

On Common Ground by Heather Graham

April 12, 1861 – “At 4:30 a.m. Confederates under General Pierre Beauregard open fire with 50 cannons upon Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina; the Civil War begins” (“U.S. Civil War”).

There are about twenty lots in our neighborhood; all consist of close to three and a half acres. Most of the lots have houses now, all of them are big and well kept; a perfect place to raise an upper-middle class family. Just outside of Richmond, the Boscobel neighborhood gives individuals a constant taste of the southern country air, a place to grow a garden, to sit out on the porch at night and look at the stars.... The neighbors are kind as they greet one another in passing. Families come together for picnics and cook-outs and mothers go on walks together with their dogs while the kids are in school. The kids of the neighborhood love to play by the creek in the back yard. They build forts and huts, find pretend food and crayfish in the creek, and play hide-and-seek in the woods beyond the creek. It is the peaceful, everyday life in the Boscobel neighborhood.

April 17, 1861 – “Virginia secedes from the Union, followed within five weeks by Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina, thus forming an eleven state Confederacy” (“U.S. Civil War”).

April 17, 1861 – The *Daily Richmond Examiner* reads,

The great event of all our lives has at last come to pass. A war of gigantic proportions, infinite consequences and indefinite duration is on us, and will affect the interests and happiness of every man, woman, or child, lofty or humble, in this country called Virginia. We cannot shun it, we cannot alleviate it, we cannot stop it. We have nothing left now but to fight our way through these troubles; and the inquiry most interesting at the moment is, what are our means of resistance? (Daniel 13)

I met Mrs. Atherholt from next door and Mr. Saverino from up the street when we moved to Boscobel my freshmen year in High School. Five-one-five Calm Creek Road. Mrs. Atherholt came over the day we moved in to welcome us to the neighborhood. She came up to the door with a big smile and a freshly baked loaf of bread. With boxes and furniture still spread out around the house she flung the door open and gave each of us a big hug of acceptance. We found room to sit and chat. As the bread slowly melted in my mouth I listened to Mrs. Atherholt's stories.

The first time I saw Mr. Saverino was one day when he was poking around in our back yard. Strapped across his shoulder he carried a metal detector that swept across the surface of the ground as he walked slowly back and forth beside the creek. His big head phones covered his ears and drowned out any sound except for that which could send his heart racing, that which could lead to historical treasures. The beeping of the metal detector set his mind in motion. And when he carefully uncovered a small metal button, it whispered softly, speaking of a great general, “He possessed every virtue of the great commanders, without their vices” (Jones).

January 19, 1807 – “Robert Edward Lee was born on the Stratford estate in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the son of Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a soldier and political leader, and Ann Hill Carter” (Weigley).

My dad, Overton Lee Graham, was born on January 19, 1949. Dad always said that his parents originally wanted to name him Robert Lee after our distant relative Robert E. Lee, on whose birthday he was born, but it was too much. They settled with Overton Lee, but he goes by Lee. When I was young my dad would sit with me telling me stories of the Confederate general. Dad would emphasize Lee's faith in God and Lee's dedication to his homeland, even though he disagreed with a key element, slavery. While I would sit on my dad's lap listening to his stories, my dad always would pause for a moment and in a quiet voice he would whisper to me, "He was a foe without hate; a friend without treachery; a private citizen without wrong; a neighbor without reproach; a Christian without hypocrisy, and a man without guilt" (Jones). I heard stories of Lee's great character, how he freed all of his slaves, but most of them didn't want to leave so they continued working in his service. "He opposed secession, disliked slavery, and never himself owned more than about a half dozen slaves (whom he emancipated before the Civil War), but he believed he must be loyal to Virginia and could not take up arms against the Commonwealth" (Weigley).

April 20, 1861 – "Robert E. Lee resigns his commission in the United States Army. "I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children." Lee then goes to Richmond, Virginia, is offered command of the military and naval forces of Virginia, and accepts" ("U.S. Civil War").

