

The ruins of VMI after Federal Gen. Hunter's raid on June 12, 1864. The cadet muskets had been loaded with other ordnance and military supplies onto barges in the nearby canal in a futile attempt to save them from destruction.

"Little Drill Guns, Unsited for War"

The Story of the 1851 VMI Cadet Muskets

By Keith E. Gibson '77 and George E. Whiting

It had taken his native Virginia fifty years to begin a monument to George Washington. President Zachary Taylor, himself a Virginian, was pleased to receive the invitation to return to Richmond and preside over the dedication of the long-awaited placement of the cornerstone. On Feb. 20, 1850, he addressed an appreciative crowd gathered on the capital grounds. A small group of 100 gray-clad cadets from the Virginia Military Institute stood at attention at the base of the official platform.

The Virginia Military Institute Corps of Cadets had been invited from their college 120 miles to the west in Lexington to serve as the honor guard to the President. Impressed with their performance, Taylor personally ordered the issue of new cadet muskets to replace the outdated and unwieldy flintlock arms being carried by the Corps.¹

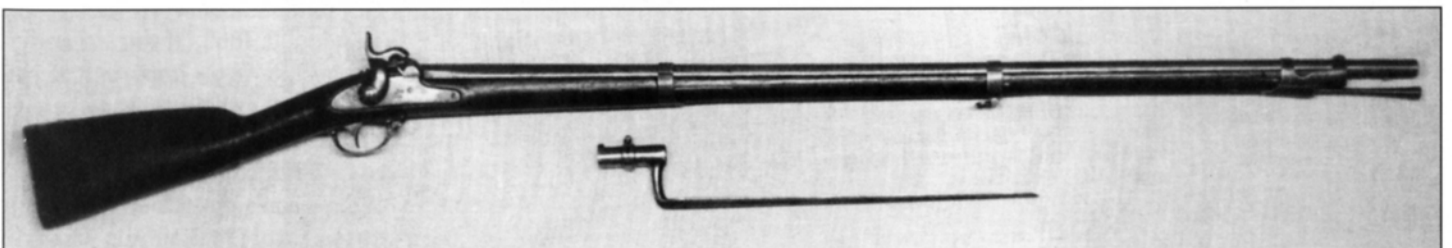
The presidential directive could not have come at a better time; a new musket — to be officially designated as the Model 1851 Springfield Cadet — was just being developed at the U. S. Armory in Springfield, Massachusetts. A scaled down version of the standard Army Springfield musket, the cadet model was lighter and shorter. Designed as a training arm, the cadet smoothbore utilized a caliber .57, considerably smaller than the standard caliber .69. The musket received a cadet proportioned socket bayonet. Unique among American bayonets, the cadet model features a slotted

locking ring held in place by front and rear shoulders.

Late in 1851, the first 200 of the new model cadet muskets were completed. Springfield Armory ordnance department procedure dictated that production not be recorded until the arms are formally turned over to the military store keeper. Although the muskets made in late 1851 are so dated, production of that year would not be officially tallied until 1852. A total of only 4,000 of the specialized arms were produced: approximately 200 in 1851; 2,640 in 1852; and 1,160 in 1853.

The shipment fulfilling President Taylor's order was sent to the Adjutant General in Richmond who forwarded the arms to VMI by canal. On Sept. 16, 1852, 31 months after the cadets' service to the President, the bright barreled gifts of admiration were received by the Corps.² Gazing upon the U.S. eagle and date "1851" stamped deep in the lockplate, the young men must have been pleased that their conduct had been recognized in such an important way. The excited cadets were reminded that the new arms were not to be altered or marked in any way, not even rack numbers would be applied.

Since 1816, the state had maintained an arsenal for militia arms in the western town of Lexington. In 1839, the additional role of state military college was introduced, the first school of its kind in the nation. The Institute would be dedicated to the training of



