MARY CUSTIS LEE UNPACKS THE WASHINGTON RELICS:  
A REVOLUTIONARY INHERITANCE IN MUSEUMS, 1901-1918

by

Hannah Boettcher

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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Mary Custis Lee was an avid networker, so it is not surprising that this project, the culmination of my studies at Winterthur Museum, has relied upon a common generous spirit of many museum professionals in disparate institutions. Mary Custis Lee’s story became the subject of over two years of family dinner conversations. Thank you to my parents and my sister, Emma, for their authentic interest as I followed “MCL,” a new household name, from our home on Arlington Road to Arlington National Cemetery.

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historical artifacts can build communities—a sentiment that I believe Lee would have both anticipated and appreciated. Thank you to Scott Stephenson, Michelle Presnall, Philip Mead, Steve Delisle, Paul Davis, Mary Jane Taylor, Virginia Whelan, John Rees, Neal Hurst and Michelle Moskal for their expertise and tireless mentorship.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents and Emma,
and written in memory of Elaine S. Weil (another revolutionary heroine)
for the Museum of the American Revolution.
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ABSTRACT

Mary Custis Lee (1835-1918), General Robert E. Lee’s eldest daughter and a descendant of Martha Washington, offered George Washington’s military tents for sale to benefit the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond, Virginia in 1906. This decision exemplifies how Lee mobilized her inheritance to preserve her family’s private history and make its legacy accessible to a national audience. The tents were part of a group of household items known to her family as the “Mount Vernon relics,” confiscated by Union military occupants at Arlington House in 1861, displayed in the United States Patent Office and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum from 1862 to 1901 and inherited by Mary Custis Lee when President McKinley restored the relics to the Lee family in 1901.

Between 1901 and 1918, Lee simultaneously managed, promoted, exhibited and interpreted the Washington relics in ways that presaged modern museum work. This collaborative project required Lee to repurpose two travel trunks and create a personal archive to house the Washington, Custis and Lee family records, which set historic precedents for her engagement with museums and historical institutions. She added correspondence, diaries, souvenirs and ephemera to the collection of family papers (1694-1917), all of which compose the Mary Custis Lee Papers at Virginia Historical Society. This thesis uses the trunks and their contents, discovered in Lee’s bank vault in Alexandria, Virginia, in 2002, as a fundamental starting point for mapping Lee’s social networks in Richmond; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; New
Orleans and many international destinations. Addressing Mary Custis Lee’s previously untold biography, this thesis studies her papers and objects to tell her story using a material culture framework. Retracing Lee’s work to unpack family heirlooms offers new information about selected Washington relics’ provenance. Her experiences as a tourist, participation in commemorative events, strategic interactions with American museums and targeted dispersal of the relics impacted how and why today’s visitors can view historic artifacts interpreted as George Washington’s belongings, once considered eighteenth-century relics to a nineteenth-century public. Mary Custis Lee’s convictions about her revolutionary inheritance and these objects’ cultural relevance to distinct institutions transformed the collective understanding of her family’s heritage in American memory.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: MARY CUSTIS LEE FINDS HOMES FOR THE WASHINGTON RELICS

Behind many of the household objects revered by museums as George Washington’s ‘relics’ is a story about how their previous owners were displaced from their home, only to reconstruct their family history for a new national audience after the American Civil War.¹ Today, these eighteenth-century objects can be interpreted together to form a three-century, cross-institutional traveling exhibition about Washington’s belongings as symbols of national memory. Mary Custis Lee (1835-1918), General Robert E. Lee and Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee’s eldest daughter and last surviving child and the great-great-granddaughter of Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, was the twentieth-century ‘curator’ of this figurative exhibition.²

¹ Teresa Barnett, Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9, 23-28. Barnett’s book influences this thesis’s goal to “look anew at our own scarcely articulated notions of what makes an object historical and of how things work to represent the past.” She argues that “relic-like things are undeniably complex and include an alienation from impersonal, state-sponsored forms of commemoration…the objects now on display in our history museums demonstrate that examining the nineteenth-century relic is not simply an abstruse exercise in antiquarianism but engages ways of transmitting the past that are reverberating anew in our contemporary culture…”

Lee’s convictions about her inherited collections’ national significance motivated her to find new homes for these objects. The Washington-Custis-Lee objects traveled from Mount Vernon to Arlington House with her grandparents and from Arlington House to the Smithsonian Institution’s United States National Museum during Lee’s lifetime. From the time that she re-acquired the “Washington relics” from the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum in 1901 until her death in 1918, Lee’s ambitious preservation efforts and attention to these objects’ provenance ensured that these objects could be appreciated by today’s museum visitors. In her decisions about the objects and their next destinations, from home to museum, Lee fought for her famous household collection’s security and public relevance.

Redistributing the Washington relics was a family project based in Virginia that involved many organizations and institutions, North and South. This network of exchange had numerous facilitators: George and Martha Washington, their descendants, government officials and rising figures in the fields of historical preservation and museums. Three generations of the Custis-Lee family worked to


4 Today, Mary Custis Lee’s Washington relics and artifacts from her personal collection can be visited at the Museum of the American Revolution, Virginia Historical Society, George Washington’s Mount Vernon, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington and Lee University, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Tudor Place along with other museums, libraries and historic sites.
trace George Washington’s military and domestic objects, things that embodied revolutionary ideals in the aftermath of a larger American conflict.\(^5\)

Lee viewed her part in the project as fulfilling a familial responsibility, motivated by charity and patriotism for Southern ideals as well as American ones. Although she footnoted her historical sources about these objects’ significance, her own voice ultimately authenticated the objects as “Revolutionary Relics.”\(^6\) Born in 1835 at Arlington House, Lee was thirty when the Civil War ended. She embarked on adventures in Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa between 1870-1901, usually accompanied by friends and relatives. In each city and country she visited, Lee formed a reputation as “General Lee’s oldest daughter,” who interpreted the Washington-Custis-Lee family’s significance to American history for foreign dignitaries.\(^7\) In the United States and especially in Virginia, Lee was famous throughout her life for both Washington and Lee ties. This connection was more strongly emphasized by the press after 1905, when she became the last surviving daughter and eventually, in 1914-1918,


\(^6\) Mary Custis Lee Papers, 1694-1917, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia [Mss 1 L5144 a Manuscripts]; Membership certificate for Daughters of the American Revolution, Revolutionary Relics Committee, 1916, MCL Papers, VHS.

the last surviving child of Robert E. Lee (Figure 4). The press called her “Martha Washington’s last surviving descendant of her generation,” but her will requested that “Last surviving child of Robert E. Lee” be inscribed on her urn before placement in the Lee Chapel family crypt at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.8

At home and among her immediate family, Lee was referred to as “Daughter” and “Sister.”9 As a young Francophile, she also went through several phases when she signed letters as “Marielle.”10 Unfortunately for future scholars, these frequent nicknames sometimes caused confusion between Lee and her namesake mother, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee. Because both Lee and her mother corresponded with museums about the Washington relics, researching these objects, requires careful attention to dates, especially without manuscript images of distinguishable handwriting. For example, Lee signed her letters “Mary Custis Lee,” sometimes with a purposefully underlined “Custis,” but at other times she stylized her name as “M. C. Lee,” which was also her mother’s signature. Historians and archivists also tend to index her mother as “Mary Custis Lee,” not “Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee.” As a result, Lee is relatively unknown to the institutions and public collections she shaped between 1901 and 1918. Her limited presence in museum records and secondary


10 Correspondence with mother and sisters sent from France, Italy and England, signed “Marielle,” c.1870-73, MCL Papers, VHS.
sources contrasts with her life as a national and international celebrity. Between 1901 and 1918, Lee made a name for herself that, because it was so successful at honoring her famous ancestors, General Washington and General Lee, has been largely forgotten to contemporary scholarship. As Lee regained ownership of the Washington relics as part of her material inheritance in 1901, she also carved opportunities to take ownership of her family legacy. In this thesis, Mary Custis Lee is identified as ‘Lee’ or by her full name, to disambiguate her from her father’s historical presence and Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, who is identified as ‘her mother’ or ‘Mrs. Lee.’

Although this thesis does not address particularities of Lee’s childhood upbringing, her formal education and informal learning experiences in Virginia, New York and Maryland informed her relationship to the Washington relics. Her father’s successful military career in the US Engineer Corps, US Army and as Superintendent at the United States Military Academy, West Point enabled the seven Lee children to attend private boarding schools and colleges. In the early 1850s, Mary Custis Lee was educated at a female seminary in Baltimore and by professors at West Point in French and piano. She later enrolled at Pelham Priory, a boarding school for young women in Westchester County, New York, founded by Reverend Bolton, an Episcopal clergyman from Georgia.11 However, Lee spent most of her time at West Point, returned to Arlington with her mother and sisters and made excursions to world’s fairs and cultural events, including the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations (1853),

known as the New York Crystal Palace Exhibition. Perhaps Lee learned the most from her intellectual friendships and connections, from James Ewell Brown “Jeb” Stuart, then a cadet at West Point, to Lord Kitchener. In addition to a sense of social mobility achieved through reading and language skills, Mary Custis Lee enjoyed a lifelong financial stability that secured her opportunities to study and travel on her own. Her father’s investments in northern railroad companies and an inheritance from her great-aunt, Maria Fitzhugh, paid for her extensive social engagements and travels in the United States and abroad. From her scrapbooks, it is possible to analyze Lee’s patterns of travel over her lifetime: she spends certain seasons in European cities, enjoys being a tourist in new destinations, returns to Virginia to stay either in hotels or with family for months at a time and joins the rising population of spa-goers: social elites who spend their time at resorts, founded for health reasons and dedicated to comforting guests.

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At commemorative events in various American cities, but also in conversations with prominent citizens abroad, Lee promoted the Washington objects as they connected to a broad sense of national importance. The patriotic relics had been traveling since their dispersal from Arlington House in 1861. By 1901, Lee worked to further mobilize this collection and as a result, increase these artifacts’ value to public audiences. Her decisions about the Washington relics, a fraction of George Washington’s Mount Vernon belongings with complicated histories that survived multiple wars, were influenced by what she saw: her family’s interaction with the objects and her frequent visits to museums and other cultural sites worldwide.

Lee was a celebrity of her time, with many personal affiliations to colonial and Confederate heritage organizations based in Virginia or Washington, D.C. An obituary printed for the United Daughters of the Confederacy listed her social activities and dedicated involvement within multiple communities. Her impressive calendar was filled with preservation-minded events. She was the Honorary President of the

Three of Lee’s travel scrapbooks are in Lee Family Papers, VHS: Scrapbook, 1898-1918, Section 45, Mss1 L51 c740; Scrapbook, 1816-1892, Section 41, Mss1 L51 b65; Scrapbook, 1732-1892, Section 40, VHS, Mss1 L51 b64.


17 “Memorial to Miss Mary Custis Lee, Died, November 22, 1918” and “Mary Custis Lee: The Last Lee of Arlington,” in United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), Minutes of the Annual Convention (1919), 516-523, GoogleBooks; Ibid., 499. Lee’s memorial at the 25th Annual UDC Convention states: “Virginia mourns, with all the South, the loss of Miss Mary Custis Lee… the last member of General Lee’s immediate family, who now sleep in the Lee Memorial Chapel at Lexington, Virginia. As memory dwells upon the matchless record of this illustrious family…[she] has left a legacy of $3,000 to the Virginia Division… we prize the thought that such a distinguished woman was a Virginian and has expressed her kinship with us.”
Jefferson Davis of the District Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (elected to Honorary President in 1917), member of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society and Regent for the Virginia Room in the Confederate Museum at Richmond, the President of the Home for Needy Confederate Women (HNCW) and a Life Member of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). She was also a guest of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA), and an honorary member of the Colonial Dames in Virginia. Lee joined the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in 1901, one month prior to receiving her collection of Washington relics. In 1916, the DAR elected her to their Revolutionary Relics Committee. Although is not clear if Lee’s position on the “Revolutionary Relics Committee” ever benefited the DAR, it is clear that she formed her own revolutionary relics committee, broadly defined, in her engagement with communities across these multiple groups, 1901-1918. Her network was informed by her experiences as an international traveler, collector and preservationist with a recognizable (though not always popular) celebrity status. With these networks, Lee deployed the Washington relics to serve her family’s memory and legacy, recognizing that these objects interpret stories involved with nation building (George Washington relics from Mount Vernon) and re-building (Robert E. Lee).

18 Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, National Park Service (NPS-ARHO), “Mary Custis Lee,” www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/mary-custis-lee.htm [accessed 3 March 2016]. A concise biography exemplifies Lee’s elusive and generally negative characterization in recent museum interpretation: “Although she was the oldest daughter…Mary has been characterized as bright, willful, intelligent and cultivated, but she seems to have been somewhat of an outsider…she refused to help with the housework…She was most outspoken and regarded by her sisters as bossy and self-absorbed. In Mary's later years, travel became almost a fulltime occupation…Mary never married and died in 1918.”
Today, the Washington relics are more famous than Mary Custis Lee: a hierarchical relationship that she anticipated and narrated during her lifetime and a historical situation that she worked to promote. However, aside from a common point of eighteenth-century provenance at Mount Vernon directly before Washington’s death, the Washington relics are American icons that are not often visually imagined as a cohesive set of items. Lee was aware that her objects, as they were displayed in the United States Patent Office between 1862 and 1883 and at the Smithsonian Institution’s United States National Museum, Arts and Industries Building between 1883 and 1901, filled a gap in the Smithsonian’s historical holdings. Historian Teresa Barnett specifically mentions Lee’s collection as it related to its home at the Smithsonian:

Throughout most of the nineteenth century the United States had no official national historical collection, but as objects representing the nation’s past made their way into the federal government’s possession they were routed to the US Patent Office, where they were displayed somewhat haphazardly… [This] assemblage…eventually moved to the Smithsonian Institution and formed the nucleus of its historical collections…Among a multitude of objects related to the founding of the republic, articles associated with Washington were held in particularly high esteem.

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20 Barnett, Sacred Relics, 22-23. “Individuals who had known Washington personally or had a connection to his family were able to acquire intimate personal effects that were handed down in their family for decades…Ordinary Americans who had no
Although George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857), Lee’s maternal grandfather and George Washington’s adopted son, was a socialite in Washington, D.C. and a benefactor to the Smithsonian Institution, the Smithsonian did not come by the Custis-Lee collection of Washington relics with the Custis-Lee family’s permission. Therefore, Lee’s decisions to distribute the relics beyond the Smithsonian were significant and covered by the press as a story that affected Americans beyond the Custis-Lee family. Although the largest collection of Washington’s household and military belongings has returned to Mount Vernon since the founding of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association in 1853, Lee also selected alternative homes for the Custis-Lee items. These objects, encountered by visitors today, each contribute to public imagination of George Washington as a farmer, access to the president or his heirs had to be content with objects generally available [such as souvenirs and clippings from Mount Vernon...]. Association items were avidly accumulated by individual collectors, but they were clearly considered to have meanings beyond any one person’s interests or predilections, since they were also the objects that represented the past even in the public repositories founded by serious students of the nation’s history...”


adoptive father, military hero and president. Lee desired her father to be remembered in similar roles. Following precedents set by her grandparents, her parents and Benson Lossing’s publications, Lee’s curatorial actions with the Washington relics celebrated both Washington and Robert E. Lee as national military heroes. Like Lossing, she recognized that these objects needed to be interpreted as valuable for their historical associations with American people and places. As a result of her concerted efforts, the way that modern Americans encounter Washington as a person through his personal effects is a cultural responsibility shared by several distinct museums. It is possible to piece together Lee’s strategy by comparing her 1901 acquisitions to how other collections have used and displayed these same objects.

On August 15, 1906, Lee visited Atlantic City, New Jersey, and gave a memorable interview, “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” published in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. In the interview, she reflected upon her collection’s national value and its dramatic journey from the Revolutionary War through the Civil War. About the Washington relics, she explained:

When we left Arlington they were among the things we took with us. My mother expected the trouble to be over soon, and all of the Washington relics, together with our household furnishings, were left in the house. Although the tents and the old Cincinnati Society china and many other heirlooms were taken to Washington by the soldiers, all of the clothing of General and Mrs. Washington was lost, together with the Custis family Bible. How great my joy was three years ago to hear, while on a visit to Philadelphia, that Mr. Kendrick had the Bible… For many years after the war, we tried to regain possession of the relics which were in the government’s possession. Not until I appealed to President McKinley through Senator Daniels of Virginia, however, were they restored to us. Many of them are now at Mount Vernon, while the others I have permitted to remain in the National Museum.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity. Gen.. R. E. Lee’s Daughter Will Sell Two Tents Used by Washington to Aid Confederate Home. WANTS TO RAISE $10,000” in
The “Sacred Relics” interview reveals that Lee interacted with Washington’s household objects as everyday things. Even within her highly esteemed family circle, these objects were worthy of veneration. As an agent for the Washington relics, Lee realized that she could use these objects to simultaneously promote Robert E. Lee’s national legacy. According to historian Teresa Barnett in her book, *Sacred Relics*:

…the historical relic as another manifestation of the sentimental memento positioned it to do a particularly kind of work in the construction of national identity. Understood sentimentally, relics structured the nation-state on the model of the family—as a domestic circle bound by ties of sentiment, affection, and above all memory. Americans used relics of the nation’s forebears, its prominent citizens, and those who had died in battle as they would have used the relics of their own family dead…Relics thus grounded the community of the living in the solemn community of the dead and constituted the nation through the mediation of a collective bond with those who had gone before…the relic as a sentimental memento thus promoted a heightened investment in its users’ collective past…relics were symptomatic of a new investment in the past, but they were alone the means by which the past came to be construed in exclusively national terms.24

Lee worked to unearth forgotten histories behind these objects and their travels between 1861 and 1901. Like other newspaper clippings, she saved the “Sacred Relics” interview as reference material in one of her many trunks, discussed further in Chapter 4. This interview is only one example of Lee’s celebrity; her actions (which also included a domestic arrest, social encounters and scandals abroad) were a popular

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Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 74-75. Barnett draws a distinction between the public “relic” and the private “memento” for analytical purposes, although “nineteenth-century usage made no absolute separation between the two forms.” MCL did not make this distinction, but her relics served a dual purpose as private, sentimental mementoes and for many Americans, as tangible connections to her ancestors, Washington and Lee.
subject for journalists between 1870 and 1918. Lee’s peripatetic lifestyle as a single, well-versed and witty woman in combination with her famous ancestry was unrivaled to other men and women of her time, though her actions both benefited and drew upon the support of many social groups. The goal of Lee’s interview was to raise awareness about the largest items in her collection: Washington’s tents, which she intended to sell as a benefit for widows of Confederate soldiers in Richmond, Virginia. To understand these objects and their history, she became the unofficial Custis-Lee family archivist. She also collected souvenirs and saved documents that enabled her to express a sense of personal, familial and national material heritage. Possessing a set of “Sacred Relics” more famous than herself, including the Washington’s tents and Society of the Cincinnati china, Lee paid close attention to the moving politics of the press, her family circle and historical institutions between 1901 and 1918.

To further appeal to the press, Lee drew connections between her two ancestral homes, Mount Vernon and Arlington House, which each had nineteenth-century histories as sites that attracted pilgrims venerating George and Martha Washington’s

25 Coulling, Lee Girls, 187-190. More notorious events in Lee’s public life included setting a small fire in a hotel room in Naples, Italy in 1878 and an incident on a segregated streetcar that ended with her arrest in Alexandria, VA, in 1902. Lee kept what she called “newspaper cuttings” in labeled envelopes, MCL Papers, VHS.


27 The majority of Lee’s inherited Society of the Cincinnati porcelain dinner service can be seen at Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE, accession no. 1963.0700.1-70 a, b., object files, Registration Office, Winterthur Museum.
Among her personal papers at Virginia Historical Society, discovered in her bank vault in 2002 at Burke & Herbert Bank, Alexandria, Virginia, are several images of these sites printed as postcards and stereograph or stereoview cards, marketed to tourists. Lee purchased stereo cards and cut them in half, to have one image of each home. Along with the interview, also saved in her trunks, the images and Lee’s actions with them reveal her personal awareness about her family’s importance to an American narrative told by its commemorative landscape. More importantly, she expressed her dedication to preserving the objects that informed and embodied this narrative, as tangible reminders of how these estates survived the Civil War.

The categories of objects that Lee presents in this interview structure my thesis into sections about her relationship to these items: Washington’s relics from Mount Vernon, Lee family things and her interaction with them in public and private. Her financial inheritance and famous name presented her with options for dispersing her inheritance to museums. Her creative, yet strong convictions about the relics were also armed by her detailed attention to family lore, an interest in historical research, constant mobility and a lifelong sense of independence. These personal qualities and freedoms allowed her to conceptualize these objects as relics whose true value lay in their long-standing resonance with American audiences.

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Lee’s process to stabilize these objects’ meanings and select their future caretakers is revealed by the personal archive she stored in two trunks. There, among approximately six thousand other things, she saved a clipping of the “Sacred Relics” article in August, 1906. Other souvenirs from her eventful summer trip to New Jersey include: letters addressed to “Miss Mary Custis Lee, Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City, NJ,” blank postcards of a “Rolling Chair Parade” on the boardwalk and a larger souvenir photo of “Fireplace in Kitchen, Washington’s Headquarters, Morristown, NJ.” These items evidence her historically-oriented itinerary and attention to her family’s past as it impacted local histories.30

The material culture evidence in Lee’s trunks shows a complicated network of experiences: influential people, places and things. These important relationships, told by objects, have not yet been connected to written history, partially because the trunks offer unparalleled access to her world. Her distinctive perspective on American history, which relied upon mass-produced items as much as her singular seventeenth-century manuscripts, was based on her encounters with historical objects in the physical world. The trunks’ contents also beg further questioning about whether or not Lee accomplished the goals she expressed to her friends, corrected the family histories she collected, or displayed the Washington relics in the ways she wanted them to be displayed. This thesis is the first study that pieces together Lee’s biography from these objects. Although the Washington relics were her most famous inheritance, their current interpretations in museums are not associated with her. Her world of objects is broad: it comprises the trunks’ papers, her own travel souvenirs and personal

30 MCL Papers, VHS. Lee collected postcards and saved them as travel souvenirs.
belongings, Lee family heirlooms and the Washington relics she inherited in 1901. These categories of belongings are significant for her because her penchant for travel forced her to compartmentalize her life, living mainly out of trunks. Mary Custis Lee’s habitual packing and unpacking of possessions required constant evaluation about use, needs and appropriateness for certain seasons or occasions. From this constellation of objects, it is possible to determine patterns about how Lee valued things, whether to leave behind, secure or store out of sight. These decisions are similar to her work for the Washington relics’ placement in museum collections.

Lee’s own archives in the trunks are corroborated by her correspondence, dispersed throughout the museum collections she shaped. Her letters often draw upon a rhetoric typical of American secular religious sentiment after the Civil War, frequently emphasizing a national language with regard to the Washington relics.31 She defined her interests in objects, people and places as ones with patriotic, commemorative, or charitable purposes. In line with growing museum collections during her lifetime, she also referenced the importance of reverence for “relics,” borrowing the objects’ long-term association developed by her Custis grandfather. These written conversations document the objects’ physical transfer from one collection to another. Together, Lee and multiple parties across state lines shared an insistence about why the Washington relics continued to demand national reverence, at the turn of the twentieth century. These reasons perpetuate why the Washington relics continue to be displayed and interpreted as relevant to American visitors today. In “Sacred Relics” and other public interviews, Lee proved her awareness about

American museums as stakeholders in protecting, telling and re-telling history through objects, for people.  

The use of the term “Sacred Relics” in 1906 raised the question of what was sacred about Washington’s belongings: not only the tents that Lee placed for sale but also the group as a whole.  

What “body” were these objects – tents, china, buttons, military equipment, household furnishings, ephemera, and documents – relics of? When separated, what concept did these fragments reference or speak to, and how has their interpretation, in some ways first determined by Lee, formed a collective sense of American history? Because these relics commemorated patriotism or national heritage to certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences, it is important to remember that Lee can be viewed as belonging to two nations—the former Confederate States of America and the United States of America—and historically, to the state of Virginia during the English colonial period. A study of the objects, the documents she saved,  


33 Barnett, Sacred Relics, 23. Barnett addresses the term “relic” to describe objects that “appealed…to the quintessentially nineteenth-century faculty of memory…At the same time that articles from the past took on a new significance, they also came to have a common name. The category of relic was never a conceptually rigorous classification, but in nineteenth-century usage the term loosely designated any and all objects from the past. “Relic” would thus have referred to many items—Washington’s uniform, for example, or equipment left behind on Civil War battlefields—that might still prove of historical interest today. Yet the items that seem most characteristic of the nineteenth century and that are usually associated with the word relic are precisely the things not likely to appear in twentieth-century historical collections.”  

and other documents can be used to reconstruct her world from a material culture framework.

Lee identified appropriate and gracious audiences who would benefit from her acts of stewardship, using her objects to act as a benefactor. She assigned values to her collection of inherited objects, and communicated her choices in both public actions and private documents. She elected to sell, donate or bequeath objects based on a variety of factors that that proves her engagement with historical preservation, sense of family duty and dedication to several social causes. Between 1901 and her death in 1918, Lee’s writing, collecting and traveling motivated her to establish a lasting presence for her revolutionary inheritance in various institutions. A project to unpack the Washington relics’ placement in today’s museums reveals her own strategy to unpack the objects and their significance. The process illuminates Lee’s own significance to American museums.

This thesis examines how Lee’s family set precedents that influenced her curatorship of the Washington relics as acts of family heritage, 1901-1918. She simultaneously managed, promoted, exhibited and interpreted her inheritance in public. Lee’s motivation to strengthen the Washington, Custis and Lee family’s connection to broad national narratives also supported charities connected with her legacy. Although the Washington relics’ displays in separate museums evidence her successful career as a private ‘curator’ with publically-minded ambitions, the untold story of Lee’s actions form the basis for a cross-institutional interpretation about how we understand Washington’s and Lee’s artifacts and their legacy.
Figure 1  “Mary Custis Lee,” by Michael Miley, photographer, 19th c. glass plate negative in Miley Collection. Courtesy, Virginia Historical Society (1940.20.112.A-B)
Figure 2  Trunk, Lee, Custis and Fitzhugh families, by E. Goyard Ainé and Trunk, containing Mary Custis Lee Papers, 2007. Courtesy, Virginia Historical Society (2002.652.1-2)
Figure 4  “Lee, Mary Custis” by Harris & Ewing, photographer, 1914. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division (LC-DIG-hec-05389)
Mary Custis Lee’s inheritance was a network of historically-minded ancestors, family members and friends, as well as Revolutionary War-era artifacts that, along with their owners, required new homes after the American Civil War. Because Arlington House was confiscated by Union military occupants between 1861-1865, Lee’s concept of “home” was a memory of Arlington that relied on the household’s dispersed artifacts. Multiple Lee family members attempted legal restitution for the home and possessions. For Lee, the concept of ‘home’ was less of a physical location and more a sense of community support. She never married and never purchased a house, although she felt at home with friends who shared her many interests in travel, historic preservation, charitable giving and the arts. In particular, her travels became a lesson in how public displays of collections create powerful narratives about their owners, provenances and audiences. However, even while abroad, Lee maintained relationships to Southern charities and monument-building in Virginia. Lee considered herself patriotic and viewed the state of Virginia and broadly, the South, as her home. This belief influenced her curatorial decisions regarding the most mobilized, most famous and most tangible pieces of her family inheritance, the Washington relics.

George Washington’s objects from Mount Vernon were known to both eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century audiences as “relics.” For a twentieth-century audience, however, they were redefined as both Washington and Lee objects.
by Mary Custis Lee, in order to unite her divided sense of family heritage. Lee communicated about the objects as representing George Washington, an ancestry shared by Northerners and Southerners. On a two-week visit to Chautauqua, New York, after an event that paid tribute to her father’s memory in Virginia and a benefit for the Warner Home for the Aged in Jamestown, New York, Lee spoke with The Jamestown Journal about her travels, collection and pride for Virginia.

“With a southern accent and a droll, non-committal expression on her face, Miss Lee gave some reminiscences of people she has met in her travels” and was quoted as saying, “I have found some people who did not know who George Washington was….[An Englishwoman of high birth asked] ‘Miss Lee, where is your home?’ ‘Virginia’ I responded.” When the woman questioned if that was a city or a province, Lee corrected her by remarking that it was a province, the same size as England and Wales combined. In spite of quoting this abrupt conversation, the reporter continued to praise Lee’s status and its many benefits to the United States:

Miss Lee is proud of her ancestry, and justly so. She has given to Mt. Vernon many of the historic pieces of furniture that thousands of tourists view annually, including the bed on which George Washington died. She now has in her possession an invaluable collection of articles, once worn by George Washington. These include moss agate buttons from the great coat of Washington…Miss Lee has exquisite ivories of General Lee taken from old daguerreotypes and mounted in Italy. She also possesses the original painting by Charles Willson Peale of Washington in the uniform of a British colonial colonel, and the Martha Washington pearls. Among her acquaintances, Miss Lee numbers the most illustrious people of the world, and she is the personal friend of leaders of all walks of life…Though Miss Lee is the daughter of a family of soldiers, dating back to the time of Waterloo, her sentiment is ‘Never was a good war, and never a bad peace.”35

35 “Miss Mary Custis Lee, Guest in Chautauqua Today of Mrs. Robert A. Miller” [n.d., New York] newspaper clipping, MCL Papers, VHS; See Figure 16.
At a time when “nation” was a fraught concept to the Reconstruction-era United States, Lee made arrangements to preserve the Washington relics, a cause upon which patriotic Americans could agree.⁴⁶

Lee’s twentieth-century assemblage of Washington relics encompasses many themes discussed in Teresa Barnett’s book, *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America* because she responds to historically-evolving definitions of the word “relic.”⁴⁷ In her argument about the relic-collecting tradition in America and its link to historical change, Barnett offers context for how Lee continued to characterize her inheritance as the “Washington relics.” Lee eventually promoted them as “sacred relics” in 1906, informed by multiple generations of family history and her travels to Europe, where “relic” had a distinct meaning associated with making medieval pilgrimages.⁴⁸ This thesis builds on Barnett’s book by showing how Lee was

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³⁷ Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 52-56. “Although in eighteenth-century antiquarian writings things from the past were referred to by a variety of terms, including “antiquity” “curiosity” “remains”, “relic” appears with some frequency, always clearly as a synonym for “remnant.” In the usage of British and early American antiquarians, as well as travelers and others interested in the historical past, the word served simply to denote the physical remains of the past and does not seem to have been accompanied by adjectives or metaphors that would suggest religious association...by the early decades of the nineteenth century, references to historical relics were increasingly embroidered with religious imagery.” Barnett points out that “[i]t was this sacralized language of sentiment that nineteenth-century Americans drew on when they cast their objects from the past as ‘sacred relics,’” whether the phrase appeared in Thomas Jefferson’s writings or stories about pilgrims, reverence and relics in *Harper’s Weekly*.

³⁸ Ibid., 5. Barnett calls this “a white, middle-class phenomenon linked to English and broader European traditions; Ibid., 18. Barnett shows that “Collecting objects that can be described as association items certainly predated the nineteenth-century” and explains shifts in how they were exhibited in private and public spaces.
responsible for unpacking the objects in revolutionary ways, which synthesized three generations of perspectives on the objects’ significance and their ability to provoke curiosity about the past.

From her family’s engagement with museums and her own travels, Mary Custis Lee recognized that personal encounters with artifacts and artworks had the power to teach about other cultures. Lee’s strategy was to disperse the collection among several institutions, both public and private. Although she was always moving, Lee wanted to locate permanent homes for these objects, in places where they would be appreciated.

Mary Custis Lee could look back two generations to take inspiration for her work. George Washington Parke Custis, her grandfather, was famous during his lifetime as “the child of Mount Vernon” and as the adopted son (in truth, step-grandson) of George Washington. He envisioned Arlington House, the mansion he constructed on his inherited Custis plantation in 1802, as the first museum for the Washington relics. Susan Detweiler has noted that George Washington Parke Custis had “considerable pride of possession, but he was exceeding generous in sharing his treasures with strangers, family and friends…a casual dispensation of family mementoes was not an unusual gesture.”

Custis worked with historian Benson J. Lossing to publish separate illustrated histories of George Washington’s two homes, Mount Vernon and Arlington House, in periodical literature. Lossing featured the


family portraits and connected them to Custis’s identity as an amateur artist. According to Lossing, the objects were also arranged in the house in a certain fashion, historical or chronological, which influenced Lee’s later attention to their display and public access conditions. Lossing characterized Custis as “a living link between the patriots of the old war and the present custodians of the prize which they won; and his memory, ever faithful, has preserved all it has received from the past.” Custis and Lossing characterized the household objects as “relics” of a national military hero and president. After Custis died in 1857, his daughter collaborated with Lossing to publish his memoirs as Recollections of Washington. Mrs. Lee anticipated the book’s success in December, 1860, and wrote to him in earnest: “If the public would give more attention to the memory & precepts [of] Washington they would not be so ripe for disunion. I will still hope ‘till the storm breaks over us.” Contrary to her mother’s

41 These paintings became a legacy divided between MCL and her siblings. George Washington Custis Lee donated his portion to Washington and Lee University, and MCL followed his pattern. Curatorial files, University Collections of Art and History and George Washington Custis Lee Papers, WLU Coll. 0142, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA.


44 Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee to Benson J. Lossing, 27 December 1860. The Archives of the Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation, Papers of the Lee Family, M2009.246, Jessie Ball DuPont Library, Stratford Hall, transcribed by Colin
beliefs, Lee was less interested in preserving Arlington as a site of family remembrance. Later in life, however, Lee would take on her grandfather’s previous performance and serve as a link between Southern and Northern perspectives: a unique position that qualified her power to distribute the Washington relics to museums beyond Arlington House.45

Seeking an alternative repository with a more secure future, Lee kept her parents’ and grandfathers’ papers from Arlington House (and other Custis, Lee and Fitzhugh family papers) in two trunks, repurposed as a portable family archive.46 Lee’s papers trace her childhood home’s personal and national significance since its construction in 1802 on Arlington Heights, across the river from Washington, D.C., only miles from both Alexandria, Virginia and Mount Vernon. Custis’s famous ancestral connections to George and Martha Washington placed the home at the


46 Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Reading the Man, xxii-xxiv. In her preface, Pryor writes an account about the origins of the Custis-Lee family papers, dispersal from Arlington House, and Lee’s priority to keep them in the family.
intersection of national sentiment about politics and patriotism. After Washington’s
death, his Mount Vernon objects descended from his widow, Martha Dandridge Custis
Washington to her grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, and then to his only
daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis.\textsuperscript{47} In 1831, Mary Anna Randolph Custis
married Robert E. Lee in her parents’ parlor at Arlington House. The Lees and their
seven children knew Arlington as their most permanent family home and the focal
point of Lee family life until 1861. By 1861, Arlington’s visible position along the
Potomac made its Confederate Lee residents especially vulnerable. In four years,
Arlington’s association with George Washington was replaced by its reputation as the
home of General Robert E. Lee, resulting in the property’s contentious repurposing
into Arlington National Cemetery.\textsuperscript{48}

When Robert E. Lee left Arlington, he anticipated its dismantling by opposing
Union forces. On April 30, 1861, Lee urged his wife to secure their family paintings
and china:

\textsuperscript{47} Because Martha and George Washington adopted their Custis grandson, George
Washington Parke Custis, as their son, scholars describe their relationship in several
ways. As a result, Martha Washington has been cited as Mrs. Lee’s grandmother,
great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother. Newspapers referenced Mary Custis
Lee (the protagonist of this thesis) as Washington’s great-great granddaughter or used
alternate terms, such as “last surviving descendant of…” to express her lineage. See
explanation in William M.S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton, \textit{Lee and Grant}

\textsuperscript{48} Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial (National Park Service), is located
inside Arlington National Cemetery. The cemetery occupies “just over half of the
1100 acres of the original Arlington plantation.” Since its restoration in 1925,
Arlington House has also been called the Custis-Lee Mansion or Lee Mansion
National Memorial, http://www.nps.gov/arho/index.htm; Randle Bond Truett, \textit{Lee
Lee remembered the eighteenth-century objects from Mount Vernon as the family’s most valuable possessions. However, when Mrs. Lee finally evacuated their ancestral home on May 15, these items did not travel with her. Her decisions about what should be left behind were made out of concerns for the objects’ portability and durability.

