

Battling For Arlington House *To Lee or Not to Lee?*

BY KAREN BYRNE KINZEY

In 1905, Iza Duffus Hardy, a celebrated English novelist, visited Arlington House only to leave in shock at its condition. "It is empty and ungarnished. Its bare floors echo mournfully to our footfalls. The lofty rooms are spotless and utterly forlorn, the desolate silence only broken by our own steps. The only living thing we come upon is a dog sleeping in a patch of sunlight . . ." Hardy was not alone in her dismay at the state of Arlington. An editorial in the *Washington Herald* bristled "the house is barren, empty, hollow, and depressing." Mrs. A.B. White, a Southern matron and prominent member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, exclaimed, "I was astonished and appalled at the barrenness of the whole building. Its life, *its soul* had been taken from it."¹

A mere fifty years earlier, no one could have imagined that Arlington would one day be described as soulless. Arlington House was the seat of George Washington Parke Custis and his wife Molly. In 1831, their daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, and Lt. Robert E. Lee were married in Arlington's parlor. Later, Mrs. Lee and their seven children often remained with her parents when Lee's army duties took him to remote locations. At Arlington, Custis carried out his life's work of perpetuating the memory and principles of President Washington. The grandson of Martha Washington by her first marriage, Custis embraced the president as a father figure. He intended his home to be the nation's first memorial to Washington. He filled the house with his collection of "Washington Treasury," heirlooms that had come from Mount Vernon and included china, portraits, and even Washington's bed. Custis greatly enjoyed showing his collection to others, including such noted guests as President Franklin Pierce and the prominent author Washington Irving.

While Custis engaged in activities to honor Washington's memory, his wife devoted herself to other concerns. She, and later her daughter, conducted prayer services twice each day at Arlington and worked tirelessly to advance the causes of the Episcopal Church. Molly Custis was also a celebrated hostess; few visitors failed to comment on the warm hospitality extended by the mistress of Arlington. For their part, Robert and Mary Lee contributed to the home's intellectual atmosphere. Both were avid readers and enjoyed discussing politics and national events. Mrs. Lee possessed "the real artistic temperament and delighted in poetry and art." Their children added a lively air to Arlington as they played hide and seek and rode their stick horses about the house. When the noted historian Benson J.

Lossing visited Arlington in 1853, he was struck by the home's vitality. "Ever green in my memory will be my visit to ARHO where generous hospitality, intellectual converse, and the highest social refinement make their pleasing impressions upon the mind and heart," he recalled.²

By the time of Lossing's visit, the convivial atmosphere that he and countless other visitors had so enjoyed at Arlington was drawing to a close. The advent of the Civil War shattered the environment of cordial hospitality and warm and affectionate family life that had distinguished the home for so long. On April 20 1861, after the "severest struggle of his life," Robert E. Lee resigned from the United States Army. He left Arlington House two days later, never to return. His family reluctantly abandoned their property a short time later. During the Civil War, Mrs. Lee, who had inherited a life interest in Arlington, saw her home confiscated by the Federal Government for her failure to comply with a wartime custom that required property owners in federally occupied areas to pay property taxes in person. In 1864, Federal authorities designated two hundred acres of land surrounding Arlington House as a national cemetery. By the year's end, the graves of U.S. war dead nearly reached Arlington's front door.

For the next sixty years, Arlington House served as living quarters and administrative offices for cemetery staff. The house and cemetery fell under the jurisdiction of the War Department, which assumed responsibility for the routine care and maintenance of the home. Cemetery workers replaced the old wooden steps, added a new slate roof, and painted the interior and exterior of the mansion. The superintendent of the cemetery and the landscape gardener had their quarters in the mansion, and other rooms were used as offices. The few remaining rooms on the first floor were open to the public. Sightseers curious to see the "home of the Rebel Lee" began to arrive as early as the 1870s. By 1893, the Custis walk was completed, which provided direct access to Arlington House from one of the cemetery's main entrances. By the century's end, visitation was so high that electric trolley lines were constructed to convey the crowds to Arlington National Cemetery.³

