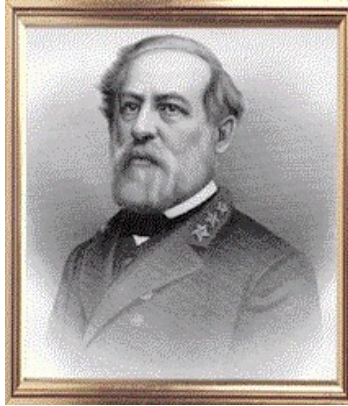


## Robert Edward Lee (1807-1870)



**"With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defense of my native State, with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword....." Lee in a letter to his sister, April 20, 1861**

The idol of the South to this day, Virginian Robert E. Lee had some difficulty in adjusting to the new form of warfare that unfolded with the Civil war, but this did not prevent him from keeping the Union armies in Virginia at bay for almost three years. The son of Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse" Harry Lee-who fell into disrepute in his later years attended West Point and graduated second in his class. During his four years at the military academy he did not earn a single demerit and served as the cadet corps' adjutant. Upon his 1829 graduation he was posted to the engineers. Before the Mexican War he served on engineering projects in Georgia, Virginia, and New York. During the war he served on the staffs of John Wool and Winfield Scott. Particularly distinguishing himself scouting for and guiding troops, he won three brevets and was slightly wounded at Chapultepec.

Following a stint in Baltimore Harbor he became superintendent of the military academy in 1852. When the mounted arm was expanded in 1855, Lee accepted the lieutenant colonelcy of the 2nd Cavalry in order to escape from the painfully slow promotion in the engineers. Ordered to western Texas, he served with his regiment until the 1857 death of his father-in-law forced him to ask for a series of leaves to settle the estate.

In 1859 he was called upon to lead a force of marines, to join with the militia on the scene, to put an end to John Brown's Harper's Ferry Raid. Thereafter he served again in Texas until summoned to Washington in 1861 by Winfield Scott who tried to retain Lee in the U. S. service. But the Virginian rejected the command of the Union's field forces on the day after Virginia seceded. He then accepted an invitation to visit Governor John Letcher in Virginia. His resignation as colonel, 1st Cavalry-to which he had recently been promoted-was accepted on April 25, 1861.

His Southern assignments included: major general, Virginia's land and naval forces (April 23, 1861); commanding Virginia forces (April 23 July 1861); brigadier general, CSA (May 14, 1861); general, CSA (from June 14, 1861); commanding Department of Northwestern Virginia (late July-October 1861); commanding Department of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida (November 8, 1861-March 3, 1862); and commanding Army of Northern Virginia June 1, 1862-April 9, 1865).

In charge of Virginia's fledgling military might, he was mainly involved in organizational matters. As a Confederate brigadier general, and later full general, he was in charge of supervising all Southern forces in Virginia. In the first summer of the war he was given his first field command in western Virginia. His Cheat Mountain Campaign was a disappointing fizzle largely due to the failings of his superiors. His entire tenure in the region was unpleasant, dealing with the bickering of his subordinates-William W. Loring, John B. Floyd, and Henry A. Wise. After this he became known throughout the South as "Granny Lee. " His debut in field command had not been promising, but Jefferson Davis appointed him to command along the Southern Coast.

Early in 1862 he was recalled to Richmond and made an advisor to the president. From this position he had some influence over military operations, especially those of Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. When Joseph E. Johnston launched his attack at Seven Pines, Davis and Lee were taken by surprise and rode out to the field. In the confusion of the fight Johnston was badly wounded, and that night Davis instructed Lee to take command of what he renamed the Army of Northern Virginia. He fought the second day of the battle but the initiative had already been lost the previous day. Later in the month, in a daring move, he left a small force in front of Richmond and crossed the Chickahominy to strike the one Union corps north of the river. In what was to be called the Seven Days Battles the individual fights-Beaver Dam Creek, Gaines' Mill, Savage Station, Glendale, White Oak Swamp, and Malvern Hill-were all tactical defeats for the Confederates. But Lee had achieved the strategic goal of removing McClellan's army from the very gates of Richmond.

This created a new opinion of Lee in the South. He gradually became "Uncle Robert" and "Marse Robert." With McClellan neutralized, a new threat developed under John Pope in northern Virginia. At first Lee detached Jackson and then followed with Longstreet's command. Winning at 2nd Bull Run, he moved on into Maryland but suffered the misfortune of having a copy of his orders detailing the disposition of his divided forces fall into the hands of the enemy. McClellan moved with unusual speed and Lee was forced to fight a delaying action along South Mountain while waiting for Jackson to complete the capture of Harpers Ferry and rejoin him. He masterfully fought McClellan to a stand still at Antietam and two days later recrossed the Potomac.

