

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Uncivil War: Integrating the Virginia Military Institute

By

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Abstract:

Virginia Military Institute is a state military school with significant historical ties to the Confederacy. As a result of this history, for over 100 years the school's identity and many of its traditions have been deeply informed by the Lost Cause narrative, the set of beliefs that stated that the Civil War was fought over states' rights, that the South fought with honor, and that Black people were inherently inferior to whites. In 1968, the Institute was forced to integrate. Those early Black cadets who chose to attend VMI faced unequal and unequivocally racist treatment at the hands of white peers and alumni, as well as an administration clearly apathetic toward such occurrences. Over the course of roughly fifteen years, these Black cadets demanded fair treatment from their fellow cadets and the Institute at large for themselves and other members of Lexington's Black community. They also forged their own traditions, looking to make VMI a space where they, and later Black cadets, could be represented and celebrated on their own terms.

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The Virginia Military Institute (VMI), located in Lexington, VA, is the nation's oldest state-sponsored military college. Founded in 1839, the Institute has trained thousands of young men, and more recently women, in a liberal arts education, featuring military-style regimentation. The Institute and its alumni played a unique role in the Civil War, a legacy that has left a deep impression on the college. Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson was a former professor at the institute, cadets enrolled at the time were used to help train and drill Confederate soldiers, and cadets even fought alongside the Confederate army, some losing their lives in battle.¹ Toward the end of the war, the institution was burned to the ground by U.S. Army troops.²

Following the Civil War, with physical and cultural destruction everywhere and the termination of slavery, former Confederates felt radically alienated from the world they once knew. As they looked to make sense of their defeat, they attempted to both quash the radical progress and success experienced by Black Americans during Reconstruction, while simultaneously re-establishing a social order as close as possible to the one they once knew. The Lost Cause narrative, in conjunction with Jim Crow laws, enabled them to do just that.

The Lost Cause narrative can be understood as "tales of the South's sufferings" during the Civil War that paints a fictional picture of slavery, the war, and Reconstruction. The narrative emphasizes that the South fought honorably, that slavery was a humane practice grounded in the belief that Black people were inherently inferior to whites, and that, above all, the Civil War was fought over states' rights.³ Like other Southern institutions and individuals, as it attempted to rebuild the school and to make sense of its legacy in the war, VMI subscribed to the Lost Cause

¹ John A Coulter. *Cadets On Campus: History of Military Schools of the United States*. First edition. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2017), 71, 74.

² Coulter, 71, 74.

³ W. Stuart Towns. *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012) 5.

narrative. As a result of this record, many of VMI's traditions and practices have long celebrated and honored the institute itself, its alumni and others who fought for the secessionist South. That legacy, and the commitment to honoring the Confederacy, continues to current day.

One such tradition is the annual New Market Day parade. Each year, VMI celebrates the anniversary of the Battle of New Market and the VMI cadets who were killed in combat. The Battle of New Market took place on May 15th, 1864. Confederate General John C. Breckinridge had called upon VMI's Corps of Cadets earlier in the month to help support his troops as they prepared to fight General Sigel and the U.S. Army in the Shenandoah Valley. Some 258 cadets participated, and the average age of the group was 18, with ages ranging from 15 to 25.⁴ As the battle raged on and Confederate troops suffered severe casualties, Breckinridge called upon the Corps of Cadets, saying, "Put the boys in...and may God forgive me for the order."⁵ The reality of their youth was not lost on the general. According to William C. Davis, the cadets were not soldiers, but "were schoolboys much like any other boys."⁶ Facing heavy fire from the U.S. Army, the cadets advanced to fill a breach in the Confederate line, one of multiple crucial factors that allowed the Confederate army to hold out and ultimately win the battle.⁷

The New Market victory was not without loss, however. While advancing to support the Confederate line, forty-seven cadets were wounded. Five were killed in battle, and five more died from injuries in the following days.⁸ The cadets who participated and survived were both proud of their performance and at the same time disillusioned by the violence and carnage that they witnessed. Many wrote home to family members recalling the bloodshed and expressing

⁴ William C. Davis, *The Battle of New Market*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 48.

⁵ Davis, 122.

⁶ Davis, 48.

⁷ Davis, 124.

⁸ Davis, 122-123.

their sadness.⁹ Over time, their contributions in the Battle of New Market became legend. Davis explains that, “With every passing year the exploits of the Corps of Cadets would grow in the veterans’ fading memories and in the burgeoning imaginations of others.” Details of the battle became exaggerated and blurred, and it came to seem that the VMI Cadets fought the U.S. Army entirely on its own, without the support of 5,000 other Confederate troops.¹⁰

Such legend was notably present at Virginia Military Institute in the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. According to the school’s traditional interpretation of the battle, it was the support and “Spirit” of the cadets that gave the Confederate troops such a significant material and psychological boost that they ended up winning. VMI’s annual New Market Day celebration, then, was intended to honor the “Spirit” of those cadets, particularly those who died, a spirit that was supposed to be shared by all who attended VMI. For decades, on New Market Day, all cadets were required to participate in a parade in which the Confederate flag was flown and ‘Dixie’ was played. The celebration continues to this day, and still honors the New Market cadets, though without Confederate iconography.

In October 2020, an article by Ian Shapiro of the *Washington Post* outlined the racist treatment that Black cadets at VMI experienced at the hands of faculty and peers. Cadets were threatened with being lynched, a professor openly lauded her father and his participation in the KKK, and the Institute was still honoring, and making cadets honor, the Confederacy.¹¹

Governor of Virginia Ralph Northam, a 1981 graduate of the Institute himself, opened an investigation into VMI’s culture. He cited the evidence of what he called a “clear and appalling

⁹ Davis, 159.

¹⁰ Davis, 179.

¹¹ Ian Shapiro, “At VMI, Black cadets endure lynching threats, Klan memories and Confederacy veneration,” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/at-vmi-black-cadets-endure-lynching-threats-klan-memories-and-confederacy-veneration/2020/10/17/3bf53cec-0671-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html

culture of ongoing structural racism” existing at the Institute as his rationale for doing so. Within a week of launching the investigation, Northam expressed his belief that Superintendent of the school, U.S. Army General J.H. Binford Peay, was no longer capable of leading the institution. Peay submitted his resignation on October 26th.¹² During his time as Superintendent, Peay continued to assert that “There is no place for racism or discrimination at VMI,” but also expressed that he was confused as to why certain cadets felt there was a culture of racism at the school.¹³

Peay was not alone in that sentiment. Following Peay’s departure, the president of VMI’s Board of Visitors John Boland wrote that “systemic racism does not exist [at VMI] and a fair and independent review will find that to be true.”¹⁴ He claimed that the instances that had been published in recent newspaper articles “had more to do with an individual’s lapse of judgment than they do with the culture of the Institute.”¹⁵ The conflicting claims expressed by Northam and Boland called for investigation into the school’s archive to understand how Black cadets had been treated at VMI over time. As a result of that inquiry, in this paper, I consider the first fifteen years following VMI’s integration and argue that a culture of racist treatment has existed at VMI since the very moment Black cadets stepped on post. Beginning in 1968, white cadets, administrators and alumni made it clear that Black cadets, their history and their experiences were not welcome at the Institute. As Black cadets continued to face hostile peers, threatening alumni, and an apathetic administration, they also asserted their right to attend the Institute as

¹² Superintendent J.H. Binford Peay III to President of VMI Board of Visitors John Boland, October 26, 2020, Superintendent of Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/media/content-assets/documents/administration/GenPeayResignation.pdf>.

¹³ Shapira, “At VMI, Black cadets endure lynching threats, Klan memories and Confederacy veneration.”

¹⁴ Ian Shapira, “VMI official to Northam: ‘Systemic racism does not exist here,’” Washington Post, October 20, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vmi-officals-racism-northam/2020/10/20/09636c20-12fd-11eb-ba42-ec6a580836ed_story.html.

¹⁵ Ibid.

full and complete cadets, building their own community and forging new traditions that represented them as fully and fairly as possible.

Integration

Nearly fourteen years after the landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared “separate but equal” public schools to be unconstitutional, the Virginia Military Institute was forced to integrate. The last school in the state to do so, its leadership acquiesced only after the federal government threatened to withhold school funding. In 1967, Superintendent George R.E. Shell informed the Board of Visitors that the school would be accepting Black cadets the following year. Out of the applications received for matriculation for the 1968 school year, only five Black men were deemed capable and qualified enough to attend VMI. Those men, all from Virginia, were Harry Gore, Adam Randolph, Philip Wilkerson, Richard E. (Dick) Valentine, and Larry Howard Foster.¹⁶ Gore, Randolph and Wilkerson were from Hampton and had been friends in high school. Valentine came from Newport News and Foster hailed from Warrenton. Of these first five men, only three would graduate from the Institute. Randolph would leave VMI after his second year, unhappy with the school’s environment, and attend Howard University. Foster would die in a drowning accident in the summer of 1969.¹⁷

Each of these men spent part of their lives attending segregated schools in various parts of Virginia. Valentine and Wilkerson were some of the first students to integrate schools in their communities, an experience that Valentine later described as “traumatic.”¹⁸ Such a recollection begs question: why did he and his fellow cadets choose to be part of the first integrated class at

¹⁶ The History of Integration at VMI,” VMI Alumni Agencies video, April 26, 2019, <https://www.vmialumni.org/history-of-integration-panel/>.

¹⁷ Transcript of the First Presentation of the Larry Howard Foster ’72 Award, 1985, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

¹⁸ Richard E. Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI,” VMI Alumni Agencies video, April 26, 2019, <https://www.vmialumni.org/history-of-integration-panel/>.

