

Saving Maine's Colors: Collaborative Strategies in Flag Conservation & Exhibition at the Maine State Museum

By Laurie LaBar and Gwen Spicer

Gwen Spicer is a Textile, Objects and Upholstery Conservator, and full-time Principal of Spicer Art Conservation, LLC. She recently became a member of the Maine Archives and Museum but she has been coming to Maine for projects since 1996. The first projects were for the Maine State Museum to work on their State Flag project, and currently she is collaborating with conservator Ron Harvey in planning for a proposed exhibit.

The Maine State Museum's collection contains over 300 flags. They were first surveyed for condition, a first task to aid the museum in determining storage and display needs. The flags are now displayed in a rotating gallery space in the museum. The work could not have been completed so well without the help of two individuals, Dona Smith and Toosie Sharoun. Over two and half years the flags were cleaned, flattened and mounted. Others who aided in this project were Susan Adler and Molly Carlson. The care and conservation of the Maine State flags is an on-going project that includes regular rotations of new flags.

Gwen with her Assistant Abby Zoldowski and family (Gwen's husband and young son who loved the ferry ride) spent a weekend on Peaks Island. Gwen and Abby carefully removed a silk National Flag at the 5th Regimental Maine Museum where it had hung since the 1880's. You can visit the 5th Maine's web-site (www.fifthmainemuseum.org) and see images of the procedure. The flag is currently being cleaned, humidified and mounted, and it will be returned to a new planned exhibit space in the museum.

Other projects from Maine have been brought to Gwen's studio, outside Albany, NY, such as the General Knox Militia Banner. This painted silk banner was glued to a board, where the backside of the banner had not been seen from many years. Seeing the reverse side was so important to the museum that a specially designed mount with a large back window was developed. Gwen will be speaking about this mount at the next American Institute of Conservators (AIC) meeting this spring in Rhode Island.

Storage has been a special focus for Gwen. She wrote the first draft of the Textile

Catalog chapter "Storage Furniture and Materials". She has been an adjunct professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where for several semesters she taught a course "Textile and Costume Storage". While in private practice she has designed storage spaces for small institutions and house museums, based on inventories, such sites are Locust Grove, Samuel Morse's House on the Hudson River and the Shaker Museum and Library in NY. When determining required storage space, square footage is determined and the space needs and supplies are calculated based on the number and type of items in a collection. The use of inventories allows small collection with limited budgets a realistic goal for collection improvements. She has also assisted historic house museums with developing collection rotation policies for display.

She is involved with two State service organization, Up-State History Alliance, which aids small institutions throughout upstate New York with collection care and storage and Vermont Museum & Gallery Alliance.

During this almost ten-year series of projects in Maine, Gwen and now young son have enjoyed their trips to this most wonderful state and the open and friendly people that they have come to know.

Citation:

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