Colors of the Confederacy: Consecration and Controversy

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"Complicated" barely begins to describe the history of the flags of the Confederate States of America. In 1861, the new nation disagreed over which national flag pattern to adopt—both in the halls of Congress, and in the sewing circles of countless Southern women. The flag most people know today as "the" Confederate flag was only one battle flag pattern out of many—to say nothing of the various presentation, state, and national flag patterns. Many decades after the war, former Confederates continued to argue over who had designed the flags. Controversy thickened when a well-known white supremacist group adopted one particular flag as their symbol, to which Southern heritage and civil rights groups alike objected. Most recently, that same flag has been absorbed into popular culture and, some would say, trivialized.

This article will explore how one flag pattern achieved primacy throughout the South during the American Civil War, and how subsequent generations have interpreted and utilized it for a variety of purposes and themes, including memorialization, discrimination, heritage, independence, and pop culture. The featured artifacts and documents are drawn from the collection of The Museum of the Confederacy (MOC) in Richmond, Virginia.

Flags made by women are often collectively known as "presentation flags", since the female makers or patrons often delivered these flags to the company in a formal presentation ceremony. These rituals were frequently reported upon by the press as well as by members of the company or regiment, and thus often constitute the first—if not the only—written account of wartime flags. Although the flags varied greatly in design, they universally inspired the men who carried them, and served as constant reminders of what—and for whom—they were fighting.

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Figure 1. Flag of the 3rd Florida Infantry, Co. B, "Florida Independent Blues" (MOC, 0985.2.159)

The outbreak of war in 1861 prompted many Southern white women to provide flags for the military companies forming in their communities. Some women personally designed and sewed the flags, the patterns of which could be quite unique. For example, the flag of the 3rd Florida Infantry, Co. B, "Florida Independent Blues", was made in the first months of 1861 by Miss Emma Wescott, assisted by a number of other women, and presented to the unit by the Ladies of St. Augustine, Florida.[1] It features ink-on-cotton drawings of cotton bolls and hibiscus blossoms, and the stars across the top are inscribed with the dates of secession of the first seven Confederate states. Its conservation was sponsored by the Museum of Florida History in 1997.[2]

Some flags made an even more explicit connection to the women who made them by means of incorporating elements of their wedding gowns. Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Dickison sacrificed a "handsomely embroidered red silk crepe shawl" from her bridal clothes to make a flag for the Florida Battery, Marion Light Artillery.[3] It does not correspond to any particular pattern. Mrs. Dickison also donated a silver hair comb, which was melted down and fashioned into the flag's spearhead finial. The flag was made and presented to the unit in April 1862 by the Ladies of Orange Lake Soldiers' Association. It was briefly captured by the Federals, who stole the silver finial, but the flag was rescued

Figure 2. Flag of the Florida Battery, Marion Light Artillery (MOC, 0985.2.157)

and ultimately returned to Mrs. Dickison, who preserved it "as a sacred trust" until donating it to the MOC in 1893.[4]

The flag of the 15th Virginia Infantry was made from the bridal clothes of Mrs. Catherine Heth Morrison. A member of that regiment would later recall that "its colors were white and blue silk, emblematic of the purity of heart of the giver, and of the heavens above us...."[5] Mrs. Morrison presented it to the regiment in Williamsburg, Virginia, after the battle of Big Bethel, Virginia, in June 1861. It was donated to the Museum in 1898 by the 25 surviving members of the unit, and its conservation was sponsored by the Powhatan County Historical Society in 1999.[6]

Women were just as likely to fundraise or contribute money toward the purchase of professionally-made flags as to make them. One example is the flag of the 27th North Carolina Infantry, Co. B, "Guilford Greys", made by Horstmann and Sons in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The obverse features a North Carolina state seal, signed by the maker, "Hortsmann, Philada.", while a presentation inscription is on the reverse. It was presented to the company in May 1860 by Miss Mary Morehead, Queen of May, on behalf of the Ladies of Edgeworth Female Seminary of Greensboro, North Carolina. The company had been organized in January 1860, probably in response to John Brown's Raid.[7]

Figure 3. Flag of the 15th Virginia Infantry (MOC, 0985.2.1761)

While some women created flag designs based on their own creativity, others adhered to state flag patterns, but sometimes customized one side of the flag. For example, the silk flag of the 4th Virginia Cavalry, Co. E, "Powhatan Troop", features a Virginia State seal on the obverse and a portrait of Pocahontas on the reverse. It was purchased by the ladies of Powhatan County, Virginia, and presented to the company in 1860. The company was the first Virginia

