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Friday, February 18, 2011

Civil War anniversary to bring tourism dollars

Tourists already flock to Civil War historical sites, but the National Park Service and others hope to cash in on the war's 150th anniversary.

TEXT OF STORY

JEREMY HOBSON: This year marks 150 years since the start of the Civil War.

And as Rickey Bevington reports from Georgia Public Broadcasting, some recession-scarred but history-filled communities are using the anniversary as a tourism opportunity.



Reenactors as they participate in the annual Civil War battle reenactment July 3, 2005, in Gettysburg, Penn. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

RICKEY BEVINGTON: In the small town of Milledgeville, the former state capitol of Georgia, politicians debate whether to leave the United States.

RE-ENACTOR: Shall the people of Georgia secede from the Union in consequence of the election of Mr. Lincoln to the presidency of the United States?

This is one of many re-enactments celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. In states from Maryland to Texas, museums, historical sites -- not to mention hotels, restaurants and gas stations -- want to draw the business of heritage tourists.

LAURA MANDALA: It's a \$192 billion business.

Tourism market researcher Laura Mandala says Americans who plan vacations to cultural and historic sites spend an average of \$994 a trip. That's a third more than the average leisure vacationer.

MANDALA: I know souvenirs is the number two category of purchase. You know shopping's number one.

Mandala says 80 percent of heritage tourists plan their trips online, so that's where communities with a historic past are working to get their attention.

I've logged on to the website of the Georgia Historical Society. I'm typing in the Civil War topic I'm interested in -- Sherman's "March to the Sea" -- and up pops a map with driving directions. It even has suggestions for hotels and restaurants.

DAVID BLIGHT: We've made history sites into commercial sites for actually centuries now.

Yale University American history professor Dr. David Blight is an author of the upcoming Civil War website by the National Park Service. The federal government oversees 70 Civil War historic sites and battlefields and they attract up to 12 million visitors a year. But so many tourists, Blight says, creates what he calls a dilemma between commemorating history and making money off of it.

BLIGHT: No one can drive into Gettysburg without seeing 50 billboards on the way in.

And since maintaining historic sites isn't cheap, making the past part of a billion-dollar market may be the best way to preserve it.

In Atlanta, I'm Rickey Bevington for Marketplace.

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By Aaron Tuell
From Manteo, NC, 02/18/2011

The first Union military victory of the Civil War, which happens to be the first major Sesquicentennial Event to be celebrated in North Carolina is an event called Flags Over Hatteras, August 22-27, 2011 on the Outer Banks. It will feature national speakers, re-enactments at the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, a blue-gray reunion and much more. FlagsOverHatteras.com

Commemorations like these give a venue for the deeper layers of our history to be told at locations such as "the beach" known for summer recreation, or "the mountains" oft-celebrated for leaf-watching.

Who would have thought that the popular Outer Banks, NC beach vacation favored by many Americans would have this relatively unknown history of being the first recorded instance of African-Americans (aboard the U.S.S. Minnesota) firing on Confederate troops at the shore-based Fort Hatteras battery. Union-occupied Hatteras Island was also one of the first safe havens for runaway slaves early in the Civil War. But the Outer Banks or OBX isn't on the national Civil War site radar for some reason, but maybe it will after Flags Over Hatteras!

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