Sylvanus Thayer:
A Biography

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Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

JAMES WILLIAM KERSHNER

Edited and Updated by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

WEST POINT PRESS

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Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography

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FOREWORD

As a proud alumnus of West Point (Class of 1969, "Best of the Line!"), I was, of course, familiar with Sylvanus Thayer's importance to USMA during its early years, as evidenced by his designation as the "Father of the Military Academy." However, I did not fully appreciate Thayer's impact as an engineer, educator, and philanthropist at a formative time in the history of the United States until two of my sons attended Dartmouth, where the School of Engineering bears Thayer's name. In trying to learn more about his contributions and accomplishments following his tenure at West Point, however, I was shocked to find there were no widely available biographies of the man who also could be heralded as the "Father of Technical Education" in the United States of America.

Countless high school students, cadets, postgraduates, engineers, and educators—and, through them, the United States as a whole—have been dramatically impacted by the life and work of Sylvanus Thayer. Thayer's steadfastness in "pursuing the harder right rather than the easier wrong" is a timeless lesson for all generations and an example worth emulating, and his legacy of service and science should inspire today's leaders as they prepare to face tomorrow's challenges.

Dr. Malinowski has done a superb job supplementing Dr. Kershner's original research to create a compelling portrait of a man whose profound influence on the literal building of America has gone unrecognized for far too long. I can think of no more fitting publisher for this work than the West Point Press, whose goal is to extend West Point's mission, influence, and long history of providing intellectual capital to the U.S. Army and the nation.

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As a member of the Long Gray Line and someone who has a deep love and appreciation for this country, I am honored to have played a small part in bringing this important project to fruition. I hope you will find it as informative and inspirational as I do.

Anthony L. Guerrerio
USMA Class of 1969

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

James Kershner's 1976 doctoral dissertation for West Virginia University, reprinted here, remains the best biography of Sylvanus[1] Thayer ever written. From Thayer's birth just miles from the birthplace of John Adams in Braintree, Massachusetts, Kershner follows the major milestones of the General's life, pausing on the pivotal years of his superintendency at West Point, to help the reader understand why a son of New England is best remembered as the "Father of the Military Academy." Beginning with Thayer's upbringing in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Kershner highlights how the future general's educational journey intertwines with military service, creating a powerful combination that forever changes the young United States Military Academy (USMA) and, through its graduates, the country. Beyond the Hudson Highlands of New York, Kershner follows Thayer's travels across Europe, details his meticulous improvements to America's coastal defenses, and remembers the generous philanthropy that produced two thriving educational institutions beyond West Point. As milestones pass, Thayer becomes more than the statue of white stone on the grounds of his beloved Academy. The reader meets Thayer the traveler, Thayer the friend, Thayer the administrator, and Thayer the frail.

Kershner's work is well-researched and thorough while avoiding falsely elevating Thayer to mythical status. In editing his work for a wider audience, I have tried to respect Kershner's original research and editorial choices where possible. In nearly all cases, his sources remain the best available and the scholarship is still

1. Pronounced *sil-VAY-nus* according to nineteenth century guides. —Ed.

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sound. However, significant Academy histories by George Pappas and Theodore Crackel, published after 1976, as well my own research, prompted minor changes in context, chronology, and biography. In such instances, or where I disagree with Kershner, I have either made changes to the text or added a footnote. As an example, Kershner included an oft-repeated claim that the Academy's first professor, mathematician George Baron, taught at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, England. Crackel's scholarship disproves this. Further, in places, I have extended quotations to give the reader more context but, in all cases, misspellings in quotes have been left unchanged except where, in consulting handwritten original documents, I felt the transcribers had erred. Footnotes have also been added to clarify events, individuals, and terms that may not be familiar to all readers. In addition, minor revisions to grammar and spelling have been made in accordance with the guidelines of West Point Press and the 18th Edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. These edits, however, leave the substance of Kershner's original work untouched, preserving his voice and vision throughout. While other scholars might choose either to linger longer or pass more quickly over aspects of USMA history—such as national debates over the need for an academy or the nature of Superintendent Alden Partridge's conflict with Thayer—Kershner's goal was expressly focused on the life of USMA's most important early leader, not on the history of the Academy.

What is fundamentally new in this volume compared to the original, or to the 1982 "Dissertations in American Biography" reprint by the Arno Press, are the photos, illustrations, and maps. In early 2025, I traveled to Massachusetts and New Hampshire to confirm Kershner's scholarship and to take photos of historical objects, documents, and locations. In addition, the West Point Museum graciously allowed me to photograph Thayer's swords, coat, and other items. In glimpses, readers can now walk where Thayer walked and see faces and objects that were meaningful to him. To complete this new edition, I have added a reflective epilogue about Thayer's

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life and the places he lived, written through the lens of a cultural geographer. I also discuss new aspects of Thayer's legacy, particularly his connection with the Thayer Method of teaching that has received significant attention since the 1980s.

As mentioned above, Kershner's dissertation remains the best biography of Thayer. I am proud to edit and update this important work and to help bring Thayer's story to a new generation of readers. Although James Kershner was not a graduate of West Point, his portrait of Sylvanus Thayer is a gift to the Long Gray Line and all who love the Academy. It remains an indispensable contribution to both USMA and American histories.

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AUTHOR'S 1976 INTRODUCTION

Sylvanus Thayer is best remembered as the "Father of the United States 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[1] and the Thayer Academy in Braintree, Massachusetts. He appeared to many to be stiff, formal, and pedantic, but these surface characteristics obscured some other aspects. He was highly intelligent and thoughtful. When he made friends, they were often his for life. He was an excellent administrator, as shown by his work at West Point. It was his work there, and later at Dartmouth, that makes him an important figure in American history. In spite of his accomplishments, no comprehensive biography has previously been written.

Although two books have been written about him, neither is scholarly, objective, or very accurate. George Fielding Eliot's *Sylvanus Thayer of West Point* (1959) is a highly fictionalized account for juvenile readers. Norman Robert Ford's *Thayer of West Point* (1953) contains much misinformation. Therefore, the need for a factual biography of Thayer existed.

The purpose of this work is to place Thayer in proper historical perspective in order to show his importance as an engineer and educator. This biography is a chronological look at Thayer's entire life. Particular emphasis is given to the men and influences that shaped him as well as to his professional accomplishments. Since

1. Since 1941, the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth.—Ed.

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Thayer is most often associated with the Military Academy, a great deal of attention is given to his sixteen years as Superintendent of West Point, but his earlier life and later career are not overlooked. His work as an engineer and his involvement in the founding of the Thayer School of Engineering are examined in detail. A post-mortem look at Thayer's life and work brings one to the conclusion that, as a result of his achievements in the area of education, Thayer is a major figure in American history.

One problem in writing about Sylvanus Thayer is that few personal letters exist today. After his death, his niece, Miss Livia Abigail Wild, destroyed many of his papers and letters. A small trunkful of letters was found in 1927 and given to the Military Academy, and a packet of Thayer's letters was discovered in the 1920s under the flooring in the Superintendent's Quarters. There are no letters from his parents and only a few from his sisters. This creates an unfortunate gap in our knowledge of Thayer's past that can never be filled.

One great help to the scholar interested in writing about Thayer is *The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808–1872* (1965) compiled and edited by Cindy Adams and J. Thomas Russel, with the assistance of Fay Yankolonis, James Pearson, and others. These transcriptions of the modest collection of letters and papers mentioned above were assembled mainly from the files of the West Point Association of Graduates, the United States Military Archives, and manuscript collections in the Academy library. The *Thayer Papers* also contain many important facsimile additions from the National Archives. Anyone interested in studying Thayer must begin with these papers. Copies are located at West Point, at the Thayer Public Library in Braintree, and at the Library of Congress.[2] Without the *Thayer Papers*, it would have been impossible to write this dissertation, and I owe a large debt to the editors.

2. The *Thayer Papers* are available online through the USMA Library Digital Collection at https://usmalibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/.—Ed.

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Sylvanus Thayer:
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I

Youth and Education

In the summer of 1815, a young American Army officer stood on the deck of the frigate USS *Congress*. He was tall for his day, between five feet ten inches and six feet in height, with a face more dignified than handsome: dark hair, sallow complexion, high forehead, dark hazel eyes, a strong nose, and a firm, sensitive mouth.[1] His appearance and bearing conveyed an overall impression of pride, strength, and authority.

His uniform would have seemed strange to the sailors who served aboard the *Congress*. American military uniforms at that time, and indeed for many years after, were more distinctive than practical, with comfort being relatively unimportant. His hat was high and bell-shaped, of the Napoleonic variety, worn with a plume.

