

# County prepares for upcoming Civil War commemoration

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Union soldiers at the Dutch Gap Canal in January 1865 *Photo courtesy of Scott Williams* Starting in 2011, a new kind of visitor will infiltrate Virginia, seeking out American history and, with any luck, spending welcome tourist dollars along the way. The years 2011 to 2015 mark the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War, and state and various localities, including Chesterfield, are preparing for an influx of tourists.

“When you look at Civil War enthusiasts, they are a loveable, crazy bunch,” says Liess van der Linden-Brusse, president of the Chesterfield Historical Society of Virginia. “They are going to basically recreate this entire war from beginning to end. Wherever there was a battle, they’re going to reenact it.”

While Richmond and Petersburg receive considerably more attention for their roles in the Civil War, Chesterfield also saw its fair share of action. In May 1862, Confederate guns at Drewry’s Bluff forced a Union flotilla led by the ironclad USS Monitor to turn back down the James River and abandon its plans to take Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. Richmond was never again seriously threatened by a water-based attack.

The Bermuda Hundred Campaign, which occurred two years later in May and June of 1864, saw the Confederates hold off the Union army for about six weeks. The Siege of Petersburg immediately followed the campaign, which took place almost entirely within the county’s boundaries and resulted in more than 6,000 casualties.

“One thing that appeals to people is that it is a lesser-known campaign of the war,” says Scott Williams, who serves as chair of the historical society’s military history committee. “[Chesterfield County] is kind of undiscovered territory for the Civil War enthusiast.”

Chesterfield boasts seven county-owned Civil War battlefields and two battlefields maintained by the National Park Service, Drewry’s Bluff and Parker’s Battery. The county’s notable Civil War history also involves non-battle-related events, including a visit from President Abraham Lincoln to defensive positions on the Bermuda Hundred line and to the field hospital at Point of Rocks a mere 18 days before he was assassinated. At the same hospital, Clara Burton – the future founder of the American Red Cross – served as superintendent of nurses starting in 1864.

“This happened right here in Chesterfield County!” exclaims Linden-Brusse. “This is the kind of story that needs to get out there.”

## **The plans**

Virginia was the first state in the nation to create a sesquicentennial commission, designated the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission by the General Assembly in 2006. Three out of every five Civil War battles were fought in Virginia, and the state also had the most military hospitals and prisoner-of-war camps. The Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors created the county’s own sesquicentennial committee, now boasting about 20 active members, in 2008.

“This commemoration is not just about battles and battlefields; it’s about understanding this conflict that defined our nation and the stories and people behind it, and trying to make it relevant to people today,” explains Chris Ruth, the county’s assistant director of public affairs who heads up the county’s committee. “We’re also looking at home-front stories, everything from Union, Confederate and African-American perspectives. It’s very much examining how we got to where we are today based on what happened in our past.”

The Chesterfield committee has established a list of priorities for the commemoration, first among them readying the historical sites for tourists. Many of them are in need of capital improvements, including parking lots, fencing, entrance signs, trails and interpretative signs so that visitors can learn the significance of each location.

“The big argument is that tourists are going to be coming here over the next four or five years, and we don’t want to have our parks look like an overgrown lot,” says Williams, who works in the Chesterfield Department of Environmental Engineering.

The county also is developing opportunities for educational outreach, including Junior Historians, modeled after the National Park Service's Junior Ranger program, and Traveling Trunks, a program that would send historic specialists into schools. To capture local history, the county is partnering with the Library of Virginia to digitize Civil War memorabilia; local residents are encouraged to bring in their letters, diaries, maps and photos to be scanned into the state's historical records. The county is also working with regional partners and the National Park Service to create special events surrounding Civil War history.

"Obviously, we are halfway between Petersburg and Richmond, which is a wonderful place to be," says Ruth, who also serves on sesquicentennial committees for Richmond and Petersburg. "The neat thing about it is we really are all talking about it and working together in a larger, multidimensional effort because we have so many tourists that are going to be going up and down [Interstate] 95 between Richmond and Petersburg."

### **Making plans a reality**

According to calculations made by the historical society based on National Park Service visitation figures, Chesterfield can conservatively expect about 18,000 visitors per year over the five-year commemoration period, resulting in an economic impact of \$1.8 million. But the county has some work to do in preparation for tourists.

The Chesterfield Sesquicentennial Committee developed a \$300,000 budget to support capital improvements at 10 different Civil War sites. To date, Chesterfield County has donated less than \$5,000 to the cause.

"They haven't given us funds because we haven't asked yet," says Ruth. "Our focus in this last year has been on grants. Grants are tough in this day and time. Out of the several we've applied for, we received one [\$10,000 matching grant]. Now we're at a point where...we're adding another strategy of looking for county and other partnership funding."

In early December, the county's 11-member Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission recommended allotting \$225,000 over three years in the budget for capital improvements to Civil War sites. The funds would allow the county to open two undeveloped parks, the 39th Illinois Park (adjacent to Branches Bluff subdivision) and Ware Bottom Church Battlefield Park, as well as upgrade the five remaining county sites.

"We've been doing it all on volunteer labor up until now, so \$225,000 is very welcome," says Williams, who co-wrote a tour guide to the Bermuda Hundred Campaign. Heretofore, volunteers – primarily the historical society's military history committee and Eagle Scout troops – have been responsible for regular

upkeep of the sites, while the parks and recreation department comes in once or twice a year for more heavy-duty maintenance.

“When you get into building parking lots and 1,500 feet of trail, that’s more than a Boy Scout troop can do in a weekend. That’s why that capital improvement money is so important,” said Williams.

The PRAC budget recommendations will be part of the overall budget considerations undertaken by the board of supervisors in April.

“PRAC is appointed by the board of supervisors to hash out the details on where our capital improvement projects should be,” explains Bermuda District Supervisor Dorothy Jaeckle, “so we usually go with their recommendations.”

“We’re trying to do stuff where it’s going to be permanent,” adds Williams. “Once you get a parking lot and a trail established, they’re pretty low maintenance from that point on. You get a lot of return for the initial investment. This will be something that lasts far beyond the 150th events.”