Reconstructing the Absent Center: Looking for Betsy Ross



Common-place *asks Marla R. Miller, author of* Betsy Ross and the Making of America *(2010) to reflect on the challenges and rewards of writing the biography of someone who left almost no trace in the historical record:*

Like most of early America's working women, Betsy Ross (that is, Elizabeth Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole, 1752-1836), a Philadelphia upholsterer and flagmaker from the 1760s to the 1820s, left little in the way of papers. Her iconic status aside, almost no letters, ledgers or journal entries remain from her hand; almost no possessions or places have survived for our contemporary scrutiny. A handful of legal documents and records associated with Philadelphia's Free Quaker meeting bear her signature, as do a smattering of receipts. A house on Arch Street stands to document the built environment she once knew, and a handful of family possessions are preserved in public and private hands, but these are only small fragments of her world. The career of the Ross legend had attracted some academic interest (in part because, as a product of the late nineteenth century, it left a more robust paper trail), but few scholarly attempts have been made to recover or understand the life behind it, mainly because we have comparatively few of the usual avenues of insight into the mind of the biographer's subject. Put differently, the subject one would expect to find at the center of a biography was absent.

If the paucity of traditional sources goes a long way toward explaining why, at the turn of the twenty-first century, no one had yet ventured anything like a biography of the legendary flagmaker, the trajectory of women's history as a field of academic inquiry also has something to do with it. Women's history, as most readers of this journal know, came out of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The rising generation of historians who were drawn to the field in the 1970s and 1980s were anxious to take on hard-hitting, substantive topics like labor unrest, political influence, and the formal and informal regulation of reproduction. No one trying to launch a career in the budding field of women's history would have taken on a project like Betsy Ross, who by the era of the bicentennial had largely been reduced to a cartoon character, a pin cushion, the salt to George Washington's pepper. Thirty years later, as I started researching the "life behind the legend," women's history was solidly entrenched in our discipline and those issues were no longer in play—though even then I sometimes preferred to describe my research topic as "upholsterers in eighteenth-century Philadelphia" to avoid the whiff of condescension (sometimes verging surprisingly toward contempt) that the name "Betsy Ross" can still conjure. But by and large, studies like Alfred F. Young's brilliant treatments of Deborah Sampson Gannett and George Robert Twelves Hughes, and Nell Painter's pathbreaking study of Sojourner Truth, had prepared readers for a scholarly biography of Betsy Ross, despite the comparatively thin documentary record.

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But the lack of traditional archival sources remained a significant challenge. Reconstructing the absent center, then, involved three main strategies: seeing familiar sources in new ways, allowing my subject to step to the side while other figures from her world occupy the reader's attention, and engaging the material record associated with her and her family writ large.

The story of Betsy Ross and the making of the first flag was launched into the public mind in 1870, when her grandson William Canby (1825-1890, the child of Betsy's daughter Jane Claypoole Canby) recounted to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania a narrative conveyed to him in the 1850s by his aunt, Clarissa Claypoole Wilson (1785-1864). Canby began researching the family story, and, unable to find proof in the archival record that the tale was true, he did the next best thing, and asked his relatives—including Rachel Claypoole Fletcher (1789-d.) and Margaret Boggs (1776-1876)—to record what they remembered hearing about these events in a series of affidavits and other testimonies. These narratives form the basis of the Betsy Ross legend as we know it today, and the family stories (like all family stories) all proved to involve both fact and fiction in varying ratios; but the testimonies also offered opportunities to explore a surprisingly wide range of topics in the social and cultural history of early Philadelphia.

