The Politics of Commemoration

The Second Battle of Fort Sumter: The Debate over the Politics of Race and Historical Memory at the Opening of America’s Civil War Centennial, 1961

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Abstract: This paper investigates the ways in which contemporary social and political events shaped the commemoration of the Civil War Centennial in 1960s South Carolina. The Centennial dramatically revealed that the issues that had divided the nation in the nineteenth century remained unresolved in the twentieth. The attempt to create a comprehensive and unifying celebration by avoiding slavery as a major topic was simply not possible amidst the national conflict over segregation. The commemoration ironically came to an explosive head in Charleston a hundred years after the first shots at Fort Sumter.

Key words: centennial, civil rights, South Carolina, commemoration, slavery

The construction of historical memory and identity is almost always complicated by the presence of the social and political context in which any public commemoration or historic program is presented. A vivid illustra-
tion of the complicated synthesis of public memory and contemporary politics occurred in Charleston, South Carolina in April of 1961, during the commemoration of America’s Civil War Centennial. On that spring weekend, at the confluence of the Ashley and the Cooper rivers, a century of Civil War memories would collide with the start of the American Civil Rights Movement’s most critical decade to teach the public more about the state of racial politics in America than it would about the war itself.

Academic and popular discussion and understanding of the conflict have evolved since the war ended at Appomattox in 1865, and that conversation has always been informed by the contemporary political climate. Perhaps no period, however, could have provided a more divisive context than America in the first half of the 1960s as the American Civil Rights Movement began to reconcile the promises guaranteed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Fifteenth Amendment. During the 1950s, the movement had gained considerable momentum, with milestones such as the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Kansas Board of Education landmark desegregation decision, Rosa Parks’s refusal to move to the rear of a Montgomery bus in 1955, the federally ordered integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, and the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the strategy of nonviolent protest. But the movement would change in the 1960s—the decade came to be defined, according to historian Taylor Branch, by the decision of four freshmen at North Carolina A&T to take their seats at a segregated Woolworth’s white lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The tenuous stalemate between the growing movement and the stalwarts of the South’s Jim Crow system of segregation would explode in the decade to come.

Race relations in 1960s America would become a national issue, punctuated by the election of pro-civil rights presidential candidate John F. Kennedy. The Supreme Court’s Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954 and the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, the first congressional civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, put the southern states on notice that segregation in all of its forms would no longer be an issue decided by the states. Community leaders, politicians, and other standard bearers of segregation were prepared to entrench and resist attempts to change the traditional social order. This escalating tension over the role of the federal government in enforcing the constitutionally guaranteed civil rights of all Americans provided an emotionally charged stage for the Centennial.

1. U.S. Constitution, Amendment XV. The Fifteenth Amendment states, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”
It was amidst this agitated context that the nation looked to commemorate the Civil War’s one-hundredth anniversary. Though Civil War memory in the early to mid-twentieth century was shaped by academic debates over the meaning and motivation behind the conflict, popular memory of the war in 1960 was still greatly influenced by the prevailing philosophy that the war was a tragedy shared by both North and South, and that the most important memory of the war was the sense of common honor and valor fought for by soldiers on both sides—not emancipation or civil rights. The late nineteenth-century shift from a Reconstruction-era memory that celebrated the liberation of African Americans to a more unifying, commonly shared white memory of honor and bravery is best described by David Blight in his 2001 Race and Reunion.5 This unified memory was challenged throughout the decades leading to the Centennial at both edges of the spectrum. Edward Pollard’s 1866 work established the pro-Confederate memory of the Lost Cause, and subsequent popular films like Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind lamented the federally imposed social chaos of the South under Reconstruction. On the other hand, academics like Rupert Vance and Alex Arnett looked to debunk these sympathetic views of the defeated Confederacy, and William Faulkner criticized the antebellum social hierarchy in works such as Absalom! Absalom!6 By mid-century, however, in a nation reunited through the shared involvement in two World Wars, the battle-focused and shared valor interpretation was still in favor, especially in an attempt to cross political and sectional divides and commemorate the war together as a nation. The debates over this established public memory, like those over civil rights, were about to face scrutiny in front of a national audience.

Public historians who choose to dive below the surface of complex and uncomfortable subjects have long struggled with the choice of whether to broach sensitive topics and risk alienating their general audience. The story of the Centennial in South Carolina highlights the public history challenge of remembering the Civil War while avoiding controversy or public debate, most notably, the gathering storm of the Civil Rights Movement.

