

0. Betsy and the Flag - Story Preface

1. Betsy's Early Life

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That Betsy Ross produced the first American flag is only part of her story. The real importance of Betsy Ross, in American history, is even more interesting.

How did she meet the man who would be the father of a new country? How did she convince him that her embellishment of the star, that he envisioned for that country's flag, would transform it into a better-looking product? Where did she get the idea that changing it from six points to five points would improve its appearance?

In doing all these things, Betsy not only improved the design of the new flag, she also secured the commission of this important work. And it came at a time when she much-needed the business.

The truth of what really transpired in Betsy's shop that day has been distorted by hearsay, inflated stories and the long passage of time. There is no documentary evidence proving that Betsy created the first flag. Nothing, independent of passed-down stories—starting with that of her grandson, William Canby—remains. On the other hand, there is also no evidence proving that Betsy Ross was not the artisan who fabricated the American flag.

What we have are the stories that Betsy told to people like her grandson. During his 1870 presentation to the Philadelphia Historical Society:

"The search was fruitless," he said, "as might have been expected, as to the finding of any matter throwing light on the origin of the design, and the making of the flag. It was not fruitless in this, however, that it establishes the fact that no such history there exists; a fact not heretofore definitely stated."

What does Canby's investigation tell us? That we have Betsy's stories but not independent proof?

That leads us to another set of questions. Do we always need independent verification, such as documents, before we believe what people say about their lives and their work? Or ... is it the passage of time which sows doubt, absent proof beyond stories?

It makes us think a bit deeper, doesn't it?

Betsy herself went on to have a long career as a flag maker for the United States government particularly during the War of 1812 when she—now remarried to John Claypoole, a customs agent—secured a contract to make a garrison flag for the U.S. Army as well as diplomatic flags for the Indian Department.

She continued to sew for the government well into her 70s, until her eyesight failed. Her daughters, nieces and granddaughters took up the business and it turned into a multi-generational enterprise.

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Betsy Ross and the First American Flag

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