

Captain Alden Partridge, Superintendent of West Point during its Formative Years
- *The Truth About the Man Behind the Myth* -

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Alden Partridge was one of the most infamous, misunderstood, and controversial figures of his day. Officially listed as the third superintendent of West Point,¹ history has been neither kind to his memory nor accurate in its depiction of the numerous contributions he made to the development of the United States Military Academy. In fact, much of what is commonly known about him is tainted by the prejudices of his enemies and the way they have chosen to misrepresent his actions, downplay his accomplishments, and demean his character. That history has taken these allegations seriously, in its portrayal of Partridge, distorts the true nature and character of a man who arguably did more for the Military Academy than any other comparable figure during the formative years of USMA's early history. We know the myth, but who really is this man named Alden Partridge, what was his vision for the Academy, and what was the true nature of his character during the time he spent at West Point? In the search to uncover answers to these questions, it will be necessary to look beneath the overt controversy surrounding Partridge so that an informed and objective assessment can be made of him as a man. This requires a good, hard look at the causal factors that contributed to his downfall and led to the subsequent development of his villainous reputation in the recorded history of the Military Academy. This paper will focus on the positive contributions Partridge made during the time he spent at West Point in order to show that while he may not be remembered as a popular figure, his notorious reputation is mostly undeserved.

¹ Alden Partridge served as superintendent of West Point from 1815-1817 and he is commonly misconstrued as the third superintendent of USMA. This is due to the apparent oversight of many historians to acknowledge the brief Superintendency of MAJ Decius Wadsworth who served as USMA's second superintendent for approximately a year and a half following the initial resignation of Jonathan Williams; this officially makes Partridge the fourth Supe. Williams returned to resume the position from Wadsworth when he returned to active duty at the behest of the President and Secretary of War. The correct order of succession for superintendents leading up to Partridge was: Jonathan Williams (1st), Decius Wadsworth (2nd), Jonathan Williams (again), Joseph G. Swift (3rd), and Alden Partridge (4th).

What we know about the early history of USMA, especially the period preceding the superintendency of Sylvanus Thayer, is vague at best. There are numerous contradictions of fact among the various accounts concerning this timeframe,² and there are two basic schools of thought that exist concerning the superintendency of Alden Partridge.³ According to some noted historians, like Thomas Fleming and Richard Dupuy, Partridge was incompetent and micromanaging. From the accounts and position of others, like Lester Webb and Peter Malloy, Partridge was brilliant but misunderstood. The underlying issue regarding history's account of Partridge therefore is very clear – what do we really know about this period?

A wealth of historical information exists about Alden Partridge, but any truly objective evaluation of him is extremely difficult due to the biased nature of existing literature. Early accounts of Partridge are overwhelmingly negative. John Crane and James Kiely in their history of West Point describe Partridge as “virtually preoccupied with marching and drilling his cadets... his ideas on running a military establishment were otherwise rather questionable.”⁴ Noted historian and founder of the USMA Association of Graduates, George W. Cullum, himself a former superintendent of the Military Academy, describes Partridge as a man who “had neither the talent, nor other

² A good example of the many contradictions that exists are the various discrepancies among different accounts concerning the dates and length of time Alden Partridge actually spent at the Academy as cadet. Partridge's son, Henry Partridge, in *Manuscript Biography of Alden Partridge*, documents this timeframe as four months in total, while the USMA web site under the Department of Mathematics lists this period as nine months, while others have still different and conflicting versions. Any interpretation of history therefore, during this timeframe, must necessarily involve close scrutiny of the information's source and any potential bias it contains before a conclusion can reasonably be made concerning what is fact and what is either fiction or a distortion of the truth.

³ Dr. Sam Watson, Dept of History, USMA, 15 October 2001, verbal interview by author

⁴ Crane, John and Kiely, James F. *West Point "The Key to America"* McGraw Hill, 1947, New York, 112

essentials for his high calling.”⁵ Cullum’s comments are especially disparaging because he wrote extensively about Partridge. As one of the most reputable early historians on USMA due to his status as a former graduate and superintendent, his work is widely regarded as credible. Cullum’s opinion serves as a significant basis for much of the negative sentiment in existence about Partridge. A more recent USMA historian during this period, Edgar Denton III, asserts that Cullum had become “so entranced with Thayer’s part in the life of that institution” that he could not bear to give any of the credit for the success of the Academy to any of Thayer’s predecessors.⁶

Following his departure from USMA, Partridge became a strong advocate for closing the Military Academy that he had loved so much during his tenure at West Point. In his bitterness over the manner at which he was relieved as superintendent, Partridge made it one of his primary life-long projects to dissolve the Academy and to clear his name. He became one of the leading advocates for West Point’s closure during his lifetime.⁷ Many of the negative accounts against Partridge also stem from the strong mutual dislike that existed between Partridge and Thayer. Perhaps these factors contributed to the development of Cullum’s low opinion for Partridge. Denton suggests a potentially collaborative correspondence against Partridge, between Cullum and Thayer, for painting such a gloomy picture of Partridge’s superintendency.⁸ It is undeniable that Cullum and Thayer corresponded with one another on the subject of Partridge and the

⁵ Cullum, George W. *Extract from General Cullum’s proposed biographical sketch of General Sylvanus Thayer.* (undated, handwritten note) Cullum Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

⁶ Denton, Edgar. *The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy 1775-1833.* Special Collections, USMA Library n. IV-V

⁷ According to the *Norwich University Record* (December 1979 Issue), among the numerous pieces against USMA that he authored throughout his life, Partridge published “a critical diatribe” against the Military Academy entitled “*The Military Academy, at West Point Unmasked; or, Corruption and Military Despotism Exposed.*” This document is expressive of his opinions about West Point and serves as an example of the numerous pieces and letters he authored that lobby for closure of the Academy.

