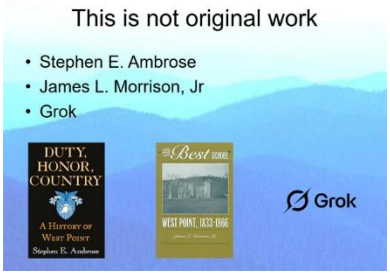
Good evening. As you know, my name is Robert Schuldenfrei. The topic for this presentation is ***Civil War Leaders and West Point.*** It should be obvious that this will need to be a brief investigation such that it will fit into a one-hour time frame. Rather than the history of West Point, this talk will be limited to some of the subjects that were taught during the first half of the 19th century and six students who absorbed this knowledge and put it to practical application during the Civil War.

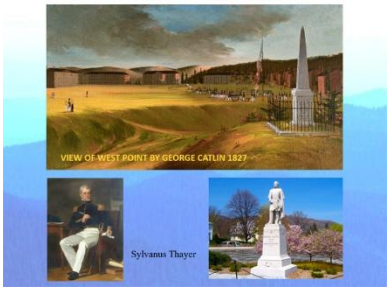


As is my habit during these presentations I confess that this is not original work. Besides two books, I used for the first time the artificial intelligent program Grok. The first book was *Duty, Honor, Country, a History of West Point* by Stephen E. Ambrose. The second book was *The Best School, West Point, 1833 – 1866* by James L. Morrison, Jr. Grok was used to zero in on the things each of my six students learn and how they applied same. I found it was an excellent tool and I will make comment on that point as I spin my tale.

The organization of my presentation tonight will be developed around six points. The first of these is a brief, a very brief, history of the United States Military Academy at West Point. This is necessary, because you need to understand the institution if you are going to learn its impact on the leaders of the Civil War. Once we have dispensed with the history lesson we will focus on tactics and strategies taught during the first half

of the 19th century and who were the men who presented this material. Third, we will concentrate in what West Point thought was fundamental to its teaching: engineering and mathematics. Next, we will address a favorite of mine, logistics. The fifth point is practical military skills. My final point will be character, behavior, and leadership.

To illustrate the pedagogy, I have chosen six leaders who I believe illustrates my point of the influence of West Point on the Civil War. These generals are Pierre G.T. Beauregard, Ulysses S. Grant, William J. Hardee, Robert E. Lee, George B. McClellan, and Phil H. Sheridan. It would be ridiculous to attribute to West Point the sole reason for their behavior during the war. That would ignore their upbringing, social life, the war with Mexico, and a great number of other factors. However, my point tonight is that the academy had significant influence on these men.

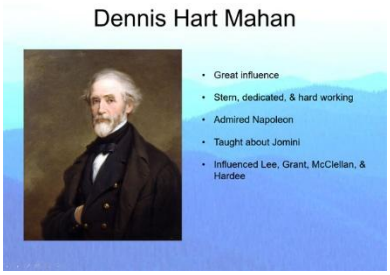


The United States Military Academy was founded under the administration of Thomas Jefferson in 1802. Its reason for being was to provide a cadre of officers around which to form a large army in times of emergency. Right from the start it was to reflect the values of the new nation by drawing the Corps of Cadets from all classes, not just the upper classes as was the model of European military schools. It was to allow the raising of an army when the need arose and avoid a large standing army. Often the armies of Europe exploited the societies they were

supposed to defend. America needed a defense policy that was both revolutionary and rational.

The first years of the school were really hard ones for West Point. The academy's foundation was the Corps of Engineers. Until Sylvanus Thayer took over as superintendent in 1817 the school struggled and nearly went out of existence. He is known as the "Father of the Military Academy." The principles he laid down formed the basis of the curriculum, some of which continue to today. Scholarship reigns supreme and the school will quickly eliminate cadets who do not measure up. Recitation, the pedagogical technique of choice, was used in the classroom and out in the field. Daily numerical grades were posted. Everyone knew where they stood in their class.

Thayer made civil engineering the foundation of the curriculum. For the first half century, graduates were largely responsible for the construction of the bulk of the nation's initial railway lines, bridges, harbors, and roads. Many of these works had an impact on the Civil War. Colonel Thayer's time at West Point ended with his resignation in 1833, after a disagreement with President Andrew Jackson. Of our six cadets of interest only Robert E. Lee, class of 1829, was enrolled during the tenure of Thayer. It is interesting to note that Lee himself was superintendent from 1852 until 1855.



No discussion of mid-century West Point would be complete without introducing Dennis Hart Mahon. He was an instructor of civil and military engineering from 1824 to 1871. He is pertinent to our story because historians agree that he had great influence over all cadets who went on to command during the

Civil War. All six of my subjects attended his classes. He founded the Napoleon Club, a seminar on the Napoleonic Wars, and his teachings introduced European military theories. His focus was on the teaching of Antoine-Henri Jomini. This meant the emphasizing combined arms tactics – the integrating different combat elements, such as infantry, artillery, and cavalry. Jomini's text, *The Art of War* published in 1838, became the "bible" at West Point.

