

ADDIE GUTHRIE WEAVER

THE STORY OF OUR FLAG

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Addie Guthrie Weaver The Story of Our Flag / Colonial and National, with Historical Sketch of the Quakeress Betsy Ross

Preface

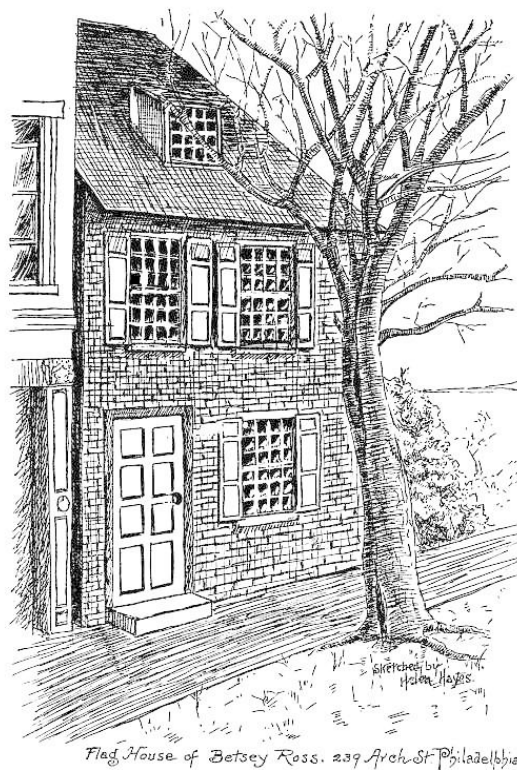
For some years the Author has been interested in the history of our First Flag and its fair maker, Betsy Ross, and fortunately, through a family relationship with one of the descendants, became familiar with much of the family history.

It seemed that so beautiful and estimable a lady, and one who played so important a part in those stirring events of our early history should be better known and appreciated by her sisters of to-day.

Fitting, it seems, that while man in defending our Flag has accomplished his greatest achievements, and won undying fame, woman first fashioned into “a thing of beauty” the symbol of that patriotic devotion.

To Mr. George Canby of Philadelphia, and Mrs. Sophia Champion Guthrie of Washington, D. C., grandson and great granddaughter, respectively, of Betsy Ross, the author is indebted for family history that has inspired this work, and to them and other descendants, this book is affectionately dedicated by

THE AUTHOR.



The Story of Our Flag. COLONIAL AND NATIONAL

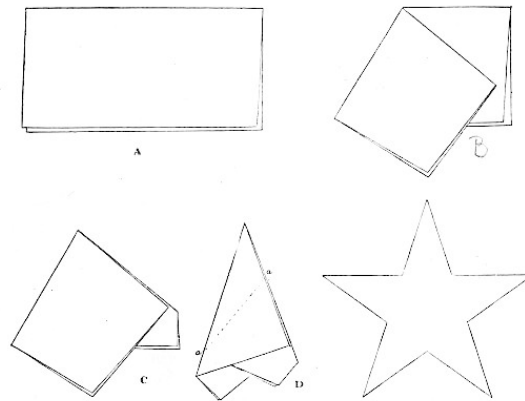
The history of our flag from its inception, in fact, the inception itself, has been a source of much argument and great diversity of opinion. Many theories and mystifications have gone forth, mingled with a few facts, giving just enough color of truth to make them seem plausible. It is for the purpose of clearing away the veil of doubt that hangs around the origin of the Stars and Stripes that this book has been written.

The Continental Congress in 1775 was very much disturbed over the embarrassing situation of the colonies, and after Washington was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army, it showed its independence by appointing a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison and Mr. Lynch to create a colonial flag that would be national in its tendency. They finally decided on one with thirteen bars, alternate red and white, the “King’s Colors” with the crosses of St. Andrew and St. George in a field of blue. The cross of St. Andrew then, as now, was of white, while the cross of St. George was of red. The colonies still acknowledged the sovereignty of England—as this flag attested—but united against her tyranny. This was known as the “flag of our union”—that is, the union of the colonies, and was not created until after the committee had been to the camp at Cambridge and consulted with Washington. It was probably made either at the camp at Cambridge or in Boston, as it was unfurled by Washington under the Charter Oak on January 2, 1776. It received thirteen cheers and a salute of thirteen guns.

It is not known whether Samuel Adams, the “Father of Liberty,” was consulted in regard to this flag, but it is a well known fact that he was looking forward, even then, to the independence of the colonies, while Washington, Franklin and the others still looked for justice,—tardy though it might be,—from England.

