

State Historical Society of Iowa

State Historical Building Opens Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory for Public Tours

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Des Moines, Iowa—Due to strong public demand and a wildly enthusiastic response to its recently opened Museum Vault Tours, the State Historical Building is opening its Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory to the general public for tours.

Beginning Saturday, January 15, 2005 at 1:30 p.m., the State Historical Building, located at 600 E. Locust Street in Des Moines, will offer Battle Flag Tours in its subterranean, climate-controlled preservation center. Tickets are \$20 per person, and \$18 for members of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the work involved with stabilizing and preserving Iowa's historic battle flags, each tour will be limited to 10 participants age 12 and older. The tour will be offered the third Saturday of every month. Reservations can be made by calling the State Historical Building's museum store at 515-283-1757.

In January 2000, Fonda Thomson, a nationally known conservator, examined the battle flags and offered an initial assessment: "the silk flags are brittle but conservable, to save them they must be removed from their staffs and laid flat in a controlled environment, the silk flags are deteriorating each day they remain in their present environment."

Her examination found the flags had accumulated dust and dirt while excessive lighting and the stress of hanging in display cases gradually weakened the fabrics so they no longer support their own weight.

Museum staff and other experts removed the flags from display cases and transported them to the Battle Flag Preservation Lab.

The flags in most need of stabilization and preservation are U.S. national colors, regimental flags, banners and Calvary guildons from the Civil War that were housed – some for more

than 100 years – in four display cases in the Capitol rotunda. Most are silk flags with painted decorations and gold fringe.

Rather than preserving the flags, the conservation treatment of the 1890s, which included machine sewing a layer of cotton gauze on each side of the flag for support, caused additional damage. The gauze is brittle and fractured and no longer provides support but adds more weight, and therefore more stress to the flag fabrics. Some flags appear to be relatively intact while others are severely fractured with large areas of loss. Left unchecked, this damage eventually would have been greater than what the flags endured in battle.

Battle Flag Preservation Laboratory staff will offer an entertaining and educational presentation how the flags are meticulously assessed, stabilized and preserved for storage and future display exhibits.

The Iowa Historical Foundation, the private, non-profit fundraising arm of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 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, please contact the Iowa Historical Foundation, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, or call 515-281-5111.

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