

**The Association of Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy, 1869-1902:**

**The Healing Years**

**Submitted to  
Colonel Johnson  
and  
Captain Moten  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For LD 720  
USMA Tactical Officer Education Program  
West Point, New York**

**Captain David A. Pinder  
1 December 1993**

On 12 April 1861, General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, an 1838 United States Military Academy (USMA) graduate and former Superintendent of the Academy, fired upon Major Robert Anderson, an 1825 USMA graduate and Beauregard's former artillery instructor at the Academy, who was commanding Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. This event not only signified the beginning of the American Civil War, but it also symbolized the division that would occur throughout the country. West Point was not spared this division, as both cadets and graduates alike fought against each other during the war. In all, 299 graduates of West Point served in the Confederate armies.<sup>1</sup> Although the Civil War officially ended in April 1865, by 1869 Northern and Southern graduates remained divided. Postwar political reconstruction in the South, coupled with congressional legislation in 1866 prohibiting the commissioning of any former Confederate who held any military or civilian position in the Confederate States of America, greatly contributed to the animosity between the graduates.<sup>2</sup>

Several historians have given the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy credit for reuniting the Northern and Southern graduates of the Academy after the American Civil War. Sidney Forman, in his book, *West Point: A History of the United States Military Academy*, says that "the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy gave great impetus to bringing together the military officers of both sections."<sup>3</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, in his book, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point*, says that after the Association of Graduates was formed, ". . . Yankees and Rebels got together and talked of old times" at the annual meetings.<sup>4</sup> Even Thomas J. Fleming, in his book, *West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy*, says that an original motive for forming the Association of Graduates was "the wish to heal wounds and to preserve the spirit of Appomattox. . . ."<sup>5</sup> In analyzing the views of these historians, one must question whether they are correct in their assessment



of the role and influence of the Association of Graduates. Was the Association formed with the specific intent to reunite the Academy's Northern and Southern graduates after the Civil War and, if so, did the Association succeed in its charter? Walter Scott Dillard, in his dissertation, *The United States Military Academy, 1865-1900: The Uncertain Years*, disagrees with other historians who think so. He states that "the Association of Graduates must be discounted, therefore, as a significant force in the healing of the bitterness remaining after the Civil War between the loyal Union West Pointers and their Confederate counterparts."<sup>6</sup>

A close analysis will reveal that the Association was founded with its primary mission being one of reunification. From 1869-1902, the Association played a significant role in the reunification process by bringing both Northern and Southern graduates back to the Academy for annual reunions that promoted "social intercourse and fraternal fellowship." Throughout this period there were significant events that clearly illustrate the significant role the Association of Graduates played in healing the wounds caused by the Civil War.

Ironically, on 28 January 1869, Major Robert Anderson, in a letter to Sylvanus Thayer, recommended the formation of an Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy. Anderson wrote that the aim or purpose of the Association would be "to see what should be done to perfect and perpetuate this truly national institution, our venerable Alma Mater."<sup>7</sup> Anderson invited Thayer to preside over the first meeting of the proposed association, which was to be held on 22 February 1869 at the College of the City of New York. In his return letter to Anderson, Thayer, because of very poor health, declined the invitation but approved fully of the idea to form an association of graduates. Like Anderson, Thayer foresaw such an association playing a major part in making changes and improvements at the Academy. In fact, Thayer listed three propositions that the Association of Graduates should focus on to improve the Academy. First, he



recommended changing the method of appointment to West Point to a competitive exam. Second, Thayer recommended a permanent Board of Improvement, and third, he recommended an Inspector of Studies.<sup>8</sup>

From the language used in the correspondence between Robert Anderson and Sylvanus Thayer, both agreed that the object of an association of graduates should be to promote the welfare of the Academy. Fortunately, neither Anderson nor Thayer was able to attend the organizational meeting that took place in the office of Dr. Horace Webster, USMA Class of 1818 and President of the College of the City of New York on 22 February 1869. Present at the meeting were Dr. Webster, Alexander S. Webb (Class of 1855), Abraham Van Buren (Class of 1827), Francis Vinton (Class of 1830), and Thomas J. Leslie (Class of 1815). These five graduates saw a different object for the Association of Graduates than that proposed by Anderson and Thayer. Although no official minutes of this meeting exist, it appears that three significant outcomes resulted from this meeting.<sup>9</sup>

The first, and perhaps the most significant outcome of the meeting, was the Association's Constitution and By-Laws (see Appendix 1). Ignoring the original object of the Association posed by Anderson and Thayer, this document restricted the Association to a purely social role. Article II of the Constitution reads: "The object of this Association shall be to cherish the memories of our Alma Mater, and to promote the social intercourse and fraternal fellowship of its graduates."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Association's founding fathers envisioned both Northern and Southern graduates coming back to the Academy to renew old friendships torn apart by the Civil War. To insure that the object of the Association was enforced, the framers wrote Article IV of the Constitution to read: "Political, or any other discussions foreign to the purposes of the Association, as set forth in this Constitution, or any proceedings of such tendency, are declared inimical to the purposes of this



organization, and are prohibited."<sup>11</sup> With these official ground rules, the Association could begin its reunification effort.

