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Kaylyn L. Sawyer
Gettysburg College
Class of 2017

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"With Nothing Left But Reputation": Reconstructing the Virginia Military Institute

Abstract

The Virginia Military Institute was founded in 1839 and flourished throughout the mid- nineteenth century. The Institute remained loyal to Virginia during the Civil War, providing the Confederate Army with top ranking generals and deploying the corps of cadets during the Battle of New Market. Exposed as a target for Union troops marching through the valley, the Institute was virtually destroyed in 1864. The defeat of the Confederacy in 1865 left VMI uncertain of its very existence. Advocates for the Virginia Military Institute faced the daunting task of rebuilding the school while a fractured nation struggled to rebuild itself through the contentious period of Reconstruction. The Institute secured initial funding from the "restored" state government in 1865, survived a critical challenge to its existence in 1868, and eventually gained compensation for unjust losses during the war. The unwavering dedication of those advocating for the Institute was met with gracious support from those in political authority who chose to share the vision of a prosperous Institute integral to the rebuilding of a nation. Through the cooperative efforts of the State of Virginia, the Superintendent, the Board of Visitors, the cadets and faculty members, and the greater Lexington community, the Virginia Military Institute was able to overcome the devastation of war and rebuild a school that would continue to prosper 151 years after it was "left in ruins, with nothing left but reputation."

Keywords

Virginia, Virginia Military Institute, Military History, Francis Smith, David Hunter, Reconstruction, Lexington Virginia, Battle of New Market

“WITH NOTHING LEFT BUT REPUTATION”: RECONSTRUCTING THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

Kaylyn Sawyer

In 1816, Virginia established two arsenals in order to store weapons and prepare for defense against insurrection. One of these was built in Lexington, a small agricultural town located in the southern portion of the Shenandoah Valley. In the 1830s, local lawyer John T. L. Preston promoted an idea suggesting that the militiamen guarding the arsenal would benefit from an education. Thus, on November 11, 1839, twenty-five men arrived at the Virginia Military Institute and became the first cadets.¹ The Institute flourished throughout the mid-nineteenth century and, by fate of circumstance, played an instrumental role in supporting the Confederate cause during the Civil War. VMI provided the Confederate Army with top-ranking generals and deployed its corps of cadets during the Battle of New Market, exposing itself as a target of Northern aggression as the Confederate defenses fell and Union troops marched through the valley. Following the war, with “the school left in ruins, and nothing left but reputation,” the superintendent, faculty, and cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, alongside the citizens of Lexington, were faced with the daunting task of rebuilding

¹ Keith E. Gibson, *Virginia Military Institute* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 7.

the Institute while a fractured nation struggled to rebuild itself through the contentious period of Reconstruction.²

Union General David O. Hunter was given command of the Valley District following General Franz Sigel's defeat at the Battle of New Market on May 15, 1864.³ The Confederate victory at New Market proved fleeting, as Federal forces continued their pursuit up the Shenandoah Valley.⁴ In June of 1864, Hunter's 12,000 men arrived in Lexington.⁵ Standing in defense of Lexington were two divisions of cavalry under Colonel William Jackson and Brigadier General John McCausland.⁶ Upon entering the town, General Hunter reported he "found the enemy's sharpshooters posted among the rocks and thickets of the opposite cliffs and in some store-houses at the bridge, and also occupying the buildings of the Virginia Military Institute."⁷ On June 11, General Hunter began his attack. After a few hours of back-and-forth engagement between the Union and Confederate soldiers, General McCausland warned the Superintendent of VMI, General Francis H. Smith, that he could not hold his position much

² *Report of the Superintendent*, January 12, 1878, as cited in Colonel William Couper, *One Hundred Year at V.M.I.*, Volume III (Richmond: Garrett and Massie Incorporated, 1939), 105.

³ Robert J. Driver, Jr., *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 2nd edition (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard Inc., 1989), 56-57.

⁴ Due to the geographical nature of the Valley, going up the Valley means going south.

⁵ Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 57.

⁶ Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 58.

⁷ "Hunter's Raid on VMI, June 1864, Union Operations Report, June 6-July 14, 1864," Virginia Military Institute Archives Online Exhibit, Accessed March 31, 2015.

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longer. Near one in the afternoon, General Smith ordered the commandant of cadets, Scott Shipp, to take the cadets and leave town.⁸ Cadet John S. Wise, a veteran of the Battle of New Market, wrote that the cadets retreated from Lexington “with heavy hearts...through the town, bidding adieu to such of its residents as we had known in happier days...it galled and mortified us that we had been compelled to abandon it without firing a shot.”⁹

With the cadets abandoning their position, the Virginia Military Institute was left to the mercy of General Hunter and his guns. In his report to the Headquarters Department of West Virginia on August 8, 1864, General Hunter plainly stated, “On the 12th I also burned the Virginia Military Institute and all the buildings connected with it.”¹⁰ In the Superintendent’s Report from July 15, 1864, General Smith reports on the extensive damage done to the Institute:

“Among the most serious losses are to be named our valuable library—the accumulated care of twenty-five years—and the philosophical apparatus, so long used by our late distinguished professor of natural and experimental philosophy,

⁸ Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 64.

