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### Mary Anne Randolph Custis Lee : wife of General Robert E. Lee

Dorothy Lee

*University of Richmond*

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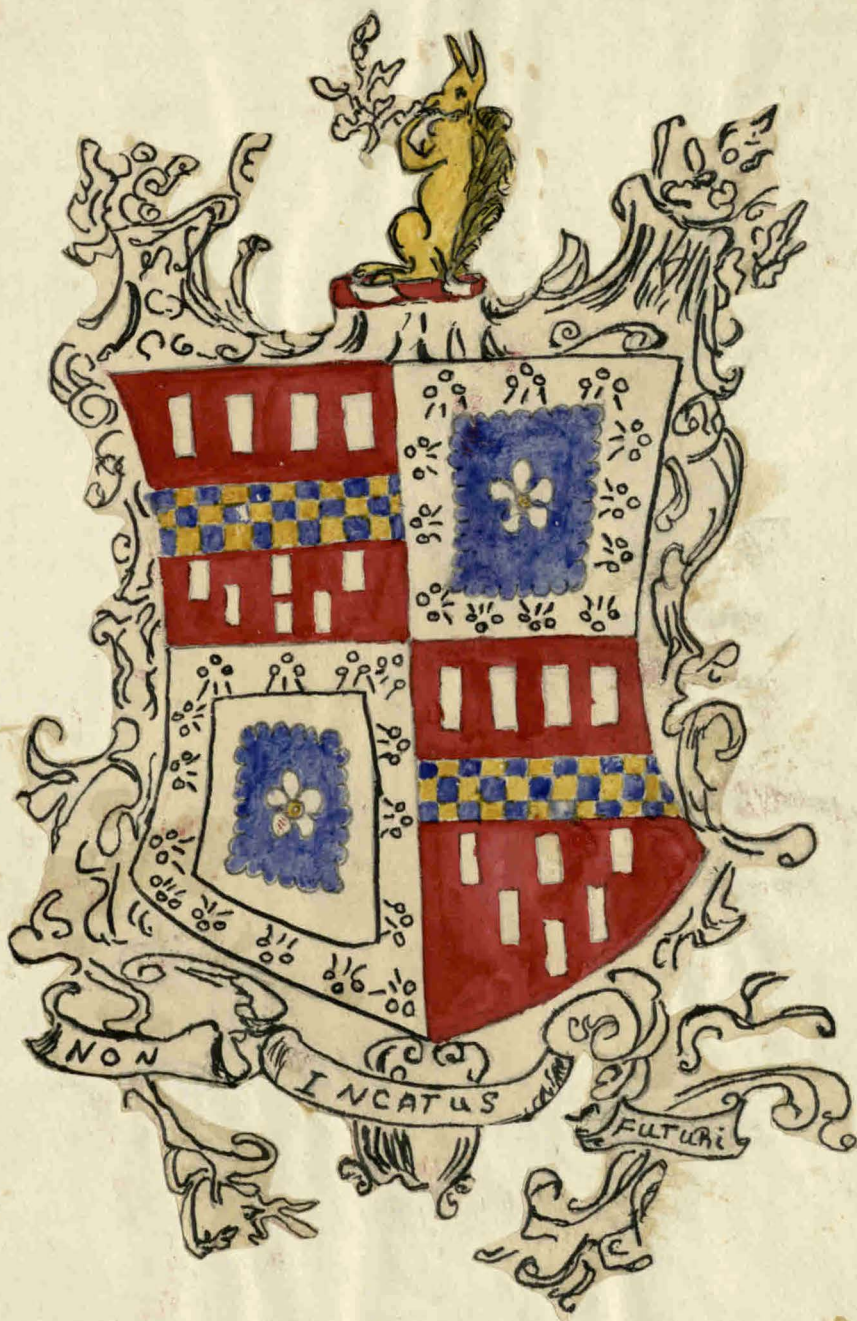
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MARY ANNE RANDOLPH CUSTIS LEE, WIFE

OF GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE

*Dorothy Lee*



MARY ANNE RANDOLPH CUSTIS LEE, WIFE  
OF GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE.

Much has been written concerning the life and achievements of General Robert Edward Lee, but the life and letters of his wife Mary Anne Randolph Custis Lee have scarcely been touched, except in their connection with her illustrious husband. From her published writings and from the devotion her husband gave her she would seem to have been a woman sufficiently individual to merit the historian's attention.

Mary Lee's life was not only brought into close relationship with the historic personages of her own generation but through her parents and grandparents she was influenced by the founders of the American Republic. Any survey of her life finds its background in the creative years of the young republic following the aristocratic colonial regime in Virginia that had helped to make her forebears rich and powerful.

Her great grandmother on her father's side was Martha Custis Washington, who before her marriage to George Washington had been the wife of Daniel Parke Custis, a wealthy colonial planter in New Kent County, Virginia. In 1753 at the "White House", on the Pamunkey River, a son John Parke Custis was born to Martha and Daniel Parke Custis. Not long after this Colonel Daniel Custis died leaving his young widow one of the wealthiest women in Virginia. She then married another young Virginia planter and soldier, George Washington of Mount Vernon.



Her children went with her to their new home on the Potomac. In 1772 John Parke Custis a youth of nineteen married Eleanor, the second daughter of Benedict Calvert, of Mt. Airy, Prince George's County, Maryland. Eleanor Calvert's grandfather was Charles Calvert, sixth Lord Baltimore. Mary Lee thus on one occasion described her grandmother's portrait and told of her grandparent's married life. "The walls of this venerable mansion (Mt. Airy) are graced with fine portraits of several of the Lords Baltimore, by Vandyke; and one of Eleanor Calvert, the mother of Mr. Custis."<sup>1</sup> It represents a young lady of a romantic and slight figure in a riding costume, with a boy's hat and open jacket. She seems scarcely fifteen, with a bright and hopeful countenance. Such was her temperament, we are told, through all the toils of life. The commencement of her career was brilliant enough. Married at sixteen to John Parke Custis, a youth of nineteen, the only son of Mrs. Washington, of large fortune, and a most amiable and generous disposition, they passed several years at Abingdon, a country-seat on the Potomac, near Washington City, in the enjoyment of such felicity as rarely falls to the lot of mortals."<sup>2</sup> This happy state did not exist very long. John Custis was aide-de-camp to General Washington and the unfortunate young man contracted a fever and died in the year 1781, the same year in which his son George Washington Parke Custis was born. General Washington adopted the baby boy and an older sister. George Washington Parke Custis was from that time called the "child of Mount Vernon".

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1. Mary Lee's father, George Washington Parke Custis.

2. Custis, G.W.P., Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington, p. 33.



After the death of Martha Washington, in 1802, her grandson moved to Arlington, a lovely site on the Potomac opposite Washington and built a mansion there. In 1806 at the age of twenty-three he married Mary Lee Fitzhugh, daughter of Colonel William Fitzhugh of Chatham and Anne Randolph. In later years an intimate friend of her parents wrote to Mary Lee about her mother, "Happy in her descent from the union of Fitzhugh, of Chatham, (the friend of Washington), a gentleman unsurpassed for dignity and courtesy of manners by any who enjoyed the society of Mount Vernon, with one of the most beautiful, accomplished, and religious ladies that ever bore the name of Randolph, all the instructions and associations, the habits and studies of her childhood and youth, were suited to nurture those just principles and pure generous sentiments which ever pervaded and adorned her entire character. Early allied by marriage to a gentleman bred up in Mount Vernon while the spot was the home of the father of his country - a gentleman whose genius, taste, eloquence, and courtesy have attracted multitudes from this country and far distant lands - she dedicated herself to those gentle offices, quiet duties, and daily graceful ministries of love, so becoming to her station and her sex."<sup>3</sup>

In a letter to Mary Lee when she was writing a sketch of her father's life for the preface to his sketches entitled, Recollections and Memoirs of Washington, which she was editing for publication there is the following account given by one of his friends. "Your father was distinguished by talents which would have made him eminent in any profession to which he might have devoted himself; but his ample fortune,

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3. Ibid, R.R. Gurley to Mary Lee, Washington, Oct. 6, 1858, p. 53.



extensive and generous hospitality, and the care of large estates, led him rather to agricultural pursuits, general literature, and the indulgence of his taste for fine arts, than to a profound study of science or philosophy.

"He read much, his memory was quick and retentive, and his knowledge of history and the public affairs of the world was remarkably full and accurate. To the history of his own country he had devoted much time and special attention, and was more familiar with the character of the men and events of the Revolution, than any one I have known. ....

"Your father was an orator around whom the public ever thronged with delight, and who that ever heard him can forget the vivacity, grace, and interest of his conversation."<sup>4</sup>

George Washington Parke Custis and his wife had four children, all daughters, only one of whom survived the period of infancy; and upon her the fondest affections of both parents were centered.<sup>5</sup> This daughter born at Arlington in 1806 was christened Mary Anne Randolph Custis. She was named Mary after her mother and Anne Randolph after her maternal grandmother. The devotion of her parents and the pleasant atmosphere of her home made her girlhood very happy.

"From her father she never received an unkind word. He was endowed with an even temper and remarkably buoyant spirit; and toward his family, servants, his friends and the world, there was a constant outflow of kindly feeling from his warm and generous heart.

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4. Ibid., R.R. Gurley to Mary Lee, Washington, Oct. 6, 1858, p. 10.

