

The Application and Acceptance Process of the
United States Military Academy in the Antebellum Period

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INTRODUCTION

The application and acceptance policies of the Military Academy were relatively simple during the antebellum period. Applicants or, in several cases, parents wrote short, handwritten notes describing the candidate's qualifications and sent it to the Secretary of War. The President made the appointments, and the War Department notified the candidates of the outcomes. In analyzing this process, political influence seemed to be the key factor in obtaining an appointment, and the more powerful the influence, the easier it was to obtain the appointment.

This paper is organized in three parts. The first section gives an overview of the application and acceptance process during the antebellum period; the second analyzes the actual cadet application papers maintained by the Military Academy Archives. The final section compares and contrasts the application process of Robert E. Lee, William T. Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, and Thomas J. Jackson as an illustration of the importance of the politics on the process.

APPLICATION PROCESS

In the years preceding the Civil War, congressional critics of West Point charged it with being a bastion of aristocracy and privilege. Defenders maintained that the academy was open to all youth, regardless of family

circumstances.¹ In his book The Best School in the World, James L. Morrison reviews the financial status and background of the Corps of Cadets from 1842 to 1879. He concludes that, although the Corps of Cadets was not significantly compiled of American aristocrats, cadets whose fathers had governmental connections or political influence, obtained more than their share of appointments to West Point.

Neither the military academy nor the Chief of Engineers, who administered West Point, had much say in selecting the nominees for cadetship. All the West Point authorities could do was examine the nominees for basic academic skills and physical fitness.²

From 1812 to 1866, the Secretary of War referred the administrative details of cadet appointments to the Engineer Department.³ The Secretary of War made the selections annually based on the number of vacancies at the Academy, and forwarded the list to the President for his signature. Those selected were conditionally appointed as cadets and notified by letters.

Before 1843, the War Department customarily distributed appointments throughout the United States in proportion to the number of Representatives and Delegates in Congress, and the Secretary of War generally made the selection based upon

1. Morrison, The Best School in the World, page 62-64.
2. Morrison, page 62.
3. Note: the Secretary of War used the Engineer department to deals with the application process, through the paper War Department and Engineer Department are interchangeable.

the recommendation of the district congressman. When a vacancy occurred in a district, because the cadet previously selected either graduated, resigned, or could not complete his education, the congressman usually recommended an individual from his own district. On March 1, 1843, Congress passed a law that made official what had commonly been done before. It required equal distribution of appointments with the additional provision that the cadets who were recommended be a resident of the District, State, or Territory from which he was appointed. The law also provided for ten at large appointments that were not confined to a congressional districts.⁴

The flow of the process tended to follow a general pattern. The applicant himself, parent (most likely the father), or friends wrote a letter to their congressman or the Secretary of War and requested an appointment. If the congressman favored the candidate, he wrote a letter to the Secretary of War nominating the candidate. The Engineer Department acknowledged the congressman's nomination by letter and described to him the upcoming selection process.⁵

The Engineer Department compiled a list of candidates for the year and presented it to the Secretary of War. Once

4. Synthesis of the Introduction, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1, page iv, 1967, and the The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point. 1802-1902, Volume I, pages 225-229, last three paragraphs.

5. Letter from the Engineer Department to the nominating congressman of John Buford, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1843, file 23.

the Secretary of War made the selections and the President signed the appointments, the candidates were notified and asked to accept or decline the appointment. The Department also asked them to get the consent of their parents or guardians to attend the Military Academy.⁶

The appointee would then report to West Point by the date indicated on the acceptance letter and be given an admission and physical examination. The Academic and Medical Boards sent home those candidates who failed.⁷

ANALYSIS OF THE CADET APPLICATION FILES

The application files of the antebellum cadets contain an assortment of information dealing with the appointment process. In examining these files, several common characteristics began to emerge and are summarized below.

To cross check a candidate's file, I referred to Register of Graduates to verify that the applicant was selected and used the Descriptive List of the New Cadets to verify that the appointee was admitted after his arrival at the Academy. The later source indicated whether a selected cadet passed the qualification standards after he arrived at West Point.

