

The War of 1812 and the Star-Spangled Banner

Less than thirty years after the American Revolution the United States was once again at war with Great Britain. America had declared war on Great Britain in 1812, but by the summer of 1814 neither side was winning. However, in August 1814 the British landed 5,000 soldiers near Washington, DC, the capital city of the United States of America, and defeated the American soldiers who were defending the city. The British soldiers burned much of the city, including the White House, and President Madison and his wife Dolley barely escaped.

The Battle of Baltimore

After destroying much of the nation's capital the British soldiers began marching toward the city of Baltimore, Maryland. At the same time the British navy began moving its ships into Chesapeake Bay so that they could attack the city from the sea while the soldiers attacked from the land. Protecting the city of Baltimore was Fort McHenry. If the British wanted to reach the city they had to first defeat the 1,000 American soldiers who were in the fort. The British soldiers waited for the British ships to destroy Fort McHenry and open the way into Baltimore. For twenty-five hours the British ships blasted away at Fort McHenry with rockets and cannon shells that burst into flame and showered hot pieces of metal into the fort. The fort was helpless to defend itself because its cannons could not reach the more powerful weapons on the British ships. Yet the British could not sail into Baltimore because if they got too close to Fort McHenry, the fort's cannons could destroy them. All through the night the attack continued but the American soldiers refused to surrender.

Meanwhile, several miles away, an American lawyer named Francis Scott Key was being held prisoner on a British warship after he had tried to help an American doctor arrested by the British. Francis Scott Key watched as the battle was fought all through the night, and as the sun began to rise he saw the British navy sail away from Fort McHenry. At that moment he saw a huge American flag waving over the fort as the victorious American soldiers inside began singing "Yankee Doodle."

Francis Scott Key and "The Star-Spangled Banner"

When Francis Scott Key saw the United States flag still flying over Fort McHenry he knew that the Americans had won the battle. He was so moved by what he had witnessed that he began writing a poem about what he had seen on the back of a letter that he was carrying. Two days later the British released him, and he returned to Baltimore, where he finished a four-verse poem that he titled "The Defense of Fort McHenry." Many of the people who read the poem loved it. Soon it was very popular and had been set to music. In October 1814 it was publicly performed and was being sold in music stores under the title "The Star-Spangled Banner." Over the years the song gained popularity and was sung at many patriotic and ceremonial events. In 1931 "The Star-Spangled Banner" was officially named our country's national anthem.