

State Historical Society of Iowa

New exhibit showcasing Iowa Civil War battle flags opens February 18

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(DES MOINES) – Some still carry the bloodstains of the men who followed them into battle. Others were tattered and torn, riddled with bullet holes from Confederate soldiers. All have incredible stories to tell.

They are seven of Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags, and they go on display in "Civil War Survivors: Iowa's Battle Flags Tell Stories from the Front," a new exhibit open February 18 through April 16, 2006 at the State Historical Museum, 600 E. Locust Street in the heart of Des Moines' Historic East Village. Hours are 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon-4:30 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free and open to the public.

"Many people don't realize how important these flags were to the soldiers who followed them and carried them into battle," Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs Director Anita Walker said. "During the Civil War, flags were more than simple pieces of cloth or symbols. They were essential members of the regiments on the battlefield. In battle, amid the noise, smoke and confusion, the flag directed the movements of the soldiers and identified the regiment to leaders in the distance. If the flag was lost, so were the regiment's position, identity and honor. Losing the flag had serious consequences that could have meant life or death for all the members of the unit."

The exhibit opening will be celebrated with a gala military-style ball with special guest Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack Friday, February 17 at 6 p.m. in the State Historical Building. The event will feature an exclusive preview of the battle flag exhibit; a formal presentation of the colors by the Iowa National Guard color guard; Civil War-era dances; curator presentations; and dinner by Café Baratta's. Tickets are \$125, or a table for eight may be reserved for \$1,000. Black tie is optional, with dress blues or mess dress for military personnel. Proceeds support continued conservation of the battle flag collection. Please call 515-281-5111 for information or to make reservations by February 10. Major support for this event has been

provided by Guidon Performance Solutions and Café Baratta's.

Flags going on display include the 1st Iowa, Company B (Hawkeye Flag); 10th Iowa Infantry; 4th Iowa Cavalry; 3rd Iowa Battery (Dubuque Battery); 1st Iowa Battery; 3rd Iowa Cavalry; and the 34th Iowa Infantry.

Each flag has silk fields, and they vary in size, colors and condition. Each has been compression framed underneath a UV filtering and bullet proof Luxan with aluminum grid work and a blue board base with polyester batting and air plane grade muslin. Each framed flag weighs 200 to 250 pounds.

“As amazing as these Civil War battle flags are to see, what really captures the imagination are the stories these and our other flags tell through the course of history,” Walker said.

For example, D. W. Reed of the 12th Iowa Infantry wrote on December 16, 1864 from Nashville, Tennessee: “At Nashville, the regiment charged across an open field, upon the enemy entrenched behind a stone wall. When about half way across the field, a rebel shell exploded exactly in the folds of the flag, tearing it to shreds. The colors, color bearer, and color guard were so enveloped in smoke, that it appeared that all were down: but without a moment's halt the battered flag came out of the smoke and Grannis, still unhurt, carried it forward with a rush, over the wall and up the high hill, in pursuit of the fleeing enemy...”

Another example from J.M. Tuttle of the 2nd Iowa Infantry who wrote on February 18, 1862 from Ft. Donelson, Tennessee: “I cannot omit in this report an account of the color-guard. Color-Sergeant Doolittle fell early in the engagement, pierced by four balls and dangerously wounded. The colors were then taken by Corporal Page, Company B, who soon fell dead. They were again raised by Corporal Churcher, Company I, who had his arm broken just as he entered the entrenchment's, when they were taken by Corporal Twombly, Company F, who was almost instantly knocked down by a spent ball, immediately rose, and bore them gallantly to the end of the fight. Not a single man of the color-guard but himself was on his feet at the close of the engagement.”

As part of the opening day event, the museum will host a number of free, family-friendly activities from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.:

- Step back to the past when more than 40 Civil War re-enactors from across the state gather at the museum to celebrate the exhibit opening.
- Try on uniforms and take a look inside an authentic Haversack; crawl into a wall tent and take home a sample of Hardtack – the food that fed the troops.
- Visit a flag conservation display to learn the seven major steps taken to conserve flags.

Museum conservators will give demonstrations and provide hands-on learning opportunities to visitors to work with tools and materials involved in the restoration process.

- Discover the role of women during the war, including life on the home front, storytelling, quilting and presentations in the Home Front Parlor.
- Join the 16th U.S. Medical re-enactors who will be in full field duty, caring for “wounded” soldiers and performing heroic operations – visitors may be asked to help.
- Learn to dance the Virginia Reel and sing songs of battle with musicians and dancers.
- Bring the names of ancestors and the county in which they lived to the museum; computerized programs can help visitors locate and identify their links to the Civil War. The museum will also share the next steps needed to dig deeper into family history.
- Watch drills being presented by color guards.

In addition, the museum will offer History Hunter tours of the museum’s permanent collection at 10:30 a.m. and the Battle Flag Preservation Lab at 1:30 p.m. The permanent collection tour is \$12 for adults/\$8 for ages 7-12 and limited to 20 people per tour. Members of the State Historical Society of Iowa receive a 10 percent discount. The Battle Flag tour is \$20 per person/\$18 for SHSI members, and is limited to 10 participants age 7 and older. Reservations can be made by calling 515-283-1757, by email Museum.Store@iowa.gov or at the Iowa Museum Store Monday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Sunday noon-4:30 p.m. History Hunter tours are offered the third Saturday of each month, but weekday group reservations can be made by calling 515-281-3809 or by email at Hillary.Liepa@iowa.gov. Café Baratta’s is open Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-3 p.m. and Saturday 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

Iowa’s historic battle flag collection includes 260 flags borne by Iowa regiments and batteries during the Civil War, Spanish American War and World War I. The vast majority of the Civil War battle flags were last seen by the public in the 1890s. Since then, sunlight, smoke and heavy gauze used to support each flag has caused damage, some of it severe. If left unchecked, the damage eventually would have become greater than what the flags suffered in battle. On average, it takes conservators up to 240 hours to preserve a flag, and up to 4,000 stitches per side are individually and carefully cut by hand to remove the gauze.

The museum plans to rotate flags in and out of public exhibits as they are preserved and prepared for display.

The average cost to stabilize a single flag is \$4,800. The Iowa Historical Foundation, a private, non-profit corporation, has established a restricted account to receive contributions for the flag project. Individuals, veteran’s organizations and many Civil War living historians

have already made contributions to the project. For information on making a contribution to the Civil War Battle Flag project, please contact the Iowa Historical Foundation, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319 or 515-281-5111.

The State Historical Society of Iowa is a trustee of Iowa's historical legacy and an advocate for understanding Iowa's past. It identifies, records, collects, preserves, manages and provides access to Iowa's historical resources. Its dual mission of preservation and education serves Iowans of all ages, conducts and stimulates research, disseminates information, and encourages and supports historical preservation and education efforts of others throughout the state.

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