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What Happened to Robert E. Lee after April 12, 1865?

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Understanding what happened to Robert E. Lee (1807–1865) after the war is a crucial component of the discussion of how men who fought for the Confederacy should be remembered. These discussions often focus on modern-day ramifications from streets and buildings named after them to statues that were erected in their honor. These discussions often overlook the negative ramifications that the losing combatants experienced after the war ended in April 1865. Further research into this topic will put modern-day conversations in the context of what happened after the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Robert E. Lee was chosen as the topic of this thesis because he was the most memorable Confederate general. Because he was the leading commander of Confederate troops, his life is well-documented, thus making him the best example of how Confederate combatants were affected after the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

Robert E. Lee commanded the Army of Northern Virginia. He was born in 1807 and was the son of a Revolutionary War hero, Major-General Henry “Light Horse Henry” Lee III (1756–1818). Lee went to West Point, graduating in 1829. He served in the United States military, moving around the country to different posts. He was even a commander of the United States

Marine Corps unit that captured John Brown (1800 – 1859).¹ In 1831, he married Mary Anna Custis (1807–1874), who was the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington (1731–1802), and the step-great-granddaughter of the first United States president George Washington (1732–1799). Both his family and his wife’s family owned slaves before the war started. Most of his family’s slaves went to his sister, but his wife’s family were major slave owners.² Lee remained in the United States military. He resigned his United States Army commission in April 1861, when Virginia seceded from the United States. Lee could not fight his home state in a civil war and when offered a commission in the Confederate military, he accepted. He served in the Confederate Army, first as an advisor of President Jefferson Davis (1808–1889), then as the commander the Army of Northern Virginia.

Four years after the war began, on April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Union General Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885) met at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia. In this meeting, there was a major contrast between the two men. Grant came in a mud-splattered uniform but Lee’s uniform was pristine.³ This meeting finally ended four long, bloody years of conflict between the Union and the Confederacy. In addition to terminating the war, this event became the point at which most of the discussion of Lee stops. Nevertheless, Robert E. Lee’s military career has been heavily studied over the century and a half since his death. However, the five years and six months that took place between the surrender of Appomattox on Sunday, April 9, 1865 and his death on Wednesday, October 12, 1870 have often been overlooked.

¹ “Robert E. Lee: President, Washington College, 1865 – 1870,” Washington and Lee University, Accessed October 20, 2019, <https://www.wlu.edu/presidents-office/about-the-presidents-office/past-presidents/robert-e-lee>.

² Allen C. Guelzo, “Robert E. Lee and Slavery,” Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Foundation for Humanities, last modified February 12, 2019, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Lee_Robert_E_and_Slavery#start_entry.

³ Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 4:135.

Lee in the Next Four Months

Robert E. Lee had no place to call home after the war. Before the war started, he had lived with his family at Arlington House, which was technically his wife's property since it belonged to her family, but that was not possible anymore. The Federal Army had taken over his property at the beginning of the war, and it now contained three forts that had helped defend Washington throughout the war. Freedman's Village was also located on the property, which helped enslaved persons transition to a life of freedom.⁴ The Arlington National Cemetery website notes that the property came into the hands of the government when "a property tax dispute, amounting to just over \$92.07 cost the Lee family their home and in January 1864, the U.S. government purchased the property for \$26,800 at public auction."⁵ This is the point when the property was transitioned into a cemetery, with the first funeral taking place on May 13, 1864. After the death of General Lee's wife Mary, their son George Washington Custis Lee (1832–1913) sued the federal government in 1882 for the return of the property. He took his case all the way to Supreme Court of the United States. After he won his case, George Lee promptly proceeded to sell the property back to the government for \$150,000 because it contained the graves of over 6,000 Union soldiers.⁶ Adjusting for almost a century and a half of inflation, that amount is almost four million in 2019 dollars.⁷

During the Civil War, Robert E. Lee's family resided in Richmond, Virginia. This city is located about one hundred miles from Washington, D.C. and was home to both the Confederate