5. Ibid. p. 56.



"Identifying himself with the past through the power of strong association, he scarcely seemed to live in the present, though deeply interested in the current events of the day. He exercised an unbounding hospitality, and loved to pour forth to his delighted auditors the treasures of his richly-stored mind and wonderful memory. He had a happy faculty for expressing his thoughts by both pen and voice; and this was exercised at a very early period of his life."<sup>6</sup>

In this highly aristocratic household Mary Custis grew to womanhood in the stately mansion at Arlington. This was, and still is, a beautiful spot, overlooking the Potomac; and from the noble portico, that adorns its front, so conspicuous from every point of the federal city and its vicinity, her father saw that city grow to its grand proportions, from an humble and uninteresting village. The master of Arlington, as mentioned before, was very hospitable. There was a grove on his estate where the sheep-shearing took place annually, but besides this personal use of the grove the owner allowed it to be open for the use of picnic parties by people from Washington, Georgetown, and Alexandria. There was a small boat, used for conveying parties which was named "G.W.P. Custis". It was estimated that at some seasons, from fifteen to twenty thousand people visited the spring on such occasions. A wharf was erected for the public accommodation, a store-room, kitchen, dining hall sixty feet in length, and a saloon of the same dimensions for dancing, were also built. No spirituous liquors were permitted to be sold there and visitors were not allowed there on Sunday. Nothing was asked in return for the use of the grove except the orderly conduct of the visitors.<sup>7</sup> Thus the solitude of Arlington was often broken.

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6. Ibid. p. 56.

7. Ibid. p. 70.





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Natural Color Photograph by Charles Martin

FROM ARLINGTON'S PLEASANT HILLS ONE OF THE FAIREST PROSPECTS OF THE NATION'S CAPITAL UNFOLDS



When his daughter was eighteen a very distinguished guest came to visit the grandson of Martha Washington. This was none other than the Marquis de Lafayette. Mary Lee recounted something of this visit in her sketch of her father. "When Lafayette came to the United States, in 1824 the guest of the nation, Mr. Custis was among those who met him at the federal Capital as a personal friend. True his recollection of the illustrious Frenchman, while on his last visit to Mount Vernon in the autumn of 1784, was dim and shadowy, yet the son of that hero and benefactor, who now accompanied him, and who bore the name of George Washington, had been the companion of his youthful days at Mount Vernon, when Lafayette was in exile. Mr. Custis spent much time with the illustrious guest at Arlington and elsewhere.<sup>8\*</sup>

This visit was one of many paid by illustrious folk to their friend at Arlington. Among his daughter's associates was the son of another distinguished Virginia family. This was Robert Edward Lee, the son of "Light Horse Harry" Lee by his second marriage with Anne Carter of Shirley on the James. The family had moved to Alexandria in order that the children might be in a position to receive a better education. The Lees had left their ancestral home of Stratford which at the death

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8. Ibid. p. 67.

\* The following letter written by the younger Lafayette, while in this country, to Mr. Custis, was preserved by Mary Lee among other letters of her father at Arlington.

"My Dear Custis: My father being able to dispose of himself on Wednesday, will do himself the pleasure of going that day to dine at Arlington. It is so long since I wished for that satisfaction myself, that I most sincerely rejoice at the anticipation of it. You know, my friend, how happy I was when we met at Baltimore. Since that day, I felt every day, more and more, how much our two hearts were calculated to understand each other. Be pleased, my dear Custis, to present my respectful homage to the ladies, and receive for yourself the expression of my most affectionate and brotherly sentiments."

"G.W.Lafayette"



of the father went to his oldest son by his first marriage, Major Henry Lee who died in 1837. Stratford then went out of the possession of the Lee family. Robert Lee, Charlotte, was a penniless younger son with only his youth and abilities and family connections to offer to the woman he would choose to marry. His ambition was to become a soldier, a career which would not quickly help him make a fortune.

He was accustomed to visit Arlington and one of his favorite companions was to read to Mary Custis and her mother, [Mrs. Robert Lee, Charlotte, Mary]



Photograph by Benjamin A. Stewart

STRATFORD, THE HOME OF THE LEES, WESTMORELAND COUNTY

The home of William Fitzhugh near Frederickburg and the grandparents of Mary Custis who were both distinguished officers, was the scene of the courtship.

One evening Robert stood in the tower of the towered garden which sloped down to the river. Mary Custis descended to become the wife of Robert Lee.

9. Lancaster, Robert L., *Richmond Virginia News and Dispatch*, p. 123.
10. Brown, W. L., *Gen. Robert Lee, Soldier, Statesman, and Patriot*, p. 273.
11. Fitzhugh owned the home in honor of his friend William W. Lee, one of the leaders.
12. *Andrews, M. W., Savage of Paper*, p. 201.



of the father went to his oldest son by his first marriage, Major Henry Lee who died in Paris in 1837. Stratford then went out of the possession of the Lee family.<sup>9</sup> Robert Lee, therefore, was a portionless younger son with only his youth and ambition and family connections to offer to the woman he would choose to marry. His ambition was to become a soldier, a career which would not quickly help to make a fortune.

He was accustomed to visit Arlington and one of his favorite occupations was to read to Mary Custis and her mother. "One day Mrs. Custis, Mary and Robert Lee sat in the big hall, the latter read aloud one of Scott's novels. When she had listened for some time Mrs. Custis said: 'Mary, Robert must be hungry. Go into the dining-room and get him some lunch.' When the young girl went the young man followed, and as she stooped to get a piece of fruit cake out of the side-board, he put his arm around her and whispered the sweet old story. He could wait no longer. Perhaps the romance of Walter Scott touched a chord in his breast which broke forth into sudden melody. Thenceforward two lives were one."<sup>10</sup>

In time, Robert Lee went to the United States Military Academy. From West Point he returned, a handsome youth in a smart uniform, a high spirited youth who renewed his suit of his childhood sweetheart. Chatham, the home of William Fitzhugh near Fredericksburg and the grandparents of Mary Custis who have been mentioned before, was the scene of the courtship.<sup>11</sup>

One evening there under the trees of the terraced garden which sloped down to the Rappahannock river, Mary Custis consented to become the wife of Robert Lee.<sup>12</sup> Her father demurred at giving his daughter to

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9. Lancaster, Robert A., Historic Virginia Homes and Churches, p. 326.

10. Brock, R.A., Gen. Robert Edward Lee, Soldier, Citizen, and Christian Patriot, p. 323.

11. Fitzhugh named his home in honor of his friend William Pitt, Earl of Chatham.

12. Andrews, M.M., Scraps of Paper, p. 201



a young man who had nothing to look to but the uncertain prospect of a soldier's life. The devotion of the young people overcame his objections and they were married on June 30, 1831, when Lee was but twenty-four years old and the bride twenty-five.<sup>13</sup> One of the twelve bridesmaids, a cousin of the bride, gave this characteristic description of the ceremony.<sup>14</sup> "The night of the wedding at Arlington happened to be one of steady rain, and much fun arose from the appearance of the Rev. Mr. Ruel Keith<sup>15</sup> who arrived drenched to the skin, and though a tall man was compelled to conduct the nuptial service in the clothes of my cousin George Washington Parke Custis, a very great gentleman but a very small man, so far as inches were concerned. .... It was the thirtieth of June, 1831 - and though the mid-summer rain denied the company the enjoyment of the gardens, which command an unparalleled view of the Potomac

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13. Maurice, Frederick, Robert E. Lee, The Soldier, p. 10.

14. The attendants on the bride and groom, as given by Long, A.L., Memoirs of Robert E. Lee, p. 32, were the following: "First bridesmaid and groomsmen, Miss Catharine Mason and Lieutenant Sidney Smith Lee; second, Miss Mary Goldsborough and Lieutenant Thomas Kennedy; third, Miss Marietta Turner and Lieutenant Chambers; fourth, Miss Angela Lewis and Mr. Tillman; fifth, Miss Julia Calvert and Lieutenant Prentiss; sixth, Miss Britannia Peter and Lieutenant Thomas Turner." "Can it be possible that the roster of the groomsmen is in error? We look there for Joe Johnston's name, and find it not . " - Young, J.C. Marse Robert, p. 32.

15. There seems to be conflicting opinion as to the minister who performed the ceremony. Some references give Mr. Ruel Keith, a professor at the Theological Seminary at Alexandria, as officiating and others give Rev. William Meade, afterward bishop of Virginia. Long, A.L., p. 32 and Freeman, Douglas S. (Lee and the Ladies), Scribner's Vol. LXXVIII July - December 1925, p. 342, state that Rev. Meade was the presiding minister and Lee, Fitzhugh, Great Commanders, p. 26 gives the public notice in which Rev. Keith is named. May it not be possible that both Rev. Meade and Rev. Keith, friends of the family, were present?



and the city of Washington, the evening was one to be long remembered. My cousin, always a modest and affectionate girl, was never lovelier and Robert Lee with his bright eyes and high color was the picture of a cavalier. The elegance and simplicity of the bride's parents, presiding over the feast, and the happiness of the grinning servants, untainted by any disloyalty and unreprieved by their master and mistress, remained in my memory as a piece of Virginia life pleasant to recall. <sup>16</sup>

Lieutenant Lee later wrote to a friend telling him his impression of the wedding. "The Parson had few words to say, though he dwelt upon them as if he had been reading my death warrant, and there was a tremulousness in the hand I held, that made me anxious for him to end; I am told I looked 'pale and interesting' which might have been the fact. But I felt as 'bold as a sheep' and was surprised at my want of Romance in so great a degree as not to feel more excitement than at the Black Board at West Point." <sup>17</sup>

There is only one picture of Mary Lee as a young woman about the time of her marriage. This painting pictures her with her hair parted in the middle, smooth on top but falling in curls on her shoulders. Finely arched eyebrows, large dark eyes, a small nose and delicately formed mouth make the general characteristics of the aristocratic face. She wears a tight fitting dress with a large square-necked collar of fine lace. She was small in stature but had a stately carriage. <sup>18</sup>

"The modesty of the newly married couple was spared the modern newspaper notice of what the bride wore at her wedding and what

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16. Andrews, M.M., p. 201.

