

2015

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Recommended Citation

Gurner, John J. M.A., MScR (2015) "Politicizing of History: The Role of Public History in an Ever-Changing Political Landscape," *North Alabama Historical Review*: Vol. 5 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://ir.una.edu/nahr/vol5/iss1/16>

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Politicizing of History: The Role of Public History in an Ever-Changing Political Landscape

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In honor of the University of North Alabama's newly created Public History Masters program, it seems appropriate to write about some of the issues that affect the vital role public historians have in society. With an ever-changing political climate, anything can be instantly commented on through social media to add fire to a controversy. Incorrect information and bad history seem ubiquitous these days. If the wrong thing is said or done that appears to contradict one's personal view of the past, people are likely to follow the sway of a mob charging after the proverbial monster and demand change of what is deemed as "offensive" history. Public historians have a unique job that brings us in direct contact with people. While many are engaged in research for various organizations or are in classrooms preparing the new generation for their future jobs, it is the ones who work at historic sites and engage with the public everyday that hold an

important, yet often precarious, position. The public historian who acts as a historical interpreter has a chance to impart knowledge or a new way of looking at a historical issue that a person may have previously believed they understood perfectly. This often means donning period costume and portraying a character. In certain settings, visitors may become fully engaged in an interpretive moment, such as visiting a British camp for a Revolutionary War event and watching an elegantly dressed British officer, bearing a look of indignant disregard for all, riding past on a horse, or watching a Civil War artillery demonstration for the first time and feeling the blast as the cannon belches its fire at an imaginary enemy charge. Such experiences can change a person's view of history entirely. In this capacity, the professional interpreter can have a rewarding experience, perhaps telling a more up-to-date version of a well-known story, taking the time to show visitors what a soldier carried in his knapsack, or getting children to assist a laundress in the less than glorious task of washing a soldier's moldy shirt—definitely an unforgettable experience! Yet, the interpreter can also be the one who takes the brunt of visitors' anger for an affront to their views of a particular heritage, real or imagined.

In the months since the tragic deaths of nine people during a service at a South Carolina church by an avowed white supremacist and Confederate sympathizer, there has been a spin-off issue: the use and meaning of the Confederate flag as a historical and cultural symbol. This quickly brought many historical sites that display Confederate symbols under scrutiny. As a historical interpreter, the controversy brought to home an issue I have been pondering for nearly two decades: how should historical objects that have developed a controversial place in the public sphere be used in public history? What follows is an examination of the issues that many historical sites are currently dealing with in terms of placing their site's history in the proper interpretive context despite any modern distaste for a particular, perhaps uncomfortable, aspect of history. As a secondary theme, I will offer some guidance for historical interpreters who work with the public and suggest how best to endure a heavily politicized controversy and still educate visitors about complex historical issues without offending sensibilities.

Before examining the issues surrounding the controversy, I must first give a background story to the events as I experienced them

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in a professional capacity. As a historical interpreter working at Fort Morgan State Historic Site, my job is to plan interpretive programs for the summer tours and weekly night Civil War tours. Fort Morgan is known for its role as a Confederate stronghold, but the site was used for more than just the Civil War. The problem for the staff is that many visitors only see one side to the site's history. With that in mind, our guided tours attempt to quickly highlight the other periods of the fort's use by the U.S. military. For the summer programs, the historical interpreters portray Confederate soldiers for the tours and school groups, so we focus on interpreting the soldiers' daily routine during the period of January 1861 to August 1864. For the summer of 2015, however, we continued the Civil War Sesquicentennial timeline and developed the program to portray the Union Garrison of 1865. This provided better interpretation of the last phase of the war and Fort Morgan's role as a staging area for the Federal operations against Mobile as well as the end of Third System Fortifications as seacoast defense platforms. At first, the events in Charleston seemed too far away to influence work at our site on the Gulf coast. Within two days all of that changed when pictures began emerging of the suspect posing with the Confederate battle flag. As I suspected, attention was

immediately drawn to the flag that has become the most recognized symbol of racial hatred, and with that it seemed likely that all manner of attention would be directed at historic sites once connected to the Confederacy. Many people in South Carolina quickly began calling for the removal of the Confederate flag from the state capitol. An editorial from the Charleston *Post and Courier* stated: “there is no appropriate place for the flag at the Statehouse.”¹ On June 23, while the legislature met to vote on issues for the upcoming special session, a rally was held where protesters of the flag hoisted their signs high. Likewise, South Carolina state senator Vincent Sheheen of Camden introduced a bill that would bring the flag down.² As the events unfolded, the Fort Morgan staff prepared for the likely rush of reporters, arriving like a horde of locusts hungry for a story. My first task was to instruct my seasonal interpreter to avoid discussion with visitors concerning the events in Charleston and the issue of the battle flag. The next day on June 24, Governor Robert Bentley surreptitiously had the Confederate

¹ Editorial, “Time to furl the Confederate flag,” Charleston *Post and Courier*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20150622/PC1002/150629774> (accessed December 4, 2015).

