

BANG!

The Civil War's 150th anniversary comes in 2011. Will we bungle it again or cash in on making it relevant?

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Do-overs in life are few.

And that fact wasn't lost on Richmond attorney Steve Baril after he heard a moving speech by University of Richmond president and history scholar Ed Ayers in April.

Ayers' thesis was this: The 150th anniversary of the Civil War is coming, and the press will focus on Richmond "whether we like it or not."

"What they write about will be more about the people who do business and live in Richmond today," Baril says. "What kind of image do we want to convey?"

Fifty years ago, the National Civil War Centennial Commission relied on fanciful battle recreations and events more nostalgic than historic. Slavery did not receive acknowledgment, nor did the lives of women and families.

So now, Virginia's Sesquicentennial Commission is responsible for making the Civil War more relevant for residents and visitors and figuring out how to commemorate the anniversary.



Some see it as a huge opportunity for the region — others, as a boondoggle.

Balancing Act

Richmond Slave Trail Commission Chair Delores McQuinn (also a delegate for Virginia's 70th District) (pictured above) and Richmond Free Press Publisher Ray Boone are on different sides of the 150th-anniversary discussion.

McQuinn wants to see Richmond's slave trail figure in the sesquicentennial.

The Richmond Slavery Reconciliation Statue, placed in 2007 at 15th and Main streets, was a significant addition to the trail. The statue, one of three worldwide, recognizes the slave-trading triangle linking Benin in West Africa, London and Richmond.

By year's end, McQuinn says, a minimum of 15 interpretive signs will be installed from the site of the Manchester docks (across the 14th Street Bridge) to Shockoe.

McQuinn sees momentum building in Shockoe for a black heritage center. "We can't wait five years, or another 10," to establish it, she says. "We have to do this now," adding that no discussion of Civil War history can occur without addressing the fundamental aspect of slavery. "It's shameful and painful, but it happened, and we can't change it," she says. "Acknowledging this allows us to move on, and to never forget."

Publisher Boone, in the spring of this year, wrote several editorials condemning the sesquicentennial. In April he wrote, "Most eighth-graders know that Virginia's participation [in the war] was hardly worthy of promoting — and certainly not deserving of honor." In a later editorial he described the sesquicentennial commission as a despicable waste of taxpayer money.

Boone claims the sesquicentennial commission is presenting distorted history. The characterization of the upcoming commemoration as being diverse and taking in all the sides of the issue, he says, is an example of how people have been duped. He posed a series of rhetorical questions.

"Say you went to the World Series, and the loser got celebrated? Is that balanced? You have Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court, which is diversity, but is it justice?" he says.

In last month's issue of the Civil War News, Len Riedel, executive director of the Blue & Gray Education Society (a Chatham-based nonprofit that conducts tours and archival projects), also addresses the issue of balance: "The tragedy is that the resources of the government and well-funded public agencies are being used to shape the discussion without accepting constructive input from people who are seriously engaged."

Riedel goes on to ask, "What makes a good sesquicentennial? ... It is the honest fulfillment and fundamental obligation of the story tellers/historians of our society — a true liberal education. What are historians and what should they be? Acceptance and tolerance goes both ways."

On to Richmond!

Like it or not, people come to Virginia and to Richmond to see the war.

Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission figures indicate that while Civil War travelers aren't necessarily more affluent than other leisure-time visitors, they nonetheless stay 50 percent longer and spend 24 percent more money than other tourists.

The American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar alone receives some 70,000 visitors a year. The Cold Harbor National Battlefield Park visitor center, not much bigger than a luxury bathroom, annually receives 20,000 people.

The slogan adopted for the Richmond region's sesquicentennial campaign is the Union rallying cry: On to Richmond! This will appear by year's end on a Web site that the Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau is building. The \$27,000 for a Web site came from the state's public-private commission, the RMCVB Foundation and the city of Petersburg.

With its small marketing budget, Richmond wants to attract European visitors who can now better afford an overseas trip, with Dulles International Airport as a natural gateway to the state's history.

A challenge for the directors of Civil War-related sites in the Richmond region is getting visitors to move around.

David Ruth, Richmond National Battlefield Park superintendent, says his staff is counting visitors leaving Tredegar to tour battlefields. The numbers aren't as high as he'd like; he estimates probably around 20 percent. Where Gettysburg is one central place, battlefields surround Richmond.

On the Tredegar site, the American Civil War Center's next-door neighbor is the Richmond National Battlefield Park Visitor Center. The former requires paid admission, the latter does not, and greater collaboration between the two is likely.

"We're trying to figure out how to better control the experience," says Christy Coleman, president of the Civil War Center. The Tredegar site is open to the ambling public, who may look at plaques and leave without going inside either center.