17. Freeman, Douglas, (Lee and the Ladies), Scribner's Vol. LXXVIII July - December 1925, p. 342, Letter to Captain Andrew Talcott, a superior officer.

18. Ibid. p. 341.



she had packed in her trunks, and her presents and trousseau are in happy oblivion.<sup>19</sup>

When all of the phases of the honeymoon were passed Lieutenant Lee and his bride settled down to live in the regular army barracks and within the means of a lieutenant's salary. This was undoubtedly hard for a young woman who had been brought up in the midst of wealth, but Mary Lee was determined to share her husband's fortunes.<sup>20</sup> She accompanied him when his various army posts were changed. Their first child was born at Fortress Monroe, September 16, 1832, and was named George Washington Custis.<sup>21</sup> In later years her son Captain R.E. Lee, Jr. said, "I can remember some events of which he<sup>22</sup> seemed a part, when we lived at Fort Hamilton, New York, about 1846, but they are more like dreams, very indistinct and disconnected - naturally so, I was at that time about three years old."<sup>23</sup> During the Mexican War when the father was away for over two years his family lived at Arlington. Captain Lee stated that the first vivid recollection he had of his father was his arrival at Arlington, after his return from the Mexican War in 1848. The following year Lee was put in charge of the defenses of Baltimore, Maryland. While in Baltimore he and his family lived at 908 Madison Avenue.<sup>24\*</sup> In 1852 they returned to New York State where Lee was Super-

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19. Lee, Fitzhugh, p. 26.

20. Freeman, D.S., p. 343.

21. Young, J.C. p. 34

22. General Lee

23. Lee, R.E., Jr., Recollections and Letters of General Lee, p. 3.

24. Shepherd, H.E., Life of Robert Edward Lee, p. 278

\* The house is still standing and is marked with a tablet.



intendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point. The ancestral home at Arlington was open to the Lees and their growing family but Mary Lee and her children made use of it, in those early days, only when her husband was away in the Mexican War or stationed at distant western posts.

What character of wife did Mary Lee make? Mary Lee was not beautiful nor was she considered brilliant. She had the look and bearing of an aristocrat and her intellect was of a high order. Her letters and other writings prove that. She was devoted to the care of her family and was in turn beloved by them. Her husband's unflinching devotion is a tribute to her personality. Her manners in the home were gracious and she shared the generous spirit of hospitality with her husband. There were little habits to which he had to adjust himself and for which he chided her gently, the most serious of which was her carelessness in dress and habit of leaving things behind, and failure to be ready on time. The latter was especially irksome to a soldier.<sup>25</sup> She bore her husband seven children all of whom reached maturity - in order of birth George Washington Custis (1832), Mary Custis (1834), William Henry Fitzhugh (1837), Anne Carter (1839), Eleanor Agnes (1842), Robert Edward Jr. (1843), and Mildred Childe (1845). The mother's authority and control over her children was not as strict as that of the father. He was always giving her advice in these matters. This is seen by the statement of her son Robert and a letter written to her by General Lee. Her son stated, "I always knew that it was impossible to disobey my father. I felt it in me, I never thought why, but was perfectly sure when he gave an order that

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25. Freeman, D.S., p. 339-349.



it had to be obeyed. My mother I could sometimes circumvent, and at times took liberties with her orders, construing them to suit myself; but exact obedience to every mandate of my father was a part of my life and being at that time."<sup>26</sup> In his letter General Lee wrote "You do not know how much I have missed you and the children, my dear Mary. To be alone in a crowd is very solitary. In the woods I feel sympathy with the trees and birds, in whose company I taste delight, but experience no pleasure in a strange crowd. I hope you are all well and will continue so, and, therefore, must again urge you to be very prudent and careful of those dear children. If I could only get a squeeze at that little fellow, turning up his sweet mouth to 'keese baba'! You must not let him run wild in my absence, and will have to exercise firm authority over all of them. This will not require severity or even strictness, but constant attention and an unwavering course. Mildness and forbearance will strengthen their affection for you, while it will maintain your control over them."<sup>27</sup>

Their home was known for its hospitality in whatever place it happened to be. Their home life in Lexington, Virginia after the Civil War was characteristic of their manner of living. Two rooms were devoted in the evenings to the entertainment of guests. These rooms opened to each other. In one, the dining room, Mrs. Lee and the general usually sat after supper, while the front room was occupied by the young people. It was understood that every visitor would spend at least a few minutes with the heads of the family, whoever might be the person on whom the call was particularly made. When ten o'clock came, if the guest seemed

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26. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 9.

27. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 16.



indisposed to leave, the General would come into the front room, sit down by the side of the young man who was enjoying the company of one of the young ladies. In a moment or two she would join her mother in the dining room. Captain Lee tells of this family regulation, in his book. Military punctuality and simplicity were also characteristic of this home. As one writer states, "General Lee was not ashamed to eat a plain dinner plainly served with his friends. He impressed these ideas and habits on his family. Mrs. Lee's usual occupation in the dining room during the evenings was mending her husband's and sons' under-clothing."<sup>28</sup> Family prayer was observed every morning and a daughter-in-law once said of General Lee "That she did not believe he could have an entirely high opinion of anyone, even George Washington, if he could return to earth, who was not in time for family prayer."<sup>29</sup>

In the year 1855 Lee, having been appointed lieutenant-colonel of the Second Cavalry, U.S.A., left West Point for Texas and his family went to live at Arlington. This was three years after the death of Mary Lee's mother in 1852, which was the first loss in her immediate family. In a letter to his wife soon after this sad event Colonel Lee said: "May God give you strength to enable you to bear and say, 'His will be done'. She has gone from all trouble, care and sorrow to a holy immortality, there to rejoice and praise forever the God and Savior she so long and truly served. Let that be our comfort and that our consolation. May our death be like hers, and may we meet in happiness in Heaven."<sup>30</sup> In a letter a few years later Mary Lee wrote: "I have been

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28. Riley, F.L., General Robert E. Lee After Appomattox, p. 95.

29. Maurice, p. 14.

30. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 18.



immersed for some time in a mess of old letters and papers. How it carries me back to the past - the happy past! Now it seems to me with all I have left I feel so bereft. Nothing can ever supply the place of our parents. None can ever love so entirely, or bear with our faults and failures as they have done, especially is a mother's love the purest and most disinterested; it can only be surpassed by that of our blessed Redeemer."<sup>31</sup> This was written on February 10, 1859 just after the death of her father. She had lost both of her parents when her husband was away on duty. He came home shortly after the death of his father-in-law in order to settle the estate.

The Arlington estate containing eleven hundred acres more or less, a mill on the four mile run in the county of Alexandria and the lands adjacent to the mill in the counties of Alexandria and Fairfax, and all personal property were left to Mary Lee by her father for the term of her natural life; and at her death, her eldest son was to inherit the above named property, provided he took his grandfather's name and coat of arms. Ten thousand dollars was left to each of the four granddaughters, and the estate called White House in New Kent County, Virginia, containing four thousand acres more or less was bequeathed to W. H. Fitzhugh Lee. The youngest grandson Robert Edward Jr. was to inherit, when he became of age, the estate called Roancock, in King William County, Virginia, which also consisted of about four thousand acres. Other land on Smith's Island and in the counties of Stafford, Richmond, and Westmoreland were to be sold to pay the granddaughter's legacies. A lot in square No. 21 Washington,

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31. Brock, R.A., General R.E. Lee, p. 324.



D.C. was left to General Lee, and Mary Lee had the privilege of dividing the family plate among the grandchildren, but the will provided that the Mount Vernon relics had to be kept together and at Arlington. The emancipation of the slaves was to be brought about within five years in whatever manner the Executors of the Will saw most expedient. The Executors were Colonel Robert Edward Lee, Robert Lee Randolph of Eastern View, Bishop Meade and George Washington Peter.<sup>32\*</sup>

This reunion of her family was not to last long. The troubled days of 1861 had come. The question as to who would support the Union and who would defend his state was before every man in Virginia. The slavery question was discussed in every home in the State. What were the beliefs of this wife of the later leader of the 'Rebel' armies? How did she look upon the decision of her husband? What did this decision mean to her? On February 9, 1861, she wrote a friend, Mrs. W.H. Stiles: "Has all love for and pride in their country died at the South, that they are willing to tear her in pieces and some even exult to see her glorious flag trailing in the dust? It should rather have drawn tears from their eyes. We have lived and fought and prospered under this flag for so many years, and though the South has suffered much from the meddling of Northern fanatics, yet do they expect to fare better now? Are there no rights and privileges but those of negro slavery? You by your situation are

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32. Will of George Washington Parke Custis, March 26, 1855.

From a copy owned by Dr. Douglas S. Freeman of Richmond.

