

FOW JOHN HENRY

THE TRUE STORY OF THE
AMERICAN FLAG

John Fow

The True Story of the American Flag

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Fig. 8

**FLAG CARRIED BY THE FIRST CITY TROOP OF PHILADELPHIA IN
ESCORTING WASHINGTON ACROSS THE JERSEYS ON HIS WAY TO TAKE
COMMAND AT CAMBRIDGE**

INTRODUCTION

I was induced to make this research by the late William H. Egle, Librarian of the State Library at Harrisburg, whose knowledge of the early history of Pennsylvania was of valuable assistance to me in preparing the data for a history of the country along the Delaware river prior to 1682 (yet unfinished). Mr. Egle agreed with me that the claim of Mr. Canby that Betsy Ross designed and made the first flag was legendary and without that foundation which is so necessary to uphold claims of this character. Statements of such a character, when allowed to go unrefuted, do harm to the history of any people, inasmuch as they encourage others to build “air castles” and purchase old portraits to be palmed off on others as *our* “grandfather” who “fit” in the Revolution, or *our* “grandmother” who carried supplies to the troops at Valley Forge.

History is the best incentive to make men love their country; it encourages that patriotism which never falters, even at the cannon’s mouth. The sight of a flag or the music of a band merely enthuses as long as one is in sight or the other can be heard; but history and its knowledge are lasting and a source of pride. So, therefore, let it be true in all its details, no matter who may fall from the high pedestals upon which they have been placed by vain-glorious descendants.

John H. Fow.

THE AMERICAN FLAG

“It will probably never be known who designed our Union of Stars, the records of Congress being silent upon the subject, and there being no mention or suggestion of it in any of the voluminous correspondence or diaries of the time, public or private, which have been published.”—*Rear-Admiral Preble*.

So far as regards the adoption of the combination of stars and stripes, the same assertion can be safely made. As to the origin of each this research, it is hoped, will prove conclusively, first, that colored stripes representing a combination for a common purpose were used nearly two hundred years before the Declaration of Independence; second, that stars were used in the union of a flag in November, 1775, on a flag raised on a Massachusetts privateer commanded by Captain Manley (see [Fig. 1](#)), and that they were also used in the design of the book plate of the Washington family along with three stripes.

There can be no doubt that the stripes were made thirteen as a mere matter of sentiment to represent the colonies engaged in the Revolutionary struggle. As a matter of fact, the number thirteen appeared in a large number of instances during the Revolution, and was apparently used as an object lesson to remind the colonists that they were united in a common cause.

The colors of the stripes have no special meaning or significance, except that which anyone may apply who desires to make use of his imagination, or who may become sentimental upon the subject. Many have written and commented upon it; some have said that the red stripes mean courage, others war, daring, determination, and so on, and that the white stripes mean purity, peace, justice, or equity.

“Thy stars have lit the welkin dome,
And all thy hues were born in heaven.”

As a matter of fact, the idea of stripes in a flag to represent a combination for a common purpose originated in 1582 in the Netherlands, and symbolized the union of the Dutch Republic in its struggles against the power of Philip and the persecutions of Alva.

In a paper read before the New Jersey Historical Society by a Mr. Haven in January, 1872, he suggested “that the combination of our flag, the stars and stripes, were favored as a compliment to Washington, because they were upon the book plate of the General’s family.” He further stated “that the stars on the book plate were of Roman origin,” and in support quoted from Virgil “Redire ad astra,” meaning and inferring that a return to the stars meant a future home of peace and happiness for the human race, and that is what this nation would eventually become. Assertions and statements similar to the above may be quoted by the score, wherein reasons are given based upon theory and imagination as to the origin of the devices which compose our national banner.

The claim that has been made about Betsy Ross, who worked at upholstering and as a seamstress during the Revolution, who is said to have lived in a house either No. 80 or 89 Arch street, Philadelphia, now said to be No. 239 Arch street, as having some time in June, 1776, made and designed the first American flag as we now worship it, cannot be corroborated by historical research.

