

Robert Edward Lee

“Robert Edward Lee was born on the 19th of January 1807.” So reads the entry in the Lee family Bible for the future commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. The first American War for Independence is still a recent memory to the world Robert E Lee is born into in 1807. After prolonged debate with Federalists who favor powerful federal government, Democratic Republicans who favor minimal federal government with most powers being retained by the States hold the Presidency and massive majorities in both Houses of Congress. The Constitution is only 20 years old and the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions declaring it’s the duty of States to override Federal laws that violate the Constitution are only 10 years old. It sounds jarring to 21st century ears, but support of powerful central government is very much out of touch with mainstream American political thought in 1807. The son of “Light Horse Harry” Lee and the former Anne Hill Carter, Lee is deeply connected to and invested in his personal heritage from the Revolution; his father was a hero of the Southern campaign. Like so many soldiers after their military career ends, “Light Horse Harry” Lee struggled with his transition to civilian life. He served as Governor of Virginia and made many efforts in what was then known as “speculation,” or investing. By 1813, Lee is forced to leave the US to flee his creditors. Anne Hill Carter Lee is taken back in by the Carters, and young Robert lives a typical life for a member of the era’s Virginia elite. Anne carefully instructs young Robert in self-control and a firm code of honor; his life will not repeat his father’s. In Alexandria, his education develops, and he gains grounding in the classics. He learns Greek and Latin like many of his era and will regret not pursuing a classical education late in life. By 1824, his education in Arlington (the home of Washington) drawing to a close, Lee is faced with the decision of what to do in life. His now-deceased father died insolvent, so there is no money for an education, no land for him to become a gentleman farmer of. So, like many others of limited means in an era long before student financial aid, his thoughts turn to the US Military Academy at West Point. The family’s lawyer, William Fitzhugh, prepares a letter of recommendation to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Lee presents it along with several other letters and is duly appointed a cadet. The irony must be observed- Robert E. Lee is approved for entry into the US Military Academy by John C. Calhoun, one of the greatest advocates for the view of the supremacy of the States over the limited powers of the general Government. Calhoun’s next appointment? Joseph E. Johnston, who at times during the War Between the States would command armies in Virginia and Georgia,. And strangely enough, one of Jefferson Davis’ earliest surviving letters is his acceptance of an appointment to the US Military Academy from the same Secretary Calhoun.

Robert E. Lee’s name was read out at West Point as a member of the new class of ‘plebes’ (as freshmen are still known) on March 17, 1825. Lee arrives at West Point in June, and on the 28th he’s formally admitted to the Academy. Over his first summer, “plebe summer,” he learns strict discipline. He’s doubtlessly impressed by the Veterans of the War of 1812 who instruct. With him, but slightly ahead, is a cadet Lee will meet again: Jefferson Davis. Lee is well-equipped for the academic classes, and the early military training for a 1820s plebe is roughly what a private soldier gets when joining the Army. The first six months are a

probationary period, and Lee does well in the examinations. As will become his custom, he resolves to improve himself at his next showing. By the next showing he improves his standing to such a degree he is selected as a “distinguished cadet,” and by the end of his first year he is selected as Staff Sergeant, the highest honor available for a first-year cadet. The Corps of Cadets returns to barracks for the second year, and the course of instruction broadens. Mathematics and drawing are added, as well as an introduction to artillery. He feels confident enough in his academic studies that he reads books from the library, including one on Napoleon, and tutors cadets who do not have his confident mastery of the Academy’s coursework. His diversions show in the January 1827 exams as he drops slightly in standing. In an early display of the self-control that will characterize the rest of his life, he drops most extra reading. Unsurprisingly, he improves and stands second in the class by the end of his second year. The third year is considerably more academic, and in the January exams Lee is again second in the class. He allows himself to indulge in reading, but it does not impact his academic standing this time. Attrition has been heavy; of the four Virginians who came to West Point in 1825, only two remain: Lee and Joseph Johnston. As the third year closes, a tradition is the naming of the Corps Adjutant, a prestigious honor. Lee is named Adjutant for 1828-29. The fourth year is crowded with academics, and Lee’s self-control serves him well. He has no demerits for his entire time at the Academy, a record that stands today. Lee graduates second in the Class of 1829, and as a leader in the class is afforded the opportunity to choose his branch of the Army. He chooses the prestigious Corps of Engineers.

