

The Star Spangled Banner: A Dramatic Retelling of the Story of Our National Anthem

The Star Spangled Banner: The Story & the Song

Overview

Cast

- Stagehands 1 and 2
- Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4
- George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland
- James Madison, fourth President of the United States
- Dolley Madison, First Lady
- American soldiers
- British sailors
- Citizens of Baltimore
- Major George Armistead, commander at Fort McHenry
- American Officers 1 and 2
- Mary Pickersgill, flag maker
- Carolyn Pickersgill, Mary's daughter
- Rebecca Young, Mary's mother
- Eliza Young, Mary's niece
- Margaret Young, Mary's niece
- Francis Scott Key, young lawyer from Washington, D.C.
- Colonel John S. Skinner, U.S. Commissioner General of Prisoners
- Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander F.I. Cochrane, commander-in-chief of 50 warships during the Chesapeake Campaign in 1814
- Dr. William Beanes, U.S. prisoner arrested for allegedly violating a pledge of good conduct after the Battle of Bladensburg, outside Washington, D.C.

Costumes

Students can wear pictures of the main characters (see Character Illustration References section) and/or large nametags that have been laminated with tie yarn strings to wear around their necks; sailors and soldiers can make hats out of newspaper

Props

- cards with scene titles
- picture of Napoleon Bonaparte¹ mounted on cardstock
- pictures of the American frigate *Enterprise*² and the British war ship *Boxer*³ mounted on cardstock
- picture of W. Charles' Boxing Match⁴ mounted on cardstock
- picture of Fort McHenry⁵ mounted on cardstock
- envelope with a letter inside addressed to Mary Pickersgill
- picture of George Washington⁶
- picture of the burning of the city of Washington, D.C.⁷
- map of battle plans
- paper and pencil (for Francis Scott Key)
- copies of the *Defence of Ft. McHenry*⁸
- large 15-star, 15-stripe American flag
- small American flags for entire cast

¹ <http://memory.loc.gov/pnp/prok/10000/10099v.jpg>

² <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/images/h54000/h54397.jpg>

³ <http://www.boxer.navy.mil/History/History.html>

⁴ [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?pp/ils:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3b52637\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?pp/ils:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3b52637)))

⁵ <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b39701>

⁶ [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/presp:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3a10229\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/presp:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3a10229)))

⁷ [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?pp/ils:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3g04555\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?pp/ils:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3g04555)))

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Defence_of_Fort_M%27Henry_broadside.GIF

Scene 1: A Prelude to War

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4

Stage center, left: King George, III; British sailors

Stage center, right: President James Madison; American soldiers

Stagehand 1 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

Narrator 1: From 1793 to 1815, England, ruled by King George III, (*steps forward and bows; British sailors cheer*) and France, ruled by Napoleon Bonaparte (*George very pompously holds a picture of Napoleon Bonaparte⁹ and gives a thumbs down motion; British sailors boo*), were at war. Both nations captured neutral American merchant ships and their cargos to prevent these supplies from reaching enemy ports.

Narrator 2: To make matters worse, captured American sailors were forced to serve in the British Royal Navy (*British sailors cheer; American soldiers boo*).

Narrator 3: Also, the Americans thought the British were encouraging the Native Americans to attack western frontier settlements.

President James Madison: (*steps forward; American soldiers cheer*)

Members of Congress, after four years of British attacks against the United States, I seek from you a declaration of war.

Narrator 4: Congress agreed and in June, 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain to protect “free trade and sailor’s rights” as well as American rights on land. (*Americans look at British and cheer*)
(*Stagehands 1 and 2 enter – stagehand 1 with a picture of the Enterprise¹⁰, stagehand 2 with a picture of the Boxer¹¹*)

⁹ <http://memory.loc.gov/pnp/prok/10000/10099v.jpg>

¹⁰ <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/images/h54000/h54397.jpg>

¹¹ <http://www.boxer.navy.mil/History/History.html>

Narrator 1: In September, the American frigate, “Enterprise” (*points to the Enterprise*) defeats the British warship, “Boxer” (*points to the stagehand with picture of the Boxer*).

(stagehand 1 with the picture of the Enterprise exits triumphantly, stagehand 2 turns the picture of the Boxer upside down and exits dejectedly; British sailors hang their heads; Americans cheer)

Narrator 2: *(shows the cartoon – A boxing match, or another bloody nose for John Bull)*

A cartoon by American artist W. Charles shows a defeated King George, who was called John Bull by the Americans, with a bloody nose and a black eye asking President Madison to stop the boxing match, or war.

