ELIZABETH BROWN PRYOR

"Thou Knowest Not the Time of Thy Visitation"

A Newly Discovered Letter Reveals Robert E. Lee's Lonely Struggle with Disunion

Nine delicate pieces of stationery, covered with the flamboyant script of Robert E. Lee's eldest daughter, have come to light at the Virginia Historical Society, offering new details about the tumultuous days of disunion in early 1861. Written by Mary Custis Lee in the weeks following her father's death, the manuscript describes his historic decisions to resign from the United States Army and follow Virginia out of the Union. It contains a fascinating description of the tense days after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, as well as insights into Lee's state of mind. Reading these faded pages reminds us that for many in Virginia the sectional rift was not only a national crisis, but also a lonely personal ordeal, and that our understanding of this consequential time is still evolving.

Robert E. Lee's death on 12 October 1870 inspired many people to chronicle his life, hoping to lessen their grief by creating lasting memories of the man. Daughter Mary, along with other members of Lee's family, responded to friends who memorialized the general, sharing recollections and anecdotes, and trying to verify biographical facts. Among Miss Lee's correspondents was Col. Charles Marshall, who had been her father's aide-de-camp during much of the war. With the blessing of the Lee family, Marshall had begun a biography of his commander and was gathering material from military colleagues as well as relatives. Chief among his interests was why and how Lee had chosen to link his fate to Virginia's.[1]

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Mary Custis Lee evidently labored over her account, for the pages left to us are draft versions, which show her earnest effort to describe the scene exactly. She did not date the drafts, but Marshall's reply indicates that her finished letter was received sometime in early February 1871. He was quite pleased with its contents. Her depiction, wrote Marshall on 14 February, was "the fullest and most graphic account I have yet had. It gives me a very clear idea of the situation of affairs at the time your Father took the final step." He went on to ask that she send any further details that came to mind and also solicited information from General Lee's wife (also named Mary Custis Lee) and his cousin, Cassius Lee.[2]

Marshall was a zealous collector of information, but in the end, unfortunately, it led nowhere. The pressure of writing candidly about an iconic figure caused him increasing anxiety, and he ultimately dropped his biographical project. Marshall feared that if he wrote all that he knew his work would be widely vilified. After nearly a year of research, his feet growing colder by the day, he told Mary: "My personal knowledge and observation assured me that to be truthful, and to do justice to my venerated commander, I would be obliged to write much that is at variance with the generally accepted opinions of the world as to many important matters. . . . To appear to endeavor to exalt him, at the expense of another, to make him when dead, the instrument of injustice, which he would shrink from, as from pollution, was something that I could not contemplate without horror."[3] Intimidated, Marshall sat on the material, and the location of most of his historical correspondence is not known. Mary Custis Lee's draft letter is correspondingly important.[4]

Lee's daughter recognized the capriciousness of memory and decided she would record only "*facts* that I can be certain of." And, indeed, her "facts" check out remarkably well against official documents and other established records. Dates when news broke in Alexandria and Washington; visitors to the Lee household; the emotions of her family: all have corroborative evidence. Even a seemingly fantastic story about her brother, William Henry Fitzhugh Lee (called "Rooney" by the family), has turned out to be true. In this anecdote, Mary says Rooney had heard a rumor that his father was arrested upon resigning. In retaliation, he held hostage dozens of sailors from a northern ship that was trading lumber near his estate on the Pamunkey

River. As unlikely as it seems, the tale is confirmed by a letter to Virginia governor John Letcher, in which Rooney announced the capture of the men and asked for instructions. (Letcher calmly advised him to keep the vessels and the timber and release the men.)[5] In only one place does Mary Custis Lee's recollection err—when assuming the participation of Secretary of State William Seward and Secretary of War Simon Cameron in discussions with Lee about leading the Union force being raised by Abraham Lincoln. Other writers later made the same mistake, but Lee himself corrected the record, stating that he only spoke with presidential adviser Francis P. Blair about this command.[6]

Until the discovery of Mary Custis Lee's letter, historians were dependent on a series of memoirs or biographical sketches, all of them published decades after the events, and all containing disconcerting inaccuracies. Because they held the best information available, however, they were used and repeated, until some of the stories took on the quality of common knowledge. These included recollections by several cousins, which are correct in the main, but assume that Lee had been offered a spot in Richmond before he left his home near Alexandria or place him in locations that are impossible to reconcile with known facts.[7] One, a memoir by George Upshur, was written in the 1930s, seventy-five years after Lee's decision, with dramatic embellishments that have survived into many biographies (including the one written by this author). Upshur depicted an agonized Lee sleeplessly pacing the floors of his home at Arlington as he pondered his destiny, while lights blazed in every room. Unfortunately, every reference to Robert E. Lee in that account is pockmarked with inaccuracies, and this, along with Upshur's tender age in 1861—he was five years old—makes his story dubious in light of the new data.[8]

Upshur was probably influenced by two other versions that were popular in the early twentieth century. The first was written forty-five years after the fact by the Rev. J. William Jones, who did not know the Lees in 1861, though he was later acquainted with them. Consistent with his pious calling, Jones painted a picture of Robert E. Lee dropping to his knees in his upstairs bedchamber to summon divine guidance, while the family nervously waited below. Thomas Nelson Page drew on this for a similar passage in his biographical study, which featured a grand climactic scene with Lee descending the

stairs at dawn, resignation in hand, to make his dramatic announcement. Unfortunately, both of these works are also unreliable. Jones was for many years the editor of the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, which sought to invoke heroic memories of the Lost Cause and manipulated many Lee materials to that end. Thomas Nelson Page was a fiction writer, similarly dedicated to portraying antebellum Virginia as a carefree world of mint juleps and faithful servants and sentimentalizing both the causes and consequences of the war. In light of the far removal of these authors from the events, and their questionable objectivity, Mary Custis Lee's description gains additional importance. Though not a perfect document (the last pages are missing and it was penned several years after the secession crisis) it is, nonetheless, the best account available written by an eyewitness.[9]

