

The Star-Spangled Banner: America'S Best-Known Preindustrial Textile

By Jamie Eves • September 15, 2020

Hands down, the best-known preindustrial textile (defined as an article made of woven, knitted, or felted cloth) that was produced in the United States and is still in existence is the Star-Spangled Banner, the famous flag that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812, and which was immortalized in song by Francis Scott Key. More than 12 million people have viewed the Star-Spangled Banner in its display case at the Smithsonian Institution, with its 15 broad stripes and 15 bright stars, and millions more have intoned its praises while singing the American national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

The Star-Spangled Banner is a preindustrial textile, which is to say that its cloth and thread was all made by hand. It was sewn in the summer of 1813 by Mary Young Pickersgill, a professional flagmaker who lived in Baltimore, Maryland. She was hired by Major George Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry, a large, granite, star-shaped bastion that guarded the entrance to Baltimore harbor. Charged with defending the city against a possible attack from the sea, Armistead was expecting trouble. Just the year before, the United States had declared war on Great Britain, and the War of 1812 was underway. Baltimore was a likely target because it was the home port of many of the American privateers that supplemented the United States’ undersized Navy – privately owned ships carrying official letters of marque issued by the American government that empowered them to engage in combat and seize British ships as prizes of war. Therefore, in July, Armistead hired Pickersgill, a 29-year-old widow, to make two flags. One was to be a giant, 30 feet by 42 feet, capable of easily being seen by ships approaching Baltimore harbor from Chesapeake Bay. Such huge flags, flown from tall poles, were not unusual. In an age before lighthouses, they served during daylight as guideposts to ships at sea seeking harbors. Armistead also ordered a second, smaller flag, 17 feet by 25 feet. The second flag was a “storm flag,” to be flown during storms, to preserve the larger, more expensive flag from being damaged. Armistead boasted that, if the British intended to attack Baltimore, he wanted them to be able to find it. He authorized that Pickersgill be paid \$405.90 for the large flag – the Star-Spangled Banner – and \$168.54 for the storm flag.

Pickersgill was an experienced flagmaker. Born in Philadelphia, she had come to Baltimore with her mother, Rebecca Young, who also made flags. Baltimore had grown rapidly in the early years of the new 19th century, quickly becoming the metropolitan center of the Chesapeake Bay region. (Washington and Annapolis remained little more than small towns.) The growth of Baltimore-based shipping meant a ready market for flagmakers, as all ships, commercial or military, flew their national flags. But the flag for Fort McHenry was Pickersgill's masterpiece. Assisted by her daughter, three nieces, a 13-year-old indentured servant, and possibly her mother, Pickersgill began the flag at home, but soon realized that she would need more space. She finished the job at Claggett's brewery across the street. Today, Pickersgill's two-story brick house at 844 East Pratt Street is a national landmark and museum, operated by the National Park Service. Most of the big flag was made of wool. The five-pointed stars, two feet in diameter, were made of cotton, then an expensive fiber. On August 19, both flags were delivered to Fort McHenry.



Pickersgill House in Baltimore. Image (c) National Park Service.

The next year, 1814, the British attacked Fort McHenry. In retaliation for American forces having burned Toronto earlier in the war, British troops sacked and burned Washington, D.C., and raided nearby Alexandria, Virginia. Then they came for Baltimore, intending to scuttle the privateers riding at anchor in the harbor and destroy the city's docks. To reach the harbor, the British fleet needed to sail through a narrows, past the guns of Fort McHenry. On September 3, lawyer Francis Scott Key and his friend John Stuart Skinner boarded the *HMS Minden* under a flag of truce. They had been sent by President James Madison, who had narrowly escaped the fighting at Washington, to attempt an exchange of prisoners, especially Key's friend, the elderly Dr. William Beanes. At Washington, Beanes had treated wounded American and British soldiers, and then turned some of his British patients over to American authorities, for which the British had arrested him. The *Minden* brought Key and Skinner to the *HMS Tonnant*, the British flagship, where they met with British commanders Major General Robert Ross and Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane. Over dinner, Ross and Cochrane agreed to release Beanes, especially when Key produced letters from British soldiers praising him for caring for their wounds. But Key and Skinner also overheard Ross and Cochrane planning the bombardment of Fort McHenry, and so they would not be released themselves until after the battle. Key and Skinner witnessed the fight aboard the *HMS Surprise* and later the *Minden*.

The Battle of Baltimore took place on September 14, 1814, a rainy night. Anticipating the bombardment, Major Armistead had hauled down the big American flag and replaced it with the smaller storm flag. Ross and Cochrane utilized a new technology, launching rockets and bombs at the Fort, allowing the British warships generally to keep out of the range of the American cannons. Armistead, fearing a siege assault, had reinforced the Fort with local militia, consisting of freemen both white and Black. The bombardment lasted much of the night. Key and Skinner watched anxiously, looking for the storm flag flying over the fort whenever a rocket's red glare or a bomb bursting in air lit up the night sky. For the most part, the two sides did little damage to each other: the rockets and bombs, launched largely from the *HMS Terror* and *HMS Meteor*, were difficult to aim, and the two sides were mostly beyond cannon range. Some British gunboats slipped past the Fort in the dark and approached the smaller Fort Covington, the Americans' last line of defense, but were repulsed. A few of the British bombs did hit Fort McHenry, and some Americans were killed, but not many. The bombardment ceased before dawn, at which point the British fleet withdrew and Armistead raised the big flag again in triumph, where everyone around could see it and know the Fort had held. At dawn's early light, Key and Skinner watched anxiously for their first daylight glimpse of the Fort. Had it held, or had it been captured? The sight of the big Star-Spangled Banner waving above the Fort let them know that the bombardment had failed, and Baltimore was safe.



