

Flagmaker

The story of our American Flag

A one act play for children

by

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Flagmaker

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Cast of Characters

(Suggested ages 8-12)

George Washington

Martha Washington

Thomas Jefferson

Congressional Clerk

Servant/Messenger

Interviewers 1 and 2

Mr. Morris

Uncle Ross

Betsy Ross

Joseph

Patience

Sarah

John Hancock

Five to Seven Congressmen

The Flagmaker

Scene 1

(The Philadelphia home of George and Martha Washington, May, 1776. The Washington's are seated in a comfortable parlor lit by candles. George is right. Martha is sewing with an embroidery hoop. George has a pained expression and sighs deeply.)

MARTHA: Does it hurt a lot, dear? You look so uncomfortable.

GEORGE: I am, but I'll just have to get through it. Soon, I hope.

MARTHA: You could take them out now. No one will be over tonight, I think. It's getting late.

GEORGE: No, I don't want to do that. I'll just wear them until I go to bed. Have to get used to them sometime. The worst part is the taste. The wood makes my mouth pucker.

MARTHA: Well, you could ask Dr. Jensen for something else. Maybe they wouldn't taste as bad.

GEORGE: But then I'd have to get used to a new set, and that's not pleasant, either.

MARTHA: You seem a bit preoccupied, though. Are you worried about something?

GEORGE: No, not worried. Just thinking. There are so many things we talk about at the meetings. Today we talked about the need for a banner - a flag - something that would symbolize the whole nation.

MARTHA: A flag! What a wonderful idea! One flag for everybody. I like it!

GEORGE: Yes, we do have a lot of regional flags, but we've never had one for the entire country. We're going to need it, and soon, I hope.

MARTHA: Who will design it?

GEORGE: We have a committee for that.

MARTHA: (*Laughing*) A committee! You know what everybody says about committees.

GEORGE: That's not always true. You know that. Our committees have worked well in the Congress.

MARTHA: Sorry, dear. I didn't mean to laugh at your committees. I was really thinking that I know someone who might help with a flag. Mrs. Ross, the woman who makes your cuffs and collars. She is one of the best with a needle in all of Philadelphia.

GEORGE: Yes, the upholstery lady. She's a war widow, too. And her husband's uncle George Ross is on the committee.

MARTHA: She sits next to us at church. We've known her a long time. A true patriot!

GEORGE: I guess I could ask her uncle to talk to her. It's worth a try. But we'd still like to make the design ourselves.

MARTHA: I'm sure she'd be happy to advise you.

(*A servant enters.*)

SERVANT: Mr. Jefferson to see you, sir.

GEORGE: Thomas? Send him in.

MARTHA: It's rather late for someone to call, isn't it?

(*Thomas Jefferson enters as GW stands to greet him.*)

THOMAS: Sorry to come so late, but I want to talk to you before tomorrow's meeting.

GEORGE: Glad to see you, Thomas. Please sit here and we'll talk. (*They sit.*)

MARTHA: Perhaps I need to go if you men are needing to talk "war".

THOMAS: No - no, please stay. You 'll be too curious if you don't.

MARTHA: (*Cheerfully*) A man who really understands women!

THOMAS: General Washington, some of the members of the Congress have sent me a letter demanding that we declare our

independence from England immediately. I received it about an hour ago. *(Shows the letter.)*

GEORGE: We are moving in that direction. They all know that.

THOMAS: There are some influential names here, and they want immediate action!

GEORGE: Well, they didn't send it to me! They know I'd tell them they'd have to wait until the proper time. Timing is everything in this.

THOMAS: They seem to be threatening us - I mean, if we don't do it now, they might do it by themselves!

GEORGE: There are always factions! Well, read it to me, and I'll try to work something out by tomorrow.

(Lights go down. Curtain closes. Clerk appears in front of curtain.)

CLERK: In the Continental Congress today: General Washington led a discussion concerning the independence of the thirteen colonies, and after some debate, Thomas Jefferson was appointed to head a committee that will draft a declaration for independence to send to the English King. The committee was asked to prepare initial documents and present them to the congress by June 15, 1776. In other business, General Washington, Mr. George Ross, and Mr. Robert Morris were appointed to make up a committee to design and implement a banner that would be used as a flag for the new nation, The United States Of America. And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have the privilege of witnessing an interview with George and Martha Washington, conducted by interviewers from your own time. Please greet the General and Mrs. Washington.

