



A TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN
WHO CHANGED AMERICA



July 2020 Her Story ENewsletter Flag Makers

Independence Day – the Fourth of July – will be here in a blink of an eye. We will fly our nation’s flag proudly as we remember the Revolutionary War days and our independence from Great Britain. The new nation needed a flag in 1776 and new U.S. flags were required as territories became states. In this month’s ENewsletter, we profile two flag makers: Betsy Ross and Mary Young Pickersgill.



Most of us learned in school that **Betsy Ross** sewed the first American flag. Although that story is in doubt today, the outlines of what we learned came about in 1870 from Ross’ grandson in a paper that he presented to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. That story is that General Washington and two members of a congressional committee visited Ross at her home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They commissioned her to make a flag; she convinced them that the stars should be five-sided instead of six-sided, since they were easier to cut.

It is documented that Ross was an upholsterer and sewed flags for Pennsylvania during the Revolutionary War and flags for the U.S. after the war. Her grandson appears to have been appealing to the desire of Americans during the 1876 Centennial for patriotic stories and role models for young women.



Unlike the story of Betsy Ross and the first American flag, the story of **Mary Young Pickersgill** and her “Star-Spangled Banner” is well documented. Pickersgill, who lived in Baltimore, Maryland, was the daughter of a noted flag maker, Rebecca Young. The War of 1812 was ongoing; Pickersgill was commissioned in 1813 to make a flag large enough that the British would have no trouble seeing it. The flag weighed fifty pounds and it took eleven men to raise it! The flag could be seen for miles.

As Mary Pickersgill’s huge flag flew over Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore in 1814, another historical moment occurred. Francis Scott Key was inspired to write a poem “The Defence of Fort McHenry.” Today that poem is the National Anthem of the U.S. with the title of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Successful in her flag making business, Pickersgill bought the house she had been renting in Baltimore. Today, it is the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House and a National Historic Landmark. She was active for more than twenty years in the Impartial Female Humane Society that found employment for women and helped poor families pay for schooling for their children.

That Star-Spangled Banner is housed today at the Smithsonian Institution. The Secretary of the Smithsonian I. Michael Heyman said in 1998, “I am often asked which of our more than 140 million objects is our greatest treasure, our most valued possession. Of all the questions asked of me, this is the easiest to answer: our greatest treasure is, of course, the Star-Spangled Banner.”

Betsy Ross and Mary Pickersgill are among the more than 850 women profiled in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women’s accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us all. Continue to help us tell women’s stories!

Charlotte Waisman and Jill Tietjen

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