

THE FAMILY CONNECTION BETWEEN GEORGE WASHINGTON AND ROBERT E. LEE

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George Washington

Henry Lee

Robert E. Lee

In early 1759, 26-year old George Washington (1732-1799) came home to the country estate of Mt. Vernon he had inherited from his half-brother Lawrence. During the previous 3-1/2 years he had commanded the Virginia Regiment in the French & Indian War as colonial Colonel, a regular commission in the British Army having been refused him. He left the army to marry Martha Dandridge Custis (1731-1802), a wealthy young widow, one year his senior. She was by all accounts, one of the wealthiest women in the Tidewater, her marriage contract attesting to an estate in excess of 20,000 pounds, and 17, 438 acres of land - a startling sum in those days. In 1749, when just 18, she had married Daniel Parke Custis, 20 years her senior. She had borne him 4 children before Mr. Custis passed away in 1757. Only two of the 4 children survived; John Parke (Jacky) Custis (5 years old) and Martha Parke (Patsy) Custis (3 years old) when Martha married George. Martha described herself as “a fine healthy girl”, slightly plump, with dark hair, hazel eyes and fine teeth, with a quiet gentle nature and an instinct for getting along with people. George called on her in March 1758 and sent to Philadelphia for a ring in early May, but the Fort Dusquene expedition interrupted their marriage plans.

George and Martha were married on January 6, 1759, shortly after his return from Fort Pitt, and Washington was consistent in describing his marriage as one not based on “enamored love”, but on friendship. By all accounts, he shared a great deal of intimate communication with Martha, and they remained the “best of friends” as few couples ever achieve. She seemed comfortable with the situation, and George provided stability, protection and honor upon their household. George provided as stable a household as possible, but Martha never conceived any additional children. Their parenting occurred over two generations, and included many heartfelt tragedies.

Patsy Custis was discovered to be epileptic at age 12 when she cried and fell from a horse. She was then treated as a quasi-invalid until June 1773, when she was suddenly stricken with a fatal seizure and died at the tender age of 17. The Washingtons provided a live-in tutor for young Jacky Custis between the ages of 7 and 13; then sent him to a private school run by the Reverend Jonathan Boucher. Boucher complained to Washington of the lad’s laziness and propensity to the opposite sex. In 1773 Jack suddenly announced his engagement to Nellie Calvert, the daughter of an illegitimate son of the 5th Lord Baltimore. This was not taken kindly, and George wrote to Nellie’s father informing him that Jack should complete college before getting married. George then hurriedly shipped his step son off to King’s College (later renamed Columbia University) in far-away New York City. While in New York City, George called upon his old acquaintance Thomas Gage, now serving as commander-in-chief of the British Army in North America, with whom he

had served on General Braddock's staff almost 20 years earlier (during the French & Indian War). Jack cut a wide swath at King's College, married at 19, and spent the last seven years of his life as a wealthy idler. He died of "camp fever" in 1781 shortly after joining his step-father as an aide during the Battle of Yorktown.

Henry Lee (1756-1818) began his military career as a young cavalry officer in Washington's Continental Army. Like Washington, he was a Virginian and a signer of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776. Between 1776 and 1780 he campaigned primarily north of the Mason-Dixon Line, mainly in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. Henry Lee one of the greatest front-line American commanders in the Revolutionary War. As a major, Lee formulated a Partisan Corps - an elite, heavily armed cavalry unit in the Continental Army consisting of about 150 soldiers, which came to be known as *Lee's Legion*. Called "*Light-Horse Harry*" by his troops, he is best known for his role in the assault on Paulus Hook, near Weehawken, New Jersey in August 1779, which he planned and successfully led. After a forced march of 20 miles to Paulus Hook and a surprisingly easy capture of the fort, Lee's tired troops suddenly found themselves on the retreat before a small force of 25 Hessian troops and a larger force of 150 elite British Buskirks. Nonetheless, Lee's Corps captured 150 of the enemy in his assault, with very little loss of life on the American side. Shortly after Paulus Hook, however, Lee was court-martialed for his performance in the assault, on charges of poor planning, breaking ranks in his personal leading the assault, improper retreat, and for "*behaving in a manner unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.*" He was acquitted with honor on all counts because George Washington intervened on his behalf. The attempted court-martial came about because many of his fellow officers envied the high status he had achieved as such a young officer and the public praise he received for Paulus Hook, and because of his close personal ties with Washington, which some believed brought him undeserved benefits.

