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Finding Meaning in the Flag: Birth of a Symbol

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Finding Meaning in the Flag: Birth of a Symbol

Abstract

The only logical place to start our journey with the Confederate flag is at its birth to examine meanings bestowed upon it by the Confederate soldiers. To do this, we must look at the history of flags within the Confederate nation. Upon its creation in 1861, the Confederate nation immediately set out to design a new flag. Headed by South Carolina's former state representative, William Porcher Miles, a committee was formed to choose a design that would be original to the Confederacy while remaining reminiscent of the U.S. flag. Although Southerners had split from the Union itself, they were not splitting from their shared history. Southerners were very proud of the founding fathers and the rights they had guaranteed, particularly property rights and the rights of the people to choose their government. It was these very rights and the legacy of the founding fathers that Southerners saw themselves defending when they made the decision to secede. This led to the acceptance of a design known as the Stars and Bars, which mimicked the original United States flag in color and arrangement. George Pickett emphasized the importance of this connection when he wrote in a letter in May, 1862 that he would fight "till our Stars and Bars wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave."

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Finding Meaning in the Flag: Birth of a Symbol

This post is the second in a series about the Confederate flag in history, memory, and culture. It offers one Fellow's individual perspective as she investigates different sources and opinions. Please feel free to engage with the author and the Civil War Institute community in the comments section. Read the first post [here](#).

By *Olivia Ortman '19*

The only logical place to start our journey with the Confederate flag is at its birth to examine meanings bestowed upon it by the Confederate soldiers. To do this, we must look at the history of flags within the Confederate nation. Upon its creation in 1861, the Confederate nation immediately set out to design a new flag. Headed by South Carolina's former state representative, William Porcher Miles, a committee was formed to choose a design that would be original to the Confederacy while remaining reminiscent of the U.S. flag. Although Southerners had split from the Union itself, they were not splitting from their shared history. Southerners were very proud of the founding fathers and the rights they had guaranteed, particularly property rights and the rights of the people to choose their government. It was these very rights and the legacy of the founding fathers that Southerners saw themselves defending when they made the decision to secede. This led to the acceptance of a design known as the Stars and Bars, which mimicked the original United States flag in color and arrangement. George Pickett emphasized the importance of this connection when he wrote in a letter in May, 1862 that he would fight "till our Stars and Bars wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave."

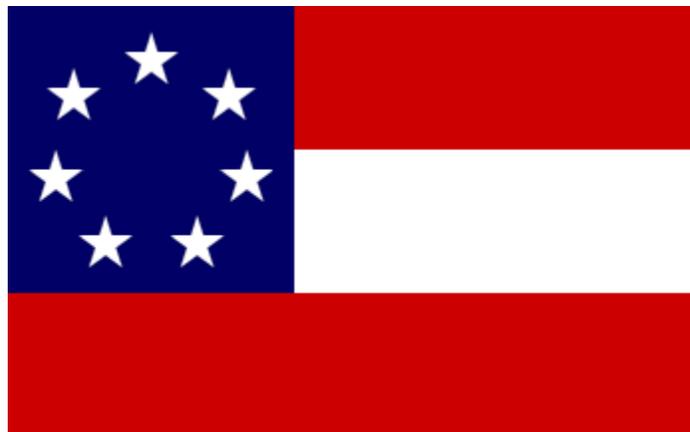


Photo credit: Clay Moss, crwflags.com

However, the connection to the U.S. design was also the Confederate flag's doom. Very quickly after its adoption as the national flag, generals began complaining that it was causing confusion on the battlefield by being indistinguishable from the enemy's. On the battlefield, the flag was instrumental as a communication device. It was a way to denote advance or retreat and friend or foe. Confederate Soldier George Lee wrote on December 9, 1861, "the enemy knows our national flag and had already tried to deceive us by hoisting it at their head." He did not clarify at which battle the enemy had supposedly done this, and it is possible that he mistook the Union flag for the Stars and Bars, seeing as how similar they were. For these reasons, it was imperative for the flags on the field to be easily distinguishable from the enemy's.

To solve this problem, General P. G. T. Beauregard suggested having a peace flag, which would have been displayed in parades and on flag poles, and a war flag, which would only be used on the battlefield. The Stars and Bars model could be kept as the peace flag and a design previously introduced by William Porcher Miles could be used as the war flag. Miles' design is the one we recognize today as the Confederate flag. Knowing this, it is important to keep in mind that in the minds of Confederate soldiers the flag would be inextricably linked to fighting.



William Porcher Miles' Confederate flag design became inextricably linked to fighting. This rectangular design served as the 1863 battle flag of the Army of Tennessee. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

The symbolism connected to the flag can best be described in terms of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism was the belief held by Civil War Americans that they were fighting for home and family, and that courage on the battlefield and a just cause would always prevail. The flag would

have been at the heart of these ideas. It represented the nation and all these sentimental concepts of home, family, and honor. In many minds, flag and nation were interchangeable. Elisha Franklin Paxton, a Brigadier-General in the Confederate army, wrote a letter to his wife in which he said, "I feel sure you would not have me abandon my post and desert our flag when it needs every arm no in its service for its defense." To Paxton, the flag and nation have the same meaning; they are completely interchangeable. Many others felt the same way. The flag was the physical manifestation of the nation and its cause.

I found many of the above-mentioned ideas while going through the several diaries and letters I chose to examine for the Confederate perspective on the flag. The flag represented nation, honor, pride, victory, inspiration—everything that you would expect a flag to symbolize. One symbolic reference I think most people don't expect, however, was to God. In a letter to his wife after the Battle of First Manassas, Paxton wrote the following: "We spent Sunday last in the sacred work of achieving our nationality and independence... others...made fourteen holes through the flag which I carried in the hottest of the fight, it is a miracle that I escaped with my life, so many falling dead around me." In this letter, he creates the idea of the flag as a holy symbol for a sacred cause. Earlier in the letter he had explained that a bullet passed through his shirtsleeve, bruising his arm but leaving him otherwise unharmed. The language he uses and the subtle message he incorporates set up the idea that God saved him because he was carrying the flag, which must mean God endorses the Confederate cause. The flag would therefore be a symbol of God's will. Although the flag carried at First Manassas was probably the Stars and Bars design—it was after this battle that Beauregard began largely switching his troops to Miles' design to avoid confusion—these same sentiments were applied to Miles' design and are shown in Paxton's later letters, albeit in a subtler manner.

To a Confederate soldier, seeing the flag would bring feelings of pride, honor, and nationalism. He would look to it as a communication device on the field for victory or defeat, knowing that it would be God's will if the flag prevailed. These sentiments are what caused men like Paxton to pick up the flag in lieu of their musket and mobilized large quantities of men. William Pegram sums it up best when he writes "I would rather die than see Virginia given up, even for three months; but we'll all follow the battle-flag *anywhere*." He wrote this in February of 1865, just mere months before Lee surrendered at Appomattox. The flag was essential to Confederates' perceptions of the war just as the war was instrumental in their perception of the flag.

If you are interested in more information about the flag's origin, I recommend looking through the sources below. For my next post, I will be considering perceptions of the flag after the war. The predominant focus will be on how Northerners viewed the flag once the war ended and whether there were any noticeable changes in flag perception by ex-Confederates. I hope you will continue to leave questions and comments about the flag and let me know if there are any perceptions you would like me to explore in the future. I hope that you will also remain open to

the information presented in this series and remember that my goal is not to tell you what to believe but simply to present the understandings of the flag that I find within my research.

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