

## 6.8 The Untold Story of the Star-Spangled Banner

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

star spangled banner, juneteenth, francis scott key, national anthem, people, british, abolitionist, flag, song, values, crandall, abolitionist movement, read, enslaved, revolutionary war, slavery, Black, first name basis, talking, important

### SPEAKERS

Jasmine (100%)

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You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Season Six, Episode Eight" "The Untold Story of the Star-Spangled Banner."

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Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the competence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together, we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want, a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.

0:51

Hello, First Name Basis, fam! I am so glad you are here. Oh, my goodness. It's an untold story episode this week! You know, I love untold story episodes; they are so interesting. And this one is actually a replay from a couple of years ago. But I figured since it's been two full years since we've thought about this episode, that you might want to hear it again. I was listening to it again, just to prepare for what I would share with you right now, and I really had forgotten the stuff that is covered in this episode. So today we are talking about "The Untold Story of the Star-Spangled Banner." We're talking about Francis Scott Key and how he wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner," and then how "The Star-Spangled Banner" became our national anthem. And then at the end, I talk a little bit about patriotism and what I think it means to be a patriot. I feel like that's actually a really loaded word at this point, so I'm actually really grateful that I get to share again with you what patriotism means to me. With the Fourth of July coming up next week, this just felt like the most perfect time to share this episode with you, because I'm sure you'll be thinking about all things America. In, you know, great ways and more difficult ways.

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But I wanted to tell you to Fourth of July is actually a really great time to be thinking about Juneteenth. I know that we just came off of Juneteenth. It was on June 19, and it was so fun for my family. But I want to remind you that if you didn't have an opportunity to commemorate or celebrate or recognize Juneteenth, you did not miss your chance. You should still take some time to sit down with your family, with your kids, with your students, or you're doing summer school, and talk about the power of Juneteenth and what it means to the history of our country, what it means to you and your racial identity whether you are a white person or a non-Black person of

color, or you're a Black person. Juneteenth is something that should be celebrated by some of us and commemorated by others. And what better way to do that than with our Juneteenth Jubilee program?

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So Juneteenth Jubilee is the program that we created so that you could celebrate Juneteenth with your family. It is everything you need to have a really special Juneteenth dinner in your home. At my house and my home, Juneteenth is all about the food. We love getting together around the table and talking about our ancestors, talking about where we came from and where we're going, and the goals that we have for ourselves, and what anti-racism means to us and our family and how we are living that out in our daily lives. So Juneteenth Jubilee gives you an opportunity to do all of those things with your own family: to teach your kids about what Juneteenth actually is and why it's so important. And we do that through a few different ways. So what I did was I asked my dad to write down some of our really special family recipes, and we put them together in a cookbook for you to use to celebrate Juneteenth. So my dad and I also got together and filmed a cooking show with some of the recipes from the cookbook so that you can see exactly how to make them. So it'd be so fun to sit down with your kiddos, watch the cooking show, and then decide what are you going to cook together for your Juneteenth meal, because cooking together is a really fantastic opportunity to talk about your values, to talk about who you are, and to talk about why this meal is so important to you. So we've got the cookbook, we've got the cooking show, and we have everything that you need to plan. So we have your meal planner, we've got a shopping list, we have everything you would need to get ready for this special dinner. And then when you're ready to sit down at the table, we have a placemat with fun activities to do while your kiddos are waiting for their food. And then we've got reflection questions that you can dig into together to talk about all of these things that I've mentioned and why this celebration or commemoration is so, so special and important. So if this is something that you're excited about or interested in, go to [firstnamebasis.org/juneteenth](http://firstnamebasis.org/juneteenth). We actually have a video there where you can check out me and my dad cooking and kind of see, get a sense of, the program. And I want to tell you that I have a coupon code for you. It is CELEBRATE15, all caps, all one word, CELEBRATE15, and you can get 15% off. But don't worry, I have everything linked in the show notes. So if this is exciting, just head to the show notes. It has the link to find all of our Juneteenth stuff and the coupon code that you can use.

5:48

All right let's get into this untold story episode. We are talking all about “The Star-Spangled Banner” and how in the world this interesting song was selected to be our national anthem. So let's start with who is Francis Scott Key, and how did he come to write “The Star-Spangled Banner”? Francis Scott Key is a really wealthy aristocrat, and he's living in Washington, DC, and he works as a lawyer. So he's a prosecutor for the city, and he's also an enslaver. A lot of his wealth, a lot of his money, comes from the people that he enslaves, and unfortunately, he was extremely racist. He is quoted as saying that “Africans in America,” he said were, quote, “a distinct and inferior race of people which all experience proves to be the greatest evil that afflicts a community.” End quote. So even though he's enslaving Black people to make himself very wealthy, he also believes that they are the greatest evil that afflicts a community. So we can see the disconnect here between using Black people but also disparaging them.

