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The Forgotten Sins of Robert E. Lee:  
How a Confederate Icon Became an American Icon

Jennifer D. Page

Salve Regina University  
American Studies Program  
Senior Thesis  
Dr. Timothy B. Neary

December 7, 2019

The author would like to express gratitude to Salve Regina University's Department of History for financial support made possible through the John E. McGinty Fund in History. McGinty Funds provided resources for travel to Washington and Lee University and Richmond, Virginia in the summer of 2019 to conduct primary research for this project.

On May 29, 1865, President Andrew Johnson issued a “Proclamation Granting Amnesty to Participants in the Rebellion with Certain Exceptions.”<sup>1</sup> This proclamation laid out the ways in which the Confederates who had taken up arms against the United States government during the Civil War could rejoin the Union. Confederate General Robert E. Lee heard of the news of the proclamation while visiting Colonel Thomas Carter at Pampatike Plantation in Virginia and returned to Richmond to begin the process.<sup>2</sup> Lee applied to President Andrew Johnson for a pardon on June 13, 1865. However, curiously, General Lee would not submit an amnesty oath until the morning of his inauguration as President of Washington College four months later. The difference in these two dates was the motivation behind a 1975 pardon by President Gerald Ford, which declared a misfiling of General Lee’s paperwork. This fact only added to the myth of the Lost Cause. Many would cite the misfiling as the sole reason why Lee was not pardoned in the years immediately following the war. Lost in history is the fact that General Robert E. Lee was being indicted for treason after his surrender at Appomattox. After the war, Charles Sumner said of Lee, “I hand him over to the avenging pen of history.”<sup>3</sup> But has history been so avenging to Lee?

“Lee, you have made the greatest mistake of your life, but I feared it would be so.”<sup>4</sup> This statement by General Winfield Scott on April 18, 1861, marks the pivotal moment in Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s career and ultimately the public memory of his life. Lee, a man with an intertwined life with the first president, George Washington, took up arms against the federal government, yet history often remembers him as an American icon rather than a

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<sup>1</sup>John Reeves, *The Lost Indictment of Robert E. Lee: The Forgotten Case Against an American Icon* (Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 73.

<sup>2</sup>Reeves, 72.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.,186.

<sup>4</sup>Robert M. Poole, *On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington Cemetery* (New York: Walker & Company, 2009), 16.

traitor. Had Lee committed the same crime in the United Kingdom, he likely would have been hanged; in France he would have met the guillotine; and in Russia most likely a firing squad. In the United States, however, he is memorialized and idolized. The persona of Robert E. Lee began in the years immediately following the war; however, the image of him as the picturesque Christian gentleman only grew with time. As time went on, Robert E. Lee became more of a character and symbol rather than a multi-faceted man. He has been idolized throughout American art, cinema and literature. His name adorns public and private schools and is etched in stone in memorials across the South. The side of Lee that committed treason and was a slaveholder was nearly completely erased from history until recently. In an effort to rebuild the Union, General Robert E. Lee became a symbol of reconciliation between whites in the North and South during the years immediately following the Civil War and beyond.

### **Washington's Only Heir**

The connection between Robert E. Lee and President George Washington shaped much of the way the public viewed Lee. During the Virginia Convention, president John Janney welcomed Robert E. Lee as commander in chief of Virginia's armed forces.<sup>5</sup> In his speech, Janney used the phrase "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of your countrymen."<sup>6</sup> The use of this phrase is not original to Janney and is not a coincidence. The quotation originated with Lee's father, Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, who crafted it in a funeral oration for George Washington.<sup>7</sup> Many southern secessionists believed Lee to be the "second coming of George Washington."<sup>8</sup> Having a Washington-esque figure only played further into the idea that southern

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Horn, *The Man Who Would Not Be Washington* (New York: Schribner, 2015), 3.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 5.

secession was a revolution rather than a rebellion. In the eyes of the secessionists, Lee was there to save what Washington had created.

