

What Price Glory?

Robert E. Lee as an Iconic Historical Figure

February of each year is Black History month. The history of African-Americans in this country did not start in 1865 with the passage of the XIII Amendment and the end of the Civil War, nor did it start with the introduction of the first African slaves into Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. It started with the European slave trade in Africa and the willingness of buyers and sellers to not only support, but to promote the introduction of slaves into the New World. The cultural aspects of slavery in this country are tangled in that history – a double-helix tangle bounded by those that profited from the trade and those that abhorred it. Caught in the middle, of course, were the African-Americans (slaves and free men) themselves.

One aspect of this that has increasingly caused friction in recent years has been the coinciding of two commemorations in January of each year: the birthdays of General Robert E. Lee (born on January 19, 1807) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (born on January 15, 1929). Alabama and Mississippi are the only two states left today that observe General Lee's birthday – an irony to some, a perceived slight by others. (Arkansas ended the practice in 2017.) Alabama officially commemorates both birthdays on the third Monday in January of each year. How can two seemingly opposite figures in history be commemorated on the same day? The Lee/King commemoration is one of three Confederate-related days on Alabama's official calendar, the others being Confederate Memorial Day on the fourth Monday in April and the birthday of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis on the first Monday in June.

Commemorating Dr. King's birthday as a tribute to his many accomplishments in the fight to advance civil rights and racial equality in this nation is understandable. Many, even in the South, do not share the same opinion concerning the commemoration of Robert E. Lee's birthday. He was, after all, a lynchpin figure on the Confederate side of the American Civil War, a catastrophic period in our history that rocked this nation to its core. Its reverberations are felt to this day. To some (then and now), his actions were treasonous. At the least, he broke his oath of allegiance to the nation when he resigned his commission in 1861 to serve his home state of Virginia. What was it about him that warrants such recognition? Perhaps it is that he was a man of stature and conviction, and a master of his profession. A product of his times, he made tough choices in difficult circumstances and followed through with them – character traits worthy of respect and emulation.

Lee was born at Stratford Hall Plantation in Westmoreland County, Virginia, to Major General Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee III (1756–1818), Governor of Virginia, and his second wife, Anne Hill Carter (1773–1829). Lee's family is one of Virginia's first families, descended from Richard Lee I, Esq., "the Immigrant" (1618–64), from the county of Shropshire in England.

Lee entered West Point in the summer of 1825. At the time, the focus of the curriculum was engineering; the head of the Army Corps of Engineers supervised the school and the superintendent was

an engineering officer. Lee graduated second in his class, behind Charles Mason.* Lee did not incur any demerits during his four-year course of study, a distinction shared by five of his 45 classmates. In June 1829, Lee was commissioned a brevet second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers.



(* Mason and Lee were tied for head of the class in Artillery, Tactics, and Conduct, but Mason bested Lee in all other subjects and graduated with an overall score of 1995.5 points out of a possible 2000, compared to Lee's 1966.5. Mason resigned his commission two years after graduation, in 1831. Mason and Lee still have the two highest graduation scores in the history of West Point. The third highest score in the Academy's history is held by Douglas MacArthur.)

Lee honed his skills as a military officer and military engineer at various assignments throughout the 1830s and 1840s. He distinguished himself as a principal aide to General Winfield Scott during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). In 1852, Lee was appointed Superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point. He received a promotion as second-in-command of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Texas in 1855, serving under Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston at Camp Cooper, Texas; their mission was to protect settlers from attacks by the Apache and the Comanche.

Lee was a slave-holder, and his treatment of his slaves is controversial. He had a reputation of being a "paternalistic" master but could be severe in his punishments. Historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor, an American diplomat and historian, wrote that Lee's private views on race and slavery, "which today seem startling, were entirely unremarkable in Lee's world. No visionary, Lee apparently tried to conform to accepted opinions. His assessment of black inferiority, of the necessity of racial stratification, the primacy of slave law, and even a divine sanction for it all, was in keeping with the prevailing views of other moderate slaveholders and a good many prominent Northerners." Columbia University historian Eric Foner notes that Lee "was not a pro-slavery ideologue. But I think equally important is that, unlike some white southerners, he never spoke out against slavery." To the extent Lee felt slavery was bad, it was, as Foner put it, "one that had more deleterious effects on whites than blacks."

At the time of Lee's career in the US Army, officers of West Point typically stood aloof from party and sectional strife on such issues as slavery as a matter of principle. Lee adhered to the principle. He considered it his patriotic duty to be apolitical while in active Army service and did not speak out publicly on the subject of slavery prior to the Civil War.

