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Abstract
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Lee and Grant: Images of Fatherhood in Victorian America

By *Abigail Cocco '19*

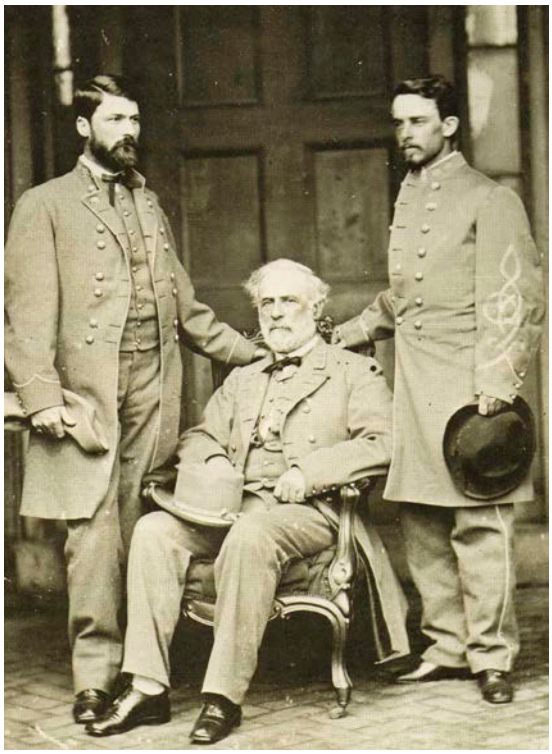
Before they were great Civil War generals, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant were fathers. Lee had seven children, three sons and four daughters. Grant was the father of three boys and a single girl. Though they are intended to paint overwhelmingly positive portraits of the two men, their children's words give us a sense of these two generals as fathers and the ways in which they reflected standard trends in fathering during the Victorian Era.

During this period, the rise of industrialization and capitalism codified gender norms and altered the dynamics of family life. Fathers increasingly worked away from the home as the production of goods shifted from the hands of artisans to the hands of unskilled laborers. Men left the farm for factories, where they completed specialized tasks in the manufacturing process. New ways of producing goods cut costs and made these goods affordable for middle-class Americans. A new middle class ideal emerged, and central to that ideal was a father who could provide these material goods while his wife and children stayed home. The shift in priorities that resulted from the emerging capitalism changed the father's role within the home. These changes were especially pronounced in the North but also appeared in the South in a more muted version.

U.S. Grant with wife, Julia, and son, Jesse. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

As more men went to work outside the home, mothers came to occupy the central role in the family. It was during this era that the idea of "separate spheres" for men and women became firmly entrenched in American society. Both Grant's and Lee's families followed this typical model of the "ideal" Victorian family: their military service necessitated that their wives be the ones to care for and educate their children. However, while family life typically centered on the mother's care and moral guidance, fathers continued to serve as the ultimate authority within the household, having the final say in disciplinary matters and teaching their children about morality and virtue.

Lee's and Grant's families confirm this generalization of fatherhood, particularly of the father as the disciplinarian. Grant's wife, Julia, wrote in her memoirs, "Whenever [the children] were inclined to disobey or question my authority, I would ask the General to speak to them." Robert E. Lee Jr. said that while he could sometimes circumvent his mother, "exact obedience to every mandate of my father was a part of my life and being at the time." Yet, the means by which a father disciplined his children during this time were reflective of society's greater emphasis on personal choice over external pressures.



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In early America, the father typically managed his household in an authoritarian style, demanding obedience from both his wife and his children. In the mid-19th century, however, a child's sense of social responsibility was expected to come from within, rather than from oppressive modes of discipline. According to his son, Frederick, Grant's "usual method of correction was to show disapproval of our actions of his

manner and quiet words." This, he remarked, "was more effective with us than scolding or whippings would have been. We all felt consternation and distress when he looked with disapproval upon what we had done." Robert Jr., too, feared the disapproval of his father. He wrote, "I never thought why, but was perfectly sure when he gave an order that it had to be obeyed." Even when his father was away during his childhood, Young Custis Lee felt the weight of the responsibility to please his father. On most of the occasions when he acted up, he "could be managed by a gentle reminder that his father had left the family in his care." The way that Grant and Lee disciplined their children is unlike the strict nature of the discipline we associate with them as generals. The disconnect between society's emphasis on personal choice and the army's more traditional means of keeping troops in line partially explains why officers in both armies struggled to discipline their men. Many soldiers, particularly volunteers, resisted the army's erosion of their independence and personal choice. A similar resistance could arise in the home when sons grew older and began to assert their own independence and manhood by challenging the previously unquestioned authority of their fathers.

Though fathers remained the ultimate disciplinarians in the home, their role in the family shifted from an authoritarian one toward a more companionate relationship with their wives and children. Though wives were still subordinate to their husbands, the emergence of two distinct spheres for men and women ensured that husbands and wives would begin to work together as equals in the management of the household. At the same time, the culture's emphasis on personal choice, as well as the diversification of means of earning wealth, meant that people were more likely to marry for love and attraction rather than to consolidate land holdings or political power. Outward displays of affection and emotion inside the home became a way for fathers to escape the strictness of life outside of it. Familial ties in the Victorian Era were usually rooted not in the authoritarian relationship of the past but in the mutual desire of fathers and their children for love and tenderness. While Lee was "very firm on all proper occasions, his children's "greatest treat was to get into his bed in the morning and lie close to him, listening while he talked to us in his bright, entertaining way." According to Frederick, Grant showed affection to his children through actions rather than words. He "bought his children many toys" and "liked to make them paper boats, which he would sail in the gutter after a rainstorm." These images of Grant and Lee stand in sharp contrast to the ways in which they are typically remembered as firm, martial, masculine men. They remind us that Grant and Lee were not just incredible generals but were also ordinary men forced to make difficult decisions and grapple with the emotional effects of those decisions.

