

This Day in History... August 11, 1939

Fort McHenry National Monument & Historic Shrine

On August 11, 1939, Congress established Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine. The monument honors and preserves this historic fort where our national anthem was born. It's also the only place in the National Park system to be designated a Historic Shrine.

An early version of the fort was built in 1776 to protect Baltimore from potential British attacks during the American Revolution. The fort fell into disrepair just a few years later, but was rebuilt in 1803. It was named after James McHenry, a signer of the US Constitution and George Washington's secretary of War, credited with establishing the Department of the Navy.



Stamp pictures the Fort McHenry flag.



Issued in 2014 for the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Fort McHenry.

Before the battle had started, lawyer Francis Scott Key had been dispatched to rescue Dr. William Beanes, who had been captured by the British days before. Key, along with the US Prisoner Exchange Agent John Stuart Skinner, negotiated Beanes's release. However, the three men had heard the British plans to attack Fort McHenry and were ordered to wait until after the battle. They were tied up on

In September 1814, the fort was targeted by British forces in the War of 1812. For 25 hours, the British bombarded Fort McHenry with up to 1,800 cannonballs. The attack did little damage, likely due to the recent fortifications completed prior to the start of the battle.

a British ship and watched the American flag over the fort, until smoke and the dark of night obscured it from their view. On the morning of September 14, they looked to the fort and saw the flag waving overhead. Key was so moved by the sight that he began to compose a poem, "The Defence of Fort McHenry," which would later become "The Star-Spangled Banner," America's National Anthem.



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

During the Civil War, Fort McHenry became known as the Baltimore Bastille. The fort was also used as a Union transfer prison camp for Southern sympathizers and Confederate prisoners of war. At its height, following the Battle of Gettysburg, the fort held



Fort McHenry was the largest receiving hospital in the US during World War I.

6,957 prisoners, though it normally averaged around 250 to 350. Interestingly, one of the prisoners was Francis Key Howard, grandson of Francis Scott Key.

Fort McHenry remained under the Army's control until 1912, when it was considered to have little military value. However, it saw more activity during World War I than it did during the War of 1812. Serving as US Army General Hospital No. 2, as it was called, Fort McHenry was the largest receiving hospital in the country. Construction began in 1917, and by the end of the war there were



The fort served as a training station for 28,000 US Coast Guardsmen during World War II.



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over 100 buildings covering nearly all the ground on the 40-plus acres. The hospital was staffed by 200 doctors, 300 nurses, 300 medical corpsmen, and 100 civilian hospital aides. Great advances were made there in neurosurgery and plastic surgery. There were also advancements in occupational therapy, marking the first serious attempt to help disabled American veterans find real employment.

Fort McHenry was made into a national park under the War Department on March 3, 1925. The park was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933. Six years later it was redesignated a National Monument and Historic Shrine on August 11, 1939, the only place in the United States with this double distinction. Despite its National Park status, part of Fort McHenry was leased to the US Coast Guard during World War II. They used it for port security and as a fire training station for some 28,000 US Coast Guardsmen. They also kept close watch on the nearby shipyards, where the Liberty fleet was under construction.

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The Coast Guard left the park after the war. Since that time, Fort McHenry has provided visitors with a window into over 100 years of US military history. Despite its National Park status, the US Code authorizes the fort's closure to the public if a national emergency arises for use by the military, further stressing the continued strategic importance of Fort McHenry.