

The Reptile Sketches of Robert E. Lee

Robert E. Lee (1807–1870) is best known as the Confederate commander of the Army of Northern Virginia during the American Civil War and, later, as President of Washington College (later Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Virginia) where he introduced novel changes in curricula in order to assist the South's recovery from a devastating war. Lee was educated as an engineer at West Point, graduating in 1829. His first major assignment was to supervise the construction of what later became Fort Pulaski, Georgia, on Cockspur Island 12 km south of the city of Savannah in the channel of the Savannah River. Lee remained at this post from November 1829 through May 1831 when construction was suspended.

Although work at Cockspur Island was difficult because of storms, heat, humidity and disease (no work occurred during the summer months), Lt. Lee had an ample social life in Savannah (see, e.g., Michael Korda, 2014, *Clouds of Glory, The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York). One of his classmates at West Point, Jack Mackay, introduced the 22-year-old Lee to Savannah society where he came to know several young women, notably Jack's five sisters and Sarah Anna Minis (1811–1884; Fig. 1). The Mackay and Minis families were prominent merchants with long ties to Savannah, and the Minis family lived close to the Mackays.

In April 1831 just before departing Savannah, Lee sent a sketch of a Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*) and American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) to Catherine Mackay (1811–1879), stating that he was sending the sketch that he had promised her earlier. This sketch is dated 1830. Presumably about the same time, he sent a second nearly identical sketch to Sarah Minis. Both sketches are extant. The sketch sent to Catherine is currently in the collection of the National Park Service at Fort Pulaski National Monument (Fig. 2). The sketch sent to Sarah Minis is housed at the duPont Library at Stratford Hall, Lee's birthplace in Westmoreland County, Virginia (Fig. 3). A larger facsimile image of the Minis

sketch is on display at the Lee Chapel Museum in Lexington, Virginia. The Minis sketch is undated.

Both sketches are done in pen and ink and on the same type of paper. For their size, they are meticulous in detail. The Minis sketch (including paper as depicted) measures 9.6 cm wide by 8.3 cm high, whereas the Mackay sketch is 9.2 cm by 9.2 cm. Although the sketches appear identical, there are subtle differences in the vegetation and shading. These are apparently the only known natural history sketches rendered by Lee, although he sketched various images in relation to his engineering tasks and is known to have sent cartoons to his children in Arlington, Virginia, while stationed in Texas. Based on his fieldwork on the lower Savannah River, Lee was undoubtedly well-familiar with alligators and Diamondback Terrapins. He was also likely familiar with the terrapin while growing up on the Northern Neck of Virginia along the southern shore of the Potomac River upstream from its confluence with Chesapeake Bay, where terrapins were considered a gourmet delicacy.

Acknowledgments.—I thank Patricia Hobbs and Lucy Wilkins (Lee Chapel Museum), Judy Hynson (duPont Library, Stratford Hall), and Laura Waller (National Park Service, Fort Pulaski National Monument) for their assistance in tracing the history of the sketches and the Mackay and Minis families. Mackay sketch reproduced with permission of the National Park Service. Minis sketch and portrait of Sarah Minis Hays are reproduced with permission of the duPont Library, Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia.

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FIG. 1. Sarah Anna Minis Hays. Date unknown. Sarah married Isaac Hays in 1834. Isaac was a well-known ophthalmologist in Philadelphia and described the Cretaceous fish *Saurodon elongatus*. Their son Isaac Minis Hays was Secretary and Librarian of the American Philosophical Society from 1897–1922. Courtesy of the duPont Library, Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia.



FIG. 2. Terrapin and alligator – Mackay sketch. Robert E. Lee, 1830. Pen and ink. Courtesy of the National Park Service (FOPU 1315). This illustration appears on the web site of Fort Pulaski National Monument (www.nps.gov/fopu/learn/historyculture/robert-e-lee.htm) and the Museum of Southern Jewish-American History (<https://savannahambitions.wordpress.com/cultural-institutional/msjah/>).

FIG. 3. Terrapin and alligator – Minis sketch. Robert E. Lee, 1830? Pen and ink. Courtesy of the duPont Library, Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia.

