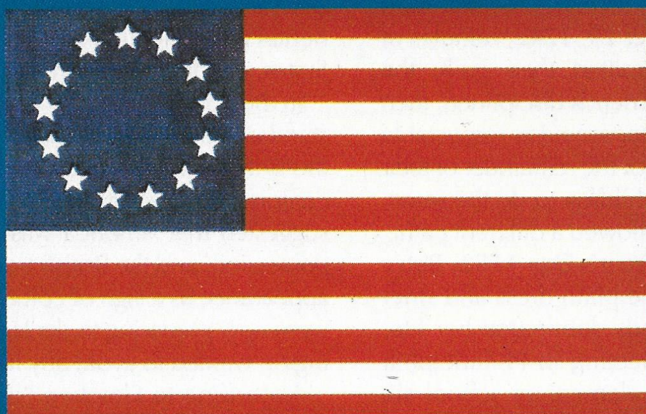
Seamstress for a Revolution

On June 14, 1777, Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, made a terse entry in the Journal of Congress: "Resolved, that the flag of the United States be 13 stripes, alternate red and white: that the union be 13 stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation." The record gave no credit to a designer and made no mention of payment.

There the matter rested, until March 14, 1870, just six years shy of the nation's centennial. On that day William Canby addressed a gathering of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and announced that Elizabeth Griscom Ross, his long-dead grandmother, had sewn the first flag at the request of General George Washington himself. Canby's case rested solely on the sworn affidavits of Betsy Ross's immediate family members.

While such circumstantial evidence has failed to convince historians, it was enough for a public eager to find a national matriarch to join the ranks of so many founding fathers. By 1892 Betsy Ross was considered important enough for residents of Philadelphia to protest the deterioration of the townhouse in which she purportedly lived in 1776. As details of her life surfaced, the story of Betsy Ross gained national notice, and her former residence was eventually restored and renamed the "Old Flag House." Today, 250 years after her birth, Betsy Ross remains a national icon, who is honored every year by the more than 250,000 people who visit her Philadelphia house. Only the city's Liberty Bell and Independence Hall draw more visitors.



Elizabeth Griscom was a rebel by birthright. Her great grandfather, Andrew Griscom, was a Quaker dissenter who immigrated to the American colonies from England in 1680 to escape religious persecution, and eventually settled in William Penn's Quaker stronghold of Philadelphia. A generation later Betsy's parents, Samuel and Rebecca Griscom, caused a sensation when

An intriguing controversy surrounds Betsy Ross and the making of the first American flag. Did she or didn't she?

by William C. Kashatus

Left: Historians' skepticism about the Betsy Ross story has not prevented numerous artists from depicting it. This painting by E. Percy Moran from 1908 is titled *Then, now, and forever!* Above: The first official American banner is often called the Betsy Ross Flag. Right: In 1785, when Betsy signed the Membership Book of the Religious Society of Free Quakers, she was married to John Claypoole.

Elizabeth Claypoole

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; FLAG: GRANGER COLLECTION; ELIZABETH CLAYPOOLE SIGNATURE: AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

GRANGER COLLECTION

Francis Hopkinson contributed to the seal design for the American Philosophical Society and the Great Seal of New Jersey. His entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography* credits him with designing the American flag in 1777.

they were accused of "unchaste intimacy before marriage"—as recorded in the October 29, 1742, minutes of their church. The Griscoms admitted their guilt; the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of Friends disciplined, then forgave the couple; and the Griscoms served as respectable members of the Society of Friends for the remainder of their lives. They intended for their 17 children to do the same, but their eighth child, Elizabeth, followed a different path.

Born in Philadelphia on New Year's Day 1752, Betsy grew up in a household where the plain dress and strict discipline of the Society of Friends dominated her life. She worshiped at the Quaker meeting in Philadelphia and attended the local Friends' elementary school six days a week. Under the guidance of her great-aunt Sarah Griscom, Betsy developed a natural ability for sewing and needlecraft. Accordingly, she began an apprenticeship with upholsterer William Webster on Second Street after receiving a secondary education at the Friends' Public School. It wasn't long before her remarkable skills attracted notice and a clientele.

It was more than needlework, however, that attracted the attention of fellow apprentice John Ross. The diminutive Betsy was said to have had expressive blue eyes, delicate features, and a lively disposition. On November 4, 1773, she and Ross eloped. Betsy's new husband was an Episcopalian and the son of a minister, and the Society of Friends discouraged what the Quaker Book of Discipline described as "Mixing in Marriage with those not of our Profession." Betsy knew that her marriage meant expulsion from the Quaker congregation, yet not only did she refuse to repent, she became an Episcopalian and worshiped with her husband's family at Christ Church on North American Street.

