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# The Sins of the Father: “Light Horse” Harry Lee and Robert E. Lee

## **Abstract**

In early 1862, Robert E. Lee was not yet in command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Instead, he was sent by Confederate President Jefferson Davis to inspect and improve the South’s coastal defenses. This job brought him to Cumberland Island, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia, and while there, he visited the ancestral home of Nathanael Greene, where his father was buried in the family plot. Greene was a famous and talented Revolutionary War general who led the Continental Army to success in taking back the Southern colonies. Lee’s father, “Light Horse” Harry Lee helped Greene take back the colonies, which is how they became friends. In a letter to his wife, Mary Anna Custis Lee, he discusses the visit and remarks how the grave is “marked by a plain marble slab.” At first glance, Lee seems to be a dutiful son visiting his father’s grave, but there is much more to the story. The story begins with Lee’s father, “Light Horse” Harry Lee, a Revolutionary War hero who seems to be just the type of person that Lee would look up to and aspire to be. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

American Revolution, Fatherhood, Harry Lee, Robert E. Lee

## **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

### The Sins of the Father: “Light Horse” Harry Lee and Robert E. Lee

By [\*Savannah Labbe '19\*](#)

In early 1862, Robert E. Lee was not yet in command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Instead, he was sent by Confederate President Jefferson Davis to inspect and improve the South's coastal defenses. This job brought him to Cumberland Island, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia, and while there, he visited the ancestral home of Nathanael Greene, where his father was buried in the family plot. Greene was a famous and talented Revolutionary War general who led the Continental Army to success in taking back the Southern colonies. Lee's father, “Light Horse” Harry Lee helped Greene take back the colonies, which is how they became friends. In a letter to his wife, Mary Anna Custis Lee, he discusses the visit and remarks how the grave is “marked by a plain marble slab.” At first glance, Lee seems to be a dutiful son visiting his father's grave, but there is much more to the story. The story begins with Lee's father, “Light Horse” Harry Lee, a Revolutionary War hero who seems to be just the type of person that Lee would look up to and aspire to be.

Harry Lee quickly rose up through the ranks in the Continental Army. In 1779, he led a handful of men on a night raid on Paulus Hook, New Jersey. The men marched thirty miles in wet terrain that damaged their gunpowder. Armed only with bayonets when they arrived, they took the British completely by surprise and captured 158 prisoners. Lee was promoted after this, and Congress minted a gold medal in his honor, one of only seven such awards. He was then sent to the Southern colonies to help Nathanael Greene take them back from the British. The Southern colonies were most full of loyalist sentiment, so Greene and Lee were sent down to ensure that the British were not able to take advantage of this loyalty and cut off the South from the rest of the colonies. The campaign was surprisingly successful under the brilliant leadership of Greene, who only commanded roughly 1,000 regulars but was able to use militia and other partisan fighters to his advantage. During this campaign, Lee and his cavalry raided British outposts, cut supply lines, and gathered information on the enemy that helped lead to the ultimate success of the Americans in the Southern theatre. After the war, Lee was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1785, and in 1787, he was elected to take part in Virginia's constitutional convention, in which he strongly fought for ratification of the Constitution. He later become governor of Virginia and was also elected to Congress.



*"Light Horse" Harry Lee. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.*

Judging from his military record and his political ambitions, Harry Lee might seem the epitome of the American patriot. However, Lee had a dark side to him, one that became more prominent as the years wore on. One can see glimpses of Lee's less favorable attributes during the Revolutionary War. Even though his actions at Paulus Hook were a success, he was court martialed due to insubordination and being too hasty in his actions. However, this charge did not stick. During the war, he was known for his brutal tactics. In 1778, he assisted General Anthony Wayne in capturing a fort at Stony Point, New York where he caught three deserters, one of which he ordered to be hanged and decapitated. He then sent the deserter's decapitated head to Washington. He also interrogated a loyalist prisoner in North Carolina by pressing a red-hot shovel to his feet to get information out of him.

