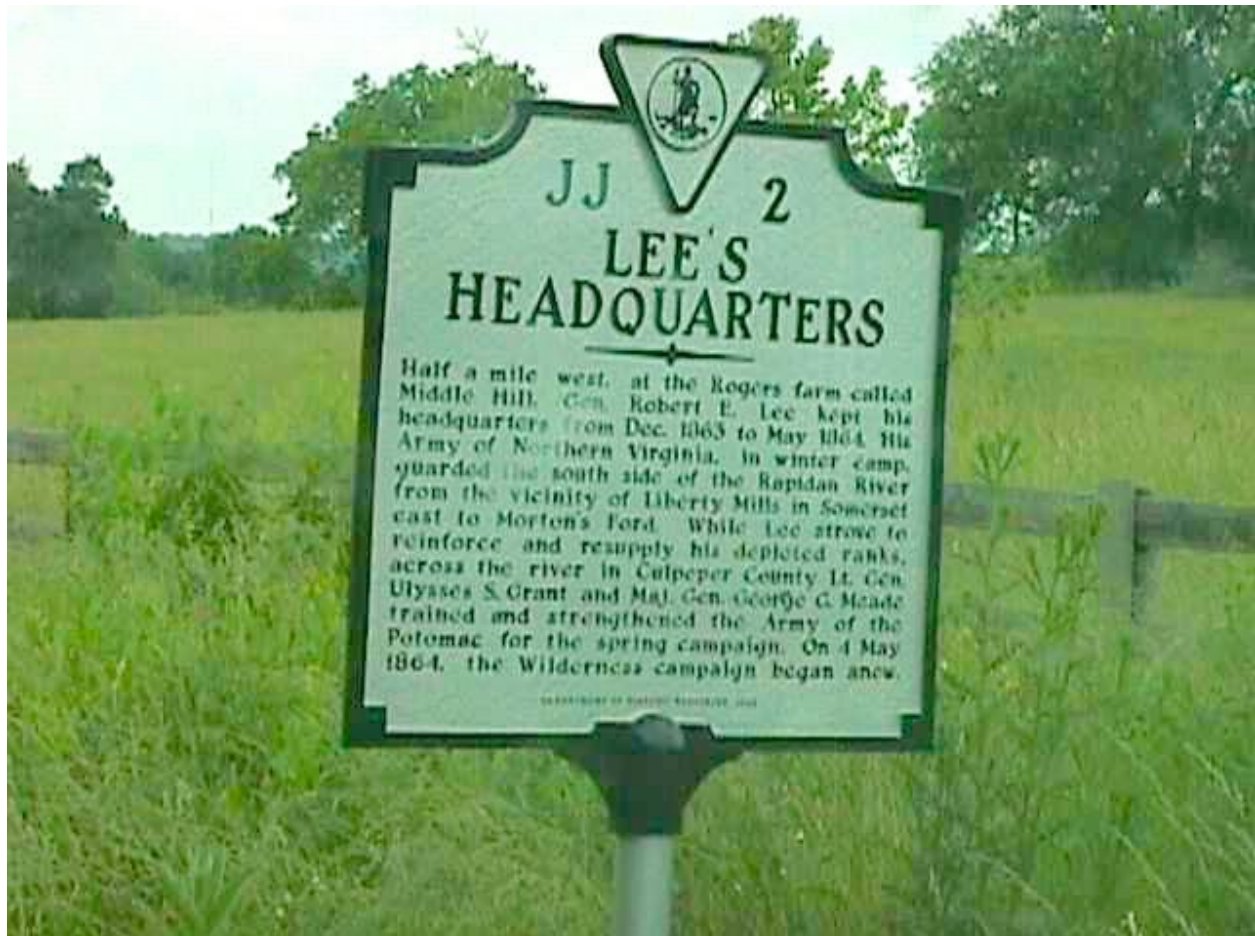


Lee's Encampment during Winter 1863-64

This article is similar to **Robert E. Lee in Orange County**--some information is repeated and some is new.



