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The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: Reunion, Restitution, Remembrance

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Abstract

This is the second in a three-part series on the legacy of the Civil War at the Virginia Military Institute. You can also check out part one to read about VMI's struggle for survival in the years immediately after the war. Stay tuned for the conclusion of the series. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: Reunion, Restitution, Remembrance

March 14, 2016

By Kaylyn Sawyer '17

This is the second in a three-part series on the legacy of the Civil War at the Virginia Military Institute. You can also check out [part one](#) to read about VMI's struggle for survival in the years immediately after the war. Stay tuned for the conclusion of the series.

Jackson Memorial Hall, home of the VMI Chapel, is a sacred space on a secular campus. Stark wooden pews face the front of the chapel, gothic-style lanterns hang alongside state flags from the exposed-beam ceiling, and a mural depicting the charge of VMI's New Market Cadets hangs prominently as the focal point. The stuffed hide of Little Sorrel, Stonewall Jackson's horse, stands one level below in the VMI Museum. Yet an even more unexpected item exists in this multi-purposed hall: a plaque honoring Henry Algernon du Pont, the Union artillery captain who shelled the Institute in June of 1864. Fifty years of sectional healing following this destruction resulted in changes not only for the Institute but throughout the reuniting nation. I'll begin with du Pont's story.



Inside Jackson Memorial Hall. Photo courtesy of the author.

Henry Algeron du Pont's father was a West Point classmate of Francis Smith, the VMI superintendent who successfully advocated for VMI's rebuilding in 1865 and again for its very existence in 1868. Du Pont graduated from West Point and rose to the rank of captain in the Army of the Shenandoah. His Union artillery encountered the VMI cadets on the battlefield at New Market in May 1864. One month later in Lexington, VA he fired his cannons at the cadet barracks that housed VMI's students, including Cadet Thomas Martin of Charlottesville, VA. This would not be du Pont's last experience with the Virginia Military Institute.

During the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, reunion and reconciliation were prevailing sentiments. Perhaps it was this spirit that prompted U.S. Senator Henry A. du Pont of Delaware to introduce *A Bill for the relief of the Virginia Military Institute of Lexington, VA* requesting funds to compensate the Institute for unnecessary damage and destruction. On February 7, 1914 the bill was heard by committee, a group that included former VMI cadet Thomas Martin, now a Senator from Virginia. The debate contained light moments of banter about the climate of the Institute "with the shells of Senator du Pont flying around" and questioned whether former Governor Letcher fled Lexington by an "ignominious flight," a "hurried departure," or simply "a leave-taking." The focus of debate, however, was whether destruction of the entire Institute was warranted under the standard of civilized warfare.

Du Pont testified that the destruction of the cadet barracks seemed justified, but destruction of the education buildings was unwarranted. Writing in support, former VMI cadet and current Texas Senator Charles Culberson stated that restitution would "be another indication that only the heroism and sacrifices of the two sections of the Union ought to be perpetuated." The argument proved convincing. VMI was awarded compensation, and the funds were used to construct Jackson Memorial Hall in 1916.



VMI Corps in full dress uniforms marching in Washington, D.C. on June 7, 1917. Photograph taken the day before the corps arrived in Gettysburg for the dedication of the Virginia monument. [Photo via the VMI Archives.](#)

This VMI story echoes the larger themes of reunion and reconciliation prevalent in the nation at the time. It highlights reconciliation as former adversaries, Senators Martin and du Pont, advocated for a common cause. It reflects suppression of discussion surrounding the uncomfortable causes of the war and ongoing inequalities by pressing the notion of equivalent heroes and sacrifices. VMI itself was, for the most part, the Institute that General Smith

described in his 1865 defense: a school of applied science. However, the need to minimize the military aspect of the school for the sake of its survival had passed. With fifty years of loyalty to the reunited states, the Institute could openly acknowledge both its military and academic missions. Former commandant Jennings C. Wise did just this in 1915, referencing England's need for "scientifically educated officers" in the early years of World War I, as he emphasized the importance of attaining excellence in both academic and military education to fulfill a "commanding role" in these "critical times." VMI could again offer this nation the educated and disciplined citizens it needed to face contemporary challenges. The arrival of 350 cadets in Gettysburg as escort of honor to then-Governor Stuart for the unveiling of the Virginia monument in 1917 also reflects how VMI no longer publically minimized the military aspect of the school. This scene, with cadets dressed in formal coatee and shako, certainly does not reflect an Institute that felt the need to "keep a low profile," militarily speaking.

Sources:

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