

# States scrimping on Civil War anniversary

Efforts to commemorate the 150th anniversary of America's bloodiest war will begin next year and run into 2015



Mike Groll / AP  
Michael Aikey, director of the New York State Military Museum, poses with a U.S. Model 1841, 6-pounder field gun in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., on Dec. 16.

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ALBANY, N.Y. — New York state contributed 448,000 troops and \$150 million to the Union cause during the Civil War, not to mention untold tons of supplies, food, guns and munitions.

But with the 150th anniversary of the war's start just months away, New York state government has so far failed to scrounge up a single Yankee dollar to commemorate a conflict it played such a major role in winning.

New York isn't alone. Other states saddled with similar budget woes are unable or unwilling to set aside taxpayer funds for historic re-enactments and museum exhibits when public employees are being laid off and services slashed.

Even South Carolina, where the war's first shots were fired upon Fort Sumter in April 1861, has declined to provide government funding for organizations planning events in the Palmetto State.

"State money right now is hard to find for anything," said New York state historian Robert Weible. "That's life. We're all living with that."

At least 21 states have formed commissions, committees or initiatives to commemorate the 150th anniversary of America's bloodiest war, starting next year and running into 2015. Of those states, Virginia and Pennsylvania appear to be leading the way in efforts to plan, promote and stage Civil War commemorations.

"Most states have very little or limited funding," said Cheryl Jackson, executive director of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. "That's not unique among the states, what you're finding in New York."

The Virginia organization has received an annual \$2 million appropriation from the state since 2008, Jackson said. Three out of every five Civil War battles were fought in Virginia, home to the Confederate capital, Richmond, and some of the South's greatest generals, including Robert E. Lee.

"Virginia bore its share of scars, many of which are still there, so it's natural that the state take the lead," said James I. "Bud" Robertson Jr., a Virginia Tech history professor and member of the state's commission.

Pennsylvania has managed to collect nearly \$5 million in government funding for its commemoration, including \$800,000 in federal grants, according to Barbara Franco, executive director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

The key, she said, was Pennsylvania's decision to start its planning in 2007, just before the economy tanked and government coffers shriveled. Plus, Franco added, Pennsylvania didn't wait for Congress to get around to creating a national Civil War commission, something lawmakers in Washington, D.C., so far have failed to do.

On the federal level, the National Parks Service is coordinating Civil War events planned through 2015 at more than 75 battlefields and historic sites, as well as at museums and other privately operated sites.

On the state level, various local and regional groups are being enlisted to muster resources for 150th anniversary events.

"Sometimes national commissions are helpful, sometimes they're not helpful," Franco said. "Perhaps this grassroots approach provides more opportunities to get down to the real issues that a national commission would never be able to do."

New York so far doesn't plan to create a Civil War commemoration commission. But Weible said talks already have begun between his office and local history-related entities to come up with ways to mark the war in the coming years.

"Our concern right now is trying to get everybody on the same page and cooperating with each other and talking to people they don't normally talk to," he said. "You don't need money to make good things happen. It's nice if you can get it. But we work with what we've got."

What New York has to work with is a deep well of Civil War resources, even though no battles were fought on its soil.

New York communities large and small were touched in some way by the Civil War, and many still have the evidence to prove it, from old industrial sites that supplied Union troops to vast collections of artifacts held by state and local museums. Besides providing the most soldiers during the war, New York suffered the most casualties, with 46,000 killed. Monuments and memorials to their sacrifice can be found all across the state.

More than 200 New York infantry, cavalry and artillery units served in nearly every campaign of the war, from Gettysburg to Vicksburg, said Michael Aikey, director of the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, home to more than 850 Civil War battle flags, the largest collection in the nation.

Prominent figures from the era — including William Seward, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Fredrick Douglass and Ulysses S. Grant — all lived in New York, and museums and historic sites in their names can be found upstate.

With such links to its Civil War history, New York is counting on local historians, re-enactment groups and the approximately 20 Civil War round tables across the state to help organize anniversary commemorations without any government funding.

"We must definitely commemorate what those soldiers did," said Patrick Falci of Queens, past president of the Civil War Round Table of New York City. "Our job is to keep it going. What happened down there made us what we are today."

Despite the lack of an official role by New York, Weible said he's certain the state's legacy in the War Between the States will be properly honored over the next five years.

"The bottom line is, we've got a great story," he said. "Stay tuned. Things are happening. We're going to make this work."

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