Figure 4. Flag of the 4th Virginia Cavalry, Co. E, "Powhatan Troop" (MOC, 0985.13.1752)

cavalry company to volunteer after its state seceded from the Union. It carried this flag for the first few months of the war, until an opportunity arose to return it to Powhatan County in late 1861, "where it has ever since been jealously guarded as a valued memorial of happier times."[8] The conservation of this flag in 1999 was sponsored by Powhatan County Historical Society.[9]

A register of donations toward the purchase of the "Powhatan Troop" flag is believed to be the only surviving example of such a list of contributors. It reveals the names and financial contributions of more than thirty individual women from a single county who provided the necessary funds to commission one professionally-made flag. Contributions ranged from twenty-five cents to five dollars, but the average donation was one dollar. This document was found in the wall of a tavern (currently a residence) in Powhatan County during renovations in the 1970s.[10]

Southern women were not alone in their rush to create flags. On 9 February 1861—just days after the formation of the new Confederate government—a Committee on the Flag and Seal was established and tasked with selecting appropriate emblems for the new nation. It was chaired by William Porcher Miles, a South Carolinian mathematician and politician, and accepted dozens of design proposals from citizens across the South. Many of the designs submitted for consideration are included in an expansive 1880 volume titled the *Documentary History of the Flag and Seal of the Confederate States of America*. Compiled by Raphael P. Thian, Chief Clerk, Adjutant General's Office, from the records of the Confederate government taken back to Washington after the war, it includes legislative extracts, newspaper editorials, and correspondence from aspiring flag designers. Two surviving copies, at Duke University and the Virginia Historical Society, also contain a collection of full-color plates that illustrate various submitted flag designs, of which approximately half resemble the United States flag to some degree.[11]

The flag pattern that became known as the First National, or "Stars and Bars", was adopted by the Confederate Congress on 4 March 1861. The example shown in Figure 5 was captured at Bristoe Station, Virginia, on 1 October 1863 by the 2nd U.S. Army Corps, and assigned War Department (WD) capture number 34.[12] While the First National design had been recommended by the Committee on of the Flag and Seal, its original designer is not definitively known. The new flag was simple and distinctive enough to satisfy the Committee's criteria, as expressed by Miles upon the adoption of this pattern: "A Flag should be simple, readily made, and, above all, capable of being made up

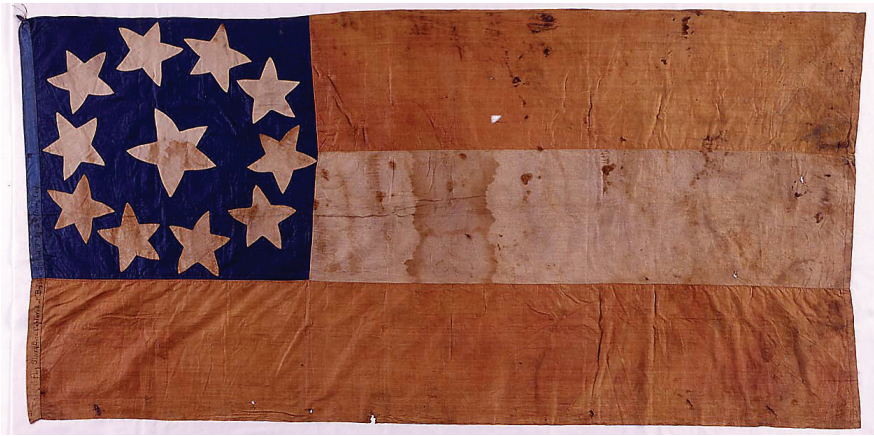

Figure 5. Flag of unidentified unit (MOC, WD 34)

in bunting. It should be different from the Flag of any other country, place or people. It should be significant. It should be readily distinguished at a distance. The colors should be well contrasted and durable, and lastly, and not the least important point, it should be effective and "handsome."[13] The flag also preserved some features of the Union flag, which was desired by many Southerners, who may have fought beneath the flag as United States soldiers, or generally harbored affection for their former nation and/or its symbols. Miles would later remark to General Beauregard, "I wish sincerely Congress would change the present one [the First National flag]….But I fear it is just as hard now…to tear people away entirely from the desire to appropriate some reminiscence of the 'old flag'."[14]

Although the official guidelines for the First National pattern specified having "a circle of white stars corresponding in number with the States in the Confederacy", in practice the number and arrangement of stars varied greatly.[15] There may have been anywhere from seven stars, one each for the first seceding states, to as many as seventeen stars, which optimistically included all of the states in both the Union and Confederacy in which slavery was still legal, as well as the pro-Confederate areas of the New Mexico Territory and Southern California.

