

## **Two Separate and Unequal Virginia Holidays**

The Lee/Jackson Holiday on Friday and the King Holiday on Monday are separated by more than a weekend. They are separated by a gulf of understanding and an ocean of celebration. The disparity is a disservice to the future of our Commonwealth of Virginia. Your elected officials, government offices, libraries and schools celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and ignore the birthdays of Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson. Check it out this Friday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

The geniuses in Gloucester figured out how to schedule both holidays for their schools. The school boards in York and Poquoson can fit only some of the state holidays on the calendar. They never include Lee/Jackson. And they never will as long as voters are mutes. Public officials justify unequal Virginia holidays with a range of reasons. Regardless of the good or ill-intent of these excuses, we culturally cleanse our history, lose worthy symbols, and abandon key virtues as Virginians when we ignore Lee/Jackson.

Every holiday, except CHRISTmas which is a religious holy day, is a state symbol worth celebrating. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday clearly fits that call for Virginia. His moral vision of a color blind society, motivated by his Christianity, is the morally superior and ascendant world view. His courage in providing leadership to end the sin of segregation was powerful. All Virginians should stop their daily affairs and remember the Dream, take stock of their hearts, look at our laws, and try to live up to him as a symbol.

The holiday for Lee and Jackson is symbolic of the best from the most significant - and awful, tragic, divisive - event in 400 years of Virginia history. Yet, some can not separate the good from the bad of those times to see true heroes as symbols. Pity those who can't understand that Lee and Jackson stand for courage, honor and integrity for all Virginians.

The significance of the war, what the newspapers referred to as 'the late unpleasantness', that separated West Virginia from the Mother State, is that it demanded and garnered more courage, more sacrifice, more suffering, more perseverance of more Virginians than any other event in our history. Almost half the names on the new York battle monument are for lives lost for Virginia between 1861-1865. One war had over 2000 combats in Virginia. Our greatest generation - our most tested generation - were these people - both races, both armies - all Virginians.

Generations followed their example, so you get the perseverance of Booker T. Washington building a college with bare hands, the courage of the boys of Bedford on D-Day, and the integrity of Virginians of all walks and stations who will not lie, cheat, or steal lest they lose their honor. Future Virginians should follow their personal morality.

Lee and Jackson are honored world-wide as Great Captains in military history. And their glory belongs to non-native born Virginians - then and now. They led new immigrants from Northern states and foreign lands in the Army of Northern Virginia. Consider a soldier who grew up in Gettysburg, PA, moved to Virginia as a young adult, and only few years later died on his own family farm as a brave Virginian in Pickett's Charge.

Likewise, today we are so fortunate to have the best 'move-ins' from other countries and states. Our ex-military citizens, Virginians by choice, especially bring their

devoted faith, patriotism, and political conservatism to their new home. We share values. This is precisely why all Virginians should stop their daily affairs on Lee/Jackson day and consider our symbols of courage, honor and integrity. If future Virginians live up to their example, this will be a better Commonwealth.

If there is an America and a Virginia 400 years from now, then King, Lee and Jackson will still be worth honoring as heroes for equal holidays. We should do so now.

James Atticus Bowden