

Mary Pickersgill Maker of the Biggest Flag to Ever Fly

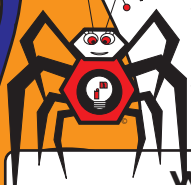


“Hi, Pixel, the **Stowaway**, here. I heard my friend Al say he was going to visit The Star-Spangled **Banner** Flag House in Baltimore, Maryland, to learn about Mary Pickersgill, a famous flag maker during the 1800’s. You know me – I LOVE adventures, so I downloaded myself right into his digital camera to tag along. The national **anthem** of the United States is “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and it was written about a famous flag Mrs. Pickersgill made in 1813. I bet you’ve heard someone sing the anthem before football and baseball games played in the United States. I’m curious to know why this flag is so special that it has its own house and its own song!



The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House

Ouch! I’m getting jostled around in Al’s camera. Guess we hit some bumps on the way to Baltimore. Now he’s stopped – must be a red light. I can text my friend Spider BYTE and ask her to do a web search so I can learn about Baltimore. WOW! Spider sure was fast! She moves at electron speed! Imagine how slow it was to find out information in Mary Pickersgill’s time when there were no computers. Spider found out by 1813, the United States was at war with the British. She told me that Baltimore is a **port** city on the Chesapeake Bay. The British had control of the



WORD BOX

stowaway: someone who hides in a ship or plane (or camera!) to avoid paying a fare

banner: a flag

anthem: a special song that represents and praises a country

port: a place where boats and ships can load and unload cargo

garrison: a place where soldiers are stationed

replica: a copy or model of something

docent: a person who acts as a guide

Chesapeake Bay, and Baltimore was preparing for an attack by the British. Baltimore was guarded by Fort McHenry, and Colonel George Armistead commanded the fort. He wanted a very large **garrison** flag 42 feet long by 30 feet wide to fly over the fort. The British sailors would be able to see the flag even though their ships were anchored a mile away from the fort. The large flag would tell the British that the Americans were courageous and wouldn’t give up. He knew just who to ask to sew the flag – Mary Pickersgill! I wonder how Mary made such a large flag?

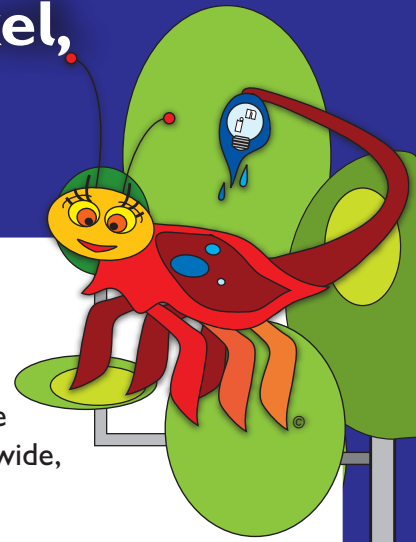


Mary Pickersgill

Yes! We finally arrived at The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House. Looking through the lens of Al’s camera, I can see a glass **replica** of the flag on the side of the building! WOW, I’ve never seen a flag that gigantic before! Al met a **docent**, and she began to tell him a lot about Mary Pickersgill. I had to turn the camera’s audio on so I could hear. Mary learned her

*All photos are courtesy of
Star-Spangled Banner Flag House
unless otherwise indicated*

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WORD BOX

widow: a woman whose husband has died and she has not remarried

standard: of a design that is regularly used

pattern: a guide for making something

fiber: material formed from threads

acquire: to buy, obtain, get

bunting: a loosely woven fabric

card: to comb or clean fibers with a sharp-toothed instrument to untangle the fibers before spinning

refine: to make something better

cheesecloth: thin, loosely woven cloth

madder: a red dye made from the root of the madder plant

indigo: a dark blue dye made from the indigo plant

brewery: a place where beer is made

craft of flag making from her mother, Rebecca Young. When Mary became a **widow** at age 29, her flag making business supported her and her daughter, Caroline. She agreed to make Colonel Armistead not 1, but 2 flags – the large flag and a smaller one, 25 feet long by 17 feet wide, to use in bad weather.

Mary had to make a flag that followed the requirements of the Flag Act of 1794. The flag had to have 15 stars and 15 stripes, one for each state when the Flag Act of 1794 was passed. By 1813 when Mary was making the flag, there were actually 18 states, but she still had to follow the 1794 Flag Act law. She could use her imagination and creativity to decide the size of the stripes and placement of the stars because there was no **standard pattern** for that at the time.

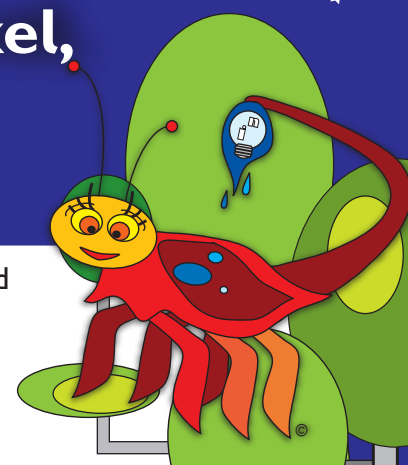
First, Mary had to use her Image Power Smarts to plan the flag's design. (see Power Smarts Chart insert) She decided to make "dancing stars" by placing the stars on their tips rather than flat on two points. Next, her Nature Power Smarts helped her choose the right **fiber** for the flag and dyes to make the flag's colors. Making a flag that large required the use of Mary's Logic Power Smarts to make the flag pattern, to estimate the amount of materials she would need, to measure the pieces before cutting out the stars and stripes, and to keep track of her expenses. She needed her People Power Smarts to teach her daughter Caroline (age 13), her nieces Eliza, Hannah, and Margaret, and a free African American apprentice Grace Wisher (age 13) how to help make the flags. Her mother Rebecca wasn't well, but she probably gave advice on how to make the flag too.