(The clerk leads the applause, then exits.)

Scene 2

(As the curtain opens, George and Martha are seated on their chairs, smiling attentively and with a nod, each acknowledges the applause. Interviewers enter Stage L and stand facing the Washingtons. The interviewers are dressed in twenty-first century clothing.)

INTERVIEWER # 1: General Washington, you were very influential in the process of designing and making the first American flag. Please tell us your thoughts as you worked on that project.

GEORGE: As I recall, I met with the committee and we talked at length about the design of the flag. We considered many possibilities, but finally decided on the seven red and six white bars and thirteen stars that became the flag.

INTERVIEWER #2: Can you give us any details about your first meeting with Betsy Ross?

GEORGE: Well, in the first place, you probably know that we were a more formal kind of society than you are now. We always addressed each other as Mr. or Mrs. unless they were part of our family, or very close friends. Now, to answer your question, I knew Mrs. Elizabeth Ross before we met with her about the flag. Both my wife and myself were customers of hers. She had an upholstery shop, but she did sewing of other kinds as well. She made a lot of the lacy cuffs and collars I wore, which, by the way, were the height of men's fashion in my time. My wife had her cover some furniture, and we sat in the pew next to hers at church every Sunday. So, you see, we did know her, at least as an acquaintance. The committee asked Mrs. Ross to make the flag because she was an excellent seamstress and an exemplary person.

INTERVIEWER #1: Mrs. Washington, the General has told us a little about Mrs. Ross. Are you able to add anything of interest from a woman's point of view?

MARTHA: Let me think - - yes, yes, I think I can say something of interest. Mrs. Ross was a war widow, as you probably know, and she had to work very hard to take care of herself. Her husband had been killed before we ever met her, very early in the conflict. An explosion, I believe. The fact that she ran a business and hired other people was unusual. Most women couldn't do that then. She was only twenty four, after all.

INTERVIEWER #1: Did you ever have a chance to talk with her as a friend?

MARTHA: As the General has told you, we were much less inclined to be social with people we didn't know very well in our day. No, I didn't ever talk to her about anything except

the work I needed done. She was always easy to talk to, though, and responded with a smile and did all the work very well.

INTERVIEWER #2: General Washington, how did Mrs. Ross respond when you asked her to make a flag. Did she know how important it would be?

GEORGE: I think she knew because we on the committee tried to explain what we really needed; A banner to signify the unity of all the people of The United States. She accepted with the understanding that she might not be able to produce the final product we wanted. I mean, she wanted us to understand that. We told her to go ahead, and hoped it would work out for the best.

INTERVIEWER #1: How long did it take her to make the flag?

GEORGE: We wanted it as soon as she was able, and she delivered it to us in less than two weeks. It took a lot of sewing, all by her own hand. It was a large flag, and needed a lot of attention to keep all the bars, you call them stripes, I believe, absolutely straight.

INTERVIEWER #2: Thank you both, very much, for talking with us today. Is there anything you might want to add before we complete the interview?

GEORGE: Do you mean about Mrs. Ross?

INTERVIEWER #2: Yes, or anything else you want to say.

GEORGE: I'd like to say this: (*standing*) I have been mighty pleased about the way the American people have rallied 'round the flag in times of stress and in times of celebration. We had no way of knowing then how much the flag, which you sometimes call "Old Glory" or "The Stars and Stripes", would mean over the next centuries, and that it would become more popular as the symbol of the nation in your time than it has ever been. I thank you all for that. (*He bows to the audience.*)

INTERVIEWER #1: And we thank you, General and Mrs. Washington, for joining us today in presenting the story of Mrs. Elizabeth Ross. Let's all thank the Washingtons again.

Scene 3

(The Interviewers begin the applause, the Clerk enters and applauds the Washingtons as the lights go down and the curtain closes.)

(Betsy Ross' house. She greets the committee in her parlor instead of the workroom. The parlor is typical of the times, with four chairs, at least one Upholstered, and a small table with a candle on it. Betsy is in the room as the committee enters.)

