

The Arlington House

Statement from The Arlington Historical Society

The Arlington House, a distinctive landmark, is owned by the federal government and located in Arlington, Virginia. The estate was built for George Washington Parke Custis in the early 1800s with the labor and skills of enslaved workers. Custis was the grandson of Martha Washington and adopted son of U.S. President George Washington. The name of the estate is derived from the name of a Custis plantation on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. However, some historians also link the name to an ancestral family home in Gloucester, England. It is noted that Custis originally planned to name the estate in honor of George Washington but was dissuaded by family members.

Over the years, the estate has been historically significant. Key periods of this significance include:

-The Custis family as occupants of the house: When the Custis family occupied the house, it was also considered a monument to the first president of the United States. Custis had on display many of the items owned by George Washington prior to his death. In addition to the Custis family, there were approximately sixty enslaved people, many who played significant roles in the history of the estate.

-The Lee family as occupants of the house: Robert E. Lee married Mary Anna Randolph Custis, daughter of G.W.P. Custis and Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, in 1831, and he and his wife raised their family at the estate. After the death of G.W.P. Custis in 1857, Robert E. Lee was named the executor of his will and managed the estate for several years.

-The estate as military headquarters for the Union: When Robert E. Lee resigned his U.S. Army commission to serve with Virginia, he departed from the estate. Early in the war, General McDowell used the estate as headquarters for his staff. Other Union generals who had headquarters at the estate included General Heintzelman and General Whipple.

-The estate as the site of Freedman's Village: In 1863, the grounds of the estate were selected to build a Freedman's Village to house the formerly enslaved. The village, which lasted until it was closed by 1900, was designed to be a model community and historians believe Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass were visitors during its existence.

-The estate as the site of a national cemetery: Originally designated as a cemetery for military dead, it is now the final resting place for some of the most prominent people in the United States, including presidents, Supreme Court justices, and other dignitaries.

The Arlington Historical Society recognizes the historical significance of this estate and the recent efforts to share a history of the estate that encompasses all the eras described above. We are especially interested in the residents of Freedman's Village as many of those residents resettled in communities throughout our county and became some of our early leaders. We support any future efforts to share a more complete and inclusive history of the estate.

The Board of the Arlington Historical Society does not believe we should take a position on any future name change of the government owned estate. The emphasis of the site including its name has changed repeatedly over the past century, reflecting the mores of the time. It has never had just one, unchanging identity. Therefore, while we believe that the proposed name of the "Arlington House National Historical Site" accurately captures the significance and various uses of the property, we believe our role is to provide historical context that will allow the people authorizing a name change to make an informed decision.