

America The Beautiful- July's Hymn of the Month 2025

By
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Cape Cod has been called by some, “The home of America” with the landing of the pilgrims in 1620 at Provincetown, then the birth of a little girl at Falmouth in 1859. It is no stretch to say, “Cape Cod, the home of America.” We all know about the pilgrims from our history classes of elementary school, but what about the little girl, Katharine Lee Bates? How did a minister’s daughter become part of the great history of America?

Well, it all started August 12, 1859 in Falmouth, Massachusetts, when Katharine Lee Bates came into this world. After graduating from Wellesley, the noted girls’ school, she taught at a high school, then returned to Wellesley as an instructor in English literature. Miss Bates’ first inspiration for writing patriotic verse occurred in 1892 in recognition of the 400-year anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America. The following year, she was invited to do summer school teaching in Colorado. It was during this time that a series of events led to the writing of the patriotic hymn.

Her first stop was Chicago and the great Columbian Exposition with its gleaming white buildings; or as Katharine called them, “Alabaster cities gleam.” (It is interesting to note that D.L. Moody, the evangelist, was also there at this time with gospel tents greeting the visitors. I wonder if Katharine met him.) She then continued westward passing through great fields of grain and fruited plains, on to the purple mountain majesties of Colorado. Finally, she arrived at Pike’s Peak. She traveled to the top in a prairie wagon and on mules. From her diary, Katharine tells us what happened next: “The peak remains in memory hardly more than one ecstatic gaze. It was then and there, as I was looking out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country spreading away so far under those ample skies that the opening lines of the hymn floated into my mind.” Later that evening, she put all her thoughts to paper and wrote *America, the Beautiful* in the Antlers Hotel in Colorado Springs. This was 1893. Two years later, the hymn would appear in the weekly church journal, *The Congregationalist* on July 4, 1895, almost 160 years ago. My wife, Linda, and I have traveled up Pike’s Peak by car. When we arrived at the top, we discovered a 12’ high plaque honoring Katharine Lee Bates at the very spot where she received the final inspiration for writing *America, the Beautiful*.

America is beautiful indeed, and Miss Bates’ patriotic hymn expresses it so well. We are a nation founded under God and blessed of God. We would do well to reconsider the words of this great song as we find ourselves at this pivotal point in history. Perhaps, *America, the Beautiful* will rekindle a love for our country and a desire to serve it and the Lord who founded it. (See “A 1000 Words” for the picture story.)

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 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!

Do you know that many people consider *America the Beautiful* to be our unofficial second national anthem? My late neighbor Jim Redding, a musician, was one of those who felt that way. As a matter of fact, if he had had it his way, *America the Beautiful* would be our national anthem. Also, do you know it almost happened? In 1926, there was a strong effort to replace *The Star Spangled Banner*. Alas, *The Star Spangled Banner* won out with President Herbert Hoover signing a bill on March 3, 1931 proclaiming it the official national anthem. Yet the winds of change still remain, dormant for now.

Another interesting facet of *America the Beautiful* is the music we sing to it today. Through the years, different musical settings have accompanied Bates' hymn. In 1926, there was a contest held by the National Federation of Music Clubs to come up with a new tune; but none of the submitted tunes won. So Samuel A. Ward's *Materna* has stayed down through the years as the musical setting. Samuel had originally written the music in the summer of 1882 for the old hymn, *O Mother Dear Jerusalem*. One account says he composed the tune while on a ferry returning home to Newark, New Jersey from Coney Island, New York. In a hurry to capture the notes, he wrote them down on a borrowed shirt cuff. A second account says that Samuel composed the tune in memory of his eldest daughter, Clara, who died in 1885.

Samuel A. Ward would serve as the organist at the Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey from 1880 to his death in 1903. He did not live long enough to see his tune, *Materna*, become the accepted musical setting for *America the Beautiful*. The words and music were wedded together in 1910 and have stayed together ever since. According to the Dictionary of Hymnology, published in England, Samuel A. Ward was the son of a shoemaker, not the last surviving line of Samuel Wards starting in Rhode Island. Julie Ward Howe is part of that Ward legacy, but that's another story for another day. Samuel left no descendants.

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