



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The local origin story of Robert E. Lee

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Image: 611 Cameron Street in the 1920s. Photo, Library of Congress.

At the start of the Civil War on April 23, 1861, just three days after resigning his post in the U.S. Army and exactly one month before Virginia's vote in favor of secession, Robert E. Lee accepted command of the Virginia state forces. The handsome general, who lived nearby at Arlington House, grew up in Alexandria and lovingly considered the city his hometown.

Although born at Stratford Hall, the Lee family plantation in Westmoreland County, young Robert was brought to Alexandria with his siblings at the age of four in the winter of 1810-11 to live at 611 Cameron St. As a member of two of Virginia's most illustrious families, his parents Ann Hill Carter and Henry Lee III feigned to have moved their children north to take advantage of the fine educational facilities in Alexandria.

However, in reality, Henry Lee had just emerged from a debtor's prison in Montross, Va., after serving a one-year sentence. When he emerged from his jail term, the ninth Governor of Virginia, former Revolutionary War commander nicknamed "Lighthouse Harry of Lee's Legion" and the man who had eulogized George Washington with the phrase, "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen" found himself in seriously distressed circumstances.

Stratford Hall had to be transferred to his son from an earlier marriage, Henry Lee IV known as "Black Horse", who quickly became ensconced in debt and was forced to sell the homestead within a few years after the older Lees' move to Alexandria.

The Federal-style dwelling at 611 Cameron St., as seen on the left side in this photo dating from the 1920s, was actually built in 1795 by cabinetmaker John Bogue for his own use, along with the companion home next door that was purchased by rope maker James Irwin. That same year, Bogue opened a ship joinery that doubled as a cabinet and home building workshop on Princess Street, near Hepburn's Wharf. A former British subject, Bogue had earlier been naturalized as a U.S. citizen.

His business prospered quickly and in 1796 he opened a large store near his workshop that carried an extensive selection of hardware and building materials. By the early 1800s he had relocated to a larger home and offered 611 Cameron St. for lease, which ultimately attracted the humbled Lee family. Although the home is often referred to as the General Henry Lee House, the family lived there for only





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about a year. When the lease ended, Mrs. Lee moved the children to a home owned by a relative, William Fitzhugh Lee, at 607 Oronoco St., near to other members of the family.

Soon after relocating to Alexandria, amid British provocations that would lead to the declaration of the War of 1812, Henry Lee was offered a military commission as a Major General. He readily accepted, but on the way to receive his command on July 27, 1812, he was seriously injured in Baltimore while trying to defend his close friend Alexander Hanson, editor of a local newspaper opposed to the war, from a mob attack. Hanson, Lee and others were severely beaten by the crowd, and Lee suffered serious internal injuries and head wounds.

To recuperate, he traveled around the West Indies and on his way back to Virginia stopped at the home of Gen. Nathaniel Greene on Cumberland Island, Ga., where he died suddenly in 1818. Robert was then only 11 years old and had only bare memories of his father. But years later, during the War Between the States, realizing that he would probably never return to Arlington or Alexandria, he expressed to his wife a desire to reacquire Stratford Hall and possibility rebuild a life for them at the quiet family homestead. His dream never came to pass.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.