

New Orientation Center for Heritage Tourism

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The aim of a new orientation center for the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation is to tell the true stories of the Civil War and to draw more visitors to hear them. It's a starting point for heritage tourism in Augusta and Rockingham counties.

The Battle of Piedmont in Augusta County, Cross Keys Battlefield in Rockingham are just two of nearly 1,000 Civil War sites in Virginia. They're part of the national historic district the spans nearly the entire Shenandoah Valley.

Terry Heder of the Valley Battlefields Foundation explained, "It can be confusing and overwhelming, especially with the great number of sites and attractions in an area. An orientation center gives them a chance to come in, learn that overall story, learn how they connect together, but then see specifically the sites they can go visit."

The new orientation center in Harrisonburg directs visitors to historic sites in Augusta, Rockingham and Page counties.

It helps them understand what they'll find there, not just the dates and places, but the stories of real people living with a war on their doorstep.

Heder stated, "One of our themes is its one story, a thousand voices. We try to tell that history -- as much as we can -- in the voices of the people who live through it."

The foundation hopes that by telling the Civil War stories in a fresh and engaging way it can draw visitors from the beaches and amusement parks to Virginia's battlefields, museums and historic homes.

Richard Lewis of the Virginia Tourism Corporation said, "Somebody who comes into Virginia and goes to a Civil War site ends up staying longer and spending more money per day than does the average visitor. So that is a market that we are really happy to go after."

Virginia has more Civil War battlefields than any other state.

The visitor center is part of the preparations for the influx of tourists that are expected for the upcoming 150th anniversary of the war.

Reported by Ken Slack