

The Making of a National Park

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Arlington National Cemetery! The most hallowed ground in the United States!

Arlington was neither intended to, nor was it expected to, become a cemetery. It was a plantation owned by George Washington Parke Custis, an adopted son of George Washington and the natural son of his wife, Martha. Parke Custis managed the plantation with about 200 slaves. The cemetery is located close to the Potomac River on a beautiful Virginia hillside with a commanding view overlooking Washington, D.C. In time of war it could become a perfect launching pad for an artillery bombardment of Washington. In time of peace, its beauty and majestic calm help create an atmosphere of sanctity and bliss. The history of Arlington has been guided both by its location threatening Washington and by its quiet dignity.

In the middle of the cemetery, surrounded by more than 400,000 graves, stands Arlington House, a nineteenth century mansion designed in Greek revival style. The mansion was built by Parke Custis who wanted it to become a memorial to George Washington. Arlington House stands on 1100 acres of land that Parke had inherited from his natural father. Parke had the mansion built on the land, moved in with his wife in 1804, and lived there until his death in 1857.

Parke Custis's only daughter, Mary Anne Randolph Custis, married a childhood sweetheart and distant cousin, Robert E. Lee. They were married in the mansion, lived there, and their seven children were born there.

The will of Parke Custis specified that his daughter had the right to continue to live in and to supervise affairs at Arlington House for the rest of her life and, upon her death, the full title would pass to her eldest son, Custis Lee. After his father-in-law's passing, Robert Lee returned to Arlington House from his military assignment as Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He returned to settle the debts and tangled problems left by the careless ways with which Parke Custis had managed his affairs.

On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter in South Carolina was fired upon and it became clear that a war between the States was imminent. One week after Sumter was attacked, President Lincoln, through a proxy, offered Lee a promotion from Colonel to Major General and asked him to take command of the union forces. Lee respectfully

and courteously declined. He repeated his loyalty to the Union but declared that he was unable to contemplate drawing his sword against Virginia, his native state. Virginia was then on the verge of secession. The day after his refusal, Lee resigned from the U.S. army. He left Arlington on April 22, 1861, and the following day accepted command of Virginia's military forces. He never returned to Arlington.

Lee knew that, for the protection of Washington, the Union Forces would overrun and occupy Arlington as soon as possible. He wrote his wife urging her to pack all the things she could and remove them as well as herself from Arlington. In May, 1861, she did so, leaving Arlington and expecting to return in a few weeks. Mary Lee did not see Arlington again until she made a short visit, twelve years later.

During the summer of 1861, as the war progressed, former friends and colleagues of Robert E. Lee now condemned him. When the army's quartermaster general, Joseph Johnston, resigned to take a command in the confederate army, the position of quartermaster general was assigned to General Montgomery C. Meigs. Meigs, also a West Point graduate, had served under Lee in the corps of engineers. His antagonism to the Federal Army officers who were now fighting for the confederates was severe. He developed an especially strong hatred for Lee and for Jefferson Davis and believed they should be executed.

As quartermaster general, Meigs was in charge of feeding, supplying, transporting, and housing the living, caring for the sick and wounded, and burying the dead. He was a conscientious and efficient officer, known for his honesty and for his attention to detail. He was a superb choice to command a branch of service often suffering from bad management and from corruption.

On May 24, 1861, one day after voters in Virginia voted for secession, Federal soldiers crossed the Potomac River and occupied the undefended estate of Arlington. The Union forces built cabins and furniture from the estate's trees and looted the mansion of its George Washington memorabilia and other souvenirs. Although there was some fighting in 1861, such as the first battle of Manassas or Bull Run, the terrible ferocity of the war started in May, 1862, when a furious series of battles were fought for control of Richmond.

In June, 1862, during the bitter fighting for Richmond, Congress passed legislation involving estates captured from the enemy. It passed a statute, intended both to raise money and to punish the rebels, which required federal commissioners to assess the value of and to collect taxes on real estate captured in Confederate territories. The taxes were to be paid by the owners in person and, if not paid, the commissioners were to seize and to sell the land. A tax of \$92.07 was levied on the

1100 acre Arlington estate. Mary Lee, whose health had deteriorated remarkably and who was stranded in Richmond surrounded by the nearby fighting, sent a cousin with money to pay the tax. The commissioners in Alexandria informed him that Mrs. Lee was required to pay the tax in person. They did not accept payment from him and sent him away. They seized the estate and arranged for its sale. It was assessed for \$34,100 and purchased by the Federal government for \$26,800. Taking the estate was completely consistent with the views of General Meigs and of the equally bitter Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, that the rebels deserved severe punishment.

