

Staunton, Va., May 10, 1864

Maj. Gen. F. H. Smith, Supt. VMI:

Sigel is moving up the Valley—was at Strasburg last night. I cannot tell you whether this is his destination. I would be glad to have your assistance at once with the cadets and the section of artillery. Bring all the forage and rations you can...

*Yours respectfully,
John C. Breckinridge, Major General*

With this terse communication to Francis H. Smith, Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute, Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge called into service a group

of young men that one historian has called “the Seed Corn of the Confederacy.” While Breckinridge neither desired nor intended to commit the VMI Cadets to battle, his summons demonstrated the desperate situation the Confederacy confronted in the Shenandoah Valley and elsewhere in the Spring of 1864.

Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s strategy was to overwhelm the Confederacy’s fragile resources by attacking in multiple places at the same time. Grant would personally accompany Maj. Gen. George G. Meade’s Army of the Potomac in its confrontation with Lee’s army, which was compelled to shield Richmond from the north. In the Shenandoah Valley, Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel would lead

BATTLE OF NEW

“Put the boys in...”



A view of the “Field of Lost Shoes”.



The Bushong farmhouse.

a Union army of better than 10,000 on a march south to take Staunton and Lynchburg, thereby depriving the Confederacy of the Valley's agricultural bounty, military stores, and vital rail connections.

To counter the Union assault, Lee assigned command of the Department of Western Virginia to John C. Breckinridge. Former U.S. Vice President, Senator, and runner-up to Lincoln in the 1860 election, Breckinridge had proven himself an effective field commander in the western theater. Lee now called upon him to organize Confederate resistance in a territory of 18,000 square miles that encompassed the Shenandoah Valley and portions of present-day West Virginia. Breckinridge had

at his disposal a widely-scattered assortment of veteran infantry regiments, partisan cavalry units and native militia and home-guard units that numbered fewer than 5,000.

Given his limited available manpower, it was natural for Breckinridge to turn to Virginia Military Institute. Established in 1839, the Institute had contributed nearly 2,000 graduates to the Confederate cause, as well as its most famous faculty member, Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. But the "Hero of the Valley" had been dead for a year, and now Breckinridge was charged with holding this vital area against Sigel's advance. The Corps of Cadets, numbering nearly 250 infantry and an artillery section of two guns, answered his call of May 10 and marched north to Staunton to join the gathering Confederate force.

