



From Minnesota to Mississippi: The Murder of George Floyd and the Retirement and Replacement of the State Flag of Mississippi

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When voters make decisions about social issues, factors including cultural heritage, religion, race/ethnicity and recent events can intersect. However, the significance of visual images, historical narratives, media presentation, and future planning should not be overlooked. This article explores the importance of state flag histories and designs in Mississippi, specifically examining the 1894 flag design that became central to the state’s identity until voters approved a new design in 2020. The state’s flag politics are discussed within a prolonged national discourse with emphasis on recent racial attacks across the U.S. This study highlights calls for reform emanating from grassroots, media, religious, athletic, economic, social, and political groups in and outside the state. The article notes that racial tragedies such as the murder of George Floyd can serve as persistent inspiration of Mississippi voters and lawmakers to address inequalities and advance democracies.

Keywords: history of racism, white supremacy, Mississippi politics, Black Lives Matter, flag politics, ongoing challenges.

**Do Minnesota ao Mississípi: o assassinato de George Floyd e a
retirada e substituição da bandeira do Estado do Mississípi**

Quando os eleitores tomam decisões sobre problemas sociais, vários fatores como o património cultural, a religião, a raça/etnicidade e acontecimentos recentes podem-se intersectar. Porém, a relevância de imagens visuais, narrativas históricas, formas de apresentação e o planeamento do futuro não devem ser também subestimados. Este artigo explora a importância das histórias e designs das bandeiras no estado do Mississípi, examinando especialmente o design da bandeira de 1894 que se tornou central para a identidade deste estado até os eleitores aprovarem um novo design em 2020. As políticas sobre as bandeiras deste estado são discutidas no âmbito de um discurso nacional prolongado, com ênfase nos recentes ataques raciais nos EUA. O estudo enfatiza os apelos a reformas por parte de grupos de base, mediáticos, religiosos, desportivos, económicos, sociais e políticos dentro e fora do Mississípi. O artigo realça que tragédias raciais como o assassinato de George Floyd podem servir de inspiração permanente para os eleitores e legisladores do Mississípi abordarem desigualdades e fazerem avançar as suas democracias.

Palavras-chave: história do racismo, supremacia branca, políticas do Mississípi, Black Lives Matter, políticas de bandeiras, desafios atuais.

From Minnesota to Mississippi: The Murder of George Floyd and the Retirement and Replacement of the State Flag of Mississippi

Caleb Smith, Stan Brunn, and Byron D'Andra Orey*

On June 27, 2020, the state senate of Mississippi initiated the final legislative phase of removing the 1894 State Flag of Mississippi, which featured a Confederate Battle Flag in its top left corner, or canton. House Bill 1763 had already passed the state's House of Representatives earlier that day, but the responsibility of debating and voting on the bill rested with the senators. In his introduction of the bill, the senate's Pro Tempore, Briggs Hopson, acknowledged the historic nature of the moment and emphasized that the flag debate would be a recurring issue if not remedied at that moment. He stated, "Whether you like the fact that a movement is going on or hate the fact that a movement is going on, it doesn't matter. This [the flag] will continue to come up again and again".¹ Hopson did not address the origins of this movement but later in the speech noted that a similar movement occurred in 2015 but did not gain enough traction to effect change.

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¹ Speech from Mississippi Senate floor by Briggs Hopson, streamed live on the Mississippi Legislature YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yRUagTaWT4&list=PLfk-c4ctYmTaKw8QnRnH65jNha7vXmE0SA&index=70> on June 27, 2020.

Interestingly, there was no significant movement or active legislation in the Mississippi legislature to remove the 1894 Flag thirty days prior to the June debate. However, the murder of George Floyd had a profound effect on the public discourse leading to a swift legislative process that retired the controversial flag. After the debate on June 27, which featured many legislators professing support for a new flag while also citing faith and economics as motivations for change, the bill to change the flag cleared the senate and was signed by the governor days later.

Passage of the bill to change the flag was the culmination of nearly four decades of public debate that featured legal challenges regarding the validity of the flag and a special election in 2001 where Mississippians overwhelmingly supported keeping the 1894 Flag.² After the massacre at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC, a growing force of support inside the state to change the flag occurred.³ But as Hopson stated, that movement died down and could not win enough support to change the flag in 2015. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 changed the movement once again, leading to a quick month of legislation that retired the 1894 flag.

This article aims to examine the complex intersection of politics, race, and religion that led to the removal of the Confederate Battle Flag from the state flag of Mississippi and how motivations for removal originated from national debates concerning the state's continual endorsement of Confederate iconography after the death of George Floyd. Specifically, the article delves into the history of the 1894 flag, the iconography associated with the flag, and the historical context that informed its design. This flag, and flags in general, we argue, shape ideologies and social practices around the role of material culture in racial formation. This article also explores the opposition to the flag

2 Jonathan Leib and Gerald R. Webster, "Black, White or Green?: The Confederate Battle Flag Emblem and the 2001 Mississippi State Flag Referendum", *Southeastern Geographer* 52, no. 3 (2012): 299-326, doi:10.1353/sgo.2012.0029.

3 Briggs Hopson's speech mentions the 2015 movement in the state that followed the Charleston shooting at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yRUagTaWT4&list=PLfk4ctYmTaK-w8QnRnH65jNha7vXmE0SA&index=70> on June 27, 2020.

that grew in the 1980s and 1990s. It also examines the 2001 referendum where Mississippians supported the flag's retention, and the subsequent shift in public opinion that emerged after the Charleston shooting. These additional voices and new perspectives challenged the status quo and began revealing the flag's historical context. Furthermore, the article discusses the national focus on change that arose after the death of Floyd along with the framing arguments and the roles of internal and external stakeholders in the process of changing the state flag. We highlight the slow and protracted nature of the effort to remove the 1894 flag while acknowledging the significant impact societal tragedies had in bringing about change.

History of the Flag

Mississippi attained statehood in 1817 but did not adopt a state flag until 1861. In late 1860 the state voted to secede from the Union and selected a new flag to symbolize Mississippi prior to the official formation of the Confederacy.⁴ The flag featured a white background with a blooming magnolia tree in the center. The tree symbolized the state as Mississippi is nicknamed "The Magnolia State." In the canton, or top left corner, was a blue field with a large single white star.⁵ From 1861 to 1865, the flag was used in battle alongside the standard flags of the Confederacy. After the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865, the flag displaying the magnolia tree flag was retired from use and Mississippi went without a state flag for the next three decades.

4 John Coski and David Sansing, "Flag, State", in *The New Mississippi Encyclopedia*, ed. Ted Ownby and Charles Regan Wilson (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2017), 436-37.

5 In this case the canton is the Bonnie Blue Flag that was first used by the short-lived Republic of West Florida but later became a symbol of independence utilized by some in the Confederacy. The Bonnie Blue is still used today by neo-Confederates as a symbol of resistance, White supremacy, and Confederate sympathy that is less recognizable than the Confederate Battle Flag. The flag serves as an understood symbol, or "dog-whistle", to other neo-Confederates.



Figure 1. 1860 Magnolia Flag and 1894 Flag. Photo by the authors.

Between 1865 and the 1890s, southern states began adopting state flags, but Mississippi was occupied with rebuilding the economic and political infrastructure that had been dismantled during the war. The Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1876 marked the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi and the transfer of state power back to the White people who ran the state during the Civil War, many of whom were former Confederate soldiers.⁶ The self-stylized “Bourbons” were former soldiers who seized control of the state after Reconstruction, establishing laws and political structures that were similar to those of the state prior to the Civil War. State leaders, fearing political unity of free Black men and yeoman White farmers, passed laws that hardened lines of race, restricting the movement of Black persons and Black access to the ballot box through a series of Black Codes. These laws were enforced through clandestine measures from groups who claimed to protect

⁶ Westley Busbee, *Mississippi: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harland Publishing, 2008), 379-81.

White supremacy in the name of political unity among White people. These restrictive laws culminated in the racially restrictive codes of the 1890 Constitution of Mississippi, which proved extremely effective in suppressing Black resistance and Black political power. The success of these measures led other southern states to emulate the Mississippi constitution, which is known as “the Second Mississippi Plan.”⁷

Leaders of Mississippi followed these new restrictive laws with the adoption of symbolic measures to reinforce White hegemony over the Magnolia State. Agrarian uprisings by poor farmers, both Black and White, challenged the political monopoly of the Democratic Party in Mississippi, revealing political fissures along lines of class.⁸ The 1890 Constitution further exposed these rifts by including a literacy test for voters that disenfranchised Blacks and uneducated Whites. In 1894, Governor John Stone sought to retain poor Whites in the Democratic Party by adopting measures that reinforced White racial unity by honoring the Confederacy – supporting a veteran’s home for Confederate veterans, as well as requesting the state legislature to adopt a new flag.⁹

The legislative committee, headed by Senator E. N. Scudder, proposed a flag with three large horizontal stripes of blue, white, and red from top to bottom.¹⁰ The canton of the flag was described as a red field with a blue “X” outlined in white. The “X” had thirteen white stars – one in the center and three on each arm. The thirteen stars were described in the legislation to correspond to the thirteen original states of

7 The first Mississippi Plan was an attempt to negate the 14th and 15th Amendments by Mississippi’s leadership immediately after the Civil War. That plan was upended when Republicans were appointed by the federal government to restructure the state’s governance and prevent a reinstitution of antebellum conditions for Black people.