Tax records indicate that sometime before March 1775 Ross opened his own small upholstery shop on Arch Street. Betsy supplemented their income with seamstress work, and their business prospered. But the American Revolution soon ended their new life together. Shortly after the April battles of Lexington and Concord, John Ross joined a local militia to support the colonial cause. One night while he was guarding a munitions warehouse near the docks of the Delaware River, a gunpowder explosion left him a semi-invalid until he died in January 1776. The newly widowed Betsy continued to make her living as a seamstress and upholsterer.

As the story goes, Betsy Ross entered the realm of legend one day in June 1776, when three visitors came to her shop with an unusual request. In an affidavit that accompanied William Canby's paper, Betsy's daughter Rachel Fletcher identified the visitors as General George Washington, war financier Robert Morris, and Second Continental Congress member George Ross, uncle to Betsy's deceased husband. The commander of the Continental Army needed a new flag for the fledgling United States, and they had come to ask for Betsy's help.

In Boston six months earlier the Continental Army's standard had been the Grand Union Flag, which included the British Union Jack in the upper left corner, called the canton (see "Evolution of a Flag," page 25). The design suggested that America was still Great Britain's colonial possession, and the British troops had interpreted the flag's appearance as a sign of colonial submission. The colonies were now preparing to declare independence, and Washington wanted to avoid any future misunderstandings.

According to Fletcher, "one of them asked [Betsy] if she could make a flag and she replied that she did not know but she could try." The three men then showed her a rough sketch of the proposed banner. The young widow approved of the general design, but she didn't like the way its six-pointed stars were awkwardly arranged on the blue canton. Betsy said a flag with 13 five-pointed stars arranged in a circle would be much more handsome as well as more practical to make.

In her affidavit, Margaret Donaldson Boggs, Betsy's niece, said her aunt then folded a bit of cloth and demonstrated her technique of cutting a five-pointed star with one snip of the scissors. In Fletcher's account the men "respectfully considered the suggestions and acted upon them, General Washington seating himself at a table with a pencil and paper, altered the drawing and then made a new one according to the suggestions of my mother." The delegation then hired the Philadelphia seamstress to make the nation's new flag; Fletcher remembers "having heard my mother say frequently that she, with her own hands made the first Star-spangled Banner that ever was made." Family affidavits

The Betsy Ross House

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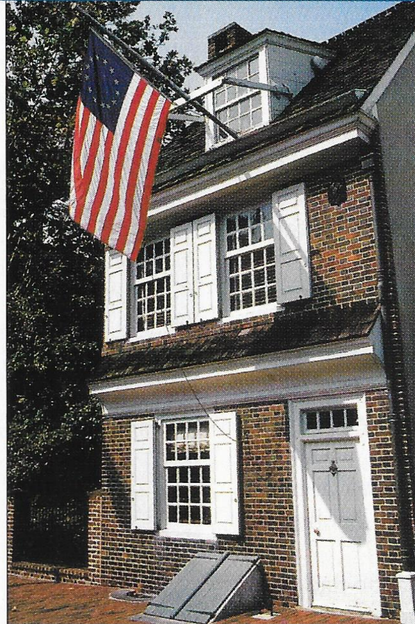

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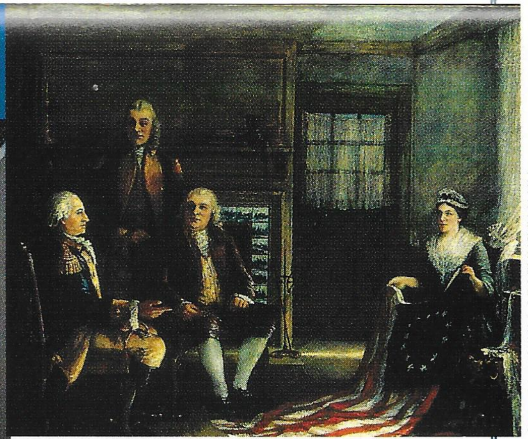


STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA

Far left: The house at 239 Arch Street needed a champion at the turn of the century. Left: Today the Betsy Ross House is one of Philadelphia's most popular historic sites. Above: Charles H. Weisgerber's descendants recently donated *Birth of Our Nation's Flag* to the State Museum of Pennsylvania.

