

GUIDE TO VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR

BATTLEFIELDS & SITES

INFO BY REGION

- Central Virginia
3-13

- Tidewater
15-19

- Valley & Mountains
22-29

- Southside
30-32

- Northern Virginia
33-37

CALENDAR

- Summer Events
Highlights
14

~ DRIVING TOURS ~

- Overland
Campaign 12-13

- Peninsula
Campaign 15-16

- Lee's Retreat
30-31

ON THE WEB

www.CivilWarTraveler.com/EAST/VA



Virginia 
is for Lovers™



VirginiaCivilWar.org



The Virginia Military Institute in 1857, painting by Casimir Bohn. Image courtesy VMI Museum.

'West Point of the South'

Virginia Military Institute at War

By Col. Keith E. Gibson

The new academic year at the Virginia Military Institute was barely underway in mid-October 1859 when the Lexington community learned of John Brown's Raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Fear of a similar attack gripped Lexington, home to VMI and one of the state's arsenals.

Brown's dream of widespread insurrection was quickly dashed at Harpers Ferry. After his capture there, he was tried and convicted of "treason to the commonwealth... conspiring with slaves to commit treason... and... murder" and sentenced to be hanged December 2.

Concerned that an attempt might be made to free Brown, Virginia Gov. Henry Wise called every available military organization to Charles Town, where Brown was held. Orders for the VMI Corps to march arrived by courier at 8 pm on November 25.

Two hours later, 96 cadets and officers departed. Maj. Thomas Jackson, in his seventh year as professor of Natural Philosophy and Artillery Tactics, commanded the cadet artillery section. VMI Superintendent Smith was selected to preside over Brown's execution.

Twenty years earlier in 1839, Smith had been one of three founders of VMI, the nation's first state-supported military college. The concept was simple: The cadets guarded the arsenal while attending to their academic studies. With a mission to create citizen soldiers, the Institute prepared young men of Virginia with a solid academic program in a strict military environment. Now, in the late fall of 1859, the time had come for the VMI cadets to prove their worth.

The day of the execution dawned overcast. In bright red wool shirts with white cross belts, the cadets were posted close to the gallows.

"The execution is over; we have just returned from the field," wrote VMI professor John Preston to his wife. "Col Smith announced 'We are ready'... [and] John Brown was hanging between heaven and earth."

Returning to Lexington, the Corps found it difficult to settle into the academic routine. In the fall of 1860 tension ran high between the unionist Lexingtonians and the secessionist campuses of Washington College and VMI.

On one occasion a rumor spread that a cadet had been accosted by a unionist mob in town. The Corps poured out of Barracks with loaded muskets determined to avenge the attack. The quick thinking superintendent intercepted the cadets, declaring that if they were going into a fight, he would lead them; but first he wished to address them back in the Barracks. The cadets dutifully followed Col. Smith back to VMI where

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 2

VMI at War, cont'd from page 1

he attempted to defuse the situation. Shortly after, Maj. Jackson entered the assembly hall. The cadets demanded to know the quirky professor's view of secession and war. "The time has not come for war," Jackson declared, "but when it does we must draw the sword and throw away the scabbard!" The hall erupted in cheers of approval. Nine months later, on April 17, 1861, Virginia left the Union. At VMI, academic work unrelated to military pursuits was immediately discontinued.

Throughout the north and south colleges saw their faculty and student ranks decimated by the call to arms. The survival of VMI was found in its distinctive nature. "We never wanted the advantages of military instruction more than now," Gen. Robert E. Lee proclaimed. "And the Virginia Military Institute is the best and purest fountain from which we can be supplied."

It didn't take long for that fountain to be tapped.

Orders arrived on April 20, 1861, for the Cadet Corps to report to Richmond where they would serve as drill instructors.

"The Corps will prove their birth and breeding and exhibit to Virginia the worth of her favorite Institution," predicted Order No. 63, which also appointed Maj. T.J. Jackson to command the march. At half past noon on April 21, the man who soon became known as "Stonewall" shouted his first command of the war: "Right Face! By File Left, March," and led his students to the Virginia capital.

