



# A half-century ago, new 50-star American flag debuted in Baltimore

**New flag made its first official appearance anywhere in the world at historic Fort McHenry**

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, The Baltimore Sun

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Forty-seven years had passed since the last star had been added to the American flag, before two new designs were flown for the first time over [Fort McHenry](#) within months in 1959.

Arizona became the 48th star in 1912, and the new flags adding Alaska and Hawaii each made their debut in Baltimore — both on the Fourth of July.

An executive order signed by [President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) on Jan. 3, 1959, after the admittance of Alaska to the [Union](#), reconfigured the stars on the old 48-star flag to seven rows of seven stars each, staggered horizontally and vertically.

The new 49-star flag was first raised by Fred A. Seaton, secretary of the interior and Eisenhower's special representative. The ceremony was held on July 4, 1959 on the grounds of Fort McHenry.

With the admission of Hawaii on Aug. 21, 1959, a new executive order again caused the flag's stars to be rearranged, with nine rows staggered horizontally and eleven rows staggered vertically.

"This is a truly historic occasion because for the second time within a year, a new state has been admitted to the union," Eisenhower said to assembled guests in a [White House](#) Cabinet Room ceremony. "It had been a long time since any state had been admitted, so to have this 49th and 50th membership of our Union in such a short space is truly a unique experience."

The new flag's design began as a history project for Robert G. Heft, who was a 17-year-old high school student in [Lancaster](#), Ohio, in 1958.

Heft had an idea that Alaska and Hawaii would one day be states, and he set out to design a 50-star flag.

Using his mother's sewing machine, Heft had spent 12 hours using a yardstick while applying his new design of 100 hand-cut stars on each side of the blue canton of an old 48-star flag.

His teacher, who had given him a "B-" for the project, promised he'd change the grade if his flag was accepted by Congress.

Eisenhower made a personal phone call to the shocked Heft to tell him that his flag design had been accepted.

With Executive Order No. 10834, signed on Aug. 21, 1959, Eisenhower selected Heft's flag out of 1,500

designs that had been submitted for consideration.

Heft's teacher made good on his promise and awarded him the coveted "A."

"I never thought when I designed the flag that it would outlast the 48-star flag," said Heft, who later became a teacher and mayor of Napoleon, Ohio, in a 2007 interview with the Grand Rapids Press in Michigan. "I think of all the things it stood for in the past, the things we've done as a nation that we're proud of. It's not a perfect country, but where else would I like to live?" Heft added in the newspaper interview. He died last year.

By presidential order, Seaton was selected to reprise his role of the year before at Fort McHenry, raising the new 50-star flag in a ceremony scheduled for 12:01 a.m. July 4, 1960.

An estimated 40,000 spectators jammed the grounds of the historic fort where 146 years earlier, Mary Pickersgill's original star-spangled banner had flown over Fort McHenry during the British attack in 1814, to witness the raising of the 50-star flag on an 87-foot flagpole.

A red rocket soared high over the fort to announce the first appearance in the world of the new flag. At one minute past midnight, it rose to the top of the flagstaff and unfurled itself in a stiff breeze that blew up the [Patapsco](#) River.

The crowd broke into singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," under the direction of Camille Elias, a secretary in the National Park Service's Washington headquarters. As soon as the last note of the song had ended, four Army 105-mm howitzers placed along the Patapsco shoreline roared out a 50-gun salute.

The 50th shell casing was later sent to Gov. William F. Quinn of Hawaii in commemoration of the historic event.

"Today Hawaii's star is set in the firmament for the first time, and for all time," Quinn told a crowd of 10,000 gathered at Iolani Palace, former residence of Hawaiian royalty, to witness the raising of the flag.

"The 50-star spangled banner was hailed most proudly last night by a delegation of 100 Hawaiians whose florid aloha shirts and full length muumuus shone against the more somber Maryland hues," an article in The Baltimore Sun said.

Leading the delegation was Rep. [Daniel Inouye](#), who would later become U.S. senator from Hawaii. He had taken office in the [House of Representatives](#) when his state had been admitted to the Union.

In his speech, Seaton said that the admission of Hawaii — with its heavy Asian population — demonstrated "the unparalleled recognition of the rights of men wherever the American flag flies."

Finan said, "The flag which we raise tonight is the banner of the most powerful nation on earth — the bright and shining symbol of hope and freedom to all peoples of the earth."

The 10-by-19-foot woolen flag that was used in the ceremony was later taken to New York and unfurled at Federal Hall, where [George Washington](#) was inaugurated president in 1789.

It later returned to Fort McHenry and was placed on display.

"Conceivably, there may never be such a ceremony in the lifetime of those who witnessed the formal recognition of Hawaii's admission as the fiftieth state," said an editorial in The Evening Sun. "The flag first flown over Fort McHenry at 12:01 a.m. on July 4, 1960, is the flag under which we and our children and grandchildren will in all likelihood live out our days."

Last month, the Saginaw News reported that Heft's collection of 500 American flag-related items was to be auctioned off.

Darrell R. Zolton, Saginaw Township attorney, told the newspaper that Heft's original 50-star flag was stored in a safe after he turned down a \$35,000 bid for it. In 2005, Heft had tried to sell the flag on [eBay](#) for \$250,000 and received no bidders.

At noon today, a special ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 50-star flag will begin when a 20-foot-by-38-foot, 50-star flag will rise over Fort McHenry. The ramparts of the fort will be lined with flags from all 50 states. Traditional Hawaiian music will be performed by "The Aloha Boys."

For further information, please call 410-962-4290.