VMI Archives

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The Horse at VMI: In War, in Peace and in Memory

By Anne McClung and Lisa Tracy

In the spring of 1948, a post-war world was seeing hopeful signs of recovery. The Marshall Plan was under way. The U.S. economy was bullish despite threatened strikes by coal, automotive and telephone workers. Congress had just approved the admission to the United States of 200,000 displaced persons from Europe.

Closer to home, Lexington and Rockbridge County were in their usual swirl of late spring events. The *Rockbridge County News* noted the threat of strikes and inflation, but its lead articles focused on a citywide street cleanup in Lexington, valedictorians and graduation speakers, and a panoply of "Finals" activities at Washington and Lee University and Virginia Military Institute.[1]

At VMI, these included graduation parties, barracks inspections (parents and alumni invited), dances formal and informal, multiple parades and Corps reviews, and a horse show, polo match and mounted riding exercises by VMI's celebrated cavalry. Behind the celebration and the ceremony, however, the month of June 1948 was bittersweet on the VMI post. The *County News* summed it up succinctly in the caption under its lead photo of the cavalry on parade, on its June 10 front page: This would be one of the cavalry's final appearances on the parade ground; its horses were to be "disposed of at once, largely to army and marines," and the stables to be converted to classrooms. It was the end of the era of the horse at VMI.[2]

Above: Virginia Military Institute's ROTC cavalry and horse-drawn artillery units on the parade ground, c. 1940.

Photo by Jack Plunkett, class of 1939, in VMI Archives

A garrison review unfolds on the VMI parade ground, likely at Homecoming, 1936.

That era formally began in 1919, though as many people might assume, horsemanship was part of the life of the Institute almost from its beginning. The VMI cadet unit known as the cavalry did not exist from the start, however; in fact, cannons of the cadet artillery unit in the mid-1800s were dragged in drills by the cadets themselves. Institute rules initially forbade cadets to bring with them any personal possessions, including horses and servants.

But as authors Edward Henson, James Morgan and James Morrison note in *Keydet Grey and Garry Owen: The Horse at VMI*, horses and horsemanship were part of the nation's everyday life in the1800s,[3] and by 1858 the Institute had changed its perspective and parents were encouraged to let cadets bring their horses with them.[4] Though there was still no official cavalry unit, cadets and graduates would make their mark in wars where they fought on horseback or alongside horse-drawn artillery. More than two dozen graduates fought in the Mexican War of 1846–48, and in 1861, cadet Preston Chew persuaded Gen. Turner Ashby, Confederate cavalry commander in the Valley, that a horse-drawn artillery battery would augment the cavalry's role on the battlefield. Ashby's Battery was organized, with Chew as his lieutenant. Chew went on to command the Army of Northern Virginia's horse artillery.[5]

In May 1864, the corps' horse-drawn artillery distinguished itself at New Market, where Commandant Lt. Col. Scott Shipp ordered its two-gun section to join the general artillery column led by Maj. William McLaughlin. Years later, in an address at VMI, John Sergeant Wise, class of 1866, recalled the action: "Thundering down the pike came McLaughlin with his artillery . . . The Cadet section of artillery . . . toils up the slope, and delivers a plunging fire . . . 'Battalion forward! Guide center!' shouts out Shipp, and off we start. . . . Patton's men rise up and are charging on our right with the world-wide rebel yell."[6]

Subsequent VMI cavalry and artillery action might pale in comparison, but VMI contributed a horseman to Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" during the Spanish-American War; and as the United States entered World War I, two VMI cavalrymen — Samuel Rockenbach, class of 1899, and George S. Patton, class of 1907 — were Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing's choice to command the newly formed American Tank Force.[7]

It was the advent of World War I that ultimately brought the horse to VMI, as the congressional National Defense Act of 1916 formally established the Reserve Officer Training Corps and authorized the Army to furnish horses for cavalry and field artillery training to a dozen military and liberal arts colleges, the latter including Cornell and Harvard. Congress' apprehension of the war in Europe was well founded. While Patton, two short years later, would be witnessing the launch of the mechanized artillery on France's battlefields, horse artillery was still evolving as a kind of "rapid response" unit, attached to cavalry divisions but also functioning independently.

