



Spring 2-13-2017

Finding Meaning in the Flag: Rebel Flag

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Ortman, Olivia, "Finding Meaning in the Flag: Rebel Flag" (2017). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 251.
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Abstract

I'm sure that as fans of history, at some point in your pursuit of knowledge, you have either read or heard the phrase "language is key". This is something my professors have harped on, class after class, explaining that the way we talk about things shapes the way they are viewed. This lesson holds true for the Union perspective of the Confederate flag during the war. In all the documents written by Northerners that I looked over for this post, I did not come across a single mention of the "Confederate flag." This was because the flag was pretty consistently, and intentionally, known as the "rebel flag." This term was used for each subsequent version of the flag, showing that each of the flags had the same meaning for Northerners, regardless of the changing design.

Keywords

Confederate Battle Flag, Olivia Ortman, Poetry, Unionism

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

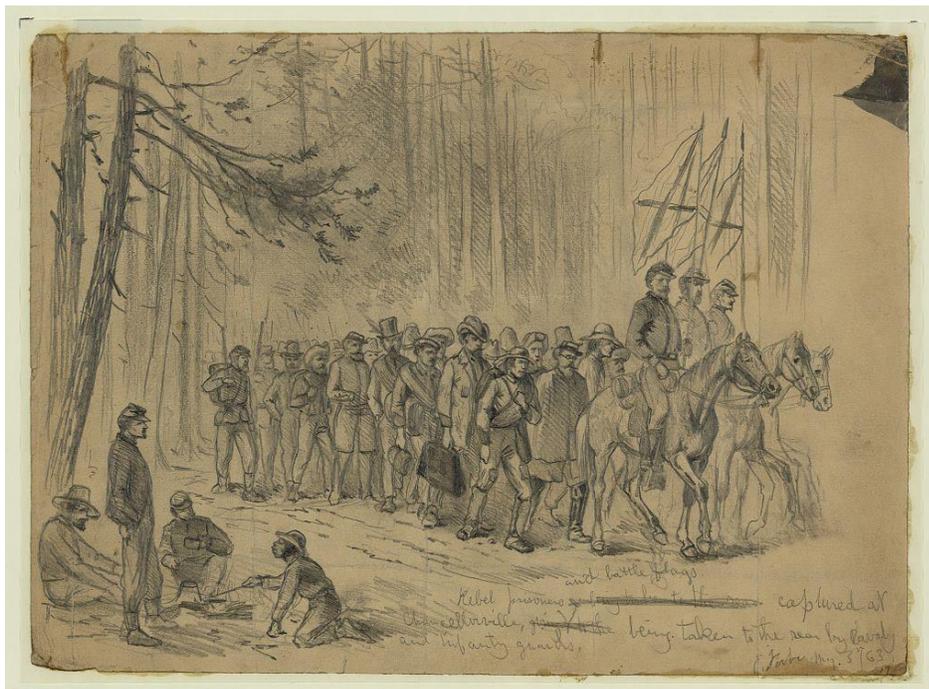
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Finding Meaning in the Flag: Rebel Flag

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

This post is the third 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](#) and the second post [here](#).

I'm sure that as fans of history, at some point in your pursuit of knowledge, you have either read or heard the phrase "language is key". This is something my professors have harped on, class after class, explaining that the way we talk about things shapes the way they are viewed. This lesson holds true for the Union perspective of the Confederate flag during the war. In all the documents written by Northerners that I looked over for this post, I did not come across a single mention of the "Confederate flag." This was because the flag was pretty consistently, and intentionally, known as the "rebel flag." This term was used for each subsequent version of the flag, showing that each of the flags had the same meaning for Northerners, regardless of the changing design.

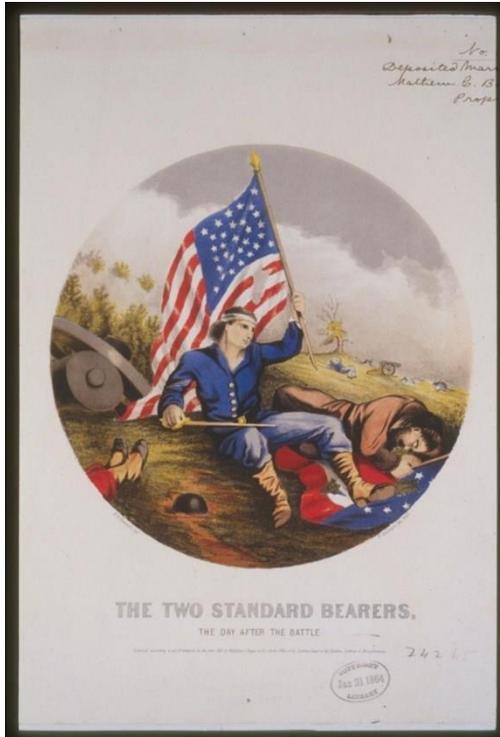


Rebel prisoners and battle flags captured at Chancellorsville, being taken to the rear by cavalry and infantry guards. Sketch by E. Forbes, 1863. Via [Library of Congress](#)