1. Thayer's passport, dated April 22, 1815, describes him as 5'10" with a "sallow" complexion, dark hair, dark hazel eyes, and a scar on his right ankle. It lists his age as twenty-six years, or "thereabout," but he was twenty-nine at the time. Kershner's description of Thayer as being five feet ten inches to six feet tall, as well as his other descriptors, may come from details on a December 1843 passport, which adds an inch to his height (five feet eleven inches) and notes his eyes, and hair, as gray. The passports are included in *The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808–1872*, edited by Cindy Adams (West Point Association of Graduates, 1965), hereafter referred to as the *Thayer Papers*.—Ed.

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His dark blue jacket had a high black velvet collar, indented cuffs, and yellow metal buttons bearing the engineer motto, "Essayons." His collar was ornamented with a gold star encircled with a sprig of laurel. His two epaulettes denoted a field grade officer, if only by brevet.[2] Insignia of rank were not very important at the time because the American Army was so small that most officers knew each other by sight. White cotton trousers and dark boots completed his military uniform.[3]

The young officer was Brevet Major Sylvanus Thayer, United States Army Corps of Engineers. With friend and fellow engineer Brevet Colonel William McRee, he was on his way to Europe for two years of work, study, and perhaps adventure.[4] Thayer hoped to see his longtime idol, Napoleon. As a youth, Thayer had been fascinated with the dashing French soldier who became emperor of the French. Thayer had read avidly of each campaign of Napoleon and knew by heart many of the earlier campaigns. In February 1815, while Thayer was planning his visit to the continent, Napoleon escaped from exile on the island of Elba and was once again terrorizing Europe. Thayer never realized this great opportunity to see Napoleon in action, possibly in victory; while he was still at sea, the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon near the city of Waterloo in Belgium.[5]

2. Receiving a brevet rank in the military refers to the conferring of a title of a higher rank as a reward or in recognition of potential that does not always include the pay or full privileges of that rank. In short, it is an honorary promotion. As an example, Thayer was a captain from 1813–1828, but was a brevet major after 1815 and a brevet lieutenant colonel after 1823. Each honorary promotion was for distinguished and meritorious service.

3. The uniform description is based on a memo from John M. Dervan, Assistant Curator, U.S. Army Engineer Museum, Fort Belvoir, VA, July 30, 1974, to Lenore Fine, Historical Division, Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore, MD.

4. This trip to Europe is discussed at length in Chapter IV.—Ed.

5. George Ticknor to George W. Cullum, May 29, 1864, an undated manuscript by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*; George W. Cullum, *Biographical Sketch of Brigadier-General Sylvanus Thayer, Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, July 28, 1817 to July 1, 1833* (New York: A. G. Sherwood and Company, 1883), 31. [This *Sketch* is a transcript of Cullum's speech at the dedication of the Thayer Monument at West Point in June 1883. It is a short, adulatory summary of Thayer's life and mostly focuses on his years as Superintendent.—Ed.]

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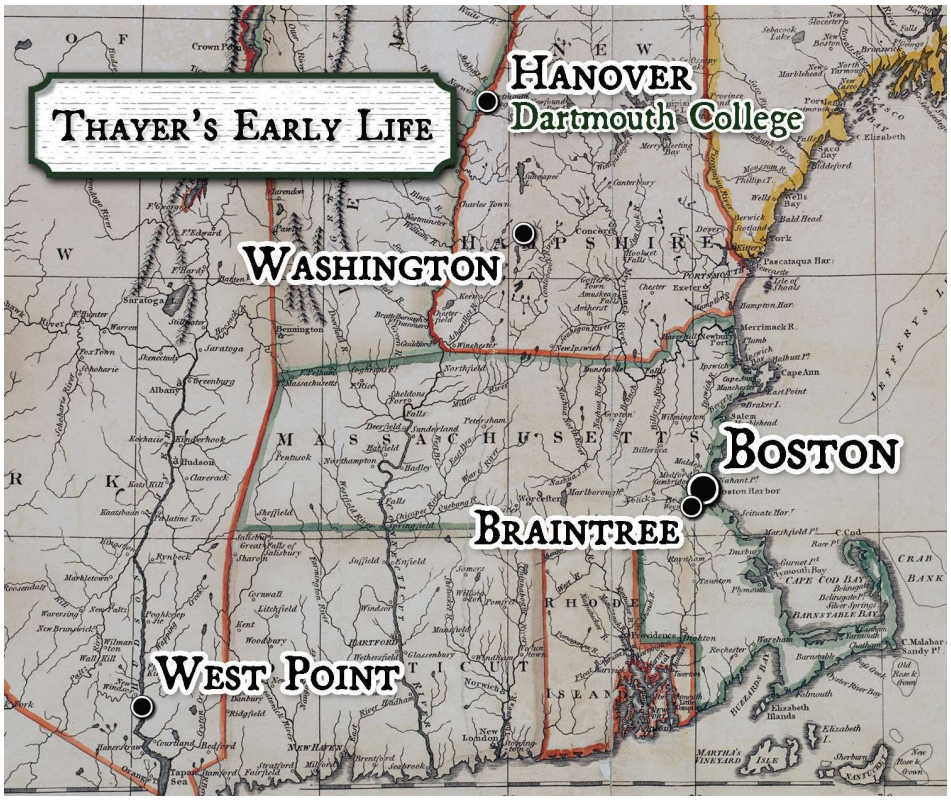
Despite Thayer's lost opportunity to report on a Napoleonic battle, his visit to Europe would have considerable reverberations that would impact American history and military policy. What he saw and learned in Europe would refine his own ideas on military training, ideas that would guide and shape the infant Military Academy at West Point, New York. Sylvanus Thayer would become known as an educator, not a warrior; as a builder, not a destroyer; as the man who earned the appellation, "The Father of the United States Military Academy."



Thayer spent his first twenty-three years in four locations: Braintree, Massachusetts; Washington and Hanover, New Hampshire; and West Point, New York. (Map by Editor. Basemap: Map of the northern, or New England states of America, Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center, Boston Public Library, 1795.)

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To learn something of Thayer's heritage, it is necessary to go back to colonial America. His ancestors were early settlers in Massachusetts, a colony founded by influential Puritan gentry and merchants who formed the Massachusetts Bay Company. Dissatisfied with the king and repression in England, the Puritans departed for new lands and created a religious commonwealth in the wilderness. Under the leadership of John Winthrop, a group of colonists sailed to America in 1630. They founded Boston and several adjacent towns, one of them being Braintree, where the Thayers later settled.[6]

Richard Thayer, from whom Sylvanus Thayer is descended, emigrated from the parish of Thornbury in Gloucestershire, England.[7] A Puritan and a freeman,[8] he came to Braintree in 1640 and lived there with his wife, Dorothy, and their children until his death in 1695.[9]

Sylvanus's father, Nathaniel, born on April 11, 1752, to Caleb and Abigail Faxon Thayer, was the great-grandson of Richard Thayer. On November 28, 1776, Nathaniel Thayer married his cousin Dorcas Faxon, the daughter of Azariah and Dorcas

6. Curtis P. Nettels, *The Roots of American Civilization; A History of American Colonial Life*, 2nd. ed. (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 119–120.
7. About twelve miles north of the city of Bristol.—Ed.
8. Puritans were Protestants who believed the English Reformation had not done enough to rid elements of Catholicism from the Church of England. To be a freeman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony required being a church member and taking an oath to the civil government.—Ed.
9. Bezaleel Thayer, *Memorial of the Thayer Name, From the Massachusetts Colony of Weymouth and Braintree, Embracing Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of Richard and Thomas Thayer, and Their Descendants, From 1036 to 1874* (Oswego, NY: R. J. Oliphant, 1874), 7; Mrs. Albert Hastings Pitkin, *Thayer Ancestry. Supplement to the "Family Memorial of the Early Settlers of New England" in the Line of Col. Abraham Thayer, His Ancestors and Descendants* (Hartford, CT: n.p., 1890), 43; Stacy Baxter Southworth, "General Sylvanus Thayer," in *A Brief History of the Town of Braintree in Massachusetts, 1640–1940 by the Braintree Tercentenary Committee*, ed. Marion Sophia Arnold (Thomas Todd Company, 1940), 43; John Adams Vinton, *Genealogical Sketches of the Descendants of John Vinton of Lynn, 1648: and of Several Allied Families . . . with an Appendix Containing a History of the Braintree Iron Works, and Other Historical Matter* (Boston: S. K. Whipple and Company, 1858), 87.

