

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

America the Beautiful

WORDS BY KATHARINE LEE BATES

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This popular and eminently singable song was written by Katharine Lee Bates (1859–1929), an English professor at Wellesley College. The poem, originally called “Pikes Peak,” was inspired by the sights Bates had seen on a train ride to and from Colorado Springs, especially by the vista she beheld from the top of Pikes Peak. As she explained, “Near the top we had to leave the wagon and go the rest of the way on mules. I was very tired. But when I saw the view, I felt great joy. All the wonder of America seemed displayed there, with the sea-like expanse.” Bates’s poem, published on July 4, 1895, was eventually combined with music written by church organist and choir-master Samuel A. Ward (1847–1903), becoming popular around 1910. Like the other patriotic songs, “America the Beautiful” is mostly known by its first stanza, which begins by celebrating America’s natural gifts and ends with a plea (or is it a prayer?) for brotherhood. What do the other stanzas celebrate, and what do they call for? How would you summarize the teaching and ideals of this poem? How does singing this song make you feel?

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 impassion’d stress
A thoroughfare of 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 prov’d
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.