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## A Burden of Honor:

### Why Robert E. Lee had to be Perfect

by Duane Schultz

The first year of the Civil War did not go well for Robert E. Lee. Soldiers in the Confederate Army called him “Granny Lee” and “Evacuating Lee.” Southerners considered him a failure as a general, even a traitor to their cause.

John Jones, a clerk in the War Department in Richmond watched Lee walk by one day and wrote in his diary: “General Lee in the streets here bore the aspect of a discontented man, for he saw that everything was going wrong.”

The war had been a major disappointment to Lee. Instead of being offered active command of troops and winning victories for the South as other officers were doing, Lee had been kept in a small office in Richmond, more clerk than warrior. He had been assigned the thankless job of recruiting soldiers for the Confederacy and outfitting them with all they would need to fight.

The job was tedious and frustrating because the Confederacy had so little in the way of supplies, not even enough bullets for new recruits to use for target practice. There were shortages of almost everything, but most Southerners were unconcerned; they were certain the war would be over in a month or two. Everyone knew that one Confederate soldier was worth ten of those damn Yankees.

Lee knew better and he tried to tell the Southern leaders that the war would be a bitter and costly fight that could last up to ten years, but pessimistic thinking was so contrary to the popular belief that people began to question Lee’s loyalty. Mary Chesnut, a prominent, well-

connected aristocrat overheard one man say, only three months after the war began, “At heart, Robert E. Lee is against us—that I know.” Another predicted, “General Lee will surely be tried for a traitor!”

Lee was increasingly concerned that he was failing to uphold the burden of his family name and honor, and the uncompromising moral duty his mother had drilled into him. He could still hear her reminders that it was not enough to be good; Lee had to be perfect in whatever he undertook. His life had been defined and driven by the belief that he must not ever do wrong.

That was the only acceptable path for him, the only way to erase the shame and dishonor of his father’s actions. Biographer Emory Thomas described the stain of Henry Lee III as a “birth defect” that marked Lee so strongly that “self-control was nearly an obsession.” Douglas Southall Freeman wrote that for Lee, “self-denial and self-control were the supreme rule of life. It was the basis of his code of conduct.”

Lee’s father, popularly known as Light-Horse Harry Lee, was a hero of the Revolutionary War. It was assumed that before long he would become president of the new nation. He was elected to the Continental Congress, the Virginia House of Delegates, and the U.S. Congress, and also served as governor of Virginia. There seemed to be no limits to what Light-Horse Harry might achieve, except, as it turned out, those imposed by his own dark nature. He married Matilda Lee, a wealthy cousin, who died eight unhappy years later, her money having long since been dissipated by her husband’s foolhardy schemes.

He then married Anne Hill Carter, whose father was the richest man in all Virginia. By the time Anne was eight months pregnant, Harry had sold off most of her property and left her house, Stratford Hall, and its substantial grounds in shambles, with most of the furniture sold and the doors chained shut to avoid creditors.

When Anne gave birth to the fifth of their six children, a child she had not wanted, she named him Robert Edward. By then, in January of 1807, there was barely enough coal to heat one room of the mansion and not enough money to pay the doctor for delivering the baby. Light-Horse Harry was sent to debtor's prison for a year, leaving Anne and the family to live off the charity of various relatives as guests before settling in Alexandria, Virginia. Anne was determined to make sure her son did not end up like his father.

Young Robert matured quickly and soon took over the household. He did the grocery shopping, kept the keys to the pantry and supervised the servants. Since Anne suffered from chronic health problems, Robert also took over her care. He mixed and administered her medicines and carried her to their carriage every afternoon for a ride.

When Robert was 13, the Lee name was publicly dishonored again by another scandal, when it was discovered that Henry Lee IV, Robert's half-brother by his father's first marriage, had an affair with his wife's teenaged sister and stole a huge amount of money from her inheritance. This Lee quickly became known as "Black Horse" Harry Lee, to distinguish him from his father. The restoration of the honor of the Lee name depended solely on Robert. If he failed, then he would be no better than his father.

