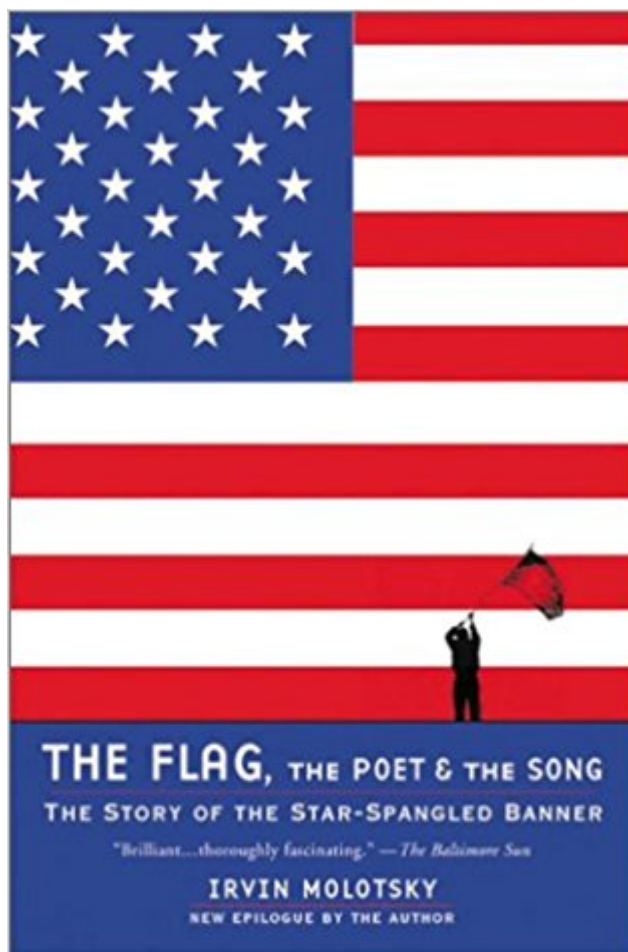


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# The Flag, The Poet & The Song: The Story Of The Star-Spangled Banner



## Synopsis

Americans have long stood to salute the flag and sing the national anthem, but in the wake of September 11, it has become more than a ritual at the beginning of a baseball game. Our flag has been on proud display in nearly every home, car, and shop window across the country and our national anthem has never been more popular. Despite this resurgence in patriotism, few know the real story behind "The Star Spangled Banner"-neither the song nor the flag that inspired it. In this remarkable book, New York Times reporter Irvin Molotsky tells the story of what really inspired Francis Scott Key, a Washington lawyer, to pen this historic ode. Brimming with fascinating Americana, *The Flag, the Poet and the Song*, brings historical events and figures, both legendary and unknown-from the flag's seamstress to the military heroes of the War of 1812-to vivid life. In witty, accessible language and brimming with little known facts, Molotsky gives readers a book to be read and reread. "This intelligent book provides fresh meaning to the poetic and patriotic language of the song." (New York Daily News) Brilliant trivia . . . that keeps the pages turning and the mind engaged." (The Baltimore Sun)

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## Customer Reviews

New York Times reporter Molotsky offers a light history of the American flag and "The Star Spangled Banner," as well as the people involved with making both. In the "little-known-facts" genre, Molotsky dances through the evolution of the song from an old English drinking song to its adoption in 1931 as the national anthem. And he gives us facts about the flag that challenge our long-held understanding of its genesis. For instance, Betsy Ross was not the flag's first seamstress, and the flag did not always have 13 stripes. There are also amusing tidbits, such as the largest American

flag, which weighed in at 3000 pounds and measured 505' 225'. Personalities play a big part in Molotsky's treatment, with President and Dolly Madison, Francis Scott Key, and Mary Pickersgill (the real Betsy Ross) taking major roles. The War of 1812 gets well-deserved coverage as the historical scene for the unfolding of the anthem. Amusing but not scholarly, this history is recommended for public libraries. Bonnie Collier, Yale Law Lib. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This absolutely irresistible slice of Americana tells the unabridged and demythologized story of the flag that inspired a relatively obscure lawyer to pen a patriotic poem that would seize the collective imagination of the American public. To provide the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Molotsky plays historical detective, investigating the creation of the flag that was to be flown over Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor, the life and times of the poet whose immortal words were set to the tune of an English drinking song, and the gradual evolution of this essentially unsingable song into the national anthem. Placing these interrelated tales firmly into social and historical context by providing an enlightening overview of the much-misunderstood War of 1812, the author provides a comprehensive analysis of a uniquely American cultural phenomenon. Chock-full of humor, irony, and fun facts, this delightful tribute to the flag will appeal to a variety of inquisitive readers. Margaret Flanagan Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A beautiful book. Great look and great delivery Haven't read it yet. Waiting until my granddaughter is done with it to read it. She asked for it for Christmas and was very excited when she opened it up.

As the author relates, the flag was an official banner during the War of 1812, but it was not the religious icon some think of today. The sack of Washington, and the impending invasion of Baltimore made people think more clearly about the British menace. When they faced off against the British when they made their attempt to capture and sack Baltimore, a poet called Francis Scott Key wrote a moving poem to the historic battle. People then moved the verse to an old English drinking song, and an official national anthem was born. It was not until the Hoover Administration that the Star Spangled Banner became the official national anthem. However the veneration for the flag took place later. When the Civil War brought bloody battles to the continent, the flag became truly a religious icon to those who fought for it. The author relates how current efforts at attacking the flag and policy towards protecting the flag might infringe on people's free speech rights. This is an OK

read about War of 1812, and the result of the flag becoming a national icon.

