

Hopkinson and Betsy Ross Flags

Peter Ansoff, Past President
North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) www.nava.org

*Resolved That the Flag of the united States ^{be designed} consist
of 13 stripes alternate red and white, that the
Union be 13 stars white in a blue field represent-
ing a new constellation. —*

The consensus among US flag historians seems to be that Francis Hopkinson was the author of the resolution that the Continental Congress adopted on 14 June 1777. There are two basic lines of evidence that support this:

- The resolution was adopted immediately after another one that dealt with preparations to defend Philadelphia against British attack. This involved coordination between the Continental Navy and the Pennsylvania state navy, and it was obviously important for them to have a common flag. Hopkinson was the chair of the Marine Committee and would have been the logical person to prepare both resolutions.
- Hopkinson himself stated in an official letter in 1780 that he had designed "The Flag of the United States of America," and requested payment for this and other services. His request was denied on the grounds that designing the flag was part of his duties on the Marine Committee, but no one questioned his claim to have designed it.

Hopkinson's design was not actually a new flag, of course, but a revision of the "Continental Colors" of 1775, with the British union crosses replaced by stars. There is no contemporary evidence about what Hopkinson intended for the star arrangement or the number of points on the stars, or that he was even concerned about such details. Many books show illustrations of the "Hopkinson Flag," but those are pure conjecture. No authentic examples of Revolutionary War-era stars-and-stripes flags are known to exist. However, there are a number of contemporary illustrations, and almost all of them show 6 or 8 pointed stars in more-or-less regular rows.

There is really no evidence that Elizabeth "Betsy" Ross had anything to do with designing the American flag. Her only documented connection with flag making during the Revolution is a 1777 payment voucher from the Pennsylvania State Navy for making "ship's colours." The story about her visit from Washington and the committee is based on a recollection of her grandson, William Canby, who presented a paper about it to the Pennsylvania Historical Society in 1870 (Canby was 11 years old when Betsy died). Many of the details are highly unlikely, and some (like the 5-pointed-star story) are not supported by contemporary evidence, as noted above. The "stars-in-a-circle" pattern that is commonly associated with Betsy Ross also appears to be a post-hoc creation and was popularized by the famous Weisgerber painting of Betsy in the 1890s.

The closest thing to a definitive discussion of the Betsy Ross legend is probably in Edward Richardson's "Standards and Colors of the American Revolution" (1982), pp. 287-273. He discusses Canby's paper and its relationship (or lack thereof) to recorded historical events. He also points out that "Canby's paper does not claim that Betsy Ross designed the stars and stripes nor does it even mention the circle of stars design."

Two other good histories of the American Flag also have briefer treatments of the Betsy Ross story: "The History of the United States Flag" by Milo M. Quaife (1961), and "So Proudly We Hail" by William Furlong and Byron McCandless (1981). Quaife's book, although it is somewhat dated now, is in my opinion the most concise and useful history of the American Flag. (Perhaps not coincidentally, it's one of the few such books written by a professional historian.)

Skepticism about the Betsy Ross story is not actually a recent phenomenon. Rear Admiral George Preble, who wrote a seminal history of the American flag in the 1870s, was a contemporary of William Canby and corresponded with him. He was particularly critical of Canby's supposition that Betsy's meeting with Washington took place in Spring 1776, which was more than a year before Congress adopted the stars and stripes. Preble commented: "Mr. Canby contends that the stars and stripes were in common if not general use soon after the Declaration of Independence, nearly a year before the resolution of Congress proclaiming them the flag of the United States of America; but I cannot agree with him."

Here are two websites that are pertinent to this topic:

[THE 13 STARS AND STRIPES: A SURVEY OF 18TH CENTURY IMAGES \(vexman.net\)](http://vexman.net)

Dave Martucci, who is a former president of NAVA, assembled this collection of contemporary images, and the overwhelming majority show the stars in rows or random patterns rather than in a circle.

["The History of the Flag of the United States" by William Canby \(ushistory.org\)](http://ushistory.org)

This is the actual text of the paper that Canby presented to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870.

From a different angle, there is an interesting article called "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory," by Michael H. Frisch, which is in a 1994 collection called "Memory and History." The author reported on an experiment in which high school students were asked to "Write down the first ten names that you think of, excluding presidents, generals, etc., in response to the prompt 'American History from its beginning through the end of the Civil War.'" He repeated the experiment with a number of different classes, and Betsy Ross was *always* the first name on the list. Frisch offered an interesting discussion of why the Betsy Ross legend is so embedded in American memory. He wrote, "It is hard to avoid the speculation that the latter-day invention of the mythic Betsy Ross -- and her immediate public enshrinement -- came as a kind of needed supplement to the revolutionary myth . . . If George [Washington] is the Father of the Country . . . then surely Betsy Ross exists symbolically as the Mother, who gives birth to our collective symbol."

There is quite a bit of literature about Betsy Ross, including some defenses of the legend by her descendants and general information about her life and genealogy (which is fairly well documented and not contentious).

The historical consensus, however, seems to be that her relationship to the origins of the flag is unlikely at best.