Lee's Retreat

In April 1865, in an unpublicized Grant tightened his grip on the Army of Northern Virginia in Richmond and Petersburg. Lee planned the evacuation of his troops. He determined to march to North Carolina, consolidate his army with Gen. Joseph Johnston's, defeat Gen. William T. Sherman's army, and then turn on Grant. When the Federals broke through his lines on April 2, Lee put his plan in motion. The wings of his army were to maneuver at Amelia Court House, reconnoir, and march to Danville along the Richmond and Danville Railroad. Little was planned. High water made crossing the Appomattox River difficult, delaying the rendezvous, and the anticipated supplies were not at Amelia Court House. Lee also lost his head over the pursuing Grant while he waited, allowing Federal cavalry to intercede his path down the track at Jetersville. Deciding not to give battle, Lee turned west and began a series of three consecutive marches to the rear while preventing him from turning south, getting the cavalry in front of him, and then surrounded and drove them to retreat—began to take effect. Fighting by day and marching by night, Lee's advanced and hung up brigades towards Fairfax, their next supply station. The columns stretched for miles, slowed by a tremendous baggage train. At almost every watercourse, the men and horses bogged down and Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's Union cavalry pressed into Lee's rear guard. On April 4, the Federals brought Lee to bay at Little Sudley, where in three separate engagements a quarter of the Confederate force was killed or captured. Lee, absorbing the magnitude of the disaster, remarked, "My God, has the army been dissolved?"

The serried ranks of the blue-coated soldiers moved northward up the Appomattox, as the scene of intense combat earlier in the day, and made their way to Fairfax. The next day, as they distributed rations from the trains at the depot, the gardens of Federal cavalry were found from the rear. Lee also learned that Union infantrymen had successfully crossed the Appomattox River on a single trestle bridge below High Bridge and were threatening his line of march. He sent his troops across the river to dig in around Cumberland Church and feed off Union provisions.

Beginning what would be their last night-march on April 4, Lee's men headed for the next destination, Appomattox Station on the South Side Railroad, where supplies were expected. But the Federals were in front, so Lee decided to turn again, and the Confederates moved north. The Union cavalry captured the station and the supplies and positioned itself between Lee and his next objectives. With Federal infantry closing in behind him, Lee ordered a breakout attempt for dawn the next morning. April 5, Gen. Lee held the attack with a combined force of infantry and cavalry and fought his men to "a frazzle." The cavalrymen cut through three Federal counterparts and escaped, but then large numbers of Union infantry arrived in support. Gordon reported to Lee that it was no use. Flags of truce broke out. The shooting died away, and that afternoon, in the little village of Appomattox Court House, the war in Virginia came to an end.

Lee and Grant met in the village residence of Wilcox McClure— who had prepared there to escape the war after the First Battle of Bull Run—shook hands across the Northern Virginia home— to sign the armistice documents. The surrender of Lee's army formally closed their campaigns and flags over the last few days. On April 12, it was the infantry's turn. AtGen. Joseph E. Johnston's headquarters in Appomattox, the Army of Northern Virginia was permitted to surrender. Lee's Grant, ending the war in Virginia and removing the largest Confederate army from the field. Other surrenders followed, the next day May 5, in North Carolina. Gen. Joseph E. Johnston and the last, at Fort Monroe, when Gen. Grant capitulated the Indian Territory.