The idea that Lee was only continuing Washington's revolution was also drawing on the myth of meritocracy. Washington had no biological children, which had ensured that a monarchy would not arise following the Revolutionary War. He did, however, adopt and raise two of his deceased stepson's children. One of the children was named George Washington Parke Custis. Washington personally raised Custis as a son starting at a young age. He also met and hosted other Revolutionary figures, such as the Marquis de Lafayette. After Washington's death, Custis dedicated his life to preserving and memorializing Washington's name and career.<sup>9</sup> Custis's home, Arlington, became a shrine to his adoptive father. Upon Custis's death, his home and much of his estate were left to his only daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis and her husband, General Robert E. Lee. The home that was once a shrine to Washington now fell into the hands of his great-grandson-in-law, Lee. The image of Robert E. Lee as the trustee of Washington's legacy and memory furthered the idea in the traditionalist southerner's mind that Lee was meant to lead the rebellion. With his own father, Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a disgraced renegade, Robert E. Lee welcomed the connection between himself and the most beloved American hero.<sup>10</sup> Lee was the closest Washington had to an heir and the closest America came to a monarchy. Whether Lee succeeded or not would also determine whether or not the American dream was a tangible idea for the average citizen. As Jonathan Horn argues, "Because Lee was the man who

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<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading The Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (Penguin: New York, 2007), 48.

<sup>10</sup>Richard B. McCaslin, *Lee in the Shadow of Washington* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 23.

would not be Washington...every child born as lowly as Lincoln can dream of being a Washington.”<sup>11</sup>

Robert E. Lee believed that siding with Virginia was what he was raised to know. In speaking with Charles Anderson, a close friend, he said that, despite his minimal justification for succession, he felt strongly that he was “educated to believe that his loyalty to Virginia ought to take precedence over that which is due to the Federal Government.”<sup>12</sup> This justification that Lee could not take up arms against his beloved Virginia was used in the years immediately following the war and throughout the twentieth century when painting the ideal picture of Lee in the myth of the Lost Cause. In these cases, the view of Lee as a slaveholder was either made into picturesque paternalism or erased altogether. Robert E. Lee, in truth, however, was a slaveholder with a complicated and entangled involvement with the institution.

### **Lee, The Slaveholder**

For the majority of Robert E. Lee’s adult life, he was a slaveholder, inheriting thirty enslaved people at the age of 22 upon his mother’s death. It was a fact that he tried to distance himself from in the five years between the end of the Civil War and his death in 1870. It is also worth noting Robert E. Lee’s ties to slaves previously owned by George Washington and his descendants. When George Washington Parke Custis died in 1857, the execution of his will and estate fell into the hands of General Lee.<sup>13</sup> The provisions of Custis’s will and the interpretation of those provisions are shaky at best. Custis left his Arlington Estate holdings to his daughter Mary Anna Randolph Lee. His other two estates, White House and Romancock, were left to his grandsons.<sup>14</sup> To each of his four granddaughters, Custis left \$10,000 to be paid once the estate

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<sup>11</sup>Horn, 250.

<sup>12</sup>Brown Pryor, 286.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 250.

<sup>14</sup>Reeves, 142.

was cleared of debt. To complicate the will further, Custis also granted his slaves freedom “most expedient and proper,” within a period not exceeding five years after his death.<sup>15</sup> The wording left room for interpretation and further added to Lee’s frustration, as Custis had died \$11,000 to \$12,000 in debt.<sup>16</sup> Lee interpreted the will to mean that the slaves would be free only after the estate was settled and the legacies paid to each of the four granddaughters. However, in May of 1859, the circuit court ruled that the slaves were entitled to their freedom in five years, regardless whether the legacies had been paid.<sup>17</sup> The court’s interpretation left Lee in charge of using the lands and enslaved people to raise the funds for the legacies and ultimately defined the type of slaveholder Lee became.