VMI? Each had a slightly different reason, though none of the men applied with the intention, or even understanding, that they would be integrating the Institute.¹⁹ Gore, the first Black cadet accepted to VMI in its history, chose the school because of its cost. As a state college, it was the cheapest he was accepted into. He also dreamed of becoming a pilot, and VMI offered Air Force ROTC. Gore wanted to be a part of the war effort in Vietnam, although he preferred “to fly above it” rather “than fight through it.”²⁰ Wilkerson dreamed of joining the Marine Corps (and eventually enlisted in the Army) and believed a military school like VMI would prepare him well for that. He also had some humor regarding the decision, saying his mother was a very strict parent, and “If you knew [her], going to military school was an escape.” Valentine aspired to be an engineer, but also wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, as he too was a military man. Valentine recalled being excited to go to college, as a plethora of new opportunities were opening for Black people at this time.²¹

Valentine and Gore remembered that, though it was an accomplishment to be accepted to school, some people questioned their decision. Not necessarily the decision to go to VMI, but to attend a military school at all.²² In the midst of the Vietnam War, college campuses across the country erupted in anti-war sentiment and protests. VMI, a college where cadets live a military-style life and where one often (though not always) trains and prepares to enter the U.S. military, presented itself in stark contrast to many universities in the era. Friends thought they were crazy for enrolling.²³ Gore’s high school guidance counselor worried too, albeit for a different reason. The opinions and expectations of the local white community in Hampton were significantly

¹⁹ The History of Integration at VMI.”

²⁰ Harry Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI,” VMI Alumni Agencies video, April 26, 2019, <https://www.vmialumni.org/history-of-integration-panel/>.

²¹ Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

²² Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

²³ Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

lower than those of the Black community, which had been supportive of their decision to go to college. Upon hearing that Gore had been admitted, his counselor, a white woman, asked him point blank, “How in the world did you get into VMI?”²⁴ As Randolph and Wilkerson were also accepted, the men felt better knowing they would be going to school with friends from high school.

These young men were, in many ways, blissfully ignorant both when they applied and when they chose to attend the school. Most, if not all, did not fully understand the reality of life at VMI – its traditions, its heritage, and its intense military regimen. In order to understand VMI, it is necessary to understand the terminology used to describe its hierarchy and overall system. The Superintendent of the Institute is similar to a university President.²⁵ He holds significant power regarding decisions made at the school, yet is held responsible by the Board of Visitors, alumni, and parents, as well as current students. All students are referred to as cadets, though they may be referred to differently based on their class. Sophomores are referred to as 3rd years, juniors as 2nd years and seniors as 1st year cadets. Freshmen are known as ‘rats’ for their first six months. According to the Institute, all rats, “start on equal footing—the same uniform, same rules, same obligations, and same expectations for excellence. Through significant adversity, they dig deep to harness their skills and determination.”²⁶ Rats are required to follow a specific route and manner of walking while in barracks – where the term “Rat Line” comes from. They must also be in perfect uniform at all times and must be prepared to sing school songs or chants at a moment’s notice. Members of the upper classes, or the “cadre,” evaluate the rats’ cleanliness

²⁴ Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

²⁵ VMI Official Records, “VMI Superintendents Since 1839,” Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/archives/vmi-official-records/vmi-superintendents-since-1839/>.

²⁶ “The Critical Role of the VMI Rat Line,” Virginia Military Institute, https://www.vmi.edu/media/content-assets/documents/administration/210526RatLineBrief_Final.pdf.

and preparedness, and, if inadequate, rats must “drop for pushups.”²⁷ When the Superintendent, cadre, and members of the 1st class feel that the rats have bonded enough as a class, they “break out of the Rat Line.” For the remainder of the school year they are then referred to as the 4th class. They do not graduate from the Rat Line as individuals but as one united class.

During their first year, rats are assigned dykes, which can be understood as mentors. The term “dyke” has historically referenced VMI’s dress uniform which includes one’s Coatee and “signature white crossing straps” and is worn only in parades.²⁸ Rat duties include helping their mentors “dyke (deck) out,” or dress, which is where the name comes from.²⁹ Dykes prepare rats for VMI’s high expectations and are there when rats experience the aspects of the Institute, such as facing discipline. In exchange for this guidance, rats help dykes with chores. The relationships between rats and their dykes, as well as between Brother Rats, often last well beyond one’s time at VMI. Harry Gore knew absolutely nothing about the Rat Line ahead of time, “and that was a good thing.”³⁰ Each of the first Black cadets felt similarly, as 50 years later, at a reunion celebrating the school’s integration, each commented on how difficult it was to make it through that first year at VMI. In terms of its heritage and “tradition,” Wilkerson was not aware that they would be the first Black Cadets until he visited.³¹

At the end of the 1967-68 school year, under threat of losing federal funding, Superintendent Irby announced to VMI’s Board of Visitors that the school would integrate that

²⁷ Virginia Military Institute Cadet Life, “First Year,” Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/cadet-life/daily-life/first-year/>.

²⁸ “New Cadet Handbook 20212022,” Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/media/content-assets/documents/corps-life/2021-Cadet-Handbook-WEB.pdf>.

²⁹ Laurie Weinstein and Christie C. White, *Wives and Warriors: Women and the Military in the United States and Canada*, (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1997), 67.

³⁰ Gore, The History of Integration at VMI.”

³¹ Philip Wilkerson, “The History of Integration at VMI,” VMI Alumni Agencies video, April 26, 2019, <https://www.vmi alumni.org/history-of-integration-panel/>.

following fall and that there would be no discussion on the matter.³² The Institute went about doing so quietly. The school newspaper, *the V.M.I. Cadet*, ignored or omitted the historic occasion from its first edition of the school year. The opening editorial addressed all cadets and new cadet parents and made no mention of the five individuals who were in the process of making history. It is possible that this omission was intentional, as Valentine revealed that Superintendent Shell had tasked the 1st class with ensuring a smooth incorporation of the Black cadets into the Corps.

The brunt of the responsibility of the integration of Black cadets fell to 1st Class President of the Class of 1969, Frank Easterly. Easterly held many meetings with various members of the Corps to make clear that the hazing in the Rat Line would be done without discrimination toward any rats of particular identities.³³ One strategy that bolstered this effort was to assign dykes to the first five ahead of time. While dyke-rat connections were at times brokered by professors or coaches, by playing on a sports team together, or by coming from the same hometown, dykes typically selected their rat. It appears that there was an explicit and concerted effort, sanctioned by the Superintendent, to match the first Black rats with specific, appropriate dyke mentors. Valentine was enlightened to this reality later, when another VMI alum approached him and explained he had initially tried to choose Valentine as his rat, when members of 1st class leadership made it known Valentine had already been assigned to someone.³⁴ This decision was likely designed to circumvent white reluctance to bond with the Black rats, and to mitigate potential retribution taken by white dykes who chose to mentor Black rats. While Black rats were

³² Peter Finn, "At VMI, Pioneers Recall Breaking Earlier Barrier," *Washington Post*, October 5, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/10/05/at-vmi-pioneers-recall-breaking-earlier-barrier/bb370fde-f457-4fc1-8249-e09a3e1395ff/>.

³³ Finn, "At VMI, Pioneers Recall Breaking Earlier Barrier."

³⁴ Valentine, "The History of Integration at VMI."

still subject to discipline from other members of the cadre, this matching ensured that the the most important relationship one has during his rat year was a supportive one. It seems that such efforts were quite successful, as Valentine recalled integration as being a “non-event” for himself and the other Black cadets, likely meaning they were treated quite similarly to their peers and entered the Institute without fanfare. When it came to actual participation in the greater Rat Line, Randolph noted that his company commander treated him and all of his fellow rats “equally as badly.”³⁵

A cadet’s first year at VMI is legendarily difficult for all who choose to attend. It was a uniquely difficult situation for the first five Black cadets. To begin with, Lexington, Virginia was and remains a city deeply entrenched in and enamored with the Confederacy and the Lost Cause narrative. According to Tony Horwitz, it is “the second city of Confederate remembrance: Medina to Richmond’s Mecca.”³⁶ Throughout the town, streets, buildings, and businesses are named for Confederate military officers and visitors can tour Stonewall Jackson’s historic home, which is preserved and run by VMI, to this day.³⁷ Both Jackson and Robert E. Lee, the highest-ranking military officer in the Confederacy, are buried in Lexington. Jackson is buried at VMI; Lee, the founding President of Washington & Lee University (for whom the university is partially named), is buried in on the school’s campus in a chapel named for him. Though the early 1970s, VMI rats were required to salute the building each time they passed. Inside Lee Chapel, a statue of the general rests on the alter. He, his family, and even his horse, are all buried in a mausoleum beneath the building. His office is also located in the basement and is a sort of

³⁵ Randolph, Adam. “The History of Integration at VMI.” VMI Alumni Agencies video. April 26, 2019. <https://www.vmialumni.org/history-of-integration-panel/>.

³⁶ Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 270.

³⁷ “Stonewall Jackson House,” Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/museums-and-archives/stonewall-jackson-house/>.

relic that remains as it was kept during his life. The chapel itself is non-denominational, but its iconography makes clear that those who approach the altar worship one of the Confederacy's most accomplished men.³⁸ This was the 'college town' in which the first Black cadets found themselves.

The Black community in Lexington, however, provided a very different environment and served as a bastion of support for the first Black cadets, as well as for those who enrolled in later years. Although a state institution and therefore presumably covered by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, VMI required that Christian cadets attend church services on-post for a certain amount of time, before being allowed to attend services elsewhere. Nondenominational services were held on-post each Sunday, and those who were Jewish or atheist were exempt from the practice entirely.³⁹ The first five cadets chose to attend the Main Street First Baptist Church, which was at the center of the Lexington Black community and whose congregation met the five with unwavering encouragement. The pastor at the time, Reverend John Trotman, invited the young men into his home following the service, thus beginning the community's tradition of hosting the cadets for Sunday dinner. Families would take turns having the young men over for a meal following church services. The practice eventually turned into a sort of competition among the congregation over who "got to host" these young trail blazers.⁴⁰

The young men did enjoy the food: but they also attended an all-male college and they quite often chose to attend dinner at the homes of families with daughters.⁴¹ While it is unclear just how effective such a strategy was in getting the young men dates, Valentine did meet his

³⁸ Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020), ##.

³⁹ VMI, 216.

⁴⁰ Gore, "The History of Integration at VMI."

