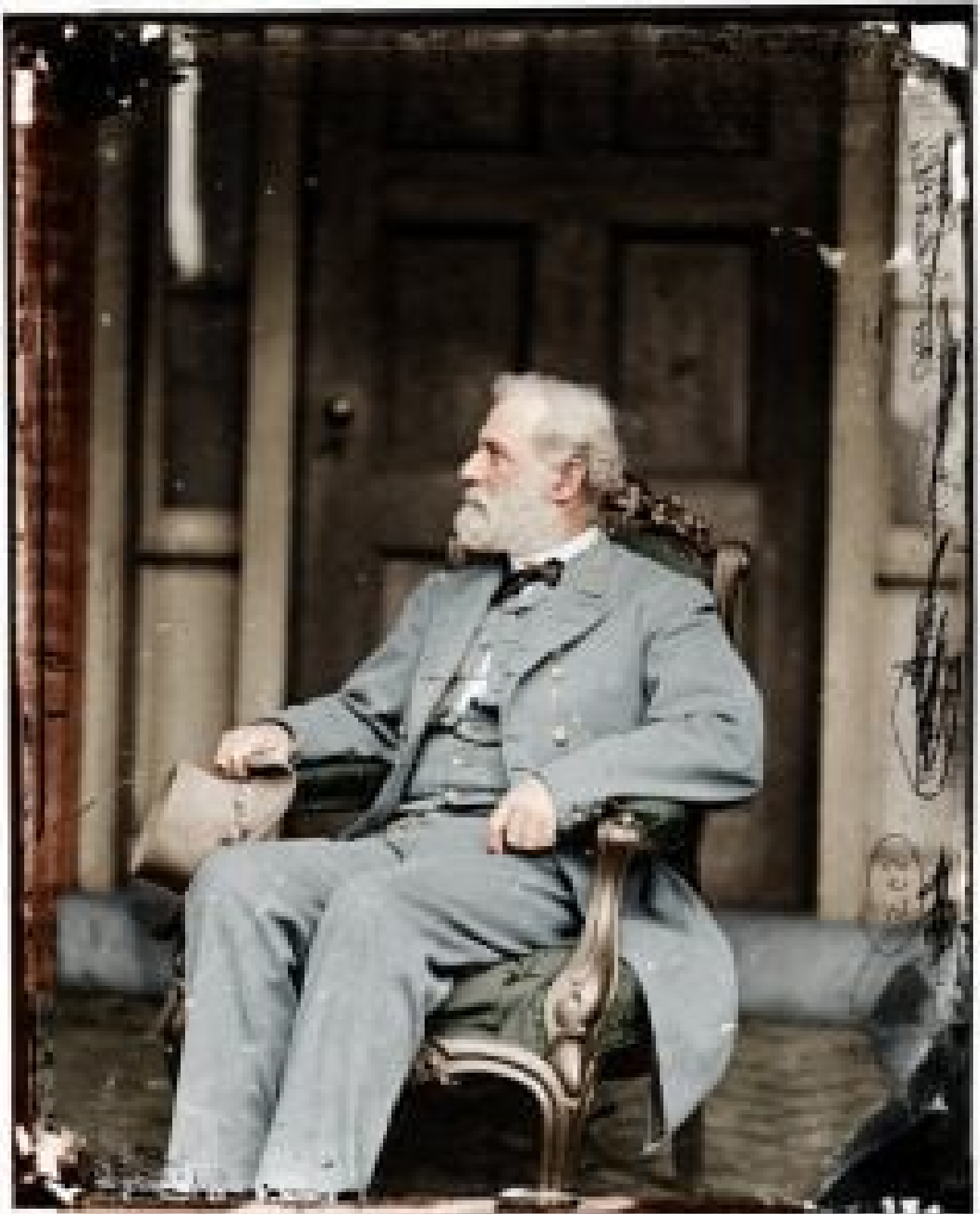


# The Confederacy and the Southern Belle of Harrison House

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (July 2022)



*Robert E. Lee (colorized)*

**Most of my time in the USA** has been spent in what southerners

call "The No-ath," Boston, Mass, New Hampshire, Indiana, Oregon, New York State including three years working in Manhattan, which is more bohemian and stateless in spirit than the rest of the Northeast, so really an exception to the rule. I have read much about America, its history, its literature, listened to its music, not only popular and Jazz and especially the church music that goes back four hundred years and sounds like cleaned up Bulgarian harmonies.