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Penniman Faxon.[10] This was a period of great turmoil in America. The struggle against Great Britain was more than a year old, and the Continental Congress had changed the character of the war from a colonial revolt demanding the redress of grievances to a full-scale struggle for independent status. Three months earlier, George Washington's tired and tattered soldiers were forced out of New York and across the Hudson into New Jersey. Despite the Revolution, everyday life in Braintree continued.[11]

Nathaniel Thayer was a housewright, or builder, of wooden houses and, like many Americans of the time, a farmer. At the time of his marriage, he was a successful, but not wealthy, man. He and his bride lived in a wooden house built by his grandfather and namesake. Their family, the seventh generation from Richard Thayer, quickly grew, and in all they had seven children who lived and at least two who died at birth or soon after. This was not an exceptionally large family, and the extra hands were always welcome in the field and kitchen. Sylvanus, the fifth child and youngest son, was for many years coddled by his mother and older sisters. The names and birthdays of the Thayer children were Dorcas, born April 2, 1778; Mehitable,[12] born July 7, 1780; Nathaniel, born November 25, 1781; Lue Maria, born September 16, 1783; Sylvanus,[13] born June 9, 1785; Abigail, born March 17, 1791; and Livia Drusilla, born February 20, 1793.[14]

10. Nathaniel and Dorcas shared the same grandparents, Richard Faxon (1686–1768) and Hannah Beckett Faxon (1687–1769).—Ed.
11. George L. Faxon, *The History of the Faxon Family, Containing a Genealogy of the Descendants of Thomas Faxon of Braintree, Mass. . . . and others* (Springfield, MA.: Springfield Printing Company, 1880), 124.
12. Typically, a female name. From Mehetabel in the Old Testament (Genesis 36:39).—Ed.
13. Sylvanus, or Silvanus, was a rural Roman god of forests and agriculture (or uncultivated fields). Related to the English word "sylvan," meaning "wooded," " pastoral," or "related to the forest." Some translations of the Bible, including the King James Version (KJV), substitute "Silvanus" for "Silas," as in 1 Thess. 1:1. The name "Silvanus" appears four times in the KJV.—Ed.
14. B. Thayer, *Thayer Memorial*, 81; Pitkin, *Thayer Ancestry Supplement*, 46; Faxon, *Faxon Family*, 124–128.

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When the War for Independence began, many men left their jobs and farms to join local militias. Thayer's father and uncles fought in the Revolution on the side of the Continentals. The name "Nathaniel Thayer" appears on the rolls of a company of Minutemen raised under the command of Captain John Vinton in Colonel Benjamin Lincoln's regiment, which assembled on April 29, 1775, and served for three days during the Lexington and Concord disturbances.[15]

Sylvanus's maternal uncles, Azariah, Francis, and John Faxon, saw more extensive service. Azariah Faxon served in a grenadier company with Captain Vinton of Colonel Benjamin Lincoln's regiment during the Lexington alarm;[16] with the company of his excellency Governor John Hancock, for the defense of Castle and Governor's Islands in Boston Harbor; and later with Captain Moses French's company in Colonel Palmer's regiment, which assembled at Braintree in March 1776. Francis Faxon served for about three years in various companies. He was a drummer in Captain Ebenezer Thayer's company and in Captain Stephen Penniman's company in Colonel Dyke's regiment in 1776 and later served with his excellency John Hancock and under Captain John Cushing. After the war, Francis and Azariah moved to Washington, New Hampshire, where other members of the Faxon family lived. John Faxon, who also served for about three years with his brother Francis as a musician and private soldier, returned to Rhode Island when the war ended, but he often visited his brothers in New Hampshire.[17]

Before the Revolution, Braintree had been prosperous and growing, but the town's economy suffered as increasing numbers of farmers and fishermen went off to join the fighting. Shipbuilding and related industries were hampered by the war. Large sums of money were spent for soldiers' pay, and the town went deeply in

15. William S. Pattee, *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy, with a Sketch of Randolph and Holbrook* (Quincy, MA: Green and Prescott, 1878), 405; Nathaniel's Find a Grave® page (Memorial ID 29863983) lists his rank as private.—Ed.
16. Beginning April 19, 1775. Considered the start of the Revolutionary War.—Ed.
17. Pattee, *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy*, 408, 410, 412; Faxon, *The History of the Faxon Family*, 123–126.

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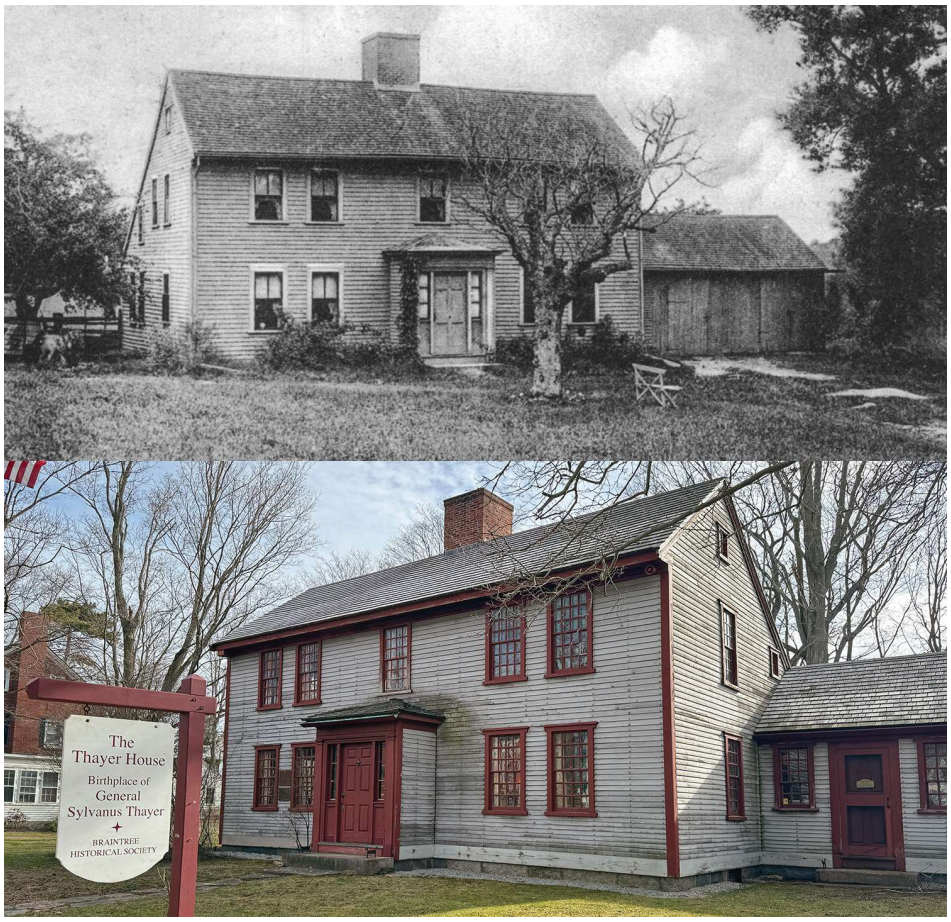
debt. When peace came, Braintree faced a long economic recovery. The general state of affairs the year Sylvanus was born can be described as a postwar recession combined with inflation. The next year saw the outbreak of Daniel Shays' short-lived debtors' rebellion, supported, at least vocally, by many of the residents of Braintree.[18]



Thayer's boyhood home in Braintree, Massachusetts, was built in 1720 by his great-grandfather. At top is the house in its original location as it looked in a 1910 postcard. Below is the house in 2025 in a new location on Washington Street. It was moved in the 1950s. (Photo and postcard courtesy of the Editor.)

