

Charlottesville Backlash Trickles into Oklahoma

September 15, 2017

After protests and counter-protests over Confederate memorials led to the loss of an innocent life in Charlottesville, the discussion about why the protests took place and what this event means for the rest of the nation continues to be debated.

The progressive left, namely the Black Lives Matter and Antifa (short for anti-fascist) movements, are calling for the removal of swaths of Confederate monuments and memorials nationwide. This sudden uproar was caused by alt-right white nationalists proudly waving the Confederate battle flag in Charlottesville, VA, protesting the removal of a statue dedicated to General Robert E. Lee.

The aftermath of the debacle has trickled into Oklahoma, with Tulsa Public Schools and Oklahoma City officials reviewing possible name changes of local elementary schools, including Lee Elementary School in Tulsa and Stonewall Jackson Elementary in Oklahoma City, both of which bear the names of Confederate generals.

Although Oklahoma was not a state during the Civil War, many American Indian tribes, including the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole and Creek, sided with the Confederacy, and some members of the tribes were slaveholders.

Throughout the state, there are approximately two dozen statues honoring the Southern cause. In Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the headquarters of the Cherokee Nation, stands a monument to General Stand Watie, a Georgia-born Cherokee Indian who supported the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and later signed the Treaty of New Echota, which ceded ancient Indian homelands in Georgia over to the United States government. Watie left for Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears in 1837.

Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, Watie took up arms with the Confederacy and became one of the highest-ranking Native Americans on either side of the war, achieving the rank of general. He led the Cherokee Mounted Rifles in the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas and was the last Confederate general to surrender to the Union, a full 75 days after Lee's final stand at Appomattox Court House.

In an interview with the Tahlequah Daily Press, Ty Wilson, Vice President of the Cherokees for Black Indian History Preservation, responded to the conversation surrounding the memorials to Watie and other Confederates.

“It may not be something that we agree with, but it is something we need to know,” Wilson said. “We try to let people know about Cherokee history. We push Cherokee history because it is American history. Cherokee or not, we are all connected and a part of that history.”

Wilson also admitted the memorials are polarizing even for Cherokees.

“Stand Watie is controversial among the Cherokees,” he said. “Some may be happy with it and some not. Somebody wanted that statue there at one point in time. We always label each other, but in [Tahlequah] we are all mixed together and we need to deal with it.”