

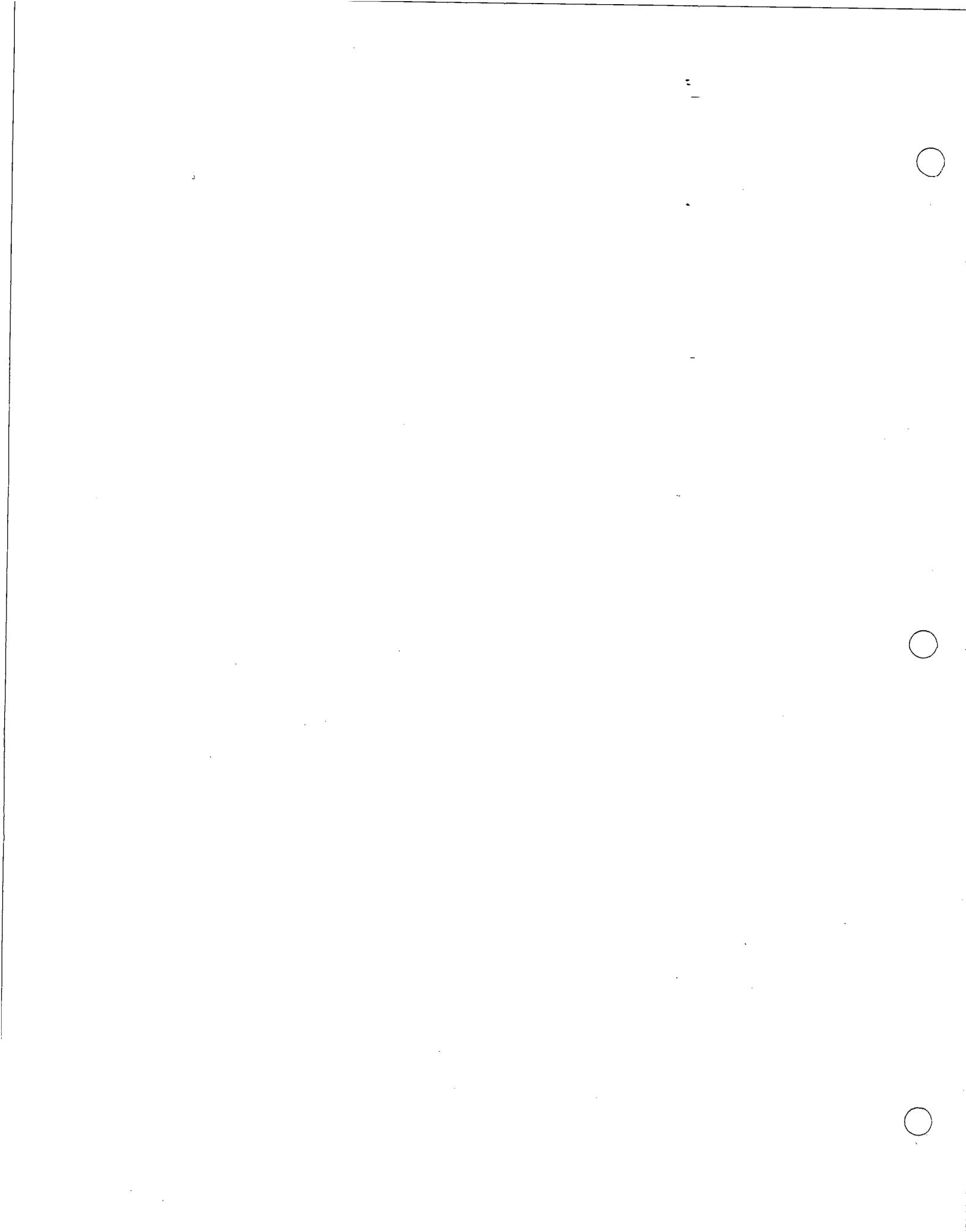
THE LONG GRAY LINE IN CONFLICT:
SECTIONAL STRIFE AT ANTEBELLUM WEST POINT

By

William J. Gallagher

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During the early 1850s, as the country edged toward civil war, the academic program at the United States Military Academy experienced relative success and stability. The Board of Visitors reported in 1849 that they had "rarely seen anything that equalled the excellence of the teaching or the proficiency of the taught".¹ The Board's laudatory comments relating to most facets of the Academy were inspired by the successful merging of quality students and faculty, a rigorous program, and high standards.

