

In 1941, with the nation on the eve of war, Civil War battle flags were in the news again. In Michigan, as elsewhere, captured rebel flags were considered spoils of war and victors' trophies. Despite the fact that the federal government had long ago (in 1905) passed legislation allowing and even encouraging the repatriation of captured Southern flags, thirteen such flags remained in the state's possession 76 years after the end of the war. The suggestion had been made to return them as early as 1913. Since the war was over, the argument ran, hadn't the time come for Michigan to do its part to unite the nation and mend the breach between North and South? The plea fell on deaf ears. Not until the last Civil War veteran was gone ran the usual sentiment. Thirty more years passed before Michigan was finally ready to lay the issue to rest.

On September 20, 1941, an impressive and unique ceremony took place on the front steps of the capitol. It was broadcast to a listening nation over the radio. Governor Van Wagoner presented thirteen rebel flags captured by Michigan troops--and three swords--to representatives of twelve southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Among those receiving the flags were several governors and 95-year-old General Julius Howell, commander of the remaining 500 Confederate veterans. Also present were three surviving Michigan Union veterans: James Hamilton, Lansing's sole Civil War survivor; 97-year-old William Howland of Battle Creek; and Smith Carleton of Kalamazoo.

The common theme of the remarks that day was one of national unity, especially in the face of "the darkly seen trials ahead," as Governor Van Wagoner phrased it. "Love and understanding have replaced all bitterness and hate," he continued. Virginia's Governor Price responded that the ceremony would serve to bind the states together at a time of vital national need: "proof to the dictators of the world that we stand together a united people." It seemed especially important to all present that America heal her old wounds and unite to face the threat from abroad.

Michigan was actually among the last to return Southern battle flags. State Senator Carl Delano of Kalamazoo, who sponsored the authorizing legislation, said he felt that Michigan hadn't fully realized their importance to the South. "We weren't looking on these flags as a symbol of the valiant spirit of men who gave their lives for a principle. I know now that we were wrong." The last veterans of the Civil War, both North and South, were almost gone, but the battle flags they carried still wielded great power.

As the flags, packed in gift boxes trimmed with red, white and blue, were presented to the representatives from each state, Governor Van Wagoner commented that they "are undying mementos left behind by brave Americans of both the North and the South" and that it would not have been appropriate to have merely quietly returned them. We needed some public demonstration, he continued, to show that the bitterness which once divided the North and South was now dissolved. The editor of Michigan History Magazine added this postscript to the day's proceedings: "They are but flags, but they speak to us of the thousands of boys in Gray, who with the faith and hope of youth went into

battle for a cause they held dear... these flags tell of hopes, and of fears, and of prayers for these boys.”  
These words must have seemed especially poignant to America on the eve of World War II, just a few months before Pearl Harbor.