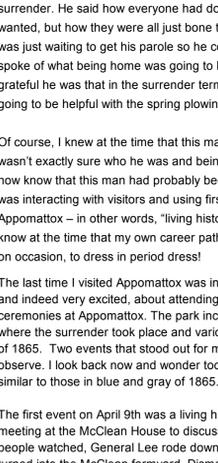




IN CAMP ALONG THE MONOCACY



From Blue and Gray Education Society Field Headquarters in Frederick Maryland
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Editor Gloria Swift and her assistant Fred

Through the Looking Glass at Appomattox

By Gloria Swift, Historian, BGES

Appomattox Court House National Historical Park in Virginia is a very special place – for so many reasons, but especially if you love Civil War history. The first time I visited there was in the springtime. I was a teenager and with my parents. As we walked along the gravel walkway in the park, I began flapping my hand in front of my face to chase off some gnats that were pestering me. All of a sudden, a voice came out of the blue saying, “Be careful...you’ll be scaring our redbirds away!” We all turned to look and found a raggedy Confederate soldier leaning up

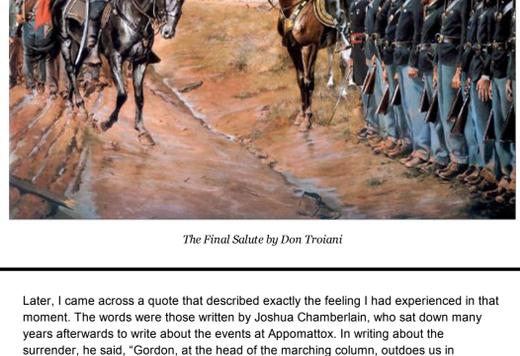
against a tree!

He introduced himself, but unfortunately, I don’t remember his name. He went on to tell us a bit about his experience in the war and about being at Appomattox during Lee’s surrender. He said how everyone had done their best, would have fought on if Lee had wanted, but how they were all just bone tired. He spoke wistfully of home and told us he was just waiting to get his parole so he could start on his journey. Most importantly, he spoke of what being home was going to be like, being back with his family and how grateful he was that in the surrender terms he was allowed to keep his horse, which was going to be helpful with the spring plowing. Life was going to be normal again.

Of course, I knew at the time that this man was not an actual Confederate soldier, but I wasn’t exactly sure who he was and being the shy teenager, I wasn’t about to ask! I now know that this man had probably been a park ranger, dressed in period clothing. He was interacting with visitors and using first person dialog to tell the story of the events at Appomattox – in other words, “living history”. He was quite convincing too. Little did I know at the time that my own career path would lead me to become a park ranger and on occasion, to dress in period dress!

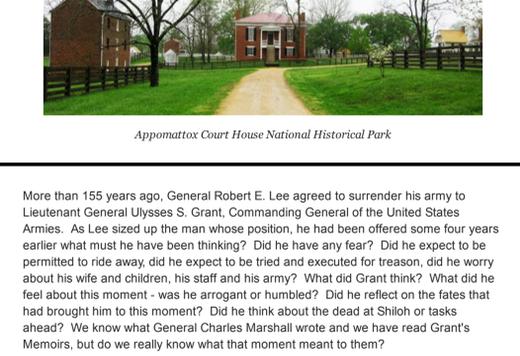
The last time I visited Appomattox was in the spring of 2015. I was fortunate enough, and indeed very excited, about attending the 150th anniversary commemorative ceremonies at Appomattox. The park includes the courthouse, the McClean House where the surrender took place and various other buildings associated with Appomattox of 1865. Two events that stood out for me those programs that were very emotional to observe. I look back now and wonder too, if the emotions I was feeling at the time were similar to those in blue and gray of 1865.

The first event on April 9th was a living history presentation about Lee and Grant meeting at the McClean House to discuss terms of surrender. As I, and 10,000 other people watched, General Lee rode down the gravel road, lined with Union soldiers, and turned into the McClean farmyard. Dismounting, he went inside the house. Shortly thereafter, Grant arrived, looking very much like he did in 1865, mud and all. While the crowd and I waited outside, the surrender terms were finalized. Finally, Lee stepped outside and while Union officers also came out onto the porch, he mounted his horse, made a final salute to Grant, and rode away – once again between the line of Union troops. As I mentioned, there were about 10,000 people in the crowd, but from the moment Lee stepped out of the McClean House to the time he rode away out of view down the gravel road, you could have heard a pin drop. I have never before had such an experience as that with the silence of the crowd. It was an emotional moment and it felt as if we had ALL stepped back into time and were witnessing the actual events. I will never ever forget it.



