



Episode 9, 2012: Star Spangled Banner

Elyse Luray: Coming up...Was this ornate powder horn carried into an early battle to seize control of North America? And later...a family divided by the American Revolution. But first...

Charlene Robbins: I'm Charlene Robbins, from Salem, Oregon. A few years ago, my father was going through his music cabinet, and came across this manuscript. We started asking my dad questions about it, and he explained that in 1917, this committee was formed to standardize the Star Spangled Banner.

When I saw John Philip Sousa's name, I started to realize that maybe this was rather important. I had the opportunity to go to the Antiques Roadshow. At that point, the appraiser appraised it for between 10 and 15 thousand dollars. What I would like to know is, what role did this document play in the Star Spangled Banner becoming our national anthem?

Elyse Luray: I'm Elyse Luray, and I'm on my way to meet Charlene and see her copy of the Star-Spangled Banner, and I can't wait. I saw it on the Antiques Road Show, but I haven't seen it in person.

Elyse Luray: How does one get a copy of the Star Spangled Banner?

Charlene Robbins: When my father graduated from high school, he took music lessons. And his teacher was Dr. Gantvort. And on the last day of lessons, Dr. Gantvort gave this manuscript to my father

Elyse Luray: Charlene's father explained that a government committee had been formed in 1917 to standardize the music for the Star Spangled Banner.

Charlene Robbins: Dr. Gantvoort is one of the men who served on this committee.

Elyse Luray: So then, the names are here. The only one I know is Sousa – John Philip Sousa. He was the famous band conductor. What are these? The D ...this is the key for who they are?

Charlene Robbins: That's correct.

Elyse Luray: Right...

Charlene Robbins: And they each have their own staff line. Notice that they broke the song down measure by measure

Elyse Luray: Oh, great...

Charlene Robbins: Here's measure one...

Elyse Luray: Yeah

Charlene Robbins: ...two, three

Elyse Luray: Charlene had done some research about the committee but had never figured out exactly what this document is. She thinks it might have been some sort of ballot. Each committee member appears to have given an opinion on what each measure of the music should sound like.

Charlene Robbins: They then went back and voted. There was a vote. And – that was for, and against.

Elyse Luray: That's absolutely fascinating.

But there are still things she has no answers to, including a curious pencil mark.

And nothing else is in pencil on the entire thing.

Charlene Robbins: And I have absolutely no idea why.

Elyse Luray: You've done a lot of

Charlene Robbins: Yes.

Elyse Luray: ...research yourself.

Charlene Robbins: Yes.

Elyse Luray: You've taken it to the Antiques Roadshow

Charlene Robbins: Yes.

Elyse Luray: What can I – What can I do for you?

Charlene Robbins: Well, I have a question about who wrote the manuscript.

Elyse Luray: Uh huh...

Charlene Robbins: The other thing I would like to know is; what role did this manuscript play in the Star Spangled Banner becoming our national anthem?

Elyse Luray: All right this is great because the piece has already been authenticated and it's been valued so I think the next step is for me to go where the Star Spangled Banner was born, which is my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. Charlene's manuscript dates from 1917, but the national anthem wasn't adopted until 1931, so I'm not sure about her document's place in history and I can't read music, so I'm going to meet with David Hildebrand, a musicologist at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore.

Elyse Luray: Couple questions for you. Is this is the music for the Star Spangled Banner?

David Hildebrand: I think so. It's melody by committee! It's a bunch of different opinions as to how each measure of the Star Spangled Banner should go. So what they're really discussing here is the melody, just the melody.

Elyse Luray: And how do we know that, cause I--

David Hildebrand: Well there is no harmony. A melody is just a string of notes by itself. Uh, that's a melody.

Elyse Luray: Uh, huh

David Hildebrand: But if you start to put chords to it..

Elyse Luray: Ah..

David Hildebrand: ...you're filling out lots of other notes ...

Elyse Luray: Yeah...

David Hildebrand: ..and you're, and you're giving it a sense of harmony, literally. So, what they're arguing over here is simply the contour of the melody and the rhythm of the melody.

Elyse Luray: David explains how the melody was based on an 18th century tune from a British gentlemen's singing club. Francis Scott Key had written the words to the Star Spangled Banner during the War of 1812, after Fort McHenry in Baltimore had survived a bombardment by the British. But over a hundred years later, there were many versions in use and the Department of Education had formed a committee to standardize the melody. The committee members appear to have shared a vision, for the most part.

David Hildebrand: No wait a minute, they couldn't agree here. They stopped. There's a big question mark. They're tied 2 to 2 to 1.

Elyse Luray: On what?

