

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Meltdown in Dixie



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Introduction

This discussion guide for *Meltdown In Dixie* is a starting point for you to plan your screening and community engagement event. We include background information about the role of Confederate symbolism, discussion questions for screenings, discussion questions for panels, small group exercises, and additional reading suggestions. Please consider this guide a tool to create meaningful discussion and action in your community.

Screenings of *Meltdown In Dixie* offer a unique opportunity for audiences to delve into the 21st Century struggle that communities across the United States are dealing with through the specific story of a battle over a Confederate flag in the town of Orangeburg, South Carolina. While the age-old debate of the heritage verses hate meaning of the Confederate flag is familiar to many, it is rare for communities to come together to discuss the issues inherent in the symbolism. Why do some feel it is heritage? How do historical events support arguments that the flag is a symbol of hate and racism? Over the decades, how has the meaning and use of the Confederate flag and Confederate symbols changed? How can communities recognize the generational trauma and fear that Confederate symbols carry for many? In the wake of the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter protests of 2020, what place (if any) do Confederate symbols have in American society?

With Confederate symbols still blanketing many American towns and cities, these questions can serve as an important starting point for communities who wish to find ways to move forward in inclusive and respectful ways. Through screenings, it is our hope that *Meltdown In Dixie* can be used to bring all echelons of society together to build relationships and work together to find equitable ways to move past centuries of inequality and division.



ABOUT THE FILM

Short Summary:

In the wake of the 2015 Charleston Massacre, a battle erupts in Orangeburg, South Carolina between the Sons of Confederate Veterans and an ice cream shop owner forced to fly the Confederate flag in his parking lot. The film explores the broader role of Confederate symbolism in the 21st century and the lingering racial oppression which these symbols help maintain.

Filmmaker Motivation:

Filmmaker Emily Harrold, a native of Orangeburg, South Carolina, began filming what became *Meltdown in Dixie* in the Summer of 2017. Growing up in Orangeburg, she was very aware about what conversations could and could not be had in “polite” company. However, she also was aware of the division that existed around Confederate symbols, particularly the Confederate flag flying in downtown Orangeburg. Seeing Tommy Daras’ efforts to remove the flag as an opportunity to potentially document a change in the community, Harrold began filming. However, Harrold also did not want to make a film that simply re-affirmed her specific viewpoints on Confederate symbolism. Considering this was an issue that went deep into the fabric of the community, Harrold approached the film with an open mind. The goal was to understand and interrogate rather than demonize or blame. Wanting to use the power of documentary to bring different voices into conversation with each other, Harrold reached out to all involved. What results is a documentary film that considers a wide variety of viewpoints on the issue of Confederate symbolism. With this in mind, the aim of the film is to confront audiences with viewpoints that challenge and break through preconceived notions in the hopes that this will lead to eye opening experiences that can lead to meaningful change across the United States.



ABOUT THE FILM

Long Summary:

In rural Orangeburg, SC, in the wake of the Charleston Massacre, a battle erupts between the Sons of Confederate Veterans and an ice cream shop owner forced to fly the Confederate flag in his parking lot. The flag has flown in Orangeburg since 2000, when former shop owner Maurice Bessinger raised the flag in protest over it coming down from the SC State House dome. Bessinger, a self-avowed segregationist, deeded the plot of land where the flagpole stood to the local Sons of Confederate Veterans chapter to ensure the flag continued to fly in Orangeburg long after his death.

In 2015, Tommy Daras, a newly retired native of Maryland moved to Orangeburg, and spotted Bessinger's old restaurant. He bought the place and opened the Edisto River Creamery, not worried about the giant Confederate flag flying in the parking lot. Tommy didn't consider the flag to be a problem. But that changed after the racially motivated Charleston Massacre in June 2015. Witnessing how assailant Dylann Roof used the Confederate flag as a symbol of hate, Tommy decided he had to bring the flag down from besides his ice cream shop. But "Keeper of the Flag" Buzz Braxton took Bessinger's charge of keeping the flag flying in Orangeburg to heart. Buzz, a true "ole southern boy" if there ever was, wears Confederate memorabilia with pride and reflects on the "good old days" of segregation with ease. He believes the Old South is disappearing and will do everything in his power to try to hold on. Tommy joins forces with local civil rights attorney, Justin Bamberg and takes the Sons of Confederate Veterans to court. He also launches a far-reaching public relations campaign to separate himself from the flag. But will it be enough to get a deeply entrenched symbol of the South removed?

With Confederate Symbolism coming down around the country, can Tommy get the flag down in Orangeburg? How far are the Sons of Confederate Veterans willing to go to keep the flag up? This intimate, verite-driven short documentary film explores the broader role of Confederate symbolism in the 21st century and the lingering racial oppression which these symbols help maintain.



FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS

We know that conversations around race and inequality can be challenging. With this in mind, consider the following as you plan your screening and conversation. We hope these suggestions can help to foster constructive conversations that ensure everyone feels safe to express their thoughts honestly and safely.

Pre-Screen The Film

Consider how your community will react to the documentary, what issues are likely to come up, and what responses and questions are important to consider in advance.

Think About The Audiences You Want To Reach

Who makes up the community in your area? Are there specific audiences that are often underrepresented in community engagement? How can you reach them? Consider partnering with other local community groups, religious institutions, schools, and affinity organizations to get a diverse audience together. Consider how inter-racial and intra-racial audiences will react and interact during discussions, and consider what you can do to facilitate meaningful conversation.

Promote Open Mindedness

When it comes to issues around race and inequality, we all tend to have preconceived notions. However, in order to bridge divides in communities, it is important that people feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgement. Remind audiences that everyone is there to listen and share with respect and compassion. Discourage interruptions and set clear expectations of the way the discussion will be handled.

Encourage Listening

Encourage everyone to be actively present and to listen to what others are saying. Take the time between comments to let audience members consider what was said. Don't be afraid to stop interruptions or distracting conversation.

Create a Safe Space

Remember that this film brings up sensitive issues that audiences are likely to have emotionally charged responses to. Prioritize creating a safe space for viewers to react and be vulnerable. Remind audiences that it is ok to be uncomfortable and to ask viewers to share what makes them uncomfortable. Be sure that no other viewers use the discussion as an opportunity to attack or pass judgement on any other individuals.

Direct Action

Ask audiences to consider what direct action could happen in your community to address the role that Confederate symbols currently play in the community. What do they want to see happen? And what are they willing to do to achieve these goals?



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Orangeburg, South Carolina

Orangeburg is the county seat of Orangeburg County. The city is southeast of Columbia, the capital of the state. As of the 2020 Census, the city has a population of just over 13,000. Over 76% of the population is African American, making it one of the cities with the largest Black population in the state. In 1860, right before the onset of the Civil War, enslaved persons made up two-thirds of the population of the city. Agriculture was the main economic driver, cotton being the main crop produced in the city and county.

Today, Orangeburg is home to two historically Black universities: Claflin University and South Carolina State University. In part for this reason, Orangeburg has a powerful history of civil rights activism in the 20th Century. That activism includes the Orangeburg Massacre, when three young African Americans were killed and twenty-eight others were wounded while protesting for the integration of a local bowling alley.

As a response to civil rights efforts across the South, the South Carolina Legislative body raised a Confederate flag about the South Carolina State House dome in the early 1960s. There it stayed for forty years. In 2000, after years of work and compromise, politicians agreed to move the flag from the dome to a place of prominence on the grounds of the State House. Angered by the removal of the flag from the state house dome, BBQ restauranter Maurice Bessinger raised Confederate flags at all of his restaurants in South Carolina. However, it was only at the Orangeburg location that Bessinger made a choice to ensure the flag's legacy. Fearing his children would remove the flag when he died, Bessinger sold the small property where the flag stands to the Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 842. Buzz Braxton took responsibility for the flag, and it has flown ever since.

While the Confederate flag outside the Creamery may be the most well-known Confederate symbol in Orangeburg, it is far from the only one. Many street signs in town are named after Confederate Generals.

And a big statue in the center of Downtown Orangeburg stands as a monument to the Confederate soldiers. The monument was unveiled in 1893 after local women raised the funds needed over the course of a number of years. With the exception of a short period when the monument was relocated, the statue has stood in the center of downtown Orangeburg for over a century.

Currently, there is a bill working its way through the general assembly to approve the relocation of the monument to a less central location. The Senate approved the bill in January 2022. It must also pass the South Carolina House before the monument can be moved.



Sources:

City of Orangeburg

<https://www.orangeburg.sc.us/>

2020 Census Data

<https://data.census.gov/>

An Economic Study of the Substantial Slaveholders of Orangeburg County, 1860-1880

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27567920>

The Times and Democrat: How the Confederate Monument in Orangeburg Came To Be

https://thetandd.com/news/local/how-the-confederate-monument-in-orangeburg-came-to-be-historian-suggests-new-location/article_d5615985-8f6e-5e6f-a49e-8289d6fd43e2.html

The Times and Democrat: Legislators try to move Orangeburg statue; Confederate monument bill passes Senate

https://thetandd.com/news/local/legislators-try-to-move-orangeburg-statue-confederate-monument-bill-passes-senate/article_d2bb327a-d19b-507c-913a-6e8ddf8f50db.html#tracking-source=in-article

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



Confederate Symbolism in the United States

The Confederate Battle Flag was first used in the Civil War in the Fall of 1861. While it went on to be the flag most commonly used during battle, it was never made the official flag of the Confederacy. However, it was seen as the soldiers' flag, and after the war ended it became a common symbol for former Confederates and their supporters.

