

This Day in History... August 1, 1779

Birth of National Anthem Author Francis Scott Key

Born on August 1, 1779, in western Maryland, Francis Scott Key became forever linked to the flag he saw above Fort McHenry after a 25-hour British bombardment. That sight inspired the four-stanza poem that became "The Star-Spangled Banner," though the song did not become the national anthem until 1931.

Key was born at Terra Rubra, his family's plantation in Frederick County, Maryland. He studied at St. John's College in Annapolis, trained as a lawyer, and settled in Georgetown with his wife, Mary Tayloe Lloyd. They eventually had 11 children. Key developed a successful legal practice and later served as US attorney for the District of Columbia.

A devout Episcopalian, Key opposed the War of 1812 on religious and political grounds. He objected especially to the American invasion of Canada. Yet he also felt a duty to defend his community. In 1813, he served briefly as a quartermaster with the Georgetown Light Field Artillery. During the British advance on Washington in August 1814, he acted as a volunteer aide at the Battle of Bladensburg. The American defeat allowed British troops to enter Washington and burn the Capitol, the President's House, and other public buildings.

Soon afterward, Key was asked to help secure the release of Dr. William Beanes, a respected physician and Revolutionary War veteran from Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Beanes had helped local residents detain British stragglers accused of looting as the enemy army withdrew from Washington. British officers viewed the action as a betrayal and arrested him.

With President James Madison's approval, Key joined American prisoner-exchange agent John Stuart Skinner. On September 5, 1814, they sailed from Baltimore aboard the American truce vessel *Stephen Decatur*. They found Beanes aboard HMS *Tonnant*, the flagship of Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane. British commanders first refused to free the doctor. Key and Skinner then presented letters from wounded British prisoners praising the medical care they had received from Americans. General Robert Ross agreed to release Beanes.

The three Americans could not return immediately. They had learned that the British planned to attack Baltimore, so they were detained until the operation ended. They were eventually placed back aboard their truce vessel, which remained under British guard in the Patapsco River. Contrary to later legends, Key was not tied up or held aboard a British warship during the bombardment.

At sunrise on September 13, British bomb ships began firing on Fort McHenry, which guarded the entrance to Baltimore Harbor. The bombardment continued for about 25 hours. British forces fired an estimated 1,500 to 1,800 shells, along with Congreve rockets. Major George Armistead commanded roughly 1,000 defenders. Four Americans were killed and 24 were wounded, but the fort did not surrender. Its survival also prevented British warships from entering the harbor to support the army advancing toward Baltimore.



This American Credo stamp features a line from the end of the song: "And this be our motto: 'In God we trust' / And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave / O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"

Through the night, exploding shells and rockets occasionally showed Key that a flag still flew above the fort. At dawn on September 14, the British attack ended. The defenders raised their enormous 30-by-42-foot garrison flag, made in Baltimore by Mary Pickersgill and her helpers. Its 15 stars and 15 stripes were large enough to be seen from Key's distant position.

Key began drafting lines about the sight, then completed four stanzas after returning to Baltimore. The poem was printed within days under the title "Defence of Fort M'Henry." Key intended it to be sung to "Anacreon in Heaven," a familiar English club song composed by John Stafford Smith. The words and melody spread rapidly, and the song soon became known as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Key remained a prominent lawyer until his death in 1843. His life also reflected the contradictions of his era. He owned enslaved people, opposed immediate abolition, and supported colonization, even while sometimes representing Black clients seeking freedom. Nearly 88 years after his death, President Herbert Hoover signed a law on March 3, 1931, officially making "The Star-Spangled Banner" the national anthem of the United States.



Pictures "Star Spangled Banner" author Francis Scott Key, American flags from 1814 and 1948, Key's family home, and Fort McHenry.



The Star-Spangled Banner was crafted by Mary Young Pickersgill of Baltimore. When the time came to sew the 30- by 42-foot flag together, her house was not big enough. The owner of nearby Brown's Brewery let seamstresses assemble the flag there.

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