Two days later, on the 4th of January, 1776, Washington received the King’s speech, and as it happened to come so near to the time of the adoption of the new flag, with the English crosses of St. Andrew and St. George, many of the regulars thought it meant submission, and the English seemed for the time to so understand it; but our army showed great indignation over the King’s speech to parliament, and burned all of the copies.

In a letter of General Washington to Joseph Reed, written January 4, he says: “We are at length favored with the sight of his majesty’s most gracious speech, breathing sentiments of tenderness and compassion for his deluded American subjects. The speech I send you (a volume of them were sent out by the Boston gentry) was farcical enough and gave great joy to them without knowing or intending it, for on that day (the 2nd) which gave being to our new army, but before the proclamation came to hand, we hoisted the Union flag, in compliment to the United Colonies, but behold it was received at Boston as a token of the deep impression the speech had made upon us and as a signal of submission. By this time I presume they begin to think it strange that we have not made a formal surrender of our lines.”



At this time the number and kinds of flags that were in use on land and sea, were only limited to the ingenuity of the state and military officials. This was very embarrassing. On May 20, 1776, Washington was requested to appear before Congress on important secret military business. Major-General Putnam, according to Washington's letters, was left in command at New York during his absence. It was in the latter part of May, 1776, that Washington, accompanied by Colonel George Ross, a member of his staff, and by the Honorable Robert Morris, the great financier of the revolution, called upon Mrs. Betsy Ross, a niece of Colonel Ross. She was a young and beautiful widow, only twenty-four years of age, and known to be expert at needle work. They called to engage her services in preparing our first starry flag. She lived in a little house in Arch street, Philadelphia, which stands to-day unchanged, with the exception of one large window, which has been placed in the front. It was here, in this house, that Washington unfolded a paper on which had been rudely sketched a plan of a flag of thirteen stripes, with a blue field dotted with thirteen stars. They talked over the plan of this flag in detail, and Mrs. Ross noticed that the stars which were sketched were six-pointed, and suggested that they should have five points. Washington admitted that she was correct, but he preferred a star that would not be an exact copy of that on his coat of arms, and he also thought that a six-pointed star would be easier to cut. Mrs. Ross liked the five-pointed star, and to show that they were easily cut she deftly folded a piece of paper and with one clip of her scissors unfolded a perfect star with five points. (See illustration showing the way Betsy Ross folded the paper giving the five-pointed star which has ever since graced our country's banner. A, first fold of a square piece of paper; B, second; C, third, and D, fourth fold. The dotted line AA is the clip of the scissors.)

There is no record that Congress took any action on the national colors at this session,—but this first flag was made by Betsy Ross at this time, and in this way, and we find in Washington's letter of May 28, 1776, to General Putnam at New York, positive instructions "to the several colonels to hurry to get their colors done." In the orderly book, May 31, 1776, are these words: "General Washington has written to General Putnam desiring him in the most pressing terms, to give positive orders to all the colonels to have colors immediately completed for their respective regiments." The proof is positive that the committee approved the finished flag of Betsy Ross, and she was instructed to procure all the bunting possible in Philadelphia and make flags for the use of congress, Colonel Ross furnishing the money.

It is easily understood how on account of the meager resources of Congress and the unsettled condition of affairs generally, together with the fact that legislative action was extremely slow and tedious, that Colonel Ross should expedite matters by defraying the expense of this first order for our national colors. There is little, if any, doubt but that Washington on December 24th, Christmas Eve, in 1776, carried the starry flag in making that perilous trip through ice and snow across the Delaware, leading his sturdy, but poorly equipped troops. How inspiring to look back to that night when the Massachusetts fishermen so skilfully managed the boats that the whole army was safely

landed and in line of march at four o'clock on Christmas morning. The story of how they plodded on through ice and snow, surprising and defeating the Hessians and capturing a thousand men and their ammunition and equipments, is well known. This was the battle of Trenton, which changed the whole aspect of the war, even causing Lord Cornwallis to disembark and again start in pursuit of Washington, whose cause he had so lately declared lost. It is fitting here to speak of that friend of Washington, Robert Morris, one of the committee that originated our national colors, the great patriot who after the battle of Trenton went from house to house, soliciting money from his friends to clothe and feed this glorious army, which had fought so well.

