

# THE SENTINEL

## THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE IN THE CIVIL WAR

The American Civil War deeply affected the nation. Whether any other American college had more impact on this war or was affected by it more than the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia, is open to debate. The relationship between VMI and the American Civil War is far more than Stonewall Jackson and the Battle of New Market.

To explain that complicated relationship, The MMCWR was visited in November by David J. Sutherland, an attorney from Brownsburg, Indiana. Dave is the Immediate past president of the Indianapolis Civil War Roundtable where he also served as president from 2001 to 2002. He is a 1973 graduate of VMI where he was a history major, and a graduate of the IU School of Law, Indianapolis. He is a member of the Indiana State, Indianapolis and Hendricks County Bar Associations, a colonel (retired) in the US Army Reserve and a volunteer recruiter for VMI in Indiana.

As VMI cadets drilled rebel recruits in 1861, VMI alumni began to profoundly shape the Army of Northern Virginia. No other school provided this famed army more trained officers than the Virginia Military Institute. Douglas Southall Freeman, the foremost historian of both Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, wrote, "I am convinced that the Army of Northern Virginia owed to the Institute such excellence of regimental command as it had . . . I do not believe the campaigns of 1862 could have been successfully fought without the VMI men."

The Patton clan is but one example of an Old Dominion antebellum family's preference for military education. This family, ancestors of the famed World War II general, had four of seven brothers and several warring cousins attend VMI under long standing tradition. During the Civil War, these four Patton brothers and their kin commanded eleven different rebel infantry regiments. One VMI graduate, Colonel George S. Patton, grandfather of the World War II general, was killed leading his regiment at the Third Battle of Winchester.

Robert Krick, author of *Lee's Colonels*, noted the Army of Northern Virginia's clear preference for VMI men for field officer positions. The impact of so many VMI men in key positions is best illustrated by a single division in one day's battle. On the afternoon of July 3, 1863, as Major General

George Pickett's Division charged across the field at Gettysburg, VMI men led thirteen of Pickett's fifteen regiments at some point in that attack. Only two of these thirteen survived unscathed after this heroic but suicidal charge. VMI men also commanded four of the other six rebel brigades advancing with Pickett's three brigades that July 3, 1863.

Upon seeing so many former cadets in his flanking column only hours before launching his famed attack at Chancellorsville, Stonewall Jackson said to Colonel Thomas Munford, "The Institute will be heard from today." They were, most assuredly, heard from when thousands of Union troops reeled from Jackson's greatest attack in the war. Ironically, the Civil War unit with the most VMI men, forty-six in the 43rd Virginia Cavalry, was not led by a VMI man, but by a University of Virginia man, John Singleton Mosby.



*Thomas (Stonewall) Jackson served on the VMI Faculty as Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy & Instructor of Artillery from August 1851 until the beginning of the Civil War in April 1861.*

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In May, 1864, at New Market, Virginia, former US Vice-President and then CSA Lieutenant General John C. Breckinridge, desperate for troops in the waning months of the war, committed VMI's young cadet corps to battle as a single military unit. These cadets suffered twenty percent casualties in their famed assault, which included ten who gave

the ultimate sacrifice and are still honored at VMI each May 15 to this day. The next month federal forces torched the Institute, although operations of some sort at VMI never ceased, moving to Richmond for a few years and eventually back to a rebuilt campus in Lexington.

VMI barely survived the American Civil War. Since 1865, VMI's citizen-soldiers have continued their legacy of distinguished national military service. More than two thousand VMI men served in World War I, more than four thousand served in World War II and thousands more from VMI served in Korea, Vietnam and the first and second Gulf Wars. Many thanks go to Dave Sutherland for coming down from the Indy metroplex and sharing this fascinating account with us.



*The Arsenal, where VMI cadets were housed until 1851*

## Roundtable on Video

The MCCWR has just begun a project to try to make a video copy of our programs. With some material assistance from Bloomington Area Cable TV (CATS), we will hopefully be recording, editing, and producing a DVD to be placed in the Overlease Library for future use by any of our members. This project is certainly in the early and experimental stages, but we hope to have videos prepared for each presentation. What we need, of course, is help. If there is anyone out there who would like help do two or three of the videos a year, contact one of the officers or anyone on the executive board. The task will not take a great deal of expertise, and minimal training will be provided.

## Civil War Conference in 2009

The Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission is offering a unique opportunity next year. Registration for the Commission's 2009 first annual Signature Conference, "America on the Eve of the Civil War," is now available. Chaired by Dr. Edward L. Ayers, this conference will bring together renowned historians discussing the state of the country in 1859, two years before the first shots of the Civil War were fired. The day-long conference is presented **free of charge**, and will be held at the University of Richmond on April 29, 2009. For more information if you plan on being in the Richmond area, go to [www.vacivilwar.org](http://www.vacivilwar.org).

## Civil War Information Source

If you have not looked at it, check out *Civil War Traveler* for information of all kinds on Civil War topics...re-enactments, battlefield preservation updates, travel possibilities, new publications, etc. This is an excellent source, with many links, to all kinds of information. Just visit it on the web at [www.CivilWarTraveler.com](http://www.CivilWarTraveler.com).

## Coming Soon!

Jan. 13: Michael Tomey on the 27th Indiana.

Feb. 10: A Lincoln birthday with Charlie Matson

## Join us at the Holiday Dinner

There is still time to "get on board" for our third annual holiday celebration in December. Rather than have a regular program, we will use the evening to gather together for a holiday meal at the uptown Café on Kirkwood Avenue in downtown Bloomington. Bring a friend, bring an artifact or story to tell, but, mostly, just bring yourself. We will order off the regular uptown menu, so food and price options will be plentiful. The dinner will be at a special time, 6:30 p.m., on our regular Tuesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>. Call anyone on the contact list at the end of the newsletter to sign up.



## New Lincoln Book Out

If you have been watching the first Saturday Lincoln presentations on C-SPAN, you may be interested in a new publication. To mark the February 2009 bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, C-SPAN's CEO Brian Lamb and co-president Susan Swain have opened the network's archives to create *Abraham Lincoln: Great American Historians on our Sixteenth President*. This book is an effort to chronicle the life and legacy of America's sixteenth president through the eyes of 56 of the country's leading Lincoln historians, journalists, and writers. There will be hundreds of things "out there" for the next several months on Lincoln, but this publication seems to be exceptional. Go to [www.c-span.org/lincolnbook](http://www.c-span.org/lincolnbook) for more information and to buy the book.

## Can You Help?

Thanks again to David and Anna Wiley who brought refreshments to the last meeting and even helped with kitchen duty at the end. As always, if you can, please consider volunteering to help out with refreshments at an upcoming meeting. Our Hospitality Chair, Deborah Cronin, can always use the help. If you can help even one time, just contact Deborah at the number below.

### Contacts

Steve Rolfe, President 336-0757 [srolfe@indiana.edu](mailto:srolfe@indiana.edu)  
David Wiley, Secretary 337-0649 [davidwwiley@sbcglobal.net](mailto:davidwwiley@sbcglobal.net)  
Carol Wise, Treasurer 824-8708 [CWise30099@aol.com](mailto:CWise30099@aol.com)  
Deborah Cronin, Hospitality 323-9615 [d.cronin@comcast.net](mailto:d.cronin@comcast.net)

On the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/>