

Educator Resource

Robert E. Lee Resignation from the U.S. Army

**Dates &
Eras** 1861

Themes Secession,
Generals,
Politics,
Soldiers

Grades 5-7

Standards VS.7,
USI.9,
VUS.7;
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.
RH.6-8.4, 5,6

History Overview

The battle of Gettysburg was the culmination of Robert E. Lee's campaign into Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863. From July 1st through July 3rd, Lee's army clashed with the Army of the Potomac under General George G. Meade, near the town of Gettysburg. On the final day, Lee ordered about 15,000 Confederate soldiers to attack the U.S. Army center at Cemetery Ridge. The charge became known as Pickett's Charge because the majority of the troops were in the division led by Major General George Pickett. The charge failed, and in the end these three days of fighting resulted in roughly 51,000 casualties (men either killed, wounded or missing in action), making Gettysburg one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. It was a devastating defeat for Lee who lost approximately one-third of his army, putting an end to future Confederate incursions north.

Resources

[Lee's Draft Letter of Resignation](#)

[Trancription of Lee's Draft Letter](#)

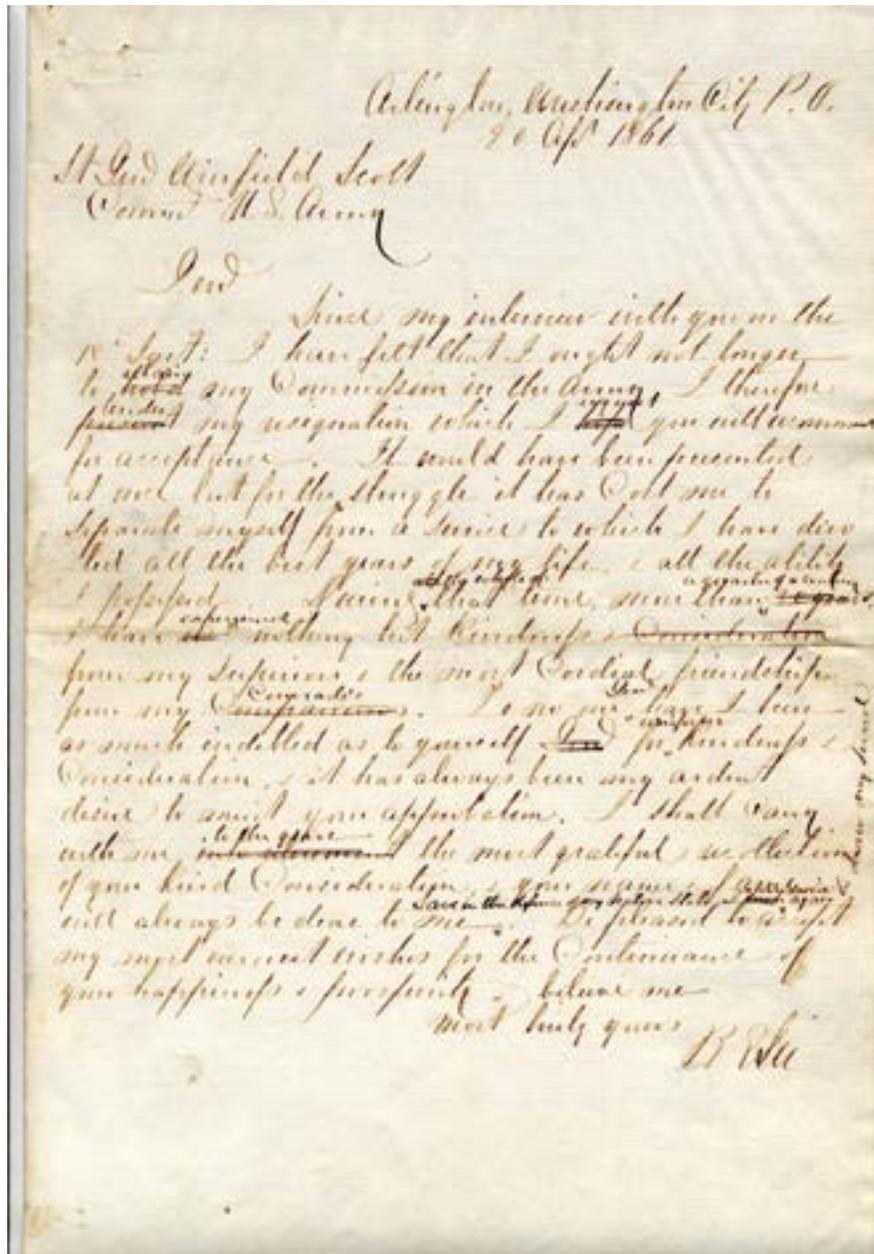
Suggested Questions

1. What is the purpose of the letter?
2. What are Lee's feelings about his resignation?
3. Why was it a difficult decision?
4. What are Lee's feelings for General Scott?
5. Why do you think Lee sided with Virginia's decision of succession, even after serving in the United States Army for over thirty years?
6. Why do you think Lee cared more about protecting Virginia, rather than preserving the Union? What does this suggest about the attitudes many had during this time period?
7. Describe the diction used by Lee throughout his letter. How does that contribute to the overall tone of the piece?
8. Explain what you think Robert E. Lee's motives were in writing this letter.
9. After reading the letter, what conclusions can one draw about the character of Robert E. Lee?
10. Lee in this letter has crossed and changed several words. Why do you think he did this? What does this show you about Lee's struggle?

Suggested Activities

1. Have students read the letter and attempt to transcribe it.
2. After reading the letter, pair the students up with a partner and have them speculate how Lee's choice affected the Civil War. Have students list the pros and cons of Lee's choice from both the Confederate and Union perspectives. Then, reconvene and discuss the conclusions drawn by students.
3. Have students research other individuals who were faced with conflicting loyalties but chose the Union (Winfield Scott, George Thomas, Josiah Gorgas, Joseph Holt, etc.). Have them write a short essay contrasting one of these individual's choice with Robert E. Lee's.

Robert E. Lee's draft resignation letter to General Winfield Scott



American Civil War Museum

Robert E. Lee's draft resignation letter transcription

To General Winfield Scott
Commander-in-Chief, United States Army

Arlington, Washington City P.O.
April 20, 1861

General:

Since my interview with you on the 18th instant I have felt that I ought not retain my commission in the Army. I therefore tender my resignation, which I request you will recommend for acceptance.

It would have been presented at once, but for the struggle it has cost me to separate myself from a service to which I have devoted all the best years of my life & all the ability I possessed.

During the whole of that time, more than 30 years, I have experienced nothing but kindness & consideration, & it has always been my ardent desire to merit your approbation.

I shall carry with me to the grave the most grateful recollections of your kind consideration, & your name & fame will always be dear to me. Save in the defense of my native State, I never desire again to draw my sword.

Be pleased to accept my most earnest wishes for the continuance of your happiness & prosperity & believe me most truly yours.

R.E. LEE