⁹ John S. Wise, *End of an Era: the Last Days of Traditional Southern Culture as Seen Through the Eyes of a Young Confederate Soldier*, ed. Paul Dennis Sporer (New York: Anza Publishing: 2005), 219.

¹⁰ “Hunter’s Raid on VMI, June 1864, Union Operations Report, June 6-July 14, 1864,” Virginia Military Institute Archives Online Exhibit.

Lieut. General Thomas J. Jackson. The apparatus and many of the valuable books had been removed to Washington College under the presumption that this venerable institution might afford a shelter and protection to them. But the work of destruction went on. The college building was sacked; the libraries of both institutions were destroyed, and every particle of philosophical apparatus broken to pieces...Our hospital was first rifled of all of its most valuable medical stores, and was then burnt...The beautiful bronze copy of Houdon's Washington, by the gifted and lamented Hubard, after being mutilated in the effort to take it from its pedestal, was removed.”¹¹

The quarters and offices of the superintendent were the only buildings to remain unaffected because the superintendent's wife and two children could not be moved without risking their lives.¹² John S. Wise, having evacuated Lexington along with his fellow cadets, went on to write, “At a high point, probably five miles south of Lexington, we came in full sight of our old home...We saw

¹¹ *Superintendent's Report, Virginia Mil. Institute*, July 15, 1864, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 21-22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21. Smith's wife had given birth 48 hours earlier, and the other child was an infant. They were eventually moved to rooms that provided more protection from the enemy's shelling.

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the towers and turrets of the barracks, mess-hall, and professors' houses in full blaze, sending up great masses of flame and smoke.”¹³ The shelling of Lexington was described by sixteen year-old Fannie Wilson in a letter to her father: “I seem to have spent a lifetime in one day. I never before had an idea of the terror caused by the shelling of a town, never seemed to realize what it meant.”¹⁴ With the burning of VMI complete, the last Union regiments marched out of Lexington on the morning of June 14.¹⁵

Although General Hunter succeeded in setting fire to the Institute, his subordinates did not wholly support his actions. Surgeon Booth blatantly stated, “General Hunter had the Military Institute and Ex. Gov. Letcher’s house burned after they had been completely pillaged. He also allowed the Washington College to be gutted...Its all wrong.”¹⁶ In addition, Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes told his wife, “Hunter burns the Virginia Military Institute. This does not suit many of us...Hunter will be as odious as Butler or Pope to the Rebels and not gain our good opinion either.”¹⁷ This debate on the rationale and justification of the Institute’s destruction continued into the second decade of the twentieth century as Senator Henry A. du Pont of Delaware introduced a “bill for the relief of the Virginia Military Institute of Lexington, VA.” Senator du Pont had

¹³ Wise, *End of an Era*, 218.

¹⁴ “Hunter’s Raid of VMI, June 1864, Fanny Wilson Account,” Virginia Military Institute Archives Online Exhibit, Accessed April 16, 2015.

¹⁵ Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁷ Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*, 72.

been the Chief of Artillery under General Hunter during the raid on Lexington and had witnessed the destruction first-hand. Du Pont testified that he, along with other subordinates of General Hunter, was “very much opposed to the destruction of the Institute buildings” and “thought it was a wholly unnecessary destruction of private property and not justified by the rules of war.”¹⁸

The Senator went on to declare, “My opinion was that the barracks should be destroyed under the laws of war for the reason that the cadets who occupied those barracks were in the field and had met us at the Battle of New Market and that they were the quarters of a hostile force...but I saw no reason why the buildings of the Institute devoted to educational purposes should be burned down.”¹⁹ Du Pont was persuasive in his arguments, and the Senate voted to reimburse VMI funds amounting to \$100,000 for its expenses in reconstruction.²⁰ Those funds, however, were not available in the summer of 1864 when the actual work of rebuilding began.

“Rise, we hope it will, with new splendor from its ashes, a memorial of the impotent rage of a malignant enemy, and

¹⁸ Coincidentally, General Smith and du Pont’s father both graduated from West Point in 1833. “Statement of Senator H. A. du Pont of Delaware,” *Hearing Before the Committee on Claims, U.S. Senate, Sixty-Third Congress, Second Session, on S.44*, February 7, 1914, as printed in Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute from 1839 to 1865, With Appendix, Maps, and Illustrations* (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell Company, Inc., 1915), 465.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 467.

