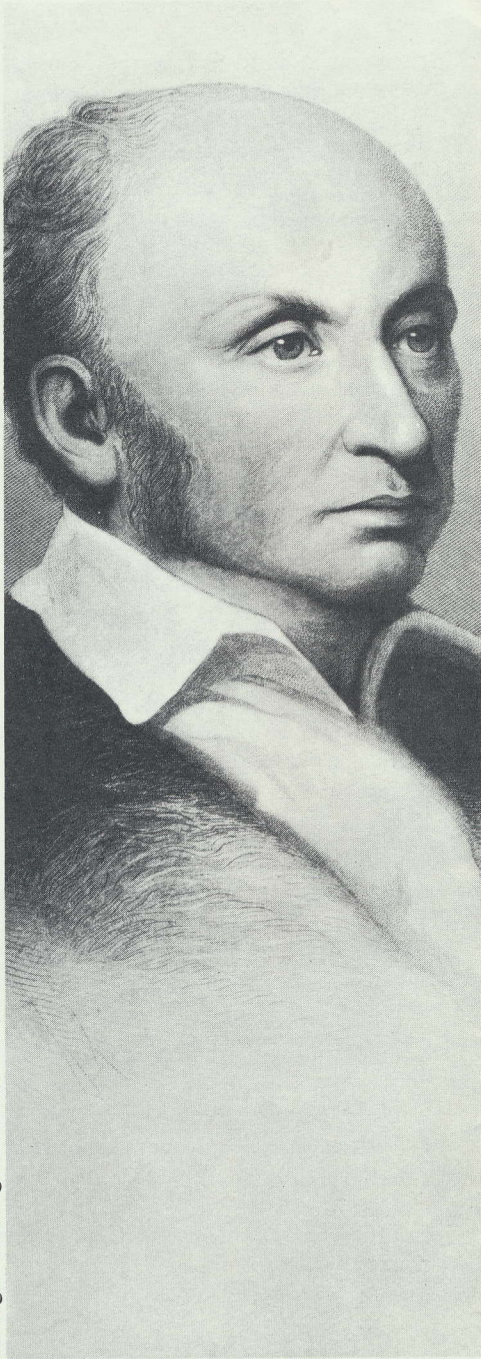


was hington
Custis-Lee Mansion

Custis-Lee Mansion

Arlington, Virginia

George Washington Parke Custis



The Custis-Lee Mansion, an outstanding landmark for more than a century and a half, is unique in its association with the families of Washington, Custis, and Lee. Its builder, George Washington Parke Custis, was the adopted son of George Washington and, later, the father-in-law of Robert E. Lee. Custis was thus a link between two of America's greatest men.

After Custis married Mary Lee Fitzhugh in 1804, her charm, simplicity, and religious ardor were an inspiration both to him and to their only surviving child, Mary Anna Randolph, born in 1808. Custis, a far-sighted agricultural pioneer, painter, playwright, and orator, seemed most interested in perpetuating the memory and principles of George Washington. He planned their house (begun in 1802 but not completed until 1817) to be a "treasury" of Washington heirlooms and a place where the Washington tradition of warm hospitality would be continued.

"Arlington"—named after the family's homestead on Virginia's Eastern Shore—is built on a hill overlooking the capital city and was part of an estate of 1,100 acres Custis' father purchased in 1778. The house was designed by George Hadfield, a young English architect in charge of the construction of the Capitol. The north and south wings were built first and completed in 1804. The large center section and the portico were finished 13 years later, presenting an imposing front 140 feet long. It was, as Robert E. Lee once remarked, "a house anyone might see with half an eye." The house attracted much attention and Custis enthusiastically welcomed all who came to visit, entertaining them with stories of the Washington relics. Among the many visitors to Arlington were General Lafayette, Daniel Webster, and Andrew Jackson.

Young Robert E. Lee was also a frequent visitor (his mother and Mrs. Custis were cousins), and it is said that he and Mary Randolph Custis planted trees near the house when they were children. On June 30, 1831, after his graduation from West Point, Lieutenant Lee and Miss Custis were married here. Lee's military assignments kept him away for long periods and much of Mrs. Lee's married life was spent awaiting his return and raising their seven children, for whom Arlington was a cherished home. Lee shared their strong attraction to the house, once writing a young cousin that here "my affections and attachments are more strongly placed than at any other place in the world."