The second significant outcome of the meeting was the decision to name Sylvanus Thayer as the first President of the Association, a position he would hold until his death in 1872. This is significant because Thayer, who was in severely bad health, would not be able to attend any annual meetings of the Association. Thayer's absence allowed Professor Charles Davies, the next senior member of the Association, to be unanimously elected permanent chairman of the Association and preside over five of the first six annual meetings.<sup>12</sup> Like Thayer, Robert Anderson also never attended a meeting of the Association because of his poor health. Anderson died on 26 October 1871, never having seen the fruits of his 1869 idea. Thus, in Thayer and Anderson's absence the Association could focus on its object.

The third significant outcome of the original meeting in 1869 was the decision to send letters to all living graduates of the Academy requesting their membership in the Association. As a result, the Secretary of the Association sent letters to all living graduates, North and South alike. Enclosed in each letter was a copy of the Association's Constitution and By-Laws. Interestingly enough, Northern and Southern graduates responded both positively and negatively to the Secretary's request. Southern graduates such as Simon B. Buckner (Class of 1844), William H. Chase (Class of 1815), and Moses H. Wright (Class of 1859) sent letters declining to join the Association. Buckner's response to the Association's Secretary, C. C. Parsons, dated 12 June, reflected the animosity



that still existed between the graduates in 1870. Buckner wrote:

These objects are as dear to me as they can be to any who have received its diploma. . . . Fraternal fellowship can exist only in the light of an acknowledged equality. This equality is denounced by the legislation of the central government which extends its fostering care to our class of graduates of our Alma Mater and at the same time prescribes the other. To mingle these two elements in an Association formed in the shadow of such legislation is, in my estimation, a recognition by those who consent to become its numbers, of the justice of such a marked discrimination and is, therefore, an acknowledgement of the inequality which renders agreeable social intercourse impossible.<sup>13</sup>

Other Southern graduates such as James Longstreet (Class of 1842), Benjamin S. Ewell (Class of 1832), William J. Hardee (Class of 1838), and Nathaniel R. Chambliss (Class of 1861) responded favorably to the Secretary's request. Ewell's letter to C. C. Parsons, dated 16 August 1869, perhaps best reflected the strong desire of the Academy's Southern graduates who wanted to reunite with their Northern comrades. He wrote:

With peculiar pleasure I received your communication of the 31st and beg you to inform the Executive Committee of the Association of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy that I rejoice to have the opportunity of becoming a member of it. I cannot think that any graduate of the Academy would, unless blinded by prejudices, decline to aid in the work of reuniting what was stated by the late Professor Bache to be the strongest general bond we knew; a bond broken asunder by civil discord and war.<sup>14</sup>

These two examples clearly illustrate that the Southern graduates generally possessed a strong desire to reunite the broken bond with their fellow graduates from the North. However, the principles of some Southern graduates, such as Simon B. Buckner, would not allow reunification to happen very easily. It was clear to Benjamin S. Ewell that the object of the Association was one of reunification, as the framers of the Association's Constitution had intended. Although this object was not the one envisioned by Robert Anderson and Sylvanus Thayer, it proved to be the right prescription to help significantly in



healing the wounds caused by the Civil War. The annual reunions of the Association facilitated the healing process.

The annual reunions of the Association of Graduates during the period of 1869 through 1902 were social gatherings. The reunions occurred once a year in June, usually in the Chapel at West Point, although four took place in the Academic Building and one in the Superintendent's office. The conduct of the annual meetings was very similar. Each usually began with a roll call of the members, followed by an address by the president of the Association or, in his absence, the presiding officer or another distinguished graduate. After the address, the secretary would read the necrology of graduates who had died since the last reunion. Then, the members would attend to a small amount of business, followed by the announcement of the following year's officers of the Association. The meeting would then be adjourned. Immediately following the meeting, the members would usually meet with the Superintendent. That evening, all members and guests would attend the annual dinner that took place in the West Point Hotel or later in the Cadet Mess Hall. During this period, the Association was a relatively poor organization, maintaining no more than \$2000 in its account from 1869 through 1892. In 1892, the Association's account increased by \$10,000 as a result of George W. Cullum's bequest.<sup>15</sup>