⁸ Denton, Edgar, IV-V.

early history of the Academy while Cullum was performing the research for his historical work about USMA. As graduates and former superintendents, both Cullum and Thayer undoubtedly despised Partridge for his personal vendetta against the Academy. Partridge was unrelenting in his appeals to national leaders for USMA's abolition; this must have been a constant thorn in the sides of Thayer and Cullum during the period when each was superintendent. It is likely that Thayer and Cullum intentionally set out to discredit Partridge's memory by focusing on the negative controversy that surrounded Partridge and not on the man's positive contributions to the institution.⁹ Even historian Stephen Ambrose made the comment that "Cullum omitted all paragraphs praising Partridge" when Cullum published his *Biographical Register of Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy*.¹⁰ This work provided the basis for the negative sentiment against Partridge as represented in Cullum's version of early USMA history. The rest comes from a relative failure by historians of this period to objectively uncover the true nature of Partridge in their research.

Other negative references to Partridge are in documents that describe the "cabal" organized to bring him down by members of the faculty during his tenure as superintendent. Much of the evidence is found in the transcripts of the two courts of inquiry organized against Partridge by the academic staff, the first occurring in 1816, and the second in 1817. On the surface, these inquiries and Partridge's subsequent court martial are indicative of a pattern of misconduct by Partridge. Closer examination, however, reveals the charges to be frivolous and unsubstantiated. They belie the fact that Partridge was consistently exonerated of all accusations each time charges against him

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ambrose, Stephen E., *Duty, Honor, Country a History of West Point*, 48.

were made. In fact, many of the counts brought against him were reiterations of the original charges that he had been exonerated for in the past.

A major source of the negative sentiment against Partridge and undoubtedly the most significant factor that contributed to his downfall, are the letters that were written by Partridge's enemies from within the faculty and staff of the Academy.¹¹ In one such letter addressed to the President of the United States, Professor Jared Mansfield of the Department of Natural and Experimental Philosophy (the chief conspirator), with the support of his co-conspirators, made twenty-eight points against Partridge calling for Partridge's removal as superintendent. "Your excellency's attention is humbly requested to a number of abuses in the management of this institution which do not come under ocular observation or could not be known to any but those who experience their ill effects..."¹² The document addressed such points as the "admission of cadets into the Academy without legal qualifications,"¹³ and the lack of "security for our rights, or any

¹¹ Webb, Lester A. *Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy 1806-1833*, 51-52, Webb interprets a "letter from Jared Mansfield, et al, to the Board of Visitors," 30 November 1815, National Archives, that offers several interesting arguments to explain the motives of members of the academic staff against Partridge:

1 - "The Corps of Engineers, although held responsible under the law for maintaining and operating a military school, had miserably failed to meet the expectations of the Government; therefore, the Corps should be relieved of this responsibility."

2 - "The success of this new institution would be assured only through control by a civilian academic staff, separate and apart from the military."

3 - "The function of the staff would be to select and train students as engineers and scientists, with military training incidental to that purpose."

4 - "To demonstrate the need for such change in the philosophy of the institution, the schemers would show that the best engineer officer Captain Alden Partridge, was not qualified for the superintendency of the Academy."

5 - "The attack against Captain Partridge was to include alleged financial irregularities, abuse of cadets, and violation of laws governing the school."

6 - "To show Captain Partridge possessed an arrogant, arbitrary, and haughty disposition which rendered him unfit to be the commanding officer of West Point and superintendent of the Military Academy."

¹² Mansfield to President Monroe, June 1817, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

¹³ Ibid.

permanency of the system.”¹⁴ The President and Secretary of War received many letters like this. What is not explained in the content of this letter however is that Partridge continued to admit cadets that didn't meet qualifications because powerful politicians in Washington continued to appoint those cadets to the Academy. This was done at a level far above Partridge irrespective of the cadets in question being qualified according to the criteria established by the law of 1812. There was not much that Partridge with his limited influence could do to stop this. Further, the inference that Mansfield was trying to create with his reference to the “permanency of the system,” does not account for Partridge's motive in being an advocate for the types of changes he made. Mansfield hints at the changes in a vague way, just enough, to create a negative perception of Partridge's actions. Partridge was an innovator and he saw that change was necessary to improve the Academy consistent with his vision. Unfortunately for Mansfield, the changes Partridge saw as beneficial for the success and growth of the Academy were in direct contrast to what Mansfield wanted for himself and the direction that Mansfield saw for the Academy. The reality that Mansfield did not serve in the official position or capacity to be making decisions regarding the Academy's future did not seem to occur to him. Mansfield's account of the situation at West Point spun things in a negative way against Partridge. Partridge's changes were good and necessary to the growth of the Academy, but they were a threat to Mansfield's cause. Partridge was mostly unaware that these letters were being written, but the effect of their continuous barrage against his character eventually took their toll to his good standing with important politicians in Washington.

¹⁴ Ibid.