6. General summary of information in the Application files, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866.

7. Descriptive Lists of the New Cadets, Archives, U.S. Military Academy. West Point, New York, 1830-1866.

In several cases the applicants' files had letters from the Engineer Department describing the qualifications for admissions and regulations of the Military Academy. The candidates usually described their qualifications using these letters as a guide. The qualifications were as follows:

No candidate could be admitted into the Military Academy who was less than sixteen, or more than twenty-one years of age, on the day of his entrance; or of less height than four feet nine inches; or who is deformed, or afflicted with any disease or infirmity which would render him unfit for Military service, or with any disorder of an infectious or immoral character; he must be able to read and write the English language well, and to perform with facility and accuracy the various operations or the ground rules of Arithmetic, of Reduction, Simple and Compound Proportion; and of Vulgar and Decimal Fractions.⁸

The majority of files contained requests from individuals, family (usually the father), or friends that were sent to their congressman or the Secretary of War requesting a nomination. These letters constituted the initial application. In some cases files contain several recommendations while in others only the application letter was present. The candidates whose files were strong, ones containing letters from several congressmen or high government officials, tended to receive an appointment. The weak files, ones containing a single letter or none at all,

8. Regulations of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 1823, page 19, and a Qualifications For Admissions Letter form the War Department to cadet candidate, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1836, file 155.

from a congressman, did not present a clear pattern. Some were selected while others were not.

The excerpts below are examples of application letters. The first is a letter written by Peter Johnston, the father of Joseph E. Johnston, to John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, requesting the nomination of his son.⁹ It is representative of the common application.

Sir,

It is my wish to obtain a situation for one of my sons, who is sixteen years of age, in the military establishment at West Point. His literary attainments are at least equal to those of most young gentleman of his years, and his morals are unblemished. But I am not informed what are the conditions for which fulfil acceptance at that institution, nor do I know whether there are any vacancies now to be filled. May, I then, beg that you will do me this favor to inform me on these points, whether my son can be admitted into the military school either now or within the next twelve months?¹⁰

The letter continues with a description of the father's background and recommends officials in Virginia Government as references to his own character.

George B. McClellan's application packet is an outstanding example of a politically strong file. The file contained letters of recommendation from many citizens in his state and from his Congressman. It also contains a letter of recommendation from James Buchanan, the future

9. Note: Some files used the word nomination while others used recommendation when making a request for appointments, after 1843, nomination was generally used when a congressman made the request.

10. Letter from Pete Johnson to the Secretary of War, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, role 1824, file 155.

President of the United States. The letter below is McClellan's application letter. It demonstrates his thorough understanding of the admission requirements that is uncommon among the other candidates letters.

Sir,

With the consent of my mother (my father being deceased) and my relatives and friends I have come to the determination of being an applicant for a cadetship at the Military Academy at West Point. I have come to this conclusion from an ardent desire to qualify myself to be of service to my country and my affairs are such as presents the gratification of my desire to inform my mind by a liberal education as the regulations of the department requiring a statement by the applicant of his physical and mental qualification. I will briefly state them. I was born the 29th of November 1818, and am 5 feet ten inches high, and am not deformed or afflicted with any disease or infirmity of any nature whatever and also of good constitution and health. I am well conversant with the rudiments of the English language including grammar and have went through a coarse of Arithmetic. I have paid considerable attention to geography and history. I beg leave to refer the department to the accompanying certificate signed by my townsmen and neighbors and also to the Hon. John Halbnaith the member in Congress from this district as referring to my habits and qualifications. In conclusion I have only to add that in the event of my receiving the appointment I shall endeavor to qualify myself for future usefulness and I think your confidences will not be misplaced.¹¹

George McClellan

The Department of War notified selected cadets by mail and described to them the requirements of their conditional appointment. The files of candidates who were appointed contained the actual notification letters.¹² The letter

11. Letter from George McClellan to the Secretary of War, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1836, 144.

12. See Appendix 1.

describes the examination the appointee must take when he arrives at West Point, pointing out that his acceptance is conditional upon his passing of the exam. Candidates were also told that no cadet could receive money or supplies from anyone without the permission from the Secretary of War and that a cadet rejected at the examination for admissions could not be re-appointed unless an appeal was accepted by the Academic Board.¹³

The letter also points out that the information the candidate gave on his application must be in accordance with the admission requirements in order to be allowed into the Military Academy. For example, if the candidate did not meet the age or physical standards he would not be admitted.