² Cynthia Roldan, “South Carolina lawmakers agree to discuss removing Confederate flag,” Charleston *Post and Courier*, June 23, 2015, <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20150623/PC1603/150629759> (accessed December 4, 2015).

battle flag removed from the Capitol building, and when asked why he had it removed he said, “This is the right thing to do. We are facing some major issues in this state regarding the budget and other matters we need to deal with.”³ Indeed, it was a bold move. By that afternoon a reporter from a Mobile news channel arrived and quickly began looking for *the* flag. Fort Morgan normally flies five flags to represent the nations that have controlled Mobile Point and the Gulf coast. We have a sixth flag that was the unit standard of the Montgomery Rifles-- one of the first units to garrison the fort during the Secession Crisis and later became a part of Confederate Army of Alabama. For the reporter, her attempt to find a story, or create one if need be, was thwarted by the rains of the early morning so that all of the flags were not flying that day. It did not, however, stop the reporter from delivering a story entitled, “Fort Morgan Still Flies Confederate Flag.” Thankfully, I was dressed as a Federal artillery sergeant for the next tour, which probably further hindered any planned stirring of the proverbial pot. Nevertheless, the story was weak and only managed to get some opinions from the visitors concerning the issue of the

³ Charles Dean, “Alabama Gov. Bentley removes Confederate flags from Capitol grounds,” 24 June 2015
http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2015/06/confederate_flag_removed_from.html,
(accessed November 16, 2015).

Confederate flag; interestingly, most of the people interviewed said it was acceptable for the flag to be displayed at a historic site.⁴ The quick media attention concerning the Confederate battle flag, combined with the fervor of the protesters calling for its removal from the public sphere, shows that Governor Bentley's action, which South Carolina's governor would later follow, resurrected an old issue for historians to yet again consider: when and where can a controversial and highly politicized historical symbol be displayed?

Before a suitable answer can be given, two aspects of the subject must be addressed: symbolism and history education. To understand the Confederate battle flag as a symbol, one must first understand why the flag was created, how it was initially used, and how it is used in a modern context. As an item that is part of a region's or nation's material culture, flags occupy a unique place. National flags are considered important symbols portraying who they are and something of the nation's heritage. The first flags were mostly for military purposes and evolved into family emblems; much later flags were developed for powerful houses (essentially a collection of related

⁴ Debbie Williams, "Fort Morgan Still Flying Confederate Flag," June 24, 2015, <http://wkrg.com/2015/06/24/fort-morgan-still-flying-confederate-flag/> (accessed November 22, 2015).

sub-families), i.e. the warlords who claimed power for particular regions, thus becoming the first nobles. Dynastic flags formed the basis for the first national flags because of the efforts of ambitious kings or powerful dukes to impose their will upon larger areas of land. The process was not easy, but over many centuries the dynasty gains more territory, and adds more minor lords to the list of allies, the nation starts to take shape. The likely symbol to represent the new collection of provinces that make up a nation has tended to come from the ruling house. In Western Europe, the rise of the Bourbon dynasty and the making of the kingdom of France is one example of the general scenario just given. The symbol or sigil of the Bourbon kings became not only the motif of the national flag, but was also the form used for the colonial flag that flew in the far-flung French territories around the globe- the white flag emblazoned with three gold or yellow *fleur-de-lis*. Out of the need for warring factions and knights to identify each other on the battlefield, heraldry was developed to organize the colors and motifs adopted by powerful leaders.⁵ Consequently, it is a complicated system where even the smallest change of a family's standard gave specific meaning as the families

⁵ H. W. Koch, *Medieval Warfare*, (London: Bison Books, 1978), 115.

intermarried or old braches died off. In the modern era, as warfare evolved into larger events with numerous types of units engaged across battlefields that could span miles, the flag designs had to be simple and distinctive enough so commanders knew where the units were located along the battlefield. During the first phase of the Secession Crisis, many units in the Confederate States had designed their own battle flags. When these units were re-organized into the Confederate States Army, such flags carried by companies- some having less than a hundred men- were required to be sent home once full regiments were raised.

