

# Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries

## Position Paper

*The Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries has created several position papers to convey their opinion of best practices on various topics related to historic cemeteries.*

### **Recommendations Concerning the Use of Confederate Flags in Historic Cemeteries**

**July 2020**

The Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries (OCHC) has created a number of position papers to convey its opinion of best practices on various topics related to historic cemeteries. The following addresses the placement of confederate flags in historic cemeteries, but may apply to all cemeteries, more generally. We feel this is a timely discussion and an important position that the commission needs to address.

#### **Memorial Day History:**

Memorial Day was established three years after the end of the Civil War on May 5, 1868, by the order of General John A. Logan (National Cemetery Administration 2020). It set forth that May 30, 1868 was to be *“designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land.....We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose, among other things, "of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance....Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic. Let us, then, at the time appointed, gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor....(National Cemetery Administration 2020).”* Memorial Day was established to commemorate the Union soldiers who defended the United States of America. Traditionally, Memorial Day is observed as the day when we commemorate and decorate the graves of the soldiers who have died while in service defending the United States of America. This is one of the largest celebrations in historic cemeteries across Oregon.

#### **Significance of Flags in Historic Cemeteries:**

Historical context is essential for understanding the intention behind the establishment of Memorial Day and how historic cemeteries can help maintain this. As stated above in General Logan’s declaration, the intent behind Memorial Day was to *“raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor.”* The flag of the United States of America is flown in many cemeteries and is an important component of the Memorial Day celebrations. In contrast, the Confederate flag is a symbol of treason, suppression, racism, and dishonor to the United States of America. It is the flag of the enemy of the United States of America and a symbol that makes many people feel unwelcome, unsafe, and it directly conflicts with the original intent behind Memorial Day celebrations. While historic cemeteries may have fallen soldiers from multiple wars and countries of origin, the significance of Memorial Day is to commemorate United States soldiers who lost their lives during defending their country.

The National Park Service and the Veterans of Affairs have set forth guidelines that do not allow flying Confederate Flags on a flagpole in their cemeteries. They do allow for small Confederate flags to be placed on the graves of Confederate Soldiers on the Confederate Memorial Day and some on Memorial Day. In these instances, a sponsor must request the flag placement, provide it, and remove it as soon as possible after the commemoration day (Display of the Confederate Flag at Federal Cemeteries in the United States 2016). While some southern states have a Confederate Memorial Day, in Oregon that is not something that is acknowledged or commemorated.

### **Summary Statement:**

Out of respect for the United States, in acknowledgement of the original intent behind Memorial Day, as well as provides a safe, and to create a welcoming environment in our historic cemeteries, that are meant to be public spaces, shared by all, the OCHC recommends that Confederate flags not be allowed to be flown in historic cemeteries during Memorial Day weekend celebrations, or at any other time. This includes flying the Confederate flag on flagpoles or with small flags placed on individual graves. We do not support allowing flags in historic cemeteries that promote systemic racism, fear, and suppression of anyone. It is extremely important that historic cemeteries are maintained as places where the visitors feel safe and welcome. If families have a Confederate soldier's grave they wish to be decorated during Memorial Day, they should choose to use the United States flag or flowers, rather than a Confederate flag. Memorial Day weekend celebrations should only utilize the flag of the United States of America, to honor the fallen soldiers, who died defending the country in which we live. The use of the Confederate flag should not be allowed in historic cemeteries, as it is not a symbol that should be promoted.

### **For more information or help:**

Advice and help is available from Kuri Gill, Program Coordinator for OCHC, and the OCHC Commissioners. Please contact Kuri for more information.

### **Bibliography:**

National Cemetery Administration

2020 <https://www.cem.va.gov/history/memdayorder.asp>

Display of the Confederate Flag at Federal Cemeteries in the United States

2016 <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IN10313.html>

United States Department of the Interior

2010 [https://www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DO\\_61.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DO_61.pdf)