As a born and bred son of Upper Canada in late middle age I have finally accepted the fact that the cultural creativity of the giant to our south is infinitely richer and superior to anything that we have put out, Leonard Cohen and Alice Munro notwithstanding.

Possessed by the soul of Edgar Allan Poe, one day in New York City near the same named street I wrote a bizarre and typically post modern story about a possible conversation with his ghost, but I leave that to my more intrepid readers as its content is less important than its context. It came to the attention of a southern literary magazine in Nashville whose editor then kindly invited me to be their guest of honour at a salon that would be held there in the spring. I have never been formally honoured by anyone (I have been shamed once or twice) and I have never been to a salon let alone one held in my honour so, I accepted the invitation and flew to music city.

When my wife and I arrived at the airport, and as we picked up our bags we noticed the beautiful exhibits of vintage Gibson guitars lining the walkway and as we passed the bars and restaurants still in the airport, we heard the sounds of live country and western singers performing for people waiting for their flights. Waiting for our rental car to be picked up I fantasized a meeting with a younger Dolly Parton performing in such a venue. "Hello, my name is Dolly and I welcome all you folks to Nashville. I will now sing you an old Appalachian ballad that I learnt as a young girl in my Daddy's holler

(valley). It is called Wildwood Flower.”

We drove onto the highway passing turnoffs named Old Hickory in memory of President Andrew Jackson who lived in Nashville and then we parked downtown just off the main drag, near the Cumberland River off Broadway where all the Honky Tonks and bars are concentrated on one short strip interspersed with tourist packed shops.

We parked in a four story garage and just before we hit the main drag we stopped to chat with a street musician, a tattooed, fifty to sixty year old man from Ohio, Jimmy Weston with his well kept Washburn guitar in open tuning. He sang a song about angels. It was marvelous. He was an original, a bona fide member of “weird America.”

Afterwards he told me, “The world we see is not the only world. There is an invisible world. I was singing about it. It is inhabited by invisible beings, angels.” He then went into a long explanation of angelology, something that I remember from studying medieval Catholic cosmology in my undergrad Great Books seminar, but here it was delivered in a streetwise version. He then asked me, “If there was one song we could sing together what would it be?” Before I could answer he broke into Amazing Grace. I harmonized with him and when he stopped he said, “You harmonized that like they do in Appalachia. Are your kin from there?”

I said, “No I was taught to sing and play Old Time music at a summer camp in Canada when I was a young teenage singer and guitarist. All of my teachers were older draft dodgers from the south, Black and White and so I lived for Blues and Ballads until I began my undergraduate career.”

He smiled and said, “If you post your recording of me on YouTube just make sure to tell them my name, Jimmy Weston. And when you are on the strip, remember, above the Cumberland River there are angels, all the old greats, Johnny Cash, Hank

Williams, Ernest Tubb, and all the rest. Late at night when everyone has gone home, I walk by the river and I can hear them talking to each other. They have even taught me some songs.”

We then entered the strip and my ears were assaulted. The street was filled with wall-to-wall clubs selling booze, food, especially bar b q and electric country and western. Everyone and everything was at full volume. It was as noisy as the rock and roll that I so avidly consumed as a young teenager and which in middle age has been one of the reasons for my reduced hearing ability.

We took a leisurely stroll past these faux “honky tonks.” The singers were good, the musicians were good, the ensembles were tight, most of the performers were in their twenties and thirties and you could just feel that they all wanted to be stars. No one and nothing was laid back. It was too loud to be able to hear if any of the ballads told a story. The goal was to sell booze and bar b q. There were no obese female musicians on stage. Just eye candy, but the audience was often filled with portly youth and large middle-aged men and women, wupping it up.

Every few yards there was a black or a white homeless man or woman with a cardboard begging sign. Some were disabled veterans (or claimed to be). All of them were panhandling. It dawned on me that their stories were the ones missing from the honky tonks. If only those young ones would take some time and interview these poor men and women who had fallen through the cracks of polite society, then and maybe only then, would the content and lyrics of their songs improve.

