

## See Civil War through new eyes

Mammoth, interactive exhibition takes fresh approach to Civil War, viewing it through the lens of biography

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One day in May of 1861, Washington County's Ann Catron, 38, wrote her son:

"With all the timidity due to my sex, I am ready to offer you up in defense of your country's rights and honor. and I now offer you, a beardless boy of 17 summers--not with grief, but thanking God that I have a son to offer."

Her letter was published in the Winchester Virginian, whose editors added, "We venture to assert, [that son] will never let a Black Republican emissary of Lincoln's see his back."

So, on May 14--one month and two days after the attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor--Andrew Catron went off to war. Enlisting in the 1st Virginia Cavalry, he became one of 280,000 Virginians who fought for the Confederacy.

This week, his story comes out of the shadows, thanks to "An American Turning Point: Virginia in the Civil War," a blockbuster exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society.

It is one of many tales that makes this giant show, which opens Friday, an absolute must-see.

"It's by far the biggest thing we've done, short of building a building. And it's all out on display, it's all got to work right," said Paul Levengood, the society's president and CEO.

"There is more packed into those 3,000-plus square feet than anything else we've ever done. And the level of complexity is far higher in terms of the number of audiovisual stations, and the number of artifacts and other elements."

The exhibition is so large that, when it tours the state, some institutions will have to split it into two parts, shown back to back.

Levengood said he believes "Turning Point" will be without equal nationally during the four-plus years of the sesquicentennial.

"Virginia was the first state to establish a commission to commemorate the Civil War's 150th anniversary, and has also been the most generous state in allocating and appropriating money for it," he said.

"That fact, and the foresight of members of the General Assembly, has allowed us to do what I think will arguably be the most dynamic and sophisticated exhibit launched anywhere for the 150th."

### GREAT STORIES

The big topic demands a big show. Occupying three galleries, "American Turning Point" takes up more than 3,000 square feet, and includes more than 200 artifacts and 17 state-of-the-art audiovisual programs.

Its subject's very scope posed hurdles for the museum's curators and designers: How do you bring home the way this war left no one untouched? How do you avoid making it yet-another retelling of military glory and heroism? How do you appeal to people to whom the word "history" is a turnoff?

Answer: Great stories.

Meet Siah Carter, 22, a slave at Shirley Plantation along the James River east of Richmond. Two months after the first battle of ironclads at Hampton Roads, the USS Monitor lay at anchor in the James. "The Yankees would carry [escaping slaves] out to sea," Carter was told, "tie a piece of iron about their necks and throw them overboard." But he rowed a small boat out to the Monitor, was taken aboard, and became first assistant to the ship's cook. Carter served in the Union navy until May 1865, returning home after war's end to marry Eliza Tarrow, a former slave at Shirley.

You'll also get to know, among others:

Anthony Rosenstock, a Petersburg businessman who, with his family, decided to leave war-torn Virginia and run the blockade.

James E. Hanger, an 18-year-old Confederate private from Churchville in Augusta County. As one of the war's first amputees, he established an artificial-limb company that continues to serve the casualties of 21st-century wars.

Union Lt. Joseph Paradis who, in 1864, survived the maelstrom of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania only to be cut down at Cold Harbor.

Anne Gordon, who became a refugee in the winter of 1862, forced to flee her Fredericksburg home as Northern troops pressed down on the city. (Watch for a story about her later this week in this newspaper.)

Union Lt. Col. Noah Farnham, who took the place of his dead commander--and died of a musket-ball wound to the head--in the war's first large-scale land battle, at Manassas.

Elizabeth T.E. Munford, who was at home in Richmond on July 1, 1862, and could hear cannon fire from the Battle of Malvern Hill. Her son, Lt. Charles Ellis Munford, was fighting in the Letcher Light Artillery. She expected to "hear from Ellis tonight," she wrote her daughters. Late that evening, his comrades brought Munford's body to her doorstep, directly from the battlefield

Henry Van Leuvenigh Bird, a Virginia private who fought in the Battle of the Crater, the Union army's ill-fated attempt to break through at Petersburg by tunneling underneath the Confederate defenses, planting gunpowder and blowing a huge hole in the line. (The chaotic scene was vividly depicted in the movie "Cold Mountain.")

