

January 1: Betsy Ross (1752)

If you were raised in the U.S., you have probably heard the story of Betsy Ross in one form or another. Visited by General Washington, tasked with sewing the first flag, designing it herself. Sorry, that's probably not an accurate story! It's closer to a revolutionary myth, spun by her grandson a century later. But that doesn't mean that Betsy Ross isn't an admirable historical woman.

To begin with, the story of her immediate families illustrates a common situation at the time. She was one of seventeen children, and eight of her siblings died in early childhood. She herself went on to have seven children (all daughters), two of whom died as young children. While the death of these children was of course traumatic for everyone involved, the brunt of childhood mortality fell on the women who gestated, birthed, and raised these children, without the benefit of modern medicine.

While she is traditionally referred to by her first married surname (Ross), Betsy was actually married three times. Her marriage to her first husband, John Ross, estranged her from her Quaker family. He died during the Revolutionary War. She went on to marry Joseph Ashburn, who was imprisoned by the British for treason and died in jail. A few years later, she married John Claypoole, who died from illness decades later.

Throughout tumult, war, and widowhood, Betsy continued to survive. She was a successful businesswoman, starting an upholstery company with her first husband that she continued on with for the rest of her life, ten years past the death of John Claypoole, when it then passed on to her eldest daughter. During the Revolutionary War, she supported the Continental Army with her upholstery skills. And it is likely that she did influence the design of the flag to have 5-pointed stars rather than 6-pointed ones, which is still seen in the U.S. flag today.

Elizabeth Phoebe "Betsy" Ross Ashburn Claypoole, née Griscom, died on January 30, 1836, at the age of 84. Today is the 265th anniversary of her birth. Happy birthday, Betsy Ross!

For more information about Betsy Ross:

<http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/flaglife.html>

<http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/news/state0605.htm>

http://womenshistory.about.com/od/rossbetsy/a/betsy_ross.htm

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/betsy-ross>