The newly minted Brevet Lieutenant is touched for the first time by sadness and tragedy. His beloved mother, who had suffered so much from poor health and the shame (and concurrent financial burden) of an irresponsible husband, passes the summer after Lee’s graduation from West Point. The stout personal code of honor he’d learned from her that had served him so well at West Point will serve him well again as he probates her estate. It is in this time he first becomes seriously acquainted with Mary Custis. She’s related to George Washington, and her home is Arlington. While Lee did get his choice of service branches, the Army sends him to his first duty in the Atlantic coast of Georgia. Hardly a plum, he spends two years there before transfer to Fort Monroe in Virginia. Lee and Mary Custis marry in 1831, and while her health precludes travel to Lee’s varied duty assignments over the next 15 or so years, they have seven children. In his marriage to Mary Custis, he marries into the legacy of George Washington; Arlington is full of relics from the Father of His Country. Lee, the son of one of the greatest heroes of the Revolution, is living in a home full of reminders of Washington. Methodically, Lee becomes the public representative of the family of George Washington.

Lee spends the next decade in a variety of jobs with the Army Corps of Engineers, building a reputation as a hard worker, and a fair leader who carefully listens to suggestions from those he is assigned to lead. He learns to supervise construction projects at Fort Monroe and builds a reputation as a superior engineer in assignments all over the United States. In the tiny prewar Army, he meets his classmates and other colleagues again and again. Promotions are incredibly slow; it is 1832 before he’s confirmed as a permanent second lieutenant in the Army. Transfers are slow too- he's finally transferred to Missouri for a new project in 1837. A new project finds him in New York by 1841, and as Lee approaches middle age, he experiences what

in another time might be called a mid life crisis. The “son of the Revolution,” related to Light Horse Harry Lee by blood and George Washington by marriage, has spent nearly an entire military career in mundane construction projects. There is an exception- in 1844, Lee and a number of Army officers, including Winfield Scott of War of 1812 fame, attend the final examinations at West Point. He shortly returns to the drudgery of his labor in New York, and as 1846 warms the US is electrified by news: War with Mexico over Texas! After 21 years in the Army, the son of Light Horse Harry Lee is in an Army at war.

Things move much slower in the 1840s; war is declared in May 1846, but its August before Captain Lee sets out for Mexico. And September by the time he gets to the theater of operations. An uneventful campaign gets Lee and the American Army to Christmas. 1847 will be more eventful, as the massive bodies of troops that have impressed Lee will now come to battle at Vera Cruz. The invading army lands in March, and in a way it’s a graduate school exercise for many future leaders on both sides in the War Between the States. Lee, McClellan, Beauregard, and Joe Johnston are only a few of those destined for fame in 15 years. There are no formal military awards in the American Army during this era, and Lee is “mentioned in dispatches,” as the phrase goes, for bravery at Cerro Gordo. He is virtually everywhere, directing everything. The war draws to its close as 1847 does, the final battle for the City of Mexico being noteworthy for a fearless young American artilleryman who works his lone cannon with the aid of a sergeant, his blue eyes flashing. History will call him, “Stonewall.”

Lee returns home after the war to another engineering project, but in 1852 becomes superintendent of West Point. While he has learned diplomacy and patience in his decades in the Army Corps of Engineers, the demands of the civilian faculty and the boys in the Corps of Cadets bring his formidable self-control and sense of duty into play again. He is the Superintendent, and he will therefore succeed. And he does. Officers in Veterans groups on both sides of the WBTS will fondly remember the fair and patient Superintendent of the 1850s for decades to come. He has learned how to lead and inspire plain soldiers. He’s learned how to train young men. He has seen great armies succeed and stumble in Mexico. But he is in Army parlance an engineer, a construction project manager. His career in the Corps of Engineers has taken him as far as it can. He therefore changes to “the line” and is selected to command the 2nd US Cavalry by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis in 1855.

