Episode 9 ,2005: Lee Family Doll Brookeville, Maryland

Tukufu: our next story explores the disputed legacy of one of the nation's most famous generals. It's 1861, the eve of the American Civil War. On April 20th, U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Lee makes a fateful decision. He resigns his commission to take command of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Lee's supporters see the decision as one of principle, to defend his home state of Virginia. But for 4 million African American slaves, his quitting the union means that Lee will spend the next four years defending the indefensible: the slave-holding south. 145 years later, a woman in Brookeville, Maryland, owns an object that may shed light on Lee's relationship with his slaves and on the personal character of this American icon. Thirty-four years ago, retired school principal Dr. Betty Berger bought this 19th-century doll.

Dr. Betty Berger: I started collecting dolls when I was a little girl. I purchased her in 1971, and I see this little paper attached to her, and it said that it was a doll that belonged to the Robert E. Lee children, and it was then given to a servant.

Tukufu: Is it possible this doll was once given by the Lee family to their former slaves? I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I've come to Brookeville to investigate.

Graham Sweeney: Professor Zuberi.

Tukufu: Hi, how are you doing? My co-investigator on this case is Betty's grandson Graham. He takes me inside to meet his grandmother.

Betty: Here's the lady in question.

Tukufu: I see.

Betty: Have a seat.

Tukufu: Wow, that's a pretty big doll.

Betty: She's 26 inches.

Tukufu: Really?

Betty: Mm-hmm.

Tukufu: Now, what can Graham and I find out about this for you?

Betty: This little paper was attached to her, and I'd like you to find out if that is true or not.

Tukufu: Okay. "This doll was bought from one of the old servants of the Robert E. Lee family and was the plaything of the Lee children." If this is true, this is a historically significant doll. Do you know much about the previous owners of the doll?

Betty: Well, the lady from whom I bought it was in my doll club. She has since died. And where she bought it from, going back, I'm not quite sure. I'm hoping you can find out something.

Tukufu: Okay, well, that gives us quite a bit to go on in our investigation. Do you mind if we take the doll with us?

Betty: Not at all, as long as you're careful.

Graham: We'll take very good care of her, Grandma. I promise.

Betty: Good.

Tukufu: Robert E. Lee is still the subject of fiery debate. While some hold him up as a symbol of honor and integrity, he took up arms against the United States to defend the slave-holding South. What kind of man was Lee? Our note says the doll was a gift to a former servant. The vast majority of Lee's servants were African-American slaves. Yet, if this doll was a gift of the Lee family to a former slave, it raises profound questions about Lee's relationship with the enslaved men and women who once worked his property.

Graham: Tukufu and I first head to Arlington, Virginia, and the former home of Robert E. Lee. I wonder, is this really possible? I mean, that a servant had a doll of the Lee family?

Tukufu: Well, I don't know if it's possible or not. The old servant could have been a slave, or it could have been a doll that they had in the post-slave period. And so we need to find out more about the Lee family and more about the doll.

Graham: Arlington House overlooks downtown Washington, D.C., and stands at the center of Arlington National Cemetery.

Tukufu: The mansion throws the realities of slavery into sharp relief. Built by slaves, the home is palatial, a classic southern plantation. It was the childhood home of Robert's wife, Mary Custis Lee, the great granddaughter of Martha Washington, George Washington's wife. In 1857, when Mary and Robert inherited the estate, some 200 slaves still worked the fields. Touring the house, we see the second-story bedroom where Lee made the decision to abandon the union. The decision proved costly. The union army forced Lee's family to flee, leaving behind family treasures and their slaves. Graham and I entered the slave quarters, where housekeeper Selina Gray lived with her husband and eight children.

Graham: Wow. I mean, what do you think about all this?

Tukufu: Well, my — my feelings are kind of mixed. I mean, they're kind of contradictory. Even though these people had this roof to live under, they were still enslaved, and so, when I think of my own ancestors experiencing something like this, it kind of pains me to then look at this today and only celebrate the beauty that I see. The slaves were stripped of basic human liberty and dignity and lived at Lee's mercy. What kind of relationship did the general really have with these people? Would Lee's family have given a doll to their former slaves?

Graham: To find out more about the Lees and the doll, I take Tukufu to my local library.

