

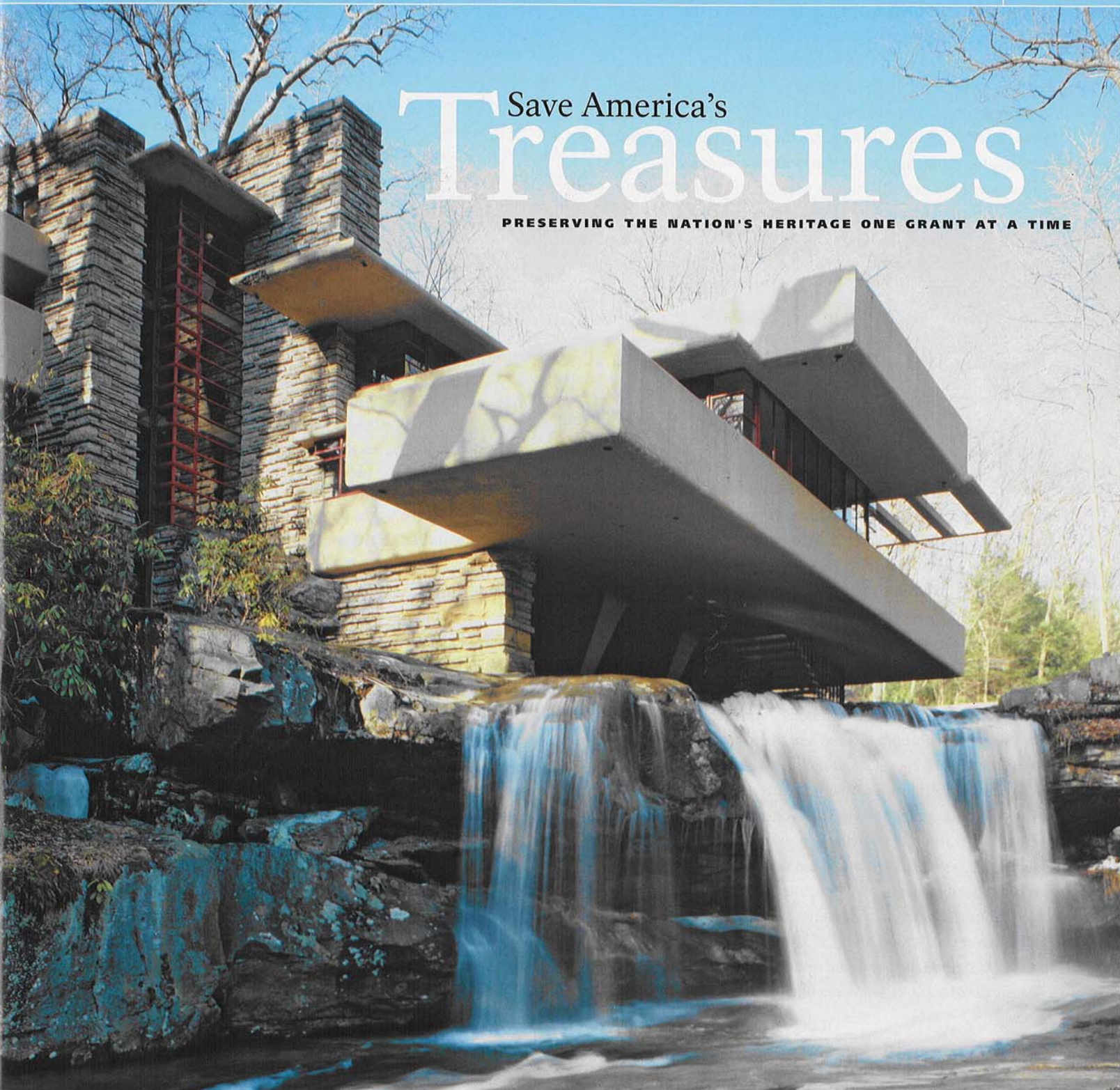
# COMMON Ground



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## Save America's Treasures

P R E S E R V I N G   T H E   N A T I O N ' S   H E R I T A G E   O N E   G R A N T   A T   A   T I M E



# Save America's Treasures

PRESERVING THE NATION'S HERITAGE ONE GRANT AT A TIME BY MEGHAN HOGAN



When Francis Scott Key spent the rainy night of September 13, 1814, watching the British bombardment of Fort McHenry—a pivotal battle in the War of 1812—he had only one question in his mind. Which flag would fly in the morning? The Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes? We all know the answer—he joyfully proceeded to write the Star-Spangled Banner, which became our national anthem. That same flag, hand-stitched by Mary Pickersgill in 1813, will soon be seen once again in a new display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. But in 1998, the flag wasn't telling a story of patriotism, it was telling a story of age. It had lost eight feet of fabric, and despite careful treatment by Smithsonian curators, dirt and light were slowly destroying the weakened wool and cotton. Its own weight was a stress as it hung in the museum. In short, it was falling apart. So began a national campaign called Save America's Treasures, with the flag one of the first and most recognized projects.

