

Full Circle: The McLean House's Role in the American Civil War  
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Life, and the variety of events it encompasses, has an odd habit of ending where it began. The family of Wilmer McLean is a fine example of this principle. On the McLean farm in Manassas, Virginia, a seminal early battle of the Civil War was fought, and four years later, Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to the Union General, Ulysses S. Grant in the McLean House at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Perhaps no single dwelling in Northern Virginia holds more historical significance than the McLean House, where the Civil War ended. The small yet respectable model of this edifice found in the Southern History Museum directs viewers to the vast anthropologic value surrounding this piece of land. This essay will discuss the enormous historical worth surrounding the McLean House, and even more, discuss the distinctive characteristics of the two significant events of the American Civil War that occurred on McLean property.

The First Battle of Bull Run, or Manassas as named by Confederates, was the war's first major land battle and is considered one of the most significant engagements of the Civil War. Although its casualty count was not nearly so vast as Antietam or Chancellorsville, its significance cannot be overstated. Many Northerners doubted the South's commitment to secession and hoped for a quick end to the war; so President Lincoln, yielding to massive political pressure, ordered Brigadier General Irvin McDowell to march on the Confederate capitol of Richmond. Directly in the path of their march was a respectable farm owned by the McLean family, who due to ensuing events would witness firsthand two of the most important events of the Civil War.

The battle began early in the morning of July 21, 1861, when Northern artillery began shelling Confederate lines, with a few shells reaching the McLean homestead where Confederate General Beauregard had set up his headquarters. Thus a rousing battle between two green, ill-prepared armies ensued. The battle initially appeared to be proceeding in a manner favoring the Union; however, the Confederates were bolstered by reinforcements under Brigadier General Joseph Johnston, recently arrived from Shenandoah. The reinforcements were able to turn the tide of the battle in favor of the Confederacy, who soon forced a full retreat of the Union forces. The retreat was highly disorganized, and hundreds of Union troops were captured as a result. Also, Washington D.C. was left virtually unprotected by the fleeing Union armies, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, recently arrived on the field of victory, urged his commanders to press their advantage and march on the capital.<sup>1</sup> However, much to his chagrin, the Confederates were as unorganized in victory as their opponents were in defeat and failed to take advantage of this opportunity. They settled for setting up camp on and around the battle-devastated McLean homestead.

Although Bull Run was a Confederate victory, it had a curiously salutary effect for the Union side; it essentially served as a wakeup call for those who had expected a definite victory. The battle forced both sides to recognize the bitter reality of a war which would be longer and bloodier than either had envisioned. In the North, the public grasped “a more sobering and realistic sense that the war would be long and bloody.”<sup>2</sup> Union

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<sup>1</sup> Durkovic, May. "Civil War Brings Fame to Wilmer McLean." Accessed 2 Feb 2013.  
[www.manassas.patch.com](http://www.manassas.patch.com).

<sup>2</sup> Gottfried, Bradley. "An End to Innocence." Civil War Trust. Hallowed Ground Magazine. Web. Accessed 2 Feb 2013.

leaders, including President Lincoln, began preparations for what they now realized would be a war of attrition. In the South, the victory was met with surprisingly little celebration because the Southerners realized that greater battles, which would cost them an even greater number of their sons, were sure to follow. The front yard of the McLean homestead hosted one of the most politically influential military engagements ever fought on American soil.

The events of Bull Run also gave rise to the tradition surrounding one of the most famous figures of the Civil War, General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. Prior to the battle, Jackson was a relatively unknown colonel from the Virginia Military Institute. However, his heroic actions during this battle have forever granted him a place in the annals of American military. Before Jackson intervened, troops under Bee, Evans, and Bartow were being driven back by a relentless Union force led by General William Sherman. Jackson and his brigade quickly came in support of the disorganized Confederates and took a defensive position on the hill opposite of Sherman’s troops.<sup>3</sup> While retreating, General Bee saw Jackson’s troops and bellowed to his troops, “There is Jackson standing like a stone wall, Rally behind the Virginians!”<sup>4</sup> It is from this legendary proclamation Jackson received the moniker “Stonewall,” and his heroic stand catalyzed the turn of the battle in favor of the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup> Jackson gained a reputation as one of the greatest military leaders in American history after this battle, and as Jackson’s legacy was born on the premises of the McLean family, the site is forever tied to one of America’s greatest heroes.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnston, R.M. Bull Run: Its Strategy and Tactics. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913.

<sup>4</sup> Stonewall Jackson House Staff. "Discovering Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson: A Biography." Accessed 2 Feb 2013. [www.stonewalljackson.org](http://www.stonewalljackson.org).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The McLean farm was largely untouched by the war following Bull Run, but as the war's end began to come into sight, fate decided to visit the McLeans once more. The final year of the Civil War was not kind to the South; its greatest cities were smoldered, its economy was driven into the ground by blockades, and its once proud armies were beaten to the point of surrender. However, Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia fought valiantly on despite inevitable defeat. Following the razing of Richmond by the Army of the Potomac, Lee and his troops retreated constantly, scavenging supplies with which they could continue the fight.<sup>6</sup> However, Grant and his subordinates were able to surround Lee and force him to surrender his command at the village of Appomattox Court House, to which McLean and his family had moved after Bull Run to escape the perils of the fighting. Grant allowed Lee to choose the location of his surrender, and the Appomattox home of Mr. Wilmer McLean was determined as an acceptable site for such a momentous event.<sup>7</sup> The two men met in the parlor of the McLean House and came to agreeable terms before rising and shaking hands; while this was occurring, Union officers purchased furniture and other ornaments from Wilmer McLean as souvenirs. Lee then left the house and informed his men of the surrender, effectively ending the war.

The American Civil War is the greatest threat democracy has ever faced, and it is for this reason that its end holds such colossal magnitude in the American story. The end of the war and the subsequent Reconstruction Period have played an integral role in

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<sup>6</sup> Schroeder, Patrick. "The Battles of Appomattox Station and Court House." America's Civil War Trust. Accessed 3 Feb 2013. [www.civilwar.org](http://www.civilwar.org).

<sup>7</sup> Porter, Horace. "The Surrender At Appomattox Court House." Shotgun's Guild, 3 Feb 2002. Accessed 3 Feb 2013. [www.Civilwarhome.com](http://www.Civilwarhome.com).

shaping this country's identity. The fact that the war ended within the premises of the McLean House grants the site a historical value rivaled by only a select few. Wilmer McLean has been quoted as having said, "The war began in my front yard and ended in my front parlor."<sup>8</sup> The model of the McLean House in the Southern History Museum does a splendid job of introducing viewers to a site and Civil War family full of historical significance that otherwise might have remained unnoticed.

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<sup>8</sup> Durkovic, May. "Civil War Brings Fame to Wilmer McLean." Accessed 2 Feb 2013. [www.manassas.patch.com](http://www.manassas.patch.com).