

Heritage and Hate

by Herb Silverman

In 1976 at the age of 34, after living in the Northeast my entire life, I moved to Charleston, South Carolina to teach mathematics at the College of Charleston. A few weeks later, I was shocked to learn that the Confederate flag flew atop the state capitol in Columbia. I considered that flag a symbol of white supremacy, hatred, and slavery. It might merit space in a museum along with other artifacts of the Civil War, but deserves no greater respect.

When I questioned southerners in my community about the flag, I often heard the H-word (Heritage). But some heritage is hateful or worse, including what the Confederate flag and swastika represent to most of the world. One of my math students belonged to an all-white fraternity that flew the Confederate flag. He said it meant “rebel” and defiance of conventional behavior.

A colleague, who had come to Charleston from New York in 1971 at the height of the Vietnam War, told me he asked a woman at a party what she thought about the Civil war. She answered, “It was terrible what happened to my great-granddaddy and other brave family members.”

Talk about living in the past! Not only do I not understand glorifying Confederate relatives, I’ve never understood unconditional ancestor worship. I have no animosity toward descendants of slaveholders or Nazis, nor do I hold any special esteem for the descendants of heroes. We are responsible for our own actions, not the actions of others.

It was nice to hear that **Robert Wright Lee IV** (great-nephew of Confederate general **Robert E. Lee**), is a supporter of Black Lives Matter. He would like to see statues of his ancestor come down because his famous relative has become an “idol of white supremacy, racism, and hate.”

Motivation for the Civil War came with the blessings of some southern clergy and politicians who used the bible to justify slavery. Reverend **Richard Furman**, from my adoptive hometown of Charleston, was the first president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and founder of the university that bears his name. Said Furman in 1838, “The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example.”

Jefferson Davis (president of the Confederate States of America from 1861-1865), added, “Slavery was established by the decree of Almighty God. It is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation.”

In 1962, at the height of the civil rights movement, the Confederate battle flag was placed on the South Carolina state capitol dome by vote of an all-white legislature, purportedly to commemorate the Civil War centennial. There it remained despite many protests, long after the centennial commemoration. The South Carolina legislature finally voted to remove the flag from the state Capitol grounds in 2015 shortly after a white supremacist on June 17th killed nine black people praying at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, three blocks from where I live in Charleston. This church was once a secret meeting place for African Americans who wanted to end slavery at a time when laws in Charleston banned all-black church gatherings.

On the day following the massacre at Mother Emanuel Church I attended a vigil at nearby Morris Brown African

Methodist Episcopal Church. The presiding minister asked the entire congregation to pray for peace, understanding, and healing. As an atheist I don’t pray but I do support those goals. I thought of the anti-war song *Lay Down* by Melanie, in particular the line “Some came to sing, some came to pray, some came to keep the dark away.” I was there to help keep the dark away by showing support for a beleaguered African American community.

During this tragic time I was amazed to watch people singing, clapping, and dancing in the aisles with broad smiles. I’m more than 99 percent certain that no God or Jesus was listening to their prayers. Yet I’m 100 percent certain that many in the audience felt transformed, if only by what I viewed as a placebo effect.

I was happy to see that at least a third of the attendees at the vigil were white. I applauded when one minister told the crowd, “Pray, but also get off your knees and work to improve our community.” Holding hands with our neighbors at the end of the service, we sang “We Shall Overcome.” I had never thought of this as a hymn but it reminded me of when I sang it in the 1960s during civil rights marches and Vietnam War protests. We were asked to continue holding hands as we prayed to Jesus. I didn’t want to withdraw my hand from the black man on my right. We held hands as the minister prayed for Jesus to get rid of any hate in our heart and replace it with love. So it turned out that I came to sing, and *pray*, and keep the dark away.

One of the most moving moments in Charleston occurred three days later when thousands of people marched onto the long Ravenel Bridge in a show of solidarity with those affected by the church murders. Blacks and whites clasped hands and hugged in a city where blacks were once expected to get off the sidewalk to let a white person pass. Everyone knew that this was a historic moment for all of us in Charleston. We hoped that out of that tragedy would come lasting good.

Fast forward to 2020. After the police killing of **George Floyd** on this past May 25, 2020, peaceful protests began in Charleston. On the night of May 30th a raucous group rioted in downtown Charleston, destroying property and looting stores for hours. Though no one was physically hurt local police were unable to contain the mayhem. The following morning (a Sunday) my wife **Sharon Fratepietro** and I walked through town and saw smashed glass windows and doors. There were empty shelves inside many stores. It was gratifying later that morning to see many volunteer Charlestonians showing up with brooms and lumber to clean up the damage and board up broken windows and doors.



Shortly afterwards numerous peaceful protests took place in front of the monument of **John C. Calhoun** located in the center of Charleston at a park named Marion Square.

Calhoun served as vice president under both **John Quincy Adams** and **Andrew Jackson**. Calhoun was an ardent defender of slavery, calling the horrific practice a “positive good.” He said this on the floor of the Senate in 1837.

