

Taking The High Ground

Jerry Grillo published March 2011

Georgia prepares for an invasion of Civil War tourists

For three years the nation had been tearing at itself, North and South drawing blood in torrents, at places like Antietam and Shiloh, Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and Chickamauga. President Lincoln wanted a new, aggressive commander to take charge of all federal forces and finally bring the tenacious but weakening Confederates to their knees and to save the Union and free the slaves. He chose Ulysses S. Grant.

The only Union general who consistently won battles, Grant was leading the federal armies of the Western Theater at the time. When Lincoln called him east in March 1864, Grant appointed his old buddy William Tecumseh Sherman as his successor to lead the Union's western armies.

The generals had a good plan and the large armies to carry it out. Grant would chase down and crush Robert E. Lee and the Army of Virginia, and Sherman would attack the Confederate Army of Tennessee in Georgia, capture Atlanta (the South's rail, manufacturing and supplies center) and destroy the will of the people.

"I intend to make Georgia howl," Sherman told Grant.

Sherman did exactly what he promised, cutting a destructive swath through the heart of the state, confirming the validity of the famous line that is widely but incorrectly attributed to him: “War is hell.”

Turns out that may also be a particularly valuable tourist attraction these days as the nation commemorates the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

Next month marks the 150th anniversary of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C., the beginning of the war. For the next several years, communities across the country, especially in the South (where most of the war was fought), will try to take the high ground and capitalize on this historic vantage point.

It’s war profiteering long after the fact, and Georgia wants in.

“I believe we’re going to see a significant increase in heritage tourism around here over the next four years,” says John Culpepper, chairman of the Georgia Civil War Commission and city manager for Chickamauga, where a million people visit the country’s oldest and largest National Military Park each year.

“The Civil War sesquicentennial gives us an opportunity to tap into a high-spending tourism market, the heritage tourist,” says Kevin Langston, who runs the tourism division for the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD), which has partnered with several other organizations to market the sesquicentennial.

“Here’s a chance to showcase some of the assets we have scattered across the state,” Langston says. “Historic sites that may not register on every traveler’s radar screen.”

They’ll register now, or soon, as 21st century technologies, such as GPS navigation and smart phone apps, are being employed to enhance the 19th-century experience.

Like Generals Grant and Sherman, Georgia is planning a multi-pronged approach for the campaign. But like the Confederacy, resources are severely limited during a global economic bummer.

So Civil War enthusiasts are working with economic de-velopment agencies, communities are crossing state lines to form alliances in a joint effort to lure armies of tourists, and historians are managing a more accurate and complete message about the war’s causes and effects.

“We’re taking a look at the past in an honest way, at the overwhelming historical evidence of the 1860s,” says Todd Groce, president and CEO of the Georgia Historical Society (www.georgiahistory.com), based in Savannah, where Sherman’s famous March to the Sea ended.

“But if this is going to work as a commemoration, it’s got to be inclusive, because the war was not just about white men fighting one another on battlefields. African-American slaves are at the center of the story. The role of women during the war has to be told.

“The war affected everyone. We live today, every day, with the decisions those people made 150 years ago. So this is an opportunity to be participatory and inclusive, to tell stories that haven’t been told before and allow a fresh look at the Civil War, and get ready for the tourists that we hope will come.”

The Heritage Trail

Here’s the dossier on the heritage tourist that Georgia’s promoters have been referring to: He spends more than the average traveler (\$994 to \$611 per trip), because he’s more likely to shop and stay the night at a hotel, and usually stays longer (5.2 nights to 4.1 nights). He is probably about 50 (and probably a “he”) with a household income of more than \$65,000, and his collective economic impact is about \$192 billion nationwide.

He’s more likely than most to pull over to read a roadside historical marker, more likely to take his time walking consecrated grounds. He’s educated, went to college, and therefore probably more capable of appreciating history and separating fact from dogma. He’s interested in where we’ve been as a country and where we are

going.

“If you don’t understand where you came from, you can’t plot the future,” says Camille Russell Love, director of Atlanta’s Office of Cultural Affairs, an African-American woman who is descended from slaves in the South. “I think a lot of people are very under-informed about the Civil War and its causes.”

No question about it.

Just a quick scan of blogs on the subject reveals a passionate, often rancorous and seemingly willful misunderstanding of why the war happened. Even today, decades after the last surviving Civil War veteran has turned to dust and memory, a discussion of the issues that divided North and South can end abruptly with the declaration, “Them’s fightin’ words!”

