



After the Fact | [Our Flag Is Still There: A Visit to the Star-Spangled Banner](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

[Footsteps]

Dan LeDuc, host: It's just up this ramp. And when you turn the corner, the corridor starts getting dark.

[Footsteps continue]

With the Fourth of July nearly here, we decided to go to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It seemed like a good time to take a look at the Star-Spangled Banner. Curator Jennifer Jones is our guide.

Jennifer Jones, chair and curator, Division of Armed Forces History, National Museum of American History: The darkness also gives it a reverence, and a quiet dignity that we want people to be able to look at it and reflect upon what it means to them. Because the flag means something different to every person that comes and sees it.

Dan LeDuc: I mean, I get teary-eyed standing here.

Jennifer Jones: That's exactly why we did it.

Dan LeDuc: For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is "[After the Fact](#)." We're visiting one of the nation's greatest symbols—the Star-Spangled Banner. This is the very flag that flew over Fort McHenry after the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812. The very one Francis Scott Key was trying to see when he asked whether it still waved.

But it doesn't look like the flag you might have by your front door this Fourth of July. That brings us to our data point for this episode: Fifteen. The Star-Spangled Banner has 15 stars and 15 stripes, for the original colonies and two new states, Vermont and Kentucky.



The number reflects how America was changing at the time. Growing, adding states. And the flag continued to change its look over the years until it was standardized into how we know it today.

Of course, we may see it differently. As Jones said, the flag means something different to every person.

We refer to the Star-Spangled Banner all the time, but this is it. There are many American flags, but this is it. When did that phrase enter the public consciousness? Now, we know that Francis Scott Key wrote his poem. And we now know it's our national anthem, but when did the flag, being known that way, sort of enter our American consciousness?

Jennifer Jones: It had to do with Key and Key's writing. So the manuscript that Key wrote, which in his mind really was to the tune of "An Anacreon in Heaven," which was a popular known tune at the time. And there were a number of different songs and lyrics that had been written to the same tune. He wrote this to that tune.

[Piano plays notes from "To an Anacreon in Heaven"]

Jennifer Jones: He had also written lyrics previously to the same tune that we don't know as well. He really coined the term and the phrase "Oh say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave," in the words that he wrote as he was inspired by seeing that flag on the morning of the end of the Battle of Baltimore on 14 September 1814.

So he really was the one that put those words to this object. And that tune started to be sung not long after the Battle of Baltimore, in Baltimore. It was published within three months, and the lyrics were also printed in newspapers, not long after the Battle of Baltimore. And so people started to sing it right away. And it, of course, didn't become our national anthem until the 1930s.

Dan LeDuc: Let's talk about the particular history of this particular flag.

Jennifer Jones: Lt. Col. Armistead, George Armistead, was the commander of Fort McHenry. He had taken commission I believe in 1813 of what he called the Star Fort, which we now call Fort McHenry. And he commissioned Mary Pickersgill, who was a known flag-maker in Baltimore, to make for him two flags. One was a garrison flag, which this Star-Spangled Banner is—or it used to be—the size of a garrison flag. And a storm flag, which was a smaller flag. And for that she was paid over \$400.



They started to make it in her home. And then it got so big and so unwieldy that they needed room to spread out. So they went across the street to a tavern, and they made it up on the floor.

Dan LeDuc: So this flew over Fort McHenry, a fateful battle of the War of 1812. And we have our national anthem as a result. But it wasn't immediately recognized as this icon, right? The flag just kept flying there for a while.

Jennifer Jones: It did. I'm guessing because he had it made in 1813, it was also flown at other occasions before the Battle of Baltimore. Most commanders will have multiple flags. Most fortifications have more than one flag. And not just a regular garrison flag, but also storm flags and other flags. So he may have had another garrison flag after this. We don't really know. But this one, having been made in 1813, did continue to fly until 1814 until after the Battle of Baltimore. It probably retired after the song became so popular, because we know that he kept it when he retired. And so, as he went out of service and left command of the garrison, he took this flag with him, knowing the history of it. And so his family kept it.

They showed it up through the 19th century. The granddaughter had it, and it was shown at the 1876 centenary exhibition. It went to the Boston Navy Yard when it was lent to Cmdr. Preble from the Navy. He would go around and lecture about the history of the flag, and that's when a lot of snippets and souvenirs were given away.

Dan LeDuc: So let's pause for just a second and describe the flag today that people see here. And it's in some ways a little shocking that it is as abbreviated in some places as it is. But tell us how the flag looks now.

Jennifer Jones: So when you are in the corner, you come into a really very dark gallery, long gallery space. And immediately you see, you know, the blue field with 14 of the 15 stars. You see a very threadbare flag, and it is truncated on what we call the fly edge. Some of the damage that was cut away was from flying. If you think about flags that fly today, the end gets whipped around from the wind and it gets frayed. And so much of the fly edge was cut away. But a lot of it was also given away as souvenirs.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, we wouldn't think of that today. To actually cut a flag would be desecration today, but yet, in those days, that was—

Jennifer Jones: That's correct. And that's because the flag code was a 20th century understanding. During the 19th century, souveniring was huge. People would take mementos of locks of hair and keep them in hair lockets and keep them to memorialize and to remember those people. This was really no different. Taking a souvenir, or giving



away a souvenir of something that was so memorialized in song in the American public—

Dan LeDuc: This was part of pop culture of the day.

