

J. E. B. STUART

The Soldier and the Man

Edward G. Longacre



Savas Beatie
California

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For
Taylor, Gabby, and Kinsley

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Introduction

He has come down to us through the decades as a man among men, the personification of military genius. Handsome, rugged, a born leader, a polished horseman, full of animal spirits, with a sensitivity to the beauties of nature, an appreciation of music, art, and poetry, an affinity for the trappings of military life, and the soul of an incurable romantic—all this was James Ewell Brown Stuart of Virginia. He has been lauded by generations of historians as the finest cavalryman in our nation's history. His inspired leadership, tactical acumen, scorn for danger, and penchant for the calculated risk are credited with having turned his talented but under-strength and undisciplined horsemen into a force so formidable that opponents were outmaneuvered, outfought, and beaten into submission until, perhaps inevitably, attrition of manpower, horseflesh, and other resources created an unlevel fighting field much in the enemy's favor.

It cannot be denied that Stuart was a man of many gifts and accomplishments, personally and professionally, or that he contributed greatly to the fortunes of his army's mounted arm to the satisfaction of virtually every superior, colleague, and subordinate. Being human, he was also prone—on more than a few occasions—to errors of misperception and underperformance, most notably during the Gettysburg campaign of June-July 1863 when his wayward path to the battlefield deprived Robert E. Lee of the ability to negotiate safely enemy territory while heading toward a climactic confrontation with the Army of the Potomac. Due to the outsize reputation for achievement that Stuart gained during the war, which has only been embellished in the century and a half since, most of these errors have gone virtually unnoticed or, when addressed, have been excused in some fashion.

Several full-length studies of the general have been published over the past 90 years. Each has acclaimed Stuart's generalship from the time he ascended to

regimental command in the spring of 1861 to his mortal wounding in battle three years later in the role of corps commander. The best-known of these studies include John Esten Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray* (1866), a colorful tribute by one of Stuart's staff officers and a kinsman by marriage; John W. Thomason's *Jeb Stuart* (1930); Burke Davis's *Jeb Stuart, The Last Cavalier* (1957); Emory W. Thomas's *Bold Cavalier* (1986); Jeffrey D. Wert's *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause* (2008); and Monte Akers's two-volume study of seminal periods in Stuart's war career, *Year of Glory* (2012) and *Year of Desperate Struggle* (2015).

To varying degrees each work romanticizes Stuart as "The Great Cavalier," "The Knight of the Golden Spurs," and "the *Beau Sabreur* of the Confederacy." Each echoes a familiar theme: that Stuart, as John Esten Cooke puts it, "was born to fight cavalry." The unabashed adulation of this novelist turned historian, who has been faulted for intermingling fiction and fact, is perhaps understandable. Thomason and Davis are only somewhat less starry-eyed, while Akers is arguably Stuart's most effusive supporter, describing him as fulfilling "a narrow niche in American legend that only a select handful of men may occupy . . . a man who proved himself, over and over, to be a winner, whose intellectual and athletic skill and tactical genius made him paparazzi-popular while being simultaneously vital to the future of his nation . . . the type of person who should be admired, emulated, and revered."¹

The only biographers to offer a more objective analysis of Stuart's career are Wert and Thomas. The former attributes to his subject a number of tactical miscues and personal flaws. Yet he characterizes Stuart as uniquely successful in fulfilling "cavalry's traditional role" in gathering and deciphering enemy intelligence and screening his army's front, flanks, and rear. He concludes his study with a comment attributed to a Union general who had been Stuart's prewar superior: "The greatest cavalryman ever foaled in America" (a quote that Stuart's widow, Flora, disliked and whose authenticity she appears to have questioned). Wert describes Stuart the man as "a devoted husband and father," although he casts an uncertain eye on the general's wartime relationships with women other than Flora. Wert admits that Stuart was ever receptive to appeals to his vanity, that

1 John Esten Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray: Being Personal Portraits, Scenes and Adventures of the War* (New York, 1867), 31; Monte Akers, *Year of Glory: The Life and Battles of Jeb Stuart and His Cavalry, June 1862-June 1863* (Havertown, PA, 2012), 12. For Cooke's limitations as a historian, see Robert J. Trout, *They Followed the Plume: J. E. B. Stuart and His Staff* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 1993), 89, 92-93, and his biography, John O. Beaty, *John Esten Cooke, Virginian* (Port Washington, NY, 1922).

he responded readily to the attentions of attractive women, and that—not unlike many another high-ranking officer, North and South—he curried the patronage of powerful men, particularly those able to advance his career.²

Emory Thomas's work sometimes seems like an effort to psychoanalyze its subject rather than chronicle his life in arms. Thomas depicts Stuart as a self-made archetype who deliberately created his own quasi-mythological image as “warrior, knight, and cavalier.” This, he claims, was Stuart’s “ideal vision of himself, the mold he made for his life, the part he cast for himself in the human drama. It was an ambitious role and a bold façade, and somewhere beneath the actor’s mask was Stuart the finite being. . . . Stuart’s triumph as a person lay in his success at acting out his vision of himself.” According to Thomas, Stuart’s effort was self-defeating: “He eventually became so absorbed in posturing and playing his role that he could not leave the stage or remove the mask. He was neither free to fail nor to feel or think anything more or less than what he believed he was supposed to feel or think.”³

