

From War Horse To Saddle Horse

From the American Saddlebred Magazine November/December 1998

Perhaps the most famous and beloved horse was Traveller, the mount of Confederate General Robert E. Lee during the Civil War.

Traveller was also his most visible companion after the war, when General Lee served as president of Washington College, today Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia.



What kind of horse was he?

Over the years the heritage of Traveller has been given several attributions - Thoroughbred, Arabian and Walking Horse. However, in 1886, the *Richmond Dispatch* printed his pedigree as given by Major Thomas Brown, whose brother, Captain Joseph M. Brown, was a quartermaster in a Confederate regiment. Brown, purchased the horse from Captain James W. "Dick" Johnson, who gave him the pedigree. According to Thomas Brown, General Lee had written his brother in 1868 asking for Travellers pedigree, which he was provided. General Lee later wrote that Traveller "was of Grey Eagle stock."

Grey Eagle, pride of Kentucky

Traveller was conceived in Mason County, Kentucky, in 1856, when his sire, the great race horse Grey Eagle, was standing on the farm of J.B. Poyntz, near Maysville. Grey Eagle made two seasons there before being sold to Ohio, where he died in Morrow County on July 4, 1863, the day after the Battle of Gettysburg.

As a four-mile race horse, Grey Eagle was the pride of Kentucky and most famous for running in a \$20,000 stakes race at the Oakland Race Course in Louisville in 1839, He was defeated by Wagner, and broke down in a subsequent challenge a week later. Grey Eagle was described as having a "lofty carriage, a magnificent gray. Sixteen hands high with the step of a

Racing stallions, ambling mares

He was put to stud and was a successful sire of race horses, but he also sired many Saddle Horses. William Henry Herbert wrote in 1857, "If the advantage to be derived from the Thoroughbred horse depended on no more than his fitness for racing, I should not have assigned him this prominent place. It was for the improvement of the native stock horses by giving them speed and endurance that no other breed can compare. That "native stock" was most likely natural-gaited mares descended from the Narragansett Pacer, and often having additional crosses to the Thoroughbred. Virtually all of today's American Saddlebreds somehow trace to Grey Eagle. Wagner and Lexington are other old time Thoroughbred stallions who contributed greatly to the Saddlebred.

Hamilton Busbey wrote in his 1907 book *Recollections of Men and Horses* that General Nelson A. Miles, a Civil War hero, contemporary of Custer under Sheridan, and later a noted Indian fighter told him that the best horses used by both armies in the Civil War "were gathered from such riding states as Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Virginia. General George A. Custer was partial to the type of Saddle Horse found in Kentucky." General Basil Duke, second in command to General John Hunt Morgan, was the first to describe the breed as "Saddlebred." He wrote, "If I be correct in my estimate of the Thoroughbred, then it must be conceded that the nearer he approximates him, the better another horse (the Saddlebred) will be. But the Kentucky Saddlebred horse has not only inherited in a large measure the excellence of the Thoroughbred in respects to which I have called attention, but has also retained certain desirable characteristics which have more peculiarly distinguished the humbler (non-Thoroughbred) strain from which he is descended. The desirable characteristics to which Duke alluded were "the peculiar gaits which make their descendants so valuable for the saddle." Sculptor Frederick Volck took actual *measurements of Traveller and* observed Lee and his horse together in preparation for the statuette executed in 1863.

Bred by sheriff

Traveller was bred by Richard Johnson, the former sheriff of Greenbriar County, Virginia (today West Virginia), and foaled on Johnson's farm near Blue Sulphur Springs.

Common sense dictates that Johnson purchased Flora, a grade mare, in foal to Grey Eagle, at Maysville, Kentucky, and shipped her home via steamboat. It simply doesn't make sense that a mare not a pedigreed Thoroughbred would be sent that distance, when there were surely other stallions standing in the area.

However, the Kanawha River is navigable to within about 30 miles of Blue Sulphur. The Kanawha joins the Ohio River at Point Pleasant and from there, it is a relatively short distance downstream to Maysville. Kentucky was famous for its Saddle Horses and what better way for a Virginia breeder to acquire a good one than go to the source?

Foaled in the spring of 1857, the gray colt was named for the prominent Mississippi Senator Jeff Davis. The handling and training of the young horse was done by Jim Johnson. Jeff Davis was taken to the horse show at the Greenbriar County Fair in Lewisburg as a two-year-old, and again at age three in 1860. Jeff Davis won the blue ribbon both times.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Johnson and the Broun brothers joined Wise's Legion, commanded by former Virginia Governor Henry Wise. Wise's Legion and a brigade under John B. Floyd, who had been US Secretary of War under President Buchanan, set out to clear Federal troops from western Virginia. When they had little success, General Robert E. Lee, then

commander of Virginia State troops, was sent to the area not to command, but to advise.

Lee meets Traveller

In late August 1861, when Wise's Legion was camped at Sewell Mountain, west of Lewisburg, General Lee saw Traveller for the first time. The Charlottesville Daily Progress reported that in 1926 Mrs. Louisa Cary Feamster told of her experience as an eye witness to the encounter. She said General Lee and his staff stopped at the Johnson farm to rest on their way to Sewell Mountain. The weather was warm, there had been a light afternoon rain and soon the General dozed off. "It is Robert E. Lee as those who knew him saw him." contemporary art critic of Volck statuerre.

After he awakened and was conversing with the Johnsons, including Captain James "Dick" Johnson, who was home visiting, General Lee saw the gray gelding grazing in a clover field near the house. He immediately offered to buy "the Kentucky thoroughbred," as Mrs. Feamster called him. Captain Johnson, who was in the infantry and not in need of a mount, told the General he had tentatively sold to Captain Broun for his brother Major Broun.

Generals Wise and Floyd did not cooperate, and that fall the military effort to keep West Virginia in the Confederacy failed. General Lee was promoted to personal advisor to President Jerrerson Davis, and was reassigned to oversee the coastal defenses around Charleston, South Carolina.

Lee calls him "my colt"

The third regiment of Wise's Legion was detached, sent into Confederate service as the 16th Virginia, and was also transferred to South Carolina. Major Broun became very sick during the campaign so Greenbriar, as the horse was called by the Brouns, went to his brother, Captain Joseph Broun. When the 16th Virginia arrived at Pocotaligo, near Charleston, General Lee again saw "my colt", as he referred to him. Joe Broun then offered him to General Lee as a gift, but the offer was declined. General Lee said, "If you will willingly sell me the horse, I will gladly use it for a week or so to learn its qualities." Captain Broun agreed and sent the horse to the General's stable.

After several weeks, Greenbriar was returned to Captain Broun with a letter from General Lee which said the horse suited, but he could "no longer use so valuable a horse in such time, unless it were his own. It was February 1862.

An allowance for inflation

Captain Joseph Broun then wrote his ailing brother asking for advice. Major Tom Broun responded immediately; "If he will not accept it, then sell it to him at what it cost me." Broun had paid \$175, so General Lee gave Joseph Broun an extra \$15 to compensate for the depreciation in Confederate money, and paid a total of \$200. In 1864, after the horse became truly famous, he was appraised at \$4,600 Confederate.

New name: Traveller

General Lee promptly gave Greenbriar his new name, Traveller, with the proper English double L. Traveller joined Richmond, a gift from the people of Virginia, and Brown Roan, in General Lee's stable. Richmond died in 1862 and Brown Roan, went blind. After the Second Battle of Manassas, General Jeb Stuart, commander of the confederate cavalry, presented General Lee with Lucy Long, a 15-hand sorrel mare with a white blaze and hind stockings. She was said

to have an "easy pace, fast walk and a short canter. She gave out in 1864 and was sent from the war zone to freshen up, and either wound up in a Confederate remount pool or was taken by stragglers. However, she was found after the war and returned to General Lee as a Christmas present in 1867. Lucy Long lived to age 33 and had to be put down in 1891.

Ajax was another of Robert E. Lee's mounts. He was a big chestnut gelding who also survived the war. He was accidentally killed in the late 1860's when he ran into a gate latch.

An indelible image

Traveller was the horse indelible in the minds of all who saw him and his master during the war. He has been an indelible image with the American public ever since. General Lee rode Traveller in every campaign of the Army of Northern Virginia after he took command in the Seven Days Battles before Richmond in 1862.

Veterans remember Lee sitting on Traveller for hours, watching his troops in retreat across the Potomac River after the Battle of Antietam. His staff recalled that at Fredericksburg, a hen nested in Lee's tent and laid an egg there nearly everyday. She roosted on Traveller's back and he never seemed to object.

The handsome 16-hand gray gelding was said to have a fiery spirit and would raise his head and arch his neck, yet Lee could maintain complete control. This can't be seen in any of the photos of Lee and Traveller, but there is an eye witness sketch made by the respected artist Alfred Wauld at Appomattox Court House at the war's end. Wauld's sketch indicates a sharp horse wearing himself proudly. Traveller was said to have a high, bouncy trot, a fast walk and long, loping canter, and General Lee was one of the few who could "make him saddle."

After Pickett's charge at Gettysburg was repulsed in bloody fashion by Federal troops, General Lee remained aboard Traveller until well after midnight, planning the retreat from Pennsylvania. When he finally rode to his tent and dismounted, Lee was so exhausted that he threw his arms around Traveller's neck to hold himself up. Neither man nor beast moved for several minutes.

A month later when Lee reviewed General A.P. Hill's Third Corps, he galloped some nine miles around the front and rear of the entire unit, leaving his escort in the wake. When General U.S. Grant took command of the Union Army he went on the offensive, but Lee attacked in the jungle-like forest of The Wilderness. In the heat of battle, General Lee attempted to lead a charge himself, but veterans surrounded their Commander-In-Chief and Traveller, and sent them back with cries of "Lee to the rear. There was a similar incident a week later at Spotsylvania with similar results, only this time Traveller was said to have reared just as a cannonball whizzed under his front legs.

Object of adoration

After the war, Traveller was an object of adoration, just as he had been during the conflict. People continually plucked hairs from his mane and tail for souvenirs. Despite that he had a good retirement in Lexington, Virginia where he was allowed to graze on the college grounds.

Robert E. Lee's riding companion during these times was his daughter Mildred who rode Lucy Long. They went for long rides, sometimes for several days and they visited Natural Bridge and the Peaks of Otter. Lee often rode 40 miles to Staunton and thought little of it. Robert E. Lee died in 1870, probably the result of heart failure caused by pneumonia.

Traveller succumbed to tetanus in June 1871. The horse was buried near Lee Chapel. His bones were then exhumed and displayed in the Washington and Lee Museum in 1907 and later, in the basement of Lee Chapel until the early 1960s. The bones were reburied just outside the front of the chapel and are there today.

There are numerous equestrian statues of General Lee and Traveller - the Virginia Monument at Gettysburg; on Monument Avenue in Richmond; in Charlottesville, Virginia; and in Dallas, Texas. There is also an exquisite piece in the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University. Except for the horse's good looks, like an American Saddlebred, there is little in these works of art to indicate Traveller's ancestry.

Then in 1994, while visiting Lexington, Virginia, Dr. e.r. Wasemiller, of Wahpeton, North Dakota, went to the museum at Virginia Military Institute. Dr. Wasemiller, whose hobby is woodcarving, has donated much of his work to the American Saddle Horse Museum, most recently "Sky Watch and Emperor". At the VMI Museum, Wasemiller luckily happened upon another statue of Lee and Traveller; one done from life that confirms Traveller's ancestry!

The Volck statue

This statue was the creation of Frederick Volck, a native of Nuremburg, Germany, who emigrated to the U.S. Volck came to Richmond, Virginia, where, with the advent of the Civil War, he was employed in the Confederate Bureau of Naval Ordnance and Hydrography. This bureau was headed by Captain John M. Brooke, the man who drew up the plans to raise the sunken frigate Merrimac and convert the ship to an ironclad.

Volck and Brooke became close friends and in his spare time, Bolck carved busts of Captain Brooke and Jefferson Davis. The Brooke bust was destroyed when Federal troops occupied Richmond, and the fate of the Confederate President's bust is unknown.

Done from life

In 1863 Volck executed the Robert E. Lee and Traveller statue. It was probably in the early months of that year, when, through the efforts of Captain Brooke, General Lee sat for Volck several times and allowed him to make a life mask. He also took actual measurements of Traveller and observed man and horse together. By the summer of 1864, plans were underway for a heroic-sized statue of Lee and Traveller to be erected in Richmond. But of course the war dictated the impossibility of that at the time. A contemporary art critic who praised the statue concluded his remarks by saying "It is Robert E. Lee as those who knew him saw him."

Frederick Volck died after the Civil War, before competition for a sculptor to do statues on Richmond's Monument Avenue was held. Shortly after the war, Volck gave the Lee bronze to Virginia Military Institute "because of (his) regard for the Institute's (professor of Physics (Stonewall Jackson))."

The statue resided at the VMI Library until Dr. Wasemiller came across it in the museum, where it was in storage before shipment to VMI's new Hall of Valor at Newmarket, Virginia. The Hall of Valor Museum commemorates the May 15, 1864, battle which involved the VMI Corps of Cadets. General John C. Breckinridge Castleman, first president of the American Saddlebred Horse Association.

How does this 135-year-old bronze statue become the final piece of the puzzle of Traveller's heritage? When combined with pedigree, eye witness descriptions and photos, the Volck statue, done from life, seems to confirm that Traveller was a prototype American Saddlebred. Can there be much doubt? The horse is racking!

Traveller's Bloodline

