

## ARIZONA

# 'I can't toe the line': Why Arizona's former leader of the Sons of Confederate Veterans resigned

**Grace Oldham** Arizona Republic

Published 8:00 a.m. MT Aug. 21, 2020 | Updated 1:03 p.m. MT Aug. 21, 2020

Shortly before resigning as commander of the Arizona Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Robert Johnson issued a directive that sparked an uproar within the organization: He banned displaying representations of the Confederate battle flags at public events, including parades or protests.

Toting the contentious flag through the streets of Phoenix or Tucson sends the wrong message, Johnson said, “especially in the current environment — it’s time to put that to bed.”

But the majority of those in the Arizona division disagreed. Johnson said they voted against his order.

That was the final straw.

He said he could no longer “toe the line” for an organization unwilling to hear new ideas and unwavering on Confederate symbols like the battle flag, which had been “hijacked” by white supremacist hate groups.

“I keep going back to say, we got to get with the times, because the real issue is, a bunch of Americans were killed,” Johnson said.

His work with the SCV was always about preserving the history and legacy of his Confederate ancestors and those who fought beside them, Johnson said. But he said the SCV’s current approach to defending members’ heritage, including a fervent defense of the flag, has clouded what he says is the group’s real mission: remembering the service and sacrifice of Confederate veterans.

Others are skeptical. Despite the genuine focus on history for some members, researchers say since its start the group has spun a narrative designed to shield the ideological cause of the

Confederacy under the veil of remembrance of its soldiers and reverence for their forebears. And while the SCV identifies as an apolitical group, preservers of Confederate history and purveyors of white supremacy coexist within the organization.

The false narrative pushed by the Sons of Confederate Veterans — including framing the Confederacy's cause as a fight for states' rights — fundamentally functions as a tool to uphold white supremacy, said Adam Dombay, a history professor at the College of Charleston and author of “The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory.”

"It's disingenuous to say this group was ever all about remembering history," Dombay said. "It's about celebrating an imagined past to justify the present."

## **Tensions grow around the Confederate battle flag**

Johnson didn't grow up in the South. His dad was from Louisiana, but he was raised in Pennsylvania.

He said there is a lot about the steadfast reverence for a bygone era among other SCV members from places like Alabama or Mississippi that he could never fully relate to. But he always kept a Confederate battle flag in his childhood bedroom and, later, on his private property.

“We all did, but it was never like, ‘If I let this go, it would be the end of the world’,” he said.

Johnson didn't get involved with the SCV until he moved to Arizona. His daughter had started to research their family's ancestry around the same time, which revealed that he had three relatives who had fought in the Civil War, two for the Confederacy. All SCV members are required to have at least one ancestor who fought for the South.

William Greene Tate, Johnson's great-great-grandfather, was 18 when he was drafted into the Confederate army in North Carolina. He was from a family of chicken farmers, not plantation owners, Johnson was careful to note.

“These guys were young kids who were tapped on the shoulder and told, ‘Hey, you just got drafted, time to go fight for North Carolina, kid’,” he said. “And a lot of them didn't come home.”

Many of them had little understanding of the "political ramifications" of their participation in the war, Johnson said.

"He was doing what his country told him to do," he said. "And we just can't let their history be erased."

Chris Hanlon, a professor at Arizona State University and author of two books about the Civil War and antebellum period, said he would expect groups interested in showing a fidelity to history — "to what actually happened from 1861 to 1865" — to share more stories like that one.

"I would think that they would want to broadcast the truth, which is that a generation of poor white Southerners were ground into mulch in the names and the interests of the rich, slave-holding pledge class," Hanlon said.

One of the first SCV events Johnson attended was a 2017 "flag run" in Mesa where the group drove around with the Confederate battle flag displayed on their pickup trucks. "Goes to show you how much a person can morph," he said, referring from his more recent stance on the flag.

There, he met some of the leaders and, soon after, became the camp commander in Prescott in July 2017. Johnson was elected in May 2018 to be the commander of the Arizona division of the SCV, a division within the Army of Trans Mississippi, one of the SCV's three regional "armies."

He spent much of his two years as commander trying to streamline communication about what the organization was about, issuing news releases that emphasized Confederate veterans' role in Arizona's statehood and the division's condemnation of "racist and supremacist thinking."

Regional and national leaders in the group consistently expressed disinterest in hearing out his ideas, he said.

"I kept saying to everybody that I really think we need to move away from this 'The South was right' talk," Johnson said, adding that he felt it was a "nonstarter" that drew focus away from remembering the soldiers who died en masse during the Civil War. While the exact number is slightly up for debate, historians estimate somewhere between 650,000 and 100,000 soldiers died of wounds or disease during the conflict.

He said he faced more internal pushback earlier this year after agreeing to follow Tucson Rodeo Parade officials' guidance not to fly the Confederate battle flag in the annual parade, instead using the Confederacy's first national flag.

Johnson said he recognized that the battle flag was divisive, noting that it's one of the Confederate symbols that has been "hijacked" by hate groups.

White nationalists and KKK members have long waved it as an emblem of American white supremacy and in an effort to intimidate civil rights movements. Photos of Dylann Roof, an avowed white supremacist, posing with the Confederate battle flag surfaced online shortly after he killed nine Black church churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina.

But many Arizona SCV members were dissatisfied with Johnson's attempts to distance from the symbol, he said.

After the group voted in June to disregard his order on the Confederate battle flag, Johnson said he knew it was time to get out. He resigned from his leadership positions June 12.

"I said, 'Fine, you guys keep doing what you keep doing, and what's going to happen is you're going to end up going underground,'" he said.

New leaders of the Arizona SCV did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The newly elected national leader, Larry McCluney Jr., said he had not heard of this particular instance but defended the groups' focus on the Confederate battle flag.

"Our charge says that we are supposed to defend the Confederate soldiers' good name, the guardianship of his history, emulation of his virtues, the perpetuation of those principles which he loved and, as a result, that means preserving monuments, symbols and anything else that is related in that form or fashion to the Confederate soldier," he said.

**'BEING VERY FRANK':** As Sierra Club confronts its racist history, tribe seeks reckoning

## **A Western battlefield near Picacho Peak**

About 50 years before statehood, Arizona was the site of the Civil War's westernmost battles.

Sites of the Battle of Picacho Pass and the Battle of Dragoon Springs, where the only known deaths of Confederate soldiers within the boundaries of modern-day Arizona occurred, later were marked by memorials.

Groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy placed a series of monuments and memorials across the state and nation throughout the 20th century. The majority weren't erected until decades after the end of the Civil War, and the

spikes in monuments coincided with civil rights movements, according to research conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Historians say the timing was no coincidence, arguing the monuments were part of a larger strategy by pro-Confederacy groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans to distort the historical record of the Civil War in the public square.

The SCV had a hand in placing the three known remaining Confederate memorials in Arizona in 1999 or later.

The most prominent Confederate monument in the state, an Arizona-shaped stone memorial dedicated to Confederate soldiers, was placed in what is now the Wesley Bolin Plaza outside the Arizona Capitol in the 1960s, where it stayed until last month.

It was dedicated on Feb. 14, 1962 — the 50th anniversary of Arizona statehood, archives of *The Arizona Republic* show. Members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy gathered for pictures around the monument dressed in “costumes” inspired by what women would wear in the antebellum South.

Secretary of State Wesley Bolin, now the plaza's namesake, spoke at the monument's dedication ceremony. Archived copies of *The Republic* reported that Bolin and his wife frequented UDC events, and a 1918 copy of the *Bates County Record* in Missouri identifies Bolin's grandfather, Thomas Bolin, as a Confederate veteran.

Hate crimes by avowed white supremacists in recent years reignited tensions related to Confederate monuments and symbols, but Black Americans say the true symbolism behind the monuments has never been a secret.

In Arizona, Black community leaders, allies and state legislators have for years called for the removal of the monuments to Confederate soldiers across the state, arguing that the monuments were “erected to intimidate, terrorize and strike fear in the hearts of Arizonans, particularly African-Americans, while inspiring and emboldening white supremacists.”

Confederate monuments in the state became a focal point of recent protests after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis.

Signa Oliver, Black U.S. Army veteran and volunteer with VetsForward, rejected the argument that the monuments were erected for a historical purpose at a June news conference at the memorial in Wesley Bolin plaza where a group of veterans called on Gov. Doug Ducey to remove that monument and others across the state.

"They were erected to glamorize this mythology of the people who stood against the freedoms of people with the skin hue of mine," she said. "We're still having this conversation in 2020, so I would say their mission was accomplished."

