



RHODE ISLAND CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION COMMISSION

ANNUAL REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

MARCH 6, 2014

The Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission was created by a Joint Resolution 2011-H5141 of the General Assembly in February 2011. The following is a report on the Commission's activities as required in the legislation.

When war broke out in 1861, Rhode Island was among the first of the Northern states to answer President Abraham Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops. Our state's quota was 780, yet 3,147 volunteered for three month's service. This spirit lasted throughout the war. Enlistments totaled 23,236 and exceeded the quota of 18,893, thus preventing a draft. Rhode Island's contribution in manpower exceeded any other state proportionately, with 13% of its population of 174,620 enlisting. Rhode Island fought in all the major battles of the War, resulting in sixteen of our soldiers earning Medals of Honor, and the loss of 1,681 men. Here in the State House, the Gettysburg cannon and the one used at the Battle of Bull Run stand aside the entrance. The flags flown by our troops in those battles and others are encased along the walls, serving as reminders to all of us of this great conflict.

But, Rhode Island impacted the northern war effort on the home front as well as on the battlefield. Our state's extensive textile industry was hampered by a scarcity of southern cotton but still excelled in manufacturing from cotton reserves. Rhode Island workers produced rifles and cannons at the Burnside Rifle Company, the Providence Tool Company, and the Builders Iron Foundry, and

other war material in many other shops. Narragansett Bay was busy with shipping. The U.S. Naval Academy moved from Annapolis, Maryland, to Newport for the duration of the war. A large army hospital opened in Portsmouth Grove. The war bolstered Rhode Island's transformation from a largely rural environment to a growing industrial power and ushered in years of economic growth in the state.

In honoring this important history, the General Assembly created a special legislative commission in February 2011 to promote greater awareness about the Civil War and Rhode Island's role in it. No state funding was allocated for the Commission. Yet, during the past three years significant progress has been made by the 27-member Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission, along with its Advisory Council. They have been meeting regularly, at least 10 times per year, to develop programs and initiatives to meet the Commission's objectives. Thus far, the following accomplishments have been achieved:

- Applied for and was awarded nonprofit 501c3 status from the IRS, allowing for donations and grants to be received.
- Received a \$10,000 contribution from Adler Pollock & Sheehan toward the purchase of "Civil War Educational Boxes" which have been distributed to high schools throughout the state to assist teachers with helpful tools to teach the lessons of the Civil War.
- Developed a website, www.rhodeislandcivilwar150.org, to help meet the Commission's objective to educate and promote awareness of Rhode Island's role in the Civil War.
- Received a \$5,000 grant from the General Assembly toward the publication of *"Rhode Island Home Front in the Civil War Era,"* a collection of studies by well-known Rhode Island authors and edited by Frank J. Williams and Patrick T. Conley. That book was released in December and has been distributed to middle schools, high schools, colleges, historical societies and libraries throughout the state. It is also for sale in the State House Gift Shop.

- Participated in "*A Tribute to the Battle of Gettysburg*" at the Newport Casino Theater, a musical-theatrical show to commemorate this battle. It combined scenes performed by Fred Zilian as Abe Lincoln and music from a 44-piece orchestra conducted by Troy Quinn. Chief Justice (Ret.) Frank Williams served as the master of ceremonies, and Ray Rickman made a guest appearance as Frederick Douglass. Capitol TV produced streaming video of the event, with introduction by Rep. Peter Martin and Chief Justice Williams.
- Numerous guest lectures about the Civil War and President Lincoln at schools and educational forums around the state by Chair Williams, as well as Commissioners Fred Zilian, Jim Tackach and others.
- Hosted the national traveling exhibit, "*Lincoln and the Constitution*," at the State House in 2012, with over 100 students visiting and participating in a program about President Lincoln.
- Have reviewed and given endorsement to dozens of educational programs and activities sponsored by various organizations around the state and promoted on the *Civil War 150* website.
- Working in partnership with other local organizations to document Civil War monuments in Rhode Island's cities and towns and identify those in need of restoration.
- Several articles about the Civil War published in newspapers and on the internet by members of the Commission.
- Successfully obtained a \$28,500 grant from The Champlin Foundations for a Flag Restoration Project to begin to conserve the flags on display at the State House from the Civil War as well as other wars.
- Successful in getting Rhode Island selected as one of 50 sites in the country to display the national traveling exhibit, "*Civil War 150: Exploring the War*

and Its Meaning through the Words of Those Who Lived It,” which was developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. While the exhibit has been displayed in libraries elsewhere, Rhode Island was the only site to locate the exhibit in the State House.

- As part of this *Civil War 150* exhibit, the Commission is collaborating with The Tsetse Initiative in a unique school field trip, in which creative interpretation of the Civil War themes will be performed in modern song and dance at the Vets Auditorium following the visit to the State House by an expected audience of 1,800 middle school students on March 18, 2014.
- On April 12, 2014 the Commission will present a full-day conference, *“Rhode Islanders on the Home Front,”* featuring an impressive line-up of scholars discussing a variety of topics which highlight the many ways Rhode Island was impacted by the War.

In conclusion, we are very pleased and proud of the progress made to date. Although the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission is due to go out of existence in March 2016, we will be asking the General Assembly to extend our tenure in order to complete several ongoing projects, including the restoration of the Civil War flags at the State House.

Respectfully submitted,

Chief Justice (retired) Frank J. Williams
Chairman

Appendix attached: List of Commission and Advisory Council Members