Congress was very slow to act, and did not seem able to command even the meager resources of the different colonies. It lacked the centralized government which gives it such strength to-day. Considering the grave questions affecting the life and liberty of the people, it is not strange that the flag or any definite action regarding it, was not given prompt consideration. To indicate how slow Congress was to act in regard to the flag, we have only to refer to the Congressional records, which show that the resolution for its adoption was dated over one year after it was actually created, by the committee of which Washington was chief; that is on June 14, 1777. However, a month previous to this, Congress sent Betsy Ross an order on the treasury for £14, 12s. 2d., for flags for the fleet in the Delaware River, and she soon received an order to make all the government flags. The first flag was made of English bunting, exactly the same as those of to-day, excepting that our bunting now is of home manufacture.

There seems to be no question but that these colors, the stars and stripes, were unofficially adopted immediately after the completion of the first flag, the latter part of May, 1776, and that they went into general use at once, so far as it was practicable under the conditions then existing. Washington had the first flag created at this time. It was satisfactory, and he immediately instructed General Putnam to have the colonels prepare their colors—the colors that had just been approved, and which we know to be our flag of to-day.

The first reference we have of an English description of our flag is at the surrender of General Burgoyne, October 17, 1777, when one of the officers said: "The stars of the new flag represent a constellation of states."

Mr. George Canby, an estimable gentleman of the old school, and a grandson of Betsy Ross, has been tireless and indefatigable in his researches on the subject of our flag, and he claims, as did his brother, Mr. William J. Canby, before him, that the first flag with stars and stripes went into immediate use after its inception in the latter part of May, 1776.

The Declaration of Independence was passed by Congress on July 4, 1776, and some authorities, of whom Admiral Preble is the best, seem to infer that the Cambridge flag, with its English crosses, which was unfurled by Washington under the Charter Oak, was still carried by our armies until Congress took action in 1777. That Washington or Congress would sanction the carrying of this flag after the Declaration of Independence seems absurd, and it is certainly against all proof, as well as against the records of the family whose ancestor made the first flag.

Peak's portrait of Washington at the battle of Trenton, December 26 and 27, 1776, shows the Union Jack with the thirteen stars in the field of blue. Admiral Preble says, this is "only presumptive proof" that the stars were at that time in use on our flag, but Titian R. Peale, son of the painter, says: "I visited the Smithsonian Institute to see the portrait of Washington painted by my father after the battle of Trenton. The flag represented has a blue field with white stars arranged in a circle. I don't know that I ever heard my father speak of that flag, but the trophies at Washington's feet I know he painted from the flags then captured, and which were left with him for the purpose." He further says: "He was always very particular in the matters of historic record in his pictures."

This Preble admits in his book, but evidently thought that the artist, Peale, took the flag as it was then (1779), and not the flag of 1776, which the writer claims was identically the same. Through

persistent research many facts have come to light that would doubtless have changed the opinion of the late Admiral Preble—facts that were unknown to him.

On Saturday, June 14, 1777, Congress finally officially adopted the flag of our Union and independence, to-wit:

Resolved, “That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the Union be thirteen stars, white in the blue field, representing a new constellation.”

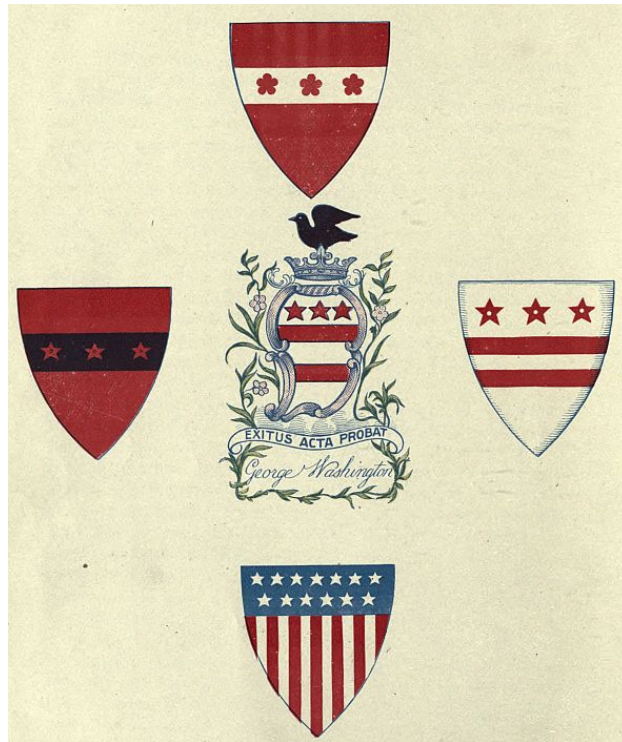
There is not the slightest record in any of the mss. journals in the library of Congress, or in the original files or in the drafts in motions made in the continental Congress of any previous legislative action for the establishment of a national flag for the United States of America, whose independence was declared nearly a year previous. Even after the official adoption of the flag it was not thoroughly brought before the people for many months. All of this adds to the proof that Congress was simply adopting and legalizing a flag that was in general use. That there was no recorded discussion in Congress regarding the adoption of our flag, was perfectly natural, because the star spangled banner came in with our independence, and at this time (June 14, 1777) was simply being officially acknowledged.