Lee spends two relatively uneventful years in Texas, occasionally chasing Indians and learning the administrative duties of a commander of combat troops. It is here that he first comments on the record on the institution of slavery, calling it a “moral and political evil.” Tragedy touches Lee again, and he is recalled to Arlington in 1857 by the death of his father-in-law Parke Custis. He returns home to find his wife quickly becoming an invalid, and the estate nearly insolvent. Lee as executor of the estate has work ahead of him. His strong sense of duty that has made him to be one of the best known and most professional soldiers in the tiny prewar Army will serve him well again. With little other choice, he requests an extended leave of absence from the Army. The request is quickly granted by General-In-Chief Winfield Scott, whose respect if not outright admiration for Lee is near boundless. It’s Scott who calls Lee, “the

very best soldier I ever saw in the field.” In an era when military awards and decorations don’t exist and promotions are glacially slow, this is high praise indeed.

As in so many things in Lee’s life, duty is his primary consideration in fulfillment of the will as Executor. As the estate is still not appropriately solvent to close, Lee requests another extension of his leave of absence. One underreported aspect of Lee’s time as Executor of the Custis estate in the later 1850s is his intent to close the estate as rapidly as possible to emancipate the slaves that are part of the estate, which he calls an “unpleasant legacy,” as rapidly as possible. It does bear mention that Lee’s definitive biographer, Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman, never found evidence of the Custis estate slaves being flogged. Freeman spent parts of three decades and several thousand man-hours researching Lee for the four-volume biography. In October 1859, Lee commands troops called to assist in preserving the peace at Harpers Ferry in what’s now known as West Virginia. A small group of what might be called “domestic terrorists” today, led by abolitionist John Brown, have attacked the US arsenal. Their intent is to arm slaves for a military revolution. Lee, dressed in civilian clothes, arrives at the scene and takes charge. Assisted by J.E.B. Stuart, Lee’s small force of US Marines quickly ends the incident. Brown is turned over to the US Marshal and the local sheriff and Lee goes back to Arlington. He soon finishes the work of the estate and returns west.

Its said history repeats itself, and so it is in 1860 in Texas as Lee battles criminals who have crossed the porous US/Mexico border. Politics are discussed everywhere, but Lee maintains a middle ground saying that “politicians are too selfish to become martyrs.” Generally, though, it is this era that Lee’s well-known reserve and self-control in commentary on controversial issues date from. From what little survives of his letters in this era, Lee is not in favor of secession even after the election of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States. It is here in Texas that Lee finally states his reasoning for supporting Virginia if she leaves the Union, stating that “...a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets” holds no charm for him. By January 1861, Lee’s duty is clear- he will not serve a Union maintained by force.

In April, Lee is directed to report to Washington. He is offered command of 75,000 troops and informed by his old boss Winfield Scott if he’s unwilling to be on active duty leading troops his course is to resign. Virginia secedes on the 19th of April, 1861. Lee’s devotion to duty drives his action the next morning. He resigns his commission in the Army, and in a letter to Winfield Scott written the same day, Lee writes these immortal words: “Save in defence of my native State, I never again desire to draw my sword.”

Two days later, Lee takes the train to Richmond to accept appointment as Commander in Chief of the Military Forces of Virginia. He’s 54 years of age and his hair is still jet black, as is his mustache. He is an elegant, dignified and unpretentious gentleman. Only once in his life so far has his legendary self-control lapsed; by all reports he is a perfect Southern gentleman. In his military education, he has studied Washington his wife’s ancestor, his father, and numerous books on Napoleon’s campaigns. Well-read and a combat Veteran in Mexico, nevertheless his primary military job has been civil engineering. We can only suppose what his thoughts may have been during this train ride. Immediately we see his humility; on arrival in Richmond, he states his preference that the job had been given an abler man. When the Old Dominion ratified

the Constitution back in 1787, she reserved the right to resume the powers delegated under the Constitution. A month after Lee arrives in Richmond; the people of Virginia approve the decision to leave the Union. Just as Lee expects, the US Army crosses the Potomac and occupies Virginia soil. As Virginia merges with the Confederate States of America, now-General Lee becomes military adviser to President Jefferson Davis. His work behind the scenes makes the victory at Manassas (called Bull Run by some) possible.

