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The Forgotten 150th: Why the Civil War Sesquicentennial is Far From Over

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Abstract

Last spring, my friends told me that it was the perfect time to get into Civil War reenacting. “The 150th is over,” they said, “No one is going to care about the Civil War anymore, so everyone will be selling all their stuff.” Somehow, this bit of insider trading information meant more to me than just bargain brogans and frock coats. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Forgotten 150th: Why the Civil War Sesquicentennial is Far From Over

April 8, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

Last spring, my friends told me that it was the perfect time to get into Civil War reenacting. “The 150th is over,” they said, “No one is going to care about the Civil War anymore, so everyone will be selling all their stuff.” Somehow, this bit of insider trading information meant more to me than just bargain brogans and frock coats.

For many, indeed most, the Civil War ended when Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox on April 9th, 1865. For reenactors and amateur historians today, the Civil War ended last April with the 150th Appomattox events or maybe even last May with [the 150th anniversary of the Grand Review in Washington D.C.](#) And then it was over. The four year frenzy concluded as if the spring of 1865 was the end of America’s great 19th century identity crisis. Yet in a broader sense, the Civil War lasted much longer than its affixed truncation date of April 1865, and its sesquicentennial commemoration should likewise project well into the next few decades.

Victories like the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments and the Civil Rights Bills of the postbellum era should be celebrated just as much as the victories at Gettysburg and Antietam. Likewise, the tragedies of the [Colfax Massacre](#) and the founding of the Ku Klux Klan should be remembered just as well as the assassination of President Lincoln.



Union reenactors at the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Appomattox. Photo by the author.

There is some hope that the sesquicentennial will live on in the years to come. In December, President Obama and congressional leaders delivered a ceremony at Emancipation Hall in the Capitol building to commemorate the ratification of the 13th Amendment. In June of 2015, the Mitchelville Preservation Project hosted a “Juneteenth,” or “Emancipation Day,” celebration at Hilton Head, South Carolina to memorialize the June 1865 holiday of the same name celebrated by freedmen throughout the South. However, these events did not see the crowds of thousands or the national media coverage that were characteristic of other 150th events.

Perhaps this is because most Americans have simply had their fill of the Civil War after four years of sesquicentennial celebrations. Many within the Civil War community certainly have – it would not be a stretch to assume the American public at large feels similarly, if not stronger in this conviction. Maybe the looming 75th anniversary celebrations of World War II have stifled any future plans for Reconstruction commemorations, as event organizers anticipate that any Reconstruction event will be overshadowed by events featuring World War II veterans and airshows with B-17s.

Most likely, Reconstruction will not be commemorated because unlike most major events of 1861-1865, occurred not on battlefields featuring heroic tales of brothers at arms, but in the halls of the Capitol and the Oval Office or the distant backcountry where the Klan reigned. The

Reconstruction sesquicentennial cannot tap into the preexisting reenacting culture, as there are no Thaddeus Stevens or Lyman Trumbull reenactors (although that would be really cool), and Union military reenactors probably will not be too interested in reenacting twelve years of occupying the South. Confederate reenactors would be left out almost entirely.

We need to remember the nonmilitary events of Reconstruction because it is our last best hope to cement the legacy of the Civil War as one that expands far beyond the battlefield, indeed into our modern world today. In his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. drew a line from the Civil War to Birmingham and Selma. Today, it would not be difficult to do the same with Baltimore and Ferguson. The events of 2015 that highlight a continued discussion on race relations in the United States are the perfect context to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the struggles of freedmen in 2016 and beyond. The questions and narratives brought forward by the Civil War did not end in 1865. Why, then, should their commemorations end in 2015?

This coming June, the Civil War Institute will host their annual Summer Conference. This year, the conference is titled “Reconstruction and the Legacy of the Civil War,” and will highlight some of the events, issues, and narratives that will be absent from the national coverage due to a lack of a Reconstruction sesquicentennial. To register for the conference, click here.

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