

“A splendid and beautiful Silk Flag”: Restoring and Remembering America’s History Stitch by Stitch

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Conservation is a process done to extend the life of an artifact. As textiles, flags are particularly susceptible to damage from wear and tear over time, and conservation is often necessary to help preserve flags for storage or display. This project involved the conservation of a 1913 U.S. flag that originally belonged to Worthen Post No. 128 of the Grand Army of the Republic, Murphysboro, Illinois. Both interventive and investigative conservation methods were used; complementary to each other, they added a richness and depth to the project.

Interventive Conservation

Interventive conservation involves any physical treatment to slow the rate of deterioration of an artifact. Treatments vary greatly and are dependent on the artifact’s current condition, materials, components, and projected future use. The artifact was analyzed and treatment was determined according to accepted conservation practices (“Keeping Your American Flag”, n.d.; *Museum Handbook Part I*, 2004; Targett, 1996; Thomsen, n.d.).

INITIAL ANALYSIS

The flag was mounted in a frame and was hanging on a wall (Figure 1). The frame was attached to the wall with large screws. In order to make



Figure 1. Original condition of the flag.

the flag fit into the frame, the flag had been folded on itself in various places. When folded, few missing or torn areas were visible and the flag appeared to be in moderately good condition. The flag had embroidered stars and yellow fringe around the three outside edges. The initial recommendation was to remove the flag from its frame, do a thorough examination, and determine a treatment plan.

Removal of the Flag. The screws that held the frame to the wall were removed, and the flag and frame were carefully carried to a flat work surface. The frame and the glass were removed. The flag had been thumbtacked onto a thin sheet of wood that had been painted a light robin's egg blue; none of the paint had rubbed off on the flag. After the thumbtacks were removed, the flag on its supporting backboard was taken to a padded work table and slid onto the surface. The flag was carefully unfolded and gently flattened and a more complete visual and tactile analysis was made.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

The flag is a staggered-row 48-embroidered-star flag, with two-inch yellow fringe on three sides (Figure 2). There were seven 1"-wide gros-grain ribbons along the fly side of the flag, which may have been used to fasten the flag to a pole. Only one ribbon tie remains relatively intact; the other ties are missing or are in pieces and were discovered under the flag. The examination revealed that the flag was in much worse condition than it originally appeared in the frame. There are significant areas of deterioration and damage to the fabrics. The fabric in the blue canton is in the best condition, with no areas of complete deterioration but many slits. The red and white stripes are completely disintegrated in many areas, leaving only the cotton threads that were used to sew the stripes together. Many of the stripes are flaking away and crumble when touched. There is evidence of mildew damage on the bottom red stripe near the lower right corner; a dead spider and small insects were also found in some of the folds of the flag.

The embroidered stars and the fringe are in very good condition. The yarns of the embroidery floss and fringe are lustrous and have a sheen characteristic of rayon fibers. Rayon was a popular fiber for embroidery floss and other types of passementerie and trims in the early twentieth century. Because there are no loose or fraying yarns, none were taken for



Figure 2. Unfolding and analyzing the flag.

examination, preserving the integrity of the stars and fringe. The fringe along the lower right edges is dirtier and stiffer than the rest of the fringe, apparently from water damage, typical of the reaction of early rayon yarns after exposure to water.

The sheen and feel of the fabrics used in the flag suggested that they were composed of silk yarns. This was confirmed in the following entry from the 1 March 1913 minutes of the Worthen Post:

“Comrade James Imhoff under the head of new business presented the Post with a splendid and beautiful Silk Flag donated by the citizens of Murphysboro, Ill. having cost \$43.85 and Comrade Imhoff was made custodian of the Flag during his natural life.” (“Minutes of the Regular Meeting”, 1913)

Using a microscope, the fabrics were identified as plain-weave taffetas. The chipping and flaking of the fabrics suggest that the silk fabrics are weighted silk fabrics. Burn testing was done on pieces of the flag that could not be sewn back into the flag and the reaction was consistent with the reaction of weighted silk fabrics (Lemin, n.d., par. 21).