King George: *(turns to Madison, who is in a boxing pose, and kneels on one knee)*

Stop . . . Brother Jonathan, or I shall fall with the loss of blood – I thought to have been too heavy for you—but I must acknowledge your superior skill – two blows to my one! And so directed too! Mercy, mercy on me, how did this happen?

President James Madison: Ha-Ah Johnny! You thought yourself a “Boxer” did you – I’ll let you know we are an “Enterprise”ing nation and ready to meet you with equal force any day! *(Americans cheer)*

Scene 2: Baltimore Gets Ready for War

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 1, 2, 3

Stage center, left: Citizens of Baltimore

Stage center, right: American soldiers

Stagehand 2 *(walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits)*

Narrator 1: Because of successful shipbuilding and its central location for trade, the city of Baltimore became an important international seaport *(citizens of Baltimore wave to audience)*.

Narrator 2: When news of war reached Baltimore, ship owners began turning their ships into privateers. Privateers were privately owned ships that had been granted permission from the United States government to capture British ships.

Narrator 3: The British called Baltimore “a nest of pirates” and wanted to stop these privateers. The people of Baltimore (*citizens of Baltimore wave to American soldiers*) knew they had to strengthen their city’s defenses at Fort McHenry (*American soldiers wave back to citizens of Baltimore.*)

Scene 3: Fort McHenry Gets Ready for War

Stage left (far left and front): Narrator 4

Stage center, left: Major George Armistead, Officers 1 and 2, American soldiers

Stagehand 1 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

(*Officers 1 and 2 step forward, one holding a picture of Fort McHenry*)

Officer 1: Fort McHenry was built between 1799 and 1802 in the shape of a five-pointed star. Each point of the star could be seen from the point on either side. The walls and buildings were made of brick. There were four barracks inside the fort to house the garrison. This is where we lived and worked.

Narrator 4: In June, 1813, Major George Armistead arrived at Fort McHenry. (*Major George Armistead enters; the Officers salute; he returns the salute*)

Major George Armistead: Officers, we have no time to lose. We must strengthen our defenses here at Fort McHenry. We have no suitable ensign to display over our fort, and it is my desire to have a flag so large that the British will have no difficulty seeing it from a distance! Commodore Barney and General Stricker have requested that Mary Pickersgill, the well-known Baltimore flag maker, make the flag. Take this order to her.

(*He hands the two officers an envelope. They salute and exit with the envelope*)

Scene 4: Mary Pickersgill's House, Baltimore

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 1, 2, 3

Stage center, left: Officers 1 and 2

Stage center, right: Mary Pickersgill, Caroline Pickersgill (Mary's daughter), Rebecca Young (Mary's mother), Eliza and Margaret Young (Mary's nieces)

Stagehand 2 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

Narrator 1: Major Armistead's request was taken to Mary Young Pickersgill, a well-known flag maker in Baltimore.

Officer 2 (*Stands at attention and hands Mary the envelope*): I have a request from Major George Armistead of Fort McHenry.

Mary Pickersgill (*Opens the envelope and reads it*): Oh, my! I have never made a flag this large before—42 feet by 30 feet—and the major needs it right away! I will certainly need a lot of material and a very large space in which to make it! Tell Major Armistead that I will start tomorrow! (*The Soldiers bow and exit*)

Mary Pickersgill (*To her mother, Rebecca Young*): Mother, I will need your help with this flag. I know you made the first flag for the Revolution under the direction of General Washington. Could you help me?

Rebecca Young: Of course, daughter! I will help you measure out the proper proportions for the stars and stripes.

Mary Pickersgill (*To Carolyn, her daughter*): Carolyn, I need you to go down the street to Clagett's Brewery. Tell them about the flag and ask them if we could spread it out on their malt house floor. We're going to need a lot more space than we have here in the house!

Carolyn: Yes, mother, I'll go right away! (*Carolyn exits*)

Mary Pickersgill (*To Eliza and Margaret*): I need you two girls to go to all the shops that sell material and ask them if they have large quantities of red, white, and blue material. I will need about four hundred yards!

Eliza and Margaret: (*Together*): Yes, Aunt Mary! (*Both girls exit*)

Narrator 2: The women worked many nights until midnight laying out the stars and stripes and sewing everything together by hand. Only two months later, on August 19, 1813, the flag was delivered to Major George Armistead along with a small storm flag.

Narrator 3: The U.S. Army paid Mary \$405.90 for the large flag and \$168.54 for the small flag. A special flagpole at Fort McHenry had to be made for the large flag because it weighed over 200 pounds!

