

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

..... NATIONAL PARK

FILE NO.

LIEUTENANT ROBERT E. LEE

EY
Rogers W. Young

1934

IMPORTANT

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ARNO B. CAMMERER,
Director.

Lieutenant Robert S. Lee

By
Rogers W. Young

November 28, 1934.

Destined to be one of the most illustrious graduates of West Point, a young man awaited his first orders in the mid-summer of 1829. The recent honor of finishing second in the Academy class of 1829 had been forgotten in his intense grief over the death of his mother on July 10. The broken home soon led him to a temporary sojourn with friends and relatives in Virginia. Here it was that Brevet Second Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, received on August 11, 1829, the following order

"Engineer Order No. 8.

"Washington, D.C. August 11, 1829

"Brevet Second Lieut. Robert E. Lee --- will, by the middle of November next, report to Major Samuel Babcock of the corps of Engineers for duty at Cockspur Island, in the Savannah River, Georgia.

"C. Gratiot, 3.
Brig. Gen. Comdg."

The assignment to Cockspur Island must certainly have held little allure for the young lieutenant of Engineers. The project to build a fort on this marshy and isolated island was then of comparatively recent origin. The commanding officer of the works, Major Babcock, had begun his preliminary surveys in December of the previous year, and the project had been suspended in June, 1829, for the hot months; while Major Babcock was on leave in the North. A stupendous task yet awaited the superior and his youthful subordinate. But orders were to be obeyed, and on September 27, Lieutenant Lee notified General Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, that he would remain in Fauquier County, Virginia, until the last of October, when he would depart for Savannah.

¹Freeman, R.E. Lee, a Biography, N.Y. 1934, Vol.1, pp 82, 87.
²Ibid, p.92; cf., R.E. Lee, Georgetown, D.C., to General Charles Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, Washington, July 31, 1829, File No. L.137, Record Section, Office, Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army (This office henceforth to be cited as R.E.)
³Freeman, op. cit., p.94, N.17.
⁴R.S., File Nos. B.563, Dec. 13, 1828; B.753, June 24, 1829.
⁵R.S., File No. L.145, September 27, 1829.

An odd responsibility faced the twenty-two year old lieutenant on the eve of his departure for the South. The care of a legacy left to his sister Mildred, by their mother, now devolved upon him. Nat, the elderly slave coachman and house servant, long regarded as a member of the Lee family, had been left to Mildred, was now ill, and must be provided for. When Robert's orders had arrived he had made his decision; one typical of the kindly nature of the man. Nat must accompany him to Savannah, where the mild climate, it was hoped, might improve the old Negro's health.

By packet, Lieutenant Lee and the old Negro reached the thriving town of Savannah about November 1, 1829. A shipping center, Savannah was then the most important seaport and largest town in Georgia, and a little city with the genuine charm of the deep antebellum South. The young lieutenant could hardly have found imperative duties at Cockspur Island, immediately upon his arrival, since Major Babcock had not yet returned from the North, and the project, in a state of suspension, was in the hands of an overseer. Fortunately, young Robert had staunch and hospitable friends in the distinguished Mackay family, "who welcomed --- (him) with open doors." Jack Mackay, classmate and close friend of Lee, was then stationed at the Oglethorpe Barracks, with the artillery garrison. The five or six weeks which were to intervene between the arrival of Lieutenant Lee and the return of Major Babcock were not to be idle ones after all. Soon Lee was to meet the society of Savannah "accounted worth knowing," and to become friendly with several of the officers of the garrison.

