

# Civil War Sesquicentennial: Details Beyond the Battles

**By Christine Tibbetts**

October 24, 2009

My way or the highway is not the attitude Virginia intends to bring to the Civil War's 150th anniversary parties starting in 2010.

Your way gets the honors. That means many new perspectives gleaned from letters, diaries, historians and the land itself form the foundation for four upcoming years of Civil War sesquicentennial special events.

Virginia's the place where 60 percent of the war was fought, according to Rich Bauman who heads up the state's 428 Civil War trails.

"With 270 battlefields and engagements, we can present engaging interpretations about what happened exactly where someone is standing," he says. "Tennessee had 80 engagements and other states had 30 or fewer."

Battles and their fields will not be the Virginia 150th anniversary experience as much as the people who lived nearby.

Stunned what people have not heard about this Civil War – that's what Christy Coleman, president of the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar in Richmond, says, and she aims to change that.

Stories in this museum housed in the brick iron works where cannons were made for the Confederacy are told in three voices: north, south and slave.

"For 150 years we've had competing monologues, not conversations. At Tredegar we're using the words people said at the time, considering what each thought about justice and taking a personal look at the legacies as well as the causes and course of the war," Coleman says.

Plan to enter into the conversation because Think About This is asked a lot throughout the two-story building.

Outside too along Canal Walk, a 1.25-mile pedestrian walkway with exhibits, history medallions and water views.

Step on signage in the footpath across from Tredegar and stop to read personal statements about the three days in April 1865 when the Confederates left Richmond, Union troops marched in and slaves became free.

Not thrilled with seeing remnants of the Civil War bridges burned here? Then just look at the James River, read the quotes, think of the people living there then and go kayaking instead; these are Class 4 urban waters. Plenty to do in Richmond with and without the focus of the war.

Back across the street – three interesting locations all from the same parking spot – is the Richmond National Battlefield Park Civil War Visitor Center.

What a mouthful, too big a title to remember but an interesting place, in ways different from the neighboring Tredegar center.

Civilian life during the war is a focus in the building, good to know before (or without) touring sites where six battles over seven days were fought June 25 – July 1, 1862.

That's an 80-mile driving tour with four visitor centers along the way if you're interested. Download a pod cast or borrow a free MP3 player on site.

I opted for the museum with its 23-minute film plus some emotional time in the upstairs exhibit with the lights low and the voices poignant as real letters are read from women and children on the home front and Yank and Reb soldiers on the military front.

Compelling way to call me to attention. My New Jersey family doesn't have Civil War ancestors and I haven't been passionate like my Southern neighbors.

Virginia's Sesquicentennial might just change that, connecting me in new ways to people involved.

"We just tell the same stories over and over. If we tell the story in a new way, a story that includes all," suggests Dr. Ed Ayres, president of the University of Richmond, "then redemption can lie at the end."

He's a Civil War scholar but apparently lots of folks are interested in hearing all the voices of the conflict. Ayres organized a seminar this fall and 2,100 people from 20 states showed up for seven and a half hours of Civil War lectures.

"I think we don't understand the Civil War very well," he says. "Four million people were in slavery and 4,000,000 freed overnight, the most important event in U.S. history.

"Religion was central and both sides knew God was on their side, the same Protestant God."

Ayres suggests experiencing the Sesquicentennial by imagining ourselves in 1859 without knowing the rest, and then listening without being defensive, self-righteous or self-congratulatory. Easier said than done, eh?

\$950,000 will help the Virginia Historical Society tell the story in new ways at their Museum of Virginia History in Richmond. That astonishing grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities will shape displays about women and children, African Americans and soldiers emphasizing people more than battles, says Andy Talkov, exhibit coordinator.

I'm guessing he's figured out all the details since this grant is the biggest ever given in any year by the NEH.

Doesn't matter that I started in Jersey and ended up in Georgia; when I come back to participate in "An American Turning Point" at this museum, I'll be dealing with Virginia Civil War questions that resonate today.

What was gained? What was lost? What's undecided? Who was a traitor and who a patriot? Pertinent stuff like that. At least it will be fun, while being hard.

Multimedia will show me arguments about John Brown's insurrection, Abe Lincoln's election and South Carolina's secession.

Touch screens will let me weigh in with what I think, and I have opinions. I'm not good with battle details but for those who are, 37 major Virginia battles fill a database and drag-and-drop-screen technology will provide details anew.

Interactive simulation will let you be that slave seeking freedom and your choices along the way will influence your outcome. I used technology like that at the Daytona Raceway Museum and it made me seriously dizzy. I suspect when this is in place, the emotional impact will be far more significant.

There's more interesting interactive technology already carefully planned at the Virginia Historical Society Museum and it just might be pivotal for the Sesquicentennial to help us think differently.

"Enough already" is what I told myself several times each day exploring Richmond through the lens of the Civil War 150 years later.

I found a good deal of green space to re-gather my thoughts between museum visits – including cemeteries, fine food to sustain me, shopping for getting ahead on gift giving, churches with stories to tell and comfy historic lodging.

Linden Row lets you sleep in modern luxurious bedding in eight 1840s row houses in downtown Richmond. University of Richmond President Ayres said we should imagine ourselves in 1859 without knowing the rest of the story, and Linden Row is a place to do that.

Pre and post-Civil War parties happened here. Edgar Allan Poe played in the garden. WiFi works and art from Richmond galleries mixes among the parlor antiques.

Point is you can sleep in history in Richmond, Virginia, and explore it. Just expect some steps beyond the elevator at Linden Row. Call first if that's trouble to arrange an accessible room.

Make a list too. The names of the museums run together after awhile but the contents and experiences differ enough to try them all. The Museum and the White House of the Confederacy are separate but share a courtyard. Being in the home of Jefferson and Varina Davis, where two of their six children were born, and which President Lincoln visited the day after Davis fled allows musing about big emotions.

The Museum claims the world's largest collection of Civil War artifacts: 550 flags, 215 uniforms, 300 swords, 5,000 domestic items, 6,000 photos and more.

Virginia's state capitol is majestic, and local folks have good reason to be proud, often claiming they set the mark for post-Revolutionary War Washington D.C. architecture

Enjoy your new thoughts about George Washington and the beginning of America when you tour this capitol building and see the nation through the lens of Virginia.

Richmond churches and its capitol tied my Civil War journey to the Revolution. George Washington stands tall in the recently renovated Capitol, and St. John's Church gives an interesting tour of the place where Patrick Henry delivered his "Give me liberty or give me death" speech.

I didn't discover that as an historian or reporter – but because I needed to wander a block after lunch at Patrick Henry's Pub and Grille.

Fine fennel salad for me in this 1850 house on the corner of a block lined with historic row houses.

Lots of those in Richmond: fine-looking houses, good eateries, neighborhoods with names like the Fan District, Shockoe Bottom, Carytown.