

Plans set for Civil War's 150th

Fredericksburg-area programs will view Civil War's 150th anniversary through many facets

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In and around Fredericksburg, the Civil War's 150th anniversary won't be the sort of occasion that your father may remember from the nation's centennial of the great conflict.

Fewer battle re-enactments. Less hoopla. No celebration of war.

Rather, it will be a wide-ranging, thought-provoking commemoration.

So says the group planning the events and programs to be held in the Fredericksburg region over the next five years.

"If there's one place on earth where you can go and get the full story of how the war went from being one thing and became another--how it went from a purely military exercise to something that transformed American society, as well as the lives lived within it--there are very few places, if any, that can tell that story better than here," said John Hennessy, chairman of the Fredericksburg-Stafford-Spotsylvania Sesquicentennial Committee.

Yesterday, the panel unveiled the plan on which its three-dozen members--citizens, history professionals and local government officials--have been laboring since the summer of 2008.

Its lineup of events begins now and continues through July 2015. The committee hopes to reach a larger audience, beyond history buffs, with creative programming that includes re-enactments, special exhibits, music, dramatic presentations, lectures and film festivals.

The battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House are one focus, of course. Spotsylvania plans re-enactments each year; it held one last month.

But the 150th's programs will ask visitors to go further--"to see battlefields not just as places of conflict, but as home places disrupted; to see the presence of the Union army not just as a cause for destruction, but as an opportunity for slaves seeking freedom; to see battles not just as military clashes, but as human experiences that reverberated across the American landscape," the committee said.

Its plan includes a "History Alive" series of interactive, participatory programs; candlelit illuminations of the Spotsylvania Court House and Fredericksburg battlefields; songs from home, field and hearth; talks by first-rate historians; and programs on local churches, wartime experiences and tales of descendants of soldiers, civilians and slaves.

This Saturday, a sesquicentennial-related event will dedicate a new "Trail to Freedom" in Stafford and Fredericksburg. Wayside exhibits, and more, will outline the story of the 10,000 slaves who gained their liberty by crossing the Rappahannock River after the Union army arrived in 1862.

The sesquicentennial also dovetails with "Footfalls of the Famous," a new exhibit at the Fredericksburg Area Museum about noted individuals who've visited here over the centuries-- including many Civil War figures.

On Nov. 20, Fredericksburg Baptist Church will host a dramatic debate by Virginians on the election of 1860 and secession. Historians William Freehling and Charles Dew, two of the nation's foremost Civil War scholars, will explore secession's causes.

Commemorative events will proliferate next year, the 150th anniversary of the war front's coming to Fredericksburg.

"We have a community that was wrapped up in war solidly for two years, by the physical presence of armies here," said Hennessy, chief historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

"Our community was a case study in all the hardships that would ultimately befall the entire South, well before most of the South felt those hardships: a town bombarded and looted, slaves seizing freedom, the labor system completely transformed, fortunes destroyed.

"There were thousands of American towns that went to war. There were only a handful of towns that had war boomerang back upon them like Fredericksburg did."

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