Mahan was known for his discipline, hard work, sternness, and dedication, traits that defined his teaching approach. Despite his stern demeanor, he intervened for struggling cadets and took pride in their achievements, reflecting a mentorship style that balanced rigor with support. His role as an instructor at West Point was not merely educational but transformative, shaping the strategic and engineering foundations of the U.S. military. His textbooks, mentorship, and curriculum innovations ensured his teachings resonated far beyond his lifetime, leaving a legacy that is studied to this day.

Beyond teaching of principles, facts, and historical references, Mahan stressed reason and common sense. Here is where our story becomes much less clear cut. Thus, most of his students did not recall and often violated Jomini's lessons. For example, the idea of avoiding a frontal assault seems to have been forgotten at Fredericksburg and Gettysburg. Further, Mahan's influence was demonstrated by his lessons in engineering. This is perhaps because some of these structures still stand today like the nearby Jupiter Lighthouse.

That being said Mahan, following in the footsteps of Jomini, stressed that speed, maneuver, logistics, and movement are more important than the destruction of the enemy. Lee seemed to take this into account. His study of Jomini's interpretations of Napoleon shaped his preference for dividing enemy forces and striking at weak points. His campaigns, like the Seven Days Battle in 1862 and Chancellorsville in 1863, reflected this influence through bold, aggressive maneuvers and attempts to outmaneuver Union forces, even when outnumbered.

June of 1862 really began the legend, or perhaps the myth, of Robert E. Lee. Joseph E. Johnston was wounded and replaced by Jefferson Davis on June 1st by the more aggressive Lee. Early in the war, Lee had been called "Granny Lee" for his allegedly timid style of command. Confederate newspaper editorials objected to him replacing Johnston, opining that Lee would be passive, waiting for Union attacks. This seemed true, initially; for the first three weeks of June, Lee did not show aggression, instead strengthening Richmond's defenses. However, on June 25th, he surprised the Army of the Potomac and launched a rapid series of bold attacks. The Army of Northern Virginia move from one battle to the next whether it had won the fight or not. Lee moved forward and McClellan moved back.

Chancellorsville was even more dramatic. Lee had a smaller force than Hooker and yet he divided it such that he had forces on many sides of the Army of the Potomac. That day maneuver trumped mass on the field of battle. Jomini looking down from heaven must have had a smile on his face.

Grant too, by fighting in all areas of operations at the same time was able to control all of his forces as one. He made good use

of the new technology of telegraph communications to bring their forces together for battle. For example, once Grant got to the eastern bank of the Mississippi River in the Vicksburg campaign, he was able to operate on Jomini's principles of interior lines and maneuver. He fought a series of battles to the south and east of the city before the siege and victory. You can see favoring decisive, offensive operations over rigid adherence to maneuver. Here was the blending of bold maneuvers with relentless pressure to achieve strategic objectives, reflecting a practical synthesis of West Point's teachings.

We also can illustrate the effects of Mahan's teaching on George B. McClellan. Mahan taught McClellan it was better to take strategic points rather that destruction of armies, unlike Grant. The academy's emphasis on Jomini's theories prioritized controlled maneuver-based warfare and securing key geographic points. He preferred large, well-organized armies and avoided risky, aggressive engagements, aiming to outmaneuver opponents strategically. This influenced McClellan's cautious, methodical, and logistics-focused style as a commander. This was seen in his reluctance to pursue decisive battles, such as after Antietam in 1862, where he prioritized regrouping over exploiting tactical victories. Because he was not a great battlefield leader, we often overlook George's strong points. I have often felt that if Grant were made the commander much earlier in the war and McClellan was his immediate subordinate the war might have been over much sooner. He did Jomini proud in developing a base of operations. He built and built up the Army of the Potomac many times under his tenure. As a PS - McClellan was the most active member of the Mahan's Napoleon Club.

William J. Hardee influenced the United States Military Academy as a teacher and was shaped by it as a student. He literally wrote the book on tactics in his 1855 book *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*. As a cadet in the Class of 1838, Hardee's West Point education provided him with a foundation in tactics, discipline, and strategic thinking that made him one of the Confederacy's most effective corps commanders. The Civil War shaped Hardee's preference for mobility and offensive tactics. His campaigns under generals like Braxton Bragg and Joseph E. Johnston often involved rapid marches and flanking maneuvers.

In 1862 Hardee had command of one of the two wings of Bragg's Army of Mississippi outside of Perryville, KY. Hardee had selected Perryville for a few reasons. The village of approximately 300 residents had an excellent road network with connections to nearby towns in six directions, allowing for strategic flexibility. It was located to prevent the Federals from reaching the Confederate supply depot in Bryantsville. Finally, it was a potential source of water.