Young's treatments of Sampson and Hughes have illuminated the ways that stories

about the Revolution as they unfolded over the course of the nineteenth century can tell us as much or more about the decades of the telling as they do about the American past. And scholars have used the Ross legend productively to probe their implications for the post-Civil War, Centennial era in which they emerged. Readers have long looked at the family oral histories largely as documents of Victorian sentimentality and centennial wistfulness, as expressions of nationalism and artifacts of gendered cultural tensions—but they remain, too, productive points of entry into the world of the Griscom family itself as well as the historical age their lives and experiences reflected. To be sure, these affidavits concerning the alleged making of the first flag are steeped in patriotic nostalgia, but they also reflect the actual lived experience of women from a large, multi-generational artisanal family. Margaret Boggs, born in 1776, became a celebrated centenarian at an opportune moment, but she also lived and worked in the upholstery trades alongside the flagmaker for many years, joining Betsy's household after she herself was widowed very young; she was the first of several nieces and daughters to return to the bustling Claypoole house in adulthood, and contributed to the various family enterprises housed there. Rachel lived to recount a version of events that transpired long before her birth, but she also spent a lifetime living and working alongside sisters, cousins, and aunts in upholstery, flagmaking, and other trades. The question is not whether these documents should be accepted or rejected as written: if we read carefully enough, we can have both baby and bathwater, too.

Consider, for instance, Rachel's testimony. When she made her contribution to the family mythology, she described how young Betsy Griscom walked from her family's Arch Street home to the workshop of Philadelphia upholsterer John Webster "to visit her sister." "While there," the story continues, "a piece of difficult work was given to one of the girls who failed in it and Betsy said she could do it, and surprised Mr. Webster by the neatness and beauty of her work. He at once went to her mother's and asked her to let him have Betsy [who] was unwilling at first to let her go. Mr. Webster offered to pay grandmother (Griscom) the wages of a woman in the kitchen & give Betsy a thorough knowledge of the business. So her mother yielded." This anecdote is obviously meant to preserve the image of an intelligent, quick-witted young Betsy, the needlework prodigy, to foreshadow the heroic contribution her stitchery would later make to the fledgling war effort. But it also offers an intriguing glimpse of artisanal work in early Philadelphia, as well as an earlier moment in her family history, worlds Rachel knew. In this telling, one of Betsy's older sisters—Susanna, Sarah, Rebecca or Mary (the eldest, Deborah, being already married and out of the house)—was already working in Webster's shop when Betsy visited her there, and, since "one of the girls" was struggling with an assignment, then at least three girls, and perhaps more, were employed by the London-trained upholsterer and laboring under the supervision of Ann King, who "had the care of women's work" in Webster's enterprise. The upholsterer is remembered to have approached Rebecca Griscom rather than Samuel to inquire about the girl's availability, and he was willing to pay a kitchen servant's wages in exchange for the novice's labor. Though it wasn't her objective,

Rachel's account can't help but shed light on the upholstery workshops that figured so largely in her family history and in her own life experience.

Second, reconstructing the life of my subject also demanded that I skirt, if not altogether violate, the conventions of traditional biography. Betsy Ross is rarely able to hold her place at the center of these chapters—the archival record is simply too slight. Making a virtue of necessity, instead we see her parents, aunts, and uncles, we meet her sisters and brothers, we consider her co-workers, children, and nieces. And in truth, we all know, from our own lives, that the things that happen to our sisters, our brothers, our parents or our children are things that happen to us as well. The eighteenth century is so very different from today in so many ways, but not, I think, in this one. Embracing that reality transformed the project from a conventional biography to a more encompassing look at the world of this large artisanal family over, in the end, some six generations.

Elizabeth Griscom a.k.a Betsy Ross grew up in a large household as one of seventeen children, and it became clear fairly early on that there were stories to tell about her several sisters—Deborah's marriage to cloth dyer and scourer Everard Bolton, her sisters' encounters with discipline and disownment after their marriages outside the unity of the Quaker community, Mary's child born out of wedlock, Rachel's own work in the upholstery trades, the death of Hannah's husband and subsequent effort to salvage some of the family's goods in the face of insolvency, and Rebecca's sorrowful death in the almshouse. If the project began, in some ways, as an effort to rescue the "real" Betsy Ross from obscurity (or, worse, from misunderstanding cloaked in familiarity), it became an opportunity to tell stories about this ordinary artisanal family in early Philadelphia, and through them to understand better the world of the iconic flagmaker. From start to finish, Betsy Ross remained elusive to me as an individual. What I could see far more clearly was the several generations of a Pennsylvania family whose fortunes fluctuated over time and space, for whom the Revolution was arguably more bane than boon, their patriotic family storytelling notwithstanding.

