

Excerpted from introduction to “Francis Lightfoot Lee: Forgotten Revolutionary” by Sarah L. Jones, Yale University (Class of 2006), 2004.

Introduction to Francis Lightfoot Lee

*Thou sweetest of all the Lee race
That ever adorned our shore,
O with us do fix thine abode
And leave Philadelphia no more.*

*Thy temper's as soft as the dove's
When she warbles aloft the air,
And thy converse enchantingly sweet,
When engaged in discourse with the fair.*

*But when learning engrosses thy thought
Then thy genious shines brighter and best,
And shows that thou shurely wilt be
An adornment to all in the West.*

*O that thou mayest chuse but to live
Where I thy sweet friendship may prove,
I will smooth the remains of my life
Until I shall meet thee above.*

*And there if our happy lot's cast
In those blessed regions to stay,
No gloomy dark night shall we know
But one clear and bright, perfect day.*

Sonnet addressed to Francis Lightfoot Lee, written by Ann Hume Shippen Livingston, his niece. c.1781.¹

“This man's life-work was so inconspicuous, that his name would now be wholly forgotten, but for one thing- he signed the Declaration of Independence. Yet his life was a most useful and worthy one. It was a good and profitable voyage, though it left no phosphorescent splendors in its wake.” –Mark Twain on Francis Lightfoot Lee, 1877²

¹ Ann Hume Shippen Livingston, “Sonnet” in Shippen Family Papers, Jessie Ball DuPont Library, Stratford Hall, VA, c. 1781.

² Mark Twain in The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 1, no. 3 (1877). Reprinted in Charles Neider, ed., Mark Twain: Life as I Find It (New York, 1961).

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Francis Lightfoot Lee is what one might call a “forgotten revolutionary.” Described by his niece as the “sweetest of all the Lee race” and as possessing a temper “as soft as the dove’s,” Lee was far from being the inconspicuous man that Twain claimed he was. Lee, his memory now nearly hidden beneath the rubble of his Virginia mansion, had a life that was “most useful and worthy,” the life of a patriot of the American Revolution. Over one hundred years after Twain wrote his sketch of Francis Lightfoot Lee, Lee has nearly become “wholly forgotten,” and, as Twain was correct to note, Lee is solely remembered for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. Yet Lee has not been granted his proper place in history, for his involvement with the founding of the country lays not only in his signature on a document, but with thirty years of an active political life, a life in which he opposed British measures, sought independence, and served the nation through a number of committees as a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, the Second Continental Congress, and the Virginia State Senate. Lee was certainly not an “inconspicuous” man, nor was he merely “soft as a dove.” Rather, Lee was a true patriot, not only according to standards held by his contemporaries, but also to his own.

Francis Lightfoot Lee was born in 1734 to Thomas and Hannah Ludwell Lee in Westmoreland County on the Northern Neck of Virginia. Lee was reared at Stratford Hall Plantation, and like most male children of the Virginia planter class, he was educated by a private tutor at Stratford Hall and was well read in Classical literature,

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history and law.³ In 1758, he took his seat as representative of Loudoun County to the Virginia House of Burgesses, having moved there to maintain his lands inherited from his father. During his time as a Burgess, Lee remained attentive to the political scene of not only Virginia, but also of the colonies. He became an opponent to taxation without representation and other British offenses, which he protested not only through personal letters, but also in signing his support to important documents, including the Westmoreland Resolves of 1766. As a member of a committee appointed to protest British policies toward the colonies in 1768, Lee maintained an active role in opposition to the British. In 1769, Lee was married to Rebecca Tayloe, daughter of planter John Tayloe II, and moved to Richmond County to the Menokin Plantation.⁴ Having settled at Menokin, Lee was elected representative of Richmond County to the House of Burgesses.

Lee continued to serve as a Burgess from Richmond County until elected as a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress in August 1775. Lee fully supported American Independence throughout most of his political career, signing the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Lee remained a member of Congress until 1779, serving on a variety of committees including the Board of War, Committee of Secret Correspondence, and other ad-hoc committees. In 1779, Francis Lightfoot Lee retired from the Second Continental Congress due to the three-year limit that had since been imposed by the Revolutionary Government. In 1780, Lee again entered Virginia

³ Paul C. Nagel, The Lees of Virginia: Seven Generations of an American Family (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 49.

⁴ Camille Wells, Notes on the Chronology of the Revolution, in Menokin Foundation holdings, c. 1996, 19.

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politics, having been elected to serve as a member of the Virginia Senate, until 1782 when he retired from politics. He did, however, remain interested in the political scene, and is purported to have supported the ratification of the Constitution. In a letter to James Madison, George Washington wrote:

Francis L. Lee on whose judgement the family place much reliance, is decidedly [sic] in favor of the new form [the Constitution] under a conviction that it is the best that can be obtained, and because it promises energy, stability, and tht [sic] security which is, or ought to be, the wish of every good citizen of the Union.⁵

Lee remained at his home, Menokin, until both he and his wife passed away in January 1797 due to illness.

⁵ Wells, 19.