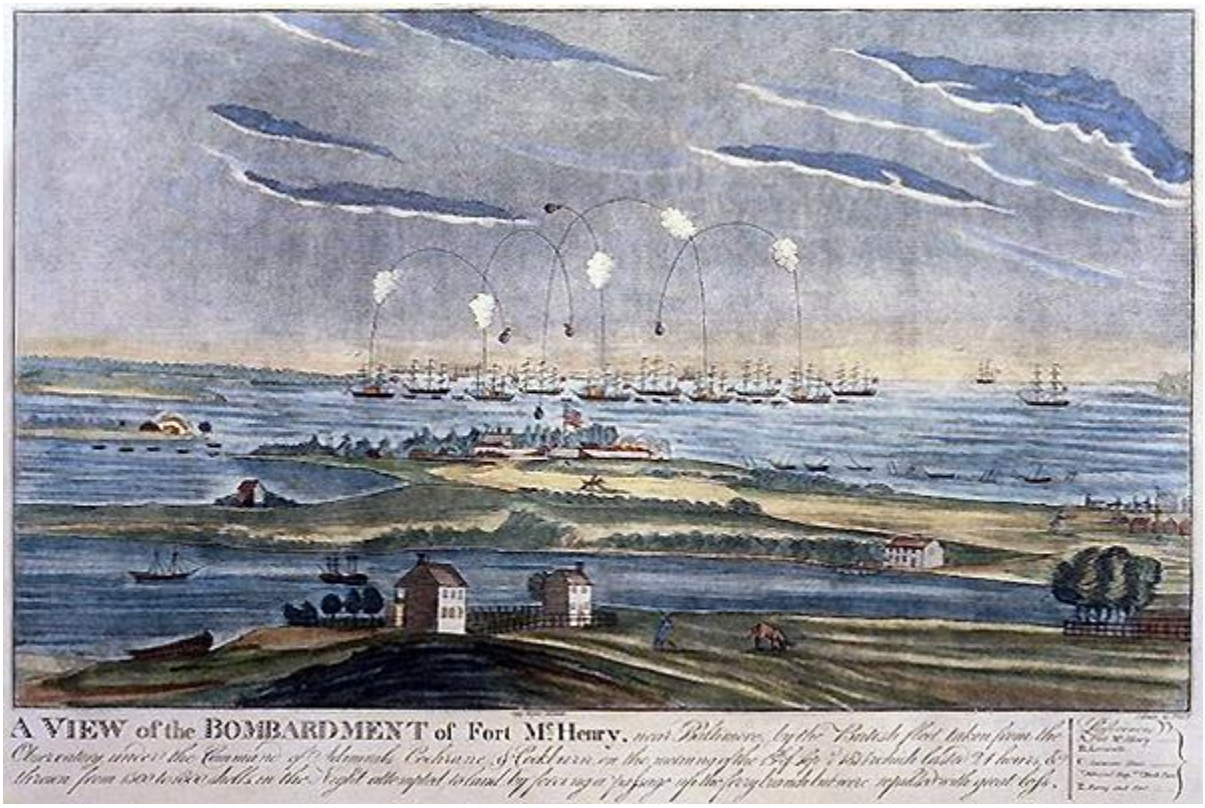
History of the Star-Spangled Banner

Veterans Day 2017

The Battle of Fort McHenry



A period illustration captures the failed September 13–14, 1814, British bombardment of Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore. (Library of Congress)

Major General Samuel Smith was resolute. Two mistakes made in Washington would not be repeated in his city. First, as commander of Baltimore's militia, he would put in place an effective defense. Second, having been given the job by Baltimore's Committee of Vigilance and Safety, he would not under any circumstances relinquish that command—especially to the man in charge of the 10th Military District. Brig. Gen. William Winder was now a two-time loser, with his failure to defend the capital added to his earlier Canadian surrender at Stoney Creek. As a U.S. senator, a veteran of the Revolution (he had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel) and a Marylander, Smith intended to make sure the British did not capture Baltimore on his watch.

The intervention of Secretary of War James Monroe had been required to quiet the outraged Winder, but since taking full command of the city defenses on August 26, Smith had worked to put Baltimore's strategic advantages to good use. The burgeoning metropolis had grown into the nation's third-largest city after New York and Philadelphia. As a center for shipbuilding, a hub for trade and home to many mills, Baltimore prospered even in the face of embargoes and the war. Its seafaring population had adapted to life during wartime, and the city's privateers seized more than 500 British ships, leading British Admiral Sir George Cockburn to describe the city as a "nest of pirates."

