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## Appomattox: 152 Years Later

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# Appomattox: 152 Years Later

## **Abstract**

Just over a week ago was the 152nd anniversary of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. Although that number may not be as big a deal as the 150th anniversary a few years ago, there was something else special about this year. For only the seventh time since 1865, April 9th fell on Palm Sunday, just as it did on the day that Grant and Lee met in the McLean House. Not only was I lucky enough to attend this commemoration, but I was able to revisit [the job I held over the summer](#) by volunteering that weekend. Arriving on Friday, I donned a volunteer uniform, attached my nametag from the summer, and walked out into the surprisingly cold air.

## **Keywords**

Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, Commemoration, Jonathan Tracey, Memory, Slavery

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Appomattox: 152 Years Later

*By Jonathan Tracey '19*

Just over a week ago was the 152<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. Although that number may not be as big a deal as the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary a few years ago, there was something else special about this year. For only the seventh time since 1865, April 9<sup>th</sup> fell on Palm Sunday, just as it did on the day that Grant and Lee met in the McLean House. Not only was I lucky enough to attend this commemoration, but I was able to revisit [the job I held over the summer](#) by volunteering that weekend. Arriving on Friday, I donned a volunteer uniform, attached my nametag from the summer, and walked out into the surprisingly cold air.



*A small section of the 4,600 paper bags with the names of slaves emancipated in Appomattox County that lined the roads throughout the park. Photo courtesy of the author.*

Luckily the weather was vastly improved on Saturday and Sunday, as hundreds of visitors flocked to the small village far out of the way of most tourists. Volunteers greeted visitors at the parking lot and helped to answer questions across the site. All weekend, [interpretative programs](#) were delivered on topics including Union General Philip Sheridan's 1865 Central Virginia campaign, the United States Colored Troops at Appomattox, and the surrender proceedings themselves. Reenactors, both Union and Confederate, camped within the park,

carrying out firing demonstrations to represent the fighting within and around the village and recreating the stacking of Confederate arms.



*Taken facing the physical center of the park as the sun began to set, this photo shows the luminaries' flickering candles as they begin to become visible, creating an astonishing scene. Photo courtesy of the author.*

In addition to these programs, Appomattox Court House National Historical Park took their interpretation further introducing innovative new commemorative programs. During the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 4,600 luminaries were placed in the village in memory of the number of slaves in Appomattox County who were emancipated as a result of the surrender. This was a fascinating take on the traditional use of luminaries to represent soldiers who lost their lives in service to the country. Other parks, such as Gettysburg or Fredericksburg, place luminaries at the National Cemeteries, while others, like Shiloh, place them on the battlefield. There's nothing bad about that use, as I am always moved by the beauty and weight that those luminaria carry. However, I still find the departure that Appomattox made from that norm interesting and powerful.



*After the sun had set, the luminaries were nearly the only source of light in the park. Only the full moon, occasional camera flashes, and campfires lit the night. Proceeding into the distance past ridges and hills, the lights went on and on. Photo courtesy of the author.*

The 152<sup>nd</sup> took that form of commemoration even further. The paper bags holding the luminaries had the names of over 3,800 of the slaves written on them. Taken from the In addition to this physical grouping by name, a list of the names was also read aloud at a podium several times throughout the day. Some of the men and women who read those names were descendants of the emancipated slaves . As the afternoon continued, the 4,600 bags were placed along the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road that runs through the park. Inside each was a battery-powered white tea light that flickered when turned on. As the sun set, the temperature plummeted, and the scene was absolutely stunning. The flickering lights along the road offered nearly the only light in the village, and the smoke and glow from the reenactors' campfires enhanced the scene. The lights illuminated the paths to buildings you could hardly see, and they continued off into the distance and over a ridge in a way that made it seem as if they went on forever. Immersed the beauty, it was simultaneously important to realize what each light meant. These lights that seemed to carry on without end signified how the number of enslaved people within Appomattox County also seemed to go on forever. It was an incredibly humbling experience both to guide visitors through the park on a momentous anniversary as well as to witness the beauty and weight of these powerful luminaries.