One important element of the design was the saltire, or St. Andrew's Cross, which in Miles's words in August 1861, "avoided the religious objection about the cross (from the Jews and many Protestant sects), because it did not stand out so *conspicuously* as if the cross had been placed upright thus." He regarded

the diagonal cross as "more *Heraldric* than *Ecclesiastical*, it being the 'saltire' of the Heraldry, and significant of *strength* and *progress*."[16] Miles never referred to the saltire as a "St. Andrew's Cross", and any invocation of the Scottish roots of Southerners is believed purely coincidental.[17]

Miles would eventually get his wish, for the close similarities between the Confederate and Union national flags created problems on the battlefield almost immediately. In response, it was determined that each Confederate army would use its own battle flag.[18] The Polk pattern was used by troops under Lieutenant-General (and Episcopal Bishop) Leonidas Polk in the Army of Tennessee, and featured a red cross of St. George (which was the emblem of the Episcopal Church).[19] General Joseph E. Johnston ordered the Army of Tennessee pattern in an attempt to standardize the flags carried by the Western Army, and was issued to units beginning in January 1864.[20] The Hardee pattern was carried by Lieutenant-General William J. Hardee's troops in the Western Theater, and was issued to units in 1862 and 1863.[21] The Van Dorn pattern was created in February 1862 by Major-General Earl Van Dorn, and is believed to have borrowed elements from the Missouri State flag. His army, then defending Missouri and Arkansas, carried the flag with them when they transferred to Mississippi in the spring of 1862, with some units carrying the flag throughout the war.[22]

The most enduring of these battle flag patterns was that adopted by Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) in late 1861. Nowadays it is often mistakenly referred to as the "Stars and Bars", or is thought to be the primary Confederate national flag. The example shown in Figure 6 is one of three prototypes of the pattern made in September 1861 upon approval of the design. Miss Hetty Cary of Baltimore, Maryland, her sister, Jenny, and cousin, Constance, made the three original prototype flags. Hetty was universally

Figure 6. Headquarters flag of General Joseph E. Johnston (MOC, 0985.13.377)

admired, and was once described as "the most beautiful woman of her day and generation."[23] She made this flag by hand; as her cousin Constance later wrote, "We set our best stitches upon them."[24] Hetty presented this one in December 1861 to General Joseph E. Johnston, who used it as his headquarters flag.[25]

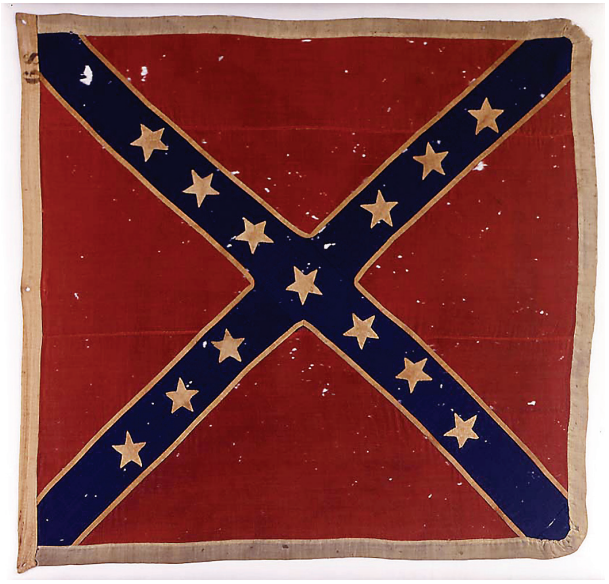

Figure 7. Flag of the 47th North Carolina Infantry (tentative identification) (MOC, WD 68)

More typical of the battle flags issued to regiments throughout the war was the wool and cotton ANV flag shown in Figure 7. There are minor variations amongst these battle flags that can indicate when and where they were made. This particular flag was captured by the 12th New Jersey Infantry at the battle of Gettysburg on 3 July 1863. Subsequent research indicates it belonged to the 47th North Carolina Infantry.[26]

