Drill at Fort Ringgold, Rio Grande City, circa 1886. Like several of the border posts, Fort Ringgold (form known as Ringgold Barracks) was to remain in operation until after World War II. Photo from Crimmins Collection, Center for American History, UT-Austin (CN# 02717).

Close Window
Chapter XXIV

COLONEL LEE DECLARES THE FAITH THAT IS IN HIM

Pitying his tired fellow-travellers more than himself, Lee reached New Orleans on the afternoon of February 13, 1860, and humorously admitted the next day, in a letter to Custis, that he had failed to bring some rather personal belongings with him: "...imagine my horror this morning when I found I had left my shaving-brush and pants behind. The first I constantly leave, but my pants, my new pants, I cannot account for.... I could hardly believe my own eyes when I found them out of their accustomed place. Take care of them, or use them as may be most convenient." ¹

From New Orleans on February 15, Lee sailed by steamer for Indianola, and
thence he went to San Antonio, arriving on February 19. As he expected to
direct the department for a short time only, he did not open elaborate private
quarters, but thriftily boarded on the plaza. The next day he assumed
command. 2 He found part of the forces disorganized by a series of plundering
raids, made by Indians in northern Texas. On February 3, the animals of
residents in the vicinity of Camp Colorado had been driven off. On February 17
many mules were stolen from Camp Cooper, perhaps by collusion. The garrison
had been so reduced at the time, because of numerous detachments for
scouting expeditions, that the band men had to be sent in pursuit of the thieves.
Twenty-three mules were recovered, but forty others and three horses were
lost. The very next day all the animals from the Indian agency near Camp
Cooper were whipped into the wilds by marauders, and a citizen was shot
within two or three miles of a fort by three Indians on foot. Lee attributed
these outrages to the lack of adequate troops in Texas, and also to the fact that
the horses of the troopers were so worn down by hard riding that they could not
overtake fleeing robbers. 3 The War Department promptly took cognizance of
these and of other depredations by the Comanches and Kiowas, and authorized
a large expedition sent out against the Indians as soon as the grass on the
prairies would suffice for the horses. 4 Until this could be done, Lee worked as
best he might to restore order.

The situation in the North had improved to such an extent by March 15 that Lee
left San Antonio on that date for the Rio Grande to deal with Juan Cortinas.
This man had been a bandit and desperado for ten years and in various ways
had defied the Texas authorities. With something more than fifty men, on
September 28, 1859, he had seized the town of Brownsville, where there were
no United States troops and only a few American citizens. Cortinas had a free
hand to murder and to rob, and then, for a time, he played hide and seek on
both sides of the Rio Grande. On October 22 he worsted an irregular force sent
out against him, and captured two light field-pieces from it. This success greatly
emboldened him and gave to his activities almost the appearance of an
insurrection. On the night of December 5, however, Lee's old West Point
acquaintance, Major S. P. Heintzelman, arrived at Brownsville with 117 men,
took over the demoralized Texas Rangers, and on December 27, near Rio
Grande City, attacked and routed Cortinas's bandits. Thereafter the theiving
band disintegrated rapidly. 5 With the leader on the run and his followers
dispersed, Lee anticipated no trouble, "but," he wrote Custis, "there are so
many contradictory reports that I think it better to see for myself, that I may if
possible give quiet there and rest to the authorities at Washington."
Accompanied by a single company of cavalry, Lee pushed on toward Ringgold Barracks, but turned to the southwest and made for the Rio Grande in the vicinity of Eagle Pass, when he heard a rumor that Cortinas was in that quarter. From Eagle Pass, Lee and his men rode down the river to the barracks, where they arrived on March 31. Once on the Rio Grande, Lee saw it would be impossible to catch Cortinas, or to prevent his return, unless the Mexican Government also took action against the bandit. Lee had been authorized to demand co-operation and to enter Mexico, if need be, in pursuit of Cortinas, so he called the Mexicans to their duty in this letter, written in a style he probably had acquired thirteen years before from General Scott:

Hd. Qrs. Ringgold Barracks, 2d April, 1860.

His Excy. Andres Trevino,
Govr. of State of Tamulipas, etc.,
Victoria, Mexico.

