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Discovering the Civil War Discovery Trail

Take a walk among the memories that once divided a nation.

By Nancy Dickinson



The tower on Droop Mountain overlooks the land where one of West Virginia's largest Civil War battles took place.

Nancy Dickinson

Inarguably, the Civil War was the most divisive event to take place in the United States. It pitted brother against brother, father against son. Passions ran high on both sides of the war, with neither side willing to admit defeat until more than 600,000 lives had been lost.

I have always had an interest in the Civil War since learning my great-great grandfather, Anthony Wayne Ross, had served for three years with the 73rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. My interest was heightened when I learned his best friend, business partner and brother-in-law, Isaac J. Sperry, died at the battle of Gettysburg and is buried on the grounds in Pennsylvania.

In researching my story for the print edition of *Home & Away, Trains, Trails and Trout*, I stumbled across West Virginia's rich Civil War history. This research led me to an initiative run by the Civil War Preservation Trust, the Civil War Discovery Trail.

Following the Trail

The Civil War Discovery Trail isn't truly a trail, not in the traditional sense of a trail like the Appalachian Trail. This trail is a grouping of sites from the Civil War that encompasses 32 states and more than 600 sites.

Because of the vigilance of the Civil War Preservation Trust, the trail is comprised of locations such as the Ford Theatre, the Antietam Battlefield or Gettysburg, to name some more famous sites. However, the trust isn't concerned with the preservation of just the large tourist attractions, it's also concerned with the smaller locations, equally important to history, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's home in Cincinnati or the birthplace of Ulysses S. Grant in Point Pleasant, along the Ohio River.

When I arrived in West Virginia, I was in awe at the tremendous pride the people take in their state. What is a greater point of pride for them, if that's possible, is the role they played in the Civil War. At every site I visited, every battlefield, every building, every state park that is built around these sites, there is something to commemorate the fallen from these battles. The respect shown for soldiers no one knew is sobering.

Footsteps of the Past

My great-great grandfather was stationed in West Virginia at one point. He left behind three years of letters written home to my great-great grandmother while he served and in each letter, he carefully wrote in the top corner the date and his location. In looking through his letters after my return, a thrill went through me seeing the names of the towns he was at in West Virginia and knowing I had been there recently. Having trod the same grounds as my great-great grandfather was humbling. I was there on an assignment to write an article while he was there to preserve the Union, usually without enough food, clothing or pay. I was tired at the end of each day, walking the little I had while the soldiers who served would walk for miles a day, sometimes with no food, shelter or sleep.

West Virginia works hard to preserve its Civil War past. Lewisburg, W.Va., in Greenbrier County, was the first battle of the war that was comprised entirely of urban warfare. The General Lewis Inn was the headquarters for the confederate soldiers who raided the town in their quest to return West Virginia to the commonwealth of Virginia. In the town are a confederate cemetery and several buildings that date to the town's inception in 1794. A later visit to Droop Mountain, another site of a Civil War battle, was equally inspiring when I saw the graves of two men who fought and died there, complete with photos imbedded in their headstones.

Rich is the history of West Virginia, not just in the Civil War but also in the coalmines and lumber camps across the state. Filled with the pride of knowing they probably helped turn the tide of the Civil War, equally impressive is the spirit these people emit in an area that is oft spoken of as a blighted area because it's part of the Appalachian Mountain region. But don't tell them they don't have a king's ransom at their feet because they love where they live. They were born there, so will they be buried there, on a rocky hillside covered with the trees, flowers and wildlife they've grown to love.



A cannon sits inside Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park near Summersville, W.Va.

Nancy Dickinson



Union troops took command of the Phillipi covered bridge in Phillipi, W.Va., and used it as a barracks.

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So Many States, So Little Time

A person could plan a lifetime of vacations to see these sites and still never see them all. In the neighboring state of Kentucky, there are 52 listed sites, such as Jefferson Davis State Historical site. In Tennessee, there are 55 sites and in Georgia, there are 41 sites preserved for future generations. Expanding as far west as New Mexico and California, these two states have a combined five sites while the great state of Texas is home to 16 locations.

Early next year, I will have the pleasure of visiting Mississippi and Beauvoir, Jefferson Davis' home and Presidential Library and Fort Massachusetts, built by the

W.Va.
Nancy Dickinson

U.S. Corps of Engineers on a sand bar christened Ship Island and used during the war to protect the entrance

to the harbor of New Orleans. Both these sites are members of the trail.

Thirty-two states, more than 600 sites and so little time to see them all; but I'd like to try. An added feature to the majority of these locations is the special events scheduled each year, usually on the anniversary of a battle or event. Until the end of this year, Harper's Ferry is commemorating the 150th anniversary of John Brown's Raid with symposiums, walking tours and re-enactments of not just the raid but the re-election of Abraham Lincoln in 1864.

The more time I spent in West Virginia, the more I realized this: preserving the history of the Civil War in their state isn't something they do to attract tourists—it's what they do to maintain the heritage that made them great.

For more information about the Civil War Discovery Trail, visit www.civilwardiscoverytrail.org or The Civil War Preservation Trust at www.civilwar.org/.

For vacation-planning help, contact your AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

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