

Light Horse Harry Lee And the Army

by Lieutenant General John F. Wall, USA (Ret.)



The following are excerpts from an address to the Virginia Society at its George Washington's Birthday Dinner February 22, 1989 at the Commonwealth Club in Richmond.

HENRY ("LIGHT HORSE HARRY") LEE was born January 29, 1756. Many tend to extol his military prowess while disparaging his economic abilities. After reading up on the man I am no longer willing to join those who would blacken the reputation of this fine but ambitious man who revered George Washington, who dearly loved his family, had great affection for his former commanders and readily accepted the consequences of his actions. But there were blemishes.

He graduated from Princeton, where he knew Phillip Fithian, James Madison and Aaron Burr. His brother Charles, also a Princetonian, was Attorney General in Washington's second cabinet. Harry planned to study law at Oxford but, uncertain about the direction of events in England, stayed home to manage the family plantation at Leesylvania. He tried unsuccessfully to join the Continental Army in 1775 but did become a captain in Bland's Virginia Cavalry in June 1776, when he was 19. The next year he was able to join the Continental Army as troop captain in the 12th Regiment of Light Dragoons.

From 1777 to 1780 Captain Henry Lee was always near the enemy in classical cavalry operations as the eyes and ears of the American Army in his area. His command formed outposts and served as scouts—in short, he "rode to the sound of the guns."

He quickly came to the attention of Washington for his raids against the British. They decided to rid themselves of this "irritant"

Message from General President Loughran



A WONDERFUL TIME was had by all at the Board of Managers' Meeting in Kansas City on October 13, 14 and 15, 1989. The meeting was well attended and we were blessed with beautiful weather. Bill Buckner, President, and Glen Whitaker, General Vice President for Region 4 and Chairman of the Committee, did a superb job on the arrangements and entertainment and all attendees appreciated the warm hospitality of the Missouri Society. It was a meeting that will long be remembered.

On October 19 at Yorktown, Virginia, I had the honor to address the audience at the 208th anniversary of the Battle of Yorktown. The Virginia Sons of the Revolution were the 1989 hosts under the chairmanship of Frank H. Galleher, Jr., President of the Yorktown Day Association and former President of the Virginia Society. It was a very impressive ceremony with participation by 13 patriotic organizations, including the Society of the Cincinnati, SAR, DAR and CAR. In the parade were units of all our Armed Forces as well as high school bands. There were at least 1,000 visitors at these festivities, which rival the Fourth of July ceremonies at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

The General Society came into existence at a General Congress of the New York, Pennsylvania and District of Columbia Societies in Washington, D.C. in April 1890, at which our Constitution was adopted. This year we will celebrate our centennial, not in the spring, but at the Board of Managers' Meeting on October 19-21, with the District of Columbia Society as host. Headquarters will be at the Capital Hilton at 16th and K Streets N.W. Details will appear in a forthcoming *Drumbeat*, but you may want to mark your calendar now. All members of all State Societies are cordially invited and your General Officers and Managers are looking forward to a large turnout to celebrate this significant event.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph Loughran". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.



Attributed to James Herring, 1794-1867 after Gilbert Stuart. Oil on canvas, c. 1834
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee

by sending a task force of 200 light dragoons against him at Spread Eagle Tavern six miles south of Valley Forge. The enemy group, which included the young and ruthless Captain Banastre Tarleton, traveled a circuitous route to avoid American pickets and attacked at daybreak. Lee quickly secured the tavern doors and posted four dragoons and two officers, Lieutenant Lindsay and Major Jamieson, at the windows. The small band beat off their British attackers, who lost five dead and took with them a few American soldiers caught outside the tavern. Tarleton then tried to take Lee's horses. Drawing up his force of six men, Lee made a show of attacking and shouted wildly, "Fire away, men, here comes our infantry; we will have them all." The ruse worked and the day was saved. As a reward, Lee

had his enlisted men commissioned as officers. Washington sent him a note of congratulations and later offered him a position on his staff. Although willing to serve where needed, Lee preferred to stay with his dragoons, stating, "I am wedded to my sword . . . and my secondary object . . . is military reputation." Congress promoted him to Major and gave him an independent partisan corps, with two—and later three—additional troops of horse.

Short on supplies, Washington was forced to order troops to forage, which was a severe irritant to Delaware and Pennsylvania farmers. Lee's suavity carried this off without the "smallest disapprobation" of the owners. He also cajoled his Sergeant Major Champe into holding up the "spirit of the corps" by feigning desertion to the British with the aim of capturing Benedict Arnold. Lee was a master at securing intelligence and interpreting, analyzing and forming plans to exploit it. He may well have been the one who suggested the attack on Stony Point. He participated with General Anthony Wayne in that attack to the degree that cavalry could be employed there, reconstituting his troop as infantry and acting as reserve for the attacking American force. The successful bayonet attack left only 11 Americans dead while killing or wounding 100 enemy soldiers and capturing the entire British garrison and large amounts of cannon and stores.

THE SURPRISE ATTACK on Paulus Hook, New Jersey made the young Partisan Corps Major's reputation. On August 25, 1779 Lee set out with 300 men to attack British Major Sutherland's strong outpost defended by 400 to 500 men. The object of the attack had access across a creek fordable in only two places. There were two abatis into the water, a drawbridge, a moat and a barred gate. On the other side was the Hackensack River. Lee's detailed planning included dovetailed calculations of marching times, tides, hours of darkness, access and egress routes. Since fording the stream made the powder wet and firearms useless, Lee ordered a charge with bayonets. The attackers were successful, losing two killed and three wounded. They returned with 158 prisoners, seven of them officers, but Major Sutherland and 50 Hessians were able to hold out in a block house that could not be taken because of the imminent arrival of British reinforcements.

