

How to Plan a Wedding

The Anniversary of the Custis-Lee Marriage

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Arlington House
The Robert E. Lee Memorial



“Do you recollect what a happy day thirty—three years ago today was? How many hopes and pleasures it gave birth to!”

-Lee in a letter to his wife, June 30th, 1864, Petersburg

The Union of Virginia Houses

On Saturday evening, June 30, 1831, Robert Edward Lee and Mary Anna Randolph Custis, Martha Washington’s great-granddaughter, were married in a ceremony here at Arlington House. For the next thirty years, this is the place they

called home. Lee’s U.S. Army duties took him and his family to posts around the country, but they returned to Arlington whenever possible.

A Rainy June Evening

Virginia hilarity was the term Dolly Madison used to describe Virginia parties and on June 30, 1831, Mary and Robert’s wedding would live up to that description. Robert wanted the “*simplest sort of ceremony*” imagining just Mary, himself and a minister, but the Custises had other ideas...

Expecting a house full of guests and parties that would last for days caused Mary and her mother to borrow mattresses, candlesticks and servants. Robert even struggled to find available groomsmen to equal Mary’s half dozen bridesmaids. Robert’s best man was his brother, Smith Lee, flanked by peers from West Point and colleagues from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Mary built her wedding party of cousins and childhood friends from Woodlawn, Tudor Place, and Calvert, Maryland.

The night of the wedding was one of steady rain but guests remembered that the bride’s “*beautiful home was happy and bright*”. The minister, Rev. Reuel Keith was caught in the rain shower while traveling to Arlington. He arrived drenched and had to borrow a suit from Mr. Custis, who was far wider and shorter than the he, much to the amusement of the wedding party.

Mary came down the stairs with her father. Bridesmaid Marietta Turner described her cousin: “*always a modest and affectionate girl was never lovelier and Robert Lee with his bright eyes and high color was the picture of a cavalier*”. A bell of flowers hung from the graceful arches of the parlor where the couple stood. The service was conducted in a “*quiet way*”. Mary was nervous: “*her hand shook as Robert held it*” and Robert describing his feelings as “*bold as a sheep*”.

Custis

Lee



MARRIED,
At Arlington House, by the Rev. Dr. Keith,
Lieut. ROBERT LEE, of the U. States Corps
of Engineers, to Miss MARY A. R. CUSTIS,
only daughter of G. W. P. Custis, Esq.

The Alexandria Gazette

Virginia Hilarity

After the ceremony there was a supper and dancing, a celebration of unlimited food and drink. The party continued for several days. George Washington's punch bowl was filled to the brim each night and the merrymakers drank until the "bottom came into view". Lighthearted flirtation occupied the wedding guests: "the whole party then traveled on to neighboring estates for a continuation of the festivities. Evidently such extended wedding parties were a purely Virginia custom..."

Marietta Turner remembered: "the elegance and simplicity of the bride's parents, presiding over the feast and the happiness of the grinning servants... remain in my memory as a piece of Virginia life pleasant to recall."

"Together the Lees would face challenges they could not possibly have imagined on that happy summer evening and they would have a marriage as original as the two individuals who entered onto it."

-Elizabeth Brown Pryor



Clockwise from top: Lee's wedding ring, a water carafe given to the Lees as a wedding gift, engraved with the monogram "M.R.C." for Mary Randolph Custis, and silver believed to have been used by the Lees at their wedding.