

## Lesson Thirty-Four

# The Star-Spangled Banner

### LESSON IDEA

To tell the dramatic story of the Star—Spangled Banner, our national anthem, and the unique battle flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write it.

### PREPARATION

Make a copy of the fourth stanza of the Star-Spangled Banner for each family member. (See page four.) Read the discussion sections of the lesson and prepare the necessary information. Have a dictionary handy.

**W**HEN YOU HEAR the words “Star-Spangled Banner,” do you think of our national anthem — or the Stars and Stripes, our nation’s flag? [Urge each family member to answer.]

Most of us probably think of both, but actually the Star-Spangled Banner was a unique flag, designed for one specific purpose, and used for that purpose only. The enormous banner (measuring 30 feet high and 42 feet long, and weighing about 200 pounds) never flew again.

Let us think for a moment how big that would be. Does anyone know the width and length of this room? [Have the room dimensions in mind and mind and make some comparisons so that the family can fully appreciate the size of a 30-by-42 foot flag.]

Why would anyone want such a gigantic flag? Are there any flags that large today? [If any of the tall office buildings in your town flies an American flag from its tower, have a family member call the building manager to ask the flag size and thank the company for displaying it.]

Such a big flag can be seen for miles, and that is precisely why the Star-Spangled Banner was so gigantic. Her designers wanted her to be seen from a great distance.

The flag was also unique in another way. You will remember that last week, when we discussed the design of “Old Glory,” we mentioned that in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s it had 15 stripes and stars. Do you recall why? [Remind family members, if necessary, that the original intent of Congress was to add a new stripe and a new star

for each new state. This resulted in a 15-stripe flag when Vermont and Kentucky joined the Union in 1791 and 1792.]

Later, as more and more states were added, it became apparent that a new stripe could not be added for each state unless the nation wanted to fly something that resembled a bed sheet more than a patriotic banner. So “Old Glory” was returned to her original design of 13 stripes representing the original 13 colonies.

**B**UT THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER was designed in the era of a 15-stripe flag. Its design and size made one of the most extraordinary flags in American history. The year was 1814, and the young nation was once again at war with Britain. The issue was independence; this time, freedom of the seas for American ships. England was also at war with France, and the United States had been drawn into the conflict because Britain had attempted to halt the shipment of American goods to France and other countries. American ships were stopped on the high seas, searched, and stripped of cargo and, occasionally, their crews. Native-born American sailors were accused of being British deserters. Many of these unfortunate seamen were sent to Dartmoor Prison in England where conditions, at best, resembled an ill-kept barnyard. Survival was precarious.

Provoked by the aggressive violation of her shipping rights as a neutral nation, and the harsh treatment of her seamen, the United States declared war on Britain in 1812. It was a courageous act of defiance for which the nation was militarily unprepared. Fortunately, however, the English war machine had become so preoccupied with its French enemy that it was unable to retaliate with a full-scale attack on its former colonies until 1814.

When the attack came, it was at the heart of the new nation: its capital in Washington. The British fleet sailed into Chesapeake Bay in August 1814, landed troops, and, after an easy victory over the

raw American militia outside the city, captured the seat of the United States government. British troops burned the Capitol and other government buildings, including the President's home. Then, fearing that their supply lines would be cut, they retreated, returned to their ships, and headed for the seaport of Baltimore.

**B**ALTIMORE, one of the nation's largest and most important cities, braced for the fight. Under Major General Samuel Smith's direction, earthworks were placed around the city and Fort McHenry, which guarded the Baltimore harbor, was hastily reinforced. General Smith also employed a psychological gambit that may have affected the outcome more than did cannon and ammunition. He ordered an enormous battle flag — 30-by-42 feet, perhaps the largest ever flown — for Fort McHenry. Its red and white stripes were two feet wide; its stars two feet in diameter. It entailed about half-a-million stitches and was flown from a staff 97 feet high. A crew of two dozen men was required to handle it.

The magnificent banner, which could be seen by Americans for miles in all directions, was a reminder to friend and foe of the relentless spirit of independence that fueled the American cause.

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The War of 1812, sometimes called the second War for Independence, makes an interesting study for those seeking to dig deeper into the history of our national anthem. *Quest Of A Hemisphere* by Donzella Cross Boyle (pp. 220–228) [does this paging match the currently-available edition?

— rwl describes the major events of the war. The Americans suffered defeats on land, but scored victories at sea, thereby establishing the United States as a naval power to be reckoned with. The historical novels of Kenneth Roberts dealing with the War of 1812 (*The Lively Lady* and *Captain Caution*) are also recommended. They detail how the war affected the American seamen. *The Lively Lady* tells the story of England's notorious Dartmoor Prison, where American and French prisoners were forced to live in squalor and filth.

*Quest of a Hemisphere* is available in hardcover for \$18.00 (plus \$2.70 shipping and handling) from American Opinion Book Services, P.O. Box 8040, Appleton, WI 54912. The Roberts novels are available in many public libraries.

It was designed to instill courage in friends and cause foes to hesitate.

As Mary Pickersgill, a skilled flagmaker, placed the finishing touches on the Star-Spangled Banner in her little Baltimore home on Pratt Street, an incident was developing outside the smoldering American capital that would bring historic fame to Fort McHenry's gigantic banner of defiance.

Three British soldiers, stragglers from the marching army, created a disturbance at the home of Dr. William Beanes, an elderly and respected physician. Dr. Beanes caused the Redcoat rowdies to be arrested and was, in turn, seized and taken prisoner aboard a British ship.

Francis Scott Key — attorney, poet, patriot, and a close friend of Dr. Beanes — immediately asked President James Madison for permission to travel to Baltimore and seek the release of his friend. With a letter of official sanction from the President, Key met in Baltimore on September 4, 1915 with John S. Skinner, United States Agent for the Parole of Prisoners. The next day, Key and Skinner left the city in a small vessel, flying a flag of truce, to find the British fleet. Two days later they were aboard the British flagship *H.M.S. Tonnant*, where they had been courteously received by Admirals Cochrane and Cockburn.

Does everyone know the meaning of the word flagship? [If not, look it up in your dictionary.] What do the initials H.M.S. stand for when used in a ship's name? [Again, consult the dictionary if necessary.]

**T**HE BRITISH CLAIMED that Dr. Beanes, a civilian, had not only interfered in military matters, but had also broken a pledge of neutrality. Key, an experienced attorney, argued that the doctor at his advanced age might not have realized what he was doing, and that in any event he had given wounded British soldiers excellent medical care. When Key produced letters from British prisoners proving that point, Admiral Cochrane relented. But he informed Key, Skinner, and Beanes that they would be held aboard ship until the attack on Fort McHenry was over and they had suffered the humiliation of seeing the Star-Spangled Banner go down. The British plan allowed two hours for defeat of the American fort, after which "terms for Baltimore" might be nego-

tiated.

The odds in September 1814 were clearly in England's favor. Fort McHenry had only 30 small (two-pound) cannons, whose range was too limited to seriously threaten the enemy. The major defense maneuvers were blocking the harbor's entrance with the sunken hulks of 24 ships and manning outlying fortifications. The British, in sharp contrast, had 16 warships, including five bomb ships and one sloop equipped with rocket launchers. During the three days preceding the battle, as Key and his companions watched from the British ship, 9,000 British soldiers and marines went ashore at North Point to prepare for an assault on a fort that was defended by a small force of untrained militiamen.

The British opened fire at dawn on September 13th and continued their relentless attack throughout the day. When dusk crept across the horizon, the Star-Spangled Banner, flag, one of its 15 stars ripped by an enemy shell, still flew over the ramparts. The "rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" continued into the night. Noisy bursts of musketry could be heard all around the fort as American sharpshooters tangled with British troops on the ground. Occasionally, in the fiery spray of rocket explosions, Key could see the giant banner of freedom waving proudly in defiance of the two-hour time period His Majesty's commanders had set for conquest of the fort.

**W**OULD THE Star-Spangled Banner still be waving proudly over Fort McHenry by morning, or would it give way to British flag? Such thoughts must have crossed the mind of the patriot-poet-attorney as he watched British bombs racking the American fort hour after hour. When dawn came, he saw a flag hanging limply over the fort. Was it British or American? An offshore breeze slowly unfurled the red, white, and blue of the enormous banner of freedom. Key, exuberant over the victory, snatched an old letter from his pocket and on a blank space pencilled the opening lines of the song that would become our national anthem.

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 rockets' 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?

The battle of Baltimore was over. The British assault had failed and taking the city without naval support seemed too costly. The next day the British returned to their ships and sailed toward the open Atlantic. Key, Skinner, and Dr. Beanes headed for Baltimore, where Key continued work on his poem. That night in his room at the Indian Queen Hotel he finished the first draft. The next morning he showed it to Judge Nicholson, his brother-in-law, who liked it so much that he immediately had it printed under the title, "The Defense of Fort McHenry." He suggested that a well-known tune, "To Anacreon in Heaven," serve as the score.

In October, a Baltimore theatre announced in its program that a well-known actor would sing a "much admired SONG, written by a gentleman of Maryland, in commemoration of the GALLANT DEFENSE OF FORT McHENRY, called THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER."

**O**VER THE YEARS the new song became so popular that in 1904 the Navy was ordered to play it at all ceremonial occasions. In 1916 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed it as the national anthem for our armed forces. In 1931 it was officially designated our national anthem.

The Star-Spangled Banner itself was kept by the officer in command at Fort McHenry. It is said that when he wished to give a gift to a friend, he would cut a strip from the famous flag and present it with his compliments. After nearly a century, his heirs asked the Smithsonian Institution to take custody of the faded and tattered remains.

To provide for their permanent preservation, the flag's fragments were stitched onto a new backing. Today, visitors can see the huge emblem hanging vertically against the wall of a great hall

at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC Bathed in a soft light, the flag's tattered ends and faded stars and stripes speak eloquently of a long-ago battle, and the defiant American spirit that won the fight for freedom.

### **Concluding Thought**

The Star-Spangled Banner was a giant battle flag made for a particular battle. It emerged from that conflict to inspire a great patriotic song. It never flew again. In time it was forgotten, and many of its pieces lost, but Americans kept singing its song until, eventually, Francis Scott Key's stirring memorial became our national anthem.

### **Looking Ahead**

There is in New York harbor another symbol of freedom that has inspired millions of people from all over the world. Radicals have attempted to destroy it, and next week we will find out why.

#### **DURING THE WEEK**

Give each family member a copy of the fourth stanza of the Star-Spangled Banner. Urge that it be memorized during the week. Discuss the ideas expressed in the third and fourth lines during the dinner hour. Be sure that all understand the source of the "power" mentioned.

#### **THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER FOURTH STANZA**

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 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 will wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.