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# AN UNFLAGGING INTEREST IN OUR PAST

BY LEILA ROOS

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." This poignant remark by novelist William Faulkner has been frequently invoked to illustrate that we live with the consequences of what has happened before and that they also influence our decisions to come. By the time we fully process the present, it, too, is past. In the historical context, however, the past is merely what happened before the present.

"It only becomes history when we use its evidence to construct a narrative," muses historian Dr. Todd Groce. "History is the story of the human past."

This distinction was drawn for me as I entered the "closed stacks" of the Abrahams Archive wing with the president of the Georgia Historical Society. The towering shelves stood shoulder to shoulder, each equipped with a crank on the side, a turn of which would permit a small space to explore. Our conversation had turned to the significance of studying history as we pored over a book plucked randomly from the first shelf, a gorgeous bottle-green tome filled with the letters of a Revolutionary War general, orders written upon translucent pages in the thinly slanted script of a bygone era.

The Society has been aggressively collecting new material to create complete pictures of a place in time. As such, they require letters and diaries in addition to official documents, and the files of ordinary citizens as well as those of the celebrated.

In response to my apprehension about the ethics of turning intimate files over to the public, Dr. Groce relates an anecdote about Martha Washington. After her husband's death, she destroyed their love letters for the sake of privacy. Although no one can fault her for doing so, the consequence is that historians have tended to think of the Washingtons as having a marriage of convenience rather than one of passion. "The archaeologist digs into the earth to learn about the earlier world," Dr. Groce explains. "Though we're above ground, all we can know comes from records. And so we end up remembering not the person who does the most, but the person who is documented the most."

Founded in 1839, the Georgia Historical Society has the largest collection of Georgian archives. The current headquarters, stately Hodgeson Hall, was built in 1876 as a library and archive research center, today providing the oldest collection on Georgian historical records. The recent purchase of the Jepson House, the neighboring 7,000 square foot antebellum mansion, will provide space for proper administrative offices, relieving pressure on the current building as it acquires more materials.

The spectacle that drew me to the Gaston Street complex that day was the exhibit, "Conquered Banners: Georgia's Civil War Flags," positioned to the right upon entry into the society's reading room. Originally donated to the museum by Civil War veterans in the late 19th century, the flags were in poor shape by the centennial of the war. With no financial resources for restoration, they were donated

to the National Park Service, who had them conserved, mounted and put on display at Fort Pulaski. Now, back in Hodgeson Hall, the four flags of military companies are shown on a rotating basis throughout the year. The current banner has the Confederate flag on the back, with the obverse face featuring the state coat of arms on dilapidated beige silk, worn where the paint ate through the underlying fabric.

Beneath the columns furls a banner proclaiming the "1st Georgia Regulars Infantry Regiment," peopled with troops from Atlanta and Brunswick, and Glynn and Montgomery counties. The regiment completed its organization at Macon in April of 1861 and soon moved to Virginia, where it was brigaded under Gen. Toombs. The



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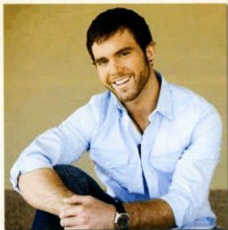
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unit transferred to G.T. Anderson's brigade and fought with the Army of Northern Virginia from the Seven Days' Battles to Fredericksburg. It was then ordered to Florida, assigned to G.P. Harrison's brigade, and fought at Olustee. In the late stages, it was stationed in the Charleston area and saw action at Savannah and in North Carolina, ultimately surrendering with the Army of Tennessee.

The banner on permanent display, however, is the apple of my archival eye. Carried through the streets of Savannah on the night of Dec. 26, 1860, it represents the regional support of South Carolina's decision to secede from the United States six days earlier. The scene casts an allegorical woman equipped with a sword and scales of justice as the Deep South, shielding the likewise feminized and armed South Carolina from attack by the Federal Eagle. The sprawling caption of "Touch her if you dare" warned the United States. If the federal authorities tried to coerce South Carolina back into the Union, the other states would secede as well and defend her.

"Somebody carefully folded this banner knowing it should be preserved so the future could learn from it," Dr. Groce marvels. "Take this one object, construct a story around it and the Secession story can be told."

The dangers of glorifying a culturally contentious symbol with disregard to its connotations can be counteracted through an educated appreciation for the full significance of its pivotal historical event. The ideal of equality for all had existed since the Declaration of Independence, but the struggle to include everyone in that concept continues to the present. Lincoln urged Congress to decide in favor of his policies in late December 1862, impressing upon them: "We cannot escape history..."

Examining cultural values requires tremendous introspection from our citizenry as educated individuals. The essence of what it means to be American is contained within our history, and understanding that history will help to make us better Americans, more capable of playing active roles in our political process. The study of history is not a luxury, but rather a necessity. The doors of the Georgia Historical Society are open to students, scholars, teachers and anyone interested to learn about our nation's story of the past.

For more information on the Georgia Historical Society, please visit [georgiahistory.com](http://georgiahistory.com)

[www.theskinnie.com](http://www.theskinnie.com)