8 Stephanie Rolph, “The History of Mississippi’s State Flag”, part of Mississippi’s History Now series from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 2021. Accessed June 8, 2022 at <https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-history-of-mississippi%27s-state-flag>.

9 Coski and Sansing, “Flag, State”, 436.

10 In the editorial by J. Ronald Parrish entitled “An Ignorant Display of Cowardice”, *Laurel Leader Call*, June 30, 2020, A4, the author attempts to defend the 1894 flag by correctly stating that the legislation never mentions the Confederacy nor the Confederate Battle Flag but fails to recognize the similarities of the 1894 flag and the Confederate Battle Flag. The author of that article also ignores the context of when the flag was adopted – a high tide of racially restrictive legislation in the state.

the union.¹¹ Nowhere in the bill did the terms “Confederate” or “rebel” appear, but the design of the flag unmistakably displayed the Confederate Battle Flag. Two decades later, Scudder’s daughter acknowledged that her father held pro-Confederate sentiments and sought to create a lasting tribute to soldiers who defended the state. Adoption of the 1894 Flag containing the Confederate Battle Flag followed the hegemonic model of that time established by Confederate monuments and new counties named for Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee – White domination while restricting challenges to the state’s Democratic leadership through racial unity.

State flags are unique because they are official symbols of the state representing all the people of that state in official government presentations through a form of symbolic messaging. These flags are located in courthouses, on school grounds, and in all state institutions as reminders of the entity in power and the themed message of that power, which under the 1894 flag was devotion to the Confederacy and the Lost Cause.¹² This continual tie to the Confederacy became a nationalistic cudgel to unite White people against Black civil rights and federal intervention that attempted to create racial equality. Representation of the flag involves the three parts of the system of symbolism discussed by Deleuze and Guattari: message, symbol, and interpretation.¹³ The message of the flag in 1894 was White power using a symbol implemented by those who attempted to defend a state’s right to protect the institution of slavery.¹⁴ The interpretation was a dual reminder of the Confederate states and a symbol of the vigilantes who defended White

11 The specific union in question was never clarified, but the irony of stating that the flag symbolized the Union of the United States but looked like the flag of the Confederate States is not lost.

12 James C. Cobb. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2005), 62-189. Cobb defines the Lost Cause as a civic religion that was formed after the Civil War to validate the Confederacy’s attempted rebellion from the United States while hiding the reason for the rebellion – slavery.

13 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

14 The act of secession by South Carolina maintained that non-slaving states were threatening slavery. Two weeks later, the State of Mississippi’s declaration of secession argued that secession was necessary as the state needed to protect slavery.

supremacy. These groups terrorized Black people with intimidating visits, symbolic meetings, and public lynchings that served as reminders that Black people were treated as second-class citizens, lacking the rights and freedoms that White people of that time enjoyed.¹⁵ This interpretation of the state flag of Mississippi did not need an additional narrative attached because it was understood inside and out of the state – White power reigned.

The next phase of public Confederate flag iconography presented itself in the mid-1900s as the Lost Cause and the Mississippi Plan faced new challenges. President Truman's integration of the United States military led to the 1948 rise of the Dixiecrat Party and the resurrection of the Confederate Battle Flag as a symbol of resistance to federal integrative efforts via state's rights as well as a symbol of maintaining White hegemony over southern states.¹⁶ The Supreme Court's 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* led to a new round of Confederate Battle Flags being displayed as symbolic resistance to federal attempts to enforce integration. In 1955 Alabama added "Heart of Dixie" to its license plates as a reminder of the Confederacy and resistance.¹⁷ The following year Georgia became the second state to add a Confederate Battle symbol to its state flag as a soliloquy opposing the Brown case.¹⁸ Georgia's flag was changed with very little debate, much like that of Mississippi, as the intention of the symbol was widely understood and required no debate because the people selecting it were White. Over the next decade the Confederate Battle Flag began to shift interpretation from the Confederacy and maintaining Whiteness

15 Rolph speaks of "whitecapping" as clandestine groups in the 1880s and 1890s dressed in white caps and used violence to force Black people off their own land. Rolph, "The History".

16 Gerald R. Webster and Jonathan Leib, "Religion, Murder, and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina", *Southeastern Geographer* 26, no. 1 (2016): 29-37 reminds that all these adoptions of Confederate Battle flags as symbols of the state were through legislative means. No ballot initiative or vote by the populace was held to determine if these symbols should be adopted. In doing this, the state legislatures determined that they were better suited to select and install the best symbol for the people of their states.

17 Jonathan Leib, "Identity, Banal Nationalism, Contestation, and North American License Plates", *Geographical Review* 101, no. 1 (2011): 45.

18 Jonathan Leib, "Heritage versus Hate: A Geographical Analysis of Georgia's Confederate Battle Flag debate", *Southeastern Geographer* 35, no. 1 (1995): 42.

to an antagonizing symbol of defiance and opposition toward outside interference that challenged White dominion. Federal intervention pertaining to the integration of public spaces became more evident. As a result, South Carolina and Alabama both opted to fly the flag atop their state capitols in continual rebellion against integration.¹⁹ By the mid-1960s, the Confederate Battle Flag became a symbol of resistance and a tool of hate by individuals and states attempting to defy federal attempts to legislate racial equality.

By 1975 the civil rights movement had been effective in integrating schools, water fountains, ballot boxes, and workplaces to a degree, and as such, opposition to the flag began to slowly grow across the country.²⁰ In 1992 state legislators in Alabama utilized courts to have the Confederate Battle Flag removed from the state capitol.²¹

That same year the state of Georgia began the process of altering its state flag, a process that would involve two new iterations of the flag and a decade of debate. The following year South Carolina, seething from the loss of a Mercedes Benz manufacturing plant to Alabama, cited the Confederate Flag over the state capitol as the reason for the inability to land the plant. Racially charged and publicly off-putting debates erupted over the next seven years leading to economic boycotts, political incumbents voted out of office, a series of Black church burnings, and Klan rallies. In May 2000 the flag was finally removed from the capitol dome and placed with a memorial on capitol grounds.

19 Webster and Leib, "Religion, Murder", 33.

20 Karen Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021), 78, states that during the 1960s and 1970s civil rights protests often included addressing Confederate symbols and monuments that were prevalent across the Southern landscape. Often leaders would gather around Confederate monuments because they were on public grounds near a courthouse or other centrally located building. On occasion, protestors would vandalize these monuments finally giving voice to the sentiments they had possessed for decades but had been too afraid to make public for fear of retribution.

21 Jonathan Leib, Gerald R. Webster, and Roberta H. Webster, 2001. "Rebel with a Cause? Iconography and Public Memory in the Southern United States", *GeoJournal* 52, no. 4 (2001): 303-10. A Black legislator found a loophole in state code stating that only the state flag of Alabama was permitted to fly over the capitol. Renovations to the capitol in the late 1980s forced crews to remove all flags, and a lawsuit filed by the legislator prevented the battle flag from being placed atop the dome of the capital again.

2001: A Flag Odyssey

In 2001, Mississippi voters faced a decision regarding a possible change to their state flag. The 1894 Flag of Mississippi was still unchanged as other states in the 1980s and 1990s continued the process of removing the Confederate Battle Flag from state insignia and state buildings. However, in the 1980s there was growing outcry against the flag in Mississippi led by Aaron Henry, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Mississippi and state legislator from the northern Delta city of Clarksdale.²² In 1988 Henry became the first legislator to file a bill aimed at changing the Mississippi flag with the hope of eliminating the Confederate Battle Flag from the official state banner. He was a pioneering voice in protesting against the symbol of hate and White power. Senator Henry Kirksey also joined Henry in his efforts referring to the flag as “the Confederate Slave Flag.” Prior to this, Black individuals who opposed the flag may have existed, but fear of the state’s governing entities had silenced their voices in the public arena.²³ Despite Senator Henry’s continued efforts to remove the symbol, filing further motions over the next six years, none of his motions moved advanced beyond preliminary committee and none made it to the senate floor.

