Nathan Bedford Forrest Park Name Change Effort Causes Uproar
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MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The statue of Confederate fighter Nathan Bedford Forrest astride a horse towers above the Memphis park bearing his name. It's a larger-than-life tribute to the warrior still admired by many for fiercely defending the South in the Civil War – and scorned by others for a slave-trading past and ties to the Ku Klux Klan. Though the bloodiest war on American soil was fought 150 years ago, racially tinged discord flared before its City Council voted this week to strip Forrest's name from the downtown park and call it Health Sciences Park. It also voted to rename Confederate Park as Memphis Park and Jefferson Davis Park as Mississippi River Park.

A committee has been formed to help the council decide on permanent names for the parks. The changes have drawn praise from those who said bygone reminders of the Confederacy had to be swept away in what today is a racially diverse city. Critics cried foul, saying moves to blot out such associations were tantamount to rewriting the history of a Mississippi River city steeped in Old South heritage. The struggle over Forrest's legacy and moves to rename other parks highlights a broader national debate over what Confederate figures represent in the 21st century as a far more diverse nation takes new stock of the war on its 150th anniversary with the hindsight of the civil rights era. Although the Forrest name change had been expected, a simultaneous move by the City Council to rename Confederate Park and Jefferson Davis Park was not. It arose quickly after council members learned of pending state legislation aimed at preventing the renaming any parks honoring wars or historical military figures. Kenneth Van Buren, a local African-American civil rights activist, said stripping away park names tied to the Confederacy or its leading figures were overdue.

"It's very offensive," he said. "How can we have unity in the nation when we have one city, right here in Memphis, which fails to be unified?" Most of the emotion over the council's action has centered on Forrest. His defenders, mostly white, cite Forrest's accomplishments as an alderman, businessman and military leader. Critics, black and white, say honoring Forrest glorifies a slave trader and Ku Klux Klan member. Katherine Blaylock, a Memphis resident who opposes the name changes, defended Forrest and accused the council of trying to rewrite history. "Memphis has always been a racially divided city," Blaylock, 43, said after Tuesday's meeting. "It's been a big clash since way back when. We do what we can to come together and be a community, but the antagonists that keep bringing it out on both sides are the bad apples."

Forrest lived in Memphis before the Civil War, working as a cotton farmer and slave trader. Though lacking traditional military training, he rose to lieutenant general in the Confederate Army. He became legendary for fast horseback raids that disrupted the enemy's supply lines and communications. Forrest also led the siege against Union-held Fort Pillow in 1864. With the clear advantage, Forrest ordered Union Maj. William Bradford and his troops to surrender. Forrest's men then stormed the fort and killed about 300 soldiers, half of them black. They also took black and white prisoners. Questions linger whether the Union soldiers at Fort Pillow were killed as they tried to surrender. Northern newspaper reports referred to the battle as an atrocity, but some historians say the deaths were a consequence of battle. Forrest later became a member of the Klan, which intimidated and threatened Southern blacks. His level of involvement in the Klans is a source of argument, and he is believed to have helped disband the first incarnation of the Klan in 1869. Supporters praise him for offering to free 45 of his own slaves if they would serve in the Confederacy. They also claim Forrest was reluctant to divide families when he bought slaves.

Forrest died in 1877 and his body was moved to Forrest Park in the early 1900s. The tree-lined park about as large as a city block is just miles from the old Lorraine Hotel, the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. King's murder is a cloud that lingers over Memphis long after the civil rights leader was slain. Race remains an undercurrent in many aspects of daily life. Not until last year did the city name its first street for King. This is not the first time Forrest Park has sparked acrid debate. Memphis officials, led by the city's black mayor, rejected an effort to rename it in 2005. Other cities in the U.S. have also wrestled with the issue of naming parks and buildings after Forrest. In 2008, a majority white school board in Jacksonville, Fla., rejected an attempt to rename Nathan Bedford Forrest High School. Last September, the City Council in Selma, Ala. voted to stop work on a monument honoring Forrest at a city cemetery after someone removed Forrest's bust from the site. The apparent theft had led to protests by civil rights advocates not to replace it.

And, in December, Dixie State College in Utah removed a bronze statue of Confederate soldiers from campus. Tennessee also has a state park named for Forrest and a modern-day statue of him in Nashville erected on private land. Civil War historian Harold Holzer said that while he thinks Forrest was an "evil character," history is not served by removing references to the past in public places. However, moving forward, more cities are likely to follow Memphis' lead, Holzer said. "Playing with names and titles and statues in a way to pretend that memory doesn't exist in a different plane for different people and different generations are a mistake," said Holzer, a Roger Hertog fellow at the New-York Historical Society. "It actually takes away from history. "The most recent move to rename the Memphis park began in January. Councilman Myron Lowery proposed renaming Forrest Park after Idab B. Wells, a black journalist who exposed the horrors of lynching and fought for civil rights for African-Americans and women. At a park committee meeting last month, Councilwoman Janis Fullilove left in tears after another council member, Bill Boyd, defended Forrest as a benefactor and promoter of black people after the Civil War. Fullilove, who is black, denounced Boyd's comments as lies. Boyd, who is white, has proposed keeping Forrest's name on the park and renaming a separate city park after Wells. Historians at Tuesday's meeting of the park commission meeting highlighted the ambiguity of Forrest's legacy. Rhodes College historian Charles McKinney said Forrest represents subjugation and division. But historian and Sons of Confederate Veterans member Lee Millar said slave trading was a part of doing business in the South in Forrest's day. "Forrest was known as a very humane slave trader," said Millar, who is white. "He never split families. He allowed his slaves for sale to seek their own master." A committee including historians, council members and an NAACP representative will discuss what to permanently name the parks. Some black and white council members hope the process helps bring people together. Others say the city needs to discuss more pressing matters such as crime and education. "I don't care if it's named for Nathan Bedford Forrest," said Councilman Harold Collins, who is black. "He's a dead man."

