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THE HOUSE THAT BUILT LEE

*Reinterpreting Robert E. Lee Through his Life at Arlington House*

BY

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BA, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 2017

BFA, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 2014

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

September, 2020

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On August 14, 2020

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*to Joseph,  
for being my home*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisory committee at the University of New Hampshire. My lead advisor Professor Jason Sokol, Professor Jessica Lepler, and Professor Kimberly Alexander—thank you for your unending guidance, patience, and inspiration. Amidst such a tumultuous year, this project was filled with its own twists, turns, and unexpected curveballs, all of which I could not have handled without your support and encouragement. You were all so enthusiastic of this research and believed in me from the start, *thank you*.

I'd also like to thank UNH's History Department Chair Kurk Dorsey, for seeing me through the initial (and sometimes arduous) development of this project, for helping me assemble such an amazing committee, and convincing me to stay true to my passion, no matter what. Thank you to Professor Cynthia Van Zandt, for reassuring me that this story—even in its earliest, messiest stages—had value, and for pushing me to tell it. And of course, thank you to Katie Rowe, for being both an exemplary friend and the creative genius behind such a snappy title. Thank you all.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE HOUSE THAT BUILT LEE

*Reinterpreting Robert E. Lee Through his Life at Arlington House*

by

Cecilia Paquette

University of New Hampshire

Since 1955, Arlington House has been a memorial to Confederate General Robert E. Lee, despite his beliefs in slavery and white supremacy. For almost a century, scholarship on Lee has been comprised of more positive interpretations, yet historians have recently begun to challenge these versions of Lee by examining his life more fully. This study aims to view Lee through the history of Arlington House, in order to more closely understand his character and to underscore that he is not as noble as was once thought. Building on the history of Arlington's enslaved community this thesis asks: how did the legacy of enslavement at Arlington steer Lee toward joining the Confederacy in 1861? In this context, the legacy of enslavement at Arlington refers to slaveholding methods and traditions that existed before the house was even built.

By analyzing the material history of Arlington within the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century political ideologies, alongside slave narratives and Lee's personal letters, I have found that Lee's years at Arlington House were a significant influence on his decision to join the Confederacy. Lee's experiences with Arlington's enslaved as well as his commitment to protecting Arlington House reveal that he actively sought to protect the institution of slavery, and therefore should no longer be positively memorialized at Arlington House, or elsewhere.

## INTRODUCTION

“I remembered what my father had said about the South bearing within itself the seeds of defeat, the Confederacy being conceived already moribund. We were sick from an old malady, he said: incurable romanticism and misplaced chivalry, too much Walter Scott and Dumas read too seriously. We were in love with the past, he said; in love with death.”

— Shelby Foote, *Shiloh*<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 1803, the annual Arlington Sheep-Shearing festival was said to have assembled the noblest men of the country.<sup>2</sup> Each year, on the thirtieth of April, white residents of Washington, D.C., Georgetown and Alexandria would ferry across the Potomac River, disembark on a specially-built wooden wharf, and enjoy the festivities at Arlington Spring. Over the years, various improvements were made to develop Arlington Spring into a picturesque country escape for the residents of the bustling city across the river. By the 1830s, guests were greeted by enticing, evergreen laurels and dewey vines dripping with sweet, fragrant honeysuckle. A natural spring flowed past a massive oak tree that grew near a dancing pavilion.

From there, an expanse of proud oaks, maples, cedars, and locusts spread across 8-acres of fenced in pastoral paradise. From its inception, Arlington Spring made up in beauty and recreation what it lacked in reality. Strategically placed at arm’s length but always within sight was Arlington farm, full of crop fields, livestock, dilapidated outbuildings, and an entire community of enslaved men, women, and children. And while some of Arlington’s enslaved people sometimes served guests at the Spring, free blacks were never permitted.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shelby Foote, *Shiloh* (New York: The Dial Press, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of George Washington by his Adopted Son George Washington Parke Custis; with a Memoir of the Author by his Daughter; and Illustrative and Explanatory notes by Benson J. Lossing* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860), 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Hanna, *Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Cultural Landscape Report History, Vol. I.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Capital Region, Cultural Landscape Program, 2001), 43-44.

The Arlington Sheep-Shearing festival was a celebration of the Early Republic's commitment to agriculture and animal husbandry; a jovial ceremony that not only promoted, but honored the growing nation's achievements in domestic manufacturing. George Washington Parke Custis, the architect of this event, among other things, was not only the grandson of Martha Washington, but also acknowledged as the adopted grandson of President George Washington.<sup>4</sup> Custis received from Washington not only his namesake, but his principles in agriculture and economy. Custis yearned for a completely self-sufficient America; one that possessed the strength, intelligence, and resolve to raise its own superior sheep, improve farming machinery, and produce wool that could rival Europe's.<sup>5</sup> After receiving a sample of Arlington wool from Custis, Secretary of State James Madison wrote back to assure the gentleman farmer that his exploits in improving American wool should be considered a patriotic example and a great success: "It gives me pleasure," wrote Madison, "to find your attention to this interesting subject does not relax, and that you are so successfully inviting it to other public-spirited gentleman."<sup>6</sup>

Madison's high praise of Custis, however, proved to be sorely misplaced. As exciting a prospect it may have been at its start, Custis's sheep breeding never acquired any lasting success, and the Sheep-Shearing festival came to an end as well. While the urgency of the War of 1812 made such a convivial celebration seem inessential and frivolous, it was actually Custis's overall lack of funds that failed to keep the event going; even construction on Custis's hilltop mansion

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<sup>4</sup> Custis, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Julia King, *George Hadfield: Architect of the Federal City* (Dorchester: Dorset Press, 2014), 112.

<sup>6</sup> Custis, 66.

was halted.<sup>7</sup> However, guests were still persuaded to visit as frequently as possible, and did.<sup>8</sup>

While visitors enjoyed the recreational luxuries of such an idyllic resort so close to the Federal City, the greatest allure of Arlington Spring lay in Custis himself, or rather, his penchant for regaling friends and strangers alike with his tales and recollections of George Washington.

Arlington was more than just a tribute to Washington, and more than a jovial social retreat for Federal City locals; it was a plantation. A plantation, by definition, usually refers to a farm or estate that supports the cultivation of crops by resident laborers.<sup>9</sup> Not just any crops, however; in-demand, moneymaking crops that often required intense and grueling labor, like sugar, tobacco, or cotton, usually in a tropical or semitropical climate.<sup>10</sup> Arlington's farm, along with its Sheep-Shearing Festival, was part of Custis's grand plans for agricultural independence on a national scale. Unfortunately, Arlington became nothing more than a family seat, and by 1857, was barely self-sufficient. The Arlington estate eventually became reliant on the profits from Custis's other inherited properties of White House and Romancock on the Pamunkey River in eastern Virginia.<sup>11</sup> Yet Arlington's failure as a profitable farm could not take away from its symbolic importance. After all, no guest could be bothered to concern himself with any passing thoughts on the farm's productivity while he was picnicking under the shade of Washington's war tent, or listening to illustrious recollections of the Revolutionary War general's many

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<sup>7</sup> Hanna, 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43. By the 1850s, it was estimated that anywhere between 50 and 200 people would visit Arlington Spring every day in the summer months.

<sup>9</sup> *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "plantation (*n.*)," accessed December 13, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plantation>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Poole, *On Hallowed Ground: the Story of Arlington National Cemetery* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 11.

adventures with the Marquis de Lafayette. The view from the war tent, however, included scenes of a functioning plantation, including slaves' quarters and operating fields.

Custis never referred to Arlington as a plantation.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps because, unlike Custis's other plantations that were always specifically referred to as such, Arlington became a more successful tourist retreat than it did a functioning plantation.<sup>13</sup> Custis and his architect, George Hadfield, specifically designed Arlington to inspire awe, stoke creativity, promote agrarian industriousness, invigorate the soul, and above all, honor a legacy, yet they still somehow found the time to remind Southerners of the region's "peculiar institution."<sup>14</sup> It was not uncommon among Southern plantations at this time to be designed around keeping its enslaved population visible to guests, as it was a display of wealth and power, and Custis had a lot of wealth and power to display.<sup>15</sup> In total, Custis could boast ownership of roughly 196 enslaved people—about sixty resided at Arlington, while the rest toiled away at Romancock or White House or were hired out to other masters.<sup>16</sup>

On the surface, Arlington combined the grandeur of a wealthy plantation, while still exhibiting the simplicity and self-sufficiency of a humble farm. This fell in line with Custis's obsession with superficial appearances and his incessant need to keep the spirit of Washington alive and present. The greatest twist of all, however, was that behind such a conceited facade lay the reality that Arlington was indeed still a Southern plantation that functioned on slave labor.

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<sup>12</sup> Hanna, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 124.

<sup>15</sup> Hanna, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Pryor, 125.

The spirit of Washington that resided over Arlington, however, was not that of a brave general, nor a devoted president; it was the haunting shadow of violent subjugation and human exploitation.<sup>17</sup> G.W.P. Custis's obsession with the past proved to greatly distort the world changing around him.<sup>18</sup>

Though Custis's eighteenth-century agricultural (and moral) values were on their way to becoming antiquated, Arlington's architectural design remained innovative and revolutionary. Its design was meant to impress rapturous feelings of liberty and democracy, as was the intention of most Neoclassical buildings in the United States at this time.<sup>19</sup> Arlington's deep portico and baseless columns were a common part of American Neoclassical architecture that was, up until this time, used exclusively for civic buildings.<sup>20</sup> Such stylistic choices made Arlington famous, and its temple-like facade—though uncommon for a private residence at this time—soon became replicated on dozens of plantations across the South.<sup>21</sup> When considering the creative choices made when designing and constructing Arlington, it becomes clear that the purpose of the structure was a memorial first and a home second. In fact, the general superficiality of the entire estate, as will be discussed, warrants consideration of new historical interpretations.

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<sup>17</sup> George Washington's influence over the story of Arlington will be discussed in the coming chapters, along with an examination of the various slaveholding traditions that affected the enslaved community at Arlington, beginning with Washington and G.W.P. Custis before eventually ending with Robert E. Lee.

<sup>18</sup> Because of the confusion that George Washington Parke Custis's name often generates when discussing both he and General George Washington, I have noticed throughout my research the repeated use of Custis's nickname "Wash" or "Washy," when discussing both men in tandem. Since this thesis seeks to view Custis through a more critical lens, I have chosen "G.W.P." as a more formal shorthand for ease of readership, rather than make use of such an informal, affectionate nickname.

<sup>19</sup> Leland M. Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Massachusetts: Westview Press, 2001), 130 - 132.

<sup>20</sup> King, 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

Arlington was more than just a temple-like tribute to Washington, or a pastoral paradise that entertained its many privileged visitors; it was also once lovingly referred to as “the place where my affections and attachments are more strongly placed than any other place in the world,” by none other than Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Lee was no mere patron of Arlington Spring, however, but—like Custis—was a sort of auxiliary representative of Revolutionary War royalty. His father, “Light-Horse” Harry Lee was the former governor of Virginia, and even fought alongside George Washington, while his wife Mary was none other than Arlington’s child—Custis’s daughter and only heir. Lee was more than Custis’s son-in-law, however, and was trusted enough to be named the eventual executor of his Last Will and Testament—a crucial position that was perhaps more important to understanding Lee’s character than his his military exploits ever were.

Upon Custis’s death in 1857, Arlington’s slaves were not granted their freedom, despite verbal promises by Custis that his death would lead to their manumission. They instead fell into the hands of Lee—someone who exhibited a much tighter grip on their enslavement than Custis had.<sup>22</sup> While whispers of secession passed from ear to ear across the nation, Lee found that his duty remained fixed on rehabilitating his grieving family’s home instead of his military duties. Lee, therefore, took a leave of absence from the Army and—without manumitting Custis’s slaves—began to reorganize and restore Arlington’s farm on his own terms, further alienating the estate’s enslaved in the process.<sup>23</sup> Lee wrote often of his disapproval toward secession, yet he

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<sup>22</sup> Pryor, 265.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-262.

was much more critical of abolition; in fact, he detested it.<sup>24</sup> Until recently, a majority of historians have told us that Lee joined the Confederacy in 1861 because he could not stand against Virginia, yet so little attention has been paid to the fact that he stood firmly against abolition. Various interactions with Arlington's enslaved families both amplify Lee's abuse and confirm his preference for white supremacy. By 1861, abolition not only stood to disrupt Lee's plans to rehabilitate Arlington, it had the potential to destroy the home's legacy as the quintessential representation of traditional Southern gentility.

There are three things to be considered when seeking to evaluate Lee's character. First and foremost are his views on slavery. A favorite quote of Lee scholars comes from a letter Lee wrote to his wife in 1856, in which he acknowledges that "slavery as an institution is a moral & political evil in any Country."<sup>25</sup> Yet what happens quite frequently in Lee scholarship is the careful and decisive exclusion of Lee's words to follow:

It is useless to expatiate on its disadvantages. I think it however a greater evil to the white than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly interested in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially & physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, & I hope will prepare & lead them to better things. How long their subjugation may be necessary is Known & ordered by a wise & merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy. This influence though slow is sure.<sup>26</sup>

What we see here are Lee's resolute feelings toward slavery and abolition. An "evil" institution though it may be, slavery's only cure, according to Lee, lay in the eventual awakening of

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<sup>24</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee, Letter to Mary Anna Custis Lee, December 27, 1856, Encyclopedia Virginia, Last modified, February 1, 2018, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter\\_from\\_Robert\\_E\\_Lee\\_to\\_Mary\\_Randolph\\_Custis\\_Lee\\_December\\_27\\_1856](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Robert_E_Lee_to_Mary_Randolph_Custis_Lee_December_27_1856)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Christian minds over the volatile fervor of abolition. Why does this matter when considering Lee before the war, or when considering the state of the nation that Lee was born into?

Second, the concept of duty and Lee's dedication to it. Precisely what Lee's "duty" was most directed towards has been argued over by countless historians over an expansive amount of time, from Alan T. Nolan's *Lee Considered* in 1991 to Elizabeth Brown Pryor's *Reading the Man* in 2007; and wider still, from Douglas Southall Freeman's *R.E. Lee: A Biography* in 1934 to Sean Heuston's essay, "The Most Famous Thing Robert E. Lee Never Said: Duty, Forgery, and Cultural Amnesia," eighty years later in 2014.<sup>27</sup> Lee's decision to join the Confederacy is often attributed to his statements that his duty lay with his family, his neighbors, and his home state of Virginia, and refusal to raise his sword against any of them. Attention is paid most heavily on his loyalty to Virginia.<sup>28</sup> But what of his family? How might Lee's duty to his family materialize itself in his resignation from the Union Army?

Last to be considered, is Arlington itself, and how a plantation, a mansion, a *home*, becomes the answer to the questions above. Arlington presents itself as the lead character in this narrative partially because of its constancy in Lee's life, but primarily as the vehicle which drove Lee towards both his greatest and darkest moments. Though rarely focused on for more than a few pages or perhaps a chapter, Arlington still commands attention in every Lee biography. It sits in the margins of Lee's life, quietly imposing as both a warm and wholesome safe-haven, and a looming specter of overwhelming responsibility and potential ruin. It was in the White Parlor of

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<sup>27</sup> Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008). Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934). Sean Heuston, "The Most Famous Thing Robert E. Lee Never Said: Duty, Forgery, and Cultural Amnesia," *Journal of American Studies*, 48. 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Korda, *Clouds of Glory: The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 212.

Arlington that the West Point graduate married his young bride, joining a family of Revolutionary torchbearers; it was here that Lee broke free from a troubled past and began a family and a legacy of his own. It was here that Lee contributed to a tradition that exploited human life and chose to resign his commission from the United States Army in favor of such a tradition. It was in the first floor office and studio Lee paced through the dark hours of the night, wrestling the most important decision of his life. It was at Arlington that Lee attempted to save his family's home by walking away from it, never to return.

Lee chose to resign from the U.S. Army in 1861 with his fair share of Southern aristocratic idealism behind him. Lee's military experiences, whether they be accomplishments or blunders, are what has often driven the narratives of most twentieth-century Lee biographies. Yet if we are to take anything away from his famously quippy nickname, "Granny" Lee had led an entire life before the war.<sup>29</sup> At fifty-four years old when the war broke out, Lee had already been a husband of nearly twenty-five years, father to seven children, a brevet-lieutenant colonel of engineers, and a veteran of the Mexican-American War.<sup>30</sup> These are *decades* of life experiences that worked together to shape Lee's character and steer him towards his most critical choices.

With so many fluid forces at work during such a tumultuous era, any number of avenues could be taken to decipher Lee's actions. But where to begin? Douglas Southall Freeman described Lee's decision to join the Confederacy as "the answer he was born to make," yet Lee's

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<sup>29</sup> Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, 1955, in *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote & Walker Percy*, ed. Jay Tolson, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 99, as quoted in Heuston, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Foner, "The Making and Breaking of the Legend of Robert E. Lee," *The New York Times* (New York), August 28, 2017.

own words tell us otherwise.<sup>31</sup> As no other place in the world can hold a candle to Arlington—the place where Lee’s “affections and attachments are more strongly placed than any other place in the world”—then Arlington appears to be the perfect place to start.

In his work on Lee, Alan T. Nolan writes, “People do not, as a general rule, like for their heroes or historical theories to be reexamined.”<sup>32</sup> This thesis is just such a reexamination. Joining the work of many other scholars that seek to view the Civil War and its major players through an alternative, non-military-centric perspective, I believe reexamining Robert E. Lee through his life at Arlington contributes to the current scholarship concerning Lee’s public image and historical interpretation. Elizabeth R. Varon and John Reeves, for example have published works that actively challenge the many myths of Lee, especially those concluding that Lee’s surrender at Appomattox was simply a magnanimous gesture, and how Lee’s forgotten 1866 indictment for treason disappeared from our national consciousness for over 150 years.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Brown Pryor’s *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* is a biography of Lee structured around the examination of letters written by both Lee and those closest to him, in order to understand his life on a more intimate and thought-provoking level. These works often fill in the gaps of Lee’s life left open by historians like Freeman, who systematically omitted any details of the “Marble Man’s” character that did not fit the narrative of the noble, resolved, duty-driven hero that has dictated our national understanding of Lee over the last

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography, Volume I* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), Chapter XXV.

<sup>32</sup> Nolan, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). John Reeves, *The Lost Indictment of Robert E. Lee: The Forgotten Case Against an American Icon* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

century.<sup>34</sup> Historians like Freeman and social and scholarly movements like the Dunning School and the Lost Cause have left us with a formidable, impossibly consummate version of Lee that appears more legend than human.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, perhaps the nation's greatest collective mistake has been the widespread acceptance of an ideology that subscribes to the unmitigated nostalgia of such an unbalanced society. Arlington was built as a symbol of remembrance for America's Early Republic, and it remains today a time capsule of life in the Antebellum South as the Lee family lived it. This "incurable romance and misplaced chivalry" of the South, as referred to by historian and writer Shelby Foote, has led to a over-appreciation of Robert E. Lee. For decades, Lee has been characterized as a fearless and admirable leader; an unquestionably and fundamentally *good* man despite his choice of loyalties. It may seem fitting that the estate Lee loved so dearly in life became a memorial to his memory. Although Lee responsibly assumed his new roles as chief executor of Custis's will and steward of Arlington, they burdened him tremendously. In a cruel twist of fate, however, I believe that Lee's beloved Arlington became the catalyst that hurled him towards his own ruin. Even in death, Lee cannot escape the place where his legend lives on.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Harwell, *Lee: an abridgment in one volume by Richard Harwell of the four-volume R.E. Lee by Douglas Southall Freeman* (New York: Scribner, 1961).