\*Colonel Robert Edward Lee, Son-in-law of G.W.P. Custis; Robert Lee Randolph, Mary Lee's first cousin; Bishop Meade, Bishop of Virginia a close family friend; George Washington Peter, Mary Lee's first cousin.



removed from any active interference, whereas we in the border States are so much annoyed that our slaves have become almost useless. In our own family we have lost numbers who have been decoyed off, and after my father's death we were preserved from an outbreak excited by two abolitionists who were constantly over here (as we learned afterwards one of whom I am happy to say is now in the penitentiary for fourteen years) - we were preserved I say by the special mercy of God. The Tribune and the New York Times published the most villainous attacks upon my husband by name and upon my father's memory in language I would not pollute my lips by repeating and yet after all these wrongs I would lay down my life could I save our 'Union'. What is the use of a Government combined as ours is of so many parts, the Union of which forms its strength and power, if any one part has the right for any wrong, real or imaginary, of withdrawing its aid and throwing the whole into confusion as Carolina who refuses all overtures for peace and imagines the world will admire her independence, whereas they laugh at her folly which is perfectly suicidal. You know my feelings are all linked with the South and you will bear with me in the expression of my opinion, but while there are many of the Northern politicians who deserve no better fate than to be hung as high as Haman, believe me that those who have been foremost in this Revolution will deserve and meet with the reprobation of the world, either North or South, for having destroyed the most glorious Confederacy that ever existed."<sup>33</sup>

When Robert E. Lee cast his lot with Virginia, his wife's words to him were: "Whichever way you go will be in the path of duty. You will

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33. Maurice, F., p. 53 n.



think right, and I shall be satisfied."<sup>33 1/2</sup> This decision called for a high spirit of sacrifice. She had to send a husband and three sons to fight against the government her ancestors had helped to form, against the Union she thought was "The most glorious Confederacy that ever existed." Here we see her giving up those who are most dear to her and her most cherished ideals through devotion to her husband. This was not all. Mary Lee and her daughters were forced to abandon Arlington and seek shelter until the struggle was past. The parting was hardest for the mother. Behind she left a stately mansion hallowed with historic associations, tinged with exquisite color of early romance and the fuller joy of wedlock, echoing with the voices of little children, blessed with the companionship of grown-up sons and daughters. Before leaving Mrs. Lee wrote and affixed to the door of the house the following appeal: "Northern soldiers who profess to reverence Washington, forbear to desecrate the home of his first married life, the property of his wife, now owned by her descendants."

"A Granddaughter of Mrs. Washington."<sup>34</sup>

Although at the front, General Lee did not fail to keep in touch with his wife and try to help her. Quoting from two of his letters written at this time his sympathetic interest is shown. "I grieve at the necessity that drives you from your home. I can appreciate your feelings on the occasion, and pray that you may receive comfort and strength in the difficulties that surround you. When I reflect upon the calamity impending over the country, my own sorrows sink into insignificance. .... Be content and resigned to

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<sup>33 1/2</sup> Brock, R.A., p. 322.

34. Jones, J.W., Personal Reminiscences, Anecdotes and Letters of Gen. R.E. Lee.





General and Mrs. Robert Edward Lee.

24. Lee, R.E., p. 20.

25. Memo of Mary Anne Lee, 1811-1812.

26. Lee, R.E., p. 21.

27. Ibid., p. 22. Robert Carter Lee, General Lee's uncle.

28. Ibid., p. 23. Memo of General Lee, 1811-1812.



God's will. I shall be able to write seldom. Write to me, as your letters will be my greatest comfort."<sup>35</sup> Again he wrote: "I have received your letter of the 9th from Arlington. I had supposed you were at Ravensworth<sup>36</sup>..... I am glad to hear that you are at peace, and enjoying the sweet weather and beautiful flowers. You had better complete your arrangements and retire further from the scene of war. It may burst upon you at any time. It is sad to think of the devastation, if not ruin, it may bring upon a spot so endeared to us. But God's will be done. We must be resigned."<sup>37</sup> Between the years 1861 and 1863 Mary Lee and her daughters were forced to accept the hospitality of their friends and relatives. Upon leaving Arlington the girls went to Fauquier County, Virginia to visit relatives and their mother went to the home of her Aunt Mrs. A.M. Fitzhugh, at Ravensworth near Fairfax Court House. This was in the last of May 1861. She did not remain there very long because General Lee advised her to leave because he felt she was in a dangerous position and that she imperilled her aunt. Accordingly she went to "Kinloch" in Fauquier County the home of Edward Turner.<sup>38</sup> By August she had again moved to the home of Mrs. Lorenzo Lewis, which was in Clarke County, Virginia and named "Audley"<sup>39</sup>

To add to the difficulties of this period was the fact that Mary Lee had become a victim of rheumatism. She was anxious therefore to go to the Hot Springs, Virginia. Bath County was not far from the seat of war in Western Virginia, so she wrote to her husband asking as to its safety from occupation by the enemy. Her son Robert escorted his mother to the Springs and remained with her a short time. The latter stayed at Hot Springs until

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35. Lee, R.E., p. 30.

36. Home of Mary Lee's aunt Mrs. A.M. Fitzhugh

37. Lee, R.E., Jr. p. 30.

38. Ibid., p. 41, Edward Carter Turner, General Lee's cousin.

39. Ibid., p. 42, Wife of Lorenzo Lewis, son of Nellie Custis, Mary Lee's great-aunt.



the first of November when she went on a visit to "Shirley",<sup>40</sup> on James River. From "Shirley" her destination was the "White House" her son Fitzhugh's home on the Pamunkey, where she remained for several months which ran into the year 1862. There was a family gathering there on Christmas at which General Lee was not present. During this whole period of her wandering from place to place and his absence they wrote to each other continually. As we have seen in one of his letters he considered her letters his greatest comfort. He felt keenly their lack of a home. On Christmas day he wrote to her on this subject. "As to our old home, if not destroyed, it will be difficult to be recognised. Even if the enemy had wished to preserve it, it would almost have been impossible. With the number of troops encamped around it, the change of officers, etc., the want of fuel, shelter, etc., and all the dire necessities of war, it is vain to think of its being in a habitable condition. I fear, too, books, furniture, and the relics of Mount Vernon will be gone. It is better to make up our minds to a general loss. They cannot take away the remembrance of the spot, and the memories of those that to us rendered it sacred. That will remain to us as long as life will last, and that we can preserve. In the absence of a home, I wish I could purchase 'Stratford'. That is the only other place that I could go to, now accessible to us, that would inspire me with feelings of pleasure and local love. You and the girls could remain there in quiet. It is a poor place, but we could make enough corn-bread and bacon for our support, and the girls could weave us clothes. I wonder if it is for sale and at how much. Ask Fitzhugh to try to find out, when he gets to Fredericksburg."<sup>41</sup> Not only was General Lee worried over this lack of a home. He felt the separation from his wife and

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40. Home of Charles Carter, Maternal grandfather of Gen. Lee.

41. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 59.



✓ loved ones. On this Christmas day he also wrote: "I cannot let this day of grateful rejoicing pass, dear Mary, without some communication with you. I am thankful for the many among the past that I have passed with you, and the remembrance of them fills me with pleasure. For those on which we have been separated we must not repine. If it will make us more resigned and better prepared for what is in store for us, we should rejoice."<sup>42</sup> In his letters he told her of the movements of his armies, their victories and defeats, the health of his soldiers and his hopes for success. She in turn told of the whereabouts of their daughters and their health. She expressed her views on the political and military situations. If she was wrong<sup>43</sup> her husband tried to give her a correct interpretation. Unfortunately these letters of Mary Lee have not been given to the public and we can only guess at their content from the replies to them by the General. In 1862 there occurred two events which added more sorrow to that which had been endured already. The youngest son Robert E. Lee, Jr. who had been studying at the University of Virginia could be kept back no longer and went into the army with his father and brothers. In October her twenty-three year old daughter Annie died while visiting at the White Sulphur Springs, North Carolina. The General wrote to his wife to express his grief at their loss and to comfort her. "... I cannot express the anguish I feel at the death of our sweet Annie. To know that I shall never see her again on earth, that her place in our circle, which I always hoped one day to enjoy, is forever vacant, is agonising in the extreme. But God in this, as in all things, has mingled mercy with the blow, in selecting that one best prepared to

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42. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 58.

43. As seen in letters collected by Captain R.E. Lee, Jr.



leave us. May you be able to join me in saying 'His will be done!' .... I know how much you will grieve and how much she will be mourned. I wish I could give you any comfort, but beyond our hope in the great mercy of God, and the belief that He takes her at the time and place when it is best for her to go, there is none. May that same mercy be extended to us all, and may we be prepared for his summons."<sup>44</sup> Here we see the deep religious faith of the husband and from the comfort he endeavors to give to his wife by his expression of his faith, she must have shared the same trust in the mercy of God.

In the fall of 1863 Mary Lee went to Richmond and rented a house on Clay Street.<sup>45</sup> In a conversation with Mrs. Nannie R. Werth<sup>46</sup> of Richmond, who was a child of eleven at the time of the Lee's residence in that city, she stated that they lived on Leigh Street between 4th and 5th Streets. Mrs. Werth said that she remembers going there to take strawberries to the General's wife. The recognised residence of the Lees while in Richmond is situated at 707 East Franklin Street and is now the home of the Virginia Historical Society.<sup>47</sup> The years spent in this war stricken city were trying, but it was during this sad period her gentle character was manifested. She was gentle yet strong in her courage to endure suffering both mental and physical. Her rheumatism

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44. Lee, R.E., Jr., p. 79.

45. Ibid., p. 112.

46. On January 12, 1930, at Protestant Episcopal Home, Richmond.

47. The exact residence of Mary Lee and her daughters from the time they moved to Richmond until they went to live at 707 East Franklin Street seems to be a matter of dispute. Captain Lee stated that she rented a house on Clay Street, Mrs. Werth maintained that they lived on Leigh Street, and Dr. Douglas S. Freeman, p. 467, holds that they were guests of Mrs. James Kerr Caskie at 11th and Clay Streets. Mrs. Caskie was a cousin of Mr. Lorenzo Lewis.



