



## Sitting in Robert E. Lee's Writing Chair: Understanding History through Period Artifacts Lesson Unit Plan Outline

The National Park Service [NPS] *Teaching with Museum Collections* provides lesson plans for teachers to use NPS museum collections in student-centered educational activities. Collections tell the story of America; its peoples, cultures, varied habitats, significant events, and ideas that continue to inspire the world. *Teaching with Museum Collections [TMC]* emphasizes the links between the 'real things,' the collections, and the sites where those collections were found, collected, or used. NPS collections include cultural objects, natural history specimens, archival documents and photographs. Lesson plans link to national education standards.

### A. Header

- ❑ **Lesson plan title:** "Sitting in Robert E. Lee's Writing Chair: Understanding History through Period Artifacts"
- ❑ **Developers:**
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- ❑ **Grade Level:** 8 - 11
- ❑ **Length of lesson:** 5 to 6 (45 minute) class periods

### B. Overview of this Collection-Based Lesson Plan

- ❑ **Park name:** Arlington House: the Robert E. Lee Memorial
- ❑ **Description:** This lesson unit plan explores Robert E. Lee's writings, his thoughts and decision to resign from the US Army before the Civil War. Engaging writing activities will give students a better understanding of how 19<sup>th</sup> century people communicated. It also allows students to investigate how the design of furniture of any given era tells us much about the lifestyles of the people who made and used it
- ❑ **Essential question:** How can historical artifacts connect us to the past?

### C. Museum Collections Used in this Lesson Unit Plan

- ❑ **Objects, specimens, documents, photographs**
  - [Robert E. Lee's writing chair](#). Wood, canvas. H 117, W 68, Depth 64 cm. Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, ARHO 2255
- ❑ **Primary documentary sources**
  - [Lee's Resignation Letter to Simon Cameron](#), Secretary of War(National Archives--ARC #306310)
  - [Lee's Resignation Letter to General Winfield Scott](#) (ARHO 5623)
  - Lee's Resignation Letter to his sister Anne Marshall (see page 10)

### D. National Educational Standards

United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

- NSS-USH.5-12.4 : Students understand the sources and character of cultural, religious and social reform movements in the antebellum period
- NSS-USH.5-12.5: Students understand the causes of the Civil War and its effects on the American people



#### United States Language Arts Standards for Grades K-12

- NL-ENG.K-12.1: Reading for Perspective. Students read a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts to acquire new information and build an understanding of themselves and American culture.
- NL-ENG.K-12.3: Evaluation Strategies. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts.

#### E. Student Learning Objectives

After these lessons, students will be able to:

- Understand that “form follows function” (the design of anything is based on its intended use)
- Critically analyze an object using “*Teaching with Museum Collections: How to Read an Object*” chart.
- Have a better understanding of how 19<sup>th</sup> century people communicated over long distances in contrast with how people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century communicate.
- Review the thoughts of Robert E. Lee through reading and analyzing his selected letters.
- Write their own letters using the standard letter form.
- Have a better understanding of Robert E. Lee by creating a cinquain [five-line stanza] or clerihew [humorous verse of rhyming couplets] poem about the design of his writing chair.
- Recognize the correlation between tone and audience/purpose in letter writing

#### F. Background and Historical Context

It is believed that this mahogany writing chair was the setting for one of the most pivotal moments in Robert E. Lee’s life, and perhaps of modern American history. On April 20, 1861 Lee probably sat in this chair and wrote two very important letters: **one to the Secretary of War tendering his resignation from the United States Army, and the other, to his mentor, General Winfield Scott, explaining his decision.**

Lee’s resignation came after much deliberation. Tensions between the north and south had been high for many months when in January 1861 Lee wrote to his wife that “*As far as I can judge from the papers we are between anarchy and Civil War. May God Avert us from both.*” Lee was not pleased when the war came in April of the same year. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, Col. Lee was asked to meet with Abraham Lincoln’s close friend, Francis P. Blair. It was at this meeting that Blair told Lee he wanted to offer him command of the army that would invade the southern states. Lee declined this offer. Years later he would recall “*stating, as candidly and courteously as I could, that, though opposed to secession and deprecating war I could take no part in an invasion of the southern states.*”

Once Lee learned of Virginia’s secession he knew the time had come to make his final commitment. Should he fight with the United States Army which he had been with for 32 years or fight with Virginia which had been his family’s home for over 200 years? On the night of April 19, 1861, the Lee Family along with relatives and friends gathered downstairs anxiously at Arlington House. Overhead they heard Lee pacing the wooden floors until finally settling into his **writing chair** shortly after midnight to make his fateful decision. Once completed, Lee came down to where his wife was waiting and said “*Well Mary, the question is settled. Here is my letter of resignation and a letter I have written to General Scott.*”



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Lee's decision remains one of the great "what ifs" in American history. "What if he had commanded Union troops instead of Confederate?"