Near the end of the year he won an easy victory over Burnside at Fredericksburg and then trounced Hooker in his most creditable victory at Chancellorsville, where he had detached Jackson with most of the army on a lengthy flank march while he remained with only two divisions in the immediate front of the Union army. Launching his second invasion of the North, he lost at Gettysburg. On the third day of the battle he displayed one of his major faults when at Malvern Hill and on other fields-he ordered a massed infantry assault across a wide plain, not recognizing that the rifle, which had come into use since the Mexican War, put the charging troops under fire for too long a period. Another problem was his issuance of general orders to be executed by his subordinates.

Returning to Virginia he commanded in the inconclusive Bristoe and Mine Run campaigns. From the Wilderness to Petersburg he fought a retiring campaign against Grant in which he made full use of entrenchments, becoming known as "Ace of Spades" Lee. Finally forced into a siege, he held on to Richmond and Petersburg for nearly 10 months before beginning his retreat to Appomattox, where he was forced to surrender. On January 23, 1865, he had been named as commander in chief of the Confederate armies but he found himself too burdened in Virginia to give more than general directives to the other theaters.

Lee returned to Richmond as a paroled prisoner of war, and submitted with the utmost composure to an altered destiny. He devoted the rest of his life to setting an example of conduct for other thousands of

ex-Confederates. He refused a number of offers which would have secured substantial means for his family. Instead, he assumed the presidency of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia, and his reputation revitalized the school after the war. Lee's enormous wartime prestige, both in the North and South, and the devotion inspired by his unconscious symbolism of the "Lost Cause" made him a legendary figure even before his death. He died on October 12 1870, of heart disease which had plagued him since the spring of 1863, at Lexington, Va. and is buried there. Somehow, his application for restoration of citizenship was mislaid, and it was not until the 1970's that it was found and granted.

Source: "Who Was Who In The Civil War" by Stewart Sifakis

### **Robert E. Lee's Opinion Regarding Slavery**

This letter was written by Lee in response to a speech given by then President Pierce.

*Robert E. Lee letter dated December 27, 1856:*

I was much pleased the with President's message. His views of the systematic and progressive efforts of certain people at the North to interfere with and change the domestic institutions of the South are truthfully and faithfully expressed. The consequences of their plans and purposes are also clearly set forth. These people must be aware that their object is both unlawful and foreign to them and to their duty, and that this institution, for which they are irresponsible and non-accountable, can only be changed by them through the agency of a civil and servile war. There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age, who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil. It is idle to expatiate on its disadvantages. I think it is a greater evil to the white than to the colored race. While my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more deeply engaged for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, physically, and socially. The painful discipline they are undergoing is necessary for their further instruction as a race, and will prepare them, I hope, for better things. How long their servitude may be necessary is known and ordered by a merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild and melting influences of Christianity than from the storm and tempest of fiery controversy. This influence, though slow, is sure. The doctrines and miracles of our Saviour have required nearly two thousand years to convert but a small portion of the human race, and even among Christian nations what gross errors still exist! While we see the course of the final abolition of human slavery is still onward, and give it the aid of our prayers, let us leave the progress as well as the results in the hands of Him who, chooses to work by slow influences, and with whom a thousand years are but as a single day. Although the abolitionist must know this, must know that he has neither the right not the power of operating, except by moral means; that to benefit the slave he must not excite angry feelings in the master; that, although he may not approve the mode by which Providence accomplishes its purpose, the results will be the same; and that the reason he gives for interference in matters he has no concern with, holds good for every kind of interference with our neighbor, -still, I fear he will persevere in his evil course. . . . Is it not strange that the descendants of those Pilgrim Fathers who crossed the Atlantic to preserve their own freedom have always proved the most intolerant of the spiritual liberty of others?

## **Did General Lee Violate his Oath in Siding with the Confederacy?**

In February, 1861, after the secession of Texas, Lee was ordered to report to General Scott, the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army. He immediately relinquished the command of his regiment, and departed from Fort Mason, Texas, for Washington. He reached Arlington March 1st. April 17th, Virginia seceded. On the 18th Colonel Lee had a long interview with General Scott. On April 20th he tendered his resignation of his commission in the United States Army. The same day he wrote to General Scott the following letter:

"Arlington, Virginia, April 20, 1861.