The inscription: "Half a mile west, at the Rogers farm called Middle Hill, Gen. Robert E. Lee kept his headquarters from Dec. 1863 to May 1864. His Army of Northern Virginia, in winter camp, guarded the south side of the Rapidan River from the vicinity of Liberty Mills in Somerset east to Morton's Ford. While Lee strove to reinforce and resupply his depleted ranks, across the river in Culpeper County Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade trained and strengthened the Army of the Potomac for the spring campaign. On 4 May 1864, the Wilderness campaign began anew."¹

¹ Photographer and author unknown. "Lee's Headquarters". *Virginia Department of Historic Resources*, Google, Accessed May 13, 2021, <https://vcris.dhr.virginia.gov/HistoricMarkers/>

From the Orange County Review of October 28, 1999:

The Winter of 1863

Author not identified

"In March 1999, a Virginia Department of Transportation crew re-installed roadside historical marker JJ-2 in Orange County, on the north shoulder of Route 20, approximately 1.5 miles east of the Town of Orange. The marker informs its readers of the existence and nearby location of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's headquarters for his army of Northern Virginia during the winter of 1863-64.

"The marker is a replacement for a similar one at that location which had been destroyed in an accident over 10 years ago. 1999, however, was the first time since that accident that the Virginia Division of Historic Resources made money available to replace it. The story of what that marker is telling--that General Lee and his army spent the winter of 1863-64 in Orange County, Virginia--is also the story of something called the Rapidan Line, and both are well worth the telling.

"Both stories begin late in 1861, the first year of the Civil War. As that year wound down, the people of Orange County were experiencing shortages and the inconveniences of having to live with all the men, supplies, and equipment moving around and through the county. They did not, however, see themselves or their property as being in any real danger. In July, the Confederate Army of the Potomac had successfully defended the northern border of the Confederacy in a battle at Manassas, and the Federals had been run back to Washington. Orange County certainly figured to be a rear area, and its residents were getting comfortable in their roles as loyal, anxious, and supportive citizens. (Local unionists would be keeping their heads down for quite some time to come.) Richmond, however, was starting to see things differently.

"During the fall of 1861 and the ensuing winter, the Confederacy was suffering reversals on almost every front except the one in Virginia. Many of those reversals involved the Federals' use of water mobility and naval fire power. With its long Chesapeake shoreline, with the Federals already holding a Chesapeake base in Fort Monroe, and with the capture of Richmond a stated Federal goal, Virginia looked especially vulnerable. There simply wouldn't be enough men and guns available to hold the Confederacy's northeast border at the banks of the Potomac while simultaneously defending along the shores of the Chesapeake. Something had to give somewhere.

"The decision was made to pull General Joe Johnston and his Confederate Army of the Potomac back to a position from which it could move quickly to repulse advances from either the Potomac or the Chesapeake. But where was such a position? As it turned out, some 50 miles south of Washington in Orange County. Why? It was the result of the combination of a number of natural and constructed features in the county.

“First and foremost is the ridge line of the Southwestern Mountains which traces most of the northern border of the county, serving also as the south bank of the Rapidan River. It is a natural military breastwork, which the Confederates over time enhanced with multiple lines of trenches, rifle and gun emplacements. By the end of the winter of 1863-64, there would be an 18-mile long battle trench running along that south bank of the Rapidan from Liberty Mills (Somerset on today’s maps) downstream (east) to just beyond Morton’s Ford. The Morton’s Ford end was roughly where a line drawn between Brandy Station (Culpeper County) and Locust Grove (Route 20 in eastern Orange County) crosses the Rapidan. That trench, along with its supporting earthworks, camps and connecting roads, was the heart of what became known as the ‘Rapidan Line.’ By the spring of 1864, the trench lines at Peyton’s Ford were reported to run four deep. But there was more to the Line than just fortifications.

