
“Died on the Field of Honor, Sir.” Virginia Military Institute in the American Civil War and the Cadets Who Died at the Battle of New Market: May 15, 1864

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The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, known as the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy,” is home to the Virginia Military Institute. Located in Lexington, Virginia, VMI played a significant role in the American Civil War—from the execution of John Brown in 1859 to the disbanding of the Corps of Cadets during the fall of Richmond in 1865. The Corps, consisting of young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, served on active duty with the Confederate Army several times during their years at VMI but no one could have predicted the events of May 11-15, 1864, when the Corps marched from their campus in Lexington into history at the Battle of New Market. During this battle, ten cadets paid the ultimate price. Today, over one hundred fifty years later, new cadets report to New Market to learn about the sacrifices made in 1864, and walk where the cadets of 1864 fought and died. Roll call taken on the anniversary of the Battle of New Market includes the names of those who died. A cadet, designated as their representative, responds to the names of the fallen with, “Died on the Field of Honor, Sir.”

In 1818, the Commonwealth of Virginia established an arsenal in the town of Lexington and stationed militia guards there to guard the arsenal and its contents. The people of Lexington, a sleepy little valley town, and home to Washington College, had no problem with the arsenal itself. However, the off-duty behavior of the militia concerned them. “The discipline was strict, but could not prevent [the soldiers] from making use of their leisure in ways that made them a very undesirable element in the population of a small town.”¹

It was not long after the establishment of the arsenal that talk began about “converting the installation into an educational institution, with the students as its caretakers.”² In the 1830s, a Lexington merchant by the name of Hugh Barclay visited the United States Military Academy at West Point. Impressed by the curriculum, the level of discipline and the morals of the students enrolled there, he returned to Lexington and began talking up the old idea of turning the arsenal into an educational facility. At a meeting of the Franklin Society—a local literary and debating society—Barclay asked, “Would it be politic for the State to establish a military school, at the Arsenal . . . in connection with Washington College, on the

plan of the West Point Academy?”³ The members of the society voted unanimously to support the establishment of such a school. It was not long after this that John Thomas Lewis Preston—a Lexington attorney who was present at the meeting—began writing a series of articles for the *Lexington Gazette* to raise more support for the idea.

After extensive lobbying by Preston and other supporters of the school, the Virginia legislature passed legislation. This reorganized the arsenal as a “military school of Washington College” with “academic and military systems based on the *École Académie* [in France] and West Point.”⁴ In April of 1836, eighteen years after the establishment of the arsenal, the Virginia Military Institute became a reality. *École* and West Point served as a model for the school, per the legislation, but it was not going to be an exact copy. From the beginning, VMI looked at the military aspect of the school as “only a means to an end: their goal was not the production of career military officers, but rather the molding of young personalities.”⁵ Military training, while an integral part of the cadets’ experience, would not interfere with the student’s academic studies. The objective of the school “was not to fit its graduates for a single profession . . . but to prepare young men for the varied work of civil life. . . . The military feature, though essential to its discipline, is not primary in its scheme of education.”⁶ While the legislation establishing VMI claimed it would be a part of Washington College, the school’s trustees said that the state legislature did not have the authority to link the two schools. As a result, VMI never became a part of Washington College.

The faculty and administration of VMI, like those of the other military schools of the South, were reasonably sure that secession was coming, and began to prepare for it. Even though the education at VMI was not supposed to be a military education, Major Raleigh E. Colston feared the cadets would be unready when inevitably called into service. Colston, a professor of Military Strategy, said, “While the cadets knew all there was to know about drilling squads, companies, or battalions, they did not know much about caring for men on the march or in camp.”⁷ While some dismissed Major Colston’s concerns, they turned out to be valid as the cadets were called into military service.

