

The Star-Spangled Banner

Our beautiful national anthem perfectly mirrors the deeply religious and patriotic nature of its composer, Francis Scott Key.

by Jodie Gilmore

*To Anacreon in Heav'n, where he
sat in full glee,
A few Sons of Harmony sent a
petition;
That he their Inspirer and Patron
would be;
When this answer arrived from the
Jolly Old Grecian;
"Voice, Fiddle, and Flute,
No longer be mute,
I'll lend you my name and inspire
you to boot,
And besides I'll instruct you like me,
to intwine,
The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's
Vine."*

Were you humming along as you read? What — don't know the tune? Perhaps a set of more familiar lyrics will jog your memory:

Oh, say, can you see, by
the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed
at the twilight's last
gleaming?...

Like many staunch patriots who may have been poor in money and land but great in heart, our beloved national anthem began life in mid-1814 in a lowly set of circumstances. The words of this now-great song were initially scribbled on the back of an envelope thrust hastily in a pocket, set to the tune of an English drinking song,* and printed anonymously in a virtually abandoned newspaper

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print shop. It would take almost 120 years for this poem, born in such humble estate on a darkened, sail-less sloop anchored in Chesapeake Bay, to rise to its current status.

Defense of Fort McHenry

Another bomb exploded, the reverberations rattling the *Minden's* empty spars. Francis Scott Key stopped his pacing, peering toward Ft. McHenry. The red glare of the rockets allowed him to plainly see the mammoth U.S. flag flying over the fort. At 32 feet by 40 feet, even at this distance of nearly eight miles it was plainly visible in his spyglass. For now, at least, his compatriots at the fort were holding out against the British. But the shelling had

been going on for more than 12 hours — how much longer could the fort hope to hold out? And what would be his and his shipmates' fate in the morning?

Certainly, when Key had agreed to attempt to negotiate the release of his dear elderly friend, Dr. William Beanes, he knew the task would put him at great personal risk. The unfortunate doctor had been imprisoned for arresting some drunken and disorderly British soldiers and was being held on a British ship. A few civilians in a small boat, sailing into the British fleet under a flag of truce to obtain the doctor's release, were at a distinct disadvantage, despite President James Madison's personal approval of the mission. Besides the sloop's crew, Key's

only companion was Colonel John Skinner, a U.S. prisoner exchange agent. But the British admiral, Alexander Cochrane, had received them courteously if reluctantly on the 10th of September, and, after several hours of persuasion by Key, Cochrane had agreed to release the good doctor instead of hanging him as he had intended.

But, instead of allowing Key, Skinner and Beanes to return to Baltimore, Cochrane, fearing that they were security risks, had decided to keep them in the bay. He had taken the *Minden's* sails and replaced its crew with British Marines. He even had the *Minden* anchored where Key and his companions could witness the humiliating defeat that the admiral was so certain would occur.

For three long days, Key



The "Star-Spangled Banner" was immediately popular, and many publishers produced attractive sheet-music versions of the song. Shown here is one of the earliest such editions.

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* Lyrics by Ralph Tomlinson; music by John Stafford Smith.



Francis Scott Key was called “Curly Key” during his school years. But those curls hid a quick wit and a logical mind.

helplessly watched as the British landed troops at North Point, then moved the fleet into a threatening half-circle around Fort McHenry. He had heard the rattle of gunfire as the British troops clashed with the Maryland militia — composed of many of his close and personal friends. How awful to be within earshot of the struggle, yet only able to pace the deck and pray for his countrymen!

Then, on the morning of September 13, the British lobbed their first shells at Fort McHenry. Key watched all that day, each repercussion of cannon fire causing his heart to reverberate with alarm and hope. As the volleys continued, he oscillated between uttering fervent prayers of supplication when the besieged fort was obscured by dense smoke, then equally fervent prayers of thanksgiving when the smoke cleared and he could see the gallant flag waving safely in the breeze.

