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The Treatment of the 4th Regiment U.S.C.T. Civil War Flag

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Abstract

An almost complete double-sided National flag from the 4th Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops, owned by the Maryland Historical Society, was conserved and mounted. The mount contained a window in order to keep the painted eagle on the canton exposed.

The hand-sewn and hand-painted silk flag was presented to the 4th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops by the “Colored Ladies of Baltimore” most likely in the summer or early fall of 1863 after President Lincoln opened up enlistment to black males. It is one of only a few surviving flags associated with the U.S. Colored Troops. Sergeant Major Christian Fleetwood, a Baltimorean, carried the flag during the fierce fighting at the Battle of Chaffin’s Farm outside of Richmond. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery during that battle. In later years, Fleetwood attributed his survival at Chaffin’s Farm to his diminutive stature which allowed the bullets to fly over his head.

This talk will discuss the history of the flag and the United States Colored Troops, Union Army. The methods employed in the flag’s conservation and mounting will also be highlighted in the presentation.



The obverse side of the mounted flag after treatment.

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Description of the Flag

This United States national flag has a canton that is constructed of two layers of blue silk with the outer sides painted. The obverse is painted in gold with black highlights and reads “PRESENTED / to the 4th Regt / U.S. / COLORED TROOPS, / BY THE / COLORED LADIES OF BALTIMORE.” It has 35 stars in a circular pattern around the text. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. – The obverse side of the flag before treatment.

The reverse side has a very painterly painted eagle. Thirteen stars are located between the upraised wings. The shield at the breast of the eagle has no stars while below the eagle reads “E PLURIBUS UNUM.” (Figure 2)

The eagle contains a mix of interesting elements. It is represented with wings upraised and thirteen gold stars located between them. It is possible that only thirteen stars were included due to the limited space. Above the stars are painted golden rays of light or elements of a sunburst. The shield at the breast of the eagle is left blank with no stars. This eagle also holds arrows in its right foot and an olive branch in its left. No ribbon is in its mouth. A quick survey of other contemporary painted eagles on flags shows that the combination of these elements is unusual. Might they be a way to identify the flag’s maker or artisan?



Figure 2. – The reverse side of the flag before treatment.

The silk fringe is composed of twisted bullion threads and runs only 47” along the upper edge of the flag. The hoist, made of red worsted wool damask, is folded over and stitched with blue thread that secures the edge of the flag. The lower red strip has a salvage edge but is also folded under.

Four purple silk ties are secured to the outer edge of the folded hoist edge. They all maintain a memory of being tied around a pole. The center two ties have modern cotton twill tape added to the inside for reinforcement. The top and bottom ties are composed of cotton twill tapes, added at some later date.¹

History

The flag is one of fewer than 25 flags from the U.S. Colored Infantry Troops to survive the Civil War and is a remarkable rare survival. The hand-sewn and hand-painted silk flag was presented to the 4th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops by the “Colored Ladies of Baltimore” most likely in the summer or early fall of 1863. Half the regiment consisted of free men; the other half comprised liberated and fugitive slaves. By war’s end, approximately 186,000 African Americans served in the United States Colored Troops. Maryland contributed 8,700 men to the 4th, 7th, 9th, 19th, 30th Regiment, USCT.

The flag is the one that Sgt. Maj. Christian Fleetwood rescued at New Market Heights. Baltimore-born Fleetwood had just turned 23 when he decided to sign an enlistment paper for the 4th Regiment, United States Colored Troops. Unlike Isaiah Fasset, who was trapped in ignorance, Fleetwood boldly signed his name, willingly putting his life on the line to seek a better future for the Union and African Americans. He was the son of “free persons of color” and enjoyed the luxury of a college education. After a brief flirtation with the Maryland Colonization Society, relocating blacks back to Africa, and serving as an editor of the *Lyceum Observer*, an early African American newspaper, he abandoned all when “war fever” swept Baltimore in 1863.