⁴¹ Valentine, "The History of Integration at VMI."

future wife, a local of Lexington, while attending VMI.⁴² The Black community provided a safe space for the cadets to socialize off-post and engage with local Blacks. Harry Gore recalled watching the Super Bowl at Rev. Trotman's home.⁴³ Local families also hosted the parents of Black cadets, so they did not have to pay to stay in local motels. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in places of public accommodation, whether or not motels in Lexington were truly desegregated or safe for Black people to use is unknown. It is possible local families hosted the parents of the cadets due to un hospitable local motels, but also possible they hosted them because of fondness for the cadet or to help a family save some money. Phil Wilkerson, as well as his mother, grew close with the Baker family, a bond that endured long after he graduated from the institute. He received many care packages and letters from the Bakers while enlisted in the U.S. Army.⁴⁴

Many members of Lexington's Black community were present on VMI grounds as well. Local men and women were employed by the Institute as kitchen staff and janitors, and they provided support for the Black cadets from inside VMI. While not cadets themselves, these workers understood the immense pressure felt by any Black person at VMI. Every one of the five's peers, professors, and administrators were white, many were from Virginia, and many would have experienced, and very possibly supported, racial segregation.⁴⁵ Those Black workers at the Institute would check in on the cadets in passing, often whispering "Hey, everything going okay? Need anything?"⁴⁶ Many years after their graduation, the former cadets emphasized the debt of gratitude that they owed to the local Black community. It was because of them,

⁴² Valentine, "The History of Integration at VMI."

⁴³ Gore, "The History of Integration at VMI."

⁴⁴ Wilkerson, "The History of Integration at VMI."

⁴⁵ Virginia Military Institute, *The Bomb 1969*, (Lexington, VA: Graduating Class of 1969, 1969), Virginia Military Institute Archives, <https://archive.org/details/bomb1969virg/page/n71/mode/2up>.

⁴⁶ Gore, "The History of Integration at VMI."

Wilkerson said, that, though he “might’ve wished [he] was somewhere else,” he never felt that he was alone.⁴⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, each of the five formed close bonds with many of their white fellow cadets. None had lived with white people previously. Valentine, Wilkerson, Randolph and Gore had only begun attending school with them when their local junior and high schools integrated.⁴⁸ Gore recalled feeling great trepidation about living with white people. Over the course of four years at VMI, however, “it turns out the bonds that [he] formed with [his white] roommates...[were] inseparable bonds.”⁴⁹ Twenty-five years later, that friendship remained close.⁵⁰ Wilkerson formed an extremely close bond with his white roommates as well, later emphasizing that “you form relationships [there that] I can’t explain to you.”⁵¹

The claim that Brother Rats form particularly strong and long-lasting bonds rang true for most of these first Black cadets. It was these friendships, according to the Black cadets many years later, that allowed the young men to engage in unique discussions and to broker understanding between individuals of different races. At VMI, self-presentation was very important. Cadets could be punished, particularly during their rat year, for looking disheveled or being out of proper uniform. Black cadets went about their personal hygiene in ways that differed from some of their white peers. Their hair was best styled using specific tools and their skin was best cared for by applying lotion to it daily. For white cadets, these practices were apparently foreign, as the Black cadets had to explain “why [they carried] these big combs and

⁴⁷ Wilkerson, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

⁴⁸ Wilkerson, Valentine, and Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

⁴⁹ Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

⁵⁰ Finn, “At VMI, Pioneers Recall Breaking Earlier Barrier.”

⁵¹ Wilkerson, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

[rubbed] lotion on [their] hands and arms each morning!”⁵² These friendships helped create space at for points of difference to be discussed and understood.

The Black cadets also educated their white friends about Black history. They taught their roommates and other Brother Rats about “black cowboys like Nat Love or ‘Deadwood Dick,’” and the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry of the late 19th century, who were “nicknamed the ‘Buffalo Soldiers’ by Plains Indians because of their hair texture.” Such exchanges of information and perspective, though at times well received, often resulted in debate and disagreement. As more Black cadets enrolled at VMI and continued to assert both their own understandings of history and their right to attend the Institute as an equal party, the differences in perspective brought the Institute to an impasse.

The New Market Day Debate:

As a military institute, VMI requires that students participate in school traditions in a way dissimilar to other institutions of higher education. Many colleges have traditions that students choose to participate in, like singing a school song or attending a certain annual event. Participation, however, in these traditions is typically optional. Cadets at VMI, as a part of its military organization and regimen, have intensely regulated schedules and ceremonial practices. Cadets are required to participate in school-wide celebrations under threat of punishment. Some of these mandatory traditions have included requiring cadets to salute a statue of Stonewall Jackson, to celebrate Battle of New Market each year, and to listen to the Confederate anthem “Dixie” at both sporting and ceremonial events.⁵³ Following integration, Black cadets began sharing their own understandings of American history at large, but of the Civil War and the

⁵² First Presentation of the Larry Howard Foster ’72 Award.

⁵³ “Solution to the New Market Dilemma,” *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 9, 1973, 1.

Confederate cause specifically, knowledge that clashed with and challenged both white students' and the Institute's understandings of their history and personal identity.

The first public clash of cultures occurred in 1970, when the 1st Class President requested that the playing of "Dixie" at sporting events be "somewhat curtailed."⁵⁴ The school's student-run newspaper, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, published an article in opposition to this modest proposal, and also hosted a small debate between white and Black cadets in its Letters to the Editor section. When white cadets wrote letters in support of "Dixie," Harry Gore, along with Mac Bowman '73, rebutted them. These letters provide valuable insight into the feelings of both Black and white cadets at VMI at the time.

In his letter, Gore agreed with the oft-heard comment, that the Civil War, and with it, slavery, had ended long ago. He, however, felt that some of the "attitudes and prejudices" expressed in the Nineteenth Century were still very much present in the United States, and at VMI, in 1970.⁵⁵ He recalled the prior year's Parent's Weekend, where a cadet stood waving a Confederate flag and donned a gray uniform, and remembered "the embarrassment and pain this incident caused my mother. How could I explain to her that racist attitudes really don't prevail at VMI (or do they?)."⁵⁶ To Gore, a celebration of the Confederacy was inherently and unequivocally racist. He stated that he was much more concerned with VMI's future than he was with its past and had no intention of taking away anyone's "good old Southern Traditions."⁵⁷ He did remark, however, scathingly, "Brother I wonder how paranoid you would be if three thousand years of your history and culture had been taken away from you. Power to the People." Gore raised a salient point – the very history and traditions VMI and its cadets were so concerned about preserving were

⁵⁴ Bowman, Mac. Letter to the editor. *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 20, 1970, 4.

⁵⁵ Harry Gore, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 20, 1970, 4.

⁵⁶ Bowman, Letter to the editor.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

fundamentally linked to a system in which slave owners actively attempted to strip millions of enslaved people of their own traditions and culture.

Mac Bowman explained in his letter that white cadets' "uninformed" opinions regarding the Old South resulted in their misunderstanding detrimental effect the playing of 'Dixie' had on cadets and the Institute at large. According to Bowman, white cadets perceived VMI as a "racial haven" that should be lauded for its integration success, and Black cadets' complaints about songs seemed trivial to them. Bowman criticized his white peers' laudatory self-perception. "Wise up, man; your ignorance is revealing itself. Sure, VMI has had its 'one' or more correctly, its 'six' Black students – in a student body of over 1100 men. If you call this integration, then go home and come again Mr. Charlie because you don't know where it's at."⁵⁸ While Bowman did acknowledge that the administration seemed to be genuinely looking to better the Institute and cadet experience, he also challenged the idea that full integration had occurred. Although they made powerful arguments, these letters resulted in no change at the Institute. The issue surrounding Dixie and traditions like it, however, was far from resolved.

In 1972, the debate arose again, though this time focused on the playing of Dixie at the Institute's annual New Market Day parade. As the debate over the significance of such a celebration ensued, the editors of *The V.M.I. Cadet* again contributed an opinion piece and published letters to the editor that expressed continued support for the playing of 'Dixie.'⁵⁹ In one letter to the editor, a white cadet posited the question, "Without Dixie, why have New Market?"⁶⁰ While evidently a rhetorical question in the context of his argument, the cadet was unaware of what was to come. Black cadets had each year volunteered for guard duty while the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ "Dixie," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, May 5, 1972, 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

rest of the Corps participated in the celebratory parade.⁶¹ In 1972, many instead refused to participate in the day's festivities entirely, a decision that nearly resulted in extreme disciplinary measures.⁶² By the next year, the playing of 'Dixie' and the New Market Day celebration presented an issue that VMI could no longer ignore.

In early 1973, Institute leadership decided to take a concerted look at the New Market Day celebration and the significance it had to all members of the Corps. On January 29th, Colonel William Buchanan addressed the entire Corps of Cadets regarding that year's New Market Day ceremony. He opened by saying, "I have made a number of speeches in my life, on occasions to the personal representatives of the President of the United States. No speech ever made before is as important to me as the one I am making here tonight."⁶³ The Corps, Buchanan explained, needed "to design a ceremony that appropriately marks an historic day for VMI without giving unnecessary offense to Cadets who have strong emotional reactions **either for or against** the Confederate States of America," (emphasis added).⁶⁴ Though a white man, a VMI leader and a US military colonel, Buchanan worked to present the perspective of the Black cadets in a fair and honest manner. In doing so, he also provided insight into the experiences of such cadets at the Institute. The Black cadets, like Black Americans at large, understood that "words come cheap and that, when the chips are down, the white man often has things in his mind that are more important than the feelings of the black man. In short, the black man needs to be shown that he is no longer simply ignored." Not only did the cadets want to have their views heard and validated, but they also wanted to be treated with greater respect.

⁶¹ Von S. Bashay, "A Black Cadet Speaks," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, March 16, 1973, 6.

⁶² Mac Bowman, "A Black Cadet's View," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 9, 1973, 4.

