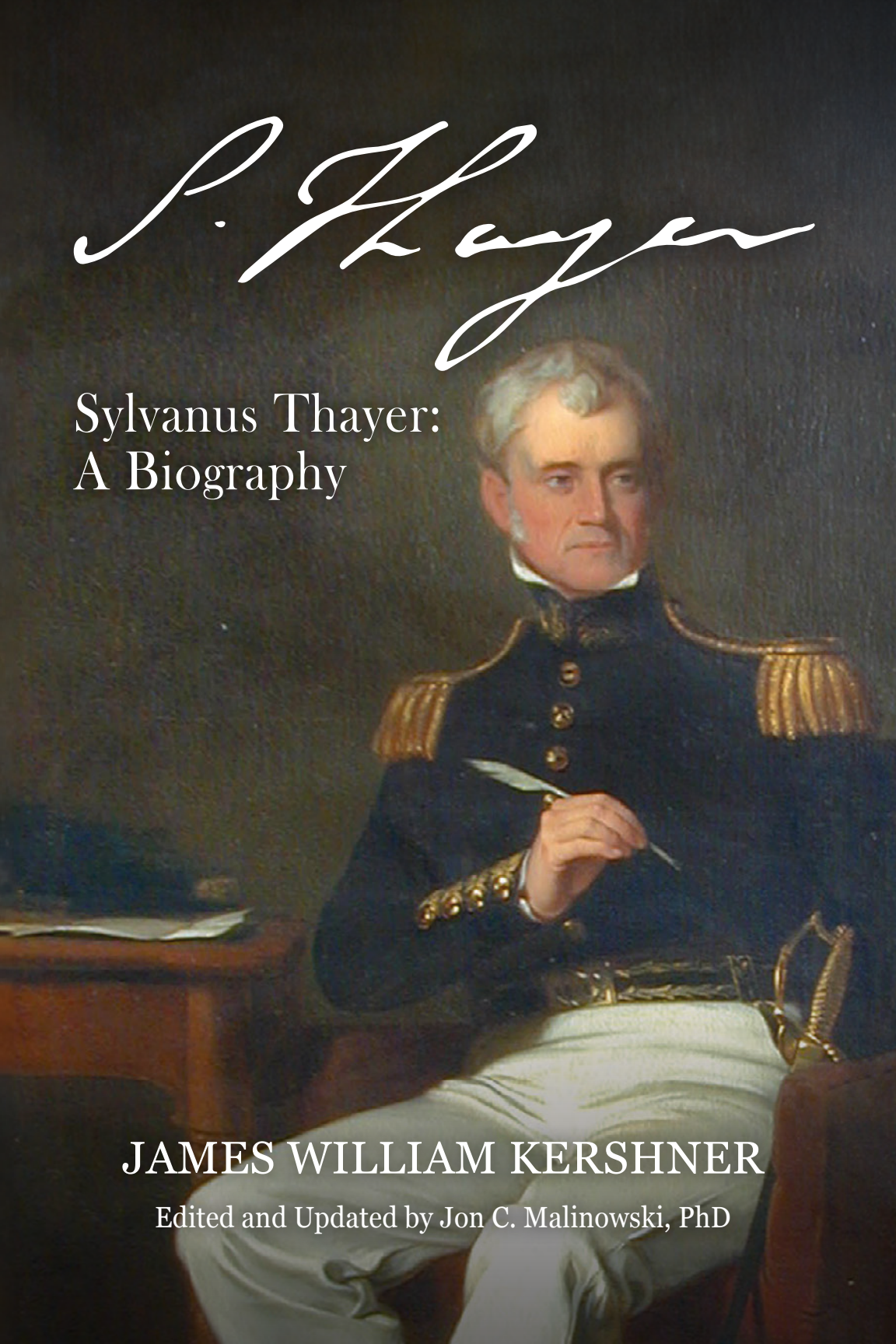

Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

JAMES WILLIAM KERSHNER

Edited and Updated by Jon C. Malinowski, PhD

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WEST POINT PRESS

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FOREWORD

As a proud alumnus of West Point (Class of 1969, "Best of the Line!"), I was, of course, familiar with Sylvanus Thayer's importance to USMA during its early years, as evidenced by his designation as the "Father of the Military Academy." However, I did not fully appreciate Thayer's impact as an engineer, educator, and philanthropist at a formative time in the history of the United States until two of my sons attended Dartmouth, where the School of Engineering bears Thayer's name. In trying to learn more about his contributions and accomplishments following his tenure at West Point, however, I was shocked to find there were no widely available biographies of the man who also could be heralded as the "Father of Technical Education" in the United States of America.

Countless high school students, cadets, postgraduates, engineers, and educators—and, through them, the United States as a whole—have been dramatically impacted by the life and work of Sylvanus Thayer. Thayer's steadfastness in "pursuing the harder right rather than the easier wrong" is a timeless lesson for all generations and an example worth emulating, and his legacy of service and science should inspire today's leaders as they prepare to face tomorrow's challenges.

Dr. Malinowski has done a superb job supplementing Dr. Kershner's original research to create a compelling portrait of a man whose profound influence on the literal building of America has gone unrecognized for far too long. I can think of no more fitting publisher for this work than the West Point Press, whose goal is to extend West Point's mission, influence, and long history of providing intellectual capital to the U.S. Army and the nation.

As a member of the Long Gray Line and someone who has a deep love and appreciation for this country, I am honored to have played a small part in bringing this important project to fruition. I hope you will find it as informative and inspirational as I do.

Anthony L. Guerrerio
USMA Class of 1969

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

James Kershner's 1976 doctoral dissertation for West Virginia University, reprinted here, remains the best biography of Sylvanus[1] Thayer ever written. From Thayer's birth just miles from the birthplace of John Adams in Braintree, Massachusetts, Kershner follows the major milestones of the General's life, pausing on the pivotal years of his superintendency at West Point, to help the reader understand why a son of New England is best remembered as the "Father of the Military Academy." Beginning with Thayer's upbringing in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Kershner highlights how the future general's educational journey intertwines with military service, creating a powerful combination that forever changes the young United States Military Academy (USMA) and, through its graduates, the country. Beyond the Hudson Highlands of New York, Kershner follows Thayer's travels across Europe, details his meticulous improvements to America's coastal defenses, and remembers the generous philanthropy that produced two thriving educational institutions beyond West Point. As milestones pass, Thayer becomes more than the statue of white stone on the grounds of his beloved Academy. The reader meets Thayer the traveler, Thayer the friend, Thayer the administrator, and Thayer the frail.

Kershner's work is well-researched and thorough while avoiding falsely elevating Thayer to mythical status. In editing his work for a wider audience, I have tried to respect Kershner's original research and editorial choices where possible. In nearly all cases, his sources remain the best available and the scholarship is still

1. Pronounced *sil-VAY-nus* according to nineteenth century guides. —Ed.

sound. However, significant Academy histories by George Pappas and Theodore Crackel, published after 1976, as well my own research, prompted minor changes in context, chronology, and biography. In such instances, or where I disagree with Kershner, I have either made changes to the text or added a footnote. As an example, Kershner included an oft-repeated claim that the Academy's first professor, mathematician George Baron, taught at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, England. Crackel's scholarship disproves this. Further, in places, I have extended quotations to give the reader more context but, in all cases, misspellings in quotes have been left unchanged except where, in consulting handwritten original documents, I felt the transcribers had erred. Footnotes have also been added to clarify events, individuals, and terms that may not be familiar to all readers. In addition, minor revisions to grammar and spelling have been made in accordance with the guidelines of West Point Press and the 18th Edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. These edits, however, leave the substance of Kershner's original work untouched, preserving his voice and vision throughout. While other scholars might choose either to linger longer or pass more quickly over aspects of USMA history—such as national debates over the need for an academy or the nature of Superintendent Alden Partridge's conflict with Thayer—Kershner's goal was expressly focused on the life of USMA's most important early leader, not on the history of the Academy.

What is fundamentally new in this volume compared to the original, or to the 1982 "Dissertations in American Biography" reprint by the Arno Press, are the photos, illustrations, and maps. In early 2025, I traveled to Massachusetts and New Hampshire to confirm Kershner's scholarship and to take photos of historical objects, documents, and locations. In addition, the West Point Museum graciously allowed me to photograph Thayer's swords, coat, and other items. In glimpses, readers can now walk where Thayer walked and see faces and objects that were meaningful to him. To complete this new edition, I have added a reflective epilogue about Thayer's

life and the places he lived, written through the lens of a cultural geographer. I also discuss new aspects of Thayer's legacy, particularly his connection with the Thayer Method of teaching that has received significant attention since the 1980s.

As mentioned above, Kershner's dissertation remains the best biography of Thayer. I am proud to edit and update this important work and to help bring Thayer's story to a new generation of readers. Although James Kershner was not a graduate of West Point, his portrait of Sylvanus Thayer is a gift to the Long Gray Line and all who love the Academy. It remains an indispensable contribution to both USMA and American histories.

AUTHOR'S 1976 INTRODUCTION

Sylvanus Thayer is best remembered as the "Father of the United States Military Academy," but for twenty-six years he was also an active military engineer in charge of the construction of fortifications in Boston harbor and other works in New England. After his retirement from active duty, he endowed two New England schools, the Thayer School of Civil Engineering at Dartmouth College[1] and the Thayer Academy in Braintree, Massachusetts. He appeared to many to be stiff, formal, and pedantic, but these surface characteristics obscured some other aspects. He was highly intelligent and thoughtful. When he made friends, they were often his for life. He was an excellent administrator, as shown by his work at West Point. It was his work there, and later at Dartmouth, that makes him an important figure in American history. In spite of his accomplishments, no comprehensive biography has previously been written.

Although two books have been written about him, neither is scholarly, objective, or very accurate. George Fielding Eliot's *Sylvanus Thayer of West Point* (1959) is a highly fictionalized account for juvenile readers. Norman Robert Ford's *Thayer of West Point* (1953) contains much misinformation. Therefore, the need for a factual biography of Thayer existed.

The purpose of this work is to place Thayer in proper historical perspective in order to show his importance as an engineer and educator. This biography is a chronological look at Thayer's entire life. Particular emphasis is given to the men and influences that shaped him as well as to his professional accomplishments. Since

1. Since 1941, the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth.—Ed.

Thayer is most often associated with the Military Academy, a great deal of attention is given to his sixteen years as Superintendent of West Point, but his earlier life and later career are not overlooked. His work as an engineer and his involvement in the founding of the Thayer School of Engineering are examined in detail. A post-mortem look at Thayer's life and work brings one to the conclusion that, as a result of his achievements in the area of education, Thayer is a major figure in American history.

One problem in writing about Sylvanus Thayer is that few personal letters exist today. After his death, his niece, Miss Livia Abigail Wild, destroyed many of his papers and letters. A small trunkful of letters was found in 1927 and given to the Military Academy, and a packet of Thayer's letters was discovered in the 1920s under the flooring in the Superintendent's Quarters. There are no letters from his parents and only a few from his sisters. This creates an unfortunate gap in our knowledge of Thayer's past that can never be filled.

One great help to the scholar interested in writing about Thayer is *The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808–1872* (1965) compiled and edited by Cindy Adams and J. Thomas Russel, with the assistance of Fay Yankolonis, James Pearson, and others. These transcriptions of the modest collection of letters and papers mentioned above were assembled mainly from the files of the West Point Association of Graduates, the United States Military Archives, and manuscript collections in the Academy library. The *Thayer Papers* also contain many important facsimile additions from the National Archives. Anyone interested in studying Thayer must begin with these papers. Copies are located at West Point, at the Thayer Public Library in Braintree, and at the Library of Congress.[2] Without the *Thayer Papers*, it would have been impossible to write this dissertation, and I owe a large debt to the editors.

2. The *Thayer Papers* are available online through the USMA Library Digital Collection at https://usmalibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/.—Ed.

Sylvanus Thayer:
A Biography

I

Youth and Education



In the summer of 1815, a young American Army officer stood on the deck of the frigate USS *Congress*. He was tall for his day, between five feet ten inches and six feet in height, with a face more dignified than handsome: dark hair, sallow complexion, high forehead, dark hazel eyes, a strong nose, and a firm, sensitive mouth.[1] His appearance and bearing conveyed an overall impression of pride, strength, and authority.

His uniform would have seemed strange to the sailors who served aboard the *Congress*. American military uniforms at that time, and indeed for many years after, were more distinctive than practical, with comfort being relatively unimportant. His hat was high and bell-shaped, of the Napoleonic variety, worn with a plume.

1. Thayer's passport, dated April 22, 1815, describes him as 5'10" with a "sallow" complexion, dark hair, dark hazel eyes, and a scar on his right ankle. It lists his age as twenty-six years, or "thereabout," but he was twenty-nine at the time. Kershner's description of Thayer as being five feet ten inches to six feet tall, as well as his other descriptors, may come from details on a December 1843 passport, which adds an inch to his height (five feet eleven inches) and notes his eyes, and hair, as gray. The passports are included in *The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808–1872*, edited by Cindy Adams (West Point Association of Graduates, 1965), hereafter referred to as the *Thayer Papers*.—Ed.

His dark blue jacket had a high black velvet collar, indented cuffs, and yellow metal buttons bearing the engineer motto, "Essayons." His collar was ornamented with a gold star encircled with a sprig of laurel. His two epaulettes denoted a field grade officer, if only by brevet.[2] Insignia of rank were not very important at the time because the American Army was so small that most officers knew each other by sight. White cotton trousers and dark boots completed his military uniform.[3]

The young officer was Brevet Major Sylvanus Thayer, United States Army Corps of Engineers. With friend and fellow engineer Brevet Colonel William McRee, he was on his way to Europe for two years of work, study, and perhaps adventure.[4] Thayer hoped to see his longtime idol, Napoleon. As a youth, Thayer had been fascinated with the dashing French soldier who became emperor of the French. Thayer had read avidly of each campaign of Napoleon and knew by heart many of the earlier campaigns. In February 1815, while Thayer was planning his visit to the continent, Napoleon escaped from exile on the island of Elba and was once again terrorizing Europe. Thayer never realized this great opportunity to see Napoleon in action, possibly in victory; while he was still at sea, the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon near the city of Waterloo in Belgium.[5]

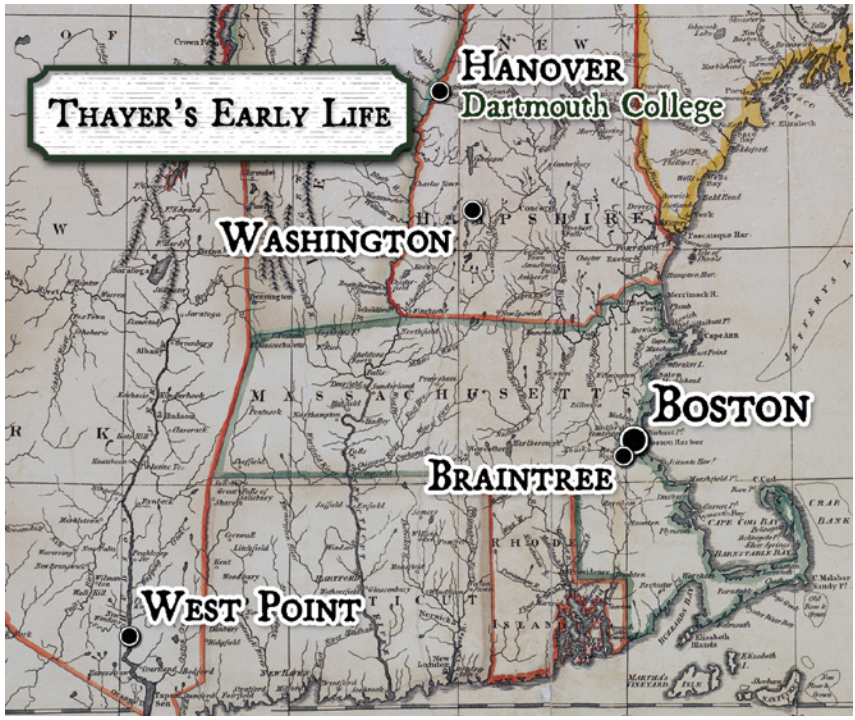
2. Receiving a brevet rank in the military refers to the conferring of a title of a higher rank as a reward or in recognition of potential that does not always include the pay or full privileges of that rank. In short, it is an honorary promotion. As an example, Thayer was a captain from 1813–1828, but was a brevet major after 1815 and a brevet lieutenant colonel after 1823. Each honorary promotion was for distinguished and meritorious service.

3. The uniform description is based on a memo from John M. Dervan, Assistant Curator, U.S. Army Engineer Museum, Fort Belvoir, VA, July 30, 1974, to Lenore Fine, Historical Division, Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore, MD.

4. This trip to Europe is discussed at length in Chapter IV.—Ed.

5. George Ticknor to George W. Cullum, May 29, 1864, an undated manuscript by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*; George W. Cullum, *Biographical Sketch of Brigadier-General Sylvanus Thayer, Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, July 28, 1817 to July 1, 1833* (New York: A. G. Sherwood and Company, 1883), 31. [This *Sketch* is a transcript of Cullum's speech at the dedication of the Thayer Monument at West Point in June 1883. It is a short, adulatory summary of Thayer's life and mostly focuses on his years as Superintendent.—Ed.]

Despite Thayer's lost opportunity to report on a Napoleonic battle, his visit to Europe would have considerable reverberations that would impact American history and military policy. What he saw and learned in Europe would refine his own ideas on military training, ideas that would guide and shape the infant Military Academy at West Point, New York. Sylvanus Thayer would become known as an educator, not a warrior; as a builder, not a destroyer; as the man who earned the appellation, "The Father of the United States Military Academy."



Thayer spent his first twenty-three years in four locations: Braintree, Massachusetts; Washington and Hanover, New Hampshire; and West Point, New York. (Map by Editor. Basemap: Map of the northern, or New England states of America, Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center, Boston Public Library, 1795.)

To learn something of Thayer's heritage, it is necessary to go back to colonial America. His ancestors were early settlers in Massachusetts, a colony founded by influential Puritan gentry and merchants who formed the Massachusetts Bay Company. Dissatisfied with the king and repression in England, the Puritans departed for new lands and created a religious commonwealth in the wilderness. Under the leadership of John Winthrop, a group of colonists sailed to America in 1630. They founded Boston and several adjacent towns, one of them being Braintree, where the Thayers later settled.[6]

Richard Thayer, from whom Sylvanus Thayer is descended, emigrated from the parish of Thornbury in Gloucestershire, England.[7] A Puritan and a freeman,[8] he came to Braintree in 1640 and lived there with his wife, Dorothy, and their children until his death in 1695.[9]

Sylvanus's father, Nathaniel, born on April 11, 1752, to Caleb and Abigail Faxon Thayer, was the great-grandson of Richard Thayer. On November 28, 1776, Nathaniel Thayer married his cousin Dorcas Faxon, the daughter of Azariah and Dorcas

6. Curtis P. Nettels, *The Roots of American Civilization; A History of American Colonial Life*, 2nd. ed. (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 119–120.
7. About twelve miles north of the city of Bristol.—Ed.
8. Puritans were Protestants who believed the English Reformation had not done enough to rid elements of Catholicism from the Church of England. To be a freeman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony required being a church member and taking an oath to the civil government.—Ed.
9. Bezaleel Thayer, *Memorial of the Thayer Name, From the Massachusetts Colony of Weymouth and Braintree, Embracing Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of Richard and Thomas Thayer, and Their Descendants, From 1036 to 1874* (Oswego, NY: R. J. Oliphant, 1874), 7; Mrs. Albert Hastings Pitkin, *Thayer Ancestry. Supplement to the "Family Memorial of the Early Settlers of New England" in the Line of Col. Abraham Thayer, His Ancestors and Descendants* (Hartford, CT: n.p., 1890), 43; Stacy Baxter Southworth, "General Sylvanus Thayer," in *A Brief History of the Town of Braintree in Massachusetts, 1640–1940 by the Braintree Tercentenary Committee*, ed. Marion Sophia Arnold (Thomas Todd Company, 1940), 43; John Adams Vinton, *Genealogical Sketches of the Descendants of John Vinton of Lynn, 1648: and of Several Allied Families . . . with an Appendix Containing a History of the Braintree Iron Works, and Other Historical Matter* (Boston: S. K. Whipple and Company, 1858), 87.

Penniman Faxon.[10] This was a period of great turmoil in America. The struggle against Great Britain was more than a year old, and the Continental Congress had changed the character of the war from a colonial revolt demanding the redress of grievances to a full-scale struggle for independent status. Three months earlier, George Washington's tired and tattered soldiers were forced out of New York and across the Hudson into New Jersey. Despite the Revolution, everyday life in Braintree continued.[11]

Nathaniel Thayer was a housewright, or builder, of wooden houses and, like many Americans of the time, a farmer. At the time of his marriage, he was a successful, but not wealthy, man. He and his bride lived in a wooden house built by his grandfather and namesake. Their family, the seventh generation from Richard Thayer, quickly grew, and in all they had seven children who lived and at least two who died at birth or soon after. This was not an exceptionally large family, and the extra hands were always welcome in the field and kitchen. Sylvanus, the fifth child and youngest son, was for many years coddled by his mother and older sisters. The names and birthdays of the Thayer children were Dorcas, born April 2, 1778; Mehitable,[12] born July 7, 1780; Nathaniel, born November 25, 1781; Lue Maria, born September 16, 1783; Sylvanus,[13] born June 9, 1785; Abigail, born March 17, 1791; and Livia Drusilla, born February 20, 1793.[14]

10. Nathaniel and Dorcas shared the same grandparents, Richard Faxon (1686–1768) and Hannah Beckett Faxon (1687–1769).—Ed.
11. George L. Faxon, *The History of the Faxon Family, Containing a Genealogy of the Descendants of Thomas Faxon of Braintree, Mass. . . . and others* (Springfield, MA.: Springfield Printing Company, 1880), 124.
12. Typically, a female name. From Mehetabel in the Old Testament (Genesis 36:39).—Ed.
13. Sylvanus, or Silvanus, was a rural Roman god of forests and agriculture (or uncultivated fields). Related to the English word "sylvan," meaning "wooded," " pastoral," or "related to the forest." Some translations of the Bible, including the King James Version (KJV), substitute "Silvanus" for "Silas," as in 1 Thess. 1:1. The name "Silvanus" appears four times in the KJV.—Ed.
14. B. Thayer, *Thayer Memorial*, 81; Pitkin, *Thayer Ancestry Supplement*, 46; Faxon, *Faxon Family*, 124–128.

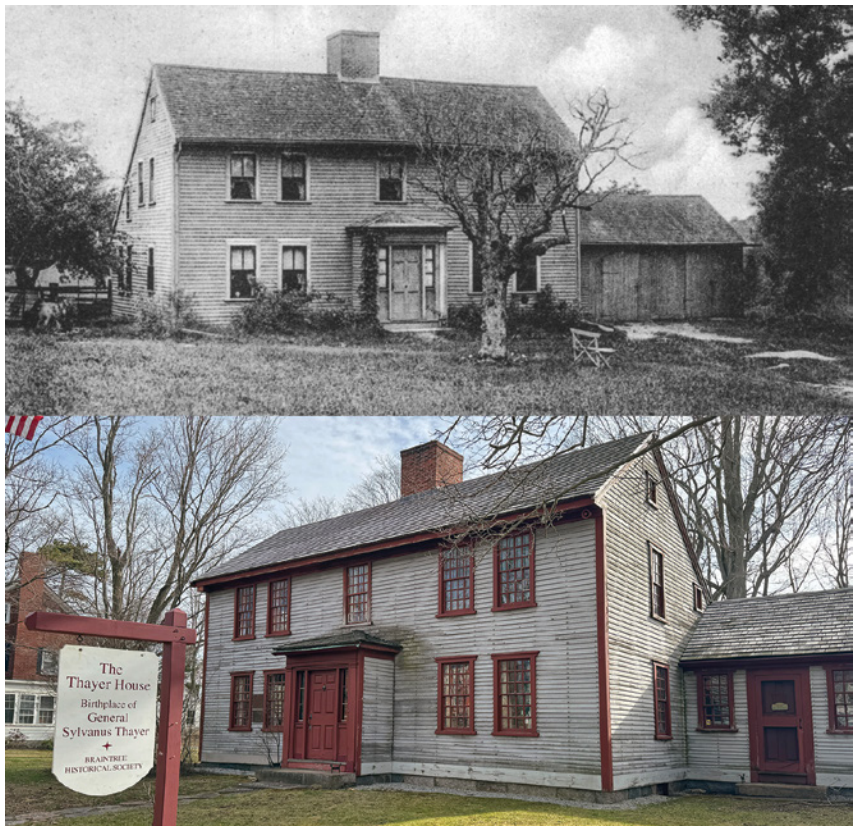
When the War for Independence began, many men left their jobs and farms to join local militias. Thayer's father and uncles fought in the Revolution on the side of the Continentals. The name "Nathaniel Thayer" appears on the rolls of a company of Minutemen raised under the command of Captain John Vinton in Colonel Benjamin Lincoln's regiment, which assembled on April 29, 1775, and served for three days during the Lexington and Concord disturbances.[15]

Sylvanus's maternal uncles, Azariah, Francis, and John Faxon, saw more extensive service. Azariah Faxon served in a grenadier company with Captain Vinton of Colonel Benjamin Lincoln's regiment during the Lexington alarm;[16] with the company of his excellency Governor John Hancock, for the defense of Castle and Governor's Islands in Boston Harbor; and later with Captain Moses French's company in Colonel Palmer's regiment, which assembled at Braintree in March 1776. Francis Faxon served for about three years in various companies. He was a drummer in Captain Ebenezer Thayer's company and in Captain Stephen Penniman's company in Colonel Dyke's regiment in 1776 and later served with his excellency John Hancock and under Captain John Cushing. After the war, Francis and Azariah moved to Washington, New Hampshire, where other members of the Faxon family lived. John Faxon, who also served for about three years with his brother Francis as a musician and private soldier, returned to Rhode Island when the war ended, but he often visited his brothers in New Hampshire.[17]

Before the Revolution, Braintree had been prosperous and growing, but the town's economy suffered as increasing numbers of farmers and fishermen went off to join the fighting. Shipbuilding and related industries were hampered by the war. Large sums of money were spent for soldiers' pay, and the town went deeply in

15. William S. Pattee, *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy, with a Sketch of Randolph and Holbrook* (Quincy, MA: Green and Prescott, 1878), 405; Nathaniel's Find a Grave® page (Memorial ID 29863983) lists his rank as private.—Ed.
16. Beginning April 19, 1775. Considered the start of the Revolutionary War.—Ed.
17. Pattee, *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy*, 408, 410, 412; Faxon, *The History of the Faxon Family*, 123–126.

debt. When peace came, Braintree faced a long economic recovery. The general state of affairs the year Sylvanus was born can be described as a postwar recession combined with inflation. The next year saw the outbreak of Daniel Shays' short-lived debtors' rebellion, supported, at least vocally, by many of the residents of Braintree.[18]



Thayer's boyhood home in Braintree, Massachusetts, was built in 1720 by his great-grandfather. At top is the house in its original location as it looked in a 1910 postcard. Below is the house in 2025 in a new location on Washington Street. It was moved in the 1950s. (Photo and postcard courtesy of the Editor.)

18. Barton, "Braintree Historical Sketch," *Brief History of Braintree*, 21–24.

Although Sylvanus grew up during an uncertain and critical period of American history, his early childhood was uneventful and ordinary. Like other farm children, he did his share of the chores and learned the fundamentals of reading and writing. As a boy, Sylvanus exhibited a strong retentive memory, a power of the mind that he shared with his older brother Nathaniel. On one occasion, Sylvanus's father chided him for apparent inattention in church. The youth astonished his family by stating the minister's text, repeating substantially the entire sermon, and giving the numbers and names of the hymns sung. Yet in spite of this amazing faculty, he was an indifferent scholar.[19]

This lack of interest in scholarship was to change after 1793, when Azariah Faxon wrote his sister Dorcas Thayer after the birth of her seventh child urging her to send her youngest son, Sylvanus, to help him in his store. In return, he would provide food, clothing, and lodging, as well as see that the boy continued his education. The Thayers considered this an advantageous arrangement for Sylvanus. Their rocky farmland was not very productive, and Azariah's offer would ease their financial burden. Moreover, Sylvanus would be learning a useful trade that might prove an exciting change for him. Thus, at about the age of nine, Sylvanus left his family in Braintree and went to live with Uncle Azariah Faxon in Washington, New Hampshire.[20] Although young Thayer worked hard in the store, he was also encouraged to study by Azariah, who had been a schoolmaster. Sometime during his stay in New Hampshire, Thayer became fascinated with stories he heard about a young soldier in France, Napoleon Bonaparte. Soon he wanted to know about military life and military education, and he developed an interest in education in general that was to last throughout his life.[21]

19. Jonathan Moulton to George W. Cullum, October 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
20. Washington, New Hampshire, incorporated in 1776, is now in Sullivan County.—Ed.
21. Robert Fletcher to George W. Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*; Ernest Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod: The West Point Tradition in American Life* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940), 11–12; Southworth, *Brief History of Braintree*, 43.

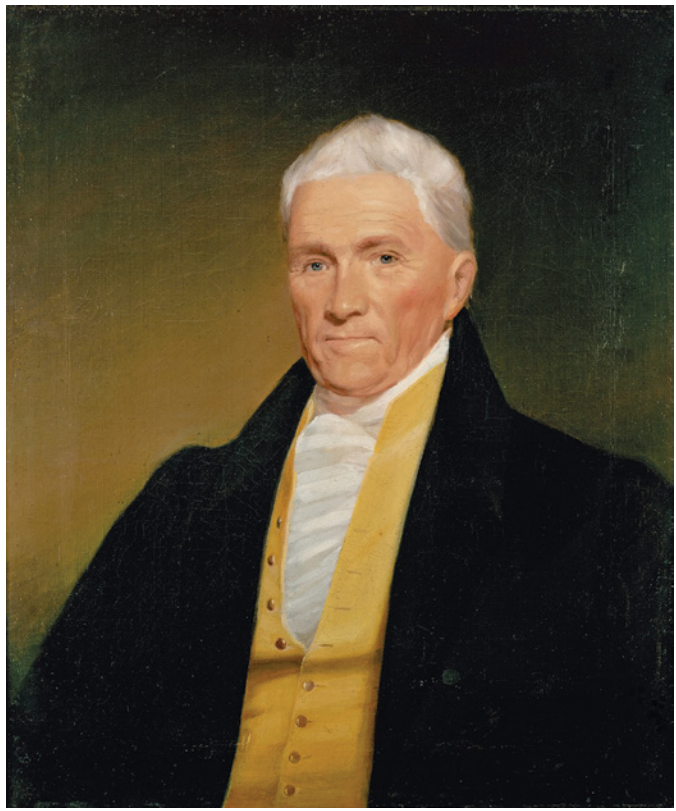


At about age nine, Sylvanus was sent to live with his Uncle Azariah and family in this house in Washington, New Hampshire. The house, of Georgian design, is believed to have been built by Azariah in about 1790. Thayer helped out in a family store nearby. (Photo by Editor.)

According to family stories, two others influenced the adolescent Sylvanus, one a military man, the other a scholar. General Benjamin Pierce, the Revolutionary War hero, father of the fourteenth president, and later governor of New Hampshire,[22] lived near the Faxon store and visited it on occasion. During these visits he became acquainted with Sylvanus. The exact amount of influence General Pierce had over Sylvanus is unknown, but later Thayer's close friend George W. Cullum said that Thayer was the protégé of the general. Perhaps it was General Pierce who interested Thayer in a military career and helped him get an appointment to the Military Academy. For lack of documentation, these questions must remain unanswered. The other man who influenced Thayer was his uncle John Faxon, who visited his two brothers in Washington

22. Pierce, a Democratic-Republican, was governor from 1827 to 1828 and 1829 to 1830.—Ed.

regularly. A graduate of Brown University, he practiced law and medicine and was a fine scholar. As a result of conversations with John, Sylvanus was inspired with some scholarly ambition, and he broadened his studies to include Latin grammar, Pikes' arithmetic, and some algebra. All the while, he continued working at Azariah's store.[23]



General Benjamin Pierce (1757–1839) was one of Thayer's boyhood mentors in New Hampshire. A veteran of the Revolution, he was twice governor of New Hampshire and was the father of President Franklin Pierce. (Portrait by Henry Willard, c.1830. New Hampshire Historical Society.)

23. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, an undated manuscript by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 12–14; Faxon, *Faxon Family*, 126.

Thayer's life was almost cut short when he suffered an attack of cholera morbus[24] in 1799, the same year that George Washington died. The great sorrow of the nation at Washington's death made a deep and lasting impression on Thayer. In his old age, he could still recall the Washington funeral orations he heard as a youth.[25]

In addition to pursuing his own studies, Thayer soon became involved in the education of others. In 1801, at the school in Washington, he taught basic arithmetic and other elementary courses to children not many years his junior. Unfortunately for us, his effectiveness as a teacher was never recorded, and he never mentioned whether or not he enjoyed this early academic experience.[26]

In the spring of 1802, Sylvanus, now a strapping young man of seventeen, returned to his parents' home in Braintree. During the summer, he helped his father on the farm; in the winter, he attended a local academy and learned a passable amount of Greek grammar. The next year, he returned to Washington and continued his studies in preparation for college. After discussion with his parents and Azariah, he decided to attend Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Having read the classics and acquired a fundamental background in algebra, geometry, and mathematics, Sylvanus passed the entrance examination and was admitted to Dartmouth in September 1803.[27]

Sylvanus's decision to enter Dartmouth showed how much he had come to value scholarship. Colleges in the nineteenth century did not occupy the same position they hold today. Although a college education was considered a distinct advantage, it was not essential to have a college degree to become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, or to join any of the other professions that might attract a young man of intelligence and initiative. Moreover, college

24. "Cholera morbus" was a term used to refer to a general gastrointestinal condition causing vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration. Thayer may or may not have had what is now called "cholera," an infection caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*.—Ed.
25. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
26. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
27. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.

curricula had responded slowly to social change and the needs of the country; the early colleges were not yet knit into the fabric of American economic life. Higher education was more of a luxury than a necessity.[28]

Why Thayer selected Dartmouth over nearby Harvard, or Brown, John Faxon's alma mater, or another college is a cause for some speculation. The curriculum at Dartmouth, while attractive to Thayer, was not significantly different from that of other institutions. At the core of the curriculum were classical languages and literature; there were also classes in English grammar, higher mathematics and natural philosophy, chemistry, rhetoric, geography, logic, and ethics. Some schools also had instruction in astronomy, navigation, and surveying. Scientific instruction at Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale was very similar—none the first year; geography and elementary mathematics for sophomores (Brown postponed these subjects until the junior year); advanced mathematics and natural philosophy for juniors; and a general review for seniors, except at Dartmouth, which introduced chemistry and natural history in the final year. Therefore, Sylvanus could have obtained almost identical instruction by attending any of the four schools.[29]

Nor could tuition costs have been a major factor in his decision. At the time of his enrollment, the tuition at Brown and Dartmouth

28. Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (Columbia University Press for the Commission on Financing Higher Education, 1952), 21.

29. Richard G. Boone, *Education in the United States: Its History from the Earliest Settlements* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889; reprint ed., Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 160, 162; Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University*, 1764–1914 (Brown University, 1914), 102–106; Sanborn C. Brown and Leonard M. Rieser, *Natural Philosophy at Dartmouth: From Surveyors' Chains to the Pressure of Light* (University Press of New England. 1974), 1; Joshua L. Chamberlain, ed., *Yale University: Its History, Influence, Equipment and Characteristics, with Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Founders, Benefactors, Officers and Alumni* (R. Herndon Company, 1900), 77, 119; Theodore Hornberger, *Scientific Thought in the American Colleges, 1638–1800* (University of Texas Press, 1945), 28; Leon Burr Richardson, *History of Dartmouth College*, 2 vols. (Dartmouth College Publications, 1932), I, 248; Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: John Owen, 1840), I, 279–281.

was about the same, sixteen dollars per year. Harvard had a similar charge. In the early nineteenth century, Yale had a policy of furnishing free tuition to deserving students with financial difficulties. One factor that may have influenced Thayer's decision was the low cost of living at Dartmouth. Because of the economics of the time, Hanover was a less expensive place to live than New Haven or Cambridge.[30]

The most logical and obvious reason for Thayer's selection of Dartmouth likely has to do with its location. While it was true that Harvard was very close to his parents' home in Braintree, Dartmouth was only about forty miles from Azariah's store in Washington.[31] An added inducement to selecting Dartmouth was that Sylvanus would be able to teach elementary school in Washington during vacations to help pay expenses.[32]

In September 1803, Thayer was off to join Dartmouth's freshman class. Like students of all eras, Thayer found college a strange and exciting place. For the first time, he was truly on his own, with no parents or uncle to advise or admonish him. He quickly adapted to college life and made many friends, several for life. His serious and somewhat mature attitude and his diligence helped him achieve academic recognition, his first award coming in his sophomore year when he received the second honor in his class and was selected to make the Greek oration.[33]

Room rentals at Dartmouth were quite low, ranging from nine to eighteen dollars per year in the building owned by the college. Most of the students preferred to live off-campus in the still less

30. Bronson, *Brown University*, 175–176; John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636–1968* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 38; Chamberlain, *Yale University*, 35.
31. As the crow flies, the Faxon House was thirty-seven miles (sixty kilometers) from Dartmouth. Roads were few in 1803, so young Sylvanus may have gone west toward the Connecticut River overland, perhaps to Walpole or Claremont where stage routes were available, and then north by stage. The trip may have even required an overnight stay.—Ed.
32. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
33. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.

expensive private accommodations, where they could escape a little of the strict supervision of the school. When the college was unable to fill all its rooms, the students were assessed for the vacancies. During Thayer's first two years at Dartmouth, the college offered no board, but in 1805 a group of students petitioned to establish a "commons." Among the many signers were Sylvanus Thayer and his close friend Richard Fletcher. The commons was established with Ebenezer Woodward as steward. Woodward was to supply the food to the students at actual cost, but not to exceed $1.34 per week per student. The cost to Thayer and the others who ate there averaged $1.20 per week.[34]

Many students found even the moderate financial demands of tuition, room, and board difficult to meet. The Dartmouth trustees, aware that teaching was the most popular method for young college students to earn expenses, arranged the college schedule to accommodate this situation. The fall semester extended from October 1 through the end of December and was followed by an eight-week vacation. The winter semester began at the end of February and continued until the end of May. After a two-week vacation, the summer session began and lasted until commencement in late August. It was not necessary to attend all three terms. The student thus had ample "vacation time" to work. If truly needy, a student could take more time without fear of recrimination. The student was supposed to make up the work missed, but no penalty was levied against him if he did not.[35]

The scholastic requirements for admission reflected the classical emphasis of the curriculum. According to the regulations passed by the trustees in 1796, each student had to be familiar with the rudiments of Greek and Latin, as evidenced by an ability to translate certain passages of Virgil, Cicero, and the Greek Testament and to

34. Frederick Chase, *A History of Dartmouth College and the Town of Hanover, New Hampshire*, ed. John Lord, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1891), I, 553; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 242.
35. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 245.

translate English into Latin. Another prerequisite was knowledge of the fundamental rules of arithmetic.[36]

Once admitted, a young man soon discovered that the Dartmouth curriculum was rigid and inflexible. All had to follow a preselected course of study; there were no such freedoms as electives or even major fields of study. During the first three years of college, the majority of time was devoted to Greek and Latin since it was believed that emphasis on the classics would lead to an appreciation and understanding of the threads that bind together modern civilization. During the first three years, the student also studied arithmetic, grammar, logic, and geography and took courses in higher mathematics, including geometry, trigonometry, algebra, conic sections, surveying, mensuration, natural and moral philosophy, and astronomy. In the senior year the study of the classics was discontinued, to the relief of many, and replaced by metaphysics, theology, and political law. These subjects brought the student into intellectual contact with the American theologian Jonathan Edwards, the Scottish mathematician and philosopher Dugald Stewart, and such masters of political thought as John Locke, David Hume, Edmund Burke, and Jeremy Bentham.[37]

The day-to-day existence of the Dartmouth College student was rather humdrum and could perhaps be best compared to life in a penal institution or monastery. At 5 a.m. or first light in winter, the sleepy students gathered in the school chapel for a religious exercise conducted by the college president, who was also the school's spiritual leader. Since there was no heat to protect against the bitter New Hampshire winter, the students bundled up in their warmest clothing, with only their frosty breaths to show they were alive, although not necessarily awake. After the religious exercise, each of the four classes went to its respective room for the first instruction of the day. The facilities were sparse. The college provided only the

36. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 246.
37. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 248.

room; the class was expected to furnish it (with table and chair for the instructor, blackboard, chalk, stove, and pine benches for the students) and to provide heat and light.

After the first morning class, time was allotted for breakfast, with a period of study following. The second class of the day met at 11 a.m., followed by lunch and another period of study. Late in the afternoon, about 3 or 4 p.m., the final class of the day was held. Evening prayers at 6 p.m. or later completed the daily schedule. On Wednesday afternoons, a rhetorical exercise and chapel services replaced class sessions. On Saturday afternoons, no exercises were held except evening prayers. Sunday was set aside as a day of rest, reflection, and worship. The students were not permitted to study or leave their rooms except for meals or the four religious exercises held to keep them occupied. To ensure further that the student would not be tempted to break the Sabbath by preparing for classes, a biblical exercise replaced the recitation period on Monday mornings.

Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors generally adhered to this schedule, with seniors having slightly more free time. Periods between classes were to be spent studying; when not in class, at church, or out for meals, the student was expected to be in his room. The hours for recreation were very limited. During the summer, the hours from the close of the first morning class until breakfast, from the end of the 11 a.m. class until about 2 p.m., and from evening prayer until 9 p.m. were unscheduled and could be used for exercise or limited entertainment. During the winter, these hours were modified, but the amount of free time was about the same.[38]

Although Dartmouth made few study aids available, the presidents of Dartmouth did establish a large school library. By 1803, the year Thayer enrolled, the library housed about 3,000 volumes, but this figure included many duplicates, and most of the books

38. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 249–250.

were theological studies of no practical value to the students. Each year every student was assessed a fee of about $1.50 for use of the library, a privilege not always appreciated. The library was open to each class one hour every two weeks. In 1796, the library hours were fixed as follows: seniors and sophomores were admitted on alternate Mondays, juniors and freshmen on alternate Tuesdays, between the hours of 1 and 2 p.m. only.[39]

The rules of conduct in the library were very restrictive and discouraged browsing and borrowing. No more than five students were permitted in the library at any one time; no one could take a book from the shelves without the librarian's permission; and freshmen were allowed to borrow one book at a time, sophomores two, and juniors and seniors three. The library restrictions stemmed from a scarcity of faculty as well as a scarcity of books. One of the professors was usually delegated the extra duty of school librarian.

During Thayer's years of attendance, the college faculty was quite small, generally four professors and two tutors for the entire student body. A professor taught a particular subject, while a tutor taught a class. When there were two tutors in residence, one taught the freshmen and the other, the sophomores. Usually, the tutors were recent graduates who might have had additional training in theology. The president of the school had the sole right to instruct the senior class. Technically, this meant that the other professors could instruct only the members of the junior class. In actuality, they would occasionally assist with instruction for freshmen and sophomores, give public lectures, and sometimes hold another, nonteaching position at the college. Nevertheless, the bulk of the instruction rested on the shoulders of three men—the president and two tutors.[40]

John Wheelock was president of Dartmouth from 1779 to 1815, a period that included Thayer's college years. His father, Eleazar

39. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 250–251; John K. Lord, *A History of Dartmouth College, 1815–1909* (Rumford Press, 1913), II, 507–508.
40. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 251; Lord, *History of Dartmouth*, II, 508.

Wheelock, had also been Dartmouth's president and had named his son to succeed him. On Eleazar's death in 1779, the trustees hesitated in appointing John to that lofty but low-paying position. John Wheelock had few qualifications and only one recommendation, from his father, who had selected him for the job.[41]

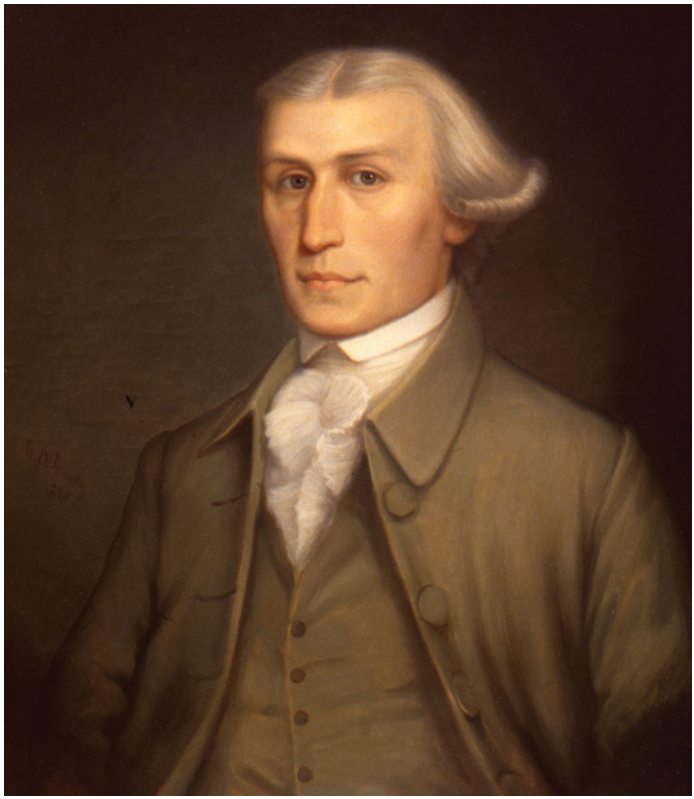
John Wheelock had attended Yale, later transferred to Dartmouth, and graduated in the first class in 1771. He served for a time as a tutor at the college and had been sent by the town of Hanover as a representative to the provincial assembly. With the coming of the American Revolution, his interest became more military than academic. He joined the American Army, served as a major and lieutenant colonel in Colonel Timothy Bedel's regiment, and eventually became a member of General Horatio Gates's staff. At the time of his father's death, young Wheelock, then twenty-five, was living in Philadelphia and was regarded by most as a "gay, carefree, debonair young officer," hardly the type of man to head a college.[42]

Although the trustees would have preferred a more mature, scholarly man of the cloth, the wishes of Eleazar Wheelock could not be disregarded lightly. He had looked on Dartmouth as a family institution and expected the mantle of the presidency to fall on the shoulders of his son John. The elder Wheelock had always served with little, if any, compensation, and the slender funds of the institution made it imperative that this arrangement be continued. So in 1779, John Wheelock became president of Dartmouth College, a position he held for thirty-six years.[43]

John Wheelock was a grave and sober college president. Reading became his major preoccupation, and the candle in the president's study often burned late at night. Young George Ticknor, a close friend of Thayer, who through his father became acquainted with President Wheelock rather early, described him in this manner:

41. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 196.
42. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 197.
43. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 197–198.

Dr. Wheelock was stiff and stately. He read constantly, sat up late, and got up early. He talked very gravely and slow, with a falsetto voice. . . . He was one of the most formal men I ever knew. I saw a great deal of him, from 1802 to 1816, in his own house and my father's, but never felt the smallest degree of familiarity with him, nor do I believe that any of the students or young men did.[44]



John Wheelock was the president of Dartmouth from 1779 to 1815 and taught Thayer. (Painting by Ulysses Dow Tenney, 1875. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

44. George Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. George S. Hillard and Anna Ticknor, 2 vols. (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), I, 5.

Many of the students were fearful of him. It was not unusual for a student to be called to the president's house for some matter. For the most part, these young men were silent and awkward, unsure of the proper manner of taking leave of the president, who was very covetous of his time. After their affairs had been transacted, the president would wait a suitable length of time, look at his watch, glance at the student, and announce in his high voice, "Will you sit longer, sir, or will you go now?" Thereupon, the student would gratefully flee. Ticknor said that this was a recognized formula, and he knew of no young man who remained after hearing it.[45]

Although students seldom formed personal relationships with Wheelock, the man made an impression on Thayer. Like all seniors, Thayer spent an entire year under Wheelock's sole instruction. The president's austere and formal temperament was not unlike Thayer's own. And in this man, Thayer could see his twin lifelong interests, the military and education, united.

Four other professors taught at Dartmouth during Thayer's college days. Bezaleel Woodward, professor of mathematics and philosophy, died in 1804, and it is improbable that Sylvanus received any instruction from him. Woodward's replacement was John Hubbard, a 1785 graduate who had studied theology after graduation and served as preceptor of New Ipswich and Deerfield Academies in Massachusetts, then later was probate judge of Cheshire County, New Hampshire. He filled the chair of mathematics and natural philosophy until his premature death in 1810. Hubbard published books on geography, an essay on music, a reader, and an oration, but nothing on mathematics. He was a kind man of gentle disposition, well liked by the students.[46]

Roswell Shurtleff, a graduate of 1799, became professor of theology in 1804 after serving as a tutor for four years. He frequently

45. Ticknor, *Life, Letters and Journals of George Ticknor*, I, 5.
46. Florian Cajori, *The Teaching and History of Mathematics in the United States*, Bureau of Education Circular, no. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 75; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 256.

quarreled with President Wheelock and never knew from one year to the next whether he would be retained. His problems with the president concerned a church in Hanover and led directly to the famous Dartmouth College case.[47] Shurtleff had a genial personality and was friendly to the students.[48]

The fourth professor at Dartmouth during Thayer's matriculation was John Smith, professor of learned languages and school librarian. He was the only member of the faculty who had any real claim to scholarship, having published grammars in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Although considered a man of great scholastic attainment, he was not particularly well liked by the student body and was considered by some to be slow-witted and timid. Worst of all, he was a dull instructor. His timidity made him an easy mark for ridicule by the undergraduates. One incident, which he was never to live down, occurred one evening at twilight when he rushed headlong into a college building with the terrified announcement that he had been chased by three bears—a mother and two cubs; upon investigation, the vicious animals were discovered to be harmless tree stumps on the campus green. Being the school librarian did not increase his popularity since the students disliked the way in which he operated the library.[49]

While Thayer was at Dartmouth, the most widely used method of instruction was recitation, which was practical in smaller classes with a shortage of textbooks, blackboards, and other instructional aids. The teacher or tutor asked questions about a particular assignment, and the student recited what he remembered. The virtues of this system were few, and much depended on the skill and

47. In short, the New Hampshire legislature attempted to transform Dartmouth from a private institution into a public college. Shurtleff took the side of the legislature against the college's trustees and was made acting president (1817–1819) after the state changed the school to Dartmouth University. Eventually, the case made it to the Supreme Court—*Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*—and was decided in favor of the school remaining private.—Ed.
48. Cajori, *Teaching and History of Mathematics*, 75; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 256.
49. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 203, 255–256.

knowledge of the instructor. At its best, recitation demanded that the student not only recite what he had read but also analyze and explain it. At its worst, it trained the student only to memorize long passages. The lecture method did not gain wide acceptance until later in the nineteenth century and was probably not much in evidence during Thayer's stay at Dartmouth.[50]

Although the student was supposed to devote much of his time to study, social life, of course, was not completely neglected. Thayer made many friends, among them George Ticknor, Richard Fletcher, and Alpheus Roberts. There was little feminine companionship to be had in Hanover, and neither the college schedule nor rules encouraged courtship. Dartmouth campus social life revolved around two primary social and literary societies, the Social Friends, founded in 1783, and the United Fraternity, organized in 1786 as a rival offshoot of the former. Undergraduates were admitted at the completion of the freshman year, and the two groups competed for the best men. Thayer was asked to join and accepted membership in the United Fraternity. He apparently measured up to the high-minded qualifications of the group: "Respectability of talents and acquirements, and a fair moral character, shall be the requisite qualifications for admission into this Society." Thayer's life was to become intertwined with two members of the fraternity, William Partridge and Alden Partridge, cousins from Vermont. William would become his close friend and roommate, and Alden his bitter antagonist for life. Sylvanus got on well with the other fraternity members, and in 1804–1805 was elected the group's treasurer.[51]

50. Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 82.
51. *United Fraternity Constitution, 1788–1821* (Baker Library, Dartmouth College), 7; *United Fraternity Treasurer's Book, 1803–1838* (Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH), 13–14.



This depiction of the Dartmouth College campus in 1803 is attributed to Thayer's longtime friend George Ticknor, a classmate from the Dartmouth class of 1807. (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

In addition to the companionship and friendship offered, a student might want to join one of these social organizations for the library each had established for its membership. At one time, the two societies combined their books into one large "federal" library, but by the time Thayer attended Dartmouth, the societies were maintaining separate collections. Most students preferred the society libraries over the college library because the hours were more flexible and the regulations few. While Thayer was at Dartmouth, the college allowed the societies in 1805 to convert two small unused rooms in Dartmouth Hall into libraries. Although each of these rooms had a window, they were in reality little more than closets.[52]

52. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 27–28; Lord, *History of Dartmouth*, II, 515–517.

The fraternities of Thayer's day were similar to those of today with their secret oaths and closed meetings, but their fraternal functions were quite different. The purpose of the United Fraternity is embodied in the following excerpt from its constitution:

> This institution, whose object is improvement in literature and science, guarantees to every member mutual forbearance and respect. It discountenances every infringement on morality and religion, as degrading to the gentleman and the scholar.[53]

The Tuesday weekly meeting of the fraternity consisted of two orations, one extemporaneous and the other prepared in advance. Not infrequently, the meeting was terminated abruptly when the orator failed to show up. A notation made by Thayer in the Treasurer's Book shows William Partridge fined seventy-five cents, which he paid on April 9, 1805, for a "non-performance."[54]

The subjects of these debates and orations ranged from the serious to the frivolous, befitting the interests of the average college student. There is no record of any oration given by Thayer, but it is worthwhile to look at examples of earlier topics debated. One question argued was "Whether clothes lend more to the preservation of chastity than nakedness?" After having discussed as far as modesty would allow, the question was decided in favor of the negative.

Other topics were of a political and contemporary nature, such as "Whether a female ought to be excluded from a succession to the throne?" This was decided in favor of the negative. A question of economic importance was also the topic of discussion: "Whether a trade with the East Indies would be advantageous to the American states?" Being good Yankee traders, the men resolved in the affirmative. Other topics were concerned with the curriculum, such as "Whether the time which is spent in studying Greek (except

53. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 5.
54. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 21; *United Fraternity Treasurer's Book*, 13.

the Testament) would not be spent more profitably in studying the French language?"[55]

Thayer's one extravagance while at college was a subscription to the *National Intelligencer*, published in Washington, DC, by Samuel Harrison Smith. George Ticknor said that Thayer was the only one at the college to take the newspaper. Thayer subscribed because, of all the American papers, the *National Intelligencer* contained the best foreign news and the best accounts of the exploits of Napoleon. In 1803, the paper was a small four-page affair, published three times a week at a cost of "five dollars per annum, paid in advance." Besides foreign affairs, the paper also covered important national events and issues.[56]

The opening of the United States Military Academy at West Point in New York in 1802 stimulated Thayer's long-developing interest in the military. In his senior year at Dartmouth, he and his friend Alpheus Roberts decided to try for appointments to the military school. With recommendations from Professors John Hubbard and Roswell Shurtleff and tutor Francis Brown, they applied to the secretary of war. Much to their delight, in March 1807 they both received warrants as cadets in the regiment of artillerists.[57] Replying in a somewhat stilted fashion, Thayer hastily acknowledged his appointment:

> This mark of confidence with which the President has been pleased to honor me while it excites in me emotions of gratitude will not fail, I trust, to cause a due emulation to excel in my profession and to call forth the

55. *United Fraternity Records, 1786–1800*, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 69, 71, 75, 76.
56. George Ticknor to George Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
57. Letters 1806/8 dated October 4 and October 30, 1806, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office Relating to the Military Academy: United States Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805–1866*, National Archives; War Department to Sylvanus Thayer, 20 March 1807, *Records of the Office of the Secretary of War: Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Military Affairs, 1800–1889*, III, 147, National Archives, Washington, DC. Hereafter cited as *Letters Sent Military Affairs*.

> exertion of whatever talent I possess for the service of my country—I therefore, accept with pleasure said appointment and, according to command, will repair to West Point as early as practicable.[58]

Some confusion exists about the dates Thayer left Dartmouth and arrived at West Point. Cullum's *Register* lists Thayer as a cadet beginning on March 20, 1807, but that is actually the date of his appointment, not the date of his arrival.[59] General Joseph G. Swift, in his *Memoirs*, wrote that among the cadets joining the Academy in the spring of 1807 were Sylvanus Thayer and Alpheus Roberts, graduates from Dartmouth College.[60] Late in life Thayer mentioned that he first laid eyes on the Military Academy in August 1807.[61] Two communications help pinpoint the date with some assurance of accuracy. In a letter, George Ticknor said that Thayer did not go to the Academy immediately after his warrant in the spring but instead remained at Dartmouth to finish his coursework. Although Thayer, as the first scholar in his class, was to deliver the valedictory, some weeks before the August commencement he left Dartmouth and went to his parents' home in Braintree. Ticknor pointed out the reason Thayer did not stay to receive the highest graduation honors:

58. Sylvanus Thayer to Henry Dearborn, April 21, 1807, *Records of the Office of the Secretary of War: Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered' Series, 1802–1870*, Letter T-86(3), National Archives. Hereafter cited as *Letters Received, Sec. War.*
59. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., From Its Establishment in 1802, to 1890, with the Early History of the United States Military Academy*, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. 3 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), I, 81. [Cullum's *Register* lists graduates in the order in which they graduated and in class years, by class rank.—Ed.]
60. Joseph G. Swift, *The Memoirs of Gen. Joseph Gardner Swift, LL.D., U.S.A., First Graduate of the United States Military Academy, West Point, Chief Engineer, U.S.A. From 1812 to 1818* (privately printed, 1890), 67.
61. Sylvanus Thayer to Joseph G. Swift, April 2, 1853, *Thayer Papers.*

> He had always been very modest & shy, and would, I think, with difficulty, have been brought to face a commencement audience consisting, in a large degree, of ladies.[62]

A second piece of correspondence helps confirm Ticknor's dates. In a letter to his close friend and teacher Joseph Swift, Thayer later wrote that it would be thirty-six years next "September" since he had reported to him at West Point.[63] Thus, while the evidence is contradictory, we might conclude that Thayer left Dartmouth perhaps in July and arrived at the Academy in August or early September.

At this point in his life, Thayer had been influenced by several prominent men, including Azariah and John Faxon, General Benjamin Pierce, President John Wheelock, and the other professors at Dartmouth. Each of these figures helped instill in Thayer a love of education and a fondness for things military. At the fledgling Academy at West Point, he would be able to pursue both of these interests.

62. Ticknor to Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
63. Thayer to Swift, July 4, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.

II

The United States Military Academy and Cadet Thayer



The young military academy to which Thayer traveled in 1807 was a school born in indecision and nurtured in uncertainty. The need for a school for training military officers was recognized decades before its actual establishment. Once in operation, the Academy was faced with the lack of a defined curriculum, with a small student body that could be ordered away at any time, and with questionable lines of authority. To understand the institution that Cadet Thayer attended, it is necessary to examine early attitudes toward the military and to trace the beginnings of the United States Military Academy.

Even before the War for Independence, military science was becoming a popular subject of study in the colonies. Among its early students was George Washington, whose military library was extensive and well selected. Henry Knox, the Boston bookseller, read the military books he imported for his customers. The military became the chosen profession of Nathaniel Greene in spite of the pacificism of his Quaker upbringing. Anthony Wayne, another important figure in the Revolution, first learned the art of military science by reading and private study. By the time of the war, there

was general agreement that some military experience or training should be required for a military commission.[1]

Despite the popularity of military science, it was soon obvious that America did not have enough men trained in the scientific areas of engineering and artillery. During the Revolution, Washington and other leaders were forced to rely on foreign talent, which fortunately was readily available. The Continental Congress commissioned the Marquis de Lafayette, Baron Johann de Kalb, Thaddeus Kościuszko, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Louis de Tousard, Stephen Rochefontaine, Louis Lebègue Duportail, and others to lend expertise in engineering and artillery in support of the American cause. All served with great honor and distinction.[2]

The American leaders realized they could not draw on outside technical aid indefinitely. The obvious solution was the creation of a military school to train American youth, particularly as engineers and artillerists. One of the first to propose such a school was Henry Knox, Washington's chief of artillery. While Knox's idea did not go unnoticed, little came of it during the Revolution.[3]

Congress did make a half-hearted attempt to establish something similar to a military school when, in June 1777, it passed an act establishing a Corps of Invalids. Similar to the French model, this corps was to be a regiment of wounded veterans assigned to light duty in garrisons or as guards in cities. An additional function of the proposed corps was to serve as a military school for young officers. Lewis Nicola, an American officer born in Ireland, became colonel of the Corps of Invalids. In 1780, part of that corps was at

1. Oliver L. Spaulding, Jr., "The Military Studies of George Washington," *American Historical Review* 29, no. 4 (July 1924): 675–680; Sidney Forman, "Why the United States Military Academy Was Established in 1802," *Military Affairs* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 17.
2. For an overview of military education before West Point, as well as European contributions to the American cause, see Don Higginbotham, "Military Education Before West Point," in *Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy*, ed. Robert M. S. McDonald (University of Virginia Press, 2004), 23–53.—Ed.
3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 7–9.

West Point, and by 1782, the remainder was located in the vicinity of the Hudson River, in the nearby towns of Fishkill, Newburgh, and New Windsor.[4] As a military school, the Corps of Invalids accomplished little. With the end of the war, what sentiment there was for a military academy died out, except in the minds of several prominent men, among them General Washington.[5]

Washington thought that America would be best served by professional soldiers, and this meant well-trained, knowledgeable officers. At the close of the Revolution in May 1783, Washington sent Alexander Hamilton, chairman of the Committee of Congress on the Peace Establishment, a paper entitled "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment," which made the following proposals:

> A Peace Establishment for the United States of America may in my opinion be classed under four different heads Vizt.
>
> First. A regular and standing force, for Garrisoning West Point and such other Posts upon our Northern, Western, and Southern Frontiers, . . .
>
> Secondly. A well organized Militia. . . .
>
> Thirdly. Establishing Arsenals of all kinds of Military Stores.
>
> Fourthly. Academies, one or more for the Instruction of the Art Military; particularly those Branches of it which respect Engineering and Artillery, which are highly essential, and the knowledge of which, is most difficult to obtain. . . .[6]

4. William Heath, *Memoirs of the American War: Reprinted from the Original Edition of 1798*, ed. Rufus Rockwell Wilson (A. Wessels Company, 1904), 278.
5. United States Military Academy, Department of Economics, Government, and History, *The United States Military Academy and Its Foreign Contemporaries* (United States Military Academy Printing Office, 1944), 17–18; Forman, "Why the USMA Was Established in 1802," 19; Horace M. Reeve, "West Point in the Revolution," in *Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1802–1902*, comp. Edward S. Holden, 2 vols. (Government Printing Office, 1904), I, 193–194.
6. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington, From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, Bicentennial Edition, 39 vols. (Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), XXVI, 374–375.

Hamilton's committee approved a plan for a peacetime army, but rejected the proposal for the establishment of a military academy on the grounds that the benefits of such a school only rarely compensated for its expense.[7] Also in 1783, General von Steuben proposed establishing three military academies, one at West Point and two elsewhere. President Jefferson would later give some consideration to this plan.[8]

For ten years, no action was taken, but the need for a military academy was still felt by some high government officials. In November 1793, the question of a military academy was again raised by Secretary of War Henry Knox during a cabinet meeting. He quite accurately pointed out that no American officer knew how to build a fort or draw up defensive measures. Alexander Hamilton and John Randolph supported Knox, but Thomas Jefferson argued that the Constitution did not authorize the creation of a national military academy. The discussion grew lively, and it ended only when President Washington declared that although such an academy would be advantageous to the United States, he did not wish to bring up for discussion anything "which might generate heat and ill humor." For the time being, the subject, if not the idea, was dropped.[9]

In his fifth annual address to Congress, delivered on December 3, 1793, Washington said that the national militia would be improved by affording an opportunity for the study of those branches of military art that could not be attained by practice alone. In these politic words, Washington was urging Congress to establish a school for engineers and artillerists. The message finally struck a responsive

7. Edward S. Holden, "Origins of the United States Military Academy, 1777–1802," *Centennial*, I, 208.
8. Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., and Christine Coalwell McDonald, "Mr. Jefferson's Academy." in *Jefferson's Military Academy*, ed. McDonald, 129.—Ed.
9. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, Library Edition, 20 vols. (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903–1904), I, 409–410. [Jefferson writes (p. 409), "It was proposed to recommend the establishment of a military academy. I objected that none of the specified powers given by the Constitution to Congress, would authorize this."—Ed.]

chord with the legislative branch of government. Disputes and problems at home and abroad had finally convinced Congress that the United States could not continue to depend upon its soldiers' or officers' native intelligence alone to win wars.[10]

Congress took a hesitant step forward in 1794 when it established at West Point the School for Artillerists and Engineers and created the rank of cadet, an apprentice officer who would earn his commission by learning his duties while on active service. The law further provided for books and other equipment necessary for instructing the cadets. By 1795, three battalions of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers were stationed at West Point. In 1796, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Rochefontaine, Major Louis de Tousard, and Major John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi, all highly educated French officers, were at the post.[11]

Although by late 1796 there were only three cadets at West Point, a formal training program of sorts had begun, because American officers also needed instruction. Officers and cadets were required to attend classes in the "instruction room" between eleven and twelve in the morning and four and five in the afternoon.[12] Instruction began with the limited materials on hand. For studying artillery, the class met outdoors to practice with the few cannons available, among them a five-inch howitzer and a half-dozen brass six-pounders. To learn military drill, the students studied in minute detail von Steuben's *Regulations*.[13] The art of fortifications was

10. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* XXXIII, 166.
11. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 11; John F. Callan, comp. *The Military Laws of the United States Relating to the Army, Volunteers, Militia, and to Bounty Lands and Pensions, From the Foundation of the Government to 3 March 1863* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1863), 104; Edgar Denton III, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775–1833" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1965), 16; Holden, "Origins of the USMA," *Centennial*, I, 212; James R. Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783–1812* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 289.
12. The location of this room was the Old Provost, a former jail, in the middle of the Plain next to a large glacial depression known as Execution Hollow. See Jon C. Malinowski, *The West Point Landscape, 1802–1860* (West Point Press, 2024).—Ed.
13. Friedrich Wilhelm Steuben, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1779).

taught by lectures and having the students draw plans. Not all students were willing, and there were many troublemakers. When the instruction room with its contents and apparatus was destroyed by fire in April 1796, arson was justly suspected, although never proved.[14] Classes then continued on a modified level in some officers' rooms. A wooden "fortification" used for instruction was erected by Lieutenant Colonel Rochefontaine and Major Rivardi in the "model yard" near the present site of Washington Hall.[15]

At this time the naval disputes between the United States and France once again spurred the realization that the United States military establishment was meager at best. The finest officers in the world were being trained in Napoleon's École polytechnique. If war came, French engineers would this time be foes, not allies.

Washington left public office disappointed that a military school had not been firmly established. In his eighth and final State of the Union message, delivered on December 7, 1796, he stated:

> I have heretofore proposed to the consideration of Congress, the expediency of establishing a National University; and also a Military Academy. The desireableness of both these Institutions, has so constantly increased with every new view I have taken of the subject, that I cannot omit the opportunity of once for all, recalling your attention to them . . . . The institution of a Military Academy, is also recommended by cogent reasons. However pacific the general policy of a nation may be, it ought never to be without an adequate stock of military knowledge for emergencies.[16]

14. Swift, the Academy's first graduate, heard Alexander Hamilton say in 1802 that he believed the fire to be arson, although Swift gives an incorrect date of 1794 for the incident. Swift, *Memoirs*, 36.—Ed.
15. Holden, "Origins of the USMA," *Centennial*, I, 212–214; Jacobs, *Beginning of the U.S. Army*, 290–291.
16. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* XXXV, 317. [This has been expanded from Kershner's original manuscript using text from the National Archives.—Ed.]



Frenchman Louis de Tousard, veteran of the Revolution and major in the U.S. Army, was an important figure in the founding of the U.S. Military Academy. (Mezzotint by Max Rosenthal, 1900. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art.)

Two laws that were passed in 1798 attempted to shore up the faltering school at West Point. The first, passed on April 27, enlarged the size of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers and proposed that books and scientific instruments be purchased for instruction in scientific warfare. The second, approved on July 16, proposed that three or four teachers be attached to the corps to provide instruction in arithmetic, geometry, mechanics, hydraulics, and design. The War Department assembled a number of prospective students at West Point, but nothing developed because competent teachers of military engineering were lacking. Without teachers, the school floundered.[17]

In 1798, Major Louis de Tousard, a veteran of the American Revolution, presented Secretary of War James McHenry with a proposal for the "Formation of a School of Artillerists and Engineers" and asked that it be forwarded to Congress for consideration. Tousard's proposal received little congressional attention.[18]

These first attempts all envisioned a military school of limited scope. The first concrete proposal for a national military school encompassing a complete system of military instruction came from Alexander Hamilton in a letter to Secretary McHenry on November 23, 1799:

> No sound mind can doubt the essentiality of military science in time of war, any more than the moral certainty that the most pacific policy on the part of a government will not preserve it from being engaged in war more or less frequently.
>
> To avoid great evils, it must either have a respectable force prepared for service, or the means of preparing

17. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 12–13; Callan, *Military Laws of the US*, 119–120, 128.
18. Norman B. Wilkinson, "The Forgotten 'Founder' of West Point," *Military Affairs* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1960–1961): 178; Louis de Tousard, "Memorandum re Formation of a School of Artillerists and Engineers," in *Alexander Hamilton Papers: Miscellany, 1711–1820*; Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, 1798.

> such a force with expedition. The latter, most agreeable to the genius of our government and nation, is the object of a military academy.
>
> I propose that this academy shall consist of five schools—one to be called "The Fundamental School"; another, "The School of Engineers and Artillerists"; another, "The School of Cavalry"; another, "The School of Infantry"; and a fifth, "The School of the Navy."[19]

Hamilton sent a copy of his plan to Washington. In his last letter to Hamilton before his death, the former president wrote on December 12, 1799:

> The Establishment of an Institution of this kind, upon a respectable and extensive basis, has ever been considered by me as an Object of primary importance to this country. . . .
>
> I sincerely hope that the Subject will meet with due attention, and that the reasons for its establishment, which you have so clearly pointed out in your letter to the Secretary, will prevail upon the Legislature to place it upon a permanent and respectable footing.[20]

Secretary McHenry sent Hamilton's plan to President Adams, partly because Hamilton was a friend and partly because McHenry believed the plan had merit. Despite his feud with Hamilton, Adams liked the idea. After making a few modifications, he submitted to Congress in January 1800 a plan for the reorganization of the Army and the establishment of a military school. With it went a warning from the Secretary of War James McHenry:

19. Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge, Federal Edition, 12 vols. (G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1904), VII, 180–181; Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801–1829* (Macmillan Company, 1951).
20. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* XXXVII, 473.