Sir: In consequence of the recent outrages of Cortinas and his followers upon the persons and property of American citizens, I have been instructed by the Sec'y of War of the U. S. to notify the authorities of Mexico on the Rio Grande frontier, that they must break up and disperse the bands of banditti which have been concerned in these depredations and have sought protection in Mexican territory. Further, that they will be held responsible for the faithful performance of this plain duty on their part. I have, therefore, the honor to request that your Excellency will cause to be dispersed any bands within the States under your jurisdiction, having for their object depredations upon American soil.

From Ringgold Barracks, on April 3, Lee conducted a careful inspection of the lower Rio Grande valley and not until April 11 did he reach Fort Brown. On the way he had some correspondence with the authorities at Reynosa, and later he received a protest from General G. Garcia of the Mexican army, over the action of some of the Texas Rangers, who had gone across the river into Mexican territory at that point, forty miles west of Matamoros, in quest of Cortinas. Lee answered with some sharpness:

Hd. Qrs. Fort Brown, Texas, 12th April, 1860.

Gen'l G. Garcia,
Comm'r in Chief of the line of the Bravo,
Matamoros, Mexico.
Lee did not think the Mexicans would act against Cortinas, and though the bandit was reported to be 135 miles away, moving into the interior, Lee would have crossed the river and would have started in pursuit if he had believed his feeble horses could have found food in the country they would have had to cover. As time passed and Lee heard nothing more of the bandit, he decided that Cortinas had left the Rio Grande, and he accordingly planned to return to San Antonio. The day before he had arranged to start, however, he got a report that Cortinas was back on the Rio Grande. To trap him Lee sent two companies across the river, only to find, once again, that rumor outdrove the bandit. More correspondence with the Mexican authorities followed. Finally they promised to arrest Cortinas, and Lee set out for San Antonio. He covered the 264 miles between May 8 and 17. Two months later Lee was able to report that even rumors of Cortinas’s presence on the north bank of the Rio Grande had ceased and that he proposed to withdraw some of the troops from unhealthy districts.
on the river.\textsuperscript{14}

From the time of his arrival at San Antonio until late in the autumn Lee had only his routine duties to occupy him. He drew up a plan for the establishment of a military post at the headwaters of the Concha, but could do nothing to carry out the idea, as the Secretary of War had no funds available for it.\textsuperscript{15} He had a few things to cheer him, such as the arrival of his first grandchild, whom Rooney and Charlotte insisted on naming after him. "I wish," he said, "I could offer him a more worthy name and a better example. He must elevate the first, and make use of the latter to avoid the errors I have committed. I also expressed the thought [in a separate letter to Charlotte] that under the circumstances you might like to name him after his great-grandfather, and wish you both, 'upon mature consideration,' to follow your inclinations and judgment. I should love him all the same, and nothing could make me love you two more than I do."\textsuperscript{16}

A certain amusement Lee found in the observance of Saint John's Day, when every Mexican in San Antonio rode wildly up and down the streets. "I did not know before," he said, "that Saint John set so high a value upon equitation."\textsuperscript{17}

He interested himself in the building of an Episcopal church at San Antonio,\textsuperscript{18} and he was rejoiced that his youngest son, Robert, was preparing for confirmation.\textsuperscript{19} Despite his separation from his family, he tried to be philosophical. "country. We want but little," he wrote Rooney. "Our happiness depends upon our independence, the success of our operations, prosperity of our plans, health, contentment, and the esteem of our friends."\textsuperscript{20} But under the surface of cheerfulness, this was a time of deep depression with Lee. He only hinted at it vaguely in one of his letters:

