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Ohio county flags in front of the
Ohio Statehouse in Columbus
Steve Grant

Did Francis Hopkinson Design *Two* Flags?

By EARL P. WILLIAMS, JR.

On 14 June 1777, the Continental Congress adopted a national flag for the United States. Although no committee of Congress was specifically created to design the flag, it had its origin in the Marine Committee of the Congress.

One might ask why a national flag would have its roots in the Marine Committee. One might expect the Marine Committee to create a naval flag—not a national flag. Would the national flag serve as both? The only man to claim that he designed the U.S. Flag—Continental Congressman Francis Hopkinson (1737-1791) of New Jersey—was also the only person to claim that he also designed the *naval* flag of the United States. When the resolution establishing the U.S. Flag was adopted, Hopkinson was serving as chairman of the committee's Navy Board at Philadelphia. The resolution reads:

> *Resolved That the Flag of the united states consist of be distinguished by 13 stripes alternate red and white, that the union be 13 stars white in a blue field representing a new constellation.*[1]

(The words "consist of" and "distinguished by" were edited out.)

After the Continental Admiralty Board members adopted a seal designed for them by Hopkinson in the spring of 1780, he wrote them a curious letter on May 25 asking for "payment" in the form of a quarter cask of the "public wine" for designing the flag of the United States, continental currency, other seals, and the Great Seal of the United States, among other items. In subsequent bills to Congress for payment in cash, Hopkinson referred to designing "the great Naval Flag of the United States", "the Naval Flag of the United States", and "the Naval Flag of the States". Although his flag
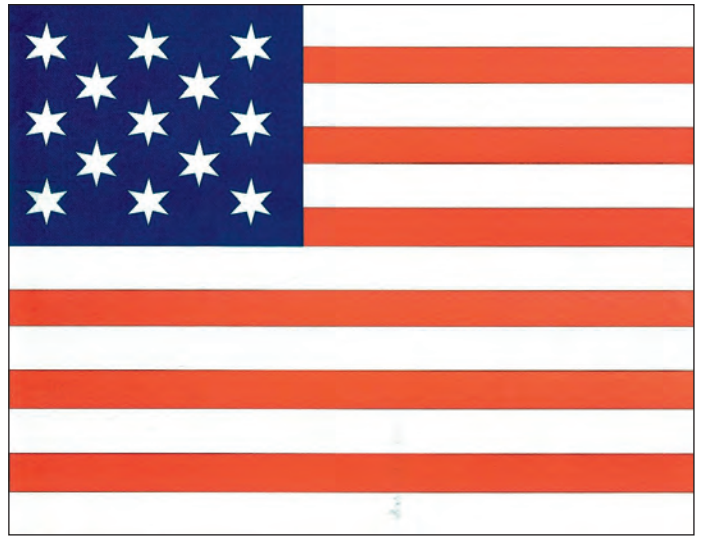

Figure 1. Conjectural drawing of Francis Hopkinson's proposed Flag of the United States of America.
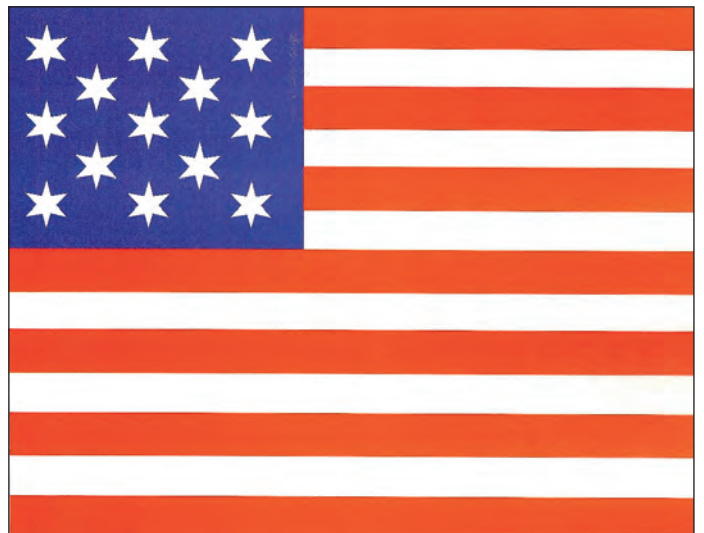(Earl P. Williams, Jr. /The Flag Guys)

Figure 2. Conjectural drawing of Francis Hopkinson's proposed Naval Flag of the United States.
(Earl P. Williams, Jr. /The Flag Guys®)

drawings have not been found, I believe that Hopkinson's U.S. Flag and U.S. Naval Flag were slightly different and that the difference lay in the pattern of the *stripes*.

In the spring of 1780, while Hopkinson was the Continental Treasurer of Loans, Congress tapped him as a consultant to the second Committee on the Great Seal of the United States because of his heraldic expertise. He prepared an obverse and reverse and then submitted a revised version of each. His second obverse for the

Great Seal and the seal that he designed for the Continental Admiralty Board offer clues to how his U.S. and Navy flags might have looked. For example, the outer vertical stripes (pales) of the Board of Admiralty Seal are *red*, which would be more appropriate for a naval flag.[2] On the other hand, the outer thin, diagonal stripes (bendlets)

Figure 3. *Great Seal of the United States from the die cut in 1782.*
Note outer white stripes.
(The Great Seal of the United States)

Figure 4. *Great Seal of the United States from 1909 print.*
Note outer white stripes.
(Patterson & Dougall)

of Hopkinson's second obverse for the Great Seal are *white* (argent), in keeping with having red (gules) stripes charged on a white background—a heraldic practice, as with George Washington's coat of arms.