In what is now known as the myth of the “Lost Cause,” many former Confederate soldiers and their families looked to create meaning for the failed uprising and rebuke of their social systems. They considered their fight a gallant battle for a way of life. They also disassociated slavery from the initial causes of the Civil War, and instead cast it as a battle to retain states' independence – or state's rights.

In the wake of Reconstruction, many Southern states reworked their constitutions to limit the gains of formerly enslaved persons. Jim Crow was born, and monuments to Confederate leaders and Confederate dead appeared in towns and cities across the country. Many were installed by the Confederate women of communities, eager to celebrate and find honor for their loved ones. However, others found the monuments as a striking reminder of racial terror and white supremacy.

In the 20th Century, the Confederate flag became a banner used to thwart civil rights gains. It was unofficially adopted by white supremacist organizations including the Ku Klux Klan. It was also used politically, most notably by the short-lived Dixiecrat party in the 1948 presidential election, which continued to advocate for racial inequality.

In the wake of the 2015 Charleston Massacre, a national movement to remove Confederate symbols took hold. Since then, over 300 symbols have come down. However, more than 2000 Confederate memorials remain standing in the United States.

Sources:

Southern Poverty Law Center: Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy:

https://www.splcenter.org/2022/02/01/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy-third-edition#_edn1

National Geographic: How the Confederate Battle Flag Became an Enduring Symbol of Racism

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-confederate-battle-flag-became-symbol-racism>

Mississippi History Now: A Brief History of the Confederate Flags

<https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/history-of-the-confederate-flags>

The Inclusive Historian's Handbook: Lost Cause Myth

<https://inclusivehistorian.com/lost-cause-myth/>

PRE-SCREENING PROMPTS



What brought you to this screening today?

What do you think of the Confederate flag? Why do you have these views?

Where are Confederate symbols visible in the community? Who is responsible for these symbols? Why are they still in visible places in the community?

Why are issues around Confederate symbols always emotionally charged?

How do you feel about discussing issues such as racism and Confederate symbols? Does it make you uncomfortable? If so, why?

What does white supremacy mean?

Do you consider Confederate symbols and racial inequality or white supremacy to be linked? Why or why not?

POST-SCREENING PROMPTS



Who did you most relate to in the film and why?

How did the film change or reshape your thoughts on the Confederate flag and Confederate symbols?

What most surprised you in the film?

What did you make of the fact that the Orangeburg mayor did not want to act to help bring the Confederate Flag down?

How do Confederate symbols perpetuate white supremacy? In your community?

Do you feel that you are complicit in any way to perpetuating white supremacy?
When is it time to speak up?

What role do local community leaders have in addressing these issues?

How do you feel about Confederate symbols in your community? What is the status of these symbols currently?

What sort of actionable effort would you like to see happen in the community around Confederate symbols locally?

PANELIST PROMPTS

Consider who you want to be a part of your panel. They could be academics, activists, community members, or local historians to name a few. These suggested prompts broadly cover what could be discussed, but you should tailor them based on the panelists you choose and what direction you want the panel conversation to go in.



What are your initial reactions to *Meltdown In Dixie*? What scenes or moments are particularly striking or revelatory?

Historically speaking, what was the role of Confederate symbols initially and how has that evolved up until the present day?

As you see in *Meltdown In Dixie*, the local leadership was afraid to act. What does that say about the legacy of Confederate symbolism as a tool of fear and trauma?

In the film the Orangeburg Massacre is referenced. What role does racial violence play in making it hard to remove Confederate statues?

In the final text card of the film, it is noted that the SC General Assembly has to approve removal of the Confederate statue? Why is that? Is this the case in other states?

Much of what Buzz Braxton holds onto is part of the legacy of the myth of the “Lost Cause.” What is that? How are myths like this perpetuated?

How do you respond to the “heritage, not hate” argument?

In our community, what is the history and legacy of Confederate symbols?

What can local communities do who wish to relocate Confederate symbols?

EXTENDED EXERCISES

These exercises are most likely to be effective in classrooms or community groups where more time and more interaction is allocated after viewing the film.

Exercise One: Confederate Symbols In Your Community

While Orangeburg is highlighted in the film, Confederate symbols still exist in countless towns and communities across the United States. Relying on The Southern Poverty Law Center's *Who's Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy* study, this exercise has participants identify Confederate symbols in their hometowns. In the third edition of this report, the SPLC concluded that 2089 Confederate memorials exist in the United States.

