

There's Something About Mary (Pickersgill)

“Betsy Ross, as far as we know, never actually did anything historically important.” The guides laugh nervously. What is an iconoclast doing among we drum majors for historical memory? “There is no credible evidence – anywhere -- that Betsy Ross lived anything other than an ordinary life.”

Ammelise Montone, Executive Director of the Star-Spangled Flag House in Baltimore, shows the receipt for the original Star Spangled Banner, “something the Ross house in Philadelphia would kill for”. So why do we remember the legend and not the documented fact – that Mary Pickersgill sewed the most famous American flag.?

“It’s about branding,” she maintains. Both of the women and the wars.

The women led very similar lives, which began in Philadelphia. They were in their mid thirties, widowed owners of upholstery shops in large cities, when asked to sew a flag by prominent men. On both occasions we were at war with Britain. And Betsy’s branding began there.

The revolution looms large in our collective memory: a republic forged by ordinary citizens. She is proximate to primordial events, given credit for the flag with the stars which “represent a new constellation”, as the original Flag Act declares.

“We enjoy this narrative,” Montone notes.

Mary Pickersgill’s War of 1812 was fought to a draw for very esoteric reasons: freedom of navigation and free trade. The only victory most Americans remember is the defense of Fort Mc Henry. The war is so little commemorated that “most Americans place Key at the time of the Revolutionary War”.

Three other factors support the Betsy Ross legend: her name itself, primacy, and some good family PR.

We tend to remember first and surnames that are well-known by not common. Betsy falls into that category; Mary was the most popular name in the 19th century. “Some names are so common that they just disappear into the background.”

Most communities have a Ross clan, but the name is not very common. Fewer towns have an Ashburn family. Perhaps that’s why even after John Ross dies in 1773, and Betsy marries Joseph Ashburn in 1777, the name Ross sticks. It’s easy to pronounce as well. Pickersgill is not only rare, but the hard consonants render it staccato on the tongue.

We also remember the first and last items on a list. Betsy did sew some of the first American flags, for Pennsylvania ships, and her grandson William J. Canby made sure we remembered her. His 1870 presentation to the Pennsylvania Historical society

asserted that 94 years ago, when he was eleven, George Washington came to his house with a sketch from which his grandmother created the flag.

“The time was ripe for a founding mother.” The Civil War had just ended; the American Equal Rights Association had just been formed. The flag had become something for which one had fought, something sacred, like a Roman standard. A few years later, in 1893, Charles Weisberger exhibited “The Birth of Our Nation’s Flag”, the painting immortalizing Washington’s alleged visit, at the Columbian Exhibition. Reproductions were sold to “America’s memory factories”: schools. A 1909 book by Canby’s brother George and nephew Lloyd Balderson, “The Evolution of the American Flag” reinforced the legend. When he celebrated the first Flag Day, President Wilson said of Ross legend, “would that it were true”.

What about Mary Pickersgill’s descendants? They certainly remembered the story of how their grandmother stayed up all night to sew a two-story high flag, and a smaller battle flag, in just six weeks. And they did tell the story. But Major George Armistead, the commander of the fort, is not George Washington. And the brewery next door, available for such a huge project, was empty because the hop harvest was not yet in. Do we really want to tell our kids that our country, founded in Philadelphia taverns, is represented by a flag sewn in empty brewery?

The facts just do not have the mythic impact of a homespun flag made in the parlor. It’s the same reason remember Silicon Valley pioneers because they founded companies in garages, at home, not on a factory floor.

Yet, Mary Pickersgill’s story does deserve to be told. Not only did she organize a community to sew the original Star Spangled Banner, she went on to the presidency of the Impartial Female Humane society, which helped children with school vouchers and built a non-profit retirement community in 1850 which still exists today, in Towson, MD. To learn more about her and what she accomplished, one can visit www.flaghouse.org.