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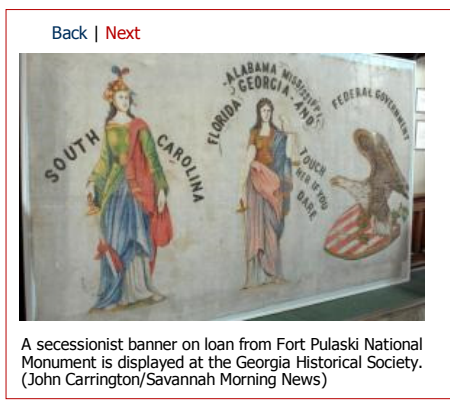
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150th Civil War anniversary seen as tourist attraction to Savannah

150th anniversary of Civil War seen as opportunity to attract more tourists

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A secessionist banner on loan from Fort Pulaski National Monument is displayed at the Georgia Historical Society.

By G.G. Rigby

As preparations are made to dedicate a new Civil War historical marker in Savannah, tourism officials say visitors interested in history bring a lot of money to the area and there's room to attract more.

"What it boils down to is blue and gray makes green," said Kevin Langston, deputy commissioner for the tourism division at the Georgia Department of Economic Development.

Langston said history buffs, known as "heritage travelers" in the hospitality business, stay longer and spend more money than typical travelers. A typical heritage traveler spends nearly \$1,000 a trip, one-third more than other travelers.

He said tourists spent \$20 billion in Georgia in 2009 and nearly three-fourths of them went to historic attractions or museums.

"It's a sweet spot for us in terms of leisure travelers," he said. "We want to make sure Georgia captures its fair share."

To that end, Langston's department joined with the Georgia Historical Society and other state and private agencies a year ago to use historical markers as a way to promote tourism.

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The historical society surveyed the 919 Civil War markers in the state, mapping their coordinates, photographing them, logging which were missing or damaged and assessing "the holes in the stories," said Todd Groce, president and chief executive officer of the group.

The survey found 150 of the markers were damaged or missing. More than 90 percent of the markers are about military topics, with nothing about the war's impact on civilians, politicians, industry, the home front, African-Americans or women.

Most of the markers were erected in the 1950s and 1960s, when the country was

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commemorating the 100th anniversary of the war. Organizers felt that focusing on the markers again at the next big anniversary, 50 years later, was appropriate.

The group used \$500,000 from the state economic development and labor departments to pay for the survey, an interactive website listing information about the markers and new and replacement markers.

Because Gen. William T. Sherman is a big drawing card for tourists, they decided to replace seven missing markers along Sherman's March to the Sea. They also decided to erect 13 new markers, many of which are on topics previously neglected.

They began a one-year public relations campaign in May 2010 focusing on the historic markers, holding storytelling events with local dignitaries, speeches and song at each new marker site.

In Savannah on Friday, they will dedicate a marker about Gen. Sherman's field orders to set aside 40-acre tracts of land for freed slaves.

As part of the campaign, the society created a new section on its website, at www.georgiahistory.com, that lists the 919 Civil War markers in the state and allows creation of customized driving tours.

Visitors can type in a topic in which they're interested, for example, Sherman's March to the Sea, and, using Google maps, find all the markers related to that topic. They can see photographs of the markers, decide which they'd like to see and put them in a cart. They wind up with a driving tour that can be loaded into a GPS or printed.

Enter start and end points, and the program also will list interesting sites and businesses along the route. It's a way for businesses with no specific Civil War ties to try to cash in on heritage tourism.

In some areas, "history is really all they've got," Groce said. "It's going to bring a lot of people to our communities."

A popular part of the dedication ceremonies has been the sale of the book "Crossroads of Conflict: A Guide to Civil War Sites in Georgia." The University of Georgia Press reprinted the book, by Barry L. Brown and Gordon R. Elwell, last fall.

Langston said the book, available at large bookstores and on Amazon.com, is so popular it sold out at some of the ceremonies.

History packages

Some Savannah-area merchants already are catering to history buffs.

The Mulberry Inn has been offering a Civil War package for several months, including tickets to Savannah Walks Civil War walking tour and to Old Fort Jackson.

