

## Sidedoor S7 Ep. 13 Broad Stripes Bright Stars and White Lies Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Growing up in America there are some nuggets of history you just seem to pick up. George Washington cut down a cherry tree, but he couldn't tell a lie about it. A young Abe Lincoln walked six miles to return a few pennies to a woman he accidentally overcharged. For me, I always liked the story of Betsy Ross. I can still imagine the page in my fourth grade social studies book, Betsy Ross is sitting in her living room, wearing a big poofy dress, a bonnet on her head. The caption says she's in Philadelphia, 1776. America is in the middle of a revolution.

Marc Leepson: And in walks George Washington and the flag committee of the Continental Congress.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Marc Leepson, historian and author of the book, *Flag: An American Biography*.

Marc Leepson: And they ask her to make a flag for this new nation. And she says, "Yes, I can do that."

Lizzie Peabody: And Betsy gets to sewing, cutting strips of red and white silk, snipping and stitching away. A few days later, Washington and the flag committee come knocking again, and from behind her skirt, Betsy Ross pulls a masterpiece of a flag. It's got 13 stripes alternating red and white. George says, "Okay, I like what you did there." And then Ross is like, "Yeah, but check this out. I put 13 white stars in a circle up in the top corner, gave it a little blue background." And George is just blown away. He's like, "By snum, Betsy, it's stupendous. This ought to impress all those old whip jackets back at Independence Hall."

Marc Leepson: And so, Betsy Ross, flag maker to the stars, makes the first American flag and helps design it.

Lizzie Peabody: But here's the thing, I've never actually seen the first flag, the famous Betsy Ross flag, but I do think I know where to find it. This Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. They have a ton of flags. It's got to be there. So off I went. At the museum, there's a dark tunnel just inside the main entrance. As you walk through, scenes of a 19th century war play out on TV screens. And as you get deeper into the tunnel, it gets darker and quieter. This is so cool. The way you've set it up, like you come into almost like this movie theater like...

Jennifer Jones: Yes, it's a space that's meant for you to be able to commune with the flag in a sense, to pause, to reflect on what the symbol means to you.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Jennifer Jones, Curator here at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. She keeps a watchful eye over many of America's most important historical flags. And she's showing me maybe the most treasured flag of all, but it's not the Betsy Ross flag. So, this is the Star-Spangled Banner.

Jennifer Jones: This is the Star-Spangled Banner. That's correct.

Lizzie Peabody: So, there's only one Star-Spangled Banner?

Jennifer Jones: Correct. And it was the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key at the Battle of Baltimore in September of 1814, to write the words which later became our National Anthem.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, the Star-Spangled Banner is gigantic. It is really something to see, but I was here on a different mission. I wanted to see the Betsy Ross flag, 13 stripes, 13 stars in a circle from the Revolution, not the War of 1812. Can you show us the first American flag?

Jennifer Jones: No, we don't have that here.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Jennifer Jones: No, I have never actually seen a 13 star in a circle, original flag from the Revolutionary period. So, we really don't know who made it, what it looked like, or if it still exists.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a minute. Jennifer Jones, I learned in fourth grade that Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag. Are you telling me that everything I learned about Betsy Ross is wrong?

Jennifer Jones: I'm telling you that we don't know.

Lizzie Peabody: So, if we don't know if Betsy Ross sewed the first flag, and we don't even know what it looked like, where did this story come from? This time on Sidedoor, we unravel this patriotic tall tale to find out how it got woven into American history, and who really was Betsy Ross, if that's even her real name. That's coming up after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: America has a unique relationship with its flag.

Marc Leepson: I'm a Historian, not a sociologist or psychiatrist or psychologist, but I think there's something in the American character-

Lizzie Peabody: Oh man, I like where this is going. This is Marc Leepson again.

Marc Leepson: I mean, there's a phenomenon of giant American... I'm talking giant flag. You've seen them right? When a flag comes out and covers an entire-

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Marc Leepson: ... hundred-yard football. Go try to find another country where you'll find that.

Lizzie Peabody: And while today, many Americans feel pride flying the flag high, the bigger, the better, this wasn't how America felt about flags back when Betsy Ross was alive.

Marc Leepson: From the time we were born in 1776 until 1861, it was almost unheard of for individual Americans to fly the flag. It just simply wasn't done.