The language “rebel flag” is important for two reasons. The first is that by using the word “rebel,” Northerners gave Southern actions a negative connotation. These “rebels” were people throwing tantrums and acting out against the government. The second reason is that calling it the rebel flag gave the Confederacy an air of illegitimacy. The flags of established nations always have the country’s name in the title. Northerners refused to acknowledge the Confederacy as a true nation and that is reflected in their refusal to call the flag a Confederate flag. These ideas were illustrated in a stanza of a poem written by John Northrop.

*“So up they hoist a Rebel flag;
They shake it in the Nation’s face —
An insolent old slavery rag —
To all the land disgrace!
Then Lincoln to the loyal said:
‘What will my brothers do?
You as the people, I the head,
To Justice must be true!
Come forth to meet this traitorous horde;
Defeat them where they stand;
They’d wreck the Nation with the sword,
Come and redeem the land!
They challenge us; shall we be brave,
Or cowards shall we be?
From basest treason shall we save
What God proclaimed was free?”*

This stanza deals with a lot of the symbolism connected to the Northern/Union supporter perspective of the flag. Northrop, a soldier in the Union army, wrote this poem in May, 1861 while detained in a prisoner of war camp. You can feel the intense hatred he harbored for the flag, and the war had only just begun. He calls the flag “insolent” and a “disgrace,” explaining it was an insult to the Nation, which he capitalizes to emphasize the legitimacy of the United States. Later in the stanza, he speaks of treason and the idea that God and manhood demands that this flag be put down. This, in a sense, acts as a call to arms, which is heard by William Timberlake. In September, 1861, Timberlake writes that from his post in D.C., he can see that “the rebel flag is now waving in sight of the President’s house!” This is a clear affront to Timberlake’s sense of pride and loyalty to his nation. He tells the intended recipient of his letter that he will “fight for the old flag till it is again unfurled and respected in all the present rebellious States!”



The two standard bearers, the day after battle. E. B. Bensell, 1864. Via [Library of Congress](#).

In the poem, Northrop also calls the rebel flag a “slavery rag.” Thomas Ellis, an army surgeon, spoke of the same tie between the flag and slavery in his diary entry in 1862. He was writing about the Seven Days Battles and shared, “We captured a rebel flag, now held by the 2d Maine regiment, marked on one side ‘Victory,’ and on the other ‘Equal Rights.’” Although emancipation didn’t enter the war’s equation until 1863, Northerners knew from the start that slavery caused the war. Northerners were fighting to preserve the Union because Southern states had feared for the continuation of slavery under Lincoln and had seceded. The link to slavery only grew stronger when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, firmly adding abolition to the reasons for fighting.

What Northrop misses, however, is the admiration some Northerners had for the flag and the men carrying it. Three months after linking the flag to slavery, Ellis writes a journal entry about his experience at Antietam. While describing the battle, he launches into praise for the bravery of color-bearers, making several notes of Union soldiers who lay down their lives to carry their flag. Ellis then extends this same admiration to Southern color-bearers. He remembers one case in particular when a rebel color-bearer was mortally wounded and as he fell to the ground, he clutched the rebel flag to his breast and held it tightly with his failing strength. This level of devotion was equal to any Union soldier and therefore gained Ellis’ respect, regardless of the fact that this was his enemy. The rebel flag may have inspired many feelings of hatred from northerners, but there were positive reactions too.

On my last post, a reader asked about the connection between the Confederacy's founding principles and the flag's symbolism. Although I don't plan to write a post specifically on that topic, the connection is important. Since my posts are necessarily short compared to the length I would need to include all the information I would wish to share, I'm going to start including a section below my sources that will have links to interesting articles. These will be articles I found while writing each post, research I did to answer a reader's question, or current events connected to the flag. It's not necessary to read them, but they might add extra context to your understanding of the flag and have certainly contributed to my search for understanding.

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