Events at Paulus Hook led to Major Lee's second court martial. The first, in 1777 for violation of orders, was dismissed as "groundless and vexatious." The second court martial was at the instigation of Virginia officers, possibly motivated by jealousy, who accused him of incompetence in the attack. Since the attack was a success, the charges were dismissed and Congress ordered one of its 12 medals for Revolutionary War accomplishment awarded to Major Henry Lee. It was the only one given an officer below the rank of General Officer.

WITH THE ADDITION OF three companies of infantry, Lee was given command of a legion and acquired the nickname "Light Horse Harry." In November 1780 Congress promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel. Washington, who relied heavily on the almost daily reports sent to him personally by Lee, ordered him and his legion south. Lee was at the disastrous Battle of Camden in which the hero of Saratoga, General Horatio Gates, and his force were almost annihilated. (It is local tradition to say that Gates holds the record for the fastest horse race from Camden, South Carolina to Charlotte, North Carolina.)

Serving under General Nathanael Greene, who had replaced Gates, Lee for a time combined forces with General Andrew Pickens, a leader of the South Carolina partisans whose assistance Gates had refused. Lee and his men in green uniforms, which closely resembled those of Tarleton's legion, lured a Tory force of 300 men into Pickens' trap. Ninety were killed and most of the remainder wounded. It was a massacre in the true sense of the word. Criticism of the action against almost defenseless men abounded but, because of this engagement, General Lord Cornwallis fought the Battle of Guilford Courthouse on March 15, 1781 with no Tory assistance.

Joining with General Francis Marion, Lee and his forces reduced British outposts from the Santee to Augusta, capturing 1,100 of the enemy. They were a formidable factor in the elimination of the British hold on South Carolina through their support of General Greene. While Greene never won a battle in the South, his strategy of leading Cornwallis farther and farther from his base of supplies won him the war in the South.

Lee witnessed Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown but did not participate in the battle which preceded it. He tried unsuccessfully at John's Island, south of Charleston, to duplicate the victory at Paulus Hook. In January 1782 he requested indefinite leave to return to Virginia.

He immersed himself in the affairs of the Society of the Cincinnati and public service. His first wife was a cousin, Matilda Lee, the heiress of Stratford Hall. In 1794 Lee was recalled to service as commander of forces which put down the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania. He was appointed Brigadier General in the undeclared war with France and was discharged in 1800.

It was Light Horse Harry Lee who wrote that George Washington was "First in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

LEE HAD NO TRAINING and no success in business. Speculation in western land (he once traded 5,000 acres in Kentucky for a horse that had belonged to Washington) and poor judgment led to debtor's prison in 1809. There he wrote his *Memoirs of*

the War in the Southern Department of the United States. After moving to Alexandria in 1811 he was offered a commission as Major General in the war against the British. He was unable to serve because he was severely beaten by a mob when he went to the aid of a friend, Alexander C. Hanson, a young Baltimore editor and outspoken critic of the war. He went to the West Indies in 1813 to restore his health and escape his creditors. Lee returned to the United States, where he died March 25, 1818 at the Cumberland Island plantation of his old commander, Nathanael Greene. ★

Editor's note: Following his military career, Henry Lee served in the Continental Congress in 1785 and was a delegate to the Confederation Congress 1786-88; a strong Federalist, he urged Virginia's ratification of the Constitution. He served in the General Assembly 1789-91 and was Governor of Virginia 1791-1794. During his term in Congress, 1799-1801, he wrote the *Resolutions* eulogizing Washington, although John Marshall spoke the words "First in war, first in peace. . ." publicly for the first time. The widower Lee married Ann Hill Carter of Shirley Plantation in 1793 and one of their sons was Robert E. Lee.

Genealogical Queries

We regret the errors in the Tyler family queries in the September 1989 issue. The corrected version appears below.

Need name of wife of:

BARTLETT TYLER: National Archives show he was Pvt. in Capt. John Camp's Co., 1st VA Regt. commanded by Col. George Gibson; he was enrolled Sept. 1777 to April 13, 1778 when he d. Red Lion PA.

Need name of mother of:

JONES TYLER: listed as "orphan son of Bartlett Tyler," b. c. 1775, probably in Hanover Cty. VA; m. Lucy Ford Dec. 1, 1795, Henrico Cty. VA; d. 1838 Rockingham Cty. VA.

Any information about wife of **BARTLETT TYLER** and/or mother of **JONES TYLER** would be appreciated.

REPLY: Col. Catlin E. Tyler, 314 Greenway Lane, Richmond VA 23226.

Will exchange information on:

JOSEPH COLBY: b. c. 1775 in NH; executed land deed Hamilton Cty. OH 1806; m. 1807 Pamela Booth in Butler Cty. OH; they had nine children; land deed executed 1835 Shelby Cty. OH; d. there 1840; wife d. 1863.

REPLY: Dr. L. Kent, 829 Riverview Terrace, #5, Dayton OH 45407-2439.

Need information on:

CAPT. NATHANIEL PLATT: Revolutionary War service after 1777 and annual Platt reunions in Plattsburgh NY and elsewhere.

REPLY: Max J. Riekse, 2026 #B Inverway Ct., Kalamazoo MI 49009.

Answers to genealogical queries should be sent directly to the enquirers. The Society appreciates receiving copies of such replies for possible publication.