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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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May ASO Magazine Column
**The Way We Handle the End is
Just as Important as How We Began**

This month as we mark the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil War, I turn to focus on the ending of the War Between the States. In all of the history books, we spend a great deal of time discussing the start of the Civil War but yet very little is spent looking at the complex way it ended. The ending of the war, and in this case the behavior of a defeated leader, is just as important if not more important than the beginning. The manner in which it ended shaped the way the nation should continue.

General Robert E. Lee has always stood out to me as an example of what a great leader is. Just something about his appearance resonates of honor, prestige, dignity and respect. Brilliant as a general, masterful as a tactician, his military exploits were already legendary while he was alive but have only continued to grow as time marches forward. Yet, it is his actions ending the war, and more importantly his actions as after his surrender that should be recognized.

On Palm Sunday, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to United States General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. Interesting enough, the actual surrender did not take place in a court house but at the home of Wilmer and Virginia McLean. The name of the small rural town was Appomattox Court House, thus leading to the confusion that the name indicates a building and not a town.

The McLean home is an interesting choice because the McLeans had only recently moved to Appomattox Court House in the spring of 1863. They moved because their first home, the Yorkshire Plantation in Manassas, Virginia, was the location of the first great battle of the Civil War, the Battle of Bull Run. Their kitchen had been destroyed during the battle when a Yankee cannon ball burst through the home. This battle and the continued conflict in the area led Wilmer and Virginia McLean to decide to move to a location far from the conflict. Little did they know that their home would be at the center of the war once more, this time chosen as the location for the surrender.

At this point, the end of the great Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, Confederate General Robert E. Lee also comes to an end. He now becomes just Robert E. Lee. He is not even citizen Robert E. Lee, as that right's of citizenship have not been granted to him. At this point, defeated and dejected, a lesser man could have just faded into the darkness of history. But a great leader like Lee has more to give.

Robert E. Lee immediately turns towards the future of the United States, not the Confederacy. He immediately starts to write and speak towards peace and reconciliation. Weeks after his surrender, he writes a public letter to Confederate President Jefferson Davis in which he expressed his opinion that the Confederacy surrender rather than continue on the war. While Jefferson Davis rejected this letter, it had a profound effect on the remaining Confederate Generals whom would follow his example and request rather than the demands on their President to continue the war.

Not just this open letter, but his actions in surrendering, his speeches following surrendering, and the American lives his actions towards peace saved could be a column all to itself. Yet the little discussed actions on a late May Sunday in 1865 at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond would tell me more about this great man than I could read in any book or speech.

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church was built in 1845 and was at the time the largest church in Virginia and one of the largest in the United States. Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and many of the other prominent Confederate leaders were parishioners. The building survived the surrender of Richmond in April of 1865 and the burning of the town at the hands of the Confederates as they left. Now, in late May of 1865, the church services continue on.

During most of the service, nothing is different on this Sunday. But then just as the minister is about to present Holy Communion, a tall well-dressed black man sitting in the section reserved for African Americans unexpectedly advances to the communion rail. No one in the community—white or black—had ever seen him before and his name has been lost to time. He proudly walked down the center aisle through the middle of the church where all could see him and approached the communion rail, where he knelt before the priest and the church's backdrop painting of Jesus.

The congregation was in shock. Never before had an African American come forward to receive communion with the white congregation in this church. Just months before, the parishioners had lead a rebellion to continue enslaving African Americans. They sat in shock, not sure what to do. The priest just stood motionless, not sure how to proceed. To many of them, the act was unimaginable. They could live in defeat, shameful as it may be. But this brazen act by an African American daring to take communion with them less than a month after the surrender of the Confederacy was just too much to comprehend.

After what seems an interminable amount of time, an older white man rises. His hair snowy white, head up, and eyes proud, he strode down the center aisle and knelt down next to black man. There, before a painting of Jesus and in the house of the lord, Robert E. Lee and an unknown African American received communion together. The rest of the congregation joins them, once more following the lead of their former General.

It is said that actions speak loader than words. In the writings of Robert E. Lee, in his speeches, from his leadership we can still learn today. But to me this silent action taken from a defeated Confederate General will remain in my mind whenever I think of the great Robert E. Lee.

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