

The Inspiration for America's National Anthem

Many of us are familiar with the story of how America's National Anthem came to be written, but the flag that, in September, 1814, inspired Francis Scott Key's poem, originally titled "Defense of Fort McHenry", has an interesting history of its own.



Baltimore was a busy port city in the early 1800s. Ft. McHenry, which was built in 1794, guarded the city and its strategic harbor. It was in June, 1813, with the War of 1812 well underway, that 33-year-old Major George Armistead took command of Ft. McHenry. By that time, Major Armistead had been in military service for nearly 14 years, and had steadily earned promotions. As an artillery officer, he had already distinguished himself in battles against the British during the war. Certain that Baltimore and Ft. McHenry would soon be likely targets for a British attack, Major Armistead began to ready the garrison. Included in his preparations was the ordering of a special U.S. flag made to fly over the fort, which would be, according to Armistead's order, "so large that the British will have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance." This task was given to Mary Pickersgill, a Baltimore widow who was well-known as an accomplished seamstress and maker of maritime signal flags and banners.

Two flags were commissioned, the over-sized garrison flag and a smaller "storm flag". With the help of a few family members and servants, Mary Pickersgill set to work, using several hundred yards of wool bunting. The American flag in 1813 had 15 stars and 15 stripes. Vermont and Kentucky had joined the Union by then, and new standards for the design of the flag, limiting the number of stripes, would not be set until 1818. Therefore, in addition to 15 individually cut stars, each of the 2 flags also required 15 stripes. On the larger flag, which would be 30 feet high by 42 feet long, each stripe was 2 feet wide, and each star, point-to-point, was 2 feet. The storm flag would measure 17 feet by 25 feet. Working diligently, Mary and her assistants had the project completed by August, 1813, and the enormous garrison flag was raised, on a greatly reinforced pole, over the fort.

The following year, the flag was well in view of the British ships in the harbor on the morning of September 13, 1814, as they began their attack on Ft. McHenry. The heavy bombardment was nearly constant for 25 hours. During the night, there was a rainstorm, and the increased weight of the huge woolen flag as it became wet began to bend the flagpole. The troops at the fort quickly pulled the flag down, removed it to dry, and hoisted the smaller storm flag. By the time of "the dawn's early light", however, the rain had ended, and the super-sized flag was, once again, flying high over the fort for all to see, including the much-relieved and elated Francis Scott Key, who was being held on one of the enemy's ships. It became evident that the American forces had successfully stopped the British assault on the fort and on the city of Baltimore. The battle had been won.

Major Armistead was presented with the Ft. McHenry flag when he retired after the war. The flag remained in his family until 1912, when Armistead's grandson donated this treasured part of America's proud history to the Smithsonian Institution. Francis Scott Key's poetic account of the battle at Ft. McHenry, set to music, was officially adopted as our National Anthem on March 3, 1931.

In patriotic remembrance, keep the star-spangled banner flying this month on **Patriot Day**, 9/11; **Constitution Day**, 9/17; **POW/MIA Recognition Day**, 9/21; and **Gold Star Family Sunday**, 9/30.
Priscilla Poese, Americanism Chair