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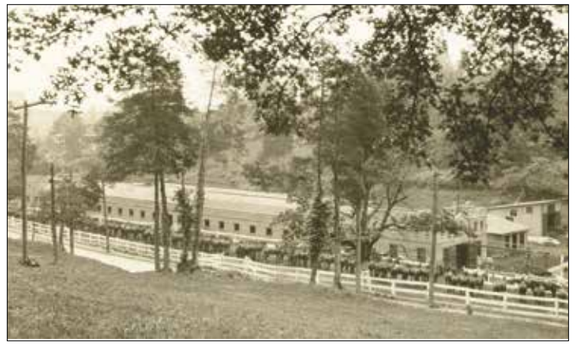


White Studio, New York, via VMI Archives

Horses in front of VMI stables, North Main Street, c. 1925

As the war was ending, VMI scrambled to erect stables for the horses that would arrive in 1919. Separate buildings would house a farrier and a blacksmith shop. White's Farm, 120 acres northwest of Lexington and the current site of the Virginia Horse Center, was purchased in 1920 for cavalry and field artillery exercises and a target range. It was the beginning of the formal era of the horse at VMI, which would come to include not only drilling and parades on the post but also wide acclaim on the polo field, in horse shows and on steeplechase courses, and even in Hollywood, with the opening scenes of the 1938 *Brother Rat*.[8]

The system of companies A through F would develop as the program at VMI grew over the next almost two decades of peacetime. Companies A and C were cavalry; B, infantry; and D, E and F, artillery. Regular garrison reviews included all three branches of the Corps: infantry, cavalry and artillery. Cadets learned the

Photo by H. C. Mann, White Studio, New York, via VMI Archives

Cavalry unit drilling at White's Farm, c. 1920

In Henson et al., *Keydet Grey: . . . The Horse at VMI*

Left: The VMI polo team forms up in front of the barracks, 1938.

Bottom: Garrison review, 1939

care and maintenance of horse and tack; much to the dismay of many, their own training involved learning to clear jumps on horseback without stirrups or reins, which was also the practice at West Point. Upperclassmen who signed the ROTC contract that would commit them to military service studied an improbable mix of courses ranging from stable management to defense against chemical warfare.

The horses at VMI were issued by the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. In selecting these mounts, the main criteria were stamina, strength and a temperament that was not easily spooked. Most of the horses were a mixed breed of Thoroughbreds and Morgans. In his book *The Corps Roots the Loudest: A History of VMI Athletics,* author Thomas W. Davis notes that polo quickly became established as the favored horseback activity. It was, he says, "a game that seemed to suit VMI particularly well in that era, with ponies wearing glistening saddles ridden almost recklessly on the Parade Ground by dashing young cavalry men hoping to catch the eyes of young ladies strolling by in long dresses and carrying parasols." [9]

Capt. Samuel White Jr. was assigned to VMI for ROTC instruction, and in November 1921 he reported that polo was not only popular but actually recommended: "In accordance with the wishes of the War Department steps have been taken to start polo at the Virginia Military Institute this year for members of the First and Second Classes in the Field Artillery and Cavalry Units. A polo association has been formed amongst these cadets." Captain White himself was a distinguished polo player and was anxious to begin a polo club. A few of the original horses were deemed suitable, and 15 more were furnished by the Army stables at Front Royal. Equipment, including saddles and bridles, was provided by the association, supplemented by the Army. [10]

By the spring of 1922, VMI had established the first collegiate polo team in the South. Its initial competition was at Camp Dix, in New Jersey, where VMI handily won, 17 to 13. Over the next decade and a half, the VMI polo team would go head to head with major competitors that included West Point, Cornell and the Ivy League squads of Yale, Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania. Horse shows were a regular event on the post parade ground, and cadet riders also showed and hunted at White's Farm, the nearby property owned by VMI. [11]

There was also one horseback activity that was open to all — if and when you could pass the test: Sunday

Barksdale Collection

Washington Post, April 3, 1938

"GARRY OWEN"

That "Garry Owen," or "Garryowen," came to be a marching and riding tune and an indelible memory for many at the Institute is a matter of record.* Originally an Irish drinking tune, its entry into U.S. military history dates from the Civil War, when it became the regimental air of the 7th Cavalry Regiment under Gen. George Custer. It's said that the regiment came to adopt the tune from a contingent of Irish draftees.