<sup>35</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished War 1863 - 1877, Updated Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988, 2014), *xvii-xxv*. As summarized by historian Eric Foner, the Dunning School refers to the work of William Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, began interpreting the Reconstruction era in such a way that highlighted the amiability of white Southerners against "negro incapacity." The Dunning school believed—among other things—that after the war, recently emancipated, uneducated, and "childlike" blacks were unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with their new political rights, President Johnson had attempted to carry out Lincoln's "magnanimous" policies only to have them cast aside by "Radical Republicans that ushered in a new era of corrupt politicians, Northern "carpetbaggers," and Southern "scalawags." What then arrived on the heels of Dunning School teachings was the rhetoric of the Lost Cause, in which the economically-humble-yet-morally-correct South never stood a chance over the industrially successful might of the North, labeling Southerners as victims and lionizing Robert E. Lee as the misunderstood and noble champion of the South.

First to be discussed is the reason for Arlington's very existence: George Washington. The first chapter will discuss various interpretations of republicanism—by historical figures and modern historians—both as a practicable concept laid out by America's "Founding Fathers," and as a dangerous ideology that inspired contradictory behavior among Washington, Custis, and Lee. This chapter will also include biographical background on both Washington and Custis, in order to further understand how Arlington came to be. In addition, this chapter will include a breakdown of "types" of slaveholders to provide insight into the fundamental similarities and distinguishable differences between Washington, Custis, and Lee as enslavers.

Chapter Two will establish the importance of marriage, family, and children as it relates to Arlington's position as a representation of Virginia gentility. Custis's affairs with enslaved women and the children produced from these unions will be addressed. Custis's marriage to his wife, for example, initiated changes in Custis's attitudes toward slavery, while his daughter's marriage to Robert E. Lee changes the course of Arlington's legacy. Emphasis is placed on the encouragement of maintaining family units among the enslaved in order to illustrate the harsh transition Arlington's enslaved experienced when Custis died and Lee became their enslaver.

The third and final chapter will discuss at length the particulars of G.W.P. Custis's will that set radical changes at Arlington into motion. In addition, the turbulence that Arlington's enslaved community experienced under the authority of Robert E. Lee will also be discussed at length, establishing the precedent Lee had to maintain the institution of slavery, even before he was faced with his decision of allegiance in April, 1861.

Historian Eric Foner refers to the "legend" of Robert E. Lee as one that merits a hasty retirement; "so long as the legacy of slavery continues to bedevil American society," writes

Foner, “it seems unlikely that historians will return Lee, metaphorically speaking, to his pedestal.” Published in the *New York Times* in August of 2017, Foner’s essay on Lee arrived just weeks after white nationalists marched in Charlottesville, VA to protest the removal of a Lee statue from Emancipation Park. Calls to remove Confederate statues all across the country—before and after the Charlottesville incident—have prompted Americans and historians alike to question the way we collectively view our national history. I believe that by retracing the story of Arlington, our collective memory of Lee may change further still. Arlington is simply a window through which we might find a man to rival the legend. Perhaps it is through this house made of brick and glass that such a man may finally appear to be made of flesh and blood, and of fault and conflict, instead of marble.

## CHAPTER I: The Inevitable Custis

“...‘That as the twig is bent so it will grow.’”

-George Washington to G.W.P. Custis, 1796<sup>36</sup>

Because of Arlington’s current status as the Robert E. Lee Memorial, most of the mansion’s most notable stories features Lee as the headliner, while much of its historiographic significance concerns the estate’s tenure as Arlington National Cemetery. Yet the story of Arlington does not, and furthermore, *cannot* begin with Lee. In fact, it barely begins with Custis.<sup>37</sup> It begins, instead—if only briefly—with a collection of men that we must first acknowledge in order to fully understand Lee’s place in Arlington’s narrative; men trying to secure the foundations of a new nation, searching for the ideal representative of the people to help bring their ideals of liberty and republican civic virtue to fruition. The first Continental Congress chose for this position the Revolutionary War hero, George Washington. Before the war, Washington—already a veteran of the French and Indian War—had been a gentleman farmer who enjoyed experimenting with farming techniques as he and his wife Martha, raised her two children (from her previous marriage to Daniel Parke Custis) on their Mount Vernon estate. Washington was also a prominent slaveholder.

Once the Revolutionary War had ended and American independence was officially recognized by Britain, Washington resigned his commission as commander of the Continental

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<sup>36</sup> Custis, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Hanna, 1-7. In actuality, the story of Arlington begins *much* earlier than this. The 2001 National Park Service’s Cultural Landscape Report on Arlington contains archeological information beginning with the Paleo-Indian Period (ca. 10,000-8,000 B.C.), through Point of European Contact in 1608. This report cites the works completed by John Smith when he navigated the Potomac Region while backed by the Virginia Company. According to Smith’s works, the land that makes up the 1,100 acres that G.W.P. Custis inherited from his father, John Parke Custis, was originally inhabited by the Algonquin tribe.

Army in 1783.<sup>38</sup> Washington then hoped to withdraw completely from the public eye and retire to his farm and the life he had built at Mount Vernon. Declaration signatory James Wilson noted the comparison of Washington's actions to that of the legendary Roman figure, Cincinnatus Lucius Quinctius, a war hero who returned home only to lay down his sword and live out his days on his farm.<sup>39</sup> Wilson noted that in ancient Rome, military men and public officials often stepped down to become gentleman farmers, reassuming "with contentment and with pleasure, the peaceful labors of rural and independent life."<sup>40</sup> However, Washington set aside his humble ambitions in favor of the Continental Congress that unanimously elected him as the new nation's first President. Though he accepted and served two full terms, Washington's popular designation as America's modern Cincinnatus never fully dissolved. Where Cincinnatus became the storied symbol of Roman civic virtue, Washington too fit this role in a burgeoning country fixated on Republican civic virtue; a hero that only wished to return to the same humble home from which he came. Mount Vernon, however, was far from humble; over the course of Washington's lifetime, at least 577 enslaved men, women, and children worked at the estate.<sup>41</sup>

Historiographically, Republican civic virtue, or "republicanism," has been defined and redefined many times over; its main point of contention often being its inherent lack of a strict definition. As a political ideology, republicanism centers on the independent citizen within a representative government. Representatives were expected to act only in the interests of the

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<sup>38</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991), 205.

<sup>39</sup> Wood, 205.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "The Growth of Mount Vernon's Enslaved Community," adapted from *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon*, an exhibition on view in the Donald W. Reynolds Museum & Education Center from 2016–2020, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/the-growth-of-mount-vernons-enslaved-community/>

common good while remaining personally disinterested. Citizens, meanwhile, were trusted to protect these civic virtues against corruption.<sup>42</sup> These foundations of republicanism are embodied in the U.S. Constitution. Historian Gordon S. Wood defines Republican civic virtue as the sacrifice of private desires for public interest—Washington as the American Cincinnatus therefore fits rather neatly into this brief and concise definition.<sup>43</sup> Yet historian Daniel T. Rodgers describes republicanism as “the most protean” concept in the Early Republic’s cultural history because of its ability to be transformed to suit numerous arguments.<sup>44</sup> Rodgers’ assessment also does not reflect a purely modern interpretation of republicanism; as early as 1807, John Adams similarly complained, “There is not a more unintelligible word in the English language than republicanism.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, a significant portion of Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address reveals that Washington’s own understanding of republicanism was in conflict with other contemporaneous political ideologies.

In his Farewell Address, Washington stresses the importance of a unified government in securing the liberty of the American people, warning that any threat to the Union should be considered a threat to individual liberties.<sup>46</sup> Although Washington advocated increasing individual interest in public and governmental affairs, his concern over the safety of individual liberties reflects principles of liberalism rather than republicanism. Individual inalienable rights

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<sup>42</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jun., 1987), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, 104.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, “Republicanism: the Career of a Concept,” *The Journal of American History*. Vol. 79, No. 1. June, 1992, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Rodgers, 38.

<sup>46</sup> George Washington’s Farewell Address, 1796, <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/washingtons-farewell-address-1796/>

such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all constructs of the Jeffersonian liberalism behind the Declaration of Independence. Washington's Address essentially calls on the politically-disinterested (a republican construct) to defend individual liberties (a liberal construct) for the good of the nation. Defending liberalism, therefore, somehow became crossed with republicanism. Meanwhile, these constructs of liberalism as outlined by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence were, incidentally, available only to wealthy, propertied white males. Furthermore, the ability to serve as a representative was limited to those that fit this same demographic.

Washington's Farewell Address also contains a warning against the dangers of government factions, sectionalism, and regional forms of republicanism. Washington goes on to acknowledge that each region within the United States has naturally developed its own motives for maintaining the Union, yet he optimistically asserts that despite varying interests in union, "all the parts combined can not fail to find in the united mass of means and efforts greater strength, greater resource, proportionably greater security from external danger."<sup>47</sup> Other historians like Robert E. Shallope, have only further qualified Rogers' assessment by exploring regional republicanism, emphasizing that different groups and classes often "constructed definitions of republicanism in their own image in order to maintain a sense of identity."<sup>48</sup> Despite Washington's early warnings, this became particularly prevalent in the South, due in part

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<sup>47</sup> George Washington's Farewell Address, 1796.

<sup>48</sup> Robert E. Shallope, "Thomas Jefferson's Republicanism and Antebellum Southern Thought," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 42. No. 4. November, 1976, 533.

to Thomas Jefferson's continuous observations on the many discrepancies between the North and the South; perhaps the most obvious, but unquestionably the most important was slavery.<sup>49</sup>

Shallope notes that "Jefferson and his colleagues left the institution of slavery far stronger than they had found it."<sup>50</sup> Although Washington's views on slavery would change over the course of his life, he remained just such a colleague of Jefferson's. During his presidency, Washington was committed to ensuring the future security of the Union, as disputes over slavery were already beginning between the North and South.<sup>51</sup> While Washington privately showed interest in gradual emancipation, he believed it could only succeed under legislative terms.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps it was the tumult of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia that dampened any hopes Washington may have had toward achieving any legislation that would support gradual emancipation. James Madison's notes from July 14, 1787 read: "it seemed now to be pretty well understood that the real difference of interests lay, not between the large & small but between N. [northern] & South[er]n States. The institution of slavery & its consequences formed the line of distinction."<sup>53</sup> The events of the Convention surely convinced Washington that if any pressure was placed on dissolving slavery, then the Union would dissolve right along with it.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps we might understand this as Washington's commitment to the principles of republicanism:

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<sup>49</sup> Shallope, 539.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>51</sup> Mary V. Thompson, "*The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret:*" *George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, 70.

<sup>53</sup> James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, as quoted in Thompson, 305.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, 307.

setting aside his personal convictions for the good of the Union. This, of course, in no way justifies his actions, but instead further complicates republicanism as a practicable concept.

The controversy behind the “protean” nature of republicanism is still ongoing amongst historians, yet the concept still merits mention in this story of Arlington for that very reason. Throughout its various definitions, republicanism in the United States has remained firmly rooted in the American Revolution, and it is through this attachment, according to Rodgers, that “it became a particularly forceful example of what an ideology could do.”<sup>55</sup> And what can an ideology do? More pointedly, what could a misconceived ideology do? What has it done at Arlington? The power of republicanism as an ideology influenced three generations of men, all of whom became famously revered and romanticized for their commitment to the American people; Washington as the dauntless president, Custis as the entertaining historian and dilettante farmer, and Lee as the reluctant, noble warrior. Each man’s “duty” to his people was driven by an ideology with flimsy definitions and a multitude of interpretations that also seemed to be crossed with an entirely separate ideology. Although historians such as Rodgers and Shallope have found the fault in republicanism as a definitive concept, this does not change the fact that as a nation, the United States has romanticized and memorialized the men that lived their lives by it for generations. G.W.P. Custis, for his part, dedicated his very *life* to the memorialization of Washington’s legacy, adhering to the late president’s political, social, and economic philosophies, and even building a shrine for a home, where romanticizations of the Early Republic abound.

Who better to chronicle the particulars of Washington’s life—his personality, his habits, his tastes, his stories, his own *words*, better than G.W.P. Custis? No one at all, as far as G.W.P.

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<sup>55</sup> Rodgers, 21-22.

Custis was concerned. Aside from using his own life to echo that of Washington's, Custis also saw fit to record the legacy of the Revolutionary veteran on the page. Custis's author's note preceding his *Recollections and Private Memoirs of George Washington* (published posthumously by his daughter, Mary Custis Lee in 1860) begins by apologizing for the tedium his reader is about to experience—but only slightly.<sup>56</sup> He writes that his apology should be found in the form of the many letters he received over the years from all over the world, begging him to chronicle the life of Washington in excruciating detail, imploring him to “omit no detail, however minute” if only the average American, the common man, may know the joy that the great George Washington was not very different from them.<sup>57</sup>

Custis writes this note with a tone that borders on condescension, implying that his audience should be pleased with the amount of detail provided in his near-600-page volume, as detail of this sort could only come from him. Custis writes: “Considering his domestic habits and manners the routine of his methodical life [ . . . ] *I ought to know much*. Taken from my orphaned cradle to his paternal arms, nourished at his board, cherished in his bosom, from childhood to manhood, I ought to know something of the First President of the United States. . . .”<sup>58</sup> While this passage also acknowledges Custis's flair for the dramatic (his father's death, for example, did not leave him orphaned; his mother, Eleanor Calvert Custis Stewart had remarried, bore six more children, and lived until 1811), it also establishes Custis as the last carrier of personal knowledge

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<sup>56</sup> Custis, 124.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-122.

of Washington, and the most well-equipped to carry on his legacy—especially where economy and agriculture were concerned.<sup>59</sup>

As a child, Custis joined Washington on many walks around the Mount Vernon estate, sometimes alone, but often in the company of guests—a visitor that would inquire about Washington’s unique approach to landscape design, perhaps, probe him for advice on the state of the economy, or listen to his radical theories on burgeoning concepts like “new husbandry” and soil conservation.<sup>60</sup> Young Custis listened intently to whatever Washington had to say, taking particular stock in president’s economic philosophies and experimental farming techniques. Unfortunately, Custis’s strengths lay predominantly in observation over practice, and his own farming endeavors were never quite fully realized. Once Custis began school, Washington wrote to him regularly. In a letter dated November 28, 1796, Washington gave special consideration to this time in his grandson’s life, alluding to these active years of education as a means of laying the foundations to his future life and happiness:

You are now extending into that stage of life when good or bad habits are formed. When the mind will be turned to things useful and praiseworthy, or to dissipation and vice. Fix on whichever it may, it will stick for you; for you know it has been said, and truly, ‘that as the twig is bent so it will grow.’ This, in a strong point of view, shows the propriety of letting your inexperience be directed by maturer advice, and in placing guard upon the avenues which lead to idleness and vice.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, the greatest misfortune here is how *well* Custis followed Washington’s advice—he was simply on the wrong side of it.

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<sup>59</sup> Hanna, 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>61</sup> Correspondence, George Washington to George Washington Parke Custis, Philadelphia, 28th November, 1796, found in Custis, *Recollections of Washington*, 75.

As the only male heir of wealthy landowners, Custis stood to inherit an exceptionally comfortable living, which often clouded his vision when forced to focus on securing his own future. Custis aspired to become a Southern gentleman farmer, just like Washington. The fundamental difference between the two, however, was that one was the American Cincinnatus, the other happened to be born into the right family.<sup>62</sup> A former tutor of the young Custis, Tobias Lear, once stated that G.W.P.'s failures as a student were the result of his "almost unconquerable disposition to indolence in everything that does not tend to his amusements."<sup>63</sup> Washington himself referred to Custis as a young man of natural talents that were unfortunately "counteracted by an indolence of mind, which renders it difficult to draw them into action."<sup>64</sup> From farming to architecture, to gardening, Washington possessed a naturalistic approach to design that Custis would mimic for the rest of his lifetime, yet never fully succeed at. Custis's future home for example, Arlington House, would reflect the "plain elegance [and] simplicity" that he so admired in Mount Vernon.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Arlington's Sheep-Shearing Festival was created in part to help realize one of Washington's most revolutionary—if not quixotic—dreams: rendering trade with Europe permanently unnecessary, and gradually introducing the United States to what would become total economic independence and self-sustainability. Once again, Custis's efforts to recreate Washington's dreams only produced a lukewarm result that slowly dissipated. Whether it was ill-execution or the gradual loss of public approval or excitement, once an idea lost its initial spark,

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<sup>62</sup> Wood, 205.

<sup>63</sup> King, 111-112.

<sup>64</sup> Correspondence, George Washington to Mr. McDowell, 5th March, 1798, found in Custis, *Recollections of Washington*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> King, 123.

Custis lost interest; sheep breeding was no different. But before sheep breeding lost its gleam, Custis committed an admirable amount of energy to it. In the spring of 1803, he placed an advertisement in D.C.'s *Universal Gazette* to encourage local sheep breeders to enter their American breeds in friendly competition. For their efforts, Custis offered an award of forty dollars, in addition to the opportunity to “demand a ram of the improved breed” for crossbreeding purposes.<sup>66</sup> The “improved breed” that Custis refers to was one of his own, the Arlington Improved, born of the sheep of Mount Vernon—another inheritance.<sup>67</sup> Just as Washington envisioned an economically independent America, Custis took it upon himself to make that vision a reality.

In fact, Custis became so fixated on keeping the spirit of his revered guardian alive that he leapt at the chance to insert himself into any public event that might benefit from a speech about Washington in the slightest. Custis's inherited interest in sheep breeding once paired unflatteringly with his overzealous enthusiasm, earning him the nickname of “the little Arlington Ram,” with a general tendency to “butt at the whole nation,” when the erection of the Washington monument was delayed. Another disgruntled citizen grew exhausted of the “little son of a step-son” who constantly appeared at ceremonial events, calling him “the Inevitable Custis.”<sup>68</sup> The Arlington Sheep-Shearing Festival was simply an inventive (and inevitable) dedication to George Washington's interests in animal husbandry as well as a fulfillment of his vision of America as a self-sustaining nation.

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<sup>66</sup> Hanna, 30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Pryor, 51.

We must pause here, however, to reconsider the sage advice that Washington bestowed upon his young grandson in 1796: “that as the twig is bent so it will grow.”<sup>69</sup> Concerned with his grandson’s general tendency to shirk responsibility and instead gravitate toward all things pleasurable, Washington urged Custis to remember the example that he had set for his young ward at Mount Vernon. Washington worked tirelessly to provide an admirable example for the boy, in hopes that he might achieve something worthwhile—something substantial that an inheritance could not provide. This is mostly likely the result of equal parts outright affection, and personal redemption for his failure to similarly inspire G.W.P.’s late father.

