Today on *Across the Fence* we visit a historic state landmark where Vermonters were called on to give their full duty in defense of the United States of America. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us, I am Judy Simpson. Vermont has a rich history when it comes to our nation's civil war. As we observe the war, sesquicentennial events are planned to honor the sacrifices made by soldiers and civilians alike. Here in Vermont and in the battlegrounds of the north and south. Vermont's role in the civil war began with a historic vote in Montpelier and that's where we find Vermont historian Howard Coffin.

Vermont's observance of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War is well underway and in many ways it has its center right here at the 1859 State House. That building opened less than two years before the Civil War began and it looks almost the same inside and out as it did then. Some interesting history happened on the State House lawn. A 100-foot flagpole was put up here as the war began and war rallies were held around it. And then at the end of the war a scaffold was built supposedly for the hanging of confederate President Jefferson Davis.

We're in the Vermont House of Representatives. Perhaps the most famous room in all of Vermont and it looks today almost exactly as it did at the time of the Civil War. The same chandelier, the same seats and the same speaker's rostrum. In 1862 John Phelps came back from Louisiana having resigned from the army after General Benjamin Butler refused to let him enlist black men into the army. He came back and spoke here to a rousing reception. He said the sun never looked down upon a greater evil than American slavery. In ruling this great nation of slaves we have to a degree, become enslaved ourselves. Many of the things said here had a ring of human freedom. Perhaps the greatest moment in this room happened on May 9 1865 when the legislature met in the next recession to consider whether to ratify the 13th Amendment which outlawed slavery. The vote was 169 to nothing and when the vote was announced a 100-gun salute was fired on the State House lawn. Republican Governor Erastus Fairbanks asked the legislature to appropriate 1/2 million dollars to begin the war effort. But that wasn't enough according to many including Representative Stephen Thomas, a democrat from West Fairlee. He rose to say this. Until this rebellion shall have been put down I have no friends to reward and no enemies to punish. I trust that the whole strength and power of Vermont both of men and money will be put into the field to sustain the government. Thomas would go on to lead the eighth Vermont regiment in the Civil War including its suicidal and brave stand at Cedar Creek.
Soldier reunions were held in this hall. In years after the Civil War Stephen Thomas came back and spoke of his comrades that were no longer with him. Their memory is like apples of gold in pictures of silver they need no eulogy for it is written in letters of living light. Abraham Lincoln had used the analogy of gold and silver to talk about the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence how they should always be considered together because the Declaration of Independence guaranteed that all men are created equal and should be treated equal he was talking about human freedom.

Here in the senate chamber all the seats are numbered. This has been called the most beautiful room in Vermont and it may well be. After the Civil War a war record was an essential thing to a political career. A lot of veterans got elected to the senate. In fact, some 95 Civil War veterans served in this room. The numbers haven't changed. Here in Seat 22 sat George Grendall Benedict a longtime editor of the Burlington Free Press who won a Medal of Honor at Gettysburg. In the seat beside him, Seat 23, Wheelock Veazey serves from Springfield. Wheelock Veazey commanded the 16th Vermont regiment at Gettysburg in the flank attack on Pickett's Charge and then turned his men around and launched another flank attack on a supporting confederate attack. Long after the war he became National Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic; the great Veteran’s organization. Right down at the end of this row at the last desk it was occupied by Redfield Proctor. Redfield Proctor led the 15th Vermont regiment to Gettysburg who later served as Secretary of War. Beloved by his soldiers, he welcomed them all to Proctor for a great reunion years after the war. In Proctor he founded the Vermont Marble Company. Vermont of course has a remarkable Civil War history but it is no where as present perhaps as in the Cedar Creek Room of the State House. An old friend of mine is with us today. David Schutz is the curator of the State House. David, there are some new things in this old room.

David: There are. We have never been able to truly bring alive the two parts of the State House that resonate with the Civil War the most. And that's this room, the Cedar Creek Room which of course has this magnificent painting behind us that was commissioned for the State House as perhaps Vermont's most important Civil War memorial. Then the flag collection which we've worked for decades to conserve but in the aftermath of that, not been able to do much with the empty cases. Now we have these glorious exhibits that actually with this significant anniversary for the Civil War are coming alive in a new way for the State House and we're very very proud of them. In this room we've never had a very effective way of explaining this magnificent painting to the public unless they had the benefit of a tour. We get so many casual visitors to the State House that we needed a more active way of bringing this to life. As you know we have these wonderful stanchions in front of the painting that explain the battle and also explain the significant story of how Julian Scott actually painted the battle for this building.

Howard: The Civil War lasted four years. We are in the middle of a four year Civil War sesquicentennial. If you come to the State House in the next four years you'll see these exhibits and understand Vermont and the Civil War.

