

Higher Education in Civil War Virginia

Peter Wallenstein

Professor of History

Virginia Tech

Civil War Weekend

Campus of Virginia Tech

10 March 2007

No incident on the topic of higher education in Civil War Virginia is better known than the march by the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute in mid-May 1864 north from Lexington to engage Union forces at New Market. Cadets from a military school marched in a body, some 250-strong, to contribute to Confederate efforts to secure the Shenandoah Valley, both to maintain control of an important source of food supply for the Confederate military as well as civilians and to keep Union forces from bringing still more pressure to bear on Lee's troops to the east, on the other side of the Blue Ridge. To this day, countless VMI cadets and alumni cherish the memory of that most memorable day.

It takes nothing away from accounts of that day's exploits to observe that many lesser stories can also be told, and that collectively they paint a portrait of political crisis and military

developments that provide context for the VMI heroics. I have in mind talking (first) about the last year and half before secession came or fighting began; (second) about four main institutions of higher education in Virginia during the war years; and (finally) something on the long aftermath of the war.

We begin with a survey of higher education in Virginia on the eve of the Civil War. At that time, Virginia had two public institutions of higher education—Virginia Military Institute, which opened its doors in 1839, and the University of Virginia, which had enrolled its first students in 1825. Most college students in Virginia attended private institutions, where men or women attended separate schools that had been founded by people associated with one Protestant denomination or another—such as Roanoke College, founded by Lutherans, and Emory and Henry College, founded in the 1830s by the Methodist Episcopal Church. All such schools were tiny by today’s standards.

Higher Education, Virginia, and the Secession Crisis

Rising tensions in the 1850s between the South and the North led to significant developments regarding higher education in Virginia. Teachers in Virginia colleges called for textbooks that reflected so-called southern values, with no whiff of criticism of slavery. Shortly after the events at Harpers Ferry—a couple of weeks after the hanging of white abolitionist John Brown in December 1859—some 250 medical students from the South abandoned their studies

in Philadelphia and headed south. Of the 244 who arrived in Richmond on December 22—greeted with a tremendous celebration—100 headed on to the Deep South, as 13 enrolled at the Medical College of Georgia, in Augusta, and another 28 at the Medical College of the State of South Carolina, in Charleston; 144 enrolled in the Medical College of Virginia (see Breeden essay in Finkelman’s book on John Brown).

And how did prominent Virginians respond to the return of the prodigal medical students? Such leading pro-slavery and southern nationalist radicals as George Fitzhugh and Edmund Ruffin celebrated the medical students’ secession from the Philadelphia school. Fitzhugh wrote: “The Southern medical students who lately deserted Northern colleges deserve immortal honor. It is time the South should educate her sons.” (Breeden, 200) Indeed, the day after the students’ arrival in Richmond, a bill to provide \$30,000 in new funds for MCV was introduced into the General Assembly, and it subsequently passed—the basis for the institution’s becoming a state facility, having previously been connected with Hampden-Sydney College (Dabney, VCU, 8). Arthur E. Peticolas, professor of anatomy at the Medical College of Virginia, told the new students at his school that they had earned “the gratitude of every man, woman and child in a slaveholding State,” for, he said, they had collectively “struck the heaviest blow that has ever yet been aimed at that hideous hydra-headed monster known to us as abolition fanaticism.” (Breeden, 203)

Late the next year, after Lincoln’s victory in the 1860 presidential contest, seven students at Washington College in Lexington hoisted a flag one night that one of the seven described as “blue with one blood red star in the middle and DISUNION painted in large letters above it.”

Revealing that the students were by no means of one mind on the subject, other students threatened to pull it down, but the same student wrote: “we told them that if they tried there would be a war.” Another student, clearly not one of the seven, expressed his being disturbed that such a flag had been “raised on the roof of the college endowed by the father of his country.” (Pace, Halls of Honor, 98) And the school president, George Junkin, a native of Pennsylvania, wished to identify the perpetrator so he could flog “the traitorous fellow.” He ordered removal of the flag, but the seven had anticipated such a move and hidden all ladders on campus. Pro-secession students guarded the flag against assaults by pro-Union classmates.

Similar incidents at the school cropped up in the four months that followed, and ever more of the students sided with what the president had called the “traitorous fellow”—in fact saw the question of loyalty in a manner radically different from the school president. On George Washington’s birthday in February 1861, a literary society at Washington College voted 43–8 for secession. (Carmichael, 129) When yet another secession banner was pulled down in early April 1861, the president set it on fire: “So perish all efforts to dissolve this glorious Union!” In emphatic dissent, one student after another tore off a strip from the burnt flag and wore it as an insignia of his political identity and loyalty.