“The reasons for the war are still very controversial for a lot of people,” notes Steven Longcrier, founder and executive director of Georgia Civil War Heritage Trails (www.civilwarheritagetrails.org).

For secession apologists and defenders, the war remains a whitewashed glorious cause, speckled with the blood of noble patriots.

Many neo-Confederates claim slavery was not the central issue; it was “states rights.” Their ancestors fought for self-governance, to defend their homes against northern aggressors (all of which still points right back at the peculiar institution, the thing their states rights and self-governance protected, and the thing the North ultimately fought to end once Lincoln got around to the Emancipation Proclamation).

Of course, most Southerners did not own slaves. Nor did most Southerners make the decision to secede, either; that was made by the men in power, many of whom owed their fortunes to slave labor.

For bona fide Confederates – unlike latter-day revisionists who have been whooping it up at secession celebrations, like the costume ball in Charleston several months back – slavery was never the elephant in the room. The actual secessionists weren’t shy about their reasons.

So when the GHS recently dedicated a new historical marker in Milledgeville near the old state house, it read in part: “Secession began in response to Abraham Lincoln’s election ... and the belief that his Republican party was ‘anti-slavery in its mission and its purpose,’ according to Georgia’s secession ordinance.”

In Georgia’s Declaration of Causes (approved January 29, 1861, 10 days after the state voted to secede), the word “slavery” appears 26 times. “States rights” doesn’t appear at all.

“Like it or not, it always comes back to race and slavery,” says Groce, a native Virginian with a Ph.D. in history who has written and lectured extensively on the South and the Civil War. “Slavery is what caused secession. It wasn’t until decades after the war that some surviving Confederates put forth a different argument. They were the first revisionists.”

The Georgia Historical Society is on a campaign to keep it real, and they’re erecting a bunch of new historical markers around the state, trying to fill in some important gaps, Groce says.

For example, they dedicated a marker in Dalton about the African-American soldiers who served there (many of them returned to slavery by their Confederate captors); another one in Effingham County tells about a Union crossing of Ebenezer Creek – the commander of the 14th Army Corps, Gen. Jeff C. Davis, hastily removed the pontoon bridges and hundreds of freed slaves who were following the army drowned trying to swim across to escape pursuing Confederates.

“A lot of stories went untold, including some you wouldn’t expect,” Groce says. “There isn’t even a marker about the burning of Atlanta, nothing that says why Atlanta was important – when the South lost its most

important industrial center, that reassured Lincoln's re-election. That's pretty significant."

The Historical Society partnered with GDEcD to develop a website (map.georgiahistory.com) that will help visitors create custom-designed driving tours by downloading information from Google maps into their cars' GPS. It also gives suggestions for places to shop, eat and sleep near sites in some of Georgia's most out of the way places.

The next phase, Groce says, will be smart phone apps that will expand upon the information available in the historical markers. The national Civil War Trust is already doing this. Based in Washington, D.C., the trust is releasing a battlefield app with GPS-enabled maps, videos, animations and audio tours for Chickamauga.

Commemorate, Not Celebrate

Fifty years ago during the centennial of the Civil War, the country was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, and segregation was still prevalent in the South. "Free and equal," was more of an idea than a reality for most African Americans, in the South and elsewhere. Congress created a centennial commission, but it was a joke – members chose to meet in a segregated hotel.

No such government commission exists this time around, and public funding is scarcer than ever as the nation begins to commemorate the defining moment in our history, the bloody family feud that made us "us."

"Fifty years ago we thought in terms of a 'celebration,'" notes Longcrier. "This time we're talking about a 'commemoration.' There's a big difference."

It is hard to imagine anyone celebrating at, say, Andersonville, a well-preserved and pristine rural South Georgia outpost, home of the National Prisoner of War Museum and the actual site of a prison camp where more than 45,000 Union soldiers were confined and 13,000 died. A visit there is guaranteed to be somber, if enlightening.

"We're talking about a war in which more than 600,000 people were killed. The population of the country was one tenth of what it is now, so that would be like losing six million people today. That's staggering. So we're trying to recognize, to commemorate. Not celebrate."

Longcrier is a historian and a Civil War re-enactor who considers the sesquicentennial his last hurrah in uniform.

"I'm in my mid-50s now. It was easier when I was young and had more time," he says. "But over these next few years, we're going to see the biggest Civil War re-enactments of our lifetime."

"The thing I enjoy most about it, more than anything else, is when the column is walking or marching, and you hear the whooshing of the uniforms, the clinking of the tin cans. In my mind's eyes, it takes me back to what it must have sounded and felt like."

