

The Family Heritage Series

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



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Five

Robert E. Lee

LESSON IDEA

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

PREPARATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though away from his growing family for years at a time, Lee, nevertheless, kept in constant touch with them through letters. To his wife, he wrote: “You do not know how much I have missed you and the children, my dear Mary. To be alone in a crowd is very solitary. In the woods I feel sympathy with the trees and birds, in whose company I take delight, but experience no pleasure in a strange crowd.” Lee, though a popular officer, shunned liquor, tobacco, and a frivolous social life.

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

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

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

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

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

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

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

