

## **Arlington National Cemetery and Robert E. Lee**

Across the Potomac River in Virginia, in a direct straight line with the Lincoln Memorial, lies Arlington National Cemetery. This site was the original 1,100 acre *Arlington Plantation* belonging to Gen. Robert E. Lee, who married Mary Anne Randolph Custis, only surviving child of George Washington Parke Custis, (George Washington's adopted grandson), and Mary Lee Fitzhugh. Mary Anne Randolph Custis had inherited this plantation from her father, who in turn, inherited it from his father, John Parke Custis. In 1802, shortly after Martha Washington's death, George Washington Parke Custis began building his house, to be named *Arlington* after the Custis ancestral home on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. His architect was George Hadfield, an Englishman who had come to Washington in 1795. Robert E. Lee and Mary Anne Custis played in this house, were married in it and spent their honeymoon in it. By virtue of his marriage, *Arlington Plantation* and the *Custis-Lee Mansion* became the home of Robert E. and Mary Anne Custis Lee. Their seven children were born here.

By Act of Congress in 1955, the *Custis-Lee Mansion* is maintained and kept open to the public by the Department of Interior, National Park Service as a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee.

At the break of the Civil War, Robert E. Lee resigned from the U.S. Army, stating that he could not lift his hand against family and friends of his native Virginia. His plantation home unoccupied, Union forces soon took over the premises. A law required that all private property owners should appear in person to pay their taxes. Mrs. Lee sent a cousin to pay the taxes amounting to \$97.04. The government turned it down, however, purchasing the estate on public auction shortly thereafter. Union troops soon took over the estate. It was thus that Robert E. Lee's Arlington home became a national cemetery.

Twenty years later, Custis Lee, Gen. Lee's son, took his father's last Will and Testament to the Supreme Court. The court's ruling reinstated Lee as rightful owner of this estate. Unable to live on the site of a now-established cemetery, however, Lee sold it to the U.S. government in 1883 for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

### ***Robert E. Lee's Genius***

General Robert E. Lee, the great leader of the Confederate army in the Civil War, was a military genius. Considered to be in the ranks of the greatest military leaders in all history, he was also loved and respected as a Christian gentleman in the north, as well as in his native Virginia and the southern states.

### ***Lee's Origins***

Born in 1807, he was the fourth son of Major General Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, a Revolutionary war hero, and Anne Hill Carter, a direct descendant of Robert "King"

Carter, one of the most noble and significant figures of Virginia's golden age in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. He grew up in his family home built in 1795, an outstanding example of federal architecture. It stands as a unique landmark at 607 Oronoco Street in Alexandria, and is operated by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

When Robert was six, his father, ill and broken in spirit, left the family for Barbados and never returned. The former hero died on his way back when Robert was eleven, so that he was raised by his mother from age six. Anne Hill Carter, one of the little-celebrated heroines of America, brought up her five children almost single-handedly, giving them a magnificent example of Christian virtue, and molding their characters upon Scripture truth.

### *Lee's Formative Years*

Fitzhugh Lee, a distinguished contemporary, wrote the following regarding Lee's early life:

If he inherited much from a long and illustrious line of paternal ancestors, he no less fell heir to the strong characteristics of his mother's family, one of the oldest and best in Virginia. The unselfishness, generosity, purity, and faithfulness of the Virginia Carters are widely known, and they have always been "true to all occasions true." In his mother was personified all the gentle and sweet traits of a noble woman. Her whole life was admirable, and her love for his children beyond all other thoughts. To her watchful care they were early confided by the long absence and death of her distinguished husband.

