

## W.Va. Civil War group debuts at Harpers Ferry

Sesquicentennial of John Brown's Raid kicks off

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### Article Photos



Robertson

HARPERS FERRY - The observance of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War officially began in Harpers Ferry and Bolivar Thursday with a joint meeting of the West Virginia and Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War commissions.

While the Virginia SACWC has been up and running since 2006 with \$2 million allotted to it by the Virginia General Assembly, West Virginia's commission is only now being filled with members, some of whom found out they had been appointed to the position at Thursday's meeting, which was the first official gathering of the West Virginia SACWC.

State Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, and state Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, D-Logan, co-sponsored legislation this year to establish a state commission to recognize the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

"The commission has three aspects," Unger explained. "To observe the 150th anniversary of John Brown's raid, the Civil War in West Virginia and the 150th anniversary of the creation of West Virginia."

Oct. 16-18 will be the 150th anniversary of fanatical abolitionist John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry.

The four-year-long 150th anniversary of the Civil War begins in 2011.

West Virginia's 150th anniversary will be celebrated in 2013.

"The state's sesquicentennial will be held at Harpers Ferry," Unger said. " President Barack Obama has been invited to attend."

Unger got \$100,000 for the West Virginia SACWC, he said. He hopes to supplement that with private donations and corporate sponsors. The commission's members are all volunteers, he said.

Unger will serve as the state Senate's non-voting representative on the commission. The state House of Delegates' non-voting representative has not been named yet.

The commission will have 11 voting members. They will serve through July 1, 2021.

Current members include Beth White and Rick Wolfe, who are citizen members; Betty Carver, commissioner of the division of tourism; Randall Reid-Smith, commissioner of the division of culture and history; Kay Goodwin, secretary of the department of education and the arts; Peter Carmichael, Ph.D., Eberly Professor of Civil War Studies at West Virginia University and Mark Snell, Ph.D., director of the George Tyler Moore Center for the Study of the Civil War in Shepherdstown, who are academic-historian members.

After tours of several sites around Harpers Ferry National Historical park in the morning, the joint meeting of the two commissions convened at the Mather Training Center for presentations and a panel discussion Thursday afternoon.

In his remarks, Tomblin said the sesquicentennial offers us a better understanding of who we are as a nation and what the Civil War means to today's social structure.

"The Civil War left us with a united nation," Tomblin told the audience. "Just think where the world would be if Lincoln had not stood his ground to preserve the union."

William J. Howell, the speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates and chairman of the Virginia SACWC, congratulated West Virginia for inaugurating its 150th anniversary commission.

"Over the next six years, we'll explore the Civil War from the battlefield to the homefront," he said.

The sesquicentennial offers an opportunity to preserve the documents of the Civil War, he added, and to expand the reach of history through the use of new technologies.

Dennis Frye, HFNHP's chief of interpretation, education, cultural resources and partnerships, presented activities planned by the Quad-State John Brown Commemoration Committee to observe the 150th anniversary of John Brown's Raid.

In August, Descendants' Day is planned, he said. About 400 descendants of all the people involved in John Brown's Raid - from descendants of Brown's raiders' to descendants of the town militia that surrounded Brown in the federal arsenal's fire station - are expected to attend, he said.

Frye said that on Oct. 16, the march of Brown and his men from the Kennedy Farm in southern Washington County, Md., where he staged the raid, to Harpers Ferry will be recreated.

"Using the original roads at the original time, 8 p.m.," he said. "It will be a night march."

Events will be held in Charles Town in November and December to commemorate Brown's trial and execution, Frye said.

The Quad-State group includes 21 members representing several different organizations from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia, he explained.

The Quad-State group formed about a year ago in Shepherdstown because Maryland does not nor does it plan to form an American Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission, Frye said. A native and life-long resident of Maryland, Frye said that embarrasses him.

Frye said that during the Civil War centennial 50 years ago, John Brown was not acknowledged as having anything to do with the Civil War.

"The superintendent of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park was instructed not to take part in any observation of John Brown's Raid," he said. "Times have changed."

Cate Magennis Wyatt, president of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership, presented her organization's plans to for observing the Civil War's 150th anniversary.

JTHG is a non-profit organization dedicated to raising national awareness of the history of a region that runs from Gettysburg, Pa., to Charlottesville, Va., primarily following the U.S. 15 corridor. Historic sites in Maryland and West Virginia are included in its promotional efforts.

Wyatt said JTHG's efforts have focused on hospitality training and creating education opportunities for all age groups using the latest communication technologies.

Cheryl Jackson, the executive director of the Virginia SACWC, presented excerpts of the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania National Military Park's vodcast tour.

Parts of a film called "Virginia in the Civil War: A Sesquicentennial Remembrance" were presented by James I. "Bud" Robertson Jr., Ph.D., alumni distinguished professor at Virginia Tech.

The three-hour documentary, which is divided into nine 20-minute segments, will be distributed to every school in Virginia this fall, he said.

Carmichael moderated a panel discussion titled "Opportunities of the Civil War Sesquicentennial: Understanding Our Past, Embracing Our Future."

The panelists were Charles F. Bryan Jr., Ph.D., president emeritus of the Virginia Historical Society; Jim Lighthizer, president of the Civil War Preservation Trust; and Robert K. Sutton, Ph.D., the chief historian for the National Park Service.

Tours of Harpers Ferry and Bolivar, featuring John Brown's Raid, Bolivar Heights and Schoolhouse Ridge Civil War battlefields, that were conducted Thursday morning, will be featured in Saturday's edition of The Journal.

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