Dusk deepened, night fell, and the flag was shrouded in mist. But throughout the

sleepless night, Key occasionally glimpsed the “star-spangled banner” illuminated against the sky by the “rockets’ red glare.” Just when he decided that things could not get worse, about 3:00 in the morning, the intensity of the battle suddenly increased 10-fold. The heavens became a seething sheet of flame, and the *Minden* tossed wildly, the harbor lashed into an angry sea by vibrations. Above the tempestuous roar, Key heard the cries and moans of wounded men — but were they British or American voices, he couldn’t tell. Oh, what torture to be held here, impotent, when his country needed every able hand!†

Suddenly, all was silent. Key leaned over the rail, peering into the dark, ominous mist. But, without the illumination of the rockets, he could see nothing. Nor could he hear anything, except for the slap of water against the sides of the ship. Had the fort surrendered? Were his friends still alive? Was Baltimore overrun? The silence and uncertainty were worse than the cacophony and heart-wrenching terror that had preceded it. Key remembered his grandmother’s four-word response when, in his youth, he had complained to her that there was nothing he could do. His grandmother, a woman of faith, had wisely replied, “You can always pray.” So Key redoubled his prayers — that his friends were still alive, that Baltimore was still free, that Fort McHenry had not been reduced to a heap of smoldering ashes.

The dark and silence stretched on — would morning ever come? Key’s shipmates came up from below deck, scanning the horizon. Slowly the mist grew lighter, but still the fort was obscured by a heavy curtain of fog and lingering smoke. But then, just when Key’s despair was deepest, a ray of the rising sun and a fortuitous breeze revealed a sight that caused a shout of thankfulness to burst from the throats of the Americans on the *Minden*. Fort McHenry’s ramparts were still topped by the beautiful flag.

Key’s poetic, patriotic heart leapt within his breast, and the words of a poem



Key’s house on Bridge St., Georgetown, served as both business office and happy home. Unfortunately, it was destroyed in 1947 after years of neglect.

† Only later did Key learn that the cries were from the British, who were raked unmercifully by the fort’s guns while attempting to sneak past the fort under cover of darkness.

poured into his mind. Casting about for something to write on, he remembered a letter he had thrust into his pocket the previous day. Pulling out the envelope, he began to scribble notes to himself, indelibly imprinting his night's experience on paper, just as it was indelibly imprinted on his memory. Key later recalled, "Then in that hour of deliverance and joyful triumph, my heart spoke; and 'Does not such a country and such defenders of their country deserve a song?' was the question."

It seemed impossible that Fort McHenry had survived 25 hours of continuous shelling — a total of more than 1,500 bombs, many of them weighing over 200 pounds.‡ It seemed even more amazing that the brave but meager American troops defending the shores of Baltimore had fended off 9,000 trained British soldiers. But that is what had happened, and the stranded patriots aboard the *Minden* got quick confirmation. In no time at all it seemed, the *Minden*, manned again by her own crew, sailed back to Baltimore, while the British fleet sailed ignominiously out to sea.

As soon as Key had returned to the Indian Queen Hotel where he had been staying, he asked for writing paper. Immediately after dinner, he retired to his room to turn his hastily written notes into the poem "Defence of Fort M'Henry." The next morning, Key showed the poem to his brother-in-law, Judge J. H. Nicholson, who was second in command at Fort McHenry during the battle. Nicholson, struck by the power of the poem, encouraged Key to publish it at once. The two made their way to the offices of the *Baltimore American*, only to find the place deserted — except for a young typesetter, 14-year-old Samuel Sands. The rest of the staff were still on duty with the militia, but Samuel agreed to print a few copies of the poem.

Always modest, Key signed his poem "A Gentleman from Maryland." But the "Defence of Fort M'Henry" wasn't destined to remain an anonymous poem read

The rising sun revealed that Fort McHenry's ramparts were still topped by the beautiful flag. Key later recalled, "Then in that hour of deliverance and joyful triumph, my heart spoke; and 'Does not such a country and such defenders of their country deserve a song?' ..."

by an elite few — it seemed to take on a life of its own. Soon, copies were circulating in all the major eastern seaboard cities and beyond. After being set to a melody (some say Ferdinand Durang, at Captain McCauley's tavern, was the first to sing Key's poem in public), it was popularly referred to as the *Star-Spangled Banner*. And the acclaimed author, instead of being allowed to stay out of the limelight and devote his time to his family and to his burgeoning career as a lawyer, was beset by requests to speak to crowds about his experiences.



The Battle of Baltimore lasted more than 25 hours, with the British firing over 1,500 bombs at Ft. McHenry. Unable to subdue the fort, the British fleet sailed away in defeat on September 14, 1814.

‡ Fortunately for the Americans, most of the bombs exploded in the air, before reaching the fort. And the new Congreve rockets used by the British proved ineffective, not having the range to reach the target. Essentially, the British put on a 25-hour fireworks display.



Inspiring moment: Key rejoiced when he saw the flag still waving over Ft. McHenry. Deeply moved, he composed his immortal anthem on the spot.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson requested that the *Star-Spangled Banner* be played at all official occasions. But it wasn't until March 3, 1931 that Congress and President Herbert Hoover raised the song to its current official status as the United States National Anthem.

