

# The Making of the "Lee's Retreat" Driving Tour

**D**uring the spring of 1993 I found myself about to play a role in one of the most phenomenal happenings dealing with Civil War history and the American public. Two civic leaders and I met in Farmville, Virginia, to discuss possible efforts for regional tourism. One was a member of the Prince Edward County economic development board, another was the director of Petersburg's tourism department, and then there was me, a historian for the National Park Service at Petersburg National Battlefield. We talked of the commonalities this region, historically known as Southside Virginia, held. It was pointed out that the most well-known historical event, "Lee's Retreat" (the Appomattox Campaign of April 1865), passed through many of the counties in the area—counties which might be interested in working together on some type of project. In the next few weeks I was asked to lay out a possible driving tour, while the others contacted officials from jurisdictions which might be affected.

At our first general meeting we had county administrators, directors of economic development, directors of tourism, and elected officials, along with personnel from the Virginia Division of State Parks since one of the sites, Sailor's Creek Battlefield, is under its authority. We then had to sell them on our proposal, even though we had absolutely no idea where the money for such a project might come from.

We eventually formed a loosely knit group called "The Southern Piedmont Retreat Consortium." It originally contained representatives from seven counties (Amelia, Appomattox, Buckingham, Cumberland,

Dinwiddie, Nottoway, Prince Edward) and one city, Petersburg. By April we were holding a planning retreat to design a strategy for our group—that being to increase tourism and economic development activity for the region involved in the proposed undertaking.

One of the first assignments I had was determining which route (of the four used by the Confederate army as it left Petersburg and Richmond) to follow toward the first destination, Amelia Court House. In this last campaign of the war in Virginia, a portion of General Robert E. Lee's men left from Richmond, another passed through Chesterfield Court

House, a third on the north side of the Appomattox River through Chesterfield County, and a fourth through Dinwiddie County from the lines west of Petersburg. In ascertaining the route we would use for the driving tour, there were a couple of factors I had to look at first. These included what points of interest relating to the campaign were available for the public to see, and whether the scenery itself was enjoyable enough for a leisurely drive through the countryside.

Since three of the routes, including the one Lee himself took, cover the territory between Richmond and Petersburg, I examined them first. Unfortunately, development is quickly urbanizing Chesterfield County, as mile after mile showed new subdivisions being thrown up. Since the Union army did not pursue the Southerners on this portion of the march, there would also be no military action to interpret. In fact, the only historical site connected with the campaign is the plantation "Clover Hill," which was the Cox home at Winterpock where Lee and other Confederate officers dined. Because this private home is not immediately visible to the public from the road, it was determined that the three routes through this county were probably not the best to follow. Besides, we thought, if anybody still wants to trace any of these particular by-ways they can do so by using my published guide for driving Lee's retreat.<sup>1</sup>

Since the existing auto (tape) tour for Petersburg National Battlefield ended at the Five Forks battlefield in Dinwiddie County, it seemed a logical choice to start "Lee's Retreat" from that point. The public could then follow the route of Confederate General Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry and General Richard Anderson's corps (Generals Bushrod Johnson and George Pickett), along with elements of General Henry Heth's infantry which were cut off during the final assault on Petersburg. This is also the route over which most of Union General Ulysses S. Grant's army immediately pursued the Confederate forces. Because of this, there would be many instances of military action along the way which could be seen and interpreted for the followers of the driving tour. Additionally, this route was the most pristine and picturesque. Therefore, it was decided that the tour would start near Sutherland Station, one of the last engagements around Petersburg which precipitated the retreat on April 2, 1865.

To make it interesting and enjoyable for our travelers, in putting together the tour I came up with at least two points of interest for every locality that was interested in participating. The only problem site was Nottoway County, through which none of Lee's army passed. A portion of Grant's did, though, and this would be explained in the village of Nottoway Court House. Another site in the county, although it had nothing to do

with the final campaign, was a cavalry battle fought on June 23, 1864, as part of the famous Wilson-Kautz Raid. I would loosely tie its story into "Lee's Retreat" by the fact that it centered around the destruction of one of Lee's soon-to-be-used supply lines, the South Side Railroad.