**Left: The first known photo of the flag that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812—inspiring Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner"—taken in 1873 at the Boston Navy Yard. Conserved with help from a Save America's Treasures grant, it will be unveiled this November in a room designed to "evoke Dawn's early light." Above left to right: Philadelphia's historic Eastern State Penitentiary, the restored Majestic Showboat in Cincinnati, and Little Rock Central High School, the focus of the desegregation crisis in 1957, all grant recipients.**

LEFT COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY, ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, WALLY GOBETZ, LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Perhaps one of the most important preservation programs ever, Save America's Treasures was created when First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton established the White House Millennium Council to celebrate the start of a new century. The council focused on the theme "Honor the Past—Imagine the Future," and what better way to do that than preserve the nation's treasures? The idea quickly became the centerpiece, stretching from a two-year program into ten. Today, it is strong as ever with First Lady Laura Bush a staunch champion as honorary chair.

Since 1998, a multi-agency team—including the National Park Service, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the



Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services—has selected the sites and artifacts to receive grant awards. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the program's private sector partner, handles fundraising and promotion. Over a thousand projects, totaling more than \$278 million, have been funded, giving their history a second chance at survival. The flag's unveiling this November will in many ways be a highlight of the accomplishments.

The program doesn't just help monuments and museums—it's one of the few initiatives that encompasses other expressions of cultural identity such as historic documents, collections, artifacts, and artistic works. According to a 2005 Institute of Museum and Library Services study, more than 4.8 billion objects—in historical societies, libraries, museums, scientific research collections, and archeological repositories—are crying out for help. Take the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Archives. Ailey worked for some of the world's top dance companies, like the Joffrey Ballet, before starting his own troupe in 1958. He created 79 ballets fusing jazz, modernism, and the heritage of African Americans. Today, the story of his company's birth resides in 8,500 photographs and more than 23,000 yellowed scrapbook pages of costume designs. Until 2006,

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the collections had grown brittle with age in one of the theater's storage closets. "In some instances, items were almost beyond salvage," says Christopher Zunner, the theater's director of public relations. But with the help of a \$132,000 award, all went to the Library of Congress for conservation and digitizing. "Most dance companies just don't have the money to process or store thousands of pages," says Elizabeth Aldrich, the library's curator of dance. Similar recipients include the Merce Cunningham Dance Archives in New York and the Conservation of Dance Archives in Washington, DC. The Ansel Adams Collection—over 2,500 prints, 40,000 negatives, and much of the photographer's equipment and correspondence, housed at the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography—received \$270,000 towards conserving images and constructing a storage facility.

"Save America's Treasures is really a showcase and repair shop for a very broad brush of our history," says Bobbie Greene McCarthy, the

Trust's Save America's Treasures project director. It supports not just collections, but the places that host them. One such place is Biloxi, Mississippi's Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art. George Edgar Ohr, the self-named "Mad Potter of Biloxi," created ebulliently shaped vases alive with ruffles, odd openings, and unusual glazes, "no two alike," he said. Ohr, who crafted over 10,000 pieces from the late 1870s to the early 1900s—many, unfortunately, destroyed by a shop fire—was way ahead of his day, frustrated by a failure to find appreciation. He once buried a stash in the hopes of reaching a future audience, and today his work is highly prized, with the museum holding the largest public collection of what remains. A \$425,000 grant went towards stabilizing the ceramics and constructing a vault in the museum's new Frank Gehry-designed home, being rebuilt after its destruction by Hurricane Katrina. The Cranbrook House in Bloomfield Hills,

**Left: From the collection of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, conserved at the Library of Congress thanks to Save America's Treasures. Right: George Ohr, the "Mad Potter of Biloxi," was frustrated that his exuberant offerings, like this one, often met with befuddlement; today, some see him as a harbinger of abstract expressionism. A grant helped stabilize a rare public collection at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, which is being rebuilt after its destruction by Hurricane Katrina.**

