



CHAPTER TWO



LEE'S FIRST MAJOR ACT AS PRESIDENT

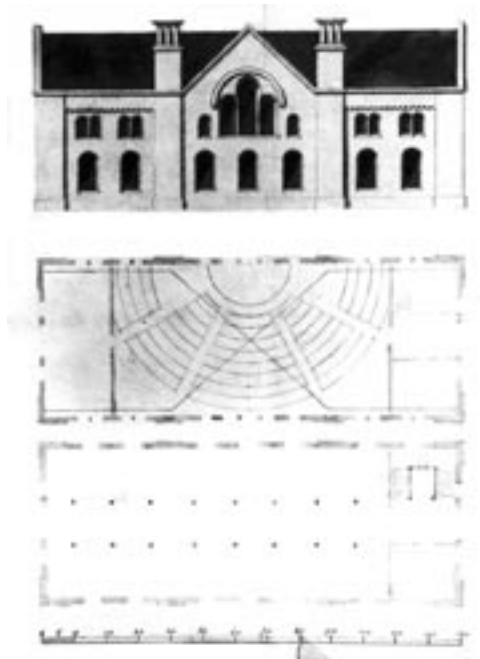
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Robert E. Lee completed his first term of office in the spring of 1866, surveying the needs of the college as it struggled to get back on its feet. Of the college's many needs, the president's first choice was the construction of a new chapel, a place for both worship and student assembly.

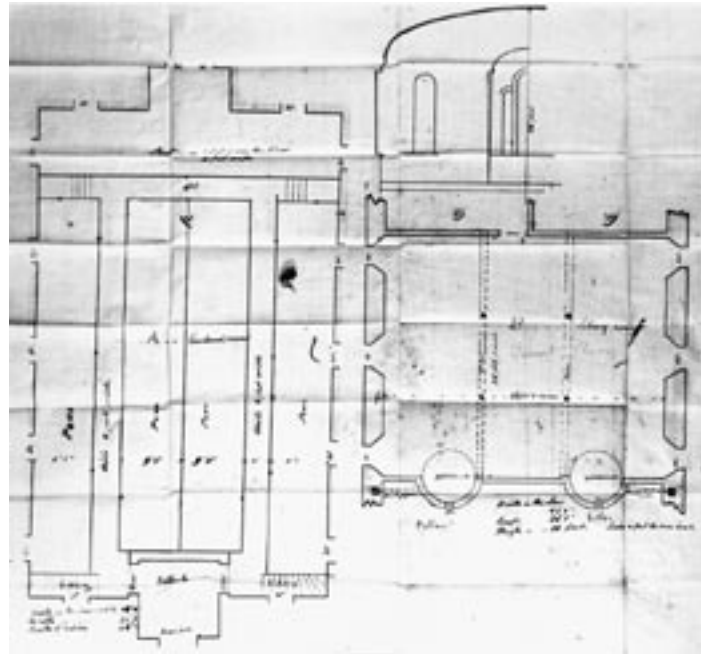
In the "Report of the President" to the board of trustees dated June 1866, Lee reported, "A larger chapel is much needed. The room used is too small and badly adapted to the purpose. It is moreover required for additional lecture rooms, into which it could be conveniently converted." The plan was to convert the current chapel to a room for the professor of Experimental Philosophy and Applied Science, and to build a small addition for scientific apparatus and tools.

Lee chose a conspicuous site for the chapel facing the row of other campus buildings. In July 1866, the board of trustees approved his request and authorized a new chapel "to be built at a cost not exceeding \$10,000." Revisiting the issue in November, the trustees reasserted their support for the new chapel and removed the cost restriction.

There has been much speculation about the chapel's design. Lee's son, Custis, was an engineering professor at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). Lee himself was a trained engineer. Custis Lee studied available texts in the VMI library on church designs. The style of the chapel is surprising in that it bears no similarity to any other campus building.



- First proposal, not accepted



- Chapel floor plan that was accepted

While it is obvious that Lee and his son contributed to the design of the chapel, Colonel Thomas H. Williamson, a professor of civil and military engineering at VMI, is credited with the design. Williamson introduced architecture in VMI coursework by 1848 and authored a text for use in his class. The first design suggested by Williamson had a Gothic appearance and indicated a circular seating pattern.