Hardee established his position north of the town so as to have room and the means to maneuver. As the battle developed one of his division commanders, Simon B. Buckner, was able to flank the Union position. Thanks in part to Hardee's planning and execution Braxton Bragg had arguably won a tactical victory, having fought aggressively and pushed his opponent back for over a mile. However, Bragg realized his gain was little and his precarious strategic situation forced him to withdraw.

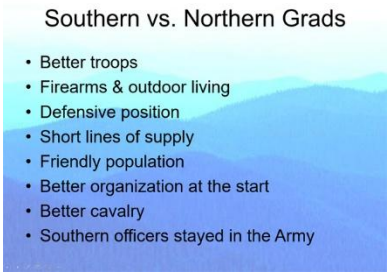
Hardee returned to West Point to serve as Commandant of Cadets in 1856. He thought that the students should have more instruction in the art of strategy than they were getting and

offered to have the tactical department provide it. In the past Thayer made the same proposal. Professor Mahan protested that he was already teaching the subject in his engineering classes, and it was true that this section of Mahan's course was the most popular at West Point. The trouble was that Mahon spent so much time on military and civil engineering that he only had a few days left over for strategy. So, in 1860, with the support of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, the teaching of strategy was transferred to the tactical department. Of course, shortly thereafter Hardee and Davis were both gone.

As has been suggested, the influence of Jomini did not have an iron grip of either Mahon nor his students. That being said, the influence of Napolean and the French military held sway over the West and continued to do so until after the Civil War. The rising European power of Prussia began to be noticed. The Prussian philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz, started to be studied. He emphasized the importance of decisive battles to break the enemy's will and achieve strategic objectives. Destroying the enemy's military capacity was often the most effective path to success. Grant in particular picked up on his concept, even before it was stated by Clausewitz, of total victory and the destruction of the enemy state.

Ambrose makes the point that in January of 1863, when things were not going well for the Union, there was the appropriations bill for West Point on the Senate floor. The Radicals, besides themselves with fury at the scope of the conspiracy that had brought the Union to the edge of total disaster – and how, save by conspiracy, could the failure of more numerous and better armed northern armies be explained? – demanded that West Point be abolished. James H. Lane of Kansas suggested that

when the North was defeated an appropriate epitaph would be, "Died of West Point pro-slaveryism." Even if there was no conspiracy, Senator Trumball said, emphasis placed by the Academy on mathematics and fortifications was the cause of the Union's defeats. I will discuss engineering and math shortly. Trumble went on "Take off your engineering restraints…Dismiss…from the Army every man who knows how to build fortifications, and let the men of the North, with their strong arms and indomitable spirit, move down upon the rebels, and I tell you they will grind them to powder in their power."

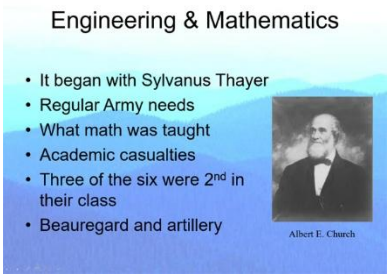


The attempt to destroy the Academy failed. Some of the Republicans who voted against the resolution noted that the Yankee armies who were being defeated, after all, by West Pointers who were displaying imagination and dash, the chief culprit being former Superintendent Robert E. Lee. The charges of incompetent training had a false ring. The North it seemed, had just got the wrong graduates.

There was more to it than that. Southern graduates did better, in the early years of the war, than their northern classmates for a number of reasons. Their troops were better. The rural South produced soldiers who were used to firearms and outdoor living. They were on the defensive and fighting in their own country with short supply lines and a friendly population. Until 1863 morale was higher. Until Halleck and Stanton came to the War Department, the Confederate Army was better organized. Confederate cavalry was clearly superior, not only because it was better led but because the southerners sat on their horses

better. Leaders like Lee, Jackson, and the two Johnstons – were career soldiers who had served as professional soldiers most of their adult lives. The leading Union officers resigned from the Army after the Mexican War to followed civilian pursuits. George Thomas was one of the few who remained – Grant, Sherman, McClellan, and Halleck had all been civilians. In 1861 they had to readjust, and it took time; the Confederates did not.

When the tide turned in the summer of 1863 the North had her two greatest victories, Vicksburg and Gettysburg, both won under Academy-trained men. The war was finally being won. Grant, Sherman, Meade, Sheridan, and other professionals were becoming heroes; McClellan and Buell, the leading conservative Democrats in the army, were gone. Halleck had become a Republican. The critics left West Point alone.



