



HURT'S BATTERY



Alabama Light Artillery, ANV^a.
Re-enactors of the American Civil War

A Confederate Reenactor's Cogitations on Slavery and Race

As a Civil War reenactor and a captain of Confederate artillery, I have sometimes been called upon to explain how I can in conscience represent the historic Confederacy given that it was “*fighting for slavery.*”

A good question whose answer is both very simple and impossibly complex. We are all aware that many modern Americans simplify the complexities of the Civil War as a fight between the *good guys*: the northerners who were fighting for freedom, and the *bad guys*: the southerners who were fighting for slavery. Everyone knows the short, easy response that is used by many Confederate reenactors: *The War wasn't about slavery. It was about States' Rights.* This response is both true and untrue at the same time. True: the vast majority of Confederate soldiers were not slave owners and so were not fighting to maintain their slave property. But also True: the vast majority of the ruling class in the southern states were slave owners and were indeed fighting to maintain their slave property.

But the above misses a main point that often gets lost in the act of simplification: The slavery issue of the 1850s and 1860s was not at its heart only about whether a state or territory would or should permit slavery within its borders – however often it was broached in those terms. What was really going on was an attempt – sometimes irrational, sometimes inarticulate, sometimes violent – to define how American society would deal with the huge number of African Americans that had been forcibly brought to these shores. The hard part (thank goodness) for most modern Americans to grasp is that, except for a tiny minority, all mid-19th century Americans north and south could no more accept that blacks could be their equals in capacity, intellect and virtue than they could have accepted that people would routinely fly across the Atlantic. Back then, the word *racist* was not even used. It was not needed. All “right-thinking” people north and south *knew* that whites were superior to blacks, browns, yellows, reds, what-have-you. If you really believed in human equality in the 19th century you were seen by most citizens a left-wing radical nut case – to put it in modern parlance.

The sad truth is that racism was the 19th century norm – north and south. Most northern freesoilers that opposed slavery did so, not because they believed in universal equality,

but because slavery meant having blacks around, and they didn't want blacks in their midst. Oregon, for example, when admitted to the Union in 1859 as a free state had in its constitution an article prohibiting African Americans from entering the state. It also made illegal black ownership of real estate and prohibited blacks from entering into contracts. This attitude was not unusual.

In the 19th century there were three ways that our white ancestors conceived they might deal with blacks and the slavery question:

1. Keep blacks in bondage as the best way to regulate them and maintain a functioning society
2. Free the slave and ship him, will he or no, to Africa (witness the creation of the nation of Liberia)
3. Allow the freedom of blacks but keep them in a perennial under-class forever subjugated to the white race.

The fourth possibility of living up to the words of the Declaration of Independence that *All men are created equal* was given consideration by very few whites.

Most common men fighting for the Confederacy did so because their homes were being invaded. If they gave voice to the slavery issue at all, they would have mostly accepted #1 above because they could not have come up with any other solution that seemed to them likely of success. Yet the racial bigotry of the common Rebel soldier was basically matched by the common soldier fighting for the Union. Equality was simply not on the table for most whites. It is true that many educated southerners, Robert Edward Lee being one such, knew that in the long term slavery was untenable. It had to die, but they had no idea how that might be achieved or how race relations could or should be redefined on a societal level.

So, if you want to be a mid-19th reenactor whose impression stands for universal equality, you have very, very few choices – a Quaker conductor on the underground railroad, perhaps.

So how do I cram all of the above into a sound bite for a spectator who asks me how I can be in gray? I tell them as much as they are willing to hear, ending with a grateful acknowledgment that we have, thank goodness, come a long way since then, though there's still a long way to go. I often add with a smile and a nod at my guitar that Reb camps tend to be more lively than many Yank camps, and I like my music.

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