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## Illinois' Military Heritage Finds a Home

**D**uring times of war, we receive visible reminders of the ongoing sacrifices our men and women of the military make to keep our country safe. These poignant reminders are nothing new – the United States has a long tradition of people willing to answer the call to serve. Soldiers have often brought back tokens of their military accomplishments or memorabilia from their experiences in foreign lands or in the United States, for that matter. For the soldier, these items range from the sacred to the mundane, whether it be the first flag flown over Richmond, Virginia after it fell to the Union troops or water bottles with Arabic labels. Illinois has a history of keeping these remembrances of past conflicts, which helps to remind the soldier and general public alike how precious freedom is. The conditions in which the memorabilia and flags have been stored have not always been ideal. They have moved around a number of times over the years. As of this year though, the war time souvenirs finally gain a permanent home and thus the respectful treatment they deserve. Now people for generations to come will be able to visit the military displays and understand the price of freedom paid by past and present soldiers.

On June 10, 2003 the Illinois State Military Museum opened at its new location at Camp Lincoln. Located at 1301 North MacArthur Boulevard in Springfield, Camp Lincoln is the state headquarters for the Illinois National Guard. The June 26, 1991 issue of *The Cook-Witter Report* discusses briefly the Military Museum's search for a permanent home, as well as providing an agency overview of the Department of Military Affairs. Twelve years later, the Illinois State Military Museum has found its home.

The Illinois State Military Museum consists of three buildings. A 1903 stone structure called "the Castle" was once used as a commissary, i.e., a place to store supplies for the Illinois National Guard. In 1985 the Castle was placed

on the National Register of Historic Places. The renovated stone facility houses the main exhibit on the second floor while the first floor contains temporary shifting exhibits, public space, library, and a gift shop. The Museum's flag collection will be stored in a second structure, and a third building contains the administrative offices. The Military Museum's curator, Mark Whitlock, said that approximately \$1.2 million was spent on the renovation of the Castle, the Museum having received federal support to complete the project. Whitlock also explained that all buildings on the grounds of Camp Lincoln receive both federal and state support.



The state-funded museum focuses on Illinois military history from the early state militia days to modern-day Army and Air National Guard missions. There are about 10,000 artifacts in the Museum's collection. Of course, the most famous item is Mexican General Santa Anna's cork leg. Santa Anna was sitting in his carriage eating a roast chicken meal. When Mexican troops realized their leader was

about to be captured, they hastily got him on a horse leaving behind his artificial leg, \$18,000 in gold and his chicken dinner. The Illinois troops purportedly gave the money to their commander, ate the chicken, and brought the cork leg back to Illinois where it remains today, one of the more popular attractions at the Museum. In fact, Mark Whitlock discussed future plans for a life size diorama representing the carriage with the leg, chicken and gold placed inside, a mural depicting a battle scene in the background and soldiers coming upon the scene in the foreground.

A target board used by Abraham Lincoln is another interesting item on display. Christopher Miner Spencer had presented the repeating rifle to Lincoln at the White House. Lincoln then suggested they take the gun to the site of the present day Washington Monument to test it out.

They each shot at it seven times. Lincoln signed his part of the board and gave it to Spencer, who in turn, donated it to the Memorial Hall at the capitol in Springfield in 1883.

Many items in the Museum's collection were donated by General John A Logan, a Civil War figure who worked hard to gather war trophies for Illinois. Not currently on display, but possibly of morbid interest to some is a piece of the stocks from the notorious Confederate prison at Andersonville. Another curious object is an eight feet tall tree stump (the Chickamauga tree stump) that is embedded with cannonballs and bullets. This tree was cut down at Chickamauga, Tenn. after one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War in which 34,624 soldiers lost their lives.

The Museum's impressive collection grows mostly because soldiers bring back personal effects from war such as uniforms, leaflets that are dropped out of planes, photos, newspapers or insignias. As Whitlock tells it, non life-threatening items that soldiers are authorized to bring back from their experiences overseas find their way to the Military Museum. One of the most recent objects brought back from Iraq is a deck of cards depicting the federal government's list of highly sought after Iraqi figures. "It's not always trophies of war, but often, memorabilia that is given to the Museum," says Mark Whitlock. "For obtaining items like weapons or tanks, there is a formal and often difficult process involved, which requires submitting a request through the Secretary of Defense."

Currently, the Museum has a couple of major projects in the works. The Museum is planning on offering a Web site from which visitors will be able to access and view aspects of the Museum's collections. Another project involves a flat screen computer that the federal government provided funding for. When the computer is up and running, people will be able to view the Military Museum's library materials and collections.

