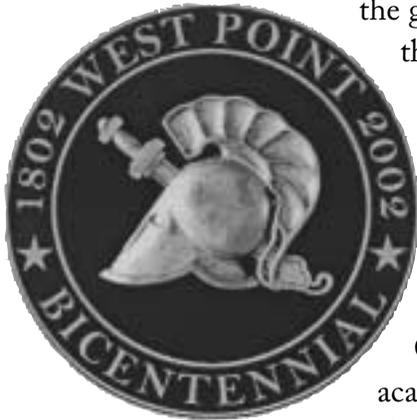




West Point: Jefferson's Military Academy

On January 1821, Professor Jared Mansfield wrote to Thomas Jefferson from West Point:

“The Superintendent, Officers, Professors, Instructors, & Cadets of the United States Military Academy, impressed, with a high sense of the great services, you have rendered the Nation, & that this Institution, with which they are connected, originated under your patronage, & presidency, are anxious for some special, & appropriate memorial of your person, which may descend to posterity.”



The library at the U.S. Military Academy, Mansfield informed Jefferson, had portraits of George Washington and of Jonathan Williams, the academy's first

superintendent. Would Jefferson, Mansfield asked, “gratify them” by sitting for Thomas Sully, one of the “best Portrait Painters of our Country,” at Monticello?

By 1802, when President Jefferson established the United States Military Academy, he had fully embraced the importance of “useful sciences” in education and in the protection of the young nation.

Two years earlier, Jefferson had written to Pierre S. du Pont de Nemours, asking: “What are the branches of science which in the present state of man, and particularly with us, should be introduced into an academy?” DuPont proposed an all-inclusive plan of national education with primary schools, colleges, and four specialty schools – medicine,

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MONTICELLO



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mines, social science and legislation, and “higher geometry and the sciences that it explains.” With engineering “urging forward the other sciences,” this school would be of the greatest benefit to the nation, du Pont explained. As he told Jefferson: “No nation is in such need of canals as the United States, and most of their ports have no means of exterior defense.”

Just two months after Jefferson's inauguration, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn announced that the president had “decided in favor of the immediate establishment of a military school at West Point and also on the appointment of Major Jonathan Williams” to direct “the necessary arrangements, at that place for the commencement of the school.”

On March 16, 1802, Jefferson affixed his name to the Military Peace Establishment Act, directing that a corps of engineers be established and “stationed at West Point in the state of New York, and shall constitute a Military Academy.” The academy's sole function would be to train engineers, and Williams, grandnephew of Benjamin Franklin, was named superintendent. On July 4, 1802, the U.S. Military Academy formally opened for instruction.

“Our guiding star,” Superintendent Williams said, “is not a little mathematical School, but a great national establishment. ... We must always have it in view that our Officers are to be men of Science, and as such will by their acquirements be entitled to the notice of learned societies.”

In the War of 1812, the enemy British did not capture any works constructed by a graduate of West Point, and perhaps, as historian Henry Adams suggested, “had an engineer been employed at Washington ... the city would have been easily saved.”

Jefferson's military academy, Adams wrote, had “doubled the capacity of the new little American army for resistance, and introduced a new



West Point Museum Collection, U.S. Military Academy

A view of West Point, c.1800, attributed to Archibald Robertson.

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and scientific character into American life.” Jefferson himself said that he “ever considered that establishment as of major importance to our country, and in whatever I could do for it, I viewed myself as performing a duty.”

Today, the Thomas Sully portrait of Thomas Jefferson commissioned by the “Superintendent, Officers, Professors, Instructors, & Cadets of the United States Military Academy” hangs at West Point on the eve of its bicentennial.

— CHRISTINE COALWELL

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