



Hidden History: National anthem has colorful backstory

March 21, 2010

During the War of 1812, the Maryland physician, William Beanes, was accused by the British of spying for the American military. Whether or not he did remains uncertain, but Dr. Beanes was taken captive by the British and held aboard the HMS Tonnant just off the Maryland coast.

On hearing the news of the physician's fate, President James Madison authorized John Skinner, a federal agent, to negotiate the release of Beanes. So on Sept. 3, 1814, Skinner and a 35-year-old lawyer and amateur poet, who happened to be a close friend of the doctor's, boarded the HMS Minden in Baltimore and set sail for the Tonnant.

Four days later, the two Americans were aboard the Tonnant dining with the British admiral, Alexander Cochrane, and the ship's senior officers and attempting to negotiate the terms of the accused American spy's release.

In an effort to free their comrade, the Americans shared with Admiral Cochrane letters from British prisoners who had been treated by Dr. Beanes, all of them attesting to the quality care and genuine empathy they received from the elderly physician. The letters worked and the release was granted. Beanes was placed in the custody of Skinner and his lawyer-poet friend.

However, while aboard the British warship, the two American negotiators overheard their guests' planning a surprise naval attack on Baltimore. Accordingly, neither they nor the doctor were permitted to go free until after the battle, lest they warn their countrymen of the pending attack.

The three Americans were transferred to another warship, the HMS Surprise, where they were held captive during the naval attack. All day and into the evening, the Americans witnessed a ferocious bombardment of [Fort McHenry](#) and the American coastal defenses.

That night, the young American attorney and amateur poet watched the British attack with anxiety. From his vantage point he witnessed the British "bombs bursting in air" on the American defenses. The outcome of the battle hung in balance until morning, but he observed with pride "by the dawn's early light that our flag was still there." The final surge against Fort Covington, Baltimore's last line of defense, also failed.

The attorney, Frances Scott Key, and the battle he memorialized were destined to be etched in American memory. The very flag that Key saw raised over the American fort had 15 stars and 15

stripes. It survived the battle and, restored, now stands in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Key and the other two Americans safely made their way back to Baltimore. The day after the battle, Key put his thoughts into verse in a poem he called "Defence of Fort McHenry." Ironically, Key's lyrics were later put to the tune of a popular British drinking song called "The Anacreontic Song" (a.k.a. "To Anacreon in Heaven"), to which many tavern brawls were fought and drunken affairs consummated!

The song would later be renamed the "Star-Spangled Banner" and, by an act of Congress in 1931, it was made our National Anthem. Sometimes, the most unlikely of events end up shaping history, a history that is always infinitely more fascinating than anything imagined by Hollywood scriptwriters!

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