

Mo. aims to promote its role in Civil War history

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CENTRALIA, Mo. -- For a state steeped in Civil War history, Missouri can be awfully quiet about its contributions.

More than 1,100 battles were fought in the border state, trailing only Virginia and Tennessee. Divided loyalties within Missouri between Union and Confederate forces mirrored the larger national crisis. Missouri was a slave state surrounded on three sides by free states, but it never formally joined the Confederacy.

History buffs and tourism boosters hope the war's upcoming 150th anniversary in 2011 will stir renewed interest in Missouri's battlefields as part of a national dialogue about the war's causes, conflicts and legacy.

"If you're not from Missouri, that flabbergasts people," said Greg Wolk, president of the nonprofit Missouri Civil War Heritage Foundation, referring to the number of battles fought. "And what's flabbergasting is we are not promoting and advertising that fact."

Wolk and others point to Virginia, historic home of the Confederacy, as a leader in the commemorative efforts. The state has its own sesquicentennial commission and \$4 million in state money.

In April, 2,000 people gathered at the University of Richmond for an academic conference reviewing the events leading up to the war.

Unlike the 100th anniversary, which was marked by nationalistic fervor amid a backdrop of Cold War struggles and domestic disputes over segregation, the Richmond conference and other planned activities won't gloss over slavery's central role.

Richmond president Edward Ayers, a Civil War historian, calls the 150th anniversary a commemoration, not a celebration.

"Balance can only come by telling all the story, not by leaving one part out," he said. "No one should want to celebrate the Civil War, but we should all want to remember it."

In Missouri, the heritage foundation is emphasizing a series of rural driving trails linking significant Civil War historical sites.

Some of the war's bloodiest battles occurred in Missouri. An 1864 massacre of Union soldiers in the central Missouri town of Centralia by a band of guerrillas, including future outlaw Jesse James. Some of the slain soldiers were returning from the siege of Atlanta under Union Gen. William Sherman.

State promotional material identifies Missouri as "where the Civil War began," a reference to the state's role in fomenting violence between pro-slavery forces and abolitionists in

neighboring Kansas and Nebraska, two territories that in 1854 were allowed to determine if slavery would be allowed within their confines.

"Missouri was torn apart by internal conflicts and guerrilla war, what one scholar calls 'inner war,'" said Ayers. "It's not an easy story to tell people who like their history neat as well as heroic."

For Lorah Steiner, executive director of the Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau, the state's largely passive approach to the war's sesquicentennial is a missed economic opportunity. She noted the zeal with which many Civil War historical tourists approach their avocation.

"These people will travel 100 miles to stand in a field where a battle occurred," she said. "They are just die-hard."

The sesquicentennial is also an opportunity to explore African-American history, Steiner said. Black Union soldiers created what is now Lincoln University in Jefferson City, and Underground Railroad abolitionists helped slaves cross the Mississippi River at St. Louis into Illinois.

"This is history," she said. "We're not favoring one side or the other. We're simply saying this was a significant part of the United States."

Though it lacks both the organization and resources of Virginia and other Southern states planning more ambitious events, Ayers said Missouri can still both honor and reflect upon the war on a smaller scale.

"Quality is more important than quantity," he said. "A little bit of thoughtful history is worth more than a lot of dull and unreflective history."