

Francis Scott Key (1779 – 1843) during the War of 1812

A lawyer and author famous for penning the poem that became the national anthem of the United States, Francis Scott Key was born on August 1, 1779, in what is now Carroll County, Maryland. His grandparents immigrated to Maryland from England and his father was a revolutionary war veteran who owned a large plantation called “Terra Rubra.” Key attended St. John’s College in Annapolis and read law in his uncle’s law office. By his early twenties he had established his own practice in Georgetown, near Washington, DC, where he met and mingled with many high profile politicians.

Though Key was respected as an attorney during his lifetime, it was his poetry that made him an iconic American figure. The story of Key’s rise to cultural prominence in the United States began during the War of 1812. In August of 1814 the British captured Washington, DC, and burned much of the city. Afterwards, as British forces moved through Maryland, they took into custody a number of prominent local residents, including Dr. William Beanes. Beanes was being held on a British ship, the *HMS Tonnant*, anchored in Baltimore harbor when several of his friends approached Key to help them obtain the doctor’s release. After receiving permission from President James Madison, Key, along with John Stuart Skinner, a prison exchange agent for the United States government, took a boat out to the *Tonnant* to negotiate Beanes’ release. At the time, the British had begun preparations to begin shelling Fort McHenry, the fort that protected Baltimore harbor, and they detained Key, Skinner, and Beanes until the shelling was over. The three men watched the twenty-five-hour bombardment with great interest until the British gave up their attempt to neutralize the installation. Once the shelling stopped, Key took out a spy glass and, to his great relief, saw that the American flag was still flying over fort. Inspired, he wrote a poem titled “Defense of Fort McHenry” that was widely disseminated after being published in a Baltimore newspaper. Set to the tune of a popular tavern song of the period, “To Anacreon in Heaven” by John Stafford Smith, Key’s four stanza poem evolved into a popular expression of American patriotism. With each passing decade the song, eventually rechristened as “The Star Spangled Banner,” became more renowned, and in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson ordered it played at official military functions and other appropriate occasions. As early as the 1890s bands were performing the song at professional baseball games, and in 1918 it was played for the first time at the World Series. In 1931, Congress recognized “The Star Spangled Banner” as the official national anthem of the United States.

After the War of 1812, Key continued practicing law in Maryland and the Washington, DC, area. He handled a number of high profile cases during his career and, as anti-slavery advocates became more vocal in the North during the 1830s, he became a staunch legal defender of the institution. On January 11, 1843, Key died of pleurisy at the home of his daughter in Baltimore.

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FURTHER READING:

Leepson, Marc. *What So Proudly We Hailed: Francis Scott Key, A Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Taylor, Lon, Jeffrey Brodie, Kathleen Kendrick. *The Star-Spangled Banner: The Making of an American Icon*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2008.