

13. HERESY OR HERITAGE?

Memphis, Tennessee bears deep scars of the American civil rights movement. Images of the Lorraine Hotel and sanitation workers picketing with placards declaring “I Am a Man” remain vivid in the memories of many here. Now the city is embroiled in a dispute that pits those who seek to honor the struggle of African Americans against others who champion less recent history.

In February 2013, the Memphis City Council voted to rename three parks that honored the city’s Confederate past. Confederate, Jefferson Davis, and Nathan Bedford Forrest parks now bear generic names, i.e. not military, whilst the Council considers permanent ones recommended by an ad hoc Council committee in April 2013.

Most observers considered the Council’s action a preemptive move to circumvent in part the intent of the Tennessee Heritage Protection Act of 2013, a bill that was moving through the Tennessee Statehouse at the time. This act, signed by the Governor on 1 April 2013, prohibits changing the name of parks, inter alia, currently named for “any historical military figure, historical military event, military organization, or military unit.” Had the City Council of Memphis not acted when it did, the city would have been stuck with the original park names in perpetuity.

Those who support the City Council measure contend the former park names evoke a racist past and were offensive in a city of largely black residents. Others simply worry that confederate-themed names make it more difficult to attract new businesses to the city by sending the wrong message about its values.

Southern heritage groups, on the other hand, believe the renaming threatens historical knowledge, even though the parks in question do not mark battlefields and are not located on sites of historic events. Chris Barker, a local Ku Klux Klan leader goes further. Quoted in the 28 March 2013 New York Times, he claims that “[t]he Memphis City Council is basically trying to eradicate white people out the history books across America.”

Both Confederate and Forrest Parks were dedicated in the early 20th Century. The former was a memorial to the Civil War. In 1904 the bodies of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and his wife were re-interred in Forrest Park. Jefferson Davis Park was opened in the 1930s and named for the Confederate President who lived and worked in Memphis from 1869 until his death.

Seeking a compromise, some in Memphis suggest adding history to the city rather than taking it away. For instance, the same New York Times article reported that Doug Cupples, a history professor from Memphis, called for reinstating the original names of the parks and also building more monuments to honor African American leaders. Illustrating just how intractable the issue has become, the newspaper subsequently quoted Baptist minister Keith Norman as equating the restoration of the park names as akin to honoring Nazis in modern Germany.