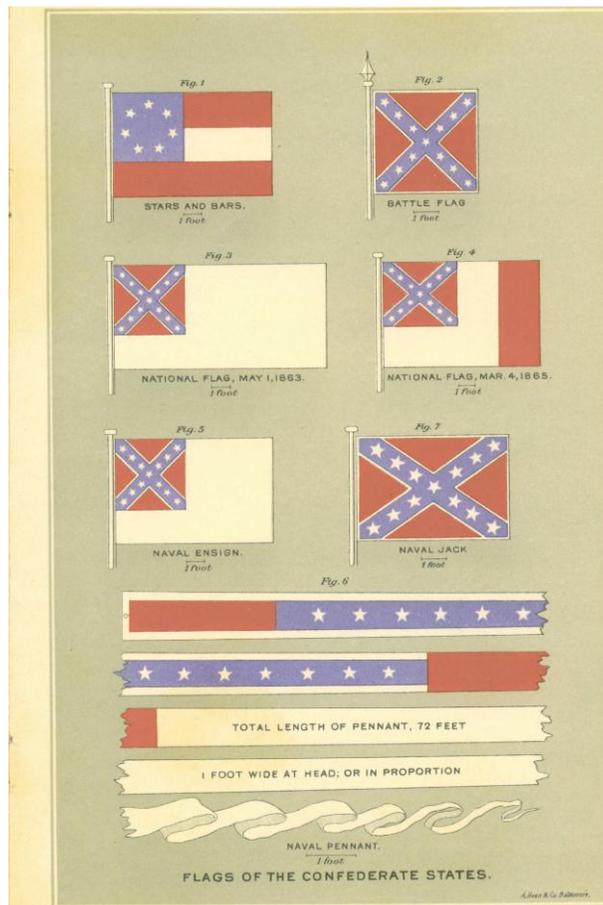


ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Confederate Flag

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The most recognizable graphic symbol to emerge from the American Civil War was a flag bearing a star-studded blue diagonal cross on a field of red. Show that symbol to most Americans (and even to many non-Americans) and they will identify it as “the Confederate flag,” “the Confederate battle flag,” or the “Stars and Bars.” Ask different people what they believe the symbol stands for or what they feel about it and you will likely receive different, often conflicting, answers. To understand how the flag became so recognizable, how it acquired so many different meanings, and became such an object of contention affords great insights into the history of the Civil War and about America since the Civil War.

Before exploring this rich history, it is necessary to clarify exactly what we mean when we talk about the “Confederate flag” or “Confederate battle flag.” This exercise is both confusing and educational. “The Confederate flag” was not, in fact, *the* Confederate flag. The blue diagonal cross on the red field was never the official flag of the Confederate States of America. But it was the essential graphic element in the Confederacy’s national flag beginning in 1863, and became the *de facto* symbol of the Confederacy – then and now.

It is similarly misleading to call the blue diagonal cross on the red field “the Confederate battle flag.” The Confederacy never designated a single pattern as the battle flag of its fighting forces. During the course of the Civil War, dozens of different patterns served as the battle flags of Confederate military units. Tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers marched and fought under those different flags, which meant more to them than did the flag later generations call the Confederate battle flag. Four decades after the war, the United Confederate Veterans imposed a uniformity that did not exist during the war, officially designating the blue cross on a square-shaped red field with a white border as the Confederate Battle Flag. Men who marched and fought under other flags protested in vain against this *ex post facto* simplification of Confederate flag history.

The version of this flag most often seen in the 20th and 21st centuries is rectangular and without a border. Those knowledgeable in the history of Confederate flags interpret this either as the late-war battle flag of the Confederate Army of Tennessee or the Naval Jack used by Confederate vessels. The resemblance of the popular rectangular pattern to historically accurate Confederate flags is coincidental. Few people deliberately display a Confederate Naval Jack or Army of Tennessee pattern battle flag. Instead, the rectangular pattern is intended as the Confederate counterpart to the U.S. national flag, the Stars and Stripes. Because so many people perceive it as “the Confederate flag,” they almost subconsciously believe that its shape ought to mirror that of “the American flag.”

