

Betsy Ross: An American Legend and Patriot Revisited

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As a fifth-generation descendant of Betsy Ross, I have examined the legend of her role in the creation of the first American flag and how that legend became overwhelmingly popular. I have also evaluated the evidence for the role of Francis Hopkinson, which I believe is inconclusive. In this paper I will cover some previously little-known and unknown evidence that strongly suggests Betsy was involved in the creation of our earliest flags. This evidence shows Betsy Ross was well known during her lifetime, much earlier than the 1870 William Canby lecture and the subsequent national coverage in *Harper's Weekly* in 1873. Such celebrity is strong support for what has been, until now, considered only a family "myth".

While the matter of "who made the first American flag?" remains undetermined, government records do document Betsy's work making flags over a career of nearly 40 years. The first record of her government-ordered flag-making appears in the minutes of the State Navy Board of Pennsylvania for 29 May 1777, which describe "An Order on William Webb to Elizabeth Ross for fourteen pounds, twelve shillings, and two pence, for making ship's colours, etc. put into Richard's store".¹ She continued in the flag-making business until at least 1816—when government letters document her filling orders from the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for presentation flags.²

1870: William Canby's Speech Documents the Legend

Broad public awareness of the Betsy Ross story has long been thought to have begun in 1870 with a speech by her grandson, William Canby (my grandfather's uncle), to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in which he described how she came to sew the first American Flag for a "committee". According to the relevant part of that speech:

Sitting sewing in her shop one day with her girls around her, several gentlemen entered. She [Betsy Ross] recognized one of these as the uncle of her deceased husband, Col. George Ross, a delegate from Pennsylvania to Congress. She also knew the handsome form and features of the dignified, yet graceful and polite Commander in Chief, who, while he was yet Colonel Washington had visited her shop both professionally and socially many times (a friendship caused by her connection with the Ross family). They announced themselves as a committee of congress, and stated that they had been appointed to prepare a flag, and asked her if she thought she could make one, to which she replied, with her usual modesty and self reliance, that "she did not know but she could try; she had never made one but if the pattern were shown to her she had not doubt of her ability to do it." The committee was shown into her back parlor, the room back of the shop, and Col. Ross produced a drawing, roughly made, of the proposed flag. It was defective to the clever eye of Mrs. Ross and unsymmetrical, and she offered suggestions which Washington and the committee readily approved.

Of the flag in the initial drawing, she said it was square and that a flag should be one-third longer than its width; that the stars were scattered promiscuously over the field, and she said they should be in lines, or in some adopted form, as a circle or a star, and that the stars were six-pointed in the drawing, and she said they should be five-pointed. That the gentlemen of the committee and General Washington very respectfully considered her suggestions and acted upon them, General Washington seated himself at a table with pencil and paper, altered the drawing to the suggestions of

my grandmother. That General Washington seemed to her to be the active one in making the design, the others having little or nothing to do with it.³

This story, which Canby documented as well as he could through family affidavits and other research, is actually supported by other new evidence which shows that others knew of this story and of Betsy's role during and after her lifetime, and this knowledge survived as folklore.

Pre-1813: Rebecca Prescott Sherman Supports the Family Story

Independent corroboration of Betsy making a flag for Washington has recently resurfaced. In *Founding Mothers*, Cokie Roberts quotes a story about Rebecca Prescott Sherman that first appeared in the *Journal of American History* in 1909.⁴ This article, which discusses the early Prescott family and recounts events from the life of Rebecca Sherman, was written by a descendant, Kate Bennett, based on the recollections of Rebecca's niece.

Rebecca (1743-1813) was the second wife of Roger Sherman from Connecticut, a drafter of the Declaration of Independence. Rebecca's niece recalled that Rebecca learned from her husband that George Washington was having a flag made by Betsy Ross, and "nothing would satisfy Aunt Rebecca but to go and see it in the works, and there she had the privilege of sewing some of the stars on the very first flag of a Young Nation". This the first instance of somebody outside Betsy's family describing her connection to George Washington.

While hearsay, the account's credibility is bolstered by the niece's recollection of another incident in the life of Rebecca Sherman. Rebecca and her husband attend a dinner party given by George Washington, who invites Rebecca to sit beside him as being the handsomest lady there that evening. The niece gave Kate Bennett a piece of green silk from the dress Rebecca wore that night, and the silk cloth was subsequently sewn into a quilt by a group of ladies who formed the Rebecca Prescott Sherman D.A.R. chapter in Minneapolis in 1907. The quilt

survives, in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The piece of green silk is in the center of the quilt.