In short order came news of the firing at Fort Sumter, Lincoln’s call for volunteer troops to help put down the rebellion in South Carolina, and the vote in the Virginia convention to secede and join the Confederacy. Students at Washington College then brought to the president a petition—they said it was unanimous—in support of keeping a secession flag waving over the campus. Speaking of “treason against Virginia,” they insisted that there could no longer be any

“opposition” to flying such a flag except from “enemies of Virginia.” The faculty voted to side with the students. President Junkin resigned his post and left Virginia for his native state in the North.

Similar developments unfolded across the Blue Ridge at the University of Virginia. Students there from Deep South demonstrated a zeal for secession that, especially in the first months after Lincoln’s win, contrasted with their in-state classmates, who typically hoped for compromise, Union, and peace. George K. Miller described himself as “an uncompromising secessionist,” “truly proud that I am a South Carolinian,” and expressed the hope that his home state “will be the first to secede.” Moreover, if South Carolina did secede, he said, and if Lincoln mobilized troops against it, Miller would “be there in two days” to help defend against such an attack. Miller wrote his girlfriend in South Carolina that “most of the Carolina and Alabama students have donned the blue cockade,” symbolizing their separate southern political identity. Even more earnest than his Deep South colleagues, however, Miller was such a purist that, hearing that the cockades had been “made by special order in a northern city,” he refused to wear one. His girlfriend back in Carolina quickly sent him a homemade version, and he became the envy of pro-secession students “when they heard it was all the way from So. Carolina & from one of its fair daughters.” (Halls of Honor, 101)

The matter of students from the Deep South came up in other ways as well. Fred Fleet, a first-year student from Virginia at the University of Virginia, wrote his father in February 1861 that the well-being of the school depended on Virginia’s secession. As he explained, unless Virginia joined the Confederacy, “a good many of the Southern students say that they will . . . all

go home, & they . . . constitute . . . nearly half of the whole number.” (Selby, Virginians at War, 26, quoting Fleet and Fuller, eds., Green Mount, 48.)

On the one hand, we could see the shifting behavior and identities of Virginia’s college students as tracking the shift toward secession, a shift that lurched forward in the aftermath of Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops, including from Virginia, to put down what he saw and termed as a rebellion. But historian Peter Carmichael observe that in fact Virginia’s students were in advance of that time line—that they had largely adopted secession as the unavoidable next step by sometime in February, and even more so when they saw in Lincoln’s inaugural speech in early March no space left for Virginia in a Union governed by Republicans. From Randolph-Macon College, Richard H. Bagby wrote his father about Lincoln’s speech in early March: “I think it is an open declaration of war against the South, and I . . . am for going out of the Union now.” (Carmichael, 137)

Students at the University of Virginia by that point had largely reached the same conclusion, and they were very public and emphatic in declaring their renovated political loyalty. They made “strong Secession speeches; and strong resolutions to the same effect were adopted unanimously,” reported one of the students there, and one week later the UVA students published a pro-secession proclamation in various Virginia newspapers. (Carmichael, 137) During the month before Fort Sumter, secession flags went up at Roanoke College, William and Mary, VMI, and elsewhere. (Carmichael, 139) It was not entirely new, then, that, writing again from Randolph-Macon College, Richard H. Bagby said, immediately after Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops, “Virginia, the most powerful of the slave states, the mother of states,”

had been “kicked out” of the nation it had once dominated. (Carmichael, 143)

Virginia students had various reasons for taking the stance they did on the great issues of the day. At Hampden-Sydney College, one student was quoted as saying to his classmates: “it will be a glorious thing if the war does come, for then we will not have to stand those six books of Geometry.” (Halls of Honor, 102) Now, the statement may have been something the student said, and the student might be typical in seeing specific campus benefits to be derived from the move toward war, but the language sounds more like what was being said by the students’ elders, perceiving the students as boys, without maturity or reflection or responsibility—and being rejected by students as denying them their own claims to manliness and honor and patriotism and action.