In 1994 the NAACP filed a motion stating that the state flag was a violation of free speech and equal protection under the law because it was a symbol of slavery. The Sons of Confederate Veterans served as defendants in the case that was heard and appealed through multiple levels of court. In May 2000 the case reached the Supreme Court of Mississippi, which ruled that the flag did not violate free speech nor was it in violation of equal protection of the law. However, the court also discovered that the 1894 Flag was not official because of an oversight in a 1906 revision in the state code that failed to renew the 1894

²² Coski and Sansing, “Flag, State”, 437.

²³ Mississippi’s long history of racial hatred made the state a place where voices in support of Black equality were silenced. Medgar Evers, Mack Charles Parker, Clyde Kennard, James Chaney, Vernon Dahmer, and Emmet Till are just a few of the Black people who were martyrs for the cause of civil rights in Mississippi.

legislation of adoption. Subsequently, Governor Ronnie Musgrove established a flag advisory board to investigate the issue of the flag and held listening sessions across the state that, at times, degraded into racially charged arguments that created negative perceptions of the people of Mississippi.²⁴

These public debates were also reported outside of the state, revealing again that racism in Mississippi was not dead in 2000 but very much alive and well. The commission determined that a vote would be held in April 2001 to allow Mississippians to resolve if they wanted to maintain the 1894 Flag or adopt a new flag. The proposed 2001 Flag retained the same background as the 1894 Flag with only an alteration to the canton, removing the Confederate flag. The 2001 Flag's canton possessed a white field containing nineteen small blue stars and one large star. The nineteen stars were arranged with thirteen on an outside circle to represent the thirteen original states of the union, six in an intermediate circle to symbolize the six entities that historically ruled Mississippi and one large star in the middle to represent Mississippi as the twentieth state in the Union.²⁵



Figure 2. Proposed 2001 Flag on Bumper Sticker. Photo by the authors.

²⁴ Current Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney tweeted in 2020 that he was a state senator in 2000 and a member of the flag listening committee. He stated that he did not want to pull the state through such a process as that again. Chaney reiterated that those meetings brought out the worst in people as many hurled racial epithets and hurtful comments toward others as well as death threats pointed at him. He was the first statewide elected Republican in the state to come forward calling for immediate change. Tweeted June 20, 2020 @MSInsuranceDept on Twitter.

²⁵ Native Americans, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Confederate States, and the United States.

Debates concerning the flag vote revealed a split populous where some Mississippians were advocating for change while others still held deeply entrenched Lost Cause beliefs. For instance, Michael Kelley, from the coastal city of Pascagoula, argued that the American flag was the flag flown on slave ships, not the Confederate flag.²⁶ He defended the 1894 Flag and later cited that the results of the 2001 vote proved that the democratic process worked. Similarly, Tommy Muirhead, expressed a similar view in a letter to the editor of *The Clarion-Ledger*, the state's largest newspaper, echoing Kelley's stance on slave ships and lauding Robert E. Lee's service record.²⁷ Oxford resident Jimmy Reed stated that getting rid of the 1894 Flag would only deepen divisions within the state and cater to "spoiled brats."²⁸ Former University of Southern Mississippi history professor William Scarborough stated that the attempt to remove the Confederate banner was a tactic by the NAACP and that changing a flag would not address real social issues.²⁹

Several individuals advocated for change, like a man attending the Tupelo listening session of the 2001 Flag Commission who only identified himself as Mr. Jones. He insisted that the flag was a symbol that was detrimental to the state.³⁰ An opinion written by Legislator David Bowen posited correctly that debates surrounding flag change would be injurious to the state but then proceeded to blame affirmative action and questioned what Black people had to compromise if a new flag was adopted.³¹ Gregory Kane, writer for the *Baltimore Sun* presented an outsiders' view of the situation most succinctly. Kane stated that race was at the root of this issue and that change was needed to move on. He continues: "Black and White Mississippians will continue to fight the old battles, not realizing that, if they win the old ones, they haven't won much and haven't even begun to fight the new ones."³²

26 Bradley Bond, *Mississippi: A Documentary History* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 298-316.

27 Bond, *Mississippi*, 316.

28 Bond, *Mississippi*, 301.

29 Bond, *Mississippi*, 301-02.

30 Bond, *Mississippi*, 298.

31 Bond, *Mississippi*, 302-04.

32 Bond, *Mississippi*, 313

The vote for the flag was held on April 17, 2001, with two-thirds of voters selecting the 1894 Flag as the official flag of the state. Post-mortem of the election revealed several key internal findings. First the flag vote was almost directly tied to racial identity of the voters.³³ Geographers Leib and Webster found a statistical correlation between Black population and votes for the 1894 Flag was -0.92. A number this close to -1 means that the vote for the 1894 Flag was nearly inverse to the voter being from a precinct with a predominantly Black population. This suggests that a vote for the 1894 Flag was largely opposed by voters from precincts with majority Black populations. Another factor that caused failure to change the flag in 2001 was what researchers labeled as plain “old-fashioned racism”.³⁴ A survey after the election found that 60 percent of White people from Mississippi felt resentment toward Blacks and the NAACP for bringing up the issue of the flag. White people saw the NAACP as outsiders who instituted the lawsuit for change in an attempt to stir trouble in the state.³⁵ The election was also held as a single ballot initiative in April, lending to low turnout as it was neither during primaries in June nor general elections in November.³⁶ Some complained that the flag was not visually pleasing and lacked unique identity that was desired in a state flag, leading some to vote to maintain the 1894 Flag instead. Mississippians who wanted to retain the 1894 flag voted because they were fighting for something

33 Leib and Webster, “Black, White or Green?”, 299-326. The authors found that flag vote and race correlated to 0.92 with Black people voting for the 2001 option and Whites voting to keep the 1894 flag. Those who identified as conservative also voted for the old flag with a correlation of 0.72.

34 Byron D. Orey *et al.*, “Accounting for ‘Racism’: Responses to Political Predicaments in Two States”, *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (September 2007): 235-55.

35 Byron D. Orey. “White Racial Attitudes and Support for the Mississippi State Flag”, *American Politics Research* 32, no. 1 (2004): 102-16. The constant theme of Mississippians labeling people pushing for change in the state as “outside agitators” has been used since the earliest days of the civil rights movement and still utilized by staunch conservatives who feel threatened by challenges to their authority. The preconceived notion of these conservatives is that things inside the state are acceptable and only those outside the state desire to make the state look bad by dragging it through such controversy.

36 Eric Clark, Mississippi Official Statistical Register, 2000-2004, State of Mississippi: Jackson, 2005. Reveals that only 767,682 people cast votes in the special election concerning the 2001 flag vote while 1,004,926 had voted the previous November in the state’s general election.

that was viewed as a threat.³⁷ The most adamant in preserving the 1894 Flag, considered conservative “traditionalists,” wished to maintain the status quo and limit perceived threats against their heritage and way of life.³⁸ The initiative itself posed another challenge to the adoption of a new flag, as other states had made changes to their flags through legislative means, but at the cost of some incumbents not being re-elected. In contrast, Mississippi’s leadership chose to leave the decision in the hands of voters to avoid being voted out of office, so they left the decision in the hands of the voters to avoid being held responsible for changing the flag and risking loss of their seats. Finally, from an internal perspective the proposed flag with twenty stars was not viewed as memorable or culturally resonant with Mississippi unlike other state flags.³⁹

The respective campaigns advocating for each flag option were instrumental in shaping the outcome of the election. The Sons of Confederate Veterans spearheaded a robust ad campaign in defense of the 1894, employing the heritage angle of preserving the Confederate Battle Flag.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the campaign for the alternative flag option was relatively less prominent and focused on economic development. The 2001 Alternative campaign avoided explicit references to race and racism related to the 1894 Flag for fear of galvanizing the conservative base of Lost Cause adherents who were not willing to part with the Confederate Battle Flag. Instead, the economic argument attempted to focus on the flag as hindrance to economic growth due to the negative messaging that it conveyed. Governor Kirk Fordice, a conservative Republican, publicly refuted the economic argument against the flag, citing the recent deal to build a new Nissan automobile plant in the state as evidence that the flag had no bearing on economics. The previous governor, Ronnie Musgrove acknowledged that Nissan had raised

37 Orey, et. al, “Accounting for ‘Racism’”, 242

38 Leib and Webster, “Black, White or Green?”, 316.

39 Some states have very generic state flags that do not make the connection to a state. Yet the flags of states like New Mexico and Texas are both identifiable and have a deep cultural connection that many outside of these states can identify as belonging to them.

