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## Finding Meaning in the Flag: The KKK Era

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# Finding Meaning in the Flag: The KKK Era

## **Abstract**

In 1972, black Vietnam soldier, Frank J. Francis sat down for an interview with *Forward*, an African American newspaper in New Jersey. The purpose of the interview was for Francis to share his experiences with racism in the army. At one point, Francis began talking about the Confederate flag. He told his interviewer, “If anyone is familiar with the South, then one knows that throughout the South black people have been and are still being terrorized by such organizations as the KKK or the White Citizens’ Councils, extreme anti-black, racist organizations. These people use the Confederate flag as a symbol of their allegiance to the racist South and all of its anti-black policies.” Francis further shared that the flag was often displayed by white men; there were four Confederate flags in his company alone. The black soldiers found these flags highly antagonistic because, as Francis explained, that flag could only mean one thing: The presence of racist organization members and sympathizers. Even in Vietnam, Francis’s most concerning battle was the one he had to fight over his skin color. Others, however, would have a very different experience with the Confederate flag and its symbolism in those circumstances. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Confederate Battle Flag, Ku Klux Klan, Memory, Young Patriots

## **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.

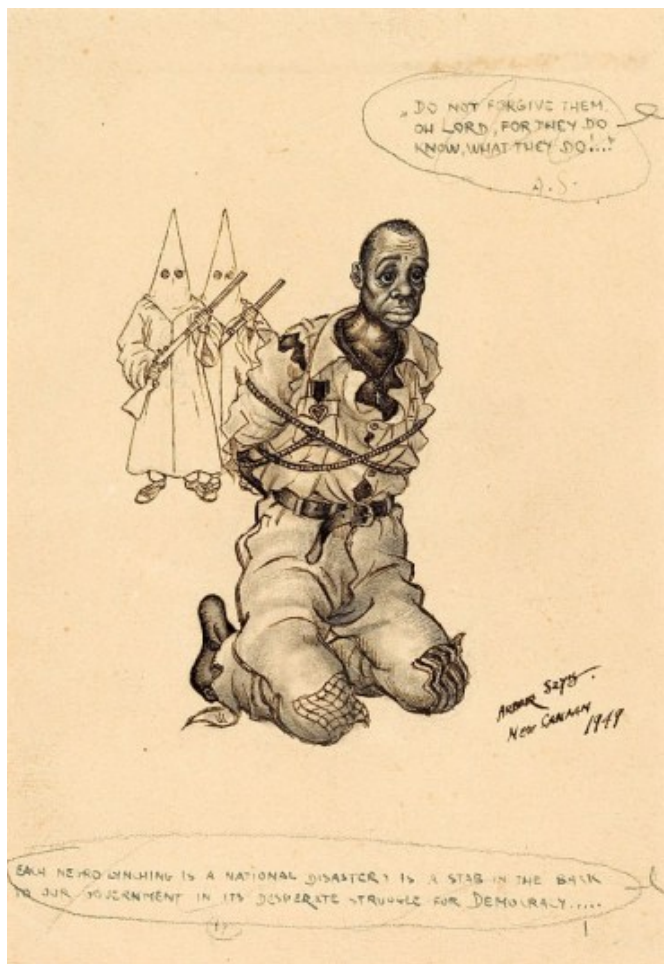
# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### Finding Meaning in the Flag: The KKK Era

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

*This post is the seventh 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. Read the first post [here](#).*



**Image drawn by Arthur Szyck in 1949. Bubble in top corner reads: “Do not forgive them oh lord, for they do know what they do!” Bottom bubble reads: “Each negro lynching is a national disaster! Is a stab in the back to our government in its desperate struggle for democracy...”**

In 1972, black Vietnam soldier, Frank J. Francis sat down for an interview with *Forward*, an African American newspaper in New Jersey. The purpose of the interview was for Francis to share his experiences with racism in the army. At one point, Francis began talking about the Confederate flag. He told his interviewer, "If anyone is familiar with the South, then one knows that throughout the South black people have been and are still being terrorized by such organizations as the KKK or the White Citizens' Councils, extreme anti-black, racist organizations. These people use the Confederate flag as a symbol of their allegiance to the racist South and all of its anti-black policies." Francis further shared that the flag was often displayed by white men; there were four Confederate flags in his company alone. The black soldiers found these flags highly antagonistic because, as Francis explained, that flag could only mean one thing: The presence of racist organization members and sympathizers. Even in Vietnam, Francis's most concerning battle was the one he had to fight over his skin color. Others, however, would have a very different experience with the Confederate flag and its symbolism in those circumstances.

Francis's association of the flag with racism was not unique; it followed a century's worth of tradition. One of the first hate groups to adopt the Confederate flag as their symbol was the Carolina Rifle Club of Charleston, South Carolina. The group was formed in 1869 to defend the white race against "negro aggression." Although their official flag was their state flag with a C superimposed over the palmetto tree, in the late 1870s, the club's president boasted that it was "the first military body of white men which paraded in the streets of the city or the State, bearing arms...under the Confederate Banner, since the struggles of the War had ceased." The South Carolina Rifle Club would be the first of many hate groups to carry the flag while preaching white supremacy.

The hate group most commonly associated with the Confederate Flag, the Ku Klux Klan, did not pick up the Confederate flag until much later. Although the KKK was formed in 1865 by a group of ex-Confederate soldiers, their connection to the flag was individual, not organizational. Several of the founding members had Confederate flags draped over their caskets when they died, denoting their involvement in the Confederacy, but the group itself did not specifically identify with the flag. Actually, since the early 1900's, the KKK's official flag has been, and still is to my knowledge, the U.S. flag. The group's goal was to defend America, which (to them) meant enforcing racial segregation and black subordination at the time.