The military academy at West Point, New York, was the only choice for a young Virginia gentleman with no money, and Robert E. Lee thrived in that environment of strict discipline and a code of honor. He was the perfect cadet. Historian Gene Smith wrote, "Always at the top of his class in every class, in four years he did not accumulate a single demerit. His buttons gleamed. His sword was spotless. He was never late for formation, never had his bed made up in less than perfect fashion, was never guilty of a sloppy salute, missed no bed checks, was not cited for abusing a horse, or for folding his towel incorrectly."

He was also handsome, charming, and well-mannered. He excelled at swimming, skating, dancing, and riding, served in the highest cadet positions, and was admired and respected by the other cadets and the staff. As always, he did everything to perfection and his nickname among his classmates was, appropriately, "the Marble Model."

After he graduated in 1829, he went home to find his mother on her deathbed; he rarely left her side for that final month of her life. At the end, he was devastated. Forty years later, he stood in the room where she died and said it felt as if it had happened only the day before. He claimed that whatever he achieved was due to her influence. He never talked about his father.

Two years later Lee married a wealthy 21-year-old cousin, Mary Anna Randolph Custis. She lived at Arlington House, one of the finest estates in the country, which Lee had admired since he was a child. Some even said that Lee was really marrying Arlington House, not Mary. It was situated high on a hill overlooking the city of Washington, D.C., and was destined to be taken over by the Yankees. Later it became the site of Arlington National Cemetery.

Mary was spoiled, unpleasant, imperious, and temperamental. "In many ways," Lee biographer Thomas Connelly wrote, "she resembled Robert Lee's mother, a factor which may have attracted the young lieutenant to a woman whose personality was so unlike his own." She even looked not unlike his mother, and later was afflicted with many illnesses, like his mother, and became a semi-invalid.

She did not take well to life in the poorly equipped quarters on army posts, and before long returned to Arlington House, content to see him whenever he got leave. She bore seven children over 15 years and by her early 30s was bedridden much of the time. He spent little time at home and as he neared 40 he became restless and irritable, believing he had failed his wife and children by being away so much. He even considered resigning from the Army but could not bring himself to take such a drastic step.

Fortunately for Lee, in 1846 the United States went to war with Mexico and through his daring exploits on the battlefield became a national hero. Newspapers trumpeted the Lee name, appearing to restore the honor his father had destroyed. But coming home after so much acclaim was a letdown. He rode up the long hill on horseback but when he arrived, no one recognized him except the family dog. His older children were aloof, his wife ailing, and when he picked up and hugged a 3-year-old boy thinking it was his youngest, the child turned out to be a neighbor.

Lee's status as a hero did not last long and he resumed peacetime duties until he was sent out west to command a cavalry unit fighting Indians. He enjoyed the rough frontier life and long grueling campaigns. He kept two pets, a snake and a chicken—a small black hen he trained to jump on his camp desk, where it often overturned the inkwell. The good times ended abruptly, however, when family duty called him back to Arlington.

His father-in-law had died and Lee found to his horror that the man had left his estate with its considerable holdings in such a deplorable physical and economic condition that Lee had to spend two years putting it back in order. By the time he rejoined the cavalry in 1860 in Texas, he had become irritable and depressed, and convinced he was a failure as a husband and a father. He believed that his two years at home had not brought him closer to his family.

"It is better for all that I am here," he wrote from Texas to his 19-year-old daughter Agnes. "You know I was very much in the way of everybody and my tastes and pursuits did not coincide with the rest of the household. Now I hope everybody is happier."

Lee was 53 years old and certain he had failed at everything. He wondered what he had to show for his 35 years of military service. He felt unworthy and saw only a bleak future. What saved him was the growing likelihood of war. But when the war came, and the charge of "traitor" was put about, Lee feared that the name of Lee would forever remain dishonored.