While there may be a grain of truth in Thomas’s observations, his efforts to inhabit Stuart’s psyche strike this writer as heavy-handed and more than a little pretentious. While Stuart cultivated the image of a leader, as would any officer worthy of his commission, he did not go to the almost neurotic lengths that Thomas ascribes to him. Rather than astute enough, ambitious enough, and calculating enough to fashion his own mythical persona, the man was far less complicated and ruthless. In the mold of many other soldiers including one particularly notable antagonist, George Armstrong Custer, Stuart was enamored of the color and verve of military life; the discipline required to do one’s duty in the face of drudgery, hardship, and looming death; and the glory and celebrity that warfare occasionally generated—all appealed to his innate sense of romanticism. Like Custer he yearned to succeed in his profession and polish his reputation—to

2 Jeffrey D. Wert, *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause: A Biography of J. E. B. Stuart* (New York, 2008), 52, 75, 78-79, 166-167, 327-328, 370-372. Wert highlights the “greatest cavalryman” quote attributed by Cooke (*Wearing of the Gray*, 39) to John Sedgwick but whose authenticity is questionable. It seems unlikely that Sedgwick would have rendered such a grandiose summing-up of his former subordinate’s career, especially as his death predated Stuart’s by just three days. Thirty years after the war Stuart’s widow expressed her distaste for Sedgwick, whom she called a “coarse man,” and informed David French Boyd, who had sent her a copy of his manuscript memoir of her husband that included the quote: “I object to the quotation,” which “I have always shrunk from”; “Corrections by Flora Cooke Stuart,” April 21, 1896, Boyd Papers, Louisiana State University Library (hereafter cited as Boyd Papers).

3 Emory M. Thomas, *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J. E. B. Stuart* (New York, 1986), 2-3, 299-300.

the point of renown, if possible—while gaining the maximum amount of satisfaction in doing so. These strivings came naturally to him, born of a simple, emotional nature. They were not the traits of a poseur determined to craft and maintain an illusory self-portrait.

One of the most formidable tasks a biographer assumes is to fashion a balanced perspective of a subject's life and work, especially when previous chroniclers have essentially gone in one direction only. In Stuart's case this perceived lack of objectivity has made it difficult to separate image from substance, measure success against failure, and define thoroughly both the soldier and the man. Complicating the effort is the fact that modern views of people and events often counter long-accepted accounts, but that does not automatically make the former accurate. Having carefully sifted through the available source material, in many cases I have reached conclusions that differ from those of other authors. That, however, is the point of studying history and the men and women who have made it.

“Out of the Army I will be Miserably Unhappy”

A hornet’s nest almost two feet long dangled invitingly from a branch of a sturdy oak in the woods surrounding the Stuart family farm, “Laurel Hill,” in Ararat, Patrick County, Virginia. Nine-year-old James Ewell Brown Stuart (“Jimmie” or “Jeems” to family and friends) and his fifteen-year-old brother William Alexander had passed the nest many times, but on this day the younger boy determined to do something about it. “Alex” reluctantly agreed.

The boys armed themselves with sharpened sticks with which to bring down the hexagonal-shaped nest. They shimmied up the tree to within striking distance, at which point the nest opened and a swarm of hornets flew out of the entrance at its base to defend their property. The boys flailed away with their fancied swords as the insects swarmed over them, stinging repeatedly. It is said that Alex, a model of prudence compared with his younger sibling, abruptly retreated to solid ground, but “Jimmie” retained his perch until the nest had been reduced to the wood pulp from which it had been fashioned. By then he had absorbed many painful wounds, all of which he endured with the stoicism of spirited youth.

Later historians would cite the attack on the nest as indicative of Stuart’s disdain for fear and his preference for head-on attacks regardless of risk. Lost in their assessment of the youngster’s performance is the fact that he need not have demolished the nest at all. The hornets were too far from the family home to pose danger and the insects rarely attacked unless threatened. The nest was not a target of opportunity—the daring boy had singled it out to demonstrate his ability to force his will and strength upon the pests regardless of the consequences that