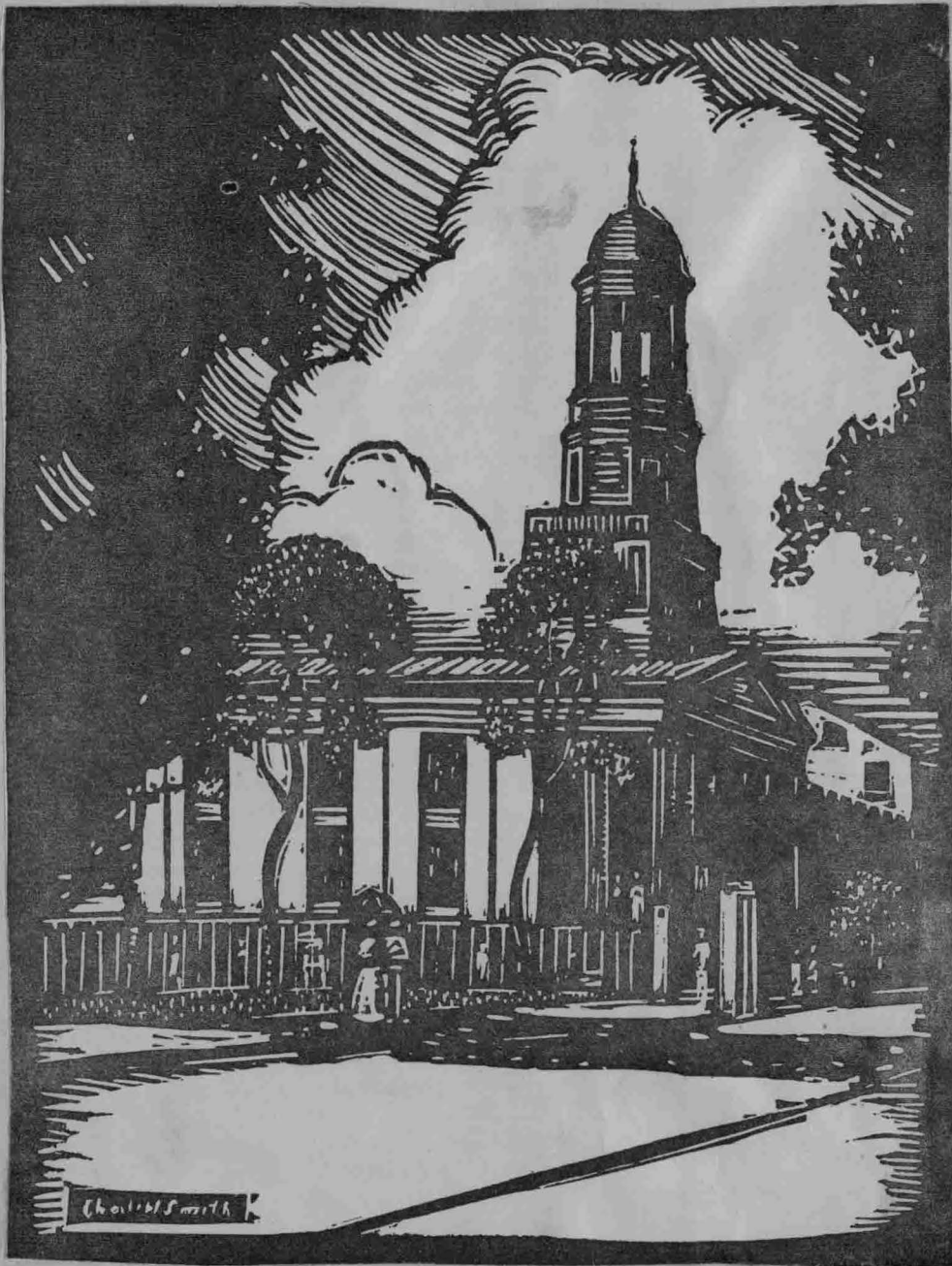
had become so bad she was confined to a wheel chair most of the time. The moment she entered "The Mess", as the house on Franklin Street was called, she adapted herself to the soldier's life which was full of hardship and danger. Richmond was in a restless turmoil - one day of hope, a night of anguish, a morning of joy or sorrow. "In these varying scenes Mrs. Lee's chamber was a 'Mecca'. Seated in her wheeled chair, she listened, and strengthened, and smiled even when her own heart ached. There was not a man or woman at 'The Mess' who ever heard Mrs. Lee complain. The brightness of her nature, amidst uncertainty and pain, was wonderful. Her eyes would shine whenever her husband came in from camp. Often he rode in just to see her for an hour, each gaining fresh courage from communion with the other."<sup>48</sup>

There were times when there was not so much pain and she could go out. She and her family attended St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Mrs. Werth, quoted before, told of an unfortunate mistake made by one of the church members. This incident occurred in the early part of Mary Lee's residence in Richmond, before she was widely known. It was before she and her family had been assigned a regular pew in the historic church. President and Mrs. Davis also attended this church and they asked the Lees to make use of their pew until they had one of their own, which they consented to do. One Sunday when General Lee was at the front his wife went to St. Paul's alone. She was escorted to the President's pew by the sexton. The sexton in those days took the place of the present day ushers. The Presidential party had not arrived but a niece of

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48. Brock, R.A., p. 334.





Saint Paul's Church, Richmond, Va.



Mrs. Jefferson Davis sat in the pew directly back of the one in which the General's wife took her seat. The President's niece tapped her on the shoulder and informed her that she was in the wrong pew, to which the latter did not respond. A few minutes later the request to leave the President's pew was again made and this time a little more forcefully. Without a word Mrs. Lee left the pew, and as she went down the aisle a friend asked her to sit with her. When the President and his wife arrived they were much surprised not to find the General's wife in their pew. Mrs. Davis went to her and asked her to come over and sit with her. She objected at first but Mrs. Davis was so persistent that she consented. After the services Mrs. Davis' niece asked her Aunt why she had asked the stranger to be with her. Mrs. Davis was very much shocked and informed her niece that the stranger was Mrs. General Robert E. Lee. This story illustrates the fact that Mary Lee was not as striking in her appearance as her handsome husband. Both Mrs. Werth and Mr. Edward V. Valentine<sup>49</sup> remember her as a sweet simple little woman who dressed well but very plainly. Mr. Valentine said that she was of medium height and delicate. Mary Lee had a gracious and pleasing personality. "In fact", he said, "there was nothing masculine about her. She was a typical Virginia lady and that is the best you can say of any woman."<sup>50</sup> The sculptor further said that she was always reserved and gentle, speaking in a low tone of voice at all times. Her tastes were domestic in nature. Her generosity prompted her to aid all those who were in need. The General would take back to camp with him the socks she had knitted for his "boys".<sup>51</sup> Some

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49. Sculptor of Recumbent Statue of Gen. Lee at Lexington, Va.

50. Conversation with Mr. Valentine, Nov. 8, 1929.

51. Brock, R.A., p. 335.



times when some loving friend in the North sent a box of provisions the General's wife would send the contents to those she knew needed it, and kept for herself only that which others did not want. Friends in Richmond would send her a package of tea or a little sugar, which she always wished to share with the "Mess".<sup>52</sup> "Mourning mothers came to her in their agony; wives of heroes brought her joy over recent success; friends came without ceremony, and partook of what they could get."<sup>53</sup> In one of his letters General Lee wrote: "I received day before yesterday the box with hat, gloves and socks, also the barrel of apples. You had better have kept the latter, as it would have been more useful to you than to me."<sup>54</sup>

In December of '63 her daughter-in-law, the wife of her son Fitzhugh, died. Mrs. Lee had been with her the year before at the "White House" and when she moved to Richmond she did so with much uneasiness at leaving her daughter-in-law alone. This death was particularly distressing because General Fitzhugh Lee who had been wounded was in a federal prison at the time. He petitioned the authorities to allow him to go to his wife, leaving his brother Robert as a hostage until he returned. This request was refused. Added to the anxiety over this son was the fear that some disaster would befall the youngest son Robert. His mother wanted him near his father. General Lee in a letter to his wife declined to forward any such arrangement. "In reference to Rob," he wrote, "his company would be a great pleasure and comfort to me, and he would be extremely useful in various ways, but I am opposed to officers sur-

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52. Ibid., p. 337.

53. Ibid., p. 330.

54. Lee, R.E., p. 141.



rounding themselves with their sons and relatives. It is wrong in principle, and in that case selections would be made from private and social relations, rather than for the public good. There is the same objection to his going with Fitz Lee. I should prefer Rob's being in the line, in an independent position, where he could rise by his own merit and not through the the recommendation of his relatives."<sup>55</sup>

During the summer of '64 Mrs. Lee was quite ill and General Lee was very anxious for her comfort and welfare, and his desire to be with her to help her, was very great. The sick in the Confederacy at this period of universal scarcity suffered for want of the simplest medicines. All that could be had were given to hospitals. To his youngest daughter, Mildred, the General wrote, and sent his wife what little he could find in the way of fruit. "I received this morning by your brother your note of the third, and am glad to hear that your mother is better. I sent out immediately to try to find some lemons, but could only procure two, sent to me by a kind lady, Mrs. Kirkland, in Petersburg. These were gathered from her own trees. There are none to be purchased. I found one in my valise, dried up, which I also send, as it may prove some value. I also put up some early apples which you can roast for your mother, and one pear. This is all the fruit I can get. You must go to market every morning and see if you cannot find some fruit for her. There are no lemons to be had. Tell her lemonade is not as palatable or digestible as buttermilk. Try to get some good buttermilk for her. With ice, it is delicious and very nutritious."<sup>56</sup>

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55. Lee, R.E., p. 119.

