



THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

Defence of Fort M'Henry -- All Four Verses

Francis Scott Key, 1814 -- Public domain

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About This Poem

Francis Scott Key wrote 'Defence of Fort M'Henry' on September 14, 1814, after watching the British bombard Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor during the War of 1812. Key was held aboard a British ship overnight after negotiating the release of an American prisoner. As the rockets lit up the night sky, he could see the American flag still flying over the fort. By dawn, when the smoke cleared and the flag still waved, Key began writing on the back of a letter. His poem was set to the tune of a British drinking song and became wildly popular. It was not officially named the national anthem until 1931, more than 100 years later. The original 30 by 42 foot flag he watched that night is now at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

Portrait: Francis Scott Key by Joseph Wood, c.1825. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

All Four Verses

Verse I

*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?*

Verse II

*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!*

Verse III

*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 wash'd 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.*

Verse IV

*O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
Between their lov'd home and the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry and peace may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the power that hath made and preserv'd 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!*

Source: 'Defence of Fort M'Henry' by Francis Scott Key, 1814. Public domain.