“At the eastern end of the Rapidan Line was the Wilderness, a 70-square mile Virginia jungle, which during the some 130 years of its existence had gotten only marginally more passable. At its western end were the bad roads and challenging terrain of the Blue Ridge foothills. Efforts to turn the line on either flank would be hampered, thus giving the defenders ample warning and time to react.

“Clark Mountain, located approximately midway along the Line, served as its primary observation post and signal station. While having an elevation of only 1,082 feet, Clark Mountain happens to be the most eastern high point of the Southwestern Mountains. There is no higher mountain between it and the Atlantic. North, south and east of Clark Mountain, the land falls away into a broad plain. The Washington Monument is visible from its crest on brilliantly clear days. Whenever the Line was in use, the mountain’s ‘eyes’ were usually supplemented by a cavalry vedette line strung out north of the Rapidan. In fact, during the winter of 1863-64, General J.E.B. Stuart’s troopers were on watch all the way from the Blue Ridge to Fredericksburg. Certain built features in Orange County also enhanced the military value of the Rapidan Line. The arrival of railroads in the 1840’s and 1850s had brought about the development of Gordonsville as a major rail center. The Virginia Central, Richmond’s rail lifeline to the Valley, went through Gordonsville. The Orange and Alexandria, running from Gordonsville through Culpeper and Manassas, was the line supporting Confederate advances north and Federal advances south.

“Highways possessing significant military value also existed in Orange County. The desire of Valley business interests to connect with the Gordonsville rail facilities had led to the construction of both the Rockingham and the Blue Ridge Turnpikes. Today’s Route 33 and Route 231 respectively trace the two routes through the county.

“Connecting Orange with Fredericksburg and the Tidewater were the Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road, two major roads which came together at today’s East Main Street/Byrd Street intersection in the Town of Orange. Sections of Route 20 through Rhoadesville follow the road bed of the Plank Road. By Locust Grove, Route 20 is running on the road bed of the turnpike. Route 621, south from Verdierville, is generally following the line of the Plank Road as it passed through the southern portion of the Wilderness.

“Another strategically important travel way existed in the form of a cleared and graded railroad right of way stretching from Orange to Fredericksburg. The coming of the war had halted construction before cross ties and track could be laid, so for practical purposes it was another turnpike. During the War the Confederates used portions of the roadbed to move troops with great effectiveness. The Federals apparently never became comfortable with using it. Abandoned in 1938, only small stretches of the railroad exist now as driveways and farm roads. Clearly visible from Route 20 is the fill embankment and culvert in the field just east of the Orange airport runway.”²

“Summarizing the foregoing, an army behind the Rapidan Line was in a reasonably secure defensive position, from which it could monitor all the logical land routes to Richmond from the north and east, and from which it could move quickly to oppose enemy advances coming from virtually any direction. Over time, the importance of the Rapidan Line to the Confederacy became so critical that on April 15, 1864, General Lee noted in a letter to Confederate President Jefferson Davis: ‘If I am obliged to retire from this line, either by a flank movement of the enemy or the want of supplies, great injury will befall us.’³ Within three weeks of the letter, Lee and his army would in fact be flanked out of the Rapidan Line, with Virginia and the Confederacy bearing the full weight of Lee’s prophecy coming to fulfillment in the 11 months which followed.

“But in 1862, the situation was not yet critical. True, in early March, the 1,400 bed Samuel P. Moore Military Hospital in Manassas, a pavilion-type facility, was dismantled and it and its patients moved to Gordonsville. Once there, the Exchange Hotel was pressed into service as the hospital’s headquarters building. Also, about that same time, General Johnston and his army were ordered to pull back to the vicinity of the Rapidan. That order, by the way, was a direct one from Richmond, so the General found himself having to move his army in knee-deep mud during a cold March rain.