Lee's Legion went onto further fame and glory, playing a dominant role in the Battle of Springfield on June 23, 1780, the last major British offensive in the north. Here Lee's Legion succeeded in stopping a 5000-man British force that was advancing on Springfield, NJ. After 1780 Lee's Legion operated almost exclusively in the South, where my family patriarch, Sgt Elijah Rogers, served under him and played the fife at the head of the Legion's marching column. Lee resigned his command in February 1782, four months after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown and exhausted after five years of war and increasingly isolated and embattled among his fellow officers, who were jealous of his notoriety. Robert E. Lee would later write of his father at that time, "*Colonel Lee left the army at the close of the campaign, in sickness and sorrow.*" He was subsequently promoted to Major General when dispatched by President Washington to command the 13,000 militia men that put down the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania in 1794.

With Jacky Custis' death at Yorktown, George and Martha Washington adopted Jack's two youngest children (their mother keeping the eldest two), George Washington Parke Custis (just 6 months old) and Eleanor Parke Custis (age 3), whom they adopted and raised as their own children, enjoying this pair more than Jacky and Patsy. "Washington" Custis was the younger and the pet of the family. In 1804 he married Mary Lee Fitzhugh, and their daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis (born in 1808) would marry Robert E. Lee in 1831. Washington Custis provided American history with some of the most tender insights about his step grandfather George Washington, who raised him as a son. Nellie Custis married Washington's nephew and aide-de-camp, Lawrence Lewis, on Washington's birthday in 1799. Gracefully, the years 1782 through 1789 were the most peaceful at Mt. Vernon, but the young nation agitated for what lay ahead. France erupted into a bloody revolution in July 1789, during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Thomas Jefferson was the Ambassador to France at this time.

George Washington served his Country faithfully through a most troubled Presidency, beginning in 1789. He repeated as a consensus candidate in 1792. He decided to step down in 1796 after serving his second 4-year term and thereby provide an example for succeeding Presidents, to prevent any temptation towards monarchy. His most fervent desire was to return to the genteel life of Mt. Vernon, where he and Martha received many visitors during his last 3 years. It became his custom to ride the boundaries of his estate in the early hours of each morning, while checking on the various activities of the estate. On December 12, 1799 Washington encountered a storm which began to snow during his ride, which suddenly turned into a settled cold rain, which soaked him. Unperturbed, he failed to change from his cold damp clothes and the following day brought a deep cold with hoarseness, which settled in his throat. On the evening of the 13th

he was seized by a chill, followed by a violent attack, and rapidly sank, dying just before midnight on the 14th. The most prominent figure in American history, God's man for a new nation and a new form of government, slipped away with the Century of which he was inextricably part. He was two months shy of his 68th birthday.

The state funeral for the nation's Commander-in-Chief was held the day after Christmas in Philadelphia, still the nation's capitol. Although the Official eulogy was written by Chief Justice John Marshall, it was delivered by Major General Richard Henry Lee at Philadelphia's German Lutheran Church, the largest church in the city, while 4000 spectators listened intently. Harry Lee gave a stirring account of Washington's life, beginning on the banks of the Monongahela River in 1753, and reviewing the countless sufferings and travails he experienced in 45 years of public service.

"First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in humble and enduring scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding; his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting.... Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence and virtue always felt his fostering hand. The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues.... Such was the man for whom our nation mourns."

Lee's words would live on as immortal descriptors of the sacrifices Washington made on behalf of a grateful nation. Every school child would recite them over the coming century, yet today, they are all but forgotten.

Martha died in 1802, and much to Washington Custis' dismay, the estate fell to the President's nephew, Bushrod Washington. Custis took with him all those personal effects willed to him by his mother; then purchased as much as he could afford (many said more than he could afford) during auctions held at the Mt. Vernon estate in 1802 and 1803. In the end he owed \$4,545, a princely sum in those days, but he retained the greatest collection of George Washington memorabilia which Americans can view today at Mt Vernon and at the Lee-Custis Mansion in Arlington.

