

HONOR THE COLORS

Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags

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How a Flag Prepared for Display

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How is a Flag Prepared for Display? Let's Find Out!

Great attention and consideration is given to the selection of a flag for display. The Battle Flag Project staff develop the flag rotation schedule one year in advance to ensure that treatment can be completed and the display be precisely planned.

Why do we take such care in selecting and planning the flag rotations? The flag collection is part of the permanent collection that provides the physical documentation of Iowa's people, events and experiences. As the conservator and collections manager I am responsible for the care and interpretation of this collection. Before any flag is exhibited the Battle Flag Project staff must examine, document, and stabilize the flag. We are also required to develop the display method and perform the associated research for labels.

Prior to exhibition either at the State Historical Society of Iowa or at the Capitol Building the flag is pulled from storage and brought to the conservation lab for basic physical and photographic documentation. This process provides the baseline condition of the flag. Part of the physical documentation includes looking at the condition of the fibers, fading of dyes, areas of loss, previous conservation treatments, battle damage and inherent vices. Adding to this information is the development of the environmental history of the flag. The environmental history helps to explain some of the current condition factors such as distortion due to prolonged display. All this information is detailed in the Examination Report and stored permanently within accession files.

Then the Battle Flag Project staff meets to evaluate the findings and make a recommendation for exhibition or not. If the recommendation is for exhibition a treatment proposal with is made. The treatment proposal will include estimate time to execute treatment, cost of materials, and restrictions for display. If the curatorial team can work within these restraints and the flag is added to the rotation schedule.

Previous conservation treatments obscure the field of most of the flag collection disrupting the overall aesthetics. The treatments also hide some condition problems. Only the careful, painstaking removal of these previous treatments reveal the true flag in all its detail. At this point the flag is re-evaluated and a treatment plan is developed. A staff person is then assigned to the flag.

Often the treatment plan calls for basic analysis work, removal of previous conservation treatments, surface cleaning, removal of distortion (unless caused by inherent vice), easing of folds and creases, consolidation of paint fragments, alignment of fragments and detangling of fringe. This phase usually lasts 3 months. At the same time, the basic history of the flag is researched.

Due to the fragile nature of the flag collection and its national importance passive mounts or compression mounts are utilized. These types of mounts place little to no stress on the flag. Most flags require a consolidating underlay or complete encapsulation in Stabiltex. Fragments and unstable areas of loss are secured with hand stitching. This phase usually lasts 3 to 6 months.

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For some flags, the area of loss is in significant areas requiring a digital print simulation of the missing parts. This is applied to the mount to visually fill in areas of loss in the flag while not altering the flag itself. All treatments must be reversible.

A structure of support is created from an aluminum grid platform constructed by museum staff. The mount is then constructed of inert materials that will not hurt the flag. The mount is padded with Ethafoam, padded with polyester felt, and covered with muslin fabric. Once the mount is secured with either linen tape or cording & grommets, the flag is positioned on top of it and lies passively. The flag is then protected by a UV-4 filter plex cover.

The flag is then transported on a rolling table to a freight elevator that opens directly onto the exhibition floor. Great care is taken to ensure that all thresholds are non-jarring and that the pathway is clutter free. A guide person is assigned to oversee the move. The gallery is temporarily closed to the public during the installation phase.

Once installed, the mount enables visitors to examine it closely while protecting the flag. The flag itself is then monitored for light, temperature and humidity.

If the flag is transported to the Capitol Building for display the flag is soft packed. Soft packed means that the flag is wrapped in bubble wrap and secured with a box constructed of acid-free corrugated board. This creates a microclimate for the flag. It also provides for safe handling of the edges so the mount and flag are not disturbed. It is then loaded into a cube van for transportation. A team of 5 experienced staff are needed to oversee the movement. Capitol Police provide security during installation.

Once in the Capitol Building the flag is installed in the NE Capitol flag case. This case has been retrofitted with the appropriate environmental equipment and lighting to provide ideal exhibition conditions. The case is monitored remotely 24/7.

The whole process usually takes 6 months of dedicated work by the Battle Flag staff along with the assistance of installations and exhibits. The planning, examination, treatment proposals, documentation, stabilization and/or conservation treatment, and research are all important components promoting the long-term preservation and interpretation of the State Historical Society of Iowa's Battle Flag collection.