



MUMBAI

American Center Bulletin

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2006

SEAMSTRESS FOR A REVOLUTION

BY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

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

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 lie 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' 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 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

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HOLIDAYS

July 4: Independence Day

A WORD FROM THE CENTER

This July is chock-full at the American Center, as we note a significant birthday and a significant departure, so I've been asked to keep this "Word from the Center" brief.

Much has already been said about America's 230th birthday (or, as I like to think of it, the quasibicentennial, five years on), so I'd prefer to focus on the sad departure we face.

It's hard to think of the American Center without Linda Cheatham. She's been a dynamic and tireless advocate for our goal of close ties between the U.S. and India, a mentor to all of us here at the Center, and a friend.

For those of you who've written or called to express your frustration with our habit of all moving around every few years: Never fear. We're only letting her go because we're pretty sure she won't be able to stay away for long. *Phir melenge*, Linda!



Ruth Bennett
Deputy Director

A NOTE OF FAREWELL

My assignment here in Mumbai has flown by all too quickly, and I find myself preparing to depart for my next tour of duty – as the Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan – before this month is over. I will do so with real regret that sheer lack of time did not permit me to get to know more of you better, travel more throughout western India as well as in the rest of your great country, or find many more hours in which to fully savor all of the marvelous aspects of life in this great city. Yet I know that even if I'd had a full five years here instead of not quite three, I'd be feeling the same way: Mumbai – and indeed, India as a whole – is far too richly faceted, and far too full of wonderful people, for me to ever know either as well as I'd like.

I trust that you will give my successor, Liz Kauffman, the same warm welcome and friendship that you have given me. Like me, she can count herself especially lucky to be here at a time when relations between India and the U.S. are evolving so positively and in so many exciting and fulfilling ways. As have so many of my predecessors, I will look forward to opportunities to return as a friend whenever I can, but in the meantime, you have my respect, my admiration and my best wishes for a bright and prosperous future.

Sincerely,



Linda Cheatham
Director

FROM THE AMERICAN CENTER STAFF

AU REVOIR TILL WE MEET AGAIN



This month, the American Center staff will bid farewell to Linda Cheatham, spokesperson for the American Consulate, and Director of the American Center in Mumbai. Since she first set foot in the American Center, she charged the atmosphere with her electrifying energy and in her unrelenting pursuit of perfection. Just as we will remember her tenure here as the most significant period in the history of Indo-U.S. relations, we will also remember her as an important catalyst in the ever-growing ties between our two countries. We have seen her working hard towards that goal – day in and day out, in office and at home, and on weekends. We will always remember Linda as a caring person and thank her for the three memorable years we have worked with her. We wish you all the best Linda, and hope that our paths will cross again, and soon.

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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. 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 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.

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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 ten 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 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' 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.

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

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NOTES FROM THE AIRC

A Select Webliography on the American Flag

http://www.legion.org/?section=our_flag
American Legion – The Flag

<http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/index.html>
The Betsy Ross Homepage

<http://betsyrosshouse.org/noflash.html>
Betsy Ross House

http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/misc/ourflag/titlepage.htm
Federal Citizen Information Center – Our Flag

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/95-709.pdf>
Federation of American Scientists – Flag Protection: A Brief History and Summary of Recent Supreme Court Decisions and Proposed Constitutional Amendment

<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?id=15510>
First Amendment Center – Implementing a Flag – Desecration Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/jun14.html>
The Library of Congress: American Memory – Today in History: June 14 Flag Day

<http://www.flagday.org/Pages/PausePage.html>
The National Flag Day Foundation, Inc.

<http://www.pbs.org/americaresponds/theamericanflag.html>
Public Broadcasting Service: America Responds – The American Flag – Classroom Resources

<http://www.si.edu/resource/faq/nmah/flag.htm>
Smithsonian Institution: Facts About the United States Flag

http://americanhistory.si.edu/ssb/2_home/fs2.html
Smithsonian National Museum of American History – The Star-Spangled Banner – The Flag that Inspired the National Anthem

<http://www.superflag.com/doc/guinness.htm>
Superflag – World's Record – The Largest Flag!