In the history of the 7th Cavalry, members of the regiment have established three bagpipe and drum bands, starting in the early 1950s. "Garry Owen" was subsequently adopted as the official song of the 1st Cavalry Division in 1981. It later became controversial because of its association with Custer's regiment.

But that came long after the cantering cavalry of VMI. Henson, Morgan and Morrison conclude their "Tributes and Remembrances" chapter with this quotation from Henry B. Higby Jr., of the class of 1951: "I'll never forget our final review in June 1948. 'Garry Owen' had always been a jaunty, happy cavalry march to me during Garrison Reviews. . . . Unfortunately for me, as 'Garry Owen' echoed the last time around the hills and faded away, and the horses left VMI, my spirit left with them."

* See the definitive *Keydet Grey and Garry Owen: The Horse at VMI* by Edward L. Henson Jr., James M. Morgan Jr. and James L. Morrison Jr., VMI, 2006.

VMI Archives

VMI Archives

Members of the VMI Hunt Club in pursuit of a fox, 1938.

rides, known formally as "privileged riding." A cadet could qualify for privileged riding through ROTC training or by reporting voluntarily for riding sessions during his free time. [12]

To understand why any cadet would give up his precious, practically nonexistent free time to learn to ride, one has to remember that a horseback ride would get you off post — at least to White's Farm or even onto nearby county roads. Civilian guests (think girls from nearby schools such as Southern Seminary, which had its own riding program) could accompany cadets if the guest was a competent rider. [13]

By the late 1930s, according to a full-page spread in the *Washington Post* on April 3, 1938, VMI had "218 horses and equitation [was] required by all cadets." Enhanced facilities for horses were needed. The nearby Jordan's Point, then known as VMI Island, was acquired in 1936 for mounted drills and for practicing show techniques such as jumping and gymkhana, a practice loosely defined as trick riding that could include barrel racing and other maneuvers. Down the hill from barracks, on Main Street, new stables were opened in 1939, and VMI's first indoor riding hall, the Field House, followed in 1942. [14]

The 1938 *Washington Post* article stated that VMI was "about the only college to have a hunt club of its own complete with horses and hounds" and that cadets "look[ed] forward to drag hunts held twice a week in favorable weather." Members of the VMI Hunt Club rode

SADDLING UP

In tacking up, or equipping, its equines, Virginia Military Institute followed U.S. Army protocol for much of the era of the horse. The horses, after all, had been supplied mainly by the Army Quartermaster Corps, originally with the goal of training VMI cadets for a role in the Army's cavalry.

Thus at the start the McClellan saddle, as it was known, was the logical choice at VMI. Named for U.S. Gen. George McClellan, it was at least in part the result of a trip the Union Civil War general had taken to Europe in the 1850s when he was a captain in the U.S. Army. McClellan was part of a commission sent to report on European military tactics, and according to the National Museum of Military History, a saddle used by the German Hussars caught his eye. Returning to the United States, he developed a new cavalry saddle structured on an oak frame covered in leather, with a void between a high pommel and the cantle — the front and back, respectively, of the saddle. It had a thick leather skirt and wooden stirrups that would not easily allow a rider's foot to be dislodged. The McClellan was light enough not to weigh the horse down and also more comfortable for the rider because of the opening in its center. It was sturdy and supported the rider, could accommodate gear fastened behind it, and sat atop a saddlecloth or saddle blanket. The McClellan saddle was used by the U.S. Army for the duration of its horse cavalry, officially disbanded in 1942.

McClung Collection

The McClellan saddle

At VMI, as horsemanship turned increasingly to showing and fox hunting as well as polo, the English saddle came more and more into use. The English contact saddle originated in the eighteenth century, giving rise to a more streamlined form as fox hunting became popular. The English saddle features a flatter seat that enables the rider to move forward or back as needed to go over jumps or fences or to adjust to uneven terrain. The saddle is built on a wooden frame (called a "tree") covered with leather, its seat typically padded with wool or other material for comfort. Saddle flaps protect the rider from chafing and the horse from pinching from the stirrup straps. The metal stirrups are more slender than those of the McClellan saddle. By the mid-1940s the English saddle was almost exclusively preferred by VMI riders.