40 Leib and Webster, “Black, White or Green?”, 312.

concerns about the flag, and he pledged to bring the issue before the state to appease the company.⁴¹ Finally, religious denominations had differing stances on the flag issue. The Catholic, Episcopal and United Methodist churches in the state supported changing the flag, while the Southern Baptist denomination, which is the largest in the state, did not support change efforts.

From 2001 until the mid 2010s, more Mississippians joined the chorus of people who still pushed for change of the flag. In 2012, Laurin Stennis, granddaughter of former U.S. Senator John C. Stennis, created an alternative flag and began a campaign to get her flag on a ballot as a new option for the state.⁴² The flag featured small vertical red stripes on the edge with a large field of white in the middle. The white field contained nineteen small blue stars in a circle around a large twentieth star. Stennis's campaign gained traction and prompted several unsuccessful attempts by the legislature to change the state flag through statute.⁴³ Despite not being officially adopted, the Stennis flag gained recognition among progressive groups and was even featured as a theme on state license plates, serving as a *de facto* alternative to the 1894 Flag.

The Shift After Charleston and Charlottesville

On June 17, 2015 a White supremacist gunman attended a Wednesday night Bible study at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and murdered nine parishioners. His actions raised questions of motive and further investigation unveiled the gunman's

41 Many Mississippi political observers maintain that Musgrove lost his re-election campaign to Fordice because he put the flag to a vote, challenging the long-held status quo of the flag in the state. Musgrove's gubernatorial loss in 1995 has served as a reminder to other candidates in Mississippi that the flag should be treated as a non-issue that should not be mentioned or placed under threat of removal for fear of loss of incumbency.

42 John C. Stennis was a staunch segregationist from Eastern Mississippi who campaigned on a platform of segregation and nullification of federal integrative efforts from the 1950s until the 1970s. Critics of Laurin Stennis's campaign stated that she was using the flag as a way to amply the Stennis name while attempting to wash over her grandfather's racist past.

43 Coski and Sansing, "Flag, State", 437.

long history of White supremacy and racist sentiments.⁴⁴ The aftermath of the shooting sparked nationwide conversations about the presence of Confederate monuments and the Confederate Battle Flag in various parts of the country. The fact that this tragic event occurred at a church added a layer of dissonance, as it brought to the forefront the intersection of religion and racism.⁴⁵ It prompted many Americans to reevaluate their loyalties and allegiances, forcing them to choose between the racial heritage associated with the continued presence of the Confederate flag as part of the civic religion of the Lost Cause, and the Christian faith exemplified by those who were martyred at Mother Emanuel, a historic site of Black faith in Charleston.⁴⁶ The immediate reaction to the Charleston massacre led to the removal of the Confederate Battle Flag from the grounds of the state capitol in Columbia, SC and the removal of multiple Confederate monuments across the country.

The event spurred a widespread reevaluation of the significance and appropriateness of Confederate symbols in public spaces, and it marked a significant turning point in the ongoing national conversation about race, heritage, and the place of Confederate iconography in American society. Two years later, these considerations led to a proposal to remove a statue dedicated to Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. Response to the proposal led to protests by White supremacist, neo-Confederates, and neo-Nazi groups. The protestors carried torches and shouted epithets and other hate speech creating imagery that harkened back to Klan rallies of the early-1900s.⁴⁷ Protests at Charlottesville revealed that the Charleston shooter was not alone in his racist ideology but was accompanied in thought by

44 Joshua Inwood and Derek Alderman, "Taking Down the Flag Is Just a Start: Toward the Memory-Work of Racial Reconciliation in White Supremacist America", *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (2016): 9-15.

45 Webster and Leib, "Religion, Murder", 35-37.

46 Latoya Eaves, "We Wear the Mask", *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (2016): 22-28.

47 Richard H. Schein, "After Charlottesville: Reflections on Landscape, White Supremacy, and White Hegemony", *Southeastern Geographer* 58, no. 1 (2018): 10-13.

thousands of others who also held sentiments of White supremacy.⁴⁸ This visceral presentation of White hatred accelerated efforts to remove Confederate iconography under the principle that these images may not shoot people or attack them, but they do reinforce an ideology that glorifies the Confederacy, which was founded on slavery and later revered under the label of White supremacy.

Inside Mississippi tectonic shifts were occurring due to the nationwide re-evaluation of Confederate iconography. After Charleston, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Philip Gunn, publicly announced that he would support a change of flag if the legislation came across his desk.⁴⁹ Response by far-right conservatives led to a campaign entitled “Change the Speaker, Keep the Flag.” The state also loosened its guidelines pertaining to insignia on Mississippi Highway Patrol vehicles, giving officers the option to use the 1894 Flag or the shield of the highway department instead. Dozens of cities and colleges across the state also stopped flying the 1894 Flag citing the flag as not inclusive for all the people that the entities serve.⁵⁰ The following year, a three-fold grassroots rally led by young people was held in Jackson to call for fully funding public education in the state through an initiative on the November ballot; support for investigating the death of Philando Castile at the hands of police in Minnesota; and the removal of the Confederate Flag from the state flag of Mississippi.⁵¹ In 2018, Governor Phil Bryant entertained a proposal for a new flag that featured the

48 Cox, *No Common Ground*, 162.

49 Adam Ganucheau. “Bipartisan Group of Lawmakers, with Speaker Gunn’s Blessing, Pushes to Change Mississippi State Flag”, *Greene County Herald*, June 11, 2020, 4. Gunn was the first prominent Republican to come forward in support of flag change. Gunn is also the most powerful legislator in the state as he assigns bills to committees. He is also head of the Republican legislative caucus, hosting multiple closed-door Republican meetings that determine legislative policy for the super-majority Republicans of the state legislature. Gunn cited his Christian faith as the main influence that led him to the decision to publically state that he favored changing the flag. [Verificar. A frase não termina.]

50 Emily W. Pettus, “Mississippi Governor Might Not Block Campaign to Change Rebel Themed flag”, Associated Press. June 24, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/jackson-us-news-ap-top-news-bills-tate-reeves-7c5b7c7ed97b8073320c9f9bcee4f3f6>. Some conservatives pushed back against colleges and cities not flying the state flag, declaring that state funds should be pulled from these entities until they begin to fly the 1894 flag again.

51 Justin Cordon, “Joshua Mannery and Maisie Brown”, *Jackson Free Press*, July 29, 2016, 2.

state seal as part of centennial celebration without calling for removal of the 1894 Flag.



Figure 3. Change the Speaker Sign. Photo by the authors.

George Floyd’s Murder: The Spark of Change

Minneapolis Police killed George Floyd on May 25, 2020 as part of an arrest following allegations of passing a fake twenty-dollar bill. The incident gained widespread attention when footage of the officers kneeling on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes circulated online, sparking renewed discussions about racial injustice in the United States. Subsequently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement organized protests in cities across the United States and around the world, including dozens of cities in Mississippi. The largest protest in the state was held in the capital city of Jackson on Saturday, June 5th, 2020.⁵² The protest had

⁵² Emily Wagster Pettus, “Mississippi Faces Reckoning on Confederate Emblem on Flag”, Associated Press, June 13, 2020, accessed 15 September, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-tate-reeves-mississippi-ms-state-wire-9b68eacdfb1c24d97adf64757c1fde4f>.

two main focuses: addressing systemic racism in American society and responding to Mississippi's Attorney General's decision to drop charges against a White officer in Columbus, MS, who had killed Ricky Ball, a Black man.⁵³ Additionally, the protest called for the removal of all Confederate symbols and memorabilia from the state flag, as highlighted by march organizer Maisie Brown, who emphasized justice, the reopening of the Ricky Ball case, and the removal of Confederate symbols in her speech to the crowd.⁵⁴

Following the BLM march, discussions were again initiated across the state regarding the possibility of changing the flag of Mississippi. Legislators began closed-door meetings to address potential avenues for flag change.⁵⁵ Representative Chris Bell of Jackson reported that meetings were active and showed promise in dealing with the flag issue. Three major hurdles hindered immediate action: garnering sufficient support to pass legislation, addressing the intricate details of proposed change, and the deadline for new bills in the 2020 session had passed. *Mississippi Today*, a newspaper based out of the capital city, followed-up the BLM march to motivate change by sharing legislators' stances on flag change, compelling elected officials to state their opinions and informing their peers about the diversity of opinions on the issue.⁵⁶ Several proposals were submitted in the house the following week including one suggesting replacing the 1894 Flag with the Stennis Flag.⁵⁷ The Speaker expressed a desire to avoid another public vote

53 Alex Rozier, "Slap in the Face: Columbus DA Rips AG Lynn Fitch for Dropping Charges against White Officer Who Killed Black Man", *Mississippi Today*, June 2, 2020, A1. The incident occurred in 2015 and possessed several inconsistencies in the timeline of the events, evidence not matching narratives, and malfunctioning body cameras that forced Attorney General Jim Hood to launch an investigation. Hood pursued the governor's seat in 2019, leaving a vacancy that was filled by Lynn Fitch in early 2020. In a moment of poor timing, Fitch dropped the investigation six days after the death of George Floyd.