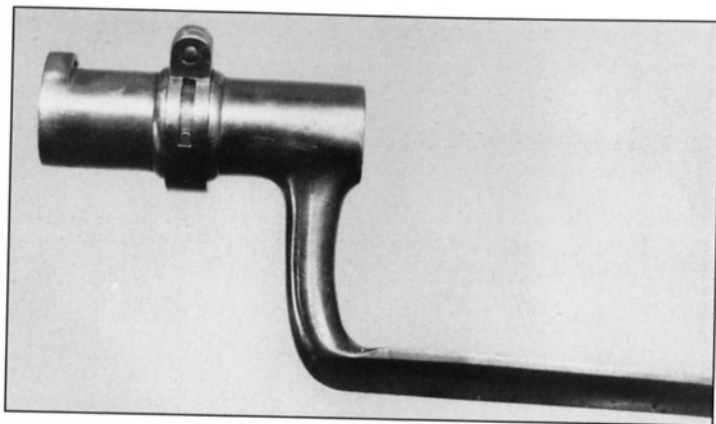
The U.S. Model 1851 Springfield Cadet musket and bayonet. This was one of the muskets from the original lot received by VMI on Sept. 16, 1852. (Photo: VMI Museum collection.)

young men in technical and military arts; the Corps would provide the guard force for the arsenal during their four year course of study. Along with the fine new training arms provided by the President, the arsenal stored over 27,000 flintlock muskets, primarily from the Virginia Manufactory in Richmond.

Over the next decade the Model 1851 cadet muskets would help school over 300 members of the cadet corps in the manual of arms and marksmanship. Although intended for official use only, occasionally, a cadet party would arm themselves with their issue muskets for an enjoyable, but unauthorized, hunting trip into the mountainous countryside. The stand of 200 cadet muskets for a corps 100 strong allowed for growth of the Institute and replacement of unserviceable pieces.

Debates over secession polarized the small Lexington community in the spring of 1861. On one occasion, a fight broke out between several pro-secession cadets and a Unionist town crowd. One cadet ran back to the barracks sounding the alarm. Every available cadet grabbed his 1851 Springfield and cartridge box and turned out ready to do battle with the local Unionists. Before a shot could be fired, the spirited Corps was intercepted by the Commandant and marched back into the barracks. Superintendent Francis H. Smith and several faculty members addressed the fiery cadets, admonishing them to reconsider the planned assault on the town. Among the persuasive speakers was Prof. Thomas J. Jackson, soon to become Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson.

"Military men make short speeches," Jackson began. "The time for war has not yet come, but it will come soon; and when it does come, my advice is to draw the sword and throw away the scabbard."³ Within weeks, Jackson's prediction came true. The Corps would be called away from its studies no less than fifteen times over the next four years to help repel federal thrusts into the Shenandoah



A close-up view of the Model 1851 Cadet musket bayonet shows the unique design features of shoulders front and rear of the locking ring and stop pin in the locking ring groove. This gun was used at VMI. (Photo: VMI Museum collection.)

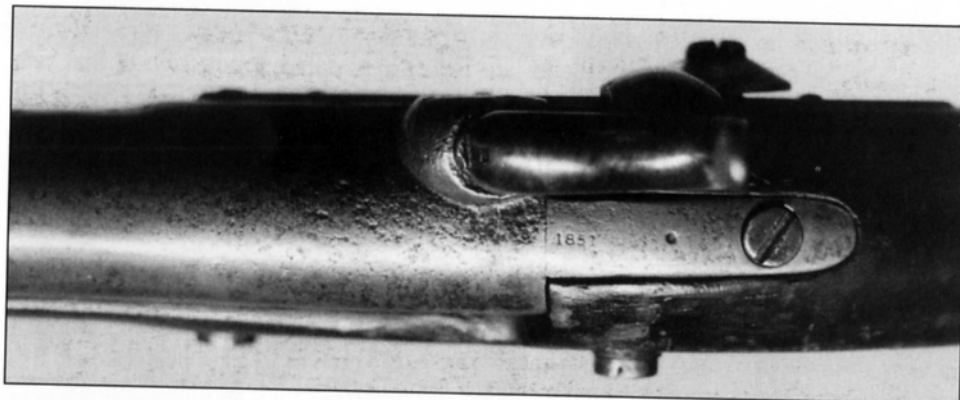
Valley. Their first opportunity came just four days after Virginia voted for secession when Jackson and the Corps, armed with their Model 1851 muskets, were called to Richmond to serve as drill instructors.