Colonel Thayer's influence as the "Father of the Military Academy" was still very evident in the mid-nineteenth century, more than thirty years after his superintendency. Several members of the Academic Board whom he appointed were still in position in the 1850s and would remain so for another two decades. Their considerable influence over all programs at West Point was instrumental in transforming the Academy into a first rate engineering school with a glowing reputation, especially in Washington.²

This was the "golden period" of West Point.³ Tragically, though, the gold would soon become tarnished from social and political forces that were smoldering within the Corps of Cadets and would erupt just prior to the South's secession in 1861. The same sectional tensions that were causing such friction in American society would begin to emerge among cadets. The Academy's leadership, therefore, had to balance the priorities of improving the curriculum and facilities, while reducing the mounting

sectional strains. The former was important if West Point was to maintain its academic reputation and continue validating the Board of Visitors comments, and the latter was critical to institutional discipline and, ultimately, its existence.

These tensions between Southern and Northern sections were not immediately apparent in the Corps. The cadets seemed to have a delayed reaction to the events that were polarizing America. The West Point of the 1850s was insulated from the rest of society. Physically isolated by the remote location in the Hudson Highlands, the restriction on cadet liberties, and the limited communication between cadets and those outside the gates, West Point experienced delayed and reduced effects from outside political events.

The physical isolation of the Academy was not the only reason why societal trends and forces (such as sectionalism) surfaced late. The psychological outlook of each cadet played an equally important role in promoting an insulating effect. West Point drew students from all states and from all socio-economic backgrounds. Southern aristocrats, Northern commoners, and Western settlers shared living quarters, meals, classes, and hardships. They arrived with all the psychological baggage---beliefs, values, and prejudices---that they had in their home states. However, once they became cadets they tended to place those divisive attitudes in a subordinate position to the larger goal of cooperation and brotherhood. Cadets were preparing to

become officers in the nation's service. It was the "nature of the Military Academy as a national institution" which allowed it to initially overcome sectional strife.⁴ That is not to say that cadets gave up their ties to local communities and the attitudes fostered there. Rather, the superordinate goal of graduation and subsequent national service was significant enough to keep the fires of group conflict from spreading.

Cadets during the 1850s rarely left West Point. They lived under a regimented system that allowed little contact with the outside world except during their one summer furlough period. Occasional weekend visitors provided a bit of a diversion from studies; but, the contacts were infrequent and brief. Authorities at the Military Academy required complete adherence to regulations that governed almost every minute of cadet life. The punishment system that enforced these regulations significantly reduced personal liberties for most cadets. Restriction to the barracks room was a common award for even minor offenses, including tardiness.

When cadets had a bit of free time, there was generally nothing to do. Cadet Jessup explained to his brother in 1854 that the reason he had not corresponded lately was because there was "nothing in the world to write about".⁵ There were a few officially sanctioned activities through which a cadet might depart the reservation for a brief time. Debating, literary clubs, sports, and limited entertainments

allowed cadets to discuss current affairs with civilians.⁶ However, these were too infrequent and too brief to provide cadets with in-depth understanding of the issues that were raising sectional tensions.

The mail system did not contribute to the cadets' timely understanding of current events because it was slow and inefficient. They corresponded with family and close friends but the letters were often lost or delayed. Few cadets discussed political or social issues in their letters home; rather, subjects were frequently the rigors of daily life at the Academy or personal family matters.⁷ Some cadets received hometown newspapers by mail, which provided a means of keeping abreast of local issues.

By 1850, sectional issues were topics of hot debate around the country. Men like John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis from the South and William H. Seward from the North spoke regularly about sectional issues.⁸ Many Southerners felt that secession was the only recourse to Northern aggression.

During the first half of the decade, West Point's "golden years" flourished because sectional conflict in the Corps was muted. There were isolated incidents of confrontation stemming from an undercurrent of regional pride, but the amount, intensity, or frequency did not accurately mirror those in society. When a fight did occur, the administration treated it like any disciplinary matter.