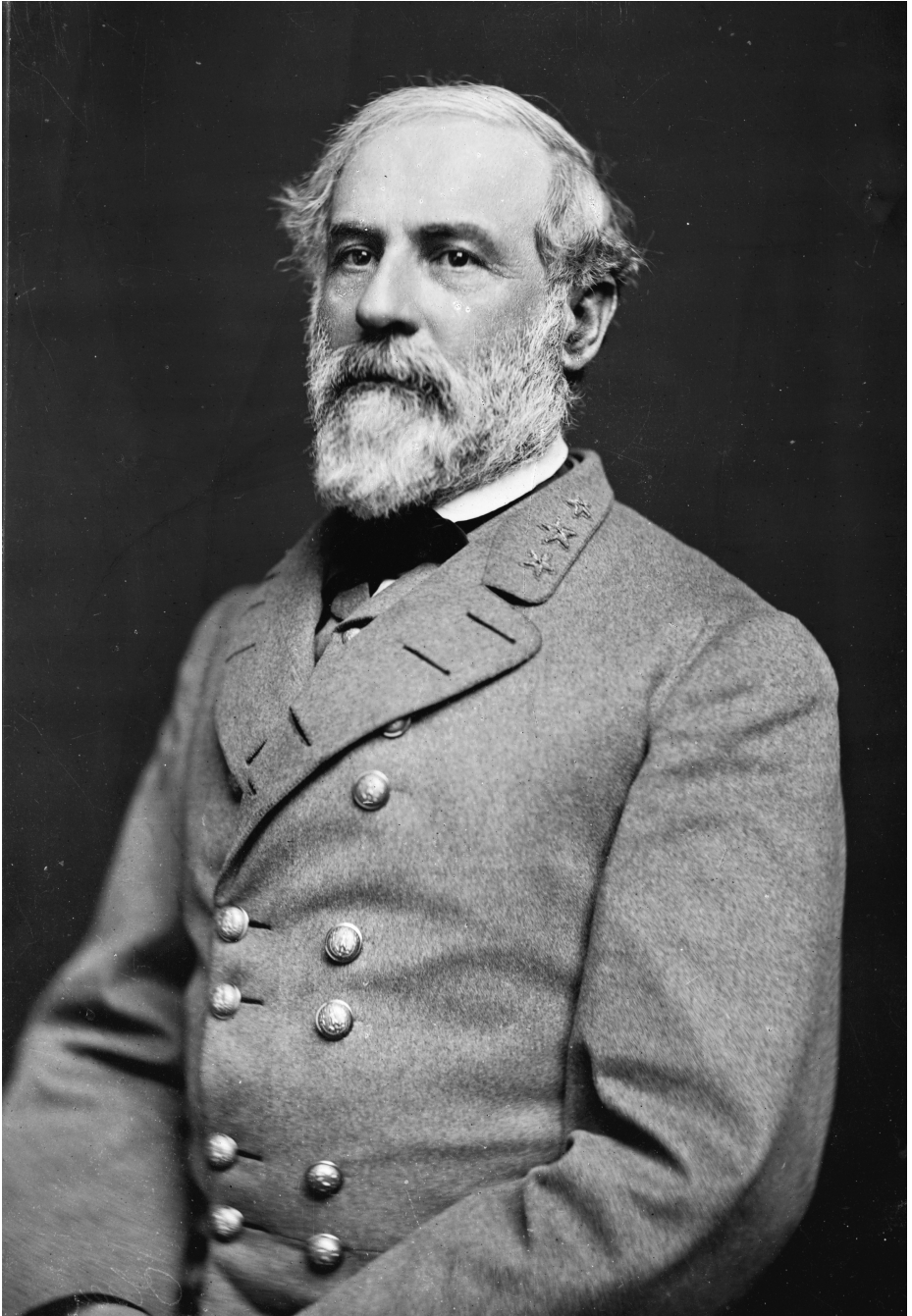
would naturally follow. Here was a trait that J. E. B. Stuart would display repeatedly, in a less domestic setting, in years to come.¹

James Ewell Brown Stuart—named for an uncle by marriage, a practicing attorney in neighboring Wythe County whom James would come to consider his “best friend”—was born shortly before noon on Wednesday, February 6, 1833. He entered life as the eighth child of a family with Scotch-Irish origins, one blessed with a proud history but lacking the affluence and social credentials enjoyed by many landowners east of the Virginia Piedmont. His lawyer father, Archibald, had served a stint in the army before entering politics on the state level and then, briefly, in the U.S. Congress. Two years or more before James’s birth Archibald Stuart built a manor house at Laurel Hill, a 1,500-acre farmstead nestled in the eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge less than a mile above the North Carolina line. The property, which abounded in oak groves, flower gardens, and fruit trees with a majestic view of the mountains, would remain in the family until 1859 when James’s widowed mother sold it to two North Carolinians. By then the house was gone, having been destroyed by a fire of unidentified origin twelve years earlier and never rebuilt. James, who was then at school in Pulaski County, would forever regret this “sad disaster” and the blow it dealt to his family’s fortunes.²

Archibald’s grandfather had inaugurated the family’s military heritage during the Revolution as a major of Virginia militia. In March 1781 Alexander Stuart served with distinction under Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene at Guilford Court House, North Carolina, the largest battle fought in the southern colonies, leading his men so close to the enemy lines that he was captured. Following his exchange and release and the eventual triumph of the Continental Army, the major acquired large parcels of land in several southwestern Virginia counties. In 1770 he sired a namesake who turned the family’s attention from military to civil pursuits. The younger Alexander, a lawyer and jurist, married three times, surviving two of his wives. The first marriage, to a member of one of Virginia’s most distinguished

1 John W. Thomason, Jr., *Jeb Stuart* (New York, 1930), 19-20; Thomas D. Perry, *Ascent to Glory: The Genealogy of J. E. B. Stuart* (Ararat, VA, 2008), 11; Wert, *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause*, 7. Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, notes that the story of the assault on the hornets’ nest “may be apocryphal” but offers no refutation.

2 Thomas D. Perry, *J. E. B. Stuart’s Birthplace: History, Guide, and Genealogy* (Ararat, VA, 2010), 8-9, 17-19, 43-48, 51, 56, 71.