Between April 23 and July 18, the Corps drilled an estimated 15,000 recruits.

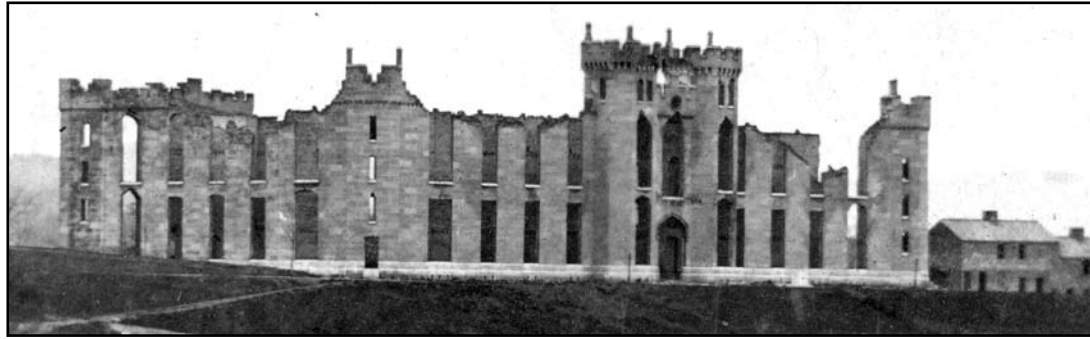
Meanwhile, Maj. Jackson had been commissioned colonel in the Confederate Army and assigned command of Harpers Ferry. "Col. Jackson desires me to send him all the cadets that can be spared from Richmond to aid in instructing his men," wrote Gen. R.E. Lee to Superintendent Smith in May, "[T]hey are wanted everywhere...." Two dozen cadets were sent to join their former professor.

A few months later, on the eve of the Battle of Manassas, "those little soldiers with buttons all over their coats," as the cadets were popularly described, found themselves hastily placed in command of the companies they recently had drilled. During the battle, July 21, 1861, Cadets Charles Norris, Charles Moore and Johnny Moffett — all three from the Class of 1864 — were killed while leading their companies in a charge against federal artillery. The war had claimed its first cadets.

A growing restlessness in the Cadet Corps at Lexington over the next year was replaced with anticipation when the cadets received an unexpected assignment from "Professor" Jackson.

"Please march the cadets at once to Staunton," Jackson requested on April 30, 1862.

"As many of the cadet's [sic] parents may have sent their sons to the Institute for the



VMI in ruins after 1864. Image courtesy VMI Museum.

Visiting the Virginia Military Institute

The Virginia Military Institute is located near downtown Lexington. See www.vmi.edu for maps. A good place to get oriented is the VMI Museum, open 9 am–5 pm daily. Call 540-464-7334.

Look for a five-stop audio tour podcast of VMI in the Civil War coming this summer on CivilWarTraveler.com/audio.

Visiting the New Market Battlefield

The New Market Battlefield State Historical Park and Hall of Valor Civil War Museum is located 84 miles north of Lexington on I-81. It's also open 9 am–5 pm daily. See www.vmi.edu/newmarket or call 866-515-1864 for details.

purpose of keeping them out of the field at present," Jackson conceded, "I can provide for all such cases...by assigning them the care of the provisions, and the baggage train."

Knowing that his former students would prefer a more heroic position with his army, Jackson reminded them that the patriot serves where he is most needed.

In a cold rain the Corps set out from Lexington to join "Stonewall" on his way to meet the advance of Union Gen. Robert Milroy at McDowell, Virginia. After being kept in the rear during the battle, Jackson ordered the cadets up — to the burial detail. He wished to dispel any notions of battlefield glory the young soldiers might have brought with them from the Institute.

Following that sobering service, the cadets returned to their studies at Lexington

Two years later, on the evening of May 10, 1864, a courier arrived at VMI with a dispatch from Gen. John Breckinridge, commander of Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley, calling the cadets to field service.