As Virginians began preparations in spring 1861 for a possible war, cadets from VMI made their way to Richmond to train volunteers. After arriving at Camp Lee on April 22, just five days after Virginia’s convention voted to take the state out of the Union, 185 VMI cadets went to work training recruits to the Confederate forces. (Conrad, 39) Effective they were, and in May, Robert E. Lee himself wrote VMI superintendent Francis H. Smith about the cadets and their efforts at training an army: “They are wanted everywhere.” (Conrad, 40)

Hampden-Sydney college president John M. P. Atkinson had no military experience, but he took on the task of drill captain for his students. Novice as he was, he chose to drill his students far from curious eyes, in the dead of night and in the basement of a campus building. It was not easy to see him at his work, but it is easy to see why he took such precautions. (Now,

please try this as I describe it.) One of his cadets described President Atkinson's instructions regarding the "double quick": "Gentlemen, when I count one, you will bring up the right foot until the thigh is perpendicular to the body, and when I count two, you will bring the other up beside it." (Pace, Halls of Honors, 105, from Brinkley, On This Hill, 273–76)

Virginia Colleges and College Students during the War

Virginia's institutions of higher education, public and private, shared some common feature of their wartime experience, though they surely differed in others. School buildings often served as military hospitals. Teachers sometimes joined the military effort. Students often left their schoolbooks behind to carry a weapon off to war. In school after school, the number of enrolled students dropped sharply. And Roanoke College, for one, responded to the sudden dearth of male students by enrolling female students for a time. Emory and Henry College closed its doors in April 1861, and in late 1862 its main building, in particular, was taken by Confederate authorities as a military hospital for wounded soldiers.

UVA

Large numbers of young white southern men left the South for their studies, as the return exodus from Philadelphia in 1859 demonstrated, and the migration pattern north persisted beyond 1859. But the University of Virginia's roster of former students revealed a contrary

pattern, not one in which northern students flocked south, but rather one in which southerners remained within the region and studied at the South's own institutions. Dozens of former UVA students became Confederate generals or figures in the Confederate government. These men include such politicians and generals as Robert Toombs of Georgia, Confederate secretary of state and brigadier general; Louis T. Wigfall of Texas, Confederate senator and (briefly) brigadier general; and James L. Orr of South Carolina, a senator in the Confederate Congress; as well as such Virginian officeholders or generals as James A. Seddon and Roger A. Pryor.

The University of Virginia was unusual among state universities and other public institutions of higher education in the Confederate South in that it remained open throughout the war. Suspending operations for much of the war, by contrast, were the universities of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and so on.

Of the former students at the University of Virginia who were of military age at the time of the Civil War, more than 2,000 fought for the Confederacy, some 500 of these men died. As the 1860–1861 school year came to a close, at least five of every six of the students enrolled during that year joined Confederate units. UVA faculty played multiple roles. History and general literature professor George Frederick Holmes joined other volunteers in May 1863 amidst rumors that a Federal force was nearing Charlottesville. Greek and Hebrew professor Basil L. Gildersleeve joined the cavalry and in 1864 suffered a serious wound (this according to Ervin Jordan; see Dabney, UVA). Dr. James Lawrence Cabell, who had attended UVA as a youth, in 1837 joined the UVA faculty as a professor of anatomy, surgery, and physiology, and while in that position a quarter century later, during the war served as the chief surgeon of the

Charlottesville General Hospital, which was organized to treat wounded soldiers not long after the fighting at First Manassas.

MCV

Newspapers and other sources tell again and again of the roles played by doctors and medical students at the Medical College of Virginia in treating Confederate soldiers who had been wounded in the Richmond area. Dr. James Brown McCaw (1823–1906), whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been local doctors, played multiple roles in the medical establishment of late 1850s Richmond. An accomplished practitioner and professor, he had a private practice; he edited the Virginia Medical and Surgical Journal; and he was professor of chemistry and pharmacy at the Medical College of Virginia. Then the fighting began. In 1861 the Confederacy's surgeon general, Dr. Samuel P. Moore, appointed Dr. McCaw to be surgeon-in-chief at what became Chimborazo Hospital, which Dr. McCaw planned and then directed throughout the war years. The MCV professor ran what is described as the largest military hospital the world had ever seen (photo of him in the 1954 VMBH article; another in Dabney, VCU, 18).

Records from MCV itself reveal ways in which the war affected the school, and in fact other medical school across the South. A catalogue published in 1864 observed that, among all the medical schools in the Confederate states, only MCV and one other had remained open throughout the war. Reflecting various kinds of wartime developments, the school apologized for having had to raise its fees, in view of the enormous inflation of the Confederate currency.

