

George Washington's Headquarters Flag

On June 19, 1775, the Continental Congress unanimously selected George Washington to lead the Continental Army in its struggle against Great Britain, granting him the title of Commander in Chief. Just a few weeks later, on July 3, 1775, Washington formally assumed command in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as American forces tightened their siege of British-held Boston.

Like many military leaders and heads of state of the 18th century, Washington adopted a personal flag to signify his rank and authority. Known as the Commander-in-Chief's Standard—or more commonly, Washington's Headquarters Flag—the banner was displayed wherever he was present, whether on the battlefield, at headquarters, or while traveling with the army.

The surviving flag is a faded but remarkable blue silk standard featuring thirteen white six-pointed stars arranged on a blue field, symbolizing the thirteen colonies united in common cause. Measuring approximately two by three feet, it is widely believed to be the earliest surviving thirteen-star American flag.



In June 2018, the historic banner was displayed publicly over Flag Day weekend, marking its first appearance in Philadelphia since the Revolutionary War and its first exhibition in Pennsylvania in decades. Because the fragile silk deteriorates when exposed to light, the flag can only be displayed on rare and carefully controlled occasions.

"Revolutionary Americans adopted various symbols to represent the new republic that they created after the Declaration of Independence," explained Dr. R. Scott Stephenson, then Vice President of Collections,

Exhibitions and Programs at the Museum.

"Washington's Standard includes a blue field with thirteen white stars representing a new constellation, which Congress adopted in 1777 as a component of the now familiar 'Star-Spangled Banner.'"

The flag's survival is due in part to Washington's family. In the early twentieth century, descendants of his sister, Betty Washington Lewis, donated the standard to the Valley Forge Historical Society. In 2003, the society transferred its collection—including Washington's Standard—to the Museum.

Adding another chapter to its extraordinary story, a replica of the Commander-in-Chief's Standard traveled into space aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery in 1998. Astronaut John Glenn and the Discovery crew carried the flag on a mission that covered 3.6 million miles and orbited the Earth 134 times. The banner accompanied them throughout the journey, linking America's founding era with one of its greatest achievements in exploration.