"General: Since my interview with you on the 18th inst. I have felt that I ought no longer to retain my commission in the Army. I therefore tender my resignation, which I request you will recommend for acceptance. It would have been presented at once but for the struggle it has cost me to separate myself from a service to which I have devoted the best years of my life, and all the ability I possessed.

"During the whole of that time--more than a quarter of a century—I have experienced nothing but kindness from my superiors and a most cordial friendship from my comrades. To no one, General, have I been as much indebted as to yourself for uniform kindness and consideration, and it has always been my ardent desire to merit your approbation. I shall carry to the grave the most grateful recollections of your kind consideration, and your name and fame shall always be dear to me.

"Save in the defense of my native State, I never desire again to draw my sword.

"Be pleased to accept my most earnest wishes for the continuance of your happiness and prosperity, and believe me most truly yours,

"(Signed) "R. E. Lee"

Lee wrote two more letters describing his grief at resigning his commission, one to his sister, Mrs. Anne Marshall, of Baltimore, the other to his brother, Captain Sydney Smith Lee, of the United States Navy:

"Arlington, Virginia, April 20, 1861.

"My Dear Sister: I am grieved at my inability to see you.... I have been waiting for a 'more convenient season,' which has brought to many before me deep and lasting regret. Now we are in a state of war which will yield to nothing. The whole South is in a state of revolution, into which Virginia, after a long struggle, has been drawn; and though I recognise no necessity for this state of things, and would have forborne and pleaded to the end for redress of grievances, real or supposed, yet in my own person I had to meet the question whether I should take part against my native State.

"With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defense of my native State, with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword. I know you will blame me; but you must think as kindly of me as you can, and believe that I have endeavoured to do what I thought right.

"To show you the feeling and struggle it has cost me, I send you a copy of my letter of resignation. I have no time for more. May God guard and protect you and yours, and shower upon you everlasting blessings, is the prayer of your devoted brother, R. E. Lee."

"Arlington, Virginia, April 20, 1860.

"My Dear Brother Smith: The question which was the subject of my earnest consultation with you on the

18th inst. has in my own mind been decided. After the most anxious inquiry as to the correct course for me to pursue, I concluded to resign, and sent in my resignation this morning. I wished to wait till the Ordinance of secession should be acted on by the people of Virginia; but war seems to have commenced, and I am liable at any time to be ordered on duty which I could not conscientiously perform. To save me from such a position, and to prevent the necessity of resigning under orders, I had to act at once, and before I could see you again on the subject, as I had wished. I am now a private citizen, and have no other ambition than to remain at home. Save in defense of my native State, I have no desire ever again to draw my sword. I send you my warmest love. R.E.Lee.”

## The Surrender

### Details of the Day as Recalled by General Ulysses S. Grant

...What General Lee's feelings were I do not know. As he was a man of much dignity, with an impassable face, it was impossible to say whether he felt inwardly glad that the end had finally come, or felt sad over the result, and was too manly to show it. Whatever his feelings, they were entirely concealed from my observation; but my own feelings, which had been quite jubilant on the receipt of his letter [proposing negotiations], were sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.

General Lee was dressed in a full uniform which was entirely new, and was wearing a sword of considerable value, very likely the sword which had been presented by the State of Virginia; at all events, it was an entirely different sword from the one that would ordinarily be worn in the field. In my rough traveling suit, the uniform of a private with the straps of a lieutenant-general, I must have contrasted very strangely with a man so handsomely dressed, six feet high and of faultless form. But this was not a matter that I thought of until afterwards.

We soon fell into a conversation about old army times. He remarked that he remembered me very well in the old army; and I told him that as a matter of course I remembered him perfectly, but from the difference in our rank and years (there being about sixteen years' difference in our ages), I had thought it very likely that I had not attracted his attention sufficiently to be remembered by him after such a long interval. Our conversation grew so pleasant that I almost forgot the object of our meeting. After the conversation had run on in this style for some time, General Lee called my attention to the object of our meeting, and said that he had asked for this interview for the purpose of getting from me the terms I proposed to give his army. I said I meant merely that his army should lay down their arms, not to take them up again during the continuance of the war unless duly and properly exchanged. He said that he had so understood my letter.

