



History

Commissioned in the summer of 1813, a Baltimore widow named Mary Pickersgill made the Star Spangled Banner with the help of her daughter, nieces, an indentured servant, and possibly her mother. Pickersgill made both a 30 x 42 foot garrison flag and a smaller 17 x 25 foot storm flag at the request of Lieutenant Colonel Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry.

Following the attack and burning of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., the British forces moved toward the Port of Baltimore. Lawyer Francis Scott Key had boarded a British-controlled ship during the battle at Fort McHenry to negotiate the trade of a prisoner. He watched the 25-hour bombardment of the Fort from aboard the ship throughout the night of September 13, 1814, waiting to see if American defenses would prevail. In the early hours of the morning on September 14, Key could see the Star Spangled Banner still flying proudly over Fort McHenry. This triumphant sight moved him to write a poem set to the popular British tune "To Anacreon in Heaven."

Key's song and the Armistead family-owned flag grew in popularity throughout the 19th century. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson ordered that the "Star Spangled Banner" be played at military and naval occasions, and a 1931 Congressional act officially designated it the national anthem. In 1912, the decedents of Lieutenant Colonel Armistead gave the original flag to the Smithsonian Institution, which continues to preserve and display it as a national treasure.