⁶³ "Text of Commandant's Address," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 2, 1973, 1

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Buchanan noted that objection to the ceremony might have been partially rooted in the feeling that Black cadets, because of their race, had not been fully accepted into the Corps.⁶⁵ This experience was intensified by the fact that “changes in the surrounding [Lexington] community was so slow” that Black cadets felt unwelcome both on and off-post.⁶⁶ While Buchanan was well intentioned with such a comment, and is accurate in noting that Black cadets were not treated with equal respect by their white peers, he ignored or glossed over the fact that many Black cadets opposed the ceremony because of its inherent racism, something both Gore and Bowman had acknowledged in their letters to the editor in 1972. Celebrating the Confederacy, a movement founded on the belief that slavery was “the proper status of the negro” would likely be opposed whether or not Black cadets received better treatment at the hands of their fellow cadets.⁶⁷

Buchanan went on to address the issue of ‘tradition’ and pointed out that the ceremony had been changed numerous times in the past, most recently in 1946, 1950, and 1952. One major reason for many of the changes was often the increase in number of cadets enrolled at the Institute. At various points in time, only a small part of the Corps of Cadets participated in any sort of ceremony, meaning that, if altered, it would not be the first time that the celebration had been changed, nor would it be the first time that the entire Corps of Cadets did not participate. At an institution where adherence to tradition was taken incredibly seriously, this presented information that would be difficult for those committed to tradition to refute.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alexander Hamilton Stephens, "Alexander H. Stephens, in public and private: with letters and speeches, before, during, and since the war by Henry Cleveland," March 21, 1861.p., 721.

On February 5th, the Corps gathered again in Jackson Memorial Hall to discuss what was referred to as the “New Market Dilemma”. Two first classmen were selected to address the Corps. A white cadet named Ned Wright spoke first, presenting the history of the Battle of New Market. Wright, correctly understanding that much of the opposition to VMI’s celebration of the Battle of New Market had to do with its association with the Confederacy, tried to create some separation between the Institute and its cadets, and the secessionist South. He explained that the cadets marched, “carrying the flag of the VMI Cadet Corps, not the Confederate Flag; since the Confederate flag did not fly over VMI during the years of conflict.” The difference in uniform, flag and formations between the cadets and those they fought with apparently “confused” the U.S. Army troops and was partially responsible for their casualties and eventual loss. Wright emphasized the ways in which the VMI cadets exhibited extreme courage and valor in the face of likely defeat, something noted by both Confederate and American troops. According to his understanding of the battle, it was their contribution and sacrifice that ultimately resulted in the Confederacy winning the battle. He concluded by stating that “On May 15 the 10 cadets who paid the supreme sacrifice, and the other New Market Cadets are honored not for any overriding ‘cause’, but for their spirit and youthful determination to complete a task given them under extreme conditions when retreat could have taken place without criticism. This Spirit of determination is what the VMI man stands for, and the Spirit is what we honor.”⁶⁸

Mac Bowman presented a historical presentation as well, though one that emphasized just what the Confederacy actually fought for and prioritized the perspectives and experiences of Black people. He acknowledged the feelings of many of his fellow cadets and emphasized that he and other Black cadets were “not trying to destroy or degrade this tradition of VMI.”⁶⁹ He

⁶⁸ Ned Wright, “The Historian’s Analysis,” *The V.M.I. Cadet*. February 9, 1973, 4.

⁶⁹ Bowman, “A Black Cadet’s View.”

called for mutual respect between members of various identities among the Corps. As he and the other Black cadets respected the opinions of their white peers, he wished that they too would do the same. The New Market celebration had presented an issue for Black cadets since integration, and, in Bowman's opinion, desperately needed to be addressed, as Black cadets had been treated with derision and disrespect since sharing their understandings of its significance. Bowman emphasized that, though Wright and other white individuals might be able to separate VMI from the Confederacy in the Battle of New Market and that they might be able to ignore that the Confederacy was formed to preserve the institution of slavery, he and others like him could not.

Some of you may reply that it's just a parade; others may say that it's just a ceremony honoring cadets who, at a very young age, were united in the bonds of battle by a common cause. Neither of these is an attitude that most of us can accept since regardless of how one construes the situation, it still comes down to the bare fact that they were a Confederate war unit. I can understand that to most of you this presents no great difficulty, but for us it ultimately means paying homage to men who fought for a cause which included the perpetuating of a system where our ancestors – not yours – were victims of the abusive and dehumanizing effects of slavery.

The V.M.I. Cadet gave ample coverage of the discussion, including transcripts of the speeches given by each cadet. Its editors chose, however, to title the two pieces in radically different ways. Wright's speech was titled "The Historian's Analysis," while Bowman's was merely "A Black Cadet's View."⁷⁰ Such a decision posits Wright not only as qualified to speak on such a topic, (the term 'historian' lends an air of expertise), but as *the* person to speak about it (the 'the' posturing Wright as the only valid perspective). By titling Bowman's speech as simply "A Black Cadet's View," *The V.M.I. Cadet* presents him as merely sharing an opinion as opposed to a presentation of factual information. The opinion of the student newspaper is evident here, as well as in the summary of the arguments made by the two speakers, where the historical and personal information shared by Bowman is again referred to as "the Black cadets' view,"

⁷⁰ Bowman, "A Black Cadet's View."
Wright, "The Historian's Analysis."

again in some ways barring it from real consideration as accurately grounded in historical evidence.

On February 19th, the Corps gather to vote as a group on how to address the dilemma. The Corps took a survey, developed by the POSIT Committee, a group specifically entrusted with polling the Corps and providing a recommendation to Superintendent Irby afterwards.⁷¹

Assembling again in Jackson Memorial Hall, the Corps was given a poll that included the following questions, which asked cadets to respond affirmatively or negatively to each:

1. After talking to the Cadet Corps, it is the belief of the VMI POSIT Committee that the ultimate goal of the New Market Day Ceremony is to celebrate the spirit, integrity, and courage of the VMI man as exemplified by the actions of the Cadets at the Battle of New Market. Do you agree with this conclusion? Yes: 852 No: 61
2. It has been suggested that the emphasis of the ceremony currently held be altered to honor all VMI alumni who have died on the field of honor fighting for their country. Is your reaction favorable to this suggestion? Yes: 612 No: 295
3. Accepting the fact that the New Market Ceremony is an integral part of the VMI tradition which honors the spirit of all VMI men, but remembering that the present ceremony is personally offensive to some members of the Corps. Would you agree to changing some parts of the ceremony? Yes: 627 No: 435
4. Bearing in mind the feelings of the black cadet, and the fact that VMI did not march under the flag of the Confederacy; Do you feel that the Confederate symbology in the Confederate Flag and the song Dixie should be replaced by appropriate VMI symbols such as the VMI Flag, Spirit and the Tribute, etc.? Yes: 470 No: 435
5. Respecting the right of every man to his own beliefs despite your own, If the ceremony were to remain the same, do you think individual cadets whose personal beliefs associate this ceremony with the Confederacy should be allowed to submit permits to the Superintendent stating such and requesting permission to be excused from the ceremony or be assigned to other duty? Yes: 701 No: 206
6. Do you feel that the New Market Parade should be mandatory for all 4th classmen so that all the VMI Cadets will be exposed to the ceremony and have the opportunity to formulate their own

⁷¹ "Corps Votes to Alter New Market Ceremony," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 23, 1973, 1.

beliefs from first hand experience rather than from the experiences, prejudices, decisions and traditions of the three upper classes. Yes: 545 No: 356”⁷²

As the poll data reveals, the majority of the Corps of Cadets was not opposed to modifying the ceremony or creating avenues through which cadets of various identities could comfortably and safely express their personal opinion and experience and celebrate (or not) the battle as they saw fit. Surprisingly, the Corps voted (though the with the closest margin of all) that the Confederate symbology in the celebration (such as the Confederate flag and the playing of the song ‘Dixie’) be replaced with those appropriately related to VMI. Separated by only 35 votes, it is evident that for some cadets the celebration of New Market truly was about the Spirit of VMI, while for others the recollection and celebration of the Confederacy was crucial as well. It is also evident, however, that many white cadets were open to changing the aspects of the ceremony that celebrated the Confederacy.

The editors of *The V.M.I. Cadet*, having made their opinions readily apparent throughout the course of the debate, were evidently surprised by and displeased with the results of the poll. In an editorial opinion article entitled “A Mockery,” the authors suggested that “certain questions on the ballot ... were inadvertently worded in a manner that encouraged a positive response.”⁷³ The authors felt that the questions, question number 4 for example, presented only the perspective opposed to the current New Market ceremony and that “The reader receives no hint, however small, that arguments to the contrary even exist.” Of course, any individual at VMI would have eaten, slept and breathed the “contrary” opinions, as they permeated every aspect of the Institute. The authors went on to state that because of the wording, the poll numbers could not be accepted

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “A Mockery,” *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 23, 1973, 4.

as a true, democratically obtained opinion of the Corps of Cadets. They were not alone in their frustration with the poll and such considerations at large.

Over the course of this three-month debate, *The V.M.I. Cadet* received numerous letters to the editor responding to the discussion. The paper operated as a sort of forum where individuals from various backgrounds and with varying ties to the Institute contributed their perspectives on the significance of the New Market Day celebration. Current cadets, alumni, parents, and even individuals who had no personal connection to the Institute contributed. The vast majority of such letters supported the New Market Day celebrations, and many attacked the cadets who dared to question such sacred tradition. Additionally, nearly all letters written in support of the New Market Day parade evinced a commitment to or belief in tenets of the Lost Cause narrative.

Following the Civil War, with physical and cultural destruction everywhere and the termination of slavery, former Confederates felt radically alienated from the world they once knew and looked to make sense of their defeat. In doing so, they also looked to both quash the radical progress and success experienced by Black Americans during Reconstruction while simultaneously re-establishing a social order as close as possible to the one they once knew. The Lost Cause narrative, in conjunction with Jim Crow laws, enabled them to do just that. What this narrative excluded, however, was the experiences of those who had been actually been enslaved and who understood quite well that slavery was a violent, exploitive and dehumanizing practice. As one reads many of the New Market Letters to the Editor, it becomes readily apparent that those individuals who had subscribed to the narrative over a century after the war ended would not or could not consider such a perspective.

Parents of both former and current cadets contributed a number of letters in strong support of maintaining the ceremony as it was. One parent agreed with *The V.M.I. Cadet* that the wording

of the survey presented to the Corps was unfair and set individuals up to respond in a particular manner. In her opinion, anyone who found the traditions and history of VMI to be offensive “should not, in good conscience, remain enrolled in VMI.” If VMI were to bend to the “whims of its most militant students” it would, like many other colleges, “stand for nothing”.⁷⁴ Another parent pointed out that his or her son and many others from the North participated in the celebration without complaint. “Why,” they asked, “can’t a few Black cadets do the same?” One mother, who signed their letter “A Yankee Mom of a Cadet” claimed that she “firmly [believed] in the equality of all men,” but she “also [believed] in the traditions for which VMI stands.”⁷⁵ To this woman, school traditions (in this context, a parade) were just as important as equality for all. One should know the traditions before one chooses to enroll, as VMI makes its practices and history evident in its Bulletin. In questioning these traditions, she declares that these cadets have “dishonored [themselves] and should silently steal away!”⁷⁶ With honor being a major tenet of both Lost Cause and VMI rhetoric, (as it is something that every Southern and VMI man should strive to have), this woman levied a heavy insult upon the Black cadets.