56. Lee, R.E., p. 133.



On April 15, 1865 General Lee arrived in Richmond after the surrender at Appomattox. When the Confederate leader returned from Appomattox he entered Richmond riding upon "Traveler", and made his way to the "Mess" on Franklin Street. There was no air of the defeated about him; his head was erect and his eyes were steady. He went straight to his wife's retreat where she awaited him, ready to give the love and comfort he so sorely needed.<sup>57</sup> To Mary Lee the month of April 1865 must have seemed to mark the end of all hope of future happiness except that which she received from her religious faith. In fact the South in its distress turned to religion for comfort in its desolation. In a letter to a cousin in Clarke County, Virginia, written two weeks after the surrender Mary Lee gave her opinion of Appomattox. The letter was delivered by some soldier returning to his home in that county. "I have just heard, my dear Cousin Mary",<sup>58</sup> wrote the General's wife, "of an opportunity to Clarke and write to tell you that we are all well as usual and through the mercy of God all spared through the terrible ordeal through which we have passed. I feel that I could have blessed God if those who were prepared had filled a soldier's grave. I bless Him that they are spared, I trust for future usefulness to their poor, unhappy country. My little Rob has not yet come in, but we have reason to think he is safe.

"Though it has not pleased Almighty God to crown our exertions with success in the way and manner we expected, yet we must still trust and pray not that our wills but His may be done in Heaven and in earth.

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57. Brock, R.A., p. 340.

58. A sister of Bishop Meade, Bishop of Virginia.



"I could not begin to tell you of the startling events that have been crowded into the last few weeks, but I want you all to know that when General Lee surrendered he had only 8,700 muskets - that the enemy, by their own account, had nearly 80,000 men, well provisioned and equipped, while ours had been out seven days with two days' rations; that they were fighting by day and marching all night without even time to parch their corn, their only food for several days.

"That even in this exhausted state they drove back the hosts of the enemy but could not follow up their advantage; that had Grant demanded an unconditional surrender they had determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible and cut their way through his encircling hosts, but the conditions he offered were so honorable that General Lee decided it was wrong to sacrifice the lives of these brave men when no object could be gained by it. For my part, it will always be a source of pride and consolation to me to know that all mine have periled their lives, fortune and even fame in so holy a cause. We can hear nothing certain from the rest of the army or from our President. My God bless and protect them. We can only pray for them.

"Our plans are all unsettled. General Lee is very busy settling up his army matters and then we shall all probably go to some of those empty places in the vicinity of the White House. Fitzhugh has gone down there to see what he can do, but this place is an utter scene of desolation - so is our whole country, and the cruel policy of the enemy has accomplished its work too well. They have achieved by starvation what they never could win by their valor, nor have they taken a single town in the South except Vicksburg that we have not evacuated.



"Dear Cousin Mary, write me about you all and how you manage to exist. Would that I were able to help you. I do not think we shall be here very long, therefore unless you can write at once you had better wait till you hear from me again. The girls and the General unite in love. He is wonderfully well considering all he has endured. Nannie, Smith's<sup>59</sup> wife, is here and several of her boys who have come in. Love to all friends. Ever affectionately yours,"

"M.C. Lee." 60

The whole family was finally united for the first time in four years, the younger son, Robert, having arrived two weeks after the surrender.<sup>61</sup> The life in Richmond was not suited to General Lee. The people were too attentive and what he wanted was quiet and a place to rest. He had always wanted a little place in the country.<sup>62</sup> The General was also anxious to take his wife from the city. He wrote to an English nobleman, General Long: "I am looking for some little, quiet home in the woods, where I can procure shelter and my daily bread, if permitted by the victor. I wish to get Mrs. Lee out of the city as soon as practical."<sup>63</sup>

It so happened that nearly exactly what he wanted was offered to him by Mrs. Elizabeth Randolph Cocke in Cumberland County, Virginia. This generous lady placed a small cottage on her estate with the land attached at the disposal of the General and his family. This house was called "Derwent", and was two miles from "Oakland" the home of Mrs. Cocke.<sup>64</sup>

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59. Wife of General Lee's brother, Sidney Smith Lee.

60. Andrews, Matthew Page, "Appomattox as Viewed by Mrs. R.E. Lee".  
Article in The Baltimore Sun, Sunday, April 6, 1930.

61. Lee, R.E., p. 157.

62. Ibid., p. 165.

63. Ibid., p. 170.

64. Ibid., p. 171.



The General and his wife and daughters were the only members of the family to move into the new home as Custis Lee was ill at Mrs. Cocke's house and the other two sons were working their farms, situated at "White House" and "Romance".<sup>65</sup> Several months were spent at "Derwent" by Mrs. Lee, her husband and daughters.

In August, 1865 General Lee received a notification that he had been elected president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. There was much hesitation on the part of General Lee as to whether he would accept the appointment. He was afraid he would not have the strength or the ability to fill the position as he felt it should be, and furthermore he feared that his position in relation to the United States Government would be detrimental to the college. After an assurance of the trustees that they wanted him to fill the Presidency in spite of his objections, he yielded.

In September his wife wrote to a friend<sup>66</sup> in New York: "The papers will ere this have probably informed you that Gen. Lee has accepted the Presidency of Washington College in Lexington, Va. He has already gone there and we expect to follow early in October. It will at least afford us a home and support for the present."<sup>67</sup>

Mrs. Lee did not arrive in Lexington until December the second.<sup>68</sup> Captain Lee gave this interesting description of the home-coming and the care taken for the comfort of his invalid mother. "The house was in good order - thanks to the ladies of Lexington - but rather bare of furniture, except my mother's rooms. Mrs. Cocke had completely furnished them, and

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65. Ibid., p. 174.

66. Mrs. C.B. Richardson

67. Mary Lee to Mrs. C.B. Richardson, Sept. 21, 1865. Letter filed in Confederate Museum, Richmond, Va.

68. Lee, R.E., p. 203.



her loving thoughtfulness had not forgotten the smallest detail. Mrs. Margaret J. Preston, the talented and well-known poetess, had drawn the designs for the furniture, and a one-armed Confederate soldier had made it all. A handsomely carved grand piano presented by Stieff, the famous maker of Baltimore, stood alone in the parlour. The floors were covered with the carpets rescued from Arlington - much too large and folded under to suit the reduced size of the rooms. Some of the bedrooms were partially furnished and the dining-room had enough in it to make us very comfortable. We were all very grateful and happy - glad to get home - the only one we had had for four long years. The silver of the family had been sent to Lexington for safe-keeping early in the war. When General Hunter raided the Valley of Virginia and advanced upon Lexington, to remove temptation out of his way, this silver, in two large chests, had been intrusted to the care of the old and faithful sergeant at the Virginia Military Institute, and he had buried it in some safe place known only to himself. I was sent out with him to dig it up and bring it in. We found it safe and sound, but black with mould and damp, useless for the time being, so my father opened his camp chest and we used his forks, spoons, plates, etc., while his camp stools supplied the deficiency in seats."<sup>69</sup> Captain Lee further on in his book described his mother's room. "My mother's room was on the first floor and opened out on the veranda, extending three sides of the house, where she could be rolled in her chair. This she enjoyed intensely for she was very fond of the open air, and one could see her there every bright day, with 'Mrs. Ruffner', a much petted cat, sitting on her shoulder or cradled in her lap."<sup>70</sup>

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69. Ibid., p. 203-204.

70. Ibid., p. 357.



The days and years in Lexington were busy. "Very domestic in her tastes and of unconquerable industry, Mary Lee would paint, knit, sew, write, or entertain her friends, and was an earnest worker for all of the interests of her church, as she was a liberal contributor to every charity that presented itself. Noted for her extraordinary common-sense and sound judgment - thoroughly educated and very accomplished - fond of reading, and remarkably well read in general literature - a fine conversationalist and a most genial, pleasant entertainer - in a word, a Virginia matron of the old school - she combined domestic virtues worthy to link together the families of Washington and Lee, was the light and joy of her home, and the recognized leader of the social circle of Lexington."<sup>71</sup> General Lee wrote the following to one of his daughters. "Your mother is about the same, busy with her needle and her pen, and as cheerful as ever."<sup>72</sup> "There is to be a great fete in your mother's room to-day. The Grace Church Sewing Society is to meet there at 10 A.M."<sup>73</sup>

Mrs. Lee was an Episcopalian and supported her church liberally and faithfully. Her faith was deep and her resignation to the Divine Will was as complete as that of her husband who was noted for his religious fervor and piety. Her resignation is very plainly shown in a letter she wrote to her friend Mrs. C.B. Richardson of New York. In speaking of her ill health she said: "I do not perceive any material benefit and much fear from what the physicians tell me of my case I

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71. Jones, J.W.

72. Lee, R.E., p. 259.

73. Ibid., p. 302.



never may and while try to bow in resignation to the will of God it is very hard to relinquish all hope for this life even when that of a future is not withdrawn."<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Lee seems to have had a tendency to moralize. In the same letter quoted above she wrote: "I can sympathise in your happiness with your first baby. None but a mother can tell the depth and purity of that joy. I pray that she may live to be a blessing and comfort to you both."

As Dr. Jones said Mrs. Lee was fond of reading and it was her husband's pleasure to read to her in the evening, after he had entertained her with accounts of what was doing in the College, and the news of the village. "There was a marked change in the character of his reading after 1867. From that date he used no more library books on American history or biography. Poetry, choice fiction, current magazines and European history filled the remainder of his literary record. - - - It is probable that this change from his own unfinished task was prompted by the literary tastes of his invalid wife, who as he said, suffered that winter and spring 'more than usual' - - - from her rheumatic pains."<sup>75</sup>

Mrs. Lee was not only interested in the books which she read or which were read to her but she was herself skilled in the art of writing. In a sketch of her father in the introduction to his Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington she shows respect and restraint in her presentation of praise, both of her father and mother, using outside opinion rather than her own. She uses the research method in writing,

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74. A letter of Mrs. Lee's dated Sept. 12, 1868; on file at the Confederate Museum, Richmond, Virginia.

