



REVISITING SLAVERY, *the* CIVIL WAR, *and* RECONCILIATION *at* ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY *and* ARLINGTON HOUSE

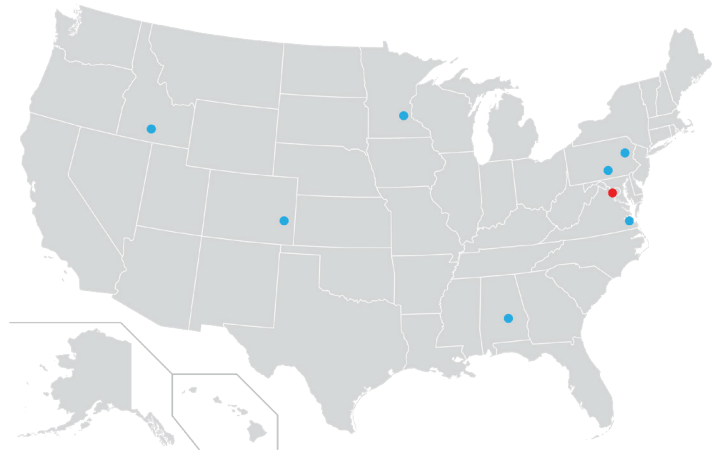
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ABSTRACT

Arlington National Cemetery, containing the graves of around 400,000 people, mostly veterans, is one of the United States' most treasured cultural sites. The site also contains Arlington House, former enslaved labor plantation and home of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Together, the cemetery and the plantation house played important roles in the divisions of the Civil War; the flawed North–South reconciliation that took place in the decades that followed; and the struggles over racial equality and historical memory that have continued into the 21st century. Following a National Park Service rehabilitation of Arlington House, accounts of enslaved people and their descendants are now considerably more prominent in the historical interpretation. Yet questions remain over how best to remember slavery, the Confederacy, and the Civil War.

It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate place to contemplate the disputed legacies of slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War. Arlington National Cemetery is the final resting place of some 400,000 Americans, most of them veterans of American conflicts from the Revolution to the present day. It also incorporates the former home of Robert E. Lee, Arlington House, which stood at the center of an enslaved labor plantation. Converted into a national cemetery during the Civil War, this land houses the graves of soldiers who fought for the Confederacy and soldiers

who fought against it, as well as formerly enslaved people whose freedom depended on the Confederacy's defeat. Many commentators have cherished Arlington as a site of national reconciliation, a place where northerners accepted Confederates back into the American fold. Indeed, reconciliation is embedded into the landscape itself: standing in front of Arlington House, looking down upon the DC cityscape across the Potomac River, one can observe how the Memorial Bridge draws a direct line from Lee's former home to the Lincoln Memorial, physically joining the Confederate and Union leadership together.



Yet the neat geographical linking of Lincoln and Lee obscures the complications and failures of post-Civil War reconciliation. It's become clearer than ever in recent years that the reunification of the North and the South came at the expense of racial justice. Looking more closely at the Arlington story reveals lingering divisions and enmities beneath the veneer of the reconciliation narrative. Arlington National Cemetery and Arlington House can offer valuable lessons as Americans engage in broader efforts to reckon anew with historical conflicts around race and region.

Revisiting Arlington is particularly timely because the plantation house reopened in June 2021 after what the National Park Service termed “a complete rehabilitation of the site and transformation of the visitor experience.”¹ Along with much-needed property repairs, a major goal of the refurbishment was to center African American history in the interpretation of the plantation and the mansion. The first time I visited, in 2016, I was disappointed by the historical interpretation, especially the lack of attention to the perspectives and experiences of enslaved people. The site lived up to its official designation as “The Robert E. Lee Memorial.” When I returned in August 2022, I was eager to discover how far the National Park Service had rectified the previous imbalance. By then, the entire landscape of public histories of slavery and the Civil War era had been transformed. The 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church massacre in Charleston, South Carolina, the white supremacist violence and the killing of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020—these and similar incidents intensified criticism of traditional, Lost Cause-style narratives of slavery and the Civil War. Demands for increased and higher-quality representation of Black stories in public history skyrocketed. Would the newly refurbished Arlington House deliver?