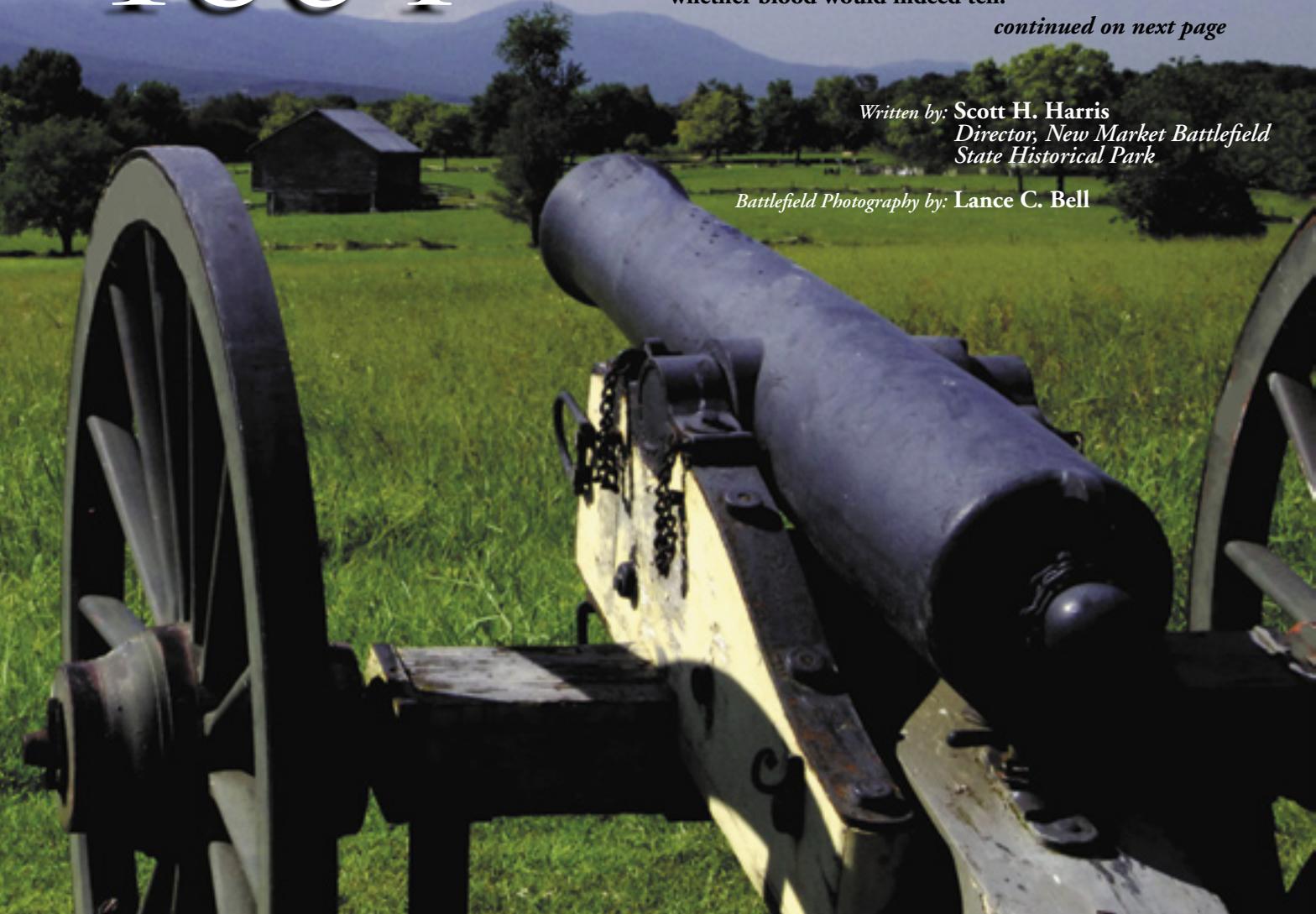
Scions of some of Virginia's most distinguished families, the cadets were young, the average age being 16. Even their colonel, Scott Shipp (VMI Class of 1859) was only in his twenties. Their youth, and the fact that they had unsoiled uniforms and pristine muskets, made the cadets easy targets for salty comments from veteran troops. Only time, and combat if it came, would prove whether blood would indeed tell.

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Battlefield Photography by: Lance C. Bell

MARKET 1864



Sigel's southward advance was slow and careful. By detaching portions of his cavalry to deal with threats from Confederate partisans, he reduced the force that would fight at New Market. A clash between Union and Confederate cavalry at New Market Gap in Massanutten Mountain on May 13 set the stage for the battle that would occur two days later. The only crossing point along the 45-mile ridge, the gap provided ready access to eastern Virginia, where Grant and Lee were preparing for their series of grinding battles. Sigel ordered Col. Augustus Moor to take an improvised brigade to New Market, where on the 14th they forced Confederate troops under Brig. Gen. John D. Imboden to withdraw until Breckinridge could arrive with the main army.

The morning of May 15 brought intermittent thunderstorms and the promise of decisive battle at New Market. Moor's Union troops held the town, and exchanged artillery fire with Confederate batteries on Shirley's Hill, roughly a mile to the South. Breckinridge had virtually his entire force on hand, numbering nearly 5,000. In contrast, Sigel's larger army was scattered down the Valley Pike nearly 20 miles; barely 6,000 men would be engaged, giving the Confederates better odds.

While Breckinridge hoped the Union army would attack his strong position on Shirley's Hill, it soon became apparent that the reverse was true. Moor withdrew his troops to Bushong's Hill on the farm of the same name north and west of New Market, sending urgent messages for the rest of the army to join him. Seizing the momentum, Breckinridge declared "I can attack and whip them here, and I'll do it." He ordered a general advance from Shirley's Hill, taking a position on Manor's Hill south of the Bushong farmhouse (where the terrified family had taken refuge in their basement). While the rest of the southern troops ran down the hill, the inexperienced cadets, marching with parade ground precision, suffered their first casualties from Union artillery fire.

