

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

---

## Robert E. Lee

By **Elizabeth Brown Pryor**

In the drama of the Civil War, Confederate general Robert E. Lee played a leading role. His splendid bearing and battlefield dexterity gave him iconic status throughout the South and won lasting loyalty from his troops. “The boys never cheer him,” a foot soldier remarked during the Gettysburg campaign, “but pull off their hats and worship.” Northern enemies feared and admired him. Stephen Minot Weld, a Union colonel, was astonished at Lee’s capitulation. “We none of us realize even yet that he has actually surrendered,” he commented. “I had a sort of impression that we should fight him all our lives.” Legendary in battle, Lee has been equally acclaimed for his personal character and dignity in defeat. His story has been so often repeated that in some parts of the country its details are considered common knowledge. However, the recent discovery of thousands of previously unseen Lee family papers has greatly amplified our knowledge of this complex and contradictory man. It has also called into question many traditional assumptions about him: starting with the date of his birth.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Edward Lee was born at Stratford, in Westmoreland County, Virginia. It was long thought his birthday was January 19, 1807, but new sources, including documents in Lee’s hand, show he was most likely born the previous year. His parents, Henry Lee III and Ann(e) Hill Carter Lee, were both raised in prominent tidewater families. Henry “Light-horse Harry” Lee distinguished himself in the American Revolution, fighting under Generals George Washington and Nathaniel Greene. As leader of a light partisan unit, he excelled at reconnaissance missions and operations meant to harass the British forces, work that merited a commendation for valor by the Continental Congress. He stood with Lafayette during the British surrender at Yorktown, and after the Revolution served as Governor of Virginia (1791-1794) and Congressman (1799-1800).

---

<sup>1</sup> Diary of Edmund De Witt Patterson, 27 June 1863 in John G. Barrett, ed., *Yankee Rebel: The Civil War Journal of Edmund DeWitt Patterson*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 111; Stephen Minot Weld to Hannah [Weld], City Point, 24 April 1865, in Stephen Minot Weld, *War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld, 1861-1865* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1979), 396; In 2000 Robert E .L. deButts, Jr., the great-great grandson of General Lee, discovered two unclaimed family trunks in the vaults of the Burke & Herbert Bank in Alexandria, Virginia. The trunks had been placed there by Lee’s eldest daughter Mary Custis Lee. They contained nearly seven thousand documents, providing new information on virtually every aspect of the Lee and Custis families. The Lee family allowed Elizabeth Brown Pryor to use the papers for her book *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee through His Private Letters* (Viking, 2007). They are now on deposit at the Virginia Historical Society.

Light-horse Harry's talents seemed more attuned to war than peace, and his fortune faltered in the years after the Revolution. He steadily lost money and gained the reputation of an unwise, and sometimes unscrupulous, land speculator. He was sent to debtor's prison while Robert was still an infant. In 1813, badly beaten by a political mob, and dodging his creditors, Henry Lee skipped bail to sail for the West Indies. Robert never saw his father again.

The family, now dependent on the generosity of their kin, moved to Alexandria, Virginia. Ann Lee was a woman of considerable grace and intellect, who did an exemplary job of raising her five children, but her fragile health gave young Robert unusual responsibilities for her care. Though pinched by poverty—Robert's wife recalled that he lacked shoes and ate from a wooden trencher—his boyhood was enriched by a fine extended family and academic success at the Alexandria Academy, where he received a classical education.

Misfortune again touched Robert's life in 1821 with a scandal involving his half-brother. Henry Lee IV, heir to Stratford, shocked Virginians by embezzling the inheritance of his young ward, Elizabeth McCarty, who was the sister of his wife. He then seduced her and possibly murdered their child. In the ensuing legal battles "Black-horse Harry" lost Stratford and the Lees were socially ostracized. Believing this disgrace meant a life of shame and isolation, Robert convinced his mother to let him join the army. It was a decision he came to regret. "How I wish I had taken my Poor Mothers advice & never entered the Army," he would write a few years later. "But then I thought ...always to be one & alone in the World..."<sup>2</sup>

In 1825 Lee received an appointment to the United States Military Academy, where he excelled. Noted for his military acumen, elegant presence, and exceptional scholarship, he was appointed both an assistant instructor and Cadet Adjutant. However, he was unable to best a talented New Yorker, Charles Mason, who took top honors academically, and who, like Lee, boasted a demerit-free record. Lee graduated second in the class of 1829, and chose to join the prestigious Corps of Engineers.

