

Maryland Historical Society

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“THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER”

{ EVEN BETTER THAN THE OLD
DRINKING SONG? }

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The words to our national anthem have nothing to do with the consumption of alcohol, but the melody that Francis Scott Key had in mind when he wrote them did indeed originate decades earlier as the melody for a song in praise of love and wine.

That Key borrowed a popular melody for his famous song is very much in keeping with common practice of his time period.

Many lyrics for songs written in the 18th and early 19th centuries were based upon popular melodies (“God Save the King” in 1745 evolved into “God Save the Thirteen States” in 1779, for example). Before there was copyright protection, such melodies were recycled over and over again.

Known widely by name, common tunes suited a variety of purposes—serving as a political song, a hymn, a march tune, a drinking song, or a country dance. Even fast Irish jigs occasionally acquired sets of words.

Many sets of lyrics were written to Key’s chosen melody. In fact, by 1820, 84 distinct songs had been traced to England and America. And unlike other common tunes like “Yankee Doodle,” we know who wrote the original words and music, and why!

The song was composed for a group of London gentlemen who had recently formed a social club. Club meetings, held every other week in the winter, included a formal concert, a dinner, and a social time afterwards, during which the members entertained each other by singing catches, glees, and amusing songs.

In 1780, the diverse membership included “peers, commoners, aldermen, gentlemen, proctors, actors, and polite tradesmen.”

One of the club’s founders, Ralph Tomlinson (1744-1778), wrote the words in 1776, at about the same time he became the club’s president.

Francis Scott Key (1779-1843). Engraving from newspaper clipping. Special Collections Department.

(FACING PAGES) PHOTOS COURTESY OF
MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

O say can you see ~~through~~ by the dawn's early light,
what so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
whose broad stripes & bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bomb 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 & 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 & the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,
That the havoc of war & the battle's confusion
A home & a Country should leave us no more?

~~Their~~
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution
No refuge could save the hireling & 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 & the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when freeman shall stand
Between their lov'd home & the war's desolation,
Blest with vict'ry & peace may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the power that hath made & 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 & the home of the brave. —

The Star Spangled Banner by Francis Scott Key, 1814. Museum Department.

lyrics

"TO ANACREON IN HEAVEN, WHERE HE SAT IN FULL GLEE,
A FEW SONS OF HARMONY SENT A PETITION,
THAT HE THEIR INSPIRER AND PATRON WOULD BE.
WHEN THIS ANSWER ARRIVED FROM THE JOLLY OLD GRECIAN:
VOICE, FIDDLE AND FLUTE NO LONGER BE MUTE,
I'LL LEND YOU MY NAME AND INSPIRE YOU TO BOOT,
AND BESIDES I'LL INSTRUCT YOU LIKE ME TO ENTWINE
THE MYRTLE OF VENUS WITH BACCHUS'S VINE."

Tomlinson's lyrics above tell us more about Anacreon, a Greek poet/composer who was born about 572 B.C. Anacreon wrote extensively about women and wine, and that explains why these London gentlemen were so attracted to him—shared interests!

The name of the club became "The Anacreontic Society," in honor of "that jolly old Grecian." The title of the new song came from the opening line, "To Anacreon in Heaven," and it became widely known by this name after its first publication around 1779 (the year of Francis Scott Key's birth!).

John Stafford Smith (1750-1836) wrote the music. Although not a member of the club, Smith was well known in London as organist at the Chapel Royal and as a composer. Tomlinson apparently commissioned Smith to compose a melody to match his Anacreontic lyrics. Many new sets of words to Smith's melody gradually appeared on broadsides, in newspapers and songsters, and in songbooks.

Sometimes the intended melody was listed as "To Anacreon in Heaven," but not always—since the distinctive structure of the poetry and other hints made the intended melody obvious.

By 1798, a very popular parody appeared in America, a piece in praise of our second president: "Adams and Liberty—The Boston Patriotic Song." After Jefferson was elected, another set of lyrics to the tune appeared under the title "Jefferson and Liberty." So it is probable that Francis Scott Key knew this melody for most of his life.



Star Spangled Banner sheet music, new edition. Published and sold by T. Carr, Music Store, Baltimore. Lister S. Lary, *Star Spangled Banner* Sheet Music Collection, Special Collections Department.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In fact, Key chose the same melody for another song that he wrote in 1805, beginning "When the warrior returns..." This, too, was a patriotic effusion, one that praised Stephen Decatur and the other heroes of the Tripolitan Wars.

The circumstances surrounding Key's witnessing of the bombardment of Fort M'Henry (September 13-14, 1814) from offshore have been well substantiated. Key was understandably moved by the scene, and the Anacreontic tune swirled through his head as he sketched out new verses (he was *not* writing a poem which "was later set to music," as is often asserted!).

On September 16, Key came to Baltimore to find a printer for his lyrics, now refined and ready. Handbills then circulated, stating the called-for

melody but not attributing a lyricist, and copies were distributed to every man who was at Fort McHenry during the bombardment.

The first newspaper to print Key's lyrics was *The Baltimore Patriot and Evening Advertiser*, on September 20, under the title "The Defence [sic] of Fort M'Henry." Another newspaper revealed Key's name on September 24.

Within a month, the song was renamed "The Star-Spangled Banner" and issued in sheet-music form. By the end of the year, it had also been reprinted across the country—a welcome reminder of the American victory.

The "Star-Spangled Banner" did not become our national anthem officially until 1931, more than 150 years after the tune's initial use, yes, as a drinking song. *

SOURCES: BACKGROUND LARGELY BASED UPON WILLIAM LICHTENWANGER'S "THE MUSIC OF 'THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER,' FROM LUDGATE HILL TO CAPITOL HILL," *THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS* 34/3 (JULY 1977), 136-170. SONG IMAGES FROM *THE NIGHTINGALE, A COLLECTION OF THE MOST POPULAR, ANCIENT, & MODERN SONGS, SET TO MUSIC* (PORTSMOUTH, NH: WILLIAM AND DANIEL TREADWELL, 1804), PP.188-191, COURTESY KATE VAN WINKLE KELLER. THE PHOTOGRAPH OF THE STATUE "ANACREON" (BY EUGÈNE GUILLAUME, 1851) BY WILLIAM H. HOUPAT AT THE MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS.