The Star Spangled Banner

The date was September 13, 1814. The location…Fort McHenry. Britain had been stopping and boarding American ships and taking from them American sailors. The Napoleonic wars had been raging in Europe for over nine years and Britain needed strong young men to fight. America had not participated in these wars and was enraged that Britain was interfering with American shipping and that American citizens were being forced to serve Britain against their will. America declared was on Britain on June 18, 1812.

In the early stages of the war, the American navy scored victories in the Atlantic and on Lake Erie while Britain concentrated its military efforts on its ongoing war with France. But with the defeat of Emperor Napoleon's armies in April 1814, Britain turned its full attention to the war against the United States. Admiral Alexander Cochrane, the British naval commander, prepared to attack U.S. coastal areas, and General Robert Ross sought to capture towns along the East Coast to create diversions while British army forces attacked along the northern boundaries of the United States.

In August 1814, General Ross and his seasoned troops landed near the nation's capital. On August 24, at Bladensburg, Maryland, about 30 miles from Washington, his five-thousand-member British force defeated an American army twice its size. That same night, British troops entered Washington. They set fire to the United States Capitol, the President's Mansion, and other public buildings. The local militia fled, and President James Madison and wife Dolley barely escaped.

After capturing Washington, D.C., and burning some of its public buildings, the British headed for Baltimore. Guarding the entrance to Baltimore harbor, Fort McHenry faced almost certain attack by British forces. Major George Armistead, the stronghold's commander, was ready to defend the fort, but he wanted a flag that would identify his position, and one whose size would be visible to the enemy from a distance. Major Armistead, along with other military leaders, knew how important Fort McHenry was to our nation at this time. These leaders believed that the citizens of Baltimore were discouraged and afraid. They felt that they would have their spirits raised by seeing a huge, high-flying flag at Fort McHenry as a symbol of defiance. Anticipating an attack on Fort McHenry, Major Armistead asked that the flag be made extra large so that it would be plainly visible to the English Fleet.

Mary Young Pickersgill, a Baltimore widow who had had experience making ship flags, was asked to make two United States flags, a storm flag and a garrison flag. Mrs. Pickersgill spent several weeks on the larger flag, measuring, cutting, and sewing the 15 stars and stripes, the number of states then in the Union. This flag would become known as the "Star-Spangled Banner." The Star-Spangled Banner's impressive scale (about one-fourth the size of a modern basketball court) reflected its purpose as a garrison flag. It was intended to fly from a flagpole about ninety feet high and be visible from great distances. At its original dimensions of 30 by 42 feet, it was larger than the modern garrison flags used today by the U.S. Army, which have a standard size of 20 by 38 feet. The garrison flag would soon after be raised at Fort McHenry.

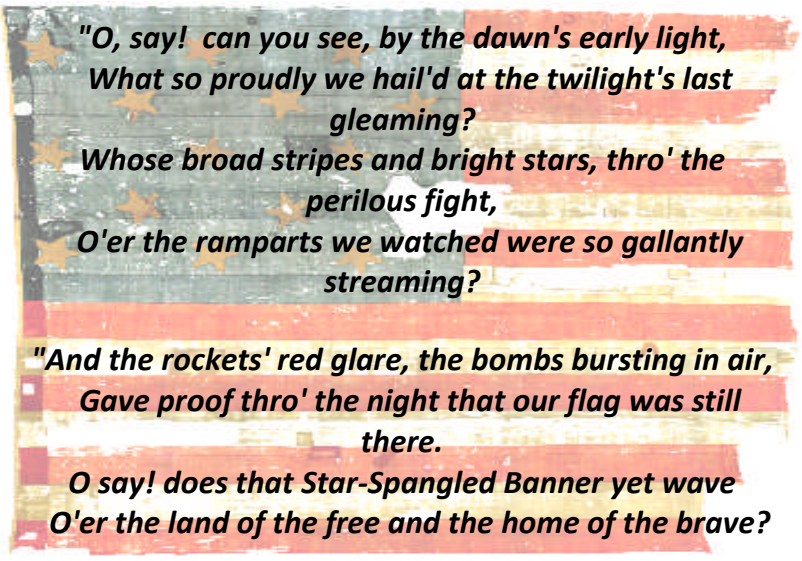
With Washington in ruins, the British next set their sights on Baltimore, then America's third-largest city. Moving up the Chesapeake Bay to the mouth of the Patapsco River, they plotted a joint attack on Baltimore by land and water. On the morning of September 12, General Ross's troops landed at North Point, Maryland, and moved towards the city. They soon encountered the American forward line, part of an extensive network of defenses established around Baltimore in anticipation of the British assault. Surprised by the strength of the American defenses, British forces camped on the battlefield and waited for nightfall on September 13, planning to attempt another attack under cover of darkness.

Meanwhile, Britain's naval force was set to attack Fort McHenry and entered Baltimore Harbor. At 6:30 AM on September 13, 1814, Admiral Cochrane's ships began a 25-hour bombardment of the fort. British bomb ships began hurling high-trajectory shells toward Fort McHenry from positions beyond the reach of the fort's guns. The bombardment continued throughout the rainy night. Rockets whistled through the air and burst into flame wherever they struck. Mortars fired 10- and 13-inch bombshells that exploded overhead in showers of fiery shrapnel. Major Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry and its defending force of one thousand troops, ordered his men to return fire, but their guns couldn't reach the enemy's ships. When British ships advanced on the afternoon of the 13th, however, American gunners badly damaged them, forcing them to pull back out of range. All through the night, Armistead's men continued to hold the fort, refusing to surrender. That night British attempts at a diversionary attack also failed, and by dawn they had given up hope of taking the city.

After destroying the Capitol, the British had headed north into Maryland. With them they took an elderly and well-respected American physician, Dr. William Beanes. Dr. Beanes was accused of spying, and was taken as a prisoner aboard the British Flag ship *Tonnant* anchored in Baltimore harbor. The remaining population of Washington, D.C. feared that the beloved doctor would be hanged and appealed to attorney Francis Scott Key to intervene. On August 27th President Madison slipped back into what remained of the Capitol and gave Mr. Key an official sanction. On September 3rd, Key and Colonel Skinner, who was experienced in negotiating prisoner exchanges, sailed for Baltimore. They reached the *Tonnant* under a flag of truce on the morning of the 7th. Although they were successful in convincing the British to release Dr. Beanes, the British feared that Key and Skinner would divulge their plans for attacking Baltimore, and so they detained the two men, along with Dr. Beanes, for the duration of the battle. Key thus became an eyewitness to the bombardment of Fort McHenry. Francis Scott Key and his two American friends were transferred to their sloop behind the convoy of British warships. They could only watch helplessly from its ramparts, closely guarded by the same enemy that was simultaneously killing their countrymen. Throughout the night they strained to see the red, white and blue banner still waving proudly over Fort McHenry. As long as they could see the flag flying, they knew there was still hope that their nation had survived. They prayed for dawn to pierce the sky and reveal the sight that would signal the survival of his countrymen and America as well. Now and then a brief flicker of light from an exploding rocket would reveal what Mr. Key thought might be that huge flag still flying proudly over Fort McHenry. So intense was the final bombardment that the early morning dawn was filled with smoke and the odor of burnt gunpowder. The smoke was so thick, that by 8 A.M. even the morning

sunshine could not reveal whether or not the flag still waved. Major Armistead had refused to take down the flag or surrender the fort. At dawn's first light, Francis Scott Key saw the huge flag. It was still flying over Ft. McHenry. Baltimore was safe. Reaching into his pocket, Key withdrew an envelope and began to write his thoughts. At 7:30 on the morning of September 14, Admiral Cochrane called an end to the bombardment, and the British fleet withdrew. The successful defense of Baltimore marked a turning point in the War of 1812. Three months later, on December 24, 1814, the Treaty of Ghent formally ended the war.

When Francis Scott Key saw the flag from a ship eight miles down the Patapsco River on September 14, 1814, the flag was still waving in the breeze after twenty-five hours of heavy bombardment by the British. The British were very discouraged to see it still there, but Key was inspired to write the poem that would become the National Anthem. As Mr. Key's sloop moved through the lifting curtain of battle-smoke towards Baltimore, the 35 year-old attorney continued to work on his poem. Later in the day in his room at Baltimore's Indian Queen Hotel he cleaned up his copy on fresh paper, added a few more lines, and titled the four stanza treatise "Defence of Fort M'Henry". His brother-in-law saw the poem and had a local printer make copies. Within days a polished up version appeared in the "Baltimore American", then in other newspapers and publications. In time, the verses began to be sung to the tune of a popular English drinking song, "To Anacreon in Heaven".



Our National Anthem is based on "Defence of Fort M'Henry". "The Star-Spangled Banner" was recognized for official use by the Navy in 1889 and the President in 1916, and was made the national anthem by a congressional resolution on March 3, 1931 (46 Stat. 1508, codified at 36 U.S.C. § 301), which was signed by President Herbert Hoover. The Act of April 4, 1818, which provided for 13 stripes and one star for each state, to be added to the flag on the 4th of July following the admission of each new state, was signed by President Monroe.

The National Anthem fostered a strong sense of national pride among the American people. Veterans can especially relate to our anthem, because our brave military forces are the ones who continue to keep this country free.