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The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: To Obliterate or Not to Obliterate?

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Abstract

My family-driven fondness for the Virginia Military Institute is not a secret. I actually have a vintage gridiron-inspired VMI bobble head doll, an inheritance from my great grandmother who was proud to see both her sons graduate from the Institute. While thinking about the Civil War history of VMI for an academic course, I was struck by a most obvious question: Why was Virginia allowed to rebuild the Institute, described by some as a factory for the mass production of Confederates, after its destruction in 1864? I considered the challenge an opportunity for engaging research, and I offer this as the first in a series of three posts focusing on the literal reconstruction of the Virginia Military Institute. My hope is to explore the challenges the Institute faced following the Civil War, examine how the Institute's story reflects greater movements in the nation, and assess how the Institute functions and influences today. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Virginia Military Institute, VMI, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory

Disciplines

History | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
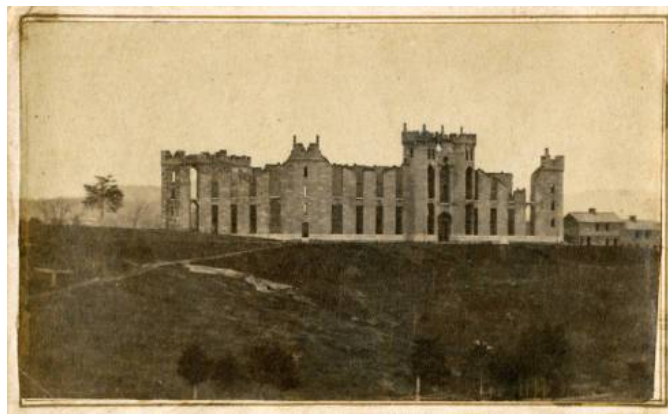## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: To Obliterate or Not to Obliterate?

February 17, 2016

By Kaylyn Sawyer '17

My [family-driven fondness for the Virginia Military Institute](#) is not a secret. I actually have a vintage gridiron-inspired VMI bobble head doll, an inheritance from my great grandmother who was proud to see both her sons graduate from the Institute. While thinking about the Civil War history of VMI for an academic course, I was struck by a most obvious question: Why was Virginia allowed to rebuild the Institute, described by some as a factory for the mass production of Confederates, after its destruction in 1864? I considered the challenge an opportunity for engaging research, and I offer this as the first in a series of three posts focusing on the literal reconstruction of the Virginia Military Institute. My hope is to explore the challenges the Institute faced following the Civil War, examine how the Institute's story reflects greater movements in the nation, and assess how the Institute functions and influences today.

The story begins in June 1864, two months after Confederate forces achieved victory at the Battle of New Market with the help of VMI's Corps of Cadets. Union General David Hunter arrived in Lexington, VA after a march up the Shenandoah Valley. Abandoned without mounting a significant defense, the Virginia Military Institute was left at the mercy of General Hunter and his guns. In Hunter's own words, "On the 12th I also burned the Virginia Military Institute and all the buildings connected with it." The Institute's Board of Visitors quickly began making plans to rebuild, but the defeat of the Confederacy one year later left VMI uncertain of its very existence.

Cadet barracks in ruin following General Hunter's raid in June 1864. Photograph by Boude and McClelland, courtesy of Virginia Military Institute Archives.

As a state-sponsored school, VMI needed funding. Institute Superintendent General Francis Smith appealed to Governor Francis H. Pierpont and the "restored" state government in Virginia, outlining the value an institution like VMI offered to the recovering South. His petition highlighted the nature of VMI as a school of applied science that addressed the agricultural, mining, commercial, manufacturing, and infrastructure needs of the country. He minimized its role in the Civil War. Clearly reflecting the tone of southern discourse at the time, the petition indicated it would be "unnecessary to dwell upon the record of the last four years." Call this ignoring, willful forgetting, or creating a diversion, the Board surely wanted to focus only on the history that would cast a positive light on the Institute with survival as the goal. 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 to aid in restoring the ruin that was the South. Pierpont ideologically and financially supported the rebuilding of VMI, and physical reconstruction began.

Exterior of barracks around 1875. The darker areas indicate what was rebuilt following Hunters' raid. Photograph by Michael Miley, courtesy of Virginia Military Institute Archives.

A second challenge, however, was presented in January of 1868 at the State Constitutional Convention of Virginia. A resolution was offered that succinctly 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." Two years after VMI was permitted to rebuild, it still faced critical opposition. General Smith was again tasked with justifying VMI's existence. In this response, he echoed what he had presented in 1865 to Governor Pierpont, outlining the four basic aims of VMI: to provide competent teachers for the Commonwealth, to promote agricultural interests, to train civil engineers for internal improvements, and to provide competent officers for the State militia. He emphasized that the practical skills learned by cadets at VMI were desperately needed to rebuild Virginia's infrastructure and industry. Again, General Smith tactically minimized the military education cadets received at VMI and omitted any references to the war. The resolution to obliterate failed, and VMI continued. In the spirit of reunification, the unwavering dedication of those advocating for the Institute was met with key support from those in political authority who chose to share the interpretation of VMI as an institute of applied science, integral to the rebuilding of Virginia and the nation. VMI struggled for its existence but was able to establish itself as an educational institution with a vital role to play in the reunited states.

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