Arlington House has a long and remarkable history—a history intertwined with the lives of George Washington, who fought so hard to establish the United States, and Robert E. Lee, who fought so hard to break the country apart. The house was built between 1802 and 1816 for George Washington Parke Custis, stepgrandson of George Washington. It became the center of a plantation that relied on the labor of dozens of enslaved workers. Custis also used the house to store and exhibit some of the revolutionary-era George Washington memorabilia he had inherited. From the beginning, this place was rich in historical meaning.

When Custis died in 1857 he left a life interest in the plantation to his daughter Mary Custis Lee, wife of Robert E. Lee, after which it would pass down to her children. Although Robert E. Lee never owned Arlington House, he wrote that this was “where my attachments are more strongly placed than at any other place in the world.” Arlington House was Lee's home. It was from this place that Lee sent his famous resignation letter of April 20, 1861, and it was from

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Arlington House. FILODENDRON / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

this place that he departed two days later to begin his four-year fight for Virginia and the Confederacy. He never returned.²

The war years transformed Lee's home beyond recognition. Just one day after the ratification of Virginia's secession, US forces occupied the plantation and turned it into a military encampment. The high ground overlooking Washington, DC, gave the place immense strategic value, while its association with Washington and Lee imbued it with symbolic significance. In 1862 the US government confiscated the property for non-payment of taxes. Over the next few years, the estate took on two vital functions in the US war effort: it provided a home for African Americans who had escaped enslavement, and it became a burial site for the war dead. One of the exhibits currently on view quotes an 1864 article from the abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator*: "How appropriate that Lee's lands should be dedicated to two such noble purposes—the free living black men whom Lee would enslave, and the bodies of the dead soldiers whom Lee has killed in a wicked cause."

From the very beginning of the Civil War, enslaved African Americans took advantage of the crisis to flee from slavery and secure freedom. Even before the Emancipation Proclamation made the ending of slavery a principal war goal, and increasingly thereafter, Black freedom seekers flocked to Union lines. US authorities created refugee camps across the country, including several in the vicinity of Washington, DC.³ In 1863, "Freedmen's Village" was established on the grounds of Arlington House. Beginning with tents and progressing to wooden buildings, it eventually housed some 1,500 formerly enslaved people, providing facilities such as churches, schools, and a hospital. After the war hundreds of Black residents continued to live in Freedmen's Village, but in 1887 the US War Department began the



(top) US soldiers at Arlington House, 1864. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (bottom) Freedmen's Village, Arlington, Virginia, *Harper's Weekly*, May 7, 1864. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

process of closing the settlement down, in response to complaints that it had become an eyesore. By 1900 the village was no more.⁴

Just as the Civil War created opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Black refugees to seek freedom and new homes, it also produced hundreds of thousands of dead bodies that required burial places. Here too, the US government identified the confiscated Arlington estate as a suitable venue. In 1864, the War Department, which now controlled the property, set aside 200 acres of the plantation's land to form a new national military cemetery. US Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs did more than anyone to shape the creation and growth of the cemetery. Meigs was

motivated in part by the general need to find suitable space to bury the war dead. But he also wanted to make sure that Arlington would never again be home to the Lee family. Thus, Meigs directed the placement of some of the graves close to the house, right by Mary Lee's treasured flower garden.⁵

The early development of Arlington National Cemetery was closely associated with US victory in the Civil War. First and foremost, in the vision of Meigs and others, it would be a shrine commemorating the sacrifices US soldiers had made to defeat the Confederate rebellion. However, hundreds of Confederate soldiers were buried at Arlington, mostly prisoners-of-war or patients who had died in area hospitals. At first, their presence caused friction. During commemorative ceremonies in the late 1860s, for example, those attempting to mourn at Confederate graves were met with anti-Confederate hostility.⁶