The first serious connection between the KKK as an organization and the Confederate flag was made in 1946. [Stetson Kennedy](#), a labor organizer and investigator from Florida, went undercover to investigate a Klan in Atlanta. During the initiation ceremony, Kennedy noticed the presence of a Confederate flag draped across the altar. His description of the ceremony was featured in the [May 27th edition](#) of *Life* magazine, along with a story of the Klan's attempted comeback.

Although there is nothing that explicitly states why the different Klan factions began incorporating the Confederate flag into their iconography, it was most likely a desire to identify with their Confederate ancestors. Historian John Coski explains that World War II had reinvigorated a sense of regional identification and the flag's connection to a unique southern identity. The Klan's adoption of the flag coincides with the end of World War II and an overall southern desire to connect with the flag. The Klan members in the 1940's were also amongst the first generations of Klansmen not directly connected to the Civil War. The original founders of the KKK and many of the members of early Klans were Confederate veterans. These early members did not need the Confederate flag to be identified as men who fought to preserve a distinctly southern way of life. For later generations of Klansmen who had not fought in the Civil War, the flag provided a tangible connection to since-deceased Confederate soldiers, men whom Klansmen upheld as heroes.

The Klan's connection to the Confederate flag would continue to grow throughout the 1950's and beyond. By the mid-1960's, the Confederate flag became almost synonymous with the KKK and white supremacy. *Life* magazine did a series of articles on the KKK throughout 1965, each one featuring prominent Klansmen standing in front of large Confederate flags. The first article was printed in the [February edition](#) and discusses several hate groups in America. The section dedicated to the KKK is preceded by a full-page image of Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton in full regalia posed in front of a very large Confederate flag. The magazine quotes other Klan members stating, "Fools, traitors, and Communists seek to mix our race with the blood of an inferior and cannibalistic black race," as well as, more simply, "We're against the niggers." The implication could not be made any clearer. By posing a prominent Klan member in front of the flag, *Life* and Shelton were claiming the Confederate flag as a symbol for the KKK and therefore intertwining the flag with the group's racist agenda.

Two months later, *Life's* [April edition](#) featured a full article on the KKK alone. Halfway through the article, a Klan member is pictured holding a Bible and a copy of the Constitution and wearing a Confederate flag vest. Above the picture is the quote, "We love Negroes, in their place – like shinin' shoes, etc." The [May edition](#) provides the most shocking connection to racism of all. *Life* covered the trial of Collie LeRoy Wilkins, a 21-year-old Klansman who murdered Viola Liuzzo, a white civil rights advocate. Throughout the trial, Wilkins ranted and raved about his violent ideas concerning blacks and the whites that helped them. Regardless of these horrifying comments, the jury found Wilkins not guilty and set him free. What was the first thing Wilkins did upon release? Wilkins marched in a Klan parade where he proudly waved a Confederate flag to the applause of the crowd. Growing up in an atmosphere like this, it is no wonder that Frank Francis would see the Confederate flag as being solely a symbol of racist hate groups.



***Imperial Wizard, Robert M. Shelton, signs autographs at a KKK rally in Hattiesburg, Miss. in 1965. The flag in the corner appears to be a Confederate flag. Surprisingly, however, the flag was also used as the symbol of an anti-racist group. In 1970, just two years before Francis gave his interview, the newspaper Great Speckled Bird printed an article about a group calling themselves Young Patriots. The Young Patriots were young white activists based in Chicago who used community service to address issues of oppression within impoverished white communities. Although their primary focus was on poor whites, the Young Patriots used their work as a platform to foster a partnership with African Americans who were also being oppressed by rich whites. The group had modeled itself after the Black Panthers and actually worked very closely with the Panthers to spread acceptance and awareness of struggles faced by African Americans.***

Members of the group were very proud to share photos of a rally held jointly with the Panthers in Chicago. In these photos, a Confederate flag hangs behind the podium right next to the Panthers' flag. For these young white men and women, the Confederate flag represented their southern heritage and what they celebrated as a uniquely southern tradition of rebellion. The Young Patriots ignored the causes of the Civil War, reducing it simply to an act of resistance by southerners, therefore making the Confederate flag the ultimate symbol of resistance to authority. The group then used the flag as a connection between themselves and poor white southerners, visually stating that they all had distinct southern roots based in rebellion. By displaying the Confederate flag, the group hoped to rally impoverished whites to join African Americans in resistance against their mutual oppressors.

Support for the Young Patriots varied amongst African Americans. Those who supported the Black Panthers usually looked favorably upon the Young Patriots, although they acknowledge there were still some racist qualities that needed to be ironed out. Others who felt the Black Panthers were too militant typically classified the Young Patriots in the same category of radicalism. Although neither that article nor the other dozen articles I looked through specifically mentioned how African Americans felt about the group's use of the Confederate flag, its continued use seems to imply a measure of acceptance from the African American community. The Young Patriots worked very closely with the Panthers and often displayed the Confederate flag beside the Panthers' flag. Since the Panthers allowed this, they must not have been overly offended by the flag. Maybe the Panthers saw this as a small token of revenge against white southern supremacists: They were appropriating one of the most dominant pieces of those supremacists' iconography and imbuing it with a message of black support in order to ultimately empower the African American community to defeat such racism. However, it is likely that the Confederate flag was still very jarring for African Americans unfamiliar with the Young Patriots. Most African Americans' only experiences with this flag had been instances of hate and racism. For them, it was a symbol of oppression and white supremacy. Considering the pervasiveness of this interpretation of the flag, one can understand how wary many African Americans must have felt when confronted by the Young Patriots bearing the flag aloft. However, the group's use of the flag proved that the flag's symbolism was not, and never would be static and that – as is still true today – specific historical context matters when determining the flag's multi-pronged messages.

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