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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



QUESTIONS

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Over the course of July 2016 and the start of August 2016, 11 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.

- 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?

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS



SCOTT HANCOCK

Associate Professor of History and Africana Studies at Gettysburg College

- "Any argument that's going to maintain that the battle flag from the Civil War until the World War II era only represented the military history or soldiers in the field, I think that's an argument that doesn't consider the kind of latent power of men and memory and symbolism. That just because something isn't utilized in really ostentatious ways, really obvious or explicit ways, doesn't mean that it doesn't still carry that power and that meaning that those connections with race and white supremacy that the Confederacy always had."



CHRIS GWINN

Supervisory Park Ranger for Interpretation and Education at Gettysburg National Military Park

- "The idea that symbols are fixed and they don't change and they don't evolve is to me absurd. The idea that someone can say that this flag was, you know, just a battle flag it didn't represent the Confederacy, that's wrong. [...] That doesn't mean that your ancestor owned a plantation full of slaves and was fighting only for the perpetuation of slavery, that's a simplistic way of looking at things. But on the same token, I think, as a historian, it's really interesting to look at how people in 1863 saw the flag and used the flag. Because obviously today when it's used in connotation with things like Charleston, that gives the flag meaning too."



ROSS HETRICK

President of the Thaddeus Stevens Society, Gettysburg, PA

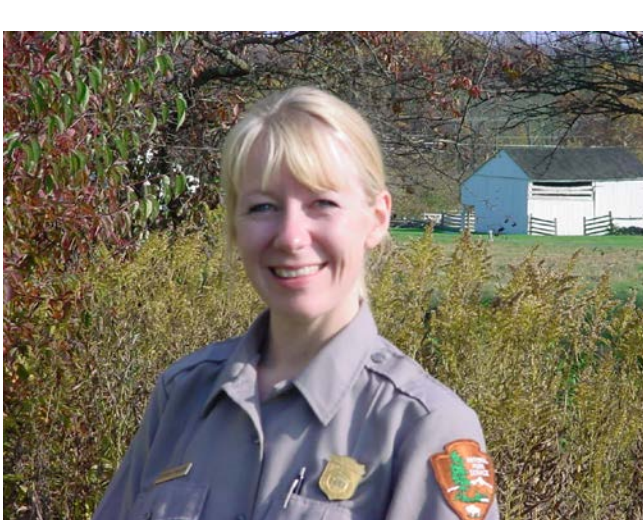
- "[The Confederate flag] should be opposed because it is a symbol of racism and treason and I feel that if that is basically unchallenged that essentially people consider that to be okay."
- "I think you have to realize [...] there are a lot of Neo-Confederates that have been drawn to Gettysburg over the years because they have a connection to the battle."
- "This was a four year period of history that goes back hundreds of years, which includes the creation of the United States like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, which are all very important people which you should embrace and say "These were great people." You don't embrace the four years where they're treasonous and racist."



GARY CASTEEL

Commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in Gettysburg, PA

- "If you were to take the Confederate flag totally out of history, all the stories, well let's say the war itself, what will we have learned from it then? Nothing. So you have this vacant part of the past that you can no longer relay to those of the future, therefore they have nothing that they are going to gain from it and they will never understand who we are today. The war created who we are today, and the flag is part of that."



BARB SANDERS

Education Specialist at Gettysburg National Military Park

- "How can people both honor a Confederate ancestor and not acknowledge the broader cause? So the individual reasons for joining and fighting cannot be reconciled often with the broader causes and meanings. And shouldn't there be a way to do that? So for some reason, it is just so close to people that they can't say that my great-great-grandfather fought for the Confederacy but he didn't believe in slavery, it wasn't about slavery, it was about states' rights, they can't separate that. [...] People are flawed, people in all generations, and you can't put yourself back in that time period, there has to be a way to do that, but people can't seem to do that, so they have to deny the cause."



BILL COE

Living Historian and Member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans

- "If you understand history, if you've ever studied history, you'll understand it's the flag of the Confederate soldier. Nothing more, nothing less. That's it. That's exactly what it is."
- "If you're doing history and American history, there was two Americas: Southern America and Northern America. To leave one out is trying to rewrite history."
- "It is a combat flag. I mean, I'm sorry, if you look at old photographs all the way up into the Korean and Vietnam War, you'll see the Confederate battle flag at U.S. camps and on U.S. vehicles, because the unit might be from the South. And they're carrying forward what their ancestors carried forward. It's a symbol of pride."