Robert was four years old when his father removed the family to Alexandria, six when he visited the West Indies for his health, and eleven when he died. If he was early trained in the way he should go, his mother trained him. If he was "always good," as his father wrote, she labored to keep him so. If his principles were sound and his life a success, to her, more than to any other, should the praise be given...As Robert grew in years he grew in grace; he was like the young tree whose roots, firmly imbedded in the earth, hold it straight from the hour it was first planted till it develops into majestic proportions. with the fostering care of such a mother the son must go straight, for she had planted him in the soil of truth, morality, and religion, so that his boyhood was marked by everything that produces nobility of character in manhood. The handsome boy was studious and sedate, was popular with other boys, stood high in the estimation of his teachers, and his early inspiration was good, for his first thoughts were directed upon subjects by an excellent mother.<sup>1</sup>

At age eighteen, Lee entered the United States Military Academy, West Point, as a cadet to train for his distinguished career. In the 1830's he became a lieutenant. Lee married Mary Anne Randolph Custis, only surviving child of George Washington Parke Custis, who was George Washington's adopted grandson. They had seven children.

Though deeply devoted to his family, Lee's military career required long separations from his loved ones, taking him to many parts of the country. In 1846, when the United

States declared war on Mexico, Lee was called into active duty, and his bravery and military skills won him recognition and promotion.

### ***Letters of Robert E. Lee***

Lee greatly loved the Union, having devoted his adult life to its service as a soldier. He was opposed to secession. The following excerpt is from a letter he wrote from Texas where he was stationed, to his favorite cousin, Martha Custis Williams just months before the Civil War began:

***January 22, 1861***

God alone can save us from our folly, selfishness and shortsightedness. The last accounts seem to show that we have barely escaped anarchy to be plunged into civil war. What will be the result I cannot conjecture. I only see that a federal calamity is upon us, and fear that the country will have to pass through for its sins a fiery ordeal. I am unable to realize that our people will destroy a government inaugurated by the blood and wisdom of our patriot fathers, that has given us peace and prosperity at home, power and security abroad, and under which we have acquired a colossal strength unequalled in the history of mankind. I wish to live under no other government, and there is no sacrifice I am not ready to make for the preservation of the Union save that of honour. If a disruption takes place, I shall go back in sorrow to my people and share the misery of my native state, and save in her defence there will be one soldier less in the world than now. I wish for no other flag than the "Star-spangled Banner," and no other air than "Hail Columbia." I still hope the wisdom and patriotism of the nation will yet save it.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Robert E. Lee Proclaims Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer***

The Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863 was the greatest battle of the Civil War. The Southern army of 75,000 men met the North's 90,000 in Union territory. Gettysburg marked a turning point in the war; the South no longer had the battle against the North. Though the Civil War would last another two years, the North began getting an upper hand with their superior resources and manpower. On August 21<sup>st</sup>, Lee issued the following order:

***General Order No. 83***

**Headquarters Army Northern Virginia, August, 1863**

The President of the Confederate States has, in the name of the people, appointed the 21st day of August as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer. A strict observance of the day is enjoined upon the officers and soldiers of this army. All military duties, except such as are

absolutely necessary, will be suspended. The commanding officers of brigades and regiments are requested to cause divine services, suitable to the occasion, to be performed in their respective commands.

Soldiers! We have sinned against Almighty God. We have forgotten His signal mercies, and have cultivated a revengeful, haughty and boastful spirit. We have not remembered that the defenders of a just cause should be pure in His eyes; that “our times are in His hands;” and we have relied too much on our own arms for the achievement of our independence. God is our only refuge and our strength. Let us humble ourselves before Him. Let us confess our many sins, and beseech Him to give us a higher courage, a purer patriotism, and more determined will; that He will convert the hearts of our enemies; that He will hasten the time when war, with its sorrows and sufferings, shall cease, and that He will give us a name and a place among the nations of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Chaplain Jones of the Confederate Army reported the following regarding the spiritual revival which resulted from this day of fasting, humiliation and prayer:

We can never forget the effect produced by the reading of this order at the solemn services of that memorable fast day. A precious revival was already in progress in many of the commands. The day was almost universally observed; the attendance upon preaching and other services was very large; the solemn attention and starting tear attested the deep interest felt; and the work of grace among the troops widened and deepened, and went gloriously on until there had been at least fifteen thousand professions of faith in Christ as a personal Saviour. How far these grand results were due to this fast-day, or to the quiet influence and fervent prayers of the commanding general, eternity alone shall reveal.<sup>4</sup>

