



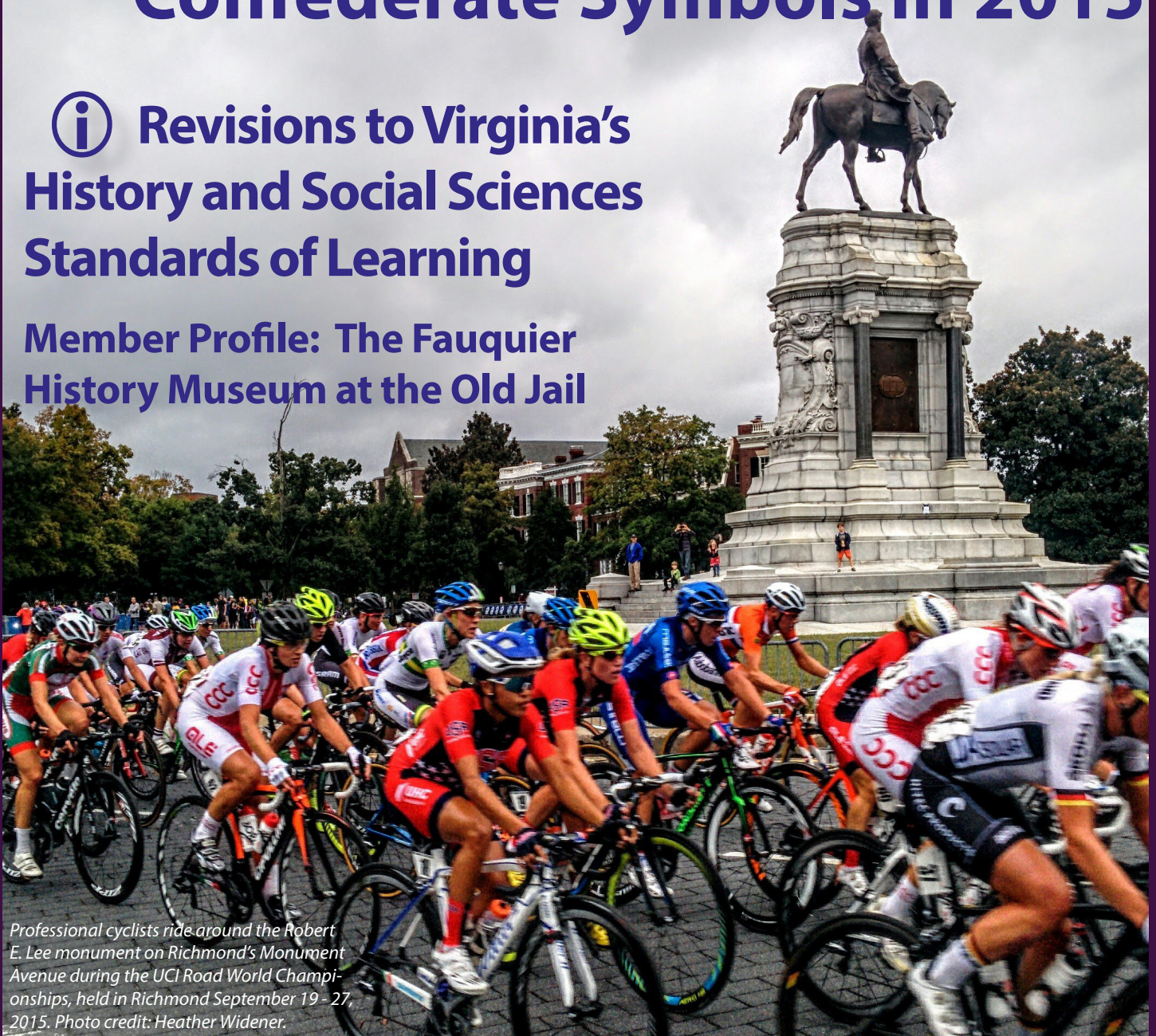
Voice

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Virginia Museums and Confederate Symbols in 2015

Revisions to Virginia's History and Social Sciences Standards of Learning

Member Profile: The Fauquier History Museum at the Old Jail



Professional cyclists ride around the Robert E. Lee monument on Richmond's Monument Avenue during the UCI Road World Championships, held in Richmond September 19 - 27, 2015. Photo credit: Heather Widener.