Dad works in Richmond. It takes him close to thirty minutes to get to his high-rise building in downtown from our home at Boscobel. Along with all the other businessmen working downtown, he follows morning traffic through the narrow city streets. He makes his way each morning to his reserved place in the parking deck below the building across the street from his work. Greeting everyone he sees as he crosses the street, he enters the old Crestar building that takes up the block between 9th St. and 10th St., and Cary St. and Main St. He takes the elevator to the 17th floor where papers await his approval and his phone constantly rings off the hook throughout the day as clients call seeking his advice. From his window he can see the capital buildings. Busy politicians scurry from place to place. The old Confederate White House sits close to the current Governor's Mansion. From another view his office he can see the canal and Chaco Slip. During the Civil War ships would travel up the canal from Lynchburg to Richmond and drop off supplies at Chaco Slip (Graham). At lunch time Dad takes clients out to talk about business and the stock market. He crosses Cary St. and walks a couple of blocks beside the cobblestone street to the center of Chaco Slip where he has a choice of many restaurants where he and his clients may enjoy a nice meal.

The gentleman does not needlessly and unnecessarily remind an offender of a wrong he may have committed against him. He cannot only forgive, he can forget; and he strives for that nobleness of self and mildness of character which impart sufficient strength to let the past be but the past. A true man of honor feels humbled himself when he cannot help humbling others. – Robert E. Lee

1967 – Dressed in his coat and tie, Overton Lee Graham makes his way to his first class as a freshman at Washington and Lee University. Finding a seat in the center of the third row Lee tries to appear comfortable as the silence of the twenty person class eats away at the inner lining of his stomach. Nervousness sets in as the professor enters the classroom and sets his stack of books neatly in a pile on the desk. For a few seconds the professor just looks at the classroom, meeting the

eye of each student and contemplating how long to hold the class in suspense. Finally he speaks. "Today, gentlemen, marks a great turning point in each of your lives. You have entered into a place where you are expected to be gentlemen and act in a manner that our founding fathers, George Washington and Robert E. Lee, would have considered gentlemanlike. Robert E. Lee once said "at all times behave as a gentleman" therefore you must be polite and carry yourselves in truthfulness and fairness (Graham). Look at Lee himself: "He was obedient to authority as a servant, and loyal in authority as a true king" (Jones). Gentlemen, we at Washington and Lee University intend to instill these characteristics in each of you."

March 2, 1862 – President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, summons Lee to Richmond to resume his duties as adviser. The Confederacy confronts Union offensives almost everywhere around its circumference without enough manpower to create an adequate defensive. Major General George B. McClellan is preparing to advance on Richmond (Weigley).

Mrs. Atherholt said, "There used to be a Ferry called the Boscobel Ferry. It came right up the canal that runs along the James River to where our neighborhood is now. Soldiers and such would come up to Boscobel which used to be a Civil War camp site. The soldiers' favorite place to come was Calm Creek. They would come right up to Calm Creek and pan for gold. They would relax by the peaceful water and tell each other stories of their homes and families. It's the same creek that still runs behind our houses" (Atherholt).

1862 – Col. McAnerney writes, "The city (Richmond) became the objective point of all the military operations.... The practically continuous siege and repeated raids kept the city in constant alarm" (Swank 33).

May 16, 1862 – *Daily Richmond Examiner*:

Virginia is not dead yet! The ancient spirit is still in the land... It is encouraging that the legislature has found its communication with the President, on the subject of the defense of Richmond, satisfactory... he will never permit this city to be taken, or leave it while one brick remains on another. (Daniel 53)

Mr. Saverino enjoys searching for civil war buttons and bullets around the land in our neighborhood. When I talked to him, Mr. Saverino said that he had found metal buttons from every southern state in the Confederacy, including North Carolina and Alabama. According to Mr. Saverino's discoveries, he has come to believe that our property was a camp site where the sick soldiers were sent from Richmond so as to contain the diseases and prevent infections from spreading.

March, 1864 – "The beginning of a massive, coordinated campaign involving all the Union Armies. In Virginia, Grant begins advancing toward Richmond..." ("U.S. Civil War"). Col. McAnerney writes, "The great battles fought in the vicinity had filled the hospitals and private houses with sick and wounded soldiers. Even the success of the Confederate forces increased the strained conditions by filling Belle Isle and the great tobacco warehouses with Federal prisoners" (Swank 33).