### *Lee's Christianity*

Author Benjamin Howell Griswold, Jr. in his book, *The Spirit of Lee and Jackson*, wrote:

...Lee and Jackson were both professing Christians – most men of their day were that – but on the premise that these men not only professed Christianity, but actually practiced it and endeavored in every way to live according to its much neglected tenets. They were great readers of the Bible, and nearly every act of their lives was directed by their interpretation of its maxims. This was true of their actions not only at home toward their family and neighbors, but even in the camp and on the battlefield toward their enemies...Humility, Purity, Peacemaking, Love of Righteousness – virtues neglected – if not a little despised today, seem to have exalted these men and lifted them from the depths of defeat to the pinnacle of fame...<sup>5</sup>

### ***Two Great Generals, Lee and Grant, Meet at Appomattox***

The two great generals, Grant and Lee, met on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox. Grant offered generous terms of surrender, which Lee accepted.

### ***The Confederate Troops Cheer Lee***

Lee then had to face his own troops with the news of the surrender, here described by Brigadier General E.P. Alexander:

He had hardly reached the line, however, when someone started a cheer, which was taken up by others, and then both infantry and artillery broke their line and crowded about his horse in the road. The general stopped and made a short address. Briefly, it was about as follows:

‘I have done for you all that it was in my power to do. You have done all your duty. Leave the result to god. Go to your homes and resume your occupations. Obey the laws and become good citizens as you were soldiers.’

There was not a dry eye in the crowd that heard him, and even he seemed deeply moved. The men crowded around to try and shake his hand or touch his horse, and some appealed to him to get us all exchanged and try it again; but he made no reply to such remarks. Then he rode on to his camp, and the crowd broke up, and then ranks were formed once more and marched off to bivouac, and the Army of Northern Virginia was an army no longer, but a lot of captives awaiting their paroles. But it had written its name in history, and no man need be ashamed of its record, though its last chapter is a story of disaster. And surely those qualities in its commander for which men are loved and admired by friend and foe shone out here with no less luster than on any other field.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Robert E. Lee, President of Washington College, Devotes His Life to Educating Youth***

In August, 1865, Lee was offered the presidency of Washington College. At the same time, he had a number of offers which would bring him fame and affluence both in this country and abroad. In his own words, his answer was:

No; I am grateful, but I have a self-imposed task, which I must accomplish. I have led the young men of the South in battle; I have seen many of them fall under my standard. I shall devote my life now to training young men to do their duty in life.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Washington and Lee University***

Founded in 1749 by Presbyterians, this prestigious school became *Augusta Academy*

(1774-1776), and *Liberty Hall Academy* (1776). In 1796, George Washington helped the fledgling school survive with a generous endowment of \$20,000.00. It was renamed *Washington College* due to his pivotal role in the history of the academy. Robert E. Lee provided innovative educational leadership during his transformational tenure as president of *Washington College* (1865-1870), also playing a major pivotal role in its history, thereby being named, *Washington and Lee University*.

On January 19, 1907, the Centennial of Robert E. Lee's birth, ceremonies were held in the Lee Chapel, of which the following was said: "a building conceived in his own mind, constructed under his watchful eye, and consecrated forever to his memory, in full view of the recumbent figure, representing him so faithfully in majestic repose." The Lee Chapel is a National Historic Landmark.

### ***The Story of Lee's Lost Bible***

Robert E. Lee had been given a Bible from some citizens in Liverpool, England, in 1861 with this inscription:

General Robert E. Lee Commanding the Confederate Army  
from the undersigned Englishmen and Englishwomen recognizing the genius of the General; admiring the humanity of the man; respecting the virtues of the Christian.

