

Preservation at the Sesquicentennial

By James Lighthizer

(June 2009 Civil War News - Preservation Column)

Often, when I speak about my goals for the Civil War Preservation Trust, I find my listeners initially taken aback by one of my themes.

Those unfamiliar with the organization and our efforts are surprised to hear me declare the urgency of our mission and insist that our window of opportunity for protecting the hallowed ground of our Civil War battlefields is rapidly closing.

How can anything related to the events of a century and a half ago be time sensitive, they ask.

The sad truth is that roughly 30 acres of battlefield land are destroyed each and every day, paved over and lost forever. Even in our current economic climate, the steady stream of loss continues, leading me to a sobering conclusion — ours is the last generation with the opportunity to ensure that appropriate portions of these sites remain.

It is, indeed, a daunting challenge, but I believe we will continue to rise to the occasion.

I also believe firmly that our preservation efforts in the next few years will take on an even greater significance as we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the tragic events that took place on these battlefields.

Communities and organizations across the country will strive to capture the spirit and memory of the war through exhibits, lectures and other events. No doubt these endeavors will have a valuable and wide-reaching impact. However, no result can be more lasting or fitting than the permanent protection of the battlefields where our ancestors fought and bled.

Nor am I alone in this sentiment. In 1864, a New York sergeant entrenched near Atlanta was eloquent and prophetic in his call for the work that we modern preservationists are still engaged in.

Albert Finbar Kennelly wrote that saving the physical site itself would be to create a “monument to celebrate the events that transpired there; each rifle-pit and battery speaking more to the heart of the spectator than would whole volumes of history.”

These words truly get to the heart of our mission and its imperative. Each and every acre of these battlefields is truly hallowed ground, but they are not static sites. They are dynamic outdoor classrooms and provide a more interactive learning experience than any library or museum.

Preserving this land, both out of respect for the sacrifices made there and for its continuing educational value, should be a major goal for the sesquicentennial commemorations now taking shape.

Currently, a wide variety of agencies, commissions and other bodies are hard at work formulating the guiding principles for their sesquicentennial activities. They have a truly unique opportunity — the perfect framework to reexamine public perceptions of the Civil War, the most formative of experiences in our nation's past.

The ensuing century and a half have allowed greater perspective on the myriad causes, motivations and repercussions of the conflict, and these eminent individuals and groups should and must work hard to ensure these themes become incorporated into the public understanding of the multifaceted history we hold so dear.

To that noble goal, I would encourage all groups involved in sesquicentennial planning to consider becoming involved in battlefield preservation efforts.

Long after the final commemorative lectures have concluded and all the special museum exhibits are packed away, preserved battlefield land will continue to stand as a permanent and tangible tribute to the memory of the brave soldiers North and South.

There are many forms this support could take, but chief among them is a financial contribution. In 2008, the Commonwealth of Virginia, at the urging of the states sesquicentennial commemoration commission, appropriated more than \$5 million in matching grants toward historic land preservation. By far the largest commitment to battlefield protection ever made by a state, this precedent-setting contribution was made to ensure a lasting legacy for the sesquicentennial commemoration.

Yet, significant impact can also be made working on a smaller scale, and in locations that do not themselves have battlefields within their jurisdiction. Merely incorporating the idea of land preservation into distributed literature will help spread the word of these efforts to a wider audience.

Experience has taught us that many people, even those who read widely about the Civil War and travel to historic sites, are unaware of the threats facing many of our battlefields. Raising public awareness in this way is a powerful tool and one that can be done even from a great distance.

In order for this sesquicentennial push for battlefield preservation to reach its full potential, it must be a call that echoes from every corner of the commemoration. Only if the numerous bodies currently involved planning and executing anniversary activities present a united front in emphasizing the critical importance and timelines of the preservation mission, will we be able to ensure the protection of these hallowed grounds.

As we remember the profound events of the Civil War, contemplating the ways in which it has shaped our nation, we must also look to the future. We must embrace the sesquicentennial period as a chance to improve our intellectual perspective on the past.

We must also look upon it as our chance to complete the altogether fitting and proper work of protecting these battlefields for future generations. If we do not act now, our children will not have the opportunity when they prepare to commemorate the war's bicentennial.

Protecting these hallowed grounds now is imperative if we are to embrace the last best chance to fulfill our obligations to both past and future generations.

James Lighthizer became the president of the Civil War Preservation Trust following service in the Maryland Legislature and as Anne Arundel, Md., County Administrator. As Secretary of the Maryland Department of Transportation, he pioneered the use of Transportation Enhancement grants for historic land preservation.