

Robert Edward Lee,

(born January 19, 1807, Stratford Hall, Westmoreland county, Virginia, U.S.—died October 12, 1870, Lexington, Virginia), U.S. Army officer (1829–61), [Confederate general](#) (1861–65), college president (1865–70), and central figure in contending memory traditions of the [American Civil War](#).

Early Life And U.S. Military Service

Robert Edward Lee was the son of [Henry \(“Light-horse Harry”\) Lee](#) and Ann Hill Carter Lee. His father had been a hero of the [American Revolution](#) and governor of [Virginia](#), and uncles and other relatives had signed the [Declaration of Independence](#), served in [Congress](#), and otherwise achieved notable reputations. When Lee was age six, his father moved to the [West Indies](#) and never returned, leaving the family in financially straightened circumstances.

Lee entered the [United States Military Academy](#) in 1825 and graduated second in the class of 1829. Fellow cadets referred to him as the “Marble Model”—a nickname that reflected envy as well as admiration. Just under six feet (1.8 metres) tall, with black hair and brown eyes, Lee cut a striking figure. High class ranking entitled him to enter the Engineer Corps as a second lieutenant on July 1, 1829.

More than a decade and half passed before Lee saw a battlefield. Promotions to first lieutenant (September 21, 1836) and to captain (July 7, 1838) punctuated his peacetime engineering service. In June 1831 Lee married Mary Anna Randolph Custis, the only daughter of George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of [Martha Washington](#). The couple would share a 39-year marriage that produced four daughters and three sons. Lee took seriously the ties to [George Washington](#), whom he sought to emulate throughout his life.

On May 13, 1846, the [United States declared war on Mexico](#). Between March and September 1847, Lee served on the staff of [Winfield Scott](#) during a campaign that ended with the capture of Mexico City. Lee impressed superiors throughout these operations and won [brevet](#) promotions to major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel.

As sectional stresses related to the institution of [slavery](#) mounted in the 1850s, Lee held the superintendency of the United States Military Academy (1852–55) and later served as lieutenant colonel of the 2nd Cavalry in Texas. In 1859 he was in Washington, D.C., when the abolitionist [John Brown](#) mounted his [raid on Harpers Ferry](#), Virginia (now West Virginia). Summoned to the War Department on October 17, Lee proceeded to [Harpers Ferry](#) with a detachment of [Marines](#) and the next morning orchestrated the capture of Brown, whom he described as an “enemy of the Country.”

Slavery And Racial Attitudes

Lee held views about slavery and [abolitionists](#) typical for those of his class and section. A member of the slaveholding [aristocracy](#), he saw the peculiar institution as necessary to maintain order between the races and resented northerners who attacked the motives and character of slaveholders and seemed eager to disrupt [white supremacy](#) in the southern states. In December 1856 he [ruminated](#) at considerable length to his wife on the topic. “Slavery as an institution,” he wrote, “is a [moral](#) & political evil in any Country. It is useless to expatiate on its disadvantages.” But he also believed slavery “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 fate of enslaved millions, he insisted, should be left in God’s hands: “Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy.” Lee unequivocally denounced abolitionists, [alluding](#) to what he termed “the systematic & progressive efforts of certain people of the North, to interfere with & change the domestic institutions of the South.” Such actions, he continued, “can only be accomplished by them through the agency of a civil & servile war.”

Lee’s most sustained experience in control of enslaved people came after his father-in-law’s death in 1857. Lee owned 10–15 enslaved people during his lifetime, but, as executor of Custis’s will, he was charged with freeing, within a five-year period, nearly 200 enslaved people. He resented the time necessary to administer the [Arlington estate](#) and other Custis properties in the late 1850s, imposed a harsher work regime for the enslaved people than had been in place under Custis, and was accused of cruelty toward enslaved people who ran away and others who were to be liberated by Custis’s will. Lee denied the accusations, but he certainly [condoned](#) whipping for infractions of his rules. He held pronounced racial views of white superiority that remained constant from the [antebellum](#) years, when applied to enslaved people, into the post-Civil War period, when the newly emancipated sought to find an equal place in southern society. “You will never prosper with the blacks,” he told his youngest son in 1868, “and it is [abhorrent](#) to a reflecting mind to be supporting and cherishing those who are plotting and working for your injury, and all of whose sympathies and associations are antagonistic to yours.”

Role In The Civil War

By the time of Lee's promotion to colonel of the 1st Cavalry on March 16, 1861, seven southern states had [seceded](#) and established the [Confederate States of America](#). Confederate artillery bombarded [Fort Sumter](#) on April 12, and three days later U.S. Pres. [Abraham Lincoln](#) issued a call for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. On April 18, the day after Virginia seceded, Lee was offered command of the United States Army being raised to put down the rebellion. He declined, with the explanation that he opposed secession but could not take the field against the southern states. "Save in the defense of my native State," Lee wrote to General in Chief Winfield Scott, "I never desire again to draw my sword."

