

HONOR THE COLORS

Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags

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A First-Hand Account of the Flag Removal, January 2002

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Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags were displayed in the four glass cases in the rotunda of the Capitol Building for nearly a hundred years. The removal process began in January, 2002, with the 24 flags in the northeast corner case. Before the actual removal process could begin a considerable amount of preparatory work was necessary.

The glass shield protecting the flags weighed about 400 pounds and was hinged at the top instead of on the sides of the case. Some volunteers from Carpenters Local Union 106 Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee built a wooden structure to support the glass shield and hold it in place while the flags were being removed. A work table was placed next to the case under this wooden structure and large sheets of tissue paper and Tyvek were pre-cut and placed on the tables for wrapping. Rolls of bubble wrap and large transportation tubes measuring 12 feet in length and 12 inches in diameter were used for transport.

On the day the removal began, January 23, 2002, an impressive solemn ceremony to commemorate the occasion took place first. An honor guard composed of members of the Grenville M. Dodge Camp #75, Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War graced the occasion with their presence. A large assembly of elected officials, members of the local television and newspaper media, and the general public were also there, including a number of school groups. Several speeches of greeting and explanation of the occasion were given.

Removal of the flags then began. Four staff members from the State Historical Society of Iowa, Jerome Thompson, Bill Johnson, Sheila Hanke, and David Holmgren conducted the removal with the special assistance of Fonda Thomsen, owner of Textile Preservation Associates of Keedysville, Maryland, and consultant to the Iowa Battle Flag Project. Staff members wore special protective clothing because of the particulates on the flags and in the air during the removal process. Each flag needed to be removed with great care due to its age and condition.

The flags were nearly 140 years old. They had been located in these cases for 98 years and had been subject to various stresses caused by electric lights, coal particulates from the old heating system in the Capitol Building, insect damage, sunlight, environmental pollutants, and also simply by hanging from their staffs for this extended period of time in addition to the particulates already present in the flags from battlefield smoke, soil, and plant and pollen material. While some flags were reasonably intact, many of them were in such a stressed condition that they were shattering and leaving fiber fragments on the floor of the flag case. The very act of removal caused some additional shattering and hence the need for great care and skill by staff during the removal to minimize shattering.

(flag removal account continued on next page)

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Just removing the flags a few feet from their locations in the cases to the preservation table required at least three people to hold the staff, the flag itself, and to guide the movement of the flag to the table without causing additional stress to the fibers. Once the flag was on the table it had to be carefully unfurled as much as possible to reveal the field. This was perhaps the most gratifying part of the process for the staff as they were the first people in 98 years to actually see the entire flag. The staff, cords, ribbons, and any case signage had to be carefully removed from the flag without additional damage to the fibers. Documentary tags were placed separately on each item for later identification purposes.

The flag would then be wrapped in the tissue and Tyvek and wrapped again in bubble wrap (to cushion it from any shocks during transport). It would then be placed in a large transportation tube and sealed with packing tape to secure it. Then they would be loaded and transported to the stabilization lab at the State Historical Building where preservation treatment would begin.

-- Dave Holmgren --

Many individuals, groups, and state agencies provided assistance in this effort. The State Historical Society of Iowa wishes to thank members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, the Iowa Battle Flag Preservation Committee, re-enactors from the 24th and 15th Iowa, the Iowa State Patrol Post #16, the Iowa Department of General Services, the Iowa General Assembly, the Legislative Information Service and the Capitol Tour staff for their cooperation and assistance.

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