

“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags

FLAG FACTS

The following questions and answers will give you some basic information about Michigan's Civil War battle flags.

What are the Michigan Civil War battle flags?

The Civil War battle flags are a collection of actual flags that were given by the state to the Michigan regiments that fought in the Civil War on behalf of the Union. The flags were carried in battle by men known as "color bearers" and were used to communicate with the soldiers in the regiments. The soldiers would look to their flag to learn if they should advance in battle, hold their ground, or retreat.

What do the flags look like?

Infantry battle flags, or *colors*, as they were called, were very large, 6 feet wide by 6 1/2 feet tall, so they could easily be seen by the soldiers of the regiment. Each flag was attached to a staff or *pole* which was 9 feet 10 inches high. The flags were generally made of silk and were surrounded by gold fringe. Regiments were given two flags: one was the *national color* based on the red, white and blue stars and stripes, and the other was the *regimental color*, which was blue silk and decorated with the hand-painted arms of the United States or the state's coat of arms.

Cavalry battle flags. Cavalry regiments carried a single silk *standard*, a much smaller version of the infantry's regimental flag. These flags were two feet three inches high by two feet five inches wide and were trimmed with yellow silk fringe.

Since the cavalry did not fight together as a regiment, each company or troop within the regiment also carried a flag, called a *guidon* (pronounced "guy-don"). Because of their shape, they were called "*swallow-tail guidons*." Originally, cavalry guidons were divided horizontally, red over white, with the letters "U.S." appearing in white on the red portion and the company letter in red on the white portion. In 1862, regulations were changed so that cavalry guidons were made like national flags, with stars and stripes.

Where are the flags?

Until recently, the flags were on display in cases in the rotunda of Michigan's Capitol in Lansing. Following the Civil War, the regimental battle flags were returned to the state in a grand ceremony in Detroit on July 4th, 1866. Governor Crapo received the flags on behalf of the state and promised to preserve them "as sacred relics," the state's "proudest possession." Michigan's Capitol was built, in part, to house and display the flags.

However, in 1992, when a complete restoration of the Capitol was begun, workers discovered that the flags had seriously deteriorated in their cases. In an effort to conserve the flags so that future generations can enjoy and appreciate them, the flags were moved to the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing, where they are now housed. The cases in the rotunda of the Capitol now house replicas of the original flags.

What is the importance of the Civil War flags?

Above all, the flags symbolize the bravery of the soldiers who fought and died under them and their belief in the Union and its Democratic government. They are valuable as a history lesson and as a "revered incentive to liberty and patriotism," as Governor Crapo said in 1866.

They are also important because they represent an attempt by the veterans of the Civil War to *lobby* the Michigan legislature on behalf of their needs following the war. As such, they are a reminder to all of us that our Capitol is a public forum, a place where we can go to make our voices heard on issues of public policy. When the legislature meets in the Capitol, they are there representing all the citizens of this state.

Why is MGTV interested in the Civil War battle flags?

Part of Michigan Government Television's job is to help make people better citizens by bringing them closer to their state government. One good way to do that is to help students and citizens in general understand more about the political history of the state and the process of state government. The Civil War battle flags not only represent an important part of the history of Michigan but also, as was mentioned in the previous answer, the flags remind us that the Capitol building, the center of our state government, is open to all of us. The fascinating stories associated with the flags are a powerful incentive to all of us to become involved in our government at the state level and at the federal level as well.

Here are some other interesting facts about the flags:

- Most of the flags are silk, although a few are made of cotton or wool bunting.
- Although regulations did not call for them, many flags bear mottoes. This was particularly true of a regiment's original presentation flags.
- Fringes are mostly silk floss, but some were made of twisted gold-colored wire, called "gold bullion." This is typical of the flags made by the famous New York jeweler Tiffany's.
- None of Michigan's cavalry guidons followed regulations and some feature crossed applied sabers--not mentioned in regulations at all!
- There are 163 Civil War battle flags in the state's collection.
- Most of these flags were presented to the state on July 4, 1866, in Detroit, by the returned Michigan regiments. Governor Crapo received the flags on behalf of the state and pledged that they would be "preserved forever."
- Not all regimental battle flags were returned to the state. Others survive in museums and private collections around the state. The whereabouts of others is unknown.
- Those who carried or defended the flags in battle suffered the highest mortality rates of the war.