⁴ "History of Arlington National Cemetery," History of Arlington National Cemetery, last modified October 7, 2015, <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/History/History-of-Arlington-National-Cemetery>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Consumer Price Index (Estimate) 1800-," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Last modified 2019, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/community/financial-and-economic-education/cpi-calculator-information/consumer-price-index-1800>.

capitol and the Virginia state legislature. After the surrender at Appomattox, Lee joined his family in the city. In a biography of this Confederate veteran leader, A. L. Long, described Lee's entrance to the city in the following manner:

He hoped to reenter his domestic portals unobserved, and to enjoy in quiet and privacy the reunion with the objects of his love. But it was impossible to prevent the heralding of his coming. Upon his approach to the city he found the whole population gathered to testify its devotion. As he passed through crowded streets Union veterans pressed Confederate soldiers in the throng, eager to catch a glimpse of the great soldier.⁸

The author goes on to describe the commander's time there as busy and chaotic because many people came to visit him, and he did not get the peace and quiet that he and his family had desired.⁹ Consequently, he moved in June to a house outside of Richmond to escape the chaotic atmosphere of the city in the midst of it being rebuilt. Lee had accepted an offer from a friend to reside near Cartersville in Cumberland County. Mrs. Elizabeth Randolph Cocke let them live on her property called "Derwent," which was approximately fifty-five miles north of Richmond. She lived about two miles away on a different plantation called Oakland.¹⁰ While he and his family did prefer these living arrangements, this situation did not last long either. In September 1865, Lee and his family moved to Lexington, Virginia because he had taken a job as the president of Washington College.

Treason Charges

While he was trying to figure out where to live, Robert E. Lee faced a different kind of problem. Matthew W. Lively notes that "on June 7, 1865, U.S. District Judge John C.

⁸ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, (New York: J. M. Stoddart, 1887), 437.

⁹ *Ibid*, 438 – 39.

¹⁰ Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 4:211.

Underwood in Norfolk, Virginia, handed down treason indictments against Lee, James Longstreet, Jubal Early, and others.”¹¹ The judge and the grand jury wanted to send a message that no future insurrections in the United States would be allowed.¹² According to the United States Constitution, treason consists of “only in levying war against them, or adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort.”¹³ Therefore, Robert E. Lee did commit treason, but the country was divided on how to proceed. President Andrew Johnson and many Radical Republicans in the North wanted to see these men punished for their crimes against the Union. However, there were others who opposed this. One of these men was Ulysses S. Grant, the main Union general, and he opposed it because of the terms agreed to at Appomattox Courthouse. These terms said that Confederates were to live in peace, except if they violated their parole. Lee wrote to Grant asking if the Appomattox agreement was still in effect. This prompted Grant to meet with the President to discuss this problem, but there was no resolution until the general threatened to resign his commission. This is when President Andrew Johnson decided to have Judge John C. Underwood drop the charges because he realized that “the public would never support him over the far-more popular Grant.”¹⁴ After Johnson’s decision, Ulysses Grant wrote to Lee on June 20, 1865, and he said that the Confederate leader was safe from a trial.

Lee at Washington College

¹¹ Matthew W. Lively, “Grant Protects Lee From Treason Trial,” Civil War Profiles, April 26, 2016, <https://www.civilwarprofiles.com/grant-protects-lee-from-treason-trial/>.

¹² John Reeves, “What America Keeps Forgetting About Robert E. Lee,” History News Network, June 24, 2018, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/169189>.

¹³ “Article III,” Legal Information Institute, Accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articleiii>.

¹⁴ Lively, “Grant Protects Lee From Treason Trial,” Civil War Profiles, April 26, 2016.

