

A. J. DAVIS: CREATOR OF V.M.I. GOTHIC

By M. W. Paxton Jr.
The Fortnightly Club, November, 1965

ALEXANDER JACKSON DAVIS had completed his plans for the Hudson River Gothic mansion now known as Lyndhurst when the first twenty cadets marched to the snow-covered Lexington arsenal for the inauguration of the Virginia Military Institute.

The highly successful New York architect and the struggling new military college seemed worlds apart on that November 11, 1839. Yet in less than ten years' time was to begin a long association between the man who has been called "the country's leading architect of secular Gothic" and the Virginia Military Institute.

Describing the conditions at the founding of the Virginia Military Institute, General Francis H. Smith, its builder and rebuilder, wrote:

It was a most unpropitious day to begin the important work in hand. . . .

A heavy snow rested on the ground. The work on the barracks had been delayed, and the buildings were in a most unfinished condition — without roof, and no rooms in a condition to be occupied except those used by the old guard. The Superintendent had to crowd the little band of Virginia youths, who had accepted their appointments as cadets expecting comfort, at least, eight in a room in

extemporized bunks, without shelter overhead. No fuel had been laid in. Their provisions had to be cooked in the sally-port, and every conceivable discomfort existed."

In addition to the twenty state cadets, there were twelve pay cadets on the rolls at the end of that first year.

In spite of the physical hardships that year and the very rigorous examinations given orally in the presence of the board of visitors, the institute's patronage the following year succeeded "the most sanguine expectations." The number of cadets doubled and the increase was exclusively in the pay cadet category.

The progress of the new institution continued.

As Superintendent Smith, who then held the rank of colonel, expressed it, "By a steady adherence to the fundamental principles which had been enunciated at the beginning: viz., *thoroughness in the distinctive scientific education supplied, and perfect discipline*, the Virginia Military Institute, which had been started as a doubtful experiment, so advanced, year by year, in the public confidence and in the public support, that the number of applicants for admission, as pay cadets, largely exceeded its ability to accommodate."

Discussions among institute leaders of the needs of the school culminated in a report to the board by General Smith in June 1848, calling for an appeal to the Virginia legislature for an appropriation of \$50,000 for removal of the old barracks and construction of a new building, "upon the most approved architectural plan, so that the institution should be presented in its buildings and grounds in such proportions and beauty as would be in harmony with its established reputation."

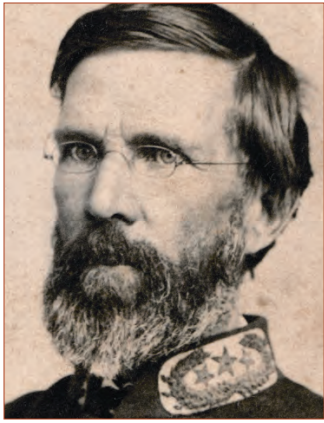
The most ardent supporter of this project was Philip St. George Cocke. Named a member of the board in 1846, Cocke "was a man of great wealth who brought to the V.M.I. board a great enthusiasm," according to Col. William Couper, V.M.I. historian.

The aristocratic planter, whose father had been instrumental in the founding of the University of Virginia, hoped to see V.M.I. become the great polytechnic insti-



Alexander Jackson Davis,
1803–92, gave VMI its
architectural personality

Mr. Paxton was the editor and publisher of the *Lexington News-Gazette* from 1952 to 1994. He is a 1949 graduate of Washington and Lee University and earned a graduate degree in journalism from Columbia. He notes: "The story of this fruitful association is richly documented in letters which have fortunately been carefully preserved in the V.M.I. archives. Col. George B. Davis, V.M.I. librarian, has been most kind and helpful in making this material available to the writer."



Superintendent Francis H. Smith, left, and board member Philip St. George Cocke, right, were Davis's patrons at the institute. (Both pictures courtesy of VMI Archives.)



tute of the South, and he yearned to provide it with a physical plant of architectural excellence and taste.

He wrote in July of 1848: "Would it not be well to form at once, an adequate and tasteful design for the future extension of the buildings In the end an harmonious whole shall be procured — beautiful and inspiring in style as well as commodious and well adapted to the purposes in view."