By the time the 19th century turned into the 20th, though, white northern attitudes toward those Confederate graves had considerably softened—part of a broader mood of reconciliation between the North and the South that rose to new heights with the Spanish-American War of 1898. Following US victory over Spain, President William McKinley, himself a Civil War veteran, proclaimed that national reunification had succeeded to such a degree that the federal government would now take responsibility for the care of Arlington's Confederate graves. The first decades of the 20th century saw ever-increasing integration of Confederates into the Arlington landscape. The federal government established a new Confederate section at the national cemetery, featuring a Lost Cause-infused monument funded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and built by Confederate veteran Moses Ezekiel. Speakers at the 1914 monument unveiling ceremony included Colonel Robert E. Lee III, General Lee's grandson, and Woodrow Wilson, the first president from the southern states since the Civil War. The speeches that day celebrated national harmony, relegating regional divisions to the distant past.⁷

Early-20th-century Americans were writing reconciliation into the landscape in other ways, too. As part of a broader reimagining of the landscape of Washington, DC, a new bridge, named Memorial Bridge, ultimately completed in 1932, linked Arlington National Cemetery with the Lincoln Memorial across the Potomac River. Though they had been the bitterest of enemies in the 1860s, northerners and southerners were reunited as Americans in the 20th century. Arlington House played a role, too. In the 1920s Congress voted to repurpose the mansion as a historic site centered on the memory of Robert E. Lee, signaling northerners' increasing willingness to pay respect to the Confederate enemies they had once fought against. In 1955, the 90th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, Congress officially designated Arlington House as "The Robert E. Lee Memorial."⁸

Reintegrating Confederates into the national community came at a cost—a cost the country is still reckoning with today. Even as cultural reintegration was occurring, it generated significant criticism. Well into the 20th century, surviving Union soldiers continued to see Confederates as enemies, just as they had been in the 1860s, and to view their rehabilitation with distaste. Even in 1925, when the conversion of Arlington House into a museum focused on Robert E. Lee was under consideration, the Grand Army of the Republic, the main Union veterans' organization, lambasted the initiative as "an insult and a disgrace to the Nation, to every grave in Arlington Cemetery." What sometimes appeared to be a smooth process of reconciliation masked deep divisions and enduring resentments.⁹

Engagement with Arlington's 19th-century past has been further complicated by the legacies of slavery and racial inequality. From its earliest days as a cemetery, Arlington housed the remains of Black as well as White people. Individuals who died while residing in the Freedmen's Village or other area refugee camps, as well as African American soldiers fighting for the United States, were buried in the northeastern part of the plantation. Their graves were not treated with anything approaching equal respect. In the late 1860s and 1870s, Black graves were excluded from Decoration and Memorial Day commemorations, just as the Confederate dead were.¹⁰ Racial inequality worsened during the era of Jim Crow. After the creation of the dedicated Confederate section in the early 20th century, the African American dead were generally treated with less respect than the Confederate dead—despite the fact that US Colored Troops soldiers had fought to preserve the United States while Confederates were trying to dismantle it. Into the late 20th century, the Black graves in Section 27 were poorly maintained and rarely emphasized in the visitor experience. Finally, things began to change. In the 1990s cemetery authorities improved the upkeep of Section 27 and replaced many of the headboards there. A new commemorative plaque was installed in Section 27

and the area began to be identified as a “point of interest” in the maps and brochures that guided visitors around the cemetery. Although Section 27 will always be overshadowed by the eternal flame and other better-known features of Arlington National Cemetery, at least its historical significance is now more prominently recognized.¹¹



When I first visited in 2016, I found the landscape of the cemetery poignant and evocative. From the constantly guarded Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to the seemingly endless rows of lustrous marble headstones, the cemetery presents rich opportunities to reflect on the sacrifices that have sustained the American nation. Arlington House, in contrast, was dissatisfying. The interpretation was limited and outdated, with little effort to tell inclusive stories of the Black as well as the White residents of the plantation.