From one perspective, the Centennial was a complete failure. The clash of past and present that culminated in 1961 seemed to shatter any hope of a com-

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prehensive national discourse on the Civil War. However, one might argue that
the contentious rhetoric and the manipulation of the past in support of a con-
temporary argument exposed the often uncomfortable and complicated threads
of history, teaching the public far more than any parade or reenactment ever
could. As public historians begin the daunting task of planning the Civil War
Sesquicentennial, perhaps the example of the Centennial experience can help
challenge historians and planners to frame programs and events through the
potentially divisive lens of today’s contemporary political debates.

The United States Civil War Centennial Commission (USCWCC) was es-
established in 1957, its twenty-five members drawn from a spectrum of gov-
ernment agencies. The preamble to the Commission’s enabling resolution es-
established the body’s principles by stating that the Civil War “has forged the
unity of this country and the sons of both North and South have subsequently
fought side by side for human freedom, justice, and the dignity of the indivi-
dual.” In December of 1957, the Commission named Major General Ulysses S.
Grant III chairman, with Virginia Representative William M. Tuck as vice chair-
man. From its beginnings, the U.S. Commission stressed the prevailing
themes of reconciliation, unity, and shared honor, and Grant, a direct descen-
dant of the Union Commander, echoed this sentiment, expressing hope that
“the results will lead us to a better understanding of America’s days of great-
ness, a more unified country.”

From the beginning, the U.S. Commission was committed to an advisory
role, encouraging states to conduct their activities as they saw fit. First World
War veteran Karl Betts, first executive director of the USCWCC, endorsed
this position, noting that although individual states had the bulk of the re-
sponsibility for organizing the formal events of the Centennial, the national
purpose of unity and commemoration was to guide the state commissions in
their work.

While most states participated in this recognition of the nation’s defining
historical event, the Civil War was of particular importance to South Car-
olinians. The first state to secede from the Union had also witnessed the war’s
first shots and felt the fiercest effects of William Tecumseh Sherman’s 1864
“March to the Sea,” a strategy to end the War through attrition that left a path
of devastation through the heart of the state. South Carolina was one of the
first states to establish a Centennial commission, passed into law by a 1959
resolution. Challenges to the national guiding principles of unity started im-
m ediately. Although Centennial officials claimed agreement with the themes
established by the National Commission, few members felt comfortable with
the term “Civil War.” J. H. Easterby, Director of the South Carolina Archives
and History Division, advised the Commission on the wording of the resolu-

7. The United States Civil War Centennial Commission (USCWCC), The Civil War Cen-
Centennial Commission (RCWCC), National Archives. RG 79, box 20.
tion. He stated that although the proposed state body should “cooperate as far as we possibly can with the USCWCC, we do not think that we could be expected to adopt a name of which many of us do not approve.” Before the state commission had even been approved by the legislature, the debate over the War’s meaning had begun. In his personal notes, Easterby noted the variety of terms used to refer to the War, including “The War of Southern Independence,” “The War of Northern Aggression,” and “The War Between the States,” rejecting “Civil War,” since the resulting conflict was between two countries, “and not between two parts of the same country.” As a result, the preamble to the Centennial resolution refers to the War in question as “The American War Between the Confederated States of America, South and the Federal Union of the United States of America, North.” “Confederate War,” however, was selected as the most sensible and appropriate term, and was written into the commission’s title, the “South Carolina Confederate War Centennial Commission (SCCWC).”

Apparently the name caused controversy outside of the state, for in 1959 Executive Director Karl Betts, in a memo to the state commissions, declared, “No red tape! No protocol! No gobbledegook!” in reaction to protests over disparate regional terminology. Betts emphatically reminded the states that “name squabbles, sectional disputes, debated issues et cetera will have no part, as far as the National Commission is concerned.” This lack of interest in “debated issues” exposed a potential crisis in leadership: state commissions were being asked to educate and inform their populace on the seminal event in American history while avoiding contentious topics, armed only with a spirit of togetherness and common respect. The official position of the USCWCC became this: “What was lost by the war was lost by all of us . . . what was finally gained was gained by all of us.”