Keep in mind that Lee had had an exemplary career in the US Army when the Civil War erupted. Based on that record, he was officially offered by presidential advisor Francis P. Blair command of the US Army forces defending Washington DC, the nation's capital. He refused. He opposed secession, predicting a long and devastating war would ensue. He supported the Crittenden Compromise, which would have constitutionally protected slavery. Still, he looked upon Virginia as his home and felt he had to defend it from a national government that, if secession led to war, he believed would transgress Virginia's rights

and state sovereignty. That's a view that may be difficult for some today to understand, but it was very real back in 1860.

In 1865, after the war, Lee was paroled and signed an oath of allegiance, asking to have his citizenship of the United States restored. Lee's application was alleged to have been misplaced; as a result, he did not receive a pardon, and his citizenship was not restored. In 1865, Lee became president of Washington College (later Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia; in that position, he supported reconciliation between North and South. Lee accepted "the extinction of slavery" provided for by the XIII Amendment, but publicly opposed racial equality, granting African Americans the right to vote, and other political rights. Lee died in 1870. In 1975, Congress posthumously restored Lee's citizenship effective June 13, 1865.

Lee opposed the construction of public memorials to Confederate rebellion on the grounds that they would prevent the healing of wounds inflicted during the war. Nevertheless, after his death, Lee became an icon of promoters of the "Lost Cause". Historian Eric Foner writes that at the end of his life, "Lee had become the embodiment of the Southern cause. A generation later, he was a national hero."

Lee's merit – his true value, as perceived from the get go by General Winfield Scott and others -- came to fore on the battlefield. In the Civil War he started out rather mediocre in what came to be West Virginia (the Battle of Cheat Mountain), losing to Union forces commanded by Union Brigadier General Joseph Reynolds. He was then sent to organize the coastal defense along the Carolina and Georgia seacoasts before being appointed as military advisor to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. This, in turn, led to his being appointed commander of the newly-designated Army of Northern Virginia (AoNV) during the Peninsula Campaign against Union Major General George B. McClellan in June 1862 following the incapacitation of General Joseph E. Johnston. This is where he came into his own as a battlefield commander. He was learning, growing into the role.

He was a believer in the offensive. While it certainly seems to have served him well during much of the war, some critics have seen it as ultimately a problem for him – too aggressive, led to too many casualties, overextended, would have been better served to stay more on the defensive. His Union opponents, at least up until General Grant came along, likely didn't share this criticism of him since he too often bested them in the field.

More importantly, he could inspire. He became an icon to the South in general and particularly to the men of the AoNV. Their devotion to him knew no bounds. Even at Appomattox, with the war going badly across the South and the AoNV depleted by desertions (in addition to casualties), some 40-45,000 Confederate soldiers stood in his ranks. Amazing.

I particularly admire his grace in defeat. There is no better example of him being a national icon than his surrender at Appomattox. The war technically went on for a while longer, but everyone knew that when Bobby Lee was defeated, it was over. He did, too. At Appomattox several of his officers recommended the army break up, head into the Appalachians, and continue with what today we would call a guerilla

war. General Lee disagreed and had the gravitas to make it stick. The war was over; it was time to put down the sword, make peace, and begin rebuilding.* Think about what might have transpired – the continuing misery and cost that might have gone on another decade or more on both sides – had he acceded to his officers' recommendation. Lee not only made the difficult decision in 1861 to break his oath as an officer in the United States Army and support Virginia over the Union, but also to admit defeat when the time came in 1865. The nation owes much to the latter decision.

** This was the same view Confederate Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest communicated to his troops.*

I do not see a conflict between the two commemorations. Who among us does not find aspects of individual lives in history to admire, even though we disagree or even reject other aspects of that person's character? Take, for random example, Queen Elizabeth I. She ruled England from November 17, 1588 to March 24, 1603. Do we reject her and her reign because she supported colonization in (and the exploitation of) North America; because she remained in power due to iron rule, assassination, and subterfuge; or that she condoned the slave trade? Do we condemn her or deny her place in history for that? No, but neither do we celebrate her for those traits.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and General Robert E. Lee both deserve respect, albeit for different reasons. Dr. King was a great civil rights leader and humanitarian. General Lee demonstrated character, leadership, and, in the end, great wisdom. Both led by example in difficult social and political times. There is no reason both cannot be celebrated on their own terms.