General Lee riding away from the McClean House after negotiating terms with General Grant during the 150th anniversary commemorative events at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park

The second living history event that I witnessed took place the next day – April 10th. This was the day the Confederate troops were going to lay down their arms and colors. The event was to take place a bit away from the Courthouse center along a stage road that Gordon’s troops had used in 1865 to come in to surrender. Once again, Union troops lined the roadway. Suddenly in the distance, I could hear the tramp of marching feet! And there were many. As I stood and listened, I contemplated that this is what it must have been like to hear the sound of a marching army during the war. It is a very distinct sound! Over a slight rise coming towards me rode General John B. Gordon followed by the Army of Northern Virginia. As he approached, the Union troops snapped to attention and shouldered arms - a salute to the approaching Confederates. Gordon was met by Major General Joshua Chamberlain who presided over the surrender. Once again, it was a very emotional moment and a lump came into my throat watching the Confederate troops stack their arms and furl their colors. And also once again, just like the day before, the crowd around me was silent. Were they feeling the same as me?



The Final Salute by Don Troiani

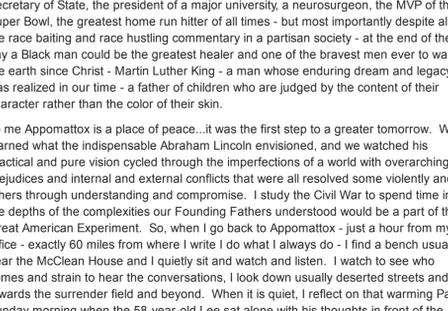
Later, I came across a quote that described exactly the feeling I had experienced in that moment. The words were those written by Joshua Chamberlain, who sat down many years afterwards to write about the events at Appomattox. In writing about the surrender, he said, “Gordon, at the head of the marching column, looks us in courtesy. He was riding with downcast eyes and most was pensive, but at this clatter of arms he raises his eyes and instantly catching the significance, wheels his horse with that superb grace of which he is master, drops the point of his sword to his stirrup, gives a command, at which the great Confederate ensign following him is dipped and his decimated brigades, as they reach our right, respond to the ‘carry!’ All the while on our part not a sound of trumpet or drum, not a cheer, nor a word nor motion of man, but awful stillness as if it were the passing of the dead”.

Appomattox is indeed a special place, for so many reasons, but especially where you can experience a significant part of our nation’s history. It was at Appomattox where our nation, torn apart by four long years of war, began to come together again. It is a place of healing and peace, and you will feel both very deeply there. Give yourself the opportunity of a visit. But when you go, be careful not to scare away their redbirds!

The Commencement, Reflections Upon Appomattox

By Len Riedel

Executive Director, BGES



Appomattox Court House National Historical Park

More than 155 years ago, General Robert E. Lee agreed to surrender his army to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, Commanding General of the United States Armies. As Lee sized up the man whose position, he had been offered some four years earlier - what must he have been thinking? Did he have any fear? Did he expect to be permitted to ride away, did he expect to be tried and executed for treason, did he worry about his wife and children, his staff and his army? What did Grant think? What did he feel about this moment - was he arrogant or humbled? Did he reflect on the fates that had brought him to this moment? Did he think about the death, at Shiloh or tasks ahead? Or do we know what General Charles Marshall wrote and we have read Grant’s Memoirs, but do we really know what that moment meant to them?

Outside those men and in the private quarters of the White House in Washington DC or in the Sutherland Mansion just south of Danville on the road to oblivion - what did the news of Appomattox mean to them? What did they think? It has been said that Lincoln had premonitions of his own death - surely the voices of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, fathers, mothers, wives, daughters and sons all poured out of every pore in Lincoln’s war torn face as he realized the moment was at hand now barely a month into his second term in which it was time to care for he who had borne the battle and for his widow and children. He who would now have to reunite the nation and settle with the makers of the rebellion...how could he reconcile; how could he be merciful and how could he reunite that which blood and conflict had forcibly torn apart? What could he say and what could he do in this most holy of weeks not knowing that in less than a week he would too lay his life upon the altar of his country? What of the man in Danville, chased from his home and capital a fugitive without a country and now without his primary military crutch and his army? Realizing he was the prey of the hunter - indeed at Henry County Court House less than 35 miles away Federal cavalry commander George Stoneman’s detachments were contemplating a rush to Danville. He would continue his flight - but to where?

