

UR conference focuses on lessons from eve of civil war

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Lessons from the eve of the Civil War that still resonate today drew about 1,800 people to the University of Richmond yesterday for the inaugural event of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of The American Civil War Commission.

The conference "helps us reckon with the hardest parts of American history," said UR President Edward L. Ayers.

Virginia began its commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the war by focusing on the events of 1859 and bringing together scholars for what was "not the usual Civil War discussion," Ayers said.

The conference looked at events two years before the first shots were fired to help "think through the meaning of slavery" and other factors leading to the start of the war, he said. That perspective is necessary to "understand the decades in the 150 years since, including our own."

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, who spoke at the opening of the daylong conference, noted controversies that still surface locally with roots in the conflict, such as disputes over putting a statue of Arthur Ashe on Monument Avenue or one of Abraham Lincoln at the American Civil War Center.

"And so this conflict 150 years ago is not in the past. We are still wrestling with it today as a commonwealth and as a country," he said.

House Speaker William J. Howell, R-Stafford, who is chairman of the Sesquicentennial Commission, said the conference was the beginning of "national conversation, one that we hope will set a new tone" for discussion of the war.

The commission, established by the General Assembly in 2006, plans six more conferences and two symposiums through 2015. The next one, "African-Americans and the Civil War," will be held at Hampton University next spring.

Yesterday's event, "America on the Eve of the Civil War," was devised as an unscripted experiment in public history, according to Ayers, who moderated four panels.

The 16 Civil War scholars were supposed to talk only about what was known in 1859 without the "familiar and distorted luxury of looking ahead."

So, Jefferson Davis is still a U.S. senator from Mississippi, and Robert E. Lee's in the U.S. Army. Fredericksburg, Manassas and Appomattox "are just towns and junctions that no one has paid too much attention to."

But the issues simmering in 1859 did not sound unfamiliar. Cotton, with its implications for slave-holding states, "was kind of like the oil of today," Ayers said.

Telegraphs and rail lines made it seem as if "space and time are shrinking in this decade," said Gary W. Gallagher, a University of Virginia history professor.

The nation had emerged from the economic depression of 1857, during which the South had fared better than the North.

Christy S. Coleman, president of the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, said Southerners saw that as a verification of the slave system.

The influx of immigrants from Italy and Germany was testing social dynamics, and Southerners saw abolitionists as challenging their very way of life, Coleman said.

Virginia didn't have the right climate for cotton, but the slave traffic flourished here and prices were rising. One trafficker in Richmond earned \$2.6 million in 1859, noted Charles B. Dew, a professor at Williams College.

John Brown emerged as the slaves' would-be savior, and his execution after the raid on Harpers Ferry "became an American crucifixion," said Yale University professor David W. Blight. At least in the North.

Ayers said the panel discussions showed how much there is to still learn and understand about American history and that today's events should be viewed with a "certain humility."

"We can't wall off any facet of human experience," he said.

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