

# At UR, Local Leaders Discuss ‘The Future of Richmond’s Past’

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The sesquicentennial of the Civil War will put Richmond center stage nationally with both the opportunity and the obligation to tell the story of what happened here honestly.

That was the message of "The Future of Richmond's Past," a forum that drew about 160 people to the University of Richmond today for the start of a series of discussions on how to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the war.

Leaders from Richmond historic and civic organizations discussed the need to develop a cohesive plan for visitors drawn to the capital of the Confederacy for four years of events beginning in 2011.

The sesquicentennial will be a twin commemoration that also will mark the end of slavery, said UR President Edward L. Ayers.

Many people, he said, "have been working for decades to prepare for a time when we can tell the story of Richmond whole, when we can tell the story of Richmond honestly, when we can tell the story of Richmond to the nation and to the world."

Visitors will be watching to see how Richmond, which was a major slave market, will interpret a past with "so many layers one on top of the other, so many meanings, so much richness," he said.

In April, Ayers was host of "America on the Eve of the Civil War," the first event of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission.

He said he was approached after that conference and asked to initiate conversations about how Richmond's various historic sites can collaborate on the sesquicentennial.

Virginia Union University President Claude G. Perkins and Virginia Commonwealth University President Michael Rao, who both spoke at today's event, said their schools will host follow-up discussions.

Virginia is better prepared now for the influx of visitors the commemoration will bring than it was in 1990 when Ken Burns' Civil War documentary series aired, said John F. "Jack" Berry Jr., president and CEO of the Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau.

That film brought a 25 percent increase in tourism and "we weren't ready," he said.

S. Waite Rawls III, president and CEO of The Museum of The Confederacy, noted that the first post-Civil War tourist to Richmond was Abraham Lincoln, and the place he wanted to visit first was the White House of the Confederacy.

Yet the museum does not get adequate support from the city for signage, parking and interpretive markers, he said.

Richmond tends to think in terms "of blue and gray or black and white, and we have forgotten green, the color of money," he said.

The city's history is perhaps its greatest financial asset "but that history sits before us without us reaching out to capitalize on it," he said.

"The twin sesquicentennial offers us that chance, and it will not repeat itself in my lifetime," he said.

Del. Delores L. McQuinn, D-Richmond, chairwoman of the Slave Trail Commission, said part of her group's mission is to "contribute to the healing of Richmond's racial past."

She hopes to see the city become an international destination for education about slavery.

"Richmond is ready for it," she said. "It's time for us to move forward."