There is some diversity of opinion as to how the red, white and blue arranged in the stars and stripes came to be thought of as our flag.

The flag of the Netherlands, which is of red, white and blue stripes, had been familiar to the pilgrims while they lived in Holland, and its three stripes of red, white and blue were doubtless not forgotten. But it seems most probable that the coat of arms of the Washington family furnished more than a suggestion. The coat of arms of his ancestors, that had been adopted by him, comprised the red, white and blue and the stars; and was familiar to all who were associated with Washington. He it was who brought the pencil drawing, when, with the others, he called upon Mrs. Ross to have a suitable flag made, and as we find no mention in history, records or diaries as to who made the drawing, it seems conclusive that he himself designed and drew the plan from his own coat of arms, which was entirely different from England’s colors which had become necessarily distasteful.

It seems fitting in this place to write a little history in regard to the Washington coat of arms, the earliest mention of which was by Lawrence Washington, worshipful mayor of Northampton, England, in 1532. In 1540 he placed it upon the porch of his manor house, and on the tomb of Ann, his wife, in 1564. At the old church at Brighton, England, the tombs of Washington’s ancestors are marked by memorial plates of brass bearing the arms of the family, which consisted of a shield that bore the stars and stripes. The Archeological Society of England, the highest authority on ancient churches and heraldic matters, states that from the red and white bars, and stars of this shield, and the raven issuant from its crest (borne later by General Washington), the framers of the constitution took their idea of the flag.

When General Washington’s great-grandfather, Sir John Washington, came to this country in 1657, the family shield was brought with him. Sir John settled in Virginia, and established the American line of Washingtons. George Washington afterwards had it emblazoned upon the panels of his carriages, on his watch seals, book marks, and his dishes also bore the same emblem.



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WASHINGTON COAT OF ARMS

The accompanying plate shows the form and colors of the Coat of Arms of the Washington family, back as early as 1300.

The name first appeared as De Wessynton; then Weshyngton, and, finally, Washington.

How appropriately our own beautiful shield of the United States comes in here, and why not? was he not the “Father of Our Country”? and what more natural than that he should have left the imprint of his life and characteristics in symbol?

The central figure is a fac-simile of his book plate.

After the admission of Vermont and Kentucky into the Union, Congress passed an act in 1794, increasing both the stars and stripes from thirteen to fifteen, to take effect May, 1795. It was as follows:

“An act making alterations in the flag of the United States. Be it enacted, etc., That from and after the first day of May, one thousand, seven hundred and ninety-five, the flag of the United States be fifteen stripes, alternate red and white, and that the union be fifteen stars, white in a blue field.

“Approved January 13, 1794.”

This flag was used for several years. It flew at the mastheads of our gallant ships and was carried by our little army in the war with England in 1812. A few years later Tennessee, Ohio, Louisiana and Indiana, now won to civilization by hardy pioneers, clamored for admittance into the Union. When they were finally admitted as states, another change in the flag became necessary. The sturdy young republic was advancing by leaps and bounds in civilization and wealth; its hardy sons pushing further west and south constantly, reclaiming from wild savages, to the uses of their own race, greater and larger areas, which were bound to be erected into states and take their places in the family of the original thirteen. It became manifest that legislation was necessary, permanently defining the national flag, and providing for such changes as the future development of the country would require. Congress rose to the occasion. A committee, with Hon. Peter Wendover of New York as chairman,

was appointed to frame a law, and with very little delay the committee reported a measure fulfilling every requirement then existing, and providing for all the future. The measure was passed by congress and went on the statute books as the law establishing the flag as our great-grandfathers of that day knew it, and as we know it to-day. The law has never been changed, and here it is:

“An act to establish the flag of the United States.

“Section 1. Be it enacted, etc., That from and after the fourth day of July next, the flag of the United States be thirteen horizontal stripes, alternate red and white; that the Union have twenty stars, white in the blue field.

