the Star-Spangled banner

State-of-the-Flag Report ★ 2001
The Flag’s environment is the most important factor in determining its future preservation and display. A secure, climate-controlled setting, low light levels, and the elimination of any contact with soils and pollution will be required in the flag’s future display to ensure its survival.

The Star-Spangled Banner is no longer an intact piece of fabric and cannot support its own weight. Conservation science has already determined that vertical display of textiles is the single most stressful exhibition method. In the past, vertical display placed enormous stress on the flag.

The Museum is carefully considering the least stressful means of support for the flag’s future display, one that will significantly minimize, if not entirely eliminate, the effects of gravity on the fragile flag. The project’s Technical Advisory Committee and invited architects are advising the Museum on possible solutions. Any future display must strike a suitable balance between what is best for the flag, and what provides an enriching visitor experience.
IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE...

Millions of television viewers learned about the flag’s illustrious history and the Smithsonian’s role in preserving it in a dramatic 50-minute documentary produced by The History Channel in collaboration with the National Museum of American History—a highlight of the Channel’s 1998 “Save our History” campaign. The History Channel and the Museum also published and have distributed more than 120,000 copies of The Star-Spangled Banner Project K-8 Teacher’s Manual.

Next steps

“What will happen to the Star-Spangled Banner in the next hundred years? Will this be a lifetime conservation?”

— Visitor to the National Museum of American History, Behring Center, 1999
In 2000, conservation of the flag continued as the conservation team carefully removed each of Fowler’s 1.7 million stitches from the old linen backing. This task and the removal of the entire linen backing, to be completed by February 2001, will reveal a side of the flag that has not been seen by the public since 1873.

Much remains to be done over the next two years, including the completion of the conservation treatment, making a final decision on how to display the flag in the future, and creating a new permanent exhibition that will feature the Star-Spangled Banner.

The Star-Spangled Banner will become part of a new exhibition, titled For Which It Stands (taken from the Pledge of Alligence). This exhibition will include a rich array of artifacts and compelling personal narratives to explore the universal themes represented by the American flag and its important place in our history and in our daily lives.

The time has long since passed for the Star-Spangled Banner to fly triumphantly in the wind as it did in the first years after its creation. However, if properly supported and subjected to no further environmental or physical stresses, even the extensive damage that was suffered by our flag over the past 187 years need not prevent its being displayed.

The red and white stripes and the blue union of the Star-Spangled Banner are made of English woolen bunting, dyed blue with indigo and red with cochineal and madder. The stars are cotton and are sewn into the union by reverse appliqué method.

Each star is about two feet across and each stripe is approximately 23 inches wide.

In 1999, John Hillman, an astrophysicist for NASA, mapped the surface of the flag using near-infrared spectral imaging.
The Star-Spangled Banner is a tangible reminder of our American identity. It is a dynamic and fluid symbol, one that has assumed new meanings during critical periods in American history.

Since the advent of the Star-Spangled Banner Preservation Project in 1996, the Museum has begun an important new dialogue with the American public focused on this most precious national icon. The Museum has partnered with organizations in the public and private sectors to create innovative television programming, educational activities, and publications about the flag that have stirred the popular imagination and enriched the lives of millions, especially those who will never travel to Washington, D.C.

We believe that the Star-Spangled Banner Preservation Project has generated new admiration and pride in the objects of our national heritage, encouraging us to appreciate anew our fascinating past and our hopes for the future. As caretaker of the Star-Spangled Banner, the Smithsonian Institution and its National Museum of American History, Behring Center have accepted the responsibility to provide for the preservation of the flag and its accessibility to the American people for many generations to come.

If you want to learn more...

Star-Spangled Banner history buffs will want to read Smithsonian historian Lonn Taylor’s book, The Star-Spangled Banner: The Flag that Inspired the National Anthem (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), a fascinating tale that recounts the author’s original research into the flag’s history.