The Barbourville Home Guard Flag, Context & Preservation

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In democratic nations, flags are never merely cloth. They are public arguments, stitched declarations of belonging, loyalty, memory, and hope. In ordinary times, a flag may become so familiar that its meaning recedes into habit, fluttering above courthouses, classrooms, cemeteries, and public squares with the quiet authority of custom. But in moments of crisis, flags recover their older and sharper power. They ask people to choose. They announce where loyalties lie. They gather communities into visible form. They can comfort, provoke, rally, accuse, and endanger.

The Barbourville Home Guard flag belongs to that more dangerous and revealing category of American symbols. Made in the summer of 1861 by women of Barbourville, Kentucky, presented to a local Union Home Guard on the Fourth of July, hidden during Confederate occupation, preserved through private custody, entrusted to Union College in 1933, and professionally conserved in 2026, the flag is among Union Commonwealth University's most evocative historical objects. Its importance does not rest simply in its age, though it is now more than a century and a half old. Nor does it rest only in its beauty, though its silk field, embroidered stars, and unusual central-star design make it visually striking. Its deeper significance lies in the fact that it survived, and that its survival was never accidental. Again and again, across generations, people decided that this flag mattered.

To understand why, one must begin with Kentucky in 1861. The Commonwealth occupied one of the most precarious positions in the nation. Officially neutral in the opening months of the Civil War, Kentucky was in practice divided by region, interest, kinship, ideology, and fear. It was a border state in the fullest sense, not only geographically but emotionally and politically. Its people lived between worlds. Some looked South by economy, family, and sympathy. Others clung fiercely to the Union. Many hoped, at least for a time, to avoid choosing at all. But the war had little patience for neutrality. Armies moved. Neighbors watched one another. Public speech grew dangerous. Symbols acquired weight.

Eastern Kentucky, including Knox County, contained substantial Unionist sentiment. That fact matters. The history of the Civil War is too often told as if Unionism naturally belonged to the North and secessionism to the South. Kentucky challenges that easy geography. In places such as Barbourville, loyalty to the United States remained strong even as Confederate forces threatened the region and as the state's uncertain position made every public declaration more fraught. In such communities, local Home Guard units formed to defend Unionist neighborhoods, families, property, and political commitments against Confederate incursion and internal dissent.

The Barbourville Home Guard flag was born in this tense world. It was not the product of a distant quartermaster or a federal supply depot. It was a local creation, imagined and made by people who knew exactly what such a banner meant. Primary accounts consistently describe the flag's manufacture in the days preceding July 4, 1861.

Congressman George Madison Adams ordered the silk. Women of Barbourville gathered at Hotel Matthews, where Mrs. William Matthews had access to what local memory preserved as the only sewing machine in town. There, the red and white silk ribbons were cut, basted, and stitched into the field of the flag. Mrs. G. M. Adams quilted the blue canton at her home. Miss Jennie Adams and others embroidered the stars so that they appeared on both sides of the fabric, a laborious and skilled technique that testifies to the care lavished on the object from the beginning.

Local accounts name several of the women involved in this work, including Mrs. G. M. Adams, Mrs. William Matthews, Mrs. H. K. Wilson, Mrs. Lou Kenningham, Mrs. Docia Herndon, Mrs. Sue Joplin, Miss Jane Glass, and Miss Jennie Adams. Other accounts preserve additional names and details, reminding us that the making of the flag was not the work of one hand but of a community of hands. Mr. William Matthews stitched the basted strips by machine. Thomas J. Pitzer laid out the stars on the blue square. Mr. H. K. Wilson made the staff. Mrs. H. K. Wilson made the silk cord and tassels. The flag, then, was at once domestic and public, feminine and civic, practical and symbolic. It emerged from parlors, hotels, sewing rooms, and family networks, but it was meant for the public square and the crisis of war.

The design was unusual and powerful. Rather than arranging the stars in conventional rows, the maker of the design arranged them into one large central star. Such designs were not unknown among handmade Civil War-era flags, especially those produced locally rather than commercially, but this pattern gave the Barbourville flag a distinctive visual character. It announced national loyalty through local artistry. It was recognizably American, yet unmistakably handmade. In that sense, it embodied the very community that produced it: attached to the Union, but speaking in its own accent.

On July 4, 1861, the completed flag was presented to Captain John G. Eve of the Barbourville Home Guard at the site of what later became the Barbourville Baptist Institute. That date requires some attention. The Fourth of July always carried civic force in nineteenth-century America, but in 1861, it meant something more. The nation was tearing itself apart. Americans North and South both claimed the inheritance of the Revolution. Both claimed liberty, patriotism, sacrifice, and constitutional fidelity. For Unionists in a contested border region, a Fourth of July presentation was not simply ceremonial. It was an affirmation that the nation created in 1776 still commanded their loyalty in 1861. The women of Barbourville did not merely give the Home Guard a banner. They gave public form to a political faith.