General William H. Richardson, another V.M.I. board member who supported the new barracks idea, suggested that the case might be more forcibly presented to the legislature if plans were prepared in advance. Cocke, who in the preceding ten years had spent about \$60,000 on the buildings at Belmead, his plantation in Powhatan County, proposed the employment of his architect, Alexander Jackson Davis.

When Major William Gilham, of the V.M.I. faculty, went to New York in the fall to purchase philosophical and chemistry apparatus, he called on Davis.

Satisfactory terms were agreed upon, and on November 6 the superintendent wrote Davis summarizing the barracks project.

The letter, in Colonel Smith's clear handwriting, is still quite legible today. It eloquently attests to the fact that, although Mr. Davis was drawing the plans, Colonel Smith had developed the layout in great detail. Some excerpts from that letter will illustrate how strongly the first superintendent put his stamp upon the Virginia Military Institute:

The main front of the building to be, say 225 to 240 feet.

The depth of the square to be 150 feet. The plan will then form a rectangle

The Barracks to be made four stories high, with the barrack rooms opening upon piazzas in the inside of the square, the rooms to accommodate three cadets and to be about 20 x 16 feet or equivalent. The object being to accommodate 200 cadets.

The barracks to be heated with hot air it is proposed also to light with solar gas.

The estimate for completing one main front and one lateral front . . . not to exceed \$30,000.00.

The Barracks to be entered by one arched door in front.

The barracks rooms for the cadets to be entirely disconnected from each other.

The main front faces south, the east front faces the river, the west front faces the town. It is proposed now to complete the southern and western fronts, but in the plan for the western front regard should be had to its prominence in facing the town of Lexington and also the parade ground. The stage road passes parallel with the southern front.

The building, as outlined by the superintendent, was to include not only cadet living quarters, but also "a philosophical academy embracing arrangements for chemical laboratory, instruments, etc., two lecture rooms . . . two debating society halls . . . and a library room."

And, the superintendent duly noted, "Such a plan and estimate Maj. G. informs me you will prepare for \$50.00."

This notation would hardly seem to bear out an assertion made by Wayne Andrews in his book *Architecture, Ambition and Americans** that the work done for V.M.I. by Davis was "a spectacular commission."

By the first of December, according to Col. Couper, Davis had his sketch plans in good shape and forwarded them to Lexington with the remark: "I have now performed all that was proposed to Major Gilham and with the calculations I have made I cannot think a cheaper building could be devised for the accommodation, or that the part colored red on plans, would exceed the sum of \$30,000.00. Indeed, it may cost just what you will, by adding or cutting off 17 foot sections at pleasure. . . . P.S. I think the building would look well in the natural brick color, without stucco, using stone for coping and foundations."

Col. Smith replied on January 13, 1849, "Absence in Richmond has delayed my attention to the claim you have against this institution for the elegant drawing you so promptly prepared for it. Above is check for \$50.00."

Further impetus was given to the proposal for a new barracks by a petition to the legislature from the corps of cadets, which stated that the existing barracks rooms, measuring 15 x 16 feet, were each occupied by four men; that fifty wood fires had to be kept burning day and night and that some rooms were often flooded with water.

* Wayne Andrews in *Architecture, Ambition and Americans: A Social History of American Architecture* (1955, Harper)

Col. Smith and Col. Cocke presented the case to the General Assembly in Richmond and the action that came out of that Assembly March 16, 1849, injected a new note into the institute's planning for the future.

The bill called for the V.M.I. board of visitors to investigate the possibilities of finding "a more suitable location for the Institute . . . combining the advantages of health and grounds better adapted to all military exercises." The act was prompted, at least in part, by an unfriendly atmosphere fostered by some local merchants as well as by certain elements at Washington College.