To better package the experience for the public, the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, the Museum of the Confederacy and the Richmond National Battlefield Park Visitor Center offer a \$15 combined ticket.

“And one gives directions to the other,” Rawls says. “We didn’t need to wait until the sesquicentennial to start that.”

The Virginia Historical Society began planning its 2011 exhibit three years ago. It will open *American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia*, Feb. 4, 2011. The exhibit will then travel to museum locations throughout the state.

VHS President and CEO Paul A. Levensgood describes the exhibit as “immersive.”

Levensgood points out that Virginia wasn’t unified in support of secession — this is a major reason West Virginia exists — yet the state became the war’s caldron.

The exhibit will allow visitors to follow the stories of individuals with poignant stories, including the opportunity to assume the guise of a fleeing slave trying to find Union lines. “Most of them didn’t make it; they were captured or killed,” Levensgood says. “You as that person will have choices to make.”

In April University of Richmond President Ed Ayers organized the first of the Virginia Sesquicentennial’s conferences, *America on the Eve of the Civil War*, which drew 2,200 people from 24 states. Ayers instructed panelists that they could not talk about anything after 1858.

Yale Professor David W. Blight participated in the UR conference and later wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Multitudes still cannot bring themselves to confront the story of slavery as both lived experience and as the central cause of the Civil War.”

Blight said that he had to pinch himself when Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission Chairman and Virginia House of Delegates Speaker William J. Howell announced that the anniversary would focus on “causes” and “enduring legacies” of the conflict. And Gov. Tim Kaine insisted that the Civil War be treated with “analysis and commemoration” and that the events of 1861-65 weren’t in the past at all, but quite alive.

The Civil War is not going away, Robertson says. “It is too huge and far-reaching to be ignored. Yet if we can see it for what it was and what it was not, treat it in the atmosphere of commemoration and not celebration, use it to teach our young people how important American history is, then some good can surely come of the sesquicentennial.”

Civil War: What Is It Good For?

Absent a national commission this time out, some 18 states and counting, of which Virginia was first, are coordinating sesquicentennial observances.

Sesquicentennial organizers want to prevent the splintering of commemorations into one for whites, another for blacks, North and South.

Historian James Robertson, director of Virginia Tech's Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, served on the national commission in 1961 and now has another chance with Virginia's new commission.

The centennial came when the nation wanted to celebrate. The new national interstate highway system allowed access to Civil War-related sites previously difficult to reach. But the events surrounding the 100th anniversary tended to illuminate generals and battles. Little mention was made of the more troubling aspects of the conflict. "There were mistakes, and some bad history," Robertson says.

"From 1846-1861, any motion that comes before Congress revolves around slavery," Robertson says. "And this debate goes from shouting to shooting in 15 years."

Waite Rawls III, director of the Museum and White House of the Confederacy, explains that for a century following the war veterans controlled the historical narrative. "They didn't care about social or political stuff. They wanted to memorialize their deeds on the battlefields. Things have happened since then, and a lot more attention is given to social history — and we have an African-American president."

Another one of the centennial's big failings was not connecting with young people, says lifelong educator Robertson. He vowed that if he lived to participate in another such anniversary, that he'd strive to get it right. Robertson serves as executive producer of a three-hour documentary on the war, which will be broken into 20-minute segments and distributed to 3,000 schools statewide.

Richmond's Slave Trail

The most thriving business in Shockoe during the 19th century was the buying, selling and shipping of human beings by the tens of thousands. When Abraham Lincoln came to still-smoldering Richmond in April 1865, this was the place he stumbled into by accident.

Slave-merchant offices lined East Main Street, near the 17th Street Market and today's Main Street Station. At the center of "The Devil's Half-Acre," Robert Lumpkin, a chief exporter of slaves into the South, maintained a holding facility termed as Lumpkin's Jail. Nearby was the

Negro Burial Ground, where blacks hanged at nearby gallows were interred, perhaps among them would-be revolutionary Gabriel Prosser.

Most of this space was ignored, built on and paved over due to “ignorance, embarrassment and shame,” says Richmond Slave Trail Commission Chair Delores L. McQuinn (also a delegate in Virginia’s 70th District).

The commission was formed in 1992 and in 2001 McQuinn (at the time a city council member) became chair. The first excavations of Lumpkin’s Jail came in 2006. McQuinn said then, about confronting Richmond’s slave history, “If we don’t get it right here, we won’t get it right anywhere in the nation.” —HK

Pathfinder

Virginia’s Civil War battlefields are collectively a huge outdoor museum. To understand what transpired on these hallowed fields, one needs guidance.