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Virginia Museums and Confe

by Heather Widener

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof entered the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and gunned down nine members of a Bible study group. As has become common in these horrendous spectacles, it took only hours for the media to begin dissecting the motives and background of the killer. Prominent was the young man's racist views, and soon images of him displaying various symbols used by white supremacist groups, including Confederate battle flags, dominated newspapers, magazines, and the internet worldwide.

The tragedy reignited a longstanding controversy over the Confederate battle flag, a flag with a century and a half old history rife with conflicting meanings and disputed understandings, uses and misuses. While some see the banner as a sacred one that signifies pride in heritage, others see it as a banner of racism, harkening back to a time when slavery was a core southern institution. Of course, as with many hot button issues, it is the noise at the fringes that gets amplified by the media. So while some used the moment to wave their flags, others desecrated Confederate monuments.

Taking the Pulse of the Museum Community

Because VAM has been fielding questions from member museums on the issue, we conducted a survey of members to gauge the extent to which the most recent controversy surrounding Confederate symbols – particularly the Confederate battle flag – has affected Virginia's museums. Nearly 150 people responded to our survey. Over 65% of them interpret or display items from the Civil War. Fifty-two respondents indicated that their visitors have expressed opinions or questions about Confederate symbols as a result of recent events. The visiting public has expressed a wide range of emotions and opinions, and all areas of museum operations at some sites have been affected. However, according to our respondents, front-line staff, interpreters, and museum gift shop personnel are most likely to be faced with questions or comments.

Many visitors are very supportive of museums' educational efforts and have simply expressed curiosity. One respondent explains, "The 'line in the sand' appears to be use of the flag as an object of interpretation or of glorification. Are we to help visitors understand our ancestors in the context of their times, or honor them as a memorial to their efforts? Should we have it in an exhibit only or put it on our flag-pole with the US flag? We must proceed with cool objectivity in the face of passionate resolve on both sides of the issue."

Responses indicate that a handful of museums are adding historical context or clarification to help visitors understand certain artifacts. Over half of respondents, however, indicate that they are offering (or plan to offer) additional training to docents and front line staff on dealing effectively with difficult questions or confrontations if they do occur. Fortunately, responses indicate that most visitors understand that museums' missions are to interpret and educate with objectivity, "[People] who have expressed concern negatively about the flag understand that it is our museum's job to interpret symbols and educate the public, so they don't have any problem with our exhibit of Civil War artifacts or flags."

However, artifacts on display with interpretation and gift shop merchandise are two different things. Says one respondent, "Most guests are ok with the artifacts that represent both sides of the war, but we've had a very mixed reaction to the Confederate flags in the shop." Of the 37 respondents that answered a question asking whether they currently offer Confederate-related memorabilia in their museum shops, 22 indicated that they do. Many museums are already sensitive about the context, quality, and mission-appropriateness of the items they do carry. For example, one respondent indicated, "We do not carry items such as key chains, belt buckles... items [we sell] include historical books, post cards, pamphlets etc. that are in a historical context." A few museums have looked anew at gift shop offerings and discontinued items that were not historically relevant; others haven't made changes yet but are watching the issue. Says one respondent, "In the future any tasteful Confederate items in our store will

directly relate to an artifact in our museum, so the educational value of the object is transferred to the souvenir."

The American Civil War Museum

Few museum professionals have more experience dealing with controversy, misunderstanding, and emotion over Confederate symbolism than those working at The American Civil War Museum (ACWM), located in Richmond and Appomattox. After all, as their mission states, the ACWM is "the preeminent center for the exploration of the American Civil War and its legacies from multiple perspectives: Union and Confederate, enslaved and free African Americans, soldiers and civilians." In the wake of the Charleston massacre, the issue has affected all areas of museum operations. As Eric App, who directs museum operations at the ACWM points out, "The national conversation included commentary about how these symbols belong in a museum. The ACWM was named, early on, as that sort of place."