The first military service performed by the cadets of VMI took place in 1859 at the execution of John Brown in Charles Town, Virginia. The governor of Virginia, John Letcher, concerned that supporters of Brown might attempt to free him or in some other way disrupt the execution, called on VMI to provide additional military presence in Charles Town. The superintendent of VMI, Francis Henney Smith, was directly in charge of the execution itself, and ordered eighty-five cadets, along with two artillery pieces under the joint command of Majors

William Gilham and Thomas J. Jackson, to proceed to Charles Town. Jackson, in a letter to his wife, described the positioning of the cadet contingent: “My command was still in front of the cadets, all facing south. One howitzer I assigned to Mr. Trueheart on the left of the cadets, and with the other I remained on the right. Other troops occupied different positions around the scaffold, and altogether it was an imposing, but very solemn, scene.”⁸

When Virginia finally passed an ordinance of secession, thousands of men flooded into Richmond to volunteer for military service. The task of turning these poorly armed, untrained men into a legitimate army fell to the cadets of VMI. While this was not their preferred assignment, the cadets believed that they were capable of accomplishing it. In April of 1861, 185 cadets were busy at Camp Lee, Virginia—a camp of instruction set up at the state fairgrounds in Richmond—training the new recruits.

Superintendent Smith offered to form the cadets into a battalion for active service with the Confederate Army. However, the government rejected the offer, as they believed the cadets would be far more valuable as officers. Many of the cadets resigned from the Institute and enlisted in various units throughout the Confederate Army, dropping the enrollment to less than thirty students. At this point (July 1861), the remainder of “the cadets were dismissed with directions to report when further orders were issued.”⁹ Following the Battle of First Manassas, Robert E. Lee said, “We never wanted the advantages of military instruction more than now and the Virginia Military Institute is the best and purest fountain from which we can be supplied.”¹⁰ The Virginia Military Institute now carried the responsibility of training officers in the Confederate Army. In January of 1862, the Virginia Military Institute reopened.

It was not long before the Confederacy once again called the cadets into active service. Under the command of Colonel Scott Shipp, the Commandant of Cadets, they supported the forces of General Thomas J. Jackson, their former artillery instructor, during the McDowell Campaign in May of 1862. The cadets pursued Federal troops through the mountains of western Virginia but were not engaged in any battles of the campaign. At one point, Jackson called the cadets to the front to be part of the burial detail. “He wanted to dispel any notions of battlefield glory the young soldiers may have brought with them from the Institute.”¹¹

In the fall and early winter of 1863, the Corps took the field again. This time it was to defend against the raids of General William Averell around Roanoke and Salem, Virginia, just south of the Institute. Again, while pursuing the Federals, the cadets did not engage in any battles. However, this was soon to change. The

next time they took the field, it would not be to train or to pursue the enemy, but to engage them on the field of battle.

In the spring of 1864, the Shenandoah Valley once again became the scene of active military actions. On May 9, Union Major General Franz Sigel began his march southward from Winchester, Virginia on the way to Staunton where he planned to destroy the railroads leading into the valley. The Confederacy did not have a significant force stationed in the valley at that time, so a makeshift force of about five thousand men under the command of Major General John C. Breckenridge countered Sigel. The force consisted of Breckenridge's two brigades of about 2500 men, a small cavalry force under the command of Brigadier John D. Imboden, and the combined reserve and home guard detachments from Augusta, Rockingham, and Rockbridge counties. "Desperate to put troops in the field, the Confederates even prevailed upon the 247-man corps of cadets from the Virginia Military Institute."¹²

Late in the evening of May 10, 1864, the cadets received their orders to march the following morning. It was just before daybreak on the morning of May 11, 1864, when the drums began to beat the long roll on the parade grounds at VMI. All but the forty-seven youngest cadets, who remained in Lexington to guard the school, began to emerge from their barracks to assemble into their companies. The gray uniforms of these cadets, all between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, were spotless. The brass buttons shone brightly in the light of the lanterns surrounding the parade ground. After officers inspected each cadet to see that he had the proper equipment, the column moved out in perfect order through the town of Lexington and onto the Valley Turnpike for the march north.

The "seed corn of the Confederacy," as they were called by Jefferson Davis, formed into four companies and marched eighty miles north along the Valley Pike to New Market, and onto the front lines, becoming part of a charge through a muddy field, into the fire of both artillery and infantry and onto the pages of history. General John C. Breckinridge knew that his forces were outnumbered, and he "neither desired nor planned to put the cadets into the battle."¹³ It was soon obvious that he had no choice. The Union army was pushing the Confederate center and Breckinridge issued a command that stated, "Put the boys in, and God forgive me for the order."¹⁴

As Colonel Keith Gibson wrote in his article "Virginia Military Institute at War," "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.”¹⁵ That field is now known as the “field of lost shoes” due to the number of shoes pulled off by the deep mud.