Then there were the cowboy shops, establishments selling all and every kind of cowboy boot and cowboy hat for both men and women. In one shop they had wallpaper from fifty years ago with reproductions of scantily clad young women stretching their legs and posing in highly suggestive ways making one

conclude that that female cowboy hats and boots were just the thing a nice southern cowgirl would want to wear before being bedded by her cowboy lover. Except that, the penchant for both old and new country and western singers to get all dolled up in their boots and hats is such an obvious defense mechanism with regards to the defeat of the south in the civil war. There are no cowboys in Appalachia.

As so many southerners went west, to Texas and Arizona after the "whoa," dressing like cowboys in what is really the heart of Appalachia, was and is a displacement of the shame of defeat and the defeat of the sacred "Lost Cause" of the south. So it seemed to me that cowboy outfits are just one cultural defense mechanism writ large; a way for "hillbillies" and southerners to avoid the shame and stigma of defeat.

My wife did not buy boots and although I love wide brimmed hats I was wearing a Safari hat from East Africa and sported a blue Somali scarf, which drew many compliments from the younger set. I did not feel like a cowboy but I did feel a tad hip. I did not buy anything. And so, with shame on my mind we went off to be honoured.



Harrison House, Franklin, Tennessee

Harrison House is an old southern mansion, a plantation house

that was not burnt down during the Civil War. It is a grand affair and a historical monument. It has been redesigned to look as it was in 1864 before it was lost to the Union after the Battle of Franklin.

The hostess offered me champagne and shrimp party food which I loved. She kept up a constant patter about the beauty of the house and the surroundings, which apart from the highways and cars, looked as if the landscape had not changed for a hundred and sixty years. I then discovered that the lady in question had grown up on the premises.

She said, "I grew up in this house after WWII. It belonged to my father, his father and his father back to 1830. When I grew up the basement was unfinished and had a dirt floor. You could stick your hand in the dirt and pull out confederate and union uniform buttons. My Daddy kept a confederate cannon in the back yard, as a kind of ornament you know. It is one of the cannons you can now see in the plaza at Franklin. Now the new mayor wants to get rid of that monument but us daughters of the confederacy will not allow it."

I remembered that just across the road from that monument in the yard of the mayor's office stands a bronze statue dedicated to the African American soldiers of the civil war with an inscription on the bottom that states, "The Union Forever." The sculptor's bronze soldiers point their muskets at the Confederate monument, just across the road in the circle.

We were treated to a short recital before my presentation. A young teenager got up on stage accompanied by a somewhat older male pianist. She sang the old Confederate love song *Aura Lea*:

*As the blackbird in the Spring,  
'neath the willow tree,  
Sat and pipd', I heard him sing,*

*Sing of Aura Lea.  
Aura Lea, Aura Lea,  
Maid of golden hair;  
Sunshine came along with thee,  
And swallows in the air.*

*Aura Lea, Aura Lea,  
Maid of golden hair;  
Sunshine came along with thee,  
And swallows in the air.*

I then realized Elvis had taken this melody and made it a hit song when I was a kid. *Love Me Tender*. It was more than one hundred and fifty years old. He really was a southern boy. You can take the boy out of the south, but you cannot take the south out of the boy. Yes mam, no sir.

I could imagine the gallant officers and their women in Victorian costumes dancing on these same floors so long ago and was lost in historical contemplation, viewing my very own Ken Burns documentary in my mind's eye, until an elderly woman beside pulled me out of my reverie. She was about ninety, with fierce blue eyes, a typical Scots Irish look on her face and she sat with a ram rod straightness that is no longer fashionable.

She turned to me and said, "It is indeed a beautiful song but it is not only the old songs that have passed, it is the old music." I asked her what she meant. She said, "No one whistles any more. Before the War and I mean WWII, men whistled. You could tell who was coming because you could hear their whistle from a distance and each one sang his favourite melody. My father's was Dixie. No one does that anymore." I immediately remembered a page from Mark Twain (Samuel Clements) 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *Tom Sawyer*.



