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ARLINGTON HOUSE

The Robert E. Lee Memorial

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 the nation's memorial to General Lee. He is honored as one of America's greatest military leaders and for the example he set in working to bind up the nation's wounds in the years after the Civil War.

Arlington House is uniquely associated with the Washington, Custis and Lee families. Its builder was George Washington Parke Custis, 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 far-sighted agricultural pioneer, painter, playwright, and orator, was interested in perpetuating Washington's memory and principles. Custis' home, begun in 1802, became a treasury of Washington heirlooms. It was named Arlington House after the Custis family's first home on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Custis' father, John Parke Custis, bought the land on which it was built in 1778. The house was designed by George Hadfield, a young English architect, who supervised some of the construction of the Capitol building. The north and south wings were completed between 1802 and 1804. The larger center section and the portico were finished after fourteen years in 1818. Robert E. Lee was to later describe the house, situated on a hill above the Potomac, as one "anyone might see with half an eye."

In 1804 Custis 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, was a frequent visitor to Arlington during the years he was growing up in Alexandria, Virginia. He and Mary Custis were close friends from childhood. Two years after his graduation from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, they were married at Arlington on June 30, 1831. Though his Army duties took the Lees to distant posts during the next thirty years, it was always Arlington that they considered as home. They shared this home with Mrs. Lee's parents, the Custises. Six of the seven Lee children were born at Arlington.

~~When George Washington Parke Custis died in 1857, he left the 1,100 acre estate to his daughter, Mrs. Lee for her lifetime. After her death it was to pass to the Lees' eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee. The estate needed much repair and reorganization. R. E. Lee, as executor, took a leave of absence from the Army until 1860 to begin the necessary agricultural and financial improvements.~~

Lee was deeply distressed when news reached him on April 19, 1861 that the Virginia legislature had passed the Act of Secession. He had always supported preservation of the Union which his father and other family members had helped to create. He had also always opposed slavery. He could not, however, bring himself to fight against his family and his home. At Arlington on April 20, he made the decision that changed his life and that would affect the course of the nation. He chose to resign his commission in the U.S. Army after thirty-two years of service. To family members he wrote that he would not raise his sword except "in defence of my native state." Two days later he left for Richmond to take command of Virginia's military forces at the request of the Governor of Virginia. Lee never again returned to Arlington.

A few weeks later, with Union occupation imminent, Mrs. Lee left Arlington. She managed to send some of the family's valuables to safety. By the end of May, 1861, Union forces occupied the Arlington estate and the house was used as headquarters for officers superintending the defenses of Washington. Eventually many of the remaining family possessions were moved to the Patent Office in Washington for safekeeping. Some items, however, including some of the Washington heirlooms, had already been looted and scattered.

A wartime ruling required that property owners in the "insurrectionary" areas personally appear at designated places to pay a real estate tax. Mrs. Lee, ill and behind Confederate lines, was unable to travel to Alexandria to pay the tax in person as required. After the Government refused payment from a cousin, the property was confiscated and offered for sale at public auction. There were no bidders and the Government claimed title to the estate. In May, 1864 a two-hundred acre section was designated as a military cemetery for Union dead. The house was used by the cemetery superintendent and his staff for offices and quarters. In 1882 George Washington Custis Lee's suit against the Federal Government for the return of the property was successful. By then, however, hundreds of graves covered the hills of Arlington and he accepted the Government's offer of \$150,000 for the property.

In 1925 the United States Congress authorized the restoration of the house to its 1861 appearance as the nation's memorial to Robert E. Lee. The house was designated as a permanent memorial in 1955. The objective of the ongoing restoration work is to recreate the original condition of the home which R.E. Lee and his family so loved.