

Thanks and Admiration During the Civil War's Darkest Days

Even in the worst days of the Civil War, R. E. Lee and his artillery commander, W. N. Pendleton, allowed no shortcuts when it came to etiquette, good manners and religion — as this exchange of letters shows.

IN OCTOBER 1864, Confederate troops were under siege in what became known as the siege of Petersburg, and Robert E. Lee was at Chaffin's Farm, about eight miles south of Richmond, where Union troops had just won a key battle. On the evening of October 17, a Monday, Lee was visited by his chief of artillery, one William Nelson Pendleton, who was not only a military officer but also an Episcopal minister who, eight years before the war began, had become rector of the church in an obscure little village in Virginia called Lexington.

As a soldier, Pendleton never earned Lee's confidence. (Lee recommended against a proposal to assign Pendleton command of the Army of Tennessee in 1864.) But they were comrades to one another, and after the war, when Pendleton had returned to his parish, he played a role in persuading Lee to accept the offer from destitute Washington College to become its president. That

he did, and Lee, an Episcopalian, became a member of Pendleton's Grace Episcopal congregation. Lee's last public activity was leading a church vestry meeting on September 28, 1870. He died two weeks later of the effects of a stroke, and on the morning of October 15, 1870, Pendleton officiated at Lee's funeral.

In that earlier October, in 1864, on the 17th, a Monday, in the midst of that unimaginable mayhem, Lee's artillery chief paid him a visit and the two had dinner. At the sat down, apparently no grace was said. Two days later Pendleton wrote to Lee apologizing, sort of, for the oversight, and Lee replied, accepting his share of the blame, sort of.

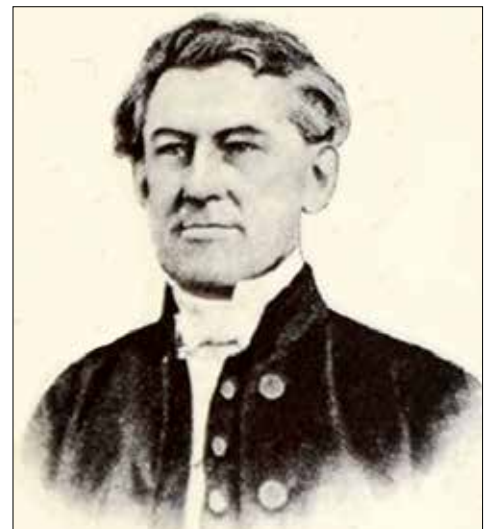
The letters are in the Washington and Lee University Library's Special Collections.

PENDLETON TO LEE, OCTOBER 19, 1864

My dear General

I have been so disturbed by an omission which occurred when I had the privilege of dining with you day before yesterday that I feel bound to write a brief note of apology if it were, as is not unlikely, a

misunderstanding of my own. It was the failure on my part to ask a blessing at the table. I expected to do so, and awaited your request to that effect, but did not notice one by sign or word. I may, however, have overlooked such intimation from you. Or you may have taken for granted that without it I would say grace. Or you may have for the time forgotten my sacred office under the military relations in which we commonly meet; in such case, however, you would, I suppose, have officiated yourself. At any rate, there was, I infer, some misunderstanding. And although not one of the more important matters of life I would not have it pass on my own part unexplained.



William Nelson Pendleton

117, Ave. City, Calif.
Oct 19th 1864

My Dear General

I have been so distracted by an affair which occurred when I had the privilege of dining with you day before yesterday that I feel bound to write a brief note of apology, if it were, as is absolutely, a mis-understanding of my own. It was the failure on my part to ask a blessing at the table. I expected to do so, and awaited your request to that effect, but did not notice one by lips or word. I may however, have overlooked such intimation from you. Or you may have taken for granted I would wait out of day grace. Or you may have for the time forgotten my sacred office under the military relations in which we commonly meet; in such case, however, you would I suppose have officiated yourself. At any rate, there was, I think, some misunderstanding. And although not one of the more important matters of life I would not have it pass on my own part unexplained.

Let me also for once so far lay aside the restraint of military etiquette as to assure you of the sincere personal friendship which I feel for yourself & of the fervent prayer with which I more than daily commend you to God's gracious guidance & blessing.

Believe me most truly
Yr friend
W. M. Pendleton

Genl R. E. Lee }
Commandg Ar. M. A. }
Believe me most truly
Yr friend
W. M. Pendleton

Pendelton to Lee

Let me also for once so far lay aside the restraint of military etiquette as to assure you of the sincere personal friendship which I feel for yourself & of the fervent prayer which I more than daily commend you to God's gracious guidance & blessing.

Believe me most truly

Yr friend

W. M. Pendleton

Chaffins 91 Oct 1864

My dear Genl

I have rec^d your note of the 19th. I had expected you to ask a blessing on our table, & turned to you with that need. It was my fault I think in not making a more pointed request, which I should have done. Finding you apparently preparing to take your seat, I failed to request your office, and as is very frequently the case with me at our informal

I reciprocate in the fullest manner your feelings of friendship which has always been to me a source of pleasure & am deeply obliged to you for your fervent pious prayers in my behalf. No one stands in greater need of them. My feeble petitions I dare hardly hope will be answered.

Very truly yours
R. E. Lee

Genl R. E. Pendleton

Lee to Pendelton

LEE'S REPLY TO PENDELTON, OCTOBER 21, 1864

My dear Gen'l

I have received your note of the 19th. I had expected you to ask a blessing on our table, and turned to you with that need. It was my fault I think in not making a more pointed request, which I should have done. Finding you apparently preparing to take your seat, I failed to request your office, and as is very frequently the case with me at our informal

camp meals, offered a silent petition of thanks.

I reciprocate in the fullest manner your feelings of friendship which has always been to me a source of pleasure and am deeply obliged to you for your fervent pious prayers in my behalf. No one stands in greater need of them. My feeble petitions I dare hardly hope will be answered.

Very truly yours,

R. E. Lee