That early fall Thursday, Sgt. Fleetwood’s regiment was a part of General Ben Butler’s 18th Army Corps, probing the defenses just east of Richmond, the besieged Confederate capital. Two regiments, the 4th and the 6th U.S.C.T., were part of an assault on a heavily-defended position called New Market Heights. Thanks to the new rifled musket, the war’s regular infantry weapon that increased the killing range from 100 to 500 yards, close-order, shoulder-to-shoulder lines of attackers became sitting ducks. Sgt. Fleetwood focused his memories of the nightmare battle on the color guard protecting the two flags that embodied the regiment’s honor.

“Our regiment lined up for the charge with eleven officers and 350 enlisted men. I, as sergeant major [supervised] the left [of the line]. Only one of twelve [color guards] came off the field on his own feet. Most of the others are there still. Early in the rush, one of the [color] sergeants went down, a bullet cutting his flag-staff. The other sergeant, Arthur B. Hilton, caught up the flag and pressed forward with them both.

It was a deadly hailstorm of bullets and it was not long before [Hilton] also went down, shot through the leg. As he fell he held up the flags and shouted, ‘Boys, save the colors!’ Before they could touch the ground, Corporal Charles Veal had seized the blue [regimental] flag, and I the American flag, which had been presented to us by the patriotic women of our home in Baltimore.

It was very evident that there was too much work cut out for our regiments. I have never been able to understand how Corporal Veal and I lived under such a hail of bullets, unless it was because we were both such little fellows.”

Fleetwood, Veal, and Hilton were awarded the Medal of Honor. Fourteen of the 16 medals presented to the war’s black soldiers recognized their bravery at the Battle of New Market Heights. In 1865, all the white officers of the 4th U.S.C.T. sent a petition to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, recommending that Sgt. Maj. Fleetwood be commissioned an officer. Stanton, however, did not recommend the appointment.

Christian Fleetwood settled in Washington, D.C., and remained active in military affairs until his death in 1914. It is unfortunate that, having fought so bravely and achieved so much, he and his generation of African Americans never enjoyed the freedom and equality they sought.

Condition

The flag had been rolled onto a large diameter tube between layers of net. About half of the silk stripes are in good condition, with the remaining half a mixture of highly and less deteriorated areas. The lower fly edge corner is missing, which affects the lower four strips. The silk of the stripes display vertical fold lines, slits and losses.

Much of the damage evident is related to the flag being rolled tightly onto its staff for an extended time period. The two layers of the blue silk fabric dominated the direction that the silk was rolled. The added layer in the canton made a thicker roll with which the lower stripes had to compensate, resulting in diagonal creases in the lower stripes. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. – The creasing directions found at the stripes of the flag

Slits in the silk were present at several of the folds. The fly edge of the stripes was quite frayed. Many of the sections of the silk were tangled before treatment. A couple of the red silk stripes are mixed with the white silk as a result. Open seams were present, mostly located at the hoist area. However, several areas around the canton were also open. The flag was soiled at the fly and lower edges with small scattered dark staining, perhaps oil or grease. Minor bleeding of red onto white stripes was also present in this area.

Three main fold lines were located in the canton that measured 10" to 14" long. Above them were shorter creases and several scattered diagonal folds. The larger folds in the group affected both layers of the blue silk canton. The blue silk of the canton was slightly faded. It was previously a much brighter blue, as can be seen in hidden area, but at the time had an overall yellowing effect. Red stripes in a hidden area at the hoist showed that they were also previously brighter in color. The painted eagle that is located on the reverse side of the canton had several tears and splits in the painted areas. The paint

layers appear well secured to the silk. The prevailing damage to the paint is the numerous tears; two are 5" long, and others are compound "L"-shape tears. One tear runs diagonally, affecting both the warp and weft silk threads. Two were located in the paint and were folded under to one side of the silk layer. Typically the slits were just in the painted areas, whereas the unpainted silk was folded. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. – The folded and torn areas in the painted canton.

Display Mount Discussion

The treatment was based on the desire of the Maryland Historical Society to exhibit and create a window in the mount for the painted eagle. The museum felt that simply having an image was not sufficient for the importance of the flag to the community. A pressure mount was selected as the best means for the support of the fragile silk. The challenge was to incorporate the window into this mount design.

Conservators have worked over the years to find a suitable method that balances both the need for overall support while also creating visible access to both sides. Traditionally, a solution of sandwiching textile between sheets of glass was used. This solution allowed for visibility, but it also placed the artifact at risk and vulnerable to damage. The smooth, hard surface of the glass did not allow for any support. In addition, areas were crushed that left long-term evidence of this type of mount as that brittle silk can no longer retain its shape. The flag or artifact was also placed at great risk if the glass broke.

For double-sided artifacts that are made of two layers of fabric, a solution of mounting each side individually but uniting each mounted side in the same frame has been developed. With this flag only the canton was constructed of two layers of fabric. This flag was sufficiently stable with original stitching that it wasn't necessary to disassemble the flag.

For an early painted militia bannerⁱⁱ, its mount had a large Plexiglas window, but the mount design incorporated a space on the face side. This was made possible by the flag's moderate size and the extent of support that necessary in the treatment. These images are solely documentary; the flag is displayed at an angle at the museum.

The mount used for this treatment offers a solution for exposing a small section of the reverse side of the flag while it is also fully supported on a cushioned surface. The large size of the window was made possible by the fact that the section was two layers of fabric. This offers a solution for special occasions where an image is not sufficient.

Treatment

The treatment progressed with thorough vacuuming, before the dyes were tested for an overall gentle wet cleaning. Aligning of the fibers occurred both at this time and during further humidification.

The flag was encapsulated between two layers of fine net that was custom-dyed to match all three colors. Once all three layers were properly married, stitching was performed at the seams and within the losses. There was no attempt at color compensation for the areas of loss. The focus was to show as much as possible of the original flag.

The canton was treated slightly differently due to its two-sided nature. The splits in both sides of the canton were secured with a conservation-approved Lascaux adhesive and sheer polyester fabric. The sheer fabric was positioned and heat set to the reverse of both sides of the canton. The slits present in the painted areas were aligned and adhered in position with the same sheer, blue fabric coated with conservation-approved BEVA adhesive and was also heat activated. A local adhesive method was selected in that each layer of the blue silk that created the canton was not individually sandwiched between net.

Prepared mount

A padded pressure mount was constructed from aluminum honeycomb with a wooden borderⁱⁱⁱ. The materials used in its construction do not release harmful pollutants and are buffered against acid migration. A window was created for the reverse side of the canton. The position of the window was placed to center only the painted eagle. The entire canton was not made to be visible. The window was made to sit within the panel with the face surface of each material to have a smooth transition.

The top surface of the mount was covered with layers of polyester needle-punched padding and pre-washed cotton fabric in a color that best blended with the flag. The layers of padding were positioned to create a slight dome. The edge of the show cover around the window inset was secured to the mount in order to keep even tension over the surface of the mount. A pillow was created with a blue cotton fabric and needle-punch batting that was inserted between the silk layers of the canton. The thickness and tapering of the pillow meshed with the domed padded layers positioned onto the mount. Layers were added to create a smooth transition between the various padded layers.

The net sandwiched flag and fringe was positioned and secured with anchor stitching to the mount. Stitching was located along seams and perimeter of the flag. The excess net at the perimeter was carefully trimmed around the silk flag before the powder-coated metal frame with ultraviolet Plexiglas was secured over the mounted flag. (Figures 5 & 6)



Figure 5. – The obverse side of the mounted flag after treatment.



Figure 6. – The reverse side of the mount flag after treatment with the window.

Both sides of the flag can be fully viewed at the Maryland Historical Society's Sesquicentennial Civil War exhibition *Divided Voices: Maryland in the Civil War*. The exhibit shows the impact of the war on the people of Maryland in personal terms. It tells the story of the tragedy in three acts: the romantic war, the real war, and the long reunion. The museum will also recreate the scene when the African American ladies of Baltimore officially presented this flag to the regiment before it set out on its first campaign.

