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The USMA Library In 2006

Joseph Barth

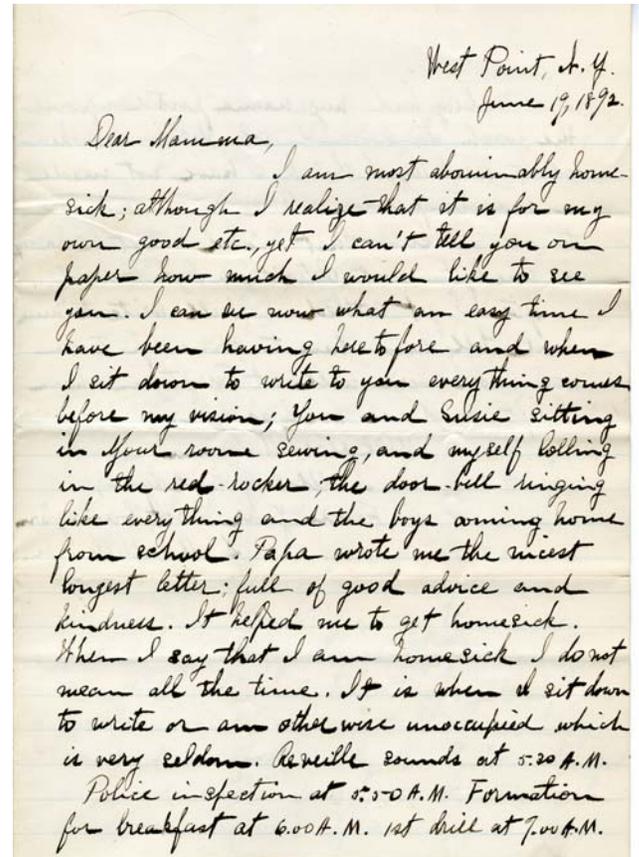
Librarian, USMA

New beginnings are appropriate for the start of an academic season. New cadets encounter a complex environment at the Military Academy and the new challenge of academics can be formidable. Returning cadets will see Jefferson Hall emerging from the pit that was opposite the Library in May.

Some letters written home by cadets in the early years of the Academy reveal feelings and impressions that are today confined to email messages. Excerpts of some letters from our manuscript collection are featured in this issue.

The familiar triptych that adorns the entryway of the library is seen every day by hundreds of cadets but its history is not well known. This piece of art is described by the artist herself inside this issue.

Finally, furniture takes the spotlight in preparation for our move into Jefferson Hall in 2008.



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This letter home was written by a momentarily forlorn Alexander Macomb Miller, Jr., class of 1896, during his plebe year. Miller was named after his famous grandfather who was Commander in Chief of the Army from 1828 to 1841. After a distinguished career in which he saw service in Cuba and the Philippines, the younger Miller retired in 1902. Read more about Miller and other cadets expressing their first year impressions of West Point on page 2.

Letters Home

by

Susan Lintelmann, Manuscripts Curator

For over two hundred years cadets have written letters home from West Point. First year cadets, away from family and friends, beleaguered and geographically isolated, are especially eloquent. Time passes and regulations change, but the themes found in cadet letters remain almost reassuringly the same. Homesickness and hunger, anxiety about grades and demerits and drill, share space with delight in new friendships and pride in achievement.

Samuel Newman, class of 1808, told his brother Harry in July of that year, "... it may be truly said that at West Point 'time taketh to itself wings'. The duties of study and parade are incessant; & the little time allowed for recreation is beguiled by the unavoidable sociability of the place...you study at discretion; I must recite two lessons every day besides parading under arms." Newman's cadet warrant in the Regiment of Artillerists was effective from 30 October 1807. His classmate Sylvanus Thayer had arrived the previous March, and both would graduate 12 December 1808, after a stay of less than two years. (After he became Superintendent in 1817 Thayer took steps to regularize the duration of residence, which in the Academy's early years was highly erratic.)

On March 12, 1838, the sophisticated fourth classman Alfred Sully wrote with amused detachment to his father Thomas Sully, then painting in London, "A cadet's life is a little better than I thought it would be, though it's harder than what I have been accustomed to. The only thing I can't agree with is the marching on guard...we cannot complain for the want of something to do; the Theatre and Concert occupy our leisure hours." We are indebted to Cadet Sully for his vivid description, in the same letter, of the Academy fire of 19 February 1838.: "It was discovered about two o'clock in the morning by a Cadet who smelt the smoke, and looking about saw the fire breaking out in the fencing room, he immediately went to the Barracks and gave the alarm; the place was soon crowded with Cadets, Officers, soldiers, etc. The Cadets were the only ones who were bold enough to go into the library with the exception of Lieut. Alvord...for which the Corps deserve much credit, as well as for their love of the fine arts, for the general cry when they arrived there was "save the pictures" which they did with little injury. They let them fall as well as they could out of the windows...the fire originated from the stove, in the room where the Engineering models were kept and now nothing is left of the Academy but a heap of black ruins."