David Hildebrand: On what's the best average melody for this measure. For these three beats here. They're in such disagreement that, that they must have decided, "Well, we'll come back and finish it later"

Elyse Luray: Okay and that's where they say, "with the land of the free"

David Hildebrand: Yeah

Elyse Luray: And they hold it really high

David Hildebrand: Mmhmm

Elyse Luray: Yeah. Okay.

David Hildebrand: Yeah it's a very, it's the climax of the song. It's the most important part of the song.

Elyse Luray: Okay, so there's there's no decision at that point.

David Hildebrand: It's left in pencil and with a question mark so I'd say there's no decision. It'd be interesting to see where it goes after this.

Elyse Luray: David explains the head of the committee was an educator named William Earhart but its star was band leader John Philip Sousa.

David Hildebrand: My goodness everybody knew him. You know, his tunes, I mean all you really need is a... and everyone knows the band is getting rolling, they're ready to play...

Elyse Luray: Yeah.

David Hildebrand: And he single handedly helped popularize this melody. His band played it around a thousand times in public. This was his showpiece. He went on a bit of a mission. He really felt that this was America's song.

Elyse Luray: And what about Damrosch?

David Hildebrand: Damrosch was the biggie, next to Sousa. The two of them towered above the others. I mean he came from a dynasty of musicians, that's how they're known. The Damrosch Dynasty.

Elyse Luray: At a time when classical music was popular music, Damrosch was a celebrity. A conductor and composer, he directed the New York Symphony Society, later the New York Philharmonic.

David Hildebrand: Sort of like Leonard Bernstein. He became well known at that time.

Elyse Luray: David says whoever wrote this had synthesized the opinions of Damrosch, Sousa and the other committee members

David Hildebrand: This is a not a working document. Someone compiled all of the different opinions, sketched them out, laid them over and then probably recopied it.

Elyse Luray: But David doesn't know who wrote it. So handwriting expert John Reznikoff has offered to take a look.

Elyse Luray: Good to see you John.

John Reznikoff: Great to see you.

Elyse Luray: Yeah I'm excited to show you this.

John Reznikoff: Can't wait to see.

Elyse Luray: First of all have you ever seen anything like this before?

John Reznikoff: This is the first.

Elyse Luray: It's in great condition, right?

John Reznikoff: Oh it's beautiful.

Elyse Luray: The History Detectives office provided John with writing samples from each committee member. One by one, Gantvort, Sonneck, Damrosch and Sousa's penmanship failed to match.

Elyse Luray: Okay so there's only one person left and that's Earhart.

Elyse Luray: Was the manuscript even written by a member of the committee?

John Reznikoff: Okay let's, let's try a whole word. See that AND there?

Elyse Luray: And the...

John Reznikoff: Wow.

Elyse Luray: Yeah they're exact.

John Reznikoff: Everything, the A, the N, the D. This is, this is a match.

Elyse Luray: Well he was the head of the committee, so that kinda makes sense. And I actually think it makes it a little bit more valuable, right? I mean, that's pretty cool.

John Reznikoff: I totally agree. More valuable, more historic.

Elyse Luray: That's awesome.

Elyse Luray: I know who wrote the document but I'm still not clear what role it played in making the Star Spangled Banner the national anthem. Vince Vaise at Fort McHenry has offered to search their archive but first shows me the rampart the British had attacked in September 1814, which had inspired the watching Francis Scott Key.

Vince Vaise: So the British started bombarding the fort firing these huge 200 pound exploding shells and they would also fire rockets as well. So these ramparts we are now walking on a lot of the defenders were hunkering down behind the ramparts and really during much of the battle we're just sitting here taking it.

Elyse Luray: The attack continued all night. Scott Key feared that it was hopeless for the American defenders.

Vince Vaise: Then at 9 in the morning, the huge 30 by 42 foot flag is hoisted as a special act of defiance. And that's when Francis Scott Key saw it. That's when he's like "Yes! You know, the flag is still there, and that's when he really gets that rush of inspiration."

Elyse Luray: Vince doesn't know a lot about the committee who wrote our document, but says they may have more information in their library.

Elyse Luray: Ok, so "History of the Star Spangled Banner".

Vince Vaise: "History of the Star Spangled Banner".

Elyse Luray: Let's take a look.

Vince Vaise: Alrighty

Elyse Luray: Ah – Committee on National Songs. All right. So, the Committee of National Songs comprised of... Alright, let's open this up.

Elyse Luray: It's an account of the Committee's work.

Elyse Luray: According to John Philip Sousa, they've gone over the matter of standardization of the anthem in the most thorough and painstaking manner.

Vince Vaise: Yeah...

Elyse Luray: It sounds like they uh– they spent a lot of time on this. And look, this is footnoted... "For comment and report of this committee, see the letter of John Philip Sousa to WA Moffett, US Marine Band Library file." Okay. So, if that file has a letter from John Philip Sousa---

Vince Vaise: Right

Elyse Luray: ---they've got to have other letters, right?