Calhoun argued that enslaved people in the South were better

off than the free black people in the North. He helped push ideologies that led the South to secede. He died in 1850, more than a decade before the start of the Civil War.

The speakers at the protests near the Calhoun statue were both black and white. My wife and I attended and wore face masks (though many others did not) and socially distanced by lingering near the back of the crowd. Most protesters looked to be about 50 years younger than me. It was good to see young people so energized in support of racial justice. Quite a few wore religious symbols. I wore a secular humanist T-shirt.

The protests worked. Seizing the moment, the Charleston City Council voted to take down the hated statue. On June 20, Calhoun was plucked from his 115-foot perch where he had stood for 124 years, just a block from Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. That was only one victory. As of this writing, there is at least one more yet to come. First, a little history.



Charleston is near Fort Sumter on a tiny island in Charleston Harbor where the Civil War started (still referred to by many Charlestonians as the “War of Northern Aggression”). Fort Sumter is visible across the water from The Battery area at the tip of peninsular Charleston. The Battery was named for a Civil War coastal defense artillery battle at the site. The Battery today is the most expensive place to live in Charleston, famous for its stately antebellum homes and mansions that overlook the harbor.

On December 20, 1860, shortly after **Abraham Lincoln’s** presidential election victory, South Carolina adopted an ordinance declaring its secession from the United States. By February 1861, six more Southern states had seceded. After the Battle of Fort Sumter (April 12-13, 1861) the United States Army surrendered, starting the Civil War. Confederate troops occupied Fort Sumter for nearly four years, resisting bombardments by Union forces, until General **William Tecumseh Sherman’s** capture of Charleston in February 1865.



Today in White Point Garden, at the southern tip of the Battery, stands a statue installed in 1932 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The monument is titled “To the Confederate Defenders of Charleston — Fort Sumter 1861-1865.”

The monument commemorates the soldiers who fought for their city and the southern states during the Civil War. The bronze statue is 12 feet tall and rests on a 13-foot-high granite base. Every weekend a small group of Confederate War enthusiasts erect a huge Confederate flag next to the statue. Lately there have been protests confronting the flag and monument, nonviolent but with lots of strong feelings expressed. As of this writing, we are still hopeful that the statue will be taken down sooner rather than later.

There is also talk of removing more symbols and names from public buildings in South Carolina, including those of “Pitchfork” **Ben Tillman**, a former governor of South Carolina and former United States Senator. He would today be

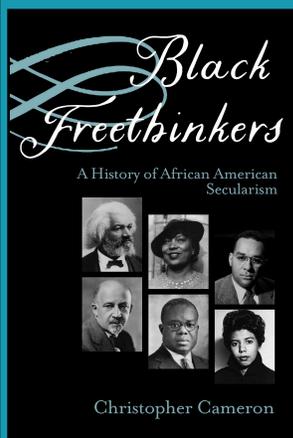
considered a white supremacist who defended lynching on the floor of the United States Senate on March 23, 1900.

Critics sometimes argue that getting rid of statues erases our history. However, we don’t learn history from statues. They are usually meant to honor people. Nobody can forget the history of Nazi Germany but there are no public statues of **Adolf Hitler** or **Heinrich Himmler** or **Josef Mengele**. It’s a shame that some people in Charleston spent decades dismissing the offense their black neighbors took when viewing the city’s statues. Charleston has a long and often unpleasant past. I’m pleased that it is making strides to acknowledge some of its past “sins.”

The question remains about what statues and symbols of famous Americans should come down. I don’t think there is an easy answer in South Carolina or anywhere. I do think we should take down statues of those who committed treason by fighting for the Confederates against the United States. Some argue that we should take down statues of **George Washington** and **Thomas Jefferson** because they owned slaves. Even though they were a product of their times (as were all slave owners), it really is a blot on their records. However, I would want to remove from places of honor statues of people primarily known for owning slaves or supporting racism. With Jefferson I think mostly of his support for a wall that separates religion and government, but I can understand why many blacks might focus on Jefferson’s sexual relationship with slave **Sally Hemings** instead.

There are no perfect beings. It is important to learn about the good and bad of past leaders and so-called American heroes. The idealized version I learned in elementary school about **Christopher Columbus** and others does not comport with reality. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to walk in someone else’s shoes. But, if we try, we might better be able to decide how or whether we should honor certain past leaders, keeping in mind that wise observation by **George Santayana**: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

This book is a must-read!



Black Freethinkers argues that, contrary to historical and popular depictions of African Americans as naturally religious, freethought has been central to black political and intellectual life from the nineteenth century to the present.

Author **Christopher Cameron** suggests an alternative origin of nonbelief and religious skepticism in America, namely the brutality of the institution of slavery. He also traces the growth of atheism and agnosticism among African Americans in two major political

and intellectual movements of the 1920s: the New Negro Renaissance and the growth of black socialism and communism. In the final chapter, he explores the critical importance of freethought among participants in the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

If interested in making a purchase, please order through the [Amazon Smiles](#) program to benefit the Freethought Society.