



3-17-2011

The Rebel Flag: Offputting Symbol or Point of Pride?

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "The Rebel Flag: Offputting Symbol or Point of Pride?" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 214.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/214>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Rebel Flag: Offputting Symbol or Point of Pride?

Abstract

In 2004, Gettysburg College hosted an art exhibit by John Sims, a Florida based artist and ethnomathematician. The exhibit focused on varied recolored versions of the Confederate Flag. The press outrage was quick and damning. I should know, I was quoted in it (in the [Civil War News](#)).

Back in 2004, I called the exhibit, "sickening," and condemned the college for, "trying to distance itself from the town by rejecting the Civil War past in which it is steeped." I was wrong. I figured that out no sooner than passing through the doors of the art gallery and viewing the exhibit. Sims' presentation was provocative and jarring, but had some of the most profound things to say about the Confederate Flag that I think can be said. It's been six long years, my views have shifted and solidified, and I now look back on those words I spoke against Sims' project in shame. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Confederate Flag, Rebel Flag

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

[Creative](#)

[Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

[License](#)



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



The Rebel Flag: Offputting Symbol or Point of Pride?

THURSDAY, MARCH 17, 2011

In 2004, Gettysburg College hosted an art exhibit by John Sims, a Florida based artist and ethnomathematician. The exhibit focused on varied recolored versions of the Confederate Flag. The press outrage was quick and damning. I should know, I was quoted in it (in the [Civil War News](#)).

Back in 2004, I called the exhibit, "sickening," and condemned the college for, "trying to distance itself from the town by rejecting the Civil War past in which it is steeped." I was wrong. I figured that out no sooner than passing through the doors of the art gallery and viewing the exhibit. Sims' presentation was provocative and jarring, but had some of the most profound things to say about the Confederate Flag that I think can be said. It's been six long years, my views have shifted and solidified, and I now look back on those words I spoke against Sims' project in shame.

What does this have to do with the proverbial prices of tea in China? It all swam back into my mind this past year, during a class session at Shippensburg University. While working on my Masters in Applied History, I had the privilege of taking classes not only with young folks like myself, but teachers returning to school for another degree. One teacher, when we were talking in class about tourism in Gettysburg, brought up the fact she can't bring her class to the town. She has the budget to pay for the buses and admission fee for the museum. She can get the chaperons. Her chief problem is that half her class is black.

I was floored. I constantly wish that Gettysburg had more African-American visitors. The battle that took place there firmly secured freedom for 4 million and acted as the basis upon which the modern Civil Rights movement stood. For a teacher to say she wouldn't bring her class because some of her students were black flabbergasted me.

I probed and challenged. Her answer was sound and succinct. To get her students into the visitor center or around town, she would need to take the bus down Steinweir Avenue. And she feared having to explain to her black students why a Confederate Flag was still allowed to fly high on the flagpole above the wax museum and from nearly every souvenir shop in town.



A young man sports a Confederate Flag cape at a Peterboro, NY reenactment.
CC / DSC01297 by orangeateblue



Protesters against school integration wield a Confederate Flag (1959) / PD / [LC-U9- 2919-25](#)

I completely understand the quandary. The feeling she has scouting out the town and deciding if a trip is the right thing for her students is the same I have in my town every day. I live in Gettysburg, under the watchful gaze of the Confederate Flag at almost every turn. And sometimes I, a short white guy from New York, feel exceedingly uncomfortable with that flag flapping over my shoulder. What does that flag mean? Proponents of the Confederate Flag's display have shouted about pride and heritage and history. That flag is a representation of their grandpappy's struggle for his "rats".

That answer is bunk, pure and simple. The sheer fact is that for every person who says that their grandpappy fought under that stainless banner, I could find someone whose grandpappy fought to destroy that flag and the treason for which it stood. My own great-great granduncle fought in the United States Regulars to tear that flag down from the 11 poles which ran it up in early 1861. He died at Gettysburg firing his gun against troops carrying that flag, trying to keep them (through force of arms) from destroying the nation *his* grandfather had helped win in the American Revolution.



Another type of flag flies from the NAACP's New York Offices in 1938 / CC / [LC-USZC4-4734](#)

The popularly understood Confederate Flag, that elongated version of the flag of the Army of Northern Virginia, has been a potent symbol in America since the day that my uncle died. The symbol cropped up again and again, each time employed for hateful and spiteful speech. By a century following his death, that flag was a banner stained not simply with the blood of Confederate soldiers, but intermingled with the blood of those who died at the hands of those bearing that flag. The countless victims of Jim Crow laws, Leo Frank, Medgar Evers and eventually Dr. King all stained that banner with blood and altered its meanings.

So, what does it mean to fly a Confederate flag today? Why did a number of southern states, rife with racial strife and challenges to institutional segregation, decide to re-hoist the Confederate Flag from their state capitols in the 1960s? Was there any question in the minds of those legislatures what that flag *really* meant? Could a dogged defense of the Confederate Flag's display dissuade visitors from coming to places like Gettysburg? Put yourself in an African-American visitor's shoes. Would you visit a place festooned with flags screaming hatred at you?