Mitch Bowman heads up the Civil War Trails Commission. A former jet fighter pilot from Charles City County who as a civilian flew aerial tours out of Williamsburg, he has for the past 15 years galvanized a six-state program to provide access and signage for Civil War sites in 224 localities.

“I wear two or three hats on any given day; I’ll be talking to the governor in the morning and Miss Utility in the afternoon,” he explains. “I love it all, but it gobbled up two or three other [earlier] coordinators.”

Logo signs, with a red bugle and three white stars on a blue background, mark the trail. The attractive plaques are placed at seemingly random country crossroads and alongside battlefields. Podcasts and maps are available on the Trails Commission web site. In an average week, some 2,000 podcasts are downloaded.



“The most important thing is getting people out,” Bowman says. “The exciting thing isn’t the guy in Wisconsin reading that sign online; but him standing on the site where his forefathers fought and bled. That’s powerful stuff, and people do it.”

Richmond has 60-70 signs among the 422 Virginia sites. The signs cost \$2,600 a pop. Their fabrication and placement is paid largely through matching federal and state road-improvement funds. Bowman estimates 70 more markers in Virginia by 2012. “We replace the markers every five to seven years,” he says. “Maintenance is half my day.”

The \$8-\$10 million spent for the past 15 years has allowed the construction of 54 parking lots, many of these near sites interpreted for the public for the first time.

These are places you’d have thought would’ve been marked long ago; Frederick Douglass’ birthplace in Hillsboro, Md., the store in Dorchester, Md., that Harriet Tubman used on 21 occasions as a stop on the escaping slave route known as the Underground Railroad. “Still with the original floorboards and cabinetry.”

When new history is learned, the signs are revised. Bowman explains, “We had 15 unknown soldiers in Scottsville [Va.], but not along ago they identified those boys, and now we have their names. Genealogy takes it out of that North-South realm.” Getting permission from property owners and civic leaders to place the signs and create pull-offs requires high diplomacy.

“We’re building in Maryland, more in Pennsylvania, and you can see their shoulders relax when we’re talking to them [and they realize] we’re not a bunch of neo-Confederates.”

Richmond and Virginia Sesquicentennial Information

American Association of State and Local History, aaslh.org: See the tab “National Initiatives” then “The Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration.” Participating states and their organizers.

American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, tredegar.org: 780-1865.

Civil War Traveler, civilwar-va.com: See the “Civil War Trails” icon that leads to a state-by-state, site-by-site description of the Civil War Trails locations and podcasts.

Civil War Trails, civilwartrails.org: Portal for the Civil War Trails system.

culturalheritagetourism.org: Go to “Success Stories” then “Virginia,” for a discussion of how the state interprets the war.

Museum and White House of the Confederacy, moc.org: 649-1861.

Pamplin Historical Park & The National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, pamplinpark.org: 861-2408.

Richmond and Petersburg National Battlefield parks, nps.org: Richmond Civil War Visitors Center, 771-2145; Petersburg National Battlefield Park, 732-3531.

Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau, visitRichmondVa.com: 782-2777.

Richmond-Petersburg Regional Civil War 150th Anniversary Committee, ontorichmond.org: Site up later this year, co-sponsored by RMCVB (above). vahistorical.org: The Virginia Historical Society, 358-4901. virginiacivilwar.org: The Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission's official site. News and events related to the 150th Civil War anniversary and archived audio files of the Commission-sponsored conferences.



A New “Museum System”

The Museum of the Confederacy is undergoing a reorganization of its one-of-a-kind collection and establishing a “museum system,” which, museum

director Waite Rawls says, is the current museum parlance. “We’re avoiding words like ‘satellite’ and ‘branch’ because this implies there’s something bigger and better elsewhere,” he explains.

Following a long and sometimes controversial analysis of the MOC’s accessibility to downtown visitors, the museum is seeking to establish three more exhibition spaces, in Appomattox, Fredericksburg and Fort Monroe. The Appomattox venue, according to Rawls, will be completed during 2011.

The 11,000-square-foot, approximately \$8 million building is to be located at the intersection of U.S. 450 and state Route 24, near the Appomattox National Battlefield Park entrance. “There’s no other building project as significant as this for the sesquicentennial,” Rawls says.

The permanent exhibit at Appomattox will concern the war's end and include a number of the Confederate unit flags surrendered there (the museum owns 59 of them), Robert E. Lee's uniform and the pen he used to sign the document of capitulation. There will be a wall with hand-written parole papers given to the remaining 28,000 Southern soldiers. Visitors can search for relatives who fought.

Rawls doesn't know when the other two parts of the system will open to the public; fundraising in the current downturn has proven difficult.

Steve Hedberg photo illustration; McQuinn photo by Sarah Walor; Illustration courtesy The Museum of the Confederacy