It is important to note that it is not definite that the authors of these letters were truly who they claimed to be. If true to their signature, these letters reveal that the influence of the Lost Cause narrative had reached far beyond the Old South. White parents in the North clearly identified much more strongly with their Southern peers than with Black Americans and white parents regardless of geographical location supported the New Market Day celebration. If these letters were falsely signed, then it is possible individuals were trying to show national (as

⁷⁴ Mrs. John C. Williams, Letter to the editor. *The V.M.I. Cadet*, March 23, 1973, 5.

⁷⁵ “A Yankee Mom of a Cadet,” Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 23, 1973, 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

opposed to regional) support for the New Market ceremony, in attempt to show broader support for the tradition.

Alumni made up a notable percentage of Letters to the Editor published during this time and their letters tended to be the most aggressive toward the prospective change. Many suggested that those who would not accept the ceremony were standing against everything that VMI stood for. In refusing to participate in the celebration, Black cadets were opposing VMI's "honor system, integrity, tradition and [the way in which it prepares one] for the real things in life," and they should not remain enrolled. One graduate from 1917 even suggested that those who opposed the ceremony be placed on Sick Leave because, "The 'Cadets' are obviously mentally sick if not physically sick" to propose such action "and should be closely guarded in the Post Hospital."⁷⁷

One B. Allison Collonna '14, cited one of the major tenets of the Lost Cause narrative in his letter to the editor. His father was one of the VMI cadets to fight in the Battle of New Market, and Collonna wrote that he didn't "think it ever occurred to [his father] or to his fellow cadets that they would be accused of fighting to support negro slavery."⁷⁸ He makes such a claim despite the fact that, if his father fought alongside the Confederacy during the Civil War, he surely understood that the South was fighting to preserve slavery. Collonna, however, continued to share his own, evidently Lost Cause influenced understanding of history, saying that Black people were enslaved and that was simply the "law of the land." The New Market cadets were focused on seceding from "the Union" and were fighting to protect their home state from invasion.⁷⁹ He then explained that, when Lincoln freed the slaves, the South imposed a "caste

⁷⁷ John T. Bancroft, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 16, 1973, 5.

⁷⁸ B. Allison Collonna, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet* March 16, 1973, 7.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

system” on its Black population and that “The present struggles of the blacks to emerge from this status have stepped on lots of toes, both north and south. If some blacks keep on antagonizing the silent majority, the politicians might eventually decide that the game isn’t worth the candle.”⁸⁰

Here, “the game” seems to mean civil rights. This man took to the student newspaper to threaten that if Black cadets would not stop challenging the status quo, they would (or should) be returned to the status of second-class citizenship.

Letters from current cadets, somewhat unsurprisingly, presented the most diverse range of opinions. Black cadets were the most likely to have a strong dissenting opinion regarding the significance of the ceremony and were the only individuals to consider why changes might be necessary. One such cadet noted that the issue was much larger than the New Market ceremony and that “The Black man is currently attempting to awaken society to the injustices which have been imposed on him for generations.”⁸¹ The cadets understood that they were being painted as willful individuals intent on destroying the Institute itself and emphasized again and again that that was not their intention. For some it was in fact their pride in VMI that pushed them to ask for these changes, and “That pride...speaking for the Black cadets, we all have it, for without it, we probably would not want to remain here, but leave like so many white cadets have.”⁸² Black cadets, having been admitted for the first time only 5 years earlier, made up a very small percentage of current cadets and alumni. White cadets had attended VMI for over 100 years. Despite the fact that they were facing such uninspiring numbers, the perspectives of Black cadets are readily apparent in *The V.M.I. Cadet*. While not necessarily listened to, and undoubtedly in

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mark Levine, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 23, 1973, Page 5.

⁸² Bashay, Letter to the editor.

the face of radical animosity, these young men took the time to intentionally and unapologetically share the what they knew to be true.

Their white peers, while less aggressive and less overtly racist than the older alumni, continued to voice strong support for the maintenance of the celebration. Many acknowledged the perspectives shared by Bowman and other Black cadets as understandable; however, it appears none took them seriously enough to change his own mind. One particular letter to the editor, evidently intended to portray the Confederate symbolism and tradition that imbued VMI as fundamentally positive, revealed much about the ways in which Confederate symbols permeated the Institute. As he listened to Bowman's speech, this individual found himself considering Jackson Memorial Hall, named for Stonewall himself, where a mural of the cadets at New Market stood. "Why, I asked myself, should a parade honoring ten dead cadets insult a black man as much as this picture – a picture which all cadets, both black and white, must stare at through four years of church services, class meetings, Ring Figure presentations and corps ceremonies." Yet it is possible to argue that New Market was not simply celebrated once a year, it was celebrated continuously, that celebration reified by the presence of such a mural at many important Institute ceremonies. He went on to note the Confederate statuary present on post and the practice of saluting Stonewall Jackson's statue during one's rat year. In a somewhat sarcastic rhetorical flourish, the cadet goes so far as to ask, if a Black man finds offense in these 'traditions,' including the fact that many Institute alumni fought for the Confederacy, "Is it just that a Black man attend VMI at all?"⁸³ This cadet insinuated that if one could not or would not accept and celebrate the Confederacy, one might not deserve to attend the Institute itself. In a single Letter to the Editor it becomes evident just how deeply steeped in Lost Cause rhetoric and

⁸³ John Miles Baumgardner, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet*, February 9, 1973, 3.

practice both the Institute and many of its white cadets were. One sentiment expressed repeatedly was confusion as to why Black cadets could not simply ignore their feelings of offense and participate in a ceremony honoring bravery and VMI Spirit. One cadet wrote, “what does color or ethics, race or creed, have to do with honoring ten men who had something in common with all of us, they were VMI cadets. Does it hurt so much to put aside your heritage, color, and belief, to honor them with the style, songs, and thoughts of their time?”⁸⁴

Those confused and offended by the proposition of changing the New Market ceremony looked frantically for an explanation as to why the administration might be considering such drastic action. Unable to accept that the administration might be considering the perspectives and experiences of Black cadets as understandable and valid, some looked to write an alternative narrative. In the Sports section of the March 23rd issue of *The V.M.I. Cadet*, author Tom Moncure tied the football program to the current debate. The Keydet football team, which was quite successful at the time, apparently received special treatment that often made other members of the Corps jealous. Over 50% of VMI cadets participated in some school sport team, meaning many would have been particularly aware of the disparate treatment between members of different teams. This favoritism, “led some critics to go so far as to accuse General Irby of initiating New Market ceremony changes to attract black football players.”⁸⁵ Again, one sees how the idea that the Institute might change a practice because it is intrinsically racist is entirely inconceivable to many. It is also interesting that the New Market Day parade is perceived as being such an important celebration that a change in that ceremony alone would entice prospective Black players to attend the Institute.

⁸⁴ Harley R. Myler, Letter to the editor, *The V.M.I. Cadet* February 16, 1973, 5.

⁸⁵ Tom Moncure, “Redline,” *The V.M.I. Cadet*, March 23, 1973, 6.

On April 2nd, Superintendent Irby addressed the Corps of Cadets regarding his decision. Despite overwhelming support from the Corps for a modified celebration, he along with the Board of Visitors decided to continue to the celebration unchanged, with “its purpose, now as always, being to honor the spirit, courage, integrity and devotion to duty represented by the young cadets who fought and died at the Battle of New Market on 15 May 1864.”⁸⁶ He went on to emphasize the importance of the ‘citizen-soldier’ concept, “which is so nobly exemplified by ‘duty above self’ which has been the hallmark of VMI cadets since the founding of the Institute in 1839. The Board further expressed pride in the Institute’s record of equal treatment for all cadets with any reservations.”⁸⁷

Irby, along with the Board of Visitors, with whom he made this decision, seemed to look to do multiple things with this statement. First, he looked to absolve himself and other VMI administrators of any potential accusations that they were not committed to equal treatment of cadets. Second, he worked to absolve the New Market cadets of any culpability in the larger picture by emphasizing that they were simply doing their duty, first as cadets at the Institute and second, though less overtly implied, to their state and to the South. In Lost Cause rationale, fighting for one’s region as opposed to one’s own personal beliefs and values is something to be lauded. Such rhetoric is used to absolve individuals like Robert E. Lee who had a “duty” to his home state and thus fought for the Confederacy, from any culpability in the fact that he both owned slaves and committed treason against the United States of America. Here, Irby and the Board of Visitors implicitly call upon the Black cadets at VMI to do their own duty. Suppress the feelings of disgust and embarrassment you feel at this ceremony for the greater good, here being the general merriment of the white corps of cadets. Parents, alumni and current cadets express a

⁸⁶ “New Market Ceremony to Remain Unchanged,” *The V.M.I. Cadet*, April 6, 1973, 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

similar sentiment in their Letters to the Editor, though more in condemnation of Black actions. Why could they not ignore their personal beliefs to serve a larger and more important cause – the maintenance of an annual parade? The letters explicitly stated that if Black cadets could not accept and celebrate VMI and all its tradition and heritage, they did not deserve to attend.

Following Irby's announcement, the editors of *The V.M.I. Cadet* made one of their own. Given that a decision regarding the ceremony had been reached, the paper would no longer accept or publish any Letters to the Editor on the matter. They stated that whether all members of the Corps agreed with the decision did not matter. It was now crucial that all followed the decision, for "Flagrant violations of laws and regulations serves no constructive purpose."⁸⁸ In declaring this, *The V.M.I. Cadet* ended any possibility for further discussion. The newspaper had acted as an important forum through which Black cadets could express their sentiments to an audience that did not or would not understand their perspective, and it would no longer serve in that capacity.