Tukufu: So you go check the Internet, I'll check the stacks. Graham discovers that in cyberspace, it seems the Civil War never ended. One Web site actually calls Lee an emancipationist, arguing that he opposed slavery. Another equates him morally with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Graham wonders if the story of a doll passing from the Lees to a former servant may support this more humanitarian image of Lee.

Graham: I found a lot of stuff on the Internet.

Tukufu: Really?

Graham: Yeah. Most of the things portray Lee to be a hero, and some even said that he was against slavery and freed his slaves.

Tukufu: Why don't you read me some of what you got?

Graham: Well, this one's an excerpt from a letter that Lee wrote. "There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil."

Tukufu: And that's a much-quoted passage there, and it's often taken out of context. If you would have continued reading, this is what you would have also read. "The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially, and physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing is necessary for their instruction as a race and I hope will prepare and lead them to better things." So his general attitude is not opposed to slavery. Lee's legacy is clearly the subject of debate in the south and the Petri dish of the Internet, but it doesn't answer our question about Betty's doll.

Graham: So where are we going?

Tukufu: I've contacted the leading expert on dolls in the United States, and we're going to talk to him about your grandma's doll.

Graham: Tukufu and I have come to Birchrunville, Pennsylvania, to show the doll to dealer and appraiser Richard Wright.

Tukufu: So this is the doll we're investigating.

Richard Wright: Okay, it's a Greiner doll.

Tukufu: A Greiner doll?

Richard: It was made in Philadelphia by Ludwig Greiner.

Tukufu: I'm from Philadelphia.

Richard: Well, not when this doll was made. It's a very good example of a mid-19th-century toy.

Tukufu: what kind of person owned a doll like this?

Richard: Uh, middle-class America. The doll cost about a dollar for the head and the body was extra. It was not a doll that sat on a shelf. It was a doll that a kid played with.

Tukufu: Really? Now, what is it made of?

Richard: Okay, the head's papier-mâché, the body's cloth.

Tukufu: Exactly when was this doll made?

Richard: Well, Greiner is the first doll to be patented in America.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Richard: And the patent date was 1858.

Tukufu: 1858, so pre-Civil-War period.

Graham: That's good. That checks out with our story.

Richard: First, let's just check the back of the doll's head because let's check the patent date.

Graham: Okay.

Richard: Here we go. Put her down here, careful of her nose, pull this back, and what do we see here? Greiner doll heads patented March 30, 1858.

Graham: "Ext 72." what's that mean?

Richard: Means it was extended in 1872.

Tukufu: Okay, the patent for this particular doll was 1872.

Richard: 72

Tukufu: So you're telling us this doll was made after 1872.

Richard: Right, up to 1882.

Tukufu: Okay, so that has important implications for our investigation.

Graham: The date is a problem. By 1872, the Lee children were already in their 20s, a little old to be playing with dolls. That part of the note is clearly wrong.

Tukufu: Back at the library, we continue to search doll-collecting books and magazines for any mention of a Lee family doll. At first, we find nothing. But then...

Graham: Hey, look what I found.

Tukufu: What did you find?

Graham: It's an article from the 1941 December issue of *Doll Talk* magazine. Here, listen.

Tukufu: Okay.

Graham: "My Greiner doll is a thoroughbred, having belonged to no less a person than the great-grandchild of Martha Washington. She is Mary Lee, after the wife and eldest daughter of the famous general, Robert E. Lee."

Tukufu: If this is Betty's doll they're writing about, maybe it did belong to the Lee family. I guess the question is, is this your grandmother's doll? The letter was signed Clara Hallard Fawcett. Searching the Internet, we

find that Fawcett was an author of doll-collecting books. We locate a rare copy of one of her self-published books at a Maryland bookstore. So what do we have here?

Graham: Well, let's see.

Tukufu: Hey, slow down a little bit.

Graham: Hey, there's our doll.

Tukufu: Sure enough, we find a Greiner doll in the book, and comparing the hair, face, even the dress beneath the shawl, it matches Betty's doll exactly. And what kind of information do we have?

Graham: Well, let's see. There's a poem about it. "Liza Lee tell me the story of your life at the Lee mansion. Did the famous General Robert buy you for his little daughter, years before the Civil War days?"

Tukufu: The poem repeats the idea that the doll was a plaything of the Lee children, but we know Lee's children were fully grown before the doll was even made. It seems the mistakes in the note are being passed along from owner to owner.

Graham: There's more. "Remember when I found you, Liza, in a shop in old Virginia? You were there with other antiques, waiting just for me, Liza."