For organizational purposes, flags were essential and a considerable amount of ceremony was given when presenting the regimental flag to the men. Such ceremonies often included what Bell Wiley colorfully described as “platitudinous” oration typical of modern high school valedictorian speeches and was given by “some beauteous, behooped patriot.”⁶ The solemnity of the occasion ensured that Civil War soldiers learned to revere the unit banner, as it instilled *esprit de corps* and confirmed the individual soldier’s commitment to

⁶ Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943; repr., New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1994), 21.

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fight for his people. Men revered the battle flag and most would do anything to save the colors from falling into enemy hands. The history of the British Army during the Napoleonic War provides many useful examples of how soldiers developed attachments to their flags.

Likewise for the French Army, soldiers prided their attachment to certain regiments and the loss of their Eagles, solid cast bronze statuettes mounted on a long blue shaft, caused just as much shame as their British counterparts would have felt if such symbols of soldiery were lost during battle. During the American Civil War similar issues with the loss of the colors occurred. Indeed, numerous courthouses and museums in the North would be lacking if they did not have the battle flags of captured Confederate units to showcase the gallantry of their homegrown citizen-soldiers. In essence, the colors or battle flags represented the soldiers of the units, so displaying them in a non-military/historical context is improper. The issue for the general public is why some people insist on flying or displaying a flag that should not have any modern significance.

The problem with producing a good answer comes from the long and twisted history of the development of the politicized Confederate flag. This is not a soldier's flag, or at least not one that is

relevant to any historical regiment. Indeed, this symbol is a later construction that has developed a different and more forceful presence in several political and pseudo-ethnic ideologies- namely the Confederate cause as the foundation of the “Southern nation.” The symbol of that nation has, for some at least, become the now ubiquitous Confederate flag; it just happens to be the wrong flag. As mentioned above, there were numerous flags used by the Confederate army, but the reason why *one* type prevailed as the all-encompassing banner has caused much discussion. One can easily blame the Virginians for this, or at least the veterans of the Army of Northern Virginia, for the first phase of the adoption of a particular flag for post-war causes. The problem, however, is one of misuse and the twisting of a military banner into something else has only recently been called into question by scholars. In 1993, Dr. Robert D. England penned an interesting newspaper opinion where he poignantly observed, “Whoa boys! We’ve got the wrong flag. There was never anything called “the” Confederate battle flag.” His article was in response to another Confederate flag controversy after the newly-elected governor of Alabama Jim Folsom brought down the Confederate flag. As England

points out, “Never mind that it never had flown over the dome in its new condition. Gov. Folsom hoped to end the controversy which consumed a forest of trees, hacked for sawdust for legal briefs and newsprint.”⁷

A decade later, John Coski examined the development of the Confederate battle flag in both the design process for the flags used by the secessionists and Confederates as well as the use of these symbols in the modern era. Coski’s work provides a great look at how emerging nations create symbols that set themselves apart from their progenitors. For the Confederates, as Americans who no longer aligned with the United States yet still clung to the symbols of the old order, this meant adopting a national flag that still had the same colors people thought represented them, but in a style different from their mother country. This process also consumed the American patriots during 1775 through 1776 while adopting flags which initially exemplified their resistance to a tyrannically tax-hungry parliament. Many flags emerged from this period; in essence, these reflected the ideology of the separately emerging states which would coalesce into a unified resistance. The Gadsden Flag, a rectangular yellow field

⁷ Dr. Robert D. England, “Whoa Boys! We’ve got the Wrong Flag,” *Muscle Shoals Times Daily*, May 16, 1993.

featuring a coiled rattler and the words “Don’t Tread On Me” inscribed below, is just one example of numerous types used during the first phase of resistance. The Grand Union flag (field of thirteen horizontal stripes, alternating red and white, with the British Union Jack in the canton) symbolized the Britishness of colonial resistance,⁸ but once the goals of the conflict changed less than a year later, so too must the flags change to show a nation fighting for its survival from the supposed tyranny of Mother Britannia. The first attempt at creating a unique Confederate flag, a living symbol of the nation itself, was a flag that was very similar to the U.S. colors but with three alternating stripes of red, white, and red, and a blue canton which contained seven pentagonal stars arranged in a circle- later one for each state of the Confederacy. This is often referred to as the “Stars & Bars,” and for the time was a well-designed flag that allowed for easy production while containing the three colors that many southerners still regarded as integral in their identity. Not everyone, of course, was pleased with

