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Confederate Flag Memory in Gettysburg, PA

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Abstract
Few towns in the United States can claim to be as in touch with its Civil War history as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the site of one of the war's most significant battles, Gettysburg today lives and breathes the Civil War every day through the historical tourism that Gettysburg National Military Park encourages, which itself has bred a Civil War merchandise economy in the town itself. As such, the town naturally becomes a new battleground for contemporary issues regarding the memory of the Civil War—including, most significantly, the interpretation and presentation of the Confederate battle flag. As the nation passed the 150th anniversary of the war itself, reigniting discussion on its purpose and legacy, controversies flared nationally and locally on display of the Confederate battle flag and its meaning as a symbol of racial hatred or southern heritage. During the summer of 2016, 11 members of the Gettysburg community with a stake in these discussions were interviewed on their thoughts and feelings towards the Confederate flag.

Keywords
confederate flag, gettysburg, civil war, oral history, race

Disciplines
Oral History | Public History | United States History

Comments
This project was conducted as part of the author’s Robert Sibley Cooper Fellowship with the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College during the summer of 2016, and later presented at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association on October 8, 2016.

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INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

Over the course of July 2016 and the start of August 2016, oral histories were conducted with citizens of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on their views of the Confederate battle flag and related topics.

The interviews were conducted upon request of Gettysburg College’s Civil War Institute, to document the controversy from multiple perspectives from the people in town most invested in the issue. Each interviewee was asked roughly the same questions, with some omitted or altered depending on other answers, or some added based on their personal experience.

QUESTIONS

• Some claim that the Confederate Flag is a symbol of their heritage; some claim that it is a symbol of racism and hate; some a mixture. What does it mean to you?
• Can the flag have both meanings, and can one claim to it be more legitimate?
• Have your views on the flag changed since the events in Charleston last year?
• Have you observed changes in Gettysburg since Charleston and the events in town since?
• Many people all over the country fly the flag: do non-southerners have any claim to the flag, if their ancestors did not fight for the south?
• You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: does its commercialization undermine its symbol of one of heritage and sacrifice?
• Gettysburg was a major victory for the Union, and is a town on Union soil: how do you explain the prevalence for Confederate iconography here? Is it right?
• Is the “hate” of the Confederate flag a product of its usage in the Civil War, the KKK and other hate groups, or both?
• Is the Confederate National Flag just as objectionable as the Battle Flag, more so, or less so?
• Is there an appropriate setting for where the flag could be flown for historical purposes—the battlefield or historical reenactments?
• You can find Confederate flag merchandise all over Gettysburg: in your opinion, does this kind of commercialization contribute to the whitewashing of the flag’s controversial status?

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

CHRIS GWINN

Executive Park Manager for Interpretation and Education at Gettysburg National Military Park

• “There is a sort of a segregation in the South and the North, and the Confederate flag is a symbol of that. It’s a symbol of the South and the North, and the South is a symbol of the Confederacy. It’s a symbol of the American South and the American North. So I think the flag is an important symbol of that.”
• “I think that the Confederate flag is a symbol of the American South and the American North. So I think the flag is an important symbol of that.”

ROSS HETRICK

President of the Thaddeus Stevens Society, Gettysburg, PA

• “I think the Confederate flag should be opposed because it is a symbol of racism and treason and I feel that is absolutely unchallenged that essentially people consider that to be okay.”
• “I think you have to realize […] that there are a lot of Non-Confederates that have been drawn to Gettysburg over the years because they have a connection to the battle.”

BILLY COE

Owner of Dirty Billy’s Hats, Gettysburg, PA

• “It is an American Flag. Like it or not, it’s an American Flag. And if we don’t dig up those issues, if we don’t discuss them academically, we will probably be condemned to repeat them or acknowledge that this is an expression of hatred and intimidation, of violence and threats.”
• “I think you have to realize […] that there are a lot of Non-Confederates that have been drawn to Gettysburg over the years because they have a connection to the battle.”

Word Cloud: Flag

Opponents

(Casteel, Wickham, Moul, Coe)

Word Cloud: Flag

Supporters

(Hancock, Black, Bloomquist, Hetrick)

AGREEMENTS

• Everyone believes that Gettysburg is important as a significant historical site that should reflect the historical reality.
• Both supporters and opponents of the flag, however, believe their interpretation of history is correct.
• Both place significantly different emphasis on different parts of history.
• All believe that despite new conversations about the flag’s meaning, recent events in town and nationally have only entrenched the two sides.
• Many believe that the current political climate only contributes to the current dispute.