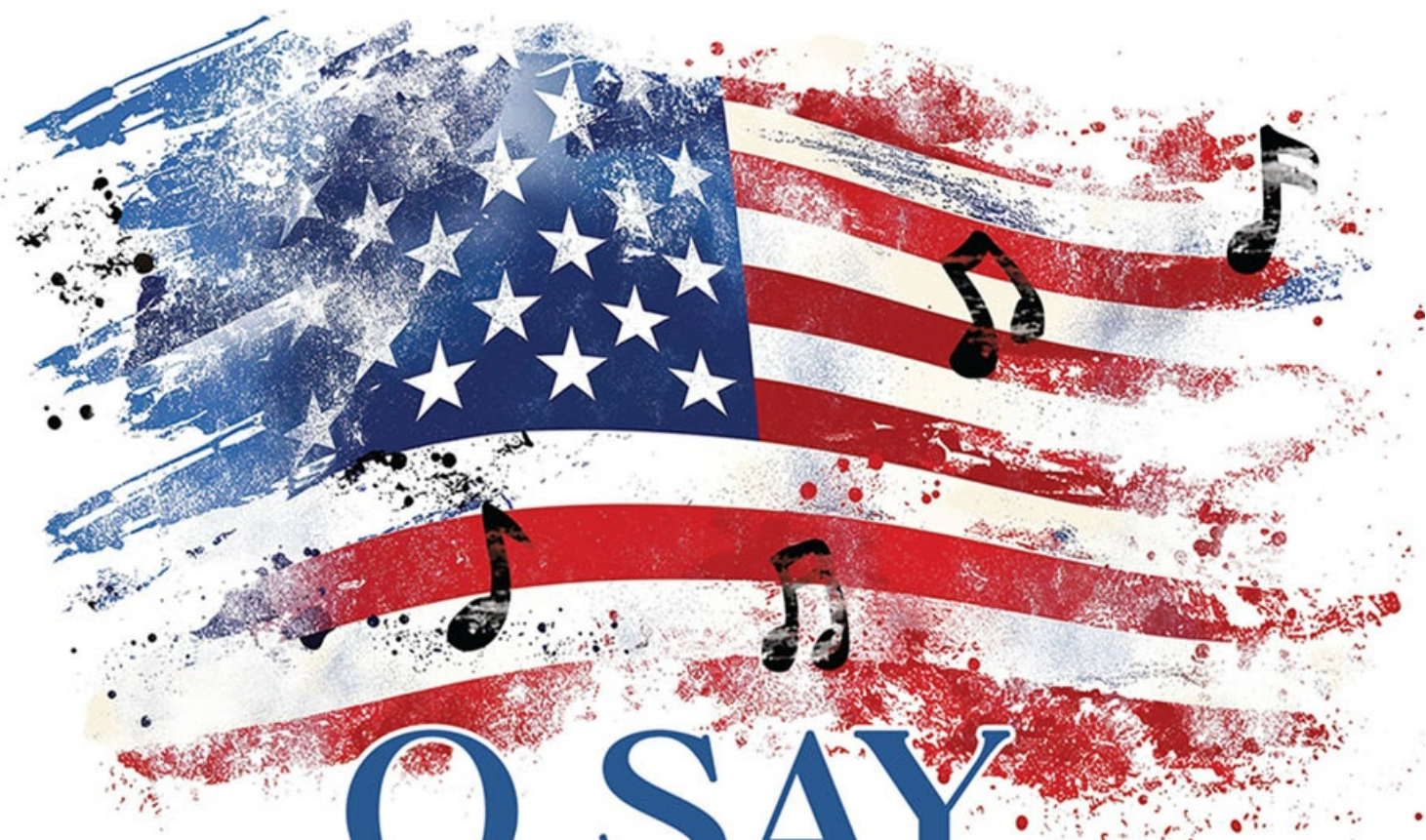


MICHAEL D. YOUNG



O SAY,
CAN YOU
SING



AMERICAN ANTHEMS,
AMERICAN HEROES

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About the Author

CHAPTER 1



Peter Salem and The Star-Spangled Banner

Peter Salem

Though Peter Salem started his life as a slave, he gained his freedom temporarily during the Revolutionary War and joined his fellow colonists in resisting British rule. He was born in Framingham, Massachusetts, around 1750. Salem was emancipated by his master to enlist in the colonial military. Having gained his own freedom, he fought for greater freedom for his fellow Americans.

Salem's most distinguished moment came during the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, one of the early confrontations between British troops and colonial forces. According to historical accounts, Salem showed incredible bravery, reportedly killing British Major John Pitcairn, who was leading the attack on the colonial forces. This valor at a critical moment in the battle made him a hero among his fellow soldiers.