No Flash in the Pan

Although Key is best known today for writing the *Star-Spangled Banner*, in his own day his fame started well before the fateful night spent on Chesapeake Bay. To understand the man who wrote our anthem

in 1814, it is necessary to go back even further in time — to August 1, 1779. On that date, (or on August 9, 1780 according to some historians), on a sprawling Maryland plantation called Terra Rubra (for the color of its clay soil), Francis Scott Key started his life's journey.

His early years were spent playing on the farm with his sister Anne, absorbing both love of fellow man and love of God from his parents and relatives. His grandmother, in particular, had a great influence on him. Grandmother Key had lost her eyesight as a young girl, rescuing two family slaves from a house fire. Instead of being

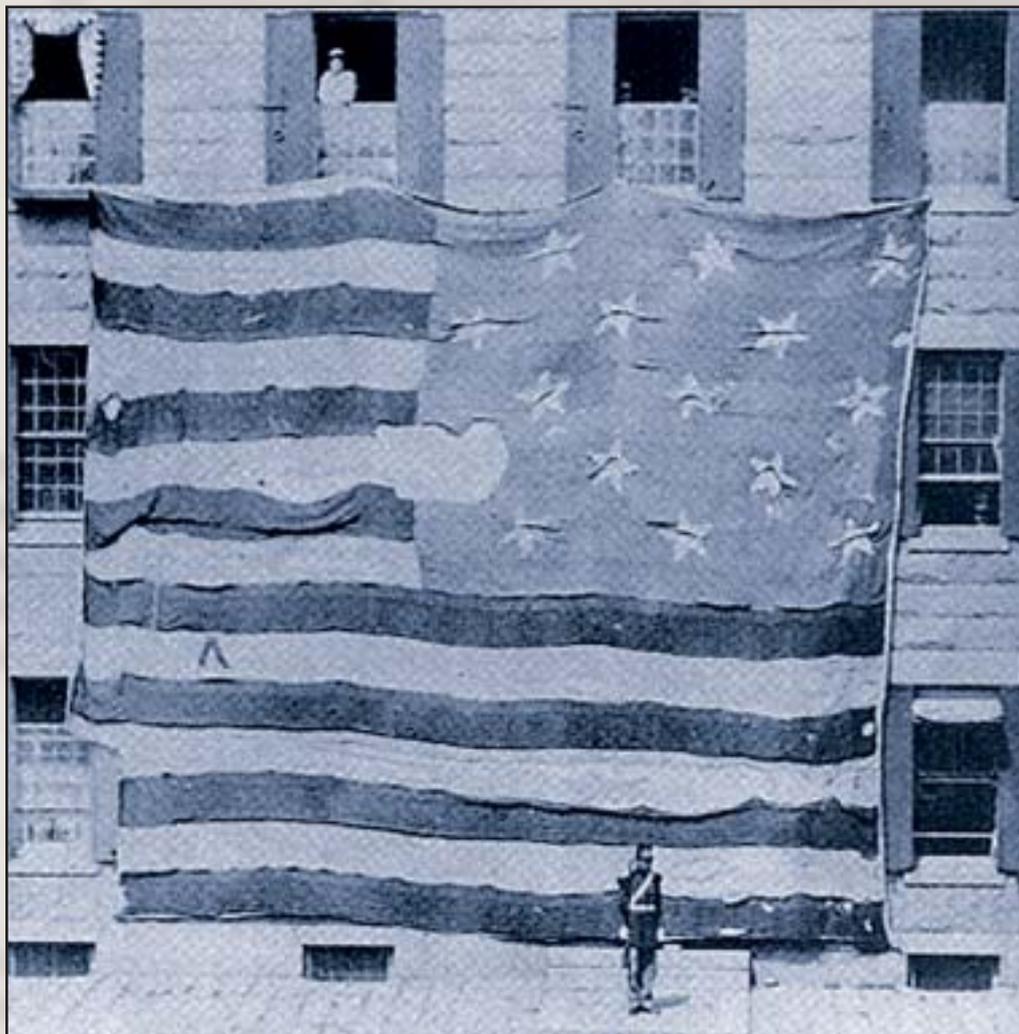
bitter about her misfortune, Grandmother Key was gentle and kind — and young Francis spent many hours at her knee.

