

Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission
Harper's Ferry, West Virginia
June 25, 2009

The Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission held a joint meeting with its newly-formed West Virginia counterpart on June 25 to mark the beginning of the national commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. The day-long program was held at Harper's Ferry National Historical Park as part of a series of events planned for the 150th anniversary of John Brown's Raid. Special guests included West Virginia Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin; Robert G. Stanton, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Policy, Management and Budget; members of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation; representatives from the Civil War Preservation Trust; and partners from the Journey Through Hallowed Ground.

Morning Program: Tours, Civil War Trails, Land Transfer Ceremony and Student Service-Learning Project

Staff of Harper's Ferry National Historical Park, led by Dennis Frye, Chief of Interpretation, Education, Cultural Resources and Partnerships, took members and guests on bus tours of John Brown's Fort. It was in this building, formerly known as the Armory, that John Brown and several of his followers barricaded themselves during the final hours of their ill-fated raid of October 16, 17, and 18, 1859. In 1909, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of John Brown's Raid, the building was purchased and moved to the Storer College campus on Camp Hill in Harpers Ferry. Acquired by the National Park Service in 1960, the building was moved back to the Lower Town in 1968. Because the fort's original site was covered with a railroad embankment in 1894, the building now sits about 150 feet east of its original location. Plans are underway to return the fort to its historically accurate location.

Following the discussion of John Brown's Fort, members and guests were taken to Boliver Heights, where the first Civil War Trails sign in Harper's Ferry National Historical Park was unveiled. Civil War Trails is a six-state program, established in Virginia in 1994 that provides public access and interpretation to sites of historical significance, many of which would remain un-interpreted otherwise. There are currently 945 Civil War Trails sites, each prominently marked with highway directional signage. Tourists can follow the trail throughout Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and North Carolina.

The group then traveled to historic School House Ridge, where the national Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) announced the donation of 176 acres of core battlefield land to Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. The property was the scene of intense fighting on September 15, 1862, during the three-day battle and siege of Harpers Ferry. CWPT purchased the land in 2002 as part of a larger parcel totaling 232 acres. Private donations of \$411,000 were matched with federal and state grants to complete the \$1.7 million total transaction. After acquiring the property, 56 acres were sold to the National Park Service for \$420,000 — the appraised fair market value for the land. CWPT maintained the remaining acreage, looking forward to a time when it could make a gift of the battlefield land to the federal government, which it did to mark the beginning of the Civil War sesquicentennial. Jim Lighthizer, CWPT

President, noted that the donation is emblematic of the organization's mission to see that preserved battlefield land becomes outdoor classrooms, available for the benefit of the American people.

As the last event of the morning program, Harper's Ferry Middle hosted the group for the premiere of a program entitled "Of the Student, By the Student, For the Student," created, developed and sponsored by The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership at the request of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), in conjunction with Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and Harpers Ferry Middle School. The program consists of six innovative vodcasts about John Brown were written, filmed and produced by students at the middle school, and are available for viewing at www.hallowedground.org. The student service-learning project serves as a model for other organizations to engage young people in history.

Afternoon program: "Civil War Sesquicentennial: The National Commemoration Begins"

The group convened at the Mather Training Center, on the historic site of Storer College, for a joint meeting of the Virginia-West Virginia Civil War Sesquicentennial Commissions. Welcome remarks were offered by West Virginia Senator John Unger, II, West Virginia Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, and Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates William J. Howell. Members of both commissions were recognized, although it was noted that West Virginia commission was so new that members had just been notified of appointment by the Governor the previous day.

Representatives of several groups presented overviews of plans in development for the sesquicentennial, and two multimedia projects were premiered. Dennis Frye, Chairman of the John Brown Quad-State Committee, discussed the full slate of activities planned leading up to, during, and after the October anniversary of John Brown's Raid. Events will include an academic symposium, special tours, dramatic and musical interpretations, lectures, and exhibits. Attendees were invited to return for the October program.

Cate Magennis Wyatt, President of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground (JTHG) Partnership, described the mission and goals of the organization, and outlined plans for the sesquicentennial. The JTHG is a national heritage area that generally follows the Old Carolina Road (Rt. 15/231) from Monticello through Maryland to Gettysburg. Goals include:

- Building a strong network of local, regional and national partners to develop a common vision for the conservation and enhancement of the scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, and natural characteristics of the region.
- Developing an education outreach program to reach every student and teacher within the region as well as across the nation.
- Creating a heritage tourism program that will provide economic development opportunities, through regional branding and cooperative marketing, in communities throughout the corridor.
- Working in partnership with local, state and national officials to create a National Scenic Byway and a National Heritage Area to sustain and strengthen the economy, heritage and quality of life in this region.

Cheryl Jackson, Executive Director of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, outlined the Commission's goals of diversity, inclusiveness, accessibility, and education. Virginia, which was the first state to create a Civil War sesquicentennial planning group, is recognized as a national leader in the commemoration and is serving as a model for other states as they begin developing similar programs. The Commission is committed to a balanced portrayal of the Civil War that includes Union, Confederate and African-American perspectives; presents stories from battlefield and home front; and examines the social and cultural legacies of the conflict, as well as the military and political. To that end, the Commission: (i) has funded a major museum exhibition, "*An American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia*," which will open at the Virginia Historical Society in February 2011 and travel thereafter in formats that include a 3,000 sq. ft. exhibition for museums, a panel exhibition for smaller venues, and, tentatively, a mobile, tractor-trailer exhibition; (ii) is conducting an annual Signature Conference series with the nation's finest historians discussing topics that address the coming of the war, the impact of race and slavery, military strategies, leadership and generalship, the effects on the home front, Civil War in a global context, and memory of the Civil War in American society; (iii) is using technology to engage the public and make travel planning easy, through vodcasts, interactive maps, kiosks, and more. A vodcast written by John Hennessy, Chief Historian of the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania National Military Park, which portrays the pivotal role of Virginia in the Civil War, was premiered. The vodcast series will highlight major Civil War battles in Virginia and be available through the Commission's website.

Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr., Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech and member of the Virginia Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission, debuted excerpts from a DVD that is one of the Commission's signature projects, "*Virginia in the Civil War: A Sesquicentennial Remembrance*." The DVD was developed by Dr. Robertson and produced by Blue Ridge Public Television specifically for teachers to use in the classroom. It is divided into eight 20-minute segments that focus on the background of the war, military campaigns, the African-American experience, leading Virginia personalities, the common soldiers, home front activities (including medical care) and legacies of the war for all Americans. The DVD will be distributed free of charge to all public schools and major library systems in Virginia beginning in Fall 2009.

As the last event in the program, Dr. Peter Carmichael, Eberly Professor of Civil War Studies at West Virginia University, moderated a panel of distinguished historians who discussed "*Opportunities of the Civil War Sesquicentennial: Understanding Our Past, Embracing Our Future*." Panelists were Dr. Charles F. Bryan, Jr., President Emeritus, Virginia Historical Society; Jim Lighthizer, President, Civil War Preservation Trust, and Dr. Robert K. Sutton, Chief Historian, National Park Service. Each expert discussed the unparalleled opportunity that the sesquicentennial commemoration presents in terms of broadening knowledge of the Civil War, engaging new audiences, and land preservation. Several panelists contrasted the differences between the centennial and the sesquicentennial, citing how advances in historiography have evolved during the intervening 50 years and will yield a different commemoration. One key example is that slavery was rarely acknowledged as a cause of the Civil War during the centennial, while it will be a central focus of discussion during the sesquicentennial. The panel discussion can be viewed at the Commission's website: www.VirginiaCivilWar.org.

