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O Say Can You See . . . The birth of our national anthem

by Stuart Englert

Lt. Jim Bailey, 29, and his troop of War of 1812 re-enactors unfurl a giant American flag and clip the red, white and blue banner onto a rope at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine in Baltimore.

“Give it all you’ve got,” shouts Bailey as Cpl. Aaron Bradford, 27, hoists the 30-by-42-foot banner to the top of the 87-foot flagpole.

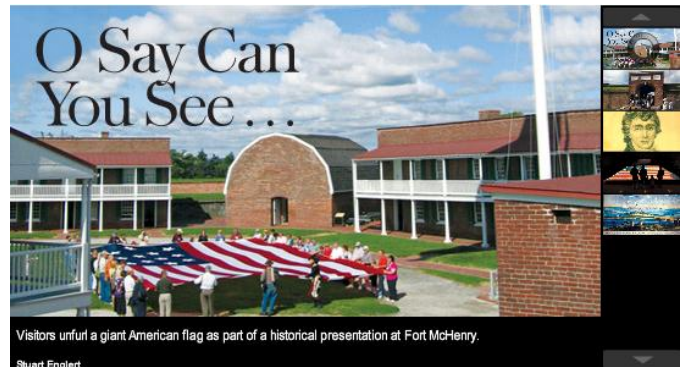
As the 15-star, 15-stripe flag catches the morning breeze, cheers and applause erupt from the crowd that gathered last September to celebrate the 195th anniversary of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Inspired by a similar scene during the Battle of Baltimore, Francis Scott Key, a Washington, D.C., lawyer, penned a poem about the American flag, and his verses became the lyrics to our national anthem—producing two iconic and patriotic symbols for the nation.

“For the first time someone had put down on paper what the flag represented to the country,” says Scott Sheads, 57, a ranger at Fort McHenry since 1978. “No one had ever done that before.”

Born of battle

During the war to affirm American independence, British troops burned and sacked the nation’s capital, and three weeks later, they set their sights on Baltimore, at the time the nation’s third largest city. A call to arms went out, and 15,000 soldiers, sailors, seamen and militiamen from Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia arrived to



Visitors unfurl a giant American flag as part of a historical presentation at Fort McHenry.



The American flag flies over Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, birthplace of the “The Star-Spangled Banner,” as War of 1812 re-enactors wheel a cannon from the Baltimore



Francis Scott Key
Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution



defend the port city.

On Sept. 13, 1814, a fleet of British ships attacked Fort McHenry, firing more than 1,500 bombs and rockets during a 25-hour bombardment of the brick, star-shaped fortification.

As morning dawned, Key, who was negotiating the release of an American prisoner aboard a ship anchored in the harbor, spotted a large American flag flying over Fort McHenry, signifying that his courageous countrymen had prevailed. He pulled a letter from his pocket and on the back wrote the immortal words “O say can you see by the dawn’s early light . . .” as the British fleet sailed out of the harbor.

“Every American can identify with Key at that moment,” says Anthony S. Pitch, 70, author of *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814*. “If we had been there, we would have felt the same way.”

Key’s four-verse poem, originally titled “Defence of Fort McHenry,” was written to the tune of a well-known British drinking song and published in newspapers across the country. Renamed “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the song was performed at official events and eventually adopted as the national anthem in 1931.

Celebrating the song

Today, the national anthem is performed at presidential inaugurations, school functions and sports events, but many Americans don’t know the words to the song and even fewer know the story behind the words. A 2004 Harris Interactive poll found that only 39 percent of Americans know all the words to the song.

While the words sound archaic to Americans today, and the song—with its wide octave-and-a-half range—is difficult for some people to sing, “The Star-Spangled Banner” tells the story of a defiant, freedom-loving people’s triumph over the most powerful military in the world.

“What we want to do is teach the story of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ and celebrate the song,” says Dan Esmond, 40, founder of the National Anthem Celebration Foundation. “We believe if you know the story behind the words and what they mean, you’ll have a greater appreciation of the song.”

Each September, Fort McHenry commemorates the Battle of Baltimore and celebrates the writing of the national anthem during the Star-Spangled Banner Weekend. This year’s event is



scheduled Sept. 10-12.

During the celebration, a giant American flag is hoisted, and a fife and drum corps plays “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” re-creating the scene on the day that Key wrote his famous words. The event also features military and civilian re-enactors of the period and cannon and musket firing, and culminates with a fireworks display and singing of the national anthem.

Last year, the Boise (Idaho) Police Honor Guard Quartet performed the song after a mock bombardment of the fort. “It was thrilling, knowing that this is the birthplace of the national anthem,” says Cpl. Mike Riley, 48, after stepping off the stage with his fellow officers.

An enduring banner and song

The flag that flew over Fort McHenry and inspired the national anthem is on permanent exhibit at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Each year, millions of people quietly and respectfully file past the faded and fragile flag displayed on a tilted, illuminated table.

“It’s a very emotional moment for many of our visitors to see the flag and understand what it means,” says Jim Gardner, 59, director of the museum’s Star-Spangled Banner exhibit, which opened in 2008. “It represents the moment when the fate of the nation was at stake and the Americans prevailed.”

Now measuring 30 by 34 feet, the flag has been on almost continuous display since 1907. That’s when Eben Appleton, the grandson of Adm. George Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry, loaned it to the Smithsonian Institution. The loan became a permanent gift in 1912.

“The flag is about 8 feet shorter than it was originally,” says Gardner, explaining how pieces of the banner were cut off and given as souvenirs to friends of the Armistead family.

While the flag that flew over Fort McHenry is not as large or as vibrant as it was in 1814, the song inspired by the banner remains as stirring to patriotic Americans today as it was nearly two centuries ago.

“The song belongs to everyone,” says Esmond, of Woodbine, Md. “I think it is important for this generation, and generations to come, to pass on the history of the song.”

Defence of Fort McHenry

(The Star-Spangled Banner)

O 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 rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O 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 through 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 in the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner! O 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 home and the war's desolation.
Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land,
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us 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!

—Francis Scott Key

Additional Information

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