

## Fredericksburg offers some new Civil War tales



By Christine Tibbetts  
CNHI News Service

FREDERICKSBURG, Va. -- I've had my fill of West Point generals.

The Civil War batch at least. How about the other people leading something other than battles?

When the Sesquicentennial of America's conflict of many names unfolds in 2010 and stretches five years, I want more access to the people who lived on the farms and villages near the battlefields, the women left in charge of so much and the men while in their camps and on their marches.

Any new opportunities coming together to read their letters and diaries and hear their voices?

That was my mission in Virginia in autumn 2009 - discover what's cooking for the 150th anniversary. Virginia already sets the standard for well-established trails linking the battlefields, pinpointing at least 500 communities and historic sites along the way, so I figured they might have some ideas to set the stage for the next 150 years.

"Those people really struggled to describe what happened here," says John Hennessey, chief historian at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

"They wrote in Victorian-style with abundant detail. Theirs was an unprecedented literary effort."

Hennessey and most everyone else I discovered in Fredericksburg, an early American city 60 miles north of Richmond and within easy access of the exceptional National Museum of the Marine Corps, wants that too.

Good place to experience Civil War America in ways old and new, and to overnight in 18th and 19th century bed and breakfasts and inns.

Downtown Fredericksburg sidewalks are brick, 40 chef-run restaurants are locally owned, not chains, and shopping is abundant.

The Rappahannock River runs through and you can simply paddle for the scenery or try to schedule a guided tour with the National Park Service to engage the stories of slaves on one bank and Union troops on the other.

"People who lived along the river left many letters and diaries," historian Hennessey said as he paddled his canoe. He brought copies of photos of those 1862, '63 and '64 days along the Rappahannock.

Got me into the hearts and minds of the neighborhood as war raged.

"The war did terrible damage to Fredericksburg," Hennessey said, showing a sketch and pointing to the spot where the Yanks built a pontoon bridge to cross into town in 1862.

"This is the first American town to be bombarded by Americans," he said. We paddled in silence for a while after that, just thinking.

I wanted to know them, the people on both sides of the river and the war. Patriots committed to something. People loved by someone somewhere. Women and men who wished their homes and churches wouldn't be shelled and others who desperately wished to go home.

Look for these stories in Virginia throughout the Civil War Sesquicentennial, and onward.

"We can lay out the quotes side-by-side and let them be," Hennessey says.

John Washington's words may be among them. He was a 24-year-old slave, a butler and bartender on Caroline Street who heard what he called "the touching music of the Union band" across the river and he walked to the bank.

Union troops rowed across the same water I paddled in safety in my green canoe and got him, along with his cousin. "Free where we stood," Washington wrote.

His accounts are captured in "Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom" published in 2007 by Yale Press, organized by David W. Blight whose research also shows Washington's slave family residence is still standing.

That's the kind of story telling to look for in Fredericksburg during the Sesquicentennial. Battlefields continue to matter and travelers who pursue and grasp

those details will still find them in great abundance, but for the rest of us, other stories will abound too.

Like Stonewall Jackson, known as Thomas Jonathan before earning his nickname at First Manassas, and maybe as a West Point cadet according to some tales. He was also known as Robert E. Lee's most trusted subordinate according to the National Park Service.

He died near Fredericksburg and you can see the very room, even his bed and coverlet. You can also hear more of these interesting people-in-the-event stories.

Fairfield Plantation at Guinea Station is the exact location where Jackson was taken after being accidentally shot in the arm by his own troops at Chancellorsville. That wasn't the only accident.

"He was dropped twice from the litter on the battlefield," said Greg Mertz, National Park Service historian on duty the day I toured what they call the Stonewall Jackson Shrine. Great storyteller.

I don't know if that clumsy action was before or after the arm was amputated, but Mertz did say 27 miles taking 15 hours was the trip from field hospital to the small frame house near the train station for more medical care.

Water therapy, cupping treatments, whiskey, opium and mercury were among the treatments before pneumonia took over, Mertz said. He also noted 70 percent of Civil War amputations were successful.

Women's history abounds at Guinea Station and Mertz knows how to tell it. He recommends "They Married Confederate Officers" by Kathy Neill Herran as a good source of more stories.

Lucy Chandler, he says, was 10 years old, living on her parents' plantation when Jackson died. She kept the little house and belongings intact and in 1928 gave them to the National Park Service.

Christine Tibbetts writes for The Tifton, Ga., Gazette.