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THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

by

John A. Carpenter

On August 18, 1814, Admiral Cockburn, having returned with his fleet from the West Indies, sent to Secretary Monroe at Washington, the following threat:

SIR: Having been called upon by the Governor-General of the Canadas to aid him in carrying into effect measures of retaliation against the inhabitants of United States for the wanton destruction committed by their army in Upper Canada, it has become imperiously my duty, in conformity with the Governor-General's application, to issue to the naval forces under my command an order to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as may be found assailable.

His fleet was then in the Patuxent River, emptying into the Chesapeake Bay. The towns immediately "assailable," therefore, were Baltimore, Washington, and Annapolis.

Landing at Benedict's, on the Patuxent, the land forces, enervated by a long sea-voyage, marched the first day to Nottingham, the second to Upper Marlborough. At the latter place, a town of some importance, certain British officers were entertained by Dr. Beanes, the principal physician of that

neighborhood; and a man well-known throughout southern Maryland. His character as a host was forced upon him, but his services as a physician were freely given, and formed afterward the main plea for his lenient treatment while a prisoner.

As the British army reached Upper Marlborough, General Winder was concentrating his troops at Bladensburg. The duty of assigning the regiments to their several positions as they arrived on the field was performed by Francis Scott Key, a young aide-de-camp to General Smith. Key was a practising lawyer in Washington who had a liking for the military profession. He was on duty during the hot and dusty days which ended in the defeat of the American army. Subsequently, he could have read a newspaper at his residence in Georgetown by the light of the burning public buildings at Washington, and he passed with indignant heart the ruins left by the retreating army when, after a night of frightful storm, they silently departed in a disorderly forced march of thirty-five miles, to Upper Marlborough. He then knew what any other city might expect upon which the "foul footsteps' pollution" of the British might come.

The sorry appearance of the British army gave the Marlborough people the idea that it had been defeated, and on the afternoon of the following day Dr. Beanes and his friends celebrated a supposed victory. Had they stayed in the noble old mansion that the worthy but irascible doctor inhabited near Marlborough, "The Star-Spangled Banner" would never have been written. Tempted by the balminess of a warm September afternoon, however, the party adjoined to a spring near the house, where, the negro servant having carried out the proper utensils, the cool water was tempered with those ingredients which mingle their congenial essences to make up that still seductive drink, a Maryland punch. It warms the heart, but if used too freely it makes a man hot-tempered, disputatious, and belligerent. Amid the patriotic jollity, therefore, when three British soldiers, belated, dusty, and thirsty, came to the spring on their way to the retreating army, their boasting met with an incredulous denial, which soon led to their summary arrest as chicken-stealers and public enemies. Confined in the insecure Marlborough jail, one of them speedily escaped, and reached a scouting-party of British cavalry, which, by order of Cockburn, returned to Upper Marlborough, roused Dr. Beanes out of his bed at midnight, and conveyed him to the British ships at Benedict's.

As soon as Key heard of the arrest of Dr. Beanes, one of his most intimate friends, he hurried, under the protection of a flag of truce, to the British fleet at the mouth of the Patuxent to arrange for his release. John S. Skinner of Baltimore, then commissioner for exchange of prisoners, accompanied him with his cartel ship.

When Key and Skinner reached the British fleet it was already on its way up the Chesapeake Bay to the attack on Baltimore. Its destination was too evident for Cockburn to allow Key to depart and give the alarm. He was informed in the admiral's grimmest manner, that while he would not hang Dr. Beanes at the yard-arm, as he had threatened, yet he would have to keep every man on board a close prisoner until certain circumstances occurred which would render their release advisable. When the ships arrived at their destination he assured them that it would be only a matter of a few hours before they would be free.

From the admiral's flag-ship the Surprise, upon which he was then detained, Key saw some of the finest soldiers of the British army, under General Ross, disembarked at North Point, to the southeast of the city of Baltimore. Then on Tuesday morning, September 13, 1814, the fleet moved across the broad Patapsco, and ranged themselves in a semicircle two and a half miles from the small brick and earth fort which lay low down on a jutting projection of land guarding the water approaches to Baltimore on that side.

