

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.  
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Five

## Robert E. Lee

### LESSON IDEA

To show that General Robert E. Lee was more than the commander of the Confederate Army. He was a man of greatness who had deep personal convictions and a firm belief in the sovereignty of the individual states.

### PREPARATION

Review the two previous lessons for an understanding of the background of the War Between the States.

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**A**N ADMIRER of Robert E. Lee once said of him: "He was a Caesar without his ambition; a Frederick without his tyranny; a Napoleon without his selfishness and a Washington without his reward." What was there about this man that inspired such dynamic and heroic comparisons? What was there about him that both friend and foe respected?

Perhaps it was Lee's honesty that drew men and women to him; perhaps it was his stern discipline and military brilliance balanced by humbleness and compassion.

No man is perfect, of course, and Lee was no exception, but occasionally we meet a man whose life is so extraordinary that we feel compelled to try to imitate it. The men and women who knew Robert E. Lee felt him to be such a man. Have you ever met a person you admired so much you wished to be like him? What did you admire about this individual? [*Encourage discussion.*]

When Lee was eleven, his father died, leaving a sickly wife and five children to fend for themselves. Lee's brothers were away from home, his

older sister was too frail to be of much help with chores, and his other sister too young.

So, at the age of eleven, when other companions were enjoying the carefree days of boyhood, Robert E. Lee was forced to accept the responsibilities of an adult — the head of a large household.

Although he must have had to give up many things, he never gave up his dream of becoming a professional soldier like his father, "Light Horse" Harry Lee, who had fought side by side with Washington in the Revolutionary War. Robert E. Lee's goal was to attend West Point, and to achieve it, he knew he had to study diligently. Somehow, amid the pressing duties of home and family, the determined young man also found time for long hours of study. Benjamin Hallowell, his instructor at school, was amazed at Lee's self-discipline and his maturity. "He was never behind time at his studies," said Hallowell; "never failed in a single recitation; was perfectly observant of the rules and regulations of the institution; was gentlemanly, unobtrusive and respectful in all his deportment to teachers and his fellow students."

The long hours of study paid off. Lee was admitted to West Point Military Academy in 1825, and graduated four years later with the second highest marks in his class. His popularity as a cadet was as well remembered as his seriousness as a student. Years later a schoolmate was to recall fondly: "There was always about him a dignity which repelled improper familiarity, and yet a genial courtesy and joyous humor, often passing into and creating delightful merriment, that rendered him a charming companion. . . . The posses-

sor of these excellences could not but be a universal favorite. No other feeling toward him was ever experienced, I believe, by any one of the several hundred fellow students from all parts of the United States.”

Certainly he was strikingly handsome – barely an-inch-and-a-half short of six feet, brown of eye, black of hair, lean at the waist, burly at the shoulder. On horseback, he looked commanding, stately, like a knight of old.

Lee’s first assignment as a newly commissioned Army officer was in the South, helping in the construction of forts. And it was at Fort Monroe in Virginia in 1831 that he took the final step in a romantic courtship of many months by marrying Mary Custis of Arlington, George Washington’s charming granddaughter.

But almost immediately the Army drew him away from wife and home as the young nation he served pushed its boundaries westward. He was transferred to St. Louis to make plans for the improvement of the Mississippi River as a transportation route. In 1847, he was fighting with General Winfield Scott in Mexico against the army commanded by Santa Anna. [*Review the causes and outcome of the Mexican War from Lesson #51.*] After the Mexican War was won, Lee returned to the East and a three-year term as superintendent of West Point. His next adventure took him west into Comanche territory with the newly formed Second Cavalry Regiment, to establish a series of Army posts.

Though away from his growing family for years at a time, Lee, nevertheless, kept in constant touch with them through letters. To his wife, he 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 take delight, but experience no pleasure in a strange crowd.” Lee, though a popular officer, shunned liquor, tobacco, and a frivolous social life.

In his letters to Mary he often mentioned the awesome grandeur of the West and the depths of his faith: “I enjoyed the mountains as I rode along. The views are magnificent and the valleys so beautiful, the scenery so peaceful. What a glorious world Almighty God has given us.” But to his children, of whom there were seven, he wrote, with

parental sternness, of self-discipline and responsibility. On the subject of money, his advice was straight to the point. “I hope you will continue never to exceed your means,” he said. “It will save you much anxiety and mortification and enable you to maintain your independence of character and feeling. It is easier to make our wishes conform to our means, than our means conform to our wishes. In fact, we want but little. Our happiness depends upon our independence, the success of our operation, prosperity of our plans, health, contentment, and the esteem of our friends.”

**I**N LOOKING at Lee’s character as revealed in these letters, or in his memoirs, or in the comments made by other men about him, it is easy to conclude that he was a gentleman. But what do we mean by “gentleman”? Perhaps we should listen to Lee himself on the subject. A memorandum found in his personal papers following his death defined “gentleman” in this way:

“The forbearing use of power does not only form a touchstone, but the manner in which an individual enjoys certain advantages over others is a test of a true gentleman. The power which the strong have over the weak, the magistrate over the citizen, the employer over the employed, the educated over the unlettered, the experienced over the confiding, even the clever over the silly – the forbearing or inoffensive use of all this power or authority or a total abstinence from it when the case admits, it will show the gentleman in a plain light. The gentleman does not needlessly and unnecessarily remind an offender of a wrong he may have committed against him. He can not only forgive, he can forget; and he strives for nobleness of self and mildness of character which impart sufficient strength to let the past be but the past. *A true man of honor feels humbled himself when he cannot help humbling others.*”

This is the nature of the man who in the spring of 1861 was offered top field command of three

#### FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

Lee’s life as a child is presented in *Robert E. Lee* by Helen Monsell, available for \$2.95 from your local American Opinion Bookstore or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

different forces by three different governments, a compliment which must be historically unique. Abraham Lincoln, shortly after his inauguration, asked Lee to command the army of the North. The Confederate States of America made a similar offer as they began to organize a Southern Army. And the State of Virginia, not yet in the Confederacy but determined to defend its soil, picked Lee to be its foremost defender.