Ann Carter Lee died shortly after her son's graduation and two years later Robert married Mary Anna Randolph Custis, the witty, artistic great-granddaughter of Martha Washington. Mary and Robert had known each other from childhood; nonetheless the Custises were reluctant to approve the match because of the Lees' reputation. Mary finally convinced her father to consent, much to the strongly-smitten Robert's relief. The couple had seven children, to whom Lee was powerfully attached. He also became increasingly tied to the Custis family seat at Arlington, with its splendid grounds, historical associations, and parade of prominent guests. In the uncertainty of Lee's army life, Arlington became an important anchor.

---

<sup>2</sup> R. E. Lee to Mary Anna Randolph Custis, Cockspur Island [GA], 13 May 1831, Mary Custis Lee Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS).

Lee spent the first seventeen years of his military career strengthening the expanding nation's frontier defense systems. Assigned throughout the country, he redirected rivers, designed coastal fortifications, and surveyed newly acquired territory. Lee earned a reputation for geniality and attention to detail from his colleagues, but referred to himself as "an indifferent engineer." The work was dirty and dangerous and required long absences from his family. Advancement was slow and Lee considered leaving the service nearly every year. "I am waiting, looking and hoping for some good opportunity to bid an affectionate farewell to my dear Uncle Sam," he wrote in 1837; and a few years later: "The army in our country is certainly not a desirable profession for any young man who has the ability and perseverance to succeed in any other." But Lee had inherited little from his family, and the need for cash, as well as camaraderie, kept him in the military.<sup>3</sup>

The Mexican War disrupted the routine of army duty. Though Lee did not approve of the war, he relished the opportunity for action. For several months Lee worked with the topographical corps, laying out transportation routes, but in early 1847, he was put on the staff of General Winfield Scott. Lee admired Scott's ability to overcome disadvantages by the use of "headwork" and Scott depended on Lee for reconnaissance and tactical planning. Lee fought with distinction at battles such as Vera Cruz, Cerro Gordo, and Chapultepec, winning two brevet promotions. Scott would later call Lee "the very best soldier I ever saw in the field." Although the Mexican War gave Lee valuable field experience, he did not lead troops or design strategic campaigns in this conflict.<sup>4</sup>

After the war, Lee returned to structural engineering until 1852, when Secretary of War Jefferson Davis appointed him superintendent of West Point. Lee had not wanted the post and found it exhausting and stressful. He was a careful steward of the academy, but introduced few innovations. Though admired by the military bureaucracy, Lee's rigid belief in the virtue of "duty" was not appreciated by the cadets, among whom he was unpopular. One notable contribution was his focus on equestrian instruction. Under Lee's leadership some of America's greatest cavalry officers were trained, among them Joseph Ewell Brown "J.E.B." Stuart, Philip Henry Sheridan, and Joseph Wheeler.

In March 1855, Lee eagerly accepted a lieutenant colonelship in the newly-established 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry. Assigned to Texas, his unit was responsible for subduing the Comanche and chasing Mexican *banditos*. It proved a difficult posting. The work was frustrating, and Lee found the isolation and harsh landscape oppressive—a desert of dullness, as he told his wife. His beloved mother-in-law and his favorite sister died in the early 1850s, causing Lee to embrace a somber brand of evangelical Protestantism, which left him

---

<sup>3</sup> R. E. Lee to Carter Lee, Old Point, 12 Oct. 1831, Robert E. Lee Papers, Small Library, University of Virginia; R. E. Lee to Capt. A[ndrew] Talcott, 2 Feb. 1837, Talcott Family Papers, VHS; R. E. Lee to Capt. E. Kirby Smith, 1845, quoted in Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Winfield Scott to J[ohn] B. Floyd, Army Headquarters, 8 May 1857, printed in William J. Jones, *Personal Reminiscences of General Robert E. Lee*, reprint (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 60.

dejected and self-critical. When his father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, died in 1857, he willingly returned to Arlington to settle the estate.