The canton and the stripes show some signs of color change. The dark blue canton fabric has areas of slight fading that correspond with the way that the flag was folded in its frame. The red color in the stripes is not as bright as the blue color in the canton, and most likely became dull through the aging process. The white stripes are no longer white, but have a beige tone. The red color has bled into the white stripes in the lower right corner area. The color bleeding appears to have occurred before the flag was mounted in the frame because none of the areas of discoloration corresponds with the folds in the flag.

When the flag was unfolded, a wonderful discovery was made. On the first red stripe below the canton, painted on the flag in gold leaf, a ‘W’, part of an ‘O’ and the straight leg of a ‘R’ were found (Figure 3). This discovery confirmed that this flag was the actual post flag of the Worthen Post. Later, a photograph of the flag was also discovered. In the photograph, the last Civil War veterans who were members of the Worthen Post stand in front of a storefront in downtown Murphysboro, Illinois. Also in



Figure 3. Gold leaf letters.

the photograph is a Boy Scout, who is holding the Worthen Post flag. This photograph has been dated to the early 1930s and may have been taken at a parade or Memorial Day celebration. The photograph also shows that even then there was already significant damage to the flag (Figure 4).

TREATMENT

The visual and tactile examinations established that the flag was in very poor condition. The fabrics were so fragile that the flag could not be turned over to be treated or cleaned on the reverse side. Any type of wet cleaning was absolutely out of the question. The recommended treatment



Figure 4. (From left) A. H. Roberts, P. W. Griffith, and Frederick Schmidgall, Worthen Post, early-1930s. The Boy Scout (at right) is holding the silk Post flag, which already showed signs of deterioration.

plan was to clean the surface of the flag, hydrate the fabrics, and stabilize the flag using supporting materials.

Surface Cleaning. A soft bristle toothbrush was used to loosen dirt and debris from the surface. Then, the surface was vacuumed using a hand-held Dirt Devil on low suction. To further cut the suction, a lightweight Pellon filter was placed over the nozzle and a clean brush attachment was placed over the filter. The surface of the flag was vacuumed through a mesh screen held close to the surface of the flag (Figure 5). During the cleaning, the Pellon filter was changed frequently.

Hydration. Because the fabrics were so dry, the fibers were hydrated to add some flexibility and decrease the brittleness of the fabrics. There was also differential shrinkage between the fringe and fabrics. Differential shrinkage occurs when different components or fabrics in one item do not shrink at the same rate. In the case of the flag, the fringe shrank more than the flag fabrics, causing the flag fabrics to buckle and not lie flat. Moisture was applied to the fringe, and the fringe was gently stretched to attempt to get the flag to lie flatter.

The flag was hydrated several times using a hand-held steamer and distilled water (Figure 6). Steam was applied to the fringe and the fringe gently stretched to block. After the fringe was steamed and blocked, moisture was applied to the canton and the stripes, and the fabrics were gently hand-pressed. The hydration was moderately successful, and the flag did gain some area in both fly and hoist directions (see Table 1). The fringe did not stretch enough to allow for the surface of the flag to lie completely



Figure 5. Surface cleaning.



Figure 6. Hydration.

Area	Before hydration	After hydration
Fly (total)	60"	64"
<i>Canton: fly</i>	27 5/8"	28"
Hoist (total)	50"	51"
<i>Canton: hoist</i>	27"	27"

Table 1. Changes in Dimensions Before and After Hydration.

flat—there would always be some buckling in parts of the flag. This was most severe in the lower right corner area of the flag, where the water damage occurred.

Stabilization: Preparation.

After the flag had been cleaned and hydrated, the flag had to be rolled up for temporary storage until the support fabrics were prepared. The flag had so many voided areas that the flag could not simply be rolled up without tangling. Areas that needed support were sandwiched between layers of acid-free paper and the papers were basted together (Figure 7). Then, the flag was rolled up on a large padded tube and further protected with sheets of acid-free paper. After the flag was rolled on the tube, it was encased in acid-free paper and stored.



Figure 7. Preparing the flag for stabilization by basting acid-free paper in the voided areas.

