

The Star-Spangled Banner

by Idella Bodie

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD Caroline Pickersgill sat beside her mother making dainty stitches on a flag. Even when her needle pricked her finger, she still pressed it in and out of the bunting as her mother, Mary, and grandmother, Rebecca Young, had taught her. The red brick house at 60 Albemarle Street near the waterfront in Baltimore was the home of three makers of “colors,” the name given to flags at that time.

Caroline loved to sew. She couldn't remember when she'd first held a needle, but she could remember sitting in her little rocker, stitching strips of bunting together for practice. All the while her grandmother told her stories of flags she'd made: “I'll never forget the day General Washington himself came to ask me to sew a flag for the soldiers during the American Revolution.” She smoothed, stitched, and snipped as she talked.

After the death of Caroline's father, Mary Pickersgill and her mother made their living stitching flags. Then the day came when Rebecca Young said, “My eyesight is failing, and my fingers are too stiff to make the tiny stitches for which I am known. It is up to you, Caroline, to help your mother sew the flags.”



~~BUNTING IS A COARSE
COTTON MATERIAL.
HEY LADYBUG, WHAT
ARE YOU MAKING?~~



DON'T BOTHER ME! GRRR...
NOW MY THREAD IS
TANGLED.

What could they do?

Of all the buildings in town, Claggett's brewery was the largest. Caroline's mother gained the owners' permission to spread the bunting out in their malt house. Night after night, they knelt on the great floor to work by candlelight. At intervals Caroline dashed to their home to check on her grandmother. Then, back by her mother's side, she took up her needle with linen thread to help join the stripes with small, tight stitches. For many weeks they worked, snipping and sewing white stars on the blue background. Finally, they completed it. The huge flag measured thirty by forty-two feet, as requested.

Meanwhile, another story unfolded. British troops had put ashore from Chesapeake Bay and marched inland to make havoc. Leaving the Capitol in Washington burning, they



then headed to defeat the American army at Fort McHenry, which guarded the harbor of Baltimore.

Now there could be no false sense of security—the British were really coming! As expected, they turned their attention to Fort McHenry. The fort was all that stood between the city of Baltimore and the British fleet. It was time to bring out the Pickersgill flag.

As the British soldiers marched through the town, they celebrated their victories by disturbing American citizens in their homes. One night, they intruded upon a respected Baltimore citizen, Dr. William Beanes. When Dr. Beanes angrily criticized their rudeness and had them jailed, a British officer took Dr. Beanes prisoner on a British battleship.

Afraid he might be hanged, friends worked to get him released. Letters were exchanged across battle lines. Finally, the British grudgingly agreed to let Francis Scott Key, a prominent lawyer and poet, and Colonel John Skinner, who was in charge of prisoner exchange, sail out to the British fleet and make their plea.

Key was gifted with words and spoke on behalf of his friend. He pointed out that the doctor had kindly treated wounded British soldiers with the same professionalism and care he had shown Americans. That won them over. Beanes would be freed and allowed to return to Baltimore, they said, but not until the battle was over.

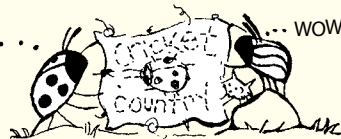
Under guard, Beanes and his friends ended up in the vessel that was to be towed behind a British ship. Early in the morning, during a pouring rain, battleships opened fire on Fort McHenry. Mortar bombs soared and crashed onto the fort in explosions of rubble. Beanes, Key, and Skinner watched from their small boat.

All day the guns pounded. Fire rockets screamed toward the fort, but as the fleet tried to move closer, the Americans drove them back. Night fell. Desperate to finish off the fort, the British set loose a fierce attack, doubling the number of bombs and rockets fired. Explosions mixed with thunder.

Key watched the fiery red arcs blaze across the sky. With each bright burst, he strained to see the flag. The roar of guns

*Explosions mixed
with thunder.*

LOOK! I MADE A
FLAG FOR CRICKET
COUNTRY.



... WOW.



UM, NICE, BUT
THAT'S NOT A
CRICKET RIGHT?
H'M.

meant the fort still held. In the first light of dawn, the rain ceased. Key could see British ships pulling out into the open sea. They'd been unable to take Fort McHenry. Baltimore would not burn.

Then he spotted the flag. A faint wind unfurled the red and white stripes and the blue square with stars. Deeply touched, Key took a letter from his pocket and, on the back, scribbled words that came to him: *by the dawn's early light . . . so proudly we hailed . . . at the twilight's last gleaming . . . so gallantly streaming . . . bombs bursting in air . . . O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.* "The Star-Spangled Banner" was coming to life.

Back on shore, a cautious Caroline crept silently out of her house and went to stand at the wharf. The bombing had stopped, and she wondered if the fort still stood. She squinted through the smoky morning air and saw . . . yes! The fort had not been destroyed, and there, stirring softly in the breeze from across the bay, was the Pickersgill flag, proudly waving above it.

As the sun rose higher past the horizon and the wind picked up, pushing the lingering battle smoke out to sea, Francis Scott Key and Caroline Pickersgill both smiled and watched silently as the Star-Spangled Banner snapped and billowed above the fort. Bombs no longer burst, rockets no longer glared, and America had won a decided victory. 🦋



The Flag Today

After the battle at Fort McHenry, Lieutenant Colonel Armistead acquired the flag. At his death, it passed to his family, who treasured it as a symbol of their ancestor's courage. They allowed it to be used for occasional displays at patriotic celebrations. In 1907 it went on loan to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Five years later, the family decided to give it permanently to the Smithsonian so that it could be cared for and seen by the public.



Today, the flag is under the care of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Time and exposure to the elements have left the nearly 200-year-old flag in tattered and fragile condition. From 1999 to 2005, conservators worked painstakingly to clean and stabilize the flag and prevent further deterioration. The museum is currently designing a new state-of-the-art gallery to showcase and protect this national treasure for future generations.