The usual textbooks were listed as to be used in the upcoming session, but prospective students were permitted to rely on substitutes if those particular books proved unavailable (“in view of the present difficulty of obtaining some of these works”), and in any case were urged to bring their books with them if possible, “rather than trust to the very doubtful chance of obtaining them in Richmond.”

Enrolled during the 1863–1864 session were 155 students, more than half of them from Virginia, but the rest of them from every state in the Confederacy, plus Maryland, Kentucky, and Washington, D.C. The 48 medical students who graduated in March 1864 came not only from Virginia but also from North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, as well as Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. In short, the chief medical school in the Old Dominion trained students from every state in the Confederacy. (see Dr. William Latane, H-S- medical degree 1853: in Dabney, VCU, photo).

Of the 46 graduates in 1863, the MCV authorities reported that, according to such information as had reached them, 20 had passed the medical board exams for the Confederate army, another seven for the navy, and others were acting in such capacities as acting assistant surgeon and hospital steward. The school anticipated—in effect, elicited—applications from what it termed “young men who have been disabled for military service by wounds or disease, and who will seek the means of livelihood in the pursuit of an honorable profession.” Surely the civilian society was in need of additional doctors, the school noted in its announcement of the upcoming session, as were the military branches. To the extent possible, the Medical College of Virginia would continue its classes, and it did so.

CWM

At the College of William and Mary, President Benjamin S. Ewell opposed Virginia's secession for as long as seemed possible. But when the news came of Virginia's secession, Ewell signed on in support of the new political world, and he soon became an officer in the Confederate army. When he met with his faculty on May 1, most of the students had already left for the war, and it was assumed that most others would soon follow. The College suspended operations, hoping to reopen in October. The buildings were soon serving as military barracks and hospital for the Confederacy. Then Federal forces moved in. When President Ewell returned in June 1865, he found a main building burned to the ground, much of the rest of the school in disrepair if not ruin, and few resources with which to commence operations again. The Civil War had done much to destroy the first institution of higher education Virginia had ever had.

So the College of William and Mary lay in harm's way during the war, and some of its students headed more directly into the war, helping to drive the institution's decision to suspend operations. The names of three of these young men are Lt. Thomas H. Mercer, Private Robert Armistead, and Private John G. Williams, who left the school in 1861 and, at Appomattox in 1865, put down their weapons again at last. Some former classmates did not live through the entire war; Private T. R. Argyle died in September 1861, Sergeant William Browne in August 1862, and Captain Sterling H. Gee was killed in action in early 1865. (Heuvel, 32, 40)

Destroyed buildings might be rebuilt; young men who survived the war, former students in

Virginia's colleges, would do what they could to rebuild their lives in the postwar years.

VMI

And then, of course, there was VMI. First, the sheer numbers of prewar and wartime VMI students who fought for the Confederacy. Before or during the war, a total of 2,030 young men enrolled at the institute, some 1,902 were still living at the time fighting began, and of these, 94 percent spent time in Confederate service. Historians of the institute go on to count 259 sons of VMI who died under arms of wounds or disease. Vast numbers of Confederate officers were former VMI cadets. During 1861, as Virginia raised 64 regiments of infantry, cavalry, and heavy artillery, 22—a full third—were commanded by VMI graduates. And some of the Confederacy's officers were faculty at the school, chief among them of course Stonewall Jackson, about whom Bud Robertson has written at length.

Let us return now to the Battle of New Market in May 1864. Under the command of the commandant, Lt. Scott Ship, some 250 cadets marched north through the Shenandoah Valley to New Market, where they joined Confederate forces under Gen. John Breckinridge. Under intense pressure, the cadets acquitted themselves very well indeed, and the Union forces were repulsed. One-fourth were casualties: Ten cadets died during the battle of afterwards from their wounds they suffered that day; 47 more were wounded that day. Our own Jack Davis has written a compelling book on the subject. A VMI historian published a different book, one that provides biographical sketches of every one of the cadets who marched north that day in May 1864— young men who grew older, who became teachers and farmers and railroads engineers and so on.

So Virginia went to war, and all its people and all its institutions became caught up in the war. The war changed everything, and everyone. Virginia's institutions of higher education tracked the shift in sentiment toward secession, from John Brown's Raid in October 1859, to Abraham Lincoln's election in November 1860, to the secession of seven Deep South states between December and the first of February, and finally the events of mid-April 1861. Those institutions played a range of roles in the war, supplying students and faculty, as officers and men, and buildings, whether as barracks or hospitals, and expertise, whether military or medical. But then the war ended, old questions recurred, and new questions arose.

