

Star-Spangled Banner

Guarding the entrance to Baltimore harbor via the Patapsco River during the War of 1812, 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. Determined to supply such a flag, a committee of high-ranking officers called on Mary Young Pickersgill, a Baltimore widow who had had experience making ship flags, and explained that they wanted a United States flag that measured 30 feet by 42 feet. She agreed to the job.

With the help of her 13-year-old daughter, Caroline, Mrs. Pickersgill spent several weeks measuring, cutting, and sewing the 15 stars and stripes. When the time came to sew the elements of the flag together, they realized that their house was not large enough. Mrs. Pickersgill thus asked the owner of nearby Claggett's brewery for permission to assemble the flag on the building's floor during evening hours. He agreed, and the women worked by candlelight to finish it. Once completed, the flag was delivered to the committee, and Mrs. Pickersgill was paid \$405.90. In August 1813, it was presented to Major Armistead, but, as things turned out, more than a year would pass before hostile forces threatened Baltimore.

After capturing Washington, D.C., and burning some of its public buildings, the British headed for Baltimore. On the morning of September 13, 1814, 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.

Anxiously awaiting news of the battle's outcome was a Washington, D.C., lawyer named Francis Scott Key. Key had visited the enemy's fleet to secure the release of a Maryland doctor, who had been abducted by the British after they left Washington. The lawyer had been successful in his mission, but he could not escort the doctor home until the attack ended. So he waited on a flag-of-truce sloop anchored eight miles downstream from Fort McHenry.

During the night, there had been only occasional sounds of the fort's guns returning fire. At dawn, the British bombardment tapered off. Had

the fort been captured? Placing a telescope to his eye, Key trained it on the fort's flagpole. There he saw the large garrison flag catch the morning breeze. It had been raised as a gesture of defiance, replacing the wet storm flag that had flown through the night.

Thrilled by the sight of the flag and the knowledge that the fort had not fallen, Key took a letter from his pocket, and began to write some verses on the back of it. Later, after the British fleet had withdrawn, Key checked into a Baltimore hotel, and completed his poem on the defense of Fort McHenry. He then sent it to a printer for duplication on handbills, and within a few days the poem was put to the music of an old English song. Both the new song and the flag became known as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

For his leadership in defending the fort, Armistead was promoted to brevet Lieutenant Colonel and acquired the garrison flag sometime before his death in 1818. A few weeks after the battle, he had granted the wishes of a soldier's widow for a piece of the flag to bury with her husband. In succeeding years, he cut off additional pieces to gratify the similar wishes of others; the flag itself was seen only on rare occasions.

When Commodore George H. Preble, U.S. Navy, was preparing a history of the American flag, he borrowed the Star-Spangled Banner from a descendant of Colonel Armistead, and, in 1873, photographed it for the first time. In preparation for that event, a canvas backing was attached to soon thereafter, it was put in storage until the Smithsonian borrowed it and placed it on exhibit in 1907.

The flag had become a popular attraction; in 1912, the owner, Eben Appleton, of New York, believing that the flag should be kept in the National Museum, donated it to the Smithsonian on the condition that it would remain there forever. Once in its possession, the Smithsonian hired an expert flag restorer to remove the old backing and sew on a new one to prevent damage during display.

The Star-Spangled Banner remained in the Arts and Industries Building (the old National Museum) as the new National Museum was constructed across the Mall. In 1964, when the Museum of American History opened, the flag was moved to a prominent place inside the museum's Mall entrance, an awe-inspiring testament to our nation's independence.