

Betsy's Flag

By Walt Vail

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DEDICATION

*To Penelope Reed and the production at
Hedgerow Theatre in Moylan, PA, 2005.*

STORY OF THE PLAY

Far from being a demure woman quietly sewing a flag, the epic life of Betsy Ross and her survival during the Revolutionary War and the British occupation of Philadelphia is brought vibrantly to life in this full-length play. It is a romantic story of heroism against the background of a great, world-shattering war for independence.

The story is told through the eyes of John Claypoole, boyhood friend of Betsy's, in love with her from the start, who is also a soldier in Washington's army. Wounded at Germantown, John became a sailor and ended the war in the British Old Mill Prison in Plymouth, England, and survived to become Betsy's husband.

While Betsy's life is portrayed in action in the scenes of the play, John Claypoole provides scenes of the progress of the Revolutionary War, so that we see how Betsy's life parallels the historic events of 1773 to 1782.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 w, 8 m, 4 flex, doubling possible)

BETSY ROSS: Energetic, cheerful, practical, independent, ages 18-27.

JOHN CLAYPOOLE: Patient, understanding, cautious, brave. A soldier in Washington's Army, ages 18-27.

JOSEPH ASHBURN: Betsy's second husband, a sea captain, hearty and full of good humor, late teens through early 20s.

WILL / WILLA HOGG (flex): Rebel and friend of John Ross. Patriotic, dedicated, age 18.

SQUIRE JAMES / SUSAN BOWMAN (flex): Tory Justice of the Peace. Authoritative, conservative, 40s.

JOHN ROSS: An Anglican. Betsy's first husband, age 18.

SAMUEL GRISCOM: A Quaker, and Betsy's father, 50s.

REBECCA JAMES GRISCOM: Betsy's feisty and opinionated mother, a Quaker, 50s.

DANIEL / DANIELLE DRINKER (flex): A Quaker. Official but kind.

ANNIE CLAYPOOLE: Sister of John Claypoole. Lively, gossipy, sweet, 16.

BECKA CLAYPOOLE: Sister of John Claypoole. Assertive, determined, 17.

GEORGE / GEORGINA ROSS (flex): Intense, dedicated, brilliant and busy. Uncle / Aunt of John Ross, 20s.

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON: Commanding, self-assured, 40s.

ROBERT MORRIS: A businessman and financier, 40s.

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE: A bit shy and polite, 19

COLONEL RICHARD MATTHEWS: A British Officer. Aloof and official but polite.

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: JOHN CLAYPOOLE appears in a pool of light.)

JOHN C: My name is John Claypoole, best known as a soldier in George Washington's Army. I joined the struggle for liberty despite my Quaker background. Not an easy decision, for I loved Betsy Griscom, a Quaker girl. *(Beat.)* Let me start at the beginning, in the year 1773. Betsy Griscom was unmarried at the age of eighteen. I was the same age, and it was time for me to speak of how I felt towards her. It was, actually, past time. I didn't know that Betsy had other, secret plans.

(LIGHTS crossfade to a parlor in the Samuel Griscom house on Race Street in Philadelphia. It's an afternoon on a Sunday in January, 1773. BETSY GRISCOM is inviting JOHN C. into the parlor.)

BETSY: Come in, John. What a surprise to see you.

(Enter JOHN C, carrying a bouquet of flowers.)

JOHN C: I wanted to bring you flowers, in honor of your birthday.

BETSY: Wonderful! Flowers in January! I'm amazed.

JOHN C: Mother and I keep a small hothouse. With enough sun and some luck, we manage to turn winter into summer in a small protected space.

BETSY: I'm impressed, John. Thank you!

JOHN C: Thank you.

BETSY: Will you sit down a moment? You've been busy -- we haven't seen you much lately.

JOHN C: Trying to run the tannery on my own, since Father got ill last summer. I can't say I want to make it my life's work.

BETSY: What would you rather do?

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JOHN C: Be a writer, like Cousin David. I love to write, and I might find work on the *Pennsylvania Packet*, or the *Daily Advertiser*.

BETSY: That would be wonderful. How are your dear sisters, Annie and Becka?

JOHN C: They told me to ask you to a quilting bee in February.

BETSY: Tell them to name the day, and I'll be there!

JOHN C: Betsy, I came to see you for another reason. I've counted the years and know you are now eighteen. And I was eighteen last November.