After months of local protests, the United Daughters of the Confederacy relocated the memorial outside the Arizona Capitol and another dedicated to Jefferson Davis near U.S. 60 outside Gold Canyon to private property.

Johnson said he was surprised — he had been fighting "tooth and nail" to keep the memorial to Confederate soldiers outside Wesley Bolin Plaza in the weeks before he split with the SCV.

Though he said he had trouble defending other monuments to "ideological figures" like the one honoring Jefferson Davis off U.S. 60, he said he believed the memorial to Confederate soldiers in Wesley Bolin Plaza was appropriate because of their contributions to the Arizona statehood and status as U.S. veterans under federal law and by the Department of Veterans Affairs. A USA Today fact check last month found that while federal law authorizes some benefits to former Confederates, they are not conferred equal status as a U.S. military veterans.

"We do a disservice to their legacy, and I just don't think we should be playing with that," Johnson said.

But Johnson said the SCV's focus on protecting "negative symbols" is counterproductive to efforts to remember their legacy.

"They think they're defending their heritage and the legacy of their ancestors, but what they end up doing is pushing everyone away," he said.

It fuels a public perception that the SCV is a racist organization because they "won't let that flag go," Johnson said.

"I don't think that's the intent, or, at least, as far as I know, we're not like that," Johnson said.

## **Who are the Sons of Confederate Veterans?**

The Sons of Confederate Veterans is a "historical, patriotic and non-political" organization founded in 1896, according to its website. The now Tennessee-based organization says it is focused on "preserving the history and legacy of these heroes so that future generations can understand the motives that animated the Southern Cause."

A pop-up ad on its site asks for donations and promotes the SCV as an organization "Where Traditional American Values are respected and defended."

Regional camps lead educational programs at local schools, mark and maintain Confederate graves, participate in reenactments and local parades as well as research Confederate soldiers, Johnson said.

The Arizona Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans only has about 200 members, Johnson said. It's a fraction of the 120,000 members McCluney says the organization has nationwide.

The Southern Poverty Law Center considers the SCV a "pro-Confederate activism group," according to Howard Graves, a senior research analyst with the SPLC's intelligence report. Graves said the SCV's activism has gone "hand in glove" with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and, in the context of the modern hate movement, neo-Confederate hate groups like the League of the South.

There's been significant overlap between the SCV and hate groups throughout the organization's history, according to research by the SPLC.

Nathan Bedford Forrest II, the SCV's 19th commander in chief, was also the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia. Leaders in modern neo-Confederate hate groups including Michael Hill, president of the League of the South, and Michael Tubbs, chief of staff of the League of the South, passed through the SCV first, Graves said.

In the past year, SCV members have rallied and protested alongside these hate groups. And while some argue these ties aren't representative of the organization as a whole, Graves said the overlap is also not something the SCV has shown initiative to "stamp out."

Arguably deeper than these overlaps in leadership, historians say the SCV functions to uphold a system of white supremacy through pushing a false narrative — one that denies slavery's role in the war and portrays reconstruction as a crime against the South.

McCluney, the new leader of the SCV and a history instructor at a Mississippi high school and community college, denied that the Confederacy was founded to protect a system of slavery, shrugging it off as "the current agenda that people want to present out there."

But among most historians, there's no debate.

"There is no way you can accurately talk about a Confederate soldier without talking about slavery," Dobby said.

And with that pretext for any discussion of their legacy, he says the American public needs to be asking not only how we remember our ancestors, but, also, whether they're worth celebrating.

"I'm not saying we should forget anything, but it is a fundamental question to ask ourselves: Do we want to celebrate people who fought a war for slavery, no matter how great they may have been individually?" he said.

## **'Mission is kind of twisted'**

Weeks after splitting with the organization, Johnson watched with disdain as the SCV flew a "DEFUND NASCAR" banner with a representation of the Confederate battle flag over Talladega Superspeedway after the stock-car racing circuit banned displays of the flag at its events at the request of Bubba Wallace, a Black NASCAR driver.

Deliberately defying NASCAR's rule to display the flag sends the wrong message, Johnson said.

For him, he said it was a telltale sign that "their mission is kind of twisted."

But this time was different. Johnson was no longer in a position where he needed to defend the group's methods that he felt were counteractive to their mission.

He was done.

*Contact Grace Oldham at [grace.oldham@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:grace.oldham@arizonarepublic.com) or on Twitter at [@grace\\_c\\_oldham](https://twitter.com/grace_c_oldham).*