Georgia will play host to several large-scale re-enactments, probably not until 2013-14, the 150th anniversary of the battles at Chickamauga and Kennesaw Mountain. Which could mean, at least for the short term, a significant economic boost for those particular neighborhoods.

Both sites are part of the National Park Service.

According to Culpepper, the economic impact of the Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park is about \$50 million annually. It's a good bit less at Kennesaw, which is surrounded by a growing suburban landscape.

On a sunny winter Sunday, the Kennesaw Mountain National Battle-field Park is packed, and visitors are forced into the overflow parking area. There's a huge banner in the visitors' center about the sesquicentennial with the words, "On the Pathway to Equality for All."

But most of these people aren't here to learn about Sherman's failed attack on Joe Johnston's Confederate

troops.

“The great majority of our visitors come to walk the trails, get outdoors for a while,” says Willie Johnson, a park historian who used to teach history in public schools.

“Maybe 15 percent come primarily for the history. They’re the ones who visit our museum and read every word, or ask questions about where their great granddaddy fought. So I still get to teach history, but I don’t have to grade papers.”

The loss at Kennesaw Mountain in June 1864 was a temporary setback for Sherman, who took Atlanta in September, then burned the city before making his scorched earth march to Savannah. The Atlanta Campaign and subsequent March to the Sea are central to Longcrier’s Civil War Trails mission.

The nonprofit organization exists to create historic driving routes across Georgia through the installation of hundreds of interpretive markers (similar to those in National Parks) and thousands of roadway “trailblazer” signs pointing the way to different sites.

Working with federal transportation funds, in conjunction with GDEcD and local communities, the organization has three trails already under way – Atlanta Campaign, March to the Sea and Jefferson Davis (which traces the escape route of the Confederate president). Three more routes are planned, but there’s no telling when that’ll happen.

“Money is the issue, or lack of it,” says Longcrier. “The economic downturn hit hard and everyone’s sesquicentennial plans had to be scaled back. Some states, like Virginia, got started early and money was appropriated early on, before the financial crisis hit.”

Nonetheless, GDEcD has produced a new website (www.gacivilwar.org) with a comprehensive calendar of sesquicentennial-related events, attractions, maps, stories and a timeline of the war. They’ve also revised and updated the popular book *Crossroads of Conflict: A Guide to Civil War Sites in Georgia*, and produced “Georgia’s Guide to the Civil War,” a free map with GPS coordinates and suggested driving trails (available at visitor centers across the state and at www.exploregeorgia.org).

GDEcD’s Langston expects a lot of activity in 2013 and 2014 with the re-enactment crowd. Union and Confederate armies fought significant battles between Chattanooga and Atlanta (besides Chickamauga and Kennesaw, there were Resaca, Picketts Mill and plenty of others).

“We expect the hardcore heritage travelers to come, but we also have an opportunity to convince families who are traveling anyway, maybe on their way to Savannah or Jekyll Island,” GDEcD’s Langston says. “We want to make it easier for those travelers to stay an extra day or two and visit these Civil War sites during the sesquicentennial.”

GDEcD estimates the potential impact of the sesquicentennial on Georgia at \$300 million and 3,500 jobs.

Love wonders how much of that action will reach the Atlanta Cyclorama & Civil War Museum, which recently completed a strategic plan with the help of some Georgia State University hospitality management students. Part of the plan includes restoring the painting (a treasure valued at \$25 million), which depicts the Battle of Atlanta, but it also outlines ways to increase the number of visitors.

The Atlanta History Center is assisting with developing new programming at the Cyclorama, which is located in Grant Park.

“But all of it depends on funding, and we all know about that,” says Love, who says the cost of implementing a plan would be between \$4 million and \$10 million.

She's talking with foundations, potential private donors, trying to form a "friends of the museum" kind of group, and envisions a collaborative effort with other local Civil War-related sites (such as Stone Mountain Park, the Atlanta History Center, Margaret Mitchell House, Oakland Cemetery and Kennesaw Mountain) to tell Atlanta's Civil War story.

"We're trying to think big and would like to take advantage of the timing, the 150th anniversary of the war," she says. "This is a chance to have the important conversations about the causes of the war, the ramifications of the war, short term and long term.

"I mean, how did we develop our personality as a city from what happened 150 years ago? Atlanta is a very special girl in the South. She looks different, acts different, has performed differently from other Southern cities. I guarantee the Battle of Atlanta has a lot to do with all of that, and we want to be part of the storytelling."



Opportunities: Camille Russell Love, director of Atlanta's Office of Cultural Affairs, at the city's Cyclorama, which depicts the Battle of Atlanta

Adam Komich



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