

Francis Scott Key: A Christian Gentleman

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As the early light of dawn crept through the darkness, haze, and smoke, three men in a small boat tensely waited with a mixture of fearful apprehension and hopeful expectancy to see what the new day would bring for their city and nation. It had been almost twenty-five hours earlier when, finding themselves detained among the enemy ships, they had watched the enemy launch a combined army-navy attack on one of their nation's most important cities. Their country had already experienced many defeats, and their capital city had been burned. When the three men, then, found themselves observing the awesome attack launched against their friends and fellow-countrymen, their concern was great. The fighting was intense; the bombs from the enemy ships readily found their mark in the attacked fort. The noise of the rockets, bombs, and cannon-fire had been almost constant throughout the day and continued into the night. Suddenly, in the early morning hours, there was silence. Only occasional firing broke the stillness. The battle seemed over, but what was the outcome? The three men in the boat watched eagerly to see if their flag was still flying over the fort and city.

It was during the hours of intense watching and waiting that the words to a song began to flow through the poetic mind of Francis Scott Key, one of the men in the boat. How did Key come to find himself watching the fate of his country from such a vantage point? What kind of a man was he to write a

song which has so often touched and thrilled his countrymen?

Francis Scott Key was born on August 1, 1779, while his country was waging the war which would establish its independence. His father, John Ross Key, fought in the American Revolution and generously armed and equipped a regiment at his own expense. The Keys were wealthy landowners from Frederick, Maryland; and Francis Scott early developed a love for the land and home of Terra Rubra, his father's estate.

Among the strong influences on Key's character in his early years was his grandmother, Ann Arnold Ross Key. She had lost her eyesight by fire when she was rescuing two servants from the flames of her father's burning house, but she bore her terrible affliction with Christian fortitude. The sensitive Francis Scott was deeply impressed by her strong faith. Francis stayed with his grandmother while he attended school in Annapolis; he later boarded with her sister, Mrs. Upton Scott, while attending St. John's College. After graduation from St. John's at the age of seventeen, Key studied law in the office of Jeremiah T. Chase. He became fast friends with his fellow law student Roger B. Taney, who married Key's sister, Ann Arnold. Taney later became Chief Justice of the United States and presided over one of the most famous court cases of the century, the Dred Scott case. He was also the Chief Justice who inaugurated Abraham Lincoln into the Presidency.

In 1802 Key married the beautiful Mary Taylor Lloyd in the elegant drawing room of the Lloyd mansion in Annapolis. Polly Lloyd, whose ancestry included a royal governor of Maryland,

had had many suitors; and Key had had some difficulty in winning her hand. Once she had consented, however, Polly became a devoted wife and mother. The Keys had eleven children, six boys and five girls, and their family life together was a happy and blessed one. Soon after his marriage, Key began to practice law in Washington, D.C.; and his family had a lovely home on Bridge Street in Georgetown. Even in the busiest of times, Key never failed to conduct family prayers in his home twice a day, always including the servants in these family devotions. The shady lawn and orchard of the Key mansion sloped to the edge of the Potomac River, providing a lovely setting for the frolics and gambols of the Key children. Francis Scott delighted in sharing the nature of the area with his children and often planned special surprises for them in the gardens. Once he instructed the gardener to make a tiny round garden for each child. When the seeds sprouted, they took the shape of the children's names -- Marie, Lizzie, Anna, etc. In midsummer the family further enjoyed the outdoors together by spending a holiday at Terra Rubra, the estate Francis Scott inherited from his father.

Key's Christian convictions were intense and influenced all his relations and actions. At one time, in 1814, he even considered entering the ministry. Though he decided to remain in his law career, his Christian beliefs continued strong and his Christian work active throughout his life. Among those whose faith was strengthened and sustained by Key's help was John Randolph of Roanoke. Randolph had had his faith



shaken by reading Voltaire and other Enlightenment authors. In a letter to Randolph, Key wrote his own views, which still contain excellent apologetical advice for today,

I don't believe there are any new objections to be discovered to the truth of Christianity, though there may be some art in presenting old ones in a new dress. My faith has been greatly confirmed by the infidel writers I have read... Men may argue ingeniously against our faith, as indeed they may against anything -- but what can they say in defense of their own -- I would carry the war into their own territories, I would ask them what they believe -- if they said they believed anything, I think that they might be shown to be more full of difficulties and liable to infinitely greater objections than the system they oppose and they were credulous and unreasonable for believing it. If they said they did not believe anything, you could not, to be sure, have anything further to say to them. In that case they would be insane, or at best illy qualified to teach others what they ought to believe or disbelieve.