Lizzie Peabody: When America declared its independence, flags were simply tools. They were used almost exclusively by the military, especially the Navy. Flags were flown to show who was in control of that particular ship or fort. And at the start of the Revolution, America already had a flag.

Jennifer Jones: We had a flag in 1776, that looked very much like a British flag.

Lizzie Peabody: This was called the Grand Union Flag. And this is Smithsonian's Jennifer Jones again. She says the Grand Union Flag had 13 alternating red and white stripes, just like our flag today, but in the corner, instead of a blue square full of white stars, it had a British cross like the Union Jack.

Jennifer Jones: Remember, we were British before the Revolution.

Lizzie Peabody: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right.

Jennifer Jones: Most of the colonists were British citizens. They were loyal to Britain. So using that flag, it was seen by the British as a capitulation to them that they were still British, that they were still honoring British rule.

Lizzie Peabody: So, George Washington and the Continental Congress were looking at this Grand Union Flag and thinking, "This is no longer a union, and it is certainly not grand. In fact, it's pure poppycock. How can we use a British flag when we're fighting the British?" So on June 14th, 1777, the Continental Congress voted to create a new American flag. Now, someone just had to design it. And I know what you might be thinking, this is where Betsy Ross is like, "Hold my flag in avail, I got this", but no.

Jennifer Jones: The Congressman who is credited with actually establishing the look for the first flag was from New Jersey. And it's Francis Hopkinson.

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Lizzie Peabody: Francis Hopkinson was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a man of many talents.

Marc Leepson: He wrote operas. He wrote plays. He wrote songs, and he was one of the designers of the Great Seal of the United States.

Lizzie Peabody: And like any working artist, he understood the value of a nice line itemed invoice.

Marc Leepson: He sent a bill to Congress, which is in the National Archives itself, and that bill says, "I'm charging you X amount of money for the design of the flag of the United States." Putting that together, historians believe that it was Francis Hopkinson who designed the first American flag.

Lizzie Peabody: But for all his talents, Hopkinson, wasn't known to sew, so maybe he designed the flag and then George Washington asked Betsy Ross to bring Hopkinson's vision to life. Marc Leepson says it would be great if we could prove this, but we can't. The whole process of designing the flag is a big blank spot in American history. I mean, you have to remember, flags were just tools the military used. The whole process of creating this new flag would've been like redesigning a shovel.

Marc Leepson: That's one reason why we don't know who made the first American flag because nobody cared about it. Very, very few people cared about it. If you read the annals of the Continental Congress, the day that they passed the first flag resolution, June 14th, 1777, there's no mention of who introduced it. There's no mention of any vote or discussion. So it's a strong indication that it was just this thing that happened, and it didn't have a lot of meaning for people.

Lizzie Peabody: It was like an administrative detail or something. It was like a footnote in the day.

Marc Leepson: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: So, from the Revolutionary period through the country's early days, for nearly a century, Americans really didn't care about the flag, until in 1861, a rebel army captured Fort Sumter and raised a Confederate flag, starting the American Civil War.

Marc Leepson: There are very few things in history that change almost immediately, but that's what happened with the flag. Almost overnight, when the war started, in the North, you saw flags in front of people's houses, schools, churches. Women wore little flags in their hats, lapel pins. They put them on wagons.

Lizzie Peabody: The flag became a symbol for the Union, something for Northerners to rally around. And as the war went on, this pride deepened and turned to love.

Jennifer Jones: We also have a large Medal of Honor collection here at the museum, and many of the Medals of Honor during the Civil War period were for flag bearers.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh wow.

Jennifer Jones: The movement of the flag up and down the field during battle shows the front line of battle.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Jennifer Jones: And so capturing the flag or dropping the flag or carrying the flag was seen as very important because you needed to know where your line was, [Inaudible 00:12:10] your military line was when you're in battle, and so if someone was killed-

Lizzie Peabody: You mean if the flag bearer was-

Jennifer Jones: If the flag bearer was killed and the flag dropped, the men didn't know where they were, then there was chaos, and so somebody had to step up and actually pick that flag up again-

Lizzie Peabody: And hold it.

Jennifer Jones: ... and hold it.

Lizzie Peabody: And they're vulnerable because they're not armed because they're holding the flag.

Jennifer Jones: Correct. Correct.

Lizzie Peabody: More than 600,000 Americans died during the American Civil War. Nearly as many as in every other American war combined. No family was untouched by death and sacrifice. And it was during this time that the flag went from being a utilitarian tool to a sacred icon.

