

Va. seeks balance in marking Civil War's 150th anniversary

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RICHMOND -- When Virginia and the rest of the nation set out to mark the 100th anniversary of the Civil War in 1961, the party got off to a rocky start.

Intricate plans were made to mark the military conquests of the Confederate and Union armies, but little attention was paid to the experience of individuals -- soldiers, civilians and slaves.

A massive reenactment of the Battle of Bull Run at Manassas was marred by too little water and too few bathrooms. Most jarringly, some adopted the events as an opportunity to celebrate the Confederacy in the face of the burgeoning civil rights movement.

At last, President John F. Kennedy called on a 31-year-old historian to take over as the centennial's executive director, refocusing it on sober education.

Virginia has turned to the same man -- James I. Robertson Jr., a history professor at Virginia Tech and a Civil War expert -- to help the state avoid the same kinds of problems as it prepares to mark next year's 150th anniversary of the start of the war.

With Robertson's guidance, a commission established by the General Assembly to plan the state's sesquicentennial events has spent four years trying to avoid the impression that they will amount to a celebration of the Confederacy.

There are no Confederate battle flags on the [commission's homepage](#). One of its first events is a [scholarly conference](#) titled "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory." Commission members, a bipartisan collection of 15 legislators, historians and others, even shy from the word "celebrate," preferring to use "commemorate" instead.

"We're going to make it a serious thing, an all-inclusive thing," Robertson said.

'Brother against brother'

Virginia officials hope they can attract tourist dollars from war buffs from across the country during four years of events in the state with more Civil War battlefields than any other. The commission, founded in 2006, is funded through a \$2 million annual appropriation from the legislature, as well as private grants.

But they are keenly aware that Virginia was the capital of the Confederacy and home to many of its most famous figures. The commonwealth got a reminder of the sensitivities

involved when Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) declared last month Confederate History Month, a proclamation he said would bring attention to the 150th anniversary.

McDonnell [quickly apologized](#) after facing stinging national criticism for omitting references to slavery. But an amended version that called slavery an abomination did not satisfy those who thought it was still too deferential to Virginia's role in a losing rebellion.

At a recent event marking the preservation of a new 85-acre section of [the battlefield at Chancellorsville](#), McDonnell told a crowd that the 150th anniversary will be about more than the Confederacy.

"I think people from all over this country and around the world will come here next year to learn the Civil War battles," he said on a podium set up in front of rolling field that saw a bloody Confederate charge during the 1863 battle. "They will also come to learn of a battle that pitted brother against brother and divided this nation like no other event in American history. They will pause to see the sites, like this one here at Chancellorsville, of the most bloody conflict on American soil. They will also pause to reflect on the fact that this was the war that eliminated the abomination of slavery from American soil."

After the event, McDonnell said the anniversary will provide additional opportunities to preserve battlefields as well as to educate Virginia's children. "I look forward to being a champion for racial reconciliation during that time," he said.

One place he might start is at the September conference on slavery at Norfolk State University, which has 1,200 registrants. It will be chaired by James O. Horton, professor emeritus of African American history at George Mason University and an expert on slavery. Horton called the conference "very important to understanding the Civil War, understanding the issues that really shaped the tremendous and heated debates of history."

Slavery plays an important role, too, in a two-disc DVD set that's been produced by the commission and distributed to every school in the state. It emphasizes the experience of soldiers on both sides, African Americans -- free and enslaved -- as well as civilians on the home front.

And in February, a 3,000-square-foot exhibit will open at the Virginia Historical Society with an emphasis on telling the Civil War story from all perspectives. After a run in Richmond, the exhibit will tour the state.

The commission also has plans for high-tech kiosks at state parks and other sites with information about local battlefields and databases of soldiers who fought there, allowing visitors to track their ancestors. The Library of Virginia will make a major push to digitize newly unearthed Civil War-related letters and diaries.

The commission's work has not been without critics. The Richmond Free Press, a black-owned newspaper, has run several editorials criticizing the commission as a waste of taxpayer money whose work is bound to invite four years of Confederate flag waving.

"Most eighth-graders know that Virginia's participation [in the war] was hardly worthy of promoting," publisher Raymond H. Boone wrote last year.

'Broader perspective'

At the same time, members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans say the commission is running a politically correct event that will ignore their ancestors' sacrifices.

"I think they're so afraid of offending someone, hurting someone's feelings, that they're just going to do this generic, bland commemoration, where at the end, we know we've commemorated something, but we're not quite sure what," said Frank Earnest, a Virginia Beach resident and chief of the heritage defense for the group.

House Speaker William J. Howell (R-Stafford), who chairs the commission, said such criticism shows the committee has found the right balance.

"We've been looking at it from a broader perspective, I think, from the very beginning," he said.

Many involved with planning the events say such controversies are inevitable -- and might help raise interest in the commission's work.

"We know this," said former governor L. Douglas Wilder, the grandson of slaves and the nation's first elected black governor. "It won't suffer a lack of attention."