I love hanging out down around Chaco Slip. The smell of coffee fills the summer air as you walk down the sidewalks passing coffee shops with walls covered in artwork. You'll see all of the old warehouses that have been around for who knows how long, but have now been converted into hair

salons, restaurants and offices. The sidewalks are always busy, most of the time with businessmen, and although most people don't notice the quaint shopping area or the old cobblestone streets, rarely do you pass a person that doesn't meet you with a warm smile or a nice southern greeting. Time after time I have passed by the Tobacco Co. Restaurant and have made a comment here and there, wishing that maybe one day an expensive date would bring me to that place; but I have yet to go through the doors. The building which used to be a tobacco warehouse has been around for many years. Most people don't even realize that within the walls where people will splurge \$50 for a meal, over a hundred years earlier those same walls acted as a cage encasing prisoners, many of whom may have spent hours just counting spider webs between the bricks.

February, 1914 – John McAnerney, Colonel 3rd Va. Regiment LDT, wrote,

It is now more than fifty years since the eventful day that Dahlgren and Kilpatrick threatened the City of Richmond, capital of the Confederate States, with destruction and desolation...The first of March 1864, was a raw and disagreeable day, fear and apprehension were increasing...In this state of excitement our command formed in front of the war department and begun its march...I did not recognize the importance of the event until told by President Davis that we had saved Richmond and its people from ruin and destruction. (Swank 37)

Driving through the crowded Saturday traffic of Richmond city I make my way down the old cobble stone street. The bumping of my car is enough to give me a headache. "Why don't they just pave that road?" I ask myself. "It would make things a lot easier for everyone." I make my way past the Jefferson Hotel, the Tobacco Company Restaurant, and Chaco Slip to my favorite pizza restaurant, Bottom's Up. Bottom's Up sits by the edge of the canal and the James River. Years ago they put up a flood wall, so there is no longer a view of the water from the restaurant. A canal walk runs along the canal for a couple of miles and at night my friends and I often walk along it, daring each other to take a step close to the old mucky canal water. Rarely do we ever stop, or even notice the historical plaques that line the canal walk, telling about Richmond, the Civil War, and the great general. The plaques whisper softly to anyone that will listen, "He was a Caesar without his ambition; a Frederick without his tyranny; a Napoleon without his selfishness; and a Washington without his reward" (Jones). Often we make our way up the canal walk to Belle Isle where we swim and hang out at the river during the summer. Belle Isle is a small Island in the James, and during the summer they have great bands that play through the night.

April 2, 1865 – "The Confederate Capital, Richmond, is evacuated. Fires and looting break out. The next day, Union troops enter and raise the Stars and Stripes" (U.S. Civil War").

If you drive down Monument Avenue, besides hoping that you would quickly make it to your destination before you find yourself lost in the Fan, you will see that it is lined with Civil War monuments. A couple of years ago they put a small fence around the Robert E. Lee monument. It used to be a great place to go with friends. A place where you could climb up and sitting on a ledge about five feet up you and your friends could break out the cigars and talk through the night. The talk never had to do with the importance of the monument, but rather usually referred to how everyone's lives had evolved in the last twenty-four hours. No one ever paid attention to the whispers going on around them saying, "He was gentle as a woman in life; modest and pure as a

virgin in thought; watchful as a Roman vestal in duty; submissive to law as Socrates, and grand in battle as Achilles” (Jones).

April 9, 1865 – “Gen. Robert E. Lee surrenders his Confederate Army to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at the village of Appomattox Court House in Virginia” (“U.S. Civil War”).

Robert E. Lee’s monument is the only one that stands different from the rest of the monuments on Monument Ave. It faces north while the others face the south. They say the reason Lee faces the North is because he chose to fight for the south, even when asked to lead the Northern armies. Whispers whip around the monument for anyone to grasp, “He loved, he did right, he was not hypercritical, and he showed no guilt. He was an obedient servant and was loyal to his word. He was selfless and sought no reward. He was a true gentleman” (Jones).

Yesterday my dad sat me down. He spoke to me about virtue, selflessness, obedience, and loyalty. He said that while raising me he has strived to teach me honesty, determination, to be humble, and to be a servant. He said “our lives have been built upon this ground, we have constructed our own world on top of worlds easily overseen, yet we are continually influenced by what those worlds once were.” With that my dad took out a little box. It was silver and polished so I could easily see my reflection on the surface. Opening the box I found a silver ring shining just as bright as the container in which it lay. Putting on the cross ring, I looked down at the box with my initials engraved on the top as my dad said, “use this box and wear this ring, but most of all, let these things remind you of the virtues I have tried to instill in you. Never forget where these things came from. I trust you now to be on your own, to live out what I have taught you and to teach others these virtues that have been passed down.”

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