

Virginians share fragile relics for Civil War's 150th anniversary

Civil War letters, diaries and photos are digitally scanned to preserve a record of places where the home front was also the front line.

By Bob Drogin, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Warrenton, Va.—

Betty Jean Vera came clutching a sheaf of yellowing papers, rolled tight and wrapped with string, which she had found in a musty trunk in her attic. The author was a young Confederate soldier.

"He was riding his horse and stopped at a home in Culpeper County," said Vera, a retired teacher. "And he saw a young lady carrying fresh biscuits in the yard. She dumped them in his haversack and he rode off because the Yankees were coming.

"And after the war, he came back and courted her, and married her, and they had five children. And he is my great-grandfather."

Next came Lindsay Grant Hope, a Realtor, with another Civil War diary. The cover was moldy with age, the pages dog-eared and frail, the writing flowery and precise. It belonged to her great-great-grandmother.

"Fort Sumter has been bombarded and captured!" the diarist wrote of the Confederate attack that started the war on April 12, 1861. "Hurrah for the success of the first blow!"

But Hope's ancestor soon penned "sad tidings," "melancholy facts" and "heart-rending news" as the conflict raged and the carnage mounted for four terrible years. The Union and Confederate armies battled so often across northern Virginia that this tiny crossroads changed hands 67 times.

Those haunting voices and other poignant portraits of America's bloodied past are public for the first time now. Archivists are visiting

129 cities and towns across Virginia to digitally scan long-hidden journals, letters, maps and other Civil War records into an online database before they disappear forever.

The project is among hundreds of efforts to commemorate the Civil War sesquicentennial, which starts next month. Nearly every state that existed 150 years ago, and several that didn't, has planned reenactments, workshops or other programs to mark the horrors and the heroism of the deadliest struggle in American history.

Whether the Civil War is still deeply divisive remains to be seen. Bitter passions overshadowed the last major anniversary, the centennial of 50 years ago. Many of those events appeared to romanticize the Confederacy and glorify its myths, historians say.

The federal commission that oversaw the centennial emphasized states' rights, not slavery, as the chief cause of the Southern rebellion, and they barely noted the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves. It also ignored the civil rights struggle then roiling America, though it was a direct result of the institutionalized segregation imposed in the post-war period.

Historians hope the 150th anniversary, and the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president, will provide a more balanced perspective on the conflict that killed about 620,000 people and redefined America.

"Our goal is not to repeat the mistakes of the centennial, which was mostly about celebration," said Bob Beatty, vice president of the American Assn. for State and Local History, which represents 6,000 museums and historical groups.

"This is what people in our business refer to as a teachable moment," agreed historian Rick Beard. Both men spoke at a March 12 briefing in Washington aimed at convincing Congress to create a federal panel to help coordinate and fund commemorative events.

For now, no national program exists. Planning has been left to state and county committees, historical societies, tourism councils and other local civic and educational groups.

Virginia, which is home to far more Civil War battlefields than any other state, has the most developed plans. In 2006, the state General Assembly agreed to pony up \$2 million a year for a commission, the only state legislature to appropriate money.

But history isn't confined to books in Virginia. Countless roads, schools and other public places are named for Gen. Robert E. Lee and other Confederate heroes. Statues and memorials abound in Richmond, former capital of the Confederacy, and nearly every other town.

So do political minefields. Republican Gov. Robert F. McDonnell was forced to publicly apologize after he issued a "Confederate History Month" proclamation last April that omitted any mention of slavery. He later amended the decree to condemn "the evil and inhumane practice."

To avoid strife, the state commission doesn't even show a Confederate flag on its website. Its first event was a scholarly conference titled "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory."

The group's most ambitious effort is a two-year project to find and digitize fragile records that families have squirreled away for generations. The goal is to shed new light on the home front as well as the front line.

Archivists from the state library began visiting rural towns last September, using local media to advertise each session. Nearly every weekend since, people have shown up with faded letters, silvery daguerreotypes, military discharge papers and other family heirlooms.

"We've already scanned more than 6,000 images," said Renee Savits, one of the archivists. "It's amazing. People have saved these through 150 years of fires, floods and people moving."

Most of the material inevitably is from the Confederate side. One slaveholder's diary laments "the unjust emancipation of the slaves,"

whom he calls "the happiest people and best servants on earth."
Another diarist rails against "Uncle Abe" and his "lawless army" of
"cowardly scamps."

Many missives are from rebel soldiers, some barely in their teens.
They plead with their mothers to send chewing tobacco or new boots.
They complain of dysentery and loneliness.

"You read some of these heart-wrenching letters from someone who
can hardly write, and then you find out that they were killed a few
days later," Savits said. "This is the minutiae of history."

On a recent rainy Saturday, Savits and two other archivists set up
their scanners in a former church in Warrenton's historic district. A
Confederate cemetery sits down the road.

Hope, the Realtor, brought a bag bulging with a 187-page diary, hand-
drawn maps, Confederate currency and other material passed down
in her family. "I inherited all this stuff, and I started looking through
it one day," she said. "I've got trunks of stuff."

She pointed to what appeared a religious relic in a scrapbook. "This is
a lock of Jeb Stuart's hair," she said solemnly, and others in the room
suddenly fell silent. "He gave it to my great-great-grandmother."

Absent a DNA test, it's impossible to know whether the reddish curl
came from the famous Confederate cavalry officer, and the archivists
aren't digitizing hair anyway. But the significance was clear.

"It's personal here," said Lorene Payne, who helps run a local history
group. "Virginia was ground zero for the Civil War. The whole state
was occupied. There were battles everywhere. There were constant
troop movements. History is all around us."

Oral tradition also keeps the war alive. According to Payne's family
lore, when Union Gen. John Pope led his troops past, her husband's
forebears "hid in the basement for 1 1/2 days. That's how long it took
for 40,000 men to march by."

Susan Gabbay, 80, a retired librarian, brought an account book from

the farm where she grew up near Petersburg. During the Union siege of the city in 1864, federal troops exploded a mine to open a gap in the rebel defenses but then rushed into the crater, where many were slaughtered.

"Before the battle, the Union general came and told my great-grandmother to leave because it was too dangerous," she said. "When I was little, I thought that's why they called it the Civil War — because he was so polite."

Before they fled, her ancestors buried their silver tea set under a hackberry bush. "They never found it again because when they came back, all the bushes and trees were burned down or cut down," Gabbay said. "They had to start life all over after the war."

Betty Pilcher Brown, 71, a retired lab scientist, said few people now realize how the war devastated the South. "The farms were destroyed, the livestock taken; the currency was worthless. A lot of men didn't come home. Everyone was poor. People didn't forget that," she said.

Brown said her oldest relatives never quite forgave the winning side.

"I had an aunt, lived to be 100, who said she was a grown woman before she knew damn Yankee was two words," she said with a laugh.

And an elderly uncle, she said, once visited the Fredericksburg National Cemetery, where only Union soldiers are buried. "He said, 'Yeah, there's a lot of Yankees here. But not enough of 'em.' "