After a series of monthly meetings, eventually we had a package to present to the various localities. We proposed to develop a twenty-stop driving tour, with the interpretive information being provided to the public via remote radio transmitters. This idea came from one of the state park staff members who had used them

successfully at Sailor's Creek Battlefield. The followers of the tour would reach each point of interest, where, upon turning into a hard-surfaced pull-off, they could tune their radios to 1610 AM and hear a three-to-five-minute narrative on what actually happened at that site. A large metal map at each location would orient those who stop by and tell them how to use the radio station. The entire tour, around 100 miles in length, was estimated to take about four hours to complete, ending with a visit to Appomattox Court House National Historical Park.

While everyone thought the idea



**Lee's Retreat.** The Fork Inn at Sutherland Station. *Photo by Brian J. Soule, 1998.*

was great, we still wondered where we would get the money from to finance such a project. We first applied for a grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program, but at that time they weren't financing such interpretive ideas. Then information came to us on the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, better known as ISTEA (pronounced "ice tea"). Under this program, a grant could be given for 80% of the cost of a project which enhanced highways and byways, with a 20% match having to be provided by each county or city. We then decided to try this approach. After developing our grant proposals, it came time to go in front of the various county boards of supervisors and plead our case.

Receiving almost unanimous support from most of the communities, we went about completing the program by applying for the grants. Soon though, we had our first controversy. A few members of the public had a problem with the terminology "Lee's Retreat." They argued that Lee never retreated, but was only withdrawing from his position. In fact, to some, he was actually advancing. It didn't matter that all the Virginia state historical markers, placed in the 1930s, were titled "Lee's Retreat." Nor the fact that a driving tour done in the late 1950s also was marked with signs saying "Lee's Retreat" (see endnote 1). In standing firm on our decision to use this designation for our newly developed tour, I ended up writing a

treatise, using primary sources and contemporary accounts, to prove that it was indeed a retreat. (This was later included in my book on the Appomattox Campaign as a sidebar.)<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the debate caused one county to not participate in the tour initially, as its supervisors deferred any action favoring it.

We eventually were able to successfully compete for two ISTEA grants for our project, the cost running in the neighborhood of \$607,000. Besides purchase of the twenty radio transmitters, asphalt pull-offs needed to be constructed, easements obtained from landowners, and signs erected. Of special note is the fact that out of the twenty property owners we dealt with, nineteen donated their easements. Two individuals, whose property was at first left off the tour for privacy reasons, actually approached us and asked to be included, which we happily did. This says a lot about the local support we received.

Others in the group worked with designers for a colorful brochure and a tear-off pad map of the drive, while I developed the various historical scripts. In doing so I had to keep within a certain time limit, yet give a story that would build upon itself from site to site. Even though the tour was touted as "Lee's Retreat," the narrative was actually written in a nonpartisan way so that the story would be told from both points of view.

Diligently continuing our work on the tour, we set a completion date for the spring of 1995 to coincide with the 130th anniversary of the campaign. All representatives in the consortium worked extremely well together, with various facets coming together on schedule. It was decided that the first week in April would be the grand opening of the tour. It was then that things really began to happen as the media began to report the story of our efforts.

Article after article appeared in the local newspapers, and were soon picked up by the major dailies. Finally, television began appearing on the scene. The idea of presenting history to the public in this novel way stirred up quite a bit of interest. Every forward movement in developing the project was the subject of a piece in the papers.

The big moment came when I received a call from a nice lady in New York. She said she represented *Life* magazine and they wanted to do an article on "Lee's Retreat." Putting her in touch with other members of the consortium, she set up a schedule to come down to Virginia. She brought along a contract photographer to visit with me first, and we ultimately began our tour of the route. Along the way we met various consortium members who helped with the article. Eventually, in April 1995, *Life* came out with a special section on "Places of the Year 1995." It was called "Great Retreats" and four pages were de-

voted to our "Lee's Retreat" tour. It was illustrated with ghostly images from sites along the drive.

To make matters even better, that same month was to be our grand opening of the auto tour. We hoped that the governor of Virginia, George Allen, would come to Farmville and give the opening remarks of our media kick-off. Then something unexpected happened again.

A few days before our ceremony, a politically and racially charged issue took place in Danville, Virginia, along the North Carolina border. Apparently the chair of the Republican party spoke at a Confederate heritage program, and this offended certain individuals of the community. Of course they vented their feelings to the news media. Members of our group wondered if this controversy would spill over into our program, since we were dealing with the issue of the Civil War. We pondered what to do. It was decided that I would give a quick opening statement to set the tone of our ceremony, then introduce the governor and his wife.

Trying to be as nonpartisan as possible with my speech, it, and the remaining program, went off without a hitch. Nothing derogatory was said about what we had accomplished with the consortium. Congratulations were extended to all.

That the program was eventually a success can only be shown in a study done later of the printed materials alone generated by this story. Com-

piling all known articles from the various national newspapers and determining their circulation, it was estimated that over 8.5 million individuals were exposed about what we had accomplished! The program was also nationally recognized as one of the top twenty-five ISTEA projects of the year.

Local television stations continually carried stories about "Lee's Retreat" and soon other regions of the state started taking note of what we had developed. The historical community in particular saw what we did; that is, actually interpret for the general public's enjoyment not just a battle but an entire campaign. The localities between Fredericksburg and Petersburg shortly began studying the feasibility of a similar driving tour for the Overland Campaign of spring 1864. To be known as "Lee vs. Grant," it will use wayside exhibits rather than radio stations to explain its numerous historical sites. Eventually it will connect with the "Lee's Retreat" tour at the downtown Petersburg visitor center.

Other localities have taken on their own projects: The Peninsula Campaign, the Shenandoah Valley Campaigns, Mosby's Confederacy, Northern Virginia—all are among the many interpretive military campaign tours in the works. The Virginia Department of Tourism has provided great support for these undertakings and developed an overall connecting tour encompassing the routes under

the umbrella title of "Virginia's Civil War Trails." Brochures, a free newspaper, and new state map all carry information about the various regions and are available at most welcome centers.

With the achievements of our initial 20-stop driving tour being recorded through visitor surveys done by Farmville's Longwood College School of Business, the local communities wanted more. Tagging onto a third and final ISTEA grant, we added six more stops to the tour. It now begins at Petersburg in front of the original ante-bellum South Side Rail Road station. After completing "Lee vs. Grant" and visiting Petersburg National Battlefield, interested individuals can continue along the route of the armies to Appomattox, spending time at the newly established Pamplin Park Civil War Site (a private park) in Dinwiddie County along the way. Nottoway County added two more sites at Crewe and Burkeville Junction, while Buckingham County joined in on the tour this time around with two sites. The effect of the program on economic development along the route is now becoming apparent. "Heritage tourism" is the buzzword being used for our interpretive "product." Clean in its demeanor, jobs in the service industry thrive off of it. Visitors come, spend money, then go on to the next community and do the same.

Another aspect that has come out of our group's efforts is the addition

of a brochure called "Virginia's Retreat." It deals exclusively with the outdoor recreational opportunities along the retreat route. This particular program was funded with a grant from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Since most of the tour passes through rural areas and generally follows the Appomattox River, many parks, boat landings, etc., are available for public use. This is just another way to develop the natural assets of the Southern Piedmont region.

The Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Virginia Tech University adopted the tour as a pilot project for the utilization of the Internet to promote Virginia history and tourism. We also can be found on another Web site under the title of "Lee's Retreat."

As I sit back and look over what this "reinvention of the wheel" has become, it's sometimes hard to believe. Others in the past have marked the route of Lee's in one way or another. Did they get this kind of response? What caused this one to be so popular? Was it Ken Burns and his PBS television series on the Civil War that sparked this interest? Undoubtedly this documentary made the American public more aware of the war, even if there are those who don't agree with the program's contents.

