

# **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MICHIGAN CAPITOL BATTLE FLAG COLLECTION**

## **MICHIGAN AND THE CIVIL WAR**

The 1860 census listed the population of Michigan at approximately 750,000 citizens. By the end of the Civil War (1861-1865) Michigan had supplied over 90,000 soldiers and sailors. Her contribution on a per-capita basis, it is believed, was among the largest of any northern state. Approximately one out of every two eligible males living in the state participated in the war. Thirty regiments of Infantry, a regiment each of African American troops, Engineers and Mechanics and Sharpshooters, 11 regiments of Cavalry and 14 light artillery batteries answered the call.

## **THE FLAGS**

Before leaving for the field of battle the men of these regiments were presented with beautiful silken flags. Traditionally, the regiments would receive a stand of colors—one flag, the national red white and blue and the other a regimental—usually with a field of blue emblazoned with the Federal coat of arms (an eagle with outstretched wings) or with the Michigan coat of arms. The flags quite often were presented to the regiments by the ladies of their communities in grand ceremonies. The flags had mottoes that were beautifully painted or even hand embroidered on the flags such as;

In Jure Vincimus-We Conquer in Right-4th Michigan Cavalry Regiment

"Do Your Duty"-6th Michigan Infantry/Heavy Artillery Regiment

" From the Ladies of Adrian to the Fourth Michigan-DEFEND IT"

"At her country's sacred call her patriot sons will peril all"-Second Michigan Infantry Regiment

"We come to war not on opinions but to suppress treason"-14th Michigan Infantry Regiment

"Fear not Death fear Dishonor"-6th Michigan Cavalry Regiment

“Presented to the Tenth Regiment Infantry by the Citizens of Flint.”, Tenth Michigan Infantry Regiment

## **FLAGS IN BATTLE**

These flags stood for everything the men were fighting for. The colors stood for country, for community, for family and for the union. Quite often the flags were presented to the men by the ladies of the communities from which they came, some of them hand sewn and embroidered. The Civil War regiments (approximately 1,000 men) were organized in specific areas of the state, as were the companies (approximately 100 men). The men who joined these companies and regiments quite often knew each other very well. They joined with men and boys they had grown up with, boys they had gone to school with, attended church services with, many of the men were related to each other. It was not uncommon to have many fathers or even grandfathers serving alongside sons, and grandsons, uncles and nephews; the 24th Michigan had 135 pairs of brothers serving in the same regiment. The flags they bore into battle, presented to them by their communities, were a tangible link to Michigan, they were a reminder of from whom they came and for the cause they were fighting and dying for.

The flags were also used as a very practical tool on the field of battle. The flags stood as markers for the men of the regiment, they knew and could instantly recognize their banners. Through the dust, smoke and confusion of battle the men could spot their flags to follow them whether in the advance or retreat. When the color bearer planted the staff in the ground the men knew their duty was to stand their ground—to rally round the flag, and the honor of carrying that flag went not only to the tallest men of the regiment but to those of the highest moral character.

The Confederate and Union soldiers recognized the importance of these flags and the importance of capturing them or of killing the color bearer. Needless to say, the honor of being a flag bearer was also basically a death sentence and yet there was no shortage of men who were willing to do the job. It was considered the highest honor to have your company serve as the color company, the highest honor to serve in the color guard or to actually serve as the color bearer. The very first Medals of Honor were awarded during the Civil War, most often for the capture of a Confederate battle flag, or for incredible acts of courage in the defense of the flags. Sixty-Nine men from Michigan would be awarded the medal, many well after the war had ended.

### **FLAG RETURN**

At the conclusion of the war these battle scarred and bullet-torn flags were returned to a grateful state by the regiments, by the men who carried them and fought under them in a grand ceremony at Detroit on July 4, 1866. In accepting the flags, Michigan's Governor Henry Crapo, pledged that:

“They will not be forgotten and their histories left unwritten. Let us tenderly deposit them, as sacred relics, in the archives of our state, there to stand forever, her proudest possession”

The flags were mementos of friends lost and a country saved. Not all of the flags were returned to the state at the conclusion of the war, some of the regiments elected to hold onto their battle flags and they would reappear throughout the years at regimental reunions, some eventually making their way into the state collection, some whose whereabouts are still unknown.

In June 1876, The Fourth Michigan Infantry regiment held their reunion in Hudson, Michigan, Lt. L. Salsbury who attended the reunion, said:

“There is the flag. It is as mute as the grave, but it tells whether the oath those boys took in that open field was redeemed. O, the dreadful fields of battle over which it has waved! O, the gallant souls that have poured out their life's blood under its folds! Its pitiful tatters indicate the number, but they do not tell the names; but those names are embalmed in our memories and shall never be forgotten.”

On June 19, 1884, 101 veterans of the Fourth gathered again at Jonesville, Michigan again, the flag was there. H.W. Magee, who had come from Chicago, was called upon to carry the flag to the front of the speaker's platform.

“he grasped it and bore it to the front of the platform, where for a moment he paused and finally said, ‘Boys, do you see that flag? How it talks!’”

Frederick Curtenius, Colonel of the Sixth Michigan Infantry Regiment at the flag presentation ceremony for his regiment held in Baltimore, Maryland stated:

"To a soldier, a good soldier, the colors of his regiment are a priceless treasure. For their honor he will submit willingly to any sacrifice, and a stain cast upon them is a stigma upon his own character. In the hour of peril he will rally round them heedless of the din of battle and he considers his life of no value in their defense”.

