



Star-Spangled Widow of Baltimore

NEARLY everyone knows how Francis Scott Key composed The Star-Spangled Banner, but few are aware that there was also a woman in the case. She was Mary Young Pickersgill, a vivacious Baltimore widow. Had it not been for her, Key might never have come to write what is now our national anthem.

It was Mrs. Pickersgill, working against time, who made the giant flag which Key saw "by the dawn's early light," still waving over Fort McHenry after an all-night British attack. Previously, a much smaller, faded banner had flown at the fort. Key might not even have been able to see the old flag from the British warship on which he was temporarily being held, and would surely have found it less inspiring to look at.

Mrs. Pickersgill, whose two-story-and-attic house still stands at 60 Albemarle Street in Baltimore, was a flag maker of experience. With her daughter, Caroline, she made a good living supplying smart banners and pennants for clipper ships. In the summer of 1814, the military authorities gave her a rush order to make "the largest battle flag in the world"—thirty-six by twenty-nine feet, with fifteen stripes, each nearly two feet wide, and fifteen stars. They

wanted a flag that could be seen for miles, to buck up morale, which was at a low ebb around Baltimore, with the nation's Capitol in smoldering ruins, the Government scattered, banks closed, troops deserting in numbers and the British fleet converging on the city.

With the help of her daughter and two nieces, Margaret and Jane Young, Mrs. Pickersgill sewed feverishly on the huge flag all through August. Stripes and stars were made in a small workroom in her house, and assembling was done on the floor of near-by Claggett's Brewery, where Mrs. Pickersgill often worked by candlelight until midnight.

She had hardly taken the last stitch on the flag when horsemen galloped down the street bearing the news that the British fleet was at North Point. The flag was rushed to Fort McHenry. The next day the British fleet closed in on the fort.

The flag was torn with shells during the action, but Mrs. Pickersgill had done her work well; it held to the mast. This original Star-Spangled Banner may be seen today at the National Museum in Washington, where, although age, wear and tear have reduced its size, it is still an impressive sight.

—DORAN K. ANTRIM.