

Mary Pickersgill: The Woman Who Sewed The Star-Spangled Banner

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Just imagine: you live in a time before electricity. There are no sewing machines, no light bulbs, and certainly no television shows to keep you entertained. You spend six days a week working 12-hours each day inside your small home with four teenage girls and your elderly mother. This was the life of Mary Pickersgill, the woman who sewed the Star-Spangled Banner.

This image is the only known likeness of Mary Pickersgill, though it doesn't paint an accurate picture of Mary in 1813. Visitors who see this image in the "Star-Spangled Banner" online exhibition" (amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner) often envision Mary as a stern grandmother, sewing quietly in her rocking chair. No offense to the stern grandmothers of the world, but Mary was actually forty years younger than depicted here when she made the Star-Spangled Banner, and was already a successful entrepreneur. Widowed at a young age, Mary took up flag making to support her family. She made ships' colors and signal flags for the military and private vessels that docked in the busy port of Baltimore.

Mary was commissioned to make the flag for Fort McHenry in Baltimore by the commander of the fort, Major George Armistead. The United States was in the depths of the War of 1812, a conflict with Great Britain that threatened the newly won independence of the young nation.¹ Baltimore was a busy and strategically important port, and Armistead wanted its Fort to have a flag "so large that the British will have no difficulty seeing it from a distance."²

Mary and her young assistants sewed the massive flag, along with a smaller storm flag, in six weeks. Many years later, her daughter Caroline recalled:

"The flag being so very large, my mother was obliged to obtain permission from the proprietors of Clagett's brewery, which was in our neighborhood, to spread it out in their malt house; and I remember seeing my mother down on the floor, placing the stars. The flag contained, I think, four hundred yards of bunting, and my mother worked many nights until 12 o'clock to complete it in the given time."³

Each two-foot stripe of the flag was sewn from two widths of British wool bunting. The stars were cut from cotton. Though the flag seems unusually large to our eyes (nearly a quarter of the size of a modern basketball court), it was a standard "gar-rison" size meant to be flown from large flagpoles and seen from miles away.

Mary Pickersgill had learned the art of flag making from her mother, Rebecca Young, who made a living during the Revolution sewing flags, blankets, and uniforms for George Washington's Continental army. Rebecca lived with Mary, but we have no idea how much the 73-year-old woman was able to contribute to this project. We do know that Mary's daughter Caroline, her two teenage nieces Eliza and Jane, and an indentured servant named Grace Wisher did help with the onerous task of sewing the 30×42-foot flag. Grace was an African-American teen who had entered into

a six-year indentured apprenticeship with Mary in order to learn "the art and mystery of Housework and plain sewing."⁴ Mary supported this household of women "young and

old" through her flag making business. The \$574 she was paid for making the Star-Spangled Banner and the smaller storm flag was more than most Baltimoreans of the time earned in a year.

The flag that Mary created was the very flag that flew over Ft. McHenry on the morning of September 14, 1814, at the conclusion of the 26-hour Battle of Baltimore. An American lawyer named Francis Scott Key was held as a war prisoner on one of the British ships. He watched anxiously throughout the rainy night as the British bombarded the fort with rockets and cannons. At "dawn's early light," he saw the flag flying, knew that the Americans had survived the British attack and would



The only known portrait of Mary Young Pickersgill. Learn more at www.pickersgillretirement.org/pickersgill-history.php

not surrender. He was so moved that he reached into his pocket, pulled out an envelope, and penned the words to the song that would eventually become the National Anthem by an act of Congress in 1931.

After the battle, the flag and its story were passed down through the Armistead family. As the “Star-Spangled Banner” became a popular song, the flag gained notoriety. It was displayed for events such as the Marquis de Lafayette’s visit to Baltimore in 1824, a speech by President-elect William Henry Harrison in 1841, and yearly Defenders’ Day celebrations marking the anniversary of the American victory in the Battle of Baltimore. Eventually Armistead’s grandson, Eben Appleton, who had inherited the flag upon his mother Georgiana Armistead Appleton’s death, decided that the flag deserved a public home. In 1907 he lent the Star-Spangled Banner to the Smithsonian, and in 1912 converted the loan to a gift.

In her later life, Mary Pickersgill became a prominent humanitarian in Baltimore. She served for 20 years as president of the Impartial Female Humane Society, which helped find education and job opportunities for poor families, and established a home for aging women that is now known as the Pickersgill Retirement Community. We often wonder what Mary would think if she knew that the flag she so lovingly created now lays as the centerpiece of the National Museum of American History. We imagine she’d be tickled that millions of people have traveled here to see it, and incredulous that her “handiwork designed to withstand a few years at the top of a flagpole” lives on to inspire people almost 200 years later.

So What About Betsy?

Many of the millions of visitors who come to see the Star-Spangled Banner every year assume that it was made by Betsy Ross. After all, she’s the only flag maker most people have ever heard of, and her name is one of the most recognizable in American history. We know that Betsy Ross didn’t make the Star-Spangled Banner; the historical evidence reveals that it was sewed by Mary Pickersgill in 1813.

But did Betsy Ross sew the first American flag, with its stars-and-stripes design? We don’t really know. Historians have found no convincing evidence that Betsy Ross sewed the first flag. Ross was one of many women working as a flag maker in Philadelphia during the American Revolution (along with Rebecca Young, Mary Pickersgill’s mother). Business records show that Ross made flags for several Pennsylvania ships in 1777.

A story of Ross’s involvement with the creation of the stars and stripes flag of the American Revolution was first told by her grandson, William Canby, to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870. His recounting of the events of 1776 is the same story that generations of schoolchildren have heard since—that his grandmother, Betsy Ross, received a visit in her upholstery shop from General George Washington, for whom she created the first American flag. Canby heard the story from his aunt in 1857, but no other evidence of her involvement exists.