The hotel wanted to capitalize on renewed interest in the Civil War because of the anniversary, said Mark Dana, who oversees the inn. He said tourists appreciate that many of the buildings in Savannah existed during the war.

"This is not a replica," he said. "You can go inside and touch the walls. These walls were here then."

Joe Marinelli, president of Visit Savannah, said he hopes more area businesses will take advantage of the anniversary. He said Savannah is a perfect "hub" where visitors interested in the Civil War can stay, then make daytrips to nearby historic sites.

"We'll be nudging some hotels to do some packages," Marinelli said. "It's a little bit early yet."

The anniversary commemoration starts this year and continues through 2015. The 150th anniversary of the more significant Georgia events is in 2013 and 2014 - the Battle of Chickamauga, the Atlanta Campaign and Sherman's March.

Langston said families will be enticed to come because school children will be learning about the Civil War.

"We'll see a lot more people getting more exposure to that type of tourism product," he said. "I think it will generate a lot more interest in historical product."

Since 80 percent of heritage travelers book online, much of the state economic development department's focus is on the web at www.gacivilwar.org.

Businesses with Civil War ties are welcome to submit information to the site for free.

An example of the tourists local merchants want to attract is the 120 people expected to come from all over the country to attend a board of trustees meeting for the Civil War Trust in Savannah Friday through Sunday.

In addition to board members, members of the group's "color bearers," who donate more

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than \$1,000 a year, are invited. They will stay at the Hilton DeSoto and will spend much of their time visiting area historic sites.

Trust spokeswoman Mary Koik said a lot of the people attending such meetings come early, stay late, bring family members and return for repeat visits later.

The group's visit was the perfect time to unveil the new historic marker, said Charlie Crawford, president of the Georgia Battlefields Association, which is helping with the markers project.

Crawford said businesses that cater to heritage tourists can't expect a guaranteed reward, such as increased profits of 3 percent. But "it tends to work," he said.

Marinelli said the Savannah area's top draws for history buffs are Fort Jackson, Fort Pulaski, the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum and the Juliette Gordon Low birthplace.

"It really is the bread and butter of who our customer is," Marinelli said. "A lot of people think about Savannah as a romantic tourist getaway, but a really big part of it is heritage visitors."



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IF YOU GO

What: Georgia Historical Society unveils a new historical marker titled "History of Emancipation: Special Field Orders No. 15."

Gen. William T. Sherman and U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met at the home of Charles Green on Jan. 12, 1865, with 20 leaders from Savannah's African-American churches. The meeting resulted in Sherman issuing field orders that encouraged the enlistment of freedmen and reserved coastal land from Charleston south to Florida's St. John's River for settlement by freed families in 40-acre tracts.

When: 4:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Northwest quadrant of Madison Square, intersection of Bull and Harris streets, downtown Savannah

Speakers: Charles Elmore, Savannah State University

Todd Groce, Georgia Historical Society

Hermina Glass Avery, Kennesaw State University

New Markers

In the year-long publicity campaign aimed at attracting tourists interested in the Civil War, seven historical markers that were missing along Sherman's March to the Sea were replaced in Sylvania, Midville, Davisboro, Milledgeville, Monticello, Jonesboro and Stone Mountain.

New markers have been erected in Rincon, Dalton, Atlanta, Quitman and Milledgeville.

In addition to Savannah, new markers will be erected soon in Columbus, Augusta, Atlanta and Dalton. Three additional markers are planned in as-yet-unconfirmed locations in Coastal Georgia and the Mountains.

Business Connection

Businesses can be listed for free on sites commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

To be listed on the Georgia Historical Society's site, www.georgiahistory.com, as being near a historic marker, businesses should e-mail the society's William Hanley, at whanley@georgiahistory.com.

Include basic information such as the name and a brief description of the business, address, phone number, web address and hours.

To be listed on the state's sesquicentennial site, www.gacivilwar.org, a business must be a tourism-related attraction or event and must have a "very strong" Civil War tie-in.

To be included, businesses must be open to individual tourists (not groups-only) and must have regular business hours (not by appointment only).

Contact Carey Ferrara, a regional tourism representative for the Georgia Department of Economic Development's tourism division, at cferrara@georgia.org.

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