The claim is one of that legendary type that the Rabbins of old handed down for centuries, and which were believed to be true, until modern investigation proved their falsity, or like the imagination of artists who attempt to paint historical events without consulting details, historical, and geographical. The two most notorious in our history are Leutze’s painting of Washington crossing the Delaware, and Benjamin West’s painting of William Penn treating with the Indians. As to the first, I write from authority, having been designated to represent the Legislature of Pennsylvania as one of a committee of three to act in conjunction with the Trenton Battle Monument Committee to select an historical subject for the medallion to be placed upon one of the four sides of a monument,

erected at Trenton, to represent Pennsylvania's part in that memorable event, we chose as the subject "Washington Crossing the Delaware," and the result of our labor, and investigation in conjunction with the Monument Committee can be seen to-day on the west side of the monument. The bronze tablet placed there by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania truthfully delineates that notable event. The late General Stryker, of New Jersey, aided us, and furnished us books, and documents to obtain part of the data. The tablet represents a small rowboat, with General Knox sitting in the bow of the boat, and Washington in the stern, the man rowing the boat was a Mr. Cadwalader. He lived at McKonkey's Ferry, on the Pennsylvania side of the river. Leutze in his painting has Washington standing alongside of a horse in a large scow, such as were used in those days on the upper Delaware to take produce to the Philadelphia markets. A number of others are in the same boat, one holding aloft a flag containing a blue union with thirteen white stars—a flag that did not come into existence until six months after the battle was fought.



FLAG CARRIED IN THE REVOLUTION BY COUNT PULASKI'S LEGION

As to West's picture, one need only look at it, and then read the facts as related in any history of Pennsylvania, and it will be found how historically untrue it is. One instance alone would be sufficient; that is, in the painting, the vessel in which Penn came over is anchored out in the river, when, as a matter of fact, she never came up to Philadelphia. She was quarantined below Chester because of the smallpox, and Penn was rowed up the river from Chester in a small boat, and landed near the residence of the Swensons, two Swedes, who lived at Wicaco, and from whom he bought the land comprising old Philadelphia. Again, the elm tree is in full leaf, yet the "pow-wow" that Penn held with the Indians took place in November, and elm trees do not have leaves on them in this latitude in November. But why digress from the subject about which I started to write, merely to show that artists and those seeking for family distinction are not to be relied upon as truthful delineators of history.

The Ross claim is based upon the assertions set forth in a paper read in 1870 by Mr. William Canby before the members of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It was claimed in the paper or essay that from traditions existing in the Ross family, Betsy Ross, the grandmother of Mr. Canby on his mother's side, was the maker and designer of the first American flag, and that she lived on Arch street. A research shows that a Betsy Ross did live on Arch street; but the exact location is doubtful, and that her maiden name was Griscom. She was married three times, first to John Ross, second to Ashburn, and lastly to John Claypoole.



FLAG CARRIED IN THE REVOLUTION BY COUNT PULASKI'S LEGION

It was asserted in the paper read that a committee of Congress, along with General Washington, in June, 1776, called at her house, and engaged her to make a flag from a rough drawing, which, not suiting her, was at her suggestion, redrawn by Washington. From other traditional resources it was also claimed, that Mrs. Ross changed the stars from six-pointed to five-pointed. The whole claim is based upon tales told from memory by relatives, no other proofs have ever been found, and a careful and thorough research fails to discover any. In 1878 a pamphlet was issued from the printing office of the State printer at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, written by a Mr. Reigart, based upon the above claim, and calling Mrs. Ross "the immortal heroine that originated the first flag of the Union." The book had an alleged portrait of Betsy Ross making the first flag; but it was afterwards discovered that it was really the portrait of an old Quaker lady who was living in Lancaster at the time the book was written. The book was so unreliable that it made the Ross claim appear ridiculous in the eyes of the public.