- 1 Have participants take out their phones or computers and read the Executive Summary of the *Whose Heritage? Report*:
https://www.splcenter.org/20220201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy-third-edition#_edn1
- 2 Have participants search the master list of Confederate memorials for their town:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1W4H2qa2THM1ni53QYZftGob_k_Bf9HreFAtCERfjCIU/edit?pli=1#gid=1386834576
- 3 Using Google Maps street view, have participants look up the memorial in their town.
- 4 Encourage participants to research when the memorial was put up and who erected it.
- 5 Come together as a group and have participants share their thoughts and reactions. Tell you about the intention of those who placed the memorial?

Possible Prompts for Discussion:

Tell us about the Confederate memorial you found in your community.

Did you know it was there? Have you seen it before?

How does it make you feel when you pass by it?

What do you think the intention of the memorial is?

What is the history of the memorial? When was it erected? By whom? What does that tell you about the intention of those who placed the memorial?

Is there any activism in your community around this memorial? What can you do to get involved? Do you want to get involved?

EXTENDED EXERCISES

Exercise Two: Reading The Documents

A common myth of the “Lost Cause” argument is that the Civil War was not fought over slavery. However, original documents from each of the states that left the United States to form The Confederacy clearly spell out the reasons for secession.

- 1** Re-screen the scene where Buzz reads sections of South Carolina’s Articles of Secession.
- 2** Depending on your locality, have participants read the relevant original document.
- 3** As a group discuss what the document outlines. Have participants identify key passages. What are the reasons for secession? Is slavery specifically mentioned?

Articles of Secession:

South Carolina, December 24, 1860

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-south-carolina>

Mississippi, January 9, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-mississippi>

Florida, January 10, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-florida-louisiana-virginia-north-carolina-and-tennessee>

Alabama, January 11, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/6/30/secession-documents-alabama>

Georgia, January 19, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-georgia>

Louisiana, January 26, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-florida-louisiana-virginia-north-carolina-and-tennessee>

Texas, February 1, 1861

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-texas>

Virginia, April 17, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-florida-louisiana-virginia-north-carolina-and-tennessee>

Arkansas, May 6, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-arkansas>

North Carolina, May 20, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-florida-louisiana-virginia-north-carolina-and-tennessee>

Tennessee, June 8, 1861:

<http://civildiscourse-historyblog.com/blog/2018/7/1/secession-documents-florida-louisiana-virginia-north-carolina-and-tennessee>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Further Reading:

Bass, Jack, and Jack Nelson. *The Orangeburg Massacre*. Mercer University Press, 2002.

Brinson, Claudia Smith. *Stories of Struggle: The Clash Over Civil Rights in South Carolina*. University of South Carolina Press, 2020.

Cox, Karen L. *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021

Domby, Adam H. *The False Cause: Fraud, fabrication and while supremacy in confederate memory*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020.

Fertel, Rien. *One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Shuler, Jack. *Blood & Bone Truth and Reconciliation in a Southern Town*. University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Gallagher, Gary W. and Alan T. Nolan. *The Myth of the Lost Cause of and Civil War History*. Bloomington, IN. Indiana University Press, 2010.

Gallagher, Gary W. Nell Irvin Painter, Karen L Cox, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, and Catherine Clinton. *Confederate Statues and Memorialization*, Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia, 2019.

Lee, Robert W. *A Sin By Any Other Name*. New York, New York: Convergent Books, 2019.

McCurry, Stephanie. *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Seidule, Ty. *Robert E. Lee and Me*. New York : St. Martin's Press, 2020.

Thomas, June Manning. *Struggling To Learn: An Intimate History of School Desegregation in South Carolina*. University of South Carolina Press, 2022.

Towns, Stuart W. *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 2012.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Southern Poverty Law Center

<https://www.splcenter.org/>

Founded in 1971, The SPLC is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people.

Zinn Education Project

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/>

The Zinn Education Project promotes and supports the teaching of people's history in classrooms across the country. Since 2008, the Zinn Education Project has introduced students to a more accurate, complex, and engaging understanding of history than is found in traditional textbooks and curricula.

Race Forward

<https://www.raceforward.org/>

In 2017, Race Forward united with the Center for Social Inclusion. Founded in 1981, Race Forward brings systemic analysis and an innovative approach to complex race issues to help people take effective action toward racial equity. Founded in 2002, the Center for Social Inclusion catalyzed community, government, and other institutions to dismantle structural racial inequity and create equitable outcomes for all. Race Forward is home to the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national network of local government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. Race Forward publishes the daily news site Colorlines and presents Facing Race, the country's largest multiracial conference on racial justice.

Equal Justice Initiative

<https://eji.org/>

Founded in 1988 by Bryan Stevenson, The Equal Justice Initiative is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.



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For more information about Meltdown In Dixie, future screenings, and story updates, please visit:

www.meltdownindixie.com

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