54 Pettus, "Mississippi Faces Reckoning".

55 Ganuchau, "Bipartisan Group", 4.

56 Kayleigh Skinner, Geoff Pender, Bubby Harvison, and Adam Ganuchau, "Here's Where House Members Stand on Changing the Mississippi State Flag", *Mississippi Today*, June 12, 2020, A3. The staff of *Mississippi Today* duplicated a method used in 1984 by another Jackson newspaper in tracking Governor William Winter's education reform bill through the legislature. In publicizing opinions on the state flag, *Mississippi Today* now had legislators on record with their intentions regarding the state flag.

57 Ganuchau, "Bipartisan Group", 4.

with the 1894 Flag as an option, citing concerns about a contentious process similar to the one in 2001.

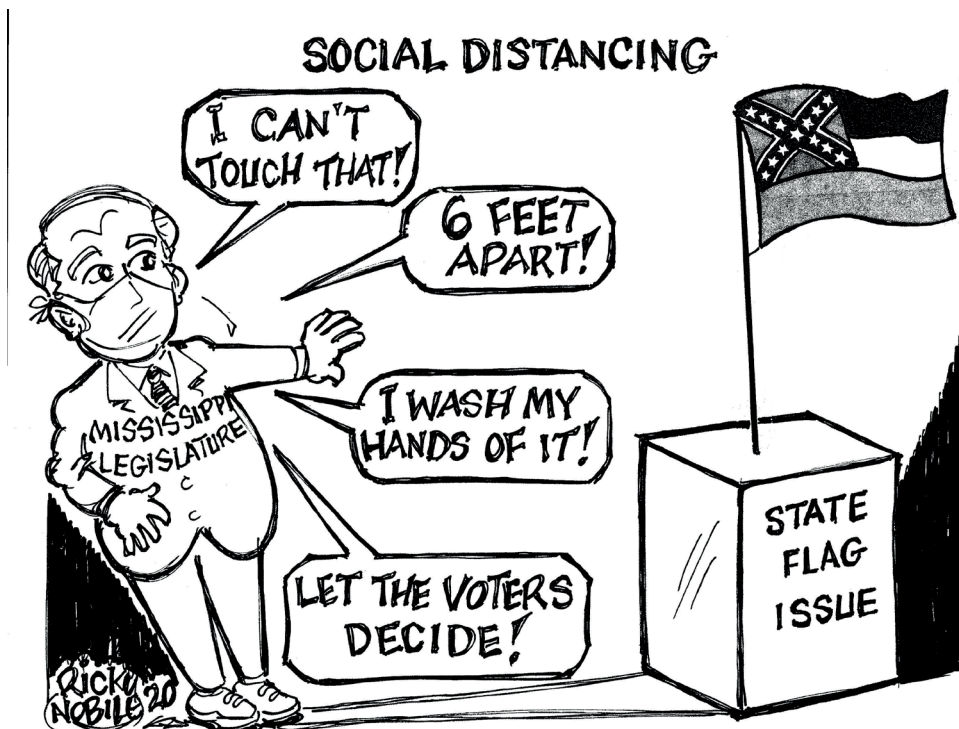


Figure 4. Political Cartoon During 2020 Session, by Ricky Nobile.

The most immediate hurdle facing the state legislature in attempting to change the flag was that the deadline for new legislation had passed. This meant that to submit a flag change bill, the legislature would require a suspension of House of Representative rules that needed a two-thirds majority vote. The week following the Jackson BLM march, the Speaker of the House and the Lieutenant Governor, head of the Senate, polled members privately and lacked the votes to suspend the rules that would permit submission of a late-session bill to change the flag.⁵⁸ There were two prominent obstacles preventing suspension of rules: first, the statewide elected officials like the Secretary of State, State Auditor, and Governor, all Republicans, who were pub-

⁵⁸ Adam Ganucheau, "Lacking Legislative Votes to Change State Flag, Gunn and Hosemann Turn To Religious Leaders for Help", *Mississippi Today*, June 23, 2020.

licly ambivalent toward flag change for fear of losing incumbency; second, a faction of far-right Republicans in the legislature who attributed this movement to “American leftists (who were) waging a war against Mississippi”.⁵⁹ In the week that followed, Speaker Gunn held several private meetings to garner support for flag change, including one held at a small college in the Speaker’s home district, just outside Jackson. As a result, several state officials left the meeting and immediately began publicly voicing support for change.⁶⁰

In addition to the efforts within the capitol building, there was a notable shift in support for changing the state flag among various groups outside of the capitol building. On June 11, a group of interfaith leaders from Jackson, the Legislative Black Caucus, and House Democrats collectively called for a new flag.⁶¹ The following week, prominent economic development groups Delta Council and the Mississippi Economic Council voiced public support for an immediate alteration to the state flag.⁶² In the days that followed the largest public teachers’ lobby in the state also called for change. On June 17, thirty-one former collegiate athletes from Mississippi penned an open letter urging the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to prevent post-season events from occurring in the state until the flag was changed.⁶³ The next day, the Southeastern Conference and Conference USA warned that they were entertaining the notion of not hosting conference championship events in the state due to the flag. The NCAA later issued a statement indicating that it would no longer allow post-season play in states that flew the Confederate Battle Flag.⁶⁴ The following week

59 Pettus, “Mississippi Governor Might Not Block”.

60 Ganuchau, “Lacking Legislative Votes”.

61 Giacomo Bologna, “Time for a New Flag”, *Clarion Ledger*, A1.

62 Luke Ramseth, “Key Moments Led up to Final Vote”, *Hattiesburg American*, July 1, 2020. A1.

63 Adam Ganuchau, “Athletes Ask NCAA to Ban College Baseball Regionals in Mississippi until Lawmakers Change State Flag”, *Mississippi Today*, June 18, 2020. The author noted that even though support outside the capitol building was growing, any flag change bill still looked dead on arrival in senate committees unless something drastic occurred.

64 The Southeastern Conference has two member institutions in Mississippi: Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi. Conference USA has one member institution in the state, the University of Southern Mississippi. Previously the state had been forbidden by the NCAA to host pre-determined post-season events because of its flag. The new 2020 ban

individual athletes from the state’s universities voiced their displeasure with the state flag and Wal-Mart announced that it would no longer fly the state flag in its stores.⁶⁵ The same religious groups that called for change during the 2001 vote once again voiced their support for changing the state flag in 2020, with new support from the Mississippi Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denomination in the state.

Business leaders in the state began to express their opinions on the state flag in the days that followed. The CEO of the largest bank on the Mississippi Gulf Coast called for immediate change because “[if the issue goes to the polls, it will be covered by every major network. Any business considering locating here will pause, not wanting to take the risk of locating here until resolution.”⁶⁶

On June 24, the Mississippi Economic Council (MEC) published a full-page advertisement in the state’s most widely circulated newspaper, the *Clarion-Ledger*. The page detailed, “The flag is offensive to many and perpetuates negative stereotypes.” It continued: “The battle flag is a symbol of hate,” and the best way to make positive change and improve the image of the state would be the immediate removal of the Confederate Battle flag from the state flag of Mississippi.⁶⁷ The document was then signed by dozens of CEOs from across the state, who made it clear that their companies did not want to be associated with the 1894 Flag. Additionally, the MEC released a poll in the last week of June that revealed overwhelming support for a new flag.⁶⁸ These shifts in public opinion, with significant support from businesses and internal stakeholders in Mississippi, provided leverage that influenced lawmakers in the state to consider changing the state flag.

forbade the state from hosting any post-season sanctioned NCAA events. The state’s three largest Division I institutions had hosted regional post-season play in baseball and basketball in the previous decade.

65 Ganuchean, “Key Moments”, A1.

66 Adam Ganuchean, “Top Executive: Send State Flag Issue to Ballot, and Any Business Considering Locating Here Will Pause”, *Mississippi Today*, June 23, 2020.

67 The page was published June 24, 2020 on page six of the first section of the *Clarion-Ledger*.

68 Frank Corder, “MEC releases poll showing more Mississippi voters favor state seal flag”, *Y’all Politics*, June 24, 2020. *Y’all Politics* serves as a mouthpiece of the Republican Party of Mississippi, but the publication of the Mississippi Economic Council’s poll demonstrated a shift in mainline Republican ideology in the state that now favored an option for state flag that was not the 1894 Flag.