Judy: I'm joined now by Howard Coffin. Welcome. The State House is a really amazing place.

Howard: You know Judy I was giving a tour of Montpelier with some people from Alaska around Christmas. It was at night and we stopped in front the State House and I found myself saying without thinking this is one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. It is--and it is filled with history.
Judy.: It is. The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. When did Vermonters first get involved in the fighting?

Howard.: They first got involved in the fighting in the spring of 1861. A little battle at big Bethel. The first heavy fighting came on the 16th of April 1862 and we're coming up on the 150th anniversary of that; a battle at Lee's Mills where we lost about 140 men, killed and wounded, including the famous ‘Sleeping Sentinel’ from Groton, William Scott.

Judy.: Did every town in Vermont send soldiers to fight in the Civil War?

Howard.: Every single town in Vermont sent soldiers. I'm just finishing a book on every single town and I've been there and I can testify to that from Victory to Burlington they went and they went in big numbers.

Judy.: What was Vermont's greatest battlefield triumph and its largest loss of life during the Civil War?

Howard.: I've written that the great moment came on May 5 in the wilderness in 1864. The Vermont brigade lost over 1000 men making certain that Ulysses Grant's army on the first day of the campaign that won the war was not cut in two. We made that stand and the army remained intact.

Judy.: You've been working as you mentioned on a project for six years researching every town in Vermont for Civil War history. What have you learned?

Howard.: I've learned that probably every Vermonter was in some way profoundly affected by the war. I've long thought that more men died in the war then the official records say. Here in Vermont certainly. I am absolutely convinced of that now because I found an awful lot of cases where men came home and died weeks or months after their enlistments were up and those figures didn't count in the official records. Now some studies nationwide are increasing the number of people who died in the Civil War markedly from an estimate of 620,000 it's now going up to the 700 thousands. So the war hit harder here than even I realized.

Judy.: You've written several books about the Civil War. What makes this latest project so unique?

Howard.: I set out almost seven years ago to visit every town and do a book on Civil War sites that survive there. I don't think in fact I am quite certain that nobody has ever done that. I don't know how you do it in New York for instance where you have a much larger population and many more towns but in Vermont at least I think we're going to have a compendium of sites unlike any other and I'm happy to say that Judy last week on a beautiful day up along the Connecticut River in the Northeast Kingdom I went to Brunswick and Guildhall and those are the last two towns I had to go to and it was a beautiful day to end it all.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about some of the stories you've learned from families who kept all these relics for years.

Howard.: I'm just starting really a project that I think should go on in Vermont for a long time. I'm going to put this book out and you know when you write a book what inevitably happens is when it hits the bookstores the phone starts to ring and people will say I've got something that should go in that book of yours. I'm telling people that this is a first edition and I can add to it correct mistakes or whatever. I'm just finding so many houses of soldiers where they came home and died. I'm
particularly touched by a recent trip to Bakersfield. Bakersfield sent a company to the 13th Vermont regiment that fought in Gettysburg. A local man was commander and he was mortally wounded at Gettysburg and came home. The house that he died in still stands in Bakersfield and the church is still there were his funeral was. I'm going to speak there on the 7th of July. They are having a wonderful event in Bakersfield. There's events all over Vermont this year and the next three years with the sesquicentennial for the Civil War. Keep an eye on the papers because they're out there along with a lot of local stuff.

Judy.: Is the Civil War still a popular topic with folks?

Howard.: Yes I think it is, and the way the Civil War sesquicentennial came almost 20 years early when Ken Burns brought out his film and the whole nation was suddenly Civil War crazy but that interest has continued and in a way it's matured because people are taking a look more closely at something they should be looking at not only what happened on the battlefield but what happened at home.

Judy.: Because there are a lot of reminders as you mentioned still standing where people can go and see these things.

Howard.: They can go and see and not only that but with a little detective work looking at town records seeking out local diaries and letters they can find their own Civil War history and yes I'm going to have sites in every town but I'm only scratching the surface. There's a lot more detective work to be done.

Judy.: We have about a minute left. Besides the State House what other landmarks are there that people can go and explore?

Howard.: Oh my goodness. Make sure you go to History Expo this year at Tunbridge Fair. I think it's the 16th and 17th of June. Every little town is going to have their Civil War treasures. The Vermont Historical Society is opening soon in Barre their Civil War exhibit. Hill Dean the Lincoln Home and American Precision Museum in Windsor. I'm very proud to say that my Civil War Exhibit is going on display there for two years starting in June and along with the items they have that concern the manufacture of weapons. They needed 50,000 rifles for the Civil War it's going to be quite a show too.

Judy.: Howard thanks so much.

Howard.: Thank you.

Judy.: That's our program for today. I'm Judy Simpson and we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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