

Lt. Robert E. Lee Kills Pelee Island Lighthouse Keeper in 1835
By Michael Gora, Middle Bass Island Historian

Can a true story also be an April Fool joke? Read on and decide for yourself. In 1835 Lt. Robert E. Lee, the later General of Civil War fame, was conducting a survey of the Lake Erie Islands to determine the disputed boundary between Ohio and Michigan. He wrote a letter from Turtle Island in which he admitted killing the lighthouse keeper at Pelee Island.

The letter had not been discovered at the time that Douglas Southall Freeman wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning four-volume biography of Lee in 1934. He didn't know that he was soon to acquire a letter that seemed to characterize Lee in a much less gentlemanly way than the biography.

In November 1935, less than a year after the publication of the final volumes of *R. E. Lee*, Freeman bought a letter written by Lee from Thomas F. Madigan, an autograph dealer in New York. Freeman sent Madigan a check for \$375 on November 9, "subject to the understanding . . . that . . . you are to give no publicity whatsoever to this letter until such time as I am prepared to use it in a new edition of the 'Lee.' " Freeman spent considerable time authenticating the letter and then trying to obtain more information about the circumstances of the events on Pelee Island. The relevant parts of the letter are below.

Turtle Island, Michigan
31st July 1835

"Mon Ami"

(The letter starts with a lengthy section, not included here, about events not related to the Lake Erie Islands.)

Tell the Genl. that in my last communication I forgot to confess an act of indiscretion which I now beg leave to do through you - viz. While at Pt. Pelè [sic], Hood & myself were sent over to Pt. Pelè [sic] Island to make a Survey of the Point on which the Light House Stands - & that it was very necessary to ascend to the Top, to discern [sic] our station at the Pt. The door was locked & we could not gain admittance, but after some time succeeded in getting through the window in rear when we discovered the keeper at the door. We were warm & excited, he irascible & full of venom. An altercation ensued which resulted in his death. We put him in charge of the men, gained the Top, attained our object, & in descending I discovered some glass lamp shades, which we stood much in need of as all ours were broken. I therefore made bold to borrow two of his Majesty, for which liberty, as well as for that previously taken, I hope he will make our Apology to his Minister at W. We have nothing to offer in our behalf, but necessity and as we found the Lt. House in a most neglected condition &

shockingly dirty, & were told by the Capt. of the Cutter that there had been no Light in it for more than a year, I hope it will not be considered that we have lopped from the Government a useful member, but on the contrary - to have done it some service, as the situation may now be more efficiently filled & we would advise the New Minister to make choice of a better Subject than a d---d Canadian snake. My Friend I have to sit up all & every clear night - & am a victim to a thousand interruptions in the course of the day. You cannot therefore expect any thing from me. (Another section of the letter is omitted here for the sake of brevity.) Please put the within letter in the office. I would not burden Uncle Sam - but I fear the P. Masters here not of Alex. 12 Remember me to the Genl & all in the office -direct to Detroit - our Boys are all well & send much love & 100 kisses. Yrs truly - R. E. Lee

Freeman hoped to use the letter as “the main feature” of a second edition of the biography. His editor told him that there would be additional printings, but no new edition for many years. Finally, in a new edition in 1949, he wrote “An unhappy incident of Lee’s experience on this survey was the accidental death of a Canadian lighthouse keeper ‘in a scuffle’ over the use of his tower for running one of the survey lines.” No further details of the letter were mentioned.

From the facts now available the conclusion is rather different. In 1835 William McCormick owned all of Pelee Island, and served nominally as keeper of the lighthouse. But McCormick lived eight miles from the lighthouse and died a natural death in 1840. No one other than the McCormick family lived on the island at that time, and the lighthouse was unmanned and poorly maintained. As a Pelee historian puts it, “it would have been an oft-repeated story if a man had been found murdered there.” The story was finally put to rest in the *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 43, No. 2, May, 1977, in the article “***A Historian's Dilemma: A Posthumous Footnote for Freeman's R. E. Lee***” stating that “Close examination of the passage describing the episode at the lighthouse suggests compellingly that it is facetious, that what the Americans killed there was quite literally ‘a d----d Canadian ***Snake***.’ ... ‘The keeper at the door’ suggests a guardian dragon of the castle ... depicted as ‘irascible & full of venom.’”

Lee was known to have a sense of humor expressed in many letters, but it took until 1977 before that bit of island history from 1835 was cleared up.