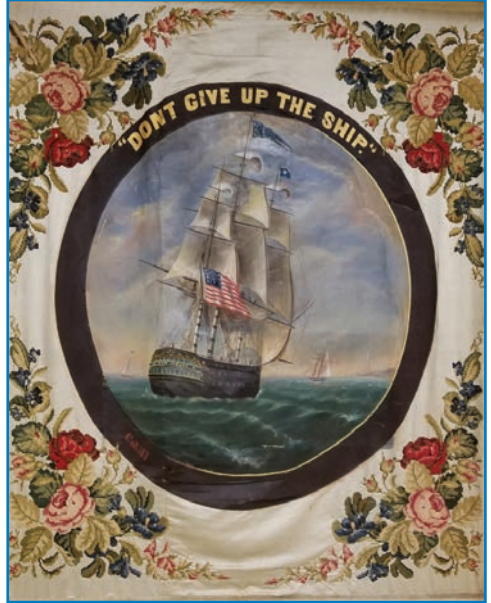


Preserving an 1840 Ocean County Legacy

By: Victoria Ford

“Don’t Give Up the Ship,” is the plea artfully stitched on a very special and historic banner, created with care by “The Ladies of Tuckerton” in 1840 for a campaign function for the presidential Whig candidate William Henry Harrison. The banner has spent the last 45 years on display inside the Ocean County Historical Museum and is currently undergoing a preservation process to prevent or slow further degradation.

Cynthia Smith, retired president of the Ocean County Historical Society, compiled the research and led conservation efforts. “I was concerned because I could see it would deteriorate,” she explained, and “we were not doing it justice” by hanging it where it was not often viewed by the public.



Historic 1840 Banner.
Photo credit: C&H Staff

She explained the Society still owns the banner but has given it on a permanent loan basis to the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, which administered the state funding for the conservation. The cost of the conservation work is \$5,775 and is completely paid for as part of a grant from the NJ Historical Commission. Ocean County Parks & Recreation will pay for a custom display case.

It’s in “fantastic condition,” Smith said, or at least “pretty darn good, considering” its 178 years.

The artifact measures 42 by 46 inches and is made primarily of silk.

On the front, an oil painting depicts a 19th-century sailing vessel, a frigate named New Jersey flying a 15-star American flag (which was customarily flown from US Navy ships during the War of 1812), and two smaller vessels in the distance. The marine scene is surrounded by a wreath of intricate and colorful floral needlework and the words “Don’t Give Up the Ship” embroidered in gold in the perimeter. The Philadelphia-based painter’s last name, Cohill, is in red. The words are attributable to New Jersey native Capt. James Lawrence, who commanded the ship Chesapeake and whose dying command, “Don’t give up the ship,” became a popular patriotic battle cry for generations of US Navy officers and sailors.

On the back of the banner is a date and location, Aug. 20, 1840, Tuckerton, New Jersey, and the words, “Our Country, Right or Wrong” (a popular patriotic slogan that has been attributed to Naval Commodore Stephen Decatur, in an after-dinner toast in April 1816) with a star in each corner.

The Society obtained the banner in the 1960s and stored it in a room of the Ocean County Courthouse. Later, when the Society acquired its present Victorian house-museum facility on Hadley Avenue in 1972, a wood and glass display box was

made for it, and it was exhibited on a wall in the Birdsall Room, the downstairs meeting room, where it was protected from sunlight.

The banner is now in the capable hands of Jakki Godfrey and Kate White of Boro 6 Art Conservation in Jersey City, where it is undergoing repair and preservation work. Godfrey said the Society had contacted her to do an assessment and proposal for treatment, which will include cleaning and stabilizing the banner, a painstaking process that may take several months.

It's been in the conservators' studio since early March, according to Smith.

Originally the conservators planned to "restore" the banner to the way it might have looked in 1840, but now the goal instead is to repair the damage and "preserve" the banner – which "is in extraordinary condition for its age," according to Cultural and Heritage Commission Director Tim Hart – to keep it from getting worse.

"This banner is true legacy of Ocean County... one of the most important artifacts anywhere in the county," said Hart.