Various options for changing the state flag were considered by the Speaker and Lieutenant Governor in their effort to gather sufficient support for removal. One initial proposal was the Stennis Flag, but the creator of the flag withdrew due to public pressure.⁶⁹ Former Governor Phil Bryant also attempted to promote his “State Seal” flag as an option after he joined the supporters for change.⁷⁰ The State Seal flag would resemble the flag of the State of Missouri, with horizontal stripes of red, white, and blue and the state seal featured in the middle. Proposals were also filed for an interim flag to be used until an official flag could be selected. However, the predominant narrative that emerged after the off-capitol meeting hosted by Speaker Gunn was a referendum with the incorporation of the phrase “In God We Trust.”⁷¹

Opposition to change again was characterized by expressions of defiance, ignorance, and prejudice. State Representative Jarvis Dortch shared on social media an anonymous letter sent to him and all other legislators that highlighted the opposition to changing the 1894 Flag.⁷² The letter made no mention of the pressing racial issues of the day such as the recent murder of George Floyd, but instead it stated that “Mississippi has stood strong as a last stronghold of Southern heritage and history.” It further asked legislators to “Stand guard with us to protect our state, our future, and our historical relevance.” Another individual, in a letter to the editor of the *Laurel-Leader Call*, minced no words in defending the 1894 Flag flatly stating: “I am empathetic with the Blacks concerning slavery. It was evil... although a necessary evil.”⁷³ Outside the capitol protestors marched and drove around the capitol

69 Alan Lange, “Op-Ed- So the Goal Is to Get a New Flag, Right? Here’s How to Do It Fast”, *Y’all Politics*, June 11, 2020. Opponents of the Stennis Flag believed that Stennis was attempting to use the flag as a symbol of racial unity to reshape her family name.

70 His tweet from @PhilBryantMS was published on June 25th and stated, “The state seal would make a good flag”.

71 Kayleigh Skinner, Geoff Pender and Bobby Harvison, “As Leaders Continue to Count Votes to Change State Flag, Hosemann Throws Support behind Legislative Action”, *Mississippi Today*, June 24, 2020.

72 The letter “Anonymous letter to senators and representatives” was published on his Twitter account @jarvisdortch on June 23, 2020.

73 David A. Wade, “Flag Never Hurt Anyone – Opinion Letter to the Editor”, *Laurel-Leader Call*, July 18, 2020, A4.

with the 1894 Flag, Confederate Flags and other flags of right-wing causes like gun rights. On social media and in email communications to legislators, constituents berated representatives as cowards and traitors, accusing them of disenfranchising voters by seeking to change the flag without a public vote.⁷⁴ Some legislators voiced their opposition to the flag change, insisting on a public vote or defending the 2001 vote that retained the flag, without addressing the racial implications of maintaining a symbol associated with the Confederacy. This opposition revealed a persistent resistance to acknowledging the need for progress and addressing the systemic racism associated with the current flag.⁷⁵

In the latter half of June, state leaders outside of the legislative sphere began expressing support for changing the flag. On June 22, Republican Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney became the first statewide elected official to call for change stating, “Now is the time.”⁷⁶ Chaney who had previously served on the 2001 Flag Committee revealed he faced death threats in 2001 from supporters of the 1894 Flag. Two days later the state auditor, state attorney general, and many other statewide elected officials joined the list of Republicans and Democrats across the state in calling for change.⁷⁷ Senator Cindy-Hyde Smith, who was in a closely contested re-election campaign against Mike Espy, also joined the group several days later. Two days later, the presidents of the state’s eight public universities and many of the schools’ athletic coaches gave a joint press conference from inside the capitol building lobbying for a new flag. The convergence of support from prominent Republican and Democratic officials, as well as leaders from high education demonstrated a growing consensus among diverse stakeholders for changing the flag.

Absent from this group was Governor Tate Reeves. The governor was the most notable voice of uncertainty toward the whole process.

74 Russell Turner, “Traitors and Cowards: The Really Troubling Side of the State Flag Debate”, *The Richton Dispatch*, July 2, 2020, 4.

75 Mississippi Legislature, MS House Floor, June 28, 2020. Streamed live on YouTube at https://youtu.be/JFwOL8_eSC8.

76 Ramseth, “Key moments”, A1.

77 Ramseth, “Key Moments”, A1. The state did not have any Democratic politicians in statewide offices in 2020.

As other prominent Republicans agreed to modification, Reeves opted to not voice an opinion on the flag, instead passing the decision to the voters of the state.⁷⁸ In a statement on June 16, he again declined to offer his own perspective, instead remarking: “I see a flag that the vast majority of Mississippians voted in 2001 to maintain as Mississippi’s state flag.”⁷⁹

A day after that statement Reeves reiterated his belief that the decision should be in the hands of the voters of the state instead of the politicians in Jackson.⁸⁰ The following day he proposed a possible two-flag solution where each city, county, or school would choose from the two options provided.⁸¹ Critics swiftly ridiculed this proposal labeling it as “separate but equal” and reminiscent of the era of segregation when schools and bathrooms were segregated. People responded that the notion of two flags was insensitive due to the racial implications of the proposal in the time following the death of George Floyd. On June 25 Reeves held a closed-door meeting after which he agreed that he would not veto a flag change bill if it came across his desk.⁸²

After the governor gave his approval, legislation quickly gained momentum through the capitol. During the earlier stages of the 2020 legislative session, Democratic legislators had filed ten separate bills to change the flag, but all died in committee.⁸³ Once Republican leadership agreed to change the flag, the bill was fast-tracked through com-

78 Emily W. Pettus, “Baptists and Wal-Mart Criticize Rebel-themed Mississippi Flag”, Associated Press, June 23, 2020. Reeves was accused of not having an opinion because of his concern of losing support from the large Conservative wing of the state’s Republican base when his bid for re-election comes forth in 2023.

79 Giacomo Bologna, “A Tipping Point? State Voted to Keep Flag in 2001, a Lot Has Changed since Then”, *Clarion Ledger*, June 10, 2020, A1.

80 Ganuchau, “Bipartisan Group”, 4.

81 Sarah Ulmer, “Governor Reeves Indicates He Might Entertain a Legislative Two Flag Solution”, *Y’all Politics*, June 18, 2020.

82 Bobby Harvison, “As Lawmakers near Votes to Change State Flag, Reeves Meets with Statewide Officials and Voices His Opposition”, *Mississippi Today*, June 27, 2020. This meeting occurred shortly after the Speaker of the House’s off-site meeting that changed the messaging of many of the state’s leaders. Several of those leaders attended both meetings, relaying the message of the Speaker of the House directly to the Governor.

83 Sarah Ulmer, “Votes Not Likely There to Pass Mississippi Flag Resolution Out of Senate Constitution Committee”, *Y’all Politics*, June 18, 2020.

mittees. On June 27, the house passed House Resolution 79 to suspend rules on filing so that House Bill 1796 could be read and sent to committee.⁸⁴ The bill removed the current state flag and created a nine-member committee that would be tasked with creating a new flag. The nine members would be from various parts of the state with three selected by the governor, three by the lieutenant governor, and three by the speaker. The new design would not possess any Confederate iconography and would have the phrase “In God We Trust.” The flag committee would actively seek suggestions from the people of the state, and a singular proposed flag would be put a vote during the November 2020 general election.

Debate over the final vote garnered national and international attention, and the debate in the legislature remained civil. Many lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, wore decals that prominently stated, “It’s Time!”⁸⁵ There were some attempts by a few legislators to block the vote by appealing to the far-right side of the Republican base, claiming that they had enough votes to prevent passage of the bill. The Lieutenant Governor responded that the group was, “Knowledgeable but not accurate.”⁸⁶ Some Republicans attempted to distance themselves from the 1894 Flag, labeling it “The Democrat Flag” as Democratic politicians had adopted it in 1894. These Republicans asked their fellow legislators to vote for a new flag that represented all Mississippians.⁸⁷ Representative Robert Johnson, a Black politician from Natchez, found the process cathartic as White members of the house expressed empathy and shared in his pain. Another Black representative, Ed Blackmon from Canton, said it was ironic that the flag that was being debated was not actually flown over Mississippi during most of the war but was: “Adopted to control Black folk (telling them) you haven’t made it yet.”

84 Luke Ramseth and Giacomo Bologna, “Flag Change a Step Closer”, *Clarion Ledger*, June 28, 2020, A1.

85 Ramseth and Bologna, “Flag Change”, A1.

86 Luke Ramseth and Giacomo Bologna, “Nation Is Watching: Pressure Mounts, but Are There Enough Votes to Change Flag?”, *Clarion Ledger*, June 26, 2020, A1.

