

Virginia Plans for Civil War Commemoration

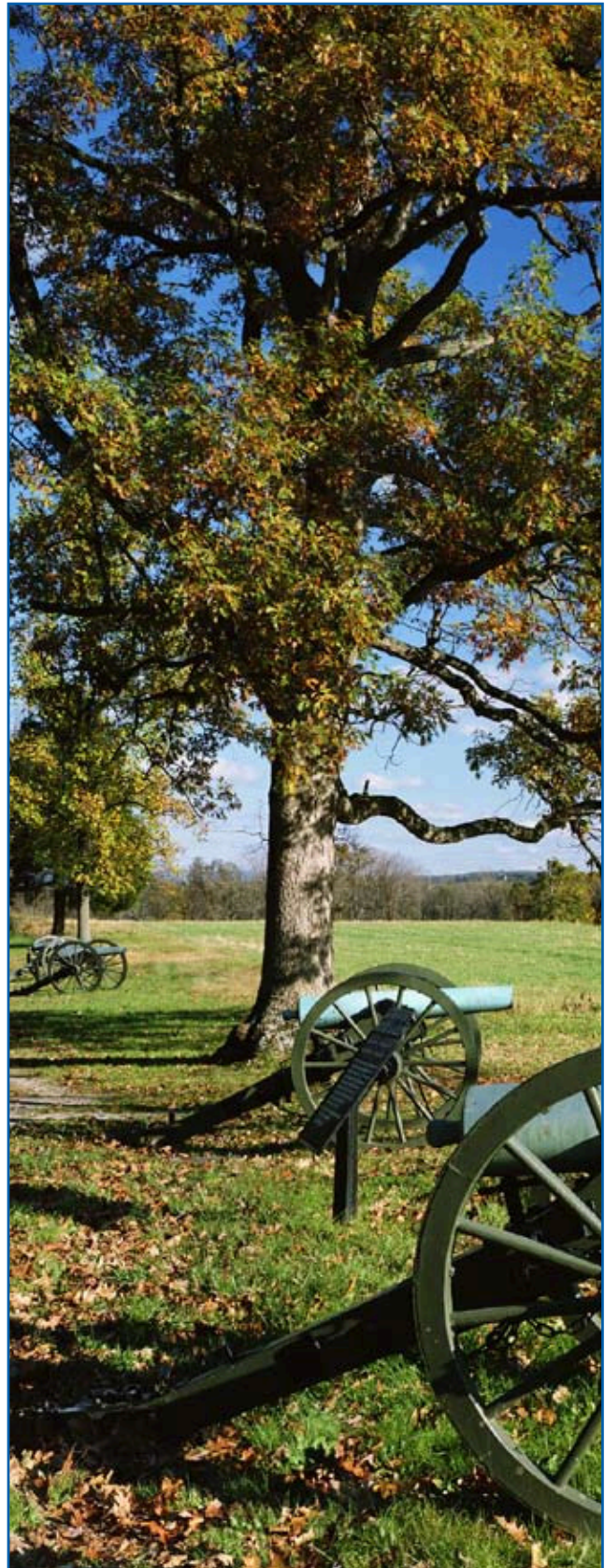
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The dawning of April 12, 1861 marked the first shot of what was to become the United States' bloodiest conflict, which stretched from Arizona and New Mexico to Pennsylvania and resulted in more than 620,000 American deaths. The American Civil War represents a turning point in U.S. history, when we were forced to rebuild our nation with a more solid foundation of liberty and individual freedom.

The state of Virginia has taken the initiative to plan the 150th anniversary commemoration of this violent but defining period of U.S. history. The sesquicentennial commission will serve as a standing committee through July 2015, a few months after the conclusion of the four-year commemoration.

Introduced in the Virginia Assembly in 2006 by ALEC Board Member and Speaker of the House of Delegates Bill Howell, House Bill 1440 has created the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission in order to prepare for and commemorate Virginia's participation in the American Civil War. Speaker Howell chairs the commission, with President pro tempore of the Senate, John Chichester, serving as vice-chair. Among the other 13 members of the commission are members of the House of Delegates and the Senate of Virginia, the President of the Virginia Historical Society, and the nationally recognized Civil War historian, Dr. James "Bud" Robertson of Virginia Tech.

Among the powers and duties of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War



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Commission are the following:

1. Encourage interdisciplinary examination of the war and develop programs and facilities to ensure that the sesquicentennial commemoration of the American Civil War results in a positive legacy and long-term public benefit;
2. Facilitate balanced activities related to the American Civil War throughout Virginia and the development and conduct of programs designed to involve all citizens in activities that commemorate the war;
3. Encourage and provide technical assistance to localities, civic, historical, educational, economic, and other organizations throughout Virginia to organize and participate in activities to expand the understanding and appreciation of the American Civil War.

Under Speaker Howell's leadership, the commission is already off to a strong start. It has adopted a logo and launched a Web site (www.virginiacivilwar.org) to educate and involve the community.

Speaker Howell has presented a vision statement, "Understanding Our Past, Embracing Our Future," to guide the commemoration period. The commission has examined examples of past Civil War commissions, specifically the centennial commission, and discussed how to improve the upcoming commemoration. Special emphasis will be placed on the immigrant population, some of whom have come to America to escape civil wars in their native countries, as well as on the younger population, many of whom have little knowledge of the lasting historical impact of the American Civil War.

An advisory council, including representatives of museums, battlefields, state and local government, the education community, and other interested groups and individuals, was also formed to provide counsel for the commission as it develops its strategy. A central point is differentiating between a celebration and a commemoration; the 150th anniversary will be a commemoration of the American Civil War and Virginia's involvement in it.

Speaker Howell said "there is no joy to be found in a war that caused the deaths of over 620,000 Americans, divided families, tore apart a nation, and left cities in ruin. This must be a solemn remembrance of the Americans—men, women and children, black and white, from the North and the South—who lived, fought, and died for that which they believed."

Virginia was the site of more than 60 percent of the Civil War's battles, and was home to the bookends of the war: the first major battle (Manassas) and the end of the war (Appomattox). As Dr.

Robertson testified to the commission at its first meeting, "We must remember, because we cannot forget...what two generations of Americans bequeathed to us through their suffering."

The Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission looks forward to working with other states as they begin to plan for the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. The beginning of the commemoration period is fast approaching and promises to provide an opportunity to better understand our past so that we can come together to embrace our future.

