

The Army Corps of Engineers Tradition: A Crucial National Science Resource

by Pamela Lowry

“We must get up early, for we have a large territory; we have to cut down the forests, dig canals, and make railroads all over the country.”

—*A West Point cadet to a foreign visitor, 1854*

All the military guests at the glittering banquet in the Hotel Robert in Paris wore sidearms, and many of the civilians had pistols hidden in their formal clothing. The headquarters of Lord Hill’s British Grenadier Corps loomed directly across the street, and it was possible that there would be some kind of trouble. It was Jan. 8, 1816, and a group of Americans, joined by their French, Prussian, Austrian, and Russian supporters, were about to defy the British occupation force in Paris.

Following on the heels of the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, the Allied Powers of Europe had occupied Paris and reinstated the Bourbon Monarchy. The crowned heads of Europe breathed a sigh of relief that so much of the pro-American faction in Europe had been destroyed or silenced by the French Terror and the Napoleonic Wars. The British officers, flushed with victory, had been insolent in their disdain for the conquered French. The Duke of Wellington had gone so far as to commandeer the box reserved for the French King at the Paris opera, but was forced to retreat amidst a hailstorm of boos and catcalls.

British scorn was also applied to the Americans, with whom they had just finished fighting the War of 1812, Britain’s unsuccessful attempt to reconquer its lost colonies. To salve their wounded pride, the regiments that had been with the defeated Ross and Cockburn at Bladensburg, Maryland, in 1814, held a banquet in Paris on Aug. 24, 1815, to celebrate the first anniversary of the burning of Washington.

Colonel Winfield Scott, who had fought heroically on the northern frontier during the war, countered this insult by scheduling the banquet at the Hotel Robert, attended by many of Britain’s erstwhile allies in the fight against Napoleon, to commemorate the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans.

There were two young American Army officers at that banquet, both veterans of the War of 1812, who were in Paris on a mission crucial to the future of the United States. They were Sylvanus Thayer and William McRee, and they had

been sent to rescue the science and technology which had been developed by France’s republican faction, and to bring it back to America. It would be desperately needed to develop the country, now that the British Empire could turn its attention away from Napoleon and towards another attempt to ruin independent America.

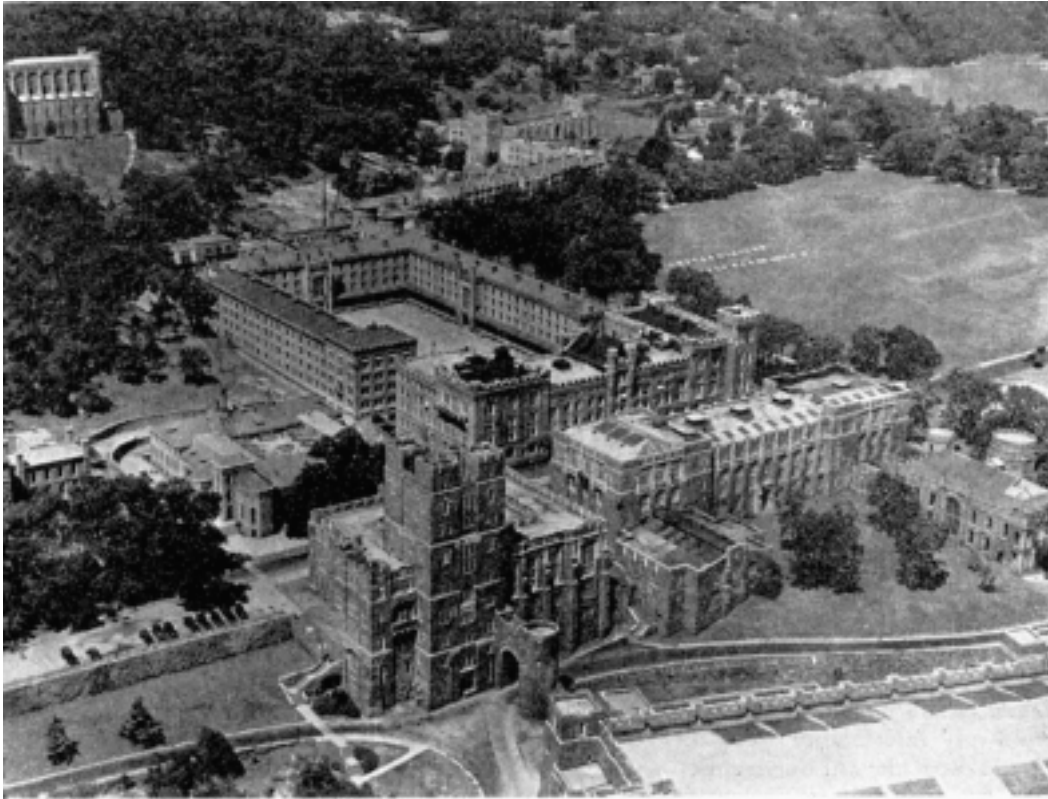
In fact, immediately after the war’s end, Britain began dumping its manufactures in America at cost, in order to strangle the development of new American industries. This policy was merely a continuation of what Americans had faced during the colonial era, when they were forbidden to build iron foundries or any other manufactories that would compete with Mother Britain.