Appomattox C. H., Va.,  
Ap'l 9th, 1865  
Gen. R. E. Lee,  
Comd'g C. S. A.  
Gen.:

In accordance with the substance of my letter to you of the 8th inst., I propose to receive the surrender of the Army of N. Va. on the following terms, to wit: Rolls of all the officers and men to be made in duplicate. One copy to be given to an officer designated by me, the other to be retained by such officer or officers as you may designate. The officers to give their individual paroles not to take up arms against the Government of the United States until properly exchanged, and each company or regimental commander sign a like parole for the men of their commands. The arms, artillery and public property to be parked and stacked, and turned over to the officer appointed by me to receive them. This will not embrace the side-arms of the officers, nor their private horses or baggage. This done, each officer and man will be allowed to return to their homes, not to be disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside.

Very respectfully,  
U.S. Grant,  
Lt.-Gen.

He then sat down and wrote out the following letter:

Headquarters Army of Northern Virginia,  
April 9, 1865  
Lieut.-General U. S. Grant.  
General:

--I received your letter of this date containing the terms of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia as proposed by you. As they are substantially the same as those expressed in your letter of the 8th inst., they are accepted. I will proceed to designate the proper officers to carry the stipulations into effect.  
R. E. Lee,  
General

... next morning I rode out beyond our lines towards his headquarters, preceded by a bugler and a staff-officer carrying a white flag. Lee soon mounted his horse, seeing who it was, and met me. We had there between the lines, sitting on horseback, a very pleasant conversation of over half an hour, in the course of which Lee said to me that the South was a big country and that we might have to march over it three or four times before the war entirely ended, but that we would now be able to do it as they could no longer resist us. He expressed it as his earnest hope, however, that we would not be called upon to cause more loss and sacrifice of life; but he could not foretell the result. I then suggested to General Lee that there was not a man in the Confederacy whose influence with the soldiery and the whole people was as great as his, and that if he would now advise the surrender of all armies I had no doubt his advice would be followed with alacrity. But Lee said, that he could not do that without consulting the President first. I knew there was no use to urge him to do anything against his ideas of what was right.



SOURCE: U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (New York, 1885), pages 555-560.

## Farewell to the Army of Northern Virginia



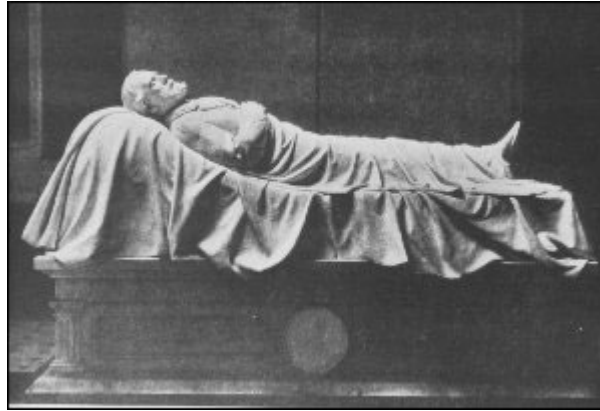
"Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia, April 10, 1865.

"After four years' of arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources. I need not tell the survivors of so many hard-fought battles, who have remained steadfast to the last, that I have consented to this result from no distrust of them; but, feeling that valour and devotion could accomplish nothing that could compensate for the loss that would have attended the continuation of the contest, I have determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their countrymen. By the terms of the agreement, officers and men can return to their homes and remain there until exchanged. You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed; and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you his blessing and protection. With an increasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

"R. E. Lee, General."

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

New York Herald (10-13-1870)



**Upon Lee's death the New York Herald wrote an obituary. It reads as follows.**

"On a quiet autumn morning, in the land which he loved so well and served so faithfully, the spirit of Robert Edward Lee left the clay which it had so much ennobled and traveled out of this world into the great and mysterious land. Here in the North, forgetting that the time was when the sword of Robert Edward Lee was drawn against us—forgetting and forgiving all the years of bloodshed and agony—we have long since ceased to look upon him as the Confederate leader, but have claimed him as one of ourselves; have cherished and felt proud of his military genius; have recounted and recorded his triumphs as our own; have extolled his virtue as reflecting upon us—for Robert Edward Lee was an American, and the great nation which gave him birth would be today unworthy of such a son if she regarded him lightly."

"Never had mother a nobler son. In him the military genius of America was developed to a greater extent than ever before. In him all that was pure and lofty in mind and purpose found lodgment. Dignified without presumption, affable without familiarity, he united all those charms of manners which made him the idol of his friends and of his soldiers and won for him the respect and admiration of the world. Even as in the days of triumph, glory did not intoxicate, so, when the dark clouds swept over him, adversity did not depress."