Cockburn's boast to Key that the reduction of the city would be "a matter of a few hours" did not look improbable. It was garrisoned by a small force of regulars under General Armistead, assisted by some volunteer artillerists under Judge Nicholson. It was armed with forty-two pounders, and some cannon of smaller caliber, but all totally ineffective to reach the British ships in their chosen position. In addition, a small earth battery at the Lazaretto—which, it will be seen, did good service—guarded the important approach to the city by the north branch of the Patapsco; while Fort Coventry protected the south branch. These batteries were armed only with eighteen and twenty-four pounders.

From seven on the morning of Tuesday until after midnight of Wednesday the fleet bombarded Fort McHenry at long range; occasionally the gunners in the fort fired a useless shot at the ships. But at midnight word was brought to Cockburn that the land attack on the North Point road to the east of the city had failed. Therefore, unless the fleet could take Fort McHenry on the west, retreat was inevitable.

Taking advantage of the darkness, a little after midnight sixteen British frigates, with bomb-ketches and barges, moved up within close range. At one o'clock they suddenly opened a tremendous and destructive fire upon the fort. Five hundred bombs fell within the ramparts; many more burst over them.

The crisis of the fight came when, in the darkness, a rocket ship and five barges attempted to pass up the north channel to the city. They were not perceived until the British, thinking themselves safe and the ruse successful, gave a derisive cheer at the fort under whose guns they had passed. In avoiding Fort McHenry, however, they had fallen under the guns of the fort at the Lazaretto, on the opposite side of the channel. This fort, opening fire, so crippled the daring vessels that some of them had to be towed out in their hasty retreat.

From midnight till morning Key could know nothing of the fortunes of the fight. At such close quarters a dense smoke enveloped both the ships and the fort, and added to the blackness of the night.

After the failure to ascend the north branch of the Patapsco, the firing slackened. Now and then a sullen and spiteful gun shot its flame from the side of a British vessel. Key, pacing the deck of the cartel ship, to which he had been transferred, could not guess the cause of this. The slackened fire might mean the success of the land attack, in which case it would not have been necessary to waste any more powder on the fort. Again, it might be that the infernal rain of shells had dismantled the little fort itself, and the enemy was only keeping up a precautionary fire until daylight enabled him to take possession.

The long hours were nearly unbearable. Key had seen the fate of
Washington, and anticipated the fate of Baltimore.

At seven the suspense was unrelaxed. The firing from the fleet ceased. The large ships loomed indistinct and silent in the mist. To the west lay the silent fort, the white vapor heavy upon it. With eager eyes Key watched the distant shore, till in a rift over the fort he dimly discerned the flag still proudly defiant. In that supreme moment was written "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The British ships slowly dropped down to North Point. Dr. Beanes went home to Upper Marlborough, very thankful as he saw the yard-arm of the Surprise melt out of sight, unburdened.

Of all national airs, it breathes the purest patriotism. Those of England, Russia, and Austria are based upon a sentimental loyalty long outgrown by this agrarian and practical age. The "Marseillaise" is a stirring call to arms, and upholds only the worst—the passionate military—side of a nation's character. "The Star-Spangled Banner," while it is animated, patriotic, defiant, neither cringes nor boasts; it is as national in its spirit as it is adequate in the expression of that spirit. Believing, then, that Key's poem will be the national air of succeeding generations of Americans, the facsimile of the original draft is here reproduced by the kindness of Mrs. Edward Shippen, a granddaughter of that Judge Nicholson who took the first copy of the poem to the "American" office, and had it set up in broad-sheet form by Samuel Sands, a printer's apprentice of twelve. He was alone in the office, all the men having gone to the defense of the city. It is written in Key's hand. The changes made in drafting the copy will be seen at once, the principal one being that Key started to write "They have washed out in blood their foul footsteps' pollution," and changed it for "Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution." In the second stanza, also, the dash after "'T is the star-spangled banner" makes the change more abrupt, the line more spirited, and the burst of feeling more intense, than the usual semicolon. The other variations are unimportant. Some of them were made in 1840, when Key wrote out several copies for his friends.