Ironically, Lee designed the chair for comfort. It reclines and both arms fold out into table tops for comfort while sitting long hours writing correspondence. The original chair still sits in the upstairs of Arlington House in Lee's bedchamber.

### G. Materials Used in this Lesson Plan

❑ ***Local Items Similar to the Museum Collections used in this Lesson Unit Plan.***

Similar Objects to Robert E. Lee's Writing Chair:

- Chair and desk
  - Recliner
  - Rocking chair
- ❑ ***Other materials:***
- Writing materials:
    - How to write a Cinquain. (see handout 5.2)
    - How to write a Clerihew. (see handout 5.2)
    - "[How to Read an Object](#)" chart
  - Art-making materials
    - White paper
    - Crayons
    - Colored pencils

### H. Vocabulary

- Artifact: anything made, modified, or used by a human
- Curator: a person who is responsible for a variety of museum activities, including researching and developing museum exhibitions
- Cinquain: five-line stanza
- Clerihew : humorous verse of rhyming couplets
- Conservator: a person who is responsible for the repair and stabilization of museum collections
- Museum Educator: a person who is responsible for educating and interpreting museum objects for visitors to the exhibits

### I. Teacher Tips

- Download images of chair and letters from the virtual exhibit at [www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibit/arho](http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibit/arho). Photo copy handouts.
  - Activity 2.1      Photograph of Lee's writing chair (ARHO 2255)
  - Activity 2.2      *Teaching with Museum Collections*: How to Read an Object at [http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/tmc/docs/Howto\\_Read\\_an\\_Object.pdf](http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/tmc/docs/Howto_Read_an_Object.pdf)



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Activity 2.3            Three descriptions of a writing chair  
Activity 3.1a, b, c    Lee's Letters  
Activity 5.1            Short Biography of Robert E. Lee  
Activity 5.2            "How to write a cinquain" and "How to write a clerihew"  
Extension & Enrichment (EEA2)  
                                 Role playing a Museum Professional Curator, Conservator,  
                                 Museum Educator (2 pages)

- Use a student chair-desk (or substitute) for the Museum Professional role playing activity. Create a setting/ stage area that will lend itself to acting.
- Have crayons, colored pencils and white paper ready for activity 1
- Consider extending writing assignments into homework assignments to give students time to revise.
- Encourage student to write their own situations for museum professionals for homework
- Invite a Museum Professional to speak with your class about their work he/she does in the museum.
- Encourage students to have fun while learning.

## J. Lesson Implementation Procedures

### □ Activity 1.

Teacher introduction to unit.

Teacher begins class by asking students how historians research the past. (Possible answers: interviews, documents, books, artifacts...) Teacher says: "*From objects they left behind, we can deduce information about the lifestyles of people long dead and buried. We are going to be looking at a particular piece of furniture, a chair with historical significance, and drawing conclusions about its function. As a warm-up activity, I'd like you to design your own "perfect" chair.*"

Distribute blank white paper and colored pencils or crayons. Ask students to design/draw their "ideal" chair. (15 minutes) Have students share and explain their designs in front of the class. Hang drawings. (1 minute per student) Discuss.

Have students each write a 5 -7 sentence paragraph about what their designs tell us about our lifestyles in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Selected students share their observations. Teacher collects paragraphs. (Remainder of class)

### □ Activity 2:

Teacher introduction.

Teacher says: "*Yesterday you had the opportunity to design a chair that fit your needs. Today we will be looking at a picture of a chair with historical significance that fit the needs of the person who designed it. Imagine you are an historian; your task is to analyze the picture and fill in the form I am about to give you.*"

Break students into groups of three. Give each group a photocopy of Lee's chair [See handout 2.1] and a copy of "*Teaching with Museum Collections: How to Read an Object.*" [See handout 2.2]) Select a leader from each group to report out. (20 minutes)



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Teacher says: “As you have noticed, the design of this chair and those you designed yesterday reflect the needs and interests of the designer/user. I am now giving you three versions of the history of this chair. Read over these within your groups and discuss each, determining which you think is accurate and why.”

