

PRESENTATION AT MENOKIN

October 15, 2009

By Suzanne Semsch, author of *The Lees of Menokin*

I'm thrilled and delighted to have this opportunity to be here on this special day to introduce my completed and published novel to you. Of course it's special to me but it is also special because it is the occasion of Francis Lee's 275th birthday, which was yesterday, October 14th.

I'm grateful to Helen Murphy, the Menokin Foundation president, Sarah Pope, executive director; and Beth Reavis, assistant director, for their help and encouragement. They've been so helpful and gracious as I went through the complicated stages of getting *The Lees of Menokin* from manuscript to printed book during the past four months,. Thank you, Helen, Sarah, and Beth.

Looking around the plantation today, it's clear that the efforts of Martin King and so many others have accomplished phenomenal things through the formation of this foundation. It scarcely seems possible to have come this far in less than 15 years. I congratulate all of you who have been a part of it. Your cause is noble and I wish you continued success.

When I began my research in the mid 1970s and during the time I was writing the novel in the months following, as most of you know, Menokin was in a crumbling state of decay, long abandoned and left to nature's fate. It was surely a sad and lonely place when I used to venture onto these grounds, as I sought to connect with Francis Lee and Becky Tayloe. And I was seeking anything I could find!

In the beginning it was Menokin itself that captured my interest and fired my imagination, yet when I began to learn about its occupants, they both quickly captured my heart. As I walked the terraced hillside struggling through the tangled mass of weeds and rubble and peered into the silent empty rooms, I wanted to know everything about this place—who built it, who lived here, who found solace within its walls.

Soon I was trying to put all the pieces together to learn what brought Francis Lightfoot Lee from Stratford on the Potomac to Menokin above the Rappahannock. I had no idea I would spend over two years researching, compiling notes, making files, collecting books, pamphlets, and copies of hundreds of 18th century letters! It was well before the internet and, believe me, it was an enormous task. But it was so exciting, and there were new discoveries every day—I loved writing this book! And this year I loved rewriting it! Are you beginning to understand that I was truly hooked from the beginning?

More than a year into my research I began thinking “book” and “novel” instead of “article” or “story,” and my excitement began to build. I needed a title and decided to call it *The Menokin Story*. But, this year, as I sorted through the faded, dog-eared copy that had sat in a box for 30 years, I struggled with that title. Anyone not familiar with the Northern Neck would have no idea what Menokin was! Then, I thought of *The Lees of Menokin*—that said a lot more, and anyone who knows any history of early America knows the Lee name, even if it usually brings to mind Robert E.

But I still wanted my title to be more informative and, one day it came to me to add a subtitle. After some concentration, I thought “an early American Love Story” would hit the target in more ways than one. For me, it has a double meaning—of course the personal love story of Francis and Becky—but I see it also as a story about a different kind of love—the love of a few determined men for the freedom to govern themselves—men who were willing risk their very lives to achieve that goal. So, that’s why I decided “an early American love story” conveys a dual purpose—a personal love story as well as a love of freedom.

I can say, quite honestly, I quickly fell in love with Francis and his Becky and became enthralled with their very tender and enduring relationship. On a lovely spring day in Williamsburg, the 33-year-old bachelor who becomes reacquainted with the 16-year-old girl he had bounced on his knee 10 or 12 years before, falls head-over-heels in love. He marries her the following year—her father gives them 1,000 acres and builds a house for them. It’s a plot that sets the stage for a story, doesn’t it?

But how do you write a book about real people who have been dead for 200 years? It sounds a little unbelievable I know, but by wandering around these acres, Becky and Francis came alive for me. Those who were part of their lives—the Tayloes, the Carters, the Lee family, the slaves, the other members of the congress—they all began to walk and talk and create situations and take actions in my head. They woke me in the middle of the night, and they interrupted my daytime activities to send me flying for a pencil.

I’ve included fictitious characters and situations for the purpose of story telling—to breathe life into the bare bones of the personalities of Francis and Becky Lee and also in order to portray typical period backgrounds amidst a variety of actual events.

Although he was called Loudoun by his family, and Frank by most, he’s always seemed like Francis to me, so that’s what I have called him and what Becky calls him in my novel. If I ever thought to doubt Becky’s absolute devotion to Francis, all I had to do was to remind myself of the fact that she not only chose to accompany him on the dangerous journey to Philadelphia

when he was elected to the Continental Congress in late 1775, but she also remained there with him for four long years.

During this time, fear of the British army drove them and the other members of the congress from Philadelphia to Baltimore, back to Philadelphia, then briefly to Lancaster, and then on to York, PA, before they were able to return once again to Philadelphia after the British retreat. And she was one of few of the southern wives who left the safety of home and family to share these hardships with her congressman husband. Some went for a few weeks or months, but I don't think any of them stayed, as did Becky.