Robert E. Lee became the president of Washington College in 1865. The college's Board of Trustees sent him a letter in early August informing him of his election to the presidency. He was apprehensive in taking this position because he was worried that his position in the Confederate military would cause hard feelings towards the institution. It took him a few weeks to decide but on August 24, 1865, he chose to accept the position because he felt it was his responsibility to help the United States heal. In his letter to the Board of Washington College, Lee responded "I think it a duty of every citizen, in the present condition of the Country, to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony...It is particularly incumbent on those charge with the instruction of the young to set them an example of submission to authority."¹⁵ The country did need to heal after the conflict, and Lee clearly wanted to help in that process.

Washington College had stayed open throughout the duration of war, an occurrence which was highly unusual because most Southern colleges had closed during this time, including the nearby Virginia Military Institute. However, the conflict had taken a severe toll on the college. It was in financial ruin and needed help getting back to a state of normalcy. In August 1865, the Board of Trustees hired Lee to be the president of the college because he was a well-known person and thus could help raise funds to rebuild the struggling college. He was inaugurated two months later on October 2.

While he did help raise funds for Washington College, Robert E. Lee also helped rebuild the college as a whole. One of the first things that he insisted on was building a chapel. The College's Board of Trustees approved this request in June 1866 and built the chapel, "A quaint Victorian structure with a flared central tower, it added Gothic trimmings to Romanesque

¹⁵ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 443.

windows, showing little aesthetic distinction.”¹⁶ It was dedicated in 1867 during the graduation ceremony of that year. This chapel held services six days a week and had different Christian ministers come on different days. On Sundays, students went to a church of their choice. When the students entered the college, the school made sure to set them up with a local church of their denomination.¹⁷ Attendance at the daily chapel services, as well as church on Sundays, were mandatory. In order to set a good example for the students, Lee and many of the professors also attended this chapel as well. As he was life-long Episcopalian, Lee attended an Episcopalian church on Sundays called Grace Church.

Another way that Lee improved Washington College was through expanding the student population. There were fifty students and four professors when he became president in the fall of 1865. Five years later when Lee died in October 1870, there were twenty professors and approximately four hundred students. There was also a greater diversity in the student’s home states. Lee biographer R. David Cox notes that it was the second largest school in the South during the 1867 – 1868 school year with 410 students, second to only University of Virginia’s 475 students. He goes on to state that “to ‘General Lee’s College’ came students from every state of the old Confederacy and every boarder state but Delaware; one or more students came from New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, California, and – making the student body truly international – Mexico.”¹⁸ This diverse mix of students shows that he was able to bring people together after the four years of strife. Bringing people together to heal was one of Lee’s goals after the war ended.

¹⁶ Marshal W. Fishwick, *Lee after the War* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1963), 129.

¹⁷ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 451.

¹⁸ R. David Cox, *The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 223.

Lastly, he expanded the various academics departments and classes during his tenure as president of Washington College. Long notes that

Apparatus for the laboratory was purchased. The library was replenished. The dismantled buildings were reconstructed or repaired. Three new chairs were instituted...with a subordinate classification of correlated studies which embraced Engineering, Astronomy, and English Philosophy....The Lexington Law School was, just before his death, embraced within the collegiate jurisdiction.¹⁹

Also during his time at the school, he introduced the practice of elective studies and got rid of the compulsory curriculum that was in place at Washington College. President Lee wanted students to take classes that would benefit to them in their futures, rather than having them take several classes that would not help them.²⁰ The Washington and Lee website notes that he made sure that the school offered classes on business and journalism, the first “offered in colleges in the U.S.”²¹ These original business and journalism classes turned into their own departments in the early 1900s. A century later, it is a fairly common experience across colleges in the United States to take classes in these subjects or major in these areas. These improvements to the academics of Washington College showed that he cared about the education of the students.

During his time as president, Lee got to know each and every student as a person. He knew student on a first name basis and that, on at least one occasion, made an inquiry as to why he did not recognize the name of one student. Long states that Lee was not “satisfied until an investigation showed that the student had recently entered and during his absence” which is why the student and the President had never met.²² This shows that he cared about his students, and not just about getting a paycheck. Clearly, he wanted them to succeed and be well-rounded. Lee

¹⁹ Long, *Memoirs*, 445 –4 6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 446.