Stabilization: Support. For the best support, the Post flag was sandwiched between two layers of Stabiltex 4, a very sheer, 100% polyester conservation fabric available in nine colors, among them red (Cherry #4/2), white (White #4/0), and blue (Blue #4/21). Because of the many voided areas in the flag, the best way to retain the aesthetics of the flag was to use the red, white, and blue conservation fabrics to create two Stabiltex flags between which the Post flag could be sandwiched and supported. The fabric yardage was calculated for the two Stabiltex flags and the fabric

was ordered (four yards of red, three yards of white, and one yard of blue). Cotton sewing thread was used, in colors to match the Stabiltex.

The red and white Stabiltex fabrics were cut into stripes in the lengthwise direction and sewn together by hand with running stitches into French seams to prevent fabric raveling. A steam iron was used to press the seams. The cantons were cut from the blue Stabiltex. The Stabiltex stripe panels and cantons were sewn into two flags that were mirror images so that one could be used as the bottom layer and one could be used for the top layer (with the French seam allowances placed toward the inside).

After the Stabiltex flags were finished, one was placed face-down, with the seam allowances facing up. The Post flag was unrolled onto this Stabiltex flag, carefully removing the basted acid-free paper. The two flags were aligned, then the other Stabiltex flag was carefully laid on top of the Post flag, with the seam allowances facing down (into the Post flag). Then, all three flags were aligned, matching seams (Figure 8).

After the flags were aligned, the Stabiltex flags were hand-quilted together using running stitches in the voided areas and along the seam lines (Figure 9). The quilting of the Stabiltex flags together proved to be very



Figure 8. The Post flag “sandwiched” between two Stabiltex flags.

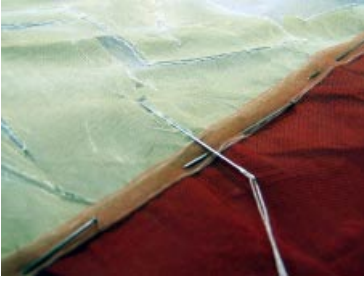


Figure 9. Quilting the Stabilizer layers to support the flag.

challenging and time-consuming. Stabilizer is very sheer, requiring very fine needles and a very gentle hand to prevent snagging and pulling of yarns. The fabrics shifted while sewing, and needed constant realignment. During the quilting, the stripes of the Post flag continued to disintegrate and pieces of the silk fabrics would break or flake off even with

gentle handling and had to be removed. Techniques were constantly modified to produce the best results. Figure 10 shows a detail of the finished flag, including the canton and the remaining gold leaf letters.

INVESTIGATIVE CONSERVATION

In the investigative conservation phase, the flag as an artifact was studied to discover the meaning of the object. In investigative conservation



Figure 10. Detail of the finished flag.

each object is believed to represent information about the culture that creates it (“Q & A”, n.d., par. 4). Investigative conservation was done concurrently with the interventive conservation phase.

PROVENANCE

Originally, the flag belonged to the Worthen Post No. 128 of the Grand Army of the Republic, in Murphysboro, Illinois. The last known use of the flag was on 7 August 1941 at the funeral of Frederick Schmidgall, the last surviving Civil War veteran of the Worthen Post (Seeber, 2004). After Mr. Schmidgall’s death, the Paul Stout American Legion Post #127 took ownership of the flag and mounted it in a frame. Eventually, the Legion Post gave the flag to the Murphysboro Township High School where it was hung in the trophy collection with a plaque that read “Worthen Post No. 128”. Years later, a new high school was built and the old high school became the junior high school. During the remodeling of the building, the junior high school principal took the flag in its frame and threw it in the dumpster behind the school. A teacher rescued the flag from the dumpster and gave it back to the Legion, where it was stored until the Legion moved into a new building. On moving, the Legion presented the flag to the General John A. Logan Museum in Murphysboro.

