the Star Spangled banner
State-of-the-Flag Report 2001
For more than 155 years, the Smithsonian Institution has been the guardian of America's cultural heritage. The Smithsonian preserves the objects that represent our collective history and offers all Americans numerous venues across the country where they can explore the seminal experiences that continue to shape our nation.

Perhaps no other object tells as compelling a story about the beginnings of our country as the Star-Spangled Banner. This famous flag flew over Fort McHenry in Baltimore during the British bombardment of 1814 and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen his patriotic poem that became the national anthem in 1931.

When Eben Appleton, grandson of the commander of Fort McHenry and caretaker of the flag, was looking for an appropriate place to preserve the Star-Spangled Banner for all time, he turned to the Smithsonian. He wanted it to stay on public view at the Smithsonian forever. True to our promise, we have kept the Star-Spangled Banner on almost continuous view since then.

As you know, the timeworn, almost 188-year-old textile is now undergoing a groundbreaking conservation treatment at the National Museum of American History, Behring Center—in full view of the public. Preserving such a large and aged object as the Star-Spangled Banner is quite a challenge. We are using many tools, from needle and thread to NASA near-infrared spectral imaging. We have removed the banner's linen backing, originally attached in 1914 during the first Smithsonian preservation effort, and all its nearly two million stitches. Absent its backing, the flag's fragile state is readily apparent; a gust of wind could virtually sweep it away. We will never let that happen. We also discovered previously unseen patches on the original flag and more vibrant colors in the fabric. We're sharing all these discoveries with the public, so a visitor can return several times and each time see a different view of the flag.

This report details our progress in the preservation effort. We explain what we have discovered about the Star-Spangled Banner, and how that knowledge informs our decisions on how to best care for it. The conservation team now estimates that, because of the strides they're making in techniques and research, the life span of this national treasure might be expanded as much as 500 years.

We are on schedule and very optimistic about the future of the Star-Spangled Banner. We're keeping our promise to Eben Appleton and the nation. We hope you find the project as enthralling as we do, and if you haven't already visited, we invite you to come to the Museum to see for yourself.

Thank you very much for your continued support.

Lawrence M. Small, Secretary
The National Museum of American History, Behring Center is entrusted by the Smithsonian Institution and the American people with the stewardship of one of this country’s most beloved national treasures, the Star-Spangled Banner. In 1996, the Museum embarked upon the Star-Spangled Banner Preservation Project, a major conservation effort to preserve for the next millennium one of the most potent symbols of our national identity.

Why is it important to preserve the flag? Objects such as the Star-Spangled Banner tell stories about our nation—what more magnificent story can be told than that of our flag emerging out of the smoke and darkness of Fort McHenry on that cold dawn in September of 1814?

This is the first time that a museum has undertaken a project to preserve such a large, fragile, and significant object. We didn’t want to do it behind closed doors, out of sight of the public. That is why the Star-Spangled Banner can be viewed today in the Museum’s state-of-the-art conservation laboratory, the focal point of an exhibition that has been seen by more than four million people since May of 1999.

Once the flag’s conservation is complete, I am proud to announce that it will become part of a new permanent exhibition, For Which It Stands. The Star-Spangled Banner Preservation Project fulfills one of the paramount goals of the Smithsonian: to preserve the objects that are crucial to our understanding of history and our place in it.

On behalf of the Museum, I wish to express our gratitude to those who made this preservation work possible. I would like to thank The Pew Charitable Trusts for its catalytic role in committing the initial support for the project. This significant leadership stimulated funding from the United States Congress. The Trusts’ partnership with First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and the White House Millennium Council led to the project’s major support from Polo Ralph Lauren. Mr. Lauren’s generosity extended beyond the Museum as it included funding for a national advertising campaign in association with Save America’s Treasures at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is public-private partnerships such as this one that allow us to fulfill the Museum’s mission and the American people’s expectations.

To quote Francis Scott Key, “The Star-Spangled Banner, long may it wave.” May it inspire our children and our children’s children, as it has inspired us and so many who have gone before, in the new millennium and beyond.

Spencer R. Crew, Director