

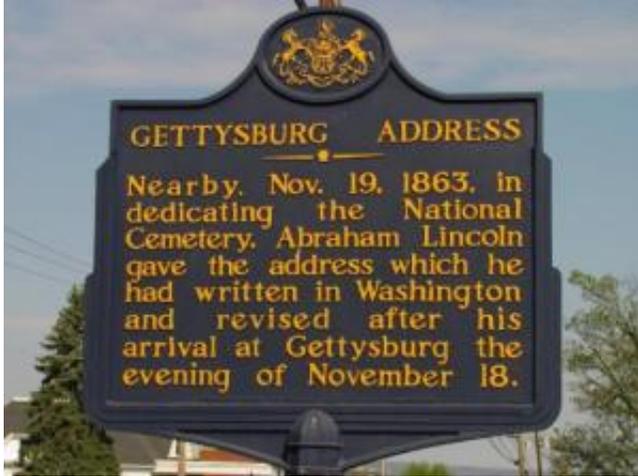
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150 Years Later, the Confederacy Still Hasn't Entirely Left Gettysburg



Last weekend, we visited Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the site of perhaps the most important battle in the Civil War. Referred to as the “high-water mark” of the Confederacy, Gettysburg is where Union forces turned back Robert E. Lee’s last invasion of the North during a massive and bloody four-day struggle in early July, 1863. Given that history, we were shocked and dismayed to discover that today, 150 years later, significant amounts of Confederate celebration and sympathy remain in and around the town of Gettysburg.

To those of us who believe that the end of legal slavery and the preservation of the Union were cherished moments in our nation’s history, Gettysburg is hallowed ground. It is the place where President Abraham Lincoln gave the [Gettysburg Address](#), in which he tied the Northern cause to not only preservation of the Union, but also to advancing the principles of liberty and equality enshrined in our nation’s founding documents. The North was far from perfect, but as President Lincoln explained in the Gettysburg Address, the Civil War was about whether our experiment in making a “government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people” would “perish from the earth.”

Gettysburg is the place where the the [20th Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment](#), led by [Lieutenant Colonel Joshua Chamberlain](#), a Bowdoin College professor who was fluent in ten languages, arguably saved the war for the North. The 20th Maine had the task of holding the far left flank of the Union line, as a flanking of the line would have given the Confederate forces a large strategic advantage and likely led to Union defeat at Gettysburg. Running out of ammunition, the 20th Maine charged directly into the Confederate forces that were massing for another assault. The headlong attack so surprised the Confederates that were preparing to flank the Union line that they were quickly overwhelmed and the flanking attempt was turned back.

Gettysburg is the place where the [1st Minnesota Volunteer Infantry](#), needing to hold off advancing Confederate troops from capturing Cemetery Ridge, a place of strategic high ground, until Union reinforcements could arrive, launched a direct assault on a Confederate force five times its size. In less than

ten minutes, 70-80% of the 262 members of the 1st Minnesota were killed, but they succeeding in buying the time needed to hold Cemetery Ridge.

Gettysburg is the place where more than 23,000 Union soldiers were killed or wounded in four days of fighting for the preservation of our country.

Given that history, it is especially galling for there to be continued Confederate sympathy in Gettysburg. Yet that is exactly what we encountered. A number of stores sold t-shirts and other memorabilia with Confederate flags and slogans such as “Proud Confederate – I Don’t Need to Be Reconstructed.” It was far from unusual to see people, cars, and houses proudly displaying the Confederate Stars and Bars flag. And our hotel concierge helpfully explained that most of the people she knew around there were more sympathetic to the South because “of course you can understand the Southern side. It isn’t about slavery, but they were correct about the need for states’ rights.”

It boggles the mind that people who presumably consider themselves to be Americans can continue to celebrate and support a Confederate movement that committed treason. Treason is defined as a violent crime that undermines one’s country. And that is exactly what the Confederates committed. Not willing to work through the political structure established by our Constitution and laws, or to accept that ones beliefs and interests do not always prevail in a democracy, the Confederates took up arms against their own government, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans, and the destruction of untold numbers of cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

It is just as mind-boggling that Confederate sympathizers deny the critical role that the South’s desire to preserve slavery played in causing that war. The oft-repeated claim that the Southern cause was about states’ rights rather than slavery represents, at best, willful blindness to reality. In reality, the two issues were inextricably intertwined, as the “right” that the Confederate states committed treason to defend was to be able to own other human beings.