Hand out three versions of description and history of the chair to each group. [See activity handout 2.3.] Have students discuss and select the version they consider to be the accurate description/history of the chair and report their decision to the whole group with their rationale for their selection.) After groups report back to the class, teacher dramatically reveals THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE WRITING CHAIR

□ **Activity 3:**

Teacher introduction:

Teacher displays communication devices (rotary telephone, cell phone, laptop computer) as students enter room. Teacher asks “What do these objects have in common?” (key word: communication). Teacher should engage students in a group discussion about the use and history of displayed objects. Teacher asks “In the 19 century how do you think people communicated over long distances?” (key words: Letter writing).

Separate class in groups of 5 and distribute 1 letter written by Robert E. Lee to each member of the group. Each group will have a different letter on which to focus. Post the following questions on the black board during observations for students to address:

- To and from whom is the letter written?
- When was it written?
- Summarize the content
- What was the purpose of the letter?
- What is the tone/mood of the letter? (Formal/informal, friendly/business, informational/instructive, etc.)

Select a group leader from each group and have group leader report out about their findings. Teacher leads discussion about how the style and tone of any writing is dependant on the audience (Form Follows Function).

**Activity 4:**

Teacher Intro ~ Teacher says: “With 21<sup>st</sup> century technological advances in communication it has become uncommon to have a record of verbal communication. With text messages, e-mails and telephone calls the preservation of our thoughts and feelings are sometimes lost. A written record of communication between family members and loved ones is important because it reveals an aspect of social history we may not otherwise have.”

Teacher should read the following excerpt or write it on the board.

Robert E. Lee once wrote to his daughter Mildred, “It has been said that our letters are representatives of our minds. They certainly present a good criterion for judging the character of the individual.” From his youngest days as a West Point cadet until his final years as Washington College president, Lee’s letters were characterized by politeness, gentility, and respectfulness- a perfect description of his personality. Cobblestone Magazine, September 1993



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Option 1: Have students choose a family member to whom they are close. Compose a letter in which you share thoughts and feelings that you may have been reluctant to share before. Inform them of something you want them to know and explain how you felt about it. (Teacher provides template for formal letter writing)

Option 2: Have students imagine they are Robert E. Lee in April, 1861. They must decide whether or not to resign from the US Army and fight for Virginia or stay in the US Army and invade Virginia. Have students write a letter to their commanding officer explaining their decision.

Option 3: Robert E. Lee had to make a decision in 1861 whether to take command of an army to invade Virginia or to fight in her defense. He chose to resign his commission in the US Army, ending a 32 year career. After accepting command of Virginia, he became a great Confederate general of the Civil War (1861-1865). Students have to make a decision. Have them imagine they are young men in the spring of 1861. It is the outbreak of the Civil War and they have to fight for either the Union or Confederate States of America. Have students consider the issues they studied in class, and then decide which side they would fight for and why. Have students write a detailed letter to their parents explaining their decision.

□ Activity 5/ Wrap Up Activity and Discussion

After reviewing a biography and lessons on communication of Robert E. Lee: have students write a cinquain or clerihew based on Lee's life. They will create their poems and set them to music. Poems must contain reference to Lee's writing chair. Students will combine their individual poems and present with background music and movement.. Video tape performance. Have viewing for performers and invited guests.

### K. Evaluation/Assessment for Measurable Results

- Students ideal drawing (Activity 1)
- Students paragraph on lifestyles the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Activity 1)
- *Teaching with Museum Collections* "How to Read an Object"(Activity 2)
- How well students worked in groups
- Written group assignment ( Activity 3)
- Students Letters (Activity 4)
- Written poem ( Activity 5)
- Presentation of Poem (Activity 5)

### L. Extension and Enrichment Activities (EEA)

- Activity 1 - Have students write two paragraphs about a misconception someone in the future may have about the drawing of their ideal chair. (Activity 1) (possible homework assignment) (Extension)
- Activity 2 - After students have studied Robert E. Lee's writing chair have students participate in a **role playing** activity that exposes the students to the work of museum professionals. The **curators, conservators, and museum educators** exhibit, care for and educate the public about historical objects.(Enrichment)



Teacher explains to students that all the situations are hypothetical, and students have to draw upon their ethical sensibilities as well as their imagination to complete this activity.