But the war soon put that faith under pressure. In September 1861, Confederate Brigadier General Felix K. Zollicoffer led thousands of troops into southeastern Kentucky. The Barbourville Home Guard, numbering roughly eighty men, was vastly outnumbered. In such circumstances, a Union flag could quickly become a liability. To possess it was to possess evidence. To display it was to invite confiscation. To protect it required nerve.

The flag survived because Mrs. J. T. Pitzer hid it. According to the preserved account, Mrs. Eve, fearing that Confederate troops would search for the flag or demand its surrender,

carried it to Mrs. Pitzer. Mrs. Pitzer placed the flag in a pillowcase, opened a featherbed on which she slept, and concealed the flag inside. The staff was reportedly taken, but the silk banner remained hidden. There it stayed until the war ended.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this act. The flag's survival began not in a museum or an archive, but in a bed. It was preserved not by climate control, acid-free materials, or professional conservation, but by the courage and quick judgment of a woman who understood that the flag was vulnerable because the idea it represented was vulnerable. In a border-state community under military threat, to hide a Union flag was not sentimental antiquarianism. It was a political action. Mrs. Pitzer's concealment transformed the flag from a presentation banner into a relic of resistance.

After the war, Colonel John G. Eve reclaimed the flag and kept it in his office. In 1881, it passed to Congressman George Madison Adams. After Adams's death in 1885, the flag transferred to John M. Tinsley, who preserved it until 1933. This chain of custody is one of the most important features of the flag's history. Many Civil War artifacts come down to us wrapped in romance but lacking documentation. The Barbourville Home Guard flag is different. Its passage from Eve to Adams to Tinsley and finally to Union College provides an unusually strong line of possession, reinforced by public appearances, local newspaper accounts, institutional memory, and archival documentation.

During Tinsley's custodianship, the flag remained a living object in Barbourville's civic memory. It was displayed at Union College in 1914 and again on February 22, 1923, during a Washington's Birthday program in the chapel. These appearances are revealing. By the early twentieth century, the Civil War generation was passing away. The flag's display allowed younger people to encounter the material remains of a conflict that had shaped their families and community. It also helped preserve a particular memory of the war in eastern Kentucky: one centered on Union loyalty, local defense, women's patriotic labor, and survival under threat.

Local accounts from the 1920s described the flag with reverence. The red and white silk had aged. The white stripes had yellowed. The stars had deepened toward gold. The fringe, once bright, had grown fragile. But age did not diminish the object. It enlarged it. The flag's discoloration and wear became visible signs of endurance. Like an elderly witness, its authority came partly from having lasted long enough to tell what others could no longer say.

In 1933, John M. Tinsley formally donated the flag to Union College, now Union Commonwealth University. The transfer was facilitated by Mrs. W. M. Tinsley and Mrs. Mayo Tinsley Rathfon. With this gift, Union accepted more than an antique. It accepted stewardship of a community's Civil War memory. The institution became responsible for preserving a flag that belonged at once to the Home Guard, to the women who made it, to the families who protected it, to Barbourville, and to the university whose campus became its home.

For most of the next century, the flag rested in a glass case on campus. That case was itself an act of preservation according to the standards and expectations of an earlier age. It protected the flag from dust, insects, constant handling, and some environmental exposure. It allowed generations of students, faculty, alumni, and visitors to see the banner. But it also reflected older methods of display that later conservation science would come to question. The flag was attached vertically, apparently with push tacks along the leader edge, and displayed in a manner that allowed gravity to pull on the fabric for decades. Silk, especially nineteenth-century silk, does not forgive such stress forever. Over time, the flag developed creases, distortions, tack holes, tears, and areas of shattering, especially in the white silk stripes.

Still, its survival is remarkable. Silk is beautiful, but it is also treacherous. It can appear stable until it begins to split. It can grow acidic. It can shatter along creases. It can weaken from light, age, metallic salts, old repairs, and the slow strain of its own weight. That the Barbourville Home Guard flag remained intact after approximately 165 years is extraordinary. It survived because it was gently used, carefully remembered, and, for the last century, at least partly protected by its case. The old display was imperfect, but it was not meaningless. Like earlier repairs, it was part of a long history of people doing what they knew to do in order to keep the flag alive.

The modern restoration of the flag grew from that long stewardship, but it also required a new vision. For Dr. Joseph W. Pearson, restoring the Barbourville Home Guard flag had been a dream since he joined Union's faculty in 2014. He understood the flag not simply as an object in the university's possession, but as one of the most significant historical artifacts under Union's care. Its story joined the Civil War, Kentucky Unionism, women's history, local memory, and institutional responsibility. To conserve it properly would be to honor all of those histories at once.

