Area planning for anniversary

Local area to be busy during Civil War sesquicentennial

BY CLINT SCHEMMER

Date published: ***8/17/2009***

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Just as armies converged again and again on the Fredericksburg area during the Civil War, so, too, will the region be in the bull's-eye during the sesquicentennial of the nation's bloodiest conflict.

Local organizers are still firming up their plans, but it's clear the public will have much to choose from among the special programs envisioned here for the 150th anniversary.

Since the war ran from 1861 to '65, the sesquicentennial will begin in 2011.

Already, Virginia's sesquicentennial commission has provided a grant to support The Crossing, events focused on the 10,000 slaves who crossed the Rappahannock River to freedom as the Union army arrived here in 1862. Fredericksburg slave John Washington, one of the first to escape bondage during that exodus, left a poignant memoir of his experience that was recently published in two books.

Spotsylvania County, the first Virginia locality to form a sesquicentennial planning group, is laying the groundwork for a future Civil War Ball by offering 19th-century dance lessons every third Friday at the Spotsylvania Courthouse area's Marshall Center.

Next month, Spotsylvania will kick off its observances with an 1859 County Fair in the courthouse area, said Russell Seymour, the county's director of economic development. Politicians will debate the hot topics of that pre-war year, a medicine show will mix banjo music and cure-alls, a historian will explain gospel songs' hidden meanings, photographers will demonstrate wet-plate techniques of the time, and players will compete in a period-style baseball game.

Fredericksburg and Stafford County have their own planning group, and its programs are going to touch on almost everything--including hospitals, civilians and slaves--said the group's chairman, John Hennessy.

Plans include a History Alive series of interactive, first-person participatory programs; candlelit illuminations of the Spotsylvania Court House and Fredericksburg battlefields; songs from home, field and hearth; talks by first-rate historians; and programs on local churches, wartime experiences and the stories of descendants of soldiers, civilians and slaves. "We want to create a new understanding and appreciation of a time when the

Fredericksburg-Stafford-Spotsylvania area was a focal point of the American experience," said Hennessy, who is also chief of interpretation at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

Virginia is in the vanguard of the nation's sesquicentennial observances. It was the first state to establish a commission to coordinate 150th-anniversary events, and is being praised for the breadth and depth of its programs. The panel is co-chaired by House of Delegates Speaker Bill Howell, R-Stafford, and former state Sen. John Chichester, who lives in the Northern Neck.

Chief among the commission's statewide efforts is a series of annual conferences that will bring leading historians to Virginia universities to focus on one year of the war. The first such session, in April of this year, brought nearly 2,000 people to the University of Richmond's Robins Arena.

The Virginia panel is also participating in 2009 events that focus on another run-up to the war: John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

Locally, Hennessy will discuss the effect of Brown's raid on our area in a Sept. 13 talk to the Fredericksburg Civil War Round Table.

Virginia and other states, of course, hope their sesquicentennial plans will boost heritage tourism.

"Virginia is a repository of dramatic personal stories of soldiers and leaders, of nurses and war correspondents, of civilians caught in the war's wake, and of enslaved Virginians yearning for and, in some cases, fighting for freedom. And those types of stories can be found aplenty in the Fredericksburg area," said Richard Lewis, spokesman for the Virginia Tourism Corp.

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