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Baltimore’s Key Bridge replacement: Let’s fix the name

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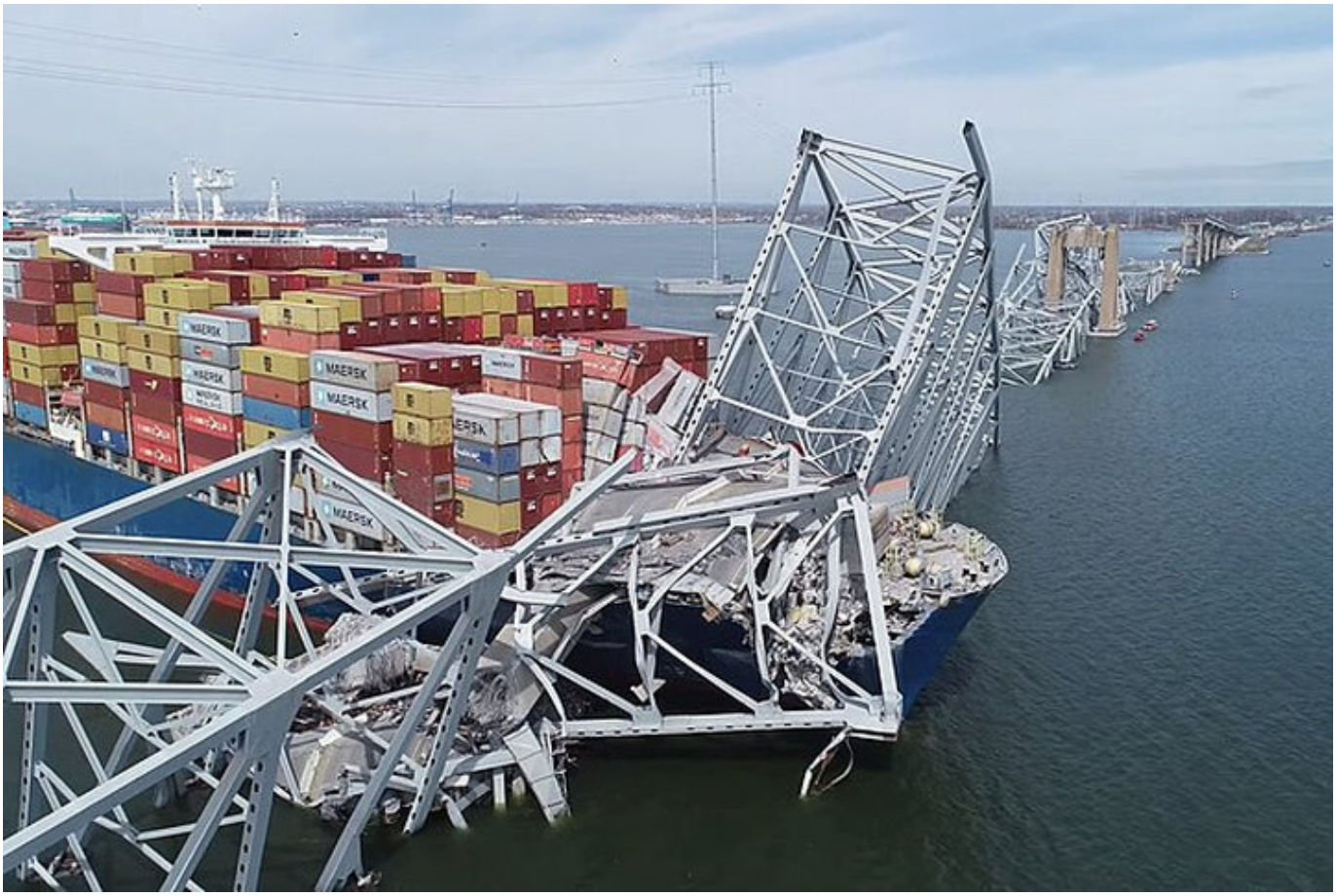
June 28, 2024

Not for slavemaster Francis Scott Key but Maryland’s Frederick Douglas or Harriet Tubman



Baltimore — Proposals for rebuilding the former Key Bridge are now in, and it is expected that a decision on who will grab the billions of dollars involved in the construction will be made by late summer.

It’s not too early to discuss the issue of what to name the new bridge. Clearly, this is an opportunity to shut down any plans to continue with its old name and rename the bridge to either Frederick Douglas or Harriet Tubman Freedom Bridge. Both are from Maryland, and both have played outstanding roles in history.

