

The Star-Spangled Banner

The words tell of a highly emotional moment in US history when the war with the British was being fought and of one man's relief in seeing the US flag still flying after a vicious bombardment.

Before the Battle

The *War of 1812* had been a particularly nasty conflict with the British. They had burned down the Capitol and the White House in Washington, and were set on taking the port of Baltimore, which was protected in part by Fort McHenry, just to the south.

On September 7th, 1814, during the build-up to the attack on Baltimore, two Americans, Colonel John Skinner and a lawyer and part-time poet by the name of Francis Scott Key, had gone out to one of the British ships. They had come to negotiate the release of Dr William Beanes, a friend of Key who had been seized following the attack on Washington. The British agreed, but all three had learned too much about the forthcoming attack on Baltimore and so were detained by the British on board the frigate *Surprise* until it was over.

The Defense of Fort McHenry

The attack started on September 12th, 1814, and after an initial exchange of fire, the fleet withdrew to form an arc just outside the range of Fort McHenry's fire.

Skinner, Beanes and Key watched much of the bombardment from the British deck. The major attack started in heavy rain on the morning of September 13th. Just under three miles in the distance the three men caught glimpses of the star-shaped fort with its huge flag - 42ft long, with 8 red stripes, 7 white stripes and 15 white stars, and specially commissioned to be big enough that the British could not possibly fail to see it from a distance.

In the dark of the night of the 13th, the shelling suddenly stopped. Through the darkness they couldn't tell whether the British forces had been defeated, or the fort had fallen.

As the rain cleared, and the sun began to rise, Key peered through the lifting darkness anxious to see if the flag they had seen the night before was still flying. And so it was that he scribbled on the back of an envelope the first lines of a poem he called *Defense of Fort M'Henry*:

*O, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming*

As the mist started to clear he was aware that there was a flag flying - but was it the British flag? It was difficult to tell:

*What is that which the breeze o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?*

But finally the sun rose, and with intense relief and pride he saw that the fort had withstood the onslaught ...

*'Tis the star-spangled banner - O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.*


The poem

Keys, Beanes and Skinner were taken by the British back to shore on Friday, September 16th. In his room in the Indian Queen Hotel, Keys completed all four verses of the poem, and the following morning he took it to his brother-in-law, a local judge, who thought it so good that he arranged to have it printed as a handbill. Printing was completed by Monday morning, and the copies were distributed to everyone at the Fort.

Key made a number of hand-written copies of his original poem, introducing occasional changes as he did so. But it wasn't just Key that made alterations; various editors along the way have also had a hand in altering spelling, punctuation and even the words.

The Star Spangled Banner Lyrics

By Francis Scott Key 1814



Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and 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! Oh long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and 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 and the home of the brave!

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!
Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and 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 and the home of the brave!

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