Scene 5: The War Takes a Turn for the Worse (August 19, 1814)

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 4, 1, 2

Stage center: President James Madison, Dolley Madison

Stagehand 1 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

Narrator 4: On August 19, 1814, 4,000 British troops landed on the banks of the Patuxent River, 30 miles from Washington, D.C. On August 24, 1814, they defeated a large American army at Bladensburg, Maryland.

President James Madison: Dolley! The British are coming! My cabinet and I must leave the city. Try to save any important documents that you can. I will send you a letter to let you know where I am! (*President Madison exits*)

Narrator 1: Several hours before the British arrived, Dolley Madison ordered that the White House possessions be packed and removed from the city.

Dolley Madison: Hurry! The British are almost here. Put these important documents in a chest. Make sure the silverware, books, clocks, and curtains are packed; we must get them out of the city. Most importantly, take down Gilbert Stuart's picture of George Washington!¹² The British might take the city, but not the picture of the father of our country!

¹² [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/presp:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3a10229\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/presp:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3a10229)))

(Stagehand 2 walks across the stage with George Washington's picture, then exits)

(Stagehand 1 enters with picture of Washington, D.C. on fire¹³ showing and stands next to Narrator 2)

Narrator 2: President Madison sent Dolley a letter, telling her where to meet him outside the city. She escaped only hours before the British set fire to numerous buildings, including the Capitol and the White House. But before the British left Washington, an amazing event happened! A tornado struck the city of Washington, killing and wounding many British soldiers. The storm also helped to put out fires that were raging in the city.

Scene 6: Fort McHenry Gets Ready for a Battle

Stage center, left: American soldiers

Stage center, right: Major George Armistead, Officers 1 and 2

Stagehand 2 *(walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits)*

Major George Armistead: *(Looking at a map of the fort with Officers 1 and 2)* Let's make sure we are ready. We have our own garrison of 60 men to man the guns within the fort, correct?

Officer 1: That is correct, sire. We do have more men, but some of them are ill, some have deserted, and others are under military guard for discipline.

Major George Armistead: We also have three companies of citizen-soldier volunteers, correct?

Officer 1: Yes, sir. They are prominent Baltimore merchants and residents ready to defend their families, homes, and businesses.

Officer 2: We also have 600 men from the 12th, 36th, and 38th detachments of the U.S. Infantry stationed here in the dry moat ready to hold back any British landing attempts.

¹³ [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/?pp/ils:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3g04555\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/?pp/ils:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3g04555)))

Major George Armistead: (*Pointing at the map*) Our 214 Sea Fencibles are ready to fire the fort's 18-, 24-, and 36-pound cannons. I find it funny that these are sailors firing canons that are usually found on ships.

Officer 1: (*Pointing at the map*) The U.S. Chesapeake Flotilla is located nearby to help defend the city of Baltimore. Sixty of their men will help shore batteries.

Major George Armistead: It looks like we're ready! (*Fort McHenry soldiers cheer*)

Scene 7: Aboard a British Warship (September 7, 1814)

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 3, 4

Stage left: Francis Scott Key, Colonel John Skinner

Stage center: Vice Admiral Sir Alexander F.I. Cochrane, British sailor 1

Stage right: British sailors

Stage right (far right and back) Dr. Beanes

Stagehand 1 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

Narrator 3: A week before the battle a young lawyer from Washington, D.C., Francis Scott Key, (*waves*) travels to Baltimore at the request of President Madison. There he meets Colonel John Skinner, (*waves*) a prisoner of war exchange agent. (*Stagehand 2 enters with card labeled American truce ship*)

Narrator 4: Under a flag of truce, they sailed down the Chesapeake Bay on a truce ship to meet a British warship in order to obtain the release of a prisoner, Dr. William Beanes (*waves*), Key's friend. (*Stagehand 2, Key, and Skinner sail to stage center*)

Francis Scott Key: Sir! (*Key and Skinner bow to Vice Admiral Sir Alexander F.I. Cochrane*) I am Francis Scott Key (*Cochrane bows to Key*) and this is Colonel John Skinner. (*Cochrane bows to Skinner*) We are here as representatives of the United States government, under a flag of truce, to obtain the release of a prisoner you have on board, Dr. William Beanes. Here are papers that prove the allegation that Dr. Beanes violated a pledge of good conduct after the Battle of Bladensburg is false. (*Key hands papers to Cochrane, who reads them*)