What America needed to develop its productive capacity—both industrial and agricultural—was transportation infrastructure, but the new nation had only a few self-taught engineers. No American school existed which could teach the scientific and technical skills required for a massive internal improvements program.

And the world’s premier engineering school, the École Polytechnique of Paris, which had been founded by French republicans in 1794, had already suffered cuts under Napoleon and now faced destruction of its core curriculum under the conquering British-allied regime. If its textbooks, construction models, and even some of its graduates and faculty could be rescued from under the very noses of the occupying army, and brought to the new military academy at West Point, then America would have a chance against the feudal, anti-development opposition now arrayed against it.

—The Invaluable École Polytechnique -

Thayer and McRee had been dispatched to France by President James Madison and Secretary of War James Monroe. Thayer carried a letter of introduction to General Lafayette, who had become Monroe’s close friend during the American Revolution. When Monroe later became American Minister to France, he and his wife helped save Lafayette’s wife, Adrienne, from being guillotined during the Terror, and then nursed her back to health. In 1802, Monroe returned to France to participate in the negotiations with Napoleon for the Louisiana Purchase. He was therefore familiar with the École Polytechnique and with Benjamin Franklin’s circles in France, which were known as the “American Party.”



West Point Military Academy

West Point was organized on the model of the École Polytechnique in France, with the mission of becoming a great scientific and technological school that would spread the benefits of its education throughout the population. The Corps of Engineers were stationed here in 1802, by an Act signed by President Jefferson.

The remaining pro-American forces in France were under heavy attack. When Lafayette considered running for the new House of Deputies, the Electoral College was informed by the victorious Allied Nations that if such an event were to occur, 20,000 additional Prussian troops would be quartered in Lafayette's district.

The beleaguered American Party had run an earlier rescue operation, which culminated in the founding of the École Polytechnique. When Lafayette and Franklin's circles began the French Revolution and attempted to establish a constitutional monarchy, the British reacted with desperate fury. The British Empire was determined that no American-style republic, monarchist or not, would ever exist on the continent of Europe. Therefore, British agents Danton and Marat were instructed to wreck the Revolution, and their chosen instrument, the Jacobin Terror, wiped out much of the French officer corps that had served in the American Revolution, including those who had contributed so heavily to the American victory at Yorktown. But that was not enough.