Upon reaching the mansion, many visitors were extremely disappointed. Like Iza Hardy, they found the barren, lonely atmosphere demoralizing. Gone were all traces of the vital family life that the Lees had once enjoyed there. At the entrance hung a sign that read "Superintendent's Office." The few rooms that were open contained a Visitors Register, maps of the cemetery, and plaques that featured copies of various speeches, including the Gettysburg Address. An early history of Arlington Cemetery captured the general feeling of disappointment. "The change from the past to the present is shown in the interior of the house. Blank, cheerless walls greet one where, in years gone by, hung objects

of artistic value, while the bare rooms can now give but little idea of the life and cheerfulness that once reigned here.”⁴

Ironically, the gloomy condition of Arlington House made the strongest impression on a thirteen year-old girl who visited just after

the Spanish American War. Frances Parkinson would later become a powerful figure in Washington as well as a widely acclaimed author. Her dismay upon her first visit to Arlington would result in a personal crusade to convert the place into an historic home many years later.

I was deeply shocked to find the home of Robert E. Lee, my favorite figure in American history, in such deplorable condition.

The dining room was dismantled, and the beautiful double parlors, where the wedding ceremony of Robert E. Lee and Mary Custis was performed, were the repository of hideous metal wreaths which had been sent to decorate the graves of soldiers who died in the Spanish American war.

Near tears, the young girl rushed from the house. On Arlington's portico, she made a prophetic vow. “When the time comes that I have some influence, I'm going to make people see what a disgrace it is that General Lee's home should be left in such a condition. I'm going to do something about it.”⁵

Some twenty years later, Frances Parkinson, now the wife of Senator Henry Keyes of New Hampshire, was in a perfect position “to do something” to restore Arlington as the beautiful family home that Robert E. Lee had known and loved. Mrs. Keyes realized that she had the backing of the people of the South in her desire to see changes come to Arlington. For many years, individuals and historical organizations throughout the South had called for the home to be set aside as a memorial to Lee. In 1914, Mrs. Joseph Dibrell introduced a resolution at the Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to form a committee to urge Congress to set aside Arlington “as a memorial to the Southern leader and to allow the Daughters to furnish it.” In a similar vein, a Mississippi native suggested that the cemetery officials should relocate “and that the Lee mansion should be restored as it existed in the days when the great Confederate commander made it his home.” The United Confederate Veterans urged that the mansion “be furnished and forever kept as a shrine where all who honor the name of General Lee and who cherish the memory of that great American may gather during all the years to come.”⁶

While Mrs. Keyes capitalized on Southern support for the restoration of Arlington House, she wisely sought sympathy for her cause from a national

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constituency. In the 1920s, Mrs. Keyes began writing a column for *Good Housekeeping*. "Letters From A Senator's Wife" proved quite popular with readers. In August, 1921, she turned to her column to advance her crusade for Arlington. Politically savvy, Mrs. Keyes appealed to her female readers' sense of patriotism and reverence.

The shocking neglect of the Lee Mansion at Arlington, which is government property, is an object lesson deserving of reflection. The Lee Mansion is an even more stately one than Mount Vernon and might well harbor as many valuable and beautiful historical objects. Whatever our opinions and traditions may be, we all realize now that RE Lee was one of the greatest generals and one of the noblest men who ever lived. To every American woman the abuse of his home must seem a disgrace; to every Southern woman it must seem a sacrilege.⁷

In addition to marshalling public support for the restoration of Arlington, Mrs. Keyes took her campaign to Capitol Hill. In 1922, she secured the assistance of Representative William Lowery of Mississippi who lobbied his fellow Representatives in support of the restoration. Of even greater importance was the backing of Representative Louis C. Cramton of Michigan. Cramton was the son of a Union veteran who had fought against Lee's armies at Gettysburg in addition to numerous campaigns in Virginia. Deeply interested in American history, Cramton had long been dissatisfied with conditions at Arlington. He joined Mrs. Keyes and her supporters in the desire to return the house "to a more suitable condition" that reflected the vital home life of the Lees. On May 28, 1924, Cramton introduced a resolution "authorizing the restoration of the Lee Mansion in the Arlington National Cemetery." In March, 1925, the resolution passed both houses and was approved by President Calvin Coolidge. Only then did the real battle for Arlington begin.⁸