Baltimore's downtown streets overlooked a protected bay. The key to Smith's strategy was to keep the Royal Navy out of this inner harbor. He had the signal advantage of Fort McHenry, a brick fortress completed in 1802, which guarded the harbor's narrow entrance. Shaped like a five-pointed star, with more than 50 guns mounted in the bastions at its points, the fortification enclosed a powder magazine and barracks. It was home to a garrison of 1,000 men, some of whom had served in Captain Joshua Barney's Chesapeake Bay flotilla. Under the command of Major George Armistead, the fort had in the preceding days been provisioned for a siege.

Smith added to nearby shoreline protections. Batteries were thrown up outside the walls of Fort McHenry and at Lazaretto Point, which guarded the harbor entrance on the east with its own three-gun battery. Citizens dug trenches at the perimeter of the town. Two redoubts were in place west of Fort McHenry at Fort Covington and Battery Babcock, near the west branch of the Patapsco River. Eighteen-, 24- and 38-pounders were in place, along with armed barges, redoubts and a squadron of gunboats that patrolled the inner harbor. As a final stroke 24 ships and barges were being sunk at the entrance to the harbor. This barrier of half-submerged merchant vessels, their masts splayed at all angles, stood as an obstacle to any approaching ship.

In a gesture worthy of first lady Dolley Madison, Armistead had determined that something else was required. He commissioned a giant woolen flag. "It is my desire," Armistead had written to Senator Smith, "to have a flag so large that the British will have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance." A Baltimore flagmaker, the widow Mary Pickersgill, together with her 13-year-old daughter, Caroline, produced the giant ensign and submitted a bill for $405.90. Now, as preparations for a British attack proceeded, the three-story-tall flag waved atop the 90-foot flagpole at Fort McHenry, its bold red, white and blue geometry unmistakable.

From Baltimore's Federal Hill the fleet of more than 40 British vessels was visible at anchor off North Point. That meant that part two of Smith's master plan, his landward line of defense, would soon be tested. Smith recognized that the formidable British army might move to take the city on foot, as it had at Washington. Even a cursory glance at a map of the region revealed that the logical line of attack on land would be along Patapsco Neck, the peninsula that extended to the point where the waters of the Patapsco flowed into Chesapeake Bay. At its tip, North Point offered a deep-water anchorage and a beach suitable for an amphibious landing. It was 14 miles from Baltimore.

Smith's defensive plan took advantage of the terrain at Hampstead Hill, the tallest of a string of hills forming an irregular ridge overlooking the city. For almost two weeks citizen work parties with pickaxes, shovels and barrows worked to construct a series of palisaded redoubts linked to one another by breastworks. Cannon were mounted in semicircular batteries; to man the fortifications, militiamen poured in from Pennsylvania and Maryland, reinforcing two U.S. infantry regiments. A contingent of seamen assigned to two new vessels under construction in the harbor, the 44-gun frigate Java and the 22-gun sloop Erie, were joined by the 350-man crew of USS Guerrière \ger-re-'ere\, commanded by Commodore John Rodgers, then blockaded in port in Delaware. These expert gunners mounted cannon on the hills, as well as at the shore. Smith's dual lines of defense at the water's edge and on the upland ridge could now claim more than 12,000 men-at-arms.

With the British fleet at anchor off North Point, Smith went on the offensive. At his order, a force of more than 3,000 men under the command of Brig. Gen. John Stricker marched forth from Hampstead Hill. They established a forward line of defense of some seven miles along Long Log Lane, the road to North Point. Many of the defenders had been among those routed at Bladensburg, and just as it was on that unlucky day, the main defense was arranged in three lines, roughly 300 yards apart, ready to defend a narrowing on Patapsco Neck between Bear Creek and Bread and Cheese Creek. But this battle would begin quite differently.

The vanguard of 400 American cavalry and riflemen waited a mile in advance of the main defensive position. At 10 a.m. on September 12 a company of soldiers came into view at a wooded turning in the road. Leading the British detachment of more than 50 men were Cockburn and Maj. Gen. Robert Ross.

The Americans opened fire. Despite being outnumbered, the British charged. Intimidated by the veteran fighting force, the defenders, according to a contemporary memoir, "fled to the right and left through the woods." Yet it was the British force that sustained the greater loss.

Upon hearing gunfire, a young British officer just out of sight ordered his troops to move at double-time to join the skirmish. Moments later an officer on horseback raced past them, heading back the way they came. He was calling for a surgeon, and, even more worrisome, they could read "horror and dismay in his countenance," British Lieutenant George Gleig later recalled.