While Confederate sympathizers today try to erase the role of slavery in the Civil War, they cannot escape the historical record making clear that the desire to preserve slavery was the motivation for secession from the Union. For example, in its [Declaration of the Causes of Secession](#), Mississippi identified as the “immediate causes which induce and justify” secession:

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.

The [Declarations of the Causes of Secession](#) of South Carolina, Texas, and Georgia are focused on slavery and the North’s efforts to end slavery as the cause of secession and the resulting Civil War.

Similarly, [E.S. Dargan, former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court](#) and member of the Confederate States of America Congress, explained his vote at his state’s secession convention in favor of secession as follows:

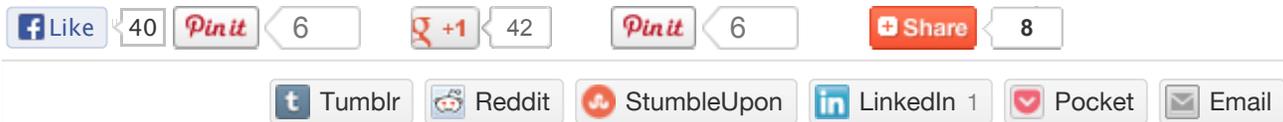
I feel impelled, Mr. President, to vote for this Ordinance by an overruling necessity. Years ago I

was convinced that the Southern States would be compelled either to separate from the North, by dissolving the Federal Government, or they would be compelled to abolish the institution of African Slavery. This, in my judgment, was the only alternative; and I foresaw that the South would be compelled, at some day, to make her selection. The day is now come, and Alabama must make her selection, either to secede from the Union, and assume the position of a sovereign, independent State, or she must submit to a system of policy on the part of the Federal Government that, in a short time, will compel her to abolish African Slavery.

An [1865 editorial in the Charleston \(South Carolina\) Mercury](#) opposing a proposal to conscript slaves to fight for the Confederacy, similarly explained that:

It was on account of encroachments upon the institution of slavery by the sectional majority of the old Union, that South Carolina seceded from that Union. It is not at this late day, after the loss of thirty thousand of her best and bravest men in battle, that she will suffer it to be bartered away; or ground between the upper and nether mill stones, by the madness of Congress, or the counsels of shallow men elsewhere.

In short, Confederate sympathizing is little more than an implicit celebration of treason and a willful blindness to the immoral and grotesque practice of slavery that such treason attempted to preserve. It is also a mindset that holds our nation back. The simple fact is that the United States of America will thrive and succeed to its fullest only if we recognize that we are all in this together regardless of our race or of the state or region we live in, and that we have established methods under our Constitution for both determining the will of the majority and protecting the rights of the minority. We will be a far stronger nation if all of us, whether we live in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, or Vicksburg, Mississippi, realize that unity, not a celebration of secession, is absolutely necessary for, in President Lincoln's words, a "government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people" to not "perish from the earth."



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One Response to “150 Years Later, the Confederacy Still Hasn’t Entirely Left Gettysburg”

1. *Churchlady320* Says:
[July 22nd, 2013 at 11:42 pm](#)

While anyone can feel compassion for the dead and wounded on either side, the cause of the Confederacy was the perpetuation of slavery, the owning and dehumanization of Black men, women, and children. There is no other issue. That's it. The non slave owning families were ruthlessly exploited by the Confederacy, taking the men as cannon fodder, subjecting the women and kids to the

slaving and ruthless pillaging BY THE SOUTHERN ELITES. Starvation and land grabs came from the Confederate raiders NOT from the North. Read Stephanie McCurry's astonishing book, "Confederate Reckoning" to get the REAL story and then explain why ANYONE who fought for plantation owners should celebrate the Confederacy today. Brainwashed and fearful – that's the only explanation. If all you do is fear Black people, you've been had. Again. As the planter class did in Reconstruction, so they're sticking it to poor whites today. And those who buy it are fools. The cause and its leaders are not your friends.

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