

Putting tourists on the battlefields



The 150th anniversary of the Civil War's start is four years away, but states that were in the thick of the fighting are planning now to cash in on what they hope will be a boom in tourism. Blake Farmer reports.

A National Park ranger talks to tourists at the Manassas National Battlefield Park in Manassas, Va., where the Civil War's battle of Bull Run was fought. (Alex Wong, Getty Images)

Kai Ryssdal: We've got another four years until Civil War buffs get to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the war with special re-enactments of Fort Sumter and what have you. But states that were in the thick of the fighting are planning now to cash in on what they hope will be a boom in tourism then. From Nashville, Tenn., Blake Farmer reports.

Blake Farmer: Standing on the veranda of the Carnton Plantation just south of Nashville, Civil War historian Eric Jacobson explains the home's role in the Battle of Franklin on November 30, 1864:

Eric Jacobson: This area was just blistered with artillery fire, but the wounded began to arrive here at about dark.

This was a Confederate hospital. The amputated limbs were said to be piled as high as the smokehouse. Four generals lay dead on the back porch after the fighting. All in all, 9,200 soldiers died that day, considered a Union victory.

The 2,500 people who lived here back then attempted to forget that battle, refusing congressional offers for any kind of commemoration. Jacobson says even the people who lived here at Carnton tried to remove most signs of the battle — including the blood stains.

Jacobson: They were removed, unfortunately, by 20th century occupants. The blood stains were sanded out of the floorboards.

Walking along the perimeter of the plantation, Jacobson reaches down for a recent artifact.

Jacobson: Oh, there's a golf ball. Isn't that funny?

The past was so completely forgotten here that what's practically the back yard of the Carnton Plantation was turned into the back nine of a golf course.

But now, Franklin is trying harder to remember its history. The city and several preservation groups have purchased the golf course for \$5 million, hoping to turn it into a battlefield park and big tourist draw. Communities throughout the Southeast are making improvements to Civil War sites. They're preparing for a projected influx in tourists during the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

States are jumping on the bandwagon too, with their own anniversary commissions, says Civil War Preservation Trust spokesman Jim Campi.

Jim Campi: Pennsylvania has started a commission, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia.

And now, the dollars are starting to flow. The state of Tennessee chipped in a million dollars to help finish paying for that golf course property in Franklin. Georgia is looking to build a Civil War visitor center. Pennsylvania's Gettysburg is getting a new museum. Groups in Maryland and Virginia are working up marketing campaigns for their historic sites.

Carole Summers says they're all after a specific group of sightseers called "heritage tourists." Summers is a tourism consultant in Charlotte, N.C.

Carole Summers: In the past 10 years, the heritage tourist has really become kind of the darling of the tourism industry. They are traveling to visit historic sites and they spend more money, they stay longer.

Heritage tourists spend \$620 per trip, compared with \$450 for a beach vacationer. That's according to a 2003 study by the Travel Industry Association. The number of wandering history buffs is growing, too. The association says heritage tourism is up 13 percent from 1996.

Campi, of the Civil War Preservation Trust, says economic forces are driving a new wave of battlefield preservation. He adds that neglected battlefield sites need to capitalize on the interest, because if they wait, developers will likely beat them to the punch.

Campi: I would argue that in places like middle Tennessee, central Virginia, around Atlanta, that we have five years at the outside. In most of those areas, maybe only two or three. Places are getting swallowed up.

Campi's pitch to the business world: as battlefields leave, so do the tourists.

The message has certainly gotten through back in Tennessee. The town of Franklin has attracted the attention of the National Park Service, which is considering the battlefield site for a military park. With help from the National Park's logo, town leaders expect the number of visitors to jump from 40,000 per year to more than 200,000.