A sketch of a hasty visit to dear old Arlington

[Smith Lee] n.d. [ 1865: in a fragment of a letter dated 9 December 1865 Mary Custis Lee quotes observations made by Robert E. Lee’s brother, Sydney Smith Lee (called “Smith’), who had recently visited Arlington House.]

Mary Custis Lee Papers, VHS, Box 21

“The Freedman’s Bureau village commences just below Bazil Williams’s house—and runs parallel with the Columbia Pike to its juncture with the Arlington & Georgetown Road. This Road is now macamadizing , and is the width of the Arlington Lane all the way to the aquaduct [sic]—The village crosses the boundary line at the run and extends over the hill just South of the old quarters,--running up to a point near Charles’s house (This hill you know was formerly in woods--) It touches Aunt Sally’s house (Selina’s mother’s) I mean the village, But does not extend farther upon the old quarter Hill—But is bounded there by a Lane fenced on both sides running up obliquely towards the old school house—From the Georgetown Road—on this Lane and near the Road, in the quarter field, there is a large stable—(wooden)—a fence divides the park from the quarter field—all the way up to the cemetery—the entrance gate, stands where it did in our day,—and on the left hand, there is a small house now closed, with printed boards hanging to its side containing the printed Rules & Regulations addressed to its visitors—(“not to drive on the grass or pluck the flowers &c”) The Road leading up to the House, runs as it did; But is ditched on both sides—and is well graveled. Up this Road I drove my blooded spanking bay, viewing as I rode along, the broad park—its forest trees & rising Hills—on the top of the Hill, there are four Roads—and leading around to the house—and to the back of the House—The other to the stable—and the fourth to the cemetery—just as they used to do, in our day, only with this exception—They are well graveled, and broader—my horse being left to himself, to pick his own Road, like a sensible family horse, chose the one leading to the back part of the house—There I was met by the person who attends to the visitors—and was politely invited in—he having learnt my name from Selina—I was taken into the parlour, which is now an office, and in looking around, I recognized the three old bookcases nearly filled with the old books found up in the garret—The officer in charge, soon made his appearance, Inviting me to a seat &c—presently I asked to see the house and was taken to every room, except your chamber up stairs—and Mr C’s office in the South wing, which is now used as a private office—All the chambers were locked up—Here & there, I saw some of the old furniture—For instance the two maroon sofas—several chairs to match—an old ‘timey’ bureau—a small marble table—a black French bedstead, & wardrobe same color—The house was clean , and not injured any where that I could see,--The marble mantles in the dining room & parlour were not injured—some of the veneering had been taken off the side of the marble table by visitors—Most of Mr C’s paintings are still hanging up on both sides of the passage,--and the old Buckhorns are still standing. In the reception room, & Rooms adjoining are the Williams’ paintings. It seems everything has been taken away from the House saving the few things I have mentioned—and the officer in charge could give no account of them—Standing on the front steps, the park; & all the surroundings, looked of days gone—I do not think many trees have been taken out if any there may be one here & there—There are no graves in the park , or on the farm—only at the grand cemetery, back of the house beyond the line where the fence stood west of the stable—Here there are some 8000—all the woods have been cut down every where—except in the park—and the surroundings about the house—The Family burying ground, has been fenced in—Some of the letters on Mr C’s tomb has [sic] been slightly defaced—the flower garden, is in fine order, and is well cared for. The walks are all graveled—and upon the whole, the garden is in better order than I have ever seen it—The old honey suckle, has died down—and in its place, a summer house has been erected—the grove has been thrown out, and the paling moved in—as is also the paling near the house, thus shortening in the garden on the two sides—The garden presents its old form pretty nearly—The greenhouse is filled with plants, flowers &c—Now comes the most objectionable part of my history—Between the garden fence, and the Road leading up to the house—there are officers graves all along the said Road around to the woods—The old fence has been replaced by a straight paling fence—and the Road runs straight too—you may remember the old fence curving—and the Road with it—The ground has been raised to receive the graves—and each grave is marked with the name date &c. These graves are most conspicuous—and are just in a place where they can’t be shut out from view—The vegetable garden is in about the same order as in ‘brother’ Ephraim’s day—The House—outhouses, and stable, have been yellow washed—a dirty straw colour—The old Ice house still standing—there is a gravel road running between Selina’s house & the garden fence, very convenient to drive around to the back yard to water the horses—a well has taken the place of the dump—The back yard is laid out circle fashion—all the walks & Roads are graveled—The stable yard is enclosed—The whole of the land on the house side, west of the Georgetown Road is enclosed with a good paling fence—from boundary to boundary—there is a small neat cemetery at the line nearest GeoTn—which used to be in woods—and a gateway leading up to the house—similar to the one in front—The farm is in good order—But badly inclosed [sic]—The overseer’s house, & brick barn are still standing—The ‘canal’ has been broken up—and all the buildings are to be sold—This canal was near the barn—The field nearest Mason’s line looks as if it had not been in cultivation. The field next to it was in corn—and those south of the Road in grass—I drove from one end of the line to the other—and down a good gravel Road to the overseers house to see him,—But he was not in—He is about moving to his own place near Cassius Lees—I have been thus particular in mentioning everything, in order that you may see in your ‘minds eye’ how matters stand at this day—The officer in charge & the porter were very kind & polite—and seemed most anxious to show me everything—The officer, went all over the grounds with me—[narrative ends]”