²¹ “Robert E. Lee: President, Washington College, 1865 – 1870,” Washington and Lee University, Accessed October 20, 2019.

²² *Ibid*, 447.

also instituted an informal student code of conduct during his time as president. This informal conduct code led to the more formal Washington and Lee University Honor Code that is used today.²³

In the last year of his life, Robert E. Lee's health was waning. He went on a trip across the South to improve his health. This trip also served to raise funds for Washington College. He died on October 12, 1870, after a bout of pneumonia. He was sixty-three years old. Lee's last words were "'Strike the tent."²⁴ This was probably in reference to his time in the Civil War since his second-to-last words were "'Tell Hill...he must come up!"²⁵ This was in reference to A. P. Hill (1825 – 1865), a Confederate military leader with whom Lee worked closely during the war and was killed in a battle on April 2, 1865, just days before Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse.

The body of Robert E. Lee was laid in the college chapel on October 14–15 for mourners to view before his funeral. Lee's burial service was on October 15. The funeral procession included students, college trustees, Confederate soldiers, citizens of Lexington, officials from the nearby Virginia Military Institute, and Lee's horse Traveler, who had accompanied him throughout the Civil War.²⁶ Throughout the South, the Confederate soldiers came together to remember their leader. Many speeches were given throughout this time and each highlighted that Lee had loved his men, as well as his home state of Virginia.²⁷ He is buried on the property of the college with his wife lying next to him.

²³ "Robert E. Lee: President, Washington College, 1865 – 1870," Washington and Lee University, Accessed October 20, 2019.

²⁴ Earl Schenck Miers, *A Great Life in Brief: Robert E. Lee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 198.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 475.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 478 – 81.

The community of Washington College loved Robert E. Lee both during his presidency and after he passed away. Because he was highly respected and set the school on a path for success, the Washington College Board of Trustees voted to change the school's title from the former name to the current name of Washington and Lee University. This change to the name happened within weeks after his death. In their minutes for their meeting in October 1870, they refer to the contributions that Robert E. Lee made to the college, referring to him as "he who reanimated and infused into it new and vigorous life."²⁸ This name of Washington and Lee University thrives to this day.

The Citizenship of Lee

Since Robert E. Lee led the troops of Army of Northern Virginia, the United States government revoked Lee's citizenship. The seventeenth United States president, Andrew Johnson (1808 – 1875), issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Pardon to those who participated in the Confederacy. This pardon covered the vast majority of the Confederate combatants. However, this document did not cover Lee because there were fourteen categories of exceptions to this proclamation and the former Confederate general fell under two of these classes: the third and the eighth. The third category of the proclamation states that "all who shall have been military or naval officers of said pretended Confederate Government above the rank of Colonel in the army or Lieutenant in the navy."²⁹ This category clearly applies to Lee because he was the

²⁸ "Text of Trustee Resolution to Rename Washington College," Washington and Lee University, Accessed October 22, 2019, <https://www.wlu.edu/about-wandl/history-and-traditions/our-namesakes/trustee-resolution-renaming-washington-college/text-of-trustee-resolution>.

²⁹ Andrew Johnson and William Seward, "President Johnson's Amnesty Proclamation.; Restoration to Rights of Property Except in Slaves. An Oath of Loyalty as a Condition Precedent. Legality of Confiscation Proceedings Recognized. Exception of Certain Offenders from this Amnesty. By These Special Applications for Pardon May be Made. Reorganization in North Carolina. Appointment of a Provisional Governor. A State Convention to be Chosen

commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. The other one reads, “All military and naval officers in the rebel service who were educated by the government in the Military Academy at West Point, or the United States Naval Academy.”³⁰ This classification also applied to Lee. The former Confederate general had attended West Point and graduated second in his class in 1829³¹ before becoming the ninth superintendent from 1852 to 1855.