6. Free as, op. cit., pp 94-95.

7. Ibid.

8. H.S., File Nos. B.823, Oct. 12, 1829; B.850, Nov. 17, 1829.

9. Freeman, op. cit., p. 95.

10. Ibid.

Major Babcock reached Savannah on December 23, 1829, and the project,
 11.
 still in a preparatory stage, was soon resumed. Lee's commander, whom he
 now met for the first time, was an aging officer in the Engineer Corps. A
 graduate of the Military Academy in 1808, Major Babcock had already seen some
 twenty years of active service on widely scattered projects, and was now tiring
 12.
 rapidly. Apparently his health was then in a very poor condition. Under
 such circumstances, the first officer to assist him with the Cockspur fort pro-
 ject would be expected to shoulder a large share of the responsibility. During
 the month of January, 1830, Lieutenant Lee acting in his capacity as Assistant
 Engineer, took over much of the direction of the work. Construction of quarters
 upon the island for Major Babcock, the workmen, and himself had to be rushed.
 A system of drainage and embankments for the island was commenced. Construction
 on the principal wharf was started. As the month closed, Lieutenant Lee was
 delegated to draw up a "Sketch exhibiting the actual state of Cockspur Island
 13.
 and the operations for Jan. 1830." This sketch, first of the rare Lee draw-
 ings made on Cockspur Island, was semi-topographical in nature, and as its title
 stated, showed not only the work accomplished, but the work projected as well.
 The island was outlined, and marshy and high ground indicated. The partially
 finished quarters, the beacon, and the revenue boat house were shown. Also in-
 dicated were the proposed fort site, advanced battery, the projected wharf and
 system of drains and embankments.

11. R.S., File No. B.870, Dec. 23, 1829.

12. Hittman, F.B. Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army. Washington. 1903 Vol. I, p.178; cf., House Doc. No. 2, 19 Cong. 2 Sess. p.83 et seq; Gale and Beaton, Register of Debates. 1826. Vol II, Pt. I, Column 702.

13. See plan, Drawer 70, Sheet 3, Construction Section, Office, Chief of Engineers, U. S. Army.

Opportunity for gaining practical engineering experience was thus first presented to the young lieutenant, and he did not fail to accept it, however difficult the conditions. Cockspur Island did not then, nor does it today, present an easy area for engineering operations. Essentially a mud and marsh island, containing a few sand ridges, Cockspur demanded patience, skill and strength from Lieutenant Lee. The stalwart young officer had a physique and mind equal to the task, however, and apparently tramped through the mud and marsh of Cockspur like some early explorer on quest bent. His endurance in the chill mud and water, in the daily survey routine is said to have been the everlasting wonder of "a certain interested young woman, up in Virginia," who subsequently became his wife. 14. These trying months on Cockspur must certainly have aided in the maturing of young Robert E. Lee to that calmness of resolve and purpose, and quiet ability which characterized him in later life. Certainly it is a rare picture we see here of the youthful days of a great character, struggling successfully and unflinchingly through the mud of Cockspur, head erect, chest out, body and mind keyed to duty and interest. A youthful glimpse accorded us of few who have inspired the world in their passing.

Major Babcock who seems to have been somewhat chary of praise, apparently had realized the ability of his young assistant by the end of their first month's association. While he characterized Lieutenant Lee as "in a measure inexperienced," he found the young officer, "active and intelligent," and had already turned over 15. to him one of the most important, difficult, and thankless of post tasks. On

14.

15Freeman, op. cit., p.97.

R.S., File No. B.012, Feb. 10, 1930.

February 1, 1830, Major Babcock notified Colonel George Gibson, Commissary General of Subsistence, that

"I have appointed 1st Lieut. R.L. Lee of the Engrs. acting assistant commissary of Subsistence of the Post under my command."¹⁶

During February and March, in addition to his new responsibility, Lieutenant Lee carried on his routine engineering duties in connection with the development of the drainage and embankment system for the island. What leisure time as he found was occupied by trips to Savannah, with the pleasant social life of his friends there, and with sketching and letter writing. Opportunities for such diversions became more rare however, as the early spring advanced. Major Babcock's health was perceptibly failing day by day, and his young assistant's duties became increasingly heavier in consequence.

Progress on the construction of the temporary quarters reached a point early in May, which allowed their occupation, and for the first time, headquarters could be established on Cockspur.¹⁸ At the end of each of the months of February, March, and April, 1830, Lieutenant Lee had revised his sketch of the condition of operations on the island, in order to show the progress on the buildings, the dikes, and the drainage ditches.¹⁹ From these can be traced the steps in the finishing of the officers' and workmens' quarters, the completion of the first main wharf on the north channel, and the beginning of the excavation on the proposed site of the fort. During these months, Lieutenant Lee gained much valuable experience in the handling and management of comparatively large crews of workmen, both white and black.

¹⁶ W.S., File No. B.901, Feb. 1, 1830. Lee was then a brevet second lieutenant, not a first lieutenant.

¹⁷ Freeman, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁸ W.S., File No. B.992, May 10, 1830.

¹⁹ See progress sketches of the works on Cockspur Island; enclosures in W.S., File Nos. B.936, March 9, 1830; B.937, April 6, 1830; B.992, May 10, 1830.