Tukufu: Okay, so we know that it was in an antique shop in Virginia and that's where she bought it. Do we have any footnotes, any other information about the provenance?

Graham: Let's see. Not on this page, and there's really nothing else in the entire book. It's just poems about dolls, really. Parts of the note are clearly inaccurate. The doll couldn't have been a plaything of Lee's children, but it's still possible the Lees gave it to a former slave. Is that really something that a former slave master would have done?

Tukufu: Back at Arlington, Graham and I meet with American University historian Alan Kraut. He says the Lees had a complex relationship with their slaves. Incredibly, when Union troops took over the house after the Lees left, some slaves, including Selina Gray, defended their former master's property.

Graham: Well, why – why would she do that?

Dr. Alan Kraut: They protected the property largely out of a sense of personal loyalty to the Lee family. Slaves like Selina Gray, who had been very, very close to Mary Custis Lee, was entrusted with the keys to the house and took that active trust very, very seriously.

Tukufu: But despite this friendship, Lee treated slaves with brutality. A slave narrative recounts an incident at Arlington when three slaves ran away. When they were returned, Lee ordered them whipped.

Alan: The system was such that there were masters and there were slaves, and the Lees were certainly part of that system, and in no way bucked the system.

Tukufu: And after the war, Lee's own attitude towards the formerly enslaved is — is in itself not too humanitarian.

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Alan: Lee never was an egalitarian. He believed in black inferiority, and after the war, he certainly didn't believe that blacks should immediately get the political rights that they might have. And yet, at the same time, there were moments when Robert E. Lee could be a bit of an egalitarian. And one of those famous moments occurs in St. Paul's Church in Richmond when an African-American man after the Civil War goes up to the bar to receive communion and the white members of the congregation are scandalized. No one moves. He's there alone. And suddenly Robert E. Lee gets up from his pew and kneels down at the communion bar next to this man.

Tukufu: That's a very, very interesting story. It, in some ways, humanizes Lee for those of us who kind of demonize slave masters, and I'm not sure if that makes me more comfortable or more frightened.

Alan: And that's part of Lee's own complexity, that within the context of the oppressiveness of slavery, there could be acts of genuine human intimacy and kindness.

Graham: So do you think the Lees would have given a former slave a doll?

Alan: I think they certainly could have. As owners who saw themselves as benevolent owners and benevolent individuals, they engaged in all kinds of acts of paternalism, and certainly gift-giving was one of the things that owners did.

Tukufu: Alan says that the Lees could have given a doll to their former slaves, but the war had driven Lee from Arlington. Was there an opportunity to give such a gift? In the family parlor, we ask park service ranger Karen Kinsey if the Lees ever gave a doll to a former slave.

Karen Kinsey: Well, there is actually a tradition of the Lees giving dolls as gifts to little girls. In fact, here you can see a very ornate doll that Mrs. Lee gave to a little girl after the Civil War.

Tukufu: Then Karen tells us a story that gives us our answer for Betty. We tell Betty we could find no evidence that her doll was the plaything of the Lee children.

Betty: Deep down I think maybe that's what I thought all along.

Tukufu: But then, we tell her what Karen has said.

Karen: Mrs. Lee had always wanted to come back to Arlington since the start of the war when she left. She talked about that constantly. In 1873, she finally did come back here for her only visit to her former home after the war.

Tukufu: In June of 1873, a horse-drawn carriage drove Mary Custis Lee past the gravestones to Arlington house. She complained of the Union's devastation to her childhood home and refused to get out of the carriage. Some of the former slaves came out to greet her. She gave one family some of the original possessions out of the house, and if a doll was given to an old servant, it would have occurred at this time.

Betty: Now I have something to tell all my friends in the doll world.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Graham: But we have a gift for you. We found this in an old bookstore. It's a book of poems about dolls, and your doll is actually in here.

Betty: Oh, it's Liza Lee. I've been calling her Mary. You don't mind, do you?

Tukufu: I want to thank you for allowing us to investigate your story. It allowed me to have a conversation with Graham about the complexities of enslavement and what all of this meant for American society's memory of itself and the past, and that was truly a pleasure.

Betty: That's wonderful. I'm glad that Mary Lee helped you.

Tukufu: Mary Lee did help us, and Graham helped us a lot.

Betty: He's a pretty good kid. I think I'll keep him.

ENDS