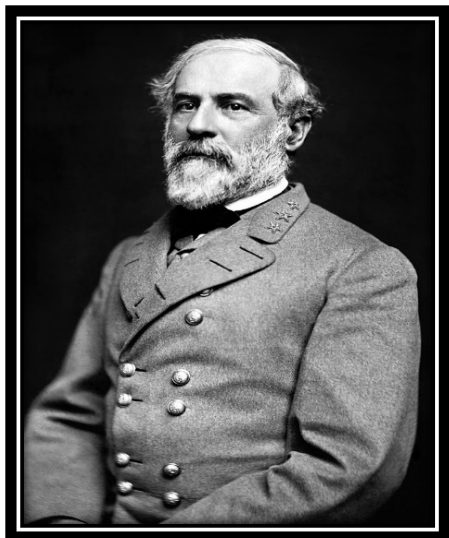


CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 5: BIO**ROBERT E. LEE**

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Robert E. Lee was born in 1807 to a wealthy family in Virginia. He was a **descendant** of one of the first families of Virginia. His father was a former governor, and his mother came from a wealthy family. However, not much is known about his childhood. He began attending West Point Academy in 1825 when he was eighteen years old.

He became a well-known army general during the Mexican-American War. His fighting style led to victories in many battles and impressed his superiors and leaders. After the war, he continued to work in the United States military. Then his father-in-law died and named Lee as the **executor** of his will, so he returned home to Virginia. His father-in-law had enslaved many people, and he had to figure out what to do.

Lee's father-in-law had promised those he had enslaved freedom. However, he died owing people a lot of money, and Lee decided to keep them enslaved in order to pay his father-in-law's debts. He then acted as an overseer to the plantation. He was viewed as a terrible overseer. He broke up families and used whipping as punishment. He viewed the practice of slavery as morally wrong but thought that White people were superior to Black people and should be treated accordingly. He thought the institution of slavery was necessary to "train" Black people to exist with White people. In a letter to his wife he wrote,

In this enlightened age, there are few I believe, but what will acknowledge, that slavery as an institution, is a moral & political evil in any Country. It is useless to **expatiate** on its disadvantages. I think it however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly enlisted 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.

Initially, Lee wanted the southern states to stay in the Union. He explained to his son in January 1861, "I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union."¹ He thought it would be a hopeless battle. After Virginia seceded, however, he

¹ Robert E. Lee to George Washington Custis Lee, January 1861, *The Civil War: The First Year Told By Those Who Lived It* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2011), 199-200.

resigned from the United States army and became a Confederate general. He believed that his duty to Virginia was greater than his duty to the Union:

I shall never bear arms against the Union, but it may be necessary for me to carry a musket in the defense of my native state, Virginia, in which case I shall not prove recreant to my duty" and "though opposed to secession and deprecating [opposing] war, I could take no part in an invasion of the Southern States.²

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Other southern soldiers, however, remained loyal to the Union, siding with the federal government against their home states. General Winfield Scott, Lee's commanding officer in the United States army, was also from Virginia, and he served as general-in-chief of the Union army at the beginning of the Civil War.

Lee, meanwhile, became general-in-chief of the Confederate army. In the early stages of the war, Lee and his soldiers held their own against the better equipped North. In July 1863, however, Union general George Meade defeated Lee's army at the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, driving Lee back into Virginia and helping turn the tide of the war. In 1864, Lee fought a series of deadly battles against Union general Ulysses S. Grant that slowly weakened Lee's army. Lee finally surrendered at Appomattox Court House in Virginia on April 9, 1865.

Lee was not arrested for fighting for the Confederacy, but he did lose his American citizenship and his right to vote. While many of his Confederate **brethren** did not want to rejoin the Union, he supported a peaceful **reunification** of the states. Even so, he still believed that Black people were inferior to Whites:

My own opinion is that, at this time, they [black Southerners] cannot vote intelligently and that giving them the [vote] would lead to a great deal of demagogism, and lead to embarrassments in various ways.

It is true that the people of the South, in common with a large majority of the people of the North and West, are, for obvious reasons, inflexibly opposed to any system of laws that would place the political power of the country in the hands of the Negro race. But this opposition springs from no feeling of enmity, but from a deep-seated conviction that, at present, the Negroes have neither the intelligence nor the other qualifications which are necessary to make them safe depositories of political power.

Lee ultimately wanted the South to return to its normal way of life, but without slavery. He encouraged Southerners to rejoin the Union peacefully. He felt it would do Southerners no good to protest federal policies. He was later invited to become the president of Washington Lee University, where he continued to promote these views. He remained there until he died of a stroke in 1870.

² Robert E. Lee, *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* (New York, NY: Diversion Books, 2014).