

Name \_\_\_\_\_



## Betsy Ross

By Mary Lynn Bushong

*Caption: This painting called "The Birth of Old Glory" by Percy Moran, c 1917 depicts what is presumed to be Betsy Ross and two children presenting the "Betsy Ross flag" to George Washington and three other men.*



What was it like to live in the American colonies?

It was very different from life in the United States now. Difficulties made the people strong. When it became time to fight for their independence, most were ready to choose sides.

Betsy Ross came from a Quaker family. Most Quakers did not believe in fighting. (That would change during the Revolutionary War when a group of Quakers chose to support the war.)

Born Elizabeth Griscom, Betsy entered this world on January 1, 1752. Her father was a carpenter and helped build the bell tower for Independence Hall. Quakers believed in educating all of their children, not just the boys as was the custom at the time. Betsy attended a Quaker school as a child. When she was old enough, she was apprenticed to an upholsterer.

Upholsterers did not just cover furniture; they did a lot of other sewing as well. Many also made flags. Betsy fell in love with another apprentice, John Ross. Quakers did not allow marriages with those who were not Quakers. When Betsy eloped with John in 1773, she was permanently cut off from her family and her church's support. Two years after their marriage, when she was 23, the Rosses started their own upholstery shop together. Instead of being a Quaker, she attended the Episcopal Church with her husband. Their pew was next to the one occupied by the Washingtons. In January 1776, the

Revolution was underway. Materials for running the shop were in short supply. John Ross joined the local militia, and a short time later was killed when the munitions depot he was guarding suddenly exploded. Betsy kept their business open, doing what work she could to support herself.

According to her own testimony, she received a visit from three prominent citizens in late May or early June. The men were George Washington, George Ross, and Robert Morris. Washington was a friend of the family, while Ross was Betsy's uncle by marriage. Morris was one of the richest men in the colonies at the time.

She said that Washington wanted her to make a flag. There was to be a field of blue with stars and there would also be red and white stripes. Washington wanted six-pointed stars, but Betsy suggested five-pointed ones instead. To prove how easily she could make them, she folded a piece of paper and with one cut, had a five-pointed star.

In June 1777, Betsy married Joseph Ashburn, a sea captain. That winter, Betsy was forced to share her house with some of the British soldiers that were occupying Philadelphia. Washington and his troops were suffering through the winter in Valley Forge.

Betsy soon had two daughters to look after in addition to her business. Ashburn used his ship to bring in supplies for the colony. While in the West Indies, he was captured by the British and imprisoned. The Old Mill Prison in England was a nasty place, and Ashburn was just one of many to die there. The young widow did not learn of her husband's death until a friend (also imprisoned there) came to bring her the news. In May 1783, Betsy married that friend, John Claypoole. He was willing to give up his life at sea to help her with her business, and they had five daughters together.

Betsy's third husband suffered from health problems for twenty years before he died in 1817. During that time, Betsy ran her business and household in addition to caring for him. She retired in 1827 and went to live with one of her daughters. She died nine years later at the age of eighty-four. Betsy Ross exemplified the strength and determination required of women to survive and excel during the difficult times of the Revolution.