Throughout the morning, the two battle lines exchanged musket and cannon fire across the Bushongs' sodden wheat fields. Twice Sigel ordered charges that fell apart from lack of coordination. Despite the lack of progress, the Union fire savaged the Confederate regiments sufficiently to open a gap in the center of their line north of the Bushongs' orchard. With no other reserves available, Breckinridge

reluctantly ordered the VMI cadets into line, saying, "Put the boys in, and may God forgive me for the order."

The four companies of cadets divided around the Bushong house and regrouped along a fence at the edge of the field some 200 yards from the Union line. When a cavalry assault ordered by Sigel was repulsed, Breckinridge sensed the moment had come for the climactic charge, and ordered his entire line forward. As the cadets moved through the muddy, ruined wheat, many had the shoes sucked from their feet, giving the ground the legendary name the "Field of Lost Shoes." The Confederate charge drove Sigel's army back across Smith Creek and captured several cannon that could not be removed in time. One of the guns was taken by the cadets, giving them the ultimate infantryman's prize in their baptism of fire.



Reinactment photo courtesy New Market Battlefield Museum

As disorganization and low ammunition slowed the Confederate attack, a Union artillery battery commanded by Capt. Henry du Pont arrived in time to cover the Union retreat with effective fire. Breckinridge called a halt and sent the cadets to the rear, declaring, "Well done, Virginians. Well done, men." Overall, Sigel's army had more than 800 men killed, wounded, or missing, while Breckinridge's losses topped 500. Ten VMI cadets had been killed or had received mortal wounds, and another 50 would recover from other wounds. Blood did tell, indeed.

The Confederate triumph at New Market safeguarded the left flank of the Army of Northern Virginia, and helped prolong the Civil War for another year. For the Shenandoah Valley, the fruits of victory were short-lived. Two days after the battle, Breckinridge and most of his command left to join Lee's army in the fight against Grant. A reconstituted Federal army under a new commander, Gen. David Hunter, marched south to Lexington and burned VMI in retaliation for the cadets' role at New Market. The destruction was overseen, under protest, by Henry du Pont. [Decades later, as a United States Senator, du Pont would sponsor legislation to compensate VMI for the damage, allowing construction in 1915 of Jackson Memorial Hall. This building is today home of the VMI Museum, and features a massive painting of the charge of the VMI Cadets at New Market by Benjamin West Clinedinst.]

The enduring image of the Battle of New Market is the participation of the VMI cadets. While they did not fight

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and win the battle by themselves, they gave it an unique aspect. Never before, nor since, has an entire student body been called from its classrooms into pitched battle. The cadets acquitted themselves well in combat, and VMI has preserved their legacy as an example to successive generations of cadets. Each May 15, in a ceremony dating to 1866, the ten young soldiers of the Institute who lost their lives in the battle are commemorated in a ceremonial roll call. It takes place before the graves of six of the cadets, marked by the statue, *Virginia Mourning Her Dead*, created by sculptor Moses Ezekiel, himself a New Market cadet.

Years after the Battle of New Market, Captain Franklin Town, a Union veteran of the conflict, wrote a letter to a VMI alumnus that described the cadet's charge in terms that touched on the timeless qualities of their accomplishment:

As a military spectacle it was most beautiful, and as a deed of war it was most grand. When such young men fall in a cause in which they believe, whether it is intrinsically right or wrong, one may realize the sadness of cutting off a life so full of promise, yet all—those who approved and those who opposed the cause they died for—will accord them the tribute of sincere respect and admiration. I don't believe the history of war contains the record of a deed more chivalrous, more daring, or more honorable, than the charge of these boys to a victory which veterans might well boast.

For VMI, the New Market legacy is more than the record of a particular Civil War battle. Rather, it is a lesson in duty, bravery, and commitment. Like the young men of 1864 who were called upon to make the supreme sacrifice, successive generations of VMI cadets have faced their own "New Markets," whether on battlefields around the world, or in other walks of life. It is a proud heritage that continues to inspire.



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