

Chesterfield promotes its role in Civil War history

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As Virginia ramps up for the sesquicentennial commemoration of its role in the Civil War, Chesterfield County is working to make sure one piece of history isn't overlooked.

On Friday, members of Chesterfield's sesquicentennial committee and area tourism officials took a tour of more than a dozen sites marking the Bermuda Hundred Campaign, a failed Union push to take Richmond.

"It was a very important campaign," said Scott Williams of the Chesterfield Historical Society. "It just got overshadowed by a lot of the bigger events - Cold Harbor, Spotsylvania and the Wilderness. But strategically, this was very significant, and it has been kind of overlooked by the history books."

After years of relative quiet in Chesterfield, Union Gen. Benjamin F. Butler brought the war there in 1864, landing with the 35,000-strong Army of the James on the Bermuda Hundred peninsula.

The mission was to secure a base, sever the rail link between Richmond and Petersburg, and capture the cities. It didn't go well.

After several failed advances, the Battle of Drewry's Bluff on May 16 halted Butler's biggest surge toward Richmond. As he retreated to Bermuda Hundred, Confederates followed, digging entrenchments along the way, which became known as the Howlett Line, using them to trap Butler in "a bottle strongly corked," as Gen. Ulysses S. Grant described in his memoirs.

Confederate and Union troops faced each other across those trenches until the end of the war.

More than 6,000 soldiers were killed or wounded in the fields and woods of Chesterfield in May and June of 1864, with many residents seeing their homes, crops and livestock destroyed.

And as Gens. Robert E. Lee and Grant blazed bloody trails toward Petersburg, leaving 70,000 killed or wounded along the way, the history of Bermuda Hundred fell by the wayside.

"I like to think of Bermuda Hundred as a campaign of what-ifs," Williams said. "When Butler landed here, Richmond and Petersburg were pretty much undefended. There were a lot of lost opportunities."

George Fickett, a Chesterfield historian, agreed. "It's a key point that had it worked, it could have ended the war in May of 1864," he said. "We want to show that Chesterfield does have a lot to offer that people don't realize because it's a very understudied campaign."

The county's historical society and its Parks and Recreation Department maintain several parks, while others are overseen by the National Park Service. A self-guided driving tour of the 26 sites associated with the Bermuda Hundred Campaign in Chesterfield, Colonial Heights and Hopewell will be available next month.

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