

Gen. Lee's sword returning to Appomattox, Va.

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AP – In a May 5, 2011 photo, The Museum of the Confederacy displays the newly restored sword carried by Confederate ...

By STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press – Tue May 10, 3:35 pm ET

RICHMOND, Va. – It's an enduring myth of the Civil War: Robert E. Lee surrendered his sword to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, and his Union counterpart refused the traditional gesture of surrender. "Lee never offered it, and Grant never asked for it," said Patrick Schroeder, historian at Appomattox Courthouse National Historical Park.

In an historical twist, though, Lee's French-made ceremonial sword is returning to Appomattox 146 years later, leaving the Richmond museum where it has been displayed for nearly a century.

The Museum of the Confederacy in downtown Richmond is delivering one of its most-treasured pieces to Appomattox for a new museum that it's building less than a mile from where Lee met with Grant to sign the document of surrender on April 9, 1865. The Army of Northern Virginia's formal surrender followed three days later, effectively drawing to a close the Civil War that left about 630,000 dead.

The sword, scabbard and the Confederate gray uniform Lee wore to his fateful meeting with Grant, are all destined to be displayed about 75 miles west of Richmond when the museum opens next spring.

Senior curator Robert F. Hancock said the Lee sword remains one of the Confederacy museum's biggest attractions.

"It's a one-of-a-kind piece," he said. "There's really no replacement so you can't put a value on it. It's like putting a value on the Mona Lisa. It can't be done."

Wearing white gloves, Hancock lifted the glittering sword and its scabbard from a metal case, both freshly conserved after years of polishing had erased much of the gold gilt from the brass. With the gold gone, the sword's elaborate hilt had turned a dull ocher.

The 40 1/2-inch sword now sparkles, from the lion head on its pommel to the gilded relief on its steel sword. It has an ivory grip.

One side of the blade, in raised letters, reads: "Gen. Robert E. Lee CSA from a Marylander 1863." The Lee admirer who had it commissioned in Paris by Louis-Francois Devisme is not known, Hancock said. The other side of the blade reads: "Aide toi dieu l'aidera." Translated, it means, "Help yourself and God will help you." The scabbard is made of blued steel.

"This would have been very expensive to produce and purchase," Hancock said of the sword. "It's the only one like this I've ever seen and the fanciest one I've ever seen from a Confederate officer."

The museum claims to possess the world's largest collection of Confederate artifacts, including battle flags, military gear, uniforms and domestic items.

Russell Bernabo, a fine object conservator, was selected by the museum to restore the piece to its original luster. He considered 12 different samples of gold before settling on a match: 23-karat Italian gold in tissue-thin sheets, used to restore gilt to the engraved text on the blade, the hilt and pommel.

Bernabo approached the job with reverence. "For an object of this iconic significance, the most important consideration is to not do anything that is too intrusive," he said. "This sword is of the very highest workmanship. This is absolutely top notch." Bernabo was also mindful of the man whose hand once grasped its ivory grip. "At no moment did I ever consider this to be a burden," he said. "It was an effervescent treat to be working with such an object. It truly had an energy of its own."

The sword was intended for ceremonial use. There is no evidence Lee used it in battle. Lee surrendered after his forces were blocked near Appomattox Court House. The Virginian returned to Richmond after the surrender and then became president of what is now Washington and Lee University; he died on Oct. 12, 1870 and is buried in the university's chapel.

Lee's descendants permanently loaned the sword to the Museum of the Confederacy in 1918. The family bequeathed the sword and scabbard to the museum in 1982.

The museum is sharing its collection — a fraction of which is on display at the Richmond facility, which will remain open — at three planned centers in Virginia. Besides Appomattox, others are planned in the Fredericksburg area and in Hampton Roads.

"I'll miss not seeing it every day," Hancock said of the Lee sword. "It's such an important icon for Lee and the South and the war, and specifically Appomattox. I think any disadvantage of it not being in Richmond will be far outweighed by its presence in Appomattox."

As for Schroeder, he's thrilled to have it in the neighborhood. He said it's a powerful metaphor for the day in 1865 when Grant, who was born of modest means, and the patrician Lee met.

"Lee represented what the country had been, and Grant represented more of Lincoln and what the future would be — that now the common man has a chance to make something of himself," Schroeder said.

Online:

Museum of the Confederacy: <http://www.moc.org>

Russell Bernabo: <http://www.russellbernabo.com>

Appomattox Courthouse National Historic Park: <http://www.moc.org>