18. Barton, "Braintree Historical Sketch," *Brief History of Braintree*, 21–24.

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Although Sylvanus grew up during an uncertain and critical period of American history, his early childhood was uneventful and ordinary. Like other farm children, he did his share of the chores and learned the fundamentals of reading and writing. As a boy, Sylvanus exhibited a strong retentive memory, a power of the mind that he shared with his older brother Nathaniel. On one occasion, Sylvanus's father chided him for apparent inattention in church. The youth astonished his family by stating the minister's text, repeating substantially the entire sermon, and giving the numbers and names of the hymns sung. Yet in spite of this amazing faculty, he was an indifferent scholar.[19]

This lack of interest in scholarship was to change after 1793, when Azariah Faxon wrote his sister Dorcas Thayer after the birth of her seventh child urging her to send her youngest son, Sylvanus, to help him in his store. In return, he would provide food, clothing, and lodging, as well as see that the boy continued his education. The Thayers considered this an advantageous arrangement for Sylvanus. Their rocky farmland was not very productive, and Azariah's offer would ease their financial burden. Moreover, Sylvanus would be learning a useful trade that might prove an exciting change for him. Thus, at about the age of nine, Sylvanus left his family in Braintree and went to live with Uncle Azariah Faxon in Washington, New Hampshire.[20] Although young Thayer worked hard in the store, he was also encouraged to study by Azariah, who had been a schoolmaster. Sometime during his stay in New Hampshire, Thayer became fascinated with stories he heard about a young soldier in France, Napoleon Bonaparte. Soon he wanted to know about military life and military education, and he developed an interest in education in general that was to last throughout his life.[21]

19. Jonathan Moulton to George W. Cullum, October 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
20. Washington, New Hampshire, incorporated in 1776, is now in Sullivan County.—Ed.
21. Robert Fletcher to George W. Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*; Ernest Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod: The West Point Tradition in American Life* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940), 11–12; Southworth, *Brief History of Braintree*, 43.

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At about age nine, Sylvanus was sent to live with his Uncle Azariah and family in this house in Washington, New Hampshire. The house, of Georgian design, is believed to have been built by Azariah in about 1790. Thayer helped out in a family store nearby. (Photo by Editor.)

According to family stories, two others influenced the adolescent Sylvanus, one a military man, the other a scholar. General Benjamin Pierce, the Revolutionary War hero, father of the fourteenth president, and later governor of New Hampshire,[22] lived near the Faxon store and visited it on occasion. During these visits he became acquainted with Sylvanus. The exact amount of influence General Pierce had over Sylvanus is unknown, but later Thayer's close friend George W. Cullum said that Thayer was the protégé of the general. Perhaps it was General Pierce who interested Thayer in a military career and helped him get an appointment to the Military Academy. For lack of documentation, these questions must remain unanswered. The other man who influenced Thayer was his uncle John Faxon, who visited his two brothers in Washington

22. Pierce, a Democratic-Republican, was governor from 1827 to 1828 and 1829 to 1830.—Ed.

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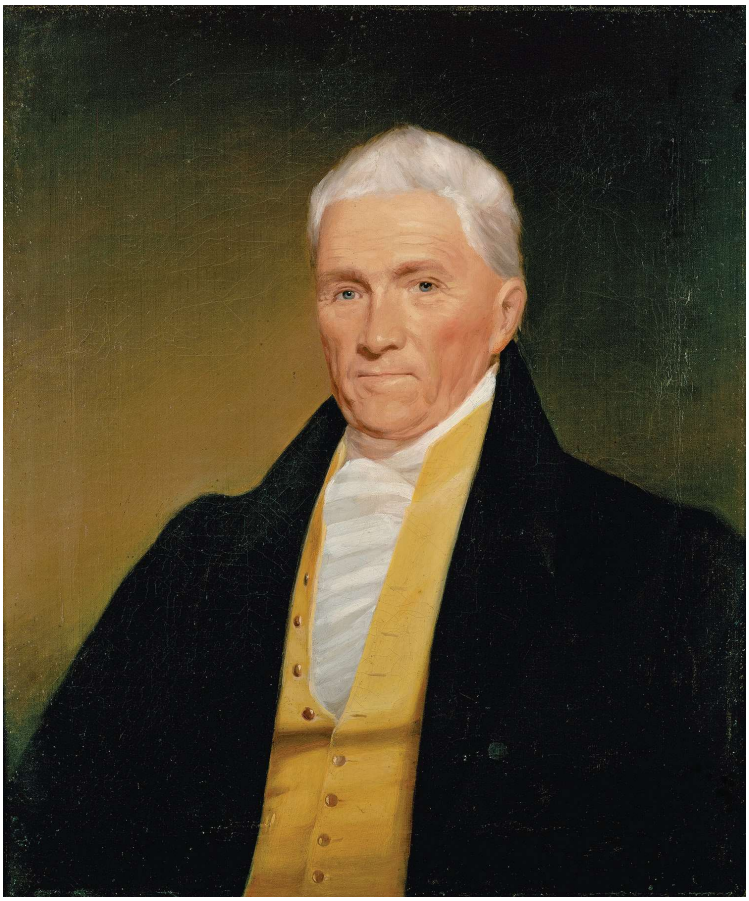
regularly. A graduate of Brown University, he practiced law and medicine and was a fine scholar. As a result of conversations with John, Sylvanus was inspired with some scholarly ambition, and he broadened his studies to include Latin grammar, Pikes' arithmetic, and some algebra. All the while, he continued working at Azariah's store.[23]



General Benjamin Pierce (1757–1839) was one of Thayer's boyhood mentors in New Hampshire. A veteran of the Revolution, he was twice governor of New Hampshire and was the father of President Franklin Pierce. (Portrait by Henry Willard, c.1830. New Hampshire Historical Society.)

23. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, an undated manuscript by Cullum, *Thayer Papers*; Dupuy, *Where They Have Trod*, 12–14; Faxon, *Faxon Family*, 126.

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Thayer's life was almost cut short when he suffered an attack of cholera morbus[24] in 1799, the same year that George Washington died. The great sorrow of the nation at Washington's death made a deep and lasting impression on Thayer. In his old age, he could still recall the Washington funeral orations he heard as a youth.[25]

In addition to pursuing his own studies, Thayer soon became involved in the education of others. In 1801, at the school in Washington, he taught basic arithmetic and other elementary courses to children not many years his junior. Unfortunately for us, his effectiveness as a teacher was never recorded, and he never mentioned whether or not he enjoyed this early academic experience.[26]

In the spring of 1802, Sylvanus, now a strapping young man of seventeen, returned to his parents' home in Braintree. During the summer, he helped his father on the farm; in the winter, he attended a local academy and learned a passable amount of Greek grammar. The next year, he returned to Washington and continued his studies in preparation for college. After discussion with his parents and Azariah, he decided to attend Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Having read the classics and acquired a fundamental background in algebra, geometry, and mathematics, Sylvanus passed the entrance examination and was admitted to Dartmouth in September 1803.[27]

Sylvanus's decision to enter Dartmouth showed how much he had come to value scholarship. Colleges in the nineteenth century did not occupy the same position they hold today. Although a college education was considered a distinct advantage, it was not essential to have a college degree to become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, or to join any of the other professions that might attract a young man of intelligence and initiative. Moreover, college

24. "Cholera morbus" was a term used to refer to a general gastrointestinal condition causing vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration. Thayer may or may not have had what is now called "cholera," an infection caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*.—Ed.
25. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
26. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
27. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.

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curricula had responded slowly to social change and the needs of the country; the early colleges were not yet knit into the fabric of American economic life. Higher education was more of a luxury than a necessity.[28]

Why Thayer selected Dartmouth over nearby Harvard, or Brown, John Faxon's alma mater, or another college is a cause for some speculation. The curriculum at Dartmouth, while attractive to Thayer, was not significantly different from that of other institutions. At the core of the curriculum were classical languages and literature; there were also classes in English grammar, higher mathematics and natural philosophy, chemistry, rhetoric, geography, logic, and ethics. Some schools also had instruction in astronomy, navigation, and surveying. Scientific instruction at Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale was very similar—none the first year; geography and elementary mathematics for sophomores (Brown postponed these subjects until the junior year); advanced mathematics and natural philosophy for juniors; and a general review for seniors, except at Dartmouth, which introduced chemistry and natural history in the final year. Therefore, Sylvanus could have obtained almost identical instruction by attending any of the four schools.[29]

Nor could tuition costs have been a major factor in his decision. At the time of his enrollment, the tuition at Brown and Dartmouth

28. Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (Columbia University Press for the Commission on Financing Higher Education, 1952), 21.

29. Richard G. Boone, *Education in the United States: Its History from the Earliest Settlements* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889; reprint ed., Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 160, 162; Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University*, 1764–1914 (Brown University, 1914), 102–106; Sanborn C. Brown and Leonard M. Rieser, *Natural Philosophy at Dartmouth: From Surveyors' Chains to the Pressure of Light* (University Press of New England. 1974), 1; Joshua L. Chamberlain, ed., *Yale University: Its History, Influence, Equipment and Characteristics, with Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Founders, Benefactors, Officers and Alumni* (R. Herndon Company, 1900), 77, 119; Theodore Hornberger, *Scientific Thought in the American Colleges, 1638–1800* (University of Texas Press, 1945), 28; Leon Burr Richardson, *History of Dartmouth College*, 2 vols. (Dartmouth College Publications, 1932), I, 248; Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: John Owen, 1840), I, 279–281.

