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NEARBY HISTORY:

Robert G. Lee worked and studied hard to pave his path

Robert Greene Lee was born Nov. 11, 1886, the fifth of nine children. His parents, David and Sally Lee, were tenant farmers on Frank Massey's farm in lower Fort Mill, an area once known as "The Fork."

NEARBY HISTORY



Louise Pettus

When Eli Springs of Charlotte offered David Lee the position of general manager of Springfield plantation with a salary of \$30 a month, he jumped at the chance. He had been earning \$250 to \$300 a year, and he was swapping life in a three-room log cabin for an 18-room house.

The house, now headquarters of Leroy Springs Recreation, was built in 1806 by John Springs III.

In the new location, 6-year-old Robert found his assigned work to be carrying water to farm workers, setting rat traps and picking cotton.

In those days, rural schools closed for the cotton-picking season (September through November) and were in session June through August.

The family rose at 4 a.m. and went to bed "with the chickens." That is, except on Sunday. The Lees were devout churchgoers. Robert Lee would become nationally famous as a Baptist evangelist.

The Lee parents were very strict. On Sunday, the only work allowed was milking the cows and turning them out to pasture. After church, "the children were allowed to walk in the woods, to pick flowers but never to play any games." There was always an evening Bible reading and prayers.

In spite of the far superior conditions at Springfield, David Lee wanted a farm of his own. In the ninth year as Springfield manager, Lee resigned and went to Texas to see if he could find something suitable, but the glory days of cheap land in the West were over.

He came back to Fort Mill and used his savings to make a down payment on 188 acres of "poor" land from Dr. T.L. Kirkpatrick.

The Kirkpatrick land was described as "red hills and rocky gullies and swamp land."

Lee agreed to pay \$1,880 to be paid off in 10 years at 8 percent interest. He had to sell off part of the land to pay the mortgage.

The Lee children hated to leave Springfield for the plain five-room farmhouse, but their father wanted "pride of ownership."

With the move, the Lee children had to change schools, leaving Railroad Bridge School, which was near Springfield for Flint Hill School, which was a walk of three miles.

In rainy weather, David Lee

took the children to school in a buggy. Robert Lee's biographer estimated that Robert attended only about one day of every 10 days.

Robert switched from Flint Hill School to the Massey School, which was located at the present Doby Bridge Presbyterian Church site. Miss Suzie White was the teacher at Massey School.

Years later, Robert Lee recounted the sheer joy in which he learned "to parse and conjugate, of studying geography, history, spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic."

School was a welcome relief from the back-breaking labor of picking cotton, swinging a wheat cradle, plowing 15 hours a day, pushing a crosscut saw, hoeing corn, pulling fodder, cleaning stables, splitting rails, digging ditches, building fences, picking blackberries and battling chiggers.

Robert dreamed of being a preacher.

He learned that he would need to know Latin to be eligible to enter college. Latin wasn't taught at Massey School. He walked 3 miles to pay Professor Boyd 50 cents a lesson. He

earned the money by trapping rabbits, peddling broom straw and selling peanuts at 5 cents a bag.

He read every book he could find.

When he was 21, Robert signed up to work on the Panama Canal. He earned enough money to attend Furman College.

He became a famous preacher and was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.