#### COURTING THE MASSES

These individuals may not have gained great fame in the war, but their experiences are riveting--and real eye-openers, an early sneak peak at the exhibition reveals.

That's just what the society's curators, archivists and designers aimed for. Using representative individuals and situations, they seek to further people's understanding of the experiences of Virginians, and those who served in Virginia, during the war.

They didn't want to take a top-down approach, the "battles and leaders" theme that's been done for decades, Levengood said. The nonprofit's 2007 "Lee and Grant" show was a fine example of that strategy.

Which is not to say that "American Turning Point" doesn't tackle big themes or ask provocative questions.

Consider one of its opening statements: "From 1861 to 1865, Virginia stood at the center of a military and social revolution. How we define freedom, liberty, patriotism, and nation today is directly related to the experiences of the generation that waged and survived the American Civil War."

The exhibition's creators, Levengood said, are eager to engage new audiences--reaching beyond the history-minded folks and Civil War buffs who would usually come to such a show.

Online, everyone can follow along. "Turning Point" is being blogged, tweeted, broadcast on YouTube, and will have a website for mobile devices.

#### PULLING IT OFF

None of this would have been possible, Levengood said, if not for generous support from the General Assembly and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the collaboration of numerous museums and private collectors. Many of the artifacts will be on public display for the first time.

"An American Turning Point" is a signature program of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. Virginia was the first state to appoint a panel to plan 150th anniversary activities.

The VHS team, working with many outside vendors, has gone to extraordinary efforts to produce the show--as was evident during a tour last week while many components were being installed.

It's been an "all hands on deck" experience for everyone, society spokeswoman Jennifer Guild said.

The exhibition, which is broken into battlefield and home front sections dubbed "Waging War" and "Surviving War," leads off by asking "Why War?" and also explores why the nation's deadliest conflict is considered its first modern war.

Other questions: Who was a traitor, and who was a patriot? Why is there a West Virginia? Who freed the slaves? How did civilians suffer? Why was Richmond so important? Why did people expect a 90-day war? Which is more important--speed or strength, offense or defense? What was the deadliest enemy? Should black men be enlisted as soldiers?

"Turning Point" ends by asking visitors to consider if the Civil War really ended at Appomattox.

Even focusing solely on Virginia, the war's numbers are staggering, notes exhibit coordinator Andrew H. Talkov. The story includes:

1,000,000 free white Virginians.

491,000 enslaved African-Americans.

2,154 military engagements (more than in any other state).

50,000 Virginians who fought for the Union.

Hundreds of thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers from across the continent who fought, suffered and died in Virginia.

But this show is certainly not about statistics, and it's hardly static. Huge photos, video screens, life-size sculpture, great quotes and cool exhibit "furniture" grab your attention, and keep it.

And let's not forget about Henry Bird, mentioned earlier. A private in the Petersburg Grays (12th Virginia Infantry), he enlisted two days after Virginia seceded on April 17, 1861.

Bird fought in the Overland Campaign, which began with the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House, was his unit's color guard in the Battle of the Crater, was captured at Burgess' Mill and imprisoned at Point Lookout, Md.

As Bird waited to be released after Appomattox, his father wrote him: "The state is quieting down and people are going to work, and the war will soon be a thing of the past. I [have] been to see Genl Lee and he told me that all the soldiers who desired to return to their native places should take the oath of allegiance to the U. States and become good citizens."

Bird went home to Petersburg in June 1865. As the prerequisite to receiving a marriage license, he took the oath of allegiance, apologizing to his fiancée, Margaret Randolph.

Looking ahead to the uncertain future, Henry wrote Margaret, "My darling, we are all strangers in the land now "

They married that September. Henry became a railroad clerk, and lived in Petersburg until his death in 1903. His bride died in 1933.