

The Sesquicentennial: 'Loudoun On The Eve Of War'

By Margaret Morton

(Created: Tuesday, June 15, 2010 9:43 AM EDT)

The Loudoun Sesquicentennial Committee will feature the second salvo in its commemoration of the 1861-1865 Civil War, with the presentation Thursday of "Loudoun on the Eve of War."

The program will describe the state of the county during the divisive 1860 presidential campaign that saw the election of Abraham Lincoln. The free lecture will take place at 5:30 p.m. at Morven Park's Coach House, and the public is encouraged to attend.

The multi-year Loudoun Civil War commemoration officially began last year with the observance of the anniversary of John Brown's raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry-considered by many historians to be the real start of the Civil War. But Thursday's meeting and lecture on Loudoun just before the war is designed to get the public interested and participating in the county's efforts, in preparation for the commemoration of the Oct. 21, 1861, Battle of Ball's Bluff, the most significant engagement on Loudoun soil.

The Sesquicentennial Committee is responsible for helping museums and heritage organizations plan events and programs, in this case during the run up to the war and the 1860 election.

Loudoun historians Rich Gillespie and Jim Morgan along with Harper's Ferry National Park Service historian John Rudy will present "Loudoun On The Eve of War," a depiction of the confused, frightened and angry state of the national populace that was mirrored in Loudoun. The presentation has particular relevance, several historians have said, noting today's fractured electorate and highly charged rhetoric bears similarities to the mood in 1860.

Gillespie said the lecture would focus on two aspects of Loudoun in 1860-the political events and atmosphere and the actual physical state of the county-what was present, such as railroads, roads, bridges, schools and churches in the county.

Loudoun in 1860, Gillespie was, was an economic "Garden of Eden," noting its high agricultural productivity. It was rich and profitable, but "hanging over it was John Brown's raid of the previous year and the fact that 28 percent of the populace was enslaved." That issue heated to the point where people were feeling it in Loudoun, Gillespie said.

Had Brown's efforts to incite an armed uprising of slaves had been successful, and it could have been, "who knows that that could have meant," Gillespie said.

At the same time, Loudouners were excited by technological advances, such as the railroad, which came in 1860. No matter that the bridge over Goose Creek washed out and it had to be rebuilt, economic progress seemed assured.

But the fear of a massive slave insurrection hung over everything, along with a feeling that an "unlearned faction of northerners," might not be aware of the consequences of their actions in electing Lincoln. Virginia, and Loudoun, were conservative in politics, but when Lincoln was elected, people in Loudoun were "appalled," Gillespie said, noting his was the party that refused to extradite those involved in the raid.

"The year starts with a panic-not all the raiders had been hanged by that time, and the militia were still guarding bridges over the Potomac-and it ends with a panic. 'How could they elect Lincoln?' was the prevailing opinion in the county," Gillespie said.

In addition to the lecture, Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority representative and Temple Hall Farm Manager George Tabb will provide an update on planning for the Battle of Ball's Bluff commemoration on Oct. 22, 2011. Plans call for about 1,000 reenactors to participate in a march to the battlefield and reenactment of the conflict, according to Morgan, a noted historian on the battle.

The most of the successful Confederate fighting at Ball's bluff was done by the 17th Mississippi infantry regiment, aided by members of the 18th Mississippi. The troops had just been at the Battle of First Manassas several months before.

For reenactors from Mississippi scheduled to participate, it will be a time of remembrance. There are 36 soldiers from Mississippi buried at Ball's Bluff in unmarked graves. As was common during the war, most died of disease, with only four of them reported to have died in battle.

Currently the event is in the preliminary planning stages, but Morgan says he is looking forward to hearing the update. "It's all pretty exciting," he said recently.

It wasn't the biggest Civil War engagement, in the light of later conflicts, but it could claim to have been the most politically significant.

Out of the stinging Union defeat at Ball's Bluff, came the creation of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. The committee remained in session for four years to investigate the Union losses in the early months of the war.

Morgan noted that the first loss came at Manassas in July. That was followed by another loss, at Wilson's Creek in Maryland in September. The rout at Ball's Bluff came on Oct. 21.

"Ball's Bluff was the last straw," Morgan said. Stung by this third consecutive defeat, members of Congress began asking, "Why are we losing?"

The intervention of the committee as it took on powers to investigate just about everything on the conduct of the war was a pain to both military commanders and Democrats. "But some good things came out of it, such as the quality of equipment, which improved," Morgan said.

Also in the works for this fall are two Loudoun Civil War Roundtable presentations with particular relevance to the run up to war.

In September, University of Maryland Professor of Government and Politics Irwin Morris will present "Running to Lose?" about Lincoln challenger and pro-slavery politician John Breckinridge and the presidential election of 1860.

The following month, author, battlefield tour guide and former National Park Service Chief Historian Ed Bearss also will speak on the 1860 election.

Those sessions will be held at the Old Court House in Leesburg on Sept. 14 and Oct. 12, respectively.

Other Civil War Roundtable sessions, all designed with the sesquicentennial commemoration in mind, include:

- July 13 - Chuck Mauro will discuss A Southern Spy in Northern Virginia: The Civil War Album of Laura Ratcliffe.
- Aug. 10 - Burrus Carnahan presents Act of Justice, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the Law of War.

In addition to the talks by Morris and Bearss, Scott Patchan will discuss the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign. Those lectures will be held at Thomas Balch Library, in the lower floor meeting room.

Any examination of the presidential election campaign of 1860 has to touch on slavery, Morgan said. By the 1850s, "it all came down to slavery," he said.

Morgan reminds people that in the South "people felt their homes were in danger."

Then, the whole concept of patriotism was different from today's understanding. "You were fighting for your state, not the country," he said, so in that context it was understandable that the South saw the war as a need to repel an invasion.

Morgan recalled the late historian Shelby Foote once saying of course, the south felt that way: "It's my family; it's got nothing to do with politics." Today, Morgan sees the conflict as a mix of political, personal and ideological issues.

Looking back, Morgan said there was valor and courage on both sides, but he singled out the Southern infantry. "They lived on a terrible diet. The odds were against them and they showed great courage, walking miles in that condition." Desertion rates, he noted, were high in both armies.

The chairmanship of the Sesquicentennial Committee is on a rotating six-month basis. Chairman Childs Burden and Morgan, the previous chairman, say they welcome members of the public to both attend the lecture and get involved in the Civil War commemoration.

For Thursday's event refreshments will be served and attendees are asked to RSVP to Tracy Gillespie at tgillespie@morvenpark.org or call her at 703-777-6034.