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The McLean House: Symbol of Reunification or Surrender Grounds?

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Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

While enjoying live music in a small coffee shop nestled in historic Appomattox, Virginia, a local asked me where I was from and what had brought me here this summer. Mine was a new face among the Friday night crowd and I expected some curious glances. However, when I explained that I was working at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, I was surprised to hear in return, “Oh, the Surrender Grounds”. This reference to the park – and the McLean House in particular – revealed one of the long-standing interpretations of the town’s events that still lives on today. Here, on April 9th, 1865 met two of the most skilled generals that ever led men into battle – with lasting implications for the nation’s future. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

[The McLean House: Symbol of Reunification or Surrender Grounds?](#)

By [Carolyn Hauk '21](#)

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While enjoying live music in a small coffee shop nestled in historic Appomattox, Virginia, a local asked me where I was from and what had brought me here this summer. Mine was a new face among the Friday night crowd and I expected some curious glances. However, when I explained that I was working at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, I was surprised to hear in return, “Oh, the Surrender Grounds”. This reference to the park – and the McLean House in particular – revealed one of the long-standing interpretations of the town’s events that still lives on today. Here, on April 9th, 1865 met two of the most skilled generals that ever led men into battle – with lasting implications for the nation’s future.

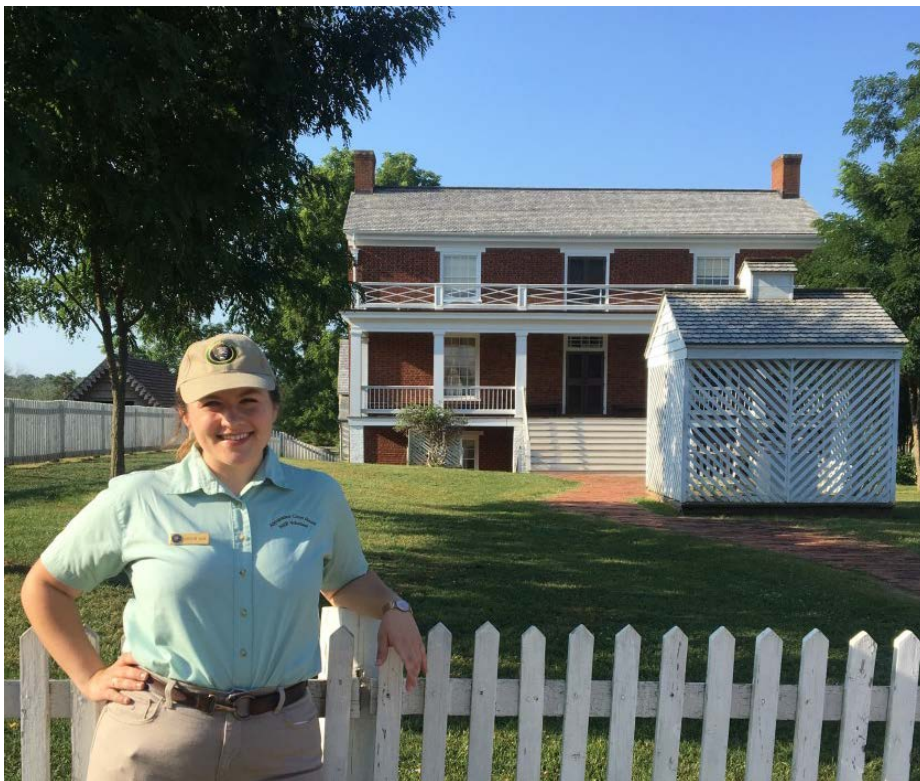
Two years prior, grocer and entrepreneur Wilmer McLean had moved his family to the small hamlet of Appomattox Court House to escape the war that had literally broken out in the backyard of his Manassas plantation. Originally a guesthouse in the Raine family tavern complex, the substantial brick McLean house reflects the well-traveled Lynchburg-Richmond State Road and the brisk stage-coach and hospitality businesses that helped to establish the village of Appomattox Court House in 1846. For the McLean family, this was now home – at least temporarily.

After nine months of laying siege to Petersburg, General Ulysses S. Grant and the Union Army finally pushed General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia west, resulting in the week-long pursuit known as the Appomattox Campaign. At each turn, Lee’s plans to secure rations and join with North Carolina Confederate forces were thwarted. Outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the Confederates lost two battles in the village. Finally, on April 9th, 1865, Lee and Grant convened in the McLean front parlor since it was Palm Sunday and the Courthouse was closed. In just over one and a half hours, the Terms of Surrender were written out by Grant and signed by Lee. As Grant had surmised, this triggered a series of Confederate surrenders that led to the official end to the Civil War.

For the Union, the McLean parlor symbolized victory — the beginning of the end of a tumultuous, four-year war. For the Confederacy, however, it meant something altogether different. During Reconstruction, the Southern war narrative would twist into a gallant, prideful story of resistance despite inevitable odds. For the Confederates, the McLean parlor did not represent defeat; rather, it was the surrender of the fight against their aggressors, the germ of what would become known as the ‘Lost Cause’. Semantics aside, for a few hours on that April afternoon the McLean parlor resonated with respect, humility, and humanity as two war-weary generals convened to bring about a peace in accordance with President’s Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address: “with malice towards none”.

In the years following Reconstruction, the events of Appomattox have been interpreted in polarizing ways. The war may have ended, but the cultural and political divide remains. Is the McLean House a national symbol of the reunification of our country or is it merely the Surrender Grounds? The battle, it seems, rages on.

Today, the McLean House is even more relevant as a monument to peaceful, humane conflict resolution. Here, two adversaries met face to face, as equals. They were not motivated by power, nor revenge, but by the greater good to put down arms, pick up pens, and “with malice toward none,” begin the process of putting to an end to one of the bloodiest conflicts in history.



Carolyn Hauk '21 in front of the McLean House at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park. Photo courtesy Carolyn Hauk.