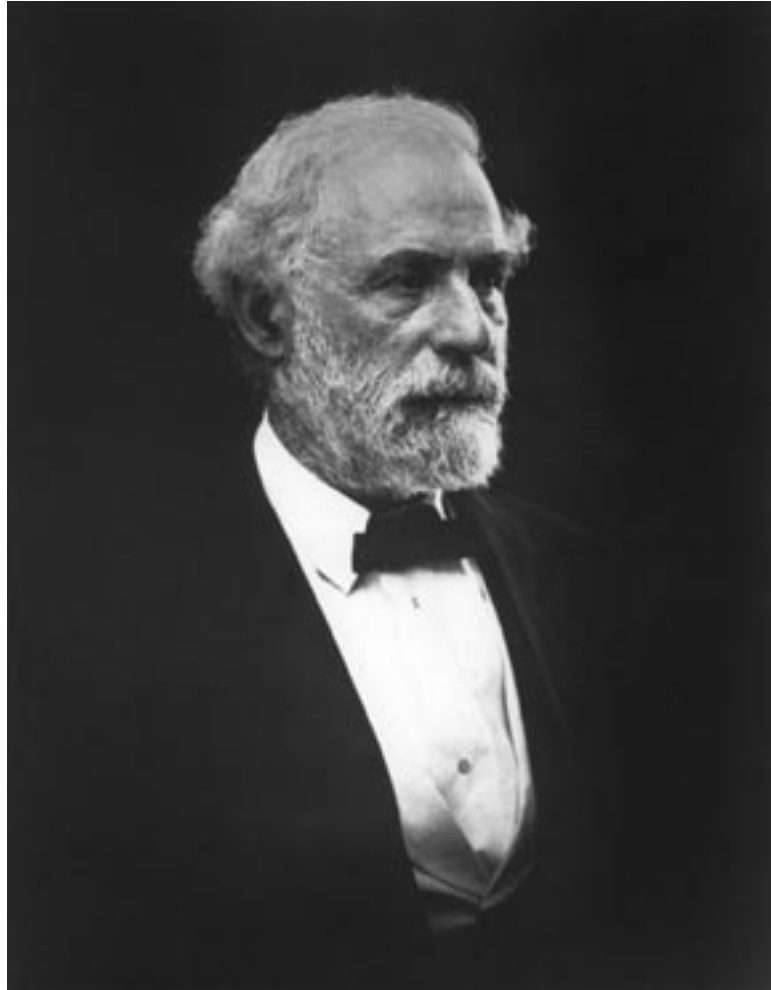
The second plan appears to be patterned after James Renwick's design for the 1849 Smithsonian Institution building. This "Romanesque" approach was selected by Custis Lee from a book entitled, *Hints on Public Architecture* by Robert Dale Owens. Custis Lee later wrote that he selected the design "because it was simple and inexpensive."

The plan features a platform at the end for the pulpit and box pews with two aisles. Custis Lee further noted, "The galleries were an addition afterwards and somewhat spoil the auditorium."

Williamson wrote his daughter in St. Louis: "I have been thrown a good deal with General Lee lately. The Building Committee of [the] College got me to design the new chapel which they are now erecting directly in front of the Central building in the lot on the south side of college avenue. And I have made all the working drawings and written out the specifications, all of which I had to confer with the Genl [sic] and explain to him."

Work on the chapel was slowed because of funding difficulties. Lee monitored the construction daily, making adjustments as needed and coordinating with both Custis Lee and Williamson.

At this same time, the new president's house was also under construction. The home, designed by VMI professor C.W. Oltmann, was built with a large stable attached to the house by a covered walkway. When the family moved in, Lee stated that he was pleased that he and Traveller were "under the same roof."



*- Robert E. Lee, 1870
Photo by Michael Miley*

With the many construction projects under way, Lee also directed the planting of numerous trees on the front campus to beautify the site. He instructed that the trees were not to be planted in rows. "Nature never plants trees in rows," said Lee. "As far as possible imitate nature."

As the chapel completion neared, plans were made for its dedication, scheduled to be held during commencement week in June 1868. On Sunday, June 14, 1868, the college chapel was dedicated in a morning service attended by the student body, faculty and area ministers. The choir from the Presbyterian Church led the singing and Dr. Pendleton, rector of the Episcopal Church, gave the dedicatory address. Later that day, Washington College held the first of many graduation exercises in the new chapel, led by the baccalaureate sermon given by Rev. Dr. Minnegerode.

In his annual "Report of the President" to the board of trustees on June 16, 1868, Lee wrote, "The completion of the new chapel, which has recently been dedicated to the service of Almighty God, is a pleasing as well as useful addition to the College buildings. Besides the auditorium room for religious worship, which will contain about 700 persons, there is a large room in the basement appropriate for a lecture room and two others suitable for offices or recitation rooms."

With the opening of the new school term in September 1869, the chapel was put into regular use. A religious service was held in the chapel on weekdays and Saturdays at 7:45 a.m. In the chilly winter months of December, January and

February, the morning services were delayed until 8:45 a.m. On Sundays, an hour of prayer was offered at 9 a.m.

Because Lee did not want to be president of a denominational school, the chapel was not consecrated by any specific denomination. The pastors of Lexington's four churches rotated officiating services. The morning services consisted of singing, scripture reading and prayer.

Lee never failed to attend the morning service at the chapel. Each morning, those in attendance found the president sitting in his regular seat, the first pew on the far left facing the podium. Afterwards, he retired to his office on the basement level. Once asked why he maintained such a serious demeanor during the morning services, Lee responded, "I was thinking of my responsibility to Almighty God for all these young men."

Despite his own strong religious convictions, Lee chose not to require student chapel attendance. He instead appealed to the students through a "conviction of duty." A telling article in the *Lexington Gazette* noted that chapel attendance was increasing due to a different influence: "The other morning a certain bachelor Professor was escorting one of our belles to the chapel when an onlooker remarked: 'Yonder comes Prof. ___ bringing a lady!' You should rather say 'that the lady is bringing Prof. ___.' And so it is the presence of the ladies will attract students and bachelor Professors, and we hope that many others of them will make it a point to go every morning."



- Miss Christiana Bond's sketch of Washington College in 1868

Lee maintained hours until 2 p.m. each day, six days a week, at his office in the chapel basement. In addition to Lee's office, the basement also housed the college library with its 5,800 volumes and a large room for use as the meeting place for the college's Y.M.C.A. chapter, organized at Lee's suggestion in 1867.

All college assemblies, gatherings and commencement exercises were held at the chapel. Very quickly, the chapel assumed a role central to the life of the college and its students. ☆