

Sesqui-what?

Coming up: the 150th anniversary of the Civil War

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LAST WEDNESDAY, the University of Richmond hosted the leadoff "signature conference" of Virginia's Civil War sesquicentennial. Other events soon will follow, leading like stepping stones to the main part of the commemoration, from 2011 through 2015. It's a can't-miss opportunity for our local area to shine.

During the Civil War more blood was spilled around here than anywhere else in four major battles and innumerable skirmishes. Troop movements and encampments abounded. As interest in America's big family fight peaks, the area is well-positioned to profit--in terms of knowledge, visibility, and finances--from it.

Already the wheels are turning. The city of Fredericksburg and [Stafford County](#) have teamed up under the leadership of John Hennessy, the National Park Service's chief local historian, to commemorate the sesquicentennial. Their mission: to broaden the appeal of Civil War events. They're planning dramatic presentations, oral histories, and multimedia shows, plus re-enactments. The focus will be on the stories of the people caught up in the conflict, people like Fredericksburg's John Washington, who escaped from slavery across the Rappahannock. Karen Hedelt, the city's acting economic-development director, thinks that these programs will have a "great shelf life," remaining usable for years after the main events.

[Spotsylvania County](#) was the first Virginia jurisdiction to jump on the sesquicentennial bandwagon, says county tourism director Rachel DeLooze. Besides planning its own events, she points out, the county is participating with the Fredericksburg-Stafford group. First on her docket: an 1859 County Fair on Sept. 12 and 13, featuring, among other things, a period baseball game.

The organizers of Jamestown 2007 found that event was a hard sell outside of Virginia, and while they had hoped to draw 90,000 visitors over the Big Weekend, only 65,000 to 70,000 came. Still, the event generated \$1.2 billion in sales and more than \$28 million in state and local tax revenue.

The UR conference last Wednesday drew more than 1,500 people from 26 states. With creativity, regional cooperation, and hard work, we can bring tourists to our area. And perhaps, in teaching them our history, we can teach it to ourselves.