## **The Illinois State Military Museum's Flag Collection**

With a total at 950, Illinois has one of the five largest collections of flags of this kind in the country. The collection includes flags from the Mexican War, Civil War, Spanish American War, through the Gulf War, as well as Confederate flags captured by Union soldiers. To be a part of the collection, the flag has to be associated with the National Guard in Illinois or be captured during operations conducted by the National Guard. And of course, the most current flag at the Museum comes from the ongoing events in Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Last fall, the flags that hung in Memorial Hall in the

Howlett Building (the Centennial Building) in Springfield were removed and transferred to a storage facility at Camp Lincoln. The flags have suffered gradual deterioration due to a variety of factors. First of all, as Mark Whitlock states, "the flags were only intended to be around a brief time, as they were made of lightweight materials to serve an immediate need, not necessarily meant to be kept around for many years." He likened the flags on their staffs in the Howlett Building to hanging a silk shirt on a metal hanger for a hundred years. A silk shirt would disintegrate over time as it hangs on the hanger, and the flags are suffering the same fate. These flags are 6 feet by 6-1/2 and made out of silk with paint applied to the surface. Over time the paint breaks down and chips off. When the paint flakes off, it takes the silk with it. The flags have endured the alternate hot and cold temperatures. Combat also took a toll on the flags resulting in tears, bullet holes, and stains. The conditions in the Hall, i.e., the sun, poor climate control, and cigarette smoke (a practice no longer allowed in the Howlett Building) have also exacerbated the poor condition of the flags.

## **The Move**

The flags were removed from the Howlett Building to be preserved in a climate-controlled storage facility at Camp Lincoln in Springfield. According to Whitlock, the adjutant general is meeting his statutory responsibility to preserve the flag collection. The purchase of museum grade state-of-the-art cabinets at a cost over three years of \$370,000 satisfies that statutory requirement. The process of moving the battle flags began September 22nd and took five weeks to complete with a difficult pace set to remove 40 flags a day from the iron and glass cases.

The last time the flags were removed from the display cases was during a 1982 cleaning of those cases. This most recent project involved relocating 464 flags from the Hall of Flags to Camp Lincoln. Illinois' early retirement policy from the fall of 2002 helped Whitlock's efforts to move the flags. He had the assistance of many volunteers, including three former Historic Preservation Agency employees, a former reference librarian with the State Library, a bureau manager for the Department of Human Services, and a retired forensics specialist with the Illinois State Police. An expert conservator from Maryland provided an all-day training session for volunteers and guidance during the "flag resting" process. Volunteers received training using reproduction flags belonging to the 114th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment who perform ceremonies at Oak Ridge Cemetery.

First each flag was photographed and then placed between sheets of Mylar and covered with bubble wrap. Then the rolled up flag and staff was placed in a waterproof cardboard tube and carried by two people to the vehicle to be transported to the storage facility. On inclement days, the ends were covered with plastic. The flags will “rest” in an insulated and climate-controlled metal PortaFab structure located inside a brick warehouse. Individually, the flags will lay flat in cabinets containing 25 individual shelves. The cabinets, which will be sealed and filtered, cost about \$17,000 each.

Once at the facility, the staff is removed and each component – the staff, flag, and cord are tagged with acid-free tags with identical identification numbers. It would be nearly impossible to match these up later without this coding system. The flags are then placed on trays and shelved in one of the cabinets until money becomes available to treat or conserve the flag. The Civil War flags have to be stored flat on a 7 x 7 tray in storage. The Museum also has several huge garrison flags. These oversized flags that were meant to hang on the sides of buildings could not fit on the trays and must be rolled. Whitlock explains that laying flat on the tray is the best way to rest the flag while rolled up is next best method

## Restoring the Flags

The process of flag restoration outlined by Whitlock is slow and complex. The flag is first transported to Textile Preservation Associates Inc. in Maryland where the needs of the flag will be evaluated and will be stabilized against further deterioration. Three or four conservators are needed to work on the project, e.g., someone with an art background, as well as a chemist. They will fill in the empty spaces where the flag is missing pieces; however, they won't make it look new or exactly like the flag originally looked. The idea is not to make it into a brand new flag, but to create an impression of what the flag looked like. People viewing the flag will be able to see what remains of the flag with a backdrop of how the rest of the flag would have appeared. Each flag will require approximately eight to nine months for treatment before it is framed and shipped back to Springfield for exhibit in seven cases along the north wall in the Hall of Flags. He estimates that it can cost between \$23,000 and \$27,000 to treat one flag.