As always in an outdoor life the elements loomed large, and encamped cadets were particularly vulnerable. William Dutton, class of 1846, wrote to his uncle on July 31, 1842, "I would not write today if I could help it, but it has been so rainy & everything is so disagreeable here you must pardon me—It was a beautiful morning, & we marched to church leaving our tent walls rolled up, & it soon commenced raining very hard. We came from church "Double quick", or at a full run. Our pants were covered with mud and our tents as wet (bedding of course) as possible." The day before however was fine, and "after taking an hours swim we clumb a high hill opposite Cold Spring- whence we found whortleberries & blackberries plenty; the first we had seen, so breaking up a large quantity of bushes we sat down on the north side commanding a view of Newburg & Shutting out that hot camp with sentries & cannon giving it a more odious appearance at a distance than anyone can imagine until shut up in one a month & eat our berries & talked about home, & friends-&-furloughs...."

George W. Cushing, Jr., (x class of 1855) of Providence was a plebe in the summer of 1854. In lively illustrated letters he records details of camp life perhaps unknown to vigilant Superintendent Robert E. Lee: "I was pulled out of my tent last night about 3 times-and every other plebe undergoes the same-one fellow plebe the other night was sent to the guard tent for picking his teeth with a jack knife-another one being asked for matches, and giving two or three was sent to the guard tent, for being "penurious"-all this is fun, you know... Tobacco is

prohibited but I never saw so much used before...Smoking is not allowed but nearly every cadet has a pipe- the cadet who is inspector, on coming round, makes a noise with his sword, or some other cautionary signal, and thus gives warning- he may look in and be stifled with smoke, but as the pipes are removed from their mouths he cannot report them as smoking....”

Although Alexander Miller, class of 1896, was from a military family he was nonetheless unprepared for the plebe experience. On 18th June 1896 he wrote to his father , Colonel A.M. Miller, USMA 1865, “On the 10th, the day I reported I perspired more, I think, than I have ever before in the same time...I had to make four trips from the Commissary to my quarters, which, by the by, are on the 4th floor....” And on the following day Cadet Miller wrote, “Dear Mamma, I am most abominably homesick; although I realize that it is for my own good etc., yet I can’t tell you on paper how much I would like to see you. I can see now what an easy time I have been having heretofore and when I sit down to write to you everything comes before my vision: You and Susie sitting in your room sewing, and myself lolling in the red-rocker; the door-bell ringing...and the boys arriving home from school...When I say that I am homesick I do not mean all the time. It is when I sit down to write or am otherwise unoccupied which is very seldom. Reveille sounds at 5.30 A.M...Drill is hard; very hard. You have to keep your wits about you and remember which is right and which is left, and follow the commands; at the same time you must keep braced up and respond to oft repeated commands to “depress those toes”, drag in that chin, sir”, “brace up”. The drill master gives frequent commands to “rest”, but there is really very little rest for the poor “beasts” for they are usually put through a regular catechism during the so called “rest”. And how those “yearling” corporals do make us sweat....”

A few years later Clement Wright of Ohio, class of 1904, was writing to his mother from camp with the same complaint: “I should like very much to write every day, but I can not possibly find time. Every minute of our time is occupied in some way or other.” A month later, on July 28, 1900, visiting relatives brought “a bag full of plums, pears and peaches you may imagine the feast Harbold and I had after taps. It’s a wonder it didn’t make us sick. I have so much to write about I hardly know what to write first. I will begin by telling of the kind of formation we have....”

