

Chandra Dillard: Civil War's legacy lives on, even after 150 years

By Chandra Dillard
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Last December, the national spotlight fell on South Carolina when the Sons of Confederate Veterans hosted a "Secession Ball," a celebration of the state's secession from the Union on the 150th anniversary of the event. Beautiful gowns and Confederate uniforms graced the halls of Gaillard Auditorium in Charleston, not far from the site of the original secession convention.

Outside the auditorium, however, there were protesters who maintained it wasn't right to hold a gala in remembrance of a heritage that included the institution of slavery. It's an argument as old as the Civil War itself.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, and it's a good time to take a thoughtful look at where our collective and individual journeys have taken us in the intervening years, from the war and Reconstruction to the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement, and to where we find ourselves today.

Because regardless of whether you're black

or white, or where you stand in relation to the merits of a "Secession Ball," there is one truth we should be able to agree on. The Civil War and the 150 years that have followed that singular event have shaped our communities, our politics, our worship, our economic and educational opportunities, and our personal relationships. It is an important subject to talk about.

When we talk about the Civil War — or any war for that matter — we often talk about sacrifice and honor. Certainly, to sacrifice one's life for a just cause is a thing of honor, and we are right as a country to honor our veterans, our fallen soldiers, and our servicemen and women at home and abroad. So it's no wonder that descendants of Confederate soldiers believe that to deny the honor and sacrifice of their ancestors is to turn their back on their heritage.

Yet, for children of slaves, the sight of the Confederate flag is a stark reminder of the injustices and oppression their ancestors

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suffered because of their skin color. It is an affront to their ancestors' — and their own — honorable struggle against those who would view them as less than equals.

As a former Greenville City Council member and current member of the South Carolina House of Representatives, I have seen how the remnants of our state's history often shape our conversations and politics today. The placement of the Confederate flag at the state capitol and the observance of Martin Luther King's birthday in Greenville County, to cite two events, aroused deeply held passions.

But I have also seen how we can overcome our differences, even when we see things from different perspectives. Two of our state's leaders — Sen. Glenn McConnell and Sen. Robert Ford — carry with them distinct images of the Confederate flag. McConnell sees it as a tribute to fallen heroes; Ford sees it as a battle cry for Ku Klux Klansmen.

Even so, these men have taken steps to understand the context and roots of their passions, and in so doing, have come to an understanding that while they may disagree, they respect one another's heritage and life experiences that have led them to where they are today. They have set aside personal scars and seek ways to work together to pursue common goals.

Here in Greenville, within our neighborhoods, our places of worship, our schools and even our homes, we cannot escape the legacy of the events of 150

years ago. It is good, therefore, to remind ourselves that despite the differences in our individual paths, we share a common journey through a turbulent history.

By focusing our attention on that collective history, we can determine how we got to where we are and how we can continue to move forward. This is an undertaking worthy of the spotlight.

As director of community relations at Furman University, I invite you to explore these themes in an upcoming series on campus called "The Legacy of the Civil War and the Long Road to Civil Rights." Sponsored by the Riley Institute and Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, this four-part series will be held at 6:30 p.m. on consecutive Tuesdays beginning July 26.

Hosted by A.V. Huff, professor emeritus of history at Furman, the series will feature commentary from three college presidents, Civil War historians, civil rights leaders, and scholars and authors who will share individual stories of struggle, perseverance

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and honor.

The series costs \$40 and attendees must register. For more information, please visit www.riley.furman.edu/summerseries or call (864) 294-2998.

Chandra Dillard is director of community relations at Furman University. She also represents District 23 in the S.C. House of Representatives. She can be reached at chandra.dillard@furman.edu.

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