

A stylized, semi-transparent graphic of the American flag is positioned on the left side of the image. It features a blue field with white stars in the upper left and red and white stripes extending downwards. The background is a solid dark blue.

**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE  
ARLINGTON PROPERTY**



*Scenes of Native American life in North Carolina in 1585. There are no depictions of the Native Americans who lived along the Potomac River at this time, but they may have lived in villages similar to those illustrated here. (The British Museum/John White)*

The earliest archaeological evidence of habitation on the land that now forms Arlington National Cemetery dates to sometime between 3000-1200 B.C. While we know little about the Native Americans who lived in this specific area, English colonizers in the 1600s recorded that they spoke an Algonquian language, lived in wooden long houses and planted maize, beans, squash, pumpkins, gourds, sunflowers and tobacco. The nearest Native American villages in the area were Nacotchtank (located on the southeast side of the Anacostia River) and Nameroughquena (located on the west bank of the Potomac River, across from Theodore Roosevelt Island.) By 1669, the land was claimed by English colonizers and was then owned by multiple generations of the Alexander family.





*Portrait of the Washington family, painted between 1789 and 1796. L-R: George Washington Parke Custis, George Washington, Eleanor Parke Custis, Martha Washington and an unidentified male slave. (National Gallery of Art/Edward Savage)*

John Parke Custis, the son of Martha Washington and her first husband Daniel Parke Custis, purchased 2,000 acres of the Alexander land in 1778. In 1802, John Parke Custis's son George Washington Parke Custis inherited the plantation, at that time known as Mount Washington, along with a large portion of Martha Washington's collection of furniture, silver, china and family portraits.





*Arlington House portico featuring large Doric columns. Despite the appearance of stone, the house was constructed using wood, brick and cement. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2017)*

George Washington Parke Custis constructed a Greek Revival style mansion on the property, which he named Arlington House. As part of a working plantation, the house was built by African American slaves, many of whom had been brought to Arlington from George and Martha Washington's home at Mount Vernon. Construction was completed in 1818, and George Washington Parke Custis displayed many of his inherited "Washington Treasures" throughout the home.

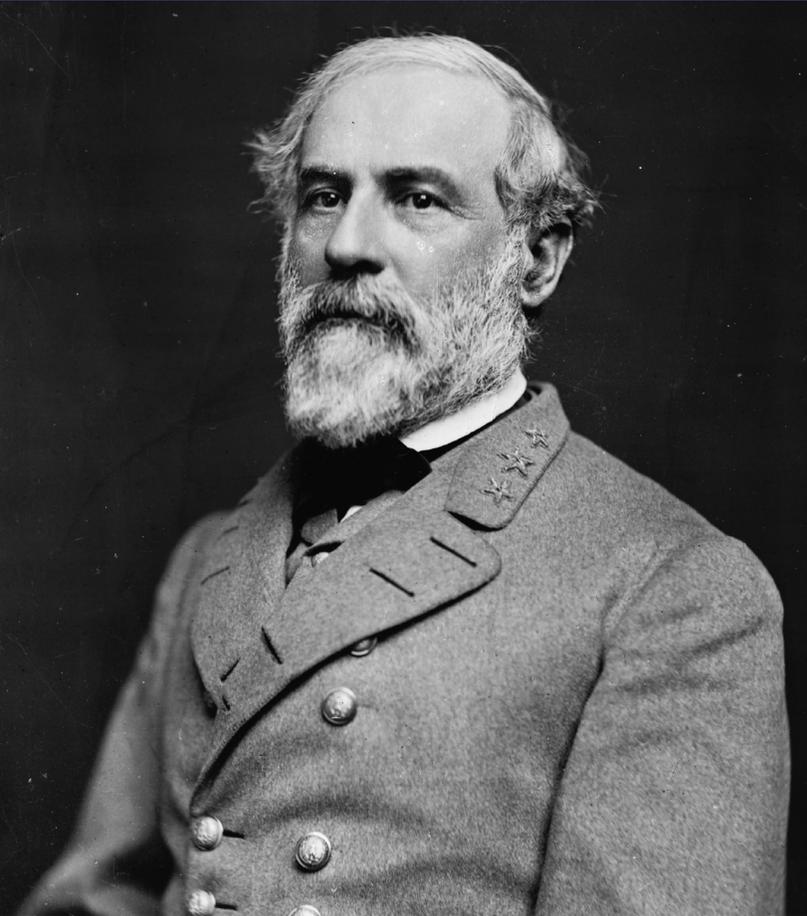




*1865 photo of Charles Syphax holding his grandson, William B. Syphax, and 1870 photo of Maria Syphax.  
(Arlington House)*

