

# The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism at Ante-Bellum West Point, 1830-1861.

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James L. Morrison

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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On December 19, 1860 Cadet John Y. Wofford, having relinquished his appointment, asked permission to leave West Point immediately rather than await the Secretary of War's formal approval of his resignation. In justification of this request Wofford wrote: . . . there can be no doubt now that my state, South Carolina, will take her destiny in her own hands either for weal or for woe . . . And I (being an only son) think it a most sacred duty to protect my mother in time of danger. . . Ten days later Charles P. Ball of Alabama, the top

cadet in the Second (Junior) Class, availing himself of a privilege traditionally extended to departing students, called the battalion to "Attention!" in the mess hall after supper and in ringing tones shouted, "Good-bye, boys! God bless you all!"<sup>2</sup> The Civil War had come to West Point. In the months that followed seventy-four southern<sup>3</sup> cadets either resigned their appointments or suffered dismissal for refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Neither those who left nor the other southerners who remained loyal and stayed at West Point had a Freeman to record for them, as he did for Lee, the agonies of their dilemma; only their letters and those of their friends can speak for them. Cadet Henry DuPont, for instance, recounted the plight of his comrade John Pelham, an Alabamian who wanted badly to remain at the Academy but who felt nonetheless that "it would be his duty to give up his own inclination and interests" if called upon to defend his native state. Another cadet, Edward Anderson of Virginia, found himself in the same predicament. Writing his mother in April, 1861, Anderson reported sadly, "I have refused to take the oath. ... I actually cried. ... I know well that I resign everything." And a letter from the father of Cadet John Marchbank to the Chief of Engineers reflects similar regret. Wofford to Adjutant, USMA, Dec. 19, 1860, USWA Adjutant's Letters Received, USMA Archives (hereafter cited as ALR).<sup>2</sup> Tully McRae to Belle McRae, Dec. 29, 1860, in Catherine S. Crary (ed.), *Letters From a Cadet and Officer to his Sweetheart, 1858-1865*, (Middletown, Conn., 1965), p. 73. Morris Schaff, *The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1860*, (Boston, 1908), p. 83. Joseph P. Farley, *West Point in the Early Sixties*, (Troy, N.Y., 1902), p. 24.<sup>3</sup> "Southern" and "South," as used herein, refer to the eleven Confederate States.<sup>4</sup> *Register of Graduates and Former Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1802-1963*, (West Point, N.Y., 1963), pp. 251-255. 138 Until lately I had intended for him to remain there until he graduated and then to enter the service of his country for life. My state, in the present distracted and troubled condition of the country, will not act with your government; therefore, I do not think it right for your department to be at the expense of educating the sons of Tennessee, and for this reason my son has permission to resign his appointment. ... I write this in sorrow.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, most southern cadets tried to postpone the fateful choice as long as possible, but with secession they could delay no longer. When that day came, each had to decide whether to stand by the Union or go with his native state. Such, for example, was the quandary of Cadet Thomas Rowland who had hoped earlier that Virginia would remain in the Union but who had come to realize by mid-April, 1861 that he too must make the bitter choice. We cannot hesitate; we must either make up our minds to fight under the Stars and Stripes ... or we must resign at once and free ourselves from that solemn oath to serve the United States Tionedy and faithfully against all their enemies or opposers whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> Students were not the only ones who left West Point in the spring of 1861; two officers of the garrison departed for the same reason. One was no less a personage than the head of the institution, P. G. T..

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