

# *Custis-Lee Mansion*

THE ROBERT E. LEE MEMORIAL



*Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia*

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In this mansion, in April 1861, Robert E. Lee wrote his resignation from the United States Army in order to join the cause of Virginia and the South

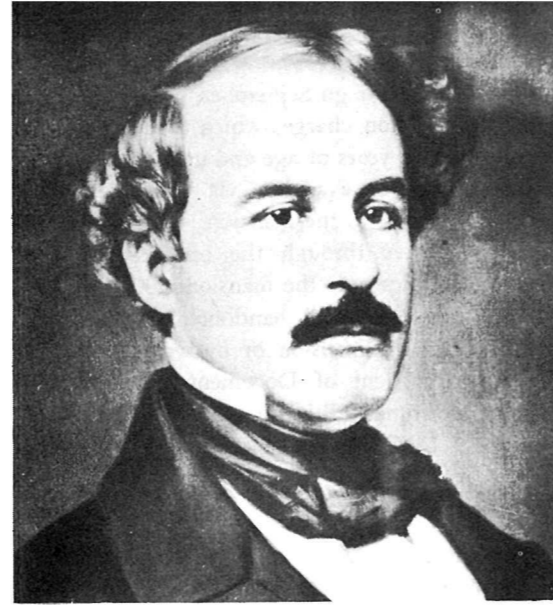
THE CUSTIS-LEE MANSION is distinctive through its long associations with the families of Custis, Washington, and Lee. By act of Congress in 1955, it was made a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee.

This home of George Washington Parke Custis, the foster son of the First President, was for years the treasury of both the Washington heirlooms and the Washington tradition. Here Robert E. Lee, a young lieutenant in the U. S. Army, and Mary Custis, the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, were married and reared a family. Here, also, Col. Robert E. Lee, torn between devotion to his country and to his native State, made his fateful decision, the substance of which he had written to his son a few months before: "It is the principle I contend for . . . But I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union . . . Still, a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets . . . has no charm for me. I shall mourn for my country and for the welfare and progress of mankind. If the Union is dissolved . . . I shall return to my native State . . . and save in defence will draw

my sword on none." Today Arlington House, as it was formerly known, furnished with appointments of its early period, preserves for posterity the atmosphere of gracious living, typical of a romantic age of American history.

### Early History

George Washington Parke Custis, builder of Arlington House, was the grandson of Martha Washington and the foster son of George Washington. When Martha Dandridge Custis became the wife of Col. George Washington she was a widow with two children, Martha Parke Custis and John Parke Custis. Martha Parke Custis died in her teens without having been married, but John Parke Custis married Eleanor Calvert of Maryland in 1774, and upon his death at the close of the Revolutionary War left four children. The death of John Parke Custis was a shock, not only to his mother, Mrs. Washington, but to General Washington as well, as he is reported to have remarked to the grieving mother at the deathbed, "I adopt the two youngest children as my own." Their names



Portrait of Robert E. Lee, about 1850  
(G. Louvrie)

were Eleanor Parke Custis (Nellie) and George Washington Parke Custis. They were reared at Mount Vernon and are often referred to as the "Children of Mount Vernon."

In 1802, the year his grandmother, Mrs. Washington, died, George Washington Parke Custis began building Arlington House on the estate of nearly 1,100 acres which his father had purchased from the Alexander family in 1778. He named the estate "Arlington" and the home "Arlington House" in honor of the ancestral homestead of the Custis family on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The house was to receive the legacy of his grandmother—furniture and pictures, plate and china from Mount Vernon, and more precious still, personal effects of Washington. Two years later, at the age of 23, he was married to Mary Lee Fitzhugh of Alexandria and "Chatham."

Plans for the building were drawn by George Hadfield, a young English architect. The north wing was built first and the south wing was completed in 1804. The foundation stone and timber came from the estate.

The bricks with which the house was built were burned from native clay. The portico and large center section were not finished until 1817.

### Arlington

The extent of the front of the mansion, with its two wings, is 140 feet. The wings are identical, except that in the north wing the space corresponding to the state dining room in the south wing was divided into small rooms for the temporary accommodation of Mr. and Mrs. Custis while the house was being built and was never changed. The central portion is divided by a wide central hall. A large formal drawing room with two fine marble fireplaces lies south of this hall. To the north of it can be seen the family dining room and family parlor separated by a north and south partition broken by three graceful arches. The second story is also divided by a central hall on either side of which there are two bedrooms and accompanying dressing rooms. A small room used as a linen closet is at the end of this hall. The third floor was used only for storage purposes and remained an unfinished attic. The grand portico facing the Potomac,

with its eight massive Doric columns, is 60 feet wide and 25 feet deep. At the rear two buildings used as servant's quarters, smokehouse, workroom, and summer kitchen form a courtyard.

