

# Pr. William Prepares for Civil War Anniversary

County at 'Forefront' For Events in 2011

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Sunday, September 21, 2008

With the 150th anniversary of the Civil War approaching in 2011, Prince William County officials and historians have begun meeting to determine how the war should be commemorated.

The county played a key role in the war's early stages, hosting the first major battle -- the First Battle of Bull Run, or First Battle of Manassas -- at what is now Manassas National Battlefield Park. Although that event and other large battles in Prince William are more well known, there are other, smaller events to commemorate in the county that will help deepen knowledge of the war and its social, political and economic significance, said Brendon Hanafin, director of the county's historical preservation office.

"The county has a wonderful opportunity to enrich folks' understanding of the war," said Hanafin, who is leading a committee composed of Prince William and Manassas representatives. The group has been meeting monthly to identify the county's key historic sites and plan events for residents, students and tourists.

"I'd say we're at the forefront in the state," Hanafin said. "We're very well positioned from a tourism standpoint."

The committee will work with the state-level Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, created by the General Assembly in 2006 to coordinate and promote events in the state through its Web site, <http://www.virginiacivilwar.org>. The site also features an interactive map with a county-by-county account of each battle fought in Virginia.

No state played a more central role in the war than Virginia. The Old Dominion was host to the war's first and last major battles and the Confederate capital, Richmond. Many of the rebel army's top officers were Virginians, notably Gen. Robert E. Lee. Hundreds of thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers were cut down on Virginia soil.

The conflict's major fighting came first to Prince William, when Union forces were defeated in an attempt to seize control of a strategic railroad junction near Manassas. Soldiers returned to the same site in 1862 for an even bloodier clash, and the two armies also fought at Bristoe Station in 1863, where the county recently opened the 133-acre Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park.

"Prince William was the front line," Hanafin said.

Battles aren't all that local officials are planning to commemorate, though, and there were other local events that factored into the war's origins and aftermath, Hanafin said.

Some of the first Virginia militias to organize after Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860 did so at the recently renovated historic Brentsville Courthouse. And Dangerfield Newby, a former slave killed in John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, W.Va., in 1859 while trying to win freedom for his wife and children, had been enslaved in the Brentsville area.

In 1911, 50 years after the war, elderly Union and Confederate veterans came together for the first time at the Manassas courthouse, along with President William Howard Taft, for the National Jubilee of Peace.

"It's going to be a time when we can talk about this very important time in our history, and the social and political issues that created a great divide," said John Verrill, director of the Manassas Museum and a committee member. "It's important to know the history so we don't repeat it."

Patricia Jones, chief of interpretation at Manassas National Battlefield Park, has been representing the park at the meetings in hopes of creating a "signature event" to commemorate the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861. Jones said that although several possibilities were under discussion, a large-scale reenactment was not one of them. "This is hallowed ground," Jones said. "Let's move those [reenactment] activities elsewhere."

Jones said the park is planning to open a new interpretive center in time for the 2011 commemoration in a historic house at Brawner Farm. The \$155,000 facility will be entirely devoted to the Second Battle of Bull Run, she said.

Others involved in the planning emphasized that the 150th anniversary would be a solemn observance, not a celebration. "It was a great tragedy, and we need to let people know what happened," said Sen. [Charles J. Colgan](#) (D-Prince William), vice chairman of the state Sesquicentennial Commission.

When he moved to the Prince William area in the early 1960s, said Colgan, 81, a Confederate flag flew above Manassas's town hall and the local radio station heralded Prince William as the "Gateway to Dixie."

These days, he doesn't hear as much about the war, he said, and he figures local schoolchildren could stand to learn something. The commemoration "is going to be a lesson in history," he said.

Plans are also in the works for a Civil War exhibit in a tractor-trailer that would travel around the state, Colgan said.