



AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

All Four Verses + The Story Behind the Song

Katharine Lee Bates, 1895 -- Public domain

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The Mountain That Inspired a Song

In the summer of 1893, a college professor named Katharine Lee Bates rode a wagon to the top of Pikes Peak in Colorado, 14,115 feet above sea level. The view stopped her in her tracks. She went back to her hotel room and wrote a poem that would become one of the most beloved songs in American history.

The Woman Who Wrote It

Katharine Lee Bates was an English professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. In 1893 she took a summer teaching job in Colorado Springs. Along the way she visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, whose gleaming white buildings inspired her line about "alabaster cities," and then traveled to Pikes Peak, where the landscape inspired the rest.

She published the poem on July 4, 1895 in a church publication called The Congregationalist. She revised it twice, in 1904 and again in 1913. The version we sing today comes from that final 1913 revision.

Almost the National Anthem

The poem was eventually set to music composed by church organist Samuel A. Ward. For decades, many Americans argued that "America the Beautiful" should replace "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the national anthem, because it is easier to sing and celebrates the land itself. The debate still resurfaces from time to time.

Portrait: Katharine Lee Bates, c.1880-1890. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

All Four Verses

Verse I

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!*

Verse II

*O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassion'd stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness.*

*America! America!
God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.*

Verse III

*O beautiful for heroes prov'd
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life.
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness,
And ev'ry gain divine.*

Verse IV

*O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea.*

Source: "America the Beautiful" by Katharine Lee Bates, 1895 (final revision 1913). Public domain.