
Spotlight **“The Star-Spangled Banner”**

Background Information

The Congress of the American colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain in 1776, and the Revolutionary War began. It did not end until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. Although the Americans won their independence, war on Great Britain was again declared in 1812 because several issues remained unsolved, including:

- Trade restrictions: Great Britain was at war with France and would not allow America to conduct trade with France.
- Impressment: The British navy stopped and searched American ships, looking for sailors who had deserted. The British captured American sailors and forced them to serve on British ships.
- British support of Native Americans: The British gave weapons to Indian tribes to raid American settlements and prevent American expansion into Indian territory.

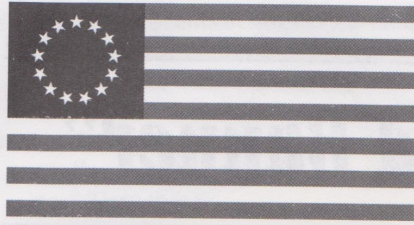
The War of 1812 is often called the “Second Revolutionary War” and lasted until the spring of 1815. In 1813, American troops attacked York (present-day Toronto, Ontario), the capital of Upper Canada, burning its Parliament buildings as well as many other government and private buildings. In retaliation, the British attacked Washington, D.C., in August 1814, and looted and burned the White House, the Capitol, the Treasury, the Library of Congress, and other government buildings. Heavy rains from a storm put out the fires in Washington, but tornadoes brought more damage to the city and caused the British to retreat. They then headed to Baltimore, Maryland, a busy port and trade center, and the third largest city in America at that time.

The citizens of Baltimore were expecting the British. They—along with volunteers from Pennsylvania, other parts of Maryland, and Virginia—had worked to fortify the city against the attack. A few thousand local militia and volunteers joined the 10,000 regular army troops assembled to protect Baltimore. Twenty-two American merchant ships were sunk in a line at the entrance to Baltimore Harbor to prevent the large British warships from sailing in. For the British navy to reach the city by sea, they had to sail past Fort McHenry, which protected Baltimore Harbor. Defending the fort were about 1,000 soldiers under the command of General George Armistead.

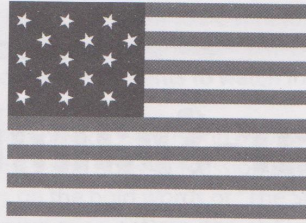
The Significance of the Flag

A flag is a symbol of a country. In a battle on land, a flag marks troop positions, so that, even in the dust and smoke of the battlefield, soldiers can “rally ‘round the flag.” On a ship, the flag (or ensign) indicates the nationality of the owner of the ship, whether it is an individual or government. If the ship is attacked and captured, the current flag is lowered and the flag of conqueror is raised in its place. Like on a ship, the flag on a building indicates who controls the building. If a conqueror lowers a flag and raises his/her own flag, it means that the location has been captured.

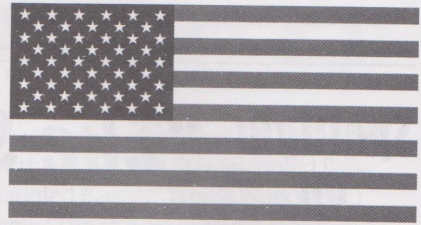
In 1813, General George Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry, ordered an American flag be designed and sewed so big that the British would have no trouble seeing it flying above the fort from a great distance. Mary Pickersgill, with the help of several other seamstresses, created two flags in six weeks. The larger flag measured thirty feet by forty-two feet, and the smaller storm flag measured seventeen feet by twenty-five feet.



Colonial flag



The Star-Spangled Banner flag



The American flag today

The flag design was red, white, and blue with stars and stripes, but was not exactly as we know it today, nor was it the same as the Colonial American flag of 1776. In 1795, after Vermont and Kentucky became states, the number of stars and stripes was increased from thirteen to fifteen.

The Poet

Francis Scott Key (1779–1843) was born to a wealthy family in Maryland. As an adult, he was described as a handsome man with dark blue eyes and curly brown hair who was quiet, dignified, kind and courageous. He studied law and opened his own law practice in Georgetown, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Key was a talented lawyer known for his clear speaking, logical reasoning, and eloquent speeches. He argued important cases in Maryland and before the U.S. Supreme Court, and was appointed a U.S. district attorney.