Perhaps one of the best quotes regarding the importance the men placed upon their colors comes from a man who served with the Thirteenth Michigan Infantry. First Lieutenant Willard Eaton of Otsego, MI was promoted rapidly, becoming a Captain in 1862 and a Major the following year. After the carnage of the battle of Chickamauga in the fall of 1863 where three color bearers of the Thirteenth fell and half of the regiment were killed, wounded or were missing Eaton wrote a letter home to his niece:

“You speak of guarding the flag, now I am aware that thousands of people have but little thought about a flag, or that it is of any importance, let such take the field and go forth to battle under a flag and bear it through the storm of death until half their number have fallen under its folds and then they will be prepared to appreciate it.”

Not long after writing this, Eaton was promoted to colonel and was killed in action March 19, 1865 at Bentonville, North Carolina (one short month before the end of the war).

## **FLAGS IN THE CAPITOL**

Eventually with the construction of the current State Capitol in Lansing in 1879 the flags were deposited there. First in a military museum in the first floor south wing and then later in 1909 in shallow metal and glass cases in the Capitol rotunda. Many men who came to the opening of the Capitol on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1879 came specifically to see their battle flags again, they pressed their faces to the glass cases and the sight of their banners brought tears to the eyes of many of the old veterans.

The flags, which were now joined by flags carried by Michigan troops in the Spanish American War and World War I, remained in the cases until the 1960’s when some were sent out for conservation in commemoration of the centennial of the Civil War. This was a very different type of conservation than what is standard practice today. The flags were sewn between layers of dyed net to encapsulate them. The stitching was done with a running zig-zag stitch through the layers of net--piercing the flag with thousands of individual needle holes.

The flags were returned to their rotunda cases and remained there until the restoration of the Capitol (1989-1992). At that time an alarming discovery was made; the flags were deteriorating

they were literally starting to fall apart. What were their elements of destruction? Time, the effects of improper lighting, fluctuating temperature and humidity and gravity. The flags, most of which measure 6x 6 1/2 ft., were hung from their original staffs and were falling apart due to the strain of their own weight. What years of battle damage could not do to the flags was actually being accomplished by these hidden enemies.

Upon the recommendation of one the country's leading textile conservators and with the full agreement of the Capitol Battle Flags task force, a volunteer group made up of historians, re-enactors and museum and Capitol personnel, the flags were removed from the Capitol and placed in a specially designed archival storage unit in the state historical museum in Lansing. There, the flags are being preserved and researched and indeed are being saved. This effort is not however without cost, it is very expensive to conserve these flags and the state of Michigan has not and does not fund this project. As part of "Save The Flags," a project to preserve the state's collection of historic battle flags, groups, individuals or families may adopt a flag by contributing to its preservation. By donating these needed funds our citizens are ensuring that the flags and the history of the men who so courageously fought and died under them will be preserved. We are saving flags. We are fulfilling Governor Crapo's pledge that these flags not be forgotten and their histories left unwritten. The veterans of the Union army and Grand Army of the Republic would be pleased by our actions.

Why are these flags so important? The answer is quite simple; they are important to the people of the state of Michigan because they were important to the men who carried them into battle and fought and died beneath them. Do we need a better reason to preserve them? Do we need a better reason to insure that they are taken care of and that the memory of those brave men is also preserved? These flags were so important to these men--that they were willing to die in their defense, they returned them to a grateful state of Michigan as "their proudest possessions", they came to the Capitol in Lansing decades after the war just to catch a glimpse of them in the shallow cases where they had been entombed. The gray-bearded, elderly gentleman often came to tears at the sight of their beloved regimental flags. They were so important that some of these veterans held onto scraps of the flags for years after the war, as sacred relics of their service, of the blood they had spilled and as a constant reminder of the comrades of their youth who perished in the struggle. These flags stood for and stand for the men who withstood four long years of horrific combat, and those who were fortunate enough to come back home, came back changed men, no doubt burdened by the guilt of their most audacious act of survival while so many round them perished. These flags also stand as a reminder of the men who gave their lives in their defense and the cause that they stood for...men who died in the flower of their youths, blossoms cut from the tree before they could bloom and flourish and produce fruit, lives cut short before these boys could grow to honorable manhood, marry their child-hood sweethearts, advance in age and walk their daughters down the aisle on their wedding day.

If we can preserve these flags, these relics of their service, then perhaps we can also preserve a part of them, perhaps, just perhaps we can make their loss and sacrifice worth the incredible and almost unfathomable price they paid. This represents our ability to pay back to them an incredible debt of gratitude.

The feelings of the men for their flag were well expressed by Lt. Henry Beach, upon sending home a standard of the First Michigan Cavalry regiment in 1864:

“Gentlemen, I have the honor to forward to you the tattered standard of our regiment. Where, when and how well we have defended it, we will let the history of the war tell. It has waved over many a bloody field, and been pierced by canister and rifle shot. Yet we trust we have never forsaken or dishonored it. Sirs, we venerate, we almost worship it, and confiding it to your care we humbly pray you will preserve it as long as the Peninsular State has a name and a place in the nation; and whenever God sparing our lives to return, any of us shall behold, we will bow to its familiar device, while we weep for our brave comrades who have fallen beneath it.”