

Fifty Lesser-Known Facts about Robert E. Lee

1. Lee's father, Henry III, was a hero during the American Revolutionary War where he earned the nickname "Light Horse Harry". His famous eulogy at President Washington's funeral included the famous quote "First in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."
2. Lee's father served as the ninth governor of Virginia from 1791 to 1794.
3. Though both of Lee's parents came from wealthy families Lee's father had made some bad business decisions and lost the family's money. When Lee was two years old, his father went to debtor's prison. A few years later his father went to the West Indies and never returned to Virginia. When his health began to fail, he attempted to return to his former home but died at Dungeness Plantation, Cumberland Island, Georgia, the home of his old friends General Nathanael and Catherine Greene.
4. Because of his father's financial shortcomings, Lee adopted an attitude of extreme frugality and careful accounting with money.
5. Lee was the youngest boy of seven children, was the closest of the children to his mother and was deeply influenced by her strength of character and high moral principles.
6. Lee had two relatives who signed the Declaration of Independence.
7. Lee saw the military as a great way to get a free education and to have a career. He entered West Point Military Academy at the age of 18. To this day, he is the only cadet to have graduated without a demerit.
8. Lee won the appointment to corps adjutant, the highest rank a cadet could attain at West Point.
9. A fellow cadet at West Point said that Lee's "personal appearance surpassed in manly beauty that of any other cadet in the corps."
10. Lee graduated second in his class from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1829.
11. Lee's wife, Mary Custis, was the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington.
12. Lee never personally owned slaves until he was charged with managing for a five-year period the 200 slaves at Arlington Plantation who had belonged to his father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, after his death.
13. In the early part of his career, Lee served as a military engineer with his duties varying from budgeting to building designs for buildings. He built Fort Pulaski which guards Savannah, Georgia.
14. As an Army engineer in the 1830s, Lee was stationed in St. Louis and, working with the forces of the river, directed the improvement of the channels of the Mississippi so as to improve greatly its navigability.

15. Lee first saw combat during the Mexican-American War in 1846, during which he was promoted to colonel and gained a reputation as a strong military leader.
16. Lee's commanding general during the Mexican-American War wrote that Lee was "the very best soldier I ever saw in the field."
17. In 1852 Lee became the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.
18. Lee changed the four year program at the U.S. Military Academy to a five year program.
19. As superintendent at West Point, Lee was forced to expel James McNeill Whistler who would go on to become a famous American Painter.
20. Lee didn't want Virginia to secede from the Union so that his various loyalties—to country, army, state, and family—could remain intact.
21. Lee considered secession a betrayal of the efforts of the founders of the United States.
22. When the Civil War began in 1861, Lee was offered command of the Union army by President Lincoln.
23. Although he didn't agree with slavery, Lee felt he could not bring himself to fight against his home state of Virginia, state's rights at that time being more prominent.
24. Mary Lee later called the moment of Lee's choosing between the Union and Virginia as "the severest struggle" of her husband's life.
25. Lee prayed for two days before accepting command of Virginia's forces.
26. Lee, as a General, took command of one of the most important armies during the Civil War: the Army of Northern Virginia.
27. The Army of Northern Virginia was the most successful of the Southern armies during the Civil War.
28. Lee's horse, Traveller, became almost as famous as him and is shown in many pictures and paintings of Lee.
29. The first field assignment of Lee in the Civil War was commanding Confederate forces in western Virginia. Here he was defeated by Union Gen. William S. Rosecrans in the Battle of Cheat Mountain in September 1861 and was relieved by President Jefferson Davis.
30. Initially during the Civil War, Lee's men called him 'Granny Lee' due to his allegedly timid style of command.
31. Lee was the military advisor to Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

32. Lee's greatest victory occurred at the end of April 1863 during the Battle of Chancellorsville when his army divided and stopped the Union Army at Salem Church.
33. Lee used aggressive tactics during the Seven Days' Battles which resulted in Union forces retreating to the James River and abandoning the campaign. Lee's men started calling him 'Marse Robert', a term of respect and affection; and he was widely praised in the press.
34. Although the Confederate armies were constantly outnumbered by the Union armies, Lee and his men won many battles due to his superior military skills.
35. Lee earned the nickname the Grey Fox. The "grey" was because he wore the grey uniform of the Confederate soldier and rode a grey horse. The "fox" was because he was smart and cunning as a military leader.
36. Lee commanded during many famous Civil War battles including the Seven Days Battle, the Battle of Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, and Appomattox Courthouse.
37. Lee always ate simple meals and took the typical army ration given to his men. Similarly, he routinely turned down offers to use the homes of Southerners as his headquarters, preferring to sleep outside in his modest tent.
38. Lee and his wife, Mary, lived on her estate, Arlington House, until the Civil War. In June 1862, the 37th United States Congress enacted legislation that imposed a property tax on all land in "insurrectionary" areas of the United States. The 1863 amendments to the statute required these taxes to be paid in person, but Mary Lee, afflicted with severe rheumatoid arthritis and behind Confederate lines, could not pay the tax in person. The Arlington estate was seized for nonpayment of taxes. It was auctioned off on January 11, 1864, and the U.S. government won the property for \$26,800 (\$438,646 today). The first burial took place on the property of May of that year. Union Quartermaster General, Montgomery Meigs, who was angry at his classmate for siding with the South, began burying Union dead in Lee's fields so that he could never farm it again. This is how Arlington National Cemetery came to be.
39. Lee was careful to pay all his debts, once during the war even sending money across the lines to pay a blacksmith \$2 that he owed him.
40. On April 9, 1865 General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, ending the Civil War.
41. Although Lee was indicted for treason and could have been tried and hung as a traitor to the United States, he was forgiven by President Johnson and allowed to return to his home, however, Lee he lost his right to vote.
42. After the war Lee was no longer considered a United States citizen. President Gerald Ford restored his citizenship in 1975 after documents were found that showed Lee had taken an oath to remain loyal to the United States.

43. Lee became president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, working there until he died from a stroke in 1870. He was buried in the Chapel Crypt and the college was renamed Washington and Lee University.
44. Lee turned down multiple business offers before accepting the position as president of Washington college including serving as president of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, commanding the Romanian army, governorship of Virginia, writing memoirs, and serving as president of multiple insurance companies.
45. Following the war, Lee was constantly asked by publishers in the north to write a book on his war experience. He was offered a great deal of money to do so, and always rejected the offers to write a book. One annoyed publisher wrote Lee a letter and asked him why he so staunchly refused his very lucrative offer to write a book. Lee's response was that he was unwilling to benefit financially in any way from the sacrifices of the brave men who served and died under his command.
46. During his time as president at Washington College, Lee added practical courses in modern languages (including one of the very few Spanish programs in the country), engineering, commerce, farming, and law to the existing program of classical education. He also opened the first-ever journalism school in the country.
47. Following the war Lee advocated for peace and healing for the United States.
48. In a letter of 1858, Lee deemed slavery to be “a moral and political evil in any country,” and once emancipation came, he accepted the new social realities and encouraged other Southerners to do so.
49. Due to heavy rains at the time of his death, the only undamaged coffin that could be found for Lee was a little short and hence he was buried without his shoes.
50. Lee remains one of the most revered American generals and has been commemorated on U.S. postage stamps at least five times.