After completing grammar school, Key began studies at St. John's College, while living with his uncle, Philip Barton Key, who was a lawyer. He displayed a natural gift for logic and persuasive speech, and, after graduating, began studying for the Maryland bar under the tutelage of Judge Jeremiah Chase. Upon passing his bar exams, he joined his uncle's law firm in Washington, D.C. By 1805, Key had his own practice in Georgetown. His reputation for fairness, justice and oratorical powers grew rapidly, and he soon had more clients than he could manage.

Key's keen analytical mind made him a force to be reckoned with in the courtroom.

One judge observed that Key "handled facts like a blacksmith pounds a shoe, with force and fury." But Key also loved poetry, and he spent much time reading and writing it. During his courtship of Mary Tayloe Lloyd (whom he nicknamed Polly), Key reportedly wrote her many love poems — and she in turn teased him unmercifully by using the poems as curling papers for her hair. But despite this undignified end to the fruits of his heart's outpouring, true love conquered, and he and Polly were married in 1802.

It wasn't long before Key began handling landmark court cases. His first big case was to defend two men who, along with Aaron Burr, were accused of treason. Burr was accused of running guns to the Southwest and trying to start his own nation. Henry Clay took Burr's case, and Key was asked to defend Burr's two messengers, Erich Bollman and Samuel Swartout. Although Key did not agree with what Bollman and Swartout did, he did think that they had been misled by Burr and that they were entitled to a fair trial. No one else wanted to defend them. Pleading their case eloquently, Key convinced the jury that the two men were innocent. Not yet 30 years old, Key



The flag from Ft. McHenry measures 32 by 40 feet — the largest flag ever made up to that time, using 400 yards of cloth. The flag was so large that the seamstress, Mary Pickersgill, couldn't finish it in her shop. Instead, she assembled the flag on the floor of the nearby Claggett's Brewery.

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had become one of the leading lawyers in the United States.

In 1829, Key was appointed district at-

torney of the District of Columbia. In 1833, President Andrew Jackson, a close personal friend, asked for Key's help with a sticky problem in Alabama, where Creek Indians had ceded a large parcel of land to the U.S. in return for a promise of land for their new home. But when the Creeks tried to move onto their new land, settlers already there refused to leave and bitter fighting broke out. It took Key six weeks, but he eventually managed to get the government of Alabama, the president, the settlers and the Indians to agree to a set of compromises — no small feat!

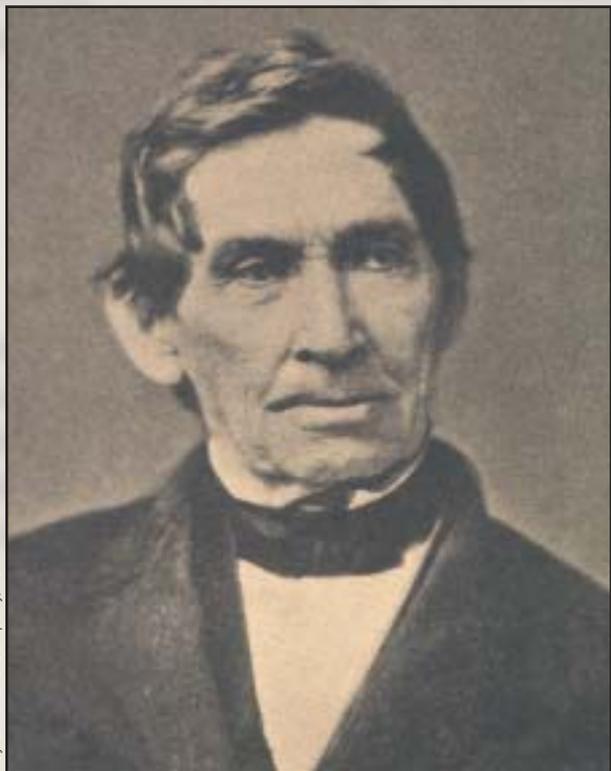
You would think that settling disputes and arguing cases in court, and raising his eight remaining children (three had died in infancy), would keep Key busy. But Key always made room for God in his life. He even briefly considered becoming an Episcopalian minister while still at school. But although the

docket called more loudly than the pulpit, Key was very active in the local Episcopalian Church. He taught Sunday school every week for many years, and was a vestryman for St. John's Episcopalian Church in Georgetown.

In his own household, he made prayer a matter of daily life, regularly holding family prayers twice a day, which even the servants were required to attend. He took a great interest in church politics and was an official delegate to the Episcopalian General Conventions from 1814 to 1826.

