

Freedom's Frontier's New Website Opens a Virtual Window to a Violent Past

On April 12, 1861, Confederate artillery fired upon Fort Sumter, igniting the Civil War - or at least, that's what most Americans believe. But the truth is a bit more complex. In fact, the war had been raging at a fever pitch for years before the northern and southern states took up arms against each other. The bloodiest war in American history, the war that would set brother against brother and father against son, began by setting neighbor against neighbor along the Kansas-Missouri border.

The war that raged along the border of these two neighboring states seethed with such an intensity of violence and hatred that the echoes linger to this day. But if this relatively small area of the western frontier was the birthing ground of a conflict that would split a nation asunder, it was also the proving ground of a national healing. It was the epicenter of the rebirth of a nation – a nation that would grow to become the greatest force for freedom on earth. It was freedom's frontier.

From a Regional Battleground to a National Park

Beginning in 1854, 7 years before the national Civil War began, anti-slavery forces in the Kansas territory were at war with pro-slavery forces in Missouri (Kansas became a state in 1861).

Some of the most well known names from that dark era in American history came to prominence in the Kansas-Missouri Border Wars. Fiery abolitionist John Brown, leader of the Pottawatomie massacre in southeastern Kansas in 1856. Rebel raider William Quantrill, viewed by some as a bloody butcher, and by others as a Confederate hero. And veterans of Quantrill's Raiders Jessie and Frank James and the Younger Brothers, who forged their fame after the war by continuing their lives of violence.

It's the history of this region, so influential upon the course of national history and so little understood by most Americans, that the Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area seeks to preserve and make available to all. This history encompasses 41 counties of eastern Kansas and western Missouri, covering more than 30,000 square miles and drawing upon the shared stories of the nearly 3 million residents of the area.

The grassroots effort that became Freedom's Frontier began in 2002 with just a handful of volunteers. The volunteer network eventually grew into a force of thousands of people, their work leading to president George W. Bush signing into law legislation designating Freedom's Frontier as a National Heritage Area in 2006.

But to accomplish their goals, Freedom's Frontier volunteers had to put to rest 150 years of animosity, prejudice, and even hate. It wasn't easy.

“They Believed in God?”

150 years of deep-seated enmity doesn't just disappear overnight. Though the Civil War ended long ago, the bitterness and hatred that had been generated among the Missouri-Kansas neighbors was far too intense to be dissipated by a truce. And in many cases, the hatred and distrust that many of the citizens of the neighboring states felt each for the other was passed down through the generations. “My father hated them, and my grandfather hated them” is the reason often given for lingering animosities, according to Ralph Monaco of the Jackson County Historical Society.

Long-held prejudices and misunderstandings were also passed along from parents to children. Eileen Robertson, Freedom's Frontier staff member, was struck by the depth of her prejudice one day when she was looking at some historical artifacts. She spotted a Confederate prayer book, and thought: “They believed in God?”

But the very process of working together to bring a violent past to light helped to finally begin the healing of old wounds. “There was a little bit of animosity for a while,” said a Freedom's Frontier volunteer. “But once we started working together, going to meetings together, talking together...and hearing their stories, it's amazing how that divide vanished.”

Deanell Reese Tacha, FFNHA Board of Trustees Chair says that Freedom's Frontier offers a “legacy of understanding freedom in ways that give everyone the room to believe what they believe personally, and yet live in a civilized society.”

Every Story Needs a Storyteller

Freedom's Frontier is comprised of a network of more than 100 historical locations in Kansas and Missouri. Each offers its own unique story and historical perspective of the Border Wars period. The Freedom's Frontier Board of Trustees wanted to offer their historical stories and the valuable lessons they teach to a global audience. And these days, that means getting online.

So the Board turned to a group of accomplished storytellers – Imagemakers, a design and advertising agency based in Wamego, Kansas. The Imagemakers team, working hand-in-hand with Freedom's Frontier Board members, created a state of the art online repository of a regional history that helped shape the destiny of a nation.

Freedom's Frontier's interactive website offers hours of interesting browsing for the casual visitor, and also provides a valuable historical resource for scholars. Visitors to www.freedomsfrontiers.org can pay virtual visits to dozens of the historical locations of the Freedom's Frontier network, stay abreast of regional news, and learn of upcoming events of interest.

And perhaps most importantly, visitors to the website are invited to share their own stories, thoughts and feelings. Family stories that have been passed down through

generations within families can be shared and preserved for future generations. Family photos that help to document the history of the region can be uploaded. Experiences and photos from visits to historical sites within the region are also welcome. And sharing is as easy as clicking the “Share Your Story” buttons found on the pages of www.freedomsfrontiers.org.

Each visitor’s input adds an important thread to the tapestry of our shared history, making it fuller, richer and more complete. History, after all, is nothing more than the sum of all our individual stories.

For more information contact (fill in the name and contact info you wish to use)