Despite being absent for virtually the entirety of his G.W.P.’s life, John Parke “Jacky” Custis shared with his son the uncanny ability to disappoint George Washington. Although Jacky was left with a sizable inheritance from his own departed father, Washington still spared no expense when providing for his adopted son’s clothing, education, and social connections. Such a privileged childhood, however, resulted in a spoiled and reckless adolescence, and an apathetic and philandering adulthood.<sup>70</sup> In fact, Jack’s only interest in establishing a respectable career in the military came after G.W.P.’s birth. Once he had secured a male heir, Jack became less fearful of dying in the war, which he did, just a few short months later.<sup>71</sup> Regularly frustrating Washington was not all the Custis men had in common; G.W.P remained as equally unfocused in his career as his biological father had. Just as Tobias Lear appeared to have met his match with the fanciful and irresolute G.W.P., Washington received word from one of Jacky’s educators, the

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<sup>69</sup> Correspondence, George Washington to George Washington Parke Custis, Philadelphia, 28th November, 1796, found in Custis, *Recollections of Washington*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Alexis Coe, *You Never Forget Your First: A Biography of George Washington* (Viking: Penguin Random House, 2020), 41-42.

<sup>71</sup> Coe, 96.

Reverend Jonathan Boucher, who wrote: “I must confess to You I never did in my Life know a Youth so exceedingly indolent or surprisingly voluptuous.”<sup>72</sup> Yet perhaps the most significant trait that Jack seems to have passed on was his “playboy” persona.<sup>73</sup> G.W.P. would eventually surpass his father’s penchant for exorbitant flirtation by raping several of Mount Vernon’s (and later, Arlington’s) enslaved women, as will be discussed in the coming chapters.<sup>74</sup>

One could easily spend a great deal of time discussing at length Washington’s most virtuous traits while chastising Custis for failing to live up to them. Instead, perhaps we might consider how adept Custis was at mimicking his grandfather’s values—farming and sheep-breeding were certainly not among them, but the perpetuation of slavery and white supremacy were. Although not virtuous in the slightest, Washington’s attitude towards slavery is fundamentally significant when seeking to understand Custis’s.

Slavery was tightly woven into the fabric of Virginian planter society before Washington was even born. He inherited his first slaves at the age of eleven upon his father’s death in 1743.<sup>75</sup> By the time of his own death in 1799, the number of enslaved people at Mount Vernon had risen to 317; about 124 were owned outright by Washington, while the rest were managed by him yet owned by other people.<sup>76</sup> In her recent book, *“The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret,”* historian Mary V. Thompson discusses the lives of the enslaved at Washington’s Mount Vernon. She describes Washington’s relationship to slavery as a mixture of paternalistic and patriarchal.

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<sup>72</sup> Coe, 42.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>74</sup> Thompson, 146. Pryor, 138. Coe, 203.

<sup>75</sup> Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 10.

<sup>76</sup> “The Growth of Mount Vernon’s Slave Community,” <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/the-growth-of-mount-vernons-enslaved-community/>

Paternal enslavers were often identified by the way they regarded themselves as generous and deserving of gratitude, while patriarchal slaveholders most often practiced violent control over their enslaved people, expecting strict obedience, and observing emotional distance.<sup>77</sup> Although Washington generally practiced emotional distance from a majority of the enslaved people he came in contact with, he did recognize slave marriages and families, despite the law that did not.<sup>78</sup> When considering the breadth of scholarship on Washington, it seems that for every single recorded act of kindness that Washington extended to individual enslaved persons, historians have found far more acts of malice, violence, and carelessness toward the many souls that lived and died on his properties and under his supervision.<sup>79</sup>

Washington's personal body servant, William "Billy" Lee, for example, was the only one of Washington's slaves to be granted immediate freedom, according to his will. In her book, *You Never Forget Your First*, Alexis Coe cites the provision in Washington's will that gave Lee the choice between immediate freedom, or—with Lee's poor health in mind—to remain at Mount Vernon. Either choice came with an annuity, which Washington gave "as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War."<sup>80</sup> Here,

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<sup>77</sup> Thompson, 47- 51, 96 - 100.

<sup>78</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: Atria, 2017), 26.

<sup>79</sup> Thompson, 48-50. The first chapter of Thompson's book, for example discusses George and Martha Washington as enslavers, and features a section titled "Thoughtfulness" in which Thompson catalogues the many instances in which George Washington showed kindness towards enslaved people—and not just ones that he directly owned or managed. Thompson notes that Washington's "consideration" for the enslaved "another mitigating factor in George Washington's relationship" with them. Thompson calls to our attention the fact that recorded acts of compassion and kindness between Washington and his enslaved people *do* exist, as do ones between G.W.P. Custis and the Lee family towards the enslaved at Arlington. While such records and oral histories might leave the legacies of such men palatable—if only briefly—it is important to remember, throughout the course of this paper, that any noted acts of humility should always be placed within their greater context; moments of humanity occurring inside of an inhumane institution.

<sup>80</sup> Coe, 198.

Washington does not express any true affection for Lee, but instead chooses to acknowledge Lee's presumed affection and dependency toward himself. Furthermore, Coe adds that the only reason Washington did not grant Lee his freedom sooner was because of his belief that Lee—like all enslaved people—was “better off in his ‘care,’” which remained a favorite excuse of enslavers well into the nineteenth century, including both Custis and Lee.<sup>81</sup> Even within this one isolated relationship, Washington's evils outweigh his kindnesses. When considering the singular act of compassion Washington bestowed upon William Lee by granting him the agency to make a choice regarding his fate—perhaps the only real choice that Lee ever had the liberty to make—one should also consider the many that could not decide their own fate. Most of them are buried in unmarked graves in the woods near the vault that houses the bodies of the Washington family.<sup>82</sup> This cemetery, as Coe reminds her reader at the close of her book, is never mentioned within the “thousands of documents Washington left behind.”<sup>83</sup>

This is the institution, the *tradition*, that G.W.P. Custis was born into and reared by. After the death of Washington in 1799, followed by his grandmother Martha in 1802, the twenty-one year old Custis emerged from Mount Vernon as a twig already bent toward the perpetuation of slavery and the safeguarding of white supremacy. It was in this direction that he—and his future family—continued to grow.

After Martha Washington's death, possession of Mount Vernon passed to Washington's nephew, Bushrod Washington. Custis was devastated by the deaths of his beloved grandparents and guardians and naturally reluctant to leave his distinguished home. Custis, of course,

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<sup>81</sup> Coe, 198.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

attempted to buy the estate from Bushrod who ultimately decided not to sell. The 1,100-acre estate that Custis inherited from his biological father, however, no doubt softened the blow. Situated on the eastern bank of the Potomac River, this “thickly timbered tract” of land had been purchased by John Parke Custis from brothers John, Phillip, and Gerrard Alexander in 1778.<sup>84</sup> Before selling, Gerrard Alexander built and rented out a small, four-room house on the bank of the Potomac. It was crudely built, extremely cramped, and—because of its proximity to the river—often muddy and susceptible to flooding.<sup>85</sup> A far cry from the luxuries and comforts of Mount Vernon, this is where Custis would sojourn until he could begin building his permanent home on the land that became known as Arlington.

While the humble riverside cabin that sheltered Custis did not echo the comforts of Mount Vernon that he had become accustomed to, the items that surrounded him inside were certainly enough to temporarily stave off his hunger for finery and grandeur. Along with the land inherited from his father, G.W.P. left Mount Vernon with an incredible collection of artwork, objects, and assorted personal possessions belonging to George and Martha Washington. What was not outright given or willed to G.W.P., was purchased at each grandparent’s estate sale. From Martha, he was bequeathed a custom master bed made in Philadelphia, complete with the mattress, bolsters, and curtains; all the dining silver “of every kind” she possessed; china jars, family pictures and the personal artwork by her granddaughter (G.W.P.’s sister, Nelly) and other female relatives; several other beds with pillows and curtains; an iron chest and desk that belonged to her first husband; a quantity of wine; all of her books, save the family Bible and

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<sup>84</sup> Hanna, 17.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

prayer book; a set of tea china with her initials on them, gifted by a Mr. Van Braam; her entire set of Cincinnati tea and table china, and a punch bowl “that has a ship in it.”<sup>86</sup>

From Washington, G.W.P. and sister Nelly (who had recently married Washington’s nephew, Lawrence Lewis, the son of his deceased sister Betty) received anything in the Mount Vernon estate that had not already been left to or devised by Bushrod, in addition to several pieces of land.<sup>87</sup> At Martha’s estate sale, G.W.P. purchased even more items, ranging from large pieces of furniture such as side boards to smaller, more personal pieces, like china jars and other decorative pieces—virtually anything a gentleman looking to establish a respectable family seat might need.<sup>88</sup> From Washington’s estate sale, Custis purchased various livestock, farm equipment, and Revolutionary War relics. Between both sales, Custis walked away with \$4,545 worth of household goods—including the bed that Washington died in.<sup>89</sup> Plans to build a permanent home may not have been immediate, but they certainly became necessary once Custis began drowning in his own clutter. If the sheer volume of his growing collection was not enough to motivate Custis, constantly-damp air near the river was; among Custis’s possessions procured at Washington’s estate sale were the General’s Revolutionary war tents and flags that had begun to mold due to the excessive moisture.<sup>90</sup>

The home Custis envisioned for himself at Arlington was a place fit for relaxation and contemplation; a place where he might hone his agricultural talents and indulge in his literary

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<sup>86</sup> The Will of Martha Washington of Mount Vernon, March 4, 1802, <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/the-will-of-martha-washington-of-mount-vernon/>

<sup>87</sup> George Washington’s Last Will and Testament, July 9, 1799, <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/george-washingtons-last-will-and-testament-july-9-1799/>

<sup>88</sup> Hanna, 22.

<sup>89</sup> King, 113.

<sup>90</sup> Hanna, 23.

and artistic pursuits.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps as attempt to maintain the tranquil and pleasant atmosphere that Custis envisioned for Arlington, the plantation was designed to be a merely self-sufficient farm and a home base for managing his other properties, yet this was hardly the reality.<sup>92</sup> As long as Arlington's farm employed the use of slave labor, it could be considered neither tranquil, or pleasant, but the harsh truths of slavery did not seem to be an issue to Custis. Everyday operations at White House and Romancock were seen to by resident managers to ensure that Custis left Arlington as infrequently as possible.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, Washington's dream of building a self-sustaining America that employed natural resources and encouraged cottage industries was still close to Custis's heart. In the end, none of Custis's properties would be very profitable at all. This would eventually cause great frustration and turmoil within the Lee family as will be discussed, but as of 1802, Arlington's virgin land still shone brightly with promise and possibility.

Above all, Custis desired that his future home pay homage to George Washington, the man that shared his virtuous republican values and dreams of a unified America not only with his grandson, but with the entire nation—according to Custis, that is. What better place for Custis to dictate the memory of Washington—who was recently referred to by historian Joseph Ellis as “our Foundingest Father—than from the comfort of his very own home, surrounded by *all* of his most prized possessions?<sup>94</sup> And who better to help such a dream of a home come to life than the

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<sup>91</sup> King, 113.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), xiv., as quoted in Coe, xxxi.

“friend and architect” of President Washington himself, George Hadfield.<sup>95</sup> Hadfield was born in Florence in 1763 to British expatriates.<sup>96</sup> As a student in England, Hadfield fell victim to a limitation of professional opportunities and traveled to the United States from Italy in 1795.<sup>97</sup> After briefly working as superintendent of construction on the U.S. Capitol building, Hadfield went on to design the first U.S. Treasury building, and eventually opened his own practice in D.C.<sup>98</sup> By the time Hadfield signed on to tackle the future Custis home, his own interests in Greek revivalism were just beginning to appeal to Americans.

The overall importance of architecture was, at this time, growing significantly—partially at the hand of Thomas Jefferson. The Virginia State Capitol, for example, was designed by Jefferson and bears a striking resemblance to Arlington House. According to American architectural historian Leland M. Roth, the Virginia State Capitol, erected in 1785-89, has the distinction of being the first building of the “international neoclassical movement, in either the United States or Europe, to be a literal interpretation of the classical temple.”<sup>99</sup> Before this, temple-like structures across the U.S. and Europe were largely decorative. Jefferson believed in using architecture as a form of “visual education,” bringing impressive scale and proportion to a functional building, particularly one with political associations, such as the Virginia State Capitol. If a civic building was designed to echo the sacred temples of the same Ancient Greco-Roman tradition from which the new United States drew inspiration for their principles of

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<sup>95</sup> King, 114.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>97</sup> Roth, 130. King, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Roth, 130.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

republicanism, then it stands to reason that one should associate a civic building with civic virtue and republican self-governance. Once these seeds of Greek Revivalism were planted by Jefferson, they were easy to replicate and they grew rapidly. New government buildings soon took on the same didactic style, thereby increasing the public's associations between civic buildings and civic virtue.<sup>100</sup>

By the time Custis and Hadfield began their collaboration, Jefferson had already established architecture as an intellectual visual experience. This would influence the choices made at Arlington tremendously. Its classical style reflected the modest countenance of George Washington, while its size and placement upon a prominent hill (the *highest* hill on the property, incidentally) overlooking and seen from the Federal City established Custis's position in the social hierarchy.<sup>101</sup> But when considering all the stylistic decisions made at Arlington House—particularly where aesthetics meet functionality—it is sometimes difficult to trace where Custis's input ends and Hadfield's begins. Both men shared a keen interest in the arts, as well as theater. Hadfield in fact designed several theaters, while Custis, later in life, inevitably forced himself further into D.C.'s cultural history by writing several semi-successful plays with titles such as *The Indian Prophecy* and *Pocahontas or the Settlers of Virginia*.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, it seems rather fitting that Custis should employ such a likeminded individual as his architect. After all, Custis lived his life like that of a stage play, offering pleasure and escapism to a captive audience, showing only what he wanted them to see. Hadfield simply built him a stage.

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<sup>100</sup> Roth, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Hanna, 46.

<sup>102</sup> King, 112.

Situated on a hill that overlooked the Federal City, Arlington was built to be impressive from a distance, which it certainly was, and still is. Unlike Custis's benchmark of Mount Vernon, however, Arlington became decidedly less impressive once one looked up close. One English visitor to the house remarked in 1832: "It is visible for many miles, and in the distance has the appearance of a superior English country residence beyond any place I had seen in the states, but as I came close to it, I was woefully disappointed." The baseless, Doric columns of its portico were five-feet in diameter, hollow in the center, built out of brick and covered with stucco. By the Civil War, the columns were intentionally scored and streaked with vein-like slashes of paint to provide the illusion that they were marble bricks.<sup>103</sup> Illusory design choices aside, these columns helped make Arlington the first temple-like private residence in the United States. By taking cues from Jeffersonian architecture, Custis and Hadfield created a revolutionary residential style that became exclusive to the wealthy planter society of the South. With its "severity and austere simplicity" Arlington was not only a successful visual homage to George Washington, but became a pioneer in Southern plantation architecture. By the onset of war in 1861, Arlington's long-established status as a fixture of antebellum culture would prove to be the greatest threat to its survival.

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<sup>103</sup> Hanna, 46. King, 116.

## CHAPTER II: Marriages of (In)Convenience

“The elegance and simplicity of the bride’s parents, presiding over the feast, and the happiness of the grinning servants . . . remain in my memory as a piece of Virginia life pleasant to recall.”

-Marietta Turner,  
Bridesmaid to Mary Anna Custis Lee, June 30, 1831<sup>104</sup>

The Mount Vernon Estate is currently owned and managed by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association for the Union—a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1853.<sup>105</sup> In the 18th century, the entirety of the Mount Vernon Estate claimed a sprawling 8,000 acres; today, the group’s current mission is the preservation, restoration, and management of its current 500 acres along the banks of the Potomac River, as well as a massive material collection. In fact, many of the items that Custis brought with him to Arlington House have found their way back into the hands of the Mount Vernon Estate over the years. The collection boasts hundreds of items of all shapes and sizes, ranging from commonplace domestic items like furniture, dinnerware, buttons, and a truly exhausting number of fishhooks, to irreplaceable pieces of history, such as a brass and mahogany spyglass used by Washington during the Revolutionary War, and fragments of the original mahogany coffin he was laid to rest in.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Correspondence, Marietta Turner Powell to “My dear Nannie,” Oakley, July 17, 1886, as quoted in Pryor, 84.

<sup>105</sup> “The Mission of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon. <https://www.mountvernon.org/about/our-mission/>

<sup>106</sup> Henry Pyefinch, *Spyglass*, 1774-1783, England, Brass, mahogany, glass, Overall (Length closed, diameter at objective lens end): 2 1/4 in. x 10 1/2 in. (5.72 cm x 26.67 cm), Overall (Length extended, diameter at eyepiece): 1 1/2 in. x 32 1/2 in. (3.81 cm x 82.55 cm), Mount Vernon, Item #W-644. <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-644/>. Artist Unknown, *Coffin fragment*, 1799, United States, Wood and paper, Overall: 1 in. x 5 1/4 in. x 1/4 in. (2.54 cm x 13.34 cm x 0.64 cm), Mount Vernon, Item #W-563 <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-563/>

One item in the collection, though unassuming at first glance, tells a more important story. A sack-back Windsor armchair, with no known maker listed, of unknown origin (though probably the United States), with an estimated date of origin spanning nearly thirty years (1770-1800).<sup>107</sup> Made of tulip-poplar, maple, ash, and paint, it is hard to see what makes this particular chair more special than any of the other 96 chairs listed in Mount Vernon's online catalogue—except for its story. It was donated to the Mount Vernon Estate in 1892, by American philanthropist, Phoebe Hearst—wife to California Senator George Hearst, mother to newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst.<sup>108</sup> Mrs. Hearst had purchased the chair earlier that same year from a Lucy Harrison. Harrison, at the time of sale was a free woman, but had been formerly enslaved at Arlington House. Her mother was Caroline Branham, who was not only enslaved herself, but was a Mount Vernon housemaid. In fact, Branham was among the few people in the room when George Washington died.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps seeing such a simple, wooden chair originate at a Founding Father's estate, pass through the hands of enslaved women and into the hands of another prominent American family, only to be returned back to its home is a remarkable enough story. But still, it does not end there; according to tradition, Lucy Harrison's father was George Washington Parke Custis.<sup>110</sup>

Caroline Branham and her family were inherited by Custis upon Martha's death. Like the rest of Custis's inherited property, Caroline Branham—and most likely the sack-back Windsor

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<sup>107</sup> Artist Unknown, *Sack-Backed Windsor Armchair*, 1770-1800, United States, Tulip poplar, maple, ash, paint, Overall (H x W x D): 35 3/4 in. x 22 1/2 in. x 17 1/2 in. (90.81 cm x 57.15 cm x 44.45 cm), Mount Vernon, Item #W-198. <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-198/>

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Coe, 194.

<sup>110</sup> Pryor, 138. Coe, 203. Thompson, 146.

chair—relocated from Mount Vernon to Arlington, along with a legacy of rape between master and slave. Branham was married to Peter Hardiman, an enslaved man belonging to the estate of David Stuart—the doctor from Alexandria that G.W.P.’s widowed mother married.<sup>111</sup>

Washington often rented Hardiman from Stuart, and though the Branham-Hardiman marriage was not bound by law, it was protected by the Washingtons. During this time, Hardiman and Branham produced eight children. In observance of Mount Vernon’s tradition of acknowledging and protecting enslaved family units, Custis inherited them all.<sup>112</sup> It appears that G.W.P. Custis’s premarital and extramarital affairs with enslaved women are no secret; not to historians today, nor to his own family. In fact, Custis made such a habit of producing illegitimate children with enslaved women that he not only manumitted them, but kept them close by so as to see to their general comfort and protection.<sup>113</sup> Although smattered with stains of rape, Custis’s gradual manumission of enslaved persons conveniently fell in line with the personal convictions of the young lady he chose for his bride.

