



The Lineage of an American Icon

Norman Dasinger, Jr., April 26, 2021
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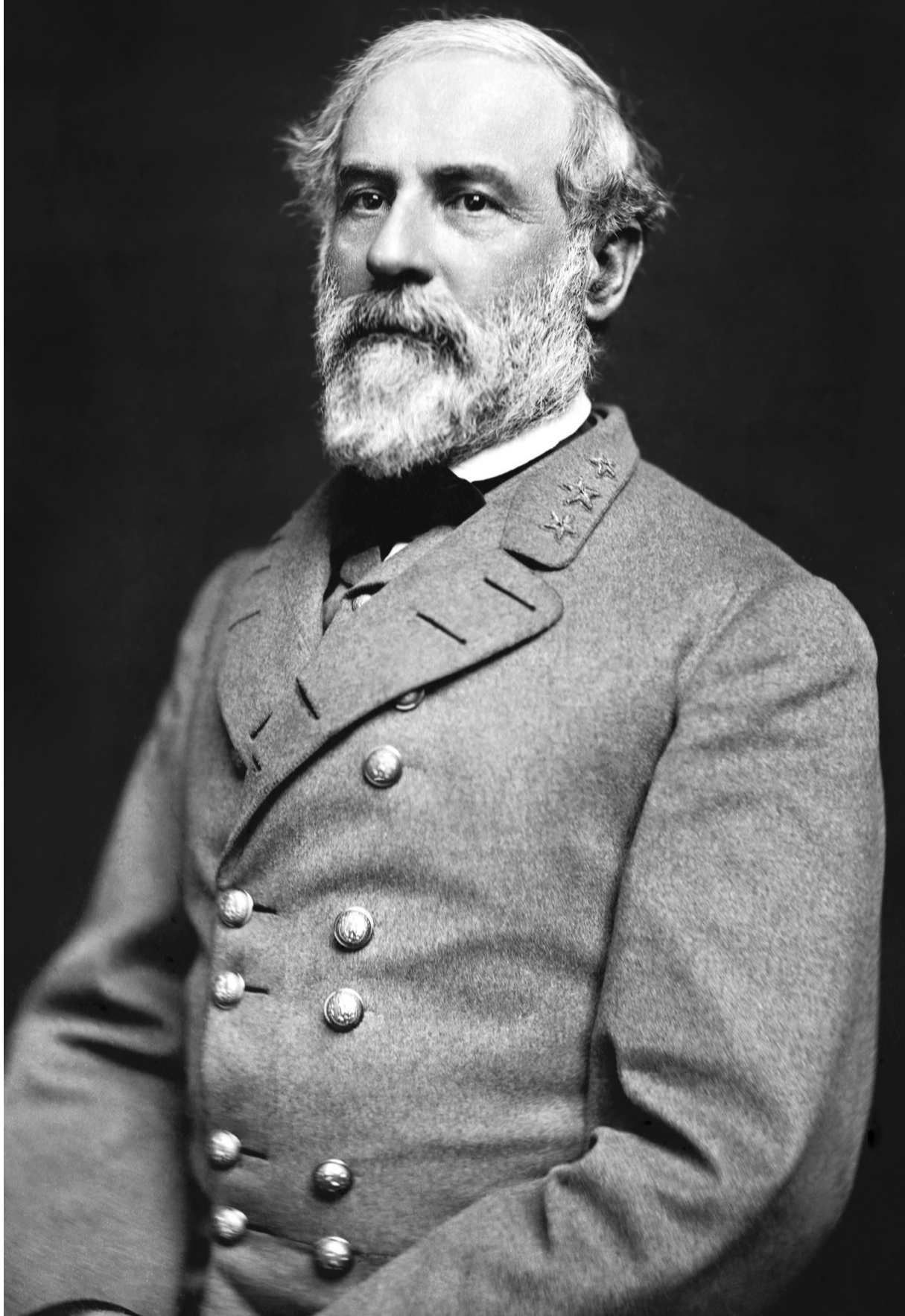
Helen Keller with her lifelong teacher, Anne Sullivan, in 1899, in a photograph taken by Alexander Graham Bell | Popular Science Monthly Vol. 63

Helen Keller was born a healthy child on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She has since become one of the most well-known figures in American history. Her life's story and her ability to convey that story to a national audience has become an inspiration to many people.

At the age of 19 months, Helen became deaf and blind as a result of an unknown illness, perhaps scarlet fever. Numerous movies and books about her ability to overcome her disability with the help of her devoted teacher have been a part of our American heritage for over 100 years. She comes from a long line of respected and accomplished people.

PARENTS

Helen's parents were Kate (Adams) and Arthur Keller. Her father was an officer in the Confederate army. He was born in 1836 and, at 19 years old, entered the law department at the University of Virginia. Two years later, he passed the Alabama Bar and began to practice law in his hometown of Tuscumbia. In November 1861, he joined the 27th Alabama Infantry, eventually serving on the staff of Confederate Gen. Sterling A. M. Wood. He finished the Civil War serving as paymaster for Confederate cavalry Gen. Philip Roddey. After the Civil War, he returned to law and then became editor of a newspaper. He died in 1896.



Robert E. Lee, a distant relative to Helen Keller | LOC

GREAT GRANDFATHER

Arthur's parents, in turn, were David and Mary (Moore) Keller. Mary's father was Alexander Moore, born in 1763 in King William County, Virginia. He was Helen Keller's paternal great grandfather. He had two sisters. One, Anne, married Charles Carter of Shirley Plantation, located along the James River in Virginia. Their daughter, Ann, was Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's mother. The other sister, Lucy, married John Robinson, Speaker of the House of Burgesses in Virginia and owner of the house named Scotchtown, later made famous by a subsequent owner: Patrick Henry.

GREAT-GREAT GRANDPARENTS

Alexander Moore's parents were Col. Bernard and Anne Catherine (Spotswood) Moore—Helen's great-great grandparents. Anne Catherine had two brothers and one sister. John married Mary Dandridge in 1745. She was a cousin to President George Washington's wife Martha. Robert was an officer serving with George Washington who was killed in 1758 near Fort Duquesne. Anne Catherine's only sister was Dorothea. She also married a cousin of Martha Washington, and the current movie actress Hillary Duff is descended from her.



Gov. Alexander Spotswood | public domain

GREAT-GREAT-GREAT GRANDFATHER

Anne Catherine was the daughter of Gov. Alexander Spotswood—Helen Keller's great-great-great grandfather, born in 1676 in Tangiers, Morocco. Alexander Spotswood joined the British army in 1693 and was commissioned a lieutenant colonel in 1703. He was appointed quartermaster general for the Duke of Marlborough's army and was wounded at the famous battle of Blenheim.

In 1710, Alexander Moore was appointed lieutenant governor of Virginia, but soon became governor, the first official to occupy the new governor's mansion in Williamsburg (a reconstruction of this building is part of today's Colonial Williamsburg Park). In 1718, he engaged a clandestine expedition to seek out the pirate Blackbeard. In 1721, he worked out a treaty with the Iroquois Indians in an attempt to end raids between conflicting tribes that endangered settlers in Virginia. The Iroquois agreed to stay north of the Potomac River and west of the Blue Ridge. When he retired to private life, he owned 80,000 acres and three iron furnaces that were located in the county which was later named for him: "Spotsylvania," or "Spots Woods." He died in 1724.

So, Helen Keller had a rich family heritage. Is it any wonder she overcame her disabilities to become the woman she was?



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