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Reviving the Past: The Battle Flag in the Confederate Memorial Period

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Reviving the Past: The Battle Flag in the Confederate Memorial Period

Abstract

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the Confederate battle flag mostly disappeared from public view. In their diaries, Southerners wrote about hiding flags and other Confederate symbols for fear of Union retaliation. In most cases, Southerners intuitively understood that these symbols were now taboo, but occasionally, they stated that Union troops explicitly forbade displays of the battle flag. Some Southerners did still flaunt the flag as a means of defiance against Union troops, as mentioned in my [last post](#), but most people quietly tucked it away. A mere five years after the war ended, though, the flag began to reappear. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Confederate Battle Flag, Memorial Day, Memorial Period, Memory

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Reviving the Past: The Battle Flag in the Confederate Memorial Period

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the Confederate battle flag mostly disappeared from public view. In their diaries, Southerners wrote about hiding flags and other Confederate symbols for fear of Union retaliation. In most cases, Southerners intuitively understood that these symbols were now taboo, but occasionally, they stated that Union troops explicitly forbade displays of the battle flag. Some Southerners did still flaunt the flag as a means of defiance against Union troops, as mentioned in my [last post](#), but most people quietly tucked it away. A mere five years after the war ended, though, the flag began to reappear.

After the war ended, Southern ladies and veterans began forming organizations to care for war survivors and honor the dead. At first, this meant transferring dead Confederate soldiers from battlefield graves to Southern cemeteries and aiding survivors with medical and monetary support. The first Confederate battle flags accepted in public again were those used to drape the coffins of Confederates being reinterred. Then, during the 1870s, these ladies' and veterans' groups turned their efforts toward memorialization. After Reconstruction, Southerners became increasingly concerned with the Confederacy's legacy. Thus, between 1880 and 1920, there was an explosion of Confederate memorial events: monument dedications, veterans' reunions, and memorial days. The Memorial Day we celebrate today is actually an offshoot of Southern memorial days. Started as local holidays organized by ex-Confederate women to honor local Confederate dead, they grew into a nationwide celebration honoring fallen soldiers from all wars.



The United Daughters of the Confederacy lay a wreath and hold up a Confederate States of America flag at the Confederate Memorial during Confederate Memorial Day services at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington County, Virginia, U.S. on June 5, 1922. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

The flag's reintroduction to the public started slowly. At the beginning of the Confederate memorial period, few flags were displayed at memorialization events, and they were displayed mostly by women, probably to avoid angering Northerners. Southern men were afraid of being accused of treason by occupying Northern troops, but women were afforded a measure of protection by their gender. Southern journalists were also careful to mention that the national flag was displayed in equal, if not greater, proportion to the Confederate flag. In the newspaper articles I found between 1878 and 1879, only one Confederate flag was mentioned at each memorial occasion, while multiple national flags were present. Journalists wanted to make it very clear that the South was loyal to the Union. Furthermore, the few flags that did appear at these early events were always old wartime flags, nothing new. Newspapers took great pride in describing "the shell-torn and tattered banner which had waved...on many a hard fought field."

Throughout the Confederate memorial period, the presence of the Confederate flag quickly increased. At the unveiling of Lee's statue in Lexington, Virginia in 1883, there was only one U.S. flag displayed, while four old Confederate battle flags surrounded Stonewall Jackson's grave alone. When another Lee monument was unveiled in Richmond in 1890, a North Dakota journalist complained that the Confederate flag was everywhere, and the authorities "refused to remove the traitorous colors."



George Washington Custis Lee, 1832-1913, on horseback, with staff reviewing Confederate Reunion Parade in Richmond, Va., June 3, 1907, in front of monument to Jefferson Davis. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Around this time, reproductions of the flag became widespread, which sparked a large debate over the flag's place in the nation. Union veterans were especially upset about the reproductions. General William Jackson Palmer started a press war in the early 1890s when he suggested banning the flag from memorial events. He and many other Union veterans had been tolerant of original flags, which were mementos of the war, but reproduction flags were outright treason. Even some Confederate veterans were upset about reproductions, believing they cheapened the integrity of the original war flags. Most Southerners, though, insisted their flags were just for commemoration of Confederate soldiers, not acts of disloyalty.

In the long run, Northern upset quieted down, and the Confederate flag was seemingly accepted in public. The 1905 Congressional act calling for the return of captured Confederate flags to Southerners appeared to signify the end of the debate. Some historians, like David Blight, have chalked acceptance up to reconciliation. Ultimately, Northerners were tired of fighting, and the presence of the Confederate flag was a small price to pay for peace and union. Other historians, like Caroline Janney, have argued that this acceptance was mostly for public show. Union veterans continued to harbor resentment towards the Confederacy and its battle-flag, but they accepted it at public events because it served their purposes. Using reunions to remember the war, soldiers

could gain personal clarity and closure while connecting with other men who understood their traumatic experiences, even if those men had fought as their enemies during the war. By talking about the Confederacy and its flag in positive terms, Union veterans also glorified their own role in the war. Fighting and defeating a worthy Confederate army made Union troops all the greater. Both historians are right; people accepted the flag for a variety of personal reasons. However, an acceptance of the Confederate battle flag in public does not necessarily correlate to an acceptance of the flag's symbolism. While the flag was tolerated at commemoration events, many Northerners, especially veterans, continued to hate it.

The inclusion of Confederate flags in memorial events had a profound impact on the flag's symbolism. The most notable consequence was the adoption of the battle flag as *the* Confederate flag. During the war, the battle flag only represented ideas related to battle, whereas in the memorial period, it came to represent the ideals and principles of the Confederacy as a whole. The choice of the battle flag instead of the Confederacy's national flag speaks a lot to the values Southerners wanted to favor in the Confederacy's legacy. When discussing the Confederacy, orators spoke in great detail about military prowess of Southern soldiers and bravery on the battlefield. Although the Confederacy lost, its soldiers could still be hailed as heroes. As Jefferson Davis stated at a Memorial Day in Georgia in 1878, "it is better to have fought and lost, than never to have fought at all." This focus on battle ensured that the Confederacy's legacy would largely revolve around politically-neutral military tactics instead of the controversial causes of the war.

When speakers did mention the Confederate cause, they waxed poetically about states' rights, carefully avoiding slavery. Only one of the dedication speeches I read included the word slavery. A Virginia senator acknowledged at an 1879 monument dedication that the Confederacy fought for the Constitutional right to hold slaves. All other speakers were either vague or completely silent about slavery. A speaker in 1894 shared, "in our Union there is trouble. Social disorder vexes the soul of the patriot," which vaguely points towards the freedom of blacks but is not explicit. However, Southerners were comfortable asserting that the Confederacy, and therefore the flag, was dedicated to white supremacy. It was made clear that these memorial events, and the Confederate flag, were for white Southerners only. During this time period, African Americans held separate memorial days and commemoration events in the South where they could celebrate the Union and emancipation.

During the Confederate memorial period, the Confederate flag became an assertion of a unique Southern identity, one deeply intertwined with the Confederacy. Southerners may have lost the war and submitted to Northern demands, but they were still unique in their white heritage. They clung to their past and their flag to preserve their honor and pride. We can also see the start of many arguments that still surround the flag today: the acceptability of originals vs reproductions; where and when to display flags; heritage vs hate. A century later, we are no closer to resolving these arguments than Americans during the memorial period.

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