> Let it not be presumed, that a country, however distantly situated from other nations, or favored by the courage and genius of its inhabitants, can neglect with impunity, military institutions, or that it may, safely, consider all regular force to be useless, except when there is an enemy present to employ it.[21]

The words were the War Department's, but the idea was clearly Hamilton's. Once again, Congress did not act, yielding to the general fear and mistrust of trained officers.

President Adams, during his remaining time in office, attempted to implement the existing laws for the instruction of artillerists and engineers. On July 25, 1800, in a letter to the new Secretary of War Samuel Dexter, Adams wrote that he was quite ready to appoint all sixty-four cadets provided by law, as soon as the proper candidates were found. Moreover, he stated, "It is my desire that you take the earliest measures for providing all the necessary books, instruments, and apparatus, authorized by law, for the use and benefit of the artillerists and engineers."[22] By the time he left office in 1801, Adams had been able to appoint only twelve cadets and one teacher, mathematician George Baron. Although Adams sought to appoint an American to mollify the American officers, he finally selected Baron, an Englishman, as the most qualified.[23]

21. *American State Papers: Class V, Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Gales & Seaton, 1832–1861), I, 133. Hereafter cited as *ASPMA*.
22. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1850–1856), IX, 65.
23. Adams, *Works of John Adams* IX, 65–66; Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 15. [Many sources, including the original version of this work, claim that Baron taught at the Royal Military Academy at Woolrich, London. The claim probably arises from Swift's memoir, but there is no evidence to support this. See Theodore Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History* (University Press of Kansas, 2002), 304. Baron got in an argument with Cadet Joseph G. Swift in Swift's first days at the Academy over the young man's refusal to dine where Baron had ordered. Baron barricaded himself in the Academy building and from a top floor window the two shared "course epitaphs." Swift was forced to apologize, but Baron was soon court-martialed on allegations of mistreating his family and associating with locals of low character. He left West Point before the end of 1801.—Ed.]

Historical caprice now took a hand in the form of Thomas Jefferson, who no longer opposed the idea of a military academy. Within four months after assuming the office of the presidency, Jefferson instructed Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to prepare for a military school at West Point. On April 14, 1801, Lieutenant Colonel Tousard was ordered to West Point as inspector of artillery; he was also to aid in the instruction of officers and cadets. Assuming that he would head the academy, Tousard began the task of converting the garrison into a school. However, Jefferson's next step was to have Dearborn order Major Jonathan Williams, inspector of fortifications, to West Point to take charge of the school. Undoubtedly disappointed and bitter, Tousard resigned a few months after Williams arrived.[24]

Williams had little actual military experience other than translating a French military treatise on artillery.[25] During the Revolution, he had worked in France as a successful businessman. A scientist and a member of the American Philosophical Society, he was familiar with French engineering theories then current. Jefferson had been favorably impressed upon meeting Williams, a grand-nephew of Benjamin Franklin, in Paris in 1784.[26]

24. Denton, "Formative Years," 22–23; Jacobs, *Beginning of the U.S. Army*, 297; Wilkinson, "Forgotten Founder," 184–187.
25. The book referred to is Heinrich Otto [de] Scheel, *A Treatise of Artillery Containing a New System, or the Alterations Made in the French Artillery, Since 1765*. Trans. Jonathan Williams (Philadelphia: War Department, 1800).—Ed.
26. Cullum, *Biographical Sketch of Thayer* 6; Denton, "Formative Years," 23; Sidney Forman, *West Point, A History of the United States Military Academy* (Columbia University Press, 1950), 23.



The Academy's first superintendent, Colonel Jonathan Williams. In the distance is Castle Williams, designed and built by Williams on Governors Island, 1807–1811. (Portrait by Thomas Sully, 1815. Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

About the time that Major Williams reached West Point, the cadets also began to arrive. One of the first cadets was Joseph Gardner Swift, who described his arrival at the Point:

> We reached West Point at dusk. The name of this place had raised many pictures to my imagination of Revolutionary history—the treason of Arnold; the fate of Andre. It was a calm October evening; the only sound was that of the cow bell. This sound at West Point has no doubt left a pleasant remembrance with many a cadet. To this day the sound of the cow bell revives the evening of my first landing at West Point.[27]

Congress finally acted, albeit in roundabout fashion, to establish a military academy. With the view that the immediate future would be a peaceful one for the United States, Congress reduced the size of the military establishment to two regiments of infantry and one of artillery. Tucked into the act, signed on March 16, 1802, was a provision for the establishment of a permanent military academy at West Point. Of added importance, article 26 of the act provided for the establishment of a corps of engineers consisting of one major, two captains, two first lieutenants, two second lieutenants, and ten cadets. The president could make promotions based on merit, thus expanding the corps to one colonel, a lieutenant colonel, two majors, four captains, four first lieutenants, and four second lieutenants. The entire corps could at no time exceed twenty officers and cadets.[28]

Two other articles in the act are worth noting in detail:

> Sec. 27. That the said corps, when so organized, shall be stationed at West Point, in the State of New York, and shall constitute a military academy; and the engineers, assistant engineers, and cadets of the said corps, shall be

27. Swift, *Memoirs*, 27.
28. Callan, *The Military Laws of the United States*, 141–149.

> subject, at all times, to do duty in such places and on such service, as the President of the United States shall direct.
>
> Sec. 28. That the principal engineer, and in his absence the next in rank, shall have the superintendence of the said military academy, under the direction of the President of the United States; and the secretary of war is hereby authorized, at the public expense, under such regulations as shall be directed by the President of the United States; to procure the necessary books, implements, and apparatus for the benefit of the said institution.[29]

Although this initial effort was rather limited, the Act of March 16, 1802, put the Military Academy on a firmer foundation than it had ever been, and was, therefore, of great symbolic importance. In spite of many and varied claims, the Academy was not the work of any one person. Rather, the school came into being because Congress, Jefferson, and the majority of the American people had come to realize that in spite of its small size, the Army must have a cadre of well-trained, professional officers, and that the federal government had to accept the responsibility for training these men. From the United States Military Academy would come the first specially trained public servants of the American people.[30]

In its early years, the Academy grew slowly. The physical plant at West Point, as described by Cadet Swift in 1801, was sparsely utilitarian. The West Point Plain, 160 feet above the Hudson River bordering the Academy grounds on the east and north, encompassed an area of about 70 acres. A stone house stood at the dock on the northern extreme. On the brow of the hill above were the "White quarters" of the post commandant and next to it the

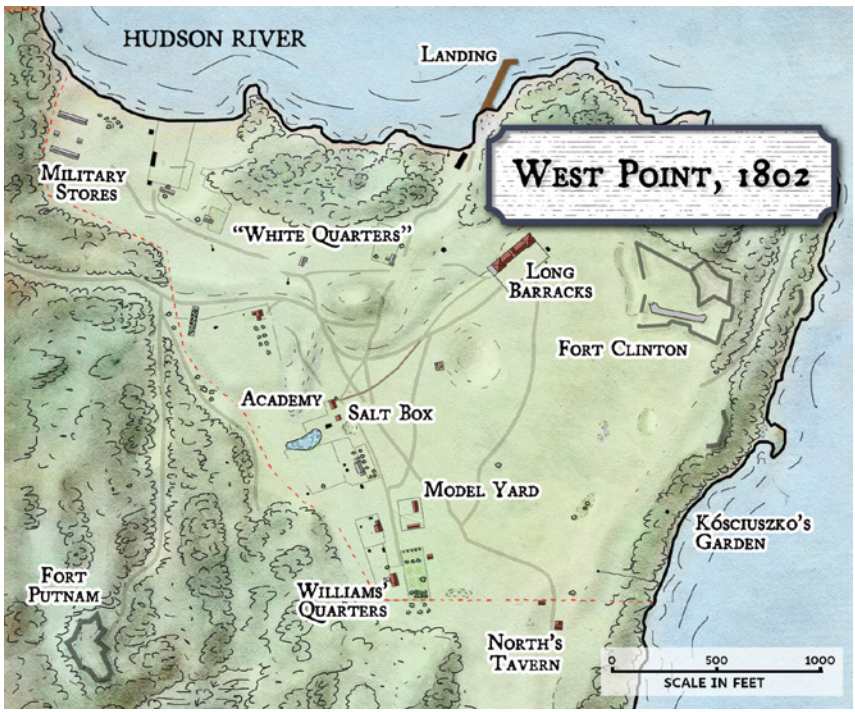
29. Callan, *The Military Laws of the United States*, 148–149.
30. White, *Jeffersonians*, 259.

artillery mess.[31] The Academy itself was located on the western side of the Plain. Towering about 400 feet above was old Fort Putnam, a relic of the Revolution. To the south were a few houses for the officers and their families. Major Jonathan Williams and his family lived in the house that had been Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Rochefontaine's headquarters during his stay at West Point. Williams's office was located in a small building known as the Salt Box. Next to the officers' quarters stood a small building used as a laboratory. In front of these buildings was the model yard containing Rochefontaine's miniature wooden fortress used in lectures on fortification. On the northeast side of the Plain were the cadets' quarters in the Long Barracks, a wooden structure over 240 feet in length. To the northwest, down by the river, the trophies and artillery captured from Burgoyne at Saratoga were kept locked in two long yellow buildings. The armory and the hospital were situated to the east of these buildings. At the northeast angle of the Plain was another Revolutionary fort in disrepair, Fort Clinton. On the eastern boundary were the stone steps leading 60 feet down to Kościuszko's Garden, a retreat built by the Polish engineer in his idle moments while he planned West Point's defenses during the Revolution.[32]

With the passage of the Act of March 16, 1802, Jonathan Williams automatically became superintendent of the Military Academy. On April 13, 1802, he became a major in the newly formed Corps of Engineers. Two other men were quickly appointed captains and teachers at the Academy, William A. Barron and Jared Mansfield. Barron, a Harvard graduate who had already tutored at West Point, taught the cadets mathematics. Mansfield had been an

31. Swift recalls reporting to Lieutenant Osborn and refers to him as the "commandant," but it would be a stretch to equate that title with the modern Academy position as the leader of military and physical training. Osborn's responsibilities are not clear. The location of the "White," or "white," quarters was near today's First Class ("Firstie") Club. It is unclear if the house was white, a rare color at the time, or named for a previous resident. The artillery mess was the residence of Lieutenants Wilson and Howard. See Malinowski, *The West Point Landscape*.—Ed.
32. Swift, *Memoirs*, 28–30.

instructor at Yale and had published essays on the motion of bodies in free space. At West Point, he was acting professor of natural and experimental philosophy and taught geometry. Both men were well-qualified teachers, wise choices for the fledgling school.[33]



The Academy of 1802 was a small campus consisting of a hodgepodge of buildings. It was nearly the same when Thayer arrived in 1807. (Map by Editor.)

The teachers, while competent, worked under a great handicap, however, in that there was no established curriculum to follow. The textbooks used included Hutton's *Mathematics*, Enfield's *Natural Philosophy*, Vauban's *Traite de fortifications*, and Scheel's *Treatise*

33. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 25; Cullum, "Early History," *Register* III, 486–487; Denton, "Formative Years," 29.

of Artillery, the latter a translation by Major Williams. Since the law of 1802 closely linked the Academy with the Corps of Engineers, the early focus of the school was on developing competent military engineers.[34]

There were only twelve cadets at the Academy in the first year. The tiny Corps of Engineers grew slightly in the summer of 1802 when Williams was promoted to lieutenant colonel and Major Decius Wadsworth transferred from the artillery to the engineers. In September, the first examinations were held by Superintendent Williams and Captains Mansfield and Barron for two cadets, Joseph G. Swift and Simeon Levy, who passed and were commissioned second lieutenants in the Corps of Engineers on October 12, 1802.[35] Both men remained at the Academy as instructors.[36]

The Academy was closed during the winter months but reopened in the spring. The year 1803 saw the addition of a new professor, François Désiré Masson, who taught French and topographical drawing.[37] It was imperative for a professional soldier to be able to read French, for it was the language in which the latest developments in science and military art were recorded. Lieutenants Swift and Levy soon became Masson's avid pupils.[38]

Despite the Academy's steady progress, there were problems. By the Act of March 16, 1802, officers and cadets could be ordered away from West Point at any time to inspect fortifications, conduct surveys, or attend to any other necessary government business. There was no assurance that either cadets or officers would be in regular attendance at the military school. In the summer of 1803, the Corps of Engineers of the Military Academy lost its leader when Lieutenant Colonel Williams resigned over a dispute of authority with George Izard, a captain of artillery stationed at West Point.

34. Forman, *West Point*, 21–23; Swift, *Memoirs*, 6.
35. Simeon Levy is Simon Levy in many sources.—Ed.
36. Swift, *Memoirs*, 36–37; Denton, "Formative Years," 32.
37. Often Francis D. Masson, or Francis De Masson, in West Point histories.—Ed.
38. Swift, *Memoirs*, 40.

Izard and other infantry and artillery line officers at West Point had refused to obey the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Williams. They claimed that as an engineer, Williams could issue orders only to other engineers, and not to line officers. When Williams complained to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, the War Department at first attempted to sidestep the issue by ordering non-engineering officers away from West Point. Williams pressed the issue and discovered that President Jefferson and the War Department stood by the rule that no member of the Corps of Engineers could have a military command. Highly agitated and claiming that he could no longer keep his commission without humiliation, Lieutenant Colonel Williams resigned on June 20, 1803.[39]

This could have been a severe blow to the Academy and the engineers, but a sense of continuity was maintained when the War Department appointed Major Wadsworth as the new superintendent and chief of the engineers. In the major's absence, which was common because of other duties, Captain Barron was in charge. Wadsworth tried to bring some system to the school by requiring punctual attendance at all classes and by ordering a morning parade and roll call for all officers, cadets, and privates stationed at West Point. However, Wadsworth found that he, too, was unable to make the artillery and infantry officers stationed at West Point obey his orders. He remained in charge until February 1805, then also resigned his commission. The young Academy was in a desperate position.[40]

The secretary of war and President Jefferson now regretted that they had lost Lieutenant Colonel Williams and persuaded him to return to West Point. Upon Jefferson's insistence, Williams was again commissioned a lieutenant colonel on April 19, 1805, and for a second time he became head of the engineers and superintendent of the Military Academy. The problem of authority remained unresolved. Lieutenant Colonel Williams was told not to "interfere"

39. Swift, *Memoirs*, 40; Cullum, "Early History," *Register*, III, 495–497; Jacobs, *Beginning of the U.S. Army*, 304–305.
40. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 28.

with the discipline, police, or command of the line troops; in all other respects, he would enjoy the "honors" due his rank.[41]

Although Williams returned to the Academy, his duties as chief engineer often took him away from West Point. Problems fell on the shoulders of subordinates not always capable of handling them. Instruction was of a low order, classes met irregularly, and many of the cadets were vastly unqualified. The Military Academy, a not quite four-year-old stepchild of the Army, was again tottering on the verge of collapse.[42]

Matters had not improved much when in the summer of 1807, Sylvanus Thayer stepped off a boat onto the dock and began the long climb up the hill to the Plain.[43] The new cadet was greeted not by Superintendent Williams, but by Captain Joseph G. Swift, the Academy's first graduate. This first meeting grew into a lasting friendship between the two men. Old friends and acquaintances from Thayer's Dartmouth days were also at West Point. Alpheus Roberts was a cadet with Thayer.[44] The Partridge cousins, Alden and William, were officers. Although neither Partridge had graduated from Dartmouth, both had been successful at the Military Academy. In October 1806, Alden Partridge had become the fifteenth graduate and was made a first lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. This was highly unusual, one of the few times a cadet was ever commissioned a first lieutenant on graduation. William, a younger cousin, was the eighteenth graduate and a second lieutenant in the Engineers. Both had been fraternity brothers of Thayer, but Thayer was on more friendly terms with William than Alden.[45]

Thayer became friends with many of the other cadets who were with him at the Academy. Chris Van De Venter, Class of 1809,

41. Cullum, "Early History," *Register*, III, 500–505.
42. Cullum, "Early History," *Register*, III, 509–510; Jacobs, *Beginning of the U.S. Army*, 306.
43. The landing was located where North Dock is today.—Ed.
44. Roberts died in Louisiana less than nine months after graduating.—Ed.
45. Cullum, *Register*, I, 69–70, 74–75; Thomas J. Fleming, *West Point; The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy* (William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1969), 17.

who became chief clerk of the War Department in 1817; John J. Abert (1811), who became chief of the Topographical Engineers; and René E. De Russy (1812), who one day would become superintendent of the Academy, were all cadets with Thayer for varying lengths of time.[46]

Although Thayer was pleased with the new friendships, he was not particularly enthusiastic about the textbooks used at the Academy. Hutton's *Mathematics* was familiar from his teaching days at Washington, New Hampshire, and he had used Enfield's *Natural Philosophy* at Dartmouth. His academic background made him better educated than some of his instructors. In fact, there was little Thayer could learn at the Academy. Mathematics was studied in the morning, French and drawing in the afternoon. The only subjects really new to Thayer, all of which he enjoyed, were artillery, fortifications, and French. Thayer benefited most not from the classroom instruction but from membership in the United States Military Philosophical Society.[47]

The society had been formed in November 1802 by Jonathan Williams and other members of the Academy to promote the study of military science and history, to encourage professionalism in the military, and to win support for the Military Academy and the Corps of Engineers. Its membership grew to include many noted personages, among them Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, James Monroe, DeWitt Clinton, Robert Fulton, and Eli Whitney. The society filled the vacuum created by the absence of a definite military policy in the United States. Realizing that popular opinion feared a large standing army, a handful of officers at West Point strongly believed it was essential to have at the very core of the small professional military system a cadre of trained and intelligent soldiers, that is, the Corps of Engineers. Thus, the United States Military Philosophical Society proceeded

46. Cullum, *Register* I, 91, 101, 109; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 25.
47. Fleming, *West Point*, 17.

to implement and promote the scientific, technical, and educational achievements of the Corps of Engineers and the newly established Military Academy.[48]

The society was firmly entwined with the personality of Lieutenant Colonel Williams. During the hiatus following Williams's resignation, the organization lapsed, but upon his return and with the hearty support of President Jefferson, it once again became a functioning and important adjunct to the Military Academy.

In practice, the society expanded its program to complement the Academy's curriculum and the Corps of Engineers' work. Frequently, technical papers on theoretical and practical military knowledge were read at the society's meetings, followed by lively discussion and comments. For Thayer and other cadet members, the society served as an excellent graduate studies seminar. Thayer's lifelong belief in the need for professionalism and technical training in the Army had its roots in the Military Philosophical Society. Later, in 1813, Thayer cast the only vote against disbanding the society.[49]

There are no records of Cadet Thayer's scholastic standing at the Military Academy. He did take his required turn in post administration and for a period acted as adjutant. Because of his Dartmouth education, there was little the Academy could offer him once his civilian style was replaced by a more military way of thinking. On February 23, 1808, after six months at the Academy, Thayer graduated and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. The two other cadets who graduated ahead of him that year, Daniel A. A. Buck and Samuel Babcock, had both been at the Academy longer than Thayer. Thayer was the thirty-third graduate of the United States Military Academy.[50]

48. Sidney Forman, "The United States Military Philosophical Society, 1801–1813," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, II, no. 3 (July 1945): 273, 277–278, 283; Swift, *Memoirs*, 37.
49. Forman, "Military Philosophical Society," 278.
50. Cullum, *Register* I, 81; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 43; Henry Dearborn to Sylvanus Thayer, February 25, 1808, *Thayer Papers*.

III

The Young Officer



After graduation in February 1808, Thayer remained at West Point for a few months as an instructor in mathematics before being assigned to field duty. He did not have to wait long to apply the scientific and technical knowledge he had gained during the preceding five years, because officers with engineering skills were in short supply. During his first few years in the Army, Thayer was sent on a number of short-term assignments that leveraged his technical expertise.

In the spring of 1808, under orders of Colonel Williams, Second Lieutenant Thayer became the first officer of the Corps of Engineers to survey sites in Connecticut. He surveyed the harbor at New Haven and submitted a plan for an enclosed battery to be built on the site of the abandoned Revolutionary War Black Rock Fort, renamed "Fort Nathan Hale." In New London, he made an estimate of the cost of repairs to Fort Trumbull. After a survey of the harbor at Stonington, he drew up plans and estimates for a gun house and battery on Stonington Point. With these duties completed and duly reported to Colonel Williams, Thayer traveled to Boston, where, on May 10, he reported to Fort Independence.

There he served under Major Swift as assistant engineer in charge of the construction of defenses along the Massachusetts coast in 1808–1809.[1]

On October 14, 1809, Swift ordered Thayer to proceed to the Military Academy, the home base for engineers awaiting further assignment, for the winter. Thayer acted as post commandant at West Point from November 1809 until late April or May 1810. After a brief stint as adjutant, he became Assistant Professor of Mathematics during the 1810 term. From the end of the term in November 1810 until the following spring, Thayer had no real duties. During this time, he shared rooms with William Partridge in a small house not far from the superintendent's quarters.[2]

That his life at the Academy was not too difficult during this time period is evidenced in a letter from his cousin and future brother-in-law, Jonathan Wild:

> I was highly gratified to hear from Lieut. Partridge of your pleasant situation at W Point—that you may continue to enjoy every advantage which can render your situation agreeable and useful is, and ever will be the ardent desire of Sir your sincere friend and cousin.[3]

However, not every member of Thayer's family was pleased with his choice of a military career. Brother-in-law Josiah Moulton, husband of Thayer's oldest sister, Dorcas, warned:

> But I should advise you by all means to the study of a profession. A soldiers [*sic*] life is a life of fluctuation,

1. Thayer to Cullum, February 25, 1860, and August 16, 1865, *Thayer Papers*; Cullum, *Register*, I, 82; Swift, *Memoirs*, 74–76.
2. Thayer to Cullum, March 19, 1853, February 25, 1860, and undated September 1865, *Thayer Papers*; Cullum, *Register*, I, 82; Swift, *Memoirs*, 87. [The location of Thayer's quarters is not entirely clear, but would likely be under Washington Hall or close to North Area today. The mention of "superintendent's quarters" does not refer to the current Quarters 100, completed in 1820.—Ed.]
3. Jonathan Wild to Thayer, July 15, 1810, *Thayer Papers*. Errors in the original are reproduced.

> dependance, servitude and uncertainty and especially in the United States. The practice of law affords an opportunity for the [sweet] enjoyment of a peaceful domestic life. It introduces you to the [public] view, and opens the widest doors for advancement to the public offices of the state. . . . It also as a general thing affords a hansome [*sic*] support to a family. . . . I would rather be a lawyer and statesman, than a soldier. A soldiers [*sic*] life tends to introduce instability and tormenting ambition of mind, together with prodigaity and disipation [*sic*][4] in practice. You will consider and act for yourself—It is time to act.[5]

Moulton clearly did not understand the motivations of his brother-in-law. Sylvanus Thayer exhibited no desire to enjoy peaceful domesticity or to hold public office.[6]

In May or June 1811, Thayer again left West Point, this time to serve as assistant to Colonel Williams in New York City. In November 1811, Thayer was given the additional duty of assisting Captain George Bomford, an expert in ordnance manufacturing. At Potter's Field, located about three miles north of the Battery near the site of Union Square, Bomford had established workshops where gun carriages were constructed, small arms repaired, ammunition manufactured, and rockets made.[7] Thayer served in this establishment from November 1811 to May 1812. In June 1812, war broke out with Great Britain, changing life for young Thayer.[8]

4. This is presumably "prodigality and dissipation."—Ed.
5. Josiah Moulton to Thayer, August 14, 1810, *Thayer Papers*. Words in brackets were added by the editors of the *Thayer Papers* when the original text was not clear or obvious words were missing.
6. Moulton also writes, "[W]e earnestly recommend to you the Christian religion as that which is in every respect, infinitely worthy your highest and first attention." This is a good clue to Thayer's religiosity at the time. Josiah Moulton to Thayer, August 14, 1810, *Thayer Papers*. —Ed.
7. A potter's field was a public burial place for the unclaimed dead. Several New York City parks, such as Washington Square Park, are on the site of old potter's fields.—Ed.
8. Thayer to Cullum, February 25, 1860, and August 18, 1865; Cullum, *Register*, I, 82.

The coming of war in 1812 brought about an increase in the size of the Army and more rapid promotions for officers. Thayer was promoted to first lieutenant, Corps of Engineers, on July 1, 1812. Two months later, First Lieutenant Thayer of the Corps of Engineers also became captain of the Ordnance Department and was assigned to General Henry Dearborn as deputy commissary of ordnance and chief engineer of the Northern Army. Thayer accepted the promotion with the belief that doing so would not deprive him of his commission in the engineers. Major Bomford also accepted promotion in both branches, ordnance and engineers.[9]

Bomford did Thayer a great injustice by stubbornly holding both commissions despite an agreement between Colonel Swift of the Corps of Engineers and Colonel Decius Wadsworth of the Ordnance Department that no officer should retain commissions in both corps after April 1813. Bomford's refusal to yield either commission blocked Thayer's promotion in either branch. Thayer wrote to Secretary of War John Armstrong to protest the situation. If circumstances warranted, Thayer wanted to resign his commission in ordnance and retain his engineering commission.[10] Colonel Swift fully backed his protégé in a letter to the secretary of war:

> It may be essential to the Service for Major Bomford to remain in the Ordnance Department,—if Maj. Bomford also retains his Commission in the Engineers it would be but justice to Lieut. Thayer of the Engineers, that he retain his commission in the Ordnance Department, which

9. Thayer to John Armstrong, April 3, 1813, *Buell Collection of Historical Documents Relating to the Corps of Engineers*, II, Letter 406, Engineer Historical Division, Baltimore, Maryland.

10. Colonel Joseph G. Swift was now chief engineer. Colonel Jonathan Williams had resigned effective July 31, 1812, over the question of whether an engineer officer could command a military post and officers of the line. The story of the events leading to this resignation is well told in George W. Cullum, *Campaigns of the War of 1812–15, Against Great Britain, Sketched and Criticised; With Brief Biographies of the American Engineers* (New York: James Miller, Publisher, 1879), 50–59; Thayer to Armstrong, April 3, 1813, *Buell Collection*, II, Letter 406.

> has not been resigned.—I will thank you to decide in this case.[11]

The decision was crucial to Thayer; a ruling assigning him to ordnance would have changed the direction of his military career. The issue was eventually resolved when Bomford relinquished his engineering commission, thus opening the way for Thayer's further advancement in the Corps of Engineers; however, Bomford's actions had delayed Thayer's promotion from April to September 1813.[12]

While awaiting settlement of the promotion issue, Thayer was ordered by the War Department to report to General Joseph Bloomfield in Philadelphia. Thayer's new assignment was to inspect an island in the Delaware River called the "Pea Patch" and determine if it could be fortified. With the adjutant general, Thayer inspected the island, situated about five miles below New Castle, Delaware, and made soundings to determine the depth of the water. The implication in Thayer's report was that the island's surface made it an unsuitable site for a fortification, and given the artillery of the time, the Pea Patch was virtually useless as protection against sea-born invasion. Unfortunately, the government went ahead with construction, and the project was plagued with difficulties.[13]

Thayer's next major assignment was as aide-de-camp and chief engineer to Major General Wade Hampton. In this position, Thayer acquired his first and, as it turned out, only combat experience, at the Battle of the Châteauguay. The war hawks of the day believed the United States would one day annex the British territory to the north; for them, Manifest Destiny in the War of 1812 was epitomized in the cry, "On to Canada!" As Julius Pratt concluded, the

11. Extract of a letter from Swift to Armstrong, August 20, 1813, *Buell Collection*, II, Letter 446.
12. Thayer to Cullum, August 18, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
13. War Department to Swift, May 25, 1813, *Buell Collection*, II, Letter 429; Thayer to Joseph Bloomfield, June 19, 1813, *Thayer Papers*. [A wooden fort was completed on Pea Patch Island by 1814. This site is now known as Fort Delaware.—Ed.]

demand that the British be expelled and Canada annexed "was a factor of primary importance in bringing on the war."[14] The first campaign against the British in Canada had been unsuccessful. In the late summer and early fall of 1813, the Americans planned an attack against Montreal, which has been accurately described as "one of the worst fiascos of the war."[15]

The campaign plan envisioned a simultaneous attack by two forces: one assembled near Lake Champlain under the command of General Wade Hampton and another commanded by General James Wilkinson at Sacketts Harbor. The two generals were not on speaking terms, and there was no one of higher rank to compel cooperation in this exercise. Although it was evident that neither of the two forces was strong enough to capture Montreal without the help of the other, there was little coordination and planning between them, and the communication that did exist was slow. To complicate the situation further, General Wilkinson was in poor health, too feeble to lead an arduous campaign. Moreover, when he began the campaign in early October, he proposed to attack Kingston, not Montreal. The objective was later changed to the original city, Montreal, but the confusion remained.[16]

Captain Thayer, General Hampton's aide, wrote an eyewitness report of the campaign that gives a revealing picture of American strategy and tactics of the period. According to Thayer's report, General Hampton's division was composed of two infantry brigades commanded by General Thomas Parker and General George Izard, four artillery companies commanded by Major William McRee of the Corps of Engineers, and two cavalry troops. About 800 men were selected from different regiments and organized

14. Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (Macmillan Company, 1925), 12.
15. Maurice Matloff, ed., *American Military History* rev. ed., Army Historical Series (Office of the Chief of Military History, 1973), 135.
16. Matloff, *American Military History*, 135; James Hannay, *How Canada Was Held for the Empire; the Story of the War of 1812* (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack; Morang and Co., Ltd., 1905), 202–203; John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (University of Florida Press, 1972), 207–209.

into four groups of light troops. The aggregate amounted to about 4,500 men. Many of the old men and young boys had been discharged by this time, and the soldiers who remained constituted as hardy a body of Americans as had ever taken the field.[17]

The officers were another matter. For the most part ignorant of their duties, many were also incapable of learning them; according to Thayer, they were "taken from that class of mankind whom nature had designed to obey, & not command." Colonels often drilled their regiments according to their own notions, rather than by the regulations of the War Department.[18]

About the middle of September, Hampton's men broke camp at Burlington, Vermont, and crossed Lake Champlain to Cumberland Head, near Plattsburgh, New York. On the evening of the nineteenth, the Army moved by boat to the village of Champlain and disembarked the same night. The next morning, the Americans marched out and met a small enemy force, killed two or three, captured five, and dispersed the rest. After some marching and countermarching, Hampton decided to head west to the Châteauguay River and then north to Montreal. From Champlain the Army marched through Chazy, New York, then west to Châteauguay Four Corners, arriving on the twenty-sixth. Hampton remained at Châteauguay Four Corners for about a month, waiting for the countryside to rally to him and for General Wilkinson to send word of his advance. Neither happened. Once during that time, Native Americans allied with the British attacked but were handily defeated. Hampton finally decided to move north along the Châteauguay River, toward the Saint Lawrence, in the hope of meeting General Wilkinson's troops and attacking Montreal with the combined forces as planned. Many of the militia with Hampton refused to cross into Canada. Powerless to do anything about this mutiny,

17. "Captain Thayer's Report of the Campaign Under Major General Hampton," November 1813, *Letters Received, Sec. War*, Letter T-233(7).
18. "Thayer's Report."

Hampton left them behind with orders to raise as much "alarm" as they could.[19]

On October 20, marching orders for Canada were issued; and on the next day, General George Izard, with a reinforced regiment, crossed into Canada with orders to seize a favorable position at Spears and hold the enemy in check. A rapid march on Smith's Road succeeded in surprising a party of the enemy; three were killed and eight wounded. On October 22, the main body advanced on the more circuitous river road, which was more suited to the wagon trains, and arrived at Spears the next day. Having penetrated without loss the wide forest that separated them from open country, the American troops felt they had surmounted the most difficult part of the trip and were confident of their strength in a field fight.[20]

General Hampton's movements had caused some consternation in Montreal, and the governor, Sir George Prevost, called out the militia. Although the response was less than overwhelming, the Canadians were fortunate in having an able commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Michel d'Irumberry de Salaberry of the Canadian Voltigeurs, who directed the advance troops of approximately 1,400 men, including the French-Canadian militia, Native Americans, and a few British regulars. Having reconnoitered the area and determined the most likely route the Americans would take, Colonel de Salaberry was ordered to impede their progress.[21]

On the line of march of the American troops was a heavy woods, followed by seven miles of open farm country, then another forest. Colonel de Salaberry chose to defend the latter by erecting a series of three breastworks of fallen trees, sharpened stakes, and brush. The British right rested on a swamp and their left on the Châteauguay River, forty yards wide and six feet deep in most

19. "Thayer's Report;" *ASPMA*, I, 458–460; Mahon, *War of 1812*, 210.
20. "Thayer's Report."
21. William Kingsford, *The History of Canada*, 10 vols. (Toronto: Rowsell and Hutchinson, 1887–1898), VIII, 363; William D. Lighthall, *An Account of the Battle of Châteauguay* (Montreal: W. Drysdale and Co., Publishers, 1889), 14; Mahon, *War of 1812*, 210.

places. The third row of breastworks was defended by the major body of troops reinforced on the flanks by artillery. To the colonel's rear was a small rapid where the river was fordable in one or two spots. This was protected by a small blockhouse on the riverbank, a strong breastwork, and a guard. Across the river, Colonel de Salaberry placed a picket of sixty men to guard the rear approach and alert him if the Americans tried to cross.[22]

General Hampton's plan was to carry the Canadian position. Colonel Robert Purdy, with the first brigade and light troops amounting in all to about 2,500 effective men, was ordered to cross on the evening of October 25 to the east bank of the river; to find a ford supposed to be in the enemy's rear; and then to recross and commence an attack on the enemy's left flank and rear while the main force attacked the enemy's front. At reveille on October 26, Hampton's men were in motion; at noon, they halted within one and a half miles of the enemy's woods to wait for a signal from Purdy.[23]

In the meantime, Purdy's men had crossed the river, and after marching most of the night, had covered only about five or six miles without finding the ford. Moreover, it appeared that the enemy knew of Purdy's presence, so the important element of surprise was lost. When Purdy finally located the ford late in the afternoon on October 26 and tried to cross, Canadian defenses drove him back with a determined fire.

Abandoning the original plan, Hampton called for General Izard to join him and attack the center of the Canadians' main defensive position. An aide was detached to call up Izard's brigade, but Hampton became too impatient to wait for these troops

22. Hannay, *How Canada Was Held*, 206; Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812; or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the Last War for American Independence* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1868), 647; "Thayer's Report"; Lighthall, *Battle of Châteauguay*, 14.
23. Hannay, *How Canada Was Held*, 206–208; "General Hampton's Report to the Secretary of War," November 1, 1813, *Letters Received, Sec. War*, Letter H-292(7); "Thayer's Report."

and ordered Izard to attack with a battalion of the 10th Infantry amounting only to 230 men! Thayer must have been horrified at the thought of so few men attacking prepared positions. It was folly, close to suicide.

The battalion moved out in column, and when the Americans came within long musket shot, the enemy commenced a heavy fire. Without orders, the Americans returned fire. With a great deal of difficulty, Izard deployed his men in line, but he could not advance because, his line being so much shorter than the enemy's front, he would be in danger of having his flank turned. In this critical and embarrassing situation, Izard sent his brigade major to the rear to bring up the rest of the brigade on the double and to form the cavalry in his rear. The cavalry would be used to accomplish two purposes: stop the Americans from running away and counterattack in the event of an enemy attack. In the meantime, the battalion on the ground kept up a hot fire on the concealed enemy until their ammunition was nearly gone. With reinforcements at hand, Izard ordered a bayonet charge. With a shout, the Americans attacked and drove the enemy from behind the first line of breastworks into the second. Here the attack faltered.[24]

On the other side of the river, Colonel Purdy was directed to recross at the first practicable ford and join Izard's men in a general assault on the enemy's front. First, Purdy called for a rest break for his exhausted troops. Many stacked arms to take a nap; others, more hungry than tired, unpacked their cooking pots. By this time, the battle had begun on the other side of the river, and many officers walked down to the riverbank to watch the contest.

Not more than fifteen minutes had passed when suddenly a heavy fire commenced across the whole of Purdy's front. Out of the woods came 300 Canadian militia and Native Americans who attacked and routed Purdy's force of over 2,000 men. There was a great deal of confusion, with some men running for their lives

24. Hannay, *How Canada Was Held*, 208–209.

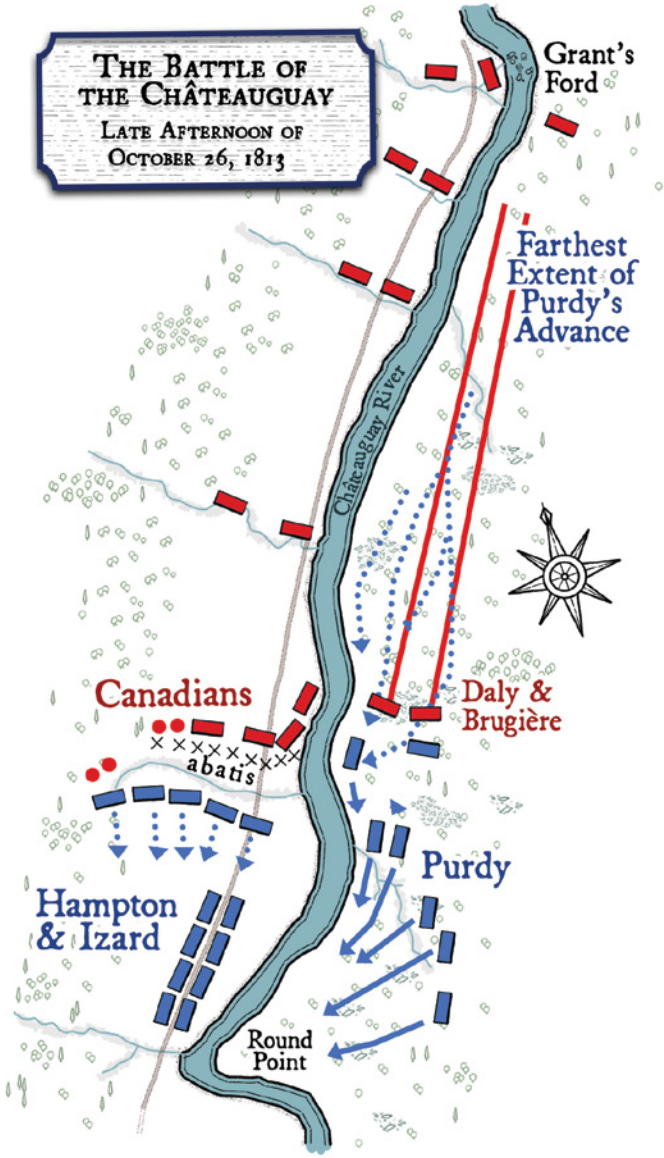
and others trying to stand and fight. To add insult to injury, some American battalions fired on friendly units. In less than five minutes, the bank of the river was covered with frightened soldiers who had thrown down their weapons and run. Many jumped into the river and attempted to swim across; other floated logs and tried to pole across. Shoving and screaming, "We shall all be tomahawked," men ran up and down the bank, begging to be helped across the river and offering rewards.[25]

Soon, enough men were rallied against the enemy. At night, Colonel Purdy formed his command into a square and, with bayonets, they repulsed several enemy attacks. While the colonel's neglect during the halt enabled the enemy to attack and rout him, his later actions evidenced bravery and courage.

The men on Izard's side of the river were facing problems of their own. The neighboring woods rang with the roar of muskets, the shouts of attacking troops, and the sound of bugles. Convinced that the enemy force was overwhelming, Hampton ordered Izard's men to give up the captured position and retire a distance of three miles upriver, which they did in good order. The Canadians later claimed that there were only 300 men behind the breastworks and that their noisemaking had paralyzed the American advance and forced Hampton to retreat. A handful of Canadians successfully countered an attack by a superior American force.[26]

In the evening, about 300 stragglers crossed the river near the scene of the battle and arrived in camp. Nothing was heard from the main body of Purdy's men until the next morning, when on the opposite bank appeared a pitiful sight. Without hats, knapsacks, or weapons, Purdy's troops came out of the woods, their clothes in tatters. They were eventually able to cross over and join the main body, where they told of their misadventure.

25. Hannay, *How Canada Was Held*, 208–209.
26. Hannay, *How Canada Was Held*, 208–209, 210; Kingsford, *History of Canada*, VIII, 306–367; Lossing, *Field-Book*, 648; Charles P. Lucas, *The Canadian War of 1812* (Clarendon Press, 1906), 134.



This map shows the Battle of the Châteauguay late on the afternoon of October 26, 1813. The primary fighting was on the west bank of the river near the Canadian abatis where American forces eventually fell back. On the east bank, Colonel Purdy's troops had advanced north in an attempt to cross at Grant's Ford and flank the enemy, but Canadian forces repelled the attack and Purdy's forces retreated in chaos. (Lossing, *Field-Book*, 686.)

Writing a report after the battle to the secretary of war, Captain Thayer blamed General Hampton's blunders for the misfortune of Colonel Purdy's men. Specifically, he observed that about two hours before Purdy and his men were to move out, General Hampton ordered the commissary to provide them with flour and fresh beef, rather than the usual Army provisions of pork and hard bread. The food was handed out so quickly that the men did not have time to cook it beforehand, and fires were prohibited while on the march. Despite this prohibition, many of the men took their knapsacks, skillets, and other cooking utensils with them. Their only alternatives were to go hungry or eat flour and raw beef.

In addition, the guides sent with Purdy proved particularly incompetent in leading the troops through the dark night and thick, pathless woods. They groped about, marching about twenty-five miles to advance only five or six miles. By the time the force reached the vicinity of the ford in the afternoon, one of the guides had deserted and the other claimed he knew of no ford.

According to Thayer, there were many instances during the campaign of unequivocal cowardice. Some officers deserted their posts and their commands, fled from the scene of action, and swam the river to safety. On the other hand, there were also officers who exhibited presence of mind, skill in leading troops, and gallantry. What angered Thayer was that the commanding general appeared to notice neither courage nor cowardice. He released some whom Colonel Purdy had arrested and refused to arrest others charged with cowardice.[27]

The Americans who were killed, wounded, and missing totaled about thirty-five to eighty men.[28] On the morning of October 28, a council of officers voted that the troops retire from the field. Stopping

27. "Thayer's Report."
28. Donald G. Graves, *Field of Glory: The Battle of Crysler's Farm, 1813* (Robin Brass Studio, 1999), 109. Chapter 5 of this book provides an excellent overview of the battle. Graves notes that Hampton claimed not more than fifty killed, wounded, or captured but that other sources claimed thirty-five to eighty.—Ed.

at a position about two miles above Spears, the Americans endured a final insult. A party of Native Americans approached a log house about 300 yards from the camp and in full view of the Americans. The house was occupied by a small guard, which was quickly reinforced. The enemy, protected by stumps and a nearby ravine, kept up an intense fire on the cabin for about forty-five minutes. Then they raised a war whoop, fired a few final shots, and withdrew. The Americans suffered one officer and six privates wounded. A small Native force, in plain daylight, had taunted Hampton's entire force without retaliation.[29]

The march was resumed, and the Army arrived at Four Corners on October 31, 1813. Two days later, General Hampton sent the dragoons and most of the artillery to Plattsburgh and dismissed the teamsters who had been employed to carry provisions, ammunition, and stores. The Army resumed the march on November 10, arrived in Chazy on November 13, and on November 17, reached Plattsburgh and winter quarters, where General Hampton soon resigned from the Army.[30]

The Battle of the Châteauguay was a humiliating experience for the American Army. After the war, one officer who participated in the battle said, "No officer who had any regard for his reputation would voluntarily acknowledge himself as having been engaged in it."[31] Captain Thayer, although very bitter about his combat experience, derived several lessons from it, the main one being that officers must be trained and competent to lead troops effectively. The professional officer, in most cases, was better prepared for leadership than the amateur or political appointee. Thayer did not forget what he witnessed and learned.

In December, Thayer left the Northern Army to join General Moses Porter in New York. On January 14, 1814, Thayer was

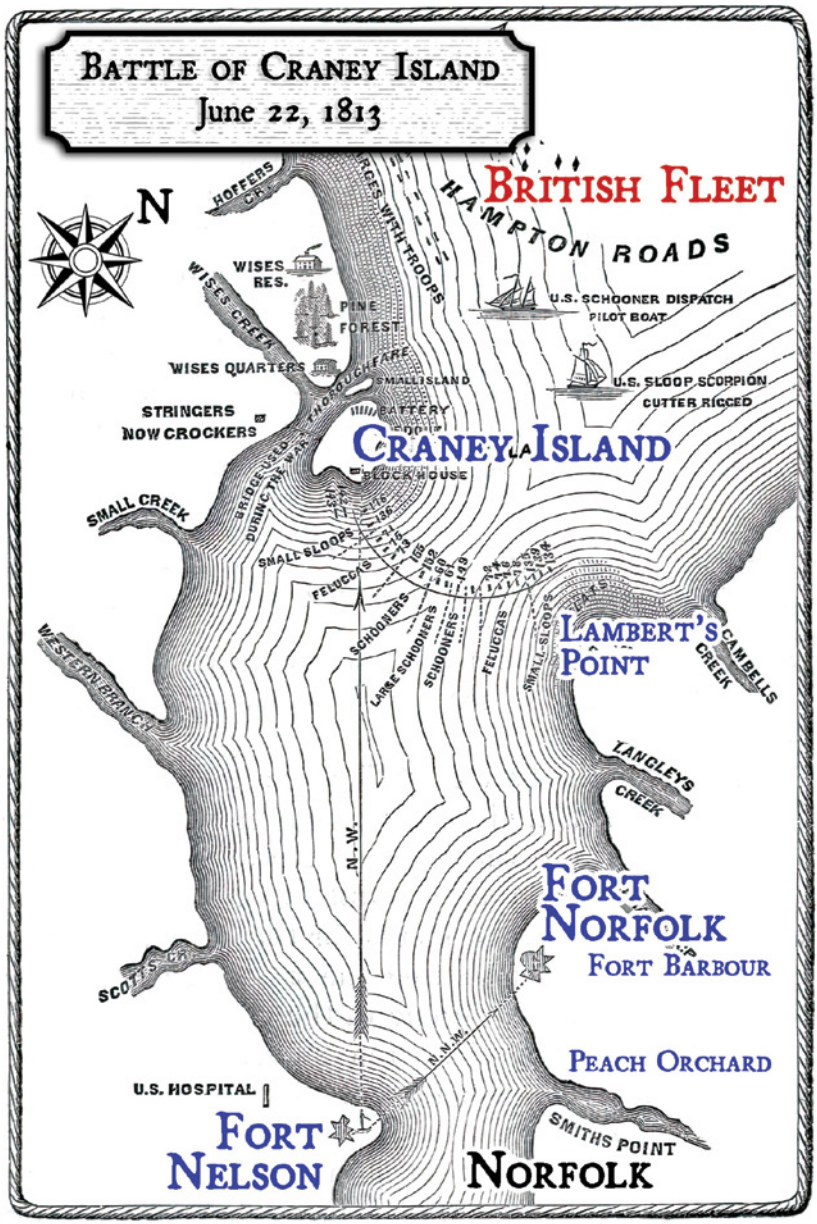
29. "Thayer's Report."
30. "Thayer's Report"; "Hampton's Report"; Lossing, *Field-Book*, 647–648; Matloff, *American Military History*, 135; Mahon, *War of 1812*, 212–213.
31. Major General John E. Wool quoted in Lossing, *Field-Book*, 648.

appointed brigade major to General Porter, and in April, he went with the general to Norfolk, where he also served as Porter's chief engineer for the remainder of the war.[32]

In the summer of 1813, a British naval force had tried to seize Norfolk and the Portsmouth navy yard and capture the USS *Constellation*. The attack had been unsuccessful, but the War Department was afraid that a second attack might succeed. As chief engineer under Porter, Thayer inspected the Norfolk defenses and made recommendations for increasing their effectiveness. Thayer stated the key to the defense of the city was Craney Island. As long as this site remained in American hands, the enemy could not pass. Instead of recommending a major fortification there, Thayer proposed that the existing circular redoubt on the southeastern extremity of the island be strengthened by the addition of a blockhouse for internal defense and a suitable barracks to house the garrison. He also advised that a smaller redoubt be erected on the opposite end of the island. The cost of this construction, together with a magazine and additional gun platforms, was estimated at $4,500.

The next most advantageous position for the defense of the city was Lambert's Point, 2,500 yards from Craney Island on the one side and an equal distance from Fort Norfolk on the other. The curve of the channel around Lambert's Point would keep an enemy exposed to fire from that site for a long time. However, Thayer did not recommend a permanent fortification at this place, since the works he proposed at Craney Island would prevent an enemy from attacking Norfolk by water. Instead, Thayer suggested that four 32-pounders be removed to Craney Island and that four 18-pounders be mounted on traveling carriages, two to be posted at the crossroads near Lambert's Point and two at Fort Norfolk for instant deployment to Lambert's Point or any other location.

32. A brigade major was an officer appointed to assist the general commanding a brigade. He did not necessarily hold the rank of major; Thayer to Cullum, undated September 1865, *Thayer Papers*.



The Battle of Craney Island on June 22, 1813, was the impetus for sending Thayer to Norfolk in 1814. Although the British attack was unsuccessful, the War Department realized that the defenses needed improvement. Locations mentioned in the text are labeled. (Lossing, *Field-Book*, 679.)



In the summer of 1814, Thayer recommended several improvements for the defenses on Craney Island, including the construction of a blockhouse, seen here. (Lossing, *Field-Book*, 686.)

The third position of importance for the defense of the city was Fort Norfolk, which was excellently situated to command and enfilade the channel. Thayer reported that this work could be strengthened at very little expense. Among the improvements suggested were installing iron grates on the windows on the lowest tiers, increasing the width of the parapet on the north wing, and building a rampart on which artillery could be mounted. The ditch opposite the northeast bastion was to be widened to hold a row of palisades. The expense of these and other improvements was estimated by Thayer at $2,500.

Above Norfolk the principal defensive means were the fieldworks at Fort Barbour and the Peach Orchard, both easily flanked.

Thayer objected to them because he held that extensive lines of entrenchments provided a feeble barrier unless flanked by artillery and fully manned by infantry. If the line of entrenchments was penetrated at any point or turned upon either flank, in all probability the entire line would be lost. Moreover, he believed that entrenchments created a false sense of security that dampened the offensive spirit. Instead of fieldworks and entrenchments, Thayer felt that Virginia riflemen, some light artillery, and a few regulars, who could move rapidly from point to point and concentrate where most needed, would constitute the most effective defense.

The final position Thayer discussed in his report was the badly designed and poorly built Fort Nelson. The fort was of little importance except as a water battery. An enemy could approach Portsmouth by land, capture the navy yard, and command the town of Norfolk without much fear of Fort Nelson.[33]

Because of its obvious weakness, Fort Nelson continued to be on Thayer's mind during the spring of 1814. In July, he reported to General Porter that the exposed position of the fort made it desirable either to demolish it and remove the ordnance and military stores deposited there to a place of greater security or to strengthen it. If the latter choice was selected, then Thayer felt the two principal defects of the fort, the weakness of the rear wall and the lack of a good flank defense, could be remedied by the construction of a horn work of earth at the rear of Fort Nelson. A horn work was a projected outwork that usually had a bastioned front and two long branches, or wings, that rested upon two adjacent branches of the main enclosure. The object of a horn work was to strengthen a weak feature of a fortification. Thayer described the horn work he proposed for Fort Nelson:

> The front to consist of a side of a regular fortification viz a Curtain and two Demi-Bastions whose flanked angles

33. Thayer to Moses Porter, May 17, 1814, *Thayer Papers*, 30.

> will extend nearly to the waters [*sic*] edge. This front to be connected with the Fort by two branches or wings extending from the flanked angles of the demi-bastions to the Ditch in front of the present rear wall and flanked by guns mounted on the extremities of that wall.[34]

This proposed construction would also strengthen the fort without requiring an increased garrison for its defense.

Thayer found his engineering duties left little time for other pursuits. He may have noticed that Napoleon, fighting for his life, had been defeated at the Battle of Leipzig only a few days before the American humiliation at the Châteauguay. Thayer continued to follow the exploits of the emperor with a great deal of personal and professional interest. He was well aware that an allied victory would mean more allied armies available to fight in America. After Napoleon abdicated and was sent into exile on the island of Elba, 14,000 of the Duke of Wellington's veterans were ordered to come to the United States. In August, Thayer heard that a British force had landed and burned Washington, DC, and for a time an attack on Norfolk seemed likely. Captain Thayer increased his efforts to prepare the city's defense.

It was in late summer that Thayer received the news of the death of his brother, Dr. Nathaniel Thayer, who had been a surgeon with the United States Army during the war. He died in a hospital in Buffalo, New York, on August 20, 1814.[35]

By late fall, many of Thayer's defensive preparations were completed. The fort on Craney Island was finished, and twenty-three pieces of artillery were mounted, sixteen of which could be brought to bear on the channel. In the center of the fort, an octagonal

34. Thayer to Porter, July 4, 1814, *Thayer Papers*. Descriptions of horn works and related engineering subjects can be found in Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Course of Permanent Fortification, For the Use of Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy*, ed. J. B. Wheeler, rev, ed. (New York: John Wiley & Son, 1874), 20–23, *passim*.
35. B. Thayer, *Memorial*, 82. [Cause of death is unknown.—Ed.]

blockhouse had been erected that Thayer felt was fully adequate to protect the fort against an enemy assault. A water battery of five 18-pounders had been erected outside, but under the control of, the fort. To prevent enemy landings on the northwestern end of the island, to cover the opposite shore, and to command a neighboring sand dune called the "grave yard," Thayer built a twenty-foot-high timber blockhouse containing two 18-pounders. Two more 18-pounders were mounted on platforms on the right and left of the blockhouse. A thirteen-inch mortar located about ninety yards southeast of the blockhouse gave Craney Island a total of thirty-three pieces of ordnance, making it a very formidable location.[36]

Forts Norfolk and Nelson had also been improved in the manner suggested by Thayer. At Fort Nelson, the parapets were widened, new ramparts and gun platforms constructed, and the whole work surrounded by a palisade. Fort Nelson had been secured by the construction of a horn work built according to Thayer's plan.[37]

Work was continuing on these and other fortifications when word came of General Andrew Jackson's great victory at New Orleans in January 1815. It was later learned that a treaty had been signed at Ghent on December 24, 1814, two weeks before the battle. The new year saw Captain Thayer severely ill, probably from malaria.[38] He was very weak and could not work. It was during this time that Thayer began to make plans that would eventually lead him back to the Military Academy.[39]

36. Thayer to Porter, November 1, 1814, *Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Reports on Fortifications and Topographical Surveys*, I, 23-24, National Archives, Washington, DC.
37. Thayer to Porter, I, 25.
38. That Thayer had malaria is speculation by Kershner, but it is a likely culprit and a possible explanation for Thayer's recurring health issues. Malaria was widespread in the United States, especially in the South but even in New England. Both the common *Plasmodium vivax* and the less common *Plasmodium malariae* can cause recurrences months, years, or even decades later.—Ed.
39. Thayer to Swift, March 23, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

IV

Thayer's First Trip to Europe, 1815–1817



For the small group of officers who composed the military elite of the early nineteenth century, improvement of the Military Academy was a high priority. The informal efforts of the United States Military Philosophical Society to upgrade instruction ended when that group disbanded in 1813 after Colonel Jonathan Williams's departure from the Army. Sylvanus Thayer, the only one who had voted against disbanding the Society, realized that the need for better formal instruction at the Academy remained. The members of the Society had often talked of purchasing books, models, maps, and other academic aids from Europe, or of sending a representative to Europe to study the leading military schools, particularly those in France. Thayer had also thought it would be beneficial for his career, and not coincidentally for the Corps of Engineers, if he were to visit Europe for this purpose, as well as to obtain what might be considered "postgraduate training" in engineering.[1]

The time now appeared to be right. With the War of 1812 over, military efforts in the United States could be expected to subside. A

1. Forman, *West Point*, 23–35; Thayer to Swift, March 23, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

young officer could go abroad without the risk of lost career opportunities at home. Furthermore, the international situation seemed, for a while, to have stabilized. Napoleon, who had occupied the attention of Europe during the early years of the nineteenth century, was in exile on Elba.[2] The allies put a Bourbon, Louis XVIII, back on the throne of France, then met at the Congress of Vienna to discuss the final settlement of European affairs.[3]

Late in February 1815, at about the same time Thayer was beginning to plan his European trip, Napoleon escaped from Elba and landed at Cannes on March 1, 1815, and, with 1,500 men, marched for Paris. The news from France probably hastened Thayer's plans; here was an opportunity for Thayer to see his idol or at least visit a Napoleonic battlefield.

In March 1815, Thayer hastily left Norfolk for Washington, DC, to see his friend Joseph G. Swift, then a brevet brigadier general. Thayer wanted to enlist the general's support for his "scheme," as he called it, to visit Europe. Finding that Swift had already departed for New York, a disappointed Thayer wrote the general a letter in which he requested a furlough to visit France for his professional improvement. He felt that the Corps of Engineers and the government would benefit by sending certain officers to Europe to study engineering techniques and buy needed books and supplies for the Military Academy. Since Thayer was certain that Swift would go along with this plan, he urged the general to write the secretary of war for permission to carry it out. Although still suffering from the effects of an illness, Thayer was exceedingly eager to get started with this project.[4]

2. Napoleon was exiled to Elba on April 11, 1814, and arrived there on May 4.—Ed.
3. "Allies" here refers to the citizens of those countries that opposed Napoleon, defeated him at Waterloo, and then occupied France, in particular, Prussians, Brits, Russians, and Austrians.—Ed.
4. Thayer to Swift, March 23, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

General Swift acted rapidly on Thayer's request, since a similar plan was also on his mind. In his memoirs, Swift related he had visited Washington, DC, in mid-February to discuss the congressional plan for the peacetime Army with the secretary of war and the president:

> An extended organization of the Military Academy was proposed, and to that effect I recommended that two of our best officers, to wit, Colonel McRee and Major Thayer, should be sent to Europe to examine the works of France, etc., and on the Rhine and low countries, and to form a library for the Academy.[5]

Shortly after receiving Thayer's letter, Swift wrote to Alexander Dallas, acting secretary of war. The original intention was for two engineer officers to join the Mediterranean fleet in a professional capacity; then, when their services were no longer needed, they would visit Spain, France, and England. Swift recommended Brevet Colonel McRee and Captain Thayer as worthy choices. William McRee, a hero of the War of 1812, had been considered for promotion to brigadier general during the recent war. Thayer was not so prominent outside engineer circles, so Swift took the opportunity to praise the young captain for his valuable service during the northern campaigns of 1812 and 1813 and his work on the defenses of Norfolk. Swift also elaborated on the advantages of sending American officers abroad. Not only would they gain knowledge of European military establishments, fortifications, military schools, and workshops; they would also collect the rare and important books, maps, and plans so needed at the Military Academy. Swift asked that funds be set aside for purchasing these items.[6]

5. Swift, *Memoirs*, 137–138.
6. Swift to Alexander Dallas, March 30, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.



A silhouette portrait of William McRee. (Lossing, *Field-Book*, 803.)

On the same day that Thayer wrote his letter to Alexander Dallas, Swift wrote to Thayer to inform him that he and McRee had been selected for the European mission. They would be paid double rations so they could travel as gentlemen and see the "best company." They would receive a list of books, maps, and instruments to be purchased at government expense. Swift also told Thayer that he would be given a promotion to brevet major. Apparently, the question of traveling incognito in civilian clothes had been raised. Swift answered:

> Uniform Military Dress is acceptable in all companies, & Col. Monroe informed me that an American Officer properly introduced, would see more and learn more,

> than any private individual; as to travelling incognito, its [*sic*] no good plan & you can gain no real advantage by it. . . .[7]

Swift was particularly interested in their studying military developments in France and England, but he could see no real advantage to be gained by visiting Spain, since neither spoke the language and, therefore, could learn little about the Spanish battlefields. They could go to Spain, Swift jokingly advised, "*provided you keep clear of the Inquisition!!*"[8]

Thayer was delighted that the trip had been approved and that he would be given a promotion, even a brevet one. When it was awarded, Thayer's promotion to brevet major was to date from February 20, 1815.[9]

Alexander Dallas soon informed Swift that the two engineers would be ordered to join one of the naval squadrons then preparing to sail against the Dey of Algiers.[10] When their services were no longer needed, they would be permitted to visit any part of Europe they wished. Dallas was not sure that an allowance for transportation could be legally provided, but Thayer and McRee would be given double rations and paid according to their brevet ranks. Moreover, $5,000, a considerable sum for the day, had been appropriated to enable them to purchase materials for the Military Academy.[11] Letters of introduction would be provided by Secretary of State James Monroe.[12]

7. Swift to Thayer, March 30, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
8. Swift to Thayer, March 30, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
9. Thayer to Swift, April 10, 1815, *Thayer Papers*; Cullum, *Register*, I, 82.
10. "Dey of Algiers" refers to the ruler of the Regency of Algiers, at the time a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire that was attacking American ships, demanding ransom, and enslaving sailors. The U.S. military action of 1815 is commonly called the Second Barbary War.—Ed.
11. $5,000 in 1815 would have the purchasing power of $100,000 to $120,000 in 2025.—Ed.
12. Dallas to Swift, April 12, 1815, *Thayer Papers;* Dallas to Thayer, April 20, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

The original plan was changed almost immediately. The already overcrowded Mediterranean squadron of Commodore Stephen Decatur had no room for Army officers. Eager to get under way, Decatur sailed from New York in May without the two engineers. The next transportation considered was the fleet at Boston, also preparing for a voyage to the Mediterranean, under the command of Commodore William Bainbridge. Meeting in New York, Thayer and McRee made final plans for their overseas trip. With new orders and letters of introduction to the Marquis de Lafayette, the Marquis of Tweeddale of Scotland, Sir Thomas Brisbane, and other ministers, merchants, and private citizens, Thayer traveled to Boston and arrived on May 11, 1815. McRee promised to follow shortly, after finishing some business in New York.

When Major Thayer presented himself to Commodore Bainbridge on May 13 with his letters of instruction for passage, the commodore reacted indignantly, saying that he had no quarters on his ships for Army officers. Bainbridge emphasized that the "apartments" of his officers were their "private property," of which they could not be deprived. Moreover, Bainbridge stormed on, he would not hesitate to disobey any order from the secretary of the Navy (who, after all, was only a civilian) that placed Army officers in the rightful quarters of his naval officers.[13]

Thayer was taken aback by this outburst. Although he knew that he carried lawful orders and that the elder officer's remarks were insubordinate, Thayer was perceptive and diplomatic enough to realize that challenging the old man would gain nothing and might cost his trip to Europe and his career. Despite his anger and embarrassment, Thayer held his tongue.

Bainbridge quickly realized that he had placed the young Army officer in an awkward position. He hastened to assure Thayer that his remarks were not meant as a personal affront, and that while he would not obey the orders of the secretary of the Navy, he would

13. Thayer to Swift, May 13, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

enjoy cultivating the friendship of the young engineer. The commodore unbent further to say that he would also enjoy making the acquaintance of Colonel McRee when he arrived in Boston. Bainbridge also hinted that he might be willing to grant accommodations as a personal favor to Thayer and McRee. Sylvanus Thayer was a proud man, and he quite correctly but courteously refused the naval officer's offer; he would not beg for a passage that was rightfully his. With strained civility and military courtesy, the two officers parted with the promise to meet again in the near future on a more personal basis.[14]

Thayer hurried to write Swift of this latest development. His restrained anger is evident in the letter:

> It appears that either the Sec'y of the Navy or ourselves have been trifled with & I am desirous of having no further connection with the Navy Department, if any other mode of conveyance than the one now contemplated can be procured.[15]

Two failures to secure transportation did not dampen Thayer's determination to get to Europe. He proposed a third ship, the USS *Congress*, which was being prepared to take Dr. William Eustis, the American minister to The Hague, and his family to Europe. Passage on the *Congress* would probably result in an earlier arrival in Europe. Thayer left the matter in Swift's hands and promised to write again when McRee arrived.

Commodore Bainbridge, in the meantime, kept his promise to the young engineer and invited Thayer to his ship for lunch and a boat ride to Fort Independence in Boston Harbor to observe some technical experiments made with ten- and thirteen-inch mortars.[16] While there is no evidence of Thayer's reply, he probably accepted the commodore's offer. There was no reason to antagonize

14. Thayer to Swift, May 13, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
15. Thayer to Swift, May 13, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
16. William Bainbridge to Thayer, May 18, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

Bainbridge. Moreover, Thayer was interested in ordnance and experiments with projectiles.

When Swift received his friend's letter, he hurriedly wrote to Dallas. Agreeing that Thayer and McRee could not be placed under personal obligation to the Navy and Bainbridge for their passage, Swift backed Thayer's proposal for accommodations on the *Congress*. As an alternative, Swift suggested booking passage on a private ship sailing directly to France.[17]

Dallas contacted Secretary of the Navy Benjamin W. Crowninshield, who wrote to Captain Charles Morris, the skipper of the *Congress*, ordering accommodations for the two officers. Crowninshield added that if Morris could not honor the request, then "you will inform this department in order that they may be provided for in one of the Ships of Como. Bainbridge's Squadron." Either the secretary of the Navy was not aware of the events that had transpired, or he was determined not to be intimidated by the commodore. Fortunately, Captain Morris had room for the two engineers.[18]

In the meantime, Thayer and Bainbridge had become friendly on a professional, if not a personal, level. The commodore decided that Thayer and McRee could accompany his squadron to Europe, but as the squadron was almost set to sail, he needed an answer soon. Thayer, who had not yet heard from Swift and was reconsidering the commodore's offer, faced a new problem: McRee, more than a week overdue, had not yet arrived in Boston. In a letter to Swift, Thayer outlined the situation:

> On my departure from New York, Col. McRee assured me that he should follow on the succeeding Friday—Why he has failed to do so I am at a loss to conjecture—The Squadron is ready for sea and if we are to go with it, Col. McRee must be here without delay.[19]

17. Swift to Dallas, May 19, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
18. Benjamin W. Crowninshield to Captain Charles Morris, May 23, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
19. Thayer to Swift, May 29, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

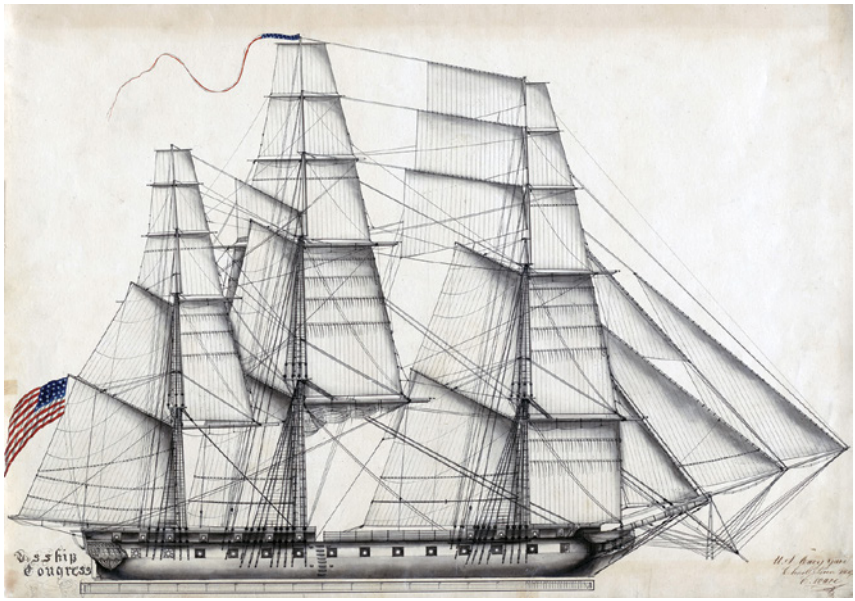
Thayer was determined to get overseas, but he needed new orders to leave without McRee. Thayer was impatient to depart as soon as possible so that, in his words, "we may not lose the advantages which the *present* state of Europe offers for military improvement." The present state that Thayer was so anxious to observe was the Napoleonic adventure known as the Hundred Days. To Thayer's relief, Colonel McRee finally turned up in Boston on June 8, 1815. They had missed Bainbridge's squadron but still had time to book passage on the *Congress*, which would sail in two days.[20]

Meanwhile, Swift was having a difficult time getting the two men letters of credit. The Napoleonic Wars had wrecked the economy of France, and even Dutch merchants did not appear receptive to extending credit to the United States. Swift tried unsuccessfully to obtain a bill of exchange in Paris, then purchased a $5,000 bill in Amsterdam for $5,375. Even with a bill of exchange to use as collateral, European merchants appeared unwilling to grant letters of credit. Swift was concerned because it would be wise for McRee and Thayer to know beforehand how and where they would draw funds to purchase the books and supplies. The problem was still not fully resolved when the pair departed for Europe.[21] Thayer had received word that Swift had a bill of exchange for them, but McRee had failed to pick it up. Moreover, Thayer had not been paid in advance for the month of June, as he had hoped. It greatly vexed Thayer to be traveling without money, and he complained, "It is not, therefore, altogether improbable that we shall be placed in the very awkward situation of being pennyless in a foreign country."[22]

Colonel McRee, who had done little to assist Thayer in the complicated travel arrangements and had delayed the trip by his unexplained absence, was set to proceed with or without funds.

20. Thayer to Swift, May 29, 1815, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, June 9, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
21. Swift to Dallas, May 17, 1815, *Thayer Papers*; Swift to Dallas, May 31, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
22. Thayer to Swift, June 9, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer reluctantly consented, hoping that a letter and a bill of credit would be awaiting them on their arrival in Paris. Gathering their baggage, they joined the passengers of the USS *Congress*, which was scheduled to sail with the tide at 9 a.m. on June 10, 1815.