²⁰ Jeff Mellott, “VMI Honors Civil War Destroyer, Rebuilder,” *Daily Press*, April 26, 2009.

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*an exhaustless nursery of whatsoever is manly, just, and of good report.”*²¹

The initial phases of rebuilding VMI began before the Civil War ended. The first question facing the Board of Visitors was whether the Institute should be rebuilt in the same location or moved to a different one. The main factor forcing the Board to consider a different location was the “limited grounds belonging to the school.”²² VMI needed a large amount of land “for barracks, mess hall, hospital, lecture rooms, museum, library, and professors’ quarters, as well as drill grounds for infantry and artillery.”²³ However, despite the concern for sufficient land, the positives for rebuilding VMI in Lexington outweighed the negatives. Those who advocated for keeping the Institute in Lexington stressed that the foundations of barracks, academic buildings, and the library were intact and sturdy, so it made sense economically to rebuild in the same location. Other considerations favoring the decision to keep VMI in Lexington included the abundant countryside, strategic location, and association.²⁴ Once the location was decided upon, the Board turned their attention to the practical aspects of operations, such as providing subsistence, shoes,

²¹ *Report of the Board of Visitors of the Virginia Military Institute*, July 28, 1864, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 4.

²² *Superintendent’s Report, Virginia Mil. Institute*, July 15, 1864, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 26-27

²³ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

books, fuel, and lights that the Institute would need to support incoming cadets.²⁵

With the physical institute not sufficiently rebuilt to support education, the corps was maintained in Richmond, Virginia, the capital city of the Confederacy. On December 10, 1864, VMI Headquarters issued Special Orders No. 126, which indicated, “The Corps of Cadets, having been relieved by the Secretary of War from their duty in the field and turned over to the authorities of the State, will be moved into the Alms House, Richmond, early Monday Morning.”²⁶ In addition, General Orders No. 23 stated, “As soon as the cadets are moved into the Alms House, all the regulations of police and discipline of the Virginia Military Institute will be reinforced.”²⁷ The Acting Assistant Quartermaster appropriated sections of the house to accommodate the various needs of the temporary institute, such as the mess-room and kitchen, offices and classrooms, the hospital, and barracks.²⁸ Following the end of the war, Cadet John S. Wise recalled, “I was dead...My beloved State of Virginia was dismembered, and a new State had been erected out of a part of her, against her will. Every

²⁵ *Superintendent's Report, Virginia Mil. Institute*, July 15, 1864, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 35-36.

²⁶ “Special Orders—No. 126,” December 10, 1864, as cited in Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute from 1839-1865, With Appendix, Maps, and Illustrations* (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell Company, Inc., 1915), 393.

²⁷ “General Orders—No. 23.,” December 10, 1864, as cited in Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute from 1839-1865, With Appendix, Maps, and Illustrations*, 394.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

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hope that I had ever indulged was dead. Even the manhood I had attained was dead...In hopelessness I scanned the wreck, and then—I went back to school.”²⁹ The cadets had to adjust to a changing state, pause and think about what their next step would be, and then move forward.

Despite these early planning efforts, the fate of the Virginia Military Institute hung in the balance following the end of the Civil War in April of 1865. With the defeat of the Confederacy, VMI faced a greater problem than before: whether they would be allowed to rebuild at all. The Board of Visitors and General Smith were forced to change their focus and would need to justify the Institute’s existence by emphasizing the positive impact VMI could have on a reconstructing nation. In order to do this, members of the VMI community appealed to the “restored” state government in Virginia, headed by Governor Francis H. Pierpont.³⁰ The *Board of Visitors Minutes* from September 22, 1865 indicated “the Board called upon the Gov.: and had an interesting conversation with him.”³¹ At this meeting, the Board argued in favor of rebuilding VMI and asked Governor Pierpont to “recommend to the Legislature to make immediate provision for the restoration of these [the library, chemical and philosophical apparatus] annuities.”³² The Board highlighted the nature of VMI

²⁹ Wise, *End of an Era*, 323-324.

³⁰ Richard M. McMurry, *Virginia Military Institute Alumni in the Civil War*, 1st ed. (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, Inc., 1999), 70.

³¹ *Board of Visitors Minutes*, September 22, 1865, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 36

³² *Special Report of the Board of Visitors of the VA. Military Institute*, September 22, 1865, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 3.

from its founding through the pre-war years, stating it was “a great school of *Applied Science*, for the development of the *agricultural, mining, commercial, manufacturing* and *internal improvements* interests the country...It adopted the military organization of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and by the application of military government and instruction to its system of discipline, gave it an efficiency which was not only valuable but distinctive.”³³ The Board of Visitors wisely minimized its role in the Civil War by saying, “It is unnecessary to dwell upon the record of the last four years...The State of Virginia, in all its organized departments, having restored its relations to the Government of the United States and acknowledged its authority, with full purpose to maintain, in good faith, these relations, presents this *State* institution in a condition of loyalty to the country.”³⁴ Like most of the nation, those tasked with the rebuilding wanted to forget the horrors of the war and move forward. Not only did the Board present the Institute as an entity that would be loyal in support of the reforming country, but also they claimed it was desperately needed:

“*Distinctively* marked out for this *school of Applied Science*: --we have only to behold the ruin which surrounds and almost overwhelms us, to heed the voice calling to us for help...This Institution desires to do

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

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its part in the great work. It was specially organized for it...if the means which it now asks, with so much reason, are granted, no interruption shall take place in its career of usefulness; but every energy shall be directed to give strength and honor and perpetuity to our State and country.”³⁵

The Board of Visitors specifically crafted their argument to emphasize the agricultural and industrial benefits VMI would have on the nation during Reconstruction while purposefully leaving out the military component of the Institution. On December 20, 1865, *The Lexington Gazette* published a portion of the Governor’s Message of December 4, indicating the state’s need for a Polytechnic School. Pierpont stated, “My opinion is, that we have in the Virginia Military Institute the elements of the proper organization to take charge of this school and give it the proper direction.”³⁶ Pierpont not only supported the rebuilding of VMI but also believed this type of institution was something Virginia needed in order to recover from the war. The September meeting with Pierpont served as the true launching point for the reconstruction of VMI because without his approval and plea to the Legislature for money, the institute may not have been permitted to rebuild. With Pierpont’s blessing, General Smith and the Board of

³⁵ *Special Report of the Board of Visitors of the VA. Military Institute*, September 22, 1865, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 5.

³⁶ “The Governor’s Message of Decem. 4th 1865,” *Lexington Gazette*, December 20, 1865, 1.

Visitors deliberated and determined that the Institute would reopen that fall with courses resuming on October 16, 1865.³⁷

Back in Lexington, VMI began to address the logistical issues of building housing for cadets, designing and maintaining an effective disciplinary system during transition, and resupplying the Institute. Construction of log or board cabins for cadet barracks began in 1864.³⁸ However, these structures were not completed in a timely manner, and by the beginning of the 1865-66 term when the corps returned to VMI, it was necessary to board cadets in private homes and at the Lexington Hotel.³⁹ Boarding houses not only provided VMI cadets a place to live, but the formerly wealthy community members impoverished by the war had a way to make money. Women, such as ex-Governor Letcher's wife, "who, in common with many other ladies in Lexington, is reduced to the necessity of keeping a boarding house"⁴⁰ played an essential role in this process. Boarding house life, however, left the cadets

³⁷ Due to the suspension of mail activities, the reopening date was not largely published, so at the onset of classes, only eighteen cadets reported for duty. By February, the numbers increased, with ten cadets in the first class, nine in the second, eight in the third, and thirty in the fourth. *Report of the Board of Visitors and the Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute*, June 27, 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 5.

³⁸ *Report of the Board of Visitors of the Virginia Military Institute*, July 28, 1864, 3.

³⁹ Colonel William Couper, *One Hundred Year at V.M.I.*, Volume III, 119.

⁴⁰ "Ex. Gov. Letcher, of Virginia," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), August 18, 1866.

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lacking in the disciplinary regimen they were exposed to at the Institute.

By December 9, 1866, the cabins were completed, and “it was possible to again establish barracks disciplinary regulations, after a fashion: a simple uniform (consisting of a cadet grey jacket, pants, and a military cap) was donned; and a company with cadet officers and non-commissioned officers was formed.”⁴¹ As those in the immediate community welcomed cadets into their homes, the faculty and members of the greater community joined together to raise money to rebuild and restock the Institute with academic materials. It was estimated that roughly \$50,000 would be needed to accomplish this task.⁴² Faculty made a substantial contribution towards funding a rebuilt VMI by proposing to surrender one-third of their salaries towards the reconstruction effort.⁴³ The Board of Visitors accepted their generous offer and declared it “a magnanimous act.”⁴⁴ Community members also played an important role in accumulating the funds needed. General Smith indicated “several public spirited gentlemen” contributed a net sum of nearly \$10,000.⁴⁵ While this donation went a long way

⁴¹ Colonel William Couper, *One Hundred Year at V.M.I.*, Volume III, 119.

⁴² *Report of the Board of Visitors and the Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute*, June 27, 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 8.

⁴³ *Report of Board of Visitors*, Richmond, November 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 3.

