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**Let’s get real about Robert E. Lee and slavery**

**Was he a hero, a traitor, an abolitionist or a slave whipper?**

**Workers removed Virginia’s biggest statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on Sept. 8.**

Washington Post

By Gillian Brockell

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People in Richmond clapped and cheered on Wednesday as a huge bronze statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee was removed from its place of honor on Monument Avenue.

“Hey, hey, hey, goodbye!” they chanted.

But around the country, there were some different takes. Former president Donald Trump released a statement condemning the removal and claiming that Lee, commander of the force that lost the Civil War, would have won in Afghanistan. The Associated Press drew criticism after describing Lee as a “hero” in a headline. On social media, many revived old claims that Lee was against secession and slavery, was practically an abolitionist and never personally owned enslaved people.

So, is any of that true?

On the one hand, it is true that Lee opposed secession in early 1861, before Virginia seceded.

On the other hand, there’s everything else.

For example, Lee also said he would “never bear arms against the Union” except to defend Virginia — a vow he did not keep at Antietam or Gettysburg.

And despite what old revisionist history or social media memes claim, Lee owned enslaved people. He drove them hard, and he pursued and punished them when they escaped. He separated families to pay off debts and fought in court to prevent them from being freed.

Robert E. Lee personally inherited “three or four families” of enslaved people from his mother upon her death in 1829, when he was in his early 20s, according to the American Civil War Museum. Then, a few years before the Civil War broke out, he became the executor of his father-in-law’s estate, which included nearly 200 enslaved people.

Lee’s father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, was the step-grandson of George Washington. Though the first president never had biological children, he helped raise Custis and many other children in his extended family. Custis owned several estates in Virginia, which he maintained with the labor of people he enslaved. He also used them to build the grand mansion he named Arlington House, which still stands, and had at least one Black child from the rape of an enslaved woman named Arianna Carter. That child, Maria Carter, served as the personal maid of her White half sister, Mary Anna.

In 1831, Mary Anna married Lee, a recent West Point graduate. For the next three decades, the Lees lived at Arlington House whenever Lee wasn’t stationed somewhere else; they raised their seven children there. So when Lee’s father-in-law died in October 1857, Lee was the natural choice to take control of the estate.

But there was a catch: In his will, Custis requested that the people he enslaved be freed as soon as possible and no later than five years after his death. According to a letter published by the New York Times in December 1857, Custis on his deathbed had told some of the people he enslaved that he wanted them to be freed immediately. Also, the letter claimed, the heirs were trying to sell some of the enslaved people South and slow the emancipation of others.

The Times subsequently published a letter from Lee that he said corrected the record on those points. But over the next few years, he twice asked state courts to extend the five-year deadline, concerned that Custis left his heirs with so much debt that it would take longer than five years of slave labor to pay it off. He took a two-year leave from his military career to oversee the work himself. He also hired out some of the enslaved to plantations farther South, separating families who had been together since Washington’s Mount Vernon, according to historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor in “Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters.”

In 1859, there was another scandal. Two anonymous letters published in the New York Tribune claimed that Lee was a strict disciplinarian and that he had harshly punished three enslaved people after they were caught in an escape attempt. “Col. Lee ordered them whipped,” one of the letters claimed. “They were two men and one woman. The officer whipped the two men, and said he would not whip the woman, and Col. Lee stripped her and whipped her himself.”

Lee didn’t seek a correction or comment publicly this time, although in private wrote to his son: “The N.Y. Tribune has attacked me for my treatment of your grandfather’s slaves, but I shall not reply. He has left me an unpleasant legacy.”

In 1866, Wesley Norris, one of the formerly enslaved men who had tried to escape, gave this testimony about the incident in an abolitionist newspaper:

“... We remained in prison fifteen days, when we were sent back to Arlington; we were immediately taken before Gen. Lee, who demanded the reason why we ran away; we frankly told him that we considered ourselves free; he then told us he would teach us a lesson we never would forget; he then ordered us to the barn, where in his presence, we were tied firmly to posts by a Mr. Gwin, our overseer, who was ordered by Gen. Lee to strip us to the waist and give us fifty lashes each, excepting my sister, who received but twenty; we were accordingly stripped to the skin by the overseer, who, however, had sufficient humanity to decline whipping us; accordingly Dick Williams, a county constable was called in, who gave us the number of lashes ordered; Gen. Lee, in the meantime, stood by, and frequently enjoined Williams to ‘lay it on well,’ an injunction which he did not fail to heed; not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh, Gen. Lee then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine, which was done.”

While Norris doesn’t repeat the claim that Lee personally whipped his sister, he does say Lee went to great lengths to see them whipped and even ordered that their wounds be doused with salt water to increase their suffering.

Lee still did not comment publicly, although he denied it in a letter to a friend. For many years, some historians cast doubt on Norris’s account, implying that abolitionists had manipulated him into exaggerating or just plain lying. In Pryor’s book, however, she presents a number of other accounts of the incident that more or less agree with Norris’s. And in Lee’s own papers, she located a receipt for a payment to the constable on the day in question.

Lee is sometimes defended as a “man of his times,” who, by the standards of the day, could not have concluded that slavery was wrong or that he could choose loyalty to the United States over Virginia. The former claim ignores the millions of Black Americans who were able to divine slavery’s evil at that time, not to mention White abolitionists and White Southerners such as Cassius Marcellus Clay, James Birney and Elizabeth Van Lew, who inherited enslaved people and freed them. As for the latter claim, it is worth noting that other high-ranking military officers from Virginia remained loyal to the United States, among them generals Winfield Scott and George Thomas.

So, Lee participated in slavery. But did he at least hate it, as Ken Burns claimed in his landmark 1990 documentary, “The Civil War”?

In public, he was neither strongly pro- nor anti-slavery. In private, many point to a letter Lee wrote to his wife in 1856, in which he called slavery a “moral & political evil.” It sounds unequivocal enough, but then Lee expands on his reasoning:

“I think it however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially & physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, & I hope will prepare & lead them to better things. How long their subjugation may be necessary is known & ordered by a wise Merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy.”

That is not how things went.

By the time Lee officially freed the people his family held in bondage, the Civil War was in full swing and the Arlington estate had been seized by the Union army. In the end, Lee blew the five-year deadline by a handful of weeks, officially freeing them on Dec. 29, 1862.

Three days later, President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation went into effect.

**Questions:**

* **Using evidence from this text, explain what the author wanted you to learn.**
* **Using evidence from this text, explain why some people want the American South to get rid of their confederate statues.**
* **Using evidence from this text, explain what kind of slave owner General Robert E. Lee was.**
* **General Robert E. Lee has been called both a traitor and a hero. What do you think – traitor or hero? Explain your position.**