The Cramton/Keyes camp had always intended that Arlington House would be restored as a memorial to Robert E. Lee. Cramton noted when he introduced the resolution that the only "proper" treatment for the house "would be to restore it as nearly as possible to the conditions that existed in that mansion during its occupancy by the Lee family." Yet as early as the original hearing, voices of dissent began to be raised. Present at the hearing was Charles Moore, Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA). The CFA had been founded in 1910 to advise the Federal Government on proposed developments in the nation's capital. Since the landscape of Arlington House was visible from Washington and was visually connected to the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington came under the CFA's jurisdiction.⁹

Even before the hearing commenced, Charles Moore had attempted to thwart the movement to restore Arlington as a memorial to Lee. In 1923, Moore

had written to the Quartermaster General in an attempt to counter Keyes' and Cramton's plans for Arlington. "It is eminently proper that the name Arlington Mansion should be applied to the house and that it should be refitted as a home *representative of the first fifty years of the Republic of the United States* [emphasis added]," Moore proposed. During the hearing, Moore lobbied for his vision of Arlington. "Arlington was built by George Washington Parke Custis, who was born during the Revolution. It would be historically correct, perhaps, to restore the mansion as Custis Mansion or the Arlington Mansion and to restore the room in which Lee was married and put that into the condition that it was at the time. Lee, of course, never really occupied the house in any way such as Custis did, because he was stationed at Fort Monroe."¹⁰

While Moore's idea did receive some support, in the end, Congress passed legislation that authorized and directed the Secretary of War to "restore the Lee Mansion in the Arlington National Cemetery to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War and to procure, if possible, articles of furniture which were then in the mansion, with a view to restoring the appearance of the interior of the mansion to the condition of its occupancy of the Lee family." Cramton and his supporters had scored an initial victory, but Arlington's future as a memorial to Lee was still uncertain. No appropriation was allotted for the restoration, and Chairman Moore was determined to realize his vision for the mansion.¹¹

Moore's influence over the future restoration of Arlington increased in August when Acting Secretary of War Dwight Davis specifically requested the CFA to assume responsibility for the furnishing of the mansion. Donations of furniture had already begun to flow in. Davis believed "that the Fine Arts Commission could best decide the articles that blend properly with the project" and asked Moore "to be kind enough to pass upon any articles that may be offered." This request must have delighted Moore, who had earlier declared at the hearing "there was no Lee furniture in the house." Not content with this additional authority, Moore took his campaign all the way to the White House. In October, Moore's maneuverings were made public in a shocking headline that appeared in the *New York Times*. "Lee Memorial Plans to be Dropped" included a statement by Moore that claimed "there is no real demand from the South that a Lee shrine be established in Arlington Cemetery." The article continued, "An entire change of base with regard to the project virtually has been agreed upon." The article concluded with the announcement that Arlington would not be restored as a memorial to Lee but to the "period style of the Custis family."¹²

It was not from any personal admiration for Custis that Moore advocated his "colonial" interpretation of Arlington. He dismissed Custis as "indolent and pleasure loving." In fact, Moore sometimes viewed Custis in the abstract. In

his 1929 publication *Washington Past and Present*, Moore claimed, “the Government is now restoring Arlington House as the home of a Southern gentleman who lived during the first half century of the Republic.” Most likely, Moore’s preference for the earlier period of restoration was attributable to the influence of the Colonial Revival movement, which was still in full force along the east coast in the 1930s. The movement drew inspiration from the early Federal period. The CFA’s endorsement of the Colonial Revival movement was revealed in the statement that “Arlington House was one of the famous buildings of the early days of the Republic in Washington” and that the “architecture, landscape, and furnishings were to reflect this ideology.”¹³