The guiding principles developed by the SCCWCC included the dual objectives of commemoration and preservation, repeating the goals presented by the National Commission. The SCCWCC was chaired by John Amasa May, a state representative from Aiken. The Commission, appointed by both the governor and the legislature, also included Daniel Hollis, history professor at the University of South Carolina, and Julian Metz, director of the Charleston Chamber of Commerce. John May agreed with Grant’s position, asserting that the Centennial was “the commemoration of the valor of our forefathers, of a grand fight—a fight in which both believed with equal feelings.” The minutes of preliminary meetings of the State Commission offered a staggering slate of potential activities. The list of suggestions included pageants, essay contests, reenactments, publications, television and radio broadcasts, stage and film productions, and the placement of historic markers. Preservation projects

10. Confederate War Centennial files, Agencies, Commissions and Organizations, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (SCDAH), Columbia. RG S108163. folder 3.
included the processing of long-neglected Civil War records at the State Archives and the conservation of the state’s Civil War sites and structures. The historical presentations that utilized costumed pageantry, however, seemed to attract the most attention in the Centennial planning process. This form of commemoration helped the Commission to promote its goal of reconciliation by taking attention away from the divisive debates over the war’s meaning and civil rights issues.\footnote{Confederate War Centennial files (SCDAH), folder 2; John Amasa May, \textit{South Carolina Secedes} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1960), 17.}

The first issues of \textit{Rebel Yell}, the SCCWCC newsletter, promoted the guiding principles of reconciliation. The restoration of a Union prisoner-of-war stockade in Florence County was followed by a matching gesture at a Confederate stockade at Camp Chase in Ohio, both carried out in the “spirit of our Centennial.” Although May included in his statement of the Centennial objectives the desire to “cement friendly relations between the two sections of our country,” he also stressed that “we apologize to no one.” This statement foreshadowed the conflict to come.\footnote{Confederate War Centennial files, folder 1.}

The first major publication produced by the SCCWCC introduced Centennial events to the public and attempted to inspire local participation. This booklet, \textit{South Carolina Secedes}, in providing a framework for the goals of the Centennial, advocated historical memory inspired by the Lost Cause interpretation that empathized with the loss of the traditional Southern way of life, and that also reflected the tenor of racial politics in 1960 South Carolina. Most of the events noted in the booklet \textit{South Carolina Secedes} promoted statewide and local programs that avoided contentious themes through the use of costumed pageantry and military reenactment. The Centennial program was framed by the reenactment of the firing on Fort Sumter in April of 1961 and the staging of the Battle of Aiken in 1965. Although the program of proposed events reflected the national commission’s goals of peace and harmony, the booklet’s introduction did not, and effectively established the Commission’s official historical interpretation of the War’s cause and meaning. One of the central causes of the conflict, in its view, was “the encroachment of the federal government upon the rights reserved under the United States Constitution.” Slavery was also mentioned, “since abolitionists were disregarding the personal property rights of citizens of the slave holding states.” The remainder of the introduction returned to a more general discussion of honor and valor, but the first few sentences clearly advocated the Lost Cause perspective as well as a commentary on the contemporary civil rights debates. Throughout the Centennial, the Commission would continue to merge these historic and contemporary debates.\footnote{John Amasa May, \textit{South Carolina Secedes}, 1–6. Some of the other works published by the SCCWCC include: Nora M. Davis, \textit{Military and Naval Operations in South Carolina, 1860–1865} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959); SCCWCC, \textit{The Hunley, The Famous Confederate Submarine} (Aiken: SCCWCC, 1961).}
Another concern that emerged during planning stages at the national and state level was the potential for sensationalism and financial exploitation. News of planned reenactments drew concern from Karl Betts and the National Commission. General Grant continuously stressed the need for a solemn tone, declaring the Centennial a commemoration and not a celebration to be accompanied by pageantry and “merriment.” The USCWCC hoped to limit the number of battle reenactments to major engagements such as Fort Sumter, Antietam, Gettysburg, and Manassas. The enormous popularity of costumed reenactments and camp life demonstrations, however, offered the promise of tourist dollars. Parade Magazine predicted the influx of 21 million tourists to the mostly southeastern Centennial sites and events, but warned against the reopening of “sectional wounds” through a discussion of difficult issues. Competition for tourist-generated income would soon overwhelm any attempts by the national Centennial officials to maintain a somber tone, as one of the first events scheduled by the USCWCC was a fully staged reenactment of Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural. Despite its statements to the contrary, the National Commission was not above employing this type of commemoration, especially as a tool for avoiding debate.15

