

Our SHARED Heritage

By Joy West, Downtown Greenville Girl

I know many of my readers check out my column each issue, expecting to read about little known spots in Downtown Greenville, hear about what's going on this month, and other light-hearted stories I choose to share with you all. I love this fair city that is my home and hope it shows in every word I write. But the disconcerting events of the final two weeks in June compel me to speak out in a manner you may find very different from my usual musings.

Let me start by saying, I am a true Southern Girl...American by birth, Southern by the Grace of God, as they say. I drink my tea sweet, my speech is heavily sprinkled with ma'am, sir & y'all, I have seen *Gone With The Wind* more times than I can count and believe that waving to your neighbors from your front porch is the best kind of social media. Beginning with my ancestors' arrival in Virginia in the early 1600's, my ancestry & relations include several Virginia governors, a South Carolina governor, Generals Robert E. Lee & J.E.B. Stuart, as well as many key, yet lesser known, characters in the colorful history of the South. I have an "old family" lineage that makes Southern genealogists pea-green with envy.

Proud as I am of my Southern heritage, I was still dismayed to discover that, the morning after 9 innocent people were gunned down in a historic black church by a young man sporting an apartheid patch on his shirt & Rebel flag license plate on his car, the Confederate battle flag was still flying at full staff on the State House grounds, even while the US & state flags were at half-mast. In the face of such horrific murders, that the shooter himself proudly proclaimed was a racially motivated hate crime, this oversight of our state government was insensitive and inhospitable in a state that prides itself on being the epitome of Southern hospitality. I applaud Governor Haley's Call to Action directed at the General Assembly to remove the flag from its current location. But after reading the scathing comments posted online in response to this action, re-igniting the heated "Heritage or Hate" debate & dividing our citizens at a time when we are trying to stand united, I found myself wondering if this was more like an attempt to place a band-aid on a deep wound that had been festering for decades. Because if we Southerners cannot listen to one another with respect and cannot discuss the issue without degenerating into disgusting slurs and personal insults that have nothing to do with the subject, this long-standing dispute will never be resolved & we will never truly be unified.

I would like to begin with a brief history. The flag that most of us recognize as the "Confederate flag", the "Confederate Battle flag" or the "Stars & Bars" was in fact, never the official flag of the Confederate States of America. According to John M. Coski, Director of Research at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, VA and author of *The Confederate Battle Flag: The Most Embattled Emblem* (Harvard University Press, 2005), the Confederacy had 3 National flags between 1861 & 1865. The first official National flag was based on the US flag & bore a strong resemblance to the "Betsy Ross" design. It featured a circle of stars (each star added as each state succeeded, so the number varied), on a blue square background in the upper left hand corner & 3 bands or "bars" of alternating red, white, red. Dubbed the "Stars and Bars", the flag's similarity to the US flag was no accident as the Congressional committee bowed to the overwhelming sentiment that we "should not abandon the "old" flag". This was the flag that was raised over Fort Sumter after Confederates captured the garrison, the flag that was displayed at the inauguration of Jefferson Davis and the flag that Southern forces carried at the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run).

It was at this first battle of the war that Confederate commanders realized the "Stars & Bars" looked too much like the "Stars & Stripes" through the smoke on the battlefield and caused confusion among Confederate soldiers. Gen. P.T.G. Beauregard proposed that a separate battle flag be created. The resulting flag featured a diagonal blue, starred "Southern Cross" on a red background, a bold design that, today, we are very familiar with. Instead of a rectangular shape, the banner was square, to lessen the chance of being shredded by bayonets and tree limbs. But to call this the "Confederate" battle flag is not historically accurate either. The Confederacy never designated a single design as the official battle flag of its military forces & many units were already carrying flags of their own design by this time. It was adopted as the banner of the Army of Northern Virginia, led by Gen. Robert E. Lee & used mostly in the Eastern Theater while the first National flag was used in the west. A rectangular version was sometimes used as the "Naval Jack" by Confederate maritime forces.

The more staunchly separatist of the Confederate leaders felt the National flag was too much like the US flag & requested a design that was more "Confederate". This new design, introduced in May 1863, featured a smaller

version of the “Southern Cross” design in the upper left corner of a white, rectangular flag. Dubbed the “[Stainless Banner](#)” this flag was more than a soldier’s flag, it quickly became a political one as well. It is with this design that racial undertones began to make themselves apparent in the National flag’s history, when George Bagby, editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, compared the “Southern Cross” design with the constellation that pointed “the destiny of the Southern master & African slave southward”. Because the first recorded use of this flag was at the funeral of Lt. Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, this design is often referred to as “Jackson’s flag”.