Whatever his motivation, Chairman Moore was not alone in his opposition to restoring Arlington as a memorial to General Lee. Marietta Minnengerode Andrews, the Virginia author whose grandmother had been a bridesmaid at the Lees’ wedding in 1831, publicly criticized the plan in *George Washington’s Country*. “Arlington is not a Lee mansion, it was only through his marriage with the heiress of Mr. Custis that General Lee occupied the house,” Andrews noted. Highly critical of the “supposedly ornamental” flowerbeds, the Temple of Fame in Mrs. Lee’s rose garden, and the ornate headstones that surrounded the mansion, Mrs. Andrews dismissed Arlington as “the last word in bad taste and inelegance; and the crowning mistake, to my mind, would be to furnish it in imitation of the Lees.”¹⁴

After Representative Cramton’s legislation passed, he was dismayed to learn that bitter feelings toward Robert E. Lee still lingered. During the 1924 hearing, Cramton stated that he believed the resolution “would be a tangible recognition by the country, North and South, that the bitterness of other days is entirely gone.” Furthermore, he was convinced that he represented the sentiment of the North in his desire to honor Lee. Cramton later learned that the Grand Army of the Republic and the Women’s Relief Corps, a Civil War Union veterans’ organization and its auxiliary society, attacked the resolution at their national conventions, as well as in his native state of Michigan.¹⁵

While the debate continued to rage, Congress granted an appropriation for the restoration of the mansion. As the Quartermaster General’s Office commenced the restoration, which was subject to the approval of the CFA, Congressman Cramton’s vision for Arlington appeared to be in jeopardy. Although the language of the resolution clearly specified that the house be restored and furnished as a memorial to Robert E. Lee, the “colonial” or Custis interpretation soon dominated the restoration. A 1929 article in the *Washington Evening Star* declared “So far as possible the Government plans to refurnish Arlington House in the colonial period.” The Quartermaster General, guided by the “advice” of the CFA, determined that no furniture made after 1830 would be used in the restoration, a clear

violation of the resolution's wording that required Arlington to reflect "the condition in which it existed *immediately prior to the Civil War* [emphasis added]."16

As the restoration of Arlington progressed into the 1930s, Charles Moore continued to assert his influence as the head of the CFA to campaign for a "colonial" interpretation in lieu of a Lee-centric memorial. In a 1930 letter to General L.H. Bash, the officer in charge of the restoration, Moore urged the removal of three marble mantels that Lee had selected for Arlington House in the 1850s. "They are rather a ghastly piece of mid-Victorian, inharmonious with the rest of the house," he complained. Moore's wish was the architect's command and in short order the original Lee mantels were removed and replaced by "colonial" specimens. The "restoration" of some of Arlington's rooms further negated Lee's presence. When the work was completed in the early 1930s, visitors could tour "the State Dining Room" where Custis allegedly entertained influential guests. In reality, no such room ever existed. The room had served as Mrs. Lee's morning room "immediately prior to the Civil War."¹⁷

Just as the physical restoration obscured Lee's role at Arlington, so too did the limited interpretation of the early 1930s. A visitor from Pennsylvania, who had "always been taught how great Lee was," was shocked that the mansion contained no portrait of Lee. Her distress escalated as she listened to the foreman in charge of greeting visitors. His remarks were limited to the Washington family and noticeably failed to include any mention of Lee. When asked about the absence of Lee's portrait, he replied, "General Lee was really only an overseer for Mrs. Lee. He never owned an acre of land or a slave." The woman left Arlington in disgust. She voiced her displeasure in a letter to the editor of the *Richmond Times*. "I am writing to say it is a shame a Southerner is not put in charge of this home or a person who is big enough to at least mention the splendid Southern gentleman who was so beloved. . . ."18

