

MARY PICKERSGILL



MARY YOUNG PICKERSGILL

My name is Mary Pickersgill. I am a maker of flags and banners, and known especially for my ships' flags. I am a widow and live on Albermarle and Pratt Streets in Baltimore. My mother and daughter, Caroline, live with me. Since I am the sole support of my family I earn a living by making flags.

I was born in 1776 in Philadelphia, PA. It was a very difficult time as the British were very unkind. My father moved us to Lebanon, PA during the Revolutionary War to protect us. We moved in a little wagon with only our most valuable possessions. Later, most of them were stolen. We finally moved to Baltimore.

As I matured I was described as having a lot of charm and a pleasing personality, and being vivacious and attractive. When I became a widow I was very sad, but knew I had to work to take care of my family. I became well known among the military for my skill as a flagmaker. I was determined to make a good bargain with history.

During the war of 1812, another critical time in our nation's history, I was selected to make two flags for Fort McHenry. I was recommended to Colonel Armistead, Fort McHenry's Commander, by Commodore Joshua Barney, General John Stricker, and General Samuel Smith. These brave gentlemen knew how important Fort McHenry was as the British burned the White House and prepared to advance toward Baltimore. They decided the worried Baltimoreans would have their spirits raised by seeing a huge, high-flying flag at Fort McHenry. Therefore, Colonel Armistead asked me in the summer of 1813, to make two flags - a large flag and a smaller one to fly in bad weather.

A fee of \$500.00 was contracted for both flags. The large flag was to be thirty feet by forty-two feet so it could be seen from a great distance. My daughter, Caroline, and a friend helped me make the flag, which became the largest battle flag in the world. We worked many nights until twelve o'clock midnight. A law had been passed by Congress in January, 1794 that the new flag should have 15 stripes and 15 stars, and this was what governed the making of the flag. The 15 stars and 15 stripes represented the 13 colonies plus Vermont and Kentucky, which had joined our country since the Revolutionary War.

First, I had to find a place to make such a huge flag. The largest place I could find was a nearby malt house which the brewery granted permission for me to use. The entire flag was sewn by hand with flat felled seams and tight stitching so it would not come apart in the wind. The stars were twenty-four inches point to point and the stripes were two feet wide. It required four hundred yards of wool material.

Why am I famous? It was my huge flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the poem which later became our national anthem. He saw the flag from a ship eight miles down the Patapsco River on September 14, 1814. The flag was still waving in the breeze after twenty-five hours of heavy bombardment by the British. The British were very discouraged to see it still there. If the flag that I made had not been so large, Francis Scott Key would not have been able to see it flying over Fort McHenry. He would not have been inspired to write such a beautiful poem on the back of an envelope. Think about my story as you sing “The Star Spangled Banner.”