Barksdale Collection

Second classman F. H. Barksdale takes a jump at a horse show on the parade ground, 1939.

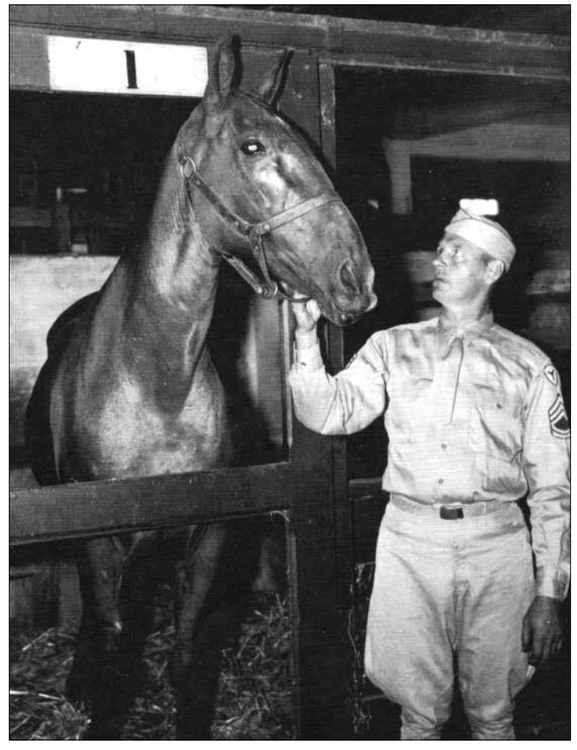
to the hounds at White's Farm and with a number of Virginia hunts, including Deep Run in Richmond and the Middleburg hunt in Northern Virginia. [15]

This period represented the peak of VMI's prowess in the show ring, with prizes and ribbons awarded for jumping and gymkhana. Some of the horses had proved themselves so well and so often that their feats became storied. Applejack was known for her skill in the trick riding arena, and Ranger could clear a 6½- to 7-foot jump. Other stalwarts in the ring included Shakespeare, Rattail, Silverbell, Greyhound and Buttercup.

And then there was Sister. Stafford Taylor, class of 1940, gave a colorful description of Sister, a light sorrel mare and only about 15 hands in height — small for a cavalry mount. Sister's claim to fame was her hateful disposition. In Taylor's words, "She was mean as hell and if she could reach you, she would try to bite you. If you got within range of her hindquarters, she would kick with both feet, squeal, and break wind all at the same time." It goes without saying that there were very few cadets who could get along with Sister. [16]

If the stable had a top horse, however, it was Jack Knife. He as good as belonged to Sgt. Edward Henson, a native of Buena Vista who had acquired his early experience with horses at the Robey stables there. Covering Sgt. Henson's retirement, the November 11, 1946, edition of the student newspaper, *VMI Cadet*, spoke of both man and horse: "Sergeant Henson was assigned to the enlistment detachment of the ROTC on March 4, 1920, and has served 26 years, 7 months, and 27 days of continuous service at the Virginia Military Institute. For years he served as the Stable Sergeant of the Cavalry and Field Artillery Unit at VMI. After Henson's retirement in 1946, he and Jack Knife made a final appearance on the parade ground the following spring. Without bridle or saddle, they successfully negotiated a figure-8 course of four-foot jumps. The rider kept his arms folded throughout the performance." [17]

VMI Archives



Jack Knife, probably the best-known horse at VMI, with Edward L. Henson in the VMI stables

But for Jack Knife as well as VMI's other horses, the end would come. The advent of the horse at VMI had followed the First World War. The technological advances in warfare that the Second World War would bring also ultimately signaled the end of almost three decades of equitation in all its forms at the Institute.

VMI Archives

Gymkhana, or trick riding, showcased VMI horsemanship. This cadet stunt was photographed at White's Farm in 1922.

