

LESSON EIGHT

The Star-Spangled Banner

Date: July 30, 2022

Themes: Determination, bravery, unwavering commitment to freedom, sacrifice

Cornerstone Values: Patriotism, pride, tradition

What is your favorite part of going to a big sports game or match? Is it cheering on your favorite team, the half-time show performance, or getting some yummy game-time snacks? We all have our own favorite memories, but there's one common experience that we have all shared.

Before every game, the crowd is asked to stand, remove their hats, and sing the national anthem.

America's national anthem is called "The Star-Spangled Banner" and it was written more than 200 years ago! Do you remember the words? It goes like this:

*O say can you see, 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 bombs 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 and the home of the brave?*

You may know the words by heart, but it's just as important to know what they mean. So let's look at when "The Star-Spangled Banner" was written and how it has since become a central part of American history, pride, and identity.

After winning a decisive victory against the British during the Revolutionary War, America faced what's been called its "second war of independence" against its former rival. On June 18, 1812, the United States officially declared war against again on Britain.

The War of 1812 was fueled by trade disputes with Great Britain (who was currently fighting a war against France), British attempts to prevent Americans from expanding into western lands, and the Royal Navy's practice of impressment (taking seamen from U.S. merchant ships and forcing them to serve in the British navy).

Two years after the war began, France had been defeated, so Great Britain focused its efforts on defeating the United States. On August 24, 1814, British forces captured and burned Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, and set the White House and the Capitol building ablaze.¹

Weeks later, the British forces launched a land and sea attack against Baltimore beginning on September 12, 1814. Baltimore was the third-largest city in America at the time and the location of one of the nation's most important seaports.²

Because the initial land advances of the British army had been held off by American forces, a naval advance was the British military's ticket to breaking through the city's defenses and capturing Baltimore. All that stood in the Royal Navy's way — which was the most sophisticated navy in the world—and just two miles south of the city's center, was Fort McHenry and its 1,000 American troops.³

By the morning of September 13, 1814, 17 British ships had advanced toward Fort McHenry and were just a few miles offshore. Just before 6:30 am, the first bomb was fired and within three hours, one bomb or rocket would explode near the fort every 45 seconds.⁴

During the bombardment of Fort McHenry, Francis Scott Key, an American lawyer, was on his ship (which was tied up to a British ship) in the bay, watching the battle take place. He had previously gone out to negotiate a prisoner's release with the British, but after learning of the plan to attack Fort McHenry, was not allowed to return to shore until after the battle was over.⁵

Francis Scott Key watched throughout the night and into the early morning as American troops bravely defended Fort McHenry from the Royal Navy for 25 grueling hours. The British were met with a determined American resistance, and on September 14, 1814, after failing to take Fort McHenry and proceed on to Baltimore as planned, the navy ceased fire at 7:30 am and prepared to retreat.⁶

As day dawned, Francis Scott Key could still see the American flag flying above Fort McHenry. If the flag had been removed or replaced with a British flag, that would have meant the fort had been captured.⁷ The sight of the American flag flying above Fort McHenry on the morning of September 14, 1814 was, for all who saw it, a symbol of enduring American patriotism, determination, sacrifice, and freedom.

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/war-of-1812/war-of-1812>

² <https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/battle-of-baltimore.htm>

³ <https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/the-bombardment-of-fort-mchenry.htm>

⁴ <https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/bombardment-of-fort-mchenry-pt-1.htm>

⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/the-negotiation-for-dr-beanes.htm>

⁶ <https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/bombardment-of-fort-mchenry-pt-2.htm>

⁷ <https://bensguide.gpo.gov/j-star-spangled>

While he was still on his ship, Francis Scott Key wrote down lyrics to the tune of a popular song at the time, which described his experience watching the attack of Fort McHenry.⁸ The lyrics (which Francis Scott Key did not title) were distributed by a local printer and then, were published in newspapers as “The Defense of Fort McHenry.” As a result, Francis Scott Key’s firsthand account of the bravery he witnessed at Fort McHenry was shared with Americans far and wide.⁹

Let’s take a second look at the first verse of Francis Scott Key’s composition.