In 1790 Light Horse Harry Lee's first wife died, and 2-1/2 years later he married Ann Carter, also of a prominent Virginia plantation family. Between 1795 and 1811 she bore him 8 children. On January 19, 1807, the Lee's welcomed their fifth and youngest son, naming him Robert Edward, after Ann's two brothers. He was born on his father's 51st birthday! At the time the family was living on the Lee's Stratford Hall Plantation, along the Potomac River in Westmoreland County, about 5 miles from where George Washington was born along Pope's Creek, near its mouth on the Potomac. Though he spent fewer than four years there, his later boyhood visits left an impression that he carried throughout his life.

His father carried on a series of dalliances with other women, which caused the family much pain and embarrassment. In 1808 Henry Lee was jailed for nonpayment of debts. While confined to a 12 x 15 feet cell he wrote *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States*, still considered the classic text on that theater of the Revolutionary War. He was released from prison in 1810 and the family moved to Alexandria, but Harry sought refuge in the warmer climate of the West Indies, because of poor health believed related to internal injuries he had suffered in a brawl defending a friend's honor in Baltimore. Soon rumors arose of his dalliances with other women in the Caribbean and he decided to return home in 1818. He made it as far as Cumberland Island, Georgia, where he died in the home of the daughter of his former commander, General Nathaniel Greene, on March 18th, at the age of 62.

Fortunately, his youngest son did not inherit his father's weaknesses, but emulated his military courage and was blessed with a strong and well proportioned body. Young Robert also grew up under the influence of George Washington, who was not only a hero to Lee, but was also a man of the times, having died but a few years previous. The two families were intertwined by proximity, lineage in settling the 'Northern neck' of Virginia in the mid-1600s and their patriarch's service to the new nation as co-signers of the Declaration of Independence and generals who endured much hardship during the weary war of independence. Because of these intimate associations, George Washington was a family figure to Lee as a

child. The development of Lee's character, however, is to be credited most of all to his mother, who instilled the Biblical values of respect, self control, prudence, responsibility and service to others. These traits would become the hallmarks of Lee's persona, which evolved into a form of hero worship similar to that accorded George Washington in his lifetime.

Lee's life of service began at an early age while caring for his mother who became sick and eventually, an invalid. Taking on the responsibilities of his father, Lee developed an instinctive sense of responsibility and matured early and soberly. He became very prudent with his money, never forgetting the value of a dollar and never deviating from his training of self denial and self control. In the early 1820s Lee's older half-brother also disgraced the family with sexual scandal and was forced to sell Stratford Hall and move to France. Seeing the hurt these indiscretions caused his mother and sisters instilled in him a strict adherence to the Christian values which his mother ascribed. He therefore developed a custodial sense of his family's traditions and sought to return honor and respect to his family name. At the tender age of 11 he received the news that his father had died. With his father's passing, his elder brothers departed from home, and his mother and sisters in failing health, Robert assumed the responsibilities as head of the household. On cold afternoons, when his mother was well enough, young Robert would stuff paper in the cracks of the carriage to block the wind and take her driving. Years later, when he left for West Point, Ann Lee wrote to a cousin, *"How I will get on without Robert? He is both a son and daughter to me."*

Robert Lee's choice of a military career was dictated by financial necessity. There was no money left to send him to Harvard, where his older brother Charles Carter Lee studied. Such circumstances led him to an appointment to the nation's Military Academy at West Point. He led the Cadet Corps during his senior year, graduated second in his class of 1829. In four years at West Point he received not a single demerit, and he became one of the most popular cadets in his class. When he returned as the academy's Superintendent, between 1852-54, he won the same affectionate respect from the cadets for his compassion, sense of fairness and, more than any other quality, his strong moral leadership.