Then a second horse, this one riderless, galloped past, its empty saddle stained with fresh blood. The realization struck that the handsome white mount belonged to Ross. Upon reaching the site of the skirmish, the infantrymen saw their commander under a blanket canopy to one side of the country road. After sustaining his terrible wound ("a musket ball through his arm into his breast," wrote Cockburn), Ross had toppled from his horse.

Summoned from the second brigade, Colonel Arthur Brooke took command. The British closed on the main American force, which came into view on the other side of a large clearing, protected by a fence of upright sharpened sticks. The Americans fired a sharp cannonade from behind the paling, clearing the road. British fieldpieces returned fire while, at Brooke's order, a British detachment moved to attack the left flank of the American line.

Cockburn, wearing his gold-laced hat and unmistakable on his white horse, rode along the line as it took shape on the British side. To the call of bugles, the British force, with machinelike determination, marched across the field toward the Americans at the tree line.

The American troops fired their cannon, and the balls, recalled one hapless young officer, "fell like a hailstorm" amid the British troops. Despite the Congreve[1] rockets fired over their heads, the American defense remained intact. The artillery continued to play upon the oncoming British, delivering, wrote Gleig, "a dreadful discharge of grape and canister shot, of old locks, pieces of broken muskets and everything which they could cram in their guns."

The oncoming British troops held their musket fire; only when they were 20 yards from the American line did they fire as one before rushing forward to the palings, brandishing their bayonets. In the resulting melee the American line broke, and by 11 o'clock the British held the field. In the absence of a cavalry force, the invaders could not pursue the retreating army, and they set up camp for the night, establishing a temporary hospital and officers' quarters in a nearby meetinghouse.

The fight resulted in more than 300 British wounded; the Americans lost half that number. Among the 46 British dead was Ross, whom no surgeon could save. Returned to the ships at North Point on a cart, wrapped in the Union Jack, his corpse was immersed in a hogshead of rum to preserve it for burial.

[1] Rocket invented by Sir William Congreve, English artillerist (*Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary*).

September 13, 1814: The Patapsco River off Baltimore

The British fleet commenced the bombardment of Fort McHenry at first light. Armistead ordered his artillerymen to return fire, and for a time the Americans maintained a brisk fire. Unfortunately, Armistead soon noted, "our shot and shells fell considerably short…a most distressing circumstance, as it left us exposed to a constant and tremendous shower of shells, without the remote possibility of our doing him the slightest injury." The enemy ships, more than two miles from Fort McHenry, were out of the range of even the biggest American cannon.

For their part the British kept up a relentless barrage from the decks of their bomb ships, firing 10- and 13-inch mortar shells at the rate of more than one a minute. Unlike solid cannonballs, each hollow projectile, some of which weighed up to 200 pounds, was packed with a gunpowder charge. Launched from muzzle-loaded mortars that resembled large iron bowls, the shells flew in a high arc, remaining in flight up to 30 seconds. Many exploded in midair, scattering deadly shrapnel in all directions. Though the mortars were difficult to aim accurately, about a quarter of the shells fired rained down on Fort McHenry. With the immense booms and the long, slow trajectory of the big bombs, the morning passed slowly, a one-sided affair.

At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, a shell registered a direct hit on an American 24-pounder cannon atop one of Fort McHenry's bastions. The lieutenant in charge of the gun was killed in the blast and four nearby soldiers wounded. The gun was dismounted, a wheel of its carriage shattered. Upon seeing a sudden commotion at the fort, three of the British bomb ships dared to sail closer. Observing the ships within range of the American cannon, Armistead ordered a barrage from every gun that would bear. The three British vessels soon slipped their cables, hoisted their sails and fell back once again out of range of the American guns.

As the afternoon wore on, the sky grew gray and a torrential rain began to fall. But the bombardment didn't cease, continuing into the evening. Even in the dense blackness of the overcast night the bombardment went on, with rocket and shell explosions lighting the sky like fireworks.

Without warning, at 1 a.m. the firing ceased. With conditions on the water thick and hazy, the defenders could no longer distinguish the enemy, but a British landing force was soon observed when a boat supporting the attack fired Congreve rockets to illuminate the shore west of Fort McHenry. The Americans at nearby Fort Babcock quickly replied with a blaze of artillery fire, driving off the attackers in their barges. The bombardment from the bomb ships resumed for several hours until, at about 4 a.m., the guns again went silent.