In fact, the museum holds 650 flags, 510 of which were used during the war (including those with a large variety of designs – many not controversial or recognizable by most people). The staff at the museum, when asked about a Confederate battle flag, are trained to asking the follow-up question, "which one?" This summer, according to App, "Our front line staff were inundated with calls and walk-ins [by visitors] who wanted to discuss [the flag] and espouse their opinions and attitudes." Luckily, these professionals are well-versed not only in Civil War history, but also in the array of opinions surrounding Confederate symbolism that have evolved in the last 150+ years. The ACWM's historian, John Coski (author of *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*) was hit with over 70 requests for interviews from media outlets from all over the country, including the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times*.

As with many museums that responded to our survey, the ACWM shop saw immediate effects of the renewed controversy over Confederate symbols, especially considering that many private retail and manufacturing companies have opted to discontinue battle flag merchandise. "While some flag-related

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merchandise was pulled from the shelves, all flag sales increased overnight and remained steady and high for about a month,” explains App. As it was at many museums that interpret the Civil War, shop workers had to be ready for a variety of questions and requests, and had to make decisions about the mission-appropriateness of certain merchandise.

Because such a large portion of the museum’s staff has been affected by the most recent events surrounding Confederate symbolism, VAM is working with leaders at the ACWM to develop a workshop centered on museums that find themselves at the nexus of crisis and controversy. The workshop will be held at their site in Appomattox, and will use the experiences of the ACWM as a case study. Coski, along with Co-CEOs Christy Coleman and S. Waite Rawls III, are among those slated to speak at the workshop. Additionally, internally at the American Civil War Museum, leaders are discussing how else they might address these current events in the museum experience.

Lee Chapel and Museum

The Lee Chapel and Museum (owned by Washington & Lee University) has been grappling with controversy over the display of the Confederate battle flag since before the incident in Charleston. In fact, in 2014, the Chapel removed several decorative reproduction flags. The move was prompted by complaints from a committee of students from their law school who objected to the flags’ presence and to taking the school honor pledge in view of the flags. The university president closely examined the history and role of the flags prior to making his decision:

“In 1930, several original and historic battle flags - “colors” that had been captured or surrendered to the Union army - were placed near the statue of Lee. The University did not own them. They were the property of the Museum of the Confederacy, now part of the American Civil War Museum, which asked us to return them in the 1990s ... [due to] deterioration. They were replaced with reproductions, which are not historic and are not genuine artifacts.

The purpose of historic flags in a university setting is to educate. They are not

to be displayed for decoration, which would diminish their significance, or for glorification, or to make a statement about past conflicts. The reproductions are not genuinely historic; nor are they displayed with any information or background about what they are. The absence of such explanation allows those who either “oppose” or “support” them to assert their own subjective and frequently incorrect interpretations.

Consequently, we will remove these reproductions from their current location and will ... [display original flags] on a rotating basis in the Lee Chapel Museum. ... and the stories behind them can be properly told.” (Excerpt from Washington & Lee University President Kenneth P. Ruscio’s Message to the Community, July 8, 2014)

According to Lucy Wilkins, director of University Collections and Lee Chapel & Museum, even though the removal of the decorative flags restored the 1883 feeling and original intent of the Chapel, there was still a lot of opposition to the move. “So much of what we had to deal with was rooted in misunderstanding,” says Wilkins. To confront the continuing controversy, the organization took a couple of steps. A key goal was to educate and take pressure off of the front-line staff. Docents were provided with additional education, and with business card-sized handouts with images of the flags and links to a website explaining the history of the flags and the President’s decision, and an additional link to the university



Re-enactors on horseback during this summer’s Civil War Weekend in Manassas. Courtesy of the Manassas Museum System.

communications department (for those who felt they needed to vent further). The Lee Chapel and Museum also increased security. Despite these steps, President Ruscio, as well as the students who originally opposed the reproduction flag display, received threatening messages – even death threats. Throughout the ordeal, according to Wilkins, the museum had complete support and backup of the administration. She emphasizes the importance of museum board support of decisions they make, and support of the organization’s staff members. This sentiment was echoed by one of our survey respondents, who indicated “I asked my Board of Trustees to go on record (minutes) as to what they wanted the staff to do about ordering more Confederate flags... they did so.”