As is said, the reward for hard work is more hard work. General Lee is dispatched to what's now West Virginia to coordinate efforts rather than command troops in the field. It will be a learning experience, and his self-control and reserve will be tested greatly. A Tennessee private from here in Maury County, Sam Watkins, will recall years later how impressive Lee was even at this early stage of the War. While he will later turn it into a benefit, here Lee's great aversion to confrontation, among many other factors, contributes to the unsuccessful conclusion of the campaign in Western Virginia. He's next sent to the coast of Southeastern Georgia and South Carolina. The Veteran of several decades in the Army Corps of Engineers quickly reorganizes the scattered defenses and sets his people to building fortifications. His troops don't appreciate his expertise, and he's dubbed "Granny" Lee and "The King of Spades." Nevertheless, his fortifications remain intact until the end of the War, and Charleston isn't captured until February 1865.

As 1862 warms, disaster is everywhere. Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee have fallen, the underappreciated Army of Mississippi has not been successful at Pittsburg Landing (called Shiloh by some), the military "superstar" Albert Sidney Johnston falling in that battle. The unionists have set up housekeeping in Nashville and middle Tennessee. And now, they seem intent on inundating Virginia with soldiers. Lee does what he's done for the war effort thus far; he coordinates efforts behind the scenes. Joseph Johnston slowly and stubbornly withdraws up the Peninsula of Virginia through modern Hampton, Newport News and Yorktown, and Lee comes across the idea he will later refine into a singularly effective and unique leadership style: rather than make concrete orders, Lee makes broad suggestions to distant commanders. The most important of these is to the eccentric former Virginia Military Institute Professor from Lexington and hero of Manassas called Stonewall. Jackson is to do whatever he can to occupy as many of Those People (as Lee will always call US Army soldiers) as he can in the Shenandoah Valley. In the mean time, the career engineer busies himself with improving fortifications around Richmond and making attempts to placate Joseph Johnston. In brighter news, Jackson is succeeding in following Lee's suggestions over in the Valley beyond anyone's possible expectation. He wins battle after battle, invariably attributing success to "God's blessing."

May ends and Johnston is seriously wounded at the battle of Seven Pines in what's now metropolitan Richmond, Virginia. As in so many cases, availability outweighs ability and Lee is appointed head of Johnston's force on June 1. He has already christened it, "The Army of Northern Virginia." In another display of self-control, reserve and discipline, during near-continuous combat Lee restructures the Army over the next few weeks. It's obvious the unionist commander McClellan isn't going to do anything quickly and Lee's plan is taken from extensive prewar study of Napoleon: Attack. He's joined by Jackson on June the 17th, and the Army of

Northern Virginia, heavily outnumbered and in direct violation of all known principles of warfare, takes the offensive with Those People in view of the Richmond skyline. Lee has gathered reinforcements from anywhere he could get them, and the ensuing Seven Days battle is as chaotic as it is successful. Leveraging his experience in West Virginia, he asks if things can be done instead of ordering. Having no real choice, the Army tries. And succeeds beyond imagination. By the first week of July, Richmond is delivered, and Those People are under cover of their artillery and gunboats. Lee reorganizes his Army yet again; some leaders have failed, while others have gained new glory. Lee, ever the gentleman, doesn't fire or openly criticize inefficient generals. Instead, he expedites their transfer elsewhere where in many cases they give much more valuable service than they did in the crisis around Richmond. Lee is applying his lessons learned in Mexico and West Virginia and learning to command an Army quickly; by the time he's in command for a month he has already fought several major battles, winning most of them, and has prevailed in the campaign. He never orders things be done. Instead, he simply asks if they're possible. In so doing, he gains the respect and admiration of his officers and enlisted men. It will be 33 months before Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia will lose a battle in Virginia.

In the first of many command changes to come, McClellan is replaced by General John Pope. Pope's bombastic manner grates on Lee, who in a rare breach of his personal restraint expresses desire he be suppressed. General Jubal Early is less circumspect in his postwar memoir, calling Pope a chicken thief. Pope is quickly dispatched of in Northern Virginia, and Lee gains experience in handling a large body of troops; the battles of August 1862 are much more coordinated than were the battles around Richmond. With Virginia relieved of pressure, the theater of war is moved completely out of the Old Dominion. Confederate leadership hopes a victory on US territory will convince foreign powers to acknowledge the CSA as an independent country. General Order 191 is compromised, giving McClellan (now back in command) complete insight to Lee's plans for the campaign. Despite this, he puts men into battle piecemeal along Antietam Creek near the town of Sharpsburg, allowing Lee to shuttle men back and forth to meet their attacks. His staff is gaining experience as is Lee himself, which greatly contributes to the result here. More Americans are casualties here than any other battle in American history so far, yet the Confederates are still in position, ready to receive an attack the next morning. The Army of Northern Virginia has coalesced.

