

Civil War lecture series set

By STAFF

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A month-long lecture series, "1861: Virginia Prepares for War," begins this week in Abingdon. It is sponsored by the Arts Array of Virginia Highlands Community College in conjunction with the Washington County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee and will be held free of charge every Thursday night in February in the Executive Auditorium of the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center.

Ben Jennings, the Arts Array coordinator, says that he hopes to have an annual spring lecture series over the next five years, each year exploring the impact of the Civil War in our region for the corresponding year 150 years ago, during the war. This year focuses on 1861. He hopes to have lectures on the battles fought in our area, the significant Civil war leaders who came from this area, as well as the strategic and economic importance of the resources of this area to the war effort.

The lecture series is coordinated with Virginia's Civil War sesquicentennial activities, "Understanding Our Past, Embracing Our Future," which begins this spring. Mike Shaffer, the chair of the Washington County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee, says that state-wide commemoration will "portray a fair and balanced story of the nineteenth-century conflict."

The local organization has already produced a brochure, "Washington County's Civil War History," and will oversee the installation of two Civil War Trails markers this summer.

Already planned is a visit by the Virginia Historical Society's new Civil War exhibit, with many more events slated over the next four years.

The first lecture on Feb. 3 at 7:30 p.m., "To Secede or not to Secede: Southern Mountain Politics 1860-1862," will be delivered by Dr. Bob Hutton. He will explore the reality of the allegiances in the region in 1860 and 1861 as the war began.

Hutton says, "The Civil War played out differently in the southern Appalachians than in much of the rest of the South. Despite their popular image, 19th-century mountaineers were a heterogeneous group of people: rich, poor, slaveholder, non-slaveholder, white, black, American, southern, rebel, Unionist, Democrat, old-line Whig, Virginian, Tennessean. As the country moved to war in 1860 and 1861, all of these 'identities' influenced their ultimate allegiances and the course of the war in the mountains."

Hutton, who is a Washington County native, teaches history at the University of Tennessee and is currently completing his first book, *Bloody Breathitt: Death and Politics in a Southern County*.

The Civil War has experienced a range of depictions in film, from *The Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith's controversial silent film, through the epic *Gone with the Wind*, to outstanding contemporary films such *Glory*, depicting the African American experience, and *Cold Mountain*, reflecting the home-front travails.

In the Feb. 10 lecture, Dr. Brian Wills will discuss the range of cinematic depictions of the war and speculate, with the 150th Anniversary upon us, whether the day of the Civil War movie is gone, or will there be a resurgence of interest in dramatizing the war in film?

Wills was formerly a professor of history at UVA-Wise, but now is the Director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era in Atlanta and the author of *Gone with Glory: The Civil War in Cinema* and a biography of General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Southwest Virginia—as well as neighboring East Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia—was contested borderland during the Civil War. The third lecture on February 17, delivered by Dr. Brian McKnight, will focus on Champ Ferguson, the most notorious Confederate guerrilla leader and how the divided loyalties about the war in 1861 made a man go from farmer to cold-blooded killer. Ferguson admitted killing over 100 men personally, and he oversaw the massacre of the wounded men and prisoners after the Battle of Saltville.

McKnight teaches history at UVA-Wise and is the author of *Contested Borderland* and the forthcoming *Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia*.

The final lecture by Mike Shaffer on February 24 is probably the one most tied to this area, focusing on the war fervor in the region in 1861. Shaffer says, “The year 1861 would prove an eventful time for young men in our region. With the Old Dominion preparing to leave the Union, some 200 volunteers began rudimentary drill procedures under the tutelage of Captain William E. Jones. The Washington Mounted Rifles soon mustered into the 1st Virginia Cavalry, and participated in the war’s first great battle near Manassas.”

Shaffer is a Bristol native, a Civil War historian and chair for the Washington County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee.

The Arts Array is the community cultural outreach series of Virginia Highlands Community College. For more detailed information about the series, contact Ben Jennings, the Arts Array Coordinator, at bjennings@vhcc.edu or phone him at (276) 739-2447