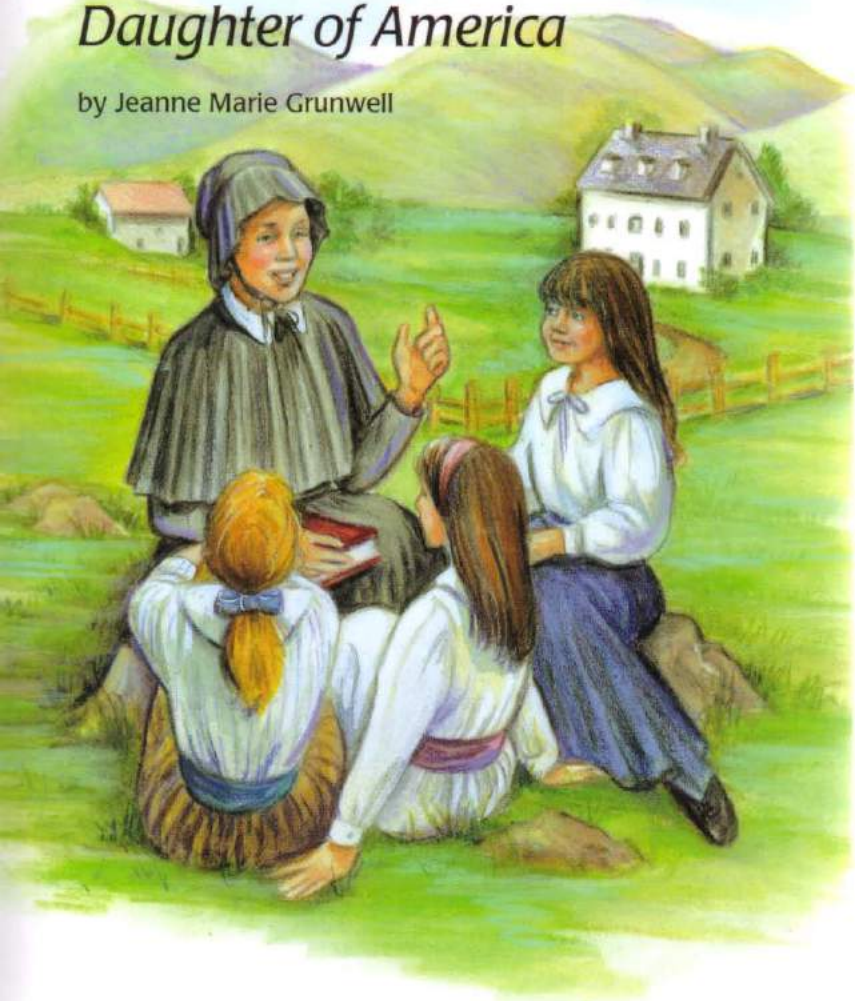
Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

Daughter of America

by Jeanne Marie Grunwell



1

CHANGES

The year was 1774. New York was still one of the thirteen British colonies and the United States didn't exist yet. But New York was already one of the busiest cities in the New World. It had banks and churches, colleges and stores, and a harbor that could hold three hundred white-sailed cutty ships all at once.

New York could also boast of its hospitals and doctors. One of the city's finest young physicians was Dr. Richard Bayley. His wife, Catherine Charlton, was the daughter of an Episcopalian minister. The couple had a little daughter named Mary.

On August 28, 1774, a second daughter was born to the Bayleys. Dr. and Mrs. Bayley named their new infant Elizabeth Ann. She was soon baptized at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church.

One week after Elizabeth was born, the first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. The thirteen American colonies wanted to declare their independence from Great

Britain. Before long, the colonies were at war. Men had to choose sides. They argued.

"I say we should side with the motherland. Who knows how this foolish revolution will end?"

"You're right. Besides, belonging to England gives us security."

"Foolishness! Security! To desire freedom is not foolish, gentlemen. As for security, all we can count on from Great Britain are more taxes! We need our independence!"

It was a confusing time.

When the American Revolution began, Dr. Bayley was away in England studying medicine. He had many friends there. He arrived back home in New York on July 12, 1776—dressed in a British army uniform.

"Richard!" his wife gasped as she opened the front door.

"Hush! Don't be frightened, Catherine," Dr. Bayley soothed. "Everything is all right. I've joined the British army as a surgeon."