I found the extremely close relationship between Francis and his brother Richard Henry fascinating. It provided me much opportunity for story-telling. I believe this alliance was based not only on kinship, but on their two completely different personalities. Richard, was by far the most aggressive, the most suited to the political arena. He held tremendous influence over the quiet, less opinionated Francis, and encouraged and pushed him time after time in every aspect of their patriotic cause. I came to imagine that perhaps Becky might have had a few thoughts of her own about this complex and demanding bond between her husband and her brother-in-law. I suspect she had justifiable concerns from time to time, and these concerns are woven into my story.

Although Francis was never an eloquent orator as was Richard, his quiet resolve and ability to negotiate stood him in good stead in the congress, and he frequently set things up and paved the way for his brother's bold and shrewd strategies.

However, I want to be clear that Francis Lee was certainly not a faint-hearted nor a timid man. During the cold, hard winter of 1777, he had an opportunity to prove that point. Congress, fearing the British army, was temporarily convened in York Town, PA. The Pennsylvania legislature, also fearing an enemy invasion of their city, had urged Washington for their own protection, to remain close to Philadelphia, and the army was therefore encamped at Valley Forge nearby. In York, many of the congressmen were absent on leave, possibly due to the retched conditions in that city and the fact that it was the Christmas season. And at Valley Forge, Gen. Washington was desperate, sending dispatches daily, requesting money, arms, and especially food. His troops were deserting, starving, and dying by the hundreds. He must have felt they were in danger of extinction.

Although the articles of confederation had been approved by the congress the previous month, they had yet to be signed by all the states. Therefore, there was no central government—the president of congress was not president of the whole. And the congress had no idea how to

respond to Washington's urgent request. So what did they do? They appointed a committee to "look into it" and report back.

As the only member of the War Board on site at the time, Francis was appointed chairman of said special committee. He agonized over it, knowing the situation was urgent, immediate, and that he couldn't wait. Finally, he bypassed the idea of investigating and "reporting back" and took matters into his own hands. He wrote letters to the governors of both Pennsylvania and Maryland, informing them in the name of the War Board, that as they were the states closest to hand, that soon officers with foraging parties would be coming into their countryside "to collect such cattle, hogs, flour and grain as the Army shall need. The crisis" he wrote "is too alarming to admit of the business being postponed on any consideration."

He knew he had no authority to do this and would likely be censured, yet he proceeded. I like to think his actions directly influenced the survival of Washington's army that horrible winter at Valley Forge.

Another time when his understanding of what was needed, and his gift of gentle persuasion came to the fore, was in 1787 when, as a private citizen, no longer an elected member of congress or the Virginia legislature, he exerted his influence over brother Richard Henry and other Virginians, convincing them to ratify the Constitution. This despite their fears that it was unfair to southern interests.

The Lees had long been a powerful family in Virginia, but during the Revolution they became even more powerful—and powerful men develop enemies. By 1778, both Richard and Francis had been reelected to the Congress several times; their brother Thomas was back in the Virginia Legislature, elected from Stafford County; brother William was serving as Commercial Agent to Berlin and Vienna; brother Arthur was one of the three Commissioners appointed by Congress to negotiate with France and Spain; and, to top it off, their brother-in-law, William Shippen, husband of sister Alice, was named Director General of the Hospitals—five brothers and a brother-in-law in key government position—now that's power!

Of course, Richard Henry was the voice behind much of the action that brought about these appointments, and before long resentment against Richard turned into attacks on his character. Criticism against his handling of his tenant rents at home caused him to lose the next election. Though he managed to get himself reinstated, by appearing in person before the Virginia House, disgruntlement and animosity against what was perceived as his arrogance, continued to boil just below the surface.

Francis struggled to remain above the fray during all this. Day after day, he supported Richard in every way he could. Yet he suffered greatly by the ill will shown his brother. And

Becky, aware of his anguish, suffered with him. When Arthur's bitter disagreements with Silas Deane, one of his co-commissioners in Europe hit the public arena, it all became too much for the modest and unobtrusive Francis—defeated by public opinion and the character assassination of his brothers, he resigned from Congress and he and Becky returned here, to Menokin.

Although he served a brief term as a state senator a year later, he was disgusted and dismayed by the dirty game of politics and chose to end his public career and spend his days tending his fields, planting his terraces, and improving his orchards. Menokin became a refuge—his consolation and his solace.

As you would expect, there's a lot of history in this book, but I've tried to tell it through the words and actions of the characters, as I've said, some real and some fictitious. The story and the people in it became so real to me, so much a part of my life in fact, that I even had a ghost-like experience 30-some years ago on one of my many visits to Menokin. Suffice it to say, that from then on I was convinced, and continue to believe that Francis Lee gave his approval to me that day to write his story! Sarah Pope told me that someone else who was here working on an archaeological project was alone on the site one day and thought she heard voices! So I'm not the only one!

In closing, thank you again for coming. A phrase taken from Ecclesiastes came to mind the other day: For everything there is a time and there is a place. By way of explanation, although I researched and wrote the story of Francis and Becky over 30 years ago, were it not for the existence of the Menokin Foundation today, I probably would not have published this book. So there you have it—now is the time, and this is definitely the place! Thank you for sharing it with me.