Apps mix history with technology at Gettysburg

KEITH COLLINS, Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- At the 150th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Gettysburg, many Civil War re-enactors will eschew the use of modern technology, but scores of tourists will embrace it.

More than 5,700 Foursquare users have checked in at sites in the historic borough; more than 16,000 Facebook users have liked it. And in the weeks leading up to the anniversary, apps that offer maps and information about key battle spots have surged in popularity.

Garry Adelman has been a licensed Gettysburg battlefield guide for 19 years and has recently moved his high-energy tour into the realm of the smartphone. The project was initiated four years ago by the Civil War Trust, a nonprofit battlefield preservation group where Adelman is the director of history and education.

The group has since released 11 free Battle Apps for the iPhone and Android. Guides like Adelman appear in videos in the apps, telling the stories behind the historic sites where smartphone users are standing. Old photos show how a landscape looked during the war. And when a tourist points a smartphone camera toward some history, virtual signs appear to show what's what.

"In-person historical interpretation, where you can answer people's questions, will always be superior to a touring product on your phone," Adelman said. The problem, he said, is there often aren't enough tour guides to serve the number of Gettysburg visitors.

For a week like the upcoming celebration, Adelman said, "it's not even close."

National Park Service rangers and guides will offer many tours of the battlefield this week. Otherwise, before smartphones, visitors to Gettysburg could hire a private guide, take a bus tour or drive the battlefield on their own guided by an audio tour from a CD.

Adelman said products like the Battle Apps fill the space in between, and that's proving to be a big space. According to Michael Bullock of NeoTreks, the company that develops the apps with the Civil War Trust, downloads of the Gettysburg iPhone Battle App have recently surged.

"Gettysburg has always had strong downloads in the past," Bullock said, "but it's increased significantly in the last month or two."

When Jim Percoco, a now-retired high school history teacher, brought his class to tour Gettysburg using a Battle App in October 2011, the reactions from students were mixed, he said.

"For these kids, they need a person to interact with," he said. After the tour, Percoco's sense was that some of his students would "rather interact with a warm body than a phone screen." Other students, though, seemed to engage with the app's multimedia features.

"It can bring the experience to a whole new level, if you're into that sort of thing," Percoco said.

Adelman noted that new technology was a big part of the Civil War itself. He cited the mass production of photographs and weaponry as examples. But whether visitors are following Adelman through the battlefield in person or through their handheld devices, he said, "We're getting people to say, `Aha! That's what it was like.'"

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