When the smoke cleared, this relatively insignificant battle began to grow in importance. Not only had the Confederates, with their hastily assembled army, captured a large number of prisoners, as well as six pieces of artillery, they had sent Sigel and his forces retreating down the Valley. The cadets were excited about the outcome. Derided by veterans a day earlier because of their young age, clean uniforms, and shiny buttons, these young men had now shown their fighting prowess. At the height of the battle, they breached the Union line,¹⁶ charged a Union position, and captured a Union artillery piece earning the respect of those seasoned veterans. The victory, however, was bittersweet for the cadets. The battle resulted in fifty-seven wounded and ten either killed in action or succumbing to their wounds afterwards, a casualty rate of over twenty percent.¹⁷

The Battle of New Market is a popular historical topic, and although many works briefly mention individual cadets, few know anything about the ten young men who gave their lives in the service of their school and state. The following is a brief biographical sketch of the ten cadets that “Died on the Field of Honor:”¹⁸

Samuel Francis Atwill.

Born in Westmoreland County, Virginia on January 31, 1846, his parents were Samuel Bailey Atwill and Jane Ann Brown. Atwill matriculated at VMI in May of 1862 just prior to the end of the session. At the Battle of New Market, Atwill served as a corporal in Company A. During the battle he was “struck in the calf of the leg, his wound was considered severe, though not dangerous.”¹⁹ Moved to Staunton, Virginia after the battle to recuperate, during his convalescence he contracted lockjaw and died a most horrible death on July 20, 1864 at the home of Dr. F.T. Stribling. Atwill is one of the cadets interred beneath the New Market Battlefield



Figure 1. Samuel Atwill, c. 1863.
Photograph, black and white print.

Monument at Virginia Military Institute.

William Henry Cabell. Cabell was born in Richmond, Virginia on November 13, 1845, the son of Dr. Robert Gamble Cabell and Margaret Caskie. His paternal grandfather, William H. Cabell was a Governor of Virginia. While a student at Richmond College in 1862, Cabell expressed an interest in joining the military. His father recommended that he plan for this future as a student at VMI. As advised, he matriculated at VMI in July of 1863, and fought (along with his brother Robert, a Cadet Private in Company A) as a Cadet 1st Sergeant in Company D. At the Battle of New Market, Cabell was “struck by a cannon-ball in the chest, [and] was left mortally wounded on the field of battle.” Cabell was initially buried in New Market, but later his remains were disinterred and reburied in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond.

Charles Gay Crockett. Crockett was born December 3, 1846 near Wytheville, Virginia, the son of Gustavus A. Crockett and Elizabeth E. Erskine. Crockett matriculated at VMI in February of 1864 and served as a private in Company D. Crockett died in the same artillery explosion that took the lives of William Cabell and Henry Jones. Crockett, like several other cadets, was first buried in New Market, but later laid to rest beneath the New Market Battlefield Monument at Virginia Military Institute.

Alva Curtis Hartsfield. Hartsfield was born June 5, 1844 in Wake County, North Carolina, the son of Wesley Hartsfield and Candace Smith. Hartsfield began his college education at the University of North Carolina, transferring to VMI in 1863 in the second class. He served in the Battle of New Market as a Cadet Private in Company B. Although wounded at New Market, Hartsfield went to Richmond with the remainder of the battalion. After collapsing in the streets of Petersburg, he was sent to a hospital in that city, where he died on June 26, 1864 as a result of the wounds received at New Market. He is buried in the Blandford Church Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia.

Luther Cary Haynes. Haynes was born on February 11, 1845, the son of William Corbin Haynes and Maria Street. Haynes matriculated at VMI on November 10, 1863 and served as a Private in Company B at the Battle of New Market. After suffering a serious wound during the battle, he died June 5, 1864 at a hospital housed in the Powhatan Hotel in Richmond, Virginia. Cadet Haynes’s remains rest at the family home in Essex County, VA in an unmarked grave.