### General Lafayette Visits Arlington

One of the most pleasant incidents in the history of Arlington House was the visit in 1824 of General Lafayette, whose reverence for the memory of Washington matched that of his host. It is related that on entering he commented on the iron lantern in the hall, which he remembered at Mount Vernon. The view from the portico he pronounced unrivaled, entreating Mrs. Custis never to sacrifice any of the fine trees. The next year General Lafayette again visited at Arlington House.

### Lt. Robert E. Lee's Marriage

On June 30, 1831, Mary Ann Randolph Custis, only child of the Arlington Custis family, became the wife of Lt. Robert E. Lee, a young West Point graduate. The wedding ceremony took place in the family parlor of the mansion. The wedding party

remained at Arlington in festivity and merriment for several days, when the groom's fellow officers, their leaves ending, were forced to depart. Some of the bridesmaids lingered until the end of the week.

### Mrs. Lee Inherits Arlington

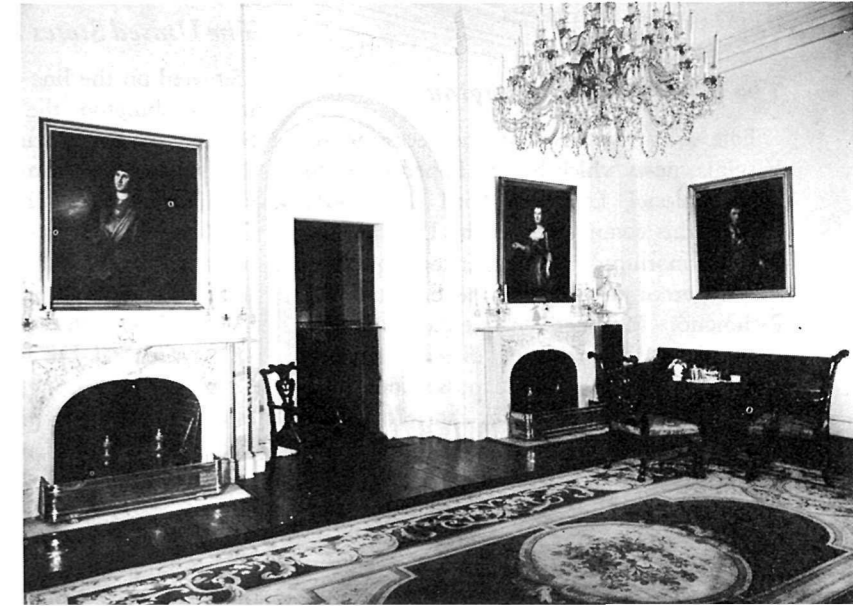
Much of Mrs. Lee's married life was spent at the home of her girlhood, sometimes with her husband, sometimes awaiting his return from the Mexican War or other distant tours of duty. Six of the seven Lee children were born here. By the will of George Washington Parke Custis, who died in 1857, the estate of Arlington was bequeathed to his daughter for her lifetime, and afterward to his eldest grandson and namesake, George Washington Custis Lee.

Never a thrifty farmer and an easygoing master, requiring little of his slaves, Mr. Custis' death found the Arlington plantation sadly run down. Robert E. Lee as executor felt that his presence at Arlington was necessary if he was to give proper attention to the estate. He, therefore, obtained extended leave and settled down to the life of a farmer. More than 2 years elapsed before he rejoined his regiment. During this

