

City developing plan to help visitors take in historic riches



The story of the Civil War — it causes, it's course its legacies — starts at Historic Tredegar in Richmond.

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For four long years of the Civil War, Union forces rallied behind the cry, "On to Richmond."

Now the same slogan is being used to lure visitors to the city that was capital of the Confederate States of America from 1861 to 1865.

As the war's 150th anniversary approaches, the motto is evidence of how much has changed since the 100th anniversary, when a Union-related slogan would have been considered heresy.

This time the region is embracing all aspects of the conflict and its resolution with a commemoration of the Civil War and Emancipation. Battles weren't the only thing that began when Confederate artillery fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C., on April 12, 1861. The day also led to the eventual end of slavery in the United States.

The shift in focus has elicited enthusiasm from people who sometimes stood on the sidelines in the past. Political leaders are offering support for tourism that goes beyond words. Gov. Bob McDonnell added \$3.6 million to the state tourism budget. Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones has dedicated nearly \$1 million to helping tourists navigate the city.

"When you make Emancipation a key part of the story, it changes the whole dynamic," said Ed Ayers, president of the University of Richmond, a historian of the American South and a leader in an initiative called "The Future of Richmond's Past."

"It doesn't leave other people out; it expands the story. It has a shape and meaning it didn't have when it was only the Civil War. We have changed the language for the upcoming anniversaries."

The governor on Friday promised to change his language when he said he made a mistake in "my major and unacceptable omission of slavery" in this year's proclamation of April as Confederate History Month.

"Ours was an error of haste and not of heart," he said when he gave the opening remarks at this year's Civil War 150th signature conference at Norfolk State University. The conference theme was "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory."

"And it is an error that will be fixed. Next year, our office will issue a 'Civil War in Virginia' proclamation commemorating the beginning of the Civil War in our state. This proclamation will encapsulate all of our history. It will remember all Virginians -- free and enslaved; Union and Confederate."

Economic development hopes also are hinging on tourism.

Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling told business leaders Thursday at Virginia State University that the state needs to invest more in tourism, which is a \$19.1 billion industry in Virginia. He expects to create a tourism development fund to help boost the state's image.

"Tourism is big business. It's economic development, and we need to fund it like economic development," Bolling said.

Historians are underlining the city's significance in the development of the nation.

"Is Richmond important to America? Undoubtedly," Ayers said.

"Can you really understand the U.S. without understanding Richmond history? I don't think so.

"If you want to understand America as a whole, if you want to understand the undercurrents, I think you need to understand Richmond."

And Richmond needs to understand itself.

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Residents don't seem to realize what historic riches they have to share, said William J. Martin, director of the Valentine Richmond History Center.

People in Boston, Philadelphia or Charleston, S.C., have a pride of place that seems to be missing here, Martin said. "We have self-esteem issues.

"If you ask someone if they like living in Charleston, they will say they love it. If you ask someone in Richmond, they'll say we've got all these political problems and problems with jurisdictions.

"A precondition for successful tourism is for residents to understand how special this place is. We have more than Charleston, more than Philadelphia."

Several initiatives in the city of Richmond will benefit tourism, the mayor said.

To make it easier to find Richmond's historic places, Jones put \$900,000 in the budget for new tourist-oriented signs. A \$100,000 contract to study what's needed and design the signs is expected to be awarded next month. Signs could be installed next summer, said Rachel Flynn, city director of planning and development.

Tourism may also be part of a revitalization strategy for Shockoe Bottom, where multiple slave markets used to be. Ideas for a slavery museum there could come in response to an already-issued request for development proposals. A riverfront design study will identify public access points, open spaces, landscape treatments and trails to provide better recreational access to the river. The city directed \$600,000 toward the restoration of the Hippodrome as a live music venue in Jackson Ward next year. Jones said he's looking into an arts district.

"I have come to the conclusion," said Jones, "that Richmond is going to have to augment [spending by the convention and visitors bureau] with a tourism effort. We will have to find the money for it. The money will come back to us if we can make something like that happen. We have to be more intentional about connecting the dots about what we have going on in Richmond."

Richmond National Battlefield Park also has installed new interpretive signs at all 13 battlefields, because 90 percent of visitors experience the battlefields without park rangers at hand. A new genealogy project funded by the state sesquicentennial committee will allow people to find out which battlefields their ancestors fought on and even where on the battlefield their unit was in action.

"We have a huge responsibility in this commemoration," said David Ruth, superintendent of the Richmond National Battlefield Park and Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site.

