

State Historical Society of Iowa

SHSI Unveils Newly Preserved Civil War Battle Flag at the State Capitol Rotunda

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(DES MOINES, Iowa) – The State Historical Society of Iowa returned the newly preserved Civil War Battle Flag for the 33rd Iowa Infantry to the State Capitol rotunda today in a public ceremony that drew Civil War re-enactors, school children, legislators, government workers and the general public.

Produced at the Philadelphia Depot prior to June 1863, the flag had been on display in the State Capitol since 1894 until it was taken to the State Historical Building a few years ago for stabilization and preservation work. The 34-starred flag is one of 214 different battle flags that have been turned over to the Iowa Battle Flag Project, a State Historical Society of Iowa program that is responsible for preserving Iowa's battle flags.

“We are very grateful to the Governor and the legislature for their foresight and vision in addressing the need to care for Iowa's battle flags,” Department of Cultural Affairs Director Anita Walker said. “Through the benefit of their leadership, we are working to preserve the memory and sacrifices of the men who fought and died for their country while serving under these flags.”

The 33rd Iowa Infantry was composed primarily of volunteers from Keokuk, Mahaska and Marion counties. Their first colonel, Samuel A. Rice, was a former Iowa attorney general who became a brigadier general. The regiment served honorably throughout the war, losing 35 percent of its force to wounds and disease. The flag's stripes hold the battle honors of Yazoo Pass, Helena, Little Rock, Prairie D'Ann, Poison Springs, Jenkins Ferry and Mobile.

The State Historical Society has two flags from the 33rd Iowa Infantry under its care – the flag unveiled today and a blue regimental banner that is undergoing conservation efforts at the Society's Iowa Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory in the State Historical Building.

As each Iowa battle flag is stabilized, preserved and prepared for public display, they will be rotated into the reconstructed rotunda alcove cased in the Capital rotunda on a semi-annual basis. This will allow public access to the flags and their stories while providing limited exposure to light. Several Iowa battle flags also are on display at the State Historical Museum in "Honor the Colors: Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags."

The time-consuming and labor intensive process of preserving Iowa's battle flags is conducted by trained technicians and conservators in the State Historical Building's Iowa Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory. Each flag takes about six to eight weeks to stabilize and preserve – a process that can cost up to \$20,000 per flag.

Preservation efforts of Iowa's battle flags began in 1892 when the 24th General Assembly passed an act requiring "the adjutant-general and the curator of the historical collections, with the advise and consent of the executive council, shall cause the colors, standards and battle flags borne by Iowa regiments and batteries during the war of the rebellion to be placed in hermetically sealed glass cases, in such a manner as to display them to the best advantage, and to preserve them as far as possible from all injury thereto." This action was completed on August 10, 1894, the 33rd Anniversary of the Battle of Wilson's Creek – the first battle of the Civil War in which Iowa volunteers were engaged.

For more than 100 years, Iowa's Civil War Battle Flags – plus later flags from Iowa units serving in the Spanish-American War and World War I – stood in honor in the Capitol rotunda. These rare artifacts, which represent the service and sacrifice of thousands of Iowans, were seriously endangered from years of display, lack of attention, and lack of a clear assignment of responsibility for their care.

In response to public concerns on the condition of the flags, the 78th General Assembly took action in 1999 by appropriating \$50,000 from the capitol restoration funds and assigning the Department of Cultural Affairs "to conduct a study to stabilize the battle flag collection's condition by a professional flag conservator.

In January 2000, Fonda Thomsen, a leading flag conservation specialist, conducted a survey of flags in the capitol, state historical museum, the State Historical Society of Iowa's Centennial Building, and the Iowa Gold Star Museum at Camp Dodge. The results of her survey and recommendations were reported to Governor Tom Vilsack and members of the General Assembly. She recommended a strategy to study and stabilize the flags, retrofit exhibit cases in the capitol for rotational display, and to provide for on-going care. This plan will take about four years and cost about \$1.2 million.

The 78th General Assembly appropriated \$150,000 in 2000 to begin work. It was determined the first phase of work should focus on 85 flags in the collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Flags from the Centennial Building were transported to the museum in

September 2000, specialized textile storage cabinets were obtained, and project staff was hired. Actual work on the flag collection began in January 2001. The stabilization treatment and physical documentation are completed on-site by the Collections Manager/Flag Conservator.

In 2001, the responsibility for the battle flag collection in the capitol was assigned to the State Historical Society of Iowa by the Iowa Legislature. Additional funds for the first phase of work on the collection in the capitol were recommended by Governor Vilsack and approved by the legislature in April 2001. This phase of work commenced in January 2002. Due to the State of Iowa budget crisis, funding for the project was reduced to \$100,000 and the position of project historian was eliminated.

In October 2002, the State Historical Society of Iowa received a \$144,000 Save America's Treasures grant to help fund the Iowa Battle Flag Project. Save America's Treasures is a national effort to protect America's threatened cultural treasures, including historic structures, collections, works of art, and maps and journals that document and illuminate the history and culture of the United States.

Stabilization and preservation of Iowa's battle flags continues today. The Historical Society's Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory is open for public tours every third Saturday of the month and for weekday tours by appointment. Reservations for Saturday tours can be made by calling 515-283-1757. Weekday group tours can be arranged by calling 515-281-3809.

More information about the Iowa Battle Flag Project is available at www.iowaflags.org.