

O! SAY CAN YOU SEE, BY THE DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT,
WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL'D AT THE TWILIGHT'S LAST GLEAMING,
WHOSE BROAD STRIPES AND BRIGHT STARS THROUGH THE PERILOUS FIGHT
O'ER THE RAMPARTS WE WATCH'D WEER SO GALLANTLY STREAMING?
AND THE ROCKETS' RED GLARE, THE BOMBS BURSTING IN AIR,
GAVE PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT THAT OUR FLAG WAS STILL THERE;
O! SAY, DOES THAT STAR-SPANGLED BANNER YET WAVE,
O'ER THE LAND OF THE FREE, AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE?



A family viewed the Star-Spangled Banner, the beloved American artifact and symbol, in its new gallery in the National Museum of American History in November 2008. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of American History.)

The Star-Spangled Banner Flies High, Shining New Light on American History

By Brent D. Glass

One million people visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in the first 100 days after the museum reopened on Nov. 21, 2008, after an \$85 million renovation. They came from across the country and around the world to explore the stories of our rich history and to connect to our national experience.

Among these visitors was a group of young men — the Boys Choir of Kenya — who were in Washington to attend the inauguration of President Barack Obama. They toured the museum's exhibition of the Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the song that became our national anthem, and then — to everyone's collective surprise and delight — they stood in the museum's atrium and performed a wonderful rendition of it.

The choir then sang "America the Beautiful" and a Kenyan folk song, adding some fancy choreography for the latter. By the time they finished, several thousand people had gathered in the atrium and along the third-floor balconies and they offered a huge roar of approval and gratitude. The boys posed for pictures with visitors and the museum staff improvised a gift bag for each member of the choir — Uncle Sam hats and red-white-and-blue wrist bands.

It was a highlight of a historic week (indeed, more than 150,000 visitors attended the museum during inauguration week). The impromptu show by these African guests also served as a

dramatic confirmation of the symbolic role this museum — and all museums, for that matter — play in American civic life.

A public place for important messages

The museum's sky-lit atrium serves as a public square and is partly modeled on what the ancient Greeks, the inventors of democracy, called the "agora," the location for political, religious, social and commercial activities. Just as societies worldwide have established plazas, squares, commons and forums as places that support the public life of the community, the museum's public square provides a civic space, a crossroad for ideas, information, entertainment and commerce.

Visitors enjoy and learn from theatrical programs, musical performances and naturalization ceremonies, the latter serving as a powerful reminder of the responsibilities of citizenship and the appeal of belonging to the American family. The public square also is the setting for a presentation about Mary Pickersgill, the woman who sewed the Star-Spangled Banner. And it is this flag, of course, the museum's most famous artifact, that most visitors want to see.

Raising the flag's impact

Located at the north wall of the public square, the entrance to the Star-Spangled Banner gallery features a sculptural

representation of a waving flag designed by the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Made of a stainless steel frame with 960 plastic tiles, the entire structure is attached at a single point to the wall and cantilevered across the wall to evoke the idea of a flag blowing in the wind. The plastic tiles are arranged in 15 rows in tribute to the 15 stripes of the Star-Spangled Banner. Each row of tiles reflects the changes in activity — movement and light — in the public square.

Visitors walk up a short ramp to reach the viewing area for the flag. Along this ramp, there is a brief history of the War of 1812 and the critical circumstances of the summer of 1814 leading up to the attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore in September of that year. By seeing period artifacts as well as a charred timber from the White House burned by British troops, visitors understand the emotional response of Key when he saw that the Americans had successfully defended the fort in spite of a ferocious 24-hour bombardment, with artillery landing at a rate of one shell per minute at its peak.

By the time visitors have reached the flag viewing area, they have adjusted to lower lighting levels and they are seeing the flag intentionally "by the dawn's early light," a conservation requirement that also provides an interpretive opportunity.

What they see is a very worn and fragile flag made of wool stripes and a wool canton with cotton stars. In the summer of



Conservators clipped the Fowler stitches to separate the old linen backing from the flag in the most recent restoration that began in 1998 and took about a decade to complete. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of American History.)

1813, Mary Pickersgill, an experienced Baltimore flag maker, and four young women assistants including an African-American indentured servant, sewed the flag under contract to the commander at Fort McHenry, Major George Armistead.



Mary Pickersgill



George Armistead

The flag is displayed behind a thick glass window on a slightly elevated table in what is essentially a clean room. All systems — lighting, security, air handling, fire prevention — are designed to meet unique technical requirements and provide maximum long-term preservation. With the first stanza of the national anthem projected on the back wall of the display, the Star-Spangled Banner gallery offers visitors a truly patriotic experience comparable to seeing the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia; the Statue of Liberty in New York; or the Charters of Freedom at the



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Star-Spangled Banner Facts

Contrary to what some people might believe, Betsy Ross did not make the flag. **Professional flag maker Mary Pickersgill** of Baltimore did in 1813. It was delivered to Fort McHenry on Aug. 19, 1813. Pickersgill was paid \$405 for a garrison flag (what has come to be known as the Star-Spangled Banner) along with \$168.54 for a storm flag (a smaller version of it that also flew at Fort McHenry).

The Star-Spangled Banner is **30 x 34 feet** and weighs less than 45 pounds.

Originally, the flag was 30 x 42 feet; some material was lost when the flag was flown at Fort McHenry and when "snippings" were taken during the 19th century for souvenirs.

The Star-Spangled Banner has **15 stripes and 15 stars**, as mandated by Congress in 1794, one for each state in the Union at that time. One star was removed before the flag came to the Smithsonian in 1907.

The flag's massive size was **typical of garrison flags** used at forts in the 19th century. They were flown from tall poles so that the flags could be seen from great distances.

This flag is known specifically as the Star-Spangled Banner. **Old Glory is another flag**, also owned by the museum. (Old Glory was made in 1824 as a birthday present for a New England sea captain named William Driver, who nicknamed it in 1831; Old Glory was later hoisted over the state capitol after Union forces recaptured Nashville, Tenn., in 1862. It never flew again.)

Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1814, but it wasn't until **1931** that it became the **official national anthem**.

The Star-Spangled Banner was **photographed** for the **first time in 1873**.

It came to the Smithsonian in **1907 as a loan**, and in 1912, the loan was turned into a permanent gift.

In 2000 and 2001 conservators removed approximately **1.7 million** stitches to separate the flag from its old linen backing.

(Source: National Museum of American History.)

Kenya did during that historic week when we celebrated the peaceful passage of power in a great democracy. ■

Author's note: The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History manages a collection of 3 million objects, from the Star-Spangled Banner to beloved icons of pop culture. Each year, more than 3 million people visit the museum's exhibitions and 15 million more visit its Web site. For more information about the museum, go to <http://americanhistory.si.edu/> and for more information about its Star-Spangled Banner exhibit, go to <http://americanhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/>.



For an account of the restorations to the Star-Spangled Banner and for a photo gallery, go online to: <http://www.PhiKappaPhi.org/Web/Publications/Forum/summer09/starspangledbanner>