“Oh Say Can You See...” starts the mural with a portrait of Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee Indian tribe of North America. He was a visionary and a leader able to predict and quite literally “see” things and events in his world that most people could not.

He is portrayed rising from a large chasm in the earth with cracks running across the ground. The fairly universal representation of the American Indian “Wheel of Life” depicting man’s place in the world with the four directions/ four winds, four seasons, past, present, future, hereafter, earth, fire, wind and water in equal balance shown just below Tecumseh’s image. Tecumseh’s portrait with eyes forward represents Tecumseh seeing not only the series of earthquakes (the largest ever documented in U.S. history known as the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811 and 1812) but also an end to his whole way of life starting with the advance of the Europeans in the “New World.” As the war of 1812 started to take its toll, Tecumseh was trying to save his world by uniting the native tribes of North America, but was unsuccessful. The trade of alcohol and firearms for land and goods with the Europeans was too powerful for most native tribes to resist. The earthquakes on Dec. 16, 1811, Jan. 23 & Feb. 7, 1812 and aftershocks were felt in 13 of the 15 United States of America as represented by the church bells ringing in the radiating force.

“By the Dawn’s Early Light” shows a river boat going backward up the Mississippi River as the power of the earthquakes caused the river to temporarily run in the opposite direction, the boat lit by a total eclipse of the sun in 1812 was also foretold by Tecumseh.

The mural doesn’t stick to a time line per se, but instead goes as the Europeans did, from the east coast westward with a few notable stops along the way.

The big cheese and the White House: The war of 1812 was a war over England’s imposed tariffs and taxes on their territories, including their claims in the Caribbean where sugar and rum was produced. England needed money to fund the continuing war in France and Napoleon as the troops were struggling. The U.S. and England did reach an agreement which was celebrated and noted by the British with the delivery of a giant wheel of President’s Madison’s favorite imported cheese as a gift. (John Bull was the British “Everyman,” a symbol like our Uncle Sam). News of this settlement came too late by three days. The U.S. had had enough and the war was on. During the attack on the nation’s capitol, the British troops set fire to the White House. President Madison and his wife had gotten advanced intelligence on the pending raid and Dolly Madison flew into action. She ordered a feast be laid out for guests in the White House banquet room sparing nothing—everything from the finest wines to sweet bay crabs and oysters from the Chesapeake Bay. Upon entering the White House, the British were amazed at their good fortune and stopped to fully enjoy their spoils of war. This gave Mrs. Madison her chance to preserve a bit of American History. Among the various pieces of silverware and personal items saved, the first Lady also saved a large portrait of George Washington painted by Stuart Gilbert. Broken from its frame and taken off its stretcher, it was taken to another location for safety. It was later returned to the White house where it can still be seen to this day hanging in the East Room.
The war of 1812 also brought in a lot of things that stayed in popular American culture. **Uncle Sam** was one, shown as a hard working man plowing his way westward. Uncle Sam was inspired as a nickname for a man by the name of Samuel Wilson. Mr. Wilson was a meat packer in Troy, New York who was contracted by the shipping company of Elbert Anderson to provide rations to the U.S. troops during the war. The boxes of rations were marked E.A.—U.S. soldiers started referring to the shipments as coming from Uncle Sam. Another American icon of progress, **Lady Liberty** leading the way—**“What so proudly we hailed...”** shown as an approaching storm clear cutting its way into the untamed wilderness and toward the coming battles in the Chesapeake. The newcomers to this land brought with them a new way of life and unfamiliar way of living off the land, far from the native ways of living with nature.

Various troops gather on the shores of the Chesapeake witness battles in several towns and villages surrounding Baltimore and around the bay area.

Frontiersmen, freed slaves and military officers alike watch the enemy ships sail into the Chesapeake Bay. Although ready for engagement, the British were not prepared for resistance they met in the Chesapeake.

As the battle ramps up, all become aware of the ferocity seen **“at the twilights last gleaming.”** At some point the fight was so intense, one couldn’t make out which flag could be seen flying over the ships or over Fort McHenry. While the battle raged, **Sir Francis Scott Key, Esq.** was being held off shore aboard a British ship while negotiating the release of American soldier. He watched carefully to see whose flag was indeed flying over the Fort. Both the British and United States flags were red, white and blue, but there was little chance in the haze and the smoke to tell which flag it was. He knew that if the British flag flew over the fort, he and his charge were not “going home anytime soon.” Key was not only a lawyer, but a poet as well and found himself writing down his fears as he scanned the hill at the fort from the rear deck of the ship. The only times he could clearly make out the flag over the fort, was in the flash from the Congreve rockets (a relatively new defense weapon for the time). **From his notes, the “Star Spangled Banner” was penned.**

The people most employed on the war ships, and given the most dangerous jobs, were slaves and those with no other alternative. Because they were considered expendable, they are represented by the **two men handling ropes** while cannons and rockets explode around them.