UNCERTAINTY HAS LONG BEEN an element in the Betsy Ross story, so it should come as no surprise that there are questions surrounding the building at 239 Arch Street in Philadelphia. City records indicate that Ross did live on Arch Street—and the argument for 239 is reasonable—but because neither she nor any of her three husbands owned that property, it has been impossible to pinpoint the exact number. The National Park Service, which oversees 21 buildings in historic Philadelphia, including the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, remains unaffiliated with the house because of the lack of absolute proof that Ross lived there.

The unassuming two-and-a-half-story Georgian-style building is two blocks from Christ Church, where Betsy and her first husband, John Ross, worshiped. Wrought-iron fencing encloses the house's courtyard, and an impressive old elm tree appears as though it is standing guard at the rear. The modest burial site of Betsy and her third husband, John Claypoole, is just off the western side of the square courtyard.

Visitors can take a short, self-guided tour that begins in the basement, where irons and pokers adorn a typical colonial kitchen. A narrowly twisting stairway ascends to the ground-floor workshop where Betsy would have plied her trade. Vintage tools and fabrics typical of eighteenth-century upholsterers lie about the tiny shop.

From there, visitors head up to the second floor and two bedrooms. Curtains hang from a pencil post bed that sits near a dressing table and other simple furnishings inside Betsy's chamber. The tour's next stop is back on street level in the small parlor at the rear of the house, the room where three members of the Continental Congress may have asked Betsy to make a national flag. The parlor is the last room on view, and from there visitors can meander into a gift shop that doubles as an exhibit space for artifacts from Betsy's life. Items on display include Betsy's personal snuffbox, small flags she made while teaching her daughters and nieces to sew, and a leather-bound Bible she inherited in 1794. A detailed, oversized family tree hangs above the cases, illustrating Betsy Ross's ancestry.

Betsy moved from Arch Street in 1786. In 1891 the owner of 239 Arch told artist Charles H. Weisgerber about the Ross connection. The story inspired Weisgerber to paint *Birth of Our Nation's Flag*, depicting the legendary meeting between Betsy and the flag committee. The artwork generated so much interest in the Betsy Ross story and her house that in 1895 the artist ordered two million chromolithographs to meet demand for reproductions to hang in homes, schools, and public buildings. Weisgerber sold the copies for 10 cents apiece and used the proceeds to purchase the house. He helped form the American Flag House and the Betsy Ross Memorial Association in 1898 and sold memberships to raise funds for preservation work.

Weisgerber later moved into the house, and his son, Vexil Domus (Latin for "flag house"), was born there in 1902. Vexil maintained the residence until 1935, when the association went out of business. The house's fate teetered in the balance for two years until radio manufacturer Atwater Kent launched a fund-raising campaign to save the building and donate it to the city. Today the nonprofit organization Historic Philadelphia, Inc., manages the Betsy Ross House. ✪

—Andrew Carr

The Betsy Ross House is located at 239 Arch Street between Second and Third Streets in downtown Philadelphia. Hours of operation are 10:00-5:00, daily during the summer season and Tuesday through Sunday the remainder of the year. The house is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. A donation is suggested. For more information call (215) 627-5343 or visit www.ushistory.org/betsy/flaghome.html.

claim that Congress approved the Ross flag and in the days following asked Betsy to manufacture as many of the banners as possible. A year later, on June 14, Congress officially adopted the colors of the United States.

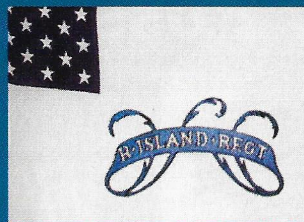
In the meantime, Betsy had been receiving the attentions of colonial war privateer Joseph Ashburn, and they were married on June 15, 1777. But Ashburn soon left his new wife to harass British ships. In September British General Charles Cornwallis led his troops into Philadelphia and settled in for a nine-month occupation. During that time Betsy helped to care for the dying and wounded American and British soldiers from the Battle of Germantown.

Ashburn returned soon after the British left, and Betsy gave birth to daughters in 1779 and 1781. Throughout the war she continued to aid the patriot cause while her husband privateered along the eastern coast. In October 1780, Ashburn set sail as the first mate on the armed brigantine *Patty*. A British frigate captured the ship, and the crew was charged with treason and imprisoned at the Old Mill Prison in Plymouth, England. There, Ashburn met a fellow prisoner named John Claypoole.

