

BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

FORT MCHENRY AND THE BIRTH OF AN ANTHEM

Of all the battles in American history none is more connected with popular culture than the battle of Fort McHenry fought during the War of 1812. The British attack on Fort McHenry and the large garrison flag that could be seen through the early morning mist, inspired Washington, DC lawyer Francis Scott Key to pen what in 1931 would be adopted by Congress as our National Anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner. The anthem is played before countless sports events from high school through the ranks of professional games. The story of the creation of the Star-Spangled Banner is as compelling as the story of the attack on Baltimore.

In 1812, a reluctant President James Madison asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Great Britain. This declaration of war was based on continued British impressment of American merchant sailors into the British Navy and repeated instigation of American Indian tribes living in the then developing American northwest, by British agents.

But in 1812 the British had a bigger problem, Napoleon Bonaparte. The British had been waging war all over Europe against Napoleon's French forces. Finally, they were able to neutralize Napoleon and once that took place they could divert their energies to deal with the pesky Americans. By 1814 the war had essentially become a stalemate with little of if anything to show for both sides. Americans had tried to invade Canada only to be repulsed, but found some success on the high seas, particularly with the frigate The USS Constitution. Earlier that year American forces burned York (now Toronto), Canada.

With a war being fought on the periphery of the United States the British, under the influence of Admiral George Cockburn, decided to bring the war more directly to America by attacking the Chesapeake Region. The British Navy, with Marines and elements of their army wreaked havoc along the Chesapeake burning numerous town and settlements. However, Cockburn had two prizes in mind – Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland. Retribution for the burning of York was never far from his mind and what a blow he thought, would it be to American morale if he could torch the still developing American capital. After pushing aside a motley assortment of American defenders of the approach to Washington, DC at the battle of Bladensburg, Maryland, Cockburn and his forces entered the city and put the torch to all the public buildings on August 24, 1814. Madison, his cabinet, and many other Washingtonians fled the city in panic. As they ransacked the Presidents Mansion, the White House, British troops dined on the food that had been prepared for the Madison family to eat that evening.



Portrait of Francis Scott Key (Library of Congress)

***“And the rocket’s red glare,
the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night
that our flag was still there,”***

- From “The Star Spangled Banner”

During the British movement on Washington the British entered the town of Marlborough, Maryland. There they were greeted by a local and respected physician, Dr. William Beanes. Cockburn was impressed with Beane's hospitality and continued his way to Bladensburg, but on the British return to their fleet, several British soldiers accosted Beanes and he was able to have them arrested and detained in the local jail. When Cockburn learned of the arrests he was indignant and ordered Beanes himself arrested and placed on a British warship in the Chesapeake. Marylanders rushed to Francis Scott Key, a prominent Georgetown lawyer, who agreed to try and help secure Beane's release. Key eventually caught up with the British sailing in a truce ship as the British lay in wait to launch a massive attack against Baltimore's star-shaped Fort McHenry. Key was successful in securing Beanes release, but he and those with him were detained until after the British assault on Baltimore. Thus, an anxious Key spent the night of September 13-14, 1814 watching the British navy bombard the fort. The British also launched a combined land action against American troops and militia but were turned back at the battle of North Point.



Mary Pickersgill's Flag (Library of Congress)

The commander of the fort, Major George Armistead, had been bracing for the attack. The British warships anchored in the Patapsco River were out of range of the forts batteries. Using all the weapons at his disposal Cockburn ordered the fort pounded with all manner of artillery. Lighting up the sky were Congreve rockets that silhouetted the fort. Cockburn and his men expected the fort to easily be captured, but by dawn they decided to give up the fight. In an act of defiance Armistead had a makeshift American flag hoisted on the flag pole. The 30-foot-high, 42-foot wide flag was the handiwork of Baltimore seamstress, Mary Pickersgill. So large was the flag that it had to be sewn in a nearby brewery and it took Pickersgill and her team seven weeks to complete the project. This large flag was what Key saw "through the dawn's early light" fluttering against a battered but not taken fort. A journeyman poet Key on board the truce ship feverishly penned a poem called "The Attack and Defense of Fort McHenry." The poem was published in Baltimore newspapers and soon the words were aligned with a British tavern song, Anacreon To Heaven. Later the name was changed to the Star-Spangled Banner and Key would forever be a part of the pantheon of great Americans.

The war ended three months later with the Treaty of Ghent and while the terms of the Treaty changed nothing there was an immense new-found pride on the part of Americans. An early wave of nationalism swept the nation as we had twice in two generations bested the world's best military force. Key's words and the eventual song would become forever a part of a growing American canon of original works.

Activity

Francis Scott Key may have composed the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner," but the melody we know today came from a different source entirely: a popular British tavern song called "Anacreon to Heaven."

Have students pick a song of their choosing and see if they can fit Key's words into a brand new melody.