"Unlike a lot of our other parks, traditional Civil War parks, where the commemoration is a one or two-day event, Richmond is participating in four years. We're working on things right now from 2011 through 2015."

Next year will have programs March 10 and April 14 on topics leading up to war, May 22 on Richmond as the new Confederate capital, and Oct. 27-29 commemorating the largest Confederate hospital, which was founded at Chimborazo in 1861.

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Even with greater attention to tourism locally, questions remain about whether enough has been invested in improving Richmond's tourism product and in getting the word out about it.

Richmond has a hard time getting noticed when competing destinations can spend \$10 for every \$1 spent here.

With a total budget of \$3.6 million, the Richmond Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau is the marketing engine for the region. Less than \$400,000 of that budget is available for advertising, said John F. "Jack" Berry Jr., president and CEO. Williamsburg spends more than 10 times as much.

The Williamsburg Area Destination Marketing Committee, which was created by the state to promote the Historic Triangle, collects a \$2 tax on every hotel room night to create a budget of \$3.2 million to \$4 million a year for advertising and operating a website.

The total spent on marketing Williamsburg probably reaches \$40 million, however, when it includes separate efforts by Colonial Williamsburg, Busch Gardens, Great Wolf Lodge, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, National Park Service, time-share developers and outlet malls, said Linda Stanier, communications director for the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance.

Williamsburg is more easily compared to Orlando than to Richmond, however, because of the density of its tourist attractions.

Richmond may be a smaller version of Philadelphia, which has a tourism budget of about \$12 million and an advertising budget of \$5 million to \$7 million. Another common comparison is Charleston, which has a tourism budget of \$5.85 million and spends about \$4.7 million on marketing.

Virginia Tourism Corp. considers its entire \$18 million budget to be dedicated to marketing. The additional \$3.6 million allocated by the governor this year allows the state to advertise on television for the first time in two years and to increase grants available for cooperative marketing efforts, president Alisa Bailey said.

"You can't compare children here," Berry said. "I'm not competitive. Not having that kind of funding, I have to be very creative."

If infrastructure is the issue, attention has to turn to local government, nonprofits and developers. "We market," Berry explained. "They develop and build." The visitors bureau has considered asking local corporations and foundations to contribute to the city tourism effort, but has held off while the economy was suffering, said Jennifer Carnam, vice president of marketing for the bureau.

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When Philadelphia decided to boost its tourism profile under its former mayor, now Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, the city invested more than \$300 million in improvements. A new visitors center and Liberty Bell pavilion were among the results, said Meryl Levitz, CEO of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"It was a conscious decision to reinvent Philadelphia," she said. "All the manufacturing was not going to come back. We looked at what could rebuild this city and Continued on Page A9 region, and the hospitality industry was one that looked like it could deliver. What are the areas in which we can excel? The history of American democracy was something we had that nobody else could claim.

"What people want is an authentic experience. We had the bell and the [Independence] hall. In the region, we had Revolutionary War battlefields" such as Valley Forge.

Virginia has its own Revolutionary War authenticity, including St. John's Church in Richmond where Patrick Henry proclaimed "Give me liberty or give me death" and the Yorktown battlefield where British Gen. Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington.

The Civil War era, however, is one in which Virginia has no equals. More of the war was fought in Virginia than in any other state, as Union forces tried to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond. Abraham Lincoln came to Richmond at the end of the war, and tourists can walk in his footsteps.

Progress toward the 150th commemoration generates optimism in some quarters, while others chafe that more hasn't been done locally.

"I always heard you're supposed to do things, not just study them," said S. Waite Rawls III, president of The Museum of the Confederacy. One action that he initiated was using "On to Richmond" as a slogan and website for the 150th anniversary.

"I made the comment that history gave us our slogan," Rawls said. "We didn't need to make one up. 'On to Richmond' was the war aim of the North for the entire four years. Northern newspapers were filled with the headline, 'On to Richmond.'

"The other thing I liked about that slogan, it's action-oriented. Marketing needs to be action-oriented."

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Richmond may be leading the charge toward the 150th in many respects.

"I believe Richmond is doing a very, very good job," said Richard Lewis, public-relations manager for the Virginia Tourism Corp. "They got started early. I think the effort will pay off. . . . The possibilities here are endless."

"If you ask about the best destination, that would be us," said Berry, the Richmond tourism CEO. Starting three years ahead of the anniversary, the city developed a marketing plan that factors in geography and interests, with history-based advertising that branches out to include an African-American history magazine.