Robert E. Lee
Library of Congress

families, the Randolphs, gained the Stuarts such illustrious collateral relations as Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee.³

Though he became wealthy and professionally prominent, Judge Stuart is best known as the sire of J. E. B. Stuart's father, born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in December 1795. "Arch" Stuart's legal career came to him as if an inheritance, and his political life began to flourish in the fall of 1829 when he was selected as a delegate to a committee to revise Virginia's 1776 constitution. In Richmond he rubbed shoulders with such luminaries as former presidents James Madison and James Monroe as well as a future president, John Tyler. The notability of this association helped Archibald gain a seat in the Virginia House of Delegates as a representative of Patrick County. After losing a bid for reelection, he served as a commonwealth's attorney and later as a member of the state senate. These positions, while prestigious, did not pay enough for Archibald to survive a surfeit of financial problems amassed over the years. Entirely of his own making, they stemmed from character flaws including an addiction to wine, women, and song, roughly in that order. In the parlance of a later generation, Archibald Stuart was the quintessential "good-time Charlie."⁴

He appeared to regain his financial footing via his 1817 marriage to a native of the Virginia Piedmont whose antecedents were at least as prominent as his. By all accounts a strong-willed woman, Elizabeth Letcher Pannill Stuart would exert a powerful influence over the 10 children she gave birth to during the nearly four decades she was married to Archibald Stuart (an eleventh child, an unnamed son, died in infancy). One recent historian, noting the troubles that roiled their marriage, has described Elizabeth, rather hastily, as "something of a shrew." A typical criticism is that she forced her influence on her family by demanding that each of her sons, in early youth, take a temperance pledge—one that James, then 12, did not break until the day he fell mortally wounded. His widow, however, would dispute this oft-repeated claim, recalling that her husband's sister Mary Tucker Stuart, 12 years James's senior, swore him to lifelong sobriety as well as gained his promise to avoid gambling and tobacco products. Rather than an ill-tempered

3 Ibid., 21-23, 45; Henry B. McClellan, *The Life and Campaigns of Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart, Commander of the Cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia* (Boston, 1885), 1-2; John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York, 1999), 372-376; David French Boyd, "Boyhood of General J. E. B. Stuart," 36, Boyd Papers.

4 Perry, *Stuart's Birthplace*, 43-63.

scold, Elizabeth was described by a daughter-in-law as “one of the most intellectual and cultured women in Virginia.”⁵

Occasionally cited examples of Elizabeth’s less-than-demure demeanor may well have been provoked by her husband’s indiscretions. Not only did Archibald drink and gamble too freely, family tradition accuses him of fathering at least two illegitimate children, one White, the other African American. Supposedly he told his suspicious wife that he had sold the slave child’s mother. In fact, he established her and her offspring on a farm in a neighboring county and inserted a clause in his will warning Elizabeth that if after his death she “did attempt to disturb any person whomsoever . . . who holds real estate by conveyance from me,” her inheritance would be void.

Elizabeth’s supposedly overbearing behavior and Archibald’s indiscretions notwithstanding, James Stuart grew up in a home defined by enough parental care and familial warmth to foster cherished memories. Laurel Hill, where he and seven of his siblings were born, generated fond recollections for the rest of his life. When his widowed mother appeared ready to sell the property, James asked her: “What would you take for the south half of your plantation? I want to buy it.” The effort failed but over the years he would make further attempts to purchase what remained of his old home, sometimes in partnership with brother Alex.

The locale that held such an attraction for him, in which he spent his first 12 years, was no paradise. Straddling the western rim of the Virginia Piedmont, an area famously described as “rural isolation,” Laurel Hill and Ararat lay far from the fecund plains of the Tidewater where plantations abounded, cash crops provided a steady income, hard roads facilitated travel, commerce boomed, and culture flourished. To share the physical toll involved, Archibald Stuart owned three slaves. His wife undoubtedly inherited others but their number remains unknown. By the time James left home to enter the U.S. Military Academy, almost 30 slaves, mostly women and children, toiled at Laurel Hill. Four years later, after he graduated and began active duty, the care of two of the slaves, one male and one female, was transferred to him. He sold both before the Civil War broke out, after which a second male slave came into his possession. The man’s identity is not definitively known, but historians speculate he was the mulatto named Bob, who according to family records had served at Laurel Hill since 1832. If so, he could be

5 Ibid., 63-73; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 14, 25-27, 29-39, 43-49, 51-55, 62-63; Perry, *Ascent to Glory*, 10, 26-33; McClellan, *Life and Campaigns of Stuart*, 3; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 5-7; Thomason, *Jeb Stuart*, 18; Flora Cooke Stuart to Bethenia Pannill Stuart, August 17, 1898, J. E. B. Stuart Papers, Occidental College Library (hereafter cited as Stuart Papers, OC).

the body servant by that name who appears in many accounts of Stuart's war service. While he admits that a connection is "purely speculation," former J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace curator Thomas D. Perry writes that "the question of his [Bob's] father might be a topic of considerable interest considering Archibald Stuart's reputation." In other words, might slave and master have been half-brothers?⁶