Issued whatever firearms were available, newly organized units poured into the state capital and county seats for instruction. One such unit from Lexington was the Rockbridge Grays, soon to become Co. H of the 4th Virginia Infantry, Stonewall Brigade. With the Corps away in Richmond, the Grays were quartered and drilled at VMI — and issued the VMI cadet model Springfield muskets. When the threat of a federal raiding party excited Lexington in June, no cadet muskets were left for the 47 man cadet guard so the

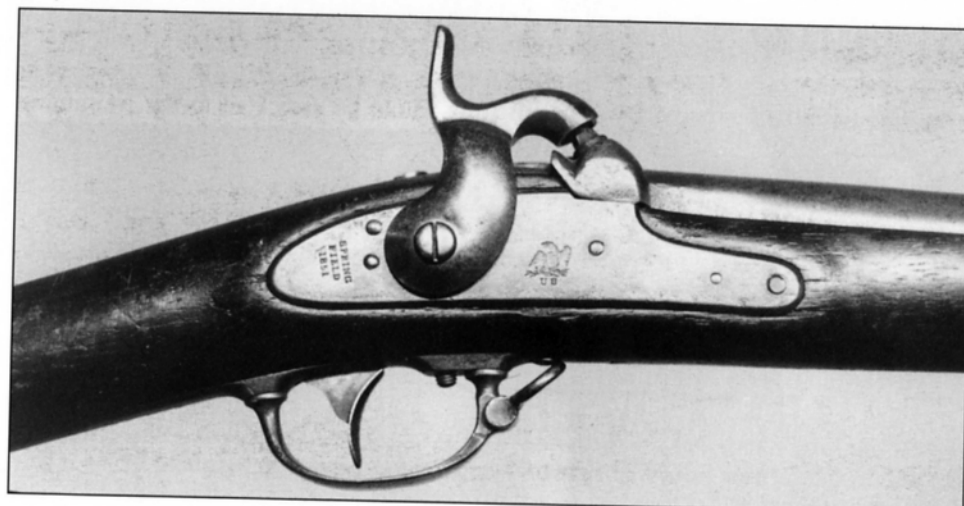
Adjutant of VMI ordered to "have issued to them the flint-lock muskets and ten rounds of cartridges, etc."⁴ The Grays, still armed with the VMI cadet muskets, left Lexington on May 3 enroute to Harper's Ferry.⁵ Two months later the Rockbridge Grays fought at 1st Manassas.

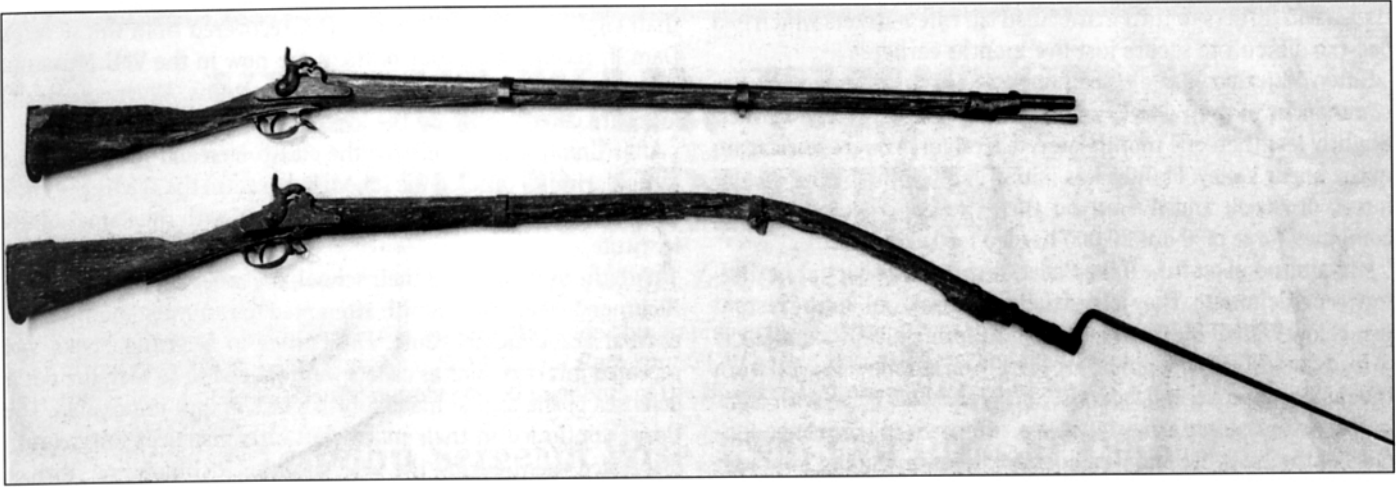
Writing to Maj. S. Basset French, aide de camp to the Governor of Virginia, in late September, 1861, from his headquarters near Fairfax Station, Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson stated: "I regret to say that Capt. Updike's company (Rockbridge Grays) has not turned in the cadet muskets and I fear that I will be unable to forward them to the VMI until their place can be supplied with other percussion muskets. I am very desirous of having them returned, and have made efforts to effect that object but in vain."⁶ Before the end of the year the arms were back at the Institute.