1832: The Waldo Portrait of Betsy Supports Her as an Important Figure



Figure 1. Portrait of Betsy Ross, by Samuel Waldo, 1832. By permission of its owner

an old woman—if it is indeed Elizabeth Claypoole, she was 80 years old at the time. The family resemblance is clear when the image is compared to pictures of her children and grandchildren.

Samuel Waldo, a well known New York portrait painter, could have searched out Elizabeth Claypoole when she lived with a daughter in Abington, north of Philadelphia. He might have heard of her historical role as “Betsy Ross” and felt she was a worthy subject for his brush. The painting is not up to Waldo’s normal quality as a portrait and it might have remained in his personal collection—certainly Betsy’s descendants were

The next piece of evidence supporting her family’s story is the painting of Betsy first published in 1975 by Dr. Whitney Smith. The owner of the painting, who remained anonymous, discovered the painting in an antique shop and suspecting it was more than it appeared to be, bought it. The shop owner saw the frame as valuable but nothing more. On the back of the canvas, in the hand of the artist, the painting was identified as “Portrait of Betsy Ross” painted by “Sam’l Waldo 32” (meaning 1832). The painting depicts

unaware of it. His interest was therefore more likely historical than commercial, reflecting contemporary traditions about Betsy's important role in the making of the flag.

1845: The “Pattern for Stars”, a Paper Artifact Held by the Society of Free Quakers, Links the Five-Pointed Star to Betsy

During the Revolutionary War, Quakers were generally sympathetic to the royalist cause. Those supporting the rebellion were promptly disowned by their Orthodox Quaker meetings, leading some to form their own meeting—the Society of Free Quakers. Betsy Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole and her husband John Claypoole joined this Society in 1785 bringing into that meeting their children, including their daughter Clarissa. Eventually, membership in the Society dwindled and meetings for worship ended in 1832 when Betsy and a descendent of one of the founders (named Wetherill) closed the door to the Meeting House for the last time (it still stands at Fifth and Arch). However, the Society continued as a social and philanthropic organization, and an important artifact is in the holdings of the current organization. This artifact is of interest because family tradition holds that Betsy convinced the “committee” that the flag should have five-pointed stars, which would be easy to make. She demonstrated a very simple way to fold a piece of paper and with one cut produce a perfect five-pointed star.

Reeves Wetherill, of the Society of Free Quakers, showed an example of this, a sample folded star pattern, at a luncheon meeting in 1963 of the Women's Committee of the Philadelphia Flag Day Association. This “Pattern for Stars” has been on display in the old Meeting House. Wetherill explained that the folded star pattern came from an old safe which his father had caused to be opened in 1922 and he, a teen-ager, had been invited to be present. Reeves Wetherill was a descendent of Samuel Wetherill, one of the founders of the Society of Free Quakers.



Figure 2. Betsy Ross's "Pattern for Stars", likely by her granddaughter Sophia Hildabrant, ca. 1845.

Photograph by Robert Vaughan, used by permission

There are four lines of writing on this artifact, in lead pencil:

