

Betsy Ross and the American Flag

JN vol. xiii. p. 159, appears an article under this heading, by our esteemed contributor, Ella K. Barnard. The following letter on this subject has been received from Dr. John W. Jordan, Librarian of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania :

DEAR MR. PENNEY.—I notice in the *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, vol. 13, no. 4, page 159, a contribution by Ella K. Barnard, claiming that “Betsey Ross” made the first American Flag, the “stars and stripes,” and that it was made after a pattern sketch agreed on and submitted to her by George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross.

This is a new phase to defend their ancestor’s claim, that has been raised by the descendants or friends of “Betsey Ross.”¹

Mr. George Canby, a grandson of “Betsey Ross,” at my suggestion, and armed with letters of influence to the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of War and the Secretary of State, visited Washington, where after stating his object in detail, he was given every facility to examine the letters and documents on file in these three Departments. After an exhaustive examination, from the date of the adoption of the American Flag by Congress, and for two years subsequent to that date, he neither found the name of “Betsey Ross” being paid for making flags, or in any other connection, nor were there any charges for the manufacture of American flags by anybody else.

We do know that “Betsey Ross” made flags for the *Pennsylvania Navy*, in 1777 and later, some of the Warrants for which are extant, but the descendants of the “little milliner” have never been able to produce any direct or positive evidence of what they claim for their ancestor. It is merely a family tradition, whereas the historically circumstantial evidence is strongly against this claim.

Mr. Fow’s book should be in the hands of every one interested in the history of the American Flag.

The so-called “Betsey Ross House,” which was purchased by an Association which agreed to give the promoter one-half of what he collected, from which he realised a large personal sum, has not been positively identified as the house in which “Betsey Ross” lived.

The cutting of five-pointed stars was made by women who antedated the epoch of “Betsey Ross” a century or more.

Yours very truly,
JOHN W. JORDAN.

¹ E. K. Barnard writes that “Betsy’s family were in no way accountable for the appearance of the story at this time—indeed knew nothing of it.” [ED.]