Operations on Cockspur during the early summer of 1830, were not to continue long after the establishment of headquarters there. Major Babcock had signified his intention, earlier in the year, of continuing the project throughout the summer, but early in July, he informed General Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, that two of the "most eminent Physicians" of Savannah had recommended him "to remove as soon as possible" from the heat, fever and mosquitoes of Cockspur, and that he would "leave it with Lt. Lee forthwith; agreeably to your instructions."^{20.} Babcock was really quite seriously ill and he left the island, never to return.²¹

Lieutenant Lee journeyed to Virginia, where he spent the summer with friends. Fortunately these friends lived close to the home of a certain young lady in whom he had long had an ardent interest. The home was Arlington, the residence of George Washington Parke Custis and his wife, and the young lady was their daughter, Mary Custis. He apparently spent much of his summer eloquently improving his suit, and the necessity of returning to Cockspur in the late autumn brought all too an abrupt ending to such a pleasant vacation.^{22.} He reached Savannah by packet from New York on the night of November 10.^{23.}

A bewildering condition on Cockspur confronted the young Engineer officer. When he had left in the previous July, the system of embankments designed to keep tidal waters off the proposed fort site had been nearly finished, and was intact, while many of the drainage ditches had been completely opened.^{24.} But now a recent gale had created havoc on these works. The situation was one

20. R.S., File No. B.1038, July 2, 1830.

21. R.S., File No. B.1099, Oct. 26, 1830; cf., Haitman, op.cit., p.178.

22. Freeman, op.cit., pp.99-100

23. R.S., File No. L.186, November 11, 1830; cf., The Georgian (Savannah) November 12, 1830.

24. R.S., File No. L.186, November 11, 1830.

requiring immediate action, in order to save the project from irreparable harm.
25.

Lee had to face it, and alone, as Major Babcock had not yet returned from the
26.
North.

Lee did not hesitate in this exigency, but plunged immediately into the necessary repairs. The main embankment protecting the fort site was broken, and the dike erected "across the mouth of the canal that drained the ditches on the site of the fort," had been completely undermined and swept into the river. The main drainage canal was filled with mud and debris. The main wharf appeared damaged beyond repair.
27.

With the help of the small crew of workmen, left on the island during the summer, the young officer first made repairs to the main embankment, enlarging it for protection against future storms. This work was done too soon, as early in December another small hurricane raged up and down the Georgia Coast. December 1 found much of the embankments replaced, and the reopening of the choked canals projected.
28.

The concern, apparently caused the young Engineer officer by his superior's continued absence, was shortly to be relieved. The Engineer Department, in a letter dated December 20, 1830, notified Lieutenant Lee that Major Babcock had been replaced as superintendent of the fort project on Cockspur Island, by First Lieutenant Joseph K.F. Mansfield. Two days later, Major Babcock's resignation from the Corps of Engineers was accepted by the Secretary of War. Lieutenant
29.
30.
31.

25. Mat. Lee's old servant had apparently died on the island some months past.

26. See Freeman, op. cit., p.95, N.13.

27. R.S., File No.B.1106, Nov. 8, 1830.

28. R.S., File No.L.186, November 11, 1830; cf; Freeman, op.cit., p.100.

29. R.S., File Nos., B.1038, July 1830; L.189, Dec.1, 1830; cf., The Georgian (Savannah), Dec. 6 and 7, 1830.

30. R.S. File No.L.189, Dec. 1, 1830.

31. Letter, General Charles Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, to Lieutenant Robert K. Lee, Savannah, Dec. 20, 1830, No. 4. Letters to officers of Engineers, p.68.

Letter, General Charles Gratiot, Chief of Engineers to Major Babcock, Wilmington, Delaware, Dec.22, 1830. No.4. Letters to officers of Engineers. p.69.

enant Mansfield, who was hardly a year older than Lieutenant Lee, was four years his assistant's senior in point of service with the Corps of Engineers, and had already gained much experience with fortification problems at Fort Hamilton, New York harbor, Fort Johnson, Charleston, S.C., harbor, and Fort Monroe, Virginia. 32. Ordered "to take charge of the construction of the Fort on Cock Spur Island Dec," on December 18, 1830, Lieutenant Mansfield, arrived at his post, and assumed command, on January 21, 1831. 33.