As she prepared to join her husband in Richmond, Virginia, Mrs. Lee made hasty yet expedient decisions to protect the Washington-Custis heirlooms. Without the ability to predict her next destination, she removed selected relics from Arlington House and assigned various family caretakers to secure them on her behalf. The majority of the Washington relics, which she prioritized according to practical and personal value, were either removed and hidden by neighboring relatives in Washington D.C. or locked away, secured, and guarded on-site by the people formerly enslaved by the Custis-Lee family.

Robert E. Lee had already claimed responsibility

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51 The Washington-Custis portraits were hidden by a cousin, Britannia Peter Kennon, at Tudor Place in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. Kennon, Mrs. Lee and Selina Gray
for any eventual destruction to Arlington’s house and its contents, and used this realization as a teaching moment to one of his daughters in 1861:

As to our old house, if not destroyed, it will be difficult even to be recognized. Even if the enemy had wished to preserve it, the change of officers, the want of fuel, shelter, etc., all the dire necessities of war, it is vain to think of its being in a habitable condition. I fear too, books, furniture & relics of Mt. Vernon will be gone. It is better to make up our minds to a general loss. They cannot take away the remembrances of the spot, & memories of those that to us render it sacred...⁵²

General Lee was concerned about jeopardizing the family’s iconic historic collection, but he was practical about his home’s instability.⁵³ Mary Custis Lee later recalled that her mother did not anticipate permanent displacement from the Custis-Lee ancestral home.⁵⁴ As a result, many items were left behind. Mrs. Lee locked a group of Washington relics inside the garret, to be supervised by Selina Gray, a woman who all wrote letters about the status of Arlington and the Washington relics, some of which Lee kept in her trunks, MCL Papers, VHS.


⁵³ Rick Atkinson, Where Valor Rests: Arlington National Cemetery (Washington, D.C., National Geographic, 2007), 23-25, for an overview of the estate between 1861 and 1865, including Virginia’s vote to affirm the state’s secession on May 23, 1861, the home’s “verge of ruin” in 1861, accounts of 14,000 Union soldiers’ activities at Arlington, 1861-63 and Arlington’s legal confiscation, 1864-1883. Because Robert E. Lee “didn’t appear in person” to settle debts in the Act for Collection of Taxes in the Insurrectionary Districts, 92.07 tax, Arlington was publicly auctioned on January 11, 1864 and sold to the US government for $26,810.

had formerly been enslaved by the Custis-Lee family. Mrs. Lee explained her hurried actions to Union General Charles W. Sandford and asked for his sympathy and toward these important artifacts:

> It never occurred to me, Gen'l San[d]ford [sic], that I could be forced to sue for permission to enter my own house and that such an outrage as its military occupation to the exclusion of me and my children could ever have been perpetrated by anyone in the whole extent of this country. I had been warned by an anxious friend that such a design was in contemplation nearly a month ago & advised to remove to a place of safety all my property that was of any value. Still incredulous, I complied with his earnest entreaties in regard to the Mt. Vernon relics, plate, & pictures that we could never replace…So I am left homeless, not even able to get or send to Alex[andria] where my funds are deposited to obtain means for my support… You have a beautiful home and people that you love and can sympathize perhaps even with the wife of a "Traitor" and a rebel.

Five days prior to this request, on May 25, 1861, the house and its extensive property was occupied by soldiers commanded by Sandford’s early replacement, Union General Irvin McDowell. Arlington’s new occupants recognized these items’ national value, but the items were still susceptible to damage, vandalism and stealing. In 1862, McDowell obtained permission to remove many objects to the Smithsonian


56 Mrs. Lee to Union General Sanford [sic], 30 May 1861, Mary Custis Lee Papers, accession no. 80-1, Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries, Civil War Letters Collection (online), digital ID no. CVW066; Horn, *Man Who Would Not Be Washington*, 122-125.
Institution’s Patent Office, where the relics became a public exhibition about George Washington, titled “Captured at Arlington.”

Postwar accounts detailed “one of the early exploits of [the Union] army” as Arlington House’s “assault, capture and sacking.” This subject became a national topic of curiosity, as the United States watched the Lees piece together remnants of a broken home. In 1870, a New Hampshire paper reflected on the activities at Arlington:

The house was literally full of mementoes of Washington, all of which were taken away—some going to the Government archives, but most of them being “appropriated” by officers and soldiers […] Those which were gobbled up by officers and soldiers, including numerous autograph letters of Washington, are beyond recovery.

This report exaggerates the number of relics destroyed by Union soldiers. In addition, the article’s reference to the US Patent Office as the “Government archives” suggests that the writer believed these items were wrongfully hidden from public view, while in reality, these items were one of many collections exhibited at the Patent Office. The article confirms, then, that the relics were conceived by public opinion as extraordinary things that needed to be both saved and displayed, as rare survivals of wartime violence. McDowell’s legal testimony, submitted to Congress during the


same year, confirmed that various “curiosity-seekers,” including men under his command, had stolen certain objects “interesting to a large class both North and South…” 59 McDowell’s officer’s report also cited the presence of family papers at Arlington that were “not safe from pilfering hands.” 60 In her book about the Civil War and ruination, Megan Kate Nelson claims that “the destruction and theft of more personal items—mementoes and letters—struck the hardest blow against domestic privacy…[though they] had no monetary value.” 61 To many Americans, Arlington’s relics and family papers had a public historical value. This perspective later influenced Mary Custis Lee’s archival and curatorial work towards her inherited possessions.

Four years after her family’s departure, a temporary displacement made permanent, Lee was sent by her mother to report their home’s postwar condition in December, 1865. She noted the estate’s alterations and her limited access to the house

59 House of Representatives, 41st Congress, 2d Session, Report No. 36, “Mount Vernon Relics” 17 March 1870, 2, GoogleBooks, cited 5 October 2015, 2. On January 7, 1862, McDowell reported that “General Washington’s Punch Bowl…was here but a short time before (as I am informed by those who saw it in the cellar), but has been stolen. There is no question about the genuineness of these relics...” For this punch bowl’s happy recovery, see Detweiler, Washington’s Chinaware, 149-153.

60 House of Representatives, “Mount Vernon Relics,” 17 March 1870, GoogleBooks; “Joint Resolution,” House of Representatives, 14 February 1870, 41st Congress, 2d Session, H.R. 158, document, MCL Papers, VHS: “directing the Secretary of the Interior to deliver the ‘Mount Vernon relics’ to Mrs. Mary Custis Lee. Be it resolved… the articles now in the Department of the Interior, in the custody of the Commissioner of Patents, known as the “Mount Vernon relics,” which, under military authority, were removed to and deposited for safe-keeping in said department, in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-two...”

and its mostly unfamiliar contents. In his book about Arlington National Cemetery, Robert M. Poole quotes this long letter from Lee to her mother because “the most detailed reconnaissance [at Arlington House] came from Mary Lee, thirty, the family’s eldest daughter and by all accounts the most adventurous one.”

Writing from a friend’s home in Baltimore, Lee relived her recent pilgrimage to the house:

> Not saying who I was, I was not allowed to enter many of the rooms…I went into the parlour, in which nothing was standing but the old sideboard, with broken doors…One of the mantels was also broken…I was forbidden to enter Papa’s office…Upstairs I was permitted to go into my own dressing room to “see the view”…It was a very trying visit more painful even & everything more changed than I had expected. I hear that Uncle Smith did not think so, but fear that you would agree with me…The view was lovely but the whole face of the country so utterly changed that with my back on the house I could have scarcely recognized a feature of it.

Inside and out, Arlington scarcely resembled the home they knew. Lee’s report remained private in her personal archive, but many newspapers published romanticized reports about how her mother confirmed these observations on a later visit to her confiscated estate in 1873, the same year that she died in Lexington. In the absence of General and Mrs. Lee and especially after 1901, national audiences turned their attention to learning Lee’s perspective on her inherited legal affairs.

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62 Poole, *On Hallowed Ground*, 68.

63 MCL (Baltimore, MD) to Mrs. Lee (Lexington, VA), 9 December 1865, MCL Papers, VHS. Lee refers to Sydney Smith Lee (1802-1869) as “Uncle Smith.”

64 Rose, “Mrs. General Lee’s Attempts...”; “Mrs. Lee’s Last Visit to Arlington,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger*, 2 December 1873.
The Lee family faced complex legal negotiations about the Arlington estate.\textsuperscript{65} Although the U.S. government compensated Lee’s brother George Washington Custis Lee (nicknamed “Custis” Lee or G.W.C. Lee) for Arlington estate’s confiscation in 1883, Mrs. Lee’s application for the Washington relics, defined as “articles taken from Arlington and deposited in the Patent Office to be returned,” faced a much longer delay.\textsuperscript{66} In a letter published in national papers, Mrs. Lee had applied to President Andrew Johnson for their return on February 10, 1869: “They are relics from Mount Vernon, bequeathed to me by my father, and consequently of great value and interest to his family.” As reported by the \textit{Charleston Courier} in South Carolina, the assigned Committee of Investigation in Washington, D.C. resolved:

\begin{quote}
That the articles known as the effects of George Washington, the Father of his Country, now in the custody of the Department of the Interior, are of right the property of the United States; and any attempt on the part of the present Administration, or any Department thereof, to deliver the same to the rebel General Robert E. Lee, is an insult to the loyal people of the United States, and they ought to be kept as relics in the Patent Office, and ought not to be delivered to any one without the consent of Congress.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

To many Southerners, this inflammatory property dispute symbolized the war’s loss.\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Charleston Courier} also printed extracts from a speech to Congress by the Hon. T. L. Poole, \textit{On Hallowed Ground}, 87-93. Congress provided Lee’s older brother with a settlement amount of $150,000 on April 24, 1883 for Arlington’s title, ending legalities that had begun with his letter to the US Senate on April 6, 1874.

\textsuperscript{65} Poole, \textit{On Hallowed Ground}, 87-93. Congress provided Lee’s older brother with a settlement amount of $150,000 on April 24, 1883 for Arlington’s title, ending legalities that had begun with his letter to the US Senate on April 6, 1874.

\textsuperscript{66} House of Representatives, “Mount Vernon Relics,” 17 March 1870, GoogleBooks.

\textsuperscript{67} “The Hon. T. L. Jones, of Kentucky, and His Appeal for Peace, and in Favor of the Restoration to Mrs. Lee of the Mount Vernon Relics,” \textit{Charleston (South Carolina) Courier}, 30 March 1869.

\textsuperscript{68} For more on Southerners’ perspectives on relics in relationship to the Confederacy’s concept of the Lost Cause, see Barnett, \textit{Sacred Relics}, 106-8. Barnett states, “By its
Jones of Kentucky, who correctly stated that these relics were the property of Mrs. Lee, “a defenseless woman” and not General Lee. Jones’ legal appeal imagined a future resolution that would follow George Washington’s command, “to be magnanimous and just…with the least shadow of revenge; [Mr. Speaker.] restore at once these little remnants of [Washington’s] house…and let them descend as cherished mementos among those who bear our name and lineage!” The Congressional battles after 1869, and especially after their mother’s death in 1873, presented a problem for Lee and her siblings. However, three of Robert E. Lee’s children, George Washington Custis Lee, Mary Custis Lee and Mildred Lee formed a diverse network of politicians and museum professionals, who assisted with creating alternative defensive strategies to protect and secure the relics.

Lee expressed a sense of family duty to Arlington House, but unlike her mother did not view the home and estate’s restoration as the key factor in preserving her family legacy. The removal of the Washington relics and her family’s story from very nature the Lost Cause was memorial, focused solely on commemorating and retelling the past…relics also played a significant role in Southern commemorations.”


70 “The Hon. T. L. Jones…,” Charleston (South Carolina) Courier, 30 March 1869.

71 Carlo de Vito, Mrs. Lee’s Rose Garden: The True Story of the Founding of Arlington (Thorndike, MA: Center Point, 2015).
Arlington House had desecrated the site. In response, Lee often spoke about the relics in the context of her family story to revitalize the objects’ personal meanings. In these stories, she remembered the legacy of her grandfather Custis. To further honor his memory, Lee made inquiries to Arlington National Cemetery concerning his gravesite at Arlington House. Referencing “my ‘Arlington’ project” in 1915, she corresponded with an alliance affiliated with the Cemetery about her hesitation in requesting his reburial. She outlined her motivations and beliefs about the process:

…I am almost hesitating, whether it would not be better to transfer the Remains to the Old “Christ Church” churchyard in Alexandria, where they worshipped for so many years and yet, who has a better right to be on his own Estate of “Arlington,” than my grandfather; & as the grandson of Martha Washington & the adopted son of the General, one would think that his grave should be duly honoured.  

Lee visited Arlington and Arlington National Cemetery as part of many ceremonially rituals, including the dedication of the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s monument in November, 1912. She participated in parades and events that marked Confederate sacrifice to ensure that Southerners’ memories would not be erased from


73 United Daughters of the Confederacy, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Arlington Confederate Monument Association, 1914,“Chapter III. The U. D. C. at Washington: Laying the Corner Stone [1912],” MCL helped lay the cornerstone. President Taft welcomed the UDC and DAR members present with a patriotic speech that cited both of MCL’s ancestral homes: “All around us "Old Glory" waves…On every side we hear familiar names, household words — Washington, Arlington, Mount Vernon, Alexandria, Georgetown, which make us feel very much at home.” http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/history-of-the-csa-memorial-at-anc-1914.htm.
the national story. To enhance her commemorative efforts, Lee recalled memories of growing up at Arlington with her grandfather’s famous Mount Vernon relics.74

The Lee family also maintained a relationship with Mount Vernon as their ancestral home.75 They participated in the increasingly national effort to preserve Mount Vernon, owned and operated by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA). Mrs. Lee and her eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee, were in more direct communication with the Mount Vernon Regent, State Vice-Regents and curators than Lee herself.76 Directly after the war, Mrs. Lee arranged for Arlington’s “bed in which Washington died” and an important sideboard to return to Mount

74 MCL (1311 New Hampshire Ave., Washington, D.C.) to Clarinda Lamar, 30 March 1915. Joseph Rucker and Clarinda Pendleton Lamar Papers, MS 22, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. Thanking Mrs. Lamar for Justice Joseph Lamar’s address at Arlington National Cemetery, which spoke to the need for Southern charity, Lee wrote: “While so much has been written about the Northern woman, the Southern has had but scant recognition, & yet She had everything to contend with… so while our victorious neighbors could afford to be benevolent, & organize charitable systems, &c. we were striving to feed ourselves, & educate the young generation. However, “the past is in the Eternal past”, & it is useless to dwell on it, though we can never forget.” See “Laying the Cornerstone of a Lasting Memorial,” The American Red Cross Magazine 10:5 (May 1915): 169.


76 Curatorial files, W-194, Washington’s Bedstead, Washington Library; Augusta Blanche Berard to [her mother], Letter, 1856 quoted in “Arlington and Mount Vernon 1856. As Described in a Letter of Augusta Blanche Berard,” in Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 57, no. 2 (April, 1949), 140-175. Berard, a friend of Markie Williams, Lee’s orphaned cousin, accompanied the family on a visit to Arlington and Mount Vernon. She had “hoped to sleep [in the] bed in which Washington died” at Arlington and shows non-familial interest in these private relics; Lossing, Mount Vernon, 316, described the sideboard as a relic. For more on this, see Chapter 8.
Vernon as gifts, where they were displayed by 1876. After corresponding with Emma Ball, Vice Regent for Virginia, about his family’s loan of relics, Lee’s brother legally transferred them to the MVLA on August 18, 1908.\(^{77}\) The family also visited Mount Vernon to honor relatives who were buried there.\(^{78}\) When Robert E. Lee received a personal invitation to Mount Vernon in 1870 from MVLA’s founder and Regent, Ann Pamela Cunningham, he expressed his “regret that it is not in my power to visit a place where I have passed some happy days in my earlier life + which from the virtues of its illustrious possessor is hallowed in the affections of the American people. With my best wishes for its continued preservations…”\(^{79}\) Although the Lees remembered

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\(^{77}\) G.W.C. Lee to Harrison H. Dodge, Superintendent, Mount Vernon, July 30, 1908 in MVLA, Index to the Minutes of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1854-1919 (MVLA, 1920), GoogleBooks: “When my mother left Arlington in the spring of 1861 she took the bedstead to Ravensworth, where it remained until Mrs. Ball, the Virginia Vice Regent, requested the loan of it for Mount Vernon… It was then sent to the furniture factory of the Messrs. Green, Alexandria, Va., to be cleaned and put in good order generally, thence it was taken to Mount Vernon. Since that time I have not seen it, but suppose that it has been well taken care of” and Power of Attorney, August 18, 1908; Ball, The Home of Washington, 1912, MCL Papers, VHS: “In his bed room, the bed upon which Washington died was entrusted to the care of the Vice-Regent of Virginia many years ago as a loan by Gen. G.N. (sic) Custis Lee. Gen. Lee has recently given his interest in it to the Association…”


Mount Vernon as a private family home, they also promoted the estate’s national significance and welcomed its repurposing as a shrine to George Washington.  

The actions of her mother and her brother, related to the “Mount Vernon relics” influenced Lee. However, she did not simply copy their example. Although she saved MVLA booklets in her trunks, Lee’s level of participation in the society mostly served to continue her parents’ endeavors, which also honored and continued her grandfather’s legacy. Although the MVLA recruited Custis and Washington lineal descendants to be involved in official (and financial) capacities, Lee selected institutions other than Mount Vernon to receive her inherited portion of the Washington relics. Because every object in Lee’s inheritance was once the property of George or Martha Washington at Mount Vernon, it was significant that Lee demonstrated her power by refusing to restore all of her inheritance to its ‘rightful’ domestic origin in a single repository, a convenient and expeditious option. Instead, she believed it was appropriate to separate the relics to benefit additional groups of people and to diversify opportunities for other caretakers to preserve Washington’s memory in other places. Nevertheless, Lee maintained that her perspective on the


81 Emma R. Ball, Washington’s Home and the Story of The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA, 1912), MCL Papers, VHS.

82 “Philadelphians Attend Washington Wedding...gathering this week of the Regents of Mount Vernon,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, 19 May 1901. The article mentions MCL’s attendance at the MVLA meeting, May 10, and states the MVLA’s preference for Washington descendants’ involvement in historic preservation at Mount Vernon.
relics was motivated by her sense of patriotism, a sentiment that helped her relate with others outside her family and inner circle of friends.  

Lee was living at the Lloyd House, down the street from Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia, when she received news that President McKinley had authorized her relics’ return from the National Museum in 1901. There, she stayed as a guest of Mrs. P.T. Yeatman (Jean Washington Lloyd), founder and honorary president of the Mary Custis Lee Chapter No. 7, UDC. Although Lee never purchased or furnished her own household, she considered Alexandria as her primary hometown. When in Virginia, she took up residence with family at Ravensworth, a Custis plantation in Fairfax County inherited by her brother, Kinloch, her cousins’ plantation where her mother had sent the family silver in 1861, and Tudor Place in Georgetown, where cousin Britannia Kennon had stored Arlington’s Washington-Custis-Lee paintings during the war. Lee also spent time visiting hot springs or Lexington, Virginia, where she continued to visit after her father’s death in 1870, her mother’s death in 1873 and her brother’s resignation as president of Washington and Lee University. Her local reputation there can be compared to published reports about her public appearances beyond family homes, especially in Washington, D.C.; Richmond;  

83 MCL to Reverend W. Herbert Burk, letters, various dates, Museum of the American Revolution. MCL and Burk often cited a mutual sense of patriotism.  


85 Poole, On Hallowed Ground, 5; Cadou, Washington Collection, preface, 264-266.
Philadelphia; New York; London and other cities. Lee’s many residences motivated her to find homes for the Washington relics in these places. In “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” Lee expressed her detachment from these family properties. She emphasized her own mobility and, importantly, her responsibility for the Washington relics:

My father, of course, was away in the army when we left Arlington, and my older brothers were also absent. We went to the home of my mother’s sister, Mrs. William Henry Fitzhugh, at Ravensworth, in Fairfax county. That is at present the home of one of my two living brothers, General Custis Lee. As the oldest son of my mother, he is the rightful possessor of the Washington relics, but he has made them all over to me.

Since Lee did not have a settled home herself, she could not offer a home to the Washington relics or convert a private home into a museum, as her grandfather had used Arlington House before the war.

Lee’s decisions about the Washington relics were also informed by her friends’ professional activities. She was a frequent houseguest, staying for weeks at a time, with other women who were also members of Confederate and colonial heritage organizations. These individuals taught Lee the power of becoming a socialite and philanthropist in multiple urban communities. North of the Mason-Dixon line, Lee often stayed with Mary Johnson Brown Chew at her home in Rittenhouse Square, on Walnut Street in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Chew had an official role in the movement to preserve Independence Hall as an exhibition space and researched her home, Cliveden, a witness to the Revolutionary War in Germantown, to become a


87 “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” 1906.
future museum. Chew’s deep understanding of relic culture in Philadelphia was informed by her friendship with local historian and collector John Fanning Watson, a non-Washington descendant who acquired his own collection of Washingtoniana. More often, Lee provided her address to social organizations’ membership records as 1311 New Hampshire Avenue in Washington, D.C., the home of Harriot Stoddert Turner and her family. Turner was a member of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and president of the District of Columbia Division, Jefferson Davis Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, No. 1650. Susan Carter Vogel, who has called Lee an “indefatigable tourist,” has noted that Turner shared her interest in travel and accompanied her on many trips abroad. Lee’s prolonged visits to them appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, and many examples of her correspondence appears with Chew’s or Turner’s addresses on its printed letterhead. Like Lee, Chew and Turner were also annual members of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), were active in local historic preservation initiatives and shared Lee’s interest in fundraising. Lee’s independence and decision


89 Barnett, Sacred Relics, 18.

90 Harriot Stoddert Turner, a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, was married to Thomas Theodore Turner and shared MCL’s interests in travel, ancestral research and writing. She published Memoirs of Benjamin Stoddert, First Secretary of the United States Navy (Columbia Historical Society, 1917), GoogleBooks.

91 Vogel, “Australia on the Brain,” 152, 177.

92 Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), Year Book of the APVA (1908), 10-11, GoogleBooks.
not to acquire a household allowed her to build a community of like-minded individuals, who challenged and expanded her views about how historical artifacts and their appreciation could foster social improvement.

Most surviving letters written by Mary Custis Lee, found in museums that she contacted about her collection, are written on hotel writing paper. Her most consistent definition of a home was a select hotel, where she often preferred to stay even when living in close proximity to American relatives and friends. As a version of keeping house, the practice of living in hotels was a more acceptable convention for her married nineteenth-century contemporaries or early twentieth-century young women.93 When in the US, she most often lived at the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, Virginia, which reopened after a fire in 1907 and famously kept pet alligators in its lobby’s fountain, and at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C.94 Although she lived out of many pieces of travel luggage, Lee did not spare expenses on personal comforts in the United States or abroad.95

Lee promoted charitable giving and supported a group home for Southern women widowed by the Civil War.96 She found fulfillment as the president of the


95 MCL Papers, VHS. Lee often made international inquiries about places to stay and planned her travel itinerary in advance of her trips.

Home for Needy Confederate Women, an organization established in 1890. Her dedication to fundraising for this Southern cause motivated her to sell George Washington’s tent in 1906. Her familial role on the board, even from a distance, increased her sense of belonging in the Confederate community. On May 26, 1905, Lee revealed her affinity for the Home as a home of her own, in response to the sympathy expressed by one member of its Board of Managers on her sister Mildred’s recent death. She wrote from the Hotel Meusice, Paris:

> These touching testimonies have come to us from occupants of our Southland; to which my sister was so devoted, & prove how undying is the memory of our Father, of the interest & affection so lavishly bestowed upon his children, & all of his blood & name. Sorrow is perhaps the hardest to bear in a foreign land, & among strangers, so that the assurances of love & sympathy that come from Home, are deeply precious. My interest in the “Institution” with which I am connected has never wavered, & I hope in the near future to meet my co-workers, & the dear old Ladies, to whom present my warmest greetings; in their new & comfortable “Home.”

Lee consulted on commissioned artworks that commemorated her family’s role in Virginia’s history, including those about herself. She attended the dedication of statues or monuments to her father, to Jefferson Davis, and to the Confederate generals T.J. “Stonewall” Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart in Richmond and in New Orleans. While memorializing those who knew her father, the memory of her other famous ancestor, George Washington, was also present in Lee’s mind. Lee’s mother had corresponded

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97 Home for Needy Confederate Women Records, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. MCL wrote to the HNCW at least once per month, contributed annual donations and made personal visits when in Richmond between 1901 and 1918.

98 MCL (Paris) to Miss Susan Dew (Richmond, VA.), 26 May 1905, Home for Needy Confederate Women Records, Library of Virginia.
with the Virginian sculptor Henry Clay Ezekiel, who had worked on a statue of George Washington with his brother, Moses:\textsuperscript{99}

I hope [Moses Ezekiel’s latest work] will be received warmly by the grand old state for whom it is intended...Having seen so often Houdon’s statue of Washington which I have heard my father often pronounce the greatest likeness ever taken of our great hero, I hope he has made it his model…The only difficulty is our poverty which renders us unable to encourage genius.\textsuperscript{100}

Lee’s mother had worked to promote George Washington Parke Custis’ legacy and family expertise, a pattern that Lee herself continued. In a 1913 letter, Lee complimented the importance of Ezekiel’s work to support Confederate monument-building and a sense of continued sympathy for her father’s side in the Civil War:

My windows look out on a lovely open square…with a statue of a Confederate Soldier in the middle, waving his Flag! I am glad you have finished modeling the “Arlington” Monument; I “Assisted” at the laying of the cornerstone in Nov. last; & am sure it will be worthy of the subject & the occasion. I hear that Col. Herbert contemplates having it unveiled on the anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg; which I, along with many others, shall certainly oppose. A monument to the dead, should not commemorate a bloody Battle, & certainly not one that was “The Beginning of the End” for our side!\textsuperscript{101}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{99} Mrs. Burton Harrison, \textit{Recollections Grave and Gray} (Charles Scribner’s Sons, October, 1911), 180, DocSouth, University of North Carolina, http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/harrison/harrison.html. Harrison was proud of Moses Ezekiel’s work (including sculptures at Virginia Military Institute and University of Virginia) and believed his “atelier in the classic quarter of the Baths of Diocletian at Rome, will enduringly attest the fame of Virginia’s wandering son.”

\textsuperscript{100} Mrs. Lee to H. Clay Ezekiel, 18 November 1872, Samuel W. Richey Confederate Collection, The Walter Havighurst Special Collection, Miami University, Oxford Ohio. Transcription of document accessed online, 15 January 2016.

\textsuperscript{101} MCL to Mr. [Moses] Ezekiel, 22 April 1913, Samuel W. Richey Confederate Collection, The Walter Havighurst Special Collection, Miami University, Oxford Ohio. Transcription of document accessed online, 15 January 2016.
\end{flushright}
Lee did not hesitate in offering opinions on these artworks; she recognized their power to communicate the war’s outcome and influence future generations’ public perceptions of the war’s memory.

From her parents’ examples and travels, Lee had a visual attention to artwork that expressed personal sentiment in a public and civic manner. On many occasions, she attended the unveilings of commissioned sculptures and paintings that honored her Southern heritage and its accomplishments. As evidenced by the programs she saved in her trunks, she was present at the Robert E. Lee Monument unveiling in Lee Circle, New Orleans, in 1884 and the Robert E. Lee Monument unveiling on Monument Avenue, Richmond, in 1907. She also kept numerous photographs and lithographed postcards of the memorial statue for her father, commissioned by the Lee Memorial Association from Edward Valentine in 1871, at the suggestion of Lee’s mother.102 The recumbent Lee statue was unveiled in 1883, as the reverential centerpiece for Lee Memorial Chapel’s new mausoleum at Washington and Lee University (renamed from Washington College in 1870). Valentine sought Lee’s approval on the statue, and Lee’s memorabilia of Valentine’s work suggests that he found it.

102 Pamela H. Simpson, “The Great Lee Chapel Controversy and the ‘Little Group of Willful Women’ Who Saved the Shrine of the South,” in Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 86-87; Lee Memorial Association Collection, Coll.148, Washington and Lee University; C. M. Wright, "Lee Chapel,” in Encyclopedia Virginia (Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 7 Apr. 2011) accessed 27 March 2016; Harrison, Recollections, 180: “To [Valentine] the South owes, besides many other works, the immortal recumbent statue of General Lee on the hero’s tomb at Lexington that to my mind is as noble as any piece of memorial sculpture in Italy or Greece, worthy to lie upon the glorious sarcophagus (called that of the great Alexander) that stands in the museum at Constantinople.”
These artworks were the focal points for community gatherings, and they were works that she noticed when traveling to other Southern cities. In 1915, Mrs. Montague at the Home for Needy Confederate Women asked her to sit for an official portrait. Lee agreed but had many qualifications about timing, scale, and funding resources. She made suggestions about other individual portraits that could be created for the Home, and responded with humor that she should be painted as a “brilliant blonde, blue eyes and golden hair!” Lee had valued paintings as important historical records from a young age: Agnes Lee, a younger sister, remembered that “Sister” had taken a particular interest in preserving and reframing their grandfather’s paintings of Revolutionary War scenes when they lived at Arlington House. Lee expressed artistic preferences, in all stages of these works’ creative processes, because she could predict that they would become permanent and public memorial fixtures. The artists, Valentine and Ezekiel, also appreciated her opinion on their efforts to achieve a true likeness of the famous persons she knew. This perspective informed her how she communicated ideal conditions for the Washington relics and influenced their future interpretation.

103 MCL to Mrs. Montague, 26 April [1915], HNCW Records, LVA. MCL wrote about her future portrait: “[in speaking with your friend, the artist] I particularly objected to those great staring pictures, & particularly I do not expect to be pleased with mine in any case! However, as I am having two old Custis pictures relined & repaired here, I consulted Mr. Moore at the “Moore Galleries” & he gave me some measurements...” MCL then inquired after her friend, Sally Tompkins, whose commissioned HNCW portrait is accession no. 2005.002, American Civil War Museum, Richmond, Virginia.

The Washington relics had a dynamic and mobile history among multiple households, even before they became Mary Custis Lee’s inheritance in 1901. Given her singular commitment to issues of national heritage with a critical attention to public monuments and memorials, Lee argued that she was the relics’ most informed caretaker. To transform the Washington relics’ private, family-based meanings into relics that offered meaningful encounters at museums, Lee identified curators willing to honor Virginia’s history using her collections and protect them in secure, fire-proof repositories. She emphasized these two qualities to anyone interested in purchasing or borrowing from her collection. Lee’s industrious efforts, aided by her networking and consistent penchant for viewing art, museum-going and general sight-seeing, facilitated the Washington relics’ placements in American museums, where these artifacts form core collections and continue to interpret the Custis-Lee family story.
Figure 5  Frontispiece illustration for “Arlington House, the Seat of G.W.P. Custis, Esq.” by Benson J. Lossing in Lossing, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, September, 1853. Courtesy, Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.
Figure 6 *The Washington Family*, painting by Edward Savage, 1798-1805, United States, Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont. Courtesy, Winterthur Museum. Lee’s grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, is the young boy in this painting (1961.708)
Figure 7  George Washington Parke Custis, by Mathew B. Brady (approximately), photographer, 1844-1849, daguerreotype, c. 1840-1850. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-110010)
Figure 8  Society of the Cincinnati China, selected pieces owned by Winterthur Museum. Courtesy, Winterthur Museum (1963.0700)
Figure 10  Washington’s room at Mount Vernon, photographic print c. 1910-1920, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. Image features “bed in which Washington died” donated by Mrs. Lee and her son, George Washington Custis Lee (LC-DIG-det-4a24427)
Figure 11  Washington’s Mount Vernon bedroom; the room where George Washington died in 1799, by Rob Shenk, photographer, George Washington’s Mount Vernon. The bed was donated by Mrs. Lee and the washstand or shaving table to the right (W-199) was donated by Mary Custis Lee. Courtesy, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association.
Figure 12  “Relics of Washington on Exhibit in A&I,” photographic print, 1891. Arts and Industries Building, North Hall. Smithsonian Institution Archives (Image # MAH-48727A)
Figure 13  “Washington Relics on Display in A&I Building,” by W. T. Smedley, 1891. Drawing of visitors viewing the relics of George Washington in the Historic and Personal Relics Exhibit in the Arts and Industries Building. Smithsonian Institution Archives (Image # 2003-19523)
Figure 14  Recumbent Robert E. Lee in Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, by Carol M. Highsmith. photographer, c. 1980-2006. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-DIG-highsm-11812)
Figure 15  Lee monument in Lee Circle, New Orleans, Louisiana, c. 1906. Detroit Publishing Company Collection. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection (LC-DIG-det-4a13322)
Figure 16  Robert E. Lee monument, Richmond, Virginia, c. 1900-1915. Detroit Publishing Company Collection. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection (LC-DIG-det-4a31511)
Chapter 3
THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF MARY CUSTIS LEE

Mary Custis Lee shaped her own legacy in museums through the Washington relics she dispersed, but there has been a lack of reliable information about Lee herself. In her groundbreaking book, Lee Girls, Mary P. Coulling noted the absence of Lee’s personal papers.105 With the recent discovery of her two trunks, containing her personal archive, Lee’s story can be told with a focus on the material culture.106 Because she involved herself in many social groups and causes based in American cities, newspaper accounts offer resounding primary evidence about Lee’s character and worldliness. Often described as “living in Europe,” her persona is consistently impressive to reporters. As one example, the Hamilton Evening Journal in Ohio published a typical description on July 16, 1892:

105 Coulling, Lee Girls, author’s note. Coulling’s work was the first publication to answer a gap in scholarship about General and Mrs. Lee’s four daughters: Mary Custis, Eleanor Agnes (Agnes), Anne (Annie) and Mildred Childe Lee; Publications that cite MCL Papers, VHS include works by Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Susan Carter Vogel, Robert E. L. deButts, Jr. and Robert Poole. See bibliography for citations.