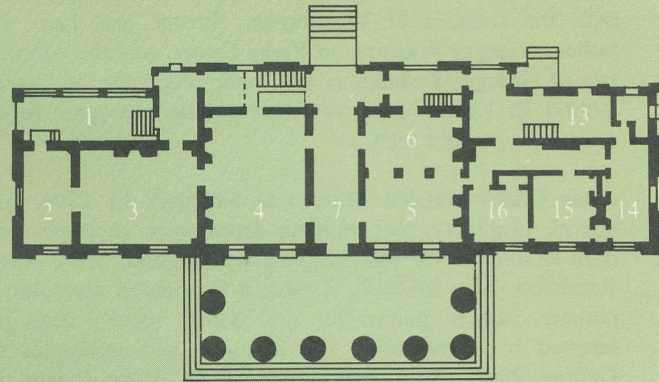
Robert E. Lee

When George Washington Parke Custis died in 1857, the Arlington estate was left to Mrs. Lee for her lifetime, and afterwards to her oldest son and Custis' namesake. The estate was much in need of repair and reorganization, and Lee, as executor, took an extended leave of absence from the Army to begin the necessary agricultural and financial improvements. Before he returned to his regiment in 1860, then stationed in Texas, the Arlington hospitality was extended to numerous friends and relatives.

Lee, opposed to the dissolution of the Union, was deeply distressed when he learned that Virginia had seceded. But through loyalty to his native State, he resigned from the U.S. Army on April 20, 1861, and the next morning left Arlington to offer his services to the Confederacy. He never returned to the house. About a month later, with Union occupation imminent, Mrs. Lee also left, having sent most of the family valuables off to safety. After Arlington became headquarters for the general superintending the nearby defenses of Washington, many of the remaining family possessions were moved to the Patent Office for safekeeping. Some items, however, including a few of the Mount Vernon heirlooms, had already been looted and scattered.

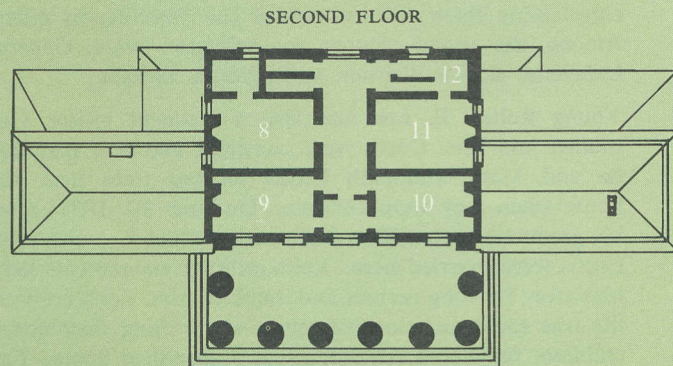
Arlington was occupied by Union troops from the beginning of the Civil War. In 1864, when Mrs. Lee was unable to appear personally to pay property taxes, the estate was confiscated by the Federal Government. A 200-acre section was then set aside for a national cemetery. (Later, through a Supreme Court decision, Custis Lee, the general's son, regained title to the property and in 1883 sold it to the U.S. Government for \$150,000.)

After the war thousands of people came to see the home of the great Confederate commander whose military genius, plus the noble qualities of his character, had made him the hero of the South. For decades the mansion was used as offices and living quarters for the superintendent of the cemetery and some of his staff. On March 4, 1925, Congress empowered the Secretary of War to restore the house to its appearance prior to the Civil War, procuring for it, when possible, the mansion's original furniture, replicas of that furniture, or other pieces of a style suitable to the first half of the 19th century. The house now contains some of the original furnishings, and where originals could not be obtained, similar period pieces and a few copies have been substituted. In 1933 Arlington mansion was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior, and in 1955 Congress designated it a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee.



FIRST FLOOR

A SELF-GUIDING TOUR OF ARLINGTON HOUSE



SECOND FLOOR

For an orderly tour of the mansion, we suggest that you follow the numbered route below, keyed to the accompanying plan of the mansion. If you wish, you may rent a portable recorded tour guide at the ticket counter.

1 Entrance is through the GREENHOUSE, also called the "camellia house" by both the Custis and Lee families.

2 The OFFICE AND STUDY can be seen through the doorway immediately to the right of the greenhouse entrance. From this room Mr. Custis, and later Robert E. Lee, managed the 1,100-acre estate. The traveling chess set belonged to Colonel Lee.

3 The FORMAL DINING ROOM, completed in 1804, was used for all formal dining and entertaining for 15 years before the huge central part of the house was built.

4 The FORMAL PARLOR now reflects the furnishing styles of three generations: red upholstered Chippendale chairs, such as those acquired from Mount Vernon; an 1837 Knabe piano representing the American "Empire" style popular during Custis' time; and the gold upholstered Victorian suite brought from West Point in 1855 where Lee had served as superintendent. Portraits in the room include George Washington, Mrs. Martha Custis just before her marriage to Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and one of the Lee daughters.