* * *

Given his father's numerous brushes with financial calamity young Stuart's upbringing may have been less than idyllic, but it appears to have been a pleasurable experience. From his parents he inherited not only intellectual gifts but also an artistic and esthetic appreciation as well as aspects of character and personality that long survived his childhood. These included a love of music, one developed at 15 when he attended a "singing school," whose students learned to sight-read vocal compositions, operated by Professor J. B. Wise of Wythe County. His closest boyhood friend, David French Boyd, recalled that "though he could play no instrument, he was passionately fond of music." Throughout the war to come, music would follow him on the march, performed by talented amateur musicians culled from the ranks of his command. His own talent was much on display, for his rich baritone accompanied the songfests that resounded through every campsite he occupied. On these and many other occasions, he exhibited what one of his aides called "the joyous qualities of a genial nature." A foreign officer on a tour of observation with Stuart's army would describe his headquarters as "one of the jolliest, as the General is very fond of music and singing, and is always gay and in good spirits himself, and when he laughs heartily, as frequently happens, he winds up with a shout very cheering to hear."⁷

Particularly from his mother James inherited an appreciation of nature in all its forms, including a love of flowers. In addition to song and merriment, his camps were brightened by many varieties of flora, carefully and sometimes lavishly arranged. Throughout his life he showed an affection for animals, especially horses and dogs. Such a sensitive side may seem out of character in a child growing up in a rough-hewn environment that prized physical strength over asceticism. He showed

⁶ Perry, *Stuart's Birthplace*, 58-61, 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77; Theodore Stanford Garnett, *Riding with Stuart: Reminiscences of an Aide-de-Camp*, ed. by Robert J. Trout (Shippensburg, PA, 1994), 17, 19; Boyd, "Boyhood," 24-26; Fitzgerald Ross, *Cities and Camps of the Confederate States* (Urbana, IL, 1958), 168.

the more manly aspects of his character by his early aptitude for firearms and horsemanship and his ability to tackle hard work. Boyd described him, even in his pre-teen years, as “an exceptionally fine rifle-shot,” as well as “a fearless rider, the wilder and more spirited the horse, the more enjoyment for him. . . . Healthy and robust, he could manage any amount of bodily strain and fatigue. He was of sanguine temperament and buoyant spirits. Like all such boys, he was fond of fun, frolic and fight.”

Other salient traits of the young Virginian became evident once James’s parents decided that he, at age 12, should be schooled outside the home. Around this time, according to Boyd, he was “of florid complexion, light hair and blue eyes, with strong features; about medium size, and somewhat inclined to be corpulent.” The extra weight he cast off quickly enough: “He grew rapidly, was loose-jointed, gawky; still of great activity and strength.” The aura of youthfulness he never entirely shed. Years later, when Stuart and Boyd were serving in the Confederate ranks, they reunited on a few occasions. Boyd found him “the same genial, pleasant boy at the heart of Lee’s cavalry that I used to know back in Wythe County at school. His boyishness would stick out [even] in grave occasions.”⁸

James’s formal education began late in 1845 when he crossed the mountains to Wytheville, not far from the home of his uncle and namesake. There he joined young Boyd at two boys’ schools operated by sometime-lawyers Richard T. Mathews and Peregrine Buckingham. Over the next several months the instructors, who “supplemented their fees with wielding the rod of correction,” grounded their pupils in Latin, Greek, and algebra. The scion of Laurel Hill did not always appreciate the strict discipline “Professor” Buckingham demanded of his students. Both teacher and pupil were “high-tempered and occasionally there was a row,” with James incurring severe punishment for unspecified offenses. According to Boyd, a tendency to oversensitivity left the boy “ever more than ready to take offense at real or supposed injustice or slight, [which] made his judgment at time appear faulty.” He “never liked to be checked or contradicted—never liked to be thwarted or opposed.” This characteristic long survived his early schooling. According to John Esten Cooke, Stuart’s first biographer, “he never forgave opposition to his will, or disobedience of his orders; and though never bearing

8 Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray*, 29; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 17-18, 21, 35, 43; “J. E. B. Stuart Was Emory Man,” *The Whitetopper: The Student News Site of Emory & Henry College*, March 16, 1928; James Ewell Brown Stuart, *The Letters of Major General James E. B. Stuart*, ed. by Adele H. Mitchell (Carlisle, PA, 1990), 134 (hereafter cited as Stuart, *Letters*).

malice, was a thoroughly good hater. His prejudices were strong; and when once he had made up his mind deliberately nothing would change him.”⁹

When engaged in group sports, he would inflict his displeasure on his teammates. As Boyd put it, “in the heat and glow of play . . . he would sometimes lash this or that poor innocent fellow of being the cause of his defeat. . . . The first fellow he got to was the unlucky one; on him he poured his vial of wrath. But the excitement over, the sting of defeat abating, and his sense of justice returning, how like a man he would acknowledge the wrong done, and beg pardon.” On one notable occasion he and Boyd were perched on the roof of a chicken coop owned by one of Buckingham’s neighbors, studying Latin. A quarrel ensued and then a fight that ended with Boyd being knocked to the ground. At first Stuart did a little victory dance but when he saw his friend’s bruised and bloodied condition he grew “badly frightened and quickly apologized.” Years later Cooke would remark on this same trait: “If he had offended anybody, or wounded their feelings, he could never rest until he had in some way made amends.” The boy was fully aware of his hair-trigger temper and worked hard to tame it. By the spring of 1846 he could write his cousin Alexander Stuart Brown that “contrary to the expectations of all,” he had avoided fighting with his classmates, “not from cowardice either” but rather “by forming a firm resolution never to be imposed upon.”¹⁰

