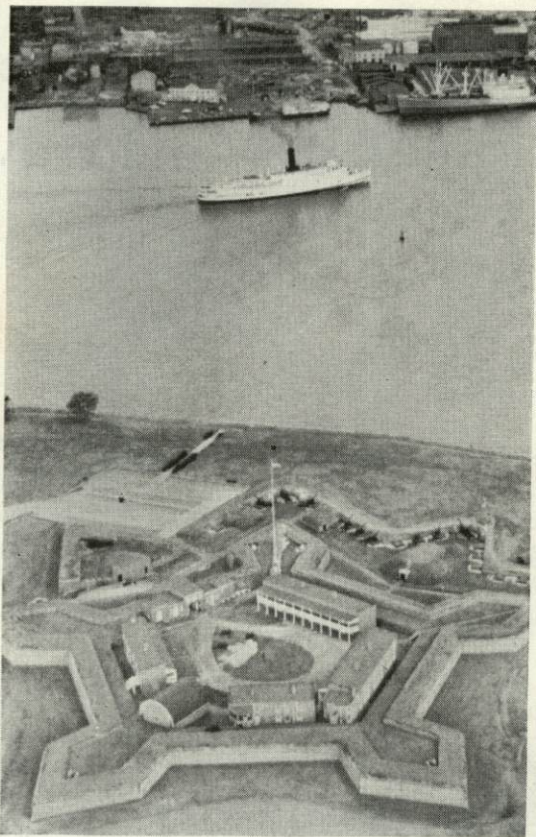


Fort McHenry



*Baltimore's Fort McHenry:
that star-spangled banner
yet waves o'er the ramparts.*

● America's flag holds a web of separate meanings, one for every citizen, and all the strands converge on an antique star-shaped fortress on Whetstone Point in Baltimore. The focal spot is Fort McHenry, whose 25-hour agony under the guns of the British fleet, in the War of 1812, transfigured it into a major shrine and, as an accidental bonus, inspired Francis Scott Key to write *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Today the aged bulwark draws an impressive—and impressed—650,000 visitors a year; insofar as any feeling can take solid form, their patriotism is embodied in its battlements.

Your own private strand of meaning, reaching back a century and a half, grips you from the moment you drive between the heavy wrought-iron gates of the Fort. Inside the 43-acre enclosure, rich lawn lines both sides of the road, and to your left the gradient slopes away to the shimmering Patapsco River. Sod, trees, shrubs wear the scrupulously policed look of a proud military post. Your mood suffers a setback, briefly, as you pass the monument to Key—a heroic fig-leaved bronze of Orpheus, plucking at his lyre in a pigeon-toed stance that belies the martial context of the setting. But

in seconds this is behind you and the Fort itself looms ahead, squat, earth-rooted, an utterly immovable object that could, and did, win out over irresistible force.

Park on a wide modern esplanade and climb some steps toward the outer wall. Above you, old-time cannon poke their muzzles over the parapet. A few paces to the right, you plunge into a medieval, or at least pre-high-explosive, world of salient and rampart and bastion, of ravelin and sally port. The ravelin is a smaller separate stronghold, shaped like an arrowhead, adding strength to the sally port or entrance. In the sternly narrow passage of the sally port you note the "bombproofs" on either side—dank underground dungeons with no hint of comfort for the occupant. Then you step through to an open area, the cozy inner sanctum of the Fort.

This is the parade ground, a pentagon 150 feet on a side, and rimming it are pleasant two-story buildings with verandas overlooking a central green. Once the barracks, these structures are now museums, some furnished to evoke garrison life in the early 19th Century, others enlivened with formal exhibits that

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unfold the lore of old firearms, the birth-story of the anthem, and the details of the battle that brought it into being. Odd man among the buildings is the Powder Magazine, a muscle-bound edifice with walls and ceiling thirteen feet thick;

many visitors settle for one claustrophobic peek inside it.

Leaving the parade ground, you climb to the parapet, some twelve feet higher. Head toward the southeasterly salient; it takes you past the modern flagstaff where the flag flies twenty-four hours a

day and where, in a fresh breeze, its hal-yards spank against the metal pole in a reassuring tattoo. Your path is lined with ugly black spheres bigger than bowling balls—the “bombs” that Key saw bursting in air, which were glorified hand grenades lobbed from four-ton

mortars. (The rockets of the red glare, as weapons, stand roughly midway between Fourth of July fireworks and the ICBM, and were seldom on target.)

The sandstone peak of the salient gives you a vantage point that illuminates the mechanics of the battle. Directly across the broad Patapsco lies the smudgy maritime shore line of Baltimore; here was the entrance to the harbor, safe as long as Fort McHenry held out. In the blue distance down-river, two miles off, you picture the sixteen British warships deployed for the bombardment. To your right, 290 feet away, another bastion tapers to a menacing point. Between the two, on an apex in the outer work, rises the tall statue of Maj. George Armistead, the fort commander who triumphed over the British—in the face, legend says, of orders from Washington to surrender. Like you, he is looking down the enemy's line of fire.

