

# Flag Day: A Living Tradition in Southwest NH

*June 14, 2025*

Good afternoon, friends and neighbors. As we gather here today to celebrate Flag Day, we stand in the footsteps of generations who have honored this day in our corner of New Hampshire for well over a century. The flag that waves above us today carries not just the hopes of our nation, but the memories of countless Flag Day celebrations that have taken place right here in southwest New Hampshire.

Let me take you back to 1895, when our community first began formally observing Flag Day on June 14th. Picture, if you will, the villages of Fitzwilliam and Hinsdale in 1896. In Fitzwilliam, residents built a great bonfire on Brigham Hill—a beacon visible for miles, declaring to the world that their patriotic spirit burned bright. Meanwhile, in Hinsdale, both Republicans and Democrats set aside their political differences to drape their homes and businesses in red, white, and blue. Politics, the newspaper noted, "had but very little to do with the decorations"—it was simply Americans honoring America.

Those early celebrations were led by remarkable organizations that understood something profound: that patriotism must be cultivated, nurtured, and passed down. The Daughters of the American Revolution took the lead, organizing speeches about Revolutionary War ancestors and ensuring that the sacrifices of previous generations would not be forgotten. As one speaker declared in 1901, we must "inoculate our children with patriotism at a young age."

By the 1920s, Flag Day had blossomed into something truly special here in southwest New Hampshire. In 1922, Keene hosted a celebration that drew 225 people. The local music store sold copies of patriotic songs so everyone could join in the singing. Can you imagine the harmony of 225 voices rising together in song, united by love of country and community?

These weren't just ceremonies—they were celebrations of life itself. Strawberry suppers brought neighbors together around tables laden with the season's first berries and fresh shortcake. Ice cream socials turned patriotic duty into pure joy. The circus even came to town for Flag Day in 1910, proving that honoring our flag could be both reverent and fun.

Governor Bartlett's official proclamation in 1920 made Flag Day official in New Hampshire, but here in the southwest, we were already decades ahead, having understood that some things are too important to wait for official recognition.

What makes our Flag Day tradition truly remarkable is how it has always combined patriotism with service to others. In the 1930s, as our nation faced the Great Depression, local Elks lodges and Boy Scout troops didn't just wave flags—they sold poppies and created silver trees adorned

with silver dollars to raise funds for those in need. They understood that loving your country means caring for your neighbors.

The Daughters of the American Revolution continued their vital work throughout these years, not only organizing celebrations but also dedicating historical markers like the one at the Blake house in 1929, commemorating Nathan Blake. These women understood that patriotism without historical knowledge is hollow, that we must know our past to honor our future.

The 1970s brought new complexities to our Flag Day celebrations, reflecting the tensions of a changing America. Yet even in times of division, our community found ways to honor the flag meaningfully. High school students in Winchester crafted flags by hand, proving that reverence could be expressed through creation as well as ceremony. Essay contests and recitation contests inspired young minds to think deeply about what citizenship means, with savings bonds as prizes—investments in both patriotism and practical futures.

The debates of that era, including controversies over wearing the flag, remind us that democracy is messy, that patriotism can take many forms, and that honest disagreement itself is part of what makes America strong.

What can we learn from more than 125 years of Flag Day celebrations in southwest New Hampshire? First, that true patriotism is not passive. It requires action—whether building bonfires on hilltops, organizing community suppers, or teaching children to sing patriotic songs as students did in 1929.

Second, that patriotism is most meaningful when it brings us together across our differences. From those early celebrations where Republicans and Democrats decorated side by side, to the diverse organizations that have led our observances—Rotary clubs, women's clubs, service clubs, the DAR, the Elks, Boy Scouts—Flag Day has always been about unity, not division.

Third, remembering our history is not about living in the past, but about understanding the foundation upon which we build our future. Not because change is bad, but because without roots, we cannot grow.

Today, as we listen to speeches and join in song, we are not merely observers of tradition—we are its living continuation. We are the latest chapter in a story. As we go forward from this gathering, let us carry with us the spirit of those early Flag Day celebrations—the willingness to set aside our differences in service of something larger than ourselves, the commitment to teach our children not just to love their country but to understand why it deserves their love, and the determination to make patriotism not just a feeling, but a way of living that serves our neighbors and strengthens our community.

Thank you, and Happy Flag Day.