The Association's first annual reunion was held in the Chapel at West Point on 17 June 1870. Of the 128 paid members of the Association, only forty-three were present at the reunion. Only three of the 128 members were Southern graduates who had taken part in the Confederacy, and none of them attended the reunion. These first three Southern members were Ewell, Longstreet, and Chambliss. The first reunion was very significant because it opened the door for Southern graduates to return to the Academy. The organizational structure of the



Association, as designed by the framers of its Constitution, would be the impetus that opened the door.

The Association of Graduates' organizational structure consisted of only eight officers during this period. These officers were the president, secretary, treasurer, and an executive committee comprising five members. The president of the Association was merely an honorary position given to the senior living member of the Association. Old age and the illnesses that usually accompanied it prevented most of the presidents during this period from actively participating or playing a significant role in the Association. The executive committee made all preparations for each annual reunion. The committee was also responsible for transacting other business of the Association during the year between meetings. The president of the Association selected a chairman of the executive committee at each annual meeting. The treasurer was responsible for disbursing the cash of the Association upon the order of the executive committee, verified by the signature of the committee's chairman. The secretary was responsible for keeping records of all annual meetings, as well as the addresses and occupations of all of the Association's members.<sup>16</sup> Although no single position of the Association was very "powerful," perhaps the most influential was that of the presiding officer. He was the senior member of the Association present at the annual meetings where the president was absent or was present but unable to participate actively. The presiding officer chaired the annual meetings and made the opening speech at the meetings.

Professor Charles Davies (Class of 1815) was the presiding officer at the 1870 annual meeting. Davies, living in retirement in Fishkill-on-the-Hudson, had been a professor of mathematics at the Academy from 1816 to 1837 and later closed his career as professor of mathematics at Columbia University.<sup>17</sup> In his



opening address to the meeting, Davies made it clear that he saw the purpose of the Association to be exactly as it was written in the Constitution. Professor Davies said:

We meet to revive cherished memories, to strengthen friendships which can never die, and to renew, together, vows of perpetual allegiance to our country, which has educated us, and whose children we are. . . . Here are deposited the trophies of the sanguinary struggles of the Revolution, of the battles of the war of 1812, of the conquest of Mexico in 1847, and the more recent and more terrible conflict, whose fruits must be peace, fraternity, and national unity.<sup>18</sup>

As the presiding officer of the meeting, Professor Davies set the tone not only for the 1870 meeting, but also for many more that followed. He had made it clear that the purpose of the meetings was one of reunification after the perils of the Civil War had divided the Academy's graduates. Charles Davies would prove to be a significant force in the Association's reunification effort.

The annual reunion of 1872 was also significant because it was the first meeting to have present a Southern graduate who had joined the Confederacy. Of the seven Southern graduates who were now members of the Association in 1872, only Major Eugene McLean (Class of 1842), chief quartermaster to Generals J. E. Johnston, A. S. Johnston, and P. G. T. Beauregard during the Civil War, was present. McLean's presence at the meeting was symbolic because Northern and Southern graduates were now sitting together "cherishing the memories" of their Alma Mater and taking part in "social intercourse and fraternal fellowship." His bold initiative opened the door that would allow other Southern graduates in the years that followed not only to join the Association but also to attend its annual reunions. For a Southern graduate to be present at an annual reunion was especially significant because most of them lived in the far southern United States and did not have the funds to travel the long distance to the Academy.<sup>19</sup> At the alumni dinner that followed the 1872 meeting, Professor Albert



E. Church (Class of 1828) stood, raised his glass, and offered the following toast to his fellow members of the Association: to "Our Annual Reunion-may the time come soon when every living graduate will be with us in person and in spirit." This toast reflected the genuine desire of the members of the Association to reunite with all of their fellow graduates after the Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

As each year passed, the desire for reunification grew stronger. Several USMA graduates met in St. Louis on 20 June 1873 to draft an address urging all graduates of the Academy to join the Association of Graduates and to attend the June 1874 annual meeting at West Point. The address, authored by Richard C. Tilghman (Class of 1828), John H. Martindale (Class of 1835), and Robert M. Renick (Class of 1835) and signed by twenty-two other graduates, appeared in the 28 June 1873 issue of the *Army and Navy Journal* and read:

We, your fellow graduates, representing all sections of the United States, earnestly invite you to join us at the next annual meeting at the West Point Military Academy in June 1874. We will rekindle there the glow of our youthful patriotism; will clasp hands which waged civil war without personal acrimony or dishonor, and rejoice again over our common country strengthened and expanded by her recent discipline and struggles.<sup>21</sup>

Professor Davies was the presiding officer at all but one annual meeting of the Association prior to his death in 1876. At the annual meeting in 1874, Davies led a campaign to get all graduates back to West Point for the 1875 meeting. In fact, on 12 June 1874, the *New York Times* reported that at the annual meeting held on 11 June 1874, resolutions were "enthusiastically adopted" inviting both Northern and Southern graduates to the next annual meeting of the Association in 1875.<sup>22</sup> Professor Davies took a special interest in many Southern graduates by personally writing them letters of invitation to attend the meeting.<sup>23</sup> Because of Davies' efforts, the total number of Southern members of the Association rose to



twelve. Seven of the twelve members were present at the reunion in 1875. This was the greatest number of Southern graduates ever to attend a reunion up to that time. Attending were Francis H. Smith (Class of 1833), Robert Ransom (Class of 1850), James Longstreet (Class of 1842), Sewall L. Fremont (Class of 1841), Joseph R. Anderson (Class of 1836), Eugene McLean (Class of 1842) and Richard C. Tilghman (Class of 1828). As presiding officer at the meeting, Davies addressed the 112 members of the Association who were present. This was also the largest number of members ever to be assembled at an annual reunion in the history of the Association. Davies said:

The Association of Graduates of the Military Academy, at their last annual meeting, by a resolution passed unanimously, invited the graduates of all classes and of all sections of the country, to meet here today, to celebrate the centennial anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill. . . . In that spirit we have come here today, to bury within the circuit of these mountains all recollections which can separate us from each other, or from our common country. In that spirit, I bid you a cordial welcome and say to all, for each, and to each for all, that from this auspicious day, all the graduates of this Institution will recognize each other as friends. Henceforth and forever, we have one flag-one country-one destiny. . . . Having viewed our duties from different standpoints, we have been separated. Viewing them together, on this spot, and on this anniversary, we are united. We all agree that the allegiance of soldiers to their country is among the safeguards of a nation and the crowning glory of the military profession. It is our unshaken confidence in that allegiance, which enables us all to meet here today. It is because the nation shares that confidence, that it approve our doings and applaud our acts. It is because of this confidence that we have again met as brothers-that we turn our eyes to the past only for instruction, and our hearts to the future, full of hope, and full of joy. In the meeting of today, the country will realize, that if the stream of nationality which flows out of this institution, be occasionally interrupted by sandbars or dashed against the rocks, eddies will be formed, only temporarily; and that the whirling, dizzy waters will soon return to their deep and tranquil channel.<sup>24</sup>

Professor Davies' eloquent words sought to reunite the Academy's graduates.

Davies was so dedicated to this end that he had Francis H. Smith stay as his guest at his home while Smith was in town for the reunion. Smith later described



the visit to Davies' home and to West Point as "the bright hour in my existence." Talking specifically about the 1875 reunion, Smith stated "my comrades, I need not recall to you the emotion which that festive reunion awakened-the warmth of the reception extended to me-all the loving work of this dear old friend."<sup>25</sup> This atmosphere that Davies and the rest of the members of the Association created at the 1875 reunion nurtured the reunification process.

Unfortunately, Professor Charles Davies died in 1876. His efforts as an active member of the Association until his death were significant. He was a major force in helping to reunite the Northern and Southern graduates after the Civil War. Both in his words and in his actions, Davies ensured that the Association remained clearly focused on its object. However, with Davies gone, George W. Cullum (Class of 1833) took center stage.

Some historians have argued that the Association did not play a significant role in the reunification of the Academy's Northern and Southern graduates after the Civil War and that it may have hindered the reunification. The main reason, they argue, is because of General George W. Cullum's strong influence in the Association and his repugnance for Southern graduates who joined the Confederacy. Dillard says that Cullum had a "fierce hatred of those graduates who had served in the Confederacy. . . ." <sup>26</sup> Historians have exaggerated Cullum's influence in the Association and his antipathy toward Southern graduates. As the chairman of the executive committee from 1878 to 1891, Cullum was perhaps the most influential member of the Association of that time. However, this influence was small. The records of the Association rarely show anyone having much influence in this organization.

Cullum's biographical registers from 1861, 1879, and 1891, clearly suggest that he disapproved of Southern graduates "taking up arms against the flag under which they were educated."<sup>27</sup> His disapproval is further supported by