The skeletal record that Mary Custis Lee fleshes out is familiar to most students of Civil War history. When the country began to divide after the November 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln, southern military officers were forced to face their conflicting loyalties. West Point had instilled in its graduates a profound dedication to national service, encouraging them to rise above provincial allegiances and become a source of leadership for the entire country.[10] Yet local ties remained strong. In addition, many officers, Robert E. Lee included, supported the institution of slavery and the planters' right to take their human property into U.S. territories.[11] From the start, Lee had stated that he would follow Virginia's lead, yet he had hoped his state would not secede—indeed remarked that the Old Dominion might take a leadership role in holding the Union together.[12] For the most part he disdained secession, claiming that the Constitution was "meant for perpetual union" and calling the actions of withdrawing states "nothing but revolution."[13] Still, he did not reject it altogether, viewing disunion as a last option, only to be invoked when all else failed. Then, he maintained, "we can with a clear conscience separate."[14] As tensions mounted, he became increasingly dejected as he watched his personal options narrow. After the fall of Fort Sumter on 13 April 1861, Lincoln called up 75,000 militia to protect federal property, and for Virginians this was a step too far. On 17 April delegates

meeting in Richmond to address the secession crisis determined to sever their ties to the Union.[15]

Lee had been called back to Washington from his command in Texas in March 1861—in fact had been promoted by the new president—and he was viewed by the army commander, Gen. Winfield Scott, as one of his most promising officers. On 18 April, Lee was summoned to meet with Francis P. Blair, who unofficially offered him command of the army Lincoln was creating. Unwilling to take part in what he believed would become an invasion of his state (correctly as it turned out), Lee turned down the job on the spot. He then walked to the war department, where he told Scott of his decision, and, according to available reports, proposed to sit out the war at Arlington. Scott, a fellow Virginian, rebuffed this idea, telling Lee his equivocal attitude was unacceptable in a loyal army and that he had best resign quickly before he was ordered to take part in the new force.[16]

Lee returned home "worn & harassed" and spent two days contemplating his options. He was faced with leaving the only career he knew, and his only income.[17] He was aware that a decision to leave the army would be derided by numerous colleagues, whose opinions he respected. His own family was sharply divided on the issues, with the majority of his generation favoring the Union side.[18] Unlike many at this time, Lee also foresaw a lengthy and brutal contest—one that was unlikely to thrill an experienced war veteran in his early fifties.[19] On 19 April, while doing errands in Alexandria, he heard that rumors of Virginia's secession were true.[20] On the morning of 20 April 1861 he wrote a terse letter of resignation to the secretary of war; a longer letter expressing sorrow and appreciation to General Scott; explanations to his Union-leaning sister and brother; and a short note to a cousin, who was also pondering his future in the U.S. Army. To the latter (who ultimately fought for the Union), he declined to give advice, concluding: "I merely tell you what I have done that you may do better."[21]

At this point, Lee apparently intended to retire from public life altogether.[22] But the following day he received a note from Judge John Robertson of Richmond, requesting an interview in the name of Gov. John Letcher. They were unable to meet as first arranged, and Lee proposed joining Robertson at the Alexandria train depot on 22 April, presumably understanding that he would be offered a military role in the newly seceded government. Though

later recollections described Lee meeting with Richmond representatives after church on 21 April, Robertson's letter to Governor Letcher and the statement of an acquaintance who delivered the judge's note both make it clear that Lee was not offered any position until the following day. Indeed Robertson, who had also met with General Scott and been rather abruptly dismissed when he suggested that Scott might renege on his oaths of loyalty to the United States, was nervous about broaching the subject with Lee. "Judge R did not know what Genl Lee was going to do!" the messenger later wrote, "two hours before I reached Arlington . . . they said [even] God did not know how to approach him on the subject."[23] Once on the train, Robertson raised the subject of Lee's participation in the military force being formed, and when they reached Richmond, Governor Letcher officially offered him the command of Virginia's defense with the rank of major general. Faced with his third critical decision in five days, Lee accepted. He was unanimously approved by the Virginia Convention and on 23 April was formally appointed during an emotional ceremony at the state capitol.[24]

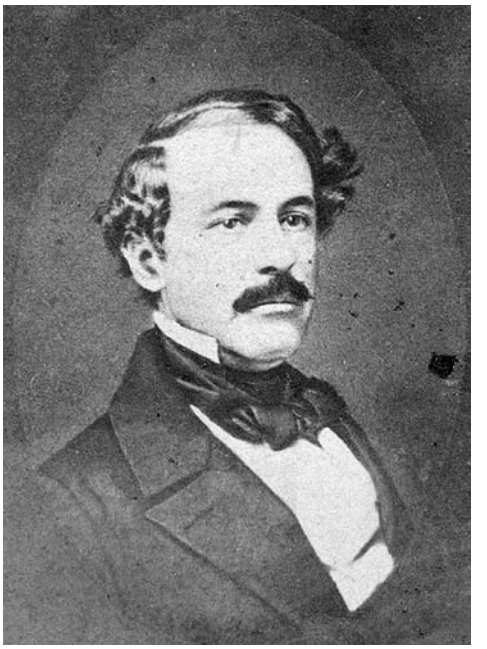
What Mary Custis Lee adds to this chronicle is specific information about her father's mood, as well as firsthand descriptions that put us on the spot at one of America's most consequential moments. We know that Robert E. Lee was anxious during the early weeks of the Lincoln administration, when colleagues and friends found him easily distracted. But Mary remembered her father as sad and deliberate at the time, rather than passionate. She notes that instead of melodramatically pounding the upstairs floorboards, he repaired to his office, quietly made his decision before breakfast on 20 April, then sent it to Washington without consulting the family. He remained calm—and counseled others to do likewise.[25]