As Custis' executor, Lee found himself confronted with the political reality of slavery. He disliked the inefficiency of the institution, yet, he defended it throughout his life, using the standard line of slavery's apologists: that the "peculiar institution" was as unfortunate for whites as for blacks; that slaves were better off in bondage than in Africa; that unwise forefathers had introduced the system and it could now only be removed by Divine Will, at some unspecified time. He also held that Southerners had the same right as other Americans to transport their slaves into new territories, particularly as much of this land had been won by their muscle and blood. Lee had inherited several slaves from his mother, who he generally leased to other people. There is no evidence that any were freed before the Civil War.

Custis, however, had liberated his slaves in a messy will that stipulated they be released within five years. Lee interpreted this to mean the slaves could be held for the entire period. The slaves interpreted it to mean they were already free, and rebelled against Lee's authority, physically attacking him and escaping in large numbers. Lee responded by hiring away most of the men, breaking up families that had been together for decades. There is also considerable evidence that he subjected several to the lash. Although such practices were well within his legal rights, they were out of keeping with the long traditions at Arlington, and of his own relatives, whose treatment of slaves was comparatively mild. Lee then filed legal petitions to keep the blacks enslaved "indefinitely." The courts ruled against him in early 1862, requiring that they be manumitted before the end of the year. Lee complied with the court, but waited until the last possible day to do so, keeping the people in bondage for eleven additional months.<sup>5</sup>

Lee was again exposed to the volatile politics of slavery in October 1859 when he was assigned to suppress an abolitionist insurrection led by John Brown at Harper's Ferry. Commanding a small detachment of marines, Lee led a model operation in which none of Brown's hostages was injured, and Brown was taken alive. He personally witnessed Brown's ominous prediction of the bloodshed to come and his warning that "you had better—all you people at the South—prepare yourself for a settlement of...this negro question." After standing guard at Brown's execution, Lee soberly returned to Arlington's disrupted operations.<sup>6</sup>

The malaise over slavery followed Lee when he returned to his cavalry unit in February 1860. The secessionist movement was strengthening and he and his fellow officers were greatly disturbed about the impending division in the country. The issue

---

<sup>5</sup> Custis EXR vs Lee and Others, "Note of Argument for Appellant," 1858, Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, Alexandria, Virginia Legal Files.

<sup>6</sup> John Brown, 18 Oct. 1859, quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years After*, reprint (Glouster, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 461.

was particularly difficult for military men, who had been trained at West Point to rise above sectional loyalty and be leaders for the entire nation. From Texas, Lee wrote to his brother-in-law that he considered “his” country “the *whole* country. That its limits contained no North, no South, no East no west, but embraced the broad *Union*, in all its might & strength;” but he was soon to have that loyalty tested. As acting head of the Department of Texas, Lee was confronted by disunionists who demanded that he hand over Federal property, which he refused to do, saying he would fight them if they tried to wrest away forts or arms. Had the secessionists pushed the point, the war’s first confrontation might well have occurred in Texas rather than at Fort Sumter. Leading the defense of U.S. interests against the rebels would have been Colonel Robert E. Lee.<sup>7</sup>

As the crisis deepened, however, Lee’s thinking became increasingly conflicted. Although he did not believe in secession, he also declared that if “the Union can only be maintained by the sword & bayonet...its existence will lose all interest with me.” He particularly hoped that Virginia would remain in the Union so that his various loyalties—to country, army, state, and family—could remain intact. Recalled to Washington in March 1861, he was promoted to full colonel by Abraham Lincoln, and once again swore an oath of allegiance to the United States. A few weeks later, Lee was forced to confront his ambivalence when Virginia seceded and he was offered command of Federal forces recruited to protect the capital.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Lee later called the moment “the severest struggle” of her husband’s life. His family was sharply divided on the issues, with most of his generation siding with the Union. His sister, closest cousins, and several nephews all urged him to respect the oaths he had given, and his wife, particularly, leaned toward preservation of the country. In the army the pressures were similar. (Of the thirteen full colonels from slaveholding states, ten remained in the Union army; of the three from Virginia, only Lee chose to fight for the Confederacy.) Faced with a divided family and the collapse of his career, Lee paced and prayed for two days. On April 20, 1861 he resigned from the U.S. Army, telling friends that he could not participate in an invasion of the South. Two days later Lee accepted command of Virginia’s forces.<sup>9</sup>