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Profiles in Scourges, by Erik Sass – An Opposing View?

One of the Confederacy’s most brilliant cavalry commanders, today Nathan Bedford Forrest is mostly remembered for one thing: being a racist cracker. Forrest sealed his legacy when he served as the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. In truth, he was a lot more complex than that. Compared to most of his fellow officers, Forrest came from a remarkably humble background. The firstborn son of a poor blacksmith in Chapel Hill, Tennessee, at the age of 13, he saved his mother from an attack by a panther. On his father’s death in 1838, the 17 year old Forrest became the head of the family and legal guardian of his 11 siblings. Three years later, he went into business in Mississippi with his uncle, who was soon killed by two local rivals, Forrest killed both of his uncle’s murderers and went on to great success as a plantation owner and slave trader based out of Memphis. With stints as a steamboat captain and a professional gambler, by the time of the Civil War he was worth 1.6 million dollars, making him one of the richest men in the South.

Plaints were legally exempt from military service, but in 1861 Forrest enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private and was quickly elevated to colonel on account of his wealth. In fact, he was asked to recruit his own special cavalry regiment, “Forrest’s Tennessee Cavalry Battalion,” which became one of the elite units of the Confederate Army. The battalion included 45 of Forrest’s slaves, whom he promised to free if they would fight with him in the war. He freed them all in late 1863.

Personally, Forrest was fearless and ferocious, killing 31 men over the course of the Civil War, many in hand-to-hand fighting. In April 1862 at the Battle of Shiloh not realizing he had become separated from his men – he charged into a brigade of Union soldiers by himself and then incredibly managed to escape by using an enemy soldier as a human shield. But there was more to Forrest than just the physical bravery. Although he had no formal education and almost no military training, he surprised everyone with his inborn genius for cavalry combat. He was especially skilled at using the mobility and speed of horse-mounted troops to outmaneuver and surprise opposing commanders. And he had plenty of tricks up his sleeve: he once duped a much larger force of Union cavalry into surrendering by making his own army appear bigger than it was. (He had his troops circle a hill several times within sight of Union lines.) He won battle after battle and was eventually promoted to major general in December 1863.

In 1865, as the war became an increasingly desperate attempt to evade Union armies, Forrest fought on, leading his dwindling army in a last-ditch defense of Tennessee and Alabama. But on learning that Robert E. Lee had finally surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia, Forrest decided to lay down arms as well, asking his troops to “cultivate friendly feelings towards those with whom we have so long contended…” This all contrasted sharply with another part of Forrest’s legacy. On capturing Fort Pillow in central Mississippi in April 1864, Forrest’s men massacred Union soldiers, including many African-Americans, which historians have interpreted as an early expression of racial animosity. After the war, Forrest joined the Ku Klux Klan, a paramilitary organization formed by Confederate officers to resist Reconstruction. The first goal of the KKK was to regain control of state governments across the South in 1867. After trying to persuade African-Americans to vote for old-school Confederates (good luck!), the Klan soon turned to violence, intimidating African-American voters to prevent them from going to the polls. Meanwhile, as one of the South’s great Civil War heroes, Forrest was elevated to Grand Wizard of the shadowy group.

All of this reads like an indictment of Forrest – but there is some evidence to the contrary. Take the massacre at Fort Pillow: according to some sources, Forrest ordered his troops to kill the Union soldiers as they tried to surrender – but others say he begged the Union soldiers to surrender and was ignored. After the battle, Forrest arranged for wounded African-American prisoners to be transported to a Confederate military hospital to receive medical care. And although his political opponents implicated him in the Klan’s turn to violence, Forrest publicly denounced the violence and order the Klan to disband as a result. In 1875 he was invited to address an African-American civic group, the “Jubilee of Pole-Bearers,” where the mistress of the ceremonies presented him with a bouquet of flowers “as a token of reconciliation, and offering of peace and good will.” After explaining his motives in fighting for the Confederacy, Forrest spoke in favor of civil equality for African-Americans, calling for their admission to professions from which they had been excluded. He said: This is a proud day for me. Having occupied the position I have for thirteen years, and being misunderstood by the colored race, I take this occasion to say that I am your friend… We were born on the same soil, breathe the same air, live in the same land, and why should we not be brothers and sisters… I want to elevate every man, and to see you take your places in your shops, stores and offices. (1875)

Support, refute, or modify the assertion that Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park should be renamed. Write a complete thesis and defend your answer with specific evidence.