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was about the same, sixteen dollars per year. Harvard had a similar charge. In the early nineteenth century, Yale had a policy of furnishing free tuition to deserving students with financial difficulties. One factor that may have influenced Thayer's decision was the low cost of living at Dartmouth. Because of the economics of the time, Hanover was a less expensive place to live than New Haven or Cambridge.[30]

The most logical and obvious reason for Thayer's selection of Dartmouth likely has to do with its location. While it was true that Harvard was very close to his parents' home in Braintree, Dartmouth was only about forty miles from Azariah's store in Washington.[31] An added inducement to selecting Dartmouth was that Sylvanus would be able to teach elementary school in Washington during vacations to help pay expenses.[32]

In September 1803, Thayer was off to join Dartmouth's freshman class. Like students of all eras, Thayer found college a strange and exciting place. For the first time, he was truly on his own, with no parents or uncle to advise or admonish him. He quickly adapted to college life and made many friends, several for life. His serious and somewhat mature attitude and his diligence helped him achieve academic recognition, his first award coming in his sophomore year when he received the second honor in his class and was selected to make the Greek oration.[33]

Room rentals at Dartmouth were quite low, ranging from nine to eighteen dollars per year in the building owned by the college. Most of the students preferred to live off-campus in the still less

30. Bronson, *Brown University*, 175–176; John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636–1968* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 38; Chamberlain, *Yale University*, 35.
31. As the crow flies, the Faxon House was thirty-seven miles (sixty kilometers) from Dartmouth. Roads were few in 1803, so young Sylvanus may have gone west toward the Connecticut River overland, perhaps to Walpole or Claremont where stage routes were available, and then north by stage. The trip may have even required an overnight stay.—Ed.
32. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.
33. Fletcher to Cullum, September 21, 1872, *Thayer Papers*.

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expensive private accommodations, where they could escape a little of the strict supervision of the school. When the college was unable to fill all its rooms, the students were assessed for the vacancies. During Thayer's first two years at Dartmouth, the college offered no board, but in 1805 a group of students petitioned to establish a "commons." Among the many signers were Sylvanus Thayer and his close friend Richard Fletcher. The commons was established with Ebenezer Woodward as steward. Woodward was to supply the food to the students at actual cost, but not to exceed $1.34 per week per student. The cost to Thayer and the others who ate there averaged $1.20 per week.[34]

Many students found even the moderate financial demands of tuition, room, and board difficult to meet. The Dartmouth trustees, aware that teaching was the most popular method for young college students to earn expenses, arranged the college schedule to accommodate this situation. The fall semester extended from October 1 through the end of December and was followed by an eight-week vacation. The winter semester began at the end of February and continued until the end of May. After a two-week vacation, the summer session began and lasted until commencement in late August. It was not necessary to attend all three terms. The student thus had ample "vacation time" to work. If truly needy, a student could take more time without fear of recrimination. The student was supposed to make up the work missed, but no penalty was levied against him if he did not.[35]

The scholastic requirements for admission reflected the classical emphasis of the curriculum. According to the regulations passed by the trustees in 1796, each student had to be familiar with the rudiments of Greek and Latin, as evidenced by an ability to translate certain passages of Virgil, Cicero, and the Greek Testament and to

34. Frederick Chase, *A History of Dartmouth College and the Town of Hanover, New Hampshire*, ed. John Lord, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1891), I, 553; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 242.
35. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 245.

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translate English into Latin. Another prerequisite was knowledge of the fundamental rules of arithmetic.[36]

Once admitted, a young man soon discovered that the Dartmouth curriculum was rigid and inflexible. All had to follow a preselected course of study; there were no such freedoms as electives or even major fields of study. During the first three years of college, the majority of time was devoted to Greek and Latin since it was believed that emphasis on the classics would lead to an appreciation and understanding of the threads that bind together modern civilization. During the first three years, the student also studied arithmetic, grammar, logic, and geography and took courses in higher mathematics, including geometry, trigonometry, algebra, conic sections, surveying, mensuration, natural and moral philosophy, and astronomy. In the senior year the study of the classics was discontinued, to the relief of many, and replaced by metaphysics, theology, and political law. These subjects brought the student into intellectual contact with the American theologian Jonathan Edwards, the Scottish mathematician and philosopher Dugald Stewart, and such masters of political thought as John Locke, David Hume, Edmund Burke, and Jeremy Bentham.[37]

The day-to-day existence of the Dartmouth College student was rather humdrum and could perhaps be best compared to life in a penal institution or monastery. At 5 a.m. or first light in winter, the sleepy students gathered in the school chapel for a religious exercise conducted by the college president, who was also the school's spiritual leader. Since there was no heat to protect against the bitter New Hampshire winter, the students bundled up in their warmest clothing, with only their frosty breaths to show they were alive, although not necessarily awake. After the religious exercise, each of the four classes went to its respective room for the first instruction of the day. The facilities were sparse. The college provided only the

36. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 246.
37. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 248.

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room; the class was expected to furnish it (with table and chair for the instructor, blackboard, chalk, stove, and pine benches for the students) and to provide heat and light.

After the first morning class, time was allotted for breakfast, with a period of study following. The second class of the day met at 11 a.m., followed by lunch and another period of study. Late in the afternoon, about 3 or 4 p.m., the final class of the day was held. Evening prayers at 6 p.m. or later completed the daily schedule. On Wednesday afternoons, a rhetorical exercise and chapel services replaced class sessions. On Saturday afternoons, no exercises were held except evening prayers. Sunday was set aside as a day of rest, reflection, and worship. The students were not permitted to study or leave their rooms except for meals or the four religious exercises held to keep them occupied. To ensure further that the student would not be tempted to break the Sabbath by preparing for classes, a biblical exercise replaced the recitation period on Monday mornings.

Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors generally adhered to this schedule, with seniors having slightly more free time. Periods between classes were to be spent studying; when not in class, at church, or out for meals, the student was expected to be in his room. The hours for recreation were very limited. During the summer, the hours from the close of the first morning class until breakfast, from the end of the 11 a.m. class until about 2 p.m., and from evening prayer until 9 p.m. were unscheduled and could be used for exercise or limited entertainment. During the winter, these hours were modified, but the amount of free time was about the same.[38]

Although Dartmouth made few study aids available, the presidents of Dartmouth did establish a large school library. By 1803, the year Thayer enrolled, the library housed about 3,000 volumes, but this figure included many duplicates, and most of the books

38. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 249–250.

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were theological studies of no practical value to the students. Each year every student was assessed a fee of about $1.50 for use of the library, a privilege not always appreciated. The library was open to each class one hour every two weeks. In 1796, the library hours were fixed as follows: seniors and sophomores were admitted on alternate Mondays, juniors and freshmen on alternate Tuesdays, between the hours of 1 and 2 p.m. only.[39]

The rules of conduct in the library were very restrictive and discouraged browsing and borrowing. No more than five students were permitted in the library at any one time; no one could take a book from the shelves without the librarian's permission; and freshmen were allowed to borrow one book at a time, sophomores two, and juniors and seniors three. The library restrictions stemmed from a scarcity of faculty as well as a scarcity of books. One of the professors was usually delegated the extra duty of school librarian.

During Thayer's years of attendance, the college faculty was quite small, generally four professors and two tutors for the entire student body. A professor taught a particular subject, while a tutor taught a class. When there were two tutors in residence, one taught the freshmen and the other, the sophomores. Usually, the tutors were recent graduates who might have had additional training in theology. The president of the school had the sole right to instruct the senior class. Technically, this meant that the other professors could instruct only the members of the junior class. In actuality, they would occasionally assist with instruction for freshmen and sophomores, give public lectures, and sometimes hold another, nonteaching position at the college. Nevertheless, the bulk of the instruction rested on the shoulders of three men—the president and two tutors.[40]

John Wheelock was president of Dartmouth from 1779 to 1815, a period that included Thayer's college years. His father, Eleazar

39. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 250–251; John K. Lord, *A History of Dartmouth College, 1815–1909* (Rumford Press, 1913), II, 507–508.
40. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 251; Lord, *History of Dartmouth*, II, 508.