As general, Lee’s first assignment was to raise a military force from practically nothing: although there were fine men available, there was neither strategy nor organization, and inadequate materiel. Confusion also existed over the relation of the state’s forces to the newly established Confederate Army, and Lee himself was uncertain of his role. (Asked by Episcopal Bishop William Meade what his job was, Lee replied he did not know.) He was “mortified” that he was out of the action at Manassas in July 1861, but received a field command in western Virginia a few weeks later. Lee was again “mortified” when Brigadier General William Starke Rosecrans defeated him at Cheat Mountain in September 1861. Lee’s campaign was hampered by poor

---

<sup>7</sup> R. E. Lee to Edward Vernon Childe, 9 Jan. 1857, Jesse Ball DuPont Library, Stratford Hall Plantation.

<sup>8</sup> R. E. Lee to Agnes [Lee], Fort Mason Texas, 29 Jan. 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Custis Lee, “My Reminiscences of the War,” Sept. 1866, Lee Family Papers, VHS

coordination and balky subordinates, as well as drenching rains, yet Rosecrans faced similar conditions. His success helped facilitate the breakaway of Unionist West Virginia. Jefferson Davis relieved Lee and sent him to oversee the construction of fortifications along the Georgia and South Carolina coast, then returned him to an advisory position. In that role, Lee was cautious, and determined to keep operations on the defensive, rejecting, for example, Stonewall Jackson's proposal to make an offensive run up the Shenandoah Valley into slaveholding Maryland. Although frustrated in the desk job, Lee later benefited from the connections he built with political leaders in Richmond.

Lee's celebrated relationship with the Army of Northern Virginia began on June 1, 1862 when Davis ordered him to replace General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, who had been wounded at the battle of Seven Pines. The moment was an urgent one, as Union forces were moving down the Peninsula to directly threaten Richmond. Many Confederates were none too pleased at Lee's assignment after his poor field performance the previous year. "Beautiful state of affairs!" exclaimed one soldier. "This army after Johnson [sic] has gotten it in shape to whip the enemy, now to be given to a Failure!" To check Major General George Brinton McClellan's advance, Lee devised a strategy that combined bold field maneuvers and defensive fortifications, facing the Union from June 25 to July 1 in a series of engagements that came to be known as The Seven Days Battles. His men decisively won only one of the contests (Gaines' Mill on June 27), and the plan suffered from overly complicated movements as well as faulty communications between Lee and his subordinate officers. Still, by relentless fighting and skillful use of terrain, his army was able to frighten McClellan away from the Confederate capital.<sup>10</sup>

The Seven Days campaign previewed much of Lee's battlefield style. The battles resulted in horrific casualties (at Malvern Hill, on July 1, the Army of Northern Virginia lost 5,300 men within a few minutes in a frontal assault that gained nothing), but showcased Lee's expert use of entrenchments, and how he exploited opportunities through improvisation and sheer bravado. The victory also inspired his men, who now rallied to their new commander with an enthusiasm that would last throughout the war.

After The Seven Days battles, Lincoln created a new army in Virginia, under Major General John Pope. Lee rightly suspected he might face both McClellan and Pope, and launched an aggressive campaign. Under his orders, Brigadier General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson confronted Major General Nathaniel Prentice Banks at Cedar Mountain on August 9 to win a narrow victory, handing Lee the initiative and moving the contest away from the Peninsula into northern Virginia. Ignoring conventional wisdom, Lee then divided his force, tricking Pope into chasing Jackson, who faked a retreat. After a dramatic 50 mile march, Jackson lured Pope's overconfident army into a fierce fight near the old Manassas battlefield on August 28. The following day, Lee's other wing commander, Brigadier General James Longstreet, brought up his men to rejoin the two Army of Northern Virginia corps in the heat of fighting—an immensely difficult battlefield maneuver. On August 30, Longstreet hit Pope's vulnerable left flank, crushed

---

<sup>10</sup> John William Ford Diary and Memoir, 1862, Manuscript Division. Library of Congress.

the Union force, and chased them to the horizon. Jackson followed the retreating bluebacks, but was halted at the battle of Chantilly on September 1.