The proclamation said that those who were not pardoned had to send in an application as well as take an oath of amnesty to regain their citizenship. Lee sent in an application on June 13, 1865 and signed an amnesty oath on October 2, 1865, which was also the same day he was inaugurated as president of Washington College. The National Archives states that Lee was not pardoned nor did he have his citizenship restored because “Secretary of State William H. Seward had given Lee’s application to a friend as a souvenir, and the State Department had pigeonholed the oath.”³² Therefore, it did not reach the seventeenth American President Andrew Johnson, who would have had to personally approve it. Because it did not reach the proper authorities, the application was never approved during Lee’s lifetime. Therefore, Robert E. Lee was technically stateless when pneumonia claimed his life on October 12, 1870. Long described Lee’s post-war years in the following way, “though his request was never formally granted, he acted in every way as if he considered himself a citizen of the united country.”³³ The author goes on to quote several letters from Lee that told of his desire to reintegrate the country after all the bloodshed,³⁴

by Loyal Citizens. The Machinery of the Federal Government to be Put in Operation. AMNESTY PROCLAMATION,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1865, <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/05/30/archives/president-johnsons-amnesty-proclamation-restoration-to-rights-of.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Robert E. Lee.” American Battlefield Trust. July 2, 2018. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/robert-lee>.

³² “General Lee’s Parole and Citizenship,” National Archives and Records Administration, Last reviewed December 19, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/spring/piece-lee#targetText=On%20October%20%2C%201865%2C%20the,nor%20was%20his%20citizenship%20restored.>

³³ Gamaliel Bradford, *Lee the American* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 247.

³⁴ Ibid, 248.

which he did through his presidency at Washington College. These actions backed up his words that he wanted to improve the country after the Civil War.

Somehow, Robert E. Lee's application ended up in National Archives and Record Administration, based in Washington, D.C. A century after Lee's death in 1970, an archivist employed there found Lee's application for citizenship and pardon among the State Department records.³⁵ This accidental finding started a movement to reinstate his citizenship, even though he had passed away a century previously. This initiative took a few years to gain momentum, but the measure was eventually successful. One hundred and five years after the death of the Confederate general, the United States Congress restored his citizenship through Senate Joint Resolution 23. The resolution was introduced on January 30, 1975. Senator Harry Byrd, Junior (1914–2013) of Virginia was the sponsor of the motion.³⁶ The text of this resolution reads as follows: "Whereas this entire Nation has long recognized the outstanding virtues of courage, patriotism, and selfless devotion to duty of General R. E. Lee, and has recognized the contribution of General Lee in healing the wounds of the War Between the States."³⁷ It goes on to point out how Ulysses S Grant was in favor of Lee regaining his citizenship and that he did not obtain it was the incorrect belief that he had not submitted an oath of allegiance to the United States government.³⁸ Since Lee had done this, they decided to restore his citizenship.

The United States Senate unanimously approved the joint resolution in April 1975. A few months later, on July 22, the House of Representatives passed it with a vote of 407 to 10.

Interestingly Robert E. Lee, great-grandson of General Robert E. Lee, was actually seated in the

³⁵ "General Lee's Parole and Citizenship," National Archives and Records Administration, Last reviewed December 19, 2018.

³⁶ "S.J.Res. 23–94th Congress: A joint resolution to restore posthumously full rights of citizenship to General R. E. Lee," GovTrack, October 5, 2019, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/94/sjres23>.

³⁷ "Senate Joint Resolution 23, 1975, August 5," Lee Family Digital Archive, April 23, 2016, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/9-family-papers/404-senate-joint-resolution-23-1975-august-5>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

House gallery when the Representatives voted on this matter.³⁹ President Gerald Ford (1913–2006) signed the joint resolution a few days later on August 5. This action meant that Lee’s citizenship was officially restored and that he was pardoned for his actions during the Civil War. Both of these were retroactively effective as of June 13, 1865, on the date when Lee had originally submitted his application. The summer of 1975 was exactly 110 years after the Confederate general applied to be pardoned and for his American citizenship to be restored.