BILL WICKHAM

Owner of Dirty Billy's Hats, Gettysburg, PA

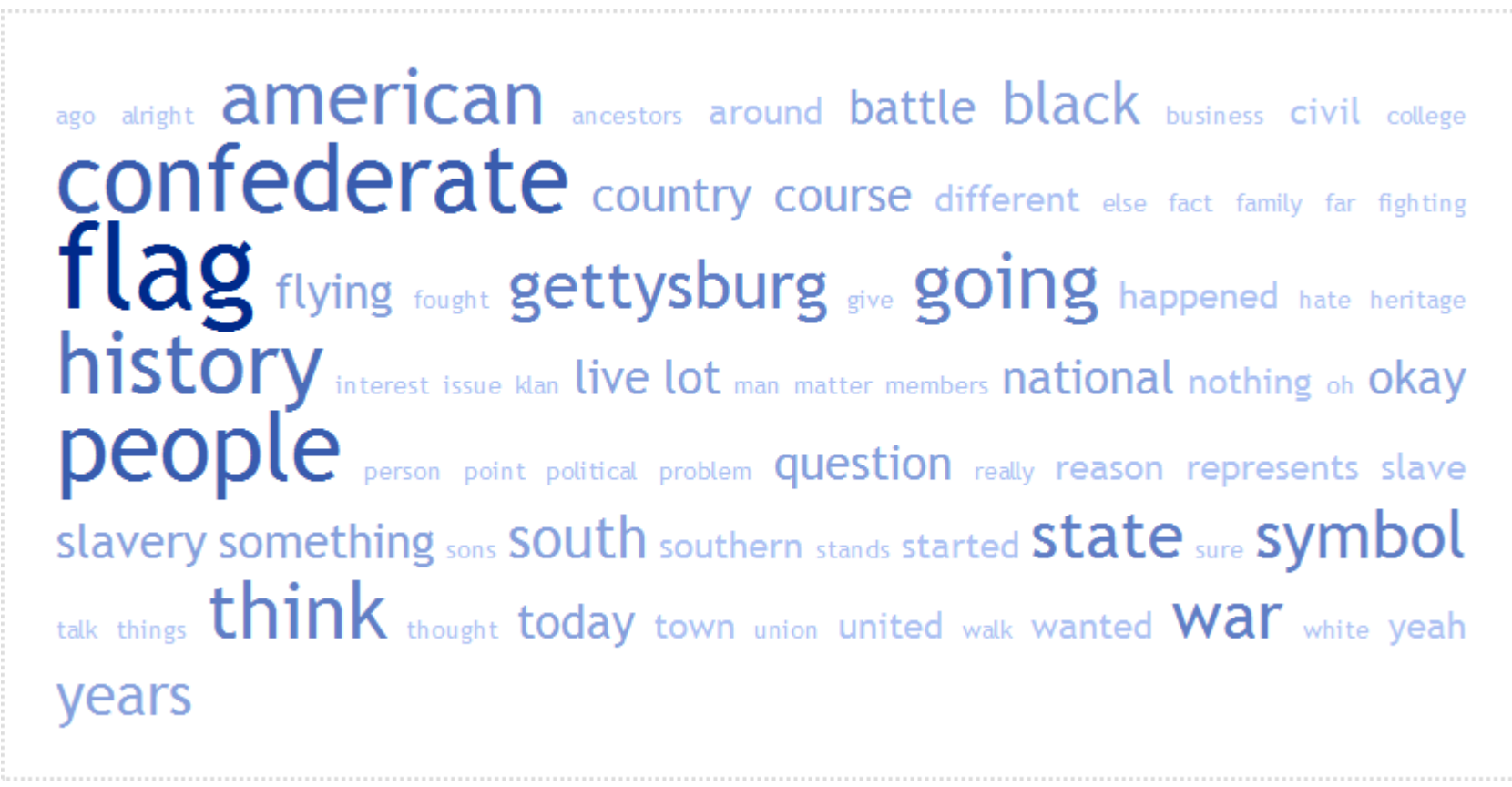
- "It is an American flag. Like it or not, it's an American flag. And if we don't dig up those issues, if we don't discuss them academically, we will probably be condemned to repeat them or acknowledge only that they existed among racists."
- "It's an antiquated historic symbol that belongs in our past. Celebrating it is not a crime: celebrating it is part of our first amendment rights."



DAN MOUL

State Representative for Pennsylvania's 91st District

- "What has happened here in this case with the Confederate flag, one day somebody that self-nominated themselves to be the spokesperson for black people got up and said, 'Today, I think that the Confederate flag that the South rode with and still, in a lot of cases today, and on a state capitol or two, still displays that, that's offensive to me because that stands for slavery.' [...] And now all of a sudden the Confederate flag, which has flown here in Gettysburg since the Civil War as part of the history of the Civil War, is now all of a sudden offensive to people. I don't know why, nobody wrote this in the history books: "This flag stands for slavery. Nobody ever wrote that. It was the flag of the South. Now what the South stood for, that's a different story. But to blame the flag that they flew as something that stood for slavery is, in my opinion, just asinine."



