

Archaeological Explorations at the
Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee

by

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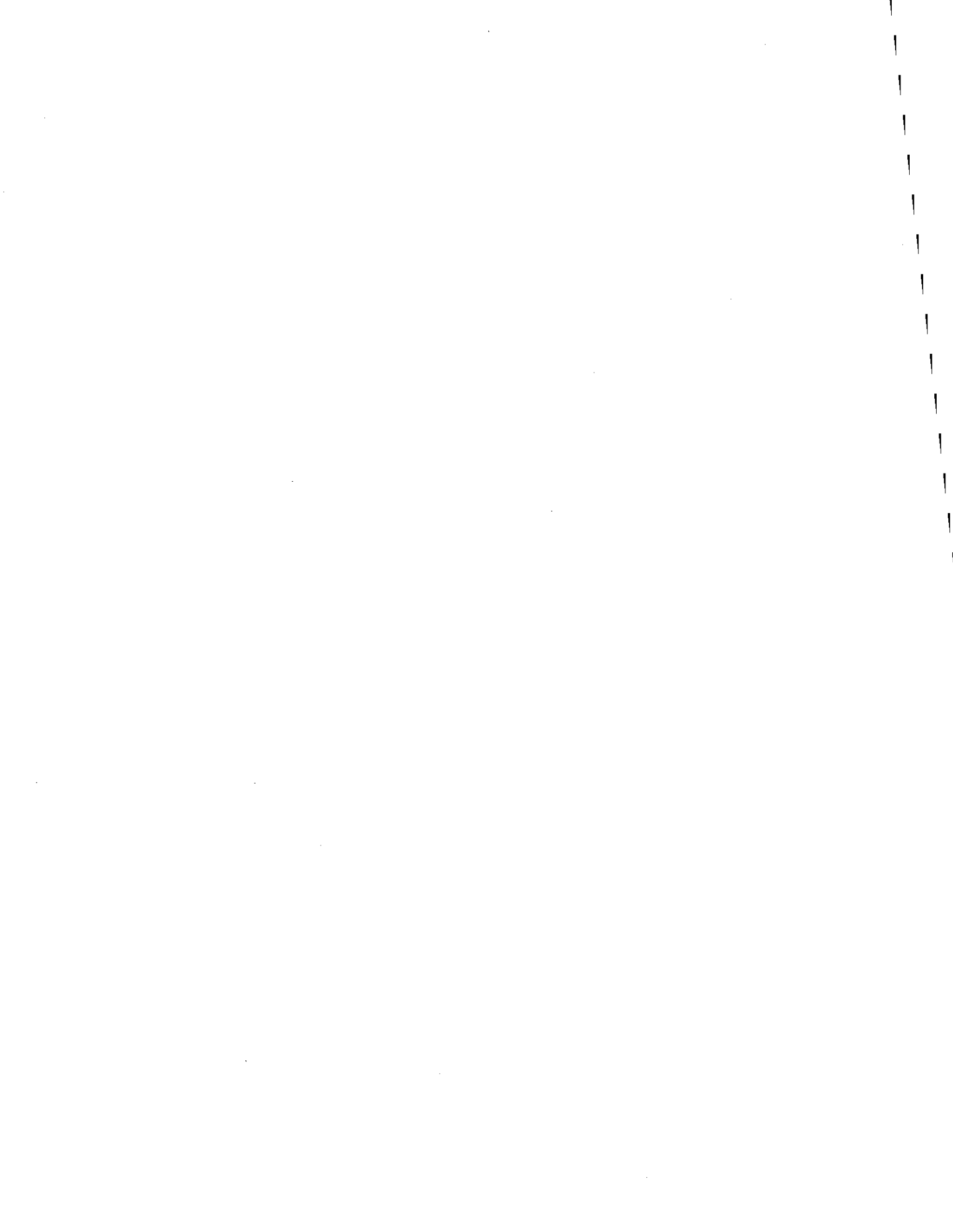
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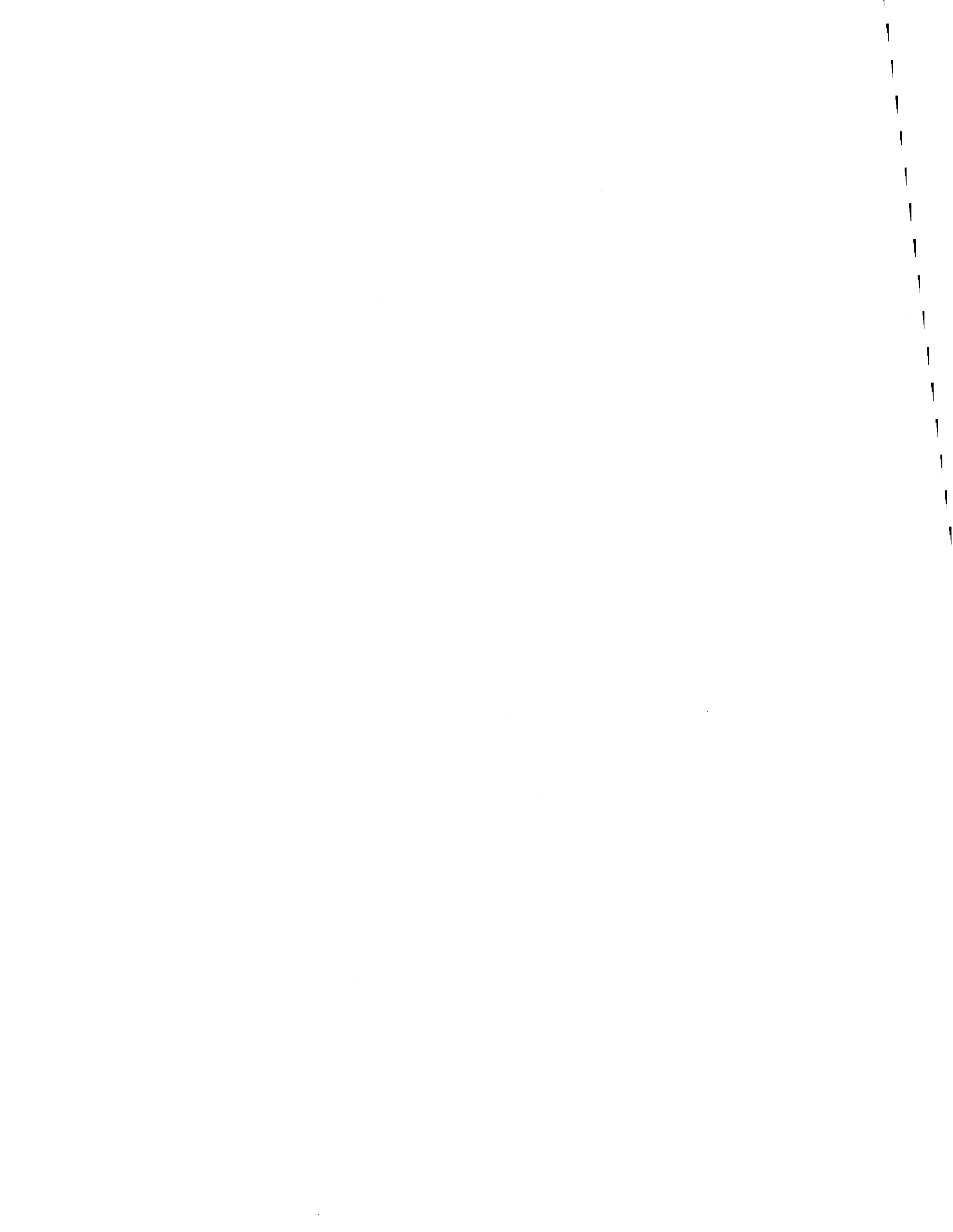
Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications series is composed of papers on various aspects of research conducted under the auspices of Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, City of Alexandria, Virginia. The authors include professional staff members, university students and Alexandria Archaeology volunteers. Editing of the papers has been kept to a minimum. It should be understood that the papers vary in tone and level of technicality, since they were originally directed toward many different audiences.

