

# Arlington House

The Robert E. Lee Memorial  
Virginia

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Robert Edward Lee, 1864

until 1817, became a "treasury" of Washington heirlooms. Arlington House, named after the Custis family's homestead of Virginia's Eastern Shore, was built on a 445-hectare (1,100-acre) estate that Custis' father, John Parke Custis, purchased in 1778. The house was designed by George Hadfield, a young English architect who was for a time in charge of the construction of the Capitol. The north and south wings were completed between 1802 and 1804. The large center section and the portico, presenting an imposing front 43 meters (140 feet) long, were finished 13 years later. Robert E. Lee described the house, situated on a hill high above the Potomac, as one "anyone might see with half an eye."

In 1804 Custis had married Mary Lee Fitzhugh. Their only child to survive infancy was Mary Anna Randolph Custis, born in 1808. Young Robert E. Lee, whose mother was a cousin of Mrs. Custis, frequently visited Arlington. Two years after graduating from West Point, Lieutenant Lee married Mary Custis at Arlington on June 30, 1831. For 30 years Arlington House was home to the Lees. They spent much of their married life traveling between U.S. Army duty stations and Arlington, where six of their seven children were born. They shared this home with Mary's parents, the Custises.

When George Washington Parke Custis died in 1857, he left the Arlington estate to Mrs. Lee for her lifetime and afterwards to the Lees' eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee. The estate needed much repair and reorganization, and Lee, as executor, took a leave of absence from the Army until 1860 to begin the necessary agricultural and financial improvements.

Lee was distressed when news reached him that Virginia had adopted an Ordinance of Secession on April 17, 1861. He had supported preservation of the Union that his

father and uncles had helped create and opposed slavery, but he remained loyal to his native state. He was at home at Arlington on April 20, 1861, when he made his decision to resign his commission in the U.S. Army. Two days later Lee left Arlington for Richmond to accept command of Virginia's military forces with the General Assembly's approval; he never returned to Arlington. About a month later, with Union occupation imminent, Mrs. Lee also left Arlington, managing to send some of the family valuables off to safety. After Arlington became headquarters for the officers who were 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.

A wartime law required that property owners in areas occupied by Federal troops appear in person to pay their taxes. Unable to comply with this rule, Mrs. Lee saw her estate confiscated in 1864. An 81-hectare (200-acre) section was set aside as a military cemetery, the beginning of today's Arlington National Cemetery. In 1882 G.W.C. Lee's suit against the Federal Government for the return of his property was successful. By then, hundreds of graves covered the hills of Arlington and he accepted the Government's offer of \$150,000 for the property.

For some years the superintendent of the cemetery and the staff used the mansion as offices and living quarters. Beginning in 1925, the War Department began restoring the house, and in 1933 it was transferred to the National Park Service. In 1955 the mansion was designated as a memorial to Robert E. Lee. Over the years some of the original furnishings have been obtained. The hope is to restore the house to its pre-Civil War appearance and to recreate the home that Lee and his family loved so much.

Robert E. Lee once wrote to a cousin that at Arlington House "my affections and attachments are more strongly placed than at any other place in the world." Today this house overlooking the Potomac River and Washington, D.C., is preserved as a memorial to General Lee, a man who gained respect of Americans in both the North and South.

Arlington House is uniquely associated with the families of Washington, Custis, and Lee, for it was built by George Washington Parke Custis. He was the grandson of Martha Washington by her first marriage to Daniel Parke Custis. After his father died, young Custis was raised by his grandmother and her second husband, George Washington, at Mount Vernon. Custis, a farsighted agricultural pioneer, painter, playwright, and orator, was interested in perpetuating the memory and principles of George Washington. His house, begun in 1802 but not completed

## A Lee Chronology

**1807** Robert E. Lee is born at Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia, January 19

**1808** Mary Anna Randolph Custis is born at Annefield, Clarke County, Virginia, October 1

**1825-29** Lee attends U.S. Military Academy at West Point; graduates second in class

**1831** Lee marries Mary Custis at Arlington June 30

**1832-46** Lee children are born; George Washington Custis, Mary Custis, William Henry Fitzhugh, Ann Carter, Eleanor Agnes, Robert Edward, Jr., and Mildred Childe

