

Civil War Trails sign unveiled

First CWT interpretive display in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park dedicated

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Article Photos



Officials unveil Thursday the first Civil War Trails interpretive marker in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park on Bolivar Heights. From left, Mitch Bowman, executive director, Civil War Trails Inc.; Harpers Ferry Mayor Jim Addy; Robert G. Stanton, deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior; Dennis Frye, chief historian of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park; West Virginia Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin; and Betty Carver, commissioner of the state Division of Tourism. (Journal photo by John McVey)

BOLIVAR HEIGHTS - The first Civil War Trails sign in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park was unveiled Thursday during the kickoff of events commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

The Civil War Trails program is administered by a nonprofit corporation headquartered in Richmond, Va. Civil War Trails Inc. designs the graphics on the displays depicting the historical significance of the site, produces the markers, installs them and maintains them.

The interpretive marker on Bolivar Heights in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park describes what happened there during a Civil War battle in 1862.

A distinctive red, white and blue Civil War Trails "bugle sign" at the intersection of Whitman Avenue and Washington Street directs visitors to the new display.

"This is about access - physical and intellectual access," explained Mitch Bowman, executive director of Virginia Civil War Trails Inc., at the official dedication of the exhibit.

The CWT program started about 15 years ago, he said, after the premiere of Ken Burns' Civil War documentary on public television.

Since then, 945 interpretive exhibits have been erected in 220 counties spanning six states, Bowman said.

West Virginia and Tennessee are the latest states to join the program. West Virginia plans to put up as many as 150 Civil War Trails signs by 2011 for the start of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

Several signs already have been installed at locations in Berkeley and Jefferson counties.

The West Virginia Division of Tourism is paying for the signs, which cost \$2,600, Bowman said, and the \$200-a-year maintenance fee.

Virginia was the focus of the CWT program initially. It has expanded to include Maryland, North Carolina and Pennsylvania in addition to West Virginia and Tennessee. Maryland and North Carolina officials continue to expand the Civil War Trails programs in their states.

The day before the Bolivar Heights marker was revealed to the public, Mitchell was in southern Washington County, Md., for the dedication of a display at the Kennedy Farm, where John Brown staged his raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry on Oct. 16, 1859.

The markers are linked with driving tours that feature regional battle campaigns of the Civil War, such as the Antietam Campaign, of which the Bolivar Heights display is a part.

With maps and literature to guide them, visitors can follow the armies of the Union and Confederacy across the countryside by following the Civil War Trails exhibits.

Most of the signs are placed at previously uninterpreted Civil War sites or little-known sites, Mitchell said.

Harpers Ferry NHP approached CWTI about putting a sign in the park, Dennis Frye, the park's chief historian, said in a telephone interview Friday.

The benefit for the park, he explained, is the marketing and promotion the Civil War Trails does. Having a sign in the park "will bring more people here," Frye said.

Local historians say Bolivar Heights played an extremely significant, but overlooked role in the Civil War and ultimately in the freeing of the slaves in America.

During Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's invasion of Maryland in September 1862, he sent Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson to capture Harpers Ferry, which was garrisoned with Union troops.

The Union troops were dug in along Bolivar Heights facing Jackson's soldiers along Schoolhouse Ridge to the west. The confederates also had stationed cannons on Maryland Heights and Loudoun Heights, surrounding the town and Union forces.

After bombarding the Union garrison and a daring nighttime charge by Confederate Gen. A.P. Hill around the Union's flank, Union commander Col. Dixon Miles decided to surrender. However, he was killed with the final cannon salvo of the battle.

The 12,400 U.S. troops captured at Harpers Ferry on Sept. 15 was the largest surrender in the history of the U.S. Army until the capture of American forces by the Japanese at Corregidor in World War II.

With the Union surrender, Jackson marched to Sharpsburg, Md., where Lee was preparing for an attack by Union Gen. George B. McClellan.

Jackson left Hill in charge at Harpers Ferry. After furloughing the captured Union forces, Hill marched to Sharpsburg late on Sept. 17, 1862, slamming into the side of Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside's forces as they rolled up the Confederate's flank, saving Lee's army from total destruction during the Battle of Antietam.

Antietam was the bloodiest single day of fighting during the Civil War.

Also, it was the tenuous victory by McClellan at Antietam that gave President Abraham Lincoln the battlefield win he believed he needed before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the southern states.

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