The USS *Congress* was a heavy frigate built at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine. Launched August 15, 1799, it was in service until 1834. As well as seeing service in the War of 1812 and the Barbary Wars, it was the first U.S. Navy ship to reach China, arriving at Guangzhou (Canton) in May 1820. (National Archives and Records Administration [NARA].)

The trip across the Atlantic for Thayer and McRee was uneventful. There is no record of any meetings or conversations between the two officers and the diplomat Dr. Eustis, who, as secretary of war in 1812, had weakened the Military Academy. When the ship reached the English Channel, they learned that Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo on June 18 by the Duke of Wellington.[23]

23. Undated MS by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*.

The ship docked on July 12, 1815, at Vlissingen (aka Flushing) in the Netherlands. Thayer and McRee arrived in Paris on July 29 after a dusty and exhausting coach trip through Bruges and Ghent in Belgium (then part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands) and into France through Lille. So anxious was Thayer to reach his destination that he did not stop at Waterloo, which was at one time within sixty kilometers of his route.

In Paris, McRee and Thayer again faced financial difficulties. When they had arrived in Vlissingen, they had been paid in advance through July 1, 1816, but the amount was barely enough to cover their living and personal expenses. Thus, a bill of exchange, letter of credit, or government funds were still needed to purchase books, maps, and instruments as expected. It would be impractical for them to negotiate any bill drawn on the American government since they did not have any direct authority from the government to do so. Moreover, the American chargé d'affaires in Paris, Henry Jackson, and others such as David B. Warden, the former U.S. consul in Paris, warned the two engineers that the cost of a bill of exchange purchased in Paris would be much greater than one bought in the United States on a banker in France. A banker in Paris named Hottinguer recommended that the secretary of the treasury give an order for a specified sum to be transferred from the U.S. banker in Amsterdam to the two men.

While awaiting a solution to their financial problem, McRee and Thayer explored the Paris bookstalls and acquainted themselves with the military works available so they would be ready to purchase a good selection when funds arrived. Their personal expenses far exceeded what they had anticipated. Thayer, still suffering from ill health, was forced to seek medical aid, another unexpected drain on his funds. Both men hoped to receive another year's pay in the spring, at which time they could start buying books and visiting French military schools.

In his correspondance, Thayer painted a picture of France as a conquered nation after the final defeat of Napoleon. The military

schools were closed and their barracks occupied by foreign troops. All depots, supplies, and military stores were in the hands of the allies, as were the French fortresses and military workshops. Heavy requisitions of foodstuffs and "contributions" of funds were levied on all towns and departments. All public and private arms and munitions were taken to strip the French of all means of resistance.

Perhaps the greatest outrage encountered by Thayer was the wanton destruction and confiscation of works of art by the victors. He wrote Swift:

> We fortunately arrived at Paris before the work of destruction & dispersion commenced & had the satisfaction to behold those splendid monuments of art, the united labor of so many ages & nations. Of the many thousand paintings which decorated the gallery of the Louvre, not more than 400 remain, and those most likely not deemed worthy of transportation. All the rest are dispersed thro Europe to ornament individual palaces & be lost to the arts. The celebrated Corinthian horses attached to the car of victory were a weeks since removed from the Arch of Triumph[24] in order to be transported to Venice or Vienna. The bas reliefs representing french [*sic*] victories have been effaced from the numerous monuments erected by Napoleon and every day witnesses some new act of robery [*sic*] or destruction.[25]

The conduct of the allies alarmed even the partisans of King Louis XVIII. During the early days of their visit, McRee and Thayer witnessed several disturbances that showed the spirit of the

24. The Arch of Triumph referred to here is not the more well-known, and larger, Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, but rather the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, built between 1806 and 1808. The Horses of Saint Mark date to antiquity and were at the Hippodrome of Constantinople for centuries before Venetian invaders looted them in 1204. They eventually graced the façade of St. Mark's Basilica until Napoleon removed the horses to Paris in 1797. Today, the horses are indoors at St. Mark's for conservation, and replicas are displayed on the façade.—Ed.
25. Thayer to Swift, October 10, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

nation was not broken. Not a night went by without the angry cry of "Vive l'Empereur!" resounding near the Jardin des Tuileries and the royal palace. The police were able to suppress these disorders to a degree, but never to stamp them out.

Thayer reported, somewhat gleefully, that on a recent Sunday the king had ventured to show his face to what he thought was an admiring multitude below his balcony window. When the royal personage presented himself for the "gratefull [*sic*] sounds of love & loyalty," shouts of "Vive Napoleon I!" arose. Embarrassed and shaken by the outburst, the king withdrew into the security of the palace. A fight broke out between the Bonapartists and Royalists witnessing the scene, with the latter receiving the worst of the tussle until a detachment of English troops arrived to restore order.[26]

The allies fared no better in public than the king. Thayer reported one incident involving the Duke of Wellington at the theater. Finding all the boxes filled, Wellington ordered the box keeper to admit him to the king's private box. When the audience realized who was sitting in the royal box, they expressed their disapproval with cries of "A bas les Anglais!" and "Vive le Roi!" The noise did not cease until the hero of Waterloo was forced to retreat and leave the theater.[27]

The political atmosphere of the period provided Thayer and McRee few opportunities for military observation other than several parades by the Russian, Prussian, Austrian, English, and other troops in the area. Although Thayer missed a large Russian review because of ill health, Colonel McRee attended the ceremony at which more than 100,000 troops maneuvered before the tsar. Thayer estimated that there were more than 700,000 foreign troops in France.

McRee and Thayer took part in an affair involving Brevet Major General Winfield Scott that could have resulted in a serious

26. Thayer to Swift, October 10, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.
27. Thayer to Swift, October 10, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

international incident. General Scott, hero of Chippewa and Lundy's Lane, like McRee and Thayer had traveled to Europe to study foreign armies and institutions. Sailing before the news of Waterloo reached America, Scott was informed on his arrival in Liverpool that France was defeated and Napoleon was now a prisoner. He hastened to Paris, where he saw a great nation conquered and subdued. Like Thayer, he witnessed the destruction and expropriation of French art but noted that many of the paintings taken from the Louvre and other places were actually Napoleonic trophies being restored to their rightful owners. Scott, Thayer, and other Americans living in France tended to commiserate with the defeated French. Although Lafayette, not Napoleon, was their major link with the French, they were sympathetic toward any country that had England as an enemy.[28]

In September 1815, an incident occurred that roused the ire of the Americans in France. Some of the British regiments quartered in and around Paris had participated in the burning of Washington, DC, during the War of 1812. These regiments decided to celebrate the first anniversary of this act of vandalism with a grand party, to which the Duke of Wellington and other officers of the English army were invited. General Scott in his memoirs could not remember whether the duke actually came, but Wellington made no attempt to stop the celebration. The party was well attended by allied officers and members of French royalty.[29]

28. Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LL. D.* (New York: Sheldon and Company, Publishers, 1864), 157–160.
29. Scott, *Memoirs*, 162–163.



An 1814 engraving of then Brigadier General Winfield Scott. (David Edwin after Joseph Wood. M. Thomas, publisher. Library of Congress.)

Furious, Scott and the Americans plotted retaliation. Grand preparations were begun for a party on January 8, 1816, the anniversary of the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans. The

Hotel Robert, a watering hole and resort for "the bucks and the bloods" of the English army, was selected as the site. A sumptuous feast, to be served on silver by liveried waiters, was planned for seventy Americans and their guests. The more ostentatious the display, the more publicity it would receive, and hopefully, the more embarrassment it would cause the English. The Americans also let it be known they expected, or perhaps wished, that English officers in the hotel lobby would try to jostle them or stop the party in some way.[30]

While in Paris, General Scott had struck up a friendship with Count Mikhail Vorontsov, the tsar's aide-de-camp commanding the Russian troops. Scott told the count of his plans for revenge and his hope that there might be some attempt by the British to interfere. Count Vorontsov immediately offered Scott a battalion of Russian Imperial Guards to protect the American celebrants. After considering that a "coolness" or some more serious breach between the count and the Duke of Wellington might result, General Scott declined.[31]

On the evening of the celebration, the Americans, in column, entered the hotel lobby and mounted the grand staircase to the ballroom. General Scott was first in line, followed in close order by retired Army officer Colonel William Drayton, Colonel McRee, Major Thayer, and the rest. All the officers were in dress uniform, with swords, and some carried pistols concealed in their pockets. Although the crowd was large, not one insult, taunt, jostle, or interruption was directed at the Americans.[32]

The banquet was attended with much good humor and enthusiasm. During the meal a band played national songs of the United States and France. Afterward, a series of toasts was drunk in quick succession, beginning with a toast to the United States, followed by a toast to the president, to the memory of George Washington, and to Lafayette (then ill in bed). The fifth toast was to

30. Scott, *Memoirs*, 164.
31. Scott, *Memoirs*, 165; Charles W. Elliott, *Winfield Scott, The Soldier and the Man* (Macmillan Company, 1937), 201–202.
32. Scott, *Memoirs*, 166.

> Major General Jackson and his heroic army, who, this day a year ago, near New Orleans, defeated thrice their numbers of the best British troops, commanded by Sir Edward Pakenham, the brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington.[33]

In all there were fourteen toasts before they were done.

Later, the participants wrote a report of the party and toasts and sent it to a Paris paper, *Le Constitutionnel*, for publication. Unfortunately, a censor deleted most of the inflammatory toasts, including those to General Jackson and Lafayette, then in disfavor. Scott later paid a London newspaper to publish an unexpurgated version. Soon after the party, General Scott left France, and life in Paris was relatively quiet once more for the American engineers.[34]

In May 1816, the Office of Inspector General wrote Thayer, "If the opportunities to accomplish the objects which carried you to Europe, are less favourable than had been anticipated—you will return and report yourself at this Office."[35] McRee and Thayer felt that they were accomplishing enough to justify their remaining in Europe, and they had reason to believe that soon they would be able to carry out the other objectives of their mission, inspecting fortifications and visiting military schools.

Also in May, Thayer and McRee received letters from General Swift that included their pay and bills of exchange. Thayer reported back that he and Colonel McRee had been spending a great deal of time outside Paris, at Versailles and other locations. They had not yet been able to visit any military establishments but expected to shortly. Military workshops previously abandoned or closed by the allies were beginning to reopen. Another obstacle to their visits would soon be removed with the coming of Albert Gallatin as minister. The French government did not recognize the present American chargé d'affaires in France, Mr. Jackson; therefore,

33. Scott, *Memoirs*, 166–167.
34. Scott, *Memoirs*, 167.
35. Daniel Parker to Thayer, May 22, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.

McRee and Thayer could not apply through him for permission to visit military installations. With Gallatin, the American officers would stand a good chance of securing the necessary permission.[36]

Early in June 1816, a letter of credit for $8,000 was sent to the two engineer officers, along with some bad news. Certain individuals in the federal government felt that the tiny Corps of Engineers was not capable of building suitable fortifications, in spite of its record of achievement during the War of 1812. It was thought that a French engineer should be brought to the United States to revise, alter, and advise the government on plans and fortifications. The officer would be given a rank equal to that of General Swift, but in reality, he would be Swift's superior, since he would be passing judgment on Swift's work.

Major Thayer heard of these events from Christopher Van De Venter, his friend and aide-de-camp to Swift. In a letter to Thayer, Van De Venter warned that such a move would be to the disadvantage of the Military Academy and its graduates. He felt that it was foolish for the government to entrust its fortifications to foreign hands. Van De Venter speculated why this action had occurred:

> The truth is, the Government is hostile to an Army—and the Corps of Engineers having done more and deserved more both from its achievements and abilities, it becomes necessary for their purpose, to degrade it. The nation have uniformly made this corps an exception from the censure bestowed on the Army; and all parties seemed to unite in acknowledging the necessity of educating the most promising youths in the country to the higher grade of the Military profession. Whenever the Army has been assailed for ignorance and deficiency in Science, the Corps of Engineers have always been excepted. To it the

36. Thayer to Swift, May 22, 1816, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Letters and Papers Received, Irregular Series, 1789–1831, Letter A-223. Hereafter, this group of records will be cited as Letters Received, Engineer Dept.

> friends of a respectable Army have constantly pointed as a proof of the usefulness of well educated officers. The Government will no longer exempt it from the degradation and disgrace awarded the American Soldier by its ungrateful policy. One would suppose our Government would profit by experience—and recuring to the events of the Revolutionary War would determine against the employment of exotic talent.[37]

General Swift and most of the officers of the Corps of Engineers intended to oppose the government in this policy. Besides the insult, there was always the danger that French officers might conspire to gain full control of the engineers and force the American officers out. Colonel Joseph G. Totten, a high-ranking engineer officer, expressed the opinion of many Americans when he sarcastically asked why all American officers should not be replaced with French ones.[38] Totten could not understand why an American officer was judged ignorant of his duties because he had not seen the great monuments to the skill of Vauban or acquired experience in building, besieging, or defending large works.[39] The government's action was even less comprehensible in light of the usual high regard in which

37. Christopher Van De Venter to Thayer, June 4, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.
38. Connecticut native Joseph Gilbert Totten (1788–1864), USMA class of 1805, was the tenth Academy graduate. A Corps of Engineers officer, he resigned in 1806 but returned to service in 1808, working on Castle Williams and Castle Clinton in New York Harbor. He spent the War of 1812 in western and northern New York. In 1816, he became a member of the first permanent Board of Engineers and, from 1825–1838, directed the construction of Fort Adams in Newport, Rhode Island. From 1838 until his death in 1864, he was Chief Engineer. During these years, he improved both fort design and construction materials and invented an improved gun door—the Totten Shutter— that would open and close instantaneously, improving the safety of soldiers as well as protecting the guns. He served in the Mexican War as the chief engineer for Winfield Scott's army and was promoted to brevet brigadier general for this service. He continued to serve during the Civil War and was promoted to brevet major general just days before his death. Forts Totten in Washington, DC, and New York City are named for him, as are Fort Totten, ND, and Totten Key in Florida.—Ed.
39. Totten to Swift, June 2, 1816, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Letters and Reports of Col. Joseph G. Totten, Chief of Engineers, 1803–1864, 1, 13–15. Hereafter *Totten Papers*.

the Corps of Engineers was held. No work built by an American engineer was captured during the recent war; moreover, as Henry Adams pointed out, during the critical campaign of 1814, the West Point engineers doubled the capacity of the Army and introduced a new and scientific character into American life.[40]

Although astonished and insulted by the government's action, Thayer was consoled by the belief that it was beyond the power of the secretary of war to disgrace the corps, noting, "The spirit of the Corps together with its unanimity will bid defiance to his malice." Thayer urged Swift to put aside any thought of resignation because that would damage the position of the corps. He counseled Swift to keep his job and fight; if resignation became necessary, then it should be done by the corps as a united body.[41]

Thayer's and McRee's reaction to the issue was colored by the fact that they had met the French engineer selected by the American government, General Simon Bernard, and found him a most worthy officer of distinguished talents. Thayer felt that General Bernard's conduct would be extremely conciliating and that, unless ordered to do so by the secretary of war, he would avoid interfering directly with the corps. McRee agreed that the French officer would work willingly under the orders of Swift. The colonel did not see how the honor or intent of the Corps of Engineers would be compromised by the employment of foreign talent. "That the corps *may* be ruined by the *practice* is evident," McRee wrote. "But at the same time I also think that foreign engineers might be employed without producing this effect." McRee also advised that foreign engineers should be placed under the immediate orders of the chief of the engineers, General Swift.[42]

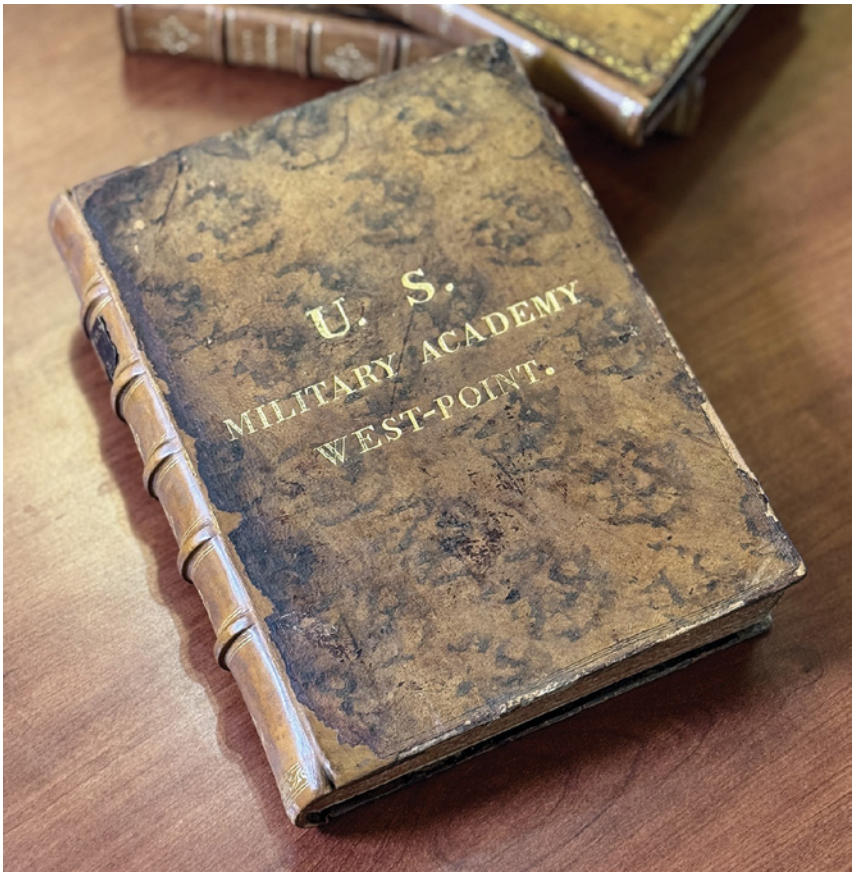
During the summer and fall of 1816, Thayer and McRee were completing the purchase of books and maps for the Military

40. Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America, 1801–1817* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), IX, 236.
41. Thayer to Swift, August 12, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.
42. McRee to Swift, January 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

Academy. Certain objects, such as working models of different types of French fortifications, and a multivolume work titled *Tables of Construction for the Artillery* had not yet been purchased due to lack of money. They intended to leave Paris once the books were mailed, visit England in the spring of 1817, and sail for the United States in May.[43]

In December, Colonel McRee sent an accounting of expenditures to General Swift. About 19,000 francs[44] had been spent: 10,500 for the purchase of between 900 and 1,000 volumes of books; 3,500 for charts and maps; and about 4,500 for binding, stamping, and other necessities. McRee and Thayer had decided to mark the name of the Academy on each book and had purchased two stamps at the small cost of 60 francs but neglected to strike a bargain with the binder for the extra cost of stamping the books. McRee remarked, "This is all according to rule. A little fair dealing in a mechanic would be treason towards the craft in Paris."[45] In spite of the delay, seven boxes of books were soon on their way to Swift. McRee and Thayer were also interested in purchasing some wooden and plaster models similar to those used by French military schools in teaching engineering constructions. After some delay, they were given an additional $3,000 to purchase the models. Colonel McRee also acquired many maps and charts, chiefly topographical, bound in atlas form. Not sure that Swift would approve of all the purchases, McRee warned that since they had purchased so many military books, some would inevitably be inferior. Nevertheless, they had tried to buy the most important books on the most important subjects.[46]

43. Thayer to Swift, August 12, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.
44. According to a note in the *Thayer Papers* dated February 18, 1817, the rate of exchange at the time was about 5.39 francs to $1.00. Thus 19,000 francs would be worth about $3,584 at the time. This could be as much as $85,000 in 2025.—Ed.
45. McRee to Swift, December 18, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.
46. McRee to Swift, September 14, 1816, *Thayer Papers*; Swift to William H. Crawford, November 6, 1816, *Thayer Papers*; Swift to George Graham, December 29, 1816, *Thayer Papers*; and McRee to Swift, January 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.



Thayer and McRee purchased between 900 and 1,000 books for the Academy while in France. This 1767 work, *Du transport, de la conservation et de la force des bois* by Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau, is one of the original volumes sent back from Paris and features the custom cover stamp purchased by the officers. The binding is a restoration. (Photo by Editor. Book in the collection of the USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

The new year brought the good news that l'École polytechnique, one of Europe's leading scientific institutions specializing in engineering, was reopening. Founded in 1794, the school had reached its highest development under Napoleon. Temporarily closed by the French king after the fall of Napoleon, the school was reorganized, some of the faculty were removed and replaced with royalists, and

the school was reopened on January 17, 1817, with the Duke de Doudeauville as president and General Baron Bouchu as director. The faculty was composed of Cauchy, author of *Cours d'analyse de l'École polytechnique*, and Ampère, both of whom were professors of analysis and mechanics; as well as Duhays in descriptive geometry, Arago in applied analysis, Petit in physics, Aimé Martin in *belles-lettres* and history, and a few others.[47]

Their acquaintance with General Bernard, a graduate, must have helped McRee and Thayer gain entry to l'École polytechnique. They visited the school, met several of the professors, and sat in on some of the classes. They were impressed by the size of the faculty and the unique method of instruction. The school used the "repetitorial" method, which has been described as a combination of professorial and tutorial teaching. The professor lectured to a large body of students, which then separated into sections of five or six students. With the help of a tutor, each section studied the lecture in detail through explanation, demonstration, practical exercise, and examination, and thus learned application as well as theory. Given Thayer's keen interest in upgrading cadet instruction, it can be surmised that he carefully observed the instruction, curriculum, and operation of l'École polytechnique and compared it with the struggling American academy on the Hudson. Thayer thought enough of the school to ask one of the professors to help him procure a set of instruction models for West Point.[48]

In the spring Colonel McRee and Major Thayer planned to separate, the colonel to visit primarily various fortifications in France and Thayer those in Germany. McRee reported that Thayer was "now breaking his teeth upon the German; and already reads it

47. Jean-Pierre Callot, *Histoire de l'Ecole polytechnique, ses légendes, ses traditions, sa gloire* (Presses Modernes, 1958), 57; A. Fourcy, *Histoire de l'École polytechnique* (Paris: l'École Polytechnique, 1828), 343–346; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 92–93.
48. Henry Barnard, *Military Schools and Courses of Instruction in the Science and Art of War, in France, Prussia, Austria, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Sardinia, England, and the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: E. Steiger, 1872), 59; Thayer to Swift, February 12, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

with tolerable facility." By now Thayer's health had improved, and according to McRee, he was entirely recovered from his old complaint.[49]

During his time in France, Thayer had become acquainted with the new American minister to the country, Albert Gallatin, and on at least one occasion the Gallatins invited Major Thayer to dine with them. Thayer asked for Gallatin's help in gaining permission to visit other French military schools and fortifications. Gallatin wrote to the Duc de Richelieu, the minister of foreign affairs under Louis XVIII, and requested that Thayer and McRee be allowed to visit French fortifications in Metz, Lille, Brest, and other cities. Richelieu granted permission to visit the training school at Metz, but regulations prohibited visits to fortifications by foreign officers. Richelieu suggested that the two American engineers examine the relief maps of the fortifications on display in the Galerie des Invalides. Although denied official permission to visit fortifications, McRee and Thayer heard from Gallatin and several French officers that they would have no difficulty in seeing what they wanted at the various cities. Apparently, Franco-American friendship was stronger than government bureaucracy. The two Americans traveled through France and the Low Countries to see the various fortifications, but Thayer never traveled to Germany as planned.[50]

After leaving Paris in February, the engineers stopped for some days at Metz to visit the training school for French engineer and artillery officers.[51] Selected students from l'École polytechnique were sent to the school at Metz for special and professional instruction. While schools like West Point and l'École polytechnique were suitable for preparatory instruction in engineering and artillery, a school of practice and application such as the one at Metz was

49. McRee to Swift, January 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
50. Mr. and Mrs. Albert Gallatin to Thayer, October 8, 1816, *Thayer Papers*; Gallatin to Duc de Richelieu, January 29, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Richelieu to Gallatin, February 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Gallatin to Thayer and McRee, February 9, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; and Thayer to Swift, February 12, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
51. The school's official name was l'*École d'application de l'artillerie et du génie*.—Ed.

necessary for a complete military education. Major Thayer hoped that the United States would soon establish advanced schools on the model of the Metz school.[52]



This map shows the places visited by Thayer during his European trip, 1815–1817, based on letters in the *Thayer Papers*. (Map by the Editor. Basemap: "Europe, 1815" in *A School Atlas of English History*, Samuel Rawson Gardiner, ed. [Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914.])

52. Sylvanus Thayer, Passport Number 180, February 8–April 24, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, May, 1816, *Letters Received*, *Engineer Dept.*, Letter A-223.

After their visit to Metz, Thayer and McRee journeyed to England by way of Brussels, Antwerp, and Calais. In March, they crossed the Channel to London and arrived on the twenty-first. There they visited the bookstalls and made additional purchases for the Military Academy. Major Thayer fell victim to the skillful hands of a London pickpocket and lost $200 of his own money and some valuable papers. Embarrassed and broke, Thayer was reduced to the rather irregular circumstance of using public money to meet his expenses on the return voyage home.[53]

In April, the two men recrossed the Channel, and on April 24, 1817, they embarked on the *Maria Theresa* bound for the port of New York.[54] Their mission had been accomplished, and they were in good spirits. For Thayer, a new assignment waited at home.

53. Thayer to Swift, March 30, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
54. Passport, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.



Légation Américaine.

Passeport.

N. 80.

Signalement:

Agé de 27 ans
Taille 5pi 10pces angl.
Cheveux châtains
Sourcils id.
Yeux idem
Nez ordinaire
Bouche moyenne
Menton rond
Visage ovale
Teint clair

Signature du Porteur.
S. Thayer

Nous Envoyé Extraordinaire & Ministre Plénipotentiaire des Etats-Unis d'Amérique près Sa Majesté très Chretienne Roi de France et de Navarre, Invitons les Autorités Civiles et Militaires du Royaume de France et autres s'il y a lieu de laisser passer et librement circuler de Paris au Pays Bas et Angleterre et revenir en France M. le Major Thayer (Sylvanus) de l'armée des Etats Unis — Citoyen des Etats-Unis, et lui donner aide et protection en cas de besoin; offrant le réciproque en pareille circonstance.

Donné à Paris sous notre signature et sous le Sceau de cette Légation ce 8e Février 1817 — et de l'Ind. 41e année de l'Indépendance des Etats-Unis.

Albert Gallatin

Thayer's passport for travel from Paris to England via the Low Countries. It lists his height as five feet ten inches in English measurements with chestnut (*châtain*) hair, eyebrows, and eyes. It is signed by Albert Gallatin, the U.S. Ambassador to France. (USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

V

Problems at West Point



When Colonel McRee and Major Thayer returned to the United States on May 14, 1817, new jobs awaited them both. McRee was assigned as project engineer for the Atlantic Coast defenses. On May 19, the War Department informed General Swift that President James Monroe wanted Major Sylvanus Thayer assigned to West Point to serve as superintendent of the Military Academy during Swift's frequent absences on official business. President Monroe did not approve of the way the Academy was being administered, and during a tour of the defenses of the eastern United States, the president intended to stop at West Point for the purpose "of inspecting its present state, and making such arrangements as may be proper for its future government."[1]

Major Thayer was willing to accept the appointment, but he was also aware that General Swift believed that Captain Alden Partridge, who had been acting as superintendent in Swift's absence, was admirably qualified for the job, an opinion Thayer did not share. Thayer had no inclination to be stationed at West Point

1. George Graham to Swift, May 19, 1817, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, IX, 290.

unless he had full authority. Rather than reporting to West Point immediately, Thayer discussed the matter with Swift and decided to remain in New York City on the chance that Swift might change the president's mind and allow Partridge to stay.[2]

To understand the problems that beset the Military Academy in 1817, it will be necessary to review its history to that point. Almost from its founding, the Military Academy had been plagued by hostility in high places and confusion over authority. For lack of cadets, instruction at the Academy ceased after mid-1810. When Thayer left West Point prior to the War of 1812, the Academy was on the verge of collapse. On June 18, 1812, the day Congress declared war on Great Britain, the Military Academy stood virtually empty.[3]

A month and a half before the War, Congress had attempted to remedy the situation. A bill signed on April 29 made further provision for the Corps of Engineers and increased the size of the Military Academy. Although this legislation was second only to the act of March 16, 1802, in securing the future of the Academy, an increase in the size of the faculty was useless without cadets, and the outbreak of war had scattered the cadets and officers around the country.[4]

Another serious blow to the Academy was the resignation of Colonel Jonathan Williams. Colonel Williams thought that the command of Castle Williams on Governors Island in New York Harbor, which he built and was named after him, should be his by virtue of his rank. Again, the old question of whether an engineer officer could command artillery and infantry officers arose. The

2. Thayer to Swift, February 17 and March 24, 1854, *Thayer Papers*. [In an 1854 letter to Swift, Thayer says he was ordered to West Point as superintendent in November 1816 and stated that he still had the order. That may be true, but no corroboration has been found in government records, and the document Thayer claimed to possess has never surfaced. What is known is that Thayer was ordered in 1816 to return to the United States by May 1817, but the Academy is not mentioned (Adj. Gen. to Thayer, November 19, 1816, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office: Letters Sent by the Office of the Adjutant General, [Main Series], 1800–1890*, V, 125).—Ed.]
3. White, *Jeffersonians*, 253.
4. Denton, "Formative Years," 79–80; Emory Upton, *The Military Policy of the United States* (Government Printing Office, 1904), 94.

matter was not resolved in his favor, and in July 1812, Williams resigned from the Army for the second, and final, time.[5]

General Joseph G. Swift, the first graduate of the Military Academy, now became chief engineer and superintendent of West Point. Swift recruited faculty for the new positions authorized by the act of April 1812. Captain Alden Partridge, who had been acting professor of mathematics, became the professor of engineering, and Andrew Ellicott became the professor of mathematics. Jared Mansfield, who had left West Point in 1803 to become surveyor general in the Northwest Territory, returned in 1814 as professor of natural and experimental philosophy.[6] These men, along with Christian Zoeller, teacher of drawing, and Florimond De Masson, French instructor, made up the academic faculty during the war years.[7]

As the senior officer, Swift was supposed to reside at West Point, but during the chaotic days of the war, his duties as chief engineer kept him busy elsewhere. During Swift's frequent absences, Partridge, as the senior engineer officer assigned to the Academy, was acting superintendent.

Captain Alden Partridge was a tall man with stern features, a hawklike nose, tightly set mouth, and jutting chin. Because he was never seen out of uniform, it was rumored that he owned no civilian clothing. He was well liked by the students, who called him "Pewt" or "Old Pewt" behind his back. To have been one of "Old Pewt's Men" was a common boast of old cadets.[8]

5. Cullum, *Campaigns of the War of 1812*, 58–59.
6. Natural and experimental philosophy would have included topics such as statics, dynamics, hydrostatics, hydrodynamics, electricity, magnetism, optics, and astronomy.—Ed.
7. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 40; Foreman, *West Point*, 37.
8. Portrait at the United States Military Academy; John H. B. Latrobe, "West Point Reminiscences," Association of Graduates, *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Reunion,* June 9, 1887 (East Saginaw, MI; Evening News Printing and Binding House, 1887), 13.



An engraving of Captain Alden Partridge said to be from his time as superintendent at the Academy, c.1814–1817. (In Merritt Elton Goddard and Henry Villiers Partridge, *A History of Norwich, Vermont* [The Dartmouth Press, 1905], 233.)

Partridge had attended Dartmouth College with Thayer but never graduated. In 1805, Partridge became a cadet at West Point, where the mathematics and science he had learned at Dartmouth were a great advantage. Within a year, he became the fifteenth graduate of the Academy and was honored with the unusual commission of first lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. Partridge spent virtually his entire military career at West Point. He was friendly with Williams and Swift and served as acting superintendent under both men. Under his energetic supervision, a regular course of

studies was set; a cadet mess was established; and regulations for parades, drills, and the daily routine were posted.[9]

Passionately fond of field exercises, Partridge often combined battalion drill with lectures on the great battles and armies of history. This innovative technique made drill less monotonous for the young cadets. There was no duty that Captain Partridge could not or would not do, whether in the classroom or on the parade ground. Some cadets saw this as an admirable trait. Cadet George Ramsay wrote:

> No one could have devoted himself more conscientiously to the discharge of his manifold duties. His habits of industry and personal supervision were truly remarkable and he seemed to have adopted the principle that administrative success depended altogether upon the personal exertion and attention, admitting of no admission of responsibility.[10]

The faculty viewed Partridge's unwillingness to delegate responsibility as evidence of his general lack of administrative skills. Although much of the credit for successfully pulling the Academy through the war years must go to Alden Partridge, despite his efforts, the Academy did not flourish as he expected. The buildings were inadequate for instruction or for housing, and it was not until 1815 that three new building—barracks, mess hall, and academy—were erected.[11] The quality of the classroom instruction suffered from the lack of all but the most basic textbooks. Many

9. Denton, "Formative Years," 98; Foreman, *West Point*, 39; Lester A. Webb, *Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy, 1806–1833* (American Southern, 1965), 16.
10. George D. Ramsay, "Recollections of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 1814–1820," United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections, 14. Cullum published part of Ramsay's "Recollections" in "Early History of the USMA, *Register*, III, 612–632, but he conveniently left out any favorable reference to Partridge. The Military Academy Archives has a typed, unedited copy of Ramsay's "Recollections" from which this quote was taken.
11. Malinowski, *West Point Landscape*.—Ed.

cadets could learn all the Academy had to teach within a year. Nevertheless, by the end of the War of 1812, there were about 160 cadets at West Point. Although the Academy had failed to play a major part in the conflict, West Point's importance was realized by many, and its position for the future was strengthened.[12]

It had long been the opinion of many, and Captain Partridge especially, that a permanent superintendent should reside at West Point. Having served as acting superintendent, Partridge wanted the job for himself. However, this objective was impossible because of the provision in the act of March 16, 1802, that named the principal engineer, or in his absence the next in rank, the superintendent of the Military Academy. Succeeding laws had authorized no other permanent superintendent than the chief engineer.

Captain Partridge decided, without General Swift's knowledge or permission, to have the statute superseded or amended. He drafted a new set of regulations concerning the Military Academy and journeyed to Washington, DC, to discuss them with James Monroe, the acting secretary of war. In part, the regulations provided for a permanent superintendent, appointed under the direction of the secretary of war, who would have exclusive control of the Military Academy and be held responsible for its progress and conduct. The proposed regulations further stipulated that the chief of the Corps of Engineers would be the inspector of the institution and would visit as often as directed by the secretary of war. Monroe approved the new set of regulations and, accordingly, appointed Alden Partridge the "new" superintendent.[13]

On his return to the Academy, Captain Partridge informed Swift of his activities in Washington. Startled by Swift's immediate negative reaction, Partridge insisted his only motive in submitting the regulations to the secretary of war had been the establishment of a permanent set of rules for the Academy, which he had no idea

12. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 40–42.
13. Denton, "Formative Years," 105–106; Monroe to Partridge, January 3, 1817, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, VIII, 9.

would be displeasing to Swift. When Swift's opposition became known to the secretary, Monroe abruptly suspended the new regulations until the general's reasons were discussed.[14]

The general had no intention of approving any set of regulations that furthered Partridge's ambitions at Swift's expense. Although not wishing to supervise the daily operations of the Academy, Swift nevertheless did not wish to relinquish his control over it. In a letter to Professor Ellicott, Swift privately criticized Partridge, condemned the new set of regulations, and vowed that the Academy would be under his control or he would have nothing to do with it.[15] Ellicott replied by urging Swift to come and live at West Point, not to take charge of academic matters, but to administer and upgrade the physical facilities, grounds, and buildings. In the letter to Swift, Ellicott gave a revealing appraisal of Partridge's capabilities:

> Captn. Partridge is almost unrivalled in the management of Cadets, and if his duty was confined to that object he would be one of the most useful men connected with the institution; but you know my dear sir he has no idea of ornamenting, and beautifying a place, and rendering it agreeable and comfortable. . . . The care of the public property, the general police of the place, and the necessary and convenient improvements ought to be under your immediate direction, and the care of the Cadets left to Captn. Partridge for which duty he is eminently qualified.[16]

In February 1815, a set of amended regulations was issued. The new rules specified:

14. Monroe to Partridge, January 22, 1815, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, VIII, 23; Denton, "Formative Years," 106; Partridge to Swift, February 6, 1815, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter C-104.
15. Swift to Ellicott, February 2, 1815, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office Relating to the Military Academy; Military Academy Records of Orders and Letters, 1812–1867*, I, 10. This source will hereafter be cited as *Military Academy Records*.
16. Ellicott to Swift, February 10, 1815, *Thayer Papers*.

> The Commandant of the United States corps of engineers is the Inspector of the Military Academy. He is responsible to the department of War, for the correct progress of the institution. . . . A permanent Superintendent of the Academy shall be appointed, who will direct the studies, field exercises, and all other academic duties; and all professors, academic officers and cadets are under his command.[17]

These were similar to the regulations Partridge had proposed to Monroe, except that Swift—not the permanent superintendent, as Partridge had proposed—retained responsibility for the Academy. Swift had no further need to oppose these rules now that the secretary of war had acknowledged the general's rightful place in the chain of command from Monroe to Partridge. On the basis of these amended regulations (which were at variance with the original rules establishing the Academy), Captain Partridge was once again appointed permanent superintendent, but this time by General Swift, not the secretary of war. Partridge was ordered to have the professors prepare a course of studies and experiments relative to the adoption of an academic course.[18]

To the outside world, the military school appeared to be functioning smoothly. In September 1815, an article in *Niles' Weekly Register* glowingly reported:

> The order, system, regularity, and discipline which pervade every branch of the institution, all praise is due to the present superintendent, Captain Alden Partridge, of the Corps of Engineers.[19]

Now that the West Point faculty was relatively secure from external threats, internal disputes began to surface. A small barracks revolution was brewing in the fall of 1815 when Partridge

17. Monroe to Swift, February 28, 1815, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, VIII, 400.
18. Swift to Partridge, March 15, 1815, *Military Academy Records*, I, 11.
19. *Niles' Weekly Register*, September 9, 1815, IX, 17.

was away. The chief issues were control and organization of the Academy, with the general unrest directed at Captain Partridge.

With Partridge's absence, the senior officer present, Captain David B. Douglass, became temporary commander of the Academy. In late October, Captain Douglass issued a "circular" calling for a meeting of all the faculty members to discuss the propriety of arranging a course of studies for the Academy, and of placing cadets in "grades" according to their academic progress. Also on the agenda was a discussion of the propriety of drawing up a code of regulations for the government of the academic staff. The faculty assembled at Professor Mansfield's quarters and elected him "president" of the group. A classification examination to place the cadets into grades according to their various proficiencies was held in early November, while Captain Partridge was still absent. Once Partridge returned, the classification of cadets was retained, but all the other proposals were rejected, and life at the Academy continued as usual. This first attempt to usurp Partridge's authority had ended in failure. Partridge, content in the belief that he had the support of General Swift, made no move to discipline Douglass and the others.[20]

The next incident occurred in December, when a Board of Visitors assembled at the Academy for an examination of cadets.[21] The board was invited to Mansfield's quarters to hear a "memorial," prepared by some faculty members, concerning the problems and deficiencies of the institution. The memorial did not single out any

20. David B. Douglass, "Circular," October 30, 1815, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter F-6; Denton, "Formative Years," 119–121.

21. Regulations approved by Secretary of War W. H. Crawford on July 2, 1816, state, "A Board of Visitors shall be constituted, to consist of five gentlemen, versed in military, and other science, of which board the Superintendent shall be President. The President and members of this Board, shall be present at the Academy during the general examination for the purpose of ascertaining the progress and improvement of the students, in the various branches of science and instruction; and also, for the purpose of examining into every thing relative to the internal organization, management, and police of the Institution." Furthermore, the Board was expected to submit a report to the Secretary of War after both the January and June examinations. See the *United States Military Academy Orders and Regulations*, United States Military Academy Library Archives and Special Collections (1816), 8–9.

individual, but it recommended that full control of the Academy should be delegated to the staff. Although Captain Partridge knew nothing of the memorial at the time, this document signaled the real beginning of the struggle between Partridge and the staff for control of the Academy. The one man who should have stepped in and settled matters, Joseph G. Swift, did nothing.[22]

The situation at the Academy continued to deteriorate. William H. Crawford, appointed secretary of war in the summer of 1815, was won over to the side of the academic staff by statements sent to him by Captain Samuel Perkins, assistant deputy quartermaster, alleging abuses of cadets by Partridge. Criticism both inside and outside the Academy had reached such a level that both President Madison and Secretary Crawford politely suggested to General Swift that Partridge might better serve the Army in some other capacity. Swift declined to act at that time, stating that he could not do so on such short notice and that replacing Partridge without cause or reason would infringe on the captain's official rights. Swift also informed the secretary that the duty of superintending West Point was not desirable to any other officer in the engineers. Both the president and the secretary agreed to give the matter more consideration. Swift retained his faith in Partridge and, without giving the captain any specifics, warned him that he had enemies in Washington.[23]

In the meantime, the secretary of war and Captain Perkins kept up a steady correspondence concerning matters at the Academy. Finally, Perkins leveled several serious but unsubstantiated complaints against Partridge, the most critical being that severe corporal punishment had been inflicted on cadets by order or with the knowledge of Partridge; that on several occasions cadets were in open opposition to Partridge; that public lands at West Point were mismanaged; and that wood had been cut from public land and sold to the public with the permission of Captain Partridge.[24]

22. Webb, *Partridge*, 63–65.
23. Swift, *Memoirs*, 141–142; Swift to Thayer, April 17, 1860, *Thayer Papers*.
24. *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry on Captain Alden Partridge, 1816*, 3.

The seriousness of these charges prompted Crawford to order a court of inquiry. Assembled at West Point from March 15 through April 12, 1816, the court investigated some twenty specific charges against Partridge.

After questioning most of the witnesses on his own behalf, Partridge submitted a statement denying all accusations and especially condemning the actions of Captain Perkins in very strong language:

> This man, while he was engaged in secretly tampering with some of the Cadets, & representing my actions to them in the darkest hue, & also depicting myself as almost a monster in human shape, at this very time was paying me compliments to my face for the excellent manner in which I conducted the Academy and professing to me an inviolable & almost an unbounded friendship.[25]

Partridge sincerely believed himself innocent of any wrongdoing and the object of underhanded persecution.

The testimony and documents in evidence exceed 300 pages, but the court found little in them to substantiate the charges against Partridge. A unanimous opinion declared him innocent of any crime and free of fraud. While the court did disapprove of several of his activities, specifically his shortening the period of encampment and not keeping regular order books, his treatment of cadets was lauded.[26]

Now that he had been cleared, Partridge became increasingly heavy-handed in his attitude toward others. As one scholar pointed out, "Partridge considered the Court's opinion to be a complete vindication of his policies, and became increasingly obstinate towards any opinion but his own."[27]

25. *Partridge Court of Inquiry 1816*, 261.
26. *Partridge Court of Inquiry*, 272–273.
27. Denton, "Formative Years," 138.

In the spring of 1816, a new set of regulations for the Academy was approved and a course of studies drawn up. The 1815 provision for a permanent superintendent was eliminated, and instead the engineer officer in charge of the military exercises at the Academy was put in immediate control of the institution. Yet the law remained in effect declaring that only the chief engineer or the next in command of the Corps of Engineers could be superintendent. The new regulations also provided for two general examinations to be held, one in July and the other in December, attended by a Board of Visitors; moved the annual vacation from the winter to the summer; and directed new cadets to report to West Point only during the month of September.[28]

Of utmost importance was the adoption of a formal course of studies for the Academy. The course of studies submitted by the staff and approved by the secretary of war was very similar to the one adopted during Partridge's absence, with Latin and Greek added at the insistence of Secretary Crawford. To complete the course of study would require four years, with the subjects divided in the following manner: first year—English, French, logarithms, algebra, and plane geometry; second year—French, geometry, algebra, trigonometry, conic sections, mensuration, and drawing; third year—natural and experimental philosophy, astronomy, engineering, and drawing; and fourth year—geography, history, ethics, review of English, Latin, and Greek, and a general review of the most important subjects in each department. The qualifications for admission, although not very strict, were also established. Each prospective cadet had to be able to read distinctly and pronounce correctly, to write a fair and legible hand, and to know basic arithmetic.[29]

28. Denton, "Formative Years," 129; Crawford to Swift, March 6, 1816, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, VIII, 463–465.
29. *American State Papers: Class V, Military Affairs*, Volume I, 838–39. Hereafter *ASPMA*.

Although the rules and regulations for the Academy were becoming more firmly fixed, the problem of the superintendent remained. Crawford, still trying to get rid of Captain Partridge and force Swift to undertake the superintendency, pointed out, "No officer, as long as the law remains as it is, can be the superintendent of the institution but the principal officer of the corps of engineers, or the next in command of that corps, in the case of his absence."[30] He told Swift, "The Academy must therefore be superintended by the principal officer of the Corps of Engineers, or by the next in rank." He also stated that the superintendent must be permanently stationed at West Point. If General Swift declined to return to West Point, then the superintendency should pass to Colonel William McRee.[31]

There are several notable points about Crawford's letter to Swift. First, it completely ignored any prior claim Partridge may have had to the superintendency. Second, Colonel McRee was not, in fact, the next in line in the Corps of Engineers. Colonel Walker K. Armistead outranked McRee, but Secretary Crawford had decided that in this case brevet rank would supersede lineal rank. Finally, there was no mention of Sylvanus Thayer for the post. Apparently, he was not considered because in lineal rank in the Corps of Engineers, he ranked below Partridge.

Members of the faculty continued to complain to the secretary about the lack of a permanent superintendent. In a private and confidential letter, Professor Mansfield charged that since 1812 the management of the Academy had been "lawless & deplorable." Yet his charges were directed not at Partridge, but at General Swift and other officers. Mansfield said that Partridge was the only person in the Corps of Engineers who would take on the job of superintending the Academy.[32]

30. *ASPMA*, I, 838.
31. Crawford to Swift, September 9, 1816, *Thayer Papers*.
32. Mansfield to Crawford, October 14, 1816, *Letters Received, Sec. War*, Letter M-344.

While Crawford agreed with Mansfield on the question of a permanent superintendent for the Military Academy, he was less enthusiastic about supporting Partridge for that position. Crawford remarked that Partridge's correspondence with the War Department exhibited a sense of "egotism and arrogance" that showed his "total ignorance of the world."[33]



Brevet Brigadier General Joseph Gardner Swift. (Painting by Thomas Sully, 1829. Courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

33. Crawford to Mansfield, October 7, 1816, *Letters Received, Sec. War.*

Another eyewitness to the events of 1815 and 1816 was Cadet Edward D. Mansfield, the professor's son. In his memoirs, Edward wrote:

> During the years of 1815 and 1816 . . . the institution was conducted on something like a patriarchal system, by Captain Alden Partridge . . . who had practical ideas and paid very little attention to the laws and regulations established for the teaching. He thought that a great military school might be conducted upon the same principles with a college, he being in the light of a president, who should advise and admonish the boys and regulate things generally, without much regard to the army regulations. In one word, the academy was conducted without system, and without much regard to anything save the opinion of Captain Partridge.[34]

After much urging, in November 1816 General Swift finally moved his family to West Point and took charge of the Academy. Swift, however, preferred to be closer to the political scene in Washington, particularly since the French engineer General Simon Bernard had arrived in the United States. Upon Swift's move to West Point, Captain Partridge resigned as professor of engineering and left West Point for a vacation.[35]

When Partridge returned to the Academy from his vacation, Swift wanted to make him instructor of military tactics. The War Department disapproved because Partridge's resignation as professor of engineering had been accepted with the understanding that his connection with the Military Academy would cease. Swift was told that he could attach any officer but Partridge to that post. In spite of this, Captain Partridge remained at West Point, and friction

34. Edward D. Mansfield, *Personal Memories; Social, Political, and Literary, with Sketches of Many Noted People, 1803–1843* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Company, 1879), 67.
35. Swift, *Memoirs*, 144; Graham to Swift, January 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

between him and the staff increased. General Swift, too concerned about his own job, made no effort to improve the situation, except an unsuccessful attempt to have General Bernard assigned as chief professor of engineering at the Military Academy, where he would be less of a threat to Swift![36]

Fearing that Secretary Crawford and some members of Congress might attempt to appoint General Bernard chief of the Corps of Engineers, Swift hastened to the capital to see the president in January 1817. Madison released Swift from personal supervision of the Military Academy so that he could devote more time to his other engineering duties, in particular, surveying and improving the defensive fortifications of the United States. Swift then notified Captain Partridge to resume his functions as superintendent.[37]

Although Captain Partridge was no doubt delighted, the staff was not enthusiastic. Complaints began again. Professor Mansfield wrote to General Swift with a number of grievances and urged Swift to return and save West Point. Another antagonist of Partridge had arrived at the Military Academy in December 1816. He was Captain John M. O'Connor, who came to West Point to work on an English translation of Guy de Vernon's *A Treatise on the Science of War and Fortification*. While serving as recorder during Partridge's court of inquiry, O'Connor had formed a strong dislike for Partridge. After O'Connor, who was a close friend of Secretary Crawford, came to the Academy, he soon joined the opposition to Partridge. O'Connor mentioned in his diary that at the request of the secretary of war he made a confidential report to the president on the state of the Military Academy and the conduct of Captain Partridge. This report may have been instrumental in strengthening the president's determination to remove Partridge from West Point.[38]

36. Graham to Swift, January 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Swift, *Memoirs*, 144–145.
37. Swift, *Memoirs*, 147.
38. Mansfield to Swift, March 27, 1817, *Thayer Papers*. An excellent account of O'Connor's anti-Partridge activity is found in Denton, "Formative Years," 153–162.

General Swift had returned to Washington to survey the "vandalic ruin" left by the British during the war and to play politics. He was instructed to make preparations to meet the new president, James Monroe, in Baltimore and accompany him on his tour of the northern United States, which would include a stop at the Military Academy in June. The same order informed Swift that the president wanted Major Thayer appointed superintendent. Thayer remained in New York City while Swift accompanied the president on his tour of inspection.[39]

Although Colonel McRee had earlier been mentioned by the secretary of war for the job as superintendent, there is no evidence to prove conclusively that McRee was seriously considered for the position. Later, President Monroe explained his reasons for appointing Thayer:

> Having had an interesting relation with you, while in the office which I lately held, & which commenc'd in the late war, in which, your conduct, inspir'd me with great confidence, in your capacity, to manage a military institution.[40]

Therefore, we can conclude that Thayer was selected because the president, having known him during the War of 1812 and having helped arrange his trip to Europe, considered him qualified to be superintendent of West Point.

During the President's visit to West Point in June, Mansfield gave Monroe three letters outlining the problems and abuses at the Academy. One of these letters was signed by all the members of the faculty; one, marked "confidential," was signed by Mansfield only;

39. Graham to Swift, May 19, 1817, *Letters Sent Military Affairs*, IX, 290; *A Narrative of a Tour of Observation, Made During the Summer of 1817, by James Monroe, President of the United States, Through the North-Eastern and North-Western Departments of the Union: With a View to the Examination of Their Several Military Defences* (Philadelphia: S. A. Mitchell and H. Ames, 1818), 64; Swift, *Memoirs*, 153; Cullum, *Campaigns of the War of 1812*, 182.
40. Monroe to Thayer, November 1, 1826, *Thayer Papers*.

and the third, a list of complaints, was unsigned, but undoubtedly the work of Mansfield. The problem was summed up thusly:

> Whether we are under a system of laws, or are subject to the mere arbitrary will of a Commander, even in the duties of our own province. If we are, as we suppose, to be governed by laws, we wish them to be observed; but unless some means be devised to enforce them, we must be subject to the will or caprice of an individual.[41]

President Monroe, now firmly convinced of the correctness of his earlier decision, told Swift, "I do not think much of your Capt. Partridge & would prefer to see Major Thayer in his place."[42]

President Monroe also decided that Partridge should be brought before a court-martial. Although Swift retained faith in Captain Partridge and gave him the three letters written by the staff to the president, the general had no alternative but to agree with his commander-in-chief. He wrote in his diary, "I accordingly proposed a substitute [for Partridge] in Major Thayer, who was the officer named to me by Mr. Monroe."[43]

Still traveling with the presidential party, Swift informed Thayer of the upcoming court-martial and asked him to "go to the Point and take charge of everything there." At the same time, General Swift notified Captain Partridge of the president's decision to order a court-martial and of Major Thayer's imminent arrival. Partridge was expected to leave the Academy until the conclusion of the investigation.[44]

Finally realizing his dangerous position, Partridge arrested all his enemies, real and imagined. Professors Mansfield and Ellicott were placed under arrest and confined to the post, as was the military

41. "An Appeal to the President of the United States by the Members of the Faculty at West Point," June 1817, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter F-13.
42. Swift to Thayer, April 17, 1860, *Thayer Papers.*
43. Swift, *Memoirs*, 157.
44. Swift, *Memoirs*, 157; Swift to Thayer. July 17, 1817, *Thayer Papers.*

storekeeper, Mr. Snowden. Partridge also intended to arrest Claudius Berard and Captain O'Connor, but he also extended the olive branch of peace to his enemies and proclaimed:

> If those Persons who, without any reason, have been assiduous in their endeavors to injure me, and the Military Academy, will now cease their attempts, and unite with me in endeavoring to promote the interests of the Institution I hereby pledge myself to bury everything that has been in oblivion.[45]

Partridge reported to Swift that he had broken up the summer camp and started the cadets' vacation, as ordered. After the arrival of Major Thayer, he intended to go to Norwich, Vermont, and await Swift's reply. From the tone of Partridge's letter, it is obvious he did not seriously believe his days as superintendent were over. He assumed that Major Thayer would serve as his assistant or as acting superintendent during the summer vacation.

Major Sylvanus Thayer arrived at West Point on July 27, 1817, and informed the secretary of war that he had "this day, assumed the command of West-Point & the superintendance of the Mil-Academy."[46] Shortly thereafter, Partridge issued an order turning over command of the Academy to Thayer and departed the post, supposedly to prepare for his court-martial. Although Thayer was not aware of it at the time, Partridge had every intention of returning to the Academy in the fall.

Actually, there was still a very good chance that the court would never meet if Partridge would leave West Point and accept another duty station as an engineer. So far, the charges against him were largely a restatement of the allegations investigated by the court of inquiry in 1816. Moreover, instead of a court-martial, General

45. Partridge to Swift, July 24, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
46. Thayer to Graham, July 27, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

Swift had proposed a court of inquiry, which could censure but not convict Captain Partridge.[47]

Partridge refused to let what he considered an insult and a gross injustice to him pass without a fight. He had been exonerated by the inquiry of 1816, and he expected to be exonerated once again. But he never realized that despite the outcome of the investigation, he would never again be superintendent of the Military Academy. The president of the United States, the secretary of war, and now the chief engineer had all decided that Alden Partridge was unsuitable for the job.

On August 28, 1817, Captain Partridge breakfasted with General Swift and requested that he be allowed to return to the Academy for "study." Just what he intended to study was never explained, but Swift told him that to do so would contravene the order of the president and injure any future chance of Partridge's restoration to duty there. The conversation then turned to other matters, and Swift thought nothing more about it at the time.[48]

Partridge, however, decided to ignore Swift's advice. He believed that having been superintendent for so long, he could not be removed. The day after his meeting with Swift, Partridge returned to West Point. Lieutenant Charles Davies and several cadets happened to be at the docks, and when they saw Captain Partridge step off the boat, they hurried to greet him. Rapidly the news spread that "Old Pewt" had returned, and many cadets went down to the edge of the Plain to give him a hearty cheer, assuming, incorrectly, that he had returned to take charge. Partridge then reported to Major Thayer, who was surprised to see him, and informed Thayer that he had returned only to prepare for the coming general investigation. Partridge requested his former quarters, but Thayer refused

47. Denton, "Formative Years," 166.
48. Swift, *Memoirs*, 167.

because they had been assigned to, but not yet occupied by, Brevet Captain David B. Douglass.[49]

The next day, August 30, 1817, Captain Partridge returned to Thayer's office and again demanded the return of his old quarters. Thayer again refused, but offered him any other quarters of his choice, even Thayer's own. Partridge then claimed that as senior captain present, he was entitled by law to be superintendent; if Thayer would not return the quarters, Partridge would have to take command of the Military Academy. Surprised by this turn of events, Thayer tried to convince Partridge that he had no such right under law. Partridge refused to listen to reason and wrote out an order assuming command of the Academy:

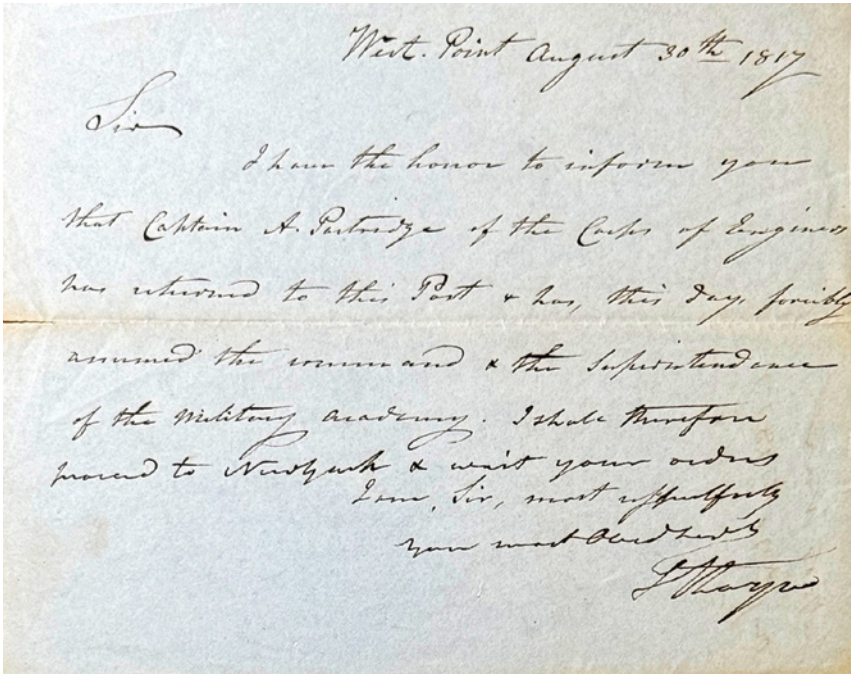
> Captain Partridge having returned to West Point in conformity with the provision of the Law establishing the Military Academy, taking upon himself for the present, the Command and Superintendence of the Institution as Senior Officer of Engineers present.[50]

Thayer decided to let the secretary of war settle the matter and wrote to him:

> Sir, I have the honor to inform you that Captain A. Partridge of the Corps of Engineers had returned to this Post & has, this day, forcibly assumed the command & the Supterintendance [*sic*] of the Military Academy. I shall therefore proceed to New York & wait your orders.[51]

49. Partridge to Swift, August 31, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Partridge to Swift, September 3, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
50. *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of the Court Martial of Captain Alden Partridge, 1817*, 55. In the cross-examination of Thayer by Partridge, the latter asked if there had not been an understanding that he took command only until the following Tuesday when General Swift was expected at West Point and the question over quarters could be settled. Thayer said that he knew the reason why Partridge took command (i.e., question over quarters), but he said that Partridge did not inform him for how long he intended to retain the command (*Partridge Court Martial*, 118).
51. Thayer to Graham, August 30, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer stretched the truth a bit because Partridge used neither physical force nor threat of violence to take command. There could be little doubt, however, that Partridge had assumed command illegally and against Thayer's will. Major Thayer's withdrawal from West Point to New York City was not unreasonable. Nothing could be gained by a confrontation with Partridge before the cadets, who by and large supported "Old Pewt." Any result would only increase Partridge's stature with the cadets and diminish Thayer's prestige.



West. Point August 30th 1817

Sir

I have the honor to inform you that Captain A. Partridge of the Corps of Engineers has returned to this Post & has, this day, forcibly assumed the command & the Superintendance of the Military Academy. I shall therefore proceed to New York & wait your orders

I am, Sir, most respectfully,
Your most Obed Servnt,
S Thayer

Thayer's letter of August 30, 1817, to Swift informing him that Partridge had returned to West Point and reclaimed control. It reads, "Sir, I have the honor to inform you that Captain A. Partridge of the Corps of Engineers had returned to this Post & has, this day, forcibly assumed the command & the Supterintendance [*sic*] of the Military Academy. I shall therefore proceed to New York & wait your orders. I am, Sir, most respectfully, Your most Obed Servnt, S Thayer." (USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

Captain Partridge's judgment, blurred by his apparent victory over Thayer, now became increasingly questionable. To obfuscate and justify his unlawful assumption of the superintendent's job, he ordered the arrest of Captain David B. Douglass and brought three court-martial charges against Major Thayer: violation of the established regulations of the War Department relative to the distribution of quarters, unjust and arbitrary conduct, and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. The specifications of all three charges centered on the dispute over quarters. For example, the first specification of the third charge, conduct unbecoming an officer, was that Major Thayer had ordered Captain Partridge's old quarters cleaned out while he was absent during his vacation and his furniture, books, clothing, and other articles removed to accommodate Captain Douglass. Thayer, according to Partridge, had promised him that his old quarters would be secured until his return to West Point or until he gave orders regarding them, unless an officer senior to Partridge would require them.

The second specification of this charge was that a closet belonging to Captain Partridge had been forcibly broken open and all the papers removed. The third specification was that furniture and other items belonging to Captain Partridge were removed from his quarters and "exposed" for several days in a room occupied by two cadets without any measures taken to preserve them.[52]

The nature of these charges clearly indicates that Captain Partridge had all along intended to return to West Point. He had been absent for six weeks not because he had been removed from command, but because it was the vacation period. It was more than a coincidence that he returned to the Academy just in time for the beginning of the semester in September.

Along with the court-martial charges against Thayer, Partridge sent a note to Swift in which he tried to justify his actions. He did

52. "Charges preferred Against Bvt. Major Sylvanus Thayer by Captain Alden Partridge," August 31, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

not want to usurp the command and the superintendency of West Point, he wrote, but merely to reside at West Point and enjoy the rights and privileges to which his rank entitled him. He attributed no improper motives to Thayer in the conduct of this case and predicted, quite correctly, that his enemies would endeavor to make a scandal of what he had done. In a statement more dramatic than logical, he noted:

> Injustice may be done me and in my public capacity I may suffer in consequence of it, but the personal Prerogatives that belong to my station as an officer are too precious ever to be wrested from me but with my life.[53]

In the same letter, Partridge called for "a general and full investigation into my conduct, as well as into the conduct of all those against whom I have preferred charges—this ought to be done immediately."

Captain Partridge need not have bothered to ask for an investigation. As soon as the War Department learned of the events at West Point, it was immediately ordered. General Swift for once also acted without delay. In a note to Major Thayer, Swift called Partridge's act "totally unauthorized" and said that his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant George Blaney, was being sent to the Military Academy to investigate the charges and, if warranted, to arrest Partridge and return command of the Academy to Thayer.[54]

By this time, the adjutant general's office had also heard of the captain's activities and ordered the arrest of Partridge and Lieutenant Charles Davies, an alleged accomplice in the takeover at the Academy, who were to be sent to Governors Island in New York Harbor to await further orders.[55]

Partridge, desperately trying to remain at the Academy, continued to level charges against Thayer, the professors, and the staff.

53. Partridge to Swift, August 31, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
54. Swift to Thayer, September 1, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Swift, *Memoirs*, 167.
55. Daniel Parker, adjutant general, to Swift, September 3, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

Still thinking that Swift would protect him, Partridge requested the general to send him an order for the occupancy of his quarters. On September 6, Partridge was given notice of his arrest by Lieutenant Blaney. Saying nothing about the charges, Partridge asked Swift's permission to remain at West Point, saying that he had been ill for several days, and even when in good health, a lengthy residence in New York City generally caused sickness. If allowed to remain, he promised not to meddle directly in the affairs of the post or the Academy. General Swift granted no more favors and insisted that Partridge come to New York as ordered. As for Lieutenant Davies, both Swift and Thayer agreed that he had acted out of youthful ignorance and should be released from arrest.[56]

Before he left West Point, Partridge staged one final scene. Without permission and against Thayer's express desires, Lieutenant Wright, the post band, and a group of cadets escorted Captain Partridge to the wharf and saw him off with all musical honors due an officer in high command. Thayer was angered but took no action.[57]

In New York City, Partridge decided to make his side of the case public. Several New York papers had been carrying brief articles on the "mutiny" at West Point. In a lengthy article, he told his version of events: that there had been no mutiny and no force involved when he assumed command at the Academy. "The right which I had to the command, and the reason why I thought it necessary to exercise that right will be made known at some future time."[58]

To ensure that the cadets knew who was in the right, General Swift had the following order read at parade:

> Without orders and contrary to the intent and meaning of General Swift's orders Captain Partridge has returned to West Point and has assumed the command of the

56. Partridge to Swift, September 5, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Patridge to Swift, September 6, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Swift to Thayer, September 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
57. Thayer to Swift, September 11, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
58. *New York Columbian*, September 12, 1817.

> Post and the superintendence of the Military Academy. This unauthorized act together with the unmilitary and disorderly manner in which it has been effected has the Brigadier General's strongest censure. In consequence of these proceedings Captain Partridge has been arrested. . . . The command of this Post and the superintendence of the Military Academy is hereby restored to Major Thayer who will be accordingly.[59]

A court-martial was ordered to be convened at West Point on October 20, 1817, for the trial of Captain Alden Partridge. At the same time, a court of inquiry would also investigate the allegations concerning the academic staff, the management of West Point, and the conduct of cadets during the recent events. General Winfield Scott was president of both courts.[60]

At the court-martial, Captain Partridge entered a plea of not guilty to all four charges against him. A summary of the charges and specifications revealed the range of complaints against Partridge, from petty to serious. The first charge was neglect of duty and unofficerlike conduct. Among its ten specifications were allegations that Captain Partridge had allowed the cannon, gun carriages, and caissons at West Point to remain in the open, uncovered and exposed to the weather; that he allowed cadets to trade and use credit at the post store and tailor shop so that in the year 1816 the debts of fifty cadets amounted to $7,500; that while he was professor of engineering, he paid insufficient attention to the instruction of cadets and altogether neglected to instruct them in engineering applications; and finally, that he did not deliver to Major Thayer the interior regulations of the Academy and other important papers.

59. "Orders issued by J. G. Swift," September 5, 1817, *Military Academy Records*, I, 6.
60. Graham to Thayer, September 25, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Daniel Parker to Partridge, September 25, 1817, in "Court-martial records, 1817–1818," *Alden Partridge Papers*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

The second charge, conduct unofficerlike and to the prejudice of good order and discipline, focused on Partridge's relationship to the cadets. It specified, for example, that he allowed certain cadets to be excused from classes during the greater part of the year 1816 and to be admitted to his philosophical class without any examination to determine their qualifications.

The third charge, disobedience of orders, was more serious. First, it specified that Partridge assumed command of the post on August 30, 1817, contrary to and in disobedience of the orders and instructions of his commanding officer, General Swift, who was acting according to directions given by the president of the United States. Second, Captain Partridge issued orders as commanding officer between August 30 and September 1, 1817, contrary to and in disobedience of orders and instructions given by his commanding officer.

The fourth and gravest charge, mutiny, beginning and exciting mutiny, contained four specifications:

> Specification 1. Captain Partridge assumed the command of West Point contrary to the orders of his commanding officer General Swift.
>
> Specification 2. He ordered or requested Lieutenant Davies to address the cadets on his behalf in an effort to gain their support for his usurpation of the command the following day.
>
> Specification 3. He took command of the post from Major Thayer by force or a show of force contrary to the orders of his commanding officer.
>
> Specification 4. He issued orders as commanding officer between August 30 and September 1 contrary to and in opposition of the orders of his commanding officer General Swift.[61]

61. Partridge, "Court-martial records," 6–11.

The court sat from October 23 through November 11, 1817, and investigated the charges against Alden Partridge. Some of the testimony was merely a rehash of that given at the earlier court of inquiry. Although there was little to substantiate the new allegations of mutiny or taking command by force, Partridge's assumption of command contrary to the orders of General Swift was established beyond a doubt. On the first two charges, neglect of duty and unofficerlike conduct, he was found not guilty by the court. On the third, disobedience of orders, Captain Partridge was found guilty on both specifications, omitting the words "of his commanding officer." On the fourth charge, mutiny and beginning and exciting mutiny, Partridge was found not guilty on the second and third specifications and guilty on the first and fourth, once again omitting the words "of his commanding officer." However, the court acquitted Partridge of the fourth charge because of the serious nature of mutiny and the fact that the specifications of which he was found guilty were similar to those in the third charge.[62]

The court sentenced Partridge to be cashiered, but in consideration of the zeal and perseverance with which he had performed his duties in the past, recommended clemency and hoped that the punishment would be remitted by the president. The court also pronounced the first two charges and most of the specifications under them "frivolous and vexatious."[63]

The members of the jury for the court-martial for Captain Partridge also served on the jury for the court of inquiry to investigate complaints against the professors and the conduct of the officers, cadets, and agents of the Military Academy. Lengthy testimony proved mainly that the staff and Partridge did not get along very well. In a few instances the conduct of the professors was found to be highly reprehensible. Professors Mansfield, Ellicott, Berard, and Captain Douglass were censured by the court for such infractions as

62. Partridge, "Court-martial records," 166–168.
63. Partridge, "Court-martial records," 168.

giving favorable certificates to cadets who had been dismissed from the Academy. Ironically, Douglass and Ellicott were censured for failing to obey an order of Captain Partridge after he had taken the command of the Academy from Thayer. None of the proven charges were found serious enough to warrant further investigation or a court-martial. The more serious allegations against the academic staff were dismissed because of insufficient evidence or vagueness.[64]

General Swift, who had heard most of the testimony, now felt sorry for Partridge and did not wish him disgraced further. Swift asked President Monroe for a remission of Partridge's sentence if the captain agreed to resign from the Army in a specified time. The president approved the proceedings of the court but disagreed with the court's opinion that the first two charges were "frivolous and vexatious," because they had been made by persons of good character and Partridge had the opportunity to prove the charges groundless. In consideration of the court's recommendation and Swift's request, Monroe remitted the punishment. Captain Partridge was released from arrest and ordered to report to General Swift for duty.[65]

Now occurred one of the strangest scenes in the entire drama. Captain Partridge applied to Swift for a leave of absence, which was granted, and then visited Washington and called upon John C. Calhoun, Monroe's new secretary of war. Having spent twelve years of his life at West Point, ten of which he had devoted to promoting its interests and welfare, Partridge asked that he be restored to his former position as superintendent of the Military Academy. Startled, Calhoun asked for and received this request in writing. Even in his final moment of defeat, Partridge believed he would be able to remain at West Point.[66]

64. *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry Against Jared Mansfield, Andrew Ellicott, Claudius Berard, and Jonathan Snowden, 21 October 1817*, 173–192.
65. Partridge, "Court-martial records," 168–169; Swift, *Memoirs*, 168.
66. Webb, *Partridge*, 145–146; Calhoun to Partridge, October 27, 1818, *Partridge Papers*.

