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North Carolina Discontinues License Plates With Confederate Flag

The Division of Motor Vehicles said it had received complaints about the specialty plate, which had been issued to members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.



By Neil Vigdor
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The State of North Carolina is no longer issuing license plates with the Confederate flag on them, the state's motor vehicle agency said on Monday, the latest turning point in a nationwide reckoning over symbols of the Old South and their meaning.

In a statement on Monday, the Division of Motor Vehicles said that the specialty plates could send the wrong message and that the state had discontinued them as of Jan. 1.

North Carolina was one of several Southern states that offered the plates with the Confederate battle flag on them to members of the group Sons of Confederate Veterans.

The state said it would continue to recognize the Sons of Confederate Veterans as a civic organization, which entitles the group to a specialty plate. But the state said that did not give the group the right to dictate the contents of the government speech on that plate.

"The Division of Motor Vehicles has determined that license plates bearing the Confederate battle flag have the potential to offend those who view them," the agency

said. “We have therefore concluded that display of the Confederate battle flag is inappropriate for display on specialty license plates, which remain property of the state.”

The change went into effect at a time when other states are also addressing the issue. Last year, Mississippi replaced its flag, one that conspicuously featured the Confederate symbol — an image embraced by white supremacist groups. The new flag features a magnolia.

The move by transportation officials in North Carolina came just days before the Jan. 6 siege at the U.S. Capitol, where a man carried a Confederate battle flag through the halls of Congress.

Larry McCluney Jr., the commander in chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, said in an interview on Monday night that the license plates were no different than those displayed by members of other civic organizations and accused North Carolina officials of trying to erase history.

“What we see here is just an attack on American history,” Mr. McCluney said. “We live in an era where all it takes is for one or a couple of people to say, ‘I’m offended by it,’ yet the majority has to kowtow to it.”

Mr. McCluney said the Confederate battle flag did not represent slavery and was a key piece of the Southern identity shared by the 30,000 active members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. He said he had one of the plates on his car in Mississippi, where he lives, and was “horrified” by slavery.

“That was the soldiers’ flag,” he said. “If you don’t like it, go the other way. You don’t have to look.”

Officials in North Carolina said efforts to develop an alternate design for the license plate were not successful.

It was not immediately clear what would happen to existing plate holders when they go to renew their registrations, but The Wilmington StarNews reported there were 3,015 plates with the Confederate flag as of Feb. 1.

The newspaper, which reported that the plates had been discontinued and had been the subject of complaints last year, stated that members of the organization learned of the decision when they tried to renew their registrations.

This was not the first time a state has grappled with the image of the Confederate flag on license plates.

In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the State of Texas did not violate the First Amendment when it rejected a Sons of Confederate Veterans specialty license plate bearing the Confederate battle flag. In the 5-to-4 ruling, the court said license plates constituted speech by the government.

That same year, Maryland recalled Confederate plates issued to the group's members. Virginia no longer offers a plate with the Confederate battle flag; it features an alternate design.

And in South Carolina, a state lawmaker recently introduced a bill to discontinue the issuance of Confederate flag plates.