Mary Custis Lee's missive is also interesting for the emphasis she puts on the military character of Lee's decisions. In one of the most intriguing passages, she recounts her father's reaction to the surrender of Fort Sumter. Instead of exalting in the Confederate triumph, his thoughts were of the men in charge of the garrison and of their precarious position. He sympathized with his old colleague Robert Anderson, the commanding Union officer: "He was a determined man, & I know held out to the last." She also states that it was not the news of Virginia's secession that prompted her father to write his resignation but his meetings with Francis Blair and

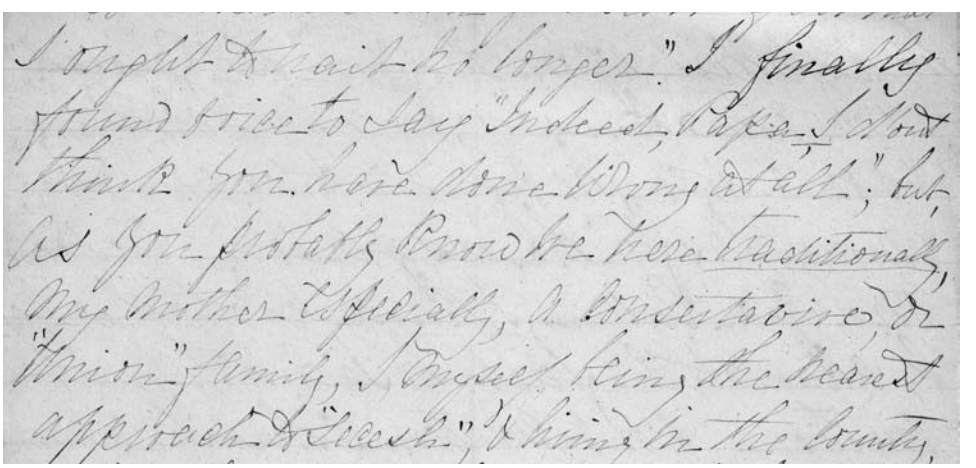
General Scott, where he was placed in a position either to reject promotion and avoid unwelcome orders—which ran against his principles—or leave the service.[26] This is in keeping with Lee's words to his brother, naval captain Smith Lee. Just after sending in his resignation, he wrote to Smith: "I am liable at any time to be ordered on duty which I could not conscientiously perform. To save me from such a position, & to prevent the necessity of resigning under orders, I had to act at once, & before I could see you again on the subject, as I had wished."[27]

Military concerns are again underscored when Mary describes her father's insistence that his action was not motivated by news of the Baltimore riots on 19 April, which raised the prospect of additional troops being sent to that city. Orders to participate in—or perhaps lead—such a force would undoubtedly have been uncomfortable for him. And Lee's wife also notes how her husband's distress revolved around his lifelong allegiance to the army. To resign a commission he had held for more than thirty-five years "was the severest struggle of his life," she would write, using that phrase on more than one occasion. "Only those who witnessed it can conceive of its intensity."[28]

Yet, in his decision to turn his back on a lifelong career, Lee was out of step with the majority of his southern comrades. Of the thirteen full colonels—Lee's rank—from slave states, ten chose to remain with the U.S. Army. Thirty percent of southerners who graduated from West Point during Lee's era (up to 1830) followed their states into the Confederacy, but 48 percent remained with the Union. Of field officers—of which Lee was one—more than half kept their U.S. commissions. There appears to have been no sense of dishonor in doing so. Most of those joining the southern columns were younger men, with more to prove and less to lose.[29] And, in fact, Lee was under no pressure to resign. Although many southerners in the army came under suspicion—some, such as Alfred Mordecai and Albert Sidney Johnston, were actually pressured to leave the service—Lee's commander and colleagues seem to have had confidence in him until the last. Indeed, Lee's departure was received at the war department with regret, and for General Scott, deep sorrow. In a moving passage, Mary Custis Lee told Charles Marshall how the old general had taken to his couch, lying down as if in mourning, refusing to hear Lee's name spoken aloud.[30]



The draft letter written by Mary Custis Lee (above left), a detail of which appears below, about events surrounding the decision of her father, Robert E. Lee (above right), to resign from the U.S. Army is filled with telling details. Most interesting are her comments about the family's reaction to Lee's decision. According to his daughter, his immediate family was "traditionally . . . a 'Union' family" and thus were bewildered by the news of his resignation. (Above left: *Virginia Historical Society, 1940.20.112*; above right: *Arlington House*; below: *Virginia Historical Society, Mss1L5144a2730*)



Perhaps the most astonishing information revealed by the letter is the news that Robert E. Lee's decisions were made despite the Unionist sentiment of his immediate family. Recent research has shown that much of his *extended* family remained loyal to the Stars and Stripes, including numerous relatives who actually served in the Union army or navy. Cousin Samuel Phillips Lee, a childhood playmate, for example, retained his post in the U.S. Navy and gave meritorious service throughout the war. His younger brother, John Fitzgerald Lee, an 1834 West Point graduate, served as judge advocate of the U.S. Army. Cousin John H. Upshur also resisted "tremendous pressure" in order to remain with the federal navy.[31] Another cousin, Laurence Williams, fought on the side of the North, serving at one point as an aide-de-camp to Gen. George B. McClellan.[32] Philip Fendall, whose family had once supported Robert E. Lee's mother, never wavered from his Union loyalties—and he had two sons in blue uniform. Edmund Jenings Lee, a first cousin, who had been a role model for young Robert, refused to let anyone mention secession in his presence, and another close friend and relative, Edward Turner, openly backed the Union throughout the war, facing danger and disdain in so doing.[33] Charles Benedict Calvert, a cousin on both sides of the Lee family, carved a unique place as a slaveholding supporter of Lincoln. He was elected to Congress from Maryland on a Unionist platform, serving from 1861 to 1863.[34] Cassius Lee, arguably Robert Lee's closest childhood chum, was also backing the Union in April 1861.[35]