Mary Lee Fitzhugh—more affectionately known by many as Molly—was only sixteen years old when she married G.W.P. in 1804. The two had known each other since childhood, as Molly’s father, William Fitzhugh of Chatham, was a great friend of George Washington’s.<sup>114</sup> Molly was described as sweet and calm, very fond of reading, and gardening, which matched the temperaments of G.W.P. and Arlington, accordingly. Much like her husband, Molly saw the

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<sup>111</sup> Correspondence, George Washington to David Stuart, January 22, 1788, *The Papers of George Washington, Digital Edition*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-06-02-0045>

<sup>112</sup> “List of the different Drafts of Negroes” [ca. 1802], in scrapbook, box 34, Peter Family Archives, Washington Library, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/caroline-branham/>

<sup>113</sup> Thompson, 146.

<sup>114</sup> Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Random House, 2000), 13-14.

power that agriculture and cultivation could generate, and poured most of her energy and creativity into developing the grounds at Arlington.<sup>115</sup> While Custis continued work on the mansion until its completion in 1818, Molly spent nearly 50 years designing, caring for, and managing Arlington's many flower and vegetable gardens, for which she very often received "rapturous praise."<sup>116</sup> This was a duty that Molly happily passed down to her daughter and granddaughters. Indeed, the commitment the Custis and Lee women harbored for their gardens was unparalleled and became a widely known fact by the onset of war in 1861.<sup>117</sup>

As for the institution of slavery, Molly, like many of her contemporaries, saw it as an evil institution, yet only supported gradual emancipation through superficial means. Many of her friends and neighbors attributed her "sympathy" toward the enslaved to her extreme Episcopalian piety, a trait she would eventually pass on to her daughter and future husband.<sup>118</sup> She was an early member of the American Colonization Society (ACS)—an organization formed in 1817 that promoted and raised money for the emancipation and relocation of blacks from America to settle in Liberia.<sup>119</sup> The idea of free blacks maintaining equal rights to that of whites within the United States was beyond her vision, so she supported a cause that sought to free blacks from bondage, but promptly remove them from her world. Washington—in a severe underestimation of the capabilities of black people—claimed that emancipating blacks that were not prepared to

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<sup>115</sup> Hanna, 38.

<sup>116</sup> Pryor, 46.

<sup>117</sup> The officer in charge of the seizure of Arlington in 1861 was Montgomery C. Meigs, who had been a friend and colleague of Robert E. Lee before the war. Meigs had the final say in what would become of Mrs. Lee's gardens, as will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

<sup>118</sup> Pryor, 46.

<sup>119</sup> Debra Newman Ham, *The African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture*, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam002.html>

be emancipated was dangerous, as they supposedly could not be expected to survive without the care of their masters.<sup>120</sup> Molly Custis, for her part, began to implement a secular and religious education for Arlington's enslaved to "prepare" them for their potential emancipation to Liberia.

While Molly managed to persuade her husband to join the ACS for a time, G.W.P. characteristically lost interest. G.W.P. made it known that he abhorred the slave trade "just as Washington had," but such an abhorrence was completely superficial. G.W.P. found slave auctions to be "distasteful," yet somehow could not see the distaste in his ownership of slaves. This, while a disturbing show of ignorance toward the entire institution of slavery, is unfortunately unsurprising; considering the fact that G.W.P. never had to purchase any of his own slaves it is likely that he was never forced to confront a real slave auction. Indeed, Custis's ignorance and apathy toward slavery is especially apparent in his reasons for quitting the ASC. By the 1840s, Custis was no longer persuaded that the organization was a valid means of solving the South's problems of slavery, which he chiefly claimed was the institution's drain on Virginia's economy.<sup>121</sup> Custis—again, characteristically—provided no alternative solution to such a problem, and simply went about his business. Meanwhile, Molly continued her work for the ACS as well as providing education for Arlington's enslaved people, as she narrowly believed she was outfitting them with the proper tools for survival.

Despite his wife's interest in promoting gradual emancipation, Custis showed no real interest in emancipating any of his enslaved peoples to Liberia or otherwise, outside of those that fell victim to his sexual appetite.<sup>122</sup> The only slaves G.W.P. freed during his lifetime were a few

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<sup>120</sup> Coe, 198.

<sup>121</sup> Hanna, 57. Pryor, 126.

<sup>122</sup> Pryor, 125.

females and their “mulatto” children, which, according to tradition, were fathered by himself.<sup>123</sup> The Syphax family, for example, were freed by Custis but remained on the Arlington property despite the Virginia law that required freedmen to leave the state. Maria Carter was the alleged result of another affair Custis had before leaving Mount Vernon, with housemaid Arianna “Airy” Carter.<sup>124</sup> New York Senator Ira Harris once noted that Custis showed “something perhaps akin to a *paternal* instinct” when Custis began the process of granting Maria Carter Syphax, her husband Charles Syphax, and their children emancipation, as well as their own parcel of land within the Arlington estate.<sup>125</sup> In the end, Molly did succeed in guiding Custis’s hand when drafting his will, persuading him to emancipate the remainder of his slaves.<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately, she could control neither the stipulations that provided emancipation, nor the financial constraints that would keep them in bondage for five more, long years.

The loss of three infant daughters was something else that Molly Custis could not control. While G.W.P. was father to several daughters through his various affairs with enslaved women, he and Molly shared only one that survived infancy: Mary Anna Randolph Custis, born at Arlington House in 1808. The young Miss Custis, much like her father, showed intellectual promise at a young age, yet appears to have similarly fallen victim to aimlessness and apathy when presented with privilege and opportunity. The lifestyle to which Mary became accustomed was the lifestyle that Custis created; from her infancy, she learned to walk in the halls of a living reliquary dedicated to the nation’s most beloved leader. She learned to speak, think, and read

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<sup>123</sup> Thompson, 146.

<sup>124</sup> Pryor, 138.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Barakat, “Historic recognition: Washington's family tree is biracial,” *Associated Press*, Updated September 19, 2016. <https://apnews.com/ee49731312304f2ba38653b775572957>

<sup>126</sup> Pryor, 127.

inside rooms splashed with Washington portraiture, learned to eat with Martha's silver on Washington's china. She was impressively educated for a girl of her era, studying history and rhetoric, and apparently harbored the same artistic temperament as her father, yet she became a frivolous, unambitious southern belle. playacting in the revival of republicanism Custis created at Arlington.<sup>127</sup> Frivolous and unambitious as she may have been, Mary Anna was still inclined to perform civic duties outlined by her father's standards of republicanism.

By Mary Anna's teen years, sectional disputes over slavery between the North and South had only increased, and the American Colonization Society was still new, but growing. In accordance with Washington's philosophies on slavery, the Custis family remained convinced that full emancipation was not in the best interests of United States, yet the problem of slavery in the South remained. Participation in the ACS became, for the Custises, a means of preserving the Union on an individual scale, which also fell in line with Washington's proposed philosophies on republicanism. This, once again, became a legacy that the Custises were content to fulfill. Mary Anna, therefore, participated in the ACS alongside her mother, as a means of performing a civic duty for the purpose of what they all believed was in the best interests of the Union. As Jennifer Hanna notes in Arlington's cultural landscape report, there were few ways for a Southern woman of the gentry class in nineteenth century to raise money in accordance with her society's rules of propriety. But Molly and Mary Custis managed to combine their love of gardening with the many natural bounties of the Arlington estate to raise money for the ACS by selling nosegays at

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<sup>127</sup> Pryor, 74.

local markets in Georgetown and Alexandria.<sup>128</sup> While the flowers were almost certainly cultivated by the Custis (or Lee) woman, they were gathered and assembled by slaves. The production of nosegays exploited the work of Arlington's enslaved to provide passage to Liberia for several members of an enslaved Arlington family. Arlington's enslaved were therefore cruelly and repeatedly put to work on a project by people that clearly did not want blacks in their country and yet forced blacks into bondage within their country. Meanwhile, the Custis and Lee women received praise for their hard work and dedication.

As the only legitimate offspring of an aristocratic Virginian dilettante, Mary Anna was so doted on as a child that she grew into an overindulged teenager, and a frustratingly freewheeling adult. Biographers of Robert E. Lee have historically been rather unkind to Mary Custis Lee. Thomas L. Connelly, for instance, once referred to Mary Lee as a “a spoiled, unpleasant woman accustomed to lavish parties and the incessant attention of her father [...] careless, self-centered, dependent, undisciplined, and dull.”<sup>129</sup> As a teenager, Mary once referred to *herself* as “an impregnable fortress,” with a sharp and reproachful attitude that one friend called “fatal to the beau.”<sup>130</sup> For all of her education and opportunity, Arlington was the center of Mary's world, and nothing could persuade her otherwise. No other place in the world could ever match the joy she felt nor comforts she received at Arlington. Mary Anna Custis was resolute in her desire to live

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<sup>128</sup> Hanna, 58. According to Arlington's cultural landscape report, nosegays were very popular in nineteenth century cities, and were used “as a method of covering up the harsh smells of both the city and other individuals.” Flowers from Arlington's many gardens are gathered very early in the morning—when blooms were considered to be at their peak—and bunched together by enslaved laborers. The most popular flowers for nosegays were ones that remained extremely aromatic after being cut, such as roses, lily of the valley, and chrysanthemums, all of which are documented in Arlington's gardens. Additionally, the Lee daughters, along with the enslaved, helped grow and assemble garlands of jasmine blooms, used to keep linens fresh. These linen garlands and nosegays were all sold by the Custis and Lee women to raise money for passage to Liberia.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 7.

<sup>130</sup> Pryor, 74.

out her entire life there, and if she had not married the young Lieutenant Lee in 1831, she very well may have. Mary Custis's self-assertion as an impregnable force was no exaggeration. She was trepidatious of marriage in spite of her fondness for Lee, whom she had known since childhood.

Before he became the commander of the Confederate forces, he was known simply as Robert Lee; born in 1807 at Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County, Virginia, to Anne Carter Lee and Revolutionary War veteran "Light-Horse Harry" Lee. Although "Light-Horse Harry" Lee had fought by Washington's side throughout the war and proudly called the General his mentor, his life ended in exile and dishonor, casting a shadow of disgrace over the Lee family. Robert Lee and his brothers, Smith and Carter worked hard to separate themselves from their father's legacy of ruin only to be shamed again by their half-brother, Henry Lee IV, who later became known as "Black-Horse Harry" Lee. Indeed, the Lee family endured a great deal of suffering, and had a bad habit of spreading their misfortunes to others, from severe financial losses, imprisonments, physical disfigurements, premature (and sometimes eerily similar) deaths, torrid affairs, and drug and alcohol addictions.<sup>131</sup> While Robert Lee struggled to avoid any more family embarrassment while making his own way and seeing to the safety and care of his beloved widowed mother, he managed to find a home at Arlington and established deep connections, both with the estate and his with his cousin Mary Anna.

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<sup>131</sup> Pryor, 3-38. Lee's father, Henry Lee III, had gone bankrupt in 1809 and spent a year in a debtor's prison. In Baltimore in 1812, Lee tried to resist an attack on a friend and in turn was beaten severely, leaving him with permanent internal injuries and facial disfigurements that even affected his speech. He decided to convalesce in the West Indies and died on his journey back to Virginia in 1818. His son from his first marriage, Henry Lee IV, married Anne McCarty Lee in 1817—this was his second marriage. Their first child fell to her death from the grand staircase in Stratford Hall; an identical death to that of four-year-old Phillip Ludwell Lee in 1780. While the inconsolable Anne became addicted to laudanum, her husband then began an affair with Anne's sixteen-year-old sister Elizabeth. This scandalous union produced a child, which was then found dead in an outbuilding. Publicly disgraced and no longer welcome, Lee exiled himself to Paris where he promptly lost the rest of his fortune.

Lee's familial issues were not unknown to the Custises, as the two families were already joined—Molly Custis's brother William Henry Fitzhugh, was also an uncle of Anne Carter Lee.<sup>132</sup> In fact, not only did Fitzhugh rescue his niece from the poverty her late husband had left her with, he also wrote to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in 1824, recommending that 17-year old Robert Lee be extended an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Despite the clouds of disgrace and turmoil that seemed to persistently darken Robert Lee's path, he managed to remove himself into a more distinguished light at West Point. As a young man that already had a "head for figures" even before attending West Point, Cadet Lee excelled in mathematics.<sup>133</sup> By the end of his first year, Lee was third in his class and promoted to staff sergeant, and by the end of his education, he finished second in his class but only a few points, earning him the ability to chose his own commission to the Engineer Corps.<sup>134</sup> Lee also left West Point with the distinction of graduating without ever receiving a single demerit.<sup>135</sup> All this, however, was still not enough to quell G.W.P.'s initial worries that Brevet Second Lieutenant Robert E. Lee was a suitable (and safe) match for his only daughter.

As a recent graduate of West Point, Lee faced a potentially successful military career, yet with no inheritance or property to call his own, he could not be counted on to achieve monetary success. Lee may have made a new name for himself in New York, but he was still forced to carry with him the stigma of financial ruin in Virginia, where he often spent his furloughs. His

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<sup>132</sup> Edmund Berkley, Jr., & the Dictionary of Virginia Biography. Robert Carter (ca. 1664–1732). (2014, November 4). In Encyclopedia Virginia. [http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Carter\\_Robert\\_ca\\_1664-1732](http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Carter_Robert_ca_1664-1732). Robert E. Lee and Mary Anna Custis Lee's actually share the same great-great grandfather, Robert "King" Carter, who was the 25th Speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses from 1696 to 1697 and the Colonial Governor of Virginia from 1726 to 1727.

<sup>133</sup> Korda, 33.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>135</sup> Foner, "The Making and Breaking of the Legend of Robert E. Lee."

romance with Mary Custis kindled slowly over time during his many visits to Arlington, and by the summer of 1830, an engagement became imminent. Lee was enjoying a routine visit to Arlington, reading Sir Walter Scott aloud to Mrs. Custis and Mary one fall afternoon in Arlington's parlor, when Mrs. Custis asked her daughter to bring their guest something to eat. According to tradition, as Mary excused herself to the dining room to slice a piece of fruitcake when Robert followed, bent over the sideboard, and quietly asked Mary to be his wife.<sup>136</sup>

Molly Custis was thrilled with the match, but G.W.P. needed some persuading. Perhaps G.W.P. feared ruthlessness in Lee. Because Mary was Arlington's only heir, she was considered a valuable match. Mary may have stood to inherit all of Arlington along with Custis's other properties, his slaves, and his money, but she was also a nineteenth century Southern woman in need of the kind of security that G.W.P. feared Lee could not provide. Lee could have just as easily been motivated to repair his family's name as he was to find love. Furthermore, after seeing the Stratford Hall estate being sold off piece by piece over time to appease both his father's and his half-brother's creditors, Lee valued the concept of home, and found a warm, respectable, and beloved one at Arlington. While the two certainly shared an immense (and convenient) fondness for Arlington, letters and diary entries also speak of a genuine fondness they harbored for one another.<sup>137</sup> It took Mary almost six months to persuade G.W.P. to approve of the match, but once she had, the marriage was soon acknowledged as equally advantageous to the Custises, who had always remained loyal to the Lees despite their many repetitive scandals.

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<sup>136</sup> Robert E. L. Debutts, Jr. "Lee in Love: Courtship and Correspondence in Antebellum Virginia" *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (2007), 491. Harwell, 27. Pryor, 77. Korda, 54. "The Dining Room," Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Last updated: January 27, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/dining-room.htm>.

<sup>137</sup> Debutts, 486-575.

Although the Custis and Lee families were technically already joined, this new marriage brought together two of Virginia's most important and influential founding families—a symbolic act of union that kept Custis's ideas of republicanism alive. Incidentally, outside Arlington, the sectional tensions over slavery that threatened to disconnect the nation only continued to grow.

Despite the months Mary spent agonizing over her father's approval, her excitement quickly turned to fear; fear led to trepidations that quickly turned to postponements. Elizabeth Brown Pryor offers perspective on Mary's sudden anxiety by including the opinion of French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville within her discussion of Mary Custis's engagement. Upon his visit to United States in 1831, he noticed that unmarried American women seemed to exhibit more freedom than their European counterparts, remarking that “the independence of women is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony.”<sup>138</sup> Pryor goes on to note that Mary, accustomed to the freedoms she enjoyed within the confines of Arlington, stood to lose her independence upon marrying Lee. The sudden and unexpected loss of her uncle, William Henry Fitzhugh in 1830, steered Mary directly into a personal path of religious rediscovery that forced her to question her future role as wife and mother.<sup>139</sup> Aside from being forced to accompany her husband on assignments as any respectable military wife was expected to do, the increasingly devout Mary had to come to terms with the loss of her virginity, as well as face her own mortality with each possible pregnancy.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, Mary's piety even became a great source of humor among the Lee brothers, who constantly teased about Robert's revivalist fiancée with increasing regularity as

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<sup>138</sup> Pryor, 80.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

their wedding date approached.<sup>141</sup> Just days before their wedding, Mary continued her efforts to postpone, yet Lee firmly ignored her pleas: “No Miss Molly,” he wrote to her, “it is too late to change your mind now.”<sup>142</sup>

As the anxious Mary and Robert prepared themselves for their fast-approaching wedding day, G.W.P. was focused on giving Arlington House a speedy makeover.<sup>143</sup> Small cosmetic repairs were made and fresh coats of paint were applied to the rooms where the ceremony and reception would take place, covering any signs of obvious neglect.<sup>144</sup> The Custises rarely entertained company in the house, nor did they allow anyone besides close family members to stay there for extended periods of time, therefore improvements for the sole sake of appearances were often ignored. In fact, Arlington’s White Parlor—the room in which the wedding ceremony would take place—had not even been fully finished by this time. For economy’s sake, the walls were still only laths—thin, narrow pieces of bare wood that served as the backing for plaster or stucco. The parlor would not be fully plastered until 1855.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, slapdash adjustments like this would come back to haunt not Custis, but Lee during his eventual tenancy as the owner of Arlington. The grandeur of Arlington was saved for the outside with its luxurious grounds and lush gardens—this is where Lee had imagined marrying his young bride in an intimate, early

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<sup>141</sup> Pryor, 79.

<sup>142</sup> Debutts, 548.

<sup>143</sup> Hanna, 40. The construction of Arlington House was a tumultuous project after production came to a halt in 1812. Property values in the area sank dramatically when the War of 1812 brought a British blockade to the Chesapeake Harbor, and if that were not enough, most of the soil in the area had depleted, and returning crops were weakened, if they returned at all. Not only did Custis’s Sheep-Shearing Festival come to an end, but the soil depletion had forced many farmers to move westward. As Arlington’s farm failed to produce any crops with which to build a profit, construction stopped. The house continued to be built in stages whenever Custis’s finances could allow it until its completion in 1818. After that, no further improvements were made to house and it gradually fell into disrepair.

<sup>144</sup> Korda, 55.

