

Family letters add ‘new perspective’ to Civil War



Traci White twhite@registerbee.com

Cecil Eanes, left, looks on while Sarah Latham, center, a staff member at the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, shows an illustration, provided by Eanes, to Valerie Tensen, a project manager for the podcast portion of a Civil War sesquicentennial project Saturday at the Institute for Advanced Learning & Research. The three-part project includes scanning Civil War-era letters, diaries and photographs, archiving interviews and creating podcasts to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

BY DEANNA OVERMANN
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Historians from the Library of Virginia came to Danville on Saturday to scan local Civil War documents and letters as part of a project celebrating the 150th anniversary of the War Between the States.

The Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission came to the Institute for Advanced Learning & Research as a joint venture with the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History to scan and archive information that local families brought in for documentation.

Love letters between distant grandparents, messages that relatives wrote home to their mothers, one soldier telling his mom that he would do anything to be at home eating her Sunday meal by the fire — all help to make the war and its participants come to life.

“All of this helps put a human face on the people involved in the war, and it allows us to capture these letters and documents and record them for history,” Lyndon Hart III,

director of description services with the Library of Virginia, said. “Eventually these pieces of American history may be lost or destroyed, but at least we will have copies of them in our archives.”

Seeing the chicken scratch of a young soldier expressing, “Mom it’s so cold and wet here that everything I own is covered in mold and ice, and I’ve completely forgotten what the word ‘warm’ even means,” transports the viewer back in time, breathing cold puffs of air beside the shivering soldier as he writes home.

“The state and local governments appointed us as the local committee to put together this project,” Lynne Bjarnesen, executive director of the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, said. “We wanted to add a new perspective for researchers of the Civil War, touching on the impact of the Civil War on the every day life of the wives, children and slaves back home.

“We are also recording oral histories from people who remember the stories their grandparents or great-aunts and uncles told them pertaining to how their family members coped or survived the years in and around the Civil War.”

Hart said he hopes that the project will help uncover artifacts from across the state. So far, it seems to have struck at least some nuggets of living history gold.

“We have heard some marvelous stories about the courage and strength of the young women who were left behind,” Bjarnesen said. “They had to go out and hunt and farm and basically just survive and provide for their children. It is just amazing what they went through.”

The project is a pilot and will be used as a reference when the Library of Virginia applies for federal grants that will allow it to do the same type of research in every county in the state. Eventually, its work will be available to view at the Library of Virginia Web site and locally at the Danville Museum.

Some of the information will also be used in podcasts that will help promote tourism in Virginia and Danville.

“We have a lot to offer with museums, the river walk, racing and the Victorian architecture in the old West End,” Bjarnesen said.