⁸ It has been long regarded that the adoption of the Grand Union Flag occurred on 1 January 1776. General George Washington was conducting an inspection of the troops still assembled at Prospect Hill near Cambridge, MA., and officially adopted the flag for the Continental army. Research by Byron DeLear, of the North American Vexillological Association, has confirmed this as a “solid” story. Edgar B. Herwick III “Somerville Still Raises the Grand Union Flag 238 Years Later,” January 2, 2014, <http://wgbhnews.org/post/somerville-still-raises-grand-union-flag-238-years-later> (accessed December 05, 2015).

the design. The Chair of the Flag and Seal of the Provisional Congress, William Porcher Miles, believed it too closely resembled the U.S. flag, but his objections were not taken into consideration until the next year.⁹ The Confederacy had many units that went to the first battle of the war at Manassas Junction in July 1861 with the First National as battle flags. The battle quickly showed the problem of using flags that looked too much like the enemy's colors, because once the fog of war set in men had to be able to recognize their standards during the confusion of the fight. Manassas proved that the similarity of the Federal and Confederate army flags was a liability and a change had to be made for the benefit of the army. For the civilians, the objections to the Stars & Bars were that it 'failed to satisfy...' and was essentially a 'hybrid bunting in use during our transitional period from attempted to confirmed independence of the country of whose flag it is a plagiarist.'¹⁰ In a strange twist of irony, the First National caused problems for northerners as reported in the Chattanooga *Daily Rebel*:

“On the night of the 3rd of July[1862] the secessionists of Middletown, Delaware, hoisted a Confederate flag on a pole which had been erected by Unionists, and that early on the

⁹ John M. Coski. *The Confederate Battle Flag: American's Most Embattled Emblem*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2006), 4-5.

¹⁰ Robert Bonner, "Flag Culture and the Consolidation of Confederate Nationalism," *Journal of Southern History* 68 no.2 (May, 2002): 313.

morning of the 4th the “Stars and Bars” were supported by forty rounds by supporters of the Abolition Government. When they discovered their mistake they were so enraged that they immediately hauled down the flag and tore it to shreds, and vigorously applied themselves to washing the pole with soap and water to cleanse the polluting effects of the Confederate banner.”¹¹

Fortunately for the Confederate Army, General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, the commander of the Confederate forces at Manassas, quickly contacted his former aide, William Miles, to develop a new army flag. Beauregard had seen first-hand the confusion in battle from the similarity of battle flags and pressed upon Miles the need for a change. Miles, yet again, proposed using his original flag design which the Flag committee had rejected- a diagonal blue cross emblazoned with stars for each state in the Confederacy, on a red field. The committee rejected the proposal to change the national flag, so Beauregard, in a bold attempt to outmaneuver the civilians, went to his superior, General Joseph E. Johnston, about creating distinctive army flags separate from the ‘peace’ flag.¹² After more discussion, it was decided to use the “Miles” flag as the new army

¹¹ Chattanooga *Daily Rebel* 08/09/1862, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015209/1862-08-09/ed-2/seq-3/> (accessed 12/10/2015).

¹² Coski, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 8.

battle flag. Miles had spent much time developing this design. At one point he changed the design from his original motif that used a cross of St. George (Latin cross) that was part of an early secession flag of South Carolina, and replaced it with a saltire or diagonal cross that was used in heraldry. Miles was very conscious of the use of heraldic symbols and made his changes to the design because a Jewish citizen of South Carolina had written to him asking for the change so the flag would not appear to have ties to one particular faith.¹³ With the saltire, Miles succeeded in creating a visually striking flag that incorporated the colors many southerners regarded as part of their heritage as Americans, whose ancestors had participated in the first war of independence. More importantly, the Confederate States Army had a distinctive battle flag that was separate from the national flag. This battle flag was a square field of red, bordered in white, emblazoned with a blue diagonal cross, bordered in white, and twelve stars within the cross, and was adopted by the Army of the Potomac (later renamed the Army of Northern Virginia). I shall henceforth refer to the aforementioned flag as the Southern Cross. The problem with using the saltire, as Coski points out, is that while it is a standard heraldic

¹³ Ibid., 5.

