

## Cover story

**Maleeha Syed**

Burlington Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

In 2017, people strolling through the Vermont State Fair in Rutland could check out the regular fixtures: Games, food, live music — and Confederate battle flags.

One year later, the NAACP's Rutland chapter launched a petition calling for a ban on the sale and display of the flag, saying the banner “represents a horrific past for many and a heritage of hatred for others.”

But how did this symbol of the Confederacy find a market in Vermont in the first place?

The flag has come under national criticism in recent years, seen at events such as the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Multiple Confederate flags emerged during the Civil War, but the one often seen today — a battle flag flown by Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia — didn't grow in popularity until after the war ended.

Some southerners consider the flag a symbol of their heritage, a reminder of their ancestors' fight in the Civil War. Others call the blue cross and stars on a red field a symbol of racism.

### Confederate flags: Why Vermont?

The Green Mountain State sent a sizable portion of its population to serve in the Union effort during the Civil War, Paul Searls, a professor at Northern Vermont University's Lyndonville campus, said.

Yet there could be overlaps in beliefs held by Vermonters and those held by people who fly the flag in the South.

Searls, whose expertise includes Vermont history, said when state legislative districts were redrawn in the 1960's, the power in the Statehouse shifted from rural areas to more urbanized population centers like Chittenden County.

Some Vermonters might view the Confederate flag as a symbol of ideals and their lifestyles, Searls said, and fly as a symbol of resistance against the existing order and outsiders perceived as threats to their well-being.

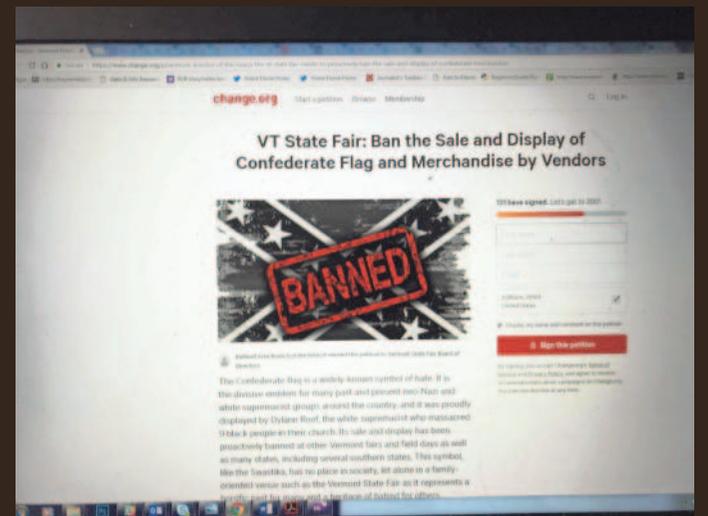
“I think that the flag, no matter where you go in the world, is a potentially provocative symbol,” he said.

A child wearing a shirt that displays the flag carries different weight in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Vermont, he said, with the racial overtones likely playing a much smaller role in the Green Mountain State.