It is likely that George Washington Parke Custis fathered an illegitimate daughter, Maria, with one of his slaves, Arianna Carter. In 1826, Maria married Charles Syphax, the slave who oversaw the dining room at Arlington House. The wedding occurred in the mansion's parlor, the same location as the later 1831 wedding of George Washington Parke Custis' daughter Mary Anna Randolph Custis and Robert E. Lee. After her marriage, George Washington Parke Custis freed Maria and gave her a 17-acre plot of land within the Arlington estate.





*1868 photo of Mary Anna Randolph Custis (Virginia Historical Society/Michael Miley) and 1864 photo of Robert E. Lee (Library of Congress/Julian Vannerson)*

Upon his death in 1857, George Washington Parke Custis bequeathed the Arlington estate – which consisted of the manor, 1,100 acres of land and 196 enslaved men and women – to his daughter Mary Anna Randolph Custis. Mary's husband Robert E. Lee assumed the role of master at the plantation, but Mary remained the owner. Robert and Mary resided at the plantation until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, when Lee left the U.S. Army to serve with the Confederate Army. As a result of the imminent arrival of U.S. troops, in May 1861, Mary and her daughters abandoned Arlington House.





*U.S. soldiers on the steps of Arlington House, 1864. (National Archives)*

The U.S. Army recognized the strategic importance of acquiring this high ground that directly overlooked Washington, D.C. in order to protect the capital city. On May 23, 1861, the U.S. Army occupied the Arlington property. It used the house as a headquarters and officers' housing, while soldiers camped around the property. The Army cut down many acres of forest in order to build multiple forts on the land.

