

This Day in History... March 3, 1931

US Adopts National Anthem

On March 3, 1931, the United States officially adopted “The Star-Spangled Banner” as its national anthem. The decision came more than a century after the song was written, ending years of debate and finally giving the nation a single, official anthem.

The story of the anthem began during the War of 1812. In September 1814, a 35-year-old Georgetown lawyer named Francis Scott Key was asked to help secure the release of Dr. William Beanes, a respected Maryland physician who had been captured by British troops. Key traveled under a flag of truce to a British ship anchored in the Chesapeake Bay. He successfully negotiated the doctor’s release. However, because Key and his companions had learned of British plans to attack Baltimore, they were not allowed to return to shore right away.



Stamp pictures Key, American flags from 1814 and 1948, his family home, and Fort McHenry.

On September 13–14, 1814, Key watched from a British vessel as the Battle of Fort McHenry unfolded. The British navy bombarded the American fort for about 25 hours. Rockets and mortar shells lit up the night sky. At dawn, Key anxiously looked toward the fort to see which flag was flying. When he saw the large American flag still waving above the ramparts, he knew the fort had held. The British attack had failed.

Deeply moved, Key began writing a poem titled “Defence of Fort McHenry.” He later revised it in Baltimore. The poem included vivid images of “the rockets’ red glare” and “the bombs bursting in air,” drawn directly from what he had witnessed. Some lines also echoed phrases from an earlier poem Key had written to honor naval officers Stephen Decatur and Charles Stewart for their service in the First Barbary War.

A few days after the battle, Key shared the poem with his brother-in-law, Judge Joseph Nicholson. Nicholson realized that the words fit the melody of a popular British tune, “The Anacreontic Song,” written by John Stafford Smith. The pairing worked well. On September 17, 1814, the first broadsides were printed in Baltimore. Three days later, the song appeared in *The Baltimore Patriot* and *The American* newspapers. Soon after, music store owner Thomas Carr published the words and music together under the new title “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In October 1814, Baltimore actor Ferdinand Durang gave one of the first public performances.

Over time, the song became a regular feature at Fourth of July celebrations and patriotic gatherings. Still, it was not the official national anthem. Other songs, such as



From the 2000 Stars and Stripes Stamp Sheet



Stamp issued for the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Fort McHenry

This Day in History... March 3, 1931 continued

“Hail, Columbia” and “America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee),” were also widely used at public events.



Coil printed by CCL Label, die cut 8 1/2 vertical

Coil printed by Ashton Potter, serpentine die cut 9 1/2 vertical perfs

Booklet stamp printed by Ashton Potter, die cut 11 1/4 X 10 3/4

Coil printed by Sennett Security Products, die cut 11 vertical

In 1889, the US Navy took an important step. The service made “The Star-Spangled Banner” the official song for flag-raising ceremonies. In 1892, Colonel Caleb Carlton, commander at Fort Meade in South Dakota, ordered the song to be played at military retreats and parades. He promoted the idea to state and national leaders. His efforts helped spread the custom throughout the armed forces.



Booklet stamp printed by CCL Label, die cut 11 1/4 X 11 1/2

Booklet stamp printed by Sennett Security, die cut 11 1/4 X 10 3/4

ATM booklet stamp printed Sennett Security, die cut 11 1/4 X 11

By the early 1900s, different versions of the song were being performed. The tempo and arrangement varied. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson ordered that an official version be prepared for military and other appropriate occasions. The Bureau of Education gathered five musicians to standardize the music. One of them was famous bandleader John Philip Sousa. The standardized arrangement was first performed in December 1917.



Sousa stamp from the 1940 Famous American Composers Set

Efforts to make the song the national anthem continued in Congress. In 1918, Maryland Representative John Charles Linthicum introduced a bill to give the song official status. The measure did not pass at first. Linthicum reintroduced it several times over the next decade.

Public support grew in 1929 after cartoonist Robert Ripley pointed out in his “Believe It or Not!” feature that the United States did not have an official national anthem. The statement surprised many Americans. In 1930, the Veterans of Foreign Wars launched a nationwide campaign to support the bill. The group gathered a petition signed by about five million people. Their efforts helped move the legislation forward.



Stamp issued for the 75th anniversary of the VFW.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate eventually passed the bill. On March 3, 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed it into law. “The Star-Spangled Banner” was now the official national anthem of the United States. The law did not change the song’s words or melody. It simply gave formal recognition to a song that Americans had been singing for more than a century.

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