When the flag was unfolded and the gold leaf letters were revealed, it was confirmed that the flag was the Post flag, which would have been used at parades, funerals, and other GAR rituals (*Services for the Use of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 1894; Tappan, 1939). As evidenced from the condition of the flag visible in the photograph, the flag had seen much active use. The use of silk fabrics for the flag was not the best choice for a flag that would be used in all sorts of weather conditions. Wool, cotton, or linen fabrics would have been more practical; a surviving Post flag from Kirkwood Post No. 8 in Iowa is wool (*O-1 GAR flags*, 2004). However, silk fabrics were typically used for military and ceremonial flags (Martucci, 2001). Perhaps because the GAR wished to maintain as much similarity to the active military as possible, silk was chosen for the Post flag, regardless of practicality. Aesthetically, the Post members may have also liked the

tattered look of the flag as it aged; this might have reminded them of tattered battle and regimental flags.

Historically, silk is one of the most expensive fibers and has a long tradition of being reserved for special textile items that could be afforded by the upper classes. Because the cost was mentioned in the minutes, an interesting question arose: Would the flag have been an expensive item in 1913?

In 1913, the average weekly wage in the United States was approximately \$12, or 22 cents an hour (Tortora & Eubank, 1998). A worker earning that average wage would have had to work 199 hours (or approximately 20 ten-hour days) to earn \$43.85, the cost of the flag. In 1913, Murphysboro, Illinois, was a small rural community and many people were involved in farming and coal mining. Donations from these hard-working citizens would have been a well-considered discretionary income choice.

To put the price of the flag in further perspective, the cost of the flag in 2005 dollars was calculated using Morgan's Inflation Calculator (Morgan's Inflation Calculator, 2005) and the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis' inflation calculator (Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2005). In today's dollars, the cost of the flag would range from \$838 to \$862. Next, a Web search of current flag prices was performed. No sites could be found that sold silk flags; modern flags are made from nylon or polyester fabrics. On most sites, a comparably sized nylon or polyester flag ranges from \$22 to \$33. (On an interesting note, a 100% silk tie with a United States' flag motif retails for \$35.)

This flag was most likely given to the Post so that it would have a flag that represented the latest admissions to the Union, New Mexico (the 47th state) and Arizona (the 48th state). The cost and the materials used for the flag suggests that this flag was a very special gift and a highly regarded item, both by the "citizens of Murphysboro" and by the members of the Worthen Post.

THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

To further understand the meaning of the flag to Civil War veterans, the investigative conservation phase of the project turned to the Grand Army of the Republic. Although forgotten today, the GAR was one of the largest and most influential Civil War veterans' groups. Founded in 1866 in Decatur, Illinois, by Dr. Benjamin F. Stephenson, the GAR was created to be a group where former Union military men who fought and suffered in the Civil War could meet with others who understood their wartime experiences. The GAR also wanted to keep the memory of the sacrifices of the Union veterans constantly in the forefront of the nation—to remind civilians that the sacrifices of servicemen during the Civil War were responsible for the preservation of the Union. Still another important goal of the GAR was also to obtain financial help for disabled Civil War veterans, their families, and the families of those who died in the service of their country.

Unlike some organizations of veterans, such as the Loyal Legion, the GAR did not limit membership to officers. Membership in the GAR was open to any honorably discharged veteran of the Union Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or the Revenue Cutter Service (now the Coast Guard) who had served between 12 April 1861, and 9 April 1865. Although the membership was not limited, the life of the organization was. The GAR made a decision not to be a hereditary organization; when the last Union veteran died, the organization would die, too.

The GAR was organized to be nonpartisan and apolitical, dedicated to improving the lives of veterans and their survivors (Carnahan, 1899). The membership was more representative of the Northern working class, and social and political agendas promoted by the GAR had a wide influence. As the organization grew, the GAR became more closely affiliated with Republican agendas (Ainsworth, 1995; Dearing, 1952). The GAR grew so strong that from 1880 through 1900, no politician was likely to win any election, whether at the local, state, or federal level, without the endorsement of the GAR (Tappan, 1939), and members of the GAR even included five U.S. presidents: Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley.

