

"[America the Beautiful] belongs to all Americans whose feeling for America it expresses. I have come to see that I was its scribe rather than its author. Its singers are its true creators."

— Katharine Lee Bates

My sister and I stood beside the tall marble marker in the cemetery in Hillsboro, Ohio. Our great-great-grandparents, James and Sarah Jane Brown, are buried there. We read the names of their children who rest beside them. One name identifies a daughter-in-law, America. What prompted her parents to give her that name, I wondered. Was it the poetry of the word, or was she, like the firstborn of the Lost Colony of Roanoke, the first child born in America—the *Virginia Dare* of her family? Maybe it was an abiding love for this country that caused her parents to give her the name of the nation. The answers are conjecture, but the beauty of the name is certain.

When we think of America, we think of freedom and liberty. We think of the struggles to achieve and maintain that freedom and liberty. We think of panoramic vistas from Tidewater to the Shenandoah, to the Great Plains and on to the mighty Rockies and Pacific Coast Highway. We think of *Big Sky Country* and the Black Hills. We think of July 4th and self-evident truths about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. When we think of America, we think of the promise of America—to be a beacon of liberty for the oppressed and a land of opportunity for the rest.

The epic saga of America's frontier has always stirred my imagination. But the attraction is far more than the romance of wagon trains heading west. It is the adventure of being drawn into the future with a sense of purpose and calling, meeting life's challenges with courage and determination. This is what is compelling about America, and the optimism is contagious.

In the film *Gettysburg*, starring Michigan's own Jeff Daniels as Joshua Chamberlain, hero of *Little Round Top*, there is a powerful scene in which Chamberlain addresses a company of "mutineers" assigned to the 20th Maine. The former Bowdoin College professor-turned army colonel

makes this impassioned defense of the Union cause: "This is a different kind of army. If you look back through history you will see men fighting for pay... for land, because a king leads them or just because they like killing. We are here for some-

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

O BEAUTIFUL for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!⁵
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

— Katharine Lee Bates

thing new. This has not happened much in the history of the world. We are an army out to set other men free. America should be free ground, all of it... all the way from here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do,

America the Beautiful

By Senator Cameron S. Brown



Katharine Lee Bates

not by who your father was. Here you can be something. Here is the place to build a home, but it's not the land. There's always more land. It's the idea that we all have value, you and me. What we're fighting for in the end, we're fighting for each other."

When Katharine Lee Bates, another New England educator, traveled west to Colorado Springs in the summer of 1893, she was not prepared for what she would see. Across the wheat fields of America's heartland to the pinnacle of Pikes Peak, she was awed by the spectacle of America's grandeur. During a field trip to the summit of Zebulon Pike's Rocky Mountain namesake, she was overwhelmed by the breathtaking beauty of the mountaintop view with its scenic vantage of valleys below. But for Katharine Bates, the majestic scenery of America's landscape was eclipsed by a deeper truth that surfaced with clarity and purpose. She, too, understood that America's greatness rests on "the idea that we all have value."

And so the thirty-three-year-old¹ Wellesley College professor of English literature wrote down the line and verse that "floated into [her] mind" on

the mountain summit that day. As the words emerged from the depths of her experience, she ended each verse with a plea to the *God of All Nations* to shed His grace on America. Later revisions² would implore divine favor to mend the nation's every flaw, make nobleness the true measure of success, and crown America's good with brotherhood.

A year after her trek west, Katharine dusted off the poem she had kept in her notebook since her stay in Colorado Springs. Her *Pikes Peak* poem was submitted to *The Congregationalist*, a weekly church periodical in Boston, and was accepted for publication in the July 4th, 1895 edition. It bore the simple title, *America*. Her patriotic verse netted a fee of five dollars.

It wasn't long before Katharine Bates' poem captured the hearts of people all across America. Her words speak to the highest ideals of American patriotism: reverence for God, sacrifice and self-control. They proclaim the hope of America, a future "undimmed by human tears."

As the country enthusiastically embraced her *ode to the nation*, the search for a suitable tune to accompany the poet's words began in earnest. Many composers tried to do musical justice to Katharine's moving lyric, but no one could match the quality of her line and verse with note and beat. That changed in 1904

when church organist and choirmaster Samuel Augustus Ward's fittingly beautiful *Materna*³ was suggested as the musical canvas for *America the Beautiful*.



Samuel Augustus Ward

Samuel Ward's hymn-tune was originally composed as new music for the centuries-old hymn, *O Mother, Dear Jerusalem*. The music came to him while on a return boat trip to New York City after spending a day on Coney Island in the summer of 1882. According to a story recounted by his son-in-law more than fifty years later, Sam

Ward wrote the music on the starched linen shirt cuff of a friend. Here is how the story goes... Anxious to capture the tune that was *playing* in his head, Sam asked his friend, Harry Martin, for something to write on. Unable to find anything suitable, Martin removed his shirt cuff and gave it to Ward, and thus the music for *America the Beautiful* was written off the cuff on the deck of a side-wheeler steaming back to the New York shoreline.

Samuel Ward's music was first published together with Katharine Bates' poem in 1910. The two never met, but they are united in the creative bonds of America's beloved anthem. Ward never knew of this special distinction. He died on September 28, 1903. Coincidentally, both Ward and Bates were thirty-three years old when their respective travels inspired the tune and words that forever bind them together. A grateful nation has sung their song ever since.⁴

When we think of America, let us celebrate the true beauty of America, measured not by power and prestige, nor by the pageantry of the land, but by the premium we place on a beating heart, a helping hand and an uplifting spirit. Let us be that generation of patriots that sees, beyond the years, the fulfillment of America's promise, from sea to shining sea.

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NOTES

- Bates was born August 12, 1859, and died at the age of 69 on March 28, 1929.
- Bates revised her poem in 1904 and again in 1911. The 1911 text revision is the familiar version we know today.
- Before Ward's *Materna* was popularly accepted as the standard musical version for Bates' poem, many tunes (nearly eighty) were paired with her words. The most notable was *Auld Lang Syne*, which has an identical meter, allowing the lyrics of both songs to be perfectly interchanged.
- In 1926 there was an effort made to adopt *America the Beautiful* as the United States' national anthem. *The Star-Spangled Banner*, older and more established, won out, receiving official status in a bill signed by President Herbert Hoover on March 3, 1931.
- Reflects punctuation and style Bates used in her 1911 revision.



Senator Cameron S. Brown, (R) Fawn River Township, is a member of the Michigan Senate Appropriations Committee where he is Chairman of the State Police/Military and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee, Chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee, and Vice-Chairman of the Judiciary/Corrections Subcommittee. He earned a Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University, and has a BA in History from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA.

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