

Sesquicentennial Offers Extraordinary Opportunities

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Published: February 7, 2010

Good citizens of Richmond, the sesquicentennial is coming, the sesquicentennial is coming!

The what?

Sesquicentennial is defined as "a 150th anniversary or its celebration." In 2006, the Virginia General Assembly created the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission (HB1440) "to prepare for and commemorate the sesquicentennial of Virginia's participation in the American Civil War."

While the commission was created for the Civil War anniversaries, the sesquicentennial is also the 150th anniversary of events leading to emancipation and the abolition of slavery. So, when I say the sesquicentennial is coming, I mean the 150th anniversary of a series of events and circumstances that forever changed our city, our nation, and the world.

For many complex reasons -- some related to issues of race -- Richmond has not embraced the power of its Civil War history, including its standing as the capital of the Confederacy.

If being the Confederacy's capital has made Richmonders cringe, Richmond's prominent role in slavery has made them want to run and hide, which has led to a coordinated repression of events and memories. The result has been a host of lost opportunities and a significant stunting of the economic and social growth of the community of Richmond.

Esteemed

Richmond Times-Dispatch Editor Virginius Dabney warned Richmond that losing its mystique as the capital of the Confederacy would lead it to become "just another city." The same could be said for the mystique of Richmond's incredible 400-plus years of history -- continually nurturing the development of our nation since 1607. Possibly due to the Civil War and slavery issues, Richmond has never embraced the power and magnitude of this historical résumé.

All that can change with the sesquicentennial, which offers a treasure trove of opportunities for the community of Richmond, for the commonwealth, and for the nation. Richmond has a unique opportunity to craft and present an incredible, interactive

historical experience through its commemoration of the sesquicentennial -- especially if it is done accurately, respectfully, introspectively, and energetically.

Richmond can and should make the argument that all who call themselves Americans must come to Richmond between 2011 and 2015 to better understand their heritage and their charge for the future. We need Barack Obama on the steps of the White House of the Confederacy exhorting Americans to use the sesquicentennial as the springboard to a new America. A similar argument should be crafted for the international community.

The potential financial windfall offered by a properly presented sesquicentennial is unprecedented and comes at a time when economic conditions have affected many important government and community resources, with more cuts on the way and very few new sources of revenue on the horizon.

The community of Richmond should see itself as truly blessed to have such an opportunity both to turn its short-term economic situation around and to help guarantee its long-term economic vitality. The beauty of this opportunity is Richmond does not need to spend any money to make it happen -- we have had all of the attractions in place for 150 years or more.

Equally important, the sesquicentennial offers the community of Richmond a four-year opportunity to firmly establish the region as The Birthplace of Our Nation because of its amazing 400-year history -- and the chance to highlight its other incredible institutional and natural resources, especially the James River.

The seeds of future visits will be planted when people come to see and understand the Civil War and slavery and are also introduced to Powhatan and Patrick Henry, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Virginia War Memorial, John Marshall and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Church Hill and "The Harlem of the South," Thomas Jefferson and Maggie Walker, and the Richmond Folk Festival and First Fridays.

The Future of Richmond's Past is a new community collaboration process engaging a growing collection of educational institutions, museums, organizations, and individuals working to strengthen Richmond's presentation of its powerful history, with special attention initially to its Civil War and slavery-related history. This group of extremely intelligent and well-meaning people has started the process of reinterpreting Richmond's history and presenting it in a more accurate and compelling way, but they can only do so much.

It is time for Richmonders from all over the region to join in the process. It is time for Mayor Dwight Jones, Council President Kathy Graziano, and Venture Richmond to see the sesquicentennial as a powerful economic engine for the City of Richmond.

It is time for the leaders of the region to see it as the ultimate regional collaboration project. It is an opportunity for Gov. Bob McDonnell and Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling to use it to create a lot of new jobs. It is an opportunity for communities of faith to use it to

examine the thoughts and decisions of their ancestors in the light of today, with a look to tomorrow (especially Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists -- Christian denominations that suffered significant splits related to the Civil War and slavery). And it is an opportunity for Richmonders and Americans to engage in honest conversations about race, poverty, and the power of community that -- while painful at times -- should lead to a positive transformation for the community of Richmond, for the commonwealth, and for the nation.

Consider being an American at the time of the firing on Fort Sumter in April of 1861 on through the surrender at Appomattox in April 1865. Regardless of which side one was on or where one lived, consider the expenditures made by Americans across the country -- daily expenditures in energy, emotion, income, and intellect by literally everyone of all ages, every single day for more than four years.

Now consider the sacrifices made during this time, including the ultimate sacrifice made by hundreds of thousands of Americans, and the financial and emotional impact on their families and communities. Imagine how invested and involved almost all Americans were in trying to shape their personal future and the future of their country.

For four years, it was quite an extraordinary display of collective human effort -- and because it was fraught with conflict and uncertainty, it was a time of true, unbridled American citizenship. Now, imagine duplicating that collective human energy, emotion, income, and intellect for four years in a collaborative effort to increase the quality of life for all Richmonders, and for all Americans.

Good citizens of Richmond, the sesquicentennial is coming. Let's make it an event they celebrate 150 years from now.