106 The Mary Custis Lee Papers, 1694-1917 [Mss 1 L5144 a Manuscripts] of 6,495 items were compiled by Mary Custis Lee (1835-1918) and deposited by her six heirs through the courtesy of their agent, Robert E. L. deButts, Jr., New York, N.Y., 31 May 2007. On 21 July 2009 Mr. Robert E. Lee, IV, Bethesda, Md., and Mrs. A. Smith Bowman, Jr., McLean, Va., each donated a quarter share of the title to this collection to VHS. See “Historical Note” and “Provenance Note,” Mss 1 L5144 a, Library and Archives Catalog (online), VHS at www.vahistorical.org.
General Lee's Daughter, Miss Mary Lee is one of the most interesting American women of our time. People who were invited to meet her at the residence of Colonel Richard Lathers, found a stately, gray haired lady, with the manners of a court and the added charm of personal magnetism and intellectual culture. There is no educator like travel, and Miss Lee has been one of the greatest travelers of her time, certainly, the most distinguished of her country. I know of no other American lady who has alone, save for her maid, penetrated into the remoter regions of Syria, Egypt, central and northern Europe and even the isles of the far east. But Miss Lee's travels and adventures have been more venturesome and more fruitful than this cursory mention could indicate. Her graces of person and mind fit her eminently for writing them, and, for all I know, she may already have the record in black and white. It ought to be good reading. The Lees, however, have all the modesty of our ancestors. They do not shrink from publicity, but withdraw themselves, rather, from elbowing the crowd and contributing in any way to a spectacle.  

Lee’s individual travels and honored participation in commemorative events, were frequently published. She viewed and saved clippings of these stories as a way of recording her experiences. The Mary Custis Lee Papers at Virginia Historical Society, found in 2002 and processed by 2007, make it clear that Lee followed her own reputation in the papers. This practice heightened Lee’s awareness about her public behavior. She clipped and saved newspaper articles about herself (sometimes truncating their dates and news sources) and about her widespread political and social interests. Although digitized newspapers have made this content more accessible online, there has been a general absence of Lee’s story from the larger historiography about her family.  


father’s legacy at Confederate memorials and commemorative events. The goal for this thesis is to help today’s museums better understand and interpret their collections, by understanding how Lee’s opinions, attitudes and activities surrounding the Washington relics impact their institutional histories. A material culture framework that focuses on these intersecting relationships can address this topic’s limited historiography, told from the perspective of separate institutions or separate biographies about Lee’s relatives, and not on the person who brought these people and places together between 1901 and 1918. From the materials she left behind in archives and museums, it is possible to recover Lee’s unknown yet influential perspective.109

This thesis addresses three categories of material. First, the items in the trunks reveal how she selected, organized and saved these documents and objects. Second, many of her personal belongings and souvenirs outside of the trunks’ contents are now at Washington and Lee University or in other museums, through the many items that she bequeathed to relatives.110 Third, the Washington relics themselves, along with

109 Pryor, Reading the Man, 368-369, “The Lees’ own Miss Mary also attracted a good deal of attention [in Richmond after the White House was burned]…so surrounded by old city beaux.” See also p. 206-207: “After the war Lee pressed his daughters to remain home…Daughter Mary ignored his demands, but Agnes and Mildred found it harder to defy him” and for why none of the daughters married, “The Lee girls did have a social life after the war, sleigh riding, and going to Virginia Military Institute’s cadet hops… Agnes, at least, was considered a catch, and Mary was reported to have abundant suitors…Mary jealously guarded her independence.”

110 Personal effects of Mary Custis Lee, bequest, University Collections of Art and History Record Group 34, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University. See: Pocket watch with initials “MCL” by James Courvoisier, Watchmaker, with charms: “cross, mug, camel, rectangle, anchor, bell, elephant, hat, coin, lion, limousine” (LC1962.12) and painted sandalwood fan from Innsbruck, Austria with friends’ signatures (LC1928.1).
their separate institutional records, can be studied as evidence about her attitude towards historic preservation as she shaped her public legacy. These artifacts have always been a favorite topic in the national press because of their attachment to George Washington, but Mary Custis Lee knew about these objects’ associations within the Lee family since the Civil War. She used her expertise to authenticate the relics and identified suitable repositories according to a variety of factors.

Lee’s biography and relationship to American history, 1835-1918, as told by the objects she inherited, saw, collected and dispersed, requires further study about how she operated in a shifting political world, as both a daughter of the American Revolution and a daughter of the Confederacy. By 1901-1918, Lee most often performed her public role as the celebrated “daughter of that defeated General,” which is how she is remembered in scholarship on Robert E. Lee and his family.111 This thesis addresses how Lee employed her fame to manage a revolutionary inheritance which, like herself, prevailed throughout the Civil War. When she honored her Washington ancestors in public events, she also paid tribute to Robert E. Lee’s memory after his death in 1870 and especially in 1907, a year when many celebrated the centennial of his birth.

Many historians have written about the Confederate Lost Cause as its ideology impacted American lives during Lee’s lifetime. When she is rarely or briefly mentioned by these sources, Lee is characterized as a symbolic figurehead at large-scale commemorative events. Historian James M. Lindgren has discussed the impact of Lee and her peers, the Southern women who joined the APVA, MVLA and other groups, on the early twentieth-century historic preservation movement in Virginia. Lee’s almost two decades of work with American institutions regarding the Washington relics kept her involved in these places and associated organizations, which occasionally placed her in honorary leadership roles. Instead of pooling her resources to benefit a single repository’s mission, however, Lee used her collection to benefit multiple institutions.

Early twentieth-century women who published memoirs of the Civil War often recall Lee’s place among Southern war heroes and socialites. The author of *Recollections Grave and Gay* ranked Richmond’s society and listed Mrs. Lee and her daughters as “the women who were most in evidence in the Confederate capital,”


second only to their friend Varina Davis, wife of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America. She described Lee’s early sociability:

The ladies of General Lee's family lived in a pleasant house in lower Franklin Street, then and afterward held as a shrine in the eyes of patriotic pilgrims. Mrs. Robert E. Lee, not strong in health and always a reserved woman in society, rarely showed herself in general gatherings. Miss Mary Custis Lee, who has for years been known to the exclusive circles of foreign capitals, having spent most of her latter life abroad, took the post of receiving and entertaining the friends and admirers who thronged around their doors.114

To further the story about Lee’s relationship to other famous Confederate wives and daughters, studies on her scrapbooks’ calling cards and clippings reveal her personal friendships with prominent figures, more well-known today than Lee herself. As one example from her scrapbooks, Lee saved this newspaper quote from 1915:

Miss Mary Lee, the only surviving daughter of General Robert E Lee, has been passing the Autumn at the Plaza. She has traveled all over the world and usually passes her Winters abroad. She is a charming woman with a remarkable memory and a fund of anecdotes. Later she is to go South and visit a number of friends in different cities below the Mason and Dixon line. Her advent is always the occasion for much entertaining.115

While Lee lived partially in Richmond during the war and entertained guests on behalf of her parents, her post-war lifestyle depended on others who would entertain her for her father’s military status. People who frequented the same social circles based in Confederate or colonial heritage often commented on Lee’s presence.

114 Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gray* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, October, 1911), 153-154. DocSouth, University of North Carolina. Harrison mentions that the death of Lee’s sister, Annie and other relatives “placed the family in mourning [...] so the old elegant hospitality of Arlington House, which had opened its doors to so many in the past, was allowed to pass away...” http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/harrison/harrison.html

115 Scrapbooks compiled by MCL, Lee family papers, VHS; “Town Topics” [clipping, original source unknown] December [n.d.] 1915, Lee family papers, VHS.
Marietta Minnigerode Andrews, a cousin and writer in New Orleans, resented her as a houseguest even though Andrews’ father, a veteran Confederate general, was honored to host Robert E. Lee’s daughter. Andrews discussed Lee’s reputation in a novel published after Lee’s death. More recently, Lee’s descendants have researched her role in American history based on the Mary Custis Lee Papers. Publications by Anne Carter Zimmer, Susan Carter Vogel and Robert E. L. deButts, Jr. have helped to characterize Lee beyond the present-day interpretation at NPS Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial.\footnote{116}

During her lifetime, Lee valued written reminiscences and memoirs. She drafted a nine-page letter detailing her father’s decision to resign from the US Army and expressed a desire to record her own story.\footnote{117} Although she never finished this project, Lee believed in this kind of record-keeping as an effective way of managing one’s legacy. Her many convictions on the subject included this suggestion:

> When people undertake to write their reminiscences, they should be very sure of two things; their that their facts are facts, or that none of the contemporaneous actors in the drama are left alive to contradict or refute them! It would also be wise, then their recollections deal with historical characters & events, to refresh a treacherous memory by such reference to official documents as would verify their statements...Let me rather conclude as I began with this single piece of advice: be sure of your facts if you contemplate writing history, or else, be very sure no contemporaries are living to confute your fictions.\footnote{118}

\footnote{116} Andrews, Memoirs; See bibliography for citations.

\footnote{117} Pryor, “Thou Knowest Not the Time of Thy Visitation...”

\footnote{118} Dr. Susan Vogel, author and scholar, conversation with author, 22 September 2015. Quote courtesy, notes on “Aunt Mary on historical standards / accuracy” by Vogel, transcribed from MCL Papers, VHS.
Lee took her own advice and cited documents and sources in her conversations about the Washington relics. Despite her limited representation in scholarship, the objects and documents associated with Lee tell the story of her impact on museums. This evidence reveals Lee’s historical role in preserving her relics and narrating their associated facts and fictions. This thesis is based on her management of the Washington relics: each object will be a case study within these relationship categories, and each relationship draws upon a) a chronological tracing of how the object moves from Mount Vernon to Arlington to Lee herself to a new and secure location; b) her influences from people, experiences, and her own material culture, including her management of Lee objects and finally, c) the people who are impacted by these relationships.

These case studies about select Washington relics will reexamine Lee’s biography in light of new source material about her role as an archivist, curator, outreach coordinator and educator. Lee fulfilled some of the tasks that are required by museum professionals today. To emphasize the impact of Mary Custis Lee’s work on museums and institutions, this thesis is organized by these contemporary terms and provides a metaphor for Lee’s work, as defined in each chapter. By providing a chronological timeline for Mary Custis Lee’s encounters with objects, this thesis will promote further understanding about the people and places she influenced, which continue to impact how museum visitors view the Washington relics today.
Figure 17  Mary Custis Lee, c. 1890-1910. Courtesy, American Civil War Museum, Richmond, Virginia (FIC2009.03763)
Chapter 4

MARY CUSTIS LEE AS ARCHIVIST: TRUNKS AS ARCHIVES

Mary Custis Lee repurposed two travel trunks as living archives, where she compartmentalized objects, research projects and ideas related to her family history, travels and national identity on a personal level. Like many of her other possessions, the trunks were locked in a vault at Burke & Herbert Bank on King Street in Alexandria, Virginia. Unlike her other possessions, the trunks’ real value for scholars was only recently realized. Discovered in 2002 and processed in 2007 at Virginia Historical Society, the trunks contain over six thousand objects and papers that document three centuries of Custis, Lee and Fitzhugh lives.119 This archival source enhanced and served as her private and portable archive until 1917, about one year before her death, and enhanced Lee’s influence on American museums, 1901-1918. This chapter will address several important themes revealed by the trunks’ contents, now called the Mary Custis Lee Papers, 1694-1917.120 First, Lee tried to understand her family legacy by documenting the Washington relics’ provenance. Secondly, she wanted to document and remember her own travels. Lastly, she collected published newspaper and ephemeral accounts about her and her collection, and perhaps more.


importantly for scholars, she annotated and corrected these accounts. As she created this collection, Lee acted in ways that characterize an archivist. Although neither she nor her contemporaries would have used this term, it is evident from these materials that she was doing archival work.

Contributing documents to this archive was Lee’s method of writing her own autobiography. For this reason, the accumulated collections housed by these two trunks can serve as the missing link between her dispersed letters and objects in today’s museums. The trunks’ papers and objects are the result of her crucial, creative and interactive engagement with her inheritance. For the purpose of this thesis, the trunks offer insights about Lee’s archival practice, which enable the museums that hold her Washington relics to better understand their collections’ histories. It is Lee’s character and sense of biography, more than her famous Virginian ancestors whose documents she saved, that ties three centuries of materials together because it was she who first recognized their historical value as a collective entity.\(^\text{121}\)

Mary Custis Lee represented the past through the artifacts and documents that she elected to save. The trunks were a safer, more portable repository than any of the household conditions that she experienced. She created opportunities to define and describe the Washington relics, arrange their historical timelines and make notes for

\(^\text{121}\) MCL (Rome) to Robert E. Lee, Jr., 17 April 1896, MCL Papers, VHS. Lee’s youngest brother, Robert E. Lee, Jr., published his recollections in 1904. Early on in his project, MCL offered her assistance and declared her own interest in writing a memoir, “I may be able to help you with some of my reminiscences, which I have always been too lazy, & too wandering, to put into shape myself…”; To add to the convenience of using the bank as a depository, Lee was a personal friend of both bank owners, Burke and Herbert; E. Lee Shepard, “Hidden Treasures: A Short History of the Mary Custis Lee Trunks,” lecture delivered at Virginia Historical Society, 22 April 2010, audio recording, accessed 19 March 2016.
future preservation. Archivist Mike Featherstone defines an archive as a “crucial site for national memory… the place in which the sacred texts and objects were stored that were used to generate collective identity and social solidarity… This sense that the archive is a key source of the nation, the basis for the construction of the national tradition, then, raises the question of who makes the history.” In addition, Featherstone, in writing about the theory and meaning of an archive, observes its importance for the researcher. If we consider the peripatetic Lee as the researcher in her own archive, Featherstone’s words offer insight about its meaning for her:

[…The archive] offers the delights of discovering records and truths that have been hidden or lost, of resurrecting the past. Here the archive is a place for the researcher both to be alone and at home. A place where the researcher can seek to find his or her identity through the process of historical identification, a place to search for images in the past which can summon up or confirm some sense of a lost self…

Hence the archive is a place for dreams and revelation, a place of longing where the world can turn on the discovery of an insignificant fragment: a place for creating and re-working memory… there will be attempts to construct archives as prosthetic memory devices for the re-constitution of identity, to invent a place to be at home…

122 Paul Conway, "Preservation in the Age of Google: Digitization, Digital Preservation and Dilemmas," Library Quarterly, 80, no. 1 (2010): 61-79 describes the role of archivists, their relationship to a repository and selection of a secure facility: “Archival repositories do more than provide space for the storage of records. They also carry out functions such as arrangement, reference, and conservation.”


124 Ibid., 594-595.
Lee’s archive contains narratives about the Lee, Custis and Fitzhugh families and their significance to world history. Especially after 1901, Lee’s creation of her own archive facilitated her own scholarship about family history and the Washington relics.

Mary Custis Lee formed an archival practice based on collecting correspondence and family papers, gathering annotated newspaper articles, and making lists. When she returned to Arlington in 1865, Lee fulfilled her mother’s request for a condition report about the home’s dispersed or damaged contents. On the same trip, she viewed the Washington relics that had been removed to the Patent Office in Washington, D.C., now set in museum cases. From these experiences, Lee had to decipher five decades of Lee family packing lists and unpack meanings about their object inventories. Lists and legal documents in her collection trace the Washington relics as they were inventoried, from their locations at Mount Vernon to Arlington to other storage solutions. Because she accumulated her family’s papers over time, after her father’s death in 1870, her mother’s in 1873, her sister Mildred’s in 1905, her older brother’s in 1913, and her younger brother’s in 1914, Mary Custis Lee’s inherited collections only grew in quantity and sentimental value.

The trunks also contained documentary and material history of Mary Custis Lee’s own life. Between 1870 and 1918, Lee shopped in international marketplaces for souvenirs, purchased international photographs, collected friends’ calling cards and memorabilia for her two large scrapbooks, managed botanical scrapbooks based on certain trips and accumulated small objects that would signify the Lee and Washington legacy to future generations.  

125 Botanical scrapbook compiled by MCL, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University; MCL Papers, VHS are archived
Lee designated her trunks as portable archives during her lifetime, which enhanced her participation in museum institutions. Many of her notes, lists and letters reveal her sense of familial duty, priority for correcting and promoting resources related to genealogy, and dedication to ensuring a public legacy for the Washington relics in American museums. At the same time that she elected to save letters commemorating her father’s 100th anniversary of his birth in 1907, she also collected documents related to the relics. As evidenced by the trunks’ diverse and ephemeral holdings, Lee’s private curiosity about the Washington relics was influenced by family precedents with the same collection, and by what she read and wrote about these items in published sources. Her archival practice provided a participatory and tangible outlet for this ongoing investigation about the Washington relics.

While not a formal system, Lee invented consistent “tags” for different categories of objects and used available containers to categorize material. For example, Lee’s eyewitness account of Arlington House in December 1865, created for her mother, confirmed her uncle’s previous report on Arlington and expanded his previous inventory of its furnishings. She also provided saw her grandfather’s paintings, still at Tudor Place in Georgetown, and visited the Washington relics on display in Washington, D.C.: “…at the Patent Office, where I took a list of our things which I will send you & since you had better read.” Her description of Arlington included the poor conditions that the Patent Office relics had escaped:

Entering [Arlington House], all looked very desolate & very dirty… I went into the parlour in which nothing was standing but the old sideboard, with broken

as “Mary Custis Lee Papers, 1694-1917. 6,495 Items. Collection of Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA. Mss1 L5144 a.” See library database, vahistorical.org.
doors & almost concealed from view by a mass of flags … Several pictures & on the walls, among them that fading Miss Custis, with white roses in her hand. I was not allowed to enter Papa’s office, nor the greenhouse though the latter was full of plants put there by the Government. In the dining room were two of the bookcases & filled with old books, the centre one gone, Agnes’ old bookcase from the hall upstairs & the old writing desk & secretaire from Papa’s office.126

At some point, probably after her mother’s death, she wrote “About Arlington” across the folded letter for convenient reference among her papers. She filed these letters in repurposed retail containers or envelopes, apart from boxes filled with blank stationery or small trinkets.127 Saved with the 1865 letter are other objects that provide context: her uncle’s earlier 1865 “sketch of a lovely visit to dear old Arlington” that Lee’s report corroborated, family accounts of Arlington National Cemetery and her parents’ attention to Confederate dead burials and reburials in Gettysburg.128 From her actions to preserve these other items as significant, Lee viewed postwar Arlington House as a burying ground that had been lost to the family’s claims for reparations. Although she had a certain nostalgia for her childhood home, she did not seek to restore Arlington House as a reliquary for the Washington relics. Instead, she created a repository for family memory and documents in her travel trunks.

From Lee’s personal collections and newspapers, it is evident that she worked to piece together the gaps in the relics’ traveling timeline between Mount Vernon, Arlington, the Smithsonian and other repositories, which informed her decisions about

126 MCL (Baltimore) to Mrs. Lee, 9 December 1865, MCL Papers, VHS.
128 Sydney Smith Lee, “A Sketch of a Lovely Visit to Dear Old Arlington,” [1865] (Mss1 L5144a 2556), MCL Papers, VHS. Robert E. Lee’s older brother was a commander in Confederate States Navy; (Mss1 L5144a 2556) is a copy [n.d.] of an appeal by Mrs. Lee (and others) to remove Confederate dead from Gettysburg.
where to place her inherited Washington relics. Some of the relics, however, proved to raise more questions than answers. She paid attention to public curiosity about the relics and amassed quantities of related publications, materials and objects to help her answer the public’s questions. For example, larger quantities of materials dealt with Washington’s military tents and Society of the Cincinnati china, including inventories, notes from museum curators thanking her for a generous loan, packing slips, bills for temporary storage units and relevant newspaper clippings. Lee corroborated her historical evidence by collecting ephemeral items that represented George Washington and Robert E. Lee in popular print culture, c. 1900, including postcards, periodicals and stereo cards produced for tourists. Lee’s archive informed her goals to develop her role as ‘the expert’ on her collection and to imaginatively, if not physically, reassemble, authenticate and disperse the Washington relics.

Lee also collected references to the history of how the Washington relics were displayed in institutions, beyond her family’s control between 1861 and 1901. On January 28, 1862, the Arlington House items were first displayed at the Patent Office:

The relics of Washington, found at Arlington House, have been artistically arranged by Caleb Lyon, of Lyonsdale. These relics consist of porcelains presented to General Washington by the Order of the Cincinnati, the arms of which are emblazoned on each piece, upheld by a figure of Fame in colors. Also, … his sleeping tent, his field tent and a portmanteau,…\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{129} Rose, Reminiscences, 29. The “Captured from Arlington” exhibit at the US Patent Office was described in The National Republican (Washington, D.C.) 28 January 1862; “Addition to the Washington Relics,” The New York Times, 26 April 1862 lists: “Additions to the Washington relics in the Patent office have been made by Hon. Caleb Lyon, of Lyonsdale, under order of the Commanding General, of the following articles: A curious antique mirror, from Lady Washington's boudoir, of thick Venetian glass, used at Mount Vernon. A rare old mahogany escritoire in which Washington kept his private papers. The wood is black with age. It formerly belonged to Lord
General Irwin McDowell gave Caleb Lyon permission to remove the Washington relics for safekeeping in a museum, away from pilfering Union troops who viewed the Washington objects as the “rebel General” Lee’s belongings, not George Washington’s household items revered as national treasures. In congressional legal proceedings from 1870, General McDowell’s records give the fullest account of the Washington relics taken from Arlington House. His report prioritized the Society of the Cincinnati china’s fragility and need for protection, but also confirmed his collaboration with Lyon as an action that would mutually benefit the Lees and a national audience. Lyon reported to McDowell that he had “received the articles enumerated in the above list, and have caused them to be deposited in the National Gallery of the Patent Office, for safe keeping, and for the examination of the public.”

Using McDowell’s list, compiled and sent to congressional court, Mary Custis Lee confirmed her own questions about the legalities regarding her family’s collection. She compared it with relatives’ accounts about where her mother had

Fairfax. Also one silk suit and a buff vest, both of finest fabric, but motheaten by time. All of these articles are of historic value. They are from Arlington House…”

\(^{130}\) Caleb B. Smith, Secretary of the Interior, 21 January 1862, transcript in folder for accession no. 1963.0700.1-70a,b Society of the Cincinnati china, Registration Office, Winterthur Museum: “3 Platters (assorted), 5 Soup Plates (imperfect) 9 Dinner plates (imperfect), 7 Custard cup covers, 3 Salad bowls (imperfect), 3 Soup tureens, 1 Soup tureen cover, 2 Sauce dishes, with covers, 2 covers [sauce dishes, with covers], 4 Sauce boats, 1 Small plate, 3 Fish drainers; 3 Blue Glass finger bowls, 2 Vases, presented by Mr. Vaughan (imperfect); 2 Cut glass Candelabras, 2 Set mirror ornaments, 1 Blanket, 2 Portmanteau, with War tent, 1 Treasure Chest, 1 Tea Table, 1 Marquet [sic] tent, 1 Set hangings, 1 Set wood poles for tent. I acknowledge to have received the articles enumerated in the above list, and have caused them to be deposited in the National Gallery of the Patent Office, for safe keeping, and for the examination of the public.”
placed the relics. By assigning herself to these tasks, Lee became the expert on the Washington relics and their locations.

Mary Custis Lee made numerous lists and inventories. Making lists gave her physical and intellectual control over the complex legal situation. It also allowed her to track the object groups’ accompanying descriptions. Because not every object in Lee’s inheritance had been catalogued with equal attention, she had to balance each object’s many written, and often confusing descriptions. As an archivist, she collected, sorted and corrected documents relevant to her family history. She ensured that her collection would maintain a status as “relics,” by sorting out their provenance and keeping her records in one place. Lee also synthesized her siblings’ investigations to corroborate her own evidence, which included her older brother’s lists of silver and china and Mildred’s earlier lists of family silver.\textsuperscript{131} She identified the tents and the china as things with the most powerful relic status, as singular or rare objects closely associated with Washington. Other objects became Washington relics because of what Lee and her siblings said they were, including Washington’s buttons, taken from his inaugural coat, and a parallel dispersal of “non-relic” furniture and Lee items from Arlington House.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{131} George Washington Custis Lee, “Lists of Silver and China: Shoreham Hotel” and other lists of silver from Mildred Lee and Robert E. Lee, Jr., MCL Papers, VHS.

Because she most often lived abroad between 1870 and 1901, Lee also lived out of additional, multiple trunks.\(^{133}\) This process, which required making packing lists for her valuables and belongings, informed her approach to the Washington relics’ dispersal. For example, the two trunks found in her bank vault include descriptive lists of clothing and numerous accessories, box-by-box and trunk-by-trunk. Lee sent memorandums to her bankers about retrieving lists of personal articles, kept itemized receipts and added cities, months and years to a running tally of her travel destinations.\(^{134}\)

As a new commodity, the larger trunk was a status symbol that signified Lee’s participation in international celebrity culture before it was repurposed as her archive. She purchased the trunk in Paris from E. Goyard, a family-owned company headquartered on Rue Saint-Honoré, which still operates as a competitor to Louis Vuitton in luxury travel luggage.\(^{135}\) The nailed wooden trunk has a red leather exterior

\(^{133}\) Inventory and Appraisement of Estate of Mary Custis Lee, 1919 June 30 (Washington, D.C.), [Reproduction], Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington, Mount Vernon. Sworn to as correct by C.S. Taylor Burke and Arthur Herbert Jr. on Aug. 23, 1919. Description: “Appraisement of estate, including stocks and bonds and jewelry—also many Mt. Vernon items...” See Appendix B.

\(^{134}\) “Dates of Travel,” Section 52, MCL Papers, VHS (Mss1 L5144a 2556). MCL’s dated entries are non-chronological and include London, May 29, 1877, most are 1873 and 1875; George Washington Custis Lee recommendation letter for William L. Price, 13 October 1897, transcription by Mark Daughtrey, 1997, George Washington Custis Lee Papers, WLU Coll. 0142, Special Collections and Archives, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA. GWCL notes, “[he] is also expert at packing trunks, putting up parcels, etc. My sister [Mary] considers him as good at packing ladies’ trunks as the professional packers of Paris...”

with a white canvas lining and brown leather handles. Blue striped cloth tape secures a removable box. Aside from the papers in the Virginia Historical Society’s library, the trunk’s contents included retail packages from the St. Louis World’s Fair, a purple drawstring pouch labeled “Valletta, Malta,” an empty corset box, *New York Times* newspapers, and labeled envelopes containing rocks with Lee’s notes about each specimen’s origin. Like all trunks from Goyard, Lee’s trunk was customized to suit her travel needs. It served a practical purpose, but its personalized “M. Lee” label and characteristic marks of the French company’s quality also confirmed to general passersby that the owner belonged to an elite social circle of Goyard consumers, including European royalty. Lee’s trunk displays hotel stickers from both American and worldwide hotels, including a circular sticker from the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, Virginia. The trunk had many removable compartments, which Lee filled with retail boxes, passports, brochures, correspondence, souvenirs, photographs, Confederate keepsakes, keepsakes made from family members’ hair, souvenir rocks, travel diaries, train time calendars, ticket stubs, an elaborate invitation to Mardi Gras from 1884, glove boxes and blank postcards, among other things. These nineteenth-century and twentieth-century items were accumulated and added to Lee’s inherited Custis, Lee and Fitzhugh family papers. While traveling, Lee frequently went shopping and also collected gifts for friends and family.¹³⁶ When she last deposited

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¹³⁶ MCL Papers, VHS. Thank-you notes from friends include Margaret Junkin Preston, New Orleans, for a gift of porcelain from Japan.
the French trunk at Burke & Herbert in 1917, it joined other items, including the
second trunk included in the Mary Custis Lee Papers archive at VHS.\textsuperscript{137}

In comparison, the second trunk is smaller and likely older. It is lined with
newspapers featuring retail advertisements and contains remaining tangled ribbons and
strings from removed archival materials, including a printed envelope from the White
House.\textsuperscript{138} Instead of assigning each trunk a distinctive purpose, Lee used both trunks
in practical and similar ways. From the lack of an overarching organizational system,
it appears that Lee considered her new acquisitions as personally valuable, important,
useful: in her arrangement, these contemporary collections deserved the same
attention, protection and secure space as her ancestral documents.

Mary Custis Lee’s lifestyle depended on a network of assistants to ensure her
personal belongings’ security. Her choice to live out of her trunks and to preserve her
life’s objects in trunks was an expression of her independence. However, this priority
was a sometimes restrictive burden: Lee often paid men to carry her trunks for her,
and the “vigilance of the [United States] Customs House” was a common point of
conversation in Lee’s correspondence. Her lifestyle depended on a network of
assistants to ensure her personal belongings’ security. She was an educated consumer
with an extreme attention to detail in safekeeping, whether she focused on an

\textsuperscript{137} L. Paige Newman, Associate Archivist for Collections Processing, Virginia
Historical Society, conversation with author. 30 March 2016.

\textsuperscript{138} VHS collections visit with L. Paige Newman and John McClure, Reference
Department Manager, Virginia Historical Society, conversation with author. 1 June
2015. The larger trunk is labeled with a printed paper label, adhered to the center of
the interior lid that reads “Malles Maroquiniere É Goyard Ain’e Maison Fonde en
1792 Fabrique a Bezans 233 Rue Saint-Honoré.”

83
expensive trunk, inexpensive trinkets or priceless Washington relics. Lee’s travels further qualified her as an archivist in her own right.

Lee collected mementoes of Arlington House and Mount Vernon. One poetic example comes from her collection of stereoview cards, called “stereoviews:” symmetrical double-image photographic cards of scenes that were produced for tourists to experience these places at home, using a three-dimensional stereo-viewer. She purchased at least two series of stereoviews that featured Washington, D.C. One set included several views of Arlington House and one view of Arlington National Cemetery. In the same pile, she had a stereoview of Mount Vernon, issued by a different company. She chose to cut three stereoviews in half, keeping half of the card. These half-cards display three photos: one of Mount Vernon, one of Arlington House and one of soldiers’ graves in Arlington National Cemetery. It is not clear where the other halves to these cards were placed. Lee had a purpose for these photographs beyond the famous sites’ touristic appeal: she kept them as mnemonic devices to remember her ancestral homes.

Lee also recorded her travels by date and place. She left home in Lexington soon after her father’s death, and frequently wrote to her mother and sisters, Agnes

\[139\] MCL Papers, VHS. Lee created labels for her souvenirs: in some cases, the note remains but the object has been separated. For example, “Slippers bought in Constantinople, during the Revolution of May 1909, when I & my escort a young British officer were the only Europeans & almost the only individuals wandering through the immensely large & usually densely crowded Bazaar over in Stamboul. M.C. Lee.”

\[140\] For more on stereo cards or stereoviews as memory devices, see Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory,” in Fiona Candlin and Rayford Guins, The Object Reader (Routledge, 2009), 331-342.
and Mildred, between 1870 and 1873. In her letters, she described her encounters with artworks and demonstrated a sense of wonder and familiarity with old masters’ works. In one report from Vienna, she wrote about her curiosity in the artistic process:

We went to the … foundry, where so many colossal statues are cast, & had the operation practically explained to us…I could have fancied myself in America, so surrounded was I by our transatlantic heroes [including the model of the equestrian statue of Washington…] & a host of others. We also saw the painted glass factory, with some beautiful specimens, & a wonderful “Museum” filled with no end of curious old things.¹⁴¹

From her upbringing and avid sightseeing, Lee formed ideas about how the public engages with cultural objects and spaces to experience a new sense of national identity. She revisited favorite places, such as the Vatican, and replicated a favorite tour routes through Europe with subsequent seasons.¹⁴² By 1901, at age 66, Lee had an educated “tourist” perspective and a collection of souvenirs to prove it. Because of her archival impulse, it is possible to trace her lifelong interests in museums and cultural institutions. Her experiences prepared her to make suggestions about how the

¹⁴¹ MCL to Mrs. Lee, 15 June 1872 or 1873, MCL Papers, VHS; MCL to [unknown], a “New Orleans classical scholar [who appreciated] antiquity,” 2 March 1873, Section 28 (Mss1 L5144a 2556), MCL Papers, VHS. An example of MCL’s travel priorities: “…on the Colisseum (sic), the Ruins, the Capitol, the Vatican, the miles of pictures, & statues we have walked through or the endless churches, monuments…[I am] tempted to follow [my friend’s example…] who says she always shuts her eyes tight when she drives out in Rome, for fear somebody should point out something to her!…so much that is astounding and wonderful.” See also MCL to Edgar Farrar, 25 March 1873, for her description of artworks at the Vatican, MCL Papers, VHS.

¹⁴² Dr. Susan Vogel, conversation with author, 22 September 2015; Mary P. Coulling, “Whereabouts of Mary Custis Lee, 1870-1918,” in Mary Coulling Papers, WLU Coll. 0248, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA.
Washington relics would be displayed, promoted to visitors, and used as educational tools on an international scale.

Mary Custis Lee’s trunks evidence her personal relationship to objects. Much like her mother’s inventories represented their family home in legal battles, always-moving Lee kept track of the Washington relics with similarly visual attention to lists, documents, and images. Lee viewed the trunks, not any one household, as a repository for her family’s three-century history. Her perspective on the significance of the various Washington relics is revealed in her personal papers. These were collected by a dedicated archivist, who sought a permanent sense of value, purpose, and place for what she perceived as an elusive inheritance.
Figure 18  Mary Custis Lee’s Trunk, by E. Goyard Ainé, at Virginia Historical Society. Courtesy, Kenneth Garrett Photography. Copyright KennethGarrett.com.
Figure 19  Trunk, Lee, Custis and Fitzhugh families, by E. Goyard Ainé, with circular Jefferson Hotel sticker and “M. Lee” label. Courtesy, Virginia Historical Society (2002.652.1)
Figure 20  Stereo half of Arlington House and Stereo half of Mount Vernon, photographic prints on stereo card in Mary Custis Lee Papers, Virginia Historical Society (Mss1 L5144 a 433)
Figure 21  Letter from Robert E. Lee to Belle Harrison, enclosed with three stars from his military uniform. Photograph of items from Mary Custis Lee trunks at Virginia Historical Society. Courtesy, Kenneth Garrett Photography. Copyright KennethGarrett.com.
Chapter 5

MARY CUSTIS LEE AS CURATOR: WASHINGTON’S TENTS

After the Washington relics were transferred from the United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution to the Lee family in May of 1901, Mary Custis Lee began a campaign to authenticate, promote and place the objects. In her correspondence with museum curators and her interviews with the national press, she became a curator in her own right. Thought she would not have applied this professional term to herself, the tasks she completed pertain to standard curatorial practice in art and historical museums today.

Lee identified the relics and their

143 President William McKinley to Senator John W. McDaniel, 25 April 1901, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, US National Museum, Permanent Administrative Files, microfilm acc. no. 13152. This letter explains the US government perspective on the issue: “...certain relics of George Washington now in the Smithsonian Institution…The relics were at Arlington when the Civil War began, and early in 1862...[General McDowell], interested in their preservation, sent them to the Patent Office for safe-keeping, whence they were transferred to their present place of deposit...All the Government did was to accept the trust of their custody at a time when the owner could not protect them and they were consequently exposed to the risk of destruction. The need for such protection having ceased, and the trust voluntarily assumed having been discharged, it will afford me great satisfaction to give direction for the restoration to the present head of a historic family of these cherished heirlooms of the Father of his Country.”

144 Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak, “From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur” in Thinking about Exhibitions, ed. Bruce Ferguson (1996), 233-236. Heinich and Pollak discuss “occupational hazards and depersonalization of the curatorial post”: “The curator’s task is not only the safeguarding, analysis and presentation of a cultural heritage: it includes enriching [collection, research and display]...by so doing, the curator engages, initiates – and, at times, squanders—credit: both the curator’s
provenances, testified to their authenticity and recorded their histories for future generations. For her seventeen-year ownership, she worked to ensure that these objects would be appropriately displayed. Some of these tasks, within the realm of curatorship, proved to be more challenging than others.