H C Wilson

Betsey Ross

pattern for

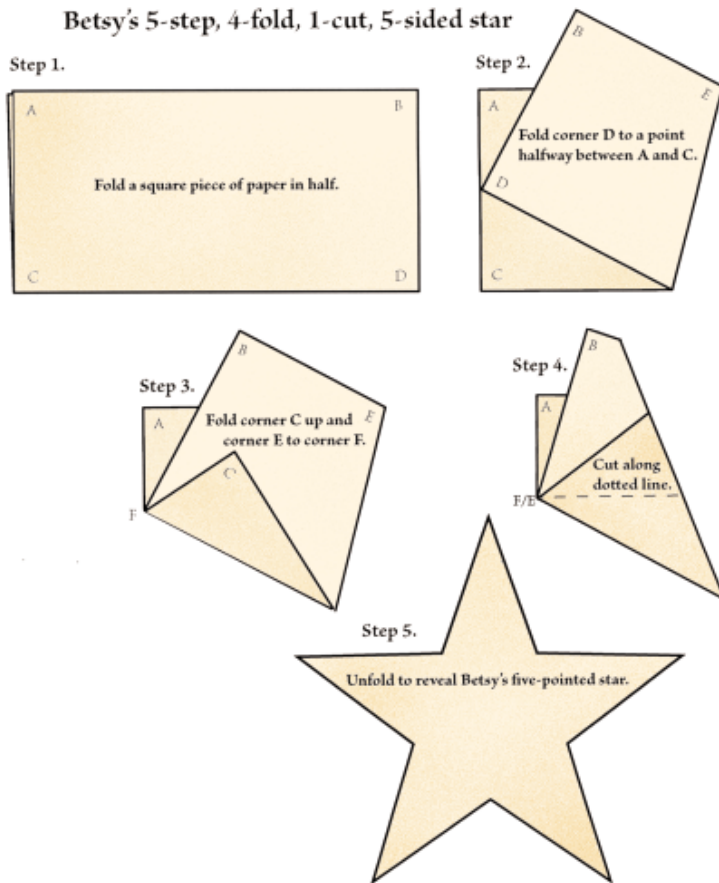
stars_____

Betsy is spelled as "Betsey", and the "H" appears to overwrite a "W".

The artifact had been in the possession of someone associated with the Society of Free Quakers since it was created.

We can only speculate as to when this Pattern for Stars artifact was created. However, there is evidence that a group of Quaker ladies gathered in 1845 to sew garments for the poor. This date corresponds with a decision by the members of the Society to purchase an iron chest in which to protect their records. Since the artifact comes down through the Society, it could have been in this very iron chest.

The Quaker ladies involved in this charitable activity (most ladies of the time were accomplished in needlework) could have included Sophia Hildabrant, Betsy's granddaughter. Sophia, with her mother, Clarissa Clay-pool Wilson, was active in the upholstery and flag-making business which Betsy had started years before. Assuming there was well-established local folklore about Betsy and the origin of the country's first flags (Philadelphia was still a small town), it is quite possible the conversation among the ladies turned to this. Sophia Hildabrant may have been asked to describe the simple way her mother Clarissa and grandmother Betsy Ross had of making five-pointed stars. With this, a demonstration piece for making a five-pointed star was produced.



*Figure 3. Schematic for cutting a 5-pointed star.
Courtesy of the American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial*

When this Pattern for Stars is created, one of the ladies feels it should be preserved. She intends to note upon it that it represents what Clarissa and Betsy used, and makes a “W” for Wilson. But before the name is written out, the W is converted to an “H” for Hildabrant because Sophia is the one present in the sewing group who made the pattern. Sophia demurs to having her name on the Pattern for Stars, feeling that her mother’s name should be on it, and the writer reverts back to “C” (for Clarissa) followed by “Wilson” spelled out in full, followed on the next line by “Betsey Ross”, and then “pattern for stars”.

The sample Pattern for Stars could have found its way into the iron fireproof chest authorized to be purchased at a January 1847 meeting of the members of the Society of Free Quakers. All we can say for sure about this sample Pattern for Stars is that somebody thought it significant enough to preserve, and it remained in the possession of the Society of Free Quakers or a Wetherill descendant from the time it was made until Reeves Wetherill brought it out in 1963. It is a significant artifact in support of the assertion and tradition that “Betsey Ross” was associated with the use of the five-pointed star in our flags.

1847: Captain Edward Williams and the Mexican War Story Gives Betsy Credit for the Trenton Flag

In February 1896 the *Harrisburg Telegraph* ran an interview with a retired gentleman who was active in the war with Mexico. Edward C. Williams, in his early twenties and a captain at the time of the war with Mexico, raised a company of volunteers in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to go to Mexico with General Scott. His story is told in an official report by Major Brindle, prepared the day after the taking of Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City on 15 September 1847.⁵

Captain Williams raised an American flag over Chapultepec after he accepted the Mexican surrender. The flag is said to have been brought by Williams from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where he had “borrowed” it from the state library. The flag was referred to at the time as the “Trenton” flag,

