All his life, Ulysses S. Grant thought of himself as a Westerner. He was born in Ohio when this was America’s frontier. He grew up loving horses, and he had a skill and connection with them that everyone noticed. He was shy, something of a loner. Around his hometown, people did not think he would ever amount to much.

West Point

West Point was his father’s idea. Grant did not want to go, had no interest in military life, and expected to flunk out. Maybe this is why he did not speak up during his application process when his birth name, Hiram Ulysses, was mistakenly written as Ulysses Simpson; he just accepted the name. On September 22, 1839, four months after he arrived at West Point, he wrote to a cousin and made fun of his new life. "My pants sit as tight to my skin as the bark to a tree and if I do not walk military. that is if I bend over quickly or run. they are very apt to crack with a report as loud as a pistol. my coat must always be buttoned up tight to the chin…. If you were to see me at a distance. The first question you would ask would be. “is that a Fish or an animal?”

Ulysses S. Grant never did like Army uniforms, or the endless regulations of the military. A so-so student, he was recognized mostly for his extraordinary horsemanship and his perseverance: he stuck with tasks until they were done. A classmate later recalled that all the cadets had considered Grant a good mathematician, and that everyone had liked him. But Grant was reserved, and the social life at West Point made him even more reserved. Many cadets were wealthy young Southerners whom Grant did not feel comfortable with, although James Longstreet, a non-aristocrat from rural Georgia, became a lifelong friend.

Because he finished things he started, Grant made it to graduation in 1843, ranking 21st in a class of 39. He
hoped to return to West Point to teach math, so he remained in the Army. Despite his skill with horses, his low class rank earned him a place in the infantry, not the cavalry. During these years, young officers were posted to far-flung parts of the country as the nation extended its reach toward the south and west. Grant’s regiment was sent to Jefferson Barracks, just south of St. Louis. This post was the Army’s major headquarters on the Mississippi River. Settlers were heading further west toward the Great Plains, and the Army’s job was to protect them from Indian raiders.

The Mexican American War

In May 1844, about a year after graduating from West Point, Grant’s regiment joined General Zachary Taylor’s troops on the Texas-Mexico border in a show of force meant to intimidate Mexico. The immediate question was whether Mexico would accept America’s annexation of Texas, but the United States had its eye on the vast Mexican territory between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Americans believed it was this nation’s destiny to stretch from coast to coast. Pro-slavery forces were especially eager for new territory because they hoped it would spread slavery.

Congress declared war on Mexico in May 1845, and Grant saw battle for the first time. He was 23 years old. Leading his company, he was always cool under fire, a trait noted by those who served with him throughout his life. When General Taylor ordered the Army toward Monterrey, deep in Mexican territory, Grant was named quartermaster, the officer responsible for feeding, moving, and supplying the regiment. He proved to be extremely good at it. Once, he volunteered to take his horse, Nellie, and race through sniper territory to secure ammunition. He protected himself by hanging off the side of the horse like a stunt man in a movie.

Grant continued as quartermaster, but when there were battles, he wanted to be in the thick of it. He saw action at Cerro Gordo, at Molino del Rey near Mexico City, and five days later at Chatultepec, the decisive battle of the war. He believed his country misused its power against Mexico, but he learned the realities of war in this campaign, was promoted for his bravery, and met many of the men he would fight with and against in the Civil War.

Shortly after the war with Mexico, in the summer of 1848, Grant married Julia Dent, the cousin of his West Point friend (and best man) James Longstreet. His marriage brought the national debate over slavery squarely into his personal life. Grant’s own father was a committed abolitionist. His new father-in-law ran a plantation, owned many slaves, and saw nothing wrong with it. This caused some arguments between Grant and his in-laws. Later, Julia Grant relied on slaves for help when her children were young, and Grant himself owned a slave for a time, freeing the man shortly before the Civil War.

In 1852, Grant was posted to forts in California and Oregon, and he entered a miserable time in his life. Frustrated and lonely without his family, he began drinking, sometimes heavily. After he was discovered drunk on duty, he resigned from the Army. He returned to his family and tried a number of civilian jobs, without much success. In the spring of 1860 he moved back to his hometown in Ohio to work with his brothers in a leather store.
Appomattox

Ulysses S. Grant returned to the Army when the Civil War began in 1861. Some of the stories of his heavy drinking may have been exaggerated and made worse by gossip, but they were told and held against him. His friends had to pull strings to get him a unit to command, and later a promotion to Brigadier General. At this point he began to show the focus and determination that would make him a winner on the battlefield. In early 1862, he led a successful attack on Fort Donelson, in northern Tennessee. The Confederate in charge was an old West Point friend named Simon Buckner, who had once lent Grant money. Buckner may have expected gentle treatment when he asked for the terms of surrender, but Grant responded that there were “no terms except immediate and unconditional surrender.” The North had been losing many battles, and this tough stance and victory made Grant a hero. People said that his initials, U.S., stood for “unconditional surrender.”