<http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/flags/fedflag.shtml>
The University of Oklahoma College of Law – National/Historic American Flags

<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/symbols.htm>
U.S. Department of State/InfoUSA – Symbols and Celebrations

<http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/Archive/2005/Jun/07-231061.html>
U.S. Department of State International Information Programs – The Origins of Flag Day

<http://www.usflag.org/>
The Flag of the United States of America

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050610-12.html>
The White House – Flag Day and National Flag Week, 2005 – Presidential Proclamation

Note: Internet sites included in this listing, other than those of the U.S. Government, should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

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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 web site 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 nonspecificity" of Ross' story. In any event, the controversy over the flag's creation should not obscure Betsy Ross' 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.

William C. Kashatus works for the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Reprinted from The American Enterprise, a Washington-based magazine of politics, business, and culture.

Admission to all American Center programs, restricted to persons over 16, will be on a first-come, first-served basis. Please bring the envelope containing this issue of the bulletin for admission (maximum two persons). The auditorium doors will open 30 minutes before the start of the program.

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FILMS THIS MONTH

HOLLYWOOD EXPLORES PATRIOTISM

Friday, July 14 **1776** (1972, color, 148 mins)

American Center Auditorium

3:30 and 6:30 p.m.

Friday, July 21 **The Right Stuff** (1983, color, 193 mins)

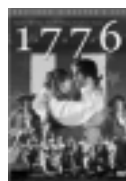
American Center Auditorium

3:00 and 6:45 p.m.

Friday, July 28 **Young Mr. Lincoln** (1939, b/w, 100 mins)

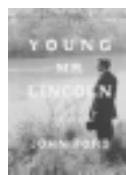
American Center Auditorium

3:30 and 6:30 p.m.



1776 is a rousing musical celebration of our Founding Fathers and the birth of America. Meet Benjamin Franklin, Caesar Rodney, Tom Jefferson, Thomas McKean, John Adams, George Read, John Hancock – all singin', all dancin'. William Daniels, Blythe Danner, Howard DaSilva star.

Spectacular adventure of the birth of the Space Age and America's Mercury astronauts combines sweeping action, humor and human drama. Sam Shepard, Scott Glenn, Ed Harris, Barbara Hershey and Dennis Quaid star. **The Right Stuff** is written and directed by Phil Kaufman from Tom Wolfe's novel.



A wonderful slice of pioneer Americana, John Ford's screen treatment of Lincoln's early life stars Henry Fonda as the inexperienced backwoods lawyer who uses common sense to defend two brothers accused of murder. **Young Mr. Lincoln** costars Alice Brady, Donald Meek, Pauline Moore and Ward Bond.

MUMBAI MONDAYS

A Discussion with Vice Consuls

Rachna Korhonen and Aroosha Rana on

Where Are You From?

The Response of Two First-Generation Indian-American Diplomats

Monday, July 17

American Center Auditorium

6:00 p.m.

How does it feel to be a first-generation Indian-American? The first Indians migrated to the United States in the late 1800s. Since then, America has been welcoming South Asians to its shores from all corners of the subcontinent. Come discuss issues of identity with two first-generation Americans, as they share their memories of growing up in the U.S. while maintaining links to their parents' South Asian heritage.

Rachna S. Korhonen joined the U.S. State Department in September 2004. Prior to that, she worked for multinational corporations in sales, product management and operations. She has a degree in Computer Science and Mathematics from the State University of New York (SUNY), and started her career at Bell Labs, where she earned two patents.

Aroosha Z. Rana joined the Foreign Service in January 2005. Prior to that, she worked in Brooklyn, New York, as a holistic educator with El Puente, a community-based arts and activism organization, and as a performer with We Got Issues, a women's arts collective. Also a writer, she has been published by the Beacon Press in *Living Islam Out Loud*, an anthology chronicling the experience of first-generation American-Muslim women. She received a B.A. in Hispanic studies from the University of Michigan in 2001 and has traveled and worked in Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Pakistan. She speaks Spanish, Urdu, and Hindi.