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# Civil War Visitor Center at Tredegar Iron Works (Exhibition Review)

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Civil War Visitor Center at Tredegar Iron Works, Fifth and Tredegar Sts. on the Richmond Canal Walk, Richmond, Virginia; part of Richmond National Battlefield Park, National Park Service, 3215 E. Broad St., Richmond, VA 23223.

Permanent exhibition, opened June 17, 2000. Daily 9–5 except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day; admission free, donations requested, small parking fee April 28 through Nov. 30. 12,000 sq. ft. Cynthia MacLeod, David Ruth, Eric Mink, Mike Andrus, National Park Service staff; Bob Krick, park historian; Hyman Schwartzberg, curator; Russ Smith, regional lead for interpretation and education; Gary Gallagher, Thavolia Glymph, Edgar Toppin, historian

collaborators; Ralph Applebaum and Assoc., designers; Maltbie Corp., case and exhibit construction.

Internet: <<http://www.nps.gov/rich/>>.

The Civil War battlefields surrounding Richmond, Virginia, are crucial to understanding the central conflict in American history. Since much of the Union war effort focused on taking the capital of the Confederacy, battles raged around the city throughout the war, especially in 1862 and 1864. The battlefields of the two vast campaigns lie interspersed among one another; famous sites such as Malvern Hill and Cold Harbor are surrounded by lesser-known but still important counterparts. Visitors must struggle to keep two complicated stories in mind as they drive from one site to another, often through subdivisions and past shopping centers. The battlefields of Richmond are important and intriguing; they are also confusing, endangered, complicated, and frustrating.

The new Civil War Visitor Center at Tredegar Iron Works attempts to bring clarity to those scattered sites, weaving them into a common story and making them accessible to a diverse audience.

The new center is, in part, the product of collaboration between the National Park Service and the Organization of American Historians (OAH). In 1997, the OAH arranged for three historians to visit the Richmond National Battlefield Park and evaluate its presentation of the events there. Gary Gallagher, Sandra Treadway, and this reviewer traveled throughout the park with its resident historians, hearing of the threats of encroachment and seeing the challenges of interpreting the many battles around Richmond from a dilapidated and outmoded old weather station far from any of the battlefields it interpreted. The exhibits in that center had fallen desperately out-of-date, offering visitors an unsatisfying portrayal not only of the battles but also of the social and political meanings of the war. The historians wrote reports and the Park Service, already working with the city of Richmond on a new center, began to recast its facilities and presentations.

The new center is located in one of the most evocative sites of the Civil War: the Tredegar Iron Works on the James River, in the heart of Richmond. The iron works, the largest industrial enterprise in the Confederacy, produced, partly with slave labor, cannon, ammunition, and iron plate for the South's ironclad ships, including the famous *css Virginia*. The building had been prepared for a museum by the earlier efforts of Richmond's Valentine Museum. After that initiative fell victim to economic and political struggles, the Ethyl Corporation, owner of the property, arranged for its occupation by the National Park Service. The service brought in Gary Gallagher and fellow historians Thavolia Glymph and Edgar Toppin as advisers to help design the new facilities.

The spare main room displays enormous panels devoted to the various facets of the war embodied in Richmond's battlefields, buildings, monuments, and cemeteries. A map table, composed of four large screens lying flat about a foot off the floor and controlled by a touch-screen monitor, plays animations of the major battles on aerial shots of local landscapes.

Upstairs, visitors find two parallel exhibits, one devoted to "Voices from the Military Front" and the other to "Voices from the Home Front." The displays, simple but effective, provide a collage of people and places in Richmond, a few artifacts dispersed among them. Visitors sit on benches in front of the mural-sized exhibits, listening to recordings of diaries and letters as lights illuminate appropriate images in the mural. The voices are refreshingly diverse, revealing the thoughts of black people as well as white, female as well as male, civilian as well as soldier, all with stories to tell.

Those who travel to the War Room in the basement of the Iron Works will find a more traditional presentation of the war. A large screen shows a film from the old visitors center, filled with unconvincing images of reenactors and sentimental narration. The same room contains a rather random sample of artifacts: a scale model of a pontoon bridge and a reconstructed pontoon; two cannon cast at Tredegar; a display of ammunition and shells; fourteen flagstaves and images of the flags they bore; a Bible and playing cards to convey the polarities of camp life; monitors showing portraits and biographies of generals who led the fights around Richmond. When the film is not showing, a large screen silently displays the number of casualties at each battle, white letters on black background. The effect is powerful.

By 2003, visitors will find a much-enlarged museum at the Tredegar Iron Works. A \$37 million museum will pull together a rich exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution, the United States Army, and the Museum of the Confederacy, featuring the roles of African Americans in the war. The old visitors center, site of the Chimborazo Hospital where thousands of Confederate soldiers died while female nurses and black slaves labored among them, is being converted into an exhibition devoted to the medical history of the war. The somber events of the war years will find a suitable reminder in Richmond, building upon a firm foundation now in place.

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