

Loudoun Launches Civil War Sesquicentennial Programs

By Margaret Morton

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It may take some of us about as long as the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War to actually be able to pronounce the word that means the 150th anniversary, but Loudoun's part in the six-year state-wide commemoration is off to a rousing start.

The kick-off event is this weekend when the Mosby Heritage Association hosts its 12th annual Conference on the Art of Command in the Civil War Saturday and Sunday at the Middleburg Community Center. Between now and the end of the year, the committee has planned a dozen events in total, with more to come between 2010 and 2015.

Events include an Oct. 13 talk by National Park Service Chief Historian Emeritus Ed Bearss at the Thomas Balch Library on the sinking of the Union gunboat USS Cairo in 1862 as well as his own involvement in the discovery and salvage of the vessel almost 100 years later.

The following night, Oct. 14, in commemoration of the October 1859 raid by abolitionist John Brown on the U.S. Arsenal at Harpers Ferry-largely considered the opening salvo of the Civil War-there will be a three-man show presenting the story of Brown's attack in a live entertainment form at Goose Creek Friends Meeting in Lincoln.

At Balch Library Oct. 17 there will be an Authors Book Signing and various exhibits, sponsored by the Loudoun County Civil War Round Table.

That night, there will be a special program, a battlefield illumination at Ball's Bluff Battlefield Regional Park in Leesburg.

The last two planned events of the month take place Oct. 24. At the Mt. Zion Cemetery on Old Waterford Road, the Mosby Heritage Area Association presents "Slavery and Flight in the Mosby Heritage Area," detailing the working of the local Underground Railroad. Participants also get to take a hike to an Underground Railroad site in Waterford.

The second event is at Rector House in Atoka, where the Mosby Heritage Area Association presents "John Mosby, John Brown," a program that looks at the local situation in the spring of 1865 and examines how the series of events leading to war began with Brown's raid in October 1859-an attack that saw the muster of Loudoun men.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg, with many more events and programs planned for 2010 and beyond, including a grand commemoration of the battle at Gettysburg. Local milestones include the Battle of Ball's Bluff, which will be commemorated in 2011; the skirmish at the Waterford Baptist Church, in 2012; and the battles that represent the start of the Gettysburg Campaign, in Unison, Aldie, Middleburg and Upperville, in 2012 and 2013.

Beth Erickson, vice president of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground, is in the last few weeks of her six-month chairmanship of the Loudoun County Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Committee, established by the Board of Supervisors last December. At the group's October meeting, she will hand over the baton to Civil War Round Table historian Jim Morgan.

The group's task is no small one. The Board of Supervisors gave a comprehensive mandate to the committee: "to coordinate the commemoration of the American Civil War in Loudoun County and to participate in the commonwealth of Virginia's state-wide efforts to remember all who lived, fought and died during this defining time in our American history, resulting in an inclusive, positive legacy and long-term benefit for residents of and visitors to Loudoun County."

It is a huge job, one that will involve the volunteer time and effort of countless people around the county over the course of the six-year period.

The panel has some distinguished representation from around the county, including noted historians,

business and tourism industry leaders and will include representatives of the School Board and Board of Supervisors.

From its beginnings as a small steering committee early this year, the panel has evolved to a three-tiered structure, comprised of the steering committee; the general committee; and various work groups.

The steering committee, made up of approximately 12 members, meets about every month, and is comprised of volunteers and staff members of nonprofits and historic sites. As the main planning committee of the Loudoun sesquicentennial, its workload is considerable and membership will fluctuate accordingly, Erickson said.

The general committee has a representation of about 60 members, drawn from a variety of stakeholders, including historic sites, heritage areas, Civil War round tables, historic preservation groups and other history-centered groups. The panel meets to hear reports from the work groups, get updates from the steering committee and to make general policy decisions. So far, the group plans to meet two to four times a year. But, 2015, when the 150th anniversary commemoration will end, is a long way off, Erickson said, and that schedule may change.

The work groups are given a specific task to accomplish by the steering committee as it works its way through the events and happenings that need to be commemorated along the six-year journey and that require a lot of research. Once a work group has finished a task, it may be given another by the steering committee or it may have done its work and be disbanded.

"It's a work in progress," and these are early days in the huge endeavor, Erickson stressed.

Early on, the group defined its mission as working to promote programs that encourage the community "to discover the unique assets" that demonstrate the county's role in Virginia history leading up to the war, during and after it as well as its place in the national history of the Civil War.

The panel laid down some ambitious goals, including working with the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission and other organizations to raise public awareness; ensuring an inclusive commemoration that will include different racial and ethnic groups, those who are either new to the country or those who did not have a hereditary link to the war, young people and others seeking to understand the relevance of that war to our society today.

Other goals include the important and fascinating duty of interpreting and relating the stories of the war—those of soldiers, famous and not famous, both from the South and the North, of civilians, slaves, freedmen, and of those who supported the war, and those who did not.

As part of that goal, the committee wants to make the commemoration accessible to residents and visitors alike, noting that the Civil War didn't just happen on battlefields. Its impact was felt everywhere—in towns, farms, villages and on local roads. How did people live, and suffer, during the war. What did it do to family relationships, where sometimes loyalties were divided? How people's religion affected their position on the war, and more.

There are a myriad of ways in which to tell those stories, and finding just the right voice or vehicle for each one is challenging.

Additional goals are to promote programs that will increase tourism and economic development, as well as to provide programs stressing local history education, to leave a legacy of interest in local history and through historic preservation, sites, signage, resources and uncovered stories.

As part of the goals for 2009, the committee hopes to develop a microsite to be hosted by the LCVA and compile information on Civil War-related sites in the county that are open to the public, including churches, cemeteries, museums and military sites.

It also intends to draw up a list of Civil War-related private properties whose owners might consider opening them for special events, or at least to be listed on a brochure, as well as a list of Civil War-related towns and villages in the county.

Lastly, the committee is working on a timeline of Civil War activities in Loudoun from 1857-1867 and a Citizens/Parents/Teachers Guide to the Civil War in Loudoun County.

Also planned is the creation and placement of up new Civil War signs in a partnership with the Board of Supervisors, which will ante up 25 percent of the cost of each sign, to be matched by an organization. Those signs will be placed around the county over a three-year period, with six planned for the first year. Each sign will cost \$2,600, which will be paid for with \$650 from the \$5,000 annual set-aside from the Board of Supervisors, \$1,300 from a \$16,000 set-aside by LCVA and \$650 from a partnering/sponsoring agency or historical organization.

Steering Committee members are: Rich Gillespie, educator and historian, Mosby Heritage Area; Tracy Gillespie, curator, Morven Park, Loudoun Heritage Consortium; Jeremy Harvey, Loudoun Convention and Visitors Association; Childs Burden, Mosby Heritage Area, Civil War Preservation Trust; Steve Meserve, historian, Eastern Loudoun Civil War Round Table; Jim Morgan, historian, Loudoun Civil War Round Table, Ball's Bluff; Beth Erickson, Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership; Phyllis Cooke Taylor, historian, Black History Committee of the Friends of Thomas Balch Library; Jackie Gosses, Civil War-related business community; Steve Price, attorney and community representative; and Wynne Saffer, historian. Seats for School Board and Board of Supervisors representatives are also planned.

Several of the committee members have dual functions as chairmen of various work groups: Jim Morgan chairs Events, Tracy Gillespie Loudoun's Civil War Infrastructure, Steve Meserve Loudoun Civil War Narrative & Chronology history, Rich Gillespie Education, and Jeremy Harvey Marketing.