

Francis Scott Key's Truce Ship

Louis F. Giles, The Society of the War of 1812 in Maryland

Over the last two hundred years, professional and amateur historians alike have spent countless hours searching for the name of the truce vessel from whose deck Francis Scott Key watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry and penned the initial words of what was to become the national anthem of the United States, "The Star Spangled Banner." This article summarizes previous work and reaches a new conclusion supported by additional evidence.

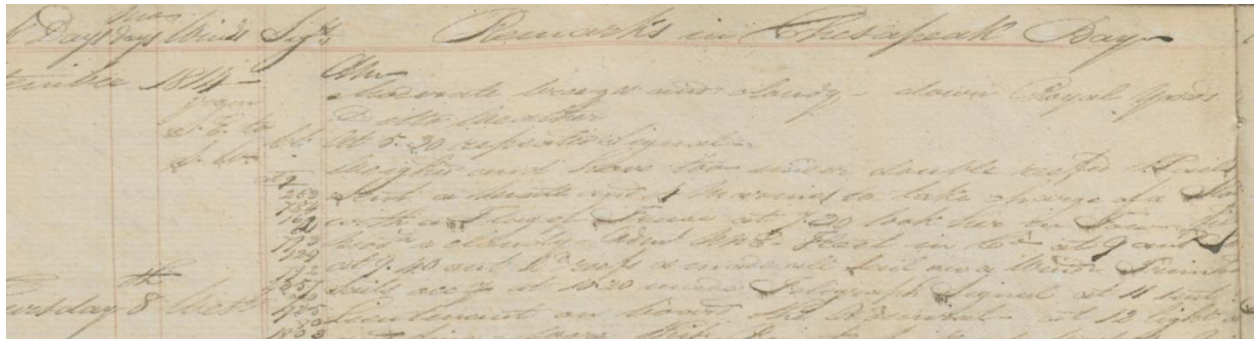
Several primary sources exist which provide us some facts behind the story of Key's adventure, most notably Key's letter to friend John Randolph, dated 5 October 1814, and John S. Skinner's "Incidents of the War of 1812" published in the *Baltimore Patriot*, 23 May 1849. Skinner, the government prisoner exchange agent, was aboard the vessel with Key. While Key's letter to Randolph provides no assistance on this matter, Skinner's detailed manuscript informs us that once reaching the Patapsco River, he [Skinner] demanded the British "return us to our own vessel - one of Ferguson's Norfolk packets, under our own " Star-Spangled Banner," during the attack. It was from her deck, in view of Fort McHenry, that we witnessed through an anxious day and night."

Several other sources provide details on these events. In 1857, Roger Taney provided Key's account of the adventure as told by Key to Taney in the book *Poems of Francis Scott Key*. In this source, Taney recounts that, according to Key, "orders were issued to the vessel usually employed as a cartel." Another source, a letter written by Key's eldest daughter Elizabeth Phoebe (Key) Howard Scott, is described by Scott Sheads and Ralph Eshelman in their book *Chesapeake Legends and Lore from the War of 1812*. The letter states "The name of the ship my father went on when he boarded the British fleet was called the *Minden*." According to Sheads and Eshelman, an additional source exists in a letter written by William Curtis Naps to President Lincoln in 1863 connecting the frigate HMS *Minden* of the British navy and Francis Scott Key.

Based on these accounts, most historians, over the years, have identified Key's truce ship as the HMS *Minden* or the "cartel *Minden*." Research by Sheads and Eshelman confirm the HMS *Minden* "was not a part of the British fleet, nor was the ship even in North American waters during the War of 1812." Additionally, research by this author show there was no Norfolk packet during this time frame named *Minden*.

In the early 1950's, Zach Spratt an amateur historian from Washington D.C., after years of research, uncovered some exciting new evidence. Mr. Spratt received from the United Kingdom National Archives a muster roll of the HMS *Surprise* covering the period 8-11 September 1814, which included a muster roll containing the names of men from an American sloop flying a flag of truce, who had been fed from the ship supplies. Names included in this list

were Dr. Baines, Surgeon, and John Ferguson, Master. Other names on this list were found by this author in a list of sailor's Certificates of Protection. The names of Francis Scott Key and John S Skinner were not on the muster roll as they were honored guests of the commander and dined with him, according to Skinner. Additionally, this author obtained a copy of the captain's log from the same Archives and discovered a record dated Thursday, 8 September 1814: "Sent a mate and 6 marines to take charge of a sloop with a flag of truce at 7:30 [AM] and took her in tow."