**L**EE'S views on both slavery and secession were well known in both the North and the South. On slavery, he had written:

"The best men of the South have long desired to do away with the institution and were quite willing to see it abolished. But with them in relation to this subject the question has ever been: What will you do with the freed people? That is the serious question today. Unless some humane course, based upon wisdom and Christian principles, is adopted, you do them a great injustice in setting them free."

His views on secession were as clear. In January of 1861 he had written: "I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation. . . . Secession is nothing but revolution. The framers of our Constitution never [would have] exhausted so much labor, wisdom, and forbearance in its formation and surrounded it with so many guards and securities, if it was intended to be broken by every member of the Confederacy at will . . . . It is idle to talk of secession."

Yet when his home state of Virginia seceded from the Union, Lee sided with the Confederate cause. Why? What was there about Lee's character that prompted him to resign his commission in the United States Army, in which he had served honorably for over thirty years, to join the secessionists? One biographer of Lee gives us a partial answer by noting: "When the Union was first established, its founders had an intense and wholesome dread of centralized power. . . from the very beginning the federal government absorbed more and more power to itself and the states tended gradually to lose even the authority which

had originally been left them. In one sense, the Civil War was a protest on the part of the South against this evolution and an attempt to restore the constitutional balance as the men of 1787 had planned it." In justifying leaving the Union to join the fight for the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee himself said, "I had no other guide, nor had I any other object than the defense of those principles of American liberty upon which the constitutions of the several States were originally founded; and unless they are strictly observed, I fear there will be an end to Republican government in this country."

It is clear that slavery was not Lee's main concern; it was the preservation of the sovereignty of the individual states. He believed that each state had the right to determine its own affairs without intervention from the central government in Washington, D.C. His comments about the usurpation of power by the federal government are particularly timely today as the central government daily increases its control over the once sovereign states and their peoples. Was he right in fearing "an end to Republican government?" What is a republican form of government? [*Encourage discussion.*]

**U**NDER LEE'S command, the Army of Northern Virginia – as the Confederate Army was called – launched spectacular assaults against the numerically superior forces of the North and achieved many victories. His leadership was exacting and stern. Deserters and thieves were shot on the spot, as an example to others. Yet his compassion and sense of duty were constant. As one biographer said: "He rarely relaxed his energy in anything calculated to amuse him, but, when not riding along his lines, or among the camps, to see in person that the troops were properly cared for, generally passed his time in close attention to official duties."

He had no taste for war or what it did to men. Even in the flush of an overwhelming Southern victory, he was heard to say: "It is well that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it." But as the months dragged into years, there were fewer victories and more defeats. The Northern naval blockade slowly but surely strangled the South's supply lines, and Lee's troops were deci-



mated by disease, desertion, and starvation. Gettysburg was the final breaking point. Lee, surveying the battlefield on which, in the brief span of three days, tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers were killed, knew the Southern cause was lost. The grim horror of death, the bodies of once-happy youth sprawled across the battlefield, caused Lee almost more anguish and heartache than he could bear. "His face was still calm," wrote a friend, "but his carriage was no longer erect, as his soldiers has been used to seeing it. The trouble of those last days had already ploughed great furrows in his forehead. His eyes were red as if with weeping; his cheeks sunken and haggard; his face colorless. No one who looked upon him then, as he stood there in full view of the disastrous end, can ever forget the intense agony written upon his features. And yet he was calm, self-possessed, and deliberate."

The hope of victory faded rapidly for the South in the months following Gettysburg.

At last, with his army overpowered and encircled by Northern troops, Lee knew he had no choice but to surrender. When he informed his officers of this decision, one officer protested, asking him what history would say of his surrender. Lee replied philosophically, "Yes, I know. They will say hard things of us; they will not understand how we were overwhelmed by numbers; but that is not the question, Colonel; the question is, is it right to surrender this army? If it is right, then I will take all the responsibility." The surrender to the Union forces under General Ulysses S. Grant took place at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. The following day Lee issued a final message to his troops: "You will take with you," said Lee, "the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed; and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you His blessing and protection. With an increasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

### **Concluding Thought**

Shortly after the surrender, Lee was named President of Washington College (now Washington

and Lee University), and spent his remaining years guiding the young people he loved in educational pursuits. When he died on October 12, 1870, the *New York Herald* wrote: "The expressions of regret which sprang from the few who surrounded the bedside of the dying soldier and Christian on yesterday will be swelled today into the mighty voice of sorrow, resounding throughout our country and extending over all parts of the world where his great genius and his many virtues are known. For not to the Southern people alone shall be limited the tribute of a tear over the dead Virginian. Here in the North, forgetting and forgiving all the years of bloodshed and agony, we have long since ceased to look upon him as a Confederate leader, but have claimed him as one of ourselves . . . for Robert Edward Lee was an American, and the great nation that gave him birth would be today unworthy of such a son if she regarded him lightly." What more can be said of this great American patriot?

### **DURING THE WEEK**

For a deeper understanding of the War Between the States, check your local library for photographic histories of this clash between the North and the South. Use these histories in conjunction with future lessons on the war.

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### **The Family Heritage Series**

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