Who knows?—but history written for public consumption seems to have generated quite an interest in this subject.

As far as my role, I was honored to be able to tell the story of both armies during those final days on the road to Appomattox. To make it more accessible to the American public was also an accomplished goal. Seeing these historic sites along the tour being recognized and, I hope, preserved for forthcoming generations has also provided gratification to me. But I think the real reason I wanted to be part of this venture is found in a letter we received from a follower of the driving tour.

Hailing from North Carolina, her great-great-grandfather was mortally wounded in the battle of Sailor's Creek. She wrote: "It is so obvious how much work and research and time went into the endeavor, and I just wanted to let you know how very impressive it all is. We stopped at each transmitter and listened to the words and gazed at the area and I must admit that there were times I weeping. I felt so honored that people cared so much about what my great great grandfather and those other brave men went through to pay them such tribute. Thank you." That pretty much says it all.<sup>3</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Christopher M. Calkins, *From Petersburg to Appomattox: A Tour Guide to the Routes of Lee's Withdrawal and Grant's Pursuit, April 2-9, 1865* (Farmville, Va.: The Farmville Herald, 1983). The "Lee's Retreat" consortium eventually worked together with the

nonprofit firm Eastern National to put together a sales-item package which contains a cassette of the driving tour narratives, the above publication, and another of my works, *Thirty-Six Hours Before Appomattox*, (Farmville, Va.: The Farmville Herald, 1980). In the late 1920s the Virginia State Commission on Conservation and Development began a program of placing highway historical markers at points of significance in the Commonwealth. One subject matter addressed was "Lee's Retreat." By the latest count, some thirty-one signs have been placed under this category dealing with its various historical episodes. In 1956, the Virginia Department of Highways developed a 20-stop tour called "Lee's Retreat Route from Petersburg to Appomattox." It was researched by Wilmer R. Turner of Blackstone and his "work was carefully studied by the Historical Division of the State Library and authenticated prior to submission of the idea to the Appropriations Committee" of the General Assembly. Two thousand dollars was allocated for small black and white signs which carry a crossed saber and rifle logo encircled with "Route of Lee's Retreat." During the early 1960s, Eastern National Park & Monument Association (precursor to today's Eastern National) published a small tour brochure for those wishing to follow the basic route of the armies from the Wilderness to Appomattox. They suggested following either Lee's route from Petersburg to Amelia (north of the Appomattox River), or the same route from Five Forks that we prescribed.

2. Chris Calkins, *The Appomattox Campaign, March 29-April 9, 1865* (Conshohocken, Pa.: Combined Books, 1997), see pp. 180-1. Another controversy arose when a local supervisor (and newspaper editor) in Nottoway County became upset about the lack of detail in the script for the Battle of Nottoway. I explained to him that only so much could be said in three minutes and that the test was written for the casual listener who had no knowledge of the Wilson-Kautz Raid or its purpose. Afterwards a wayside exhibit was placed at the site with battle maps and extensive narratives, and this seemed to placate him.
3. Doris G. Kinney, "Great Retreats," *Life* (April 1995), pp. 78-82; Virginia's Retreat, *Driving Tour of the Route of Lee's Retreat*, Media Summary 1993-1995. *Southern Living* magazine, not counted in this summary, also did a feature on the tour by Les Thomas (April 1996), pp. 2va - 5va. Longwood College Business School and Virginia's Retreat, *Lee's Retreat: Visitor's Survey Results, Fall 1996*. In a survey question concerning satisfaction with the tour, the majority indicated that they were most satisfied with the route: 77.8% said they would recommend the route to others, 74.1% liked the narrations at the pull-off sites, and 70.4% said they would return. Communication from Peter Laws, lawsp@vt.edu, "Lee's Retreat" Web site; letter to author from Susan Smith-Carpenter, 31 May 1995.

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