In 1793, the French Committee on Public Instruction ordered all academies suppressed, including the world-renowned Academy of Science, which had been founded in 1666 by Jean Baptiste Colbert. Marat followed up by attacking Benjamin Franklin's theory of electricity and the "aristocracy of knowledge" which had produced it. The "Law of the Suspects," also passed in 1793, proclaimed that the scientific aristocracy was to be prosecuted in the same manner as the

aristocracy of birth. The guillotine then claimed much of Franklin's scientific circle, including Paris Mayor and Lafayette co-adjutor Jean Bailly; Franklin's former secretary, the Duke de La Rochefoucault; and chemist Antoine Lavoisier.

As soon as the 1794 Thermidorean reaction against the Reign of Terror had been accomplished, surviving American Party members Lazare Carnot and Gaspard Monge took control of the Committee of Public Safety and founded the École Polytechnique. The school was founded to train engineers, to spread republican values throughout the population, and to arouse talents which could advance science. Monge, who became the heart and soul of the École, based the structure and curriculum of the school on his training by the great humanist Oratorian Order, and on scientific schools which had been directly founded by Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues, while Franklin was the American representative in Paris.

The students at the École were divided into small sections, and more advanced students were able to test and widen their knowledge by teaching the younger students as assistants to the professors. The most important subject at the school was geometry. Monge taught this not as a fixed set of axioms, but as a means to educate the students' minds by showing them the coherence of the physical universe with the way their own minds worked. It gave them the capacity, therefore, to think well about any scientific or technological problem.

Monge wrote a textbook on descriptive geometry for his

students, which enabled them to represent three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane. It was a tool to achieve higher technological levels of development, and Monge wrote in his treatise on the subject that “it was a language necessary to the man of genius who conceives a project, to those who must direct its realization, and finally, to the craftsmen who must themselves complete its specific aspects.” By the 1820s, the Americans were applying this principle to the problem of producing interchangeable parts for armaments and machines.

A Treasure-Trove for West Point

Despite the fact that the *École* had been shut down by the time they reached Paris, Thayer and McRee were able to speak with many of its faculty members, using their letters of introduction to the remnants of the pro-American networks. It is possible that they were able to speak with Carnot before he was exiled to Switzerland, and to Monge, who was still in Paris. Their journals show that they consulted with an unnamed professor who taught descriptive geometry, and that he obtained architectural models for them. Thayer bought more than a thousand books for the West Point library, including many of those used at the *École*. He also obtained topographical maps and models of fortifications. Most important, *École* graduate Simon Bernard was recruited to head the construction of U.S. coastal fortifications, and *École* Professor Claudius Crozet agreed to teach engineering and descriptive geometry at West Point.

While Sylvanus Thayer was still in Paris, he was selected to become the new Superintendent of West Point. Thayer had been an early graduate of the academy, and had experienced the frustrations felt by its faculty and students alike at its lack of funding for textbooks and scientific apparatus, and its inconsistency of requirements for its students. Thayer resolved to completely reorganize West Point on the model of the *École*, and to transform it into a great scientific and technological school which would disperse the benefits of its education into the general population.

This outlook corresponded to that of the Founding Fathers, who had pressed Congress for the establishment of a military academy, including the study of science and technology. George Washington, Henry Knox, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams had all envisaged such an academy, but the funding from Congress was not forthcoming. Finally, in 1802, President Jefferson signed the Military Peace Establishment Act, creating a Corps of Engineers to be “stationed at West Point,” which was ordered to “constitute a military academy.”

Jefferson had reversed his original opposition to the plan, and appointed Jonathan Williams, the grandnephew of Benjamin Franklin, as head of the Corps of Engineers and Superintendent of West Point. Williams, a scientist in his own right, had worked with Franklin’s ally, Caron de Beaumarchais, to conduit French supplies from his base in Nantes, France, to the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Once

at West Point, Williams stocked the academy’s library with the books he had inherited from Franklin.

Williams added geometry to the West Point curriculum, but his requisition for 12 inexpensive drawing instruments took months to fill. The War Department turned down his request for more and newer textbooks, on the grounds that scientific knowledge was changing so quickly that the books would be out of date before they arrived. Despite these frustrations, Williams told one of his officers to never “lose sight of our leading star, which is not a little mathematical school, but a great national establishment to turn out characters which in the course of time shall equal any in Europe.”