This tendency to regard it as the counterpart to the Stars and Stripes also explains the popular fallacy that the blue cross flag was known as the “Stars and Bars,” a name that juxtaposes so neatly with “Stars and Stripes.” The blue cross flag was not and should not be called the Stars and Bars; during the life of the Confederacy, the blue cross flag was in fact the practical and symbolic antithesis to the real Stars and Bars.

“Stars and Bars” was the name given to the national flag of the Confederacy adopted by the Confederate Provisional Congress in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 4, 1861. It features two red and one white horizontal bars and a blue field in the corner (called the union or canton) with white stars corresponding to the number of states in the Confederacy. At first glance, it looks like the Stars and Stripes. That is no accident. The Congressional committee charged with choosing a flag found itself “overwhelmed with memorials not to abandon the ‘old flag’.” Accordingly, the committee bowed to the “strong and earnest a desire to retain at least a suggestion of the old ‘Stars and Stripes’.”

The chairman of the committee, William Porcher Miles of South Carolina, disagreed vehemently with the majority on principle and because he had championed an alternative design: a blue St. George’s (or upright) cross on a red field. Emblazoned on the cross

were fifteen white stars representing the slaveholding states, and on the red field were two symbols of South Carolina: the palmetto tree and the crescent. Charles Moise, a self-described “southerner of Jewish persuasion,” wrote Miles and other members of the South Carolina delegation asking that “the symbol of a particular religion” not be made the symbol of the nation. In adapting this design as the flag of the infant Confederacy, Miles removed the palmetto tree and crescent and substituted a diagonal cross for the St. George’s cross. Miles explained that the diagonal cross was preferable because “It avoided the religious objection about the cross (from the Jews & many Protestant sects), because it did not stand out so conspicuously as if the cross had been placed upright thus.” The diagonal cross was, Miles argued, “more Heraldric [sic.] than Ecclesiastical, it being the ‘saltire’ of Heraldry, and significant of strength and progress (from the Latin salto, to leap).”

The flag’s patron may have considered it a heraldic, not a religious, symbol, but some of his contemporaries and subsequent generations have tended to identify it as a cross. Some Confederates referred to it as the “Southern cross,” a constellation visible only the southern hemisphere and rife with sectional symbolism. Others began referring to it as a St. Andrew’s cross.

The cross of St. Andrew is a familiar symbol in western culture. The “X” shaped cross derived its name from the first century Christian martyr who did not believe himself worthy to die on the same kind of cross as Jesus Christ. Crucified in 69 A.D., Andrew’s remains were transported to the Scottish coast in the fourth century. He later became the patron saint of Scotland and his cross the symbol of Scotland. Although the mid-19th-century South was steeped in Scottish literature and poetry, the cross of St. Andrew was not widely used, and few Confederates viewed the blue cross flag as a St. Andrew’s cross with religious significance. Later generations have imbued the flag with a religious symbolism that it did not carry during the life of the Confederacy.

Miles lost the battle to design the national flag, but he won the war to create “the Confederate flag.” He correctly judged that the new nation would eventually reject a flag that imitated that of the nation from which it had broken away. The Stars and Bars (the first national flag) soon proved impractical and symbolically inadequate.

The first problems to emerge were practical. When Confederate regiments marched off to war in 1861, many carried the Stars and Bars as their battle flags. Intended primarily to assist commanders in locating and directing units on the field, battle flags that too closely resembled those of the opposing army’s flags undermined their fundamental purpose. At the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861, at least one Confederate regiment fired on another Confederate regiment, possibly because of inability to distinguish between battle flags, and Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard during a critical point in the battle could not tell whether his army was being reinforced or flanked by the enemy.

As did other generals throughout the Confederacy, Beauregard determined to adopt a new and distinctive battle flag. For advice Beauregard turned to a volunteer aide: William Porcher Miles, the same man who been chairman of the Congressional Committee on the

Flag and Seal. Beauregard wrote to his new commanding officer, Gen. Joseph E. Johnston suggesting that they ask the War Department for “badge flags made of red with two blue bars crossing each other diagonally on which shall be introduced the stars....” Johnston agreed, but suggested that the battle flag pattern should be perfectly square and thus better proportioned. The flags issued to the units of the army were of standard size varying according to service branch. The army quartermaster arranged to make prototypes of the pattern (the most famous of which were those made by sisters Jenny and Hetty Cary and their cousin Constance), and consigned the task of making 120 silk flags to 75 women in four Richmond churches.