Throughout the Antebellum period the concept of paternalism was commonly used in order to justify, among white southerners, the treatment of enslaved African Americans. Paternalism centers around the idea that the oppression of a group of people is in the best interest of the subordinate group. The storyline of a Lee as a “humane” Christian slaveholder is where the pen of history and the myth of the Lost Cause once again intersect. The long-standing definitive biography of Lee entitled *R.E. Lee: A Biography*, by Douglas Southall Freeman, published in four volumes in 1934 and 1935, is considered by many to have painted the modern image of Robert E. Lee that has lasted throughout the twentieth century. In Elizabeth Pryor Brown’s *Reading the Man*, she notes how the image of Lee as “gentleman” slaveholder was virtually created by Freeman. Freeman found no tax listings after 1847 for Lee’s enslaved people, so he assumed they all had been liberated by 1847. Moreover, Freeman relied on testimony from Dr. John Leyburn from Washington and Lee College, who claimed that Lee had

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

freed all of his enslaved people prior to the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> However, modern historians note that three facts are definitive: Lee personally held slaves until at least 1852; he used the Custis slaves in order to pay off the legacies and debts left behind by George Washington Parke Custis; and Lee traveled with enslaved black people as personal servants throughout the Civil War. These three facts are in direct contrast to the picture of Lee painted by Freeman. They are further supported by primary sources.

Fifty-three years following the Civil War, Reverend William Mack Lee, formerly enslaved by Robert E. Lee, published and sold pamphlets for \$1. The pamphlets were one of many fundraisers the reverend came up with in order to raise money for the new church his parish needed. The pamphlet outlined Reverend Lee's time with General Robert E. Lee during the war. Reverend Lee writes that he served as General Lee's "body servant and cook" during the war.<sup>19</sup> Curiously, the reverend never uses the word slave when describing his time with General Lee, although he was enslaved at the time. The pamphlet goes on to tell stories of how General Lee had only surrendered because he was outnumbered at Appomattox and even claims that General Lee personally paid for Reverend Lee's education after the war. At the end of the pamphlet, Reverend Lee goes as far as to write, "The best friends we have are the Southern people, who know all about our raising, and if we colored people want to get along well with the white people we must show our behavior to, respect and be obedient to them"<sup>20</sup> The contents of the pamphlet play into the idea of the Lost Cause. At the end of the pamphlet, Reverend Lee briefly mentions one encounter in the office of the *World-News*, a local newspaper where the reverend was trying to solicit donations for his church. When the reverend goes into the office

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<sup>18</sup>Brown Pryor, 148-149.

<sup>19</sup>Reverend WM Mack Lee, *History of the Life of Rev. WM. Mack Lee Body Servant of General Robert E. Lee*, Rare E 467.1 .L4 .L454, Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.



asking for money, not one person working looks up; he then remarks that no one will give General Robert E. Lee's body servant any money. Reverend Lee notes that, once he uses this line, the workers at the *World-News* opened their wallets for his parish. This small story at the end of the pamphlet suggests that perhaps Reverend Lee realized the importance and legacy of General Lee and found a way to capitalize on his connection in order to benefit the community he served. While this theory may never be proven, it is clear that Reverend Lee's pamphlet added fuel to the idea that Lee was a victim of his time and was not a cheerful participant in the slaveholding trade. It also proves that Dr. James Leyburn was incorrect in stating that Lee had freed all of his slaves prior to the war. Reverend Lee was enslaved throughout the war and was documented to have been with General Lee through Appomattox. The pamphlet also indicates the early images of Robert E. Lee in what will become the Lost Cause narrative.

### **Reconciliation Between White Men Begins**

While Reverend William Mack Lee may have been using his connections to General Robert E. Lee to serve his community, other men began focusing on finding common ground to begin rebuilding the Union. They found and, in some ways, manufactured that common ground in the image of General Robert E. Lee. Prominent northern men, such as General Ulysses S. Grant, Gerrit Smith, and Henry Ward Beecher came forward with testimony about what they believed Lee's moral character to be and, in many cases, encouraged others to do the same.

Ulysses S. Grant, commanding general of the Union Army, eighteenth U.S. President, and Robert E. Lee's most well-known opponent during the war, became one of Lee's main advocates between 1865 and 1870. Following the surrender at Appomattox, both Lee and Grant believed that the terms of surrender protected Lee from being hanged.<sup>21</sup> Both men had been

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<sup>21</sup>Reeves, 60.