"Please march the cadets at once to Staunton," Gen. Jackson wrote Gen. Smith of VMI on April 30, 1862, "if you feel authorized to cooperate in an important movement which I will explain to you when we meet."⁷ Smith complied with the cryptic request from his colleague but was perplexed by Jackson's circuitous movement from Conrad's Store to Staunton via a trip east through Brown's Gap to Mechum River Station, then taking the railway westward



Close-up views of the Model 1851 Cadet musket reveal the Union eagle over "U.S." and "Springfield/1851" on the lockplate. On the barrel tang can be seen "1851." (Photo: VMI Museum collection.)





Two of the Model 1851 Cadet muskets recovered from the Maury River in 1980. These were but two of the cache of cadet weapons dumped in the river by the marauding Union cavalry. They are shown below in close-up.

to Staunton.

Jackson's secretive movement would ultimately take his army, and the cadets, to McDowell, Virginia, where he would fight the second battle of his famed Valley Campaign. Their former professor did not engage the young cadets in the battle on May 8, but rather assigned them to the burial detail. Recalling the experience, Cadet Benjamin Colonna, Orderly Sergeant of Company D, wrote that "the cadets carried their own blankets, etc., each had a tin cup and plate, haversack and canteen, and were not equipped as fancy soldiers at all. Our arms were the little drill guns, quite unsuited for war, smooth bores — just what we had before the war for drill guns."⁸ In Aug. 1863, Brig. Gen. William Averell raided south western Virginia with a view toward destroying the saltpeter works in that part of the state.⁹ Again the disappointed cadets supported the confederate forces. The federal raid was checked without the Corps coming into contact with the enemy. If contact had been made, the cadets would have been hopelessly outgunned, for they were still using the smooth bore cadet musket.

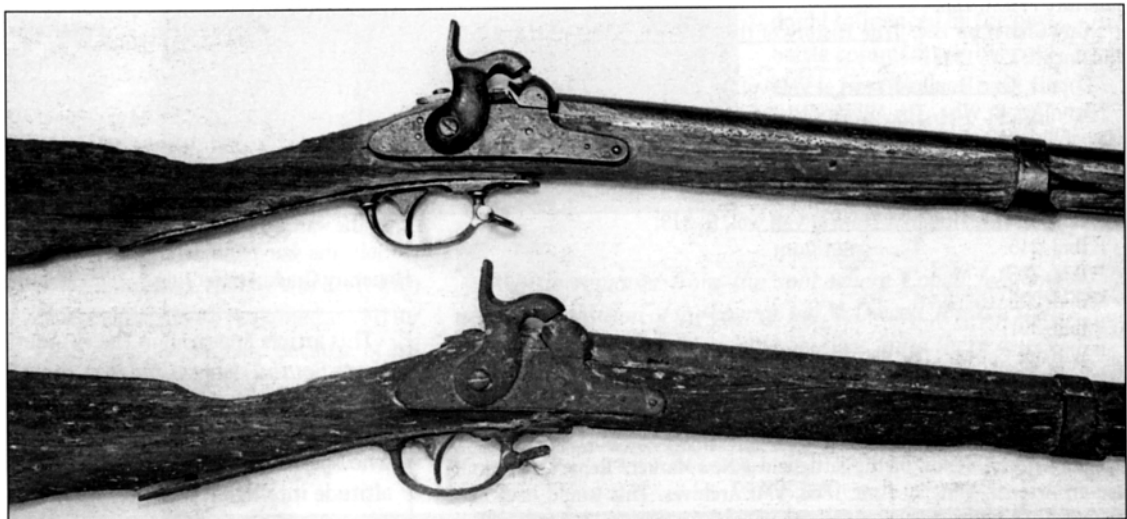
Gen. Smith wrote Gen. William Richardson, Adjutant General of Virginia, emphasizing the need for a suitable arm to replace the Model 1851 Springfield Cadet if the cadets were to serve in the field.¹⁰ Much effort was expended in Richmond in an attempt to find arms for the Corps from either state or confederate sources. Finally, the Adjutant General was able to advise Gen. Smith in a letter dated Nov. 11, 1863, that the desired material had been shipped.¹¹ Included in the shipment were two rifled three-inch iron Parrott guns and 200 Austrian rifle muskets.¹² This armament did not reach VMI in time to be used when the Corps was next called out in Dec. 1863, to assist in stemming yet another federal raid into western Virginia.¹³

