

A version of the following piece appeared as a letter to the editor of the Virginia Gazette, December 2017 and is reprinted with permission. There at the end I appealed for any further information; I heard nothing back. SPCR has a note from me identifying the location of the pole.

W&M's KKK Flagpole: Found?

--Terry Meyers | September 8, 2022

Ever since 2008, when I wrote a piece for the Gazette about Williamsburg's almost century old encounter with the KKK, I've been on a hunt for a flagpole. In 1926, 5000 Klansmen flocked to town to see W&M dedicate the Klan's gift to the College—a huge American flag and a 70 foot flagpole to fly it. I wanted to know what became of that pole.

J. A. C. Chandler, the president of W&M, accepted the Klan's gift (how could he refuse such a patriotic gesture?), but in his speech he eviscerated the KKK, detailing how its values violate all that Americans revere in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Though the pole was not used after 1942 (the halyard was said to be inoperable), it stood at College corner until March 1959 in what is now a garden. During Massive Resistance, it was moved to a spot just north of James Blair Hall, shortened to 45 feet and repurposed to fly the Virginia flag—an affirmation of states rights and Jim Crow to balance the other flag already there, the American flag.

Both poles were taken down at a date no one seems to recall. I heard conflicting stories about the further life of the KKK pole—it was supposedly moved to the law school, or it was in an attic on campus, maybe James Blair's, maybe Tucker's.

But I couldn't find it. I checked all the current flagpoles on campus, thinking it might have been recycled once again. No luck.

Now I think I know the fate of the flagpole.

I recently happened to reread a 2007 article by Ryen Rasmus in The Virginia Informer that said the pole had been “quietly moved to a nearby Confederate cemetery.”

I knew there was no flagpole at the Cedar Grove Cemetery where more than 200 Confederate soldiers are buried, but I wondered about how many Confederate cemeteries there might be close to Williamsburg.

The editor of James City County, Virginia Cemeteries (2011), Fred Boelt is the go-to guy for local cemeteries, so to him I went.

And he suggested a possibility that seems to me likely—that the KKK pole had gone to Fort Magruder, not a cemetery but the site of many deaths. The pole might have been bought at a sale of the College's surplus property.

A Fort Magruder pole was replaced about seven years ago and moved by the Sons of Confederate Veterans to a family burial ground not far from Williamsburg to honor a local man who was a Confederate officer.

Blurry photos I've seen of Fort Magruder in the 1980's show a flagpole very similar to the pole I think a candidate to be the KKK pole (see the papers of the local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy in Swem's SPRC).

The flagpole at that family cemetery is made of steel and has a smaller circumference than is usual these days—perhaps a sign of its having once been the top of a taller flagpole. The two sections of the pole are joined by bolts, and the paint seems thick.

All that suggests to me a flagpole dating from well before the days when aluminum began to displace steel for poles, in the 1950's.

I feel sure this pole is the remnant of the KKK flagpole, though the evidence is circumstantial.

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