

Commission fulfilling ambitious plans

By Staff Reports | Times-Dispatch

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The 150th anniversary of the Civil War got its first official recognition in 2006 when the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission was created by the General Assembly. Its current budget is \$2 million a year from the state.

Accomplishments so far include commemorative committees to plan local events in all but six of the state's localities, educational DVDs for all schools in the state, a major exhibition opening in February at the Virginia Historical Society and an annual signature conference -- this year's was Friday at Norfolk State University on "Race, Slavery, and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory." Also in progress are a historymobile tractor-trailer and a traveling exhibition.

"I think it's a huge deal," said Del. William J. Howell, R-Stafford, speaker of the House and chairman of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission.

"The American Civil War continues to be a topic of interest to people all over the world, let alone the country. It offers a real opportunity to bring people from all corners of the world to Virginia, where the majority of the Civil War happened."

The signature exhibition, "An American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia," is the most ambitious and most interactive exhibition ever put together by the historical society, said Paul Levensgood, director.

Opening Feb. 4, it will appeal to everyone from Civil War re-enactors who want the nitty-gritty of every battle to people who think they don't like the Civil War because they don't like military history, he said. Interactive elements will allow visitors to simulate the combat experience or the experience of a slave trying to reach freedom.

The runaway slave exhibit -- some prefer the term "self-emancipated slave" -- will be an immersive experience with a big screen that almost puts you at the point of view of the slave, Levensgood said.

"You come to a river and decide how to cross. You come to a train line and decide whether to try to jump on board. You make decisions." Statistics determine whether you make it.

"It's not necessarily a feel-good thing. Bad things can happen."

"It will have a lot of human stories," he said, "getting inside the minds of people at the time, using their words and their experiences."

-- Katherine Calos