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Uncle Sam

The term Uncle Sam has been historically associated with Samuel Wilson, a meat packer from Troy, New York. When shipping containers of meat to troops during the War of 1812, he marked the casks with the letters U.S. for United States. Because Sam Wilson was affectionately known as “Uncle Sam” Wilson by friends, the story went out that the meat came from Uncle Sam, or US. That identification is said to have led to the widespread use of the nickname “Uncle Sam” for the United States, and a resolution passed by Congress in 1961 recognized Wilson as the namesake of the national symbol.

His appearance derives from two earlier symbolic figures in American folklore: Yankee Doodle, a British-inspired nickname for American colonials during the American Revolution, and Brother Jonathan, a rural American who, by surprising displays of native intelligence, always triumphed over his adversaries in plays, stories, cartoons, and verse.

The present-day figure with the beard and top hat was actually the creation of Thomas Nast, a famous political cartoonist during the Civil War. The Uncle Sam symbol has appeared on a variety of folk art items including mechanical banks, sheet music, glass and a mailbox holder. The Smithsonian Museum of American History has even designated September 13 as Uncle Sam Day.

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