So Francis Scott Key writes “The Star-Spangled Banner” in 1814, during the War of 1812. Now, this is not the Revolutionary War. During the Fourth of July, we are celebrating the events that happened during the Revolutionary War, because during the Revolutionary War is when the Declaration of Independence was signed. So that was in 1776. We all know that date, right? So that's the Revolutionary War. This is fast forward to the War of 1812, which is considered America's second Revolutionary War, where we are again defending ourselves against the British. That's when Francis Scott Key is writing “The Star-Spangled Banner”. So we all know the story. As Francis Scott Key is trapped on this boat, he's a prisoner, and he's watching a battle going on on the land. And then he writes “The Star-Spangled Banner”. But when I was doing my research, I realized the story actually starts before then.

So we need to go about a month, three ish weeks, before he watches that battle, to a different battle called the Battle of Bladensburg. And that takes place on August 24, of 1814. During this Battle of Bladensburg, Francis Scott Key has a really important role. He is assigned to give out field positions to the American troops. So he's not the head person in charge, but he's in charge of telling everybody what the plan is and where they're going to go. Well, the Battle of Bladensburg goes really terribly for the Americans, and it is considered the, quote, “greatest disgrace ever dealt to American arms.” Francis Scott Key and the other American soldiers get their tushes kicked by the British, and the British then go on to burn up a bunch of our important government buildings. They burn the Capitol building, they burn the Library of Congress, they burn the White House and some other buildings in the process. So that's why this battle is considered the greatest disgrace, because it opened that door for the British to go and really take over our capitol.

One of the things that made Key the most angry about the Battle of Bladensburg is that a lot of the British forces were part of a group called the Colonial Marines. And the Colonial Marines were a group of formerly enslaved people who had escaped from the United States and went over to fight for the British. So the British had told these enslaved people, these Black freedom seekers, that if you come and fight for us, we will give you your freedom. So Francis Scott Key is so angry to be fighting against people that he believes should still be enslaved. And it made him even more mad that they were beaten so badly by them. So during the Battle of Bladensburg or shortly after, the British capture an American doctor — his name is Dr. William Beans. And this is actually how Francis Scott Key comes to be on that British ship, watching America being bombed from a distance before all of the bombing begins. Francis Scott Key goes with a man named John Skinner to the British ship. So John Skinner is the official US envoy. And it's his job to negotiate prisoner releases, so this is what he does. And he and Francis Scott Key go together to try to get Dr. Beans released. So these two men are on the ship negotiating the release of Dr. Beans, and the British tell them, “Okay, you know what? we will let him go, but first you have to wait until the Battle of Baltimore is over.”

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So here's the part of the story that we all know: Francis Scott Key is on this British ship and there's heavy bombing going on. And he's watching it, and he's worried, and it takes 25 hours. And after all the smoke clears, he's able to see the flag. And that's when he decides to write “The Star-Spangled Banner”. So I feel like I was taught that he was a prisoner on the ship himself. But that doesn't seem to be the case. Dr. Beans was a prisoner on the British ship, and he was

negotiating the release of Dr. Beans. And he stayed on the ship until the bombing was over so that Dr. Beans could come and go with him. So the bombing ends, and he is so happy to see the flag still waving that he writes “The Star-Spangled Banner”, which was originally a poem.

So then I wanted to dig into a little bit of well, how did this poem become a song and then become our national anthem here in the United States? Did you know that “The Star-Spangled Banner” didn't actually become the national anthem until 1931? That really isn't that long ago. Now, unofficially, people would sing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” but it wasn't the national anthem until really recently. It became our national anthem because a congressman from Maryland named John Charles Linthicum introduced the bill to make “The Star-Spangled Banner” our national anthem in 1918. So you're thinking, “Wait a minute, if he introduced this bill in 1918, then why did it take all the way until 1931 for it to become the national anthem?” Well, because it failed. It failed 13 times before it became law. John Charles Linthicum reintroduced this bill for thirteen years, every single year for 13 years, and it did not become law until his 14th try, and that was in 1931.