To understand Partridge's difficulties as superintendent, it would help to know his background. Alden Partridge was the second of seven children born to his parents Samuel Partridge Jr. and Elizabeth (Wright) Partridge on 12 February 1785. He was raised on a farm in his native state of Vermont and was characterized even as a child as highly intelligent and energetic. Farm life contributed to instilling him with a solid work ethic. As a child he was known to be an especially avid reader who entertained himself by reading everything he could get his hands on. From a very young age he demonstrated a solidly rooted set of values; he was never known to swear, and faithfully attended church.¹⁵ He went on to be educated at nearby Dartmouth College, which he attended for three years from 1802 until 1805. At Dartmouth he was recognized as an exceptional student, even though a fire at the college later destroyed his academic records. He had not yet graduated from Dartmouth when on 23 November 1805 he was appointed to attend the United States Military Academy by President Jefferson. Partridge entered West Point in December 1805 as a "cadet in the engineer corps." His age, experience, intelligence, and solid educational background made the program at the Academy little challenge. He attended his courses at USMA at an accelerated pace and graduated less than a year later on October 29, 1806 becoming the fifteenth cadet in the history of USMA to graduate from West Point. Following his graduation, Jonathan Williams (the Academy Superintendent) recognized Partridge's potential by commissioning him directly to first-lieutenant. He became the first of only two known graduates in history to receive this honor.

Partridge spent his entire career as a soldier in the Army at West Point without leaving the Military Academy and remained unmarried until later in his life, after being

¹⁵ Partridge, Henry V. *Manuscript Biography of Alden Partridge*.

forced to leave. Following his graduation with the class of 1806, he stayed on at the behest of Williams and accepted an initial position on the academic staff as an assistant instructor in the Mathematics Department on 4 November 1806. By all accounts an avid and enthusiastic teacher, Williams wrote to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn "I cannot too strongly express my satisfaction at the good management of Lieutenant Partridge in my absence. I think him highly deserving of the first vacant captaincy."¹⁶

Partridge was promoted to captain on 9 March 1811 and assumed the position as full professor of the Mathematics Department on 14 April 1813. Later that same year on 3 September, Secretary of War John Armstrong appointed Partridge to the influential position as "Professor in the Art of Engineering." His appointment to this capacity was approved by President James Madison, which shows an interesting level of involvement and support for this decision at the highest levels of U.S. Government. The appointment itself is representative of a tremendous shift for Partridge because the title officially made him the senior ranking officer on post in the absence of the superintendent.¹⁷

Involvement of the President in this act moreover, while probably required by the standard procedures of the time, legitimized Partridge's position as "acting superintendent." It is also undoubtedly reflective of the efforts and potential Partridge was perceived to display up to that time. Even so, Partridge was known to serve as the acting commander of the post as early as 1807.¹⁸ It seems reasonable to conclude from this that his early promotion to first-lieutenant may have been due, at least to some

¹⁶ Williams to Dearborn, 30 October 1808, quoted from Denton, 74.

¹⁷ Millet, Alan R. and Maslowski, Peter. *For the Common Defence*, 104. "the said corps shall constitute a military academy" The act of 1802, was approved by President Jefferson; it authorized creation of the U.S. Military Academy and placed the command and administration of West Point under the purview of the Corps of Engineers. It established *by law* that it would be run by the senior engineer officer present.

¹⁸ A number of sources establish the idea that Partridge served as acting superintendent of USMA shortly following his graduation. In support of this statement, Edgar Denton III makes this assertion in his: *The Formative Years of the U.S.M.A.*, 74.

degree, to more than just a simple recognition of his performance as cadet and potential for future service by Superintendent Williams. There were not many others as available or as qualified to assume the role of instructor, as Partridge was at that time, either in the Army or in the country at large. Men of Partridge's caliber were quickly gobbled up by the civilian sector and put to work in the physical "building up" of America. The direct appointment to first-lieutenant may be an early indication of Williams' intent to groom Partridge not just as an instructor, but also for the position as acting commander of the post.¹⁹ It may also have been this assumed understanding that formed the basis of Partridge's disgruntled relationship with Charles Gratiot, another graduate from his class of 1806.

Captain Charles Gratiot and Lieutenant Sylvanus Thayer were assigned to USMA for a brief period starting in 1810 to assist in the administration of the Academy. By bringing Gratiot and Thayer back to West Point, Williams tried to introduce a more efficient overall structure at USMA that would enhance its organizational effectiveness. The arrangement made Partridge, as senior instructor, the head of the academic staff, essentially making him the dean of the Academy. Instead of being pleased with the change and with his designation in status as "chief professor," Partridge became very angry over what he viewed as a loss in his overall authority.²⁰ If there had developed any sort of unwritten arrangement between Williams and Partridge, this action by Williams had certainly broken it. Partridge felt violated over what he probably perceived as a

¹⁹ This is my personal assertion as a possible reason for Partridge receiving his direct commission to first-lieutenant. I base this on reasonable assumption, from my part, in consideration of what is known about Partridge and the needs of the Academy during this time. Partridge's solid educational background at Dartmouth and the trust he developed through his relationship with Williams as a cadet made him ideal to assume the role of instructor and "acting commander for the post."

²⁰ Denton, 75.

“breach of contract” and took a short leave of absence after his request for return to the previous arrangement concerning the scope of his authority was denied. This incident is significant to our understanding of Partridge for two reasons. First it provides valuable insight to the importance Partridge placed at “being in control,” and second because it undoubtedly serves as the initial source of Partridge’s resentment toward Thayer. Both of these things become more significant a few years later. The climate of the Army and the needs of the nation being what they were, Thayer and Gratiot were soon called away from the Academy to supervise construction of facilities work elsewhere; with their departure, Partridge regained the lost control he previously had held.