On May 11, 1864, Gen. Smith reported to Gen. John Breckinridge, commanding the confederate forces in the Valley, that "the cadets are armed with Austrian rifles."¹⁴ The 200 Aus-

trian rifle muskets became the primary arm used by the Corps four days later at the Battle of New Market. A union artillery shell found Cadet Charles Read, a private in C company, knocking Read to the ground and shattering his Austrian musket.¹⁵ Read's musket remains today on the battlefield in the Hall of Valor Civil War Museum operated by VMI.

Numbering 275, the enrollment in the Corps was at its highest ever. With only 200 Austrian rifle muskets available, Gen. Smith ordered the issue of the 13-year-old, lightly constructed, smooth bore Model 1851 cadet muskets for use in non-critical areas. One of them, now in the VMI Museum, was carried by Cadet John S. Wise, 2nd corporal in company D. It was appropriate that Cadet Wise should have the inferior cadet musket because he was detailed as a train guard, which created a personal dilemma for the son of the former Virginia Governor. "If I should return home and tell my father that I was on the baggage guard when the cadets were in battle," Cadet Wise explained to his fellow guards, "I know what my fate would be. He would kill me with ridicule, which is worse than bullets. I intend to join the command."¹⁶ Convinced of his duty, Wise picked up his cadet musket and ran to catch up with his comrades.

The confederate victory at New Market brought fame to Cadet Wise and the 275 man Cadet Corps. In Richmond, they were presented new uniforms and heralded as the "seedcorn of the Confederacy" by Jefferson Davis. The military ability of the Corps was further recognized when superior British Enfield rifles were



issued with orders to turn in the Austrian rifle muskets which had been so difficult to secure just five months earlier.¹⁷

Union Maj. Gen. David O. Hunter replaced the defeated Sigel as commander of the Valley District after the Battle of New Market. Slightly less than one month later, federal forces were once again in the upper Valley. Hunter was joined in Staunton by the cavalry forces of Crook and Averell on the 7th and 8th of June. The combined force of about 20,000 headed for Lexington.

Mid-afternoon on June 9 the Cadet Corps arrived back at Lexington from Richmond. They joined their professor, Col. John Preston, just below VMI on the Maury River in the feverish efforts underway to load canal boats with public property in an attempt to save it from the rapidly approaching federals. Six barges were laden with commissary stores, quartermaster stores, ordnance and ordnance supplies of the Institute and Confederate States, including the cadet muskets. With Lynchburg as its destination, over 50 miles by canal, the last of the barges got off as the federal advance neared town. The Cadet Corps joined the local confederate forces under the command of Gen. John McCausland, a member of the Class of 1857, and marched to Lynchburg.

The lightly manned, slow moving flotilla had gotten as far as Gooseneck Dam, some 12 miles below Lexington, when they were overtaken by the wide ranging federal cavalry. The Union troops searched the contents of the barges, taking what was usable, selecting a few souvenirs, and destroying the rest.¹⁸ Being of no military importance to the federals, the cadet muskets were tossed into the river.

"This is a fine town," wrote Rutherford B. Hayes, colonel of the 23rd Ohio, to his wife from Lexington on June 12. "Stonewall Jackson's grave and the Military Institute are here... I got a pretty little cadet musket here which I will try to send the boys."¹⁹ Whether the future president was able to get the pretty little musket to Ohio is uncertain but it is clear from his letter that some of the Model 1851 muskets escaped destruction.

Physical recoveries of cadet muskets from the Maury River provide additional evidence as to their fate. Local history tells of a farmer who recovered a pick-up truck load of water logged muskets from the river bank in the 1930s and sold them as curios. No less

than eight cadet muskets have been recovered from Goose Neck Dam in recent years; four of them are now in the VMI Museum. Several river muskets are in private collections. All the recovered arms are dated "1851" on the lockplate and barrel tang.