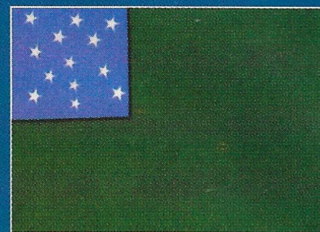
Not only was Claypoole from Philadelphia, he had attended the same Quaker meeting as Betsy and had even courted her in their youth. When the war began, he had enlisted in the Continental Army, and the Society of Friends had disowned him for violating its testimony on peace. Claypoole was commissioned a second lieutenant for outstanding service at the Battle of Brandywine in September 1777 and was wounded at the Battle of Germantown the following month. Though not life-threatening, the wound ended his military career. Claypoole soon became bored with life as a private citizen, and in November 1780 he sailed aboard the U.S. frigate *Luzerne*, which carried cargo for France. On the ship's return voyage, the frigate was captured by the British and her crew jailed in the Old Mill Prison.

Ashburn did not survive his prison experience. He died on March 3, 1782, "after an illness of about 10 days which he bore with amazing fortitude retaining his senses till the last moment of his life," recorded Claypoole in his diary. Claypoole was finally released in June 1782 as part of a prisoner exchange, and on his return to Philadelphia he delivered the tragic news of Ashburn's death to Betsy. During the next year the two renewed their friendship, and according to family tradition, she consented to marry the former officer on the condition that he quit privateering and remain at home. Claypoole agreed, and they married on May 8, 1783. Two years later the couple returned to their roots and joined the Free Quakers, an offshoot of the Society of Friends whose members had been disowned for their active support of the American Revolution. The Claypooles had five children, all girls, and lived happily until John's death in 1817.

With the help of her daughters, Betsy continued to make flags for the government and shipping companies until she retired in 1827 at age 75. She died on January

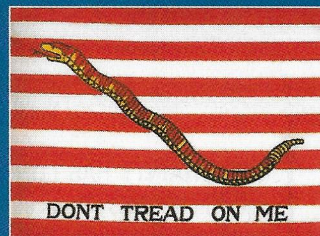


First Rhode Island Regiment

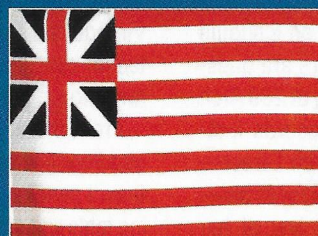


Green Mountain Boys

The flag was dubbed "Old Glory" by Captain William Driver when he saw it hoisted above his ship in 1831.

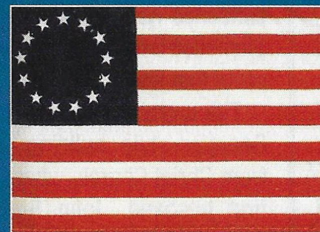


First Navy Jack

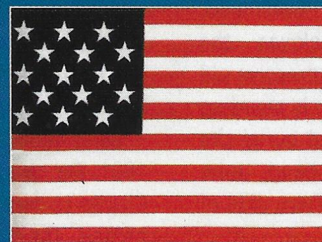


Grand Union

As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., wrote in 1862, "One flag, one land, one heart, one hand, One Nation, evermore!"



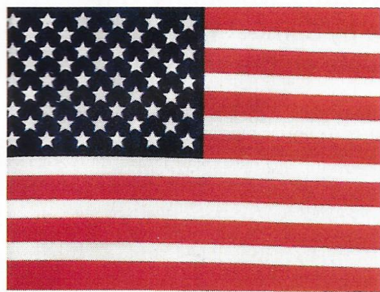
Betsy Ross



Star-Spangled Banner

"The flag is the embodiment, not of sentiment, but of history." President Woodrow Wilson, from Flag Day speech, June 14, 1915.

Evolution of a Flag



Current U.S. Flag

"There is the National flag. He must be cold, indeed, who can look upon its folds rippling in the breeze without pride of country. If in a foreign land, the flag is companionship, and country itself, with all its endearments."

"Are We a Nation?" November 19, 1867, Charles Sumner

By early 1776 the thirteen rebellious colonies had a real and pressing need for a national banner to represent the emerging nation. Various colonies and militias had adopted their own individual colors, but none stood as a symbol for the united body. Some of these early flags did contain elements that would appear in the first American ensign. The flag of the First Rhode Island Regiment included a blue canton and a smattering of white stars, as did the standard flown by Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys. Three different colonial Navy Jacks featured a rattlesnake and the warning "Don't tread on me," and one of them had a field of 13 alternating red and white stripes.

Benjamin Franklin supposedly favored using the rattlesnake as a national emblem. In the December 27, 1775, issue of *Bradford's Pennsylvania Journal*, an anonymous writer believed to be Franklin pitched the reptile's cause. "The rattlesnake is found in no other quarter of the globe than America," he wrote. "She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged ever surrenders. She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage . . . . She never wounds until she has generously given notice even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her. Am I wrong, sirs, in thinking this a strong picture of the temper and conduct of America?"

George Washington had other ideas. On January 1, 1776, he ordered the Grand Union Flag hoisted above the colonial forces that were then laying siege to British troops in Boston. The banner had 13 alternating red and white stripes with Great Britain's Union Jack in the canton. The combination of Old and New World symbols well illustrated the colonies' desire for a new relationship, but not necessarily a break, with mother Britain. When the beleaguered British troops saw the ensign, however, they believed the colonials were surrendering in response to a call from King George III for the rebel colonies to put down their arms. Three days later Washington wrote to Joseph Reed, "[B]efore the [king's] proclamation had come to hand, we had hoisted the union flag in compliment of the United Colonies But behold! It was received in Boston as a token of the deep impression the speech had made upon us, and as a signal of submission . . . . By this time, I presume, they begin to think it strange that we have not made a formal surrender of our lines."

Furthermore, the Grand Union was practically identical to the house flag of the British East India Company. So in 1777 the Continental Congress established a new standard. On June 14—now nationally recognized as Flag Day—the Congress passed a resolution officially mandating the flag's design—a field of 13 alternating red and white stripes, representing the 13 rebellious colonies, and a canton of blue with 13 white stars. The resolution did not standardize the national banner's size and shape, however, or establish a fixed pattern for the stars. Consequently, a number of variations appeared. The next official adaptation came in 1794 after Vermont and Kentucky joined the Union, and Congress passed a bill updating the flag to the 15-stripe/15-star version that flew over Fort McHenry on the morning of September 14, 1814, and inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner."

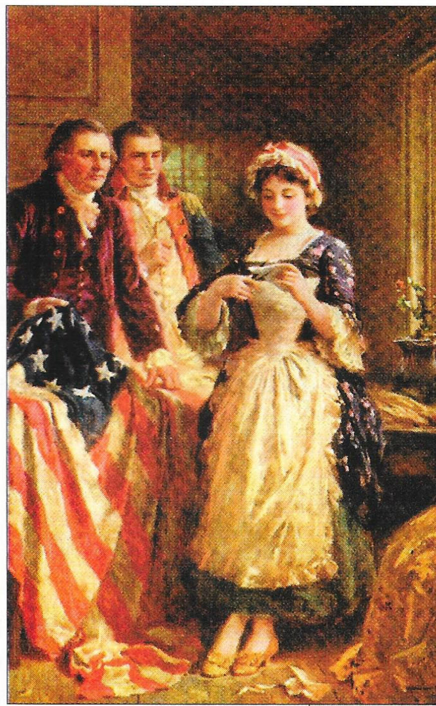
It wasn't until April 4, 1818, that Congress standardized the flag's 13-stripe appearance and decreed "that on the admission of every State into the Union, one star to be added on the Fourth of July next succeeding admission." Then on August 21, 1959, President Dwight Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10834 mandating the flag's proportions. That same year Alaska and Hawaii joined the Union, and the following July "Old Glory" appeared with the 13-stripe/50-star configuration that we see and honor today. ✪

—Allyson Patton

30, 1836, and was interred at the Free Quaker Burial Ground without fanfare.

The Betsy Ross story might have ended there, had William Canby not made his case for her, despite unsuccessful searches for documentation in the National Archives and Congressional records. According to Canby, when all else fails, "the next and last resort then of the historian, is tradition."