The official beginning to the Centennial observance in South Carolina was the reenactment of the Star of the West incident. In January of 1861, cadets at Charleston’s Citadel military academy fired a warning shot across the bow of the Star of the West, a civilian steamship attempting to re-supply federal troops at Fort Sumter. The incident was promoted as the official start of the War, and a three-day ceremony recognizing the event included a reenactment by Citadel cadets in period dress as well as a costume ball, despite the official position of the USCWCC discouraging costumed reenactment. Other events included a parade, the placement of a monument at the site, an awards luncheon, and a pyrotechnic display.

J. H. Easterby, in advising the SCCWCC on an appropriate speaker for the event, suggested someone that would “place the event in its true perspective” and “not give an antagonistic speech.”16 Easterby understood the delicacy of the situation, as the eyes of the nation were fixed upon South Carolina; NBC’s Today Show was present, as well as reporters and photographers from Life Magazine and Fox Movietone News. The ceremony managed to maintain the Centennial’s aspiration of unification, aided by the presence of prolific and popular Civil War scholar Bruce Catton. In the spirit of reconciliation, Catton’s speech discussed diplomatic options that could have prevented the war, portraying the conflict as the result of an unfortunate set of misunderstandings.17 Opening ceremonies in New York and Virginia also emphasized the national

16. Confederate war Centennial Files, folder 3.
theme with joint memorial services at the tombs of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, respectively.\textsuperscript{18} Aside from disagreement over some of the finer points of the commemoration, the first months of the Centennial proceeded mostly free of the political conflict the USCWCC hoped to avoid.

In March and April of 1961, the contemporary civil rights debate emerged and overwhelmed the efforts of planners to avoid conflict, and the tenuous peace came to a bitter end. The USCWCC, in conjunction with the weekend-long ceremony commemorating the firing on Fort Sumter, made plans to hold their fourth annual conference in Charleston. Representatives from forty-four states, the District of Columbia, and a number of local commissions from around the country were invited to participate in workshops and roundtables to discuss and exchange planning information regarding funding, publicity, and interpretation. The previous three annual meetings had proceeded without incident.\textsuperscript{19} Logistical problems like fundraising and dignified marketing were the focus of planning sessions, not discussion of the meaning or causes of the war, specifically slavery and race, nor how to address some of these more contentious topics in a nation divided by racial tensions.\textsuperscript{20}

The USCWCC accepted the South Carolina Commission’s invitation to the Charleston meeting, to be held April 11 and 12 at the Francis Marion Hotel. On March 10, 1961, the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission (NJCWCC) announced that it would not be attending the National Assembly. The Commission included an African-American member, Madeline A. Williams, and since South Carolina hotels were segregated in 1961, Williams was required to seek accommodations at a separate hotel. The resulting conflict would dramatically fuse together, on a national stage, the growing rancor and discord over the debates on civil rights and Civil War memory and force the participants to address the topic the planners had sought to avoid.

No stranger to the politics of race, Williams was a civil rights pioneer as the first African-American woman to be elected to the New Jersey State Legislature in 1957. An executive member of her local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch, Williams was serving her second term in the Legislature when selected to represent the state at the Conference.\textsuperscript{21} Everett Landers, Executive Director of the NJCWCC, immediately called for a change of venues for the meeting to “a location which will respect the fundamental Constitutional rights of persons of all races and creeds.” John May and the members of the SCCWCC brushed off the initial report, stating, “that deals with state law and not the workings of our commission.” In addition to the statement released by the NJCWCC, the Tren-

