

For Immediate Release:

Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau and Antietam National Battlefield Collaborate to Open New Welcome and Exhibit Center

(Sharpsburg, Md.) – Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau President and CEO Tom Riford and Antietam National Battlefield Superintendent John Howard have entered into a cooperative agreement to open a Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area Welcome and Exhibit Center at Antietam National Battlefield. The center will be located off of Route 34 at the historic Newcomer Farm, near the Antietam Creek.

“This is an important day for Antietam National Battlefield,” said Superintendent John Howard. “This center will not only help bring visitors here, but will also help tell the story of what happened in Maryland during the Civil War.”

In October of 2008, Antietam Superintendent John Howard offered the Newcomer House to the state-certified heritage area to use as an exhibit and visitor center. A working group, consisting of board members from the heritage area, rangers from Antietam, Monocacy, Harpers Ferry, and South Mountain parks and battlefields, and several volunteers, has been developing plans for exhibits at the Newcomer House. Tom Riford is the chairman of that task force.

“This is the first welcome and exhibit center dedicated to orienting visitors to the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area’s resources and interpretive themes,” said Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau President and CEO Tom Riford.

The goal of the heritage area is to have the center open to the public in time for the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War and to provide information that will direct visitors to the many Civil War sites located throughout the entire heritage area. There is already a “gateway sign” at the home, and more interpretive signage will be installed in the months to come. The first floor of the home will be outfitted with three exhibit rooms, and a main visitor center room.

“This has been planned carefully, over quite a long period of time. Our organization is very pleased to be able to have this chance to showcase our history and heritage, our attractions, our lodging and dining establishments, and our retail opportunities,” said Tom Riford. “The Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area Welcome and Exhibit Center will assist in the promotion of Washington County, Frederick County, and Carroll County, as well as to be able to tell the story of what happened during the Civil War here. This is an important part of our preparations for the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War.”

Riford presented the beginning plans for the Newcomer House Welcome and Exhibit Center at the Civil War Sesquicentennial Summit, held in January 2009 in Frederick, Maryland.

As outlined in the cooperative agreement, the National Park Service will be responsible for ongoing maintenance at the Newcomer House, including lawn care and snow removal, as well as repairs to the floor, the security system, and the summer kitchen’s chimney, located at the rear of the house. The National Park Service has provided exterior signage and will help staff the visitor center with volunteers.

The Hagerstown-Washington County CVB will be responsible for training the volunteer staff and keeping supplies of information stocked and current. The CVB will also pay for the visitor center’s utility costs.

The historic house was once a private home, and witnessed the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862. It can be seen in historic photographs taken immediately following the battle. The

house was once used for a small museum, and was obtained by the National Park Service several years ago. It is in need of retrofitting, and some renovations, although the National Park Service has already begun making the Newcomer House ready for its new role.

The Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area has already obtained \$24,000 through the National Park Service's Challenge Cost Share Program and has applied for a grant from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) for an additional \$24,000. The money will be used for exhibit design and fabrication, furnishings, and grand opening festivities. The Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau will act as the project's financial entity, coordinating procurement and purchasing.

"At a time when visitor centers are closing left and right due to budget cuts, it's significant that the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area is opening up a new welcome and exhibit center," said Washington County Heritage Area Assistant Charissa Beeler Stanton. "Thanks to Superintendent Howard's generous offer of the Newcomer House and Tom Riford's ongoing commitment to heritage tourism in Washington County, this project continues to move forward. The Newcomer House will be a valuable resource for the increase of visitors expected in the area over the next few years in celebration of the Civil War Sesquicentennial. We expect the tourism benefit to be an increase in return visits and an increase in the length of stay as a result of the visitor center."

"We see this opportunity to help show what happened in the Civil War in our county, and also to help bring new attention to the entire heritage area," said Tom Riford. "This facility will also promote what's here today, because visitor information will be available including brochures, guides, videos, maps, and more." Riford also said that the Newcomer House is an important piece of American history. "Just as this farmhouse witnessed the Battle of Antietam, it's important that visitors understand the significant events that took place along Antietam Creek. My hats off to the National Park Service for wanting this historic building to not only be preserved, but to have an ongoing and positive use."

The Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area Welcome and Exhibit Center will have a grand opening weekend September 17-19, 2010. It will be open seven days a week, from April to November, from 11a.m.-4 p.m.

The Newcomer House was built in the 1830s alongside the Boonsboro Pike (present-day Route 34) near Middle Bridge across Antietam Creek outside Sharpsburg. Currently within Antietam National Battlefield, the Newcomer farmhouse and 2.5 acres were purchased from a private in-holder by the National Park Service in 2007. The 2,000-square foot house is in good condition. Repairs made by the previous owner, who used the house as a small private museum, have met the Department of the Interior's standards. The house is adjacent to a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, and also very near the Pry House Field Hospital Museum.

The Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization whose mission is to help attract visitors to Hagerstown and Washington County. The CVB helps to create vibrant growth for the local economy by promoting, developing, and expanding the local visitor industry. For more information see: www.marylandmemories.com.

Washington County is part of the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area (www.heartofthecivilwar.org), and the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area (<http://hallowedground.org>). Washington County is also part of the Quad-State Tourism Coalition, a four-state tourism group along I-81. For more information, see: www.quadstate81.com. The Hagerstown-Washington County CVB was recently awarded the Maryland Cultural Heritage Tourism Award by Governor Martin O'Malley.

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