

Effort Launched to Commemorate Civil War

by SCOTT McCaffrey, Staff Writer

(Created: Thursday, October 23, 2008 8:39 AM EDT)

County government officials hope to use the upcoming 150th anniversary of the Civil War as a learning tool for members of the community who may have only a vague understanding of the causes, and repercussions, of the nation's most searing event.

County Board members on Oct. 22 set up the Committee for the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War. It will guide Arlington's participation in statewide events related to the war, which occurred from 1861 to 1865.

The task force's work is likely to be similar in scope to that of the group that coordinated Arlington's participation in statewide events surrounding the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown.

As with that group, county officials are being careful not to portray the anniversary as a time for joy, but as one for contemplation.

"This is not a celebration, it is a commemoration," County Board Chairman Walter Tejada said. "This is an opportunity to learn more."

With its strategic location, Arlington can claim several direct connections to the Civil War:

- * It was at the Arlington House plantation - then the dominant landmark in what was a rural county - that Robert E. Lee in 1861 made his decision not to fight for the federal government, but rather to side with Virginia and the Confederacy.
- * At the outbreak of war, federal troops marched across the Potomac and occupied Arlington (then known as Alexandria County) for the duration.
- * In the midst of the war, the federal government seized Arlington House - an action later ruled illegal by the U.S. Supreme Court - and began the first burials of what would become known as Arlington National Cemetery.
- * The federal government also built a series of forts in Arlington and elsewhere in Northern Virginia, in an effort to protect the District of Columbia from Confederate attack. Remnants of many of the forts still exist.
- * A larger federal fort, Fort Whipple, was established in 1863. Today, the Army base is known as Fort Myer.
- * And during the war, the Union government set up Freedman's Village, a community in modern-day South Arlington for freed slaves.

County Board members plan to begin appointing members of the committee next month. For information on serving on the task force, call the County Board office at (703) 228-3130.