“Local diarist Fanny Page Hume took much alarm at those events. She wrote on March 8, 1862: ‘Jackson is said to have evacuated Winchester, and part of the Manassas army has fallen back to Rappahannock Bridge [Remington]. Cannon and all kinds of supplies have been sent back to Gordonsville. It is thought all places will be burnt, if they fall back. God help us all if the enemy should get this far.’⁴

“But Miss Fanny’s alarms were premature. In the spring of 1862, Stonewall Jackson undertook his Valley Campaign and turned himself into a legend in the process. At about the same time, Federal General McClellan attempted to take Richmond from the east (Chesapeake) side. Both actions drew the Confederate forces away from the Rapidan Line until midsummer. In late July/early August 1862, things were briefly very serious in the Orange area. But then Jackson defeated Federal General Pope at Cedar Mountain. Lee, now in command of the now-named Army of Northern Virginia, assembled his army in Orange County. He took it to Manassas once more and followed up on his victory there with his first invasion of the North.

² Author Unknown. “The Winter of 1863.” *Orange County Review*, Thursday, October 28, 1999, B1.

³ *Ibid.*, B-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

“Returning from Maryland, Lee soon learned that the Federal army was gathering just across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg. Moving to Fredericksburg, Lee prepared a defensive position reminiscent of the Rapidan Line. Marye’s Heights took the place of the Southwestern Mountains. Telegraph Hill substituted for Clark Mountain. The Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac railroad substituted for the Orange & Alexandria. Not quite as formidable as the Rapidan Line, but good enough. On December 13, 1862, Federal attacks against that line were repulsed with awesome losses.

“In the spring of 1863, the Federals tried once more to turn what could be called the ‘Rappahannock Line’ during what we call the Chancellorsville Campaign. The resulting Federal defeat was followed by Lee’s second invasion of the North. All remained relatively quiet along the Rapidan--but that was about to change.

“On July 3, 1863, Confederate Generals George Pickett, James Pettigrew, and Isaac Trimble sent their troops up Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg, and the result was ‘a Fredericksburg in reverse.’ Supplies were about gone, the army’s ranks depleted and exhausted--it was a time to go home.

“On August 1, General Lee telegraphed President Jefferson Davis from Culpeper: ‘I shall not fight a battle north of the Rapidan, but will endeavor to concentrate everything behind it. It would be well to send all reinforcements in Richmond to Orange Court House.’ Get ready, Orange County. Here they come!.

“On August 4, General Lee offered a bit more detail to General Samuel Cooper, Adjutant and Inspector General of the Confederate Army: ‘The movements of the enemy...determined me to unite the army south of the Rapidan. General Ewell’s corps, which after crossing the Blue Ridge had been posted in Madison, had been previously ordered to Orange Court House. Longstreet’s and Hill’s corps were yesterday ordered to the Rapidan. I could find no field in Culpeper offering advantage for battle, and any taken could be so easily avoided should the enemy wish to reach the south bank of the Rapidan, that I thought it advisable to retire at once to the bank.’

“Lead elements of the Army of Northern Virginia were in fact already behind the Rapidan Line by August 1. Over time, all of its divisions assembled in the vicinity of the Rapidan to re-equip, resupply and retrain. The strength of that position was obvious, and the Federal army maintained a respectful distance.

“With little happening along the Rapidan, Lee agreed to Longstreet’s corps being detached to duty in Tennessee. That was mid-September, and Lee was not feeling well. By early October, the general was in better health, and he decided to see if he could take his remaining troops and run the Federals out of Virginia--while capturing some desperately needed supplies. It is called the Bristoe Station Campaign, which began on October 9, 1863. During that campaign, the advance of Lee and his army was turned back to Bristoe Station (just south of Manassas)

with significant losses in Hill's corps. They then failed to contain a river crossing at Kelley's Ford, and suffered an outright defeat at Rappahannock Station. Lee's already thin ranks were now ever further depleted and his army had been roughly handled in the process. The protection of the Rapidan Line was badly needed, and by November 9, they were back behind it.

