

Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries

Position Paper

The Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries has created several position papers to convey their opinion of best practices on various topics related to historic cemeteries.

Recommendations Concerning the Use of Confederate Flags in Historic Cemeteries

October 2020

The following paper addresses the placement of confederate flags in historic cemeteries, but may apply to all cemeteries, more generally. Flags are seen in historic cemeteries for many reasons including, to recognize the purpose of the cemetery, as in a Federal veteran cemetery, to recognize veterans during Memorial Day, and as decoration for individual burials. While it may not be common in Oregon, the Confederate flag can be found in many of these situations. With this paper, the Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries is reviewing the purpose of flags in cemeteries and the historical use of what has been become known as the Confederate flag.

Memorial Day History and Commemoration:

Memorial Day was established three years after the end of the Civil War on May 5, 1868, by the order of General John A. Logan (National Cemetery Administration 2020). It set forth that May 30, 1868 was to be “designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land....We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose, among other things, “of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion.” What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance.... Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic. Let us, then, at the time appointed, gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor. (National Cemetery Administration 2020).” Memorial Day was originally established to commemorate the Union soldiers who defended the United States of America from the Confederate rebellion. Traditionally, Memorial Day is observed as the day when we commemorate and decorate the graves of the soldiers who have died while in service for the USA. This tradition has since extended to recognizing all deceased veterans who served the United States of America. This is one of the largest celebrations in historic cemeteries across Oregon. The flag of the USA is an appropriate symbol to recognize veterans on Memorial Day. In contrast, the Confederate flag is the flag of the enemy of the USA. it directly conflicts with the original intent behind Memorial Day celebrations. While historic cemeteries may have fallen soldiers from multiple wars and countries of origin, the significance of Memorial Day is to commemorate those soldiers who served for the USA.

Significance of flags and their use in historic cemeteries:

The flag of the USA is flown in many cemeteries, some are government facilities, some follow tradition of the federal cemeteries, some due to the memorial practices commonly associated with cemeteries, and some in recognition of their service to the public. These are generally raised by the cemetery organizations



themselves. Flags of the USA are often placed on specific graves by the cemeteries, community organizations or individuals. These are typically placed during holidays and following the guidelines of the cemetery. The flag of the USA represents the entire country.

The flag of the State of Oregon is also raised in cemeteries. This would serve as an indicator for the location and governmental affiliation of the cemetery. The Oregon State flag represents the entire state. Cemeteries with specific veterans or war memorials raise the Prisoner of War flag and those of the various services. Generally, these flags are only used at the specific memorial location in the cemetery. Some cemeteries may raise them for specific veterans related holidays.

Oregon does not have cemeteries specific to the Confederacy, as exist in other states. The cemeteries themselves generally do not raise the Confederate flag, but individuals have placed the Confederate flag on graves sites.

The Confederate flag is a symbol of treason, oppression, racism, and dishonor to the USA (Luckett et al. 2017, Behrend 2017, NAACP 2020, Bristow 2019, and Moeschberger 2014). It is the flag of the enemy of the USA. And over the decades since the US Civil War it has become a symbol that makes many people feel unwelcome and unsafe.

Historical context is also crucial for understanding how closely the Confederate flag is linked to the support of slavery and the perpetuation of racism.

The flag generally considered to be the Confederate flag today, was never the official flag of the Confederacy. The first official flag of the confederacy was the “Stars and Bars,” used from 1861 - 1863, then it shifted to the “Stainless Banner,” used from 1863-1865, and then the “Blood-Stained Banner,” used shortly during 1865 until the dissolution (Brundage 2005). The current Confederate flag used to symbolize the Confederacy was actually the flag of the Army of North Virginia during the Civil War. Still over time it has come to represent the intent of the Confederacy. The Confederacy began with the Mississippi Ordinance of Secession in 1861 “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth. These products are peculiar to the climate verging on the tropical regions, and by an imperious law of nature, none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun. These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization. That blow has been long aimed at the institution, and was at the point of reaching its consummation. There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin (Yale Law School 2008).” This is a clear indication for the support of slavery in the development of the Confederacy that was later down-played during Reconstruction. Andrew Stephens, the Confederate Vice President, gave a speech to justify secession known as the Cornerstone Speech in which he stated “Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition (Teaching American History 2020).” Another key speech for the Confederacy indicates a clear racist position.



After the Reconstruction era the southern states began to rewrite their state constitutions to disenfranchise Black citizens, many adopted new state flags and Confederate memorials. The Confederate flag started to be put to use as symbol of anti-black sentiment. In the 1890s, the Redemption period was when Mississippi adopted a Confederate flag on their state flag (Brundage 2005). In 1915, the movie “The Birth of a Nation” celebrates the Klu Klux Klan and celebrates the Confederate flag as a symbol of liberty, rebellion and white control of the southern states. In the 1930s, thousands of KKK members marched in Washington D.C. and used the Confederate flag as their symbol. Georgia put the Confederate flag on their state flag after the Brown vs. the Board of Education rulings in 1954. South Carolina put the Confederate flag up on the capital building in 1961, 100 years after the beginning of the Civil War. These and a series of other actions over decades following the Civil War clearly indicates how the Confederate flag has been used to symbolize racism and oppression.

The National Park Service and the Department of Veterans of Affairs have set forth guidelines that do not allow flying Confederate Flags on a flagpole in their cemeteries. They do allow for small Confederate flags to be placed on the graves of Confederate Soldiers on the Confederate Memorial Day and in some cases on Memorial Day. In these instances, a sponsor must request the flag placement, provide it, and remove it as soon as possible after the commemoration day (United States Department of the Interior 2010). While some southern states have a Confederate Memorial Day, in Oregon that is not something that is acknowledged or commemorated.

Summary Statement:

Out of respect for the United States, in acknowledgement of the original intent behind Memorial Day, as well as to provide a safe and welcoming environment in our historic cemeteries, that are meant to be public spaces, shared by all; the OCHC recommends that Confederate flags not be allowed to be flown in historic cemeteries during Memorial Day weekend celebrations, or at any other time. This includes flying the Confederate flag on flagpoles or with small flags placed on individual graves. We do not support allowing flags in historic cemeteries that promote systemic racism, fear, and oppression of anyone. It is extremely important that historic cemeteries are maintained as places where the visitors feel safe and welcome. If families have a Confederate soldier’s grave they wish to be decorated during Memorial Day, they should choose to use the United States flag or flowers, rather than a Confederate flag. Memorial Day weekend celebrations should only utilize the flag of the USA, to honor the fallen veterans who served the United States. The use of the Confederate flag should not be allowed in historic cemeteries, as it is not a symbol that should be promoted.

For more information or help:

Advice and help is available from the OCHC Program Coordinator and the OCHC Commissioners.



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