Mary **acquired** wool **bunting** that was **carded** and **refined** for the flag. It had a **cheesecloth**-like texture. Vegetable dyes were used for the colors: **madder** for the red dye and **indigo** for the blue dye. For

the stars and white stripes, Mary used unbleached cotton. The bunting only came in 18-inch width pieces, but Mary's design called for the stripes to be 24 inches wide, so she had to sew an extra 6 inches of fabric onto the pieces to make the stripes.

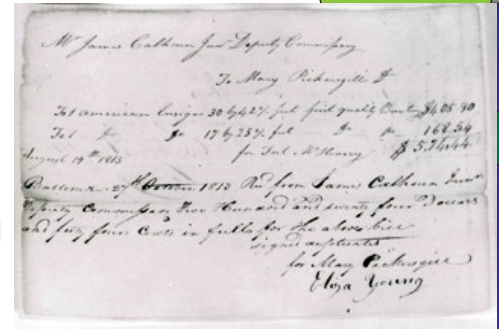
I started wondering where Mary and her family could have made such a large flag. It was too big to fit in her house. The docent said Mary got permission from the owners of a neighborhood **brewery** to work there at night when the brewery was closed. There was a very large floor in the brewery where

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Mary could spread out the huge flag to work on it. Mary and her helpers finished the 2 flags in just 6 weeks! They used 400 yards of fabric, and it is estimated that there are over 1 million hand-made stitches in the flag! Mary received \$405.90 for the larger flag and \$168.54 for the smaller flag. The larger flag weighed between 75-80 pounds. It took 11 men to hoist the flag up the 90-foot flagpole.

During the Battle of Baltimore in 1814, the British ships launched 1,500 rockets and bombs at Fort McHenry for 25 hours, but the fort's defenders did not give up. Francis Scott Key was an American who was on a British ship **negotiating** a prisoner exchange. The battle was fierce, but Key never gave up hope that the Americans would win, and he was right! By the dawn's early light, as the song says, he could see Mary's giant flag being **raised** and waving over Fort McHenry. Francis Scott Key was so **inspired** by seeing the flag that he wrote a poem, "The Defence of Fort M'Henry." Later the poem was put to music, and it became "The Star-Spangled Banner," the national anthem of the United States.



Payment receipt for the flag

Mary Pickersgill used her Power Smarts to become a successful businesswoman long before most women were in business. In 1807, Mary, with the help of her mother Rebecca Young, established the flag making business of the first floor of the Flag House. Rebecca had made flags in Philadelphia and had experience placing advertisements. They used their Word Power Smarts to make

WORD BOX

negotiate: to discuss to try to reach a decision that everyone can accept

inspire: to fill someone with the urge to do or feel something

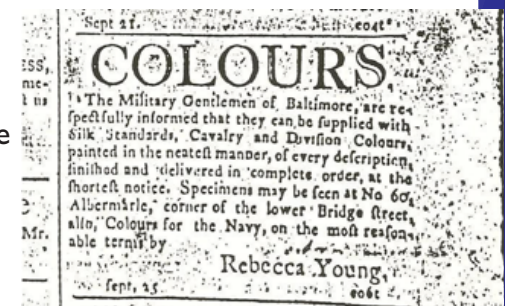
colours: the flag of a regiment or ship

humanitarian: a person who helps people

disadvantaged: when a situation is difficult, such as not enough money or opportunities

vision: a mental image of what the future could be like

interesting advertisements to increase business. Rebecca's name appears on the ad for **COLOURS**, but the colours were made by Mary. Mary had many customers for the flags she made including the United States Navy, Army, and many merchant ships. Mary made enough money in her flag making business to purchase the house she had been renting.



Mary's business advertisement

I learned that Mary was also a **humanitarian**. She was concerned about housing and employment for **disadvantaged** and elderly women. Mary used her People Power Smarts when she was president of the Impartial Female Humane Society. She had a **vision** for helping women, and under her leadership, the organization built a home for aged women and later a home for aged men. In 1959, the homes were named the Pickersgill Retirement Community to honor Mary's work.

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Mary has been honored in many ways for her contribution to the United States: a World War II ship was named after her, a flower is named the Mary Pickersgill Rose, and in 2002, she was **inducted** into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame.

Mary died in 1857 and is buried in Loudon Park Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland. The house where she lived is now called The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House and is open to visitors. Today The Star-Spangled Banner Flag is displayed in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and it is the museum's greatest possession.

I'm glad I got to **stow away** in Al's camera during his visit to The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House. You can check out its website at flaghouse.org. I learned that Mary Pickersgill was an amazing woman!

WORD BOX

induct: to admit someone into a special group or organization

stow away: to hide in a ship or plane (or camera!) to avoid paying a fare

See ya on my next adventure at bytespowersmarts.com!"

Questions:

1. What were some challenges Mary faced in her life and her work?
2. What Power Smarts did Mary use to help her face these challenges?
3. What do you think was Mary's greatest contribution to society?
4. What Power Smarts did Mary use to contribute to her community?
5. What are some challenges you face in your life?
6. What Power Smarts do you use to face your challenges?
7. What are your strongest Power Smarts?
8. How could you use your Power Smarts to contribute to your community?
9. How would you like to use your Power Smarts in the future?

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*Courtesy of the
Smithsonian National Museum of
American History*