When Calhoun denied his request, Partridge went home to Vermont to brood over his trial and past events. Soon he began to bombard the War Department with charges against Swift, Thayer, and his other enemies. He charged Thayer with violation of Army regulations relative to assignment of quarters, unjust and arbitrary conduct, and conduct unbecoming an officer; and he charged Swift with extravagant and needless expenditures at West Point and conduct unbecoming an officer. Unsuccessful in his attempts to bring Thayer and Swift to trial, Partridge resigned from the Army in April 1818. A bitter man, he continued his letter writing campaign to Calhoun, who exasperatedly told Partridge that mere allegations were not enough to cause the arrest and confinement of officers. The secretary noted that all the charges brought by Partridge were more or less connected with his earlier court-martial and had already been investigated. Partridge's connection with West Point was now forever severed.[67]

The end of the Partridge affair signaled the beginning of Sylvanus Thayer's reputation as the "Father of the Military Academy." There has been a tendency on the part of some writers and historians to glorify Thayer and defame Partridge and vice versa. Generally, one's bias depends on where one went to school, Norwich, which Partridge founded in 1819, or West Point, or the source of one's commission in the Army. In examining the matter objectively, it appears that Alden Partridge did have some grounds for complaint. The staff did, to a large extent, "intrigue" against him. This may not have been entirely due to their desire to gain control of the institution but was perhaps spurred by something in Partridge's abilities and temperament. Partridge, although a good teacher and drill master, was a poor administrator and disciplinarian, with a tendency to play favorites among the cadets. That the cadets liked him is not necessarily a point in his favor; immature students tend to favor easy teachers.

67. Webb, *Partridge*, 146–154.

Partridge tried hard to be a successful superintendent but failed. His administrative inability caused much of his time to be taken up in petty quarrels with the faculty. Furthermore, neither Swift nor the executive branch gave Partridge the support he needed; he was never as fortunate as Thayer in having a person at the cabinet level to back him up. When Partridge turned to Swift for help, it was always promised but seldom delivered.

In fact, a large portion of the blame for the entire Partridge affair must fall on General Swift. On several occasions, Swift was urged to replace Partridge and take on the superintendent's duties himself, but he was too involved in political maneuvering to do so. His greatest error in the matter was in not assigning Partridge another duty after sending Thayer to the Military Academy. Swift told Partridge not to return to West Point but neglected to tell him where to report. Giving Partridge another assignment might not have prevented the eventual confrontation, but it would have defused Partridge's alibi that he was merely returning to his normal duty station.

Thayer also played a role in precipitating the confrontation. It would have been easy for him to give Partridge his old quarters, but that would not have solved the problem in the long run. Captain Partridge never recognized that Brevet Major Thayer outranked him, nor did he acknowledge the fact that Thayer had been sent to West Point to replace him. At some point, a confrontation between the two men over command of the Military Academy seems, in retrospect, to have been inevitable.

Partridge was responsible for bringing the Academy through many hard times, and for that he deserves a great deal of praise. But a new era at the Academy was about to begin, and it could only begin without Partridge. He might have become a successful engineer in the Army had he been willing to step aside quietly, but his frantic letter writing strengthened feelings against him among powerful antagonists.

The legal question of Partridge as superintendent has generally been ignored. Although it was a violation of the laws establishing

the Military Academy for anyone but the chief engineer to act as superintendent, Partridge, and later Thayer, was recognized as superintendent by all concerned. While both men may not have been superintendents *de jure*, they were *de facto*. Partridge was appointed superintendent by Secretary Monroe and General Swift, and Thayer by Swift, President Monroe, and Secretary George Graham. Laws are not immutable, nor are they always explicitly obeyed.

Partridge went on to become what one of his supporters called "the father of the private military school movement."[68] In 1819, he established the American Literary, Scientific, and Military Academy at Norwich, Vermont. He remained the foe of Thayer and Swift and continued to spread his criticism of the Military Academy.

Thayer probably learned several lessons from the Partridge affair: the first, that Swift could not be relied on for support. To survive as superintendent, Thayer needed a stronger and more reliable ally, and he soon found one in John C. Calhoun. Thayer must also have realized that the staff could not be fully trusted and had to be kept on a tight rein. Jared Mansfield especially kept up his barrage of complaints and was unofficially known as the "Old Grumbler," and Thayer came close to court-martialing Claudius Crozet; but they and the other members of the staff lacked the power to do much damage to Thayer. He intended to oversee every phase of the cadets' activities to prevent anything that smacked of mutiny against his authority. He would tolerate no interference from the cadets in running the Academy. Finally, Thayer resolved to reorganize the Academy to make it a more effective school of military instruction.

The high reputation of the Military Academy dates from Sylvanus Thayer's superintendence. His appointment was a victory

68. Lester A. Webb, "The Origin of Military Schools in the United States Founded in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1958), 32. [For a detailed account of all the schools Partridge influenced, see John Alfred Coulter, II. *Cadets on Campus: History of Military Schools of the United States* (Texas A&M University Press, 2017).—Ed.]

for the policy of military professionalism that sought to create a well-trained and educated officer corps to lead an Army of regulars. Once in control, Thayer soon restructured the Academy and patterned it after the French military schools. West Point soon had a dual function—training engineers for use to the country, the government, and the Army; and serving as a general military school for the less scientific branches of the Army.[69]

69. Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians; The Martial Spirit in America, 1775–1865*, 2nd ed. (Free Press, 1973), 157, 259.

VI

Thayer Takes Charge, 1817–1819



Brevet Major Sylvanus Thayer came to West Point with some preconceived ideas about the purpose of military schools. From France, he had written to General Swift that the first and greatest objective of such institutions was "that of giving suitable instruction to those who are designed for the Engineers & Artillery."[1] While he hoped that more advanced institutions of practice and application similar to the school in Metz in France would be established, Thayer thought that West Point should focus on preparatory instruction for engineers and artillerists, as well as education for cadets in less scientifically demanding arms of the service. Since there was no other school of engineering in the United States, Thayer proposed to model West Point along the lines of the French schools of engineering and fortification, especially l'École polytechnique. His recent tour of European military schools convinced Thayer that France was indeed the "repository of military science,"

1. Thayer to Swift, May 22, 1816, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter A-223.

and he hoped to transplant French standards of officer professionalism to the United States.[2]

As superintendent, Thayer was subject only to the orders of the secretary of war and the president. General Swift's slow-moving, hesitant steps in the Partridge affair caused him to lose the president's confidence. Swift remained inspector of the Academy but otherwise had little control over it.

Partridge had left without turning over the interior post regulations or the War Department regulations, and Thayer had to rely on the faculty for information and guidance. In August, the War Department finally sent Thayer a copy of the 1816 regulations and other related orders. He was instructed to focus his attention on dividing the cadets into classes; determining class studies, hours for class attendance, and the assignment and necessary number of assistant professors; and selecting textbooks. He was to consult with the faculty and prepare a report for the secretary of war, which, if approved, would become a part of the Academy regulations.[3]

The War Department also hoped that under Thayer's administration the feuds and dissensions that had disrupted West Point and embarrassed the government would cease, and that he would bring the Military Academy "to a degree of perfection corresponding with the views of the government, and the expectations of the public." It was also politely suggested that Thayer try to improve relations with the faculty by consulting with and advising them.[4]

Even before he received this directive from the War Department, Superintendent Thayer had embarked on a major program of reform and reorganization in three primary areas: faculty, curriculum, and cadets.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State; The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1957), 197; Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (Columbia University Press, 1962), 42.
3. Graham to Thayer, August 6, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
4. Graham to Thayer, August 6, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

In considering the faculty, Thayer found the men on hand well qualified in their fields, but he saw that help was needed in other areas. Thayer requested two additional French teachers and four military men: a captain of infantry to act as instructor of tactics and have immediate charge of the cadets; a lieutenant of artillery to teach and oversee that subject; a quartermaster; and a subaltern to aid the superintendent.[5]

Thayer hoped that additional personnel would relieve him of details and leave him free to handle more important matters. He had determined that as superintendent it was not his job to teach classes or drill platoons. Nor did he intend to become a college president in the nineteenth-century definition of the term, i.e., supervisor, teacher, and preacher. Thayer undertook none of these roles. The commandant of cadets supervised and disciplined cadets, the staff instructed them, and the chaplain saw to their religious needs. Thayer probably resembled the modern college president more than he did such contemporaries as the Reverend William Allen at Dartmouth or the Reverend John T. Kirkland at Harvard. Thayer defined his job as primarily administrative:

> To watch over the general interests of the Institution, to inspect its operations, to see that the Professors & officers perform correctly the duties assigned to them, to regulate & harmonize the whole machine of instruction would be sufficient, in addition to other duties as Commandant . . . to call for all the vigilance & assiduity of the Superintendent.[6]

The request for additional staff was transmitted through General Swift to the War Department and then to the president for final determination. Thayer was told by the acting secretary of war,

5. Thayer to Graham, August 1, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, August 1, 1817, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter C-186.
6. Thayer to Graham, August 1, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, August 1, 1817, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter C-186.

George Graham, to nominate the officers best qualified for the jobs requested. The position of the instructor of tactics was thought to be especially critical.[7]

Thayer nominated Lieutenant George W. Gardiner to be the instructor of artillery and Lieutenant James D. Graham, adjutant. He had no one in mind for the instructor of tactics but suggested that Lieutenant Gardiner could also perform that duty until a permanent officer could be appointed. The secretary concurred but mentioned that Lieutenant Graham could not report to West Point until October. No decision was made on the instructor of tactics.[8]

The curriculum also required the superintendent's immediate attention. Although a course of studies had been approved by the secretary of war in 1816, Major Thayer very wisely requested the faculty's opinion. He asked each professor to draw up a program of instruction for his department, specifying subjects to be taught, time required for each, necessary textbooks, and method of instruction. Because the French Department needed immediate help, Thayer requested two additional French teachers to help instruct the approximately 125 to 140 cadets who were expected to take daily French instruction. Other than that, Thayer did not change the course of instruction until he received the faculty reports.[9]

7. Graham to Thayer, August 6, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
8. Thayer to Graham, August 20, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Graham to Thayer, August 25, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
9. "Circular to the Academic Staff," August 1, 1817, *Thayer* Papers; Thayer to Graham, August 28, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.

Distribution of the Daily Exercises at the Mil Academy

(Sept. 1, 1817)

SUMMER

Reveille	at the dawn of the day (the intervall between revellie & the drill will be employed in arranging & inspecting the rooms)
Drill of the Squad	20 Minutes after revellie
Breakfast	7 o'Clock A.M.
Academy	8 o'Clock A.M. to 1 o'Clock P.M.
Dinner	1 o'Clock P.M.
Academy	2 o'Clock to 4 o'Clock
Drills	¼ past 4 o'Clock to Evening Parade Company drills, Mond. Tuesd. Thursd. Frid. Battalion Do. Wednesdays & ½ past 2 o'C. Sundays Saturday afternoons devoted to the cleaning of arms & recreations
Inspections	9 o'Clock Sunday Mornings
Supper after parade	
Candles extinguished at 9 o'Clock P.M.	
Sword Exercise during the Squad exercise & Compy. drills	

WINTER

Breakfast	8 o'Clock A.M. No squad drill in the morning from 1t. Nov. to 1t. Mar
Academy	9 o'Clock A.M. to 1 o'Clock P.M.
Dinner	1 o'Clock P.M.
Academy	from 2 o'Clock to 4 o'Clock
Drills	No afternoon drills from 1t. Nov. to 1t. March (except on Wednesdays & Saturdays from 2 o'Clock P.M. to Parade. Battalion drills & Inspections on Sundays as during the summer
The Sword exercise will commence with the 2d class commencing alphabetically. The Squad shall be divided into two divisions which shall be taught alternately every other day during the Squad drills—a squad of the 1t. Class shall practice every afternoon during the compy. drills under the eye of the swordmaster.	

The cadet daily schedule as implemented by Thayer in September 1817, not long after becoming superintendent. (Source: *Thayer Papers*)

Having dealt with the faculty and curriculum, Thayer next turned to the cadets. The first problem he encountered was that most of the cadets had left the Academy for vacation under the impression that they would be recalled by a general order. Although the current regulations stated the date on which vacations would end, Captain Partridge had allowed cadets to return at various times. Thayer proposed that an order be published by the adjutant general's office recalling the cadets on the last day of August. The secretary of war concurred and instructed the adjutant general to issue an order for the cadets to return to West Point by September 1, 1817.[10] This order was published in newspapers and read, "Sir—You will rejoin the Military Academy at West Point by the first day of September next, or as soon thereafter as practicable."[11]

Superintendent Thayer next notified the faculty that classification examinations would be held when the cadets returned in the fall. The return of Captain Partridge in late August and the ensuing court-martial trial slowed but did not halt Thayer's program of reorganization and his desire to rid the Academy of unfit cadets. The first cadets asked to resign were those who were married or had physical handicaps. George Ramsay, who was a cadet under both Partridge and Thayer, reported that there was a cadet from Pennsylvania who had one arm. This had proved no bar to his admission, but he subsequently resigned. There were also at least two cadets who were married. While this was not yet strictly against the rules, Thayer, a bachelor, was of the opinion that a married cadet would find it impossible to devote full time and attention to his studies. They, too, soon resigned.[12]

Many cadets had been at the Academy for years and had no intention of graduating as long as the government paid their bills

10. Thayer to Graham, August 4, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Graham to Thayer, August 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
11. For example, *Daily National Intelligencer and Washington Express*, August 26, 1817.—Ed.
12. Ramsay, "Recollections," 20.

and gave them money, food, and clothing. The classification examination soon uncovered these hangers-on. Those who the faculty determined had not made sufficient progress in their studies were recommended for discharge. In late September, Major Thayer sent the secretary of war two rolls with the names of forty-three cadets found deficient during the general examination or as a result of past performance. Twenty-one of the men had been at the Academy for three or more years without advancing beyond the coursework of the first year. These "hardy perennials," as Thayer called them, were recommended for immediate discharge since they were "deficient in the natural abilities & all are destitute of those qualities which would encourage a belief that they can ever advance thro the four years course of studies." It would be a waste of the taxpayers' money, in Thayer's opinion, to allow these cadets to remain at West Point any longer. The remaining twenty-two cadets were not regarded as completely hopeless, so Thayer requested that they be allowed to start anew with the incoming fourth class on a trial basis.[13]

In addition, Major Thayer had inherited two troublesome foreign cadets. The Blanco brothers from Chile, Mateo and Luis, had been enrolled at West Point by Commodore David Porter.[14] Thayer described the two as

> extremely deficient in the first rudiments of education, reading, writing & orthography. They manifest no desire to learn & accordingly make no progress. They are besides extremely troublesome as they cannot be made to observe any of the police regulations. They have been

13. Thayer to Graham, September 27, 1817, *Thayer Papers*. [First-year students at USMA are fourth class cadets. Sophomores are third class cadets, juniors second class cadets, and seniors are first class cadets.—Ed.]

14. Luis Blanco and Mateo Blanco are listed in the Cullum *Register* as Lewis and Mathew. Commodore Porter brought the boys, by some accounts young teenagers but a bit older in other sources, to be educated in the United States to repay the generosity of a merchant in Valparaíso, Chile, who had opened his house as an infirmary in 1814 during the Chilean War of Independence.—Ed.

> advised, admonished & punished but entirely without effect. They are real nuisances & should be removed.

Thayer wanted them removed, and by order of the War Department, they soon were.[15]

The new superintendent was unable to expel all his problem cadets so easily. One of the cadets slated for dismissal was Edward Pinckney from South Carolina, son of General Thomas Pinckney. When Cadet Pinckney failed to return to the Academy in September, Thayer assumed the young man had decided to resign. However, in October General Pinckney wrote to General Swift explaining that his son had been detained in South Carolina as a result of the "unhealthy season & dangerous travelling in that climate til 15th of this month." Informing Thayer of the situation, Swift requested that Cadet Pinckney be allowed to join his class.[16]

Unwilling to play favorites or make exceptions to the Academy regulations, Major Thayer informed General Pinckney that in conjunction with the academic staff, he had recommended to the secretary of war that Cadet Pinckney be dismissed from the Academy because of lack of progress. Thayer also stated that Cadet Pinckney's resignation would be accepted to take effect immediately. The general brought a great deal of political pressure to bear on officials in Washington. Finally, with the urging of the new secretary of war, South Carolinian John C. Calhoun, President Monroe directed that Cadet Pinckney be reinstated at West Point. The justification given was that Pinckney had not been a member of the Academy for two years when dismissed and that the recommendation for his dismissal did not conform to any specific regulation.

15. Thayer to Graham, September 27, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Graham to Thayer, October 25, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
16. Swift to Thayer, October 14, 1817, *Thayer Papers*. [The quotation is Swift relaying the information to Thayer and may not be a direct quote from the elder Pinckney.—Ed.]

Although reinstated, Cadet Pinckney must not have found the new Academy to his liking, for he resigned on March 22, 1818.[17]

The admission of 45 new cadets brought the total number of cadets present for duty on October 1, 1817, to 187. At least 30 cadets had not returned from vacation and were considered absent without leave. After the cadets were given the classification examination, Thayer further implemented the regulations of 1816 by arranging the cadets into regular classes and sections and accepting cadets only during the regular admission period. So far, Thayer had initiated no new policies, but his actions served notice that henceforth the existing academic regulations would be strictly followed.[18]

Determined to bring order and discipline out of the general confusion that had prevailed under Partridge, Thayer instituted a system combining tight organization with negative reinforcement, such as fear of punishment or dismissal. One of the first things he did as superintendent was to organize the Corps of Cadets into a battalion of two companies officered by cadets. With the exceptions of the adjutant, the sergeant major, and the company first sergeants, leadership positions in the battalion were rotated weekly. This served the dual function of giving leadership experience to cadets and forcing them to become more conscious of their own behavior and the behavior of their fellow cadets.[19]

Other more mundane orders dealt with study hours, roll call in class, wearing of the proper cadet uniforms, and posting of the names of cadets who had conducted themselves in unmilitary or disorderly fashion. For the truly recalcitrant, the final threat was the court of inquiry, with dismissal from the Academy the ultimate punishment.[20]

17. Thayer to Thomas Pinckney, November 8, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; John C. Calhoun, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. W. Edwin Hemphill and Robert L. Meriwether, 8 vols. (University of South Carolina Press, 1959–1975), II, 57, 205.
18. Thayer to Graham, August 29, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Graham, October 2, 1817, *Thayer Papers*.
19. Robert H. Hall, "Early Discipline at the United States Military Academy," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 2, no. 8 (1882), 452–458.
20. Hall, "Early Discipline at the United States Military Academy," 458–461.

One of Thayer's major innovations in bringing about good order was requiring all professors and section leaders to file written reports every Sunday on the progress of their students.[21] These reports designated which cadets had neglected their lessons, had not made suitable progress, or had conducted themselves improperly in the classroom. The reports were consolidated and sent to the secretary of war. In this way, Thayer kept an eye on the progress and behavior of all cadets without direct involvement in their instruction.[22]

Another innovation came later. For a long while, cadets had been divided into sections. Thayer and the staff decided to organize these sections according to talent and ability. As a result of the weekly reports, cadets were moved and placed in sections corresponding to their level of achievement. This system of sectioning allowed both the more advanced cadets and the slow learners to progress at their own speed. A minimum level of learning that all cadets had to attain remained.[23]

Thayer was also concerned with cadet indebtedness. Many cadets had contracted large obligations with the post storekeeper and other merchants, and some had sold their pay books in New York City. To stop these practices, he proposed a regulation prohibiting cadets from receiving pay anywhere except from the paymaster at West Point. Instructions were soon given to the paymaster general to make no payments to cadets except at the Academy. Then to ensure that cadets did not contract large debts, he forbade them to have any money in their possession. To make a purchase on post, the cadet used a "checkbook" that allowed

21. Thomas J. Cram, an instructor in the 1820s, says the weekly reports were delivered to Thayer at his quarters on Saturday, not Sunday, between 2:00 and 3:30 in the afternoon. Thomas J. Cram, "Extracts from Recollections Jotted Down During Half a Century's Service—Four Years as a Cadet—Forty Six Years as an Officer in the United States Army," manuscript in the United States Military Academy Library Archives and Special Collections, West Point, New York, 13–14. The source that Kershner cites mentions disciplinary rolls being required each Sunday as per an order of September 20, 1817. See the next footnote.—Ed.
22. Hall, "Early Discipline at the United States Military Academy," II, no. 8 (1882), 458–61.
23. Denton, "Formative Years," 195.

him to purchase on credit, but first the purchase had to be authorized by Thayer and the checkbook signed by him. The paymaster kept a running account, and when a cadet's debts exceeded his pay, the paymaster saw to it that the creditors were paid first. Although the cadets did not favor this paternalistic system, it did keep them out of debt. The combination of rules, policies, regulations, and reforms that Thayer introduced during his years as superintendent eventually became known as the "Thayer System," a structure that made West Point a unique educational institution.[24] Thayer could not have effected these changes without a great deal of support and encouragement from high places.[25]

In December 1817, an event of major importance to Thayer's administration of the Military Academy took place when John C. Calhoun was appointed secretary of war. For the next seven years, Calhoun supported Thayer and encouraged the growth and development of the Military Academy. As early as 1816, Calhoun had spoken out in favor of additional military schools to give the sons of all classes of Americans the opportunity for training. Both he and Thayer recognized that if the United States was to maintain a small standing army, then the safety of the nation depended not on a large and ill-disciplined body of militia, but rather on competent, well-trained officers and men. It was not surprising, therefore, that as secretary of war, Calhoun encouraged and aided Thayer in every way possible.[26]

24. The phrase "Thayer Method," used to refer to daily student recitation, will be discussed in the Editor's Epilogue. It was not a phrase commonly used when Kershner completed this work.—Ed.

25. Thayer to Graham, August 19, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; Graham to Thayer, August 25, 1817, *Thayer Papers*; "Extract of Military Orders, 16 October 1817," in Thayer to Armistead, April 21, 1820, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office Relating to the Military Academy: Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy, 1819–1866*; Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 33.

26. John C. Calhoun, *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Richard K. Crallé, 6 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1851–1856), V, 54–57; Margaret L. Coit, *John C. Calhoun, American Portrait* (Houghton, Mifflin Company; The Riverside Press, 1950), 130; Charles M. Wiltse. *John C. Calhoun,* Vol. I: *Nationalist, 1782–1828* (Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 105.

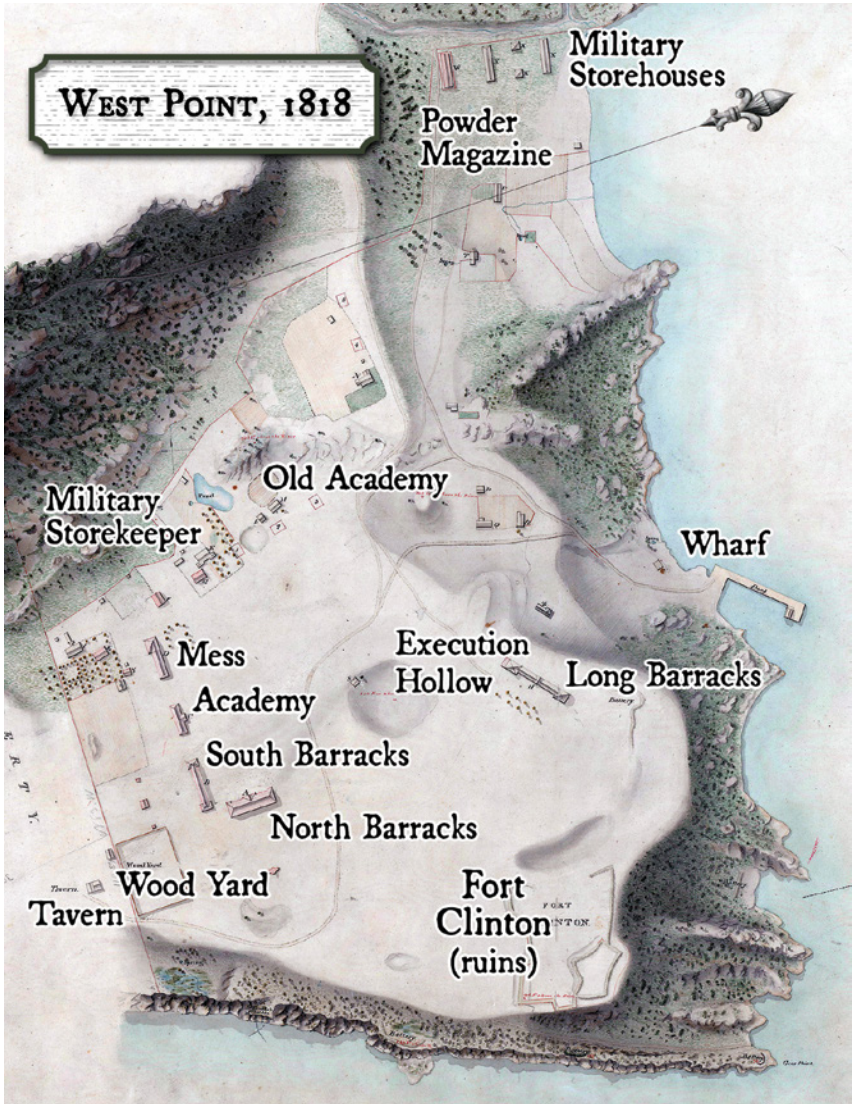
Shortly after Calhoun's appointment, Thayer submitted an estimate of funds needed for the following year amounting to $63,596.10, and the new year of 1818 began with Major Thayer requesting more professors and instructors. He wanted an increase of four assistant professors of mathematics for the estimated 120 cadets in the third and fourth classes who received daily mathematics instruction. He proposed to divide the math classes into sections, with an assistant professor to teach each. Thayer wanted to abolish the system of employing cadets as assistant professors. Not only was it difficult to find capable cadets, but they served reluctantly since they received no compensation. As teachers, they were unable to inspire respect among their peers, and valuable teaching experience was too often lost when the cadet-instructor received his commission and left the Academy.[27]

Thayer also requested additional faculty to teach French (two instructors),[28] natural and experimental philosophy, chemistry and mineralogy, languages and oratory, and military drawing, as well as a quartermaster and a chaplain who could also teach ethics, geography, and history. Realistically, Major Thayer knew he would not get all these positions, but he wanted to make his needs known to Calhoun. If West Point was to become a first-class military academy, the faculty would have to be enlarged.[29]

In February 1818, acting in accordance with the instructions of the previous secretary of war, Major Thayer presented Calhoun with a list of twenty-four propositions, drawn up by him and the faculty, for changes at the Academy. Calhoun turned the propositions over to a review board consisting of General Simon Bernard and Colonel William McRee. In December, Bernard and McRee

27. "Estimate of Appropriations for 1818," December 1817, *Thayer Papers; ASPMA*, II, 79.
28. It is unclear if the two French instructors requested at this time were in addition to those requested in September, or whether the previous request had not been granted.—Ed.
29. "Estimate of Appropriations for 1818," December 1817, *Thayer Papers; ASPMA*, II, 79–80.

submitted their recommendations to Calhoun, who later submitted them to Congress.



A map showing the major buildings at West Point in Thayer's first full year as superintendent. The two barracks buildings, the Academy, and the mess hall were built in 1815–1817. The Long Barracks at this time housed soldiers. The tavern was not on government property. (Map by Editor. Basemap: National Archives and Records Administration.)

The twenty-four propositions provided insight into Thayer's amazing administrative ability. In a short time, he had intuitively grasped the management needs of the Academy and set them down in a relatively small number of propositions that comprehensively covered organization, job descriptions, definitions of authority and responsibility, personnel matters, compensation, academic procedures, and flexibility for future growth.

The propositions began by defining the composition of the Military Academy as consisting of the academic staff, officers, and cadets on duty at West Point. The Academy was to be controlled by a permanent superintendent specifically appointed for that duty by the president. Major Thayer pointed out that the acts of 1802 and 1812 had created the Military Academy as a part of the Corps of Engineers, and that the senior officer of the corps present at West Point was *ipso facto* superintendent. The beneficial results of this economy measure had been largely negated by the increasing duties of the engineer officers, thus resulting in the past of the post being held by a very low subaltern (Alden Partridge). The purpose of the first proposition was, according to Thayer, the removal of the Academy from the control of the Corps of Engineers and the appointment of a permanent superintendent. The chief engineer, however, would remain the inspector of the institution.

Since West Point furnished officers for the entire Army, Bernard and McRee agreed that there was no reason for the Corps of Engineers to have exclusive control over it. They agreed with the proposition and recommended that the only immediate authority between the president and the superintendent should be the secretary of war.

No one pointed out that Thayer had either misread or misinterpreted the acts of 1802 and 1812 dealing with the superintendency. By the terms of the act of 1802, only the "principal engineer," or in his absence the next in rank, could be the superintendent. But from its passage, the law was always interpreted to mean that the highest-ranking engineer officer stationed at West Point could hold

the job. It was based on this interpretation that both Partridge and Thayer were superintendents.

Only part of the first proposition was acted on. Starting with Sylvanus Thayer, the superintendent was appointed on a permanent basis by the president acting through the secretary of war. But the link between West Point and the Corps of Engineers remained unbroken until after the Civil War.

The second proposition asked for an increase in the academic staff to include one professor and two assistant professors of natural and experimental philosophy; one professor and two assistant professors of mathematics; one professor and one assistant professor of engineering; one professor of geography, history, and civil law, who would also be a chaplain; one professor of languages, oratory, and *belles-lettres*; one principal and two assistant French teachers; one teacher of elementary drawing; one teacher of military drawing; and one riding and sword master.

If Thayer had received this increase in staff, he would have had one of the largest faculties in the United States at that time. Based on his experiences at Dartmouth and l'École polytechnique, Thayer intended to give the cadets as broad an educational background as possible. But Bernard and McRee expressed the opinion that law, geography, history, languages, and *belles-lettres* were unnecessary accessories that should not be included in the curriculum until the improved position of the school showed they were necessary.

Proposition three called for future vacancies in the academic staff to be appointed primarily from the entire Army. By the present law, Thayer pointed out, assistant professors could be taken only from the Corps of Engineers or the ranks of the cadets. For the sake of the institution, the field of selection should be as wide as possible. Bernard and McRee agreed that future selections should come from all the branches of the Army, and qualified civilians should also be considered for certain posts. The necessity for using outstanding cadets as assistants nevertheless remained throughout Thayer's tenure.

The next three propositions requested staff positions that, if filled, would free Thayer's time for higher-level administrative duties. Instructors of tactics and artillery, who would also serve as subordinate officers under Thayer in command of the cadets, were requested in proposition four. The fifth and sixth propositions requested a surgeon, paymaster and treasurer, quartermaster, and adjutant to be placed on the academic staff. An increase in pay and emoluments and standardized pay scales were also requested.

The seventh proposition called for the number of cadets at the Academy to continue at 250 and their pay to remain at sixteen dollars per month. Thayer, Bernard, and McRee wanted to limit the number of cadets at the Academy so that the number of graduates would not exceed the vacancies within the Army.

Proposition eight said that the cadets were to be subject to the established regulations of the Academy, organized into companies for police and military instruction, and were to be taught all the field and garrison duties of a private, noncommissioned officer, and officer. This proposition was very similar to the act of 1812, but with the new provision that the cadets would be organized into companies at the discretion of the superintendent instead of according to the directions of the commandant of engineers. This was another way of clarifying lines of authority.

The ninth proposition called for the establishment of an Academic Board to fix and improve the system of studies and instruction, conduct all examinations, and specify the duties of the instructors. It would be made up of the professors, the principal French teacher, the instructors of tactics and artillery, and the superintendent. Thayer wanted the Academic Board to be similar in function to the *conseil de perfectionnement* of l'École polytechnique, but Bernard and McRee felt that its powers would be too broad and sweeping, especially in the area of determining curriculum. Therefore, they suggested that any changes made by the Academic Board be subject to the approval of the federal government. Their suggestion was

followed, and the power of the Academic Board was not as broad as Thayer envisioned.

The tenth proposition affirmed that the academic course of study was to cover a four-year period. Although this reflected no change from the current regulation, Thayer wanted to make sure it was clearly stated in the new regulations.

Proposition eleven established the age requirement of cadets appointed to the Academy as sixteen to twenty years. Further, no cadet would be admitted until he had been examined in reading, writing, spelling, English grammar, and arithmetic. The entrance examination had already been in effect and remained so, but raising the minimum age from fourteen to sixteen was not instituted until after Thayer left West Point.

The twelfth proposition specified that after completing the course of instruction and passing a final examination, cadets would receive a degree from the Academic Board designating the corps in which they were judged qualified for commissioning. Bernard and McRee disagreed with this article and instead proposed that according to his rank on the merit roll, each cadet be given the choice of entering any branch or corps in which there was a vacancy. The compromise reached on this point allowed the Academic Board to specify all the branches for which it thought the cadet qualified, and then let him choose. The cadets at the top of the class were able to pick any branch, but they usually became engineers. The next group could pick any branch except engineers, the usual choice being artillery. Those graduates with more common talents went into the infantry, with the best horsemen going to cavalry or mounted infantry. This system ensured that the cream of the graduating class would join the "scientific" branches of engineering and artillery.

That only the top two cadets should be eligible for promotion in the Corps of Engineers was the thirteenth proposition. According to Thayer, this would guard against the admission of unqualified new graduates and would serve to maintain the high standards and scientific character of the corps. Although Bernard and McRee felt

this was too restrictive, Thayer carried his point. Only the top of the graduating class (the number varied from one to five) became eligible for the Corps of Engineers.

Proposition fourteen stated that if no vacancy existed, an Academy graduate should, at the discretion of the Academic Board, be attached to the selected corps as a brevet and a supernumerary officer until a vacancy occurred. Since Thayer felt that the engineers would have more officers attached by brevet than any other corps, he called for the creation of an additional number of vacancies in that corps. General Bernard and Colonel McRee, fearing that too many young officers would be attached as supernumeraries, recommended that this article be suppressed. Their recommendation was not acted upon, nor were their fears realized. While it was not unusual to find new officers carried as brevet second lieutenants, that ambiguous condition seldom lasted very long.

The fifteenth proposition would have allowed cadets to be attached to regiments but not promoted until their class graduated, upon the recommendation of the Academic Board. In the past, Thayer explained, there had been cadets who, although unable to complete the academic course, were judged potentially good and useful officers. Once again, Bernard and McRee disagreed, mainly because this proposal vested too much power in the hands of the Academic Board. This point was probably moot, for very few, if any, cadets were attached to regiments before graduating.

Proposition sixteen stated that no cadet would be promoted from the Academy until he completed the course of study.

Proposition seventeen specified that cadets who resigned from the Academy would be ineligible for any office in the Army until their class graduated. The idea behind this point was to keep cadets from resigning to accept an open post in the Army. Bernard and McRee suggested two further modifications to discourage cadet resignations for this purpose. First, only Academy graduates would be appointed in the lower grades of the military establishment in peacetime. This would maintain the professional integrity of the

officer corps and limit political appointments. Second, in the event that vacancies should exceed graduates, the cadets who had regularly graduated would take precedence over all other appointments.

Propositions sixteen and seventeen were never very significant. In peacetime, few men sought political appointments in the lower ranks of the officer corps. During war, political appointments to all ranks continued to inundate the officer corps and impair efficiency. By limiting junior appointments to Academy graduates or ex-cadets, the Army left itself open to attacks by politicians who feared the officer corps might become a dangerous elite.

According to the eighteenth proposition, cadets dismissed from the Academy would be ineligible for any military office for five years, and those dismissed for a dishonorable act would become ineligible forever. Bernard and McRee believed that the article gave too much power to a superintendent to inflict a lifelong punishment on a youthful offender, and that crimes that merited such strict punishment should be defined.

The nineteenth and twentieth propositions called for a number of waiters and musicians to be employed by the Academy.

By the terms of the twenty-first proposition, the chief engineer was to be the inspector of the Academy and visit as often as the president directed. While Bernard and McRee agreed with the need for an inspector, they wanted no permanent immediate authority to exist between the president and the superintendent, except the secretary of war. Moreover, they saw no reason to confine the office of inspector to any one man. In practice, however, the chief engineer did become the inspector of the Academy.

The twenty-second proposition requested that four scientific men be selected by the president to constitute a Board of Visitors, with the inspector as president of the board. The duty of the board would be to attend examinations and report on the state and progress of the Academy. This was a slight variation of the regulations adopted by Secretary of War William Crawford in 1816, in that Thayer wanted the inspector of the Academy, that is, the chief

engineer, and not the superintendent, to be president of the board. Actually, Thayer's proposal kept the position in the hands of the person originally intended to have it. In arguing against this proposition, Bernard and McRee remarked that if their suggestions for more government control of the Academy were followed, this proposal would be unnecessary. In the end, their views were overruled, and the board was initiated.

The twenty-third proposition requested that engineer officers residing at the Academy be permitted to attend lectures as long as they did not interfere with the officers on duty. Bernard and McRee suggested that this article be modified to include any officer residing at the Academy.

In the final proposition, Major Thayer noted that many of the laws regulating the Military Academy were outdated and should be repealed, and new regulations should be adopted that embraced the proposals suggested. Bernard and McRee agreed that new provisions should be adopted, but with their suggested amendments included.[30]

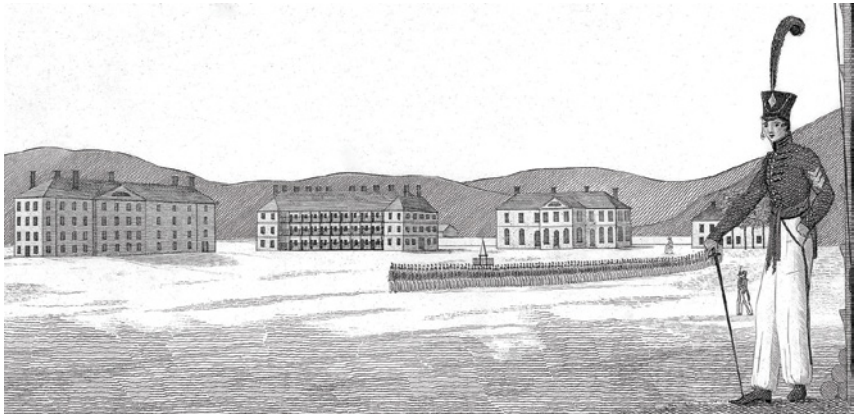
As it turned out, in many cases the suggestions of Bernard and McRee were overruled and Thayer's proposals put into operation. In addition to a permanent superintendent, new staff positions were soon created and filled, most importantly the instructors of tactics and artillery; the Academic Board was set up; and the Board of Visitors was reinstituted for a particular function. Not all Thayer's propositions were accepted, and some that required congressional approval never became law; but it was soon obvious to all concerned that Secretary Calhoun and the federal government intended to give Superintendent Thayer a great deal of freedom and support in running the Military Academy at West Point.[31]

The first semiannual examinations were held between December 15, 1817, and January 3, 1818. Although highly satisfied with the

30. "Estimate of Appropriations for 1818," December 1817, *Thayer Papers; ASPMA*, II, 80–86; Denton, "Formative Years," 182–187; "Propositions for the Reorganization of the Military Academy," February 1818, *Thayer Papers*.
31. Denton, "Formative Years," 187.

overall results, Thayer noted that many of the cadets were found deficient in French due to a shortage of instructors. He was particularly pleased with the weekly class reports, which gave him almost daily knowledge of the class standings of every cadet. After the examination, Thayer forwarded the class rolls of cadets to Calhoun with the request that the merit rolls, which ranked cadets according to class standing, be published in the *Army Register* beginning with the results of the June examination.[32] Gratified by Thayer's efforts, Calhoun replied:

> It affords me pleasure to witness the progress of the institution under your superintendence, and to express to you my approbation of the measures you have adopted to promote its improvement, and to secure to it the reputation which it ought to possess with the nation.[33]



The Plain at West Point, 1820, showing the main institutional buildings built between 1815 and 1817. From left to right, North Barracks, South Barracks, the Academy, and the Mess Hall. The Wood Monument in the middle of the parade ground would have been placed there during Thayer's first full year as superintendent (1818). It is now in the West Point Cemetery. (*Analectic Magazine*, August 1820.)

32. Thayer to Calhoun, January 31, 1818, *Thayer Papers*.
33. Hemphill, *Calhoun Papers*, II, 130.

The secretary of war also promised to publish the names of the top five cadets and the areas in which they excelled in the *Army Register* to encourage future "emulous exertions among the cadets."

The superintendent soon tackled other problems, including the establishment of new dates for encampments, vacations, general examinations, and admission of new cadets. Although the act of 1812 had decreed an annual encampment of three months in the summer, the law had been frequently ignored in the past because such an encampment was too long and injurious to the course of studies. It was Thayer's opinion that the two months between the end of one academic year and the beginning of another, July and August, would be more than sufficient for summer encampment. Thayer also wanted to do away with the annual vacation for cadets. Since the Academy supplied food, clothing, and money to the cadets, he saw no reason why they should go home every year. The three weeks allotted for the general vacation was insufficient to allow those who lived in the southern states to visit home and return. Major Thayer had also been informed that several cadets did not bother to go home during the vacation period, but instead "flocked, as usual, to New York & other cities there to indulge in dissipation & to contract disease, vices & debts." Thayer proposed that in lieu of the annual vacation, furloughs be granted to certain cadets during the summer encampment.[34]

Thayer also proposed to organize the academic year so that it extended from September 1 through June 30, with the annual examination to be held in June. At the same time, he requested that new cadets be required to join the Academy in June instead of during the fall. This schedule would permit the examination of new cadets and the rejection of those found deficient before the start of the academic year in September. New cadets would also have the

34. Thayer to Calhoun, April 5, 1819, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter C-204.

benefit of two months of military training in the field before the start of fall classes.[35]

Later in 1818, Major Thayer was pleased to learn that his requests had been approved by Calhoun to become effective the next year. According to the terms of the new regulations, first, there would be two general examinations a year, one beginning on January 1 and the other on June 1. Second, all newly appointed cadets were ordered to join the Military Academy for a preliminary examination by June 25. No cadet would be examined for admission after the first of September, unless prevented from doing so by illness or unavoidable delay, in which case he would be admitted conditionally and examined with the fourth class in January. Third, until the laws were revised, in lieu of the annual vacation, an encampment would be held from July 1 to August 31. Fourth, the superintendent of the Academy was authorized to grant furloughs to cadets at the request of their parents during the period of the encampment, provided that not more than 25 percent of the cadets were absent at the same time, and provided also that every cadet had to have attended at least two encampments before he could receive his diploma. The fifth and final article noted that the foregoing regulations superseded certain articles of existing regulations.[36]

Personal finances soon became a pressing problem for Thayer. Even with very strict economy, he had difficulty covering his expenditures. Informed by the paymaster of the Corps of Engineers that he was no longer eligible for double rations or brevet pay as a major, Thayer requested General Swift to compensate for this loss. If compensated as a captain, Thayer would receive $480 per year, three rations daily, and an allowance for one servant, whereas as a major of engineers, he would be entitled to $600 yearly, four

35. Thayer to Calhoun, April 5, 1819, *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter C-204.
36. "Regulations Approved by the Secretary of War," July 23, 1818, in Thayer to Armistead, November 16, 1819, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*

rations per day, and an allowance for two servants—not a princely sum and still rather modest for the head of the United States Military Academy. Since there was no law establishing the pay of the superintendent, he was paid according to his rank. Without the meager benefits he was receiving as a brevet major, Thayer felt he would be reduced to a standard of living degrading to the office of the superintendent. Fortunately, good sense prevailed, and Thayer's brevet pay was not stopped. His pecuniary embarrassment was further alleviated later when Secretary Calhoun authorized triple rations for Thayer.[37]

Although Thayer had brought about many changes at the Academy during his first school year as superintendent, Congress had been slow in enacting many of his early proposals, and by May the question of his brevet pay had not been settled. The Academy still needed a math teacher and a quartermaster. At one point, Thayer wrote to General Swift telling him that the band uniforms were two years old and unfit for further wear. Many of his requests went unanswered, and his patience came to an end in an angry letter to General Swift:

> Believing that I shall not have it in my power, hereafter, to be usefull [*sic*] in any considerable degree, to the Mil Academy I request the War Department will be pleased to have me relieved in the command of this Post & in the Superintendance of the Institution.[38]

Swift ignored Thayer's letter, the superintendent soon calmed down, and a normal flow of communication resumed. Swift must have realized that Thayer was not serious about resigning, for he made no effort to follow through on Thayer's request. If Thayer

37. U.S. Pay Department (War Department), *A Compendium of Pay of the Army from 1785 to 1888*, comp. Thomas M. Exley (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 28–29; Thayer to Swift, April 14, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Calhoun to Thayer, October 16, 1820, *Thayer Papers*; *ASPMA*, III, 97.
38. Thayer to Swift, May 12, 1818, *Thayer Papers*.

had really wanted to resign, he would have written directly to the president or secretary of war.[39]

The first annual examinations in June 1818 gave Thayer a chance to evaluate his new organization. All four classes were examined by the Academic Board over a period of three weeks, and the results were sent to the War Department. Several cadets were turned back, others were discharged, and many advanced to the next highest class. A few exceptional cadets skipped a class. Andrew Jackson Donelson, the nephew of General Andrew Jackson, was advanced from the fourth to the second class.[40]

Thayer was especially pleased with the effectiveness of the merit system in ranking cadets. In a letter to Calhoun the following year, Thayer explained that the relative merit of cadets in each department of instruction was determined by frequent inspections, by a daily record of progress on each cadet as reported weekly by the instructors, and by rigid semiannual examinations. Rolls of merit were then compiled and cadets ranked. Each branch of study was given a multiplier or weighted number corresponding to its importance as follows:

Mathematics	0.2
Natural and experimental philosophy	0.2
Engineering	0.2
Military exercise and conduct	0.2
French	0.1
Drawing	0.1
Total Course of Studies[41]	**1.0**

39. Denton, "Formative Years," 189.
40. Denton, "Formative Years," 189–190.
41. Thayer to Calhoun, July 23, 1819, *Thayer Papers*.

In the summer of 1818, the Academic Board faced a special problem when Secretary Calhoun gave lieutenants' commissions to Edward Polk and Wilson Armistead, who had been discharged from the Academy under "circumstances more or less disreputable." In a strongly worded protest, the Academic Board stated that the just claims of cadets, the reputation of the Academy, and the interests of the Army would suffer as a result. It was precisely this sort of situation that Thayer had hoped to prevent by the adoption of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth propositions, which would have established the policy of appointing only Academy graduates to the lower officer ranks. After some delay, the government decided not to revoke the two protested commissions, but the president promised to consider the evaluation of the Academic Board in future requests for commissions by ex-cadets.[42]

Early in Thayer's superintendency, new faculty members joined the Academy. Thomas Picton arrived in the fall of 1818 to become chaplain and professor of geography, history, and ethics. However, Thayer soon lost his adjutant when Lieutenant Graham left West Point to join Major Stephen H. Long's exploration between the Mississippi and the Rockies. Still, Thayer was most pleased in being assigned an instructor of tactics and commandant of the Corps of Cadets, Captain John Bliss.[43]

The Partridge affair motivated Major Thayer to make a concentrated effort to enforce discipline and thus prevent any further cadet disturbances. There were several pro-Partridge cadets who would have been only too pleased to welcome the return of "Old Pewt," and Partridge himself was keeping the controversy alive by attacking Thayer, Swift, and the Academy in newspapers, especially in his home state of Vermont. Thayer intended the instructor of tactics, who would also serve as commandant of cadets, to be

42. Academic Board to Calhoun, June 28, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Denton, "Formative Years," 192–193.
43. Thomas Picton to Thayer, August 24, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, September 21, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, November 15, 1818, *Thayer Papers*.

instrumental in maintaining discipline and control. Major Thayer thought he had found the right man for this key assignment in Captain Bliss, but he soon discovered his confidence was misplaced.

Not an Academy graduate but a veteran of the War of 1812, Bliss was a stern disciplinarian who demanded instant obedience to his orders. Unfortunately, he was also a zealot with a fierce, uncontrollable temper. The cadets disliked Bliss not only because of his strict discipline, which was in contrast to that of former times, but primarily because of the degrading manner in which he treated them. He inflicted punishments for minor delinquencies and had on occasion pushed, shoved, and verbally abused cadets. As an infantry officer, Captain Bliss was accustomed to dealing with mature veterans and private soldiers, not fuzzy-cheeked cadets. Given to profanity and violent outbursts of temper, he was a man more suited to the battlefield than the parade ground, and, in truth, a poor choice to influence and guide young cadets.

The mutual hostility that had developed between Bliss and the cadets reached its boiling point on Sunday, November 22, 1818, when Captain Bliss ordered Cadet Edward L. Nicholson from the ranks for disorderly conduct. When the cadet refused to obey, Bliss lost his temper, seized the young man by the shoulder, shook him violently, and ordered him to his quarters. When Cadet Nicholson asked if it were proper for Bliss to treat him in such a manner, the captain harshly replied, "Yes, God damn you."[44]

Instead of going to his quarters as ordered, Cadet Nicholson walked across the parade ground to the superintendent's office, where he found Major Thayer at the doorway in conversation with Professor Mansfield. Visibly displeased by the interruption and the cadet's story of events, Thayer told Nicholson to go to quarters as ordered until Thayer could read Captain Bliss's report on the matter. On this occasion, as in the past, Major Thayer had a tendency to

44. Nathaniel H. Loring, *Memorial of Nathaniel Hall Loring, and Others, Late Cadets at the Military Academy, West Point* (Washington, DC: Gales & Seaton, 1819), 261.

believe the reports of Captain Bliss rather than the stories of cadets. Thus, instead of investigating the conduct of Captain Bliss, Major Thayer intended to investigate the conduct of Cadet Nicholson.[45]

Cadet reaction to the incident varied. Among those who disapproved of the captain's action were some old offenders from the days of the Partridge disturbance who saw an opportunity to stir up more trouble. That night in the cadet barracks, a petition was circulated and a committee organized to protest the actions of Captain Bliss. About one hundred eighty cadets signed the "round robin" petition, and five were selected to represent the entire cadet corps in the matter: Thomas Ragland, Nathaniel H. Loring, Charles R. Holmes, Charles R. Vining, and Wilson M. C. Fairfax. On November 24, the five men went to see the superintendent and attempted to present him with a list of grievances against Captain Bliss. Petitions by cadets had been a common practice under Partridge, but this was the first time the situation had arisen under Major Thayer. When the five requested an interview, Thayer agreed to talk with Cadet Ragland alone to learn the nature of their business. Ragland explained that he and the others were members of a cadet committee selected to present a list of charges against Captain Bliss to Major Thayer. Looking briefly at the paper, Thayer handed it back to Ragland and commented that any cadet who had a grievance could state it as an individual, but interference from other cadets was inexpedient and improper. Thayer further stated that cadets had no right as a body to form committees or draw up petitions. Cadet Ragland was dismissed with instructions to inform the other four that in the future Thayer would not receive the committee or any communication from it.[46]

That night four of the cadet representatives (without Cadet Vining) returned to Major Thayer's office. Cadet Loring handed

45. *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry on Captain John Bliss, 9 December 1818,* 33–34.
46. *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of the Court Martial of Cadet Thomas Ragland, 1819,* 22–23.

Thayer his resignation, which Thayer rejected because the cadet lacked his father's permission. The others also attempted to resign and were turned down for the same reason; thereupon, they returned to their barracks.[47]

Two days later, on Thursday, November 26, Cadets Ragland and Fairfax came once more to Thayer's office and requested permission to give him a statement regarding Captain Bliss. Although the two cadets assured the superintendent that it was not a communication from the committee, but a private statement by them as individuals, Thayer found the list of charges against Bliss signed by the five members of the committee. Thus, the matter was brought to a showdown.[48]

Of the five cadets, all but Cadet Holmes had been favorites of Partridge. Ragland, who had served as post adjutant under Captain Partridge, had played a large part in the disturbances the previous year. Thayer had not held their past conduct against the cadets but had tried to remain impartial in his judgment. Ragland and Fairfax, in fact, had recently been appointed assistant professors, and Loring was cadet captain of one of the battalions. Thayer was sorry to see Cadet Fairfax numbered among the five, for his conduct had been commendable up until that time. Convinced that he was faced with a potential mutiny by the Corps of Cadets, Thayer saw no alternative but to suspend the five and send them home to await further orders.[49]

Major Thayer next informed the cadet corps of his actions, and in the post orders, he warned that it was against all military principles for the cadets to form themselves into combinations or committees as a means of communication with the superintendent. He adopted the conciliatory point of view that many of the cadets

47. *Ragland Court Martial*, 23, 34.
48. *Ragland Court Martial*, 23–24, 38.
49. Thayer to Armistead, November 30, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Bliss Court of Inquiry, 7; Loring, *Memorial*, 29–30; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 147–149; Fleming, *West Point*, 41–42.

who had signed the round robin did not know the severe consequences of their actions. Thayer warned that any further attempt to draw up petitions or to form committees without special permission would be looked on as criminal in nature and intent.[50]

The cadets were not in a mood to be pacified or threatened, nor did they consider their actions contrary to good order and military discipline. In a message to the five departing cadets, over one hundred forty of their classmates pledged to aid them in their common cause. Despite this show of solidarity, in reality the Corps of Cadets circulated no other petitions and took no further action.[51]

Upon reaching New York City, the five suspended cadets wrote to Secretary Calhoun to apprise him of their plight. They alleged that the conduct of Captain Bliss was unofficerlike and detrimental to the best interests of the Academy, and that Major Thayer had refused to listen to the committee's complaints.[52]

In a letter to the new Chief Engineer Colonel Walker K. Armistead (General Swift had resigned from the Army in November 1818), Major Thayer gave his version of the incident. The underlying cause of the disturbance, Thayer stated, was the cadets' erroneous and unmilitary impression that they had certain rights as a corps, including the right to have a voice in the running of the Military Academy. As long as those false impressions remained, Major Thayer was convinced further disturbances were likely. Determined to put down any cadet uprisings before they began, Major Thayer requested that one of the principal officers of the Corps of Engineers visit the post and examine the state of the Academy.[53]

The War Department considered the case too delicate to be handled by only one officer. Colonel Armistead ordered a court of inquiry to assemble at West Point to investigate the incident. The court found that Captain Bliss was not in sufficient control of his

50. Loring, *Memorial*, 29–30.
51. Loring, *Memorial*, 31–32.
52. Loring, *Memorial*, 34–36.
53. Thayer to Armistead, November 30, 1818, *Thayer Papers*.

fiery temper to be in command of West Point cadets and decided that the recent disorders at the Military Academy had arisen largely as a result of Captain Bliss's conduct toward cadets. On the other hand, the court held that the cadets' forming committees to obtain redress of grievances bordered on mutiny, but their conduct was excused because of their youth and inexperience. No action was taken against the five cadets who had been sent home by Major Thayer. Bliss was relieved from duty at the Academy and transferred. His replacement as commandant of cadets and instructor of tactics was Captain John R. Bell. A better choice, Bell was experienced in commanding troops. He was also a veteran of the War of 1812, and a graduate of West Point. The investigation also declared Major Thayer's conduct during the unpleasant disturbance satisfactory. President Monroe and Secretary Calhoun agreed that he was free from any blame.[54]

Calhoun felt that the actions of the cadets, particularly the formation of the committee, were highly reprehensible. "The redress of Military grievances must never be extorted, or obtained by combinations which are alike mutinous," the secretary of war observed. Like the court, Monroe and Calhoun were inclined to excuse the youthful insubordination. Calhoun ordered Thayer to restore to duty the five cadets who had been ordered away from West Point "whenever, in your opinion, it can be done without injury to the discipline of the institution."[55]

In January 1819, the five cadets awaited orders to return to the Academy. Again, they took the opportunity to write to Calhoun, this time centering their complaints on Major Thayer and the way he was running the Academy. They charged that several of the officers teaching at the Academy lacked a regular military education,

54. Armistead to Thayer, December 9, 1818, *Thayer Papers*; Daniel Parker to Moses Porter, January 14, 1819, *Thayer Papers*; Parker to Thayer, January 14, 1819, *Thayer Papers*; Calhoun to Thayer, January 15, 1819, *Thayer Papers*; *Bliss Court of Inquiry*, 36–38.
55. Calhoun to Thayer, January 15, 1819, *Thayer Papers*.

writing, "A large majority of the students are superior to them in the acquirements of literature, as well as in the particular branches taught at the Academy." They also said that Major Thayer contravened the law by placing cadets under the command of "persons of fictitious titles," e.g., commandant of cadets. Once more the five affirmed their innocence and maintained there was nothing disorderly in organizing committees and signing petitions.[56]

Major Thayer planned to hold a court of inquiry for the five cadets before allowing them to return to duty at the Academy, and he informed Colonel Armistead of his decision. Armistead replied that according to article 92 of the Rules and Articles for the Government of Armies (also called the Articles of War), only the president of the United States had the authority to establish a court of inquiry. Thayer was somewhat surprised by the chief engineer's letter. In a lengthy reply, Thayer remarked that while he did not doubt he had no right to order a court of inquiry for individuals in the Army, until receipt of the chief's letter he had always assumed he had the right to order a court of inquiry for cadets. Thayer's argument rested on two foundations: the first, that cadets were not subject to the Articles of War, but only to Academy regulations; and the second, precedent. In the past, Thayer had called courts of inquiry for cadets and the proceedings had been sent to the chief engineer and the War Department without receiving disapproval. For the present, Thayer abided by Armistead's decision and did nothing. Armistead took the matter to Calhoun. The secretary sent word to Thayer that either the five cadets should resume their studies, or a court-martial should be assembled to look into the matter.[57]

56. Loring, *Memorial*, 37–42.

57. Armistead to Thayer, January 21, 1819, *Military Academy Records*, I, 71–72; Armistead to Thayer, February 20, 1819, *Military Academy Records*, I, 71–72; Thayer to Armistead, February 3, 1819, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy*. The exact wording of the pertinent part of article 92 is, "But as courts of inquiry may be perverted to dishonorable purposes, and may be considered as engines of destruction to military merit, in the hands of weak and envious commandants, they are hereby prohibited, unless directed by the President of the United States, or demanded by the accused," in Callan, *Military Laws of the U.S.*, 192.

Thayer did not want to reinstate the five without some investigation of their conduct, so a court-martial was held in the spring. Assembling at West Point in May 1819, the court heard testimony for several days; then, without warning, it decided that it was not competent to try West Point cadets and adjourned.[58] Displeased with the court's unseemly action, President Monroe asked William Wirt, the U.S. attorney general, to give an opinion on the subject. Wirt decided:

> The corps at West Point form a part of the land forces of the United States, and have been constitutionally subjected by Congress to the rules and articles of war, and to trial by courts martial.[59]

In September the court reconvened, but in spite of the decision given by Wirt, again declared itself incompetent to try cadets. Monroe dismissed the court with the statement that West Point was governed by martial law and the cadets were subject to courts-martial. The president condemned the conduct of the five cadets, but considered their long suspension punishment enough and ordered them restored to the Academy.[60]

Because the president condemned only their actions and not those of Major Thayer or Captain Bliss, the five cadets refused to return to West Point and resigned from the Academy. Bitter over events, they took their case before Congress. After investigating their complaints against Major Thayer and the Military Academy, a congressional committee called the five "high-minded young men of talents and honor," and expressed regrets that they were lost to the Military Academy and the Army. However, the congressmen noted, "*Obedience and subordination are the essential principles of the army*, which is not the place for the exercise of liberty."

58. *Ragland Court Martial*, 51.
59. Loring, *Memorial*, 71.
60. *Ragland Court Martial*, 55; Parker to Thayer, November 10, 1819, *Thayer Papers*.

Although the conduct of the superintendent was not altogether satisfactory to the committee members, they pointed out that he was a worthy officer eminently fit for his assignment. In conclusion, the committee agreed with the president and the secretary of war that the redress of military grievances must never be sought by combinations, which were considered mutinous.[61]

The disturbances of 1818–1819 had several positive results and served to clarify several heretofore gray areas concerning the Military Academy. First and most important was the fact that Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer was now firmly in charge. As long as he had the confidence and support of the president and the secretary of war, he would be able to withstand attacks from within and without. Second, the military nature of the Academy was firmly established by Wirt's opinion on the status of cadets. They were no longer "gentleman cadets," but a part of the military establishment. Third, Congress asked to examine a copy of the Academy regulations. Fourth, Thayer called for a Board of Visitors, the first to meet under his jurisdiction.[62]

The reforms and innovations that Thayer introduced during his first two years were modeled on French technical institutes, especially l'École polytechnique. Rather than turning West Point into a narrowly focused military school, Thayer instead was making it the most important scientific institution in the United States at that time. Thayer's cadets learned to be soldiers on the drill field and during summer encampments, but in the classroom, Thayer and his faculty saw to it that the cadets learned practical science. As a result, West Point turned out not only first-class officers, but also first-class engineers.[63]

61. *ASPMA*, II, 139.
62. Fleming, *West Point*, 43–44; Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 79.
63. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 79.



The hilts of two swords believed to have been owned by Thayer while superintendent at the Academy. The rapier on top may be the older of the two, possibly acquired in Europe. The dress sword, with the dealer mark of New York merchant Adam W. Spies, is believed to date to the end of Thayer's superintendency. (Photos by Editor. Courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

VII

The Good Years, 1819–1828



In April 1819, in accordance with the regulations governing the Academy, Major Thayer requested that a Board of Visitors be appointed to attend the next general examination of cadets.[1] This, the first of many such boards that met while Thayer was superintendent, consisted of General Joseph G. Swift, Colonels John R. Fenwick and John E. Wool, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph G. Totten, and Major Samuel B. Archer, among others. As instructed, the Board attended the June examination and submitted a report to the secretary of war that was generally favorable to what Thayer had accomplished. Considering that the Academy was a school of elementary military instruction for cadets, the Board found the course of studies well suited, but deplored the lack of practical instruction, especially in the Department of Natural Philosophy and Engineering. As for Major Thayer, the Board stated that the present superintendent had

1. See footnote 21 on page 107.—Ed.

placed West Point on an equal basis with the best school of its kind, and that the country was under a lasting obligation to him.[2]

In its investigation, the Board found six major defects in the laws governing the Academy. First, the superintendent was subject to all the changes of a regular military command. Second, the Corps of Engineers was unable to act as a constituent part of the Academy as contemplated by law. Third, the Corps of Engineers was unable to furnish the number of officers required for the instruction of cadets. Fourth, a sufficient number of educated instructors was lacking in most of the departments, resulting in several provisional appointments. Fifth, there was a limited field for the selection of assistant professors. And sixth, compensation for the professors and other officers at the Academy was inadequate.[3]

As a means of partially correcting these defects, the Board called for a basic reorganization of the Military Academy that would allow a larger faculty and staff with better pay and equipment. The Board also thought that the superintendent should have the rank, pay, and emoluments of a brigadier general. The Board concluded that no further legislation was necessary for the continued organization and government of the Military Academy, and that any changes in the details of instruction, police, and discipline were better adjusted by Academy regulation than by federal law.[4]

Many of the recommendations made by the Board of Visitors were similar to those of Major Thayer. He used the Board of Visitors to good effect; it essentially performed a public relations function for Thayer and the Military Academy. Although one scholar has observed that during Thayer's years as superintendent, the many reports from the Board of Visitors had little impact in

2. Thayer to Armistead, April 23, 1819, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy*; John L. Smith to Thayer, May 1, 1819, *Thayer Papers*; "Report of the Board of Visitors for 1819," *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter F-44.
3. "Report of the Board of Visitors for 1819," *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter F-44.
4. "Report of the Board of Visitors for 1819," *Letters Received, Engineer Dept.*, Letter F-44.

Washington or West Point, the reports did effectively convey to the general public a favorable impression of the Military Academy and, not coincidentally, of Sylvanus Thayer.[5]

The reading public also learned of the state of the Military Academy from publications issued by several foreign and American visitors to West Point. During Thayer's tenure, it was fashionable for travelers to stop over at West Point and report on the progress of the Military Academy and on the superintendent. Thayer entertained these guests with civility and kindness. One English gentleman reported that Thayer treated him with every hospitality and concluded, "The establishment at West Point has now, under his care, arrived at near to perfection, as any place of public education can easily be brought."[6]

A few of the visitors were illustrious persons. In 1824, the Revolutionary War hero General Lafayette came to the United States as the guest of the nation. That summer, Thayer was on a steamboat trip up the Hudson from New York City with Lafayette's son, George Washington Lafayette, who accompanied his father throughout his 1824–1825 journey. Why the two were on the same boat is unknown. Realizing that an appearance by the military hero would add to the prestige of the Military Academy, Thayer impressed upon the son that the institution would be greatly honored by a visit. Thayer also asked his old friend General Swift, who was now surveyor of revenue for the port of New York, to do what he could to schedule a visit. Lafayette accepted the invitation, and on his tour up the Hudson from New York to Albany, West Point was to be his first major stop.[7]

5. Denton, "Formative Years," 210.
6. William N. Blane, *An Excursion Through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822–1823* (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824), 359.
7. Thayer to Swift, September 7, 1824, *Thayer Papers*, 7.



An 1823 portrait of Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette. Inset: A ticket stub for a reception with Lafayette at Castle Garden in Lower Manhattan found in a pocket in the coattails of a coat owned by Thayer. It is dated September 10, 1824, but the event was postponed to Tuesday, September 14, due to rain. The West Point Band performed at the fête, but Thayer's attendance is unconfirmed. (Painting, U.S. House of Representatives. Ticket courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

Thayer devoted his usual careful attention to planning the day's activities to ensure that Lafayette's visit was as memorable and impressive as the grand parties and balls already given in his honor. The arrival of the general's party was delayed a few hours by fog and by their steamboat's running aground, but much to the relief of Thayer and the throng of people waiting at the Point, the steamboat *James Kent* finally docked about 12:30 p.m. on September 15, 1824. General Lafayette was received by Superintendent Thayer, Generals Jacob Brown and Winfield Scott and their staffs, and the officers and staff of the Military Academy. After brief introductions, Lafayette was ushered into an open carriage for the ride up the hill to the Plain, while two cannons fired a twenty-one-gun salute, and the Hudson Valley reverberated with a continual cannonade. Once on the Plain, the general was received by the Corps of Cadets, drawn up in a line. The officers then watched the cadets march by and perform several evolutions. After some refreshments at the quarters of Generals Brown and Scott at Mr. Cozzens's, Thayer escorted the distinguished visitor to the library, where the cadets and members of the staff and faculty were each introduced to him.[8] From there, the party moved to the cadet mess hall, where Thayer presided over an excellent meal, followed by many toasts. Over 400 people attended the banquet. At six o'clock, Lafayette and his party reboarded their boat. It had been an exciting day

8. William B. Cozzens was the contractor for the cadet mess hall after 1821. In the west end of the mess, a few rooms were available for the lodging of visitors. It was the closest thing to a hotel at the Academy proper but was not formerly known as that. In 1829, Cozzens became the first proprietor of the West Point Hotel, which overlooked the Hudson on what is now Trophy Point near the location of the links of the Great Chain.—Ed.

for Thayer and the cadets, and the Military Academy had again acquitted itself as a smooth, militarily correct operation.[9]

Other foreign nobility also visited the Academy during Thayer's superintendency. In 1825, Karl Bernhard, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, came up the Hudson on a steamboat and stopped over at West Point. Favorably impressed by what he saw, the duke stayed with Thayer for three days, inspecting the cadets and their barracks, attending classes, studying the curriculum, and even attending church. Observing that Thayer was modeling West Point on l'École polytechnique, the duke noted, "But he will find it difficult to equal this once celebrated school, as with the best will in the world he cannot find in this country such excellent professors as were assembled in that institution."[10]

The cadets became quite jaded with these foreign visitors. Cadet Samuel P. Heintzelman noted in his diary that a whole "passel" of German officers, accompanied by American officers in full dress uniform, were on post. As for the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Cadet Heintzelman dismissed him as a "sorry looking chap."[11]

9. Frederick Butler, *Memoirs of the Marquis de La Fayette, Major General in the Revolutionary Army of the United States of America* (Wethersfield, CT: Deming & Francis, 1825), 325–328; A. Levasseur, *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825; or Journal of a Voyage to the United States*, trans. by John D. Godson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1829), I, 107–108; Albert E. Church, "Personal Reminiscences of the Military Academy, from 1824–1831," *Association of Graduates, Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Reunion, June 9, 1881* (East Saginaw, MI: E. W. Lyon, Publisher, 1881), 163–164. [In a uniform coat owned by Thayer, a ticket stub to a New York City reception for Lafayette dated September 10, 1824, was discovered by the staff of the West Point Museum. That event, which took place at Castle Garden (Castle Clinton) at the southern end of Manhattan, was postponed by rain until September 14, 1824, the day before Lafayette visited West Point. Over 7,000 attended, according to news accounts, and the West Point Band provided music ("Fete at Castle Garden," *The Evening Post*, September 15, 1824). Thayer's actual attendance is unknown. Given that Lafayette visited the Academy the next day, there would have been reason for him not to go. Thayer was reported to be at West Point to meet Lafayette's boat (Butler, *Memoirs*, 327).—Ed.]

10. Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, *Travels Through North America, During the Years 1825 and 1826*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Carey, 1828), I, 110.

11. Samuel P. Heintzelman, *Diary, 1825–1833*, 20–21, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC. [The original is in the collection of the USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.—Ed.]

