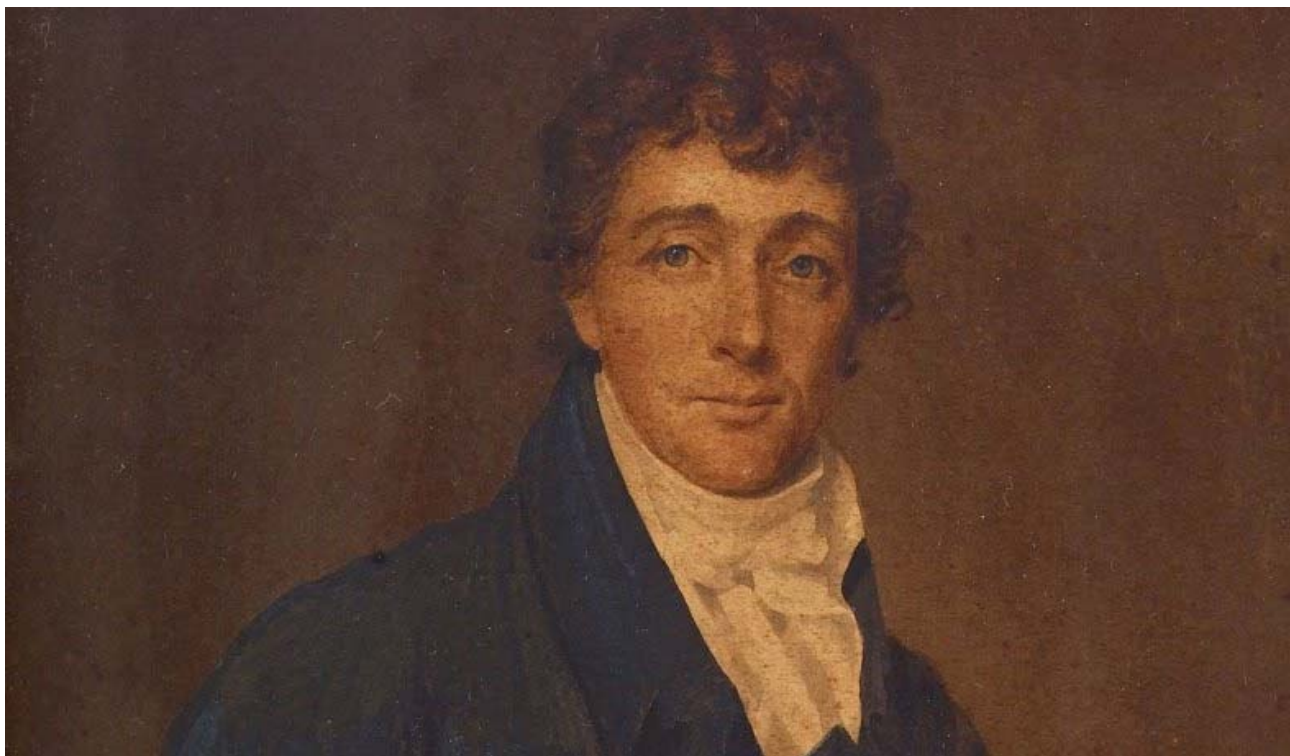




CULTURE

Is 'The Star-Spangled Banner' Racist?

By WALTER OLSON | September 15, 2017 4:18 PM



Detail of portrait of Francis Scott Key by Joseph Wood, 1816 (Image via Walters Art Museum)

Its third verse uses the word 'slave,' but it may not have referred to chattel slavery in the South.

By now you've probably heard the claim that America's national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," is an expression of racial hostility toward African Americans and should be either retired or at least acknowledged as a subject of national embarrassment.

These reports appear to have influenced the act of vandalism in a Baltimore park this week, in which a statue of Francis Scott Key, the Maryland lawyer who wrote the words to the song during the War of 1812, was defaced with red paint and slogans including "Racist Anthem."

But although claims of this sort have been circulating since at least the 1990s, it would not be fair to say that historians are of one mind on whether Key's song was understood in its day to be making any reference to race.

Exhibit A in critics' account is the anthem's seldom-sung third verse, which gloats at the defeat of the "band who so vauntingly swore" America would lose its independence:

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.*

There it is: the word "slave." To an American of 2017, the word is likely to mean one thing only: the system of chattel slavery prevailing in Key's day in Maryland and throughout the American South. Key was from a slaveholding family and litigated many cases involving slavery issues; he argued numerous cases in favor of slaves' freedom, but also prosecuted a prominent abolitionist.

Not so clear is what the phrase "hireling and slave" would have meant to listeners in Key's day.

To some critics who believe the reference to be racial, it's significant that among the British troops Key fought against in Maryland during the War of 1812 were the Corps of Colonial Marines, free persons of color who had formerly been slaves.

But there are other possibilities to consider, too.

At the time Key was writing, the word "slave" (we'll get to "hireling" in a minute) had long functioned in English as a wide-ranging epithet, hurled at persons of any and all colors, nationalities, and conditions of servitude or otherwise.

Shakespeare, who barely mentioned America in his writings, used the word more than 180 times in his works. Fewer than a third of those references are in the plays set in Roman and Greek times, in which characters in the drama might be literal slaves. More often, Shakespeare's characters — including Macbeth, Lear, and many of the kings in the history plays — use "slave" as an insult. ("O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" says Hamlet, a prince, as part of a self-lacerating soliloquy.) Though often signifying low birth, these uses have no connection to color or — aside from the frequent use of the epithet to put down the

French — to nationality. Still less do they connect to the institution of chattel slavery as found in the Americas.

This usage had not disappeared by Key's lifetime. In Robert Burns's battle poem "Scots Wha Hae," written in 1793 though set more than 400 years earlier, the word "slave" is an insult directed at his fellow Scots who would flee rather than follow their king into the Battle of Bannockburn.

To Americans, while "slave" was both a common descriptive word and an epithet, "hireling" — especially in contexts of poetry and literature — ordinarily carried derogatory connotations. It meant someone such as a soldier, official, or laborer who served for money rather than from some more durable loyalty such as to family or nation. Yet another Robert Burns song, "Parcel of Rogues," describes Scotland as having been sold out for "hireling traitor's wages." "Hireling and slave" is not an accidental pairing; the two words often occurred together as epithets.

Was Key pursuing a grudge by describing, or misdescribing, the Corps of Colonial Marines as slaves? Or did he have the (predominantly white) conscripts in mind?

Some soldiers on the British side were involuntary conscripts, and the British crown's policy of in effect kidnapping young men and sending them into battle had roused indignation, contempt, and disgust on the American side.

Was Key pursuing a grudge by describing, or misdescribing, the Corps of Colonial Marines as slaves? Or did he have the (predominantly white) conscripts in mind? Or was he just reaching for a common word pairing, familiar to his listeners, that provided him with a rhyme?

There's no record of him ever explaining why he chose those words. When we decide whether to give his words a reading that is charitable or otherwise, we make a choice too.