**1846-48** Lee serves in Mexican War

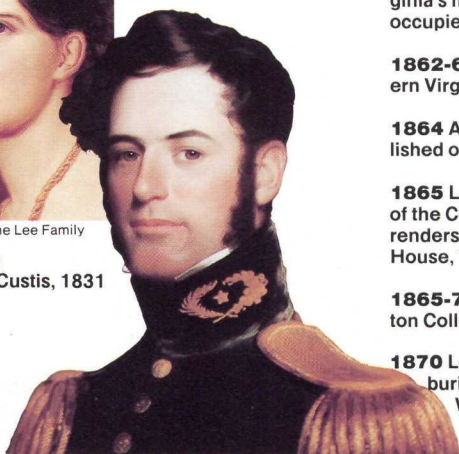
**1852-55** Lee serves as superintendent of U.S. Military Academy

**1857-59** Lee acts as executor of his father-in-law's estate taking two-year leave from active duty

**1859** Lee commands troops sent to put down



The Lee Family  
Mary Anna Randolph Custis, 1831



Lt. Robert E. Lee 1838

Washington and Lee University

**John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia)**

**1861** Virginia secedes April 17; Lee resigns from U.S. Army April 20; Lee receives command of Virginia's military forces April 22; Arlington House is occupied by Union forces May 24

**1862-65** Lee is commander of the Army of Northern Virginia

**1864** Arlington Cemetery for Union dead established on Arlington House grounds

**1865** Lee is named general-in-chief of the Armies of the Confederate States February 6; Lee surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, April 9

**1865-70** Lee serves as president of Washington College, Lexington, Virginia

**1870** Lee dies at Lexington October 12 and is buried in chapel of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University)



# Touring Arlington House

For an orderly tour of Arlington House, we suggest that you follow the numbered descriptions keyed to the accompanying plan of the mansion.

You enter Arlington House from the portico as guests did before 1861.

**1** In 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette described the view across the Potomac to Washington from the **Center Hall** as the "finest view in the world." This hall was the scene of many happy homecomings and farewells for Lee. The ceiling lantern is a copy of the Mount Vernon lantern that Custis brought to the house with other furnishings. High on the walls at the west end of the hall are hunting scenes painted by Custis about 1818.

**2** The **Family Parlor** is the room in which Lt. Robert E. Lee and Mary Custis were



married on June 30, 1831. This was the family's main parlor from 1817 until the white parlor was completed in 1855.

**3** It was Lee's custom to gather roses in the garden each morning and place one beside the plate of each woman present at breakfast in the **Family Dining Room**. Original pieces include china, silver, glassware, and the twin serving tables. A copy of a portrait of G.W.P. Custis, the builder of Arlington House, hangs over the fireplace.

From the Family Dining Room, please walk across the hall and enter the White Parlor.

**4** The **White Parlor** was decorated by the Lees in 1855. Left unfinished when the rest of the house was completed about 1817, it served as a storeroom for almost 40 years. Lee selected the marble mantels and purchased the Victorian parlor furniture.

**5** The **Morning Room**, built for use as a parlor, was furnished as a morning room by Mrs. Lee in 1855. Custis used it as his



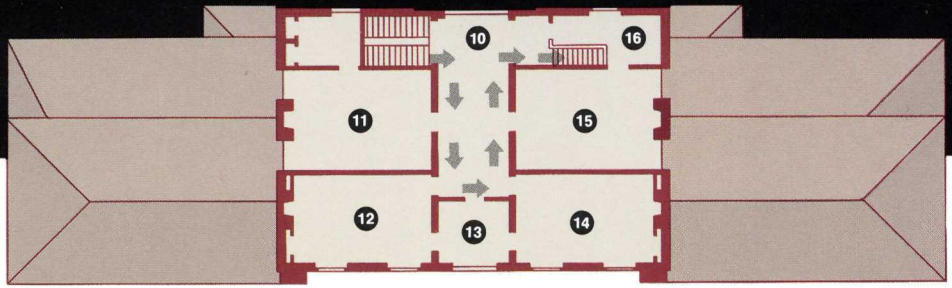
auxiliary painting studio. The Revolutionary War scene—the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey—is one of the largest paintings he produced in this room.

**6** You enter the **Store Room** by the door on your right and pass through the next door on your left into the Conservatory.