Select students to play the museum professionals and the other roles from the role-playing sheet to complete the scene. **See role playing handouts.**

## M. Resources

### □ *Bibliography*

- Cobblestone The history magazine for young people: *Robert E. Lee*; Cobblestone Publishing Inc., New Hampshire, September 1993
- Dowdy, Clifford and Louis H. Manarin *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*; edited by, Da Capo Press, New York, 1961
- Judy Monroe. *Robert E. Lee*; Capstone Press, Minnesota, 2002 (Children's Book)
- Southall, Douglas. *Lee Freeman* Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1991

### □ *Annotated related web sites with url addresses*

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| ○ <a href="http://www.stratfordhall.com">www.stratfordhall.com</a>                   | Robert E. Lee Birthplace                            |
| ○ <a href="http://www.montvernon.org">www.montvernon.org</a>                         | Home of George Washington                           |
| ○ <a href="http://www.civil-war.net">www.civil-war.net</a>                           | Civil War History                                   |
| ○ <a href="http://www.tudorplace.org">www.tudorplace.org</a>                         | Home of G.W.P. Custis's sister, Martha Custis Peter |
| ○ <a href="http://www.woodlawn1805.org">www.woodlawn1805.org</a>                     | Home of G.W.P. Custis's sister, Mellie Custis Lewis |
| ○ <a href="http://www.arlingtonblackheritage.org">www.arlingtonblackheritage.org</a> | Arlington, VA Black Heritage Museum                 |
| ○ <a href="http://www.nps.gov/arho">www.nps.gov/arho</a>                             | Arlington House homepage                            |
| ○ <a href="http://www.leebothoodhome.com">www.leebothoodhome.com</a>                 | Robert E. Lee boyhood home, Alexandria, VA          |
| ○ <a href="http://www.moc.org">www.moc.org</a>                                       | Museum of the Confederacy                           |

## N. Site Visit

Teacher should arrange a class visit to a local historic house museum, and on a pre-site visit, identify similar objects. Then:

- *Pre-visit*: Pass out copies of each of the objects from the leisure section to selected groups
  - Traveling Chess Set, ARHO 0527
  - Writing Chair, ARHO 2255
  - Card Case, ARHO 3282
  - Lock of Travelers Hair, ARHO 03564
  - Photograph of Lee on Traveler ARHO 5478

Have groups discuss the object within the group and report out on one of the objects. Teacher will engage students in a dialogue about the social and personal use of each leisure object. Teacher will touch on the historical significance as well.



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- ❑ **Site visit:** While at the Arlington House, or the local historic house museum, students will search for the five objects discussed during the pre-visit lesson. They will prepare a brief description of the location of the object in the house and provide a sketch of the object in context.
- ❑ **Post-visit:** Students will report out on their findings in the classroom.
- ❑ **Virtual visit:** Go to [www.cr.nps.gov.arho](http://www.cr.nps.gov.arho)



## Activity 2 Handout

### **Hospital Chair**

c.1760

It is believed that this oak chair was designed by Benjamin Franklin as a hospital chair for wounded soldier of the French and Indian wars with arm injuries. This chair also served as a place where the wounded could nap in a reclined position during the afternoon while convalescing in the bright sunshine. Today the chair is owned by the Walter Reed Medical Museum.

### **Sewing Chair**

c.1776

It is believed that this cherry sewing chair was owned by the Ross family of Philadelphia and was the chair in which Betsy Ross sewed the American flag. Today the chair is on display at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

### **Writing Chair**

c. 1860

It is believed that this mahogany writing chair was the setting for one of the most pivotal moments in Robert E. Lee's life and perhaps all of the American history. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1861 Lee probably sat in this chair and wrote two very important letters. One to the Secretary of War tendering his resignation from the United States Army and the other to his mentor, General Winfield Scott, explaining his decision.

Robert E. Lee to his sister, Anne Marshall April 20, 1861  
Excerpt of a Letter

*"With all my devotion to the Union, and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relative, my children, my home. I have, therefore, resigned my commission in the Army..."*

## Short Biography of Robert Edward Lee



As a young boy, Robert E. Lee visited Arlington often, and grew very close to Mary Anna Randolph Custis. Choosing a military career, Lee graduated second in his class from the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY in 1829. He proposed to Mary in 1830 and the two were married on June 30, 1831. They would have seven children, six of whom were born at Arlington.

Over the years, Lee's military career kept him away from Arlington much of the time. However, the house and its occupants were very important to him and he regarded the estate as his home. In the 1850s he began to play a more important role in the affairs at Arlington, taking over some financial matters for G.W.P. Custis. After Custis' death in 1857, Lee took leave from the army to act as executor of the Custis estate and manager of Arlington and the other Custis lands. Through Arlington House never belonged to Lee (it belonged to his wife), he was the effective master of Arlington after 1857. From 1857-1861, he attempted to organize the slaves into an efficient labor force, cleaned up the grounds, hired a new overseer and supervised the planting of crops. Lee also oversaw extensive rebuilding around the plantation. He virtually rebuilt the overseer's house at the farm and the stable west of the mansion. He had the roof of the mansion fixed, and took out a fire insurance policy on the mansion and the barn.

