

The Grandson Who Remembered Betsy Ross

William Jackson Canby and the family stories that shaped an American legend

Introduction

Today, much of what Americans know about Betsy Ross can be traced to the recollections of her grandson, William Jackson Canby. Raised in Philadelphia during the final years of his grandmother's life, Canby grew up hearing family stories about the Revolution, the city's early days, and the remarkable woman whose name would eventually become inseparable from the American flag.

For most of his life, those stories remained family history. In 1870, however, Canby presented them to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, transforming private recollections into a public narrative that would help shape one of America's most enduring legends.

Yet William Jackson Canby's story extends beyond Betsy Ross. Through his marriage to Caroline Louisa Prescott of Maine, his life became unexpectedly connected to a second historical journey—the rediscovery of the Prescott family schoolgirl samplers nearly two centuries later.

Betsy Ross Before the Legend

Elizabeth Griscom was born in Philadelphia on January 1, 1752, into a Quaker family. Trained as an upholsterer, she learned a skilled trade that involved sewing curtains, bed hangings, cushions, and other furnishings for homes and public buildings.

In 1773, she married fellow apprentice John Ross. Because he was not a Quaker, the marriage resulted in her disownment by the Society of Friends. The couple established an upholstery business together, but their marriage was short-lived. John Ross died in 1776 while serving with the Pennsylvania militia during the Revolutionary War.

Several years later, Betsy married sea captain Joseph Ashburn. During the war, Ashburn was captured by the British and died in Mill Prison in Plymouth, England, leaving Betsy a widow for the second time.

In 1783 she married John Claypoole, a Philadelphia merchant who had reportedly shared imprisonment with Ashburn and carried news of his death back to America. Together they raised a large family and spent decades in Philadelphia as respected members of the city's artisan community.

Long before she became a national icon, Betsy Ross was known simply as a skilled craftswoman, wife, mother, and grandmother.

Jane Claypoole and the Canby Family

Among Betsy Ross's children was Jane Claypoole, the daughter of Betsy and her third husband, John Claypoole. In 1816, Jane married Caleb Harlan Canby, linking two long-established Philadelphia Quaker families.

On September 30, 1825, their son William Jackson Canby was born in Philadelphia. Few children grow up knowing that a grandparent will one day become a national icon. Yet for William, Betsy Ross was not a symbol or a historical figure. She was simply his grandmother.

By the time William was born, Betsy was seventy-three years old. Her years as an apprentice upholsterer, business owner, widow, and survivor of war were largely behind her. Philadelphia itself had changed dramatically since the Revolution. Yet within the Claypoole and Canby families, memories of those earlier years remained alive.

During William's childhood, Betsy spent her final years moving among the households of her children and grandchildren. Family gatherings brought generations together, creating opportunities for younger relatives to hear stories of Revolutionary Philadelphia, family hardships, and the people who had helped shape the young nation. These recollections, preserved in memory long before they were written down, would later form the foundation of William Jackson Canby's efforts to preserve his grandmother's story.

Growing Up on Cherry Street

William spent much of his childhood in the neighborhood around Cherry Street, only a short distance from Elfreth's Alley and the historic heart of Philadelphia.

The city he knew was changing rapidly. The generation that had fought the Revolution was passing away. New industries, new immigrants, and expanding commerce were transforming Philadelphia into one of America's largest cities.

Yet within the Canby and Claypoole households, memories of the eighteenth century remained alive.

William later recalled visits with his grandmother and hearing stories of her life and experiences.

These memories, preserved in family conversations rather than official records, would become the foundation of the account he later shared with historians.

What William Remembered

When historians discuss William Jackson Canby, they often focus on the famous flag story. Equally important, however, is the broader role he played as a witness to family memory.

Canby was only eleven years old when Betsy Ross died in 1836, but those eleven years placed him within living reach of the Revolutionary generation.

His recollections included stories told by Betsy herself as well as traditions passed through children, grandchildren, and other family members. Like all family memories, they blended personal experience with stories heard repeatedly over many years.

These recollections would later form the basis of Canby's efforts to preserve his grandmother's history.

A Quaker Education

As a young man, William attended Westtown School, one of the most important Quaker educational institutions in the United States.

Founded in 1799 by the Religious Society of Friends, Westtown emphasized scholarship, moral character, practical skills, and community responsibility. Students lived, studied, and worked together in an environment designed to encourage discipline and self-improvement.

The school reflected many of the same Quaker values that had shaped Betsy Ross's early life: simplicity, education, service, and conscientious conduct.

Surviving school records offer a glimpse into William's education and provide another connection to the wider network of Quaker families that linked Philadelphia to communities throughout the eastern United States.

The Death of Betsy Ross

Betsy Ross died on January 30, 1836, at the age of eighty-four.

For William, the loss marked the end of a direct connection to the Revolutionary era. Yet the stories remained.

Within the family, letters, Bibles, records, and recollections continued to be preserved. These materials would later prove essential as descendants attempted to document their family history and answer growing public interest in Betsy Ross.

The preservation of those records became one of William's lifelong interests.

Caroline Louisa Prescott

While William Jackson Canby's family history was rooted in Philadelphia, another story was unfolding hundreds of miles away along the Kennebec River in Maine.

Caroline Louisa Prescott was born on January 2, 1829, the daughter of Warren Prescott and Rebecca Johnson Prescott. Her early years were marked by both opportunity and loss. When Louisa was still a child, her father died, leaving Rebecca to raise her daughters during a period of profound change for the family. In the years that followed, Louisa and her sisters—Rebecca "Beckie" Prescott and Sarah "Sallie" Prescott—spent much of their childhood at the old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine, where their mother managed a busy household connected to one of the region's most historic buildings.

