

THE TOWN COMMON COMMEMORATIVE FLAGS

HISTORY

In 1974, the Pitt County Historical Society presented the City of Greenville with six flags to be flown over the Town Common. The gift, given as part of the city's bicentennial celebration, was designed to remind citizens of their historical heritage through a visual representation of the various governments under which the people of Greenville have lived since the city's founding in 1774.

The 1974 flags were: (1) a Greenville city banner; (2) the British Colonial flag (Union Jack); (3) the Grand Union flag which had been adopted by the Continental Congress in 1776; (4) The Stars and Stripes flag adopted as the national flag in 1777; (5) the Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America; and (6) the North Carolina state flag. Over the years, several changes occurred as the original flags wore out. The city was unable to find a replacement for the city flag, and the 50-star U. S. flag was put up in its place. The current flag of Great Britain was mistakenly ordered when the British Union Jack wore out. In addition, when the Grand Union flag wore out, it was not replaced.

For nine years, the only concerns regarding the Common flags were those of wear and tear. In 1983, then City Manager Gail Meeks received a letter from Glenn J. Maughan regarding the flags. Maughan was a Massachusetts native who resided in Greenville while pursuing a degree in education from East Carolina University. While a student, he had successfully campaigned to have the word "colored" removed from the World War I marker on the Pitt County Court House lawn, and had protested the presence of U. S. Army recruiters on the ECU campus. Maughan wanted two flags removed from the Common: the British Union Jack and the Confederate battle flag. He saw no ties between Greenville and the two flags, and felt the British flag would be more appropriate in Dare County. He believed the Confederate battle flag to be (1) racist since it was used by the Ku Klux Klan and (2) a flag of violence since it was used only for war. He also noted that it was not the official flag of the Confederacy.

Based on this single complaint, City Manager Meeks removed the flags in question. The action created immediate controversy and was reported in the media in Greenville, Raleigh, and other areas. Mayor Percy Cox, in response to a query, stated that a decision concerning which flags would fly on the Common was to be made by the Pitt County Historical Society, which had originally presented the flags to the city. The Society met and chose the flag adopted by the Confederate Congress in March 1985, and which is

currently flown by the State of North Carolina at the Bentonville Battlefield Park. In the meantime, the City Manager had contacted the N. C. Division of Archives and History for information on which flags had flown over the region since 1760. This agency supplied the requested data, but without realizing its error, used an outdated and incorrect reference book for its information on the Confederate flag. This work incorrectly stated that the so-called Stars and Bars was the first official flag of the Confederacy. Based on this erroneous data, the agency suggested it as a compromise to flying the Confederate battle flag, which had been approved only as a military and not a national flag by the Confederate government. Within days of the Pitt County Historical Society meeting, City Manager Meeks, without consulting the Historical Society, and in disregard of its decision, announced to the press that she had selected the March 1861 "Stars and Bars" flag to represent the Confederate period of the city's history on the Town Common. Despite criticism from the press that "What does it take to fight City Hall?---One complaint!" and the advice of a professional historian that the flag never was recognized as the official national flag of the Confederacy, the Stars and Bars continues to represent the Confederate States on the Town Common.

The issue died down, but remained beneath the surface. In 1988, the Pitt County Historical Society sent a proposal to current City Manager Gregory Knowles which requested that all the flags on the Town Common be the official national flag of the country each represented. In the case of the Confederate flag, this would require a choice between the National Flag of 1863 or the National Flag of 1865, since these were the only two flags officially adopted by the Confederate government.

