

Perspectives

Georgia Kicks Off the Civil War 150

by W. Todd Groce, Ph.D.


THE SIX-MONTH KICK OFF OF GEORGIA'S CIVIL WAR Sesquicentennial began in May when the Georgia Historical Society dedicated the first of ten new historical markers dealing with the Civil War. Subsequent dedications will take place at the rate of about two per month. Funded by the Department of Economic Development with additional support provided by the Georgia Department of Labor and the Georgia Battlefields Association, this initiative is designed to promote tourism to Georgia and prepare the state to participate in the 150th anniversary of the war.

These new markers cover a wide variety of topics that offer a more comprehensive picture of Georgia at war than has previously emerged through historical markers. Subjects range from the 1864 bread riots in Columbus, the explosion of a munitions factory in Augusta, the only documented instance of African-American soldiers in Georgia fighting in a pitched battle, the mass desertion of Confederate soldiers in north Georgia, and the meeting in Savannah of federal officials with 20 African-American leaders to discuss the fate of freedmen across the South.

The first new marker dedication took place on May 25 in Effingham County near Ebenezer Creek. There on December 9, 1864, hundreds of fugitive slaves following Sherman's army as it approached Savannah drowned when the pontoon bridges were taken up after the troops crossed. This little-known tragedy led directly to the issuance of Field Order No. 15 that confiscated 400,000 acres of land on the southern coast and redistributed it in 40-acre plots to freed slaves.

In addition to new markers, the project will repair and replace damaged and missing existing Civil War markers, nearly 1,000 of which have been installed since the 1950s. Although current funding allowed for only seven to be repaired this year, those selected all deal with Sherman's March to the Sea (a popular tourist attraction) so that now the entire route will be marked once again.

One of the most exciting aspects of the project is its boost to tourism. Tourists can visit the GHS web site, select which of the 1,000 Civil War markers they'd like to see, and then create their own custom-designed driving tour. The directions can be downloaded into a GPS device or printed out. The web site also offers additional information about other historical sites to visit in the area, as well as places to stay and eat. Depending on future funding, iPhone applications such as full color maps and additional historical background will also be developed to supplement the marker text.

By investing in an existing state government asset, the Georgia Historical Society and its partners are creating jobs by pumping badly needed tourism dollars into Georgia's rural counties. Just as important, we are incorporating the stories of women, the home front, and African Americans into the saga of the Civil War, demonstrating that war is more than just military action, and that it has meaning for *all* Georgians. Far from ending when the Civil War 150 finishes in 2015, these new markers and the older ones that will be repaired over the next six months are a legacy project that will continue to tell their stories and draw lovers of history to Georgia for generations to come. 

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