\textsuperscript{18} Bodnar, \textit{The Making of America}, 210.
\textsuperscript{19} United States Civil War Centennial Commission, \textit{The Civil War Centennial: A Report to the Congress}, 9, 10.
\textsuperscript{20} Confederate War Centennial files, folder 4.
ton City Council rescinded an offer to return the “Swamp Angel,” a Union cannon used in the siege of Fort Sumter. The NJCWCC decision received an emphatic endorsement by the New Jersey State Legislature. State Senator Walter H. Jones expressed outrage at the choice of cities, denouncing the situation as “a mockery of our history and heritage.” United States Senator Clifford P. Case supported the boycott decision, adding that the policies of Charleston hotels represented an “irony of a most bitter sort,” in that the cause of the war was the “freedom and dignity of the individual.” The issue the USCWCC had tried to avoid had reared its head, but General Grant voiced a position similar to that voiced by May and the SCCWCC, noting that the USCWCC was itself a guest of the South Carolina delegation and was in no position to dictate conditions. Karl Betts repeated Grant’s position, and requests to change the site of the meeting were denied. South Carolina Governor Ernest F. Hollings accused New Jersey politicians of making “political capital” out of the Centennial remembrance, even suggesting that Madeline Williams was sent with the express purpose of “pressuring the anti-South integration battle.” Less than a week after the New Jersey announcement, other state commissions reacted to the proposed site change. Most northern commissions were hesitant to support the suggested change of venues, although Illinois and Michigan reported that they would not send delegations for financial reasons. Bruce Catton, chairman of a New York commission that included an African-American member, remarked, “I doubt that we would send a delegation any place where a member might not be welcome.” Catton regretfully remarked that the issue might require that New York “secede” from all of the southern Centennial events.

USCWCC member and Emory professor Bell I. Wiley characterized the paradoxical situation in his plea for peace, reminding Americans that the centennial of the Civil War should not be a forum for conflict, but that the war should be remembered for the “test it furnished both North and South, and for the good which came out of it.” Taking the advice of the national leadership, Wiley continued to try to stifle discord by avoiding specifics in favor of vague established notions of reconciliation and unity. Although Grant and Betts were responsible for mediating the conflict, neither took charge of the situation. Instead, they deferred to the customs and laws of South Carolina, seemingly unaware of the complicated irony of the problem.

Although John May and the SCCWCC were satisfied with Grant’s response, President John F. Kennedy was not. Kennedy sent a letter to Grant and the USCWCC citing the fact that the USCWCC was a federally chartered body, funded by a congressional appropriation, and consequently was subject to federal anti-segregation policies. Although the new president recognized the value of southern Democratic support, conflict over his proposed

civil rights legislation had already made him unpopular among South Carolina legislators.  

In a March 16th interview with The State newspaper reporters, United States Senator Strom Thurmond and Representative L. Mendel Rivers defended the position of the SCCWCC. Rivers resented Landers’ and the NJCWCC’s attempt to “create an incident in my home town concerning the meaning of the Fort Sumter event.” Thurmond followed in a defiant tone, asserting that New Jersey “might like to put the South back into a Reconstruction straitjacket” and “impose the notions of his constituents on South Carolina and the South, but he will be unable to do so.” Clearly segregation, as Governor Hollings had suggested, was “political capital.” Thurmond’s reference to Reconstruction not only confirmed his position on the sovereign power of the states in the fight against the national Civil Rights Movement, but it also linked the historic argument that the Civil War was an act of oppressive northern tyranny with the contemporary debate over federal control.  

SCCWC officials switched the focus of their defense, contending that the president had no jurisdiction over a body appropriated by a Congressional Order (despite his role as an ex-officio member). Governor Hollings held that no government body “can dictate to a hotel who it may not receive as guests.” The state coalition eventually won what The State newspaper referred to as “the first battle of the new Civil War,” when the USCWCC’s Executive Council rejected the president’s plea to offer equal accommodation opportunities for all participants. Southern officials and the national leadership were determined to hold the conference in Charleston, and no compromise was ever explored. Tuck’s reply to the president stated that “the Centennial belongs to all Americans,” adding that the USCWCC had no power over the actions of local commissions.

Kennedy did not accept the decision of Grant and the USCWCC and said during a March 24th press conference, publicly expressing the issue his letter had hoped to avoid: “any program of this kind in which the United States is engaged should provide facilities and meeting places which do not discriminate on the grounds of race or color.” South Carolina officials remained defiant. John May said of the NJCWCC boycott threat, “They’re welcome to come. If they decline to come, it’s entirely up to them.” He also expressed disappointment in the position of the New York commission and Bruce Catton, who had apparently forgotten the “full Charleston hospitality” he had received at the Star of the West event.  

On March 24th, Ohio Senator Fred Schwangel, seeking a solution to the quarrel, requested moving the meeting to the Charleston Naval Base which, as federal property, would not be subject to state segregation laws. Grant de-

livered the announcement that the meeting, including lodging, luncheons, and business sessions, would be held at the federal facility, making sure to thank the SCCWCC for having “cooperated so well.” An article in *The State* compared Grant’s diplomatic actions with those of his grandfather at Appomattox in his charitable treatment of the defeated enemy. Most of the offended state commissions expressed satisfaction with the decision, with the exception of California, which maintained its indignation with “the South Carolina people’s attitude against colored people.” NJCWCC Chairman Donald Flamm believed it seemed like a “very desirable solution of the problem,” but added the caveat that “if they are providing a Jim Crow section for integrated delegations, I do not want to attend.”

Despite the reservations of some northern state commissioners, the compromise seemed to offer a way to calm the sectional feud. For both parties, however, compromises, like those in 1820 and 1850, would not resolve the basic sectional differences, and the contemporary political climate continued to dictate the mood of the Centennial.

As the rhetoric of the altercation intensified, the SCCWCC quietly organized a separate annual meeting at the Francis Marion Hotel in conjunction with the Confederate States Civil War Commission, a joint body representing the eleven states of the Confederacy. Although Chairman John May assured the public that the meeting was not intended to compete with the national commemoration, a separate set of luncheons and slate of speakers were arranged. The former Confederate states had seceded from the National Commission.

Finally, the weekend of April 11th arrived, and ceremonies began amidst the tense and polarized environment. Despite the discord, Grant continued to try to calm the waters. When asked whether he felt that the issue of segregation would affect future Centennial events, he responded, “I don’t see why it should. It’s all adjusted now and everybody should be satisfied.” A costumed John May presented the Chairman with a Confederate flag. Grant, along with most of the national representatives, did not stay at the integrated accommodations at the Charleston Naval Base. USCWCC liaison Virgil C. Jones attributed his decision to maintain separate quarters to a heavy workload and a desire not to keep other committee members awake. Fewer than forty attendees had reserved space at the naval facilities, and only twenty-four actually stayed at the base.

The National Assembly featured a performance by Harold Reeves, a local authority on the African-American Gullah culture of the South Carolina coast.

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30. The 1820 Missouri Compromise sought to calm sectional tensions by allowing for the admission to the Union of Maine as a free state in return for Missouri as a slave state. The Compromise of 1850 attempted to accomplish a similar goal by passing a number of laws, the most significant of which was the strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act. Both only postponed the inevitable conflict. In M. B. Norton, D. M. Katzman, P. D. Escott, H. P. Chudacoff, T. G. Patterson, and W. M. Tuttle (Eds.), *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume I: To 1877.* (2nd ed.). (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 233, 360–61.
The subject of slave culture, however, was presented not to offer an African American perspective, but “for the people of the South to remember the loyalty of many Negroes during the Civil War.” This rare Centennial reference to African Americans during the War was tempered with a familiar Lost Cause tone. Reeves concluded that “despite the Supreme Court decision and other happenings, a feeling of affection remains between the White and Negro races in the South.”

Senator Strom Thurmond’s defiant opinions regarding the application of federal integration pressure could be found in South Carolina newspapers on an almost daily basis during the early 1960s, and the senator did not pass up the publicity opportunity presented by the April Fort Sumter weekend. At the separate April 11th meeting of the Confederate States Centennial Commission, the senator delivered a speech that synthesized the Southern position on the historical and contemporary race debates. Thurmond claimed he was not there to “reopen the wounds of the war and reconstruction,” but to promote “national harmony, unity and toleration.” This harmony, Thurmond charged, was jeopardized by “egalitarians” who wished to force “sameness” on the American public. Thurmond identified communism as the most dangerous purveyor of the un-American notions of total equality and argued that the enemy revealed itself most plainly in “the advocacy of ‘social equality’ among diverse races.” Thurmond used the stage of a historical commemoration to defend what he referred to as the “great tradition” of providing separate but equal facilities against the dangerous trend of “socialism and conformity.” The senator defended his political objectives by reasoning that racial and social equality represented a danger to American society. Thurmond’s invective reflected a common strategy employed by pro-segregation forces since the 1940s—connecting the federal push for integration with the specter of Communists, both of which were being imposed on Americans and supported by outside agitators. The “Southern Red Scare” fueled fears that democracy and self-determination were threatened by the scourge of international socialism. Here was yet another politically savvy defense of the segregation position via a reference to historical precedent, connecting the traditional scapegoat of Marxism to the tyranny of Lincoln’s Union to the contemporary federal movement to override state policies regarding race.