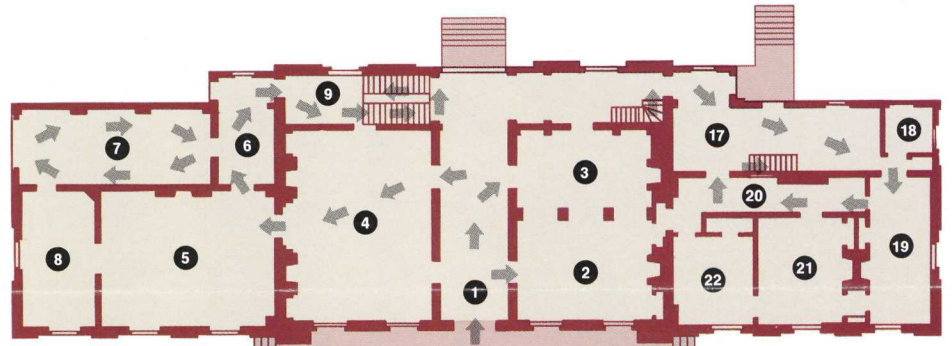
**7** The **Conservatory**, also called the "camellia house" by both the Custises and Lees, was once an open porch enclosed and used to protect Mrs. Lee's plants in winter.

**8** You can see the **Office and Studio** through the doorway at the top of the steps on your left at the south end of the Conservatory. From this room Custis, and later Robert E. Lee, managed the estate.

**9** Please retrace your steps through the Conservatory and re-enter the Store Room. Turning to your left, you leave the Store Room by the north door, pass through the **South Stair Hall**, and ascend the main stairs to the second floor.



Second Floor



First Floor

**10** At the top of the stairs you are in the **Upper Hall** that provided access to five bed chambers and the Girls' Dressing Room.

**11** On the night of April 19, 1861, here in **Colonel and Mrs. Lee's Chamber**, Lee faced the grim choice of honoring family ties in Virginia dating back six generations or of supporting the Union his family had helped create. From his long night of solitude, Lee emerged with a letter of resignation, thus ending a 32-year career of service to his country. Two days later he left Arlington, never to return. "I did only what my duty demanded," he said later. The door on the right leads into the dressing closet.

**12** The **Lee Boys' Chamber** was shared by Custis, William Henry Fitzhugh (Rooney), and Robert, Jr.

**13** In the 1850s, Mrs. Lee had two dressing rooms converted into this one **Small Chamber**, with a new doorway cut into the upper hall. It was used for guests.

**14** The oldest of the four Lee daughters occasionally shared her room, **Miss Mary's Chamber**, with Martha "Markie" Williams, a cousin and frequent guest.

**15** The **Lee Girls' Chamber**, a large and sunny bedroom, was shared by Annie, Agnes, and Mildred.

**16** The **Girls' Dressing Room** connects with the girls' bedchamber and also was used as a playroom. The small cupboard on the far wall belonged to Eleanor Custis who in later



life presented it to her niece, Mrs. Robert Edward Lee.

From the girls' dressing room, please walk down the adjoining rear stairway and turn right. **Caution—Steep Staircase.**

**17** In the **Outer Hall Pantry**, finishing touches were put on food on its way to the dining room.

**18** A **Bath** and water closet were installed by Lee in the 1850s.

At the Bath, please turn right and step up into the oldest section of the north wing.

**19** In the **School and Sewing Room** clothing was made and the children and servants

received their education from Mrs. Custis and later from Mrs. Lee. The slaves had been promised their freedom in Custis' will. **Caution—Low Doorway.**

**20** From the **Inner Hall** you view the Custis Chamber.

**21** This part of the north wing of the house was to have been one large banquet room, but it was partitioned and served as **Mr. and Mrs. Custis' Chamber**, a sewing room, guest chamber, and inner hall. The wooden mantelpiece is the oldest in the house.

**22** Many visitors to Arlington were accommodated overnight in this **Guest Chamber**.

Please step down from the inner hall and continue on your right to walk downstairs to the cellar rooms. **Caution—Low Doorway.**

Equipped with a cookstove and utensils typical of the period, this **Winter Kitchen** (not shown on plan) with its huge center chimney helped to warm the upstairs rooms in winter. The area beyond the chimney was used as a laundry.

Wine and brandy made from fruit grown at Arlington and on other Custis farms were stored in the **Wine Cellar** (not shown on plan).

**Please exit through the cellar door.**

You also may see the servants' quarters on the west circular drive. The museum, just beyond the vegetable garden north of the mansion, contains memorabilia of the Custis and Lee families.

## Access/Hours of Operation

Subway service is available from Washington and Alexandria on Blue Line trains. Parking is available at the Arlington Cemetery Visitor Center. From there you may walk to the house or ride the Tourmobile, a concessioner-operated service. Tourmobiles operate from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. April through September and from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. October through March.

Arlington House is open 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. April through September and from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. October through March. Park guides are on duty to answer your questions. Guided tours for groups are available by appointment.

Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For further information write to the superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA 22101.