

JAMES WILLIAM KERSHNER proudly served his country in the U.S. Army as a 1st Lieutenant in Vietnam. He was a platoon leader with A Troop, 4/12th Cavalry, 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division. During his time in the military, he received several medals, including the Army Presidential Unit Citation, the Vietnam Armed Forces Gallantry Cross, the Army Commendation Ribbon, the National Defense Ribbon, the Vietnam Service Ribbon, and the Vietnam Campaign Ribbon.

Dr. Kershner received his BA, MA, and PhD from West Virginia University and a BA in Accounting and Business Administration from the University of Maryland.

Lt. James W. Kershner was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. He is loved and missed by his daughters and grandchildren.

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive free, confidential support and crisis intervention available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Dial 988 then Press 1, text 838255, or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

JON C. MALINOWSKI is professor of geography at the United States Military Academy, where he has taught since 1995. An expert on West Point's history, he is the author of *The West Point Landscape, 1802-1860* (West Point Press 2024), as well as several academic and trade publications on the history of the Academy.



Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

“ In tracing Thayer’s relentless pursuit of excellence, discipline, and honor, Kershner and Malinowski draw us into an enduring dialogue between past and present, revealing how one citizen’s devotion can shape a nation’s future. Every cadet who marches across the Plain today follows in Thayer’s footsteps. Told with both rigor and grace, Thayer’s story is not just history—it’s a guide for today, proof that ‘Duty, Honor, Country’ remains a living imperative in the American experiment. ”

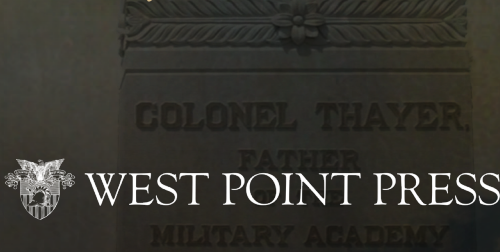
— **KEN BURNS**
Filmmaker

“ Sylvanus Thayer set the standard of excellence for all future Superintendents of this hallowed institution. This definitive biography of the ‘Father of the Military Academy’ provides insight into West Point’s rich history and tradition, and the way Thayer’s leadership laid the foundation for how the United States Military Academy develops our Nation’s leaders of character today. ”

— **LIEUTENANT GENERAL STEVEN W. GILLAND**
61st Superintendent of the US Military Academy

“ For many years, James Kershner’s 1976 doctoral dissertation was the finest biography of Sylvanus Thayer ever written. With some much-needed updating and gentle editing, Dr. Jon C. Malinowski, Professor of Geography at West Point and an expert in West Point history, has enhanced the manuscript significantly, creating a masterful biography of Superintendent Thayer—a leading figure in 19th-century education and engineering—that will stand the test of time. ”

— **BRIGADIER GENERAL (RETIRED) LANCE BETROS**
Author of Carved from Granite: West Point Since 1902



KERSHNER

Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

S. Thayer

Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

JAMES WILLIAM KERSHNER

Edited and Updated by Jon C. Malinowski, PhD

Sylvanus Thayer is best remembered as the “Father of the Military Academy,” but for twenty-six years he was also an active military engineer in charge of the construction of fortifications in Boston Harbor and other works in New England. After his retirement from active duty, he endowed two New England schools, the Thayer School of Civil Engineering at Dartmouth College and the Thayer Academy in Braintree, Massachusetts. Many thought he appeared stiff, formal, and pedantic, but these surface characteristics obscured other qualities. He was highly intelligent and thoughtful. When he made friends, they were often for life. He was an excellent administrator, as shown by his work at West Point. His achievements at both the United States Military Academy and later at Dartmouth make him an important figure in American history.

This updated biography of Sylvanus Thayer provides a chronological look at his life, with particular emphasis given to people and influences that shaped him, as well as to his professional accomplishments. Ultimately, this book aims to place Thayer in proper historical context to show his importance as both an engineer and educator in a formative era of American history.