Dreams of this kind, however, require more than historical appreciation. They require leadership, money, expertise, coordination, and trust. President D. J. Washington deserves great credit for supporting the project and helping get it off the ground. Preservation projects often begin with one person's conviction, but they move forward only when others recognize the value of the work and lend it institutional force. President Washington's support helped transform a long-held hope into a concrete undertaking.

The restoration also depended on the remarkable generosity of the GFWC Kentucky Barbourville Junior Woman's Study Club, which served as the sole sponsor of the restoration and conservation effort. Their support deserves special emphasis. It is historically fitting, almost poetic, that a flag made by Barbourville women in 1861 should be conserved in 2026 through the sole sponsorship of a Barbourville women's civic organization. The line is not merely financial. It is moral and historical. Across more than a century and a half, women of Barbourville once again stepped forward to protect the flag. The first generation made it. Another hid it. Later generations preserved its memory. The GFWC Kentucky Barbourville Junior Woman's Study Club ensured its future.

The physical work of restoration began with the careful removal of the flag from its 95-year-old case in January 2026. That moment marked the end of one chapter in the flag's life and the beginning of another. The extraction required patience and practical skill, because a silk flag of this age cannot be handled casually. Dr. Pearson was joined in that work by Mr. Shain Sizemore, Mr. Ray Bratten, and members of Union's Physical Plant team, whose assistance helped make possible the safe removal of the artifact from the case in which it had rested for nearly a century. The flag was then laid out to flatten before being rolled for transport.

Dr. Pearson's daughter, Adeleine Pearson, also belongs to this modern chapter of the flag's history. Her steady support and encouragement accompanied the project both in taking the flag to Washington, D.C., and in bringing it home. That detail may seem personal, but preservation work often is. Artifacts survive through institutions, certainly, but also through families, friendships, conversations, long drives, anxious decisions, and acts of encouragement offered at the right moment. Herself a young lady from the mountains, Adeleine's support formed part of the human scaffolding around the project.

From February through June 2026, the flag underwent professional conservation under the direction of textile conservator Julia M. Brennan of Caring for Textiles in Washington, D.C., with framing assistance from Archival Arts Services in Virginia. Brennan's assessment measured the flag at 86 by 60 inches and described it as intact and in surprisingly good condition for a silk flag of its age. That assessment was encouraging, but it did not mean the flag was safe. The red and blue silk remained structurally sound and not noticeably faded. The embroidered stars, though yellowed with age, were intact. The flag was relatively clean, thanks in part to its long protection in a case. Yet the white silk told a more troubling story. Several of the cream-colored stripes contained clusters of splits, tears, holes, and shattering areas. Some pieces were actively vulnerable to loss. The fringe along the fly end was also extremely delicate, with fine silk threads breaking and shedding.

The uneven condition of the flag itself is historically revealing. Brennan noted that the white silk was in poorer condition than the red and blue silk, a pattern consistent with what conservators often see in nineteenth-century textiles. Cream-colored silk taffeta was sometimes of lesser quality or weighted with salt, a common practice among fabric dealers who increased the weight, and therefore the price, of silk. Such weighting could contribute to later discoloration and shattering. Whether that precise process explains this flag's deterioration or not, the material evidence reminds us that historic objects are not abstractions. They are physical things made from particular fabrics, threads, dyes, tools, habits, and economies. Their meanings are cultural, but their vulnerabilities are material.

The goal of conservation was not to make the flag new. Indeed, to make it look new would have been a kind of historical dishonesty. A flag that had passed through war, concealment, family custody, public display, institutional stewardship, and nearly a century in a case should look old. Its age is part of its truth. The conservator's task was instead to stabilize the flag for long-term preservation and public display while respecting the evidence of its making, use, repair, and survival.

Because the textile was too delicate to vacuum, it was gently surface cleaned with a fine sable brush. Pressing and weighing reduced creases and wrinkles, though not all puckering could or should be removed. Some of that puckering comes from the flag's original construction, especially the machine stitching along the joined silk ribbons. The seams speak to the circumstances of manufacture. They remind us that this was a handmade community banner, not a factory-perfect object.

The fringe required special attention. Before other treatment could proceed safely, the fragile silk fringe had to be aligned and encapsulated in transparent netting. The netting stabilized the threads and prevented further shedding. This work preserved one of the flag's most delicate visual features while acknowledging that it could no longer safely remain unsupported.

The torn white silk stripes required another kind of care. Because the silk was too brittle for extensive stitching, the conservator used fine silk crepeline prepared with a low-percentage conservation-grade adhesive known as Lascaux. These support patches were applied selectively to stabilize splits and tears, often slipped beneath the damaged silk where possible. The result was a flag that appeared more visually whole and, more importantly, was significantly more stable. The repairs did not erase the flag's age. They helped prevent the injuries from worsening.

