

# Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission

## Workgroup 2 (Signature Events and Activities) The Honorable William J. Howell, *Chairman*



### Signature Conferences and Signature Tours: Discussion Points December 3, 2007

At its initial meeting, members of the workgroup reviewed a draft proposal for Signature Conferences and Tours, and were asked to reflect and comment on the proposal during the interim. In addition, members were asked to suggest themes that would unify the statewide commemoration period. Those comments have been captured below and are offered as a starting point for discussion. Last, issues that the workgroup identified needing further discussion are presented.

The workgroup agreed that the ultimate interest in planning Signature Events and Activities is to present a balanced, truthful depiction of Virginia's participation in the American Civil War, with the chief goal as education.

#### Themes

1. Assign a theme to each year. Use the "Signature Conference" topic as the annual theme for the statewide commemoration, which localities, museums, schools, and universities can amplify the theme through exhibits, lectures, etc. Current annual conference topics are:
  - 2009 - *The Coming of the War*
  - 2010 - *African-Americans and the Civil War*
  - 2011 - *American Military Strategy and the Civil War*
  - 2012 - *The Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac*
  - 2013 - *The Homefront in the Civil War*
  - 2014 - *The Civil War in a Global Context*
  - 2015 - *The Promise of Freedom: Memory of the Civil War*
2. "*Virginia's People, Virginia's Stories*": Tell stories of the people affected by the Civil War - - real people that the public can identify with, who left behind their words, whose story is tied closely to a place or places in Virginia. Visitors could read the stories online for the first time, look at supporting photographs, then come to Virginia to see where the events took place (e.g., Shenandoah at War website - story of Eliza Clinedinst in New Market). It is important to show the reality of the war (both battlefield and homefront) as an all-consuming event that touched every life in Virginia.

## **Signature Conferences**

1. Statewide inclusiveness: Issue an RFP or letter of invitation to each public and private college and university in the state, outlining the requirements necessary to serve as a host institution, allowing them to opt-in for consideration as the host site.
  - a. Consideration: Can the Conference Chair be affiliated with a different university that which is hosting the conference?
  - b. Consideration: Should other sites be considered as conference host, such as the Virginia Historical Society, the Library of Virginia, the American Civil War Center at Tredegar, Mariners' Museum, or Fort Monroe?
2. Order of the conferences should reflect African-American focus at the beginning of the series (*note: change has been made in current draft of Signature Conferences*). Be sure to include African-American civilians and soldiers.
3. Is there a way to extend the conferences past 1865 to include reconstruction? The period after the end of the fighting could be instrumental in helping to understand why things are the way they are.
4. Use the Signature Conference as a kickoff for the year, presenting it as the beginning of the theme for that year, rather than just a one-day conference.
5. Divide the conference into separate segments that can be located at various points throughout the state as a way of engaging the maximum number of people.
  - a. Consideration: Can conferences be simulcast statewide?
6. Target the conferences to the general-interest public as opposed to the Civil War buff or academic historian, helping to broaden the general interest in history and specific interest in Virginia's Civil War history.
7. Be sure that conferences help people understand why the Civil War still matters today.
8. Funding: Seek corporate sponsorship of the conference series.
9. Plan effectively to absorb increased traffic during events, but don't scare people off by warning of traffic or parking problems.
10. Will the conferences be free of charge? For how many participants should we plan?

## **Signature Tours**

1. Geographic diversity: include every corner of the state. For example, the 2010 tour could be based in Wise and conducted as a joint venture between UVA-Wise and Emory and Henry, and include military actions at Pound, Jonesville and Cumberland Gap.
2. Work with regional organizations, such as the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation or The Journey through Hallowed Ground, to help organize and present tours regionally.
3. Give local communities every opportunity to participate financially and materially in the tour series.
4. National Endowment for the Humanities: Create a three-way partnership among the NEH, the state (through the Commission), and the National Park Service to create specialized tours that are designed for and embedded into an interactive website.

## **Remaining Issues:**

1. If the Commission serves as an umbrella under which statewide activities take place, what should be included and what should be excluded from a calendar of events for the website and/or a newsletter? Namely, will reenactments be publicized?
2. How will the Commission "guard its logo?" What events and activities should the Commission endorse?
  - "A potential problem is what would happen if a local group or chapters of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and/or the Daughters of the Confederacy decides to sponsor such activities; African-American groups/chapters of the NAACP, etc., may consider such efforts with antipathy and as having possible racist connotations. Resulting negative publicity would have consequences across the state and the nation and impact the Commission's goals and work. One hopes citizens of goodwill can come together to address and resolve as many potential racial issues as possible. African-Americans have had an ambivalent relationship with America for four centuries. One person's villain is another person's hero, and this is particularly embodied in the Old Dominion where two of its cities are known as "the capital of the Confederacy" (Richmond) and the "Last Capital of the Confederacy" (Danville). Many white Americans resent being symbolically and literally blamed for sins and crimes not their own and their ancestors branded as criminals and oppressors. It goes without saying that Civil War commemorations are potential cultural and racial minefields. . ." (Excerpted from comments submitted by Prof. Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., October 26, 2007)

3. Commemoration fatigue: How do we pique and sustain public interest in the sesquicentennial: (i) over a seven-year span, and (ii) with a multitude of other competing events and anniversaries (e.g., bicentennial of the War of 1812, centennial of the start of World War I in 2014, etc.)
4. Who is the target audience for commemorative activities and events? What is "the message?"
5. How will the "Ask an Expert" webcast be managed? Options include:
  - a. "Historian in Residence" who changes every quarter.
  - b. Assign a chief historian who oversees the project and assigns questions to a particular historian.
  - c. Send question out to all historians, letting the 'first responder' take the question.