

THE CONFEDERATE FLAG:

Heritage
OR
Hate?

The recent murder of nine black people by a white supremacist has reignited a debate about Confederate symbols BY BRYAN BROWN

Everyone there knew they were witnessing history. On July 10, a South Carolina Highway Patrol honor guard marched up to a flagpole on the grounds of the State House in Columbia, the state capital. In front of a crowd of 10,000 people, the officers ceremoniously lowered the Confederate flag, folded it, and took it away.

It was a moment packed with emotion, especially since it had come to pass because of the shocking murder in June of nine black churchgoers in Charleston by a young white supremacist. As the flag came down, some in the crowd chanted “U.S.A.!”


“I didn’t think I’d live to see this,” says James Johnson, who was there. For him, the flag represented slavery—the main cause of the Civil War (1861-65)—and the oppression of blacks like himself in the South for a century after the war.

Others in the crowd weren’t so happy. Robert Hines, who is white, stood quietly holding small rebel flags. “We had 22,000 South Carolinians die under the flag,” he said. For him and many other Southerners, the flag is a symbol of pride and heritage.

How did the flag—and other symbols of the Confederacy—come to represent such different things to Americans?

Reconstruction & Jim Crow

The flag we know today as the Confederate flag wasn’t actually the official flag of the Confederacy but a battle flag carried by rebel soldiers during the Civil War (see box, p. 21). After the war, those tattered battle flags receded somewhat into the background, as white and black Southerners tried to rebuild their lives. During the period of Reconstruction (1865-77), the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery, the 14th granted blacks citi-

 Watch a video on Southerners discussing the flag.

Rallying for the Confederate flag at the State House in Columbia, South Carolina (right); Dylann Roof (below), in a photo he posted on his website; mourners paying respects to victims of the Charleston shooting (facing page, bottom).

ANALYZE THE ARTICLE



VIA THE NEW YORK TIMES (DYLANN ROOF); MYRTLE BEACH SUN-NEWS/ZUMA PRESS/CORBIS (RALLY)



CEM OZDELAN/AGENCY/VOXETTY IMAGES (MEMORIAL)

zenship, and the 15th gave black men the right to vote.

But shortly after Reconstruction, much of the South began instituting “Jim Crow” laws that kept discrimination against black people in place for nearly a century. Violence against blacks, including lynchings, also became common. Starting in the early 1900s, the N.A.A.C.P. and other groups began working to gain civil rights for blacks, and during the 1950s and '60s, they began winning some major battles.

The Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling outlawed segregation in public schools. And federal courts forced integration on buses, trains, and other public spaces. Many white Southerners **bridled** at Northern “interference,” and the battle flag became a symbol of resistance. In 1961, the South Carolina Legislature ordered the rebel flag to be flown from the State House dome. Officially, it was to commemorate the start of the Civil War 100 years earlier. But many people understood it as opposition to civil rights gains.

“The more the white South lost on this issue,” says Charles Zelden, a historian at Nova Southeastern University in Fort

Lauderdale, Florida, “the more important that flag came to be.”

That’s something Johnson, who witnessed the flag removal in July, experienced firsthand. When he was a boy, the Ku Klux Klan, a racist group that terrorized blacks, would march through his hometown of North Charleston carrying the Confederate flag. “That’s

how they showed they disliked you,” he says. “There’s nothing good about that flag as far as black folks are concerned.”

Since the civil rights era, the battle flag has become more ingrained in Southern life. It’s flown proudly from many houses, in public squares, and by fans at NASCAR races. Some elements of its design are included in seven state flags.

In South Carolina, numerous attempts had been made over the years to remove the flag from the State House, and demonstrators by the thousands had marched for or against it. In 2000, state lawmakers compromised by moving it from the top of the State House dome to a flagpole in front of the building. Opponents of the flag remained frustrated.

Then came Dylann Roof. On June 17, the 21-year-old white man opened fire at a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He killed nine people, all of them black. After Roof was arrested, authorities found his website. Along with racist rants, it showed Roof posing with Confederate symbols, including the battle flag.

The shootings spurred renewed debate about the Civil War and its meaning today: Are flags and memorials to Confederate figures racist? Or do they simply honor Americans who fought on what was ultimately the losing side of the Civil War?

After the shootings, calls arose once again in South Carolina



The Southern Cross is flown during the 1864 Battle of Franklin in Tennessee

to remove the State House flag. This time, Governor Nikki Haley joined in. “One hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War,” she said, “the time has come.”

While the State Senate debated the matter, Senator Clementa Pinckney’s desk was draped in black as a sign of mourning. Pinckney, who was also pastor of the church

in Charleston, was among the nine killed by Roof. Despite some resistance, a majority of legislators agreed to remove the flag. With almost unbelievable swiftness, the flag was gone. Yet the debate over Confederate symbols and where they fit in America in 2015 remains unresolved.

‘It’s Not About Slavery’

Since the Charleston shootings, many Southerners have rallied to defend the flag. “It’s not about slavery,” wrote Ron Springer, a descendant of Civil War veterans, in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. “It’s about my ancestors fighting for their freedom.”

Zelden, the Nova Southeastern University professor, says that many Southerners see the flag as a symbol that the South, in its history and culture, is different from the North.

“Symbols have the power to represent so much in a quick visual flash,” he says. “The flag is a shorthand for ‘This is who I am, this is what I believe.’”

