

## Robert E. Lee and St. Thomas's Episcopal Church of Orange, Virginia



***Soldier of Faith***<sup>1</sup>  
**Portrait by artist Mort Künstler**

### **Historical Information:**

“Those who personally knew General Robert E. Lee agreed that faith was the foundation of his life. ‘In sunshine and in storm, in victory and in defeat,’ observed General John B. Gordon, ‘his heart turned to God.’ A challenging childhood, the discipline of military life, the burden of command, the hardships of war — all were tools of grace that shaped and reflected the faith and character of Robert E. Lee.

“In February of 1864, while in winter camp near Orange, Virginia, Lee was visited by a delegation of army chaplains. ‘I can never forget my first interview and conversation with General Lee on religious matters,’ recalled the Rev. J. William Jones, who was one of the chaplains. ‘As we began to answer his questions about the spiritual interests of the army, and to

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<sup>1</sup> Künstler, Mort. “Soldier of Faith” (2002). *Mort Künstler, America’s Artist*, Google, Accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.mortkünstler.com/html/store-limited-edition-prints.asp?action=view&ID=133&cat=136>

tell of that great revival which was then extending through the camps...he expressed his delight [and] we forgot the great warrior, and only remembered that we were communing with a humble, earnest Christian...'

"For Lee, it was a typical statement that reflected his humility and his abiding personal faith. Said one who knew Lee the soldier: 'He was a foe without hate, a friend without treachery, a soldier without cruelty, a victim without murmuring...and a man without guile.' The lasting legacy of Robert E. Lee would be measured for generations to come not by military genius alone, but also by the caliber of his character and the fruit of his faith."<sup>2</sup>

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### **Artist Mort Künstler's comments regarding the evolution of "Soldier of Faith":**

"I was visiting an art gallery in Virginia, when a delegation of town leaders from Orange, Virginia introduced themselves and asked me to consider painting a historical scene from their community. Although I was deeply complimented by their confidence in me, I knew I had years of commitments ahead of me. As politely as possible, I tried to explain my inability to grant their request. They received the news graciously— and warmly invited me to visit Orange someday. As I studied the war and worked on other paintings, I noted that Lee's Army of Virginia spent the winter of 1863-64 near Orange. Later, as I was mulling over ideas for a new snow print, I recalled Lee's winter there and decided to see for myself what the folks from Orange loved so much about their history.

"In June of 2002, I arranged a visit. The town of Orange, I discovered, was a delightful place and was rich with Civil War history. I met with Jay Harrison, Executive Director of Orange Downtown Alliance, Inc., local history expert Frank Walker, and others from the Orange delegation that had called on me years earlier. I examined historic maps and studied period photographs, and became fascinated with several existing period structures. The historic Orange County Courthouse is a wonderful structure — an excellent setting for a painting. Then I saw St. Thomas's Episcopal Church. The courthouse would have to wait. I realized instantly that St. Thomas's— which has changed little since the war — would be the perfect setting for a snow scene with Robert E. Lee as the central figure.

"Lee's army was in winter camp nearby during the winter of 1863-64, and the general prayed at the church regularly. His church pew is preserved and designated by a bronze plaque today, and an ancient locust tree outside had been the 'hitching post' for Traveller. From my friend, Civil War historian Dr. James I. Robertson Jr., I learned that heavy snow fell on February 15, 1864, so there would have been snow on the ground during Wednesday vespers. It was the ideal setting for a nighttime snow scene of Lee and his place of worship that winter..."

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Excerpt from St. Thomas's Episcopal Church website:

### ***St. Thomas's Parish History***



“Above, a map drawn by Confederate Lt. Walter Izard during the Civil War. St. Thomas's Episcopal Church can be seen with a steeple atop beneath the "ORANGE C H" [court house] legend. The photo is ourtesy Library of Congress, Geography & Map Division.

“During the army's stay, General Lee, General A.P. Hill, and General Robert Rhodes were among the many Confederates of high and low rank who attended St. Thomas's. In November 1863, Confederate President Jefferson Davis was among those who attended a service preached by Reverend/General William Pendleton, Lee's Chief of Artillery and an Episcopal minister. When new pews were installed in the 20th century, Lee's pew was saved and a plaque installed on the new pew that occupies that place in the nave.

“Lee is known to have tied his horse, Traveller, to a locust tree on the church grounds when attending St. Thomas's, and a locust continues to stand at that spot today...”<sup>3</sup>

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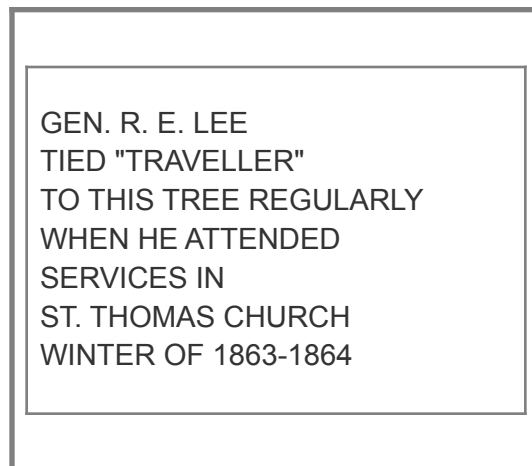
<sup>3</sup> Author unknown. “St. Thomas's Parish History.” *St. Thomas's Episcopal Church: the Diocese of Virginia*, Google, Accessed May 10, 2021, [http://www.stthomasorange.org/About\\_Us/Saint\\_Thomas\\_History/](http://www.stthomasorange.org/About_Us/Saint_Thomas_History/)