Even Robert's sister, Anne Lee Marshall, did not agree with him, and her son, Louis Marshall, fought with Gen. John Pope against his uncle. No one in that family ever spoke to Lee again.[36] With great reluctance, Smith Lee became a Confederate naval officer, where he served without enthusiasm, and as late as September 1863 still "pitched into" those responsible for "getting us into this snarl." Saying that both the Lees and his in-laws in the Mason family had pressured him with ideas that Virginia came first, Smith grumbled, "South Carolina be hanged. . . . How I did want to stay in the old navy!"[37] His wife held onto her northern connections until she was "dragged away from Washington and across the [Potomac] bridge, kicking."[38]

But what is particularly striking about Mary Custis Lee's letter is that Robert E. Lee's innermost circle was bewildered by his decision. After send-

ing his resignation letter, he did not immediately tell his wife and children but waited until the visitors to Arlington became so numerous that he had to explain his position. And when he did so, calling the family into his office, he apologized, saying, "I suppose you all think I have done very wrong." The little group was literally struck dumb, because, as Lee's daughter tells us, "we were traditionally, my mother especially, a conservative, or 'Union' family, I, myself, being the nearest approach to 'Secesh,' & living in the country, out of the way of the exciting influences that were agitating the rest of the South, & under the shadow, as it were, of the Capitol dome at 'Washington' we had scarcely kept progress with the spirit of the times." Mary finally found her voice and told her father that *she* did not think he had done wrong, but, according to her account, the others remained silent.[39]

This information tracks with what we know of the family's political leanings at the time. In early 1861, Mrs. Lee was as anxious as her husband but held fast to her Unionist views.[40] Though sympathizing with some of the South's complaints, she wrote, "for my part, I would rather endure the ills we know, than rush madly into greater evils & what could be greater than the Division of our glorious Republic into petty states, each seeking its private interests & unmindful of the whole." Mary Lee would later become a staunch Confederate, but at this pivotal moment she still favored a reunification of the splintered country.[41] The Lees' sons were also considered loyal to the federal government in April 1861. A cousin remembered that the eldest, Custis Lee (himself a West Point graduate and U.S. Army officer), was "no believer in secession," and she heard him remark that if he were "able to dictate proceedings he would call it revolution and order at once the seizing and fortifying of Arlington Heights." Lee's second son, Rooney, was also apparently stunned by the whirlwind of events. One who met him at this time observed that there was a notable contrast between his deep depression and the jubilant secessionist celebrations around him. "He said the people had lost their senses and had no conception of what a terrible mistake they were making." Both sons would become Confederate generals but did not make their own decisions to fight for Virginia until several weeks after their father.[42]

Important questions come to mind as we look at Lee's decision in light of this new material. His personal explanation for the action is well known:

"With all my devotion to the Union . . . I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home." He repeatedly used this phrase, with small variations, during the early days of the struggle.[43] But, given his extended family's loyalties in April 1861 and the apologetic letters and statements he delivered to his kin, it is not clear who exactly Lee felt he would affront by remaining with the Union. The majority of his contemporaries were either opposed to Virginia's secession or openly backing the Union. Only his eldest brother, Charles Carter Lee, was actively pro-Confederate. He was a genuine fire-eater, who gave rousing speeches that admonished the young men of his neighborhood to "resist the buzzards of black republicanism." Lee received a letter from this brother just days before his decision—which he asked to have destroyed—and perhaps this colored his deliberations.[44] The majority of his contemporaries, however, were opposed to what Lee himself called Virginia's "ordinance of revolution" or were openly backing the Union. Those of the Lee clan who pledged their allegiance to Virginia before their cousin were largely the younger men, who had come of age during the 1850s. Like so many of their class and generation, they not only feared that their future way of life would be irrevocably altered but were also eager for fight and glory. These included Lee's nephew, Fitz Lee, who resigned from the U.S. Army before his uncle; a second cousin, Edwin Gray Lee; and several youthful Wickham, Carter, and Turner relatives who joined their state's defense at an early date.[45]

The teasing question is whether these young men and Lee's reluctant brother Smith might have chosen a different path had Robert E. Lee set the example. A member of the younger generation, Orton Williams, suggested as much when he announced from the war department that "now that 'Cousin Robert' had resigned every one seemed to be doing so"—as if Lee's actions had suddenly given permission for others to follow.[46] It appears that fellow citizens in the Alexandria area were also looking for Lee to show the way—indeed, begged him to take an active part on behalf of reconciliation with the Union.[47] As one relation remarked, "for some the question 'What will Colonel Lee do?' was only second in interest to 'What will Virginia do?'" Another neighbor observed: "They none of them wanted secession, and were waiting to see what Colonel Robert Lee would do." Even the local paper editorialized on the subject, admitting that all eyes were on Lee, yet releasing

him from any social pressure in his deliberation. "We do not know, and have no right to speak for or anticipate the course of Coll. Robt. E. Lee," wrote the *Alexandria Gazette* on the very day of his resignation. "Whatever he may do, will be conscientious and honorable."[48]

Mary Custis Lee leaves us without a concrete explanation for her father's actions. Her draft letter breaks off before he makes his final choice—not only to abandon his long career with the U.S. military but also to serve Virginia actively. Part of the strength of her narrative is that she does not presume to speak for him or guess his motives. Lee's biographers have traditionally portrayed the move as inevitable—a foregone conclusion based on home and heritage.[49] But what Mary Custis Lee tells us is that he chose to join his state despite his family's leanings and that he left his beloved Arlington "as if there were a death in the house." She attests that his immediate neighborhood was perplexingly divided and that local pressure was not a factor. And she confirms that the army, which "had been his home and his life," watched him depart with regret.[50] This was not an atmosphere that dictated but one honorable course.

