

Francis Scott Key
Christian, Churchman, Poet, Patriot, Lawyer –
Founder of the First Bible Society of the District of Columbia

by Dr. Catherine Millard © 2020



A painting of the young Francis Scott Key. From, *Portrait of Old Georgetown*, 1933.

Francis Scott Key (1780-1843) was born in Frederick County, Maryland. After graduating from St. John's College in Annapolis, he studied law in Frederick, Maryland, and in Georgetown, District of Columbia, (then Maryland). He later became district attorney of the District of Columbia.

St. John's Episcopal Church in Georgetown, of which Francis Scott Key was a founder, displays a prominent plaque affixed to a rock adorning its front entranceway. It states,

St. John's Episcopal Church, Georgetown Parish

This first Episcopal congregation in Georgetown was founded in 1796 by the Reverend Walter Dulaney Addison. Other founders and benefactors include Thomas Hyde, Thomas Corcoran, Benjamin Stoddert and Francis Scott Key. President Thomas Jefferson contributed to the building fund. This Federal- style building, based on a design by



St. John's Episcopal Church, circa 1804, Georgetown, District of Columbia. Francis Scott Key was a founder of this church.

William Thornton, Architect of the Capitol, was opened in 1804 and consecrated in 1809. The foundations, walls and bell tower are original. Founded as a Christian community for the worship of God, the dissemination of the Gospel, and the furnishing of spiritual and material help to those in need, St. John's remains dedicated to these purposes. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1: 1.

Founder of the First Bible Society in the District of Columbia

A lover of the Word of God, Francis Scott Key was also a founder of the first Bible Society in the District of Columbia.

Francis Scott Key – Vestryman

Early in 1804, the trustees of St. John's Church, Georgetown, advertised their want of a Rector. In March, they were visited by the Reverend John Sayrs of Port Tobacco Parish, who served as the first pastor of the church. Francis Scott Key was a founding member and vestryman, becoming Rev. Sayrs' devoted parishioner and intimate friend.

At his untimely death in 1809, Key penned a moving epitaph to this great man of God, "who lived and died a humble minister of his benignant purposes to man." The epitaph was engraved upon Rev. Sayrs' marble sarcophagus, which lay beneath St. John's sanctuary until the church's renovation years later, when it was discovered.

It is now displayed on a wall within the church for all to read:

John J. Sayrs

First Rector

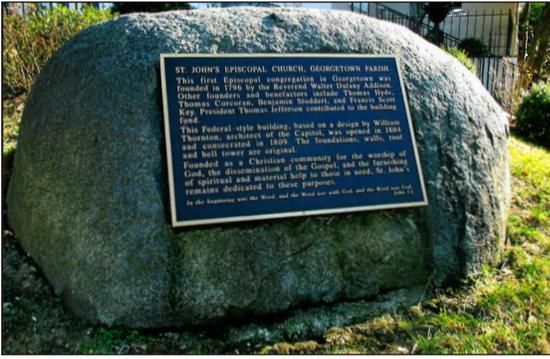
Who served as Faithful Minister of Christ Died January 6, A.D. 1809.

Here once stood forth a man, who from the world,
Though bright its aspect to his youthful eye.
Turn'd with affection ardent to his God,
And lived and died an humble minister
Of his benignant purposes to man.
Here lies he now – yet grieve not thou for him,
READER! He trusted in that love where none
Have ever vainly trusted. Rather let
His marble speak to thee, and should'st thou feel
The rising of a new and solemn thought,
Wak'd by this sacred place and sad memorial,
O listen to its impulse! 'tis Divine –
And it shall guide thee to a life of joy,
A death of hope and endless bliss hereafter.

Francis Scott Key and the Star- Spangled Banner

Francis Scott Key was the author of the words of the national anthem. He was inspired to write it during his attempt in September, 1814 to secure the release of a prominent Baltimore physician, Dr. William Beanes, held prisoner aboard the British war fleet, standing off Baltimore.

Accompanied by Colonel J.S. Skinner, United States government



Historic marker in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, Georgetown, circa 1804. Founded in 1796 by Rev. Walter Dulaney Addison. Designed by William Thornton, Architect of the Capitol.

agent for exchange of prisoners, Key rowed out to Admiral Cockburn's ship under a flag of truce. They accomplished their mission, but were told they must remain aboard since the British were preparing to bombard Fort McHenry, citadel of Baltimore. Through the night of bombardment, Key remained on deck, and at daybreak saw the American flag still flying over the fort. He had jotted down on the back of an old letter the four stanzas which became America's national anthem. That morning, Admiral Cockburn sent his prisoners ashore.

