

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

PART I

HISTORICAL DATA SECTION

CUSTIS-LEE MANSION

BY

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September 1968

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Washington, D. C.

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CUSTIS-LEE MANSION

Between 1802 and 1818, Arlington House (the Custis-Lee Mansion) was built by George Washington Parke Custis, grandson of Martha Washington by a child of her first marriage, and "adopted son" of George Washington. Reared at Mount Vernon, young Custis left there after Mrs. Washington's death to settle in on the right bank of the Potomac in the newly created District of Columbia where he began to develop an 1100 acre estate which was first called Mount Washington and later Arlington. About 1802, he began to build a mansion on the heights overlooking the Potomac. The plan of the house was grandiose and Custis had to build it piecemeal as his financial resources permitted. The north and south wings were built first as separate buildings and both were completed by 1804. In that year he married Mary Lee Fitzhugh and brought her to live in quarters established in the north wing. In 1817-1818, after a long delay Custis was able to complete the two-story, porticoed, central section of the house to connect the older wings. The most striking architectural feature of the finished exterior of the house, the massive portico, was visible for miles and has variously been said to have been modeled after the Temple of Paestum, Italy or the Temple of Theseum, Greece. George Hadfield, the English architect who worked for many years in Washington, is usually credited with the design of Arlington House, although the plans have not been found and it is not recorded that Custis ever wrote down anything about the design.

Life at Arlington in the early years focused on the activities of its master. Reared in the shadow of the "Father of His Country," Custis worshipped the memory of Washington but was curiously unlike him. He tried his hand at many things without outstanding success. Yet he was kind and patriotic and an amateur in the best sense. He devoted much energy to improving American agriculture and particularly to improving native breeds of sheep. He was in demand as an orator on patriotic occasions, and on at least one occasion, his speech at the funeral of Gen. James Ligan who had been in effect killed by a mob in Baltimore, showed considerable courage. He painted large pictures of Revolutionary battles and wrote several successful if ephemeral patriotic plays or pageants. He found time to play

the violin, carry on an extensive correspondence, and entertain visitors to Arlington Spring. Most important he collected, preserved, and displayed to all who wanted to see them his "Washington Treasury" or collection of relics from Mount Vernon.

His wife's activities centered on the management of the household, her flower garden, and her only surviving child, Marry Anna Randolph Custis. In addition she maintained the wide circle of social relationships incumbent upon one of Virginia's first families and devoted funds, energy, and time to the care and education of the sixty or more members of Arlington's slave population.

In 1831, in a ceremony in the family parlor at Arlington, Mary Custis became the bride of U.S. Army Lieutenant Robert E. Lee. Thereafter, though he would be away on duty much of the time, Lee would regard Arlington as his home. Here six of the couple's seven children were born and all were reared.

In 1853, Mrs. Custis died and four years later, in 1857, her husband G.W.C. Custis followed her. The death of George Washington Parke Custis placed a heavy responsibility on Robert E. Lee, now a Brevet Colonel, who became in effect the master of Arlington. Custis' will stipulated that Mrs. Lee was to have a life interest in Arlington and upon her death the estate was to pass to her eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee if he would support the name and arms of George Washington Parke Custis.

In 1857, the estate was in somewhat rundown condition even though the Lees, in 1855, had renovated and splendidly furnished the large parlor or drawing room of the house, installed a coal furnace, and made various other improvements. Custis' death caused Lee to take extended leave from his military duties (1857-1860) in order to administer Custis' complex estate, repair and refurbish Arlington, and put the family finances on a sound and profitable basis to ensure the inheritances granted to his sons and the legacies to his daughters in the Custis will.

Although Lee was on leave from the Army much of the time between 1857 and 1861, he was able to participate in one of the sensational occurrences of the period. In 1859, he was called upon to command U.S. Marines in the suppression of John Brown at Harper's Ferry, Va. Life at Arlington in these years was somewhat clouded by the recent deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Custis and by the partial incapacitation of Mrs. Lee by an arthritic condition, but there was also liveliness and joy. Friends and relatives, strangers and notable personages came to call. And the lively children of the Lees now rapidly growing to adulthood added sparkle. Then came the Civil War.

In the spring of 1861, Lee was forced to decide between his State and the Union. And it was at Arlington House, with the lights ablaze

and the family gathered, that he wrote his resignation from the United States Army and left for Richmond on his way to become the principal hero of the Confederacy. Soon afterward Mrs. Lee and the girls were gone from Arlington too, a few days ahead of the vanguard of the Union forces. Since that time Arlington has been occupied by the United States Government. During the war, the grounds became a military camp and the house a military headquarters. In 1864, military burials began to be made on the grounds and thus began Arlington National Cemetery.

In 1925, through the efforts of Rep. Louis C. Cramton of Michigan, legislation was enacted to implement the restoration of Arlington House as a memorial to General Robert E. Lee. Between 1929-1933, War Department architects, historians, and officers with the advice of the Commission of Fine Arts and local historian restored the house, although not to the period immediately prior to the Civil War. For a variety of reasons, the period chosen as a target for restoration was the early nineteenth century.

In 1933, the house, but not grounds immediately around it, was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior by Executive Order. Extensive research was then undertaken by National Capital Parks historians and it has continued over the years. Voluminous files and artifact collections have been assembled. A small amount of additional land including the sites of the former estate gardens has been acquired. Interpretive innovations, such as the use of costumed guide personnel, have been instituted. Certain structural modifications have been made, such as the restoration of two mantels installed by Lee in 1855; the removal of balustrades at the roofs of both wings, which had been removed prior to 1861, but replaced by the War Department; and marbleization of the exterior paint to conform to the evidence of historic photographs. National Capital Region staff members have prepared Research Reports or Historic Structures Reports on the flower garden, North Servants Quarters, and the exterior paint of the mansion.

Research Needs

The files of the Custis-Lee Mansion contain a mass of information. In 1953, Murray H. Nelligan produced an exhaustive history of the house and its occupants for the period up to 1861. War Department architects investigated the house during the restoration 1928-1933, and their drawings are in the mansion files. Unfortunately it appears that many of the letters and documents associated with the War Department restoration have not turned up. According to architect Luther M. Leisenring who was a key man in the original restoration, the War Department "cleaned house" as far as their files were concerned when the mansion was transferred to the Department of the Interior. (Statement to Murray H. Nelligan, June 17, 1949, notes in Custis-Lee Mansion

Files). It is possible that these letters may be somewhere in the National Archives, but to date research in the files of Quartermaster General's Office and the Commission of Fine Arts have not turned them up.

No detailed construction and maintenance history of the house has been written for the period since 1861, although it would be possible to write such a history from materials already collected at the Custis-Lee Mansion, from materials in the Quartermaster General's Office files and other materials in the National Archives, and from the Repair and Restoration File at the mansion and the correspondence in the National Capital Region Decimal Files. There is no official Part II, Historic Structures Report covering the entire Custis-Lee Mansion, but Nelligan's 702-page "Old Arlington," (National Capital Parks, 1953) is certainly ample for the Historical Data Section if condensed and supplemented by an investigation of Lee and associated materials which have become available since his report was written. Principally, the new materials are to be found in the Virginia Historical Society at Richmond.

It must be said that even when documentary research is brought up to date by the study of materials that have recently become available there is scant likelihood of producing answers to all the unanswered questions about the minute details of the mansion. It seems unlikely that the original plans for the mansion will turn up. Evidence for the use of certain rooms in the mansion which is currently diaphanous may well continue to be even after additional research, and some restoration and furnishings details will remain largely matters of opinion to be decided only by arbitrary, if educated, decisions.