<sup>145</sup> King, 123.

morning ceremony. His wishes were ignored at the behest of the Custis women and a formal wedding was arranged.<sup>146</sup> Custis scrambled to gather the cash needed for repairs while Mary and her mother quickly began *borrowing* items from friends and family in order to properly furnish the event; from cake baskets to candlesticks, to mattresses, and even servants.<sup>147</sup> In doing so, the Custis, in a bizarrely public manner, brought to light the unfortunate truth about his financial state; though rich in land and slaves he may have been, he was extremely cash poor.

A rainstorm caused the minister to arrive at Arlington completely soaked, leaving him to preside over the ceremony in ill-fitting clothing borrowed from G.W.P.—who was significantly smaller in stature. Mary had chosen six bridesmaids for herself while Robert had difficulty finding an equal number of groomsmen—even his own brother Carter could not attend. Years later, Lee remembered being told he looked “pale and interesting” throughout the ceremony, and recalled Mary’s constantly shaking hands.<sup>148</sup> Tradition also says that Nelly Custis was there to play the piano as the bride descended the stairs with her father. Despite the pandemonium that preceded the ceremony, Mary Anna Custis and Robert E. Lee were married beneath a floral bower in archway of Arlington’s White Parlor, and the festivities carried on into the night. For the occasion, Custis happily made use of Martha Washington’s bowl with the ship at the bottom and had it filled with punch. It is said that once the hull of the ship became visible, it was time to go to bed.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Pryor, 81.

<sup>147</sup> Debutts, 550.

<sup>148</sup> Pryor, 83.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Marietta Turner, one of Mary's bridesmaids, happily remembered the evening to an acquaintance years later, writing: "The elegance and simplicity of the bride's parents, presiding over the feast, and the happiness of the grinning servants . . . remain in my memory as a piece of Virginia life pleasant to recall."<sup>150</sup> Indeed, the bride's parents could be described as such, as the Custises were very similar to Arlington House itself—grand, but "chaste" and intentionally understated.<sup>151</sup> As for the "grinning servants" that Turner refers to, the enslaved house servants present for the wedding were apparently allowed to celebrate after the event as well, but separately, and in the slaves' quarters away from the house, only after they had finished working the party, if they were ever excused at all.<sup>152</sup> Although most records of this event are often filled with poetic descriptions and happy recollections by members of the Custis and Lee families and those closest to them, it certainly bears repeating that "pleasant" pieces of Virginia life such as this were only remembered as such by elite whites. The Custis and Lee wedding is, therefore, as much a quintessential piece of romanticized antebellum history as Arlington is. It would also be prudent to read between the lines of Turner's memories since they come from a letter dated 1886, twenty-one years after the Civil War had ended. In considering Turner's fifty-five years worth of retrospect, she appears to admit that there are memories of Virginia life *not* so pleasant to recall; perhaps the status of the so-called "grinning servants" is among them. At the very least, they should be. The point, therefore, of this particular story—and its exhaustive detail—is not meant to provide any sort of insight into the Lee marriage or to share a moment that makes them look tender, relatable, or human. The point is in fact to highlight the significance of the marriages and

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<sup>150</sup> Correspondence, Marietta Turner Powell to "My dear Nannie," Oakley, July 17, 1886, as quoted in Pryor, 84.

<sup>151</sup> King, 123.

<sup>152</sup> Pryor, 83.

weddings that took place at Arlington—all of them.

A *Washington Post* article from June 1992 titled “Lee Family Gatherings” describes a pair of upcoming events at Virginian historical sites for locals to enjoy, including a reenactment of the Lee’s 1831 nuptials at Arlington House. Not only does the article inform its reader that the House has been restored to 1857—the year Custis died and it officially became the Lee home—but is filled with misinformation and its tone misrepresents what life was like at Arlington in 1831: “If your own family's social calendar cannot accommodate these two special events,” it reads, “try to allow one summer afternoon to leave the Washington of today and obtain a glimpse into family life of another era.”<sup>153</sup> The family life on display for tourists and locals alike does not appear to include that of the enslaved people that also called Arlington home.

The article continues on with a brief biographical background on the Lee family, making such statements as “Lee had a very happy childhood,” and “When his father-in-law died in 1857, Lee took a leave of absence to help his wife settle the estate—including freeing the slaves—and take over the house,” both of which seriously gloss over a dark and extremely complicated truth.<sup>154</sup> Not only does this insinuate that the emancipation of Custis’s slaves was Lee’s own decision, which it certainly was not, it also implies that the enslaved were freed immediately upon Custis’s death in 1857. In reality, the process was long, difficult, and very painful—the details of which will be discussed in the next chapter. The second event the article alludes to is the wedding of G.W.P. to Molly Fitzhugh at the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee in Alexandria.

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<sup>153</sup> Joan Leotta “Lee Family Gatherings,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1992. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1992/06/26/lee-family-gatherings/83c7fd4c-bd25-4ffa-b796-3118b6820009/>

<sup>154</sup> As previously noted, Robert E. Lee’s childhood was marred by the various scandals and misfortunes of relatives, leading some biographers and historians to describe Lee as “the boy without a childhood.” (see Pryor, 32) Custis’s death and the contents of his will created much conflict at Arlington; the manumission of his slaves was an extremely complicated process, the details of which will be addressed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Marriages are important in Virginia history, certainly, and—as this chapter has demonstrated—are *vital* to Arlington’s history. But if the goal of these events was to provide insight into 19th century Virginia life by discussing the importance of marriage or weddings, then its organizers failed miserably, because another wedding of significance took place at Arlington.

Selina Norris Gray was born and raised a slave at Arlington. She and her husband, Thornton Gray, lived in Arlington’s South Slave Quarter building. Together, they raised eight children in one room with a small, ladder-accessible loft where some of the children slept, and a crawl-space sized attic that had no windows.<sup>155</sup> Such a life paled in comparison to that of the Lees, who enjoyed the spaciousness of all of Arlington House while they raised one less child than the Grays had.<sup>156</sup> According to Syphax family tradition, however, the Gray wedding became a cherished memory of life at Arlington for its enslaved community. Selina and Thornton were married in the same room as Robert and Mary Lee, by the same Episcopalian minister, creating a tradition that briefly blurred the lines of the master/slave relationship.<sup>157</sup> Unfortunately, this wedding was apparently not the sort of pleasant memory of Virginia life worth recalling. The fact that there is significantly less detail of the Gray wedding than the Lee wedding speaks volumes. There is no record of precisely when it happened, just that it had. It very likely took place before 1855, when the Lees had the White Parlor formally finished, so it is probably safe to assume that the room did not receive the same amount of care to improve its appearance as had been done for

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<sup>155</sup> “The Slave Quarters,” Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, National Park Service, Last updated: January 27, 2017. <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/slave-quarters.htm>

<sup>156</sup> Mary Custis Lee gave birth to seven children within a fourteen-year period. Their first child, George Washington Custis Lee (b. 1832) was born at Fort Monroe, VA, while the rest were all born at Arlington House: Mary Custis Lee (b. 1835), William Henry Fitzhugh Lee (b. 1837), Anne Carter Lee (b. 1839), Eleanor Agnes Lee (b. 1841), Robert Edward Lee, Jr. (b. 1843), and Mildred Childe Lee (b. 1846).

<sup>157</sup> Pryor, 140.

the Lees. Indeed, there is no record of decorations or reception; the bride was not escorted down the staircase by her father; there were no bridesmaids, no flowers, no piano, no punch bowl. It was not even considered legal.

The spiritual acknowledgement of marriages between the enslaved was not a new concept by the time Selina and Thornton Gray were wed at Arlington. It was a tradition brought to Arlington by Custis, who had learned it from the Washingtons at Mount Vernon. That is not to say that the Washington's had invented the concept by any means, but more so solidifies the fact that Washington's beliefs toward his enslaved community were of great influence and import on G.W.P. By authorizing not only the Gray's marriage but also a formal *wedding*, G.W.P. established the importance of marriage and family unity at Arlington, in a long history of family unity that could be traced back to Mount Vernon. Indeed, the continuity between the Lee and Gray weddings is too compelling to ignore. Custis may have promoted familial connections within his enslaved community, but he nor any member of his family appears to have respected the Gray marriage enough to have recorded it. Truly, the cruelty and injustice far outweighs any act of kindness the Custis and Lee family believed they had shared.

Considering the nonconsensual nature of his relations with Airy Carter and Caroline Branham, G.W.P. appears to have possibly attempted atonement for such unions by performing grand gestures after the fact. He allegedly told Maria Carter Syphax "face to face" that he was her father and arranged for her and her family's manumission.<sup>158</sup> According to Mary Gregory Powell of Alexandria, G.W.P. Custis arranged the emancipation of two of her family's nurse

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<sup>158</sup> Thompson, 146.

maids—Eugenia and Sarah—because they were the granddaughters of Caroline Branham.<sup>159</sup>

While this in no way absolves Custis of any of his sexual indiscretions—and certainly does not seek to excuse his role as a slaveholder—it does establish a precedent for enslaved families at Arlington. Enslaved families had no reason to believe that they should be permanently separated while under Custis’s authority. This is part of the legacy that Robert E. Lee married into in 1831, and severely disrupted in 1857.

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<sup>159</sup> Thompson, 146.

### CHAPTER III: An Unpleasant Legacy

“We hear often of the distress of the Negro servants, on the loss of a kind master; and with good reason, for no creature on God’s earth is left more utterly unprotected and desolate than the slave in these circumstances.”

— Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 1852<sup>160</sup>

A frequent visitor to Arlington was Martha Custis Williams, a cousin of Mary’s. Another sweet-tempered and dark-haired Custis woman, young Markie, as she came to be known, quickly grew very fond of Cousin Robert. Since military assignments kept Lee away from Arlington so frequently, he and Markie managed to strike up an intimate relationship through their correspondence.<sup>161</sup> In fact, it was in a letter to Markie in which Lee expressed his vehement feelings for Arlington, as the place where his “affections and attachments are more strongly placed than any other place in the world.”<sup>162</sup> Markie’s presence at Arlington, therefore, was substantial. Not only was she a frequent visitor, but as an intimate family member and close confidant of Lee, she understood the allure and power of the place. She also saw how the estate was managed on a day-to-day basis when it was not on display for the public.

Her diary entry of November 2, 1853, contains record of a conversation that she shared with her uncle, G.W.P., on the status of his enslaved. She notes that G.W.P. remained steadfast in his assertion that the enslaved of America were often better off than those of the lower class in England. He further argued that the slaves depicted in the recently published and extremely

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<sup>160</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2016), 321.

<sup>161</sup> Pryor, 203-205; 231. Although twenty years her senior, Lee was equally fond of Cousin Markie. Lee might sometimes go weeks or months without word from Markie, and as a result he sometimes explicitly begged for a response. Markie, in turn, once described her love for Cousin Robert as “perfectly unique.”

<sup>162</sup> Hanna, i.

popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could find no kindred spirits among Arlington's enslaved, whom he felt were content in their place and could want for nothing.<sup>163</sup> These remarks also occurred long after G.W.P. lost interest in funding the American Colonization Society, which only further deepened his delusions of being a paternal slaveholder. Markie, for her part, appears to have agreed with the opinions of her uncle, as she notes in her diary:

To eat & drink & sleep are the only duties with wh[ich] he has anything to do—with regard to most of them . . . They have their comfortable homes, their families around them and nothing to do but to consult their own pleasure. Their eating & drinking & clothing is all provided for them. And truly in many instance[s] the master is the only slave.<sup>164</sup>

Perhaps the only remark that rings of any truth is the fact that Arlington's enslaved did exist alongside their own families; a basic human right that the Custises and Lees seemed to have mistaken for a gift. And yet—completely similar to the enslaved of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—any enslaved person at Arlington could never been certain of their family's fate. Custis may have made the maintenance of enslaved families at Arlington somewhat of a tradition, but there is nothing to suggest that he extended the same effort to the enslaved at any of his other properties. Furthermore, nothing save for verbal promises—which to an enslaved person meant nothing—concretely suggests that Arlington's enslaved were totally immune to being sold off anywhere, at any time. In fact, almost as soon as Custis had died, any form of comfort or security that Arlington's enslaved community may have had was taken by Lee. Once responsibility of Arlington passed to Lee, his support of slavery and abhorrence of abolition became known to all.

Custis's belief that he was a kind and fair slaveholder was not at all unlike George Washington's. Washington, who had essentially taught Custis everything he knew about being a

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<sup>163</sup> Pryor, 267.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

enslaver, had also passed on the crucial tradition of maintaining slave families, as Chapter One demonstrated. Molly Custis was also essential in creating an education system for the enslaved community at Arlington. Conditions for the enslaved at Arlington may have appeared to be comparatively much better than other Virginia plantations, yet appearances are not always what they seem. Since appearances were all Custis seemed to care about, his will inevitably doomed his enslaved people to endure five more turbulent years of bondage under the supervision of Markie's beloved Cousin Robert. Custis may have appeared to consider the maintenance of enslaved family units as a priority, but the provisions of his will suggest otherwise. He may have thought his death would be enough to free his enslaved, yet he failed to make clear whether or not his enslaved could be sold. Arlington's enslaved were, after all, Custis's property, and whoever held power over the estate held equal power over them and their fate.

Lee did not have to wait until G.W.P.'s death to make his opinions on Arlington's enslaved community known to his father-in-law. Arlington Spring's proximity to Arlington Farm, for example, was a point of contention between the two men. According to Hanna's cultural landscape report of Arlington, the spacial organization of nineteenth century plantations often placed private spaces in view of public ones, as is the case with Arlington Spring.<sup>165</sup> Arlington's grounds were arguably more impressive than the house itself. Under Molly Custis's years of meticulous care and management, the grounds surrounding Arlington House had become a splendid array of oak groves and roses gardens. The Arlington estate was truly a pastoral paradise, with the natural charms of a country manor on a grand, aristocratic scale. Visitors to the Spring, however, did not enjoy such a view. Instead of picnicking in view of a pristine lawn or

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<sup>165</sup> Hanna, 44.

manicured hedges, visitors to the Spring had a front row seat to pastures, poultry yards, functioning farm buildings including a blacksmith and a wheelwright's shop, crops fields, orchards, markets gardens, and even the living quarters of Arlington's enslaved.<sup>166</sup> As stated, Custis was frequently cash poor, but by configuring guest access to the Spring so close to the farm, visitors could clearly see the kind of wealth Custis *did* have: his enslaved people.

Beginning in 1843, Arlington Spring and Arlington Farm became visually separated by the Alexandria Canal. This, however, did not entirely disassociate one space from the other. In order to reach the main estate and the house from Arlington Spring, one had to pass under the berm of the canal through a "wet dripping tunnel," and directly into what resembled a tiny village of the enslaved's cabins and personal gardens and vegetable plots. One then had to follow a road that led past the rest of the farm's operating fields, and cross the Alexandria and Georgetown Turnpike to reach the main gate of the Arlington estate.<sup>167</sup> While the canal left enough space between the Spring and the Farm, it was the traffic through the canal itself that Lee found issue with, believing it to be too much of a distraction to laboring slaves: "The whole place will be exposed to the depredations of the public," wrote Lee. "his [Custis's] own people [slaves] will have more opportunity for gossip and idleness and greater temptation and inducement to appropriate the small proceeds of their labor themselves."<sup>168</sup> By the time Lee was in a position to make changes at Arlington, however, there was nothing to be done about the canal or the location of the Spring. But what this statement provides is insight into Lee's opinion on how Custis managed his estate.

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<sup>166</sup> Hanna, 41-44.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Similar to his father-in-law, what Lee despised most about the institution of slavery was the alleged inefficiency of it. Custis—still narrowly focused on creating economic independence in the U.S.—blamed Virginia’s many economic crises on what he called “the Vulture of Slavery.”<sup>169</sup> Lee too believed slavery to be an inefficient system. He also understood it as having negative affects on both blacks and whites, though he was infinitely more interested in the fates of the latter.<sup>170</sup> Ever a man of convictions, Lee was much more inclined to do something about the inefficiency of Arlington Farm than Custis, and when his father-in-law died, he finally had the chance. Was it simply Lee’s efficient nature, his “head for figures,” up against a lackadaisical enslaved community, nurtured and indulged by Custis, that created chaos at Arlington?

Absolutely not. For one, the enslaved at Arlington could never be considered lackadaisical, as slavery was fundamentally a system based on coerced labor. No matter how many members of the Custis and Lee families claimed that their “servants” lived lives equal to their own, the fact remains every enslaved person was always under some form of constant supervision, living in constant fear of being sold. Recognition of family lineages and last names may have given Arlington’s enslaved the rare opportunity for individuality and identity, but they were forever deprived of agency.

Was the Arlington that Lee reluctantly inherited inefficient merely because it functioned on slave labor? Again, no. Custis may have built and designed Arlington with the highest hopes of achieving—or at least working toward—economic independence by promoting cottage industry and experimentation in agriculture and animal husbandry, but he failed to harness any

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<sup>169</sup> Pryor, 125.

<sup>170</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to Mary Anna Custis Lee, December 27, 1856.

lasting success. He let his Sheep-Shearing festival die with the War of 1812, constantly lost interest in his agricultural experiments, and let all of Arlington's mills and outbuildings fall into disrepair. Custis eventually lived out his days on a dying plantation, collecting stray cats and painting mediocre Revolutionary War frescos inside Arlington House.<sup>171</sup> Arlington's financial issues were not the fault of its enslaved, nor was the slave unrest it experienced the result of a supposedly inherently inefficient system. It was a lethal combination of broken promises, radical change, and a contradictory will written by a man with lofty expectations of his own wealth, and a severe misjudgment of how badly an enslaved person wished to be free.

When Molly Custis died in 1853, no one seemed more truly bereaved than Lee. Markie Williams recalled visiting Mrs. Custis's grave with Cousin Robert, when he suddenly began to sob. "It was a scene of pity to behold," she wrote in her diary, "to see that strong man weep so bitterly."<sup>172</sup> It seems that Molly's death inspired a religious reawakening inside Lee, similar to the one his wife experienced after she lost her Uncle Fitzhugh in 1830. Lee began to consider God's role in his life more than ever before. Many of his beliefs remained fundamentally the same, except now they were more easily justified by God's plan. His views on slavery were perhaps chief among them. Throughout the majority of his life, Lee believed slavery to be an evil institution, but that it was nonetheless the world he was born into, and one that he could not change. His experiences with Evangelical revivalism then led him to decide that the fate of slavery was in God's hands, and man should simply leave it alone until God could provide a

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<sup>171</sup> Pryor, 51; Custis, *Recollections of Washington*, 480-531. Custis had an enormous respect for painters (especially those that painted George Washington) and spend a great deal of time elucidating on the talents of such great American artists as Charles Wilson Peale and Gilbert Stuart within the text of his *Recollections of Washington*. In his later years, as he lost interest in his agricultural pursuits, he began painting large scale depictions of Revolutionary War battle scenes, some on canvas, some on the walls of Arlington. He received glowing praise from his daughter, but critics saw his work as "primitive."

<sup>172</sup> Pryor, 231.

clear answer, or a clear path to its destruction.<sup>173</sup> Lee's discovery of God weakened any possible inclinations he may have had toward advocating abolition, and certainly did not alter his inequitable opinion of blacks.