On the afternoon of November 28, 1861, the army assembled on the heights overlooking Centreville, Virginia, for a ceremonial presentation of the new battle flags. “The troops looked well as the colonels successively received their colors to defend,” wrote staff officer G. Moxley Sorrel. Read to the troops was a general order from Beauregard that infused the strange new battle flags with the same associations as the silk flags that many communities presented to their voluntary companies:

“A new banner is intrusted to-day, as a battle-flag, to the safe keeping of the Army of the Potomac. Soldier: Your mothers, your wives, and your sisters have made it. Consecrated by their hands, it must lead you to substantial victory, and the complete triumph of our cause. It can never be surrendered, save to your unspeakable dishonor, and with its consequences fraught with immeasurable evil. Under its untarnished folds beat back the invader, and find nationality, everlasting immunity from an atrocious despotism, and honor and renown for yourselves – or death.”

Battle flags issued subsequently to the army were made not of silk, but of wool bunting, and differed slightly from the original issue (and from each other) in minor details. After the formal admission of Kentucky into the Confederacy in December 1861, the flag bore 13 stars. While the name and *élan* of the Army of Northern Virginia awaited the command of R. E. Lee in June 1862, by the end of 1861 the army possessed the flag under which it was to fight its greatest battles. The success of the army with which that flag was associated and the importance of that army in defending the Confederacy’s independence may well explain why the flag soon became the most important symbol of Confederate nationalism.

Thanks primarily to its well-traveled patrons, generals Beauregard and Johnston, the blue cross pattern was soon introduced to most other Confederate armies and departments. They took the pattern with them and sought to impose the same uniformity of flags on their new commands as they had done in Virginia. While many units in the western armies continued to carry national flags as battle flags or battle flag patterns adopted early in the war, the blue cross reigned supreme throughout the Confederacy by 1864. When Joseph Johnston assumed command of the Army of Tennessee in late 1863, he introduced as that army's official flag a rectangular variant of the blue cross pattern – similar to the Confederate naval jack and the version most widely seen in modern America.

In all theaters of war, battle flags of all patterns served important practical and, especially, emotional functions. Flags were tangible cloth embodiments of military units' *esprit d' corps* and camaraderie. Carrying the regimental colors was a high honor and grave responsibility; losing colors a source of grief and usually an indication of high casualties. Stereotypical stories of men picking up the regimental colors from the hands of fallen comrades are based on the very real heroism of men such as the fourteen members of the 26th North Carolina Infantry who fell carrying the regimental flag on the first day of Gettysburg. In this way the battle flag was "consecrated" on the field of battle.

Just as the Stars and Bars proved impractical as a battle flag, it proved uninspiring as a national flag, and for the same reason that it had been adopted. Influential southerners and southern newspapers began lobbying as early as August 1861 to replace the flag denounced as a "servile imitation" of the Stars and Stripes and "too much like the old concern for the emblem of a separate and independent nation." The new Confederate Congress appointed a new flag committee, which reported in April 1862 that any new pattern must symbolize "our absolute severance from the 'United States' and the complete separation of every sentiment indicating the faintest hope of reconstruction."

Significantly, when the Confederate people were ready to symbolically declare their "absolute severance" from the old Union, the blue diagonal cross was the pattern that made this statement of heightened nationalism. The cross symbolized the rejection of the sentiments reflected in the Stars and Bars. The Confederate nation was ready to adopt William Miles' pattern as its national flag in 1863. The *Southern Illustrated News* urged that the battle flag alone replace the "stars and bars," which, it opined, "is suggestive of the detested Federal Government and its oppressions. . . . We repeat that the baptism of blood and fire has made the battleflag of General Johnston [sic.] our national emblem. It is associated with our severest trials and our proudest achievements." On May 1, 1863, the Confederacy adopted a new national flag – the so-called "Stainless Banner" – which emblazoned the square blue cross battle flag on a white field. This was the first official government recognition of the Confederate battle flag.