“Sec. 2. And be it further enacted, That on the admission of every new state into the Union, one star be added to the union of the flag, and that such addition shall take effect on the fourth of July next succeeding such admission. Approved April 4, 1818.”

The thirteen stripes will always represent the number of the “old thirteen” whose patriotism and love of justice brought about the independence of America. The stars that come into the blue sky of the flag will mark or indicate the increase of the states since the adoption of the Constitution. It is interesting to note that under the stars and stripes Washington, in 1793, laid the corner stone of the capitol of the United States, first having personally selected the site of the building. It is also interesting to know that Washington did not live to see the capitol completed, but died before the seat of government was moved to Washington in 1800. The main capitol building was not completed till 1811. It is also a matter of historical interest that the president’s home, now called the White House, was completed during the life of Washington, and it is an authenticated fact that he and his wife inspected the house in all its parts only a few days before his death. The president’s house was practically destroyed by the British in 1814; the walls alone remained intact, but the stone was so discolored that when the building was reconstructed, it had to be painted, and from this came the name of the “White House.”

The large picture of Washington, by Stewart, which is now in the east room, at the time of the bombardment by the British, was taken out of its frame by Mrs. Dolly Madison, wife of the president, and sent to a secure place across the river.

This flag of forty-five stars, this flag of our country, is our inspiration. It kindles in our hearts patriotic feelings, it carries our thoughts and our minds forward in the cause of liberty and right. On sea and on land, wherever the star spangled banner waves, it thrills the heart of every true American with pride. It recalls the memories of battles bravely fought. It recalls the victories of Trenton and Princeton, it recalls the victories of Gettysburg and Appomattox. We see the flag as first carried by Paul Jones across the sea; we see the flag as carried by Commodore Perry on Lake Erie; we see the flag as carried by Farragut at New Orleans; we see Admiral Dewey through smoke and fire hoisting the flag in the Philippines. This same flag was carried to victory by Admirals Sampson and Schley in Cuba. This flag recalls the many battles bravely fought and grandly won. It symbolizes the principles of human progress and human liberty. The stars represent the unity and harmony of our states. They are the constellation of our country. Their luster reflects to every nation of the world. The flag of 1776, the old thirteen, has grown to be one of the great flags of the earth. Its stars reach from ocean to ocean. We see it leading the armies of Washington and Greene, of Grant and Sherman and Sheridan, and of Miles, Shafter and Merritt.

This is the flag of the “dawn’s early light” that was immortalized by Francis Scott Key—“The Star Spangled Banner.”

General Grant once said, “No one is great enough to write his name on the flag.”

A century under the stars and stripes has been the greatest century of progress in the history of the world. No other nation that has ever existed has carried forward such a banner. Its colors were taken from various sources and brought into one harmonious combination, and it “waves over a country which unites all nationalities and all races, and in the end brings about a homogeneous population, representing the highest type of civilization.” It is not strange that this flag of Washington,

of Hamilton, of Adams, of Jefferson; this flag of Jackson, of Webster, of Clay, this flag of Lincoln, of Grant and of McKinley should exert such world-wide influence. It holds a unique place in the nations of the world. It has spread knowledge and faith and hope among all classes. It means liberty with justice. Its international influence places it in the first rank. It twines itself among the flags of other nations, not for destruction or war, but for friendship and progress in the cause of humanity. In the councils of peace; in the conquests of war; in everything that pertains to government, in everything that pertains to the advancement of humanity, it calls forth the admiration of mankind. Under its influence the arts and sciences have been fostered, commerce has expanded and education has been made universal. It waves for the right and the harbors of the globe will salute this banner as a harbinger of progress and peace.

The youngest nation has the oldest flag.

It is of historical interest that our flag is older than the present flag of Great Britain, which was adopted in 1801, and it is nine years older than the flag of Spain, which was adopted in 1785. The French tricolor was decreed in 1794; then comes the flag of Portugal in 1830; then the Italian tricolor in 1848; then the flags of the old empires of China and Japan, and of the empire of Germany, which represents the sovereignty of fourteen distinct states established in 1870.

Prior to the Revolution, and indeed during the evolution of a nation through the crucible of war, separate and distinct flags were popular with the colonists. Nearly every colony had at least one. They were not abandoned until it became apparent the colonies were never again to be colonies, but to form a nation with one flag, one set of institutions and laws, a fact which inspired the visit of Washington to Betsy Ross as told in the foregoing papers. Many of the colonial flags were interesting.

GROUP OF COLONIAL FLAGS, NO. 1

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