

VIRGINIA SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR COMMISSION
Summary of Workgroup 2 - Signature Events and Activities
August 1, 2007

Members Present:

Speaker William J. Howell, Chair
Delegate Johnny S. Joannou
Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr.

The Honorable Viola O. Baskerville, Secretary of Administration
Dr. Theodore DeLaney, Associate Professor of History, Washington and Lee University
Graham Dozier, Assistant Editor of Publications, Virginia Historical Society
Prof. Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Associate Professor in the History of the American Civil War, UVA
Richard Lewis, National Public Relations Manager, Virginia Tourism Corporation
Dr. John W. Mountcastle, Ret. Brig. Gen., Army Chief of Military History, UofR
Dr. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, President, Sweet Briar College
Dr. Brian Wills, Professor of History, University of Virginia at Wise

Advisory Participants Present:

Will Greene, Pamplin Historical Park
Jim Kelly, Virginia Historical Society
Howard Kittell, Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation
Kevin Levin, Charlottesville
Russ Smith, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County National Battlefield Park

The purpose of this organizational meeting of Workgroup 2 (Signature Events and Activities) was to discuss and consider recommendations on events, activities and themes to unify the commemoration. Members shared their thoughts, ideas and perspectives about the 150th anniversary commemoration, including the importance of local involvement; the need to have a balanced recitation of the war; the desire to sponsor cumulative events; and the need to tell the story throughout the education community, including elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and law schools. Prof. Ervin Jordan submitted a reflective essay on potential complications and recommendations for the commemoration.

Staff Report - Cheryl Jackson

Staff presented an overview of the work of the Commission to date by outlining its objectives, accomplishments, and goals. The makeup of the Commission's three workgroups was presented, along with information pertaining to the activities and costs associated with the Civil War Centennial Commission.

Plans in development include: (i) a statewide coordination effort, through which the Commission will link, coordinate, unify, and support existing Civil War-related museums and sites; (ii) working with the Virginia Historical Society to develop a major statewide traveling exhibit of

artifacts, documents and high-tech components; and (iii) a HistoryMobile tractor trailer exhibition that will travel to every city and county in Virginia.

Plans currently under discussion include a digitization project to collect, catalog, preserve and digitally scan Civil War documents and artifacts; and establishment of a grant fund for Civil War programs, including teacher workshops, in-school activities, conferences, exhibits, speakers' bureaus, etc.

National Centennial Commemoration: Lessons Learned - Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr.

Dr. Robertson, who served as Executive Director of the national centennial commission, stated that mistakes were made during the centennial, but are being addressed by the Commission. He pointed to the fact that the Commission is meeting throughout the state and not just in Richmond, which is important because the commemoration should be taken into the community. Furthermore, he applauded the decision not to build a new facility for the sesquicentennial, but rather coordinate all that there is to see throughout the Commonwealth.

Dr. Robertson stressed that the Commission should not try to control everything that is said or done during the commemoration. In fact, it can not control what others may say or do, due to freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The Commission must expect that some will disagree, protest, or take unpopular stands. However, in all things, the Commission must hold the high ground, focusing on solemn remembrance. In his inimitable words, the warts of history are often as telling as the beauty spots.

Dr. Robertson opined that the Commission should publish a monthly newsletter as a primary form of contact, which would list announcements of events happening throughout the state and position the Commission with oversight of statewide events. However, there is a problem when considering what include and what to exclude on such a calendar. Only those events that commemorate, not celebrate, should be published. The Commission needs to consider whether it should publish reenactments or not, which can insert a celebratory atmosphere into what should be a solemn remembrance of lives lost.

The primary goal for the Commission should be education. Dr. Robertson stated that the biggest mistake made during the centennial was that it overlooked young people. The Commission must seek out ways to bring young people into the commemoration, imparting to them the lessons that have been learned. Dr. Robertson mentioned the importance of local involvement in the commemoration, including establishing a sesquicentennial committee in each city and county. As a way to get individuals involved at the local level and also to serve as a lasting research tool for historians, Dr. Robertson recommended that each locality be asked to transcribe its 1860 Census.

Dr. Robertson ended his remarks by saying that Virginia will be the leader that the nation will follow in commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. The nation as we know it today was born in 1865; the Commission must work hard to make the sesquicentennial meaningful to all.

Virginia Tourism Research - Richard Lewis

Mr. Lewis stated that the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) surveyed more than 4,000 visitors to Virginia in 2003/2004 and more than 10% said that they experienced a Civil War site while in Virginia. Data from the VTC show that Civil War travelers tend to be older adults, travel with few young children, and to stay longer and spend more money than average visitors to the state. In addition, Civil War travelers tend to research and plan their trips months in advance, which has implications for the Commission's website to serve as an interactive travel planning tool.

Discussion of Proposals: Signature Conferences and Tours - Dick Hickman

Mr. Hickman presented a schedule for proposed Signature Conferences to be sponsored by the Commission that set a national standard; are designed for the general audience; and are made broadly accessible through television, radio and the commission's website. A suggested format for the conferences might be a dinner the night before for donors, followed by a one day conference, including a series of panel discussions. The conferences could be held in early spring of each year in order to publicize commemorative events scheduled during the coming year. To appeal to the largest audience, the conferences should feature top speakers with national name recognition.

Next meeting: Workgroup members were asked to identify themes to unify the commemoration period, and to comment on the Signature Conference proposal. The next meeting of Workgroup 2 will be held on Monday, December 3, 2007, at 1:00 p.m., in the General Assembly Building, 6th floor.