

# *St Aiden's Homeschool*



## *Fact File & Note Pages*

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## *Introduction*

While Americans recognize and celebrate collective achievements such as the writing of the Declaration of Independence, victory in the Revolutionary War, or the landing of a man on the Moon — it is individual accomplishment that is cherished the most. The "stars" of the aforementioned events — Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Neil Armstrong — outshine the collective constellation. One person's contribution **can** define the course and meaning of history.

When we view the flag, we think of liberty, freedom, pride, and Betsy Ross. The American flag flies on the moon, sits atop Mount Everest, is hurtling out in space. The flag is how America signs her name.

It is no surprise that Betsy Ross has become one of the most cherished figures of American History.

Betsy Ross (January 1, 1752 – January 30, 1836) was an American woman said to have sewn the first American flag which incorporated stars representing the first thirteen colonies, although "many details (about her life) are conjecture based on research."

[The story of Betsy Ross's Life](#) is one of triumph through adversity. She was disowned by the Quakers. She lost one husband to an explosion at a munitions depot that he was guarding. Her second husband died in a British prison. She survived her third husband, who was sick for many years. She had seven daughters, two of whom died in infancy. She maintained a business through it all. Her pew was next to George Washington's at Christ Church.

### **Early years**

Betsy Ross was born Elizabeth Griscom to parents Samuel and Rebecca in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 1, 1752, the eighth of 17 children. She "grew up in a household where the plain dress and strict discipline of the Society of Friends dominated her life." She learned to sew from her great-aunt Sarah Griscom.

After she finished her schooling at a Quaker public school, her father apprenticed her to an upholsterer named William Webster. At this job, she fell in love with fellow apprentice John Ross, son of an assistant

rector Aeneas Ross (Sarah Leach) at (Episcopal) Christ Church. They married and had two children.

As interdenominational marriages typically led to being read out of their Quaker meeting, the couple eloped in 1773 when she was 21, and married at Hugg's Tavern in Gloucester, New Jersey. The marriage caused a split from her family and meant her expulsion from the Quaker congregation. The young couple soon started their own upholstery business and joined Christ Church.

### **The Revolutionary War**

The Rosses were financially stressed by the outbreak of the [American Revolutionary War](#). The fabrics they depended on grew scarce, and business slowed considerably. John joined the Pennsylvania militia and was killed in January 1776 when ammunition in a storehouse he was guarding exploded.

After her first husband's death, Betsy Ross joined the "Fighting Quakers" which, unlike traditional Quakers, supported the war effort. In June 1777, she married sea captain Joseph Ashburn at Old Swedes' Church in Philadelphia. British soldiers forcibly occupied their house when they controlled the city in 1777. Following the [Battle of Germantown](#), she nursed both American and British soldiers.

Betsy Ross is best remembered, however, as a flag maker during the Revolution. Family oral history, supported only by 19th century affidavits, recounts the widowed Ross meeting with [George Washington](#), [George Ross](#), and [Robert Morris](#) at her upholstery business in Philadelphia, a meeting said to have resulted in the sewing of the first U.S. "stars and stripes" flag. According to the story, it was at this meeting, to "silence the men's protests that these new five-pointed stars would be unfamiliar and difficult for seamstresses to make, she folded a piece of paper, made a single scissor snip, and revealed a perfect five-pointed star."

Evidence that Ross did in fact make flags for the government includes a receipt for her making "ship's colours" for the Pennsylvania Navy in May 1777, as well as a folded star pattern with her name found in a Philadelphia Quaker Society safe. Whether or not Ross made the "first" stars and stripes has never been proven, however. According to the family legend, many women were making flags when Betsy received

her first order. Francis Hopkinson also took credit for the design of the stars and stripes, which was partially acknowledged by Congress.

## **Post-War**

In May 1783, Ross married John Claypoole, an old friend who had told her of Ashburn's death in a British prison where he and Ashburn had been confined. The couple had five daughters together. He died in 1817 after twenty years of ill health. She continued working in her upholstery business, including making flags for the United States of America, until 1827. After her retirement, she moved in with her married daughter, Susannah Satterthwaite, who continued to operate the business. Ross died in Philadelphia on January 30, 1836, at age 84.