The focus of a West Point education was built upon the study of engineering and mathematics. This was due to the foundation created by Sylvanus Thayer. Thayer's philosophy and influence continued long after his resignation in 1833 and it touched every graduate through the end of the Civil War. This approach made a great deal of sense when the regular army which would receive these cadets numbered a little more than six thousand in the early 1830s. Small though it was, this force undertook a variety of tasks. The regulars' routine duties included manning the coastal defenses, exploring, mapping, policing the West and building bridges, railroads, and canals.

Let's focus on mathematics first. In our time period, there was one teacher who was a standout. Albert E. Church graduated

first in the class of 1828 and was commissioned in the Artillery, there being no vacancies in the Corps of Engineers. Thayer requested that Church stay at West Point to teach mathematics, and there he remained except for the two years starting 1832, when he joined his artillery unit. In 1837, he became professor of mathematics. Church served as a professor until his death in 1878, a total of fifty years.

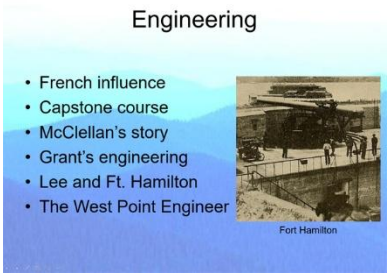
A large portion of the Fourth and Third Classes, Freshman and Sophomore, were devoted to math. It was indeed impressive. The cadets took Algebra, Plane & Solid Geometry, Plane & Spherical Trigonometry, Mensuration (the branch of mathematics that studies the measurement of geometric figures and their parameters like length, volume, shape, surface area, lateral surface area, etc.), Analytic Geometry, and Differential & Integral Calculus.

Mathematics was by far the leading producer of academic casualties. By itself that subject accounted for 43% of all failures. The weakness in math led to failures in other subjects. This amounted for 35% more leading to the conclusion that 78% of all academic failures were attributable wholly or in part to mathematics. In order to remain high in class rank you had not only to be good in math but to excel in it.

Three of our six candidates were ranked second in their class at West Point. Pierre G.T. Beauregard was 2nd out of 45 in the class of 1838, Robert E. Lee was 2nd out of 46 in the class of 1827, and George B. McClellan was 2nd out of 59 in the class of 1846. All three excelled in mathematics. It has been noted that if you were from a good family and had excellent early education you probably had a good background in arithmetic and went on to learn many of the above listed courses in

secondary school. Speaking for myself, I had most of the above math courses before I went to college.

While I could not find any interesting stories about how mathematics played out in the Civil War with the three leaders, one story shows that it must have played a role. Beauregard's artillery setup was a textbook application of his West Point training and engineering skills. By encircling Sumter with batteries, he ensured a crossfire that maximized psychological and physical pressure on the Union garrison. Here is where Grok was a big help. The AI provided two pages of information when I asked: "How did Pierre G.T. Beauregard set up his artillery in order to fire on Fort Sumter?" After all of the details, including equations, Grok summarized the answer like this. "Pierre G.T. Beauregard's mathematical skills were integral to the success of the Fort Sumter bombardment. He applied geometry and trigonometry to position 19 batteries around Charleston Harbor, ensuring a devastating crossfire. Ballistic calculations, rooted in projectile motion equations, guided the accurate fire of mortars, Columbiads, and smoothbores, while triangulation and range tables enabled precise targeting. Arithmetic underpinned logistics, from ammunition allocation to firing schedules, and timing calculations synchronized the 34-hour barrage. These efforts, grounded in Beauregard's West Point training and artillery experience, forced Fort Sumter's surrender and marked the start of the Civil War."



Next, we will turn our attention to engineering. We have already discussed Dennis Hart Mahon and why engineering was the primary force behind the establishment and continuation of the military academy. Before developing the effect on the graduates, let's first layout what the students were taught. West Point was heavily influenced by the French military engineering tradition, as the U.S. sought to model its military education on the renowned École Polytechnique. It goes without saying that French was required because many engineering and military texts were in French, and cadets needed to read original works or translations. The focus was on producing officers capable of designing fortifications, bridges, roads, and other infrastructure critical to military and national development.

Almost all of the course work in engineering and its related subjects like chemistry took place in the second and first class years. The capstone of the academic program was Mahan's civil and military engineering lectures called the science of war. In the paper and pencil world of the 19th century much of these studies depended on the student's ability to draw. It therefore should come as no surprise that there were whole courses devoted to drawing and topography. Technical drawing was emphasized, teaching cadets to create precise plans and maps. Topographical sketching and mapping were critical for military reconnaissance and planning engineering projects in the field.

To see how this curriculum set one of our six on the path to his downfall consider this story about George McClellan. He was part of an elaborate team of engineers who went on an

expedition to the Pacific Northwest. During this journey McClellan gave an early display of excessive caution which was to mar his performance in the Civil War. While searching for possible railroad passes through the Cascade Range, the future commander of the Army of the Potomac failed to examine what may have been the most suitable one at Yakima Pass in the mistaken belief that the snow cover was much deeper than it actually was.