From the documents she archived in her trunks and her correspondents’ personal papers held in museums and public archives, it is clear that Lee attempted to understand each Washington object’s location history and took notes about public interests in her family’s history. To assess potential institutional owners, she traveled to museums, participated in heritage organizations and collected information about why private and public groups valued the Washington relics. As the vocal representative of the Custis-Washington and Lee legacies (who coordinated and expressed her siblings’ interests in the relics until her youngest sister’s death in 1905 and older brother’s death in 1913), Mary Custis Lee influenced perceptions of her family’s objects as nationally-significant artifacts. Her curatorial actions included a corrective approach to collections management, developing and using networks of like-minded colleagues, fulfilling relatives’ final wishes toward these objects to preserve her family’s memory, and influencing museums to maximize appropriate donation and display strategies.

Lee’s largest curatorial challenge was presented by her inheritance’s largest and most mobile artifacts: George Washington’s tents used during the American professional credit and the institution’s moral credit…” Due to the lack of attention toward her impact on museums, MCL experienced what these authors describe as “this erasure of the person occupying a position that is part of a public-service institution.” See also Jens Hoffmann, “Ten Fundamental Answers,” in Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating, ed. Jens Hoffmann (2013). Professor Kelly Baum, class discussion on contemporary curating, University of Delaware, Newark, DE. August 28, 2014.
Revolution. Washington’s camp equipage included parts that may have belonged to two, or even three tents. Before the tents were restored to Lee, they had a commemorative purpose, displayed both indoors (in pieces) or outdoors at numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century homes and events. As she described in “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” they were transferred from Mount Vernon to Arlington House to the US Patent Office and later, the Smithsonian Institution’s US National Museum. After Lee recovered her ownership of the tents, overcoming several logistical and legal problems in doing so, she finally succeeded in placing one of the tents in a newly-created public institution in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. This chapter details her curatorial work in this accomplishment. Lee’s handling of the tents displays her awareness of the special meaning of these objects directly connected to Washington’s military achievements. Her persistence to demystify the tents’ histories and direct efforts to preserve them, and their authenticity, is also notable. Lastly, the sale of the tent to aid charity demonstrated Lee’s considerable business acumen and made a political statement about her support for men and women who served with or made sacrifices for her father and the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Throughout her curatorship of the tents, Lee cultivated an audience who would financially, but also patriotically, aid in preserving her ancestors’ legacy. When George W. Kendrick, Jr., of Philadelphia finally returned the Custis family Bible to Lee in August, 1906, after three years of coverage about the object’s contested ownership in the national press, Lee realized that her convictions about a relic’s

patriotic associations could be repurposed for public benefit. However, she only ever sold one of her relics, Washington’s marquee tent, to a Pennsylvania clergyman in 1906 to 1909. Selling the tent to benefit the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond, Virginia, a charity of which she served as president, proved to be very complicated. Her strategic plan for the tent’s future installation fostered communication among Northern and Southern preservation networks and institutions. In a collaborative process often impeded by changing conditions, Lee’s visionary one-time-only “sacred relics” sale tested the standards of curatorial expertise and museum security, resulting in her successful preservation of the Washington tents at multiple institutions. As she intended, each part of the set continues to inspire American museum audiences today.


149 Washington’s military tents have many parts, the majority of which are located at the Museum of the American Revolution (Philadelphia, PA), Smithsonian National
Lee’s passion for the tents was rooted in their clear and traceable provenance before Washington’s death in 1799 and Martha Washington’s death in 1802. However, the tents’ story and locations since its reverential place among the relics at Arlington House, after 1861 and before 1901, proved to be a convoluted puzzle to its previous owners, temporary stewards and future caretakers. Additional mysterious aspects of this narrative, as the tents survived military occupation, vandalism, war and looting at various moments, continue to elude researchers.

Foreshadowing the actions of modern researchers, Lee herself relied on correspondence with the tents’ homes away from home. For a time, Lee’s own position in relation to the tents was more similar to a museum visitor than their rightful owner. To gather information about how to authenticate the tents, which later informed her sales pitch in 1906, Lee aimed to sort facts from fiction on visits to the US Patent Office (1862-1883) and the US National Museum (1883-1901). Her childhood memory of the tents was hazier than her memory of her grandfather’s other objects. Their famous use at Arlington to celebrate the Marquis de Lafayette’s return to the United States (1824) predated her birth, and her grandfather displayed and loaned the tents’ many parts during her lifetime. Because of the celebrity status shared by Lee, her parents, her maternal grandfather, the tents and Washington relics in general, any newspaper reader in the Washington, D.C. or Alexandria area could know the complexities of her inheritance. Lee used her celebrity to cross-examine the
objects’ missing forty years of history, since the time that the family heirlooms were removed from Arlington in 1862. Curious about the experiences of those who saw the relics displayed at the US Patent Office or the US National Museum, prior to her accession of them, Mary Custis Lee validated public interests and effectively broadened the audience for the tents as public artifacts.

The Tents in the Nineteenth-Century: Arlington’s Military Occupation

Though Lee would eventually argue for her ownership of the tents to be restored, the relics’ removal from Arlington in 1862, ordered by Union General Irwin McDowell, served the same purpose as Lee’s (and her grandfather’s): to protect the relics by making the tents into public artifacts. McDowell corresponded with Mrs. Lee after his troops occupied Arlington in May, 1861. After realizing that the relics were both present and endangered in their current state in the mansion, McDowell consented to storing the discovered Washington-Custis-Lee objects at the US Patent Office. Caleb Lyon of Lyonsdale, New York, a politician characterized by an early Robert E. Lee biographer as an “insatiable curiosity-hunter,” deposited the relics at the Patent Office sometime after January 7 and before February, 1862. Lyon’s inventory mentioned George Washington’s sleeping tent and a field tent.150

150 William Parker Snow, Lee and His Generals (New York: Richardson & Company, 1867), 40-42, GoogleBooks; E. Mason, Jr., “The Castorland Half Dollar” in Mason’s Monthly Coin and Stamp Collectors’ Magazine 4 no. 11 (November, 1870), 170, GoogleBooks; Caleb Lyon’s inventory of the Arlington House relics (copy), folder for acc. no. 1963.700.1-70a,b, Registration Office, Winterthur Museum; “Captured at Arlington,” The National Republican (Washington, D.C.) 28 January 1862, quoted in Rose, Reminiscences, 29: “The relics of Washington, found at Arlington House, have been artistically arranged by Caleb Lyon, of Lyonsdale. These relics consist of porcelains presented to General Washington by the Order of the Cincinnati, the arms of which are emblazoned on each piece, upheld by a figure of Fame in colors. Also,
In 1869, four years after Mary Custis Lee’s first postwar return to Arlington House (discussed earlier in Chapter 4), curatorial staff at the Smithsonian received a letter from Mrs. Lee on February 10, writing from Lexington, VA. The confiscation of Arlington House, now more associated with General Lee, was an uproarious political and social matter in national news. Department of the Interior Secretary O.H. Browning, the government department that oversaw the Smithsonian Institution, was optimistic in his ability to help, stating on February 24:

Dear Madam, I am directed by the President to inform you that in accordance with the request contained in your note…all the relics from Mount Vernon bequeathed to you by your father, George Washington Parke Custis, which were taken from Arlington and which are now deposited at the Patent Office, will, upon being properly identified, be delivered to such agent as you may designate and authorize to receive and receipt for them in your name.\(^{151}\)

However, the Custis-Lee mansion’s confiscated contents proved to be a legal issue beyond the museum’s control. Mrs. Lee then applied to President Johnson to return the Washington relics, in an action tabled by the House on March 3, 1869.\(^{152}\) Although this was an early instance of many unsuccessful Lee family attempts to regain pieces of a tea set presented to Mrs. Washington by General Lafayette, in 1781, with the monogram “M.W.” on each piece, in a gold centre, his sleeping tent, his field tent and a portmanteau, his tea table, his mahogany cabinet, his punch bowl, his treasure chest, two vases presented to him by Mr. Vaughn, a Londoner; two candelabras presented to him by Count Rochambeau, and the blanket under which he died.”


ownership of their Arlington possessions, the claim accounted for McDowell’s eyewitness participation in these events, which Lee recorded in her archive as a reference point for retracing the relics’ pathways.

Unlike their assessments of the moveable artifacts’ individual property rights, the Lee family’s contested ownership and application for restitution of Arlington House, three years later, was a faster and less contested process. Congress purchased the Arlington estate from Lee’s older brother, George Washington Custis Lee, for $150,000 on April 6, 1874, after his father’s death in 1870 and his mother’s death in 1873.\textsuperscript{153} The artifacts, however, would remain encased at the US Patent Office until 1883, when they were transferred to the US National Museum, Smithsonian Institution.\textsuperscript{154}

\textbf{Two Groups of “Washington Relics” at the Smithsonian: The Custis-Lee Collection and the Lewis Collection, 1868-1901}

The Smithsonian staff’s 1883 notion to display all associated relics in the Arts and Industries Building further complicated the artifacts’ eventual return to the Lee family. In this new installation, curators had additional space to display additional Washington relics, acquired in 1868. The “Lewis Collection,” a much more numerous collection of Mount Vernon items than the Arlington group, had descended through Nelly Custis Lewis, the granddaughter of Martha Washington and older sister of Lee’s

\textsuperscript{153} Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, microfilm acc. no. 13152.

Custis grandfather. The collection had been kept at her Virginia home, Woodlawn, a short distance from Mount Vernon. The group was sold by her descendants to the Congress for $12,000 in 1868, but was not placed on immediate display. However, it did receive public attention as part of the “Washington Relics” displayed at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. The collection was described, photographed and printed as an engraved illustration in periodical literature such as Harper’s Weekly (1876, 1880) and Frank Leslie’s Guide to the Centennial Exposition (1877). On May 19, 1883, the Custis-Lewis and the Custis-Lee Washington relics intersected in their collective transfer from the Patent Office to the new, fireproof National Museum building, grouped as Accession No. 13152, titled “Collections of Washington and other Relics which have been on exhibition for years past at the US Patent Office.”

As she followed the relics’ transfer reported in the newspapers, Lee seized this moment of transition as the opportune time to communicate with Smithsonian staff about her intentions to regain ownership of the Arlington House relics. Although she spent most of her time traveling abroad, Lee had visited the relics on several occasions and was prepared to devote additional energy to finishing her mother’s important work. On January 23, 1885, a Smithsonian Institution curator noted a “list of articles claimed by Miss Lee in the presence of Doctor Goode and A.H. Clark.” The list was an annotation of the original “Partial Invoice of Washington Relics Transferred by the

155 Marling, Washington Slept Here, 25-29; David L. Ribblett, Nelly Custis: Child of Mount Vernon (Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, 1994). Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis Lewis (d. 1852) grew up at Mount Vernon and married Lawrence Lewis. Their son, George Washington Lewis initiated negotiations for the Lewis Collection sale to Congress. The items were purchased and deposited at the Patent Office in 1868.
Smithsonian Institution” from May 1, 1883, with object dimensions, and various marks that included many question marks. Smithsonian curators kept a copy of this invoice, a topic that stirred internal confusion and debate across emerging curatorial departments and in communication with government offices. Lee kept the original handwritten list in her trunks, as she worked to discern the Arlington items she remembered from nearly identical items in the Lewis Collection. Her 1885 visit caught national attention, from Staunton, VA, to St. Louis, MO. Lee could challenge the custody of the relics to honor her deceased parents and on behalf of her living siblings, George Washington Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee, Jr., and Mildred Childe Lee. Mirroring her mother’s preparations for Arlington’s imminent occupation, Lee reached out to her cousin, Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon, as the family authority about the Washington relics’ locations and expert on their legalities. Kennon, the daughter of Martha Custis Peter and a descendant of Martha Washington, in the same generation as Lee’s mother, lived at Tudor Place in Georgetown, Washington D.C.

156 Bird, Jr., Souvenir Nation; SI Archives, Record Unit 305. Among others, Lee communicated with Spencer F. Baird and George Brown Goode, both key leaders in the museum field and in the history of museums in the United States.

157 MCL Papers, VHS.

158 “Facts of Interest,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat (St. Louis, Missouri), 9 February 1885 reported: “THE WASHINGTON RELICS. Philadelphia Times: Miss Mary Custis Lee, daughter of Gen. Lee, visited the National Museum a few days ago to look at the Washington relics there that she might identify those taken during the war from Arlington. The relics were in the Patent Office from 1861 to 1882, when they were removed to the National Museum. Miss Lee has a miniature of Martha Washington which was buried during the war. It is the one of which Mrs. Washington spoke in a letter written the last year of her life.” Also printed in Staunton Spectator, 11 February 1885, Chronicling America, LOC.

159 Cadou, Washington Collection, 264-265.
She managed her own collection of Washington relics until her death in 1911. By 1890, the public had already known her as the “oldest living descendant of Mrs. Washington.” Lee trusted Kennon’s accounts about her grandfather’s paintings and granted her a temporary power-of-attorney in 1885, in case the property negotiations were successful and required physical transport to a nearby location.

In early spring, 1887, Lee returned to the National Museum and made a list of her family’s items with the assistance of curatorial staff. George Brown Goode, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian, sent the list to his superior secretary, Professor Spencer F. Baird. Goode endeavored to help deliver the items in Lee’s collection, whether General Washington’s property or “simply the belongings of the Arlington estate, which had no special historical significant and which for some years have been withdrawn from the exhibition collection,” and provided an account to his supervisor about their collective, mysterious conditions of ownership. He enclosed “a list of objects identified by Mary Lee during a visit to the Museum a few months ago, and would add that I can find no evidence that any of these articles have come into

possession of the Government...” Baird wrote to President McKinley on March 24, 1887, asking for a directive:

I beg to enclose a communication (No. 2) from Mr. G. Brown Goode, in charge of the National Museum, with a request that the Attorney General be invited to say whether under the circumstances I may deliver to the heirs of General Robert E. Lee the articles in question, or whether I must hold them until Congress can pass an act to that effect.

The attorney general, A. H. Garland, replied on April 12 that the Congress must make the decision about the return of the objects to the Lee family.  

More time passed. In 1892, a communication from the House of Representatives requested information about the Lee family claims from the curator-in-charge, Dr. Frederick W. True at the Smithsonian. The curator confirmed that objects were received from the Patent Office in 1883. He confirmed that the Lee family claimed ownership and deferred his expertise on the subject. He advised that the Department of the Interior or the Department of War might contain some information about the issue. Finally, in 1901, President McKinley wrote to Lee of his intention to return the artifacts to her family.

On May 14, 1901, President McKinley restored the Arlington House items to the Lee family, reflecting years of paperwork for the objects’ safekeeping, housekeeping and related legalities, a decision confirmed on May 14, 1901. Mary Custis Lee regained power of attorney for the Washington relics from her brother.

161 Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, microfilm for acc. no. 13152.
162 F. W. True, Head Curator of Biology and National Museum curator-in-charge, to the Honorable Hilary A. Herbert, House of Representatives, January 14, 1892, SI Archives, Record Unit 305, microfilm for acc. no. 13152.
George Washington Custis Lee, on May 13, 1901. Smithonian curator A. Howard Clarke’s notes on the relics’ accession card from 1883 evidence conversations with Lee: “Washington relics from Arlington part of Patent Office Collection acc. 13152 May 19, 1883, delivered to Miss Mary Custis Lee May 13, 1901; Part returned 5-28-1901; Part returned 5-29-1901.” After regaining ownership of the relics in 1901, it was Mary Custis Lee’s responsibility to identify them, separate them from their related Mount Vernon counterparts left permanently to the Smithsonian, and decide their rightful places. Potential options included temporary storage, personal use, or an action to de-accession certain pieces. Lee also considered her Lewis cousins’ decisions to sell as an option for her own actions with the relics. However, as she wrote to her

163 Power of Attorney for George W. Custis Lee, 13 May 1901, MCL Papers, VHS and copy, SI Archives, Record Unit 305, microfilm for acc. no. 13152.

164 Ella S. Herbert, MVLA Vice-Regent for Alabama to the President of the United States, May 19, 1883, SI Archives, Record Unit 305, acc. no. 13152. Citing George Washington Custis Lee’s permission, Herbert asked for the hall lantern to be returned to Mount Vernon, reasoning that “this article was included in the confiscated property of Mrs. Lee. I hope the Government will allow its restoration to Mt. Vernon.” Benjamin Harris Brewster, Attorney General responded by writing to the Department of Justice on May 22, 1883. On June 1, a patent case attorney, D.P. Holloway of Holloway & Blanchard, 608 F. Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. wrote to Spencer F. Baird in reply to Baird, citing E.M. Stanton, Secretary of War’s request to the Secretary of the Interior, J.P. Usher, who authorized Lyon to “take possession of all articles left at Arlington, which he was satisfied had belonged to Gen. Washington, and deposit them in the Patent Office. There was a Hall Lantern among the articles deposited, but I am impressed with the belief that the Regents of the Mt. Vernon Association obtained it and that is now at the Old Mansion, but am not confident to this. I remember distinctly there was a lantern…Allow me to suggest an inquiry at the War Office…my recollection is that the order of Mr. Stanton included all articles of a similar character that might be found in Alexandria, in a museum said to have been there [The Alexandria museum, where GWPC loaned several items before his death in 1857], but Gov. Lyon informed me that he could not reach them.”
friends and family, Lee created her own rules and only followed this precedent in one exceptional case. Her to sell Washington’s tents supported her purposes: to maintain a national family legacy through material culture, and to benefit her extended Lee family, a growing museum collection in Pennsylvania and, most significant to her, a charity that operated an aging women’s home in Lee’s beloved home state, Virginia. Instead of treating her inheritance as a holistic group, Mary Custis Lee saw these objects as having distinct places with known caretakers, both institutional and personal, and directed this effort after 1901.

**George Washington’s Tents in National Memory, 1844-1901**

By the time Mary Custis Lee and her brother arrived to pick up their collection’s items from the Smithsonian on May 14, 1901, these objects had already gathered a national audience. People had viewed Washington’s relics on display at the Patent Office and the National Museum for almost forty years. General and Mrs. Lee and their seven children were part of this audience, but only four children, the

165 For one visitor’s account of the Washington relics at the Patent Office in 1873, see Mary Clemmer Ames, *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital, as a Woman Sees Them* (1873), 441-442, Public Domain, Hathitrust.org: “Chapter XL….The next cases contain the Washington relics, which are amongst the greatest treasures of the nation. They consist of the camp-equipage, and other articles used by General Washington, during the Revolution. They are just as he left them at the close of the war, and were given to the Government, for safe keeping, after his death. Here are the tents which constituted the head-quarters, in the field, of the great soldier. They are wrapped tightly round the poles, just as they were tied when they were struck for the last time, when victory had crowned his country's arms, and the long war was over. Every cord, every button and tent-pin is in its place, for he was careful of little things…” Ames, a journalist based in Washington, D.C., does not mention an Arlington exhibit label. She later visits Mount Vernon and Arlington National Cemetery.
surviving members of the family, could testify as witnesses to the collections’ national impact on visitors from Arlington House to the Smithsonian Institution.\textsuperscript{166} Mary, George Washington Custis, and Mildred (Robert E. Lee, Jr., Lee’s youngest brother, was less involved) worked in tandem to observe their materials’ relevance to other collecting institutions, as exemplified by their participation in other museums.\textsuperscript{167} They were well aware that, unlike the Lewis Collection, their relics were more difficult for museum curators to interpret for visitors, due to their entwined associations with both George Washington and General Robert E. Lee.


\textsuperscript{167} “Personal,” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, 11 June 1892. Cornell University Library, Making of American Collection: “General [G.W.C.] Lee is President of Washington and Lee University, and was for some time a professor there of mathematics and engineering. He is a man of dignity and refinement, much adverse to notoriety, and of retiring and modest disposition.” By 1901, Lee’s brother had donated “artistic and historical treasures which would shine in any company and adorn the most eminent repository” to the President’s House and the Washington-Custis-Lee Collection: The 1772 portrait of Washington by Charles Willson Peale and a portrait of Lafayette had been recently transferred to the Chapel; John Paul Bocock, “Washington and Lee University,” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, 26 January 1901: “Washington's candlestick, pen-tray, and inkstand, the whole writing-set as he last used it, and the Washington tea-set, including sugar-bowl, tongs, and cream-jug, teapot and bowl, on the very tray on which Martha Washington made tea, were to be seen near by…”
Though the legacy of the relics was one challenge, the set of tents and accommodating pieces presented a complex logistical challenge as well. It took enormous energy and teamwork to identify each tent’s appropriate pieces and physically set them up. As a result, curators usually decided to place the relatively sturdy pieces in a gallery corner or on the floor. There, the objects could be viewed as relics and the curators did not need to pitch the tent for the visitors. The tent-related artifacts included two tents, poles, pins and mystery pieces of fabric with holes made by previous relic-takers. Though this set was most physically durable category of relics, its confusing number of parts and mismatched pieces characterized it as the most difficult portion of the Arlington House inheritance to comprehend. For this reason, the tents had spent the most time off-view in relation to the rest of the Custis-Lee collection, either in museum storage or kept in their attractive portable form: Washington’s distinctive leather portmanteau.

Subsequent curatorial research has somewhat distinguished the different tents among the tent artifacts. Washington’s tents can be separated and studied by the form and function. Included are a headquarters or office tent, a dining tent, and a corresponding tent lining. The earliest associated label, referencing a gift from Mary Custis Lee’s grandfather, states:

168 Waldon Fawcett, “Relics of George Washington.” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Sunday, 17 February 1907. Chronicling America, Library of Congress and a copy in MCL Papers, VHS. An exception to this is revealed in a photograph, which appeared on the front page with other photographs of MCL’s relics. See Figure 43.

Part of the smaller or SLEEPING TENT of WASHINGTON Venerable as the Canopy that sheltered the FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY in the days of his COUNTRYS TRIAL Presented by Geo. W. P. Custis, Esq. of Arlington, Rec’d Feb’y 6th 1844.170

George Washington Parke Custis may have donated, loaned or sold the “part” to Congress, but it is not yet known why or when this action took place. By the time of the tents’ transfer to the US Patent Office in 1862, the tents had already established public lives as a group of moving parts. Therefore, their separation into distinct, and not necessarily functional, groups of “Camp Equipage” within the Patent Office collection of Washington relics was related to their eighteenth-century usage and nineteenth-century displays.

**Family Influences on Curatorial Efforts**

At this point, it is useful to interrupt the complex story of Lee’s attempts to re-acquire the tents, to recapitulate her grandfather’s, her father’s, and her mother’s actions and attitudes about them in relation to the other relics, for two reasons. The first is a practical one: prior accounts and documentation demonstrated a confused understanding about the number of tents, their components, their functions, and their disposition prior to 1901. The second is more abstract: her family’s actions and attitudes served as Lee’s ‘curatorial training’ and influenced her motivations and actions.

Lee followed in her grandfather’s precedent to determine some relics as personal and discern other relics as appropriate for public view. In her later letters, Lee is convinced that her grandfather had bequeathed Washington’s dining tent to the

170 SI Archives, Record Unit 305, US National Museum, Microfilm acc. no. 13152.
Smithsonian Institution during his lifetime. She reasoned that because the museum “already had” one tent, the tents could be donated to other museums and increase opportunities for others to encounter them, in other geographic locations.\(^{171}\) Her argument about the tent’s interpretation and curatorship was tested by how the pieces fit together, when set up to construct a relic that looked like a whole shelter, instead of dilapidated pieces. Lee did not have the information, the access or the ability to fully explore this issue, but she could make appropriate inquiries within her many preservation-oriented social circles. Above all other motivations, Mary Custis Lee was aware that her family’s provenance of the tents had been disrupted and sought to correct their future paths into museum collections. Her curatorial strategy for the tents, as well as for her entire inheritance, aimed to reconnect the Custis, Washington and Lee names in both private and public memory for an early twentieth-century audience on a national and international scale.

In acting as a curatorial advocate for the Washington relics once owned by her family, Lee was following in a tradition established by her grandfather and her parents, a connection underscored by contemporary publicity. Well-known as a Washington descendant and noted for her “striking personal likeness to her distinguished father,” Lee was greeted by various groups whenever she returned to the United States for a short stay. These events were often covered by news reports. For example, on December 7, 1901, a reunion of Confederate veterans were pleased to

\(^{171}\) R. Scott Stephenson, conversations with author, 2013-2016. MCL acted according to her belief that her grandfather had donated the larger dining tent to government, either deposited at the Smithsonian or the US Patent Office, but no evidence has yet been found to confirm that he donated an entire tent (as opposed to a fragment, mentioned in the 1844 label) before his death in 1857.
meet her, as she represented “with so much distinction both the Custises and the Lees.” The article noted her frequent absence in a misprint, calling this “her first visit to the United States in nine years” although Lee had visited the Smithsonian in May of 1901, to receive the relics.\footnote{172} Like those describing Lee herself, press releases about Washington’s tents had associated the items with Washington’s memory since before the Civil War. Audiences were familiar with the tents’ significance through Lossing’s publications and her grandfather’s societal presence and oratory performances that intersected with neighboring collecting institutions and their missions.\footnote{173} George Washington Parke Custis had displayed one tent at the Baltimore Museum in 1837, along with other relics. While away from his young family at Arlington, Robert E. Lee visited the exhibit in Baltimore and wrote to his wife on July 12, 1837, that he had:

…spent an hour or two at the Museum. Tell your Father that the tent looked very well, that it is pitched in a fine large room and makes a handsome show, with the bust of Wash\textsuperscript{a} at the middle of the farther extremity and a flag on each side, one bearing the inscription, Surrender of Yorktown, and the other, the Heights of Dorchester. It appears to be in a safe and good situation and M\textsuperscript{r} De S. was very polite but wishes for it a longer stay…The camp chest of Gen\textsuperscript{l} W. was sitting in the tent, having been sent there by Gen\textsuperscript{l} Winder. M\textsuperscript{r} De S. told us that the maker of the tent, by the name of Flax an old man of 90 was in the town but that he could not find him he was in his dotage.\footnote{174}

\footnote{172} “Personal Notes,” Harper’s Weekly, 7 December 1901. 

\footnote{173} Timothy Winkle, Deputy Chair, Division of Home and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, e-mails to author, January 12-18, 2016, and conversations with author, February 10 and February 27, 2016. 

\footnote{174} Robert E. Lee to [Mrs.] Mary Custis Lee, July 12, 1837, Custis-Lee-Mason Papers, Library of Virginia, Accession No. 20975. Transcription courtesy of Robert E. L. deButts, Jr. and Susan Carter Vogel, e-mail to author, 16 October 2015.
Just as her father had reported the elderly craftsman claiming to be the tent’s maker as part of his encounter with the authentic relics, Lee would later present her own oral history of the Washington relics in order to authenticate them for visitors.

To foster and anticipate public interest in his legacy, George Washington Parke Custis specifically perpetuated fact and fiction about the eighteenth-century tents’ Philadelphia origins and Revolutionary War usages in “The Tent of Washington,” published in an article for the May 18, 1855, issue of *The National Intelligencer*:

There were two Tents or rather Marquees attached to the baggage of the Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary War. The larger that can dine about forty persons…The smaller or sleeping Tent, has a history of touching and peculiar interest attached to it…to this Tent the Chief was in the constant habit of retiring to write his despatches…From within those venerable canvas walls, emanated momentous despatches that guided the destinies of the Struggle for Independence…[they] are now preserved in the Portmanteau in which they were carried during the whole of the War of Independence. We learn that it is the intention of Mr. Custis to bequeath these venerated relics of the Revolution and of Washington, to the American Army to be preserved among the Military Archives of the Nation, at the Seat of Government. Till which time, they will be preserved where they have been for half a century, at Arlington House.¹⁷⁵

Illustrations created for Custis’ obituary in *Harper’s Weekly* on October 24, 1857, memorialized him as the famous “child of Mount Vernon” through his family heirlooms.¹⁷⁶ Although not pictured, the tents were described as part of the Arlington inheritance:


¹⁷⁶ The strong box, an iron chest, was in the collections at the National Museum, which MCL and subsequent generations allowed to remain on display there. The iron chest (sometimes referred to as a “treasure chest,” SI Archives) is now at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, W-1964, Purchase, 1954. Washington’s bed, or the “bed in which Washington died,” has been at Mount Vernon since the 1870s, placed there
Here, likewise, is General Washington's tent, used by him during the entire war; his camp-chest, containing the various furniture of his kitchen and table; his massive silver tea set; a side-board; a punch-bowl, of finest china, bearing the initials G. W.; a small tea-table, long used by Washington, together with many other articles of inestimable value as memorials of the great man.\textsuperscript{177}

After Custis’ death, Lee’s parents were dedicated to preserving the relics as relics of Washington. The tents, left in Arlington’s garret in 1861, were included in the Washington relics exhibited at the US Patent Office. Robert E. Lee assisted with his wife’s unsuccessful application to reclaim her Arlington property in 1869, realizing this action would remove the relics from public view. His efforts were documented by his son (also a general) in a 1904 memoir. In \textit{Recollections}, Robert E. Lee, Jr. noted that his father wrote to the senator with a “bit of quiet humour”:

\ldotsMrs. Lee has determined to… apply to President Johnson for such of the relics from Arlington as are in the Patent Office. From what I have learned, a great many things formerly belonging to General Washington, bequeathed to her by her father, in the shape of books, furniture, camp equipage, etc., were carried away by individuals and are now scattered over the land. I hope the possessors appreciate them and may imitate the example of their original owners, whose conduct must at times be brought to their recollection by these silent monitors. In this way they will accomplish good to the country…\textsuperscript{178}

by Mrs. Lee and officially donated to the MVLA by GWCL. It is now at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, W-194, Gift of George Washington Custis Lee, 1908.

\textsuperscript{177} “The Late G.W.P. Custis,” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, 24 October 1857.

\textsuperscript{178} Robert E. Lee, Jr., \textit{Recollections}, 1904, GoogleBooks. REL, Jr., also recalled two subsequent letters by his father that detail their failure to obtain the relics. First, Robert E. Lee wrote again to the senator: "…In reference to certain articles which were taken from Arlington, about which you inquire, Mrs. Lee is indebted to our old friend Captain James May for the order from the present administration forbidding their return. They were valuable to her as having belonged to her great-grandmother (Mrs. General Washington), and having been bequeathed to her by her father. But as the
Subsequent letters, public opinion expressed in newspapers, and government courts reveal that the Washington relic’s association with General Robert E. Lee prevented their return to the Custis-Lee family during his and his wife’s lifetime. Like the siblings themselves, individually reported in newspapers as living links between George or Martha Washington and Robert E. Lee, the objects were caught in association with two names that would cause any American during the era of Reconstruction to form a strong opinion about this association, from visceral hatred to a patriotic reverence. As she considered future audiences for the tents, it was Mary Custis Lee’s task to anticipate both of these perspectives on her inheritance, and to negotiate her twofold military ancestry as one with a national significance.

Mary Custis Lee’s Proposals for Acquisition

On May 14, 1901, Smithsonian curatorial staff confirmed what Lee took with her and what she left on loan at their museum, realizing that this decision was subject
to change under her direction. Various newspapers documented different relics in ways that may not be as accurate as the curatorial records. However, they indicate how widely this transaction could have been known and hint at Lee’s long process to disperse her inheritance. The report in the Prescott, AZ, newspaper detailed the transaction, stating that a tent, a lantern, and other relics remained at the Smithsonian:

Such of the Washington relics which were taken from the Arlington House at the beginning of the civil war, and which have been on exhibition in the National museum for some years, as she desired, were this week turned over to Miss Mary Custis Lee, representing her brother, Gen. G.W.C. Lee, their legal owner, by the United States government. Several of the relics, including one of Washington’s tents, a treasure chest, a lantern, and a glass candelabra, were left in the National Museum, subject to the order of the owner…The final disposition of the articles removed from the Museum has not been determined upon.

The persistence of Mary Custis Lee and her family succeeded in regaining ownership of the Arlington relics. However, two other distinctly curatorial problems faced Mary Custis Lee regarding the tents. She had to understand the components of the tents and their physical locations. Lee also had to decide on their disposition and display. In her actions to solve both of these problems, Mary Custis Lee was influenced by the actions of other like-minded people, personally known to her or not, who shared her dedication to the history of the United States and of the South.

“Pitching” the Tent, 1901-1918

In 1901, Mary Custis Lee resolved to scatter the relics, as they had been scattered before, with renewed purpose. George Washington’s military tents had a

179 See Appendix C.

180 Prescott Evening Courier (Prescott, AZ), 22 May 1901.
sentimental value within her family history and also came grouped as a valuable assortment: textile pieces, poles of various sizes, ropes and pins. As their long-awaited curator, Lee developed a network of communication about what to do with the tents. She joined many organizations that introduced her to American circles of historic preservation and influenced how she curated the Washington relics. Even before the relics were restored to her, she preemptively joined the Daughters of the American Revolution, (DAR) in Washington D.C. on April 30, 1901. She was later elected as a member of its Revolutionary Relics Committee in 1916. Pamphlets, programs and periodicals stored in her trunks demonstrate her professional development as a curator of the Washington relics. Many of her correspondents were also Daughters of the Confederacy, and her government connections tended to be former Confederate generals who had found postwar work.

These groups connected Lee with people whose family history, experiences, class, and social connections paralleled hers. Nannie Randolph Heth, in particular, embodied parallels to Lee’s colonial and Confederate material inheritances. Heth, also from Virginia, was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Colonial Dames. Like Lee, she was committed to helping Confederate veterans and their families. She was president of the Southern Relief Society of the District of Columbia, which aided veterans left without pensions and veterans’ families and

descendants. She also hosted an annual Southern Relief Ball that Lee attended.”

Heth also inherited a group of George Washington’s belongings through Lee’s cousins, the Goldsborough family, who lived on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. In a 1908 catalog, the National Museum mentioned Heth’s loan of “a collection of 175 specimens of Lowestoft china and cut glass used at Mount Vernon by General and Mrs. Washington.” Heth and Lee’s simultaneous collections management, competing for safe places for their relics, inspired each other’s curatorial ambition and charitable giving to similar Southern societies.

On June 13, 1906, Mary Custis Lee returned to the Smithsonian to confirm that several items in her inheritance would remain on loan there. In this list, two tents were listed as part of the loan. After this visit, she was interviewed later that month alongside Heth in Washington, D.C. (detailed in Chapter 6) and then, in Atlantic City (detailed in Chapter 1). The Atlantic City interview reveals at least two important


184 Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to MCL, 13 June 1906. SI Archives, Record Unit 305: “Madam: I am authorized by the Secretary to thank you for your kindness in leaving at the National Museum as a loan the Washington Relics from the Arlington Mansion enumerated in the following list: 11 sections of tent poles; 2 marquee tents; 1 woolen tent cover; 2 canvas tent pouches; 1 leather tent pouch; 37 tent pins, 3 slides and a guy rope; 2 glass candelabra; 1 hall lantern; 1 iron treasure chest.” See Appendix C.
aspects of Lee’s curatorial understanding of the tents, which had not been separated into distinct groupings of which pieces belonged to which tent, and what that tent’s intended function was for George Washington during his military career. First, Mary Custis Lee stated that there were three tents, one belonging to the Smithsonian and two that she inherited. Secondly, she states that she would like to sell one or both of her tents. Like Heth, she wished to support a Southern charity:

It has been in my mind for some time to dispose of the two tents, which I own for the benefit of the Richmond home,” said Miss Lee. “There were three tents used by Washington in his campaigns that came into the possession of my grandfather who was Martha Washington’s only grandson. The largest, which was Washington’s mess tent, was given to the government by my grandfather.185

Lee’s decision to sell the tents in 1906, motivated by her responsibility to the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond, was her first curatorial action. One of the tents, the marquee tent, was eventually placed in Pennsylvania, at the new Valley Forge Museum of American History in 1909. This sale relied on a surprising network of preservation-oriented groups, much like the collaborative energy required by museum curators and collections managers today. Lee linked people and groups committed to preserving the memories of the colonies, the era of the American Revolution, and the Confederacy.

