

Civil War sesquicentennial: A time to remember R.I.'s contribution

Editor's Note: This is the first installment of a new biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff member Sam Simons. The series will run on Sundays and cover a variety of topics, including the people, places, organizations and issues.

By SAM SIMONS
Special to The Sun

WESTERLY - January 2012 marks the 150th anniversary of the first New Year observed during the American Civil War. It was a time not so much of celebration as of reflection for the residents of Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Civil War Round Table (RICWRT) recently hosted historian Kevin Levin, who spoke on Civil War memory and the sesquicentennial.

"He (Levin) held the audience in the palm of his hand," said round table president Mark Dunkelman. "It led to quite a lively Q&A session afterwards. There is still a lot of controversy around our memories of that war."

The first blush of romance and adventure had died on the fields of Bull Run near Manassas, Virginia, and at Wilson's Creek in Missouri in 1861. Though small by the standards of later battles, they had nevertheless brought home that this was going to be a long and bloody war.

Rhode Islanders figured prominently from the beginning.

A regiment of Rhode Island militia, redesignated the 1st Rhode Island regiment under command of a little known colonel named Ambrose Burnside, played a prominent role in the first major battle of the war at Bull Run and the 2nd RI regiment would serve in every major engagement of the Army of the Potomac.

Burnside would rise to command of the Army of the Potomac, but become more known for his famous sideburns than his epic failures at Fredericksburg and the Battle of the Crater.

In all, more than 25,000 men from Rhode Island would wear the uniform of the Union army or navy during the war and 1,685 would die in the struggle. Sixteen of the Ocean State's finest would win the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Dunkelman is also secretary of the Rhode Island Sesquicentennial Commission, recently established to commemorate the effect Rhode Island had on the war and the corresponding effect the war had on Rhode Island.

"The war had a profound impact on the nation's history," said Dunkelman, "Rhode Island was intimately connected to the South. The textile mills were completely dependent on its cotton (yet) the industrial capacity of Rhode Island was booming (that first year)."

The RICWRT plans to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War by supporting preservation efforts in Rhode Island as well as battlefields throughout the country.

“The Round Table is a member of the Civil War Trust,” Dunkelman stated. “The Trust has set a goal of saving 20,000 acres of battlefield land during the sesquicentennial.

“The fact that they (battlefields) aren’t here in Rhode Island doesn’t mean that we don’t have a connection. The 2nd RI (regiment) served so well in the Army of the Potomac throughout the war; these battlefields need to be preserved. They are sacred, hallowed ground.”

The Civil War Round Table meets nine times a year at the William Hall Library in Cranston. For more information, go to www.RICWRT.com.

The Civil War Trust is a national non-profit organization that has been at the forefront of rescuing our sacred heritage by partnering with smaller, local groups to purchase critical land and support legal battles aimed at saving our history. More information on the Civil War and the fight to save its battlefields can be found at www.civilwar.org.

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