Temperatures continued to boil on the second day of the split conference. Charleston native and Saturday Evening Post editor Ashley Halsey Jr. spoke at a dinner ceremony at the National Assembly and prompted Landers and the NJCWCC to storm out of the event in protest, holding an impromptu press conference in the hallway outside of the ballroom. According to Vice-chair-

33. South Carolina Confederate War Centennial Commission, South Carolina Speaks, 39–43.
man Joe Dempsey, the Commission had been “grossly insulted and offended” by the contents of the speech and demanded an opportunity to respond. Grant denied the request and drew the fire of NJCWCC members, who called for his resignation. Halsey released a summary of his speech, with some of the more incendiary sections removed. One deleted segment of the speech argued that segregation be decided by popular vote and not by Congress or the courts. The passages that remained, however, called out New Jersey’s own poor record on civil rights and questioned Abraham Lincoln’s racial composition. Halsey also described the Reconstruction era as an example of why integration could not be forced upon the South “by sudden coercive pressures whether political or military.” Halsey received a number of supportive telegrams and stated that he believed that he “expresses the southern viewpoint.” He later charged the USCWCC with “a sad capitulation of free speech” and likened his gracious self-censure to that of Lee in his surrender at Appomattox. While the source of the original salvo at Fort Sumter remained in question among historians, Halsey declared that in this contemporary altercation New Jersey had “fired the first shot.”

The crisis of the Charleston incident only seemed to fortify the unwavering position of state officials regarding the unquestioned legitimacy of the Confederate cause. At the 1961 Confederate Memorial Day speech at a meeting of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, SCCWCC member Roddey LeHew Bell reiterated the righteousness of the southern position. His historical summary mentioned slavery, in that the Confederate Constitution “expressly forbade the slave trade, or the importation of slaves from any foreign country other than the slave-holding states and territories of the United States.” Slavery was addressed, however, not as a cause of the War but as a virtue of the Confederate government. The words of speakers like Halsey and Bell presented a Civil War reading that did not allow for the shared reconciliation practiced by previous generations of Americans, establishing or rather re-establishing a sectional conflict over the once generally accepted memory of the War.

Forgotten amidst the historical and contemporary debates over race among the conference leaders were the efforts of the NAACP to represent the African American perspective on the war’s legacy. Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, spoke out against the Charleston meeting, describing his feelings of “resentment at efforts to commemorate the Civil War with meaningless pageants and spectacles which overlook the real meaning [of the War].” South Carolina’s NAACP president J. Arthur Brown challenged the historical perspective sanctioned by South Carolina, “a version based on [the] alleged inferiority of the Negro, upholding the Confederacy and repudiating the great moral issue which lay at the bottom of the Civil War.” The NAACP

35. The State, April 14, 1961.
was joined by the American Jewish Committee in their dissatisfaction regarding “this disservice of American interest.”

The NAACP held a rally in Charleston on April 11th, to coincide with the National Assembly and Confederate States Conference. Madeline Williams, the pivotal figure in the controversy, and fellow NJCWCC member Joseph Dempsey attended the rally. At the rally, speakers intentionally bypassed the issue of segregation in favor of a telling of “the true story of the Negro in the Civil War” by Morgan State College historian Benjamin Quarles. Quarles established his high standing in the historiography of the Civil War with works such as his landmark biography of Frederick Douglass in 1948. At the rally he emphasized an issue heretofore unexamined publicly during the Centennial in South Carolina: the substantial role African Americans played in the Union victory. Orangeburg's Reverend Matthew D. McCullom stated that “no attempt to glorify the Confederacy can be valid—for it was founded on the principle of slavery.” A resolution drafted by the organization for the event included the definitive phrase, “We are glad the South did not win.”