Mary Johnson Brown Chew, a prominent Philadelphian socialite and key motivator for founding the National Museum at Independence Hall.186 Mrs. Chew was

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185 “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” 1906.

a Colonial Dame descended from early Virginia and Maryland, associated with the Custis and Lee families and very familiar with museum exhibitions. Lee corresponded with Mrs. Chew and considered her a friend. For example, the Richmond Times-Dispatch published a notice in February, 1903, that:

Miss Mary Custis Lee, daughter of General Robert E. Lee, was the guest of honor at the annual meeting to-day of the General Dabney H. Maury Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy. […] During her stay in this city Miss Lee is the guest of Mrs. Samuel Chew, No. 1716 Walnut Street.¹⁸⁷

On February 20, 1907, Lee wrote to Mary J.B. Chew with a report about her enjoyment at a recent commemorative event and family reunion in Richmond, which honored Robert E. Lee’s birthday (January 19, 1807: a holiday in three states):

… with the exception of Custis, we were all together in “Richmond”, & witnessed such an outpouring of love & reverence, as is difficult to describe & was almost overpowering in its intensity after 35 years too! Even the little nieces performed their part, & unveiled a portrait of their grandfather at the “Historical Society,” in the House we occupied during the war. I bade them bear it well in mind, to tell their children in the future; but “Mary Custis”, to whom time is nothing, confidently looks forward to the “next Centennial”, largely remarking that “somebody will be there”¹⁸⁸

Lee’s attention to future generations in recalling the ceremony to Chew suggests that they shared a dutiful responsibility to cultivate interests in the topic of American history, as it could be encountered by visiting preserved sites. In addition to writing to Chew, Lee wrote to friends and family about her associations with the present-day Museum of the Confederacy, Jefferson Hotel, Arlington House, Mount

¹⁸⁷ “Philadelphia – Miss Mary Custis Lee Was Guest of Honor,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 10 February 1903.

¹⁸⁸ MCL (Jefferson Hotel) to Mary J.B. Chew, February 20, 1907, Mary Chew Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; The “Historical Society” at this time was Battle Abbey, now VHS. Paige Newman, conversation with author, 31 March 2016.
Vernon, and the Smithsonian, among others, through people, places and objects. This network reveals travel itineraries and preservation-oriented circles that reflect her Confederate and colonial ancestries. The tents were the first of many relics in Lee’s collection to accumulate new historical associations from a display at a new museum.

Lee’s promotional activities for the Washington relics can be traced in circles, much like the objects’ placements can be traced among museums today. She acted as a collections curator with a distinct mission and without a home institution. Working to identify caretakers with secure and fireproof repositories, Lee had another goal: to perpetuate her family legacy and promote its reputation as a favorable one, using her collection of unique relics. In her daily activities, Lee was the voice for her collection and spoke up for certain objects’ relevance. Moreover, she allowed the Washington relics to shift her daily activities, as her curatorial practice influenced her social calendar and public activity. She revered Washington’s tents as the “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity” and communicated her only sales pitch in the year that she became General Lee’s sole surviving daughter. In 1906, she transformed her complex decisions about the relics into a personal interest story, which skillfully drew additional national attention to the need for social welfare in the American South. At a crucial turning point in these objects’ histories, Lee acted as a judicious curator who prized relationships with those who felt “real reverence” for her collection.189

Seeking a Site-Specific Installation, 1906-1907

Lee’s friendship with Chew proved especially fateful, as Chew likely introduced her to one tent’s eventual purchaser, Reverend W. Herbert Burk. Burk, the rector at an Episcopal Church in Norristown, Pennsylvania, claimed that the story of his most famous acquisition began with a friendly suggestion from “Mrs. Mary Johnson Brown Chew of Philadelphia,” a turning point for his work in historic preservation, described in his 1926 memoir. 190 In 1907, Mary Custis Lee began corresponding Burk, who shared her reverence for the Washington relics and was willing to raise funds for one tent. Burk needed a centerpiece for his visionary new museum of American history, intended for a park outside Philadelphia, PA, on the rural site of George Washington’s winter encampment at Valley Forge in 1776.191 As individuals who shared an investment in amassing, correcting and retelling American history for others’ educational benefit, Lee and Reverend Burk identified a lasting audience for Washington’s marquee, or headquarters tent.

Citing her own patriotism throughout numerous letters, Lee sought a strategic location for the tents to be admired.192 The future destination of the tents may have

190 Loret Treese, Valley Forge: Making and Remaking a National Symbol (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). At this time, Burk was campaigning to build Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge, completed in 1918. The building commemorated Washington’s winter at Valley Forge before a national park system was established. In Burk’s mind, displaying the tent at his new Valley Forge Museum of American History would authenticate his mission to revive Valley Forge’s significance to American history.

191 Burk, Making a Museum. Burk wanted to construct the Washington Memorial Chapel to be the “American Westminster” and the museum was a crucial, more effectual part of this plan.

192 MCL’s use of the word “patriotism” is not distinctive to her sale of the Washington relics, as she discusses it in other correspondence, MCL Papers, VHS. Agnes Lee to
been flexible, but Lee’s motivations to protect, account for, and sell them was unyielding. She wanted to further her community-building with others devoted to the memory of George Washington. An inseparable and greater motivation for the sale was motivated by her sense of duty to honor her father and Virginia after the American Civil War. Lee elected to sell Washington’s tents in fervent support of the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond, VA, where she served as the honorary president. Lee’s interest in fundraising for the charity reveals her own national cause: the welfare of Southern women related to Confederate soldiers who had died in service to Lee’s father’s military leadership.

Though Mary Custis Lee now owned the tents outright, she had left both of Washington-Custis-Lee family tents on loan to the National Museum while she considered alternate options for her tents’ future. In her 1906 interview, Lee stated that Mount Vernon had been an obvious option, but she preferred to solicit offers from preservation groups who revered the story of George Washington’s life, times and places:

“The ladies of Mount Vernon Society have asked if I would sell them the other two. But I do not think Mount Vernon is the proper place for them. I have been “Sister,” 9 March 1873: “You must not forget us all nor become too fond of “across the water”…Patriotism though I don’t pay is a noble sentiment.”


194 MCL to Mrs. Montague, letters, various dates, HNCW Papers, Library of Virginia. The home was mainly operated by Elizabeth Montague, whose correspondence with Lee reveals much about Montague’s full-time commitment to the charity’s success.
told that certain wealthy men in the West will pay me any price for them, but I will not dispose of them to any but a resident of one of the thirteen original States. It was my idea to sell one to New York and one to Pennsylvania... There is no place at which I should rather see at least one of the tents than in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, beside the Liberty Bell and its other historic relics. 195

In truth, representatives of Mount Vernon had been in total agreement with Lee about their unsuitability as a new home for the tents. A letter from Harrison C. Dodge, Superintendent at Mount Vernon, to the Regent of the MVLA communicated that Miss Lee had set an unreasonable price for the tents, especially for objects that interpreted Washington’s military history. Dodge preferred a mission that interpreted Washington’s life at home. 196 Although Washington himself had stored the tents in Mount Vernon’s outbuildings, occasionally setting them up after the war, Dodge could not imagine a place suitable for preserving or displaying large tents as part of the museum collection. The MVLA had little incentive to build a case for new objects;


196 Emma R. Ball (MVLA vice-regent for Virginia), *The Home of Washington*, 1912, Washington Library, Mount Vernon. Also a copy in MCL Papers, VHS.
Dodge was working to construct a new fireproof relic house.\textsuperscript{197} Dodge wrote to Lee that it would be impossible to acquire them.\textsuperscript{198}

Though Reverend W. Herbert Burk was not competing with Mount Vernon for the tents, settling the terms and price of the tent purchase took much longer than Lee anticipated. The two developed an epistolary relationship that called upon a shared sense of heritage through George Washington’s memory. In their correspondence, preserved by the Valley Forge Historical Society and now in the collection of the Museum of the American Revolution, each writer expresses an awareness about their individual power to act on a national scale. In her handwriting, Mary Custis Lee heavy-handedly emphasized American cities and landmarks with underlines. These names and places resonated with Burk’s constant appeals to garner nation-wide patriotic (and financial) support for Washington Memorial Chapel, and his effort to purchase one tent. The people, places, and things mentioned in Lee’s letters to Burk describe a collaborative interest in preserving what they felt were unquestionably significant, patriotic and even sacred American objects. Lee and Burk agreed to display the tent in a collection that would be crowd-pleasing and significant for its location’s connection to history.

\textsuperscript{197} Lydia Mattice Brandt, “Re-creating Mount Vernon: The Virginia Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition” in Winterthur Portfolio 43:1, Spring 2009, p. 79-82; MVLA, Index to the Minutes, various dates, 1901-18, GoogleBooks.

\textsuperscript{198} Harrison C. Dodge to MVLA, 1914, Washington Library. For more on Dodge, see Scott Casper, Sarah Johnson’s Mount Vernon, 160.
Reverend W. Herbert Burk and Mary Custis Lee’s enthusiasm for Washington’s marquee as a national symbol emerges in their letters, diminishes even their differences, contrasting personalities, motivations for preservation, and regional geographies. In her earliest extant letter, Lee responded to Burk’s admiration for George Washington and historical interest with good humor, noting that his name combines the names of her bankers, Burke and Herbert. She then proceeds to authenticate the tents by citing her ‘sources:’ her grandfather, her own early memories and Lossing’s work. Writing from The Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, she remarked:

If you consult a Book of Ben. J. Lossings, entitled “Washington,” I think, easily procurable. I should suppose in any “library.” You will find an account of these tents, the name of their maker in Philadelphia, also, if I remember rightly, a picture of them. He was a personal friend of my grandfather Mr. Custis; was often at “Arlington” where as a child I remember him very well; to his descriptions & drawings of Relics, here derived from the Fountainhead. There were 3 tents, but the larger one was presented by my grandfather to the Governors after his death; of these the smaller ones are even more interesting, as they were his personal living & sleeping tents. Doubtless he used them also at “Valley Forge,” They were only rolled up & put in their leather cases, at “Yorktown.” Coming then first to “Mt Vernon” afterward to “Arlington,” where I remember them as a child piled up in the garret. Taken away during the war, & deposited in the “museum” at Washington, where they still are; though, along (with?) other Relics, restored to the Family by President McKinley….199

199 MCL to Reverend W. Herbert Burk, May 21, 1907, Museum of the American Revolution. Custis’ presentation of “the larger [tent] to the Governors after his death” requires additional research. This tent is now interpreted as Washington’s dining tent, owned by the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History. The following three quotations in this section are all from the letter of May 21, 1907.
Lee appreciated the historical value of her inherited relics, but also knew their financial value would benefit her charity. In the same letter, she continued to explain her goals from a position of curatorial power:

I am now [the tents’] sole possessor & I am much in need of funds in the support of a charity, an “old Confederate Woman’s Home” of which I am President & where we take care of 20 poor old women; too old to work & not of the clan that can beg; I have determined to sell them for that purpose. As the “Home” commenced with nothing but faith & charity & practically lives now from “hand to mouth,” I cannot afford to be generous or sentimental with regard to the price & was advised to ask $5000 a piece for them.

She also appealed to Burk’s allegiance to his own state and region, employing his dedication to evidencing Washington’s Philadelphia connections. As in her correspondence with Chew, Lee claimed that she could easily have sold the tents to wealthy groups in “rich Western cities” such as Pittsburgh and Chicago. However, she admitted:

I did have a sentiment about returning them in the old original 13 states, & thought of “Philadelphia,” where they were made, where Washington was President, ought to have one in that wealthy City, wished the tent to remain within one of the original thirteen colonies […] either to “Independence Hall” or to your Museum. I do not think you need more than one. However, why should I have more sentiment, on the subject than you have yourselves, especially as I so much require the money for the living; the dead can do without it! At the South, we have no money to spare, & Alas! No fireproof “Museums,” the only proper depository for such bulky articles!

Lee wanted the tent to rejoin its historical city of use, in Philadelphia, where she believed the Burk would find willing and wealthy benefactors eager to assist with his cause. Historian Marla R. Miller has noted that Lee was correct in her statement about the tent’s creation in Philadelphia, by eighteenth-century upholsterer Plunkett
Based on her friendship with Mrs. Chew, Lee knew firsthand that Burk could find financial assistance for the tent’s purchase among many Philadelphia-based preservation and heritage organizations. She was eager to find a wealthy donor to support her cause, but she also liked Burk’s convictions that her tent would be an important and historical addition to Philadelphia’s growing commemorative landscape. Burk’s plan met Lee’s standards for an ideal fireproof repository, and more importantly, she realized his display of the tent at Valley Forge could cultivate a Northern curiosity about her family’s Southern heritage.

Although her sentiment about the tents was based on their sale’s benefit to the Confederate widows, another group of beneficiaries could be Burk’s future museum visitors themselves. Lee’s curatorial decision was to ensure the tents’ significance would not die, or even diminish under her supervision. Without her action to sell the tents, the story might have ended at the Smithsonian, with curators who could not remember the Patent Office’s acquisitions enough to discern Washington’s relics from Mount Vernon as Custis-Lee objects, from Arlington House, from the more recent Custis-Lewis acquisition. The collection would have remained at the Smithsonian. While that consequence would have fulfilled Lee’s eventual goal to preserve the artifacts, it would have lessened their opportunities for continuous public display, and for their dispersal throughout the country as iconic relics.

**A Detour in the Road to Valley Forge**

Mary Custis Lee had decided to expand possibilities for others to encounter and learn about the tents’ famous provenance by 1907, but she had acted on this belief

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before writing to Burk in 1907. She had already promised to loan one of her tents, still housed at Smithsonian, to the Jamestown Tercentennial or Tercentenary Exposition (April 26, 1907 to November 30, 1907), held near Hampton Roads, Virginia. An important consequence of this decision was the confusion it inserted into the negotiations with Burk. He followed her instructions to visit the Smithsonian’s National Museum, where she believed that the tents could easily be seen. Because of the national fair, however, Burk was not able to view them immediately.

Nannie Heth, a person within the network of Southern patriots, had a strong hand in this interruption in the Lee-Burk negotiations. Heth, previously noted for her biographical parallels to Lee, was paid by the Smithsonian Institution to organize a loan of relics to the Jamestown Exposition, organized at several early Virginia settlement sites. Although correspondence between Heth and Lee has not yet been located, it is clear that no one party kept a close watch on the tents’ packing and unpacking at the Jamestown Exposition. Lee first noticed this discrepancy when she offered Burk his first choice out of the two available tents. She wrote “in great haste” that Burk may take his time to secure arrangements to purchase one tent:

Am willing to give you reasonable time to see if you can make any arrangement about the tents, or tent, as I think one will answer your purpose, & be as much probably as you can afford as they are $5,000 apiece. I should think there were though Millionaires in Penn. to be (sic) patriotic though, to

201 Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 70, Exposition Records of the Smithsonian Institution and the United States National Museum.

present it to you as the price to them would be nothing; Cannot you approach any of them? I promised to lend one to the Jamestown “Exposition,” & it may have already been removed, but the other is in the “National Museum” in “Washington” & can easily be seen, without any permission. If you wish it (sic) apply to Mr. Paul Beckwith there in my name, but I will enclose a little note to him.203

Letters from Lee to Beckwith, regarding this the tents’ uncertain location, survive in the curatorial files accessioned with the Washington relics at the Smithsonian. This complicated story is captured in greater detail by Lee’s more frequent reports to Burk. In February, 1908, Lee wrote to Burk from the Mediterranean Sea onHôtel de Luxembourg, Paris stationery, regarding his financial plan for the tent purchase. Her motivation was to defend the tent’s cost as a worthy price for a valuable acquisition. In the letter, she acted as the tent’s generous benefactor, even though the price was non-negotiable, and suggested ideas about how the tent itself, as an investment, could bring in an additional income through its exhibition:

…I do not think the price is high for such an interesting, perfectly well authenticated, ‘Souvenir of “Washington,”’ & of the “Revolutionary War,” the Era of our National existence; & when one sees the large sums constantly expended on mere articles of personal…luxury. Or even so called “Relics” of one kind of another, it seems to me that Sentiment & Patriotism are at rather a low off! … I agree with you in thinking that “Valley Forge” will be a fitting abiding place for one of them at least…I will communicate with the Authorities of the “National Museum,” Washington, to turn the Tent over to you, … I think if the tent is properly advertised, its exhibition will bring you in a good deal, especially on National holidays, such as the 4th of July, &c. that rent of it perhaps should be more enumerative in “Philadelphia” itself, say in the sphere of Independence Hall; but you will be the best judge of that. Put it up & charge a small sum for admittance though it is very old, recollect, & only a certain number could be admitted at a time. I still hope that some Patriotic

203 MCL (Richmond) to Burk, May 26, 1907, Museum of the American Revolution.
philanthropist will come forward & help you out, for my interest in the matter is not wholly selfish!204

Burk slowly completed his initial deposit, which Lee’s bankers kept on a separate account.205 During their 1906-1909 exchange, Burk was also campaigning to build Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge. The Chapel, completed in 1918, commemorated Washington’s winter at Valley Forge before a national park system was established.206 In his mind, displaying the tent in “fitting abiding place” would legitimate his mission to revive Valley Forge’s significance to American history.207

**An Acquisitions Committee**

Mary Custis Lee was faithful to an inner circle of those curious about supporting her legacy.208 She respected Burk’s commitment to acquiring an authentic museum collection to display with the tent, and his dedication to charity. She agreed to let him pay in installments to Mrs. Montague at the Home for Needy Confederate Women, in an act of mutual and self-declared patriotism:

> My dear Mr. Burk…I am indeed glad to know that you see your way clear to installing one of the tents at Valley Forge, where it doubtless once stood before, & where it will find an appropriate resting place. My patriotism is as

204 MCL to Burk, February 10, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.

205 “Washington’s Tent Account,” Burke and Herbert Bankers, MCL Papers, VHS.

206 Treese, *Valley Forge*, 91-103.

207 MCL to Burk, February 10, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.

208 MCL (Jefferson Hotel, Richmond) to Mary J. B. Chew, February 20, 1907, Chew Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. MCL’s letters to Montague documents mutual Philadelphia friends’ generosity to HNCW, HNCW Records, LVA.
much enlisted as yours, but I felt that the living, old, poverty stricken, & helpless had the first claim...209

Lee was quick to encourage Burk on her belief in his being a suitable new proprietor for Washington’s marquee. They shared plans for exhibition and their interests in American history at a regional, national and international level. She reported on her health and tourist activities at Europe’s historical sites; in one postcard from the same trip, she tells Burk about her hotel in Rome. However, she never forgot her real reason for the correspondence, to facilitate the purchase of the tents. In a postscript, she also suggested that Burk “…might apply to a certain G. W. Kendrick in Phil., Mrs. Chew knows all about him, for a money contributions as he seemed to be much interested in Washington Relics, ” citing her Philadelphia connection and recent return of the Custis family Bible. As she stated in “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” Lee was moved by Mr. Kendrick’s actions to return the Bible to her family in 1906.

Mary Custis Lee had already informed Mrs. Chew about her arrangement with Burk to sell the tent to the forthcoming museum in Valley Forge. As one example of his preservation-minded alliance with Chew, Burk received a letter from her in March, 1908.210 Writing from her second home at 1716 Walnut Street, near Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, Mary Johnson Brown Chew acted as correspondent for the Colonial Dames and enclosed a check for fifty dollars, “received from Mrs. Charles C. Harrison, 1618 Locust Street Philadelphia for the fund for the purchase of Miss Lee’s tent…& will you kindly acknowledge it to her...” Mrs. Charles Custis Harrison was

209 MCL (Hotel Imperia Roma, Rome, Italy) to Burk, March 23, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.

210 Mary J. B. Chew to Burk, March 24, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.
also a Philadelphia Colonial Dame and linked to the Custis family. Chew marketed Lee’s charitable project in other Philadelphia genealogical societies. Richard M. Cadwalader, president of the “Sons of the Revolution” contributed five dollars “to the fund for the Tent.”211 In accordance with Lee’s prediction and at this point, mainly due to Chew’s resources, Burk’s fundraiser for his museum of American history at Valley Forge was a worthy competitor for Philadelphia social and historical preservation organizations.

As the tent’s buyer, Burk learned that his purchase came with some assembly required. His retrieval of a single tent from the National Museum involved solving a mystery about how many eighteenth-century tents, pins, poles, and ropes were in the Arlington House collection. Lee, who had trusted the Smithsonian curators with that puzzle, helped Burk to acquire enough parts to complete one tent. She referred to her own memories of the tents at Arlington as authority for their provenance. Although her grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, had celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence under Washington’s tent as “a shelter of the party, worthy of the day,” Lee remembered the tents, “collecting dust in the garret room” at Arlington House. She advised Burk to again check her source, Lossing’s book, Mount Vernon and its Associations, for a detailed visual account.212 Lossing, on

211 Mary J. B. Chew to Burk, April 1, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution; Charles Henry Browning, American of Royal Descent, Collection of Genealogies Showing the Lineal Descent of Kings of Some American Families (Genealogical Publishing Corporation, 1911), 48, GoogleBooks.

212 Lossing, Arlington and Lossing, Mount Vernon; Barnett, Sacred Relics, 66-67, 70-71. Barnett discusses Lossing’s friendship with Custis and account of Mount Vernon, in which “the material object’s ability to bring the past into physical convergence with the present was made clear in descriptions of mirrors and other reflective surfaces.”

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a weeklong research trip to Arlington House in 1853, had taken an interest in the relics. An illustration in Lossing’s *Arlington* featured the tents as they were rolled away, represented by their portmanteau. Lee’s checklist from Arlington, sent home to her mother in 1865, accounted for the tent among the family’s furnishings confiscated during the Civil War. As a result, her mother could legally account for “Washington’s tent and tent poles,” listed between “a small mahogany cabinet with one drawer missing” and “one suit of Washington’s clothes, buff with blue” to request their immediate return.²¹³ The Washington-Custis-Lee items had always been distinguished by their provenance, as interpreted by its owners.

**Travel Arrangements, 1907-1909**

Almost a year after Lee’s suggestion to visit the tents at Smithsonian, Burk had raised enough funds to make an initial deposit of five hundred dollars, encouraging a legal agreement to their sale. Finally visiting the museum, Burk was alarmed to confirmed her previous expectation about one tent’s misplacement to the Jamestown Exposition, on April 2, 1908:

> When in Washington the other day I noticed that the tent sent to Jamestown has not been returned… In regard to the guarantee: this should set forth the facts as you know them about the tents, showing how they came into your possession, etc.. This paper will attest the genuineness of the tents for those who come after us.²¹⁴

The final agreement between Lee and the Burk details conditions for insurance and an exhibition to raise funds, but even within this agreement’s formality, there is

²¹³ MCL (Staunton, VA) to Mrs. Lee, [n.d.] 15th [1865], MCL Papers, VHS.

²¹⁴ Burk to MCL, April 2, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.
documentation of the continuing concerns about the actual number of tents and their authenticity. The agreement asserts that Mary Custis Lee as the owner of two tents, but that Burk wishes to purchase only one, with “the choice as to which tent he will select.” The agreement also requires Mary Custis Lee to furnish a guarantee, with the tent, “that said tent is the headquarters tent of General George Washington used by him during the Revolutionary War.” Burk also expressed his ambitious plans for the Valley Forge Museum of American History beyond this purchase, recognizing that Lee’s collection would meet his purpose for “the Washington relics at Valley Forge to be worthy of the man and the place.”

Lee used her influence to assist Burk in reviewing and selecting the tent artifacts. She corresponded with the curator at the National Museum, Mr. Ravenel, about Burk’s condition report. On April 20, 1908, she wrote to Ravenel from Rome:

I believe that since the death of my old friend, Mr. Beckwith, you are in charge of the “Washington Relics,” & so I write to you to permit the Rev. W. Herbert Burk of Norristown, Penn. To examine the two Washington Tents, belonging to me, in the “National Museum” I have practically sold him one of them for the “Valley Forge Museum.” & have given him permission to select the one he prefers. I mentioned to him the one lent by me to the “Jamestown Exhibition,” thinking that had perhaps been chosen as being in the best condition (thought they may be equally good, I have never seen them thurolee) & was surprised & shocked, to learn that it was not in the Museum! I committed it to the charge of Miss Nannie Heth, who had also some of the Government Exhibits in her hands, & concluded of course that is been returned when the “Exhibition” closed, I being then abroad. She had no right to make any other disposition after & I have written to her to that effect. I had also given permission for her to take the old Iron Safe, & the Lamp; did she & are they also not back in your charge? Please write to me, care of Morgan Haifes & Co; 31 Boulevard

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215 Burk to MCL, April 2, 1908, copy of letter and legal agreement to transfer purchase of the tent, Museum of the American Revolution.
Haussmann, Paris, & tell me about this though I trust that by this time, all the articles are safely back in your keeping.\textsuperscript{216}

Lee’s concerns about the tent spread to the other objects in her collection. In her letter, the confusion surfaces again, about whether a tent was lent to Jamestown, under the auspices of Nannie Heth, another direct influence on the confusing provenance of Lee’s Washington tents, and whether it was returned. Although Heth was the moving force behind the purported loan of one tent to the Jamestown (VA) Tercentennial Exhibition, it is not clear from Lee’s correspondence whether and when this loan was made, successfully exhibited or returned to the National Museum.

Lee continued her correspondence about the tents from Rome. On April 20, 1908, she was very busy in this matter, writing to Burk, Mr. Ravenel at the Smithsonian, and possibly Nannie Heth. She also sent a calling card to Dr. Richard Rathbun, whom she perceived as Ravenel’s supervisor, that “I hope I am not quite forgotten, & that you will kindly carry out my wishes, respecting one of the Washington Tents in the “Museum,” about which I have written fully to Mr. Ravenel”\textsuperscript{217} In her letters to Burk, she continued to try to settle the Jamestown

\textsuperscript{216} MCL (Paris) to William de Chastignier Ravenel, April 20, 1908, enclosure, Museum of the American Revolution.

\textsuperscript{217} MCL (Paris) to Ravenel, April 20, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution, “…Firstly, being much \textit{shocked & concerned}, to hear that the “Tent” from the “Jamestown Exposition” had not been returned I had \textit{first} to write several letters about that; the principal one of course to Miss Nannie Heth of “Washington,” to whose charge with ‘\textit{misgivings}’ I confess, I had committed it. But as she also has entrusted with a “Government Exhibit,” I thought I could not do better than to give it into her hands, & as I left early in Nov. for this side, before the “Exposition” commenced to break up, I concluded that of \textit{course my} things, the value of which she well knew & appreciated, would be returned to “Washington” with the other Government Articles. I hope…the whereabouts of ‘The Missing “Tent” will be discovered…”
confusion and described her familial correspondence and preservation efforts aimed to settle the issue. She said that she is writing to Heth and suggests that Burk write as well. She enlisted her cousin, Virginia Miller, who resides in Washington, as an advocate on the side of Burk’s and her interests. She also indicated that the agreement of sale, since it is coming from a foreign country via the American consulate, has been changed slightly and required Burk’s signature again. In this case, Lee’s decision to conduct her business from abroad delayed its completion:

I had to take the papers to the American Consul (there being a great deal of red tape in a foreign country) & for several days I failed to see him. When I did, he inserted the Custis in my name, my legal signature & he also thought it necessary to insert those 4 lines commencing with the “Tent” selected…& which entailed the re-typewriting of your last sheet…Therefore I lose of course your signatures to the agreement. Consequently please sign again the enclosed document, & I will also …I think Mr. Ravenel has charge at the Department of the “Relics” &c. so I enclose a line to him which I think will be sufficient. Like you, I am anxious to have the business closed, & regret the delay incident to the ocean being between us!218

Mary Custis Lee’s letter to Ravenel at the National Museum, who had initially approved Heth’s role in the Jamestown Exposition, at the National Museum follows the same pattern. 219 She informed him about her almost completed agreement with Reverend Burk and asks him, to enforce security with allowing others to access her collection. The Washington tents, as a group, contained many parts that Lee had never seen. As underlined in her letter, Lee was “surprised and shocked” to learn that one tent, committed to the charge of “Miss Nannie Heth, who had also some of the

218 MCL to Burk, April 20, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.

219 SI Archives, Record Unit 305, Microfilm for acc. no. 13152; Ravenel to Heth, SI Archives, Record Unit 192, US National Museum, Permanent Administrative Files.
Government Exhibits in her hands” was never returned to the Smithsonian. Curiously, the Smithsonian loan exhibit catalogue lists many Washington relics and even photographs of Robert E. Lee, exhibited as an exemplary Virginian, but does not mention a Washington tent.220

The complications did not diminish Mary Custis Lee’s encouragement for Burk’s patriotic project, and her personal investment in Washington’s legacy. Her letters about the Washington relics underscore the importance of the “Custis” in her name and she had reminded Burk, “in writing to me always give my full name.” This was both a practical and sentimental issue. She promoted her tie to Washington to back her argument for the importance of the Confederate home, as a charity that needed urgent funds. Though the charity’s need remained great, her curatorial goal to find the tent a home within the original thirteen American colonies where it could be displayed for public benefit, and her friendship with Burk, appear to have superseded her financial goal. She wrote with encouragement toward Burk’s patriotic project, assuring him that his initial payment of five hundred dollars need not be immediately followed by the full balance:

I heard from dear Mrs. Chew that you had been seriously unwell; broken down she said by overwork. You must not do that again, “good men are scarce,” & judging from the pictures you send me, you must already have accomplished a great deal, & with a fair prospect of realizing your Patriotic aspirations in the near future. I am writing in great haste, to catch our one daily mail…& let you get possession of the tent as soon as possible, with no factious opposition. They say they must retain the title until the money is paid in full, but I am quite

willing to extend the time to 5 years, & hope you will be able to call quits before that...I wish I could send you some of this gorgeous sunshine...a party of us visited the Temples of “Karnak” & strolled about for hours, through its stupendous ruins...221

The two enthusiasts faced additional delays and challenges in securing the acquisition. The Smithsonian curators acted as intermediaries between Burk and Lee, who was in Europe during most of their 1907-1909 correspondence. On July 25, Lee blamed the postal service for misdirecting paperwork about legally transferring her ownership of one tent to Burk, and apologized that the tent could not be available to visitors in time for the 4th of July celebrations. She anticipated that the tents would make Valley Forge a tourist destination, but her haste had other motivations:

I shall do all in my power to expedite the business, for my poor old women want the money even more than you (did?) the Tent! I wrote on the subject from “Egypt” to Mrs. Chew, but having received no answer, perhaps that letter miscarried too. Travelling about as much as I do, I fear I lose more letters than I know of, & the postal service in France is proverbially bad; still it was most unfortunate that these particular letters should have gone astray, & I must again express my great regret. I trust you have quite recovered your health & are able to devote yourself with comfort to your very interesting labours. I hope someday to visit “Valley Forge,” & see the results!222

Even with one tent’s home settled, Lee believed that the sacred relics did not have to be contained in a single institution. Instead, they could be dispersed to benefit multiple audiences. She notified the curators about her decision to remove one tent, reserved for Burk, from the National Museum on July 29, 1909. She also asked the curatorial staff for their advice on where to advertise the remaining tent pieces, so that she might continue her charitable work:

221 MCL to Burk, February 8, 1909, Museum of the American Revolution.

222 MCL to Burk, July 25, 1909, Museum of the American Revolution.
Having sold one of my Washington Tents (Temp Acc. 6868), which has long been in the United State National Museum, of which you are the Head Curator, I write to empower you to turn it over to the Rev. W. Herbert Burk, Rector of “All Saints”, Norristown, Pa. and much interested in the “Valley Forge Museum”, which is intended to be its ultimate destination. I should wish Mr. Burk to have the best one of the two, and I have told him to select the one he prefers. As negotiations for the tent have long been in progress, and delayed by my absence abroad…I am also anxious to sell the other Tent (you already possess the largest, given by my Grandfather, G.W.P. Custis, Esq.) for the same sum, $5,000., and for another important charity; and had thought that perhaps the “City of New York”, where Washington was first inaugurated as President, might be glad to have it for the Metropolitan Museum; but I know so few people there and live much abroad, that I have had no opportunity of bringing it before their public…223

Washington’s Tent on Permanent View

While Lee believed there were two tents to choose between in Washington, D.C., Burk’s return trip to the National Museum in 1909 to select one tent left him with more questions about the tents’ many pieces. Perhaps his was the one that had returned from the mysterious dispatch to Jamestown in 1907-1908, or perhaps not. Enlisting the assistance of curatorial staff and Lee’s banker, Reverend Burk finally hand-delivered George Washington’s marquee from Washington D.C. to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania on August 19, 1909. He later recalled his trip, “…I could not take my precious burden into the passenger coach, but had to consign it to the expressmen, but they guarded it with real reverence, when I told them what it was, for they were Americans.”224

223 MCL to Mr. Mason, July 29, 1909, SI Archives, Record Unit 305, US National Museum, Permanent Administrative Files, Microfilm acc. no. 13152.

224 Burk, Making a Museum.
Once at home in Valley Forge, Burk strove to follow Lee’s guidelines for displaying the tent. However, his first condition report to Lee on August 30 noted that his purchase was missing an inner curtain and that “only one half of the side could be found, and some relic hunter had cut a large piece out of the top.” Burk recommended that the pair work together to investigate the missing piece, although he stated, “I suppose the vandal who cut the tent will never be discovered.” To Burk, these missing sections added to the tent’s historical value as a relic of Washington, which had survived over two centuries of various purposes. Although fabric, thread and metal were tangible evidence of Washington’s wartime shelter, Burk also needed to prove the tent’s provenance. He was interested in the tent as a witness to weather, war, and what Lee called “the era of our National existence.” However, this condition presented a challenge for his new display:

On the 19th of August I went up to Washington for the tent and met Mr. Burke at the National Museum…The following day I set up the tent so as to show the only side we have at present, and around it I have had built a room of sheet iron with glass windows so as to further protect the tent against fire or damage from relic hunters. I am trying now to secure the funds with which to erect a special room for its exhibition. To-morrow Mr. Burke will receive the first proceeds from the exhibition, $7.47.

Having secured the tent as the centerpiece of his collection, Burk became preoccupied by other acquisitions, his large-scale building project to found the Washington


226 Burk to MCL, August 30, 1909, MCL Papers, VHS.
Memorial Chapel and the challenges of promoting admissions to a new museum. His ownership of the tent allowed him to gather publicity for other relics, other projects and Valley Forge’s collection.

Like her curatorial goals, the goal for raising money for the Confederate widows also did not meet outright success. Mary Custis Lee wrote to Burk in 1913, inquiring about payment of the remaining $4,500 within five years, as stipulated in the agreement of sale in 1908. She continued to suggest possible donors to Burk and extended the term of payment by another three years. However, her major fundraising advice focused on promoting the tent’s authenticity as a sight for all patriotic Americans to see. She reasserted the tent’s unquestionable worth as a national relic:

I am willing to extend [your stipulated purchase time] to three years, on the same terms, & will write to “Burke & Herbert” to that effect. I cannot imagine people doubting the authenticity of the Tents, & should suggest, as my word does not seem to be inefficient, that you consult Benj.(sic) Lossing’s work, easily accessible I should think in Philadelphia, have an extract from it, either typewritten, or printed, accompanied by his own sketches of the Tents, rolled up in their cases, & put it prominently in view in the “Museum.”

