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.

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.

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.