Hart is hoping the work will be completed by fall; the plan is to display the banner at the soon-to-be opened Cedar Bridge Tavern, given its time period and proximity to Tuckerton. The Society just wants to maximize and optimize the banner's visibility.



Tears in silk before repairs.
Photo credit: C&H Staff

Smith said what she finds most impressive about the banner is the craftsmanship, which shows in how well it has held up all these years. "I think it's well done," she said.

The research process had a very alluring effect on her. The work of piecing together the sequence of events and key players in the story was like unraveling a mystery, she said.

Smith's research revealed much in the way of facts and assumptions that may illuminate

the banner's significance and exposit its imagery.

A little more background:

William Henry Harrison, ninth President of the United States, was nominated by the Whig Party to run against the Democratic candidate, incumbent President Martin Van Buren; his campaign emphasized his military record during the War of 1812. He was inaugurated on March 4, 1841, in Washington, D.C., on a cold, wet day. He read his nearly two-hour inaugural speech – the longest in U.S. history – outside and rode his horse through the streets in the inaugural parade. Twenty days into his term, he became very ill; he died nine days later, on April 4, making his presidency the shortest of any American president, only 30 days.

As Tuckerton was part of Burlington County at that time, Smith found the newspaper articles she needed in the Burlington County Library. The "Ladies of

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Tuckerton,” who made and presented the banner to the Whig Party, must have been extremely supportive of Harrison, Smith said. “This was a common thing to do at the time,” she noted. She’s not sure if the banner really was carried in the inaugural parade, however, given the description of the weather that day was cold and wet and, after so many hours in the rain, she would think the banner would be far worse for wear.

Nevertheless, sometime after the inauguration, the banner made its way back to Tuckerton and into the home of Tuckerton physician Thomas Page or one of his descendants, and in that family it stayed for several decades until, in 1910, the banner came into the possession of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, i.e. the youth auxiliary of the anti-Catholic American Nativist adult organization known as O.U.A.M. that grew out of the resentment many native American workers felt toward foreigners during the depression of the mid 1840s.

Godfrey, the art conservator, earned her masters degree in art conservation at Winterthur and works at the Brooklyn Museum part-time while running her business, Boro 6, which provides museum-quality conservation, restoration and collections care services to institutions, galleries and private individuals in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. She and her colleague Kate White have backgrounds that encompass art (hand skills), art history and science. They specialize in objects and textiles ranging from ancient Egyptian mummies to more contemporary materials.

In Godfrey’s overview of the painted silk banner, she explained the problem with silk is at one point in history it was made with lead in it, to give it weight. As a result, over time it can “shatter” or develop cracking and splits, increasing its fragility. The Tuckerton banner has splits throughout, and will continue to degrade.

It also has metallic fringe on the sides, gilded acorn finials, and wooden bars at top and bottom for ease of carrying in a marching parade.

Godfrey and White will do a surface clean with some soft gentle brushing and low suction to remove dust and debris. If necessary, a tool similar to a cosmetic sponge can coax out more ingrained dirt. They will stabilize the shattered areas with adhesive backing to support it and help hold the fabric together.

The areas of surface loss they will tone with paper fill to blend them in and make them less distracting. To the acorns, where the gilding has flaked, they will add some conservation-grade adhesive, she explained. Some of the fringe needs to be re-sewn in spots where it has come apart, Godfrey added.

To some silk ribbon on the banner that has very severely degraded, they will do an encapsulation with nylon net that has been dyed to match the original color. “You won’t really be able to tell from far away,” she said.

They will work with a company to construct a glass display case. The banner needs to be visible



Experts from Boro 6 examine the banner.
Photo credit: C&H Staff

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from the front and the back, and it should not be hung vertically anymore; so the case may have a rake of 115 degrees or so, with a mirror placed beneath it to reflect the work on the back.

More aesthetic compensation could be done, Godfrey said, but, as a used object, the signs of wear are acceptable. The priority is to clean and preserve its integrity, “to the best of our knowledge and use of materials,” and in accordance with the guidelines of the American Institute of Conservation, she said.

Smith’s conclusion: From 1840-2016, some 178 years and 45 presidential campaigns later, the banner has been cared for and preserved by various stewards as a unique historical piece of presidential campaign memorabilia.