

Studying and debunking civil war myths



1 OF 2 PHOTOS:

THE MYTH: This photo is often used as an example of an African American Confederate unit. But James Horton, the Benjamin Banneker professor emeritus of American studies and history at George Washington University, said there were no major African American Confederate units that engaged in substantial military battles. (Courtesy of James Horton)

[Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory](#)

Where: [Norfolk State University](#)

Date: Sep. 24, 2010

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The Virginian-Pilot

© March 2, 2010

Civil War history is rich with tales of blood and gore, heroism, and too many lies.

Some of the nation's pre-eminent historians will examine that history in a symposium, "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory," at Norfolk State University in September.

The conference is free and open to the public, and registration opened this week.

James Horton, professor, author, and consultant to film and television, will lead the conference. He has signed on several noted Civil War scholars, including Pulitzer Prize-winning author James McPherson and David Blight, director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of

Slavery, Resistance & Abolition at Yale University. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, an award-winning professor and department chair of history at NSU, also will participate.

Horton said one of the biggest myths about the Civil War is that slavery was not a cause.

Slavery is the "great American contradiction," he said. Writers of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, for example, cried for freedom yet held slaves. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, there were more than 4 million slaves in America, Horton said.

"The issues of slavery and race are significant in understanding the Civil War; that's why we decided on that theme," Horton said in a phone interview.

"If you're a historian who thinks it's important to

understand the historical context for things going on in today's society, then you've got to teach history where people are out learning history." Most people are not learning history in a classroom but in museums and forums like the conference, Horton said.

The daylong event will feature panelists talking about events leading up to the war and the conflict itself, then discussions with the audience.

The organizers are planning Saturday tours of local war sites, and Norfolk State will host an exhibit of Civil War images from Hampton Roads at the Harrison B. Wilson Archives. There are plans to video-stream and record the conference for use in schools, Newby-Alexander said.

Newby-Alexander and Horton said it's important to present historical research and allow people to draw their own conclusions. It's also important to debunk the myths that have persisted for decades.

For example, Newby-Alexander said, Lincoln is often called the "Great Emancipator" of blacks but was ambivalent in his feelings toward them. He supported colonizing blacks outside of the country because he did not think whites and blacks could live together once slaves were freed.

Another myth, Newby-Alexander said, is that the North embraced freed blacks.

"It was in the North that you had these riots against abolitionists," Alexander said. "When we look at books like 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' - which was a novel, not a fact - we get these myths, like all white Northerners loved blacks."

This year's conference is the second in a series sponsored by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, created to mark the 150th anniversary of the war's beginning. Other annual gatherings will be held around the state until 2015, each with a different theme.

Last year's event in Richmond drew more than 2,000 people from around the country, said Cheryl Jackson, executive director of the commission. Organizers can register 1,600 for the September event.