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Wheelock, had also been Dartmouth's president and had named his son to succeed him. On Eleazar's death in 1779, the trustees hesitated in appointing John to that lofty but low-paying position. John Wheelock had few qualifications and only one recommendation, from his father, who had selected him for the job.[41]

John Wheelock had attended Yale, later transferred to Dartmouth, and graduated in the first class in 1771. He served for a time as a tutor at the college and had been sent by the town of Hanover as a representative to the provincial assembly. With the coming of the American Revolution, his interest became more military than academic. He joined the American Army, served as a major and lieutenant colonel in Colonel Timothy Bedel's regiment, and eventually became a member of General Horatio Gates's staff. At the time of his father's death, young Wheelock, then twenty-five, was living in Philadelphia and was regarded by most as a "gay, carefree, debonair young officer," hardly the type of man to head a college.[42]

Although the trustees would have preferred a more mature, scholarly man of the cloth, the wishes of Eleazar Wheelock could not be disregarded lightly. He had looked on Dartmouth as a family institution and expected the mantle of the presidency to fall on the shoulders of his son John. The elder Wheelock had always served with little, if any, compensation, and the slender funds of the institution made it imperative that this arrangement be continued. So in 1779, John Wheelock became president of Dartmouth College, a position he held for thirty-six years.[43]

John Wheelock was a grave and sober college president. Reading became his major preoccupation, and the candle in the president's study often burned late at night. Young George Ticknor, a close friend of Thayer, who through his father became acquainted with President Wheelock rather early, described him in this manner:

41. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 196.
42. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 197.
43. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 197–198.

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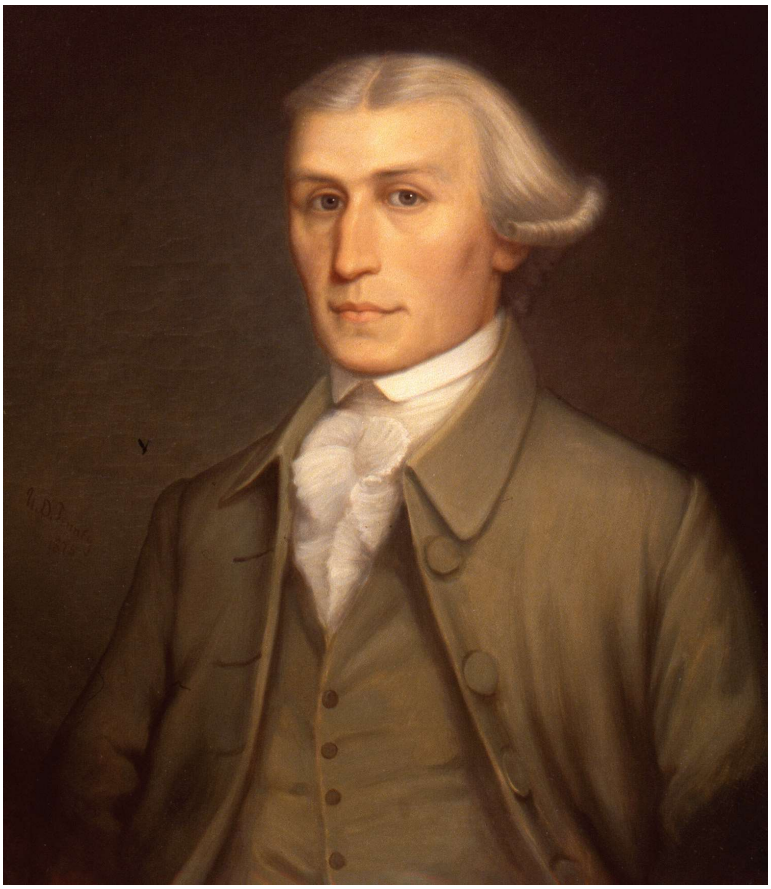
Dr. Wheelock was stiff and stately. He read constantly, sat up late, and got up early. He talked very gravely and slow, with a falsetto voice. . . . He was one of the most formal men I ever knew. I saw a great deal of him, from 1802 to 1816, in his own house and my father's, but never felt the smallest degree of familiarity with him, nor do I believe that any of the students or young men did.[44]



John Wheelock was the president of Dartmouth from 1779 to 1815 and taught Thayer. (Painting by Ulysses Dow Tenney, 1875. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

44. George Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. George S. Hillard and Anna Ticknor, 2 vols. (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), I, 5.

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Many of the students were fearful of him. It was not unusual for a student to be called to the president's house for some matter. For the most part, these young men were silent and awkward, unsure of the proper manner of taking leave of the president, who was very covetous of his time. After their affairs had been transacted, the president would wait a suitable length of time, look at his watch, glance at the student, and announce in his high voice, "Will you sit longer, sir, or will you go now?" Thereupon, the student would gratefully flee. Ticknor said that this was a recognized formula, and he knew of no young man who remained after hearing it.[45]

Although students seldom formed personal relationships with Wheelock, the man made an impression on Thayer. Like all seniors, Thayer spent an entire year under Wheelock's sole instruction. The president's austere and formal temperament was not unlike Thayer's own. And in this man, Thayer could see his twin lifelong interests, the military and education, united.

Four other professors taught at Dartmouth during Thayer's college days. Bezaleel Woodward, professor of mathematics and philosophy, died in 1804, and it is improbable that Sylvanus received any instruction from him. Woodward's replacement was John Hubbard, a 1785 graduate who had studied theology after graduation and served as preceptor of New Ipswich and Deerfield Academies in Massachusetts, then later was probate judge of Cheshire County, New Hampshire. He filled the chair of mathematics and natural philosophy until his premature death in 1810. Hubbard published books on geography, an essay on music, a reader, and an oration, but nothing on mathematics. He was a kind man of gentle disposition, well liked by the students.[46]

Roswell Shurtleff, a graduate of 1799, became professor of theology in 1804 after serving as a tutor for four years. He frequently

45. Ticknor, *Life, Letters and Journals of George Ticknor*, I, 5.
46. Florian Cajori, *The Teaching and History of Mathematics in the United States*, Bureau of Education Circular, no. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 75; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 256.

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quarreled with President Wheelock and never knew from one year to the next whether he would be retained. His problems with the president concerned a church in Hanover and led directly to the famous Dartmouth College case.[47] Shurtleff had a genial personality and was friendly to the students.[48]

The fourth professor at Dartmouth during Thayer's matriculation was John Smith, professor of learned languages and school librarian. He was the only member of the faculty who had any real claim to scholarship, having published grammars in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Although considered a man of great scholastic attainment, he was not particularly well liked by the student body and was considered by some to be slow-witted and timid. Worst of all, he was a dull instructor. His timidity made him an easy mark for ridicule by the undergraduates. One incident, which he was never to live down, occurred one evening at twilight when he rushed headlong into a college building with the terrified announcement that he had been chased by three bears—a mother and two cubs; upon investigation, the vicious animals were discovered to be harmless tree stumps on the campus green. Being the school librarian did not increase his popularity since the students disliked the way in which he operated the library.[49]

While Thayer was at Dartmouth, the most widely used method of instruction was recitation, which was practical in smaller classes with a shortage of textbooks, blackboards, and other instructional aids. The teacher or tutor asked questions about a particular assignment, and the student recited what he remembered. The virtues of this system were few, and much depended on the skill and

47. In short, the New Hampshire legislature attempted to transform Dartmouth from a private institution into a public college. Shurtleff took the side of the legislature against the college's trustees and was made acting president (1817–1819) after the state changed the school to Dartmouth University. Eventually, the case made it to the Supreme Court—*Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*—and was decided in favor of the school remaining private.—Ed.
48. Cajori, *Teaching and History of Mathematics*, 75; Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 256.
49. Richardson, *Dartmouth College*, I, 203, 255–256.

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knowledge of the instructor. At its best, recitation demanded that the student not only recite what he had read but also analyze and explain it. At its worst, it trained the student only to memorize long passages. The lecture method did not gain wide acceptance until later in the nineteenth century and was probably not much in evidence during Thayer's stay at Dartmouth.[50]

Although the student was supposed to devote much of his time to study, social life, of course, was not completely neglected. Thayer made many friends, among them George Ticknor, Richard Fletcher, and Alpheus Roberts. There was little feminine companionship to be had in Hanover, and neither the college schedule nor rules encouraged courtship. Dartmouth campus social life revolved around two primary social and literary societies, the Social Friends, founded in 1783, and the United Fraternity, organized in 1786 as a rival offshoot of the former. Undergraduates were admitted at the completion of the freshman year, and the two groups competed for the best men. Thayer was asked to join and accepted membership in the United Fraternity. He apparently measured up to the high-minded qualifications of the group: "Respectability of talents and acquirements, and a fair moral character, shall be the requisite qualifications for admission into this Society." Thayer's life was to become intertwined with two members of the fraternity, William Partridge and Alden Partridge, cousins from Vermont. William would become his close friend and roommate, and Alden his bitter antagonist for life. Sylvanus got on well with the other fraternity members, and in 1804–1805 was elected the group's treasurer.[51]

50. Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 82.
51. *United Fraternity Constitution, 1788–1821* (Baker Library, Dartmouth College), 7; *United Fraternity Treasurer's Book, 1803–1838* (Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH), 13–14.

