



Williams, Stephanie <stephanie.williams@dhr.virginia.gov>

Nomination for Statuary Hall

1 message

Mary Stevens <marystevens827@gmail.com>

Mon, Oct 5, 2020 at 9:38 PM

To: "Williams, Stephanie" <Stephanie.williams@dhr.virginia.gov>

Ms. Williams, I appreciate you distributing the below to the Commission. Thanks. Mary Stevens

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I dearly hope that you leave the beautiful statue of the Honorable General Robert E Lee in our nation's Statuary Hall. If he is unfortunately removed, I hope that you will place a monument of Mary Custis Lee in the hall. The following is a copy of a newspaper article that describes her actions in 1905 when riding a streetcar in Alexandria, VA.

Mary Custis Lee took a stand against Jim Crow Laws over a century ago.



On the evening of June 13, 1902, Mary Custis Lee was arrested on an Alexandria streetcar for sitting in the section reserved for black patrons. As the daughter of Robert E. Lee, the General of the Confederate Army, the incident caused quite a stir within the community.

On her way to visit a friend, and being burdened with many large bags, Miss Lee chose to sit near the rear of the car in order to easily exit upon arriving at

her destination. Shortly after she sat down the conductor Thomas Chauncey “explained the Virginia law on the subject, but being ignorant of the existence of the law herself, and also being loth [sic] to move her baggage, she protested.” At that time, Chauncey let her stay seated.

At the next stop, a black man boarded the car. The conductor stated that Miss Lee “was occupying a seat to which he was entitled under the law” and asked her once again to move to the front section, which was reserved for whites. But, even after being threatened with arrest, Miss Lee refused to give up her seat.

Upon exiting the streetcar a few stops later, she was met by two police officers who informed her she was under arrest. Officers Bettis and Sherwood escorted Miss Lee to the station. “In front of the police station, Miss Lee appeared calm, but was evidently concealing her embarrassment with great effort.” As other streetcar passengers and onlookers realized who she was, crowds began to form.

Several “gray-haired men, many of whom had doubtless served under her father” protested against Miss Lee’s holding. Confronted with the dilemma of arresting a woman of Miss Lee’s status, she was released under the condition that she appears for a court hearing the next day.

To The Evening Star, Miss Lee claimed “she knew nothing about the law requiring the separation of white and colored passengers.” While it sounds like a classic excuse, this is at least somewhat plausible. The local government had only recently adopted streetcar segregation laws and it is likely that many were still adjusting to the new regulations, which were not common at the time. In fact, as of 1902, Alexandria and Fairfax were the only localities within Virginia which mandated that blacks and whites sit in separate areas of streetcars. Statewide segregation on rail lines wouldn't happen until 1906.

But, is it possible that Mary Custis Lee's actions were driven by more than just ignorance of the law? Might she have been making a political statement in opposition to segregation?

Perhaps but that might be giving her too much credit. It seems that personal convenience may have been the bigger motivation for her actions. Mary Coulling’s biography *The Lee Girls*, hinted that Lee was argumentative with the

conductor because the segregation law disrupted her usual travel routine with her maid.

In any case, the word of Miss Lee's arrest spread quickly and some latched onto the idea that she was taking a stand for racial integration. As one man from Alberta, Canada wrote to her, "Please accept my thanks for your human action in breaking the color line."

Ms. Lee should be honored for standing up against Jim Crow Laws in 1902!!!

Attached is a petition of over 750 (36 pages) names of those who also recommend Ms. Lee for this honor. Also, attached are a few comments made about this petition.

Let me know if you need additional information.

Thanks.....Mary Stevens

marystevens827@gmail.com

2 attachments

 **petition_signatures_jobs_23688415_20201006004155.pdf**
139K

 **petition_comments_jobs_23688415_20201006012659.pdf**
38K