

Anna Von Lunz and Scott S. Sheads

# Saving The Star-Spangled Banner

## A NPS-Smithsonian Partnership

*The highest project for the millennium at the Smithsonian is to save our Star-Spangled Banner by 2001—the very flag that flew over Fort McHenry and inspired Francis Scott Key to write the poem that became our National Anthem.*

President William J. Clinton  
August 15, 1997

In 1996, Ronald Becker, Associate Director for Capital Programs of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and several staff members visited Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine. During their visit he requested assistance from the park with their renewed quest for information about the history of America's most famous flag—the Star-Spangled Banner that inspired our national anthem. Since that time, we have participated as consulting historian and curator with their team.

The Smithsonian has embarked on a most ambitious preservation project to conserve the nation's flag. Our literary search for documents, persons, and events associated with the flag provides a new understanding of the icon that symbolizes the American landscape and cultural identity. This research will also assist the conservators with their work.

Since 1912, when a descendant of the Armistead family donated the flag to the museum, its physical story had remained a mystery, while the story of its inspiration to Francis Scott Key, a young American lawyer, has been known to every schoolchild. That story has even overshadowed the battle it commemorated during the War of 1812.

Historian Lonn Taylor and Textile

Conservator Suzanne Thomassen-Krauss were asked to lead the team of specialists. The following are brief excerpts from some of our findings.

The flag was made in August 1813 at the request of Major George Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry. He received the flag from a local Baltimore seamstress, Mary Pickersgill, a Baltimore "maker of ship pennants." The flag measured 30' x 42' and was made of "English wool bunting." A year later, this enormous flag inspired the writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" following a British 24-hour naval bombardment.

Following Armistead's death in 1818, the flag remained in the care of his widow, Louisa Armistead, and her descendants until 1912.

The flag had begun its journey to become an inspirational icon, not only to the old defenders of Fort McHenry, but to thousands of citizens and soldiers alike. Therefore, the story of the current preservation began to unfold.

In the century following the bombardment, the flag was exposed to light and weather during various commemoration and civic patriotic occasions. For example, on October 7, 1824 the flag was hoisted for the last time at Fort McHenry to welcome the French General Marquis de Lafayette. Beneath the flag, another American symbol was also displayed, George Washington's campaign tent. The following is a brief review of the flag's journey after that momentous occasion.

- 1839—The flag is displayed during the 25th anniversary of the Battle of North Point.
- 1841—Armistead's son delivers speech in Richmond, Virginia, to receive a sword on his father's behalf while the flag is hung behind the podium.
- 1844—Young Men's Whig National Convention of Ratification held on May 2, 1844—The flag is hung from Armistead's residence in Baltimore.
- 1861—The flag is described as "faded and worn by exposures to storms and missiles. It had eleven holes in it, made by shot of the British bombardment." The family repeatedly

*The Fort McHenry Guard stands before the flag on Defenders' Day September 12, 1998, for the last official ceremony before the flag is lowered from this exhibit space on December 3, 1998.*



cut off pieces and gave them to veterans and patriots.

- 1861—Widow of George Armistead dies and bequeaths the flag to her daughter, Georgianna Armistead Appleton, who cared for it through the Civil War period with her husband, a native of Boston.
- 1873—While on loan to Admiral George Preble, a canvas backing is sewed to the flag to support it while being displayed and photographed at the Boston Navy Yard.
- On Flag Day, 1877, a family member gives a presentation at the Old South Meeting House in Boston, Massachusetts. The flag had been considerably diminished to a size of 30' by 34', which is its present dimensions.
- 1880—The flag returns to Baltimore for the last time and displayed during the 150th anniversary celebration of the founding of the city.
- 1907—Eben Appleton loans the flag to the Smithsonian but then completes the actual permanent gift in 1912.

Exhaustive research efforts have yet to resolve when the flag was actually presented to the Armistead family. While newspapers record the details of George Armistead's funeral there is no mention that the flag was used during that event. Furthermore, it is equally surprising that there is no clear indication that the flag was used during the funeral ceremonies for Francis Scott Key in 1843.

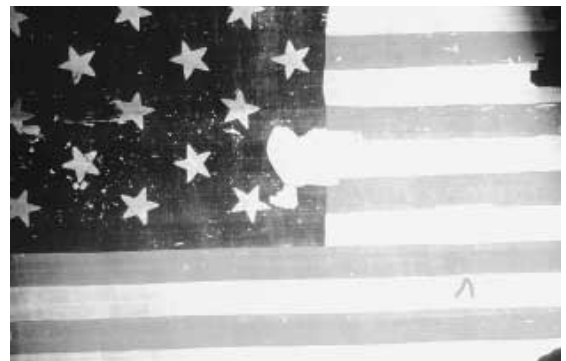
By the turn of the 20th century, the family began to make inquiries for the permanent preservation and display of the flag. In 1912, it came to the final destination of the journey when it was given to the Smithsonian Institution where it has remained.

In 1914, the Smithsonian conducted the first restoration/preservation of the flag and documented the flag's condition as the nation prepared for the National Star-Spangled Banner Centennial Celebration. The first canvas backing was removed and a new linen material was carefully sewn to the flag to give it support. After treatment, it was placed on display in the Arts and Industry Building, until 1964 when it was put on display at the new National Museum of American History.

In 1993, Smithsonian textile conservators were concerned by the flag's delicate condition, due to constant exposure to light and air pollutants. In order to understand the current condi-

tion of the flag, it was important to determine when and how often the flag had been exposed to light and weather, while it was at the garrison and later during its historic passage through time.

On the evening of December 1, 1998, the great flag was lowered from its 35-year-old exhibit space. It is now in a newly constructed conservation laboratory where visitors may view the flag today. Here conservators began the slow and careful three-year preservation treatment of the delicate woolen fibers of the bright stars and broad stripes. Wool experts from New Zealand have joined the team to further examine and analyze fibers of the flag to determine how best to preserve the flag.



That same week, the History Channel, aired a one-hour documentary entitled, "Save Our History: the Star-Spangled Banner Project" in cooperation with the Smithsonian and the National Park Service staff at Fort McHenry. A teacher's curriculum manual was also prepared through a joint effort by the museum education department and the park staff in collaboration with the History Channel. The video and the manual have been distributed to over 20,000 teachers across the country. In addition, hands-on activities will be offered at the museum daily explaining this nationally significant preservation treatment project.

In the 185 years since the great flag was hoisted "by the dawn's early light" to give birth to our national anthem, this almost legendary American story remains one of the most revered in our nation's history.

*Historian Scott S. Sheads and museum specialist Anna R. Von Lunz both serve at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine in Baltimore.*

For more information, visit the Smithsonian Institution's Star Spangled Banner web site: <[www.si.edu/nmah](http://www.si.edu/nmah)>.

*In 1914, Amelia Fowler, the foremost flag restorer of the day, used a process that she patented and covered the flag with delicate stitches in order to attach the linen backing to the wool bunting.*

*Photos courtesy Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History.*