

The Surrender Scene at the McLean House

Written by David L. Mowery, Cincinnati Civil War Round Table

Copyright ©2015 David L. Mowery

It's the late morning of April 9, 1865. We have just witnessed the last battle of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which had been the largest and most important Confederate army operating east of the Appalachian Mountains for most of the Civil War. Now, here at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, Lee's army was about half of its original size from only a week earlier when it had defended its trenches at Petersburg. Because of thousands of battle casualties, thousands of desertions, and losses of hundreds of supply wagons over the course of that fateful week, the Army of Northern Virginia had lost much of its size and strength, but not its will, to fight on. The rebel soldiers believed that, just like many times before, General Lee would find a way out of this scrape. Private A.C. Jones of the 3rd Arkansas represented most of the remaining troops of the Army of Northern Virginia when he wrote in his diary, "Up to this time there was not a man in the command who had the slightest doubt that General Lee would be able to bring his army safely out of its desperate straits."

However, after the unsuccessful battle on the morning of April 9, and with the capture by Union cavalry of four train loads of food, clothing, and ammunition the previous night, it became obvious to Lee and his subordinate officers that their situation was hopeless. Union Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant and Major General George Meade's Army of the Potomac faced the Confederates on the east, Major General Phil Sheridan's Union Army of the Shenandoah blocked Lee's escape route to the south and west, and now Major General Edward Ord's Union Army of the James, which contained veteran African-American soldiers of the U.S. Colored Troops, had arrived on the battlefield in support of Sheridan. Lee and his men were outnumbered and surrounded, and they were too exhausted to break through the strong Union line. There was simply no way out, not this time, and not without unnecessary bloodshed.

At 11 a.m., General Lee ordered several flags of truce to be sent to Union headquarters, asking for a surrender meeting with General Grant. Grant was so excited by the message that his migraine headache instantly disappeared. General Grant quickly responded by ordering a cease-fire and sending his aide, Lieutenant Colonel Orville Babcock, to General Lee's headquarters. Babcock found Lee sitting in an apple orchard. Babcock told the Confederate general that he could choose the meeting place and time. Lee chose the village of Appomattox Courthouse as the site of his momentous conference with Grant.

General Lee, his military secretary Lieutenant Colonel Charles Marshall, his flag-bearer Sergeant George Tucker, and Union Lieutenant Colonel Babcock arrived in the village about 1 p.m. on April 9th. It was Palm Sunday. Tucker and Marshall came upon Wilmer McLean, a resident of the village, and asked him if there was a suitable place where they could hold a meeting. McLean offered his own parlor for the occasion. Tucker and Marshall accepted McLean's kind offer and went to retrieve Lee and Babcock.

The three guests entered Wilmer McLean's house and sat down in the parlor to await General Grant's arrival. Sergeant Tucker remained outside to take care of the horses and stand watch.

It is one of those strange coincidences of history that Wilmer McLean had owned a house in 1861 near the town of Manassas Junction, Virginia. In fact, in July 1861, McLean had witnessed the first major battle of the Civil War, the Battle of Bull Run, being fought on his property in Manassas. After a second battle had occurred in 1862 around his house, Wilmer had decided it was time to move his family to a safer place. He had moved them here, to the seemingly quiet and far-off town of Appomattox Courthouse. Now, the village was not so quiet, and his house would become the scene of an event that would change the course of American history.

While waiting, General Lee thought of his future and his possible fate. He knew there were many politicians in the North that wanted all of the prominent Confederate politicians and generals to be put on trial for treason, and if convicted, to be executed. Would Lee suffer this awful end? Yet, he also knew there were those in the North who wanted to make peace with the South. Would they prevail? Lee, showing no signs of being nervous or upset, accepted whatever fate might come upon him and his men.

The people of the village gathered around the McLean House. They were curious about the Confederate general's presence here and about what was going to happen. Over the past few weeks, the newspapers had only displayed bad news regarding their Confederate armies. Everyone knew that the Confederacy was in dire trouble.

Silence prevailed, even as the crowd looked on, anxious to hear the result of the meeting. The soldiers in the fields on both sides waited anxiously, too. Would the Confederates surrender, or would they fight tomorrow? Would the Union soldiers imprison the Confederates and set up tribunals to punish them? Or, would the former Rebels be allowed to go home in peace? Soon they would receive answers to these questions.

Thirty minutes passed; the excitement and tension mounted. Then, they heard a group of horsemen riding into town from the southeast.

It was General Ulysses S. Grant, his staff, and General Ord and General Sheridan. Grant and his followers walked toward the McLean House, where Colonel Babcock, standing at the doorstep,

saluted them and told them that General Lee was waiting for them in the house. The Union officers entered the house and met General Lee and Colonel Marshall in the parlor. There, Grant and Lee shook hands and sat down to discuss surrender terms for the Army of Northern Virginia. Since not enough chairs were available for all, generals Lee and Grant took the first available seats, while many of the others remained standing in the crowded parlor.