It was while returning from an outing of "privileged riding" on a December day in 1941, Charlie Miller (class of 1942) recalled, that he and other cadet riders learned of the event that would soon change all of their lives. They'd been out riding at White's Farm and were walking the horses back when the driver of a passing pickup truck stopped to tell them the news: Pearl Harbor had been bombed. "We probably said, 'Where is Pearl Harbor?' When we got on back up to the barracks, they're singing, 'Hi, ho, the derry-o, the hell with Tokyo!' " [18]

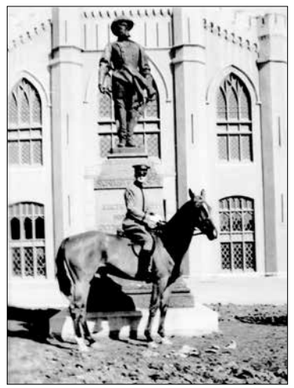
Now the choices that VMI graduates, and some not yet graduated, had made upon arrival as Rats — that is, whether to be infantry, cavalry or artillery — began to affect their wartime fates in ways they never could have imagined.

Former members of companies A and C — the cavalry — found themselves at Fort Riley, the Army's traditional cavalry training post. The newly arrived recruits were pressed to stay with the horses, but already the times, they were a-changin'. "I think there were about 60 of us that went out there," J. P. Irby (class of 1944) recalled, "and about 10 or 12 of them went to horse cavalry. The rest of us went into the mechanized cavalry" — and were shipped off forthwith to Fort Knox, to learn about tanks, Jeeps and the rest of the mechanized cavalry. [19]

That technology spelled the inevitable end of a storied era at the Institute. When the Army decreed in 1948 that the horses it had previously supplied to VMI must go, the men who had nurtured and guided cadets and their mounts through so many years — years of military equitation, jumps without reins, mucking out stalls, taking home prizes — those men faced a grim reality.

One of those men, Col. F. H. Barksdale, class of 1940, had been among the VMI Horse Show Team's leading riders and one of its coaches. While on active duty in World War II, Barksdale was assigned to VMI as assistant professor of military science and tactics and cavalry instructor. Returning to VMI in 1946 after service in the Pacific, he became VMI's executive officer. In a diary entry in July 1948, he wrote of the decision by Congress to end appropriations for horses at ROTC colleges. Sadly, he wrote, most of the horses — "including Tomede, the greatest horse I ever rode" — were to be sent to the Fort Royal Remount Depot, "where we understand they were to be traded for breeding stock which the Dept. of Agriculture expects to use in its breeding program." [20]

But not all of VMI's mounts would be so lucky. Barksdale continued: "Other horses were condemned for destruction if they were senile or unsound or labeled for sale by the surplus property agents. Eight went to the Marine Corps School at Quantico and the last one, sold on sealed bid, left the Institute on 28 June. The stables are to be converted to classrooms and offices for the ROTC." [21]



Barksdale Collection

Cadet F. H. Barksdale, class of 1940, in front of the barracks and the T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson statue, c. 1937–40

A kind of retirement had, however, been wangled for Jack Knife. But as the horse era was ending, Jack Knife — by now more than 20 years old — somehow got entangled in some barbed wire at White's Farm. The damage could not be remedied. Henson's son wrote of the legend's end: "On a fine summer day, the two of them stood on a little hill on the White's Farm, the scene of so many of their triumphs over the laws of physics. The Sergeant knew exactly where the bullet must go to make it all as painless and as quick as possible." Jack Knife was buried on the farm, near the current site of one of the Virginia Horse Center's stables. [22]

Photo by A. Aubrey Bodine, class of 1946, via VMI Archives

VMI's ROTC cavalry unit, c. 1942–46

White's Farm remained throughout the 1950s as the site of the Rockbridge County Horse Show. In 1986, ground would be broken there for the construction of the Virginia Horse Center, a world-class facility for regional, national and international equestrian events — a testament, perhaps, to the legacy and long history of the horse at VMI.

BUT THE HORSE ITSELF was not so easily dismissed from the Institute. In 1960, the *Rockbridge County News* reported, under the headline "Polo Returns To Institute Saturday": "A colorful and action-packed sport will return to VMI . . . . This occasion will be a polo game between the VMI Polo Association and the Virginia Polo Association from Charlottesville. Since 1948, when the cavalry left VMI, there has not been such a spectacle on the parade ground." [23]

From 1970 to 1982, a team of cadets called the VMI Greys rode regularly under the leadership of the late, beloved Col. Jack Reeves, a legend at VMI and beyond for his teaching, work in environmental conservation and much more. Reeves, a biology professor, had a farm and stables in the Buffalo Creek area of Rockbridge County, which became the Greys' base of operations. Reeves provided the opportunity for cadets to ride with the Rockbridge Hunt and occasionally to perform exhibitions on the parade ground at VMI. [24]

