

Behind the Lyrics

The inspiration for the words of favorite musical compositions often are forgotten or never even known. Do you know the answers to the what, where, when and by whom as those questions relate to our national anthem? The official 2012 North Carolina Fourth of July Festival here in Southport will give all of us opportunities to sing “The Star Spangled Banner” or hear the music and silently sing the words that answer most of the questions.

The “broad stripes and bright stars” of the American flag were seen over Fort McHenry by “the rockets’ red glare”. Polls have shown that many people know Fort McHenry is at the entrance to the Baltimore harbor and that Francis Scott Key wrote the verses of the “Star Spangled Banner”. But ‘when’ the event occurred usually receives the fewest correct answers because most people think the battle was during the American Revolution.

It was only by chance that Francis Key was a witness to the bombardment of Fort McHenry during the last months of the War of 1812. He was in the harbor on a truce ship trying to negotiate the release of a friend who had been captured in Upper Marlboro by the British as they left Washington City. Key obtained his friend’s freedom, but they were both detained until the 25-hour battle was over.

Although Key’s poem was an immediate hit and soon put to the music of an English bar tune, “The Star Spangled Banner” was not officially proclaimed our national anthem until 1931. It is an irony of history that a grandson of Key was imprisoned in Fort McHenry during the Civil War when he was caught in Lincoln’s dragnet of Baltimore’s editors, mayor, councilmen and other civilians who seemed to be Southern sympathizers and were without the protection of the writ of habeas corpus.

The “Marines’ Hymn” has been called the oldest official song in military service. The stirring melody is from a duet sung by gendarmes in Offenbach’s 1859 comic opera, “Genevieve Brabant”. Although the lyrics do not refer to any 20th century event, the hymn was not the official hymn of the Corps until 1929. In 1942, the fourth line was changed to include the word ‘air’ with fighting on land and sea. Most historians accept the fact that the author of the verse is unknown, but others have suggested it was written by a Marine stationed in Mexico, which is certainly the first place mentioned in the “Marines’ Hymn”.

“The halls of Montezuma, still to be found in Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, were named in honor of two Aztec rulers of that name. The second of those emperors died in 1520 but it was the 1847 Battle of Chapultepec successfully led by General Winfield Scott that inspired the opening line of the Marie Corps’ hymn.

The inclusion of Tripoli in the first line of the hymn refers to a battle, which occurred more than forty years before the Mexican incident and is far more obscure. That period of history is thoroughly covered in *White Gold* by Giles Milton (Picador Edition 2006). It is not another narrative about the wealth provided by rice plantations on the Lower Cape Fear but is rather the history of white slavery that provided much wealth for sultans in northern Africa for almost 700 years.

The Barbary privateers made Atlantic voyages uncertain for passengers and seamen alike beginning in the 16th century. 1645 is the first recorded date of an attack on a ship from colonial America. North Carolina history books used to include an incident involving an Englishman, Seth Southwell, who was two years late accepting his post in Carolina where he had been appointed governor of the young colony in 1681. He was captured by Algerian pirates and enslaved for two years. Fortunately for Southwell, an English admiral had captured two influential Islamic corsairs who were exchanged for Southwell. (D.H. Hill writing a 1907 North Carolina history book for young people remarked that North Carolina would have

fares better if Southwell had stayed in Algiers.) You might read historical markers about a ‘Seth Soethel’; he is the same man as Seth Southwell but his name was spelled phonetically in order to be pronounced correctly.

As early as the 11th century, five coastal towns in southeast England had formed an organization, Cinque Ports, to defend themselves against privateers from the Barbara Coast. The European coastal towns of the Mediterranean were just as vulnerable; both areas had entire villages of 200-500 people kidnapped and enslaved by corsairs from Tunis, Algiers, Meknes and Tripoli. Algiers was reported to have a stable population of about 25,000 white captives between 1550 and 1730. Some 7,500 were held during the same period in Tunis and Tripoli.

An enlightened Moroccan seized the throne in 1757 and realized that international trade could be more lucrative and less trouble than slavery and piracy, so peace treaties were quickly signed with England, Denmark, and Holland. Ten years later, there were treaties with Spain, Portugal and France. In 1786, the young nation of the United States signed a peace treaty but the world still had to contend with individual privateers. In the spring of 1805, during the First Barbary War, an American-led force of Marines and mercenaries captured the city of Derna on the “shores of Tripoli”. It was the first time the American flag had been raised in victory in the soil of the Old World.

Perhaps during this year’s Fourth of July Festival, we shall have a better understanding of the lyrics to our patriotic tunes. The Southport Historical Society will add to the festivities by having the Old Jail opened for a tour in the afternoons and by conducting free tours in the Old Smithville Burying Ground. And be sure to look for our cannon, “Thor”, in the parade!

Musette Steck
June 21, 2012