Key was also an amateur poet. Most of his poetry was written quickly when he was inspired, often on the back of an old paper or letter.

Francis Scott Key married Mary Taylor Lloyd in 1802, and they had eleven children: six boys and five girls. In 1843, while visiting his daughter in Baltimore, Key died of pleurisy, a painful swelling of the linings of the lungs and chest, often caused by pneumonia.



The Situation at Hand

After the British attacked Washington, D.C., Dr. William Beanes, a respected physician who lived about sixteen miles from the Capitol, was falsely accused of having mistreated some British soldiers. He was arrested and imprisoned on a British ship, where he was to be hanged. Key was asked to act on behalf of the U.S. government, go to the British admiral, and negotiate the doctor's release. With Colonel John S. Skinner, U.S. agent for parole of prisoners, Key set sail from Baltimore, under a flag of truce, to find the British fleet in Chesapeake Bay. He convinced the admiral to release Beanes but was not allowed to return to Baltimore because the Americans had overheard plans for a British attack. On September 10, 1814, Key, Skinner, and Beanes were transferred to their own ship, where they were held under British guard, within eight miles of Fort McHenry. When the attack began, the British kept their nineteen warships anchored just outside the range of the American cannons but close enough so that British bombs would still reach the fort. Fort McHenry's cannons were fired occasionally, so the British knew the fort had not surrendered.

The British bombardment began in heavy rain at 6 a.m. on September 13 and continued until around 3 p.m. When the British sent some smaller ships closer to the fort, American General Armistead opened fire, and they retreated to the British fleet. The bombardment began again and continued through the night. Fort McHenry faced 1,500 British bombshells (of between 200 and 220 pounds each). Each had a fuse that was supposed to cause the bomb to explode on contact. But the bombs were undependable, and often exploded in the air.

At dusk, Key could see the American flag above the walls of the fort. When his friends went below to rest, Key stayed on deck and watched, straining to see, in the glare of the exploding bombs, if the flag still flew over the fort. Around 3 a.m. on September 14 the bombing stopped, and the British sent 1,200 men to try to slip by the fort and attack Baltimore. But the cannons of Fort McHenry fired on the British, and a fierce battle began. Then, all bombing stopped again. It was still dark, and Key could not see the flag above the fort. He had to wait—tired and anxious—until dawn, but even then, the heavy fog of smoke and mist prevented him from seeing the fort. Key's relief was tremendous when the smoke cleared and he was able to see the American flag. He was inspired to write, on the back of a letter, the first draft of the words we know today:

*Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
 O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
 And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
 Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
 Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*

Shortly after sunrise on September 14, the British admiral sent word that the attack had failed, and that Key and his friends were free to go. Back in Baltimore, Key completed the first complete draft of his poem, which included three additional verses. He called his poem "The Defense of Fort McHenry." On September 15, Key's poem was printed in handbill form and distributed on the streets of Baltimore. The poem was soon sung to a popular British tune, "Anacreon in Heaven," and the song became known as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Our National Anthem

"The Star-Spangled Banner" became very popular in the nineteenth century, and it was frequently played by bands at public events. In 1889, the U.S. Navy recognized "The Star-Spangled Banner" for official use during flag-raising ceremonies, and in 1916, President Wilson ordered that it be played at military and other important events. During World War II, "The Star-Spangled Banner" began to be performed traditionally before the start of every baseball game. "The Star-Spangled Banner" became the official national anthem of the United States by a congressional resolution in 1931.



Want to learn more? Take a WebVisit!

You can learn more about Francis Scott Key and "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Smithsonian website: <http://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/>. The site is divided into five sections:

- War: The War of 1812 (**The Capital Captured, Baltimore in the Balance, A Moment of Triumph**)
- Flag: The Making of the Flag (**Family Keepsake, National Treasure, Preservation Project, Science of Preservation**)
- Song: The Lyrics (**Francis Scott Key, The Melody, National Anthem**)
- Legacy: Symbols of a New Nation (**The Flag in the Civil War, Flag Rules and Rituals, The Flag in WWII, The Flag in the Sixties**)
- Interact: (**Interactive Flag, Sing National Anthem, Share Your Story**)



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