Although it is one of the most visited tourist sites in Philadelphia, the claim that Ross once lived at the [Betsy Ross House](#) is a matter of dispute.

## **Burials**

Ross's body was first buried at the Free Quaker burial ground on South 5th Street. Twenty years later, her remains were exhumed and reburied in the Mt. Moriah Cemetery in the Cobbs Creek Park section of Philadelphia. In preparation for the United States Bicentennial, the city ordered the remains moved to the courtyard of the [Betsy Ross House](#) in 1975; however, workers found no remains under her tombstone. Bones found elsewhere in the family plot were deemed to be hers and were re-interred in the current grave visited by tourists at the Betsy Ross House.

## **Betsy Ross postage stamp**

On January 1, 1952, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp to honour the 200th anniversary of her birth. It shows her presenting the new flag to George Washington, Robert Morris, and George Ross. The design was taken from a painting by Charles H. Weisberger, one of the founders and first secretary of the Memorial Association.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### ●What do the red, white, and blue of the flag represent?

The Continental Congress left no record to show why it chose the colours. However, in 1782, the Congress of the Confederation chose these same colours for the Great Seal of the United States and listed their meaning as follows: white to mean purity and innocence, red for valour and hardiness, and blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. According to legend, George Washington interpreted the elements of the flag this way: the stars were taken from the sky, the red from the British colours, and the white stripes signified the secession from the home country. However, there is no official designation or meaning for the colours of the flag.

### ●Why are the stars in a circle?

The stars were in a circle so that no one colony would be viewed above another. It is reported that George Washington said, "Let the 13 stars in a circle stand as a new constellation in the heavens."

### ●If Betsy sewed the flag, who designed it?

Betsy Ross's daughter, Rachel Fletcher, testified in 1870, the following: "[The committee] showed her [Betsy Ross] a drawing roughly executed, of the flag as it was proposed to be made by the committee, and that she saw in it some defects in its proportions and the arrangement and shape of the stars. That she said it was square and 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 either 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."

### ●Why would Betsy Ross be chosen to make the flag?

It was usual in that day for upholsterers to be flag makers. As Betsy Ross prayed in the pew next to George Washington and had already sewn buttons for him, and she was a niece of George Ross, it is not exceptional that these members of the Flag Committee formed by the Continental Congress would call upon Betsy Ross to make the flag.

### ●Was this her house?

It is known that Betsy Ross rented rooms here. At the time of the flag creation, she was either here at 239 Arch Street or next door at 241 Arch, where the garden is now. House numbers on her street between the years 1785 and 1857 were registered using three different numbering systems, making the determination very tricky. If you are interested in historical detective work, you'll enjoy the methodical,

historical approach used by experts: check out the [Was this her house?](#) page.

● **Where is the first flag?**

No one knows what happened to the first flag. Very few flags from that time have survived.

● **Why is the flag called "Old Glory"?**

In 1831, Captain William Driver, a shipmaster from Salem, Massachusetts, left on one of his many world voyages. Friends presented him with a flag of 24 stars. As the banner opened to the ocean breeze, he exclaimed, "Old Glory." He kept his flag for many years, protecting it during the Civil War, until it was flown over the Tennessee capital. His "Old Glory" became a nickname for all American flags.

● **Who was Mary Pickersgill?**

Mary Young Pickersgill sewed the very large (30'x42') Star-Spangled Banner in the summer of 1813. It flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 (1812-1814) and was the inspiration for Francis Scott Key to write what would become our National Anthem. Pickersgill's flag today hangs at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Her house still stands as a museum you can visit in Baltimore, Maryland.

● **What is a vexillologist?**

A vexillologist is an expert on flags and ensigns. A vexillum (plural vexilla) is a military standard or flag used by ancient Roman troops.