Not all visitors to the Academy were impressed. Captain Basil Hall from England criticized much of what he saw at West Point, and doubted very much whether the Academy would diffuse any helpful knowledge to the country as a whole. With a trace of anti-American sentiment, he described the cadets this way:

> Instead of the chest being braced or held forward, it is drawn back into a concavity, while the shoulders necessarily assume a correspondent roundness. To foreign eyes, nothing can be more awkward than this mode of carrying the body. In justification, however, of the practice at West Point, it is fair to state that it prevails more or less over the whole country; and being nearly as characteristic as the tone of voice, would almost as inevitably betray an American in other parts of the world.[12]

Another Englishman, James Stuart, wrote in a travel book that Thayer felt Captain Hall, who had spent only two or three hours at the Academy, had reached conclusions that were generally incorrect and showed unjust prejudice. In spite of the occasional bad press, visitors continued to come to West Point.[13]

Guests took only a small part of Thayer's time. His major preoccupation was the education of cadets and the successful operation of the Military Academy. Thayer took a personal interest in every young man who came to West Point, and it was his custom to interview every applicant when he arrived at the Academy.[14] Thayer was at his best during these interviews, putting the prospective students at ease while sizing up his potential. Although most of the cadets, overwhelmed by the force of Thayer's personality, were somewhat

12. Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Carey, 1829), I, 52.
13. James Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1833), I, 436–427.
14. In Thayer's era, cadets arrived throughout June but were not formally admitted until taking an entrance exam near the end of the month that covered mathematics, reading, and writing. Before the examination, they attended some classes—designed to help prepare them for testing—and learned basic military skills.—Ed.

reticent during these interviews, not all were so affected. There is a story (which may be apocryphal) concerning one young man's first meeting with the superintendent. After surviving the steep climb from the boat dock to the Plain and the walk to the superintendent's quarters, all the while carrying a trunk on his shoulders, the tall, muscular youth was quite worn out. Once in the superintendent's office, he drew up a chair, carefully studied the man sitting behind the desk, and unabashedly inquired, "Old man, are you Colonel, or Captain, or whatever-you-callum Thayer?" Upon being informed that he was speaking to the man sought, the youth exclaimed, "This yere hill o'yourn am a breather, if it ain't, damn me!" An amused Thayer soon had his orderly direct the lad to the cadet barracks.[15]

Thayer's interest in the cadets did not end with the initial interview. He kept abreast of their individual progress through weekly reports from the instructors. During weekly official visits, each instructor was received separately and his report kept confidential. Thayer wanted to know not only the proficiency of the cadet, but also his deportment during recitations; in this manner, Thayer was able to assess accurately the ability and maturity of each cadet.

Thayer's day followed an orderly pattern. He was known as the earliest riser at West Point, and many a sleepy guard on early morning duty was startled to see the superintendent on his morning walk. Afterward, it was his custom to observe the morning parade, have a light breakfast, and be at his desk ready for work by seven o'clock. Routine business was conducted at his office in the basement of his house between the hours of seven and eight. During this time, the

15. Cram, "Extracts," 13; Randolph B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1866), 376–371; W. Eugene Hollon, *Beyond the Cross Timbers: The Travels of Randolph B. Marcy, 1812–1887* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 9. Cram identified the cadet only as a "verdant Kentucky boy," but Marcy said that the cadet later was known as the author of a history of Texas. Marcy's biographer, Hollon, thinks that the cadet involved was Henderson K. Yoakum who graduated in Marcy's class of 1832 and went on to write *History of Texas from 1685 to 1846*. The accuracy of the story cannot be firmly established.

cadets who had business with the superintendent were admitted one at a time, and each was dealt with patiently and courteously.[16]

To counteract the problem of cadet indebtedness, Thayer decreed that no cadet was allowed to contract a debt or receive money from home without the superintendent's permission. The cadet's pay of sixteen dollars per month was credited to an account book, not issued in cash. The superintendent had to affix his name to a "check" before the storekeeper would supply anything to a cadet. Therefore, cadets often visited Thayer's office during his morning office hours for permission to make a purchase. Not infrequently, their requests were refused; Thayer was steadfast in his resolution to prevent cadet indebtedness.[17] On one occasion, a cadet named Dewey presented his account book to Thayer with an order for four shirts. The superintendent glanced at the deficit balance in the book and handed it back. The cadet remarked, "Colonel, I am much in need of shirts." Thayer replied, "I take it for granted you are, or you would not present this order; but you are in *debt*." Undaunted, the cadet pleaded, "But, Colonel, I am almost destitute; I have only one shirt to my back, and that is a *fatigue jacket*." Unmoved, Thayer ended the conversation: "Well, Mr. Dewey, I would advise you to wear that fatigue jacket until you get out of debt."[18]

Superintendent Thayer's knowledge of cadet indebtedness and of the number of demerits each cadet had received appeared to reach almost mythical proportions. The reason for his supposedly prodigious memory was really quite simple. In the back of his desk, invisible to the cadets, was a series of deep pigeonholes pasted with

16. Church, "Personal Reminiscences," 159; Cram, "Extracts," 8; Fleming, *West Point*, 47; Elizabeth Dey J. Waugh, *West Point; The Story of the United States Military Academy Which Rising from the Revolutionary Forces Has Taught American Soldiers the Art of Victory* (Macmillan Company, 1944), 75.
17. Cram, "Extracts," 8–9.
18. Francis H. Smith, "West Point Fifty Years Ago: An Address," *Association of Graduates, Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Reunion, June 12, 1879* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, Publisher, 1879), 4. [Thayer is referred to as both Major Thayer and Colonel Thayer during his superintendency. His dates of rank are as follows: Brevet Major, 1815; Brevet Lieutenant Colonel, 1823; and Major, 1828, but the Brevet Lieutenant Colonel rank continued, and Thayer signs letters as such after 1828. —Ed.]

current lists of cadet debts and demerits. To know the standing of the cadet before him, Thayer had only to glance briefly into the hidden recesses of the desk. Then, if appropriate, he could reply, "No, sir, you are so much in debt," or "No, sir, you have so many demerits." Thayer's ability seemingly to know all things usually kept cadets from asking for unnecessary purchases or privileges.[19]



Thayer had two offices in the basement of his quarters accessible via an exterior stairway. This photo shows the larger room on the northeast corner of the house used as his main office. The furnishings are not original and the layout of the room when Thayer used it is unknown. The exact location of his second, smaller office used to meet with cadets, and where he kept a desk with pigeonholes containing up-to-date information on cadet finances and grades, is unclear. It may have been in a small, adjoining hallway or part of the nearby adjutant's office. (Photo courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

Thayer generally busied himself with paperwork in the morning. In the afternoon, he was frequently out of his office on barracks

19. Church, "Personal Reminiscences," 162; Fleming, *West Point*, 48.

inspections or classroom visits. During these inspections, when accompanied by a guest, Thayer always took the time to introduce every cadet by name. Frequently, the superintendent would appear during class recitals to listen to the instruction and recitation. In this manner, he was able to judge the effectiveness of the faculty as well as the ability of the cadets. He usually returned to his office by four o'clock, when he received officers and the instructors who had matters to discuss. Later, he would inspect the evening parade, and then return to his quarters to dine on an excellent meal prepared by his Irish cook, Molly.[20]

In addition to his knowledge of individual debts and demerits, Thayer knew so much about the activities of the cadets that they were convinced he used a system of spies to keep him informed of their conduct. In fact, he did. Just about everyone who worked on the post kept an eye on the cadets and reported any questionable conduct to the superintendent, an arrangement that most cadets resented. One day, Cadet Leonidas Polk, who later became an Episcopal bishop and Confederate general, was startled to be told by Thayer, "You have received money from home, sir." Supposing that his father had informed the superintendent, Cadet Polk readily admitted he had. Thayer warned him that in the future he must obey the regulations on that subject. Later, Polk discovered that Thayer had learned of the money from a nosy postmaster who had seen Polk open the letter. Outraged, Cadet Polk indignantly wrote his father that Superintendent Thayer

> will not hesitate a moment to receive any information from *any source* concerning us; there are a great many individuals (of all ranks) on the Point, who act as his emissaries, and whose duty it is to *spy out secretly* and report all infractions of regulations.[21]

20. Cram, "Extracts," 6–7; Waugh, *West Point*, 75.
21. William M. Polk, *Leonidas Polk, Bishop and General*, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1893) I, 62.

Even Cadet Robert E. Lee remarked that cadets generally disliked Thayer because of his constant espionage. Lee's biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, stated that no matter how venal or disreputable the source, Thayer always listened to any accusation against a cadet. Although heartily disliked by the cadets, the spy system worked in enforcing strict discipline.[22]

Thayer did not always have to resort to spies to catch cadets in misdeeds. The post limits were hung on a wall map in the adjutant's office, and to be caught off post without permission was a court-martial offense. Generally, a cadet was given a pass only for special occasions, and only if his academic standing was satisfactory. Once, a cadet was invited across the Hudson River to attend an evening dinner and social gathering at the home of a prominent family. The cadet was denied permission to attend the soirée because of his academic standing. Deciding to take a chance, the young man rowed across the Hudson. As it happened, Thayer had also been invited to the party, and the cadet was horrified to come face-to-face with the superintendent. Thayer said nothing unpleasant to the cadet and even drank a glass of wine with him and conversed normally. After the party, the panic-stricken cadet excused himself and rapidly rowed back across the river. He returned to his barracks to spend an anxious night waiting for the fateful dawn that would bring a summons to the superintendent's office and possible dismissal. The summons never came. Years later, the former cadet learned it was the Commandant of Cadets who was summoned that morning and berated for allowing such a breach of discipline.[23]

In spite of his busy schedule, Thayer led an active social life. He frequently held dinner parties to which he invited officers, professors, and instructors at the Academy and their wives, and friends who lived nearby. Occasionally, he also hosted chess parties for a

22. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee, A Biography*, 4 vols. (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934–1935), I, 50.
23. Robert Fletcher, "Some Reminiscences of General Thayer," United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections, West Point, NY.

few intimates. He was a first-rate chess player who seldom met his match at the chessboard. Thayer's wide range of interests made him a fine conversationalist. Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Cram, an assistant professor of mathematics, recalled that, to his knowledge, Thayer was never known to be at fault on any question concerning history, civilian or military, ancient or modern. Moreover, Cram said Thayer had a good knowledge of the biographies of distinguished men in literature, science, and the military profession. When Thayer spoke, all listened, but he did not try to monopolize the conversation and was a good listener himself. Besides stimulating conversation, Thayer's parties featured good food and excellent wine, which the superintendent consumed in reasonable amounts. Seldom did the parties continue after ten o'clock.[24]



A bone chess set owned by Sylvanus Thayer, an enthusiast of the game. (Photo by Editor. Set access courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

24. Cram, "Extracts," 15–17.

Considered by many to be forbidding and aloof, Thayer was indeed a very commanding person. On first meeting, he appeared stiff and formal, but after a few moments of conversation, it became obvious that Thayer possessed what is generally called a military bearing. Cadet Lee said that Thayer had the clean-cut features of an aristocrat and, in his official relations, was an austere man who rejected any appeal to sentiment or emotion.[25] Captain Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Commandant of Cadets from 1829 to 1833, noted that Thayer relaxed his official dignity only when in the company of those officers or friends who he knew would not approach him with any selfish or sinister purpose. Hitchcock wrote, "His character, on the whole, was entitled to sincere admiration."[26]

Sylvanus Thayer never married. There is almost no evidence of Thayer's romantic interests or any intimate personal relationships he may have had other than friendships. There are suggestions that he was socially shy. As mentioned in Chapter I, George Ticknor hypothesized that Thayer may have skipped his valedictory speech at Dartmouth out of fear of an audience with many women in attendance.[27] Furthermore, Captain Hitchcock recalled Thayer as possessing "a slight tincture of humility amounting to bashfulness."[28] In 1843, Thayer wrote in a letter to Dartmouth friend Icabod Chadbourne that he was a bachelor and "miserable of course" but as happy a person as he had ever been.[29] A February 26, 1862, letter from Swift to Thayer mentions that Swift told Winfield Scott that Thayer was not a punctual correspondent "save to one or two ladies."[30] Whether Swift's comment was a joke or the truth is unknown. Ford's 1953 book *Thayer of West Point* details a romance with a woman named Georgia Richards while Thayer was in Norfolk in 1814. Thayer falls

25. Freeman, *Lee*, I, 50.
26. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Fifty Years in Camp and Field, Diary of Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, U.S.A.*, ed. W. A. Croffut (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909; reprint ed., Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 49.
27. Ticknor to Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
28. Hitchcock, *Fifty Years*, 49.
29. Thayer to Ichabod Chadbourne, February 5, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.
30. Swift to Thayer, February 26, 1862, *Thayer Papers*.

in love but concludes that he cannot subject Georgia to an Army life. There is no evidence that this relationship ever happened and is best described as historical fan fiction.[31]

Although generally stern, Thayer was not without a spark of humor. Cram reported that Thayer had a servant named Patrick Murphy who had grown accustomed to being in charge of everything in Thayer's house. One day, Thayer, in the company of a friend, was overseeing the laying of some new carpeting in the hall of his quarters. Murphy was very officious in the operation, but quite unsuccessful in making the pattern match to Thayer's satisfaction. Impatiently, Thayer took hold of the carpet and told Murphy, "Get your big Irish splay foot off the carpet!" His dignity injured, the Irishman marched away, muttering, "Big splay foot, is it? And by Jazzas, I've worn his boot many a time, it is!" Overhearing the remark, Thayer and his guest roared with laughter.[32]

A recollection by class of 1833 graduate Francis R. Smith shows a side of Thayer's humanity that he did not display to cadets. Smith writes:

> I met Col. Thayer in Newport, R. I., the fall after graduation. We were stopping at the same hotel. I involuntarily drew back as he entered the room. He was smoking a cigar (no cadet ever saw Col. Thayer smoke a cigar). He came forward with a smile (no cadet ever saw Col. Thayer smile). He grasped my hand cordially and made me sit down by his side. (I had never sat by his side before). With affectionateness and tenderness, which showed what a warm heart beat beneath the cold austerity of the superintendent, he spoke of my class and of my classmates in terms which brought the color to my

31. Norman Robert Ford, *Thayer of West Point*, Thayer Book Press, 1953. [This paragraph is significantly changed from Kershner's original paragraph, which tried to attribute Thayer's bachelorhood to his being married to the Army. The historical record simply lacks information to speculate beyond what is in this paragraph.—Ed.]
32. Cram, "Extracts," 20–21.

> cheeks. He said: "Yours was the *best* class to graduate under my superintendency, and I regard it as the *best*."[33]

Unfortunately for future generations, Thayer seldom wrote except on official business. The *Thayer Papers* contain no letters from his parents, who were still living in Braintree at this time, but there are a few from his sisters, especially Abigail. Thayer had not seen his family for many years, and in October 1819, applied for a five-month furlough to visit them. Before he could leave, the Bliss incident occurred, and pressing matters kept him at the Academy. Thayer did manage to keep in touch with all five of his sisters. The oldest sister, Dorcas, had married Reverend Josiah Moulton in 1806. The declining membership of his churches forced them to move frequently. During much of the time Thayer was superintendent, they lived in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. In a letter written in 1822, Dorcas mentioned that it had been thirteen years since they had seen each other. Mehitable in 1806 had married Silas Ludden of Boston, and they eventually settled in East Hampton, Massachusetts. Lue Maria had a school in Sutton, Massachusetts. After marrying Joseph Marsh in 1815, she settled in Hartford, Vermont, and probably quit teaching. When Sylvanus took over as superintendent, neither of his two younger sisters, Abigail or Livia, was married, and both appeared to be more interested in careers than marriage, an attitude unique for the time. In 1820, Livia had a school in Boston, and Abigail was quite pleasantly situated at an academy in Northboro, about thirty miles from Boston. An interest in education was a Thayer family trait. Three of Sylvanus's sisters—Lue Maria, Livia, and Abigail—were actively engaged in teaching, and Dorcas one time mentioned an interest in establishing a private academy with Abigail.[34]

33. Smith, "West Point Fifty Years Ago," 7.
34. Josiah Moulton to Thayer, August 14,1810; Abigail Thayer to Sylvanus Thayer, May 24, 1818, January 8, 1819, January 5, January 18, May 1, and June 24, 1820; Josiah Moulton and Dorcas Thayer Moulton to Sylvanus Thayer, June 6, 1821, *Thayer Papers*; B. Thayer, *Memorial*, 81–84.

One disadvantage of having such a famous brother was that friends, acquaintances, strangers, and sometimes even family members tried to take advantage of the relationship. Several times Abigail wrote to Sylvanus as a mediator for someone who wanted a cadet's warrant for a son or nephew. Occasionally, Thayer would be of some help. One incident was particularly interesting. In January 1820, Abigail began a letter writing campaign to Sylvanus, telling him of the merits of one Phineas Davis, aged eighteen, the son of Phineas Davis of Northboro, whose grandfather had been a patriot in the Revolution. Young Davis was studying French in the hope of winning an appointment to the Academy. Later she told her brother that Davis was an excellent scholar possessing uncommon energy and perseverance. When no commission was forthcoming that year for him, Abigail was very disappointed. Davis continued his studies and finally succeeded in getting an appointment. Then Abigail wrote Sylvanus that hard study had ruined Davis's health, and doctors urged a European trip to restore it. Shortly thereafter, Davis himself wrote to Thayer to inform him that because of ill health he would not be able to report at the time stipulated but hoped to be well enough to enter by the following June. No Phineas Davis ever entered West Point at that or any other time. On July 22,1822, Abigail married Phineas Davis; whether father or son is not known. They had the kindness to name their fourth child Charles Sylvanus.[35]

During Thayer's years as superintendent, the turnover of faculty was relatively small. Andrew Ellicott died in 1820, and Captain David B. Douglass became professor of mathematics. In 1823 Claudius Crozet resigned to become the state engineer of Virginia, Douglass moved over to take the chair of engineering, and Charles Davies became head of the Mathematics Department. Jared Mansfield remained as professor of natural and experimental philosophy

35. Abigail Thayer to Sylvanus Thayer, February 23, June 24, and August 15, 1820, and May 25, 1821; Phineas Davis to Sylvanus Thayer, September 10, 1821, *Thayer Papers*; B. Thayer, *Memorial*, 84.

until his resignation in 1828. While Thayer was superintendent, most of the top faculty remained, and it became the accepted practice to fill open positions with Academy graduates whenever possible. One of the best appointments was that of Lieutenant Dennis Hart Mahan, USMA class of 1824, as professor of civil and military engineering in 1830.[36]

The Academy's curriculum was well established, and few changes were made. Superintendent Thayer was able to prevent interference from outsiders who wanted to increase the number of courses or change the content of those already established. Two suggestions for additional courses were received from Washington, but neither was acted upon. In 1824, General Alexander Macomb, who had become the chief engineer in 1821, proposed:

> To add two Professors of the Spanish language, as there is every prospect of our being, at a future day, intimately connected with the people of South America, and the acquisition of their language may become very important.[37]

Thayer felt that it was inexpedient to add another course to the already full curriculum. Later, in 1825, an attempt was made to teach cadets to speak French as well as read it, but little became of this proposal.[38]

As the Academy grew stronger, Sylvanus Thayer's reputation increased. In February 1823, General Winfield Scott suggested to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun that the rank of brevet lieutenant colonel be conferred on Thayer:

> If any officer, since the peace, has earned a brevet, Major Thayer is certainly that individual. The Academy has been placed in a state of the most perfect organization & efficiency under his administration, & has, in the last five

36. Denton, "Formative Years," 216–217; Cullum, *Register*, I, 23.
37. Macomb to Thayer, January 23, 1824, *Thayer Papers*.
38. Denton, "Formative Years," 201–202.

years, given to the Army a majority of the good officers in it.[39]

Calhoun agreed with Scott's opinion, and the request was endorsed and forwarded to President Monroe, who also approved. In March 1823, Brevet Major Thayer became Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Thayer for distinguished and meritorious service; his lineal rank remained that of a captain of engineers.[40]



A portrait of Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, c.1823. (Painting by Charles Bird King, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)

39. Hemphill, *Calhoun Papers*, VII, 462.
40. Cullum, *Register*, I, 82.

During the early 1820s, the Academy had many friends and supporters, but none greater than John C. Calhoun. He was personally involved in recruiting both cadets and instructors. Calhoun himself chose Reverend Charles Pettit McIlvaine as chaplain for the Military Academy after the resignation of Reverend Thomas Picton in 1824 following a critical report from the Board of Visitors. McIlvaine, who had been Senate chaplain in 1822 and was rector of Christ Church in Georgetown, District of Columbia, recalled his selection in this manner:

> One night I was taking tea at the house of John C. Calhoun, Esq., then Secretary of War, with whom I was intimate. To my great surprise, he suddenly asked me if I would accept the place of Chaplain and Professor of Ethics at West Point, adding that if I would, the appointment should at once be given me. I demurred on account of my youth; for then I had not completed my twenty-fifth year. He answered that he preferred a young man who would grow to the place, rather than one whose habits of mind were so fixed by age that they could not be moulded. All I could say was that I would consider it.[41]

His health having suffered from Georgetown's climate, McIlvaine decided to accept the appointment. In the spring of 1825, he went to West Point expecting the worst. He had been warned that there was widespread infidelity, i.e., atheism and agnosticism, among the officers and cadets, and that he would receive no religious sympathy or fellowship, but only opposition. Although his reception was kind and friendly, and he found Lieutenant Colonel Thayer a gentleman of the highest order, the new chaplain quickly discovered that there was a decided lack of religious sentiment at West Point, particularly among the junior officers and cadets. The first

41. Charles P. McIlvaine, *Memorials of the Right Reverend Charles Pettit McIlvaine*, ed. William Carus, 2nd ed. (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 20–21.



Reverend Charles Pettit McIlvaine, c. 1860–1870. (Studio of Mathew Brady, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)

year, no cadet came to see the chaplain outside of the chapel or the classroom. Then, in 1826, Cadets Leonidas Polk and William B. Magruder "converted" and were baptized in front of the Corps of Cadets and officers. The service of adult baptism had never before been performed at West Point, and an unusually large number of officers and cadets attended. Soon a minor "Great Awakening" was under way at the Military Academy. Meetings were held two or three times a week in the chaplain's study. Thayer gave McIlvaine every support, and although not a member of any church himself, Thayer greatly encouraged the new religious spirit at the Academy. He was sorry when McIlvaine left West Point in 1827.[42]

Calhoun's appointment of McIlvaine was one of his last efforts as secretary of war to aid the Military Academy. In 1824, he was elected vice president by a wide margin. President John Quincy Adams selected James Barbour of Virginia as the new secretary of war. The Military Academy and Thayer lost a most important supporter when Calhoun left the War Department. Calhoun the vice president never had the power of Calhoun the secretary of war.

Even without Calhoun, the year 1826 was one of Thayer's best. During the general examination in June, Lieutenant Colonel Thayer had the distinct pleasure of playing host to his old friend from Dartmouth days, George Ticknor. Now a distinguished professor at Harvard, Ticknor had been appointed a member of the Board of Visitors. In several letters to his wife, he left a detailed account of his visit and of a typical meeting of the Board.

Commodore William Bainbridge, whom Thayer had met while trying to find passage to Europe, called the meeting to order; General Sam Houston, being the senior military person present, was chosen president; and George Ticknor was selected as recording secretary. In the examination room, Thayer, surrounded by the members of the Academic Board, presided at one table; General

42. McIlvaine, *Memorials*, 28–29; Polk, *Leonidas Polk*, I, 72–75; Denton, "Formative Years," 223–226.

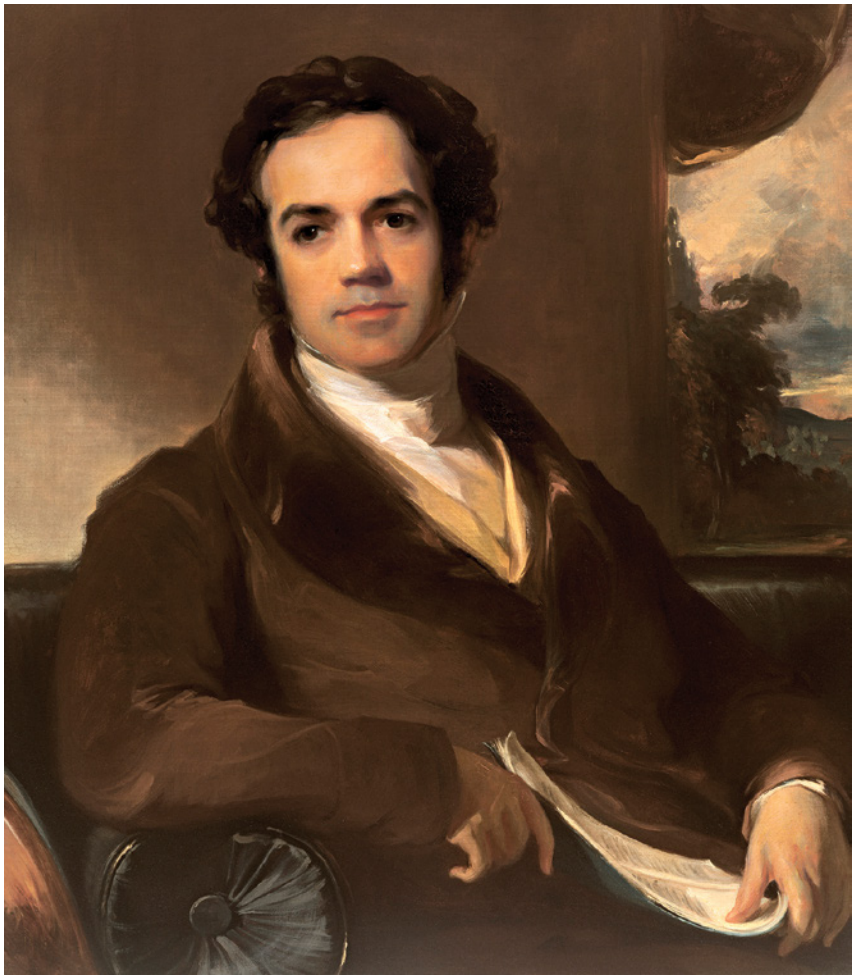
Houston, along with the Board of Visitors, sat at a second. In front of each group was a large blackboard, with two cadets standing at each. The usual procedure was for one cadet to answer or demonstrate questions put to him, while the others prepared problems that had been given them. Ticknor reported that cadets possessed the composure that came from a thorough knowledge of the subject material. The examination itself was a very laborious task and proved tedious to many concerned with it, but Thayer was indefatigable in his attention to each cadet on every subject. Thayer was as familiar with every branch taught as was the instructor himself.[43]

Ticknor was delighted to find that the close bond of friendship still existed between him and Thayer. He was especially pleased with Thayer's house and found a great deal of dignity in the sort of solitude in which Thayer lived. Regarding Thayer himself, Ticknor wrote:

> There is nothing at all either repulsive or stiff in his manner to the officers and teachers under him, or to the Cadets. All the members of the Board [of Visitors] seem to have the most thorough admiration of him.[44]

Every morning during the general examination, which lasted almost three weeks, Thayer delivered Ticknor's wife's letters to him precisely at 6:30 a.m. Then the two of them breakfasted and read newspapers until a little before eight o'clock, when they met the rest of the Board of Visitors for the day's examination. Lieutenant Colonel Thayer would inquire if the president of the Board was ready to attend the examination. If so, Thayer would conduct him into the examination room with great ceremony, followed by the others. If he was not ready, "Thayer goes without him; he waits for no man."[45]

43. Cram, "Extracts," 7; Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, I, 373.
44. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, I, 374; [Board here seems to refer to the Board of Visitors, of which Ticknor was a member.—Ed.]
45. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, I, 374.



Thayer's longtime friend George Ticknor, Dartmouth class of 1807, in an 1831 portrait. (Painting by Thomas Sully, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

Ticknor was at West Point for the entire examination period, and in spite of Thayer's heavy workload, Ticknor found him always fresh, prompt, ready, and pleasant. Ticknor concluded that there were not three people in the country who could take Thayer's place. In a discussion among a few members of the Board of Visitors about who would replace Thayer if he resigned, someone told

Colonel Joseph G. Totten that he would be the only man who could do so. Totten replied, "No. No man would be indiscreet enough to take the place after Thayer; it would be as bad as being President of the Royal Society after Newton."[46]

George Ticknor and the rest of the Board of Visitors were highly gratified by the results of the examination and the excellent example set by the cadets and staff. The Harvard professor told his wife, "There is a thoroughness, promptness, and efficiency in the knowledge of the Cadets which I have never seen before, and which I did not expect to find here."[47]

While the Board of Visitors was impressed by what it had observed, it identified seventeen problem areas that required resolution or change. Concerning facilities and equipment, the Board saw the need for several new buildings, including a chapel, hospital, gymnasium, and gun house. It also recommended an increase in the size of the library, the appointment of an assistant librarian, and the purchase of surveying instruments, casts and engravings, and solid models. As for the curriculum, the Board recommended that a permanent Department of Chemistry and Mineralogy be established; that cadets commissioned into the engineering branch be required to remain at the Academy for an extra year's study; and that after 1828, the entrance requirements include an understanding of English grammar and geography. The Board recommended that cadets no longer be employed as teachers, and that no young man less than fifteen or more than eighteen years old be admitted. Turning to personnel matters, the Board recommended that an additional clerk be appointed; that officers charged with enforcing discipline and police receive a ten dollar per month pay raise; that the rank and pay of the superintendent be increased; and that the superintendent be made responsible directly to the secretary of war and hold all his official correspondence directly with the War Department.[48]

46. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, I, 375.
47. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, I, 375.
48. *ASPMA*, III, 385–387.

The Board of Visitors concluded its report by expressing pleasure with the condition and management of the Military Academy:

> Every year the privileges of this institution are sought for at the War Department by above a thousand to whom it is not possible to grant them. It is praise enough to the present superintendent and those who have so faithfully labored with him to say that this change is their work.[49]

After the examination, with the cadets in summer encampment, Thayer took a much needed vacation. He spent the first three weeks of July on a tour of upstate New York and Niagara Falls, returning to West Point in time to meet some of Ticknor's friends from Cambridge who had come to see the Academy. Then Thayer traveled to Washington intending to see President Adams, Secretary Barbour, and the Chief Engineer General Alexander Macomb. Finding all three had left the hot, humid city for cooler climes, Thayer decided to travel to Virginia to visit the secretary of war. Although an unexpected guest, Thayer was received with true Virginia hospitality by Barbour. In long talks with the secretary, Thayer explained some problems concerning the chief engineer, probably Macomb's interference with the running of the Academy. Thayer felt that Macomb, who was not an Academy graduate, was overstepping his authority as inspector in trying to involve himself with everyday affairs at West Point. Barbour agreed not to be led astray concerning certain unmentioned regulations and promised to enforce all regulations and support Thayer in his enforcement of them. Once more, Thayer requested that the connection between West Point and the Corps of Engineers be severed, and again, his request was denied. After his brief visit with the secretary of war, Thayer returned to New York,

49. *ASPMA*, III, 387. [The Board is saying that, because of improvements by Thayer and his staff, there were more applicants annually for the Academy than spaces available.—Ed.]

where he was stricken with a fever and unable to return to the Military Academy until September 2, 1826.[50]

Later in the fall, after he had recovered from his illness, Thayer became involved in correspondence with former President James Monroe, who had been appointed a regent of the University of Virginia. Monroe had a great deal of respect for Thayer's success at the Military Academy and sought advice on managing a literary institution. Thayer's answer to Monroe was an honest statement of what might be called his educational philosophy, setting forth his views on running West Point or any other institution of higher learning. He agreed with Monroe that the two basic goals of every seminary for the education of youth ought to be, first, to keep the students at their studies and, second, to prevent gambling, intemperance, and dissipation. If the first was achieved, then the second would naturally follow, and vice versa.[51]

Thayer also wrote that the government of the University of Virginia ought to be paternal in nature. Severe punishment frequently levied against students would largely discredit the institution and imply that the system was deficient or improperly administered. Monroe's purpose, therefore, should be to devise a system that would greatly alleviate the necessity for punishment, i.e., a system of prevention or perfect police. To achieve this system, Thayer recommended the following methods. First, leave no idle time on the students' hands. Assign each student an amount of study material equal to his capacity and have daily examinations to ascertain whether he has studied; occupy all time not devoted to sleep, meals, or study with physical exercise, such as dancing, fencing, horseback riding, gymnastics, or military exercise. Second, use roll calls and monitors to verify attendance. Third, make frequent inspections or visits to determine what students were doing with their study time. Fourth, remove all pecuniary means from the students' hands and

50. Thayer to Ticknor, October 12, 1826, *Thayer Papers*.
51. Monroe to Thayer, November 1, 1826, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Monroe, November 23, 1826, *Thayer Papers*.

forbid them to contract debts or receive funds except by permission of the school's executive government. Student expenses could be paid from funds deposited with the school treasurer. Fifth, apply to the state legislature for a law imposing restrictions on tavern keepers and others within a limited distance from the university. Thayer warned that these measures would be fruitless without a vigilant, active, and energetic executive, a person of high character and attainment who possessed particular qualifications for governing youth.[52]

In another letter, Thayer said that a president or a single, efficient responsible head was necessary for the permanent prosperity of the university. That man should be vested with extensive powers and entitled to the advice of the professors but not shackled or controlled by their votes. Thayer felt that the same sentiments could be applied to the superintendent of the Military Academy.[53]

In early 1827, Thayer heard of the financial problems of General Swift. A few years earlier, Swift had become a vice president of the Life and Fire Insurance Company of New York. Without Swift's knowledge, the president of the firm was using company money for speculation. When the company failed to meet the demands for cash on bonds due, company officials were indicted for conspiracy to defraud the state. Swift, obviously innocent of all charges, was found not guilty, but his reputation as a businessman suffered, and a hoped-for government job failed to materialize. Soon he was without a job and almost without funds to support his large family. Reluctantly, he turned to his friends for help.[54]

Thayer was aware of Swift's difficulties and wrote him:

> Your misfortunes, general, have been great indeed & call forth the deep sympathy of those who know the purity, generosity & benevolence of your heart. Adversity will only serve to draw them closer to you & to quicken into

52. Thayer to Monroe, November 23, 1826, *Thayer Papers*.
53. Thayer to Monroe, October 10, 1828, *Thayer Papers*.
54. Swift, *Memoirs*, 199–201.

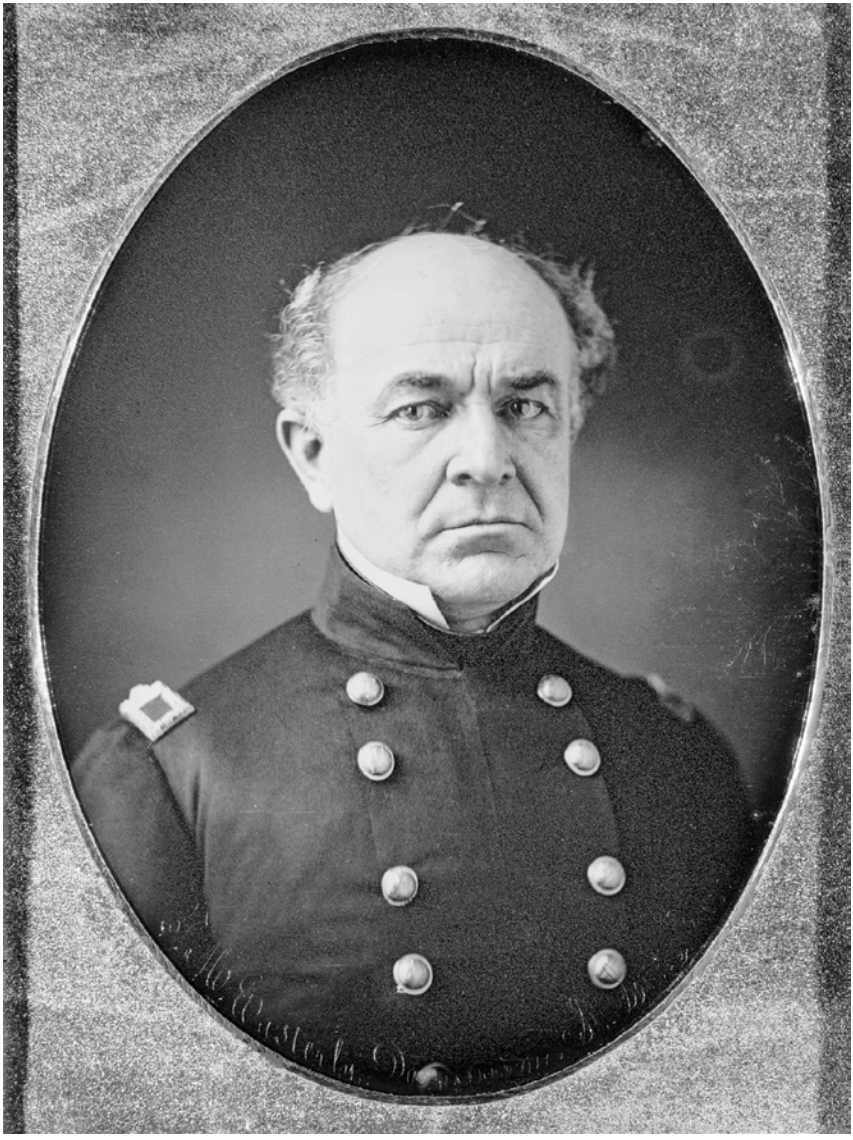
> action that friendship which lay dormant during the period of your prosperity.[55]

Showing that he was as good as his word, Thayer sent Swift $500 as a loan. Thayer, on most occasions a parsimonious man, showed his close friendship and trust, and Swift was grateful.[56]

In the spring of 1827, Thayer again became involved in a controversy with some of his officers, in particular, Captain Ethan Allen Hitchcock, the assistant instructor of tactics at the Academy. The trouble came about when Lieutenant Colonel Thayer drew up an Academy regulation giving him the power to authorize courts of inquiry. Apparently ignorant of article 92 of the Rules and Articles of War, which limited the power of calling such courts to the president, Secretary Barbour signed the order. This new power remained unused until the spring of 1827 when a disorder in the cadet barracks caused Thayer to convene a court of inquiry, with Captain Hitchcock as president. When the court assembled, there was general agreement among the officers comprising it that Thayer's order was illegal. Some of the officers drew up a letter of complaint and forwarded it through the superintendent to General Alexander Macomb, the chief engineer.[57]

About three weeks later, Thayer assembled the officers to hear Macomb's reply. The questions raised had been put before the secretary of war and the attorney general, who determined that Superintendent Thayer did indeed have the authority to order a court of inquiry at the Academy as provided for in the regulations. Several of the officers still disagreed and drafted a second letter of complaint, again citing the 92nd Article of War as their reason for refusing to obey Lieutenant Colonel Thayer's order. As a result of their actions, Thayer had three of the officers, including Captain Hitchcock, arrested.[58]

55. Thayer to Swift, January 28, 1827, *Thayer Papers*.
56. Thayer to Swift, February 24, 1827, *Thayer Papers*; Swift, *Memoirs*, 202.
57. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 52–53.
58. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 52–53. For an explanation of article 92, see footnote 56 in Chapter VI.



Ethan Allen Hitchcock graduated from the Academy in 1817. He was stationed there from 1824 to 1827 and served as Commandant of Cadets from 1829 to 1833. This photo of an older Hitchcock is from 1851. (Daguerreotype by Thomas M. Easterly, Library of Congress.)

The problem was referred once again to the chief engineer, who again took up the matter with Secretary Barbour. They decided not to court-martial the three because of the expense, trouble, and inconvenience. Instead, the three officers were to be censured, relieved from duty at the Military Academy, and ordered to join their respective regiments.[59]

Captain Hitchcock was outraged by this action. Expecting to be court-martialed, he had prepared what he considered a brilliant defense and was determined to press his argument. He went to Washington to visit the secretary of war in person. According to Hitchcock's diary, Secretary Barbour did not take the matter seriously. When Hitchcock argued that there was a point of law involved, the secretary shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Oh, it is a mere difference of opinion, and if you don't choose to obey orders at West Point, we will send others there who will obey them."[60]

Hitchcock next visited President John Quincy Adams, who said that he had just received the papers in the case and would examine them shortly. The president promised, "If I find the order legal, I will confirm it; if illegal I shall annul it."[61] Hitchcock felt confident that Adams would decide in his favor. In the meantime, Hitchcock was ordered to New York for temporary duty.

After some weeks had gone by, Captain Hitchcock was visited by Major William Worth, the Commandant of Cadets and instructor of tactics at the Academy. During their conversation, Worth asked if he could apply for Hitchcock's reinstatement. Hitchcock,

59. Macomb to Barbour, April 10, 1827, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office Relating to the Military Academy: Letters Relating to the Military Academy*, 1811–1836.

60. Hitchcock to Thayer, January 13, 1829, *Hitchcock Papers*. [Hitchcock wrote, "The Superintendent has selected me notwithstanding my declared and persistent opposition to the exercise of his authority. This seems to me alike honorable to the Superintendent and myself; for, while it ought to secure my name from any imputation of having lent myself to unjust measures, it shows no less clearly that the Superintendent has only the good of the institution at heart and does not wish the presence of a submissive instrument for improper purposes." Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 60.—Ed.]

61. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 56.

wanting to return to the Academy, agreed. However, while Lieutenant Colonel Thayer, too, was eager to have Hitchcock return, the superintendent stubbornly resisted any challenge to his authority and power. Thayer felt that Hitchcock's reinstatement was impossible unless the captain changed his mind concerning the superintendent's authority to call courts of inquiry.[62]

During the summer of 1828, Lieutenant Colonel Thayer visited Captain Hitchcock in New York and tried to persuade him to change his position. When Hitchcock refused, Thayer changed tactics. He told Hitchcock he was on his way to Washington where he would refer the matter to the secretary of war and the president. If they annulled his authority, he would ask for Hitchcock's immediate return; but if they affirmed his right to order a court of inquiry, would Hitchcock not feel it his duty to yield? A stubborn man like Thayer, Hitchcock replied that he would wait until after Thayer's visit to reach a decision.[63]

While he was in Washington, Thayer was unable to see the secretary of war and had no opportunity to speak to President Adams about the matter. In short, nothing was accomplished. Soon Captain Hitchcock was ordered to join his regiment at Fort Snelling on the upper Mississippi River in the Northwest frontier. During a stopover at Fort Crawford, at Prairie du Chien, while waiting for the river to freeze over so he could travel upon it to his duty station, Captain Hitchcock was surprised to read in a newspaper that Major Worth had resigned, and he had been proposed to take Worth's place. Later, two communications from Lieutenant Colonel Thayer arrived. One was a handwritten copy of a private letter from Colonel Charles Gratiot, the new chief engineer, to Thayer stating that in view of Thayer's request, Captain Ethan Allen Hitchcock would be appointed as Major Worth's successor. The other was a note

62. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 56–57.
63. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 57–58.

from Thayer requesting that if the offer was agreeable, Hitchcock should start east for West Point right away.[64]

Putting aside his previous arguments, Hitchcock noted in his diary:

> Here was a promotion for me and a very considerable change in my destination. I immediately prepared for a midwinter journey, starting the middle of January from Fort Crawford.[65]

Before starting his trip, he wrote to Thayer accepting the position—"It will give me the greatest pleasure to report in person to you for duty"—and informing him that the necessary orders had arrived from the adjutant general's office.[66]

Before the captain's arrival, Thayer dealt with another point concerning the proper exercise of the superintendent's authority. Although he had been instrumental in having Hitchcock return to the Academy, Thayer was distressed that the order made Hitchcock both the instructor of tactics and the Commandant of Cadets. This, he felt, was an intrusion on the superintendent's prerogative, which he always guarded carefully. In a private letter to Colonel Gratiot, Thayer complained:

> This is the first instance in which a Commandant of the Corps has been appointed by the *War Department*. The Superintendent being solely responsible for the correct administration & discipline of the Academy it has been left optional with him either to reserve to himself the exclusive command of the cadets or to confer the immediate command on a subordinate officer. . . . While therefore the office of instructor of Tactics was permanent

64. Copy of a letter from Gratiot to Thayer, November 22, 1828; Thayer to Hitchcock, November 26, 1828, *Ethan Allen Hitchcock Papers*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.
65. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 60.
66. Hitchcock to Thayer, January 13, 1829, *Hitchcock Papers*.

> & not liable to be abolished without the sanction of the War Department; that of Comm'dt of cadets depend for its continuance on the will of the Superintendent.[67]

While Thayer's point was technically valid, there was little chance that any Commandant of Cadets would dare to usurp Thayer's authority. Moreover, although Thayer could not have known it at the time, Captain Hitchcock was to be his last Commandant of Cadets, serving with him until Thayer left West Point.

Captain Hitchcock reached the Academy in March 1829 and was warmly received by Lieutenant Colonel Thayer. No mention was ever made of the difficulty between the two men that had caused Hitchcock to leave in the first place. Later, Hitchcock learned that President Adams had annulled the superintendent's power to convene courts of inquiry. The secretary of war sent Thayer an informal note directing him to hold no more such courts. Thus, Hitchcock was finally vindicated.[68]

Hitchcock's return to West Point coincided with the beginning of what would be Thayer's most difficult time as superintendent. The years between 1829 and 1833 were marked by decreasing support from the War Department, lack of presidential confidence, and increasing attacks on the institution of the Military Academy. It was not a coincidence that the Age of Jacksonian Democracy signaled the decline of Thayer.

67. Thayer to Gratiot, December 5, 1828, *Thayer Papers*.
68. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 62.

VIII

Conflict and Controversy, 1829–1833



Thayer's last four years as superintendent of the Military Academy were a period of turmoil and crisis for the institution that he had loved and guided for so long. During this time, West Point and Sylvanus Thayer came into conflict with the commanding general of the United States Army, the secretary of war, a segment of Congress, and even the president. Without doubt, this was one of the saddest and most bitter times of Thayer's life and career.

When Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828, there were few indications that he harbored hostility toward the Military Academy or Sylvanus Thayer. While Jackson may have expressed the opinion that the Military Academy was established for the sons of Revolutionary officers who died poor, he had thought enough of West Point to have sent two nephews, Andrew Jackson Donelson and Daniel S. Donelson, Classes of 1820 and 1825, respectively, and a ward, Edward Butler, Class of 1820, to the Academy.[1]

When A.J. Donelson and Butler were about to graduate in 1820, Jackson asked Secretary Calhoun to promote Donelson to

1. Fleming, *West Point*, 70.

the Corps of Engineers and Butler to the artillery. Fortunately, the two cadets were of such high standing, Donelson second and Butler ninth, that they were placed in the branches requested. Donelson later resigned his commission and became Jackson's private secretary, but he always considered Thayer a friend. Frequently, Donelson wrote Thayer letters of introduction for newly appointed cadets. In one such letter he added the message:

> Since my resignation I have learned with a great deal of pleasure, that your exertions have extended the course and given more perfect organization of the school—It is more popular in this section of the Country than it has ever been before.[2]

Thayer also wrote to General Jackson on at least one occasion enclosing a register showing the class standing of Cadet Daniel Donelson, who graduated fifth in the class of 1825 and commissioned in the artillery. At this time, Jackson called the Academy "the best school in the world."[3] Later, in his first annual message to Congress on December 8, 1829, President Jackson again praised the Academy:

> I recommend to your fostering care, as one of our safest means of national defense, the Military Academy. This institution has already exercised the happiest influence upon the moral and intellectual character of our Army; and such of the graduates as from various causes may not pursue the profession of arms will be scarcely less useful as citizens. Their knowledge of the military art will be advantageously employed in the militia service, and in

2. Andrew J. Donelson to Thayer, July 19, 1823, *Thayer Papers*.
3. Andrew Jackson, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, ed. John S. Basset, 7 vols. (Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926–1935), III, 191.

> a measure secure to that class of troops the advantages which in this respect belong to standing armies.[4]

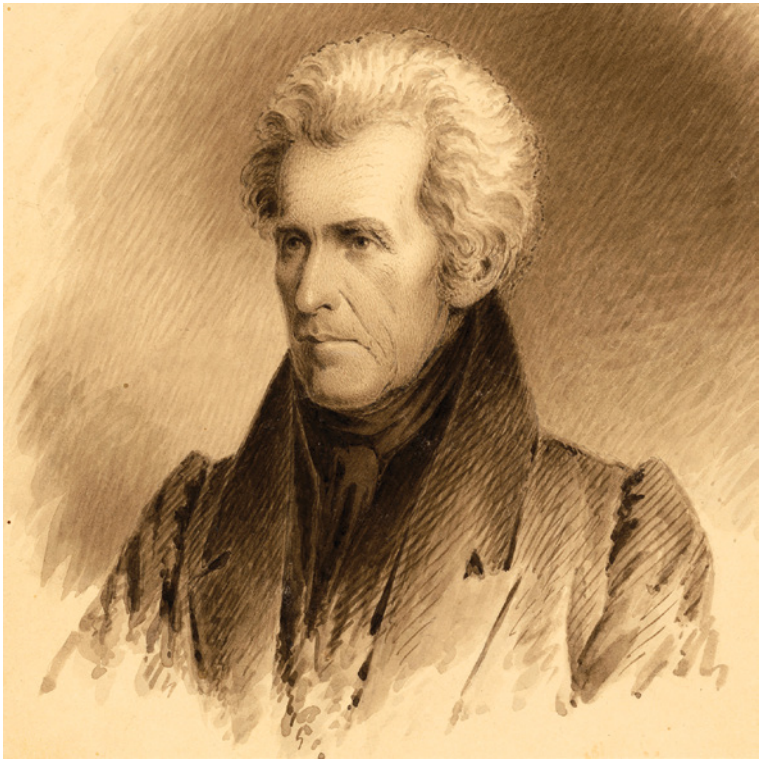
The attacks on West Point that came after 1829 did not originate with President Jackson, but with his supporters, the Jacksonian Democrats, especially those from the West. The political upheaval of 1828 that brought Andrew Jackson to the presidency symbolized the triumph of the "natural" man in American life. The glorification of Jackson by his supporters was exemplified in this eulogy by George Bancroft, the historian and diplomat:

> Behold, then, the unlettered man of the West, the nursling of the wilds, the farmer of the Hermitage, little versed in books, unconnected by science with the tradition of the past, raised by the will of the people to the highest pinnacle of honor, to the central post in the civilization of republican freedom, to the station where all the nations of the earth would watch his actions—where his words would vibrate through the civilized world, and his spirit be the moving star to guide the nations.[5]

The inauguration of Andrew Jackson on March 4, 1829, as the seventh president of the United States marked the beginning of a new era. In the words of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, "The election of General Jackson was a triumph of democratic principle, and an assertion of the people's right to govern themselves."[6] The Jacksonians intended to destroy a system that they saw as giving special privilege to a few, and replace it with one that combined political freedom with social and economic opportunity;

4. James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 20 vols. (New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897–1927), III, 1019.
5. *Memoirs of General Andrew Jackson, Seventh President of the United States* (Auburn, NY: James C. Derby and Company, 1845), 259.
6. Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820–1850*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883), I, 111.

but in appealing to the egalitarian sentiments of American society, they also appealed to its anti-intellectual instincts. The attack on privilege eventually turned its sights on the Military Academy, which the most ardent Jacksonians viewed as an institution that created aristocratic officers for a caste-ridden army. For the Military Academy, the Age of Jacksonian Democracy initiated a crisis of democratic hostility that lasted until the Academy redeemed itself in the Mexican War.[7]



An 1829 portrait of Andrew Jackson. (Painting by James Barton Longacre, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)

7. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 161; Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829–1861* (Macmillan Company, 1963), 265, 208; Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 106–108.

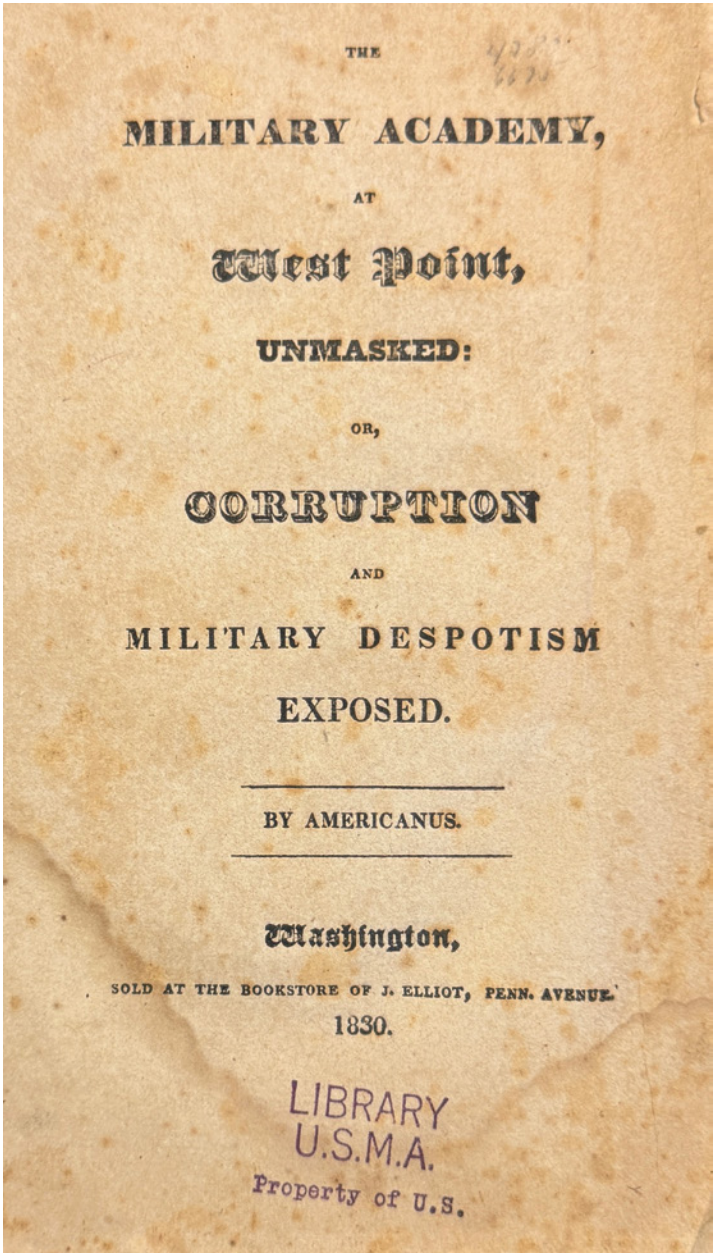
The first serious attack on the Military Academy occurred in January 1830 during the opening session of the new Congress, partially as a result of the efforts of Alden Partridge, who saw in the climate of opinion in Washington an opportunity to generate anti-Academy sentiment. Partridge visited James Blair of South Carolina, a member of the House Committee on Military Affairs, presented him with a list of alleged abuses by Thayer and the Academy, and persuaded Blair to call for a full investigation of West Point. Blair introduced a House resolution calling for the secretary of war to give complete information concerning cadets and financial matters. After a great deal of discussion over wording, the bill was sent to committee for review at the suggestion of Edward Everett of Massachusetts. Fearing that the bill would die in committee, Partridge, under the pseudonym "Americanus," published a pamphlet entitled *The Military Academy, at West Point, Unmasked; or, Corruption and Military Despotism Exposed*. The pamphlet was divided into three parts and was addressed to the members of Congress, the president, and the people of the United States.[8]

The first section of the pamphlet was an attack on the current organization of the Academy:

> There is not on the whole globe an establishment more monarchial, corrupt, and corrupting than this, the very organization of which is a palpable violation of the constitution and laws of the country, and its direct tendency to introduce and build up a privileged order of the very worst classes—a military aristocracy.[9]

8. Denton, "Formative Years," 239–241.

9. Americanus [Alden Partridge], *The Military Academy at West Point, Unmasked; or, Corruption and Military Despotism Exposed*. (Washington, DC: privately printed, 1830), 1. This pamphlet has long been out of print and is difficult to find. Fortunately, there is a transcribed copy in the *Thayer Papers*. All quotes and page numbers refer to that copy.


THE

MILITARY ACADEMY,

AT

West Point,

UNMASKED:

OR,

CORRUPTION

AND

MILITARY DESPOTISM

EXPOSED.

BY AMERICANUS.

Washington,

SOLD AT THE BOOKSTORE OF J. ELLIOT, PENN. AVENUE.

1830.

LIBRARY
U.S.M.A.
Property of U.S.

The cover of Alden Partridge's anonymous 1830 pamphlet attacking the Academy. (United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections.)

His specific objections to the Academy were outlined in thirteen charges. First, the organization of the Academy and the War Department regulations that governed it were in direct violation of the Constitution because no person could receive a military commission unless he had first been educated at West Point. Expressing the sentiment of many Jacksonians, Partridge emphatically stated that "offices of honor, trust, and emolument shall be equally opened to all!" Second, the Military Academy under its present organization had introduced a military aristocracy by allowing only certain individuals (i.e., West Point graduates) to claim and exercise privileges and immunities that the great majority of the people were denied. The third and fourth objections stated that certain academic regulations were in direct violation of the law. Partridge said that the period of encampment had been illegally shortened, and that there was not a single engineer officer attached to the Academy as a military instructor. He specifically charged that the superintendent was incompetent to teach the elementary duties of the soldier, had never commanded a parade since he took over West Point, and could not turn out a corporal's guard correctly. The fifth and sixth objections stated that there were more instructors at the Academy than called for by law, and that the cadets who served as assistant instructors were illegally paid an extra ten dollars per month. Objection seven questioned the financing of the construction of a building used for cadet exercise during cold weather, eight questioned the expense of erecting a public house or tavern on the Academy grounds, and nine asked why all publications about the Academy by persons attached to it were prohibited. The tenth objection charged that cadets were punished by laboring at the wheelbarrow. Eleven stated that the superintendent had illegally called for courts of inquiry. The twelfth claimed that in 1827 an individual not subject to martial law had been seized by military force and confined to the guardhouse at West Point. Finally, the last objection noted that

the pay of cadets had been unlawfully stopped, and that an excess amount of funds had been spent in construction at the Academy.[10]

In the second part of the pamphlet, Partridge summed up his case to Congress by calling for the reorganization of the Military Academy. He proposed to restrict the Corps of Engineers to those duties specified in the laws of 1802 and 1812. He intended to abolish the whole system of cadets and to fill vacancies in the officer corps with candidates appointed from the various states and with deserving noncommissioned officers. All newly appointed officers would then report to West Point where they would be put through a six-month course of practical instruction. Finally, Partridge wanted to place a capable officer of first-rate experience and talent at the head of this school of practice.[11]

In the third part of the polemic, addressed to the president, Partridge launched a personal attack on Lieutenant Colonel Thayer, Captain David B. Douglass, and Claudius Berard. Partridge's accusations were the same grudge stories he had been circulating for years. In one case, he referred to an incident that had occurred sixteen years earlier. Partridge said that Thayer had acquired "a fictitious importance and popularity, with a certain class of persons, to which it is believed, neither his merits nor his real consequence, aside from circumstances, give him any claims."[12] Partridge then leveled nine allegations against Thayer: repeatedly violating the Rules and Articles of War by ordering illegal courts of inquiry; making a false report concerning certain events that took place on August 29–30, 1817 (i.e., that Partridge had illegally and forcibly assumed command after the dispute over quarters); charging double rations and receiving pay when he was absent from West Point for nearly three weeks in August and September 1817; subjecting Cadets Loring, Fairfax, Ragland, Holmes, and Vining to tyrannical and unjust treatment; arbitrarily stopping the pay of cadets in repeated instances; violating

10. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 2–6.
11. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 7–8.
12. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 9.

the law by confining one or more persons to the guardhouse at West Point who were not subject to martial law; not personally giving military and other instruction to cadets, thus being guilty of neglect of duty; inflicting degrading punishments on cadets at West Point by putting them to work at the wheelbarrow; and authorizing corporal punishment in direct violation of the law. Partridge charged Douglass with defrauding members of the Company of Bombardiers, Sappers, and Miners of part of their rations during a march from Buffalo to West Point in 1814 and with beating one of the privates during that march. Claudius Berard was charged with selling cheap watches to cadets in violation of Academy regulations.[13]

Partridge topped these allegations with the unkindest cut of all: that West Point was not worth its $200,000 annual cost because it did not produce good officers, saying, "The effeminate and pedantic system now practised [*sic*] at West Point, is, the last of all, calculated to form efficient officers for active service."[14] Partridge also charged that the Academy was not truly a national seminary, and that vacancies at West Point were filled unfairly:

> I have, myself, known the sons of members of congress appointed cadets, whose fathers were in very affluent circumstances, out of the ordinary time of making such appointments; and without recommendations, unless by their fathers; and at the same time, the sons of honest, industrious, and useful citizens, whose pecuniary circumstances did not permit of their giving their sons a public education, put by, or entirely rejected; although their recommendations were of the most respectable and favorable character.[15]

Partridge then criticized Congressman Everett for sending Blair's bill to committee. The opposition of a few congressmen

13. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 9–13.
14. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 13.
15. Americanus, *Military Academy*, 15.

to an inquiry into matters at West Point was evidence enough to Partridge that something was rotten on the banks of the Hudson. He predicted that the bill would never make it back into the House because two committee members had sons at West Point.

William Drayton of South Carolina, the committee chairman, and Joseph Vance of Ohio, the second most powerful man on the committee, did, indeed, have sons who were cadets, but Partridge was incorrect in assuming that a few men would thwart the majority's will. On January 26, 1830, the committee offered a resolution to the House requesting that the War Department furnish extensive and detailed information concerning cadet applications and appointments, as well as records of Academy expenses from its founding until 1829. Although not as comprehensive as Partridge wanted, this initial victory must have pleased him.[16]

Thayer's friends in Congress kept him abreast of events, and he was disturbed by the reports from Washington. Vance and Drayton told Thayer not to worry about the committee resolution, that Alden Partridge was behind the attack, and that they believed in the correctness of Thayer's administration. However, to reinforce Thayer's case, they suggested that anything necessary to Thayer's "defense" should be forwarded to them.[17]

This hardly gave Lieutenant Colonel Thayer much encouragement. He did not take lightly a possible congressional investigation of himself or the Academy. Although innocent of any wrongdoing, Thayer knew that Alden Partridge was capable of creating a great deal of trouble and embarrassment. Publicly, Thayer maintained a stoic silence, but privately he fretted. Years later, he called Partridge a bundle of deceit and hypocrisy, unfortunately as artful and plausible as he was revengeful and malevolent. Thayer said that under other circumstances, Partridge would have been another Tartuffe.[18]

16. *ASPMA*, IV, 307; Denton, "Formative Years," 245–246.
17. Joseph Vance to Thayer, January 29, 1830, *Thayer Papers*.
18. Thayer to Swift, April 23, 1860, *Thayer Papers*. ["Tartuffe" here refers to a hypocrite pretending to be moral but actually being self-serving or corrupt, just as the character by that name in Molière's 1664 farce.—Ed.]

Thayer again consulted with Congressman Vance on how matters stood in Washington, and Vance reassured him by reporting that Blair of South Carolina had now come around to their side. Completely disgusted with Partridge, Blair stated in public that Partridge was a vindictive and disappointed man. Vance also cautioned, "Under the present state of parties it would not be advisable for my name to appear as your personal friend either before the War Dept or elsewhere." For Thayer's "amusement," he enclosed a copy of Partridge's pamphlet.[19]

Thayer also turned for advice to General Charles Gratiot, who had become the chief engineer in 1828. He assured Thayer that Partridge's attack would not amount to much and advised the superintendent to take no public action. Nevertheless, Gratiot warned that although the motive behind Partridge's activities was well known to many, he still had the power to poison the minds of some. Gratiot also suggested that Thayer collect evidence that might be needed in the future and offered to open the files of the Engineer Department to Thayer, telling him:

> The files of the office can furnish a great deal that would go far to destroy him, particularly as respects these points of his accusations relating to expenditures, unlawful punishments, etc., copies of which can be handed to you, for your amusement, if wanted.[20]

While the information requested by the House committee was being gathered, another attack on the Academy came from a new direction. On February 25, Congressman Davy Crockett of Tennessee introduced a resolution calling for the complete abolition of the Military Academy on the grounds that its cadets were frequently the sons of the rich, while the sons of the poor were often neglected. He called the institution "aristocratic" and argued that

19. Vance to Thayer, February 8, 1830, *Thayer Papers*.
20. Gratiot to Thayer, February 11, 1830, *Thayer Papers*.

its existence was in violation of the Constitution. Nothing came of his resolution.[21]

Early in March 1830, Thayer again wrote to Vance asking what steps, if any, should be taken to remove any suspicions concerning the administration of the Academy. Vance replied that he did not believe the hostile feeling toward West Point was either general or serious. While a few members of Congress were opposed to West Point, this had always been the case. A large majority of the members of the House was decidedly in favor of sustaining the Military Academy. He assured Thayer:

> No member of Congress of either political party having the least knowledge of yourself or associates entertains towards you, or them, any other feeling, than those of great respect and entire confidence.[22]

On March 15, 1830, the long-awaited report on the Academy was given to the House of Representatives by the War Department. It was divided into seven parts and contained a register of all cadets who had attended the Academy; a register of applicants who were given cadet warrants, but who failed to report or did not obtain admission; a register of rejected applicants by state; a register listing the names of all professors, instructors, and other officers employed at the Academy, along with their pay and emoluments; a statement of the annual expenses of the institution; a statement showing the annual pay and emoluments of the professors, instructors, cadets, and all others employed at West Point; and a statement exhibiting the amount of money spent at the Academy for the construction of buildings, the purchase of books and maps, and the pay and subsistence of professors, officers, cadets, and others.[23]

As a bombshell, the report was a dud. There was nothing in it that substantiated any of Partridge's allegations. The major

21. *Niles' Weekly Register*, March 13, 1830, XXXVIII, 59.
22. Vance to Thayer, March 9, 1830, *Thayer Papers*.
23. *ASPMA*, IV, 307–364.

criticism of the Academy concerned the method of selecting cadets. Only Davy Crockett tried to make political hay out of the report by calling for the printing of 6,000 copies to help elect men to Congress who would abolish the Academy. Publication of the report failed to create any excitement, and one congressman complained that the report had cost the government $1,700 to print and was not worth 17 cents.[24]



Tennessee Congressman Davy Crockett, 1834. (Painting by Chester Harding, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)

24. Denton, "Formative Years," 250; *Niles' Weekly Register*, April 17, 1830, XXXVIII, 151.

Although blunted, attacks on the Military Academy continued. West Point was the favorite target of several western Jacksonian congressmen who saw it as a hotbed of military elitism. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, who was in Congress at this time, stated in his biography that he had always been against the Military Academy. He based his criticism on the grounds that common soldiers could not rise in the ranks and become officers, as they could in certain European countries, since West Point graduates had a "monopoly" on these positions. Only a select few could get into the Academy without family connections or political influence. Finally, he argued that many cadets left the military service soon after receiving their education at public expense.[25]

The attacks on the Academy continued until the Mexican War, when, as a member of the Board of Visitors said in 1848, West Point "fought itself into favor." Although troublesome, these attacks were ultimately unsuccessful for a number of reasons. First, they were more noisy than powerful. What appeared to be widespread criticism actually emanated from the pen of one man, Alden Partridge, and his "Americanus" article probably did more to weaken his cause than help it.[26] The editors of the *North American Review*, a contemporary journal of some importance, criticized Partridge because:

> His pamphlet is strongly tinctured with prejudice; his assertions are, in many instances, notoriously unfounded; and his reflections upon particular individuals, are rather too indicative of disappointed ambition and personal resentment.[27]

Further, the western congressmen at this time were not powerful enough to threaten seriously the existence of the Military Academy. Their attacks were more in the nature of harassing resolutions than

25. Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, I, 182–186.
26. Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 151, 173.
27. "Military Academy," *North American Review*, XXXIV (January 1832), 258.

frontal assaults, and their thundering in Congress gained little popular support.[28]

Finally, the specific criticisms of West Point were weak, and so gained little sympathy or support from congressmen, voters, or influential citizens. The argument that the Academy was unconstitutional lacked substance. The charge of favoritism, while seemingly valid, was not really conclusive. Members of Congress were usually the agents for dispensing cadet warrants, and there was, in general, an attempt to have a cadet appointed from each congressional district. On the whole, appointments for the Military Academy were less influenced by partisan politics than appointments in any other branch of government. Once a young man received a cadet warrant, there was no guarantee either that he would be admitted or that he would remain at the Academy long enough to graduate. An appreciable number of cadets were the sons and relatives of the famous and powerful, but that was more an indicator of the importance of the Academy in national affairs than proof of a flagrant admissions patronage system. The objection that, after having been educated at government expense, young men often resigned their commissions in the Army was true, but two important points should be noted. First, the Army was not large enough to absorb all the graduates. Second, their education provided the nation with a ready resource of untapped military talent.[29]

In addition to the congressional attacks, Lieutenant Colonel Thayer soon found himself involved in conflict with the commanding general of the Army, Alexander Macomb. In May 1831, General Macomb directed Inspector General John Wool to inspect the Military Academy. When informed of the impending visit, Thayer objected that such a course of action appeared to be in violation of the regulations governing the Military Academy and requested

28. Denton, "Formative Years," 250–251.
29. "Academy at West Point," *American Quarterly Review*, XVI (December 1834), 373–374; "Military Academy," *North American Review*, XXXIV, 254–256; Erasmus D. Keyes, *Fifty Years' Observation of Men and Events, Civil and Military* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), 190.

that the inspection be postponed until the matter could be clarified. Wool refused, on the grounds that it was reasonable to assume the commanding general was aware of the regulations governing the Military Academy and had acted in accordance with the instructions of the secretary of war.[30]

The inspection took place, and Lieutenant Colonel Thayer wrote an angry letter to the chief engineer:

> This was the first instance since the establishment of the Academy in which the General commanding the Army had ever attempted to exercise any control over the Institution. I say control because it cannot be denied that the power of inspecting involves in its consequences that of controlling or directing. Such a power assumed too far the first time seemed to me utterly inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Army Regulations and subservient to the rights and authority of the regular inspector.[31]

Thayer did not care how often West Point was inspected or by whom, but he was interested in finding out

> whether the Academy is to be subject to the inspections and control of two separate and independent authorities or in other words whether it be expected of me to please two masters which, with the best intentions on my part, would, I doubt not, be found quite impossible.[32]

General Gratiot, in turn, strongly complained to General Macomb about the inspection. Gratiot said that the chief of the Corps of Engineers was the sole inspector of the Military Academy, and that all orders relating to it should pass through his department.

30. John E. Wool to Thayer, May 25, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*
31. Thayer to Gratiot, June 26, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*
32. Thayer to Gratiot, June 26, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*

General Macomb disagreed. An earlier ruling by the attorney general had determined that the Military Academy and the cadets were a part of the regular military establishment. Therefore, Macomb saw no impropriety in West Point's being subject to inspection by a regularly constituted inspector general as provided for in the regulations. The chief engineer, according to Macomb, was the inspector of the Military Academy, but not the sole inspector.[33]



On the left is a coat believed to have been owned by Thayer while superintendent. On the right is a photo from the 1850s or 1860s showing him wearing what appears to be the same coat. (Coat is from the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy. Photo is of unknown origin.)