* * *

In late 1846 James left the school in Wytheville, which he had outgrown, and headed east to Pulaski County where for a year he was privately educated in the Drapers Valley home of the Reverend George W. Painter. There he received what he called a “first rate” liberal education with emphasis on ancient languages and history. During this period he also attended a school in Wythe County operated by a Mr. Buchanan, a teacher he would recall fondly. The cumulative effect of this varied experience was that, according to Boyd, he “was better educated when he went to West Point than the average graduate on leaving there.”¹¹

9 Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 57, 77, 85, 87; Peter W. Hairston, ed., “J. E. B. Stuart’s Letters to His Hairston Kin, 1850-1855,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, No. 51 (July 1974): 261-262, 270, 313-315; Perry, *Ascent to Glory*, 27, 32-33; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 17, 21-23, 27-33, 43; Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray*, 27.

10 Boyd, “Boyhood,” 29-30, 33; Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray*, 27; Stuart, *Letters*, 3.

11 Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 78; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 37.

Henry B. McClellan

Library of Congress

No young man with six sisters lacks familiarity with the feminine mind and heart, but these qualities still possess an unmistakable allure. Early in his schooling James found himself attracted to the opposite sex and attentive to their charms. His first recorded romantic encounter occurred while at Reverend Painter’s school, where he was accused of having stayed out too late one night with a girl, to the manifest displeasure of her father. Afterward it was said that Stuart was no longer welcome in



that part of Pulaski County. Upon returning to Buckingham’s school he claimed to have sworn off girls: “I believe they were just made for man’s troubles.”¹²

At one point, no girl wished to look long at him. During the winter of 1847-48 he contracted a severe form of typhoid fever that resulted in hair loss—every strand on his head as well as his eyebrows and eyelashes. By March his recuperation was well underway but, as he informed Cousin Alexander, “even at this time my head is as bald as an eagle and I am very much laughed at by the gals.” A perhaps greater obstacle to attracting the other sex was a slight facial deformity that left him, as some believed, “rather an ugly boy.” Stuart’s wartime chief of staff, Maj. Henry Brainerd McClellan, described the defect as a jaw too long and angular and a chin “so short and retiring as positively to disfigure his otherwise fine countenance.” At West Point his appearance would inspire mocking classmates to bestow on him the nickname “Beauty.” As soon as possible after graduating he cultivated a mustache and a luxurious cinnamon-colored beard, presumably to hide the unattractive

¹² Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 77-78.

feature. A West Point classmate opined that few men benefited more from a forest of facial hair.¹³

By the spring of 1848 James was back in Wytheville studying music at Wise's school and pondering his immediate future. For a brief period he assisted brother Alex, who was serving as clerk of the circuit superior court of law and chancery in Wytheville. In later years he claimed to have volunteered for service in the ongoing Mexican War "but was not accepted on account of my youth"—apparently his first show of interest in a military career.¹⁴

As the fourth son of a family not awash in money, he stood little chance of inheriting enough to support a career other than the army, the law, or the classroom. Perhaps to prepare for a teaching job, he decided to pursue higher education. In the fall of 1848 he matriculated at Emory & Henry College, a United Methodist Church institution in Wythe County noted for classical studies and oratory, which his brother David and A. S. Brown had attended. There he plunged into an ambitious curriculum that included Greek, algebra, bookkeeping, geometry, ancient history, and English including grammar, composition, and elocution. His parents funded his tuition (fifteen dollars per semester) and his board (one dollar and fifty cents per week).¹⁵

He validated the family's support through a show of dedication and discipline that enabled him to begin his second year at the school as a full sophomore (he had entered as a "special student," lacking in his fundamental studies). That year saw him again tackle Greek, translating Herodotus and Plato, while also studying trigonometry, mensuration (a branch of geometry), rhetoric, and a variety of subjects with professional applications such as navigation and surveying. He gravitated easily to the classical and historical courses, developed a reputation as "a

13 Boyd, "Boyhood," 17, 20; Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols. (New York, 1942-44), 3:419; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 19; Burke Davis, *Jeb Stuart: The Last Cavalier* (New York, 1957), 19-20, 27-28. After leaving the Academy Stuart could joke about the nickname, applying it to himself: Stuart, *Letters*, 119.

14 Perry, *Stuart's Birthplace*, 77-79; Boyd, "Boyhood," 32-33; Stuart, *Letters*, 9-12, 179. Information on Stuart's symptoms came from: John Fahey, M.D., email to the author, July 3, 2021, and W. E. Haefeli et al., "Hair Loss Following Typhoid Fever: A Forgotten Phenomenon," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 20 (March 1995): 723-724.

