

The Star-Spangled Banner: A Play in Six Scenes

The following script provides ideas for acting out the story of how “The Star-Spangled Banner” came to be written. Several versions of the story exist, and historians are not sure of all of the facts. The source used to write this script is from the Library of Congress. “The Star-Spangled Banner” by Oscar George Theodore Sonneck, Chief of the Division of Music (Library of Congress, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914).

CAST:

Francis Scott Key: author of words

John S. Skinner: government agent for flags of truce and exchange of prisoners

James Madison: president of the United States

Dr. William Beanes: a U.S. doctor held prisoner on a British ship

Judge J. H. Nicholson: chief justice of the Baltimore Court of Appeals and Mr. Key’s brother-in-law

Ferdinand Durang: local musician and actor, attributed with the first singing of the song

British General

British Soldier

Printer

Narrator

Script

Scene 1

Narrator: During the War of 1812 (in August of 1814) the British had burned the president’s house and other public buildings in Washington D.C. and then retreated. When they left, they took with them William Beanes, an American doctor, and held him prisoner on a warship in Chesapeake Bay. Beanes was a friend of Francis Scott Key. Key asked James Madison, then president of the United States, for permission to talk with the British, hoping to get Beanes freed.

Scene 1

Washington D.C. September, 1814, Francis Scott Key talking with President James Madison.

Key: Mr. President, I would like your permission to go to the British and ask that William Beanes be freed.

President Madison: You have my permission to go, but be careful. Take Mr. Skinner with you. He knows all about how to exchange prisoners.

Key: Thank you, President Madison.

Mr. Skinner: We will fly a white flag on our boat so the British know we are not coming to fight, but to make a truce.

Scene 2

Mr. Key and his friend Mr. Skinner boarding the British ship.

Mr. Key: I have come to get my friend Mr. Beanes. Will you release him?

British Officer: Yes, we will release Mr. Beanes, but not until after we have attacked Fort McHenry in Maryland. In the meantime, you will be held prisoner with Mr. Beanes. [*To British soldier*]: Take these men to the prisoner-exchange boat. We do not want them to go ashore and tell the Americans that we are going to attack Fort McHenry.

British Soldier: Yes sir! [*To the prisoners*]: Follow me.

Scene 3

Mr. Key, Mr. Beanes, and Mr. Skinner on the prisoner-exchange boat.

Mr. Key: The fighting has been going on for hours. Fort McHenry does not have a strong defense. They could be captured. But I can still see the flag flying, so I know the Fort has not been captured yet.

Mr. Beanes: Night is approaching, perhaps we should try to get some sleep.

[Men lie down and try to sleep.]

Mr. Skinner: I can't sleep. Look, whenever they fire a bomb, I can see the flag. So far, they have not captured Fort McHenry.

[The three men pace up and down the deck of the boat, worried and fretful.]

Mr. Key: The fighting must have stopped, because I cannot hear gunfire. Can you tell which flag is flying over Fort McHenry? Is it the British flag or the American flag?

Mr. Beanes: All I can see is smoke from the gunfire. I cannot tell which flag is flying.

[Men pace some more.]

Mr. Skinner: Dawn is approaching. I wish I knew who won the battle. Look, the smoke is clearing.

Mr. Key: Can you see the stars and stripes? Is the flag still flying over the fort?

Mr. Beanes: Yes, yes, the flag is still there!

Mr. Key: I am so grateful. This is a wonderful moment. The British have not taken over Fort McHenry. The flag is still flying. I am so happy I must write about it.

Mr. Key: [*Writing as he talks*]: Yesterday we were taken prisoners by the British. The British attacked Fort McHenry. Last evening, just at twilight, we could see that our flag was still flying, and we were proud. Through the night, the bombs bursting in the air provided light, and we could see the broad red and white stripes and the bright stars streaming in the wind, proving to us that the British had not yet conquered the fort. But as dawn approached, we could not see, because of the smoke and haze. Did the star-spangled banner still wave, or was the British flag waving over Fort McHenry? As we worried, the smoke cleared, and we could see the stars and stripes. We were thrilled.

British Officer: Mr. Key, Mr. Beanes, and Mr. Skinner, follow me, please. You are to be freed today.

[The men follow the British officer out.]

Scene 4

Mr. Key in the office of his brother-in-law Judge J. H. Nicholson.

Key: Hello, Judge. Here is a poem I have written about our experience on the British prisoner-exchange boat. What do you think of it? I will be going home soon, now that the battle is over.

Judge J. H. Nicholson: It's good to see you, Francis. This is a very good poem. Thank you for the copy. Please tell your family hello when you return.

Key: I will. Goodbye for now.

Judge J. H. Nicholson: Goodbye. [*Mr. Key leaves.*] This is a great poem. I am going to take this poem to the printer and have copies made for the people in the town.

Scene 5

The printer's office of the newspaper the Baltimore American.

Judge J. H. Nicholson: My brother-in-law Francis Scott Key just gave me this poem. I think the people of this town would like to have copies of it.

Printer: I will print it on handbills, and we will pass it out to the people of the city. Does it have a title?

Judge J. H. Nicholson: Call it "The Defense of Fort M'Henry."

Printer: [*Pretends to print the handbills.*]

Scene 6

The town square filled with people.

Printer: Everyone, here is a new poem by a gentleman who witnessed the attack on Fort McHenry. [*He passes out handbills to a crowd of people.*]

People: This is an interesting poem. [*People mingle and discuss the poem together.*]

Ferdinand Durang: Gather 'round, I'll sing this poem to the tune of an old song we all know, "To Anacreon in Heaven." [*Mr. Durang climbs up on a chair and begins singing the song. As he sings, the others join in.*]

Narrator: Sometime later, the name of the song was changed from "Defense of Fort M'Henry" to "The Star-Spangled Banner." More than 100 years later, in 1931, the U.S. Congress officially approved the song as the national anthem of the United States.