Vince Vaise: I would think so.

Elyse Luray: Master gunnery sergent Mike Ressler will help me search the archive at the Marine Band Library in Washington, DC, but first, a surprise... from the United States Marine Band! Called "the president's own" by Thomas Jefferson, the US Marine Band's primary mission is to provide music for the president of the United States.

Elyse Luray: That was fabulous. Thank you.

Mike Ressler: Let's go down to the library, where the archive is located. We have a tremendous amount of information about the Star Spangled Banner, and we'll look and see what we can find.

Mike Ressler: Here we are. This is uh Music-Specific Titles.

Elyse Luray: Ok

Mike Ressler: We have information about lots of different pieces. But this is the section that we – we want to take a look at.

Elyse Luray: Ok.

Mike Ressler: This is all on the Star Spangled Banner.

Elyse Luray: Ok.

Elyse Luray: As the United States prepared to enter the first world war, a patriotic fervor had gripped the nation. In 1917 the Star Spangled Banner became the official national anthem of the army, navy and marine corps.

Elyse Luray: All right – So, what's in here?

Mike Ressler: Let's see what we have...

Elyse Luray: We sifted through the file for a direct link to Charlene's document.

Mike Ressler: Here's a letter dated November 18, 1917.

Elyse Luray: We find the letter from John Phillip Sousa that had been footnoted at Fort McHenry.

Elyse Luray: What's it say?

Mike Ressler: He says, "I am in receipt of a letter from the chairman of the committee, Mr. Will Earhart, which I enclose, and which is self-explanatory." Let's see if we have the copy of the letter from Mr. Earhart...

Elyse Luray: Earhart, yeah...

Mike Ressler: And here it is. It's a three-page letter...

Elyse Luray: What I found next connected the dots. I asked Charlene to meet me at Fort McHenry.

Elyse Luray: So I brought you here to Fort McHenry because the subject matter of your document was born here in 1814

I explained that her document had been written by the committee's chair, William Earhart, and how it had been a cornerstone in making the Star Spangled Banner our national anthem.

Elyse Luray: And it's interesting how I figured it out. But, there was a footnote in a book which led me to the Marine Band Library.

Elyse Luray: At the archives we uncovered a letter written by Earhart to the other members of the committee.

Mike Ressler: It says, "To the members of the committee on national songs. "You will note that in the manuscript, we had no majority version in measure 30."

Elyse Luray: I noticed this on 30, because it says, "Two, two, one, question, question"

Mike Ressler: Ok

Elyse Luray: – and I couldn't figure out what that means.

Mike Ressler: That's exactly talking about this very difference, right here.

Elyse Luray: Okay. So, that's referring to this.

Mike Ressler: It is. I have a copy of their finished published version of the anthem. Let's see how this compares.

Elyse Luray: Ok

Elyse Luray: The published version was note for note what was on Charlene's document including the changes in measure 30.

Elyse Luray: The fact that we have Sousa's letter talking about Earhart's letter, and then we have Earhart's letter, which specifically says that there's a discrepancy in 30, and our document shows this discrepancy that they're talking about...

Mike Ressler: Exactly.

Elyse Luray: And then we have the final version that's printed – I mean, in your opinion, isn't this

Mike Ressler: I think...

Elyse Luray:... probably the final draft?

Mike Ressler: I think that this, this is the final version that the committee agreed upon, the final, standardized version of the Star Spangled Banner.

Elyse Luray: Committee head Earhart had conducted a second ballot, by letter, on measure 30. That verdict had swung the vote in favor of Walter Damrosch's choice, the familiar rising melody of baseball games and Olympic medal ceremonies.

Charlene Robbins: That's wonderful. That's wonderful. My father would be thrilled, to know how much attention has been given to this manuscript.

Elyse Luray: The military's official use of the song and the standardization of the melody had been the foundation for its adoption as our national anthem.

Mike Ressler: It was very important. Because it – it codified the anthem. The committee that was responsible for standardizing this version carried tremendous weight. So, I think it really helped to catapult the Star Spangled Banner forward to the point that in 1931, Congress finally passed legislation, and it was signed by Herbert – President Herbert Hoover, making it our national anthem for the entire country.

Charlene Robbins: Thank you so much.

Elyse Luray: Charlene surprised me. She wanted to donate the manuscript here at Fort McHenry.

Charlene Robbins: I would like to introduce my sister, Carmel Knutsen, who is a co-donor along with me.

Carmel Knutsen: I am delighted to be here.

Charlene Robbins: It is really our pleasure to be able to donate this to you today.

Gregory Weidman: We thank you very much, both of you.

Charlene Robbins: Well I think it's just wonderful for this to end its journey where its history began.