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So there were three main reasons why this bill kept failing. There were three reasons that people did not want “The Star-Spangled Banner” to become our national anthem, three reasons why they were opposed to the song. The first reason is that when he first introduced the bill in 1918, we were still fighting World War I. And during World War I, the British were our allies. Well, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is a song that is mainly about fighting against the British, so people thought this song is too militaristic, and it doesn't represent what we feel now towards the British. The second reason that people were opposed to “The Star-Spangled Banner” becoming our national anthem, is because it's sung to the tune of a British drinking song. So it's set to the tune of a song called “To Anacreon in Heaven,” and it was sung by these men in a society called the Anacreontic Society. So this was a social group of men that formed and came together to drink. So people were like, “This doesn't feel good to have our national anthem be sung to the tune of a drinking song. Yeah, we're not feeling it. No.” The third reason that people were opposed to “The Star-Spangled Banner” is because they felt that it was too hard for the average citizen to sing, because the notes actually span two different octaves. So they said the high notes are too high, the low notes are too low. There's no way the average citizen could sing this song. So in order to prove them wrong, John Charles Linthicum brought in singers to Congress to show them how easy it was. And of course, he brought the sopranos who flawlessly hit the high notes. And he was like, “See, everyone? This is easy. Everyone can sing this song.” So after being shot down over and over again for 13 years, “The Star-Spangled Banner” became the national anthem in 1931. President Herbert Hoover signed this bill into law. So even after “The Star-Spangled Banner” becomes the national anthem, people are still frustrated, and there are newspaper articles talking about how much they disagree and how much they don't want “The Star-Spangled Banner” to be the national anthem.

Now, their reasoning is the three reasons that I mentioned before. And I was thinking this whole time, “Why didn't anybody talk about the racist language and the fact that “The Star-Spangled Banner” specifically talks about slavery?” I was so confused that that wasn't one of the reasons that they were opposed to the song being our national anthem. But then I also thought to myself, “Well, were Black people even considered when they were making this decision? Were they

asked of their opinion?” So I started to do some digging. And I found out that there was only one member of the House of Representatives of the whole Congress that was Black. His name was Oscar Stanton De Priest, and he was actually the very first Black member of Congress in the 20th century. So Oscar Stanton De Priest represents Illinois for three terms, from 1929 to 1935. So in 1931, when they make that decision that it's going to be our national anthem, he is the only Black member of Congress, and he is one out of 435 representatives in the House. So if you can imagine, Oscar Stanton De Priest probably has these frustrations and says, “Well, this song does not represent my community,” while he's one voice out of over 400 representatives at the time. So I don't think that the opinion of the Black community was really taken into account when they were trying to decide if this should be our anthem.

16:13

So let's break down the actual words of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, and have a conversation about why there are some verses in it that are problematic. And Francis Scott Key, as I mentioned at the beginning, he was very pro-slavery, and that shows in the song. So when we hear “The Star-Spangled Banner”, we usually hear the very first verse and then it's over after that. But there are actually three additional verses following that one. And the third verse is really what stands out to most people as the part of the song that does not show our American values or does not uphold what we claim to believe as Americans. I am going to read you that third verse, and then we can break it down together.

It says: “And where is that band who so vauntingly swore, that the havoc of war and the battle's confusion a home and a country should leave us no more? Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution. No refuge could save the hireling and slave from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave. And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph doth wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Okay, I'm sure that you can see the part that is troubling. And that is the line that says, “No refuge could save the hireling and slave from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.”

So in this line, I was reading some articles that broke down “The Star-Spangled Banner” line by line, and in the line where he talks about the slave, he's talking about the Colonial Marines. So remember, back at the beginning, when I told you he was so frustrated during that battle, because they were beat by the Colonial Marines, and the Colonial Marines were the enslaved people who were fighting for the side of the British because the British told them that they could get their freedom. And Francis Scott Key saw these formerly enslaved people as extreme traitors. So what he's saying here is that there is no refuge that can save these formerly enslaved people, these people that he sees as traitors, from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave. He's basically talking about killing all of those Colonial Marines.

