

The Business Connector

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Stars & Stripes Forever

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Prior to the late spring of 1776, the American army and navy had fought under an array of local, state and homemade flags representing colonies or militias. These flags featured pine and palmetto trees, rattlesnakes, eagles, stripes of red, blue and yellow, and stars of gold, to mention just a few of the designs.

George Washington knew that for the revolutionary effort to be successful, the American troops, both on land and at sea, needed a single flag to unify the 13 colonies rebelling against the King of England. To find someone to sew his design for what would become the first American flag, Washington turned to Betsy Ross.

Certainly Betsy's contribution to history is relatively well known. What is not well known, however, is that Betsy Ross was an unlikely person to occupy this place in history and that it mainly occurred as a result of networking.

Betsy was born Elizabeth Griscom, on January 1, 1752 in Philadelphia, as the eighth of seventeen children. Although her father was from a working-class family and her mother was from an affluent one, the one thing they had in common was their religion. They were Quakers.

Being Quakers meant that Betsy's family had some unique beliefs. For purposes of her place in history, the most significant was that Quakers did not believe in retaliating against evil. In short, they were pacifists. No Quaker would have been involved in the war effort against

England let alone become a major figure in the independence of America.

Everything indicated that this would be true for Betsy as well. She was brought up like a traditional Quaker. Because the Quakers believed in educating both girls and boys, however, Betsy went to public school.

It was here that Betsy discovered her love of sewing. And it was here where she met the children of the wealthiest and most prominent families in the greater Philadelphia area.

What is not well known, however, is that Betsy Ross was an unlikely person to occupy this place in history and that it mainly occurred as a result of networking.

Betsy's education provided her with two important things: award-winning sewing skills and a highly diversified network. These elements coupled to provide Betsy with an opportunity to be an apprentice with a well-known local upholsterer, William Webster.

While working with William Webster, Betsy met even more people. One in particular was a man by the name of John Ross, the son of an Episcopal assistant rector at Christ Church.

John and Betsy were immediately smitten with one another. Before long they were truly in love.

Betsy's father, however, disapproved of John Ross for his daughter. First, the Ross family was deeply involved

with the war against England. More importantly, however, John Ross was not a Quaker.

Despite the fact that Betsy and John were in love, the Quakers disapproved of marriages to those outside their religion. Nonetheless, John and Betsy decided to get married in November 1773. As a result, shortly thereafter, Betsy was officially "read out" of the Quaker community.

Betsy was no longer welcome at the Quaker Meeting House. In addition, she was ostracized from her family. Literally overnight, she was cut off emotionally and economically from the life she had known.

Despite this setback, John and Betsy began a life together. He served in the army. She started a sewing business. Together they attended church.

Because Betsy was no longer welcome at Quaker services, John introduced her to Christ Church, which included as parishioners Benjamin Franklin and five others who would eventually sign the Declaration of Independence.

From a historical perspective, however, the most important people attending Christ Church each week were in the adjacent pew – Martha and George Washington. Here the relationship was formed which eventually led to George Washington asking Betsy to sew the first American flag.

Our lesson: Opportunities from networking can occur at anytime and anywhere – sometimes when we least expect them. ▼