

Episode 235: Surrender at Appomattox

Week of April 5-April 11, 1865

By April 5, 1865, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, having abandoned its defensive lines around Richmond and Petersburg, had moved westward to Amelia Court House, where they hoped to obtain badly needed supplies before continuing the march southward to hopefully join forces with Joseph Johnston's army in North Carolina. Unfortunately for the Confederates the supply train was not there, and the rebel forces spent a precious day searching for supplies in the countryside. By the time they were ready to continue their march, Union cavalry under Philip Sheridan had reached the rail junction at Jetersville, preventing a more direct movement to the south and pushing Lee instead westward towards Farmville, where he hoped another supply train would be waiting. Meanwhile the Union Army of the Potomac and Army of the James, well-supplied and marching along shorter routes, continued to threaten his rear and flanks, while attempting to get ahead of the Confederates and cut off their retreat.

On April 6, elements of Sheridan's cavalry and the Union Sixth Corps struck Lee's force, which had become divided into several columns. During the fighting at Sailor's Creek, Lee lost about 8,000 men, including eight generals who were captured. Viewing the carnage, Lee plaintively cried: "My God! Has the army been dissolved?" His remaining veterans pressed on towards Farmville in two columns, with one crossing over High Bridge to the east of the town. They set fire to the massive span to delay the Federals, but the bluecoats used a separate smaller bridge to continue the pursuit. Upon reaching Farmville the Confederates found the desperately needed supplies, but the fast approaching Yankees prevented many of Lee's hungry men from receiving them. Lee then crossed north of the Appomattox River and, after fighting off a Federal

force at Cumberland Church, moved his army on a wide arc to the west, hoping to finally receive supplies at Appomattox Station.

The Federals continued their pursuit. Following Sailor's Creek, Philip Sheridan had reported to General Grant that "If the thing is pressed I think Lee will surrender." Upon hearing that news President Lincoln replied "Let the thing be pressed." From his headquarters in Union-occupied Farmville, Grant sent the first of several notes that he would exchange with Lee over the next two days, proposing a surrender. Lee replied that he did not yet feel surrender was warranted, but he did inquire about possible terms. By the afternoon of April 8, Union cavalry under George Custer had raced ahead of the rebels to capture Lee's supply trains at Appomattox Station, and set up positions to block the Confederate path westward. The bulk of Lee's army had reached Appomattox Court House that evening. The Confederate leader held his last council of war, directing an attack to be made on the morning of April 9 to drive away the enemy cavalry. The assault made some headway, but then ran into Union infantry, which had arrived in time to seal Lee's fate.

Realizing the futility of further resistance, Lee sent another note to Grant asking for a meeting to discuss surrender terms. He dispatched a staff officer to select a suitable location for the meeting, and the two commanders met that afternoon in the home of Wilmer McLean. After a few minutes of conversation relating to their service in the Mexican War, Lee asked Grant for his terms. The Union commander replied that the Confederates would be paroled and allowed to return home rather than be sent to prison camps. Their weapons and equipment would be surrendered, but they could maintain their private property, including their horses and mules. Grant also agreed to provide food for Lee's starving men.

After signing the document Lee, left the McLean house with Grant and his staff tipping their hats in salute. Federal officers began to fire an artillery salute in celebration, but Grant ordered them to cease so as to not humiliate the southerners. The following day Lee and Grant held a second brief meeting, with Grant hoping that Lee would urge the remaining Confederate forces to capitulate. Lee also issued his poignant General Order No. 9, expressing his appreciation for the valiant service of his army over four long years of war. Both generals departed Appomattox before the final paroling of the 28,000 men in the Army of Northern Virginia, and the stacking of arms ceremony, which took place on April 12.

The Appomattox surrender did not mark the official end of the Civil War, though history records it as the symbolic end. Large numbers of Confederate troops remained under arms, and the final surrenders would not take place until June. Still, the dream of southern independence effectively ended in that small central Virginia village on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865.