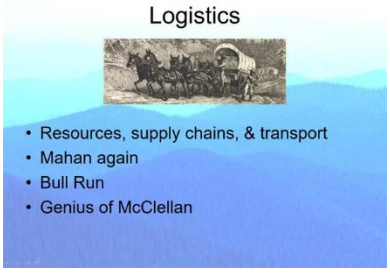
While this story explains McClellan's short comings one should not conclude he was a failure. On the contrary he was involved with many things. During the war with Mexico, he built roads, bridges, and fortifications for General Winfield Scott. He supported battles like Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec as part of the Company of Sappers, Miners, and Pontooners.

Grant's pre-Civil War activities show limited direct involvement in engineering projects compared to McClellan. Grant's West Point training provided him with mathematical and technical skills, but his military roles leaned toward logistics rather than engineering design. Historians note that Grant's strength lay in his ability to adapt and learn from observing engineering feats. An example of this was what he observed in Mexico and how that was applied in Vicksburg where he oversaw complex siege works and river crossings.

Robert E. Lee's engineering career before the Civil War spanned military fortifications, civil infrastructure, and wartime field engineering. His success in these endeavors, combined with his leadership during the Mexican-American War, established him as one of the most respected officers in the U.S. Army by the time the Civil War began in 1861. Early on, while a Second Lieutenant fresh out of West Point, Lee worked on building Fort

Pulaski outside of Savannah, Georgia. As he gained experience he was put in charge of major projects. As a Captain Lee was in charge of the construction and improvement of coastal defenses at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York.

Before ending this section, we should reflect on the West Point engineer. Many cadets failed to grasp the practical side of military education because the men who controlled West Point viewed its mission as being the production of engineers who could function as soldiers rather than the other way around.



As we begin to look at military logistics the name Mahan reappears. As was stated earlier, his impact on the school and its students cannot be overestimated. Pre-Civil War logistics education included lessons on the importance of securing resources, maintaining supply chains, and ensuring efficient transportation of troops and materials. The principles of military logistics were taught through a combination of theoretical lectures and practical exercises.

As you will remember Mahan's classes were derived from the French with heavy emphasis on Jomini. The Frenchman was the master of supply. There is a story, which may or may not be true, that Jomini asked the great emperor for 30 days leave. Napolean was predisposed to grant the request however he asked one question. How will you know where to find the army when you return as I myself do not know where I shall lead the troops? Jomini replied that you will be at the only place you can be and still resupply the troops.

Cadets were taught the importance of securing and transporting food, ammunition, medical supplies, and equipment. This included calculating the quantities needed to sustain troops based on campaign duration and distance. Lessons covered the establishment of supply depots, the use of wagons and pack animals, and the protection of supply lines from enemy raids. For the first time the lesson plans included the use of railroads to bring vast quantities of cargo to the battlefield. The quartermaster (responsible for equipment, transportation, and lodging) and commissary (responsible for food and provisions) departments were stressed. This involved budgeting, requisitioning supplies, and coordinating with civilian contractors. Case studies from the American Revolution and the War of 1812 illustrated the consequences of logistical failures, such as General Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga due to overstretched supply lines.

Mahan's lectures were supplemented by texts like Jomini's *The Art of War* and Mahan's own writings, such as *A Complete Treatise on Field Fortification*. These works included sections on logistics, emphasizing the need for careful planning to support military operations. Cadets were required to take detailed notes and recite lessons, ensuring they internalized logistical principles.

It is not hard to find examples of the impact of logistics on the behavior of the leaders we are here presenting. At the Battle of Bull Run in 1861, as one of the commanders, Beauregard demonstrated an understanding of the importance of coordinating troop movements and supplies. His ability to concentrate Confederate forces, despite initial logistical challenges, contributed to the Confederate victory. His West

Point training helped him manage the rapid deployment of troops and resources to counter Union advances.

As you know full well, at the beginning of the battle the Confederates were badly undermanned. The early morning attack looked like the forces of Irwin McDowell would carry the day. However, under orders from General Joseph E. Johnston, Thomas J. Jackson's Virginia Brigade moved from Winchester, Virginia, to reinforce Beauregard. They marched to Piedmont Station and boarded trains on the Manassas Gap Railroad. The brigade reached Manassas Junction just before the battle. From there, they marched to the battlefield around noon, where Jackson's stand on Henry House Hill earned him the nickname "Stonewall."

George McClellan's West Point education provided him with a deep understanding of logistics as the backbone of military success, leading to a well-organized and supplied army. It is easy to forget in light of his military failures on the battlefield, that it was his genius in supply that saved the Army of the Potomac from ruin in the early days of the war. Back in 2009 I gave a presentation called *Manna From Heaven – Northern Supply* where this was discussed in detail.

In just a few words let me suggest to you the logistics that went into the Peninsula Campaign. Besides the roughly 100,000 men in McClellan's force, it took a staggering amount of material to support this army. A force of this size "ate up" 150 wagon loads of supplies per day. This is not battle losses. A campaigning army could use up three times this amount. Even if the men sat on their rumps, as they often did during this adventure, they consumed the one to two tons each of these wagons. Picture this: If those 150 wagons held and average of 1½ tons we are

talking about 225 tons today, tomorrow, and on and on for the days between mid-March and the end of July 1862. The nation built up these supplies, wore them out, and built them up again time after time during the war. This is what George McClellan learned at West Point and demonstrated in the field.

It is now time to look at practical military skills. This will view the individual as a young officer and not the great leader they will become. It is the journey that will land these men in positions of command. In order to introduce the cadets to the soldier's life and to keep a closer watch on them, Sylvanus Thayer abolished the practice of annual vacations. In its place Thayer instituted a summer encampment during which time the cadets lived in tents, participated in drills, and practiced tactical movements. The Superintendent also added the cadets' practical training by forming them into two companies, each with its own officers and non-commissioned officers selected from the upper two classes. Thus, before graduation most cadets had an opportunity to serve as a corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, company adjutant, and company commander.

The summer schedule was a busy one. Drills began at 0530 and continued until 1700 hours. During the day cadets took instruction in riding, dismounted drill, infantry tactics, musketry, artillery drill and firing, and fencing. In addition, the boys walked guard, served on fatigue details, and of course, parading. Moreover, the first class devoted a part of the summer to making rockets, grenades, powder bags, and other munitions in the ordnance laboratory.

One should not conclude that all of the “practical stuff” took place during summer encampment. Drills and parades took place the year round after classes ended for the day. The Department of Practical Military Engineering was established and it was NOT under Mahan’s purview. A regular officer of the Corp of Engineers chaired the department and served as a member of the Academic Board in his own right.

We could go on for hours discussing many of the practical skills, but I will not drown on with many, many examples. Let’s just discuss one area and let it serve for all of the practical side of being a soldier. Horsemanship is a good topic. In the fall of 1839 horses were procured and the equitation arts were taught. Of our six only Grant, McClellan, and Sheridan had the benefit of this training as they graduated after the arrival of the horses. That does not mean that this topic was ignored. After the War of 1812 horsemanship became a formal part of cadet education, reflecting the Army’s reliance on mounted units for frontier defense and potential conflicts with European powers. Cadets were trained in basic horsemanship, including mounting, riding, and handling horses under various conditions, as well as cavalry tactics such as saber drills and mounted formations.

Ulysses S. Grant’s horsemanship skills, refined at West Point from 1839 to 1843, were a cornerstone of his military success and personal character. His exceptional riding ability translated into practical advantages during the Mexican-American War and Civil War. His knowledge of the horse and rider enabled bold maneuvers, strategic mobility, and a commanding presence. Beyond tactics, West Point’s training in this area instilled discipline, empathy, and adaptability, shaping Grant’s leadership style. His lifelong affinity for horses, sparked and formalized at

the Academy, remained a defining trait, influencing his approach to war, leadership, and life.

One small episode will serve to demonstrate Grant's ability. During his time at West Point the finest horse was York, a chestnut-colored animal, seventeen hands high, with a strong will. York would not tolerate an inferior rider and would through him off, then go through the remainder of the drill alone, never making a mistake. His favorite rider was this young cadet from Ohio. Once, before the Board of Visitors and a large crowd of spectators, the riding-master had one of his dragoons hold a pole at arms' length above his head, the other end resting against the wall, and signaled Grant, mounted on York, to jump it. They cleared the pole, "coming down with a tremendous thud" in a din of applause. The crowd called for a repeat, and the team of Grant and York did it three more times.

Grant's comfort with horses allowed him to personally scout terrain, as seen at Shiloh in 1862, where he rode across the battlefield to rally his troops. His West Point training in cavalry tactics informed his use of cavalry for reconnaissance, flanking maneuvers, and rapid advances, notably under subordinates like Philip Sheridan. This would be an appropriate spot to talk about Sheridan, but before I do, let me express a bit of personal trivia. When I was seven years old my parents bought a house at 730 Sherman Avenue in Plainfield, NJ. Sherman Avenue and my home was bounded by Grant Avenue to the west and Sheridan Avenue behind it on the north.