Jennifer Jones: It really was part of pop culture. And it became so even before the Civil War. Post-Civil War, it became even larger, because people were really trying to stitch back what America meant to them, and stitch back the nation after a civil war. And so having this travel the East Coast in particular, and being lectured on and talked about and seen by the publics, was a really important, cathartic experience for many Americans helping to bind those wounds.

Dan LeDuc: Before it came to the Smithsonian in 1907, almost eight feet of the flag were lost to wear and tear or given away as souvenirs. At some point in the 1800s, one of the stars was cut out.

We have a national mystery as well, right? There is that missing star.

Jennifer Jones: Yeah, the mystery of that star. Yeah, nobody really knows. Georgiana Armistead took the information to her grave. She knew.

Historians other than myself are guessing that it's either in Armistead's grave. Maybe her father was buried with it. She did say it was given to a very prominent individual. So the question is, was it given to Lincoln? So we just don't know.

Dan LeDuc: One thing that isn't a mystery is how much work goes into caring for the flag. This November marks the 10th anniversary of the completion of a massive restoration effort on the Star-Spangled Banner.

A number of donors, including Pew, supported the work, which was the most extensive ever undertaken on the Star-Spangled Banner. It included the removal of 1.7 million stitches that had attached an old linen backing to the flag.

Jennifer Jones: We recognized that any conservation treatment that was done can be undone. That's the nature of conservation. So they had to undo the old treatment. And in doing so, were able to do state-of-the-art material studies of the wool fibers, of the dyes, and of all of the marks that we have found on the flag, including iron gall ink, which indicated signatures on stars from the Armistead family as well as some of the defenders.

Dan LeDuc: And you mentioned the wool. I read it's British wool.



Jennifer Jones: It is British wool.

Dan LeDuc: There's a certain irony, right?

Jennifer Jones: There's a huge irony. There was not enough wool being manufactured in the United States at the time of the war that they needed. And so they had ordered it. Even though we have British blockades of goods and things like that, they were able to secure in 1813 all wool for two flags that she was commissioned to make.

So putting this flag and continuing to use this flag as the iconic image for this museum really put it in the middle of the museum. This is the heart.

Dan LeDuc: This is where we are, right.

Jennifer Jones: We are in the heart of the National Museum of American History. And the heart really revolves around this flag.

We give people a very brief history of that information on the Battle of Baltimore and the beginnings of it. And as you turn a corner, you're coming into a very long dark space, and you immediately see the flag in its chamber. And we call this a chamber because it really is a chamber. It is a conservation chamber that is specially prepared for this object.

Dan LeDuc: The flag doesn't hang here. It's displayed here almost on a large table.

Jennifer Jones: It's exactly on a large table. This is a conservation table, as a matter of fact, that is at a 10-degree angle. Inside this chamber, we keep it at less than 14 percent oxygen, because the low oxygen helps prevent continuous deterioration of the wool fibers. And it's only in one foot-candle of light. And so it sort of pops visually. You have to have a dark area outside in order to see the flag. There's no electricity. There's nothing inside the chamber that could combust. And so what you see is a visual display, but it's really for conservation of the flag and the long-term preservation.

Dan LeDuc: You present us in such a lovely way, and yet I'm sure everyone who steps out of here probably has a slightly different reaction.

Jennifer Jones: I'm sure they do. The best reaction we got a letter about was this young boy who came here with his family. And he was so excited to come in and see this flag. And his father talked about how, when he came in, he knelt down in front of the flag. And he put his ear up to the glass, because he saw the words that are on the back of the exhibit case—"Oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wave?" And he felt that he could hear those words being sung. And this was like a 7- or 8-year-old little boy. And he



was so moved by his experience, and his parents were just taken aback. They had no idea that this was so meaningful to him.

Dan LeDuc: Oh my.

Jennifer Jones: And we often have groups that come into the museum—choir groups and things—they will break out in song in the atrium. People stop. And they listen and they applaud, or they'll sing along. And so while we create exhibits that have objects, we're hoping to create those kinds of experiences for people. And for people to be moved by what we do here. And I would say that is a true indication that people are moved by this flag.

The fragility of America is really on display here with this object. And how our democracy is part of the cloth of America, but here is a physical manifestation of that idea and ideal that we continue to hope all Americans aspire to.

["The Star-Spangled Banner" plays]

Dan LeDuc: Well, Jennifer, thank you so much.

Jennifer Jones: You're very welcome.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Thanks to our friends at the National Museum of American History for showing us around.

Check out the Smithsonian's podcast, "[Sidedoor](#)," for more history on some of the 154 million treasures in their vaults.

And if you'd like to hear more from us, visit us online at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. We're on Twitter at [PewTrusts](#), and you help us out by giving us a rating on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen.

[Closing theme music]

Dan LeDuc: For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."