Col. Smith himself favored a move of the institution to Mount Vernon. He noted in his history of V.M.I. that "the friends of the Institute had seen, with great dissatisfaction, the unfriendly, if not hostile attitude sustained by the town of Lexington toward the Virginia Military Institute, as exhibited: first, in the presentment by the grand jury and subsequent prosecution of the Superintendent, upon the charge of selling goods without a license; second, in the effort to assail the Institute and its administration upon the charge of sectarianism; and, third, in the still more serious attempt made by the Trustees and Faculty of Washington College to circumscribe the work of the Institute. . . ."

The grand jury action against the superintendent had been brought when he took the procurement of cadet uniforms out of town. The case was dismissed upon motion of counsel for Col. Smith, the Hon. John White Brockenbrough.

The directive of the legislature was a bombshell in Lexington.

A public meeting of citizens held in the Court House on June 4, 1849, and presided over by former Governor James McDowell, passed a resolution urging retention of the school in Lexington, and calling on Washington College to join in a similar resolution. The document stated, in part, "we rejoice to see the harmony that prevails between the professors, students and cadets of the two institutions And we are gratified to find that the only effect of their being located in the same vicinity has been to stimulate the professors and students in both to extraordinary exertions in their respective avocations."

On the twenty-first of the same month, the trustees of Washington College resolved that they had "no desire for any change in the present location of the Virginia Military Institute . . . and there need be no conflict between the two institutions to disturb their present harmonious relations."

In the late summer the board of visitors began an investigation of sites ranging from Winchester, Romney, Martinsburg and Alexandria to Waynesboro, Buchanan and Salem. The board then met in Lexington on September 15 and decided that "considering the extent and cost of the buildings already erected here, and the great

loss the State would sustain by removal to another place, the board therefore deem it inexpedient to remove the Institute from its present location."

A RENEWED REQUEST TO THE LEGISLATURE for \$46,000, including \$30,000 for the new barracks, won approval by large majorities in each house in an act passed March 8, 1850.

No one in Lexington knew of the passage of the bill when Col. Smith returned to town from Richmond, and the Superintendent's own account of his breaking the news reveals a genuine sense of humor.

I kept it a profound secret from everyone but my wife; and requesting her to have a nice supper prepared, I wrote a note to Major [J. T. L.] Preston, and invited him to come down and bring our friend John B. Lyle with him, and take supper, and I would then give them an account of the condition and prospects of our bill. They promptly came, but found me very slow to answer their many questions. I told them I had a great deal to talk about, that I had had a long ride, was very hungry, and after we had all taken a good supper and then a smoke, I would be prepared to talk about public matters. There was nothing in my manner to indicate success. . . .

At last supper was over and we were all seated around the fire . . . and allowing my wife to form one of the council, I commenced to unfold my budget.

"Well, gentlemen, what do you think here as to the prospects of our bill?" Preston said: "Well, I am in hopes the visit of the cadets will have a good effect." But Lyle put in: "Too much money for the State to appropriate. I always thought Smith was too sanguine in expecting to get \$50,000"

In conversation of this kind some half hour or more was spent, and as the minutes glided on, and no revelation made by me of the result, the hopes of both seemed to be getting lower and lower. . . .

When Major Preston said: "Well, Colonel, when do you think our bill will come up, for it is getting late in the session?" I replied, "Our bill was called up on the eighth of March," speaking very slowly, "on its final passage," and, putting my hand to my pocket I went through the form of drawing out a bag, "and here I have the neat little sum of forty-six thousand dollars to begin with"

"What's that you say?" asked Preston. "None of your nonsense," said Lyle, and neither would be satisfied until I showed them the documents in a certified copy of the Act of March 8, 1850.

The superintendent wasted no time but communicated immediately with A. J. Davis, sending him back the barracks plans for the completion of details. He

seemed to be somewhat worried by the hot air furnaces, as, he observed, “heating by furnaces is altogether new with us.”

He explained that the new barracks would be erected ten feet in front of the then existing barracks building, a hodgepodge extension of the original armory building.

He also gave his reasons for recommending a stucco finish for the new buildings, a decision that has been something of a bone of contention ever since.

He suggested stucco, he said, first because of its general effect, second because of its use on existing buildings, and third because local workmen “cannot give us the finished bricks which northern art furnishes.”

A lengthy correspondence was begun between the superintendent and the New York architect.