Lee Today

When talking about the legacy of Robert E. Lee today, people fall into two camps. The first group calls him a racist traitor. They point out that he fought against the United States, and that choosing to commit treason is an evil act. Also, they state that the Confederacy fought to preserve its way of life, which mainly centered around owning slaves. The second group admires Robert E. Lee for his loyalty to the state of Virginia. The Confederate officer resigned his United States military commission because he wanted to give his “heart and soul to the service to his native State.”⁴⁰ He believed that it was his duty to protect his native state and therefore he had to follow Virginia into the Confederacy, even if it meant fighting against the United States.

There are many things like roads and schools named after Confederate generals, as well as statues to these men. As of June 2018, there were 109 schools named after Confederate leaders and Lee was the top name.⁴¹ With the exception of one school in Washington state, all of

³⁹ Marjorie Hunter, “Citizenship is Voted For Robert. E. Lee,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/07/23/archives/citizenship-is-voted-for-robert-e-lee-congress-votes-lees.html>.

⁴⁰ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 96.

⁴¹ “SPLC study finds 1,700 monuments, place names, and other symbols honoring the Confederacy remain in public spaces,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 04, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2018/06/04/splc-report-more-1700-monuments-place-names-and-other-symbols-honoring-confederacy-remain>.

these schools were located in the South.⁴² Oddly, Washington was not a state during the Civil War. This number has been going down over recent years. This total does not include those schools that solely use Rebel mascots or use Confederate flags. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center conducted a study on how many monument, places, holidays, and other Confederate symbols exist in the United States.⁴³ In the updated study in 2018, there were “772 monuments in 23 states, and the District of Columbia; more 300 of which are in Georgia, Virginia, or North Carolina.”⁴⁴ Both the topics of names and statues have been a subject of debate recently due to an increase in white supremacy. White supremacy has been linked in with the Confederacy because it sometimes uses symbols of the South, such as the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia. There has been debate over the names and the statues. This stemmed from an increase in white supremacist incidents over the past five years, including the Charleston, South Carolina shooting in June 2015 and the Charlottesville, Virginia “Unite the Right” rally in August 2017.

The Charleston church shooter posted pictures of himself with the Confederate flag on social media in the months leading up to his attacks. There were several different flags used during the Civil War, but the perpetrator used the flag of the Army of Tennessee. In June 2015, he attacked Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina. The man’s nine victims were Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Hon. Rev. Clementa Pickney, Tywanza Sanders, Rev. Daniel Simmons, Sr., Rev. Sharonda Singleton, and Myra Thompson. He joined his victims, as

⁴² Corey Mitchell, “Schools Named for Confederate Leaders: The Renaming Debate, Explained,” Education Week, last modified April 13, 2018, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/confederate-named-schools/index.html?cmp=soc-edit-tw>.

⁴³ “SPLC study finds 1,500 government-backed tributes to the Confederacy across the U.S.,” SPLC Southern Poverty Law Center, April 21, 2016, <https://www.splc.org/news/2016/04/21/splc-study-finds-1500-government-backed-tributes-confederacy-across-us>.

⁴⁴ “SPLC study finds 1,700 monuments, place names, and other symbols honoring the Confederacy remain in public spaces,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 04, 2018.

well as several survivors, in a Bible study before carrying out his attack.⁴⁵ His actions were determined to be a racially motivated attack, and his use of a Confederate flag triggered a debate about how the Confederate flag should be used, if at all. In response to this attack, the South Carolina state legislature removed the Confederate flag from the premises. People have called for the Confederate flag to be removed from the state flag of Mississippi, as well as for the state to stop displaying it in public.