educated at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where they learned not to impose excessively harsh punishments on defeated enemies.<sup>22</sup> The terms of surrender laid out at Appomattox were far from excessively harsh. Rather, they were generous, making General Lee a paroled prisoner. Grant was under the impression that the terms he had given to Lee on April 9, 1865, ensured that Lee was not be put on trial for treason. Consequently, when talks of an indictment began, Grant was one of the first to come to Lee's defense. Grant lobbied to President Andrew Johnson numerous times on behalf of Lee's appeal application. Not only did Grant earnestly recommend Lee to be granted amnesty, he appealed for the indictment to be dropped, writing that federal judge John C. Underwood "be ordered to quash all indictments against paroled prisoners of war, and to desist from further prosecution of them."<sup>23</sup> At this point, the matter again came back to the gentlemanly ways of West Point. When appealing to Johnson, Grant stated, "Lee has given me his parole, sir. You can trust every West Point officer who gives his parole."<sup>24</sup> General Grant often called upon Lee's ties to West Point and his education as a gentleman when requesting that the case of Lee's indictment be dropped. The term "gentleman" is important to unpack in this case. While the term implies civilized, moral, and educated, it is also vital to look at the word itself. Directly following Appomattox, the view of Lee was not always that of a Christian gentleman. While the South viewed him as a hero and defender, the North saw him as the figurehead responsible for the massive number of dead who had accumulated during four years of war. In many political cartoons, treason is a common theme. Lee is often depicted as a monster who should be hanged for his actions. By repeatedly using the word "gentle," implying unharmed and innocent with "man," which in a patriarchal society

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.,19.

<sup>23</sup>Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (New York: Mariner, 1998) 63.

<sup>24</sup>Reeves, 84.

implies strength, Grant is changing the narrative and public view of Lee. The idea of Robert E. Lee as an upstanding gentleman became the rallying point to which white men from both the North and South gravitated towards when attempting to reconcile.

Gerrit Smith was a northerner most known for backing and funding John Brown's anti-slavery raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (West Virginia after 1863). A trailblazing abolitionist, Smith was an active participant in the Underground Railroad and gave shelter to many fugitive enslaved people.<sup>25</sup> In 1868, Smith convened with other prominent white northern men, including Henry Ward Beecher, at the Cooper Institute in New York in anticipation of George Washington's birthday. The topic of conversation was one that was first and foremost in the minds of Americans: Reconstruction. Curiously, the sentiments expressed by northern men during the speeches were somewhat shocking and their actions following the meeting even more so. During Gerrit Smith's speech, he proclaimed, "Sinners should be helped as well as Saints," when speaking of funding and assisting with reconstruction in the South.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, he said, "What the South needs to know is that the North loves her; then she will love the North, and readily leave the matter of reconstruction to the justice and generosity of the North"; a shocking statement that implies a man who funded a rebellion that sparked the Civil War believes the North should show mercy upon the South.<sup>27</sup>

As the meeting continued and multiple men spoke, it was clear that Henry Ward Beecher was the most anticipated and well-respected speaker. While most speakers, including Gerrit Smith, called upon the North to help rebuild the South, Beecher took it further by listing ways in

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<sup>25</sup>*Gerrit Smith Estate and Land Office*, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/ny3.htm>.

<sup>26</sup>Gerrit Smith quoted in *A Meeting In Anticipation of Washington's Birthday*, Rare LD 5871.8.m47 1868. Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

which northern men might help the South, praising Robert E. Lee for the position he took at Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. Beecher resolves that Washington College, today Washington and Lee University, was not just left to the southern people but to America as a whole.<sup>28</sup> The idea that rebuilding the South was the responsibility of the North was common throughout the speeches given at the assembly. However, even more noteworthy was the underlying reason the men assembled. The meeting was called in order to discuss Reconstruction but also served as a fundraiser for Washington College, of which General Lee was the president. Men like Gerrit Smith and Henry Ward Beecher, who had previously put their money into funding abolitionist movements such as John Brown's raid, were now putting their money behind educating many of the white men who fought for the Confederacy. Furthermore, Beecher almost absolved Lee of his sins by saying, "No one regretted the course that General Lee had chosen in the former days more than he did."<sup>29</sup> Beecher commended Lee for taking the position at the College by saying that he had devoted himself to the "elevation of his fellow citizens and ours."<sup>30</sup> This sentiment was a common theme throughout the assembly that Robert E. Lee was contributing to the rebuilding of the South by taking up the position at Washington College—and in many respects he was.