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This depiction of the Dartmouth College campus in 1803 is attributed to Thayer's longtime friend George Ticknor, a classmate from the Dartmouth class of 1807. (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.)

In addition to the companionship and friendship offered, a student might want to join one of these social organizations for the library each had established for its membership. At one time, the two societies combined their books into one large "federal" library, but by the time Thayer attended Dartmouth, the societies were maintaining separate collections. Most students preferred the society libraries over the college library because the hours were more flexible and the regulations few. While Thayer was at Dartmouth, the college allowed the societies in 1805 to convert two small unused rooms in Dartmouth Hall into libraries. Although each of these rooms had a window, they were in reality little more than closets.[52]

52. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 27–28; Lord, *History of Dartmouth*, II, 515–517.

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The fraternities of Thayer's day were similar to those of today with their secret oaths and closed meetings, but their fraternal functions were quite different. The purpose of the United Fraternity is embodied in the following excerpt from its constitution:

> This institution, whose object is improvement in literature and science, guarantees to every member mutual forbearance and respect. It discountenances every infringement on morality and religion, as degrading to the gentleman and the scholar.[53]

The Tuesday weekly meeting of the fraternity consisted of two orations, one extemporaneous and the other prepared in advance. Not infrequently, the meeting was terminated abruptly when the orator failed to show up. A notation made by Thayer in the Treasurer's Book shows William Partridge fined seventy-five cents, which he paid on April 9, 1805, for a "non-performance."[54]

The subjects of these debates and orations ranged from the serious to the frivolous, befitting the interests of the average college student. There is no record of any oration given by Thayer, but it is worthwhile to look at examples of earlier topics debated. One question argued was "Whether clothes lend more to the preservation of chastity than nakedness?" After having discussed as far as modesty would allow, the question was decided in favor of the negative.

Other topics were of a political and contemporary nature, such as "Whether a female ought to be excluded from a succession to the throne?" This was decided in favor of the negative. A question of economic importance was also the topic of discussion: "Whether a trade with the East Indies would be advantageous to the American states?" Being good Yankee traders, the men resolved in the affirmative. Other topics were concerned with the curriculum, such as "Whether the time which is spent in studying Greek (except

53. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 5.
54. *United Fraternity Constitution*, 21; *United Fraternity Treasurer's Book*, 13.

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the Testament) would not be spent more profitably in studying the French language?"[55]

Thayer's one extravagance while at college was a subscription to the *National Intelligencer*, published in Washington, DC, by Samuel Harrison Smith. George Ticknor said that Thayer was the only one at the college to take the newspaper. Thayer subscribed because, of all the American papers, the *National Intelligencer* contained the best foreign news and the best accounts of the exploits of Napoleon. In 1803, the paper was a small four-page affair, published three times a week at a cost of "five dollars per annum, paid in advance." Besides foreign affairs, the paper also covered important national events and issues.[56]

The opening of the United States Military Academy at West Point in New York in 1802 stimulated Thayer's long-developing interest in the military. In his senior year at Dartmouth, he and his friend Alpheus Roberts decided to try for appointments to the military school. With recommendations from Professors John Hubbard and Roswell Shurtleff and tutor Francis Brown, they applied to the secretary of war. Much to their delight, in March 1807 they both received warrants as cadets in the regiment of artillerists.[57] Replying in a somewhat stilted fashion, Thayer hastily acknowledged his appointment:

> This mark of confidence with which the President has been pleased to honor me while it excites in me emotions of gratitude will not fail, I trust, to cause a due emulation to excel in my profession and to call forth the

55. *United Fraternity Records, 1786–1800*, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 69, 71, 75, 76.
56. George Ticknor to George Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
57. Letters 1806/8 dated October 4 and October 30, 1806, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office Relating to the Military Academy: United States Military Academy, Cadet Application Papers, 1805–1866*, National Archives; War Department to Sylvanus Thayer, 20 March 1807, *Records of the Office of the Secretary of War: Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Military Affairs, 1800–1889*, III, 147, National Archives, Washington, DC. Hereafter cited as *Letters Sent Military Affairs*.

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> exertion of whatever talent I possess for the service of my country—I therefore, accept with pleasure said appointment and, according to command, will repair to West Point as early as practicable.[58]

Some confusion exists about the dates Thayer left Dartmouth and arrived at West Point. Cullum's *Register* lists Thayer as a cadet beginning on March 20, 1807, but that is actually the date of his appointment, not the date of his arrival.[59] General Joseph G. Swift, in his *Memoirs*, wrote that among the cadets joining the Academy in the spring of 1807 were Sylvanus Thayer and Alpheus Roberts, graduates from Dartmouth College.[60] Late in life Thayer mentioned that he first laid eyes on the Military Academy in August 1807.[61] Two communications help pinpoint the date with some assurance of accuracy. In a letter, George Ticknor said that Thayer did not go to the Academy immediately after his warrant in the spring but instead remained at Dartmouth to finish his coursework. Although Thayer, as the first scholar in his class, was to deliver the valedictory, some weeks before the August commencement he left Dartmouth and went to his parents' home in Braintree. Ticknor pointed out the reason Thayer did not stay to receive the highest graduation honors:

58. Sylvanus Thayer to Henry Dearborn, April 21, 1807, *Records of the Office of the Secretary of War: Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered' Series, 1802–1870*, Letter T-86(3), National Archives. Hereafter cited as *Letters Received, Sec. War.*
59. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., From Its Establishment in 1802, to 1890, with the Early History of the United States Military Academy*, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. 3 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), I, 81. [Cullum's *Register* lists graduates in the order in which they graduated and in class years, by class rank.—Ed.]
60. Joseph G. Swift, *The Memoirs of Gen. Joseph Gardner Swift, LL.D., U.S.A., First Graduate of the United States Military Academy, West Point, Chief Engineer, U.S.A. From 1812 to 1818* (privately printed, 1890), 67.
61. Sylvanus Thayer to Joseph G. Swift, April 2, 1853, *Thayer Papers.*

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> He had always been very modest & shy, and would, I think, with difficulty, have been brought to face a commencement audience consisting, in a large degree, of ladies.[62]

A second piece of correspondence helps confirm Ticknor's dates. In a letter to his close friend and teacher Joseph Swift, Thayer later wrote that it would be thirty-six years next "September" since he had reported to him at West Point.[63] Thus, while the evidence is contradictory, we might conclude that Thayer left Dartmouth perhaps in July and arrived at the Academy in August or early September.

At this point in his life, Thayer had been influenced by several prominent men, including Azariah and John Faxon, General Benjamin Pierce, President John Wheelock, and the other professors at Dartmouth. Each of these figures helped instill in Thayer a love of education and a fondness for things military. At the fledgling Academy at West Point, he would be able to pursue both of these interests.

62. Ticknor to Cullum, May 29, 1864, *Thayer Papers*.
63. Thayer to Swift, July 4, 1843, *Thayer Papers*.

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II

The United States Military Academy and Cadet Thayer

The young military academy to which Thayer traveled in 1807 was a school born in indecision and nurtured in uncertainty. The need for a school for training military officers was recognized decades before its actual establishment. Once in operation, the Academy was faced with the lack of a defined curriculum, with a small student body that could be ordered away at any time, and with questionable lines of authority. To understand the institution that Cadet Thayer attended, it is necessary to examine early attitudes toward the military and to trace the beginnings of the United States Military Academy.