The ANV flag was more distinctive than the First National, but more importantly, it resonated strongly with the Southern people. Historians have documented the extent to which Confederates identified the success and survival of their nation with that of Robert E. Lee and his army by the middle of the war; correspondingly, that army's flag became near and dear to many Southerners.[27] Furthermore, tales of the tremendous courage and immense sacrifices of color bearers imbued these flags with deep meaning for many Confederate citizens. These associations soon elevated the ANV battle flag to a primary emblem of the Confederacy. It became so connected with Confederate identity

Figure 8. Casket flag of General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson (MOC, 0985.13.47)

that, when the defective First National flag was finally replaced in May 1863, it was little surprise that the ANV flag was incorporated into the new Second National flag as its canton.[28] The first official use of the Second National pattern flag was on General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's casket while he lay in state in the Virginia capitol building on 12 May 1863.[29]

While the Second National was more distinctive from the Union flag than the First National, it was also a problematic design, in that it could look like a flag of truce or surrender when hanging limp. This necessitated the creation of the Third National pattern, the final Confederate national flag, which was not adopted until 4 March 1865.[30] It was a slight modification of the Second National pattern, with the addition of a red bar on the fly. As it was in use for such a short time, it is possibly the least recognizable of the Confederate flags. The example shown in Figure 9 is a postwar satin flag, which was draped on Jefferson Davis's casket just before he was reinterred in Richmond in May 1893.[31]

What became of these flags, during and after the war? More than 500 flags were captured by Union troops from Confederate regiments and naval vessels, including that of the 29th Mississippi Infantry. The number "95" stenciled in black paint on the lower left corner is known as the "War Department capture number", and is how the United States government catalogued its captured flags. The corresponding written index, the "Register of Flags Captured or

Figure 9. Casket flag of President Jefferson Davis (MOC, 0985.13.239)

Recaptured by Union Troops, 1861-65", tracks such useful information as the captor's name and regiment, date, place and/or battle. In the case of the 29th Mississippi Infantry flag, it was captured at the battle of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, on 24 November 1863 by Sergeant Norman F. Potter of the 149th New York Infantry.[32]

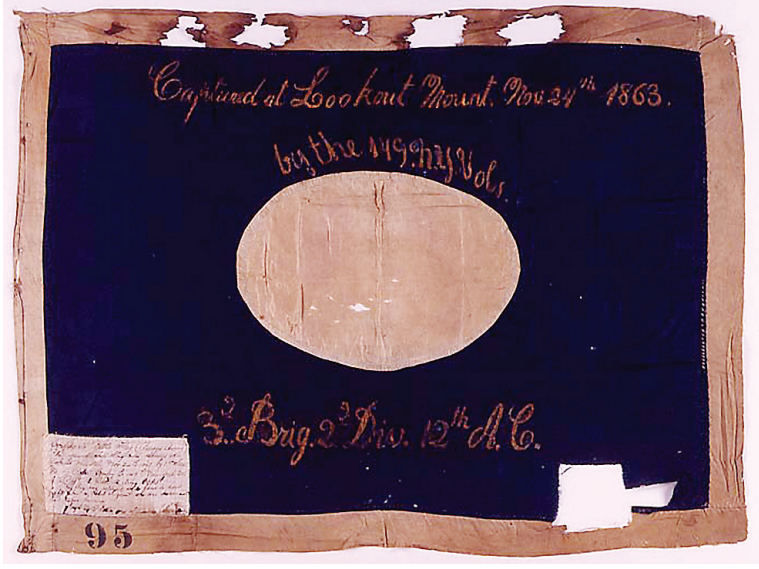

Figure 10. Flag of the 29th Mississippi Infantry (tentative identification) (MOC,WD 95)

The fate of hundreds of other Confederate flags remains unknown. Some were retired when a new flag pattern was put into service. Others were turned into souvenirs, either by being preserved intact by the captors, or by being cut up and fragments distributed to the troops. A few were hidden by Confederate soldiers to avoid placing them in Union hands. Many flags that survived the war were lost to history in subsequent years, but some were carefully preserved by families or donated to museums such as the MOC. The depth and breadth of the MOC's flag collection is largely due to the fact that it began collecting artifacts in the 1890s, and received many flags from the veterans who had personally fought beneath them.