The Pownalborough Court House had already lived many lives by the time the Prescott family arrived. Built in the eighteenth century as a courthouse for Lincoln County, it had also served as a tavern, post office, and community gathering place. For the Prescott girls, however, it was simply home. The rooms where judges, lawyers, merchants, and travelers had once gathered became the setting for childhood games, lessons, family celebrations, and the ordinary routines of daily life.

Like many young girls of her era, Louisa received an education that emphasized reading, writing, needlework, and moral instruction. In 1838, at the age of nine, she completed the schoolgirl sampler that survives today. Together with the samplers stitched by her mother and sisters, it offers a rare glimpse into the educational traditions and family life of nineteenth-century New England. What began as a childhood exercise in stitching would, nearly two centuries later, become an important artifact linking generations of the Prescott family to a much larger historical story.

Although separated by hundreds of miles, the worlds of Louisa Prescott and William Jackson Canby shared important similarities. Both were raised in families shaped by strong traditions, close-knit communities, and a respect for education. Both inherited stories that connected them to earlier

generations. Neither could have known that their lives would eventually bring together two remarkable family histories.

In time, Louisa left Maine and settled in Philadelphia, where she married William Jackson Canby. Their marriage united descendants of two very different American experiences. On one side stood the Ross, Claypoole, and Canby families, whose lives were intertwined with Revolutionary Philadelphia and the traditions that would later shape the legend of Betsy Ross. On the other stood the Prescott and Johnson families of Maine, whose surviving letters, diaries, schoolgirl samplers, and family records preserved a vivid picture of life in early nineteenth-century New England.

Today, that connection can still be traced through the surviving artifacts left behind by both families. Louisa's sampler, William's transcript of the Betsy Ross family Bible, family photographs, correspondence, and other historical records together form a bridge between Philadelphia and Maine, between the Revolutionary generation and the generations that followed. The rediscovery of the Prescott family samplers and the recovery of long-overlooked Ross and Canby family materials have revealed how closely these histories became intertwined.

For researchers, these materials offer more than genealogical connections. They demonstrate how family stories, cherished objects, and everyday acts of preservation can carry history across centuries. Through a schoolgirl sampler stitched in Maine and family records preserved in Philadelphia, the lives of Caroline Louisa Prescott and William Jackson Canby continue to illuminate a shared American past.

Preserving a Family Legacy

William Jackson Canby was more than a grandson. He became a family historian.

Among the records associated with his efforts is a transcript of the Betsy Ross family Bible, a document that preserved names, relationships, and dates across multiple generations.

Like many nineteenth-century Americans, Canby understood that family records could disappear unless someone took responsibility for preserving them.

His work helped ensure that future generations would have access to sources that might otherwise have been lost.

The Historical Society Presentation

In March 1870, William Jackson Canby presented a paper entitled *The History of the Flag of the United States* before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Drawing upon family recollections preserved by his mother, aunts, and other relatives, he described a meeting that had long been part of Ross family tradition.

According to the family story, George Washington, Robert Morris, and George Ross visited Betsy Ross's upholstery shop in 1776 to discuss the design of a flag for the new nation. Washington reportedly showed a sketch that included six-pointed stars. Betsy suggested a five-pointed star instead. To demonstrate its practicality, she folded a piece of fabric and, with a single cut of her scissors, produced a symmetrical five-pointed star. Impressed by the demonstration, Washington agreed to the change.

Canby presented this account as family history passed down through several generations. It became the most widely known element of his paper and remains one of the best-known stories associated with Betsy Ross.

Although historians continue to debate aspects of the account, Canby's paper remains the single most influential source for the traditional Betsy Ross story.

From Family Memory to American Legend

In the decades that followed, Canby's account spread far beyond Philadelphia.

Writers, educators, patriotic organizations, and historians repeated the story. By the time of the nation's Centennial celebrations in 1876, Betsy Ross had become an increasingly familiar figure in American culture.

The story evolved from family tradition into national legend.

Historians continue to debate the extent of Betsy Ross's role in creating the first American flag. No surviving contemporary documents conclusively place her at the center of the design process, nor do records from 1776 directly confirm the meeting described by Canby. At the same time, upholsterers routinely produced flags and military colors, making such work entirely plausible. As a result, historians generally distinguish between documented evidence and family tradition while recognizing that Canby's account remains the primary source for the story as it is known today.

Modern historians continue to examine the evidence, distinguishing between documented facts and family recollections. Yet regardless of where one stands in that debate, William Jackson Canby's contribution is undeniable.

Without him, much of what we know—or believe we know—about Betsy Ross might never have entered the historical record.

Conclusion

William Jackson Canby occupied a unique position between memory and history.

As Betsy Ross's grandson, he inherited family stories that connected him directly to the Revolutionary generation. As an adult, he preserved those stories and shared them with a wider audience, helping transform private recollections into a lasting part of American culture.

His later marriage to Caroline Louisa Prescott created an unexpected bridge between two families whose surviving artifacts continue to inform historical research today. Through family Bibles, schoolgirl samplers, letters, diaries, photographs, and personal recollections, both families left behind traces of lives that might otherwise have been forgotten.

The result is not merely the story of a legend, but the story of how memory itself is preserved—from one generation to the next.

About This Research

The Prescott Girls Historical Research Series

The Grandson Who Remembered Betsy Ross is part of an ongoing effort to document the people, artifacts, family connections, and historical discoveries that inspired *The Prescott Girls: A Letter from Philadelphia*.

For additional research articles, historical images, schoolgirl samplers, family records, and educational resources, visit:

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