Consider what Armistead confronted. It was September, 1814. Napoleon was moldering in impotence on Elba, and England could at last detach crack troops to fight in the United States. Only weeks before, these had captured nearby Washington—sweeping in, some say, in time for their officers to enjoy a White House dinner prepared for President Madison and Dolly. At their leisure afterward, they put Federal buildings to the torch. Now, on September 13th, many of these same fighters were bivouacked two miles outside Baltimore, ready to move in as soon as Fort McHenry struck its flag.

Consider, too, the patriotic ordeal of Francis Scott Key as he stood on the deck of a small American ship, behind the British men of war, straining for glimpses of the flag through the murk and uproar of the shelling. Lawyer, diplomat, patriot, poet—the gifted man was here by a freak of circumstance. His mission was to meet the enemy fleet under a flag of truce and negotiate the release of a captive friend, one Dr. William Beanes. He succeeded. But by then the warships were closing in on Fort McHenry, and it was too late to put the Americans ashore

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So Key watched the whole operation, a saturation attack that lasted from dawn on the 13th to seven the following morning. In anguish he paced the deck while the air shuddered with blammings that shook houses miles away. All day and into the night he saw the Fort take the lambasting helplessly because the enemy was anchored out of range. And after midnight, when the firing died down briefly while a picked party approached for a landing, he couldn't tell the outcome, though the defenders poured out a hellfire that charred the maneuver to a standstill. Nor could Key take comfort from the enemy's haphazard marksmanship—only 400 of the 1800 shells found their mark; nor from the lightness of the damage—only two buildings hit badly and only four dead and two dozen injured among the 1000-man garrison. He had only the flag to go by—a mammoth banner with 15 stars and 15 stripes, 42 feet long and 30 high, made specially for this defiant moment—and when he saw it in the dawn, flickering through the fog and the haze of half-hearted parting shots, the poet in him burst out. "Though it had been a hanging matter to make a song," he said later, "I must have written it." Stilted words to the modern ear, but true ones.

It was 117 years later, in 1931, that the slow mills of Congress ground out an Act making *The Star-Spangled Banner* the nation's anthem, honoring it above such rivals as *America the Beautiful*, *Hail Columbia* and even *Yankee Doodle*. Through those years, Fort McHenry served honorably in all our wars, though its guns never again shot to kill. A low point came in the Civil War, when its buildings teemed with thousands of imprisoned Southern sympathizers; it was not quite another Andersonville, yet no place for the sybarite. The Navy used it for a fire-control school as late as World War II, and even today, while the stronghold slumbers in mellow peace as a National Monument and Historic Shrine under the National Park Service, our armed forces keep the right to rouse it "for any and all military purposes" in an emergency.

Clearly, this is a warrior grown old in the nation's service. Except to the purist, it cannot matter much that Fort McHenry's cannon do not necessarily date from 1814; that the scarred remnant of the battle flag is not here but in the Smithsonian Institution; that the second story of the barracks buildings was added later, and that the whole area was

restored a generation ago to look as it did in the 1830's. Only the face is changed, not the body or spirit.

If such lapses do disturb you, there is a corps of Government scholars on your side, men who have been working with old documents and modern shovels and coming up with thrilling finds of the 1814 period. They have explored beneath the barracks and uncovered the cellar kitchens, long boarded over and forgotten, where chow was prepared for Armistead's men. And guided by a map of 1819, they dug in the inner parade area and unearthed the subbase of a flagpole—two crossed oaken beams, one nine feet long and one a foot shorter, each weighing better than 200 pounds. These timbers, preserved in the wet soil seven feet down, almost certainly held up the flag that was still there.

The web of meanings, the individual strands—Baltimore knows and cherishes them best. Last year, on September 14, the city exploded with historic pride and gratitude in its annual Defenders' Day observance, a triple gala which includes the celebration of Constitution Day and I Am an American Day. The parade was a three-hour affair watched by a record throng of 315,000. Buddy Ebsen turned up in the flesh as on the TV screen, in the working clothes of Davy Crockett's right-hand man. Lucy Monroe did her celebrated bit, singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* on this most relevant of all occasions.

For the climax of the day, Fort McHenry took over. Out on Whetstone Point, in the twilight, the Marine Corps Band played. Speakers said their say on a platform flanked by a Nike and an Honest John missile. Then came the ceremonial re-enactment of the battle, a mock engagement between the Coast Guard Cutter *Bibb*, out in the Patapsco, and three modern field pieces at the Fort. For minutes the opponents blasted fiercely at each other with blank shells. Fireworks followed, giving way at last to a spell-casting high point called the illumination of the flag. Massed searchlights, including the *Bibb's*, picked out the banner at Fort McHenry, high above the ramparts, and held it for all to see that it yet waves.

One lone bug put a lurch in the proceedings. The shore batteries barked first. For the next five minutes, silence gripped the Patapsco. Then someone bellowed into a public-address mike, "Would the British ship please start firing?" And the *Bibb* cut loose with its vain salvos.

—HARRY NICKLES