A little over two years later in 2017, there was a white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in a Charlottesville park. Various factions of white nationalists, including the Ku Klux Klan, and several neo-Nazi and neo-Confederate groups, organized this rally to protest the planned removal of the Robert E. Lee statue that was in the park.⁴⁶ Several of the people participating in the rally carried Confederate flags. As a result of this rally, there were two police officers killed in a helicopter crash⁴⁷ and Heather Heyer, a counter-protestor, were killed as part of that counter protest.⁴⁸ The result of this rally was that the statue of Robert E. Lee was not removed and it still remains in the Charlottesville park. This monument to the Confederate leader has been vandalized on a couple different occasions over the past two and a half years since the rally.

As a result of these two incidents and others like them, people begin to discuss if names associated with the Confederacy should continue to be integrated into American public and social life. While the different studies do not agree on the exact number of schools, the trend is

⁴⁵ Kylee Scales, “Charleston Shooting Victims’ Names Released,” Fox 59, June 18, 2015, <https://fox59.com/2015/06/18/charleston-shooting-victims-names-released/>.

⁴⁶ Marianna Sotomayor, Phil McCausland and Ariana Brockington, “Charlottesville White Nationalist Rally Violence Prompts State of Emergency,” August 12, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/torch-wielding-white-supremacists-march-university-virginia-n792021>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Steve Almasy and Chandrika Narayan, “Heather Heyer Died ‘Fighting In What She Believed In,’” CNN. Last modified December 16, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-heather-heyer-profile/index.html>.

the same: the vast majority of the Confederate-leader named institutions have the name of Robert E. Lee. There are over 100 schools named after different Confederate leaders and approximately two-thirds of them are located in four states in the Deep South – Texas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana – as well as in Robert E. Lee’s home state of Virginia.⁴⁹ There are also ten military bases across the South that are named for Confederate military leaders.⁵⁰

In the four years since the attack in Charleston, there has been much debate over changing school names. One of the schools that changed is Washington-Liberty High School, which is located in Arlington, Virginia. In January 2019, the Arlington County school board changed the name from Washington-Lee High School to Washington-Liberty High School with a vote of five to zero.⁵¹ The name change came about directly as a result of the increase in white supremacist incidents. The name “Liberty” was chosen because the school board said that it represented the ideals of America. Another name proposed was “Washington-Loving High School.” Loving was the last name of an inter-racial couple who fought the Virginian law that banned inter-racial marriage. However, the Arlington County School Board voted down this name with a vote of two to three.⁵² Many people objected to this name change because they felt that it was erasing of their history. In addition, they pointed out that it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to change the name, due to the necessary changes in signage, athletic uniforms, and other school items. However, others supported this alteration because they believed the name “Lee” portrayed racist sentiments and that it did not make minority students

⁴⁹ Mitchell, “Schools Named for Confederate Leaders,” Education Week, last modified April 13, 2018.

⁵⁰ “SPLC study finds 1,700 monuments, place names, and other symbols honoring the Confederacy remain in public spaces,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 04, 2018.

⁵¹ Abigail Constantino and Mike Murillo, “Washington-Lee High School in Arlington renamed Washington-Liberty,” January 10, 2019, <https://wtop.com/arlington/2019/01/arlington-co-school-board-votes-to-rename-washington-lee-high-school/>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

feel welcome. They believe that “liberty” will be more inclusive and represent the ideals of America.

Other schools that have changed their name across the South have changed their names, including several in Virginia. These schools include Lee High School in Staunton, and J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church.⁵³ These schools have changed their names to Staunton High School, and Justice High School, respectively.⁵⁴ Across the rest of the South, there are still several schools named after the Confederates leaders including Lee High School in Fairfax, Virginia.

