

Program takes look at John Brown's raid

Historian's talk, historical personages' debate to open Fredericksburg area's Civil War sesquicentennial observances

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Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, barely a month after Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as president.

The 150th anniversary of the attack that started the Civil War will come in 2011. But local groups aren't waiting until the year after next to fire the first salvo in the Civil War sesquicentennial.

A special program tomorrow evening--"Distant Thunder: John Brown's Raid"--will kick off local observances of the 150th anniversary.

And what more natural place to start than Brown's 1859 failed raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry?

John Hennessy, chief historian of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, will explore how the fiery abolitionist's attack was viewed at the time in the Fredericksburg region.

"With the sesquicentennial, we're trying to engage not just the traditional few, but everybody. And to do that, we're going to tell some new stories and we're going to use some new methods to engage some audiences who might otherwise not pay attention," Hennessy said yesterday.

"This program on Wednesday, with its debate between historical personages, is just a little wrinkle, a little foreshadow, of the sorts of things we're going to be doing in the Fredericksburg region over the next many years."

Many historians consider John Brown's actions--and his subsequent trial in a Virginia court, conviction and hanging--as milestones in Americans' march toward war.

Hennessy will examine how local residents and governments responded. He'll delve into the raid's implications for the decision that would soon face all Virginians--to secede or not?

For Virginians, Brown's raid fanned fears of slave rebellions--a daunting specter in the state with the most slaves. To many in the South, it suggested that unseen forces at work in the North were intent on abolishing slavery, using violence if necessary.

Residents of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, Stafford and Caroline counties reacted with alarm. Many girded for war.

Tomorrow's inaugural program will feature an unusual twist, a re-created historic debate over the impact of the raid.

Two local political activists will face off: J. Horace Lacy, owner of Chatham and an ardent secessionist, and G.H.C. "Clay" Rowe, a local attorney who urged calm as Virginians responded to what they saw as the rising threat from abolitionists.

They'll argue the place of slavery in the region, the question of Union or disunion, and the prospects for war.

Richard Chapman, an actor whose theatrical credits include a recurring part on the hit TV series "Cheers," will portray Lacy. Roy Jarnecke will portray Rowe.

"Distant Thunder" is sponsored by the National Park Service, the Fredericksburg-Stafford Sesquicentennial Committee and the regional library. The program will begin at 7 p.m. in the auditorium of library headquarters on Caroline Street.