5 The FAMILY PARLOR is the room in which Robert E. Lee and Mary Randolph Custis were married on June 30, 1831. Original pieces here include Lee's writing chair and the small Bible he carried throughout his military career. A portrait of Nellie Custis, Mr. Custis' sister, of Woodlawn Plantation, hangs over the fireplace.

6 FAMILY DINING ROOM. It was Colonel Lee's custom to gather rosebuds in the garden each morning and place one beside the plate of each of his daughters. Original pieces include china, silver, and glassware, the twin serving tables, and the five Empire side chairs which date to about 1830. A portrait of George Washington Parke Custis, the builder of "Arlington House," hangs over the fireplace.

7 CENTER HALL. In 1824 Lafayette described the view across the Potomac toward Washington from here as the "finest view in the world." The 37-foot hall with its extra tall doors was designed for ventilation and used as a parlor in the summer. The lantern is a replica of the original from Mount Vernon which hung here for many years. In the west alcove is a portrait of "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, hero of the Revolution and father of Robert E. Lee. High on the walls are still visible the animal scenes painted on wet plaster by Mr. Custis when the house was new.

From the center hall, please walk upstairs to the Lee bedrooms.

8 COLONEL & MRS. LEE'S BEDROOM. Here on the night of April 19, 1861, while anxious family and friends waited below, Lee faced the grim choice of honoring family ties in Virginia dating back six generations or accepting command of the Union forces. From his long night of solitude, Lee emerged with a letter of resignation, thus ending a brilliant 30-year career of service to his country. Two days later he left Arlington, never to return. "I did only what my duty demanded," he later said.

9 The LEE BOYS' BEDROOM was shared by Custis, William Henry Fitzhugh (Rooney), and Robert.

10 MISS MARY'S ROOM. Mary, the oldest of the four Lee daughters, occasionally shared this room with Martha Williams. "Markie," as Martha was affectionately called, was one of the Lees' cousins and a frequent guest.

11 The LEE GIRLS' ROOM, a large and sunny bedroom, was shared by Annie, Agnes, and Mildred.

12 The PLAYROOM connects with the girls' bedroom, and was also used as a dressing room. A badminton set and wooden ice skates dating to 1849 hang from coat pegs along the north wall. The secretary was used by Eleanor Custis at Mt. Vernon and later given to her niece, Mrs. Robert E. Lee.

From the playroom, please walk down the stairway and turn right.

13 OUTER HALL PANTRY. The china and glassware in the corner cupboards are original pieces. The original walnut cupboard standing at the end of the room is where Colonel Lee is said to have come each night for a glass of milk.

14 The SCHOOL & SEWING ROOM, where clothing was made and where the children and servants received their education from Mrs. Custis and later Mrs. Lee, is at the far end of the pantry. Mrs. Custis felt a strong obligation to prepare Arlington slaves for a useful life as free men. The slaves were promised their freedom by the terms of Mr. Custis' will.

15 MR. AND MRS. CUSTIS' BEDROOM. This wing of the house, finished in 1803, was to have been one large banquet room, but when Mr. Custis married in 1804, he partitioned it to provide bedrooms and a sitting room until the rest of the house was finished. Though the Custises later had a bedroom on the second floor, the growing Lee family eventually made it necessary for them to reoccupy their old bedroom. The wooden mantelpiece is the oldest in the house.

16 GUESTROOM. Many of the visitors to Arlington were accommodated overnight in this room. Under the window is a small candle stand owned by Martha Washington and later part of the Arlington furnishings.

Please walk downstairs from here and exit through the basement.

WINTER KITCHEN (not shown on plan). Equipped with utensils typical of the period, this kitchen, with its huge center fireplace, helped to warm the upstairs rooms in winter. The area beyond the chimney was used as a laundry.

WINE CELLAR (not shown on plan). Wine and brandy made from fruit grown at Arlington and on other Custis farms were stored in this room.

You may also see the servants' quarters on the south side of the circular drive. The museum is just beyond the flower garden north of the mansion.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

For days and hours of operation, please check with the mansion staff. Bus service is available from Washington via Arlington Memorial Bridge. There is a parking area near the entrance, and park guides are on duty to answer your questions and to interpret the mansion. Guided tours for special groups should be arranged in advance.

ADMINISTRATION

The Custis-Lee Mansion is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Inquiries should be addressed to the Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA 22101.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

national park service
u.s. department of the interior

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1972-483-424 /94
REPRINT 1972

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 - Price 10 cents