Since the start of the war the slaves who had been pouring into the north were not being returned to their owners as they were now considered legitimate wartime contraband. Their living conditions in and near Washington were awful, overcrowded, unhealthy, and a danger to the health and welfare of the general public. To help alleviate these conditions somewhat, in May, 1863, a new Freedman's Village was established in the rich bottomlands of Arlington. Several hundred former slaves were moved in, each given a small portion of land. The establishment of the Freedman's Village was welcomed by Meigs as an aide in his efforts to render Arlington so unwelcome a place as to discourage the Lee family from ever wishing to re-establish residence in the mansion. The Freedman's Village in Arlington became a stable community of about 1500 with schools, churches, and a hospital.

The war intensified in the summer of 1864 as General Grant, now commanding general of the federal forces, was determined to use his superior number of soldiers and greater resources of material and supplies to give a final blow to the enemy. Casualties multiplied. By the hundreds and then by the thousands, wounded and dying were brought into Washington. There was a desperate shortage of hospital beds and every public building in Washington was crowded with cots. The country was as badly prepared to bury the dead as it was to care for the wounded. Already by the end of 1862, the military had consecrated and filled three dozen new military cemeteries around the country.

It is not entirely clear how Arlington was transformed during the Civil War from plantation to cemetery. Military burials actually occurred before it was officially recognized as a military cemetery. On May 13, 1864, the first known military burial took place in Arlington. The deceased was Private William Christman, twenty one, who died of infection in a Washington hospital a short time after recruitment and before he had been in battle. He was joined shortly thereafter by the burial of battle casualties, including a Rebel soldier who had been a prisoner of war. Meigs ordered that officers were to be buried at the edge of the Lee family garden in plain view of the mansion.

This was to help assure that Arlington House would never again be occupied by Lees unless they wanted to be surrounded by the dead.

About one month after the burial of Private Christmas, Meigs officially recommended that 200 acres of land surrounding Arlington mansion be appropriated as a National Military Cemetery. The shortage of burial places sparked the idea in his head and it may be that he engineered the burial of Private Christman and the other soldiers to help get the idea accepted. The Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, approved the recommendation immediately upon receipt.

Meigs wanted a perfectly neat and functioning cemetery. The military officers in charge were sloppy about carrying out his orders (particularly regarding arranging burials to be near the mansion) and they were not careful about spiritual or religious matters pertaining to burials. He arranged for chaplains to be in charge of Arlington House and of burials in the cemetery. Senior officers were no longer needed and they were replaced by junior officers from the quartermaster corps. The junior officers were not in charge of burials but, now under Meigs's direct orders, looked after military duties on the cemetery grounds. Possibly these administrative shifts helped change the national character of Arlington. It lost its significance as a military headquarters and became a national symbol of the spiritual values this country respects.

After the Civil War ended, Meigs organized special recovery crews to examine all the war's battlefields and prison camps to recover the remains of the dead and to bury them in military cemeteries. The recovery program was surprisingly successful. At the beginning of the effort there were approximately 240,000 unaccounted for deaths; when the campaign ended the number was reduced to about 26,000 or somewhat over 10 percent. Of course a fair number of the recovered were buried in Arlington.

In 1865, Meigs heard that the Lee family may try to regain their plantation. This spurred him to further action. He received a large shipment of remains of unknowns from nearby battlefields and had a gigantic pit, twenty feet deep and twenty feet around, dug near Mary Lee's garden. He buried them in the pit and estimated that the mass grave held more than 1100 remains. He designed a stone sarcophagus to mark the grave.

It was correct that the Lee family was to attempt to regain ownership of the property. Robert E. Lee died in 1870 and a few weeks after his death, Mary Lee petitioned the Senate to disinter all the buried at Arlington and to return the property to her. She managed to have a bill to that effect introduced in the Senate. The bill was

easily defeated. Mary died in 1873 and, according to her father's will, Arlington was now the property of her son, George Washington Custis Lee.

Shortly after Mary Lee's death, Custis Lee petitioned the Senate to compensate him for his confiscated property. His request died in committee without being considered. In 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes, a member of the Literary Club, became President. He owed his election largely to southern states and to his promise to reunify the North and the South. Custis considered the time favorable to revive his campaign for Arlington. This time he took his case to the courts. Eventually it resulted in a trial by jury at the U. S. Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Virginia.