"At this distance from those you love and care for, with the knowledge of the vicissitudes and necessities of life, one is rent by a thousand anxieties, and the mind as well as body is worn and racked to pieces. But I will not, dear Cousin Anna, impose my sad thoughts upon you, for a man may manifest and communicate his joy, but he should conceal and smother his grief as much as possible. Touching your kind wishes for my speedy return, you know the embarrassment that attends it. A divided heart I have too long had, and a divided life too long led. That may be one cause of the small progress I have made on either hand, my professional and civil career. Success is not always attained by a single undivided effort, it rarely follows a halting vacillating course. My military duties require me here, whereas my affections and urgent domestic claims call me away. And thus I live and am unable to advance either. But while I live I must toil and trust."\textsuperscript{21}
Slow promotion, as well as homesickness, had something to do with this mild but melancholy expression of the old sense of frustration. He was now fifty-three, and had been twenty-two years in advancing from the grade of captain to that of lieutenant colonel. Between him and the rank of general officer stood nineteen colonels and three lieutenant colonels, while four other lieutenant colonels had been commissioned the same day he had been. Twenty-two men at least between him and titular brigade command! After holding a commission for thirty-one years his pay was only $1205 per annum, and his gross return from the government — pay, rations, quarters, travel, and everything — was only $4060. This was discouraging to the father of four unmarried daughters, and the husband of an invalid wife. What made it worse was the belief that he did not know how to advance his interests in the army. There was Joe Johnston, for instance. Johnston had belonged to the topographical engineers, but he had early undertaken special duties in order to win promotion. Lee had realized what Johnston was after, had seen how he was proceeding to get what he wanted, and yet Lee had felt himself wholly incapable, somehow, of doing the same thing. Johnston, who was a cousin of the Secretary of War, had been on detached duty in Washington and had been assigned important duties. Lee was glad to see his friend advanced and cheerfully admitted that Johnston was worthy of the honor, but he was stung by what he considered the injustice of Floyd's preferment of Johnston. "I think it must be evident to him," Lee confided to Custis, "that it never was the intention of Congress to advance him to the position assigned him by the Sec'y. It was not so recognized before, and in proportion to his services he has been advanced beyond anyone in the army and has thrown more discredit than ever on the system of favoritism and making brevets."

While Johnston was in Washington, death made vacant the office of quartermaster general, long held by Thomas S. Jesup. The office carried with it the rank of brigadier general and, of course, was much sought after. Scott is reported to have been asked to suggest a successor to Jesup and is said to have declined to do so, preferring instead to name four men, any one of whom he considered qualified. The four were Joseph E. Johnston, Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Charles F. Smith. As among these possible appointees, Floyd chose Joseph E. Johnston. Lee cheerfully wrote his congratulations to the fortunate brigadier:

San Antonio, Texas, July 30, 1860.

My dear General: I am delighted at accosting you by your present title, and
I feel my heart exult within me at your high position. I hope the old State may always be able to furnish worthy successors to the first chief of your new department; and that in your administration the country and army will have cause to rejoice that it has fallen upon you. Please present my cordial congratulations to Mrs. J., and say that I fear, now that she will have you constantly with her, she will never want to see me again. May happiness and prosperity always attend you is the sincere wish of

Very truly yours,

R. E. LEE

His old classmate's attainment to the rank of the general officer made Lee look on himself, more than ever, as a failure, a man whose errors of judgment and slowness in promoting his own interests had left him far down the ladder. In this depression of mind, as the autumn of 1860 opened, Lee found himself involved in the darkest of American tragedies. He had bantered Cassius Lee years before about the superiority of the Whigs, and he had watched the outcome of the successive presidential elections with more than the average man's interest, but this had primarily been because of the effect that changes of administration had on the War Department and on the army. Of Congress he had seen enough to view it without illusion, but he had served in no Southern state except Texas in nearly thirty years, and he had not had close contact with the passions the slavery question had aroused there. It was his nature, moreover, to leave politics to the politicians.

It could no longer be so. The wrath aroused by the John Brown raid had not cooled. Politics had become the affair of every man and the concern of every soldier, for the old amity among the states was gone. Men all around Lee were talking of secession if the "Black Republicans" carried the presidential election. The Republican ticket, Lincoln and Hamlin, had no support in Texas. Douglas and Johnson, the nominees of the Northern element of the disrupted Democratic party, had only a scant following. Lee himself had believed in July that Judge Douglas should withdraw "and join himself and party to aid in the election of Breckinridge" and the defeat of Lincoln, but he had added regretfully, "Politicians I fear are too selfish to become martyrs." The real contest in the Lone Star State was between Bell and Everett, the Whig candidates, and Breckinridge and Lane, chosen by the Southern Democrats who had left the Charleston convention because of disagreement over the party's declaration on slavery in the territories. When the state elections of October 9 in Pennsylvania and Indiana were carried by the Republicans,
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*Note: The table represents a sample of data from the 1860 census.*

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1860 | Grande Cty, TX  | Kingsland Barreos  
Herman Steneling 23  
and others