The letters Cadet George S. Patton, Jr., class of 1909, sent home were introspective as well as descriptive. Patton, ambitious and observant, was at once confident and self-doubting. In his first term he wrote, “I fancy there is no one who so hates to be last or who tries so hard to be first and so utterly fails. And what makes it worse, the failure is partly my fault. I still dawdle a little in studying and I can’t seem to get over it. In fact the sum total of me is that I am a characterless, lazy, stupid yet ambitious dreamer who will degenerate into a 3rd rate Second Lieutenant and never command anything more than a platoon.” At Christmas 1904 he wrote to his always encouraging father, “I think the little success and all the failures I have had are due to the same thing that is I continually live in the land of “tomorrow” this makes me work and again it keeps me from working I continually say I will study harder tomorrow and make up for my lack of preparation to day. This same thing keeps me from considerable fun in the present for I am so egar[sic] after what is to come that I clean walk over what is at hand. If I could only live in the present in detail while at the same time live in the future in ideal I might amount to something so I guess I had better try to do it.” Cadet Patton’s Christmas letter continues, “Barracks was quite gay last night with a good many bottles of rot-gut...We had a fine dinner to day...I carved the turkey and all said I was a wonder...it is snowing again now and has turned quite cold I have nothing more to tell so will stop and go over to the library and read.”

Cadet Rings



The Class Ring Case is one of the most popular display features in the USMA Library and dates back to the 1930s. Cadets, graduates and visitors of all types are rightfully awed and inspired by these impressive relics of the long gray line.

When a limited number of ring photographs were added to our digital library a few years ago, the collection was given a new life on the web. Over the past summer the original digital offering that contained only a select group of rings was made complete. The new feature even includes the five rings representing the Classes of 1862, 1979, 1985, 1999 and 2003 that were donated this summer. Please check out the on-line feature at: <http://digital-library.usma.edu/collections/photographs/classrings/index.asp>

Pictured here: left, MacArthur ring; top, Eisenhower ring; lower right Whipple ring. Photos by Chris Wright all rights reserved.



This ring case was donated by the class of 1986 and is the latest in a series of display furniture that has housed a library ring collection since the 1930s.

While the on-line feature does a marvelous job of documenting the rings and explaining the origin of the tradition of class rings, it is meant to enhance – never replace – the ring case. Although we know that in modern parlance the class ring is sometimes dismissed as “a crass mass of brass and glass,” it is clearly so much more than that. As Eleazer Parmly III, a 1924 graduate of the Academy, wrote in the October 11, 1940 issue of The Pointer:

...[Y]our ring is a personal, concrete symbol of everything West Point stands for. ... [I]t's a symbol of accomplishment, your ring, and something even more – it's a goading spur to future accomplishments. You see, it is always with you, a part of you. You carry it wherever your life may carry you, into high places and low. And, you just can't let such an inseparable pal down. ... [Y]our ring is just another piece of jewelry, but what it stands for is nothing ordinary.... [Y]our pride in the ring is understandable, justifiable, and proper. However, wearing it makes you a marked man [or woman]; when you slide it down over your finger for the first time, you also slip on a mantle of responsibilities that can never be shrugged off so long as you remain in the service.

Each ring has a story and each ring is an inspiration. The ring display will endure in the Library in Jefferson Hall as part of our own tradition of keeping these rings within view of the Corps of Cadets. The Library's goal in displaying the rings is the same as Colonel Parmly's, to encourage you to “raise your chests, you wearers of the ring and those of you who are working so hard to win the right to wear one.” “You have hard work ahead of you, as well as limitless opportunities.” The Library staff is here to support you every step of the way.

Where Have You Seen This?



Hundreds of West Pointers pass this daily, some even touch it for luck. Visitors are often observed looking at it. It is one of several works done for West Point by Laura Gardin Fraser and it is located at the entrance to the USMA Library. The large bronze triptych was commissioned for the new Library and it is described in the 1964 Library Dedication pamphlet. Here is the description taken from that pamphlet.

“In 1951, during a visit to the studio of Mrs. Laura Gardin Fraser, Brigadier General L.E. Schick, former Professor and Head of the Department of Earth, Space, and Graphic Sciences at the Military Academy, noticed an unfinished work depicting the history of the United States. He was moved by its beauty and impressed with the artistic conception of symbolizing history through the medium of bronze bas-relief sculpture. He remembered this sculpture when the new Library was in process of design, and he remembered too the large number of Military Academy graduates who, as major figures in our country’s history, were included in the work. With the approval of Major General William C. Westmoreland, then

Superintendent, Mrs. Fraser was commissioned to complete her work that will be installed in the entrance portico of the Library.

Mrs. Fraser’s motivation for so depicting our history is best described in her own words: ‘As far back as 1935....it was rare to come upon anyone who had a real knowledge of American history or an appreciation of our heritage. Being one of these myself, the realization started a train of thought that became a dominant force. By intensive reading and research, I began to make small sketches in clay, in between “jobs” of larger form, depicting historical incidents of persons...The use of allegories and symbolism became the means of expressing certain phases of the growing nation...Eventually, these small sketches in clay became so numerous, like the leaves of an unbound book, that I patterned them onto large panel backgrounds.’