Grant’s next victory was at Shiloh, but the North was shocked by the 13,000 Union soldiers lost or wounded. There were stories of Grant sitting alone and whittling during battles, not seeming to care that he had sent so many to their deaths. People thought his celebrated coolness under pressure was really just coldness. President Lincoln overlooked the criticisms. “I can’t spare this man; he fights.”

In 1863, after Grant’s long siege and hard-won victory at Vicksburg, Lincoln put him in charge of the entire Union Army. General Grant established his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac and began his long face-off with Robert E. Lee in Virginia. With a larger, better-equipped Army, Grant pressured Lee relentlessly, but the cost was staggering. At the Battle of Cold Harbor, 7,000 Union soldiers were killed or wounded in a single half hour, and now people called Grant a “butcher.” His campaign against Lee, however, was working. With the Union armies closing in, Lee was forced to protect the capital city of Richmond, Virginia. He did this by digging in around Petersburg, the capital’s main supply station some 20 miles to the south.

For months, Grant’s forces pushed against Lee’s trenches, until Lee had no option but to abandon the defense of the capital. In March 1865, Grant pursued Lee when the Army of Northern Virginia tried to escape along the Appomattox River. The Confederate soldiers were weakened after the long period of trench warfare, and they were hungry, close to starvation. Under Grant’s orders, General Philip Sheridan’s cavalry raced ahead, destroyed Confederate food supplies, and trapped Lee’s Army near the village of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. After four years of war and two years going head-to-head with Lee, Grant had won.

Grant and Lee exchanged letters on the battlefield, agreeing in gentlemanly language to meet at a farmhouse in Appomattox to discuss surrender. General Lee put on his best uniform and strapped on his engraved sword. General Grant, never a man for spit and polish, arrived at the farm house wearing the field clothes he had put on that morning when he dressed for battle. His trousers were splattered, and his boots caked with mud. He admitted later to being embarrassed. But he and Lee sat down and agreed to the liberal terms Lincoln had outlined with his generals just weeks earlier. There would be no punishment of Confederate soldiers or officers, and no prison terms. The men would be able to keep their horses—the officers could keep their personal weapons as well—and go home. Grant ordered over 25,000 Union rations to feed Lee’s men, the first real food they had had in days. General Grant was the victor, but writing about Appomattox later, he said, “I felt sad and depressed at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought.”
Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

In the North after the war, Ulysses S. Grant was everyone’s hero. He was promoted to four-star general in 1866 by President Andrew Johnson, and in this role he commanded the weak occupying Army in the South. Like Lincoln and Grant, Johnson was a Republican. But Grant was disgusted by Johnson’s unwillingness to enforce the goals of Reconstruction in the South. In 1868, with no political experience, Grant rode his popularity into the White House, with a vision for a dramatically better society for black and Native American peoples. He tried, though not consistently, to protect the rights of freed people. But his administration was increasingly caught up in scandal and corruption, the American economy was in crisis, and voters lost interest in paying for Reconstruction, which ended formally in 1877. The Democratic Party gained power in the South by appealing to former Confederates, beginning a long period of white supremacist violence toward black people.

Grant waited until after his presidency to say anything publicly about the increasingly god-like reputation of his old adversary, Robert E. Lee. In 1879, he said: “Lee was of a slow, conservative, cautious nature, without imagination or humor, always the same, with grave dignity. I never could see in his achievements what justifies his reputation. The illusion that nothing but heavy odds beat him will not stand the ultimate light of history. I know it is not true.”

In the mid-1880s, Grant learned that he had throat cancer. He spent the next months feverishly writing his memoirs, hoping that their sale would provide his wife with an income. The book he finished just days before his death became the best-selling autobiography of the 19th century. When he died in 1885, people overlooked his disappointing presidency and grieved for the man who had saved the Union.

Robert E. Lee
1807-1870

In some ways, Robert E. Lee was born with everything. His slave-holding family had wealth and prestige. They lived in one of Virginia’s grandest estates and traced their roots back to the Jamestown colony. They were the American version of aristocracy. Among his ancestors were governors, diplomats, and signers of the Declaration of Independence. His father, nicknamed “Light Horse Harry” Lee, was the best cavalry officer in the American Revolution and had fought at George Washington’s side.

All was far from perfect, though. The celebrated “Light Horse Harry” had ambitions for even greater wealth, but no skill with money. He lost a fortune on bad investments, even wrote bad checks. Lee was two when his father went to debtors’ prison, four when the family had to leave the estate, and six when his father ran off to escape his creditors. Lee grew up with little memory of him. Lee’s mother was able to support her children with a small inheritance and help from relatives, but she was humiliated by her husband’s actions. She raised Robert to make up for this disgrace – to practice self-control, to be frugal with money, and to always behave with dignity.

West Point

When Robert E. Lee was admitted to West Point on July 1, 1825, he had become the young man his mother wanted, and he stood out. At 17, he was tall, powerfully built, extremely handsome. He was friendly, charming, smart, and he had gone to good schools. From the start, he was a success. He won awards for mathematics and French, but he was good at everything, including drawing. In his third year he was named corps adjutant, the highest rank among cadets. He followed the rules to a T, earning no demerits at all in four years at West Point. Every cadet probably knew who he was. One, fellow-Virginian Joe Johnston, became and remained a close friend.
In 1829, Lee graduated second in his class. His high ranking gave him the right to choose the Army department he joined. Like most top graduates, he chose the Corps of Engineers, the elite part of the Army. Engineers were critical at this time in American history, when the country was growing so fast. They had the skills to survey land, map out roads, oversee the construction of bridges, dams, and buildings. There was an urgent need to improve the defenses of the American coastline, so Lee’s first assignment was in Georgia, where he worked on the building of a fort.

In 1831, Lee married Mary Custis, the great granddaughter of Martha Washington. His marriage gave him a direct link to George Washington, the man he admired most. For the next three years he worked on the building of a fort in Virginia. Then he went to St. Louis to design a plan for redirecting the Mississippi River to keep this vital harbor clear and free of silt. He was considered a first-rate engineer and was brought to New York in the 1840s to serve as the resident engineer of the new Fort Hamilton. A respected family man in his 30s, Lee was an Army captain who had never been to war. That was about to change.

**The Mexican American War**

When war was declared with Mexico, the Army’s engineers were essential. They could study the landscape, make accurate field drawings, and build roads through the wilderness. The commanding officer of the main Army of invasion, General Winfield Scott, requested Robert E. Lee as his chief engineer. With his instincts and training, Lee was able, more than once, to find routes through almost impossible terrain. The American victory at Cerro Gordo was credited to one of Lee’s ingenious paths through the mountains. Ulysses S. Grant, then a young man in the same war, admired the roadways that had been “opened over chasms to the right where the walls were so steep that the men could barely climb them….The engineers…led the way and the troops followed.”

Lee knew the danger he was in, from the terrain and from combat. He wrote to his wife: “[I]f my life & strength are spared, I must see this contest to an end & endeavor to perform what little service I can to my country….Goodbye my dear Mary. Teach my children to be good & virtuous & not to forget me.” But he survived the war, earning a promotion for his actions at Chapultepec and entering Mexico City with Scott’s forces to mark the end of the war.

Like Ulysses S. Grant, Lee learned valuable practical lessons about war from his experience in Mexico. And, like Grant, he believed that his country had bullied Mexico, but his criticism went no further. He thought Americans had fought well and fairly, and he was angered by those who saw the war as a plot to extend slavery into the west.

**Appomattox**

Robert E. Lee called slavery “a moral and political evil,” but he kept the slaves he inherited when his wife’s father died in 1856. On a leave of absence from the Army, he worked to put his father-in-law’s affairs in order, which included managing the slaves. He considered himself a fair slave owner, but abolitionists accused him of whipping captured runaways. Lee thought abolitionist efforts were hopeless, that only God would be able to end slavery. In 1859, when he was ordered to lead the government’s effort to put down John Brown’s slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry, he did not question the rightness of it.
When the Civil War began, Robert E. Lee was one of the most promising and respected officers in the Army. He was the reasonable choice to lead the Union Army, but he turned the offer down. After 35 years in the U.S. Army, he resigned in order to join the Army of the Confederate States of America. It was not an easy decision, but in the end, his loyalty to his home state won out. In 1862, he was named commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. His strength was in seeing that the Confederacy was too intent on defense—it needed to attack, despite the enemy’s greater numbers. When this led to victories, Lee planned the invasion of the North. The resulting Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 ended in a defeat that many felt the South never recovered from.

When Ulysses S. Grant was named commander of the Union forces, he and Lee became locked in a long fight over Richmond, Virginia, the capital city of the Confederacy. Grant’s men were constantly pushing at Lee’s defenses of the city and of Petersburg, which was the main supply depot for the capital. At the end of March 1865, Lee’s embattled forces abandoned their position and tried to escape along the Appomattox River. They were trapped at the Virginia village of Appomattox Court House by Grant’s men, and Lee was left with no way out.

On the morning of Sunday, April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee looked at his staff and said: “Then there is nothing left me to do but go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths.” For the first time in his life he was facing overwhelming failure, but dignity still mattered. Expecting to be taken General Grant’s prisoner, he put on a new uniform, his polished boots, and his best sword. Then he and his secretary, Charles Marshall, went to the local farmhouse where the Army of Northern Virginia would surrender. General Ulysses S. Grant arrived half an hour later, with a number of aides.

General Grant later wrote that he had no idea what Lee was thinking that day, that “his feelings…were entirely concealed.” In a supremely difficult moment, General Grant began with cordial small talk, saying he remembered General Lee from the war with Mexico. Eventually the two men sat at small separate tables and agreed to the surrender terms, which were much more generous than Lee expected. When it was over, Lee mounted his beloved horse, Traveller, and returned to his men. “Boys,” he said, “I have done the best I could for you. My heart is too full to say more.”

**Reconstruction and the Lost Cause**

Lee was offered and accepted the presidency of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. Like other former Confederates, he thought about the war, the pivotal loss at Gettysburg, and especially about the errors that had caused the slaughter of Confederate troops at Pickett’s Charge. Though he had taken complete responsibility at the time, later he blamed his subordinates: Jeb Stuart, James Longstreet, and E. Porter Alexander. But he was aware of the dangers of pointing fingers. He urged his fellow Southerners to forgive and forget. He had special words for Jubal Early: don’t say things that will “excite bitterness or animosity.”

The Lost Cause movement that would turn Robert E. Lee into a near god did not begin in earnest until after he died of a heart attack in 1870, at the age of 63.

James Longstreet  
(1821-1904)

Most people knew James Longstreet by his nickname, Pete. He was born in South Carolina but raised mostly in rural Georgia, where his parents owned a farm. He did not grow up in the wealthy, genteel South, and he always showed the rough, down-to-earth qualities of his country childhood. When he was nine, his father sent him to live with an aunt and uncle on their large cotton plantation in Augusta, Georgia, so he could attend military school there. He stayed in Augusta after his father died and his mother moved to Alabama. He felt great affection for the aunt and uncle who raised him. His uncle, Augustus Longstreet, was a lawyer who helped him win an appointment to West Point.

West Point

Longstreet’s career at the Military Academy did not predict that he would become one of the greatest generals of the Civil War. He was like his good friend Ulysses S. Grant in this way, but his record was worse. Longstreet finished 54th out of a class of 56, and tallied up a long list of demerits for poor conduct. Burly and well-liked, Longstreet enjoyed getting into mischief and playing cards, especially a game called brag. He was posted to Louisiana after he graduated in 1842. When Grant joined him there a year later, Longstreet introduced his friend to a young relative named Julia Dent. A few years later, Ulysses S. Grant and Julia Dent were married, with James Longstreet as best man.

The Mexican American War

As part of the Eighth Infantry in General Zachary Taylor’s army, Longstreet fought in most of the major battles of the war with Mexico, earning a series of promotions. As his unit charged a hill at the climactic battle of Chapultepec, he carried the regimental flag, the visible signal soldiers follow in battle. When he was badly, almost fatally, wounded in the leg, he managed to pass the flag to another officer who carried it to the summit. Longstreet’s reputation for courage, even recklessness, was formed from actions like this.

Appomattox

Longstreet resigned from the U. S. Army and joined the Confederacy as a Brigadier General in June 1861. A year later, Robert E. Lee selected him as his second in command, and the two became friends, almost brothers, although they differed on important military strategies. Longstreet had a reputation as a bulldog, the best fighter in the Army. Lee called him his “old war horse.” In the spring of 1865, Longstreet was with Lee as the Army of Northern Virginia abandoned Richmond and fled along the Appomattox River. When they were trapped and surrender seemed unavoidable, Longstreet told Lee that he believed his old friend Ulysses S. Grant would offer them fair terms, but if not, they should keep fighting. After the surrender, Longstreet and Grant met for the first time since the war began. “Pete,” General Grant said, “let us have another game of brag, to recall the days that were so pleasant.”
Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

James Longstreet moved to New Orleans after the war and became a businessman. After the 1866 riots, he was the commander of the Louisiana State guards, so he was called on to put down ongoing white resistance to voting rights for freed slaves. He believed that fighting the terms of Reconstruction would only prolong the Yankee presence in the South. Like many former Confederates, he urged Southerners to accept defeat and the rules of Congress. But unlike other Confederates, he joined the Republican party—the party of Lincoln, Grant, and emancipation—and he supported his old friend Ulysses S. Grant for president in 1868.

So despite his service to the Confederacy and close relationship with Lee, white Southerners began to see him as a traitor. When Jubal Early and others began to frame the myth of the Lost Cause, Longstreet was already an outcast, a hated scalawag, and a convenient villain. Early portrayed him as the man who betrayed Lee and the South, and blamed him especially for the defeat of Lee’s forces at Gettysburg in 1863. He accused Longstreet of violating Lee’s direct order to appear at sunrise on the second day at Gettysburg, and of half-hearted leadership at the disastrous Picket’s Charge on the third day. Longstreet brought some of the criticisms on himself. He often exaggerated his own accomplishments and even claimed that the Confederates would have won Gettysburg if Lee had followed his advice. The South did not tolerate criticism of Robert E. Lee.

Historians are still analyzing the battle of Gettysburg. Most believe that crucial mistakes were made by several Confederate generals, including Lee himself. But in the years after the war, Longstreet took most of the blame. He was seen as the Judas of the Confederacy. More than 30 years after the war ended, when Longstreet wrote his memoir, he was still defending himself against charges that he had caused the Confederate defeat. He in turn blamed Early for the smear campaign against him.

Jubal Early
(1816-1894)

Jubal Early was born and raised near Rocky Mount, in southwestern Virginia. His prominent family owned a 4,000-acre tobacco plantation and a large population of slaves. Early was sent to the best local schools and private academies in the area, but he does not seem to have been impressed. In his own words, he “received the usual instruction in the dead languages and elementary mathematics.” Jubal Early had a sarcastic streak.

West Point

Appointed by a Virginia member of Congress, Early entered West Point in 1833. One of his best subjects was civil engineering, which was a major course of study at West Point. Graduating officers were often posted to the frontier, where they were essential in building the roads, canals, dams, and bridges that would open the wilderness. About his career at West Point, Early wrote that “I was never a very good student, and was sometimes quite remiss, but I managed to attain a respectable stand in all.” He was 18th in his class when he graduated in 1837. He spent the next year in the campaign against the Seminoles in Florida, which was part of President Andrew Jackson’s plan to relocate American Indians from the Southeast to lands beyond the Mississippi. Then Early resigned from the Army to practice law and try his hand at politics. Like many young men at West Point, he did not expect to spend his life in the military.

The Mexican American War

Early opposed the American annexation of Texas, but when war broke out with Mexico in 1846, he considered it his duty to return to the Army. It was there that he first met Colonel Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, who would later be the President of the Confederacy and who “did me the honor of complimenting the order and regularity of my camp.” Early did not see much battlefield action during the war, acting instead as the military governor of Monterrey, Mexico. He proudly wrote later that “it was generally conceded by officers of the Army and Mexicans that better order reigned in the city during the time I commanded there, than had ever before existed, and the good conduct of my men won for them universal praise.” It mattered to Jubal Early when people thought and spoke highly of him.

Appomattox

After serving in Mexico, Jubal Early returned to his law practice. He was still serving as a country lawyer in rural Virginia when his state voted to secede from the Union. He joined the Confederate Army and later served under Robert E. Lee in the Army of Northern Virginia. His men called him “old Jube.” Lee referred to him as “my bad old man,” because Early was blunt and peppered his speech with cuss words. In the summer of 1864, while most of Lee’s men protected Petersburg and Richmond, General Early was ordered to the Shenandoah Valley to defend the farmland so critical to the Confederacy. Early succeeded until a huge Federal cavalry
arrived under Philip Sheridan, who won a series of battles and put much of the valley to the torch. Early had been badly outnumbered by Union forces, but embittered local people and soldiers blamed him for this defeat anyway. His blunt, sometimes biting personality probably did not help. Lee realized that Early had lost too much support to be effective, so he relieved him of his command on March 30, 1865. “Thus terminated my military career,” he wrote later. Early was returning to his home near Rocky Mount when he heard the stunning news of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox.

Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

Jubal Early never blamed General Lee for his dismissal or for the loss of the war—far from it. Returning to his law practice, he began writing and giving speeches about Lee’s military brilliance, his upstanding character, his near-perfection as a man and soldier. Early believed the South lost because the North had more soldiers, and because of fatal mistakes made by key Confederate generals at crucial moments, not because of any failure of Lee’s. As time went on, his main target was the Confederate General James Longstreet. Early claimed that Longstreet directly disobeyed Lee’s orders at Gettysburg. Many in the South believed that the Confederacy would have won the war if it had won at Gettysburg, so Longstreet was being blamed for the entire Confederate defeat.

Praising Lee and blaming Longstreet were hallmarks of the Lost Cause movement, and no one did more to promote it than Jubal Early. As one of the founders of the Southern Historical Society, he was able to present his views as serious history in the Society’s journal. Modern historians do not agree with his interpretation of Gettysburg, citing errors made by several generals, including both Lee and Early. But Jubal Early helped determine how the war would be remembered in the South, with Lee high on a pedestal and Longstreet single-handedly to blame for the outcome of the war. He gave the South a hero, a villain, and a simple way to think about its crushing defeat.

Phil Sheridan
1831-1888

Born to Irish immigrants, Philip Sheridan grew up in Ohio. He went to a one-room schoolhouse for four years, which is all the education that most frontier children received. He was small and Irish, so he bore the brunt of the local bullies’ teasing. In response he developed a quick temper and a willingness to throw a punch. Even when he was one of the great generals of the Civil War, he was still called “Little Phil.”

The Mexican American War

Sheridan was too young for this war. He was just 15 when it began and working in a dry-goods store in Ohio. He had a good head on his shoulders, so he was made the store accountant. Sheridan also had a passion for history, and around the store he was seen as an authority on the subject. So when news came in from the war with Mexico, he followed it all, joined the arguments about it, and absorbed the stories of military heroics. This is what made him want to go to West Point.

West Point

Given his limited schooling, Sheridan’s chances for admission were not good, but he had a stroke of luck when a boy from his region failed the entrance exam. Never the shy type, Sheridan asked a customer at the store, Congressman Thomas Ritchey, to recommend him. He was accepted to West Point in 1848, and, more good fortune, he had a helpful roommate named Henry Slocum. At night they would hang a blanket over one window so Slocum could tutor Sheridan by candlelight. Sheridan managed to stay more or less in the middle of his class, until his temper got the best of him. He threatened a cadet sergeant with a lowered bayonet, and he later attacked him with his fists. He was suspended from West Point for a year. Some people would have walked away for good, but Sheridan returned and graduated in 1854. He spent the next six years with his regiment in the West.

Appomattox

Ulysses S. Grant trusted Philip Sheridan completely, and in 1864 he picked him to lead the cavalry. It was a good choice. Until then, the cavalry was used mostly to collect information, but Sheridan saw bold new ways to mass the mounted forces and attack the enemy. Beginning in the fall of 1864 and continuing through the following spring, Sheridan’s cavalry harassed Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley, defeating him soundly and ordering the farmland burned to destroy the Confederate food supply. Then Sheridan and his men joined Grant at Petersburg, where the war’s last phase was beginning.

On April 1, 1865, Sheridan attacked at Five Forks and destroyed the last railroad connection that took Confederate supplies up to Richmond. The following day, when Lee’s army escaped and headed west along the Appomattox River, Grant ordered Sheridan’s cavalry to move at top speed, get ahead of Lee, and stop him.
The first skirmish between the two sides was at Sailor’s Creek, where Sheridan defeated the Confederates in a brutal contest and captured 6,000 men. Knowing that Lee’s men were starving, Sheridan reached a waiting food supply and destroyed it before Lee arrived. On April 8, when Lee’s men tried to break out, the cavalry held them, and the surrender came the next day. Grant said “I believe General Sheridan has no superior as a general, either living or dead, and perhaps not an equal.” And when the pro-Union newspaper, Harper’s Weekly, put out its issue after the fall of Richmond, the man on the cover was not Ulysses S. Grant or Robert E. Lee. It was General Philip Sheridan.

Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

After the war, General Sheridan was given command over Texas and Louisiana, with his headquarters in New Orleans. He was in Texas when the New Orleans riot broke out in the summer of 1866. He hurried to the city, but arrived too late to stop the bloodshed. He confirmed the order of martial law, though Mayor John T. Monroe and city and state officials claimed that the police could maintain order without the Army. At first, Sheridan blamed the organizers for inviting violence with fiery talk. But soon he believed the Mayor and police were at fault. Sheridan was furious when President Johnson gave the New York Times a garbled, edited copy of his first telegram, blaming the organizers. Johnson may have been furious himself that Sheridan was not in New Orleans at the time of the convention, despite clear warning signs of violence. The President ordered Sheridan to be less heavy-handed in his response to racial unrest, but Sheridan ignored him and from then on, the two men were enemies.

Sheridan wrote his memoir late in life. Perhaps responding to the Lost Cause movement, he wrote that when Lee faced Grant, the Confederate general was overmatched for the first time. Sheridan praised Grant’s intellect, tenacity, leadership, and the central role he had played in the Union victory.

Joseph E. Johnston grew up in Virginia with six older brothers. He was related on his mother’s side to Patrick Henry, so he had a blood connection to America’s founding fathers. But all members of the Confederacy, which he would eventually join, saw the American Revolution as their historic starting point. So did those on the Union side.

West Point

When Johnston entered West Point in 1825, he met a classmate named Robert E. Lee. There were four Virginians in the class originally, but two left, so Johnston and Lee agreed that they would work hard and make their state proud. In the process they became close friends. Other cadets called Johnston “the colonel,” as if he had already set himself apart in some way. He finished 13th out of 46 cadets in his class of 1829. After graduation he was sent first to Fort Columbus in New York Harbor, then to Fortress Monroe in southwestern Virginia, where his friend Robert E. Lee was also posted. Much of the Army’s work in the decades after Johnston left West Point involved enforcing the 1830 Indian Removal Act, which mandated that American Indians living east of the Mississippi River be relocated beyond the river’s west bank. Johnston saw his first combat against the Seminoles in Florida, but when it appeared that the war was won, he resigned from the Army in frustration over low pay and slow promotions. After a brief, unsuccessful civilian career, he returned to the Army and remained there for the rest of his life.

The Mexican American War

Johnston was 38 years old when war was declared against Mexico. He had some combat experience from the Indian wars, but he was eager for a war with a familiar style of fighting, with uniformed armies and rules of combat. He and his friend Robert E. Lee were both assigned to the staff of General Winfield Scott, commander of the Army in Mexico. Others on this staff included future Confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard and future Union generals George McClellan and George Meade. It was not a surprising coincidence that they would all work together, since they were all trained at West Point and this was America’s first foreign war. Nearly all the officers of the Regular Army, even those who had graduated from West Point years apart, met during the Mexican American War. Johnston was wounded at the battles of Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec, but he was still part of the U.S. Army’s triumphant entry into Mexico City.

Appomattox

Johnston did not have an easy career in the Civil War. He had numerous injuries that took him out of battle for months at a time. He argued frequently with President Jefferson Davis – over his rank, over strategy and tactics, and over his assignments. He had a reputation for not being aggressive enough on the battlefield, for falling back when he should have charged (his nickname was “Retreatin’ Joe”). Davis blamed him for the Confederate defeat at Vicksburg and finally relieved him of his command in the summer of 1864. Robert E.
Lee brought him back in March 1865 to lead the Confederate effort to put a stop to William Tecumseh Sherman’s campaign against the Southern countryside.

At the end of March 1865, as Lee planned to abandon Richmond and escape the grasp of General Grant, Johnston’s forces in North Carolina were the light at the end of the tunnel. But the tunnel closed around Lee’s army, and he surrendered at Appomattox. Johnston received a message from Davis ordering him to retreat to a safer location and keep fighting, but Johnston ignored this direct order. He surrendered to General Sherman on April 26, 1865, with the generous terms that Grant had given Lee at Appomattox. People had often accused Johnston of not being able to make a decision, but in the end he made one of the war’s most historic decisions and followed the example of the friend he had first met at West Point. Over the next two months, all the Confederate generals would surrender. Jefferson Davis never forgave Johnston for surrendering when he was neither defeated nor surrounded.

Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

On May 29, 1890, an elderly General Johnston was given a very public and important task. In front of 100,000 people, he dramatically unveiled the towering statue of Robert E. Lee that had been built in Richmond. Jubal Early presided over the festivities. It was a somewhat strange decision to give General Johnston this honor, since he had come up on the wrong side of the Lost Cause movement and taken his share of its attacks. His offense, in the eyes of the old Confederates, was criticizing Jefferson Davis. But everyone knew Johnston had been Lee’s close friend since they were young men, and so he was asked to unveil the monument to the South’s larger-than-life hero.

Less than a year later, Johnston was asked to serve as a pallbearer at the funeral of his old adversary, William Tecumseh Sherman. The two men had become friends after the war. Johnston and his wife had visited Sherman’s home on occasion, and Sherman had recommended Johnston for a job in the government. The weather on the day of the funeral was rainy, but Johnston knew that men who wished to show respect removed their hats, so his head was bare. He caught a cold and died of pneumonia a few weeks later.

William Tecumseh Sherman
1820-1891

Sherman was born and raised in Ohio. His father died when he was nine, leaving behind a large family and no money. From then on, Sherman was raised in a foster family that treated him as a son, but he felt the sting of poverty and the loss of his father all his life. It was his father who gave him the middle name Tecumseh, in honor of the great chief of the Shawnees. His nickname, “Cump,” was a shortened version of this name.

West Point

His foster father helped him win an appointment to West Point. At the time, the entrance age was 16, so he had to wait until he reached this milestone. He entered West Point in 1836, later saying that he was not considered a good soldier, was not selected for any office, and remained a private for four years. “Then, as now, neatness in dress and form, with a strict conformity to the rules, were the qualifications required for office, and I suppose I was found not to excel in any of these.” His closest friend was a relative named William Irwin, and the two liked to sneak off at night to Benny Haven’s, the tavern near the Academy. Sherman averaged about 150 demerits per year. He was a strong student, but the demerits dropped his final class ranking from fourth place to sixth.

The Mexican American War

When war was declared against Mexico in 1846, Sherman was ordered to California. He arrived in the settlement of Monterey and found a small, chaotic place, but no war. The stars and stripes were already flying over the town. Sherman spent the war doing paperwork, which he hated as much as he did not being on the battlefield. The big excitement was a trip he and his commander made to investigate the stories of gold discoveries in the mountains. Sherman left California in 1850, and three years later he left the Army for civilian life.

Appomattox

Sherman had unusually strong ties to the South. He had spent time there after West Point, had friends there, and supported slavery. But his allegiance to the Union was too strong for him to side with the Confederacy. He entered the Union Army in the summer of 1861 and spent the first months convinced that the North was so disorganized that it would never win the war. Meeting Ulysses S. Grant – the man he barely remembered from West Point – gave him hope. General Grant in turn trusted him completely, maybe more than any other general. In 1864, Sherman and Grant mapped out a final, massive attack against the Confederacy on several fronts. The plan was that Grant would move against Lee in Richmond, and Sherman would operate further south in Georgia. The two other lines of attack failed, but these two generals brought the Confederacy to its knees.

In April 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, Sherman was still in the South,
following Joseph E. Johnston’s weakened forces. When news came of Lee’s surrender, General Johnston sent word that he was willing to discuss the surrender of his own Army. At their first meeting on April 17, Sherman showed Johnston the telegram he had received that morning, announcing Lincoln’s assassination. Both men understood how much this could change Northern feelings about the South. They moved forward with their negotiations, which had to be confirmed by Washington. On April 26, they agreed formally to the same terms Lee had accepted at Appomattox.

Sherman believed in what he called “soft peace,” meaning easy terms for the loser. But during the war, he and General Grant, as well as Abraham Lincoln, agreed that the South needed to be crushed, or fighting would continue without end. Sherman called this “hard war,” which meant targeting civilians, not to kill them but to make their lives so miserable that they would stop supporting the war. He made no excuses for this. “War is cruelty,” he wrote, “and you cannot refine it.” So in the South, Sherman had waged a war against supplies and crops, anything the Confederacy might need, and against people’s sense of well-being. In pursuit of Johnston, he burned his way across Georgia. He left behind a 60-mile wide path of scorched earth and bitter, despairing people.

Reconstruction and the Lost Cause

Southerners were not alone in trying to write the history of the Civil War in their own terms. Sherman worried that the Lost Cause movement in the South would distort the Union’s accomplishment. In 1874, he wrote “we the victors must stamp on all history that we were right and they wrong – that we beat them in Battle as well as in argument.” He wrote his own memoirs to state the truth once and for all. Some reviewers admired his book, and Grant said it was accurate, but others attacked him as egotistical and unreliable. In his effort to protect Grant’s reputation and his own, he carried on a heated exchange of accusations with Jefferson Davis, former Confederate president. Like many former generals on both sides, he went to his grave reliving and retelling the war.