



CELEBRATING AMERICA'S FREEDOMS

“The Star-Spangled Banner”

This patriotic song, whose words were written by Francis Scott Key on Sept. 14, 1814, during the War of 1812 with Great Britain, was adopted by Congress as the U.S. national anthem in 1931. For many years before Congress made this choice, the song was popular and regulations for military bands required that it be played for ceremonies.

Though Key wrote the words during the British bombardment of Fort McHenry at Baltimore, the melody was an English tune well known in America by the 1790s. It was the music for a poem, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” written about 1780 as the official song of a British social and musical organization, the Anacreontic Society. In fact, Key had used the music in 1805 to accompany another poem he wrote to honor Commodore Stephen Decatur.

Key Detained While Negotiating

Key was a well known 34-year-old Washington, D.C., lawyer-poet. The British had captured Washington and taken William Beanes, a physician, prisoner. They were holding him aboard ship in their fleet off the Baltimore shore. Friends of Beanes persuaded Key to negotiate his release. Key went out to the British fleet and succeeded in gaining Beanes' release but, because the British planned to attack Baltimore at that time, both were detained.

During the night of Sept. 13-14, Key watched the bombardment of Baltimore from the deck of a British ship. Although rain obscured the fort during the night, at daybreak he could see the American flag still flying from Fort McHenry. The fort still stood after the British had fired some 1,800 bombs, rockets and

shells at it, about 400 of them landing inside. Four defenders were killed and 24 wounded. Key drafted the words of a poem on an envelope. The American detainees were sent ashore, the British fleet withdrew, and Key finished the poem and made a good copy of it in a Baltimore hotel the next day.

Poem an Instant Hit in Baltimore

According to some accounts, Key showed the poem to relatives of his wife in Baltimore who had it printed immediately and distributed throughout the city on a handbill, entitled “The Defense of Fort McHenry.” Within a couple of weeks, Baltimore newspapers published the poem. It gained instant popularity and was renamed “The Star-Spangled Banner.” An actor sang it to the popular British tune at a public performance in Baltimore.

Only with the start of the Civil War did “The Star-Spangled Banner” become a nationally popular song. During World War I, a drive began in Congress to make it the official anthem of America's armed forces. There were other contenders for the title, including “America the Beautiful” and “Yankee Doodle.” Maryland legislators and citizens were among the most active groups and individuals who pressed to get Francis Scott Key's words and accompanying English tune ratified into law as the country's first national anthem. That finally happened when President Herbert Hoover signed legislation on March 3, 1931.

The anthem has four verses, each ending with the line, “O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”