Partridge made many significant contributions to West Point during his tenure at the Academy. Most significantly, he provided the critical leadership that sustained West Point throughout an extremely difficult period in its history. He did this by virtue of his continuous physical presence during the eleven consecutive years that he served there. The Academy’s remote setting, in an isolated area of New York’s Hudson River Valley, compounded his problems. Its location, while picturesque, contributed to a lack effective transportation networks and made communication with the outside world difficult. As “acting superintendent,” he was forced to contend with a shortage of adequate housing, the dilapidated condition of the facilities, and a lack of adequate funding or support from the government.²¹ Worse, he was never given a clear focus, mission, or purpose to work with from his superiors. Some of the other problems he faced, were a general lack of

²¹ Several examples of the shortage of adequate funding include an incident during one of the winters at West Point where Partridge was forced to have workers cut timber for heating fuel from federal lands, and then to sell some of this wood in order to make enough profit to pay the workers for their efforts. Other examples include times where he went out of pocket himself to pay for the cloth and material to make cadet uniforms, or the time following the War of 1812 when the Swift had to take out a private loan for \$65,000 in order to keep the Academy afloat with its expenses – times were tough!

effective regulations or systems that organized the Academy. This contributed to the lack of a properly developmental and structured environment that he knew would be capable of achieving and sustaining the requisite and uniquely military experience so essential in the development of cadets and to the success of the young Academy.

Cadets received their initial appointments and arrived at USMA to begin their instruction at a variety of times throughout the year, making adherence to a schedule or any effective structuring of the academic program exceptionally difficult. Partridge had a limited staff to work with, and at times during his tenure almost no staff at all. The cadets currently in attendance under him came to the Academy at various ages and experience levels. Some lacked a proper background in academic preparation to be instructed with their peers. This created a requirement for those cadets to receive special tutoring. Others were so far ahead academically that the standard program of instruction was holding them back.²² Partridge had to contend with constant political interference in these issues.²³ As "acting superintendent" he lacked the political clout he needed to stop

²² Admissions conditions at the Academy, Partridge's own solid educational background, and the rapid manner that he completed his courses to graduate ahead of schedule, as a cadet, contributed to Partridge's concept advocating that every cadet "be allowed to progress as rapidly as he could" through the Academy. It's my belief that while his concept was misguided by today's standards, it was certainly a potentially appropriate response to the situation and circumstances facing Partridge. His technique addressed the disparity of academic preparation that cadets, during those times, came to the Academy with. For his part, Partridge lacked the type of clout and political support that later enabled Thayer to correct this problem, enforce admissions standards, and implement the four-year course for cadets that we know exists at USMA today. It is further arguable that Partridge continued this practice at Norwich and other early military schools that he later founded, not because he didn't believe in the merits of a structured four-year curriculum, but that he may have continued to fight the same sorts of shortcomings in the educational backgrounds of his students at these other schools. Partridge was much criticized for this practice by members of the academic faculty at USMA, like Mansfield, while he was superintendent. Undoubtedly, this philosophy was what also contributed to Partridge's motives behind teaching the courses he was criticized for teaching by USMA faculty members like Mansfield and Ellicott. Their criticisms of this act contributed to the list of charges faced by Partridge during the two courts of inquiry he faced during his tenure at West Point.

²³ Partridge was constantly flooded with letters from parents and politicians on the behalf of parents. It is possible that he had to contend with some level of harassment from a number of concerned sources for nearly every cadet in his charge. An example of the constant criticism he was under can be found in his letter to Major Wood that states: "I have just received a letter from honorable James Monroe, Secretary of

the intermittent appointment of cadets to the Academy or the ability to enforce the law of 1812.²⁴ As a captain, he was too junior to effectively solicit the kind of support from political leaders needed in order to get things done more effectively. Both Williams and Swift were far too busy with their other duties to take up his cause. The worst part of his experience was that his official title being only "acting superintendent" for a majority of his tenure and as only a *captain* in rank, he lacked the authority he needed to enforce order among the academic staff. The faculty's disloyalty to him and the controversy they caused through malicious letter writing completely destroyed any unity of effort Partridge may have achieved. For all intents and purposes, he had all of the responsibility but none of the authority to make things work. Still, even in the midst of all these troubles, Partridge was able to make a difference at the Academy. It was his leadership that kept it going through the War of 1812, in spite of the drop in support and enrollment that nearly caused USMA to disappear prior to the war.²⁵

Partridge brought a solid vision to the Academy; it was to not only educate, but to train cadets in preparation for their future military service as officers. There is evidence of this as early as 1810, when he ordered that "cadets are by law liable to perform any duty that a soldier may be commanded to perform ..."²⁶ Partridge believed in a balanced program of instruction for the Academy. It is remarkable that he was such an advocate

State, directed to me at West Point, in which among other things, he expressed some anxiety for the situation of his nephew, Cadet James Monroe at West Point." – *Partridge to Wood*, 17 January 1814, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

²⁴ The law of 1812 referred to in this paragraph reorganizes USMA in response to the demands of the War of 1812. Among its provisions, it increases the size of the Corps of Cadets to 250 and prescribes important criteria in the areas of admissions and graduation requirements.

²⁵ Denton, p. 78 – Denton asserts that at one point just three months prior to the War of 1812, "there were no instructors and no cadets." Partridge was the only instructor to stay with the Academy and his boss Superintendent Jonathan Williams resigned in protest for a final time at not being given command of troops to fight in the war. The institution virtually ceased to exist.

²⁶ Partridge, Alden. *Regulations of 1810*, provision #13, Partridge Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

for military training throughout his tenure because he had never spent any time in the operational army outside of West Point. This is even more surprising in light of the fact that he began his career as an instructor without becoming completely consumed by academic considerations, a failing of many of his future compatriots. Through analysis, it is possible that a portion of Partridge's strong feelings on the subject of things military developed as a result of his rapid advancement through the Academy in 1806. "I was drilled but twice after entering the Academy before I was required to instruct cadets in the duties of the company. The consequence was that I and others acquired a smattering of elementary duty, partly right and partly wrong."²⁷ From the basis of this statement, Partridge probably felt a little cheated by his lack of military experience as a cadet and sought to make up for it through his position as superintendent of the Academy. The statement also indicates that the military component of Partridge's vision was a logical outgrowth of what he was witness to from the sidelines in the War of 1812.

