

The Lee Family's Silver Came To Lexington Before The General Did

GEORGE and Martha Washington, father and mother of our nation, collected beautiful household objects. Washington and Lee has some of their porcelain, donated by Louise and Euchlin Reeves in 1967. The Washingtons also owned a big collection of silver – tableware, wine-bottle holders and other sterling silver pieces.

Martha Washington, who died in 1802, three years after her husband's death in 1799, bequeathed "all the silver plate of every kind" which she owned to her grandson, George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857). After his death, his only child, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, inherited the silver

Mary (1808-73) had married Robert E. Lee in 1831, when she



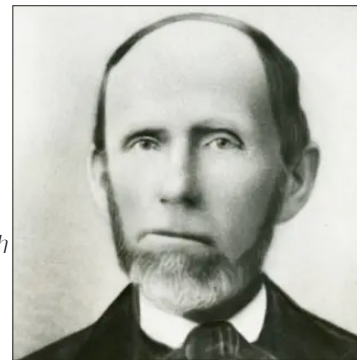
Mary Custis Lee in a Miley photo, c. 1868

was 23, and the couple lived at Arlington, her ancestral home outside Washington, for the next 30 years.

PAST FORWARD to 1861 and the beginning of the Civil War. Lee left Arlington to join the Confederate forces. Everyone knew that for strategic and symbolic reasons, Arlington was a prime military target, situated as it was atop the heights overlooking the Capitol. Lee wrote to his wife: "You had better prepare all things for removal, that is the plate, pictures &c."

That she did. The treasures were sent first to Alexandria, then to Richmond, and from there to Lexington, where they would be hidden at the Virginia Military Institute, out of harm's way. There is no indication as to why, of all the places the Lees might have chosen, VMI was where they sent their silver treasures. The portrait collection was similarly sent to her aunt's home, Ravensworth, in Fairfax County and the books and porcelain were hidden in closets and the cellar at Arlington.

By 1864, however, the war was about to reach the Valley in the



John Hampsey, 1877, in a Miley photograph

west of the state, where VMI was located. VMI's superintendent, Francis H. Smith, instructed the institute's ordnance sergeant, John Hampsey, to bury the two large trunks containing the Lee/Washington family silver, and Hampsey did as asked.

After the war was over, and by an amazing coincidence, Lee accepted the presidency of Washington College, which was next door to VMI in Lexington – a town in which he had never before set foot. The Lees, Robert E. and Mary, then asked Hampsey to unearth the buried treasure, and again he did as asked.

THUS the silver was returned to the Lees, "black with mould and damp," as the Lees' son Robert Jr., wrote – but intact.

When Mrs. Lee died, the collection dispersed among her relatives,

but in 2007, Robert E. Lee IV and his sister, Mary Lee Bowman, found tucked away in Mrs. Bowman's basement several of the silver pieces, and they donated them to Mount Vernon.

And so those artifacts, which had been collected at Mount Vernon in the 18th century, went back to their original home in the 21st.

MOUNT VERNON



(The story comes from the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, which owns and administers Mount Vernon.)

One of two "bottle rollers" owned by the Washingtons, passed down to the Lees — a lazy Susan for wine bottles