

The Star Spangled Banner & the 15 Star Flag

The Star Spangled Banner:

This Flag became the Official United States Flag on May 1st, 1795. Two stars were added for the admission of [Vermont](#) (the 14th State on March 4th, 1791) and [Kentucky](#) (the 15th State on June 1st, 1792), and was to last for 23 years. The five Presidents who served under this flag were; [George Washington \(1789-1797\)](#), [John Adams \(1797-1801\)](#), [Thomas Jefferson \(1801-1809\)](#), [James Madison \(1809-1817\)](#), and [James Monroe \(1817-1825\)](#).

The 15-star, 15-stripe flag was authorized by the Flag Act of January 13, 1794, adding 2 stripes and 2 Stars. The regulation went into effect on May 1, 1795. This flag was the only U.S. Flag to have more than 13 stripes. It was immortalized by [Francis Scott Key](#) during the bombardment of Fort McHenry, Sept 13, 1814. The image above is representative of the actual flag that flew over Fort McHenry on that day and which is now preserved in the Smithsonian Museum. You can notice the "tilt" in some of the stars just as in the [original Star Spangled Banner](#).

Where the original Star Spangled Banner went...

1814 The battle occurred, and the flag won its glory. Armistead was promoted to Lt. Colonel by Madison. Armistead died in service on April 25, 1818. He acquired the flag sometime before that date, but at this point it is unknown how.

1818 Armistead died and "legend" says that the flag was used in his funeral. However, in all of the newspaper accounts of Armistead's funeral, there is no mention of the flag being displayed at

it. At his death the flag passed to his widow, Louisa Armistead.

1824 The flag was used in a reception for General Lafayette.

1861 Louisa Armistead died on October 3, 1861, and in her will left the flag to her daughter, Georgiana Armistead Appleton. The flag was sent to England for safe keeping during the Civil War, according to one of the Armistead family members, who made this statement in a newspaper interview in the 1880's. But Georgiana said, in a letter to Admiral George Preble, that the flag was in her possession during the rebellion.

June 24, 1873

The flag was displayed in the Charleston Naval Yards. Canvas backing was sewn on the flag and one of the first photographs was taken of it.

1876 The flag was loaned to the Navy Department for the Centennial Celebration.

1879 Georgiana Armistead Appleton died in 1879 and left the flag to her son Eben Appleton.

1907 Eben Appleton loaned the flag to the Smithsonian.

1912 Eben Appleton converts the loan of the flag to a gift to the Smithsonian.

1914 Amelia Fowler was commissioned to remove the canvas backing sewn on the flag when it was photographed in 1873 and replace it with the present linen backing.

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The 1818 Flag:

Realizing that the addition of a new star and new stripe for each new State was impractical, Congress passed the Flag Act of 1818 which returned the flag design to 13 stripes and specified 20 stars for the 20 states.

This Flag became the Official United States Flag on April 13th, 1818. Five stars were added for the admission of [Tennessee](#) (the 16th State on June 1st, 1796), [Ohio](#) (the 17th State on March 1st, 1803), [Louisiana](#) (the 18th State on April 30th, 1812), [Indiana](#) (the 19th State on December 11th, 1816), and [Mississippi](#) (the 20th State on December 10, 1817), and was to last for just one year. The only President to serve under this flag was [James Monroe \(1817-1825\)](#).

Evolution of the United States Flag

No one knows with absolute certainty who designed the first stars and stripes or who made it. Congressman [Francis Hopkinson](#) seems most likely to have designed it, and few historians believe that [Betsy Ross](#), a Philadelphia seamstress, made the first one.

Until the Executive Order of June 24, 1912, neither the order of the stars nor the proportions of the flag was prescribed. Consequently, flags dating before this period sometimes show unusual arrangements of the stars and odd proportions, these features being left to the discretion of the flag maker. In general, however, straight rows of stars and proportions similar to those later adopted officially were used. The principal acts affecting the flag of the United States are the following:

On June 14, 1777, in order to establish an official flag for the new nation, the Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act: "Resolved, That the flag of the

United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation."

Act of January 13, 1794 - provided for 15 stripes and 15 stars after May 1795.

Act of April 4, 1818 - provided for 13 stripes and one star for each state, to be added to the flag on the 4th of July following the admission of each new state, signed by President Monroe.

Executive Order of President Taft dated June 24, 1912 - established proportions of the flag and provided for arrangement of the stars in six horizontal rows of eight each, a single point of each star to be upward.

Executive Order of President Eisenhower dated January 3, 1959 - provided for the arrangement of the stars in seven rows of seven stars each, staggered horizontally and vertically.

Executive Order of President Eisenhower dated August 21, 1959 - provided for the arrangement of the stars in nine rows of stars staggered horizontally and eleven rows of stars staggered vertically.

Francis Scott Key, 1780-1843

Francis Scott Key was a respected young lawyer living in Georgetown just west of where the modern day Key Bridge crosses the Potomac River (the house was torn down after years of neglect in 1947). He made his home there from 1804 to around 1833 with his wife Mary and their six sons and five daughters. At the time, Georgetown was a thriving town of 5,000 people just a few miles from the Capitol, the White House, and the Federal buildings of Washington. But, after war broke out in 1812 over Britain's attempts to regulate American shipping and other activities while Britain was at war with France, all was not tranquil in Georgetown. The British had

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entered Chesapeake Bay on August 19th, 1814, and by the evening of the 24th of August, the British had invaded and captured Washington. They set fire to the Capitol and the White House, the flames visible 40 miles away in Baltimore. President James Madison, his wife Dolley, and his Cabinet had already fled to a safer location. Such was their haste to leave that they had had to rip the Stuart portrait of George Washington from the walls without its frame!