The third and final National flag was adopted less than 6 weeks before Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. This final design closely resembled the Stainless Banner, whose all white background was often mistaken for a flag of truce. To avoid this, a broad, vertical red stripe was added on the right edge of the 2nd National flag. Because it was adopted so close to the end of the war, few were made & even fewer are still in existence.

For many white Southerners, myself included, we are taught pretty much from birth that the flag like the one that flies at the State House represents a proud heritage, a rebellious spirit and a noble cause to be revered with a religious-like fervor. The movie, *Braveheart*, has a line at the beginning narrative that “history is written by those who have hanged heroes” – which means the victor’s version of history is usually the one that is recounted. But that rule did not apply the same way here in the South. We have all been raised on romanticized stories of brave chivalrous men who fought against an invading foe in defense of their homes and their graceful, cultured way of life. Growing in up in Georgia, I had teachers who regaled us with embellished stories of the hoopskirted ladies of Augusta, brandishing dueling pistols, standing shoulder to shoulder with a diminished, yet courageous group of Confederate soldiers in defiance of “Sherman the Arsonist”, causing the Yankee general to bypass the city in his March to the Sea. My own family history tells of “Granny Mac” who stood her ground against deserters from Sherman’s Army intent on looting her Carolina home & even in my lifetime, there was a wall in my grandmother’s house (the same home) that still bore scars attributed to bayonet gouges made by these soldiers. And let’s not forget all those viewings of *Gone With The Wind* I mentioned earlier. But a symbol that has such a gallant significance to one group, can mean something entirely different to another group.

I remember the first time I had an indication that this emblem meant something different to African Americans. I was in 3rd grade and my best friend was a black girl named DeeDee. We were inseparable – sitting next to each other in class, playing together at recess and joining the Girl Scouts together. Every Wednesday, her mother would pick us up to take us to our scout meeting & would greet us as one entity with “Hey DJ! How was your day!” DeeDee & I would excitedly tell her all about our day, completing one another’s sentences, with her mom smiling and enthusiastically joining in. I loved DeeDee’s mom and it felt natural to hug her & say “I love you” before bounding to my front door when she brought me home every week. One day I hopped in her car, waiting for her happy greeting, but she only said, “Joy, please put that away” – pointing to my notebook. I looked down and saw the Rebel flag sticker that adorned it. Not really understanding the look of pain on her face, I flipped the book over and then DeeDee & I launched into our usual retelling of our day’s adventures. But her mom was silent during the ride, which confused me. Not really understanding why she was quiet and not knowing how to ask what was wrong, I quieted down myself. The next week, she greeted us with her usual cheer and the matter was pushed to the back of my child’s mind.

It was years later before I would think about the incident again. I was a young adult, now residing in South Carolina, coming of age in the midst of the “Heritage or Hate” controversy. Ready to fiercely defend this proud symbol of my Southern heritage, I remembered that day more than a decade earlier. Never being the type to just accept one view, I decided to ask two of my friends, both African American, what the flag meant to them and prepared myself for a reply I might not like. The first friend declined to answer, saying she feared it would ruin our friendship. My other friend, who I loved like a sister and who was never afraid to be honest with me, spoke up. She said that although that flag was originally flown by men who were fighting, in part, to keep her ancestors enslaved, that wasn’t the main problem. All the people who were around at that time were dead & gone and we shouldn’t be held responsible for their actions. What caused the fear, pain and anger for her was the flag’s more recent history. She said when she looked at it, she saw the flag that was waved by the angry white men who spit on her parents as they tried to enter the doors of their newly desegregated school. It was the flag brandished by hostile white Southerners who threw rocks at them and shouted threats as they participated in peaceful Civil Rights marches as adults. It was the flag that represented the unjust segregation laws that were being defended by police officers who attacked and beat them. It was the flag that was displayed by men in white hoods, proudly posing for pictures next to the body of a murdered black man in her grandparents’ time. And the flag was everywhere she looked. I decided to “walk a mile in her shoes” & try to view the world as I thought my friend saw it. She was right – the flag was everywhere...on bumper stickers, on t-shirts, and flying in front of my neighbors’

homes. I started to wonder if the people displaying that flag would mean me harm if my skin were darker & I began feel a knot of panic in the pit of my stomach that she probably felt every day. My opinion was forever changed.

