

The Pledge of Allegiance

Brother Francis Bellamy
Author of "The Pledge of Allegiance"

Who wrote the Pledge of Allegiance to our Flag? Can you imagine a time when this was not known?

"Well, truth is stranger than fiction, for up until 1939 it was not certain who had written the Pledge, and what's more, until that time no one seemed to care. Finally, in that year after years of research a committee of the U.S. Flag Association ruled that Francis J. Bellamy had indeed written our Pledge of Allegiance. The Reverend Francis J. Bellamy was a Mason, a member of Little Falls Lodge #181, Little Falls, New York. The Order of the Eastern Star erected a memorial tablet to him in 1955 in Oriskany, New York.

At the First National Flag Conference in Washington, D.C., June 14, 1923, the words "the Flag of the United States" was substituted for "my flag." The change was made on the grounds that those born in foreign countries might have in mind the flag of their native land when giving the Pledge. The Second National Flag Conference in Washington on Flag Day 1924, added, for the sake of greater definition, the words "of America." On Flag Day, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an Act of Congress adding the words "under God".

For greater meaning and proper presentation when reciting the Pledge there should be only three pauses: 1. After "America;" 2. After "stands;" and 3. After "indivisible."

Due to the fact that no author was mentioned when the Pledge appeared in 1892, few knew who actually had written it and in time its origin was completely veiled in obscurity. This is the story of how the Pledge of Allegiance came into being, and of a long-delayed tribute to its author.

James B. Upham was a man imbued with patriotic fervor. At the close of the last century he was a partner of the firm publishing the Youth's Companion, a juvenile periodical of Boston. One of his strong beliefs was that an American flag should be flown over every schoolhouse. To this end he persuaded his magazine to sponsor a plan to sell flags to schools at cost; the idea being so successful that 25,000 schools acquired flags in just one year. He also campaigned to have flags flown over public buildings—his success in this endeavor is clearly evident today. Brother and Sir Knight James B. Upham is known as the "Father" of the movement to display flags in schools and in public places. We Masons, who pride ourselves on our patriotism, salute him! He was a member of Converse Lodge, Maiden, Massachusetts.

Brother Upham had still another idea—that on Columbus Day 1892, the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, every public school in the land would hold a flag-raising ceremony under the most impressive circumstances, and every school child rededicate himself in love and service to his country. Upham conceived this as a National Public School Celebration of Columbus Day.

Daniel S. Ford, the owner of the Youth's Companion and Uncle James Upham appointed Francis Bellamy, a member of the Youth's Companion staff, the national chairman of a committee to

enlist the support of educators, mayors, governors and members of Congress in this tremendous undertaking. The results of their labors surpassed their fondest dreams, for the President of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, enthusiastically endorsed the plan and declared a national holiday for Columbus Day, October 21, 1892.

There was great excitement in the schools throughout the land during the months preceding the great day of celebration. Committees were busy at every school, planning the Columbus Day program down to its finest detail.

It was understood by all that the climax and the most important and impressive part of the ceremony would be the raising of the Flag and the salute to it by the students. In preparing the suggested program for the Columbus Day Observance to be printed in the Youth's Companion, James Upham hesitated when they came to the salute by the students. He was not entirely satisfied with the "Balch" salute, then in common usage. This was written in 1887 by Colonel George T. Balch, and went "We give our heads and our hearts to God and our country—One Country, one language, one flag."

A variation of this was: "I give my heart and my hand to my Country: One country, one language, one flag." Upham discussed his dilemma with Francis Bellamy and asked for his help. Here is Bellamy's account of the thoughts that went through his mind as he wrote the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag note the attention he gave to each word of the Pledge.

Mr. Upham and I spent many hours in considering the revision of the salute. Each one suggested that the other write a new salute. It was my thought that a vow of loyalty or allegiance to the flag should be the dominate idea. I especially stressed the word "allegiance." So Mr. Upham told me to try it out on that line.

It was a warm evening in August, 1892, in my office in Boston, that I shut myself in my room alone to formulate the actual pledge. Beginning with the new word "allegiance," I first decided that "pledge" was a better school word than "vow" or "swear;" and that the first person singular should be used, and that "my" flag was preferable to "the" when those first words, "I pledge allegiance to my flag" looked up at me from the scratch paper, the start appeared promising. Then: should it be "country," "nation," or "Republic?"

"Republic" won because it distinguished the form of government chosen by the fathers and established by the Revolution. The true reason for allegiance to the flag is the "Republic for which it stands."

Now, how should the vista be widened so as to teach the national fundamentals? I laid down my pencil and tried to pass our history in review. It took in the sayings of Washington, the arguments of Hamilton, the Webster-Hayne debate, the speeches of Seward and Lincoln, the Civil War. After many attempts, all that pictured struggle reduced itself to three words, "One Nation, indivisible."

To reach that compact brevity, conveying the facts of a single nationality and of an indivisibility of both of states and of common interests, was as I recall, the most arduous phase of the task, and the discarded experiments at phrasing overflowed the scrap basket.

But what of the present and future of this indivisible Nation here presented for allegiance? What were the old and fought-out issues which always will be issues to be fought for? Especially, what were the basic national doctrines bearing upon the acute questions already agitating the public mind?

Here was a temptation to repeat the historic slogan of the French Revolution, imported by Jefferson, “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” But that was rather quickly rejected as fraternity was too remote of a realization, and equality was a dubious word. What doctrines, then, would everybody agree upon as the basis of Americanism?

“Liberty and Justice” were surely basic, were undebatable, and were all that any one Nation could handle. If these were exercised “for all” they involved the spirit of equality and fraternity. So that final line came with a cheering rush. As a clincher, it seemed to assemble the past and to promise the future.

That, I remember, is how the sequence of ideas grew and how the words were found. I called for Mr. Upham and repeated it to him with full emphasis.

“I pledge allegiance to my flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.”

Thus was our Pledge of Allegiance born—and it was proclaimed with great rejoicing throughout the land on October 21, 1892.

In writing the Pledge Bellamy was only fulfilling one of his many assignments for the magazine, but those who knew the man himself knew also that he was fulfilling a deep desire to compose a simple dignified message of loyalty which would convey the truest and most noble sentiments of a devoted patriot toward his native land.

Francis J. Bellamy was born on May 18, 1855 in the town of Mount Morris, New York. His father, the Reverend David Bellamy, minister of the First Baptist Church, was 50 when Francis was born and had recently married a second time. Francis received his early education in the public schools of Rome, New York, where, in 1859, his father became minister of the First Baptist Church. He graduated from the Rome Free Academy in 1872.

After high school Bellamy entered the University of Rochester, graduating in 1876 at the age of 21. He then attended the Rochester Theological Seminary, completed his training there and was ordained in 1879. A year later he accepted his first pastorate at the First Baptist Church in Little Falls, New York.

In 1885 he left the Little Falls church to assume the pastorate of Boston’s Dearborn Street Baptist Church. His next and last church was the Bethany Baptist Church of Boston. In 1891 he joined the staff of the Youth’s Companion.

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