



Roads Scholar Educational Adventures in Our Own Backyard

By Kathleen Williams
CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Marketplace

Designing Women Who Really Made the First American Flag?

Americans celebrate Independence Day on the 4th of July, the anniversary of the day in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was officially adopted by the Continental Congress (even though the resolution that led to the writing of the Declaration had actually been approved two days earlier). Just one year later, on July 4, 1777, Independence Day was celebrated in Philadelphia with bonfires, bells and fireworks, a custom that has since spread to cities and towns throughout the country. While the festivities vary somewhat from place to place, one patriotic symbol remains constant. “Old Glory,” our American Flag is in evidence at virtually every celebration. The flag is the most best-known symbol for our country; it is how America signs its name.

If you ask many Americans who made the first flag, they will respond quickly that, of course, it was Betsy Ross. In March of 1870, William Canby, a grandson of Betsy Ross made public his grandmother’s story in a paper presented to the Pennsylvania Historical Society. His information was based on his own childhood recollections, as well as those of other relatives. According to Canby, members of a secret Congressional Committee, Robert Morris, George Ross, and George Washington, met with Betsy Ross and the result of that meeting was the creation of the first American flag. Betsy Ross is believed to have suggested a 5-pointed star rather than the 6-pointed star that George Washington suggested, believing it would be easier to cut from cloth. Betsy Ross reportedly showed Washington her ingenious way to fold the cloth and quickly cut a five-pointed star. (Visit <http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/flagstar.html> to learn her trick.) Harper’s Monthly retold Canby’s story in their July 1873 issue and Betsy Ross quickly took root in the hearts of the American people

More recently, however, many historians and flag experts aren’t buying the Betsy Ross story, believing it to be little more than a fable. There is, in fact, no receipt for the flag, nor any record of a “flag committee.” Even more importantly, there is no physical evidence in terms of an original flag. Some say that the widowed Betsy Ross was not important enough to have been chosen for such a distinguished honor. She was, however, the niece of George Ross and her pew was next to George Washington’s at Christ Church, so she was certainly known to the two men. Paintings by Colonel John Trumbell and Captain Charles Willson Peale, artists who fought under George Washington, have been used as documentation by those on both sides of the argument.

Some historians maintain that it was not Betsy Ross, but Mary Pickersgill who sewed the first flag. There is no question that Pickersgill sewed a very large (30 foot by 42 foot) flag in the summer of 1813. This is the flag that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 and served as the inspiration for Francis Scott Key’s penning of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which would become our national anthem. Today Pickersgill’s flag hangs in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

We may never know the truth for sure, but the argument for Betsy Ross’s story cannot be disproved with certainty. What do you think? For a more complete explanation of the arguments both for and against Betsy Ross as the creator of our country’s first flag, visit the Betsy Ross home page at www.ushistory.org/betsy.

Going the Extra Mile

The American Flag in Art

Ever since its creation, the American flag has served as a source of inspiration for artists. American Impressionist painter Childe Hassam (1859-1935) painted a series of some 2-dozen flag paintings between 1916 and 1918. The most famous of these, *Allies Day, May 1917*, commemorates visits by the French and British war commissioners. Charles H. Weisgerber painted *The Birth of Our Nation's Flag*, depicting Betsy Ross making the first flag. Other artists known for their flag art include Norman Rockwell, Jasper Johns, and Guy Carleton Wiggins, among many others.

Here in Tucson, we received nationwide attention for our own version of flag art. Just four days after the tragic events of September 11th, radio station KRQ spearheaded an effort that culminated with over 8000 local citizens dressed in red, white or blue converging at Tucson Electric Park where they were assembled to form a giant "human flag." Images of the flag were sent to New York City to show support for the rescue workers.