But the Academy was only insulated, not immune, from the growing regional aggression. So it was inevitable that as the decade progressed, the tensions grew until they had become equivalent to those in the rest of society.

The reasons for the growing tensions at West Point were varied and complex. The cultural differences were the underlying catalysts, but by themselves they would not likely have been sufficient to bring tension to the flashpoint reached in 1860 when the first Southern cadet resigned.⁹ There were three significant political events which, when coupled with the cultural differences, caused a noticeable escalation in tensions: cadets' exposure to Uncle Tom's Cabin; John Brown's raid and capture; and the election of 1860.

The sectional tension at the Academy, as measured by the frustration exhibited by the cadets, evolved through three periods. The periods were general time frames that reflected the attitude in the Corps as a whole, with each period representing an evolutionary escalation of sectional tensions.

The first period, during the early to mid 1850s, reflected the cadets' strong identification with their home state and its unique culture. Many cadets harbored stereotypical prejudices about classmates from other regions of the country. Though these views resulted in limited outward conflict, there was a growing undercurrent of contempt and jealousy. Their negative sentiments, though

rarely expressed to the object of frustration, were evident from letters home describing the foibles of classmates.¹⁰ These events were significant for two reasons: First, they were the seeds of future, more destructive, and sometimes violent frustrations. Second, they were indicative of the insulation effect because, at that time, the frustration of sectional tensions in society had already boiled into heated rhetoric and even violence.

Northern, Southern, and Western cadets were culturally very different. Many Northern cadets were from rural families who neither owned slaves nor condoned the practice. They were generally better educated than their Southern or Western classmates. Many Southern cadets were from aristocratic, slave-owning communities who viewed Northerners and Westerners as crude farmers and settlers. They were troubled by what they perceived as encroachment by the newly rich North.¹¹ Some felt academically inferior due to the generally poorer educational facilities in the South. They envied the relative ease with which many Northerners succeeded in math class, for example.¹² The Westerners were the regional minority (only seven out of forty from the class of 1860¹³). They, too, were not as academically prepared as the Northerners.

These cultural differences resulted, to some degree, in the misperceptions, petty jealousies, and unfounded prejudices characteristic of the first period of sectional tensions. They were not necessarily new to the 1850s,

either. These differences had existed within the Corps for several decades, at least. (For example, in 1840, Cadet Richard Ewell wrote to his sister, "I am sorry. Mother thinks me such a Yankee as not to write on account of postage."¹⁴) They were brought to the surface by combining them with the provincial attitudes of cadets of that generation. Those attitudes were the unique ingredients that caused harm when added to the existing cultural differences.

The second period of frustration, the mid to late 1850s, evolved from the sectional tensions of the first. Hazing was becoming a popular activity for upperclassmen, who regarded first-year cadets (Plebes) as sources of entertainment. By the mid-1850s, the theme of many hazing incidents shifted toward forcing the Plebes to address sectional issues. This took the form of forced debates between Northern and Southern Plebes and requirements for them to side with a political party. During this period, cadets were continually projecting their sectional frustrations on others---mostly the fourth class--- for the first time. It seems logical, then, to call this the period of frustration projection.

The Dialectic Society provided cadets with a forum in which they could debate the issues of the day. However, due to a rewording of the club's charter in 1845, topics for discussion were limited to those which were "confined within proper limits."¹⁵ This was a reaction to the heated political debates of the Society during the previous decade

and was meant to give the Superintendent authority to eliminate those topics which might incite confrontation.

By 1855, hazing had come into full practice.¹⁶ Upperclassmen found it entertaining to require Plebes to choose a position (Northern or Southern) and debate the issue in a location where they were not likely to get caught. The Missouri Compromise was a controversial issue that Plebes (or "animals", as the new cadets were called) were forced to debate.¹⁷

By 1858, many cadets either knew, or sought to find out, their classmates' political affiliations. Companies in the cadet battalion tended to become "Northern" or "Southern" in orientation. Officially, cadets were assigned according to height by the adjutant; in reality, they were assigned by the combined criteria of height and home state.¹⁸ Cadet Morris Schaff (USMA 1862) from Ohio, related how upperclassmen stopped him as a Plebe and quizzed him about his political beliefs and party membership. He happened to be a Democrat like the questioning upperclassman and passed without being hazed.¹⁹

The significant lesson from these mid-decade, second-period experiences is that upperclassmen tied sectional issues to hazing. They seemed to be making a game out of harassing the Plebes, as hazing was to many of them, yet it had a darker side that reflected the upperclassmen's increased level of frustration with the dividing nation. They either took out their frustrations on a Plebe from the

opposing side, showed favoritism to one from the same side, or used Plebes as surrogates to fight their battles for them verbally, while they cheered from the sidelines.