Lee recognized that the Confederacy losing the war meant much more than simply freeing all enslaved people in the southern states; it meant a complete change of society. Lee taking the position at Washington College was a strategic move. He knew, that in the years following the war, the South would have thousands of young men who had fought for the

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<sup>28</sup>Henry Ward Beecher quoted in "*A Meeting In Anticipation of Washington's Birthday*", Rare LD 5871.8.m47 1868. Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Confederacy, lost, and returned home to nothing. Washington College was an educational institution that had taken a hard hit during the war and whose enrollment numbers had dwindled. The situation presented itself with the opportunity for Lee to educate those southern men coming back from war and work on rebuilding the educational institution. What Lee most likely did not foresee was that these efforts would become the foundation for the crafted image of him as a model leader in the postwar period. Powerful northern men like Gerrit Smith and Henry Ward Beecher put their money behind the educational institution in the early years of Reconstruction and ultimately manipulated Lee's image in order to bring other donors in to do the same.

### **“All I Have Is My Name”**

After the war, the defeated General Lee received multiple offers in the private sector. In one article, J.F. Hobson writes of one situation when Lee received an offer to become president of an insurance company that was accompanied by “all we want is your name.” Lee replied with “all I have is my name.”<sup>31</sup> In many ways, Lee was keenly aware that his next move needed to be his most strategic. After the war, he was left with no home to return to, half of the nation who wanted him hanged, and half who felt he had let them down. When offered the position of president at Washington College, Lee accepted. During his tenure at Washington College, Lee saw enrollment skyrocket, with mostly young southern men returning home from war. The demographic of this population was a critical part of Lee's dream for the South after the war. Lee brought in a smaller, local law school to merge with the college and founded a civil engineering program, which educated white southern men in skills that he saw as critical for rebuilding the South. The image of Lee soon became one of an obedient, reformed citizen, who was concerned primarily with the welfare of his defeated people. Sixty-six years after Lee's death, it was still

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<sup>31</sup>J.F. Hobson, *How General Lee Came To Washington College*, Collection 064 – Lee, Robert Edward Box 13 Folders 0-17, Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

evident that this image persisted with the help of the Lost Cause narrative. In 1936, *The Chattanooga Times* wrote, “Robert E. Lee, as a college president, was the real architect of the new South.”<sup>32</sup> Although Lee only spent five years as president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, his public memory is forever tied to the school. On October 12, 1870, the same day that General Robert E. Lee died, the Board of Trustees met to discuss how to find a suitable memorial that would allow “his name publicly held in grateful remembrance.”<sup>33</sup> It is clear from the meeting minutes that the Board decided to change the name of the college to memorialize Lee the same day as his death.<sup>34</sup> Washington College became Washington and Lee University forever tying Lee’s name to the institution and beginning a long and entangled history with the Confederacy.

### **Bigger Than Himself**

Confederate General Robert E. Lee is buried in simple black civilian clothes.<sup>35</sup> His body lies under the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University in a crypt that holds other members of the Lee family. The chapel, of which he once oversaw the construction, became a shrine to him. The massive life-like Edward Valentine sculpture depicts Robert E. Lee in full Confederate military regalia resting after a battle. The sculpture is a significant design considering that even after a long military career, Lee himself chose to be buried in civilian clothing, not his uniform. The sculpture, however, is very much the result of an orchestrated effort to craft the Lost Cause narrative following Lee’s death.

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<sup>32</sup>*The Chattanooga Sunday Times*, “Lee – Friend of Children”, Collection 064 – Lee, Robert Edward Box 13 Folders 0-17, Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>33</sup>*Washington College, Records of Board of Trustees, Feb 21, 1845 – Sept. 1873*”, Cabinet 7, Box 1, Drawer 1, Folder #3, Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>R. David Cox, *Lee Chapel at 150* (Virginia: Mariner Publishing, 2018) p 62.

