

3-3-2005

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Brian Flanagan
Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation

Flanagan, Brian, "Presidents and the Star Spangled Banner" (2005). *Features*. Paper 117.
<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/117>

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Presidents and the Star Spangled Banner

By Brian Flanagan

"The Star-Spangled Banner" was inspired by a British attack on Fort McHenry during the War of 1812, written by a Maryland lawyer, and popularized by the American people and American troops -- particularly during the Civil War. But Herbert Hoover's pen made the song America's national anthem on March 3, 1931, and U.S. presidents were intimately involved in each stage of the song's story.

President Madison and Francis Scott Key

"Off Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor on the early morning of September 14, Francis Scott Key, a Washington lawyer sent by Madison to arrange prisoner of war exchange, observed 'by the dawn's early light' that the 'star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,' proving that the British bombardment had failed."^[1]



The story of "The Star Spangled Banner" begins during the War of 1812. Shortly after occupying Washington, DC, and setting fire to many of its buildings (including the White House), the British navy floated up the Chesapeake and launched a series of attacks, eventually occupying Upper Marlboro, near Baltimore, Maryland. There a successful lawyer from Georgetown named Francis Scott Key was about to achieve more lasting fame than he could have imagined.

William Beanes, an eminent physician in Upper Marlborough, was taken prisoner by the British for having two of their soldiers arrested -- the intoxicated soldiers had disturbed the peace near his manor house while he entertained dinner guests. When the British fleet withdrew to the Chesapeake Bay, they took Beanes captive. Francis Scott Key was hired to negotiate his release.

Of course, a civilian could not legally negotiate with the British without the consent of the American government; Key first had to lobby President James Madison to become a representative of the U.S. in the exchange. Madison granted Key's request, wrote a letter of introduction to the British, and sent Colonel John Skinner as his aid.

After boarding the British ship *Tonnant*, Key and Skinner successfully negotiated Dr. Beanes's release but they also learned that the British planned to attack at Baltimore -- needless to say they were detained until the attack was underway.

On September 13, 1814, Key and Skinner witnessed the attack on Fort McHenry. It lasted through nightfall, and so the two could hear -- but not see -- the conclusion. At dawn the next day, Key knew the Americans had triumphed when he saw the star-spangled banner waving over Fort McHenry. Inspired, he sat down and wrote

O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thro' the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore dimly seen thro' the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected, now shines on the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner: O, long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when free-men shall stand
Between their lov'd home and the war's desolation;
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n-rescued land
Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust!"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

A Patriotic tune becomes the national anthem

First published in newspapers as "The Defence of For M'Henry," then as "The Star-Spangled Banner," Key's poem was put to an old British tune, "Anacreon in Heav'n." It wasn't the first time the tune had gained American patriotic lyrics -- it was used to pay tribute to two former presidents in the 18th century:

Adams and Liberty^[2]

Let Fame to the world sound America's voice;
No intrigues can her sons from their government sever;
Her pride is her Adams; Her laws are his choice,
And shall flourish, till Liberty slumbers for ever.
Then unite heart and hand,
Like Leonidas' band,
And swear to the God of the ocean and land;
That ne'er shall the sons of Columbia be slaves,
While the earth bears a plant, or the sea rolls its waves.

Jefferson and Liberty^[3]

Rejoice, Columbia's sons, rejoice!

To tyrants never bend the knee,
But join with heart, and soul, and voice,
For Jefferson and liberty!
No lordling here, with gorging jaws
Shall wring from industry the food;
Nor fiery bigot's holy laws
Lay waste our fields and streets in blood!

As Key's fame grew -- as a prolific writer; as a close friend and advisor to President Andrew Jackson; and eventually as prosecutor in the trial of Jackson's would-be assassin -- so did his song's fame. In fact, "The Star-Spangled Banner" transcended all other patriotic tunes and became so intimately tied to America's heritage that a nativist society adopted Key's title in the middle of the 19th century: "The Order of the Star Spangled Banner," later the "Know Nothing" Party, nominated Millard Fillmore for president in 1856. Key's poem also became a rallying song during the Civil War -- for Union and Confederate troops.

During Benjamin Harrison's administration, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long designated "The Star-Spangled Banner" to accompany each morning's flag-raising ceremony. By World War I, Woodrow Wilson and every succeeding president used the song at military events and adopted it as an unofficial national anthem. Then on March 3, 1931, an act reached President Herbert Hoover's desk, and was signed, officially designating "The Star Spangled Banner" as America's national anthem.

[1] Ketcham, Ralph Louis. *James Madison: A Biography*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990.

[2] <http://www.potw.org/archive/potw233.html>

[3] <http://www.ku.edu/carrie/docs/texts/jeffsong.htm>

Learn more

Books:

Borneman, Walter R. *1812: The War that Forged a Nation*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

Collins, Ace. *Songs Sung Red, White, and Blue: Stories Behind America's Best-Loved Patriotic Songs*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.

Ketcham, Ralph Louis. *James Madison: A Biography*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990.

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