

How did we get our national anthem?

In 1812 - twenty-five years after America's Constitution was written - Congress declared war against Great Britain because Britain was interfering with American international trade and forcing captured American sailors at sea to serve in the British Navy. In August of 1814, the British invaded and captured Washington D.C. They set fire to numerous public buildings including the Capitol and the President's Mansion (the White House). The flames were visible 40 miles away in Baltimore. Severe thunderstorms and a tornado accompanied by torrential rains dampened the fires and kept them from spreading. The British left Washington and began preparing for a land and sea assault on Baltimore, America's third largest city.

A respected young lawyer named Francis Scott Key had received word that a much loved town physician and patriot, Dr. William Beanes, had been captured by the British and was being held prisoner on a British flagship. President James Madison, who had taken notes on the Constitution Convention proceedings in 1787, gave Francis permission to arrange a prisoner exchange with the British and to fly a white flag of truce while attempting to find Dr. Beanes on an enemy ship somewhere on the Chesapeake Bay. Francis was accompanied by Colonel John Skinner. They found the British ship holding Dr. Beanes prisoner and were successful in obtaining Dr. Beanes' release. However, the British chose to keep Francis and Col. Skinner under guard aboard a truce ship until the conclusion of the battle to ensure they would not divulge their plans for attacking Baltimore. Hence, the two men were later eyewitnesses of the 25-hour bombardment of Ft. McHenry.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Baltimore were preparing for the attack. They dug trenches and built ramparts (protective barriers) around the city. The militia, although inexperienced, was on call. At Ft. McHenry, one thousand men under Major George Armistead had stacked sandbags around the powder magazine (a storage area for gun powder) and had sunk numerous small ships and barges in the river to slow the approach of enemy ships. As the pending British attack coincided with a heavy rainstorm, the smaller of two, bold new American flags – the storm flag - was flying over the fort.

At 6:30 am on September 13, 1814, the British bombardment of Ft. McHenry began. Cannons fired bombshells that often prematurely exploded overhead and rained down flaming shrapnel. From special small boats, the British fired rockets that shrieked through the air leaving trails of fiery red glare as they arched across the night sky bursting into flame wherever they struck. In one account, the deafening noise of the explosions and the thick, acrid smoke forced Francis and Colonel Skinner to seek shelter below deck. From that limited vantage point, one can only imagine their thoughts and

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deep concern for our country. Throughout the rainy and smoke filled night, they viewed the battle and saw our flag waving over Ft. McHenry as it was sporadically illuminated by exploding bombs.

By dawn on September 14th, the British gave up hope of taking the city and the British commander ordered an end to the bombardment. The British began to retreat. Questioning the cause of the silence, Francis and Colonel Skinner hoped for a sign that the city - and our nation - had been saved. Whose flag was raised above the fort? Was there a flag of surrender, or our own Stars and Stripes? As the rainstorm had ended, Major Armistead ordered his men at Ft. McHenry to replace the storm flag with the larger garrison flag - our Star-Spangled Banner. To celebrate their victory, the troops fired their guns and played "Yankee Doodle" as they raised our flag. The Star-Spangled Banner was so large that Francis and Colonel Skinner could see it proudly waving over the fort from their ship anchored eight miles down the river. Relieved and inspired by the sight, Francis captured his feelings of joy and gratitude on the back of a letter he had in his pocket. In 1931 the words of his poem became our official national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner".