

"The Star-Spangled Banner" as Nation's Anthem

Only Since the Present War Against Germany Began Has It Been Generally Recognized—The Real Story of Its Origin

THE present war has given "The Star-Spangled Banner" a vogue which it never possessed before. For the first time it is recognized throughout the country as the national anthem, although it is not such in legal fact, Congress having repeatedly rejected proposals—one as recently as three years ago—to make a declaration to that effect by resolution. Nearly a hundred years after Francis Scott Key wrote the song it was prescribed by formal orders to be played in the army and navy on occasions of ceremony, and that is the extent of its official recognition today.

Foreigners have long believed "The Star-Spangled Banner" to be the fully accepted national anthem of America, and in their armies and navies, and on all public occasions when it is desired to honor this country in music abroad, the familiar air is played. While many on this side of the water were inclined over a period of years to discredit the song and to advocate strenuously the claims of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and even "Yankee Doodle" and "Dixie," the standing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" has not been disputed in other lands.

Even as late as the Spanish war the "Star-Spangled Banner" had only limited popular recognition. No theatre audiences stood while it was being played in 1898, and, in fact, the general disposition at that period, at least in the North-eastern part of the United States, was to elevate "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," to the place of honor. Marching troops in Cuba and Porto Rico, as all the world knows, were partial to "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." In the civil war, "John Brown's Body" and "Yankee Doodle," on one side, and "Dixie" and "The Girl I Left Behind Me," on the other side, were the favorite inspirations of the stern men who clashed on a hundred bloody fields.

But since we have taken up arms against Germany debate and difference on the subject of whether we have a pre-eminently preferred national anthem and what that anthem is appear to have vanished.

The National Star-Spangled Banner Commission laid the groundwork for the change. It was organized in Baltimore for the purpose of preparing the centennial celebration of Key's song in September, 1914, and for many months before that it conducted an active and widespread propaganda. Committees were formed in every State, by appointment of the Governors, and local committees were appointed by Mayors to co-operate with the commission, both in diffusing interest in the celebration and in emphasizing the claims of "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the national anthem.

These committees were composed, in large part, of influential men and women who took up the work in a spirit of pride and created a state of public opinion the fruits of which we now see. Patriotic organizations, such as the Sons of the Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution, the active organizations of "Daughters" and the Society of the War of 1812 co-operated with enthusiasm, and both through their general and local officers did a great deal to develop public opinion.

No other candidate for acceptance as the national anthem had this systematic and vigorous backing, and no other writer of an American patriotic song has had so many honors paid to him as Key, for whom Congress has erected an imposing sculptured memorial in Fort McHenry and whose lineaments are preserved in public statuary as far from the scene of his labors as San Francisco. The incidence of war so soon after the propaganda caused it to have a maximum effect.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" was composed by one of the best of the American types. Key was a poet, scholar,

O say can you see, ~~through~~ by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare the bomb bursting in air,
gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O say does that Star-spangled Banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free & 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 beams,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream,
'Tis the Star-spangled Banner — O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave!

And when is that band who so vauntingly swore,
That the havoc of war & the battle's confusion
A home & a Country should leave us no more?
— ~~Their blood~~
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution
No refuge could save the hireling & 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 & the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
Between their lov'd home & the war's desolation,
Blest with vict'ry & peace may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the power that hath made & 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 & the home of the brave.

FACSIMILE (EXACT SIZE) OF KEY'S MANUSCRIPT. Photographed from the Original, Which Is in the Possession of Henry Walters of Baltimore. Attached to the Verses, but Not Shown Here Because the Lines Are Too Faint to Reproduce, Is a Note from Key's Niece Attesting the Genuineness of the Manuscript.

lawyer, public official, and churchman, a member of a distinguished family on whom the researches of posterity have cast no blemish. He wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner" in a burst of inspiration—"a conflagration of the senses," as James Ryder Randall described his own state of mind when he leaped from bed and composed "Maryland, My Maryland." It was written in a moment of acute national stress and expressed the characteristic feelings of the country—not desiring to provoke war, but rising with determination to take arms in defense of the national honor when a crisis required it. In literary form, it is far superior to most patriotic songs, and even without the music would find wide popularity on its merits as a poetical composition.

It struck the popular fancy at first, and has held it in large measure ever since. Key had the words printed in handbill form in the office of The Baltimore American, and distributed on the streets of the delivered city in September, 1814, before the fleet which had been beaten off from Fort McHenry had got out of the Chesapeake. It was sung on the stage of the famous Holliday Street

Theatre in Baltimore and taken up with intense eagerness by the people there and throughout the nation—being heard in distant New Orleans and Boston in a space of time incredibly short in the days before the railroad and the telegraph.

Unfortunately—though it does not affect the main point—few incidents in our national history have been beclouded by so much misconception of fact as the origin of "The Star-Spangled Banner." In view of the increased popular acceptance of the song and the accentuated interest in its history, this may be expected to vanish, though it has persisted so long.

The most common error, which has had an unfortunate habit of creeping into print, is that Key composed the words while he was a prisoner of war on the fleet which attacked Fort McHenry. Key was not a prisoner of war, but had gone to the fleet on the cartel ship Minden, used by the American Government in negotiating exchanges of prisoners, for the purpose of obtaining the release of a civilian, Dr. William Beanes of Upper Marlborough, Maryland, who was being detained because he had caused the arrest of British marauders.

As Key reached the fleet, when the attack on Baltimore was about to begin, he was kept behind the British lines until it was over in order that he might not convey information of the impending movement. He was treated with the utmost consideration and was promptly released when the attack ended. When he was rowed ashore on the morning after the bombardment ceased, the Admiral did not know that, a few hours before, he had scribbled on the back of an old letter which he happened to have in his pocket the draft of the song which has become so famous since. The original manuscript is now in the possession of Henry Walters, owner of the Walters Art Gallery, and directing spirit of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, who treasures it as one of his most valued possessions.

The flag whose "broad stripes and bright stars" burst upon Key's enraptured vision on that September morning in 1814 has also been carefully preserved. It passed into the hands of heirs of the family of Colonel George Armistead, commander of the fort during the bombardment, and was finally placed in the National Museum at Washington.