The strong Christian faith of Francis Scott Key often found expression in poetry. "Lord, with glowing heart I'd praise thee" couples Christian humility with confidence in God's gracious provision. It found a place in many hymnals and well expresses Key's life:

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.

When the United States went to war with Great Britain in 1812, Key was opposed to the war and thought his country's action was precipitous; yet he joined the Georgetown Field Artillery Co. in 1813, and performed volunteer duty to defend his home. In August, 1814, he served as an aide to General Walter Smith at Bladensburg. Here the Americans were severely beaten by the British, and many feared Georgetown would be the next point of British attack. Key hurried home to help his wife and children evacuate; but Polly Key refused to leave her husband behind and determined to stay in her home, in spite of the threatening British. The British never came to Georgetown, but headed for Washington, D.C., where they burned and ransacked many of the nation's public buildings. Key's encounters with the British were not at an end, however. He was sent on a mission to the British which would indirectly lead to his national fame. This mission was concerned with the capture of Dr. William Beanes by the British.

Dr. Beanes was a prominent physician who lived in Upper Marlborough, Maryland, about sixteen miles from Washington. The doctor lived handsomely and had one of the finest houses in the area. When the British passed through Upper Marlborough, the officers used Dr. Beanes' home as their headquarters. They

treated Dr. Beanes and his property well, though they did require the doctor to give an oath of good behavior to the English. Apparently Dr. Beanes believed the oath applied only while the officers were in his home; for after the battle of Bladensburg, Beanes captured and had arrested some British soldiers who were behaving disorderly near his home. When the British officers heard of this, they sent a squad of marines to arrest the doctor and imprisoned him aboard a British ship. The appeals of family and friends for the doctor's release went unheeded by the British. As a last resort, the family appealed to Francis Scott Key, also a friend of Dr. Beanes', to secure the United States' government support in negotiating Beanes' release.

Key was able to secure the necessary letters from the Department of State and prepared to visit the British under a flag of truce. He was accompanied on his mission by Col. John S. Skinner, agent of the U.S. for Parole of Prisoners. The two men set sail in a small boat in the Chesapeake September 5, 1814. They were not sure exactly where the British fleet was, and it took them two days to find it. Though the men were cordially received by the British, the officers were unwilling to release Dr. Beanes, who they felt had humiliated the British soldiers. Not until Col. Skinner presented letters from wounded British officers left at Bladensburg to their friends aboard the fleet did British General Ross begin to relent in his detention of the doctor. The letters told of the humanity and kindness with which the Americans were treating



the wounded British, and General Ross felt the release of Dr. Beanes would in some way show his appreciation for the American kindnesses.

Though Key and Skinner had secured the release of Dr. Beanes, they were not immediately allowed to return to their homes. The British had been planning an attack on Baltimore, and they did not want Key or Skinner to return to tell the Americans of the British plans. They would be detained behind British lines until the attack on Baltimore had been successfully completed.

For a man of Key's sensitive nature, the waiting and emotional stress was intense. The last months had been full of emotionally draining days. Key had seen and been a part of the American rout at Bladensburg. He had feared for his family as the British attacked near his home. He had learned of the burning and destruction of his nation's capital city. Now, he was being detained within the enemy's lines, without being able to contact his family, to watch the British attack on his home-state's major city. Years later, in a speech at Frederick, Maryland, Key described his feelings during this time:

I saw the flag of my country waving over a city -- the strength and pride of my native State -- a city devoted to plunder and desolation by its assailants. I witnessed the preparations for its assaults, and I saw the array of its enemies as they advanced to the attack. I heard the sound of battle; the noise of the conflict fell upon my listening ears, and told me that the "brave and the free" had met the invaders.

Key's intense emotions were released the morning of September 14,



when after the noise of the battle had ceased, he looked and saw the flag waving defiantly over Fort McHenry. He later remembered that

Through the clouds of the war the stars of that banner still shone in my view, and I saw the discomfited host of its assailants driven back in ignominy to their ships. Then, in that hour of deliverance and joyful triumph, my heart spoke; and "Does not such a country and such defenders of their country deserve a song?" was its question. With it came an inspiration not to be resisted...Let the praise, then, if any be due, be given, not to me, who only did what I could not help doing, not to the writer, but to the inspirers of the song!