Interest in the flags of the defunct Confederacy remained high in the decades following the war. Confederate veterans carried original and reproduction flags at many of their reunions. Southern literature, art, and commercial products commemorated and memorialized the flags as emblems of the "Lost Cause". One outstanding example is a postcard produced in and after 1907, which was based on a photograph taken at the statue of General Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth. Hundreds of boys dressed in white and girls in blue and red stood on a platform to achieve this "human Confederate battle flag" effect.[33]

Figure 11. Postcard, "Human Confederate Battle Flag" (MOC)

Identifying the creator of the First National pattern was of particular importance at the turn of the twentieth century for such disparate groups as state governments, historians, and heritage groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV). The origins of various Confederate flag patterns are explained in a UDC publication by Mary Lynn Conrad. After reviewing competing claims for the creator of the First National pattern, she found the evidence wanting, and ultimately concluded that she was "yet unable to award the honor of this beautiful banner to an undisputed author."[34]

In contrast, the UCV promoted a single individual, Orren Randolph Smith, as the definitive author of the First National pattern. Like the UDC, the UCV reviewed competing claims and evidence, but they felt able to reach a conclusion. A pamphlet published in 1915 ultimately approved this interpretation as their official stance on the matter.[35] They reiterated their position in a 1918 pamphlet that also included a resolution by the General Assembly of North Carolina regarding the identification of Orren Randolph Smith as the creator of the First National pattern flag.[36]

Into the twentieth century, the Confederate battle flag became a lightning rod for debates surrounding its associations with Southern heritage or racial hatred. Ironically, the group most closely identified with those sentiments, the Ku Klux Klan, vastly preferred to fly flags other than the Confederate flag until the 1950s. It used its own flag, or "Grand Ensign", featuring a winged dragon and a motto that, translated from the Latin, means, "What was right was right for all times and places", or the United States national flag, as it represented their white, native-born, Protestant values.[37] A photograph taken as the Klan paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., on 13 September 1926 clearly shows its preference for the United States national flag.[38] It was not until the mid-twentieth century, as American society began racially

Figure 12. Grand Ensign of the Ku Klux Klan (MOC, 0985.9.174)

Figure 13. Ku Klux Klan Parade, 13 September 1926 (LC-F8-40559 [P&P])

integrating, that the Confederate flag became explicitly equated with opposition to civil rights. Groups like the UDC, incidentally, decried the perceived desecration of the flag by groups like the KKK.[39]

During the twentieth century the Confederate battle flag also became more broadly connected with rebellion, independence, or simply used as a dispassionate symbol of the South. An article that appeared in *Life Magazine* on 15 October 1951 simply referred to the flag as "the Confederate flag"—revealing how the wartime variety of flag patterns had been largely forgotten or overlooked in favor of this pattern by the mid-twentieth century. One of the pho-

Figure 14. Postcard, "Human Pyramid on Water Skis" (MOC).

tographs illustrating the article depicts a young woman wearing a halter top constructed from three Confederate battle flags.[40] In another example of the flag being used dispassionately as a Southern symbol, a 1950s postcard from Cypress Gardens, Florida, depicts the popular amusement park's famous water skiers carrying a Confederate flag.[41]

A few critics argue that it has become commercialized, even trivialized or desecrated. Items that the MOC has collected featuring the flag include a "Pride of the South" beer can (apparently associating the flag with heritage) and a lighter (equating the flag with rebellion).[42] Movies and television have taken the Confederate flag into the realm of pop culture, sometimes confirming and other times challenging cultural assumptions typically equated with the symbol. Just think of the General Lee car from the television series-turned-movie "Dukes of Hazzard", or the 1995 film "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar", in which the famous drag queen Ru Paul wears a sequined Confederate flag ball gown.

Today, nearly every aspect of this potent symbol of the Confederacy continues to be debated. It was created for a particular purpose, but has evolved —some would say strayed—far beyond its original definition and symbolism. Although it is unknown what the flag will mean to Americans in fifty or one hundred years, this much is certain: it will continue to stir passions and make headlines well into the twenty-first century, and probably beyond.

This paper was first presented at the 46th Annual Meeting of NAVA in Columbus, Ohio, in October 2012.