The conventional wisdom is, as in so many things, wrong: this is NOT a victory for Those People. It is an uncategorical tactical failure on McClellan's part; he mismanaged the battle, throwing corps piecemeal against the Army of Northern Virginia. While Lee's Army of Northern Virginia has nothing left for further offensive operations, they retreat back to Virginia in good order. The plain facts are: The theater of operations was moved completely out of Virginia; Lee fought numerically superior enemy forces to a standstill on THEIR home ground, inflicting disproportionate casualties for numbers engaged and finally Lee unquestionably won two battles, South Mountain and Harper's Ferry. Soon, the Confederate Congress authorizes a corps level of command for the Army, formalizing the arrangement Lee had created later in the Seven Days and in Northern Virginia to make the great cloud of divisions more manageable by placing them under intermediate leaders to the Commanding General. The rank of Lieutenant

General was also created, inferring that commanders of the new Army Corps should always rank their division commanders. These long overdue process improvements make the Army of Northern Virginia, and other forces, magnitudes more effective as field Armies. The plain soldiers begin to think Lee is unbeatable.

Soon, McClellan is relieved in favor of Ambrose Burnside, best known at this point for the massive and costly attack at Burnside's Bridge at Sharpsburg. Soon, his plan becomes clear: He will inundate Lee's army with soldiers. The Army of Northern Virginia, led by an expert engineer, is in well-covered positions at the top of a hill overlooking the community of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Rather than a coordinated attack all along the front, Burnside attacks at the left, center and right successively, repulsed with heavy losses at each attack. It is here that Lee, ever the gentleman, says, "It is well that war is so terrible, lest we grow fond of it." It is also here that medical historians believe Lee suffers his first heart attack, and here that the Army's implicit and explicit trust in their General Lee matures.

The Army goes into winter quarters, as is the custom in warfare. 1862 becomes 1863, and Burnside is supplanted by Hooker. Hooker's plan is to attack Lee through the Wilderness, a heavily wooded area in central Virginia. As always, Lee is heavily outnumbered, but his aggressive lieutenant, Stonewall Jackson, has an idea. He will take his entire Corps through the Wilderness and hammer Hooker's flank. Having few other choices, Lee agrees. The movement is carried out with Jackson's usual high level of operational security, and soon the Second Corps is stepping off for the advance on Howard's unsuspecting and unprotected flank from out of the heavy woods of the Wilderness surrounding Chancellorsville. In May 1861, these men were shopkeepers or farmers for the enlisted ranks and lawyers or politicians for the most part for the officers. They will never be more professional than they are right now in May 1863; Lee through the power of suggestion and reasoned authority has forged a mass of volunteers and leaders with limited military experience into an Army that is better than anything they have yet faced. These men, as Lee will later say, know their duty and would do it even without officers to lead them. By dusk on May 2nd, 1863, Lee's gambit of sending the majority of his people through the dense woods of the Wilderness surrounding Chancellorsville to slam into Hooker has paid off handsomely. The unprotected flank (the Army simply ends with no real fortifications) has been rolled up, and Howard's 11th Corps (the unit on the end) has been stampeded back towards Chancellorsville. Hooker's not panicked, but he DEFINITELY doesn't have control of the battle. It's getting dark, though, and nighttime combat has its own challenges. "Stonewall" Jackson has fire in his belly; his exhortations to isolate Hooker's Army from the United States Ford across the Rappahannock would cut them off from assistance, forcing them to be slaughtered or surrender. He continues the attack until nearly midnight and, scouting between the poorly defined lines, is mistakenly shot by his own men. Nevertheless, Lee's plan succeeds beyond any expectation. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia win their most comprehensive victory of the War, but at a terrible cost: Stonewall Jackson, the one man that understands Lee's thoughts, suggestions, and intentions better than anyone else in the entire Army, dies of his wounds a week after the victory.

