

239 Arch Street Philadelphia

by Gilbert Baker

Betsy Ross lived in a two-story red brick row house with white shutters and a shingled pitched roof with a big dormer at 239 Arch Street – it's still there in Philadelphia, and now a museum. Her story as the creator of the American Flag is vague at best. She was always an enigma, never famous in her lifetime, undiscovered until 50 years after her death, when her grandson recounted her story to the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1876.

Betsy Ross was an invented hero- or heroine. - The Suffragettes who adopted her gave women a symbolic place in the American pantheon at the centennial of the Revolution. George Washington, the father of the country, and Betsy Ross, the mother of the Flag share the highest –and posed the question of equal- pillars of legend. She was in a sense the first American Feminist.

Indeed right after the discovery of Betsy Ross, her image as an American icon became a wave of art, published on everything, an allegorical goddess wrapped in red white and blue on the sheet music of a John Phillip Sousa

March. There she was on the thick pages of my grade school homework, wearing a white bonnet, simple blue dress, and a shawl, stitching the stars, George Washington resplendent in a gold-buttoned waistcoat, Commander of the Continental Army at her side.

A perfect picture every one understands. An easy question on the quizzes and tests about the birth of the nation; where did the flag come from? Betsy Ross.

She's more famous than most movie stars, but maybe not as famous as Madonna. When I went to Rome in 2000 for World pride, no one ever heard of Betsy Ross, her name doesn't mean anything in Europe and the rest of the world. The Betsy Ross "brand" has its limits, still America is big and great country. Old Glory flies everywhere and woven into it forever is her name. She is the consummate artist, even two hundred years later considered important and relevant by intellectuals like Susan Sontag.

It's all an illusion, a Victorian photo shop of nostalgia, and a contrived curriculum. Francis Hopkins is regarded as the inventor designer of the American flag; he's buried with that honor on his tombstone. It's a

historical fact that vexillographers- people who make and study flags- agree is true, but sigh loudly that in most libraries of the public mind Francis Hopkins remains anonymous.

Betsy Ross was it all a lie?

But I knew all this years before I went to her house, it wasn't a casual pilgrimage. Flags are my passion, my craft, and my art. I knew she was an upholstery shop owner- a woman in business at the time is remarkable. 3 husbands and 7 daughters, a Quaker, who lived most of her long life never having a sewing machine - which was invented just as she died.

Perhaps Washington and Hopkins commissioned her to sew their flag- it's possible even probable- how many sewing rooms were there in Philadelphia 1776? I always gave Betsy Ross the benefit of the doubt, homage to a fellow seam master. All flag makers walk in her long shadow.

Hardly any one was there in April- though in the summer there are huge crowds. I'd seen Her home before from the outside, but never actually gone inside.

The whole Colonial facade and the courtyard adjoining it are decked out year round in red, white, and blue cotton buntings: fans, that drape from every window, and end to end along the garden wall. Capping it all off triumphantly, from her second story window, is an outrigger pole flying a huge American Flag. A very impressive architectural statement, with a not so subliminal marquee announcing this is a secular holy place, real history happened here.

You walk in from the street thru the courtyard, where people wait in line when it's busy. They have some costumed plays on a little stage under the tree, but there were no actors that day. Big welcoming doors, with a crisp red white and blue welcome banner hung above the transom open to the gift shop, that's the first stop.

I looked at the labels on everything to see if it was all made in America. Predictably no, but there were a lot of homemade chotckes from some Pennsylvania locals. I felt like I was in Muir Woods, the whole place was so solemn and reverential. They sell white bonnets, just like the one she always wears in the pictures.

After paying respects to the lady at the counter, I followed her instructions and was led into the house by a docent security guard thru the back door.

Actually it's an addition that came later in the 19th Century.

It's smaller than it looks, people were tiny. All the rooms are sealed off with bulletproof plexi-glass, and seemed a little dark for such a sunny day.

Turns out hardly anything there is authentic, the few pieces of furniture aren't even hers, though they are from around the same time. Counterfeit relics.

The entire experience was a Disneyland people conveyer belt, single file thru the narrow white washed hallways, one at a time, up and down the steep winding staircases, "and this is the living room, and this is the bedroom."

I took my turn looking, glancing really, thru the translucent wall between the "evidence" of a life mostly reconstructed for tourists and my eyes in the present wondering what it was really like.

I didn't get it, her vibe never reached me, and there was no ghost. People have called me the gay Betsy Ross because I made the Rainbow Flag, and as I summoned my illustrious ancestor, looking at what might have been her

craft tools, her hand's magic instruments, hoping for a moment of revelation, a spark of inspiration, or ray of intuition, nothing happened. She's not there.

Maybe we're separated by the curtain of a century of technology; my work is so easy and industrial, Hers one stitch at time with a needle and handspun thread. When I sew, I listen to music on loudspeakers, she heard the sound of horses hooves on the cobblestones.

Across the ages I listen, imagining her living with fearful war, death and violence all around. In her dim basement workroom rusty scissors hang on a sagging beam, I finally recognize something, a stain on the chunky worn blades, the patina of time revealing the sad color of flags, the invisible warp and weft of hope and courage, blood and honor. I wonder if the Star Spangled Banner and the Rainbow Flag are cut from the same cloth.

The fabric of freedom is an open weave.

Betsy Ross, more questions than answers, more a puzzle than ever,
Wherever you are, your quaint house has been invaded by aliens in sneakers and t-shirts, they take pictures of themselves on cell phones with your

fireplace in the background, and walk dutifully with brochures later packed into vacation suitcases unread. They will salute the Flag at ballgames and parades with lumps of patriotism in their scoundrel throats and think they know you, you've been celebuted for our shorthand understanding of symbols that proudly wave.