The cornerstone for the barracks was laid on July 4, 1850, and the front section of the main building was occupied in September 1851.

The Institute has preserved a number of the letters written by Davis to the superintendent in the spring of 1850. In some of them the architect sketched various details that were being discussed.

In a letter on March 15, he stated that he will “proceed immediately to prepare details” for the barracks plan. He adds that he will send in the meantime a rough sketch for the professors’ houses “so as to get your views by the time the details are ready for the barracks.”

The houses referred to were the two located between the present superintendent’s house and the barracks. They were built in 1853, were burned during the Civil War, were reconstructed and were then moved back and reconstructed again when the parade ground was enlarged in 1914.*

On March 19, 1850, Davis asked the superintendent for a rough sketch of the rooms necessary in the professors’ houses, giving “size, number, uses and materials you would use (not pitch pine and plaster, I hope).”

“I’ll hint,” he continued, “that one large room 16 to 18 by 20 to 24 might suffice, the rest (even the dining room) may be small, say 12 by 18 or 14 by 14, or with a bay window 10 by 14 is not a bad room for a modest professor.

“These professors’ houses, standing on a slope, as I learn . . . should from economy of walking be made as narrow as possible. Besides, a dumpy mass, say 40 by 40, tho somewhat cheaper, would look petty in its narrow front. . . .”

* Built for Professors William Gilham, chemistry, and Thomas Williamson, engineering. Professor Gilham’s survives as the Maury House, residence of the commandant and family. The Williamson House was demolished in the 1960s to make way for Lejeune Hall (now incorporated into the Third Barracks, completed in 2008).

Going on to a discussion of the barracks plans, the architect writes:

Think not of any rooms in the cellar On a slope the rooms would be damp. . . . A great objection to having habitable rooms in the basement is the necessity of riddling the wall for light where above all it should look like solid rock.

I will propose that whatever wood you use for doors and inside work be avowed for what it is, not be painted at all — oiled perhaps and lac varnished. You have an abundance of black walnut, I believe — no matter if it be pine. You may turn it into ebony by means of nitric acid.

This castle-like design would look very well without stucco or paint, leaving the walls brick color, but if desirable to refine a little, a stucco finish would doubtless give more general satisfaction, and a granite imitation would be suitable.

Davis concluded by saying that business would call him to “Stanton” in April, and he hoped to stop in Lexington to “visit and examine your site and get just views of the fitness of things.”

We are indebted to Philip St. George Cocke for verification of the fact that Davis did actually visit the institute that spring.

Cocke wrote Col. Smith on April 21, 1850, indicating that Davis was then in Lexington and expressing a desire to see him at Belmead to confer with him about the plans and also about improvements at his own place.

It takes quite a bit of deciphering to make out Cocke’s scrawly handwriting, but the fact emerges from this letter that he is most anxious for the new V.M.I. buildings to be finished in stone.

He writes: “Stone is certainly the most appropriate material for Gothic buildings and is more durable than brick and stucco, and I suppose would be cheaper too. Houses are built of limestone everywhere in the Valley and I see it is used generally for foundations at Lexington and even at the Institute.”

A letter from Cocke to Smith in May followed a visit by Davis to Belmead.

The writer admits that “Davis agrees that stone would be more expensive” for the barracks construction.

“I am quite pleased with Davis’ plan for the professors’ houses,” Cocke continues. “He is certainly a most accomplished fellow in his line. The castellated and battlemented Gothic style which he has adopted is most suitable for military building and is the plainest and cheapest style we could have selected.”

Cocke’s admiration for Davis’ work found expression on another occasion in a letter to the architect himself in which he exclaimed: “If I were autocrat or even emperor . . . I should delight with your aid to build up the waste places, repair di-

lapidation . . . and beautify the goodly and glorious heritage of our Rip Van Winkle people.”

During this period when V.M.I. was establishing its architectural identity, A. J. Davis was a busy man.

In 1850, at the age of 47, he was at the peak of his career, with clients scattered from New England to Kentucky and Virginia.