⁴⁴ *Report of the Board of Visitors and the Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute*, June 27, 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

in aiding the process of rebuilding and restocking, more money was needed. To reach a broader audience, General Smith had ads printed in newspapers throughout the country to petition support. Such ads appeared in the *New York Times*—“Contributions in money or books, to aid in restoring the Library of the Virginia Military Institute, on the appeal of Gen. Francis H. Smith, Superintendent, may be left with D. Van Nostrand, No. 192 Broadway, who has kindly offered to receive and forward the same”—and in Raleigh’s *Daily Progress*—“Smith...has issued a circular appealing for aid to rebuild the barracks of that institution destroyed by order of General Hunter. Fifty thousand dollars are required.”⁴⁶ The extent to which the newspapers were effective is unknown, but General Smith was able to acquire enough money to eventually rebuild the Institute.

The year 1866 proved to be productive in terms of restoring to the Institute what the Civil War had taken. On May 15, 1864, ten cadets from VMI were mortally wounded at the Battle of New Market. Two years following the battle on May 5, Colonel J.T.L. Preston issued Special Orders No. 10, which stated the bodies of the fallen New Market cadets “should rest together on the grounds of this institution where they were trained to arms and which they illustrated by their courage. A detail consisting of one member from each class of the present corps will leave the Institute on Monday May 7th.”⁴⁷ The detail of cadets left

⁴⁶ “Virginia Military Institute,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1865; *The Daily Progress* (Raleigh, North Carolina), November 18, 1865.

⁴⁷ The detail consisted of Cadet Glazebrook and Overton of the 1st class, Dinwiddie of the 2nd class, and Anderson of the 4th class. Cadet

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Lexington and travelled to New Market in order to retrieve the remains of five of their fallen comrades—Samuel Atwill, Thomas Garland Jefferson, Henry Jones, William McDowell, and Joseph Wheelwright—and bring them back to the Institute.⁴⁸ As per the order of General Smith, religious ceremonies honoring the cadets took place on the second anniversary of the battle at the Presbyterian Church. In addition, General Smith declared that all duties were to be suspended on that day “as an appropriate mark of respect to the memory of the gallant dead.”⁴⁹ Following the services in the church, a procession was formed. It consisted, in order, of:

“The Clergy, then the five bodies borne in separate hearses, with Committee of ex-Cadets who had participated in the battle, from the University, Washington College,

Glazebrook had charge of the detail, and Colonel Scott Shipp, Commandant of the Cadets, accompanied them. Colonel J.T.L Preston, *Special Orders No. 10, May 5th 1866*, Virginia Military Institute Archives Online Exhibit, Accessed March 20, 2015.

⁴⁸ Charles Crockett was reunited with his fallen comrades in 1960 when his remains were moved to VMI. The four remaining New Market cadets are buried at various locations in Virginia. William Cabell is buried at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond; Alva Hartsfield is in an unmarked grave in Petersburg; Luther Haynes is at his home “Sunny Side” in Essex County; and Jaqueline Beverly Stanard is in Orange, Virginia. Virginia Military Institute, “New Market Day, May 15, 1866: Reburial of Five Cadets Who Died at New Market, An Online Exhibit,” Accessed March 20, 2015.

⁴⁹ Major General Francis H. Smith, *General Orders No. 7, May 14, 1866*, Virginia Military Institute Archives Online Exhibit, Accessed March 20, 2015.

and various parts of the State, as pall bearers. Then followed the Corps of Cadets with Faculty of the Institute, as mourners—then the Students and Faculty of Washington College, and a long procession of gentlemen and ladies of the town and vicinity. In slow and solemn step they moved to the Institute, where the closing services were conducted by the Rev. Mr. Whisner.”⁵⁰

Once returned to Lexington, however, it would be years before the cadets would be laid in their final resting place. Their bodies were first placed in a vault in the old Porter’s Lodge located near the Limit Gates, then moved to the magazine located on the bluff across the ravine behind barracks.⁵¹ In 1878, the cadets were again moved into the newly erected Cadet Cemetery but were again relocated in 1912 for the final time and now rest under the statue “Virginia Mourning Her Dead.”⁵² For Cadet John L. Tunstall, a veteran of the Battle of New Market, witnessing his five classmates being re-interred in Lexington brought back the horrors of that battle. In a letter to his mother, Tunstall wrote, “Sorrow shrieks, and memory wails, when I revert to the bloody picture of intolerable scenes of

⁵⁰ “Local Items,” *Lexington Gazette*, May 23, 1866.

⁵¹ Virginia Military Institute, “New Market Day, May 15, 1866: Reburial of Five Cadets Who Died at New Market, An Online Exhibit.”

⁵² *Ibid.* The Cadet Cemetery served as a place to bury VMI alumni and ex-Cadets who died in battle. Moses Ezekiel, veteran of the Battle of New Market, sculpted the statue “Virginia Mourning Her Dead.”

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suffering and destruction which encompassed me on every side...War is a hard thing!”⁵³

Perhaps as symbolic of restoration as the return of those five cadets killed at New Market, the governor of West Virginia returned the statue of George Washington that was removed by General Hunter’s army in 1864.⁵⁴ A ceremony was held for the re-inauguration of the statue on September 10, 1866. Among the distinguished figures present were General Smith, ex-Governor Letcher (now on the Board of Visitors), and Robert E. Lee. General Smith invited General Ulysses S. Grant on August 4 to attend the festivities, but General Grant declined, citing an obligation to accompany President Johnson on his trip to Chicago.⁵⁵ The main orator at the ceremony was ex-Governor Letcher, and his speech was more directed towards the state of the country in the post-war years than the legacy of George Washington. Letcher stated,

“A wise, just, tolerant, upright administration of public affairs will win back the affections of the south and entwine them around the pillars that uphold the Union as the ‘clasping ivy’ encircles the majestic oak...If the scenes of the last four years cannot be forgotten by either side, let

⁵³ “New Market Cadet John L. Tunstall to his mother,” May 15, 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives.

⁵⁴ *Report of Superintendent*, June 27, 1866, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 3.

⁵⁵ *The Daily Standard* (Raleigh, North Carolina), September 15, 1866.

them be, at least, forgiven, and passed in solemn, dignified silence. Let each side cease to remind the other of the disagreeable incidents that occurred during that sad but eventful period.”⁵⁶

Through his speech, Letcher expressed his views for how the nation should handle Reconstruction. He essentially believed that in order to appease the South, the North needed to give them what they wanted and extend forgiveness in not discussing the war. The West Virginia Governor’s willingness to return the statue of Washington was a physical example of what Letcher preached to the audience. His speech was met with mixed reviews. *The Spectator*, a newspaper based out of Staunton, Virginia, wrote, “The speech of Governor Letcher was well received and heartily applauded at its conclusion.”⁵⁷ However, a Northern newspaper took a very different interpretation of the ceremony. An article in *The New York Times* ridiculed Letcher’s statement and stated, “Had these been the extemporaneous after-dinner utterances of men flushed with wine, they might have passed without comment. But they are the deliberately conned words of men in responsible places, soberly put forth.”⁵⁸ Additionally, it was noted that George Washington’s name was only

⁵⁶ “An Address by Ex. Gov. Letcher,” *Daily Milwaukee News*, September 26, 1866.

⁵⁷ “Re-inauguration of the Statue of Washington at Lexington, Va.,” *Spectator* (Staunton, Virginia), September 18, 1866.

⁵⁸ *New York Times*, October 29, 1866.

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brought up in connection with the example Robert E. Lee set for these young cadets.⁵⁹ The author of this article argues Letcher used the re-inauguration of the statue of Washington as an opportunity to tell young men to look to Confederate heroes for inspiration instead of men like George Washington, who were essential in forming a united country. Despite varied responses over General Letcher’s remarks, Hubard’s statue of Washington was replaced on its original pedestal to stand watch over the recovering Institute.

With the restoration of the Washington statue and the return of the fallen cadets of New Market, VMI moved forward in its effort to restore full operations. A significant step was taken in that same year as the Institute was given permission to resume the use of arms to train the cadets. On September 11, 1866, *The Raleigh Sentinel* wrote, “General Grant has not only given arms to the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, but has also restored to them the old ‘Cadet Battery.’ He remarked in doing so that, ‘the rising generation must be educated, and the means for that purpose must not be withheld.’”⁶⁰ General Grant’s decision indicates a desire for a return to normalcy and progress in advancing the country through a small action taken at a Virginia school. As the Board of Visitors had declared their loyalty to the Union as part of a restored Virginia, this action by Grant reflects his belief in the sincerity of their purpose and declaration. History proved him right, as

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ *The Raleigh Sentinel*, September 11, 1866.

graduates from VMI in its post-war years to the present have served honorably in the services of the United States military with undivided loyalties.⁶¹

Throughout the academic years of 1866-1867 and 1867-1868, General Smith and members of the Board continued to be encouraged by the progress of VMI's reconstruction. However, the Institute faced another critical challenge in January of 1868. At the State Constitutional Convention of Virginia, Mr. Carr, of Dinwiddie County, offered a resolution that stated, "The property known as the Virginia Military Institute ought to be obliterated, and the property and funds of the same converted into a fund for the benefit of common schools."⁶² Even roughly two years after VMI was permitted by Governor Pierpont to rebuild, it still faced critical opposition. In consideration of Mr. Carr's resolution to destroy VMI, William James, Chairman of the Committee on Public Institutions, reached out to General Smith and requested he give the past and present status of VMI for the committee to examine in order to reach an appropriate conclusion.⁶³ In his response, General Smith clearly stated the four basic aims of the Virginia Military Institute:

⁶¹ Some of these graduates include Medal of Honor Recipients Clarence E. Sutton, Class of 1890, and Charles E. Kilbourne, Class of 1894. Another distinguished post-Civil War VMI graduate is George C. Marshall, class of 1901. "VMI Alumni Medal of Honor Recipients," Virginia Military Institute Online Archives, Accessed April 16, 2015.

