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Americana

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By Camilo Martinez

Some 70 miles northwest of my hometown – Sao Paulo (the largest city in South America) – the city of Americana represents a gateway to the richest farmland in the State.

A city called Americana in Brazil?

So what?

In the United States we have Lebanon (Maine), Baghdad (Kentucky) and Paris (Texas).

Yes, but Americana represents a little-known chapter in American history, linked to a bygone armed conflict that claimed the life of more than half-a-million Americans.

In 1865, at the end of the American Civil War, Colonel William Hutchinson Norris, a Confederate combatant and senator for the State of Alabama, led a group of some 30 families who decided to leave the United States to emigrate to Brazil to escape famine, impoverishment and a perceived or real political persecution by the victorious Yankees.

They went by invitation of Peter II, Emperor of Portugal and Brazil, who was keen to attract well-educated immigrants from the North Hemisphere and prepared to give free land to all those who accepted. Another 100-or-so families joined the first settlers, who settled around a train station and in total 9,000 American went for a new lease in life. The settlement would soon be known as Vila Americana (the American village), a district of Santa Barbara, the nearest city, and was, in effect, a piece of U.S. Confederate territory lost in the tropics.

In 1867 when the first settler died (Beatrice Oliver, wife of Col. Oliver, another South combatant), the Catholic Church would not allow Protestants to be buried on its cemeteries so Col. Oliver buried his wife at a meadow in his farm and allowed all members of the community to be buried in the same area.

The community soon founded a benevolent society to look after funeral arrangements and the area was eventually bequeathed to this society. The cemetery became the focal point of communal life, a fact perhaps emblematic of a story forged in bloodshed and death.

The district outgrew the city and became a city on its own right. Cotton and cotton mills were the basis of the flourishing economy. The first Presbyterian Church was founded in 1895 and the new city became a powerhouse in the rich countryside of the State of Sao Paulo. Teachers were brought from the United States to teach the new generations and help them honor and maintain their traditions. All under the sign of the Confederated flag, flown all over the city.

All we have to do is look at (the first, only and present) official coat of arms of Americana.



Coat of Arms of the City of Americana (SP), Brazil



“Stainless Banner” – the Confederate Flag

To this day, in special occasions, the descendants of the Confederates meet around the chapel which commands the view of the meadows where their ancestors rest, and party with period dresses and uniforms and songs and dances from a distant past.

Nearby, one of the tombstones reads:

"Soldier rest!
Thy warfare o'er
Sleep the sleep that knows no breaking
Days of toil or nights of walking"

Frightfully present words at a time Americans fight in foreign lands¹ ...

Camilo – 2006

¹ At the time this article was written, Americans were battling in Iraq and Afghanistan