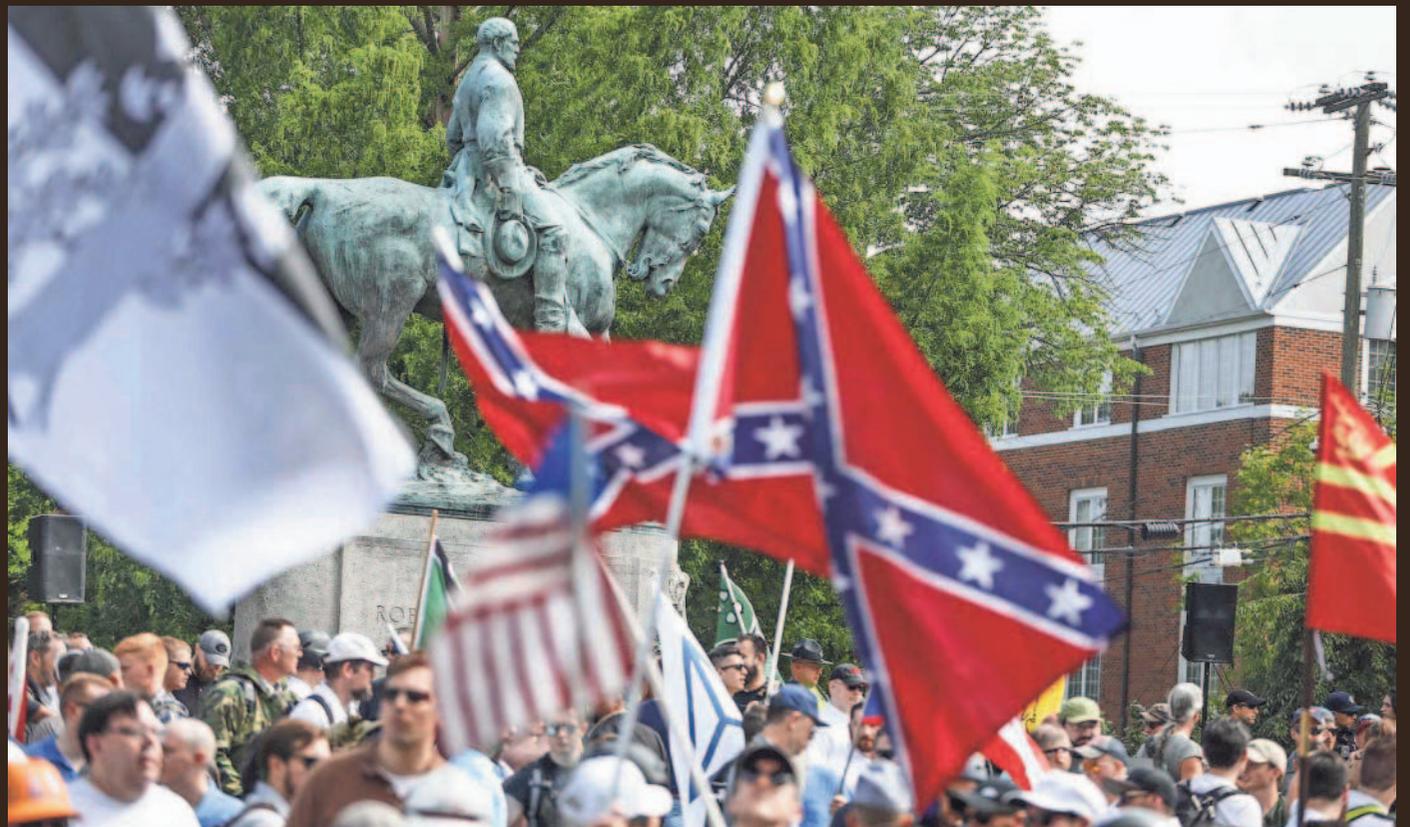
Searls said those who fly the flag in Vermont today are unlikely to explicitly support white supremacy or slavery. Vermonters who wave the flag might feel it represents a way of life they support, like: hunting; rights guaranteed in the Second Amendment; opposition to large, powerful government and resistance to urbanization.

### What makes the Confederate flag controversial?

The Rutland NAACP chapter was one of the latest in calls to remove the Confederate battle flag from public view. Incidents that made national news over the



# How Confederate battle flags came to Vermont



**Top: A photo of Dylan Roof from the white supremacist website “The Last Rhodesian.” Top right: A Change.org petition is asking for the Vermont State Fair to ban the sale and display of Confederate flag merchandise. Above: Multiple white nationalist groups hold the grounds Emancipation Park, formerly known as Lee Park, during a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Aug. 12, 2017.** DYLAN ROOF COURTESY OF THELASTRHODESIAN.COM, JESS ALOE/FREE PRESS, MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/INDYSTAR

last few years led to widespread backlash against the symbol.