75. Riley, F.L., p. 170-171.



using letters and other authentic papers to prove her statements and also giving foot-notes for her sources. This may have come from her association with her father and his literary work. Quoting from her introduction it is seen that she had a keen sense of the value of the historic events of which her father wrote. "It is with much diffidence that I offer to the public the Recollections of my father, in their present unfinished state. They were written by him at intervals of many months, sometimes of a year, during a period of thirty years, and were nearly all first published in the National Intelligencer, printed at Washington City, in the District of Columbia. They have been extensively copied by the press throughout the Union, and sometimes quoted by historians, but from the perishable character of the vehicle by which they were conveyed to the public, it is to be doubted whether a perfect copy of the series is preserved, except the one contained in this volume.

"For many years my father, influenced by the urgent solicitations of friends in all parts of the Union, entertained a design to arrange and revise his Recollections, supply omissions, and have them published in the more durable form of a volume, as a legacy to his countrymen. But this design was never carried out; and now, actuated by filial affection, and a feeling that these recollections of the Father of his Country, by his adopted son should not be lost - that leaves so precious should not be scattered to the winds - I have undertaken to perform what he left undone."<sup>76</sup>

Mrs. Lee had some knowledge of French literature as well as that of her own country. In an account of Nelly Custis<sup>77</sup>, Mrs. Lee

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76. Custis, G.W.P., Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington, p. 9.

77. Daughter of Martha Washington by her first marriage.



wrote. "She was often urged to write her memoirs, which might even have surpassed, in interest to her countrymen, those of Madame de Sevigne and others of equal note, as pen gave free utterance to her lively imagination and clear memory."<sup>78</sup>

The General's wife was always interested in what was going on around her and read the newspapers. General Lee wrote: "Your mamma is up to her eyes in news."<sup>79</sup> At one time during the War he wrote: "I am sorry, as you say, that the movements of the armies cannot keep pace with the expectations of the editors of papers. I know they can regulate matters satisfactorily to themselves on paper."<sup>80</sup>

The General's wife had a practical knowledge of medicine. This was characteristic of the Southern women of her day. They had gained much of their knowledge taking care of their large families and slaves. A story told to Captain Lee by Colonel Shipp, Superintendent of V.M.I., illustrates this knowledge of Mrs. Lee. Captain Lee wrote: "He tells me that he was ill for some weeks, laid up in his room. My father seemed much interested in his getting well. He said that he would consult Mrs. Lee ('Who is a great doctor!'), and he finally brought a bottle of something in which sudor-berries were the chief ingredient. Colonel Shipp found out afterward that the sudor-berries had been sent from the 'White House' and that my mother had concocted the medicine."<sup>81</sup> As a grandmother she was interested in the health of her little grandson Robert. Both she and General Lee were very fond of children. The grandfather writes to his son: "I wish I could have visited you and Rob and have seen my daughter and grandson, but that pleasure, I trust is

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78. Custis, G.W.P., p. 40.

79. Lee, R.E., p. 207.

80. Ibid., p. 51.

81. Ibid., p. 324.



preserved for a future day. How is the little fellow? I was much relieved after parting from you to hear from the doctors it was the best time for him to have the whooping cough - in which opinion the 'Mim'<sup>82</sup> concurs."<sup>83</sup>

This interest in people on the part of Mrs. Lee was extended to the students at the college. A most amusing incident occurred where her well-meant interest was misplaced. People came from all over the world to Lexington to see General Lee. Among the visitors from afar were the Marquis of Lorne and the Hon. Mr. Cooper, who were on a tour of the United States. "They came to Lexington to see General Lee. When they called at the house there happened to be no servant at hand, and the General meeting them at the door, received their cards. Not having on his glasses, he could not read the names, but ushered the strangers into the parlour, and presented them to Mrs. Lee, without calling their names. My mother thought the tall, slender youth was a new student, and entered into conversation with him as such. Struck by his delicate appearance she cautioned him against the harsh winter climate of the mountains, and urged him to be careful of his health. On this Mr. Cooper explained who his companion was, and there was much amusement over this mistake." <sup>84</sup>

Literature was not the only art for which Mary Lee had a talent. She could use the brush as well as the pen. Her artistic interest had probably been developed by her early association with her father. "One

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82. Mrs. Lee's nickname.

83. Lee, R.E., p. 352.

84. Ibid., p. 244.



of the principal amusements of Mr. Custis's later years, was painting revolutionary battle-scenes in which Washington participated. Upon these he worked with the greatest enthusiasm. Considering the circumstances under which they were produced - painted without first composed or drawn in outline, by an entirely self-taught hand more than threescore and ten years old - they are remarkable."<sup>85</sup> It is a strange coincidence that father and daughter both in the closing years of their lives amused themselves painting pictures. Mary Lee tinted pictures of her husband and relatives and sold them for the benefit of the church. There are in existence two original landscape oil paintings made by Mary Lee for her son, G.W. Custis Lee, while his father was at war in Mexico.<sup>86</sup> Mr. Edward V. Valentine<sup>87</sup> said that Mrs. Lee was not an artist, but that she painted for pleasure, and that she could appreciate other works of art.<sup>88</sup> In a letter to a friend she told of her work for the church and her difficulties. "I received," she wrote, "The \$3.00 safely and send the pictures, which I am sorry are not better; but my brushes and materials for work are so indifferent that none but an artist can understand my difficulties . . . . I want to tell you also that I have so many more orders for pictures than I can fill that I fear my poor old eyes will give out, and I shall not sell any more for less than \$1.00 apiece for those that are autographed and colored, and half a dollar for General Washington not colored. One

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85. Custis, G.W.P., p. 68.

86. Added to Lee collection at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, The Baltimore Sun, March 16, 1930.

87. Sculptor of Lee Recumbent Statue at Lexington, Virginia.

88. In a conversation with Mr. Valentine, November 8, 1929.



The servant problem was an ever present one and both Mrs. Lee and the General were trying to adjust themselves to the new situation of servants being able to leave whenever they felt like it. Captain Lee told of the trouble his parents were having to obtain desirable help. "In the absence of my mother, my father was trying to better the staff of servants. Their inefficiency was the drawback to our comfort then, as it is now. Often the recommendation of some was only the name of the estate from which they came."<sup>95</sup> Mrs. Lee sought the aid of her friend Miss Mary Cocke, of Brems, Virginia. The former wrote: "I have sent a letter to your mother, dear Mary, this evening by the Boat, and Mildred informed me that you had written her sometime ago about a servant we could get in your neighborhood.

"If she is one you would recommend entirely I would like to engage her, as my maid is about to leave me, indeed she says she has an engagement for the 1st of May, so that she cannot go down in the Boat with me, she is one I have been anxious to part with for some time and am glad that she has decided the matter for me as I hate to change though my patience has been tried with her a long time. If the girl you spoke of is available I thought it might be well to take her with me to the 'White House' as I pass your home, though it is not important so I can get her on my return.

"I want a respectable neat girl, good humored and willing.

"Her duties will be light as we keep two now in the house and I only offer \$5.00 a month. She will sometimes have to assist in the washing or ironing but never to have the burden of it.

"If she suits me I shall be willing to raise her wages."<sup>96</sup>

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95. Ibid., p. 239.

96. The Richmond News Leader, May 15, 1929. Date of letter not given.



Quoting from a letter to the Honorable Thomas Lawrence Jones: "My Dear Sir: I beg to be allowed to tender you my sincere thanks for your efforts to have restored to Mrs. Lee certain family relics in the Patent Office in Washington. The facts related in your speech in the House of Representatives on the 3d inst., so far as known to me, are correct, and had I conceived the view taken of the matter by Congress I should have endeavoured to dissuade Mrs. Lee from applying for them. It may be a question with some whether the retention of these articles is more 'an insult' in Buildings, 'to the loyal people of the United States', than their restoration; but of this I am willing that they should be the judge, and since Congress decided to keep them, she must submit. However her thanks to you, Sir, are not the less fervent for your kind intercession in her behalf, and with highest regards, I am with great respect,

Your obedient servant,

R.E.Lee" 103

Every summer of their years in Lexington General Lee arranged that Mrs. Lee should spend several months at one of the many medicinal springs in the neighboring mountains, as much that she might be surrounded by new scenes and faces as for the benefit of the waters. There was always a great bustle when setting out on a journey. "The stage is at the door to carry us to Goshen, and if Mrs. Lee's strength permits, we hope to reach the Warm Springs to-night. ----

Mildred is quite well again and is flying about this morning with great activity. Agnes is following with slower steps, Mrs. Lee is giving her last injunctions to Sam and Eliza. Letitia<sup>104</sup> is looking on with wonder

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103. Ibid., p. 338. (These relics were restored to the family in 1903 by order of Pres. McKinley.)

104. A new maid of Mrs. Lee's.



at the preparations, and trying to get a right conception of the place to which she is going, which she seems to think is something between a steel-trap and a spring-gun. Custis is waiting to help his mother into the stage, and you see how patient I am." <sup>105</sup> Thus wrote General Lee before going on one of their visits to the springs. The hotel authorities were always eager to accommodate the Lees. "Every possible attention that love, admiration, and respect could prompt was paid my father by the guests at the Springs. My mother and sisters shared it all with him for any attention and kindness shown them went straight to his heart."<sup>106</sup> After spending three weeks at 'The White', my father's party went to Old Sweet Springs, where they were all made very comfortable, one of the parlours being turned into a bedroom for my mother, so that in her wheeled chair she could go out on the verandas and into the ball-room."<sup>107</sup> One of the guests at the White Sulphur Springs remembers Mrs. Lee as a dark-eyed lady sitting in a rocking chair, wearing a calico dress, low shoes and blue cotton stockings, which most probably she had knitted herself, for Virginia ladies often knitted their own stockings, and around her several children were playing.<sup>108</sup> Another guest tells of her experiences while at "the White" with friends. Upon their arrival after a dusty journey they attempted to go into some vacant rooms to freshen up. They were met by a colored maid who addressed them in this fashion: "Honey sure I is sorry, I don't like to see you young ladies put out; your Mammy likes for all real quality folks to have the best of eberythin' the way I done

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105. Lee, R.E., p. 320.