The middle-class ideal was a family in which the father worked to provide for his family and allowed his wife and children to stay at home. Unfortunately, this ideal was not attainable for most families. Working-class fathers had no choice but to send their wives and children to work in factories in usually terrible conditions. The exploitation of children in factories led to calls for reform and the emergence of ideas about the sanctity of childhood. These ideas prompted adults of all classes to take a greater interest in the well-being and education of children. Moral obligation and deep affection demanded that parents involve themselves in their children's education. Though mothers took

primary charge of their children's education, the Lee and Grant children recall their fathers taking active roles as well. Robert Jr. wrote that on many occasions, his father would help him with difficult arithmetic by going through the problems step-by-step. Frederick Grant recalled fondly the times when Grant would read aloud to his family from classics like *Oliver Twist* and the works of Charles Dickens. Fathers were also responsible for teaching their children the strict moral code of the Victorian Era, as well values like "purity, honest, truthfulness, and consideration of others," which Grant, according to his son, taught his children by example. Considering the emphasis on separate spheres for men and women during this time, it is no surprise that fathers' interactions with their children were colored by perceptions of gender norms. Fathers encouraged their sons to pursue activities associated with masculinity. Both Robert E. Lee Jr. and Frederick Grant confirmed this image of the Victorian Era father. Grant was "so anxious that his boys be strong and manly, and took the greatest interest in our sports and pleasures." Lee, too, took a great interest in his sons' physical activities. He monitored their progress in sports like horse riding and swimming. Both men encouraged their sons to uphold values traditionally associated with masculinity from a very early age. Frederick wrote, "My father...would not tolerate timidity in his small boy, and a display of it meant an unhappy hour for him, and me also."

A father's relationship with his daughter was often incredibly important in Victorian America. However, as family members negotiated their social and gender roles in a war-torn and increasingly capitalist society, this relationship took on a different dynamic that in had in the past. Fathers were more inclined to treat their daughters as companions, and both increasingly relied on the other for love and affection. In one sense, this relationship was a way for fathers to maintain a sense of stability in a family unit that was increasingly out of their control, though "power over daughters now came less from authority than from paternal love."

Both Grant and Lee were incredibly close with their daughters. Grant's only daughter, Nellie, was said to be his favorite child, and Lee referred to his daughter, Mildred, affectionately as "Precious Life." The relationship between fathers and daughters in the North and South was a familiar constant that served to preserve a sense of the old social order. In the South, these relationships took on political significance. The legitimacy of fathers' authority over their wives and daughters served to "naturalize subordination" and, therefore, help justify the subordination of African Americans under the slave system. The political significance of the father-daughter relationship in the South perhaps ensured that this relationship would more closely resemble the paternalistic one of previous generations than it would for Northern families. In the North, close and more companionate relationships with strong fathers seemed to produce self-assured daughters who were more willing to strike out on their own. It was sometimes mentioned in the press that Grant's daughter, Nellie, "was too fond of partying, staying out late and doing other things teenagers are prone to do." In 1874, Nellie married against Grant's wishes and moved to England with her husband. While in the past, marriage often meant separation from their fathers, daughters in the Victorian Era maintained strong bonds with their fathers. Nellie communicated with her parents very frequently and sometimes spent summers with them, even after her marriage. She

remained extremely close to her father for the rest of his life. Upon learning of the severity of his illness, she rushed to the United States. Grant, though he was dying at that point, met his only daughter at the dock when she arrived.

As typical relationships between fathers and their children evolved, physical proximity became a central element of conceptions of family. The practice of sending children to boarding schools declined, indicating the preference for parental involvement on a more daily basis. In fact, two of Grant's children, Nellie and Jesse, lasted only a few days in boarding school before returning home. Unfortunately, war threatened families' abilities to remain physically together. Grant and Lee both longed to be physically close to their families. In 1861, Lee wrote to his daughters, "I wish indeed I could see you, be with you, and never again part from you." Grant's wife, Julia, wrote that Grant "wrote me many times, urging me to visit him...which I, at length...decided to do. He desired the children to accompany me." It is true that Grant often implored his wife to visit him, as long as he determined that the place and time was safe. Frequent letters and visits to camp were just two of the ways that families resisted the separation wrought by war.

In many cases, fathers and sons went off to war at the same time. All three of Lee's sons served in the Confederate Army, and Lee's youngest son wrote that whenever he had the opportunity to visit his father, Lee would "talk to me about my mother and sisters, about my horse and myself...I think my presence was very grateful to him, and he seemed to brighten up when I came." Grant's son, Frederick, though only twelve years old, accompanied his father on several campaigns. As much as possible, families tried to bridge the separation by keeping each other informed. Lee wrote to his wife, "I have not laid eyes on Rob since I saw him in the battle of Sharpsburg...Custis has seen him and says he is very well, and apparently happy and content." Lee and Grant exchanged frequent letters with their wives and children, and their families followed their military movements through the newspapers.

As fathers, Lee and Grant were just two examples of shifts in parenting that occurred during the 19th century. Broad societal changes such as the rise of capitalism altered family dynamics and challenged fathers' total control of their households. In a rapidly changing world, fathers used emotional expression in the home to escape the rigidity of public life and resist the disruption of civil war. Above all, fathers in 19th century America, like Lee and Grant, expressed their love for their wives and children and hoped that it would be returned. Images of Grant and Lee as fathers are valuable because they help us view these two generals, who have been immortalized and so often vilified, as ordinary men. Grant and Lee were imperfect generals and fathers, and they were products of the societies in which they lived.

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