…The National Museum in “Washington” has the large one which he presented them, no doubt has ever been thrown on that authenticity, & these two smaller ones (one of which you have) reposed beside it, & more taken from our old Home with the other Relics, during the war times. I should think when such large prices are often paid for very doubtful, or less interesting, Relics some Patriotic Millionaire might have been found to assist for in raising the required sum!... Our “charity,” a worthy one as you must admit, is still struggling on...so you see I can not afford to let sentiment take place of reason. I do wish the Tent to remain at “Valley Forge,” but under the circumstances, I could not give it away. I should have thought you might have exploited it at

227 MCL (Luxor) to Burk, February 8, 1909, Museum of the American Revolution.
“Gettysburg” recently, with some recurring advantages. For your own sake & mine I wish you “good luck”… 228

By 1916, Burk’s payments were still incomplete, but one aspect of Lee’s curatorial mission was successful: they were seen by visitors to Valley Forge, and became the core of a permanent collection that interpreted Washington’s legacy. 229 Lee was able to fulfill her promise of funds to the Home for Needy Confederate Women, due to Burk’s initial deposit from Mrs. Chew. 230 This initial donation allowed Lee to deepen and demonstrate her commitment to the Richmond charity.

228 MCL (White Sulphur Springs, WV) to Burk, July 19, 1913, Museum of the American Revolution.

229 MCL (Shoreham Hotel, Washington D.C.) to Burk, April 6, 1916, Museum of the American Revolution. “The money goes, as you know, to a charity very near to my heart, & a very noble one as you, yourself, characterized it, & we are taking care now of 31 poor old, helpless, women. I should think such an interesting Relic as the Tent in which Washington lived, & slept, for so many eventful years made too in “Philadelphia,” would appeal more strongly to the Patriotism of your Pennsylvanians, so much wealth among them too, in Pittsburg (sic), as well as Philadelphia. We have nothing like it in this part of the world, & in Virginia especially, we not only have little money, but so much & so many, to care for! You also have, no doubt, & you must know that I do not wish to press you unduly, or cause you any annoyance, but imply to call your attention to the fact, which may have escaped you, among your many & multifarious duties.”

230 Burke and Herbert Bank to Mrs. A. J. Montague, September 10, 1909, HNCW Papers, LVA. Montague received a check for $500, “at the request of Miss Mary Custis Lee…for the use of the Confederate Widows’ Home with which both she and you are connected”; MCL (Interlaken, Switzerland) to Montague (Richmond), September 13, 1909, HCNW Papers, LVA: “My dear Mrs. Montague…you will have received from “Burke & Herbert” a cheque for $500, the first payment on the sale of my “Washington Tent” which I have sold to the “Valley Forge Museum,” & the proceeds of which sale I wish to donate to the “Old Confederate Women’s Home.”
Newspapers that picked up the long-term story, of the Pennsylvania-made, Virginia-used tent’s retrieval from the Smithsonian and transfer back to Pennsylvania, focused on the tent’s full history, 1776-1909, as a relic:

**WASHINGTON’S TENT.**
George Washington Park[e] Custis, Washington’s adopted son, counted Washington’s tent the greatest treasure in Arlington House and the most precious heirloom of the Father of his Country. This “Pretorium of Valor,” as it has been called, has had a remarkable history which may be briefly summarized as follows [...]

On May 27, 1907, the Rev. W. Herbert Burk, minister in charge of the Washington Memorial Chapel, secured from Miss Mary Custis Lee, the daughter of Mrs. Robert E. Lee and the owner of the tent, an option for its purchase at $5,000, and on August 19, 1909, made the first payment of $500, contributed by friends of the chapel, and received the tent, minus one-half of the side wall, from Miss Lee’s representative Mr. Julian T. Burke, of this city, and the curators of the National Museum. The following day, 131 years after it was carried from Valley Forge, it was set up in the Valley Forge Museum of American history. By the terms of the contract the balance of $4,500 is to be paid within five years, the tent to be exhibited for the purpose of raising that amount. Miss Lee will devote the proceeds to the support of the “Widows’ Confederate Home,” in Richmond, of which she is the president.

The tent is made of heavy linen, and is 23 feet long and 12 feet wide, with circular ends. Some vandal has cut a large piece from the top, and one-half of the side wall is missing. Otherwise the tent is in excellent condition. On the inside near the back there is a line of tape to which are sewed iron hooks. From these was hung the curtain which screen the camp-cot used by Washington. This part of the tent was his dormitory and sanctuary...

An appeal is made to American patriots to give more than the small admission fee that the whole amount required to complete the purchase may be quickly made up, and this tabernacle of our American Moses kept at Valley Forge for all time.231

231 “Washington’s Tent” [n.d.] enclosure to Mrs. Montague, HNCW Papers, LVA.
As an epilogue to Lee and Burk’s accomplishments, the American Historical Society published an account about Valley Forge in 1923 that highlighted the tent’s unexpected placement in such a small institution. This experience is presented as distinctive within the growing amount of historical attractions at Valley Forge. The writer mentions Lee’s maternal lineage alongside the tent’s impact on visitors, “But the most interesting object of interest to the thoughtful visitor is the original field tent General Washington used as his headquarters…To look upon the real canvas tent which the Great Commander used as his sleeping place and general headquarters rivets the attention upon its every thread and fold, as it is seen in the Museum, in the last place where one would think to find so valuable a relic. It was secured by Dr. Bur[k] from its owner, Miss Mary Custis Lee, the daughter of Mrs. Robert E. Lee, wife of the great Confederate commander.” 232 As an initial focal point for Burk’s museum, in an era when many more spurious “Revolutionary relics” found homes in a rising antiques market, Lee provided a framework for his interpretation about this singular marquee, ordered and owned by Washington himself.

Mary Custis Lee’s actions—locating and taking responsibility for these objects, understanding their histories, commemorating their significance and ensuring their value to a wider audience beyond the family collection—left a lasting impact on many groups. Viewing each individual Washington relic as an inherited project and intellectual challenge, Lee broadened her network with these institutions based on her own value for the artifacts. As a result, she controlled the narrative for her

permanently-traveling exhibition of Washington relics. The tent’s sale, intended as an expedient fundraiser to benefit a Southern cause, gave Lee a platform to express her views on her historical legacies. Moreover, Lee’s curatorial insights and forward thinking after 1906 preserved Washington’s tent as a conversation point that serve to trace shifting definitions about many eras of American “national existence.”

233 MCL to Burk, February 10, 1908, Museum of the American Revolution.
Figure 24  "The Centennial - Washington Relics, United States Building" in 
Magazine Co., etc. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Books and 
Periodical Collection.
Figure 28  Mary Custis Lee in Paris, France, letter to Reverend W. Herbert Burk in Norristown, Pennsylvania, July 25, 1909. Detail featuring text about Washington’s tent, which Lee underlined for emphasis. Courtesy, Museum of the American Revolution.
Figure 30  Washington’s marquee tent on display at Valley Forge, 20th-c. photographic print. Courtesy, Museum of the American Revolution.
Chapter 6
MARY CUSTIS LEE’S OUTREACH STRATEGY: WASHINGTON’S
SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI CHINA, BUTTONS AND FAMILY
LEGACY

Mary Custis Lee valued her collection for its separate pieces, whole, missing, broken and otherwise – as tangible sources of stories about her family legacy. She expanded her curatorial role by becoming a spokesperson for the relics’ national relevance.\(^{234}\) She promoted the collection’s value for a public audience, using the objects as tools for audience engagement and outreach through loan exhibitions, news stories, and personal performance. With the support of her surviving relatives, Lee promoted the Washington relics in a variety of public and private spaces. As a result, Mary Custis Lee’s selection of new institutional “reliquaries” for the relics demonstrated her interpretation of the objects’ meanings, as well as her understanding about these meanings’ mutability with each new display.

This chapter introduces Lee’s outreach role between 1901-1918, focusing on how she managed and marketed the stories of two categories of family heirlooms. First, Lee paid consistent attention to small and personal items of both George Washington and Robert E. Lee. Primarily, these were buttons from military and

\(^{234}\) “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” 1906, is an example of Lee’s promotional activity after Mildred’s death in 1905. In the following year, “Relics of Washington,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1907, heightened public awareness about the relics as a group and emphasized Lee’s plans to disperse the group’s pieces.
professional clothing, but also included autographs and other wearable men’s accessories. When speaking to the press, she also used these “clippings,” portable fragments taken from larger objects, documents or garments, to draw attention to herself. Second, Lee worked to promote the George Washington’s Society of the Cincinnati china by dispersing it to various social groups and family members. Throughout, Lee found innovative ways to cross-promote her Washington and Lee family legacy, using her own performance, publicity and exhibition skills. These activities became her full-time occupation while at home in Virginia and abroad. She envisioned these object’s separate placements as separate occasions to educate, and ensure the continuing influence of her Washington, Custis and Lee forbearers’ place in national memory.

In her public statements, such as the “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity” interview (1906), Lee convinced audiences that one piece of George Washington’s set of Cincinnati China signified his presence, in spite of its pre-Civil War status as her grandfather’s complete collection of ancestral dinnerware. Lee and Mildred applied this theory to buttons from George Washington’s military clothing and simultaneously distributed General Lee’s military uniform buttons and autographs. They worked in tandem to collect their rare materials and fulfill requests from people who wished to own his personal relics, valued as symbols of their admiration and esteem for the Confederate leader. Lee also repurposed these small and lightweight items for her own use, to perform their lineage. By collecting and sending these objects as heirlooms to
those outside the family, the two sisters valued and acknowledged others’ relationships to their family’s story.235

Sixty-three pieces from George Washington’s set of Society of the Cincinnati china were listed in Mary Custis Lee’s probate inventory. This china had been a fixture of her grandfather’s collection at Arlington House, and had a more public life in more locations than Washington’s military tents. After the Washington relics’ legal return to the Lee family on May 14, 1901, Lee mobilized the hand-painted Chinese ceramics, as well as the Washington buttons, to become an essential aspect of her collection’s exhibition and outreach strategy.236

In using and exhibiting Washington’s buttons and china, Mary Custis Lee took actions that paralleled the way she and her sister Mildred managed Robert E. Lee’s objects and memory, especially until Mildred’s death in 1905 and after their brother, George Washington Custis Lee’s death in 1913. Between 1901 and 1918, Lee intentionally dispersed the plates and buttons as a testament to Washington’s memory.

235 G.W.C. Lee to P.A. Greene, 24 April 1899. The Lee-Jackson Foundation Collection 0170, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University. George Washington Custis Lee was also involved in distributing their father’s effects, and “regretting that I have nothing better to send,” responded to one request that “in breaking up my residence in [Lexington, 1897], I have given away nearly everything that I had in the way of mementos or relics; and can find nothing for your collection but two small buttons, taken from one of Genl. Lee’s coats or waist coats.”

236 Emporia Gazette (Emporia, KS) 15 May 1901 reported that “sets of China, including one given to Mrs. Washington by Gen. Lafayette […] will be sent to an address to be designated by Miss Lee.” This describes the ‘States’ china, the second china pattern in MCL’s Washington relics inheritance. Visitors to China Hall (formerly, Lowestoft Hall) at Winterthur Museum can see both patterns displayed, accession nos. 1963.700.1-70a,b (Cincinnati china) and 1964.0705 (‘States’ china); MCL accompanied her older brother to the US National Museum on May 14, 1901.
Her display tactics also serviced the memory of Robert E. Lee, in a variety of institutions that honored both Washington and Lee.

Outreach tactics other than exhibitions were important to both Mary Custis Lee and Mildred Lee, who was eleven years younger than Lee. Both participated in historical commemorative societies. As they traveled to many places together and were invited to the same annual meetings, their separate personalities caught public attention. A reporter characterized the pair in *Harper’s Weekly*:

> The daughters of the Confederate leader are especially interesting women, of cultivated mind and great charm of manner. Miss Mary Lee has been an adventurous traveler in regions of Europe and the Orient far removed from the beaten track of tourists, and her sister is a woman of unusual talent and personal distinction.²³⁷

Both had strong connections with various museums, as financial contributors and guest curators. As observed by reporters, Lee wore jewelry set with Washington’s agate buttons or with a recognizable miniature of her father to social events. Distributing Robert E. Lee’s uniform buttons to souvenir seekers required Lee and Mildred to account for individual buttons in their written correspondence. Lee drew upon her family archive to locate and clip Robert E. Lee’s autograph from letters sent to Southern sympathizers.²³⁸ The autographs and the buttons can be considered as “signature” pieces for the Custis-Lee legacy. Lee used these objects to discern


²³⁸ Two extant examples of MCL correspondence, which transferred an enclosed autograph of Robert E. Lee to others: Mary Custis Lee to a “Miss Day,” 28 February 1916, Alfred and Elizabeth Brand Collection of Civil War and Lee Family Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University and Mary Custis Lee to Edwin A. Warfield, Governor of Maryland, 1910, Warfield Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.
stakeholders’ political and patriotic interests in her family legacy. Her actions to exercise this power, within these individual and private relationships, further enabled her to promote the Washington relics as objects that belonged in public museums.

**Wearable Relics: Two Sets of Buttons**

Mary Custis Lee knew firsthand the power of relics of Washington and of her father. The “Sacred Relics” interview mentioned that Lee took “delight” in:

showing…a few small relics of General Washington, which she always carries with her in her trunk, and a sort of “memory book,” in which are the autographs of hundreds of prominent persons she has met abroad...

In this interview, Lee was careful to display her personal authority about their authentic provenance. She described finding the buttons at Arlington House:

Among the relics which Miss Lee especially prizes are several large moss-arket buttons—each nearly an inch in diameter—with silver shanks, which she and one of her sisters during a childhood’s prank, clipped from one of Washington’s coats, thus bringing upon them a stern reproof from her mother and her grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis. The buttons were never sewed on the coat again, and were the only part of the garment saved after Arlington was confiscated by the government. In settings of gold Miss Lee now wears them in the form of breast pins and pendants…[she said,] “One day, I remember, we stole up there and decked ourselves out in General and Martha Washington’s clothing… It was a fine black velvet coat—one which General Washington wore on great occasions, from which we cut the moss-agate buttons. There were about twenty of the buttons, and I strung them on a string. I shall never forget my mother’s horrified expression as I appeared before her with the improvised necklace about my neck. She took them away from me and placed them in a drawer, intending to sew them on the coat again. This was only a little time before the war, and during the troublesome days which followed the buttons were forgotten.240

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239 “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” 1906.

240 Many of Washington’s agate buttons, some of which were repurposed into jewelry pieces by either Lee or her mother, are in the collection at George Washington’s
Mary Custis Lee did not demonstrate a “lack of reverence” for these smaller Washington relics in her adult life, but she did maintain her playful attitude toward them. Lee wore the aforementioned gold-colored brooch set with a single agate button, mentioned in this article, to have her photograph taken. She preserved this photograph in her trunks, now at Virginia Historical Society. Lee presented herself in the press as an important living link to Martha (Custis) Washington and George Washington. In Lee’s perspective, this characterization was strengthened by the 1906 return of the Custis family bible to her hands.\textsuperscript{241}

Lee described the importance of the bible in “Sacred Relics,” before she mentioned Washington’s tents. Her own voice comes through in a public statement about the importance of her own role and of the objects in her keeping. The bible had been lost from Arlington during the Civil War, discovered in the hands of George Kendrick of Philadelphia in 1903 (who loaned it to Washingtoniana exhibitions), and returned in 1906. Lee suggested that Martha Washington owned, used and wrote in the bible from the time of her first marriage to Daniel Parke Custis until her death:

\ldots the old Bible of Martha Washington, which disappeared from Arlington the home of the Lees, during the civil war. It is a quaint old leather-bound affair in perfect preservation, in large, clear type, in which the land’s first “first lady” was wont to read her daily chapter from the time she was pretty Martha Dandridge, through her wedded life with Daniel Parke Custis; down to the time of her death at Mount Vernon. The book contains no record of the marriage of the young widow, Martha Custis to George Washington, although her wedding

\footnote{241 The privately-owned Custis family bible is illustrated in Coulling, \textit{Lee Girls}.}
in 1750 to Custis when Martha Dandridge is formally entered along the other family data. A clear chirography, with the ink yet unfaded.242

Lee relied on the bible to authenticate her own story about the provenance of her famous possessions. The bible’s legal return to a Custis descendant was an important moment in Lee’s development of her role as curator of the family collections. She realized the diligence necessary to prevent an important object from becoming lost to the family’s consciousness, which would weaken its ties to national history. Later, in a letter to a bishop who had inquired about the location of George and Martha Washington’s marriage, Lee reflected on this role that she was undertaking. Her interpretation, that the bible is the hard evidence of her testimony as a link to the Washingtons and to the Lees, attaches to the bible. She formed a reputation as the family expert and ultimate authority on the objects’ national significance.243

Lee’s family, and more widely the reporters who wrote about her activities, accepted the authoritative persona that Lee was beginning to present publicly in support of her collections. An article entitled “Interesting Talk About Mary Custis Lee” appeared in print only a few days before “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity” in August, 1906. Here, Lee emphasized both her Lee and her Washington heritage. She

242 “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” 1906.

243 MCL (Alexandria, VA) to Bishop William Ford Nichols (Second Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of California), November 11, 1907, Historic Manuscripts Collection, Washington Library (RM-288, MS-2904). “The presence of your card in my pocketbook, reminds me of my promise to you to try & obtain some definite information respecting the actual locality of Gen. Washington’s wedding, which I regret to say I have been unable to do…. Strange to say, I have Martha Washington’s large Bible from which they say she daily read, & in it is recorded her marriage to her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis, the birth of her Custis children, & grandchildren, but not her marriage to Washington. I have written you a long letter though with a bad pen, & in haste, as I leave for “New York” tomorrow…”
told the reporter that her “most sacred treasure” was a French-produced miniature of her father. Following this statement, she mentions the buttons as a focal point:

A set of buttons from the coat of General Washington is an interesting possession of Miss Lee. The buttons themselves are intrinsically valuable. They are a “moss agate,” of a milky translucence, with tiny flecks of moss below the surfaces, the whole about the size of a half dollar, mounted on gold of heavy workmanship done in England. “In those days, my dear,” Miss Lee smiled reminiscently, “people didn’t value heirlooms as they do today.” She and her small brothers and sisters more than half a century ago likely as not played “dressing up” and “having shows” in Grandpa Washington’s old plunder…the buttons from the old velvet coat were the only traces preserved of the distinguished garment.

Individual buttons snipped from Washington’s coat became the repurposed as souvenirs that represented and embodied Washington’s national memory. They did not have intrinsic value without Mary Custis Lee’s narrative about their previous owners. Her oral history, printed in the press, authenticates this group of objects. Like Lee

244 Photograph of MCL wearing this miniature, collection of the American Civil War Museum, Richmond, VA (FIC2009.03763). It appears to be painted after Mathew Brady, daguerreotype of Robert E. Lee in Roy Meredith, The Face of Robert E. Lee in Life and Legend (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), 25.

245 Photograph of MCL wearing a brooch in MCL Papers, VHS; Brooch, c. 1860, George Washington’s Mount Vernon, W-2777. Purchased by the A. Alfred Taubman Acquisition Endowment Fund and partial gift of an anonymous donor, 2004. Probably made: United States. Agate, gold, white metal. Overall: 1 3/8 in. x 2 5/16 in. x 1 3/16 in. Online catalog credits its setting to Mrs. Lee: “The agate button with a silver boss that constitutes the center of this brooch was originally among a larger set of buttons owned by George Washington. Following his death in 1799, his agate buttons joined many others removed from his clothing and preserved by family members and admirers. It was likely the Washingtons’ great-great-granddaughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee (1808-1873), who set this button in gold for proud display.”

herself, the objects can be viewed as last survivors of two centuries of American military history.

The journalist who wrote the “Interesting Talk” article showed a high degree of acceptance of Mary Custis Lee as the especially authoritative source about Washington and Lee family history. The journalist did this by comparing two powerful women who displayed American patriotism, tied to both Confederate and colonial Virginian memory, which elevated them to a status worthy of national celebrity. One was Miss Mary Custis Lee; the other was her fellow Washington, D.C. philanthropist, Miss Nannie Randolph Heth (1861-1921), who had played a complicated role in locating the Washington tents for the Jamestown Tercentennial, detailed in chapter five. Heth inherited objects from her Baltimore godmother, Mrs. Goldsborough, “another lineal descendant of the charming Widow Custis.”247 The article describes Mary Custis Lee’s collection as based in Washington’s military equipage, Mount Vernon furnishings, and a few extraordinary personal effects. Heth is mentioned as using Washington’s desk, candlesticks, leather chair, warming pan, silver drinking cup, cut glass tumblers, and possessing “a handsome necklace of Martha Washington’s that she wears at all patriotic balls and celebrations.” While Heth’s objects are her primary connection to the Washington ancestry, Mary Custis Lee is presented as a true relative to Washington. Her material inheritance serves to illustrate her more significant, more rare and valuable oral history about national significance in a new nation. The journalist emphasized kinship in his first impression of Lee:

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247 MCL and Heth are both pictured in The Sunday Star, 3 June 1917. Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
When you call on Miss Mary Custis Lee she shows you things. She loves to scramble through ancestral loot and regale the appreciative with views of relics that have played their part in history and romance in other days, things that pertain to her personal pedigree. For Miss Lee is “bloody kin” as the small boy said to most of the big things that have happened in this country.248

Lee kept some of her more portable relics, like the Washington buttons, with her during her travels and wore them as adornments. This behavior puts into sharp focus the importance she attached to these objects, as indicators of her family’s national significance. By contrast, many Lee personal possessions and some of the larger items of family memorabilia were not easily accessible to her, the journalists, and the public audience she was developing. Between 1901 and 1918, she worked to find places to display her relics and extend this story beyond the family circle.

Lee kept some of her inheritance stored away in multiple places. As evidenced by her probate inventory, she deposited possessions with the Burke and Herbert Bank in Alexandria, Virginia; the National Savings & Trust Company in Washington D.C.; another bank, a storage company, and under the supervision of curatorial staff at the Smithsonian Institution. Her 1919 probate inventory taken in Washington, D.C. accounts for these separate spaces.249

Lee’s main mission in her outreach efforts, after the tent’s placement in Valley Forge, was to keep the Society of the Cincinnati china on public view. She supported

248 “Interesting Talk...” The Wilmington Messenger, 7 August 1906.

249 Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, Holding Probate Court appraisal for personal estate of Mary Custis Lee, late of the District of Columbia, August 23, 1919 (copy), Washington Library. See Appendix B.
the loan of some of the Cincinnati china to Virginia institutions and also gave select pieces to the White House, prior to her death. The story is told below.

Lee acquired her “curatorial training” by observing her grandfather, her parents, and her siblings’ care and concerns toward their objects. Her curatorial processes were focused on managing and promoting the objects with the goal of developing an audience for them and placing them on public display. She wanted to impact museums. In this effort to disperse the pieces to several places, however, it was very important to her to be seen as a descendant of both Washington and of Lee. The processes she used for Washington-associated objects, including exhibition, personal use and performance, were also used for the other set of Lee-affiliated objects.

Mary Custis Lee and Mildred Childe Lee, the eldest and youngest surviving daughters of General Lee, used their family’s everyday things to attract supporters for their work and family legacy. As their mother had before them, she and Mildred produced souvenirs important to Northern and Southern societies. Mildred shared

250 Grant S. Quertermous, curator, Tudor Place Historic House and Garden (Washington, D.C.) email-messages to author, March 30-April 1, 2016. A third and final location for pieces of the Cincinnati china was Tudor Place. Lee gave one Cincinnati soup plate [Tudor Place, accession no. 3004] to her cousin, Armistead Peter, Jr., who noted the accession on February 10, 1918: "The little piece of old china mentioned in this letter from Cousin Mary Lee was given to me by her today at The Shor[e]ham Hotel and proved to be one of the plates from the set of Cincinnati China that belonged to Washington and came from 'Mt. Vernon.' This plate has been broken, but cousin Mary has had it mended - even to replacing a missing piece"; Mary Custis Lee to Anna “Nannie” Williams Peter, Papers of Armistead Peter Jr., MS 14, Box 77, Folder 16, Tudor Place Archives. Lee wrote, “…I may present him with a piece of old china, which I have been saving for him…”

251 Mrs. Lee hand-tinted portraits of George and Martha Washington and sold them to benefit Lee Chapel. University Collections of Art and History, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA and American Civil War Museum, online collections.
her eldest sister’s curatorial impulse. As the curator of the Confederate Museum in Richmond’s Virginia Room, Mildred catalogued and donated relics of General Lee for permanent exhibition. Mary Custis Lee adopted this role after Mildred’s death, but did not add to her sister’s material legacy there. Instead, she attended public programs, gave financial gifts and allowed the Society of the Cincinnati China to be displayed there, among other places. These activities all evidence Lee’s efforts to support the china’s ancestral ties to Washington while preserving Robert E. Lee’s reputation through material culture. Mary Custis Lee selected caretakers for relics that would represent her dual legacy in the developing historical institutions in the United States.

**General Lee’s Relics in Museums: Parallel Tactics**

Mary Custis Lee’s work on behalf of the Robert E. Lee relics is similar to the work with Washington relics, and thus throws her curatorial process into relief. Influenced by her mother’s, sister’s, and brothers’ efforts, she prioritized the same kinds of objects for both Washington and Lee. She valued objects that related to the great men themselves, to their military careers and to their daily lives, especially objects that they had touched. These objects showed both their military expertise on

252 Confederate Memorial Literary Society (CMLS), *Catalogue of the Confederate Museum, Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Ware & Duke, 1905), Archive.org. Mildred Lee was the Regent, Virginia Department of CMLS by 1898; the museum opened in 1896. See Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman’s War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond; and University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1996); UDC, *Minutes of the Annual Convention* (1919), 250-252, GoogleBooks. The Confederate Museum included the White House of the Confederacy, now part of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, VA. When Mildred was Regent of the Virginia Room, she donated many of her father’s personal effects for the “Lee Case.” These artifacts are similar to the Washington relics in category and type.
the public stage and familial roles in their private lives. Her selection of objects and her public promotion of them supported a characterization of both generals as humble leaders, as leaders who were accessible and fatherly.

Mary Custis Lee found a home for Lee artifacts at two Virginia educational institutions in Lexington: the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and Washington and Lee University. She presented Robert E. Lee’s books and objects to the Virginia Military Institute and attended a commemorative event with VMI cadets at Petersburg, Virginia. Her brother Custis had already begun a family initiative to bequeath Washington-Custis-Lee portraits to VMI, for educational display in a place of honor at Lee Chapel. Lee corroborated evidence about the portraits, another example of her use of her own authority to promote her family’s story. She kept an article about this in her scrapbook and clippings.

The list of objects which Lee gave to VMI show that she valued similar kinds of objects as relics of her father and as of Washington. Her gifts included a tactical sketch from the Mexican War in 1847, buttons from “six Generals of the war,” and “insignia and three stars taken from coat of Robert E. Lee...” Although Mary Custis Lee’s Washington buttons went to family members and were only later acquired by the MVLA, General Lee’s buttons were immediately displayed at the VMI museum in June, 1916. Mary Custis Lee donated her Lee and specifically, Confederate memorabilia to the military college, where her father’s personal belongings would signify his model behavior and inspire future military careers. Her willingness to meet

253 Virginia Military Institute, *VMI Cadet*, October 4, 1913 and October 25, 1913.

public interests in Lee’s relics helped her to advance the Washington relics’ placement in museums.

A more present resident of Lexington after 1914, Lee also made dedicated contributions to Washington and Lee University’s collections that she felt supported the student body’s educational goals and honored her father.255 First, most of her efforts were devoted to correcting university staff’s cataloguing records about the Custis-Lee paintings that her brother and she donated to the permanent collection.256 This endeavor strengthened her role as an expert about her family’s heritage. Second, in a rare decision to keep a collection in one piece, instead of donating pieces to separate collection, Lee also donated her personal collection of international souvenirs to the University. She described them as “my little Cabinet of “curious”…not of much intrinsic value, simply souvenirs of my Travels, & [I] keep them together, as I have no home of my own.”257 This collection includes items that Lee purchased while

255 MCL to Paul M. Penick, Office of the Treasurer, Washington and Lee University, November 26, 1917. The Lee-Jackson Foundation Collection 0170, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA. She explained a decision to donate an English-made military chest to the university: “I have thought it was best to consign this Military Souvenir of my Father to the care of the “Washington & Lee University,” feeling sure that they will value & preserve it in the Memory of their beloved President in the time of Peace, as he was their adored Leader in the heroic times of War.”

256 MCL to Dr. Smith, President of Washington and Lee University, December 15, 1917. The Lee-Jackson Foundation Collection, Washington and Lee University. In multiple letters, MCL cited her memories about her grandfather’s Arlington House paintings collection and expressed concern about the “Family Pictures, now hanging in the “Library…as soon as may be possible put them in a Fire Proof Building” to be made as a gift to the University.

257 Ibid.
traveling abroad: coins, trinkets, jewelry, fans, and other souvenir objects made from metals or carved wood. Although her heritage was evidenced by the collections she inherited, Lee strengthened her role as expert about her family’s heritage and emphasized her individual importance as her “father’s only surviving child,” at the same time that newspapers celebrated her as the “last living relative to Martha Washington of her generation.” In her correspondence about university collections, Lee advocated for the Lee name’s prominence in its own right, intertwined yet distinct from Washington, to ensure that her family’s relics will be available for public and private veneration.

Lee’s donations to the Virginia institutions demonstrate that her disposition of George Washington’s Cincinnati china followed a characteristic process. In addition, her prioritizing of personal objects showed a similar characterization of the two generals, as a host and as a humble leader fulfilling a patriotic duty.

**Dispersed Dinnerware: The Society of the Cincinnati China**

Mary Custis Lee curated another collection of family items as numerous but more breakable and more fragile than Washington’s and Lee’s military buttons. George Washington’s Society of the Cincinnati china could be appropriately termed the family china. Lee’s grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, kept the not-yet-antique, hand-painted china out of his grandchildren’s reach. His daughter, Mary Custis Lee’s mother, inherited this responsibility and took charge in preserving the china, along with the other Washington items known as the “Mount Vernon relics.”

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Unlike the buttons, the china had a long history of public display, even more famous than Washington’s tents. Lee used public exhibition as a primary outreach tactic for the china. She furthered the china’s diverse exhibition program as early as 1901. However, she received more attention from the press when she elected to split the china pieces among Richmond institutions in 1907, in coordination with the Jamestown Tercentennial, and when she gifted one plate to the White House, received by President Woodrow Wilson’s daughter in 1915. This action allowed Lee to “fill in” Washington’s place in the new presidential china exhibit at the White House. Finally, in 1917, Lee allowed a final loan exhibition based on her remaining pieces of the Society of the Cincinnati china. On these occasions, Lee was asked to contribute her opinion on the objects’ written exhibitions label, which denoted its provenance.

Lee made it possible for today’s museums to tell emblematic stories using the objects themselves. Today, visitors may see numerous items from Washington’s

259 See Appendix C: The Washington Relics; The majority of Lee’s famous inherited dinnerware is displayed in China Hall at Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE, accession no. 1963.0700.1-70 a, b. Files, Registration Office, Winterthur Museum. This collection is itemized in: “List of Objects returned to Mr. George Washington Custis Lee, May 14, 1901 [from the National Museum...] One dinner set now consisting of (Cincinnati China): 33 dinner plates, 8 soup plates, 1 small plate, 6 side dishes, 2 sauce dishes and covers, 1 spare cover, 4 gravy boats, 1 cream pitcher, 4 tureens (2 with covers), 3 fish strainers, 3 salad bowls, 1 fish dish, 1 meat dish, 6 tops for custard cups, 2 cups, 1 saucer, 1 pickle dish.”

260 Pieces of the china were exhibited in Richmond (1907, 1917) and bequeathed to MCL’s relatives, who continued the china’s display at Battle Abbey until its sale to Henry Francis du Pont; Melissa C. Naulin, assistant curator, Office of the Curator, The White House (Washington, D.C.) email-messages to author, April 11-13, 2016.

261 Label for White House plate donation, February, 1915, MCL Papers, VHS.

262 Winterthur Museum, Public Programs Department, “Wheel of Interpretation.” Using the wheel suggests some of these “stories” that the china supports: Washington
302-piece service, ordered in 1785, at the White House, Winterthur Museum, Mount Vernon, Tudor Place, and other major art museums in the United States. Some items are in private collections and not on public display. The Washington china, therefore, can now only be completely understood in the work of scholars, who fill in its missing pieces and account for over two hundred years of its shifting usage, provenance, condition, use and display.\textsuperscript{263} Mary Custis Lee’s documentation was an early contribution to this record. Her handwritten lists, letters and annotated newspaper clippings document these most breakable items of the Washington relics.\textsuperscript{264} Along with the set’s remaining pieces, these documents evidence Lee’s work to ensure the china’s survival, its public display, and its interpretation as Washington relics.

Mary Custis Lee’s probate inventory described her as the owner of sixty-three pieces of china “from the Order of the Cincinnati presented to George Washington by the Officers of the Revolutionary Army.”\textsuperscript{265} Those who wrote the probate inventory listed the china as on display at the Confederate Museum in Richmond, owned by the Confederate Memorial Literary Society and operated by the Confederate Memorial as revolutionary hero, Washington and his home as center of important hospitality, Washington as investing in the trade of the young US, Washington as a good colleague and touchstone of memory of the revolution for other members of the Society. Rosemary T. Krill, conversation with author, April 16, 2016.


\textsuperscript{264} MCL Papers, VHS. For a detailed study of this famous set, see Detweiler, \textit{Washington’s Chinaware}, 83-102.

\textsuperscript{265} Fuchs, “A Passion for China,” 126-127.
Institute Library, which Lee and Mildred had both supported.\(^{266}\) This note evidences Lee’s constant challenge to keep track of her peripatetic inheritance. Her own previous inventories listed the china as it was displayed at Battle Abbey, now part of the Virginia Historical Society, which was owned and operated by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.\(^{267}\) To commemorate this significant loan and its famous benefactor, the President of the APVA memorialized Mary Custis Lee, a Life Member in the APVA, as “a member who delighted in attending our meetings when in Richmond. She was warmly attached to our work […] we shall always remember and honor her for the unfailing sympathy while she was living in everything that pertained to the work that we were striving to do and the confidence in us that led her to select the A.P.V.A. as the custodian of the George Washington Cincinnati China.\(^{268}\) However, the Confederate Museum was only one repository for the china during Lee’s

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\(^{266}\) Inventory and Appraisement of Estate of Mary Custis Lee, 1919 June 30 (Washington, D.C.), [Reproduction], Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington, Mount Vernon.


\(^{268}\) APVA, “Deep Sympathy for Bereaved Members,” *Association of the Preservation of Virginia Minutes* (Richmond: APVA, 1918), 15-16. GoogleBooks. Interestingly, MCL is memorialized as a Lee descendant at the same time as Mrs. Emma Ball, a Washington descendant and MVLA vice-regent for Virginia. Mrs. J. Taylor Ellyson, President of the APVA, claimed that this “recording the death of two of the most illustrious families of Virginia – Washington and Lee” is shared by Ball and MCL. Ellyson wrote for the APVA audience: to Virginians, MCL’s link to Lee was more important than her more distant link to George and Martha Washington, not mentioned by Ellyson and credited to Ball, although MCL owned the china as evidence.
lifetime. Lee made selected pieces of the china available to various appreciative audiences between 1901 and 1918. Inspired by her personal travels to museums and memberships in historic preservation organizations, Mary Custis Lee facilitated new homes for the Cincinnati china pieces and successfully ensured her family’s legacy through displays that continue to engage museum visitors.