Lee proved to be somewhat ruthless and also vain and arrogant. He resigned his commission in 1782 because he felt he was underappreciated. He also was summoned by Washington to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, which was an uprising of farmers in Pennsylvania who were protesting a tax on whiskey, as they often used it as a type of currency and it was important to their economy. Even though the Rebellion was bloodless, and Lee did not do much besides provide a show of force, he was promoted to general and insisted that people call him general after that.

After the war, Harry Lee's life seemed to only go downhill. He was a big dreamer and an optimist, which caused him to get involved in a lot of land speculation schemes and get himself in a lot of debt. One of these schemes was to build a canal in Great Falls, Virginia that would link the United States to Western lands on the other side of the Alleghenies. He bought 500 acres around Great Falls that he hoped to make into a city named Matildaville (named after his first wife and second cousin, Matilda Lee, who died in 1790). Neither the city nor the canal came to fruition. He tried to get out of debt by borrowing more money and buying more land, but he only ended up digging himself deeper. He started selling property he did not even own, and he put up chains on the door of his house to keep creditors out. He became very mobile in the early years of the 1800s, hardly staying at home in order to keep from paying his debts. Finally, in 1808, he gave up running and turned himself in and was put in jail for two years, released only after he agreed to pay his larger debts through the sale of land. He had written a memoir while in jail and hoped to use this to get rich again but did not make any money off of it. He then continued to avoid his debtors, going to the Caribbean and returning to the United States in 1818, where he died while staying with Nathanael Greene.

Robert E. Lee was left with a confusing legacy of his father. In fact, he hardly knew his father, as he was only two years old when Harry was imprisoned; after that, Harry spent most of his time trying to escape creditors and was not home often. In what little time Lee had known his father, Harry was no longer a Revolutionary War hero but rather a swindler, even earning the new nickname Swindling Harry Lee. So, what influence did Harry Lee have on Robert E. Lee? It seems that most of what Lee knew influenced him not to be like his father. Lee only visited Harry's grave for the first time in 1862, almost fifty years after the latter's death. Lee could have easily visited before then but never did, indicating a dislike for his father and the legacy he left. He did mention the visit to his grave to his wife, but he had to tell her in the letter how his father came to be buried there, indicating that he did not really talk about his father to anyone, including his wife. In a letter he wrote a day later to his son he did not even mention his father's grave, instead remarking on the beautiful gardens on the property.

As a result of his father's influence, Lee never drank, and he was exceedingly frugal with his money. He was very hard on himself and his children to make sure that none of them ended up like Harry. For example, in 1851 he wrote a letter to his son at West Point, admonishing him for being second in his class when he should be first. Lee was also very concerned about his honor and maintaining his status as an upstanding Virginia gentleman, most likely because his father had tarnished his honor and had not behaved

like a gentleman. Lee was determined to prove that he was different. The experience Lee had with his father helped shape the man he would become, providing a model for everything that Lee should not be. If anything, the person he became was much more like his mother. His mother made sure that he did not end up like his father and wanted Lee to grow up to be another George Washington; he even married a woman who was a descendent of Washington.

Parents always influence their children, and Robert E. Lee is no exception to this. The pressure to reclaim and reimagine his family image was very great and in many ways he did a very good job of that. Not only does Harry Lee influence how we view Robert E. Lee, Robert E. Lee also influences how we view Harry Lee. It is easy for us to overlook Harry Lee's flaws and see him as only a great Revolutionary War hero since his son was also a great military figure and it is easy to assume it is just in their blood. Robert E. Lee would probably be happy that we see his father in such a way, as he tried so hard throughout his life to redeem his family name and salvage the reputation of his father. He did not want people to know who his father really was and hardly talked about him. Instead, he set out to help save the reputation of the Lee family by being nothing like his father and always doing his duty. He felt a duty to uphold his family name and he did so by trying to erase the sins of his father. Lee in fact overshadows his father in the history books. It is Robert E. Lee that everyone talks about, not his father. He is the Lee that everyone remembers and so in many ways it seems that Lee succeeded in reclaiming the family name.

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