Although Arlington's future as a memorial to Robert E. Lee seemed on the verge of extinction in the early 1930s, the tide was slowly beginning to turn. Interest in the Civil War remained high and was heightened by the phenomenal success of the book and the motion picture *Gone With the Wind*. In 1934, Douglas Southall Freeman's four-volume biography of Lee, the culmination of nineteen years of work, received the Pulitzer Prize and gave rise to a new generation of Lee devotees. *R.E. Lee* met with remarkable critical acclaim and sold in excess of 35,000 sets over the next fifteen years. Freeman followed up his success with the publication of his three-volume study *Lee's Lieutenants*. Additional appreciation of Lee and his legacy was stimulated by the campaign to preserve Stratford Hall, Lee's birthplace, in Westmoreland County, Virginia.

There was new cause for optimism that Arlington would someday be converted to a Lee memorial when original family heirlooms slowly began to find

their way back to the mansion. Some of the first “donations” to the restoration were “souvenirs” that Federal soldiers had taken from Arlington during the war. The son of a Union veteran returned two china custard cups that belonged to Mrs. Lee. The return of a portrait of Mildred Lee, the youngest of the Lee girls, attracted much attention in the press. James A. Learned, a Massachusetts artilleryman, had cut the portrait from its frame and carried it back to his home in New England after the war. His daughter displayed the portrait in her home for many years. When she learned of the restoration plans for Arlington, she decided to return the painting. A statuette of *The Three Graces* that belonged to Annie, Agnes, and Mildred Lee was donated by George Bedell, Jr. The return of authentic family possessions signaled the gradual weakening of the colonial interpretation of the home.¹⁹

The most significant change at Arlington occurred as a result of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s decision to reorganize the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. In 1933, “Lee Mansion” was transferred, along with nearly fifty other historical sites, from the War Department to the Department of the Interior by Executive Order 6166. Interagency fighting and miscommunication delayed the formal transfer until the following year. In 1934, the National Park Service of the Interior Department assumed control of and responsibility for Arlington House. From the beginning of its administration of the mansion, the National Park Service (NPS) strove to adhere to the spirit of the legislation sponsored by Congressman Cramton. Arlington was now on the road to becoming “Lee’s Mansion.” In response to a local historian who urged a return to the historic name “Arlington House” as well as a Custis-centric interpretation, the NPS made its policy of restoration and interpretation perfectly clear: “Robert E. Lee’s fame so far overshadows that of George Washington Parke Custis that in the minds of the people of the United States, and especially those of the South, Arlington House is Lee’s Mansion. This is a fact that must be recognized.”²⁰

The colonial revival program so insisted upon by Charles Moore and the CFA no longer guided the restoration. For the next twenty years, the NPS labored diligently to make Arlington House a memorial to Lee. Gradually the atmosphere inside the mansion began to change. The vague “home of a Southern gentleman who lived in the first half of the Republic” with its generic colonial furnishings gave way to a factually based interpretation of the Lee family life prior to the Civil War. This new interpretation was the result of a painstaking research program carried out between 1948 and 1953. The NPS strove to create a memorial to Lee that remained true to the spirit of the 1920s legislation, but also allowed for the interpretation of the seminal role George Washington Parke Custis played in the creation and traditions of Arlington.²¹

In 1955, Arlington's fate was sealed with the passage of Public Law 107. On the ninetieth anniversary of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, Arlington was finally dedicated as "a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee."²² Congress wished to "pay honor and tribute to the everlasting memory of Lee whose name will ever be bright in our history as a great military leader, a great educator, a great American, and a truly great man through the simple heritage of his high character, his grandeur of soul, his unflinching strength of heart." Thirty years after Congressman Cramton proposed his resolution, Arlington's status as a memorial to Lee was finally secure. Today the National Park Service continues the work of restoring and interpreting Arlington as the home once described by Robert E. Lee as "the place where my affections and attachments are more strongly placed than any other place in the world."

