

The time is almost here for history to happen in Virginia

It will not be long before an event of historic proportions occurs in the United States. No, that great occurrence is not actually the one that is only days away when the nation chooses its president, although that is already historic enough in its own right, whichever way the outcome transpires. Instead, the milestone moment of a very different nature that is due to descend upon us quicker than we might imagine is the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War — the 150th anniversary of one of the most significant periods in our country's storied history.

Over the next several years, the country will be reexamining a time that was not only arguably the most divisive and destructive in our collective history, but also the one that has allowed us to reach the point at which we stand as a people today. In many ways, the Commonwealth of Virginia was at the heart of that tragic conflict. Fittingly, it has led the way in planning for the sesquicentennial as well. The first state to form a commission to lay the groundwork for the commemoration,



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Virginia and her legislative leaders have demonstrated an uncommon vision that melds past with present while anticipating the future. Indeed, the motto of the Virginia Civil War sesquicentennial speaks to "Understanding Our Past," while "Embracing Our Future."

Under the leadership of William J. Howell, the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, the commission has already established a general plan. The most immediate and tangible result of these efforts is a Web site that can be accessed at virginiacivilwar.org. The Web site currently offers a "Then and Now" feature that allows the Internet visitor to view synopses of engagements and historic sites and interpretative opportunities for many of the

locales that experienced the war firsthand. Undoubtedly as the work progresses, additional elements will be added that will enable visitors to enhance their encounters with history before venturing to see these places themselves.

The Web site also references the major events that are going to be made available as the sesquicentennial unfolds. Among the more high profile of these activities are a series of "signature events" that begin with a major conference to be held at the University of Richmond in 2009. Chaired by Edward L. Ayers, president of UR and Kingsport native, the conference will focus on "America on the Eve of the Civil War" and is set for April 29. Among the expected topics are examinations of the state of the nation in 1859 and the future of Virginia and the South, as well as examinations of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and the then-forthcoming election of 1860 that propelled a little-known Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln into the White House.

There will be other ways to participate in the observances, too. The Virginia legislature has authorized the Division of Motor Vehicles to issue special license plates that feature the logo and the Web site address. Localities have also been urged to participate. Indeed, while Speaker Howell notes that Virginia is central to the commemoration of the Civil War, he is not talking simply about Central Virginia or what happened there. Many communities, including Wise, Lee, Buchanan, Tazewell and Washington counties in our region have "answered the call" to form local committees to oversee the activities that will take place closer to home for their citizens and visitors.

There is no doubt that as the former Confederate capital Richmond will be at the center of attention, much as it was for the Union armies that sought to take it and the Southern troops who tried to defend it, but the corner of Virginia we call home will have its place in educating those who want to learn about more than

just the major battles and leaders of the conflict. Other regions are also firmly attached to what happened in Southwest Virginia. One cannot understand the events on the border regions without taking into account the events and personalities associated with neighboring Tennessee and Kentucky, for instance.

Of course, as the last point makes clear, the Civil War sesquicentennial is not Virginia's alone. Other parts of the South and the nation will certainly want to create those same types of opportunities for people who will be visiting from across the country and the globe. Virginia is fortunate to have the chance to build on the momentum that already exists by virtue of the observances related to the founding of Jamestown that took place in 2007, but for the examination of the Late Unpleasantness to be complete, it will require the efforts of and support from us all.

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