The song, in its broad-sheet form, was soon sung in all the camps around the city. When the Baltimore theater, closed during the attack, was reopened, Mr. Hardinge, one of the actors, was announced to sing "a new song by a gentleman of Maryland." The same modest title of authorship prefaces the song in the "American." From Baltimore the air was carried south, and was played by one of the regimental bands at the battle of New Orleans.

The tune of "Anacreon in Heaven" has been objected to as "foreign"; but in truth it is an estray, and Key's and the American people's by adoption. It is at least American enough now to be known to every school-boy; to have preceded Burr to New Orleans, and Fremont to the Pacific; to have been the inspiration of the soldiers of three wars; and to have cheered the hearts of American sailors in peril of enemies on the sea from Algiers to Apia Harbor. If the cheering of the Calliope by the crew of the Trenton binds closer together the citizens of the two English-speaking nations, should its companion scene, no less thrilling, be forgotten—when the Trenton bore down upon the stranded Vandalia to her almost certain destruction, and the encouraging cheer of the flag-ship was answered by a response, faint, uncertain, and despairing?

Almost at once, as the last cheer died away:

Darkness hid the ships. As those on shore listened for the crash, another sound came up from the deep. It was a wild burst of music in defiance of the storm. The Trenton's band was playing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The feelings of the Americans on the beach were indescribable. Men who on that

awful day had exhausted every means of rendering some assistance to their comrades now seemed inspired to greater efforts. They dashed at the surf like wild creatures; but they were powerless.

No; it is too late to divorce words and music.

The song is generally accorded its deserved honor; the man who wrote it has been allowed to remain in unmerited obscurity. The Pacific coast alone, in one of the most beautiful of personal monuments,* has acknowledged his service to his country—a service which will terminate only with that country's life; for he who gives a nation its popular air, enfeoffs posterity with an inalienable gift. Yet Key was the close personal friend of Jackson, Taney,—who was his brother-in-law—John Randolph of Roanoke, and William Wilberforce. He it was, in all probability, who first thought out the scheme of the African Colonization Society; the first, on his estate in Frederick County, to open, in 1806, a Sunday-school for slaves; who set free his own slaves; and who was, throughout his whole career, the highest contemporary type of a modest Christian gentleman. This religious side of Key's character found expression in that fine hymn found in the hymnals of all Protestant denominations,

Lord, with glowing heart I'd praise thee.

*In Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

Foote, in his "Reminiscences," leads us to think highly also of Key's personal appearance, and of his powers as a public speaker.

Francis Scott Key was the son of John Ross Key, a Revolutionary officer. He was born in Frederick County, Maryland, August, 1780. He studied law, was admitted to the bar at Frederick, subsequently moved to Georgetown, and was district attorney for three terms. He was frequently intrusted with delicate missions by President Jackson. A volume of his poems was published in 1856. He died in 1843, and is buried in the little cemetery at Frederick, Maryland. Efforts have been made in his native State to erect a monument over his grave, but unsuccessfully. In justice such a memorial shaft should be the gift of the whole American people.

As it is, his grave is not without tributes which are curious and honorable. During the war Frederick was quietly a "rebel town," but it contained one good patriot besides Barbara Frietchie. This loyal Mr. B——, when he received favorable news from the Northern army, or whenever his patriotism had need of bubbling over, regularly made a pilgrimage to Key's grave, and there, standing at the head of it, exultantly and conscientiously sang through the whole of Key's song.

On every Decoration Day the grave is covered with flowers, and the flag which always waves there—the Star-Spangled Banner which his strained eyes saw on that 14th of September, 1814, rise triumphant above the smoke and vapor of battle—is reverently renewed.

Perhaps, after all, it is his best monument.

The flag of 1814 and that of 1894 are nearly identical, the greatest change being merely in smaller stars in the cluster. The flag of the United States, adopted June 14, 1777, was one of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, with a union of thirteen white stars in a blue field. Upon the admission of Kentucky and Vermont, two stripes and two stars were added. This flag continued in use until 1818, when, five more States having been admitted, the bars were reduced to the original thirteen, with an added star for every new State, the star to be placed in position on the Fourth of July following the admission.

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