Thomas Garland Jefferson. The son of John Garland Jefferson and Otelia Mansfield Howlett, Jefferson was born on January 1, 1846 in Amelia County, Virginia. Cadet Jefferson was the great-great nephew of President Thomas Jefferson. He matriculated at VMI on August 1, 1863 and served as a Private in Company B at the Battle of New Market. He suffered a mortal wound during the battle and died three days later, May 15 in New Market. When two members of his company stopped to try to give first aid, Jefferson pointed to the front and said, “You can do nothing for me; go to the front; there is the place for you.”²⁰ Today, he rests beneath the New Market Monument at VMI.

Henry Jenner Jones. Jones was born on March 10, 1846 in King William County, Virginia. His parents were Thomas S. Jones and Mary E. (maiden name unknown). Jones served as a Private in Company D. Jones died, along with two other cadets, when a shell burst over their heads while charging the Union artillery. “His face lit up with the fire of battle, he fell ere his hand had been raised to avenge his own and his country’s wrongs.”²¹ Along with some of his comrades, he is buried beneath the New Market Monument at VMI.

William Hugh McDowell. Cadet McDowell was born on December 31, 1846 in Iredell County, North Carolina. His parents were Robert Irwin McDowell and Rebekah Brevard. McDowell served as a Private in Company B. Killed in action at the Battle of New Market, McDowell is called the “Ghost Cadet” because of the fictional account of his participation in the Battle of New Market in *The Ghost Cadet*, an award-winning children’s book by Elaine Marie Alphin. His remains lie beneath the New Market Battlefield Monument at VMI.



Figure 1. Cadet William H. McDowell, ambrotype, 1863.

Jaqueline Beverly Stanard. “Bev” was born in either 1844 or 1845, the son of Beverly Stanard and Ellen Taliaferro. Stanard first matriculated at VMI on January 20, 1863, but resigned on January 29, 1864. Eight days later, he was reinstated, and at the Battle of New Market he served as a Private in Company B. Stanard was one of three cadets killed by an artillery shell at the beginning of the cadet’s advance. Stanard lived for a while and sent a message to his mother saying, “I fell where I wished to fall, fighting for my country, and I did not fight in vain. Tell my mother that I die with full confidence in my God.”²² He is buried in Graham Cemetery in Orange, Virginia.

Joseph Christopher Wheelwright. Born on September 26, 1846 in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the son of Dr. Frederick D. Wheelwright, and Maria L. (maiden name unknown), Wheelwright entered VMI in August of 1863 and served as a Private in Company C during the Battle of New Market. He suffered a mortal wound during the battle and died in Harrisonburg, Virginia on June 2, 1864. He rests beneath the New Market Monument at VMI.

For years the exploits of these ten young men, along with the others from the Virginia Military Institute who fought and bled at New Market, lived on in the memories of the veterans who fought with them, and in the imaginations of others who were not there. Eventually, the myths surrounding the cadets grew to such proportions that it was not just one gun that they captured, but an entire Union battery. The cadets’ story became so famous that many seem to have forgotten the other five thousand men who fought with Breckenridge; the cadets seemed to have won the battle entirely by themselves. Sadly, the myths began to hide what the Corps of Cadets did accomplish. They fought as well as—and in some cases better than—many seasoned veterans; they held a critical position in a battle line that was weak, and they stood their ground and were in position to be in the lead during the final charge. While the myths tend to exaggerate the role the cadets played, there is no doubt that they were instrumental in the Confederate victory. The loss at New Market led to the reassignment of Sigel, and the return of General David Hunter, who would later remember the part the cadets played at New Market and take vengeance on their school.

When Hunter led his army through the Shenandoah Valley in June of 1864, he retaliated against Virginia Military Institute by burning and looting the campus. According to David Hunter Strother, General David Hunter’s cousin and Chief of Staff, there were military reasons to burn the school. “The professors and cadets had taken the field against government troops, as an organized Corps. The

buildings had been used as a Rebel arsenal and recently as a fortress.”²³ Hunter’s men pulled down and took away a bronze statue of George Washington on the campus. They looted and burned the library and laboratories. One Union officer noted, “The burning of the Institute made a grand picture, a vast volume of black smoke rolled above the flames and covered half the horizon.”²⁴ The cadets, who had just returned to Lexington had to retreat, and could do nothing to prevent their beloved campus’s devastation.