Reaction to the new national flag was favorable. "The new flag, which was displayed from the Capitol on Thursday (May 14, 1863), it is gratifying to say, gives universal satisfaction," commented the Richmond *Daily Dispatch*. "Almost any sort of a flag, to take the place of the detested parody of the 'Stars and Stripes' for so long the lawful emblem of the Confederacy, would have been hailed with pleasure." The new flag was all the more satisfactory because "in it is preserved that immortal banner – the battle flag – which has been consecrated on so many battle fields. . ." In March 1865, the Congress modified the design, reducing the whiteness by adding a vertical red stripe to the flag's fly edge, creating what is known as the third national flag of the Confederacy.

Less than two months later, R. E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia furled its battle flags at Appomattox. Three weeks after Appomattox, Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee furled its rectangular blue cross flags at Greensboro, North Carolina. All other Confederate armies surrendered in the next month. On May 10, 1865, Federal cavalry

caught up with Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the remnants of his cabinet, effectively ending the existence of the Confederate government. As battle flags of military units or symbols of a living nation, the blue diagonal cross effectively died in the spring of 1865.

But, as Abram Ryan, the “poet priest” of the Confederacy predicted in his 1865 poem, “The Conquered Banner,” the flag continued – and continues still – to “live in song and story.” There was a brief period during Reconstruction when the Federal government strongly, but apparently unofficially, discouraged the appearance of flags and other symbols of the “rebellion.” But there is evidence of former Confederates breaking out unsundered flags for funereal or even quasi-military purposes by the early 1870s.

The actual battle flags of all patterns carried by and captured from Confederate military units lived on, primarily as trophies of war in the U.S. War Department building in Washington, D.C. In 1887, President Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat in the White House since 1861, endorsed a War Department plan to return the trophies to the southern states. The reconciliation gesture proved premature, especially for a president who had hired a substitute during the war. Twenty years later, in the wake of the Spanish-American War, in which southerners played a prominent role, Republican President Theodore Roosevelt succeeded where Cleveland failed. Declaring that it was no longer right for the United States to retain trophies captured from their southern brethren, the U.S. government returned the flags to the states of their origin in 1905 and unidentified flags to the Confederate Museum (now The Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia) in 1906.

In the half-century after Reconstruction, when Confederate veterans and their generation were the leaders of southern society, Confederate flags, especially those of the blue cross pattern, enjoyed a quasi-religious status and a high public profile. (Ironically, most of those flags were manufactured by companies in New York and New Jersey.) The flag was used widely in rituals related to mourning Confederate dead and celebrating the cause for which men fought and died. It was, naturally, a fixture at Memorial Day observations, veterans’ reunions and parades, and meetings of the various Confederate ancestral organizations. Significantly, as an object of reverence, its use was all but restricted to such appropriate memorial activities. An informal, but effective, taboo precluded its use as a political and commercial symbol. The taboo would weaken by the mid-20th century.

Exactly how the flag came into widespread use as something other than a Confederate memorial symbol may never be known, but some patterns are clear. Even during the height of the “Lost Cause,” the flag occasionally appeared as a symbol not just of the Confederacy, but more generically as a symbol of the South and of southern pride. By the 1930s, the flag was a presence on southern college and university campuses, thanks primarily to the Kappa Alpha fraternity. Founded at Washington College, Lexington, Virginia, in 1865 when R. E. Lee was college president, Kappa Alpha was as much a heritage organization as a fraternity. As the decades passed, Kappa Alpha blended Confederate heritage and symbols with fraternity life and was probably responsible for giving the flag a new life as a popular culture symbol.

Bespeaking as it does a southern, specifically Confederate, identity, the flag became a popular symbol for white southerners when they interacted with non-southerners. Southern men who served in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War I and especially during World War II embraced the flag as a playful totem of regional identity. For the most part, journalists played along and gave favorable coverage to dozens of incidents in which southern boys unfurled the “Stars and Bars” [sic!] in Europe and the Pacific. The nation could afford to celebrate the flag now that the grandsons of men who marched with Lee, Jackson, and Forrest were fighting under the Stars and Stripes. The same kind of expression of regional identity probably accounted for the flag’s use by southern college football fans when their teams began playing northern schools after World War II.