And what of the armies? Those brave men in butternut, gray and blue, white and black whom had found themselves in a section of the country few knew existed and many would never visit again. Where would they go what would they do? When would they go home? What home would they go to? Would their families be there to greet them, or would they be haunted by the memories of friends killed randomly and without warning? How could they return to farming, clerking and mining? What would black men do now that they had been freed and bore arms? Was there a future for them?

I raise these points because they are questions that I see that are eternal and afflict us even today. For more than 13 years we have interacted with their comrades in olive drab and desert khaki. We have seen the spirit of men whose arms and legs have been blown off by mines and explosive devices, we have assimilated men and women who have seen the elephant and as young as those heroic men in 1861 answered their nation’s call - where in June they were at their high school prom with their teenage sweetheart now less than 90 days later clinging to life with both legs off at the hip two weeks after entering the combat zone. We see a government besieged by the demands of men and women fighting for their dignity and to regain their youth and piece of the American Dream. We also see men and women haunted by the unforgettable events they participated in and the rank inhumanity that war reduced them to. Yet if you look closely enough you see them triumphing in their own ways - forging a new path forward and assuming the mantle of leadership - a mantle deservedly awarded to those who are the few - the chosen few - the band of brothers and sisters.

The town of Appomattox boasts that it is the Place where America was reunited - it is a lie. It is the place where America turned in a new direction. It was the end of the first great epoch, and it put forth the jingoistic and idealistic concept that “All Men Were Created Equal.” In God’s eyes perhaps yes but in our eyes, it was the fork in the road the place where we could not turn away from. We had to deal with the humanity of the enslaved and the deconstruction of humanity as property to be controlled and exploited. I have labored it to trying to remove a stain from a favorite shirt - you can wash it and wash it and it will be, but the stain remains - admittedly fainter but still distinctively there even after more than 155 years. We tried educating, we tried excluding, we tried separating and we tried integrating but yet we cannot make it whole even now. But what we have done is evolve - truly we have achieved the promise...a black man could grow up to be president, he could be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he or she could be a Senator, Governor or Congressman. He or she could be an astronaut, be the Secretary of State, the president of a major university, a neurosurgeon, the MVP of the Super Bowl, the greatest home run hitter of all times - but most importantly despite all the race baiting and race hustling commentary in a partisan society - at the end of the day a Black man could be the greatest singer and one of the bravest men ever to walk the earth since Christ - Martin Luther King - a man whose enduring dream and legacy was realized in our time - a father of children who are judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin.

To me Appomattox is a place of peace...it was the first step to a greater tomorrow. We learned what the indispensable Abraham Lincoln envisioned, and we watched his practical and pure vision cycled through the imperfections of a world with overarching prejudices and internal and external conflicts that we all resolved some violently and others through understanding and compromise. I study the Civil War to spend time in the depths of the complexities our Founding Fathers understood would be a part of the Great American Experiment. So, when I go back to Appomattox - just a hour from my office - exactly 60 miles from where I write I do what I always do - I find a bench usually near the McClean House and I quietly sit and watch and listen. I watch to see who comes and strain to hear the conversations, I look down usually deserted streets and towards the surrender field and beyond. When it is quiet, I reflect on that warming Palm Sunday morning when the 58-year-old Lee sat alone with his thoughts in front of the Confederate picket line waiting for an escort into the village. How was his stomach and his angina and I think of the 42-year-old Grant - down on his luck just 4 years earlier and now about to end the greatest threat to America in its 81 1/2 years of independence. I am now 66 with a career behind me and more than 55 years in the study of this great event. It has impacted me and that is why there is a Blue and Gray Education Society - because I believe we must reveal our past for our Future generations and pay it forward if we are to Save Our Civil War History! We owe it to them - yes to all of them.

Len

Appomattox: An End and a Beginning

By Bert Dunkerly

Park Ranger, Richmond National Battlefield Park

The first week of April, 1865 saw a rapid and unexpected ending to the war. On April 1, Union troops crushed Confederate forces at Five Forks. The next day the Petersburg defenses were breached. That evening the Confederates evacuated Richmond and Petersburg, and on the 3rd, Union troops entered the capital. Lincoln, who happened to be nearby, toured Richmond on the 4th.

Lee’s army turned west, its command structure shattered, its hopes of reinforcement gone, and its hope of re-supply slipping away. The constant marching and combat was exhausting. One soldier recalled, “. . . the march was almost continuous, day and night, and it is with the greatest difficulty that a private in the ranks can recall with accuracy the dates and places on the march. Night was day-day was night. There was no . . . time to sleep, eat, or rest . . .”