Lee’s plan for the china’s future reveals her ongoing concern for these objects’ expanding audiences. She had a similar concern about the George Washington tents, but her tactics with the china were very different. She did not seek to sell the Cincinnati china for a profit. Instead, she kept its ownership in the family and permitted its temporary display. For example, in 1917, as mentioned above, she lent twenty-seven pieces of china to the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). The loan to the APVA was reported in the press, stating that the president of the APVA received and unpacked the china in Richmond on July 6, 1917.

The twenty-seven items were “washed & placed in a case” at the Confederate Memorial Institute library. The press report relied on Lee’s statements about the china’s use by the Washington family and its vulnerability during the Civil War as provenance for this display:

[Lee presented] what is left of the Cincinnati China which was made in Canton, China, for General Washington. This China, she stated, was stored in barrels in the cellar at Arlington when Mrs. Robert E. Lee was required to leave there on twenty-four hours’ notice during the War Between the States.269

The same newspaper reported her loan’s placement in “handsome cases, in a fireproof building of Lee’s selection. She felt that Virginia and this association were the proper

269 “Miss Mary Lee Loans the Washington Relics” (newspaper clipping, n.d.), MCL Papers, VHS.
custodians of these relics of the two great Virginians, Washington and Lee.” Lee often addressed the tie between Washington and Lee using audience-specific language, citing shared statehood, ancestry and patriotism.

Lee paid specific homage to George Washington by allowing one Cincinnati dinner plate to stray from the set. In February 1915, perhaps motivated by publicity from the Daughters of the American Revolution, she called upon a “Miss Wilson,” perhaps Margaret Wilson, daughter of the recently widowed President Woodrow Wilson. Lee had met President Wilson at the White House on January 24, 1915 and later met First Lady Edith Bolling Wilson at a White House reception on March 3, 1916. Lee presented the plate in person on February 16, 1915, to fill a gap in the White House collection of presidential china. The “George Washington” plate’s first museum label included its matrilineal provenance. At the time of the gift to the White House, Abigail Gunn Baker, who had an official managing role in the White House Collection throughout several presidential terms, was especially impressed by Lee as a benefactor:

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271 Two personal invitations to events at the White House, MCL Papers, VHS.

272 Melissa C. Naulin, The White House, email-message to author, April 11, 2016. Society of the Cincinnati plate (9 ½” diameter), accession no. 1915.2747.1, The White House Collection. The cabinet was located in the Ground Floor Corridor of the White House and the idea for the presidential china display (and purchase of cabinets) came from First Lady Edith Roosevelt in 1904, and there were six cabinets in total by 1907. First Lady Ellen Wilson suggested that the display should be permanent for the “Presidential Collection” and drew plans before her death in August 1914. President Wilson’s second wife, First Lady Edith Wilson, “revived the project and the first cabinet in the west wall was completed by September 1916.”
...it is perhaps the most historic dinner service in the United States. I was with Miss Lee this morning when she made the presentation to Miss Wilson, and went with her to place it in the cabinets, as, of course, Miss Lee gave the plate to the White House, rather than as a personal gift...I would suggest that the [plate’s accompanying] card be as small as possible as the shelf is crowded.  

Baker later reported for *The Crockery and Glass Journal* that the plate was the most valuable item in the growing collection. Her article stated that increased significance was due to its “well-founded family tradition” of how it was used in the Custis and Lee families. The tradition was a direct result of Lee’s promotion of the china and its long years of display in Richmond.

At the White House, the plate appeared first in the chronological exhibit. A year later, a reporter described the plate’s prominence in the gallery’s restoration, characterizing its donor not only as Robert E. Lee’s daughter, but also as “the last


274 Abby Baker, “White House Collection of Presidential Ware,” *American Monthly Magazine*, Vol. XXIX no. 2 (Washington D.C., August 1906): 250-256: “It is only within the past few years and undoubtedly then largely due to the interest aroused by the organization of the Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution that the American people have awakened to the importance of the preservation of places and objects of historical associations […] landmarks intimately associated with the most thrilling events of our history have been allowed to fall into decay while the household articles and individual belongings of those who made the very history of the nation itself have been so carelessly cared for that many of them are irretrievably lost. Mount Vernon, the home of the immortal Washington, is an illustration of this unfortunate fact […] The White House at the National Capital is without question the most historical building in the United States […] The work of collecting the presidential ware has been necessarily slow as is all patriotic endeavor.”; Abby G. Baker, “The White House Collection of Presidential Ware,” *The Century Magazine* 76 (Century Company, October 1908): 828-841; Abby G. Baker, “Washington Plate for White House Collection,” *Crockery and Glass Journal*, 81 (New York, 24 June 1915): 8.
living Martha Washington descendant of her generation.”

By 1918, sightseers viewed the Society of the Cincinnati dinner plate in a cabinet specially created and labeled as “China Used By the Presidents.”

When Baker reflected on her career, she recalled Lee’s generosity regarding the Washington relics. In an unpublished manuscript, Baker described Lee’s lasting impact on the White House Collection:

For a number of years after the Collection was started it was impossible to procure any Washingtoniana for the cabinets…Miss Mary Custis Lee assisted me in finding many of the Washington heirs, and she could identify almost any Washington heirloom which came under my study. Soon after Miss Lee’s last return from Europe, in 1914, immediately following the outbreak of the world war, she presented the White House with one of the Washington Cincinnatus dinner plates. A few months before her lamented death in 1918, she made a handsome gift of Washingtoniana to the Richmond, Virginia museum. While she was having her Washington china repacked for this purpose she invited me


276 Melissa C. Naulin, email message to author, April 11, 2016. The plate was not the only gift that Lee made to the White House. In 1917, she also donated a sugar bowl and saucer from the Martha Washington ‘States’ service. See Winterthur Museum, accession no. 1964.0705 for a cake plate from this service; Abigail Gunn Baker, unpublished manuscript Heirs and Heirlooms of the White House, 1920, Abigail Gunn Baker Papers, White House Collection; Abby Gunn Baker (1303 Clifton Street, Washington, D.C.) to Mr. F.W. Clarke, Curator of Historical China, National Museum, Washington D.C., March 13, 1914, SI Archives, Record Unit 305, microfilm for accession no. 13152. Abigail Gunn Baker wrote to Clarke for information which she needed “for a book I am writing, on the transfer of the George Washington relics from the National Museum to Miss Mary Custis Lee in 1901.”

to go over it with her in order to make a selection of two pieces for the White House Collection. We selected a sugar bowl and a saucer bearing Mrs. Washington’s initials…

These two selected Martha Washington ‘states china’ pieces were displayed with the Society of the Cincinnati plate. Although the first president and first lady never actually lived in the White House, the plate’s labeled display at that important site visually enhanced the interpretation of their national significance. Lee’s donation also set an important precedent for the White House’s collecting and display strategies.

In her will, Lee bequeathed pieces of the china to members of her family, so that they might continue the Lee legacy in museums. In 1928, four of her relatives sold this china to Henry Francis du Pont in Winterthur, Delaware. While the pieces had once represented southern American accomplishments as they were displayed in Richmond museums, du Pont repurposed the china as artifacts intended to instruct and impress connoisseurs of the American decorative arts. Although she could not have predicted the china’s move north, Lee anticipated its capacity for interpreting history.

Journalists traced the Washington relics, formerly on view at the Smithsonian Institution, as they shifted back into private hands and off-view. Fortunately for visitors to American museums, Lee was publicity- and publicly-minded. Museums


extended Lee’s outreach initiative, and Lee supported museums as extensions of her social and community networks. In 1917, Lee returned to the US National Museum for a commemorative event that benefitted the United Daughters of the Confederacy. An eager journalist described her as “the link between The Old and The New South…awake to the issues of the day.”

Using the relics, Lee expressed perspective on Southern sympathies and tied them to her participation in national interest groups. Her tactics generated a national audience that supported both the Washington memory and Lee memory, which she entwined in a national story. As a result, the Washington relics retained their status as national icons that bridged a nation divided by the outcome of the Civil War.

Mary Custis Lee’s actions reserved a place for the next generation of Lees to participate in and influence museums. Lee’s wearable relics and souvenirs were visible evidence of her timeless ancestry. Most notably, the Society of the Cincinnati china set’s complex dispersal over time also provided multiple opportunities for Lee to speak up for her family legacy and influence how the American public would remember her ancestors. As she had done with the Lee objects given to Virginia college, she ensured that the china would remain safe and in the public eye, as it had been between 1861 and 1901. Mary Custis Lee realized the fragile nature of these objects’ “relic” status and found like-minded individuals who would uphold her legacy. Because Lee was motivated to establish a lasting public “presence” for these

280 Leonore Calvert, “‘Miss Mary’ Lee, Link Between The Old and The New South. Only Daughter of Great Confederate Leader Idolized by Veterans Who Wore Gray—Not a Suffragist, But Awake to Vital Issues Of the Day,” [news source title missing], 11 June 1917, clipping in MCL Papers, VHS.
historical artifacts in the last decades of her life, she is a largely unknown yet significant connector among several institutional histories. In a sense, Lee’s actions provided a model for curatorial practice that inspired museums, Winterthur included, to reconsider these objects’ national value.
Figure 31 Society of the Cincinnati china plates, photographed as a special arrangement. Courtesy, Winterthur Museum (1963.0700)
Figure 32  Mary Custis Lee [n.d.] wearing brooch set with George Washington’s agate button. Photographic print, Mary Custis Lee Papers. Original photographer’s frame has been cropped by the author with permission. Courtesy, Virginia Historical Society (Mss1 L5144 a 5082)
Figure 34  Mildred Childe Lee (left) and Mary Custis Lee (right), both seated second row, photographic print, c. 1890, White Sulphur Springs, Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Courtesy, Virginia Historical Society.
Figure 35  “George Washington Custis Lee,” by Michael Miley, photographer, 1892, photographic print. Prints and Photographs Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.
Figure 37  Presidential China Room at the White House, West Wall, photograph, c. 1916-1918, Abigail Gunn Baker Papers. Courtesy, The White House Collection.
Figure 38  Presidential China Room at the White House, Southeast Wall, photograph, c. 1918. Abigail Gunn Baker Papers. Courtesy, The White House Collection.
Figure 39  Stereo card of Lowestoft Hall, Keystone View Co., 1935. Robert V. Brost, photographer; Annette Karge, colorist. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Winterthur Archives (P20-B #1)
Figure 40  Stereo card of Lowestoft Hall, now China Hall. Keystone View Co., 1938. Robert V. Brost, photographer; Annette Karge, colorist. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Winterthur Archives (P20-D #3)
Chapter 7

MARY CUSTIS LEE AS INTERPRETER: A HOMECOMING FOR WASHINGTON’S LANTERN

For a person who was frequently honored at public receptions, Mary Custis Lee knew the importance of making a first impression. In the same year that she donated an emblematic plate to the Presidential China collection at the White House, she returned a singular object, an eighteenth-century lantern, to its original role as a household furnishing at George Washington’s Mount Vernon. The hall lantern lit the passageway above the stairs at its entrance facing the Potomac River, making a first impression to many of Mount Vernon’s guests. Lee’s grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, had also used it to grace the hall entrance at Arlington House. Mary Custis Lee was responsible for the lantern’s return, as a welcome addition to the historic home’s collection in May, 1915.\textsuperscript{281}

Since 1901, Mary Custis Lee had archived her inheritance’s history and listened to others’ perspectives on the Washington relics’ national value. Her donation of the lantern demonstrated her accumulated knowledge and attention to various interest groups throughout this process, including the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA). Between 1901 and 1915, Lee had attended MVLA events, befriended MVLA Vice-Regents, and gifted several less significant “association

\textsuperscript{281} Curatorial files, Hall Lantern, W-15, George Washington’s Mount Vernon and Washington Library. The lantern was not “lit” until 1933.
objects,” including a mahogany washstand for Washington’s bedroom, two chairs, textile fragments and porcelain vases.\textsuperscript{282} In her last donation to Mount Vernon, Lee showed a personal sense of civic responsibility that was informed by her sale of the tents and her ongoing dispersal of the Society of the Cincinnati china. Unlike the tents, china or buttons, Lee did not see the lantern as an object of George Washington’s personal use. As a home furnishing that pre-dated his residence at Mount Vernon, the hall lantern’s age categorized it as a relic of the ancestral home more than a relic of Washington himself. Because it had been illustrated by Lossing, as described in Chapter 2, the lantern was also a symbol of both Mount Vernon and Arlington House. It was also familiar to all Smithsonian visitors, since its accession in 1862.\textsuperscript{283} By 1915, Lee returned to this object with renewed purpose. Her concern for her relics’ safety and convictions about public display outweighed her limited interests in adhering to the structures of the MVLA’s interpretive goals. However, the lantern’s homecoming was a strategic point of celebration for both groups. Lee’s decision to return it may have shown that she was aware that the lantern’s placement


\textsuperscript{283} Theodore T. Belote, \textit{Descriptive Catalogue of the Washington Relics in the United States National Museum} (Proceedings, U.S. National Museum 49 no. 2092, March 4, 1916) 7, Hathitrust. Belote’s catalogue lists, “Hall lantern, Cat. No. 2089—A rectangular iron frame set with glass sides and bottom. The four corner strips of the frame curve over and unite in the center at the top to form an iron ball fitted with a ring for suspending the lantern from the ceiling. The bottom and sides are ornamented with slender open-work strips of iron. Dimensions 12 by 12 by 18 inches. Lent by Miss Mary Custis Lee,” but includes the footnote, “Since the above was written [in 1915] this object has been withdrawn from the Museum by the owner.”
authenticated the site as a home, more than it substantiated its role as a shrine or reliquary.

Lee was the primary caretaker of the lantern and other Washington relics since May of 1901, when the United States government’s legal transfer of the group’s custody made national news. At various points after 1901 and until Lee’s death in 1918, reporters were eager to follow the Washington relics’ movements as designated by Lee’s curatorial direction. Although she did not mention the lantern in “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” the lantern became a focal point in a full-page Richmond Times-Dispatch illustrated feature about the Washington relics on February 17, 1907:

The oldest article in the Lee collection and which Miss Lee has kindly allowed the officials of the Smithsonian Institution to continue to exhibit at the National Museum, is the huge iron-framed lantern which was used to illuminate the great hall at Mount Vernon when its first owner, Lawrence Washington, was master there. The big lantern served a similar purpose at the manor house on the Potomac during the regime of George Washington, and then it was transferred to Arlington and cast its glowing beams upon many a scene of old-time Southern merrymaking at this famous habitation.

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284 *Prescott Evening Courier* (Prescott, AZ), 22 May 1901. “Such of the Washington relics which were taken from the Arlington House at the beginning of the civil war, and which have been on exhibition in the National museum for some years...were this week turned over to Miss Mary Custis Lee… The final disposition removed from the Museum has not been determined upon. This act of rightful restitution has not serious injured the Washington exhibit in the Museum, as many of the articles were large pieces of furniture which have been stored away, and others were duplicates of articles which properly belong to the government.”

285 "Arlington" and "Washington relics" newspaper clippings, MCL Papers, VHS. Full page image, above the newspaper fold, “Relics of George Washington,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 17 February 1907. This article explores the possibility that the United States government could purchase the Washington relics from MCL, as a response to her “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity” proposal in 1906.
The article had an optimist purpose: to influence the United States Congress to purchase Lee’s collection. It described her collection of Washington relics and printed several photographs, including a photograph taken of Washington’s tent pitched outdoors at the Smithsonian, taken around the time of Reverend Burk’s purchase. To the public, a government purchase of Lee’s remaining relics would secure the relics’ future appreciation in one convenient repository. However, only the tents were ever for sale during Lee’s lifetime. The hall lantern was held at the Smithsonian until Lee donated it to Mount Vernon, where it could regain its initial home, function and eighteenth-century interpretation.

When it was re-installed in 1915, the hall lantern represented a time period at Mount Vernon that pre-dated Washington’s residence. In this, it was unusual among the other furnishings donated by the MVLA vice-regents. As a symbol that beckoned visitors upstairs, the lantern was a welcome addition to the collection. Because it did not require a relic case, the lantern’s appearance was consistent with sightseers’ expectations to experience Washington’s home as he had once experienced it. As an artifact, it helped the MVLA recreate a space that could have been familiar to Washington, and therefore, fulfill an essential aspect of the pilgrimage site’s mission.

Lossing titled his illustration of Mount Vernon’s hall lantern “Ancient Lantern,” but Mary Custis Lee could not ascertain how ancient it actually was. Like Lossing, Lee had only seen the lantern as part of her grandfather’s Arlington House furnishing plan. Lossing wrote about its “strong contrast” to other Washington relics displayed there and praised its important provenance:

286 Lydia Mattice Brandt, “Re-creating Mount Vernon.”

287 Lossing, Mount Vernon, 301.
…the ancient dingy iron lantern which hung in the great passage…first hung up on in the original cottage upon Mount Vernon by Lawrence Washington, continued its services there until the death of the general. It had then cast its dim light upon the entrance door full eighty years. It is still in service, having for more than fifty years lighted the great passage at Arlington House, illuminating pictures by Vandyke and Sir Godfrey Kneller. 288

Lossing assigned the lantern a symbolic meaning for its ability to light paintings by British artists. Vandyke and Kneller were known for their paintings in British collections at Houghton Hall, Tythorpe and other mansion houses in eighteenth-century England. 289 As the MVLA aimed to elevate Mount Vernon as an American version of a castle or country estate, they acquired objects that tied George Washington to his English heritage.

The hall lantern’s prominent display at Mount Vernon is akin to how it once greeted guests of Washington and displayed his ties to European history. Mounted on an adjoining wall, in a labeled glass case, is the principal key to Paris’ Bastille Prison. Since the home’s public opening in the 1850s, the key had been a favorite object for visitors. It was a symbolic gift from the Marquis de Lafayette. Because it never left the hall at Mount Vernon, Lafayette must have seen the key on his reunion tour of the United States in 1824. 290 At that time, the key and the lantern were separated from each other. Lafayette would have seen the lantern at another point on his tour, when he

288 Lossing, Mount Vernon, 302.


visited George Washington Parke Custis at Arlington House. Each a relic, the iron key and the iron hall lantern enhance the other’s interpretive value due to Lee’s efforts.

Today, Mount Vernon interprets both objects through Washington’s ownership; both had been present at the time that Washington died upstairs in 1799.

Lee’s decision to reunite the lantern with its oldest home also reinstated the hall as a celebratory entrance. There, a material culture framework can interpret Washington’s practicality, family duty (he kept his brother’s lantern, a purchase from England that was gifted to him), national patriotism, and value for international alliances. Lee shared these values with her famous ancestor, motivating her offer of selected relics to Mount Vernon, to honor Washington’s living legacy.

Lossing’s narrative about Mount Vernon situated his readers in the house itself, mirroring Custis’ recollections of living with Washington’s relics when they were still viewed as practical household furnishings. As a precedent to Mary Custis Lee’s donation, her mother had restored Washington’s Virginian sideboard to Mount Vernon’s dining room directly after the Civil War. The sideboard was another object used by the Custis-Lee family at Arlington, yet revered as “another relic…one of the most precious mementoes of Mount Vernon.” Citing the sideboard’s value, Mary Custis Lee argued for the lantern’s similar importance to Virginia’s state history. The Vice-Regent for Virginia, Emma R. Ball, had supported Lee’s participation in the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) and Mount Vernon for over a decade. Like Lee, she was a Washington descendant who operated in many

291 Lossing, Mount Vernon.
historic preservation circles. Lee knew that Mount Vernon had a place reserved for the hall lantern, but her conclusion to donate it there was not immediately apparent. As described in previous chapters, Lee’s involvement with the MVLA was overall a fraught relationship. However, the MVLA thanked Mary Custis Lee, who was a familiar face at several annual meetings, for the lantern. She had made earlier donations to Mount Vernon, but the lantern had been the first object identified as interpretively important to Mount Vernon’s mission, even among the Arlington House display at the US National Museum before 1901. The lantern was Lee’s final personal placement to Mount Vernon, although Mount Vernon subsequently acquired objects that had been owned by Lee. Influenced by her archival and curatorial experiences, and her concerns for security and storage, Lee relied on the MVLA to interpret the lantern as a permanent fixture in the home.

Writing her offer to Harrison C. Dodge, Superintendent of the MVLA, Lee cited Lossing to evidence her claim that the lantern had been first ordered by Admiral Edward Vernon, the commanding officer to Washington’s half-brother Lawrence and

292 Ball corresponded with MCL about the Washington relics inheritance. From Ball’s Virginia state reports, MCL is mentioned as loaning objects to Mount Vernon as early as 1906 in the MVLA minutes for May 10, 1906; MCL kept one of Ball’s pamphlets, The Home of Washington, 1912, sold by one of her “homes”, the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, written by Ball in her trunks, MCL Papers, VHS. Ball particularly enlisted Virginians to “meet the gross representation and the rude attack made upon the MVLA of the Union, before two Committees of the Virginia State Legislature in February 1912…carry the Truth through all Virginia.” The pamphlet mentions Washington’s sideboard and bed on display, as earlier Lee gifts to the MVLA.


294 One example is Lee’s brooch, W-2777, which returned to Mount Vernon in 2004.
the person for whom Mount Vernon was named. Dodge did not trust Lee’s history of
the lantern’s associations, but he did not argue with Lossing’s publication.295 On June
7, 1915, he submitted a report to the Regent of the MVLA, Harriet C. Comegys:

Miss Mary Custis Lee (she is very particular in emphasizing the “Custis”) gave
two interesting Washington relics, viz (1) the Hall Lantern which (she
declares) was originally a gift to Major Lawrence Washington from Admiral
Vernon. It hung at Mt Vernon during the remainder of Lawrence Washington’s
life; during Geo. Washington’s occupancy, and descended from Mrs.
Washington to Geo. W. Parke Custis who took it to Arlington, where it hung
until the beginning of the Civil War. It (with other relics) was then removed,
for safety, to Washington, and for many years was displayed at the National
Museum.296

Although the process for retrieving the lantern had been started by the Vice-Regent for
Alabama, who was in charge of furnishing Mount Vernon’s hall in the 1880s, the
thank-you sent to Lee was written on behalf of the entire MVLA.297 In the note, which
Lee archived in her trunks, Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, Louisiana Vice-Regent for
Louisiana, exclaimed, “The Hall looks as though it was rejoicing over the restoration

295 Current curatorial staff members at Mount Vernon question whether the depiction
of the lantern in Lossing’s publication is correct. Amanda C Isaac, Assistant Curator at
Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association to author, January 11-12, 2016.

296 Dodge to Comegys, 7 June 1915, curatorial files for W-15, Washington Library;
Ball, Home of Washington, 1912, MCL Papers, VHS. Miss Harriet Clayton Comegys
of Dover, DE was the present regent, elected in 1909. Her mother had been the first
vice-regent for Delaware, and her father was the late Chief Justice of Delaware, and
one of first members of the Advisory Board for MVLA during the Civil War.

297 Mrs. Ella S. Herbert to President of the United States, 19 May 1883, cited in
“Papers Relating to the Collection of Washington Relics in the National Museum,
Copied from Letter Book 65, page 348,” 8 June 1904, SI Archives, Record Unit 305:
“Gen. Custis Lee has given permission to [Herbert] as Vice Regent of the Mount
Vernon Association of Alabama, to place at the home of Washington the hall
lantern…”; Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle (MVLA) to MCL, 19 May 1915, MCL
Papers, VHS.
of the Lantern to its former place.” The MVLA was honored by the gift, and reassured her that the lantern was a “precious relic confided to the association in trust for the American Nation will be safely guarded and cared for.”298 As the lantern’s new caretakers, the MVLA researched the item’s eighteenth-century provenance, promoted its conservation and made decisions about an appropriate light source. Lee probably approved Mount Vernon’s mission to maintain the lantern’s authentic form and interpret its owners and makers, and practical function within the household.299

The lantern’s current placement in its original stair hall at Mount Vernon can be credited to Mary Custis Lee. She gifted the lantern to the MVLA in 1915; over two decades after a Vice-Regent had first requested it from her brother, George Washington Custis Lee, upon identifying it at the National Museum. The Vice-Regent’s initial inquiry helped to inspire Lee’s participation to develop a curatorial response to the confiscated objects. As a singular object with an ironclad provenance, the lantern’s homecoming in 1915 evidenced Mary Custis Lee’s independent strategy and its reliance on a network of other perspectives. Although Lee had given other items to Mount Vernon years earlier, the eighteenth-century iron lantern’s return was met with greater fanfare because it signified a lengthy collaborative effort. George Washington’s hall lantern from Mount Vernon best illuminates her attention to

298 Pringle and Annie R. King (MVLA) to MCL, 19 May 1915, MCL Papers, VHS.

299 Amanda C. Isaac, catalog entry for lantern, 7/2/2009, curatorial Files W-15, Mount Vernon. The lantern is catalogued as a square japanned lantern, c. 1750-1770 that “corresponds to the description of the lantern in a 1761 invoice. [Its materials] indicate that it is almost certainly the lighting fixture from the purchase…Confiscated by US Government, c. 1861 and kept at the Census Office. Recovered by Miss Mary Custis Lee, c. 1896. Presented to the MVLA, 1915.” Research for this thesis suggests that the date when the lantern was recovered by MCL was 1901, rather than 1896.
authentic interpretation and long-ranging perspective on institutional histories. This later decision, which favors authentic interpretation for generations of Mount Vernon visitors, would be deemed appropriate to modern museum staff and visitors who value authenticity over sentimentality in their museum experience. Therefore, the lantern placement, a seemingly straightforward and appropriate choice in modern museum terms, shows how Lee considered decisions about her material inheritance, balancing the insights of a modern historic preservationist and a nineteenth-century attitude toward historical relics. Appearing today as though it has never left the hall passage, the lantern serves as a point of interpretation about George Washington’s English heritage, but it also illuminates Mary Custis Lee’s strategic promotion of her heritage and its ability to educate others.
Figure 44  “Relics of Washington,” in Richmond Times-Dispatch (Richmond, VA), February 17, 1907. Courtesy, Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

Mary Custis Lee’s illustrious curatorship of the Washington relics between 1901 and 1918, in the last two decades of her life, required her to create a personal archive in her trunks and act upon precedents set by her family. Today, these papers and objects document her influences in a single repository, which connects her active networking among museums and institutions. Most importantly, Lee’s archive is a fundamental starting point for gathering information about how and why American can view George Washington’s belongings, and their interpretations in museums today. Reflecting upon and adding her own resources to over three hundred years of private family documentation, Lee simultaneously managed, promoted, exhibited and interpreted her inheritance in public collections.

The Washington relics’ return to the Lee family in May, 1901 sparked Lee’s interest in telling her family legacy through object lessons.300 This moment was a turning point that renewed her archival impulse and repurposed what she had learned from a public life of continuous sightseeing, researching, writing and attending commemorative events. Enlisting project-by-project assistance from her widespread network, she managed her Washington and Lee inheritance over a span of seventeen years. Because of these endeavors, Lee crafted her own national identity, expressed

300 Sarah Anne Carter, Object Lessons in American Culture (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2010).
her ancestral ties to modern culture and ensured these objects’ access to an appreciative public.

Mary Custis Lee considered the historical impact of these objects and their lives outside of the Washington-Custis-Lee family. Lee committed to solving logistical, historical and sentimental complexities surrounding her Washington-Custis-Lee inheritance. She interrogated the history of the Washington relics and their displacement from Arlington. Lee drew upon historical text and her memories about her family’s personal attachment to the objects, which helped future caretakers interpret their value. She imagined the objects’ placement in public collections, as a patriotic contribution to the nation, an imagined sense of the past that relied upon both Washington and Lee. For Mary Custis Lee and her museum audience, the definition of “nation” was fraught. Nonetheless, because these individual relics also embodied and defined patriotism, these objects continue to resonate with curious visitors.

Lee’s varying tactics with different meaningful and valuable objects: trunks, tents, china, buttons, and the lantern and other identifiable relics, illuminate her motivations to strengthen the Washington, Custis and Lee family narratives and offer immediate benefit to specific charities and social organizations. Her archives in the trunks show her diligence as a family archivist, with a critical attention to preserving, researching, cataloguing and correcting her inheritance’s many associated and potential values to multiple groups. Her sale of the tent demonstrates how her curatorial strategy and philanthropic impulses reconnected the Custis, Washington and Lee names in both private and public memory for an early twentieth-century audience, which benefited others on a national and international scale. Her dispersal of select Cincinnati china pieces and her legacy of other portions of the set illustrate the priority
she placed on developing public audiences and securing caretakers for the Washington relics, to allow individual items to speak to both the Washington and Lee legacies through their displays. Finally, her donation of the hall lantern to Mount Vernon shows her attention to visitors’ experience and authentic interpretation.

Curiosity about the Washington relics continues in today’s museums. Visitors can ask questions about where they came from, who used them, who donated them, and why. This potential for interpretation, especially as each individual object connects to other members of the group placed in other institutions, can be credited to Lee’s impactful role as the collection’s curator. Her insight about these objects as relics that require public appreciation in secure repositories adds an important dimension to these artifacts. Mary Custis Lee’s sense of strategy for the placement of the Washington relics still impacts how a widespread public imagines Washington, and his national significance.

Now, Lee’s legacy connects to broader national narratives and compels visitors to act as she did, to see more than one place and experience many methods of displaying and interpreting Washington’s relics. Lee did not take the relics’ significance for granted. Americans today think of George Washington as having a lasting significance into the future. His step-great-great-granddaughter, however, did not have this assumption and chose to keep her version of the story alive, with the Washington relics’ display in museums as evidence. The previously untold story of Lee’s successful career as a private curator with publicly-minded ambitions deepens our understanding and fosters new interpretations about Washington and Lee’s artifacts and their significance to American history.
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“Inmates of Home are Entertained by Miss Lee.” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 20, 1907.


“Mary Custis Lee Will Admitted to Probate. Document Distributes Bequests Aggregating Total of $137,000 Among Many Industries. REMEMBERS RICHMOND HOME. United Daughters of Confederacy Are Bequeathed $3,000. While $2,000 Is Given to the Virginia Historical Society.” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 1918.


“Miss Mary Custis Lee Was Guest of Honor.” Richmond Times-Dispatch, February 10, 1903.


“The Washington Relics,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), February 9, 1870. America’s Historical Newspapers Database.


III. Secondary Sources


“Mary Custis Lee” at Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial (NPS) online: http://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/mary-custis-lee.htm


Appendix A

“SACRED RELICS TO AID CHARITY” (1906)


SACRED RELICS TO AID CHARITY
General R. E. Lee’s Daughter Will Sell Two Tents
Used by Washington to Aid Confederate Home.
WANTS TO RAISE $10,000.

To help swell the endowment of the Confederate Women’s Home, at Richmond, Va.—the charity that is dearest to her heart—Miss Mary Lee, the only surviving daughter of General Robert E. Lee, purposes selling two of the three camp tents used by George Washington in the War of the Revolution. They are among the most precious of the Washington relics which were saved from the home of General Lee, at Arlington, when it was settled by troops of the Northern armies following the expulsion of the Confederate leader’s family in 1861.

The two tents, with canvas and poles well preserved, are at present packed away in leather cases in the National Museum at Washington. Miss Lee thinks that Independence Hall in Philadelphia is the proper place for them, and efforts may be made by patriotic citizens of this city to purchase one or both by popular subscription.

Although Miss Lee’s idea of disposing of the tents for the benefit of the charity which she helped to found was communicated to some of her friends in Philadelphia three years ago, nothing was done in regard to the subject at that time owing to her departure soon afterward upon a trip abroad. She returned about two months ago after a tour of Europe and a prolonged stay in Egypt, and is now sojourning at Atlantic City, where she is one of the most interesting figures on the Boardwalk and beach.

It was upon her return from abroad that Miss Lee recovered the Custis family Bible from George W. Kendrick, Jr., of this city, in whose possession it had been for thirty years, unknown to the Lees, who had searched for it ever since it was stolen from Arlington by a Union soldier. About this precious heirloom, Washington’s tents and other relics which have descended to her and her brothers through the Custis family she talked entertainingly when seen at her hotel.

Notwithstanding that she is approaching her sixtieth year, Miss Lee looks to be many years younger. Her step is as sprightly as a girl’s and her face wears the accumulated tan of her long travels. This is her first visit to Atlantic City. She has been there three weeks and during that
time has daily taken a surf bath and has explored the mysteries of the shops and the piers from one end of the boardwalk to the other.

Following a custom she often pursues on her outings, Miss Lee is at the seaside unattended, her only friends being those acquaintances she has made at the hotel. A chosen few of these she has delighted by showing them a few small relics of General Washington, which she always carries with her in her trunk, and a sort of “memory book,” in which are the autographs of hundreds of prominent persons she has met abroad.

Her relationship to General Lee has been a passport to almost every court in Europe and the book contains the names of many crowned heads. Such renowned military figures as Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, and Lord Roberts, besides scores of statesmen and literary men have written short passages on its pages in praise of the military genius and lofty character of her father.

HAS WASHINGTON’S BUTTONS.

Among the relics which Miss Lee especially prizes are several large moss-agate buttons—each nearly an inch in diameter—with silver shanks, which she and one of her sisters during a childhood’s prank, clipped from one of Washington’s coats, thus bringing upon them a stern reproof from her mother and her grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis. The buttons were never sewed on the coat again, and were the only part of the garment saved after Arlington was confiscated by the government. In settings of gold Miss Lee now wears them in the form of breast pins and pendants.

A report has been in circulation that some of the pages containing the birth and marriage records of the Custis family were missing from the Custis Bible when it was sent to Miss Lee by Mr. Kendrick two months ago, following a long correspondence from abroad with the Philadelphians. This is denied by Miss Lee, however.

“The Bible has evidently received the best of care from Mr. Kendrick,” said Miss Lee. “There was one page, containing the records of the marriage of my father and mother and of the births of their children, that was missing from its original place. But I found it on looking through the book.”

Miss Lee said that she had not yet decided which was the best city in which to place the Bible on exhibition. It is now locked up in a safety deposit vault in Washington, she said, and she may loan it to the National Museum, where are Martha Washington’s iron chest and General Washington’s tents.

“It has been in my mind for some time to dispose of the two tents, which I own for the benefit of the Richmond home,” said Miss Lee. “There were three tents used by Washington in his campaigns that came into the possession of my grandfather who was Martha Washington’s only grandson. The largest, which was Washington’s mess tent, was given to the government by my grandfather.

“The ladies of Mount Vernon Society have asked if I would sell them the other two. But I do not think Mount Vernon is the proper place for them. I have been told that certain wealthy
men in the West will pay me any price for them, but I will not dispose of them to any but a resident of one of the thirteen original States. It was my idea to sell one to New York and one to Pennsylvania. I have fixed no definite price, but would like to secure about $10,000 for the two, as that is the sum which I should like to raise for the Confederate Home.

“There is no place at which I should rather see at least one of the tents than in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, beside the Liberty Bell and its other historic relics.”

The subject upon which she was speaking recalled to Miss Lee’s mind her childhood’s days at Arlington.

“We lived there with my grandfather,” she said, “and my brothers and sisters and I – seven of us in all – frequently worried him with our lack of reverence for the Washington relics which were stored in the attic. One day, I remember, we stole up there and decked ourselves out in General and Martha Washington’s clothing. My brothers put on his coats and hats, and my sisters and I attired ourselves in Mrs. Washington’s fine dresses. We then trooped downstairs and paraded before my grandfather, who was greatly angered.

