

KEEPING IT REAL

This spring marks the beginning of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, and the Georgia Historical Society is actively involved in the commemoration, not only statewide, but on a national level.

Three years ago, we launched the Civil War 150 Historical Marker Project, a partnership between GHS and the Georgia Department of Economic Development, with additional support from Georgia Battlefields Association, Georgia Department of Labor and Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Using an old form of public history—historical markers—and coupling them with the best in recent scholarship and the latest in online technology, this initiative is building heritage tourism while promoting a better and more thorough understanding of the conflict.

Since most of the existing 1,000 Civil War markers were put up in the 1950s for the Civil War Centennial, one could look in vain for anything about the role of African Americans, women, Georgia's secession convention, Unionists or wartime industry and the home front. Not anymore. GHS has installed eight new markers, with plans to install four more, which examine these subjects. What emerges is a broader, more complex picture of the war than was possible half-a-century ago.

These markers are changing perceptions about the results and meaning of the war. For example, a new marker about the burning of Atlanta (there never has been one) triggered opposition from the NAACP because it was erected on present-day Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, where the destruction began. For many Americans, the Civil War is still equated with glorification of the Confederacy, and the NAACP considered the marker an insult to the memory of the martyred Civil Rights leader. For many others, of all races, the war meant African American liberation, and a marker at that location about an event that told the story of the end of the war was eminently appropriate. For weeks, this debate went on in the Atlanta media. And it was a welcome one.

The project is also generating tourism. GHS has launched a micro website featuring the new markers plus all 1,000 of Georgia's older Civil War markers, allowing tourists to use Google maps to create custom driving tours based on topics of their interest. We also created a free smart phone application. These online tools have thrust GHS to the forefront of historical institutions using technology to develop heritage tourism.

More importantly, we are changing the way history is interpreted through historical markers, which have traditionally presented a narrow and sanitized version of the past. Our willingness to widen the subject matter and tackle controversial topics has sparked a dialogue that is reshaping how Americans understand the war, garnering national media attention in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Miami Herald*, the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, as well as a prestigious Leadership in History Award from the American Association for State and Local History.

The ongoing debate about the meaning and legacy of the Civil War demonstrates that topics like secession, states' rights, federal power and race are just as crucial today as they were 150 years ago. By taking a deeper and more inclusive look at the past, the Georgia Historical Society is helping Americans gain a better understanding of the present and find answers to the vexing questions that still face us in our quest to form a more perfect union.

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