Photographs of Dylann Roof holding the emblem circulated in 2015 after he opened fire and killed nine people in a historically black church in South Carolina. The massacre eventually led to the removal of the flag from statehouse grounds.

South Carolina's neighbors — including Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi — addressed the symbol's presence on capitol grounds, license plates and state flags around the same time

Debates over commemoration of the

Confederacy was reignited in 2017 in the wake of a “Unite the Right” rally that erupted in violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. Participants, including white nationalists, protested the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. Some partaking in the rally marched with Confederate flags.

### What Confederate flags represent

“Legally, technically, it represents the Confederate States of America,” said Cheryl Greener, a history professor at Trinity College in Connecticut who explores topics like social movements and

the history of African Americans in the 20th century.

For white southerners who display the flag today, Greenberg said they are likely motivated by a nostalgia for a time they associate with chivalry, identity and culture they feel is lost.

But she argued the flag, regardless of intent, is rooted in racism. Ignoring this truth, she said, is the equivalent of someone saying they miss Nazi Germany — minus the Holocaust.

The flag encapsulated “white suprem-

**Continued on next page**

## Cover story & Vermont

Continued from previous page

acy, states' rights, and Southern distinctiveness," Amy Dru Stanley, a history professor at The University of Chicago whose research specialties include slavery and emancipation, wrote in an email. But its presence was in the North as early as the war, as a sign of sympathy and opposition to abolition.

### Confederate flag rises again

The Confederate battle flag found its way back into mainstream society when the civil rights movement took off in the mid-20th century. Displaying the Confederate flag was an act of defiance in the face of the government moving to guarantee rights for African Americans.

Greenberg pointed out that many Confederate statues were also erected for the same purpose.

Immediately after the Civil War, the flag symbolized a "Lost Cause," Stanley wrote. This phrase referred to a desire for a lifestyle that no longer existed without slavery and in the face of Constitutional amendments granting rights to black Americans.

In the early 1900's, this sentiment

continued with the growing prominence of the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws and lynchings.

### Can you separate the Confederate flag from slavery?

Greenberg and Stanley said one cannot distinguish modern usage of the flag from its contentious history.

Stanley said the Confederate flag's connection to recent incidents of race-related violence negate the argument that brandishing the banner is purely only about respect for southern heritage.

"In the aftermath of Charleston and Charlottesville, any pretense of innocence is impossible," she wrote. "The Confederate flag is revealed to be what it always has been – a menacing symbol of white supremacy that legitimates racial violence."

Greenberg acknowledged not everyone who displays the flag is a racist, but said the flag's past is undeniable.

"I don't think you can divorce it from racism and segregation," Greenberg said.

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Amber Tozzie, of Burlington, a bartender at Stonecutter Spirits Highball Social, makes a drink Sept. 6, 2018. BRENT HALLENBECK/FREE PRESS

## BTV's Highball Social closing doors at end of year

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The space next to Folino's Pizza often clamors with patrons sipping cocktails from Stonecutter Spirits. This won't last for much longer: The distillery announced it is closing its doors to Highball Social in Burlington.

Stonecutter Spirits, which describes itself as a "woman-led craft distillery making thoughtful gin and whiskey on the edge of the mountains in rural Vermont," opened its cocktail bar in the Queen City last year.

The distillery, founded in 2013, has a tasting room located in Middlebury, which will also shut down. You still will be able to find its products in bars and

restaurants, as well as liquor stores, in the Green Mountain State.

"We're proud to be a part of the Vermont ecosystem, and are excited to host fundraisers, collaborations, and holiday parties to close out this year," Sas Stewart, president and co-founder, wrote in a news release. "While we're sad to end this chapter, it's only fitting to spend this time celebrating the people and products that make Vermont outstanding."

The distillery plans to go out with a bang, planning events over the next few weeks to celebrate its legacy, including a New Year's Eve party and a closing event during the first week of January.

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