Tune-up Your Mind

Look for these books:

Beat the Drum, Independence Day Has Come by Lee Bennett Hopkins, illustrated by Tomie de Paola (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$9.95)

Celebrate America in Poetry and Art edited by Nora Panzer (Hyperion Books for Children, \$21.95)

Fireworks, Picnics, and Flags by James Giblin (Clarion Books, \$7.95)

Fourth of July, Sparkly Sky by Joan Holub (Little Simon, \$4.99)

How Artists See America by Colleen Carroll (Abbeville Kids, \$12.95)

Details

Places to see interesting flags/flag art in Tucson:

Tucson Map & Flag Center, 3239 N. 1st Ave., Tucson, 887-4234

The largest map and flag retail outlet not just in Tucson, but the whole country!

Quebedeaux Pontiac, 3566 E. Speedway, Tucson, 795-5550

Reportedly the largest flag flying consistently in Tucson

CRIZMAC Marketplace, 1642 N. Alvernon Way, Tucson, 323-8555

Images and information about American art and artists

Discovery Detours

Star-Spangled Quiz

1. What do the red, white, and blue of the flag represent?
2. Why were the stars in the first flag sewn in a circle?
3. Why is the flag called “Old Glory?”
4. What is a vexillologist?
5. Is it ever appropriate to fly the flag upside down?
6. True or False?. Wearing clothing designed like the American flag is respectful and a display of patriotism.
7. What should you do if you have a flag that is old and needs to be retired?

Answers:

1. There is no official designation or meaning for the colors of the flag, but according to legend, George Washington said that the stars were from the sky, the red from the British colors, and the white to signify the secession from the home country. In 1782, the Congress of the Confederation chose the same colors for the Great Seal of the United States, they listed their meaning as follows: White for purity and innocence, red for valor and hardiness, and blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice.
2. So that no colony would be viewed as above another. It is reported that George Washington said, “Let the 13 stars in a circle stand as a new constellation in the heavens.”
3. When Captain William Driver left on a voyage in 1831, his friends presented him with a flag. When the banner opened to the ocean breezes, he exclaimed, “Old Glory.” He kept his flag for many years, protecting it during the civil war by sewing it inside the quilt on his bed. After the war, his flag was flown over the Tennessee capital.
4. A flag expert
5. Only as a signal of distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property.
6. False. Section 8d. of the Flag Code reads “The flag should never be used as wearing apparel.”
7. Contact your local VFW Chapter, Elks Lodge, the American Legion or the Knights of Columbus for assistance. Some Boy Scout and Girl Scout Troops also can provide this service. A small donation is appropriate.

Fuel for Thought

Did you know...

While we may never know for sure who made the first flag, there is no question about the designer of our current 50-star flag. In 1958, Robert G. Heft was a student in Lancaster, Ohio. His interest in politics, coupled with the talk of Alaska and Hawaii becoming states, prompted him to design a 50-star flag as a school project. Heft spent over 12 hours one weekend arranging and sewing a new combination of stars. His project was made more difficult by the fact that he didn't know how to use a needle and thread, and his mother, who feared her son's project would be desecrating the flag, refused to help. Heft's teacher wasn't particularly impressed either, giving him a B minus for the project, but he did tell Heft that he would raise his grade if he could get Congress to accept the design. Heft rose to the challenge and sent his flag to his congressman, Rep. Walter Moeller, who eventually got Heft's design accepted.

If there is ever a 51st state, we will need a new design. Any budding flag designers out there? How could you arrange 51 stars?

Think Tank

Discussion questions for the whole family to consider:

If you were going to make a flag to represent your family, how would you design it? What colors, images or emblems would you include? What would they symbolize?

For the Mouse-bound

www.ushistory.org/betsy

www.american.edu/heintze/fourth.htm

www.askart.com/askART/interest/flag_painters

Wheels Are Turning

Parents and Caregivers: These activities can help your child meet Arizona's educational standards. The standards addressed here include:

1SS-F4. Describe the stories of important American heroes and their contributions to our society. (Grades 1-3)

1SS-E1. Understand and apply the basic tools of historical research, including chronology, how to collect, interpret, and employ information from historical materials (Grades 4-5)

1AV-F1. Select and use subjects, themes and symbols in works of art (Grades 1-3)

1AV-R2. Recognize that the visual arts are a form of communication (K)