BETSY: Welcome, Gentlemen. *(She inclines her head and shakes each by the hand.)* General, Uncle, Mr. Morris. Please come and sit with me. *(As they are all seated.)* Your message said you want to talk about a new flag. I must tell you that I have never made one before, but I believe that I may be able to do it.

GEORGE: We are confident that you are able, Mrs. Ross. It is good of you to see us on such short notice.

BETSY: It is an honor for me, sir. Please tell me about this new flag.

GEORGE: I'll ask Mr. Morris to describe it to you first.

MORRIS: The committee has decided that we need thirteen bars on it, of red and white, and that we should also have thirteen stars, white stars on a blue field. One bar and one star for each of the States in the new nation.

BETSY: That will be pretty indeed.

UNCLE: We have brought a drawing of what we want it to look like. Something of what we want, at least. It's not the best drawing, but you can get the idea.

GEORGE: I think it a good drawing. He made it himself, with our advice.

BETSY: It is! I can understand it well from this picture.

UNCLE: *(Smiling)* You are kind, my dear.

BETSY: Thank you, Uncle. I'm right, also. I see you want to start with a red bar and then alternate with the white. So it will have red at the top and bottom. Very pretty, indeed.

MORRIS: I'm glad you like the design, Mrs. Ross. But we aren't sure about the arrangement for the stars.

BETSY: (*Studying the picture.*) Yes - Hmmm - yes, I believe that the circle will work very well. It will be more attractive than lines, since we have only thirteen. But, there are six points on these stars. Have you considered anything else?

GEORGE: We thought of five, but that would take much time and effort to make each one. Four points are too few. With six, the stars are simpler to make.

BETSY: Please allow me to show you something, sir. (*She reaches into her sewing basket and brings out a piece of fabric and a scissor. She folds the fabric deftly, then, with one snip, unfolds a perfect five point star.*) That is a little trick I learned a long time ago. It is nicer than the six point star, I think.

GEORGE: Gentlemen, I'm sure we have found our flag maker - and a co-designer. Mrs. Ross, we are in your debt, and I think we all agree that the five point star is exactly what we need.

(The men agree vigorously.)

BETSY: You are kind, General Washington. I will certainly do my best to make this flag a strong symbol of our nation! But I must add that I cannot be absolutely confident that I can do it well. It takes a fine hand to sew these intricate things.

MORRIS: As General Washington has said, we are in your debt, and we have no doubt but you will do it as well as any we might find. One thing, however, we may need this flag soon. When do you think you can have one ready?

BETSY: It is better if you tell me when you need it. I will work on it at odd moments, and finish it soon, I believe. That is, if I am able to finish it at all. I needs must tell you that if I cannot, I will advise you within three days.

GEORGE: Do you think three weeks would be enough time?

BETSY: Yes, but I think, if all goes well, and your faith in me is right, I could have it ready sooner. - - Two weeks.

Two weeks from today, if that is right for you. I will make it my first project rather than work the odd moments!

MORRIS: We thank you, Mrs. Ross, for your generous spirit. General?

GEORGE: Yes, that's good timing for us. We do thank you, Mrs. Ross. (*Rising*) Good -day to you now. (*All rise.*) Let us hear from you if any problems occur. Oh, yes, the payment will be as you decide for this project. Is that satisfactory?

BETSY: It is, sir, and I will certainly advise you concerning my progress! Good day, gentlemen. Thank you. (The men begin to leave.)

(Lights go down, curtain closes. Clerk enters in front of curtain.)

CLERK: In the Continental Congress today: A committee headed by General Washington, Head of the Continental Army, with Mr. George Ross and Mr. Robert Morris, members, went to meet with Mrs. Elizabeth Ross, widow of Mr. John Ross and upholsterer, of Arch Street, and arranged for her to make a sample of a Flag that will become the symbol of The United States Of America, if this congress so agrees. The Flag will be delivered for consideration no later than two weeks from this day.

(Clerk exits as lights go down.)

