

The Future of Richmond's Past

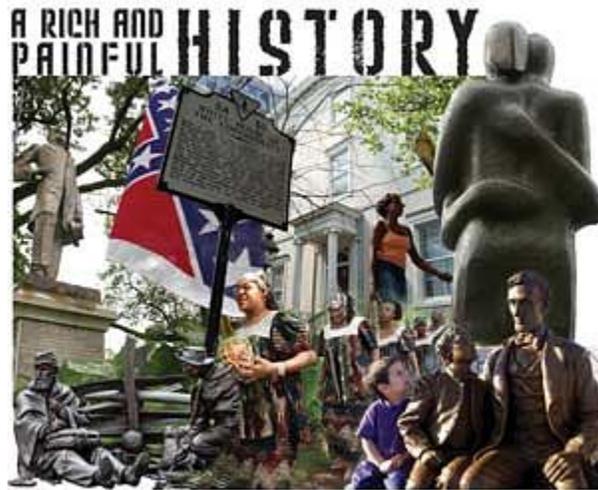


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The front-page story in the Richmond Times Dispatch on Sunday, Jan. 24, was entitled, "Reconciling Our Past: Seeing Our Future," and dealt with how the sesquicentennial -- the 150th anniversary -- of the Civil War in 2011-2015 has stimulated a group in Richmond to think differently about how our city should deal with its history. The Civil War was the most important period in our community's and our country's history. It settled the issue of secession and defined us as an indivisible nation; it settled the issue of slavery and defined us as a nation "with liberty and justice for all"; and it witnessed the death of 620,000 Americans -- more deaths than in all of our nation's other conflicts combined.

Many states have created sesquicentennial commissions, with Virginia leading the way. Our state commission has constructed a wonderful Web site, <http://www.virginiacivilwar.org>, and is planning annual daylong conferences throughout the period.

The first one -- called "America on the Eve of the Civil War" -- was held at the University of Richmond last April and attracted more than 2,200 people from 26 different states to a discussion of events leading up to and through John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.

The state commission also plans two educational exhibits in collaboration with the Virginia Historical Society -- one designed to be carried in a tractor trailer to many locations across the state and another to begin in Richmond and travel to major museums across the state.

During this period, many people from across the country and around the world will look toward Richmond -- the former capital of the Confederacy and the target of four years of war. What are we in Richmond to do about that?

If we ignore it, we could squander both an economic opportunity and the opportunity to help the world understand the history made here in Richmond. Nor should we make the mistake of the centennial in the 1960s by emphasizing only the battles and soldiers -- paying little notice to the home front and the ultimate reunification of America and staying silent about slavery, emancipation, and the legacies of Reconstruction.

Our group has come together with these issues in mind and begun an effort called "The Future of Richmond's Past" to make sure that our commemoration is not marred by complacency or the mistakes and omissions of the centennial.

We started by addressing the "twin" sesquicentennials -- of the Civil War and of the end of slavery. We tried to make sure that all of the parties were "at the table" so that the entire story would be told, and we are reaching out to a broader and more diverse audience in the city. For the first time in this city's history, all of the parties are working together so that the complete story can be told -- to people from out of town and to our own residents.

Richmond's history cannot be told by silence on slavery, because we were the biggest slave-trading center of the biggest slaveholding state in the Union in 1860. The expression "sold down the river" originated here, as slaves from across the state were brought to Richmond to be auctioned and shipped to points farther south, with many families torn apart. And the desire for freedom was demonstrated by many attempts to escape.

Likewise, Richmond's history cannot be told by silence on the Confederacy, because we were the capital of the Confederacy.

The political will to maintain a new nation emanated from Richmond. The military will and ability to fight a long and costly war flowed from here, with Virginians like Lee, Jackson, and Stuart at the forefront. For four years, Richmond was the central war aim of the Union, as the expression "On To Richmond" filled northern papers. And the Confederacy effectively ended and the nation was reunified at Appomattox, within a week of the fall of Richmond.

From the end of the war through the centennial period of the 1960s, Richmond only officially addressed the Confederate part of this story, as white residents simply did not want to hear about slavery, and black residents had few means of making their own history known. In the past several decades, it seems like we did not want to discuss the Confederate part either, but our silence on either has not made us better off.

This new effort has made great progress to date, and we are developing plans for the near future. Our first "community conversation" was at the University of Richmond in

September with 150 community representatives attending. It resulted in the creation of two working groups.

One group, chaired by Christy Coleman, the president of the American Civil War Center, is addressing the issues we need to address to attract people to Richmond to hear our story. Interpretive and way-finding signs, Web sites, walking trails, and marketing are important elements as we compete with Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Charleston for the visitors who want to learn more about this pivotal period.

The economic impact of those visitors can be powerful as they create jobs and pay taxes. Tourism is Virginia's second largest industry, and we have all of the raw materials here in Richmond -- far more than Gettysburg, Vicksburg, or Charleston -- to claim a much bigger slice of that economic pie if we take action.

Some of the basics have already been done, as the local sesquicentennial committee has launched <http://www.OnToRichmond.com> and developed other plans, but the wider community has not been involved.

The second working group, chaired by Delores McQuinn, a delegate in the General Assembly and chair of the Slave Trail Commission, is addressing the needs of our own residents to hear more about Richmond's past, especially those parts which have not been effectively told, including not only slavery, but also women, immigrants, southern unionists, free blacks, and the common Confederate soldier.

In the second community meeting at Virginia Union University in November, the two working groups presented their initial thoughts. The audience of more than 100 people expressed their strong desire for more dialogue within the community. As a result, we are developing plans for a wider involvement with upcoming sessions located around the city to encourage people to come, listen, question, and speak.

The winter weather forced us to postpone our "community conversation" at New Bridge Baptist Church this weekend, but the schedule still includes a gathering at Union Theological Seminary tomorrow, and at the East End Family Resource Center on Feb. 28. These sessions will lead up to another larger conference at VCU in the spring, and we plan to continue them into the future.

In this effort, we are not just talking about history, we are also making history.

A community that engages its past is healthier than a community that closes its eyes and ears; and this is the first concerted effort to address the complete story, the whole story that has made Richmond what it is today.

We think that Richmond can finally talk about the shared history of Confederates and slaves at the same time -- the intertwined history of black people and white people -- so that we can learn the lessons of the past and apply them to the future. There is a chance

that we can set a model for the rest of the state and nation, and we in Richmond should take that chance and move forward.

We believe that the future of our past will be made brighter through these conversations. We can move into a new era with a stronger economic base and, more importantly, a better understanding of who we are.