One of the major contributors to the task was the Lee Memorial Association. The Association was made up of many former high-ranking Confederates. Jubal Early emerged as a prominent leader in the work of the organizations. Early, a major general in the Eastern theater escaped to Canada immediately following the war in fear of being hanged for treason.<sup>36</sup> When he finally returned after President Johnson declared amnesty, Early became the leader of the movement to write the Lost Cause narrative. As R. David Cox writes, the chapel at Washington and Lee University “was becoming the site of a Lee cult.”<sup>37</sup> Lee’s birthday, January 19, became a common day for white southern men to rally in the chapel to celebrate the former leader of the Confederate army. The Lee Memorial Association began sponsoring lectures and raising money in order to transition into a shrine. On June 28, 1883, the statue was complete, and the chapel dedicated in a new way; the structure officially became and still is, the largest memorial to Lee on the campus of the university. During the dedication ceremony, John W. Daniel spoke on behalf of the Lee Memorial Association. In his oration, there are clear examples of just how far the myth of the Lost Cause had advanced. In the thirteen years since his death, Lee had become a martyr in the eyes of white southern men. The speech included phrases, such as, “He had not been tried, but he had been convicted. He forgave, but he was unforgiven.”<sup>38</sup> The Lee Memorial Association had a clear method to their work: memorialize Lee while changing the way his actions were viewed by white men.

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<sup>36</sup>Reeves, 151.

<sup>37</sup>Cox, 52.

<sup>38</sup>John W. Daniel, *Ceremonies on the Inauguration of the Memorials & Historical Sketch of the Lee Memorial Association*, Rare E 467.1 L4 L465 C.4 (Lee L482cr), Washington and Lee University Archives, Lexington, VA.

## Lee Revisited

Lee Chapel quickly became the focal point of the Washington and Lee campus. One of the school's largest spaces, the chapel was used for religious services, assembly points, and special occasions. The shrine to Lee became the center of the college and ultimately stood unquestioned for more than 80 years. In 1964 when the Board of Trustees began the process of racial integration at the school, the conversation began changing.<sup>39</sup> It was also during the height of the dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War, and discussions began acknowledging that "race and war might seem paradoxical occurring in the context of a building, and in front of a statue memorializing a Confederate general."<sup>40</sup> Even as early as the late 1960s, the conversations about how Confederate leaders should be remembered were beginning to change, and Washington and Lee University was no exception. As the demographics for colleges began to change into the 1990s, so too did Washington and Lee University. The make-up of the student body became more diverse; no longer was the average student a traditional southern man. Rather, students were coming from all over the country and were individuals of many different races. Those now coming to the university were no longer guaranteed to hold the traditional "family lore of the Civil War."<sup>41</sup> Consequently the significance of the chapel and the statue of Lee began to change. The university continued to struggle with the issue throughout the 2000s. While the site became a beloved spot among groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans, the university also had an obligation to protect the interests of all students, including those students of color, who often viewed the statues and shrines to Lee in a much different way than white southerners.

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<sup>39</sup>Cox, 213.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 215.



As public opinion about Lee began to change, the chapel at Washington and Lee University needed to evolve as well. One example can be seen in the Confederate battle flags that once hung around the Valentine statue of Lee. The battle flags at first were originals, dating back to the Civil War but, as their condition deteriorated, the flags were replaced with reproductions. Washington and Lee University began admitting African American students in 1969. In an odd twist of imagery, the students were still required to sign the matriculation book and honor code in front of the statue chamber of Lee Chapel where the Confederate battle flags hung. It was not until 2014 that a group of African American law students began organizing an effort to take down the replica battle flags.<sup>42</sup> On June 8, 2014 President Kenneth Ruscio agreed to have the flags removed. Taking the measure even further, Ruscio banned the Sons of the Confederate Veterans from rallying on Lee-Jackson Day. This day was traditionally when the group would march through campus with Confederate flags and rally in Lee Chapel. When protests to this new policy began, Ruscio responded, “The statue memorializes Lee as a man of honor and principle throughout his life; it was never meant to be a memorial to the Civil War or the Confederacy. His actions during his five years as president of Washington College made it clear that he had put that chapter of his life behind him. It is also clear that he tried to help others do the same.”<sup>43</sup> While there were still remnants of Lost Cause sentiments in the statement, it was clear that Washington and Lee University was changing and ushering a new era for the school.