THEN CAME THE WAR.

“It was a fine black velvet coat—one which General Washington wore on great occasions, from which we cut the moss-agnate buttons. There were about twenty of the buttons, and I strung them on a string. I shall never forget my mother’s horrified expression as I appeared before her with the improvised necklace about my neck. She took them away from me and placed them in a drawer, intending to sew them on the coat again. This was only a little time before the war, and during the troublesome days which followed the buttons were forgotten.

“When we left Arlington they were among the things we took with us. My mother expected the trouble to be over soon, and all of the Washington relics, together with our household furnishings, were left in the house. Although the tents and the old Cincinnati Society china and many other heirlooms were taken to Washington by the soldiers, all of the clothing of General and Mrs. Washington was lost, together with the Custis family Bible. How great my joy was three years ago to hear, while on a visit to Philadelphia, that Mr. Kendrick had the Bible, should readily be imagined.

“My father, of course, was away in the army when we left Arlington, and my older brothers were also absent. We went to the home of my mother’s sister, Mrs. William Henry Fitzhugh, at Ravensworth, in Fairfax county. That is at present the home of one of my two living brothers, General Custis Lee. As the oldest son of my mother, he is the rightful possessor of the Washington relics, but he has made them all over to me.

“For many years after the war, we tried to regain possession of the relics which were in the government’s possession. Not until I appealed to President McKinley through Senator Daniels of Virginia, however, were they restored to us. Many of them are now at Mount Vernon, while the others I have permitted to remain in the National Museum.”
In the summer of 1908, being in “Homburg,” Germany, I took advantage of the presence there of my two lawyer cousins, father and son, Bernard Carter and Bernard M. Carter, to make my will, which they drew up, wrote, signed, and sealed. But many changes have taken place since then, viz. the death of my two remaining brothers, of two of the personal friends whom I had named as my Executors, and of several relatives to whom I had left legacies. Therefore, I am writing out another one myself, availing myself somewhat of the legal forms used by the aforesaid cousins, both of “Baltimore” and one of whom is also since dead. And so I will commence as they did.

I, Mary Custis Lee, now of the District of Columbia do publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament, hereby revoking any former Will and Testament by me made: though more than once previously I have drawn up memoranda of my wishes, which circumstances having changed, I hereby revoke, should any be found undestroyed.

1st, I give to the R.E. Lee “Memorial Church” in Lexington, State of Virginia, built in memory of my father, General R.E. Lee, the sum of ten thousand dollars ($10,000) for the improvement and preservation of the edifice first; and included in the “improvement,” if it is decided to add a chancel, as I understand was in the original plan; I am willing that half of that sum, if found necessary, $5,000. should be devoted to that object. Other-wise, I am so opposed to any other alterations in the building that in case plans of that kind should be hereafter adopted. I will that the aforesaid $5,000. should be turned over to the College, “Washington and Lee University”, to keep in order the Chapel where my father is buried and the preservation of his tomb and the tombs of the “Family” buried there. The question of salaries is not considered in this Testament, as a congregation that needs and wishes a Pastor must themselves remunerate him.

2nd, I bequeath ten thousand dollars ($10,000,) to Old “Christ Church” in Alexandria, Virginia, for its preservation, improvement and current expenses of the Church; but with the same reservation as to the clergyman’s salary, which should be raised by the
Congregated themselves. It was the church of my parents, and grandparents and of my own childhood, and is associated with many of my happiest days.

3rd, I bequeath five thousand dollars ($5,000.) to the “Needy Confederate Women’s Home” in Richmond, Virginia, of which I am the President, to go into the little “Endowment Fund” we are endeavoring to raise to insure an annual income. Should this Institution ever cease to exist in its present form, I would recommend that it be turned into an asylum for poor or orphan children.

4th, I also bequeath the sum of five thousand dollars ($5,000.) to the preservation of the Monument of my father, General R.E. Lee, in Richmond, Virginia, to keep it in repair and the grounds around it in order and neatness. Colonel Cutshaw, now dead, was formerly the official that had it in charge, and I do not know who has succeeded him; but whoever he is, I know he will be a Virginian to whom it will be a labor of love to care for this monument and who may be trusted to expend the money carefully and judiciously. Personally, I have always wished the removal of the Green Patine, or whatever is its technical name, and the Bronze re-stored to its pristine color, as is the case of most of the monuments in Europe much older than this one. In the beginning it might easily have been done and at a moderate cost, but now I am not sure. I must leave the decision to others, but I consider it at present a decided disfigurement to an otherwise beautiful monument.

5th, I bequeath to my first cousin Mrs. Mildred Lee Francis, at present living in “Norfolk”, in the State of Virginia, five thousand dollars ($5,000.) and at her death to pass to her only child, Mildred; should she survive her mother; she being now married; to her child or children after her; and failing in heir to dispose of by will as she thinks fit.

6th, To my godchild, Mary Custis Lee, the youngest daughter of my first cousin, Dan M. Lee, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, the sum of five thousand dollars ($5,000.); and to her elder sister Edmo, and youngest brother, Harry Fitzhugh Lee, one thousand dollars ($1,000.) each; and should any of the, die unfortunately before receiving their legacies, let their share be divided between either or both of the survivors.

7th, I bequeath the sum of two thousand dollars ($2,000.) to each of my girl cousins herein enumerated, all daughter of first cousins to whom I have been always much attached, and who, as well as their children after them, have ever been to me attentive and affectionate relatives: viz., 1st Nannie M. Lee, daughter of John M. Lee, now my oldest living first cousin, and residing near “Acotink”, Stafford County, Virginia. 2nd, Anne Lee, only daughter of my deceased first cousin, Henry Lee, living at present with her mother in Richmond, Virginia. 3rd, The two daughters of my first cousin, Katherine Lee, Mrs. Guerrant, also living in Virginia, as in fact I believe they all are. 4th, To the two daughters of my youngest first cousin, Robert Lee, of Powhatan County, Virginia, on the James River. This amounts to $12,000 in all, which I should wish my “Executors” to pay out to them at once, or just as soon as the law permits, they being at this present unmarried women, and of limited means.
I also direct that my charitable bequests come next in order, which include my legacies to the two Churches. Though these aforementioned female cousins, six in number, are still young women death is no respecter of persons, so in the case of any one of the sisters dying ere this will is executed, let her portion devolve on the remaining one alive, unless she has been married and leaves children, to whom the money should of course descend. As it would also be in the case of Nannie and Anne, who having no sisters, would naturally bequeath it to their next of kin as they would designate. To my cousin, John Penn Lee, of “Rocky Mount”, Franklin County, Virginia, I give the sum of five thousand dollars ($5,000.) not only as a testimony of affection, but because he has a large family of children in whom I take great interest, and for whose benefit, and education, I know he will use it judiciously.

To the “Society for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities,” Headquarters, Richmond, three thousand dollars ($3,000.) I being a life member; the same sum, three thousand dollars ($3,000.) to the “Virginia Room,” of which I am President in the Confederate Museum, Richmond. I also bequeath three thousand dollars ($3,000.) to the “United Daughters of the Confederacy”, U.D.C. the Virginia Division; and if I might suggest, not in putting up tablets, etc., but in the good charitable work, really their principal and highest duty, of which there is always much need in our State of Virginia; many needy old Confederate Soldiers, etc., etc.

And I hereby give and bequeath the sum of two thousand dollars ($2,000.) to that very worth object the “Virginia Historical Society”, now located on Franklin Street, Richmond, which I know is in need of funds and which has not room to house its many objects of interest. To Washington and Lee University, Lexington, [5] Virginia, the sum of ten thousand dollars ($10,000.) to assist in building what I know has been in contemplation, a Fireproof Room in which I should especially wish deposited my share of the Family Pictures from “Mount Vernon” and “Arlington.” The division of them was made some years ago without consulting me at all, my due I think, as I was the last surviving child of my parents, and having been brought up at “Arlington”, was the one living person who knew much about them. Consequently, many mistakes were made regarding both the subjects and the artists which I shall endeavor to have corrected, most of them being still in the College Library at “Lexington.” I hereby bequeath those belonging to me, as a personal gift to said “College”, of which my father and eldest brother were the consecutive presidents and who both lie buried there. I sincerely hope that as soon as practicable the pictures may be securely hung in this fireproof building, as most of them are a part of the history of our Country, and especially of Virginia. I have already donated them to the College, and given them a list of them.

To each of my nephews, Robert E. Lee, of “Ravensworth”, Fairfax County, Virginia, and Dr. George Bolling Lee, a practicing physician in the City of “New York”, the sum of twenty thousand dollars ($20,000.) each, in fee simple, to dispose of as they think fit; only if they remain unmarried and have no lineal descendants, should suggest that, unless bestowed in charities, it went back to the Lee Blood.

To my nieces, Anne Carter Lee, and Mary Custis Lee, also the sum of twenty thousand dollars ($20,000.) each; and in case of one dying unmarried before the other, that her share; viz. $20,000. shall revert to the surviving sister. As they are both [6] young girls, one still at school, I wish my “Executors” to give them the use of the income only, as they
respectively attain the age of twenty-one (21) and turn over the principal to them when reach twenty-five (25); but for life, as I should wish it to be handed down to their children; the principal I mean, intact. Should the remain unmarried and leave none, not likely, they may make what disposition of it they prefer, though I should suggest their next of Lee kin, or in charity.

I will now name my executors, hoping that they will all be able and willing to act, and stipulating that none of them required to give bonds or security as such Executors. I first appoint my eldest nephew, Robert E. Lee, of “Ravensworth,” Fairfax County, Virginia, and do not name his brother, Dr. G. Bolling Lee, partly because he lives in “New York,” and also because he has always declined to qualify. I, however, have personally requested him, as a medical man, to see to it that my remains are mated, having had a life long horror of being boxed up in a coffin. Let them be kept in the open for three (3) days and then consigned to the flames. The ashes can afterwards be collected and put in a marble or alabaster urn inscribed with my full name, and date of decease, and added, “The last surviving child of General Robert E. Lee.” I attach much importance to this my last solemn request and feel sure that it will be carried out by the letter to all my Executors, in whose hands I confidently leave it. As my second Executor, I name my particular friend and banker, G. Taylor Burke, of the firm of Burke & Herbert, Alexandria, Virginia, who has long had charge of my money affairs and knows all about them.

I wish here to add a bequest of five thousand dollars ($5,000.) to the Hospital in Alexandria, Virginia, corner of Washington and Duke Streets, in which I am interested.

In case of death, or other accidents, which would prevent either of the above named two from serving. I would suggest another of the same firm, Arthur Herbert, Jr., whom I have known from boyhood. I had at first selected Mr. Harry Burke, the oldest now in the bank, but learning that he is in bad health think it advisable to substitute Arthur Herbert in his place. My fourth (4th) and last Executor, I name Greenlee Letcher, of Lexington, Virginia, youngest son of Ex-Governor Letcher, deceased. As he is a practicing attorney himself and lives in Lexington he will be specially fitted to attend to the legacies I have bequeathed in that town; viz., to the “Memorial Church”; the “University”; disposal of the “Pictures”; etc., as well as the proper disposition of my remains. Of course any three executors would be sufficient; but I named a fourth in case of accidents, as life is so uncertain. Since writing this, Mr. Letcher has joined the Army and may be sent abroad at any time. Therefore, if necessary let another be appointed in his place by the remaining executors. Before signing I am authorized by a legal friend to add the following: “I hereby authorize my said executors to sell such securities as they deem best for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this will or for the protection of said estate; re-investing the proceeds in case of sale for the protection in such securities as they deem safe. And I do not require purchasers from my said executors to see to the application of the purchase money.

My own funeral expenses will, of course, be deducted from the estate and my executors, all who act, must naturally receive their percentage; and I should also wish to present them each, including Arthur Herbert, Jr., with five hundred dollars ($500.) as a small token of my esteem, friendship, and gratitude for their unfailing kindness to me, and assistance in various ways whenever asked for.
I had better say here that having already bestowed all of my pictures to “Washington and Lee University” I have left the list with them, so it is unnecessary to repeat it here.

The foregoing Will has been written at different times, recopied, etc., and without advice or assistance, and is therefore probably not always in technical legal language. But I think I have made my meaning clear, and as both my legatees and executors, are all near relatives or old personal friends, I anticipate no difficulty in its being carried out according to my wishes.

In testimony whereof I hereunto set my hand and seal this 9th day of February 1918, Nineteen Hundred and Eighteen. Mary Custis Lee (SEAL).

Signed, sealed, published and declared as, and for her last Will and testament, by Mary Custis Lee, on this the 9th day of February 1918 (Nineteen Hundred and Eighteen) at her request and in her presence and in the presence of each other, we have hereunto signed our names as witnesses.

Leigh Robinson

J. Upshur Moorhead.
Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, Holding Probate Court.
Appraisal for Personal Estate of Mary Custis Lee.

June 30, 1919

AT BURKE AND HERBERT BANKERS, ALEX, VA.

 […Mortgages, bonds, stocks.]

1 Brilliant pendant, triangle
2 Small gold rings, three turquoise rings, insignia, brilliant bar-pin
Miniature Sarcophagus
Neck chain set with various synthetic stones
“ “ “ tiger’s claw pendant
1 ring, as is
1 “ set with synthetic stone
1 “ turquoise and pearl setting
1 “ moonstone and synthetic emerald setting
1 “ diamond and garnet
1 “ pearl and turquoise
1 “ monogrammed
1 “ moonstone
1 Ring, pearl and brilliant setting
1 Two-stone synthetic ring
1 Three “ ring
1 Unmounted topaz
Gold watch, chain and trinkets *** Washington & Lee
Brilliant brooch
Cross and brilliant bar-pin
Plated lorgnette
Seed pearl bracelet
Contents of jar consisting of pencils, etc.
Silver puff box, repousse top
Traveler’s case, fully fitted
Antique cameo
3 miniatures of General Robert E. Lee, by Brinak, not appraisable
Baroque gold pendant, and two cuff buttons, set with the buttons taken from the black
velvet coat of General George Washington, authenticated
3 Buttons taken from the black velvet coat of General George Washington, unset
Gold necklace, baroque cross pendant
2 Pair of buckles Mount Vernon
Gold locket containing picture and a lock of hair of General Lee, not appraisable
Pearl and brilliant pendant
2 Gold buckles, and bracelets
2 Collection of autographs, stamps, water colors, and pen and ink sketches 26/1
Gold chain bracelet
“ shell “, Florentine design
Silver bar
Pair of telescopic opera glasses
4 Hat pins
Lot of miscellaneous jewelry
Mahogany drop-leaf table
Antique gilt framed mirror
Trunk #1 and contents
Antique mahogany knife racks (2)
“ “ medicine chest
Trunk #2 and contents consisting of foreign jewelty (sic) and ornaments
Trunk #3 and contents
“ #4 “ “
“ #5 “ “
“ #6 “ “
“ #7 “ “
“ #8 “ “ consisting of rare laces and embroideries 28/45
“ #1A and contents
“ #2A “ “
“ #3A “ “
“ #4A “ “ consisting of laces, etc.
“ #5A “ “ exclusive of wearing apparel
“ #6A
63 Pieces of china from the Order of the Cincinnati presented to George Washington by the Officers of the Revolutionary Army. This china now in the Confederate Museum at Richmond, Va. Estimated value furnished by Mr. Burke. (also two other pieces of china) 1,000.00
2 Footed trays
2 Silver goblets
1 “ mug
1 “ tea pot
2 “ “ caddies, urn-shaped with covers
5 “ dessert spoons
Silver fish knife
“ tray
“ punch ladle
12 “ teaspoons
7 Odd pieces of silver
Silver teaspoon
Bible owned and used by Martha Washington and containing Custis family records. In fair state of preservation but not appraisable 32/1
AT THE NAT’L SAV. & TR. Co. WASH. D.C.
2 Salt cellars and spoon, used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon and inherited from him by George Washington Custis Lee
Soup ladle used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, and inherited, etc.
Silver hand waiter, round, footed, used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.
Silver hand waiter, round, large, used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.
Deep silver dish
Small round waiter used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
Silver goblet used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
Castor with five crystal bottles used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
Silver wine cooler used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
2 Candlesticks, large, Ravensworth
2 “ small, “
Pair of silver salt cellars and spoon, “Lee”
5 Silver teaspoons, T.W. on back
Small silver teaspoon used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
7 Tablespoons, used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
5 Dessert spoons used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.
Washington tablespoon, broken
6 Antique serving spoons, “F. A. C.”
Antique silver teapot, handle missing
Silver coffee pot, Ravensworth
Small silver bonbon basket, no mark
2 Tankards, Ravensworth
Ivory handle fish lifter
10 Silver tablespoons, Ravensworth
Extra large antique silver spoon, Ravensworth
Small silver sugar sifter, “C. M. F.”
Antique silver coffee urn, approximately 20 inches high, Ravensworth
6 Silver dinner forks, “Lee”
Small silver urn, antique, Ravensworth
Broken cruets, antique
Antique pitcher, urn shaped, hinge top, Ravensworth
2 Broken silver ladles, Ravensworth
Silver sugar tongs, broken, Ravensworth
Silver loving cup, “Lee”
4 Silver teaspoons, used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon, etc.,
12 Silver dessert spoons, “Lee”
12 Extra heavy large size dinner forks
Silver and glass salt cellars (2) “Lee”
3 Antique silver wine ladies
Napkin ring, “Robert E. Lee”
Small silver waiter, “N. V. L”
Silver tray, oval, “Robert E. and Mary E. Lee” (sic)
6 Silver fruit knives, “Lee”
Silver butter knife
“ fruit basket
AT THE UNION TRUST CO.
Contents of barrel #1
" " " #2
" " " #3

AT THE SHOREHAM HOTEL
Hat box containing miscellaneous jewelry
Gold chain with locket
Seed pearl spray

AT THE SEC. STORAGE CO.
Contents of trunk, and trunk
Trunk and contents
" " "
" " " *

AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE
Iron treasure chest
2 Tents, poles, tent cover, pegs, and bag for carrying.
2 Three-light crystal candelabra, chains and pendants used by George Washington at Mt. Vernon 33/1

RECAPITULATION
Household Effects
Jewelry “silver, autographs, etc.” 15,349.50
Stocks 2, 210.00
Bonds 138,939.92
Books
Wearing Apparel
Horses, Carriages, etc.,
Total $156, 589.42 June 30, 1919
Appendix C

THE WASHINGTON RELICS (1891, 1897, 1901, 1906)

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, accession no. 13152.
Selected documents from microfilm, transcribed by author.

I. November 21, 1891
A. Howard Clark, Curator of Historical Collections, US National Museum
Memorandum, “These are what Miss Lee claims”

*Household Goods*
Two cotton embroidered bed curtains, the handiwork of Martha Washington.
One heavy white woollen blanket, homespun and woven.
One oval top mahogany table with two drop leaves, one drawer and drop loop handles, one of the handles being gone. The table is inlaid at the sides and down the legs.
One carved walnut chair with cover worn off.
One mahogany washstand with folding cover for the top, one drawer with two brass loop handles, and the same kind of handles at the side for carrying. In the rack is a looking glass which is made to slide vertically in a recess, so that when not in use it may be put out of sight.
Two veneered and inlaid knife cases adapted to hold a dozen knives…
Nine pieces of curtain looping representing foliage made on wire of cotton and plastic material and gold finished.
One dinner set presented by the Society of the Cincinnati, which consists now of thirty-three dinner plates, eight soup plates, and one small plate, six side dishes, two sauce dishes and covers and a spare cover, four gravy boats, one cream pitcher, four tureens, two having no cover, three fish strainers, three salad bowls, one fish dish, one meat dish, six tops for custard cups, two cups, one saucer, and one pickle dish.
Three blue glass finger bowls
One brown earthenware teapot.
The remains of the set of china presented by General Lafayette to Mrs. Martha Washington. Consisting of a sugar bowl and cover, one broken saucer, two tops probably for sauce dishes, and one plate. The articles have the names of the several states of the union inscribed in the links of a chain which extends around each article, and the Washington monogram is also suitably placed on each piece.
One oval gilt frame cheval glass.
One large square iron frame hall lantern.
Two cast-iron andirons.
One oak dining kitchen? Attic room chair
One small studded iron treasure chest.
One large and one small vase of porcelain, ornamented in blue and gold, with
landscapes and animal scenes presented in the front.
One large punch bowl.

_Camp Equipage […]_

II. **January 9, 1897**
Memorandum to Mr. [Frederick William] True:

It appears that all of the relics of George Washington which have come into the
possession of the Museum (with the exception of a few scattering objects received
since 1883 from Messrs. Lamborn, Fox, and others), are accessioned under one
number, namely, Accession 13152. This accession, from a historic or administrative
standpoint, may be divided into three sections, although it is to be remembered that all
(with the exception of the scattering objects above mentioned) were received from the
Patent Office in 1883.

**Section I.** The collection of Washington relics (Exhibit A) which had been in the
Patent Office for many years before their transfer to the National Museum, but which
does not include the so-called Lewis collection (See Section 3), the latter having been
bought by the U.S. Government in 1878 from the Lewis family for the sum of
$12,000. In Exhibit A are also included several objects claimed by Miss Lee as
belonging to the Arlington estate and referred to at greater length under Section II.

**Section II.** In this part of the collection are several objects said to be relics of George
Washington and, after their transfer to the Museum, claimed by Miss Lee as the
property of the Lee family. Their ownership was referred by Prof. Baird to the
President of the United States in 1887, and by the latter to the Attorney General, who
in replying, held that for the present their possession seemed to be established in the
Government of the United States and there they had better remain, at any rate, until
Congress should direct to the contrary. It should be state that among these objects in
dispute are several articles of furniture which appeared to have simply belonged to the
Arlington estate and to have no special historical significance.

**Section III.** The objects in the so-called Lewis collection are included in Exhibit B.,
and were purchased as already stated, from the Lewis family by the Government of
the United States in 1878 for $12,000. These objects were, however, transferred to the
Museum in 1883 along with the collection of Washington relics shown in Exhibit A.

(Exhibit C. is a list of the objects claimed by Miss Lee and constituting a portion of
Exhibit A.) Respectfully yours, R.I. Geare [Division of Correspondence and Reports]
III.  May 14, 1901

Disposed of as follows.
Sent to Miss M.C. Lee, to following address, as per her order.
One table. 92648
Two knife cases. 92530-92531 1919
One mirror. 92528
Two chairs. 92636, 92637
“one spice case” 92689

Deposited in the National Museum by Miss M.C. Lee, May 13, 1901.
Two candelabra 92432-92433.
One hall lantern 92541
One treasure chest 92635

Taken away by Miss Lee in person, this same date.
“Cincinnati” One plate, no. 92502  One cup, no. 92448
P.E.B.

IV.  June 13, 1906
Assistant Secretary to Miss Mary Custis Lee, 1729 P. Street, NW., Washington, D.C.
Madam: I am authorized by the Secretary to thank you for your kindness in leaving at
the National Museum as a loan the Washington Relics from the Arlington Mansion
enumerated in the following list:
11 sections of tent poles;
2 marquee tents;
1 woolen tent cover;
2 canvas tent pouches;
1 leather tent pouch;
37 tent pins, 3 slides and a guy rope;
2 glass candelabra
1 hall lantern
1 iron treasure chest.

Very respectfully yours, Assistant Secretary
Appendix D

MARY CUSTIS LEE (1835-1918): BIOGRAPHICAL TIMELINE

1835
Born July 12 at Arlington House, home of George Washington Parke Custis and Mary Ann Fitzhugh Custis (grandparents), second child and eldest daughter to Robert E. Lee (REL) and Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee (MARCL).

1835-1865
Grows up at Arlington and attends boarding school near West Point, New York. REL, MARCL and their seven children live at West Point, at Arlington House and in Baltimore. They often visit White Sulphur Springs, Virginia and relatives in Virginia and Baltimore.

1853
Grandmother, Mary Anna Fitzhugh Custis, dies and is buried at Arlington in April. Meets historian Benson J. Lossing, who visits Grandfather Custis at Arlington House. Attends Crystal Palace Exhibition with family in New York. Attends Christ Church, Alexandria with father and sister, Annie on July 17.

1857
Grandfather Custis dies and is buried at Arlington in October. MARCL inherits Arlington and Washington’s silver, furnishings and other relics. The four sisters, Mary, Annie, Agnes and Mildred, each inherit $10,000 sale of Smith Island but due to grandfather’s debts, are unable to inherit money from his farms. Brother, Robert E. Lee Jr., inherits Romancoke. Brother, Rooney, inherits White House estate.

1861

1865
Visits or stays with family in Richmond, Staunton, Lexington, Baltimore, and Eastern Shore, Maryland. Returns to Arlington and Washington, D.C. for a few days to report an inventory of the Washington relics and Lee furnishings to her mother in December 1865.
1870
Visits St. Louis, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Detroit.
Father, REL, as president of Washington College, dies in Lexington in October. Returns to
Lexington, where brother George Washington Custis Lee becomes president at Washington
and Lee University. Lives with sister, Mildred Lee in Lexington.

1872
Sails for Europe in June. Visits England, Scotland, France, Belgium and Italy.

1873
Mother, MARCL, dies in Lexington. Sister, Agnes, dies in October. Lee visits Paris, Rome,

1878
Visits San Gabriel, Australia, Gibraltar, Cairo, Athens, Malta, Naples, Marseilles. Sets fire to
a mosquito net in her hotel in Naples, which makes international news.

1879
Visits Mediterranean Sea, Seville, Tours.

1883
Visits India, Ceylon, Singapore, Java, Hongkong, Japan.

1884
Attends unveiling of REL statue in New Orleans on February 22, attends Mardi Gras in
March. Mildred Lee is elected as Queen Comus, and Lee is presented in her “court.”

1890
Visits Paris, Cairo in January. Attends unveiling of REL statue in Richmond on May 29.
Attends National Mary Washington Memorial Association and receives ribbon.

1892
Attends Chicago World’s Fair.

1899
Elected by Mrs. Elizabeth “Betsie” Lyne Hoskins Montague to become the honorary president
of the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond, Virginia.
1901
Visits Nice, France. Travel destinations between 1870 and 1901 include France, Germany, Austria, Athens, Exeter, Vienna, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Brittany, Russia, Madeira, Cairo, Havre. Attends Annual Southerners’ Ball, held by Nannie Randolph Heth in Washington, D.C. and receives an ovation at the hall of the National Rifles Army.
Joins the DAR, attends the MVLA council on May 10.
President McKinley returns the Washington Relics to the Lee Family on May 13-14.
Visits the Smithsonian US National Museum, with brother, Custis and cousin, Fitzhugh to retrieve the relics. Inscribes mother’s Book of Common Prayer with her own name on July 4.

1902
Write a letter about Robert E. Lee’s horse, Traveler, for the New Orleans Picayune on April 7.
Visits New Orleans, attends reception for and with Varina Howell Davis, widow of Jefferson Davis. Arrested in Alexandria, Virginia on June 13 for breaking the Jim Crow law on a streetcar, which makes national news.

1903
Lee is guest of honor at UDC meeting in Philadelphia, stays with Mrs. Chew on Walnut Street, Philadelphia.

1905
Travels to Paris. Sister, Mildred Lee dies in New Orleans at the home of Margaret Junkin Preston on March 29. Returns to Lexington to stay with family.

1906

1907
Corresponds with Burk, Chew, Heth, Smithsonian staff and Montague about Washington’s military tents. Attends many events honoring the 100th anniversary of Robert E. Lee’s birth. Publishes an article about REL’s horse, Traveller, in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on March 10. Visits the Jamestown Exposition on March 13 with the Governor of Virginia, British ambassador Joseph Bryan and others. Attends unveiling of Davis and Stuart statues on Monument Avenue, Richmond. Visits New York, sails to England, Paris.
1909
Visits Constantinople and is reported in the papers as “Safe in the Beleagured City,” Paris, Athens, Egypt, Orient Express, Switzerland. Reverend Burk delivers Washington’s marquee tent to Valley Forge on August 19.

1912
Spends the winter at the Jefferson Hotel, Richmond, Virginia, visits Rob, Jr., at West Point for Christmas. “Lays the Corner-stone” for the United Daughters of the Confederacy Monument at Arlington National Cemetery as an honored guest in November.

1913

1914

1915

1916

1917
Visits Savannah, Richmond, Washington D.C. for Confederate Veterans Reunion, June 4-17. Photographed for the New York Times, 1917. Loans collection of Society of the Cincinnati China porcelain to the APVA in July. Moves to Lexington in October and arranges to donate the Custis family portraits to Washington and Lee in December. Mends one Society of the Cincinnati china plate and gifts it to a cousin at Tudor Place.

1918
Appendix E

SELECTED FAMILY GENEALOGY AND HOMES

1 Martha Dandridge (1731-1802) | MOUNT VERNON ( - 1802)
1750 married Daniel Parke Custis (d. 1757)
1759 married George Washington (d. 1799)
1 (II) John Parke Custis (d. 1781) | MOUNT AIRY
married Eleanor Calvert Custis, later Stuart (d. 1811)
1 (III) Elizabeth “Eliza” Parke Custis Law (1776-1832)
2 (III) Martha Parke Custis Peter (1777-1854) | TUDOR PLACE
1 (IV) Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon (1815-1911)
3 (III) Eleanor “Nelly” Custis Lewis (1779-1852) | MOUNT VERNON, WOODLAWN
4 (III) George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857) | MOUNT VERNON
married Mary Lee Fitzhugh (1788-1853) | RAVENSWORTH
ARLINGTON HOUSE (1802 - )
1 (IV) Mary Anna Randolph Custis (1808-73)
1831 married Robert Edward Lee (1807-73)
STRATFORD HALL ( - 1810)
ARLINGTON HOUSE ( - May 1861)
1 (V) George Washington Custis “Custis” Lee (1832-1913) | RAVENSWORTH (1897-1913)
2 (V) Mary Custis Lee (1835-1918)
3 (V) William Henry Fitzhugh “Rooney” Lee (1837-1891)
marrided Mary Tabb Bolling (d. 1891)
1 (VI) Robert E. Lee III (1869-1922)
2 (VI) George Bolling Lee (1872-1948)
4 (V) Anne Carter “Annie” Lee (1839-1862)
5 (V) Eleanor Agnes “Agnes” Lee (1841-1873)
6 (V) Robert Edward “Rob” Lee, Jr. (1843-1914)
RAVENSWORTH
married Charlotte Taylor Haxall (d. 1873)
marrided Anne Juliet Carter (d. 1915)
1 (VI) Anne Carter Lee Ely (1898-1978)
2 (VI) Mary Custis Lee deButts (1900-94)
7 (V) Mildred Childe Lee (1846-1905)
Appendix F

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Sincerely,

Byron Faidley
Co-Manager
Lee Chapel Museum Store
Lee Chapel and Museum
Collections Assistant
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James G. Leyburn Library

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MOC email
Hi Hannah,

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Making a Museum is part of the Reverend Burk Collection, accession number 2003.00.1387. We have a bunch of photos of Burk already digitized as Jpegs. You can have any of those right away, or we can get you a TIFF sometime before your deadline. (I want to promise tomorrow, but I don’t want to break that promise.)

VF Museum – both Michelle and I remember seeing sketches or architectural plans (or something along those lines) of what Burk dreamed the museum would look like. We can’t promise we’ll be able to find those before next Thursday. I. We do have at least one photo of the tent on display in the museum, which we’ll be happy to send you.

No scans of MCL’s letters yet, but we know exactly where they are and we can get you something ASAP. We’ll try for a TIFF.

Quote whatever letter you want, wherever you want, in whatever format you want. We have no rules on that. J

Did I miss anything?

-M

Michelle Moskal
Assistant Registrar

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M.A. Winterthur Program in American Material Culture

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Publisher/Producer: University of Delaware and Winterthur Museum

Date of publication/release/broadcast: May 2016
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Carol M. Highsmith

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Hello again Hannah –

I’m glad my message was helpful. Yes, Abby Gunn Baker was really the driving force behind establishing and growing our china collection – she was involved with the White House from 1901 until her death in 1923. While first ladies came and went, she was the constant. Her knowledge about the White House collection made her a trusted resource.

In the “Southeast cabinet” image, you will see that the pieces from the Martha Washington “States” service that MCL donated to the White House in 1917 are displayed flanking the Cincinnati plate that she gave in 1915.

I would be happy to receive a copy of AGB’s correspondence in the Smithsonian Archives. There is no rush on this however – please do not pursue it until after you’ve handed in your thesis! I will also look forward to reading your completed thesis to learn more about Mary Custis Lee.

Please let this email serve as permission to reproduce the images titled “c1916-1918 West Wall Abby Gunn Baker Papers image” and “Southeast cabinet 1918+ Abby Gunn Baker Papers” in your MA thesis. The credit line should read “White House Collection”. I am attaching copies of the images that permission is being granted for to this message.

The letter from Abby Gunn Baker to Col. W.W. Harts can be cited as “Abigail Gunn Baker to Colonel William W. Harts, February 16, 1915, National Archives, Office of Public Buildings and Grounds.” The quotes from her manuscript can be cited as “Abigail Gunn Baker, unpublished manuscript Heirs and Heirlooms of the White House, 1920, Abigail Gunn Baker Papers, White House Collection.”

Finally, to your question about tours – I am not exactly sure how much the public got to see the China Room in its earliest days. Tours in the first years of the Wilson administration originated in the East Wing (as they do today) and visitors walked through the Ground Floor Corridor until they reached the stairs that go up to the State Floor. The China Room is located across the hallway from this staircase, so I don’t know if the door was open after the first cabinet was installed in the west wall in late 1916. It is likely that visitors did not enter the room, but only looked in from the doorway. However, if the China Room was open to the public at this time, it would not remain so for long as the White House was closed to tours after the United States entered World War I in April 1917. The cabinets on the east wall were added during this wartime period when the house was closed. There is conflicting evidence on whether or not the house reopened for tours in 1919 and 1920, as newspaper accounts in 1921 describe President Harding opening the house for the first time since the start of World War I.

Please let me know if you need anything else. Best of luck completing your work!

Melissa
Re: Inquiry from Hannah Boettcher

KENNETH GARRETT <kennethgarrett@mac.com>
To: Hannah Boettcher <hcboettcher@gmail.com>  
Mon, Mar 28, 2016 at 5:17 PM

Hannah
If you say Copyright KennethGarrett.com that gets my website in
You can use it in the publications
Best
Ken

On Mar 28, 2016, at 4:48 PM, Hannah Boettcher <hcboettcher@gmail.com> wrote:

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Please let me know how I should properly credit your generosity in my use of these two images. It was wonderful to discover your appreciation for these historical artifacts and documents through your website. Having seen these objects in person at Virginia Historical Society, I’m delighted to include and promote your work as it captures Mary Custis Lee’s collection and its extraordinary qualities.

Thank you for your patience in answering my questions concerning rights and reproductions.

With much appreciation,

Hannah Boettcher

University of Delaware
Winterthur Program in American Material Culture, M.A. 2016
hcboettcher@gmail.com
www.hannahboettcher.com

On Mon, Mar 28, 2016 at 3:38 PM, KENNETH GARRETT <kennethgarrett@mac.com> wrote:

Hannah
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Good luck
Ken

On Mar 28, 2016, at 3:08 PM, PhotoShelter <do-not-reply@photoshelter.com> wrote:

Kenneth Garrett Photography
April 19, 2016

Hannah Boettcher
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