Critics complained that Lee took too many risks on the campaign; that luck and Pope's ineptitude rather than Confederate skill held it together; and that the days had again been shockingly "sanguinary." Yet the boldness of his actions had given Lee both confidence and momentum. In the coming months he would be on the move, agile and elusive, continually "baffling" superior Union forces, and often turning their offensive drives into desperate defensive stands. In this spirit Lee undertook an invasion of Union territory, an idea popular with his men and the public. Lee wanted the destructive armies out of Virginia, and he was anxious for his men to live off Maryland's greener pastures. He and Davis believed if the war directly threatened Northerners it might create a political crisis for the Lincoln government and attract foreign assistance to the South. They also thought slaveholding Maryland could be "liberated" and brought to their side.<sup>11</sup>

But the arduous march north was poorly outfitted, and Lee's men arrived in Maryland weakened by hunger and diminished by the high rate of desertion. (By some estimates Lee lost a third of his army.) Nor were they greeted with the expected enthusiasm, and for the first time suffered the disadvantage of being on hostile territory. The invasion had been a gamble, but Lee increased the odds by again dividing his army, despite his officers' skepticism. Jackson's corps was sent to take logistically important Harper's Ferry, and the rest faced McClellan's advancing men. Blue and gray clashed at South Mountain on September 14, where Lee was able to delay, but not defeat Union forces.

Three days later, the armies confronted each other near Sharpsburg, Maryland. Lee's forces were still divided, and McClellan, who had the good fortune to intercept Lee's campaign plans, also had superior numbers of artillery and men. But the Union effort along Antietam Creek was badly executed, and its numerical superiority never tapped. Much of the action on September 17 was chaotic, with desperate drives and shifting positions making it difficult to know who was winning at any moment. It was not a coordinated battle, but a series of violent skirmishes, and Lee was only able to thwart disaster by adroitly re-arranging forces to meet each of the contests. Always brave under fire, his strong presence on the field—in some cases he actually rallied troops like a company captain—helped his men hold their positions. At the end of the bloody day, however, the Union held its advantage.

When McClellan did not immediately pursue him, Lee saved his army by deftly retreating across the Potomac two days later. He put a brave face on the situation, writing (with some exaggeration) that his men had been outnumbered three to one, had repulsed all attacks, "held our ground and retired when it suited our convenience." His army did not, he asserted, "consider ourselves beaten as our enemies suppose." The campaign had featured a victory at Harper's Ferry and some impressive tactical parrying; still, Lee had achieved none of his strategic objectives, and the evidence indicates most Confederates actually saw Antietam as a serious setback. In addition, Lincoln used the Union's

---

<sup>11</sup> "Sanguinary" "baffling" and "liberated" are all words frequently used by Lee in his wartime writing.

advantage to wrest the moral high ground from the South. A few days after the contest, he issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, effectively closing the possibility of assistance to the Confederacy from European governments.<sup>12</sup>

Lee's army reestablished its formidable reputation at Fredericksburg in December 1862. This time the Confederates faced a Union contingent a third again its size, under Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside. Lee concentrated his forces, and by establishing positions that played to the weaponry of the day, slaughtered thousands of Union soldiers as they fruitlessly attacked his defensive strongholds. The Federal army survived by escaping across the Rappahannock River, but the defeat badly undermined the credibility of Lincoln's government and strained Northern morale.

In spring 1863, the Union again changed generals, placing its military machine under Major General Joseph Hooker. Hooker believed he could trap Lee by attacking him simultaneously from several directions. Facing a Union force double his size at a crossroads called Chancellorsville, Lee again precariously divided his army. During five days of fighting, May 1-6, Southerners squeezed the Federals from two directions, captured the most favorable artillery positions, launched a devastating barrage, then pressed the attack until Hooker had to pull back. Through surprise and daring, Lee had turned a vulnerable defensive position into a brilliant tactical offense. But the victory was dearly bought. More than 20 percent of his men lay on the gory fields, or were maimed or missing. Stonewall Jackson, wounded accidentally by his own troops, died on May 10. Lee was distraught by the outcome, admitting to his wife that "our loss was severe, and again we had gained not an inch of ground and the enemy could not be pursued."<sup>13</sup>

At a pinnacle of confidence, Lee convinced Confederate officials to approve another northward excursion, rather than send his men to reinforce besieged Vicksburg. In June 1863, after reorganizing his army, he marched toward Pennsylvania, again hoping to deliver a knock-out punch that would win peace on Southern terms. A chance encounter ignited a battle near Gettysburg between July 1 and 3, 1863. Lee's men dominated the field the first day, driving their opponents outside the town, where the Federals made a prescient decision to retreat to easily defendable high ground. Lee also recognized the value of these heights and ordered Major General Richard Stoddert Ewell to take a critical rise called Culp's Hill, but failed to provide Ewell either the precise instructions or reinforcements needed to gain a success.