**“Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight, o’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming? And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.”** The flag was indeed still flying above Fort McHenry and a chicken was crowing its’ little lungs out on the fort’s battlements. According to traditional maritime superstition, birds (mainly chickens) were used to predict a battle’s outcome. If the bird ate the feed tossed toward it at the beginning of the battle they would be victorious, if not...it’s not good for the bird. “If he will not eat, then let him drink.” The rooster at Fort McHenry belonged to a defender of the fort by the name of Henry Barnhart. At the height of the attack on the fort, it was struck in the foot by flying shrapnel and started crowing. Another defender of the fort, on witnessing this, said “If that rooster doesn’t stop crowing and we win this battle, I’ll buy it a pound cake.” When the bombing stopped and the smoke cleared, the man remained true to his word. **A pound cake was presented to the rooster** with all the military presentation and ceremony.
Below the rooster image is the “Baltimore American Farmer” where the words to the Star Spangled Banner first appeared in print. In that first printing the song was titled “In Defense of Fort McHenry” and was attributed wrongly to “B. Key Esq.” although not the same in title or attribution, it is now our National Anthem “The Star Spangled Banner” and sung to the tune of a standard pub and drinking song of the 1800’s, “To Anacreon in Heaven.” The small sort of one sheet newspapers were seen as news and entertainment in the day, a lot like tabloids and tabloid shows are today. At the top you will find a teaser about the U.S. clipper ships, and indeed they were the fastest in the world and able to out maneuver the best of the British Navy which at the time were thought to be state of the art.

There next, is a former slave leaning against a tree as we also move from the shore to the cities. He’s reading his bible, not only seeking comfort but also being one of the only things most slaves were allowed to read. That is how he learned.

The poem on the tree he leans against illustrates the fact that the war of 1812 was not a popular war with all U.S. citizens. The island of Nantucket, just off the coast of Cape Cod, declared itself a neutral state and things would remain business as usual with Britain and the Allies alike. The war was not popular with Canada or most of the states along our northern borders. With money and supplies running short for England, the states decided to “take Canada” from them with Thomas Jefferson saying “It’s simply a matter of marching.” We attacked Canada at points along Lake Erie to Fort Dearborne and Fort Detroit. We were turned back in short order.

As we move along the wharf, there are two men from opposite factions having a pint or two, sometimes not as good a time as it may seem. Because of short supplies, rations and ammunition, morale amongst the English Navy is starting to drop. The drop in morale makes a lot of British Navy regulars seek employment on the “other side” joining the American Navy. At the same time, England’s naval officers use what is known as “impressing” citizens into employment on their ships. People coming home from a night of spirited rivalry may wake up on a British battleship with a hangover, at the point of a sword several miles from shore and with a decision of “serve or swim.” Meanwhile English ship jumpers would often mark themselves with tattoos of popular American icons, as not to be found being a spy and being forced overboard. The American sailors’ traditional symbols are expressions of love, liberty, hope, defiance and freedom. Among these are the swallow (likely one of the first land-based birds a sailor sees at the end of a long voyage) and the directional navigation star to keep them from being lost at sea and for a safe return to loved ones. We also see the phrase “Don’t give up the ship” (still used an encouragement to remain determined). This was a dying command of James Lawrence in 1813 aboard the USS Chesapeake in a battle against the HMS Shannon, not so far from here.

In the mural, the war itself is wrapping up. With the three flags, “Oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wa-ave,” United States victorious with its flag still waving, Canada still a proud separate nation and England’s Union Jack folded under and heading home. The war was declared over. The Fleur-de-lis is in flames representing the city of New Orleans but again because of bad communication, the battle of New Orleans was fought three days later.

The alligator’s tail on the top of the building is in reference to a song popular in 1953, “The Battle of New Orleans” by Johnny Horton. Major losses were suffered on all sides. General Jackson (later
to become President) declares victory over this battle and uses it again to gain backing for his run for the Presidency.

As troops and others go back to lives they had before the war, most find that little has changed. Slaves are still slaves and trading goes on. The Native Americans are losing ground more and more everyday as the Europeans still advance westward with leaps and bounds. As settlement takes more and more land for its foothold in the New World, the Indians move further west. It was not an easy road for anyone. Settlers cleared trees for their cabins and others were taking their place. **John Chapman aka “Johnny Appleseed”** took seeds from cider presses back in the east to plant nurseries for apple trees on claimed land. Settlers in those areas were required by law to tend the trees in order to retain their rights to the claimed land. The apples were then sold back to the cider presses and then sold or traded as cider. According to author Michael Pollen “Really what Johnny was doing and the reason he was welcome in every cabin in Ohio, was that he was bringing the gift of alcohol to the frontier.” September 26th is Johnny Appleseed Day.

As America pushes west, more immigrants move into eastern cities and the cities grow, buildings built from sticks and wood turn to bricks and steel at the turn of the century. The railroad linking east and west coasts marks the beginning of the industrial revolution. It also marks the point of no return for the taking of the North American wilderness. Though he didn’t live to witness it, **Chief Tecumseh “saw” it happening a long time ago.** Immigrants from all over the world are arriving in this expanding United States in search of opportunities and equal shares in the land where dreams come true.

“In the la-and of the free...” where all people have rights and all have an equal chance to make their lives and the lives of others better. The rights of all voices and beliefs to be heard.

A place to stand and be counted as **“We the people”** of those who claim their “ho-ome of the bra-ave.” Each person is trusted to hold his piece of the dream, knowing the price for it may be high.

The mural finishes with **Tecumseh’s valor speech.** Tecumseh dies at the hand of the U.S. Military in October 1813 in the Battle of The Thames, but his words live on in award ceremonies of the U.S. Military even today “Our Visionary Hero...”

*Thank you to all who participated in and supported this project.*
*The story would not have been told without you.*
—LEE T. WHEELER, artist and mural designer