Souvenirs of the Surrender at Appomattox

Souvenir. What does that word call to mind? Its origins are French and it means a memory or recollection. When people experience a particularly memorable moment in their lives, they often wish to acquire a physical artifact that will in the future call that event to mind. These artifacts are sometimes called 'souvenirs' and are readily available at shops and other public places all over the world, waiting for travelers to seize upon them as mementos of their journey.

A Farmer's Parlor is the Scene for Peace

This desire to possess a physical object representative of a momentous occasion is not a new one. Indeed, the officers present at the surrender of General Lee to General Grant, certainly the most momentous occasion of the 19th century, were acutely aware of the value that was instantly bestowed upon the artifacts present in Wilmer McLean's living room.

Wilmer McLean, a Virginia farmer, could claim the distinction of having the Civil War start in his back yard and end in his parlor. Canon balls fired at Manassas rolled onto his property and convinced him he should move to avoid any more such unsettling events. So he took his family to a little hamlet known as Appomattox Court House, 93 miles southwest of Richmond. Four years later he welcomed the two opposing generals and their staffs into his living room. Here Grant and Lee faced each other across two tables instead of across rivers and battlefields. Here they wielded pens and pencils instead of guns and cannons. Here simple household items became instruments of peace. Until this culminating moment tables, chairs, pencils, and other inanimate objects resting mutely in Mr. McLean's living room had no particular value, except to their owner. Within four hours, these plain simple objects all became souvenirs, more significant than any ordinary shop trinket.

Horace Porter Seizes an Opportunity

During the negotiations, Horace Porter, one of Grant's staff members, was the first to recognize the golden opportunity being presented to him. General Lee, with Grant's permission, was to write in a mark indicating an omission of a word in the terms of surrender. Lee had no pencil,
and Porter, who was taking notes on the entire proceedings, loaned his to Lee. General Lee carefully entered the necessary mark, but then, instead of returning the pencil to Porter immediately, he twirled it several times in his fingers and tapped it on the table as he continued to read the terms. In that moment "Porter realized that his little brown pencil had suddenly burst its way into history." (Mende, 1927) He felt a pang of anxiety that perhaps Lee would forget that he had the writing instrument and not return it, but that did not happen and Porter got it back. Presumably he cherished it the rest of his life.

Generals Grant and Lee Depart the McLean Home
General Porter's detailed account (Porter, 1897) of the events of the day tells of the ensuing scramble in the parlor for relics of the occasion. General Ord paid $40.00 for the marble topped table at which Lee sat. He later offered it to Mrs. Grant who politely declined, telling him to give it to his own wife. Another general got the chair Grant sat in, another procured the Lee chair. But the grandest prize of all, the small wooden table upon which Grant wrote the terms of the surrender, went to General Sheridan who paid $20.00 in gold for it. He turned it over to the 'boy wonder' on his staff, General George Armstrong Custer, whose wife Elizabeth possessed it for the rest of her life. She also cherished the letter General Sheridan sent along with the table.

My Dear Madam: I respectfully present to you the small writing-table on which the conditions for the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was written by Lt.-General Grant, and permit me to say, madam, that there is scarcely an individual who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your very gallant husband.

Lula's Doll: The Silent Witness
All of these items could no doubt be considered the ultimate souvenirs of an ultimate national "journey." Yet there was one more seldom mentioned artifact present at that occasion that has been called the "eighteenth member of the surrender party," a witness to the incredible event that took place in the McLean parlor. Wilmer's young daughter Lula had been playing with a rag doll when the soldiers invaded the scene. Lula fled the parlor, leaving the doll behind. The poor little doll was retrieved from the floor when Grant and Lee left and tossed about by gleeful soldiers playing a spontaneous game of catch. Later in the day, the doll rode off without a whimper under the arm of Lt. Col. Thomas W. C. Moore. (Kunhardt, 1951)

The Ark of the Covenant
The table that came into the possession of Mrs. Custer was undoubtedly the prize of the day. In later years she had it stored in a fire proof warehouse in New York City and had it brought out only for special occasions. One of these was a meeting of the Union League Club on November 21, 1896. Here, General Porter, who had undertaken to raise the balance of the fund for Grant's Tomb, was to deliver an address on the surrender. The removal of the table from the warehouse was attended by much pomp and ceremony. Later, there were many veterans in the audience that listened to General Porter's address. They were surprised to see so small and humble-looking table in front of the speaker. When they heard its story, their interest was immediate and intense. One of them, with religious fervor, pronounced it "the Ark of the Covenant to all survivors of the Civil War." (Custer, 1911)

Today, that "Ark of the Covenant" resides in the esteemed National Museum of American History, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. The marble topped table upon which Lee wrote is in the Chicago Historical Society's Civil War Room. Thus, the two most important souvenirs of the Civil War were removed from a humble parlor and given immortality in two of our country's great repositories. By visiting either of those museums, Americans may reflect upon the scene they bore witness to and its lasting importance in the history of the United States.

What happened to all the precious souvenirs that came from Wilmer McLean's parlor?

1. Robert E. Lee sat in the caned armchair. General E. W. Whitaker bought it and later donated it to a charitable raffle, where another military individual became its new owner. That man's widow gave it to the Smithsonian in 1915.

2. Grant's chair went to General Henry Capehart for $10.00 in gold. Capehart gave it to General Wilmon W. Blackmar who left it in his will to the Smithsonian.

3. Grant used a small "spool-turned" table upon which to write the terms of surrender. General Sheridan took it without McLean's permission, leaving behind $20.00 in gold as payment. He gave it to his favorite General, George Armstrong Custer, and Elizabeth Custer eventually gave it to the Smithsonian.

4. The marble-top table upon which Lee signed the terms of surrender was taken by General Edward O. C. Ord. His widow eventually sold it to Charles F. Gunther, the owner of a small museum in Chicago. Later it was purchased from his estate by the Chicago Historical Society, where it is now on display.
5. Lula McLean's doll has finally been placed on permanent display at the Appomattox Court House National Historical Park after residing with Captain Moore's descendant for years.

See a picture and narrative at the Smithsonian's Civil War website.

See painting of the surrender scene with corrections relating to who was in attendance.

References

Custer, Elizabeth B. "Where Grant Wrote Peace." Harper's Weekly, v.55, June 24, 1911, p. 7-8

Links to Websites on Appomattox and the McLean House

The McLean House. from Wikipedia
The McLean House, from the National Park Service
Appomattox Court House National Historical Park.
The Grant/Lee Surrender Correspondence.