What we are left with is the intensely personal nature of Lee's decision. "Thou knowest not the time of thy visitation" was the text the Lees heard at Christ Church on 21 April 1861.[51] In this, the most troubling visitation of his life, Lee followed his own instincts rather than the inclinations of his closest communities. Perhaps in the end he was tugged by what his cousin Anna Maria Fitzhugh called "a sweet binding to this spot of earth, this soil of Virginia that is irresistible."[52] Perhaps in his heart he was less lukewarm toward secession than he had believed—as his postwar writings indicate.[53] In any event, it is clear that Robert E. Lee stood nearly alone at this moment. He chose to tread a highly personal—and perilous—path, and this, we must conclude, is where he wanted to be.

Following is the text of Mary Custis Lee's letter with its original spelling and punctuation. Because she wrote two versions of the last pages—both incom-

plete and overlapping slightly in content—the text indicates where the second version begins.

Dear Colonel[54]
After copying the enclosed letters for you, I thought I would write down some of the circumstances as I remember them, of the exciting time, which you might make use of, if you saw fit to do so. I have nothing but my memory to trust to, & no striking events to relate, & moreover, find that in attempting to recall things that have so long laid dormant in my mind, there is so much confusion of thought, that writing, in this way, on the spur of the moment, I must confine myself to the few facts that I can be certain of. They may merely help to throw additional light on the character which you are attempting to portray. As well as I can recollect, it was on Sunday, the 14th of April 1861, that, coming out of the old 'Christ Church No. Alexandria'[55] we were greeted with the intelligence, of the fall of 'Sumpter.' The excitement & confusion were intense & every one flocked around Papa, following him in a crowd of ladies as well as gentlemen to the door of my Aunt's, Mrs. Fitzhugh[56], where we habitually stopped after church—He was perfectly calm, though evidently much moved & I remember his saying 'poor General Anderson! He was a determined man, & I know held out to the last.'[57] On Thursday, the 18th, He drove over to Washington, not returning till late in the evening. That was his final interview with Gen. Scott; Cameron, Secretary of War, & Seward, both being present &, as I understand afterwards, every inducement being held out to persuade him to accept command of the Federal Army.[58] I remember him saying to me subsequently, 'I told Mr. Seward that if he could give me the whole four millions of slaves into my own hands tomorrow, they would not weigh one moment in the balance against the Union. That I was not contending for the perpetuation of slavery'—or words to that effect. When he returned after dark, evidently worn & harassed, I told him that we had had a visit that was from a cousin of ours, just from 'Richmond' & though he had left the (~~day~~ b~~efore~~) morning of the passage of the ordinance of Secession—he was convinced that it would pass very soon, & had been extremely anxious to see him (Papa). He several times said 'I wish I could have seen him,' & plied me with many more questions than I could answer as to exactly what he had said; adding,

'I presume the poor old State will go out. I d'ont think she need do so, yet at least, but so many are trying to push her out that she will have to go I suppose.' The next day was the eventful 19th of April, but being in the country, six or seven miles from our P.O., we were in blissful ignorance of the storm that was breaking over 'Baltimore,' & the remittings of which were being carried by the telegraph through the length & breadth of the land. On Saturday morning however, directly after breakfast, a carriage stopped under the trees at some distance from the house, & two prominent gentlemen of Alexandria, (one of them was Mr. Henry Daingerfield,[59] I have forgotten the other) were shown into Papa's office. In a few moments he came out & handed me the 'Baltimore Sun,' from which, in the midst of our excitement you can well imagine, I read aloud an account of the riot in 'Baltimore' & the killing of Mr. Davis,[60] who was a personal acquaintance of my own. Not long afterwards Papa called us into his private room, where, his visitors having gone, unseen by the rest of the family, we found him seated at his table, with papers before him. He read to us, from the identical rough draft from which I have copied the same letter for you, saying, when he had finished 'This is a copy of the letter which I have sent to Gen. Scott. I wrote it early this morning when I first came down & dispatched 'Perry'[61] over to 'Washington' with it before breakfast;' adding 'I mention this to show you that I was not at all influenced by the exciting news from 'Baltimore.' None of us could speak for several moments, & he presently said, 'I suppose you all think I have done very wrong, but it had come to this, & after my last interview with Gen. Scott I felt that I ought to wait no longer.' I finally found voice to say 'Indeed, Papa, I d'ont think you have done wrong at all;' but as you probably know we were traditionally, my mother especially, a conservative, or 'Union' family, I, myself, being the nearest approach to 'Secesh,' & living in the country, out of the way of the exciting influences that were agitating the rest of the South, & under the shadow, as it were, of the Capitol dome at 'Washington' we had scarcely kept progress with the spirit of the times. We had several visitors from 'Washington' in the course of the day, none of whom Papa saw, if I recollect aright, & to none of them did we mention the step he had taken. That same afternoon, a cousin (poor Orton Williams)[62] who was on Gen Scott's staff, & a great favorite of his, rode over, & first mentioned the subject to which had been engrossing our