The fact that Partridge's vision was so narrowly focused on military training caused significant problems with the academic staff, which through the secret leadership of Jared Mansfield had a very different, contrasting view for the future of the Academy. Mansfield advocated the formation of a non-military institution at West Point based on the French science and engineering academy, the Ecole Polytechnique. A critical subcomponent of this vision was that West Point would become America's premier institution of higher learning. Graduates destined to become military officers would go on to be trained at separate finishing schools like the ones in France at Metz and

²⁷ Account from Alden Partridge, "in his own words" taken from his son Henry Partridge in his type written: *Manuscript Biography of Alden Partridge*, 11.

Fontainbleu.²⁸ Mansfield's version for USMA did not focus on military training, which he believed would be an obstacle to academic studies. Thomas Jefferson was vague in his reasons for establishing the Military Academy in 1802. Subsequent Presidents (in addition to superintendents Williams and Swift) also failed to clarify their visions for the Academy, which provided latitude for Mansfield's interpretation.²⁹

Partridge's emphasis in the military training of cadets was focused toward the preparation of educated *and* trained military officers capable of leading units of infantry, artillery, and cavalry.³⁰ Webb quotes Partridge as having said:

I beg not to be misunderstood as recommending a system of education for our youth purely military. Being far from this: I mean nothing more than that the military should constitute an appendage to their civil education, and thereby qualify them for the correct and efficient discharge of their duties as soldiers when their country requires their services in that capacity.³¹

Like Mansfield, Partridge's vision was based on his understanding of Jefferson's intent, with the important difference that Partridge focused on the component of Jefferson's vision that called for the Academy to provide trained officers to lead the nation's forces in time of war. Partridge should be credited for his vision in this regard. Ultimately West Point adopted the sort of balanced curriculum and program of instruction of which Partridge was such an advocate. The balanced approach between academic education

²⁸ Malloy, Peter, M., *Technical Education and the Young Republic, West Point as America's Ecole Polytechnique, 1802-1833*, 365. – Malloy asserts that both he and Lester Webb support the idea that Mansfield advocated the formation of a non-military institution based on the French academy Ecole Polytechnique and the assertion that Mansfield believed West Point would become America's premier institution of higher learning.

²⁹ Watson, Samuel, "Jefferson's Academy, Jefferson's Army, Jefferson's Nation: West Point from Williams to Thayer, and Its Impact on Army and Nation," 5. – Watson asserts that Jefferson "had a number of motives" for the creation of USMA in 1802.

³⁰ Malloy, 365.

³¹ Webb, Lester A. *The Origin of Military Schools in the United States Founded in the Nineteenth Century*, 187, quoted from the *Prospectus of the American Literary, Scientific, and Military Academy*, Norwich, Vermont, 1820 (Manuscript in Norwich University Library)

and military training currently in practice at USMA is owed, at least in part, to Partridge's influence; this is part of the legacy that he left behind.

The military component of Partridge's vision had strong linkage to events concerning the Academy and its lack of substantial influence during the War of 1812; the war was a difficult test for the American Army. Although it ended victoriously for the United States, the performance of the Army during the war was barely adequate. The war exposed serious deficiencies in the preparedness of the nation to mobilize and also in the ability of its officers to lead forces in combat. America maintained the integrity of its borders and was successful in driving out British forces, but was unsuccessful in its campaign to remove Britain's influence in Canada.³² The War of 1812 is representative of a series of U.S. failures but mostly the failure of its militia forces that were woefully inadequate to the task. Following the war, President Madison recognized the lack of West Point officers available to fight the war and the general failure of the officer corps overall to provide the necessary leadership that would have made a more decisive impact.³³

Partridge learned some important lessons from the War of 1812. Support for the Military Academy seriously wavered prior to the war. The outbreak of war itself and the problems faced by America's forces saved the Academy from extinction, reinvigorating it with vital relevance for its existence.³⁴ Soon after the declaration of war, Partridge himself attempted to join the Northern Army but was unsuccessful because it was commonly thought that engineer officers should not command troops. There was also the

³² Millet, Allan R. and Maslowski, Peter. *For the Common Defense, A Military History of the United States of America*, 89-119.

³³ Ambrose, 43.

³⁴ Malloy, Peter M., *Technical Education and the Young Republic, West Point as America's Ecole Polytechnique, 1802-1833*. 346.

issue of a scarcity in trained instructors available to teach at the Academy during a time when it underwent rapid expansion in response to the needs of the war.³⁵ As rooted as Partridge was to the Academy academically, he was much too valuable to the overall needs of West Point to be reassigned and his repeated requests for reassignment were turned down. Partridge should be credited for the professionalism he showed in the way he chose to handle this situation. Instead of being consumed by the frustration he must have felt, Partridge channeled his energy into the military training of cadets in order to prepare them to fight in his place. After the war, he continued this emphasis.