A few short weeks later, Dr. Bayley was off again, this time traveling with the British fleet. He spent many months away from his family. During those months British troops occupied New York. In an attempt to stop their advance, some patriots set fire one night to a small house on one of the wharves.

Within minutes the blaze exploded out of control. It swept through the city, destroying everything in its path. Trinity Church was burned to the ground and Elizabeth Ann Bayley's baptismal records were destroyed.

Elizabeth was too young to remember much about the war raging around her. But then something happened that would change her life—forever.

In the chill of the early morning, Elizabeth awoke to hushed sounds coming from her mother's bedroom. Mrs. Bayley had just given birth to a baby girl. But now the young mother was dying. Dr. Bayley arrived in time to have her die in his arms. He tearfully named the new baby Catherine, after his wife.

"Mommy, Mommy!" two-year-old Elizabeth whimpered as strangers continued to bustle in and out of the bedroom. But no one seemed to pay any attention.

2

A New Mother

A year passed. Dr. Bayley felt his three little girls needed a mother to look after them. He met Amelia Charlotte Barclay, and soon they were married.

"Come now, give your new mother a kiss," Dr. Bayley coaxed. Mary and Elizabeth solemnly obeyed. Baby Catherine cooed. But somehow, things were different. An icy feeling separated the girls from their new mother. They never called Amelia "Mommy." Instead she was "Mrs. Bayley."

When Elizabeth was four, Catherine, or "Kit," as everyone called her, died. Elizabeth sat by herself on the doorstep while the grown-ups gathered inside for the funeral. She looked up at the clouds. "How beautiful it must be in heaven," she imagined. The thought made her smile. Just then her Uncle William slipped outside. He sat down beside Elizabeth.

"Betty, didn't you cry when your baby sister Kitty died?" he asked softly.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, Uncle William."

"Why not?"

"Because Kitty is gone up to heaven. I wish I could go, too, and be with Mama and Kit."

Uncle William picked up little Elizabeth and placed her on his lap. He drew her head to his heart, stroking her curly hair. "Betty," he said quietly, "someday, we will all be happy together in heaven."

After that day Elizabeth often thought of her mother and little Kitty in heaven. One evening, just as the sun was setting, Elizabeth carried her new baby half-sister up the attic stairs. "Look, Emma! See how beautiful!" she whispered, pointing out the window to the setting sun. "See where God lives? He lives up in heaven. Someday we'll go to live with him too," she promised, "someday."

Elizabeth wanted more than anything to go to heaven, and she tried hard to be good. But it wasn't always easy. She had a fiery temper which showed itself in different ways. For one thing, she hated having to study French and music. "But why do I have to?" she'd demand with a stomp of her foot. "Why?"

Within eight years, Amelia and Dr. Bayley had six children. Mary and Elizabeth had trouble getting along with their new mother, and Amelia often paid less attention to them than to her own children. On top of it all, Dr. Bayley spent a lot of time away from home. His days were filled with making house calls or working at the hospital. He was up nights caring for the sick, especially the European immigrants who now flooded New York Harbor, carrying with them contagious diseases. Elizabeth and her older sister Mary felt more lonely than ever. Then one day their father called for them.

"I have some news for the two of you," he announced. "I'd like you to go and live with Uncle William in New Rochelle for a while. I think it will be a nice change."

The girls looked at each other in surprise. Spending time at their uncle's 250-acre farm on Long Island Sound would be fun!

In New Rochelle Mary and Elizabeth were warmly welcomed by their Uncle William and Aunt Sarah, and their four cousins, William Jr., Susanne, Joseph, and Richard. Living on a farm was a whole new experience for the two sisters. Elizabeth liked to spend time by herself and found quiet mo-

ments for walking along the shore of the Sound collecting shells. She learned to speak French fluently with her cousins and finally learned to play the piano, becoming quite good at it. Mary, instead, was satisfied with studying the basics of arithmetic, reading, writing and sewing.

One day Uncle William hurriedly rode in from town. "There's great news!" he cried. "The war has ended! We've won our independence! George Washington will soon be marching up Broadway in a victory parade."

Aunt Sarah ran to the porch and excitedly rang the farm bell, calling everyone in from the fields. Such good news had to be shared!