

Lesson Thirty-Three

“Old Glory”

LESSON IDEA

With this lesson we begin a series about four important symbols of our American heritage: the flag, national anthem, Liberty Bell, and Statue of Liberty. The first, about the Stars and Stripes, is designed to promote an understanding of Old Glory's history and the ideals it represents.

PREPARATION

Locate a copy of the U.S. Flag Code (the law relating to care and display of the flag). Possible sources included an American Legion Post, a public library, or the local offices of your U.S. Representative and Senators.

D ID YOU KNOW that there is a famous American beauty for whom young Americans continue to fight and die despite her age of more than 200 years? She was born on June 14, 1777, two years into the Revolutionary War, and went to battle with the shoemakers, farmers, and tavern owners of the Continental Army as if she had been born for the experience. Which was indeed the case.

Do you know who she is? [Urge each member of the family to answer.] We are talking about Old Glory — also nicknamed the Stars and Stripes — that red, white, and blue beauty that for more than two centuries has marked our nation as a land of opportunity and freedom.

In 1777, the British flag which had been flying above colonial assembly halls for more than 100 years came down, just as England's Old World concept of authoritarian rule by kings would fall a few years later to the new American ideals of self-government and individual responsibility.

Does anyone know what the British flag looked like? Does it resemble the Stars and Stripes in any way? [The pictures on page three show the similarity in design. Point out that the colors of both flags are red, white, and blue. Also note that the British flag is a combination of the flags of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Originally it was the red cross of St. George on a white field, while the flag of Scotland was the white cross of St. Andrew on a blue field. In 1606, when England and Scotland were united into one nation, the two

crosses were combined, with Scotland's in the background and England's in the foreground. The Irish cross of St. Patrick was added in 1801.]

During the early days of the Revolutionary War, the spirit of rebellion against British injustice was sufficiently strong to cause muskets to be fired at Lexington and Concord, and an army to be formed to oppose His Majesty's troops in Boston. But it was not yet strong enough to contemplate nationhood — or a new flag. Many colonists hoped that a show of strength would convince the British to begin treating them with respect. Slogans and symbols of defiance began springing up in each of the colonies like mushrooms after a rain.

For example, at the battle of Concord, when the militia from surrounding towns gathered to stop the Redcoat advance toward the colonial cache of gunpowder, the Minutemen of Bedford carried a flag with the fiery rallying cry *Vince Aut Morire* — “Conquer or Die.” This elaborate and unique Bedford Flag is still displayed by the Minutemen of the town (distant descendants of the original Minutemen), who give musket-firing demonstrations for visitors at the historic Concord Bridge near Boston. [Perhaps your family could visit Concord some day during a vacation. The famous “Battle Road” that the British traveled from Lexington to Concord on April 19, 1775 has been preserved. At the bridge, guides vividly describe the “shot heard ‘round the world” that signaled the beginning of the war.]

A S THE MILITIA gathered outside Boston to form the Continental Army in 1775, its members brought a variety of flags and banners. The hard-hitting slogans typified the spirit of righteous indignation that was to become an American hallmark. The pine tree was a popular symbol on these early flags, especially in the northern states. Some historians believe that it was to protest against King George's decree to cut the best and tallest New England pines to use as masts for his navy. Others suggest that the pine tree represented the famous patriotic meeting

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Learn more about the symbolism associated with various nations. Although such outward signs are often dismissed lightly, flags, insignia, seals, and symbols reflect a country's outlook. Compare, for example, the flag design of various communist nations with that of "Old Glory." What is the significance of the communist use of the color red? Of the hammer and sickle? Compare the United Nations flag that of the former Soviet Union. And consult an encyclopedia for the meaning of the Nazi swastika.

places, such as the Liberty Tree of Boston, a fine old elm where the Sons of Liberty frequently gathered, or the wide-spreading oak in Charleston, South Carolina, where leading patriots of that state met to discuss the political situation.

The rattlesnake was also a popular flag symbol. One explanation by a writer of that time suggested that the snake represented vigilance, since its eyes exceeded in brightness those of any other animals and it had no eyelids. Furthermore, a rattlesnake would not instigate an attack, but once attacked would never surrender, making it a symbol of courage and fearlessness. Flag designers may also have been fascinated by the deadly bite of rattlers, since the warning "Don't Tread on Me" usually appeared on such flags.

Three of the best known flags having the rattlesnake in their design were the First Navy Jack; the Culpeper (used by the Minutemen of Culpeper County, Virginia, that showed a rattlesnake in a spiral coil, poised to strike, on a field of white with the mottoes "Liberty or Death" and "Don't Tread on Me"); and the Gadsden (with the same coiled rattler on a field of yellow).

Other militia marched to battle under banners that portrayed characteristics of their home territories. The flag of Rhode Island — a seafaring colony — was designed with an anchor, 13 stars, and the word, "Hope." The Hanover Associators of Pennsylvania opted for a red flag showing a rifleman in hunting clothes above the words "Liberty or Death." New Hampshire's banner had a chain of 13 links in the center, with the motto "We Are One."

THE FIRST colonial flag bearing a resemblance to the Stars and Stripes was the Grand Union, sometimes called the Continental Colors or Cambridge Flag. It was first flown in 1775 on colonial ships in the Delaware

River. The Grand Union had 13 stripes, alternating red and white, to represent the 13 colonies; and a blue field bearing the British flag, to signify union with the mother country.

Even though independence from Britain had been declared, The Grand Union was chosen to be the standard of the Continental Army from January 1776 to June 1777. Few, however, regarded it as an official banner, and a colorful assortment of individually designed flags continued to be appear, especially from colonial seamen making hit-and-run strikes against Britain's heavily manned and equipped Navy. This practice soon created a crisis on the high seas, since His Majesty's commanders considered armed vessels not sailing under an authorized national flag pirate ships. When captured, their crews were hanged. To protect captured seamen from the British gibbet (gallows), the Second Continental Congress decided that a national banner was a necessity of war. On June 14, 1777, "Old Glory" received her birth certificate. The Congress resolved that "the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation."

This simple blueprint left several questions unanswered. For example, how were the 13 stars to be arranged? Different designers had different ideas, but the first flag to fly above Washington's headquarters had the stars arranged in a circle so that no colony could claim prominence over the others. This became known as the Betsy Ross Flag, since it was believed that Philadelphia seamstress Betsy Ross had helped to design the stars as well as make the flag.

The symbolism of the stars, stripes, and colors was made clear by General Washington: "We take the stars from heaven, the red from our mother country, separating it by white stripes, thus showing that we have separated from her, and the white stripes shall go down to posterity representing liberty."

Choosing stars to represent the states was profoundly significant. Since ancient times, the star had symbolized dominion, sovereignty, and lofty ideals. Grouping the stars on a field of blue represented the relationship of the states to the federal government. Each state in the Union was to retain its individual sovereignty, as do stars within the heavenly constellations. Yet together they formed a pattern of brilliance and strength greater than that of any one alone.

