

Carroll County Times

# MPT to bring F.S.K. to life

Scholars panel for screenwriters held for \$8M production

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By Baxter Smith

Two hundred years later it's played at the start of baseball games and other sporting events. Yet it was an incident during the course of the War of 1812 that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the lyrics to that famous song, "The Star Spangled Banner."

While Key's name is associated with something that's become so much a part of the national fabric, little else is broadly known about the Maryland lawyer who played an important role in public life during the years between the Washington and Lincoln presidencies.

That's about to change as Maryland Public Television begins development of a two-hour dramatic film on the life and times of Francis Scott Key. Titled "FSK," the \$8.2-million production is to be broadcast in September 2014, which is 200 years after the Battle of Baltimore, the incident Key witnessed that prompted him to write "The Star Spangled Banner."

Last week more than 20 history scholars, language experts, a musicologist, a special effects technician, producers and directors gathered on the Owings Mills campus of MPT to discuss ideas, little-known facts and broad themes to be incorporated into the film's script.

MPT has formed a business relationship with American Photoplay to raise funds for the film project, which is expected to have a Hollywood-caliber cast and local talent including historical re-enactors.

The film is to be made in the style of the seven-hour HBO series "John Adams" that screened in 2008. However, "FSK" will be comprised of two hour-long parts, according to Philip J. Marshall, the film's director and an artist-in-residence at Maryland Public Television. It's expected to be shot in Baltimore, Annapolis and in the MPT studios.

Nothing exhaustive has been written about Key's life, and since there were no photographs or audio recordings from that era, Marshall said producers will pull together original research, historical anecdotes and references from biographies and information about his contemporaries to sketch as accurate a portrayal of Key as possible.



*Philip J. Marshall, standing right, conducts a conference of scholars for script preparation of the public television production about the life of Francis Scott Key. Baxter Smith/Submitted photo*

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Even accurate renderings of Washington, D.C., of that era are difficult to come by. In that regard, producers plan to use the assistance of resources at the special effects laboratory at the Imaging Resource Center at UMBC.

Lee Boot, interim director of the imaging center, said his facility was recently called upon to visualize the Washington, D.C., of 1814 for a public television documentary about architect Benjamin Latrobe, who oversaw the construction of the district's Capitol Building and the Baltimore Basilica.

"We had to put together a representation of what D.C. was like based on maps," Boot said.

Key was born in 1779 in a portion of Frederick County that is now in Carroll County. He died in 1843.

Joshua C. Nathan, a co-producer, said much of the lore of U.S. history "tends to go from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln and skips this period." He added, "The film will become our point of view on American history."

Because of that, Nathan said, it's important to get the facts right.

Marshall added that "100 years from now the film may be looked at as fact."

Key attended St. John's College in Annapolis and became a lawyer. He was an advisor to public officials and was called upon by President Andrew Jackson to travel to Alabama to negotiate a land dispute involving American Indians.

He had the occasion to write what was to become "The Star Spangled Banner" because he was aboard a British warship in Baltimore Harbor where he witnessed the British naval bombardment of Ft. McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore in 1814. He was aboard the vessel to negotiate the release of prisoners who had been captured by the British.

Despite a "perilous fight" with "bombs bursting in air," Key observed that at battle's end the American flag was still flying over the fort.

Key's song was written to the melody of "Anacreon in Heaven," a popular tune of the day.

The words of "The Star Spangled Banner" got printed and widely publicized. Throughout the 19th century the song was performed at military and July 4th functions, and it was designated as the national anthem by President Hoover in 1931.

The act for which Key is best known occurred in the middle of his life, which leaves filmmakers with the task of filling in his life before and after writing the anthem.

As a lawyer, Key argued several cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, including an important one involving the right of habeas corpus (not to be illegally imprisoned). His brother-in-law was Roger B. Taney, the Supreme Court chief justice who presided over the Dred Scott decision, which affirmed that blacks were not full citizens.

Nathan noted that Key was influenced by the politics and issues of the day.

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Boot added that Key was ambivalent, something that "was symbolic of the nation at the time." Key was against the War of 1812 but joined the Georgetown Field Artillery Co. and was a volunteer aide to Gen. Walter Smith.

"He was very upset about slavery," Nathan said. "He is just repulsed that this is going on."

Alan Gephardt, a seasonal ranger at Ft. McHenry National Park, said that Key, an Episcopalian, was prominent in the American Bible Society. "This was a man who was very religious," he said.

"I love identifying him that way," Nathan said. "The nation was unhappy about slavery and [Key was] using the church to add meaning to his life."

Key was also active in the American Colonization Society, a grouping of abolitionists, slaveholders and others with mixed motives who shared the desire to remove free blacks from this country by shipping them to Africa. The controversial plan was opposed by people who believed free blacks should enjoy the fruits of their labor here rather than risk conflict with Africans in resettlement schemes.

For more information about the project, the filmmakers have created a Facebook page, [facebook.com/fskmpt](https://www.facebook.com/fskmpt), and a Web site, [fskusa.org](http://fskusa.org).

They intend to put information on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and to create a Twitter account.



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