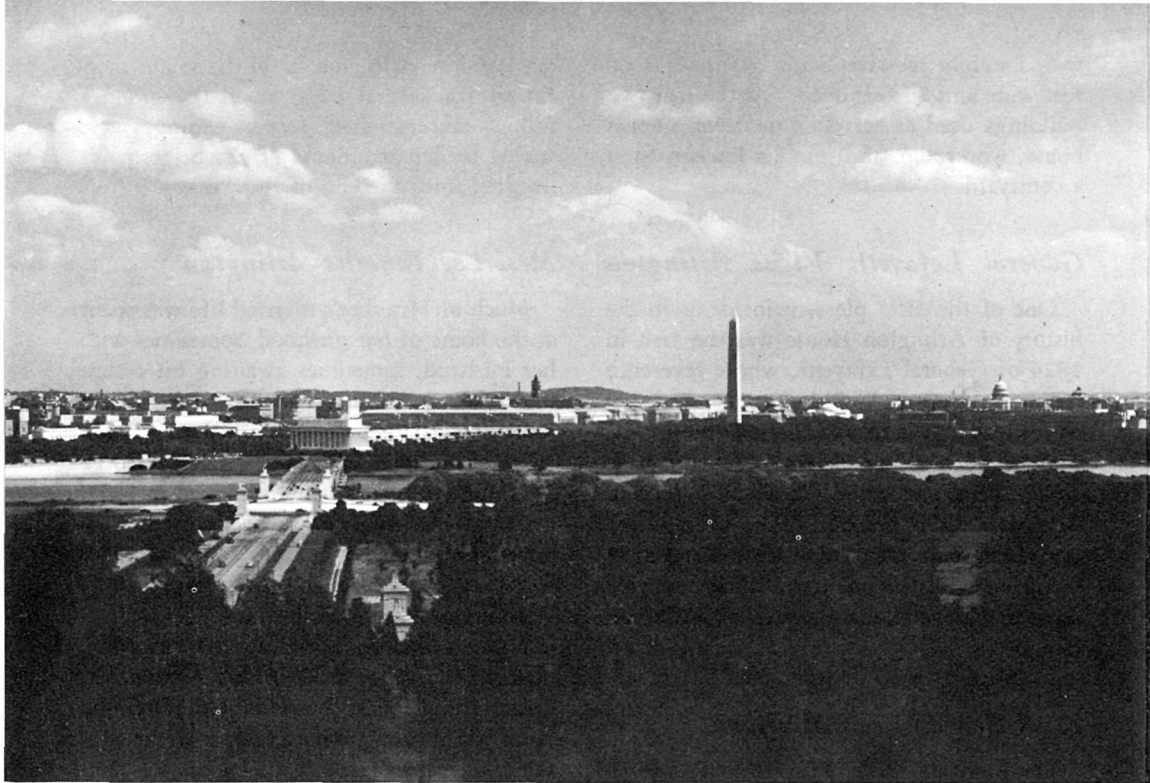
The dining room as viewed from the parlor



The drawing room







View of the city of Washington from the Custis-Lee Mansion

period, the traditions of Arlington House were maintained. Situated on the main-traveled road from the South, Arlington was a favorite stopping place for relatives and friends. Its hospitable doors were always open to such guests.

### *The Lees Leave Arlington*

Following the news of the secession of Virginia, news which he had hoped never to hear, Colonel Lee, on April 20, 1861, resigned his commission in the U. S. Army. Monday morning, April 22, at the request of the Governor of Virginia, he departed for Richmond. Mrs. Lee remained at Arlington engaged in the work of dismantling her home and sending family possessions to a place of safety. Soon after she left Washington, Federal troops occupied the lands between Washington and Alexandria. The remaining family possessions were later

taken from Arlington to the old Patent Office in Washington, but not before many things, including some of the Mount Vernon heirlooms, had been carried away.

### *The United States Acquires Arlington*

Situated on the line of fortifications guarding Washington, the Arlington estate soon became an armed camp. Headquarters of the general commanding the forts in the vicinity were established in the mansion. Confiscated by the Government for nonpayment of taxes, about 200 acres of the estate were set aside for a national cemetery in June 1864. Upon the death of Mrs. Lee in 1873—General Lee having died in 1870—Custis Lee took steps to recover his property, as under the will of his grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, he became entitled to Arlington. His case was carried to the United States Supreme Court, where a de-

cision favorable to him was obtained. He then consented to give the United States a clear title to the property for \$150,000, and Congress in 1883 appropriated the necessary funds.

### *Arlington House Restored*

For years after the war, the mansion stood an empty shell—an office for the superintendent of the cemetery and a place for his tools. By act of Congress, approved March 4, 1925, the Secretary of War was empowered to undertake the restoration of Arlington House to the condition in which it existed prior to the War Between the States. He was to procure for it, when possible, furniture known to have been in the mansion, replicas of that furniture, or other pieces of a style suitable to the first half of the 19th century. Some of the historical originals have been returned, and for those that could not be obtained similar period pieces and a few copies have been substituted. In 1933 Arlington House was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior.

### *About Your Visit*

You may visit the Custis-Lee Mansion, which is located in Arlington National Cemetery, from 9:30 a. m. to 4:30 p. m. October

through March, and from 9:30 a. m. to 6 p. m. April through September. There is a small admission charge, which is waived for children 18 years of age and under.

Bus service is available via Arlington Memorial Bridge to the mansion. Automobiles may drive through the cemetery to parking facilities near the mansion.