We are pleased to offer the papers within this series and in so doing are opening our "manuscripts on file" - including professional conference papers, background documentary studies, student course papers, and volunteer research papers - to professionals and public alike.

This paper was originally presented at the annual conference of the Society for Historical Archaeology, in January, 1991.

Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.
City Archaeologist
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The house at 607 Oronoco Street in Alexandria, Virginia, known for many years as the Fitzhugh-Lee House and now as the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee, was built in 1795 by John Potts. Potts was secretary of the Potomac Canal Company, and entertained the company's president, George Washington, in the house on several occasions. By 1798 Potts had sold the house to William Fitzhugh of Chatham. During Fitzhugh's occupation his lifelong friend, George Washington, dined and slept there often as evidenced by Washington's diaries (Moore 1949:203-204). These occasions were especially enjoyable for George Washington Parke Custis, Washington's adopted son. The child of Mount Vernon courted and later married Fitzhugh's daughter, Mary Lee Fitzhugh, in front of the fireplace in the parlot of the house. The union produced only one surviving child, Mary Anne Randolphe Custis. Mary Custis grew up in the house her father built north of Alexandria and called Arlington, but was to marry a boy who grew up in her grandfather's house on Oronoco Street, Robert E. Lee.

When Fitzhugh died in 1809, his heirs leased the house to their distant relation, General Harry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee. Light-Horse Harry was a close friend of Washington and the father of Robert. The elder General Lee had an illustrious Revolutionary War record as commander of "Lee's Partisan Corps," an independent force made up of both horse cavalry and infantry (Freeman 1961:4). After witnessing the surrender of Cornwallis' army at Yorktown, Lee served his native Virginia as its delegate to the Continental Congress during the Constitutional debates,

governor from 1791 to 1794 and as a United States Congressman from 1799 to 1801. The great Washington died while Lee was in Congress and it was Lee that was chosen to deliver the eulogy for the father of his country. Throughout this period, the Lees lived at Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County. Stratford was the ancestral home of the Lees in America but had passed down through a different line of heirs. Light Horse Harry's residence here was courtesy of his marriage to his second cousin, Matilda, daughter of Philip Ludwell Lee. When Matilda died in 1790, title to the property was held in trust for her and Harry's son Henry Lee. In 1793, Harry married Ann Hill Carter of Shirley Plantation who bore five children who grew to adulthood, including Robert Edward Lee, born in 1807 at Stratford Hall.

The first decade of the 19th century was a time of serious pecuniary problems for Light Horse Harry. Due to a number of ill-fated speculations in land, Lee found himself in prison for debt in 1809. By 1811, Lee's oldest son by Matilda claimed Stratford Hall as his inheritance and the younger Lee family moved with Harry to Alexandria. Their first domicile in that city was a house on Cameron Street that still stands today. After several months there, the family moved to their distant cousin's house on Oronoko Street. In 1812, Light Horse Harry was severely beaten and disfigured by a mob in Baltimore who disagreed with his dovish position on the War with England. Therefore, it was both for matters of health and because of his financial distress that Lee left the country for the West Indies in 1813.

The Lees lived in the house on Oronoco until Robert went to the United State Military Academy at West Point in 1825. His mother moved to Georgetown for a time, but was residing at the Fitzhugh estate of Ravensworth when she died in 1829.

Tax and title records indicate that in 1820 Fitzhugh's heirs sold the property to a William Brent of Stafford County. In 1824, some months before the Lees moved out, the house was sold at auction to the Mechanic's Bank of Alexandria. In 1826 the bank leased the house to William and Portia Hodgson. Portia was the daughter of William Lee of "Greenspring," one of the first American envoys to Britain after the Revolution. She married William Hodgson, a successful London Merchant and they moved to Alexandria (Bailey 1966:4). Portia Hodgson bought the house from the Mechanic's Bank in 1839 and it was occupied by her and her heirs until it was sold to William C. Yeaton in 1851.

The home remained an upper middle class residence throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1966 the Lee-Jackson Foundation purchased and converted the building to an historic house museum.

Even by Alexandria standards, the documentary record for this site is remarkable. First hand accounts, legend and lore, even ghost stories are told about the Fitzhugh-Lee house. There is a sketch of the house and gardens complete with the location and types of plantings as it looked ca. 1870 when Robert E. Lee paid his last visit to the house in the spring of 1870 (Wagener 1934:1). Also, the early owners of the house held insurance with the Mutual Assurance Society. Sketch maps were drawn on the

policies showing the locations of each of the insured buildings. At least five of these documents survive for different years from 1796 to 1846. The dimensions and positions of the buildings remain the same throughout this period. Besides the main house a two story rear ell containing morning room and kitchen are listed as two separate structures. A one story brick smokehouse [razed in this century] was attached to the rear of the kitchen. Two substantial outbuildings including a two story carriage house and a one-story brick office were shown in the east side yard.

Archaeological explorations of the Lee-Boyhood Home (44AX43) by Alexandria Archaeology commenced in June 1989 with limited test excavations. Research goals for the 1990 season included locating remains of the one-story brick office building in the side yard, possible examinations of a well that was once under the smokehouse at the rear of the kitchen ell, and location of carriage house remains. The well feature was sealed off by the managers of the site before we had an opportunity to examine it. An attempt to locate the carriage house failed, but the footing to what was probably a garden well were encountered.

During the first two weeks of the project (May 15-25, 1990) students from the George Washington University Summer Field Session in Historical Archaeology began the investigations. Work continued through mid-July with Alexandria Archaeology volunteers. Excavators found the remains of the side yard office building in exactly the right spot as indicated by the insurance maps, beginning in 1796 when John Potts took out the first policy. It is guessed that Potts used this building to conduct

the daily business of the Potomac Canal Company. The office appears on the Hodgson's policy dated 1846 but had disappeared by the time the first fire insurance map was published in 1877 (Hopkins 1877:46).

Since there was no evidence of a fire and relatively few bricks were found inside the stone foundation, the building may have been razed and the bricks reused at some other location. More than 2,000 artifacts associated with the office included household trash such as broken Chinese porcelain and English pearlware plates and tea wares, a bone toothbrush, clay pipes, and brass buttons. An 1837 seated liberty dime was recovered on the surface of one of the test squares elsewhere on the site.

It is possible that the Lee-Jackson Foundation might reconstruct the office for use as an interpretive visitor's center.



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