



**Francis Scott Key 1779-1843**

As the early light of dawn crept through the darkness, haze, and smoke; three men in a small boat tensely waited. They were torn between a fearful apprehension and hopeful expectancy. Daylight would show what lay ahead for their city and nation.

It had been almost twenty-five hours earlier when, finding themselves detained among the enemy ships, they watched the enemy launch a combined army-navy attack on one of their nation's most important cities. Their country had already experienced many defeats, and their capital city had been burned. When the three men, then, found themselves observing the awesome attack launched against their fellow countrymen, their concern was great. The fighting was intense; the bombs from the enemy ships readily found their mark in the attacked fort. The noise of the rockets, bombs, and cannon fire had been almost constant throughout the day and continued into the night.

Then in the early morning hours, there was silence. Only occasional firing broke the stillness. The battle seemed over, but what was the outcome? The three men in the boat watched eagerly to see if their flag was still flying over the fort and the city. It was during those hours of intense watching and waiting that the words of a song began to take shape in the poetic mind of Francis Scott Key, one of the men in the boat. How did Key come to find himself watching the fate of his country from such a vantage point? What kind of a man was he to write a song that has ever since touched and thrilled his countrymen?

Francis Scott Key was born on August 1, 1779, while the young United States was waging the war that would establish its independence. His father, John Ross Key, fought in the American Revolution and generously armed and equipped a regiment at his own expense. The Keys were wealthy landowners from Frederick, Maryland; and Francis Scott early developed a love for his father's land and home.

Among the strong influences on Key's character in his early years was his grandmother, Ann Arnold Ross-Key. She had lost her eyesight by fire when she was rescuing two servants from the flames of her father's burning house; but she bore her terrible affliction with Christian fortitude. The sensitive Francis Scott was deeply impressed by her strong faith. Francis stayed with his grandmother while he attended school in Annapolis. After graduating from St. John's College at the age of seventeen, Francis went on to study law.

In 1802, Key married and the couple had eleven children. His life was a happy one. Soon after his marriage, Key began to practice law in Washington, D.C. Even in the busiest of times, Key never failed to conduct family prayers in his home twice a day, always including the servants in these family devotions.

Key's Christian convictions were intense and influenced all his relations and actions. At one time, in 1814, he even considered entering the ministry. Though he decided to remain in his law career, his Christian beliefs continued strong and his Christian work active throughout his life.

When the United States went to war with Great Britain in 1812, Key was opposed to the war and thought his country's action was precipitous; yet he joined the Georgetown Field Artillery Co. in 1813 and performed volunteer duty to defend his home. The times were tense, as the British successfully attacked and burned Washington, D.C., and moved towards Baltimore.

Just as Key was negotiating with the British about the release of a civilian prisoner, the British began their attack on Fort McHenry. Key and his friends had to remain with the British throughout the battle. They intensely watched Fort McHenry's large flag to determine the outcome. As he watched and waited, Key wrote out the phrases to a song on the back of an envelope. Later the song was published as "The Defense of Fort McHenry"; soon it was retitled, "The Star-Spangled Banner." The title of the song became the name of the country's flag and because of the song, the country itself would ever after be known as the "Land of the free, and the home of the brave."

Although written to rejoice in the victory of the moment, the last stanza describes what Key, the Christian, hoped would be a constant characteristic of his beloved country:

"Oh, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved home and war's desolation;  
Blest with vict'ry and peace may the Heav'n rescued land  
Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserved us a nation!  
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just;  
And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust!'"

Francis Scott Key continued a successful law career and became instrumental in the formation of several theological institutions and missionary societies. On the occasion of his death in 1843, his family was comforted by an earlier verse written by Key, the end of which declared, "Death is not the end of life."