87 The Democratic Party was basically the only part in the state in 1894. Those who adopted the 1894 flag were all Democratic.

Both the house and senate passed the bill on June 28, 2020 to thunderous applause in both houses. Governor Reeves signed it into law two days later giving the state fifteen days to officially remove the old flag. House Speaker Gunn referred to the passage, “A significant day”.⁸⁸ Lieutenant Governor Hosemann praised the passage as a bipartisan effort, transcending party lines. The Mississippi Economic Council released a statement, “Perceptions of our state will change around the nation and around the world.” Even President Joe Biden noted the change as: “The arc of the moral universe bent a little more today”. Senator Hillman Frazier, who was on the 2001 Flag Commission, compared this change to the 2001 attempt, declaring that it was definitely different this time.⁸⁹

Results and Conclusions

The new 2020 flag committee was formed in August and commenced its work with a diverse composition of four women and five men, six White, two Black, and one Native American.⁹⁰ The committee was hosted by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, which sought expertise from a vexillologist to outline the basics of flag design. Suggestions for a new flag included a limited number of colors, a meaningful symbol, and a design simple enough for an elementary student to duplicate. In the subsequent month the committee received nearly three thousand designs that it narrowed down to two hundred. To further involve the public, a web-based voting system was implemented to further trim the number of options. After multiple rounds of elimination, the commission selected a single design on September second that would appear on the November General Election ballot.

The proposed design of the new flag was a combination of several elements and designs that had been proposed. Rocky Vaughn, Hunter Jones,

⁸⁸ Sarah Ulmer, “Reactions Roll In after Mississippi’s Legislature Votes to Change Flag”, *Y’all Politics*, June 30, 2020.

⁸⁹ Hillman Frazier, personal interview via e-mail, September 25, 2021.

⁹⁰ Emily W. Pettus, “Choctaw Chief Chosen to Help Design New Mississippi Flag”, Associated Press, July 24, 2020. [Apnews.com](https://www.apnews.com).

Sue Anna Joe, Dominique Pugh, and Kara Giles were all credited on the project as their designs were melded into a singular proposal.⁹¹ The recommended flag featured vertical red stripes on either end with a blue field in the middle. The blue was separated from the red by small gold stripes. Inside the blue field was a magnolia bloom encircled by the words “In God We Trust” and twenty small white stars. At the top of the encircled stars was a singular gold star that was composed of diamond shapes. The magnolia was chosen for the flag as Mississippi’s nickname is “The Magnolia State.” The twenty small stars symbolize Mississippi as the twentieth state to join the union and the gold star represents the Native American people who have historically and presently inhabit the land that is Mississippi.



Figure 5. Image of 2020 Flag, provided by Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Opposition to the removal of the 1894 Flag was expressed by a vocal minority. One opined that the death of George Floyd allowed Democrats in the state to seize “low hanging fruit” in removing the

⁹¹ Alissa Zhu, “Shield or Magnolia”, *Clarion Ledger*, August 26, 2020, A1.

flag.⁹² The Sons of Confederate Veterans responded to the flag's removal, as well as potential efforts to remove Confederate general names from military bases at the federal level, by labeling these actions as: "Unprovoked nationwide attacks against Confederate memorials by Marxist agitators."⁹³ A few state senators and representatives, especially those from rural and predominantly White districts combined efforts with far-right Republicans across the state in an attempt to place an initiative on the 2020 ballot with the aim of reviving the 1894 Flag and placing the flag decision in the hands of the voters of the state. The proposal, which appeared to be more of a symbolic cause for the leaders of the movement rather than a substantive campaign for a flag, sought to gain enough signatures to place an initiative on the 2020 ballot that would give people of the state four flags from which to decide: the 1894 Flag, the Stennis Flag, the Great Seal Flag, and the 2020 In God We Trust Flag.⁹⁴ The initiative failed to make it onto the 2020 ballot and is currently mired in legal gridlock, as courts have declared the general public initiative process in Mississippi null.⁹⁵

Voting turnout in November was high due the November ballot containing races for President, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House and initiatives related to electoral votes in the selection of governor of the

92 Alan Lange, "Op-Ed- so the Goal Is to Get a New Flag, right? Here's How to Do It Fast", *Y'all Politics*, June 11, 2020.

93 Staff reports, "SCV Forms Military Committee to Attack Misinformation", *Laurel-Leader Call*, July 30, 2020, A11.

94 At one of the meetings of this group that was broadcast on Facebook Live, the most vociferous state senator in attendance told an audience of a two dozen that this movement was, "Not about a flag at all". That senator would later attempt to use the action of the legislature taking away the power of voters to determine the fate of the 1894 Flag as a springboard for a campaign for Lieutenant Governor in 2023. Rallies of this group included a handful of state legislators, the far-right militia Oath Keepers, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

95 The null ruling of the initiative process was caused by one of the issues on the 2020 ballot, an initiative to legalize medical marijuana. The initiative surprisingly passed, giving authority to the Mississippi Department of Health to certify dispensaries. The mayor of an upper-class Jackson exurb, Madison, did not wish to cede such authority as certification to the state, so she found an issue in the initial process that prevented the medical marijuana bill from becoming law. The initiative process as passed in the 1990s set baseline requirements of the number of signatures required statewide and from each of the five federal congressional districts to place any initiative on a ballot. Since the initial bill in the 1990s, the state has lost one congressional seat rendering the initiative process unable to follow the letter of the law.

state, medical marijuana, and the proposed new state flag.⁹⁶ Nearly seventy percent of voters approved the new flag, a direct inverse of the 2001 vote. Voting data was retrieved from the Mississippi Secretary of State's website and inputted into ARC-GIS mapping software with Census data provided by the Mississippi Automated Resource Information System (MARIS).⁹⁷ The data was scaled to the precinct level, the lowest level that voting data can be publicly presented and analyzed through statistical software to determine correlations between the flag vote, voting trends, and demographics.

Analysis of the vote found that race was still a determining factor as those who voted against the new flag were perceived as proxy voters in favor of the 1894 Flag. Race and flag vote had a correlation coefficient of .78 meaning that White people were more likely to vote against the new flag and Black people were more likely to vote for it. However, comparison of votes reveals that political affiliation was a greater influence in the decision of whether to support the new flag.⁹⁸ A comparison of votes for 2020 presidential candidates found that those against the new flag had a correlation of .87 compared to Republican voters in the same election. Opposition to the new flag and Republican vote were not a one-to-one relationship but precincts that voted in heavier percentages for Republicans in 2020 were also precincts that were more likely to oppose the new flag. Only two counties, George and Greene, had a majority of voters who voted against the new flag. Both are rural, predominantly White counties that have long been Republican strongholds.⁹⁹ Wording of the initial flag-change law stated that

96 According to the Mississippi Secretary of State's Office, nearly 1.4 million people voted in the 2020 election at <http://sos.ms.gov>.

97 Election results were from <https://www.sos.ms.gov/index.php/elections-voting/election-results/2020-election-results>. Geospatial data was retrieved from <https://maris.mississippi.edu/HTML/Data.html#gsc.tab=0>.

98 These findings are based on the authors' comparisons of 2020 election data regarding votes for presidential candidates at the precinct level compared to racial composition and result of the flag vote. Data was provided by the Mississippi Secretary of State's Office and the Mississippi Automated Resource Information System (www.maris.state.ms.us).

99 Greene County is also the mailing address of the most public Ku Klux Klan chapter in the southern part of the state as evidenced by flyers dropped in one of the author's lawns that had a Greene County mailing address.

the legislature had to certify votes in January, after which the governor would officially approve the new flag. As per this requirement, the legislature certified votes at its 2021 opening session, and the governor signed the new flag into effect in January 2021.

The issue of the 1894 Flag was that it was a symbol of a country and time that have long passed. Geographers Webster and Leib reviewed the 2001 flag vote and deemed the core of those who wished to retain the 1894 Flag as “Traditionalists,” conservative-minded people who embraced heritage and feared change.¹⁰⁰ Historically, traditionalist have dictated policy in the state by utilizing history, namely White history, as a source of unity to blur lines of class and maintain the hegemonic structure present in state politics. In the 2020 vote, leadership approached the issue differently, not focusing inwardly on heritage but an outsider’s perspective of perception. The 2001 Flag Listening Sessions were at times contentious and divisive, and they did not present that best image of the state.¹⁰¹ In the 2020 debate over the flag, Representative Ed Blackmon retold of his personal experiences on the 2001 Flag Commission and reminded the legislature that “The world is watching”.¹⁰² Others in the legislature addressed the external perception of the state removing their own personal attachment from the issue, similar to John Rawls’s “Veil of Ignorance.”¹⁰³ Rawls proposed that for decision-making to be fair, the decision-maker must remove their own personal biases and personal identity to make an informed decision from an unbiased state. The racial implications of the events in Charleston and Charlottesville formed visceral images of racist identities in America, and leaders of the state viewed flag change as an opportunity to distance the state from these images.