With my subject so elusive in the archive, material culture offered a compellingly direct link to her world, though this proved another genre of sources that illuminated Betsy's world obliquely at best. The Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia does own Betsy's spectacles as well as a silver snuff box engraved "EC," Betsy's initials after her marriage to her third husband, John Claypoole, and a petticoat, remade in the early 1800s from an older silk dress. But here again, objects associated with others proved enlightening, in more ways than one. In the course of researching the book (as well as co-curating a museum exhibition based on the project mounted in 2010 by the Winterthur Museum), I had the great good fortune to become acquainted with several descendants, who (I report with no small amount of gratitude) greeted our hesitant inquiries with generosity rather than suspicion. One led us—literally led us, that is—through a basement piled high with the detritus we all accumulate through life to a far corner, where, beneath stacks of sewing and

quilting supplies, sat the sea chest John Claypoole packed for his 1792 voyage to Demerara; another drove to a Baltimore bakery with a spectacular pieced silk signature quilt made in the 1841 for Betsy's grand-daughter Catherine (and so documenting the family's social circle), while another shared a stunning appliqué cotton quilt made by Betsy's daughter Clarissa Claypoole. The latter bore a striking resemblance to another quilt, owned by a collector, made by Clarissa's cousin and Betsy's niece (and co-worker) Margaret Boggs, and the two quilts together—both moving examples of beautiful needlework produced by women who otherwise sewed for a living—offered insight, if indirect, into their own skill (one flag attributed to Clarissa survives in the collections of the Betsy Ross house, but otherwise, none of the sewing that they did in the course of their trade is at present known to survive). But more importantly, they served as a reminder that these women embraced outlets of aesthetic expression broader than that offered by flags and chair covers. More interestingly, the stylistic tradition with which both quilts are associated—the polychrome floral motifs cut from polished cotton chintz, their arrangement on a neutral cotton background, the inclusion of inscriptions—underscored the significance that new religious communities came to assume later in the family's history.

Certainly the most emotionally compelling artifact I encountered in the course of the work is the cane carried by Betsy's third husband, John Claypoole. I had known, from archival research, that Claypoole suffered from some disability late in life that impaired his mobility; in the early nineteenth century, with John unable to work, the Claypoole household depended on the charity of the Free Quaker community. The cause of John's disability is unknown, but some sources gestured toward injuries he received during the Revolution, while others hinted that he had had some sort of stroke. Some documents said he was paralyzed. I didn't know what to make of it all. And then on one extraordinary day in Maryland a descendant reached into the back of her kitchen closet and pulled out John Claypoole's cane. The artifact—a gift from his son-in-law, the ship captain Isaac Silliman (who had married Betsy's daughter Eliza Ashburn, the only surviving child from her marriage to mariner Joseph Ashburn), probably crafted at sea—confirmed that he was not in fact paralyzed, at least not at this date. The head of the cane was carved in the shape of a dog's head, and it carried a Masonic symbol. The shaft was marked "I.S. to J.C, 1811." The most obvious conclusion is that Claypoole was still ambulatory even in 1811. But it was another inscription—"John E. Claypoole, 74 So Front Street"—that made me sit up straight; it was an "if lost, please return to" note for the finder, should the elderly Claypoole leave it behind on some ramble through the neighborhood. The whole package—long days at sea bodied forth in a gift thoughtfully carved by a son-in-law for the adoptive father of his own beloved wife, and the image of old John Claypoole making his way down the street to the beehive that was the house on Front Street—made this family real to me in ways that the documentary record perhaps never could.

