



“Birth of Our Nation’s Flag” by Charles H. Weisgerber, 1892
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

IT'S A GRAND OLD MYTH

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Every schoolchild knows the story by heart: Gen. George Washington, recognizing the need for a flag to represent the new nation, called upon Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia seamstress he knew well and commissioned her to turn sketches he bought into a flag. There’s just one little problem with that story: It most likely didn’t happen that way.

THE GREAT BETSY ROSS MYTH

Her name was Elizabeth Griscom, but all her friends called her Betsy. She worked in Philadelphia as an apprentice upholsterer until she married wealthy socialite John Ross in 1773. They opened their own upholstery business and conducted a lively social life until John was killed two years later in the Revolutionary War.

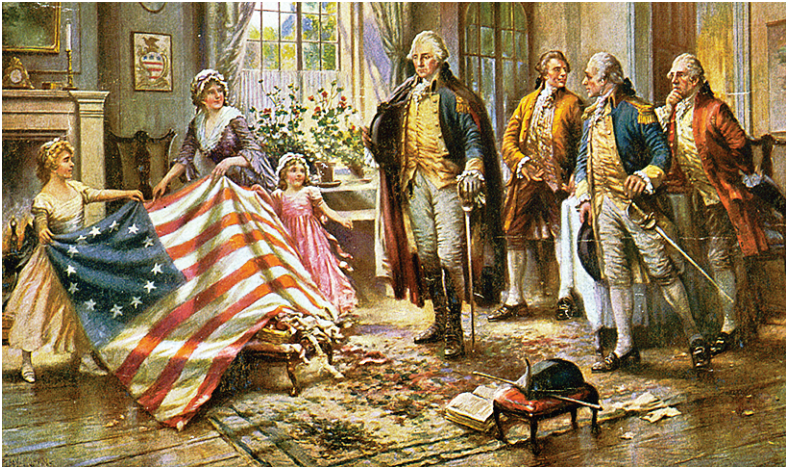
Betsy carried on. She sewed flags for naval ships and made tents for George Washington’s Continental Army — which might explain why Washington was acquainted with the quality of Ross’ work.

One day, Washington and a few members of the Continental

Congress walked into her shop and asked her to sew them a new national flag. The general showed her sketches that indicated 13 alternating red-and-white stripes, a blue field in the upper left and a circle of 13 six-pointed stars.

Ross took the assignment, but made one suggestion: Change the six-pointed stars to five-pointed stars. She then demonstrated how easily one could fold fabric to cut a five-pointed star.

Sold. Within a few days, Ross had the flag completed. It would be the first of many Ross would make for the new federal government.

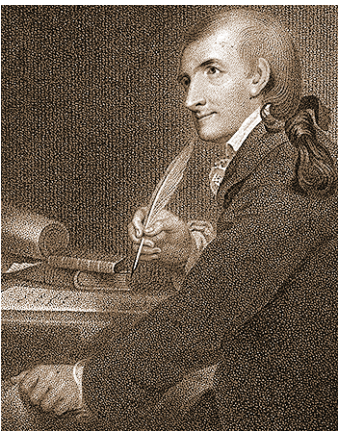


“The Birth of Old Glory” by Edward Percy Moran, 1917
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But none of this was documented at the time. The way we know this tale: Ross’ grandson, William J. Canby, told it in a speech he made before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870 — nearly 100 years after it supposedly took place and 34 years after Ross died.

Newspapers in and around Philadelphia ran with the story. Then, Harper’s Weekly — probably the most-read publication of the day — printed the story. The myth was spreading quickly.

In 1892, Charles H. Weisgerber painted “Birth of Our Nation’s Flag” — which you see at the top of this page — in which she seems to be working on the flag right in front of Washington. People lined up to view the massive painting at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.



NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
Francis Hopkinson

By that time, the Betsy Ross myth had begun popping up in school history textbooks. The legend had become fact. Despite the fact that historians have never found evidence that it might have actually happened.

Yet, evidence *has* surfaced ... that suggests someone *else* had created the flag. That someone was Francis Hopkinson, a flag designer who had signed the Declaration of Independence and had, for a while, represented New Jersey in the Continental Congress.

In 1780, Hopkinson billed the Continental Congress for designing both the nation’s Great Seal and “the flag of the United States of America.” For payment, Hopkinson asked for a cask of wine. The government never paid him.

HOW WE TREAT OUR FLAG



STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A family walks through a Memorial Day display at Boston Common in which volunteers place a flag for each fallen member of the U.S. military from Massachusetts from the Revolutionary War to the present day.

When President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed June 14, 1916, the first Flag Day, there were no official rules for how to display or to handle the U.S. flag.

On Flag Day 1923 — 99 years ago today — representatives of 68 patriotic, fraternal, civic and military organizations led by the American Legion published a set of guidelines it named the National Flag Code. Most of those guidelines would become law on June 22, 1942.

It should be noted that the Flag Code might be U.S. law, but there

are no provisions whatsoever for violations of the code. The code should be treated as guidelines.

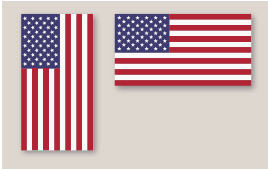
One exception to this was the Flag Protection Act of 1968, which Congress passed in reaction to Vietnam War protests of the era. That act prohibited “mutilating, defacing, defiling or burning the flag” and defined criminal penalties for doing so.

The Flag Protection Act was struck down in 1990 when the Supreme Court ruled that burning a U.S. flag was a form of free speech.

FLAG ETIQUETTE

You can find the U.S. Flag Code, how to properly fold or dispose of a flag and tips on how to display one at legion.org/flag/faq

Here are some highlights:



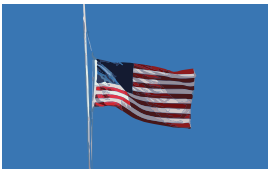
Always keep the blue field at the upper left. Even if you’re hanging it vertically.



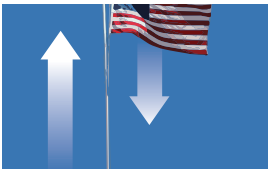
Fly the flag from sunrise to sunset. Bring it in at dark, unless it’s lit up.



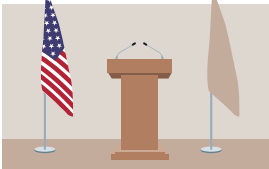
Replace your flag when it becomes tattered, faded or soiled.



Fly your flag at half-staff on Memorial Day and when asked by the president or state governor.



When you fly it at half-staff, raise it all the way first. Do the same when you take it down from half-staff.



When displayed at a speech, always place the flag to the right of the speaker. Other flags go to the left.

Sources: “Star-Spangled Banner: Our Nation and Its Flag” by Margaret Sodeen, “The Stars and the Stripes: The American Flag as Art and as History from the Birth of the Republic to the Present” by Boleslaw and Marie-Louise D’Orange Mastai, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, HistoricPhiladelphia.com, National Geographic, Library of Congress, PBS, History.com, Cornell Law School’s Legal Information Institute, Almanac.com, Military.com, FlagAndBanner.com, National Flag Foundation, HomesForOurTroops.org, USFlags.com