Every American knows the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner," because every American watches sporting events. Some of us know the words, although we can't sing it unless we are singers of special talent, because of the reach of range of the notes (the "red glare" of the rockets makes most people's voices break). And every American who knows some history knows that Frances Scott Key, watching the bombardment of Fort McHenry from the shore of Baltimore Harbor, saw the Star-Spangled Banner flying over the fort, and wrote the poem bearing that name on the back of an envelope, and since then it has been our national anthem, sung before baseball games starting from the last century. All this history is pleasant, but it is not at all true. Setting the record straight about our most famous flag and its anthem is the purpose of *The Flag, the Poet, & the Song: The Story of the Star-Spangled Banner* (Dutton) by Irvin Molotsky, a fun look at an important part of American history. It is important history because of the emphasis we place on our sacred flag, and it is important to see how we often get that history wrong. It shows how in the War of 1812, the British looked invincible advancing onto Baltimore after burning Washington (which they did in retaliation for the Americans unjustifiably burning Toronto). Frances Scott Key, a lawyer, was commissioned by President Madison to negotiate freedom for a captured American, and thus was on a British ship when the bombardment of Fort McHenry took place. He did not see the huge Star-Spangled Banner under bombardment; a smaller, less valuable one was flying in the rain, but the big one was raised the next morning. He wrote his poem, "The Defence of Fort McHenry," not the title by which we know it, and someone discovered it could be sung to "Anacreon in Heaven," a jolly English drinking song. It was popular, but it was not adopted as the National Anthem until 1931, and the choice was controversial. Critics said that the music ought to be of a more modest range so everyone could sing it, and that it should not be derived from a British tune, much less a drinking song since America was under prohibition. Most objections were about the martial lyrics, which would give "to millions of children who sing it the notion that the only real patriotism is warlike activity." This and its unsingability are objections that continue to be brought up, when "America the Beautiful" or "God Bless America" are proposed as replacements, but the anthem is secure. Molotsky's book is largely a happy miscellany of flag and anthem lore. It spends a chapter on the proposed constitutional amendment to prevent flag burning (General Colin Powell: "I would not amend that great shield of democracy to hammer a few miscreants. The flag will still be flying proudly long after they have slunk away."). The original flag is now undergoing an \$18 million restoration and preservation, in a laboratory that visitors to the Smithsonian can peer into. There are plenty of enjoyable details here,

but the flag and anthem form an important facet of American history and public thought, and Molotsky has done a fine job of making the historic ideas accessible in a patriotic little volume.

This book began as a newspaper article on the conservation of the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key during September 13-14, 1814. Chapter 1 tells how it is sung before every baseball, football, basketball, hockey, and soccer game in the United States. The television networks use that time for commercials. The wide range of the anthem is difficult for the average person. Robert Merrill advocates playing it more briskly, as a march (p.11). The huge flag that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814 was made by Mary Young Pickersgill. Major Armistead wanted a flag so large the enemy could see it from a distance. The flag over Fort McHenry had 15 stars and 15 stripes, the standard from 1794 to 1818 (p.77). It was 30 feet high and 42 feet long, and weighed 80 pounds. Chapter 3 explains "The Second War of Independence". One item was the impressment of British subjects. These seamen worked for higher wages aboard American ships. Many were called deserters but they had been abducted by impressment gangs. The Embargo was tried and failed. The British practice of seizing crewmen from ships provoked a declaration of war in June 1812. There were other causes (pp.39-42). The canceling of the British Orders in Council came after the war was declared. America became an ally of Napoleon. The British rejected the American right of citizenship to British subjects (Chapter 4). General William Hull, the governor of Michigan Territory, surrendered Detroit (pp.47-48). The attack on Canada ended in a retreat. The attack on York (Toronto) and its burning led to the burning of Washington in retaliation (p.50). After the defeat of Napoleon the British now concentrated on the United States, raiding Maryland and Virginia, Washington DC was lightly guarded as it was not much of a military target (p.54). The enemy of the British was the August heat (dehydration). Baltimore in 1814 was the third largest city, a center of shipping, commerce, industry, and shipbuilding. The British approached by sea. Dr. William Beanes was arrested by the British (p.71). Richard West, a patient, got lawyer Francis Scott Key to free Beanes; he was accompanied by Colonel John S. Skinner, an exchanged prisoner of war. This flag did not fly over Fort McHenry during the British bombardment because of the rain; a smaller storm flag was used (p.90). At dawn the much larger flag was run up the flagpole. Key's poem was printed by his brother-in-law Judge Joseph H. Nicholson, the second-in-command at Fort McHenry; it quickly caught popular favor (p.93). Ferdinand Durang, a musician, adapted the words to the old tune "Anacreon in Heaven". It quickly gained a national reputation throughout the country. The next week Key changed its name to "The Star-Spangled Banner". Francis Scott Key was an important person in his day, but his only moment of fame was his poem (p.97). The remaining chapters cover

other topics. Chapter 7 tells about the Treaty of Ghent which ended the war. It was a victory for America because it united the nation (p.131). Britain never again interfered with American shipping. The pause of commerce with Europe made industry flourish in America. The flag did not enjoy its status until the Civil War (p.134). Chapter 8 has the history of the flag and the song. During the Civil War Fort McHenry was a prison; one prisoner was the grandson of Francis Scott Key (p.147). Chapter 9 gives the history of the National Anthem. It was adopted by the Army and Navy in the 1890s. The song was used in Puccini's 'Madame Butterfly' in 1904. It became official in March 3, 1931 (p.151). It supplanted the older song "Yankee Doodle" (more easily sung by the people).

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