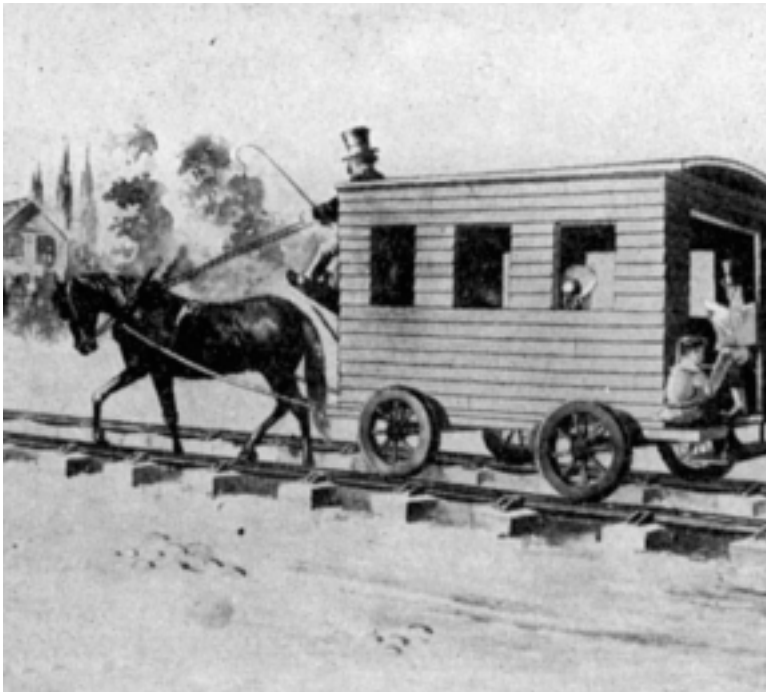
When Thayer returned from France, he was determined to carry out this mission, whatever it might cost him personally. He set up requirements for admission to West Point, drew up an honor code of conduct, and evaluated cadets only on their merits. As one West Pointer of the time remarked: “West Point constitutes the only society of human beings that I have known in which the standing of an individual is dependent wholly upon his own merits so far as they can be ascertained without extraneous influence.”

The curriculum was completely overhauled to correspond as much as possible to that of the *École Polytechnique*. French was taught from the first year, since the *École* texts had not yet been translated into English. Mathematics, including descriptive geometry, was considered to be the basis for an engineering degree. Classes were small and used cadet instructors from the older classes to supplement the faculty.

When Claudius Crozet arrived from France and attempted to teach engineering, he received a shock. One of his students wrote that “The surprise of the French engineer instructed in the Polytechnique may well be imagined when he commenced giving his classes certain problems and instructions, which not one of them could comprehend or perform.” Many of the cadets had only a very rudimentary background in simple arithmetic, and therefore Thayer instituted a mathematics curriculum which led from algebra, geometry, and trigonometry to calculus and engineering.

In the cadets’ senior year, Crozet, using a blackboard and sometimes a student translator of French terms, taught field fortification, permanent fortification, the science of artillery, grand tactics, and civil and military architecture. In the architecture section of his class, he taught the construction of buildings, the design of arches, canals, and bridges, and the machines used to build them. He also made sure that his students learned the amount of materials, labor, and time that it took to build the structures they studied. By 1826, the engineering course included roads, tunneling, inland navigation, railroad construction, and artificial harbors.

The West Point curriculum also included chemistry, and Thayer procured enough equipment to allow the physics course to cover hydrostatics, hydrodynamics, hydraulics, pneumatics, machinery, optics, and astronomy. The four-year course also included mineralogy, rhetoric, moral and political



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The Baltimore and Ohio railroad in the 1830s. Members of the Army Corps of Engineers built locks and dams, canals, highways, and surveyed railroad routes, including the survey for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

science, and an emphasis on both topographical and classical drawing.