Fifty-eight year-old General Robert E. Lee was dressed in his finest military uniform, with shined boots and a decorative sword. Forty-two year-old General Ulysses S. Grant, on the other hand, was dressed in his field uniform – mud-spattered and simple – with his sword missing from his side. Grant admitted embarrassment about his dress, but he said he had not wanted to make Lee wait any longer than he should just to change clothes. Lee appreciated Grant's thoughtfulness. To break the tension, General Grant asked if General Lee remembered him from their soldiering days during the Mexican-American War. Twenty years earlier, Lee and Grant had fought on the same side – that of the U.S. Army – during its war with Mexico. They had met when Lee had visited Grant's brigade once. "I have always remembered your appearance and I think I should have recognized you anywhere," Grant said. "Yes, I know I met you on that occasion," Lee replied, "and I have often thought of it and tried to recollect how you looked. But I have never been able to recall a single feature." Their reminiscences of their time in Mexico together became friendly and pleasant, so much so that Grant nearly forgot the subject of their meeting.

Lee cut short the small talk and came straight to the point: "I asked to see you to ascertain upon what terms you would receive the surrender of my army," Lee politely interrupted. The Union's overall army commander responded to the inquiry with no change of expression on his face or voice. "The terms I propose are those stated substantially in my letter of yesterday," Grant explained. "That is, the officers and men surrendered to be paroled and disqualified from taking up arms again until properly exchanged, and all arms, ammunition, and supplies to be delivered up as captured property." Lee breathed a sigh of relief. This is all that he had wanted to hear. "I would suggest that you commit to writing the terms you have proposed, so that they may be formally acted upon," Lee stated. "Very well, I will write them out," Grant replied. As Grant wrote the terms onto paper, he saw from the corner of his eye Lee's beautiful sword, and he added to the terms the following exception: "This will not embrace the side arms of the officers, nor their private horses or baggage." Grant finished the 200-word surrender document with these assurances for his former enemy: "Each officer and man will be allowed to return to their homes, not to be disturbed by the United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside." Grant handed Lee the drafted document. The Confederate general placed his spectacles on his nose, carefully read the whole document, and then warmly said, "This will have a very happy effect on my army."

Grant asked if there was anything Lee wanted to change in the wording. Lee hesitated at first, but then mentioned that his army, being different from Federal forces, allowed artillerymen and cavalrymen to own their own horses. He wondered if the terms included those men to be allowed to retain their horses. Grant replied that they were not included, but when he remembered his short time as a struggling farmer outside of St. Louis, he recalled the importance of having a horse for the plowing and hauling. Besides, President Lincoln had told Grant to "Let 'em up easy" and assist the former rebels to return to their homes and re-start their lives. General Grant said to Lee, "I will arrange it this way: I will not change the terms as now written, but I will instruct the officers I shall appoint to receive the paroles, to let all the men who claim to own a horse or mule take the animals home with them to work their little farms." Lee replied with gratitude, "This will have the best possible effect upon the men. It will be very gratifying, and will do much toward conciliating our people."

Lee asked if he could release his Union prisoners as soon as possible, because he had no food for them. In fact, he had little food left for his own men or horses. Grant answered "yes" and inquired, "Of about how many men does your present force consist?" Lee did not know how many soldiers were remaining in the Army of Northern Virginia, because its attrition rate had been so high lately. Grant continued, "Suppose I send over 25,000 rations. Do you think that will be a sufficient supply?" "Plenty, plenty; an abundance," Lee responded.

After Colonel Marshall drafted a formal acceptance letter that Lee signed, and copies were made of all documents, Grant introduced Lee to his staff and generals. Lee shook hands with those who offered, and bowed to the others. When Lee met Grant's military secretary, Colonel Ely Parker, who was a Seneca Indian, Lee said he was glad to see one real American in the room. Parker replied, "We are all Americans."

The meeting had lasted nearly three hours. The two commanders, now reunited as Americans once again, shook hands, and then General Lee and Colonel Marshall exited the house. General Lee called for Sergeant Tucker to retrieve his beloved horse, Traveller.

Grant and his entourage prepared to leave the McLean House. Grant felt depressed and sad, realizing that he could not rejoice over the fall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and who had suffered so much for a cause that Grant believed was the worst for which a people ever fought.

As Lee and Marshall left toward their lines, they saw Grant and his men raise their hats in salute. Lee returned the salute in the same manner. At this poignant moment, the reuniting of the country began. Lee felt very relieved because of his enemy's generous mercy, but he was greatly saddened by the fact that he had to break the news of the surrender to his beloved soldiers who had fought so hard for him. These veterans of many bloody battlefields would

stack their arms and battle flags at the courthouse square over the course of the next three days. After that, Lee's 43-year career as a soldier would end forever. In his new role, Lee would become a model citizen of the United States, one which most of the former rebels would imitate.

When news of the surrender reached Union lines, the joyous soldiers in blue cheered and fired their cannon in celebration. Grant ordered the cheering and cannonading to stop. "The war is over," Grant said to his staff. "The rebels are our countrymen again." However, after Grant left to go to his headquarters, he could not stop his staff and generals from obtaining furniture and other items from McLean's parlor as souvenirs of this historic event.

The citizens surrounding the McLean House understood what had transpired. For most of them, the news of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia was depressing. The war was indeed coming to an end, and the Confederacy would end with it. Though other Confederate armies remained active in the field, they would soon follow Lee's path to surrender. By July of 1865, all the Confederate forces in the country would disperse. The Civil War had cost nearly 700,000 lives and had devastated the South. The time for rebuilding and resurrecting a new, stronger nation "of the people, by the people, and for the people" had arrived. The surrender at Appomattox truly embodied the immortal words of President Abraham Lincoln: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive ... to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Sources:

Long, A. L. *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*. Secaucus, NJ: Blue and Grey Press, 1983.

Simon, John Y., ed. *Ulysses S. Grant: Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant and Selected Letters, 1839-1865*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.