The Army is again reorganized; Longstreet leads the First Corps, Jackson's trusted lieutenant Ewell is placed at the head of the Second Corps, and aggressive A. P. Hill leads the

new Third Corps. This Army is as professional as it will ever be and hasn't lost a battle, as the men of the Army see it, in over a year. Shortly, they head out for another campaign to move the war out of Virginia. It will be 11 months before the US Army mounts another full-scale invasion of Virginia.

For details on the Battle of Gettysburg, please see the following QR code: (Michael Hardy's work)

It's mid-July 1863 and the Army of Northern Virginia, bled white in Pennsylvania, is again reorganized. The remarkable fact about Gettysburg is not that so many mistakes were made. Instead, it's that so much was accomplished in spite of the mistakes. This battle, more than any other so far, is a THUNDEROUS testimony to the fundamental resiliency of the Confederate soldier. Now, though, Lee is leading a virtually brand-new Army with leaders that, on average, have less experience for their roles than those who held the jobs a year ago did. It takes them time to grow into their new roles, and Lee's habit of asking if things can be done rather than ordering them be done serves him well here as he trains his new and relatively inexperienced leaders. After the Battle of Bristoe Station in October, he tells his corps commander A.P. Hill who regrets the mistakes of inexperience, "Well, well, General, bury these poor men and let us say no more about it."

1863 becomes 1864 and the Army of Northern Virginia is led by Longstreet, back from Chickamauga and the disappointment of East Tennessee; Ewell, in poor physical health; and Hill, who has yet to confirm the confidence placed in him with corps command. They are faced by Meade, one of the more competent US Generals. And 'behind the curtain' is Grant, from the West. Grant is no military genius: his record is one of unimaginative persistence, not of brilliant maneuver. In May 1864, Meade takes the Army of the Potomac into the Wilderness, and after a desperate fight in the thick woods, Lee again prevails. The victory in the Wilderness comes at a terrible price as well: Almost exactly a year later and near the same spot Stonewall Jackson was wounded in 1863, Longstreet is shot by HIS own troops. Here, the Army suffers a serious leadership crisis. Longstreet is seriously injured and will be out for months, if he can ever come back. Ewell's health has deteriorated further, and A. P. Hill suffers from a health issue that has been debated by historians ever since the war ended. Lee is now more or less in direct command of somewhere around 60,000 men in almost continuous battle. This would be a challenge for a young man in excellent health. Lee is nearly 60, which is quite old for the era; average lifespan in this era is 71. Lee, however, has suffered health issues throughout the war. Medical historians believe he has had at least one heart attack, possibly two.

Those People disengage after the Wilderness. Grant's idea is to get between Lee and Richmond, so a simple race to Spotsylvania Court House from the Wilderness ensues. The Army of Northern Virginia wins and prevails again, in another brutal battle over several days in mud and driving rain. Lee has become almost more than human; at one point he attempts to personally rally a wavering unit. The men demand he get back to safety. "Lee to the rear!" they shout. He agrees, only after they promise victory. Lee's unique leadership style has made the Army of Northern Virginia greater than the sum of its parts; by now, Lee only has to ASK men if things are possible and they accomplish them. The troops who promised to win the battle do just

that. Lee is an engineer and understands fortifications and entrenchments. Grant, though, has virtually limitless reinforcements to draw on. Grant disengages, again, and tries to flank Lee, again. Having tried maneuver, Grant resorts to use of massive numbers, and assails Lee's well-entrenched forces at Cold Harbor. The massive casualty list makes the third assault on the Confederate positions the one military decision Grant will later in life say he regrets. By this third assault, Those People refuse to attack. One unionist junior officer says, "I would not assault the Confederate positions again if Jesus Christ Himself were to order the attack."

Lee understands the seriousness of the situation and has said that the Army of Northern Virginia cannot stand a siege. If besieged, he fully believes the Army's end will be a simple matter of time. Nevertheless, his firm self-control keeps him poised and doing his duty of defending Virginia. One lesser-reported but essential decision Lee makes is coordination with P.G.T. Beauregard, who concocts a defense of Petersburg on the fly. He saves the Confederate capitol of Richmond as the Summer of 1864 continues. Another of Lee's 'suggestions,' to exploit developments that may occur added to General Jubal Early's mission to defend the Shenandoah Valley in June, becomes his greatest victory, Lynchburg, and a heroic campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. Early and his Army of the Valley march from Lynchburg to the gates of Washington DC and tie up nearly 20,000 soldiers in the Valley away from Grant for the rest of the year. Nevertheless, 1864 cools in Virginia and the Army of Northern Virginia is caged in Petersburg.

