

History

Many people know that Francis Scott Key wrote the words for the Star Spangled Banner, but we are going to dig deeper into what was going on in the world at the time Key wrote these words. In Europe, Britain (England) was fighting a war with France and had been for twelve years. Napoleon was in power in France at this time. Because of the war, Britain did not have ships trading with France and the United States decided to pick up the slack and was doing quite well. Our trading with France angered Britain so they set up a blockade to stop the United States from trading with France insisting all ships (mostly American) had to stop first at Britain to be inspected. Napoleon wanted nothing that had anything to do with Britain, and this included any cargo that had even stopped in British ports.

So the Americans retaliated with embargos stopping the trade of British goods. In 1807, President Jefferson closed all American ports which prevented foreign ships from trading with us, but Embargo Act of 1807 also blocked American ships from leaving the ports. Well, guess what? Now Britain was mad at the United States because we found a way around their embargo. So what happened next? Well, American President Thomas Jefferson closed all American ports. He wanted to force France and Britain to let the American ships through and get rid of the rules they had each imposed. This was in 1812.



Well, it didn't work quite the way President Jefferson had hoped, in fact, it actually made things worse! American tobacco, wheat and lumber started to pile up in a warehouse because trading had been blocked. Instead of removing the offensive rules for inspection, Britain actually started to board American ships to capture British sailors who were working for the American sailors and at the same time took some Americans to make them fight for the British! Can you believe it?! Guess what? Now America was mad as well because Britain had already taken 2,273 Americans, and the United States declared war on Britain! This was in July of 1812. The war had started.

So, British troops sailed to America for war. Britain attacked Detroit and took it over, and the battle was on. After Napoleon had abdicated his position in France, Britain sent more troops to America and took over Chesapeake Bay; they even attacked Washington D.C. and burned down the Capital Building, the President's house and other government buildings! The fire didn't spread too much because of a rain storm. Then the British headed to Baltimore.

The Story Continues

The Americans expected this and Baltimore was ready. Fort McHenry had put a bunch – 24 to be exact – of old ships' hulls in the water and sank them before the British Navy arrived which blocked them from entering the harbor. The British lobbed between 1,500 and 1,800 shells (some of these actually weighed over 200 pounds) at the Fort, but it survived, and the American flag was still there. (It is usually common for a conquering country to raise their standard, or flag, claiming ownership.)



When the British left Washington, D.C, they arrested someone named Dr. Beane because he had three British stragglers arrested. Britain felt Beane stuck his nose where he shouldn't have... actually they felt Dr. Beane, as a civilian, had intervened in the war. In the meantime, American and Britain signed a peace treaty called "The Treaty of Ghent" effectively ending the war on December 24, 1814. Unfortunately, no one really knew the war was technically over before the big battle at Fort McHenry! They didn't have cell phones or internet in those days!

Let's keep going... On September 4th, 1815, Francis Scott Key, a lawyer and a friend of Dr. Beane, rode by horseback all the way from Washington to Baltimore to try and get him released from the British. Some say Key boarded a schooner with Col. Skinner – but somehow he got to Boston! Francis Scott Key and John Skinner, a specialist in prisoner exchanges, used a small ship and located the British fleet. While they were able to board and convince the British Admiral holding Dr. Beane, the Admiral refused to let the three men leave. The problem was that Col. Skinner and Mr. Key had seen and heard everything the British had planned for the attack on Fort McHenry. The Admiral returned them to their own vessel but kept them under guard. So it was from this small vessel, in the Patapsco River that Francis Scott Key watched the attack on Fort McHenry – for twenty five hours; from dawn on September 25th, through the day and into the evening.

Our flag was still raised at dusk, but the British had planned a major attack to occur that night. Shells bombarded the fort for hours when suddenly there was a shot and unexpected dark silence followed by a deafening cannonade that continued through the night. Assuming this was the final devastating attack on the fort; Key stood by the railing of the ship and only simply watched. There was nothing he could do. He was still watching when the sun



rose early on September 26. He could see a flag but could not determine if it was British or American. Watching quietly, he noticed a slight breeze slowly unfurling the flag as it hung limply on the pole high above the battered fort. Then he saw it! It was the Stars and Stripes, the red, white and blue of the United States Flag! The fort had survived; they had won the battle!

Francis Scott Key was overwhelmed and greatly moved by the sight of the Stars and Stripes and what the flag signified. He found an envelope in his pocket and began writing down what he saw and felt when looking at the ragged and torn flag of the United States.