When a Richmond tourism ad says "history repeats itself," the image is cars circling the track at a NASCAR race. "History is all about dates" shows a couple having dinner at a restaurant. "History is revealing" features the grand opening of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. "History has many faces" depicts an African-American woman during the Civil War.

"We twist the history thing. It's hip. History is hip," Berry said.

To Don Pierce, who grew up in Kansas and co-founded www.civilwartraveler.com here, Richmond has a good claim to being the most historic city in America.

"Boston and Philadelphia can certainly claim some important history, but when you look at the scope that Richmond represents, from the early English colonists and Powhatan and Pocahontas, no city beats Richmond as far as history goes," Pierce said.

"We've got black history and Civil War that beats everybody, Revolutionary War history -- Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, the state Capitol. Go through the list. If you're talking about African Americans, earliest slavery, civil rights, sit-ins, Doug Wilder, [first elected African-American governor in America], you name a kind of history you want to look at, and I think we got it.

"From prehistory to the present day, it's everybody's history."

One challenge in promoting Richmond as a historic destination is that some of its history still provokes controversy.

The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia is a unifying symbol for the nation. The White House of the Confederacy represents a time when the nation broke apart in a fight over slavery, among other issues. A rah-rah interpretation of history here doesn't work.

Teresa Roane, library manager at the Museum of the Confederacy, said strong emotions are often connected to family stories passed from generation to generation.

"We're still too close. There are still people who are real sons and daughters," people whose fathers fought in the Civil War, she said. At last count, there were more than 60 people alive whose fathers were Confederate veterans, five of them living in Virginia, said Ben Sewell, executive director of the Sons of Confederate Veterans general headquarters in Tennessee.

"Can we talk about slavery? Yes," Roane said, "but we have to talk about it in a way not to make people defensive, because if you make them defensive they will shut down. The 19th century is so complicated and so complex. What we need to do is look at what exists and try to understand it."

Levitz, Philadelphia's tourism leader, sees some similarities in that city's juxtaposition of the Constitution Center, Liberty Bell and Independence Hall with African-American and Jewish museums.

"A lot of people don't relate directly to Colonial history," she said. "Their ancestors weren't here. They came in great waves of immigration or they didn't come willingly. All of that leads to a wonderful tension that is provocative and gives people a chances to talk to each other about issues that otherwise don't get talked about."

Every destination has its "challenged history," Berry of the Richmond Visitors Bureau agreed. "If truth be known, I think we do as good a job as anybody does. We have it front and center on the table. It's the anniversary of the Civil War and Emancipation."

Rawls contends that we make our history more difficult than it has to be. "It's a whole lot simpler for everyone else. The Civil War buff and greater heritage traveler are very interested in the stories and tales of the Civil War. They're not trying to force it into a 21st-century morality. They're looking at it as history. I think we need to say, come see where it happened."

"It isn't always comfortable, but there are important contemporary lessons to be learned," said Christy S. Coleman, president of the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar. "That's why people come, to find a sense of place, to find a sense of identity, most of them with a sense of curiosity. They want to expand their knowledge."

Historic Tredegar was designated on Wednesday as the city's official Gateway to the Civil War. The American Civil War Center and Richmond National Battlefield Park, both located in restored buildings of the former Tredegar Iron Works, are partners in the new effort to orient visitors to Richmond's historic riches.

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Dreams for an improved visitor experience include a new visitors center with easy parking, shuttles among tourist sites and a series of neighborhood or themed walking tour maps.

Free parking for the current visitors center inside Richmond's convention center is available in a parking garage at Third and Marshall streets, but it's not readily apparent.

Berry sees the future as being more mobile -- as in cellphone apps that help visitors get where they want to be, or a mobile visitors center that can move to where big events are happening.

"You have to connect the dots for the person who's never been here before," Rawls said.

"Go to Boston and they paint it on the sidewalk. Follow this red line . . . to do the Freedom Trail. Fred and Myrtle say, 'Let's do our next vacation in Boston.' The same people say, 'I went to Richmond and that was hard. I couldn't find parking. I couldn't find maps. I couldn't find the visitors center.'"

Coleman shares some of the frustrations about getting around.

"It's all over the place. Things have different names. I hear it all the time. Which sign am I following? You see Brown's Island and then you get to the bottom and it's Tredegar." Yet she's pleased that the city has set an "aggressive timeline" for the way-finding study.

"From this perspective, there seems to be a greater political will and that is so critically important," she said. She is also encouraged that the business, political and nonprofit organizations seem to be coming together on tourism issues.

"I am very optimistic for our city, that we're going to be able to shine."