Natural men can only do so much; as 1864 becomes 1865, the tyranny of numbers and the Blockade that has slowly starved the Confederate States of America begin to make terrible progress; the CSA's last winter is her worst winter. Early's Army of the Valley is slowly returned to Lee's force at Petersburg, and finally Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia are inundated with more and more soldiers. Winter ends, and there's nothing to do but abandon Richmond and Petersburg, hopefully to link with Joseph Johnston and turn on Those People in North Carolina. Starving and outnumbered, Lee and his Army stagger across Virginia. Fighting as they go, they somehow continue as a cohesive army. Some just go home from along the road, and after the Battle of Sailor's Creek Lee's iron self-control deserts him, briefly. Seeing part of the Army routed, he exclaims, "My God! Is the Army dissolved?"

Starving men can only march so quickly, and the path to the rail yard at Lynchburg is blocked by Those People. Well fed, they can march much more quickly. John Brown Gordon, now commander of Stonewall Jackson's old Second Corps, tries one last time to break through; his message back to Lee that he's fought his Corps "to a frazzle" and can make no progress without reinforcements that simply don't exist adds a new word to the American language. Lee's self-control drops once more; once faced with the inescapable surrender of the Army, he idly observes he has but to ride the lines one time to be killed in battle and evade the crushing reality. He concludes there's nothing for him to do but go negotiate with Grant, which he does. The Army of Northern Virginia cannot be defeated in anything approaching equal combat. It is therefore dissolved at Appomattox, 20 minutes' modern drive east of Lynchburg and less than an hour's modern drive from Lexington and the Shenandoah Valley, and so ends Lee's military career.

Really, though, his greatest career is only beginning as in just a few months the trustees of Washington College in Lexington offer him a job as President of the college. Not realizing his experience as Superintendent at West Point before the War, they think they're giving an impoverished hero of the Southland a pension. The University of Alabama attempts to reopen at about this time, as well. One student enrolls, and the trustees decide to wait for a more opportune time to reopen. Lee arrives at the campus in September 1865, and classes resume shortly with a student body of about 50, which soon increases to 140. There's a sign of things to come the day of his arrival: As he reins Traveller in front of the Lexington Hotel, a group of Veterans of the Army of Northern Virginia who had been loitering recognize him and snap to attention. One salutes and takes Traveller's bridle and stirrup to aid Lee in dismounting.

He quickly makes a habit of personally interviewing each new student. One, a Veteran, makes mention of 'making up for time wasted in the Army.' Lee firmly corrects this, and the Veteran (who later becomes a professor of the classics at three American universities) never again considers his time in the Confederate Army "wasted." Younger students who had not served in the War encounter a grandfatherly figure, but with a gentle, almost undefined, yet profound sadness just below the surface. He can be firm as marble: A student appearing in his office chewing tobacco is requested to remove it, and return. He leaves and returns, still chewing. He is presented an ultimatum: Remove the quid or be expelled in 10 minutes. We can assume he got rid of the "chew."

Lee finds the damage of Hunter's raid the previous summer still fresh in Lexington, but it does not remain so. He launches into a whirlwind of construction, fundraising, and advocacy for the school. One endowment, from industrialist Cyrus McCormick, is in the amount of \$10,000. Enrollment grows, and his clear advocacy of rebuilding the Southland as well as the rest of the country resonates: there are students from North and South at Washington College in 1867. Lee sees the need for broad education, famously saying a man's education isn't finished until his life's finished. Under Lee's direct advocacy, Washington College quickly launches one of the first elective systems at an American college. Before, especially at smaller colleges, all students took the exact same classes. Lee understands the massive need for trained men in many fields of endeavor to rebuild the shattered Southland. Soon, the elective system at Washington College becomes what might be called "career and technical education." A law school is opened, and Washington College also soon offers courses in agriculture, journalism, and engineering. The students at Washington, inspired by Lee's humble, suggestive leadership organize a fraternity specifically to emulate the personality that so impresses them, Kappa Alpha.