Sectional tension and the resulting frustration peaked in the Corps at the end of the decade as cadets became verbally and physically abusive toward each other. Fistfights, offers to duel with firearms, and saber fights became common. By then, sectional feeling ran deep and talk of resignation and secession received much attention. By the time West Point reached this period, society had already experienced bloody conflict. From this point onward, the sectional tensions accurately mirrored those in America. Reality had overcome the insulation effect.

As Northern cadets went on furlough, many became exposed to the anti-slavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin (published in 1852). They also became more aware of the cruel effects of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850). They returned to West Point incensed over the perceived injustices of life in the South. Meanwhile, Southern cadets returned from furlough, infuriated over the gall of the extreme abolitionists. On at least two occasions cadets attacked each other with sabers: when Jessup from Maryland assaulted Paine from Massachusetts and when two opposing cadets in a play fenced in earnest.²⁰ Northern and Southern cadets returned from furlough to hold leadership positions in the Corps and so they had a forum to voice their opinions.

John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry on 17 October 1859, together with the certainty that Brown had tolerated a massacre and the role of Robert E. Lee in suppressing the outbreak, had a significant effect on raising and solidifying sectional tensions at the highest level.²¹ Many fights resulted from these events, perhaps the most famous of which involved Emory Upton (USMA 1861) and Wade Gibbs (USMA 1860). The two fought in the First Division Barracks over a racial slur made by Gibbs against Upton. The whole Corps gathered and took sides, North versus South. Upton lost, as numerous cadets screamed for blood. This incident, in 1859, was the first example of intragroup conflict in which cadets were nearly killed.²²

The election of 1860 inspired an unknown cadet to organize a "straw" poll in October. When Southerners discovered that sixty-four cadets had voted for Lincoln, they conducted an inquisition to find out who the supporters were. Numerous fights and assaults occurred among the "band of brothers" as a result of that incident.²³

Each of the evolving periods of frustration included elements of the former one(s). Each built on the previous state of relations among cadets and reflected growing tensions. There was no distinct beginning and end to each period. Rather, the periods identify the trends of escalation in general terms. They also provide a means of comparing the frustration level at the Academy to that of society in its entirety. As civil war drew near, cadets

felt personal frustration with the sectional division at their Alma Mater. The events at West Point and in society were too overwhelming to ignore by then.

The Superintendents of the period, Colonel Robert E. Lee (1852-1855), Captain John G. Barnard (1855-1856), and Major Richard Delafield (1856-1861) attempted to reduce and control the level of frustration in the Corps. They generally tried to ameliorate the strife while maintaining the rigorous academic program. Ultimately, they were not successful in the former; however, Lee's actions augmented the effects of insulation more effectively than those of the other two Superintendents.

Colonel Lee desperately tried to be the "peacekeeper".²⁴ He continuously reminded the cadets that they were a "band of brothers" and encouraged team-building by instilling cooperation. His extreme popularity with the cadets helped him influence their attitudes. He also implemented new projects, such as the riding hall, and took an intense interest in each cadet's progress.²⁵

Captain Barnard's term was brief (only eighteen months) and thus he had no significant impact. He attempted to continue the programs begun by Lee and to transition to a five year academic program. These he did, but he also witnessed the evolution of the frustration level to the second period. Perhaps he dismissed the evidence which, in hind sight, clearly indicates sectional tension: the nature of the hazing and the subjects of the secret debates.

Major Delafield faced numerous challenges during this, his second term as Superintendent. Aside from academic and honor problems that he addressed, he was also deeply concerned about the obvious sectional strain within the Corps. He instituted a demanding athletic program, perhaps in an effort to provide a release for cadet frustrations.

