

VMI Cadets at Battle of New Market

The Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, Virginia, was known as the West Point of the South. During the Civil War the students ranged in age from 15 to 24 and most of them were between 17 and 21. At the beginning of the war there were 1,973 living alumni of VMI and 1,865 (94.5%) of them served in the war. Of those, 261 died, 172 killed or mortally wounded in action and 89 from other causes. Approximately 19 served in the Union Army. Twenty-one of the alumni or faculty members became Confederate generals with Stonewall Jackson the most famous of those.

Controlling the Shenandoah Valley was a key element in General Ulysses S. Grant's effort to press the Confederacy into submission. In May of 1864, Grant ordered General Franz Sigel's army of 10,000 troops to the valley. Confederate General John C. Breckenridge pulled together 4,500 veterans to counteract the threat.

On May 11, 1864, 257 VMI students, ranging in age from 15 to 24 left Lexington on a march to New Market, Virginia, to reinforce and support General Breckenridge. After a march of 71 miles they arrived at New Market on May 14. The battle was to take place the following day.

Breckenridge's intentions were that the students would remain behind the lines and be used as back up only in an emergency. Among the company of cadets were many of Virginia's finest sons. One was a direct descendant of George Washington and another was Thomas Garland Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's grandson. As fate would have it, the situation grew bad for the Confederates and one of Breckenridge's staff suggested sending in the untried cadets. "I will not do it," Breckenridge replied. "General, you have no choice," responded the desperate officer. "Put the boys in," Breckenridge ordered, "and may God forgive me for the order ...". Immediately, a Union artillery shell killed or wounded several. But the cadets bravely closed ranks and continued.



In the middle of the battlefield was the farm house of one Jacob Bushong who had built the house in 1825. And it still stands today. It was raining and had rained for some time before that. The field had turned to mud that often came over the tops of their shoes. As the cadets ran through the field toward the house many of them lost their shoes. The field around the house is still known as "The Field of Lost Shoes." When the cadets reached the house they split into two groups and went around the house.

On one side of the house they did encounter and defeated an artillery group. The Union forces were routed and one of the main reasons given for the victory was the cadets taking of these artillery pieces.

Six cadets died on the battlefield and four more died of their wounds later, one living in agony for 66 days. One of the truly sad stories was that Thomas Garland Jefferson was severely wounded in the chest. His good friend Moses Ezekiel, the first Jew admitted to VMI, searched until he found him in the home of one the New Market ladies. Moses lay in bed and held Jefferson in his arms for two days until Jefferson finally succumbed to his wounds three days after the battle. Ezekiel who had always wanted to be an artist rather than a soldier returned to VMI after the war, went on to Europe to study, was knighted by the king of Italy and became a famous artist. He designed the Confederate Soldiers Memorial in Arlington Cemetery, among many other famous memorials. He was originally buried in Rome but now rests at the foot of this memorial.



The six cadets that died on the battlefield were originally buried in the St. Matthews Cemetery in New Market, Virginia. In the Spring of 1866 four of them were relocated to the cemetery at VMI and two were returned to their families.