15 George J. Stevenson, *Increase in Excellence: A History of Emory & Henry College* (New York, 1963), 206 and fn.; Perry, *Stuart's Birthplace*, 80-81; Stuart, *Letters*, 11-12; Stuart to "Dear Sir," September 4, 1849, J. E. B. Stuart Papers, Confederate Memorial Literary Society Collection (Under Management of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond) (hereafter cited as Stuart Papers, CMLSC); Board and Tuition Register, James E. B. Stuart, October 23, 1848-March 30, 1850, Emory & Henry College Archives.

natural-born orator,” and took part in the debates sponsored by the school’s Hermesian Literary Society. One oration, given before an outdoors audience of students, staff, and visitors, attracted a young woman whom he wished to impress by his eloquence. By focusing on her instead of on his balance, in mid-address he fell from the speaker’s platform and landed face down on the ground. To his “ever lasting mortification,” gales of laughter erupted, in which the object of his romantic interest heartily joined.¹⁶

The college boy further aligned himself with the governing spirit of the institution by embracing its core values. During a local revival at the outset of his freshman year he joined the Methodist church. Previously he had espoused no religious adherence although presumably he had been influenced by his mother’s strong religious faith. In later life, after converting to his mother’s Episcopalianism, he attended church services both in camp and on campaign whenever duty permitted. He avidly supported the appointment and maintenance of regimental chaplains, helped fund a parish in the Kansas Territory, and urged his mother to establish a church near Laurel Hill, an effort to which he contributed generously.¹⁷

By the fall of 1849, well into his third year at Emory & Henry, he had grown enervated of academic life, at least on the civilian level. His family’s wartime heritage and his inherent interest in things military turned his attention to soldiering as a profession and the prospect of entering West Point. In seeking admission to the latter his father’s political connections appear to have helped considerably. The previous year Archibald Stuart had failed to gain his party’s support in reclaiming his seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. According to unverified sources, he reached an agreement with the victorious candidate, Thomas H. Averett, to appoint James to the Military Academy. In April 1850 Averett did in fact offer the appointment, and Arch duly forwarded his son’s acceptance to Secretary of War George W. Crawford.¹⁸

* * *

In the last days of May, having bade farewell to parents, siblings, and friends, the prospective soldier traveled to his new destination via Salem and Lynchburg,

16 Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 80-81; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 35; Stuart, *Letters*, 11-12.

17 Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 81-82.

18 *Ibid.*, 52; Stuart, *Letters*, 12-13; Appointment of James E. B. Stuart to U.S. Military Academy, June 30, 1850, Stuart Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society Collections (hereafter cited as Stuart Papers, VHSC).

where he visited various relatives including several cousins he had never met, children of his uncle Dabney Chiswell. From Lynchburg he spent a day in Charlottesville, visiting Jefferson's home at Monticello. Then by train and by steamboat he traveled to the nation's capital. On Monday, June 3, he went up to Capitol Hill and took in the debates in both houses of Congress. He would especially recall the features and mannerisms of Daniel Webster of Massachusetts ("the finest looking man in the Senate"); Sam Houston of Texas, a distant relative whom Stuart considered "very fine looking" but no orator; Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, one of the most prominent spokesmen of Southern politics and culture and a graduate of the West Point Class of 1828; and the Illinois solon Stephen A. Douglas, a leading light of the northern wing of the Democratic Party. Later he snipped a twig from a stately bough on the Capitol grounds, adding it to a collection of souvenirs that included a piece of marble chipped from Jefferson's grave and two roses plucked from Monticello's front yard.¹⁹

Early on June 4th he was off to Baltimore by rail and then via steamboat on Chesapeake Bay. His next stop was New York, the traditional jumping-off point for West Pointers via the Hudson River steamers. He did not enjoy the layover, brief as it was. The city was too crowded ("I couldn't see the town for the houses") and unsavory (being at "so great variance with religion"). As he wrote to one of his cousins, "when I came here I had reason to expect that many and strong temptations would beset my path, but I . . . prayed God to guide me in the right way and teach me to walk as a Christian should."²⁰

Anxious to depart, he left New York on or about June 7th and reached West Point one hour before midnight. He alighted from a steamer at West Point's North Port, hoisting the luggage he had brought from home, its contents undoubtedly enlarged by relatives and friends en route. Probably responding to instructions received aboard ship, he started off on a quarter-mile walk to the office of the Academy's superintendent, located in the library on the southeastern corner of the installation. One wonders if his thoughts mirrored those of a cadet who one year later made the same trek across "the broadest and smoothest lawn I had ever seen. Half hidden by lofty elms . . . were the immense gray stone barracks with towers and sally port [i.e., entranceway], the academic building, the chapel, the library with a dome from which the flag was floating." The latter-day newcomer never forgot how his mind reeled from "painful and wracking confusions. My natural freedom

19 Stuart, *Letters*, 13-16; Stuart to "Dear Cousin," June 3, 1850, Stuart Papers, CMLSC.

20 Stuart, *Letters*, 20; Perry, *Stuart's Birthplace*, 83-84.

was flitting away. I felt myself already enmeshed by an invisible but controlling authority . . . but the grand scene around me claimed my attention and did much to calm and divert me.”²¹

At the library Cadet Stuart reported to the adjutant of the Academy, First Lt. (and future Brevet Maj. Gen.) Seth Williams, where he registered his name and answered a few questions for purposes of identification. Then, hoisting up his baggage, he followed an orderly to a room in the western wing of the cadet barracks that had been erected the previous year. Later in his academic career he apparently was transferred to the east section of the new quarters, completed the year following his arrival.

