
[Editor's Note: In the spring of 2013, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Maonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the first annual Arlington History Essay Contest, intended to encourage interest and research in local history. The contest was open to 11th graders from H-B Woodlawn, Wakefield, Washington-Lee, and Yorktown High Schools. The theme of the contest was "Describe Arlington County today had the retrocession not occurred." The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay, below.]

Retrocession What If?

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In September of 1846, residents of Alexandria and present-day Arlington County voted in favor of retrocession from Washington D.C. and in March of 1847, Virginia accepted jurisdiction over the area.¹ Had that not occurred, Arlington County could be drastically different today. The most drastic possible change would deal with the decision of the "County's best known citizen of all time."² Although Robert E. Lee had deep "ties to Virginia," through his family, the location of his home within the boundaries of the nation's capital could have aided his natural inclination towards the "preservation of the Union" and caused him to accept the command of the Federal Army as was offered in 1861.³ Lee's command of the Union's army would have ended the war more quickly, helped enact Lincoln's plan of reconstruction and lessened the effects of the occupation and fortification of Arlington. This would have contributed to greater economic prosperity and created lasting social and political differences as a result of lenient reconstruction policies.

Robert E. Lee was vitally important to the Southern cause and it could be argued that "without Lee's generalship, the Confederacy would have crumbled earlier."⁴ Historians such as Grade McWhiney and Perry Jamieson may criticize Lee for being too aggressive, yet his aggression would have been an asset for the Union.⁵ Lee's military genius may not have been able to achieve a victory at First Manassas, being unable to anticipate the arrival of Joe Johnston and with the Confederate troops commanded by Beauregard. However, Lee could have at least avoided the over-cautiousness of McClellan and used the superior resources

of the army to full effect early in the war to win a decisive victory.⁶ Additionally, without Lee, the Confederate army would not have been aggressive enough to fight the “Seven Days” campaign and drive back the Union.⁷ With the advantage in numbers and equipment that the Union enjoyed, Lee could conceivably have captured Richmond in the summer of 1862, if not earlier, given McClellan’s delay.⁸ Given the loss of Virginia, and the majority of the South’s scarce industry, the Confederacy would have fallen much faster, aided by the geographical advantages given by the Union’s control of the major rivers.⁹

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Although many of the fortifications were built early in the war, the perceived need for them was influenced by the “tides of war.”¹¹ Construction could have ceased in 1863 or earlier. This would have meant that Forts C.F. Smith, Whipple, and Berry would not have been constructed.¹² The dismantling of the defensive works would have begun earlier than 1865 and agricultural prosperity would have returned earlier.¹³ Instead of total farmland falling from 15,260 acres in 1860 to 8,095 acres in 1870, the effect would have been lessened by the shorter war and the largest farm, the Arlington estate, would have remained in Lee’s possession.¹⁴ The difficulties of obtaining financing for infrastructure projects such as the Alexandria Canal caused financial problems that led to the movement to retrocede from Washington D.C.¹⁵ The Congressional Committee on the District reported that the original cession of Alexandria was “injurious to the people of that portion which was ceded by Virginia.”¹⁶ This however, would be remedied by the political goodwill earned by Lee as a hero of the Civil War, enabling access to the funding and preferential treatment desired.¹⁷ The increased prosperity and “relative affluence” of 1900 would have been greater than was indicated by the growth of the number of small farms from 5 to 112.¹⁸ While population doubled and manufacturing saw a slight increase, this would have been greater with an increased access to investment caused by the lessened agricultural destruction and the decreased cost of the war for the federal government.¹⁹

With the earlier cessation of the war, the South would have been treated with greater leniency by either Lincoln or moderate Republicans in Congress with less reason to be vindictive.²⁰ This would have led to less confiscation of property and greater political participation for Confederate leaders, resulting in greater land concentration.²¹ With the political support of former Confederates, plantation and large farm owners would continue to dominate the economy and oppose industrialization.²² Additionally, the end of slavery would have encouraged the cultivation of crops other than cotton, diversifying the economy and decreasing Southern dependence on outside manufacturers.²³ With a shortened war, the Union death toll of about 360,000 and the comparable number of Confederates who died would be smaller which would give northern manufacturing both a larger labor force and market.²⁴ The increased interdependence between the North and the South following the same pattern as prior to the Civil War would benefit Arlington and Washington, D. C. existing in a central location as they are.²⁵ More trade also means more taxes under a Republican Congress, enabling the growth of government and the funding of infrastructure, both of which would bring prosperity to local areas that supplied the government with employees.²⁶

Another factor that grew the federal government during the reconstruction era was the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau to provide basic health care, education, and jobs to blacks and poor whites.²⁷ A further development was the establishment of the Freedman's village "at the Southern end of the Arlington estate."²⁸ Had Lee been a Union General, seizure of his estate would have been much less likely and Arlington Cemetery as well as "the single most important lunge ahead" and "the seed for the establishment of other nearby neighborhoods" would not be located there.²⁹ In a more general sense, African Americans would likely have faced greater difficulties in obtaining suffrage, with limited opportunities to fight in the war before 1863.³⁰ Without the 15th Amendment, and with Lincoln's conciliatory methods, African Americans would have faced greater discrimination, a much more difficult battle for civil rights, and perhaps even under-representation today.

Had the retrocession not occurred, it could have drastically changed the outcome of the Civil War. Lee would be a national hero and there would be many more schools named after him and George Washington. His mansion and the surrounding land would be a museum or private property and Arlington County would be superficially different in organization and naming. It would continue to rely on the government for jobs and economic opportunities, but the country as a whole could have been more prosperous. The county and the country's ethnic diversity and political system could have been compromised with greater prejudice against minorities. In essence, there would be no Arlington County as we know it today.

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- ¹ Sherman Pratt, *Arlington County Virginia, A Modern History* (Arlington, VA: The Author, 1997), pp. 176-177.
- ² Cornelia B. Rose, *Arlington County, Virginia: A History* (Arlington, VA: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), p. 98.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ⁴ Alan Farmer, *The American Civil War: Causes, Course and Consequences, 1803-77*, 4th ed. (London: Hodder Education Publishers, 2008), p. 188.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- ¹⁰ Rose, *Arlington County*, p. 105.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ¹⁵ Pratt, *Arlington County*, p. 175.
- ¹⁶ Arlington County, *A History of the Boundaries of Arlington County, Virginia* (Arlington, VA: Office of the County Manager, 1967), p. 13.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Rose, *Arlington County*, p. 121.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Farmer, *American Civil War*, p. 211.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Pratt, *Arlington County*, p. 37.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ³⁰ Farmer, *American Civil War*, p. 204.