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Ryan M. Nadeau
Gettysburg College

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Confederate Flag Memory in Gettysburg, PA

Abstract
Few towns in the United States can claim to be as in touch with its Civil War history as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the site of one of the war’s most significant battles, Gettysburg today lives and breathes the Civil War every day through the historical tourism that Gettysburg National Military Park encourages, which itself has bred a Civil War merchandise economy in the town itself. As such, the town naturally becomes a new battleground for contemporary issues regarding the memory of the Civil War—including, most significantly, the interpretation and presentation of the Confederate battle flag. As the nation passed the 150th anniversary of the war itself, reigniting discussion on its purpose and legacy, controversies flared nationally and locally on display of the Confederate battle flag and its meaning as a symbol of racial hatred or southern heritage. During the summer of 2016, 11 members of the Gettysburg community with a stake in these discussions were interviewed on their thoughts and feelings towards the Confederate flag.

Keywords
confederate flag, gettysburg, civil war, oral history, race

Disciplines
Oral History | Public History | United States History

Comments
This project was conducted as part of the author’s Robert Sibley Cooper Fellowship with the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College during the summer of 2016, and later presented at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association on October 8, 2016.

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CONFEDERATE FLAG MEMORY IN GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA
RYAN NADEAU ’16, GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Over the course of July 2016 and the start of August 2016, oral histories were conducted with citizens of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on their views of the Confederate battle flag and related topics.

The interviews were conducted upon request of Gettysburg College’s Civil War Institute, to document the controversy from multiple perspectives from the people in town most invested in the issue.

Each interviewee was asked roughly the same questions, with some omitted or altered depending on other answers, or some added based on their personal experience.

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

SCOTT HANCOCK

Associate Professor of History and Africana Studies at Gettysburg College

• I do believe that the flag is a symbol of slavery, and that is why it is a symbol of racism.

GARY CASTEL

Commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in Gettysburg, PA

• You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: in your opinion, does this kind of commercialization contribute to the whitewashing of the flag’s controversial status?

DARYL BLACK

Executive Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning for the Lutheran Theological Seminary

• “I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

BILL WICKHAM

Owner of Dirty Billy’s Nuts, Gettysburg, PA

• “I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

DAVID BLACK

Executive Director of the Seminary Ridge Museum and President of the Seminary Ridge Historic Preservation Foundation

• “It’s not slept in [racial history], it’s woven out of white cloth from it. It is the physical embodiment of that nation, that shorthand for that nation, that emblem for that nation, that was conceived on the proposition that all men are not created equal, and some men are born to own other men and women.”

JOHN SPAGNER

Executive Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning for the Lutheran Theological Seminary

• “I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

CHRIS GWINN

Lecturer in History, Park Manager, Interpretation and Education at Gettysburg National Military Park

• “You see the Confederate flag as a symbol of domestic terrorism. I see it as a symbol of hate and violence.”

BARR SANDERS

Executive Director at Gettysburg National Military Park

• “I think there was a real historic context to the battle flag, and that’s it. That’s exactly what it is.”

ROSS HETRICK

President of the Thaddeus Stevens Society, Gettysburg, PA

• “The Confederate flag should be opposed because it is a symbol of racism and treason and I feel that if that is basically unchallenged that essentially people consider that to be okay.”

BILL COE

Civil Historian and Member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans

• “If you don’t do your history and American history, there was two Americas: Southern America and Northern America. To leave one out is trying to rewrite history.”

ROSS HETRICK

President of the Thaddeus Stevens Society, Gettysburg, PA

• “The Confederate flag should be opposed because it is a symbol of racism and treason and I feel that if that is basically unchallenged that essentially people consider that to be okay.”

BARR SANDERS

Executive Director at Gettysburg National Military Park

• “I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

JENNIFER BLOOMQUIST

Associate Professor of Journalism and Communication at African Studies at Gettysburg College

• “I see it as a symbol of domestic terrorism. I see it as a symbol of hate, I understand the heritage argument, and I have traveled in the South, and I have seen it, and I have seen a lot about the Confederate flag, but as a black person in America, I can only see it as a symbol of hate and violence.”

JOHN SPAGNER

Executive Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning for the Lutheran Theological Seminary

• “I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

QUESTIONS

• Some claim that the Confederate Flag is a symbol of their heritage; some claim that it is a symbol of racism and hate; some a mixture. What does it mean to you?

• Can the flag have both meanings, and can one claim to it be more legitimate?

• Have your views on the flag changed since the events in Charleston last year?

• Have you observed changes in Gettysburg since Charleston and the events in town since?

• Many people all over the country fly the flag: do non-southerners have any claim to the flag, if their ancestors did not fight for the south?

• You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: does its commercialization undermine its symbol of one of heritage and sacrifice?

• Gettysburg was a major victory for the Union, and is a town on Union soil: how do you explain the prevalence for Confederate iconography here? Is it right?

• Is the “hate” of the Confederate flag a product of its usage in the Civil War, the KKK and other hate groups, or both?

• Is the Confederate National Flag just as objectionable as the Battle Flag, more so, or less so?

• Is there an appropriate setting for where the flag could be flown for historical purposes—the battlefield or historical reenactments?

• You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: in your opinion, does this kind of commercialization contribute to the whitewashing of the flag’s controversial status?

• All believe that despite new conversations about the flag’s meaning, recent events in town and nationally have only entrenched the two sides.

• "I think you have to realize … there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to the flag because they see it as a symbol of pride.”

• “You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: in your opinion, does this kind of commercialization contribute to the whitewashing of the flag’s controversial status?”

• Everyone believes that Gettysburg is important as a significant historical site that should reflect the historical reality.

• Both supporters and opponents of the flag, however, believe their interpretation of history is correct. Both place significantly different emphasis on different parts of history.

• All believe that despite new conversations about the flag’s meaning, recent events in town and nationally have only entrenched the two sides.

• Many believe that the current political climate only contributes to the current dispute.