

# Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission

*September 12, 2006*

The Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, created by House Bill 1440 (2006) and continuing until July 1, 2015, held its first meeting in Richmond on September 12, 2006. Speaker William J. Howell was elected chairman of the Commission, and Senator John H. Chichester was elected vice-chairman.

## **Staff Overview of HB 1440**

The commission is charged with planning, developing, and carrying out programs and activities appropriate to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War in Virginia and specific duties include:

- Encourage interdisciplinary examination of the Civil War.
- Facilitate a balance of events throughout the state.
- Encourage civic, historical, educational, economic, and other organizations throughout Virginia to organize activities to expand understanding and appreciation of the significance of the Civil War.
- Provide technical assistance to localities and nonprofit organizations.
- Develop programs and facilities to ensure a positive legacy and long-term public benefit from the commemoration.
- Encourage programs designed to involve all citizens.

The Commission is funded by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission Fund, a special, nonreverting fund consisting of gifts, grants, donations, bequests, or other funds. Staff also offered information regarding other commemorations, which included the 200th anniversary of the birth of Robert E. Lee and the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Staff noted that in the past, the Virginia Civil War Commission, created by the General Assembly in 1958 to observe the centennial anniversary during a commemoration period from 1961 to 1965, focused on national unity; however, the commission's work was criticized for not directly addressing the role of slavery or race relations before, during, and after the war.

## **Other Sesquicentennial Initiatives**

Virginia is the first state to begin planning for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Several other states have introduced legislation creating sesquicentennial commissions, but none have passed to date. Civil War 150, a private, nonprofit organization that aspires to build a consortium of history institutions to coordinate sesquicentennial planning throughout the states, has been chartered in Atlanta.

On the federal level, although Congress in 1996 designated the U. S. Civil War Center at Louisiana State University as the flagship institution for planning the sesquicentennial commemoration, funding for the center never materialized. Commission members expressed an

interest in working with Congress to ensure that Virginia has a lead role in the national sesquicentennial commemoration.

### **Civil War in Virginia**

Dr. James Robertson, Jr., Alumni Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, presented an overview of the Civil War in Virginia and the pivotal role that Virginia played in the Civil War. Most of the South's iron, coal, salt and lead were mined in Virginia and the state produced almost a third of the South's manufactured goods. Transportation also made Virginia prominent, with the state having 20% of the South's railroad mileage and its largest navy yard. Initially reluctant to leave the Union, it was President Lincoln's call for troops to coerce the Southern states back into an undesired union, more than the divisive issue of slavery that made Virginia secede.

As the confederate state that most closely bordered the Union, Virginia had to endure being the major battleground of the bloodiest war in America, and its capital was the primary target of Union forces. Sixty percent of the war's battles—three out of every five—took place in Virginia. No other area in the Western Hemisphere has ever been as devastated by war as was Virginia during the Civil War.

Dr. Robertson advised the Commission to help local committees in their planning efforts, since local history is the seed from which interest in the Civil War will bloom. He also cautioned that the 150th anniversary of the Civil War is a commemoration, not a celebration. There is no joy in remembering the days of the Civil War, but the commemoration is done out of respect. It is only through learning from history that we can go forward. The commemoration, Dr. Robertson stated, must be done comprehensively, honestly, and fairly.

Dr. Charles Bryan, Jr., President and Chief Executive Officer of the Virginia Historic Society echoed Dr. Robertson's sentiments and emphasized that what was won in the Civil War was freedom for part of the population that was not free. Dr. Bryan asked the Commission to consider ways to make the commemoration relevant to all Virginians, including immigrants, some of whom came to the state to escape civil wars in their native countries.

### **Next Meeting**

The Commission agreed to meet again in late fall. Information pertaining to the next Commission meeting will be posted on the General Assembly's legislative meetings calendar and the study website.

#### ***Chairman:***

The Hon. William J. Howell

#### ***For information, contact:***

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