A 48-page historical handbook may be purchased at the mansion or by writing to the Superintendent of Documents, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C., for 20 cents.

### *Administration*

The Custis-Lee Mansion is administered by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. The superintendent of National Capital Parks, whose address is Interior Building, Washington 25, D. C., is in immediate charge of the memorial, and all communications concerning it should be addressed to him.

Five national memorials in the city of Washington are also administered by the National Park Service and under the jurisdiction of the superintendent of National Capital Parks. They are: The Lincoln Memorial, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Museum, and the House Where Lincoln Died.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.

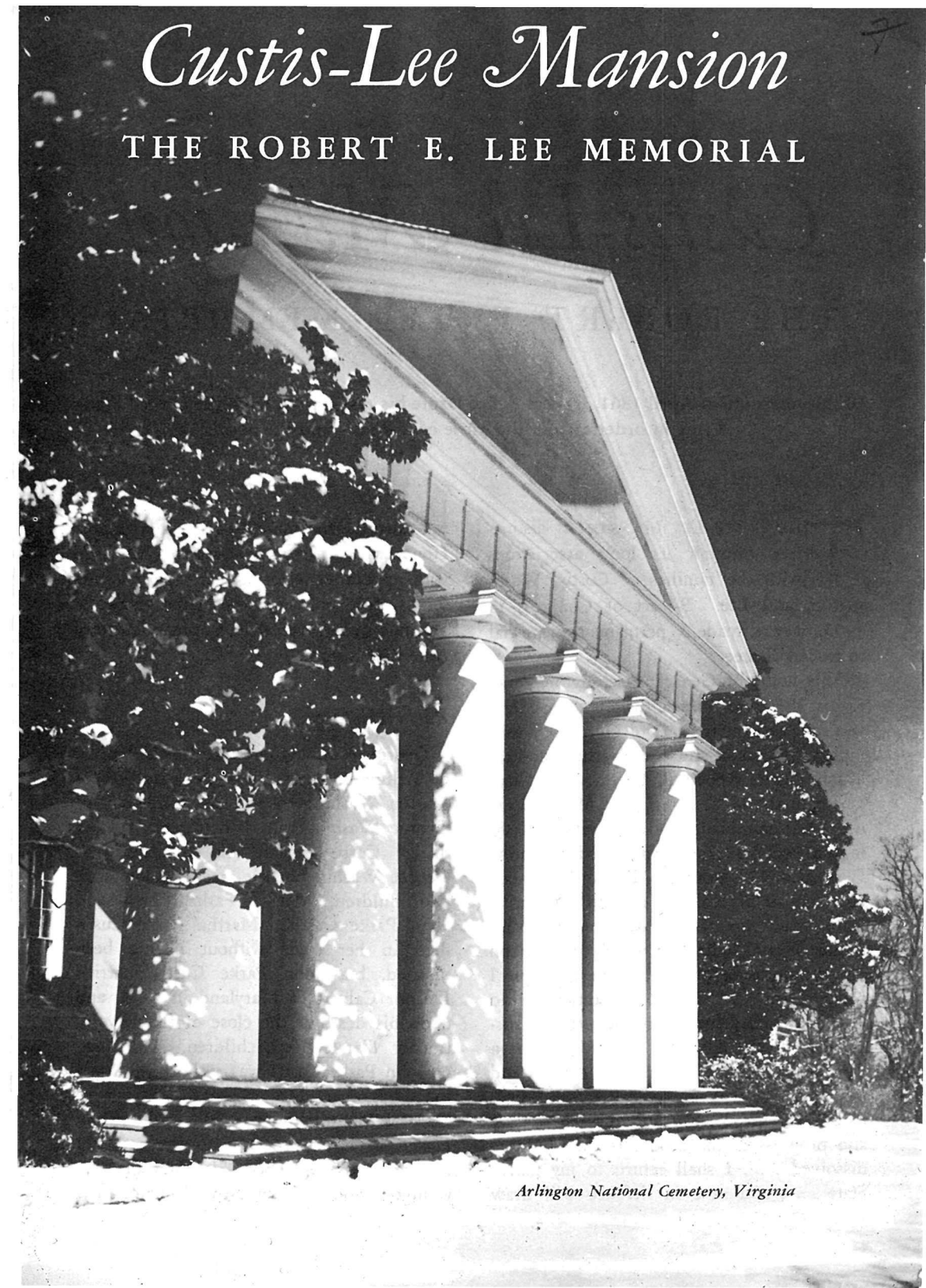


United States Department of the Interior

Fred A. Seaton, *Secretary*

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Conrad L. Wirth, *Director*



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