

Appomattox Court House

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Appomattox Court House
National Historical Park



Historical Landscape



Frankenstein, George. *Where Lee and Grant Met*. 1866. Museum Collection, Appomattox Court House NHP

“Following the road that bears north-eastward from the Appomattox [River], lone and bushy ravine-scored fields tilt up for a mile, at least, to a timbered ridge ...” Morris Schaff, *Sunset of the Confederacy*, 1912

What landscape did soldiers see when they arrived at Appomattox Court House in April 1865? Accounts and images, such as the 1866 painting by George Frankenstein (top), depict an area with active but worn farmlands dotted with patches of woodlots. “Hardscrabble” was a word used by one Union soldier in contrasting this region to the fertile farms found in his home state. At the time of the Civil War, this region had been settled for over 100 years. The orange clay soils in this area were fertile enough for crops when first cleared of forests, but could not support a large population of people.

Farmsteads were remote and distantly spaced across the rural landscape.

Today, the park’s 1,694 acres protect the lands associated with the surrender. Although the muddy roads, plowed fields and farm buildings of the past are now gone, it is still possible with a little imagination to glimpse the scene that the soldiers experienced.

This guide highlights the past farming practices that shaped the land and eventually defined the landscape viewed in the park today.

*If Eastern lands are poor and dear,
And Western [lands are] cheap and fertile;
And if a man of money’s clear,
Or nearly so,
Be pioneer,
And Westward ho!*

W. L. Gordon

In the 1800s, most people in this region were farmers. Tobacco was the primary cash crop, but farmers also grew a wide variety of grains including corn, wheat, and oats. Minor crops included barley, hemp, and flax. Every farmstead also had fruit trees, milk cows and kitchen gardens. The primary livestock were hogs and sheep, free-ranging but fenced out of crop areas.

Farming practices of the time depleted and eroded the soil. Soil husbandry techniques such as applying manure were understood, but little practiced due to cost and labor. The average young farmer found it more profitable to move west and settle new cheap frontier lands than to restore worn-out soil on the family farm. Plantation owners, who had more acreage and a larger number of enslaved laborers, were better able to implement soil restoration practices.



Tobacco Crop

National Museum of American History

In the first half of the 1800s, the demand for tobacco led to a surge in production across central Virginia. Growing tobacco quickly drained the soil of nutrients and promoted erosion. As existing fields became depleted, new forest lands were cleared and planted in tobacco. By 1860, the Appomattox landscape was mostly open land dotted by patches of woodlots. Fallow and abandoned fields constituted almost half of this open land.

Through the late 1800s to mid 1900s, farming gradually decreased as better economic opportunities elsewhere lured people away from the overworked land. The growing number of unplanted fields were first colonized by broomstraw, Indiangrass and other plants that could tolerate the worn soil. In time, Virginia pine and other tree seedlings took root and started new forests.

Present Day Landscape

The park today is more wooded than in 1865. Mature forests now cover the lands no longer suited for farming. Soil recovery is a slow process, and the scars of the past such as ravines, gullies, rock piles and stream channelization are still visible. The current forest cover now plays a critical role in the park by rebuilding the soil, protecting the Appomattox River watershed, and providing wildlife habitat.

Since the 1940s, the National Park Service staff has maintained a portion of the park in open fields to evoke the feel of the 1865 landscape.

Agricultural leasing, mowing and prescribed fire are the primary tools used to maintain almost 600 acres of open lands. Where possible, native grasses and wildflowers are planted to promote the historic scene while providing critical habitats for declining native pollinator insects and grassland birds, such as the Eastern Meadowlark

While the exact landscape features of 1865 are not known, photos taken later in the century were probably similar in appearance. Contrasting those views with today shows both the similarities and differences of the landscape over time.



Near Tibbs Lane looking north circa 1940

NPS

In 1865, the antebellum Tibbs House (background, barely visible) could be seen from the village across open fields similar to this view in 1940.



Current view

NPS

Today, forest screens the view of two modern day houses that were built in the 1960s at the site of the former Tibbs House.



Salute site looking northeast circa 1890

NPS

This view looks across the shallow valley of the Appomattox river. The native grasses and shrubs in the foreground show that the field was no longer used for growing crops in 1890. The woodlot on the horizon to the right was the location of General Robert E. Lee's Headquarters.



Current view

NPS

The view is more wooded today as forests have regrown on hillsides, wetlands and floodplains. The field in the foreground is planted in native grasses to reflect the old fields of the 1800s. Trees in the mid-view area are periodically cut or thinned to maintain the view.



Salute site looking southwest circa 1890

NPS

Similar to 1865, this view shows hedgerows and fence lines in the background, and overgrown pasture in the foreground.



Current view

NPS

The field is planted in native grasses to mimic the old field appearance. Native grasses grow 4 to 5 feet tall in summer.