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Finding Meaning in the Flag: Contextualizing the Confederate Flag

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Finding Meaning in the Flag: Contextualizing the Confederate Flag

Abstract

When I first learned about the removal of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's state building in July of 2015, I was angry like many other people. For me, it wasn't about the actual removal of the flag, but rather the arguments sparked around it. I understood not flying the flag on a state building; as such a building represents state and country, and the Confederate flag symbolizes neither the United States nor South Carolina. However, I didn't understand the public hatred towards the flag.

[excerpt]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Confederate flag, Civil War

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Finding Meaning in the Flag: Contextualizing the Confederate Flag

This post is the first 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.

By Olivia Ortman '19

When I first learned about the removal of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's state building in July of 2015, I was angry like many other people. For me, it wasn't about the actual removal of the flag, but rather the arguments sparked around it. I understood not flying the flag on a state building; as such a building represents state and country, and the Confederate flag symbolizes neither the United States nor South Carolina. However, I didn't understand the public hatred towards the flag.



A Confederate flag rally was held in Gettysburg in March 2016. Photo credit: Jeff Lauck.

People were demanding the flag's removal from all public spaces on the grounds of the flag inspiring racism and violence, and I didn't agree with this demand. I had read a very vague reference in the article I was perusing that connected the decision to remove the flag with a mass shooting in a historically black church, but I didn't see how this incident made the flag inherently evil. The Christian cross has inspired far more cruelty and death, yet we still openly accept it. The flag is just a piece of history, a memorial to the Southern men who died fighting in the Civil War. It occasionally gets misused, as was the case with the mass shooting, but the blame with that should lie with the misguided shooter, not the object he may have been carrying. Removing the Confederate flag from all public spaces would only be a destruction of history, and that was inexcusable to me.

About a month later, the Gettysburg College Civil War Club invited an alumnus to talk about his experience in public history. At the end of his talk, the discussion inevitably turned towards the Confederate flag controversy, and this alumnus made a comment that I will never forget: "What would the Union officers think if they could see all the Confederate flags displayed throughout the nation?" This is a question I had never thought about before. As the alumnus pointed out, the Union soldiers had fought hard for their victory, and the continued display of the Confederate flag would be an affront to that victory. Nowhere else in history will you find an example of the symbol of the losing side being openly displayed with pride after its defeat. He wasn't saying we had to hate the flag because a Union soldier would have found it offensive, but he was asking us to think about the situation from multiple perspectives.

I left that meeting feeling very confused. Had I been incorrect in my views of the flag? Was it wrong to sell miniature confederate flags in museum gift shops? Did the Confederate flag belong in the same category of taboo items such as the swastika? What should I feel about the flag? These are all questions I have yet to resolve, and when recently asked what my ideas were for my next blog post, I decided it was time to answer those questions.

I am a girl who grew up in northwestern Connecticut, a place that I feel is about as removed from the Civil War as you can get. In Connecticut, you don't hear much about the Confederate flag. We learn the general summary of the Civil War, and we might see a picture of the flag in a text book, but its role in our lives there is very minuscule. We spend more time learning about the underground railroad and industrialization, topics that I now realize are biased towards the specific place Connecticut has in history. Half of Main Street in my town is home to rundown factories which had provided hundreds of jobs and made the town a prime destination just a century ago. In grade school we would take field trips to several homes which boasted secret compartments where slaves would hide on their trail to freedom. My town is not unique in those aspects; towns across the state have places that are identical. It wasn't until I developed an interest in the Civil War and started traveling further South that I started to see and hear more about the Confederate flag. However, my knowledge and experience with the flag were still very

small. I realized that maybe I had been too quick to jump to an opinion before getting all the facts.

Over the course of the next few months, I plan to use history to help me understand the Confederate flag. Each blog post will focus on a different perspective of the flag, from the moment of its creation to its interpretation in the present day. Through the analysis of first-person accounts, I will be able to learn how the flag has been used throughout history and the symbolic significance it has held. It is my hope that you, as the reader, will join me as an active participant on this journey. Whether you are confused about the flag like I am, or you already have a well-developed opinion, this will be a great opportunity to explore an important piece of history. My goal is not to tell you how to see the flag but simply to provide you with information and leave you with questions that will help you come to your own conclusion. As I analyze each new perspective, I hope that you will leave questions and thoughts and let me know what further perspectives you would like me to look at.

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