

1863: Loyal till death



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NEW YORK STATE CAPITOL



National Color, 64th New York Volunteers

In December 1861 the Board of Supervisors of Cattaraugus County presented this silk national color to the 64th New York Volunteers. The regiment first used the flag at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1–3, 1863. During that battle, two color bearers, Corporal Thomas Zibble and Corporal Albert Empey, were wounded while carrying this flag.

Introduction and Acknowledgements

During the Civil War, thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers were wounded or killed around their battle flags. These courageous men perilously defended their colors not just for what the flag represented but for the banner itself. Civil War battle flags were more than just a state or national symbol. To the soldier, these patriotic emblems embodied the honor of their regiment and the pride of their home-town communities.

Befitting the state that supplied the most resources to the Union cause during the Civil War, New York State is endowed with the nation's premier Civil War battle flag collection. The New York State Battle Flag Collection, a group of over 2,000 military flags administered by the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, includes approximately 850 Civil War flags—the largest public collection of Civil War flags in the nation. Collectively, the flags serve as a window to our past, revealing inspirational personal stories and exposing the devotion shared by all New Yorkers.

These historically significant and fragile emblems provide us with the most insightful and evocative way of presenting New York's rich Civil War history as the state and nation observe the Civil War sesquicentennial, 2011–2015. This year's exhibition, 1863: Loyal till death, presents inspirational flags provided by, and representing, local communities; chronicles the fearless color bearers, including those who gave "the last full measure of devotion"; and spotlights the men and women responsible for the flags. By examining several flags' designs, including a unique flag with the inscription "Loyal till death" from which the exhibition draws its name, we explore the prevailing attitudes exhibited by the soldiers and their dedicated patrons.

This exhibition was developed jointly by the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the Natural Heritage Trust.

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Devotion to the Flag

On the often smoke-filled and confusing field of battle, Civil War soldiers followed and rallied around their flags, typically either their national or regimental colors. Recognizing the flag's practical importance for direction and morale, the Confederates often targeted the colors and the men who bore them aloft, the color bearers. As a result, soldiers went to great lengths to protect the colors. If enemy fire wounded or killed a color bearer, another soldier would heroically snatch the staff and wave the flag anew to rally the regiment and defend its honor. Throughout the Civil War, hundreds of New Yorkers proudly carried their colors, often with deadly consequences, always with pride.

On December 21, 1861, as the 91st New York Volunteers prepared to leave Albany, New York, for the seat of war, the regiment assembled outside Alderman John W. Harcourt's residence on Lydius Street, where Mrs. Harcourt presented the home-town regiment with a national color. When Color Sergeant Edward Gill accepted the flag, the men pledged to honor and defend the cherished emblem.

The seven-week siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 21–July 9, 1863, tested the regiment's resolve and dedication. On May 27, 1863, during the first assault on the Confederate stronghold, Color Sergeant Gill led the 91st New York Volunteers, with flag in hand, until he was wounded and forced to retire. The flag next fell into Corporal James E. Jones's hands, who suffered a facial wound when enemy fire severed the top of the flag and its staff. After Jones, Private Samuel Townsend, a southerner who had deserted from the Confederate Army and joined the 91st New York Volunteers in Pensacola, Florida, seized the damaged flag and staff and rallied the regiment. Townsend received a battlefield promotion to Color Sergeant for his distinguished bravery on May 27. Corporal Patrick Garrity recovered the severed top of the flag and its staff. Garrity ultimately gave the pieces to the colonel, who delivered it to Mrs. Harcourt in Albany by early 1864.

During the second assault on Port Hudson, June 14, 1863, newly promoted Color Sergeant Samuel Townsend again led the regiment as color bearer in another desperate charge. The ex-Confederate received several gunshot wounds, including one reportedly from his brother, a soldier with an Alabama regiment. Townsend succumbed to his wounds six weeks later. Second Lieutenant William Diamond, previously wounded, caught the flag as Townsend fell and immediately received another more dangerous wound in a hail of enemy fire that also tore through the flag's canton, obliterating nearly every star. Undaunted, Corporal Patrick Garrity, who previously recovered the portion of the flag shot off on May 27, took the color from Lieutenant Diamond's hands and, despite a severe wound to his right foot, carried the torn flag throughout the remainder of the assault.

In July 1864, a year after the deadly assaults on Port Hudson, the 91st New York Volunteers returned to Albany on furlough. As American flags draped from the facade of the Harcourt residence on Lydius Street, the regiment redeemed their pledge and formally returned the tattered color to their benefactor. Now reunited with the severed portion previously returned to Mrs. Harcourt, the flag had come full circle, tattered and worn, fiercely defended, but never disgraced.