Marc Leepson: And this is the time in American history where, what historians call, the cult of the flag started. This is when we had the first movement for a National Flag Day holiday. This is

when we had the Pledge of Allegiance written, 1892. And this is when we had the Betsy Ross myth first pop up.

Lizzie Peabody: By this time, Betsy Ross was long dead, but her grandson, William Canby, he was alive and well. And he'd grown up hearing the story that his grandmother sewed the first American flag. So, he might have thought, "If people love the flag so much, Grandma Betsy should get some credit." So, in 1870, he gives a speech to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

William Canby: Mr. President and the gentleman of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania...

Lizzie Peabody: This is a long speech that kind of goes on and on.

William Canby: ... for a tolerably full account of the colonies flags...

Lizzie Peabody: And on.

William Canby: ... leaders of the Revolution were men of intelligence and experience in military...

Lizzie Peabody: But then, Canby drops a bomb. He tells the crowd that the Continental Congress actually adopted the American flag during a secret session in early 1776. And then he reveals who made the flag that general Washington presented during that secret meeting.

William Canby: Elizabeth Betsy Ross. This lady is the one to whom belongs the honor of having made with her own hands the first flag.

Lizzie Peabody: And after a rousing speech like that, it's no wonder people were shouting the name Ross from the rooftops. Seriously though, the Betsy Ross story took hold, mostly because Canby had really good timing. The country was healing after a brutal Civil War, and having a single flag was a powerful symbol. Plus, America had plenty of Founding Fathers, now it had a founding mother. So, Betsy Ross was already on her way to becoming an American icon when something sealed her bonneted face forever in the collective American imagination, a painting.

Marc Leepson: When I do talks, when I get to Betsy Ross, I say, I know what you're thinking, right? And I know what they're thinking. They're thinking of that picture. Betsy Ross sitting in her parlor on Arch Street, the flag is on her lap, a sun beam is coming through, illuminating it. The flag committee of the Continental Congress is hovering over her.

Lizzie Peabody: You've probably seen this painting at some point in your life. It was even on stamps in the 1950s. For me, it was in that fourth-grade social studies book.

Marc Leepson: That picture is completely made up.

Lizzie Peabody: The painting we all know was dreamt up by a guy named Charles Weisgerber. He painted the Birth of our Nation's Flag more than a hundred years after the scene supposedly took place, and it's entirely a product of his imagination, but accuracy wasn't Weisgerber's goal.

Marc Leepson: It was part of Weisgerber's promotion of the Betsy Ross myth and not coincidentally the Betsy Ross house, which he owned and was his tourist attraction. So, I mean, I don't want to be cynical.

Lizzie Peabody: It was part of his marketing plan.

Marc Leepson: Listen, you're a hundred percent right.

Lizzie Peabody: Charles Weisgerber, marketing genius, was also apparently a Betsy Ross super fan. He loved her story so much, he bought her old house in Philadelphia and spent the rest of his life promoting her legacy. He even named his son Vexil Domus, which just Latin for... wait for it, Flag House.

Marc Leepson: Gosh, if there was an internet back then, I mean, he would've been all over the place, right? He would've had a podcast and Instagram.

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to Weisgerber, Betsy Ross's story was permanently woven into the American fabric. And yes, historians have tried to correct the record ever since, but the myth persists, and Jennifer Jones thinks she knows why.

Jennifer Jones: Because it's a great story, and the real story is so much more complicated.

Lizzie Peabody: And the myth is just a part of that story. Still ahead, we meet the real Betsy Ross, who is so much cooler than the bonneted woman I thought I met in fourth grade. That's coming up after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Marla Miller didn't plan to write a book about Betsy Ross, she just wanted to read one, but when she went off in search of a good biography, all she found were children's books and a whole bunch of other weird stuff.

Marla Miller: You'll see salt and pepper shakers with a little mini Betsy Ross. There's many, many dolls and all kinds of silliness. There's a PEZ head that comes out.

Lizzie Peabody: There's a Betsy Ross PEZ head?

Marla Miller: There's a Betsy Ross PEZ head.

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Lizzie Peabody: So, Miller figured if there's no book on Betsy Ross, maybe she should just write one, and she did. She's the author of *Betsy Ross and the Making of America*. And there's one thing she thinks we should all know about Betsy Ross, she was a badass.

Marla Miller: That's how I like to think about her. Betsy Ross got the job done.

