

## Arlington House Q&A

- **How was the historic site named originally?** “Arlington House” is the original name. Congress and President Coolidge first acted to restore the house to honor Robert E. Lee in 1925. A joint resolution dedicating the “Lee Mansion” in Arlington National Cemetery as a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee was passed in 1955. It became Public Law 84-107. Then, on June 30, 1972, Congress amended that law and passed public law 92-333 renaming the historic site to the “Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial.”

- **Who owns the historic site?** The Arlington House plantation was established by George Washington Parke Custis the grandson of Martha Washington (and step grandson of President George Washington) after he inherited land and enslaved persons upon Martha’s death in 1802. Upon Custis’ death in 1857, everything passed to his daughter Mary (Custis) Lee. The land was confiscated during the Civil War, purchased by the US Government and managed by the Army until 1933 as headquarters of Arlington National Cemetery. In 1933, legislation transferred ownership from the Army to the National Park Service.

- **How was/is the Arlington property used?** Arlington was a working plantation from 1802 until the Civil War when it became a refuge and community of formally enslaved free people. There was a continuous presence of people of color on the property starting in 1802. Custis gave Maria (Carter Custis) Syphax, his daughter with an enslaved woman, 17 acres located at the southern end of the plantation in 1826. A freedman’s village existed from 1863 until 1890. Arlington National Cemetery was established in 1864. Between about 1900-1940, 400 acres of the property was managed by the Department of Agriculture as an experimental farm. Today the original plantation is divided into the National Park Service unit, Arlington National Cemetery and Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall.

- **How does Robert E. Lee fit in to this narrative?** Robert E. Lee married Mary Custis, daughter of George Washington Park Custis, at Arlington House in 1831. Robert E. Lee was rarely in residence due to his military duties, but Arlington House was considered the Lee family home until the Civil War. When his wife’s father died, G.W.P. Custis, in 1857, Mary inherited the estate and Lee would serve as executor of his father-in-law’s will. He left the estate in April of 1861 after deciding to become a General for the Confederate Army and would never return.

- **Where is the Arlington plantation house located?** The Arlington plantation house was built by enslaved persons between 1802-1818 in northern Virginia. It is located within the boundary of the Arlington National Cemetery overlooking the President John F. Kennedy grave site and Washington D.C. across the Potomac River.

- **Is the Arlington plantation house open to the public?** Yes. The historic site was reopened to the public in June of 2021. Between 2018-2021, the Arlington plantation house and the outbuildings underwent major renovation supported by a \$12.3 million gift from David M. Rubenstein.

- **Are there living descendants of Arlington House?** Yes, there are many. Living descendants of those who were enslaved and free at Arlington Plantation have had the opportunity to meet each other, exchange stories, and have open and candid conversations about their ancestors. In April 2023, descendent family members came together for a 3-day reunion that included a public program on the grounds of the National Park Service site.

- **How has interpretation of the historic site changed?** Updated and enhanced exhibits at the historic site provide the opportunity to include more aspects of the history of Arlington House and bring light to all the lives lived there. The National Park Service has introduced visitor expectations and a language resource guide for visitors.
- **Why is there a desire to redesignate the site?** Living descendants, including Lee descendants, believe that the historic site should be less exclusive and more inclusive. The 'Arlington House National Historic Site' is more than the bricks and mortar and Robert E. Lee. This historic site can, and should, become a vital focal point for education, awareness, repair and healing within our country. In 2022, the Washington Post published an OpEd by descendants titled "Encouraging a necessary name change at Arlington House."
- **Why can't the National Park Service just change the name?** The National Park Service does not have the authority to change the name of this site. Congress established the name and only Congress has the authority to change it through legislation.
- **Is Robert E. Lee being removed from history?** No. That is impossible. Redesignating the site does not remove Robert E. Lee from the history at Arlington House. The redesignation makes the history of Arlington less exclusive and more inclusive. It prevents the Arlington history from being dominated and overshadowed by Lee and allows the narratives of all the other people who are part of its history to be seen and heard. Elected officials may represent citizens who feel strongly about the legacy of Lee and may have the perception this redesignation is intended in some way to tear down, degrade or erase Robert E. Lee from the history at the Arlington House. This is neither the case nor the intent of living descendants. In fact, descendants of both Lee and the community he enslaved have come together to set an example for the country. They have expressed their desire to use this historic site for education, awareness, reflection, healing and repair.