Like most officers who graduated at the top of their class, Lee was offered a commission in the prestigious Engineering Corps. On June 30, 1831, while serving as Second Lieutenant of Engineers at Fort Monroe, Virginia, he married Mary Ann Randolph Custis of Arlington. Mary was the only daughter of George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington and the adopted grandson of George Washington. Robert E. Lee shared his father's reverence for the memory of the General and that bond with the Father of our Country served as an inspiration throughout Lee's life. The young couple moved into Arlington, the Custis mansion across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. This estate would later become the Arlington National Cemetery, after the Federal government confiscated it for non-payment of taxes during the Civil War, burying dead soldiers on the grounds to discourage and disgrace Lee for siding with the Confederacy. At the time, no one dreamed that it would eclipse the Congressional Cemetery a few blocks southeast of the Capitol Building and become the nation's preeminent National Cemetery!

In spite of his flawless performance as an engineer and his brilliance as an officer, promotion came slowly for Robert Lee. His assignments were lonely and difficult, and he found the separation from his family hard to bear. His love of Mary and his ever-increasing brood of children were the center of his life. He was appointed superintendent of West Point in 1851 and the Lees saw their eldest son Custis graduate #1 in the West Point Class of 1854, alongside many other future generals.

The opportunity that won him enduring fame was one he would have preferred not to have taken. The Army of the United States had been his life's work for 32 years, and he had given it his very best. On April 18, 1861, he was finally offered the reward for his service. On the eve of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, through War Secretary Francis Blair, offered him command of the Union Army. There was little doubt as to Lee's sentiments. He was utterly opposed to secession and considered slavery evil. His views on the United States were equally clear - *"no north, no south, no east, no west,"* he wrote, *"but the broad Union in all its might and strength past and present."* Blair's offer forced Lee to choose between his strong conviction to see the country united in perpetuity and his responsibility to family, friends and his native Virginia. A heart-wrenching decision had to be made. After a long night at Arlington, searching for an answer to Blair's offer, he finally came downstairs to Mary. *"Well Mary,"* he said calmly, *"the question*

is settled. Here is my letter of resignation." He could not, he told her, lift his hand against his own people. He had "*endeavored to do what he thought was right,*" and replied to Blair that "*...though opposed to secession and a deprecating war, I could take no part in the invasion of the Southern States.*" He resigned his commission and left his much beloved Arlington to "*go back in sorrow to my people and share the misery of my native state.*"

Upon secession in April 1861 Lee was given command of all Virginia military forces. On June 1, 1862 he assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia in the Confederate capital of Richmond, after General Joseph Johnston was wounded. Not until February 1865 was he named Commander in Chief of all Confederate forces, but the leadership throughout the war was undeniably his. His brilliance as a commander is legendary, and military colleges the world over study his campaigns as models of the science of war. That he held out against an army three times the size and a hundred times better equipped was no miracle. It was the result of leadership by a man of exceptional intelligence, daring, courage and integrity. His men all but worshiped him. He shared their rations, slept in tents as they did, and, most importantly, never asked more of them than he did of himself.

On December 25, 1861, in the midst of war and with Arlington confiscated and occupied by Union troops, the lonely Lee wrote to Mary:

...In the absence of a home I wish I could purchase Stratford. That is the only place I could go to, now accessible to us, that would inspire me with feelings of pleasure and local love. You and the girls could remain there in quiet. It is a poor place, but we could make enough cornbread and bacon for our support and the girls could weave us clothes. I wonder if it is for sale and how much.

Sadly, circumstances prevented them from ever returning to Stratford (located along the Potomac estuary in Westmoreland County). Lee's legendary command of the Confederate forces came to an end at Appomattox, Virginia in April 1865. "*There is nothing left for me to do,*" he said, "*but to go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths.*" With the war now over, Lee set an example to all in his refusal to express bitterness. "*Abandon your animosities,*" he said, "*and make your sons Americans.*" He then set out to work for a permanent union of the states.

Though his application to regain his citizenship was misplaced and not acted upon until 1975 - more than a century late - Lee worked tirelessly for a strong peace. With some hesitation he accepted the presidency of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, a few blocks from the Virginian Military Institute. Lee strove to equip his students with the character and knowledge he knew would be necessary to restore the war-ravaged South. Lexington became his home, and there he died of heart problems on October 12, 1870. After his death, his name was joined with that of his lifelong hero, and Washington College became Washington and Lee University. Robert E. Lee and his immediate family and that of Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and his family are all buried in Lexington, Virginia, near the universities they served before and after America's bloodiest conflict.



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