## A Brief Look Back at Memorial Hall

In the nineteenth century, the flags were maintained

at the State Arsenal on North Fifth Street but were transferred to the first floor (then the basement) of the State House. The new Memorial Hall was dedicated in 1878. This year is recognized as the date when the Illinois State Military Museum was established. The move involved a great procession of various battle flags of Illinois volunteer troops, including veterans of the Black Hawk and Winnebago Wars. The newspaper account estimated that 20,000 visitors arrived in Springfield to view the transfer of the flags to the State House. Some of the men who carried the flags in battle returned to carry them to their new home at the Capitol. The celebration included music, speeches, patriotic poems, and a public dinner. An 1884 Illinois State Register article reveals that \$10,000 was appropriated to transform the Art Gallery in the State House, immediately over the east entrance into the 40 x 60 foot new Memorial Hall, which was dedicated on March 26, 1884. Two cases 48 foot long and 12 feet high were built for \$5,680. Thousands of people attended the ceremony dedicating Memorial Hall. General William Tecumseh Sherman was also in attendance and gave a speech in honor of the dedication of Memorial Hall.

Even in the late 19th century, the flags were in a fragile condition with some “mere pieces of silken rags.” In 1884 a restoration effort occurred, which involved cleansing the flags with alum, then mounting them to pieces of white tarlatan cut to the exact size of the original flag. The pieces of the flag were basted with white sewing silk in its proper place, and then were returned to their staves.

The flags were moved yet again in 1924 to the spacious Memorial Hall on the north side of the Centennial Building, located just southeast of the Capitol on Second and Edwards. The newly-constructed Centennial Building (now the Howlett Building) opened in 1923. The last attempt at flag restoration took place over 75 years ago when, according to a *State Journal-Register* article from April 20, 2003, close to 500 flags underwent a preservation process. The flags were removed from the tarlatan before being sewn between pieces of black silk netting. Afterwards, the flags were reattached to their staffs with leather straps and returned to Memorial Hall. The black silk netting was sewn over the flag as a way of protecting the flag. Unfortunately, this measure has “now created tension on the fabric and has caused the fibers to deteriorate.” The newspaper article estimates a cost of \$5000 to \$6000 per flag to remove the stitched netting. Originally, \$93,626 was spent on the netting that provided support in keeping the fabric together, a considerable amount of money in the 1920s.

## The Flags Commission

In 2000 Public Act 91-813 established an Illinois Military Flags Commission with the objective of determining how the flags could best be preserved. The flag commission met in April of 2002 with two objectives in mind – to determine the order in which flags should be treated. The priority given would be based mainly on the historical significance of the flag. The commission's second objective dealt with fostering increased public awareness about the flag collection and the need to care for it. A prioritized list of flags was created, and fundraising efforts got underway. People have been granted the opportunity to sponsor a flag, and several groups have started to raise funds. Unfortunately, the legislation concerning the flag commission contained a sunset clause, which has come and gone. Efforts are currently in the works to revive the flags commission. This past spring Senate Bill 1997 passed the Senate 55-0 but still needs to be considered in the House.

Whitlock stated that the ultimate goal is to treat the flags and return them to the Howlett Building where they will be displayed in seven cases (one flag per case) on the north wall between the windows in order to protect them from the sun. The displays will tell the story of the flag; possibly include pictures of the treating process; provide information about organizations or person sponsoring the restoration of a flag; and include information about the regiment. The flags will be removed from staffs and framed and placed in cases that are 12 feet by 3 feet deep. Every once in awhile the flags will be rotated to allow for more flags to be viewed and to rest the flags that were previously on exhibit.

An exhibit called "Patriots of the Heartland" is currently being developed for placement on the north and south wall. The exhibit will cover the history of the Museum and various youth programs, among other things. Whitlock estimates that it should take about nine months to a year to complete "Patriots of the Heartland", which is

a joint effort with the Illinois State Museum. According to Mark Whitlock, "It will educate the public about the history of the citizen soldier from early settlement times to the modern day National Guard."

The Illinois State Military Museum is open from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday or by appointment. Any persons interested in supporting the cause to conserve one of the resting flags should contact Mark Whitlock at the Illinois State Military Museum for more information. Whitlock has been curator at the Museum for the past eight years. As the only full-time employee at the Museum, he keeps very busy, but he has some help in the form of two museum assistants working for him on a part-time basis throughout the year. He also relies on a dependable corps of volunteers. The size of the Museum facilities has expanded and the number of programs has increased, so the Museum is now able to offer more to the public. With all the exciting changes taking place at the Museum and the increased visibility as a potential tourist attraction, meeting these demands might eventually prove challenging with existing personnel.

A series of pictures depicting the delicate process of removing the flags from the Howlett Building can be found at [www.ilstatehouse.com](http://www.ilstatehouse.com). The Web site also contains a great picture of the flags when they were part of Memorial Hall at the Illinois State House, as well as a May 24, 1878 *Illinois State Journal* article, a January 18, 1884 *Illinois State Register* article and articles from the *Illinois State Register* dated March 26 and 27, 1884.



### References

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*General Santa Anna's cork leg. Courtesy of the Illinois State Military Museum.*