A lack of funds dampened the Greys' activities, and the team was disbanded in 1982. But apparently equestrian endeavors could not cease as a part of the VMI experience for long. In 1987, as VMI's sesquicentennial was approaching, Col. Leonard L. Lewane, class of 1950, wrote to Colonel Barksdale, pondering the idea that a Buildings and Grounds facility might be named after Jack Knife, or that "some plaque or tablet commemorating this colorful era of horses at VMI should be recommended. . . ." [25]

Nothing came of that idea, but in 1996, the VMI Equestrian Club was created under the leadership of Col. Reeves' daughter, Terry Reeves Whitmore, with about 20 cadets as members — this time both men and women. VMI professor David Bolen, who was then the master of the Rockbridge Hunt, served as their faculty adviser. [26] It happened that then-Superintendent Josiah Bunting's wife, Diane, was an avid horsewoman, and she gave Bolen a hand in getting the club started. Whitmore

Members of the VMI Mounted Color Guard practice their drills at Stone Tavern Stables. Pictured from left: Conner Evans, Henry Papiano, Jill Hafer, Rob Elder and Chris Carter.

Papiano Collection via VMI Archives

Papiano Collection

Henry Papiano, class of 2002, prepares for color guard on the parade ground, 2001.

provided mounts for many of the riders, but some cadets brought their own horses and stabled them with her. Not only did club members ride with the Rockbridge Hunt and even show their horses at the Virginia Horse Center; they also had a mounted drill team and a mounted color guard. [27]

Under Whitmore, these cadets gained a wide range of experiences that were much appreciated by club members. Henry Papiano, class of 2002, recalls it well: "I can honestly say that the first time I was ever on a horse was at Terry Whitmore's barn, and the moment my feet went into the stirrups, I felt at home." He went on to participate in the mounted color guard, which presented the colors at rodeos and on the parade ground on many occasions. [28]

Papiano adds that he was grateful and appreciative to have ridden with Whitmore. "The lessons of horse care, farm labor, family, friendship are a few things I learned. The ability to understand control of an animal and work in unison with him and other cadets to present colors is something that is not in any lesson book at VMI." [29] Unfortunately for cadets who gained so much in their time in VMI's Equestrian Club of the 1990s and early 2000s, Superintendent J. H. Binford Peay's administration defunded it as a student activity — somewhat abruptly, Whitmore recalls — in 2003. But again, the horse and horsemanship reasserted themselves at the Institute. Today, says David Hess, class of 2024: "The club is best known for its blend of riding, training and trail adventures." [30]

The current Equestrian Club is under the tutelage of Tish Vest, a well-known horsewoman who has stables at her Windhorse Farm near Route 11 south of Lexington. She provides horses to ride and boards horses owned by cadets. Each session begins with the riders determining their riding goals, under Vest's guidance, whether working with their mounts in the ring or going out on the trail. [31] Speaking for his fellow riders, Hess adds, "She will work with anybody and teach you everything you need to know." [32] Another cadet lamented that being at the barn reminds her of home.

Some things haven't changed. The cadets of long ago found a sanctuary with the horses at the Field House. Jim Hodgkin, of the class of 1943, never forgot his Rat year. He had this to say, "To begin, let me say when I awoke one September 1939 morning at the ripe old age of 16, I couldn't believe my situation. An immediate reaction was to flag the first Trailways bus out of Lexington and, had not all my clothes been absconded, I might well have done so. Several days later, however, I was marched to the stables and my whole life changed." [33]

McClung Collection (both)

VMI Equestrian Club members get ready for a lesson from Tish Vest, 2024.

THE BOND between human and horse goes back thousands of years, evolving as the years passed. At VMI it developed from a utilitarian relationship, in the Institute's cavalry, to the venues of polo ground and show ring, and now as an escape from the rigors of academic life. Through all its mutations, the bond endures, and with it, the horse remains a part of life at VMI.

VMI Archives

Little Sorrel, Stonewall Jackson's mount through the Civil War, shown on the VMI parade ground, c. 1890

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