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From the Archives

When Robert E. Lee Was Civilian-ized

Robert E. Lee, having been in military settings for two-thirds of his life, was an unlikely candidate for the honorific “mister.” He accrued 40 years as an Army cadet and officer. Lee graduated from West Point in 1829, second in his class; fought in the Mexican-American War; resigned from the US Army in 1861 after declining an appointment to command the federal army; and led the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, 1862-65, the source of his greatest reputation and fame. He then turned to higher education as president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, from August 1865 until his death in October 1870.

Robert E. Lee, Jr., recalled:

A young friend who was a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute [adjacent to the Washington College campus] called on my sisters one evening, and remarked, “Do you know this is the first civilian’s house I have entered in Lexington.” My father was in the room, in his gray Confederate coat shorn of the buttons, also my two brothers, Custis and Fitzhugh, both of whom had been generals in the Confederate Army; so there was quite a laugh over the term *civilian*.

Source: Thomas Forehand, Jr., ed., *Robert E. Lee’s Lighter Side: The Marble Man’s Sense of Humor* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 2006), 38.