Some years earlier he had been selected to be one of a committee of three to arrange and issue the call for the first meeting of the American Institute of Architects, and thus was a founder of the A.I.A.

Born in New York City, the son of a Congregationalist theologian, he was convinced by Rembrandt Peale, the well-known painter, that his aptitudes lay in the field of architecture.

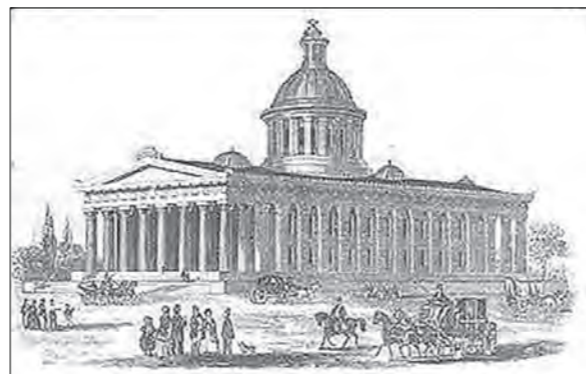
After studying under John Trumbull, painter of Revolutionary scenes, and perfecting his genius for rendering in Boston, he was invited in 1828 to become the partner of Ithiel Town, a successful architect who had gained wealth from his invention of the lattice truss for covered bridges.

Town had the finest architectural library in the country and Davis had ample opportunity, especially when his partner was on extended trips, to study the collection.

The partnership lasted for seven years, from 1829 to 1835, and resumed briefly in 1842–43, when Davis found that he had more commissions than he could handle alone.

Among the impressive commissions of Town and Davis were the state capitols of Indiana and North Carolina and the New York Customs House, all in the Greek Revival style.

But Davis was strongly drawn to the Gothic style and it is in this romantic genre that he made his great contribution to American architecture.



Two state capitols designed by Town & Davis: left, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1840; Indianapolis, Indiana, 1835 (demolished 1877), illustration courtesy of Columbia University.



Lyndhurst, the Gothic revival country house on New York's Hudson River, designed by Davis in 1838 and acquired in 1880 by railroad tycoon Jay Gould.

His interest in this style brought him into association with one of the most influential arbiters of taste in that day.

Andrew Jackson Downing, who, it is said, “interpreted the architecture of his generation with a grace denied to American commentators before or since,” chose Davis as his collaborator for his books on landscape gardening. The first of these appeared in 1841. Davis contributed most if not all of the Gothic and Italian illustrations for Downing's books.

The interesting observation has been made by several writers that the Gothic revival, representing as it did a rebellion against the narrow rules of the classicists, was the forerunner of modern architecture. The asymmetrical opportunities of the Gothic style provided new freedom in the use of space, just as did the abandonment of classical forms bring new freedom to the concurrent romantic era in music.

To Davis and his associates, Gothic was not a matter of archeology or of slavish copying, but rather “the means of suggesting the poetry inherent in the passing of time,” one critic has commented.*

One of Davis' greatest achievements was Lyndhurst, the Gothic mansion referred to at the beginning of this paper. Started in 1848, it was more than doubled in size in 1864–67 under Davis' design. It is considered the finest example of the

* Andrews, *op. cit.*

American Gothic Revival mansion. Lyndhurst is situated on the Hudson River, where the craggy landscape helped foster a great interest in the Gothic Revival.

Lyndhurst, once owned by railroad magnate Jay Gould, was left [in 1961] to the National Trust for Historic Preservation by Gould's daughter, Anna, Duchess of Talleyrand-Perigord, and was opened to the public by the National Trust earlier this year [1965].



Top: Lexington Presbyterian Manse, 1848, emulating the style of A. J. Downing; Henry Delamater house, Rhinebeck, N.H., 1844, by Davis.

His Grecian buildings included the old library of the University of North Carolina, which later became the Playmakers' Theater, and the administration building at Davidson College, which has vanished from the scene.

His only Moorish style building was the house of Senator William S. Archer of Virginia.

Belmead, the Gothic house he created at Powhatan for Philip St. George Cocke, has been stripped of its umbrage, the Gothic term for porch, and now serves as the administration building for St. Emma's, a Roman Catholic School.