Lee and his wife had different attitudes toward a number of matters. Neatness was one of them. Lee was disciplined, punctual, precise, and a very careful dresser who was fond of social functions. He liked parties, the theater, and the company of women. Lee was courtly and genial with equals, and courteous and hospitable to strangers. He preferred things to be orderly and clean. In all these habits and tastes he differed from his wife, but they were devoted and congenial couple.

Lee brought warmth and friendliness to Arlington house. He was fond of children and animals. He sometimes gathered rose buds in the garden before breakfast and place them at the ladies' places at the breakfast table, the smallest bud for Mildred, the youngest, and the larger ones for the older ladies. He was also reputed to have enjoyed a glass of milk at bed time that was left from him by a slave on the ledge of the cupboard [ARHO 218] that was used as a pantry.

Lee was well informed, and a reader. He was a capable engineer and an excellent military officer. Like other members of the family, he was also devout Episcopalian. Confirmed in 1853, with his daughters Mary and Annie, he was very interested in the church and religious publications. Lee was disciplined and abstemious. He did not use tobacco or much alcohol. A handsome man, Lee was 5 feet 10 inches tall, with the athletic physique of a fine horseman.

Lee's presence at Arlington lent gaiety and vigor to the atmosphere. As a father he was firm but genial with his sons and gentle and a trifle indulgent with his daughters' His association with Arlington House was perhaps less intimate than that of his wife, But it was close. In his room on the second floor he wrote out his resignation from the United States Army in the spring of 1861 and it was for the people of Arlington and the State of Virginia that he gave up a long career for an uncertain future.

## How to Write a Cinquain

A cinquain is a 5 line poem

First line	One word
Second Line	Two words
Third Line	Three words
Fourth Line	Four words
Fifth Line	One word that relates to the first word on the first line

### Example of a cinquain:

Lee's  
Writing Chair  
Was very rare  
For the time invented  
Innovative

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## How to Write a Clerihew

A clerihew is a 4 line poem. A clerihew should be funny. The first line ends in the subject of the poems name.

First and Second line should rhyme with each other  
Third and Fourth line should rhyme with each other

### Example of a clerihew:

There was a General named Robert E. Lee.  
To make his chair he had to cut down a mahogany tree.  
He was a well known Virginia Lover.  
Who designed a chair like no other.

**Lee's Writing Chair**  
**Role playing a Museum Professional**  
**Curator**

You are a **curator** at Arlington House. For the next six months the Arlington House is closed for repairs. You admire **Lee's writing chair** so much that you can't bear the thought of not seeing it while it is in storage, so you decide to take it home with you for safe keeping over the next six months, after you decide where the objects go during the restoration period and besides no one will miss it.

Everything is fine until you have some people over to your home after work one Friday and one of your co-workers notices **Lee's writing chair** in the corner of our family room.

**WHAT DO YOU SAY? WHAT DO YOU DO? ACT IT OUT.**

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**Lee's Writing Chair**  
**Role playing a Museum Professional**  
**Conservator**

You are a **conservator** at Arlington House. It is your responsibility to clean **Lee's writing chair**. Today is the day some high officials in the U.S. government are scheduled to come to Arlington for a private tour. You are excited about the possibility of seeing and perhaps meeting the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, or even the President of the United States.

You love **Lee's writing chair** and want it to look especially nice for the distinguished visitors.

You rush into work, pick up your cleaning supplies, and apply the "cleaning" solution on the seat only to discover that you have stained the seat instead of cleaning it.

Your supervisor walks in just as you have discovered the mistake.

**WHAT DO YOU SAY? WHAT DO YOU DO? ACT IT OUT.**

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**Lee's Writing Chair**  
**Role playing a Museum Professional**  
**Museum Educator**

You are a **museum educator** at Arlington House. You are conducting a tour for visitors. You have done a superb job this far on the tour. You are informative, engaging, and at times funny. The visitors are really impressed. In fact other guided visitors have abandoned their group to follow you.

You are charged by the visitors' response. So much so that when you get to **Lee's writing chair** you wax brilliantly. To your delight the tour is interactive.

Then from the back of the crowd you hear a man's voice over everybody else's. Unbeknownst to the museum educator it is the voice of a well known millionaire offering the museum educator \$10,000 because he is so impressed with the knowledge of Lee. The only catch is that the millionaire request to write the check while seated in **Lee's writing chair**.

**WHAT DO YOU SAY? WHAT DO YOU DO? ACT IT OUT.**