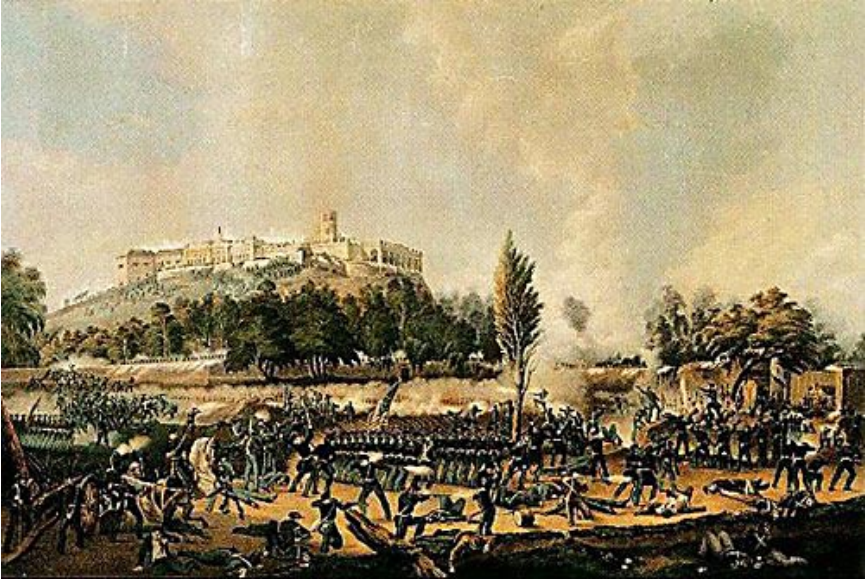


Figure 4. "Storming of Chapultepec", after James Walker.
Published by Sarony and Major, New York, 1848.

given to George Washington by Betsy Ross before that battle in 1776. Several other reports filed regarding the military actions in Mexico mention the captain and his flag.⁶

In the interview in the *Telegraph*, Williams recalled that the flag he "borrowed" to take to Mexico was one of three from the state library, the other two being a Hessian flag and a British red banner. He said that these were generally believed to have been given to the state library by Dr. Benjamin Rush. The state library was in Philadelphia until 1810 and so this recollection is reasonable, although the actual origins of the flag cannot be confirmed. Of interest is the extent to which Betsy Ross was associated with the national flag in 1847.

1851: The Wheeler Portrait Shows the Family Story in Art

A third piece of artistic evidence is a painting by Ellie Sully Wheeler of Philadelphia owned by Weston Adams, a lawyer in Columbia, South Caro-



Figure 5. Painting of Betsy Ross and the “Flag Committee”, by Ellie Sully Wheeler, 1851. Courtesy of Weston Adams

lina. It is a painting of Betsy Ross and the Flag Committee, done in 1851, some twenty years before William Canby’s speech and 42 years before the famous Charles Weisgerber painting. It is Betsy showing the flag, with the stars in a circle, to Washington, Morris, and Ross. A young girl is in the picture, holding the attention of one of the men.

The artist was the daughter of a famous Philadelphia painter, Thomas Sully, and she had grown up in the neighborhood of Philadelphia where much of this history had occurred. She may have known, through folklore, the story of Betsy and the “committee” and may even have known Betsy herself, as their lives overlapped by some twenty years. The picture was painted fifteen years after Betsy’s death.

Interestingly, the picture was copied around 1900 by J. L. G. Ferris, as part of his series “Pageant of America”. In a way, this establishes its au-

thenticity. It was known and owned by somebody in Philadelphia at that time, and Ferris copied it to compete with the 1893 Weisgerber painting which was then making Betsy famous.

1856: U.S. Capitol Fresco Design Tells Betsy's Story

An interesting piece of evidence has recently come to light in the office of the Architect of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.: a glass-plate negative depicting a proposed fresco that might have been considered for the Ladies Waiting Room. In the 1850s an Italian artist, Constantino Brunidi, was commissioned to create frescoes in the Capitol Building. One of his draftsmen produced a rough layout for consideration, and while it was not utilized, the design reflects the folklore of the period regarding important women of the Revolutionary War period.