In the wake of the Charleston shootings, some Southern states are rethinking their relationship to the battle flag. Alabama quietly took down flags at its state capitol grounds in June. Other states are moving to stop using the image on license plates. And retailers like Walmart, Sears, and Amazon have stopped selling items bearing images of the flag.



Rethinking *Mockingbird*

If you’ve read Harper Lee’s 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you probably know Atticus Finch as a white Alabama lawyer who honorably defends an innocent black man accused of rape.

He’s been an American hero for generations, so many readers were shocked to learn that in Lee’s recently released book *Go Set a Watchman*, which is set 20 years after *Mockingbird*, Atticus says things like this: “Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?”

Watchman was actually Lee’s first draft

of the book that her editor helped shape into the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Mockingbird*. Lee’s original vision of Atticus as a racist was very different from the Atticus of *Mockingbird*, in both the book and the 1962 Academy Award-winning movie starring Gregory Peck. Some have questioned whether Lee, who is 89 and suffered a stroke in 2007, really wanted *Watchman* published. But publisher HarperCollins issued an enthusiastic statement from Lee about the book’s release.



Which is the real Atticus Finch? Both, say many critics. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, African-American historian Isabel Wilkerson writes about how the “unmasking” of Atticus is a good thing, representing “a character study in the seeming contradiction that compassion and bigotry can not only reside in the same person but often do.”

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (BATTLE OF FRANKLIN COURTESY OF HARPERCOLLINS (GO SET A WATCHMAN))



Which Flag Is the Fight About?



The Confederacy had a battle flag as well as three official flags (below).

Today, seven Southern states incorporate elements of the battle flag design in their state flags. Mississippi uses the entire Southern Cross in a corner of its flag.



'Southern Cross'
1861-65

What most people today call the Confederate flag was actually a battle flag flown by Confederate Army units, including General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.



'Stars & Bars'
1861-63

The first official flag of the Confederate states was so similar to the Union flag that it left soldiers on smoke-filled battlefields confused.



'Stainless Banner'
1863-65

The second national flag incorporated the Southern Cross into its design. But critics said the white looked too much like a surrender flag.



'Blood-Stained Banner'
1865

A red bar was added to make the flag look less like a surrender flag. Ironically, though, this flag was short-lived since the Confederacy surrendered in April 1865.

The flag isn't the only Confederate symbol being re-examined. Countless streets and parks named after Confederate figures as well as public monuments honoring them have also recently come under attack. In July, Memphis, Tennessee, voted to remove a park statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate commander and the first leader of the Ku Klux Klan.



Robert E. Lee High School
in San Antonio: Debates are raging at this and other schools named for Confederate icons.

Even the Supreme Court had to weigh in on the Confederate flag recently. Last spring, in a 5-to-4 ruling, the Court upheld a Texas law that barred the flag from specialty license plates, which can feature anything from sports logos to environmental slogans. In the Court's view, state-issued license plates are government speech, and the government doesn't have to endorse a viewpoint that some find offensive. But

School names are also being scrutinized. According to one estimate, 188 public schools around the U.S. are named for Confederates. At one, J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, students have circulated a petition to rename the school, which honors a famed Confederate cavalry officer. Matt Levi, a teacher at the school, says it was named for Stuart in 1959 as part of Virginia's so-called massive resistance to integration.

Afia Kwarteng, a recent graduate of J.E.B. Stuart, signed the petition. "As a black student," she says, "I didn't like attending a school named after someone who was for enslaving and oppressing my people."

But Tony Konjevoda, a former student who is white, thinks society needs to "move on" from trying to erase every trace of the Confederacy. "Changing the name will do nothing to change history or make amends at all," he says.

Many Southerners argue that efforts to wipe the past clean might never end. "George Washington owned slaves," a great-great-grandson of Nathan Bedford Forrest recently said. "Are you going to take him off the dollar bill?"

Ben Jones, a former U.S. congressman from Georgia, calls the campaign of tearing down and changing names a "feeding frenzy." Erasing the Confederate past "will not erase any scars nor heal any wounds," he recently wrote in *USA Today*.

the ruling, which was criticized by free-speech groups like the A.C.L.U., has no impact on private speech, legal experts say. That means anyone has a First Amendment right to show the flag on his or her lawn or on a bumper sticker.

New Monuments?

Bill Ferris, a white Mississippi native who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has written extensively about the South. Though he supports taking down the battle flag in all public places, he also believes that the best way to combat hate is not to erase history but to confront it.

Recent events have forced Americans to answer some tough questions about race. A string of high-profile cases in the last year involving black men who died during encounters with police has reignited a national debate about race. And the publication of a rediscovered novel by *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee has also forced a re-examination of one of literature's most beloved champions of black rights (see "Rethinking *Mockingbird*," p. 20).

But confronting race and racism doesn't mean the country should whitewash history, Ferris says. Instead, he advocates erecting new monuments to honor notable African-Americans.

"The South has a long memory," he says. "The full range of people who live in the South should have their history and memory recognized." •

SHUTTERSTOCK (MISSISSIPPI FLAG); NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES/SALAMY (SOUTHERN CROSS, STARS & BARS, FINAL FLAG); DON TRONANI/CORBIS (BLOOD-STAINED BANNER); VIDEO GRAPHICS/ANTON (ROBERT E. LEE HIGH SCHOOL)