"It was probably about this time that General Lee established his headquarters on the side of the Orange Turnpike about 1.5 miles east of town. He had A.P. Hill and his Third Corps holding the Rapidan Line from Liberty Mills south to the vicinity of Clark Mountain and General Richard S. Ewell and his Second Corps extending it downstream from there. Lee's headquarters would be about where the two corps joined, making him readily accessible to both. It was also on a ridge line, high enough to permit the exchange of messages with Clark Mountain as well as with other signal stations in Orange and along the Line.

"It should come as no surprise to learn that General Lee's headquarters was a tent. It was his practice of long standing, and it would continue well after he left Orange. The previous winter, Lee had written his wife Mary: 'The weather has been wretched. More unpleasant than any other part of the winter. The earth has been almost fluid and my tent even muddy.' In a letter to Mary the following winter, he offered an explanation/excuse for his tenting practice: 'The people are very kind in giving me invitations to take a room in their house, but they do not know what they ask. I cannot of course go alone or be alone, as a crowd is always around me.'

"There was something different about the winter in Orange County, however. General Lee had not been a truly well man for the entire war. He suffered from what he called 'rheumatism' and which most doctors studying the sketchy medical record think was probably angina. There was chest pain, most often triggered by cold weather, and which in its severest stages was accompanied by arm numbness. The spring of 1863, Lee had suffered what may have been a full-blown heart attack. As the winter of 1863-64 approached, he wrote Mary: 'I do not know what I shall do when the winter really comes, I have suffered so from the cold already. I hope I shall get used to it. But I have felt very differently since my attack of last spring, from which I have never recovered.'

"General Lee's transition into winter would also not be without some outside disturbances. The Federal army undertook the Mine Run Campaign, coming into eastern Orange County on November 26, 1863, and after some maneuverings in weather that anyone would call 'wretched,' left the county on December 2. Lee had moved his headquarters tent and set up near the Catlett Rhodes house Mine Run actions. That house, now gone, stood at the intersection of Routes 20 and 621 south. With the Federals now gone, however, it was time to return to winter quarters along the Line.

"General Lee's officers and men took as good a care of their chief as they could. By the time winter really got going, his tent featured a wood floor and brick fireplace with a chimney. He reported to his wife that actually he was pretty comfortable. Also, local tradition has it that in times of very severe weather, the General could be prevailed upon to spend a night or town in a nearby home, his reluctance to do so notwithstanding.

“When spring came, the armies began preparations to move. On midnight, May 3, 1864, the entire Federal army began marching out of Culpeper County into the Wilderness. Some time the next day, General Lee’s tent was struck and taken away, leaving the floor, fireplace and chimney. Lee would spend one more night in Orange County, again near the Rhodes’ house in New Verdiersville. Then he was gone, never to reside in Orange County again. The man whose almost legendary life and character symbolized the virtues of an entire society--a society which, along with its vices, was destined to be overwhelmed in less than a year--had at least been an Orange County neighbor for a time.