The former commander of the Army of Northern Virginia does not neglect his military career. Concerned that the common soldier of the Confederate Army be properly remembered, he begins gathering information for a memoir but decides the timing isn't appropriate yet. In 1866, he tells Jubal Early in a letter that, "the public mind is not prepared to receive the truth," and actively dissuades others from forming Veterans' groups and erecting memorials. He does not oppose either as such, but simply believes the timing isn't right yet and that passions should cool before the Southland memorializes her dead. Lee turns to the work of rebuilding the college

as well as building the intellects of the men he'd led into battle just a few years prior. He will never return to gathering information for posterity.

Success, like at Chancellorsville and so many other battles, has come at a cost. Visitors remark how much he has aged since the war and some remark at his weight gain. Given his lifelong habits of restraint and self-control, it's plausible visitors are mistaking the bloating and water retention common in those suffering from congestive heart failure for simple weight gain; 1860s medical science has no idea what causes heart trouble not any real idea of the symptoms. He tries to take vacations at resorts in the Valley of Virginia, but crowds greet him everywhere.

By 1869, his health is deteriorating, and he can only walk 150 yards unassisted. The President of Washington College has leveraged his fame to rescue the school from insolvency; where there were only 50 present the day he arrived in Lexington back in 1865, there are 400 students enrolled in 1870. As 1870 warms, people notice Lee's deteriorating health. He takes another vacation, this time to deep Georgia, but to no avail- he's greeted by massive crowds everywhere he goes. Almost unnoticed is one 13 year old boy who comes to see Lee alone. He just stares, but will remember the event for the rest of his life. The world will later know this little boy as Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, who will lead the country through the First World War. Finally, in October 1870, the warrior turned educator passes away. Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's definitive biographer, writing six decades later, refuses to use superlatives in describing Lee. He firmly believes he doesn't need them.

In 1861, Lee is well-known to the Army. In 1865, he's well-known in the South. But by the turn of the century, he's well-known to the entire United States. How could this one man become so iconic of an era? Libraries can be filled with books about the War Between the States, but we need look no further than his definitive biographer, Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman, for an answer. Dr. Freeman, in an address given on Lee's birthday in 1926 (by this time a public holiday in many places), sums up the simplicity of Lee's personality. He never asked if a thing *would* be done, only if it *could* be done. The emergency of the circumstance around Richmond in the summer of 1862 forced men to try this, as there was no other choice. And they won. As is said, nothing succeeds like success. Lee's "suggestions" cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Those People twice, brought the Army of Northern Virginia within an eyelash of victory in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and were key in 33 months of unbroken victory in Virginia. At Washington College, he could be a gentle grandfather, and he could be hard as nails too. Lee never asked men to do something that couldn't be done, and they loved him for it for the rest of their lives.

Lee may be gone, but his legacy endures. The trustees of Washington College quickly rename it, "Washington and Lee University" in honor of his work in resurrecting the liberal arts school from the fire and ashes of war. Within two years, monument associations, ladies' memorial associations, and Veterans' associations are prolific in the impoverished South. By the 1880s, monuments to the fallen cover the South. By 1890, 12 Confederate Veterans' associations coalesce into the United Confederate Veterans which will have well over 1,500 "camps," as the local chapters are called, at its height. By 1900, the ladies' associations will have coalesced into the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Finally, in 1896, an organization is formed with the aid of both the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy for the descendants of Confederate Veterans. They will continue the work Lee set aside in 1865 to preserve the history and heritage of the era for posterity. The first camp is chartered in Richmond as R. E. Lee Camp 1, and Lee's biographer Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman will be a member. Their Charge is, in part, to defend the Confederate soldier's good name and emulate his virtues.

Today, this organization is known as the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

For Further Reading

- a. Early, Jubal A. (Ruth H. Early, editor)
 - i. Narrative Of The War Between The States
- b. Flood, Charles W.
 - i. Lee: The Last Days
- c. Freeman, Dr. Douglas Southall
 - i. R. E. Lee
 - ii. Lee's Lieutenants
 - iii. Douglas Southall Freeman on Leadership, edited by Stuart W. Smith.
- d. McCaslin, Richard B.
 - i. Lee In The Shadow of Washington
- e. Watkins, Samuel R.
 - i. Company Aytch: A Side Show To The Big Show