### **The Stone Man**

While Washington and Lee University may be one of the most concentrated examples of a shrine to Robert E. Lee, there are countless smaller monuments, statues, and memorials in addition to iconography of Lee in popular culture, much of which is a direct result of the

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 236.

narratives put forward in the years immediately following the end of the Civil War and Lee's death in 1870. Robert E. Lee's name adorns school buildings, bridges, churches, hotels, and theaters, in addition to numerous memorials and sculptures. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly to the average American, these monuments are not just in the deep South, they are in places such as Brooklyn, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The reach of the constructed persona of Robert E. Lee is almost unmeasurable. These monuments are also not just harmless pieces of stone that sit unnoticed. They represent one of the darkest periods in American history and glorify a man who was a leading contributor to the deadliest American war.

The debates about Confederate General Robert E. Lee came to the forefront of Americans' consciousness after nine black parishioners were murdered by a white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2014. Suddenly, symbols and iconography of the Civil War which previously were like white noise around the United States become more and more noticeable. At Washington and Lee University, the conversation switched to whether or not Lee's name should stay enshrined in the name of the university. Ultimately it was decided that Lee's name would stay but that all images depicting him in uniform would be removed from the campus, an acknowledgement that Lee's work at the university was done as a civilian, not as a military commander.<sup>44</sup> However, while the university had a direct link to Robert E. Lee the civilian, many places were finding that there was little to no justification for having statues of Lee and other prominent Confederates. In cities across the country, the discussion began about what symbols and iconography mean, as well as what impact they can have on a community.

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<sup>44</sup>*Lee's Name Stays*. 2018. US: Historynet LLC. <https://ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=khh&AN=130650434&site=ehost-live>.

One city that continues to struggle with this legacy is Richmond, Virginia. Lining the city's Monument Avenue are six memorials, five of which are dedicated to Confederate men: Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, Jefferson Davis, J.E.B. Stuart, Matthew Fontaine Maury, and Robert E. Lee. The last monument, erected in 1996, a statue to the African American tennis player Arthur Ashe, is a halfhearted attempt to reconcile the others to contemporary sensibilities regarding race. Important to note is that the statues line a busy, four-lane road, making interpretation of them difficult. Robert E. Lee's statue was the first of the six. Erected in 1890, the statue depicts Lee on his famous horse Traveller and is intended to memorialize him "as a military hero of national stature."<sup>45</sup> A statue to J.E.B. Stuart followed, then Jefferson Davis, and eventually Stonewall Jackson. Stuart and Jackson are often categorized as martyrs for the Confederacy because they died in battle. The addition of Davis's statue is interesting, because in the years immediately following the war he was often called a coward after running from the Union army. However, his statue was erected in 1907, when the United Daughters of the Confederacy were beginning their memorial crusade and just before the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. In an effort to continue the myth of the Lost Cause, Davis received new recognition, this time more favorably. Lee's statue straddles the two categories. While Lee did not die in battle, his death just five years after the war often categorizes him as a martyr for the cause. Dying after his great military command allowed for him to become a symbol and icon of the enduring legacy of the Confederate army.

As cities around the country grapple with how the statues should be handled, Richmond is no exception. The issue of the statues is not exclusive to what they depict; it is also concerned

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<sup>45</sup>*National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form- Robert E. Lee Monument Richmond, Virginia*, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, August 2002, [https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR\\_to\\_transfer/PDFNoms/127-0181\\_LeeMonument\\_2006\\_nomination\\_final.pdf](https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFNoms/127-0181_LeeMonument_2006_nomination_final.pdf).

with how they are interpreted. The statues glorify men who committed treason in order to protect the institution of slavery. They are physical symbols and reminders of what the Confederacy stood and fought for. On Richmond's Monument Avenue the symbols are left in an awkward environment. The statues are on a busy roadway where cars often drive by, without any explanatory plaques or interpreters there to educate the general public. Thus, the symbol of Robert E. Lee is left up to the interpretation of the passerby. In stark contrast, Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University has its symbols and statues in controlled environments in which the entire narrative can be told. In the statue chamber in the upper level of the chapel there is an interpreter available to inform visitors of Lee's complicated public image. In the museum of the Lee Chapel, the Confederate battle flags are on display but with explanatory messages of their complex history. In the twenty-first century, it is imperative that symbols and iconography, especially concerning points of our history that have historically often been told incompletely, are presented in a controlled environment. However, with Robert E. Lee the situation is far more complex. Lee's popularity and image has grown so much that the glorification and iconography have surpassed traditional marble and stone.