The new superintendent for the Cockspur fort soon fell heir to the results engendered by the inefficiency of the commanding officer who preceded him. Poor, sick Babcock apparently had been very lax in his supervision of the project, and had allowed his office routine, and records system to lapse into chaos. General fiscal affairs appeared hopelessly tangled. Office records were disarranged, or totally missing. Contracts had been made orally, or no record retained on regularly executed ones. Construction plans were conspicuously missing. 34. Not having been charged with the supervision of the details which Lieutenant Mansfield now found in error, Lieutenant Lee, could offer little aid. He gave some aid however, in untangling the affairs, and in one instance gave his opinion in writing on the fraudulence of a timber contract. 35.

Despite the general chaotic conditions, Lieutenant Mansfield early took measures to reopen operations on the island, which had now virtually ceased. On January 23, Lieutenant Mansfield informed General Charles Orriat, Chief of Engineers that

32. Heitman, op.cit., p.688; Freeman, op. cit., p.100; R.S. File Nos. M.713, Oct. 7, 1830; M.731, Dec. 23, 1830.
 33. R.S., File Nos. M.731, Dec. 23, 1830; M.739, Jan. 21, 1831; cf., The Georgian (Savannah), Jan. 22, 1831.
 34. R.S., File Nos. M.741, Jan. 23, 1831; M.742, Jan. 23, 1831; M.749, Feb. 8, 1831; M.758, Feb. 26, 1831.
 35. R.S., File No. M.749, Feb. 8, 1831.

"I have directed Lt. Lee to make a Survey and Plan of the Island and the additions to it by Major Babcock, which with his zeal and industry will occupy but a few days and then the site and commencement of the body of the work will immediately be examined, fixed and take place."³⁶

In the same letter, he brought to the attention of General Gratiot the necessity for a change in the original foundation plans of the fort, due to the nature of the soil conditions on the island, and asked permission to design a new plan based on his own observations. A few weeks later, the Engineer Department authorized Lieutenant Mansfield to make a soil examination of Cockspur Island, instructing him to make a full report of his observations so that the Department could advise the changes thought necessary in the foundation plans.³⁷

Since his survey work did not now occupy all of his time, Lieutenant Lee again began his trips up the river to Savannah. His chum, Jack Mackay, had in the meanwhile been assigned to a post in Alabama. Of the three Mackay sisters, with whom young Robert had spent many gay hours, Margaret was now married. Catherine and Eliza gave him the usual delightful welcome, however. Nearby the hospitable old Mackay home, on Broughton Street, was the residence of the Isaac Minis family. Here two beautiful daughters always were glad to entertain the handsome young lieutenant from Cockspur Island. These charming hours in the spring of 1831 were numbered, as Lee was soon to learn.³⁸

Meanwhile, on Cockspur the work of the survey and soil examination was producing results. On February 26, Lieutenant Mansfield reported conclusively that the soil composition would not provide a sufficient base for the fort's foundation, as originally designed.³⁹ Shortly afterwards, the Department notified Lieutenant Mansfield that a Captain Delafield, of the Engineer Corps, who was somewhat experienced with problems similar to that at Cockspur would be ordered to

³⁶R.S., File No. M.749, Feb. 8, 1831.

³⁷General Gratiot, to Lieutenant Mansfield, Feb. 1, 1831. No.4 Letters to officers of Engineers pp.81-82.

³⁸Freeman, op. cit., p. 101.

³⁹R.S., File No.M.758, Feb. 26, 1831.

40.

report to Cockspur for a joint conference, at an early date.

The survey of Cockspur Island undertaken by Lieutenant Lee was completed early in March, 1831. He incorporated the results in a sketch titled a "Map of Cockspur Island, and position of Fort Pulaski," which was forwarded to the Engineer Department on March 8.^{41.} This sketch exhibited a thorough survey of the island, giving the high water line, fixed features of the terrain, showing the positions of the dikes, sluices, and embankments as actually existing, located all of the temporary buildings, quarters, boathouses, and shops, and clearly indicated "the site of the fort as laid down by Major Babcock."^{42.} In addition to finishing this survey, Lieutenant Lee had been engaged in the supervision of the new excavations for the foundations of the fort, a task which was to consume most of his time during the early part of April, as well.^{43.}