Delafield was a strict disciplinarian. Perhaps his leadership style was appropriate for the turmoil of the times. The intimidating effect his punishments inspired may have caused some cadets to think twice before starting a fight. Cadet Henry A. duPont wrote in 1856 that the Superintendent was "very rigid" and that he was a "most inveterate foe to furlough and leaves of absence".²⁶ The following year, duPont concluded, "he (Delafield) is insane".²⁷

During the decade before the Civil War, as sectional tensions rose in the Union, environmental and psychological factors combined initially to insulate the Military Academy from the negative effects of division, which the rest of the population was experiencing. But over the course of the decade, the tremendous impact of the historic events overwhelmed the insulation, causing the West Point culture to accurately reflected the tensions in society.

The Superintendents during the decade had minimal effect in trying to defuse the volatile situation. Lee tried to be the teambuilder, appealing to the cadets' sense of brotherhood. He was well liked yet tensions in the Corps

escalated. Barnard spent his brief term implementing major changes to the academic program but was ineffective in checking the widening sectional schism. Finally, Delafield the disciplinarian, assumed command of a school in growing turmoil and left it a divided institution.

The policy of transferring Superintendents during the 1850s after short terms made it difficult for those officers to, first, recognize the sectional problem for what it was, and then to devise an effective, continuous strategy for combating it. Therefore, as commanders, they had little influence over the effects of social and political forces within the ranks.

Finally, Lee, Barnard, and Delafield allowed hazing (with the associated "North-South" companies) to mature as an institutional activity, but failed to realize its broader significance with respect to sectional conflict. Had they listened to the themes of the hazing---forced political debates and siding with parties---they may have identified a deep frustration with the Academy and with the Union that was not yet apparent on the surface. This should serve as continuing reminder to West Point's leadership that underlying frustrations within the Corps can manifest in the administration of the Fourth Class System.

The 1850s was a fascinating decade in West Point's illustrious history. The Academy was populated with colorful personalities and distinguished scholars who tried to reconcile, at both personal and institutional levels, the

great socio-political issues of that time. To those who persevered to keep West Point afloat during the tremendous adversity of the period: It may be said, "Well done."

Endnotes

¹United States Military Academy, Report of the Board of Visitors, USMA Archives, West Point, New York, 1849.

²Thomas J. Fleming, West Point (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 126.

³Ibid., p. 126.

⁴Sidney Forman, West Point (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. x.

⁵Personal letter from William C. Jessup to his brother, 7 September 1859, USMA Library Special Collections, Jessup papers file.

⁶James L. Morrison, "The Best School in the World" (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1950), p. 75-76.

⁷Personal letters of George D. Bayard (USMA 1856), 1853-1856, USMA Library Special Collections, Bayard papers file.

⁸Flemming, p. 126.

⁹E. D. J. Waugh, West Point (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 116.

¹⁰Personal letters by Cadet I. I. Stevens to his uncle, 6 July 1836; Cadet Richard S. Ewell to a friend, 29 August 1836; and Cadet Samuel G. French to a friend, 15 January 1840, all as quoted in Forman, p. 113.

¹¹Waugh, p. 114.

¹²Forman, p. 113.

¹³George W. Cullum, Biographical Register of Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy (Saginaw, Mich.: Seemann and Peters, 1910), p. 94-99.

¹⁴Personal letter from Richard S. Ewell (USMA 1840) to his sister, 6 May 1838, as quoted in Forman, p. 113.

¹⁵Order #101, 7 November 1845, from the Superintendent, USMA, as quoted in Forman, p. 116.

¹⁶R. Ernest Dupuy, Where They Have Trod (New York, NY: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940), p. 280.

¹⁷Morris Schaff, The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1862 (Boston, 1907), p²⁹, as quoted by Forman, p. 116.

¹⁸Morrison, p. 130.

¹⁹Schaff, as quoted in Forman, p. 117.

²⁰Waugh, p. 115.

²¹Ibid., p. 115

²²Dupuy, p. 281.

²³Forman, p. 118.

²⁴Fleming, p. 130.

²⁵Ibid., p. 130.

²⁶Personal letters of Henry A. duPont to his parents, 1886-1887, USMA Special Library Special Collections, duPont papers.

²⁷Ibid.

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