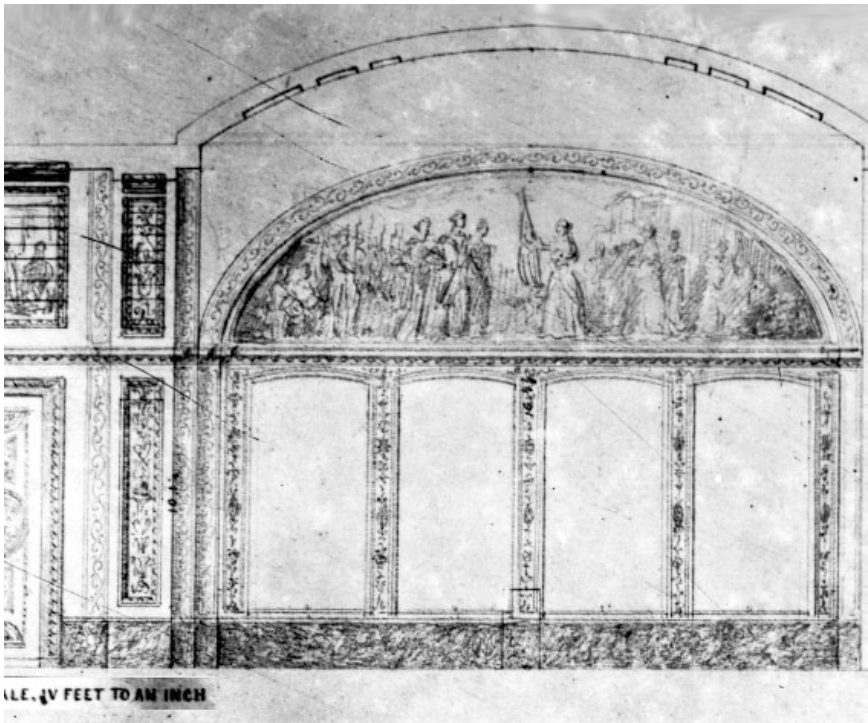


Figure 6. Proposed Frescoes for U.S. Capitol, Ladies Waiting Room, 1856.
 Courtesy of the Architect of the U.S. Capitol

There are four images, roughly done, one of which would have been a flat panel (apparently above a door) and three others that would have been in a four-part panel on the ceiling.

The image intended for over the door is of a woman presenting a flag to a group of three men in uniform, with a cluster of soldiers in the background. This is not the typical scene of “Lady Liberty” giving a flag to a single soldier, often found on Regimental flags. Instead it shows a real woman and a group of three men, consistent with Betsy’s description of the “committee” who called on her for a flag. How the artist knew of the story we do not know, although clearly the story was known during the 1850s.

(The additional images, for the ceiling panel, are most likely other women with legendary roles in the American Revolution: Molly Pitcher, who served in her fallen husband’s place on a cannon crew during the Battle of Monmouth; Lydia Darragh, the Philadelphia Quakeress/spy who warned Washington of an impending British attack at Valley Forge; and Deborah Sampson, who dressed as a man and served in the Continental Army from May 1782 to October 1783. The fourth panel is blank on the rough drawing, and the fresco was never painted.)

Conclusion

Indirect evidence has surfaced in the last 100 years which supports the Betsy Ross family traditions—that Betsy influenced or initiated the use of 5-pointed stars on the national flag, that she sewed prototypes and actual flags for the Pennsylvania Navy and for the U.S. Government, and that her role was appreciated in Philadelphia and national folklore for generations before her grandson’s speech in 1870. While there is no documentary evidence as to who designed and sewed the first national flag, she was in the center of it all during the Revolution and has a defensible place in our nation’s history.



The paper from which this article is abridged was presented at the 38th NAVA Meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana in October 2004. It is an excerpt from the forthcoming book about this new evidence: Betsy Ross's Five Pointed Star, to be published by the author in 2005.

Endnotes

1. Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, p. 112. This payment to Betsy is mentioned in nearly every book on the subject. Henry W. Moeller (in *Shattering an American Myth: Unfurling the History of the Stars and Stripes*, Amereon House, 1992, pp. 119-121) asserts the minority opinion that she made signal flags, not ship's colors.
2. Howard Michael Madaus, "The United States Flag in the American West: The Evolution of the United States Flags Produced by or for U.S. Government Entities During the Westward Movement, 1777-1876", *Raven* 5, 1998, pp. 74-77. The flags may well have been made for William Clark, then governor of the Missouri Territory, for his dealings with the territory's tribes—an echo of his experience during the Lewis & Clark expedition (see Tschachler's "Sacred Emblems of Attachment" elsewhere in this volume).
3. William Canby, "The First American Flag and Who Made It", paper presented to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, March 1870. From the original long-hand version, courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., transcribed in full by John B. Harker.
4. Cokie Roberts, *Founding Mothers*, HarperCollins, New York, 2004, p. 90. Originally published in *The Pioneer Mothers of America: A Record of the More Notable Women of the Early Days of the Country, and Particularly of the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods*, Volume 3, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1912, pp. 93-98. <<http://www.colonialhall.com/sherman/shermanRebecca.php>>
5. Williams would serve as a major general in the Civil War, responsible for organizing a training camp in the Harrisburg area. His Mexican War service and flag role were described in *Harper's Weekly*, 27 July 1861, p. 466.
6. Randy W. Hackenburg, *Pennsylvania in the War with Mexico*, White Mane Publishing, Shippensburg, Penn., 2002. Hackenburg works at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.