Perhaps that Maryland kitchen could even be called an artifact in my search for the absent center. I was writing about an American icon, but Betsy Ross was not only a mother, a sister, an aunt, and a grandmother—she is also an ancestor to

living people who welcomed me into their homes and into their families. Getting to know so many of Betsy's descendants as I was writing kept me honest in a way that I came very much to appreciate. If ever the temptation came to make a flip or glib remark or easy joke at the expense of my subject, I quickly recalled that she was not, for one set of readers, an abstract figure. While I never pulled any analytical punch for the sake of her descendants (who are, I should say, well-read, sophisticated students of history who did not need me to point out places where family stories broke down), the past was made much more immediate to me by these connections. I have often joked with students about how much easier it is to write about the eighteenth century than the twentieth, as my long-dead subjects are far less likely to contradict me. But my acquaintance with the grandchildren of Betsy's grandchildren helped me remember that we are not, in truth, always so very distant from our subjects.

Perhaps this brings us full circle—the present-day family of Betsy Ross reminds us that behind the legend there are and have always been very real people. The community of family members who told these stories in the last quarter of the nineteenth century embraced the story of the "first flag" for reasons ranging from tension over women's suffrage to patriotic longing, and the story of Betsy Ross, to be sure, sheds light on that moment in time. But those narratives also help us understand the lives of laboring women of the Revolutionary era, an enterprise fragile enough. The storytelling of Clarissa Wilson and William Canby, of Rachel Fletcher and Margaret Boggs, and of the present-day descendents of Betsy Ross each offer opportunities to push past the romance, to peer through the haze of nostalgia, and find vibrant communities of artisanal women in the American past.

Engaging the stories of the dozens of men and women whose lives crossed Betsy's horizon at various points in her life necessarily dislodges the subject from the center of her own story. But perhaps she would have found this position a familiar one, enmeshed as she was in thick ties that were simultaneously familial and commercial, political and spiritual. Here I only partially mean to cue the sorts of narratives Barbara Taylor contemplates in her thoughtful contribution to the June 2009 *American Historical Review* roundtable on "Historians and Biography," in which some sort of pre-modern "self" "rooted in communal life, lacking any sense of unique individuality," gives way to "the modern Western self, a 'bounded, unique' individual possessing innate character and psychological interiority." But in the end, I do suspect that de-centering my subject produced a more truthful telling of her life—a closer approximation of the lived experience of working women in eighteenth-century America, whose lives were inextricably connected to their families (past, present, and future), and embedded in neighborhoods, women whose experience was shaped by both the fellowship of faith and communities of artisanal practice. Departing from convention allowed me to show readers something about the lived experience of the eighteenth century that is certainly truer than I would have been able to achieve had the documentary record been more cooperative.

Though many readers come to the book primarily to learn whether the "first

flag" story they learned in childhood is true, that question was the least interesting to me while writing, and the book leaves the "did she or didn't she" question wide open (in the end, I suggest that there are probably some grains of truth at the bottom of the family legend, but just which those grains might be—and their relative weight—is very much left up to the reader). I have remained, on the whole, far less interested in Betsy Ross than I am in "Aunt Claypoole," the woman whose crowded Front Street home sheltered a substantial flagmaking enterprise at least in the early nineteenth century, whatever went before. I perhaps possess some romantic attachment to Ross, but it's not the young widow of the Revolution who captures my historical affection: it's the aging artisan whose spectacles today document her failing vision, the mature sister, aunt, mother, and grandmother on whom so many others came to depend—the woman at the center of one lively artisanal world.

Further reading:

Readers interested in the legend as the family reported it should consult the several transcriptions made by James M. Duffin, in the collections of the Betsy Ross House. To read more about the making of the Betsy Ross legend, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's essay in this journal, "How Betsy Ross Became Famous" (*Common-Place*, Vol. 8 No. 1).

For other biographies that examine the lives of subjects not well represented in the archival record, see Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004), and *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 2000); also Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (New York, 1996). The thoughtful roundtable on "Historians and Biography," which includes Barbara Taylor's essay, can be found in the June 2009 *American Historical Review.* See also Nick Salvatore, "Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship," *Labour History* 87 (November 2004). An earlier contribution to this ongoing conversation is another roundtable, "Self and Subject" in *The Journal of American History* 89: 1 (June 2002).

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