

DON'T MAKE MONTY MAD

Mike Bell



Gen. Montgomery Meigs, U.S.A.
Library of Congress, Prints &
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To this day, if you ambled into a Lee family reunion and extolled the virtues of General Grant, you might get a sideways look. But those gathered would quickly reflect on Grant's treatment of Lee both during the war and after, and likely let such a remark pass. I would not recommend however, should you ever be invited to such a gathering, that you raise a glass and toast the memory of Montgomery Meigs. You would likely find yourself flying out the front door courtesy of a couple of burly Lee cousins.

And they would be quite justified in doing so. It was Meigs, as quartermaster of the Union Army who saw to the Lee mansion at Arlington which had been being taken from the family, was turned into that most hallowed of all ground, Arlington National Cemetery. More importantly, it was Meigs who made sure that all Union troops were supplied during the war. Before the war started, it was Meigs who made sure the capitol we know today was finished. What a shame that hardly anybody knows his name!

Born in Georgia in 1816, Meigs came north with his family as a young child. Settling in Pennsylvania, Meigs later attended West Point and found himself serving as an engineer in the pre-war army. He even did a tour of duty serving as a subordinate to the dashing model of a West Point man himself, Robert E. Lee, outside of St. Louis. Lee was tasked with improving the navigation systems of the Mississippi and Meigs was part of the effort.

After years of service in the army, which included supervising the final work of the Capitol dome and other improvements, Meigs cast his lot with the Union when the war came. He damned all those who did not as traitors, especially Robert E. Lee! Meigs had proved himself an able administrator, and when Joseph Johnston resigned his post as quartermaster to don the confederate gray, Meigs was appointed to that post. For the next four years, he ran an efficient effort that kept the boys in blue supplied with everything they needed! For every success of a Grant, Sherman or Adelbert Ames, there was the organizational prowess of Montgomery C. Meigs.



City Point, Va. Federal supplies deposited on the landing. [Note water access, rail capability, and supply wagon transport.] Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, LC-DIG-cwpb-04346. (Cropped for presentation.)

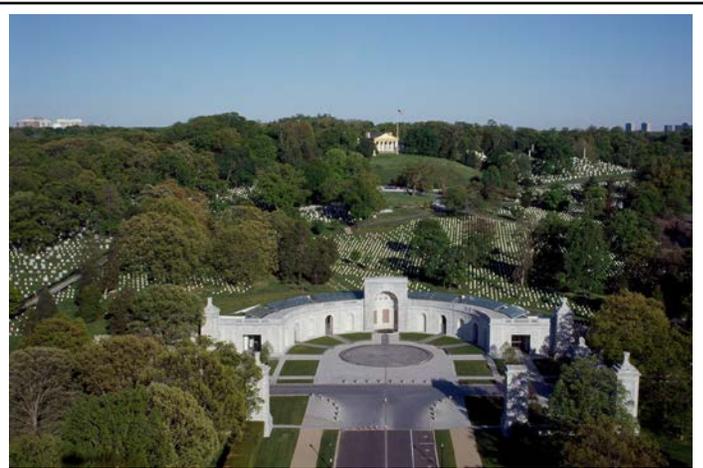


Rows of tombstones at Arlington Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia [ca. 1865]. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-DIG-ppmsca-49715. (Cropped for presentation.)

As the war in the east drove the body count ever higher, Meigs saw a need to bury these honored dead in a fitting locale. The fields in front of Arlington House were perfect! And what a way to remind old “Bobby” Lee of the cost of betraying his country! The first burial was a Private Christman in May of 1864. New burials soon followed. He (Meigs) even buried the dead in what was once Mary Lee’s private garden. The first was a Maine man—Captain Albert Packard of the 31st Maine Infantry.

Some years after the war, the Lee family once again had title to Arlington. But they could not very well enjoy a home with war dead buried in their lawn, especially in the garden, so they sold it back to the government.

Today, over 400,000 rest peacefully at the cemetery. In Section One, just a few feet from Mary Lee’s rose garden, lies the man himself, Major General Montgomery Meigs. Fitting when you think about it.



Aerial view of Arlington Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia. [Note former Lee family estate, Arlington House, on the hill at the skyline.] Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Carol M. Highsmith, reproduction number LC-DIG-highsm-14700.