On September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key wrote out his heaven-inspired poem in an inn in Baltimore harbor, portraying America's flag – her foremost symbol, representing her origins, dependence upon Almighty God, and her value system as a nation. Soon afterward, the completed poem was printed and circulated in Baltimore, spreading rapidly through all the States.

It is interesting that many people are only familiar with the first stanza of this poem. However, the remaining stanzas clearly speak of the relationship of God to this nation and her dependence upon Him. It is here printed in its entirety:

The Star-Spangled Banner

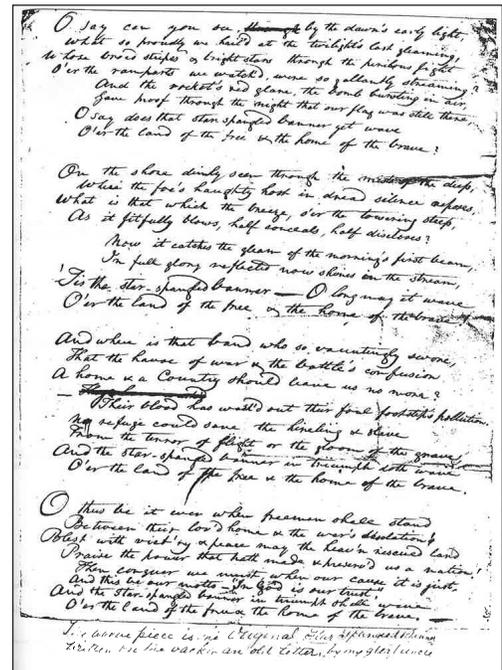
O say! Can you see, by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
 O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
 And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
 Gave proof through 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!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,
 That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
 A home and a country should leave us no more?
 Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps'
 pollution.
 No refuge could save the hireling and slave
 From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
 And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph doth wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when free men shall stand
 Between their loved homes and war's desolation!
 Blest with victory and peace may the Heaven-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.



The Original Star-Spangled Banner (written on the back of an old letter) by Francis Scott Key. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division

These magnificent words, depicting love of God and country, were adapted to the inspiring music of John Stafford Smith (circa 1780).

On March 3, 1931, an Act to make the Star-Spangled Banner the national anthem of the United States, was resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled (36 U.S.C. Sec. 170).

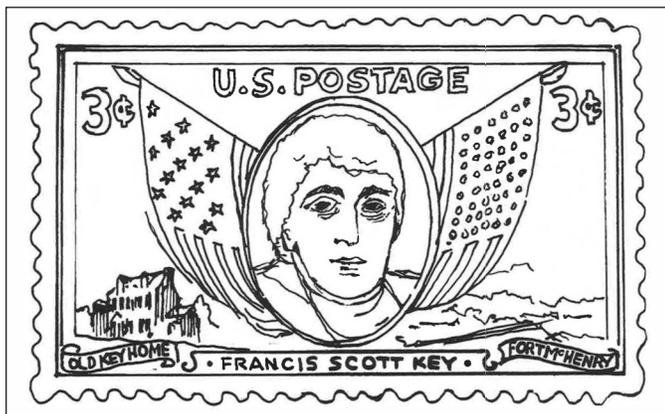
The United States Supreme Court Chief Justice, Key's brother-in-law, wrote that he "admired Francis Scott Key for his brilliant genius, and loved him for his many virtues." ¹

The author of the Star-Spangled Banner wrote that “the patriot who feels himself in the service of God, who acknowledges Him in all his ways, has the promise of Almighty direction, and will find His Word in his greatest darkness, ‘a lantern to his feet and a lamp unto his paths’...He will therefore seek to establish for his country in the eyes of the world, such a character as shall make her not unworthy of the name of a Christian nation...”²

Millions of Americans throughout the ensuing years have paid homage to their flag – the Star-Spangled Banner, by singing the National Anthem, giving full expression to their love of Almighty God and their homeland.

On October 21, 1892, Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister, ordained in the Baptist Church of Little Falls, New York, wrote a pledge of allegiance to America’s flag – the Star-Spangled Banner.

On February 7, 1954, United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his wife attended the Lincoln Day Observance Service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Abraham Lincoln’s church. The sermon topic was one nation “under God.” So moved was President Eisenhower by these immortalized words coming from Lincoln’s famed 1863 Gettysburg Address, that he had the words, “under God” put into the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag. This took place by Act of Congress on Flag Day, June 14, 1954



The Francis Scott Key Commemorative Postage Stamp. Illustrator: Maxwell Edgar © 2000.