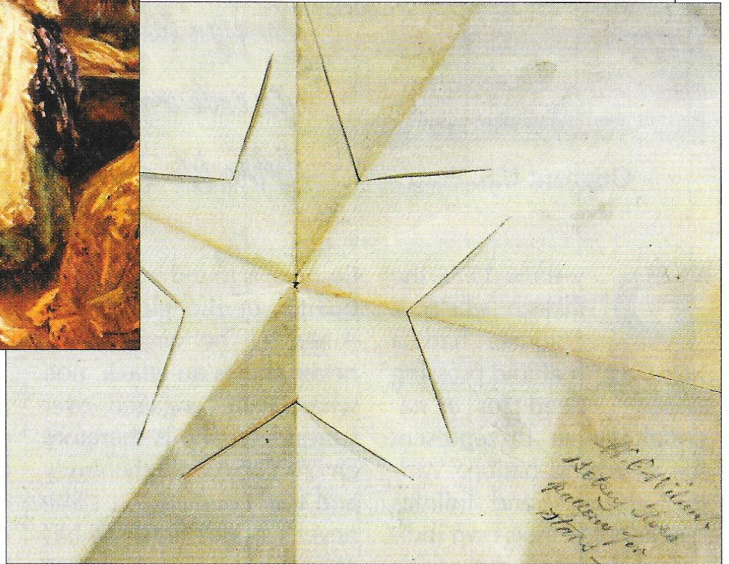
Debate about Ross's role in making the nation's flag stirred again in 1963 when Reeves Wetherill, whose ancestors were founders of the Free Quaker Meeting, went public with a pattern of Betsy's five-pointed star. According to Reeves, at some point Betsy's friend Samuel Wetherill came into possession of the artifact. One story says Wetherill called on Betsy soon after the flag committee had departed, and when she related the day's events he asked to keep the little pattern. Supposedly he made notations on the star, and writing is faintly visible on the fragile artifact. The story gave greater credence to the Ross flag tradition, which was seemingly endorsed even further when in 1976 the city of Philadelphia exhumed Betsy's remains and relocated them to a lot adjacent to the house at 239 Arch Street.



AMERICAN GRAPHIC SYSTEMS, INC.

Left: An early twentieth-century lithograph shows Ross demonstrating her star-cutting technique. Below: Reeves Wetherill considered the five-pointed paper star found in a family safe the "missing link" that proved the Betsy Ross story. Notations, supposedly made by Samuel Wetherill, are faintly visible on the paper.

STAR COURTESY WETHERILL FAMILY/SOCIETY OF FREE QUAKERS; PHOTO BY INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



Nevertheless, Betsy Ross doesn't hold the sole claim to the flag's origin. In 1780 Francis Hopkinson, a versatile member of the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, asked Congress for "a Quarter of a Cask of the public wine" for "Fancy work" (designs for the American flag, the Great Seal of the United States, and Continental currency) he had submitted for its consideration. The Hopkinson flag featured 13 red and white stripes, with 13 six-pointed white stars in a 3-2-3-2-3 pattern on a blue canton.

The Continental Congress rejected Hopkinson's request "for want of vouchers to support the charges." Even if vouchers had been produced, Congress wouldn't have paid because "the said Francis Hopkinson was not the only person consulted on those exhibitions of Fancy, and therefore cannot claim the sole merit . . . ." Furthermore, "the public is entitled to those little assistances given by Gentlemen who enjoy a very considerable salary under Congress without Fee or further reward . . . ." Nothing in Congressional records either refutes or substantiates Hopkinson's claim. In fact, many variations of the stars and stripes had been submitted to Congress prior to 1777.

Evidence for the Ross tradition is equally ethereal, however. Congressional records do place General Washington in Philadelphia from late May to early June of 1776, and it is possible that he knew the newly widowed seamstress. When the Washingtons visited Philadelphia, they attended Christ Church and sat in a pew adjacent to that of Betsy and John Ross. Robert Morris also attended Christ Church, and John's uncle, George Ross, would have undoubtedly known of Betsy's skill with a needle. That Betsy did make flags during the Revolution is confirmed by a record of payment in the Pennsylvania Board of War minutes of May 29, 1777. Added to that are the sworn affidavits of her family. The evidence is circumstantial, and the website affiliated with the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia admits, "Historically, the story of Betsy Ross remains unresolved. However, its likelihood is reasonable. The dates match. The need matches. She was familiar to Washington and the others."

And so the uncertainty surrounding the Betsy Ross flag story remains unresolved. Americans passionately defend the story of their grade school icon, while historians just as fervently refute it. Neil Ronk, in charge of historical interpretation at Philadelphia's Christ Church, observes that no other nation is so obsessed with the notion of who made its national flag and that we should "enjoy the non-specificity" of Ross's story. In any event, the controversy over the flag's creation should not obscure Betsy Ross's real accomplishments as a colonial seamstress who played a role in the American struggle for independence and challenged convention as a talented businesswoman. That's a worthy legacy in its own right. ✪

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