Key wrote out the phrases to his song on the back of an envelope. Later that evening, in a Baltimore hotel, he wrote out a complete draft. In the morning he showed it to his brother-in-law, Judge Nicholson, who had commanded the volunteer artillery at Fort McHenry's defense. Nicholson soon had the song published as a handbill, and under the title "The Defense of Fort McHenry" it was soon circulating throughout Baltimore. Set to the English tune "To Anacreon in Heaven", the song enjoyed immense popularity and soon was retitled "The Star-Spangled Banner". The title of the song became the name of the country's flag, and because of the song, the country itself would ever after be known as the "Land of the free and the home of the brave." Although written to rejoice in the victory of the moment, the last stanza describes what Key the Christian hoped would be a constant characteristic of his beloved country:

Oh, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved homes and war's desolation;  
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the Heav'n rescued land  
Praise the Pow'r 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!"

After the War of 1812 was over, Key continued his successful law career. For three terms he was district attorney for the District of Columbia. In both this position and as a private lawyer, Key argued many cases before the Supreme Court. President Andrew Jackson valued Key as a warm friend and intrusted him with several delicate missions. In 1832 he was sent to South Carolina by Jackson to help solve the nullification crisis which was threatening dismemberment of the United States. In 1833 he was sent to Alabama to resolve a conflict between the state of Alabama and the national government over lands reserved for the Indians. During his six-weeks stay in Alabama, Key was often a guest in the home of Governor Gayle. Mrs. Gayle described in her diary the social side of Key's stay,

Francis Scott Key, the District Attorney for the District of Columbia, is here at present for the purpose of assisting to settle the Creek controversy. He is very pleasant -- intelligent you at once perceive. His countenance is not remarkable when at rest, but as soon as he lifts his eyes, usually fixed upon some object near the floor, the man of sense, of fancy, and the poet is at once seen. But the crowning trait of his character, I have just discovered, he is a Christian.

Mrs. Gayle was delighted that Key was a Christian and loved to speak of spiritual things. At her request, Key wrote several verses for the albums of Gayle's daughters. The verses written for nine year old Sarah Ann Gayle were entitled "The Rock of Thy Salvation",

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 favors seek,  
 Fix there thy hope's foundation;  
 Love him, and he shall ever be  
 The rock of thy salvation.

If troubles e'er befall thee --  
 Painful though they be --  
 Let not fear apall thee,  
 To the Savior flee.

He ever near, thy prayer shall 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.

And death shall bring to thee no sting,  
 The grave no desolation;  
 'Tis gain to die, with Jesus nigh --  
 The rock of thy salvation.

Though a member of the Episcopal church with strong doctrinal beliefs, Key did not believe any particular form of church government was divinely established. He was tolerant in an age of much intolerance and willing to work readily with Christians of other denominations. Giving liberally to organizations he deemed worthy, Key was also instrumental in organizing several worthwhile causes. In Georgetown he helped organize the Lancaster Society for the free education of poor children. On a national level he was a founder and principal promoter of the American Colonization Society, one of the earliest societies devoted to dealing with slavery in America. Several theological institutions were either organized with



Key's aide or administered by a Board of which he was a member. These included the General Theological Seminary, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, and the Virginia Theological Seminary at Alexandria. Even on his deathbed Key was concerned about helping others. He told his wife of the leather bag containing money for charity he had in his desk and instructed her not to use the money for herself but to see that this was used for charitable purposes. All his life he had reserved a tenth of his funds for charity.

Francis Scott Key died of pleurisy in the home of his daughter in January, 1843. However, because his trust was in God, death was not the end of life. Key's earlier verses themselves undoubtedly comforted his family as they laid the body of their husband and father in the grave,

I have been a base and grovelling thing  
And the dust of the earth my home,  
But now I know that the end of my woe,  
And the day of my bliss is come.

Then let them, like me, make ready their shrouds,  
Nor shrink from the mortal strife,  
And like me they shall sing, as to heaven they spring,  
Death is not the end of life.

Key had lived the life of a Christian gentleman and allowed his Christianity to visibly affect his public as well as his private life. His desire that his life should show forth praises to God had been fulfilled, and now he could anticipate singing a new song with the saints around the throne and the Lamb.

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