The extensive damage to all of the buildings as well as the loss of the library and laboratory equipment made closing the school necessary, and resulted in the furloughing of the Corps of Cadets. In his annual report on July 15, 1864, Superintendent Smith said, “Finding, upon examination, that most of our commissary stores had been destroyed or taken by the enemy—that the public property was in a state of utter ruin—I deemed it my duty to place all the cadets who were able to reach their homes, or the homes of their friends, on furlough.”²⁵ It would be over a year before the cadets could return to their school.

An interesting footnote to the Battle of New Market and the burning of VMI occurred fifty years later. At the Battle of New Market, Henry DuPont was an artillery officer, and later reluctantly shelled VMI during Hunter’s raid on Lexington. In 1914, DuPont was a senator from the State of Delaware and the sponsor of legislation compensating VMI for the damages sustained during the war. The Senate majority leader at that time was Senator Thomas Staples Martin of Virginia. Martin was a member of the VMI Corps of Cadets at the Battle of New Market.²⁶ Two men who fought bravely at New Market now worked together to help heal the wounds of war.

Notes

1. John Thomas Lewis Preston, *Historical Sketch of the Establishment and Organization of the Virginia Military Institute* (Lexington, VA: VMI Archives, 1889) 2-3.

2. James Lee Conrad, *The Young Lions: Confederate Cadets at War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 1.

3. *Ibid.*, 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. Conrad, 17.

6. Preston, 17-18.

7. *Ibid.*, 33.

8. "The Execution of John Brown: Stonewall Jackson eyewitness Account," *VMI Archives*, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=4919>.
9. Conrad, 41.
10. *Ibid.*, 45.
11. Keith E. Gibson, "Virginia Military Institute at War," *Guide to Virginia's Civil War Battlefields and Sites*, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.civilwartraveler.com/inprint/VCW-10-2-p1-2.pdf>.
12. Michael G. Mahon, *The Shenandoah Valley, 1861-1865: The Destruction of the Granary of the Confederacy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999), 108.
13. Scott H. Harris, "Put the Boys In": The Battle of New Market," accessed September 1, 2014, <http://www.shenandoahatwar.org/The-History/The-Stories/Put-the-boys-in-The-Battle-of-New-Market>.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Gibson, "Virginia Military Institute at War."
16. Mahon, 109.
17. William Couper, ed., *The Corps Forward: Biographical Sketches of the Cadets Who Fought in the Battle of New Market* (Charlottesville, VA: Mariner Press, 2005), 15.
18. The information contained in these biographies was compiled from several sources, including *The Corps Forward*, edited by William Couper, The VMI Archives, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates and Elevés of the Virginia Military Institute Who Fell at the Battle of New Market* by Charles Walker, Find-A-Grave, and RootsWeb: Obituaries.
19. William Couper, ed., *The Corps Forward: Biographical Sketches of the Cadets Who Fought in the Battle of New Market* (Charlottesville, VA: Mariner Press, 2005), 15.
20. Charles D. Walker, *Biographical sketches of the Graduates and Elevés of the Virginia Military Institute who fell during the War Between the States* (Philadelphia, PA: J.P. Lippincott, 1875), 290.
21. *Ibid.*, 311.
22. *Ibid.*, 494.
23. David Hunter Strother, *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War: The Diaries of David Hunter Strother* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 255.
24. "The Story of General David Hunter's 1864 Raid," *Hunter's Raid: The Lynchburg Campaign*, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.huntersraid.org/story.html>.
25. "The Burning of VMI, June 1864, From the Annual Report," *VMI Archives*, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=4717>.
26. "Heroism in Defeat," *Stone Sentinels*, accessed October 10, 2014, http://www.shenandoah.stonesentinels.com/New_Market/Heroism_in_Defeat.php.

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