A View of the Bombardment of Fort M'Henry. Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3661221> .

Key scratched out the lines of a poem, “Defense of Fort M’Henry,” on a piece of scrap paper. He based it on an earlier poem he had written, “When the Warrior Returns,” an ode to Stephen Decatur and the First Barbary War. Like many Americans, Key was familiar with the popular song, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” and wrote both poems so that they could be sung to the same tune. “Anacreon in Heaven” had been written by the British writer John Stafford Smith a few years earlier for the Anacreontic Society, and it was quite popular despite being difficult to sing, with a range of 19 semitones. Key’s poem contained four stanzas. It was published in *The Analectic Magazine* and quickly became popular. The U. S. Navy adopted the song version, now called “The Star-Spangled Banner,” for official use in 1889. President Woodrow Wilson ordered its expanded use in 1916, just before the United States entered World War I. Congress adopted it as the official United States national anthem in 1931. It won out over “Hail, Columbia,” “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” (to the tune of “God Save the King”), and “America the Beautiful.”

O say can you see ~~the~~ by the dawn's early light
 what so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
 whose broad stripes & 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 beam,
 In full glory reflected now shines on 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 where 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 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. —

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Handwritten first draft of "Defense of Fort M'Henry," by Francis Scott Key.
 National Star-Spangled Banner Centennial, Baltimore, Maryland,
 September 6 to 13, 1914 (1914). Baltimore: National Star-Spangled Banner
 Centennial Commission. p. 64. Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3807435>

“The Star-Spangled Banner” remains a controversial anthem. The third stanza is either racist or anti-British, depending on who is doing the interpreting: it contains language about “the hireling and the slave,” which might be a reference to enslaved African Americans, liberated by the British, who fought as British troops in the War of 1812, or to the large number of hired mercenaries in the British armed forces, or to the fact that many Americans, immersed in 18th-century Enlightenment political theory, viewed monarchy as a kind of political slavery. Starting with World War I, American military bands were asked not to perform the controversial third stanza, as it might offend the British, who were now American allies. Some people today object to a war song serving as a national anthem, although the United States is not the only country with such an anthem. Today, few Americans know more than the first stanza, and the controversial third stanza is never sung. There is also a later fifth stanza, added in 1861 by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., which interprets the just commenced Civil War. All five stanzas are reproduced below.



The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Good Old Songs We Used to Sing, '61 to '65, by Osbourne H. Oldroyd, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/21566>. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3293355>

Following the Battle of Baltimore, Major Armistead kept the big flag. (The smaller storm flag has disappeared.) Armistead remained in command of Fort McHenry until he died in 1818. In his will, he left the flag (it is unclear how he came to be its legal owner) to his wife, Louisa. Over the years, Louisa clipped pieces off the flag and gave them away as souvenirs. One of the 15 stars disappeared. One rumor was that it was buried with a soldier. Another held that it had been given to President Abraham Lincoln. When Louisa died in 1816, the flag passed to her daughter, Georgiana Armistead Appleton. In 1873 Georgiana loaned it to the historian George Preble, who kept it at the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Not very professionally, Preble continued the practice of clipping off portions of the flag and giving them away as mementos. When Georgiana died, the flag passed to her son, Eben Appleton. Eben exhibited it in 1880 in Baltimore, and then placed it in a safe-deposit vault in New York City. He loaned it to the Smithsonian Institution in 1907, and then transferred ownership to the Smithsonian in 1912.

The Smithsonian, predictably, took better care of it. In 1914, it hired Amelia Fowler, an embroidery teacher and well-known flag preserver to restore the flag. Fowler removed an old canvas backing sewn to one side of the flag and replaced it with a linen backing, to stabilize the well-worn textile. Assisted by ten seamstresses, Fowler restored as much of the flag as she could. The task took eight weeks and cost \$1,243. In more recent years, the Star-Spangled Banner has undergone a more thorough and painstaking restoration – all done in public view at the Smithsonian. The threads were cleaned. Some stitches were replaced. The linen backing was removed. The flag is considered one of the Smithsonian's greatest treasures. It remains America's best-known textile.



Restored Star Spangled Banner, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution Archives. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19974709>

The four original stanzas, by Francis Scott Key:

*O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, 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?*

*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 beam,
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 and the home of the brave.*

*And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country, should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and 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 and the home of the brave.*

*O thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation.
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the Heav'n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and 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 and the home of the brave!*

Fifth Civil War stanza, by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

*When our land is illumined with Liberty's smile,
If a foe from within strike a blow at her glory,
Down, down with the traitor that dares to defile
The flag of her stars and the page of her story!
By the millions unchained, who our birthright have gained,
We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained!
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
While the land of the free is the home of the brave.*