

From Then to Now

The Confederate Battle Flag

Memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction formed a crucial part of southern civic and religious culture from the late nineteenth century onward. White southerners perceived themselves and the rest of the nation through the lens of the heroic Lost Cause and the alleged abuses of Reconstruction, and the symbols associated with those events took on the status of icons. During the 1890s, the memory industry that white political and religious leaders had promoted since the end of the war became institutionalized. Organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans strove to educate a new generation of white southerners on the sacrifices of the war generation, bolstering white supremacy through racial segregation and disfranchisement. The Confederate battle flag emerged from this process as an icon of the Lost Cause and a symbol of white supremacy.

The Confederate battle flag was displayed mostly at veterans' reunions and only rarely on other public occasions



CONFEDERATE BATTLE FLAG The Confederate battle flag at a 1917 reunion of Confederate veterans.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division[LC-DIG-hec-08840]



“KEEP THE FLAG, CHANGE THE GOVERNOR” A “Keep the Flag, Change the Governor” political sign is shown in a yard in Louisville, Mississippi, on October 9, 2003. Two years after Mississippi voters decided to keep a Confederate battle emblem on their state banner, the flag again became an issue in the governor’s race. In a television ad, Republican gubernatorial nominee Haley Barbour said Democratic governor Ronnie Musgrove “attacked” the state flag when he insisted on giving voters a chance to decide the banner’s design in 2001. Barbour’s campaign office in Yazoo City, Mississippi, was also distributing “Keep the Flag, Change the Governor” campaign materials. Barbour won the election.

Greg Campbell/AP Images

until the late 1940s, that is, when civil rights for African Americans reemerged as a national issue. Proponents argued that the battle flag represented heritage, not hate. Opponents denounced it as a symbol of white supremacy. Controversies and referenda over the display and location of battle flags and the design of state flags flared in South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi from 1999 through 2004, and an NAACP boycott of South Carolina over the battle flag ended only in 2015 when the legislature voted to remove the battle flag from the State House grounds following the massacre at a black church in Charleston by a white supremacist. When people in other parts of the country sometimes remark that white southerners are still fighting the Civil War, it is controversies like the one over the battle flag that they have in mind.

But the controversy is less about the past than it is about the way we use history to shape our understanding of the society we live in and our vision of its future. At issue is not just history, but whose history. In this sense the flag controversy can at least generate positive dialogue. Even so, in the interests of reconciliation, it may be time for southerners to follow Robert E. Lee’s final order to his men and “Furl the flag, boys.”

Question for Discussion

- Is the current conflict over the Confederate battle flag a reflection of differing views of history or does it derive from present-day issues?