thoughts all day, adding that 'now that 'Cousin Robert' had resigned every one seemed to be doing so.' He also told us how heavily the blow had fallen upon the 'poor old General,' as he called him, how very unwell, & lying upon a sofa, he had refused to see every one, & mourned as for the loss of a son. To some one, Gen. Cullum,[63] I think, who rather lightly alluded to the fact, he said, with great emotion, 'd'ont mention Robert Lee's name to me again, I cannot bear it;' & Papa, that same day, said to me in response to a question I had asked about Gen. Scott—'Yes, he is going to hold on to the Union,—but I believe it will kill him; I don't think he can live through it all.'[64] He himself lived to see that, in this instance, at least, his judgment was in fault, that Gen. Scott's vanity proved to be a great recuperative power. The next day, Sunday the 21st, we drove in to 'Alexandria' to church & found that really quiet little town in another great state of fermentation. [Begin second draft] The Secession of Va. was known now, & Papa was followed by the crowd, & buttonholed in the street, as if their faith was pinned on him alone. A rumour had prevailed there that he had been arrested as soon as he resigned, & great was the emotion expressed at seeing him safe & well. This rumour had reached my brother, (Gen. W.H.F. Lee) down at the 'White House' & in the indignation & impulse of the moment, he had made prisoners of the crew or crews, of two Northern lumber trading schooners in the Pamunkey River. I am sure that while in 'Alexandria,' arrangements were made [to] telegraph to my brother to release the men immediately, but as we drove home, Papa said quietly, 'You see how unfortunate it is to yield to excitement, let me beg of you all, whatever happens, & there are probably very trying times before you, when I may not be with you to advise you, that you will listen to your reason, not to your impulses. Try & keep cool in all circumstances.' That evening after dark two gentlemen rode out from 'Alexandria' & brought him a message, perhaps a letter, from a gentleman ( )[65] who had come up from 'Richmond' that day to see him, reaching 'Alexandria' after we had left town.[66] The purport of the message was that the [document ends at this point]

NOTES

1. Charles S. Marshall to Mary Custis Lee (cited hereafter as MCL), 14 Feb. 1871, Mary Custis Lee Papers, 1694–1917, Virginia Historical Society (cited hereafter as VHS).

2. Ibid., and Charles Marshall to Cassius Lee, 20 Feb. 1871, Edmund Jennings Lee Papers, 1753–1904, VHS.

3. Charles Marshall to MCL, 1 Nov. 1871, Mary Custis Lee Papers.

4. Some of the documents written and collected by Charles Marshall were edited by Frederick Maurice after Marshall's death and published in a volume entitled *An Aide-de-Camp of Lee: Being the Papers of Colonel Charles Marshall, Sometime Aid-de-Camp, Military Secretary, and Assistant Adjutant General on the Staff of Robert E. Lee, 1862–1865* (Boston, 1927).

5. William Henry Fitzhugh Lee to John Letcher, [20 Apr. 1861], and reply of Letcher, 20 Apr. 1861, Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

6. See Robert E. Lee (cited hereafter as REL) to Reverdy Johnson, 25 Feb. 1868, in Robert E. Lee letterbook, 1866–70, Lee Family Papers, 1824–1918, VHS.

7. "Memoir of Mrs. Harriotte Lee Taliaferro Concerning Events in Virginia, April 11–21, 1861," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (cited hereafter as *VMHB*) 57 (1949): 416–20; "Reminiscences of Cazenove G. Lee," n.d. [c. 1900], Kate Waller Barrett Library, Alexandria, Va.; and Miss S[arah] L. Lee, "War Time in Alexandria, Virginia," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 4 (1905): 234–48.

8. George Lyttleton Upshur, *As I Recall Them: Memories of Crowded Years* (New York, 1936), 16–17. Errors include descriptions of Lee's Mexican War service, distortions of his letters, and inclusion of the supposed Lee quotation "Duty is the sublimest word in the English language," which was disputed by the Lee family even during the general's lifetime (see Upshur, *As I Recall Them*, 17, 18, 23; Charles A. Graves, "The Forged Letter of General Lee," *Southern Historical Society Papers* [cited hereafter as *SHSP*] 40 [1915]: 101–48; and "The Duty Letter and the Lloyd Letter," *SHSP* 42 [1917]: 234–36). Upshur's draft notes for the memoir contain similar errors ("General Robert E. Lee and Arlington," 19 Jan. 1932, George Lyttleton Upshur Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina). The author is grateful for the help of writer William Arthur in locating this document.

9. J. William Jones, *Life and Letters of Robert E. Lee, Soldier and Man* (New York, 1906), 132. For one of numerous examples of document manipulation, see pp. 120–21. The original is in the George Bolling Lee Papers, 1841–68, VHS. Also Thomas Nelson Page, *Robert E. Lee, Man and Soldier* (New York, 1911), 54–55. For more on the vision of Page and Jones, see www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Page_Thomas_Nelson (accessed 24 May 2011); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 221–27; and Richard D. Starnes, "Forever Faithful: The Southern Historical Society and Confederate Historical Memory," *Southern Cultures* 2 (1996): 177–94.

10. For more on the dilemma of army officers facing disunion, see William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms* (Lawrenceville, Kans., 1992), 348–58 and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 91–111.

11. REL to MCL, 27 Dec. 1856, and REL to Agnes Lee, 29 Jan. 1861, both in Lee Family Papers,

VHS and REL to George Washington Custis Lee, 14 Dec. 1860, Robert E. Lee Papers, Duke University (cited hereafter as DU). For more on Lee's attitudes toward slavery, see Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee through His Private Letters* (New York, 2007), chaps. 8, 9, 16, 17.

12. REL to George Washington Custis Lee, 5 Dec. 1860, Robert E. Lee Papers and REL to Agnes Lee, 29 Jan. 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS.

