

Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

- ²¹ quoted in James McPherson, *Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1996), 62.
- ²² This amendment was passed in the U.S. Congress. Events of March 1861 had moved too far and were advancing too fast for such an amendment to move to completion.
- ²³ Speech delivered by Robert Toombs, November 13, 1860, Milledgeville, Georgia, reprinted in Freehling and Simpson, eds., *Secession Debate*, 40.
- ²⁴ McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 64
- ²⁵ "John Singleton Mosby to Samuel Chapman," Washington, D.C., June 20, 1907 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York, New York).

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The Remarkable Legacy of Selina Gray

Emma Gray Syphax, left and Sarah Gray Wilson, Selina Gray's daughters, assisted the U.S. Army with the restoration of Arlington House.

Among early preservationists, Selina Gray stands out as a unique and remarkable individual; yet, her name is nowhere to be found in the annals of the historic preservation movement. That Selina did not fit the prototype of the early stewards of the nation's past in no way diminishes the importance of her contributions. In fact, it is her very dissimilarity from traditional 19th-century preservationists that makes Selina's story so compelling.

Selina Gray was one of the many slaves owned by George Washington Parke Custis. Raised at Mount Vernon, Custis was Martha Washington's grandson and the adopted son of George Washington. When Washington died in 1799, Custis inherited and purchased many of the President's possessions. After he left Mount Vernon, Custis needed a proper place to exhibit his "Washington treasury." In 1802, he finished the first wing of his new home, Arlington House.

Construction continued for another 16 years. Custis intended the house to be far more than a private home for his family. The building served as a shrine to George Washington, which made Arlington House one of the nation's earliest memorials. On display was the "Washington treasury," which included portraits, china, furniture, and even the President's war tents. Custis welcomed all visitors who wanted to view his collection of mem-

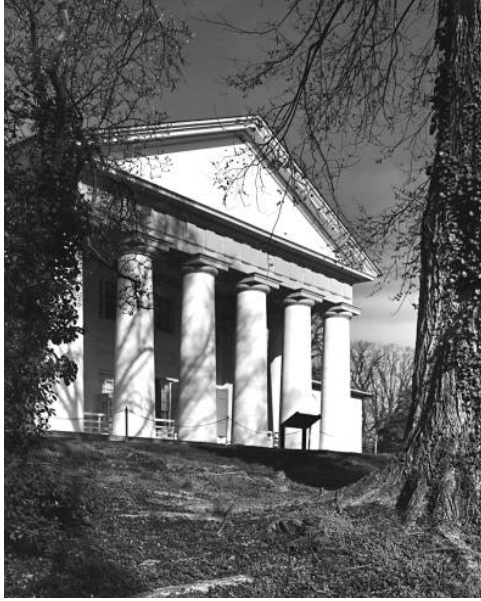


orabilia, and thus Arlington also functioned as an early American museum.

Much of the day-to-day care of Custis' "treasury" fell to his slaves. The first generation of Arlington slaves belonged to Martha Washington and had come from Mount Vernon. They remembered and took pride in their service to and affiliation with the Washingtons. This heritage, as well as the daily responsibility for the upkeep of the Washington relics, made a significant impression on the succeeding generation of slaves, particularly Selina Gray.

The daughter of Sally and Leonard Norris, Selina was born and raised on the Arlington estate. She, as well as the other slaves, received a rudimentary education from the Custis family. From the time she was old enough to work, Selina probably trained as a house servant. Thus, from an early age, Selina was steeped in Washington apotheosis.

At least some of Custis' slaves attended one of the most important events ever to occur at Arlington. In 1831, Custis' only child, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, married Robert E. Lee, a young army lieutenant. Although no one knew it at the time, Lee's connection to the family would one day cost them their ancestral home as well as the Washington treasury.



Arlington House.
Photo by Jack E.
Boucher, HABS,
NPS.

Over the next three decades, the lives of Mary Lee and Selina Gray became increasingly entwined. Selina eventually became Mrs. Lee's personal maid. Even before her children began to arrive, Mary Lee developed a reputation for personal untidiness, lack of punctuality, and haphazard housekeeping. She increasingly relied on Selina to maintain order within the household.

As the years passed, the two women developed a mutual

respect and genuine affection for each other. When Selina married Thornton Gray, Mrs. Lee arranged to have the service performed by an Episcopal clergyman in the same room where she herself had exchanged vows with her husband. Both women presided over large families: Mary Lee gave birth to seven children and Selina bore eight. The joys and frustrations of motherhood served as another common bond between the two women.

The advent of the Civil War forever altered life at Arlington. On April 19, 1861, after more than 30 years' service in the United States Army, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission. He left Arlington shortly thereafter, and traveled to Richmond to assume command of Virginia's military forces. Lee's resignation and his service in the Confederate army caused many to view him as a traitor. His decision ultimately cost Mary Lee her

family home and threatened the future of the Washington collection.

Mrs. Lee soon realized that she and her children would be forced to abandon Arlington. The house simply sat too close to the United States' capital. The family understood that the Union army would eventually occupy the 1,100-acre estate in order to help defend Washington. Few events in her lifetime grieved Mary Lee more than the loss of the place she valued

"dearer than life." After she resigned herself to the inevitable, Mary Lee devised a defensive plan for her household.

