

## Topic Page: [Lee, Robert \(1807 – 1870\)](#)

Summary Article: **Lee, Robert Edward**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1807–70, general in chief of the Confederate armies in the American Civil War, b. Jan. 19, 1807, at Stratford, Westmoreland co., Va.; son of Henry (“Light-Horse Harry”) Lee.

### **Pre–Civil War Career**

After graduating second in his class from West Point in 1829, Lee was commissioned in the Corps of Engineers. He married (1831) Mary Anne Randolph Custis, a great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, and Arlington House, her father's residence in Virginia, was their home until the Civil War (see Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial). In the Mexican War, Lee made a brilliant record as captain of engineers with Gen. Winfield Scott's army, winning three brevets; his reconnaissances during the advance on Mexico City were important to the American success.

Lee was superintendent at West Point from 1852 to 1855, when he was made lieutenant colonel of the 2d Cavalry and sent to W Texas. He commanded that regiment from 1857 to 1861. While at Arlington House on an extended leave, he was called to lead the company of U.S. marines that captured John Brown at Harpers Ferry in Oct., 1859.

### **Civil War Leadership**

In Feb., 1861 (after the secession of the lower South), General Scott, with whom Lee was a great favorite, recalled him from Texas. Lee had no sympathy with either secession or slavery and, loving the Union and the army, deprecated the thought of sectional conflict. But in his tradition, loyalty to Virginia came first, and upon Virginia's secession he resigned (Apr. 20, 1861) from the army. His resolve not to fight against the South had already led him to decline (Apr. 18) the field command of the U.S. forces.

On Apr. 23 he assumed command of the military and naval forces of Virginia, which he organized thoroughly before they were absorbed by the Confederacy. Lee then became military adviser to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and was made a Confederate general. After the failure of his efforts to coordinate the activity of Confederate forces in the western part of Virginia (July–Oct., 1861), Lee organized the S Atlantic coast defenses.

In Mar., 1862, Davis recalled him to Richmond. Lee's plan to prevent reinforcements from reaching Gen. George B. McClellan, whose army was threatening Richmond, was brilliantly executed by T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. When Joseph E. Johnston was wounded at Fair Oaks in the Peninsular campaign, Lee assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia (June 1, 1862). His leadership of that army through the next three years has placed him among the world's great commanders.

Lee immediately took the offensive, and after ending McClellan's threat to Richmond in the Seven Days battles (June 26–July 2), he thoroughly defeated John Pope at the second battle of Bull Run (Aug. 29–30). McClellan, however, checked him in his first Northern invasion, the Antietam campaign (Sept.). Advances by Ambrose E. Burnside and Joseph Hooker were brutally repulsed in the battles of Fredericksburg (Dec. 13; see Fredericksburg, battle of) and Chancellorsville (May 2–4, 1863), though in the latter victory Lee lost his ablest lieutenant, Stonewall Jackson.

Lee's second invasion of the North resulted in the Confederate defeat in the Gettysburg campaign (June–July). He sorely missed the services of Jackson, and some historians attribute his defeat at Gettysburg to the failures of his subordinates, particularly James Longstreet. Other authorities argue that Lee underestimated his opposition and failed to impose his will upon his subordinates. Lee assumed full blame for the defeat, but Davis refused to entertain his offer of resignation. After Gettysburg, Lee did not engage in any major campaign until May, 1864, when Ulysses S. Grant moved against him. He repulsed Grant's direct assaults in the Wilderness campaign (May–June), but was not strong enough to turn him back, and in July, 1864, Grant began the long siege of Petersburg.

Lee's appointment as general in chief of all Confederate armies came (Feb., 1865) when the Confederacy had virtually collapsed. On Apr. 2, the Army of the Potomac broke through the Petersburg defenses, and Lee's forces retreated. One week later Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse (see under Appomattox).

After the war Lee became president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee Univ.). Although President Andrew Johnson never granted him the official amnesty for which he applied, Lee nevertheless urged the people of the South to work for the restoration of peace and harmony in a united country.

### **Character and Influence**

Many historians consider Robert E. Lee the greatest general of the Civil War, and it is generally agreed that his military genius, hampered though it was by lack of men and matériel, was a principal factor in keeping the Confederacy alive. Others point out, however, that he never developed a coordinated overall strategy, that he failed to provide an adequate supply system for his armies, and that he was reluctant to deal with difficult subordinates, such as Longstreet. Of admirable personal character, Lee was idolized by his soldiers and the people of the South and soon won the admiration of the North. He has remained an ideal of the South and an American hero, although some late 20th cent. historians have tended toward a more critical view of him as a general and as a man.

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