I was pleased, then, to learn that a major refurbishment was already in the works, funded by a \$12 million gift from philanthropist David Rubenstein. The renovations, originally intended to take place in 2016, began in 2018 and were finally completed in June 2021. During the years the house was closed, our world changed. The COVID pandemic roiled the entire enterprise of heritage tourism. And the murder of George Floyd intensified a nationwide conversation about racial injustice throughout American history, accelerating angry challenges to the veneration of Confederate history and the marginalization of Black history that had already emerged following events in Charleston in 2015 and Charlottesville in 2017.

Even though the renovation plans had roots stretching back for years, responses to the reopening of Arlington House in June 2021 reflected the most recent struggles over public representations of Black history. As they reported on the reopening, many commentators emphasized the new exhibits’ attention to the experiences of enslaved people. Donor David Rubenstein himself made the connection explicit, expressing his belief that “Arlington House’s rich and complicated history will add to the necessary and important discussion in our country about racial justice.” The President and CEO of the National Park Foundation agreed, observing that “the reopening of Arlington House provides a place for hard and important conversations that illuminate more perspectives, including the experiences of enslaved people and their descendants.”¹²

When I returned to Arlington House in August 2022, I did so with great expectations about promised improvements to the quality and inclusivity of the historical interpretation. As I entered the main building, however, I did not immediately notice drastic transformations. The overall feel of the building, outside and inside, has not changed very much. Most of the rooms are filled with dark, antique furniture, and the walls are mostly adorned with portraits of White people and historical paintings related to George Washington and the American Revolution. I knew that many of the refurbishments had involved electrical work and other essential yet hidden infrastructure, so perhaps it’s not surprising that no fundamental physical makeover was apparent. But what about the more inclusive interpretation of the history of the place?

Only when I began to read the interpretive markers positioned around the house did I start to notice the new emphasis on enslaved stories. In the dining room, for instance, the marker mentions that an enslaved man named Charles Syphax would ring the dinner bell. In the family parlor, visitors are informed that “according to oral tradition” certain “enslaved workers” were married in this room, as were Robert and Mary Lee. One of the more extensive references to Black people comes in the “school and sewing room,” where it’s noted that both Black and White women engaged in sewing, and that the Lee family women illegally taught enslaved people to read. Material on the lives and activities of African Americans are not present in all rooms, and it would be easy for visitors to miss such material if they were focusing on the artifacts and décor rather than the interpretive text. But still, these references are thoughtfully woven through the house as a whole and they convey to attentive visitors how intertwined the lives of enslaved people and slaveholders tended to be in homes like this. The interpretive markers within the main house represent a major improvement.¹³

The real transformation, however, lies elsewhere. Behind the mansion sit two low-slung outbuildings, and it is in these buildings that the stories of Arlington’s Black residents are more fully told. The exhibits provide glimpses into the lives of some of the individuals enslaved here. Maria Carter Custis Syphax, for instance, was the daughter of the

enslaved woman Arianna Carter and slaveholder George Washington Parke Custis. She was granted land on the estate by Custis, and her son William had to petition the government to make sure she retained ownership of the land after the Civil War. James Park is another example. After the Lees left, Park, who had been enslaved by them, stayed at Arlington, working for the US military building fortifications and even digging the first graves for the national cemetery. He was employed by the cemetery until the 1920s and told a reporter, “Arlington’s my home.” Several of the rooms in the outbuildings center on individual stories. “Selena Gray’s Chamber” provides glimpses into the life of an enslaved family of ten who lived in this small space, while “George Clark’s Quarters” introduces an enslaved cook. Information about these individuals is limited, as is almost always the case for Black people during the era of slavery. But the interpretive text and exhibits make good use of the evidence available to depict how they lived at Arlington and what they were able to accomplish despite the enormous impediments of slavery and racism.

This is state-of-the-art historical interpretation. The result of years of careful research, it presents the lives and experiences of enslaved people with complexity and nuance. Visitors have the opportunity to learn about enslaved people *as people*—people with names, people with multifaceted lives that went far beyond their status as “slaves,” people who forged their own identities and existence with some autonomy despite the oppressive constraints of enslavement.