CRUSADES OF THE GAR

Like soldiers going into battle, the GAR aggressively pursued agendas it believed would honor Civil War veterans and ensure that future citizens would not forget the sacrifices they made to preserve the Union. Two of its most important agendas were the movements to make Decoration Day (Memorial Day) a day of national observance and to obtain veteran and survivor benefits (Ainsworth, 1995). Working through the political system, as well as playing on the public's emotions, the GAR succeeded in establishing both agendas. However, as the 19th century ended and the 20th century began, the GAR found itself in a peculiar position. Union veterans were dying, and GAR membership started an alarming decline. As numbers became smaller, the GAR, as a group, feared becoming less politically and socially influential. The remaining membership also wanted to leave a legacy, one that reflected its intense patriotism and could continue to shape future generations of United States' citizens.

Starting in the 1880s, the GAR became involved in "the crusade against anarchy" (Dearing, 1952). The GAR was gravely concerned by the lack of "correct" instruction in the public schools. It also believed that there was a lack of patriotism and love of country in young people, many of whom were from immigrant families whose loyalty to the United States was in question. Essentially, the GAR wanted to promote its own version of American nationalism (McConnell, 1992). In order to do that, the GAR concentrated on educating schoolchildren in patriotism and love of country. The GAR agenda focused on three issues to create a new generation of American patriots: editing school textbooks to correctly present the role of the Northern military in preserving the Union; instituting military drills as part of regular instruction for schoolchildren; and flying the national flag over every schoolhouse in the nation (Dearing, 1952; Guenter, 1990; McConnell, 1992).

The GAR was extremely successful in promoting this agenda. Textbooks were written or rewritten with no sympathetic notions of the role of the Confederacy in the Civil War. Patriotic and quasi-military drills were conducted in many public schools; the Pledge of Allegiance was recited daily and schoolchildren celebrated Memorial Day as well as Flag Day.

But the greatest legacy of the GAR's patriotic campaign was the establishment of the national flag as the ultimate symbol of patriotism, loyalty, and love of country.

THE GAR AND THE NATIONAL FLAG

The national flag of the United States became the symbol and rallying point for the GAR's campaign of patriotism. This was a natural development from the GAR's perception of the national flag that intensified during the Civil War. During the war years, regimental, battle, and national flags became objects of deep reverence and meaning, evoking memories of hearth and home (Fahs, 1999; McConnell, 1992) as well as personal sacrifice for a higher cause (O'Leary, 1999). Although there had been a national flag since the founding of the nation, it was not until the Civil War that the national flag became a "sacred symbol" (O'Leary, 1996, p. 61), revered as strongly by many citizens as the cross was by many Christians (Goldstein, 1995). During the Civil War, the national flag became the symbol of ultimate patriotism, representing the blood of Union soldiers willingly shed for the preservation of the Union—a Union united under one flag.

From the beginning of the organization, the GAR used the national flag in all of its rituals and organization-related items. The national flag is prominently featured in almost every photograph of GAR gatherings, and on GAR badges, postcards, and other printed material. At annual national encampments, flags "by the tens of thousands" could be seen at parades (O'Leary, 1999, p. 58); a common theme of many speakers was the flag as "the symbol...of our union" and "the hope of the Republic" (Beath, 1889, p. 176, p. 190). GAR members spoke at public schools and colleges, first displaying battle and regimental flags and later donating national flags to schools for their use. As the patriotic campaign grew in fervor, so did a "cult of the flag" (Guenter, 1990, p. 103), and the national flag became a quasi-religious symbol. This fueled the debate over flag desecration, an issue that continues to challenge cultural perceptions of patriotism and nationalism (Goldstein, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This project started out initially as an interventive conservation project to save a 1913 GAR post flag. Conservation procedures were documented and can be adapted by those who are interested in flag conservation, as they work to preserve these important historical artifacts. Because flags are also important symbols, the study of flags is enriched when an investigative conservation component is added. In this project, investigating the original owners and their culture gave insight into how a special interest group can effectively use a symbol, such as a flag, to further its own agenda. Capitalizing on its members' war experiences, the GAR used the symbolic meaning of the flag to transform the national flag into the country's most important symbol of patriotism.



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