Despite the pains his dearly departed mother-in-law, wife, and daughters, took to educate the enslaved at Arlington, Lee continued to regard their education as fundamentally useless. It should be remembered that by teaching its enslaved community, every member of the Arlington household was in conflict with state laws. Such open defiance of the law suggests the genuine care and interest that Custis and Lee family members felt toward their enslaved. Lee, though clearly complacent with his family's law breaking, could not be moved enough to believe in anything other than his preconceived notions of white supremacy. He often referred to his daughters' students as childlike "ebony mites," whose emancipation could only be secured by "the mild & melting influence of Christianity," rather than the revolutionary tactics of abolitionists.<sup>174</sup> According to Elizabeth Brown Pryor, during her lifetime, Molly Custis saw that the use of children for field labor and the selling of Arlington slaves was discontinued.<sup>175</sup> While this did not offer outright immunity to being sold, Arlington's enslaved were, at the very least, given the impression that such a precedent might protect them, for at least as long as the Custises lived. Lee loved Molly Custis dearly, his bereavement is proof of that. Unfortunately, his love for Mrs. Custis could not outweigh his support of slavery. He therefore blatantly disrespected Molly Custis's legacy by continuing the sale of Arlington's enslaved once she and G.W.P. were gone.

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<sup>173</sup> Fellman, 76.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 69 - 73.

<sup>175</sup> Pryor, 131.

George Washington Parke Custis died on October 10, 1857, after a brief bout of influenza that quickly turned to pneumonia.<sup>176</sup> Lee was in Texas, and had been for months. As chief executor of the will, however, Lee was forced to return to Arlington. Upon his arrival in early November, Lee not only had to deal with his wife's grief, but the fact that her health had seriously degenerated since last he saw her. Mary Lee's general health had been a concern since the birth of her first child and only worsened as time pressed on. If bearing seven children within a fourteen year period was not physically and mentally taxing enough, Mary also suffered through difficult pregnancies, strenuous births, and painful infections. Mary had barely reached forty years of age when she developed rheumatoid arthritis so severe she could barely move about her own house without a crutch or a cane.<sup>177</sup> This was not news to Lee, who had sent Mary and their daughters to healing springs periodically, but her depleted state in November of 1857 was especially concerning.<sup>178</sup> Mary had lost her father but she had also gained the responsibility of Arlington. Though she had become the owner of Arlington, Mary was completely incapable of managing it, as were her four unmarried daughters that all still lived there. Lee, unable to leave his wife to suffer through the situation with no real support, took a two-year leave of absence from the army in order to settle Custis's estate.

According to Custis's will, all of Arlington—including all Washington relics—passed directly to Mary Lee. Upon her death, the entirety of the estate went to the Lee's first born child,

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<sup>176</sup> Mary P. Couling, *The Lee Girls* (North Carolina: John F. Blair, 1987), 112.

<sup>177</sup> Pryor, 101-103.

<sup>178</sup> Couling, 103. According to daughter Agnes Lee, Mary Lee had been advised by doctors for years to employ continuous visitation to Virginia's various hot springs and spas that were "much celebrated for their rheumatic cures." This reinforces the fact that Arlington Spring was not a legitimate healing spring or that its waters have no recorded benefits. It is possible that Custis's designation of it as spring was only born out of want of popularity for healing springs and spas. Arlington Spring was essentially just a picnicking retreat, whose only healing qualities, according to Custis, were for that of the soul.

George Washington Custis Lee, who, at this time was twenty-five years old and a second lieutenant of the Regular Army. Given the fact that Mary Lee was already considered an invalid with increasingly declining health, an early death was entirely possible. G.W.P.'s properties of White House and Romancock were to be given to William Henry Fitzhugh Lee and Robert E. Lee, Jr., respectively; the latter was only fourteen-years old. Each of the Lee daughters was to receive a \$10,000 legacy to be paid out of the sales of G.W.P.'s various properties in the Stafford, Richmond, and Westmoreland counties; if these total sales could not raise the \$40,000 needed for his granddaughters, then the balance should be paid with profits from any of his farms along the Pamunkey River (White House and Romancock). Most importantly, Custis's will granted emancipation to all of the enslaved at Arlington—but only under specific circumstances, which Custis explains in a most confusing manner:

And upon the legacies to my four granddaughters being paid, and my estates that are required to pay the said legacies being clear of debt, then I give freedom to my slaves, the said slaves to be emancipated by my executors in such manner as to my executors may seem most expedient and proper, the said emancipation to be accomplished in not exceeding five years from the time of my decease.<sup>179</sup>

The is perhaps the most momentous occasion of G.W.P.'s entire life. In drafting this will on March 26, 1855, G.W.P. did what his revered grandfather could not; he chose to end a violent legacy of human bondage, suffered by generations of families that could all be traced back to Mount Vernon. And yet, the Inevitable Custis managed to do so under the cover of nearly impossible stipulations in the most convoluted language possible. With very little comprehension of how inimical his last will would be to Arlington, Custis proved to be just as frivolous and apathetic as Washington feared he would be, thoughtless and feckless to the last.

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<sup>179</sup> Will of George Washington Parke Custis (March 26, 1855), Encyclopedia Virginia, First published: February 8, 2019 | Last modified: February 8, 2019, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Will\\_of\\_George\\_Washington\\_Parke\\_Custis\\_March\\_26\\_1855](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Will_of_George_Washington_Parke_Custis_March_26_1855)

According to this clause, Custis granted freedom to his enslaved whenever all of his debts were paid. Yet he also appears to have relinquished the power to decide *when* to emancipate Arlington's slaves to his executors, who apparently may do so whenever they see fit. But at the same time, the executors are to take no longer than five years after his death to pay the debts and emancipate the enslaved. This also gives the vague impression that the executors could choose to grant emancipation anytime within that five year period, whether the debts have been paid at all. It is frustratingly unclear which part is meant to be the chief priority in settling the estate—the legacies? the debts? Was emancipation only secondary? It appears that Lee's interpretation of the will believed the latter to be true, and all his energy went into paying off debts in order to secure his daughters' legacies. Note that this clause of Custis's will refers to multiple executors; Lee was not the only one named an executor of Custis's will, he simply had the misfortune of being the first name on the list. Following Lee was Robert Lee Randolph of Eastern View, Retired Reverend Bishop Meade, and George Washington Peter.<sup>180</sup> In a letter to Anna Maria Fitzhugh (William Henry Fitzhugh's widow) dated November 22, 1857, Lee explains the troubling contents of Custis's will, while specifically stating that as of the date his letter, he had received no word from Bishop Meade, while Randolph and Peter had expressed their wishes that Lee act alone.<sup>181</sup> "Dear Cousin Anna," wrote Lee, "what am I to do."<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Will of George Washington Parke Custis (March 26, 1855) Encyclopedia Virginia, First published: February 8, 2019 | Last modified: February 8, 2019, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Will\\_of\\_George\\_Washington\\_Parke\\_Custis\\_March\\_26\\_1855](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Will_of_George_Washington_Parke_Custis_March_26_1855). One of two witness listed was Markie Williams.

<sup>181</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to Anna Maria Fitzhugh, November 22, 1857, Lee Family Papers, Mss1 151 c293, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>182</sup> Although Anna Maria Fitzhugh was Mary Lee's aunt, Robert E. Lee referred to her exclusively as "Cousin Anna," most likely because she was a relation of his before his marriage to Mary. Further reference to Mrs. Fitzhugh in this thesis will likewise reflect Lee's chosen title of "Cousin Anna."

Since Mary Lee was in no condition to control Arlington, responsibility then passed to their eldest son, Custis Lee, in accordance with G.W.P.'s will. Lee immediately recognized the fact that his son Custis was in no way prepared to take command of Arlington, especially in its increasingly dilapidated state: "Everything is in ruins," he wrote, "& will have to be rebuilt."<sup>183</sup> A few months later, Custis Lee wrote to his mother from San Francisco, insisting that his father was the only logical choice to take care of Arlington and see that the provisions of G.W.P.'s will were adhered to. Custis Lee further expressed his confidence in turning over responsibility of the estate to his father, writing, "I trust Pa will not refuse to receive my interest in Arlington, for my sake, if not for his own."<sup>184</sup>

But Lee *did* refuse, and quite strongly. A month later, Lee responded to his son, imploring Custis to rescind his offer and take responsibility for his inheritance. ". . . I cannot accept your offer," Lee wrote, "It is not from any unwillingness to receive from you a gift [ . . . ] But simply because it would not be right for me to do so. Your dear [Grandfather] distributed his property as he thought best & it is proper that it should remain as he bestowed it."<sup>185</sup> Lee enclosed with this letter a copy of G.W.P.'s will, hoping that his son would perhaps be more motivated to take over after reading its stipulations with his own eyes. Lee also urged his son to either save or smartly invest *all* of his money so that he may use it for the eventual and inevitable improvements to Arlington. He goes on to share his various financial woes, the lack of profit from the farm, and openly seeks his son's opinion on the will's provisions, "especially that clause respecting his

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<sup>183</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to Anna Maria Fitzhugh, November 22, 1857, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>184</sup> Correspondence, George Washington Custis Lee, to Mary Anna Custis Lee, February 16, 1858, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>185</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee, George Washington Custis Lee, March 17, 1858, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

slaves.”<sup>186</sup> Custis Lee remained unmoved by his fathers pleas. By May of that year, Lee appears to have accepted his role as the manager of Arlington (Mary Lee being consistently recognized as the true owner), and wrote to his son only of current family matters, listing his efforts in improving the farm and voicing his hopes for the year’s corn crop.<sup>187</sup>

Unable to pass the responsibilities of Arlington off on his son, Lee turned to the enslaved at Arlington as his only means of maintaining the estate. Unrest among Arlington’s enslaved began as soon as Custis died. Many of them claimed that Custis had verbally promised them they would gain their freedom upon his death.<sup>188</sup> Custis failed his enslaved people tremendously, whether it was his failure to be frank in their conditions of freedom, his failure to understand the consequences of including such conditions, or because he simply lied to them. Had they been granted full and immediate emancipation, they would have been spared years of turmoil at the hands of the Lees. By this point, Mary Lee had also failed Arlington’s enslaved.

Much like her father, Mary thought herself to be a kind and charitable mistress. But, also like her father, she shirked responsibility whenever she could. In an effort to blame her father for the growing tensions between her family and the enslaved, she wrote, “My dear father in his usual entire ignorance of the state of his affairs has left provision in his will which it will be almost impossible to fulfill even in double 5 years.”<sup>189</sup> It is entirely possible that Mary Lee is as responsible for this provision as G.W.P. Before her wedding, Mary, the fiercely independent Arlington heiress, struggled to find any appeal in marriage that could surpass the life she led as a

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<sup>186</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to George Washington Custis Lee, March 17, 1858, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>187</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to George Washington Custis Lee, May 17, 1858, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>188</sup> Pryor, 261.

<sup>189</sup> Fellman, 71.

wealthy and devout single woman. As a result, she apparently cautioned her own daughters against marriage, urged them to appreciate their “blessed single state,” and warned against rushing to leave it.<sup>190</sup> It is therefore no surprise that by the time their grandfather died in 1857, at least three out of four Lee daughters were of marriageable age, yet remained unmarried and living at Arlington with their mother. With no substantial prospects in their foreseeable future, their legacies became vital to their future security. It is little wonder that their father should be so concerned with fulfilling this particular aspect of Custis’s will. Whether or not Mary Lee could be held accountable for her daughters’ marital status is unknown, but all four of the Lee girls did die unmarried, the first as early as 1862, the last as late as 1918.

Similar to her husband, Mary blamed G.W.P. for their unfortunate situation. The Lees were left to decipher a confusing will, pay off an incredible amount of debts, manage multiple plantations in various states of disarray, bleed an already depleted farm dry in order to turn a profit, and secure the legacies for their four unmarried daughters. On top of that, their beloved Arlington House was falling apart all around them while their enslaved community cried out for justice. Much of this *was* G.W.P.’s fault. His flighty nature and carelessness were very much to blame for the mismanagement of his properties as well as his staggering debt. His debt led to the neglect of Arlington House, as he could never provide the finances needed for substantial repairs. The language of his will and the fact that he had no lawyer assist in its composition were, again, his fault. However, his will also stated that the executors had the power to emancipate Arlington’s slaves in whichever manner they deemed “expedient” and “proper.”

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<sup>190</sup> Pryor, 81.

Mary Lee insisted that they could not free their slaves due to the Virginia law that required freedmen to leave the states; providing safe passage of their enslaved out of state would be far too expensive.<sup>191</sup> Robert E. Lee on the other hand, insisted that their labor was required in order to rejuvenate Arlington's farm and turn a profit.<sup>192</sup> In any case, the Lees continued to operate under the notion that the institution of slavery was proving to be far more harmful to *them* than their enslaved. They found themselves bound to Custis's will and bound to Arlington itself, suffering through financial woes and slave unrest as if *they* were the victims of their own fate. No matter how many times the Lees described the institution as a white man's burden, or imagined the sweet relief of such "an immense burden" being taken off their shoulders, they continued to change nothing about slavery at Arlington, save for exposing them to Robert E. Lee's cruelty.<sup>193</sup>

According to testimony of an Arlington slave published by the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1866, Arlington's enslaved community believed themselves to be free after G.W.P.'s death, but were "informed" by General Lee that they were to remain enslaved at Arlington for five more years in accordance with G.W.P.'s will. Wesley Norris, the author of this testimony, explains that he was born at Arlington, served there his entire life under G.W.P. Custis, and spent less than two years under the supervision of Robert E. Lee before he and a few others decided to run away in 1859. Norris, his sister Mary, and their cousin escaped from Arlington and made it as

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<sup>191</sup> Fellman, 71. Early in 1858, Mary Lee reportedly saw two white men on the estate who were apparently creating a rapport with several enslaved persons, insisting that they had a right to freedom, and if they decided to stage and uprising to take it, they could surely have it. In a rather snide manner, Mary Lee echoes her husband's hatred for abolition by writing to friend W.G. Webster in 1858, "We should be most deeply indebted to their *kind friends* the abolitionists. . .if they would come forward [and purchase their] freedom *at once*."

<sup>192</sup> Pryor, 263.

<sup>193</sup> Fellman, 70.

far as Westminster in Maryland before being apprehended and imprisoned for fifteen days before Lee had them returned to Arlington. Norris writes that upon their return to the estate, Lee “demanded the reason why we ran away; we frankly told him that we considered ourselves free; he then told us he would teach us a lesson we never would forget.”<sup>194</sup>

This lesson, according to Norris, included all three enslaved persons being brought to the barn, tied to posts, stripped to the waist, and whipped. Norris and his male cousin received fifty lashes, his sister received twenty. Lee was present for the entire ordeal, but only as an observer. The overseer did the tying and the stripping, but apparently refused to whip the victims. The whipping was instead done by Dick Williams, a county constable that had to be called to Arlington to carry out Lee’s orders. All the while, Lee stood watch, occasionally reminding Williams to “lay it on well.”<sup>195</sup> Norris further illustrated Lee’s drive to teach such a brutal lesson by then adding that though the whipping was done, the punishment was not. “Not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh,” Norris wrote, “Gen. Lee then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine, which was done. After this my cousin and myself were sent to Hanover Court-House jail, my sister being sent to Richmond to an agent to be hired.”<sup>196</sup>

After fifteen days in jail, Norris and his cousin were then sent to work at the Orange and Alexander railroad for seven months, then to the Northeastern railroad in Alabama, and back to Richmond in January of 1863. After years of forced labor, away from his family, and away from his home, Wesley Norris testified that upon finding himself in Richmond in the throes of the

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<sup>194</sup> Wesley Norris interview in “Robert E. Lee: His Brutality to his Slaves,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 14, 1866.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

Civil War, he dared to escape through rebel lines and to his freedom.<sup>197</sup> The end of Wesley Norris's testimony states that as of its publication, he was currently employed by the U.S. Government at Arlington National Cemetery, and invited any who wished to question him about this account to find him there. Norris also included his sister's known place of employment in the event that anyone wished to further corroborate his testimony with her.<sup>198</sup>

Before Wesley Norris had his testimony published in 1866, two similar accounts of Lee's cruelty towards Arlington's enslaved were anonymously sent to the *New York Tribune* in June of 1859. The first anonymous author shares with the *Tribune's* editor that after G.W.P.'s death, word had circulated that he had liberated his slaves, yet as of 1859 they were clearly still held in bondage at Arlington. Because the contents of the will were never made public, this aroused suspicion, and this anonymous author felt it prudent to share their information with the nation, most likely as a means of implicating Lee. This account contains particulars of the unfair treatment now bestowed on Arlington's enslaved community, including old women that were "kept sewing, making clothes for the field hands, from daylight till dark," an eighty year old man that was "turned out as a regular field hand," another group of three runaways (separate from the Norris group) that were returned and whipped, and the general deprivation of private time to earn their own comforts or enjoy leisure, as was once customary on the estate. Furthermore, this account—though slightly in conflict with some details—corroborates with Wesley Norris's testimony, which remained unpublished until 1866.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Wesley Norris interview in "Robert E. Lee: His Brutality to his Slaves," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 14, 1866.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Anonymous, "Some Facts That Should Come To Light" *New York Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1859. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1859-06-24/ed-1/seq-6/>

This testimony—purportedly written by neighbors of the Lees—notes that after three of Arlington’s “most valuable servants” ran away, Lee made no advertisements of their escape, nor publicly offered any sort of reward for their return.<sup>200</sup> This, according to the author, was most likely an attempt to avoid further embarrassment, as another group of three slaves had also run away one week earlier. The author also notes that as of the date of his letter to the *Tribune*’s editor—June 21, 1859—the Norris runaways were still being held in a Richmond jail. The second letter to the *Tribune*’s editor, dated June 19, 1859, refers to the group of three runaways that preceded Norris’s group. One week before the date of this letter, an officer was sent from Arlington to retrieve them; the three were apprehended just nine miles outside of Pennsylvania. Upon their return to Arlington, Lee ordered them whipped. This account was submitted by “A Citizen,” who claims to have lived only a mile away from Arlington, and who also claims that Custis fathered at least fifteen children by enslaved women; all of which were apparently seen by this citizen on a regular—if not daily—basis.<sup>201</sup> Although this citizen offers no speculation as to why this group chose to escape, the anonymous letter dated June 21 does: “for simply going down to the river to get themselves some fish, when they were literally starved.”<sup>202</sup>

While some of the details of the anonymous 1859 accounts conflict with Wesley Norris’s (such as the number of lashes being 39 to each victim, and a most incriminating claim that Lee had whipped the female victim himself), the fact remains that someone was able to collect detail of the goings-on at Arlington that one of its own enslaved people could confirm.<sup>203</sup> At the very

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<sup>200</sup> Anonymous, “Some Facts That Should Come To Light” *New York Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1859.

<sup>201</sup> A Citizen, “Some Facts That Should Come To Light” *New York Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1859. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1859-06-24/ed-1/seq-6/>

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

least, it demonstrates the level of unrest that Arlington's enslaved were experiencing under Lee's authority, in addition to confirming that Lee had no moral objections to hiring out slaves and breaking up families. Both letters were also written by neighbors under the impression that Custis had freed his enslaved upon his demise, yet remained in bondage under Lee. Despite varying details and sometimes overlapping timelines, both letters to the *Tribune* reflect the fact that Arlington was carefully under watch by concerned citizens. Since Custis literally designed the entire estate to be conspicuous, easily observable, and welcoming to visitors, it comes as very little surprise that so many locals became involved in Arlington's everyday activity, especially after Custis's death.