End Notes

1. "A Flag With a 'History'," *Florida Times-Union* [Jacksonville], 13 February 1896, 8.
2. Conservation Treatment Report, 2 December 1997, "3rd Florida Infantry, Co. B, 'Florida Independent Blues'" flag accession file, 0985.2.159, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia [hereafter "MOC"].
3. Mary E. Dickison to Mrs. Lizzie Cary Daniel, 1 June 1896, "Marion Light Artillery" flag accession file, 0985.2.157, MOC.
4. Confederate Memorial Literary Society, *Catalogue of the Florida Department of the Confederate Museum* (Richmond, Virginia: n.p., 1914), 32; Mary E. Dickison to Mrs. Lizzie Cary Daniel, 22 March 1893, "Marion Light Artillery" flag accession file, 0985.2.157, MOC.
5. *1861-1911: An Address Delivered by J. Staunton Moore at the 50th Re-Union of the Fifteenth Virginia Regiment at Williamsburg, Virginia, May 24, 1911*, copy in "15th Virginia Infantry" flag accession file, 0985.13.1761, MOC.
6. List of donors of flag of 15th Virginia Infantry, no date (c.1898), in "15th Virginia Infantry" flag accession file, 0985.13.1761, MOC; Conservation Treatment Report, 4 November 1996, "15th Virginia Infantry" flag accession file, 0985.13.1761, MOC.
7. Signed note from Mr. John A. Sloan, Jr., no date, in "27th North Carolina Infantry" flag accession file, 0985.9.201, MOC.
8. James Keith, *Addresses on Several Occasions* (Richmond, Virginia: Privately Printed at the Appeals Press, 1917), 53-56.
9. Conservation Treatment Report, 10 December 1999, "4th Virginia Cavalry" flag accession file, 0985.13.1752, MOC.
10. List of donations to the Powhatan Troop flag (2011.15), Captain Daniel Lette Collection, MOC.
11. Raphael P. Thian, *Documentary History of the Flag and Seal of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (Washington: n.p., 1880).
12. Flag (WD 34) from the collection of the MOC. Capture information from "Register of Flags Captured or Recaptured by Union Troops, 1861-65", Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.
13. Thian, 5.
14. William Porcher Miles to P. G. T. Beauregard, 27 August 1861, MOC.
15. Thian, 5.
16. William Porcher Miles to P. G. T. Beauregard, 27 August 1861, MOC.

17. John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 5-6.

18. An official order to this effect is sometimes referenced, but the original document itself has never been found. Evidence supporting such an order relies upon secondary references, such as: "When the regiment was first attached to the army before Richmond the Confederate battle-flag was issued to it and all other colors ordered to be discarded." Report of Major S. D. Thruston, 5 October 1862, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, 27 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894-1917), 51, part II: 632.

19. Devereaux D. Cannon, *The Flags of the Confederacy: An Illustrated History* (Memphis, Tennessee: St. Lukes Press, 1988), 56.

20. Howard Michael Madaus and Robert D. Needham, *The Battle Flags of the Confederate Army of Tennessee* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1976), 63.

21. *Ibid*., 49.

22. Major General Earl Van Dorn to Major General Sterling Price, 7 February 1862, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series* 1, 27 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office,1894-1917), 8: 749; Cannon, 63.

23. Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 271.

24. C.C. Harrison, "A Virginia Girl in the First Year of the War", *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, August 1885: 609.

25. Accession file for flag, 0985.13.377, MOC.

26. Flag (WD 68) from the collection of the MOC. Capture information from "Register of Flags Captured".

27. For one notable example, see Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

28. Thian, 31-32.

29. Flag from the collection of the MOC. Accession file for flag, 0985.13.47, MOC.

30. Thian, 36.

31. Flag from the collection of the MOC. Accession file for flag, 0985.13.239, MOC.

32. Flag from the collection of the MOC. Capture information from "Register of Flags".

33. Postcard, "Human Confederate Flag", Postcard Collection, MOC.

34. Mary Lynn Conrad, *Confederate Banners* (Roanoke, Virginia: Stone Printing, n.d.), 9.

35. United Confederate Veterans, "Report of the Stars and Bars Committee, United Confederate Veterans, Richmond Reunion, June 1 to 3, 1915" (n.p., n.d.).
36. "The Stars and Bars" (n.p., n.d.).
37. Flag from the collection of the MOC. Accession file for flag, 0985.9.174, MOC.
38. "Ku Klux Klan Parade", 13 September 1926, National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., accessed 3 February 2012, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/npc2007016219/.
39. Coski, 161-162.
40. "Confederacy's Banner Reaches a New Popularity", *Life*, 15 October 1951: 64-66.
41. Postcard, "Human Pyramid on Water Skis", Postcard Collection, MOC.
42. Can (1993.14) and lighter (1993.34.32) from the collection of the MOC.