100 Leib and Webster, “Black, White or Green?”, 322-24.

101 Representative Ed Blackmon was on the 2001 committee and stated in the 2020 House debate on the bill that the 2001 vote was a “pretty bad experience” and there were times when, “our lives appeared to be in jeopardy”. Mississippi Legislature YouTube Channel, 2020 Session, <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfk4ctYmTaKw8QnRnH65jNha7vXmE0SA>.

102 June 27, 2020 session to suspend the rules of bill introduction, <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfk4ctYmTaKw8QnRnH65jNha7vXmE0SA>.

103 John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971).

Mississippi also has a demographic issue that has become more evident over the three years since the flag change. The state is losing population.¹⁰⁴ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the state had its first loss of total population in history between 2010 and 2020. Historically the African American population of the state declined between 1910 and 1990, but the growth of White population had kept the state's rate of growth positive. The most recent Census in 2020 reveals that the state lost population, especially young people who are finishing college in the state then moving away. A 2022 article published by the Mississippi State Auditor found that nearly half of all recent college graduates from Mississippi's eight public universities leave the state within five years of completing college. The auditor does not give specifics of how to solve the issue, but a thesis by a student at the University of Mississippi found that college graduates in Mississippi were looking for more diversity and social events to attend.¹⁰⁵ They were leaving the state for larger cities that offered better-paying jobs and opportunities. The Mississippi Economic Council in June 2020 dictated in its open letter that the state needed to retire the flag and develop a better climate for future business.¹⁰⁶

Change agents were key to the eventual retirement of the 1894 Flag. Maisie Brown, organizer of the initial BLM march in Jackson credits the people of Mississippi for advocating for change. She states: "It is really important to realize that nothing can be changed if it isn't faced."¹⁰⁷ State Senator Hillman Frazier credits the Jackson BLM march and the young people who organized it as the entities that deserves the most credit.¹⁰⁸ Their use of social media and the prominent yet peaceful march gives him solace in our future. Syndicated statewide sports columnist, Rick Cleveland, stated that

104 Office of the State Auditor of Mississippi, "Money Down the Brain Drain: Are Taxpayers Getting Their Money's Worth?" (Jackson, MS: State of Mississippi, April 2022). https://www.osa.ms.gov/documents/Special_Reports/Brain%20Drain%20Report.pdf. The publication highlights the loss of college graduates in the state but fails to provide solutions.

105 Savannah Smith. "Brain Drain in Mississippi: Why Some of the State's Best and Brightest Are Leaving" (Honors Thesis, Barksdale Honors College, University of Mississippi, 2018).

106 Published June 24, 2020 on page six of the first section of the *Clarion Ledger*.

107 Wilton Jackson, "We Are Going to See a Shift", *Clarion Ledger*, August 23, 2020, A1.

108 Frazier, personal interview.

athletic entities inside and outside the state combined and deserve credit as drivers of change.¹⁰⁹ Cleveland acknowledges the SEC, Conference-USA, and the NCAA as well as former and current athletes from Mississippi. One prominent feature that has connected athletics and image has been the long history of Confederate iconography of the University of Mississippi Rebels. Former chancellor of the university, Robert Khayat, states that the reason he led the university through the process of changing the image of the Confederate mascot and the banning of Confederate flags was that the iconography was damaging the image of the institution and limited the university's ability to recruit students.¹¹⁰

Individuals can make calls for change, but structures needed to be involved to create the shift that occurred in Mississippi. Closed doors meetings in Jackson were frequently held in June 2020, and individuals left those meetings encouraging flag alteration. The theme of "It's Time" motivated the Republicans who held a super-majority in the legislature to reshape the narrative of the state, and leaders of both houses encouraged dialogue that encouraged change. Beyond individuals, the wave of support for a new flag grew from businesses, religious organizations, athletic groups, and media outlets and leaders took notice of the spotlight that the state was placed under. As the Senate Pro Tempe stated from the senate floor, the issue of the flag will come up again and again. The state would be unable to shake this debate over the flag until it is removed.

Another theme of change was economics and capital. Early in June 2020 several economic councils were among the first organizations to widely call for change. They believed that the Confederate Battle Flag did not convey a welcoming message to potential investors. Darren Purcell and Cayton Moore's article on selling Southern destinations says, "Mississippi deals with the shadow of presenting the state in a flattering light, a shadow that has to be contained, controlled, or ignored".¹¹¹

109 Rick Cleveland, "No Doubt about It: Sports Sparked Successful Mississippi Campaign for a New Flag", *Mississippi Today*, July 20, 2020.

110 Robert Khayat, *Education of a Lifetime* (Oxford, MS: Nautilus Press, 2013), 160-210.

111 Darren Purcell and Cayton Moore, "Selling Southern Places: An Examination of Delta's Sky Magazine City Profiles", *Southeastern Geographer* 59, no. 3 (2019): 248-67.

This history and messaging of a flag tied to a racist past places Mississippi at a disadvantage in its attempts to attract new investors and retain some of the college graduates who are quickly leaving the state. This argument of economics was one of the motivators behind removal of Confederate monuments in Tampa in 2017. Some supporters of removal in Tampa failed to address the racism of the monuments, instead supporting removal because it was good for business.¹¹² Kirk Savage articulates that change or lack of change always possesses a cost.¹¹³ Change may cost some incumbents their seats, but the cost of retaining Confederate iconography is much more costly. To move forward as a state, both socially and economically, people have to embrace change and reject complacency in the past.¹¹⁴

Religion was another theme that served as a catalyst for change in Mississippi. The 2001 vote to change the flag had the support of several religious organizations, but since the 2015 Charleston Massacre, religious organizations have become more vocal in their opposition to racist iconography. Faith has now become a driver of addressing if not slowly eroding racial prejudice across the country.¹¹⁵ New endorsements by more religious organizations in the state in 2020 allowed state leadership to address some of the issues of the past and attempt a form of racial reconciliation. The Mississippi (Southern) Baptist Convention endorsement of a new flag included the statement, “The racial overtones of this flag’s appearance make this discussion a moral issue”.¹¹⁶ Mandated use of national motto “In God We Trust” on the new flag is also a union of faith and state. Mississippi followed the example of Georgia in placing the phrase on the new flag, duplicating the process

112 Stephen McFarland, Samantha Bowden, and Martin Bosman, “Take ‘Em Down Hillsborough: Race, Space, and the 2017 Struggle Over Confederate Iconography in Neoliberal Tampa”, *Southeastern Geographer*, 59 no. 2 (2019): 174-82.

113 Kirk Savage, “Iconoclasm and the Confederacy: The Challenge of White Supremacy in the Memorial Landscape”, lecture hosted by *Southern Spaces* at Emory University, October 30, 2017.

114 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 86-122.

115 Priscilla McCutcheon, “The Radical Welcome Table: Faith, Social Justice and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina”, *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (2016): 16-21.

116 Pettus, “Baptists and Wal-Mart”.

of removing a Confederate symbol and replacing it with a statement tied to religion. This change forced some social actors to make a decision on what they valued most and whether they would choose faith over heritage.

Finally, the thread that ties these debates together is race. The flag was selected in 1894 as a unifier of White power and a reminder that Black people were to be subservient. White people dictated narratives attached to the flag, though Mississippi is more than just a state of White people. When calls for change started in the 1980s, Black voices were the ones who overtly pushed for change. These voices were not enough as it took more than three decades for the requests to come to fruition. Black voices were emboldened by continual occurrences of racial violence. Protests and marches grew as Black residents became more vocal and non-Black people became more cognizant of the struggle that Black people endured. These voices eventually gained enough White attention in the state to force the flag's retirement. In 2020, the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota spurred protests in the capital city of Mississippi. Those protests led to conversations in the chambers of the state legislature forcing it to address the symbolism of a state's official symbol of a state that implicated racism.

Race, religion, and the state all overlapped in the debate over the state flag of Mississippi. This combination forced Mississippians and state leaders to confront the issue of racialized messaging as an official proclamation of a state. Dealing with these histories is uncomfortable but ignoring them is costly. The process in Mississippi lasted nearly forty years and involved moments of joy and times of unpleasantness. Public opinion and hegemony over that time shifted and many people are to credit for this alteration. The death of George Floyd sparked the eventual retirement of the 1894 Flag. Although Floyd was not directly tied to Mississippi, his death influenced the removal of a symbol that represented three million residents in a southern state.

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