

This Day in History... December 3, 1775

The Grand Union Flag

On December 3, 1775, the Grand Union Flag was reportedly flown for the first time.

The Continental Colors Flag, also known as the Grand Union Flag, the Congress Flag, the Cambridge Flag, and the First Navy Ensign, is considered the first national flag of the United States.

It's unknown when the flag was designed, or by whom, but by late 1775, the United Colonies recognized a need for their own banners. Continental Army, Navy, and Marine forces needed a flag that would be easily distinguished from Britain's red and white ensign carried aboard ships and the flag of Great Britain used by troops on land.



Stamp pictures John Paul Jones and John Barry.

The flag was first flown aboard the Continental ship, *Alfred*, on December 3, 1775 (some sources say December 2). Lieutenant John Paul Jones commanded the ship shortly after he received his first commission. At the time, the ship was in the harbor on the western shore of the Delaware River at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This event marked the first time an American flag was raised over an American naval vessel.



Issued as part of the Bicentennial Series.



Grand Union flag stamp from the Historic American Flags Issue

The Grand Union Flag was easily created by sewing white stripes onto existing British Ensign flags. The Grand Union's 13 alternating red and white stripes represented the original colonies as our flag's stripes do today. The British Union flag of the time was included in the upper left corner. This was a symbol of colonial loyalty to the crown and British laws. It shows the colonies originally wanted peace with England, but a fair representation in government.



From the 2000 Stars and Stripes sheet

On January 1, 1776, Commander George Washington reportedly hoisted the flag near his headquarters in Cambridge. The Continental Army was besieging the city of Boston at the time. When the British troops within the city saw the flag, they thought it was a sign of surrender.

The flag was used until June 1777. After that, the Flag Act of 1777 dictated that 13 stars be added to the upper-left corner to represent each of the colonies.

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