

# America the Beautiful

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"**America the Beautiful**" is an American patriotic song. The words are written by Katharine Lee Bates and the music composed by church organist and choirmaster Samuel A. Ward. Bates originally wrote the words as a poem, *Pikes Peak*, first published in the July 4th edition of the church periodical *The Congregationalist* in 1895. The poem was titled *America* for publication. As for the music, Ward had originally written the music *Materna*, for the old hymn, *O Mother Dear, Jerusalem*, in 1882. Ward's music combined with the Bates poem was first published in 1910 and titled *America the Beautiful*. The song is one of the most beloved and popular of the many American patriotic songs.<sup>[1]</sup> From time to time it has been proposed as a replacement for *The Star-Spangled Banner* as the National Anthem.

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## History

In 1893, at the age of thirty-three Katharine Lee Bates, an English professor at Wellesley College, had taken a train trip to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to teach a short summer school session at Colorado College. Several of the sights on her trip inspired her, and they found their way into her poem, including the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the "White City" with its promise of the future contained within its alabaster buildings; the wheat fields of America's heartland Kansas, through which her train was riding on July 4; and the majestic view of the Great Plains from high atop Zebulon's Pikes Peak.

On the pinnacle of that mountain, the words of the poem started to come to her, and she wrote them down upon returning to her hotel room at the original Antlers Hotel. The poem was initially published two years later in *The Congregationalist*, to commemorate the Fourth of July. It quickly caught the public's fancy. Amended versions were published in 1904 and 1913.

Several existing pieces of music were adapted to the poem. A hymn tune composed by Samuel A. Ward was generally considered the best music as early as 1910 and is still the popular tune today. Just as Bates had been inspired to write her poem, Ward too was inspired to compose his tune. The tune came to him while he was on a ferryboat trip from Coney Island back to his home in New York City, after a leisurely

### "America the Beautiful"



Commemoration plaque atop Pikes Peak

#### Patriotic

<b>Published</b>	1895 (poem)
<b>Writer</b>	Katharine Lee Bates
<b>Composer</b>	Samuel A. Ward

#### Audio sample

File:America the Beautiful.midfile info · help

summer day in 1882, and he immediately wrote it down. He was so anxious to capture the tune in his head, he asked fellow passenger friend Harry Martin for his shirt cuff to write the tune on, thus perhaps the *off the cuff* analogy. He composed the tune for the old hymn "O Mother Dear, Jerusalem", retitling the work "Materna". Ward's music combined with Bates' poem were first published together in 1910 and titled, *America the Beautiful*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Ward died in 1903, not knowing the national stature his music would attain, as the music was only first applied to the song in 1904. Miss Bates was more fortunate, as the song's popularity was well-established by her death in 1929.

At various times in the more than 100 years that have elapsed since the song as we know it was born, particularly during the John F. Kennedy administration, there have been efforts to give "America the Beautiful" legal status either as a national hymn, or as a national anthem equal to, or in place of, "The Star-Spangled Banner", but so far this has not succeeded. Proponents prefer "America the Beautiful" for various reasons, saying it is easier to sing, more melodic, and more adaptable to new orchestrations while still remaining as easily recognizable as "The Star-Spangled Banner." Some prefer "America the Beautiful" over "The Star-Spangled Banner" due to the latter's war-oriented imagery. (Others prefer "The Star-Spangled Banner" for the same reason.) While that national dichotomy has stymied any effort at changing the tradition of the national anthem, "America the Beautiful" continues to be held in high esteem by a large number of Americans.

Popularity of the song increased greatly following the September 11, 2001 attacks; at some sporting events it was sung in addition to the traditional singing of the national anthem. During the first taping of the *Late Show with David Letterman* following the attacks, CBS newsman Dan Rather cried briefly as he quoted the fourth verse.<sup>[3]</sup>

Ray Charles is credited with the song's most well known rendition in current times (although Elvis Presley had good success with it in the 1970s). His recording is very commonly played at major sporting events, such as the Super Bowl; Charles gave a live performance of the song prior to Super Bowl XXXV, the last Super Bowl played before the September 11 terrorist attacks. His unique take on it places the third verse first, after which he sings the usual first verse. In the third verse (see below), the author scolds the materialistic and self-serving robber barons of her day, and urges America to live up to its noble ideals and to honor, with both word and deed, the memory of those who died for their country. Symbolically, Marian Anderson (a noted opera singer of her day) sang a rendition of America on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after being refused use of Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution because of her skin color.

When Richard Nixon visited the People's Republic of China in 1972, this song was played by Chinese as the welcome music. Interestingly, the Chinese characters for United States literally mean "Beautiful Country."<sup>[4]</sup>

The song is often included in songbooks in a wide variety of religious congregations in the United States.

## Idioms

**"From sea to shining sea"** is an American idiom meaning from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean (or vice versa). Many songs have used this term, including the American patriotic songs "America, The Beautiful" and "God Bless the USA". In addition to these, it is also featured in Schoolhouse Rock's "Elbow Room". Although the United States has borders with the Arctic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico,

the phrase refers only to the West and East coasts of the Continental U.S. A term similar to this is the Canadian motto *A Mari Usque Ad Mare* ("From sea to sea.") See also Manifest Destiny.

## Lyrics

*Note: some sources omit the second verse and substitute its refrain for that of the fourth verse.*<sup>[5]</sup>

O beautiful, for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
*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 ev'ry 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 ev'ry 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!*

## Books

- Lynn Sherr's 2001 book *America the Beautiful* discusses the origins of the song and the backgrounds of its authors in depth. ISBN 1-58648-085-5. The book points out that the poem has the same meter as that of "Auld Lang Syne"; the songs can be sung interchangeably.
- Barbara Younger has written a children's book about the writing of the song: *Purple Mountain Majesties: The Story of Katharine Lee Bates and "America the Beautiful"*. The book has illustrations by artist Stacey Schuett.

## References

- <sup>^</sup> <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.100010615/full.html>
- <sup>^</sup> <http://209.85.173.132/search?>

q=cache:B6A\_mmftHFYJ:www.cameronsbrown.com/Resources/Other/america%2520the%2520beautiful.pdf+o+mother+dear+jerusalem+august+ward&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ca

3. ^ Zacharek, Stephanie (2001-09-18). "Dan Rather's tears; Journalists don't cry on camera. That was before last week.". *Salon.com*. <http://archive.salon.com/ent/tv/feature/2001/09/18/rather/index.html>.
4. ^ "Lucky Symbols". *About: Chinese Culture*. [http://chineseculture.about.com/library/picks/aatp\\_luckysymbols.htm](http://chineseculture.about.com/library/picks/aatp_luckysymbols.htm).
5. ^ *The United Methodist Hymnal* © 1989

## Sources/external links

- MP3 and RealAudio recordings available at the United States Library of Congress
- 1913 Lyrics (eight stanzas)
- Lyrics (four stanzas)
- Midi file of *America the Beautiful* from NetHymnal
- America the Beautiful in today's news media.
- Biography of the songwriter, Katharine Lee Bates, part of a Series poet's biographies.
- America the Beautiful Park in Colorado Springs named for Katharine Lee Bates' words.
- Page with lyrical transcription and low fidelity recording of Ray Charles's version of the song
- [1] Archival collection of America the Beautiful lantern slides from the 1930s.

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