

Proposed Signature Conferences

Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission

The Commission may wish to sponsor a series of signature conferences, in cooperation with Virginia's public and private institutions of higher education, to address the broad themes and the military history of the Civil War. These conferences will be designed for the general interest audience, rather than for academic historians, although the presentations could be published.

This series of conferences would be intended to set the national standard for interesting, informative discussions by the most distinguished scholars, at the highest level, to foster the broadest possible public understanding of the history of the Civil War era, including the causes of the war, the perspectives of African Americans, why the North won and the South lost, the impact and continuing legacies of the war -- and why the Civil War still matters today.

The conferences should be widely accessible. In cooperation with public television, the conferences could be televised and recorded for use in secondary schools and colleges and viewing on the commission's web site. A standard schedule could be developed, including a formal dinner or other signature event sponsored by the commission at the host institution, followed by a one-day conference the following day. An early spring date could be selected as the fixed date each year, so the theme for that year could be presented and the events scheduled during the coming year could be publicized at each conference.

An overall chairman for each annual conference would be appointed by the commission. The conference chairmen should be persons of national stature, and the speakers should include the recognized national leaders in the field. The emphasis should be on fewer speakers, and the highest quality of presentation. A secretariat to provide support services and coordination would be required.

Proposed Recommendation

The Commission may wish to consider funding a series of signature conferences through a general fund grant each year, which could be supplemented with other nongeneral funds, such as federal or corporate grants, and private fundraising. A proposed series of seven annual conferences is suggested below, for the years 2009 through 2015. In view of the limited time remaining before the first conference, the first conference in spring 2009 would be held at the University of Richmond under the chairmanship of Dr. Ed Ayres.

*The Promise of Freedom: The Legacy of the Civil War
(Proposed Signature Conferences)*

2009 - The Coming of the Civil War

Focus: The broad causes of the war, including the development of southern sectionalism and nationalism, the debates over slavery, federalism, and states rights, leading up through the splintering of the national political parties and the election of 1860, and secession.

Chairman: Dr. Ed Ayres

Location: University of Richmond

2010 - African-Americans and the Civil War

Focus: The perspectives and contributions of African-Americans, both slave and free, during the Civil War, on slavery, the home front, the abolition movement, the Underground Railroad, the role of African-Americans in the Union and Confederate Armies, emancipation and reconstruction. (A conference on the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution has also been suggested by the work group on education.)

Chairman:

Location:

2011 - American Military Strategy and the Civil War

Focus: The broad military strategies of both the Union and Confederate Armies in the Eastern Theatre, including the relative economic and military strengths and weaknesses of the Union and the Confederacy; the reasons why the North won and the South lost; Abraham Lincoln's and Jefferson Davis' leadership of their respective war efforts; the impact of the war in increasing the size and scope of both the United States and the Confederate governments; and, the impact of the Civil War on American military strategy and tactics.

Chairman:

Location:

2012 - The Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac

Focus: The military history of the Army of Northern Virginia from the emergence of Robert E. Lee in 1862 through the end of the war, including an overview of the major battles in Virginia, as well as perspectives on the leadership qualities of Lee and his key lieutenants, his relations with the Confederate government, his staff, intelligence and supply operations, and his ability to maintain the morale of the Confederate soldiers through 1865 in the face of diminishing resources. The conference would also address the corresponding qualities of the Union Army of the Potomac, and the role of African-American troops.

Chairman:

Location:

2013 - The Home Front in the Civil War

Focus: Life on the home front, including the impact of the war on women and the economic devastation of local communities in Virginia. This conference could highlight the Valley of the Shadow program developed by the University of Virginia, which provides web-based resources to study the impact of the war on two communities: Staunton, Virginia, and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

Chairman:

Location:

2014 - Civil War in a Global Context

Focus: International perspectives on civil war, including but not limited to the American Civil War, the impact of civil war on government, the military, and society, and the effect of civil war on the development of democratic institutions. This conference might also consider the diplomatic aspects of the American Civil War, including the involvement of the European Great Powers, including France and England, and the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation on international relations; as well as the diplomatic relations between the governments of the United States and the Confederate States of America and the unsuccessful negotiations for peace between the two governments.

Chairman:

Location:

2015 - The Promise of Freedom: The Memory of the Civil War

Focus: The memory of the Civil War and the continuing debates over its meaning for all Americans today, including the development of the concept of the Lost Cause, the process of reconciliation, and current interpretations of the war from the Union, Confederate and African-American perspectives.

Chairman:

Location: