

Historians push for preservation of Civil War sites; sesquicentennial planning group visits region

Virginia commission meets at Belmont to plan Civil War sesquicentennial, then tours battle sites



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Fredericksburg historian Robert K. Krick (center) gives a tour of Slaughter Pen Farm in Spotsylvania yesterday to Virginia Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission members, including House Speaker Bill Howell (right). CHRIS WEHLING/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

If those planning Virginia's commemoration of the Civil War's 150th anniversary had any doubt of the importance of their work, their visit here yesterday should have erased it.

In Falmouth, where the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission met, and at every turn in a 21/2-hour bus tour its members took of Fredericksburg, Stafford and Spotsylvania counties, there was a gripping Civil War story to be told.

The 15 commissioners saw battlefield tracts lost to development and heard National Park Service officials explain how those losses crippled their ability to foster understanding of America's deadliest conflict.

"This is our last best chance to preserve battlefields and restore their landscapes," Russ Smith, superintendent of Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park, said of the sesquicentennial.

Virginia is already well along in preparing for the four-year observance, which begins in 2011, having formed the nation's first commission to mark the big anniversary. That's only fitting, members said, given that more Civil War battles were fought on Virginia soil than anywhere else.

The panel, appointed by the General Assembly, is led by House Speaker Bill Howell, R-Stafford, and Senate president pro tempore John Chichester, R-Northumberland. It is meeting in communities across the state to ensure the 150th reflects the breadth of the war's impacts and benefits local economies by boosting tourism.

Leaders of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, which has saved 700 acres on the area's four battlefields from development, and the national Civil War Preservation Trust urged the panel to do everything possible to preserve the historic sites that are left.

"What is not bought and saved in the next five years, by the time of the sesquicentennial, will be lost forever," CVBT executive director Linda Wandres warned.

Preservation Trust President James Lighthizer proposed preservation be one of the commemoration's primary goals and that state legislators spend \$5 million a year to protect threatened battlefield sites before the sesquicentennial ends in 2015. The trust would match the contribution 2-to-1, tripling the investment.

"The war happened everywhere in Virginia, and everywhere in Virginia would benefit from this initiative, Lighthizer said, noting that heritage tourism puts money in local pockets.



Historian Robert K. Krick (center) leads a bus tour of the Fredericksburg battlefield yesterday for members of the state's Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission.
CHRIS WEHLING/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Robert K. Krick, the national park's former chief historian, led the commissioners on a whirlwind tour of the Fredericksburg battlefield.

He ended the tour at Slaughter Pen Farm off Tidewater Trail in Spotsylvania, which he noted was narrowly saved from the development now occurring all around it.

The 208-acre farm, where the Union army briefly broke through Confederate defenses, has been called the heart and soul of the 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg.

Krick recalled that in the mid-1970s, the Park Service bought two small pieces of farmland where the most intense fighting occurred. Those 26 acres cost about \$1,000 apiece; now, the Preservation Trust is paying about 57 times that much for every acre it's preserving at Slaughter Pen.

"I don't know why we didn't do more," he said with obvious regret. "All of us need to do whatever we can, while we can, for preservation."

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