13. REL to William Henry Fitzhugh Lee, 29 Jan. 1861, George Bolling Lee Papers.

14. REL to Annette Carter, 16 Jan. 1861, Lennig Collection, Washington and Lee University (cited hereafter as W&L).

15. For an in-depth discussion of Virginia's struggle with the question of secession, see Nelson D. Lankford, *Cry Havoc! The Crooked Road to Civil War, 1861* (New York, 2007); Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1989); and William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union* (Charlottesville, 2010).

16. REL to Reverdy Johnson, 25 Feb. 1868; A. M. L. Washington to Fannie W. Reading, 13 May 1861, Arlington House Archives; and "General Lee and General Scott," *National Republican*, 12 July 1861.

17. Financial concerns were an important factor in many of the decisions made at this time, including by such top men as Joseph E. Johnston. Although Lee's wife had inherited extensive property, Lee himself had only modest investments and was dependent on his military salary. Johnston's concerns were recorded by Mary Boykin Chesnut, 2 Sept. 1861, in *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, edited by C. Van Woodward (New Haven, 1981), 187. For others who faced similar financial dilemmas, see Benjamin M. S. Cabell to Wyndham Robertson, 30 Jan. 1861, Wyndham Robertson Papers, 1740–1925, VHS and A. C. Flagg to Editors [of *New York Herald*], 1 Aug. 1862, James Gordon Bennett Papers, Library of Congress (cited hereafter as LC). The characterization of Lee as "worn & harassed" is in MCL to Charles Marshall, n.d. [c. February 1871].

18. For a more in-depth discussion of the dilemmas faced by Lee at this moment, see Pryor, *Reading the Man*, chap. 17.

19. For Lee's feelings about the harsh war to come, see REL to Annette Carter, 16 Jan. 1861; diary of Cornelius Walker, 26 Mar. 1861, Ellen Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy; and REL to MCL, 13 May 1861, Mary Custis Lee Papers.

20. Agnes Lee to Mildred Lee, 19 Apr. 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS and *Alexandria Gazette*, 19 Apr. 1861.

21. REL to Simon Cameron, 20 Apr. 1861, RG 94, National Archive and Records Administration (cited hereafter as NARA); REL to Winfield Scott, 20 Apr. 1861, VHS; REL to Anne Lee Marshall, 20 Apr. 1861, in Robert E. Lee, Jr., *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* (Garden City, N.Y., 1904), 25–26; and REL to Smith Lee, 20 Apr. 1861, Sotheby Auction Catalog N018755, 17 June 2011 (transcript courtesy of Sotheby's and Robert E. L. deButts, Jr.). Quotation is from REL to Roger Jones, 20 Apr. 1861, United States Military Academy Archives.

22. REL to Smith Lee, 20 Apr. 1861 and "Reminiscences of Cazenove G. Lee."

23. For the story of Robert E. Lee in the churchyard, see Lee, "War Time in Alexandria, Virginia,"

235. John Robertson to John Letcher, 23 Apr. 1861, Library of Virginia (cited hereafter as LVA) and A. Herbert to MCL, 13 June 1892, Mary Custis Lee Papers.

24. John Robertson to John Letcher, 23 Apr. 1861, John Letcher to the Members of the Convention, 22 Apr. 1861, and Journal of the Virginia Convention of 1861, all at LVA.

25. Diary of Samuel P. Heintzelman, 5 Mar. 1861, Samuel P. Heintzelman Papers, LC; Diary of Cornelius Walker, 26 Mar. 1861; and MCL to Charles Marshall, n.d. [c. February 1871].

26. For Lee's belief that an officer should accept promotion, see REL to George Washington Custis Lee, 15 Feb. 1858, Robert E. Lee Papers, DU, and Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, "Biography of General Robert E. Lee," fragment, n.d. [c. 1871], Helen Marie Taylor Collection, VHS.

27. REL to Smith Lee, 20 Apr. 1861.

28. Quotation from Mary Custis Lee, "Biography of General Robert E. Lee." She also uses the phrase in Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, "Mary Custis Lee's Reminiscences of the War," edited by Robert E. L. de Butts, Jr., *VMHB* 109 (2001): 314.

29. Statistic from Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, "'I Owe Virginia Little, My Country Much': Robert E. Lee, the United States Regular Army and Unconditional Unionism," in Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher, and Andrew J. Torget, eds., *Crucible of Civil War* (Charlottesville, 2006), 36–49.

30. MCL to Charles Marshall, n.d. [c. February 1871]; Erasmus D. Keyes, *Fifty Years Observation of Men and Events* (New York, 1889), 205–7; W. H. Cobb, "Reminiscences of Washington in 1861," n.d., Simon Cameron Papers, LC; Almira Russell Hancock, *Reminiscences of Winfield Scott Hancock* (New York, 1887), 67–69; and "Major Mordecai," *Troy Daily Times*, 8 May 1861, in Mordecai Papers, LC.

31. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.* (2 vols.; Boston, 1891), 2:466–67; letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee in *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee*, edited by Virginia Jean Laas (Urbana, Ill., 1991), 15n, 302; Edmund Jennings Lee, *Lee of Virginia: Biographical and Genealogical Sketches of the Descendants of Col. Richard Lee . . .* (1895; repr., Baltimore, 1974), 396–98; and Upshur, *As I Recall Them*, 15–16.

32. Cullum, *Biographical Register*, 2:506 and George B. McClellan to Martha Custis Williams, 24 May 1862, Martha Williams Carter Papers, Tudor Place Archives.

33. Henrietta Bedinger Lee Goldsborough, "The Recollections of Netta Lee, 1861–1865," *Magazine of the Society of the Lees of Virginia* 6 (1928): 4–5 and Claim of Edward C. Turner, Kinloch, Fauquier County, Va., Mar. 1876, Southern Claims Commission Records, NARA.

