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Francis Scott Key Author of the National Anthem

If you're an American, you've read a poem by Francis Scott Key many times. A baseball game doesn't start until everyone stands to sing "The Star Spangled Banner," and many civic or patriotic ceremonies begin with its stirring words. But have you ever wondered about the man behind the song?

Francis Scott Key was born on August 1, 1779 to wealthy parents in Frederick County, Maryland. His father, John Ross Key, had fought in the Revolutionary War. A judge and a farmer, Mr. Key owned three thousand acres of land on the family homestead, Terra Rubra. The words *Terra Rubra* mean "red land," a name given for the red clay soil of the plantation. Francis also had a younger sister named Anne.

When Francis was 10, he was sent to Annapolis, Maryland, to go to school. He lived with his grandmother, Ann Arnold Ross Key. Because his grandmother had been blinded at a young age while rescuing two servants from her father's burning house, Francis spent many hours reading to her. In later life, he would credit the time spent with her for making him into a better public speaker.

At 14, Francis was ready to be enrolled in St. John's College in Annapolis. Here he studied grammar, poetry, Latin, Greek, algebra, navigation, and geography. Francis did not always like college and wrote once it was a "dull school." Memories of other students prove that Francis did not always find his school days unpleasant. According to his classmates, he was always ready for some mischief, such as playing tricks on teachers he didn't like. Once, he even let a cow loose on the school lawn! His classmates also remembered him as a deeply religious student and for a time, Francis thought of studying for the ministry.

When Francis graduated at the age of seventeen, he was first in his class of twelve. He changed his mind about entering the ministry on the advice of his father and his uncle, Philip Barton, and decided to study law instead. Francis began to study law in 1800. He was soon given a position to study law under Judge Roger Brooke Taney. Taney also became Francis' brother-in-law when he married Francis' sister Anne. Taney is best known for becoming Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and issuing the Dred Scott Decision. This was a controversial decision that said that the slaves did not have any rights.

In 1801, Francis opened his own law practice with Taney. A year later, he married Mary Taylor Lloyd. Francis called her Polly. The Keys had eleven children and then decided to move from Annapolis to Georgetown, Maryland. It was a nicer place to raise their children and Francis could practice law with his uncle, Philip Barton.

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Conditions in the United States during this time were unsettled. At the end of the Revolutionary War, Great Britain had agreed to remove all their forts from the Great Lakes area and Canada. They didn't. For years, Great Britain had been at war with France. As the war dragged on, the British needed more and more soldiers. They began to drag Americans off ships and put them to work on their own vessels. This practice, called *impressment*, made the Americans angry. France and Great Britain were also blocking American trade with other countries. The situation was even more serious for settlers in the West, since the British soldiers were encouraging the native tribes to attack settlers. When Shawnee Chief Tecumseh joined the British army, Congress knew it needed to act. On June 18, 1812, Congress declared war on Great Britain. This war became known as the War of 1812.

Francis Scott Key, a devout Episcopalian, at first thought the war was wrong. He refused to fight. It wasn't until the British soldiers landed their fleet in Chesapeake Bay in 1814 that Key became a strong supporter of the war effort. He joined the local militia of Georgetown and was trained to clean, load, and fire the cannons. Key would later write that he was not very good at this job.

In 1814, the courts closed because no lawyers were needed while the war dragged on. Key rejoined the militia. His job was to find food and supplies for the militia—another job at which he was not very good. Friends would later call him “clumsy” after he had such mishaps as being thrown from his horse into a river and being hit accidentally in the face with a piece of pork!

On August 24, 1814, the British landed near Washington, D.C. The British defeated American soldiers and militia at the Battle of Bladensburg, also called the Battle of Washington. The British then marched into the city where they burned government buildings. President James Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison had just sat down to dinner when the troops arrived. They had to flee so quickly, they left the food on the table. The British soldiers ate the dinner and then burned the Executive Mansion to the ground. There was nothing Francis could do but return to Georgetown.

At home in Georgetown, Francis learned that his good friend Dr. William Beanes had been captured by the British. He was being held on a ship called the HMS *Tonnant*. Francis went at once to President Madison and asked for permission to speak to the British to have him released. The President gave him permission and insisted Francis take along Colonel John Skinner, a government officer who worked to help free prisoners of the British.

Francis appealed to the British and they finally agreed to release Dr. Beanes. However, they did not let the Americans return to shore right away because they planned to bomb Fort McHenry, the fort that defended Baltimore, Maryland. The British did not want the Americans to warn the fort of their plans. It was September 13, 1814.

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Forced to remain on the British ship, Francis watched as they bombarded the fort all day and night. He feared the tiny fort could not hold out against the strong British warships. As dawn rose over the fort, Francis looked toward the flag flying over the fort. Was it British or American? Imagine Francis' joy as he realized it was the Stars and Stripes! The British had not been able to take the fort. Francis quickly wrote a poem to celebrate the great event.

