

# Patriot Women: Betsy Ross

Betsy Ross is best known for making the first American flag. The story told is that she made the flag after a visit in June 1776 by George Washington, Robert Morris, and her husband's uncle, George Ross. Though the legend says that Washington requested 6-pointed stars for the flag, Betsy demonstrated how to cut a 5-pointed star with a single clip of the scissors, if the fabric were folded correctly. This so impressed the group that they agreed to the 5-pointed star.

So the story goes -- but this story was not told until 1870 by Betsy's grandson, and then even he claimed it was a story that needed confirmation. Most scholars agree that it was not Betsy who made the first flag, though she was a flagmaker who, records show, was paid in 1777 by the Pennsylvania State Navy Board for making "ship's colours, &c."

She was born Elizabeth Griscom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Samuel and Rebecca James Griscom. She was the great-granddaughter of a carpenter, Andrew Griscom, who had arrived in New Jersey in 1680 from England.

Young Elizabeth probably attended Quaker schools and learned needlework there and at home. When she married John Ross, an Anglican, in 1773, she was expelled from the Friends Meeting for marrying outside the meeting. She eventually joined the Free Quakers, or "Fighting Quakers" because they did not adhere strictly to the historic pacifism of the sect. John and Elizabeth (Betsy) Ross began an upholstery business together, drawing on her needlework skills.

John was killed in January 1776 on militia duty when gunpowder exploded at the Philadelphia waterfront. Betsy acquired property and kept up the upholstery business, beginning to make flags for Pennsylvania as well.



BETSEY ROSS MAKING THE STARS AND STRIPES.  
(Adopted by Congress June 14, 1777.)

In 1777 Betsy married Joseph Ashburn, a sailor, who had the misfortune of being on a ship captured by the British in 1781. He died in prison the next year.

In 1783, Betsy married again -- this time, her husband was John Claypoole, who had been in prison with Joseph Ashburn, and had met Betsy when he delivered Joseph's farewells to her. He died in 1817, after a long disability.

Betsy lived until 1836, dying on January 30. She was reburied in the Free Quaker Burying Ground in 1857.

When Betsy's grandson told his story of her involvement with the first flag, it quickly became legend. published in *Harper's Monthly* in 1873, by the mid-1880's the story was included in many school textbooks.

What made the story turn into legend so quickly? Probably three social trends helped:

- changes in women's lives, and social recognition of such changes, made discovering a "founding mother" to stand alongside "founding fathers" attractive to American imagination. Betsy Ross was not only a widow making her own way in life with her young child -- widowed patriotically in the American Revolution not once, but twice -- but she was earning a living by a traditionally women's occupation: seamstress. (Notice that her abilities to buy and manage land never made it into her legend, and are ignored in many biographies.)
- A growing patriotic fever connected with the American flag required a tale that was more than just a business transaction, such as the probably-true story of Francis Hopkinson.
- The growing advertising industry made the woman with a flag a popular image, used to sell a variety of products (even flags).

Ignoring many other stories of women's involvement in the American Revolution, Betsy Ross became a prominent character in the telling of the story of America's founding.



Today, a tour of Betsy Ross' home in Philadelphia (there is some doubt about its authenticity, too) is a "must-see" when visiting historical sites. The home, established with the aid of two million ten-cent contributions by American schoolchildren, is still an interesting and informative tour. One can begin to see what home life was like for families of the time, and to remember the disruption and inconvenience, even tragedy, that war brought to women as well as to men.

Even if she did not make the first flag -- even if the visit by George Washington never happened -- Betsy Ross was an example of what many women of her time found as the reality in time of war: widowhood, single motherhood, managing household and property independently, quick remarriage for economic reasons (and, we can hope, for companionship and even love, too).

## Bibliography

- *Betsy Ross*: Alexandra Wallner (illustrator). For ages 4-8. The author tells the traditional story (including instructions for children to follow to cut 5-pointed stars), but acknowledges that the story is challenged, in an afterword for adults.
- *Betsy Ross: Patriot of Philadelphia*: Judith St. George, Sasha Meret (Illustrator). Ages 9-12. St. George acknowledges that the story is challenged, but prefers to believe it, citing the family's Quaker beliefs as evidence of their integrity.
- *Betsy Ross, Designer of Our Flag*: Ann Weil, Al Fiorentino (Illustrator). Traditional story told for ages 9-12.