**Poems of Francis Scott Key³
On reading Lines by Fawcett
On Revisiting Scenes of Early Life**

So sings the world’s fond slave! So flies the dream
Of life’s gay morn, so sinks the meteor ray
Of fancy into darkness; and no beam
Of purer light shines on the wanderer’s way.

So sings not he who soars on other wings
Than fancy lends him, whom a cheering faith
Warms and sustains, and whose freed spirit springs
To joys that bloom beyond the reach of death.

And thou would’st live again! Again dream o’er
The wild and feverish visions of thy youth

Again to wake in sorrow, and deplore
Thy wanderings from the peaceful paths of truth!

Yet yield not to despair! Be born again,
And thou shalt live a life of joy and peace.
Shall die a death of triumph, and thy strain
Be changed to notes of rapture ne’er to cease.

**“All Things are Yours.”
I Corinthians 3:21**

Behold the grant the King of kings
Hath to his subjects given:
“All things are yours,” it saith; all things
That are in earth and heaven.

The saints are yours, to guide you home,
And bless you with their prayers;
The world is yours to overcome
Its pleasures and its cares;

And life is yours, to give it all
To works of faith and love;
And death is yours, a welcome call
To higher joys above;

All present things are yours; what’er
God’s providence decreed.
Is from His treasures culled with care,
And sent to suit thy need;

And things to come are yours; and all
Shall ever ordered be,
To keep thee safe, what’er befall,
And work for good to thee;

And Christ is yours – His sacrifice,
To speak your sins forgiven;
His righteousness the only price
That thou canst pay for heaven.

Thus God is yours – thus reconciled
His love your bliss secures,
The Father looks upon the child
And saith, “All things are yours.”

Efficacy of Prayer

**“When I called upon thee thou heardest me, and enduedst
my soul with much strength.” Psalm 138: 3**

When troubles, wave on wave, assailed,
And fear my soul appalled,
I knew the Lord would rescue me,
And for deliverance called.

Still onward, onward came the flood;
Again I sought the Lord,
And prayed that He the waves would still
By His resistless Word.

But still the rushing came; again
Arose my earnest prayer,
And then I prayed for faith and strength
What'er He willed, to bear.

Then his felt presence was my strength,
His outstretched arm was nigh;
My head he raised, my heart he cheered,
"Fear not," He said, "'tis I."

Strong in that strength I rose above
The tempest's fierce alarms;
It drove me to a port of peace,
Within a Saviour's arms.

Life

If life's pleasures cheer thee,
Give them not thy heart,
Lest the gifts ensnare thee
From thy God to part:
His praises speak, His favor seek,
Fix there thy hope's foundation;
Love Him, and He shall ever be
The rock of thy salvation.

If sorrow e'er befall thee,
Painful though it be,
Let not fear appall thee:
To thy Saviour flee;
He ever near, thy prayer will hear.
And calm thy perturbation;
The waves of woe shall ne'er o'erflow
The rock of thy salvation.

Death shall never harm thee,
Shrink not from his blow,
For thy God shall arm thee,
And victory bestow:
For death shall bring to thee no sting,
The grave no desolation;
'Tis gain to die, with Jesus nigh,
The rock of thy salvation.

Man

"The days of man are but as grass: for he flourisheth
as a flower of the field. For as soon as the wind
goeth over it, it is gone and the place thereof shall
know it no more. But the merciful goodness of the Lord
endureth forever and ever upon them that fear Him,
and his righteousness upon children's children; Even
upon such as keep His covenant and think upon His
commandments to do them.
"The Lord hath prepared His seat in heaven, and His
kingdom ruleth over all." Psalm 103; 15-19

Such are thy days – so shall they pass away –
As flowers that bloom at morn, at eve decay;

But then, there comes a life that knows no end –
Rich in unfading joys that far transcend
Thy highest thoughts or warmest wishes – given
To those whose days on earth have fitted them for
heaven.

Home

O! Where can the soul find relief from its foes,
A shelter of safety, a home of repose?
Can earth's brightest summit, or deepest hid vale,
Give a refuge no sorrow nor sin can assail?
No, no, there's no home!
There's no home on earth; the soul has no home.