Francis showed his poem to his brother-in-law, Taney, that night. Later, Taney took the poem to a printer with a request to set the words to the music of a popular tune, "To Anacreon in Heaven." Originally the poem was titled "The Defense of Fort McHenry." By October, the tune was being sung across the country and had been renamed "The Star-Spangled Banner."

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson made the song the official song of the Armed Forces. On March 3, 1931, an Act of Congress made the Star-Spangled Banner the national anthem of the United States.

While Francis Scott Key is best known as the writer of this famous song, he was also known as a father, religious leader, public servant, and poet. He did not like the idea of slavery, but he kept slaves because he was afraid they would have no one to take care of them if he set them free. As a lawyer, he tried to defend free slaves as often as possible and fought for their rights. With several others, he organized the American Colonization Society. Key thought that by giving slaves the chance to return to Africa, they could best become freed men and women. They established a colony for freed slaves on the West Coast of Africa. It was named Liberia from the Latin word *liber*, which means "free." This is the same root word from which our word *liberty* originated.

As a poet, Francis Scott Key wrote many hymns that are still found in Episcopal Hymnals today. As a lawyer, Francis often appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court to argue cases. He later served as the District Attorney for the District of Columbia. A deeply religious man and community leader, Francis kept busy with organizing a society to educate poor children and by working with several religious groups. He was mourned by many when he died on January 11, 1843 in Baltimore, Maryland.

You can still see the same flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner." It is on display at the Smithsonian Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. In 1996, the museum began a special project to restore the flag, thereby helping to preserve a piece of American history for generations to come!

Reading Comprehension/Biography

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Answer the multiple choice questions about *Francis Scott Key*

1. Francis Scott Key grew up on a Maryland plantation named Terra Rubra. The name means:
 - a. Red Clay
 - b. Red Land
 - c. Clay Rubric
 - d. Torn Rubble

2. After he graduated from St. John's College, Francis began to study law with Judge Roger Brooke Taney, who was most famous for his decision in a case involving slavery. It was called:
 - a. the Dred Scott Decision
 - b. the Anderson Ferry Decision
 - c. the British and Slavery Decision
 - d. the Slavery Issue Decision

3. One reason Americans went to war was to end the British practice of dragging Americans off ships and forcing them to work on the British ships. This was called:
 - a. slavery
 - b. piracy
 - c. captivity
 - d. impressment

4. When the British encouraged the native tribes to fight against the settlers moving west, an important Shawnee chief joined the British army. What was his name?
 - a. Sitting Bull
 - b. Geronimo
 - c. Tecumseh
 - d. Crazy Horse

5. When Francis went to help free his friend, Dr. William Beanes, from British capture, he watched a battle at a fort that protected Baltimore, Maryland. What was the fort called?
 - a. Fort Ticonderoga
 - b. Fort McHenry
 - c. Fort Sumpter
 - d. Fort Addison

6. After the battle was over, Francis wrote a poem that would later become "The Star-Spangled Banner." What was the original title of the poem?
 - a. The Defense of Fort McHenry
 - b. To Anacreon in Heaven
 - c. The Free and the Brave
 - d. The Stars and Stripes

7. Francis Scott Key was a key organizer of the American Colonization Society to send free slaves to the colony of Liberia. The colony was named for the Latin word *liber*, meaning:
 - a. free
 - b. Africa
 - c. happiness
 - d. colony

8. Francis Scott Key wrote many of a certain type of songs. What were they?
 - a. ballads
 - b. folk songs
 - c. hymns
 - d. opera

9. You can still see the same flag Francis Scott Key wrote about in what famous museum?
 - a. Museum of Science and Industry
 - b. Museum of Arts and Crafts
 - c. Museum of Natural History
 - d. Museum of American History

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Star Spangled Banner
Fill in the Blanks

You've probably sung the song many times in your life, but how well do you know the words? Statistics tell us that many Americans do not know all the words to their national anthem. See if you can fill in the blanks to complete the song lyrics below. Use the words in the box for your answers.

RAMPARTS	STREAMING	GLARE	STRIPES	AIR
FIGHT	NIGHT	HOME	FREE	LAND
THERE	EARLY	HAILED	STAR- SPANGLED	GLEAMING

Oh, say, can you see

1. By the dawn's _____ light
2. What so proudly we _____
3. At the twilight's last _____?
4. Whose broad _____ and bright stars
5. Through the perilous _____
6. O'er the _____ we watched
7. Were so gallantly _____?
8. And the rocket's red _____,
9. The bombs bursting in _____,
10. Gave proof through the _____
11. That our flag was still _____.
12. Oh, say, does that _____ banner yet wave
13. O'er the _____ of the _____
14. And the _____ of the brave?

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Answers

Multiple Choice

1. b
2. a
3. d
4. c
5. b
6. a
7. a
8. c
9. d

Cloze

1. early
2. hailed
3. gleaming
4. stripes
5. fight
6. ramparts
7. streaming
8. glare
9. air
10. night
11. there
12. star-spangled
13. land, free
14. home