Shortly after this battle, General Washington enacted a policy that enslaved people could not join the militia. In light of this, those who had enslaved Salem set him free permanently so he could continue fighting in the army. Salem served bravely in the army until he was honorably discharged in 1780.

After the war, Peter Salem continued to live as a free man in Massachusetts, where he led a modest life. Congress did not pass a pension plan for non-disabled veterans until 1818, so he did not receive any support considering his service.

Despite the limited recognition he received during his lifetime, his legacy has grown over time. A famous painting by John Trumbull called *The Battle of Bunker's Hill* includes a soldier thought to be Salem. He is now remembered as an African American patriot, fighting for freedom in a society that denied his people some of their rights.



The Star-Spangled Banner

It's a song played in many a sports arena across the US and is the theme song of the Fourth of July. Yet, there are plenty of songs about American patriotism. Other songs were suggested as our national anthem besides "The Star-Spangled Banner." So how did it obtain the top billing? It's a story that starts a long time ago, before the United States won its independence.

During the Revolutionary War, the fledgling nation did not have a national anthem, and Frances Scott Key, an American lawyer, did not write the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner" until the nation's next armed conflict, the War of 1812.

One of Key's friends had been arrested and imprisoned on a British ship in the Chesapeake Bay near Boston. Key boarded the ship in hopes of securing his friend's release. Though he succeeded in getting his friend's freedom, they overheard the British ship's plans for attacking a fort near Baltimore. Americans returned to their ship and the British guarded them, preventing them from warning others. Key and his friends watched in the distance as the British bombed Fort McHenry on September 13. The British bombarded the fort for more than twenty-five hours, and Key watched to see if the fort would fall, indicated by the lowering of the American flag from the fort. He wrote of the attack, "It seemed as though mother earth had opened and was vomiting shot and shell in a sheet of fire and brimstone." Through the night, he watched. By early dawn, Key saw the American flag still flying over the fort.

Key was so inspired by the sight that he wrote a poem called "Defense of Fort M'Henry," which was printed in a local newspaper a few weeks later. Many other papers reprinted it after that, making it famous all over the country. He had written it to the tune of a popular English drinking song, to which it is still sung today.

The same flag that flew over the fort still survives today in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. It is a huge banner, thirty feet by thirty-four feet, which allowed it to be seen from miles away. It was made that way on purpose. The American commanding the fort, Major George Armistead, knew his fort would probably be attacked and commissioned a huge flag for the fort. He said, "We, sir, are ready at Fort McHenry to defend Baltimore against invading by the enemy . . . except that we have no suitable ensign to display over the Star Fort, and it is my desire to have a flag so large that the British will have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance."¹ He hired a twenty-nine-year-old widow, Mary Young Pickersgill, to create a flag that had fifteen stars and stripes, representing all the states in the Union. She worked ten-hour days to complete the flag and was paid more than four hundred dollars for the feat, which would be about \$16,600

today.

It wasn't until much later that this song officially became the national anthem. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson said that it should be played before all official events. On March 3, 1935, the song was adopted as the national anthem. It caused controversy, mainly because of the tune it was set to. The tune, "To Anacreon to Heaven," was the theme of the Society of Anacreon from 1766 to 1791. The club's anthem was written by British composer John Stafford Smith.

The club, a gentlemen's music club, had reportedly questionable morals. A bunch of guys would get together, drink, and sing off-color songs. Some original song lyrics were deemed inappropriate for promoting drinking and wild revelry, so they didn't want the tune linked to the national anthem lyrics. Here is a taste of the first stanza, which seems quite tame by today's musical standards:

To ANACREON in Heav'n, where he sat in full Glee,
A few Sons of Harmony sent a Petition,
That He their Inspirer and Patron wou'd be;
When this Answer arriv'd from the JOLLY OLD GRECIAN
Voice, Fiddle, and Flute,
No longer be mute,
I'll lend you my Name and inspire you to boot,
And, besides, I'll instruct you like me, to intertwine
The Myrtle of VENUS with BACCHUS's Vine.

Others found it difficult to sing or too military-focused. Other songs were suggested, such as "Hail, Columbia," "My Country Tis of Thee," and "America the Beautiful," but in the end, "The Star-Spangled Banner" won. The first verse is typically sung, but this song has additional verses that reveal more of the story.

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:
'tis the star-spangled banner, O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation.
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the Heav'n rescued land
Praise the Power 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.'
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And as a bonus, here's an additional verse that came about during the Civil War:

When our land is illumined with Liberty's smile,
If a foe from within strike a blow at her glory,
Down, down with the traitor that dares to defile
The flag of her stars and the page of her story!
By the millions unchained, who our birthright have gained,
We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained!
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
While the land of the free is the home of the brave.



Endnote

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