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About the Authors



Gwen Spicer is a textile, upholstery, and objects conservator with 25 years experience, including 16 years in private practice. She earned her MA in Art Conservation from Buffalo State College, and has since taught and lectured around the world. She has been involved with several large upholstery and flag conservation projects across the United States. In her private practice, she assists many individuals and organizations of all sizes with storage, collection care, and exhibitions, and has become known for her innovative conservation treatments. Ms. Spicer also provides expertise in the areas of housekeeping strategies, integrated pest management, and disaster planning. She is a Fellow and active member of the AIC.



Alexandra Deutsch attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York where she studied English and Art History, concentrating her studies on early American women's writing and American decorative arts. In 1992, she was awarded a fellowship to study decorative arts at Historic Deerfield in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and in 1993 she was one of 10 students selected for the McNeil Fellowship at the Winterthur Museum. In 1995, she received her Master's Degree in Early American Material Culture from the University of Delaware and that same year received a Victorian Society Fellowship to study Victorian decorative arts and architecture in Newport, Rhode Island. In 1996, she was appointed Acting Curator at the Bennington Museum in Bennington, Vermont. From there, she became Curator of the Chapman Historical Museum in Glens Falls, New York, overseeing a Victorian house museum and one of the finest collections of early Adirondack photographs in the country. After moving to Maryland in 1998, Ms. Deutsch became Manager of Decorative Arts and Americana for Sloan's Auction Galleries then in Rockville and, in 1999, she began a long tenure as Curator of Historic Annapolis Foundation in Annapolis, Maryland. During her time in Annapolis, Ms. Deutsch launched and oversaw an ambitious, multi-year reinstallation and reinterpretation of the William Paca House, the 1765 home of one of Maryland's signers of the Declaration of Independence. In the fall of 2008, Ms. Deutsch became Maryland Historical Society's Deputy Director of Special Projects and in March, 2009, she was appointed Chief Curator. In addition to her curatorial work, Ms. Deutsch has authored two one-hour plays based on pre-Revolutionary events in Annapolis that have been performed for sell-out audiences and school groups throughout Anne Arundel County. She has lectured widely on American decorative arts and most recently published an article on the folk art collection at the Maryland Historical Society.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Registrar recalled that flag arrived on a modern wooden pole with plastic finials.

ⁱⁱ The flag with a spectacular painted central eagle, is known as the Thomaston Cavalry Banner, and owned by the Museum of General Knox's recreated home in Thomaston, Maine. David Martucci has dated it ca. 1800, based on the size of the flag and its color and design, which conform in some detail to that specified by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1786 (Maine did not become a state until 1820). Furthermore, the shield on the banner has 15 stripes, the number that would have commonly appeared on a flag of this type between 1792 and 1796—after Kentucky's admission as the 15th state of the union, but before Tennessee's admission as the 16th. Finally, the 1799 Thomaston Town Meeting appropriated \$200 for flags for its militia companies. At this time, Thomaston fielded five militia companies, three regular State Militia Companies and two 'elite' units—the Thomaston Artillery and the Thomaston Cavalry—which were armed and accoutered solely by local funds. The significance of the banner is that the cavalry company was started at the instigation of General Knox. The organization of such militia had been greatly pushed by Knox while he was Secretary of State under President Washington. Two legends are associated with it. One is that it was used in the military escort at General Henry Knox's funeral in October 1806. The other legend or mystery is who might the artist have been. Stylistically, the painted banner suggests that it may have been created by a Portland, Maine artist, either John Penniman or his student, the better-known landscape artist, Charles Codman, (who began working ca. 1820), known to have worked after the date of the funeral. Whatever its exact date, it is one of the oldest Maine military colors still extant.

ⁱⁱⁱ The mount and frame were constructed by SmallCorp, Inc., Greenfield, Massachusetts, 800-392-9500.