The death of a master was sure to cause anxiety amongst an enslaved community, whether that master was believed to be kind or not; fear of the unknown was concerning enough and the unknown was what Arlington's enslaved faced in 1857. Frederick Douglass covers this issue several times in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), as does Harriet Beecher Stowe towards the close of her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852): "No creature on God's earth," wrote Stowe, "is left more utterly unprotected and desolate than the slave in these circumstances."<sup>204</sup> The anonymous author of the June 21 letter appears to have held Custis in very high esteem, implying that Lee's treatment of Arlington's enslaved should be considered a disgrace to Custis's memory: "Shall "Washington's body guard" be thus tampered with, and never a voice raised for such utter helplessness?"<sup>205</sup> Custis was of course nowhere near as benevolent as he believed himself to be, yet the negative impact that his death had on

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<sup>204</sup> Stowe, 321.

<sup>205</sup> A Citizen, "Some Facts That Should Come To Light" *New York Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1859.

Arlington's enslaved community is hard to ignore. Perhaps Custis's biggest success as a man, in addition to being "Washington's body guard," was his dedication to keeping slave families together. Generations of families, white and black, enslaved and free, all grew and worked and lived together at Arlington. This tradition was just as much a part of building Arlington's foundations as Custis's inherited monetary and material wealth was. Yet it was also the first thing to go once Lee assumed responsibility of the estate.

The reports printed in the *Tribune* were not alone; similar articles that questioned Lee's tactics were also found in the *Boston Traveller* and the *New York Times*. Most were deliberately ignored by the Lees. Mary Lee insisted that whomever wrote the letters was "telling lies so atrocious that they scarcely deserved a reply."<sup>206</sup> Lee responded only to the December, 1857 article in the *Boston Traveller* which claimed that the emancipation of Arlington's slaves was "much retarded if not wholly prevented, by the heirs," naming John Washington as the chief executor.<sup>207</sup> The article continues to share speculation that each enslaved person had been individually called to Custis's deathbed where he allegedly granted them their freedom, yet there was no white man in the room to bear witness to such a verbal promise.<sup>208</sup> The *Traveller* demanded that a will be produced, lest such salacious happenings concerning the enslaved be all that is remembered of "the last remaining member of the household of Washington." Lee's response mainly clarifies the fact that John Washington was not only *not* the will's executor but was not even included in the will as an heir at all. Lee goes on to explain that no member of the

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<sup>206</sup> Coulling, 122.

<sup>207</sup> "The Slaves of Mr. Custis," *The New York Times* (New York), December 30, 1857. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/us/robert-e-lee-slaves.html>. The original article from the *Boston Traveller* was reprinted in *The New York Times*, besides Lee's response.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

family wished to ignore or interrupt the provisions of the will concerning the enslaved, and insisted that there is “no foundation for the assertion that they are being sold South.”<sup>209</sup>

As of December 1857, no Arlington slaves had been sold South, but Lee’s stewardship of Arlington had only just begun. By the time the 1859 accounts were published, Lee seemed to suffer through his embarrassment silently. The only acknowledgement of these accounts came in a letter Lee wrote to his son, Custis, which does not confirm the accusations, but certainly makes no move to deny them either: “The *N. Y. Tribune* has attacked me for my treatment of your grandfather’s slaves, but I shall not reply. He has left me an unpleasant legacy.”<sup>210</sup>

Though Lee desperately tried to rid himself from the chaos at Arlington, there is no doubt that the responsibilities fell solely onto his shoulders. Perhaps Lee’s back was up against a wall in terms of maintaining his family’s financial security, yet his decision to view the will’s emancipation clause as a secondary issue was entirely his own, as was his cruelty, and his willingness to separate generations of enslaved families. Lee’s only other option—outside of his refusal to immediately manumit Custis’s slaves—was to sell the estate. Yet despite his reluctance to take responsibility of the estate, and his wife’s increasing irritation with the enslaved, there is no record of either of them considering such an option.

In a letter to his Cousin Anna dated November 26, 1857, Lee wrote of the legacy which was so unpleasantly bestowed upon him: “My uncertainty as to the best course for me to pursue, under the new duties delivered upon me, arises not from what would be most agreeable to me, but what would be best for my children & the most prudent for my wife.”<sup>211</sup> Lee’s wife and

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<sup>209</sup> “The Slaves of Mr. Custis,” *The New York Times* (New York), December 30, 1857.

<sup>210</sup> Coulling, 122.

<sup>211</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to Anna Maria Fitzhugh, November 26 1857, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

children depended on Arlington. Arlington, after Custis's death, depended on Lee to ensure its survival. After taking a leave of absence from the army, Lee's sole duty was to maintain Arlington and maintain his family's standard of living. Lee chose to accomplish these tasks by draining as much labor from Arlington's enslaved as he could manage within a five year period. His duty, therefore, remained fixed on his family and their dependence on Arlington rather than the moral dilemma of slavery that had begun to shake Virginia to its core.

Another letter from Lee to Cousin Anna, dated November 20, 1858, reveals that Mrs. Fitzhugh had sent Lee a check for \$1,000 to help him in his mission to rejuvenate Arlington. Lee informed his cousin that he could not accept her generous offer, and implored her to perhaps save it for him until such a gift became absolutely necessary.<sup>212</sup> In what is either an impressive show of honor, or simply a means of seeking approval for his own accomplishments, Lee insists that all on-going projects at Arlington in need of funds were already completed by himself, out of his own pocket. The cost was substantial for a Lieutenant Colonel on leave, but a majority of the labor was of course provided by what a frustrated Lee called "unwilling hands."<sup>213</sup>

In any case, by 1859, Lee had grown somewhat accustomed to his new role as the steward of Arlington. According to his son Rob, Lee's fervor in transforming Arlington was not solely because he was duty-bound to his family, but because he harbored a preexisting fondness for farming.<sup>214</sup> Once Lee could no longer persuade his son Custis to redeem his inheritance, Lee immediately began improvements to Arlington's farm, outbuildings, roads, fences, fields, and

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<sup>212</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee to Anna Maria Fitzhugh, November 20 1858, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>213</sup> Pryor, 263.

<sup>214</sup> Robert E. Lee, Jr., *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* (New York: Doubleday, 1905), 20.

livestock.<sup>215</sup> In fact, before he had even left for Texas in 1855, Lee had already finished drawing up plans for a new furnace, as well as major renovations to the interior of Arlington's south wing.<sup>216</sup> Rob also insisted that the general appearance of the estate under Lee's supervision had improved in an impressively short amount of time. "He often said that he longed for the time when he could have a farm of his own," wrote Rob of his father, "where he could end his days in quiet and peace, interested in the care and improvement of his own land. The idea was always with him."<sup>217</sup>

It appears that such a future was within Lee's grasp by 1859. Despite his struggles with Arlington's enslaved and in spite of the major financial roadblocks he continued to face, Lee came very close to emulating the life of Washington in a way that G.W.P. Custis could not; try as he might to recreate the illusion, Custis was no American Cincinnatus. Lee, on the other hand, had a military career that easily put Custis's inconsiderable service to shame. By 1859, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee was a distinguished veteran of the Mexican War turned gentleman farmer—a true Cincinnatus. He had dutifully performed his Republican civic duties, and became increasingly disinterested in the politics that surrounded him. The rehabilitation of Arlington was difficult, but substantial accomplishments had already been made. All that seemed to stand in his way was the eventual loss of Arlington's enslaved, but he still had roughly three more years to bleed them dry and he was well on his way to doing. For two years, Lee isolated himself at Arlington, busying himself with the needs of the farm while a storm began raging outside. While abolitionists and rumors of secession during the summer of 1859 occasionally

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<sup>215</sup> Lee, Jr., 20.

<sup>216</sup> Coulling, 89.

<sup>217</sup> Lee, Jr., 20.

penetrated the umbrella of familial duty that Lee so often took cover under, his avoidance of national issues came to head later that fall, when he could avoid his duties to army no longer.

On October 17, 1859, Lee mailed in an application for insurance to the Hartford Fire Insurance Company to cover Arlington House.<sup>218</sup> Still focused on the rehabilitation of the estate and securing future stability for his family, Lee, on this day, was probably not expecting to be called back to his military duties. Arlington, at this time, was also playing host to J.E.B. Stuart, of the First Cavalry. Stuart was a close friend and former classmate of Custis Lee, as well as a friend and admirer of the Lee's eldest daughter, Mary Custis Lee.<sup>219</sup> On the afternoon of October 17, while Lee was penning his insurance application, Stuart was in the waiting room of Secretary of War John B. Floyd on a personal business matter when he overheard that a slave insurrection was taking place at Harper's Ferry. Floyd, along with President Buchanan had decided to summon Colonel Lee to the War Department to handle the situation, initiated by famed abolitionist John Brown. An order to take command of the troops en route to Harper's Ferry was quickly written out and passed on to Stuart who would deliver it directly to Lee at Arlington.<sup>220</sup>

After having dealt with varying degrees of slave unrest earlier that summer, the idea of a slave insurrection so close to his home was surely an enormous threat to Lee, who departed Arlington with Stuart immediately upon receiving his order. By midnight, Lee and Stuart arrived in Harper's Ferry, along with a group of Marines led by First Lieutenant Israel Green. Together they learned that Brown and his party had raided and gained possession of the U.S. Armory at

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<sup>218</sup> Application for Insurance, Robert E. Lee to Hartford Fire Insurance Company, October 17, 1859, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>219</sup> Coulling, 73.

<sup>220</sup> Korda, xxv.

Harper's Ferry along with thirty-five hostages that they were holding in the engine house. Lee, in full command of all troops, quickly had all sides of the armory surrounded when he sent word to Brown, imploring him to surrender peacefully. Brown refused. Lt. Greene and his Marines attacked the engine house and broke through within minutes, rescuing the remaining hostages, while all of Brown's raiders were either killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.<sup>221</sup>

On October 19, Lee wrote and dispatched a detailed account of the event back to Adjutant General Colonel S. Cooper, describing Brown's intentions as "the liberation of the slaves of Virginia, and of the whole South; and [he] acknowledges that he has been disappointed in his expectations of aid from the black as well as white population, both in the Southern and Northern States."<sup>222</sup> Having been unexpectedly immersed back into his military life, Lee still managed to fulfill his duties successfully at Harper's Ferry. Brown's failure to garner support for his raid led Lee to conclude that the entire endeavor was simply proof that Brown was "a fanatic or a madman."<sup>223</sup> If nothing else, it was further validation of Lee's intense dislike for abolition. To the devout and increasingly politically disinterested Lee, John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry was nothing more than a violent lesson against meddling with matters best left up to God.

By February of 1860, Lee's leave of absence had come to an end and he was back in charge of the Department of Texas, where he stayed for one year. Mary Lee and her daughters spent much of this year visiting family, spending a significant amount of time in New York where they often came face to face with Northern abolitionists that openly criticized their

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<sup>221</sup> Dispatch, Robert E. Lee, to Adjutant General Colonel S. Cooper, October 19, 1859, John Brown's Raid Militia Records of the Adjutant General, 1859, 38917, Library of Virginia.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Korda, xxxvi.

Southern, slaveholding way of life.<sup>224</sup> Upon returning to Arlington, the Lee women tried to go on with their lives in as normally as was possible, mostly entertaining visiting family, tending to their gardens, rescuing stray cats, and writing to Lee in Texas. Outside the estate, however, the reality of Southern secession was rapidly in motion, and without the comfort and safety of Lee's presence, the Lee women feared for their protection among such political unrest.<sup>225</sup> By December 20, South Carolina had officially seceded from the Union, and by March 1, 1861, Robert E. Lee returned to Arlington at the behest of General Winfield Scott.

Just as Lee was leaving Texas, a fellow officer shouted to him, "Colonel, do you intend to go North or South?" to which Lee replied: "I shall never bear arms against the United States,—but it may be necessary for me to carry a musket in defense of my native State, Virginia, in which case I shall not prove recreant to my duty."<sup>226</sup> This is the very statement that Lee biographers have latched onto when reasoning Lee's decision to join the Confederacy. It is acknowledged that a patriotic and virtuous republican like Lee saw secession as nothing more than revolution and had no desire to oppose the Union. Union above all else, after all, was a tenet of George Washington's—the man Lee's father-in-law idolized, the man that Lee himself was emulating, whether he consciously did so or not. It is Lee's duty to his home state of Virginia that so many Lee historians and biographers have remained fixated on. While choosing to carry a musket against the Union did not fall in line with Washington's interpretation of republicanism,

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<sup>224</sup> Coulling, 129.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>226</sup> Pryor, 285.

choosing to remain loyal to the state of Virginia was exactly the kind of sectional republican allegiance that James Madison identified during the Constitutional Convention of 1787.<sup>227</sup>

Lee was offered command of the United States armies to which he immediately declined, much to the dismay of General Scott, who tried his best to convince Lee to stay. Convinced that suppression of Southern forces would only be met with aggression, Lee refused to take any position that would involve defensive moves against Virginia. Agnes Lee wrote that during the next few days, Arlington felt “as if there had been a death in it,” and in a way, it had.<sup>228</sup> As Lee contemplated his next move, walking back and forth across Arlington’s immense portico, pacing through the Lee girls’ flower gardens, and praying in his upstairs bedroom, any loyalty in his heart toward the United States had been killed by his overwhelming duty to his family and to his home. By April 20, Lee resigned his commission in the United States Army, and by April 23, accepted command of Virginia’s forces and left Arlington for good.

The republicanism of Lee’s world—that world that Arlington was built to represent—had aligned itself with the same foundations of Jeffersonian liberalism that had limited its tenets of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to elite white males. Lee was a believer in white supremacy, and could not envision a world in which he—a descendant of one of Virginia’s founding families, a war hero turned respectable gentleman farmer—could share his liberty equally with say, one of the enslaved families he had just violently torn asunder. Slavery was as much a part of Arlington’s identity as the preservation of Washington’s memory was, and

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<sup>227</sup> James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, as quoted in Thompson, 305.

<sup>228</sup> Pryor, 291.

Arlington had been the focal point of Lee's life for over thirty years. Standing for Virginia meant standing against abolition, and this was a cause he could back without any further persuasion.

Virginia may have been Lee's home state, but Arlington was his *home*. While many historians have chosen to accept Lee's commitment to Virginia at face value, they have failed to acknowledge the importance of Arlington. Arlington was built with the spirit of Washington behind it, and designed to encourage and inspire republican civic duty. Lee had just spent three frustrating years tirelessly pouring all of his resources into the preservation of the house and its legacy. Slavery was vital to maintaining the Arlington he knew, and necessary to create the Arlington he envisioned. He chose to view the emancipation clause of Custis's will as a secondary issue, continuing the exploitation of human life to fulfill his duty to his family to save them from the embarrassment of financial ruin—something he had already spent his whole life running from.

Arlington was quickly seized by Union forces in May, 1861 because of its proximity to the capital, and Lee had anticipated this. He implored his wife to leave as quickly as she could, and she characteristically took her time in doing so. Lee repeatedly wrote to her, urging her to leave of her own volition before the Union could force her out.<sup>229</sup> Having anticipated such a seizure, Lee seems to have very well understood the reality that he and his family would lose Arlington. One might pause here to assume that Arlington was a secondary issue for him, and could in no way be his true motivation for joining the Confederacy. It stands to reason that if Lee's only true aim was to protect Arlington, then he would have accepted his commission as

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<sup>229</sup> Correspondence, Robert E. Lee, to Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, April 26, 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS. Correspondence, Robert E. Lee, to Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, April 30, 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS. Correspondence, Robert E. Lee, to Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, May 2, 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS..

commander of Union Forces, ensuring that the house be left alone and considered neutral territory like Mount Vernon had.<sup>230</sup>

Perhaps Lee was not motivated to protect the house, because after all, it was just a house; it was falling apart, it was too much responsibility, and he made it clear several times that he had no desire to be in charge of it. But as we have come to know throughout this thesis, Arlington was actually so much more than just a house—it was a way of life. Lee may not have been able to raise his sword against Virginia, nor to his family, his friends, or his home, but he could raise his sword against the swift winds of change that threatened to destroy all he sought to protect. By choosing to leave Arlington, Lee was choosing to protect slavery, the only thing that Arlington could thrive on. He did not join the Confederacy to protect Arlington, he joined the Confederacy to protect the institution that kept Arlington *alive*.

When General Scott tried to convince Lee of all the reasons that he should stay with the Union, Lee remained resolute that he could not lead an invasion against the South. This is a fact that historians have always known. It should be noted, however, that before resigning his commission, Lee inquired of Scott the possibility that he might be able simply stay out of the conflict entirely, and ride out the storm quietly at Arlington.<sup>231</sup> If Lee's declaration of loyalty to the Confederate cause is not enough to convict him, then perhaps this display of his blatant disregard for what was right and just should be.

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<sup>230</sup> General Order Number 13, by General Winfield Scott, July 31, 1861, <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/mount-vernon-ladies-association/mount-vernon-through-time/mount-vernon-in-the-civil-war/>

<sup>231</sup> Elizabeth Brown Pryor, "Robert E. Lee's 'Severest Struggle,'" *American Heritage*, Vol. 58, Issue 1, Winter, 2008.

## CONCLUSION

“That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

—“How Firm a Foundation,” Robert E. Lee’s favorite hymn<sup>232</sup>

On May 24, 1861, Union forces officially commenced occupation of Arlington House and its grounds. Although the Lee family had been fully evacuated at this point, there had been no way for them to move all of their possessions out of the house; in fact it is likely that they expected to be back there quite soon. Before she left, Mary Lee wrote a farewell letter to General Winfield Scott, expressing with “sadness and sorrow,” that the only reason she was willing to leave was to be of one less concern to her already troubled husband. Otherwise, she wrote, “nothing would induce me to abandon my home.”<sup>233</sup> Since Mary Lee in her decrepit state could hardly travel at all let alone while hauling priceless Washington artifacts, she and her daughters quickly hid some of the most valuable family possessions in the house’s attic, basement, and closets. She left all the household keys with Selina Gray, who remained on the property with her family.<sup>234</sup> Gray had been Mary Lee’s personal servant for many years and as such, became the only person she could trust with such responsibility.

Upon the first arrival of Union troops, Selina Gray met them at the door, handing the keys over to the officer in charge, General Irvin McDowell.<sup>235</sup> Not soon after the occupation

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<sup>232</sup> The Lee Family Digital Archive, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/reference/theses/vll/index.html>

<sup>233</sup> Pryor, 304.

<sup>234</sup> “Selina Gray,” Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial, National Park Service, last updated January 27, 2017. <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/gray.htm>

<sup>235</sup> “Life of Gray Family,” The Black Heritage Museum of Arlington Virginia, last updated December, 2018. <https://arlingtonblackheritage.org/life-of-gray-family/>

began, Gray had begun to notice that items all over the house had gone missing. It was little things at first; small items and inconsequential trinkets. Soon, entire pieces of furniture were gone, as well as treasured items like the Custis family Bible, Martha Washington's damask curtains, Washington's war tent, and the famous punch bowl that were never recovered. Eventually, even the front door's iron latch was gone.<sup>236</sup> Selina Gray had hid items under lock and key as best she could, and even confronted soldiers head on, demanding that they stop touching Mrs. Lee's things. She was soon forced to report the looting to General McDowell, explaining that many of the soldiers stealing to seek revenge on General Lee had actually stolen irreplaceable heirlooms from General Washington. Gray provided him with a list of missing items and assured him that their recovery required his personal attention.<sup>237</sup> McDowell did his best to salvage what he could, and all remaining items of import were shipped to the U.S. Patent Office for safekeeping.<sup>238</sup>

Aside from the missing items, Arlington House had meanwhile fallen into disrepair once again. All of Lee's hard work between 1857 and 1860 had all but disappeared in a matter of weeks with the constant presence of Union troops. General McDowell had done his best to maintain distance between his troops and the house, viewing it only as a temporary set up. After the first battle of Manassas in July, 1861, however, McDowell was dismissed and replaced by George B. McClellan. McClellan turned Arlington into an active, bustling encampment, whose

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<sup>236</sup> Pryor, 306.