⁶² *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Virginia* (Richmond: The Office of the New Nation, 1867), 67.

⁶³ *Documents of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Virginia* (Richmond: The Office of the New Nation, 1867), 239.

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“1st, to provide competent teachers for the schools of the Commonwealth, as a State *normal* school; 2d, to promote the agricultural interests of the State, by imparting a practical education for the farmer; 3d, to train *civil engineers* to construct the works of internal improvements of the State; 4th, as incidental to its military government, to provide competent officers for the State militia. This brief outline of its general character shows that the Virginia Military Institute is a practical school, organized and regulated to meet the wants of the *industrial classes*, including in this designation the teacher, the farmer, the merchant, the manufacturer, the civil engineer, and the miner, and its courses of study and methods of instruction have been carefully prepared to meet these important ends.”⁶⁴

General Smith used similar reasoning in this response as he had in 1865 when he successfully petitioned Governor Pierpont to allow reconstruction to proceed. His goal was to emphasize that the practical skills cadets learned at VMI were exactly what Virginia would need to physically rebuild the state’s infrastructure and industry. General

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 239

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Smith indicated that VMI bettered the young men who came in, which in turn benefited the state. He stated,

“I would say that 350 poor young men...many without resources of any kind, and have been here trained for usefulness and distinction; all of whom, save *two*, have first taught in the schools of the State, as required by law, and thus aided in improving and developing the educational interests of the State; others have built our railroads and canals; others again engaged in mining and like industrial pursuits; and they have exhibited a capacity for their distinctive work which has been so marked as to place them in positions of eminence and expansive usefulness.”⁶⁵

Again, General Smith tactically omitted the military aspect of education young cadets receive at VMI. He largely focused on the material and physical benefits Virginia would receive by endorsing such an institute as VMI. As a result of General Smith’s persuasive and favorable argument, the committee tabled the resolution by Mr. Carr and did not obliterate VMI.⁶⁶ Boosted by this positive outcome, the Board of Visitors was able to efficiently press

⁶⁵ *Documents of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Virginia* (Richmond: The Office of the New Nation, 1867), 239.

⁶⁶ *Report of the Superintendent*, January 12, 1878, Virginia Military Institute Archives, 9.

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forward in rebuilding the mess hall and professors’ houses, purchasing the hospital building and adjacent lots, and fully equipping departments of instruction and administration.⁶⁷

With the last major challenge to the existence of the Institute in the past, General Smith and other members of the VMI community were able to look to the future of the school. Reconstruction of post and barracks continued to press on, and by November 1869, “all of the wartime damage was repaired and the entire Corps was living in Barracks.”⁶⁸ In 1868-69, the Corps had returned to normal and “reached its *antebellum* size of four companies.”⁶⁹ In addition, daily life for cadets become regularized, as indicated by a letter from Cadet Edward M. Watson to his father:

“I will begin my description just at 5 o’clock when I awakened by a most dreadful noise. I at first thought that the house was falling or that a volcano had burst in about a quarter of a mile from—I hardly knew where, as I found myself lying with nothing between me and floor except a mattress about three feet wide. I was soon enlightened as to the cause of the disturbance by an old cadet

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸ McMurry, *Virginia Military Institute Alumni in the Civil War*, 1st ed., 71.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 71.

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who in the dim light of the very early morning, as he stood dressing close by, I had not noticed. He remarked in a tone which seemed anything but motherly, ‘Rat, get up, Sir, and go to reveille.’”⁷⁰

Watson goes on to describe another aspect of his daily ritual: mealtime. For each meal, the cadets march into the mess-hall and,

“Each one having reached the seat assigned assumes the position of a soldier and standing staring the boy on the opposite [side] of the table in the face (who by the way in my case is mighty ugly), we have to wait until everybody has formed in his place. Then at the word ‘be seated’ each head of the three hundred cadets bobs down and we commence eating.”⁷¹

Such a routine as described by Watson would occur every day, except for Saturdays and Sundays, as it had in the pre-war years.

⁷⁰ “Cadet Edward M. Watson to his father,” September 17, 1868, Virginia Military Institute Archives.