device it can easily be misconstrued as St. Andrew's cross and by extension impart a strong Christian connotation. Indeed, many denominations of Christianity use particular crosses to represent their churches, but despite the attempt by Miles to lessen the implied religiosity of the flag by using the 'more *Heraldic [sic]* than *Ecclesiastical*' saltire, the flag would acquire layer upon layer of extra meaning in terms of heritage, culture, and by extension, defense of slavery.¹⁴ Confederates quickly inferred their own religious views into the meaning of the diagonal heraldic cross, once described by one flag committee member as resembling a pair of 'blue suspenders.'¹⁵ The editor of the *Countryman* revealed his religious interpretation when he stated that by adopting the St. Andrew's Cross emblem, 'the southern people recognize Christ and him crucified, and his precious teachings...'¹⁶ What was important for commanders was the implementation of uniform battle standards and ordering new flags to replace the old ones being used. This was not to be an easy task. Many units of the various departments were strewn across a vast geographical area and had already developed their own standards,

¹⁴Coski, 5, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁶ Bonner, "Flag Culture," *JSH* 68, 315.

fought under them, and were very much attached to these fighting colors. After the Army of the Potomac adopted the Southern Cross as its battle flag, General Beauregard urged flag conformity. Later, transferred to the west, he continued his crusade, which was taken up by General Joseph Johnston as commander of the Army of Tennessee. John Bell Hood tried the same thing, despite his understanding of ‘the pride many regiments of the corps feel in other flags which they have gloriously borne in battle but interests of the service are imperative.’¹⁷ Although many regimental commanders resisted the order, most units were forced to change the colors to the Southern Cross design, but with a slight deviation. Instead of a complete adoption of the Virginian flag, the flags were made rectangular and with no border. Some units from Alabama retained their original banners, and these relics show the problem with people of today who ascribe one type of flag for all the units that fought for the Confederacy.¹⁸

¹⁷ General Orders no. 39, March 11, 1864 in Coski, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 13.

¹⁸ In an interview with Robert Bradley of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, he explained that a large majority of Alabama units of the Army of Tennessee were called the “d--n blue flag boys” due to their ‘non-regulation’ flags. Since these units became part of General Patrick Cleburne’s division they were exempted from Johnston’s order. A quick look at the ADAH online photograph collection shows the variety of unit flags, particularly the 16th and 33rd who were issued Hardee/Cleburne flags after losing the originals at Franklin, <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/search/searchterm/civil%20war%20flags/mode/all/order/date/page/1>.

For the average public historian acting as tour guide or historical interpreter, the opportunity to relate even a brief outline of an artifact or historical symbol's history, such as the account of the Confederate battle flag given above, is normally not possible during most encounters. So how do we educate people regarding the accuracy of their personal views regarding a historical issue? First, perhaps obviously, that starts in the classroom. Secondary education teachers who teach history have more opportunities than ever before to obtain the correct information either from their former professors or from digital archives. While most schools are governed by state and local standards of instruction, teachers still have the power to remove the old and outdated views of sensitive historical periods and insert modern interpretations, i.e. use the national flags of both the combatants of the Civil War instead of the contentious battle flag. Given the modern era development of the Ku Klux Klan as a racist institution that propagates hate and fear, removing the popular version of the Confederate flag is one way to lessen the discomfort for some, yet maintain historical accuracy detached from any possible controversy. Despite attempts from well-known Civil War groups such

as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans to persuade fringe groups to cease using the rectangular battle flag for their political agendas,¹⁹ the flag's use in the public sphere will likely never stop. However, as historians, we can use such a symbol to educate people about what the imagery means and explain how perceptions become distorted overtime. A colleague of mine once said, "The worst place to learn about the Civil War is at your grandmother's knee." He has a point and one that is hard to fight, especially if a visitor asks a question that requires one to answer in a way that contradicts what someone was taught at home, saying that the sainted grandma- preserver of family lore and epitome of sagacity- was wrong!

Returning now to problems with politicized history, often used by conflicting sides to further their cause; how can public historians do their jobs during what often turns into a public relations crisis? As mentioned earlier, the emergence of a distracting controversy with a historic site flying a Confederate flag never emerged, and Fort Morgan

¹⁹ Coski, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 106; The SVC produced a new flag resolution where it stated, "the use of the Confederate Battle Flag by extremist political groups and individuals who seek to clothe themselves in respectability by misappropriating the banner under which our southern ancestors fought for a Just Cause which is as noble as much latter day is ignoble," *New Flag Resolution*, <http://www.sev.org> (accessed December 17, 2015).