The Letters to the Editor make clear that Black cadet opinions were valued differently than their white peers. Though again and again letters from white individuals acknowledge the validity of the Black cadet arguments, their own personal understandings of what the Confederacy, New Market and VMI were supposed to stand for always took precedent. While many white cadets voted to change aspects of the New Market ceremony, not one white cadet wrote a Letter to the Editor in agreement with what the Black cadets had expressed. The reasoning behind that silence will likely never be known. There is potential that some cadets were willing to vote for a change in the ceremony, but were unwilling to publicly advocate for one. White cadets in support of changing the ceremony would have undoubtedly witnessed the

⁸⁸ "The End," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, April 6, 1973, 4.

negative responses that the Black cadets received and likely would have been privy to discussions held by white cadets without the Black cadets present. Some may have feared that they would face retaliation from fellow cadets or the larger VMI community if they spoke out.

What is also revealed in this debate is the degree to which many white individuals had grounded their own identity in the traditions of the South, meaning commitment to white supremacy and Black inferiority, to the concept of states' rights, and to the idea of Honor. When any aspect of that identity was challenged, in this context, when the meaning of the Battle of New Market was questioned, those invested in its continuance felt that they themselves, as Southerners, VMI alumni, or white men, were being attacked.

The debate around whether or not to change the New Market Day ceremony was couched in terms of protecting or breaking with tradition. What, in reality, was the greatest break in tradition at Virginia Military Institute was the admission and matriculation of Black cadets in 1968. An institute that had once enslaved Black people, had long excluded Black cadets from its halls and long employed Black adults only in positions of servitude had been radically altered just a short 5 years prior. When the incorporation of Black cadets into the student body could no longer be avoided, many white cadets, parents, alumni, and others continued to invest in 'tradition' as a way to both maintain their own understandings of self and heritage while also ensuring that the Black cadets would understand their place at the Institute. While the Board of Visitors did not have a say in the integration of the Institute, they made it clear that they had quite a say in just what that integration actually looked like over time. Changes to celebrations that implicitly, if not inherently, celebrated the Confederacy and white supremacy, were not to be had. Black cadets, while treated equally by many standards at the Institute, were to remain second-class

citizens in many others. While they were welcome to attend the Institute, their history and opinions were not to be incorporated.

The Founding of the Promaji Club:

On April 24, 1975, 18 Black cadets, under the leadership of Cadet Frank P. De Laine Jr. '76, submitted a permit to Superintendent Major General Richard L. Irby to found the Promaji Club. The club, with the backing of the Main Street First Baptist Church of Lexington, (the very same church that provided VMI's first Black cadets with support), would be a club oriented toward community engagement and service. While not officially deemed a Black Student Union, the club would serve predominantly as a space for Black cadets, though all members of the Corps were welcome to join. The word Promaji was selected intentionally and means "togetherness" in Swahili. As its founding permit explains, Promaji was to "[strive] for the solidification of the bond of hospitality and goodwill between Black cadets and an extremely [gracious] Lexington community" and was to "act as a communicating body facilitating rapport among the community, Corps of Cadets, and the Institute."⁸⁹ The club looked to bring those of various identities at VMI together and to help those individuals find some common ground.

VMI's archive includes no response from Superintendent Irby approving or rejecting their proposal and it appears inconclusive as to exactly when the club officially began operating. The next mention of the organization in the archive is in April of 1977, when *The V.M.I. Cadet* published an article entitled, "Promaji Now Official Club."⁹⁰ The goal of the article seems to be to explain to the Corps of Cadets the purpose of the organization, as well as notify those involved at the Institute of some of the events it had organized. The club had held a Christmas party for

⁸⁹ Promaji Founding Permit, 1975, "Promaji Club, 1975-," Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

⁹⁰ "Promaji Now Official Club," *The V.M.I. Cadet*, April 8, 1977, 5.

the local Lexington boys club the previous Christmas where they played games and gave the boys bags of fruit and candy. It was understood that “some of the young men had come from underprivileged homes, and it was hoped that such a festivity would contribute to the young men’s celebration of Christmas.”⁹¹

Though relatively quiet in 1978, in 1979 the club held its first ever Afro-American Culture Week at the Institute. The goal of the event was to introduce African American culture to the Corps and VMI’s administration, both of which were predominantly white and whose opinions were likely informed by unfair and inaccurate bias. *The V.M.I. Cadet* ran an article about the week, in which it was regarded as successful and where the importance of such brokering of mutual understanding at VMI was emphasized. The article stated, “It is only through an increased understanding and, consequently, togetherness of these groups that this club will continue to have importance. Promaji believes that there is a place for a club with these ambitions, as it is hoped the readers of this article will agree.”⁹²

Between 1979 and 1983, the Promaji Club hosted an impressive array of events for the Institute at large, Lexington’s Black community, and for those in the club itself. During one of its Afro-American Culture weeks, the group hosted an art exhibit featuring members of the “Art Crew of the Helio Museum” focused on African American art. The Promaji Club invited various notable Black military generals to speak at the Institute, including Major General Fred C. Sheffey and Major General Frederic E. Davidson. The housing and feeding of such prominent individuals seem to have been funded by the Institute, and both programs were also deemed huge successes. The club rented various films focused on or featuring prominent African American

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² The V.M.I. Cadet March 2, 1979, Page 2 “Promaji Culture Week Succeeds In Advancing its Goal Of Togetherness”

actors to show on campus. In a time when films were quite difficult to access and screen for a large group, such an event would often cost hundreds of dollars. By securing funding for the event through V.M.I., the club was able to at times offer such screenings free of charge to those interested. Such practices would have allowed for greater Corps participation and might have helped entice those who might be interested in the content but were deterred by the ticket price. Some films screened included “The Wiz,” “Zulu,” and “Sparkle.”⁹³ In a request for funding for the 1980-1981 school year, the club looked to secure funding for an exhibition offered by the Smithsonian Institute focused on Black American history.⁹⁴

As is evident, the Promaji Club provided an impressive number of social, cultural, and historically educational events focused on forging greater understanding among the Corps of Cadets and the Institute at large. The educating of white peers, which had been taking place informally since Dick Valentine and the other first four cadets integrated the school, was now taking a much more organized and intentional form. In doing this, the Promaji Club had the potential to engage far more cadets than if they, as individuals, were sharing their knowledge with those they knew, though they also may have sacrificed the personal connection that had helped forge much of the understanding between the early Black cadets and their white friends.

In the spring of 1983, with the election of club president Neville A. Anderson, Promaji took a notably more engaged role at the Institute. In a letter to the group following his election, Anderson attached Promaji’s original permit and stressed that the club needed to return to its founding values – working as a community-oriented, service-based organization that looked to broker greater understanding between the Corps, the administration, and the Lexington

⁹³ Tentative Calendar of Promaji Events Spring “83,” 1983, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

⁹⁴ Budget Request Justification for the Promaji Club of VMI, 1980, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

community.⁹⁵ Anderson also took great care to emphasize the importance of the social aspect of the Promaji Club. Following his election, he stated “I am aware of the difficulty in finding similar cultural activities at VMI and Lexington in general.”⁹⁶ Despite the support of the local Black community both on and off-post, it was still an isolating experience to be a Black man at VMI. That year’s Promaji spring schedule featured its usual service-based events, which included sponsoring a local Black youth to go to camp and an Easter Egg hunt for children in the Lexington community. It also included social events, such as a club picnic and a party at a local Howard Johnson’s restaurant.⁹⁷

At these social events, the club also looked to engage not only with one another but also with Black students from other institutes of higher learning. Dances, held at places like HoJo’s or local motels, were often open to all members of the Black Students of Central Virginia (BSCVA). The BSCVA was an organization where Black students gathered and found solidarity with those also attending predominantly white institutions. Members of the group gathered and shared negative or challenging experiences at their individual schools and looked to one another for advice and support. It included students from VMI, Washington & Lee, Hampden-Sydney, Hollins, Sweet Briar and Randolph-Macon Women’s College. VMI cadets had particular success as leaders in the BSCVA. While looking to maintain the connection with the local community, the Promaji Club looked to create opportunities for its members to meet with one another comfortably, as well as spaces to interact with women their age.

In the fall of 1983, under the leadership of President Anderson, the club decided to take concerted action against the racist treatment that white cadets exacted on their Black peers. On

⁹⁵ Correspondence from Neville Anderson to the Promaji Club, March 23, 1983, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Tentative Calendar of Promaji Events Spring “83.”

November 1st, the Promaji Club filed a “Report to the Superintendent” citing numerous instances in which Black cadets experienced racist treatment at the hands fellow cadets. It is the only document available in the archive that explicitly details the racist treatment that Black cadets faced daily and provides crucial insight into what it was like to be a Black person at the Virginia Military Institute. The authors note that they believed that the administration was unaware of the events that had taken place, or was unaware of the impact of these incidents on Black cadets. The all-white administration could not “understand what it is to be black,” but the club hoped they would understand the significance of the occurrences outlined.⁹⁸ On other occasions, when issues of racist treatment had been brought to VMI leadership, the oft-heard response declared that no such issues existed at the Institute. Evidently having learned from this past experience, the Promaji Club chose not to accuse the Institute of having “an overt racial problem” but instead asked “that [the administration] take a realistic view of the problems that do exist.”⁹⁹ They also brought multiple examples of racist treatment to the Administration, as opposed to a single incident, hoping to show a pattern of disrespect.