Lee submitted his letter of resignation from the U.S. Army on April 20 (after five days of processing in the War Department, it became official on April 25) and on April 22 accepted appointment as major general of Virginia's state forces. After Virginia joined the Confederacy on May 7, Lee was commissioned a [brigadier general](#) in the Confederate army on May 14 and promoted to full general on [August 31](#) as the rebellious slaveholding republic's third-highest ranking officer.

During Lee's first year in Confederate command, stints in western Virginia and along the South Atlantic coast created the impression that he lacked aggressiveness. In early March 1862 he became the principal military adviser to Confederate Pres. [Jefferson Davis](#) in [Richmond](#), Virginia. Growing Federal threats in Virginia occupied much of Lee's attention. The most serious was [George B. McClellan](#)'s 100,000-man Army of the Potomac, which by the end of May had pushed to within a few [miles](#) of the Rebel capital. On May 31 [Joseph E. Johnston](#) received a wound in the [Battle of Seven Pines](#) and was replaced as chief of the army defending Richmond by Lee, whose appointment provoked a mixed reaction. A member of Lee's staff recalled that "some of the newspapers...pitched into him with extraordinary virulence," predicting that "henceforth our army would never be allowed to fight."

As in all of his subsequent campaigns, Lee sought to take the [initiative](#). Between June 25 and July 1, he and McClellan fought the [Seven Days' Battles](#). The Confederates attacked repeatedly, pushing the Federals away from Richmond. Although Lee's army suffered more than 20,000 casualties to McClellan's 16,000, the Seven Days lifted civilian spirits across the Confederacy and greatly [enhanced](#) Lee's reputation.

Lee reorganized the Army of Northern Virginia, giving half of the infantry to [Thomas J. \("Stonewall"\) Jackson](#) and half to [James Longstreet](#), and commenced a season of bold campaigning. The army marched north to defeat Gen. [John Pope](#) at the [Second Battle of Bull Run](#) (or Second Manassas) on August 28–30. Casualties included more than 9,000 Confederates and 16,000 Federals. Lee next decided to invade the United States, crossing the [Potomac River](#) into [Maryland](#) on September 4–7 with 55,000 men. General McClellan, reinstated after Pope's defeat, opposed Lee on September 17 in the campaign's climactic [Battle of Antietam](#). Severe straggling and desertion had depleted Lee's force to 38,000 troops, who faced 75,000 Union soldiers. More than 10,000 Confederates and 12,500 Federals fell at Antietam, making it the bloodiest day in United States history. The Army of Northern Virginia retreated to the Potomac on the night of September 18.

The Maryland campaign capped a three-month drama that reoriented the war in Virginia. Although turned back at Antietam, Lee had crafted an overall success that drove major Union forces from Virginia, raised Confederate civilian morale, sent tremors through the North, and laid the foundation for a powerful bond between himself and his soldiers.

A victory at [Fredericksburg](#) on December 13, 1862, increased Lee's reputation in the Confederacy. This unusual winter campaign pitted 75,000 Confederates against more than 130,000 Federals under Gen. [Ambrose E. Burnside](#), who had replaced McClellan. At one point in the battle, an admiring Lee watched his infantry drive back the Federals. Turning to General Longstreet, he said, "It is well this is so terrible! We should grow too fond of it!" The battle claimed 12,653 Union and 5,309 Confederate casualties and created a crisis for Lincoln after news from Fredericksburg spread across the loyal states. Behind the lines in the Confederacy, Fredericksburg spawned optimism and heightened faith in Lee.

In spring 1863 Lee confronted more than 130,000 Union troops under the command of [Joseph Hooker](#), his fourth opponent in less than a year. Reduced to 66,000 soldiers, Lee's army nonetheless maintained high confidence. In late April Hooker opened an offensive that ended with the [Battle of Chancellorsville](#) on May 1–4. Lee reacted with a series of daring moves, dividing his army three times in the course of forcing Hooker to retreat.

Chancellorsville confirmed Lee's reputation as an unexcelled Confederate field commander and completed the process by which the Army of Northern Virginia became almost fanatically devoted to him. He had fashioned a victory from circumstances that would have undone most generals. He also lost more than 12,500 men—19 percent of his army (among them [Stonewall Jackson](#), who died on May 10).

Chancellorsville sent waves of disappointment rippling across the United States and made Lee the Confederate people's leading military idol. For the remainder of the conflict, he and his army functioned as the most important national institution in the Confederacy—the entity to which most citizens looked to determine whether victory was possible.