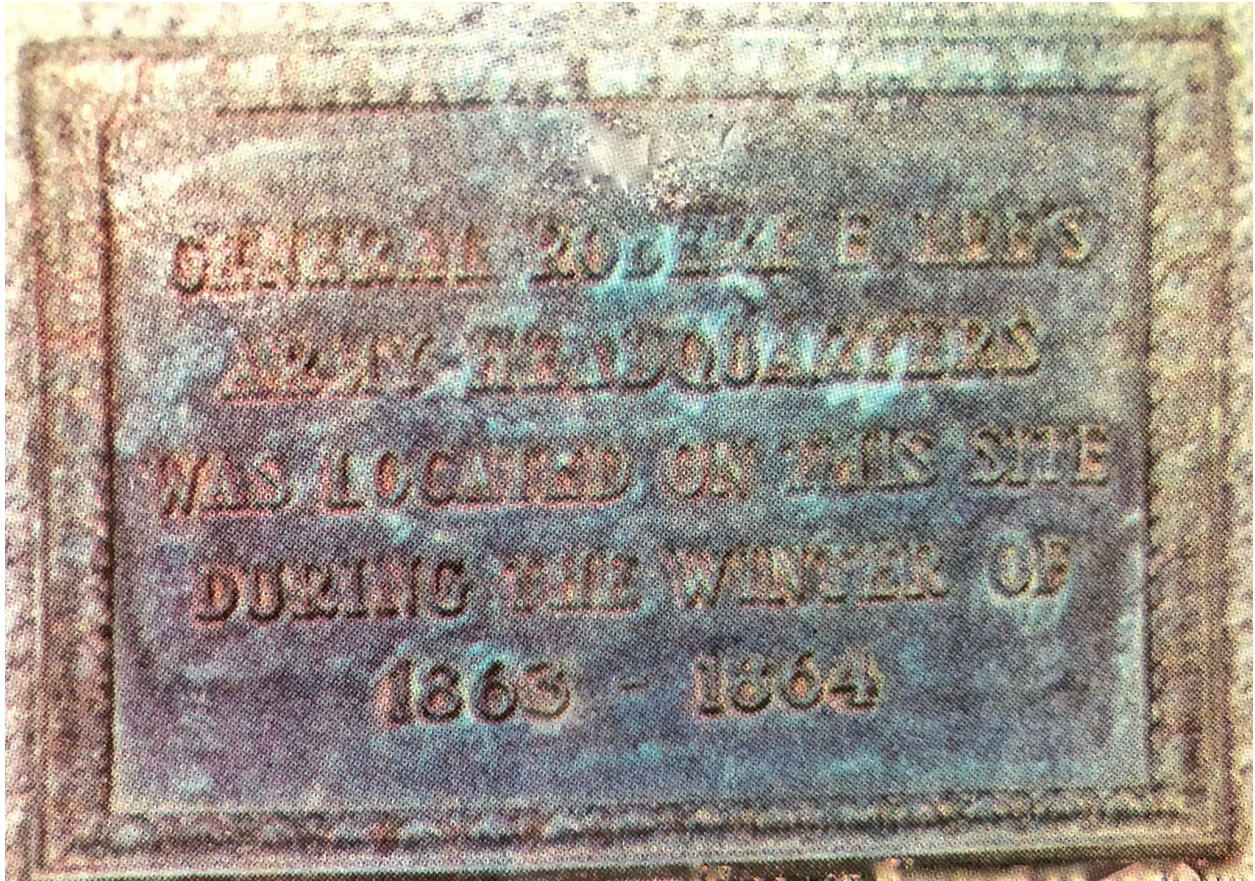
“As the armies moved away, Orange County and the Rapidan Line were left behind, experiencing an unaccustomed quiet. Federal Generals Grant and Meade had decided that the primary means of transportation and supply for the Army of the Potomac would be by coastal shipping. They also did not plan to occupy and hold all the territory the army passed through. Those decisions combined to spare Orange County the travails of being both occupied and becoming a supply center, something which Culpeper County had endured the previous winter. Weeds and grass grew around the old Lee headquarters site.

“As a youngster, the late Wallace Walters and his friends played around the old camp site. The stone pillars which had supported the approximately 12 foot square floor were still in place. The remains of the fireplace and chimney were clearly evident. The cherry tree to which General Lee had tied Traveler stood nearby. The site of a military forge, where couriers and generals alike got their horses shod, could still be seen--if you knew what to look for. But over time, things began to disappear.

“Some time in the 1940’s the cherry tree blew down. The then-owner of the property pushed the stone pillars into a hole and covered them up. The bricks of the fireplace and chimney were not of the best quality, and they began to revert to red clay. People with metal detectors picked the forge area as well as the camp site clean. It was all beginning to exist primarily in the memories of those who had known the site from earlier days. That bothered Walters, and he decided to do something about it.