Davis' plans for this house, along with his plans for V.M.I. and his other outstanding creations, are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The old New York University building, by Town and Davis (1832), was one of the earlier major achievements in secular Gothic.

A residence designed for Henry Delamater of Rhinebeck, New Hampshire, in 1844 bears a striking resemblance to the Lexington Presbyterian manse.

In addition to the Gothic mode, Davis designed buildings in the Grecian, Italian and Moorish styles then popular.

In the Italian style Davis drew the plans for Locust Grove, the residence of Samuel F. B. Morse, near Poughkeepsie. A more imposing structure by Davis in this style is the State Hospital for the Insane at Raleigh, North Carolina.

Belmead, the Powhatan County estate of Philip St. George Cocke, member and eventually president of the V.M.I. board and Davis's great champion. A National Historic Landmark, Belmead is now owned by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and operated as a Catholic high school.



After drawing the plans for the V.M.I. barracks and the faculty houses, Davis designed the old mess hall on which construction was completed in 1854.

The years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Civil War brought another flurry of building activity on the V.M.I. post, and there was another lively exchange of correspondence between the V.M.I. superintendent and the architect.

Davis wrote Col. Smith on September 15, 1859: "Am glad to hear of the flourishing condition and prospects of the V.M.I." He agreed to have plans for proposed additions ready before a board meeting in October.

"My copy of your barrack plan exhibits the sides in all respects like the front, 236.8 feet and what better arrangement could be made? If this does not furnish room enough, the square might be enclosed as per red color."

On May 18, 1860, Col. Smith wrote Davis that his plan for the superintendent's house "pleases me mightily. . . . Mrs. Smith is altogether pleased with the provision made for her."

Well might they be pleased with the plans. Though not ostentatious or elaborate in detail, the superintendent's house eloquently bespeaks Davis' originality, his eye for graceful shapes and proportions, and his feeling for space. The house was built in 1860.



Old V.M.I. mess hall. Undated photo by Michael Miley (Library of Congress; copy in Rockbridge Historical Society archives at Washington and Lee University).



Davis's rendering of his proposed superintendent's house at V.M.I., 1860. Courtesy V.M.I. Archives.

One detail which was not mentioned here, but which became a family story and is recalled by Col. Smith's granddaughter, Miss Nettie Smith, is that the superintendent's wife quietly insisted that the casement windows typical of the Gothic style were not for her. Her windows must go up and down. And for many years, and maybe even today, they are the only double-hung windows in the parade ground buildings.

The superintendent wrote to Davis on May 21, 1860, that excavation had commenced for the foundation of the eastern wing of barracks.

He comments: "It has occurred that we might save the immense cellar the slope of the hill would give by allowing the building to follow the slope of the hill.

"From the corner of the wing as completed I can run back some 90 feet or more. Suppose we round that corner and then run to the northwest by the line of the hill. This would make our area an irregular polygon. Let me know what you think. It struck me we might have something of the effect at the corner like the round tower at Windsor Castle."

The discussion on this suggestion waxes rather heated. We find a letter from Davis to the superintendent in November of that year stating: "And now for the Barracks. I am as little wedded to symmetry as any person living (though my wife is quite symmetrical) and yet it has appeared to me from the first that your barracks ought to be 'orderly and well balanced.' Now are we to give up the hope of making our front face the Parade? and with this view to extend a wing on the right of a bold

center and thus dominate over the southeast front? . . . And why should your barrack look askance at the town, and over its shoulder at the Parade?

"Is it not probable that enlarged accommodations will be required?" Davis asks. Then, in an imaginary dialogue, he replies, "Yes, more accommodation is wanted now."

"Then why not extend?"

"Because the ground will not admit of it."

"Ah! That should have been thought of at the outset, and a general plan secured for all time. Is there a general plan?"

"Not any very definite one, as we are adding to our grounds, and cannot see exactly how our plot may lie together next year or next century."

"Very well then, plot, front and face with reference to this state of things, providing for all contingencies."

"Ah, would we could!"

"Is it too late?"