The story of Betsy Ross gained prominence in 1893, when a painting of Betsy Ross by Charles Weisgerber, “The Birth of Our Nation’s Flag,” was exhibited at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It was then mass-marketed in inexpensive prints. Her story became more popular at the dawn of the 20th century, when new immigration to America sparked an interest in patriotic traditions and stories. Countless books and toys helped fix in children’s imaginations an indelible image of Betsy Ross. Whether the story of her involvement in the creation of the American flag is historically accurate, she has grown to be a maternal symbol—“Mother America”—for many people.

Why Learn about Mary Pickersgill?

Social studies textbooks often miss out on the human stories within the vast context of American history, including the War of 1812, an unfamiliar topic for many students and teachers. By focusing on Mary’s story, teachers can start to think more imaginatively about the Star-Spangled Banner and the War of 1812 and introduce students to some important historical concepts:

- Everyday people make history. Mary Pickersgill was not the president. She did not win a battle with an army behind her. But the work of her hands—with the help of the young women in her household—created an object that inspired a song that’s now part of our national heritage.
- Women have had complex and changing roles throughout American history, and have contributed in many ways to the larger narrative of American history. In some ways, Mary’s story conforms to a stereotype of women working on the homefront in a craft that is often associated with women. But by observing that she was a single mother and entrepreneur, we see that the idea of the working woman isn’t entirely a 20th-century notion.
- Artifacts can tell rich, important stories about our shared past. Historians study objects, the material culture that people from the past left behind, in order to understand history. Because objects are the product of human workmanship—of human thought and effort—objects tell something about the people who designed, made, and used them.
- Art and music from the past sometimes refer to specific events in history. Without learning about the context of the Star-Spangled Banner, students might sing the song at a baseball game and assume it is all poetic flourish. But with a bit of information about who wrote it, when, and why, students may uncover “a-ha” moments: Why does it make sense to face the flag during the song? Why is the first stanza asked as a question, and what was the answer?

Teaching Ideas for the Star-Spangled Banner

- Refer your students to an online exhibit of the National Museum of American History (NMAH), amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/educational-resources.aspx
- Ask students critical thinking questions, inviting them to develop their understanding of the topic at a deeper level while imagining the perspective(s) of the participants. Some examples include: What was life like for a regular person living at that time? What would it have meant to everyday Americans if Baltimore had not been defended?

The NMAH theater department has developed a Mary Pickersgill historical character (reenactor) as an extension of the Museum's scholarly research into. An actress performing as this character presents via videoconference at the Museum's Let's Do History teacher training workshops. You can view video of the character and supporting classroom materials online at the URL above
- Consider how The Star-Spangled Banner also relates to other items in the curriculum. Exploring the song's tune (starting with the 18th century British melody, a performance accurate for 1854, or modern performances from the Museum's YouTube contest) might help your students sing along during school assemblies or baseball games. Also, you can get your students to explore the science of light to understand how the Museum protects a flag that is nearly 200 years old, or flex your geometric thinking and take out your yard stick to map out the size of this gigantic flag on your school's ball field. (Hint: Even after dozens of snippets were given away as souvenirs, it is today 30 feet by 34 feet!) The online exhibition includes detailed instructions for each of these mini-projects and links to the audio files.

- The story of this national symbol is rich with primary sources, secondary sources, fanciful legends, and mysteries. Introduce your upper elementary students to primary and secondary sources using the online lesson plan. You could also prompt a creative writing exercise regarding that mysterious missing star on the flag. (Possible side-bar: One legend sometimes stated in print tells that the star was given to Abraham Lincoln at the beginning of the Civil War, but neither the Lincoln Papers nor any other documentary source reveals any evidence that he received it. Considering the Armisteads' Southern sympathies, the story seems highly unlikely. Other leads by Smithsonian curators over the years have also failed to yield any solution to the mystery of the missing star's whereabouts).
- Employ your classroom's interactive whiteboard. Try the interactive Star-Spangled Banner at amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/interactive-flag.aspx. Click the online flag's 25 "hotspots" to view text and additional images. Our personal favorite is the red cloth "A" in the lower right part of the flag, reportedly sewn into the flag by Louisa Armistead, widow

of the 1814 commander of Fort McHenry. At one of the Museum's reopening events, we were thrilled to show this "A" to one of the Armistead descendents.

- Beyond the online exhibition, check out the children's book, *The Flag Maker*, by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, which includes not only the story of Mary Pickersgill, but also that of her 12-year-old daughter Caroline.⁵ From Caroline's perspectives, we see the flag's creation and the battle unfolding in Baltimore Harbor. In addition to a compelling story and pleasing illustrations, share with your students the author's note, where Bartoletti discusses a few details in the story that are not historically verifiable—a great point to consider while introducing young learners to the genre of historical fiction. The online resources from OurStory include a reading guide for this book, as well as four other related activities, at amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/starspangled. 🌐

Notes

1. Steven S. Lapham, "The First War Hawks: the Invasion of Canada in 1812," *Middle Level Learning* no. 45 (September 2012): 12-16
2. Armistead's letter is quoted in Walter Lord, *By the Dawn's Early Light* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 274.
3. Caroline Pickersgill Purdy to Georgiana Armistead Appleton, undated [1876], Appleton Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
4. Indenture of Grace Wisher to Mary Pickersgill, Baltimore County, Orphans' Court, Indentures, January 6, 1810. The painting is part of the holdings of the Pennsylvania State Archives.
5. Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *The Flag Maker* (New York: Sandpiper, 2007).



An unfinished cloth letter "A" has been sewn onto the Star Spangled Banner
(National Museum of American History)

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