33. Gratiot to Macomb, July 9, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy*; Macomb to Gratiot, August 4, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*

Lieutenant Colonel Thayer had little time to wonder about the correctness of this decision, for other matters, centering on presidential interference with discipline at West Point, occupied much of his time. When Jackson first became president, it appeared that he and his secretary of war, John Eaton, would support Thayer's administration of West Point as former presidents and secretaries had done. Thayer's control of cadets depended on strict enforcement of Academy regulations. Punishment at the Academy could take a number of forms. Minor offenses generally resulted in extra guard duty or a number of demerits, while serious offenses were brought before a duly appointed court-martial board, with the ultimate punishment being dismissal. Decisions of court-martials were reviewed by the secretary of war as a matter of course, and occasionally by the president, either of whom could overturn the court's recommendation and remit the punishment. President Jackson, who knew nothing about the Academy, its officers, its course of instruction, or its problems, soon intruded his personal prejudice.[34]

When the cadets realized that they might receive a sympathetic hearing from Jackson, it became common practice to appeal almost all dismissals. Even those who had been discharged for poor academic standing wrote to the War Department asking to be reinstated.

The appeals became so frequent that Secretary Eaton issued an order stating that he would not examine the case of every cadet dismissed by the Academic Board:

> All applications, then, for a reversal of any decision recommended by the Academic Board, must be accompanied by some satisfactory showing, that injustice has been done to the party complaining.[35]

34. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 64; Denton, "Formative Years," 252.
35. "Orders Issued by the Secretary of War While at West Point in June 1830," in Thayer to Gratiot, August 8, 1830, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*

This reduced the number of appeals relating to academic deficiencies, but it did not stop cadets from appealing cases involving violations of the Academy's many regulations.

In an effort to prove to the secretary of war the futility of reinstating former cadets, in July 1831, Lieutenant Colonel Thayer sent via the Engineer Department a roll listing those cadets who had been reinstated or reappointed between July 1, 1822, and December 31, 1830. The total number of cadets on the list was sixty. Of that number, twenty-eight had been discharged again, twenty-one had resigned, one had been dismissed, and ten were presently enrolled at West Point. None of the reinstated cadets had yet managed to graduate. Yet in spite of Thayer's protests, reappointments continued.[36]

Politics had always played a role in cadet appointments. One of the earliest cadets appointed during the first year of Jackson's presidency was H. Ariel Norris, who came from a "hotbed of Jacksonian influence" in New York City. Older than his classmates, Cadet Norris may have been over the legal limit, since there is no mention of his age in Academy records. Although he was quite studious and had a respectable academic ranking, he was one of the worst offenders in conduct. During his first years at the Academy, his class standing was as follows:

	ACADEMIC STANDING	CONDUCT	OVERALL RANK
1830	10th	96 demerits	136th
1831	14th	222 demerits	214th
1832	17th	181 demerits	190th

His preconceived democratic notions were clearly in opposition to many of the regulations.[37]

36. Thayer to Gratiot, July 25, 1831, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy*. Three of the ten cadets on Thayer's list did eventually graduate: Charles B. Chalmers, William S. Ketchum, and James M. Wells.
37. "Memo as to Cadet Norris' Former Conduct," *Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General: Proceedings of the Court Martial of Cadet H. Ariel Norris*, August 1832.

Cadet Norris's troubles began in the spring of 1831, when he and three other cadets were discovered playing cards in the barracks, a clear-cut violation of Academy regulations.[38] Cadet Norris based his defense, such as it was, on the rather unique argument that he had joined the game with great reluctance. He added that the game was being played during the period for recreation, and that if it had carried over a few minutes into the time for study, this was not the fault of the players because none had heard the signal for study hours. His defense also included the following political statement:

> To the high Officer from whom I received my appointment, I consider myself accountable in an especial manner for my treatment of his generosity; on his account chiefly it is that I feel my deepest regret for having departed from my duty; I can support the charge of breaking a rule of discipline but I cannot suffer him to believe I have disgraced his patronage so far as to devote the Idleness of a paltry & pitiful amusement [during] those hours reserved for the Highest of our duties—our Academic Studies.[39]

This argument may have gratified the Jacksonian Democrat who had obtained Norris's cadet warrant, but it did little to move the members of the court. Norris was found guilty and sentenced to be dismissed from the Academy. His appeal to the secretary of war was more effective; Norris and the other cadets involved in the incident were reinstated.

Cadet Norris was soon in trouble again; he was court-martialed for taking a musket from the guardroom of the Corps of Cadets.

38. "No cadet shall play at cards, or any other game of chance, nor bring or cause to be brought, into either the barracks or camp, nor shall have in his room, or otherwise in his possession, the cards or other materials used in these games, on point of being dismissed the service of the United States." "Military Academy," *Register of the Army and Navy of the United States*, 1830 (1), 95.—Ed.
39. *Proceedings of the Court Martial of Cadet H. Ariel Norris*, March 1831.

Found guilty of improper conduct and neglect of duty, he was sentenced to be publicly reprimanded.[40]

During the spring of 1831, Cadet Norris saw fit to express his satisfaction with Jackson's support by erecting a hickory pole in the center of the parade ground. This was so obviously a violation of propriety and good order that Lieutenant Colonel Thayer rebuked the cadet. Norris saw to it that the rebuke was reported to the president with the implication that Thayer was anti-Jackson.[41]

Deeply disturbed by infringements on his prerogatives as superintendent, Thayer was driven to the extreme of no longer asking for court-martials; instead, each case was sent directly to the War Department for decision and action. Thayer summed up his feelings in a bitter note to his old friend, General Swift. The general's nephew, Cadet Julius Adams, was dismissed from the Academy for an infringement of the regulations, and the decision had been forwarded to Washington for approval. Thayer told Swift that there was no longer anything he or the authorities at the Academy could do about Cadet Adams's impending dismissal and referred Swift to Jackson:

> The only source of hope is in the President who is in the habit of dispensing with the most important regulations of the Academy in favor of his friends in spite of the Academic Authorities & the Secretary of War himself. I do not see why he will not be as likely to yield to any solicitations from the friends of Cadet Adams as to those of others in behalf of their relations. The chances of success would, in my opinion, be as 3 to 1.[42]

The rest of the academic year was relatively quiet. The Board of Visitors in June was highly gratified by the results of the examination and the deportment of the cadets. As for the superintendent, the commander-in-chief of the Army, General Macomb, reported:

40. *Proceedings of the Court Martial of Cadet H. Ariel Norris*, May 1831.
41. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 65; Denton, "Formative Years," 255.
42. Thayer to Swift, February 29, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.

> Your assiduity did not escape the notice of the Members of the Board—they have all gone away impressed with a correct Idea of your dilligence [*sic*], intelligence, perserverance [*sic*] & ability to fulfil the duties assigned you in a superior manner—without flattery, I am able to assure you that your character stands if possible higher than ever—a character the most amiable of any one in the Army & equal to that of any out of it.[43]

Shortly thereafter, in July, Colonel Gratiot proposed that in consideration of the length of time Thayer had been superintendent and the highly satisfactory manner in which those duties had been performed, he be given a brevet promotion to full colonel. Thayer did not receive the promotion at this time, and perhaps one of the reasons was that he was involved in an argument with Secretary of War Lewis Cass, who became secretary in 1831 when the Eaton Affair forced Jackson to reorganize his cabinet.[44] Thayer complained to Gratiot that furloughs granted by the superintendent to certain cadets had been extended at their request by the secretary of war. Thayer correctly pointed out that the superintendent's authority to grant leaves of absence allowed him to reward and encourage meritorious conduct.[45]

During the summer encampment, there were more problems with Cadet Norris. On August 26, Norris was discovered absent from his tent and ordered to be court-martialed for violation of paragraph 107 of Military Academy regulations, which stated:

> No Cadet shall visit during the hours of study, or between tattoo and reveille, nor be absent from his room

43. Macomb to Thayer, June 26, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.
44. Also known as the Petticoat Affair. Peggy Eaton, the wife of Secretary of War John Eaton, was ostracized by John C. Calhoun's wife, Floride, and others connected to Jackson's cabinet. The toxicity of the atmosphere exacerbated political divides and led to resignations and new appointments, as well as the president's increasing reliance on an unofficial Kitchen Cabinet.—Ed.
45. Thayer to Gratiot, July 29, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.

> at those times for any purpose, without permission from the proper authority.[46]

Cadet Norris pleaded guilty to the specification, i.e., absent from his tent, but not guilty to the charge. With a legalistic twist, Norris argued that he had not been absent from his "room" but from his "tent," and paragraph 107 referred specifically to "room." The court did not accept his argument, and he was found guilty and again sentenced to be dismissed from the Academy.[47]

Norris then took his case to President Jackson in Washington. Once again, he argued that paragraph 107 had nothing to do with summer camp when cadets resided in tents instead of barracks. He explained:

> Around the barrack there is *no guard after tattoo*, whence *cadets can leave the barrack & the limits*; the requisition, that Cadets when absent shall, in barracks, give an account of themselves, arises from that circumstance. In camp, Cadets cannot leave the ground and it is as absurd to require proof of their not going beyond limits, as to require proof of a man's presence when he is in a dungeon under bar & bolt.[48]

Norris closed his case to Jackson with the plea that dismissal from the Academy for being absent from a tent for fifty to sixty minutes was a case of the punishment exceeding the crime. He asked Jackson to rebuke the court and set aside its proceedings and to restore him in rank and station.[49]

46. U.S. Military Academy, *Regulations of the U.S. Military Academy, at West Point* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 29.
47. *Norris Court Martial*, August 1832.
48. "On the Case of Cadet Norris to the President," *Norris Court Martial*, August 1832.
49. "Appeal of the Case of Cadet Norris, by Andrew Jackson, 30 October 1832," *Norris Court Martial*, August 1832.

President Jackson accepted the cadet's appeal, and Norris was ordered to be reinstated in the Military Academy. Thayer and the staff were outraged that a cadet who had been court-martialed three times was now reinstated for a second time. Very much distressed by what was taking place at the Academy, the instructor of tactics, Captain Hitchcock, observed:

> The temper of the whole corps had become more or less corrupted, so that, instead of looking upon the professors and officers as their friends working for their advancement in life, they regarded them rather as enemies seeking occasion to punish them.[50]

Hitchcock was so dissatisfied with the state of affairs that he requested permission to go to Washington to convince Jackson of the importance of strict observance of Academy regulations. Although Lieutenant Colonel Thayer could not give an order for such a mission, he wished the captain well and instructed him to say that if the regulations did not meet with the president's approval, they would be modified until they did. Hitchcock arrived in Washington on November 24, 1832, well prepared to lay the subject before the president.[51]

President Jackson saw the captain and listened to his statements without visible emotion. When Jackson started speaking of the "tyranny" of Lieutenant Colonel Thayer, however, he became very excited. Rising from his chair and swinging his arms as if in a rage, Jackson began to speak of the case of Cadet Norris. Hitchcock observed that Jackson had been misinformed. The president stormed that the autocrat of the Russias could not exercise more power than Thayer. Captain Hitchcock, by now equally excited, replied, "Mr. President, you are misinformed on this subject and do not understand it."[52]

50. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 66.
51. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 66.
52. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 67.

Jackson's attitude immediately changed when he saw that Captain Hitchcock would not be cowed by a display of presidential anger. Discussing the case more rationally, the president stated that in putting up the hickory pole, Cadet Norris had done only what people in New York and elsewhere had been doing. Hitchcock countered by remarking that people everywhere might do a great many things that cadets at West Point could not. It was, he explained, not proper for cadets at the Military Academy to make political demonstrations on the parade ground instead of attending to their studies. The interview ended with Jackson asking Hitchcock to send General Gratiot in to see him at once. Gratiot later reported that the president had ordered two officers to examine the academic regulations to determine if they needed to be amended. After a few weeks, it was reported that no changes were needed. Yet a few months later, Jackson again interfered in discipline at the Academy, showing that he was determined to impose his own will despite Academy regulations.[53]

While Hitchcock was visiting the president, Lieutenant Colonel Thayer was coming to the conclusion that he could no longer be an effective superintendent if the president and the secretary of war continued to disrupt internal discipline. His mind was not yet made up when he wrote an unofficial letter to Secretary Cass, saying:

> From what has occurred during the present year & especially from the nature of certain recent orders to which I need not allude more particularly I am led to believe that there is something at this Institution which does not altogether meet with the Presidents [*sic*] approbation, but I am at a loss to conjecture whether the dissatisfaction, if such really exists, relates to persons or things.[54]

53. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 67.
54. Thayer to Cass, November 26, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer said that if the president wanted Thayer or someone else removed from the Academy, that was easily accomplished. Then Thayer asked, "Has a single abuse or act of maladministration during these fourteen years been presented to the notice of the Government . . . ? If so I am utterly ignorant of it." If necessary, Thayer called for a three-man board having the confidence of the president to come to West Point to discuss matters, review regulations, and report their opinions to the president.[55]

Thayer did not receive an immediate reply to his letter, but West Point was soon visited by the two officers sent by Jackson to examine the academic regulations, Generals Jones and Jessup, who were accompanied by General Gratiot in an ex-officio capacity. The two found no reason to alter the regulations, but they did make two changes in the court-martial procedure. The first made the War Department the appointing authority; the second required that the court investigate and report all facts in a case, even when the accused entered a guilty plea.[56]

In December 1832, a general court-martial appointed by the War Department met at West Point. The court was exceptional because it was made up of several high-ranking officers: three generals, four colonels, three majors, and four captains. The court heard a few minor cases and was dissolved. Because no officers from the Academy were allowed to sit on the court, it was looked on as a rebuke to Thayer's administration.[57]

Thayer was now convinced that it was time for him to leave the Academy. He talked the matter over with the chief engineer in early December. As a result of their conversation, Thayer, intending to write a letter of explanation later, gave Gratiot a letter of resignation to be given to Secretary Cass at a later date.[58]

55. Thayer to Cass, November 26, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.
56. Denton, "Formative Years," 271–272.
57. Denton, "Formative Years," 271–272.
58. Denton, "Formative Years," 277.

The reply to Thayer's earlier letter to Secretary Cass, which came late in December, gave Thayer some encouragement: "There is not in the mind of the President the slightest shade of unkindly feeling towards you. . . . He has great respect for you, and he has expressed it to me many times." But Cass also pointed out that Jackson had his own ideas concerning the government of West Point. The secretary admitted that until recently he had held similar views, but after conversations with several individuals, among them former Secretary of War John Eaton, his impressions had somewhat altered. In conclusion, he assured Lieutenant Colonel Thayer, "The state of affairs at the Academy is good. The temporary difficulties have disappeared and I imagine when they existed they were greatly overrated. Dismiss the whole subject from your mind."[59]

Involved in another crisis, Thayer had little time to be reassured by the words of the secretary of war. On December 26, 1832, General Gratiot sent Thayer a copy of the *Charleston Mercury* dated December 19, which had been sent to him by Cass from President Jackson. The newspaper reported on the proceedings of the "Young Men's State Rights and Free Trade Association." The association had been formed to oppose the passage in 1828 of a high protective tariff, called the "tariff of abominations" by the South. The state of South Carolina took the lead in opposing the tariff, and John C. Calhoun, repudiating his earlier championship of nationalism, became the acknowledged head of the Southern State Rights Party. In July 1832, Jackson had signed a new tariff that, while lowering the tariff of 1828, still remained clearly protectionist. A state convention met in South Carolina in November and declared the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 null and void within the state after February 1. Calhoun later resigned as Jackson's vice president.

Sentiments were running high over the nullification crisis, and Jackson gave every indication that he would use force if necessary to settle the issue. The edition of the *Charleston Mercury* sent to

59. Cass to Thayer, December 27, 1832, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer reported that Southern cadets at West Point stood ready to march at a moment's notice to support South Carolina and defend the cause of nullification. President Jackson, already taking a dim view of West Point and aware of the close relationship between Thayer and Calhoun, was outraged by the report and asked Cass to investigate.[60]

Thayer reported to Gratiot that the cadets from South Carolina as well as others to whom he had spoken, while acquainted with the facts, disclaimed all knowledge of any resolutions proposed by the Young Men's State Rights and Free Trade Association. Thayer confidently stated that there had been no proceedings at West Point that would verify the statement in the Charleston paper and enclosed a copy of a letter from a cadet to the *Mercury* that declared that no such resolutions had been adopted by Southern cadets. In the controversy between the United States and South Carolina, the Southern cadets, no matter what their sentiments, felt duty and honor bound to remain neutral, at least for the present.[61]

Now compounding the many problems facing Thayer and West Point was this additional issue of sectionalism. Thayer realized that it was time for him to leave the Academy. He was no Alden Partridge. He did not whine or beg to stay, nor did he imply that West Point could not get along without him. Early in January 1833, Sylvanus Thayer wrote to General Gratiot tendering his resignation as superintendent of the Military Academy and requesting that he be relieved as soon as possible. Enclosed with his resignation was a private communication to the chief engineer:

> My engagements during the examination were such as prevented me from writing the letter with which I had intended to accompany the act of resignation. That letter is still unwritten & as it has become of little consequence

60. Denton, "Formative Years," 275–276.
61. Thayer to Gratiot, December 31, 1832, and "To the Editor of the *Charleston Mercury* from a Cadet from South Carolina 1 January 1833," in Thayer to Gratiot, January 2, 1833, *Correspondence Relating to the Military Academy.*

> I shall omit writing it only requesting that you will present the letter of resignation enclosed herewith instead of that which I handed to you at West Point.[62]

When Secretary Cass received Thayer's resignation, he instructed Gratiot to say that it would be acted on at the proper time and that the secretary refused to recognize the principle, implied in Thayer's resignation, that an officer possessed the right to decline a service. On March 3, 1833 Thayer was finally promoted to the rank of a full brevet colonel for faithful service of ten years in one rank.[63] The next day, Andrew Jackson was again inaugurated as president of the United States. Then, in spite of the veiled threat not to let Thayer resign, his resignation was accepted in March, and he was given the choice of superintending the building of fortifications in either New York or Boston Harbor. Thayer's choice was Boston, which was very close to his childhood home of Braintree.[64]

Colonel Thayer kept busy during his last months at the Academy preparing for his new assignment. Little had been done to effect a system of fortifications in Boston, and it looked as if the Boston project would occupy his time for quite a while. Thayer asked for and received funds amounting to $685 to purchase needed instruments and was busily ordering precision instruments from an agent in London. He was given permission to take with him a sextant and box compass that had been left at West Point by Captain Douglass. Looking forward to his new assignment, he did not appear to regret leaving West Point and its many problems, political and otherwise. He wrote to his old friend General Swift, "The change, altho' delayed some years too long, will, as I flatter myself, prove to be an advantageous one, as far at least as regards my health, purse, & comfort."[65]

62. Thayer to Gratiot, undated January 1833, *Thayer Papers*.
63. Despite this promotion, Thayer continues to be addressed as and to sign his letters as Brevet Lieutenant Colonel for years. See Thayer to Gratiot, July 6, 1834, *Thayer Papers*, and Mather to Thayer, March 4, 1835, *Thayer Papers*.—Ed.
64. Gratiot to Thayer, February 1 and March 14, 1833, *Thayer Papers*.
65. Thayer to Swift, undated 1833, *Thayer Papers*.

He was to be replaced by Major René E. De Russy, a distinguished engineer who had graduated from the Academy in 1812. Captain Ethan A. Hitchcock had also decided to leave West Point and join his regiment in the Northwest; he remained at West Point during the summer of 1833 to help in the transition. Hitchcock was succeeded as Commandant of Cadets and instructor of tactics by a non-Academy graduate, Major John Fowle.[66]

Ironically, Thayer and Hitchcock were not the only ones to leave the Academy at this time. During the academic year, Cadet Norris had accumulated 225 demerits. Because a regulation adopted in 1831 stipulated that any cadet who had received more than 200 demerits in the course of a year would be discharged, Cadet Norris was once again recommended for dismissal. In spite of strong appeals from Norris and others in New York, Secretary Cass and President Jackson this time upheld the decision of the Academic Board.[67]

To avoid any public demonstration, Colonel Thayer kept the exact date of his departure secret. One afternoon, a few days after the close of the June examination, a few of the officers strolled down to the dock to greet the boat from New York City. Colonel Thayer was there, as he had often been before. As the boat came in, Thayer suddenly turned to the waiting officers, and to their astonishment, he shook hands with them, said goodbye, and stepped aboard. He never had the heart to return to West Point.[68]

The conflict between Jackson and Thayer had both military and political aspects. Jackson, essentially an untaught general, put his faith in the militia system, while Thayer saw professionalism as the key to a successful military policy. Their disagreement may also have been an offshoot of the feud between President Jackson and Vice President Calhoun over the tariff of 1828. The growing bitterness and hostility that Jackson felt for Calhoun may

66. Croffut, *Hitchcock Diary*, 67–68; Denton, "Formative Years," 279.
67. Denton, "Formative Years," 279.
68. Cram, "Extracts," 37–38.

have prejudiced the president against Thayer, who maintained a close relationship with Calhoun. This hypothesis could bear more investigation.



Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Sylvanus Thayer, 1832. If the date is correct, this was Thayer close to the end of his superintendency. (Painting by Thomas Sully, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

There have been attempts to show that Jackson was unduly influenced against Thayer by his nephew, Andrew J. Donelson. This seems unlikely. Donelson showed no hostility toward Thayer or gave any indication that he actively sought his removal as superintendent; relations between Donelson and Thayer were friendly on the surface. No serious case has been made that Donelson "poisoned" Jackson's mind against Thayer.[69]

There was really no question over the ultimate authority at the Academy—Jackson could have had Thayer removed or transferred at any time. Although many Jacksonians viewed West Point as an evil institution that had to be destroyed, President Jackson never attacked West Point or questioned its utility. His quarrel with Thayer was over discipline, and it was a quarrel between two strong-willed men. Jackson too often let political considerations color his decisions concerning academic dismissals. While Thayer tended to be severe in his punishments, Jackson was more flexible and overlooked what he considered minor infractions of the rules. Thayer had administered the Academy longer than Jackson had been president, and he felt that he knew what was best for the Academy. To be a successful superintendent, Thayer had to have the support of the president and the secretary of war. When this support was no longer available, Thayer knew he had to resign.

In 1835, only two years after Thayer left the Academy, Jackson made the following statement:

> I had hoped that a lenient system of administration would be found sufficient for the government of the Military Academy—but I have been disappointed: and it is now time to be more rigorous in enforcing its discipline. If

69. Cram said (p. 30) that tradition had it that Donelson left the Academy with the feeling of disapproval over Thayer's administration, but he had no proof that the tradition was true. In a footnote in *Soldiers and Civilians* (p. 262), Cunliffe says that Donelson believed the Academy was being mismanaged and conveyed this impression to his uncle, Andrew Jackson. But neither offers sufficient evidence to prove these speculations.

> the young men who are sent and educated there by their country, will not demean themselves as they are required to do by the regulations, they must suffer the prescribed punishments. Hereafter, therefore, the sentence of courts martial will when legal and regular be confirmed, and the punishment will be remitted only in cases recommended by them, or where the circumstances may appear so very favorable as to justify such a measure.[70]

Too late, but Thayer had been vindicated.

70. Extracted from *United States Military Academy Post Order Book*, VI, 351–352. United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections.

IX

Thayer the Engineer, 1833–1858



In the nineteenth century, and indeed until the age of the ICBMs, the first line of defense for the United States was the Navy, and the second, the seacoast fortifications. Construction of these fortifications was the oldest peacetime function of the Corps of Engineers and constituted one of the Army's major activities between wars. One of the most important locations on the Atlantic Coast was Boston Harbor. The water was very navigable, the approach to dockside relatively easy, and the inner harbor full of shipping at all times. In the first part of the nineteenth century, Boston was second only to New York in maritime commerce and thus required a comprehensive system of fortifications.[1]

Going from superintendent of the Military Academy to superintendent of Boston Harbor's fortifications was a downward step for Sylvanus Thayer. He lost prestige and position. The effect of the transfer on his finances was a bit more complicated. His basic pay from October 1833 to September 1834 dropped from $690

1. Emanuel Raymond Lewis, *Seacoast Fortifications of the United States: An Introductory History* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), 6; *ASPMA*, V, 500–501.

annually to $600, and his allowance for subsistence fell from $966 to $584, although he was allowed $72 more for forage. Thayer did receive $2 per day in 1833–1834 for disbursing public funds, amounting to $730.[2] This additional money would compensate for the pay and subsistence reductions, but it is unclear what expenses he might have been expected to pay from this daily amount. Ideally, he should have been promoted to chief engineer, but two officers stood in his way: General Charles Gratiot, the chief engineer, and Colonel Joseph G. Totten. As long as these two men remained on active service, there was little chance that Thayer would become head of the Corps of Engineers.



An 1867 map of Boston Harbor showing the location of Forts Independence and Warren. (Map by Editor. Basemap: Boston Harbor, Massachusetts, 1867; 1872 edition.)

2. *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1861), 224.

His duties as engineer officer superintending the construction of fortifications, as summed up in article 67, paragraph 889, of the Army Regulations, were wide-ranging. Before construction began, he was to inspect the site and

> minutely survey, and take the levels of, the site and the contiguous grounds; trace the work upon the site; ascertain, by boring or digging, the nature of the soil, and what preparation, if any, would be necessary to make a solid foundation for the support of the walls of the work; examine the soundings, should the position be intended for marine defence, and, to test the accuracy of the plans furnished him, compare the results of those several operations with the corresponding results indicated by the plans. . . . if he should think any alteration of the plan would adapt it to the variation adverted to, he will suggest it, and furnish the drawings requisite to explain it. Should there be no material variation between the plan and the results adverted to, he will ascertain the best means of procuring the various kinds of materials, labour, and workmanship requisite for the construction of the work, and their respective rates of cost, and, upon these data, will prepare an analysis of prices adapted to the several kinds of work, and a minute estimate of the expense of constructing the work and of procuring the site.[3]

His report was also to include a detailed construction plan and schedule. In addition, Thayer had to furnish the Engineer Department with a yearly plan of operations and numerous reports, including annual reports on the progress of the operation, conditions at the project, and a review of the local resources available

3. War Department, *General Regulations for the Army; or, Military Institutes*, ed. General Winfield Scott (Washington, DC: Davis & Force, 1825), 168.

for the purpose of construction at the site; a statement of contracts entered into; a monthly progress report; general quarterly returns of government property and its condition, of provisions purchased for workers, and of purchases and issues of forage; and an annual estimate to accompany the annual report, a quarterly estimate, and a monthly estimate.[4]

This demanding mental and physical work did have its financial rewards. According to paragraph 893 of the Army Regulations:

> The engineer superintending the construction of a fortification, will disburse the monies applied to the same, and, as compensation for the performance of that extra duty, will be allowed at the rate of two dollars per diem during the continuance of such disbursements; provided the whole amount of emolument shall not exceed two and a half per cent on the sum disbursed.[5]

Colonel Thayer's superintendence of fortifications under construction in Boston Harbor initially encompassed the following: the new fort that was to be named Fort Warren on Georges Island and repair of any defects in the completed works on the island; the preservation of Castle Island and repairs of Fort Independence, including the erection of a wharf; and construction of a seawall for the preservation of Deer Island. Funds available to him were $25,000 for the fort and $220 for repairs on Georges Island; $37,000 for Castle Island; $1,500 for Fort Independence; and $50,110 for Deer Island.[6]

4. War Department, *General Regulations for the Army; or, Military Institutes*, 169–170.
5. War Department, *General Regulations for the Army; or, Military Institutes*, 170–171.
6. Gratiot to Thayer, *Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Letters Sent to Engineer Officers, 1812–1869*, IV, 457. Hereafter cited as *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*.



A 2018 image of Fort Warren on Georges Island in Boston Harbor. Thayer oversaw its construction for most of his post–West Point career and lived on the small island for extended periods of time. (United States Army Corps of Engineers,)

In addition to his duties as the superintending engineer in Boston Harbor, Thayer was made a member of the Board of Engineers. He was also charged with the superintendence of the civil works at the mouth of the Kennebunk River in Maine, on the Berwick branch of the Piscataqua River, at the Quamplegan Rapids on the Piscataqua River in Maine, and at the mouth of the Merrimack River in Massachusetts. These works were all under the immediate direction of a civil agent, but Thayer was to inspect them and instruct the agent in charge.[7]

In July 1833, Colonel Thayer notified the Engineer Department that he was ready to begin work at Boston Harbor and requested an assistant. Thayer soon found that his work in Boston would take up much of his time and asked that he be relieved from all other duties. Because qualified senior engineer officers were in short supply, Secretary Cass refused his request.[8]

In the fall, in accordance with his instructions from the Engineer Department, Colonel Thayer inspected the civil works under his general supervision in Massachusetts and Maine and reported to General Gratiot. In October, he made a more thorough inspection of the works at the mouth of the Kennebunk.[9]

Later in the same month, Thayer reported on the progress of works in Boston Harbor. He had contracted for labor, stone, and other materials necessary for the repair of Fort Independence. Realizing that the amount appropriated for the purchase of stone was too low, he informed the Engineer Department of this and requested more money. The surveying work at the site of Fort Warren on Georges Island had been delayed by lack of proper instruments, but Thayer believed that the field operations would be completed

7. Gratiot to Thayer, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, IV, 457–458.
8. William H. C. Bartlett to Thayer, July 12, 1833, *Thayer Papers*; Gratiot to Thayer, August 30, 1833, *Thayer Papers*.
9. Thayer to Gratiot, September 25, 1833, *Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Letters Received, 1826–1866*, Letter T-2176, National Archives, Washington, DC. Hereafter cited as *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*. Thayer to Gratiot, October 8, 1833, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-2187.

in due season, nonetheless. Also, Thayer had discovered that while Congress had appropriated $25,000 for the construction of Fort Warren, as a result of a bureaucratic error, none of this money was allowed to be spent for labor. Thus, nothing could be done until that senseless restriction was corrected.[10]

In October, Colonel Thayer traveled to Washington to close his Military Academy accounts with the Treasury of the United States. To his embarrassment, Thayer found that he owed the United States slightly over $500. To clear this debt, Thayer asked Gratiot for the money allowed him for having served as the disbursing agent at West Point, an amount that exceeded $500. Previously, Thayer had informed the chief engineer that he did not intend to claim this disbursing fee, but these circumstances forced him to request the 2½ percent due him according to paragraph 893 of the *General Regulations for the Army*.[11] Actually, he did not care if he received the entire amount due, but asked for only enough to cover the deficit of $500.79 that he owed the federal government.[12]

The Treasury Department, interpreting paragraph 893 strictly to apply only to engineer officers engaged in the construction of fortifications, informed Thayer that he was not allowed any compensation for disbursing funds. Thayer understood the paragraph to mean that any officer engaged in the extra duty of disbursing funds would be compensated by the government for his time and expenses and wrote his opinion to the chief engineer. The law seemed clear, but in 1825 Secretary of War James Barbour had ruled that topographical engineers and other persons disbursing monies under the direction of the Engineer Department were entitled to compensation; therefore, Gratiot decided that Thayer might have a just claim and turned the case over to the War Department

10. Thayer to Gratiot, October 14, 1833, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-2187.
11. *General Regulations for the Army; or, Military Institutes*. Washington, DC: Davis & Force, 1825, 170.
12. Thayer to Gratiot, October 21, 1833, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-2192.

for resolution. The matter was not immediately settled, and before long, it ended up in court.[13]

While the argument was going on, Thayer's work continued. As a member of the Board of Engineers, he and Colonel Totten submitted a report to Congress in 1834 on Fort Independence on Castle Island in Boston Harbor, an old fort in dilapidated condition. Since it was a key part of the defensive system for Boston Harbor, the Board of Engineers proposed extensive reconstruction. An estimate for repairs of Fort Independence had been made in 1831, but it was badly outdated. Thayer proposed a major overhaul of the scarp wall, casements, and bomb proofs at an estimated cost of over $250,000. Because of the interest of the mayor of Boston and others, the proposal was sent by Congress to the House Committee on Military Affairs. Colonel Thayer was called to testify, and convinced the committee that the repairs recommended by the Board of Engineers should begin at once. Thus, instead of a minor repair job, Thayer was to undertake a renovation of the fort.[14]



Fort Independence on Castle Island in Boston Harbor, 2025. The location was connected to the mainland by a causeway in 1928 and is no longer an island. (Photo by Editor.)

13. Third Auditor to Thayer (copy), November 6, 1833, and Thayer to Gratiot, November 21, 1833, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-2217.
14. *ASPMA*, V, 297–299, 500.

New Army regulations of 1835 no longer permitted engineer officers to receive an extra allowance of 2½ percent of their disbursements. For Sylvanus Thayer, this meant an annual loss of at least $730. When the Engineer Department confirmed the new regulation in a general order, Colonel Thayer informed the department that he would disburse no more federal money. Perplexed by Thayer's decision, Chief Engineer Gratiot took the problem to Secretary of War Cass, who ruled that any officer in the Corps of Engineers could be required to act as a disbursing agent. In spite of his explicit authority to do so, Gratiot declined to burden Thayer with the extra duty. Colonel Thayer was therefore requested to call on any bank in the Boston area to act as the disbursing agent, free of charge, for the United States government. Thayer turned over the federal money to the Merchants' Bank of Boston and to various civil agents, and, for the time being, had nothing more to do with disbursing government funds.[15]

Colonel Thayer soon found himself involved in the court case with the federal government over the issue of his unsettled West Point accounts versus the disbursement fee owed him as superintendent of the Military Academy. In June 1836, in the United States District Court in Massachusetts, the federal government brought an amicable suit against Thayer. Much to the government's surprise and Thayer's delight, the jury found in favor of the defendant and ruled that the United States owed Thayer the sum of $962.34. With true deliberateness, the government delayed paying. In December 1849, the chief engineer requested the secretary of war to ask Congress to appropriate the necessary funds. In 1852, Thayer's claim was before the House Ways and Means Committee, but no action must have been taken, for Thayer was told in 1857 that the money owed him (now mentioned as $930.57) had been added to the annual estimates of the Military Academy, but Congress had always failed

15. Gratiot to Thayer, April 23, 1835, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, V, 265–266; *ASPMA*, VII, 648–650.

to include it in the appropriations. It is probable that Congress never did pay off this long-standing debt, but as a result of winning the suit, Thayer no longer had to pay back the government.[16]

In 1837, Martin Van Buren became president and named Joel R. Poinsett of South Carolina secretary of war. The two politicians were well acquainted with the success of Sylvanus Thayer at the Military Academy. The president's son Abraham had graduated from West Point, thirty-seventh out of thirty-eight in his class of 1827, and the secretary of war had served on the Board of Visitors when Thayer was at West Point. Both men were interested in having Thayer return as superintendent. Poinsett promised, as long as he remained secretary of war, to support Thayer as Calhoun had done.[17]

However, Thayer was unable to return to West Point at this time because of the poor state of his mother's health. His father had died in 1829, and Thayer felt responsible for looking after his mother. His work in Boston Harbor allowed him to visit her in Braintree frequently. He also believed that Colonel De Russy, if given the proper support, would do a good job at the Academy. Therefore, Thayer stipulated that he would consider returning only on two conditions: first, if his mother's health improved, and, second, if another officer was appointed to replace De Russy and found wanting.[18]

Certain that placing another officer in charge of the Academy would be a mistake, Poinsett kept De Russy in the hope that if Thayer's mother's health improved, the former superintendent could be induced to return to West Point; but Poinsett did not insist upon Thayer's return. In 1838, Richard E. Delafield, the 180th

16. Totten to George Crawford, December 18, 1849, *Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers: Letters, Reports, and Statements Sent to the Secretary of War and Congress, 1836–1868*, VI, 368–369; Thayer to Totten, undated January 1852, *Letters Received*, *Chief of Engineers,* T-1430; Totten to Thayer, May 12, 1857, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XXVII, 46–47.
17. Cram, "Extracts," 38–39.
18. Thayer to Gouverneur Kemble, August 9, 1838, *Thayer Papers*.

graduate of the Military Academy and first in his class of 1818, became superintendent of the United States Military Academy.[19]

Actually, Sylvanus Thayer showed no real inclination or desire to return to the Military Academy. Poinsett was still in office when Thayer's mother died in 1840, but nothing was done to bring about Thayer's return. Delafield was doing a satisfactory job, and Thayer, now fifty-five and not in good health, had no desire to replace him. The best explanation for Thayer's lack of interest in returning to West Point was the one he gave Thomas J. Cram some years after he had left the Academy:

> The circumstances which led to my leaving were for years so annoying and tending so much to the injury of the academy that I thought it my duty to leave—believing that I could leave it in good hands; and I have never had the heart to visit it since; but I have never regretted the step, and yet my heart has been and always will be full of the academy.[20]

Along with the presidency, Van Buren also inherited the Panic of 1837, caused in part by Jackson's foolhardy bank war. A slight recovery followed in 1838; then in 1839 the collapse of European cotton prices brought on one of the worst depressions in the young nation's history. For Colonel Thayer and the other engineers, the nation's economic state was reflected in a cutback in government spending. As early as 1838, Thayer was informed by the Engineer Department that there was little chance for any appropriations that year.[21]

Later that year, Congress did appropriate money to the Corps of Engineers for internal improvements, construction of fortifications, and work on rivers and harbors. Thayer's share of more than $200,000 enabled him to continue his work in Boston and other

19. Poinsett to Kemble, November 13, 1837, *Thayer Papers*; Kemble to Thayer, July 30, 1838, *Thayer Papers*.
20. Cram, "Extracts," 38.
21. Gratiot to Thayer, May 21, 1838, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VI, 436.

locations, but he was warned to be careful of expenses. He was also told to postpone, if possible, obligations contracted during a fiscal quarter until the end of the quarter.[22]

Since construction work was temporarily slowed, Colonels Totten and Thayer were ordered to examine Fort Delaware and report on the progress that had been made at that site. Several letters passed between the two officers on the matter, but before much work could be done, the chief engineer was ordered by the secretary of war to have the two senior engineers examine the northern frontier of the United States. As a result, they stopped work on Fort Delaware and took up the new project.[23]

One of the major diplomatic problems confronting the United States in the years after the Treaty of Ghent was the settlement of the boundary dispute between Canada and Maine. Several attempts at arbitration and negotiation had been stymied by the persistent opposition to compromise by both the state of Maine and the British foreign minister, Lord Palmerston. Since relations between the United States and Great Britain were such that armed conflict was always a possibility, the secretary of war decided that the northern defenses of the United States should be thoroughly examined.[24]

In September 1838, Totten and Thayer were ordered to make a general reconnaissance of the northwestern frontier, extending from Fort Niagara at the mouth of the Niagara River to Fort Gratiot on the Saint Clair River near the outlet of Lake Huron. Before they could begin, the order was countermanded. They were told instead to inspect the area from Sackets Harbor to a point opposite Montreal and to determine the most important places of defense for permanent occupation.[25]

22. Gratiot to Thayer, July 14, 1838, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VI, 454.
23. Gratiot to Thayer, August 15, 1838, *Thayer Papers*; Totten to Thayer, October 1, 1838, and Totten to Gratiot, October 1, 1838, *Totten Papers*, III, 388–389.
24. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, 3rd ed. (Henry Holt and Company, 1950), 255–256.
25. Gratiot to Thayer, September 19, 1838, *Thayer Papers*; Gratiot to Totten and Thayer, October 18, 1838, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VI, 518.

In the fall the two engineers made the inspection as ordered and in December submitted a lengthy joint report in which they observed, "The political condition of our neighbor on the north, we must not forget, is such as even in the time of peace obliges him to maintain the attitude of war."[26] Working from this assumption, Totten and Thayer recommended the strengthening of the northern frontier so that if war came, the country would be better prepared for an invasion from Canada. Specifically, they proposed the occupation and repair of old Fort Oswego as a temporary work; construction of fieldworks and fortifications at several locations; the immediate construction of barracks and storehouses at Plattsburgh and the macadamization of the road between Plattsburgh and Ogdensburg; the acquisition of accurate and detailed topographical information on the entire frontier; and the establishment of a large military depot at Albany.[27]

The report was received with much interest at the War Department, and the two engineers were then ordered to present their views on the defense of the frontier of Maine. Since there was no time for an on-the-spot inspection, they relied largely on the earlier reports of Brevet Brigadier General John E. Wool. In their report, Totten and Thayer cautioned that before the exact locations for any defensive positions were finally determined, a careful and deliberate examination of the ground was necessary. They estimated that $100,000 would be needed during the coming year to build the fortifications they suggested on the headwaters of the Kennebec, on the headwaters of the Penobscot, on the Saint Croix River at Eastport, at Bangor, and on the Penobscot opposite Bucksport.[28]

Colonel Thayer frequently found that his construction work in the Boston area and general supervision of works in other parts of New England prevented him from accepting other duties. In October 1837, Thayer had been appointed to a board to determine

26. Totten and Thayer to Poinsett, December 27, 1838, *Totten Papers*.
27. *Totten Papers*, III, 409–410.
28. Thayer and Totten to Poinsett, February 20, 1839, *Thayer Papers*.

the best method of deepening the mouth of the Mississippi River. When the board was ordered to meet in early 1839, Colonel Thayer still had not found the time to give the matter any consideration. He wrote to the new chief engineer, Colonel Totten—Gratiot had been dismissed by the president in December 1838 for misuse of government funds—asking to be replaced:

> Having no experience in river improvements & the subject being extraneous to my professional duties & studies it must be evident that I would not be an efficient or useful member.[29]

Totten agreed and relieved him from the onerous duty.

In March 1839, when it looked as if federal funding for fortifications would be greatly reduced as a result of the depression, Edward Everett, the governor of Massachusetts and a friend of Thayer's, suggested to the president that in consideration of the particularly defenseless position of the city and harbor of Boston, the state of Massachusetts was willing to furnish the funds necessary to complete the project. The executive branch investigated this offer and determined that the federal government had no power to receive such aid. Colonel Thayer was advised that the state government could assume costs of completing the project, but that supervision of the work had to remain under Thayer's control. The situation was resolved when federal funding continued.[30]

In April, Totten informed Thayer that by an act of Congress of July 5, 1838, it was the duty of the superintending engineer to disburse money. A supplementary act of July 7, 1838, disallowed compensation for this duty. Thayer was therefore ordered to disburse the money remitted for Forts Warren and Independence beginning in the third quarter of the present year. Also in 1839, Thayer was placed in charge of the repairs of Forts Constitution

29. Thayer to Totten, January 24, 1839, *Letters Received*, *Chief of Engineers*, T-195.
30. Totten to Thayer, March 14, 1839, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VII, 95.

and McClary in Portsmouth Harbor, New Hampshire, and Forts Preble and Scammel in Portland Harbor, Maine. He was to undertake the general supervision and hire direct overseers. The funds available were very limited, and Thayer was instructed to restrict repairs to matters of the most urgent necessity. In the spring he was ordered to Maine and New Hampshire to examine those repairs. In his report he explained that although the four fortifications needed a great deal of work, not all of it had to be completed immediately, and much could be done with little money. Thayer estimated that the total cost of restoring Fort McClary would be about $2,500; Fort Constitution, $3,500; Fort Scammel, $3,300; and Fort Preble, $3,000.[31]

In 1839, the funds available in the United States Treasury were limited and expected to remain so. The Engineer Department informed its officers in charge of construction that operations would be restricted. In order to provide for continuing operations next season, as much of the remaining appropriation as possible would be retained. No new debts would be contracted on the faith of new appropriations in 1840.[32]

Funds were still short in the spring of 1840 when Colonel Thayer was ordered to make a tour of Lake Champlain and upstate New York to inspect a site for a proposed fortification. This was familiar ground, for he had been in the same area during the War of 1812. He spent twelve miserable days at Rouses Point, during which time it rained almost constantly, and Lake Champlain rose two feet higher than at any time since 1818. In spite of the bad weather, Thayer was able to carry out his inspection. He reported to Totten that the ground was a lot softer than expected and suggested that the project be modified. During the summer of 1840, Colonel Thayer devoted much of his time to construction of a project on Stony Point, Lake Champlain. After he reported his findings

31. Totten to Thayer, June 19, 1839, *Letters Received*, *Chief of Engineers*, VII, 211; Thayer to Totten, May 10, 1839, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-230.
32. Engineer Department Circular, October 31, 1839, *Thayer Papers*.

to the Engineer Department, the actual supervision of construction was given to another.[33]

In August 1840, Colonel Thayer was once again urged to take even more drastic measures to reduce expenses. First, he was to expect no appropriations before next March. Second, he was ordered to reduce his workforce immediately to an absolute minimum by discharging every person but one or two on low wages who would act as fort keepers. Property, such as livestock, that could not be retained without expense was to be sold. Third, if possible, arrangements were to be made then for materials and labor for the following year. Thayer was also notified of the appropriations for his works passed at the last session of Congress: for repairs of Fort Preble, $3,200; Fort Scammel, $3,400; Fort McClary, $750; Fort Constitution, $3,671; Fort Independence and the seawall of Castle Island, $100,000; and Fort Warren, $15,000.[34]

In his annual report in September 1840, Thayer made an interesting observation on the changing patterns of work in America. He was obviously opposed to some of the gains made by the working man. He wrote:

> I deem it my duty to apprise you that the introduction of the 'Ten hour system' in conformity to the President's late order will greatly increase the cost of the public works under my charge. The average loss of each man's [daily] time is found to be two hours & twelve minutes or about eighteen per cent.
>
> It may perhaps be objected that a man working only ten hours will accomplish more in a given time than he would if he worked more hours. This is doubtless true with respect to certain kinds of work but, on the other hand the hours lost are decidedly the most favorable for

33. Thayer to Totten, May 20 and September 15, 1840, *Letters Received*, *Chief of Engineers* T-357 and T-387.
34. Totten to Thayer, August 10, 1840, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VIII, 80–81.

> work, so that on the whole it may be safely stated that the loss to the works will not be less than . . . *Eighteen thousand dollars* on each hundred thousand paid for daily wages.[35]

Thayer, like all government employees, was burdened with red tape. A circular sent out from the Engineer Department proclaimed with all seriousness:

> Hereafter, for convenience in the examination and filing, all papers forwarded to this Department, will be folded to the size of a third of a common letter page; and when there are more than two folds, they will be in alternated directions, in the manner shown by this circular.[36]

In March 1841, a new appropriations bill was passed by Congress. For repairs of Fort Independence and the seawall of Castle Island, Thayer was allowed $35,000. For Fort Warren, he was given $45,000; for repairs of the seawall on Deer Island, $1,500; and for seawall repairs on Rainsford Island, $1,000. He was instructed to make the works under construction, in particular Forts Warren and Independence, at least partially effective, if not complete, at the earliest possible time.[37]

In September 1841, Colonel Thayer was informed that Congress had appropriated $25,000 for the construction of defensive works, barracks, and other necessary buildings and for the purchase of a suitable site for a depot at or near the junction of the Mattawamkeag and Penobscot Rivers in Maine. Although the chief engineer realized that Thayer was already overworked, he wanted Thayer to be in general charge of construction and select the best site, since he had been

35. Thayer to Totten, October 13, 1840, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-394.
36. Engineer Department Circular, October 31, 1840, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VIII, 201.
37. Totten to Thayer, March 12, 1841, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, VIII, 303–304.

on the board of officers that had picked the general location in the first place. He was instructed to go to Maine, examine the countryside, ground, and circumstances, and prepare a detailed report.[38]

Instead of complying with the chief engineer's directive, Thayer wrote to Totten, citing the need for him to remain in Boston. The letter reveals the pressures under which Thayer worked, resulting from the detailed nature of his many projects. First, he wrote, the works at Warren and Independence were in a critical situation owing to a failure in the supply of rubble stones. Second, the working period in Boston Harbor had been extended beyond the normal working season. Moreover, the officer sent to relieve the former agent at Fort Independence was not sufficiently familiar with the project to be safely left on his own. The operations at the other sites were in such a state that they should not be left unsupervised. Third, heavy payment of bills amounting to $50,000 fell due at the end of the month, and the funds in Thayer's hands could not be turned over to anyone else without direct orders from the Engineer Department. Fourth, because of these and other duties, Thayer could not start out before the first week in October, and if he went then, he would not be able to transmit the quarterly and annual reports, nor would he be able to attend the adjournment of the special engineer board of which he was a member. Fifth, depending on the weather, operations in Boston Harbor would cease about the middle of October and between 200 and 300 workers would have to be discharged and paid. Sixth, Thayer mentioned that he had placed advertisements in several Boston papers requesting proposals for the completion of the parade wall at Fort Independence and for building part of Castle Island's seawall. It was important that contracts for these projects be arranged as soon as possible. Seventh, if he left Boston late in October for the Mattawamkeag and Penobscot Rivers in Maine, it was very likely that the ground

38. Totten to Thayer, September 15, 1841, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, IX, 65–66.

would be snow-covered and a close inspection impossible. Eighth, Thayer mentioned that his health could be harmed by the inclement weather in Maine. He explained that his constitution was so impaired that he feared his career as an officer and engineer was reaching an end! With a note of regret, Colonel Thayer wrote:

> I cannot expect, therefore, supposing my health not to improve, to retain my present connection with the Corps however desirable it would be to me under other circumstances & the only question is as to the time that may be allowed me to withdraw.[39]

Totten agreed that Thayer's work in Boston was more than enough to keep him fully occupied, and Thayer did not have to go to Maine as previously ordered. By 1842, Thayer was overworked and his health poor. In early April, Colonel Totten had heard that Thayer was ill and wrote that he should take a trip now and then to get away from his labors in Boston. He urged him to come to Washington, DC, for a rest and a visit.[40]

During the summer and fall of 1842, Thayer mentioned to his friend Ichabod Chadbourne that his health was better than at any time in the previous six months. Chadbourne's wife had dreamed that Thayer was lonely and melancholy, and Thayer jokingly commented:

> Altho' my health is not good & what is still worse I am a bachelor & *miserable* of *course* still assure her that I am by no means as melancholy as she dreamed I was or indeed as much so as might reasonably be supposed I would under such circumstances. On the contrary I think I am quite as cheerful & happy as I ever was at any period of my life which goes to show how natural and easy it is to accomodate [*sic*] ourselves to the circumstances &

39. Thayer to Totten, September 27, 1841, *Letters Received*, *Chief of Engineers*, T-472.
40. Totten to Thayer, November 23, 1841, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, IX, 163–164; Totten to Thayer, April 7, 1842, *Totten Papers*, V, 186.

> condition in which Providence has placed us especially when we have no hope of changing them for the better.[41]

Thayer was not really as cheerful as he indicated in this letter. On the Fourth of July, with work suspended to celebrate the holiday and Fort Warren silent, Thayer wrote General Swift a letter that is perhaps more indicative of his feelings. He spoke happily of the past and noted that it would be thirty-six years next September since he had first reported to Swift at West Point. He wrote:

> Acts, events, incidents, occurrences, circumstances, how many of them rush into my mind exciting emotions that it would be difficult to describe. The future is dark & gloomy, the present little satisfactory but the past is full of agreeable reminiscences on which I continually dwell. These with books, studies & active duties fill up the intervals between sleep & preserve me from all depression of spirits.[42]

In another letter in the early fall, Sylvanus told his friend George Ticknor:

> I have indeed lived the life of a hermit for some years not altogether from choice, however, the term I had fixed for my penance will expire one of these days. All I can now say is that when I finally leave my *cell* I shall first be seen under your hospitable roof.[43]

Ten years had passed since Sylvanus Thayer left West Point. Although his life as an engineer was satisfactory, he was not a happy man. He was overworked, and his health had become a major concern. For these reasons, Thayer began to think about a second trip to Europe. In November 1843, on the advice of his

41. Thayer to Ichabod Chadbourne, February 5, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.
42. Thayer to Swift, July 4, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.
43. Thayer to Ticknor, September 16, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.

physician, Colonel Thayer wrote to Secretary of War James H. Porter and asked for a two-year leave of absence with permission to visit Europe for the purpose of regaining his health. The leave was quickly approved, to begin from the date of his embarkation.[44]

The military soon saw many ways to take advantage of Thayer's trip. Thayer was advised by Totten that the Engineer Department was interested in obtaining the latest information concerning fortifications, sapping and mining, pontoonering, barracks and quarters, camps and cantonments, military schools, interesting construction projects in civil engineering, and any new developments and applications of military and naval power that he might observe. Specifically, Totten promised to send Thayer a list of books to purchase for the engineer library. The department was also interested in receiving manuscripts, drawings, maps, plans, and Thayer's own special reports. The amount allowed for his purchases was not to exceed $300. The Ordnance Department of the Army, with the authorization of the secretary of war, also asked Colonel Thayer to supply it with any information he might come across on improvements and developments in artillery and ballistics. A selection of recently published books was also requested. The War Department, too, was interested in buying books. Originally, $1,000 was set aside for books, maps, and charts for the department's library; later, the amount was raised to $1,600, and a board of officers headed by General Winfield Scott sent Thayer a list of books to purchase. Although Colonel Thayer was instructed to turn over the works in Boston Harbor before leaving the country, the Engineer Department wanted to retain Thayer's counsel and advice while he was abroad and requested that he maintain a general supervision over the works through correspondence with the local engineer in charge of construction.[45]

44. Thayer to James M. Porter, November 8, 1843, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-755.

45. Totten to Thayer, November 16, 1843, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XI, 219–22; Totten to Thayer, January 13 and March 5, 1845, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XII, 524–525, 596; Totten to Thayer, March 5, 1845, *Thayer Papers*.

On his second trip to Europe, Colonel Thayer's traveling companion was Charles C. Parker, a student of medicine and surgery in Philadelphia and the son of an old friend, General Daniel Parker of the War Department. The idea was for young Parker to keep watch on Thayer's health while the colonel saw to it that Parker broadened his education and kept out of trouble. This time, travel arrangements were less complicated than when Thayer and McRee sailed together in 1815. Colonel Thayer paid $152 for a stateroom and passage to Liverpool on the packet ship *Liverpool*.[46] He hoped that a sea voyage, a change of air and scenery, and relief from his burdensome duties would restore his health and spirits. With a pocketful of introductory letters and instructions, Thayer and his youthful companion sailed from the port of New York on December 21, 1843. Finances for this trip were not a problem for Thayer. The United States government deposited $3,747.74 in a New York bank for him to draw on. Moreover, he was given a letter of credit on a London and Paris bank for the equivalent of 1,000 pounds sterling.[47]

From England, Thayer and young Parker took another boat to France and arrived in Paris on January 25, 1844. Thayer informed Totten that it was his intention to remain in the French capital until good weather in the spring, when he hoped to continue his travels throughout northern and eastern Europe, with St. Petersburg, Russia, as his eastern terminus. He promised, when the weather improved, to apply for permission to visit the military fortifications around Paris. He also reported that his health remained poor.[48]

In Paris, Thayer ran into an old friend, Major Guillaume Tell Poussin, who had accompanied General Simon Bernard to the

46. The *Liverpool* was in transatlantic service from 1843 to 1880, a length of service noted for its longevity. In 1843, the ship was operated by the Liverpool New Line company and sailed for England three times per year.—Ed.
47. Hugh S. Legaré to United States Consuls, June 9, 1843; receipt from Woodhull and Minburns, November 30, 1843; Prime, Ward, and King to Thayer, December 20, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.
48. Thayer to Totten, March 15, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.

United States after the fall of Napoleon and had become an officer in the topographical engineers. A naturalized U.S. citizen, Poussin missed the country of his birth and returned to France, where he later actively participated in the French government. He wrote several books about his adopted country, among them *Chemins de fer Américains* (1836); *Considérations sur le principe démocratique qui régit l'union Américaine, et de la possibilité de son application a d'autres états* (1841); and *De la puissance Américaine* (1843). Poussin gave Thayer a newly printed edition of one of his books along with a note that read, "From a brother officer who values much your opinion and friendship, and who would be proud of your accepting of this feeble token of his sincere attachment."[49]

Thayer tried to keep abreast of news from the United States while in Europe. In a note to Ticknor, after mentioning that he hoped to reach Dresden by the first of August and spend the remainder of the mild season in northern and middle Germany, Thayer commented on American current events, one of the few times he did so. He had heard there was a treaty before the Senate to annex Texas. Thayer saw this as an election maneuver and predicted that it would be rejected. He was correct on both counts. Calhoun's annexation treaty of April 1844 was defeated, but it became an issue in the presidential election of 1844.[50]

In the spring, Colonel Thayer visited several French fortifications and public works, as promised, before departing for Belgium. He arrived in Brussels in the middle of May. Because of a mix-up in letters, Thayer did not receive official permission to visit the military installations in Belgium until he had already reached Antwerp and was preparing to depart for the Netherlands. The lack of official permission had not been a handicap; through letters of introduction and the intervention of friends, Thayer had been able

49. Guillaume Tell Poussin to Thayer, May 2, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.
50. Thayer to Ticknor, May 18, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.

to visit the citadel at Ghent, the fortifications at Namur, and Liege on the Meuse River.[51]

His next stop was the Netherlands, where he visited only the fortification and military academy at Breda. He had wanted to visit the fortification at Bergen op Zoom, but it was a two-day journey out of his way. His trip to the Low Countries had been fruitful because he had purchased several valuable topographical and hydrographical maps of Belgium and the Netherlands.[52]

Thayer next traveled to Copenhagen, possibly by way of Hamburg. He remained in the Danish capital until the second of July, when he went to Elsinore, Denmark; then across the water to Gothenburg; and then by way of the Göta Canal across the Lake District of Sweden to Stockholm, finally arriving in St. Petersburg.[53] Unfortunately for us, Thayer left few notes of his journey, so it is impossible to know what impressions his tour across northern Europe made on him or whom he met.

Thayer remained in Russia very briefly before traveling to Berlin. From there, in September, he went to Frankfurt. He spent a month visiting many of the towns in southern Germany, among them, Karlsruhe, Baden-Baden, Stuttgart, and Munich. In the absence of official permission, which again arrived too late, Thayer had been unable to see the fortifications along the Rhine, but he had stopped a few hours at Rastatt and Ulm and had been greatly impressed by the huge works that were designed to hold 20,000 to 25,000 men. At Mayen and Koblenz, he saw only what was normally shown to visitors. He hoped, with official permission, to be able to see more the next year. Finally, Thayer traveled down the Danube and arrived in Vienna on October 14, 1844.[54]

51. Thayer to Totten, June 14, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.
52. Thayer to Totten, June 14, 1844, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Totten, May 30, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.
53. Thayer to Totten, August 7, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.
54. Thayer to Totten, November 4, 1844, *Thayer Papers*.



This map shows places where Thayer is known to have visited during his 1844–1846 trip to Europe. (Map by Editor. Basemap: New York Public Library.)

During the next three months, Thayer did a great deal of traveling and sightseeing. In November, he went from Vienna to Trieste, then down the Adriatic to Greece, and across the Mediterranean to Egypt, where he went up the Nile as far as Cairo and Memphis,

undoubtedly seeing the Great Pyramid of Giza. Returning by way of the port city of Alexandria, he proceeded by way of Malta and Sicily to Naples, which he reached on January 18, 1845.[55]

After a few days' rest, he went to Rome, where he planned to stay until spring. While in the Eternal City, Colonel Thayer had an opportunity to see His Holiness Pope Gregory XVI. On March 29, Dr. Paul Cullen, rector of Irish College and a future cardinal, informed Colonel Thayer that he could be presented to his holiness the next day at 4:30 near the Sistine Chapel.[56] Did Thayer meet the pope? If so, what were his impressions? The answers remain lost to us. Except for a tantalizing bit of paper, there is no other information available.

In the spring, Thayer traveled to Florence and then to northern Italy. On June 27, he crossed into Switzerland, where he remained for two or three weeks. Then he went down the Rhine to Cologne, across Belgium through Liege to Ostend, where he took a boat for England, arriving in London on July 19, 1845. While in Great Britain, Colonel Thayer intended to spend six or eight weeks traveling through the countryside before he returned to London to purchase books for the Engineer and War Departments.[57]

In an unofficial letter to the chief engineer, Thayer asked Totten for a six-month extension of his leave. He wanted to remain abroad until the following June but promised to return sooner if his health improved. Thayer mentioned that he had walked through a great deal of England, Scotland, and Ireland much too rapidly for pleasure, health, or profit. His next stop was Paris, where he would try to obtain some French maps of Mexico. He noted that this seemed unlikely because the French maintained a close alliance with the British and seemed little pleased with the planned acquisition of Texas by the United States. Thayer's health had not yet been fully reestablished, and he was enjoying his travels, so he

55. Thayer to Totten, February 14, 1845, *Thayer Papers*.
56. Dr. Cullen to Thayer, March 29, 1845, *Thayer Papers*.
57. Thayer to Totten, July 20, 1845, *Thayer Papers*.

wished to remain in Europe during the coming winter and spring. Permission was granted for the extension of his leave. In the fall, Colonel Thayer shipped several hundred books to the War Department and the Engineer Department. In November, he was back in Paris, where he remained until he sailed for home the following summer.[58]

Much had taken place in the United States while Thayer was in Europe. In 1844, James Polk, a firm believer in Manifest Destiny, had been elected president. The West, particularly Texas, California, and Oregon, was of great interest to him. Polk and many other Democrats called for the "reannexation" of Texas and the "reoccupation" of Oregon. By the time Polk assumed office, half of the Democratic platform had been achieved—Texas had been annexed and eventually became a state in December 1845. President Polk was not satisfied with only Texas; he wanted Mexico to sell California to the United States. Mexico, offended by the annexation of Texas, broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, and war seemed imminent. Polk responded to the apparent threat of hostilities by ordering General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande, supposedly to repel a Mexican invasion. The eventual result, after a series of border clashes provoked by both sides, was war, which Congress officially declared on May 13, 1846.[59]

With war clouds gathering south of the border, for a time there was also a chance that the United States might find itself involved in a war with Great Britain over the Oregon Question. The United States claimed Oregon as far north as the line of 54°40′. Although there were war cries on both sides of the Atlantic, cooler heads prevailed, and Oregon was divided at the 49th parallel with the signing of a treaty on June 15, 1846.

After a voyage of thirty-three days, Thayer's ship docked in New York Harbor. The Oregon Question, he was pleased to learn,

58. Thayer to Totten, October 4, October 20, and November 27, 1845, *Thayer Papers*.
59. Bemis, *Diplomatic History*, 232–240.

had been peacefully settled, but the war with Mexico continued. He was greatly encouraged to learn that American soldiers led by West Point graduates were doing so well. Upon his return, Thayer wrote to his friend Chadbourne:

> You can better imagine than I can describe my feelings in reading the Reports & accounts relative to the achievements of our little Army in Texas & Mexico. The sons of West Point have covered themselves with glory.

But his elation was tempered with sadness. The price of glory and victory was the deaths of many friends and former cadets. On a more somber note, he continued:

> My Joy is not unmingled with groans & tears. I have lost several of my dearest friends but I am more particularly affected by the loss of your son. I need not say how truly I sympathize with the father & the mother but there is consolation in the reflection that he has died as every true soldier must wish to die for his country, on the bed of honor, in the arms of victory leaving an immortal name.[60]

Thayer was too old for active duty in Mexico, and his fortification work was yet to be completed. Chief Engineer Totten assigned him to resume his supervision of the works under construction in Boston Harbor from Captain George W. Cullum, who would remain as his assistant. Thayer was also instructed to resume his position on the Board of Engineers as a senior member.[61]

During the winter of 1848, the Board of Engineers for Atlantic Coast Fortifications was ordered to examine the coasts of east and west Florida and furnish the War Department with a plan showing all bays, harbors, and inlets that should be fortified and integrated

60. Thayer to Chadbourne, June 28, 1846, *Thayer Papers*.
61. Totten to Thayer, June 29, 1846, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XIV, 295–296.

into the general system of coastal defense. But in January the following year, Thayer's ill health caused him to inform Totten that he was unable to travel and consequently could not take part in the planned examination. Throughout the rest of his life, Thayer was plagued by ill health and unfortunate accidents.[62]

In the summer of 1849, he was appointed by the secretary of war to a joint commission of naval and engineer officers established to examine the dry dock at the New York Navy Yard. About the middle of June, Thayer fell from an embankment and received serious contusions. His injury was such that he was unable to walk much or wear a boot for several weeks. Thus, at his request, he was relieved from duty with the joint commission, but his additional request to be relieved from the Board of Engineers for Atlantic Coast Fortifications was denied.[63]

In spite of his poor health, Colonel Thayer continued his work on the fortifications in Boston Harbor, but Congress, it seemed, wanted more and more for less and less. In 1851, the House of Representatives rejected the appropriation for Fort Warren for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1852. As a result, Colonel Thayer was instructed to develop a plan of operations restricted to the amount of money he had on hand, and to reserve a sufficient amount for a single fort watcher to protect government property.[64]

During the period from 1850 to 1852, Thayer's health remained about the same. He suffered less from colds as a result of taking careful precautions, but he was bothered by a new affliction. On his right temple, about half an inch from the eye socket, was a small, painful eruption that he at first thought was a pimple. Thayer ignored it until his sister urged him to see a physician. When the

62. Totten to Thayer, September 8, 1848, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XVI, 215–217; Totten to Thayer, January 5, 1849, *Thayer Papers*.
63. Thayer to Totten, August 1, 1849, *Letters Received, Chief of Engineers*, T-1240; Totten to Thayer, August 6, 1849, *Thayer Papers*; Totten to Thayer, August 13, 1849, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XVII, 173; Totten to George Crawford, August 11, 1849, *Letters Sent to the Secretary of War and Congress*, VI, 3371d.
64. Totten to Thayer, February 27, 1851, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XVIII, 289.

doctor diagnosed the condition as cancer and began treatment, Thayer prepared himself for the worst.[65]

Death was becoming a constant companion to the Thayer family. While Sylvanus was out of the country in 1844, his oldest sister, Dorcas, had died. In November 1850, Lue Maria died in Oberlin, Ohio; the next year saw the death of Abigail's husband Phineas in October in California. Only two members of Thayer's immediate family survived, his younger sisters Abigail and Livia. Both lived in Braintree, and after his return from Europe in 1845, Sylvanus spent a great deal of time with them.[66]

During the early months of 1852, Thayer was kept extremely busy. His official labors occupied between sixteen and eighteen hours every day, except Sunday. He kept three officers busy making drawings of his projects, for which he had to prepare his own sketches and calculations. In addition, Thayer received between ten and twenty letters per day, many requiring lengthy replies, from officers and agents working under his general supervision and from the Engineer and War Departments.[67]

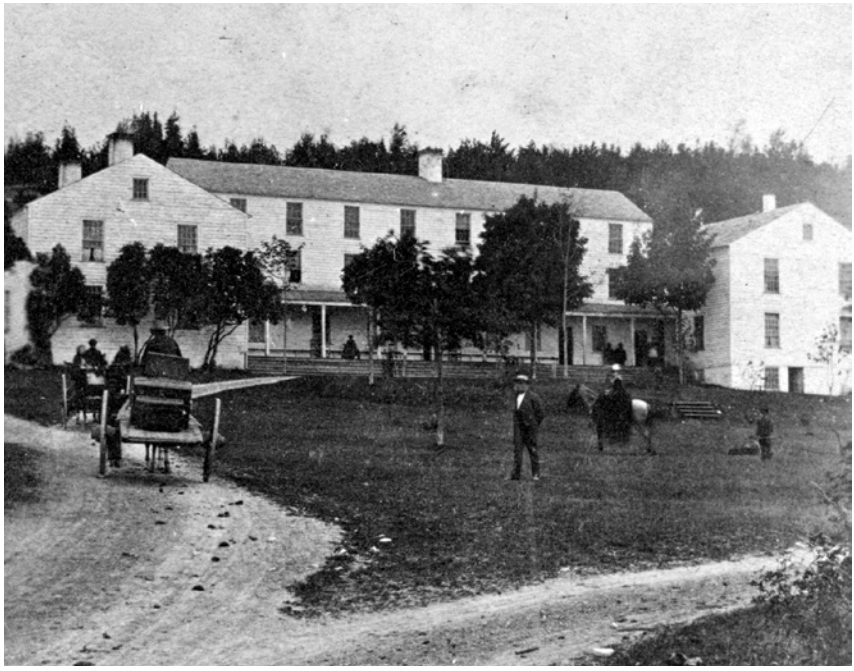
As a result of his poor health, Colonel Thayer decided that it would be beneficial for him to take a leave of absence to travel westward. He had been to Europe twice and had traveled extensively through New York and New England, but he had had little chance to visit the Midwest. Once his request for leave was approved, he started out in June 1852 but only got as far as New York before he was taken ill and forced to return to Braintree to convalesce.

When Thayer resumed his travels, the trip lasted for six weeks and was most enjoyable. He went by way of the Erie Railroad to Elmira, New York, and then to Lake Erie. Crossing the lake, his boat, the *Northern Indiana*, struck a schooner, sank her, and was

65. Thayer to Chadbourne, March 6, 1852, *Thayer Papers*. [There is no record of how he was treated, but it most likely would have been surgical excision. Treatments such as topical zinc chloride were also being used by some medical pioneers.—Ed.]
66. B. Thayer, *Memorial*, 81–84.
67. Thayer to Swift, April 17, 1852, *Thayer Papers*.

forced to put into Cleveland for repairs. From Cleveland, Thayer traveled to Chicago, which was a rapidly growing city. He predicted, "Chicago is destined to be the greatest city on the Lakes & in the West after Cincinnati & St. Louis."[68]

Thayer had considered traveling up the Mississippi River to its source but gave up his plan and instead headed north into the interior of Wisconsin and Michigan. After stops at Racine and Milwaukee, he crossed Lake Michigan to Mackinaw City on the Strait of Mackinac. At this out-of-the-way town, Thayer found the most comfortable place of his journey and reported that the Mission House was all that the traveler could desire.[69]



Thayer wrote of a pleasant stay at the Mission House in Mackinaw City, Michigan. This photo is from approximately a decade after Thayer lodged here. (Library of Congress.)

