Conserving Minnesota’s Battle Flags
Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

I’m Doug Bekke, Assistant to the Textile Conservator at the Minnesota Historical Society and Curator of the Minnesota Military Museum at Camp Ripley. In 2009, the Society received a Save America’s Treasures grant to begin conservation work on 58 historic battle flags from the Civil War and the Spanish American War. Some of the flags have been on constant display in the state’s capitol rotunda, while others have been in storage. Time and environmental conditions have taken their toll, and the flags are in need of stabilization.

In March 2009 the Conservation Department removed the first set of flags from their cases in the capitol rotunda. A century of continuous display has caused some of the flags to tear under their own weight and fade under the constant light. One by one, the flags are carefully packed and brought to the History Center’s Conservation Lab for treatment.

After unpacking, each flag is first cleaned with a special vacuum to remove dust and debris. Next, the flag is flattened and returned to its original shape using contact humidification, a gentle, non-invasive technique. The flag is then placed on a custom-built, solid support mount. The mount, made from honeycombed aluminum covered with polyester padding and cotton fabric, allows the flag to be stored and displayed flat, to prevent further tearing or creasing. Each flag is painstakingly hand-sewn into place on its mount using inert polyester thread no thicker than a human hair. The needle is drawn through existing holes to prevent further stress on the flag’s fibers. The entire process takes an average of 80 hours per flag.

During treatment, each flag’s condition is carefully documented. Fabrication techniques, materials, and evidence of its use are all recorded, and color photographs are taken of each flag’s front and back side. Additional detailed photos are taken through a microscope. All of this information ultimately will be made available to scholars via the Society’s web site.

After treatment, each flag is stored in one of two custom-built cabinets. The cabinets are crafted from coated steel, and feature doors with silicone gaskets that seal out dirt. The cabinets themselves are housed in a secure, climate-controlled room to maintain safe levels of humidity, temperature, and light.

The four original capitol rotunda display cases, designed by capitol architect Cass Gilbert expressly to house the flags, will continue to be used. However, the cases
will be modified to seal their interiors and control climate and light levels. One flag at a time will be displayed in each of the four cases, so that the flags can be displayed flat, and so that the flags can be rotated on a regular basis between storage and display.

The current conservation of these historic flags will ensure their preservation and keep them available for all to see in the state’s capitol rotunda.