(right) Selena Gray and her daughters. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
 (below) Selena Gray’s chamber. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Descendants of Arlington’s enslaved community are also represented in the new interpretation, providing a reminder of slavery’s long-lasting legacies in the United States. Walking into the “South Slave Quarters Museum Exhibit,” for example, visitors see a large photo of present-day descendants of Arlington’s enslaved families, including a reminder that “Their descendants continue to shape the story of this area today.” By tracing the stories of once-enslaved families and individuals forward, into the post-emancipation years and down to the present day, the exhibits make clear that 19th-century history continues to exert its influence on all of us today. The creators of the new exhibit thus avoid the common tendency in plantation museums to compartmentalize racial inequality as a sin of the past for which today’s visitors have no responsibility.¹⁴

The only downside is that this thoughtful, valuable information about the enslaved community and its descendants might be overlooked by some visitors. Historical sites in general face the problem that even when they try to incorporate under-represented stories, those stories often feel tacked on rather than fully integrated. As Katrina Phillips’s essay in this issue indicates, for example, the Dakota Memorial at Historic Fort Snelling in Minnesota is physically separated from the main site.¹⁵ Likewise, at Arlington, the outbuildings are tucked away behind the main house. Physically and architecturally, they are overshadowed. One of the challenges faced by public historians who aspire to lift up traditionally marginalized communities is that they tended to leave fewer, less permanent, and less visible physical remnants upon the landscape.¹⁶ No matter what riches lie within Arlington House’s outbuildings, the buildings themselves are easy to miss in a way that could never be true of the main house, with its size, grandeur, and commanding location. Exacerbating this common problem in the specific case of Arlington is a lack of conspicuous signage directing visitors to the outbuildings. When I visited in August 2022, there were laminated pieces of paper taped onto the doors of the outbuildings—hopefully a temporary circumstance, but one that further reduced the visibility and apparent importance of the exhibits on enslaved people. As a group of descendants of enslaved people at another Virginia plantation, Montpelier, have urged, “There should be provisions for making enslaved people visible” at historic plantation sites; “If visitors cannot see evidence of slavery, they will not ask questions about it, or pay attention to the message.”¹⁷

Overall, I left Arlington House greatly encouraged by the positive changes in the way enslaved people’s experiences are interpreted there. In recent years, prevailing expectations about how the histories of plantation homes should be told have changed, drastically, and the National Park Service has successfully responded. So long as visitors take the time to read the interpretive markers inside the main house with care, and so long as they make the effort to locate the less visible buildings out back, they will have the opportunity to learn much fuller histories of Arlington’s enslaved people than were previously available.

Disputes continue over how to commemorate Arlington’s history, and which aspects of that history deserve our attention. As part of the same process that resulted in the renaming of US forts named for Confederates, the Confederate monument at Arlington will soon be removed. Yet the exact fate of the monument remains undecided.¹⁸ As for Arlington House, even while the content of the historical interpretation has become more inclusive, its official name remains “Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial,” suggesting an objective to commemorate and celebrate just one individual. Descendants of the enslaved have requested that the name be changed to “Arlington House National Historic Site” to make clear that the site wishes to research and share the histories of all Arlington’s residents, not just Robert E. Lee. Donor David Rubenstein has added his voice in support of renaming the site, too, and a name change has been formally proposed in Congress. As of July 2023, the outcome is uncertain.¹⁹ In addition to catching up with the more inclusive content of the exhibits, a name change could also boost a new kind of reconciliation initiative already taking place at Arlington House. In April 2023 descendants of both Arlington’s enslaved and Arlington’s enslavers gathered there to discuss their connected histories. Their efforts point toward a much deeper kind of reconciliation and reckoning with the past than previous efforts.²⁰

Arlington has always been a place where Americans have struggled to define the boundaries of their national identity—a place to advance competing understandings of who belongs and who does not. George Washington Parke Custis envisioned his home as a patriotic shrine to the “Father of his Country,” George Washington, as well as a plantation where dozens of people were subjected to enslavement. The Civil War transformed the property into hallowed ground that would eventually house the remains of 400,000 Americans, most of them military veterans.