If Mrs. Ross made a flag in an Arch street house, as claimed, it was made after a design that had been conceived and born somewhere else, and her contribution was no more than her labor in sewing on some stars, the same labor that is given by any girl or woman who works in a flag manufactory. Even according to the paper which was read before the Society in 1870 it is admitted that a design made by someone else was taken to her, but that she made certain changes in it. Now, that is all there is in the Betsy Ross claim; yet the growing youths of the nation are being misled and taught an historical untruth when it is asserted that Mrs. Ross designed, originated and made the first American flag, and a lithograph has been issued showing that historical untruth, which has not as good a foundation, in fact, as the two paintings to which I have referred, because the events sought to be depicted in those two cases did happen. All the sentiment exhibited over the Betsy Ross story is lost upon those who have looked the matter up, and are conversant with the history and growth of our national emblem, which I will now take up. Those seeking for more elaborate details are referred to Bancroft's History of the United States; Lossing's Field Book of the Revolution; Philadelphia Times, April 6, 1877; The American, The Colonial and the Pennsylvania Archives; Journals of Congress, Vols. 1 and 2; Preble's History of the Flag; Cooper's Naval History; Life of John Adams; Hamilton and Sarmiento's Histories of our Flag; Sparks' and Washington Irving's Lives of Washington; Washington's own letters, diaries and other writings, and William Cullen Bryant's History of the United States, in which pages 420 and 421 of the third volume he devotes to a history of the flag, but nowhere does he mention the Ross

claim. He evidently, like myself, could not find any authority for it, yet his history was published in 1879—nine years after the Ross claim was made. There are many other authorities, but not one of them gives her the credit claimed, and all of them except those written since the claim was made, leaving out the Bryant history, do not even mention her name.

A claim similar to the one made by Mr. Canby on behalf of Betsy Ross, was made by a woman named Elizabeth Montgomery, daughter of Captain Montgomery, of the armed Brig *Nancy*. She claimed that a flag, “stars and stripes,” was made early in July, 1776, by a young man on her father’s brig while it was in port at St. Thomas; see “Reminiscences of Wilmington, ancient and new,” printed in 1851, on pages 176 to 179; but her claim it proved to be absolutely false, as a reference to the American Archives, vol. vi, page 1132, fourth series, will show that the Brig *Nancy*, Captain Montgomery, was destroyed at Cape May, June 29, 1776, to keep her from being captured by the British.

At the outbreak of our Revolutionary struggle the different colonies had flags of their own design, which, if grouped together, would have reminded one of Joseph’s coat, embellished with Latin and other mottoes. At the battle of Bunker Hill the Americans fought without a flag, although Botta in his history of the American Revolution says that there was one with the words “An Appeal to Heaven” on one side, and the Latin inscription “Qui transtulit sustinet” upon the other (see [Fig. 2](#)). In Lossing’s field book of the American Revolution, Vol. 1, page 541, he states that an old lady named Manning informed him that the Americans did have a flag at the battle, of which the field was blue and the union white, having in it the Red Cross of St. George and a green pine tree (see [Fig. 3](#)); but this cannot be considered an authority any more than Trumbull’s picture of the Battle in the Rotunda of the capital at Washington. He depicts the American flag carried in that battle as something which no one ever saw or even heard of, to wit: a red flag with a white union, having in it a green pine tree (see [Fig. 4](#)).

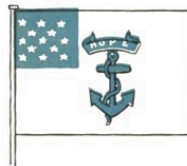


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

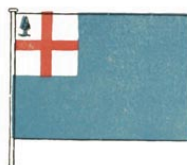


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Frothingham in his history of the siege of Boston says that there was a flag over Prescott's redoubt having upon it the words "Come if you dare;" but there is no authority given for the statement. As a matter of fact, it might have been, for at that period flags were used as ensigns, with different sentences upon them, such as "Liberty and Union," "An Appeal to Heaven," "Liberty or Death," "An Appeal to God." Several such flags were captured by the British and mentioned in the English journals of that period (see Figs. [5](#)

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