

Civil War anniversary program starts



State observance of Civil War anniversary begins in Richmond

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RICHMOND

--Virginia just set the stage for the nation's upcoming observance of the Civil War's 150th anniversary--and richly so.

About 1,500 people from 26 states descended on Richmond yesterday for an early taste of the great conflict's drama, surprise and heartache. They got all that--and more--during a daylong conference at the University of Richmond's Robins Center that kicked off the state's sesquicentennial activities.

Gov. Tim Kaine welcomed the attendees to Richmond, saying of the war, "We are still wrestling with it as a commonwealth and as a country."

House Speaker Bill Howell, R-Stafford, said Virginia intends a full, nuanced commemoration that uses new technologies--such as yesterday's video Webcast and live blogging by Charlottesville history teacher Kevin Levin (cwmemory.com)--to reach new audiences.

"Today begins a national conversation, one that we hope sets a new tone and lasts for years to come," said Howell, who chairs Virginia's Civil War sesquicentennial commission.

The historians who headlined the conference purposefully dealt with only 1859, eve of Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 and all that followed. They limited themselves largely to examining what people knew at the time, trying to avoid the prejudices of judging history when it's looked at backward.

The conference's organizers, who tried "an experiment" to see if people care about what led to the Civil War, were heartened by the result, UR President Edward Ayres said at day's end.

"We showed that we can see the war with fresh and new perspectives, and that things are not cut and dried the way we thought they were," he said. "History is more interesting

than political slogans or the day's headlines or what we tend to get from traditional interpretation."

Ayres, a noted historian himself who taught at the University of Virginia before taking UR's helm in 2007, led 15 of the nation's leading scholars in four wide-ranging conversations on the tensions in Virginia and the nation that fomented the crisis.

All appeared to agree that, a year to 14 months beforehand, very few people saw the war coming. Most white people, North and South, weren't slave-holders and didn't have strong feelings about the centuries-old institution of human bondage.

"Most people didn't wake up in 1859 and say 'My God, the nation is on the precipice [of war],' or 'Isn't it great living in the antebellum years?'" U.Va. historian Gary Gallagher noted.

Yet there was no escaping how central slavery was to the time. It was critical to producing cotton, by far America's largest export, and underpinned the nation's economy, not just in the South.

That year, slave and cotton prices were at their peak, as revolutions in communications (the telegraph) and transportation (railroads and steamships) advanced these enormous global businesses.

Slaves were worth more than all of the manufactured goods in the nation combined, Ayres said. One Richmond slave trader grossed \$2.67 million that year in the sale of black human beings, a sum worth 20 times that in today's dollars, said Williams College historian Charles Dew, displaying the firm's receipts.

In lively and loose conversations led by Ayres on a TV-news-show style set, the historians also tackled issues of immigration, religion, racial attitudes, states' rights, national and sectional politics, and abolitionist John Brown's 1859 raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry and his trial, hanging and martyrdom.

The politics rapidly spun out of control, with factions hardening their pro- and anti-slavery views after the U.S. Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision in 1857 disenfranchised blacks and Brown's raid whipped up Southern fears of Northern agitators and slave revolts, the historians said.

"It was a structural failure of the first American republic," Yale University historian David Blight said.

The conference, "America on the Eve of the Civil War," was the first of seven annual sessions that Virginia's Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission will hold at various colleges and universities during the war's 150th-anniversary years.

Virginia, which saw more Civil War battles than any other state, is at the forefront of planning for the sesquicentennial. The first state to create a committee to plan for the anniversary, it has set aside \$4 million for its commemoration, partnering with many localities and institutions in the effort.

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