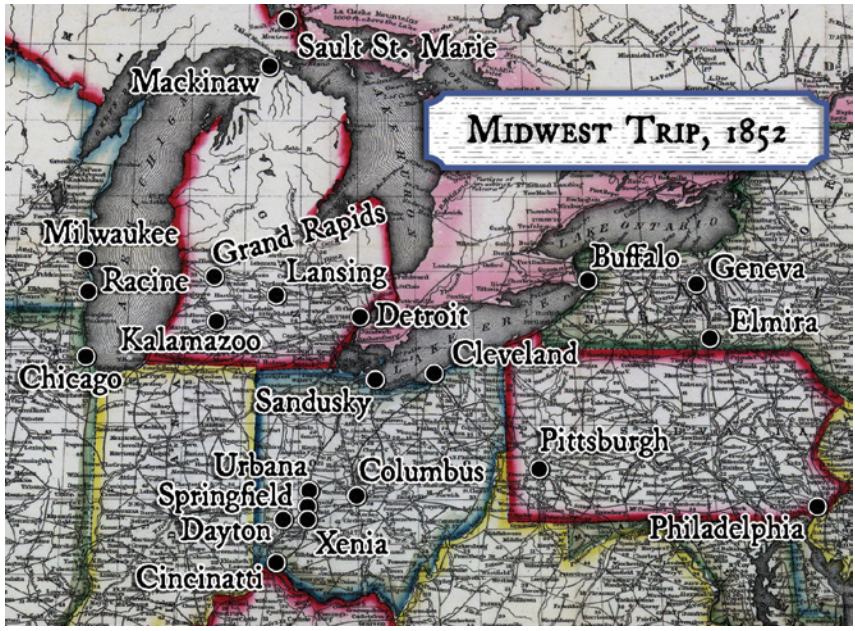
68. Thayer to Chadbourne, July 31, 1852, *Thayer Papers*.
69. Thayer to Swift, July 31, 1852, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer next went to Sault Saint Marie and would have gone farther up Lake Superior if he had been able to find a comfortable conveyance, but none was available. He came back down Lake Huron to Detroit and then traveled through the interior of Michigan by rail to Lansing, the capital, and by train along the Grand River to Grand Rapids, to Kalamazoo, and finally back to Detroit. The rest of his trip was by rail. He traveled through Ohio, stopping, in the order that he relayed to Swift, at Sandusky, Urbana, Springfield, Dayton, Xenia, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland. From there he crossed the northern panhandle of Virginia into Pennsylvania, stopping at Pittsburgh. Then he proceeded over the Allegheny Mountains to Philadelphia and finally returned to Boston.[70]

Thayer told his friends that his health had greatly improved and that his tour was highly satisfactory. At many of the towns at which he stopped he had met West Point graduates and had renewed several old acquaintances. Thayer, ever the meticulous engineer, estimated that in 40 days he had traveled a total of 4,050 miles, of which 230 were by stage and wagon, 1,652 on steamboats, and 2,168 on railroads. His expenses for transportation were eighty-two dollars, or about two cents per mile. For subsistence and incidentals, he had spent eighty-four dollars, or about two dollars per day. It was a most gratifying trip![71]

In the fall of 1852, Brevet Colonel Sylvanus Thayer, Lieutenant Colonel René De Russy, and Brevet Colonel John L. Smith, all engineers, were ordered to form a Board of River and Harbor Improvements. Even before the board met, Thayer asked to be relieved from that duty because of ill health. The secretary of war agreed to his request.[72]

70. Thayer to Swift, July 31, 1852, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Chadbourne, July 31, 1852, *Thayer Papers*.
71. Thayer to Swift, July 31, 1852, *Thayer Papers*.
72. Totten to Thayer, November 19, 1852, *Letters Sent to Engineer Officers*, XIX, 488.



Thayer's ambitious 40-day Midwest trip in the summer of 1852 covered 4,050 miles. (Map by Editor. Basemap: *Phelps's National Map of the United States, A Travellers Guide*, 1852, Library of Congress.)

Captain George W. Cullum, Thayer's former assistant, had published a *Register* of officers and graduates of the United States Military Academy in 1850. In 1853, he began working on a history of West Point and naturally wrote to Thayer for help. There was a close, very warm, almost father-son relationship between Thayer and Cullum, who had graduated third in Thayer's last class of 1833. As a result of a lame hand, Thayer had been unable to hold a pen, but he finally wrote with sage advice:

> Nothing could have gladdened me more than did the information that you had undertaken to write the history of our Alma Mater. You are the very man for the work & now is the time. If not taken in hand by you it probably would not be by any other 'till essential facts were lost beyond

> recovery. God be praised & prosper the noble design! I shall of course furnish the information you desire so far as I am able except such as you can obtain from other & better sources. I deem myself tolerably well posted up as to the history of the Academy from its first establishment. Nevertheless direct testimony is always better than hearsay evidence and many witnesses better than one. You will accordingly elicit facts & information from all quarters & then compare. Where all agree that argument will settle the question. Where there is disagreement or deficiency of information I would cheerfully do my best to reconcile the one or supply the other as the case may be.[73]

Regarding the condition of the Academy and the level of instruction and discipline at the time he took charge in 1817, Thayer said the best witness, if he were alive, would have been George W. Gardiner, who had been killed in 1835. Next to him, Thayer recommended Lieutenant Colonel James Graham, a topographical engineer, who was Thayer's first permanent adjutant and was at the Academy from 1813 until 1819. Thayer also encouraged Cullum to discuss the subject with several others who were at the Academy during the period in question. While Cullum was collecting materials and procuring information, Thayer promised to spend his leisure moments in making memoranda and notes that he would forward from time to time. He also promised to examine the *Register* with care to correct any errors or omissions.[74]

Thayer, as promised, soon wrote with advice and questions for Cullum. If he had not done so already, Thayer recommended that Cullum refer to the several acts of Congress and all congressional documents relating to the Academy, all reports from the Boards of Visitors commencing in 1818, the printed regulations of the

73. Thayer to Cullum, February 8, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
74. Thayer to Cullum, February 8, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.

Academy, the first triennial *Register* of graduates that was published in 1820 or 1821, and reports by the secretary of war and messages from the president in which the Academy was mentioned. Thayer also asked why Jonathan Williams was omitted from Cullum's *Register* as superintendent. Although not a graduate, Williams was one of the most illustrious officers connected with the Academy and one to whom West Point and its graduates owed a great deal of gratitude.[75] Once again in the role of master instructing a pupil, Thayer, as usual, expected near perfection. He wrote:

> My paramount desire is that the Register as well as the history may be complete & correct in its facts so that there may be no grounds for reclamations or heart-burnings,—no need of future corrections, no cause for regrets in any quarter & that the book may be, what I doubt not it will be, in all respects such as to reflect credit equally on the industry & talents of its author.[76]

In April, Thayer received a most pleasant letter from a former cadet, Robert F. W. Allston, who wanted Thayer to select a day in the summer when the surviving members of the class of 1817 could meet Thayer at West Point.[77] This group of men, the first to pass through the "ordeal" at the Military Academy under the new regime of Thayer's organization, had only eighteen known survivors—one who graduated in 1819, two in 1820, eleven in 1821, and four in 1822.[78]

Greatly touched by Allston's letter, Thayer replied, "The kind recollections of me by those whose education it was my good fortune to superintend at West Point I prize above every other earthly blessing." The idea of a reunion at the Academy was an example

75. Thayer to Cullum, February 11, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
76. Thayer to Cullum, March 2, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
77. In this case the "class of 1817" refers to cadets who entered the Academy in that year and not to a particular graduating class. Allston, for example, graduated in 1821.
78. Robert F. W. Allston to Thayer, April 7, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.

he hoped other classes would follow, but he entreated Allston not to make his appearance at West Point a condition of the meeting. Although honored by the request, Thayer declined to name a date because the chances were slim he would be able to keep his promise, no matter how strong his inclination to do so. His official duties might prevent his attendance; moreover, he was nearing the limit of his biblical "three score years & ten" with more than an ordinary share of bodily infirmities. Thayer said that of all the classes that entered or graduated during his superintendence, the class of 1817 had the highest claim to his affection by "right of primogeniture."[79]

Allston was disappointed by Thayer's reply but nevertheless selected a date for the reunion—July 14, 1853. He suggested that if Thayer was up to it at the time, he could journey to Cold Spring where Gouverneur Kemble maintained a quiet and comfortable residence. Then, if agreeable, the members of the class might pay their respects at Thayer's convenience. Allston also informed Thayer that the class intended to present him with an inscribed gold ceremonial sword.[80]

Allston's proposal and Cullum's plan to write a history of the Academy revived old memories, not all of them pleasant. In a letter to Swift, Thayer finally revealed his feelings toward his old antagonist Alden Partridge. Thayer felt that he had given Partridge no cause to regard him as an enemy. In Thayer's opinion, Partridge, in fact, had never believed Thayer an enemy except when it suited his purposes to try to make others believe it. Thayer's only mistake, he thought, was in treating Partridge's squibs with silent contempt:

> I would not, if I could, injure a hair of his head & feel no other sentiment toward him than that of pity. I think I know him at least as well & can judge him quite as impartially as any other person. Before he went to W. P. he was with me at Dartmouth College over two years. At W. P. I

79. Thayer to Allston, April 20, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
80. Allston to Thayer, April 29, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.

> saw more of him & under circumstances more favorable for judging him than did either you or Col. Williams.[81]

Thayer also mentioned to Swift that his relations with Totten were bad and that he had seen neither Totten nor Washington, DC, since 1852, writing, "There has been no interchange of greetings between us for more than ten years nor will there *ever be again while we live under any circumstances*."[82] Later, Thayer explained that he harbored no unkind feelings toward Totten, but Totten had "dropped" Thayer's friendship when it could no longer be used to any advantage.[83]

The meeting of the Class of 1817 took place on July 13, 1853, a day earlier than originally planned. Colonel Thayer was not in attendance, nor had he been able to travel to Cold Spring. The class members wrote Thayer that they intended to send a committee to Boston in September to place the ceremonial sword in Thayer's hands. At the request of the manufacturer, the sword had been left to exhibit as a sample of the manufacturer's art at a trade exhibition in New York.[84]

In the meantime, Thayer received news that Swift was ill with a liver complaint. He hoped that the general would be able to come to Boston soon for a visit; if not, Thayer would try to get to Geneva, New York, to visit Swift. He wrote, "We must if possible meet once more on earth & there should be no delay for neither of us has a long lease of life." Thayer assumed, incorrectly as it turned out, that he had precious few years of life left. He lived in constant pain as a result of the cancer on his face. Although it had not spread as rapidly as he had first feared, he felt on the whole it was worse and the cure hopeless. This and most of his other infirmities he

81. Thayer to Swift, May 2, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
82. Thayer to Swift, June 9, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
83. Thayer to Swift, June 18, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
84. Washington Wheelwright, John B. Scott, Seth M. Capron, Robert F. W. Allston, and Joshua Baker to Sylvanus Thayer, July 14, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.

traced back to his illness at Norfolk at the close of the War of 1812. He also told Swift that President Franklin Pierce and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis had placed him on a board to examine federal armories, but while flattered by the appointment, he did not feel capable of carrying out such a duty. As a result, Thayer felt that he might be compelled to resign his commission, a step he did not relish, but health and age were causing him to slow down.[85]



The sword presented to Thayer in 1853 by graduates who had been at the Academy in 1817 when he took over as superintendent. The pommel is a bust of John C. Calhoun, and the scabbard has engravings of West Point buildings such as the 1840s Library, which Thayer never saw in person. The inscription reads, "His first Class of 1817. Graduates of 1820, 1, 2. To Col Sylvanus Thayer Corps of Engineers USA Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy West Point 1817 to 1833." (Photo by Editor. Courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.)

85. Thayer to Swift, July 16, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.

In the fall, Thayer's sword was delivered to him as promised. He accepted it with pleasure and thanked the members of the class of 1817 for their kind and flattering letter from West Point.[86]

In January 1854, Captain Alden Partridge died. Thayer recalled the man dispassionately:

> Some of the notices I have seen are curiosities containing about as many lies as paragraphs, but it is not worthwhile to point them out. He entered Dartmouth College in 1802 at the age of twenty four in the class immediately preceding mine. Altho a plodding student he was not a distinguished scholar. His *fort* [*sic*] was Mathematics in which he attained a standing about the middle of his class. He left College when he had completed one half of the regular course & was consequently not a graduate. At West Point he proved to be a good teacher of Huttons Mathematics or at least such portions of the work as were then taught. The higher branches he never studied. His cousin William Partridge who was much younger was vastly his superior in genius & attainments.[87]

In spite of his age and ill health, Thayer retained an active interest in his work as an engineer. Thayer was now sixty-nine. He had worked hard all his life and intended to do so as long as his body did not fail. His indomitable spirit drove him on despite impaired health. As he got older, Thayer found that he needed only a few hours' rest every night. As he explained it, he went to bed, folded his arms over his chest, said his prayers, took a nap for a couple of hours, and awoke about two or three in the morning. Actually, he enjoyed these quiet hours alone in a still house when, without interruption, he was able to devote his time to

86. Thayer to Wheelwright, Scott, Capron, Allston, and Baker, October 24, 1853, *Thayer Papers*.
87. Thayer to Cullum, February 5, 1854, *Thayer Papers*.

> pious or other edifying meditations or giving flight to imagination, build castles, visit distant friends, retrace my former wanderings on the earth, soar among the stars until with tired wing I return & again commit myself to the arms of Morpheus. Now is not this a reasonable way of passing the night?[88]

Thayer's imaginative travels through the night skies gave him many pleasant memories. His faculties remained sharp, but he was worried about Swift, who was only two years older. Thayer confided to Cullum that Swift's memory appeared to be faltering. Thayer had tried to get a list of his fellow cadets at West Point from the old general, but Swift had been unable to furnish him with a correct one. More disturbing to Thayer was the fact that Swift's memoirs, which were going to be published, were in a perfect chaos, with many of the facts and events wrong or out of their proper place in the narrative.[89]

Many who had led a life as eventful as Thayer's might have written memoirs, but Thayer was always self-deprecating; and although he had personally enjoyed the many honors his hard work and devotion to duty had brought him, he took himself lightly. In the late summer of 1855, he wrote to Cullum that he had made a grand discovery. With tongue in cheek, he explained, "I thought I was a Pasha with *three tails* only but lo! I have four at least." Thayer had found that in addition to receiving honorary degrees from Dartmouth, Harvard, and Saint John's College in Maryland, he had been awarded an LL.D., by Kenyon College in Ohio. The degree had been conferred while he was in Europe in 1846, and for some unknown oversight, Thayer had never been officially notified. He learned of the award only when the college sent him its catalog,

88. Thayer to Chadbourne, February 6, 1854, *Thayer Papers*.
89. Thayer to Cullum, undated (possibly 1855), *Thayer Papers*.

which listed his name among those holding honorary degrees. He was pleased, but amused, by the belated discovery.[90]

Thayer's lighthearted view of his own attainments did not distract him from the importance of events taking place in the United States. In the mid-1850s the nation was on the road to disunion. Every day, papers carried stories about "bleeding Kansas," where pro-slavery and abolitionist forces fought with the fury of zealots. Even the halls of Congress were not free from intersectional strife. Preston Brooks, a member of the House from South Carolina, beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a cane until the senator fell bleeding and dazed to the floor. With each incident, hatred and bitterness hardened hearts on both sides, and the art of compromise was forgotten.

The election of 1856 saw the creation of a new political party, the Republican Party, which nominated John C. Frémont as its candidate. The Democrats, wanting a safe candidate, nominated James Buchanan. Calling for "Free Soil, Free Speech, and Fremont," the Republicans demanded the end of the expansion of slavery. Thayer, a staunch New England conservative, wrote of the campaign:

> I too under all the circumstances am for Frémont. I was a Fillmore man until I saw that foolish speech of his. As to Buchanan I detest his '*platform*' & have a poor opinion of him as a man & always have had from the time the 'hue and cry' was raised against Mr. Clay.[91]

Thayer was vigorously opposed to slavery and its extension into the territories. He wrote to Swift, "I concur with you entirely on the slavery question. Rather than submit to its extension, I declare for War; War to the knife with all its consequences." Nothing astonished Thayer more than the strength of the pro-slavery party in the North, which sanctioned everything that had been done to force

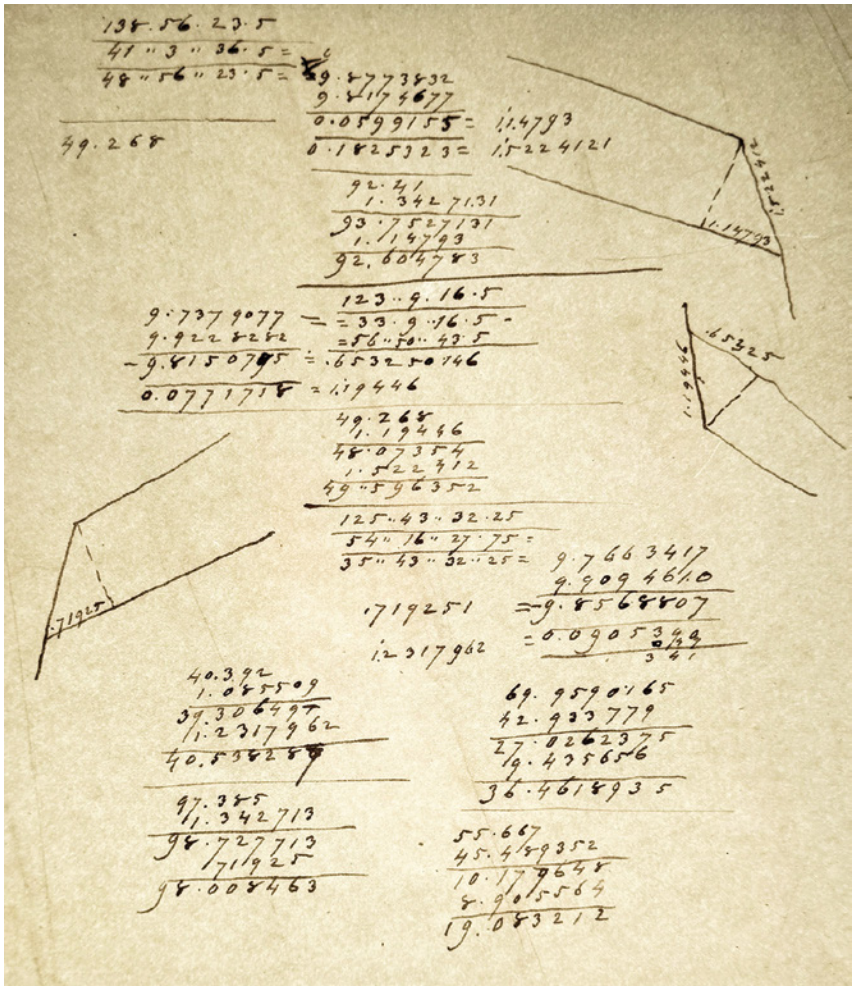
90. Thayer to Cullum, August 4, 1855, *Thayer Papers*. [A pasha is a butterfly with two tails on each hind wing and thus four total.—Ed.]
91. Thayer to Swift, August 6, 1856, *Thayer Papers*.

slavery into Kansas. "To be sure," he noted, "it consists entirely of office seekers & their blind & deluded followers but then it gives the measure of the corruption & degeneracy of the Times.[92]

Thayer was disappointed when Frémont lost the election, but his attention turned to his own financial problems. His circumstances had undergone a change for the worse in the past three years. He had enough for his own wants but needed extra money for one of his widowed sisters. Thayer had accumulated some railroad stocks, which constituted most of his property, but at the time they were not worth half of what he had paid for them. Furthermore, he had lost the sum of $4,250 in a loan to Ben V. French, a neighbor in Braintree, who was thought to be wealthy. French either died or defaulted, because Thayer complained, "All his property will go to pay debts (believed to be fictitious) to his brothers. The other creditors will get little or nothing." In December 1856, Thayer received $150 from General Swift's brother, William H. Swift, completing payment of the general's note for $500 of February 26, 1837. Thayer had never previously reminded Swift of the debt and would probably not have done so except that he now needed the money and had been convinced by Swift that repayment would not be inconvenient.[93]

Thayer was still busy with his fortification projects in Maine, New Hampshire, and New York, but he hoped to be finished with these before the end of his fiftieth year of service, February 1858, when he hoped to be released from further service. Thayer was tired and disgusted with the way the affairs of the Corps of Engineers were being managed. He predicted that one day there would be a blowup, and he wanted no part of it.[94]

92. Thayer to Swift, October 8, 1856, *Thayer Papers*.
93. Thayer to Swift, December 1, 1856, *Thayer Papers*.
94. Thayer to Swift, September 14, 1857, *Thayer Papers*.



A page of Thayer's handwritten calculations. Date and project unknown. (Braintree Historical Society.)

Later he explained in detail just what he thought was wrong with the Corps of Engineers. First of all, under General Joseph Totten, the office of the chief of engineers had been declining in dignity and importance until it had become a mere clerkship. Totten could not assign a single officer to any duty or perform a single official act without the formal sanction of the secretary of

war. This degradation of the office was a serious wrong in Thayer's point of view.

Second, Thayer believed the three to five officers on the Board of Engineers should be released from all other duties, except perhaps those related to inspections or general supervision of works in progress. The Board of Engineers should have a permanent location and office with all necessary reference books and, to stay current of all new developments, should send one of its members abroad periodically.

Third, the present distribution of duties was, Thayer felt, bad for the service and unjust for the higher-grade officers. In actuality, regardless of rank, all officers were pretty much on the same level, except for pay.

A fourth complaint of Thayer's was the way works were supervised. In theory, every work was under the immediate charge or supervision of an officer, but in fact, there was rarely an instance when the work was conducted under the eyes of any officer, even a second lieutenant. Generally, the officer in charge lived at a distance from the work, visited it only occasionally, and conferred the immediate charge to a mechanic or other civilian overseer. Thayer was of the firm opinion that the construction of fortifications and other works by the Corps of Engineers was costing the government on average twice as much as it should because of bad management.

Fifth, Thayer pointed out that the same officer who started a project should complete it. In some cases, there had been as many as a dozen superintendents for one project; consequently, no officer could be expected to take pride in his work or to feel much responsibility for it.

Sixth, the inspection of works was poor. Merely looking on the visible surface of a work for an hour or two once a year at a fixed time was a useless formality. To be worthwhile, Thayer said an inspection should continue for some days and be repeated at several unexpected times.

Finally, Thayer hoped that every officer superintending a work would have the benefit of the experience of every other officer in the Corps. Under the present system, young officers were placed in charge of works before they had acquired experience and then left entirely isolated and unaided by the counsel of their elders.

All the evils that Colonel Thayer pointed out were admitted by General Totten, but he dismissed them by saying there was no remedy, and indeed, there probably was none while he was in charge of the Corps of Engineers.[95]

In spite of these problems, Thayer did not intend to resign after the end of his fifty years, but only retire from active service. Before Thayer could retire, he had one final duty to perform for the country. General Totten was planning to travel to Europe for a six-month period or longer. As next in rank, Thayer was to be put in temporary command of the Corps of Engineers. Thayer had no desire to be called to Washington, DC, to breathe in that "corrupt atmosphere," nor did he desire to step down and assume the duties of a humble clerk. A compromise was reached that made Boston the figurative headquarters of the Corps of Engineers during Thayer's command.[96]

While Thayer was acting chief engineer, he uncovered a whiff of scandal that further lowered his estimation of Totten. In November 1857, Joseph C. McKibbin, a congressman from California, wrote to Secretary of War John B. Floyd requesting that a certain Charles Murphy be appointed master mason and overseer of the government project on Alcatraz Island. Murphy was supposedly a competent mason, but his major qualification was "He is a thorough Democrat & is applying for a place held by one who had no identity with our Party."[97] Floyd endorsed the proposal with the statement, "I wish this arrangement made." McKibbin and

95. Thayer to Swift, October 28, 1857, *Thayer Papers*.
96. Thayer to Swift, December 8 and 31, 1857, *Thayer Papers*.
97. Joseph C. McKibbin to John B. Floyd, November 22, 1857, No. 1. Notes made by Swift, March 13, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.

Congressman Charles L. Scott of California further informed Secretary Floyd that Murphy was an efficient and thorough Democrat and that the present appointee had used his position to "oppress & discharge" loyal Democrats. Floyd endorsed the proposal with the comment, "I have no doubt of the will & capacity of this man for the duties of the place & wish the officer in charge of the Work to give it to him."[98]

General Totten sent McKibbin's first letter and the secretary of war's endorsement to Lieutenant James B. McPherson, the officer in charge on Alcatraz Island, with the order to put the secretary's wishes into action without delay. Lieutenant McPherson complied, but after a month's trial determined that Murphy was not competent for the job and discharged him. In the meantime, Totten had gone on leave, and Thayer was temporarily in charge. When McPherson informed the Engineer Department of his action, Thayer agreed with the lieutenant and noted that the matter of hiring and firing workers lay completely within the competency and discretion of the officer in charge of the work. Thayer said that the officer in charge had no right to inquire into or know the religious or political opinions of the agents he employed. Clearly, Thayer's reply was a rebuke to the chief engineer and the secretary of war.[99]

Thayer sent Swift the evidence and said that he had informed the War Department of his action in the matter and that he cared not a "fig" how the secretary of war took the news. Swift became very excited over the issue and wrote back to Thayer, saying that if the secretary of war was smart, he would drop the matter.[100]

98. Joseph C. McKibbin to John B. Floyd, November 22, 1857, No. 1. Notes made by Swift, March 13, 1858, *Thayer Papers*; McKibbin and Charles L. Scott to Floyd, undated January 1852, No. 2. Notes made by Swift, *Thayer Papers*; Thayer to Swift, March 13, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
99. Totten to McPherson, November 24, 1857, No. 3. Notes made by Swift, March 13, 1858, *Thayer Papers*; McPherson to Thayer, February 1, 1858, and Thayer's endorsement, undated, No. 4. Notes made by Swift, March 13, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
100. Thayer to Swift, March 13, 1858, and Swift to Thayer, March 18, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.

Thayer was soon greatly upset to learn that Swift had made copies of his letters concerning the McPherson affair. Thayer was afraid that the letters might fall into indiscreet hands and requested Swift to destroy them: "There must be no allusion to the matter, directly, or indirectly, in any newspaper [Because] it would do a great deal of mischief which neither you or I could *undo*."[101] Swift replied that no use would be made of the papers without Thayer's consent. If Swift were still chief engineer, he would have informed the president of this "Vile Interference" and made it the subject of an official protest. Thayer, in Swift's view, had not done enough by indirectly telling the secretary of war that he had no right to know the religion or politics of the mechanics.[102]

Thayer told Swift that at some proper time he might let the matter get before the public or into newspapers, but not at the present. He explained that if he were actually the chief engineer and not just acting temporarily in that capacity, he would have taken stronger action. Because the matter was actually between Totten and Floyd, Thayer intended to let the chief engineer fight his own battles. There had been other instances of political interference that Totten should have protested and resisted but did not. In the future, Thayer said the best remedy would be for every chief engineer to resist such intrusions and, if necessary, either resign or be dismissed. When ten or twelve senior officers had left the Army in that fashion, public opinion might be aroused enough to force a change.[103]

Yet Swift still urged Thayer to remedy the evil, saying: "When your command ceases those who have infixed the Evils will come again to the place to Repeat & sustain them;—I may be wrong, but if I were Chief Engineer they never should have the Power to Repeat the Evils."[104] But Thayer had made his mind up and would not be budged. Totten, not he, would have to correct the situation.

101. Thayer to Swift, March 22, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
102. Swift to Thayer, March 25, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
103. Thayer to Swift, March 28, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
104. Swift to Thayer, April 14, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.

These matters remained until late in December 1858 when Colonel De Russy went to Washington to assume, temporarily, command of the Corps of Engineers.

Thayer had learned that Secretary Floyd was going to order him to Washington, and not wanting to go, he instead applied for a leave of absence due to ill health to begin in June. The leave was quickly granted. After De Russy assumed command, Thayer told Swift that Floyd had ordered Thayer to Washington ostensibly because it was inconvenient to have the engineer headquarters in Boston and the rest of the department in Washington. Thayer believed the secretary knew that he would not want to come to Washington and would probably ask for a leave. Floyd wanted Thayer out because he was conducting affairs in a manner that thwarted the secretary's policy. This was what Thayer had intended; he had been a real thorn in the secretary's side and had enjoyed it thoroughly.[105]

Ill health was not the real reason for Thayer's retirement from active duty. He was disgusted with General Joseph Totten's management of the Corps of Engineers. When faced with the prospect of going to Washington and acceding to the wishes of Secretary Floyd, Thayer chose to request a leave. If he had been the chief engineer instead of a temporary replacement, Thayer would have fought the growing political interference of the secretary of war in the corps' affairs. It would have been an interesting struggle.

Thayer deserved a rest. During the last year he had been working almost thirteen hours a day, except Sunday. Whether he would enjoy this newfound freedom he could not predict. In a letter to his friend Swift, Thayer expressed his uncertainty, saying, "I may feel like the emancipated slave who asked his master to take him back."[106]

The years between 1833 and 1858 had not been a particularly happy time for Sylvanus Thayer. Although his engineering duties

105. Thayer to Swift, December 22, 1858, *Thayer Papers*.
106. Thayer to Swift, January 5, 1859, *Thayer Papers*.

were physically taxing, Thayer was bored. His work as an engineer did not compare with the mental challenges of running the Military Academy, and he sought diversion with trips to Europe and the Midwest. During the twenty-five years he served as an engineer, the one time he seemed to become intellectually stimulated was when George Cullum began working on *The Early History of the United States Military Academy* to include in his *Register.* In helping Cullum gather the necessary research materials, Thayer showed a spark of the old flame that had burned within him as superintendent. It is obvious that West Point had remained the major interest in his life; everything else was secondary.

Thayer never went back on active duty. He was on sick leave from 1858 to 1863, when he finally retired from the Army with over fifty years of active service. Thayer's long years of service, his accomplishments at West Point, and his work on fortifications made him one of Uncle Sam's better bargains.

X

In Retirement, 1858–1872



Thayer's retirement, which should have been a time of peace and relaxation for him, was clouded by the turbulence in the country at the time. There was talk of Southern secession, and war was a distinct possibility. Sectional feelings were further inflamed by John Brown's fanatical raid on Harper's Ferry in October 1859. As a staunch Unionist, Thayer was greatly disturbed by the declamations of "fire eating" Southern orators, and he followed current events with a sense of dread.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 greatly troubled the South. It signified that a majority of the voters were interested in arresting the further spread of slavery. Faced with the choice of giving in to the national will or attempting to preserve their own special interests by withdrawing from the Union, moderates in the South struggled through a crisis of conscience. Secessionists had no such problems. After years of preaching the doctrine of states' rights, South Carolina now led the way. In December 1860, a convention meeting in Charleston voted to dissolve the existing union between South Carolina and the other states. Between Lincoln's

election in November and his inauguration in March, seven Southern states left the Union with virtually no opposition.

During this extremely critical period in American history, Joseph G. Swift corresponded frequently with Thayer, and Swift's views on current affairs expressed the Northern sentiment of the time. Convinced that free and slave states could no longer exist side by side, Swift wrote that it may have become an "Evil" to remain allied to the South and slavery; however, he feared that conquest of the South by force of arms would prove a curse, not a blessing.[1]

Swift was deeply angered by the inauguration of Jefferson Davis as president of the Confederate States. Swift lamented to Thayer:

> As you & I rejoiced in the Constitution & Union as they were—we cant [*sic*] be far apart in our estimation of the Inaugural of Jefferson Davis—O that any who were Educated, Clothed & Fed by the Union could turn their backs—its monstrous.[2]

Thayer did not reply to Swift's remarks about Davis, but his attitude toward the Southern president had been previously recorded. He had not liked Cadet Davis nor Secretary of War Davis, and there is no reason to believe he approved of Confederate leader Davis.

The enmity between the two began at West Point, where Davis was not exactly a model cadet. Although distinguished for his bearing and character, Davis was not above sneaking down to Benny Havens's tavern in Buttermilk Falls, now Highland Falls, for an

1. Swift to Thayer, January 18, 1861, *Thayer Papers*, 2.
2. Swift to Thayer, February 19, 1861, *Thayer Papers*.

occasional frolic.[3] During the summer encampment of 1825, a cloudburst flooded the tents of Davis and some other cadets. Ostensibly seeking shelter, they went to Benny's. There they were discovered by Captain Hitchcock and later court-martialed for going out of bounds, for being in a public house where liquor was sold, and for drinking "spirituous and intoxicatious liquors." Cadet Davis based his defense on the fact that going to Benny Havens was not "officially" against Academy rules. The court found him guilty and sentenced him to be dismissed from the Academy, but by order of the secretary of war, Davis was pardoned and allowed to resume his studies. Some companions were dismissed.

On another occasion, Davis and a companion were again enjoying themselves at Benny Havens when they were warned that an officer was coming. Rushing out the door, Cadet Davis took a shortcut along the riverbank to the barracks. Misjudging a step, he slipped and fell sixty feet down the bank, but his luck prevailed, and he survived the fall. On a third occasion, an illegal Christmas party was planned by some of the Southern cadets. Informed that Captain Hitchcock was on the prowl, Davis rushed to warn the others, who were making a rather potent eggnog. As he was speaking, Captain Hitchcock entered the room behind him, and Davis was ordered to go to his barracks, which turned out to be another exceedingly

3. Benjamin Havens (1787–1877) operated a small establishment on Gee's Point at West Point, along the Hudson River across from Constitution Island, when Thayer arrived in 1818. He leased the land from the Government. His business served as a place for boats to wait for favorable winds. He sold food, drink, and basic provisions. Cadets rarely went there because Gridley's Tavern was closer and the walk down the hill from the Plain to the River at night could be perilous. Around the time that the Academy purchased Gridley's Tavern in 1824, Havens lost his lease and was banned from West Point for selling alcohol to cadets while working for the post sutler. Benny then opened a new establishment on the River about two miles south of West Point in Buttermilk Falls, now Highland Falls. Thayer's personal opinion of Havens is not recorded, but his administration certainly prosecuted cadets who went there without permission. The famous song "Benny Havens, Oh!" dates to 1838. Set to the tune of "The Wearing of the Green," authorship is credited to Cadets Ripley Allen Arnold and John Thomas Metcalfe of the class of 1838 and to Second Lieutenant Lucius O'Brien, an Army surgeon. Verses have been added over time. (Pappas, *To the Point*, 84, 121, 134, and 160; Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History*, 90–91.)—Ed.

lucky circumstance for him: he missed the riot—the legendary Eggnog Riot—that followed when the officers tried to confiscate the eggnog and contain the misbehaving cadets.[4] The rioters were court-martialed and dismissed. Because he refused to testify about his roommate's participation, Davis was confined to his quarters for several weeks. Although his conduct in these three affairs made him extremely popular with the other cadets, it did not endear him greatly to Superintendent Thayer.[5]

Years later, when Jefferson Davis was secretary of war in the cabinet of Franklin Pierce, Thayer wrote of Davis:

> Neither he or my opinion of him has changed since I knew him as a cadet. . . . If I am not deceived he intends to leave his mark in the Army & also at West Point & a *black* mark it will be I fear. He is a recreant & unnatural son, [Who] would have pleasure in giving his Alma Mater a kick & would disown her, if he could, I think. There is some excuse for him, however. He feels *sore*. His career

4. Until 1825, Thayer allowed cadets to drink alcohol on holidays such as the Fourth of July and Christmas. Cadets got a bit too celebratory on the Fourth in 1825 and carried Major William Worth on their shoulders around the Plain. Thayer banned alcohol after this incident, but some cadets did not take well to the prohibition. In the days before Christmas 1826, cadets bought several gallons of booze from local establishments and late on Christmas Eve began drinking, particularly in the North Barracks. When caught, some tipsy cadets violently rebelled against the officers on duty. One cadet fired a pistol through an officer's door. Another attacked a superior with a piece of wood. When the rioters mistakenly believed that the soldiers of the post had been called to put down their rebellion, the destruction escalated into a full-scale riot in the North Barracks. There was significant property damage. Numerous young men were still drunk at morning formation, and there was a fight at breakfast in the mess hall. Thayer left most of the aftermath to his Commandant, Major Worth, and went to Christmas dinner at Gouverneur Kemble's residence in Cold Spring. Before he did so, however, he kept Christmas religious services unusually short, presumably a holiday gift for the many hungover attendees. Nineteen cadets were court-martialed. The best book on the Eggnog Riot is James B. Agnew, *Eggnog Riot: The Christmas Mutiny at West Point*, Presidio Press, 1979.—Ed.

5. Varina Howell Davis, *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir by His Wife*, 2 vols. (New York: Belford Company, 1890), I, 52–54; Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis, Vol. I: American Patriot, 1808–1861* (Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), 41–43; Walter L. Fleming, "Jefferson Davis at West Point," *Mississippi Historical Society Publications* 10 (1909), 262–264; Fleming, *West Point*, 55–59.

> at West [Point] as exhibited in the *indelible* records of the Institution was not such as he can look back upon with pride or satisfaction or even without mortification.[6]

Thayer explained that although Davis was older than most of his classmates when he entered the Academy, on every merit roll he was among the lowest third. At the end of his third year at West Point, only five cadets were below him. Even less flattering was Davis' standing on the conduct rolls. In his final year he had amassed a total of 189 demerits, only 11 short of the 200 needed for expulsion. When he graduated in 1828, Davis was twenty-third in a class of thirty-three. It is not illogical, therefore, to conclude that Thayer disliked Jefferson Davis even more after he became leader of the rebel cause.[7]

When the war between the states finally came, Sylvanus was living in Braintree with his widowed sister Livia Drusilla Wild and her daughter Livia Abigail, who was usually called Abby. Too old for fighting and generally unfit for any other form of active service, Sylvanus Thayer once again missed participating in a war. He followed the progress of the war by reading newspapers and letters, and occasionally an old friend dropped by to discuss current events. Always a man of strong opinions, Thayer was never afraid to express them to anyone who cared to listen.

In July 1861, a few days before the First Battle of Bull Run, Sylvanus was visited by his nephew Jonathan Moulton. The conversation before dinner centered on the war and its possible effects on free government. In the strongest possible terms, Thayer denounced John B. Floyd, the former secretary of war, along with his associates who had allied themselves with the Southern cause. Talk soon turned to a battle that was shaping up in Virginia. Thayer said the forces that advanced would be beaten back, and he naturally hoped

6. Thayer to Cullum, December 18, 1855, *Thayer Papers*.
7. Thayer to Cullum, December 18, 1855, *Thayer Papers*.

the rebel army would take the first step. Moulton mentioned that greater numbers might make a difference, but Thayer insisted that the greater the numbers of the advancing forces, the more certain their defeat. If one division were driven to rout, Thayer was certain the whole pack would run, an accurate prediction of events at Bull Run. Thayer estimated that in the whole Union Army, there were probably not one hundred fit soldiers, except the officers who had received a military education at West Point, and that it would take at least three years to train the troops. Since the Union Army was obviously not yet ready for a fight, it would be to its advantage to remain on the defensive.

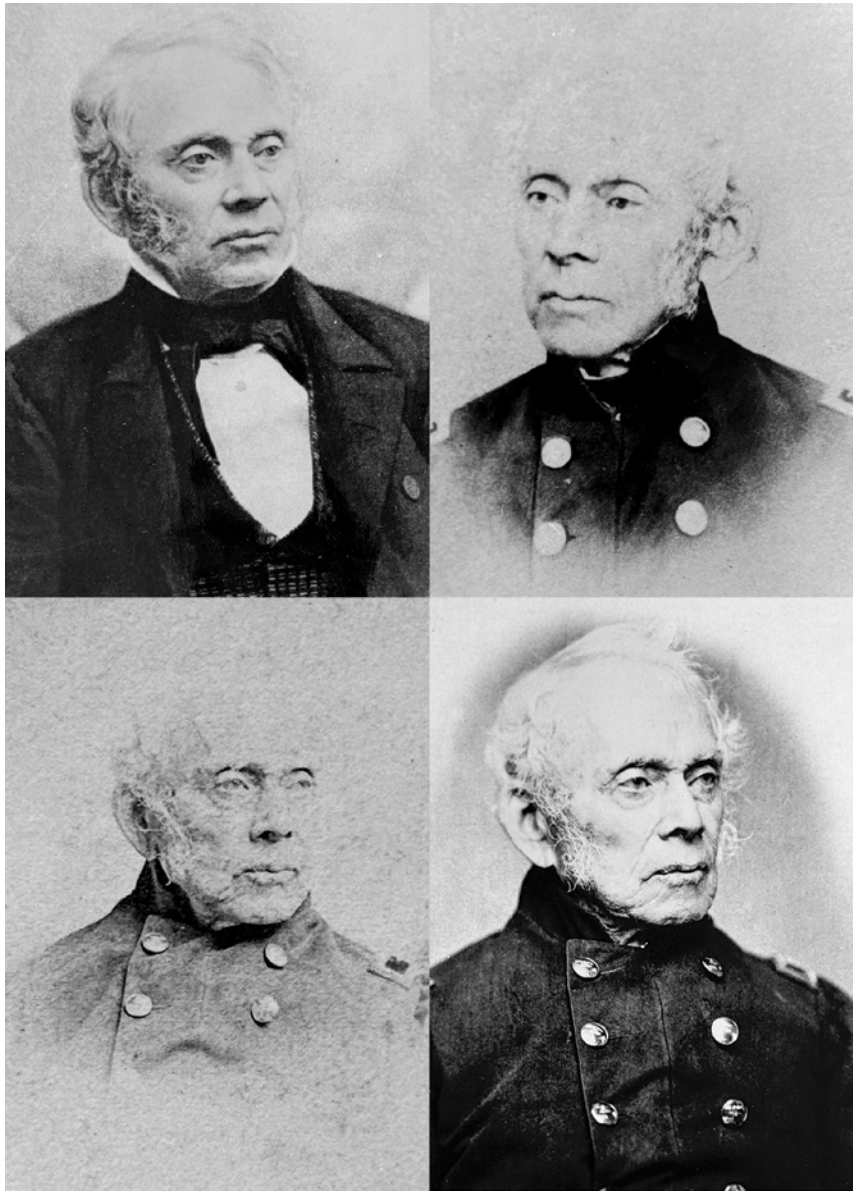
Thayer also voiced his concern over the present leadership of the Army. He was not sure that old Winfield Scott was still a competent general. When asked who would make a good military commander, Thayer replied somewhat despondently that he did not know. He could name some officers who might be good leaders, but the war had to develop them. Our best friends, he said pragmatically, might not always make the best generals.

Thayer had no doubt that, in the long run, the numerical superiority of 20 million Northerners would overcome 12 million Southerners. The real danger to the country, he predicted, would come with the subsequent demoralization caused by the war and the ensuing Northern victory. The conversation grew heated when Moulton argued that perhaps the South would produce a military general who, by great genius and popularity, would lead the South to victory. Thayer looked sharply at his nephew and replied:

> Are you a traitor, with the blood of the Thayers in your veins? If you are not, let me hear no more of that; but if you entertain such an opinion, you are an ignoramus, Sir, absolutely an ignoramus, Sir.[8]

With that, he grandly left the room.

8. Jonathan Moulton to Cullum, October 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.



Thayer in his later years. At top left, he wears civilian clothes. The image at top right is undated, but the photo at bottom right is believed to be from 1869, when he would have been eighty-three or eighty-four years of age. The photo at bottom left is a *carte de visite* from the studio of James Wallace Black in Boston. (Pitkin, *Thayer Ancestry*; Braintree Historical Society.)

At dinner that night, Moulton spoke of several officers in the Army who might make good generals. Thayer responded impatiently:

> That subject, Sir, is exhausted; allow me to offer you a glass of wine, which came from my vaults at West Point, of the vintage of 1825, and congratulate you on your abominable ignorance.[9]

Another of Thayer's frequent visitors was old Dartmouth friend and Harvard Professor George Ticknor, who said that General Scott, among others, valued Thayer's opinion on military affairs. Many Union officers also visited Thayer at Braintree during this time and received his exact and well-thought-out explanations of all movements of the Armies on both sides. General Robert Anderson of Fort Sumter fame was a regular guest, and on at least one occasion in 1863, General George B. McClellan met with the former superintendent.[10]

The war was a special agony for Sylvanus Thayer. Friends and former cadets fought and died for both sides. Of the total number of West Point graduates who fought in the Civil War, a majority served in the Union Army (one estimate puts the figure at 73 percent), but Thayer felt especially betrayed by the 304 graduates who took up arms against the Union. Of that number, at least 46 had graduated while Thayer was superintendent, including the Confederate generals Albert Sidney Johnston, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, William M. Pendleton, and John B. Magruder.[11]

On inactive duty since 1858 as a result of ill health, Brevet Colonel Sylvanus Thayer remained on the Army's duty roster until 1863, when he officially retired.[12] In March of that year, Thayer

9. Jonathan Moulton to Cullum, October 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
10. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, II, 443–444.
11. Ellsworth Eliot, Jr., *West Point in the Confederacy* (G. A. Baker and Company, Inc., 1941), xvii–xix, 23.
12. The *Thayer Papers* indicate that in addition to suffering from painful boils, Thayer fell and broke some bones in the late winter or spring of 1862 and then again around Thanksgiving of that year. The second accident happened when he fell down a flight of stairs and "upon concrete."—Ed.

was finally promoted to full colonel in the Corps of Engineers. Without his knowledge, several of his friends were trying to get a brevet promotion to general as official government recognition of his character and long service. Edward Everett, who not long before had shared a platform with Lincoln at Gettysburg, wrote to Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts concerning Thayer:

> He is a Patriarch in the Services; he has no competitors or rivals; he is (I fear) near the end of his career; and is in no want of the little increase of pay. His friends ask it, as a well deserved compliment to a man of the most sterling character, who, if he were 25 years younger, would unquestionably command an army Corps, with the rank of Major General,—and do it with credit to himself & benefit to the Country.[13]

Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's secretary of war, favored the proposal. In 1864 Sylvanus Thayer was made a brevet general to date from May 31, 1863, the day before his official retirement from the Army. Ticknor joyously wrote to Thayer:

> My Dear General,
>
> I can't help it this once. Next time it shall be 'My dear Thayer,' as of old. But today you must consent to be 'the General,' and nothing else. At any rate, since last evening, when I saw the announcement in the paper, I have had you constantly before me with the two stars on your shoulder-strap; feeling all the time that a galaxy would not be an overstatement of your deserts, so far as the creation of West Point, and the education of the officers of our army, is concerned.[14]

13. Edward Everett to Henry Wilson, April 22, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
14. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, II, 468.

General Thayer's health remained poor throughout 1864. He suffered from a painful stomach disorder, and for a while it appeared that he might die at any time. In spite of his illness, he was bright, cheerful, and perfectly natural. Ticknor visited Thayer frequently and kept George Cullum advised about their friend's health. Although Ticknor put his faith in the physician's skill and Thayer's remarkable constitution, by the summer of 1864 Thayer was frail and emaciated, and his stomach complaint limited his diet to liquids and some fruits.

To everyone's surprise, by January 1865 Thayer's health improved to the point where he was once again able to correspond with Cullum. By February, Thayer had a surprising gain in weight and his strength increased accordingly. Ticknor commented that Thayer was as well as he was twenty-five years ago.[15]

In 1864, General George Cullum was appointed superintendent of the Military Academy. In a very interesting letter to Cullum, Thayer compared their takeovers of the Academy:

> My mission and task were unlike yours; mine were to create, to construct, to build up from the foundation under difficulties coming more from within than from without; and then to preserve and defend what had been accomplished against the assidious [*sic*] or open attacks of its enemies among whom was sometimes the government itself, or against the visionary schemes of its professed friends, the latter more dangerous and infinitely more difficult to be resisted than the former; both were, however, successfully resisted up to the time I left. How it has been since you know. Your mission is to repair, to restore & then to complete the edifice that I left unfinished, or to change the figure. That respectable old lady, our dear Alma Mater under your care is sick abed,

15. Ticknor to Cullum, June 8 and July 5, 1864; Swift to Thayer, February 22, 1865, *Thayer Papers*.

> you as her doctor will administer the proper physic to set her on her feet again, to restore her to pristine health. That done you will dress her up and adorn her so that she will reappear more beautiful and her sons be more proud of her than ever before. And for doing which you will receive in reward the gratitude of her sons and all her admirers. Amen![16]

After the end of the Civil War, Thayer took steps to implement a plan that he had been considering for over thirty years. Through wise investments and sound land purchases, Sylvanus had accumulated a small fortune. The foundation of his wealth was the percentage he received while building the fortifications in Boston Harbor prior to the revocation of the percentage fee for engineers. During the years he worked as an engineer, his personal expenses were minimal, and he had been able to save part of his pay. He successfully invested his savings in railroads and other stocks, which increased in value as a result of the Civil War. By the end of the war, his fortune was in excess of $100,000. Having no direct descendants, Thayer decided in 1867 to donate a bequest of several thousand dollars to Dartmouth College to help establish a school of civil engineering and architecture.[17]

He chose to give Dartmouth the bequest while he lived so he could enjoy the fruits of his labor. General Thayer had met Asa Dodge Smith, the president of Dartmouth College, and judged him to be a person who would appreciate and carry out the plan exactly according to Thayer's views. In April 1867, Thayer officially notified Smith:

> Sometime next year, not later than Febuary [*sic*], probably, I hope to be prepared to place in the hands of trustees the sum of thirty thousand dollars the income derived

16. Thayer to Cullum, March 20, 1865, *Thayer Papers*.
17. John M. Fessenden to Cullum, July 27, 1867, *Thayer Papers*.

> therefrom to be applied to the establishment and maintenance of a Department or School of Architecture and Civil Engineering connected with Dartmouth College, the institution in which I was educated and in the prosperity of which as my Alma Mater I feel the deepest interest.[18]

From the beginning, Thayer was deeply involved in establishing the new school and selecting a suitable curriculum. The first major step was the choice of a suitable chairman for the department. Naturally, Thayer suggested concentrating the search on graduates of the Military Academy, whom he considered to have the best scientific education in the United States. Despite the fact that most Military Academy graduates were receiving higher pay on active military service than was given to Dartmouth professors, Thayer felt certain a qualified officer could be found who would prefer the chair to dull peacetime service in camp and garrison. President Smith, delighted by Thayer's proposal and the generosity of the gift, welcomed the general's assistance in selecting the first chairman and agreed that it was logical to look in the direction of West Point.[19]

Thayer turned to his friends at the Academy, in particular Dennis Hart Mahan, professor of engineering, and Albert E. Church, professor of mathematics, to aid in the search for a nominee to fill the newly created post. Professor Mahan soon wrote to recommend Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Peter S. Michie, his first assistant professor of engineering at West Point. Thayer was willing to accept Michie for the job, but Michie declined consideration because he wanted to remain in the military.[20]

18. Thayer to Asa Dodge Smith, April 4, 1867, Edward C. Lathem, ed., *The Beginnings of the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth College* (Thayer School of Engineering, 1964), 3.
19. Thayer to Asa Dodge Smith, April 4, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 3; Smith to Thayer, April 12, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 4–5.
20. Thayer to Smith, May 2, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 5–7; Dennis Hart Mahan to Thayer, June 17, 1867, in Smith et al., *Correspondence Concerning the Establishment of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering* (Dartmouth College, Rauner Special Collections Library, Hanover, NH).

On the Fourth of July, Thayer sent to the trustees of Dartmouth College the instrument of gift that stated that he intended to provide the college with the sum of $40,000, instead of the $30,000 that he originally mentioned, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a school or department of architecture and civil engineering. While the search continued for a man to fill the professor's chair, General Thayer was busily drawing up standards and procedures, just as he had done at the Military Academy almost fifty years earlier. The requisites for admission were outlined in what Thayer called Programme A. Since the school was intended to be postgraduate in nature, a student seeking admission had to have a sound background in the definitions, propositions, and principles of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and calculus, as well as knowledge of the fundamentals of chemistry, physics, physical geography, and descriptive astronomy. Thayer affirmed that the course of study in the new department would be for a two-year period and that the curriculum would be outlined in Programme B. As it turned out, Thayer later found the task of completing Programmes A and B beyond his physical capacity, and after submitting an outline to the trustees, he left the final task to others.

Thayer also wanted a proper degree and diploma awarded to students who satisfactorily completed the coursework. A committee of examination, consisting of the president, the professor of mathematics, the professor of natural philosophy, the professor of chemistry, and the senior professor of the School of Architecture and Civil Engineering would be established to examine the students at the beginning and the end of each school year.

Management of the new department would be vested in a Board of Overseers, consisting of the president of the college and four others initially appointed by Thayer. Later vacancies would be filled by the president acting in conjunction with the other board members. The duties of the board would be to fix the requirements for admission, establish the course of studies, and make any rules necessary concerning teachers and students. The funds for the new

department would be safely invested, and the income that was derived would be disbursed only by the treasurer on the order of the president. Thayer reserved for himself the right to choose the first professor of the new department.[21]

The trustees of Dartmouth gratefully accepted Thayer's generous gift with the proclamation:

> *Resolved*—That we gratefully accept the munificent donation of Gen. Sylvanus Thayer, upon the terms and conditions expressed in his Communication; and that the President appropriately communicate to Gen. Thayer this acceptance, with the earnest thanks of the Board.[22]

Now the search for a qualified chairman became crucial. Although given carte blanche, Professor Mahan was having difficulty in finding a suitable candidate. West Point graduates were generally unwilling to give up the advantages that public service offered for any civilian position unless the pecuniary advantages were very tempting. Throughout the summer of 1867 and into the fall, the search continued.

In October, Thayer met with an accident and was temporarily bedridden. While riding on a train, he caught his right hand in the hinge of a car door and severed one finger so badly it could not be saved. Eventually, another finger had to be amputated. The loss of part of his right hand further weakened the eighty-three-year-old general and caused him to take to his bed for several weeks. From that time on, writing was difficult, and many of his letters were dictated to and written by his niece Livia Abigail Wild.[23]

21. Daniel Doan, "A History of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering Under Director Fletcher," *Register of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering* (Dartmouth College, May 1937), 7; Thayer to the Trustees of Dartmouth College, July 4, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 19–23; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, 541–342.
22. Smith to Thayer, July 23, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School.*
23. Thayer to Robert Anderson, February 12, 1869, *Thayer Papers.* [Thayer did sometimes write with a pencil after the accident.—Ed.]

While Thayer was bedridden, the search for a chairman continued without success. At one point even Thayer despaired of finding a West Point graduate qualified for the post, and suggested that President Smith select someone from Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, or one of the other New England colleges, who had all the requisite qualities except a Military Academy background. Thayer suggested that such an individual could spend one term at West Point, then complete his education in Paris at the French school of civil engineering, l'École nationale des ponts et chaussées. Just as he had used l'École polytechnique as a basis for his innovations at West Point, Sylvanus Thayer now intended to use the French National School of Bridges and Highways as the basis for the new engineering school at Dartmouth. He had Professor Mahan send him a copy of the admission requirements from the French school to aid in the preparation of Programmes A and B.[24]

The next man seriously considered as a candidate for the professorship was Captain Edward C. Boynton, author of *History of West Point*. Professor Mahan favored him, and President Smith concurred. Only Thayer was hesitant. He wrote to Smith, "Were I to form an opinion from the Captain's History of West Point, I should have serious doubts of his fitness, the Book I regard as a miserable failure."[25] President Smith changed his opinion and agreed with Thayer, but Mahan's strong arguments in favor of Boynton eventually convinced Thayer and Smith to accept him as a candidate. Before any final decision could be made, Captain Boynton declined further consideration for unstated reasons.[26]

President Smith decided that rather than continue their search for an experienced man, they should find some recent graduate with excellent potential and send him to Europe for a year of seasoning:

24. Thayer to Smith, September 16, 1867, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 29–30; Mahan to Thayer, September 27, 1867, Smith et al., *Correspondence*.
25. Thayer to Smith, June 26, 1868, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 45.
26. Mahan to Thayer, July 16 and July 29,1868, Smith et al., *Correspondence*.

> The men more advanced in years are hard to get. If they are worth any thing, it has been found out, & they are fixed. A youngish man would have a pride in making at once the School & his own reputation.[27]

Smith also outlined the qualifications they should seek in a younger man: good moral tone, common sense, original ability, an interest in the proposed line of study, organizing power, aptness to teach, and a gentlemanly bearing. Thayer readily agreed that it might be best to select some young man with the "stuff in him." He also hoped that the school could be opened next year, as soon as the right man was found.[28]

In the fall, Professor Mahan informed Thayer that he had found another candidate for the position at Dartmouth—Colonel Charles C. Parsons, the principal assistant professor of geography, history, and ethics at West Point. As in the past with other candidates, Thayer expressed some doubts about the colonel's qualifications. Mahan said that Parsons could qualify for the position after a year of hard study in Europe and warned that they were unlikely to find a better qualified man.[29]

Thayer relented, talked with Colonel Parsons, and sent him to Dartmouth for an interview. Smith was delighted with Parsons, and Thayer agreed not to object to the appointment. It was hoped that Parsons would get a year's furlough to go to Europe to study and purchase models and equipment for the new department. In March 1868, Colonel Parsons changed his mind and decided, for family reasons, not to take the chair. Thayer thought the reason Parsons declined was his lack of self-confidence. Thayer's attitude toward Parsons had changed, and he wrote, "I still believe that he would have filled the Chair with credit to himself and to our

27. Smith to Thayer, August 10, 1868, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 45.
28. Smith to Thayer, August 10, 1868, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 45; Thayer to Smith, August 13, 1868, *Thayer School*, 46.
29. Mahan to Thayer, October 12, 21, and 30, 1868, Smith et al., *Correspondence*.

entire satisfaction, and am therefore sorry we are not to have his services."[30] The primary reason Parsons turned down the professorship was that he had found another profession. In December 1870, he resigned from the Army and became a clergyman in the Episcopal Church.

Mahan now became very pessimistic and suggested that it might be better to look to Dartmouth graduates to fill the job. The search instead centered on younger West Point men. As summer turned to fall, other candidates were considered and rejected. Although no chairman had yet been selected, Thayer had endowed the new department with donations totaling $60,000. It was also decided to drop the word "architecture" from the department's name and call it simply "The Thayer School of Civil Engineering." Thayer was justly pleased by the honor.[31]

In September 1869, Professor Mahan reported to General Thayer that he had a new and unexpected candidate for the professorship, his son Lieutenant Frederick A. Mahan. To obtain his former mentor's opinion, Mahan sent Frederick to Braintree to visit the aged general. Lieutenant Mahan seemed almost assured of the appointment; with the help of his father, he began an intensive program of study and laid the groundwork to obtain a leave of absence from the Army to study for a year in Paris.[32]

Thayer and President Smith began to hedge. While they had a favorable opinion of young Mahan as a man, they had concluded that he was not a viable candidate for the job. After much soul-searching, Lieutenant Mahan withdrew his name from consideration. Professor Mahan confided that his son had so much physical energy that he doubted Fred would have been happy with the constant mental work that would have been his life at

30. Thayer to Smith, March 12, 1869, Smith et al., *Correspondence*.
31. Mahan to Thayer, March 8 and April 10, 1869, Smith et al., *Correspondence*; Smith to Thayer, September 24, l869, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 54 and footnote 1.
32. Mahan to Thayer, September 24 and 27 and December 7, 1869, Smith et al., *Correspondence*.

Dartmouth. Both General Thayer and President Smith were obviously relieved.[33]

The search for a new candidate continued. Professor Mahan interviewed a promising young lieutenant named Robert Fletcher and praised him as one of the best informed, industrious, and most reliable men in his class, which had indeed been a superior one. Mahan asked Thayer to examine Fletcher's record in the *Cadet Register* of 1868, and if Thayer was favorably impressed, Mahan would send the lieutenant to Dartmouth with a letter of introduction.[34]



Cadet Robert Fletcher, class of 1868, from a class album. (USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

33. Mahan to Thayer, December 11 and 18, 1869, Smith et al., *Correspondence*; Mahan to Thayer, June 20, 1870, Thayer to Smith, June 24, 1870, and Smith to Thayer June 25, 1870, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 59–61.
34. Mahan to Thayer, June 20, 1870, *Thayer School*, 59–60.

Robert Fletcher had been born in New York City on August 23, 1847. He attended the New York Free Academy (which later became the College of the City of New York) for three years before entering the Military Academy in September 1864. He graduated with the class of 1868, in which he ranked twelfth of fifty-four men. Commissioned as an artillery officer, Lieutenant Fletcher had served on frontier duty at Brownsville, Texas, and with the garrison at Fort Trumbull, Connecticut, prior to being made the assistant professor of mathematics at the Military Academy in August 1869. Thus, his credentials appeared to be in order.[35] President Smith, delighted to hear about Lieutenant Fletcher, in July invited him to Hanover for a visit. Favorably impressed by Fletcher, Smith found only one criticism—Fletcher's youth; his intellect was good, his manners easy and gentlemanly, his moral tone excellent, and his enthusiastic interest in the engineering department greatly in his favor. Moreover, Lieutenant Fletcher was from a good Boston family; Judge Richard Fletcher, a Dartmouth classmate of Sylvanus's, was his great uncle. On the whole, he appeared to be a man of excellent promise.[36]

On his return from the meeting with President Smith, Lieutenant Fletcher stopped at Braintree to visit General Thayer, who was immediately impressed by the young man. In him he must have seen himself as a youth. From 9:30 in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon the two men talked. Thayer told of his youth and upbringing, and of his early military career. He talked a great deal about the Military Academy and condemned many features of its present management. From this one meeting, Thayer concluded that Fletcher was the man he had been seeking. He offered him the job, conditionally. Thayer wanted Fletcher to apply for a six-month leave of absence starting in September in order to begin a course of preparatory studies at Dartmouth and teach higher mathematics.

35. Mahan to Thayer, June 20, 1870, *Thayer School*, 60.
36. Smith to Thayer, July 7, 1870, *Thayer School*, 62–63.

Afterward, Fletcher was to study at l'École nationale des ponts et chaussées in Paris for one term. Thayer hoped that Fletcher would then be ready to assume the duties of professor of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering by the summer of 1872. Lieutenant Fletcher accepted the offer subject to the approval of all concerned. Once the business meeting concluded, the two men discussed educational systems in general and the benefits of an "elective-study" system while Thayer showed Fletcher around his farm.[37]

There was no doubt now in Thayer's mind that finally they had found the right man. Thayer soon wrote to Fletcher, encouraging him to apply for a one-year furlough instead of six months so that he could make an adequate trial of the professorship before resigning his commission. As instructed, Lieutenant Fletcher wrote to the secretary of war and requested a year's furlough, but in August the request came back disapproved. The superintendent of the Military Academy, Colonel Thomas G. Pitcher, had reluctantly approved the application, with the notation that Fletcher's going would be a loss to the institution as well as to the service. Secretary William Belknap disapproved the application without further comment.[38]

Upset by the refusal, Thayer advised Fletcher neither to resign from the Army immediately nor to abandon the prospect of filling the position at Dartmouth. Attempts would be made to procure the leave of absence through other channels; meanwhile Thayer assured Fletcher that no other candidate would be considered. Determined not to lose this conscientious young man, Thayer intended to enlist the aid of Senator James W. Patterson, a Dartmouth alumnus, and to contact General William T. Sherman, the commanding general of the Army. Thayer felt it might be necessary to explain to the

37. Robert Fletcher's *Journal* quoted in Lathem, *Thayer School*, 63, footnote 1.
38. Thayer to Fletcher, July 13, 1870, *Thayer School*, 63–64; Fletcher to Thayer, August 8, 1870, *Thayer School*, 68–69 and footnote 1. In 1866 a new law opened the office of the superintendent of the Academy to all branches of the Army. Now the Corps of Engineers no longer had firm control over West Point. Colonel Pitcher, an infantry officer, was the first to hold the office under the new law. Perhaps this explains his unwillingness to grant Fletcher's request.

president and the secretary of war how the new school of engineering would supply an important national need.[39]

President Smith agreed that they should continue efforts to get a leave for Fletcher, but he was also eager to open the Thayer School of Civil Engineering as soon as possible. He felt that if Fletcher could not obtain the desired leave, he should resign his commission and accept the professorship.

When it became apparent that no amount of influence would secure the leave, Fletcher decided to resign from the military. However, in July 1870 Congress had passed a law reducing the size of the Army; at the same time, there was a shortage of second lieutenants. Therefore, there was the possibility that his resignation might be refused.[40]

In mid-December, Lieutenant Fletcher again requested a six-month leave of absence. When no answer was received, Fletcher journeyed to Washington. There, he obtained an interview with President Ulysses S. Grant, who gave him a note granting the leave. Much to his surprise, when Fletcher went to the War Department, he learned that the secretary of war had again denied his application for a leave. Fletcher visited Secretary Belknap, who explained that since several officers of higher ranks had made similar applications and been turned down, he had to refuse Fletcher also. When shown the note from the president, Belknap replied that he would talk the matter over with the president and telegraph an answer to Fletcher. If the answer was no, then the secretary would give the lieutenant permission to resign from the Army. When the answer came, it was negative, and Fletcher resigned his commission effective December 31, 1870.[41]

39. Thayer to Fletcher, August 10, 1870, and Thayer to Smith, August 10, 1870, *Thayer School*, 69.
40. Fletcher to Thayer, August 31, 1870, *Thayer School*, 70–71; Smith to Thayer, September 30, 1870, *Thayer School*, 73; Fletcher to Thayer, October 5, 1870, *Thayer School*, 76–78.
41. Fletcher to Thayer, December 31, 1870, and Fletcher's *Journal* quoted in footnote l, *Thayer School*, 87–88.

Now that he was out of the Army, Robert Fletcher was able to devote his full attention to the Thayer School. In January 1871, he spent several days at Braintree making further plans with Thayer for the organization of the school. Before going on to Hanover, Fletcher visited the Sheffield Scientific School in New Haven, the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at Boston to gain further insight and ideas.[42]

In the middle of January, he arrived at Dartmouth and became Professor Robert Fletcher of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering. Much hard work remained before the school could actually open. Shortly after his arrival, Professor Fletcher began the preparatory instruction of three students who were to make up the school's first class: Henry A. Hazen, Albert H. Porter, and Thomas S. Greenlay. Later, other students were added to other preparatory sections. A large part of Fletcher's time was devoted to hearing recitations, giving examinations, organizing the curriculum, and working on Programmes A and B.[43] Thayer continued to monitor Fletcher closely, and wrote to President Smith: "Are you free to confide to me, without reserve, your opinions of Professor Fletcher?"[44] Smith replied with unbounded enthusiasm: "We are *delighted with him*. I think we have been directed, after several disappointments, to *the man for the place*."[45] Sylvanus Thayer was finally satisfied that he had picked the right man.

Although he kept up a fairly steady correspondence with President Smith and Professor Fletcher, General Thayer's health was in a dangerous state of decline. In the early spring of 1871, when it looked as if the end was near for the general, Thayer sent for Fletcher, who arrived at Braintree at the end of May. The purpose of the visit was to select, arrange, and catalog some of Thayer's

42. Fletcher to Thayer, January 5, 1871, *Thayer School*, 88–89.
43. William Phelps Kimball, *The First Hundred Years of the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth College* (University Press of New England, 1971), 46; Doan, "History of the Thayer School," *Register*, 14.
44. Thayer to Smith, March 1, 1871, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 96.
45. Smith to Thayer, March 13, 1871, *Thayer School*, 97.

books for the new school. Over 2,000 volumes, along with many atlases and plates, were cataloged and packed for shipment. Some were to remain in Braintree as a gift to the local library; the rest were given to Dartmouth and the Military Academy.[46]



Dartmouth Thayer School of Engineering students, 1876. They are either on a coastal surveying trip or showing off their equipment and dress for the trip. (Photo: Dartmouth College Photographic Files. Digital by Dartmouth Library.)

Thayer had expected that it would take several years before Fletcher would be ready to open the school. Fletcher himself was reluctant to launch the school without extensive preparation, but President Smith was impatient. Several times the college catalog had stated that the new school would be opened the following fall, and each time there had been a delay. If the school did not open

46. Fletcher's *Journal* quoted in footnote 1, *Thayer School*, 106–107.

soon, President Smith was afraid the credibility of the institution might suffer.[47] Finally, after only nine months of preparation, Professor Fletcher notified General Thayer: "I have the honor to report that the Thayer School of Civil Engineering has fairly opened."[48]

Although Thayer continued to keep in close touch with Fletcher, he was satisfied with the professor's good start. Late in the summer of 1872, ill health and the knowledge that Fletcher was indeed the right man for the job caused Thayer to relinquish all supervision. Robert Fletcher remained in charge of the Thayer School of Civil Engineering until his retirement in 1918. Dartmouth, indeed, had found its professor.[49]

Although work on the establishment of the engineering school at Dartmouth had occupied much of his time, Thayer was able to follow other pursuits. Early in 1869, General Robert Anderson contacted Thayer concerning a proposal to form an association of the graduates of the United States Military Academy and requested that he be present at the organizational meeting. Thayer gave the proposal his heartiest endorsement. He saw the association as a vehicle to bring about constructive and beneficial change to West Point. In his lengthy reply to Anderson, Thayer noted that during the fifty-one years that had passed since his takeover as superintendent, there had been scarcely a single change in the Military Academy's organization, system of instruction, administration, or general regulations. Although this was good evidence that the edifice was not badly planned and constructed, Thayer was aware of the dangers of stalled development. West Point's good works in the past, he warned,

> should not blind us to her shortcomings if any there be, or dampen our zeal to make her still more useful, and beautiful, till she shall become the beau ideal I have dreamed of for half a century."[50]

47. Kimball, *First Hundred Years*, 47.
48. Fletcher to Thayer, September 20, 1871, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 124.
49. Doan, "History of the Thayer School," *Register*, 17.
50. Thayer to Robert Anderson, February 12, 1869, *Thayer Papers*.

He hoped that one function of the proposed association would be to reconcile different opinions on upgrading the Academy and thus bring about orderly change. He suggested that a special committee made up of General Anderson, Dr. Horace Webster, and Professor Dennis Hart Mahan be appointed to look into certain areas that needed immediate improvement. Thayer also recommended three items for discussion at the first meeting. The first was a change in the method of filling vacancies at the Academy. Members of Congress should have nothing to do with the selection of candidates. To secure the most talented and worthy cadets for the Academy, Thayer proposed that vacancies be filled by competitive examinations. He also called for the establishment of a permanent Board of Improvement and the appointment of an inspector of studies.

Thayer was both moved and flattered that so many graduates were eager for him to preside over the meeting, but he had to decline, saying:

> The belief that I am kindly remembered by the graduates still living, whose education I had the honor to supervise, is the principle [*sic*] source of happiness now remaining to me. To meet them again face to face, and to pass a few days or hours in social interview with them, would afford me a pleasure I could not deny myself, were it possible for me to make the journey to New York. As it is, my spirit can only be there, my worn out body cannot be.[51]

In May, Thayer was again notified that a meeting was to be held in New York to organize the Association of Graduates of the Military Academy. At the organizational meeting in the office of Dr. Webster, the president of the College of the City of New York, General Sylvanus Thayer was named president of the association.