Even before the War for Independence, military science was becoming a popular subject of study in the colonies. Among its early students was George Washington, whose military library was extensive and well selected. Henry Knox, the Boston bookseller, read the military books he imported for his customers. The military became the chosen profession of Nathaniel Greene in spite of the pacificism of his Quaker upbringing. Anthony Wayne, another important figure in the Revolution, first learned the art of military science by reading and private study. By the time of the war, there

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was general agreement that some military experience or training should be required for a military commission.[1]

Despite the popularity of military science, it was soon obvious that America did not have enough men trained in the scientific areas of engineering and artillery. During the Revolution, Washington and other leaders were forced to rely on foreign talent, which fortunately was readily available. The Continental Congress commissioned the Marquis de Lafayette, Baron Johann de Kalb, Thaddeus Kościuszko, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Louis de Tousard, Stephen Rochefontaine, Louis Lebègue Duportail, and others to lend expertise in engineering and artillery in support of the American cause. All served with great honor and distinction.[2]

The American leaders realized they could not draw on outside technical aid indefinitely. The obvious solution was the creation of a military school to train American youth, particularly as engineers and artillerists. One of the first to propose such a school was Henry Knox, Washington's chief of artillery. While Knox's idea did not go unnoticed, little came of it during the Revolution.[3]

Congress did make a half-hearted attempt to establish something similar to a military school when, in June 1777, it passed an act establishing a Corps of Invalids. Similar to the French model, this corps was to be a regiment of wounded veterans assigned to light duty in garrisons or as guards in cities. An additional function of the proposed corps was to serve as a military school for young officers. Lewis Nicola, an American officer born in Ireland, became colonel of the Corps of Invalids. In 1780, part of that corps was at

1. Oliver L. Spaulding, Jr., "The Military Studies of George Washington," *American Historical Review* 29, no. 4 (July 1924): 675–680; Sidney Forman, "Why the United States Military Academy Was Established in 1802," *Military Affairs* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 17.
2. For an overview of military education before West Point, as well as European contributions to the American cause, see Don Higginbotham, "Military Education Before West Point," in *Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy*, ed. Robert M. S. McDonald (University of Virginia Press, 2004), 23–53.—Ed.
3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 7–9.

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West Point, and by 1782, the remainder was located in the vicinity of the Hudson River, in the nearby towns of Fishkill, Newburgh, and New Windsor.[4] As a military school, the Corps of Invalids accomplished little. With the end of the war, what sentiment there was for a military academy died out, except in the minds of several prominent men, among them General Washington.[5]

Washington thought that America would be best served by professional soldiers, and this meant well-trained, knowledgeable officers. At the close of the Revolution in May 1783, Washington sent Alexander Hamilton, chairman of the Committee of Congress on the Peace Establishment, a paper entitled "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment," which made the following proposals:

> A Peace Establishment for the United States of America may in my opinion be classed under four different heads Vizt.
>
> First. A regular and standing force, for Garrisoning West Point and such other Posts upon our Northern, Western, and Southern Frontiers, . . .
>
> Secondly. A well organized Militia. . . .
>
> Thirdly. Establishing Arsenals of all kinds of Military Stores.
>
> Fourthly. Academies, one or more for the Instruction of the Art Military; particularly those Branches of it which respect Engineering and Artillery, which are highly essential, and the knowledge of which, is most difficult to obtain. . . .[6]

4. William Heath, *Memoirs of the American War: Reprinted from the Original Edition of 1798*, ed. Rufus Rockwell Wilson (A. Wessels Company, 1904), 278.
5. United States Military Academy, Department of Economics, Government, and History, *The United States Military Academy and Its Foreign Contemporaries* (United States Military Academy Printing Office, 1944), 17–18; Forman, "Why the USMA Was Established in 1802," 19; Horace M. Reeve, "West Point in the Revolution," in *Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1802–1902*, comp. Edward S. Holden, 2 vols. (Government Printing Office, 1904), I, 193–194.
6. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington, From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, Bicentennial Edition, 39 vols. (Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), XXVI, 374–375.

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Hamilton's committee approved a plan for a peacetime army, but rejected the proposal for the establishment of a military academy on the grounds that the benefits of such a school only rarely compensated for its expense.[7] Also in 1783, General von Steuben proposed establishing three military academies, one at West Point and two elsewhere. President Jefferson would later give some consideration to this plan.[8]

For ten years, no action was taken, but the need for a military academy was still felt by some high government officials. In November 1793, the question of a military academy was again raised by Secretary of War Henry Knox during a cabinet meeting. He quite accurately pointed out that no American officer knew how to build a fort or draw up defensive measures. Alexander Hamilton and John Randolph supported Knox, but Thomas Jefferson argued that the Constitution did not authorize the creation of a national military academy. The discussion grew lively, and it ended only when President Washington declared that although such an academy would be advantageous to the United States, he did not wish to bring up for discussion anything "which might generate heat and ill humor." For the time being, the subject, if not the idea, was dropped.[9]

In his fifth annual address to Congress, delivered on December 3, 1793, Washington said that the national militia would be improved by affording an opportunity for the study of those branches of military art that could not be attained by practice alone. In these politic words, Washington was urging Congress to establish a school for engineers and artillerists. The message finally struck a responsive

7. Edward S. Holden, "Origins of the United States Military Academy, 1777–1802," *Centennial*, I, 208.
8. Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., and Christine Coalwell McDonald, "Mr. Jefferson's Academy." in *Jefferson's Military Academy*, ed. McDonald, 129.—Ed.
9. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, Library Edition, 20 vols. (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903–1904), I, 409–410. [Jefferson writes (p. 409), "It was proposed to recommend the establishment of a military academy. I objected that none of the specified powers given by the Constitution to Congress, would authorize this."—Ed.]

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chord with the legislative branch of government. Disputes and problems at home and abroad had finally convinced Congress that the United States could not continue to depend upon its soldiers' or officers' native intelligence alone to win wars.[10]

Congress took a hesitant step forward in 1794 when it established at West Point the School for Artillerists and Engineers and created the rank of cadet, an apprentice officer who would earn his commission by learning his duties while on active service. The law further provided for books and other equipment necessary for instructing the cadets. By 1795, three battalions of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers were stationed at West Point. In 1796, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Rochefontaine, Major Louis de Tousard, and Major John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi, all highly educated French officers, were at the post.[11]

Although by late 1796 there were only three cadets at West Point, a formal training program of sorts had begun, because American officers also needed instruction. Officers and cadets were required to attend classes in the "instruction room" between eleven and twelve in the morning and four and five in the afternoon.[12] Instruction began with the limited materials on hand. For studying artillery, the class met outdoors to practice with the few cannons available, among them a five-inch howitzer and a half-dozen brass six-pounders. To learn military drill, the students studied in minute detail von Steuben's *Regulations*.[13] The art of fortifications was

10. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* XXXIII, 166.
11. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 11; John F. Callan, comp. *The Military Laws of the United States Relating to the Army, Volunteers, Militia, and to Bounty Lands and Pensions, From the Foundation of the Government to 3 March 1863* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1863), 104; Edgar Denton III, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775–1833" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1965), 16; Holden, "Origins of the USMA," *Centennial*, I, 212; James R. Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783–1812* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 289.
12. The location of this room was the Old Provost, a former jail, in the middle of the Plain next to a large glacial depression known as Execution Hollow. See Jon C. Malinowski, *The West Point Landscape, 1802–1860* (West Point Press, 2024).—Ed.
13. Friedrich Wilhelm Steuben, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1779).

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taught by lectures and having the students draw plans. Not all students were willing, and there were many troublemakers. When the instruction room with its contents and apparatus was destroyed by fire in April 1796, arson was justly suspected, although never proved.[14] Classes then continued on a modified level in some officers' rooms. A wooden "fortification" used for instruction was erected by Lieutenant Colonel Rochefontaine and Major Rivardi in the "model yard" near the present site of Washington Hall.[15]

At this time the naval disputes between the United States and France once again spurred the realization that the United States military establishment was meager at best. The finest officers in the world were being trained in Napoleon's École polytechnique. If war came, French engineers would this time be foes, not allies.

Washington left public office disappointed that a military school had not been firmly established. In his eighth and final State of the Union message, delivered on December 7, 1796, he stated:

> I have heretofore proposed to the consideration of Congress, the expediency of establishing a National University; and also a Military Academy. The desireableness of both these Institutions, has so constantly increased with every new view I have taken of the subject, that I cannot omit the opportunity of once for all, recalling your attention to them . . . . The institution of a Military Academy, is also recommended by cogent reasons. However pacific the general policy of a nation may be, it ought never to be without an adequate stock of military knowledge for emergencies.[16]

14. Swift, the Academy's first graduate, heard Alexander Hamilton say in 1802 that he believed the fire to be arson, although Swift gives an incorrect date of 1794 for the incident. Swift, *Memoirs*, 36.—Ed.
15. Holden, "Origins of the USMA," *Centennial*, I, 212–214; Jacobs, *Beginning of the U.S. Army*, 290–291.
16. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* XXXV, 317. [This has been expanded from Kershner's original manuscript using text from the National Archives.—Ed.]

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