34. Margaret Law Callcott, ed., *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert* (Baltimore, 1991), 387–88.

35. Biographical introduction to Philip R. Fendall Papers, DU. In the wake of federal depredations on Virginia's civilian population, Cassius Lee ultimately came to sympathize with the Confederacy, but at the time of Robert E. Lee's decision in 1861, he was still a staunch Union man (Cazenove G. Lee, "Reminiscences").

36. REL to MCL, 28 July 1862, and MCL to Ann Carter Lee, 20 Aug. 1862, both in Lee Family Papers, VHS.

37. Chesnut, *Diary*, 480.

38. Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee, 4 June 1861, in Lee, *Wartime Washington*, 43 and Chesnut, *Diary*, 131.

39. MCL to Charles Marshall, n.d. [c. February 1871].

40. Ann Carter Lee to Agnes Lee, 2 May [1861], Robert E. Lee Papers.

41. Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee to "My dear Helen [Peter]," 1 Feb. 1861, Lee Family Papers, W&L.

42. Lee, "War Time in Alexandria, Virginia," 235–36.

43. REL to Anne Lee Marshall, 20 April 1861, in Lee, *Recollections*, 25–26. Lee uses similar phrases in REL to Roger Jones, 20 Apr. 1860 and REL to "My Dear Little H," 5 May 1861, James D. Barber Papers, LC.

44. REL to Smith Lee, 20 Apr. 1861, and Charles Carter Lee, "Soldiers!" speech, May 1861, Mary Custis Lee Papers.

45. REL to Mildred Childe Lee, 1 Apr. 1861, Lee Family Papers, VHS. For more on the generational divide in 1861, see Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

46. MCL to Charles Marshall, n.d. [c. February 1871].

47. James May to Cassius F. Lee, 22 Apr. 1861, and Cassius F. Lee to REL, 23 Apr. 1861**,** both at Stratford Plantation.

48. Lee, "War Time in Alexandria, Virginia," 235; Mrs. Burton Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay* (New York, 1912), 25; and *Alexandria Gazette*, 20 Apr. 1861.

49. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (4 vols.; New York, 1934–35), 1:431 and Clifford Dowdey, *Lee* (Boston, 1965), 134. Even contemporary writers follow this theme. "Lee had no choice in the matter," writes historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown as recently as 2005 (Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Robert E. Lee and the Concept of Honor," in Peter Wallenstein and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, eds., *Virginia's Civil War* [Charlottesville, 2005], 37).

50. "Memoir of Mrs. Harriotte Lee Taliaferro," 419.

51. Diary of Cornelius Walker, 21 Apr. 1861. The passage is from Luke 19:44.

52. Anna Maria Fitzhugh to Charles Carter Lee, 12 Nov. 1830, Ethel Armes Papers, LC.

53. For some of Lee's postwar writings that justify secession, see REL to "Dear Sir," n.d., Robert E. Lee Papers, DU, and REL, "Government" and "War," c. 1868, Mary Custis Lee Papers.

54. Colonel Charles Marshall (1830–1902) was a native Virginian who was appointed to Robert E. Lee's staff in March 1862. He remained with Lee throughout the war and was the only aide to accompany the general to his meeting on 9 April 1865 with Ulysses S. Grant, at which Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia. Marshall wrote the original draft of General Order No. 9, Lee's farewell to the Army of Northern Virginia.

55. Christ Church on North Washington Street was the Episcopal church where the Lee family habitually worshipped. Lee was confirmed there in 1853.

56. Anna Maria Goldsborough Fitzhugh was the aunt of Robert E. Lee's wife and a member of

their inner circle.

57. Robert Anderson (1805–1871) was a career U.S. Army officer from Kentucky. Graduating from West Point in 1825, he served with Lee during the Mexican War. In 1861 he was in charge of the garrison at Fort Sumter, where he was praised for the fine line he walked between maintaining his post and avoiding outright warfare. He was actually a major at the time of Fort Sumter's fall but was later promoted to brigadier general.

58. Simon Cameron (1799–1889) was Abraham Lincoln's first secretary of war; William H. Seward (1801–1872) was secretary of state. According to Lee's account of his meeting on 18 April, he met only with Francis P. Blair (REL to Reverdy Johnson, 25 Feb. 1868).

59. The Daingerfields were among the prominent citizens of Alexandria and cousins of the Lees.

60. The Baltimore riot of 19 April took place between southern sympathizers and Massachusetts troops who were passing through the town en route to defend Washington. When Baltimorians attacked the soldiers, some returned fire. At least four soldiers were killed as well as twelve civilians, including Mary Custis Lee's friend Robert W. Davis, who was a lawyer with the firm of Pegram, Paynter & Davis (*New York Times*, 19 Apr. 1861).

61. Perry Parks was an Arlington slave who often carried mail and did errands for the family.

62. William Orton Williams (1839–1863) was aide-de-camp to Gen. Winfield Scott (1786–1866). He resigned from the U.S. Army in May 1861 and joined the Confederate forces. He was hanged as a spy in June 1863.

63. George W. Cullum (1809–1892) was a career U.S. Army officer from Pennsylvania. An 1833 West Point graduate, he was a fellow member of the corps of engineers and professional colleague of Lee. In April 1861 he was a lieutenant colonel on Winfield Scott's staff. Cullum was later promoted to the rank of brigadier general.

64. Scott remained in command of the U.S. Army until his retirement in October 1861.

65. Empty parentheses in original.

66. The gentleman from Richmond was Judge John Robertson (1787–1873), a member of the Virginia Convention. Robertson also spoke with Winfield Scott and Joseph E. Johnston (1807–1891) on this trip.