



# Access Today

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## The Star Spangled Banner Exhibit is Making the Grade at the American History Museum

The patriotic significance of our nation's Star Spangled Banner can be felt in the hearts of Americans now more so than ever before. The flag that inspired Francis Scott Key's writing of the National Anthem is currently being restored in a temporary laboratory located in the Smithsonian American History Museum in Washington, D.C.

Visitors may experience the restoration project and view the condition of the enormous flag that once flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812. The American History Museum has created opportunities for all visitors to experience the various features of the flag in a variety of

mediums. According to American History Museum Curator Lonny Taylor, "Accessibility was generally planned for in the exhibit. Things suggest themselves as to what features are used for the tactile displays."

The exhibit consists of the laboratory where the flag is being restored and a wall of displays depicting more specific information on the flag. Included in the displays are tactile and auditory exhibits at a lowered level allowing people with sensory impairments and people who use mobility devices to experience the glory of one of our nation's most profound symbols. The laboratory is behind glass partitions that offer visitors the



The flag that inspired Francis Scott Key's writing of the National Anthem

opportunity to observe the workers performing the tedious task of restoring the banner. A television monitor is also provided playing a captioned video on the restoration process.

The design of the American Flag at the time

the Star Spangled Banner was produced included 15 alternating red and white stripes and 15 white stars in a blue union located in one corner of the flag. Each of these distinctive features has been represented in the exhibit. Tactile exhibits include replicas of the size and shape of the stars and stripes along with their arrangement. Although difficult to demonstrate the 30-by-42 foot size of the flag to a person who is blind, the actual size of a star gives some perspective on the enormity of the banner.

Ninety years prior to being donated to the Smithsonian, the original Star Spangled Banner was in possession of the family of the commanding officer at Fort McHenry, Lieutenant Colonel George Armistead. Modifications to the flag while in possession of the Armistead family include a red chevron stitched onto the third white stripe from the bottom of the flag. The chevron was intended to be the letter "A" and was added by



Tactile depiction of the size and shape of a star from the Star Spangled Banner.

Louisa Armistead. The intention may have been to sew the entire Armistead name, as it was the fashion at the time. Another tradition was the clipping of small pieces of historical objects to give to others deemed worthy of such a keepsake. By the time the Smithsonian received the flag, eight feet and one star had been removed. These modifications can be experienced tactily by a model where the stars and red stripes are raised. In addition, the model is treated with paint removed in the



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Department of Recreation and Park Administration and is funded in part by the U.S. Congress through the National Park Service. NCA focuses primarily on accessibility as it relates to parks, recreation, and tourism industries. Major objectives include: conducting research, providing technical assistance, developing resources and training materials, and conducting educational programs.

**Access Today** is a publication of the National Center on Accessibility. As a continuing service of technical assistance, the National Center on Accessibility has published a series of tech sheets on access to outdoor recreation, parks and tourism environments. These tech sheets are intended to be used only a resource. They are not intended to be used as a design guide. As a result of evolving accessibility guidelines, some technical specifications presented herein may change as new accessibility guidelines are released. This publication is available in alternate format upon request.

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Tactile model depicting missing star from the Star Spangled Banner.



Samples of the fabric backing used for preservation of the Star Spangled Banner.

location of the piece missing from the flag. This gives visitors with visual impairments more information on the flag's missing pieces.

Throughout the Star Spangled Banner's existence, various efforts have been made to maintain it. In 1873, George Henry Preble took the first known photograph of the flag. In order to take this photograph, a canvas backing was added to reinforce the fragile fabric enough to be hung. Forty-one years later, Amelia Fowler was hired by the Smithsonian to add a new backing to the

flag. Mrs. Fowler had a patented method of flag preservation involving linen stitched on by thread dyed to match the particular color on each section of the flag. Samples of the backing fabric are available to view and touch in the exhibit, along with the wool and cotton fabric used for the flag itself.

Additional maintenance procedures include vacuuming to remove the dust particles. To prevent the fragile fibers of the banner from being removed, a fiberglass screen is placed over the

flag as it is vacuumed. An example of the screen can also be found in the exhibit for tactile and visual exploration. Lonn Taylor expresses the difficulty in making the conservation process accessible, "One of the conservationist came up with the idea to include a sample of the screen used. We wanted to begin to explain what we were doing and why it is important to conserve the Flag."

The audible portion of the exhibit involves a small speaker wand that a visitor holds up to their ear. Visitors are able to



A small speaker wand is used to relay audible information.

listen to information regarding the exhibit with low physical effort. The design is easy to understand allowing simple and intuitive use, and flexibility in that it can be operated with either hand. Low physical effort, simple and intuitive use, and flexibility are three of the principles of Universal Design applied in the exhibit to assure it is usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. Lonny Taylor explains, "Intellectual accessibility is taken into consideration. Some people respond to audible information whereas some respond to tactile information." The American History Museum has taken these differences into consideration and presents information in multiple mediums to offer equitable experience for visitors.

The original Star Spangled Banner represents the history of a great nation built on diversity. The Smithsonian American History Museum has presented this historical feature in an exhibit utilizing Universal Design principles that promote equitable use. The accessibility features in this exhibit did not significantly add to the cost of the exhibit, and they are a great demonstration of how accessibility can be achieved with simple concepts. All visitors are offered the chance of experiencing the various aspects of the flag. Tactile, auditory, and visual information is available to people who have sensory impairments and are also installed at a height accessible for people who view the display from a seated position.

The National Center on Accessibility extends its gratitude to the Smithsonian American History Museum for cooperation in providing additional information on the exhibit's design and permitting photographs of the exhibit to be taken.

### Resources

*The Star-Spangled Banner  
The Flag that Inspired the  
National Anthem*  
Lonny Taylor  
*The Smithsonian American  
History Museum  
Washington, D.C.*

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