The main house is far more prominent in the landscape than the smaller buildings in the rear of the property. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Arlington has always reflected America at its best and its worst. It's a place to reflect on the immeasurable patriotic sacrifices of American service members. It's also a place to reflect on the legacies of enslavement and the long-term exclusion of African Americans from dominant historical narratives. As Americans continue to struggle with the legacies of slavery, the Civil War, and the flawed reconciliation that followed, Arlington will no doubt continue to be a cultural battleground and an enlightening classroom—a place where American history continues to be discovered, reinterpreted, and fought over.²¹

ENDNOTES

1. National Park Service, “Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Reopens following Major Rehabilitation,” <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/news/arlington-house-the-robert-e-lee-memorial-reopens-following-major-rehabilitation.htm> (accessed May 21, 2023). For their feedback on a draft version, many thanks to Michael “Mo” Becker, Julie Mujic, Angela Murphy, and Mindy Quigley. I am also grateful to Jessica Taylor for reading suggestions.
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3. Abigail Cooper, “Interactive Map of Contraband Camps” (2014). *History Digital Projects*. 1. https://repository.upenn.edu/hist_digital/1 (accessed May 21, 2023).
4. Micki McElya, *The Politics of Mourning: Death and Honor in Arlington National Cemetery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 58–94; Poole, *On Hallowed Ground*, 52–54, 94–99.
5. Poole, *On Hallowed Ground*, 58–64.
6. Poole, *On Hallowed Ground*, 77; McElya, *The Politics of Mourning*, 116–121.
7. Michelle A. Krowl, “‘In the Spirit of Fraternity’: The United States Government and the Burial of Confederate Dead at Arlington National Cemetery, 1864–1914,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111(2): 151–186 (2003);

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10. McElya, *The Politics of Mourning*, 102–103, 120, 125–127; Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 102.
11. McElya, *The Politics of Mourning*, 287–289.
12. National Park Service, “Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Reopens following Major Rehabilitation.”—For reports that emphasized the increased attention to enslaved stories, see NBC Washington, “Robert E. Lee Memorial Reopens in Virginia With New Exhibits on Enslaved People,” <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/arlington-house-robert-e-lee-memorial-reopens-virginia-exhibits-on-enslaved-people/2695136/#:~:text=The%20National%20Park%20Service%20opened%20Arlington%20House%20to,delay%20and%20the%20coronavirus%20pandemic%20extended%20the%20closure> (accessed May 21, 2023); Livia Gershon, “Robert E. Lee’s Former Home Reopens with Renewed Focus on the Enslaved,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/arlington-house-once-robert-e-lees-mansion-reopens-180977934/> (accessed May 21, 2023).
13. A “virtual tour” of the exhibits at Arlington House is available at <https://www.nps.gov/arho/learn/historyculture/virtual-tour.htm> (accessed May 21, 2023).
14. Helpful suggestions for best practices for representing the histories of enslaved people at historic sites, including the importance of consulting descendant communities at all stages, are available in “Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices Established by the National Summit on Teaching Slavery,” <https://montpelier-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/Interpreting%20Slavery%2011-12-19.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2023). See also Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Doron Eldar and David Jansson, “Challenges and Opportunities in the Transition of Plantation Museums from Erasing to Narrating Slavery,” *Southeastern Geographer* 61(2): 111–129 (2021).
15. Katrina M. Phillips, “‘As They Have Formerly Done’: Unraveling the Entanglements at Historic Fort Snelling,” in this issue.
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21. For insightful reporting and analysis of how the history of slavery is being reinterpreted at other historic sites—and a powerful case for the value of public history sites as suitable venues for contention, discussion, and learning about the past—see Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021). For critical analysis of Arlington National Cemetery as a place where America’s divisions and inequalities as well as its triumphs are on display, see McElya, *The Politics of Mourning*.



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On the cover of this issue

This viewpoint of a Union soldier facing Pickett's Charge reveals a pivotal moment at Gettysburg, foreshadowing the Civil War's outcome.

GARY E. DAVIS