This outer-white-stripe configuration was, in my opinion, intended for the flag of the government, i.e., Hopkinson's Flag of the United States, while the flag with top and bottom stripes of red was for the Navy. My conclusion is that Hopkinson provided the Marine Committee with both designs and that we as a nation (including the government), have preferred his intended Navy Flag. Furthermore, Hopkinson mentioned designing the U.S. Flag only once—in his letter to the Admiralty Board—but mentioned designing the Navy Flag in each of his three bills to Congress. Today, traces of what I believe was his U.S. Flag are found in the Great Seal (the U.S. Coat of Arms), other similar seals, and on the back of the current one-dollar bill.[3]

Hopkinson added motifs from the U.S. Flag to three of the many seals that he designed: the Seal for the Admiralty Board, his two obverses for the U.S. Great Seal,[4] and his temporary seal for the Board of War and Ordnance.[5] He was the first of the many Great Seal designers to add motifs from the Stars and Stripes to the seal.

William Barton served on the final Great Seal Committee. He also prepared two designs. His first design is missing, but a realization of it appears in Patterson. In general, it shows red stripes charged on a white field. For example, on the dexter side of his shield, only the top stripe is red. Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress, also served on this committee. His first proposal also ran into similar problems. In general, the pieces on the chevrons that he used show a white field, but since the number 13 (for the number of states) is not divisible by two, the dexter side of his chevron shows a top red stripe.[6] Congress adopted the final proposal on 20 June 1782. It incorporated Hopkinson's red, white, and blue shield

with outer white stripes; his crest of 13 stars in a cloud; his arrows for war; and his olive branch for peace.

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[1] Williams, p. 44.

[2] Placing the red stripes on the upper and lower edges would make the flag more visible from a distance against a sky background. Special thanks to Harold B. Langley, former Curator of Naval History, Smithsonian Institution, for this insight. Hopkinson's actual design for the Seal of the Admiralty is known only through a few very poor impressions. The illustration published in *NN* 171 was a 20th-century realization.

[3] For an inventory of Hopkinson's designs, see Martucci, pp. 8 and 9.

[4] When viewing the obverses of Hopkinson's Great Seal designs, if one were to turn the drawings sideways, the constellation of 13 stars (asterisks), which were drawn freehand, would appear in a loose linear pattern similar to the pattern in Hopkinson's Board of War and Ordnance Seal. The closest symmetrical arrangement for this linear pattern is rows of stars in a 3-2-3-2-3 arrangement.

[5] Knill, p. 27, states that the War Office was using a temporary seal before usage of the new (current Army) seal commenced on 8 March 1779. This temporary seal was possibly Hopkinson's Board of War and Ordnance Seal, which was dated 1778. The temporary seal features a blue flag with 13 six-pointed stars. Donald W. Holst, retired Curator of Armed Forces History, Smithsonian Institution, believes that this flag was an ordnance artillery flag. He further asserts that similar flags depicted in paintings by Charles Willson Peale and his brother James have been misidentified as General Washington's Commander-in-Chief flag (see Holst, Part I, pp. 123–125) and that the flag known as "Washington's Headquarters Flag" in the collection of the Valley Forge Historical Society is also an artillery flag (See Holst, Part II, pp. 171–172). Hopkinson did not list his Board of War and Ordnance Seal design in his bills to Congress. However, this design, when considered with what I believe were Hopkinson's two Stars and Stripes Flags, seems to indicate that he designed three flags for the government: a national flag, a naval ensign, and an army artillery flag. (Whether he specifically designed this flag as an artillery flag is not clear. It could be that the Board of War and Ordnance used the Stars and Stripes as the inspiration for this flag by just using the union of 13 stars on a blue field as a battle flag.)
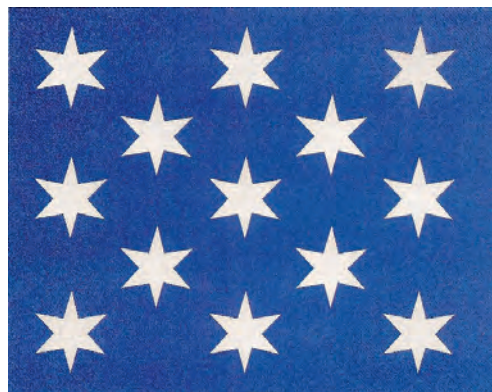
[6] See Patterson, chapters IV–V.

Figure 5. Flag traditionally known as Washington's Headquarters Flag, but believed by Donald Holst to be an artillery "gun flag". Possibly designed by Hopkinson.
(Earl P. Williams, Jr. / The Flag Guys®)

Figure 6. Francis Hopkinson (1737–91): self-portrait.
(Maryland Historical Society Museum and Library)

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