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Take on Appomattox

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Abstract

On April 9, 1865, Palm Sunday, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant met in the front parlor of Wilmer McLean's house in the little village of Appomattox Court House to discuss the status of their two armies. After swapping stories of the days of their Mexican War service, the two men finally penned their names on terms of surrender, effectively ending the American Civil War. Grant, magnanimous towards the now defeated Confederates, and Lee, humble in his loss, ushered in the era of reconciliation that would bandage up the past four bloody years and push the reunited country forward together as one. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Take on Appomattox



Lee and Grant meet at Appomattox Court House to settle terms of surrender. Wikimedia Commons.

April 9, 2015

by Brianna Kirk '15

On April 9, 1865, Palm Sunday, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant met in the front parlor of Wilmer McLean's house in the little village of Appomattox Court House to discuss the status of their two armies. After swapping stories of the days of their Mexican War service, the two men finally penned their names on terms of surrender, effectively ending the American Civil War. Grant, magnanimous towards the now defeated Confederates, and Lee, humble in his loss, ushered in the era of reconciliation that would bandage up the past four bloody years and push the reunited country forward together as one.

Most Americans are familiar with this depiction of the way the Civil War's end happened, basking in the intense moment of genuine reconciliation and healing, all feelings of animosity and politics pushed aside. The meaning of the Civil War, we've been told, was decided upon that day when Grant and Lee met. Appomattox has become interchangeable with peace, progress, and reunion in the American consciousness.

But scholars have begun to break down rosy images like these, pushing back against the idea that the Civil War's meaning and legacy were settled on April 9. Instead, as historian Elizabeth Varon points out, the war's meaning was not determined on that Sunday afternoon. Grant and Lee "positioned themselves at the center of a bitter and protracted contest over what exactly was decided that April day at Appomattox" at the second that they shook hands.



The McLean house in Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Photo credit to the author.

As the sesquicentennial events come to a close, I want to encourage you, the reader, to take a step back and really ponder what happened at Appomattox one hundred and fifty years ago and the implications that those actions had for the end of the conflict, the beginning of Reconstruction, and ultimately our memory of the Civil War. While the classic image of Grant and Lee signing the terms of Confederate surrender has become synonymous with national healing, in actuality it spelled out uncertainty for the young country. Grant viewed the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia as one of Northern dominance, of right over wrong. Lee, conversely, saw it as his defeat by a host of overwhelming odds that from the beginning had sealed the fate of his army. The two generals and their differing views on the war's end greatly affected Reconstruction. The creation of military districts and the belief that Northerners could dictate how Southerners were readmitted to the Union reflected the North's insistence that their victory was one of right over wrong, while the creation of the Lost Cause narrative can be tied to Lee's belief that the Union victory was only one of might over right.

The terms of surrender have also greatly affected our memory of the conflict. We see Appomattox as the complete surrender of all Confederate forces, when it was only the first of a string across the South, with Confederate armies still surrendering well past April 9. We must also remember that Appomattox simply signaled the beginning of the end of the military conflict. The Confederate government was still on the run when Grant and Lee met. Jefferson Davis was somewhere in the South, and Confederate veterans would still praise their cause long after their weapons were stacked and their uniforms tucked away.

While Americans, then and now, should celebrate Appomattox as a victory, I challenge you to think of it as a dangerous time as well. The war itself was unprecedented; people did not know how to handle the United States tearing itself apart over issues like slavery. But the end of the war—and the start of Reconstruction, of national reconciliation, of the reuniting of two warring sections—was just as unprecedented. How would the nation go about readmitting the Southern states? Would the traitors be tried

and executed? Was secession even treason? What was to be done with Robert E. Lee? Alexander Stephens? Jefferson Davis? What would happen with the four million newly emancipated slaves? What about the returning soldiers? What about the dead?

The Civil War was, in a sense, a paradox. It answered some questions that the nation had had prior to its start—such as that of slavery—but also left some unanswered, and even raised many more that the nation was unprepared to answer and deal with. As I sit writing this blog, sipping coffee out of my Appomattox Court House mug, its inscription on the back is a clear indicator to me of how Americans remember the event a century and a half later: “In the village of Appomattox Court House, now a national park, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the largest field army of the Confederacy to Union Commander Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865, effectively ending the American Civil War.”

Appomattox is such a well-remembered and glorified moment in American history, but it is seldom understood. As the event that ended our Civil War and supposedly reunited us after such a devastating military conflict, though, perhaps it should be.

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/04/09/a-take-on-appomattox/>