The eerie quiet was matched only by the darkness. Nothing could be seen of the blacked-out city, and aboard the U.S. cartel ship Minden three American detainees did not know what to think. Had Fort McHenry surrendered? Or perhaps the British had abandoned the attack?

Employing the spyglass aboard Minden, lawyer Francis Scott Key had surveyed Fort McHenry the day before as artillery shells arched toward it. The brick fortress, the water, the sky graying as clouds moved in and the smoke from the gunpowder explosions made a melancholy sight, and he had found his eye drawn repeatedly to the immense flag with 15 white and red stripes, each of which was 2 feet tall. A field of blue in one quadrant contained 15 large white stars. From his distant vantage he could not know it, but the woolen flag was a full 42 feet across. But he did know the flag was a beacon.

Early in the morning, in the silence after the firing ceased, Key waited impatiently for the dawn to illuminate Fort McHenry. He and American prisoner exchange agent John Stuart Skinner "paced the deck for the residue of the night in painful suspense, watching with intense anxiety for the return of day," he later told a friend. They checked their watches, waiting for first light or word of the battle's outcome. "Before it was light enough to see objects at a distance," the friend recalled, "their glasses were turned to the fort, uncertain whether they should see there the stars and stripes or the flag of the enemy."

Finally, with a soft lightening in the sky, Key saw the immense American banner. Upon seeing the giant flag, he put pen to paper.

Born on a Maryland plantation, Key had been educated at St. John's College in Annapolis, then remained in Maryland's capital to clerk for a lawyer. He became not only a legal wordsmith, who as a barrister tried cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, but also something of a literary man, too, with a taste for Jonathan Swift and Sir Walter Scott. He wrote occasional poems for his friends, and in the night just passed some poetical phrases came to him. With daylight, on the deck of Minden, "in the fervor of the moment," he told his friend, he noted them on the back of a letter he happened to have in his pocket.

Before he could finish his composition, HMS Surprise made ready to sail. The sails for Minden were handed down from the British frigate; Skinner, his ward Dr. William Beanes and Key, along with the sloop's several sailors, were now free to go. The siege by sea was over. Once clear of the British warship, the single-masted Minden unfurled its sails and headed for shore at Baltimore several miles upstream. The men aboard watched as the invading fleet came about and retreated toward Chesapeake Bay. Key kept scribbling, completing a draft of his ballad.

Once ashore, Key rented a room at the Indian Queen Inn on High Street. There he made a fair copy of the lines he had written, complete with the phrases "rockets' red glare" and "bombs bursting in air." He composed them to the remembered strains of a popular British drinking song (Key's four verses aligned with the melody of "To Anacreon in Heaven"). He showed his work to a friend, a well-connected Maryland jurist, and within a day a typeset version of the song came off the press at the Baltimore American, which had yet to resume regular publication after the siege. Key had left the piece untitled, but the small handbill—6 1/2 inches high, 5 1/2 wide—bore the title his friend the judge had added. A few days later the Baltimore Patriot published the poem, "Defense of Fort McHenry." Though the editors noted that the song was "destined long to outlast the occasion," no author was credited.

The land assault on Baltimore had also ended. After receiving word from the harbor that the Royal Navy could not help them, Cockburn had held a long counsel of war to consider the entrenched Americans on Hampstead Hill. At midnight he decided to rejoin the fleet at North Point. In the rain and predawn darkness on September 14 the British army retreated.

 Text from: Hugh Howard, "Big Night in Baltimore," Military History, March 2012, 28–34.

Francis Scott Key[2]

Key's Youth and Marriage

The father of our national anthem was born in 1779 in Frederick (now Carroll) County, Maryland at the family property called Terra Rubra. He loved and wrote poetry as a child and by adulthood had learned the style of oratory practiced by the ancient masters of Greek and Roman history.

His was a Christian who made it his practice to read his Bible first thing each morning and before retiring at night. His thinking and his lifestyle exhibited his complete trust in divine guidance. No matter the circumstance he believed all things occurred by divine will.

In his letters to friends and family members this instruction is found among them, "Read your Bibles every morning and evening, never neglect private prayers both morning and evening, and throughout the day strive to think of God often, and breathe a sincere supplication to him for all things."

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[2] The excerpts in this section are paraphrased or copied from: Marc Leepson, *What So Proudly We Hailed: Francis Scott Key, A Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), passim. See link to this title at amazon.com: https://www.amazon.com/Proudly-Hailed-Francis-PROUDLY-Hardcover/dp/B00QOJ4IFY/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1510458125&sr=1-2&keywords=what+so+proudly+we+hailed+francis+scott+key%2C+a+life