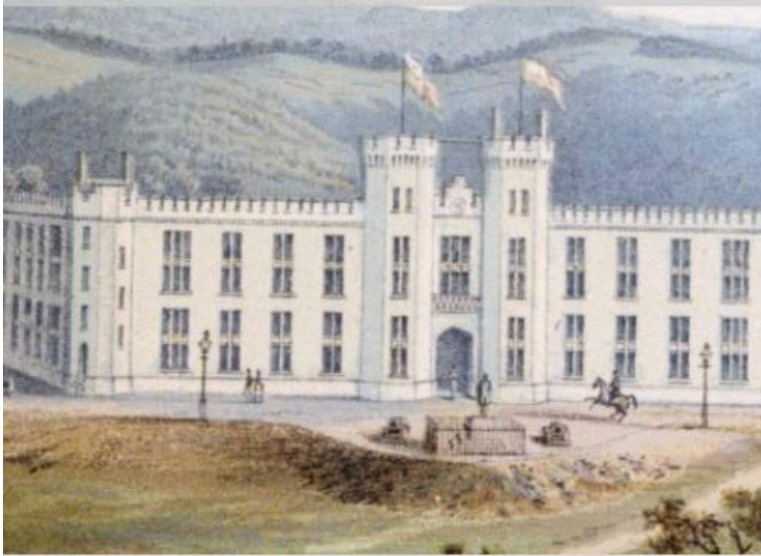
⁷¹ Ibid.

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With the disciplinary model restored and a normalized schedule, life at VMI resumed much as it had been before the war. Not unlike the rest of the country, the years of Reconstruction found VMI facing such trials and struggles that its very existence was called into question. However, the unwavering dedication of those advocating for the Institute was met with gracious support from those in political authority who chose to share the vision of a prosperous Institute integral to the rebuilding of a nation. Through the cooperative efforts of the State of Virginia, the Superintendent, the Board of Visitors, the cadets and faculty members, and the greater Lexington community, the Virginia Military Institute was able to overcome the devastation of war and rebuild a school that would continue to prosper 151 years after it was “left in ruins, with nothing left but reputation.”⁷²

⁷² *Report of the Superintendent*, January 12, 1878, as cited in Colonel William Couper, *One Hundred Year at V.M.I.*, Volume III, 105.

Appendix A



VMI Barracks as it looked in 1857. *VMI Barracks History—A Digital Exhibition from the VMI Archives.*

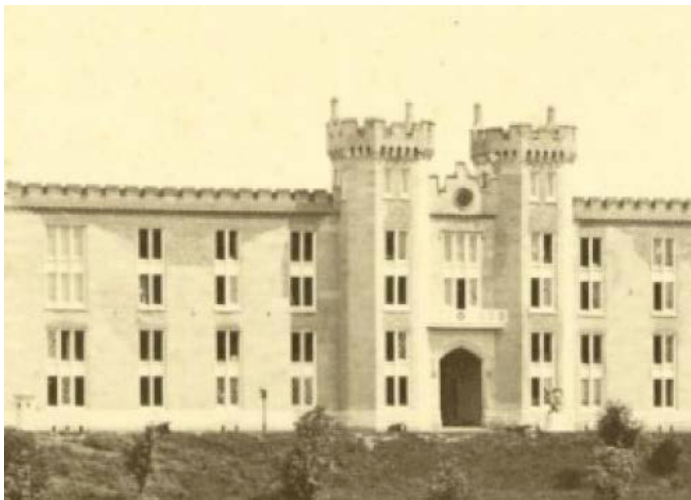


Barracks in ruin after General Hunter's raid, ca. 1866. *VMI Archives Photographs Collection*

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Main Street in Lexington, VA, ca. 1865-1866. *VMI Archives Photographs Collection*



VMI Barracks ca. 1875—Dark portions indicate what was rebuilt as a result of Hunter’s raid. *VMI Barracks History—A Digital Exhibition from the VMI Archives.*

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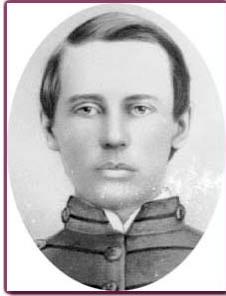


Cadets and townspeople in front of the Washington Statue, 1866. *VMI Archives Photographs Collection.*



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New Market Monument, “Virginia Mourning Her Dead,”
1903. *VMI Archives Photographs Collection*



Three of the five New Market Cadets that were reinterred at VMI in May of 1866. Colonel William Couper, *The Corps Forward: The Biographical Sketches of the VMI Cadets who fought in the Battle of New Market* (Buena Vista, VA: Mariner Publishing, 2005), 16.

Top: Samuel Francis Atwill; died July 20, 1864 at the home of Dr. F. T. Stribling in Staunton, VA as a result of lockjaw.

Bottom Left: William Hugh McDowell; killed in battle on May 15, 1864.

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Bottom Right: Thomas Garland Jefferson; died three days after the battle, May 18, 1864 in the home of New Market resident, Mrs. Clinedinst.

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