Vice Admiral Cochrane: (*To British sailor 1*) Go down below and bring up the prisoner, Dr. Beanes. (*British sailor 1 exits and brings back Dr. Beanes*) Ah, yes! It looks like these papers prove your innocence, Dr. Beanes. However, we cannot let any of you return to Baltimore, today. You will return to your truce ship, which will be guarded by one of our war ships, lest the intended attack of Fort McHenry be disclosed. It should only take a few hours for Fort McHenry and then Baltimore to fall because of the superior firepower of our rockets and bombs! (*British sailors cheer*)
(*Key, Beanes, and Skinner bow and then go to the truce ship—stage left—where Stagehand 2 stands with the truce ship card*)

Scene 8: The Battle Begins at 6:30 a.m. (September 13, 1814)

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4

Stage left: Dr. Beanes, Colonel Skinner, and Francis Scott Key

Stage center: American soldiers, one holding 15-star, 15-stripe flag

Stage right: British sailors

Stagehand 1 (*walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits*)

Narrator 1: The truce ship sailed up to the mouth of the Paterson where they witnessed the bombing of Fort McHenry. (*Stagehand 2 enters from stage right with truce ship card and walks in circle with Dr. Beanes, Colonel Skinner, and Francis Scott Key to represent the sailing of the truce ship*)

Dr. Beanes: What chance does Fort McHenry have with over 50 war ships firing those rockets and bombs?

Colonel Skinner: I have faith in our soldiers at Fort McHenry. They are well prepared. Even if the British get past the fort they will find it very difficult to enter the harbor since our forces are strong and they have sunk old ships at the entrance to the harbor.

Francis Scott Key: Look! The flag is still flying over Fort McHenry. If the flag remains up at the end of the battle, it will mean the Americans have won.

Dr. Beanes: And if the flag is lowered, it will mean the Americans have lost the battle and surrendered.

Narrator 2: All through the day, the men kept their eyes on the flag, which continued to wave.

Narrator 3: As early evening, or twilight, approached the men could still see the flag's broad strips and bright stars through the smoke of the cannon and rocket fire.

(British sailors make bombing sounds; American soldiers turn flashlights with red gels over the ends on and off)

Narrator 4: That night, through the red glare of the rockets and the bombs bursting in air, Key and his friends could still see the flag waving proudly over the fort's ramparts.

Narrator 1: As the early light of dawn shone through the smoke of the battle, Francis Scott Key and his friends looked towards the fort.

Francis Scott Key: *(Excitedly and with concern)* Oh, look! Can you see the flag?

Dr. Beanes: There it is! And it's still flying!

Colonel Skinner: The Americans have won! And look, the British are retreating! *(British sailors exit dejectedly)*

(American soldiers start humming "Yankee Doodle Dandy") Listen! Can you hear *Yankee Doodle* coming from the fort?

Francis Scott Key: Does not such a country and such defenders deserve a song? I must write down what we just witnessed these past 25 hours as we sail back to Baltimore. *(Key takes out a piece of paper and starts writing)* O say can you see “through” *(scratches out “through”)* “by” the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming? *(All exit)*

Scene 9: Baltimore (September 16-17, 1814)

Stage left (far left and front): Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4

Stage center (front): Francis Scott Key

Stage center (back): Entire cast

Stagehand 1 *(walks in with scene title card, reads it, then exits)*

Narrator 2: Two days later, Key was back in Baltimore. His brother-in-law read the finished poem and convinced him to send it out to be published the next day.

Narrator 3: The poem was printed as a broadside, titled *Defence of Fort MCHenry*. It told about the recent battle and contained four verses. *(holds up copy of the broadside while Stagehands 1 and 2 pass out copies of the Defence of Fort MCHenry to American soldiers and the citizens of Baltimore)*

Narrator 4: Key had indicated that the words should be sung to a popular British tune, *To Anacreon in Heaven*, by the composer John Stafford Smith.

Narrator 1: Key’s poem was an immediate success. Soon after, Thomas Carr’s music store in Baltimore, printed both the words and the music together. This song had a new title . . .

All Cast and Crew: *The Star Spangled Banner!* *(All cast members move forward to join Key carrying small flags and one American soldier holds the 15-star, 15-stripe flag next to Key)*

Francis Scott Key: Please stand and join us in singing our national anthem!
(All sing The Star Spangled Banner)

Character Illustration References

George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a10456>

James Madison, fourth President of the United States

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b34361>

Dolley Madison, First Lady

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pnp/cph/3b10000/3b15000/3b15600/3b15638r.jpg>

Major George Armistead, commander at Fort McHenry

<http://www.americanmemory.org/images/Armistead.jpg>

Mary Pickersgill, flag maker

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/012400/012457/html/msa12457.html>

Francis Scott Key, young lawyer from Washington, D.C.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b00995>