A thunderstorm at dawn kept the fires from spreading. The next day more buildings were burned and again a thunderstorm dampened the fires. Having done their work the British troops returned to their ships in and around the Chesapeake Bay.

In the days following the attack on Washington, the American forces prepared for the assault on Baltimore (population 40,000) that they knew would come by both land and sea. Word soon reached Francis Scott Key that the British had carried off an elderly and much loved town physician of Upper Marlboro, Dr. William Beanes, and was being held on the British flagship TONNANT. The townsfolk feared that Dr. Beanes would be hanged. They asked Francis Scott Key for his help, and he agreed, and arranged to have Col. John Skinner, an American agent for prisoner exchange to accompany him.

On the morning of September 3rd, he and Col. Skinner set sail from Baltimore aboard a sloop flying a flag of truce approved by President Madison. On the 7th they found and boarded the TONNANT to confer with Gen. Ross and Adm. Alexander Cochrane. At first they refused to release Dr. Beanes. But Key and Skinner produced a pouch of letters written by wounded British prisoners praising the care they were receiving

from the Americans, among them Dr. Beanes. The British officers relented but would not release the three Americans immediately because they had seen and heard too much of the preparations for the attack on Baltimore. They were placed under guard, first aboard the H.M.S. Surprise, then onto the sloop and forced to wait out the battle behind the British fleet.

Now let's go back to the summer of 1813 for a moment. At the star-shaped Fort McHenry, the commander, Maj. George Armistead, asked for a flag so big that "the British would have no trouble seeing it from a distance". Two officers, a Commodore and a General, were sent to the Baltimore home of Mary Young Pickersgill, a "maker of colours," and commissioned the flag. Mary and her thirteen year old daughter Caroline, working in an upstairs front bedroom, used 400 yards of best quality wool bunting. They cut 15 stars that measured two feet from point to point. Eight red and seven white stripes, each two feet wide, were cut. Laying out the material on the malthouse floor of Claggett's Brewery, a neighborhood establishment, the flag was sewn together. By August it was finished. It measured 30 by 42 feet and cost \$405.90. The Baltimore Flag House, a museum, now occupies her premises, which were restored in 1953.

At 7 a.m. on the morning of September 13, 1814, the British bombardment began, and the flag was ready to meet the enemy. The bombardment continued for 25 hours, the British firing 1,500 bombshells that weighed as much as 220 pounds and carried lighted fuses that would supposedly cause it to explode when it reached its target. But they weren't very dependable and often blew up in mid air. From special small boats the British fired the new Congreve

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rockets that traced wobbly arcs of red flame across the sky. The Americans had sunk 22 vessels so a close approach by the British was not possible. That evening the cannonading stopped, but at about 1 a.m. on the 14th, the British fleet roared to life, lighting the rainy night sky with grotesque fireworks.

Key, Col. Skinner, and Dr. Beanes watched the battle with apprehension. They knew that as long as the shelling continued, Fort McHenry had not surrendered. But, long before daylight there came a sudden and mysterious silence. What the three Americans did not know was that the British land assault on Baltimore as well as the naval attack, had been abandoned. Judging Baltimore as being too costly a prize, the British officers ordered a retreat.

Waiting in the predawn darkness, Key waited for the sight that would end his anxiety; the joyous sight of Gen. Armistead's great flag blowing in the breeze. When at last daylight came, the flag was still there!

Being an amateur poet and having been so uniquely inspired, Key began to write on the back of a letter he had in his pocket. Sailing back to Baltimore he composed more lines and in his lodgings at the Indian Queen Hotel he finished the poem. Judge J. H. Nicholson, his brother-in-law, took it to a printer and copies were circulated around Baltimore under the title "Defence of Fort M'Henry". Two of these copies survive. It was printed in a newspaper for the first time in the Baltimore Patriot on September 20th, 1814, then in papers as far away as Georgia and New Hampshire. To the verses was added a note "Tune: Anacreon in Heaven." In October a Baltimore actor sang Key's new song in a public performance and called it "The Star-Spangled Banner".

Immediately popular, it remained just one of several patriotic airs until it was finally adopted as our national anthem on March 3, 1931. But the actual words were not included in the legal documents. Key himself had written several versions with slight variations so discrepancies in the exact wording still occur.

The flag, our beloved Star-Spangled Banner, went on view, for the first time after flying over Fort McHenry, on January 1st, 1876 at the Old State House in Philadelphia for the nation's Centennial celebration. It now resides in the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History. An opaque curtain shields the now fragile flag from light and dust. The flag is exposed for viewing for a few moments once every hour during museum hours.

Francis Scott Key was a witness to the last enemy fire to fall on Fort McHenry. The Fort was designed by a Frenchman named Jean Foncin and was named for then Secretary of war James McHenry. Fort McHenry holds the unique designation of national monument and historic shrine.

Since May 30th, 1949 the flag has flown continuously, by a Joint Resolution of Congress, over the monument marking the site of Francis Scott Key's birthplace, Terra Rubra Farm, Carroll County, Keymar, Maryland.

The copy that Key wrote in his hotel September 14, 1814, remained in the Nicholson family for 93 years. In 1907 it was sold to Henry Walters of Baltimore. In 1934 it was bought at auction in New York from the Walters estate by the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore for \$26,400. The Walters Gallery in 1953 sold the manuscript to the Maryland Historical Society for the same price. Another copy that Key made is in the Library of Congress.