**EP 87 - THE NATIONAL ANTHEM.mp3**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:29] Ever heard the song To Anacreon in Heaven? Of course you have. It is a centuries old bawdy drinking song that is the basis of a tune you hear before every professional sports game in the U.S., the national anthem. Today we're digging into the history of The Star-Spangled Banner with Marc Leepson, historian and author of What So Proudly We Hailed. Marc great to have you with us.

**Marc Leepson:** [00:00:50] Thank you very much.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:51] This may be obvious but what is the national anthem?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:00:55] What is the national anthem. Well, it is the song that a Washington D.C. lawyer named Francis Scott Key wrote on the night of September 14th in Baltimore Harbor during the Battle of Baltimore during the War of 1812 and he was an amateur poet. He was arranging a prisoner release on board a British ship during the battle and he had a ringside seat over that 25 hour bombardment. They didn't know what happened when the dawn's early light came and he saw an American flag realizing the Americans had won the Battle of Baltimore, which by the way was a turning point in the War of 1812.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:35] Is it true that the melody came from a kind of saucy old British drinking song?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:01:39] Yeah you know that's a little bit of an oversimplification. This was a popular melody during the early republic. It was called To Anacreon in Heaven. It was the theme song of a group called the Anacreontic Society which was a group of British gentlemen that later came to the United States that would meet to discuss literature and issues of the day.

[00:02:00] They would meet in pubs they would eat they would drink, so you could call it an English drinking song but I think it was a little more high minded than that, it was not like 99 bottles of beer on the wall kind of drinking song but a little more high minded than that. And during the early republic it was very common for people to morph words onto existing melodies and this was one of the most popular, something like 75 songs were put onto that music so it was a very popular tune at the time.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:28] So how did the Star-Spangled Banner become popular?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:02:33] You know it did not become popular right away. It was one of only a handful of patriotic tunes that were played after the War of 1812 and right on up into the 20th century at patriotic events, Yankee Doodle was another one, and it didn't become the official national anthem until 1931, although the American military, beginning in 1890, the Army and the Navy began using it as their official national anthem.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:02] Was anybody against making it our national anthem?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:03:05] Oh yes. Yeah. There were hearings on Capitol Hill when there were I don't know a dozen bills that kept coming up in the early 20th century to make it the national anthem. And at the final hearings the arguments against it were ones you hear today. You know, the range is crazy, I think there's seven different octaves, it's very difficult to sing. It's a song that was written by not Americans right it was a British song. In fact as an anti British song and by the 20th century the Brits were our very best friends. And people say that it also celebrates war. And it also ends in a question mark or at least the first verse does, you know, "Oh say does that Star-Spangled Banner wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave." So those arguments have been going on since before it was official into this very day.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:55] Well typically we do only hear that first verse. How many are there?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:03:59] There are four verses and they were sung you know fairly regularly back in the day but I don't know over the last four or five decades just kind of gotten that down to that first verse.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:10] And we've already spoken to you Mark about the U.S. flag code which outlines rules for how to salute and display and dispose of flags. You can find that episode at Civic's 101 podcast dot org. Are there rules also for the national anthem?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:04:26] Yeah there are in the flag code. It specifies how you are to react to the national anthem. It's pretty simple. You know people are supposed take off their hats put the hat over their heart or if you don't have a hat, your hand, and people in uniform, military, fire, police can salute and veterans have the option, this is only fairly recently, of saluting during the playing of the national anthem or putting hand over heart.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:54] When did it actually start being played before sports games?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:04:58] Yeah you know the evidence is a little conflicting about that. Some people think that it goes way back into the 18th century but we think that the first time was during the 1918 World Series when it was played as it was during World War One which was a time of very amped up patriotism and it was only played during the seventh inning stretch. I'm not sure but it was only played during the World Series for a few years. Only then it was only like the first game of the season and then it kind of just as the 20th century rolled on it became played more and more often.

[00:05:34] And now you can't go to a little league game without seeing the Star-Spangled Banner played. So with college, high school. All manner of sports and different levels.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:52] Recently a number of athletes have protested police shootings by choosing to sit or kneel during the pregame national anthem. Many made clear they are not protesting the song itself, but do you have any historical insight into what these protests or maybe even the coverage of them tend to get wrong?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:06:14] You know people have protested similarly here and there you know going back to the 1968 Olympics when two track athletes raised right fists with their glove during the national anthem and occasionally an athlete would sit down or just not participate in that. But I think these days what's happening now is the reaction I think is amped up by 24 hour news cycle and by you know politicians trying to make it into something that it isn't. Or at least their interpretation is different from what the athletes are doing in the kneeling.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:51] Not a protest of the anthem yet the California NAACP has called the Star-Spangled Banner racist specifically pointing to one of these lesser known verses that says that no refuge could save the hireling and slave from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave. And since there have been a lot of ways of re-examining our various national legacies from perspectives of institutional racism. What can you tell us about the Star-Spangled Banner and Francis Scott Key's relationship to the institution of slavery?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:07:31] Well I can tell you a quite a bit. He was a slave owner from a slave owning family. He bought and sold individuals his whole life. He was a very religious man and he was against the institution of slavery, spoke out against it, yet nevertheless he did participate in. And you know during the war of 1812 as well as during the Revolutionary War the British put out proclamations aimed at enslaved Americans telling them if they came over to the British side they would have the freedom and thousands did during the Revolutionary War and thousands did during the War of 1812 and that is what I believe and I think most people do believe that is what Key is making reference to in that hireling and the slave line in the third verse. So he was not happy about it. A lot of slave owners were not happy about it. And that's pretty much what most people believe that he is referring to in that verse. And of course you know he talks about the land of the free and the home of the brave. Well when he wrote that in 1814 there were millions of enslaved people. So that's another part of the legacy of slavery and the Star-Spangled Banner.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:49] Do you think Mark that we'll look back differently at this song in 50 or 100 years because of that?

**Marc Leepson:** [00:08:57] You know, I'm not quite sure, if you had asked me 50 years ago would we be dealing with it now, I don't think so. But I think that's almost an unanswerable question probably, if we ever reconcile all those issues. But who knows. I wish I could have an answer for that.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:17] When we spoke about the flag you said that America was the only country that had such a specific Flag Code. And I'm wondering if you think that America has worked especially hard to create national symbols like the flag, like the pledge, like the national anthem and why.

**Marc Leepson:** [00:09:36] Yeah I do believe that. I'm not quite sure of all the reasons why but I think I can nibble around a few of them and one of them is that you know we don't have a monarchy. And I think there's something in every national group that craves symbols of a leader, of a dynastic family or a monarchy and in some ways the flag code the national anthem and The Pledge of Allegiance, the old flag protection laws. That has to do with that. Also we're a nation of immigrants. And I think the flag as a symbol has been something that immigrants can rally around and feel as though they're part of it. We don't have a national religion either and a lot of ways. You know in the 1870s and 1880s when Americans changed from the flag being almost unheard of, for individual Americans to fly it to now all of a sudden the flag being everywhere. That ushered in the Betsy Ross myth, it ushered in the first Flag Day holiday. It ushered in flag protection laws,some people call this the cult of the flag. And you know the almost religious feelings that Americans have for our national emblem. And you know in some ways we don't have a national religion and in some ways this cult of the flag might be a substitute for that.