Of utmost concern was the safety of the Washington artifacts. The most treasured items, such as family portraits, the President's letters and papers, as well as some of his personal effects, were packed and shipped away for safekeeping. Many of the original Mount Vernon pieces such as artwork, the Cincinnati china, knife boxes, and tea table remained at Arlington locked in the cellar, garret, and closets.

Once she had secured her treasured family heirlooms and prepared to leave, Mrs. Lee summoned Selina Gray. As she entrusted the household keys to her slave, Mrs. Lee explained to Selina that henceforth she would serve as the head of the household. Thus the responsibility for the house and all its venerable contents passed from owner to slave.

The enormity of this event cannot be overemphasized. Mary Lee's decision to place Selina in charge testified to her supreme confidence and trust in the woman's abilities. Well aware of the national significance of the vast collection that had been left in her care, Selina understood the importance of her new role. Not only did she assume the stewardship of the Lees' revered possessions, she also became the guardian of their heritage, and, in a broader sense, the heritage of the entire nation.

Both women understood the emotional ramifications of their arrangement. Selina had been a companion to Mrs. Lee for many years. Undoubtedly, Selina's company would have greatly comforted Mary Lee during her involuntary exile from her beloved home. Such a request, however, would have required Selina to abandon her husband and children. Mrs. Lee refused to ask such a sacrifice. For her part, Selina was well aware of the rumors that slaves might experience rough treatment at the hands of Federal soldiers. Yet she put aside her concerns for her own personal safety, as well as that of her family, so that she might carry out her new responsibilities.

Around May 15, 1861, the Lees left Arlington for what they hoped would be a temporary exile. Removal from her home proved most painful for Mary Lee. She had grown up at Arlington, married in one of its rooms, and given birth to six of her children in another. Both of her parents had passed away in the house. Yet, as painful as the separation was, she could draw comfort from the knowledge that her home possessed a capable and vigilant guardian. Just several weeks after the Lees' departure from Arlington, an acquaintance commented on how cheerful Mary appeared, despite having left many of her valuables behind. Such peace of mind was possible only because of

Mount Vernon
bookcase from the
"Washington
Treasury" on display
at Arlington
House.





Martha Washington's knife boxes; dinner plate, Cincinnati service; and globe from the "Washington Treasury."



Selina's presence at Arlington.

For a brief time, the daily routine continued as usual on the estate. The slaves, by then the sole occupants, went about their activities under Selina Gray's supervision. Then on May 23, 1861, thousands of Federal troops marched out of Washington and into Virginia. By the end of the month, Arlington had become headquarters for the commander of the Department of Northern Virginia, Brigadier General Irwin McDowell.

The presence of the large numbers of soldiers who occupied Arlington House and its grounds proved a constant source of anxiety for Selina Gray. There was little she could do about the damage to the

property. Union soldiers had constructed roads and forts and cleared most of the large forest at Arlington. Instead, Selina concentrated her efforts on the sacred possessions inside the house for which she was responsible.

For the next six months, Selina successfully executed her duties as the guardian of the family heirlooms. In December, however, she discovered that various items had disappeared from the house. Selina's daughters later recalled an incident in

which their mother had witnessed looting in progress; she personally confronted the individuals and demanded that they stop their pillaging. This incident reveals several crucial characteristics about Selina: a deep-rooted sense of responsibility; her confidence and pride in her authority; and her personal courage.

After her initial discovery, Selina made a thorough investiga-

tion. To her horror, she found that the secured areas of the house had been broken into, and some of the Washington relics had been stolen. Selina, who had grown up with an appreciation for the national significance of the collection, immediately took decisive action. She informed General McDowell of the situation and impressed upon him the importance of protecting the collection from further theft.

After Selina and the other slaves identified the possessions that constituted the "Washington treasury," McDowell assumed responsibility for the collection. He arranged to have the relics transported to the Patent Office in Washington for safekeeping. They remained the property of the Federal government until 1901, when the Lee family finally regained their prized heirlooms. When Selina Gray surrendered the household keys to General McDowell, she symbolically surrendered her authority. Yet, because of her actions, the Washington artifacts have survived for posterity, some of which may still be seen at Arlington House.

Selina's accomplishments are all the more remarkable when juxtaposed with the work of other 19th-century preservationists. In the early period of the American preservation movement, the effort to save artifacts of the nation's past was carried out almost exclusively by wealthy white women. The most notable example is Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. The MVLAs' success in saving Washington's home is indeed a seminal event in the history of preservation. Yet, no less important are Selina Gray's contributions to the preservation of the Washington heritage. That she succeeded on the basis of her personal convictions, in the midst of war, without the benefits of wealth or rank makes her legacy all the more compelling.

For too long Selina Gray's legacy has been overlooked. Often portrayed as merely an example of a "loyal and faithful servant" of the Lee family, Selina's slave status has obscured the true meaning of her achievements. Little is known about her life after the war. She received her freedom in 1862, and continued to live at Arlington for a number of years. Selina died in 1907, but her legacy remained alive in her daughters, who assisted the U.S. Army with restoration plans when Arlington House was designated a national memorial to Robert E. Lee. For her crucial role in the preservation of the nation's past, Selina Gray deserves a place in history.

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Except where noted, photos are courtesy Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial.