

# The War of 1812 & The Star-Spangled Banner

In 1802, Napoleon became emperor of France. He wanted to conquer most of Europe, and was almost successful. The British declared war on France to put a stop to Napoleon. The British had a great navy, with many warships, but they always needed sailors. Life on board ship was rough, the food was bad, and sailors could be flogged if they made a mistake. In Britain, young men were captured by press gangs who forced them to join the navy. Then the British started seizing American ships and taking sailors to serve on their own ships. This was called impressment. It was similar to kidnapping. Many Americans grew outraged over the impressment of American sailors.

Americans were angry with the British for other reasons as well. Before the American Revolutionary War, the British built forts west of the Appalachian Mountains. When the Americans won the Revolution, the British promised to hand over the forts. But by 1812, 29 years after the treaty to end the Revolution had been signed, the British still held onto their forts. They would not let settlers move west. The British also protected Native Americans who lived on lands the American settlers wanted. The Native Americans were angry that many whites wanted to seize their land.

The people who wanted to fight against Britain were called “war hawks.” Henry Clay from Kentucky and Andrew Jackson from Tennessee were two leaders of the war hawks. Other Americans did not want to go to war against the British. People who were involved in the sea trade, especially in New England, did not want to see their commerce disrupted.



In 1812, when James Madison was President, the United States declared war on Great Britain. The American forces invaded Canada, still a British colony, with high hopes of conquering British territory. Most of the fighting took place along the Great Lakes. Indian national joined the British in fighting against the Americans. The capital of Canada, York (now known as Toronto), was attacked, and the Americans burned the Parliament building.

Ultimately, the United States was able to keep the Northwest land it had claimed, but did not succeed in capturing any part of Canada.



Meanwhile, in Europe, the British defeated Napoleon in 1814. Now they were able to focus their energy against the United States. To get revenge on the United States for burning the capital of Canada, the British troops attacked Washington, D.C. First they burned the home of the U.S. Congress—the Capitol Building—and destroyed all of the books in the Library of Congress. Then they headed for the President’s house. Although President Madison wasn’t at home, his wife, Dolley Madison, was about to give a dinner party. When she heard that the

British were planning to attack, she packed as many valuables as she could (including velvet curtains, silver, and important papers) into wagon. She made sure that a portrait of George Washington was safe just before she fled. When the British arrived, they ate the dinner she had planned to enjoy with her friends. Then they set fire to the President's mansion.

After sacking Washington, D.C., the British army planned to attack Baltimore. Baltimore was a very important port, and the home of many American sailing ships that had fought with the British navy. By conquering Baltimore, the British hoped to turn the war into a victory. But Baltimore was under the command of Major General Samuel Smith, who had absolutely no intention of surrendering to the British. Amazingly enough, he convinced the ship owners in the city to sink their ships in the harbor. These sunken vessels formed an underwater wall that the huge British warships couldn't sail past.



Baltimore was lucky to have another fine leader, Major George Armistead, who commanded Fort McHenry. Fort McHenry was shaped like a star, with cannons mounted at every point. It was located on Baltimore harbor. In 1813,



a year before the British attacked, Major Armistead had hired Mary Pickersgill to sew a huge flag, 30 foot high and 42 feet wide. An expert flag maker, Mrs. Pickersgill made flags for many ships. But even she had never made such a large flag. Her workshop was not big enough for the job. So with the help of her 13-year-old daughter Caroline, she sewed the giant flag in a brewery, where there was enough space. Although there were 18 states in the United States in 1813, Mrs. Pickersgill and Caroline sewed 15 stripes and 15 stars on the flag. Each white star was two feet across! (The official American flag with 13 stripes representing the 13 colonies and one star for each state wasn't established until 1818.) Now Major Armistead had one of the biggest flags in the country.

A year later, in September 1814, the British prepared to attack Baltimore. An American lawyer named Francis Scott Key and another American, John Skinner, who was in charge of prisoner exchanges, sailed up to the British fleet in a small boat. The British had captured their friend, Dr. William Beanes. Mr. Key requested that the British free Dr. Beanes, because he was not a soldier. In fact, he helped many people— even British soldiers—when they were sick or wounded. The British agreed to release the doctor, but they required that the three Americans stay on a British ship until they had finished attacking Baltimore.

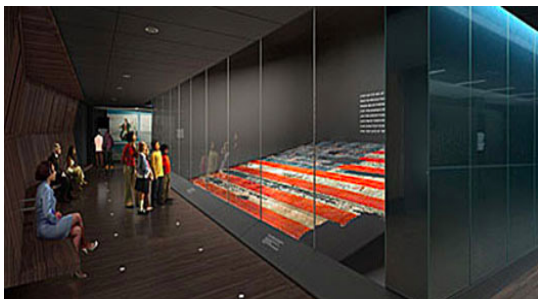
Mr. Key, Dr. Beanes, and Mr. Skinner had no choice. All they could do was watch as the British navy fired huge 200-pound bombs and rockets at Fort McHenry. Because of the

ships sunk in Baltimore harbor, the warships could not get close enough to land. But they fired upon Fort McHenry for 25 hours. It was very smoky, and darkness fell. The three Americans who were witnessing the bombing from a British ship were very scared that Baltimore would be conquered. They could not see through all the smoke and the dark night.

Finally at dawn, on September 14, 1814, Mr. Key looked through his telescope. There, in the early morning light, he saw the huge American flag waiving proudly over Fort McHenry. The Americans had won the battle! He was overcome with joy, and was inspired to write some poetry to the tune of a song he knew. In a few days, his completed poem was published, entitled "The Defense of Fort McHenry." These words, set to music, would later become the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Americans were very happy and relieved that Baltimore had defeated the British attack. But the war was not over yet. More fighting took place along the Gulf of Mexico. The more famous American victory took place in New Orleans on January 8, 1815, where General Andrew Jackson defeated the British. The Americans had already signed a treaty of peace in Ghent, Belgium, on December 24, 1814. But news of peace had not arrived in time.

In New Orleans, 6,000 trained British troops fought against Tennessee and Kentucky frontiersmen, two companies of free African-American volunteers from New Orleans, and other American soldiers. At the end of the battle, 2,000 British were killed or wounded and only 13 Americans had died. It was a huge victory for the United States, even if it happened after the peace treaty had been signed. But it was tragic that so many people died needlessly in New Orleans.



The War of 1812 established the United States as an independent nation that even the great powers in Europe had to respect. And Francis Scott Key's experience during the bombing of Fort McHenry inspired the patriotic song, "The Star-Spangled Banner". The giant flag that flew over the fort "by the dawn's early light" would become a national treasure. Today, that same flag is being preserved at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of

American History in Washington, D.C., so that it will last for generations to come.

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