Captain Partridge was an accomplished tactician of his day: and was well versed in the science of artillery. He was passionately fond of drilling, and often rendered the battalion drills interesting and instructive by forming diminutive armies and fighting over renowned battles. And always accompanied by an intelligible and interesting lecture. He showed us "how fields were won;" and thus beguiled many an hour from the tedium of the usual beaten path of drill. So fond was he of practical military instruction that it was no uncommon circumstance to find him drilling a squad.³⁶

As professor of engineering for the Academy, Partridge added the discussion of military topics to his course. This provided him an important opportunity to augment the drill and other physical forms of military training that he advocated.³⁷

A smaller, but no less visionary component of the program Partridge foresaw for cadets at the Academy can be found through the emphasis he placed in physical

³⁵ Webb, Lester A. *Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy 1806-1833*, 23.

³⁶ George D. Ramsey, *Recollections of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1814-1820*, MS, USMA Library, as quoted from Denton, 99.

³⁷ Partridge was a visionary in many respects. This was not only evident through his actions to include military training at the Academy, but was also evident in his ideas. He submitted several proposals to Washington City that included an idea to build other military academies, possibly suggestive of his foresight for the creation of the Naval Academy. He was also an advocate for the expansion of military training at the Academy to include both regular army and militia officers who could choose to accept active service upon graduation, or remain dormant until needed during time of crisis or war. Partridge's ideas were not acted upon, but serve as further examples of his forward thinking concerning the concept of military training. Much of this can undoubtedly be attributed to the influences that the Academy and the War of 1812 had upon him. In any event, these ideas undoubtedly contributed to Partridge's later reputation as the "Father of ROTC" and as founder for numerous military schools across the nation.

education. An early advocate for a “sound mind in a sound body,”³⁸ no other educational institution at the time had the same kind of early foresight concerning the importance of this issue. Further scrutiny could suggest a link in Partridge’s influence to the modern pillars of the USMA experience that places emphasis on the academic, military, physical, and moral ethical development of cadets. Partridge was an advocate for cadet development in all of these areas.

Among Partridge’s other substantial contributions, he issued a series of regulations starting in 1810 that significantly enhanced the structure of the environment at West Point for cadets. Prior to 1810 there were no formal rules governing the discipline of cadets and the administration of the Academy. The only rules in written existence dated to the regulations of 1802, from a time that dates to the founding of the Academy. These regulations did little more than address peripheral issues from an installation level perspective. The document itself focused exclusively on the assignment of quarters, definition of the jurisdictional authority for the military commander, and garrison support for the post. The 1802 regulations did not even begin to address the requirements for running the Academy, at least not from the cadet perspective. This is what Partridge did when he authored the regulations of 1810.

The regulations of 1810 were drafted in two parts and endorsed with the approval of the superintendent, LTC Williams and Secretary of War, William Eustis. The first part addressed administrative issues such as admissions requirements, leaves, academic requirements, etc. The second part addressed rules and regulations governing cadet life such as disciplinary offenses, the conduct of courts of inquiry, etc.

³⁸ Webb, 199.

10th. Every Cadet who shall knowingly violate any of the above regulations, shall for the first offense be privately admonished by the commanding officer, for the second offense be publicly admonished, and for the third offense he shall be publicly reprimanded, for the fourth offense he shall be confined to his quarters for a term not exceeding eight days, and for the fifth offense shall be stricken from the rolls of the Academy as an unworthy member.³⁹

The document contained many prescriptive requirements, but more importantly set everything down in an effective way that brought a new element of organization and consistency to the administration of the Academy. It provided the rudimentary elements for cadets to get the most from their experience at USMA. It also provided for their development on their way toward ultimately becoming proper military officers, equipped with the basic skills for success. It was a hand written document and consisted of five pages; certain provisions from the original document are still in use and remain in effect even today. Partridge continued to revise and improve the list of regulations he introduced to the Academy, issuing them as new orders as they became necessary.⁴⁰

Another significant contribution Partridge made to USMA was the success of his long fought struggle for better authority and autonomy for the position of superintendent. He did this with the successful introduction of the Regulations of 1815 that were approved by Secretary of War Monroe. Unfortunately for Partridge, his victory at

³⁹ Partridge, Alden. *Internal Regulations for the Military Academy*, 25 May 1810, Partridge Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

⁴⁰ Copies of which are located in the Special Collections of the USMA Library, Partridge issued other major regulations during his tenure that included:

- The *regulations of 1814*, drafted as an order, these contained additions to the internal regulations issued in 1810 and included provisions for inspections, roll calls, daily schedule, discipline, conduct, etc
- The *regulations of 1815*, include provisions that primarily cover the responsibility of the superintendent and functions of other supporting staffers on the post
- The *regulations of 1816* further addresses provisions not covered by previous regulations. More importantly these address the issue of the command authority of the superintendent, duties of the professors, and inspector, and establishes a Board of Visitors for the Academy.

It is significant to note Partridge's important work as the source in the introduction of these regulations, many of which Thayer is later credited with having instituted.

establishing himself in position as superintendent came at a substantial political cost. This act is representative of a major shift in his relationship with his superior, the commandant of the Corps of Engineers, Brigadier General Swift. Not being consulted in the plan to separate the position of superintendent, Swift found out about it after the fact, making the following comments as a result.

The Rules and Regulations which Capt. Partridge succeeded in getting authorized by the Secretary of War I condemn and they are suspended by the Secretary. The Military Academy shall be under my control or I will have nothing to do with it. After March 1815 every professor shall sign a diploma before a cadet is commissioned. I did wish to make this agreeable to Capt. Partridge; I now care not for his opinion or convenience.⁴¹

Partridge's action in taking this step was initially approved, then rescinded by Secretary of War Monroe, later to be re-established again. Partridge won a major victory with his introduction of this regulation both for himself as well as for all those who would follow him as future superintendents.

