The State of the Flag

INTRODUCTION

“This is about the preservation of our history—one of the most important pieces of our history.”
—Visitor to the National Museum of American History, Behring Center, 1999

FROM ITS HUMBLE BEGINNING IN 1813 as an ordinary garrison flag to its transformation into a national symbol of our American identity, the Star-Spangled Banner has served to remind all people of this country's fascinating past and our enduring ideals of citizenship, patriotism, and national identity.

The Museum's Star-Spangled Banner Preservation Project is unprecedented in the history of the Smithsonian Institution. It has combined the expertise of some of the world's foremost textile conservators with the best scientific conservation research and technology in a monumental effort not only to rescue an aging artifact, but also to preserve it for the millions of Americans, now and in the future, to whom it rightfully belongs.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Throughout history, flags have generally been regarded as utilitarian objects—only occasionally repaired and usually discarded when they are too worn to use.

Mary Pickersgill. Pickersgill Retirement Community, Towson, Md.
The state of the flag

NATURAL AGING AND DAMAGE from exposure and handling of the Star-Spangled Banner, already well under way when it arrived at the Smithsonian Institution in 1907, has literally threatened the existence of the nearly 200-year-old artifact. By the end of the 20th century, it had become clear that the Museum needed to take immediate action to halt the deterioration.

In 1996, the Museum convened a technical advisory symposium, inviting 50 of the world’s foremost conservators, historians, curators, engineers, and organic scientists to evaluate the flag’s condition and recommend a course of action for its conservation and future preservation.

Some of these experts have continued to advise the

CONDITION OF THE FLAG

“This Flag is part of our history...it is incredible that it has been preserved this long considering what it’s been through.”
— Visitor to the National Museum of American History, Behring Center, 1999

THE FLAG TODAY measures 30-by-34 feet. With its linen backing, it weighed about 150 pounds; without its backing, the flag weighs about 50 pounds. Although people are continually amazed by the flag’s monumental size, its original size of 30 by 42 feet was typical of 19th-century garrison flags. Flown from 90-foot-tall poles, these giant flags were meant to be seen from great distances.

PIECES OF THE FLAG were removed from the fly edge and the interior—and reportedly given to important personages, a common practice at the time, known as “souveniring”—before it came to the Smithsonian in 1907.

MARY PICKERSGILL started sewing the Star-Spangled Banner in her home in Baltimore. When it outgrew the confines of her home, she borrowed the nearby malt house of a local brewery in which to complete the flag.
Museum. In December 1998, the flag was carefully removed from the wall where it had hung for 35 years and transported to a specially designed state-of-the-art conservation laboratory at the Museum. It lies there today, visible to the public, the focal point for an exhibition about its illustrious history and the conservation process.

The flag's condition has been exhaustively documented at each stage of the preservation project. Research indicated that over its lifetime 80 percent of the wool's physical strength has been lost. Fortunately the wool's chemical structure has remained mostly unchanged, with light causing the most severe damage. The cumulative effects of nearly 200 years of light, dust, and a host of environmental factors and physical stresses have all taken an inevitable toll on the fragile textile. As illustrated in the first known photographs of the Star-Spangled Banner, taken in 1873, damage to the flag was clearly visible decades before it came into the care of the Smithsonian.

As caretaker of this precious artifact, the Smithsonian kept a watchful eye on the Star-Spangled Banner and cleaned and treated it several times. The most extensive treatment occurred in 1914 when renowned flag restorer Amelia Fowler attached a protective linen backing to the flag. Over time, Fowler's backing became weak and soiled and actually obscured the flag's true condition. Overall physical deterioration of the flag is extensive. Large new holes, clearly visible in the delicate

---

**WEATHER IS AN ENEMY** of all flags. When the Star-Spangled Banner flew at Fort McHenry, it suffered from exposure to the elements. A preservation treatment by Amelia Fowler in 1914 dramatically altered the worn and stretched flag to give it a rectangular flat look — which made for a more pleasing appearance in her day. The flag's halyard (rope) also was removed from its hoist. The old halyard will be displayed in the new Star-Spangled Banner exhibition.

**THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER** has 15 stars and 15 stripes as mandated by the Flag Act of 1794.

Francis Scott Key. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Md.
fabric, have opened up. Severe breakage of the textile fibers was caused by abrasion, a virtually imperceptible, but constant, movement of the flag against the old linen backing. Before coming to the Smithsonian, significant portions of the flag, about 8 feet or 240 square feet, were worn away and lost to a common practice called "souveniring," in which pieces of the flag were removed and given away as mementos.

**DID YOU KNOW...?**
The Star-Spangled Banner was first displayed in the Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries Building. In 1964, it was placed in the new National Museum of History and Technology, renamed the National Museum of American History in 1980.
Glossary of Flag terms

**BUNTING**
This is the lightweight woolen fabric used to make flags.

**CANTON**
This part of the flag's field is distinguished by color or design. On the Star-Spangled Banner, it is where the stars are situated. The canton is also called the “union.”

**FIELD**
This is the basic area of a flag, also called the "ground."

**FLY EDGE** or **FLY**
This is the edge of a flag that flies loose in the wind.

**GARRISON FLAG**
This is a national flag flown at military installations.

**HALYARD**
This is the formal name for the rope that was pulled through the hoist, holding a flag to its pole.

**HOIST** or **HOIST EDGE**
This is the side of a flag that is attached to the pole.

"You can neither honor the past, nor imagine the future, nor achieve it without the kind of citizenship embodied by all of our memories of the flag. So, as you see this flag, and leave this place, promise yourself that when your great-grandchildren are here, they’ll not only be able to see the Star-Spangled Banner, it will mean just as much to them then as it does to you today."

— PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON,
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY, BEHRING CENTER, 1998