The work consists of a dedicatory inscription, and three panels each measuring 10’7” x 4’8”, cast in bronze by the lost-wax process. The first panel spans the period from Leif Ericson to the formation of the Republic and the passage of our frontier thought the Appalachian Mountains. The central portion of the panel depicts in symbolic and allegoric forms the principal events of the period and the personages associated with them. The Seal of the United States symbolizes our genesis as an independent nation. Around the border are vignettes depicting other significant personages of the period. The lower border of the panel

Panels (continued)

pictures the indigenous fauna and flora. The general design for the other two panels is the same.

The second panel continues the story through the formation of the two-party political system and the expansion of the nation in area, industry, commerce, and culture. It concludes with the depiction of the joining of East and West at Promontory Point in 1869. Central in the panel is the figure of the Tree of Liberty, symbolic of the fact that despite the turmoil and tragedy of the War Between the States, it continued to flourish.

The third panel shows in perspective the growth of science and invention in America. Depicted are the conflicts between industry and labor as the nation became industrialized, the great wars of the period, and the atomic bomb. The central allegorical figure is made up of the Griffin, the guardian of the riches of the universe—the elements earth, air, fire, and water--; and of Pegasus, symbolizing inspiration and imagination. Together, these two symbolize the fundamental components of science and invention. The lower portion of this panel depicts basic occupations, professions, and sports.

The continuity of history relates one panel to another as do their titles:

“A Goodly Heritage of the Host of Nations”

“One Nation, Under God, Indivisible.”

“God Grant New Knowledge by Tempered by Wisdom”

Mrs. Fraser’s artistic talents are not new at West Point. In 1951 she designed and sculpted the medal for the Sesquicentennial Celebration of the Academy; in 1957 she designed and sculpted the medal for the Thayer Award; and she assisted her husband in the final stages of the work on the General George S. Patton monument [formerly] located on Jefferson Road, immediately north of the Library

The New Top Ten List

Here are the top ten most circulated videos from our DVD collection (note that we had 6 titles tied for 10th place):

1. Glory
2. Scent of a Woman
3. Enemy at the Gates
4. Last of the Mohicans
5. Bowling for Columbine
6. Apocalypse Now
7. Taxi Driver
8. Band of Brothers
9. Tears of the Sun
10. A Clockwork Orange
10. Adaptation
10. Captain Corelli’s Mandolin
10. Gallipoli
10. Monster’s Ball
10. William Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet

These were the most popular single disk videos that were circulated. Another category of popularity is the multi disk sets that were checked out frequently and in this category we have 2 notable titles:

1. The World at War; the Definitive History of the Second World War
2. Stephen Hawking’s Universe

By Popular Demand

Several cadets have asked the library staff about having more Science Fiction titles and comedy videos represented in the collection. We will add more titles like this but it may take one or two months for the new titles to show up. In the meantime, the library has introduced a paperback book exchange now located on the north wall of the periodical room. This will be stocked with many science fiction and fantasy titles and will operate on a take one - bring one back system. Please let us know if this service works for you and keep making suggestions for improving service.



The Library Chair

There are times when everyday objects are viewed with a special attention that reveals qualities not otherwise appreciated. In anticipation of relocating to Jefferson Hall, we have been considering the qualities that give durability to certain pieces of furniture. When the present library opened in 1964, there were over 800 of these maple chairs on hand for the use of cadets. Because of the unique design, most of those chairs are still here undamaged by the faults that plague chairs of a more conventional design. The distinguishing feature that has given the chair its long life is the diagonal back post that prevents leaning back in the chair. Three horizontal pieces of wood form the chair arm, the seat support, and the stretcher connected to another diagonal front upright comprise a rectangular structure that is very strong, holding the chair together. The joinery is done with a mortise and tenon assembly held together with glue.

Manufacturing techniques have advanced the quality of adhesives to a point where some chairs being made today will withstand daily stress. Walk through the first floor reference room of the library and you will notice a number of chairs that look out of place. Most of these are chair designs that are being considered for Jefferson Hall. Look also in the periodical room for upholstered chairs that offer different designs and functionality. You may see some of these in Jefferson Hall in two years. Please take some time to consider these options, remembering that decisions made now will influence the library environment for years to come. Library staff would like to hear your comments on any of the pieces that are being considered.