

America the Beautiful

The Hymn Society became embroiled in its first public controversy by promoting a candidate for the national hymn. From the Society's beginning, its members expressed high regard for Katharine Lee Bates and her work. They particularly favored "America the Beautiful," but few of them thought it had found a worthy partner in Samuel A. Ward's MATERNA, which predated the text.

The final event of the day-long meeting at Emily Perkins' home in May 1924 was the playing of several tunes for Bates' words. These included MATERNA, CRUSADER by S. B. Whitney, Perkins' own CENTRAL BRANCH, and unnamed tunes by William T. Sleeper and John N. Burnham. A year later, as the discussion continued, Milton Littlefield expressed regret for the pairing with Ward's tune and asserted that those by Sleeper and Charles S. Brown were superior matches.

On November 15, 1925, members of THS gathered at Boston's Westminster Hotel for a luncheon to honor Bates. They were joined by more than two dozen others from Wellesley College and the Boston area. Announcement was made of a proposed resolution to urge adoption of "O beautiful for spacious skies" as the national hymn, and a preliminary draft was shared. The final version of the resolution appears in Chapter 1.

Perkins introduced Bates with words that seem appropriate in many subsequent contexts:

Whatever we may think of America—with all its faults and failures and wrong doing—we must believe in its fine idealism. The poets tell us so—and we must believe the poets. For after all, National Life is but an enlargement of the individual life, in which the poet sees the fine moment that we ourselves are often unable to recognize. And Miss Bates has given us in this great hymn an interpretation of what we may be,—perhaps what we really "are for one transcendental moment."

Miss Bates is a great teacher—but there is nothing she has given forth that is of finer educational value than this hymn of brotherhood.

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Peace will come—the peace our aching hearts long for so intolerably—peace will come when "All people that on earth do dwell" have learned to sing together these hymns of brotherhood.

The effort to find a different tune to set "O beautiful for spacious skies" did not generate a consensus, and MATERNA continued as its standard setting. Neither did peace come from the debate about a national hymn. Supporters of "The Star-Spangled Banner" ultimately carried the day, as Congress adopted it in 1931 as the national anthem of the United States.