In addition to teaching, the professors soon began to translate the French textbooks, and to write texts of their own. These were used in many other American colleges. By 1821, Claudius Crozet had published his “Treatise on Descriptive Geometry,” and exhibited for the first time, in English, Pascal’s Theorem. Cadet William Frazer wrote proudly to his brother: “We have just finished our course for this year and are now reviewing; we went as far as Spherical Projections in Descriptive Geometry, it is a study which is studied no other place but here.”

To inform the nation of what was going on at isolated West Point, Thayer encouraged the War Department to establish a Board of Visitors, composed of distinguished men from across the country, who would oversee the oral examinations of the cadets and report on the progress of the school. He also formed a West Point band, and during the summer the smartly uniformed cadets would march through cities and towns, demonstrating their precise maneuvers to great applause.

On one of these trips in 1821, they visited the aging John Adams at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, and heard this early supporter of a military academy tell them: “I congratulate you on the great advantages you possess for attaining eminence in letters and science as well as arms. . . . These advantages are a precious deposit for which you are responsible to your country.”

Building the Nation

The cadets who graduated early-on in Thayer’s superintendency were generally deployed as officers in charge of the construction of coastal forts or the dredging of harbors. But Thayer and his fellow officers did not see the cadets’ function as purely military. In 1823, Thayer wrote to General Alexander Macomb suggesting that if at any point some of the graduates were not needed for military service, “they might be usefully employed as Civil Engineers either in the service of the General Government or of the States.” And in 1824, Congressional legislation would establish a military-civilian partnership for developing the nation.

In that year, the Supreme Court ruled in *Gibbons v. Ogden* that the Federal Government asserted authority over interstate commerce, which included river navigation. Following that decision, Congress passed two pieces of legislation that enabled the Corps of Engineers to participate in planning and building civil infrastructure. The first was the General Survey Act, which authorized the President to order surveys of routes for roads and canals “of national importance, in a commercial or military point of view, or necessary for the transportation of public

mail.” President James Monroe assigned the survey task to the Corps of Engineers. Second, Congress appropriated \$75,000 to improve navigation on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers by removing sandbars, snags, and other obstacles. Later, the act was amended to include other major rivers such as the Missouri. This task, too, was given to the Corps of Engineers.

In 1825, John Quincy Adams was inaugurated as President, and the American System of Political Economy came into its own. Both large and small infrastructure projects were undertaken in every area of the country, forging a system of national communication and improving the transportation of finished and unfinished products. These engineering projects for improving the general welfare also brought the realization that the nation as a whole benefitted from improvements that were made in any area of the country.

New legislation in 1826 authorized the President to have surveys made to clean out and deepen selected waterways and to make other river and harbor improvements. This led to major Corps of Engineers projects to build locks and dams along hundreds of miles of river, and to the development of floating machines to remove giant snags, or log-jams, from rivers. These were known as “Uncle Sam’s tooth pullers.”

Members of the Corps also built almost every canal in America, with the exception of the Erie and the Middlesex. Two very large-scale hydraulic surveys were also mounted;

one of the Great Lakes and the other of the Mississippi Delta.

On land, the Corps was given responsibility for taking over construction of the National Road, which stretched from Chesapeake Bay to Illinois. As railroads began to be built in the mid-1820s, members of the Corps surveyed railroad routes, and the War Department often loaned engineers to the railroad companies once construction began. Thus, Captain William McNeill supervised the survey for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and Lieutenant George Whistler was in charge of laying the track. By 1830, many engineer officers were granted furloughs to work on the railroads.