### **A Monument More Than Stone**

Martin Sheen and Robert E. Lee lived almost a century apart and seem like an odd pairing. However, Sheen's portrayal of Lee in the 1993 film *Gettysburg* is one of the best displays of how glorified Lee became.<sup>46</sup> Sheen is a classic American actor and activist. He is a recognizable and likeable figure in American popular culture. On the contrary, an actor named Richard Anderson plays Lee's counterpart, Union General George G. Meade. Anderson is not a household name nor a recognizable figure within history. So, why are the choices of actors

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<sup>46</sup>*Gettysburg*, Ronald F. Maxwell, (2000) DVD.

important? The choice indicates stature in the social order of historical figures. Sheen is easily recognizable to the American public and the actor's rapport with the audience often translates to the trust they feel with the characters he plays. By having such an actor portray Robert E. Lee, the myth of the Lost Cause is presented for contemporary popular audiences. A casual viewing of *Gettysburg* does not make it clear Lee, portrayed by Sheen, was a slaveholding stakeholder who was committing treason. Rather, Lee comes across as a flawed man who in some sense the audience is rooting for. The casting choice shows why symbols are important. By having Sheen play Lee, it is implied that Lee has the stature of an American hero. Such imagery is how the myth of the Lost Cause has continued to impact generations of Americans for the last 150 years.

Images of Robert E. Lee permeate popular culture and often their meanings are lost along the way. America has become desensitized to the Confederate flag, as the myth of the Lost Cause has perpetuated the inaccurate idea that the Confederacy fought for states' rights, not slavery. Rewriting narratives in order to fit white-washed history is what has allowed Robert E. Lee to go from a Confederate icon to an American icon. In the years following the Civil War, the complex and tangled history of Lee as a slaveholding southerner were overlooked and, in many instances, erased in an effort to reunify North and South. In the process the enslaved people Lee fought to keep oppressed were tragically disregarded. Lee was a complex man, but the image of him as a Christian gentleman has overlooked this complexity. The image of Lee that has endured for much of the past 150 years is a water-downed version of a multi-faceted historical figure. The Lee depicted through most of the twentieth century was done so through the lens of the Lost Cause rather than a more objective, historically nuanced perspective. Lee has become a symbol and icon rather than a flawed individual. He has been simplified into symbolic images, the most notable and widely circulated created just days after Appomattox.

For one hour on Easter Sunday, April 16, 1865, Civil War photographer Mathew Brady took six photos of Lee. They would become the most used and well-known photos of the Confederate General. The pictures of Lee from this one hour have become common household images and what exactly they portray has been interpreted in different ways. Many see the image of Lee sitting in his uniform without his sword, weary eyes, and a war-worn face as one of defeat. Others see the strong face, polished shoes, and showy uniform as displays of pride. Some view the sheer idea of sitting for photographs mere days after surrendering as pompous. However, a fact that is often overlooked is that President Abraham Lincoln had died from an assassin's bullet just one day earlier. One newspaper reported that Robert E. Lee was told by Robert Ould on a Sunday afternoon of Lincoln's death.<sup>47</sup> Ould was one of only two other men present at the time of the photos, taken one day after Lincoln died, on a Sunday afternoon. It is plausible that Lee was told just before the photos were taken that President Lincoln had been assassinated. The addition of this information could change one's interpretation of the image of Lee in the Brady photos. Lee would later say that the South lost a friend in Lincoln.<sup>48</sup> It was clear that Lincoln was likely not going to pursue putting Lee on trial for treason, but with his assassination, Lee knew that the South would now be under a microscope for killing the most beloved man in the North. The photo of General Robert E. Lee sitting on the back porch of the Richmond home he did not own portrays the uncertainty of his future. While that uncertainty does not absolve Robert E. Lee of his sins, it does solidify one thing: The image of Lee as an American hero is one crafted for the Lost Cause narrative in order to achieve reconciliation between white Americans in the North and South.

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<sup>47</sup>Reeves, 143.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

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