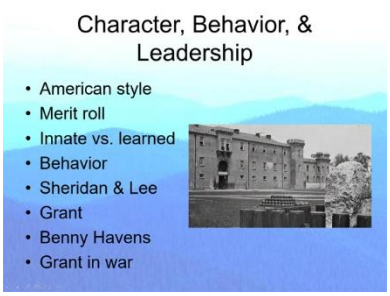
Sheridan's Civil War career began in infantry and staff roles, but his West Point training in cavalry tactics became critical when he was appointed colonel of the 2nd Michigan Cavalry in 1862. His rapid rise to command the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry

Corps by 1864 under Ulysses S. Grant was fueled by his ability to apply and innovate upon West Point's cavalry principles. At Cedar Creek, October 19, 1864, Sheridan's famous ride from Winchester to rally his army—covering 20 miles on his horse Rienzi—demonstrated his physical endurance and horsemanship, skills refined at school in spite of the fact that when he arrived at West Point, he had very few skills on the horse.

Sheridan's time at the Point was marked by disciplinary issues, including a suspension after a confrontation with a fellow cadet, which delayed his graduation until 1853. While he was not a standout like Grant, his persistence in mastering riding and tactics laid a foundation for his later success. His exposure to structured cavalry training gave him a theoretical and practical understanding of mounted warfare. His ability to inspire troops while riding under pressure mirrored the Academy's emphasis on leadership in the saddle. Sheridan transformed Union cavalry from a scouting force into a decisive combat arm, a shift rooted in tactical foundations but expanded through his vision. He integrated cavalry with infantry and artillery, using mounted troops for shock attacks and raids, as seen in the Yellow Tavern raid in 1864, where Confederate cavalry leader J.E.B. Stuart was defeated and mortally wounded.

Yellow Tavern deserves a bit more attention. Up to this point, Sheridan was dissatisfied with his role in the campaign. His Cavalry Corps was assigned to the Army of the Potomac, under George G. Meade, who reported to Grant. Meade had employed Sheridan's forces primarily in the traditional role of screening and reconnaissance. Sheridan, on the other hand, saw the value of wielding the Cavalry Corps as an independently operating

offensive weapon for wide-ranging raids into the rear areas of the enemy. On May 8, 1864, Sheridan went over Meade's head and told Grant that if his Cavalry Corps were let loose to operate as an independent unit, he could defeat "Jeb" Stuart, long a nemesis to the Union army. Grant was intrigued and convinced Meade of the value of Sheridan's request. Sheridan's raid achieved a victory against a numerically inferior opponent at Yellow Tavern but accomplished little overall. Their most significant achievement was killing Stuart, which deprived Lee of his most experienced cavalry commander, but this came at the expense of a two-week period in which the Army of the Potomac had no direct cavalry coverage for screening or reconnaissance. This absence of cover for the Union Army reminds us of Stuart himself and his habit of leaving the Army of Northern Virginia blind.



The last section of this presentation is about character, behavior, and leadership. It was recognized early on that West Point, while learning from European military schools, was going to be American in spirit. It was formed out of all classes of society and this meant that it was up to the academy to produce the kind of officers that reflected American values of the 19th century. It should come as no surprise to anyone who has sat through this talk that the values of the United States Military Academy would be the values of the "Father of the Military Academy," Sylvanus Thayer. When he came to West Point one of the things that had shocked Thayer's systematic mind was the casual manner in which the cadets reported to duty, attended classes, took examinations, and graduated. He wanted a system

whereby he could eliminate the subjective opinions of the professors and himself in making corps recommendations for the graduates.

His solution was his most important contribution to both West Point and the Army of the United States. It remains to this day at the heart of the West Point system. It was the merit roll, a device which allowed Thayer to rank each cadet within his class, so that at the end of four years he could say that the cadet ranking first or second in his class should be an engineer, the highest branch of the army at that time. And, in similar manner the cadet at lowest position on the honor role ought to be in the infantry. This tool practically eliminated all subjective feelings, while it took into account nearly everything a cadet did for four years, both in and out of the classroom. It was the most complete, and impersonal, system imaginable.

Every cadet was graded on every activity, in the classroom and on the drill field in a positive manner and added to his class rank. Everything else subjected the student to a black mark which lowered his rank. In his subjects, the cadet received marks ranging from 3.0 at the top to 0.0 for a complete failure. The more points he had the higher he stood. But, no manner how brilliant he was, his class rank could be lowered if his behavior was poor. Thayer had set up a system of demerits for each infraction of the regulations. Academics counted to most, but demerit could significantly lower your rank. Further, Thayer automatically dismissed anyone who receive more than 200 demerits in a single year.

Each of the four years had rank for the Corps of Cadets. Officers came from the first class, sergeants from the second, and corporals from the third. The school was organized as a

battalion of infantry with four companies. A cadet Captain commanded each company, and the senior of the four student officers was the "First Captain." There were many positions filled by seniors who held the rank of cadet lieutenants. However, there were still seniors who had "clean sleeves," but in deference to their status as seniors they were termed "High Privates." It is interesting to note that three of our six subjects, Lee, Beauregard, and McClellan, all were cadet officers as determined by their class rank. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were all High Privates.

