

Tuesday, November 24, 2015 Talbot County Council Meeting

In July of this year (2015), the Talbot County Council held a public work session with senior members of the Talbot County branch of the NAACP. The work session was convened to discuss several questions posed by the membership concerning the Talbot Boys statue. First, it was questioned whether the Talbot Boys statue, erected in 1916 to honor those Confederate soldiers from Talbot County, told the full story of Talbot County's involvement in the Civil War. Secondly, the appropriateness of having a statue of a color bearer with a Confederate flag on the County courthouse green.

The NAACP's questions came on the heels of a tragic shooting on June 17, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina where a lone gunman slaughtered nine innocent members of Emanuel AME Church while they attended a Bible study. In the horrifying aftermath, it was revealed that the shooter had left several racist filled messages as well as photographs of himself with the Confederate flag.

First designed in 1861 as the battle flag of the Confederate States of America, the Confederate flag has been a constant source of debate, honored and revered by some, while to others the flag casts a darker and more sinister image. The leadership of the NAACP not only came before the Council with questions, they were also prepared with recommendations. It is their position that the image of the Confederate color bearer is not suitable for the courthouse lawn and, therefore recommends its removal and placement in a more appropriate setting. Their second recommendation is for the commission of a group of citizens who would reasonably discuss the erection of a new statue depicting both the Union and Confederate soldiers.

Over the past five months, the County Council has received comments from many of its citizens, as well as from people outside of the county. The comments came by email, by hand written letter, by phone message, and by an open public comment session hosted by the Council in October. It was the sentiment of the Council to allow both time and opportunity for all Talbot Countians to fulfill their right to be heard. Some of the comments were only a few words, such as "let the statue stand," while other responses were several pages long containing names and dates of historical events. Nearly all the emails received started by thanking the Council for holding the public comment session, and yet, while none relished being in our position, there was a genuine sense of appreciation to the duty. While an overwhelming percentage of the comments centered around the principle issue at hand, which is the symbolic representation of the Confederate flag on public property, it was troubling that some comments received contained elements of intolerance.

At last check, more Americans fought and died in the Civil War, then in all other American wars combined. The reasons why these young man left their farms and towns to go off to war varied greatly, some perhaps felt it was a sense of duty, some left to protect a way of life and for others it was simply because the other boys were going. But whatever their individual reasons, to ignore the political and economic impact that slavery played in the cessation of states is being naïve.

It has been 150 years since the last shot was fired in the battle between the states, and after the fighting stopped, the period of reconstruction began. Bombed out cities and burnt down towns were rebuilt, new train tracks were laid and terminals reconstructed; for families torn apart, the end of the war meant that healing and reconciliation could begin. Yet for millions of African Americans, complete reconstruction and restoration would be a century away. For these Americans, the image of the Confederate flag is only a harsh reminder of those times.

At the conclusion of the Spanish American War on Dec 14, 1898, U.S. President William McKinley, in his address, cited both the Union and Confederate soldiers for their valor and urged reconciliation between Northerners and Southerners based on the outstanding service of Southerners during the recent war with Spain. These veterans who were once at odds now fought side by side, wore the same uniform, and fought under one united flag. President McKinley later called for federal recognition of the Union and Confederate soldiers because he considered them all Americans.

After the killings in Charleston, many Americans were surprised to discover that under federal law, both Union and Confederate soldiers are considered U.S. veterans, and thereby are entitled to the same benefits, privileges and protections. Also under federal law, Confederate soldiers are eligible for burial in National cemeteries and for taxpayer funded headstones, equal to their Union counterparts. Government records show that the last known Civil War veteran died in 1956; the last known widow of a Civil War veteran died in 2003 at the age of 93.

What this Council is now faced with is a vastly different situation than what was dealt with in South Carolina, where the Confederate flag was flown on the State House grounds. If that were the case here, I am certain that this Council would have voted unanimously to remove the flag without delay. But this is a monument that commemorates those deceased Talbot Countians who fought and died in battle. Whether you agree or disagree with the cause that these young men fought for doesn't change the historical facts of the war.

As a monument commemorating Confederate veterans of the Civil War, who by federal law have the same status and distinction as any other American war veteran, it would be a sign of dishonor to those 90 deceased soldiers, as well as disrespectful to the family members, should this Council or any other Council remove, deface or alter this monument in any way. Therefore, this Council does not support the recommendation to have the Talbot Boys monument moved to another location.

But this Council believes, as did many citizens in 1913, and as many do here today, that the Talbot Boys monument alone does not tell the complete story of Talbot County's involvement in the Civil War. It is recorded that over 330 Talbot County young men fought for the Union and their exclusion is neither a fair nor accurate depiction.

Therefore, this Council accepts the recommendation of the NAACP in part, and will permit the erection of a monument commemorating those Union soldiers from Talbot County who fought in the Civil War.

Any proposed monument shall not be greater in size or mass than its Confederate counterpart. The monument must be funded with private funds, as are all other monuments on the Courthouse green. All proposals for a Union monument must be approved by the Talbot County Council.

This Council is cognizant that this decision will not be well received by everyone, yet we hope that all sides are at least satisfied that their comments, suggestions and opinions were given full and complete consideration by this Council.

It has been said that life is not about trying to change one's thinking, but to have the freedom to express one's thoughts.