The flag took on a new ideological symbolism in 1948, which was the most important date in the history of the Confederate flag since 1865. In July 1948, the delegations from Alabama, Mississippi, and other southern states bolted the National Democratic Party after it passed a strong civil rights platform. As previously arranged, the bolters met in Birmingham, Alabama, to form the States Rights Party, known colloquially as the “Dixiecrats.” The party nominated J. Strom Thurmond, of South Carolina, for president. In the boisterous rally that followed, convention delegates waved Confederate flags. Not coincidentally, a large number of delegates came from southern colleges and universities, where the flag had become a fixture. But the students were not waving the flag as a mere regional symbol. University of Mississippi students told a reporter that they were in Birmingham on “serious business,” not “as college students on a lark.” A University of Alabama student-delegate told a reporter: “We’re just here to protest. Every fraternity in Tuscaloosa is flying a Confederate flag from the roof today.” Although Southern States Rights Party chiefs shunned the symbol and endeavored to build a party with national appeal, the flag became a *de facto* party symbol in the hands of its supporters.

Broadcast around the world, the photographs of Confederate flags at the Dixiecrats convention transformed the battle flag into a symbol of southern resistance to civil rights, by implication, of racial intolerance. The parallel was obvious and significant. In the 1860s, the flag with the blue diagonal cross emerged as the symbol that best represented the nationalism of a fledgling nation formed to prevent federal interference with the South’s “peculiar institution.” In the late 1940s, the flag emerged again as the most potent symbol of resistance to federal interference with Jim Crow segregation, the South’s post-Reconstruction “way of life.”

Throughout the ensuing civil rights era, ordinary white southerners displayed and employed the flag as a symbol of segregation and resistance, often in direct opposition to the Stars and Stripes. Most damaging to the flag’s long-term reputation was the Ku Klux Klan’s use of the flag in its violent defense of segregation. Contrary to modern assumption, the original Klan of the 1860s-1870s had not (despite the Confederate origins of its members) used the flag, and neither had the second Klan born at Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1915. Available evidence suggests that the Klan embraced the flag by the mid-1940s and used it more widely as other southerners did after World War II.

Dixiecrat supporters, southern football fans, and southern military servicemen gave the flag a new visibility that soon evolved into a nationally important “flag fad,” as the headline writers dubbed it. Although the flag had ideological meaning for many of its users, most analysts believed the youth-driven fad of the early 1950s to be harmless and no more threatening than the other popular culture fads that swept America in the 1950s. Significantly, the flag became popular in the north among the grandchildren of men who fought against the forces of Lee, Jackson, and Forrest. By the mid-1960s, the Confederate flag was a symbolic cacophony. It continued to symbolize Confederate soldiers and heritage, but it also symbolized the South, segregation and outright racism, and (probably deriving from the “Rebels” in the Civil War) a spirit of individual or collective rebellion and groups who projected a rebellious, individualist personae, such as bikers and truckers.

The best indication of how unprecedented was this popular culture use of the flag came from the reactions of Confederate heritage organizations. The United Daughters of the Confederacy reacted immediately in the fall of 1948 against improper use of the flag “in certain demonstrations of college groups and some political groups” and proposed model legislation to protect the flag from misuse. The UDC and the Kappa Alpha Order in particular understood that wider use of the flag meant a loss of control over its meaning. To be trivialized and politicized undermined the flag’s previously restricted role as a revered symbol of Confederate soldiers and the cause for which they fought. The campaign to protect the flag from misuse proved quixotic, especially as many flag protectors fundamentally re-defined “protection” to mean protecting the right to display the flag anywhere and everywhere against African-Americans and “scalawags” who campaigned to restrict its use.

The long-term effect of the “flag fad” and the resistance to integration was to make the Confederate flag a fixture on the southern and indeed the wider American landscape. Schools throughout the nation adopted the flag as their symbol, usually in conjunction with the popular nickname “rebels” and a “Johnny Reb” mascot. This symbolic triumvirate was popular among white schools formed as a direct or indirect result of segregation, but it also indicated the flag’s pervasive presence in American culture. For example, when the Thornton school district in suburban Chicago split into northern and southern districts in 1958, students in the southern district adopted Confederate symbols because that spoke to their new “southern” identity.

