

Hunger for history as Civil War's 150th approaches

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RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - Growing up in the South, Lydia Doyle can't recall a family dinner when the Civil War didn't come up. For the Doyles, it was their own history - not some faded event of 150 years ago.

Her father Joe's great-grandfather, Thomas J. O'Brien, fought for the South under Stonewall Jackson. Joe's great-great-grandmother, Mary Larkin O'Melia, ran the household of President Jefferson Davis at the Confederate White House in Richmond.

When the Doyles weren't debating the war, they'd take weekend trips to battlefields.

"We just kind of grew up in the middle of it," Lydia Doyle said.

The Doyles are heading to Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, to join prominent historians and amateur Civil War buffs alike in unprecedented soul-searching about the causes of America's most divisive war. They will be taking part Wednesday in the first of a conference series leading up to the war's 150th anniversary.

"America on the Eve of the Civil War" is being cast as a defining event in the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and is expected to set a reflective tone for the anniversary events among Southern states. With a focus on 1859 and the runup to war, the conference will include discussions on slavery, the abolitionist John Brown, and the political tensions leading to the signing of the Ordinance of Secession - which marks its 150th anniversary next year.

North and South, black and white, history buffs like the Doyles and educators - some 2,000 people in all - are expected to attend the daylong gathering at the University of Richmond, where the leading Civil War historians won't exactly rewrite history. But they do promise new scrutiny of a war whose causes have long since been reduced to bumper sticker slogans.

Conference organizers said overwhelming public interest in the conference underscores a national hunger to better grasp the reasons why 620,000 neighbors, family and friends fought and died during the Civil War.

Edward L. Ayers, a pre-eminent Civil War historian who organized the inaugural conference, said the goal is "to put people in the moment" and set aside preconceived notions. He said voices overlooked in past war narratives are being welcomed and future conferences will probe the role of African-Americans, the home front and even a global view of the conflict.

"We have the opportunity to look at this with a fresh eye," said Ayers, president of the University of Richmond. "Let's enter into a conversation with these people of the past and understand just what they were thinking. How was it they could end up killing people that were their neighbors?"

Virginia, a mecca for Civil War buffs because of the many key battles fought here, has been at the forefront of planning for the sesquicentennial. It was the first state to establish a committee to plan for the anniversary and has set aside \$4 million for it. Congress has not acted on legislation to create a national sesquicentennial commission.

Historians say it is time for the American public to shed long-held notions about the war, many of them overly simplistic: that a more noble North was only interested in ending slavery, or that freed slaves didn't flock to Union armies to battle their former masters.

Charles B. Dew, professor of American history at Williams College in Massachusetts, said southerners have been unwilling to confront a prewar economy based on slavery while northerners have sought to blot out memories of their own "profoundly racist" society.

"Americans, like most people, want a usable past. They want it to make sense," Dew said.

The conference, he said, is an opportunity "for shining some light in some of the darker corners in Virginia, and by extension, Southern history in a very critical moment."

As president of the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar in Richmond, Christy S. Coleman makes it her mission to offer a more complex, layered view of the conflict. The roles

of women on the homefront and suffragists who began their activism in the anti-slavery movement are rarely told, she said.

"These women not only advocated for freedom of the enslaved, but began to tie the issue to the lack of freedom that women had in the nation," she said.

Manisha Sinha, an associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said the role of black Americans is especially overshadowed in the "whitewashed version - literally and figuratively - of the war itself and its consequences."

"It's about time when we talk about the Civil War in the South that we take into perspective not just the views of white southerners but also of black southerners," she said.

Joe Doyle, 60, a native of Lynchburg, and his 26-year-old daughter, Lydia, an attorney in Athens, Ga., plan some stops at battlefields in the Fredericksburg area before heading to Wednesday's conference.

Joe Doyle said history is a family tradition.

"I grew up in a family that constantly talked history," Doyle wrote in an e-mail. An aunt told him how Thomas O'Brien would visit Chancellorsville decades after the war and "all he could do is weep."

Lydia Doyle isn't looking for her history to be sugarcoated.

"There's a great opportunity here to tell the truth, be honest about it."