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Endnotes

¹ Esther Singleton, ed., *Historic Buildings of America as Seen and Described by Famous Writers* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1906), pp. 15-16; *Confederate Veteran*, Vol. V (1929), p. 351.

² Mary Custis Lee deButts, ed., *Growing Up in the 1850s: The Journal of Agnes Lee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 116; Benson J. Lossing, "Arlington House Seat of GWP Custis" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (September 1853), p. 454.

³ The administration and restoration of Arlington House was carried out by the Office of the Quartermaster General under the auspices of the War Department.

⁴ Karl Decker and Angus McSween, *Historic Arlington* (Washington, DC: The Decker and McSween Publishing Co., 1892), p. 37.

⁵ Frances Parkinson Keyes, *All Flags Flying: Reminiscences of Frances Parkinson Keyes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 181.

⁶ *Confederate Veteran*, Vol. XXII, p. 542; *National Republican*, June 11, 1922; *Confederate Veteran*, Vol. XXXIII, p. 246.

⁷ Keyes, *All Flags Flying*, p. 182. Keyes hoped to establish a ladies group similar to the Mount Vernon Ladies Association to preserve General Lee's home. *Washington Post*, August 7, 1921.

⁸ *Public Resolution No. 74 68th Congress* (H.J. Res 264).

⁹ *Restoration of the Lee Mansion, Hearing Before the Joint Committee on the Library, Congress of the United States 68th Congress, First Session Pursuant to the H.J. Res. 264, Authorizing the Restoration of the Lee Mansion in the Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia*, May 28, 1924 (Washington D.C., 1925), p. 2.

¹⁰ Charles Moore to Quartermaster General, March 12, 1923. Records of the Commission of the Fine Arts, National Archives, copy in Arlington House Archives; *Restoration of Lee Mansion hearing*, p. 5. Correspondence between Mrs. Keyes and Moore suggests that he had hoped to talk her out of her plan to raise support

for the restoration of the mansion.

¹¹ *Public Resolution No. 74, 68th Congress* (H.J. Res 264).

¹² Dwight Davis to Charles Moore, August 15, 1925, Records of the CFA, copy in Arlington House Archives; *New York Times*, October 26, 1925.

¹³ Charles Moore, *Washington Past and Present* (New York: The Century Co., 1929), pp. 299-300; Jennifer G. Hanna, *Arlington House The Robert E. Lee Memorial Cultural Landscape Report Site History* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Interior, 2001), pp. 125-6.

¹⁴ Marietta M. Andrews, *George Washington's Country* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1930), p. 146.

¹⁵ *Public Resolution No. 74, 68th Congress* (H.J. Res 264); Mary F. Anderson, "The Restoration of Arlington Mansion," *Americana Illustrated*, Vol. XXVII, No. 34, pp. 465.

¹⁶ *Washington Evening Star*, July 14, 1929.

¹⁷ Charles Moore to General Bash, July 17, 1930, Records of the CFA, copy in Arlington House Archives. Two of the mantels were taken from the cellar and replaced in 1953; unfortunately, the third mantle was never found.

¹⁸ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, September 19, 1931.

¹⁹ Anderson, "Restoration of Arlington," p. 468 Although it was widely reported that the stolen portrait was that of Mildred Lee, the portrait in question appears to be an oil painting of her elder sister, Annie, who died in 1862.

²⁰ Ronald F. Lee to Enoch A. Chase, July 29, 1939, National Park Service files, copy in Arlington House Archives.

²¹ Moore refused to give up without a fight. He wrote to President Roosevelt urging him to return Arlington House to the War Department. While others joined in this campaign, Arlington was ultimately given to the Department of the Interior to be managed by the National Park Service. After the transfer, Moore's (and the CFA's) authority over the restoration was greatly diminished.

²² In 1972, Public Law 92-333 changed the official name of the home from Custis Lee Mansion to "Arlington House The Robert E. Lee Memorial," further emphasizing the site's status as a memorial to Lee. Local sentiment for the old name remains strong, and many Arlingtonians still refer to the house as "Custis Lee Mansion."