

Lee and Jackson – The Lexington Years

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Lee and Jackson. These two names struck terror into the hearts of many a Union soldier and gave confidence and hope to thousands of Confederates during the War Between the States. Together they, along with their fellow gray-clad generals and the armies that they led, were quite the match for the larger armies of the North.

Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee had much in common. They were both native-born Virginians, although Jackson was born in a part of Virginia that would later become West Virginia. Both of them graduated from West Point Military Academy. Both were also educators of military cadets. They also shared a fervent faith in and reliance upon Jesus Christ as their Savior.

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Another thing shared by these two Southern legends is that they both resided in a small town in the mountain region of Virginia called Lexington. The curious thing, however, is that they were never neighbors. Jackson lived there before the war and Lee lived there afterward. Both are even buried there, but neither ever passed the other in that town.

After the Mexican War, in which both fought with distinction, Jackson moved to Lexington in 1851 to accept a teaching position at the Virginia Military Institute. During his time in Lexington the devout Presbyterian also taught a Sunday School class for slaves.

Two years later he married Elinor Junkin, the daughter of the president of the nearby Washington College. They lived with her father in an addition built on to the president's house. After the war, when Lee became president of the small college, he lived in the same house, another connection that the two of them shared.

In 1854, Elinor died in childbirth. In 1858 Jackson remarried to Mary Anna Morrison. A year later he bought a house on East Washington Street which serves today as a museum in his honor.

When Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, Jackson seceded along with his native state. He joined the Confederate forces and marched into American history. After going off to war he would never again see his adopted hometown, having been killed by friendly fire in May 1863.

Lee, on the other hand, moved to Lexington shortly after the war. Immediately after the surrender

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At Appomattox on April 9, 1865, Lee returned to Richmond, Virginia, where his wife and daughters had been living during the conflict. Soon afterward he received a letter from a delegation from Washington College. In the letter they asked him if he would consider becoming president of their small school.

An evidence of Lee's greatness is that he passed up more lucrative offers in order to get the opportunity to be involved, in the time he had left, in the education of the youth of the South, a goal he considered essential if the South was ever to arise from the ashes of war.

From the fall semester in 1865 until his death in October 1870, Lee labored to rebuild the college and to do his part in helping his former Confederate soldiers as well as other young men of the South to get an education so that they could then go out and rebuild the fortunes of the former Confederacy.

I paid a visit to Lexington this past October as I returned to Greenville from visiting my mother in Maryland. After touring the Virginia Military Institute, which I described in the previous installment of this travel series, I went next door to the campus of Washington College, which has blossomed over the decades into a much larger institution whose name was changed after Lee's death to Washington and Lee University.

I saw the house that was built for Lee during his administration and which still serves as the president's residence. Since it is still a private home, I could not tour the inside but I did gaze at the front of the house and also saw the stable where Lee's steed de guerre, Traveller, called home after the war. A plaque on the outside brick wall reads, "The Last Home of Traveller. Through war and peace the faithful, devoted and beloved horse of General Robert E. Lee." As a side note, years ago on a radio program called Radio Reader, noted narrator Dick Estell read an entertaining book over the course of several weeks that was written from Traveller's perspective.

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A short stroll from the president's house is a stately building known as Lee Chapel, which served as a place of religious instruction for the college students. Lee and his family members are buried in a crypt below the chapel. Traveler lies buried in a plot just outside the chapel. A statue of the inventor Cyrus Hall McCormick, a native of Rockbridge County, of which Lexington is the county seat, stands nearby. McCormick was a benefactor of the college and a contemporary of Lee.

After leaving Lee Chapel I drove a few blocks to Jackson's home, which, as I mentioned earlier, is now a museum. In addition to myself, about eight or nine fellow tourists gathered there for a tour of the house. Mrs. Jackson rented out the house after her husband's death until 1906, after which she sold it to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who established the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital. In 1979 the building was restored to its appearance during Jackson's ownership.

After the tour I walked several blocks, passing the Presbyterian church where Jackson worshipped before the war, to the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery. I asked a workman where I could find Jackson's grave and he pointed me in the direction in which I should go.

A monument enclosed by iron fencing marks the place where Jackson's remains are temporarily buried until that great day when the graves of the saints will be opened to meet their Savior in the air, the Savior in Whom both Jackson and Lee had put their trust. The ground atop his grave was strewn with lemons. Jackson used to suck on lemons during the war. Now, modern-day admirers leave them there as a tribute.

I then walked back to my car and began the long drive back to Greenville, my head full of fresh experiences of interesting places about which I could write in these articles during this latest travel series. I thank you for riding shotgun with me. I hope you enjoyed the trip.

I will rest up a bit for now, but please come back to these pages in a few weeks so that I can tell you about another interesting trip I took this past February to help celebrate my mother's birthday. While on that trip I managed to squeeze in a few historic sites and museums along the way. Stay tuned.