BETSY: Then we're both eighteen!

JOHN C: (*Very seriously.*) Yes. I want to ask your permission—

BETSY: Wait, John. You sound so serious. What are you about to say?

JOHN C: Something I have to ask, whatever the answer.

BETSY: What's wrong, John?

JOHN C: I want your permission to see you. Oh, I'm so awkward! I want to court you, Betsy. You know I've always been terribly fond of you.

BETSY: Oh. Oh, John. John, you see...

JOHN C: I have my sisters and mother to support right now, but I believe Father will recover and run the tannery again.

BETSY: John, I can't let you court me. I'm very fond of you, and love you like a brother. But I can't... I'm sorry.

JOHN C: You can't?

BETSY: I can't say anything more. I have my secrets, John. I wish I could tell you all about them, so you'd understand. You deserve an explanation, because I value your friendship, and I hope we'll always be friends. Always. But I can't say more.

JOHN C: You're in love with someone else.

BETSY: I can't say, John. Please.

JOHN C: I respect your silence. But...

BETSY: I'm sorry. I know you've always been a friend... I didn't think it went further than that.

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JOHN C: I should've spoken when we were seventeen—no, when we were fifteen, and still in Quaker school together. Why did I think I had to wait until we were eighteen?

BETSY: Because it's the age when we make our own decisions.

JOHN C: At least now you know my feelings. But clearly you do love someone else.

BETSY: I can't say anything.

JOHN C: Still, I'm bursting with curiosity to know who is the much better, much luckier man than me?

BETSY: I'm sorry.

JOHN C: Is it Joseph Ashburn? No, don't tell me. I don't want you to break your trust. But it couldn't be Joseph Ashburn. He's not a Quaker. He's a sailor, and I doubt you'd ever marry a sailor.

BETSY: I can't say...

JOHN C: Is it John Ross? It couldn't be John Ross, because he's a member of Christ Church, and his father is a minister there. An Anglican, not a Quaker. Oh, but of course you see him every day at Webster's Upholstery Shop, where you're both apprenticed. No, it couldn't be John Ross.

BETSY: John, can we talk about something else?

JOHN C: I'm sorry. I'm hurting a bit. I'll try harder to be a gentleman. You wouldn't marry outside of the faith, would you?

BETSY: Please, John.

JOHN C: And yet...and yet...your sisters. Deborah married Everett Bolton. Susannah married Ephraim Doane, and Sarah married a seaman, William Donaldson. All of them, now I think of it, not Quakers!

BETSY: That is true, John. All of them married non-Quakers, and were read out of Meeting. I have a lot of independent sisters; all of them married for love.

JOHN C: But you...you wouldn't break your parents' hearts again, would you?

BETSY: I can't say, John.

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JOHN C: Heavens, your parents' hearts must already lie in pieces at the bottom of their stomachs! Three daughters out of the faith, and—

BETSY: You've gone far enough, John! Please!

JOHN C: I apologize. Let's say I will always be your friend, and love you with all my heart in the way of friendship. I thank you for listening to my offer. I wish you happiness, Betsy, in your secrets and in your choice.

BETSY: Thank you, John.

(SFX: A knock at the door.)

JOHN C: Another visitor? You're having a busy morning.

BETSY: I'm not expecting anyone. Excuse me.

(BETSY admits JOSEPH ASHBURN.)

JOSEPH: Betsy, darling! Thought I'd drop in to say hello on my way to— Oh, excuse me! You've company! It's old sobersides, John Claypoole. How are you, old man?

JOHN C: Fine, Joseph. I see you're in good spirits.

JOSEPH: Always! Nothing in the world gets me down, old chap!

JOHN C: Good. Can I ask you a favor, Joseph?

JOSEPH: Anything!

JOHN C: I can stomach "Old Sobersides," because I often do take life more seriously than you...seem to, at least...but since you're several months older than me, could you drop the "Old," and the "Old Man," and the "Old Chap"?

JOSEPH: Sorry, no offense. Just a manner of showing affection for an old...a young classmate.

JOHN C: I know. You called me "Old Chap" when we were children in Quaker school. I shouldn't mind it, but...

JOSEPH: But now you're older, you're a bit more... sensitive? *(Laughs at his own joke.)*

BETSY: Stop it, Joseph. No teasing allowed at my house. I reserve that for myself.

JOSEPH: Want to be teased, do you?

End of Freeview

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