Further: "...In recognition of its rich past, St. Thomas's was added to both the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. In 2002, the rich and varied history of St. Thomas's was again featured when noted artist Mort Künstler released his snow scene 'Soldier of Faith', Gen. Robert E. Lee, Orange, Va., February 17, 1864." The artwork portrays the general and members of his staff leaving St. Thomas's after a vesper service."<sup>4</sup>

### Robert E. Lee's Hitching Tree

"During the Civil War, following the defeat at Gettysburg, General Robert E. Lee and the Confederate army arrived in Orange County, Virginia and encamped from August 1863 to May 1864. During their stay many of the soldiers and officers including Gen. Lee attended services at St. Thomas's Church. Even Confederacy president Jefferson Davis came to a service that was preached by Lee's Chief of Artillery who was also an Episcopalian minister.

"When Lee visited St. Thomas's, he tied his horse, Traveller, to a nearby locust tree. The tree is still standing almost 150 years later. It has been memorialized with a small brass plaque that reads:



"The tree now stands in the front yard of a private home next to the church. A brick wall on which the plaque is mounted separates the church grounds from the adjacent property, but the tree is easily viewable from the church or the sidewalk."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Author Unknown. "Robert E. Lee's Hitching Tree Orange Virginia". *Waymarking.com*, Accessed May 10, 2021, [https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMF5YY\\_Robert\\_E\\_Lees\\_Hitching\\_Tree\\_Orange\\_VA](https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMF5YY_Robert_E_Lees_Hitching_Tree_Orange_VA)

The Legendary “Traveller’s Tree”, a locust reputedly 150 years old where Robert E. Lee tied his horse, Traveller, when attending church services at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church.<sup>6</sup> The top of the church is seen in the background.

### Traveller’s Tree

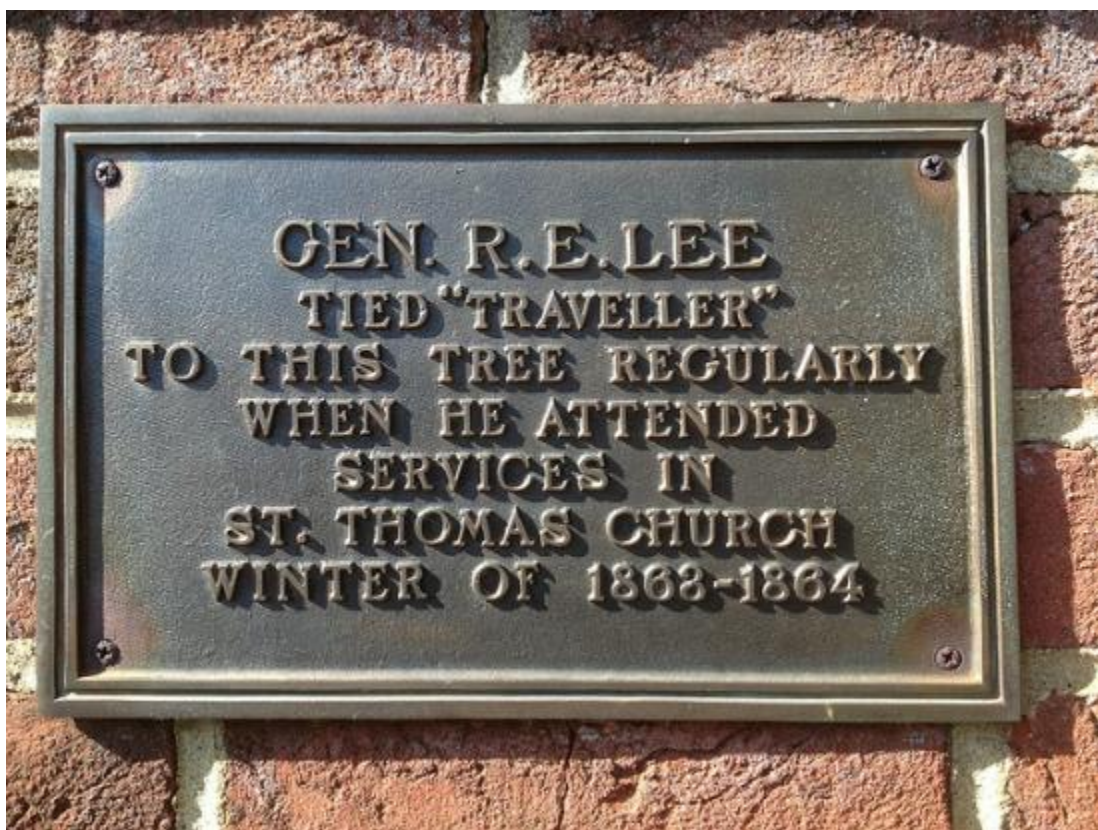


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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Plaque marking “Traveller’s Tree”<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> Photographer Unknown. “Robert E. Lee Passing St. Thomas Church.” *Tripadvisor*, Google, Accessed May 20, 2010, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g58048-d108476-i120416969-St\\_Thomas\\_Parish\\_Church-Orange\\_Virginia.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g58048-d108476-i120416969-St_Thomas_Parish_Church-Orange_Virginia.html)