"No, we have only to contend with a little piece of low ground on one side of our parade and the limited contents of our purse."

Sketching out a rough plan for the quadrangle in this letter, Davis then goes on to argue for the closing of the court, even if some parts of the building would have to remain unfinished on the inside.

Again the pen proved mightier than the sword. A letter from Davis in February indicated that he had won his point and plans were progressing for construction of a quadrangle whose outer dimensions would be 225 feet by 326.

As the eve of war approached, considerable attention is given in the letters to the question of the location and space in barracks to be occupied by the armory.

In 1860 the V.M.I. superintendent and Philip St. George Cocke, then president of the institute board of visitors, had been named two of the three members of the state munitions commission, and the study and procurement of arms was occupying a considerable part of their time.

In 1861 Cocke, with the rank of brigadier general, was in command of all military operations along the Potomac. At First Manassas he commanded a brigade that played a strategic role in the victory.

He was reduced in rank to colonel when a reduction in the number of general officers was ordered by the Virginia Convention. He was greatly embittered by this and it evidently affected his mind. On the day after Christmas, 1861, while on leave at home, he fatally shot himself.

For the last fifteen years of his life he had been a devoted leader of the Virginia Military Institute. Though references here have been confined to his role in bring-



Restored barracks, ca. 1875. Photo by Michael Miley.

ing the institute and the architect together, he expressed the hope that V.M.I. would become “the great school of the physical sciences,” and he gave the Institute \$20,000 to establish a chair in agriculture.

THE MAIN SURGE of the Gothic revival had about run its course by the outbreak of the Civil War, but its outstanding exponent was called back into service for the post-war rebuilding of the Virginia Military Institute.

In October of 1869, Davis replied to a letter from General Smith that he was “much gratified at your progress with the barrack restoration.”

Asking whether all of his pre-war plans were lost in the burning of the institute, he observed that if they were “it will take time to make out the whole of so great a work and I must send such items as you first need and designate by piece-meal.”

The architect outlines the work he had done from 1859 to 1861, including:

“General plan for barracks addition with an elevation for new front, October 15, 1859.” The charge for this work was \$50. Also, among many other items, “Maj. Gilham called and we passed the day in planning, \$10.”

Of the total fees of \$160, \$70 had been paid on account February 14, 1861, and a balance of \$90 was still due.

“Few or none of these drawings were duplicated,” Davis wrote, “much being in letters and others too elaborate to admit of being copied at the very small amount charged as fees, compared with ordinary demands by architects, the same being a labor of love in good part”

It can be assumed that the pre-war plans were destroyed in the sacking of the institute, as Davis goes on to say that he would proceed with preparing the plans he

had duplicates of and he asked the superintendent to help him recall others. “I shall presume that we had all digested well and that we wish to adhere to what we made in 1861,” he comments.

A week later he was writing to General Smith: “I send you a general plan of the entire block of barrack building by which alone the additions and mode of extending the pile can be judged as expedient and all wants be provided for at the smallest cost. And here it is that I may be able to save you two or three thousand dollars. At this you will cry, hear! hear!”

Two days later he writes expressing his displeasure at the news that the level of the parade is eight feet above the line of the principal floor of the barrack building. “The whole mass will appear from the parade as sunken in the earth,” he laments.

He concludes with a typical Davis comment, “It is a great work and requires much discussion. God himself assisted David in a plan for the temple, but who shall assist us?”

His letters that followed in ensuing weeks were rich in literary allusions. Discussing the placement of stairs to the chapel he wrote: “To place the stairs in the towers only will be ‘by indirection to find direction out.’”

He accompanied his plans for the chapel on November 10 with an eloquent plea for their acceptance in all their Gothic richness:

“In the V.M.I. you will agree with me that the buildings should be as correct as it is in our power to make them, with regard to the style adopted, both within and without; and that our audience hall should be shaped and seated according to the laws of phonics etc., and that cadets returning to their homes should be enabled to serve on building committees and have a competent knowledge of Castellated, Collegiate, Memorial and Domestic Gothic . . . that the stigma justly cast upon American architecture shall no longer apply.