106. Ibid., p. 276.

107. Ibid.

108. Brock, p. 326.



'tend to young ladies 'fore de war, but I jist dassent let nobody come into them rooms nohow. Why Gen'l Robert Lee hisself done tell me keep them rooms safe tell his Mistis come. He rode 'long fust on old Traveler, he did. He's a grand gemmen, he is."<sup>109</sup> These ladies were finally settled in one of the cottages and a fellow sojourner at the resort described it as follows: "Our cottage was in the 'Baltimore Row', a neat, whitewashed structure with a vine-clad veranda along the front, and between us and the wide columned hotel, a stretch of lawn shaded by great trees. The 'North Carolina Row', with the yellow washad walls and high porches supported by pillars, was on our right. Close by was General Lee's cottage, on the veranda of which stood the invalid chair of his wife."<sup>110</sup>

Mrs. Lee took very few long journeys after the War. This was because of her ill health. She visited her son at the "White House" and visited Richmond and Arlington once. General Lee was never anxious for her to undertake a trip. In a letter to his son around Christmas 1869 he wrote: "It is too cold for your mother to travel now. She says she will go down in the spring, but you know what an exertion it is for her to leave home, and the inconvenience if not the suffering is great. The anticipation, however, is pleasing to her and encourages hope, and I like her to enjoy it, though am not sanguine that she will realize it."<sup>111</sup> She did go in the spring. Noted above she also went to Richmond and Arlington. "She returned to Richmond once, on her way to the White House. She then sat in the cabin of the canal boat and held a big reception.

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109. Bond, C., p. 18.

110. Bond, C., p. 21.

111. Lee, R.E., p. 378.



So many people brought her flowers that tubs were set around to hold them, and the shabby canal banks appeared like a gay boulevard filled with smart people. Once, too, she went to Arlington, but the mighty changes made her ill. 'Let me get a drink of water from the spring', she said, 'and then take me away.'<sup>112</sup>

Mrs. Lee was deeply religious and it was her faith that helped her endure the greatest tragedy of her life - the death of General Lee. She had hoped that she would go first, and being in such poor health it seemed probable, but her desire was not fulfilled. On October 2, 1870 her dearly beloved husband passed away. On that day she wrote the following letter to a cousin. "My dear Cousin Mary:<sup>113</sup> I have been thinking of writing to you for a long time but this day of my great sorrow I feel that I can do nothing else and I must do something. I have prayed and wept till my fountain of tears seems dried up and all my prayers to spare my husband's life have been unanswered so that I can only now pray Thy will Oh God be done for me and mine. This morning at 10 o'clock he expired. - - We all prayed God so fervently to prolong a life so important to his family and country but He in his mysterious Providence thought best to call him to those mansions of Rest which he has prepared for those who love and serve Him and Oh what a rest to his toilsome and eventful life, so humble was he as a Christian that he said not long ago to me he wished he felt sure of his acceptance. I said all who love and trust in the Savior need not fear. He did not reply but a more upright and conscientious Christian never lived. He has been for the last two years fully impressed with the belief that he should not live long, but I thought it was only

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112. Brock, R.A., p. 344.

113. Sister of Bishop Meade, Bishop of Virginia



because he did not feel well and I did not feel as if he could die at least before me, and was selfish enough to wish that I might be spared what I now endure, thinking too my life was of so little importance compared to his, nothing could add to his estimation in the hearts of his countrymen and yet I was ambitious enough to hope the day might come when in a political sense at least he might again be its Deliverer from the thralldom which oppresses it. By our country I mean the South. ---- Poor Virginia seems not to have filled as yet the cup of her sorrows. The visitations of Providence seem to be increased upon her flood and flame. The world does indeed seem to be completely sitrred up and were we assured in Scripture that the Millenium had to come before the great day, when the elements would melt with fervent heat we might suppose it was now coming to a close. You and I my dear cousin I trust in the mercy of God may be safely sheltered ere that day, in company of the Redeemer and with so many of our loved ones who have gone before. ---- I pray that his noble example may stimulate our youth to a course of uprightness which never wavered from the path of duty at any sacrifice of ease or pleasure so long too has the will of God been the guiding star of his actions. I have never truly felt the purity of his character as now when I have nothing left me but his memory, a memory which I know will be cherished in many hearts besides my own. I will soon follow him but his children what a loss to them. I pray his death may be blessed to them for dearly they all loved him."<sup>114</sup> Mary Lee also told of her husband's last days and in her actions at the time her irritability manifested itself. She wrote: "My husband came in. We had been waiting tea for him, and I remarked:

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114. Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. XXX, p. 23.



'You have kept us waiting a long time. Where have you been'? He did not reply, but stood up as if to say Grace. Yet no word proceeded from his lips, and he sat down in his chair perfectly upright and with a sublime air of resignation on his countenance, and did not attempt a reply to our inquiries. That look was never to be forgotten, and I have no doubt he felt that his hour had come for though he submitted to the doctors, who were immediately summoned and who had not even reached their homes from the same vestry-meeting, yet his whole demeanour during his illness showed one who had taken leave of earth. --- He slept a great deal, but knew us all, greeted us with a kindly pressure of the hand, and loved to have us around him."<sup>115</sup>

The executive committee of the Lee Memorial Association asked Mrs. Lee to indicate her preference in regard to the monument which was to be erected by the association. She suggested the distinguished Virginia sculptor, Edward V. Valentine, who had made several busts of General Lee from life. After examining various drawings and photographs she selected as a suitable design a recumbent figure of General Lee lying asleep upon the battle field. The design was suggested to her by Ranch's figure of Louis of Prussia in the mausoleum at Charlottenburg. The monument was to be of white marble and placed over the remains of General Lee in the University Memorial Chapel at Lexington.<sup>116\*</sup>

Mary Custis Lee and her eldest son George Washington Custis Lee were made executrix and executor of the General's will. He bequeathed his whole estate, real and personal, to his wife until her death. The

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<sup>115</sup>. Lee, R.E., p. 439.

<sup>116</sup>. Riley, F.L., p. 226.

\* Students of Richmond College made application for the privilege of taking charge of the monument when it was sent to Lexington and to pay the expenses of transportation. This request was granted.





Mrs. Robert E. Lee 1873



estate involved in the will was estimated not to exceed \$50,000.00, \$38,750 of which was in stocks and bonds and the remainder in land situated at Floyd, Hardy and Harper's Ferry, all in the state of  
117  
Virginia.

Mary Lee after her husband's death continued to make her home in Lexington with her three daughters Mary, Mildred and Agnes and her son Custis Lee, the other two sons had their homes on their respective estates. On October 15, 1873 her daughter Agnes died. Thus was added new grief to her already broken spirit that had battled so nobly against  
118  
ill-health and adversity.

Three weeks after this fresh tax on her feeble strength Mary Lee died on November 6. In the southern news papers throughout the country appeared the notice of her death and eulogistic articles recounting the series of misfortunes which they felt culminated in her death.

From the University in Lexington where Mrs. Lee and the General had spent their latter years came the following tribute in the student publication. "Tempting as the theme is, we forbear to offer any eulogy on the character of this women so venerated and loved by the entire community in which she resided, related to our University - we may say linked to its history and its destiny, by so strong and tender ties, and around whom there has gathered for years past a degree of public interest and affectionate solicitude that has never attached to any other women in the history of our country. It is enough to say that in intelligence and in refinement of taste, in kindness of heart and attractiveness of manners,

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117. Copy from Will Book 21, p. 179.

118. Southern Collegian: Vol. 6-10, 1873-78. Nov. 8, 1873, p. 4.



in cheerfulness under the heaviest reverses of fortune and the agonies of bodily pain, in sympathy and in benefactions toward the impoverished and suffering people of her country, in her manifold and ceaseless self-denials and labors on behalf of religion and the church of her fathers and of her choice, - in all this she was an ornament to her sex, was 119  
worthy of her illustrious ancestry and worthy of her illustrious husband."

The funeral obsequies took place Friday, November 7, in the Memorial Chapel in Lexington. Her three sons, W. H. F. Lee, Custis Lee, and Robert E. Lee, Jr., and her daughter were present, besides a large concourse of friends. She was placed beside her husband in the memorial room. Business was entirely suspended in the town and many places were draped in mourning. The services were dignified and expressive of the honor and esteem felt by the South for the wife beloved through 120  
so many years by its defeated chieftain.

Mary Lee who had once been the possessor of large estates left the the following will to dispose of her rather slight possessions at her death. Only four of her children shared in the estate as her sons W. H. F. Lee and Robert E. Lee Jr., had agreed to relinquish all benefit in it. The estate was to be divided equally between her daughters and son G. W. Custis Lee. If the Arlington estate was returned to the family by the United States Government or said Government should pay for the estate then the fourth portion inherited by G. W. Custis Lee should go to his sisters and be divided equally between them. Mary Lee appointed her sons G. W. Custis Lee and W. H. Fitzhugh Lee Executors of her will. 121

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119. Ibid

120. The Baltimore Sun, (Morning edition), Nov. 10, 1873.

121. From a copy of the original owned by Dr. Douglas S. Freeman.



With Mrs. Lee's death ended the life of one of a cycle of unique historical figures. The touch with the Old South and its part in forming the young Republic, the line of famous soldiers and charming women of the old school were broken. With her generation's passing came the birth of a new civilization, based on a different economic system, which would create a different type of life from the age in which she lived.



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