This burst of internal improvements, leading to the forging of a strong national identity and a strong economy, did not go unnoticed by America's inveterate enemies, who encouraged the growth of a kind of populism known as "Jacksonian Democracy," which had an eerie resemblance to the Jacobin attacks on the *École Polytechnique*. When Andrew Jackson was elected President in 1828, West Point began to be the target of coordinated attacks. It began with speeches and articles stating that the local militia companies were all the country really needed to defend itself, not those high-tone cadets at the military academy. Congressman Davy Crockett, who had ridden Jackson's coattails to victory, proposed in Congress that West Point be eliminated. Other attacks took the form of proposals for "local control" of internal improvements, which would eliminate the national planning focus of the Corps.

Future President Martin Van Buren fought John Quincy Adams tooth and nail on the question of the Federal role in internal improvements, and proposed a constitutional amendment in 1825, which would have prevented federally sponsored public works. The rationale was that development legislation was "unequal and unjust" because money from one state was being used to benefit other states.

The populist rhetoric had gained such momentum by the mid-1830s that many states withheld the Federal treasury surplus which they normally gave to their private colleges, even though there was a tradition of state support for these institutions. The United States fell upon hard times economically in the Panic of 1837, largely because President Jackson had refused to re-charter the Bank of the United States, and had fired Treasury Secretary McLane when he refused to transfer the funds to Jackson's "pet banks" on the state level.

Jackson found a more pliant Treasury Secretary by appointing Roger Taney to do the dirty work, moving him over from the Attorney General's slot. The U.S. Senate was so furious at this action that it refused to ratify Taney's nomination as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in 1835. But the membership of the Senate had changed enough by the next year to allow Taney to be appointed as Chief Justice.

Jackson also vetoed the Maysville Road Bill, on the grounds that the road lay completely within Kentucky and therefore could not qualify as a national project. On the role of the Corps of Engineers, Jackson was more cautious, as

internal improvements were popular, and Jackson himself had stated that West Point was a good school and two of his nephews graduated from it. But he defied Superintendent Thayer again and again, by reinstating cadets who had been dismissed from the academy for code infractions or academic problems.

Thayer refused to be baited, and said, "This course may in the end occasion my removal, but in the meantime I shall have done some good and performed my duty." Finally, the challenge to his authority as Superintendent became so severe that he sent Captain Ethan Allen Hitchcock, his commandant of cadets, to the White House to see what could be done. President Jackson shouted at Hitchcock: "Sylvanus Thayer is a tyrant! The autocrat of the Russias couldn't exercise more power."

Spreading the Army Corps Tradition

On Jan. 19, 1833, Thayer resigned as the Superintendent, in order to save the institution from Jackson's further wrath. It was only a matter of time, before the Survey Act was withdrawn (it happened in 1838), and Congress passed legislation that prohibited Army officers from being granted leave to work with private companies such as railroads.

However, the foundation which Thayer had built for the Corps of Engineers endured. Many engineering officers resigned from the Army and continued to work on developing America's infrastructure, especially its railroads. Others, still members of the Corps, completed projects on America's coasts, rivers, and lakes. Still others built railroads in countries like Russia and Egypt, or in the growing republics of Central and South America. Before the Civil War, the four alternate routes for the Trans-Continental Railroad were surveyed by members of the Corps.

Other engineering schools were founded, including the one endowed by Thayer at Dartmouth, and many of them used West Point texts and West Point professors. Secretary of War Porter stated in 1828, "The Military Academy is scattering the fruits of its science . . . not merely to the rest of the army, but to the youth of our country generally, and the interchange of the theoretic science of this national school with the practical skill and judgment of our civilian engineers, which is now going on throughout the United States, will soon furnish every part of the country with the most accomplished professors in every branch of civil engineering."

As the American Civil War approached, pushed by the forces that wanted to destroy internal improvements and national sovereignty by any means possible, it was still the case that almost every infrastructural project had been planned or executed by a West Point-trained engineer. A Congressional committee declared, after enumerating some of these benefits: "These are some of the enduring memorials of the usefulness of the Military Academy, and of the returns it has made for the care, and time, and money which have been bestowed upon it."