“I do not ask that you should yield one iota in regard to convenience and appropriate use, for

“Can beauty deign to dwell

“Where use and aptitude are strangers?” also

“Taste, never idly working, saves expense.”

“In all events, our towers and turrets will be of great use as abutments and I leave it to you if their size is not also productive of grandeur.”

The correspondence continued apace throughout 1870. In February he enclosed a large drawing for the memorial chapel, and the finance problem cropped up again.

“I cannot justify myself,” he noted, “in going on with other details as in looking over my diary I find items of drawing to the amount of \$200, and more than this I do not wish to note without your sanction.”

In April he mentioned the fact that the duplicate of his design for the V.M.I. chapel was then in the National Academy spring exhibition.

Later that month we find a remarkable communique from the New York architect.

“My Dear General,” he wrote:

I have a project, first proposed by Capt. Bobadil, which I submit to your ‘high consideration.’ You are to have a topographical survey made of the region around Lexington, with a view to its being made (the whole twelve or more miles) a ‘Rockbridge Park,’ that a nursery or botanic garden for exotic hardy shrubs and trees be got up under the auspices of the V.M.I. or yourself, out of which and at reasonable prices young men of your Institute and others may be induced to invest a small capital in park lots (as places for summer retreat, hunting, etc., after the manner of English sportsmen in Scotland). . . . That Davis be invited to deposit in the library of V.M.I. plans for simple but elegant ‘hut cottages’ to cost, say \$500 to \$5,000 each. . . . Bobadil (a landscape man) to receive one per cent on the whole outlay and the architect one per cent. . . .

That club may serve as a model in its way for the whole people in all parts of the sunny south, ‘high, low, Jack and the game’ (high and low lands are referred to, not people, there are no low people in Virginia) . . . Lexington with its memorial chapel and galleries of art, chemistry, natural history and agriculture and a splendid library would be the Versailles, or rather the Athens of the South and your V.M.I. the very academie of the new world.”*

Whether intended seriously, or a mere lighthearted whim, this letter shows a decided lack of comprehension on the part of Mr. Davis of conditions in the Valley of Virginia five years after the close of the Civil War. The fact should not be overlooked, however, that he showed great interest in helping V.M.I. acquire books to reestablish its library.

There is a sharp change in tone in a letter of July 7, in which the architect complains about the superintendent’s failure to answer questions. He commented acidly: “I presume that you yourself are too much exercised in educational and other present affairs that you cannot give time to the future.”

One gathers from the letters later that year that the Gothic details with which Davis was preoccupied were a bit precious for the down-to-earth superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute.

Davis gives details of windows for the chapel and comments that “the designs of William of Wickham are models for all time.” He is much concerned in another letter over whether “we should not make every part of our chapel iconological.”

The last letters in the V.M.I. collection, dated in October 1870, refer to the architect’s financial embarrassment and report that he has drawn upon the institute’s account for plans he has submitted.

Undoubtedly there was further correspondence, as Davis lived until 1892, dying at the age of 89.[†] And the institute continued to build upon his plans until the present [20th] century. In the work that Bertram Goodhue, another eminent architect, completed for the Institute in 1915, the extension of the north end of the west wing of the barracks was a continuation of Davis’ design, and the Gothic motif was continued in Jackson Memorial Hall and in additional parade ground houses.

It has been said that the style of architecture developed at V.M.I. became a model for military schools throughout the country.

This may be an overstatement.

Jane B. Davies, who has been studying the work of A. J. Davis for nearly a decade, has verified the fact that West Point had Gothic buildings (not Davis’s) before V.M.I. did. But she points out that “as V.M.I. developed, it presented a more unified Gothic appearance,” and she expresses the view that “the Davis design of the V.M.I. Barracks is superior to the West Point one.”

As one of the early Gothic campuses and, certainly, one of the most successful, the Virginia Military Institute buildings have undoubtedly strongly influenced other military campus planners.

[†] General Smith stepped down as superintendent on December 31, 1889, and died three months later at age 77.

* Captain Bobadil is a character in Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in his Humour* (1598), a blustering braggart.