Captains log HMS Surprise Thursday, 8 September 1814

Thus, from the foregoing information we now know several important facts:

1. Key and Skinner were on one of Ferguson's Norfolk packets.
2. The packet was a sloop.
3. The master of the sloop was John Ferguson

Based on Spratt's work, Ralph J. Robinson of Baltimore performed additional research at the United States National Archives and published articles in 1955 and 1956 in the *Baltimore Magazine*. Combing the files of the State Department's Diplomatic and Consular Accounts, Robinson discovered various expense accounts submitted by John S. Skinner during the period 1 March 1813 to 1 July 1815 during which time he served as agent for the Commissary General for Prisoners. The only Ferguson packet sloop found by Robinson in Skinner's receipts was for the use of the sloop *President* on 8 December 1813, mastered by John Gray, to transport prisoners. All bills submitted in 1814, were merely designated "to B. Ferguson for the use of his vessel as a Flag of Truce." (Brothers Benjamin and John Ferguson were the owners of the Baltimore - Norfolk packet line along with Norfolk partner Theodosius Armistead). As the word "vessel" was used in the singular, Robinson contended that the *President* was the only sloop contracted for use by Skinner in 1814.

Based on these findings, many modern histories tend to identify the *President* as Key's truce ship. However, this author has discovered evidence that disputes Robinson's assumption. A

snippet in the American & Commercial Daily Advertiser published in Baltimore on 4 May 1814 advertises: “The fast sailing sloop *Stephen Decatur* [C]apt. Ferguson, left here yesterday morning at 10 o’clock, with Mr. Swerthkoff, Russian Secretary of Legation, and Mr. Skinner of this city, on a visit to the English admiral’s ship in the Chesapeake.” Additionally, on 23 June 1814, the *Stephen Decatur* was again used by Skinner to transport troops from Baltimore to Annapolis to support the Chesapeake Flotilla at St Leonard’s Creek. Thus, if Robinson is correct in that Skinner used a single vessel for diplomatic missions throughout 1814, that vessel was the *Stephen Decatur*.

FLAG OF TRUCE.
The fast sailing sloop **Stephen Decatur** capt. **Ferguson**, left here yesterday morning at 10 o'clock, with Mr. Swerthkoff, Russian Secretary of Legation, and Mr. Skinner of this city, on a visit to the English admiral's ship in the Chesapeake.—*Ib.*

American & Commercial Daily Advertiser, May 4, 1814 Baltimore, Maryland

Even if Robinson was incorrect regarding his contention of a contract for a single vessel during 1814, it is still almost certain that the vessel used for the Key mission was the *Stephen Decatur*. On 25 December 1811, an advertisement in the American & Commercial Daily Advertiser reads, “Benjamin Ferguson has added to his line of Norfolk packets two coppered vessels. The packet sails every Wednesday and Saturday.” These packets were the sloop *Stephen Decatur* and a schooner which was sold in late 1812. Given the time urgency of Key’s mission, the use of Ferguson’s newest and fastest sloop would be paramount. Additionally, we know from the muster roll of the HMS *Surprize*, the master of the truce sloop was John Ferguson, not John Gray, who, based on newspaper shipping records of the period only captained the sloop *President*, while Ferguson captained the *Stephen Decatur*.

While it may be of no great historical significance to determine the name of the vessel upon which Francis Scott Key stood and penned the “The Star Spangled Banner,” yet it does give historical dignity to the occasion. All Americans know the name the name of the *Mayflower* which transported the Pilgrims to America – should we not know the name of this vessel – *Stephen Decatur*.¹

¹*It is indeed serendipitous that the vessel upon which Francis Scott Key penned "The Star Spangled Banner" was named Stephen Decatur. Maryland native Decatur's heroic actions in the Barbary Wars led to him becoming a national hero of the time, and a personal hero of Key. According to Marc Leepson in his book What So Proudly We Hailed, on 6 December 1805 at a dinner in Georgetown honoring Stephen Decatur, the guests sang a lyric written by Key honoring Decatur called "When the Warrior Returns." This poem contains the lines: "In the conflict resistless, each toil they endur'd Till their foes shrunk dismayed from the war's desolation and pale beam'd the Crescent, it's splendour obscur'd By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation" and was to be sung to the same tune as the yet to be written "Star Spangled Banner" - "To Anachreon in Heaven."*