

Rockets on the Hill

“We found three rockets on our hill evidently pointed at our house but fortunately did not reach it.”

Mary DeButts, writing to her sister Millicent on March 18, 1815

Samuel and Mary DeButts were lucky not to be home when three Congreve rockets landed on their farm. By all accounts, the rockets were terrifying. They spewed flames and sparks in flight, changed direction unpredictably, roared as they flew by, and often exploded overhead, showering down hot fragments and powder.

The rockets were named for their inventor, William Congreve of Great Britain. They were light, had a range of more than a mile, and did not recoil like a cannon, which made them easy to fire from the deck of a ship. Although they petrified soldiers and citizens who had never seen them before, and sometimes caused fires where they landed, they usually did less damage than a cannonball.

Despite Mary DeButts’s worries, the rockets probably were not aimed at her house. They might have been a signal to other British ships anchored some twenty miles away in the Patuxent River.

Congreve rockets have a special place in American history. They supplied the “red glare” that Francis Scott Key remembered as he wrote the poem “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

*And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.*

Above:

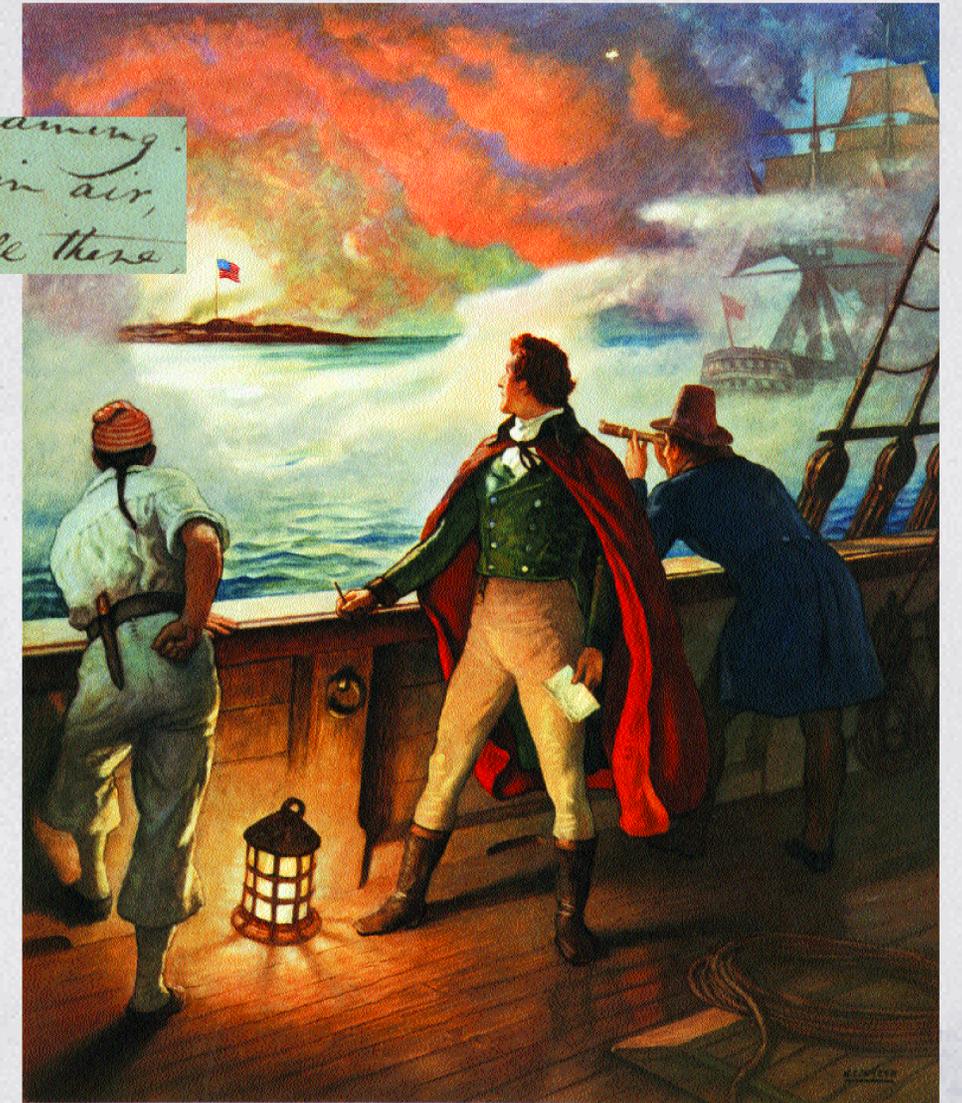
Detail, one stanza from one of the early handwritten versions of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key. Courtesy of The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.

Left:

This painting by N.C. Wyeth, *By the Dawn's Early Light* shows Francis Scott Key (center) gazing at Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor. Image used with permission of New York Life Insurance Company.

Background:

Attack on Fort Washington on Potomac, 17 August 1814, watercolor by Irwin Bevan, 1852-1940. Courtesy of The Mariner's Museum, Newport News, VA.



· THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER ·

Francis Scott Key writing the immortal verses which became our National Anthem