The Corps left the Barracks at 7 am the next day and four days later — after marching 80 miles — the cadets were committed to their most famous trial-by-fire at New Market.

Fate, more than planning, brought the young soldiers to the Confederate line at a critical moment on the New Market battlefield. After heavy Union artillery fire punched a hole in the center of the Confederate line, the Cadet Corps moved from its reserve position into the breach then spearheaded the Confederate infantry assault across a rain-soaked wheat field. Breckinridge later credited the performance of the cadets for the Confederate victory. Of the 257 VMI cadets who fought, 47 were wounded, 10 died.

The cadets returned to Lexington on June

9, just one day ahead of 18,000 enemy soldiers under the command of Gen. David Hunter. Without firing a shot in resistance, the cadets joined a small unit of Confederates under Gen. John McCausland (VMI Class of 1858) and retreated toward Lynchburg. On June 12, the Institute was shelled and burned.

After being held in reserve in a rain-drenched cemetery during the Battle of Lynchburg June 18, the cadets were moved into the front lines. But the Union forces withdrew that night, ending the battle, and the Corp returned to Lexington.

The fire-scarred shell of the Institute greeted the cadets. On July 4 Superintendent Smith received a private letter from a strong supporter:

"I grieve over the destruction of the Military Institute. But the good that has been done to the country cannot be destroyed, nor can its name or fame perish. It will rise stronger than before, and continue to diffuse its benefits to a grateful people. Under your wise administration, there will be no suspension of its usefulness...."

*"With great regards, yours very truly,
R.E. Lee"*

Later that summer Gen. U.S. Grant's Union forces finally had Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia pinned down at Richmond and Petersburg. The Confederate War Department issued emergency orders for the VMI Cadets to report to Richmond for "immediate ... field service."

That service included periodically manning the fortifications that nearly surrounded the Confederate capital.

"On the night of April 1, 1865, it was apparent to us that something out of the ordinary was taking place," explained Cadet Francis Smith. The long roll of the drum summoned the Corps to formation where the cadets received orders to march immediately to the outer defense lines 9 miles east of Richmond. "Going out a quarter of a mile in front of the breastworks on picket next morning," continued Cadet Smith, "we found a division of negro union troops in front of us. We remained there constantly expecting attack, and when the tremendous cheering of the enemy was heard, from time to time, we were sure our time had come."

The black soldiers across the field already knew what the cadets soon found out.

After returning to Richmond later that day, the cadets witnessed the pandemonium of the Confederate capital being abandoned. Once back at their quarters the Corps was officially "disbanded and directed to escape the best way we could." Union soldiers occupied Richmond the next day. Lee's surrender at Appomattox was one week away, but for the VMI Corps, the war was over.

During the four years of war, the Corps was called into the field on 15 occasions. Nineteen cadets had died on Virginia battlefields. The Institute lay in ruins. But following the war, Superintendent Smith presided over the re-birth of his school. VMI soon would resume its position as the nation's college of the citizen-soldier, a mission it proudly continues today.

Col. Gibson is director of VMI Museum Operations.

GUIDE TO VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELDS & SITES

An Independent Newspaper © Copyright 2010

PAGE ONE HISTORY PUBLICATIONS

The *Guide to Virginia's Civil War* is published three times yearly. Editions are printed in early February, late May and early September. Free copies are available at Virginia State Welcome Centers, most Virginia Civil War sites and selected local/regional visitor centers. For a free copy by mail, visit www.CivilWarTraveler.com, click on the "Free Info" button, and fill out the form (check Virginia). A copy of the newspaper and other related Civil War travel information will be sent to you.

PO Box 4232
Richmond VA 23220-4232
www.civilwartraveler.com/EAST/VA
editor@civilwartraveler.com

Editor / Publisher Don Pierce
804-399-5737
Associate Publisher Norma Pierce
Database Administrator Greg LeHew