Scene 4

(Betsy is seated in her parlor in a straight backed chair. The new flag draped across her lap. She is slightly left of center stage. The flag is 6 or 7 feet long, and most of it extends across her lap and drops to the floor so the audience can see it. (There is a well known portrait of Betsy in this position.) She is sewing on the end with the star field. (Most of the stars are not visible in order to create the illusion that the flag is not finished.) One of the shop girls is with her.)

SARAH: Mrs. Ross, there is an order here for two cushions to go on a divan. They want the indigo silk. Would you like me to cut that now?

BETSY: You do have all the facts; dimensions and depth, and all that?

SARAH: Oh, yes ma'am. All that is clear.

BETSY: Then you can go ahead. I'll check into it before you turn it, of course.

SARAH: Yes, ma'am. *(Sarah exits left.)*

(Betsy sews a moment, then picks up a small bell and rings it. A young man enters.)

JOSEPH: Yes, ma'am. What can I get for you?

BETSY: The committee from the Congress is going to be here soon. I'd like to serve them some tea, and some of those sweet rolls we had this morning. Just cut the rolls in half, please, and get the tea ready. I'll ring for you when they get here.

JOSEPH: I'll get everything ready, ma'am. *(He exits.)*

BETSY: *(Calling him back.)* Joseph - Joseph!

JOSEPH: *(Reenters.)* Yes, ma'am?

BETSY: Be sure to put plenty of butter on those rolls. They might be a little dry. And heat them on the stove just before you butter them.

JOSEPH: I will do that, ma'am.

(Sarah enters as Joseph leaves.)

SARAH: The men are here to see you about the flag, ma'am.

BETSY: Excellent. Please show them in and then tell Joseph they are here.

SARAH: Yes, ma'am.

(She steps out for a moment, then returns with the congressional committee. The men enter the room from stage left. Betsy does not rise to meet them but remains in her chair with the flag draped across her knees. George stands beside her to stage left, and the other two cross behind. All are looking at the flag.)

BETSY: Gentlemen, I am glad you have come. I want you to see that the major part of the job is finished. The bars are all sewn together. (She runs her hand across the flag.) Now it won't be very long before I finish the star field and the flag will be placed into your keeping.

MORRIS: Greetings, Mrs. Ross. We are glad to see that you are keeping well, and that you've made such excellent progress on the flag!

GEORGE: Indeed, we are more than pleased to see it so nearly ready.

BETSY: Thank you, gentlemen. I am pleased with it also, although I do see some things I might have done just a bit differently. Well, that will be for future flags, I think. You will notice, gentlemen, that I have made it a rectangle with all the bars the same length. I then placed the blue ground cloth for the star field in the upper left corner; left to those who look upon it from the front, that is, and then fasten all the stars upon it. That will be different with other flags. I will shorten the top seven bars so that the blue star field will not overlay them. It will look better, I believe. Flatter, and better.

UNCLE: This very flag is a beauty, my dear. I don't know how it could become better than this.

BETSY: I do thank you, uncle, for your kind words. All of you, gentlemen, I thank you.

GEORGE: It is we who need to thank you, Mrs. Ross. We will take the flag to the congress soon, and I know that they will heartily endorse it! It is a thing of beauty!

BETSY: Thank you, sir. I will try to do my best work.

(A messenger from the congress enters hurriedly.)

MESSENGER: I have an urgent message for General Washington!

GEORGE: Yes. I will take it here.

MESSENGER: *(Handing a paper to George.)* Your message, sir!
(He salutes and waits.)

(George looks at the paper, studies it a moment, then folds and pockets it.)

GEORGE: I must go. Immediately. Pressing business with the war council, gentlemen. Good day, Mrs. Ross.

BETSY: Good day, sir.

MORRIS: We will go with you General. Sorry to leave so abruptly, Mrs. Ross.

BETSY: Please, sir, do not apologize. These times call for quick action! Good day to you all.

UNCLE: Good day, Betsy.

(The men leave quickly and Betsy rings the bell again. Joseph enters with a tray of tea and rolls. He looks around but sets the tray on a side table and pauses.)

BETSY: They had to go on urgent business. War business, I think. Anyway, call Patience and Sarah in, and we'll all have this food together. We can all profit from the committee's loss of your kitchen work! *(Laugh)*

JOSEPH: Yes ma'am, I'll do that.

(Lights go down and curtain closes.)

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