It is very difficult to separate innate character, behavior, and leadership from what was learned at schools of all levels and culminating at West Point. When we get to behavior, we will see with Sheridan what was frowned upon at the academy may have made the man a better warrior. In his book, Morrison points out in words he has chosen the following: The disciplinary code rewarded alibiing, docility, and punctilious (puhngk-ti-lee-uhs) obedience to a set of minutely detailed rules. The code did not reward, in fact, it attempted to discourage, initiative. Had the regulations been literally and unthinkingly applied, West Point could have only produced automatons! That it did not was due less to the system itself than to the more humane and broad-minded members of the staff. They refrained from pushing the code to its limits and to the stouthearted young men who refused to surrender their individuality regardless of the pressure to conform.

With that as a shaky foundation we will yet forge ahead with four of our six examples. Let's investigate fighting as an example of bad behavior. It was a popular pastime. The antebellum cadet was pugnacious. His sense of honor was

prickly, and an insult or injustice almost invariably provoked a scuffle. Usually, the altercations were simple fist fights, resulting only in bloody noses and black eyes. Occasionally, the combatants resorted to weapons with intent to do bodily harm.

Philip Sheridan was suspended for one year after a physical altercation with a fellow cadet, William R. Terrill. The incident began when Sheridan, offended by the tone of an order given by Terrill, a cadet sergeant, broke ranks and threatened to "run him through" with a bayonet. The following day, the two engaged in a fistfight. Sheridan's suspension was a result of this assault on an upperclassman, which was considered a serious breach of discipline. It is doubtful that little Phil learned to be pugnacious at West Point, and further this “bad behavior” served him well when he received his own command in the war.

We will now contrast Sheridan with that gentleman from Virginia. As a cadet and superintendent, Robert E. Lee exemplified West Point’s ideals through his discipline, integrity, and dedication to duty. His academic excellence, impeccable conduct, and efforts to mentor cadets set a high standard. He was a model cadet, graduating second in his class in 1829 with no demerits over his four years, an extraordinary achievement reflecting discipline, adherence to rules, and moral conduct. His peers and instructors noted his diligence, courtesy, and commitment to the Academy’s code of honor. He avoided the infractions like drinking, gambling, or insubordination, that were common among cadets.

However, his later decision to join the Confederacy raises questions about loyalty within the framework of West Point’s values, though it does not negate his earlier alignment with the Academy’s principles. Lee’s legacy at West Point remains a

study in both exemplary adherence to its ideals and the complexities of applying those ideals in a divided nation.

Grant fell short of West Point's ideals of character, behavior, and leadership. His accumulation of demerits, mediocre academics, and lack of prominence in leadership roles reflected a lack of discipline and ambition compared to the Academy's high standards. Grant's behavior was inconsistent with West Point's ideal of disciplined conduct. He accumulated numerous demerits—mostly for minor infractions like tardiness, sloppy appearance, or neglecting his quarters—finishing with 218 demerits over four years, placing him near the bottom of his class in conduct. While he avoided serious violations, his casual attitude toward Academy regulations showed a lack of the meticulous discipline West Point prized.

Drinking was an issue that dogged him all of his life. For this his detractors have written a condemnation of the General. That being said, there is no definitive evidence that Ulysses S. Grant visited Benny Havens' Tavern while he was a cadet at West Point. The same could not be said of Sherman who was documented as a patron of this establishment. For decades the authorities at West Point tried to close this "watering hole" without success. The tavern was so popular it was eventually immortalized by the ditty, "Benny Havens' Oh." Here is the first verse and chorus:

Verse 1:

Come, fill your glasses, fellows, and stand up in a row,

To singing sentimentally, we're going for to go;

In the Army there's sobriety, promotion's very slow,

So, we'll sing our reminiscences of Benny Havens, Oh!

Chorus:

Oh! Benny Havens, Oh! Oh! Benny Havens, Oh!

We'll sing our reminiscences of Benny Havens, Oh!

Returning to Grant he demonstrated character through his personal integrity and a strong sense of duty during the Civil War. He accepted the immense responsibility of leading Union forces with unwavering commitment to preserving the Union. His willingness to endure criticism and his lack of vanity, evident in his simple demeanor and focus on results, aligned with West Point's emphasis on selfless service.

In the area of behavior, he exhibited the discipline he lacked as a cadet. His calm under pressure, clear decision-making, and ability to maintain composure in chaotic battles like Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Appomattox embodied the professional conduct West Point sought in officers.

Grant's leadership as a general is where he most clearly fulfilled West Point's ideals. His strategic brilliance, tenacity, and ability to inspire loyalty in his troops, despite initial skepticism from superiors, made him one of America's greatest military leaders. He prioritized mission success over personal glory, delegated effectively, and adapted to modern warfare's demands, as seen in his innovative campaigns. His respect for adversaries, notably in accepting Lee's surrender at Appomattox with magnanimity, reflected West Point's emphasis on honorable leadership.