The trial was held in July 1877 and the jury decided for Custis. The jury agreed that Mrs. Lee, by reason of bad health and surrounding battles, was unable to appear in person to pay the "insurrectionary tax". But she had made a good faith effort to pay the tax. She had dispatched an agent with the funds and with the mission to pay in person on her behalf. By refusing to accept payment and selling the property, the government had unlawfully deprived Custis Lee of his property without due process of law. The government appealed to the Supreme Court which also ruled in favor of Custis Lee.

The federal government was now obliged to pay a costly penalty. It was obliged to disinter the twenty thousand graves, to remove the residents of Freedman's Village, and to vacate and restore the mansion. This presented a dilemma and a serious challenge. There was a solution. The government could buy the estate. But only if Custis Lee were willing to sell.

Custis was willing. The estate was assessed to be valued at one hundred fifty thousand dollars. Congress appropriated the money and the papers were signed on April 24, 1883. The federal ownership of Arlington was now established. The title was formally accepted by the Secretary of War, Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of President Abraham Lincoln, from Custis Lee, the son of Robert E. Lee. It was a sign of the times that sons of former enemies had, without rancor, easily reached a fair and honorable agreement.

General Meigs retired from active military service in 1882. Before retirement he had arranged for his own burial in Arlington and had reserved a prime area for members of his family.

During the 1880's it was decided that the existence of Freedman's Village on Arlington grounds was inconsistent with the atmosphere that was being created for the

cemetery and its immediate surroundings. The residents were asked to leave and were reimbursed for their property.

In 1892, the bodies of some Revolutionary War veterans were exhumed and reburied in Arlington. Today war casualties from all our country's wars, including the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, are represented. A section for fallen confederate soldiers and a Confederate Memorial was added in 1912.

One of the most popular sites at Arlington National Cemetery is the "Tomb of the Unknowns", originally called the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier". Congress passed a resolution in 1921 that an unknown American soldier, who had perished in a World War I battle in Europe, was to be returned for burial in the United States at Arlington. Great pains were made by the Army to ensure that the dead soldier was indeed American and that he was and would remain unknown. He was interred at Arlington on Armistice Day (now Veterans Day), November 11, 1921. On Veterans Day, 1958, unknown soldiers of World War II and of the Korean War were added and on Veterans Day, 1984, an unknown soldier of the Vietnam War was interred. But the Vietnam War, which had caused so much distress to the country, still had more mischief to offer. The remains of the Vietnam War unknown were disinterred four years after interment. DNA testing found him to be First Lieutenant Michael J. Blassie, of St. Louis. He was no longer an unknown. His family accepted the remains and had him buried near their home. It has been decided that his crypt in the tomb would remain there but be empty. It is likely that DNA examinations will prevent future burials to the Tomb of the Unknowns. The Tomb has been guarded around the clock since July 2, 1937, by the United States Army. The 3rd U. S. Infantry Regiment ("The Old Guard") has been guarding the Tomb since April 6, 1948.

Arlington National Cemetery and the United States Soldier's and Airmen's Home National Cemetery are the only two military cemeteries administered by the Department of the Army. The other national cemeteries are administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs or by the National Park Service. Arlington House (the Custis-Lee mansion) and about 20 acres surrounding the House are administered by the National Park Service as a memorial to Robert E. Lee. The house was restored in 1925 and is unofficially known as the Lee House. Visitors often assume that Robert E. Lee probably owned the house. Although the Lees lived there for many years, neither Lee nor his wife ever owned the house.

General Meigs had designated 200 acres as the size of the cemetery. As the need was becoming ever greater, the size of the cemetery has been increasing. It now occupies 680 of the original 1100 acres inherited by Parke Custis.

To the dead at Arlington, to the Presidents, to the Justices of the Supreme Court, to the generals, to the athletes, the soldiers, sailors, marines, flyers, to the rebels, the slaves, the nameless, to all our brave men and women who lie there –

May They Rest in Peace.

To the millions of visitors each year, to the Fathers and Mothers, to the Brothers and Sisters, to the Sons and Daughters, to the friends and fellow citizens, may they all hearken to the Biblical admonition:

Choose Life.

Live it wisely, live it well.

Recommended for further reading:

Robert M. Poole, "On Hallowed Ground: the Story of Arlington National Cemetery", Walker and Company, N.Y. 2009.