The NAACP clearly understood the connections between the Centennial and the Civil Rights Movement, and feared the event could “strike a hard blow at our present day movement towards equality.” The organization's leadership did not, like state and federal officials, take advantage of the tailor-made Centennial context of Civil War remembrance and Williams’ segregation from the conference to promote their civil rights fight. In fact, they advised their membership not to be involved in any Centennial events, and to “work against any Federal participation.” The NAACP tried to focus instead on the historic debate over the war’s meaning and held the rally in order to discuss the African American perspective on the war. Only three hundred people attended the rally to witness a different history than the one presented by state officials and the press, and the crowd included only one white visitor and only a small percentage of Charleston’s five thousand NAACP members. The rest of the New Jersey Commission did not attend. Although the NAACP did not exploit the Centennial to advance their cause, it is difficult to imagine that their leadership did not recognize the national and international impact the events in Charleston could have on raising public awareness of the movement and its principles.

The public battle over the Charleston meeting would shape the entire Centennial, despite efforts to write the incident off as an unfortunate mistake or an episode of political posturing. To the editors of The State, the furor caused by the Charleston accommodation dispute was more regrettable than the original 1861 battle over Fort Sumter, for “frightful as was the original conflict, it was an honest war,” “good blood” as opposed to the “bad blood” shed during

the commemoration. The commentary appears to mourn the end of the shared white memory of a war in which honorable soldier fought against honorable soldier, a memory shattered by the “bad blood” created when the politics of race entered the discussion. At the national level, the USCWCC’s role diminished greatly as events and planning were limited to state, local, and private entities. The SCCWCC continued to operate programs and activities, and although many of those events were still charged with statements of political defiance, the original ambitious agenda was reduced to a few state park dedications and a series of costumed reenactments. Local Centennial commissions and civic groups took over the bulk of programs and activities during the remainder of the Centennial and tended to revert back to the traditional memory of shared honor, avoiding race completely, and mostly avoiding the contemporary civil rights debate. The most common Centennial references could be seen in the commercial sector, in symbols such as the Piggly Wiggly cartoon pig mascot in a Confederate cap, or an offer for new car buyers to “celebrate the Centennial in style” and purchase “The New Valiant Dixie Special,” a limited edition model that boasted “a soft Confederate gray exterior” and a “special insignia on the door,” and was “not available up North at any price.” Visitors to South of The Border in Dillon could enhance their vacation experience with a visit to “Confederateland.” By the Centennial’s end, although the national organizers’ goal of avoiding commercialism and spectacle was not achieved, at least in South Carolina, most commemorative efforts reverted to the noncontroversial themes of common glory and honor delivered in the form of generally agreeable pageants and reenactments. But while the debate over Civil War memory in South Carolina quieted through the remainder of the Centennial, the Civil Rights Movement would charge forward, leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which at least began the process of delivering on the promise the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

Many people in South Carolina had hoped that the state would not celebrate the Centennial of the Civil War at all. Former South Carolina Senator and Governor James F. Byrnes expressed fear before the Centennial that it was “quite impossible to relive the four years of the Civil War without recalling experiences that will be unpleasant to the people of both North and South.” In a 1999 interview, South Carolina Confederate War Commission member and University of South Carolina professor Daniel Hollis expressed regret over the decidedly pro-Confederate nature of the event, quoting writer George Santayana: “Loyalty to our ancestors does not include loyalty to their mistakes.” Another South Carolinian, in writing to Senator Olin Johnson in 1959, considered the Civil War “a disgrace to the United States and might well be covered up.”

The Centennial was a vivid manifestation of the striking connections between many of the social and political debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a reminder that in 1961, the Civil War remained unfinished. Although the Centennial failed in the national leadership’s original goals, as a public history program, it is difficult to imagine a more robust and well-publicized forum to teach the public the lesson that history, and especially the history of America’s seminal historical moment, is not a static event to be referred to in the past tense, but an unending and relevant part of the present. Discussion of the Civil War and its impact on civil rights in America may have been effectively stifled in the public sphere since Reconstruction, but in the first years of the 1960s, the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement was too strong, and the Centennial would force its participants to address directly the injustice of Madeline Williams’ inability to join her fellow Commissioners at the Francis Marion Hotel during the remembrance of a war fought to end the subjugation of one race over another. The tragedy of the Centennial as a teaching opportunity is that the discussion was cut short by organizers and planners seeking to squelch controversy and debate. As we face a very different political context during the Sesquicentennial, public historians should avoid the pursuit of the unattainable consensus that doomed the Centennial and actively engage the public in those same politically charged topics and sensitive debates over America’s Civil War memory that fifty years ago, turned a weekend of parades and reenactments into a revealing public dialogue on history, memory, and race.

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