Lizzie Peabody: Ross was hustling and sewing her entire life. She started working when she was a teenager to help support her family.

Marla Miller: She was the eighth of their 17 children.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh. Hold on, what?

Marla Miller: Yeah, yeah. Not all survived to adulthood as is common in that time and place, but she was in the middle of a big family.

Lizzie Peabody: Betsy was born Elizabeth Griscom, and at the age of 21, she rebelled against her strict Quaker upbringing. She ran away and married John Ross, who was not a Quaker. And this led her family to basically disown her. So, she and John fled to the big city, Philadelphia. They opened up an upholstery shop, and things were really good for a couple of years until John died in an explosion during the Revolutionary War.

Marla Miller: So, there she is, it's January of 76 and she's a young widow. And at that time, in the course of the Revolution, Philadelphia is fearful that the British Navy is going to appear, and so there is a mad scramble to create what's essentially the first Navy.

Lizzie Peabody: And what does the Navy need besides ships? That's right, flags. Anyone who could push a needle through a piece of fabric was competing for government contracts to sew these flags. It didn't matter if you were a dress maker, a saddler, or an upholsterer, the government was desperate for flags, and Ross no longer had her family or a husband to help support her. She was desperate too.

Marla Miller: And I think that Betsy Ross saw that happening and wanted to get on the Rolodex for those contracts. And so, I always say, it's Betsy Ross, government contractor is what we need to be thinking.

Lizzie Peabody: Betsy Ross, government contractor, wasn't sitting at home quietly sewing on her lap. She was out kicking butts and taking names. She sniffed tobacco, ran a commercial upholstery shop, and wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty.

Marla Miller: It's pretty physical labor. I mean, this is one of the things that I appreciate about Betsy Ross, because we think of her as being this sedate little seamstress, but if you ever look at upholstery tools, if you look at the needles that upholsters use, they are wicked.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, so in the Spring of 1776, Betsy Ross is out competing for these flag contracts, and George Washington needs a flag maker. The historical record is a little fuzzy here, but this is what Marla Miller thinks probably went down.

Marla Miller: George Washington and two other members of the Continental Congress come to her shop...

Lizzie Peabody: And they hand her a sketch and say...

Marla Miller: "Could you make us one of these?" And she looks at that and says, "Well, yeah, these red and white stripes, they look good, and I see you have this field of stars and they have six points."

Lizzie Peabody: And Betsy says, "You know the star should be five-pointed, right?" And they're like, "Yeah, we know, but it's really hard to make a five-pointed star." And Betsy says, "Ha, nothing easier."

Marla Miller: She pulls out... We don't know if it's fabric. We don't know if it's paper, but she folds out a little scrap, just so, and with one snip of the scissors, out pops this five-pointed star. And so, they applaud. "That looks great. Love it."

Lizzie Peabody: They all cheer. Marla Miller says this is most likely the Betsy Ross contribution to the American flag. General Washington couldn't figure out how to make a five-pointed star for his new flag, and she gave him some help. And she did it simply because she had the skills to pay the bills.

Marla Miller: That story is not her saying, "I made the first flag." What she was proud of, and this just resonates with everything we know about the period, is that the Father of our country, the nation's biggest celebrity in that period came into her shop and she taught him something. That resonates for me. That's the kind of moment a woman like her would remember forever.

Lizzie Peabody: Of course, some historians will never buy this story, not without hard evidence, which we'll probably never have, but you can't disprove it either. George Washington was in Philadelphia at the time, and one of the members of the flag committee, George Ross was Betsy's uncle. George Washington could have said, "Hey, other George, do you know any good flag makers in Philadelphia?" And George Ross could have said...

Marla Miller: "You know, you should give my niece a chance at this work. She would appreciate the work."

Lizzie Peabody: But all we have to go on are the Ross family stories.

Marc Leepson: Family stories are the least reliable form of historical evidence.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Historian Marc Leepson again.

Marc Leepson: The Betsy Ross story is based 100% on family stories, and when historians judge the merits of historical evidence, you know what's on the bottom?

Lizzie Peabody: Family stories. After all families have a way of embellishing the accomplishments of their ancestors, but let's take a closer look at the story William Canby told the Pennsylvania Historical Society in 1870. Where did he get it from?

Marla Miller: I always like to take it back a generation because he got the story from Betsy's daughter, Clarissa. Clarissa is in many ways the hero of this tale.