After the War

At least three story lines emerge from the war years in Virginia. One might follow individuals in their postwar careers, for example the VMI cadets who fought at New Market. Another might follow the institutions. So weakened, for example, was the College of William and Mary that, resuming operations on a shoestring in the 1870s, it staggered through the decade and then in 1881 suspended operations, leaving great uncertainty that it could ever resume. So devastated was VMI, with much of destroyed by Union troops in 1864 in retaliation for the role the cadets had played shortly before at the Battle of New Market, it offered to move lock stock and barrel to Richmond on condition of obtaining a new source of public funding. As things turned out, of course, VMI was restored at Lexington. William and Mary stayed where it was as

well, reopened, and during the next century grew into a very different institution—public, comprehensive, coeducational, multiracial. The University of Virginia, too, developed into a far greater institution than it had once been.

Yet a third story line introduces a cluster of brand new phenomena. Early in the war, at about the time of Second Manassas, the United States Congress enacted a law, the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, to promote studies in agricultural and engineering. When the war ended, and Virginia's state government was back in more or less normal operation and with more or less normal relations with the government of the United States, the legislature turned its attention to the contentious question of how to put to good use the small bonanza of federal funds that had become available. Virginia accepted the fund from the government it had fought for four years. Every school across the state earnestly sought to benefit. That was the money that lured VMI into offering to move to Richmond if only.

In the end, the two leading candidates for the fund canceled each other out. VMI went away empty-handed. So did UVA. So did all the lesser rivals, including Hampden-Sydney College, Washington College (W&L), Roanoke College, Richmond College (UR), Emory and Henry College, Randolph-Macon College, and New Market Polytechnic Institute.

So it is that a portion of the fund, two-thirds of it, went to an institution in Montgomery County, a former white boys' Methodist academy that had come on hard times on account of the war and now offered to give up its former identity if the state would allow it to rise from the dead and live in a new incarnation, as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, a land-grant

institution.

But the 1872 law reflected not only a wartime act of Congress AND the Union's defeat of the Confederacy. It also reflected the advent of universal emancipation, an end to slavery, PLUS the postwar developments that made citizens of former slaves, permitted black men to vote and run for office in Virginia, and led to the presence of a scattering of black delegates and senators in the Virginia legislature that passed the 1872 law. The same law that bestowed a modest largesse on a tiny school just outside the village of Blacksburg ALSO gave a small allowance, the remaining one-third, to a new school for freedmen, Hampton Agricultural and Normal Institute, near the farthest reaches of the other end of the state.

Members of the first board of visitors included Blacksburg's Dr. Harvey Black, an officer of the predecessor school and a medical doctor in the Confederate Army. Another was Joseph Reid Anderson, of Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works, an enterprise that had fueled the Confederate quest to get Virginia to join it, the decision to move the Confederate capital to Richmond, and the military effort in the long war that had followed.

Later, many years after the state government had established an institution for black Virginians, the land-grant designation and money were lifted from Hampton Institute and granted to that public institution, Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute, a school just outside Petersburg that over the years became Virginia State University. And so it is that today, during the 2007 edition of Civil War Weekend—400 years after the founding of Jamestown, 142 years after the end of the Civil War, 135 years after the 1872 law was passed—this event this morning

is being held on the campus of one of Virginia's two land-grant schools.

In multiple ways, then, today's events here at the Inn reflect the continuing influence of the Civil War on higher education in Virginia. Thank you.

Sources

James O. Breeden, "Rehearsal for Secession? The Return Home of Southern Medical Students from Philadelphia in 1859," in Paul Finkelman, ed., His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

Peter S. Carmichael, The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

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

William Couper, The V.M.I. New Market Cadets: Biographical Sketches of All Members of the Virginia Military Institute Corps of Cadets Who Fought in the Battle of New Market, May 15, 1864 (Charlottesville, 1933).

William C. Davis, The Battle of New Market (New York: Doubleday, 1975; reprint Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

Susan H. Godson et al., The College of William & Mary: A History (2 vols.; Williamsburg: King and Queen Press, 1993).

Sean M. Heuvel, "The Old College Goes to War: The Civil War Service of William and Mary Students," Virginia Social Science Journal 42 (2007): 32–48.

Ervin L. Jordan, Charlottesville and the University of Virginia in the Civil War (Lynchburg: H. E. Howard, 1988).

Robert F. Pace, Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

Willis Rudy, The Campus and a Nation in Crisis: From the American Revolution to Vietnam (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).