Local and state governments throughout the South similarly adopted Confederate symbols, usually the rectangular battle flag, in the 1950s and 1960s. In many cases, the convergence of the flag fad, resistance to civil rights, and the observation of the 1961-1965 Civil War centennial made it difficult to discern the motives for embracing Confederate symbolism. Clearly, the fad period – and the shattering of the taboo that restricted use of the flag in earlier decades – made the flag available for more widespread use. The city fathers of Pensacola, Florida, for example, in 1949 devised the Fiesta of Five Flags (flags of the five nations that had ruled west Florida) as a tourist attraction. In 1956, the Georgia legislature adopted a new state flag that featured the Confederate battle flag in the canton. In 1962 and 1963, respectively, South Carolina and Alabama began flying rectangular battle flags (naval

jacks) over their capitol domes, during the Civil War centennial, but also suspiciously coincident with high-profile gestures of defiance to the federal government.

The story of the Confederate flag from the late 1960s into the 21st century has been the often noisy public debates over those flags placed on the symbolic landscape in the preceding decades. Beginning with the first effective integration of public schools and the first election of African Americans to public office, they campaigned to remove Confederate flags from public places. Federal courts usually found in favor of plaintiffs when Confederate symbols related directly to resistance against integration or figured into disturbances that undermined a school's learning environment.

In 1987, the southeast region of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People launched a campaign to remove Confederate symbols from public spaces and especially from the state capitols of South Carolina and Alabama and the state flags of Georgia and Mississippi. This organized effort provoked an equally organized "southern heritage" resistance that fought to protect Confederate symbols on the landscape and the rights of individuals to display them. Fought in the courts, state legislatures, the streets, the media, and in the court of public opinion, the intense battles over the flag garnered national and even international headlines. Only in Mississippi (which in 1894 adopted a state flag with the Confederate battle flag in its canton) was the decision to keep or replace the blue cross Confederate flag put to a popular vote and only there was it retained. The latest round in the "flag wars" effectively ended in 2004, when Georgians finally settled their long and bitter debate over their state flag. When the smoke cleared, Georgia had replaced the 1956 flag with a new one that featured the state's coat of arms in the canton of a Confederate first national flag – the *real* Stars and Bars.

An outcome that at first seems almost amusingly ironic in fact accurately captures the origins, history, and significance of Confederate flags. The Confederacy adopted the Stars and Bars pattern as its national flag in 1861 because it resembled the Stars and Stripes. The Confederacy rejected it in 1863 for the same reason and because it was not, in short, Confederate enough. The only flag pattern that was Confederate enough was the blue diagonal cross on a red field – the flag that had been consecrated with the blood of Confederate soldiers and that R. E. Lee's army had made the symbol of Confederate military victory and national independence. One hundred years later, the blue diagonal cross flag was still the only flag Confederate enough to satisfy self-appointed defenders of southern heritage. They rejected the Stars and Bars for the same reason their Confederate forbears had rejected it and that their contemporary opponents in the flag wars were willing to accept it as an alternative: because it was not Confederate enough.

Twenty years after Appomattox, Confederate veteran Carlton McCarthy wrote in the conclusion of his *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life in the Army of Northern Virginia* what became the mainstream American perception of the Confederate battle flag:

"It was not the flag of the Confederacy, but simply the banner, the battle-flag, of the Confederate soldier. As such it should not share in the condemnation which our *cause*

received, or suffer from its downfall. The whole world can unite in a chorus of praise to the gallantry of the men who followed where this banner led.”

McCarthy’s explanation is convenient and attractive for those who want to defend the most visible of all Confederate flag patterns from controversy. But it is inaccurate. In truth, even during the Civil War, the star-studded blue diagonal cross on the red field became the primary symbol of the Confederate nation and cause as well as the flag of the soldier. The 150 years since the war have only made the flag’s symbolism more complicated and more powerful.
