

On July 4, sing the national anthem and visit ... the memorial buoy?

There are plenty of patriotic monuments to visit this July 4 weekend. One of the weirder ones is a red, white and blue buoy floating in a Baltimore river, marking the spot where Francis Scott Key composed the Star Spangled Banner in 1814.

By [Peter Grier](#), Staff writer
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“What’s that?” asked a fellow parent. He pointed at what appeared to be a giant pencil floating upright in the Patapsco River.

Below decks, 120 fifth-graders were celebrating graduation from elementary school by shrieking to a Michael Jackson medley. We chaperones were standing as far from the chaos as we could – topside on the cruise ship stern. We’d have trailed behind in a dinghy if the captain would’ve thrown us a line and a box of turkey sandwiches.



Coast Guard crew members lower the Francis Scott Key buoy, marking the spot where Key watched the American flag flying o'er the ramparts of Fort McHenry, into the Patapsco River in 2009. Ayla Kelley/U.S. Coast Guard

“That?” said a crew member. “That’s where Francis Scott Key saw the dawn’s early light.”

He was right. It turned out that our harbor cruise past Baltimore’s Fort McHenry included a circle around one of America’s most unusual patriotic memorials – the “Star Spangled Banner” memorial buoy.

This marker floats at the exact location where, in 1814, the ship carrying Francis Scott Key was anchored while Fort McHenry was bombarded by the British. As every schoolchild in America learns, when the morning sun came up at this spot, lawyer/poet Key saw the [broad stripes and bright stars](#) of the gallantly streaming fort flag, inspiring him to write the book and lyrics of “Cats.”

Just kidding. Key penned “The Star-Spangled Banner,” otherwise known as the most-difficult-to-sing national anthem in the world.

A buoy was first dropped at this site in 1914, as part of the 100th--anniversary celebration of the US anthem. The current buoy dates from the 1970s. It is, yes, [red, white, and blue](#). It doesn't wave, though. It bobs. The Coast Guard picks it up every fall for cleaning and winter storage, then sets it again in the spring at a ceremony that can draw crowds in the high double-digits.

Oh say, where can you see the Francis Scott Key Memorial Buoy? O'er the ramparts of a boat in the Patapsco River, several miles out from Baltimore's Inner Harbor and just outside cannon range from Fort McHenry. Or, you can spot it from the Francis Scott Key Bridge, a part of the Interstate system so notorious for backups that locals call it (no lie) The Car-Strangled Spanner.