<sup>237</sup> "Life of Gray Family," <https://arlingtonblackheritage.org/life-of-gray-family/>

<sup>238</sup> "Selina Gray," <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/gray.htm>

foot traffic quickly destroyed the landscape, while officers began claiming rooms inside the house.<sup>239</sup>

In May of 1863, a Freedmen's Village was established at Arlington under the authority of the Department of the Army.<sup>240</sup> Although Arlington was certainly not the first Freedmen's Village to be established, it eventually became the most famous with a population of roughly 1,500, hospital, two churches, schools and a home for the elderly.<sup>241</sup> The spot was chosen by Danforth B. Nichols of the American Missionary Association, and Lieutenant Colonel Elias M. Green, Chief Quartermaster of the Department of Washington, for its high ground, its proximity to Washington D.C., and the perimeter of military installments around it that could keep it safe.<sup>242</sup> Almost immediately, the village became home to over one hundred former slaves, the majority of them having been enslaved by the Custis and Lee family.<sup>243</sup>

By 1864, the volume of Union war dead had left cemeteries in D.C. and its surrounding areas beyond capacity. General Montgomery C. Meigs of the Quartermaster Department was given permission by President Lincoln to establish a cemetery on the Arlington estate.<sup>244</sup> In what has been recognized as both personal revenge on Lee and insurance that the Lee's could never return to Arlington, Meigs chose plots as close to the house as he could manage, to see that the house remained unlivable forever.<sup>245</sup> He also organized the burials of soldiers in plots that were

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<sup>239</sup> Pryor, 305.

<sup>240</sup> Hanna, 82.

<sup>241</sup> "Freedmen's Village," Arlington National Cemetery, Department of the Army, <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/History-of-Arlington-National-Cemetery/Freedmans-Village>

<sup>242</sup> Hanna, 82.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1995), 52.

<sup>245</sup> Hanna, 88.

once Mrs. Lee's precious rose garden, which had once grown the flowers, as Hanna notes, "once sold by slaves to raise funds for their own freedom."<sup>246</sup> No longer forced or expected to live out their freedom outside the United States, many of these former enslaved families began their freedom right there at Arlington where their home had always been, in the Freedman's Village.

The Lees never again resided at Arlington, nor did Robert or Mary show any interest in buying it back from the government.<sup>247</sup> Mary Lee came back to Arlington only once more in 1873 when her curiosity could keep her away no longer. Although travel was nearly impossible at her advanced age, she made the trip anyway. As her carriage entered the grounds, Mary Lee is reported to have described what she saw as being so changed "it seemed but a dream of the past." Upon arriving at the front of the house, she exited her carriage for mere moments before turning around and leaving.<sup>248</sup> Robert E. Lee never returned.

In 1874, after both of his parents had died, the eldest Lee son, Custis Lee, filed a suit against the U.S. government on the grounds that Arlington House had been seized in 1861 without due process. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Lee in 1882.<sup>249</sup> With no desire to actually keep it, Custis Lee sold Arlington House to the government for \$150,000 in 1883. From there, the War Department began dismantling the Freedmen's Village in 1888 in order to expand what had become Arlington National Cemetery. While the cemetery still falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Army today, Executive Order 6166 transferred jurisdiction

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<sup>246</sup> Hanna, 88.

<sup>247</sup> Hanna, 81. On September 16, 1863, Mary Lee—still technically the owner of the estate—was given sixty-days notice to pay Arlington's property taxes, totaling \$34,100. Mrs. Lee was required to pay the balance in person, yet as the wife of a Confederate general, she dared not travel to D.C. She sent someone in her stead, but they were immediately turned away. The property was sold at auction on January 11, 1864, and was purchased by the government for \$26,800.

<sup>248</sup> Pryor, 446.

<sup>249</sup> *United States v. Lee*, 106 U.S. 196 (1882).

of the house itself to the Department of the Interior in 1933, where it remains under the authority of the National Parks Service. In 1955, a Senate Joint Resolution observed that although the “Custis-Lee Mansion” was undergoing rehabilitations, it was not yet officially dedicated as a memorial to Lee. This public order explained that Lee—as Ulysses S. Grant’s counterpart during the Civil War—had not been appropriately recognized or memorialized by the government. According to the Senate Joint Resolution that set this designation into motion, Robert E. Lee, as of the 90-year anniversary of his surrender at Appomattox, had never been “suitably memorialized by the National Government,” whereas Ulysses S. Grant, was felt to have long-since received his own recognition, having been “highly honored by becoming President of the United States.”<sup>250</sup>

Congress, at this time, decided it was high time they pay tribute to Lee, “whose name will ever be bright in our history as a great military leader, a great educator, a great American, and a truly great man through the simple heritage of his personal traits of high character, his grandeur of soul, his unfailing strength of heart.”<sup>251</sup> Such rhapsodic recognition of Lee—as with other Confederate icons—began early in the twentieth century, when D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* appeared in 1915. This sweeping epic drama—still hailed as a filmmaking triumph—depicts the South as the weakened yet righteous victim to the North’s aggression during the Civil War, now surviving the trials of Reconstruction. As its “innocent” women repeatedly pursued and ravaged by violent, sexually ravenous blacks (played by white actors in blackface), the economically and emotionally decimated South find hope in a highly romanticized portrayal of

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<sup>250</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Dedicating the Lee Mansion in Arlington National Cemetery as a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee*, S. Res. 62, Public Law 107, June 29, 1955. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-69/pdf/STATUTE-69-Pg190.pdf#page=1>.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

the Ku Klux Klan. After the film's release—and after President Woodrow Wilson's glowing enthusiasm and approval—the KKK experienced a surge in popularity and membership, and continued to wreak havoc on blacks for years to come.<sup>252</sup>

Another result of the film was the birth of the Lost Cause, which—among other things—led to the funding of Confederate monuments across the nation, most notably from organizations like United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). In her book, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*, Karen L. Cox explains that the UDC raised the stakes of the Lost Cause by making it “a movement about vindication as well as memorialization.”<sup>253</sup> The 1955 decision to rededicate Arlington as the Custis-Lee Mansion and to incorporate a memorial to Robert E. Lee is just another accomplishment in the South's movement to memorialize and vindicate. As Michael Chornesky notes in his essay, “Confederate Island upon the Union's ‘Most Hallowed Ground,’” this decision came shortly after the Supreme Court's landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in schools.<sup>254</sup>

In 1972, Congress again decided to rename the memorial, this time choosing to refer back to the site's original name—Arlington House—followed by its explanatory memorial phrase. The elaborate resolution of 1955 is a justification of *why* the site should become an

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<sup>252</sup> Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation: A History of “The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time.”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 111. *The Birth of a Nation* was the first film to ever be screen at the White House. After the viewing, President Wilson remarked that the film “was like writing history with lightening!”

<sup>253</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2003), 1.

<sup>254</sup> Michael Chornesky, “Confederate Island upon the Union's ‘Most Hallowed Ground’: The Battle to Interpret Arlington House, 1921-1937,” *Washington History* Vol. 27 No. 1 (Spring 2015), 32.

official memorial to Lee; the resolution of 1972 was a name change.<sup>255</sup> Though it appears to be nothing more than a simple name change, the transition from the “Custis-Lee Mansion” to “Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial” proves that even as late as 1972, Lost Cause rhetoric in the United States was still alive and well. This resolution may given Arlington House its name back, but it also made sure that Lee was still the center of its narrative. It also told the public that even the U.S. government acknowledged Robert E. Lee as someone who deserved to be memorialized. Perhaps it is no coincidence that both acts of Congress took place during periods of rising white backlash to civil rights activism alongside massive unrest within the black community.

In May, 2018, Arlington House began a multi-million dollar rehabilitation, yet as of the completion of this thesis during the summer of 2020, remains closed.<sup>256</sup> This project included excavations, landscape repair, and interior and exterior renovations, yet plans for its exhibits as the Robert E. Lee Memorial remain unknown. So far, 2020 has been a year of extreme turbulence, unrest, and grief. On May 25, the killing of a black man in police custody shook the nation—and the world—to its breaking point. George Floyd of Minneapolis died after being handcuffed and pinned to the ground by a police officer. As the officer kept his knee lodged against Floyd’s head and neck, Floyd repeatedly cried, “I can’t breathe,” until he became

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<sup>255</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *An Act to restore to the Custis-Lee Mansion located in the Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Va., its original historical name, followed by the explanatory memorial phrase, so that it shall be known as Arlington House-The Robert E. Lee Memorial*, H.R. 10595 (92nd): June 30, 1972. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/92/hr10595>

<sup>256</sup> According to the National Park Service, Arlington House was slated to reopen Fall of 2019, then was pushed back to Winter 2020, and again to March 2020. Upon the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, all rehabilitations to Arlington House were halted. As of August, 2020, Arlington House remains closed, and its rehabilitation presumably unfinished.

unresponsive. The officer then continued to press his knee against George Floyd's neck for an additional two minutes and 53 seconds.<sup>257</sup>

The next day, hundreds of protestors assembled in Minneapolis seeking justice for Floyd's murder. By May 27, protests began in major cities across the nation, and by May 28, cries for justice for Floyd's killing came from around the world. From Nigeria and Liberia, to Australia, and all through Europe, people assembled in support of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. On May 30, protestors in Richmond, Virginia set fire to the United Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters, reigniting the nation's pleas to remove Confederate monuments and memorials that began back in 2017, and those pleas continue.<sup>258</sup>

On June 7, the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece entitled: "Robert E. Lee is my ancestor. Take down his statue and let his cause be lost." The author is Robert W. Lee IV, a pastor and direct descendant of Robert E. Lee, who has joined the nation in demanding the removal of Confederate icons from public spaces. Lee IV writes that his upbringing "oozed Southern pride" and that even as a child in the 1990s, he had a black nanny, yet as an adult now recognizes the desperate need to end systematic racism in the U.S.<sup>259</sup> "I am fully aware that the broken, racist system we have built on the Lost Cause is far larger than a single statue," he wrote, "but the statue of my ancestor has stood for years in Richmond as an idol of this white supremacist mind-

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<sup>257</sup> "What We Know About the Death of George Floyd in Minneapolis," *The New York Times*, Published May 27, 2020 Updated May 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/us/george-floyd-minneapolis-death.html#link-6f02b463>

<sup>258</sup> Ned Oliver, Sandra Vogel song, "Confederate memorial hall burned as second night of outrage erupts in Virginia," *Virginia Mercury Online*, May 31, 2020. <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2020/05/31/a-second-night-of-outrage-erupts-in-virginia/>

<sup>259</sup> Robert W. Lee IV, "Robert E. Lee is my ancestor. Take down his statue and let his cause be lost," *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/07/robert-e-lee-is-my-ancestor-take-down-his-statue-let-his-cause-be-lost/>

set.”<sup>260</sup> Indeed, the mythology of the Lost Cause seems to have known no bounds, and its twisted logic remains rooted in the minds of so many individuals in the United States.

The *Washington Post* article from 1992 cited in Chapter Two, for example, encouraged locals and tourists to celebrate the marriages of two fundamentally racist families on the antebellum South, and ignored the history of Arlington’s enslaved people altogether. By enticing tourists to revisit a “bygone” era, events like the reenactment of the Lee wedding actively celebrate antebellum history and culture while failing to include the harsh realities and violent truths of the era. Even as recently as 1992, interpretations of history such as this reflect just how deep Lost Cause mythology still ran and continues to run throughout the nation.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam and Lt. Governor Justin Fairfax announced on June 4, 2020, the intent of the commonwealth to remove the statue of Robert E. Lee on Richmond’s Monument Avenue. Lee IV expressed nothing but pride at being present for such a moment.<sup>261</sup> Although the removal of Richmond’s Lee statue is imminent, it still remains in its place. Since the death of George Floyd, however, it has been defaced by outraged Richmond citizens, covered in graffitied messages that read “Stop White Supremacy” and “Black Lives Matter.” In an effort to create a new form of memorialization in Richmond, the George Floyd Foundation and [change.org](https://www.change.org) announced on July 23 a new, collaborative project. “A Monumental Change: The George Floyd Hologram Memorial Project,” features a hologram of fireflies that swarm and unite to form the face of George Floyd, his name appears in graffiti to mirror the defaced monument that it projects over. The Hologram Memorial Project reportedly follows the route of

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<sup>260</sup> Lee IV, “Robert E. Lee is my ancestor. Take down his statue and let his cause be lost.”

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

the 1961 Freedom Rides; the Lee statue in Richmond is but one of five stops on a tour of Confederate statues across Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia.<sup>262</sup> But the current changes to Confederate memorialization do not stop there.

On June 8, *The Washington Post* published another opinion piece, this one entitled: “I funded the rehabilitation of this Robert E. Lee memorial. Congress, please rename it.” The author of this piece, David M. Rubenstein opens by recalling Governor Northam’s decision calling it “appropriate and long overdue,” and urged the federal government to follow suit and rename Robert E. Lee Memorial at Arlington House. Rubenstein explains that he funded the project after it suffered serious earthquake damage in 2011. “I have always seen it [ . . . ] as the crown on the country’s most sacred ground. I thought the crown should be in far better shape than it had been.”<sup>263</sup> When Arlington House became designated as the Robert E. Lee Memorial in 1955, one of reasons cited on the public order was that Arlington House, as Rubenstein explains, was therefore meant to be a monument to Lee’s post-Confederacy efforts to reconciliation, which in retrospect were not particularly substantial, especially not by today’s standards. Rubenstein reminds his readers that he is proud to finance the rehabilitation of a historic site and submits that Arlington House should not be torn down. A rehabilitation of its name and mission, however, are long overdue.

Since circumstances beyond my control kept me from visiting Arlington House throughout the entirety of this research project, it has been difficult to comment on its

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<sup>262</sup> Alicia Lee, “A George Floyd hologram will light up the Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond tonight,” *cnn.com*, July 28, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/28/us/george-floyd-hologram-richmond-robert-e-lee-statue-trnd/index.html>

<sup>263</sup> David M. Rubenstein, “I funded the rehabilitation of this Robert E. Lee memorial. Congress, please rename it,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/08/i-funded-rehabilitation-this-robert-e-lee-memorial-congress-please-rename-it/>

memorialization without knowing what state it is in, or what state that its rehabilitation team envisioned. With recent discoveries of more evidence about the Gray family—including a previously unknown photograph of Selina Gray—I can only assume that more attention will be paid to the stories of Arlington’s substantial enslaved population. And yet, as this is still a nation where a group of protestors calling for the removal of Confederate monuments can be met with a group of protestors calling for their protection, it is difficult to imagine the Lee family being pushed into the margins instead of remaining the central theme. Still, I cannot help but imagine all the possibilities that Arlington House has to offer in terms of presenting its history to the public. The house could instead be dedicated specifically to Arlington’s enslaved families, or to the history of the Freedmen’s Village. Perhaps as a means of maintaining continuity with Arlington National Cemetery, it could be a tribute to fallen black soldiers, to the telling of their stories. Arlington House could even become a place for black artists to showcase their work, using the house’s rooms and various spaces for art installations that either acknowledge the history of Arlington’s enslaved community, or the Freedmen’s Village, or anything that wishes to tell compelling black stories, or address and challenge the systematic racism that still runs rampant in the United States.<sup>264</sup>

Despite the looting that took place during the war, the material culture of Arlington House is still considerable. The collection even contains a wealth of enslaved artifacts, many of which were donated by descendants of the Gray and Syphax families. Yet I don’t believe there is

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<sup>264</sup> <https://www.easternstate.org/explore/artist-installations> Eastern State Penitentiary, “America’s Most Historical Prison,” in Philadelphia, for example, makes use of its many cells and spaces this way. According to their website, art installations at Eastern State are chosen for their ability to “address Eastern State’s primary themes—including perspectives on the contemporary American criminal justice system and the penitentiary’s fascinating past—with a memorable, thought-provoking approach.” Having personally seen many of the installations at Eastern State, the impact of seeing any form of art in such an historically daunting place is extremely powerful and emotional. Turning Arlington House into a space like this, I feel, would have a *profound* and completely new effect on the public.

reason the discard the possessions of the Lee family either. Every object tells a story, much like Lucy Harrison's Windsor chair, or Arlington House itself. These histories and these stories do not need to be erased, but I don't believe they deserve to be the focus of Arlington House any longer. Keep the furniture, the photographs, the portraits; do not ignore the girls' dolls, the dinnerware, the candlesticks, or even the locket of hair. But put them in a museum somewhere else, take them away from the house. I say, leave the house empty. Imagine the power of its emptiness, the eeriness of its echoes as visitors pass through its rooms silently, hearing the house's every creak, every bend, every breath, as they begin to feel the way the Civil War made an entire nation feel—hollow, empty, yet alive. For those that ask, "Wouldn't the silence be uncomfortable?" Yes, it would be. It *should* be.

Douglas Southall Freeman ends his infamous Lee biography by reminding his reader of Lee's kindness and humility. "Those who look at him through the glamour of his victories or seek deep meaning in his silence will labor in vain to make him appear complicated," wrote Freeman, "His language, his acts, and his personal life were simple for the unescapable reason that he was a simple gentleman."<sup>265</sup> Calling Robert E. Lee an inherently uncomplicated man is perhaps Freeman's gravest mistake. If we are ever to consider the full measure of man, he should be measured fully. Upon a full examination of Lee—much fuller than Freeman provided—we see that Lee may have been kind to some, but not to all; and when it came to Blacks, free or enslaved, Lee showed little to no humility. Lee was in fact extremely complicated; if he was as simple a gentleman as Freeman claimed, no one would write about him anymore, and yet, here we are. Arlington and its legacy were just as much apart of Lee's life as his wife, his children,

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<sup>265</sup> Harwell, 585-586.

and his military career. All of his personal letters prove that no matter where he was, Arlington was the only place he wanted to be. But Arlington never truly belonged to Lee, and it fills me with nothing but grief that it must still belong to him now. It should be given back to the souls that built it, the ones that kept it alive.

We have all heard the expression, “if these walls could talk...what would they say?” What would Arlington say? Would it brim with pride over its agricultural and economic promise? Would it recall seeing summertime picnics and dancing down at the Spring as it watched from the crest of its grassy hill? Would it smile while remembering all the laughing children and happy festivities? Would it sigh in confusion, frustration, or anger? Would it cry tears of anguish at the daily injustices it bore witness to? Would it scream in agony as tourists snapped pictures of portraits of white aristocrats, ignoring the very hands that built its walls? Does it ache with the pain of every soul that lay buried in its gardens, the ones that gave their lives to break the chains of bondage?

Perhaps the more important question is not what those walls would say, but whether or not we as a nation are prepared to listen?

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APPENDIX



The Custis-Lee Mansion  
[i.e. Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial],  
Arlington, Va., ca. 1900

(Source: Library of Congress)