The national color carried by the 91st New York Volunteers epitomizes the spirit and dedication this exhibition seeks to present. Turned in to state officials in 1864 and held in sacred trust for 150 years, the flag has finally received the conservation and proper storage it deserves. The national color and its story can now again inspire all New Yorkers as it once did 150 years ago.



The national color carried by the 91st New York Volunteers during the assaults at Port Hudson, Louisiana, May–June 1863.

Loyal till death

The Confederate bombardment upon the federal garrison at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, April 12–14, 1861, ignited the Civil War and awakened a patriotic spirit throughout New York State. Many communities quickly banded together to supply the local volunteer company or regiment with a flag, either homemade or specially commissioned. As the war progressed, the army's quartermaster general shouldered the burden of purchasing and distributing supplies, including flags. These flags, often made under contract by the hundreds or thousands, adhered to prescribed regulations regarding size and design. Despite the largely efficient government procurement and distribution system, many community-minded, patriotic New Yorkers nevertheless continued to provide custom-made flags to their home-town regiment. Often featuring unique or personalized design elements, these flags from the heart and home captured the pride and devotion shared by all.

Tiffany & Co., a leading jewelry and silverware company located on Broadway in New York City, quickly established itself as a premiere flag supplier and provided many of the finest quality flags made during the war. Between June 1861 and February 1862, the company manufactured over 100 flags for New York regiments funded by various individuals, ad hoc community organizations, and civic groups. Tiffany & Co. made flags in accordance with governmental design standards but often incorporated custom features including battle honors. Founded in 1837 as Tiffany & Young by Charles Lewis Tiffany and John B. Young, the company became Tiffany & Co. in 1853 when Charles Lewis Tiffany acquired full ownership. Today, Tiffany & Co. is an international corporation with its flagship store on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

Tiffany & Co. provided its customers with high quality flags, but perhaps no other flags are more special than those made at home by a beloved family member or local seamstress. Often unique and personalized, these homemade flags usually featured patriotic slogans and symbols as well as inscriptions and battle honors.

The 13th Independent Battery, New York Volunteers from New York City proudly carried a special homemade flag. In late May 1862, the battery received an embroidered flag made by Mary Wheeler, a cousin of first lieutenant, later captain, William Wheeler. The blue silk banner features an embroidered eagle in flight with a red ribbon flowing from its beak. The ribbon includes New York State's motto, "EXCELSIOR." An inspirational motto, "Loyal till death," from which this exhibition draws its name, is embroidered below the soaring eagle.

The flag accompanied Wheeler and his battery from May 1862 until they mustered out in 1865, including at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where, on July 1, 1863, the 13th Independent Battery joined the effort to check the Confederate advance. Nearly a year later, on June 22, 1864, at Kolb's Farm, Georgia, Wheeler received a fatal shot through the heart. To the end, Wheeler lived up to the motto so lovingly embroidered on the flag by his dear cousin Mary.

Mary Wheeler's flag, and many other homemade flags in the state's collection, epitomize the love and devotion as well as the sacrifices made by all New Yorkers during the Civil War. These banners remain today as silent testimonials to the support provided by New York for the preservation of our Union.



The "Loyal till death" battery flag carried by the 13th Independent Battery.

Conserving the Colors

Many Civil War battle flags in the New York State Battle Flag Collection were damaged during the war. While battlefield use accounts for damage to some of the colors, poor storage techniques and environmental conditions have continuously and noticeably harmed all of the flags since the collection's origin in 1863. The Civil War's centennial, which began in 1961, prompted the most significant effort up until then to repair or improve the flags. Despite these efforts, and in some instances because of these centennial-period treatments, the fragile banners continued to suffer, furled around their staffs in crowded display cases in an uncontrolled environment in the Capitol.

In 2000, the Governor and the State Legislature noticed and recognized the needs of the New York State Battle Flag Collection, and provided funding to launch the New York State Battle Flag Preservation Project. Textile conservators from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation began treating those flags in greatest need of conservation, working from smallest sizes to largest.

Before treatment begins, a flag's condition is documented, both in a written report and with photography. Because of their storage conditions, all the flags are cleaned with a low-suction vacuum to remove the surface soils that can accelerate degradation. Many flags, such as the national color carried by the 27th New York Volunteers, require controlled humidification to realign the fabric. Proper alignment reduces stresses in the fabric and makes it easier to read inscriptions, such as battle honors or the unit designation, on the flag.

Although once supple, painted areas on the flags are now brittle and fragile. Many of the flags awaiting conservation have lost vast areas of paint; others have large splits within painted areas. To prevent further losses, State Parks textile conservators have used conservation-quality adhesive treatments to keep the fragile pieces of flags together.