After Union soldiers pilfered the classrooms and remains of the arsenal, Hunter ordered the school burned. On the evening of June 12, the sky over Lexington was illuminated with the flames of the Institute.

With the destruction of their school, the cadet Corps relocated to Richmond where Gen. Smith attempted to resume something of a normal academic schedule. Difficulties in securing books and repeated interruptions as cadets were called out to man the outer defenses of the capital made Smith's task all but impossible. The Corps continued in their make-shift circumstances until Smith disbanded them during the evacuation of Richmond on April 3, 1865.

Gen. Smith returned to Lexington after Appomattox determined to rebuild his beloved Institute. That fall cadets resumed an unexciting schedule of study and drill, now, however, without arms.

Gen. Pierpont, the reconstruction governor of Military District Number One (Virginia) ordered that the cadets would not receive instruction in the use of martial arms.²⁰ Repeated requests by Superintendent Smith and Gen. William Richardson, Adjutant General of Virginia, to rearm the Corps went forward to Washington. At last Secretary of War John Schofield and Gen. Ulysses Grant, now the Republican presidential candidate, sent word that the government would not oblige the request, however, "no notice would be made" if a benefactor were to arm the Corps.²¹

Before the summer had passed three alumni, all members of the class of 1863, seized upon the Secretary of War's implied permission and purchased 260 Austrian muskets as a gift to the Corps.²² The three loyal alumni wished for the post-war cadets to have the benefits they had received years earlier with the arm that has become known as the VMI Cadet Musket, the Model 1851 Springfield Cadet.²³ In the fall of 1868, the proud Virginia Military Institute Cadet Corps posed on the parade ground for their first Corps photograph—in full dress uniform, complete with arms.

¹ William Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol I (Richmond, VA: Garret and Massie, 1939), 267; John S. Wise, *End of An Era*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 57.

² Invoice Number 4, September 16, 1852, VMI Archives.

³ Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol. II, 86.

⁴ Special Order, VMI, June 4, 1861. VMI Archives.

⁵ Oren F. Morton, *Morton's History of Rockbridge County* (Staunton, VA: McClure Press), 126.

⁶ Guy Charellon Lee, *True History of the Civil War*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, Co., 1903).

⁷ Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI* vol. II, 147.

⁸ Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Company, Inc., 1915), 204. Benjamin A. Colonna, VMI Class of 1864 papers, VMI Archives.

⁹ Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol. II, 207-221.

¹⁰ Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol. II, 213.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 215.

¹² *Ibid*, 215.

¹³ *Ibid*, 215.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 301;

¹⁵ William Couper, *The VMI New Market Cadets*, (Charlottesville, VA: The Michie Co., 1933), 166.

¹⁶ Wise, *End of An Era*, 297.

¹⁷ Col. John M. Patton incorrectly states that the cadet's Austrian rifles were exchanged for Enfields "on the battlefield of New Market." Report of Committee on Arsenal, VMI, 30 June 1864. VMI Archives. This would have been contrary to Ordnance regulations which required equipment scoured from

battlefields to be turned in for reconditioning and systematic issue. The exchange actually took place in Richmond five days after the battle. See file of Gen. Scott Shipp, Office of the Adjutant General, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ MG Hunter's Report, *Official Records*, Series I, XXXVII, pt. 1, 96-97; Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol. III, 30.

¹⁹ Charles Richard Williams, ed. *Diary and Letters of Rutherford B. Hayes*, vol II (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1922-26), 474.

²⁰ Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, vol. III, 145.

²¹ *Ibid*, 147.

²² *Ibid*, p199.

²³ Charles C. Flowerree served as colonel of the 7th Va. Inf. and was a lawyer and businessman in Vicksburg, Miss., after the war. John Denegre, of New Orleans, La., served with the 2nd La. Inf. as a lieutenant and died in 1871. Milton Rouss served as a lieutenant with the 12th Va. Inf. and was a merchant after the war. Like most members of the Class of 1863, all three men left VMI to join the war effort after only two years of study. They were declared Honorary Graduates on July 2, 1869. *Register of Former Cadets, 1889*.

This article appeared in the September-October 1995 issue of *North South Trader's Civil War* and is reprinted with the permission of the authors, Keith Gibson '77, the director of Museum Programs at VMI, and George Whiting, a World War II veteran who spent his post-war career in classified satellite and high-altitude intelligence gathering.