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"...Sexual Relations with that Woman...": Why the Lee Quote is Still Valid

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Abstract

A quick reflection this week. This started as a comment on [Brooks Simpson's comments on Colin Woodward's blog post](#) at his new blog *civilwarhistorian* highlighting a quote he found in a Massachusetts newspaper. Whew... now that that's out of the way.

The validity of the quote has been called into question, and seemingly thereby its usefulness to the historian. But I object to consigning this tidbit to the dustbin of history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 2011

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Did this man shtup his slaves?
Is that really the most important
thing we can discover from this
account? / [PD / cwpbh 03116](#)

The quote has now been proven valid and invalid simultaneously. Colin [has since posted an update](#) at his blog offering the reading of John Neff (University of Mississippi) that the piece refers to a daughter of Parke Custis and not Robert E. Lee. So, the soldier's reading of the situation was, in essence, dead wrong. Still, there were master-slave relations at Arlington, so the concept is proven somewhat right.

This quote is like a [Schrödinger's cat](#) of the Civil War.

Does the flaw within the soldier's words render them an invalid historical source?

Certainly, they cannot and should not be used to prove that Robert E. Lee slept with his house staff. He might have. He mightn't have. We don't know the answer to that one without a solid primary source to the affirmative. This soldier's account is a far cry from a primary source, in essence being hearsay evidence of an account that was itself hearsay. Even if the facts of the case were true, this soldier did not witness the events firsthand. Neither did the woman who claims to be Lee's daughter (for a quite obvious 9-month long reason).

But is there other value in those words? Read them closely:

At the cook house for the overseer's family I noticed an octoroon, nearly white, with fine features. She told me that her mother, long since dead was a quadroon and Gen. Lee's housekeeper at Arlington, and to the question, 'Was your father a colored man?' she answered without hesitation 'No,—master's my father.' And this father and master now leads an army, the sole purpose of which is to establish a government founded on an institution which enslaves his own children, making his own flesh and blood saleable property!
-Soldier in Greenfield, MA *Gazette & Courier*, 15 June 1863

Look at that soldier's assertion. He wants desperately to believe that Lee would fight to keep his own children in slavery. It certainly has been a long war by 1863, and will only get longer. Villainizing the enemy can get a soldier through the long arduous marches and hot battles. Look at the need of this man to see the war framed starkly in the world of moral crusade, and not a simple war to save the nebulous Union.

The Confederate cause is plain in this soldier's estimation. The rebel armies march for slavery. The rebel officers command their men to victory in order to establish a slave nation. *This* is what the soldier finds abhorrent in the South. It is what impels him to pick up a rifle and charge into battle. It is the means he chooses to villainize Lee in his own mind. This soldier is fighting for a high ideal, indeed the highest: the freedom of another man.

So is this source invalidated just because the information it contains is false? Definitely not. It just can't be used how everyone immediately expects. The soldier's longing for the validity of the facts is just as useful to an historian. The imaginary Lee this soldier constructs is the embodiment of both the general Confederate *beau idéal* and the personification of the very thing he is fighting to prevent. The imagined Lee becomes a crystal clear window into this fighting man's motivation.