I read an article that was written by a man named Jason Johnson. And in the article it talks about the hidden racist history of the national anthem. And he had a quote that I wanted to read word for word because it really struck me, he says, “In other words, Key was saying that the blood of all the former slaves and hirelings on the battlefield will wash away the pollution of the British invaders. With Key still bitter that some Black soldiers got the best of him a few weeks earlier, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is as much a patriotic song as it is a diss track to Black people who had the audacity to fight for their freedom. Perhaps that's why it took almost 100 years for the

song to become the national anthem.” The part in that quote that really stuck out to me was where he talks about the Black people who had the audacity to fight for their freedom. I think back to what I would have done in that situation, and now maybe I wouldn't have been accepted because I'm a woman, but if I was given the opportunity to fight for my freedom, based on what I know about the atrocities of slavery, I would take it in a heartbeat even if it means putting my life in danger, because that's how awful it was. And another thing I want to point out about this verse is how contradictory it is. I don't know how Francis Scott Key himself couldn't see how contradictory it is. He talks about enslaving people. And then he talks about the land of the free and the home of the brave. Well, the land of the free for who? Obviously not the people that you are enslaving. So obviously, you can see why there are people who feel frustrated by the National Anthem and feel like it doesn't align with our values as a country.

And Francis Scott Key himself, we view him, often we are taught to view him as this extreme patriot, but in reality, he was willing to compromise American values to maintain slavery and power. Let me give you an example of this. So in 1833, Andrew Jackson, the president, nominates Francis Scott Key to become the District Attorney for the city of Washington, DC. And I read an article in the Smithsonian Magazine that explains how he quote, “used his office as a district attorney to defend slavery, attacking the abolitionist movement in several high profile cases.” So there's more than one instance in which he is attacking the abolitionist movement. And the abolitionists actually used to mock him, they would say, “land of this free and home of the oppressed,” because they knew that he did not live up to the values that we have as a nation, they thought, “This guy doesn't stand for freedom. He is upholding enslavement at every turn.” And so they would say, “How could he be for the land of the free and the home of the brave if he is continuing to be an enslaver?” So in the 1830s, the abolitionist movement is picking up a lot of steam, and this leads to violence. White pro-slavery mobs are attacking the abolitionists, and they're attacking free Black people. And so the abolitionists start to submit these anti-slavery petitions to Congress, and they submit 1500 petitions. And these petitions are signed by more than 100,000 people. Of course, there are a lot of congressmen who are still in support of slavery. And they are overwhelmed by all of these petitions, and they really want to silence the abolitionists. So they start to pass what are called these gag rules. And in the gag rules, it restricts the reading and discussion of all anti-slavery petitions. So if a petition comes in that's anti-slavery, they're not even going to read it. They're not even going to look at it. And this actually gets the attention of former president John Quincy Adams. He sees this as an assault on the first amendment rights for the citizens. He says, “his is restricting debate, it's restricting protesting, it's restricting petitioning. No, this is not in line with our First Amendment.” While all of this is going on, Francis Scott Key is serving as the District Attorney, and he is repeatedly fighting to crush the abolitionist movement. And there's one example that stuck out to me in particular, so I really want to share this story with you.

So there was this doctor, and his name was Ruben Crandall. and he was an abolitionist, and he had these abolitionist pamphlets. And Francis Scott Key found out about him and his pamphlets, and so he called for him to be arrested for sedition, which is similar to treason. So Dr. Reuben Crandall, he gets arrested, and he's in jail. And while he's in jail, this white mob comes to the jail and they try to hang him because they're so angry that he's an abolitionist. Well, the mayor decides to save Reuben Crandall from this mob. And he sends a state militia in to protect him and save him from being hanged. But Francis Scott Key is the prosecutor in his case. So Francis

Scott Key goes to the judge in the case and convinces the judge to deny Crandall any bail. So he's in jail for having these abolitionist pamphlets, and he has no opportunity to get out on bail. This works out first, but then eventually, the judge does decide to set bail, and when they do finally set bail, they set bail at \$5,000, which today would be the equivalent of over \$100,000. So in order to get out of jail, he would have to pay six figures. So even though Ruben Crandall didn't get hanged by the white mob, he is facing the possibility of this same fate again because Francis Scott Key, the prosecutor in his case, argues that Crandall should be hanged, because he believes abolitionist speech is extremely dangerous.

I want to read you a quote from Key's closing argument, he says, quote, "Are you willing, gentlemen, to abandon your country, to permit it to be taken from you and occupied by the abolitionist, according to whose taste it is to associate and amalgamate with the Negro?" Now I looked up the word amalgamate, because I wasn't really sure what it meant, and it means, "merge into a single body." So it basically means integrate. So then he goes on to say, "Or gentleman, on the other hand, are there laws in this community to defend you from the immediate abolitionist who would open upon you the floodgates of such extensive wickedness and mischief?" End quote. So in his closing arguments, Francis Scott Key is saying, "Shouldn't you be protected from these abolitionists who are going to open the floodgates of extensive wickedness and mischief?" And in the article that I was reading, they said that Key actually makes national headlines, because he asks whether property rights of slave holders should outweigh the free speech rights of those who are arguing for the abolition of slavery. So he's saying, "Shouldn't our property rights be more important than their free speech?"