“With permission of the landowner and the help of some friends, Mr. Walters erected a stone marker with a bronze plaque at the campsite. The plaque reads: ‘General Robert E. Lee’s Army Headquarters was located on this site during the winter of 1863-1864.’ The present owner of the property, The Honorable Helen Marie Taylor, whose interest in local history is legendary, has seen to the maintenance of the site and marker. Indeed highway historical marker JJ-2 also serves to honor Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Walters, and the others who have maintained their appreciation of the historical value of this place and who have worked to preserve it.”

A photo of the plaque that appeared in the Orange County *Review* article: ⁵



“General Robert E. Lee’s Army Headquarters was located on this site during the winter of 1863-1864”

⁵ *Ibid.*, B1. Photographer is unknown.

From the Fredericksburg Free-Lance Star:

Lee's winter camp tells story

By Clint Schemmer

October 5, 2010

"If landscapes can tell stories, this one surely does.

"Here, nestled against the flank of a mountain in Orange County, Gen. Robert E. Lee pitched his tent for the long winter after the Battle of Gettysburg.

"Today, it's a little-known spot on private property, noted only by a distant historical marker along State Route 20. But this weekend, about 90 people got a rare glimpse of what Lee and his troops called home for months.

" 'It's really something to see,' National Park Service historian Jake Struhelka said of the winter encampment's site, where Lee and his men stayed from the Mine Run campaign in November 1863 until late April 1864.

"Most of the weekend's visitors were members of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, which held the tour and a picnic to raise money for its college scholarship fund. For a tandem treat, Orange County resident Helen Marie Taylor welcomed participants to Bloomsbury, the locality's oldest home--built in 1722.

"Preservation of Lee's headquarters is important, Struhelka said, but what is most important is what happened at the site. 'This is a great place to see the relationships between Lee, the army, and the Confederacy,' he said.

"From his hilltop, Lee--'the soul of the Army of Northern Virginia'--was pulled in many different directions, he said.

"The general planned strategy for other armies in distant states, strove to improve his men's morale after the Confederate defeat in Pennsylvania and battled with recalcitrant quartermasters to better supply his soldiers, who had to live on quarter rations, " Struhelka said. He had to fight on many fronts--even to get shoes for his troops 'lest they go barefooted' when campaigning resumed, as Lee wrote reprovingly to one officer.

"At this point in the war, even after its string of battlefield successes, Lee's army was conflicted about itself and the Confederacy, the historian argued.

"Men soldiered on. But others deserted, or at least contemplated doing so.

"As an example of the strains felt by the army, Struhelka quoted Sgt. Christopher Hackett, who wrote home that meals were 'regular enough, but getting enough is the thing.'

“Hackett asked his family to keep a February 1864 letter secret, writing that ‘I intend to make the trip the first opportunity that offers itself, for I intend to get out of this war some way.’

“ ‘He’s talking about a trip back to North Carolina, back to home,’ Struhelka said.

“Hackett felt so desperate, he was willing to let down his comrades, his family and Lee, he said.

“While other soldiers felt differently, Hackett’s letters do point to why the army could muster only 64,500 men when the official rolls said its strength was at 122,000. Some were too sick to muster; others filtered away from camp and later came back.

“ ‘But the vast majority have taken the trip home, like Hackett,’ Struhelka said.

“Soldiers’ letters also reveal a developing schism between the Army of Northern Virginia and civilians back home who wouldn’t enlist, and hard feelings about war profiteers and despondent family members.

“But visits to the site by Southern dignitaries such as Confederate President Jefferson Davis and North Carolina Gov. Zebulon Vance (on different occasions) helped to boost morale, Struhelka said. So, too, did daily prayer meetings and weekly revivals.

“As the men reflected, they started to see the army itself as the reason they’ll continue to fight, Struhelka said.

“Today, the place is hallowed, just as are the battlefields of Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Antietam, Vicksburg, and Shiloh, he said.

“The site of the winter encampment was consecrated ‘not by lead and steel, but by the hearts and minds of the men, the most important part of any military organization,’ Struhelka said.”⁶

⁶ Schemmer, Clint. “Lee’s winter camp tells story.” *The Free Lance Star*, October 5, 2010.