After the appointees received a letter of notification, the War Department directed them to return a letter of acceptance or declination and, if they accepted the appointment, a letter of consent from one of the their parents. Below is a letter of acceptance from William T. Sherman to Secretary of War Lewis Cass written in April of 1836.

Lancaster, Ohio

Sir,

I have duly received your notice of the 4th of March, informing me that I have been conditionally appointed a cadet in the service of the United States.

I herewith notify you, that I accept the appointment, and will cheerfully comply with the conditions annexed to it.

13. Qualification for Admissions Letter from the War Department to a cadet candidate.

I have the honor to be very respectfully yours
servant

William T Sherman 14

Accompanying Sherman's letter was a letter of consent
given by his mother.

I do hereby agree and consent that my
son, William T. Sherman, shall bind himself
by such written articles as may be necessary
to his gaining admission to the Military
Academy at West Point.

Mary Sherman 15

The Cadet Application Papers suggest that the mechanics
of application and acceptance policies were simple during
the antebellum period. The candidate, or any other
interested person, wrote a letter outlining his
qualification in accordance with the West Point regulations
and waited for a reply. If he was selected, he either
accepted or declined the appointment.

The two most common characteristics found between the
files were that parents or friend usually initiated the
application process instead of the candidate and that the
politically strong files consistently received an
appointment.

14. Letter from William T. Sherman to the Secretary of
War, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application
Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1835, file 143.

15. Letter from Mary Sherman to the Secretary of
War, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application
Papers, 1805-1866, roll 1835, file 143.

ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROCESS

Although the application process was relatively simple, the gathering of political influence to secure an appointment was complex. This section demonstrates the important of political influence through the application process of Robert E. Lee, William T. Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, and Thomas Jackson.

Robert E. Lee had a genuine interest in becoming a soldier and West Point seemed the logical choice in beginning a military career. The education was free and his mathematical abilities were exceptional.

Lee's situation dictated that he obtain an answer to his application as soon as possible. His mother was not financially strong and the selection of a career had to be made quickly to provide income. He was also eighteen years old and nearing the Academy maximum age limit of twenty-one.¹⁶

The competition for appointments from the state of Virginia was strong. Of the thirty-six who applied in the year prior to Lee's application, only six were selected.¹⁷ This competition, coupled with the haste to begin a career, influenced Lee, with the help of some family friends, to

16. Note: several qualifications for admissions letters from the War Department to the candidates and the introduction to the cadet application papers list the age requirements from 1812 to 1866 as 14 to 21. Freedman, R.E. Lee, lists it from 14 to 20.

17. Freedman, Douglas Southall, R.E. Lee, page 38.

make a personnel application to the Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun.

William H. Fitzhugh, a prominent Virginian and a long time friend of the family, wrote a letter of introduction for Lee to present to the Secretary of War. Calhoun granted the interview and found Lee to be impressive. He told Lee that if he produced suitable recommendations that he would be considered.¹⁸

Lee received a letter from his teacher, William B. Leary, attesting to his scholastic abilities and managed to get another from Congressman R.S. Garnett. As a resident of the District of Columbia, Lee did not have a representative in congress, but the family was traditionally from Westmoreland, Garnett's district, and, as described by Douglas Freedman in R.E. Lee, "Robert or some member of the family" secured the recommendation.¹⁹