● **Many people discover among their family relics a certificate from the American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial Association. What is it?**



Over two million of these certificates were sold starting in 1898 in order to raise funds needed to preserve the Betsy Ross House. These certificates were receipts or "thank-yous" for contributions of 10 cents. The Association went out of business in 1935. The only "value" to these is the knowledge that the recipient participated in the preservation of the Betsy Ross House.

## How to Display the Flag

PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION FROM <http://www.ushistory.org/betsy>



1. When the flag is displayed over the middle of the street, it should be suspended vertically with the union to the north in an east and west street or to the east in a north and south street.

2. The flag of the United States of America, when it is displayed with another flag against a wall from crossed staffs, should be on the right, the flag's own right [*that means the viewer's left --Webmaster*], and its staff should be in front of the staff of the other flag.



3. The flag, when flown at half-staff, should be first hoisted to the peak for an instant and then lowered to the half-staff position. The flag should be again raised to the peak before it is lowered for the day. By "half-staff" is meant lowering the flag to one-half the distance between the top and bottom of the staff. Crepe streamers may be affixed to spear heads or flagstaves in a parade only by order of the President of the United States.



4. When flags of States, cities, or localities, or pennants of societies are flown on the same halyard with the flag of the United States, the latter should always be at the peak. When the flags are flown from adjacent staffs, the flag of the United States should be hoisted first and lowered last. No such flag or pennant may be placed above the flag of the United States or to the right of the flag of the United States (the viewer's left). When the flag is half-masted, both flags are half-masted, with the US flag at the mid-point and the other flag below.



5. When the flag is suspended over a sidewalk from a rope extending from a house to a pole at the edge of the sidewalk, the flag should be hoisted out, union first, from the building.



6. When the flag of the United States is displayed from a staff projecting horizontally or at an angle from the window sill, balcony, or front of a building, the union of the flag should be placed at the peak of the staff unless the flag is at half-staff.



7. When the flag is used to cover a casket, it should be so placed that the union is at the head and over the left shoulder. The flag should not be lowered into the grave or allowed to touch the ground.



8. When the flag is displayed in a manner other than by being flown from a staff, it should be displayed flat, whether indoors or out. When displayed either horizontally or vertically against a wall, the union should be uppermost and to the flag's own right, that is, to the observer's left. When displayed in a window it should be displayed in the same way that is with the union or blue field to the left of the observer in the street. When festoons, rosettes or drapings are desired, bunting of blue, white and red should be used, but never the flag.



9. That the flag, when carried in a procession with another flag, or flags, should be either on the marching right; that is, the flag's own right, or, if there is a line of other flags, in front of the centre of that line.



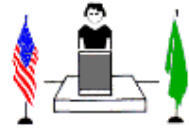
10. The flag of the United States of America should be at the centre and at the highest point of the group when a number of flags of States or localities or pennants of societies are grouped and displayed from staffs.



**11.** When flags of two or more nations are displayed, they are to be flown from separate staffs of the same height. The flags should be of approximately equal size. International usage forbids the display of the flag of one nation above that of another nation in time of peace.



**12.** When displayed from a staff in a church or public auditorium on or off a podium, the flag of the United States of America should hold the position of superior prominence, in advance of the audience, and in the position of honour at the clergyman's or speaker's right as he faces the audience. Any other flag so displayed should be placed on the left of the clergyman or speaker (to the right of the audience).



**13.** When the flag is displayed on a car, the staff shall be fixed firmly to the chassis or clamped to the right fender.



**14.** When hung in a window where it is viewed from the street, place the union at the head and over the left shoulder.



# Flag Trivia

**Q** Who cut the American flag into pieces and was honoured for doing it?

**A** Robert Peary, who left pieces of the flag scattered at the North Pole. [Ref](#)

**Q** Is it ever appropriate to fly the flag upside down?

**A** Yes, but only in an emergency. It means "Help Me, I am in Trouble!"

**Q** What is done with worn or outdated flags?

**A** Flags are used until they are worn out and then they are destroyed, preferably by burning.

**Q** Francis Scott Key wrote the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the back of an envelope. What is the source of the music for it?

