Finding Meaning in the Flag: Furl that Banner

Olivia Ortman
Gettysburg College

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Abstract
Hello again, readers. I hope you enjoyed the summer and are now as eager as I am to jump back into our conversation about the Confederate flag. Although I spent the summer at Minute Man NHP, the Civil War was never far from my mind. Even in a northern park dedicated to the American Revolution, I still heard a lot about the Confederate monument debates, and as I spoke with visitors who were following this topic in the news, I was reminded of a similar debate several years ago concerning the Confederate flag. [excerpt]

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Finding Meaning in the Flag: Furl that Banner

By Olivia Ortman '19

Hello again, readers. I hope you enjoyed the summer and are now as eager as I am to jump back into our conversation about the Confederate flag. Although I spent the summer at Minute Man NHP, the Civil War was never far from my mind. Even in a northern park dedicated to the American Revolution, I still heard a lot about the Confederate monument debates, and as I spoke with visitors who were following this topic in the news, I was reminded of a similar debate several years ago concerning the Confederate flag.

After researching wartime perspectives, I wanted to write a post focusing on Confederate attitudes toward the flag after the war’s end. I wondered how losing the war affected Southern feelings towards the flag. Were there any former Confederates who rejected it? How did demographics play into this issue? While researching these questions, I stumbled across a 2014 article in the Washington Post about the removal of Confederate flags from the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University. A group of students had spoken with the administration and shared their discomfort with having the flags, which they believed to symbolize racism, present on campus. These students cited the Confederate flag’s connection with the interests of slaveholders in the Civil War and its appropriation by hate groups later on. After much deliberation and discussion, the University agreed to the students’ demand and moved the flags from the chapel to the museum in the basement. As part of the justification for this action, the university president cited Robert E. Lee’s own feelings for the flag.

For many Southerners in the immediate post-war years, the Confederate flag underwent an amplification of its war symbolism. It became the ultimate representation of hope, strength, and resistance to the Yankees, who were trying to control the South through Reconstruction and brief occupation. Some Southern women would drape themselves in Confederate flags or stick them in their hats and dresses before walking by occupying Union soldiers. U.S. Army Sergeant Mathew Woodruff, stationed in Mobile, Alabama, reported one of these instances of defiance. Walking down the street one day, he saw a black woman reprimanding three girls for waving rebel flags. The girls’ mother justified their actions by saying that the South “was not whipped [and] if they got a chance would rise again.” The war may have ended, but many Southerners were not ready to admit full defeat, especially not in the face of people who used to
be considered property. The flag was their proof that the South would rise again and when it did, it would finally crush the North and return to the correct social order.

Some Southerners, on the other hand, rejected the flag and other symbols of the Confederacy in the post-war years. Robert E. Lee, a man who is every bit as symbolic of the Confederacy as the flag, wanted nothing to do with Confederate memory and war memorialization. When asked by David McConaughy to return to Gettysburg in 1869 to recollect battlefield events for posterity, Lee politely declined. “I think it wiser moreover not to keep open the sores of war,” he wrote, “but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife & to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered.” In a letter to John Letcher, the governor of Virginia during the Civil War, Lee firmly stated that all citizens should put aside bad blood and unite in efforts to forget the effects of war.

The Confederate flag is one of the marks of war that Lee removed from his own life. In one popular story, a Southern woman wrote to Lee asking what she should do with an old battle flag. Lee supposedly responded, “Fold it up and put it away.” This has been a source of some contention, however, because no letter has been brought forward with these words. Regardless of whether Lee actually wrote these words, however, he did ask his children to keep the flag out of his funeral. He was buried in a plain suit, not his Confederate uniform, and other former Confederates in attendance were also asked not to wear their military uniforms. The Confederate flag was nowhere in sight that day. Its presence would only have served to open old wounds and forever connect him with one of our nation’s greatest failures.

William Roane Aylett, a colonel under General George Pickett, also publicly denounced the flag in a speech at the 1887 Gettysburg Reunion. “Southern men don’t care who keeps the flags; the past went down in the war,” he stated at the beginning of his speech. He continued with, “what matters who shall keep the battle flags? They passed into your hands in brave and manly combat…and we are as willing your people should keep them as ours.” He effectively ended his discussion of the Confederate flag by pronouncing it dead. This was met with great applause from the audience, which was equal parts former Union and Confederate soldiers. During the war, Aylett had been a staunch Union hater, as were many of the former Confederates in the audience that day, but during this speech they seemed determined to reconcile with their Yankee brothers, even at the cost of their beloved flag.

Lee and Aylett were not the only ones who recommended moving away from the flag, but they were only a small minority of the Southern population. Many former Confederates, like Jubal Early, became very vocal in their support of the flag after Reconstruction. Interestingly, all of the people I found in that small group of anti-flag Confederates had been officers or clergy during the war. This could just be that these men were literate and important enough for their letters to be preserved, but I think there’s more to it. Each of these men had more to gain from putting the flag aside than honoring it. They were leaders of a failed rebellion that had generated political
hostility and tension. If these men wanted any hope of holding a  in the post-
war America and in posterity, they needed the North and South to reconcile. No one
wants to be history’s villain, which is what you become when attached to a flag that
protected slavery and stood against its country. The only way to reconcile and save the
manhood/honor of defeated Confederates was by putting aside some of the more
unpleasant aspects and connotations of the war. Although I do truly believe these men
wanted to see the country reunite for the good of the nation, I think self-
preservation was a motivating factor in their views.

If asked their opinions on the removal of Confederate flags at Washington and Lee, I
believe Lee and Aylett would both express approval. The flag had a place in their lives at
one point, but that ended when the Confederacy lost the Civil War. All of this has left me
with a question that I’m now going to put to you: is it right for us to use the Confederate
flag today when some of the men to whom it belonged wanted it put aside? To go with
that, to whom does a symbol belong? Father Abram J. Ryan expresses his
feelings in, “The Conquered Banner,” a poem written mere weeks after the Confederacy surrendered:

Furl that banner, softly, slowly,

Treat it gently – it is holy –

For it droops above the dead;

Touch it not, unfold it never,

Let it droop there, furled forever,

For its people’s hopes are dead

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