After vacuuming, realigning, and any needed stabilizing, the flags are carefully transferred to a support panel. The flags are stored horizontally on their panels, covered with acid-free tissue and Tyvek® to protect them from dust and light. Conserved flags are placed within a storage cart where they are safely preserved and also accessible for exhibition and study.

Today, professional standards are in place to safeguard the flags from unnecessary handling and other damaging practices. Current treatments and documentation of the New York State Battle Flag Collection follow the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.

Although textile conservators have conserved hundreds of flags over the last decade, nearly 75 percent of the collection, including about half of the Civil War flags, still awaits preservation and proper storage.



Before



After

Conservators secured loose pieces of a flag's painted stars with small strips of semi-transparent fabric coated with a conservation-quality adhesive. The green circles mark the areas treated.

Battle Flags in the Exhibition

National Color, 27th New York Volunteers

Silk national color with reverse appliquéd stars initially presented to Company I by Elizabeth Church in Belvidere, New York, in April 1861, and later adopted by the regiment as its national color. Carried in battle for two years and many times struck by enemy fire. During the Chancellorsville Campaign, April 30–May 6, 1863, a star was shot from the canton and saved by color bearer A.L. Van Ness.

Guidon, 11th Independent Battery, New York Volunteers

Silk guidon made in the United States national pattern with 34 gold-painted stars. The regiment personalized the flag by adding an appliquéd crossed cannons symbol with the unit's numeric designation in the canton as well as battle honors along the stripes to honor their service through the end of 1863.

National Color, 91st New York Volunteers and staff

Silk national color with painted stars presented to the regiment in late December 1861 in Albany, New York, by the colonel's wife. During the siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 21–July 9, 1863, the flag and its staff were severely damaged, and one of the color bearers, Sergeant Samuel Townsend, a Confederate deserter, fell mortally wounded, reportedly at the hands of his own brother. The regiment returned the war-torn flag and its battle-damaged staff to the woman from whom they initially received the banner.

Standard, 9th Cavalry, New York Volunteers

Reuben E. Fenton, Congressman from Chautauqua County, New York, and later Governor, presented this "Tiffany Co." marked standard to the 9th Cavalry in March 1863 on behalf of the ladies of Chautauqua County. Carried by the regiment until July 1864, the flag's blue silk fabric is badly damaged but still retains the Tiffany maker's mark, the embroidered Coat of Arms with motto, and the unit identification.

Regimental Color, 119th New York Volunteers

Blue silk regimental color made by Ball, Black and Company of New York City with the Arms of the State of New York embroidered in the center and presented to the regiment in September 1862 in New York City. At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1–3, 1863, two color bearers suffered mortal wounds, and the flag fell into the hands of the 13th Georgia. After the war, veterans from the 13th Georgia returned the flag to a veteran from the 119th New York Volunteers.

Regimental Color, 146th New York Volunteers

A typical, military-issue, blue silk regimental color with the Arms of the United States painted in the center. Personalized by the regiment to include its nickname, "Halleck Infantry," the flag accompanied the unit to the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1–3, 1863, where it helped save Little Round Top, key to the ultimate Union victory.

Battery Flag, 13th Independent Battery, New York Volunteers

Made by an acquaintance of Captain William Wheeler in the spring of 1862, this unique blue silk flag includes both embroidered and painted battle honors, an embroidered American eagle in flight, and the inspirational slogan, "Loyal till death."

National Color, 64th New York Volunteers

In December 1861 the Board of Supervisors of Cattaraugus County presented this silk national color to the 64th New York Volunteers. The regiment first used the flag at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1–3, 1863. During that battle, two color bearers, Corporal Thomas Zibble and Corporal Albert Empy, received wounds while carrying this flag. At some point during its use in the war, a skilled seamstress repaired damage to the upper hoist corner by using a piece of blue silk cloth.

Flank Marker, 1st Engineers, New York Volunteers

This blue silk flank marker, one of approximately 100 similarly designed flags carried only by New York State regiments, includes the regiment's numeric designation painted on both sides.

National Color, 48th New York Volunteers

Silk national color with 34 appliquéd stars presented to the regiment in October 1861 at Annapolis, Maryland, by the wife of General Egbert Viele, as part of a larger, brigade-wide flag presentation ceremony. The event, in a vital border state where citizens had divided allegiances, provided Maryland Governor Thomas Hicks with the opportunity to publicly affirm his devotion to the Union. The flag accompanied the regiment on campaign, including during operations at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, July–September 1863, where two color bearers were killed in action.



National Color
27th New York Volunteers



Regimental Color
146th New York Volunteers



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