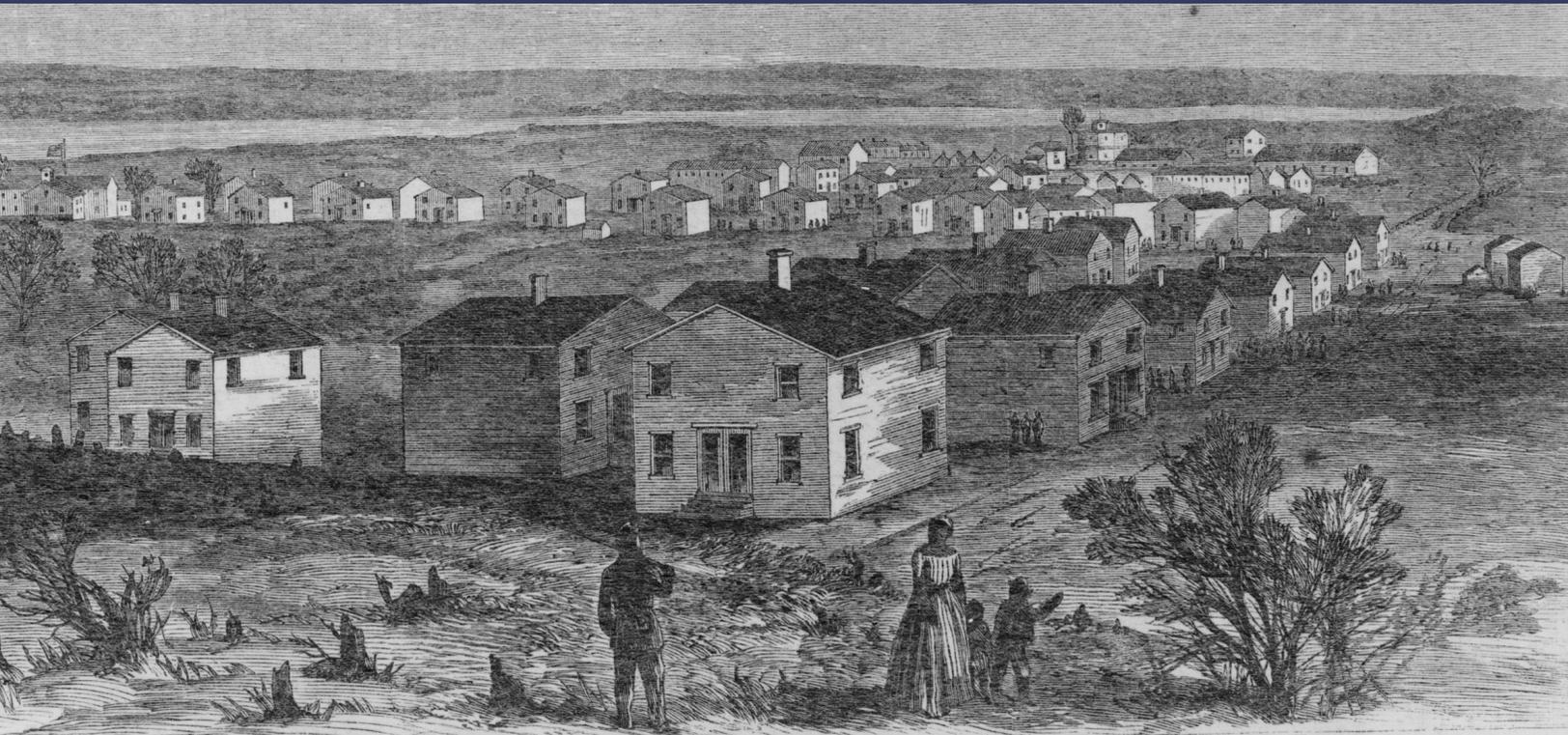




*1865 photo of military burials in Arlington National Cemetery (National Archives) and 2014 photo of William Christman's grave in Section 27 (Arlington National Cemetery)*

By 1864, the mounting number of deceased soldiers from battlefields and military hospitals exceeded the capacity of existing national cemeteries in the Washington, D.C. area, so the U.S. government began looking for additional burial space. On May 13, 1864, U.S. Private William Christman became the first soldier buried on the Arlington property. On June 15, 1864, 200 acres of the plantation were officially designated as a military cemetery, formally establishing Arlington National Cemetery.





*1864 illustration of Freedman's Village which appeared in the May 7, 1864 issue of Harper's Weekly. (Library of Congress)*

In addition to the cemetery, in 1863 the federal government built a “Freedman’s Village” on land to the southwest of Arlington House. Planners initially envisioned Freedman’s Village as a place where newly freed slaves could temporarily live while they learned trade skills and earned money before moving to a permanent home. However, many residents took pride in the lives they had built and stayed at Freedman’s Village for many years. Some members of the Syphax family, whose land was adjacent to Freedman’s Village, worked to support the residents and advocated for better conditions and treatment by the government. Despite residents’ protests, the government closed Freedman’s Village in 1900, and the land was eventually incorporated into Arlington National Cemetery.





*1865 photo of burials in Arlington National Cemetery. (Library of Congress)*

Burials at Arlington National Cemetery continued for the rest of the Civil War and in the years after it. In spite of the graves that surrounded Arlington House, Robert and Mary Lee's son, George Washington Custis Lee, sued the United States government in 1874 for the return of the Arlington property. In 1882, the Supreme Court ruled that the estate had been illegally confiscated and returned the property to George Washington Custis Lee. To avoid disinterring the 20,000 soldiers already buried in the cemetery, the federal government negotiated with Lee, and on March 31, 1883, he agreed to sell the property to the government for \$150,000.





*Aerial view of Arlington National Cemetery, looking northwest from Patton Circle. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2018)*

In the years since the Civil War, Arlington National Cemetery expanded multiple times, acquiring land from the National Park Service, Fort Myer, the Syphax family and the former Navy Annex building. These expansions have been necessary to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of veterans interested in being laid to rest at Arlington. Today, the cemetery encompasses 639 acres and is the resting place of approximately 400,000 active duty service members, veterans and their families.





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