At the end of the summer of 1861, President Jefferson Davis gave Lee an operational command, in the rugged mountains of northwest Virginia, to deal with three Confederate generals who were political appointees with no military experience. They seemed more intent on vanquishing one another than defeating Union forces.

He was reluctant to give the bickering generals direct orders, although he had sufficient rank to do so. Instead he tried to reason with them and make polite suggestions about how they should lead their forces. In addition, their troops had little training or discipline. The weather was awful; it had been raining and bitterly cold for nearly three weeks, making the narrow mountain roads impassable and spreading disabling diseases like typhus and measles. When the Union troops attacked, the three separate Rebel forces quickly retreated in panic, leaving the Northerners in control of the region.

That was when southern newspapers dubbed him "Granny Lee." Speeches of condemnation were delivered in the Confederate congress and Lee returned to Richmond in disgrace. But Davis still had confidence in him, though not enough to offer him another combat command.

Davis planned to send Lee to Charleston and Savannah to strengthen coastal fortifications. This should have been a simple matter of issuing the appropriate orders to get the job done, but civilian and military leaders in both cities protested Lee's presence. They organized public demonstrations, prepared petitions, and obtained thousands of signatures for their cause. Once again, the Lee name was maligned and shamed. Davis wrote forceful letters to the governors of both states supporting Lee's assignment and eventually they grudgingly accepted the appointment.

Lee spent four months strengthening and fortifying the coastal cities. The Confederate troops under his command, however, complained about the digging and manual labor, which they considered beneath their dignity as soldiers. They were glad to see him go.

But after that assignment, while other Confederate officers won battles and promotions, Robert E. Lee was ordered back to his desk in his small Richmond office, watching the war pass him by. Then finally, on May 30, 1862, more than year after the onset of war, a Yankee bullet and shrapnel from a Yankee shell changed Lee's life and the course of the Civil War.

George McClellan, the cautious Union general, was advancing slowly toward Richmond with 120,000 troops against a much smaller number of Confederate troops, led by General Joseph E. Johnston, who had graduated from West Point in the same class as Lee. The Yankee troops were only five miles from the city and hundreds of civilians were fleeing.

Jefferson Davis and Lee visited the front line on May 30, when Johnston was wounded by a musket ball and shell fragment and was carried off the field. His second in command was not deemed capable of replacing him and there was no time to send for someone else. That left only Robert E. Lee, and Davis appointed him to command the south's largest army.

Davis was not convinced that Lee could do the job, and neither were the soldiers. He put them to work with shovels, picks and spades to dig an elaborate system of trenches and rifle pits. Instead of attacking the enemy, they felt like slaves being forced into labor. They added a new nickname to the roster of epithets for Lee—the "King of Spades." The soldiers wanted to fight, not dig. It was not a promising beginning.

Lee was as eager as his men to attack the Yankees but his strategy was first to lull McClellan into thinking the rebels were preparing for a long siege, hence the digging of the fortifications. Lee waited, drawing the Union forces nearer, letting them grow careless about defending their own lines. Then in a series of brilliant tactical moves, that later came to be called

the Seven Days (June 25-July 1), he forced McClellan's much larger army to retreat down the Virginia Peninsula, away from Richmond, ending the threat to the capital.

Lee was praised throughout the South as one of the boldest, most daring military leaders of all time, the man who saved the Confederacy. Suddenly, it seemed, his men changed their opinion of him and for the rest of the war referred to him respectfully as "Master Robert." Whenever he rode by, soldiers would reach out to touch his horse or stirrup as if they were holy objects.

One soldier recalled, "Anything that Lee touched was sacred to us." They removed their hats and stood transfixed when they saw him. He could do no wrong. No one ever called him *Granny Lee* again. It seemed that he had fulfilled his life's mission to restore the honor of the family name.

Duane Schultz is the author of numerous articles and books on military history, including *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War*, *The Most Glorious Fourth: Vicksburg and Gettysburg*; and *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862*. He can be reached at [www.duaneschultz.com](http://www.duaneschultz.com).

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