51. Thayer to Robert Anderson, February 12, 1869, *Thayer Papers*.

Although he was never able to attend the annual reunions because of his health, he was elected president every year until his death.[52]

Age had finally caught up with Sylvanus Thayer. He still remained mentally alert and clear, but his thoughts came more slowly and his articulation became somewhat difficult. He had a hard time remembering names but could recall dates with great ease. Thayer had never been a particularly religious man. Robert Fletcher noted, during a visit to Thayer in the summer of 1871, that "he has no proper appreciation of the Gospel of Christ." Although the old general claimed that he would die as nearly as possible in the faith of the Pilgrims, Fletcher considered him Unitarian in outlook. Thayer did not read the Bible and had not done so in many years. He avoided all religious conversation and stubbornly refused to see ministers when they came to talk on theological topics. Fletcher was disturbed by Thayer's attitude and prayed for him, but in secret, since reference to personal religious matters irritated Thayer.[53]

In the fall of 1871, Thayer was upset by the news that his longtime friend Dennis Hart Mahan had died in a rather unexpected fashion. For some time, Professor Mahan had suffered from a severe nervous disorder that caused violent convulsions. While traveling down the Hudson on a steamboat on September 16, 1871, to visit a doctor in New York City, Mahan went into the river near Stony Point and drowned. The body was recovered eight days later and buried at West Point. Although there was the possibility that Mahan had fallen overboard during a convulsive fit, an inquest that was convened at Haverstraw concluded it was a suicide, and newspapers reported it as such even before an official cause of death was released.[54] Fletcher seems to have thought Mahan's death was a suicide when he wrote to Thayer:

52. Horace Webster to Thayer, May 19, 1869, *Thayer Papers*; Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy, *Bulletin Number 1* (West Point: United States Military Academy Press, 1890), 7.
53. Fletcher's *Journal* quoted in footnote 1, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 106–107.
54. Thomas Everett Griess, "Dennis Hart Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism, 1830–1871" (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1969), 342–343.

> I have been very much shocked by the horrible news in regard to Prof. Mahan, which appeared in yesterday's paper.—It is hard to imagine a reason for such a dreadful step,—considering his position and prospects.[55]

Many of Thayer's other friends had died, Swift in 1865 and Ticknor in January 1871. Thayer wrote to Cullum that with Mahan gone, Cullum and John G. Barnard were dearer to him than any other living persons. Thayer survived Mahan by slightly less than a year. On September 7, 1872, General Sylvanus Thayer died. He was eighty-seven years old.[56]



In 1872, Thayer was buried in what is now Elm Street Cemetery in Braintree near the grave of his parents, seen here. (Photo by Editor.)

55. Fletcher to Thayer, September 20, 1871, Lathem, *Thayer School*, 124.
56. Thayer to Cullum, October 9, 1871, *Thayer Papers*.

In tribute to his memory, the officers of the Corps of Engineers were ordered by the War Department to wear the prescribed badge of mourning for thirty days. At the Military Academy, guns were fired every half hour from sunset to sunrise and the flag was displayed at half staff. Thayer was buried in the Braintree Cemetery—now called Elm Street Cemetery—near his father's grave.

XI

Postmortem



In his will, Sylvanus Thayer made generous provisions for relatives and friends. To his sisters Abigail and Livia, he left annuities of $1,000 and $900, respectively, for life. Livia was also given the house she and her brother had shared in Braintree, as well as the household goods, furniture, and farm equipment. All of Thayer's books and maps that had not already been given away were willed to his friends Asa French and George Augustine Thayer, a relative and Civil War veteran.

The largest bequest went to the town of Braintree for the further development of education in Massachusetts. Thayer instructed his trustees to set aside $60,000 for the purchase of land and the erection of a suitable building to house a New England–style academy. The town of Braintree was required to furnish an additional $20,000 within a reasonable time; if it did not, the same offer would be made to the town of Quincy or Randolph. The town of Braintree accepted the terms, and the academy—coeducational from the beginning—was duly built and opened in September 1877. After

almost a century of service, the Thayer Academy still functions today as a coeducational institution for over 700 students.[1]

Thayer also made provisions to build a local library in Braintree. In 1870, he had proposed that if the town would put up $10,000 for the project, he would donate the rest. Although the offer was rejected at first, the city fathers later accepted. Thayer died before completed plans were drawn up, but his executors carried out his wishes. The Thayer Public Library was completed at a cost of $30,000 and was opened to the public in September 1874. Ever the practical man, Thayer left a maintenance fund of $10,000, the interest on which the town would spend for the benefit of the library.[2]

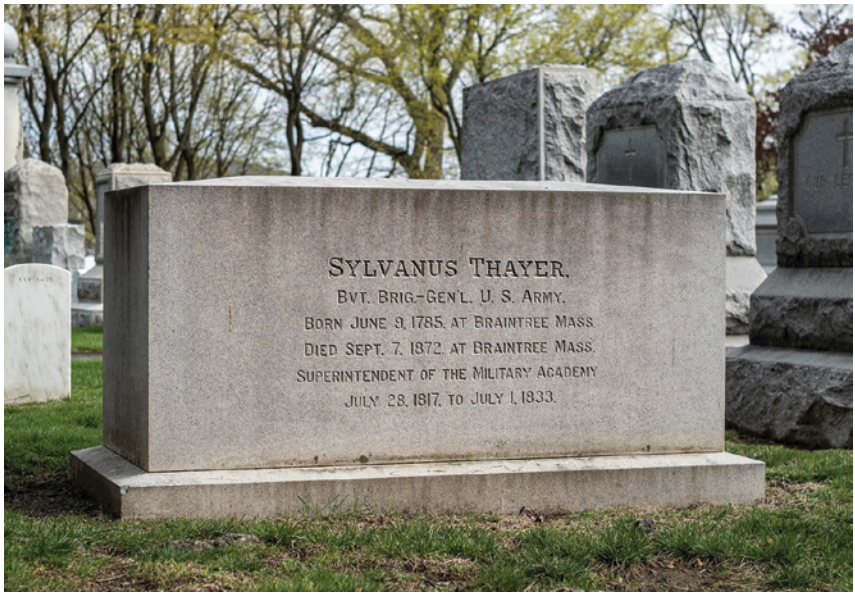
General Sylvanus Thayer had been buried in Braintree, but West Point graduates revered his memory and wanted him to repose at the Academy. At first, his sister Mrs. Livia D. Wild refused, stating that it was her brother's wish to be buried with his parents. Finally, after four years of relentless appeals by George W. Cullum and the Association of Graduates, Mrs. Wild acquiesced, partly because of the overcrowded condition of the Braintree Cemetery. On November 8, 1877, with solemn and proper military honors, Sylvanus Thayer finally returned to the West Point he had left in 1833. The pallbearers in the cortege were the eight earliest Academy graduates in attendance; all had been cadets under Thayer. The eldest had been a cadet when Thayer became superintendent, and the junior was a member of the last class that graduated under Thayer.[3]

1. Sylvanus Thayer, *Will of Sylvanus Thayer* (United States Military Academy Library Archives and Special Collections), 1–6; Pattee, *History of Old Braintree*, 346–347.
2. Pattee, *History of Old Braintree*, 353; Southworth, "General Sylvanus Thayer," *Brief History of Braintree*, 46; "One Hundred Years of Public Service, 1874–1974," a pamphlet given out by the Thayer Public Library, Braintree, MA.
3. George A. Thayer to Cullum, September 10, 1876, *Thayer Papers*.



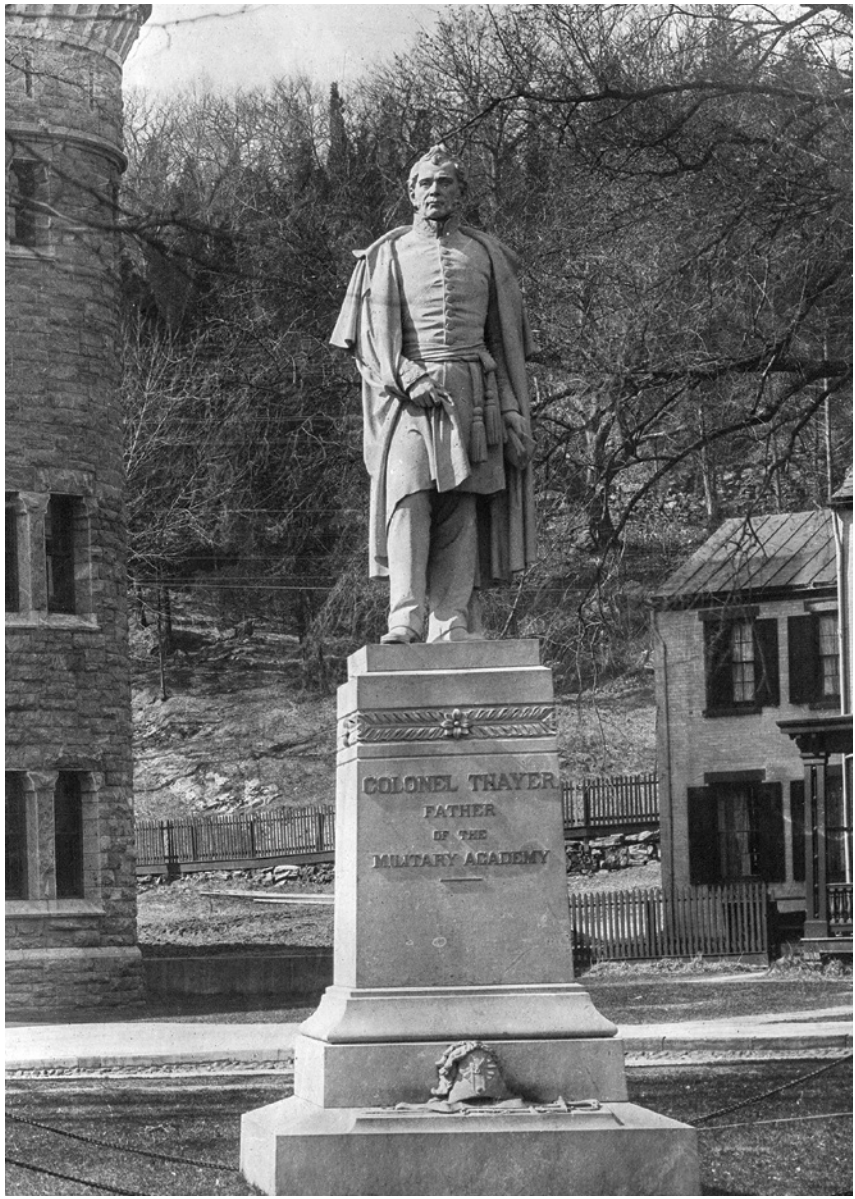
Top: The Thayer Academy Main Building (1876–1877) and the Glover Building (1894), Braintree, MA. Bottom: The Old Thayer Public Library (1873), Braintree, designed by Hammatt Billings and Joseph Billings. The building served as the town's library until 1953. The current public library still bears Thayer's name. (Photos taken in 2025 by Editor.)

Thayer's coffin was placed upon a gun carriage draped with national flags. The engineer castle and the letter T, for Thayer, were mounted on either side, and his chapeau and sword rested upon the coffin. The military escort, preceded by the West Point Band, was composed of the battalion of cadets, a battery of light artillery, and a detachment of cavalry. Numerous graduates of the Academy and private citizens closed the procession. Following a simple Episcopal service, Thayer's remains were committed to the earth, and an emotional eulogy was delivered by General Daniel Tyler.[4]



Five years after his death and forty-four since he had left the Academy, Thayer's remains were moved to the West Point Cemetery. (Photo by Editor.)

4. Cullum, *Biographical Sketch of Thayer*, 32–33. [The eight pallbearers, along with their years of graduation, were Brevet Brigadier General Henry Brewerton (1819), Brigadier General Daniel Tyler (1819), Benjamin H. Wright (1822), Alexander J. Center (1827), Professor Albert E. Church (1828), Brevet Major General Andrew A. Humphreys (1831), Brevet Major General John G. Barnard (1833), and Brevet Major General George W. Cullum (1833).—Ed.]



The Thayer Monument, West Point, in its original location close to the current location of the door of the Cadet Mess. This photo dates from about 1903–1904. The building on the left was a gymnasium built in the 1890s. The officer's quarters on the right was built in 1829 with a wing added later. (USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

The Association of Graduates also raised funds to erect a memorial to Thayer. On June 11, 1883, the statue of Sylvanus Thayer was unveiled at a West Point ceremony, during which Cullum delivered a lengthy biographical sketch of his old friend and mentor. The monument was the work of German immigrant and Union veteran Carl Conrads of the New England Granite Works. Engraved on the granite monument were the words, "Father of the Military Academy." This was not the first time this tribute was given to Thayer as a fitting reward for his many years of hard work and dedication. Although moved several times, the statue of Thayer stands today looking out across the West Point Plain, serenely watching the thousands of cadets who march before him.[5]

In 1958 the Sylvanus Thayer Award of the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy was established by the class of 1931 to recognize yearly a worthy American for outstanding service to the nation. The award, a bronze medal bearing the profile of Thayer on the obverse and the coat of arms and motto of the Academy on the reverse side, was first presented to Dr. Ernest O. Lawrence, the inventor of the cyclotron, a recipient of the Nobel Prize, and one of the leaders in the development of high-energy accelerators.[6]

5. Cullum, *Biographical Sketch of Thayer*, 35.

6. "Sylvanus Thayer Medal Awarded to Dr. Ernest O. Lawrence," *Assembly*, XVII, no. 1 (Spring 1958), 6–8. [Other recipients of the Thayer Medal have included John Foster Dulles (1959), Dwight D. Eisenhower (1961), Douglas MacArthur (1962), Bob Hope (1968), Neil Armstrong (1971), Omar N. Bradley (1973), Warren Burger (1988), Ronald Reagan (1989), George H. W. Bush (1994), Walter Cronkite (1997), Colin Powell (1998), Henry Kissinger (2000), Sandra Day O'Connor (2005), Tom Brokaw (1996), H. Ross Perot (2009), Madeline Albright (2013), Condoleezza Rice (2014), Gary Sinise (2015), George W. Bush (2017), and Barack Obama (2024).—Ed.]



The Sylvanus Thayer Medal is given to recipients of the annual Thayer Award. This one was photographed in 1959. (National Archives and Records Administration.)

The town of Braintree also honored the memory of one of its famous sons. Between 1957 and 1960, the birthplace of Sylvanus Thayer was restored by the Braintree Historical Society. It was dedicated on April 30, 1960, with the help of Army dignitaries and West Point cadets. The house, today located at 786 Washington Street in Braintree, was originally constructed in 1720 by Thayer's great-great-grandfather Nathaniel Thayer. Both a National Register of Historic Places site and a Massachusetts Historic Landmark, the house now serves as a proud symbol of Braintree's history.[7]

As an additional honor, Sylvanus Thayer was elected to the New York University Hall of Fame for Great Americans in 1965. To familiarize the public with the outstanding qualifications of Sylvanus Thayer as an educator, an ad hoc committee headed by General Willis D. Crittenberger of the Association of Graduates was organized in 1959–1960 to advocate for Thayer to be elected. Three candidates were selected for membership into the Hall of

7. "General Sylvanus Thayer Birthplace," a free pamphlet distributed by the Braintree Historical Society, Braintree, MA.

Fame in 1960—Thomas A. Edison, Henry David Thoreau, and Edward A. MacDowell. Thayer fell short of selection by only two votes, which made him automatically eligible for the next election in 1965. In 1965, the Thayer committee was successful. On October 28, 1965, the college of electors of the Hall of Fame for Great Americans recognized Thayer's importance as an American educator. His name was added to the roll of the ninety-two other men and women who had been honored up until that time.[8]



General Omar Bradley (left) and Dr. James M. Hester of New York University at the unveiling of a bronze bust of Sylvanus Thayer on Sunday, May 15, 1966, in the auditorium of NYU's Gould Library, part of what is now the campus of Bronx Community College. The bust, which is still on display, is by sculptor Joseph Kiselewski. (USMA Library Archives and Special Collections.)

8. United States Military Academy, *Sylvanus Thayer Hall of Fame Committee* (Association of Graduates, 1960), n.p.; R. Ernest Dupuy, "Sylvanus Thayer: Man of Destiny," *Assembly* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1966), 3.



A commemorative medal by Joseph Kiselewski produced for the 1966 induction of Thayer into the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. (Yale University Art Gallery. Transfer from the Yale University Library, Numismatic Collection, 2001.)

Thayer's greatest achievement was in the area of education. He was, indeed, the "Father of the Military Academy" whose guidance and ideas shaped the institution and for many years made it the primary school of engineering and technology in the United States. Thayer was suited by background, education, and personality for his work at the Academy. Almost everything he did up until that day in the summer of 1817 when he came to West Point as superintendent prepared him for the job. During his childhood, little set him apart from other boys, except perhaps his strong retentive memory. One of the early fortuitous events that shaped his life was being sent by his parents to live with his uncle in New Hampshire. Except for that circumstance, Thayer would probably have become a housewright like his father or perhaps a doctor like his brother. During his years in New Hampshire, two uncles and a general played a large part in influencing his future. Azariah Faxon and John Faxon developed in Sylvanus an everlasting interest in knowledge and education. His early contact with General Benjamin Pierce stimulated his interest in the military; Cullum said that Thayer was

the protégé of General Pierce.[9] Thus, education and the military became the two threads that bound his life together.

His years at Dartmouth increased his thirst for knowledge and further stimulated his interest in the military. There he came in contact with John Wheelock, the president of Dartmouth, who had been both a soldier and an educator. At Dartmouth, Thayer learned the value of a scientific education. His interest in the military never slackened, as he followed avidly the campaigns of his French hero, Napoleon. After four years at Dartmouth, Thayer entered West Point as a cadet.

The Military Academy at the time of Thayer's attendance as a cadet was not a grand institution. Except for French and military instruction, there was little formal instruction more advanced than what he had received at Dartmouth. His membership in the Military Philosophical Society was more valuable to him than any courses he took. After only a few months at the Academy, Thayer became an engineer lieutenant. At West Point two men greatly influenced Thayer, Joseph G. Swift and Alden Partridge—in very different ways. Swift became Thayer's close friend and mentor for life and saw to it that the young officer had several advantages that other young lieutenants did not. Partridge, whom Thayer had known at Dartmouth, became his bitter antagonist.

The War of 1812 also played a major part in shaping Thayer's life. What he saw during the war convinced him that the country lacked trained officers to lead the Army and professional engineers to build its defenses. Later he would help correct these deficiencies by his work at the Military Academy. The two years that Thayer spent in Europe after the war, with the help of Swift, further prepared him for the great undertaking of his life. He so admired the French system of military education used at l'École polytechnique that he adopted it as the model for West Point.

9. Undated MS by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*.

In addition to his background and education, Thayer's personality and character suited him for the role of superintendent. Although many cadets disliked Thayer's coldness and apparent lack of compassion, his friends saw a different man altogether, one who was warm, human, kind, and understanding. Officially, he could appear as a stern military figure who refused to deviate from the rules. He could be austere, taciturn, and autocratic, as Jackson charged, but above all he was a man of integrity, honor, high intelligence, and great motivation. George Ticknor once outlined Thayer's character: good-tempered and gentle, clear-minded, farseeing, firm, and unyielding in matters of principle, Thayer was a man who always put his country before everything, except his honor. According to Ticknor, Thayer was also unhesitatingly obedient to his superiors, but indifferent to the general public and to popular opinion.[10]

The final ingredients necessary for Thayer's success at West Point were an aptitude for administration and his total dedication to the job. He took charge of the Academy when it was a fledgling institution and brought order and discipline out of chaos. There can be no doubt that West Point's high reputation dates from the years of Thayer's superintendency. He was deeply committed to the Academy; in a sense, he was "married" to West Point and the cadets were his "sons." During the sixteen years he was superintendent, Thayer had virtually no life of his own outside the post limits. If it had not been for the rift with Jackson, it is quite likely that Thayer would have remained at West Point for his entire career. Leaving the Academy was quite painful for Thayer, and he departed abruptly and with no ceremony. As an act of "penance" for his mistakes, he never returned to West Point.

Today, Thayer is remembered not as a military leader or an engineer, but as a leader in scientific and technical education. Before West Point, there was not a single school of engineering

10. Ticknor to Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.

in the United States. Shortly after he took over as superintendent, the Military Academy began graduating men with mathematical and scientific backgrounds superior to those obtainable from any other college in the country. As late as 1850, the nation's supply of American college-educated engineers came almost entirely from two technical institutions, West Point and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.[11] Military Academy graduates were sought by many American colleges to serve in chairs of mathematics, natural philosophy, engineering, and astronomy. Later, when specialized schools of engineering were founded, they frequently looked to West Point for instructors and textbooks.[12]

At the foundation of Thayer's educational policy were three necessary ingredients—competent instructors, proper facilities, and a sound curriculum. He brought men of high character, ability, and resourcefulness to the Military Academy as faculty and staff. He also saw to it that additional buildings and facilities were constructed to ensure that the educational process could begin in a proper atmosphere. The curriculum that Thayer introduced was the keystone of his entire system and included French, mathematics, the physical and natural sciences, military and civil engineering,

11. Norwich University and Union College also had engineering programs. The Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard opened in 1847.—Ed.

12. Hofstadter and Hardy, *Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States*, 21; William T. Morton, "Sylvanus Thayer—Neglected American," *Assembly* 3, no. 1 (April 1944), 2. [Some researchers have tried to scientifically assess the impact of West Point engineers on the profession of engineering in the United States. Calhoun concluded that by the late 1830s, West Point was a more fertile training ground for civil engineers in the early nineteenth century than the massive New York State canal system. See Daniel H. Calhoun, *The American Civil Engineer: Origins and Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1960), 37–43. Sian Zelbo, however, cautions not to oversell West Point graduates' contributions, noting that Academy grads were more represented in civil engineering than in other fields, such as mechanical or industrial, and that they often moved quickly into management, administrative, or civic positions. See Zelbo, "The Role of the United States Military Academy at West Point in the Formation of America's Engineering Profession (1802 to 1850)," *Histoire & mesur*e, XXXVIII-2, 2023, 217–240. Thus, the impact of Academy-trained engineers might be better considered through a lens of influence and reputation, rather than sheer numbers in the engineering profession.—Ed.]

literature, history, and, of course, the military subjects necessary to make the cadets into soldiers.[13]

One of the major virtues of Thayer's system of education was that it was founded on character. He insisted on the absolute honesty and complete integrity of every officer and cadet. Moreover, the curriculum he established was consistent with the primary demands of both a professional military and a scientific education. West Point turned out not just officers, but scientifically trained men capable of entering a number of vocations in addition to the Army.[14]

Since West Point was the school for training and developing junior officers, Thayer also exerted a direct influence on the American military. Thayer molded the Academy, the Academy molded the cadets, and the graduates of the Academy soon dominated and molded the Army. The effectiveness of the Military Academy—and, indirectly, of Thayer's work—was noted by General Winfield Scott when, in his famous "Fixed Opinion," he praised the decisive role of West Pointers in winning the Mexican War.[15]

In conclusion, it was Thayer's groundbreaking work at West Point and the many accomplishments of Academy graduates that make him an important figure in American history. The United States owes a large debt to Thayer. Although he was a soldier who fought no battles and an engineer who built no lasting marvels or monuments, for the Military Academy, Sylvanus Thayer was the necessary man. The work he accomplished as superintendent has long endured his passing. "Duty, Honor, Country," the motto of the United States Military Academy, is an accurate description of his life's work and personal philosophy.

13. Robert Fletcher, "Some Reminiscences of General Thayer," United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections; Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 90.
14. Morton, "Sylvanus Thayer," *Assembly*, 2.
15. Morton, "Sylvanus Thayer," *Assembly*, 2. In a speech at a dinner after the capture of Mexico City, December 8, 1847, General Winfield Scott said, "I give it as my fixed opinion, that but for our graduated cadets, the war between the United States and Mexico might, and probably would, have lasted some four or five years, with, in its first half, more defeats than victories falling to our share."

XII

Four Houses—
An Editor's Epilogue



A half century has passed since James Kershner finished his biographic dissertation of Sylvanus Thayer. In preparing his work for a wider audience, I felt the need to connect with Thayer's life and legacy beyond the written page. In addition to reading Kershner's sources and the new scholarship published after 1976, I wanted to walk in Thayer's footsteps. As a human geographer, I believe strongly in the power of place. Landscapes can reflect who we are and influence what we become. Thayer changed West Point, but he was also changed by it.

To this end, I set out from West Point to experience a few of the places where Thayer worked and lived, including Braintree and Boston, Massachusetts, and Washington and Hanover, New Hampshire. While some locations were not available to visit in the winter, such as Georges Island in Boston Harbor, I was able to visit four homes in which he lived and step inside two of them. Each house, more than merely timber or brick, prompted reflection on Thayer's life, his character, and the numerous forms in which he is memorialized.

Braintree: The Thayer House

As I edited Kershner's work, Thayer's Braintree and Massachusetts roots became quite apparent. Although I reject deterministic linkages between place and culture, General Thayer certainly had many of the classic nineteenth-century New England characteristics so often mentioned by cultural historians: frugality, industry, competency, intellectualism, and civic mindedness[1]—and perhaps a pound or two of Yankee stubbornness. Thayer worked hard throughout his life, like his parents and ancestors before him. He saved his money and lived modestly in his old age despite considerable wealth. He obviously valued education, reforming the Military Academy, establishing through his generosity two schools—one coed from the start—that still thrive, and endowing a public library that still serves his hometown. His reserved religious views mirror a shift from Congregationalist to Unitarian seen throughout the Northeast during his lifetime.

In the upstairs of Sylvanus Thayer's childhood home, tirelessly maintained by the Braintree Historical Society, is a small back hallway created by the eighteenth-century conversion of the Georgian-style house to a saltbox. As I looked left and right down the dimly lit passageway, I immediately pictured a young Sylvanus, perhaps six or seven years old, running hither and thither. The house, built by his grandfather Nathaniel, would likely have been a buzz of activity with four older siblings and a new baby sister and another two years later. His father, active in Braintree affairs, would have had visitors regularly even though the house's location was not as central as it is today.[2] There would have been a never-ending list of chores. We can never know if the hubbub of young

1. See, for example, Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
2. It was painstakingly moved and rebuilt in the 1950s to prevent demolition and was dedicated in 1960.

Sylvanus's home made his personality more guarded and introspective than his father's, but it is clear that he was a child of this house, a New England house, a Massachusetts house.



The kitchen of Thayer's boyhood home in Braintree, Massachusetts. It is maintained by the Braintree Historical Society. (Photo by Editor.)

Thayer's lifelong friend George Ticknor is often connected to the Boston Brahmin social class of nineteenth-century Massachusetts that believed strongly in classical education, individual reason, a patriotism rooted in their ancestors' roles in the Revolution, and a degree of social superiority that was supposed to motivate civic duty.[3] All these characteristics can be seen in Thayer. While his working years in Boston were often reclusive due to weeks and months of living on Georges Island with little social engagement in

3. David B. Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Harvard University Press, 1967).

the city, Thayer would have undoubtedly met many of the emerging cultural, political, and social leaders of the region. The Boston Brahmins also believed in traveling to Europe for the Grand Tour. Thayer's second European trip included all the classic destinations of a proper tour, including Greece and Italy.

Scholars such as Kershner are correct to look at Thayer's experience at Dartmouth and his observations of European academies such as l'École polytechnique as influences on his reforms at the United States Military Academy. However, the cultural trends emerging in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Boston and its hinterlands could also have been catalysts for his support of an Academy curriculum focused on practical subjects combined with ethical development achieved through discipline and study. Certainly, Thayer, through his later actions, demonstrated the ideals of New Englander Noah Webster, who wrote in 1790:

> Such a system of education as gives every citizen an opportunity of acquiring knowledge and fitting himself for places of trust. These are fundamental articles; the *sine qua non* of the existence of the American republics.[4]

Consider also Caleb Bingham's influential *American Preceptor*, a widely used collection of readings and lessons designed for use in schools and first published in Boston in 1794. Bingham emphasized national, republican values; morality in education; and the teaching of practical, technical subjects. For example, Bingham includes an excerpt from New Hampshire historian Jeremy Belknap:

> Every local library, among other books, should be furnished with those of natural philosophy, botany, zoology, chymistry [*sic*], husbandry, geography, and astronomy; that inquiring minds may be directed in their inquiries;

4. Noah Webster, *On the Education of Youth in America* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1788).

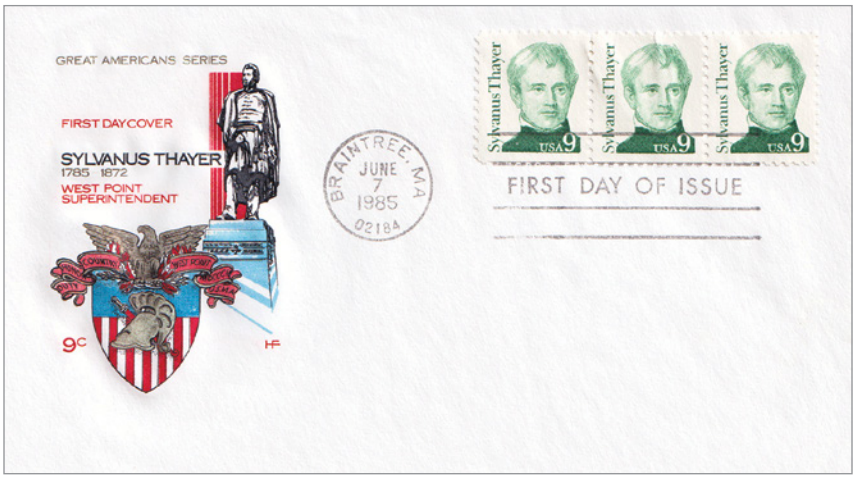
> that they may see what is known, and what still remains to be discovered; and that they may employ their leisure and their various opportunities in endeavouring to add to the stock of science, and thus enrich the world with their observations and improvements.[5]

It is hard to imagine that Thayer, having taught school himself and being the brother of teachers, and given that Bingham was a Dartmouth grad (1782), would not have been aware of and influenced by these Enlightenment attitudes toward education.[6]

The community of Braintree certainly has embraced its famous resident. In 1957, the property where Thayer's birthplace stood was purchased by the Walworth Manufacturing Company with the intent of building an industrial complex. With Braintree and Walworth Manufacturing working together, the house was moved and carefully rebuilt by 1960 about one mile north at 786 Washington Street. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. From the time the house was relocated, the town has repeatedly honored Thayer. On April 24, 1965, Braintree held General Sylvanus Thayer Day and marked the occasion with a parade that included one hundred USMA cadets and a speech by USMA superintendent Lieutenant General James B. Lampert. The Academy also presented Braintree with a War of 1812 four-pound French field gun that remains on display today.[7] A week of celebrations, including concerts, a ball, and educational exhibits, took place in June 1985 to mark the 200th anniversary of Thayer's birth. A highlight of this celebration was the issuing of a nine-cent stamp on June 7

5. Jeremy Belknap as quoted in Caleb Bingham, *The American Preceptor: Being a New Selection of Lessons for Reading and Speaking* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1811), 122.
6. For an overview of broader changes in the era, see Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L Wagoner, *American Education: A History*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2014).
7. James B. Collins, "Braintree Honors 'Father of West Point.'" *Boston Sunday Globe*, April 25, 1965, 16.

honoring the town's famous son.[8] Thayer's legacy is often included in local events, and the Braintree Historical Society maintains an exhibit of Thayer memorabilia near the house where he was born.



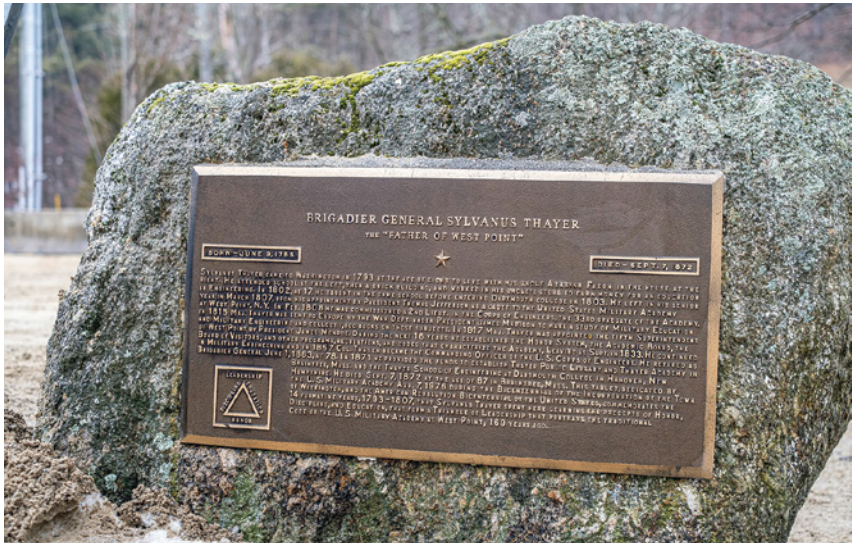
A first day of issue of the nine-cent Thayer stamp from his hometown, June 7, 1985, just two days short of the 200th anniversary of his birth. The stamp's artist was Robert Alexander Anderson. (Collection of the Editor.)

Washington, New Hampshire: The Faxon House

Standing in front of the Faxon House in Washington, New Hampshire, you are transported back two centuries. The road, still dirt, is either muddy or dusty depending on the season, and the scene invokes Robert Frost: "Out of the mud two strangers came, / And caught me splitting wood in the yard."[9] Ignoring the sign out front and the memorial to Thayer on the side, I could picture Thayer as

8. *General Sylvanus Thayer: 1785–1872*. Pamphlet. Braintree Historical Society, undated.
9. Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time," *A Further Range* (Henry Holt and Company, 1936).

a young teenager eating an apple on the front steps before returning to work in his Uncle Azariah's store. There is still, in fact, a general store not fifty yards away in the tiny town of 1,200 where locals gather for pancakes and gossip. Sure, the Faxon House was unlikely to have been white in the 1790s when a nine-year-old Sylvanus moved in, and the grassy yard may have been a practical garden of vegetables and herbs, if it even existed, but its importance on Thayer's future cannot be understated.



A memorial to Brigadier General Sylvanus Thayer next to the Faxon House in Washington, New Hampshire, where he lived as a boy and teenager. (Photo by Editor.)

Thayer's time in Washington was valuable for two reasons. First, it seems that his love for military history and civic service was ignited during these years through interactions with Revolutionary War veterans such as Benjamin Pierce, who had also served in the New Hampshire House of Representatives by this time. It was during these years that Sylvanus, like many teens, became fascinated by celebrities and adventure. In his case, the campaigns and

stories of Napoleon Bonaparte sparked a wanderlust to visit the battlefields of Europe and make a proper study of the art and science of warfare.

Second, working and living in New Hampshire focused Thayer to be more serious about education. He had the opportunity to teach mathematics and other subjects in the local school at age sixteen, a job he continued during breaks from Dartmouth. In addition, visits by his Uncle John Faxon, a Brown graduate who practiced law and medicine, made clear the opportunities that could come with a college degree, which was rare at the time. It is also hard to imagine that Thayer would have gone to Dartmouth had he not moved within forty miles of the campus. Braintree may have given Sylvanus Thayer a moral and ethical foundation rooted in a set of traditional Massachusetts values, but his years in and around the Faxon House provided him the opportunity and motivation that led him to Dartmouth and to military service via admission to the United States Military Academy.

West Point, New York: The Superintendent's Quarters

Fittingly, Sylvanus Thayer was the first USMA superintendent to occupy what is now Quarters 100.[10] The modest, Federal-style house was being built in 1819 and early 1820 just as Thayer was constructing and revising an educational system he felt was necessary for a military college. It is this building, painted yellow during his superintendency and lacking a porch, that represents the Thayer that most Americans know. It is fitting that less than one hundred feet from the front door is the most famous monument to the man—a statue marking Colonel Thayer as the "Father of the

10. For many decades, the building was Quarters 23. See Malinowski, *West Point Landscape,* for more details.

Military Academy," reminding all of his importance in shaping the cherished institution.[11]

The legacy of the era represented by the Superintendent's Quarters is the blending of methods of education, discipline, and training that coalesced into something that effectively produced both competent Army officers and leaders in other fields. At this point, it might be useful to distinguish between the "Thayer System" and the "Thayer Method." The Thayer System historically refers to the combination of academics, military training, discipline, and moral-ethical development that Thayer put in place. For example, Pat Ryan wrote in the magazine *Assembly* in 1963, "Graduates of the Thayer system were responsible also for broadening the American educational scene by influencing other technical schools."[12] The Thayer Method, discussed below, is the use of recitation in the classroom, meaning that students prepare material ahead of time and are then expected to answer questions during a class session. The Thayer System was so successful that it remained relatively unchanged until the twentieth century when weekend time became more liberal and teaching techniques more diverse.

The list of prominent Academy graduates who distinguished themselves in wartime service needs no repetition here. Libraries are filled with their heroic accomplishments, and monuments to their deeds scatter the American—and international—landscape. But Thayer and the system he implemented also produced a list of graduates who contributed to other fields but who do not receive as much attention. Just among his cadets are several important examples. Benjamin Ewell, class of 1832, became the president of William and Mary. Alexander Bache, class of 1825, became the head of Girard College and the superintendent of the Geodetic and Hydrographic Survey of the United States. James Clark, class of

11. The monument can be seen in a photo in Chapter XI or in the drawing from *Harper's Weekly* on page 343.
12. Pat Ryan, "Sylvanus Thayer—Educator and Engineer," *Assembly* 22, Spring 1963, 23.

1829, became a Jesuit, taught at schools such as Georgetown and Holy Cross, and became the president of Gonzaga.[13] By 1830, nine Academy grads were teaching among the nation's fifty-six colleges. By 1860, seventy-eight graduates were teaching at a college or university when the nation had only 203 such institutions.[14] This serves as a fitting reminder that Thayer was a role model for educational administration in addition to military service and academic scholarship. While Thayer could be tough on cadets and faculty, Cram notes that he also took an active role in issues such as the creation of a water system and the location and care of the trees on the West Point Plain.[15] There were even plans for a turnpike road to Newburgh almost a century before the Storm King Highway opened in 1922. Thayer was a hands-on administrator with a strong sense of duty focused on producing graduates ready to serve the country.

In 1958, R. Ernest Dupuy dubbed Thayer the "Father of Technology in the United States." He notes that the first professor of engineering at Harvard's Lawrence School in 1846 was a USMA graduate, Henry Eustis, class of 1842. Yale, when starting the Sheffield School of Engineering in 1847, hired William Norton, USMA 1832. William Peck, USMA 1844, was the first professor of physics and civil engineering at the University of Michigan in the 1850s. The list goes on. Texts published by USMA faculty with names familiar to graduates, such as Mahan and Bartlett, were used nationwide. Thayer's Dartmouth classmate and friend George Ticknor visited the Academy on several occasions and brought ideas back with him to Harvard, where he was a professor. In short, Thayer's teaching legacy was already being seen in his lifetime, and he was rightfully proud of the graduates' successes.

Some readers may have noted that Kershner never mentions the Thayer Method. To reiterate, the Thayer Method refers to the system of recitation used at West Point in which a cadet is expected to

13. R. Ernest Dupuy, *Sylvanus Thayer: Educator.* West Point, 1940.
14. Dupuy, *Sylvanus Thayer: Father of Technology*, 11.
15. Cram, "Extracts," 26.

come to class ready to go to a blackboard and demonstrate knowledge through working out a problem on the board or answering instructor's questions. In modern parlance, it is a "flipped classroom," a form of active learning. Thayer certainly did not invent recitation in the classroom, having observed it, for example, at l'École polytechnique while in France. However, he is credited with insisting on daily recitation combined with daily grading and small class sizes.

The term "Thayer Method" was not commonly in use when Kershner finished his dissertation in 1976, and so while the term may have been used internally at the Academy, it was little known in the wider education community. However, a 1965 book about liberal education at the service academies does refer to the Thayer Method and discusses mathematics classes at USMA. Use of the term exploded in the 1980s and then again in the second decade of the twenty-first century.[16]

This teaching strategy is now common in education literature, particularly in STEM disciplines.[17] There are hundreds of studies, large and small, evaluating the use of the Thayer Method in teaching across various disciplines. Most studies argue that the Thayer Method has its place and can be successful with modifications, such as integrating new technologies available to students when preparing for class.[18]

16. William E. Simons, *Liberal Education in the Service Academies* (Institute of Higher Education, Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1965).
17. Amy E. Shell, "The Thayer Method of Instruction at the United States Military Academy: A Modest History and a Modern Personal Account," *Primus: Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 2002), 27.
18. Corey S. Gerving et al., "Bringing the Thayer Method into the 21st Century: T21," in Ender et al., *Teaching and Learning the West Point Way* (Routledge, 2021), 123–128.



The upper floor of Cullum Hall was habitually called "Thayer Hall" in the early twentieth century. (United States Military Academy Archives and Special Collections.)

This brings us to the subject of how Thayer has been memorialized at the Academy. Because of his connection with academics, the modern cadet sees Thayer as a stern taskmaster, a symbol of busy class weeks and relentless studying. He is portrayed this way by actor Timothy Spall in the 2022 Netflix movie *The Pale Blue Eye*, based on Louis Bayard's 2006 novel. To be fair, this view of Thayer is probably true given the recollections of him by some cadets. Tough, fair, and consistent seem to have been his treatment of the corps. Today, cadet slang terms using his name include a "Thayer Week," meaning a difficult week filled with multiple assignments or examinations, and "Thayer Eclipse," the rare occurrence when a cadet has no classes at all on an academic day because instructors

have canceled a lesson to allow time for research or to compensate for a field trip or large project; in other words, it resembles a rare celestial event at an institution known for filling a cadet's time with numerous academic requirements.



Lieutenant Colonel Thayer was portrayed by actor Timothy Spall (left) in the 2022 Netflix film *The Pale Blue Eye*, a murder mystery set at the Academy in 1830 and featuring Cadet Edgar Allan Poe. On the right is actor Christian Bale as retired detective Augustus Landor. Costume Designer Kasia Walicka-Maimone clearly drew inspiration from the surviving coat owned by Thayer and now in the West Point Museum Collection. The bicorne hat appears to be modeled on the one at the base of the Thayer Monument at West Point. Thayer would have been only 45 years old in late 1830, about twenty years younger than Spall. The movie was based on Louis Bayard's 2006 novel of the same name. (Photo: Courtesy of Netflix. Used with permission.)

Memorialization of Thayer began with small tributes, such as the 1853 sword presentation made by cadets present at West Point in 1817 that is discussed in Chapter IX. Two years after Thayer's death, the 1874 Association of Graduates annual reunion report refers to a bust of Thayer cast from life by Boston sculptor Martin

Milmore. At the 1877 meeting, Brevet Major General George Washington Cullum proposed that the Association of Graduates procure a marble copy for the library.[19] The whereabouts of this bust, if it was procured, is currently unknown. Some busts and statues known to have been at West Point deteriorated over time and no longer exist.

On June 11, 1883, the statue that now stands just feet from the Superintendent's Quarters was unveiled at a location close to the front door of today's cadet mess hall. The unveiling was preceded by speeches in the chapel (now called the Old Cadet Chapel). General Cullum gave a lengthy address, prompting *The New York Times* to write that "being full of the subject, he naturally gave the visitors a little larger dose of Thayer and ancient history than they cared to take on so warm a day."[20] Following the address, the guests and the Corps of Cadets, led by the West Point Band, filed a short distance to the Thayer Monument, which was unveiled by its creator and officially accepted from the Association of Graduates by Colonel Wesley Merritt, superintendent. President Ulysses S. Grant and General William Tecumseh Sherman were among the guests at West Point that day.

The statue was moved in the 1960s to Trophy Point and then to its current location across from the Superintendent's Quarters. The sculptor was German immigrant and Civil War veteran Carl Conrads of the New England Granite Works in Hartford, Connecticut. It has long been a gathering place for graduates during alumni events. This was especially true before the 1970s, when the monument was centrally located under towering shade trees and large numbers of alumni, gathered at West Point just before graduation, would lay a wreath as part of their annual reunion.

19. *Fifth Annual Reunion of the Association of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, June 11, 1874* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1874), 49; *Eighth Annual Reunion of the Association of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, June 14, 1877* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1877), 72.
20. "Big Guns at West Point," *The New York Times*, June 12, 1883, 1.



The dedication of the Thayer Monument in June 1883, as shown in *Harper's Weekly*. (*Harper's Weekly*, June 23, 1883, 392.)

For many years after Cullum (Memorial) Hall opened in 1898–1899, the upstairs ballroom was called Thayer Hall. Memorialization continued in June 1926, when the Academy opened a much-needed new hotel, the Thayer West Point Hotel, near the Academy's boundary with Highland Falls. It went bankrupt fourteen months later, the first of many struggles over the decades. Because of ownership changes, the building has been called various similar names, including the United States Thayer Hotel and the Hotel Thayer. There is also now a Thayer Road and a Thayer Gate. The exact dates of these designations are uncertain. "Thayer Road" appears as early as 1929 on a map in a motoring magazine.

"Thayer Gate," formerly "South Gate," seems to be used by 1939, according to a reference in the *Congressional Record*.[21]



The Thayer West Point Hotel, which opened in 1926, rises above cadets learning about a war tuba in 1933. The device was used in conjunction with spotlights to track aircraft. (National Archives and Records Administration.)

Decades later, there was a flurry of interest in Thayer's legacy. As mentioned in Chapter XI, the Sylvanus Thayer Award was first presented in 1958 to physicist Ernest Lawrence. Today, the award is "given to a citizen of the United States, *other than a West Point graduate*, whose outstanding character, accomplishments, and stature in the civilian community draw wholesome comparison to the

21. "United States Military Academy," map, *Motor Travel* 21, no. 3, June 1929, 17. *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 76th Congress, First Session* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 1739.

qualities for which West Point strives, in keeping with its motto: 'Duty, Honor, Country.' "[22] During the 2000s, the award has typically been given to government officials, such as ex-presidents, secretaries of state, and cabinet members. Exceptions have included actor Gary Sinise (2015), newscaster Tom Brokaw (2006), and astronaut Mae C. Jemison (2021).

Also, in the 1950s, the Academy named the renovated 1911 riding hall "Thayer Hall." Construction began in March 1956. This academic building has spawned Thayer-related slang phrases, including some unsuitable for mentioning here. A common one that can be mentioned is a "Thayer Run," referring to situations when a cadet has to go from the bottom of Thayer Hall to an upper floor of the gymnasium, change, and get to class without being marked late. At times, as little as ten minutes might be allocated for the journey (necessitating a pace far quicker than a leisurely walk), and a late arrival could result in disciplinary action.

In 1964, the United States Army created a 28-minute documentary as part of its *The Big Picture* series. "Sylvanus Thayer of West Point" summarizes the changes Major Thayer made when he became superintendent in 1817. Using a combination of fictionalized scenes and voice-overs, Thayer is always shown from an over-the-shoulder point of view, and the actor's face is never shown. The script seems to draw heavily from the biographical works of Ernest Dupuy and highlights Thayer's changes to the Academy, as well as the scientific and military accomplishments of early Academy graduates. The episode ran on television networks sporadically from 1964 to 1966 and likely later in rotation.[23]

To this day, as I pass the Superintendent's Quarters—Thayer's house for 13 years—I often picture Major Thayer buttoning his coat behind the door and getting into character before heading out to

22. "Thayer Award," West Point Association of Graduates, 2025, https://www.westpointaog.org/traditions/wpaog-awards/thayer-award/.
23. "Sylvanus Thayer of West Point," episode 432 of *The Big Picture*, Department of the Army, 1964.

observe a recitation or to attend to an administrative matter. It is clear from reading his letters and studying his life that he was not a cold, uncaring autocrat who disliked cadets. I like to think that Thayer felt that he had to be in character to make the Academy work properly—that his duty to the country, the Army, and the cadets required it. It was a duty born of his upbringing, of the chaos of his first months fighting with Alden Partridge, and of his struggles to bring order to an institution that the country so desperately needed.

Braintree, Massachusetts: The Dr. Jonathan Wild House

The house where Sylvanus Thayer died stands at 714 Washington Street in Braintree. A Thayer Academy historian explained that the house was moved from a nearby location across the street, but when that happened is unclear. Maps suggest it was after 1888 but before 1906. Either Thayer built it for his sister Livia and her husband, Dr. Jonathan Wild, or he took over the mortgage on the property, or perhaps both. On my journey to understand the "Father of the Military Academy," this house represents two things to me.

First, it is owned by Thayer Academy, which would not exist without Thayer's generosity. Coed from the start, it has produced graduates such as author John Cheever, social worker and management expert Mary Parker Follett, and Chief of Staff of the Army Gordon R. Sullivan, the 2003 Thayer Award recipient. It is a symbol of Thayer's commitment to education and civic duty. A few hundred yards south of the house is the Thayer Public Library that he endowed. In Hanover, New Hampshire, the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth, branded "Dartmouth Engineering," is consistently ranked in the country's top third of engineering programs that offer doctoral degrees. Each of these was brought to life in Thayer's later years while living with his sister and niece in the Wild House. It was here that friends and colleagues would come to

speak with him and from here that he wrote or dictated letters to bring his projects to life. This house was the hub of a legacy that would go beyond just his contributions to the Army.



The Wild House in Braintree where Thayer spent much of his later years and where he died on September 7, 1872, age 87. (Photo by Editor.)

Finally, the Wild House is a private residence and not open to the public. It was a bit of a mystery to me from outside, and I could not wrap my head around its floorplan or grounds. This represents to me the enigma of Sylvanus Thayer the man. As Kershner notes, he left few personal letters. His correspondence was largely business-related, and many items were destroyed by his family after his death. His personal life is largely unknown except for a hint here and there, such as a brief glance into someone's backyard while on a walk or an overheard snippet of a conversation. After reliving the timeline of Thayer's life for months, I wish I could have read his impressions of the Great Pyramid of Giza, his papal audience, or the streets of Paris. Such memories would tell us so much more about his worldview, his amusements, his passions, and his fears.

The hidden Thayer is perhaps revealed in his 1854 letter to college buddy Ichabod Chadbourne in which he writes:

> I get to bed regularly about 10 stretch myself on the back, fold my arms on the breast & with clasped hands say my prayers "Now I lay down to sleep" etc, take a comfortable nap of a couple of hours, then keep the vigils 3 or 4 hours which I devote to pious or other edifying meditations or giving flight to imagination, build castles, visit distant friends, retrace my former wanderings on the earth, soar among the stars until with tired wing I return & again commit myself to the arms of Morpheus. Now is not this a reasonable way of passing the night? I need not ask how *your* nights are passed, you rake, don't I remember that famous night at Hatch's in Norwich? & that other—but I forbear.[24]

Here is Thayer the dreamer, a nineteenth-century romantic longing for travel, remembering dear friends, and reminding a college friend about a wild night of partying at Hatch's Tavern in Norwich, Vermont, across the Connecticut River from Dartmouth.

As I stood across the street from the last house in which Sylvanus Thayer lived, I wondered about his own recollections of the places he had lived over an amazing life. Did he ever walk the mile to the house of his childhood and remember his parents and siblings? When relatives visited, did he tell stories of when he was a boy and met President Pierce's father in Washington, New Hampshire? What anecdotes from his time at West Point were most memorable to him, and did they include gatherings at his quarters there or interactions with future generals in his basement office? What interesting people did he recall from his travels? What was life like as an Army engineer on an island in Boston Harbor in the 1840s?

24. Thayer to Chadbourne, February 6, 1854, *Thayer Papers*.



Dartmouth College's Thayer School of Engineering, often called Dartmouth Engineering, is a lasting legacy of Thayer's philanthropy. He was actively involved in founding it and choosing its first leader. (Photo by Editor.)

In the end, the places of Thayer's life highlight his greatness: a son of Massachusetts whose interest in education and military service was kindled in a small New Hampshire town; a young man who vigorously pursued knowledge through education, hard work, and travel. In midlife, he obtained immortality upon the banks of the Hudson River and then, just shy of fifty years old, set off for a hard and somewhat reclusive life building America's coastal defenses. But while he undoubtedly looked back over his life in his final home, the ever-industrious Thayer also looked forward and left a legacy far beyond his contributions to the Military Academy. Cadets, students, and citizens still benefit from his forward-looking vision of civic duty each and every day.

APPENDIX

Sylvanus Thayer's Cullum Register Entry, 1891

What follows is the biographical entry for Sylvanus Thayer as it appeared in the Third Edition of George Washington Cullum's *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy*, published in 1891.[1] Cullum, an 1833 graduate of the Academy and Superintendent from 1864 to 1866, conceived of the idea to index each USMA graduate from 1802 onward based on year of graduation and class rank. Each graduate is accordingly assigned a "Cullum Number." The first graduate, Joseph Gardner Swift is referred to as Cullum Number 1. Levy, the second graduate, is Cullum Number 2, and so on. Numbers are still assigned to this day, but class rank is no longer a factor. As the 33rd cadet to graduate from West Point, Thayer is Cullum Number 33.

In 1850, Cullum published the first version of his *Register* with basic summaries of each graduate's career ordered by Cullum

1. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N. Y. from its Establishment, in 1802, to 1890 with the Early History of the United States Military Academy*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891).

Number.[2] A more thorough second edition was published in 1868, followed by another printing in 1879 with supplements covering later graduates. Before he passed in 1892, Cullum completed a third edition of the *Register*, containing more complete entries for key graduates. It is from this version that the entry for Thayer reproduced on the following pages is taken.

Cullum entries for early graduates such as Thayer should be referenced with a bit of caution. For example, Thayer's entry says he was a cadet from March 20, 1807, but as discussed in Chapter II, that date is his appointment date. He did not arrive at West Point until the late summer of that year. Furthermore, the dates of rank can be a bit misleading, especially given the wide use of brevet ranks during the era and the fact that rank could change based on the job held at a particular time. For example, while Thayer was promoted to Brevet Colonel in 1833, he continued to sign letters Lieutenant Colonel and to be addressed as such in correspondence throughout the 1830s. These issues notwithstanding, the 1891 *Register* entry in this biography of the "Father of the Military Academy" is helpful to understanding what decades of graduates and historians would consult as the most accurate biographical timeline of Thayer's life and career.

2. George W. Cullum, *Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N. Y. from March 16, 1802, to January 1, 1850* (New York: J. F. Trow, Printer, 1850).

33....(Born Mas.)...**SYLVANUS THAYER**.....(Ap'd Mas.)

Military History. — Cadet of the Military Academy, Mar. 20, 1807, to Feb. 23, 1808, when he was graduated and promoted in the Army to

Second Lieut., Corps of Engineers, Feb. 23, 1808.

Served: in surveying sites and projecting plans for batteries at New Haven and Stonington harbors, Ct., and inspecting Ft. Trumbull, Ct., 1808; as Asst. Engineer in the construction of the defenses of the Massachusetts Coast, 1808–9; at the Military Academy, 1809–11; as Asst. Engineer, at the fortifications of New York harbor, and Asst. Ordnance

(First Lieut., Corps of Engineers, July 1, 1812)

Officer, New York city, 1811–12; in the War of 1812–15 with Great Britain, as Chief Engineer of the Northern Army, under command of

(Captain, Staff — Dep. Commissary of Ordnance, Sep. 22, 1812)

Major-General Dearborn, in the Campaign of 1812, — of the Right Division of the same Army, under command of Major-General Hampton, to whom he was also Aide-de-Camp, in the Campaign of 1813, being engaged

(Captain, Corps of Engineers, Oct. 13, 1813)

in the Combat of Chateaugay River, Oct. 26, 1813, — of the forces under command of Bvt. Brig.-General Porter, in the Defense of Norfolk, Va., in 1814, — and Brigade Major to Bvt. Brig.-General Porter,

(Bvt. Major, Feb. 20, 1815, for Distinguished and Meritorious Services)

1814–15; on professional duty in Europe, examining fortifications, military schools and establishments, and the operations of the Allied armies, then occupying France, on the fall of Napoleon, 1815–17; as Superintendent of the Military Academy, July 28, 1817, to July 1, 1833; as

(Bvt. Lieut.-Colonel, Mar. 3, 1823, for Distinguished and Meritorious Services)

(Major, Corps of Engineers, May 24, 1828)

Superintending Engineer of the construction of Fts. Warren and Independence,

(Bvt Colonel, Mar. 3, 1833, for Faithful Service Ten Years in One Grade)

Boston harbor, Mas., 1833–43, continuing the direction of those works while on professional duty in Europe, till 1846; in general supervision of Harbor Improvements in Maine and Massachusetts, 1836–43, and of the Coast Defenses east of Boston, Mas., 1833–43; as Superintending

(Lieut.-Colonel, Corps of Engineers, July 7, 1838)

Engineer of the construction of Ft. Warren, Mas., 1846–57, — of Ft. Independence. Mas., 1847–48, — of Ft. Winthrop, Mas., 1847–48, — and of the Sea Walls in Boston harbor, 1846-57; as Member of the Board of Engineers for Coast Defenses, Apr. 2, 1833, to Dec. 21, 1857, being President of the Board from Dec. 7, 1838; in command of the Corps of Engineers, Dec. 21, 1857, to Dec. 22, 1858; as Member of various special Engineer, Ordnance, and Artillery Boards, 1825–58; and

(Colonel, Corps of Engineers, Mar. 3, 1863)
(Bvt. Brig.-General, U. S. Army, May 31, 1863, for Long and Faithful Service)

on sick leave of absence, 1858–63.

Retired from Active Service, June 1, 1863, under the Law of July 17, 1862, "having been borne on the Army Register more than 45 Years."

Civil History. — Degree of A. M. conferred by Dartmouth College, N. H., 1810, from which he was graduated in 1807, — and by Harvard University, Mas., 1825; of LL. D., by St. John's College, Md., 1830, — by Kenyon College, O., 1846, — by Dartmouth College, N. H., 1846, — and by Harvard University, Mas., 1857. Member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1834, — of the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, Pa., 1838, — and of various scientific associations, 1834–67.

Died, Sep. 7, 1872, at Braintree, Mas.: Aged 87.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Bvt. Brig.-General Sylvanus Thayer was born June 9, 1785, at Braintree, Mass.; received a classical education at Dartmouth College, N. H.; was graduated from the Military Academy, and promoted to the Corps of Engineers, Feb. 23, 1808; served on various engineer and ordnance duties, 1808–12; was engaged in the War of 1812–15 against Great Britain, receiving for his "distinguished and meritorious services" the brevet of Major, Feb. 20, 1815; soon after went abroad on professional duty; and July 28, 1817, at the age of thirty-two, assumed the responsible trust of Superintendent of the U. S. Military Academy, which he found in a deplorably chaotic condition.

Major Thayer's military experience in the field, his foreign travel and associations, his familiarity with the polite usages of society, his dignified bearing and refined mode of life, and, above all, his scientific acquirements, enlarged professional reading, and familiarity with the French and dead languages, gave him immense vantage ground for success. Almost by intuition he discovered the virulent ulcers

destroying the vital parts of the Academy and such as he could not cauterize into healing action, like a bold surgeon, he promptly amputated. Examinations were at once held, the incompetent and vicious dismissed, and the indolent, who had lingered for many years without progress, quickly discovered that a like fate awaited a continuance of their dereliction. He promptly organized the Cadets into a battalion of two companies, officered by members of their own body, with a colonel at its head and an adjutant and sergeant-major for his staff; appointed an officer of the army as "Commandant of Cadets," responsible for their tactical instruction and soldierly discipline; transacted business with members of his command only at stated office hours; classified all Cadets according to their proficiency in studies; divided classes into small sections for more thorough instruction by the teachers in charge; required weekly class reports showing the daily progress of students according to a scale of marks; directed more thorough recitations and a freer use of the blackboard; greatly improved the curriculum of studies, according to a well-digested programme; organized a proper Academic Board, with the Superintendent at its head; introduced the check-book system, to curtail the prevailing extravagance of Cadets then deeply in debt; reduced the expenses of educating pupils to less than one half the cost at the Woolwich Military Academy in England; had the Officer of the Day daily to dine with him, enabling himself thereby to learn all that was transpiring in camp or barracks; required Cadets to obtain a permit from him for almost everything, even to a letter from the post office, thus maintaining such constant intercourse as enabled him to call all by name, and understand their characters and habits; and made many other salutary provisions to secure thorough discipline, a high standard of honor, complete physical and mental development, and a generous rivalry for conspicuous soldiership and eminent class rank. The more thoroughly to guarantee the latter, the Secretary of War directed, Feb. 14, 1818, the publishing in the Army Register of the names of the five Cadets of each class most distinguished for attainments and meritorious conduct. Soon after, Apr. 14, 1818, the Professorship of Geography, History, and Ethics was established, thus adding new and important elements in the education of Cadets.

These successive advances, which so marvelously elevated the tone and character of the Military Academy in less than a year, are best exemplified by the first regulations under Major Thayer's Superintendency, approved, July 23, 1818, by that enlightened Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun. These regulations provided for a January and a June examination in each year; required new Cadets to report at West Point before the 25th of June, and prohibited examinations for admissions after September 1st, unless candidates were prevented by

sickness from reporting sooner; established an annual encampment in July and August in lieu of vacations, which were abolished; granted furloughs for two months after the June examination, provided that not more than one fourth of the Corps of Cadets were absent at one time; allowed only those to be graduated who had gone through the exercises of two entire encampments; stopped the pay of all failing to return at the expiration of their furloughs, and dismissed them from the service; made a diploma the evidence of having completed the full course of studies; attached to the Army Register the names of the five most distinguished of each class reported at the preceding June examination; secured promotion to the grade of commissioned officer according to "general merit," as established upon graduation; admitted aptitude for the several arms of service to be considered, provided it did not interfere with the order of class rank; declared a Cadet suspended for any cause from the Academy ineligible to a commission in the Army till his entire class had been promoted; and, finally, forbade that any deficient or dismissed Cadets be appointed "to any office or post in the Army of the United States until at least five years after the promotion of the class to which he had belonged."

The day after the adoption of these salutary safeguards for the discipline, instruction, honor, and rights of the military service, the first class in the order of scholarly attainments and meritorious conduct was graduated from the Academy.

With each revolving year of Colonel Thayer's Superintendency, class after class was graduated, adding to our army 570 officers, of whom the nation may be justly proud, for in that galaxy are many bright particular stars which have given lustre to our arms, illuminated the paths of science, brightened halls of learning, and adorned various vocations of usefulness.

In this brief sketch it would be impossible to record each prominent event in Thayer's management, and to descant upon the multiform meliorations introduced by him during the sixteen years of his masterly administration, wherein he built up the Military Academy from an elementary school to a model seminary of science and soldiership worthy of a great people. In these sixteen years mathematics, from Hutton's Elements, had advanced to a complete course of algebra, geometry, plane and spherical trigonometry, descriptive geometry (including shades, shadows, and perspective), surveying and the use of instruments in the field, analytical geometry, and differential and integral calculus; from a little smattering of French, taught to a few in 1817, some in 1833 became sufficiently proficient to speak the language, most to read it fluently, and all to translate readily scientific text-books and professional works; drawing, confined mostly to copying a few traces of fortifications and a slight use of the brush, had progressed to

the delineation of the human figure, pen and pencil landscapes, and topography in all styles of representation; natural and experimental philosophy, from what is to be found in Enfield, had grown to an extended course in physics, dynamics, hydrostatics, hydrodynamics, magnetism, electro-magnetism, optics, and astronomy, embracing their principles, phenomena, and use of the various instruments; chemistry, mineralogy, and geology, in all their branches, had been introduced in 1820; artillery, from a few elements given in a small treatise, with a little target practice and the manual of the piece, had expanded to the theory and practice of gunnery, the fabrication of pyrotechnics required for all the purposes of war, and the manoeuvre of pieces and foot batteries; grammar, rhetoric, geography, history, moral philosophy, and constitutional and international law had been added in 1818 to the duties of the Chaplain; engineering, just beginning to be taught as in the Polytechnic School of France, had been enlarged to the broad basis upon which was built subsequently the admirable course of field and permanent fortifications, the science of war, architecture, stereotomy, and civil engineering in all of its branches; infantry tactics, confined chiefly to elementary drills in 1817, comprised in 1833 the theory and practice of all movements from the school of the soldier to evolutions of the line, including the exercises of light infantry and riflemen; military police in camp and barracks was carried out to the full extent required by army regulations; numerous summer marches had been made, extending even as far as Boston, but were abolished after 1822, that hospitable city having proved a Capua to the Cadet Hannibals; the hours for study, recitation, exercises, recreation, and sleep had been judiciously adjusted to produce the maximum instruction and minimum injury to health; rigorous and just discipline and healthy moral tone had been firmly established; cheerful obedience to orders and harmonious and goodwill prevailed; the power of courts-martial to try Cadets had been affirmed in 1819 by the Attorney-General and President; all degrading punishments had been abolished, and those of a strictly military type substituted; the dissipated, idle, vicious, and incompetent were eliminated from the institution; effete professors had been replaced by the brightest instructors who had been graduated at the Academy; a new hospital had been erected for the accommodation of the sick, and malingering was checked; the library, from a few miscellaneous volumes, had grown to embrace a large and valuable collection of scientific, military, and standard works; models, instruments, and apparatus had been supplied for instruction in the various departments; a Board of Visitors annually attended the June examination, and reported upon the condition of the Academy; Cadet appointments were distributed according to population; the hotel had been erected for the accommodation of official visitors and relatives

of Cadets, but not to subserve the purposes of a fashionable watering-place; many buildings for the accommodation of officers and for the other uses of the Academy had been built; adjacent land had been purchased of the enlarge the post, and remove the "Gridley Tavern" nuisance; a military band of great excellence had been created, led by Willis's famous Kent bugle; shade trees had been planted and many embellishments made to the grounds of West Point; and above all, there had been inculcated sentiments of high honor, strict integrity, ardent patriotism, obedience to command, fidelity to duty, laudable ambition, professional pride, refined courtesy, kindness to juniors, reverence for seniors, and the various accessories which make up the true gentleman and chivalric soldier.

Colonel Thayer, in the sixteen years of his successful administration, had gathered round him an able body of skilled officers, who materially aided him in his herculean task, — Professors Douglass, Davies, and Courtenay, who had developed the analytical sciences, the true groundwork of military education; Torrey, Hopkins, and Mather, who had made the course of chemistry, mineralogy, and geology; Crozet and Mahan, who had skillfully applied all these branches to military and civil engineering and the science of war; McIlvaine and Warner, who had given their culture and eminent abilities to the teaching of ethics and law; the haughty Worth and the scholarly Hitchcock, who had impressed discipline and tone in their daily control of Cadets; an able body of assistant professors, selected from the fittest of their classes, who efficiently aided their chiefs; and the soldierly members of his military staff, who had essentially lessened his burden of endless details. But the directing mind was the great Superintendent himself, a ripe scholar, acquainted with every science taught, passionately fond of military literature, and singularly gifted for his elevated command. To the discharge of his important functions he brought eminent personal qualifications, uniting decision with courtesy, authority with kindness, knowledge with consideration for ignorance, strict discipline with paternal admonition, unfaltering integrity to unflinching firmness, fidelity to his trust, and loyalty to his country, and with a restless energy and an untiring industry that never left anything unfinished or to chance. With such qualities and accomplishments it is not surprising that the Academy, which he found weak, imperfectly organized, low in prerequisites, and inferior in its course of training, should be raised by his knowledge of its wants and devotion to its interests, to be the paragon of educational institutions in this country; and, judged by its fruits, not surpassed in the nations of the Old World.

Commendations, official and unofficial, of Thayer's Superintendency came from all quarters: he was made, Mar. 3, 1823, a Bvt. Lieut.-Colonel "for distinguished and meritorious services;" and, in

1826, was strongly recommended by General Scott to be brevetted a Colonel, "for the highest development and effect" given to the Military Academy, to which "for more than eight years he had devoted his great attainments, and the most unwearied zeal and application to its duties."

For twelve years Colonel Thayer had held a sway at West Point which had never been disputed even by the Executive, when, in 1829, General Andrew Jackson, a man of iron, became President of the United States, and John H. Eaton, a man of putty in the hands of his moulder, his Secretary of War. Though the existing relations between Jackson and Thayer were amicable, it was inevitable that there would soon be a collision between these two positive men respecting the control of the Military Academy.

The history of the subsequent differences between the President and the Superintendent is too long to be given here, but its details are to be found in my address upon the unveiling of the Thayer statue at West Point, June 11, 1883.

Thayer, worn out by the irrepressible conflict of authority, saw that he had become a mere automaton of power at West Point, and felt that he could no longer, under the existing régime, be of service to the institution which he had raised to its present excellence, and that he could not continue to be a target for the shafts which were daily destroying his prerogative. He accordingly asked to be placed upon other duty.

The peerless Superintendent was relieved, July 1, 1833, from command of the Military Academy, which, in the sixteen years of his devoted administration, had grown from a badly conducted rudimentary school to become a preëminent seminary of science, an enduring monument of his fame, a fostering mother to the whole army, the cynosure of all educational instructions throughout the land, and a priceless possession for the nation's security and glory. Such laurels had Thayer won by his masterly skill and efficiency that, five years later, when his successor was relieved from duty at West Point, he was invited by Mr. Poinsett, then Secretary of War under President Van Buren, to resume with almost absolute powers the charge of the Military Academy. The unfortunate appointment at the time of a Chaplain little suited to secure the moral discipline of Cadets frustrated the whole scheme.

Upon leaving West Point, Thayer was made a member of the Board of Engineers, and was also charged with the planning and building of the fortifications and other public works in and about Boston harbor, which, as erected by him, will endure for ages as models of engineering skill and standards of economy and stability of construction. These arduous labors, to which he gave his whole time, except while absent sick in Europe, occupied him for thirty years, when, June 1, 1863, age

and feeble health terminated his active military career of more than half a century of unsurpassed usefulness and faithful service. The day before his retirement he was brevetted Brigadier-General for "long and faithful service."

After his retirement from active service, he lived a humble and almost hermit life at Braintree, Mas., where he died Sep. 7, 1872, at the advanced age of eighty-seven. His remains were removed and re-interred, with military honors, at West Point, Nov. 8, 1877, and to the "Father of the Military Academy" was erected upon the plain at West Point, on the semi-centennial of the retirement of the great Superintendent from command of the Academy, a striking statue of him who had achieved so much for military science and the glory of his country; who was always true to himself and to his trust; and who with pride could point to the graduates of this Academy as the jewels and adornments of his administration, as did the noble Cornelia to her Gracchi sons.

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1. This famous line is from Donne's 1630 "Meditation XVII."—Ed.

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