*Within two minutes, or even less, he had forgotten all his troubles. Not because his troubles were one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man's are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest bore them down and drove them out of his mind for the time-just as men's misfortunes are forgotten in the excitement of new enterprises. This new interest was a valued novelty ... whistling*

Just before I got up to speak my hostess pointed to an elegant black box on one of the corner tables. She said, "General Robert E. Lee gave that box to my great, great, great grandfather. It was delivered on horseback by Jeb Stuart himself, just before the battle of Franklin. Over the decades we have lost the key. We feel it is disrespectful to open it and there is a tradition that whoever finds the key will be blessed with success, health and happiness."

Eventually I was called to speak. My topic was Canada and the Civil War. I basically explained that the British Government claimed to be neutral during the war but sold battle ships to the Confederates and smuggled them into New Orleans until they could not longer pass by Pensacola's batteries. I explained that the Confederates had an elaborate spy system in what is now Ontario and Quebec, that Robert E. Lee's uncle Cassius ran a spy ring out of Hamilton Ontario, and that John Wilkes Booth himself planned Lincoln's assassination on the streets of Toronto and Montreal.

Finally, I pointed out that although more simple Canadians signed up with the north, many others went south and the elite tipped towards the south so much that when Jefferson Davis was finally released from jail, after the "whoa" he came to Canadian Niagara Falls where he was given a hero's welcome. I ended by saying that none of this was taught in Canadian high

schools as today's woke politicians and educators had simply brushed these inconvenient facts under the carpet. I titled my speech, "Intellectual Carpet Baggers" and the audience got my point.

A gracious looking woman in period costume had sat herself down at the back of the audience and followed my every word as I spoke. There was nothing lascivious about her. She was a comely, well-preserved woman in her early fifties. After the talk she came up to me and asked me a whole set of questions about the history of Canada until 1920. She either avoided topics after that or, did not respond to anything that I raised that would have brought her interest into the last one hundred years.

A judge from Georgia spoke to me after the talk. I was complaining to him about the growing political tyranny in Canada, the lock downs, the Critical Race Theory in the schools and media, money printing and inflation. He took a deep breath and told me, "The south fought the civil war for two reasons. One was slavery and that is a fact. The other was for states rights and that is also true. You may have noticed that since Martin Luther King race relations in the south have improved." I had noticed that the young white and black employees at our hotel were colour blind.

He continued, "Well the racial antagonism is no more, but the rest of southern culture has not changed. Imagine if you will if the Spartans had given up kingship and joined Athens in democracy while maintaining their Spartan traditions. Southerners are first loyal to their family, community, region, state and country and that is what is going to save us from the New Yorkers and Californians, with their crazy race-based Marxism. The south will rise again. This time it will truly save the Republic ... but you did not hear it from me."

My wife is an antiques dealer so the next day we were in Franklin and she spent hours looking at everything in the

stores while I spent my time looking at civil war memorabilia that was up for sale. I felt like I was in a historical museum. I noticed one photographic portrait of a southern belle from 1865 and pointed it out to the owner. He told me "Oh that was one of the Harrison girls. She was said to be the best-looking woman in Franklin. She died around 1920 and my great grandma was a friend of hers." I remarked that I had met a woman who was her spitting image the day before at the Harrison House. The owner said, "That is highly unlikely. She died without having any children."

I immediately put my hand to my chest and pulled out an envelope that this mysterious woman had absent mindedly asked me to give to my hostess before she had left Harrison House the day before. I opened it and pulled out an old-fashioned 19<sup>th</sup> century key. I had forgotten about the envelope. I called my wife and we drove back to Harrison House. The hostess was getting ready for another event. I recounted my strange experience. She laughed and said, "Maybe it will open the mysterious box." I knew she wasn't serious but had a good southern sense of humour, and was putting me on. She brought it to me. I tried the key, it got stuck for a moment and then the top popped open.

She lost all the colour in her face and looked like she was about to faint. I found a simple dry, somewhat dessicated envelope in the box and opened it is. I pulled out a sheaf of paper and read the first few lines of the first page. "This is the updated last will and testament of Robert. E. Lee. This document abrogates any will or testament that has come before it ..."

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I sat down on the nearest chair. My hostess did the same. She said, "I do declare that I am in need of a very strong drink." She called one of the staff and then added, "Bring another chair so this woman can sit with us," motioning towards my

wife.

She then asked one of the staff to bring us an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels which the three of us then finished in a few short minutes, crystal glass after crystal glass.

It still took us another hour and a half to fully calm down.

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**Geoffrey Clarfield** is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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