As March, 1831, drew to an end, the Engineer Department apparently decided that as a suspension of the operations on Cockspur Island appeared imminent, there was no necessity for two valuable Engineer officers remaining in comparative idleness.^{44.} The Engineer Corps was then very small, projects were many, and a vigorous young officer of Lee's ability was too valuable, to allow his inactivity on Cockspur. Accordingly on March 26, General Gratiot requested Lieutenant Mansfield to order Lieutenant Lee to Hampton Roads as soon as practicable if his

40. Letters, General Gratiot, to Lieutenant Mansfield, March 9 and 26, 1831.

41. No. 4 Letters to officers of Engineers pp. 97, 110.

42. See plan, Drawer 70, Sheet 4, Construction Section, Office, Chief of Engineers, U. S. Army.

43. R.S., File No. M.765, March 8, 1831.

44. R. S., File Nos. M.765, March 8, 1831; M.799, April 1, 1831.

Letter, General Gratiot, to Lieutenant Mansfield, March 26, 1831. No. 4. Letters to officers of Engineers. p. 110.

45.

services could be dispensed with.

Meanwhile, Captain Delafield had arrived for conferences with Lieutenant Mansfield, on the redesigning of the foundation plans for the fort, and Lee's services could not immediately be relinquished. Lee realized however, that his transfer to Hampton Roads was only the matter of a few days, and shortly thereafter wrote one of his delightful letters to one of the fair Mackay girls, in the nature of a gay, but pensive farewell. Wittily wrote the young lieutenant

46.

Cockspur, Wednesday 13th, 1831 (April)

There has been but one redeeming circumstance in the occurrences of (this) day Miss Eliza & that has been the arrival of your letter. Indeed I have been dreadfully harassed by these two men, who call themselves Engineers. For you must know that Capt. Delafield has arrived & is in high consultation about Foundations, Grillage, Piles & what not. And I have made them more little troublesome plans & worse calculations about weight, cost, etc. of Masonry, lime, sand & such stuff than I intend to do tomorrow, "and that's the certain of it. Will you believe that they are still at it, & have just touched upon cranes, "With Lee give us a sketch of that"? But I happened to have my watch in my hand & seeing that it was ten minutes to 11 P.M. says: "Yes Capt tomorrow" And then I takes up this table & placed it by the fire, with pen ink & paper. And I will leave them to themselves, & they shall leave us to ourselves. ---But Miss Eliza, this parting with all in Broughton St. is dreadful ---Perhaps, owing to Capt. D.'s arrival I shall be obliged to stay longer. Perhaps I can get to Beaufort. Perhaps your two weeks will be out next Tuesday, Perhaps I shall be taken sick.--- I have not yet fixed upon the day I shall go or how.---

---So good night &

Yours

truly 47.

R.E.Lee.

The transfer of Lieutenant Lee from Cockspur Island came soon thereafter. Lieutenant Mansfield had advised General Gratiet on April 4, that he would have to retain Lee for a few days, after which his young assistant would be ordered to

45. Letter, General Gratiet, to Lieutenant Mansfield, March 26, 1831. No. 4.

46. Letters to Officers of Engineers pp.111-112.

47. Letter, R.E.Lee to Eliza A. Mackay, "Wednesday 13th, (April), 1831." Property of Mrs Frank Screven, Savannah.

49. Ibid.

Mount p. 11. Balbrade.

The excavation of a short canal, upon which building materials were to be transported, from the North Channel of the Savannah River to the northwest angle of the fort site, had been completed during the spring. Two temporary wharves at the mouth of this canal had also been built.

48. Hampton Roads. As soon as the young lieutenant had finished his survey drawings, and the necessary assistance at Lieutenant Mansfield's conference with Captain Delafield, he was ordered by his superior, on April 21, 1831, to proceed to Old Point Comfort, Virginia, and to report to Captain Talcott for duty. On that date, Lieutenant Mansfield sent an official communication to General Gratiot that

"I have the honour to inform the Department that I have this day ordered Lt. Lee to proceed to Hampton Roads and report himself to Capt. Talcott for duty agreeably to the instructions from the Department under date of the 26 March last."⁵⁰

Lee's first tour of duty in the army was ended, and he left Cockspur Island, more experienced, more mature, and better equipped for his duties, having profited by the practical problems he had encountered there. The days of his apprenticeship were over, and he had served them well.

48. B.S., File No. M.793, April 4, 1831.

49. B.S., File No. M.795, April 21, 1831.

50. Ibid.