Key's strong faith was no secret. He often quoted Scripture in the courtroom to great effect, and over the years he counseled many in their times of doubt. He once wrote to Virginia Congressman John Randolph:

I don't believe there are any new objections to be discovered to the truth of Christianity, though there may be some art in presenting old ones in a new dress.... Men may argue ingeniously against our faith, as indeed they may against anything — but what can they say in defense of their own — I would carry the war into their own territories, I would ask them what they believe — if they said they believed anything, I think that they might be shown to be more



Key-Smith and Company, 1911

Samuel Sands, when he was a 14-year-old printer's apprentice at the *Baltimore American*, set the type for the first copies of the "Defence of Fort M'Henry," later known as the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

The Complete Star-Spangled Banner

by Francis Scott Key

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, thro' 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 thro' 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?

On the shore, dimly seen thro' the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected, now shines on the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner; oh, long may it wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.

And where is that band, who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution;
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.

O, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation;
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the Heav'n-rescued land
Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserved us as a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just;
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust!"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave. ■

The next time we debate an issue with our neighbor or stand in the voting booth to choose our country's leaders, let us remember Key's words and take care that our star-spangled banner continues to wave "o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave."

full of difficulties and liable to infinitely greater objections than the system they oppose and they were credulous and unreasonable for believing it. If they said they did not believe anything, you could not, to be sure, have anything further to say to them. In that case they would be insane, or at best illy qualified to teach others what they ought to believe or disbelieve.

It is possible, in this brief passage, to detect echoes of what Key must have been like in the courtroom, "pounding facts like a blacksmith"!

Key was solidly opposed to slavery, and he often took slavery-related court cases, usually receiving no pay for his efforts. Since he had freed Terra Rubra's slaves, he stood on solid moral ground in such cases. However, he recognized that freed slaves often had no training, no home and no money — and for the sincere purpose of trying to solve this problem he helped set up the country of Liberia. If elderly soldiers from the American War for Independence needed legal advice, Key never charged them. In the modern world of gibes about the unlikelihood of finding a lawyer's hands in his own pockets even if it were freezing, Key's willingness to take such cases may seem strange. But it didn't seem strange to Key. He once told a friend, "I do good only for the joy of seeing good done."

Life After Death

Key continued to "do good" in the courtroom, the church and the community until he died of pleurisy on January 11, 1843. With characteristic faith, he met his death with equanimity. In one of his last poems, he wrote:

I have been a base and grovelling thing,
And the dust of the earth my home,
But now I know that the end of my woe,
And the day of my bliss, is come.

Then let them, like me, make ready their shrouds,
Nor shrink from the mortal strife,

And like me they shall sing, as to heaven they spring,
Death is not the end of life.

Key's death was just the beginning of life for the *Star-Spangled Banner*. It became a popular patriotic tune, and was sung by both Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War and by American troops in World War I. On July 26, 1889, the secretary of the navy designated the *Star-Spangled Banner* as the official tune to be played at the raising of the flag, and as early as 1913, Army and Navy regulations referred to the *Star-Spangled Banner* as the national anthem. (Its closest competitor was "Hail Columbia.") Further underscoring the *Star-Spangled Banner*'s growing popularity, John Philip Sousa composed an official arrangement of the song for the United States Army and Navy, and, in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson requested that the song be played at all official occasions. But it wasn't until March 3, 1931 that Congress and President Herbert Hoover raised the *Star-Spangled Banner* to its current official status as the United States National Anthem.

Although we hear our anthem often, we should not take it, and the spirit behind it, for granted. For Key reminds us that if we cease to be "the land of the free and the home of the brave," if we begin to persecute patriots who point out corruptions and usurpations, if we become the "purchased possessions of a company of stock jobbers and speculators," then the very spirit

of our nation — the "soul of national poetry" — is in grave danger. In his words,

such a country may furnish venal orators and presses but the soul of national poetry will be gone.... No, the patriots of such a land must hide their shame in her deepest forests, and her bards must hang their harps upon the willows. Such a people, thus corrupted and degraded,
"Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying shall go down,
To the vile dust from whence they sprung,
Unwept, unhonored and unsung."

The next time we stand up to hear the stirring bars of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, or the next time we stand in the voting booth to choose our country's leaders, or the next time we stand in the grocery line debating a topic with our neighbor, let us remember Key's words. And let us take care that our star-spangled banner continues to wave "o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave." ■



Battle-worn banner: The flag from Ft. McHenry now resides at the Smithsonian. You can plainly see where a British shell destroyed one of the 15 stars, but the spirit embodied by this banner still runs strong in America.