Lizzie Peabody: Clarissa worked beside her mother in the upholstery shop for years. Doing what? Making flags. Miller says that by the mid-1800s, Revolutionary heroes were starting to die of old age, and there were a ton of books being written about them, but Clarissa wasn't seeing her mom's name anywhere.

Marla Miller: And so, she allegedly sits her nephew down, William Canby, and says, "I want you to take this down. This story is important."

Lizzie Peabody: And she tells little Will how his grandmother showed the Father of our great nation, how to make a five-pointed star for the flag. And Canby is like, "That is so cool, but what if people don't believe us? Is there any proof of this?" And Clarissa is like, "Well, here's the deal, no, there really is no proof."

Marla Miller: And so, instead he asked all of these relatives to go to an attorney, go to a notary and tell the story as you remember hearing it, and then that became sort of the archival basis for the story as it was in 1870.

Lizzie Peabody: So, instead of letting this story get distorted, generation to generation in a game of family telephone, the notarized accounts are like a voicemail from the past. Canby had the receipts, and there's one more clue Miller discovered while researching her book. It's still something from a family member, but from another perspective.

Marla Miller: This is interesting. So, one of Betsy's extended family members is an illustrator named Joseph Boggs Beale. He was very important in the 19th century as an artist.

Lizzie Peabody: While Miller was digging through the Ross family historical documents, she came across one of Boggs Beale's diaries, and while she was leafing through it, she found an entry from February 1857. Boggs Beale is heading over to Clarissa's house for a big family gathering.

Marla Miller: All the players are there, and in the diary, although he's an artist, there are no other doodles. At the bottom of this page, is a five-pointed star. And I looked at that and it gave me a chill, and it's hard not to think he came home from that and wrote up his evening and that he heard a story that night about a five-pointed star.

Lizzie Peabody: Historians will never agree on Betsy Ross's contribution to the American flag. The family stories could be true, or they could be just that, stories, but Marla Miller says it doesn't really matter.

Marla Miller: We know so much about her flag making later in her life. There are many, many flags, dozens of flags documented that she made. Her horizons were broad. They weren't confined to that parlor, and they certainly weren't confined to the Spring of 1776.

Lizzie Peabody: Miller says this is the problem with being fixated on the first, because we miss the rest of the story. Should we stop asking who sewed the first American flag?

Marla Miller: I would very much love it if that happened.

Lizzie Peabody: Why?

Marla Miller: It just derails more thoughtful and interesting conversations. We have this tendency in our culture to want to look for firsts, and they're almost all flawed, so what really is the first one, and what does it tell us? I'm not sure it's a useful question.

Jennifer Jones: The first is just that, it's a first, but it doesn't mean it's the most important.

Lizzie Peabody: This is the Smithsonian's Jennifer Jones again.

Jennifer Jones: I don't think that's the way we should be thinking of history. It isn't always about the first. It is about perseverance. And I think part of our work as historians is to give our history more nuance and add to that narrative because that makes us more rich as a nation.

Lizzie Peabody: Marla Miller, Marc Leepson, and Jennifer Jones all agree on one thing, our history is too rich to fixate on a single accomplishment in any one person's life. This would be like focusing on an individual thread in an intricately woven tapestry. It's best to step back and take in the bigger picture that emerges. The shapes, the colors, even the rips and tears, together, they tell a story a single star never could.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: To learn more about Betsy Ross's contribution to our flag, as well as other important flag makers, like Rebecca Young and Mary Pickersgill, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at [si.edu/sidedoor](http://si.edu/sidedoor).

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Lizzie Peabody: For help with this episode, we want to thank Jennifer Jones, Marc Leepson, and Marla Miller. We'll share links to Marc's book, "Flag: An American Biography," and Marla's book, "Betsy Ross and the Making of America," in our newsletter as well.

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Lizzie Peabody: And special thanks to PJ Talbot for reading that speech of William Canby's. For more stories of important women in history, be sure to look into this Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. To learn more, go to [womenshistory.si.edu](http://womenshistory.si.edu), or join the conversation using #becauseofherstory on social media.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship@prx.org](mailto:sponsorship@prx.org). To keep up with the Sidedoor team, you can find us on social media @sidedoorpod, on Twitter and Instagram, or you can also email us your suggestions or show ideas at [sidedoor@si.edu](mailto:sidedoor@si.edu).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I can do it even longer if you want. Which is Latin for... wait for it... Flag house.