

150th Civil War anniversary to attract visitors

December 28, 2010 6:00 AM

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The new year marks the beginning of a major campaign involving the American Civil War, and tourism officials are trying to make sure Virginia is the winner this time. They see the 150th anniversary of the war, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, as a prime opportunity to boost tourism and fill hotel rooms. But the tongue-twisting name of the four-year anniversary, "the sesquicentennial," has proved to be a challenge.

The word hampered efforts to find a message about the anniversary that would resonate with visitors. "The public doesn't understand 'sesquicentennial,'" says Alisa Bailey, president and CEO of the Virginia Tourism Corp. (VTC). "We're using the simpler '150th.'"

VTC is trying to get the word out that anyone interested in the war needs to visit the commonwealth. Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy and 60 percent of the war's battles were fought in Virginia.

Civil War tourists could help the state rebound from an 8 percent drop in tourism revenue, from \$19.2 billion in 2008 to \$17.7 billion in 2009. Virginia's tourism industry supports nearly 205,000 jobs and ranks eighth in the nation in terms of domestic visitors, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

Bailey says there's no way to estimate how many travelers the Civil War anniversary might generate. "But with more Civil War sites than any other state, Virginia is well-positioned to capitalize upon this multi-year anniversary," she says.

VTC research shows these niche tourists do much more than wander through battlefields. They visit beaches, mountains, parks, wineries and museums, spending money on food, lodging and a variety of activities.

Because they spend an average of \$374 per person per trip, every locality with any Civil War connection at all hopes to engage these travelers with its own history.

Civil War hotel packages

A number of Virginia hotels are also gearing up to attract travelers with special packages that include tours of related historic sites and tickets to local attractions.

Peter Regan, director of sales and marketing at Wyndham Virginia Crossings Hotel & Conference Center in Henrico County, says it already has 11 groups, comprising 580 room nights between April and October, booked for the \$119 Richmond Civil War History package. That package includes breakfast, tickets to the Museum of the Confederacy, a guided tour of the White House of the Confederacy, a guidebook to Richmond's Civil War sites and a map of the city's Civil War battlefields.

"This package has already generated \$75,000 in bookings for us," Regan says. "Typically people don't book this far out, but for 2011 we see people attracted to the Civil War. These groups will be traveling between Gettysburg and Richmond, taking in both destinations. Interestingly, our hotel even sits on what was once a Civil War battlefield — where the Battle of Yellow Tavern was fought." (Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, a swashbuckling Confederate cavalry leader, was mortally wounded at the 1864 battle.)

Farther west, at Lexington's Llewellyn Lodge, a \$295-\$437 package includes two nights' lodging with afternoon refreshments and full breakfast, plus a tour of the Stonewall Jackson House and a Lexington Heritage guided walking tour with visits to the Virginia Military Institute Museum and the Lee Chapel (the burial site of Gen. Robert E. Lee) at Washington & Lee University.

Meanwhile in Hampton Roads, a Civil War Heritage package at Newport News' Hampton Inn & Suites includes admission to Endview Plantation, Lee Hall Mansion, The Mariners' Museum/USS Monitor Center and the Virginia War Museum for the entire year.

Promoting the anniversary

The 150th anniversary will be different from the Civil War Centennial of the 1960s. Like the recent 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the observance will be a commemoration, not a celebration, because of the destruction and great loss of life caused by the war. Greater emphasis during the anniversary year also will be placed on the emancipation of slaves.

In promoting tourism, VTC is working with the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, the group leading the commonwealth's official observance of the anniversary. The commission actually began sponsoring events in 2009, beginning with "America on the Eve of the Civil War," a conference at the University of Richmond at which noted scholars discussed actions in 1859 that led to war.

In 2010, the General Assembly granted VTC \$3.6 million in additional money for each year during the current two-year budget. But Bailey says this money "is dedicated to out-of-state television [such as the Washington/Baltimore market] — the first time in 2½ years we are able to have an out-of-state broadcast presence. These will be general ads directed toward Gen-X families [the generation born after the baby boom ended], our new target audience."

With no funds earmarked in its budget to promote the sesquicentennial, she says, "We draw upon the funds allocated from our overall budget [\$18 million annually in this biennium, including staff salaries] and direct those toward the 150th anniversary of the Civil War."

Bailey says the Civil War Trails program, which now includes North Carolina, Maryland, West Virginia, Tennessee and Pennsylvania, has been the state's best asset for Civil War promotion for many years. The trails system, which began in 1995, now boasts 328 Civil War sites in 87 Virginia localities. "Our new money allowed us to ensure that we can almost double our state grants program in working with communities on their own marketing programs," Bailey says.

Using micro-grants

The state has a \$350,000 matching-grants program helping local communities promote Civil War sites. These communities receive micro-grants (of \$2,500 to \$5,000 each), which require a match of local funds.

Fourteen localities — from Abingdon to Arlington, from Luray to Virginia Beach — have received a total of \$55,450 thus far for their 2011 Civil War 150th marketing plans. For example, the funds have been used for ads highlighting the Gloucester Court Circle, buildings constructed from 1766 to 1896 that recently were named to the Civil War Trails program, and promotions for Trail to Freedom sites in Fredericksburg and Stafford County. The trail tells the story of 10,000 Virginia slaves who sought freedom by crossing the Rappahannock River and passing through Union lines in the spring and summer of 1862.

The Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau is using its \$2,500 state grant and \$25,000 from its budget to develop a website promoting Civil War sites and events in Central Virginia, <http://www.ontorichmond.com>. The region also is hoping that a British television special on the Civil War, filmed in Richmond in September, will help boost foreign visitors to the area.

Some communities might be holding off on event-planning until they see how large the crowds are at the four-day commemoration of the First Battle of Manassas/Bull Run on July 21-24. The event will include re-enactments, parades, ranger-led tours, exhibits and living history.

Perhaps the most creative observance of the anniversary will be a Civil War-themed musical, "Rappahannock County," which will be produced during the Norfolk-based Virginia Arts Festival. In 23 songs, five principal performers in multiple roles will explore the war's impact on a Northern Virginia community. The musical's composer, Ricky Ian Gordon, and librettist, Mark Campbell, drew on diaries, letters and other personal accounts of the period. "Rappahannock County" debuts at Norfolk's Harrison Opera House on April 12, the anniversary of the attack on Fort Sumter. Spoiler alert: the Confederates are defeated in the end of show.