The final mounting decision was central to the flag's future. The flag could not be safely stitch-mounted because sewing through its fragile silk would cause further damage. Nor could it return to a vertical hanging arrangement, where gravity would continue to pull at the fabric. The safest option was pressure mounting. A custom basswood stretcher system with crossbars and a coroplast insert created a stable support. Layers of padding and high-loft batting built up the surface. Off-white cotton duck covered the mount. The flag was then laid flat, fully extended, with its fringe spread and its canton positioned in the upper left. A custom smoked walnut hardwood frame and protective glazing completed the presentation.

This new display allows the flag to be seen as it should be seen: open, supported, legible, and protected. The silk remains fragile and will continue to age, as all historic textiles do. Conservation is not immortality. But pressure mounting prevents the flag from sagging, shifting, cracking, or bearing its own weight in dangerous ways. It is the best available solution for secure display and long-term preservation.

The conservation work also established a clear provenance for this artifact. Dr. Pearson's February 2026 research report concluded that the preponderance of evidence supports that conclusion. The archival record, local accounts, chain of custody, material assessment, and dimensions all point toward authenticity. The flag has been restored over time but not replaced. That distinction is crucial. Historic artifacts often survive because people repair them. Later backing, older stitch repairs, and possible 1933 restoration work are not evidence against the flag's authenticity. They are evidence of stewardship. They show that previous generations recognized the flag's importance and, with the methods available to them, tried to keep it whole.

The Barbourville Home Guard flag matters, then, because it gathers so many histories into one object. It matters to the history of the Civil War because it documents Unionism in a contested border region. It reminds us that Kentucky's wartime experience was not simple, and that loyalty to the United States ran deep in parts of the Upper South. It matters to the history of women because women made it, protected it, remembered it, and, through the GFWC Kentucky Barbourville Junior Woman's Study Club, made its modern conservation possible. It matters to Barbourville's history because it was born of local hands and local conviction. It matters to Union Commonwealth University because the institution has been its steward since 1933 and now has the opportunity to interpret it with renewed care.

Most of all, it matters because it makes the past tangible. One can read about Kentucky Unionism, Confederate incursions, Home Guard units, women's wartime labor, and Civil War memory. But to stand before the flag is to encounter the thing itself: the silk ordered by George Madison Adams, the stripes sewn in Barbourville, the stars embroidered by women whose names local memory struggled to preserve, the banner presented to Captain Eve on the Fourth of July, the cloth hidden in a featherbed when Confederate troops came, the object kept by Eve, Adams, and Tinsley, the relic entrusted to Union, the fragile survivor lifted from its old case and carried to conservation.

There is a temptation in modern life to imagine that preservation is about nostalgia, as though saving old things were merely an exercise in sentiment. The Barbourville Home Guard flag proves otherwise. Preservation is an argument about responsibility. It insists that communities owe something to the people who came before them and to those who will come after. It asks institutions to treat memory not as a possession, but as a trust. It reminds us that objects become meaningful not only because of what they are, but because of what people have been willing to do for them.

The flag was made in a moment when the nation's future was uncertain. It was hidden when its display became dangerous. It was saved when it might easily have been lost. It was donated when memory needed a permanent home. It was restored when age threatened its survival. In each generation, someone answered the same quiet question: is this worth preserving? Again and again, the answer was yes.

The restoration of the Barbourville Home Guard flag is therefore not simply the successful conservation of a rare silk banner. It is the renewal of a community covenant. Dr. Pearson's dream, President Washington's support, the sole sponsorship of the GFWC Kentucky Barbourville Junior Woman's Study Club, the careful assistance of Mr. Shain Sizemore, Mr. Ray Bratten, and Union's Physical Plant team, the encouragement of Adeleine Pearson, and the professional skill of Julia M. Brennan and her colleagues all belong to the flag's continuing story. They join the women who made it in 1861, Mrs. Pitzer, who hid it, the custodians who preserved it, and the university that accepted it.

Fragile though it is, the flag endures. Its silk has yellowed. Its fringe has weakened. Its white stripes bear the marks of age, stress, and repair. Yet those marks do not diminish it. They are evidence of its passage through time. The Barbourville Home Guard flag survives as a witness to loyalty in a divided state, to women's civic labor in an age that often denied

women formal political power, to the dangers of war in a border community, and to the long work of memory itself.

It is, in the end, both a local treasure and a national artifact. It began in Barbourville, but it speaks to the American experience of division, allegiance, sacrifice, and remembrance. Its restoration ensures that future generations will not encounter it as a fading rumor in an old case, but as a preserved and interpreted object capable of teaching still. And that is why it matters. It is not simply the flag that Barbourville made. It is the flag that Barbourville saved.