It would later prove extremely unfortunate for Partridge that Monroe was an intimate witness to the whole affair concerning the methods he used in getting the regulations of 1815 approved. Monroe's official capacity through his secretarial positions gave him tremendous insight as a witness to the situation that occurred between Swift and Partridge. While it is arguable that Monroe saw the merit of Partridge's argument for making a distinction in the role of superintendent for the Academy, he undoubtedly also saw how underhanded Partridge was in getting the motion approved. The act was disloyal to Swift, and created the perception that Partridge had violated his chain of command by going around his superior in order to gain approval for the proposal he submitted. Additionally, Monroe in his capacity as both Secretary of State and

⁴¹ Swift to Ellicott, 2 February 1815, quoted from Denton, 106.

Secretary of War was undoubtedly privy to the malicious rumors being circulated about Partridge by the faculty at West Point. His inside knowledge of Partridge's underhandedness, together with his existing knowledge of the "cabalous" letters against Partridge must certainly have caused Monroe to develop a very negative perception against Partridge. Monroe's knowledge of this matter would later hurt Partridge when Monroe became President. Partridge lost favor with both Monroe and Swift as a result of this action and the incident that followed. This would also contribute to Monroe's action to fire Partridge and replace him with Sylvanus Thayer as superintendent. Even still, Partridge's act to create autonomy for the position of superintendent is admirable and representative of one of his most significant contributions to the Academy.

Another of Partridge's contributions includes the formation at USMA of a military band. It was his thought that "music would improve cadet drill and raise morale."⁴² He also designed and instituted the change to a cadet gray uniform that we know did not set well with his boss, General Swift, who wrote the following in his comments to Partridge: "I do not like the uniform & am not pleased at the manner in which it has been established."⁴³ While the letter expresses Swift's dislike of the new uniform and its change from its blue revolutionary war counterpart, the new design has established its hold in the traditions of the Academy and has become a trademark of USMA and other military schools that is still very much in evidence today.

An extremely complex figure in the history of the Military Academy, Partridge made many significant contributions to its growth and subsequent success. In order to understand why he is least remembered for those contributions and most remembered in a

⁴² Ambrose, Stephen E., 48.

⁴³ Swift, J. G. to Partridge, A, 22 September 1816, Partridge Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

negative way, some discussion of his faults and attributes is necessary in order to develop a more complete picture of the "whole man" that was Alden Partridge.

All men have their faults and Partridge is certainly no different. Among his most limiting features, Partridge's lack of experience in matters external to USMA is one of his biggest detractors as superintendent. Throughout the eleven years that represent his military career, he had never served in an operational assignment away from West Point. In fact, he never left West Point at all except for brief periods during a few occasional trips he made while on official business for the Academy, or when visiting his home state of Vermont on leave. He was unfortunate to never have gotten the same sorts of opportunities that other officers enjoyed and it affected his ability to exercise a mature judgment as superintendent. In fact Swift was known to remark in private that Partridge was "uncouth" and lacked "what is called genteel carriage." Swift also said that Partridge had "[an] awkwardness of manner that gave a repulsive first impression."⁴⁴ All of this points in the direction of Partridge's relative inexperience, both with respect to his isolation at West Point as well as to the isolated nature of his upbringing as a child on a secluded farm in Vermont. Partridge undoubtedly recognized this shortcoming himself, which could explain part of his motivation in volunteering for reassignment and service in the War of 1812.

In addition to Partridge's obvious lack of experience, he was very young and not politically connected. Having come from a remote area of Vermont, a state with little political influence, Partridge had little constituent support in Washington. Only thirty-two years old at the time of his relief from the Academy as superintendent, Partridge shared many of the same sorts of problems later experienced by Douglas MacArthur

⁴⁴ Watson, 27.

following the conclusion of WWI. Partridge was in an unenviable position where he had to enforce a superior-subordinate role upon men like Mansfield and Ellicott who were nearly twice his age. Many of the conflicts he experienced with the faculty resulted from this relationship, which violated the cultural norms of the era. Older men were typically characterized as holding the legitimate positions of authority within society while the young were expected to demonstrate a "reverence" toward their elders.⁴⁵ The relationship Partridge shared with Mansfield and Ellicott did not fit this profile. His age coupled with the corresponding lack of support Partridge enjoyed routinely from Swift put him in a difficult position with senior members of the academic staff. Swift never intervened on behalf of Partridge, despite it's being well within the scope of his power to do so. While Partridge was a "father figure" toward young cadets, he must have seemed impudent to the cantankerous, older members of the faculty.

Many of Partridge's problems were attributable to the lack of a mentor in his life.⁴⁶ Neither Williams nor Swift in their capacities as Commandant of the Corps of Engineers spent much time at USMA, being too busy in the supervision of construction projects around the country or pursuits of interests elsewhere. While Williams may have acted as a mentor, he was out of the picture by the beginning of the War of 1812.

Although some attribute Swift as assuming this role as Partridge's mentor,⁴⁷ Swift really only inherited Partridge from Williams. Both Williams and Swift failed to have any real sort of vision for the Academy, and neither made much effort to communicate a productive sense of purpose to Partridge concerning the subject. It is true that Swift did

⁴⁵ Aimone, Alan, C., Archival Historian, USMA Library, 22 October 2001, verbal interview by author.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Watson, Samuel, "Jefferson's Academy, Jefferson's Army, Jefferson's Nation: West Point from Williams to Thayer, and Its Impact on Army and Nation." -- Watson refers to Swift as Partridge's "protector" and Partridge as Swift's "protégé."