In addition, with the coming hoopla around July 4th and obligatory summer renditions of the “Star Spangled Banner,” what better time to echo these demands,

bury Francis Scott Key forever, and put his song in the dustbin of history where it belongs?

How did the 'Star Spangled Banner' even become the national anthem, and who was the real Francis Key?

Since grade school, most of us have been fed not only a sanitized version of the anthem but also a myth about the national anthem and Francis Scott Key, who is portrayed in paintings and statues as heroically standing in a ship, arm stretched out, scribbling down the words to the "Star Spangled Banner" after witnessing the British bombardment of Fort McHenry in 1814.

The fact is that the full anthem and its history run deep in slavery's soil. The original song penned by Key was eventually scrubbed of its racist lyrics that taunted enslaved African people. "No refuge could save, Hireling or slave, From terror of flight, Or gloom of grave" is a reference to Black men who escaped from slavery to join the British during the War of 1812.

Key's diddy never actually took off during his lifetime, partly due to the song's overt racism. Most people of his period preferred to sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

The singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" didn't pick up until after the post-Reconstruction period by pro-slavery advocates and military officers and generals.

The song's popularity was boosted as the U.S. emerged as a global military power. It was played after the Navy destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in 1898. By 1904, the Navy made "The Star-Spangled Banner" its de facto anthem. Simultaneously, the Army required its members to "stand at attention" during the song. It became the national song of the U.S. military.

Following the horrors of World War I, many workers were turned off by the anthem's obvious pro-war bent. However, the United Daughters of the Confederacy fought

hard to elevate the song to an official national anthem.

In 1931, President Herbert Hoover rubber-stamped the military's choice and conceded to the old Confederacy. Francis Scott Key's song was finally made the official anthem almost a century after his death. If there is any question about whose victory this was, supporters in Baltimore threw a victory parade, hoisting the Confederate flag at the front of the march.

By the early 20th century, the objectionable verses had been revised or cut, not because of inherent racism but because of their anti-British bent. By that time, the British were considered a U.S. ally.

Truth is that the "Star Spangled Banner" was the product of a rotten compromise with proponents of the slavocracy, marking the betrayal of Reconstruction and the beginning of enlarged military power, then called the Department of War.

Francis Scott Key, the person

Key was a descendant of Maryland's slave-holding aristocracy. He was no fervent opponent of British colonialism but rather a well-heeled opportunist attorney who used his connections with Andrew Jackson to become District Attorney for the District of Columbia — the top cop and chief law enforcement officer for the capital.

He grew up on a wealthy plantation and was waited on by people his family enslaved. Key's privilege and great wealth were built on slave labor and stolen Indigenous land; his actions and life's course never strayed from this course.

Later, he married Mary Tayloe Lloyd, whose family coincidentally owned Frederick Douglass, the great anti-slavery opponent and orator. Roger Taney, the Supreme Court chief justice, was his best friend, law partner, and brother-in-law. It was Taney who wrote the white supremacist Dred Scott decision that declared Black people had no rights the white man was "bound to respect." Such were the connections in

the antebellum South.

Key helped found the American Colonization Society, known earlier as the American Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of the United States. In essence, it was a rather extreme group that advocated sending formerly enslaved people back to Africa not in the cause of freedom but fearing that freed Black people could organize rebellion on colonial soil. The project served more as a penal colony.

But Francis Scott Key's most intense period in this onerous history occurred when he served as the "law and order" District Attorney (from 1833 to 1841) under Andrew Jackson, also a wealthy Southern slaveholder. During this period, he fervently enforced enslavement laws meant to protect the white man's right to own human property.

His crusade included banning anti-slavery publications from circulating in Washington, D.C., and prosecuting anti-slavery abolitionists. Key personally sought to prosecute the case of Arthur Bowen, a 19-year-old accused of attempting to murder his enslaver. Bowen was wrongly convicted and eventually pardoned, but Key continued to push for the death penalty.

In August 1835, when racist mobs attacked freed and enslaved Black people in the nation's capital (referred to as the "Snow Storm"), Key stood on the wrong side, using every avenue to buttress slavery and to indict the victims.

It's reported that Key died a bitter and somewhat broken person three years after hanging up his District Attorney position. The winds of the anti-slavery movement were blowing stronger. He was bitter about losing the push to hang the youthful Arthur Bowen. Nevertheless, he never changed. He died with eight enslaved people.

Besides the anthem, his political legacy in upholding slavery is damning.