

Renowned historian kicks off 150th anniversary of Civil War at Averett

By [JOHN CRANE](#)

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James I. Robertson, a nationally-renowned Civil War historian and lecturer and a celebrated Danville native, kicked off Virginia's sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War with a lecture at Averett University on Saturday.

About 200 people attended Robertson's lecture, "Why Civil War Came," at the university's Pritchett Auditorium. The city of Danville and the rest of Virginia are holding sesquicentennial commemoration events that will last from 2009, 150 years after events leading up to the Civil War, to 2015, 150 years after its end.

"You'll never understand America unless you understand the Civil War," Robertson, alumni distinguished professor in history at Virginia Tech, said at the start of his lecture.

The Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, evolved from a long series of arguments and a piling up of hostilities over 14 years. Civil wars, as opposed to wars involving two or more separate nations, come slowly, Robertson said.

Robertson started the timeline with the Mexican-American War in 1846, a war fought for new land in the American Southwest to grow cotton. It led to disputes between the North and the South over whether slavery would be allowed in the acquired territories. The Compromise of 1850 emphasized the doctrine of "popular sovereignty" — that a state's population decides its fate or whether to be a slave state or a free one. Northerners and Southerners were unhappy with the compromise.

Another factor was the publication of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1852, which personalized the lives of slaves, moved readers, Christianized the anti-slavery cause and fueled the abolitionist movement, selling more than 300,000 copies in its first year, Robertson said. Soon, pro-slavery authors wrote and published works glorifying the South and slavery.

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, proposed by Illinois Sen. Stephen Douglas, allowing popular sovereignty in those states and repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had banned slavery above a set northern latitude. Anti-slavery interests headed to Kansas to make it free, while pro-slavery forces there told them to head to Nebraska.

Passions became so heated a congressman from South Carolina attacked a Massachusetts senator with a cane after the senator, during a speech, insulted the Southern state and the congressman's uncle, a senator who was disabled by a stroke.

"This shows how dangerously inflamed men's minds were becoming," Robertson said. "The North and South were losing control. Emotion was replacing common sense."

Also, the Republican Party formed in 1854 and opposed slavery, while the Democrats lacked leadership. President Franklin Pierce, who served from 1853 to 1857, was an alcoholic, and President James Buchanan, serving from 1857 to 1861, was ill-suited for his job and tried to ignore the problems, Robertson said.

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Dred Scott Decision, which ruled that a slave cannot be considered a citizen but is property. Meanwhile, mid-term 1858 elections were coming up, and Douglas was up for re-election as senator. Entering the scene was a man named Abraham Lincoln, and they had their famous seven debates in Illinois. Lincoln lost the Senate race.

However, Robertson said, "a small spark was all that was needed to produce a great flame."

Fifty-nine-year-old John Brown, a fierce abolitionist, and a band of his followers launched their famous attack at Harper's Ferry on Oct. 16, 1859. The attack was a failed disaster for Brown and he was hung for the crime. Northerners saw him as a martyr, but to Southerners, he was a terrorist, Robertson said.

Southerners, in response, began forming militia units while the federal government, led by Buchanan, just sat on its hands, Robertson said. Congress argued but was ineffectual, he said.

"Congress talked much, said little and did nothing," Robertson said.

By the 1860 election, "too much had been said," Robertson said.

"The spirit of compromise had broken into fragments," he said.

Lincoln would win the presidency against Douglas this time. Six weeks after the election, South Carolina and six other Southern states seceded, Robertson said. They called for federal garrisons in the Confederacy to be abandoned but Lincoln refused. Next came the famous attack on Fort Sumter by Confederate forces and many hours later, the Union soldiers there surrendered.

About 700,000 men died in the Civil War and 500,000 were crippled, Robertson said. The war caused billions of dollars in property damage.

Of all the issues that have been prevalent in politics throughout history, slavery was the most overwhelming, Robertson said.

“No other issue has ever dominated political life so completely,” he said.

However, slavery was the fourth problem on the list of top issues that led to the war, he said. The main issue was the notion of states’ rights, which was not just confined to Southern states, Robertson said.

Another factor leading to the war was emotionalism, he said. Communication was primitive then, no phones, television, Internet, radio or electronic means and of the nation’s white population of 27.5 million people, more than 1/2 were under the age of 20, Robertson said. Young people are very emotional, he said.

In addition, a shift of economic power from the South to the North left Southerners feeling disenfranchised, a minority, Robertson said. Finally, there was slavery and a succession of incompetent presidents from the time Andrew Jackson left office in 1837 to Lincoln’s ascendency to the presidency in 1861, he said.

- Contact John Crane at jcrane@registerbee.com or (434) 791-7987.