

George Washington Custis Lee

General Robert E. Lee's son, Major General George Washington Custis Lee, was elected to the MAC presidency in 1866, but declined the position for both personal and public reasons.

The oldest child of Confederate military hero General Robert E. Lee, George Washington Custis Lee was born in Virginia in 1832. He was named for his maternal grandfather, George Washington Custis, who had been raised by his adoptive grandfather, President George Washington. He received some of his early education under the direction of Benjamin Hallowell, a Quaker schoolmaster, the first president of MAC. Custis, as he was called, followed his family's professional path and attended the United States Military Academy, graduating first in his class in 1854. He was appointed to the Corps of Engineers and assigned to construct military fortifications across the country.

Both the Lees, father and son, were officers in the United States Army when Virginia seceded, and both reluctantly resigned within a few weeks of each other to accept commissions in the Provisional Army of Virginia. When Virginia turned its army over to the Confederate States, the younger Lee became a captain of engineers, and soon after, was promoted to colonel and named an aide-de-camp to President Jefferson Davis, Commander-in-Chief of the army.



(CONFEDERATE.)

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Geo. W. C. Lee
Col.

Appears on a Register
of Appointments, Confederate States Army.

State Va.

To whom report The President

Date of appointment Aug. 31, 1861.

Date of confirmation , 1861.

To take rank Aug. 31, 1861.

Date of acceptance , 1861.

Delivered Richmond, Va.

Secretary of War L. P. W.

Remarks: Aide-de-Camp
with rank of Colonel
of Cavalry.
Act No. 21 Approved Apr. 2, 1862.

Confed. Arch., Chap. 1, File No. 86, page 130

Geo. S. Preston
5797 Copyist.

(636)

Custis Lee spent most of the war years as a close advisor to Davis rather than gaining field experience, apparently against his own wishes and those of his father. By the time President Davis offered to General Lee to promote Custis and give him command of a branch of the army, his father declined, saying that he could not promote an “untried man” over his men with more experience. Custis Lee was assigned to the defense of Richmond and eventually led a skeleton division after the city fell in April 1865, but was captured a few days later. He was then a major general.

After the war, Custis Lee was named chair of Military and Civil Engineering at the Virginia Military Institute, in Lexington, Virginia. In the interim, his father had become the president of Washington University, located in the same town.

Not completely satisfied with his situation, Custis Lee inquired about positions in other states, including Maryland. The MAC Board of Trustees elected him president in December 1866, but Lee never arrived on campus. He declined the position the following month in a letter to board chair James T. Earle, citing his sense of obligation to VMI and admitting he remained unsure about his suitability for academia.

Custis Lee's decision may also have been affected by sentiments expressed in the Maryland legislature. Taking a greater interest in the college because of the state's budgetary commitment to it, members of the General Assembly offered a strongly worded resolution in opposition to Lee's election.

The legislators may also have been angered by his close association with Jefferson Davis, still imprisoned at that time. Faced with the choice of remaining near his father, with whom he shared a close relationship, in a commonwealth where they were both revered, or moving to a more hostile environment for a job he wasn't sure he wanted, Custis Lee chose the safer path.

He stayed at VMI for three additional years, then accepted the presidency of Washington University, renamed Washington & Lee, when his father died in 1870.

Custis Lee retired from Washington & Lee in 1897 and lived quietly at Ravensworth, the Fitzhugh family estate in Virginia, until he died in 1913.

658 JOURNAL OF PROCEEDINGS [Mar. 1, 1867.]
OF THE HOUSE OF DELEGATES.

The House took up for consideration the resolutions directing the Comptroller to pay Trustees of Agricultural College remaining instalments for purchasing an interest in said college.

Said resolutions being upon a second reading,

Mr. Appleman submitted the following substitute:

Whereas, The State Agricultural College, situated in Prince George's county, was constructed and is sustained at vast expense of the State;

And whereas, The General Assembly, at its session of 1865, directed the land scrip donated by the General Government to the State of Maryland, to be applied solely for the benefit of said college, thus making it a Federal as well as State institution;

And whereas, The trustees of said college have recently appointed to the presidency and chief professorship a notorious rebel and traitor, a certain General Custis Lee, late of the rebel army, the influence of whose public character, as well as his professional labors, would have had a dangerous tendency to corrupt the minds of pupils with treason and disloyalty to the Government; therefore,

1st. Resolved, by the General Assembly of Maryland, That the State Agricultural College would be an unsafe place for the education of our young men, and wholly unworthy of either State or Federal patronage, with a man of that cast at its head.

2d. Resolved, That the Treasurer and Comptroller of the Treasury be and they are hereby instructed to withhold from payment all monies or interests heretofore appropriated to said institution, in case of the occupancy of the professorship or presidency of said college by any man who has been in the confederate army;

Which was rejected.