

Lesson Thirty-Four

The Star-Spangled Banner

LESSON IDEA

To tell the dramatic story of the Star—Spangled Banner, our national anthem, and the unique battle flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write it.

PREPARATION

Make a copy of the fourth stanza of the Star-Spangled Banner for each family member. (See page four.) Read the discussion sections of the lesson and prepare the necessary information. Have a dictionary handy.

WHEN YOU HEAR the words “Star-Spangled Banner,” do you think of our national anthem — or the Stars and Stripes, our nation’s flag? [Urge each family member to answer.]

Most of us probably think of both, but actually the Star-Spangled Banner was a unique flag, designed for one specific purpose, and used for that purpose only. The enormous banner (measuring 30 feet high and 42 feet long, and weighing about 200 pounds) never flew again.

Let us think for a moment how big that would be. Does anyone know the width and length of this room? [Have the room dimensions in mind and make some comparisons so that the family can fully appreciate the size of a 30-by-42 foot flag.]

Why would anyone want such a gigantic flag? Are there any flags that large today? [If any of the tall office buildings in your town flies an American flag from its tower, have a family member call the building manager to ask the flag size and thank the company for displaying it.]

Such a big flag can be seen for miles, and that is precisely why the Star-Spangled Banner was so gigantic. Her designers wanted her to be seen from a great distance.

The flag was also unique in another way. You will remember that last week, when we discussed the design of “Old Glory,” we mentioned that in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s it had 15 stripes and stars. Do you recall why? [Remind family members, if necessary, that the original intent of Congress was to add a new stripe and a new star

for each new state. This resulted in a 15-stripe flag when Vermont and Kentucky joined the Union in 1791 and 1792.]

Later, as more and more states were added, it became apparent that a new stripe could not be added for each state unless the nation wanted to fly something that resembled a bed sheet more than a patriotic banner. So “Old Glory” was returned to her original design of 13 stripes representing the original 13 colonies.

BUT THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER was designed in the era of a 15-stripe flag. Its design and size made one of the most extraordinary flags in American history. The year was 1814, and the young nation was once again at war with Britain. The issue was independence; this time, freedom of the seas for American ships. England was also at war with France, and the United States had been drawn into the conflict because Britain had attempted to halt the shipment of American goods to France and other countries. American ships were stopped on the high seas, searched, and stripped of cargo and, occasionally, their crews. Native-born American sailors were accused of being British deserters. Many of these unfortunate seamen were sent to Dartmoor Prison in England where conditions, at best, resembled an ill-kept barnyard. Survival was precarious.

Provoked by the aggressive violation of her shipping rights as a neutral nation, and the harsh treatment of her seamen, the United States declared war on Britain in 1812. It was a courageous act of defiance for which the nation was militarily unprepared. Fortunately, however, the English war machine had become so preoccupied with its French enemy that it was unable to retaliate with a full-scale attack on its former colonies until 1814.

When the attack came, it was at the heart of the new nation: its capital in Washington. The British fleet sailed into Chesapeake Bay in August 1814, landed troops, and, after an easy victory over the

raw American militia outside the city, captured the seat of the United States government. British troops burned the Capitol and other government buildings, including the President's home. Then, fearing that their supply lines would be cut, they retreated, returned to their ships, and headed for the seaport of Baltimore.

BALTIMORE, one of the nation's largest and most important cities, braced for the fight. Under Major General Samuel Smith's direction, earthworks were placed around the city and Fort McHenry, which guarded the Baltimore harbor, was hastily reinforced. General Smith also employed a psychological gambit that may have affected the outcome more than did cannon and ammunition. He ordered an enormous battle flag — 30-by-42 feet, perhaps the largest ever flown — for Fort McHenry. Its red and white stripes were two feet wide; its stars two feet in diameter. It entailed about half-a-million stitches and was flown from a staff 97 feet high. A crew of two dozen men was required to handle it.

The magnificent banner, which could be seen by Americans for miles in all directions, was a reminder to friend and foe of the relentless spirit of independence that fueled the American cause.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The War of 1812, sometimes called the second War for Independence, makes an interesting study for those seeking to dig deeper into the history of our national anthem. *Quest Of A Hemisphere* by Donzella Cross Boyle (pp. 220–228) [does this paging match the currently-available edition?

— rwl describes the major events of the war. The Americans suffered defeats on land, but scored victories at sea, thereby establishing the United States as a naval power to be reckoned with. The historical novels of Kenneth Roberts dealing with the War of 1812 (*The Lively Lady* and *Captain Caution*) are also recommended. They detail how the war affected the American seamen. *The Lively Lady* tells the story of England's notorious Dartmoor Prison, where American and French prisoners were forced to live in squalor and filth.

Quest of a Hemisphere is available in hardcover for \$18.00 (plus \$2.70 shipping and handling) from American Opinion Book Services, P.O. Box 8040, Appleton, WI 54912. The Roberts novels are available in many public libraries.

It was designed to instill courage in friends and cause foes to hesitate.

As Mary Pickersgill, a skilled flagmaker, placed the finishing touches on the Star-Spangled Banner in her little Baltimore home on Pratt Street, an incident was developing outside the smoldering American capital that would bring historic fame to Fort McHenry's gigantic banner of defiance.

Three British soldiers, stragglers from the marching army, created a disturbance at the home of Dr. William Beanes, an elderly and respected physician. Dr. Beanes caused the Redcoat rowdies to be arrested and was, in turn, seized and taken prisoner aboard a British ship.

Francis Scott Key — attorney, poet, patriot, and a close friend of Dr. Beanes — immediately asked President James Madison for permission to travel to Baltimore and seek the release of his friend. With a letter of official sanction from the President, Key met in Baltimore on September 4, 1915 with John S. Skinner, United States Agent for the Parole of Prisoners. The next day, Key and Skinner left the city in a small vessel, flying a flag of truce, to find the British fleet. Two days later they were aboard the British flagship *H.M.S. Tonnant*, where they had been courteously received by Admirals Cochrane and Cockburn.

Does everyone know the meaning of the word flagship? [If not, look it up in your dictionary.] What do the initials H.M.S. stand for when used in a ship's name? [Again, consult the dictionary if necessary.]

THE BRITISH CLAIMED that Dr. Beanes, a civilian, had not only interfered in military matters, but had also broken a pledge of neutrality. Key, an experienced attorney, argued that the doctor at his advanced age might not have realized what he was doing, and that in any event he had given wounded British soldiers excellent medical care. When Key produced letters from British prisoners proving that point, Admiral Cochrane relented. But he informed Key, Skinner, and Beanes that they would be held aboard ship until the attack on Fort McHenry was over and they had suffered the humiliation of seeing the Star-Spangled Banner go down. The British plan allowed two hours for defeat of the American fort, after which "terms for Baltimore" might be nego-