So this trial goes on for eight months, and Crandall is in jail this whole time, and he finally gets acquitted of all the charges by a jury. But while he's in jail, Ruben Crandall gets tuberculosis. And so very soon after the trial ends and he gets out of jail, he actually passes away. I just thought that this was a really important example from Francis Scott Key's life. I feel like it shows how he used his power to uphold enslavement, and that he was willing to go as far as compromising the First Amendment, which is one of our nation's most important values. It was really telling to me that he is willing to forego the First Amendment for some people in our country so that he can maintain wealth and power and continue as an enslaver.

Something that I've noticed is that our country really struggles with change, even if those changes help us become more aligned with the American values that we all hold dear. But I wanted to share with you an amazing change, an inspiring change, that happened this past weekend in Mississippi. So you might already know that the current Mississippi state flag has the Confederate battle flag within it. So there's a square at the top of the Mississippi flag — that is the Confederate flag. And there have been outcries for a very long time to get rid of this symbol of hate that's within their flag. And they finally over the weekend voted to change the flag. So they voted in both the House and the Senate, and now it's on the way to the governor, and the governor has said that he is going to sign it. And they are going to change! They're going to get together a commission of people who are going to design a new Mississippi State Flag. And I think that is so powerful. But what really, really struck me was a quote from a Republican congressman who was talking about why it's so important that they change the flag. Republican House Speaker Jason White was arguing against keeping the flag. So before they take the vote, he's trying to convince his fellow members of the House of Representatives that they should vote

to get rid of the current flag and get a new one. And in this argument, he says, quote, “By changing our flag, we don't abandon our founding principles. We embrace them more fully by doing what is right. We're not moving further away from our founding fathers' visions, we're moving closer to them. We're not destroying our heritage, we're fulfilling it.” End quote.

I just really love this quote, because it shows that change can help us get closer to our values as Americans. And there have been some calls lately to change the national anthem from “The Star-Spangled Banner” to something that better represents us as Americans. And a lot of people have been reaching out to me on social media and asking my thoughts. And with Fourth of July coming up, I just thought maybe I would share a little bit of how I feel and what I usually think about during Fourth of July. So I've never really thought of myself as a super patriotic person until I read this quote by James Baldwin. He is a writer and an activist, and he was absolutely inspirational. And every year on the Fourth of July, I take some time to reflect on this quote, he says, “I love America more than any other country in the world. And exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” End quote I realized after reading this quote for the first time, that using our voice, and using our vote, and using our dollar to hold our country accountable to our values, is one of the most patriotic things that we can do. I am a patriot by calling for change, and by looking for ways for us to improve and to be more inclusive, and to stamp out racism and all of the other things that hold our country back from truly being the America that we all want it to be. That is patriotic.

So it's very clear to me that “The Star-Spangled Banner” was not written to make people of color, Black people specifically, feel included, respected, or like valued members of our country. It's clear to me based on the words that are in the song, but it's also clear to me based on the person who wrote the song and what he spent his life doing. And as I mentioned before, it is also apparent that we in the Black community, we were not considered when the song was chosen as our national anthem in 1931. No one asked for our feelings or opinion on this song, because I'm sure if they had asked, we would have been able to say that we don't feel represented, we don't feel uplifted, we don't feel included by this song. So on the Fourth of July, when we are celebrating that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and then among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Wouldn't it make more sense to choose a song that uphold these truths that we hold so dear? Shouldn't everyone feel empowered and inspired by our anthem?

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I think as Americans, we can do better. And I think one of those ways that we can do better is by being more committed to our actual values than we are to the symbols of our values. The National Anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is not a value in itself. It is a symbol of what we value. But unfortunately, it falls short of truly painting the picture of who we are as a nation and what we are striving to be. So I hope that as you are finishing up this episode, and reflecting on it later, that you will be able to see that a patriot is someone who truly holds America to our values. And that a patriot is someone who raises their voice over and over again relentlessly, until liberty and justice for all is truth, and not just something that we say.



My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you, and how deeply I know that when we work together, we can make real change in our communities. Any of the books or podcasts or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site, I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes, and everything is linked there so you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram @firstname.basis. If you're interested in partnering with First Name Basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at [hello@firstnamebasis.org](mailto:hello@firstnamebasis.org). All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon.