



The Star-Spangled Banner Francis Scott Key (1814)

“The Star-Spangled Banner,” officially the United States’ national anthem since 1931, began as a poem, “Defense of Fort McHenry,” authored by white American lawyer Francis Scott Key. The poem captured Key’s experience watching British naval forces bombard Fort McHenry, outside Baltimore, Maryland, during the War of 1812. Key watched the bombardment while being detained overnight on a British warship, where he had met with British officers to negotiate a prisoner release. In the darkness that followed the nighttime bombardment, Key was uncertain if the British had won; at daybreak, he was relieved to see the US flag still flying over the fort.

Today there is controversy over the meaning, in the third stanza, of “the hireling and slave.” Does that phrase refer generically to British troops, made up of foreign mercenaries and the ostensibly tyrannized subjects (“slaves”) of the British monarch? Or was Key referring specifically to African Americans who had escaped slavery and were fighting for the British? Key’s personal history in relation to slavery was multifaceted: he was a slaveholder who manumitted some of his slaves, he provided legal assistance to certain enslaved individuals seeking their freedom, he helped found the American Colonization Society in order to remove free African Americans from the United States, and he actively opposed the abolition movement. His religious affiliation was Episcopalian.

Oh say, can you see, by the dawn’s early light,
what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming,
whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
o’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
gave proof through the night that our flag was still there...
Oh 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 through 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! Oh, 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 washed 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.

Oh, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
between their loved home and the war’s desolation!
Blessed with vict’ry and peace, may the heav’n-rescued land
praise the power that hath made and preserved 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.

Source: [Francis Scott Key], “Defence of Fort M’Henry,” in *National Songster; Or, A Collection of the Most Admired Patriotic Songs* [...] (Hagerstown, MD: John Gruber and Daniel May, 1814), 30-31, <http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/general/VAC2228>. Public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

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