Washington and Lee University has not changed their name, despite mounting pressure to do so. The institution pointed out that Robert E. Lee made significant contributions to the success of the school during his presidency. However, the University Board of Trustees did decide to change the names of a several of the buildings on campus. The name of Robinson Hall has been changed to Chavis Hall and the Lee-Jackson House was renamed to the Simpson House. Both of these names are in honor of people who made many contributions to the school.⁵⁵ In the university chapel, there were the paintings of Washington and Lee in their military uniforms. Those were replaced by ones of the same men in civilian uniforms.⁵⁶ While there is still strong debate surrounding changing the names of schools, the side that supports the

⁵³ Julia Fair, “School Board announces new high school name, unveils tentative school renovation plans,” Staunton News Leader, Published November 12, 2018, <https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2018/11/12/staunton-high-school-new-name-robert-lee-name-change-renovation-plans/1976255002/>.

⁵⁴ Debbie Truong, “With Confederate name stripped, classes start at renamed Virginia high school,” *News Leader*, Published August 29, 2018, <https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2018/08/29/ex-j-e-b-stuart-h-s-fairfax-ditches-confederate-name-becomes-justice-h-s/1130893002/>.

⁵⁵ Alison Graham, “W&L trustees rename campus buildings following commission's recommendations,” *The Roanoke Times*, October 9, 2018, https://www.roanoke.com/news/education/w-l-trustees-rename-campus-buildings-following-commission-s-recommendations/article_004637ab-b60c-5feb-b502-0f248397f386.html

⁵⁶ Ibid.

rebranding appears to be winning because of the sharp increase in attacks using Confederate symbols.

The increase in high-profile white supremacist incidents also caused a discussion about removing the monuments to Confederate generals. Many of these statues and monuments depict Robert E. Lee. There are hundreds of statues depicting these men, and the majority of them are located in the American South. According to a Southern Poverty Law Center study that was conducted in 2016, there were several hundred statues or monuments that were dedicated to Confederate veterans.⁵⁷ However, this study does not state exactly how many monuments were created after Lee.

The abundance of these statues has been debated since the rise of white supremacist incidents. In this discussion, there are two sides: those who support the statues and those who want the statues to be removed. People who want the statues to be removed argue that it represents racism and bigotry. People who support the statues remaining do so for various reasons. One of the reasons is that the statues remind us to not repeat the bad things in American history. Other statue supporters genuinely admire these men for what they did and thus want these statues to remain. While many of these statues remain, the councils of several cities across the nation have made the decision to remove the statues dedicated to the Confederacy. The person depicted on the majority of the removed statues was Confederate General Robert E. Lee.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “SPLC study finds 1,700 monuments, place names, and other symbols honoring the Confederacy remain in public spaces,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 04, 2018.

⁵⁸ Leanna Garfield and Ellen Cranley, “More than a year after Charlottesville, these cities across the US have torn down controversial Confederate monuments,” January 15, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/confederate-white-nationalist-monuments-removed-cities-2018-2>.

There is much debate over how people today should remember the legacy of the Confederacy and the people who were involved in it, including Robert E. Lee. In the past few years, Americans, especially in the South, have been debating whether or not it is correct to remember them through school names and statues. Also, they discuss how the recent rise of white supremacy and the racism that is present in American history should factor into these discussions.

Clearly, Robert E. Lee should be known for more than just his time as a Confederate general. After his time fighting for the Confederacy, the man impacted the lives of hundreds of college students during his five years as the president of Washington College. This fact needs to be taken into account when discussing how the Confederacy should be remembered today. In addition, people today need to remember that he was pardoned and his citizenship restored a little over forty-four years ago in August 1975. This event occurred well over a century after Lee passed away. Because he was never pardoned or regained his citizenship, he was not able to hold any public office after the Civil War ended. The schools named after Lee and the statues made in his likeness are often debated because of the fact that he was entrenched in the leadership of the Confederacy, which was fighting for the South's ability to keep its slaves, as well as its honor.

About the author

Katherine Hugo is a senior history major at Franciscan University of Steubenville. She is from near DC and this inspired her interest in all things American History. After graduation in May 2020, she plans on working at either an educational nonprofit or a museum.

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