Shall it leave the low earth, and soar to the sky,
And seek an abode in the mansions on high?
In the bright realms of bliss shall a dwelling be given,
And the soul find a home in the glory of heaven?
Yes, yes, there's a home!
There's a home in high heaven: the soul has a home!

O! holy and sweet its rest shall be there,
Free forever from sin, from sorrow and care,
And the loud hallelujahs of angels shall rise,
To welcome the soul to its home in the skies.
Home, home, home of the soul!
The bosom of God is the home of the soul.

Hymn

Lord, with glowing heart I'd praise thee
For the bliss thy love bestows
For the pardoning grace that saves me,
And the peace that from it flows
Help, O God! My weak endeavor,
This dull soul to rapture raise;
Thou must light the flame, or never

Can my love be warmed to praise.
Praise, my soul, the God that sought thee,
Wretched wanderer, far astray;
Found thee lost, and kindly brought thee
From the paths of death away.

Praise, with love's devoutest feeling,
Him who saw thy guilt-born fear,
And, the light of hope revealing,
Bade the blood-stained cross appear.

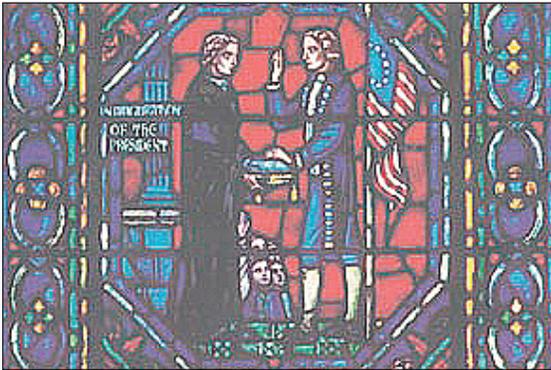
Lord! this bosom's ardent feeling
Vainly would my lips express;
Low before thy foot-stool kneeling,
Deign thy suppliant's prayer to bless.
Let thy grace, my soul's chief treasure,
Love's pure flame within me raise;
And, since words can never measure,
Let my life show forth thy praise.

“The Daily Sacrifice” – George Washington’s hand-written Prayers

George Washington wrote prayers for the morning and evening of each day of the week, entitling them “The Daily Sacrifice.” Following is his Sunday Morning Prayer:

Sunday Morning

ALMIGHTY GOD, and most merciful Father, who didst command the children of Israel to offer a daily sacrifice to thee that thereby they might glorify and praise thee for thy protection both night and day; receive, O Lord, my morning sacrifice which I now offer up to thee; I yield thee humble and hearty thanks that thou hast preserved me from the dangers of the night past, and brought me to the light of this day, and the comforts thereof, a day which is consecrated to thine own service and for thine own honour. Let my heart, therefore, gracious God be so affected with the glory and majesty of it, that I may not do mine own works, but wait on thee, and discharge those weighty duties thou requirest of me; and since thou art a God pure eyes, and wilt be sanctified in all who draw near unto thee, who dost not regard the sacrifice of fools, nor hear sinners who tread in thy courts, pardon, I beseech thee my sins, remove them from thy presence as far as the east is from the west and accept of me for the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ, that when I come into thy temple, and compass thine altar my prayer may come before thee as incense, and as I desire thou wouldst hear me calling upon thee in my prayers, so give me grace to hear thee calling on me in thy Word that it may be wisdom, righteousness, reconciliation & peace to the saving of my soul in the day of the Lord Jesus. Grant that I may hear it with reverence, receive it with meekness, mingle it with faith, and that it may accomplish in me, gracious God, the good work for which thou hast sent it. Bless my family, kindred, friends and country, be our God & guide this day and forever for His sake, who lay down in the grave and arose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



Stained-glass window of George Washington sworn into office as first U.S. President, by Chancellor Robert Livingston, in Federal Hall, New York, April 30, 1789. Washington’s left hand lay upon the Bible, opened between the 49th and 50th chapters of Genesis. His right hand was upraised, swearing allegiance to the U.S. Constitution. Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C. Photograph: © Christian Heritage Ministries.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Key, Francis Scott. *Poems of the Late Francis S. Key, Esq.*, with an introductory letter by Chief Justice R.B. Taney. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857, p. 28. Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection.
- ² Key, Francis Scott. *An Oration delivered by Francis S. Key, Esq.* before the Washington Society of Alexandria, February 22, 1812, p. 9. Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection.
- ³ Key, Francis Scott. *Poems of the Late Francis S. Key, Esq.*, with an introductory letter by Chief Justice R.B. Taney. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857. Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection.