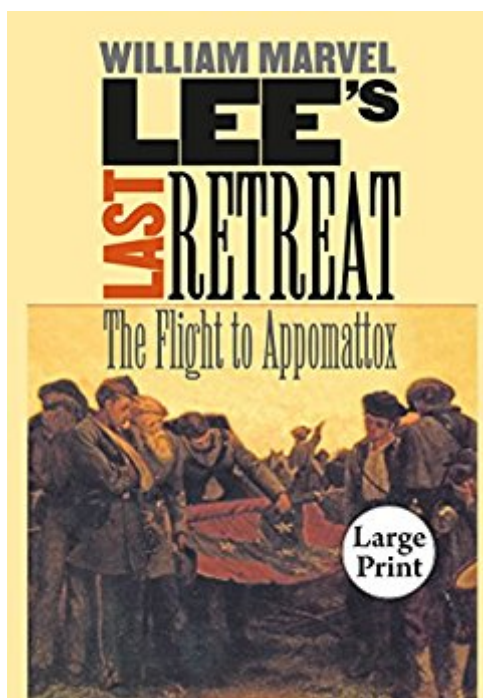


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# Lee's Last Retreat: The Flight To Appomattox (Civil War America)



## Synopsis

Few events in Civil War history have generated such deliberate mythmaking as the retreat that ended at Appomattox. William Marvel offers the first history of the Appomattox campaign written primarily from contemporary source material, with a skeptical eye toward memoirs published well after the events they purport to describe. Marvel shows that during the final week of the war in Virginia, Lee's troops were more numerous yet far less faithful to their cause than has been suggested. He also proves accounts of the congenial intermingling of the armies at Appomattox to be shamelessly overblown and the renowned exchange of salutes to be apocryphal.

## Book Information

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History

## Customer Reviews

The final days of the Civil War in Virginia are often short-changed in some histories -- as if events suddenly shifted from the end of the 10-month fight around Petersburg to the parlor at the McLean House in Appomattox Courthouse. Lee's Last Retreat covers the battles and skirmishes in the two weeks preceding Robert E. Lee's April 9, 1865, surrender. It also relates the moves by Gen,

Ulysses Grant and his subordinates in preventing a union of the southern armies of Lee and Gen. Joseph E. Johnston (who was facing Gen. William T. Sherman in North Carolina). William Marvel relates the pressures and alternatives faced by Lee as his army disintegrated. Men continued to die and suffer for two days while Grant and Lee exchanged correspondences leading to their meeting the afternoon of April 9.

Overall, a very good book. It destroys many of the myths surrounding the last days of Lee's army. there were many facts I had never seen before and I have read several books about this period. I believe the book has one flaw in that it could have used more maps. at one point, the narrative became tedious as I was unable to follow the patterns of battle or the units involved.

This book has been hyped as a myth busting history of Lee's retreat to Appomattox. As such I feared that it would be a bashing of Lee and the Southern viewpoint of the war. Instead Marvel has written a very even-handed account of this story that has become an epic of American history. "Lee's Last Retreat" is a fast paced book retelling Lee's retreat and Grant's relentless pursuit. Unlike so many recent Civil War books, Marvel does not get lost in the details nor does he make his book too long. He tells the story in 199 pages including 23 pages of photographs. To use a term seldom used to describe works of nonfiction, this is a real page turner. That is not to say that this is a "light" work. The author spices his account with a lot of detail from diaries and letters. His research and documentation is first-rate. For those wanting more he includes @40 pages of appendices and an order of battle. This is Marvel's second work on Appomattox and he is very familiar with the material. His other book was "A Place Called Appomattox". Marvel does not hesitate to state his opinion and I found his insights fair and refreshing. I found myself laughing at some of his characterizations. For example, on page 87, he refers to George Custer as "the insufferably arrogant Custer." He spares neither Rebels nor Yankees where it is deserved. "Lee's Last Retreat" adds to the excellent reputation that Marvel earned with his book on Andersonville. Add this book to your library.

The author provides a detailed step by step reconstruction of the events leading up to the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. There are numerous citations of primary sources outlining the collapse of the Army of Northern Virginia on it's flight from the siege lines around Petersburg.

William Marvel is well known for books of Civil War history challenging conventional wisdom, such

as his very sympathetic biography of Ambrose Burnside. In "Lee's Last Retreat" Marvel's target is the hazy romanticism of the Lost Cause version of Appomattox wherein a band of peerless heroes gracefully surrender their arms only because they faced with a numberless horde of enemies led by the plodding, remorseless U.S. Grant. Marvel successfully demonstrates, in my opinion, that in fact Lee's army at the start of the affair was much larger than popularly supposed -- more than 70,000 men available to him -- and that Lee's army was plainly outmaneuvered and outmarched over the next week, its morale collapsing disastrously as thousands of soldiers deserted its ranks (Marvel includes an interesting discussion of how the records show that the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia were more likely to desert the closer to their own homes they were). Marvel also devotes substantial space to discussing why Lee fatally delayed for an entire day at Amelia Court House, permitting Grant to catch up to him; the usual claim that Lee was waiting for supplies is rejected in favor of an explanation that the failure to erect a needed pontoon bridge over the Appomattox River was the primary reason. And there is an interesting discussion of the final surrender ceremonies. Our traditional view has been largely shaped by the writings of two remarkable men -- Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and John B. Gordon, both fine warriors and both men unable to resist romanticizing and expanding their own roles in post-war writings; Marvel's version is that mutual salutes exchanged by the two sides never happened and that Gordon tried desperately in violation of the agreed conditions to avoid making a public surrender. I am certain that there are many who will disagree with some of Marvel's conclusions. Sometimes the old, romantic myths are difficult to shed. But if a reader is looking for a good, fast-paced narrative about the final campaign between Lee and Grant, then this book will fill the bill.

The author ignores the accounts of virtually all parties involved at the time to advance an agenda that denigrates the brave soldiers of both the North and the South in this last significant campaign of the war. I give this book low credibility.

Very detailed & complete description of the final 10 days in the East. Highly recommended !

Lee's Last Retreat is a detailed, professional, and exhaustive study. Conclusions replace the myth of the "Lost Cause" with statistical facts. Readers have a better understanding of Lee because he is treated objectively, fairly, and realistically. Pompous ego centered officers such as Gordon and Chamberlain suffer with the same objective analysis as that given Lee.

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