



## Opinion

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING..... David Christy



**Discussion**

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### O'er the ramparts we watched ...

Go to a football or baseball game anywhere in this land and it opens with the “Star-Spangled Banner.” And although the words of the first stanza are stirring, most people tend to stumble and kind of follow along with the lady belting it out next to them, generally right after “by the dawn’s early light.”

To my way of thinking, the words of Francis Scott Key’s “In Defence of Fort M’Henry,” written in September 1814, are sacrosanct, to be immortalized as this nation’s national anthem forevermore.

For some years now, a fair number of Americans have thought the lyrics awkward, the tune hard to sing and not as melodious as “America the Beautiful” or “America.”

Yet, those songs, while patriotic, were not born amid the smoke of battle or the clash of arms as did Key’s famous words.

Key was born in Maryland in 1779, to a family of great wealth and estate, a deeply religious man who almost gave up his chosen profession — that of a lawyer — to become a minister.

In fact, due to his religious background, Key strongly opposed the War of 1812 between the still-fledgling United States of America and its former sovereign and nemesis, Great Britain.

But Key had such a strong love for country he served a brief time in the Georgetown field artillery.

Lawyer Key had been asked to assist in efforts to obtain release of close friend Dr. William Beanes, who had been taken prisoner during the British invasion. He arranged the release through a prisoner exchange, and although he was successful in getting his friend paroled, they had to wait aboard an American ship behind the British fleet preparing to bombard Fort

McHenry, which was defending Baltimore Harbor from attack.

After 25 hours of continuous bombardment, upward of 1,500 shells were hurled at the star-shaped fort, along with rockets.

As the British guns pounded Fort McHenry, many shells carrying lighted fuses, which were quite unreliable, often exploded in midair over the fort. The Congreve rockets arched gracefully from smaller ships toward the embattled men in the fort, shooting red-flame arcs across the sky.

The American commander of Fort McHenry, Maj. George Armistead, whose nephew would fall nearly 50 years later at the head of a Confederate brigade at Gettysburg during Pickett's Charge, had requested his fort have a flag so large the British would have no trouble seeing it from a distance.

Mary Young Pickersgill, a maker of colours, as flags were known in the day, was commissioned to make the massive flag. Using 400 yards of wool bunting, she and her 13-year-old daughter cut 15 stars, each two feet wide tip-to-tip, and eight red and seven white stripes, each two feet wide.

They sewed the flag on the malthouse floor of Claggett's Brewery in Baltimore. It measured 30 by 42 feet at a cost of \$405.90. It was hauled up over the American fort for all—including the British—to see in Baltimore that early fall day.

Francis Scott Key observed the British bombardment of his nation's shores throughout the night. And he waited anxiously in the predawn darkness for sight of Pickersgill's prodigious American flag, which he and thousands observed still blowing in the breeze off Chesapeake Bay.

Inspired by the sight of the unbowed flag and fort, Key began to write on the back of a letter he had in his pocket, composing line upon line aboard ship and back at his lodgings in Baltimore.

Titled "Defence of Fort M'Henry," the four stanzas appeared in the Baltimore Patriot newspaper Sept. 20, 1814, and then in papers from Georgia to New Hampshire.

The verses immediately were added to the tune "To Anacreon in Heaven." Many characterized the tune as a drinking song, and although there is some truth to that view, it still is a point of historical contention.

Anyway, the song and lyrics quickly became better known as "The Star-Spangled Banner," and eventually it was adopted as America's national anthem by executive order of President Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

It finally was approved by resolution of Congress in 1931 and signed by President Herbert Hoover.

Unfortunately, the precise words were not included in the legal documents and because Key himself had written several versions with slight variations, discrepancies in the exact wording still occur.

But as with much of American history, the song has meaning far beyond mere tune and lyrics.

This nation's national anthem was born from conflict and the uncertainty that followed, and from a Maryland lawyer's pen:

“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.”

Enough said.

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