When VMI integrated, it did not segregate cadets. From the very start Black cadets enrolled ate, slept and attended classes with their white peers. That commitment to equal treatment extended to the funding of the Promaji Club as well. In a September 1983 letter thanking Superintendent Walker, club President Anderson shared the stories he had heard from other Black Student Unions. “There were organizations that were not supported by their administrations, but used... We heard of organizations that did not receive any financial support from their administration but were forced to such things as car washes and bake sales while other

⁹⁸ Timothy Harris and Neville Anderson to Superintendent Walker, through the Commandant, November 1, 1983, “Report to the Superintendent,” “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

organizations on campus were receiving adequate funding.”¹⁰⁰ Promaji was grateful to be financially supported like any other club at the Institute. Interestingly, it was the “VMI system” that was credited with ensuring the greater levels of equality between cadets of various races.¹⁰¹

That same “VMI system,” however, is what made the issue of racist treatment, as the Promaji Club explains, “more complex.”¹⁰² As a military school, VMI has a uniquely regimented schedule, system of superiority and methods and frequencies of reprimand. Cadets in higher grades are considered of a higher rank than those below them and are tasked with commanding and punishing those in lower grades. Punishment also occurs at significantly higher rates at VMI than it would at other non-military colleges. One may commit an infraction by having sloppy physical appearance (one must have a clean, proper uniform), for failing to adhere to the incredibly regimented schedule, or for breaking one of the military rituals or traditions. Despite equal administrative support for the Promaji club, Black cadets at VMI were vulnerable to frequent racist treatment at the hands of their fellow students. While Black students at other schools in central Virginia may not have been treated fairly by their administrations, students at most of these schools would have been subjected to significantly less supervision and reprimand at the hands of their classmates. Most of the incidents outlined in the report took place between cadets in different positions of power.

The report goes on to list eight “Incidents of Concern”. The authors preface the list, saying, “These occurrences are only representative of *some* of the problems black cadets face *daily*” (emphasis added), underscoring both that these are incidents that should alarm

¹⁰⁰ Correspondence from Neville Anderson to Superintendent Walker, through Col. Buchanan, September 20, 1983, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

¹⁰¹ Timothy Harris and Neville Anderson to Superintendent Walker.

¹⁰² Ibid.

administration and that they are occurring constantly.¹⁰³ One incident listed as occurring between “A Black Cadet (Rat) and a Cadet Sergeant” describes an interaction in which a rat did not have his appropriate uniform, to which, “The Sergeant replied, ‘You tell that blackie that he better have his coatee by DRC tomorrow, or I’ll personally take his ass to a KKK meeting.’ He then added, ‘No racial slur intended.’”¹⁰⁴ It is evident in this context that the cadet sergeant understood what the KKK stood for and what type of impact such a statement would have on a Black person. He chose this rhetoric as opposed to threatening him with calisthenics. The cadet sergeant likely also understood that referring to another cadet as a “blackie” was not appropriate, and felt that stating he did not mean calling a Black person an explicitly derogatory derivative of “black” was an adequate qualifying statement. Another altercation listed as “Black Cadets and a Present Cadet Sergeant” explains that “Black cadets were running back to barracks and the Sergeant yells from his window ‘Run n---s run.’ The incident nearly ended in a physical confrontation in which cadets could have been seriously injured.”¹⁰⁵ White cadets calling Black cadets a myriad of racial slurs was evidently a constant practice at VMI. This already offensive act takes on a more sinister tone when considering that these white cadets are in positions of authority. It is evident that Black cadets took great offense to this as well, as the note regarding the near physical confrontation makes apparent.

The racist treatment was not reserved only for Black cadets but extended to those Black individuals who were employed by the institute as well. The report takes time to note an incident that took place between a “Black Cafeteria Worker and White Cadets.” “A black worker asks several white cadets to move elsewhere so that she can clean the table. The white cadets rudely

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

decline. The worker says, ‘You don’t have to be like that.’ The white cadets reply, ‘That’s all you people understand,’” (emphasis original).¹⁰⁶ The Promaji Club’s decision to include an incident of racism against a Black female employee indicates that the club was looking to provide support and representation in a way that included and considered all Black people associated with the institute. This is not entirely surprising, considering the support provided by Black workers to Black cadets at the Institute, and reveals a continued relationship between those Black individuals who worked at VMI and those who attended. The remaining incidents listed note various instances of racist name calling, selective punishment of Black cadets out of a larger group, and even an instance of a member of the Honor Court and a cadet lieutenant threatening to “bone the black cadet out of school.”¹⁰⁷

The report continues on to address instances where groups of Black cadets were treated unfairly, focusing on “Feelings of Mistreatment by Last Years Predominantly Black Track Team.” The track team, in addition to receiving fewer days off and fewer privileges than other sports teams, also felt that they were unfairly targeted by VMI’s Honor Court. It is alleged that the Honor Court intentionally placed money and watches so frequently in the area where the track team practiced that members of the team began to joke about it. It is also noted that, in instances where the Honor Court was investigating conduct of Black cadets, such was leaked to the general Corps are also noted, an unfair slander of character without confirmation of guilt. The authors follow these claims, stating that they “do not object to the Honor Court doing its job, but [they] do question what would appear to be special scrutiny of black cadets, as if black cadets were less honorable than other cadets.”¹⁰⁸ Honor Court violations could result in expulsion,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

which, at VMI, of course had its own ceremony.! Cadets would be “drummed-out” of the school at midnight, while their names were announced to the whole Corps.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, such an accusation at an institution like VMI, where one’s honor is one’s “most cherished possession and one that distinguishes him from students at every other school,”¹¹⁰ would have been considered a serious affront.

The report goes on to address “Negative Feelings Towards Promaji,” a phrase that reveals that the club was not well-received by the Corps at large. The report explains, “When Promaji meetings are announced in the mess hall, white members of the Corps will announce a KKK meeting at the same time.”¹¹¹ There was apparent resentment towards the club for the privileges they were granted regarding socials, and the club struggled to have permits for their proposed events approved in a timely fashion. In response to such animosity against Black individuals and groups, the club proposed that “members of the Communication Committee of the Promaji Club [should] be recognized by the Commandant’s Office as representative of the black cadets tasked to keep the Commandant’s Office informed of any unfair treatment given black cadets.”¹¹² The Club hoped that, if all groups at the Institute worked together, they would, “all be able to someday say, ‘There is no racial problem at VMI.’” Col. William Buchanan, who advocated for Black cadets in the New Market Day debate and was the Promaji Club advisor, added his own commentary following this section, writing, “Strongly recommend approval of the suggested role for the Communication Committee. We owe all cadets a proper education in leadership and

¹⁰⁹ Ian Shapira, “VMI has tolerated ‘racist and sexist culture’ and must change, investigation finds,” *Washington Post*, June 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vmi-report-investigation-racism/2021/06/01/380c08c4-c2cb-11eb-93f5-ee9558eecf4b_story.html.

¹¹⁰ Virginia Military Institute, *The Bomb 1982*, (Lexington, VA: Graduating Class of 1982, 1982), Virginia Military Institute Archives. <https://archive.org/details/bomb1982virg>.

¹¹¹ Timothy Harris and Neville Anderson to Superintendent Walker.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

interpersonal relations.” The document is signed by President Neville A. Anderson and Timothy Harris, Chairman of the Communication Committee.

Superintendent Walker sent a response to the Promaji Club on November 7th. He applauded their efforts to improve communication amongst the various groups at VMI and agreed to their request for formal recognition of the Promaji Club’s Communication Committee. He followed that approval by stating that “The Promaji Club president and the chairman of the Communications Committee will work closely with the Promaji Club faculty adviser, the Regimental Commander and the Commandant in identifying potential problem areas, quelling rumors and developing courses of action to endure that the Corps of Cadets remains a unified, cohesive organization and that the rights of all its members are respected.”¹¹³ Though Walker’s response is limited, he does mention some of the issues raised by the Promaji report. He did not, however, apologize to the Black cadets or condemn the heinous treatment they received at the hands of their white peers. Nowhere does he state that Black cadets deserve to attend an institute free of bigotry or hatred or that he himself would take action to alleviate some of these injustices. This report and ensuing response show that VMI administration had been ignoring individual reports of racist treatment and that, even when presented with ample evidence of concerning practices, some that could result in unfair expulsion of Black cadets, no action on behalf of the Institute was to be taken.

I argue that the founding of the Promaji Club in 1975, in tandem with the events it sponsored in attempt to educate the Corps of Cadets in years following, was largely a response by Black cadets to their experience with the New Market Day debate in 1973. During the debate,

¹¹³ Superintendent Walker to the Promaji Club, through the Commandant, November 7, 1983, “Promaji Club, 1975-,” Identifier RG08.01, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, United States.

many Black cadets voiced their feelings and knowledge regarding the ceremony, the history of the Civil War, and the reason for which the Confederacy was founded. They did so, however, as individuals. There was no organized, coherent Black sentiment being expressed to the Corps or the Administration. While the individual Letters to the Editor, in addition to Mac Bowman's speech, provided invaluable and insightful information, they were not enough to change the minds of those who had grounded their identity in Lost Cause rhetoric. Though a majority of white cadets did vote to change the New Market Day ceremony, many members of the greater VMI community remained staunchly opposed to such propositions. Some even demanded that the Black cadets leave the Institution. In response to such vehement anger, the Promaji Club looked to present a unified voice representing all Black cadets (and eventually even Black workers) at the Institute, as well as to "enhance cordial relations" by discussing "standard grounds of difference."¹¹⁴ Finding common ground amidst said 'grounds of difference' would be the starting point of the club's activities. The screening of Black films, the exhibiting of Black art and history, and the hosting of successful Black military leaders all looked to combat and counter the ideas that Black people were inherently inferior and that Black cadets did not deserve to attend VMI.

The club's second stated goal was to help prepare prospective students with an accurate and "unbiased" understanding of what attending VMI entailed. This suggests not only that Black cadets were unprepared for the treatment they would go on to receive at the Institute, but also that the VMI system was particularly harsh on Black cadets. This unfair treatment, outlined in the November 1st Report to the Superintendent, seems to have been incessant. Black cadets were harassed constantly by their white peers, specifically because of their race. I argue that the

¹¹⁴ Promaji Founding Permit.

founding of the Promaji Club was not influenced exclusively by the New Market experience, but was also prompted by the ways in which many white cadets treated them in day to day interactions. This treatment, in addition to hostility from parents and alumni, lukewarm support from faculty, and a brazenly unapologetic administration, were defining characteristics of their time at the institute.

One does also see, however, that in the face of such animosity, Black cadets continued to assert not only their right to attend VMI, but their right to do so unmolested. When individual incidents of racist treatment were brought to administrators and were ignored, the Black cadets returned with an organized, and very likely not exhaustive, list of recent incidents. They proposed new methods and points of communication with the hope of relating just how problematic and pervasive such practices had become. When, in the New Market debate, they were told they did not understand “history,” Black cadets found avenues through which they could demonstrate both the accuracy and importance of African American experiences.