stick up for Partridge on occasion with the President and Secretary of War in Washington, but much of the motivation for this support can be attributed to Swift's fear that he would be forced to replace Partridge if Partridge was relieved.⁴⁸ The truth about this matter was that no other officer at the time really wanted the job of superintendent for the Military Academy.⁴⁹ Major William McRee, groomed for the position and considered most qualified for the job declined and resigned his commission two years later on a different issue. Thayer himself only reluctantly accepted the position, and was known to have requested reassignment on a few occasions during his tenure.⁵⁰ Partridge was the only man who really wanted the job.⁵¹ Ultimately, both Williams and Swift felt he was "the right man in the right place."⁵²

His habits of industry and personal supervision were truly remarkable and he seemed to have adopted the principle that administrative success depended upon his personal exertions, admitting no division of responsibility. There was no duty that he could not perform, whether in the professorial chair, the pulpit, drilling the battalion and discoursing on grand tactics, down to the more humble role of drilling a squad.⁵³

Partridge had a domineering personality. The cadet's nicknamed him "Old Pewter" because he was always so serious with his strict spit and polish image, buttoned uniform, and buckled saber. "No one ever saw him out of uniform, and it was commonly believed that he owned no civilian clothes."⁵⁴ Partridge had what we would call today as a "Type-A" personality. In combination with the other faults of his inexperience and youth, the faculty found him especially annoying. His bearing and characteristics all

⁴⁸ Watson, 52.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Denton, 100.

⁵² Thayer to Swift, 17 February 1854 and 23 April 1860, quoted from Denton, 100.

⁵³ George D. Ramsey, *Recollections of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1814-1820*, as quoted by Denton, 100.

⁵⁴ Ambrose, 44.

served to reinforce the military components of his vision for the Academy. His opponents, especially Jared Mansfield, must have regarded every aspect of his character as extremely annoying. In addition to being a threat to the direction they saw for the Academy, the faculty often accused him of being a micromanager. Partridge did not trust the academic staff because they demonstrated to him that they were unworthy of this trust.⁵⁵

Partridge loved the Army and the Military Academy. He summed up his feelings about West Point in a letter to the Secretary of War using the following words:

I can with the most perfect conviction of speaking the truth, declare that none of my private concerns have even interested me half so much, and also that nearly my whole time and attention, to the almost total neglect of my private affairs, have been unremittingly devoted to the promotion of its interests...⁵⁶

In spite of his shortcomings, Partridge demonstrated an extraordinary dedication to the accomplishment of the vision he had for USMA. He provided a personal model of leadership to the cadets and exhibited a genuine concern for the success of the Academy. Perhaps Williams best summarized his performance and contributions to USMA when he commented that "if I had not been well assisted by Lieut. A. Partridge I should not have been able to have got through in the Government of the young men."⁵⁷ Swift, also impressed with Partridge's accomplishments commented that Partridge "deserves much

⁵⁵ Webb, Lester A., *Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy, 1806-1833*, 47. "Generally, policies and practices of the senior are carried out. When Captain Partridge, in the winter of 1815-1816, went on business of the Academy to Washington City, Douglass was the next senior at the Point and temporarily was its commander. No sooner had Partridge left the Academy than Douglass completely changed policies and practices. No doubt the instigation of Ellicott and Mansfield, an examination of the cadets by a committee of visitors was arranged, the course of instructions changed to exclude military instruction and a subtle attempt was began to change the purpose of the institution."

⁵⁶ Partridge to Secretary of War Crawford, 25 July 1816, quoted from Webb, Lester A., *Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy, 1806-1833*, 91-92.

⁵⁷ Williams to Mansfield, March 1809, quoted from Pappas, *To the Point*, 63.

commendation for a systematic and zealous discharge of his duties.”⁵⁸ The cadets loved and admired him,⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ he was an honest, morally upright, and well-intentioned man who had a deep regard for the welfare of USMA that was not seen again until the superintendency of Robert E. Lee.⁶¹

Partridge’s work during his tenure at USMA laid an important foundation for the success of Thayer who followed in his footsteps. In spite of his shortcomings, Partridge demonstrated many admirable qualities and left behind many contributions that were critical to the long-term success of West Point throughout history. His influence continues at the United States Military Academy through its regulations, the cadet uniforms, the USMA band, and his vision for a balanced curriculum. These accomplishments and USMA’s continued existence to modern times, provides substantial evidence that while Partridge was not a “perfect” individual, the common misperception of his notorious reputation is mostly undeserved.

⁵⁸ Swift to Secretary of War, April 25, 1815, Swift Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY

⁵⁹ Letter to Alden Partridge from John Wright, George W Leslie, Chas Davis, and George W. Gardiner, November 1816, Partridge Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY. – This letter summarizes the feelings of former cadets who worked under Partridge during his superintendency; it is also representative of the sentiment shared by many others who were cadets under Partridge. The letter stated:

Having been informed you are about leaving this post for a time if not forever, and where too we have for a long period had the honor of being commanded and instructed by you, we beg leave to submit to you our acknowledgements for your services while cadets and the gentlemanly and officer-like behavior you have invariably exhibited towards us since commissioned. They have impressed upon us sentiments of respect which time cannot obliterate and which are only increased by the sincerity of our belief that the good of this institution with the advancement of its members has been ever foremost in your mind.

⁶⁰ Ambrose, 59-60. – Another good example of the reverence the cadets felt for Partridge can be taken from Ambrose’s recounting of Partridge’s return to USMA following his relief from command.

Thayer had been at West Point only six weeks when, on August 29, 1817, Partridge returned. Several cadets who were waiting idly by the landing when he returned rushed up to shake hands with him. They then escorted him up the hill, where more cadets were collected who, when they saw Partridge, threw their hats in the air and cheered.

⁶¹ Malloy, 366.

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