

Iowa Battle Flag Collection Stabilization Project

In 1999, the 78th General Assembly began the effort to stabilize Iowa's battle flag collection by appropriating \$50,000 to the Department of Cultural Affairs with a directive to "conduct a study to stabilize the battle flag collection's condition by a professional flag conservator." Since that time, each successive session of the Iowa General Assembly have included funding for the stabilization effort in annual budgets. In addition, a federal Save America's Treasures Grant has supported the stabilization effort.

An initial evaluation of the flags in the alcoves of the Capitol led to an estimate of 140 Civil War flags in need of stabilization. An additional 14 flags represent the Spanish American War and 27 flags date to World War I. All of these have been steadily deteriorating since they were originally placed in those alcoves. Upon opening the alcoves to transfer the flags to the Battle Flag Conservation Lab in the State Historical Building, the number of flags increased. To the present 240 Civil War flags have been moved to the State Historical Building. The numbers increased as more than one flag was attached to each standard in the case.

The stabilization of these flags requires tedious, professional conservation simply to prepare them for safe, stable storage. The stabilization of an individual flag requires as much as six weeks of intensive work by professional conservators. For a standard flag (6.5 x 6.5 feet) as many as 4,000 individual stitches must be cut and removed from each side of the flag to remove a gauze coating that had been applied in an earlier conservation effort; the flag is vacuumed twice on each side to remove the years of dust and soot from having been in the Capitol Alcoves. Special vacuums with less than 1/10 the power of a common household vacuum are used to clean the flags. Particulates are examined, for example, to compare pollen from the flags with pollen known to have been at particular battle sites and in particular places. Each flag is humidified so the fabric will relax and be able to be re-positioned as in the original. The humidification process alone is fascinating. Each area of the flag is humidified using a steam pen the size of a mechanical pencil and each piece of the flag needs to be addressed individually. The entire process, of course, is thoroughly documented with photographs and conservator notes.

All of this simply to stabilize a flag. To prepare a flag, such as the flag of the 1st Iowa of African Descent which is now on display in the northeast Capitol Alcove, for public display requires additional conservation work so the flag can be displayed and honored. That additional work usually requires an addition 2 – 3 weeks of intensive work either at an outside professional lab or by in-house staff with proper equipment.

Clearly the process is staff intensive and demanding.

Governor Vilsack has recommended an appropriation of \$220,000 to the Department of Cultural Affairs to address needs of the Iowa Battle Flag Collection. That request includes funding for three professional staff members (one conservator, one conservator assistant, and a research historian). At present we have one conservator employed full time, one conservator assistant employed as a temporary staff member using federal funds that are about to end, and we use 50% of a museum curator position to conduct research related to the flags. In addition to the staffing needs, this recommendation includes equipment designed to reduce the amount of outside contract work for preparation of flags for display. We estimate the contract to prepare a flag for display to cost about \$20,000. We believe we can reduce that cost by one-half to one-third by acquiring the appropriate equipment and doing the work in-house.

Our appropriations request, then is for staff and equipment designed to allow us to make significant progress on stabilizing Iowa's Battle Flag Collection, researching the background of those flags so we can better understand the contributions of the men who served under those flags, and to prepare those flags for public exhibition so the stories of valor and honor exemplified by these flags can be appreciated by the public.