The next test for Lee came on northern soil. By the last week of June 1863, his 75,000 men had marched into [Pennsylvania](#). The bloodiest battle of the war opened on July 1 just west of [Gettysburg](#), with Confederates carrying the field and then continuing their tactical offensives during the next two days. The battle closed on July 3 with the failed attack known as Pickett's Charge. More than 23,000 Federals and at least 25,000 Confederates fell, and on July 4 Lee retreated toward the Potomac. Lee took full responsibility for the defeat. Amid the wreckage of

Pickett's broken division on July 3, he told a subordinate, "Never mind, General, all this has been *my* fault—it is I that have lost this fight."

Most Confederate soldiers and civilians did not view Gettysburg as a disaster, and fewer still regarded it as a major blemish on Lee's record. Although losses had been heavy, Lee's army withdrew safely from Pennsylvania by the middle of July. Moreover, the Army of the Potomac, now led by [George G. Meade](#), seemed to be in no hurry to force a battle.

Nearly 10 months passed before the next major campaign in Virginia. Lee faced yet another opponent in the spring of 1864. [Ulysses S. Grant](#) brought to Virginia a sterling record in the Western Theatre and raised hopes among Northerners that he would vanquish Lee. The Confederate people and soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia held an equally firm belief that Lee would triumph against Grant. The Army of Northern Virginia mustered 65,000 men to face roughly 120,000 Federals.

The confrontation between Lee and Grant, known as the Overland campaign, witnessed almost constant fighting and set a grim standard for slaughter in the Battles of the Wilderness (May 5–6), Spotsylvania Court House (May 8–21), Cold Harbor (June 1–12), and Petersburg (June 15–18). The Overland campaign ended on June 18 as the armies settled into lines around Petersburg. Since crossing the Rapidan River on May 4, Grant had lost nearly 65,000 men and Lee more than 34,000—a roughly equal ratio of casualties to strength on each side.

The ensuing [siege of Petersburg](#) lasted more than nine months. Although many Confederates took heart at Lee's appointment as general-in-chief of all national forces on February 6, 1865, the promotion came too late to have any practical effect. On April 1, Federals turned Lee's right flank at Five Forks, and on the night of April 2–3, Confederates abandoned the Richmond-Petersburg lines.

A weeklong retreat westward followed. Lee hoped to join Confederate forces in [North Carolina](#), but Grant's pursuit denied him an opening. The two generals met at the village of [Appomattox Court House](#) on April 9 and agreed to terms of surrender. The Army of Northern Virginia, reduced to just 28,000 men, ceased to exist. Although many in the United States believed that Lee should be treated as a traitor, General Grant, in line with the wishes of President Lincoln, [stipulated](#) that all the Confederates, including Lee, sign a parole and return to their homes.

Word of events at Appomattox prompted feelings of resignation across the Rebel states. Thousands of Confederate soldiers remained under arms, but for most white southerners—as well as most people in the United States—the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia signaled the end of the war.

Postwar Life And Legacy

In August 1865 Lee became president of Washington College (now [Washington and Lee University](#)) in [Lexington](#), Virginia. During his five-year [tenure](#), the student body increased dramatically, the physical condition of the institution improved, and the faculty grew in size. Lee also revised the curriculum, adding courses in science and engineering to traditional offerings in classical subjects.

Despite lingering personal grievances against the United States, Lee refrained from public [criticism](#) of the victors while president of Washington College. His attitude toward defeat can be summed up simply: The Confederacy had mounted its best effort, had lost irrevocably on the battlefield to a more powerful foe, and must accept the consequences of that defeat. The [Radical Republican](#) political agenda during [Reconstruction](#), which attempted to place Black people on more equal footing with former Confederates, deepened Lee's private [animosity](#). But, from Appomattox until his death, he suppressed his bitterness. He might be termed a situational reconciliationist—someone who said things in public that enhanced progress toward reunion but never achieved true forgiveness and acceptance vis-à-vis his old enemies. Plagued by various physical ailments during the postwar years, Lee suffered a stroke on September 28 and died on October 12, 1870.

Lee figured prominently in two memory traditions related to the Civil War. The Lost Cause tradition, forged by former Confederates, cast him as a brilliant Christian soldier who lost only because of insurmountable Union advantages of men and material resources. The Lost Cause memorial landscape featured many statues of Lee. Later in the 19th century and well into the 20th, the Reconciliation Cause tradition helped convert Lee into a national icon who appeared on six U.S. postage stamps and whose home at Arlington became, by congressional action, the Robert E. Lee Memorial. During the first two decades of the 21st century, Lee, as a Confederate and slaveholder, became a more controversial figure, and statues of him were removed from public places in many cities.

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