In the various Promaji documents from over the course of a decade, one also sees, in spite of such adversity, the active attempt to cultivate space and practices at VMI through which Black cadets could create their own traditions. In forging these new paths, Black cadets did not look to separate themselves from the Institute. At a school where tradition had been considered of the utmost importance, and where they and others like them had been excluded from developing and identifying with such traditions, Black cadets worked to reclaim the space. They looked to VMI’s own history to find individuals they felt deserved to be honored, affirming and emphasizing both their right to attend and their right to do so as full and equal participants. In 1985, the Promaji Club sponsored the first ever Larry Howard Foster Award ceremony. Foster was one of first five cadets to integrate the Institute, and the club “determined to memorialize

Larry Foster’s pioneering spirit” as well as “honor a black alumnus for distinguished service and for upholding the high ideals of the institute.”¹¹⁵ The first recipient of the award was Eugene Williams, class of 1974. In his acceptance speech, Williams emphasized the importance of Promaji’s initiative, stating “Until the day when no one would see in race or color any measure of the good or evil in men and until things in this world so change that there is no more significance in skin color than in the color of eyes or hair, it will be necessary for black people to constantly acknowledge that great blacks are great and black.”¹¹⁶

Post-VMI:

Despite the fact that VMI’s archive features the voices of many Black cadets from the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, it is by no means exhaustive and does not feature many opinions regarding the Institute itself and the overall experience of Black cadets while attending. In looking to understand as fully as possible the Black man’s experience at VMI, there is value in considering the ways in which Black alumni have related to and engaged with the Institute following their graduation. Some alumni have returned to the Institute and have shared their feelings and memories many years later. Eugene Williams ’74, when being honored at the first presentation of the Larry Howard Foster Award, explained his relationship with VMI following graduation.

As the years since my graduation passed, I began to realize that there really was something to this “spirit of VMI.” Viewing and appreciating the value of VMI is very much like viewing and appreciating a great oil painting. The closer you are to it, the more cluttered the shades and disjointed the form. But as you move away from it, the clearer and more beautiful the picture becomes. With regards to VMI, after one has been away from it for a while, the more one is able to realize and appreciate the value of the experience.¹¹⁷

A similar appreciation for VMI seems to be shared by many who return to the Institute, though particularly the integrating cadets. Harry Gore, nearly 50 years later, explained that he did not

¹¹⁵ Transcript of the First Presentation of the Larry Howard Foster ’72 Award.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

believe he would have developed such strong self-discipline at any other school.¹¹⁸ Dick Valentine felt that his VMI training influenced the choices he made on a daily basis. He also found that, without fail, the VMI community had “showed up” for him whenever he needed it.¹¹⁹ All of the men recalled the strong relationships forged, some with one another, some with their white roommates and Brother Rats. There is also value in considering that their testimony, some of which was provided half a century after they attended, may be in many ways romanticized.

While some available recollection does seem to be somewhat romanticized, the “VMI experience” and the hardships of cadet life are recalled with vivid clarity. Gore said that he hated VMI for three-and three-quarter years. When asked if he would do it again, he conceded that he would, but that he would not like it.¹²⁰ Valentine, when asked the same question, jokingly responded, “What are my other choices?”¹²¹ Black alumni, while in many ways grateful for their experience, have not entirely sentimentalized their time at VMI. Phil Wilkerson admitted there were things about his experience at the Institute that he would have liked to change. Adam Randolph, who left after his second year, explained that “There are things I find very distasteful about the environment, I always have.”¹²² What specifically he found distasteful, Randolph does not say; however, it does not seem to be the “VMI system,” which was so favorably and comically, remembered. The fact that Randolph went on to attend Howard University, a historically Black university, implies that race influenced his decision. Those Black cadets who attended the Institute in later years that the first five have recently openly expressed their unhappiness with the Institute and the treatment they experienced.

¹¹⁸ Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

¹¹⁹ Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

¹²⁰ Gore, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

¹²¹ Valentine, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

¹²² Randolph, “The History of Integration at VMI.”

While later reflection by alums helps to fill in some of the gaps, and also helps put the VMI experience in perspective, what might also be equally revealing about the feelings of Black alumni toward VMI is the fact that they seem to return to the Institute less regularly than white alums. Gene Williams noted it in his acceptance speech in 1985, and the Promaji Club of 2015 continued to underscore the need for Black alums to be further involved with the Institute and current Black cadets.¹²³ While those who have returned and whose testimony is available value their time at the Institute, or at the very least view it with a sense of humor, those who have not returned have not been able to share their stories. What, one might wonder, would those alums recall and how would it differ (or not) from those whose stories have been shared? There is also value in considering silence. While alluding to racist treatment, not one of the first cadets overtly discussed any racism that they experienced at the Institute. In his acceptance speech for the Foster award, Williams did not mention it either. Valentine, who introduced Williams at the event, also made no note of any racist treatment. Whether this was due to romanization of one's time at the Institute or the fact that the occasions in which their testimony was provided did not allow, explicitly or implicitly, for such commentary, is unknown. It must also be noted that much of the testimony provided by Black alumni comes from ceremonies hosted at the Institute. Panels celebrating integration or Institute sponsored award ceremonies might not encourage the most honest and complete reflection.

In the program for the first-ever Larry Howard Foster Award is a short poem written by Eugene Williams. He writes,

Guarded by her three fathers, she has changed,
 Yet remains unchanged.
 Slow to see that the color of one's skin has as
 little meaning as does the color of one's eyes

¹²³ Transcript of the First Presentation of the Larry Howard Foster '72 Award.

or hair; she opened her doors, and prospered.
 Her sons she mourns, her sons, the fallen;
 Her sons, now all colors, still proud and true.¹²⁴

Williams' poem is incredibly relevant. VMI both has changed and remains unchanged. For example, the New Market Day celebration continues, but without the Confederate iconography.¹²⁵ Many of the Black men that have graduated from VMI since 1968 are quite clearly proud and true. Proud of the values and characteristics they developed while attending VMI. Proud of the people they are and the relationships they have made. Proud of themselves and their heritage. While attending, many remained true to the Institute, though it and its attendees so often fell short of accepting and incorporating the Black cadets equally into the Corps. These cadets claimed VMI as an institution that represented them as well and acted to make such a claim true. Though the racist treatment remained rampant long after many of these cadets graduated, so did the efforts, words and Spirit of VMI's early Black cadets. Just as the New Market cadets are an irremovable aspect of VMI's history, the Black cadets of the late 20th century are as well. Their story deserves celebration, for in considering VMI's racist past and present, as Col. Buchanan noted in his 1973 speech to the Corps of Cadets, "Addressing this problem with an open mind will take as much courage, although of a different type, as that displayed on the battlefield of New Market." VMI's Black cadets evinced incredible courage and today, the Institute and the larger VMI community are being called upon to do the same.

Epilogue:

In 2019, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam came under fire when pictures of him in blackface and posed next to a student dressed as a KKK member were found in a medical school

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ "New Market Ceremony History," Virginia Military Institute, <https://www.vmi.edu/archives/civil-war-and-new-market/battle-of-new-market/new-market-ceremony-history/>.

yearbook.¹²⁶ Choosing not to resign, Northam vowed to commit the rest of his time as governor to addressing issues of racial inequality. Investigating VMI's structural racism has become one of his projects. He initiated an independent, state-sponsored probe into the Institute, conducted by the law firm Barnes & Thornburg. Published on June 1, 2021, the report found that, "Although VMI has no explicitly racist or sexist policies that it enforces, the facts reflect an overall racist...culture," "fierce resistance to change, and a fear of retaliation among students and faculty who want to report bigotry...to administrators."¹²⁷ In conducting this investigation, the firm found that VMI leadership, despite promising publicly to cooperate, "sought to control the investigation, the message, and the report's findings." They made it difficult for investigators to contact faculty and looked to have lawyers present when students were questioned, something that would have undoubtedly influenced their ability to be candid.¹²⁸ It was also noted that, not unlike the New Market debate of 1973, "The reaction to the investigation from the larger VMI community and the Institute itself demonstrates...[a] problematic culture. The unusual amount of vitriol, criticism, condescension, and condemnation from many in the VMI community regarding the investigation has been alarming."¹²⁹ To the VMI community, an investigation signifies change, something many of those who have attended have long been unwilling to accept.

VMI's new Superintendent, Army Maj. General Cedric T. Wins, VMI class of '85 and the school's first Black Superintendent, has been supportive of the investigation. Like many of VMI's Black alumni, he believes "in the honor, integrity, civility, and sacrifice that we instill in

¹²⁶ Gregory S. Schneider and Laura Vozzella, "How Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam and aides made his blackface scandal even worse," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/how-va-gov-ralph-northam-and-aides-made-his-blackface-scandal-even-worse/2019/05/25/9a096912-7da0-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17_story.html.

¹²⁷ Ian Shapira, "VMI has tolerated 'racist and sexist culture' and must change, investigation finds," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vmi-report-investigation-racism/2021/06/01/380c08c4-c2cb-11eb-93f5-ee9558eef4b_story.html.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

our cadets.”¹³⁰ Having been a cadet himself, it seems Wins would be perfectly positioned to address VMI’s racist culture. However, in a recent address to the Corps of Cadets he stated that he did not experience racism of any sort while attending the Institute. While possible, given the “VMI System” and the pervasive presence of racist behavior made evident by the 1983 Report to the Superintendent, it seems unlikely that this is true. It is possible that Wins, like other Black alumni of VMI, attributes his success and personal character to his time at the Institute. In such a situation, it would be incredibly difficult to condemn the school and his experience. It is also possible that Wins is taking a strategic stance here. Knowing how violently the VMI community responds to prospective change, by claiming he did not experience racism, Wins may be positioning himself to foster change quietly behind the scenes. While one cannot know his intentions, Wins has affirmed that he has “zero tolerance for racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia. Zero tolerance. It is antithetical to what VMI should be about.”¹³¹ Just how he will ensure that that becomes true at the Institute remains to be seen.

¹³⁰ Ian Shapira, “VMI select s first Black superintendent as racial climate comes under scrutiny,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vmi-cedric-wins-black-superintendent/2021/04/15/bc5ae1f2-9b95-11eb-9d05-ae06f4529ece_story.html.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

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