

Marketing a war

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By [David Sachs](#)



Usually tourists are told to stay away from warzones at all costs, but marketing experts and historians planning the commemoration of the Civil War's 150th anniversary are luring out-of-towners and locals to take part in Alexandria's four-year-long retrospective.

The city was a pivot-point in the War Between the States. Once a stronghold of the South, the Union Army occupied Alexandria — or liberated it, depending who you ask — in May of 1861. A once refined and thriving port city began resembling Gomorrah overnight: prostitutes, refugees, drunks and dead men laced the Old Town streets where commerce and vitality once flourished.

"What we see in Alexandria during those days was physical, mental and economic collapse," said Lance Mallamo, director of the Office of Historic Alexandria.

A Southern state behind Northern lines, Alexandria's strategic location in the shadow of the nation's capital was unmatched, creating a plurality of unique experiences. Mallamo's office has teamed up with the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association to market the city's history, particularly these often-unbelievable stories of individual struggle and heroism.

Historians and tourism experts will portray first-person perspective stories more than war strategy throughout the commemoration; stories of Alexandria residents, refugees, slaves, freedmen, nurses and passers through.

Judith McGuire, wife of the headmaster at Episcopal High School, captured Alexandria's unique position in her diary about three weeks before occupation: "I heard distinctly the drums beating in Washington. As I looked at the Capitol in the distance, I could scarcely believe my senses. That Capitol of which I had always been so proud! Can it be possible that it is no longer our Capitol? ... and must this Union, which I was taught to revere, be rent asunder?"

Many believe the first two deaths of the conflict occurred at what is now King Street's Hotel Monaco — once

Marshall House — when innkeeper James W. Jackson, a rebel, shot and killed Union Col. Elmer Ellsworth for filching his Confederate flag from the roof. Ellsworth's backups killed Jackson moments later.

And there was Sarah Emma Edmonds, a Canadian-born woman who worked as a spy in Alexandria during the war — as a man, Frank Thompson.

“Very fascinating insights have survived — period accounts of locals. We're very fortunate to be able to piece together a portrait [of Alexandria]. Focusing on individuals is what's going to bring people to our town,” said Sarah Coster, curator at Carlyle House.

ACVA has created a comprehensive marketing plan under the banner “Witness to War and Reunion: Commemorating the Civil War in Alexandria.” Partnering with 18 historical sites, the local tourism industry will bring vestiges of the Civil War into the 21st century with the help of historians.

The initiative will attract three “ripples” of people, said Stephanie Pace Brown, president and CEO of ACVA: lifetime history buffs seeking out Alexandria as a destination rich with Civil War history, tourists with an average interest in the war and those who will stumble upon the city and, ideally, become engaged with the stories Alexandria has to hold.

“We'll have those hardcore Civil War enthusiasts and people with cursory interest and we're going to have to come up with a product that pleases all of those people,” Brown said.

And ACVA has, she said. The organization is banking on their \$14 dollar key to the city (Civil War edition), allowing its holders access to war sites and information, 80 offers coordinated with the city's attractions, shops an restaurants and a dial-up guided cell phone tour.

But this is not a celebration, Mallamo said, and the “commemoration” tag was deliberate.

The War Between the States often becomes a platform for controversy in the city: the Appomattox statue grieving for fallen Confederate soldiers on Washington Street, reverence for the boyhood home of a complex historical character in Robert E. Lee's — some believe they are monuments celebrating the South, while others see them as commemorating the history itself.

“[The commemoration] is not to come with preconceived notions of who was right, who was wrong,” Mallamo said. “This is a solemn event.”