Union troops endured hardships too. Captain Albert Maxfield of the 11th Maine wrote, “It was now a question of legs and endurance. On and on our men plodded.” Another from Illinois stated that they were “days without stopping for meals or sleep.”

Lee’s immediate goal was Farmville, where he hoped to rest his exhausted men and receive supplies. Yet at Sailor’s Creek, the Confederate army met disaster as Union troops attacked at three points. The Confederates tried to stop and fight, but were overwhelmed. It was one of the worst defeats of the whole war, and Lee wondered out loud if his army had been dissolved.

Much of General Richard Ewell’s Corps was captured, along with Ewell himself. Lee lost 1/5 of his army in one day: 8,000 men, 9 generals (including son Major General Custis Lee), about 50 battle flags, and many cannons, wagons, horses, and supplies.

As the survivors staggered into Farmville, Lee realized things were at a crisis level. There was little time to rest, and Lee decided to continue west with the ultimate goal of reaching General Joseph Johnston’s army in North Carolina.

On April 8 the Army of Northern Virginia reached Appomattox Court House. The men in the ranks knew their situation was desperate, but they had been in tight spots before. Private A.C. Jones of the 3rd Arkansas wrote, “Up to this time there was not a man in the command who had the slightest doubt that General Lee would be able to bring his army safely out of its desperate straits...”

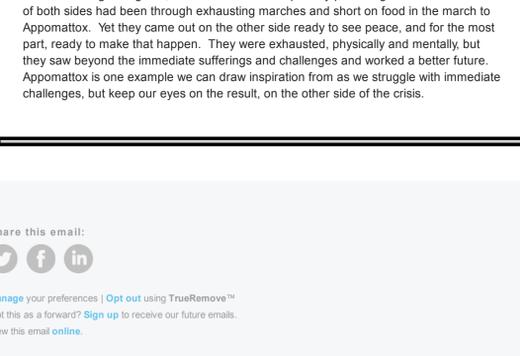
Yet the army’s organization was in chaos. Captured or wounded officers could not be properly replaced. Many commands were merged, and the army was an ad-hoc organization that reflected the chaos of the preceding week.

At Lee’s headquarters, Lt. Col. Colonel Charles Marshall recalled that “We lay upon the ground, near the road, and with our saddles for pillows, our horses . . . eating the bark from the trees for want of better provender, and with our faces covered with the capes of our overcoats to keep out the night air.”

Lee and his exhausted officers held a council of war at his headquarters. It was acknowledged that Union cavalry was in front of them, and the officers agreed on an attack to break through and continue the retreat.

The final battle between the major field armies in Virginia closed early on April 9. The attack was initially successful, but Union reinforcements closed the door on Lee’s retreat by mid-morning. Flags of truce soon went out, and Lee and Grant prepared to meet.

They met around 1:20 that afternoon in the parlor of the McClean family house. Lee asked what Grant’s terms would be. He replied that the Confederates would have to surrender their arms and equipment, but would then be allowed to go home. Lee asked for this in writing, and Grant wrote out the terms and passed them to Lee.



The Stagecoach Road, scene of the Confederate surrender - Appomattox Courthouse
Photo by Bert Dunkerly

Quickly, the Confederate commander, General John Gordon, ordered his men to shoulder arms, returning the salute. It was incredible: Union and Confederate soldiers facing each other and honoring each other.

Lieutenant Abner R. Cox of the Palmetto Sharpshooters (SC) noted, “. . . a large force of Yankee infantry was drawn up on either side of the road, with flags flying and officers and men in full uniform. We marched up one line, and our Regt. stacked arms in front of the 118th Pennsylvania. The men were very civil and polite. . .”

To achieve a larger goal for the common good, men on both sides came together, and in many cases, went above and beyond. We see it at Appomattox where Grant offered lenient terms to Lee’s army and ensured their safe travel home, and later at Bennett Place, where Johnston went against the orders of his superior, Davis, to meet with Sherman. And Sherman worked with Johnston to ensure an end to the fighting and save lives.

It had been a grueling war, and it had been an especially punishing few weeks. Soldiers of both sides had been through exhausting marches and short on food in the march to Appomattox. Yet they came out on the other side ready to see peace, and for the most part, ready to make that happen. They were exhausted, physically and mentally, but they saw beyond the immediate sufferings and challenges and worked a better future. Appomattox is one example we can draw inspiration from as we struggle with immediate challenges, but keep our eyes on the result, on the other side of the crisis.

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