Word Cloud: Flag Opponents

(Hancock, Black, Bloomquist, Hetrick)



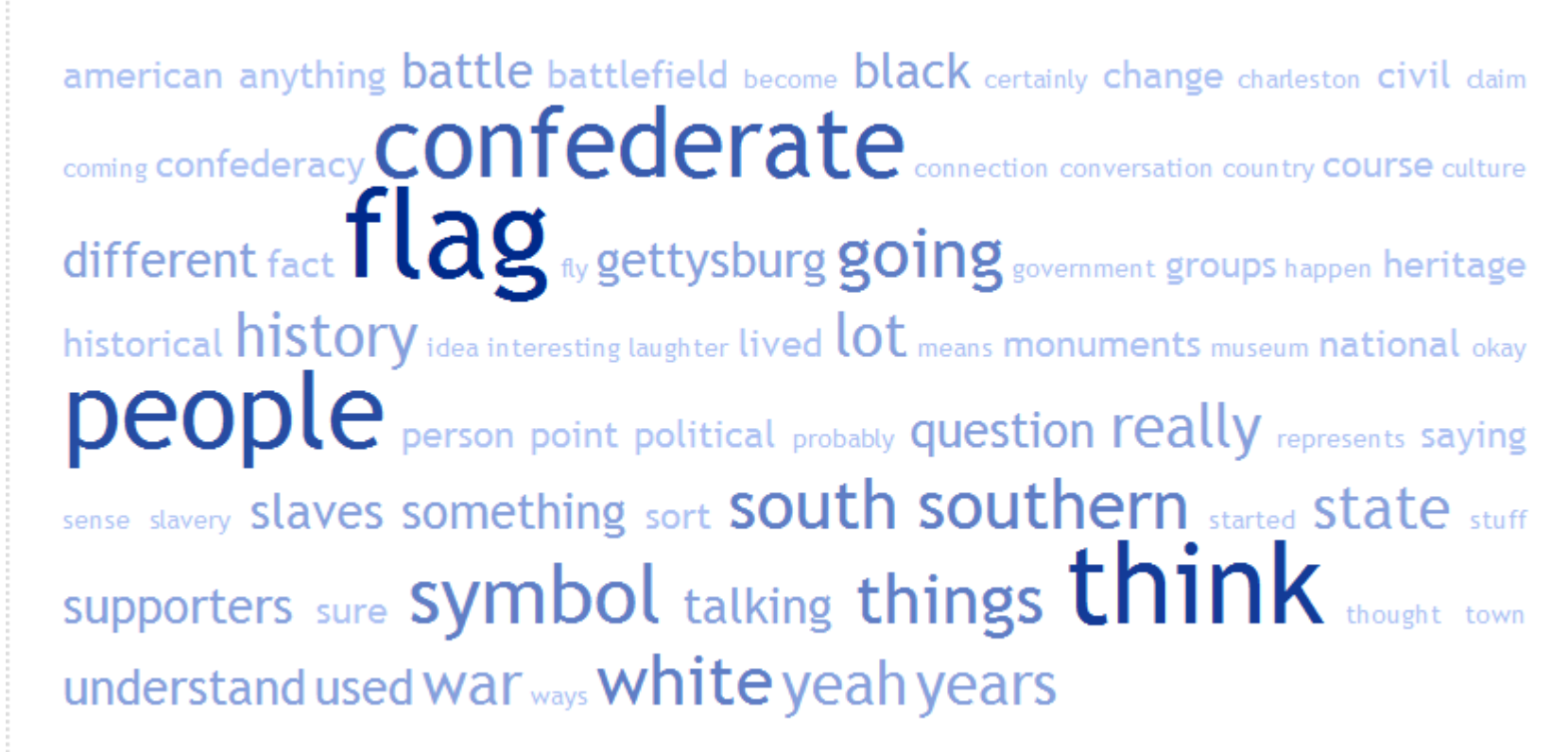
DARYL BLACK

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

- "It's not steeped in [racial history], it's woven out of whole 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."
- "[The heritage argument] to me is 'we're not going to engage critically with anything, it is what's come down to me in oral history and tradition, and that's it, that's the only meaning that this thing can have.'"

Word Cloud: Flag Supporters

(Casteel, Wickham, Moul, Coe)



AGREEMENTS

- 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.



JOHN SPANGLER

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

- "It does represent half of the nation making a treasonous decision to remove itself from the Union. It does represent, and it historically represented, a battle for the privilege of holding human slaves. That just can't be denied, and it's a part of that history. The flag as the Confederate battle flag in particular then has a subsequent history that is very difficult, because in the twentieth, the late nineteenth, and emerging through the entire twentieth century, you have the resurrection of that symbol, used where the civil rights struggle began. It was brought out as part of a campaign of hatred and intimidation, of violence and threats."