For a number of years, a chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans used the Lee Chapel for a commemoration of Lee-Jackson Day in January. However, because of threats and inflammatory messages sent by people identifying themselves as members of the group, the University this year will not allow the group to use the Chapel. The university decided that, in light of the threats, hosting the program was not an appropriate use of the Lee Chapel. Says Wilkins, although the controversy has subsided of late, “It’s been emotionally wearing on the staff, and just sad to see people still splitting up over this same issue 150 years after the fact.”

Manassas Museum System

According to Mary Helen Dellinger, the curator for the Manassas Museum System, the organization recently held their annual Civil War Weekend. It is a family-oriented living history event featuring costumed interpreters – many of them volunteers – portraying figures from both the Union and Confederate armies. Because the Confederate battle flag and other Confederate symbols would be on display, and anticipating public sensitivity following the incident in Charleston, the museum decided to be proactive and provide training to the front line interpreters. Staff created a two page sheet explaining the history of the battle flag and the differences between it and the various Confederate national flags. Says Ms. Dellinger, “We distributed it

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to all volunteers. Everyone had it in front of them. Volunteers were told to call in a staff member if they got into a discussion where the explanations weren't enough." Luckily, that situation didn't happen. This was clearly a case where the site was both prepared to serve the visiting public and to protect their volunteers through proactive measures.

Additionally, says Dellinger, "We went through our gift store with a critical eye to differentiate between things that were "over the top" and items that speak to our shared history, that are scholarly works. For items like that, the [battle flag] image is still there."

Dellinger, who in her museum career has worked with exhibits containing inflammatory items such as KKK uniforms and Nazi insignia, emphasizes the importance of displaying these items and their educational value. "We don't own any [Confederate battle flags] but if we did, they'd be out. These are powerful symbols of history – you have to look at what they represent. ... Flags are very powerful symbols. You can't just assign a meaning to [a flag] and say that's that." Dellinger also emphasizes the importance of objectivity in interpreting

such items. "You really have to work hard on that label not to take a side." One survey respondent echoed the importance of interpreting Civil War emblems, "Our museum has displayed and interpreted both sides of the American Civil War through artifacts and flag displays since 1970. We feel that the most appropriate place to interpret and think about Civil War emblems is in an exhibit....In this way we are examining it in its historical context and not as a modern symbol from 2015."

John Coski would agree. Museum professionals should keep in mind the logic in Coski's analysis of historical interpretations. Coski contends, "Interpreting a monument at a historic site requires a viewer to consider as many as three contexts: the event or period commemorated; the period in which the monument was erected; and the viewer's own time. The same reasoning applies to the interpretation of Confederate flags in historical contexts. Whether or not a flag really symbolizes history in an essentially neutral way depends on the occasion and motives that put it there." (Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*, page 290)

In museums that interpret the Confederacy and its symbols, professionals responsible for interpretation and education must be ready to put the symbols in historical context to promote understanding. As ACWM Co-CEO Christy Coleman says, "At the museum, visitors bring their *history, heritage, and memory* to our door every day and ask us to make it plain. God bless our staff. ...How do we find common ground? We stop. We breathe. We listen. And then we educate."

If you are interested in the results of VAM's survey on Virginia Museums and Confederate Symbols, contact Heather Widener or call the VAM office at 804.358.3170.

Coming Soon: Improvements to Your Museum's Membership!

Beginning in December, your museum's membership will be better than ever. Most notably, for the first time ever, VAM will include in your museum membership FULL member benefits for ALL staff members, volunteers, and board members of your museum.

VAM museum member dues will continue to be based on museum budget (see chart).

Museum Budget	Membership Fee
All-volunteer; < \$ 25,000	\$ 50
\$ 25,001 - \$ 100,000	\$ 150
\$ 100,001 - \$ 250,000	\$ 225
\$ 250,001 - \$ 500,000	\$ 300
\$ 500,001 - \$ 1,000,000	\$ 500
\$ 1,000,001 - \$ 2,500,000	\$ 650
\$ 2,500,001 - \$ 4,000,000	\$ 850
Over \$ 4,000,000	\$ 1,100

New Option: Be a Leadership Member

Your museum now has the option to show its dedication to our museum community by joining at the new Leadership Level. Four of our museums already have committed to this level: George Washington's Mount Vernon, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Virginia Historical Society, and the Virginia Museum of Natural History. Thanks to those *Leadership* members! To learn how to join them, please contact Jennifer Thomas at 804.358.3172.