*O say can you see, 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 bombs 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 and the home of the brave?*

Francis Scott Key describes the American flag, with its “broad stripes” and “bright stars,” that flew over Fort McHenry and the American defenses. But as night fell, it wasn’t always clear that the American flag was still flying. Yet, from the glow of the “rocket’s red glare” and the “bombs bursting in air” as the Royal Navy bombarded the fort, Francis Scott Key could see the American flag still waving.

As the day dawned the next morning and the fighting stopped, the questions for Francis Scott Key, who was watching offshore, were “Why has the fighting stopped?,” “Where are the British ships preparing to go ?” and “Did America stop the British from seizing Fort McHenry and capturing Baltimore?”

The only way he could tell was if the American flag was still flying high in the sky.

Take note of the punctuation. Francis Scott Key is asking a question: “Can you see the American flag?” If the American flag, covered in stars and stripes, was flying, America was still the land of the free— a fact that remains as true today as it was more than 200 years ago. Key also pointed out that not only is America the “land of the free,” but it is also the “home of the brave.”

Freedom requires bravery. Had it not been for the men and women who have served in our military, law enforcement, and as first responders — including those who defended Fort McHenry in 1814 — America would not be the strong, free, and prosperous country that it is today.

⁸ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-story-behind-the-star-spangled-banner-149220970/>

⁹ <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-star-spangled-banner>

By November 1814, Francis Scott Key's lyrics were printed on sheet music by a Baltimore music store and given the title, "The Star-Spangled Banner" – the name we know today.¹⁰

Over time, the song increased in popularity, and was used for ceremonial purposes by the U.S. military by the 1890s.¹¹ It wasn't until 1931, however, Congress made "The Star-Spangled Banner" the official national anthem of the United States.

Although America is not a perfect country, "The Star-Spangled Banner" serves as a reminder that regardless of the challenges our nation faces, we will always find a way to persevere. The American flag will continue to fly and represent the determination, bravery, and sacrifice of Americans since the founding of our nation. So next time you are at an event, whether it is a celebration or sports game, take a moment to think about the significance of the national anthem and what it means to you personally as an American.

Supplementary Discussion: Race and the American Flag

Today, we most commonly hear the national anthem sung before sporting events. This tradition was born in the 1918 World Series, when the Chicago Cubs faced off against the Boston Red Sox. During the 7th inning stretch, the energy in the crowd was low and the home team (the Cubs) were playing badly. World War I was also in full swing, weighing in the back of the minds of those who were watching and playing. The band started playing, "The Star-Spangled Banner," and it brought the stadium to life. Some players even reportedly marched along to the song in a military fashion. The song was played at the next games in the series. By the late 1930s, it was commonly played at baseball, hockey, and football games!¹²

However, you may have noticed that during some of the games today, athletes will take a knee instead of stand. Demonstrators do this because they think that the American flag and the national anthem are symbols of the unfair treatment of Blacks in America.

However, this view ignores the meaning of the flag, and the significant role "The Star-Spangled Banner" has played throughout history.

As a song honoring the American flag and the unity and sacrifice it represents, "The Star-Spangled Banner" was often played by bands and became an anthem for Union troops during the Civil War.¹³ We'll learn this later, but the Union army was fighting to eliminate slavery in America and preserve the unity of the country. The American flag and "The Star-Spangled Banner" were important representations of a unified, free country.

¹⁰ <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-star-spangled-banner>

¹¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/the-star-spangled-banner>

¹² <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/06/644991357/how-sports-met-the-star-spangled-banner>

¹³ <https://www.nps.gov/stsp/learn/historyculture/national-symbols-stories-icons.htm>

In fact, the first time “The Star-Spangled Banner” was recorded to have been played at a sporting event was during the Civil War, at the dedication game of a new baseball field in Brooklyn, New York in 1862.¹⁴ New York is a northern U.S. state that was part of the Union. (Almost 100 years later, Jackie Robinson, the first black player in the MLB, would begin playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. It was a pivotal moment in the desegregation of American sports that blazed the trail for the future of Black athletes in professional sports.¹⁵)

A refusal to stand for the national anthem and the American flag is an outward sign of disrespect for the men and women who have fought for and defended our freedom throughout history, including those who did so on the sports field. The flag flies for each of them. A refusal to honor the American flag is a dismissal and disregard for the freedom, values, and pride we share and cherish as a unified nation.

¹⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/06/644991357/how-sports-met-the-star-spangled-banner>

¹⁵ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jackie-robinson>