**A** The music is from an old English drinking song called "To Anacreon in Heaven."

**Q** The American flag first flew over a foreign fort in what country?

**A** Libya — over Fort Derne, on the shores of Tripoli.

**Q** A vexillologist is an expert in what?

**A** The history of flags.

**Q** "Shipwreck" Kelly (1885-1952) was famous for sitting for long periods of time. What did he have to do with flags?

**A** He set many flagpole-sitting records. He sat for 49 days on one flagpole. He once estimated that he spent a total of over 20,000 hours sitting on flagpoles. Flagpole sitting was a craze started in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1929.

# 5-Pointed Star in One Snip

## ★ Cut a 5-Pointed Star in One Snip ★

George Washington's original pencil sketch for the flag indicated 6-pointed stars, a form he apparently preferred.

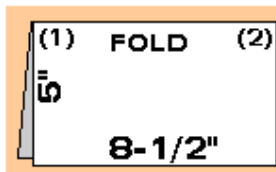


Betsy Ross, however, recommended a 5-pointed star. When the committee protested that it was too difficult to make, she took a piece of paper, folded it deftly, and with a single snip of her scissors, produced a symmetrical five-pointed star. This seeming feat of magic so impressed her audience that they readily agreed to her suggestion.

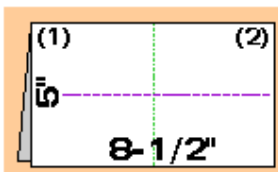
To you we pass along the secret...

**Take a thin piece of paper 8-1/2" x 10" (or an exact proportion thereof), fold it as indicated and cut yourself a perfect 5-pointed star.**

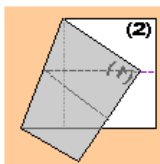
Thanks to the Betsy Ross House for providing these instructions.



**Step 1.** Fold an 8-1/2" x 10" piece of paper in half.

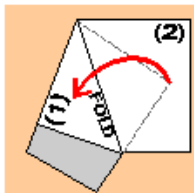


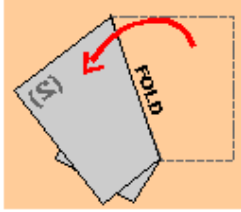
**Step 2.** Fold and unfold in half both ways to form creased centre lines. (Note: be sure paper is still folded in half.)



**Step 3.** Bring corner (1) right to meet the centre line. Be sure to fold from the vertical crease line.

**Step 4.** Bring corner (1) left till edges coincide, then make the fold.



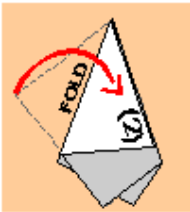


Step 5. Bring corner (2) left and fold.

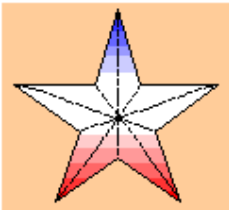


Step 6. Bring corner (2) right until edges coincide. Then fold.

Step 7. Cut on the angle as shown in the picture. Then unfold the small piece.



Step 8. Marvel at your perfect (we hope!) 5-pointed star! If your star is not perfect, take a fresh piece of paper (8-1/2" x 10" — not 8-1/2" x 11") and [return to Step 1](#).



[BETSY ROSS HOME PAGE](#)

Thanks & Credits to <http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/>



*Read the questions below and write the answers on the lines provided:*

**1. Who is Robert Peary and what is he famous for?**

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**2. What does it mean if the flag is flying upside down?**

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**3. What happens to old or outdated flags?**

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**4. Write a little bit about Francis Scott Key and what he is most famous for.**

