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## The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: Resolved to Be

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# The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: Resolved to Be

## **Abstract**

This is the last 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 and part two for information about the Institute in Civil War memory. [*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

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### The Literal Reconstruction of VMI: Resolved to Be

March 29, 2016

By [Kaylyn Sawyer '17](#)

*This is the last 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 and [part two](#) for information about the Institute in Civil War memory.*

The Virginia Military Institute was reconstructed on the same ground upon which it was founded in 1839. The Institute has progressed and evolved, at times contentiously, to become the school it is today. Racial integration was realized in 1968, and in 1997, following an unfavorable Supreme Court ruling, women were admitted into the corps. That same year, the Jonathan M. Daniels Humanitarian Award was established to commemorate the life and legacy of Jonathan Daniels '61 who was killed in Alabama during the civil rights struggles of 1965 while accompanying an African American teenager into a store. A ceremony is held every March, two months prior to the Institute's long-standing New Market Ceremony, which has expanded in scope to commemorate all cadets who have sacrificed in service to the nation. The Institute has not remained "frozen in time" but has instead moved forward with the currents of the nation. The school's current mission statement reflects an evolution of Civil War era Superintendent Francis Smith's 1868 characterization of the Institute as a "school of applied science," producing graduates competent in civilian life and as officers in the military.



*The Jonathan Daniels Ceremony from March 2014. Photo via the VMI archives.*

Smith characterized VMI as an institute that utilized military-style discipline not for the primary purpose of producing soldiers but as one component of a broader educational goal. Statistics show this continues to be true. On average, 50% of current graduates pursue military commissions and 15% make a career of military service. With social sciences and engineering as top majors, graduates are prepared for careers either inside or outside of the military. For evidence of VMI's continuing role in preparing civilian leaders, one need look no further than the Virginia General Assembly, where Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam (D) and State Senate Majority Leader Tommy Norment Jr. (R) are on opposite sides of the aisle. While their paths to civil service and their political leanings differ, they share a common bond in their alma mater.



*An oil portrait of Francis H. Smith, the first superintendent of VMI. Photo via the VMI archives*

A natural question then is whether a state-supported school that blends academic rigor with military discipline still has value. John Wise, a cadet-veteran of the Battle of New Market, writes that his father sent him to VMI in 1862 to be “under restraint and receive instruction, instead of growing up in ignorance and idleness.” With ROTC options now available at traditional colleges and universities, what is the contemporary appeal of this unique and arguably oppressive college experience? I ventured to the Institute to ask this question, interviewing ten cadets about their reasons for choosing VMI and their experiences there. While one cadet cited the opportunity to play water polo, and another cited the desire to be out of his home state, the majority indicated they wanted a challenging and unique college experience. One cadet thought it was great to be from VMI but not at VMI. I think many others would agree. They described daily life as a grind, and one cadet jokingly stated VMI was wiping away his soul. Perhaps his soul will one day be restored to him spit-and-polished, regimented and undaunted by adversity. Despite cadets’ complaints about the food, dated rules, and lack of freedom, they agreed that the long-term benefits of learning time and stress management skills, self-discipline, and experience in handling adversity would one day make the experience worthwhile. Finally, to determine whether VMI still functioned in practice primarily as an educational institution with a secondary

military component, I asked the cadets which they felt was emphasized more. The unanimity of their response surprised even me. Every cadet said that education comes first; VMI is a college above everything. A first class cadet remarked that no one had been kicked out because their shoes weren't shiny enough.

Thomas Jackson's words "You may be whatever you resolve to be" are etched above the arch that frames his statue at the Virginia Military Institute. Those words have inspired cadets for years, yet they appear to be an affirmation for the Institute itself. After near destruction in the waning months of the Civil War, the administrators of VMI made a choice to rebuild. They "resolved to be." The Institute survived an early political challenge in 1868, gained compensation for supposedly unjust losses during the war, and has evolved with the social and cultural movements in this nation to remain a relevant and contributing Institute of higher learning with an oddly appealing spirit all its own.



*The interior of barracks through Jackson Arch, ca. 1970. Photo via the VMI archives*

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