REASONS FOR THE REPLACING THE STARS AND BARS FLAG WITH THE OFFICIAL FLAG OF THE CONFEDERACY:

1. To be historically accurate, the flags flown on the Town Common should be only those legally adopted and in use by those governments in existence during the various periods of the city's history.
2. The Stars and Bars, which is currently used to represent the Confederate period of Greenville's history was not the official flag of the Confederacy. This was the provisional flag of the Provisional Congress. This "Congress" was in reality merely a convention of delegates sent to Montgomery, Alabama by separate conventions in only seven Southern states. It's flag was not approved by the officially

elected Confederate Congress. The Congressional Committee on Flag and Seal continued to receive designs for a permanent flag through 1861, 1862, and until an official flag was finally approved in 1863. The Stars and Bars was unpopular in the Confederacy because its resemblance to the U. S. flag caused confusion on the battlefield. Since it was not the legally recognized flag of the Confederacy, this flag is out of keeping with the remaining legally recognized flags on the Town Common.

3. Only two flags were adopted as official national flags by the Confederate States of America--the 1863 and 1865 flags. These are therefore the only acceptable choices to represent the 1861-1865 period.

4. The criticisms expressed by Glenn Maughan which resulted in the removal of the British and Confederate flags were based on three things: (1) ignorance of history; (2) a failure to understand the context of the Town Common flags; and (3) emotion resulting from numbers 1 and 2. Therefore, any decision regarding the flags in question should be based on historical facts, and not on the inadequate research and personal opinions of a single individual. Nevertheless, Maughan represents a certain body of opinion, and his arguments should be understood and answered: (A) Maughan stated that the British flag should fly in Dare County rather than Pitt. Maughan ignored the fact that Pitt Countians and Greenville residents considered themselves citizens of England prior to 1776. Because of this, the British flag of that time should fly on the Town Common to represent this period of history. (B) Maughan believed that no Confederate flag should be exhibited outside a museum. However, North Carolina, Pitt County, and Greenville were under Confederate rule from 1861 into 1865. North Carolina provided more troops to the Confederate army and suffered more casualties than any other state. Many of these men were the grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. of current citizens of this area. Most were non-slave holders who fought for love of their state and the South. To not fly the Confederate flag on the Town Common is to ignore and dishonor the ancestors of many area residents. (C) Maughan was correct in his statement that the Confederate battle flag was strictly for military use, and was not the national flag of the Confederacy. It should therefore not be displayed on the Town Common. (D) Maughan stated that the Confederate flag is the flag of the Ku Klux Klan. This is only partially true, and ignores the history of the flag and the KKK, and ignores the context in which the flag is flown. In 1860, the United States was a racist country, both North and South. Abraham Lincoln viewed Blacks as inferior persons who should be free. Confederate General Robert E. Lee freed his slaves, and fought, not for slavery, but for the independence of his native state. This is in contrast

to Northern generals who believed in slavery and sent escaped slaves back to the South. The men who selected the flag for the Confederacy included moderates, at least two of whom made speeches in the U. S. Congress only months earlier opposing the secession of the Southern States. The Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s lasted only a few years. The Klan of today was formed during the 1920s, and until the past few decades carried the United States flag to represent its racist views. The Confederate flag was added in recent decades, and is now flown by the Klan alongside the U. S. flag. Today, the Confederate flag is displayed by persons of diverse social and political backgrounds. It is supported by proponents of civil rights who abhor the KKK; by the KKK (which misrepresents the flag to express its own narrow viewpoints); by historical re-enactment groups; by the State of North Carolina at appropriate historical sites and functions; etc. The meaning of the Confederate or any other flag changes with the context in which it is displayed. When the KKK displays the Confederate flag, it means racism. When others display the Confederate flag (e.g., on a Town Common, on a Civil War battlefield park, in a Civil War re-enactment, on a tourist map of North Carolina historical sites, etc.) it represents history as it was, with which some will disagree and others agree, but which should be remembered. In summary, context and facts should determine an issue, not the narrow view of a minority.

In conclusion, it is the opinion of this report that the 1988 proposal of the Pitt County Historical Society that the flags of those governments under which Greenville and Pitt County has lived should be flown on the Greenville Town Common, and that these should be the officially adopted flags used by each government during the time that the area was under that particular government.

This report was prepared by Donald E. Collins, Ph.D. (History). Dr. Collins is an authority on the history of the flags of the Confederate States. He is currently engaged in research on this topic under a grant from East Carolina University.