was spared, this time. The potential was there, and is likely to re-emerge if attention is again brought back to the issue of the battle flag. After a day or two of fretting over how to deal with the issue, I decided the best way to handle any questions about the flag, beyond the usual question of why the site does not fly *the* flag, was to tackle it head-on. Shying away from answering any question concerning an artifact's meaning and use, or a historic site's history, only portrays an unprofessional attitude and possibly one's own personal bias. Having grown up in the Mid-South- from northern Mississippi to northern Alabama- my own preconceived notions of the South's less than perfect history had to be assessed and pushed out of mind when writing or talking to people about the region's history. While the taint of rebellion still hovers across the reconstructed states, what happened is not the fault of anyone living today; some of us just happened to be descendants of those rebels. When wearing a Confederate uniform for an event, my role is that of historical interpreter, but the role of historian will quickly emerge when a visitor asks a question regarding anything that happened at the site beyond "the War," or when linking issues together to present a larger historical landscape. Speaking

candidly, with regard for propriety, and with evidence behind those words, such as quoting from a letter or diary of a person involved, does more to make any moment into an interpretive one, which a person can take with them and hopefully share with others. If there is one good thing that the controversy of the Confederate battle flag has done, it is to elicit discussion regarding the propriety of its use and promote more accurate use of historical images. Baldwin County, Alabama, is a good example of how the controversy produced a proper change when the county Department of Archives and History decided to change the flags on the county seal.²⁰ Not only was the old Confederate battle flag removed and replaced with the Confederate First National flag, other changes were made to better reflect the county's colonial heritage. For the longest time the British flag used on the seal was the blue flag with a red cross of St. George, bordered in white, overlaid on a white cross of St. Andrew, but it also contained a smaller red saltire emblazoned on the edges of the white cross. This happens to be the current flag of the United Kingdom, known as the

²⁰ John Sharp, "Baldwin County votes to remove four flags from its seal including Confederate battle flag," October 6, 2015, http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2015/10/baldwin_county_votes_to_remove.html (accessed December 10, 2015).

Union Flag, which became the official British flag in 1801²¹ after Ireland was incorporated into the United Kingdom.²² The red saltire, then referred to as the cross of St Patrick,²³ was added to represent Ireland, so the Union flag was not used by the short-lived British colony of West Florida (1763-1781). Now the proper colonial flag, the King's Colour, has its rightful place. Likewise, the Spanish and French flags were corrected to the proper colonial banners. This shows that despite any politicized moment, no matter how it was generated, small but important changes can be made for an accurate portrayal of cultural heritage. In the long-term, actions such as those taken by the BCDAH indicate that when a populace allows historians to add a new

²¹ <http://www.flaginstitute.org/wp/flag-registry/?flagtype=National+Flag> (accessed December 30, 2015).

²² R. F. Foster has described the "Union with Westminster" as a "radical act of reform" and largely part of a security measure due the 1798 rebellion, *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 183.

²³ The addition of the red saltire to the British flag has a strange history due to its dubious historical authenticity. The cross may have originated from misconceptions of unit banners first used by the Earls of Kildare as early as 1467, who later participated in many battles to remove the English presence from Ireland. Alternatively, flags bearing the Cross of Burgundy (red, rough-shaped cross on a white field) were used for various units of Irishmen in the service of Spain. These units fought against Anglo-Irish and English soldiers in Ireland at different times, so the symbol may have become associated with Ireland through them. The red saltire, as far as can be ascertained, was not an original symbol of old Eire, despite modern assertions to the contrary, like those of David Kerr writing for the [ulsternation.org](http://www.ulsternation.org), http://www.ulsternation.org.uk/cross_of_st_patrick.htm (accessed December 28, 2015).

layer of accuracy to the perception of local history, everyone benefits. Nevertheless, there are sure to be more controversies in the future. Consequently, usurpation of the Gadsden Flag by the Tea Party and other groups may cause Revolutionary War sites to come under scrutiny if found flying it, even when displayed in the context of representing the first phase of colonial resistance. In responding to a politicized moment of historical importance, should historians use a crisis as an educational moment? Yes, but it has to be done carefully. A recent college graduate working as a tour guide may not have the ability to deal with a media spawned PR nightmare, but professional historians can act as a united front to thwart the distortion of historical facts. Perhaps historians should push for the removal of secessionist symbols from official seals, flags, and other displays, but it is not our place. Moreover, in dealing with politicized moments of corrupted history, if public historians stand firm with the facts and carefully constructed theories, we may yet dispel the myths, slay all shibboleths, and accomplish our mission to educate the people.