October 13, 1861.<sup>8</sup>

Somehow, the Bible had been lost during the war and finally rediscovered in Beira, Portuguese East Africa (modern-day Mozambique) in the 1930's. It was presented to Francis P. Gaines, president of *Washington and Lee University*, to be placed in the Lee Archives in the school's library. "Every fragment of memorabilia that in any way bears upon the General's relation to our national history will be accessible to students of his life and all those who loved him," said Gaines. "The Liverpool Bible so designated will repose under glass in a place of honor."<sup>9</sup>

Robert E. Lee was confirmed by Bishop Johns in Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia, when he was 54 years old. A silver plaque on the communion railing marks this event for posterity. Lee's family pew is designated by a larger silver plaque with his signature engraved upon it.

### ***Robert E. Lee's Death***

Robert E. Lee's last days were written by Colonel William Preston Johnston for Reverend J.W. Jones in his *Personal Reminiscences of General Robert E. Lee, 1874*. Colonel Johnston was an intimate friend of the general and a distinguished member of the faculty of his college. He was one of those at the bedside of the dying general. It is being excerpted below in order to shed further light on Lee's true character and Christian comportment:

The death of General Lee was not due to any sudden cause, but was the result of agencies dating as far back as 1863...In October, 1869, he was again attacked by inflammation of the heart-sac, accompanied by muscular rheumatism of the back, right side, and arms. The action of the heart was weakened by this attack...His decline was rapid, yet gentle; and soon after nine o'clock on the morning of October 12<sup>th</sup>, he closed his eyes, and his soul passed peacefully from earth...General Lee's closing hours were consonant with his noble and disciplined life. Never was more beautifully displayed how a long and severe education of mind and character enables the soul to pass with equal step through this supreme ordeal; never did the habits and qualities of a lifetime, solemnly gathered into a few last sad hours, more grandly maintain themselves amid the gloom and shadow of approaching death. The reticence, the self-contained composure, the obedience to proper authority, the magnanimity and the Christian meekness, that marked all his actions, still preserved their sway, in spite of the inroads of disease and the creeping lethargy that weighed down his faculties...Leaning trustfully upon the all-sustaining Arm, the man whose stature, measured by mortal standards, seemed so great, passed from this world of shadows to the realities of the Hereafter.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Historic Arlington National Cemetery***

About 400,000 people are buried here. Only retired military or those on active duty, the wives and widows of military, children of military under eighteen years of age, and the recipients of the gold Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Navy Cross, the Silver Star and the Purple Heart, have the right to be buried at Arlington.

Most of the tombstones, that is, those of regular dimensions, are provided by the government. A circle upon the face of each shows forth a cross in the vast majority of cases, designating the individual's faith at time of death.

### ***The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier***

A steep climb to the summit of Arlington National Cemetery takes us to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the first and second World Wars; the Korean War and the Vietnam War. This seventy-two ton block of carved white marble bears the poignant Inscription:

Here lies in Honored Glory an American Soldier known but to God

An Honor Guard, the Third United States Infantry and official Presidential Unit Resolutely guards this sacred tombstone, twenty-four hours a day. The inspection and changing of the guard is a memorable occasion for all who witness this moving ceremony.

(Excerpted from, *The Rewriting of America's History*, © 1991; 2011 and *Great American Statesmen and Heroes*, © 1994 by Dr. Catherine Millard).

Bibliography:

<sup>1</sup> Lee, Fitzhugh. *General Lee*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894, pp. 20-22.

<sup>2</sup> Lattimore, Ralston B. (ed.) *The Story of Robert E. Lee*, as told in his own words and those of his contemporaries. Washington, D.C.: Colortone Press, 1964, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Griswold, Benjamin Howell. *The Spirit of Lee and Jackson*. Baltimore: The Norman Remington Company, 1927, pp. 12-13; 18.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, Brigadier General E.P. *Lee at Appomattox, Personal Recollections of the Break-up of the Confederacy*. Century Magazine, Vol. 63, No. 6 (April, 1902), p. 930.

<sup>7</sup> Banks, Louis Albert, D.D. *Capital Stories about Famous Americans*. New York: The Christian Herald, 1905, p. 361.

<sup>8</sup> Lyne, Cassie Mancure. *Preface of George Fox's Diary and Other Christian Historical Data, 1875*. Washington, D.C. Rare Book Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, Robert E., Captain. *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee by his son*. p. 439.

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