C.F. Mercer, another Virginia congressman, also wrote a letter of endorsement. Freedman suggests that Henry Lee, the half brother of Robert, or "some other interested friend," circulated the Mercer letter among the senators and representatives for their added signatures. The signers included Virginia Congressmen George Tucker and R.S. Garnett (second recommendation), Virginia Senator James Barbour, who was to succeed Calhoun as Secretary of War, and Kentucky Senator Richard H. Johnson, who later became Vice-President

18. Freedman, page 40.

19. Freedman, pages 40-41.

under Van Buren. The other three that signed were Tennessee Senators Henry Johnson and William Kelly, and Mississippi Senator David Holmes.²⁰ Robert's brothers Henry Lee and Charles Carter Lee also sent letters.

The letters made strong reference to the talents of Robert E. Lee and to the military reputation of his father, Major General Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee. With the backing of the five senators and three representatives, Calhoun selected Lee to attend the military Academy in 1824 but delayed his admittance for one year because of a lack of vacancies.

Lee's acceptance into the military revolved around two events. The first was the interview that Calhoun granted him. The prominent position that Fitzhugh held, through his letter of introduction, might have influenced Calhoun to see Lee. This seem reasonable, but it was Lee himself that impressed Calhoun enough to continue the application process.

The second event seemed to be the key that secured the appointment. Henry Lee, Robert's half brother, was the richest member of the Lee family.²¹ He had obtained his wealth through a trust fund set up by his mother, "Light Horse Harry" Lee's first wife, and had served as Assistant Postmaster General under John Quincy Adams. The work he did, or the "interested friend", in collecting the seven

20. Freedman, page 41.

21. Freedman, page 36.

congressmen's signatures, was the most impressive item in Lee's file and the most likely item that influenced Calhon's selection.

William T. Sherman was the son of an Ohio Supreme Court Judge. His father died when he was nine and Thomas Ewing, a man who had worked his way up from a manual labour to a member of the United States Senate and close friend of the family, took him into his home. Two years before Sherman was eligible to attend West Point, Ewing told him to prepare for the Academy; two years later he went. Sherman met the requirements, but his appointment was a relatively minor affair compared to others. Ewing's position as a United States Senator was the key factor in the obtaining the appointment. 22

Jesse Grant, Ulysses S. Grant's father, wanted to send his son to college but at that time he could not afford the cost. He understood that the Government paid the cost of an education at the Military Academy and began the process of procuring an appointment for his son. In the Autumn of 1838, Jesse Grant wrote to his friend, Senator Thomas Morris, asking him to nominate Ulysses to the Military Academy. At that time, the Senator did not have a vacancy. He had given it to a Pennsylvania Congressman. Morris suggested that Jesse write directly to the War Department or

22. Hart, B.H. Linddell, Sherman, page 13-14.

his own Congressman because there was now a vacancy in that district.²³

A cadet who had resigned because of poor grades created the vacancy. Jesse had applied for an appointment for his son through the War Department, but he now had to get the approval of his Congressman, a man he did not like. The Congressman, Thomas L. Hamer, used the situation to end the quarrel between himself and Jesse and nominated Ulysses for cadetship.²⁴ The key to Grant's appointment was his father's acquaintance with Senator Morris. Because of this relationship, Jesse Grant was able to gain information about the West Point vacancy and act.

The appointment of Thomas Jackson to West Point was one of opportunity and determination. Jackson, who was an orphan, sought an appointment to gain a free education. He also believed that military life would improve his health, but he did not plan on a career in the Army.²⁵

When the congressional district in which he lived had a vacancy to West Point, he and three other men applied. Samuel L. Hays, the congressman from the district, enlisted Capt. George W. Jackson, a West Point graduate and the son of Jackson's great uncle, to help him test the candidates.²⁶

23. Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, pages 45-57.

24. Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, pages 45-59.

25. Chambers, Lenoir, Stonewall Jackson, page 49.

26. Note: The competitive examinations used by Hays were rare but not uncommon, it was one of the first technique to make appointments based more on merit. See also Morrison, The Best School in the World, page 63.

When Captain George Jackson held the examination, Gibson J. Butcher, Thomas Jackson's close friend and an orphan, did so well in mathematics that he received the recommendation and a conditional appointment. However, after arriving at West Point he disliked the life so much that he left within a few days without notifying the authorities.²⁷

On his way home, Butcher stopped in Jackson's hometown and explained what he had done. When Jackson heard the news, he consulted with Captain George Jackson and his family on how best to pursue the vacancy. The plan was to go to Washington as soon as possible and provide to Congressman Hayes, who did not yet know there was a vacancy, a candidate to replace Butcher.²⁸

Jackson met with Congressman Hayes and gave him a letter from Butcher describing why he chose not to attend the Academy and recommending Jackson to take his place. He also carried several letters of recommendation from influential men in the community, most of which were familiar to the congressmen. This action, coupled with the congressman's own knowledge of Jackson and a quick escape from the embarrassing resignation of Butcher, secured the recommendation for Jackson. The Secretary of War, satisfied with Jackson's abilities, granted the conditional appointment.²⁹

27. Chambers. page 50.

28. Chambers. pages 50-51.

29. Chambers. pages 51-54.

Jackson's appointment was the result of a quick response to a window of opportunity. His community mobilized around him and produced the necessary letters of recommendations; his congressman knew him and he received good advice from a former West Point graduate and Army officer.

Although a small sample, these illustrations seem to parallel what the cadet application papers also suggest: that political influence was the greatest factor in obtaining an appointment. Additionally, the amount of political influence brought to bear seemed to be directly related to the ease of obtaining an appointment.

Since Sherman's foster father was a United States Senator, he knew he was going to the Academy two years before he went; whereas Lee, although he had a prominent family name, still had to recruit influential family members to obtain his appointment. Grant's father knew a United States Senator, but had to wait for a vacancy before his son could get an appointment, as compared to Lee who was guaranteed an appointment but had to wait a year.

Jackson knew few people with political influence. He was an orphan and had to enlist the help of his community. Of the four individuals that initially competed for the appointment, two were orphans, and the only one with any family connections was too young.³⁰ This left three men of relatively low social standing which might have allowed the

30. Chambers, page 49.

congressman to use the examination because he would not have to fear any political repercussions. Jackson received the appointment mostly through his own determination and some luck.

CONCLUSION

During the antebellum period, the application and acceptance process of the Military Academy was simple . Although a basic set of qualifications were used to screen candidates, the evidence suggests that political influence was the greatest factor in gaining an appointment. This seems to imply that, if the best qualified people did not have sufficient political influence, they may not have received a deserving appointment. It was not until after the Civil War that merit began to be a greater factor in obtaining an appointment.

Appendix 1

DEPARTMENT OF WAR 1836

Sir:

You are hereby notified, that the President of the United States has, this day, conditionally appointed you a Cadet in the service of the United States, and that on repairing to West Point, in the State of New York and reporting yourself to the Superintendent of the Military Academy, you will be examined for admission into that Institution, and, if found qualified, will be admitted conditionally as a Cadet.

Your warrant of appointment as Cadet be dated back on the thirtieth of June, will be made transmitted to you should the Academic Staff, on the termination of the examination, report favorably as to your conduct, industry, and qualifications; but should the report unfavorable, you will be no longer considered a member of the Academy.

You will immediately inform this Department of your acceptance or nonacceptance of this conditional appointment. Should you accept it, and repair to West Point and report yourself, as above indicated, your pay will commence on passing your examination for admission; but unless you repair to West Point within the time specified, or render a satisfactory reason for delay, your appointment will be recalled.

Your acceptance must be accompanied by written assent of your parent or guardian (as the case may be) to your signing articles, by which you will bind ... putted from the time of your admission to the Military Academy.

It is proper to observe, that this appointment confers no right to enter the Military Academy, unless your qualifications, with regards to age and attainments, agree, to the letter, with those annexed.³¹

The Secretary of War

31. Appointment Letter from the War Department to a cadet candidate, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866, roll 11836, file 155.

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