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

Once were the days of bright stars through the distant night. 
And the rochet's red glare, the bombshell's bursting, 
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 and the home of the brave!

O where is that land so dear, so dear? 
That the brave are free, and the trial's done? 
Can it be that we shall never see 
Our loved home in freedom again?

There's a 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 mails and the telegraph.

Unfortunately—but it does not affect the main point—few incidents in our national history have been bewildered 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 such an influence on the meaning of the present national anthem, is that Key composed the words while he was a prisoner of war on the island after the battle of 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 Barnes of Upper Marlborough, Maryland, who was being held because he had caused the arrest of British marauders.

At 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 engagement. Key treated with the utmost consideration and was promptly released when the attack ended. When he was shaved 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 a draft of the song which has become so famous since. The original manuscript is now in possession of Henry Walters of Baltimore, Mount Royal Art Gallery, and is the sort of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, who possesses it as one of his most valued possessions.

The flag whose “breed stripes” and bright stars are burnt upon Key’s enigmatic 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.