To fully understand the link this flag has to racism, one has to look at the flag's more recent history and it's reemergence in the 20th century. After the Civil War, many Southern states desired a redesign of their state's flags to honor those who fought & died for the Confederacy. Many of these flags, most designed by artists who were Confederate veterans themselves, were inspired by the first National flag – the true “Stars & Bars” and were accepted by white and black Southerners. But in the 1940's, 50's & 60's, that changed and the driving force of this change was segregation. In the 1940's, a group of Southern Democrats, who disagreed with the party's support of desegregation, formed their own party. These segregationists, named Dixiecrats, held their convention in 1948, and displayed a variation of the battle flag (that had long been used by the Ku Klux Klan), as a symbol of southern protest and resistance to the federal government's early desegregation efforts. The segregationist movement gained monumental speed after the Supreme Court's *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954. In 1956, Georgia redesigned its state flag, amid great protest from citizens, to feature the same battle flag displayed by the Dixiecrats. In 1961 (& again in 1963), the state of Alabama hoisted the rectangular variation of the battle flag over their state capital and in the same year, South Carolina followed suit (passing legislation to keep it there in 1962). According to an [inquiry](#) into the reasons behind the 1956 redesign, commissioned by the Georgia state government in 2000, the incorporation of the battle flag into the Georgia flag's design, as well as the raising of the flags in Alabama and South Carolina, were done for the same reason – in protest of the desegregation of public schools. As former Representative James MacKay, who voted against the 1956 flag, stated, “There was only one reason for putting that flag on there. Like a gun rack in the back of a pickup truck, it telegraphs a message.”

Despite the fact that this flag was supposed to honor and embrace the Southern heritage, its display on state flags and capital domes was opposed by some of the very groups you would expect to support it – Confederacy groups. Many of these groups protested all uses of the flag except in commemoration events by Confederate organizations. The Ladies Memorial Association (caretakers of the graves of the “glorious dead”) read deeper into the meaning of the flag's display in this manner & pointed to the fact that “the nation is becoming more unified, sectionalism and prejudice is disappearing and a movement of this kind is a backward step.” Although years later, amid protests to remove the emblem from state flags and state houses, many of these legislators who had voted to show the battle flag in this manner, claimed that the exhibition was done so in commemoration of the centennial of the Civil War. But the fact that the public display of the battle flag was opposed by some Confederacy groups, the many racially tinged speeches by segregationists that proclaimed they were “preserving the South's segregated way of life”, the fact that numerous segregation laws were passed during this time (including one that stripped police officers of their jobs and pensions if they declined to enforce these unjust laws) and the fact that the flags remained right where they were placed years after 1965, proves that the flags were not raised with the singular intent of honoring the Civil War centennial. As the *North Georgia Tribune* argued in 1956, “We dislike the spirit which hatched out the new flag, and we don't believe Robert E. Lee would like it either.”

Many will argue that the flag “doesn't mean hatred to us” – it just represents all that is proud & unique about the South. In response to this argument, I offer the swastika as an example of how an image meaning one thing can be twisted and defiled to suit the self-interests of a hate group. For centuries, the swastika had symbolized prosperity in many cultures. As recently as the 1920's, it was a harmless sign of good luck. But in less than two decades, the Nazis changed all that. Now it symbolizes the atrocities and hatred perpetuated by Hitler and his followers. We Southerners pride ourselves on being are good, hospitable people and I know that it is not our intention to cause pain to our fellow humans, but the battle flag is to our African American neighbors what the Nazi flag would be to our Jewish neighbors. For my fellow Southerners who still cling to the belief that the flag represents Southern heritage, I ask this – is a symbol that alienates our African American neighbors, that embodies violence & degradation for almost 30% of our state's population, is this the symbol we want to epitomize our Southern heritage? If so – then you must be prepared to accept the entire history...both the romantic AND the racist ...that the flag has come to represent – mostly due to the actions of segregationists and hate groups who have used the flag to humiliate, intimidate and frighten into submission all whose physical appearance & beliefs differed from their own.

Our Southern heritage is a SHARED heritage – belonging to both white and black Southerners (and everyone in between). How many of our black friends have either not said anything when asked (like some of my friends) for fear of ruining a friendship and remained silent on the matter (like my childhood friend's mother), despite the

pain they feel? If you are still not convinced, ask your black friends, neighbors and relatives what the battle flag means to them...and be prepared for an answer – if it is an honest one – that will most likely make you uncomfortable.

Let me say again, I am a proud Southerner whose heart is filled with a great love for my home. I have been offered opportunities to live in other parts of the country & even abroad, but my devotion to my Southern home runs deep to my very core & holds me here. I love the South and respect her people...so much so that I feel they deserve my honesty. This flag - a flag that alienates nearly a third of our state's population...a population that has just as much right to decide what symbols should represent their state, and their home, as the rest of us - needs to be removed so that we Southerners can move forward together. I humbly beg the General Assembly to take action to make this so. To reference a song title from the 60's, "A Change Is Gonna Come"...and the time for that change is now.