The next day, Lee determined to attack the Northern forces, despite the misgivings of his lieutenants. This time the Army of Northern Virginia nearly equaled the size of the Union force, but he had two serious disadvantages. The first was position: Major General George Gordon Meade held the better ground and had been strengthened overnight by entrenchments and additional troops, who formed an ingenious "fish hook" defensive line, allowing for easy reinforcement of its weaker sections. Lee's second problem was a

---

<sup>12</sup> R. E. Lee to Mary Custis Lee (daughter), HdQrs near Martinsburg, 23 Sept. 1862, private collection

<sup>13</sup> Lee quoted in Henry Heth to J. William Jones, Richmond, June ?, 1877 in J. William Jones, ed., *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 52 vols., reprint (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot, 1990-1992), 4: 154.



lack of information. J.E.B. Stuart, his eyes and ears, was absent (with Lee's approval), foraging and harassing the Union rear. Lee had hoped for a simultaneous early morning attack on the Federal right and left flanks, but the unreliable intelligence caused delays, misguided marches, and unforeseen exposure to Yankee fire. Despite spirited fighting by the gray-backs at critical points such as Little Round Top and Devil's Den, the Union line held. On the third day, Lee stubbornly continued his attack. The Army of Northern Virginia nearly seized Culp's Hill, but fell back when the Federals rallied in a do-or-die defense. Late in the afternoon, Lee ordered a massive assault against the Union center, again overriding his subordinates' objections. Poorly organized and facing formidable defensive works, the 12,500 men in Pickett's Charge were repulsed at tremendous cost. As the routed Confederates streamed back to their lines, Lee acknowledged his responsibility. "It is all my fault," he told the shattered men. The next day he began a tortuous ten-day retreat to Virginia, and, to Lincoln's chagrin, was able to salvage his army.<sup>14</sup>

Lee hoped to recoup Army of Northern Virginia pride during the fall 1863 Bristoe Campaign, but Meade refused to be enticed into another major engagement, and the Confederates had little success. Still determined to "strike them a blow" Lee eagerly awaited the spring season, undaunted by the appointment of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant to head the Army of the Potomac. What ensued was the Overland Campaign, some seven weeks of brutal, relentless fighting. The armies first met on May 5-6, 1864 in the scrubby woods near the old Chancellorsville battlefield. Lee knew his resources were too limited to force Grant back to Washington, but had not expected the Union to push onward after their appalling casualties in a stalemated contest at the Wilderness. Some of the heaviest fighting of the war took place the following week near Spotsylvania Courthouse, particularly around a Confederate breastwork known as the Bloody Angle. Lee, outnumbered two to one, was able to hold his own through swift tactical maneuvering and his forceful role in rallying the men. Still, Grant edged southward. Lee forestalled the drive when, on June 3, the Union flung itself against the zig-zag Confederate fortifications at Cold Harbor, losing 7,000 men in an ill-conceived assault. Nonetheless, Grant continued the forward movement, maneuvering Lee a few weeks later into a siege at Petersburg.<sup>15</sup>

Diminished by some 35,000 casualties, including the death of J.E.B. Stuart, the Army of Northern Virginia held on in miserable trench conditions for nearly nine months. Lee's men quashed a Federal attempt to mine their fortifications at the Crater on July 30, 1864, but their efforts at offensive action failed. In February 1865, Lee was made general in chief of all Confederate Armies, but admitted that it probably came too late to have much impact. Unable to wrest critical supplies from the authorities in Richmond, as a

---

<sup>14</sup> E. Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, Gary W. Gallagher, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 266.

<sup>15</sup> Lee quoted in Peter Carmichael, "Lee's Search for the Battle of Annihilation," in Peter S. Carmichael, ed., *Audacity Personified: The Generalship of Robert E. Lee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 17.

last-ditch effort he supported the use of slaves as soldiers, promising them freedom. Though he ordered their initial enlistment and training, a full-scale recruitment was never launched.

After a final assault was repelled at Fort Stedman on March 25, 1865, Lee's capitulation was only a matter of time. Hoping to move the remnant of his army southward to join Joseph Johnston's troops, Lee advised Davis that Petersburg and Richmond must be abandoned. On April 6, the Confederates suffered a costly defeat at Saylor's Creek, leaving them desperately short of men and supplies. Cornered, Lee surrendered on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Court House. "I fought the enemy at every step," was Lee's final assessment. "I believe I got out of [my army] all they could do or all any man could do."<sup>16</sup>

Despite his defeat, Lee was hugely admired in the post-war South. Counseling his soldiers to return home peaceably, Lee showed by example how to accept loss with dignity. The war had taken a terrific personal toll on the Lees: death had claimed children, grandchildren, and cousins; pro-Union family members refused their company; and Arlington had been confiscated for use as a national cemetery. Penniless, Lee agreed to be president of a small, nearly destitute school in western Virginia called Washington College. He proved an able educator, though he did not enjoy the job. Lee added practical subjects such as engineering and journalism to the traditional classical studies, attracted funding both North and South, and introduced a rigorous disciplinary code. Publicly he counseled Southerners to face the future with stoicism and hard work.

Privately, he was far from content. Although granted parole at Appomattox, Lee's fate was uncertain until his citizenship was returned in the amnesty of 1868. After this, though still maintaining a low public profile, Lee worked to establish a conservative state government, wrote angry private diatribes against the principle of majority rule, and advocated disenfranchising newly-liberated African Americans. Racial conflicts plagued Washington College, to which he responded ambivalently. He considered writing a memoir, but decided it might become provocative and edited his father's recollections instead. Sad and embittered, Lee told a friend that the "great mistake" of his life had been "to take a military education." Lee died of a probable stroke on October 12, 1870.<sup>17</sup>

Southerners went into universal mourning and Lee became a charismatic symbol of honor and sacrifice in the region. In the decades following the war there was a conscious effort to mold a public image of Lee, using myth as well as fact to portray him as a titan of military genius and personal virtue. Early in the twentieth century, several national figures, including Woodrow Wilson, praised his efforts to pacify the South and reunify

---

<sup>16</sup> W. G. Bean, ed., "Memoranda of Conversation between General Robert E. Lee and William Preston Johnston, 7 May 1868 and March 18 1870," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 73, no. 4 (Oct. 1965): 478.

<sup>17</sup> Milton Wylie Humphreys, "Reminiscences of General Lee as President of Washington College," in Franklin L. Riley, ed., *General Robert E. Lee After Appomattox* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 38.

the country. Recent scholarship has more closely probed Lee’s motives and military directives, as well as his support for a racially stratified society. His 1861 decision to fight against a country he had sworn to defend provoked controversy during his lifetime, and continues to do so. Yet, Lee remains a significant historical figure. His importance lies not only in his impressive military prowess, but in the questions he prods Americans to ask about the nature of patriotism and loyalty.

**Robert Edward Lee**

Born	Stratford Hall, Westmoreland Co., Virginia Date uncertain: January 19, 1806 (most likely) or January 19, 1807
Died	October 12, 1870, Lexington, Virginia
Buried	Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia
Father	Henry Lee III
Mother	Ann(e) Hill (Carter) Lee
Career Milestones	1825 appointed to the United States Military Academy   1829 appointed second lieutenant of engineers   1831 married Mary Anna Randolph Custis   1836 appointed first lieutenant of engineers   1838 appointed captain of engineers   1846-1848 served in the Mexican-American War   1852 appointed superintendent of West Point and served until 1855   1855 appointed lieutenant colonel 2 <sup>nd</sup> US Cavalry   1859 led the force that captured John Brown at Harper’s Ferry   1861 promoted to colonel, resigned from the U.S. Army, appointed commander of Virginia’s Confederate forces then appointed full general of the Confederate Army   1862 appointed Commanding General, Army of Northern Virginia   1865 appointed General in Chief, Confederate Armies   1865 appointed President, Washington College (Washington and Lee University) and served until his death in 1870.

\*\*\*\*\*