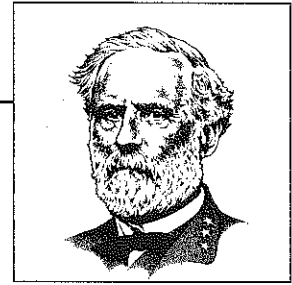


## Robert E. Lee

### Confederate General



*Robert E. Lee (1807–1870) was commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. He led troops for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Lee was a brilliant general. He managed to win battles and keep Southern armies in the field against great odds.*

**R**obert E. Lee was the fourth child of a leading Virginia family. Lee's relatives on both sides lived on great plantations. His father, Henry Lee, had been a cavalry leader during the Revolution. He received the nickname "Light-Horse Harry" for his bravery. Henry Lee also served as Governor of Virginia after the Revolution. When George Washington died, Lee wrote these famous words: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Like his father, Robert E. Lee would also adopt George Washington as his model of what a man should be.

**West Point** Henry Lee's death when Robert was still a child left his mother with seven children and little money. Lee was strongly influenced by his widowed mother. He tried to do well at every task he faced. Lee's first major success came at West Point, the United States Military Academy.

Confederate general Joseph Johnston attended West Point with Robert E. Lee. Johnston said Lee's natural superiority won "warm friendship" and commanded "high respect." While at West Point, Lee was appointed corps adjutant. A cadet could win no higher rank. In 1829, Lee graduated second in his class.

**Early Military Achievements** Lee won his first commission to the army corps of engineers. He was stationed as an assistant engineer in Fort Monroe, Virginia. There he met and married Martha Washington's great-granddaughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis. Mary's family mansion became the Lees' home. This mansion, Arlington, still overlooks Washington, D.C. The Lees eventually had seven children.

The Mexican War, in 1846, gave Lee his first chance to display his abilities on a national stage.

Lee's engineering skills allowed American troops to cross difficult Mexican mountain passes. During the war, Lee was promoted, first to major, then to lieutenant colonel, and finally to colonel. General Winfield Scott, who led American forces in this war, said that his "success in Mexico was largely due to the skill, valor, and undaunted courage of Robert E. Lee . . . the greatest military genius in America." But in the United States, another war was brewing. When the Civil War began in 1861, Lee and Scott found themselves on opposing sides.

**A Reluctant Decision** Lee realized that staying in the army would mean he must invade his native Virginia. Instead, Lee chose to resign. In a letter to General Scott, his commander-in-chief, Lee noted that he had devoted more than 25 years to army service.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

It [the letter of resignation] would have been presented at once but for the struggle it has cost me to separate myself from a service to which I have devoted the best years of my life, and all the ability I possessed. . . . I shall carry to the grave the most grateful recollections of your kind consideration, and your name and fame shall always be dear to me. Save in defense of my native State, I never desire again to draw my sword.

ROBERT E. LEE, quoted in  
*Robert E. Lee, A Life Portrait*

Lee's reluctance to resign from the army also stemmed from his patriotism. In a letter to his sister, he said that he considered the South to be in "a state of revolution" and that he recognized "no necessity for this state of things." Lee did not favor secession. Further, he did not believe in slavery. He had freed his few slaves before the Civil War.

But in time, Robert E. Lee came to believe that defending Virginia meant protecting the freedoms George Washington had won for the American colonies. Lee was appointed commander-in-chief of Virginia's troops. As such, he became the architect of the Confederacy's military strategy.

**Civil War General** With much less manpower than the North, Lee had to mass his forces where the Union Army might invade. After Confederate troops turned back Union forces at the first Battle of Bull Run, the long war started in earnest.

Lee knew the Confederates lacked the strength to win in the field. At the beginning of the war, he kept the Union army away from Richmond. There, arms were produced. He also kept Union forces far from the farms of northern Virginia. He tried to win victories that would weaken the enemy's will to fight. He won a major victory at Chancellorsville in May 1863. There, he divided his forces and circled the Union army, which outnumbered his forces by two to one.

**The End Is Near** But as the war dragged on, Lee's army began to shrink. In contrast, the Federal forces maintained their strength. Under Ulysses S. Grant, Union armies began to approach Confederate strongholds such as Richmond and Petersburg in 1864. Lee built fortifications into permanent lines. Like trenches, these lines allowed Lee's armies to defend against Grant's siege of the Virginia cities for almost a year. But General Lee knew that the end would be "a mere question of time." On April 2, 1865, Grant broke Lee's defenses, and the Confederate retreat began. Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865. A Union officer described Lee in these words.

#### **A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

There behind me, riding in between my two lines, appeared a commanding form, superbly mounted, richly [dressed], of imposing bearing, noble countenance, with expression of deep sadness

overmastered by deeper strength. It is no other than Robert E. Lee! And seen by me for the first time within my own lines. I sat immovable, with a certain awe and admiration.

JOSHUA CHAMBERLAIN, quoted in  
*Robert E. Lee, A Life Portrait*

**After the War** Lee took a few months to recover from the exhaustion of the war and surrender. However, he never regained his health. To support his large family, Lee became the president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. The college and its library had been looted during the war. Only 50 students were enrolled. By the fall term of 1870, enrollment had risen to almost 400. Lee advised his students to keep the peace and accept reunion with the North. "Make your sons Americans," Lee urged his fellow Southerners. After Lee's death in 1870, the college was renamed Washington and Lee University.

#### **Review Questions**

1. How did Robert E. Lee's family background influence his drive to succeed?
2. Why did Lee oppose the Civil War?
3. How did Lee's engineering background play a role in the South's defenses near the end of the Civil War?

#### **Critical Thinking**

4. **Summarizing** Explain the important influence of George Washington on the life of Robert E. Lee.
5. **Finding Main Ideas** How did Lee think the South might win the Civil War despite its weakness compared to the North?
6. **Supporting Opinions** Do you think the Civil War might have been shorter had Lee kept his post in the U.S. Army? Explain.