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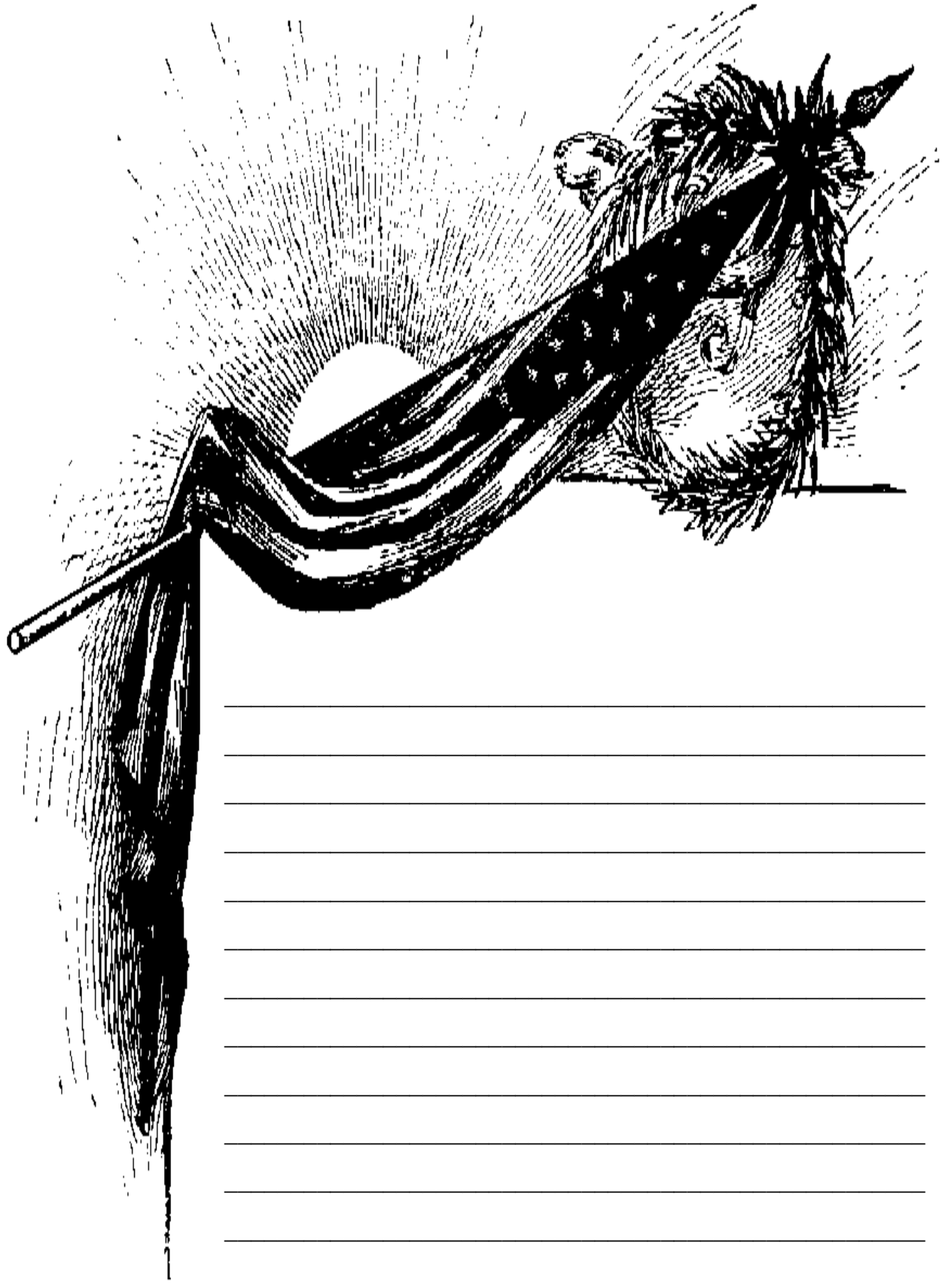
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## **Further reading**

- Chanko, Pamela. *Easy Reader Biographies: Betsy Ross: The Story of Our Flag* (Easy Reader Biographies). 2007.
- Cohon, Rhody, Stacia Deutsch, and Guy Francis. *Betsy Ross's Star* (Blast to the Past). 2007.
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- Mader, Jan. *Betsy Ross* (First Biographies). 2007.
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*REFERENCES & CREDITS WITH THANKS FOR IMAGES AND INFORMATION*

<http://www.wikipedia.org>

<http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/>

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