Stuart’s quarters were spartan in the extreme. They encompassed a room 14 by 22 feet with a single window overlooking the surrounding, majestic mountains. Its contents included a fireplace with an iron mantle, two alcoves at one end of the room separated by a partition fitted with hangars, and no furniture beyond an iron bedstead sans mattress. There was no running water; it had to be carried in by bucket from outside wells. The compact sparseness of the surroundings may have been depressing but at least the rooms, unlike those of the older quarters, featured steam heating from coal-fired boilers—not a luxury but a necessity given the severity of the local winters. Stuart would spend the majority of the next four years in this cheerless venue and others of similar description. The only exceptions were the two months of each year (July 1 through August 31) devoted to summer camp, during which everyone drilled outdoors and lived in tents, and the 10 weeks between the second and third years of study when cadets went home on furlough.²²

One of the first inspections Cadet Stuart would have undergone was a perfunctory physical examination at the Academy hospital conducted by Surgeon Maj. John M. Cuyler or his assistant, Lt. James Simon. Published accounts usually describe the young plebe, or fourth-year cadet, as standing a couple of inches below 6 feet tall, with long arms and legs befitting a born horseman, broad shoulders, and a barrel chest that suggested overweight. No doubt because of the physical exercise he underwent at West Point, a daguerreotype of Stuart supposedly taken shortly after graduation in company with two others including his brother Alex reveals no trace of excess girth except a somewhat pudgy face. His hair style, high on top and

21 William W. Averell, *Ten Years in the Saddle: The Memoir of William Woods Averell*, ed. by Edward K. Eckert and Nicholas J. Amato (San Rafael, CA, 1978), 15-16.

22 Ibid., 17, 19; “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 262-263, 272; James L. Morrison, Jr., “*The Best School in the World*”: *West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent, OH, 1986), 64-71, 118-119.

bushy at the ears, emphasizes his broad forehead as well as his meager chin. The image helps explain why he acquired the unflattering nickname he bore throughout his academic career and, in many cases, for years beyond.²³

Physical flaws aside, he made several friends within weeks of his arrival, beginning with two of his earliest roommates, Judson D. Bingham of Indiana and fellow Virginian Charles G. Rogers, both of whom he would describe as amicable as well as “very studious and clever fellows.” Early on he also bonded with a member of a historic and prestigious Virginia family, George Washington Custis Lee, eldest son of Brevet Lt. Col. Robert Edward Lee of the Army Corps of Engineers, the latter being the son of George Washington’s celebrated commander of cavalry, “Light Horse Harry” Lee. During his third year at the Academy Stuart would make a lifetime friend of another scion of the Lee family, Fitzhugh Lee (Class of 1856), son of Colonel Lee’s elder brother, Smith. He came to consider another classmate from his native state whom he quickly drew into his inner circle, John Pegram of Richmond, “decidedly the best hearted fellow I ever knew.” In common with the Lee cousins, when civil war came Pegram would rise to major general in the Confederate ranks.²⁴

While Stuart’s close connection with fellow Southern-born classmates is understandable, the apparently firm friendship he formed with Cadet Oliver Otis Howard of Maine is more confounding. The cheery, gregarious boy from the mountains of southwestern Virginia and the dour New England scholar (a graduate of prestigious Bowdoin College), whom one biographer describes as “priggish, self-righteous, and opinionated,” made a curious couple. In his memoirs, however, Howard, whose regional identity and off-putting behavior earned him numerous enemies among the cadet corps, especially those from below the Mason-Dixon Line, celebrates Stuart’s “manliness” in bucking the trend of opinion, which included outright ostracism: “He spoke to me, he visited me, and we became warm friends, often, on Saturday afternoons, visiting the young ladies of the post together.” This despite the two having little in common beyond their membership in the bible class taught by the Academy’s chaplain and ethics professor, Reverend

23 Thomason, *Jeb Stuart*, 1-2; Heros von Borcke, *Memoirs of the Confederate War for Independence* (1 vol. edition. Mount Pleasant, SC, 2017), 14; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 17-19; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 18-19; Davis, *The Last Cavalier*, 19-20. The well-known image of the three figures usually identifies the person on Stuart’s left as another West Point classmate, Stephen Dill Lee. However, the description of the original likeness, in the CMLSC, places Alex Stuart there.

24 Stuart, *Letters*, 26-27, 34, 36, 90-93; “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 272; Wert, *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause*, 15-16, 18.

William T. Sprole. On at least one occasion, the two shared the speaker’s platform during the annual public activities that attended Independence Day. Stuart did not hesitate to describe his classmate’s speech that day as “a first rate one.”²⁵

In the eyes of West Point’s Southern clique, Howard’s greatest sin was his institution-wide identity as an abolitionist. Although he would claim that “I would not have owned at that time that I was an abolitionist,” his religious beliefs and personal inclinations ran in that direction. Stuart’s attitude to the contrary was pretty much set in stone. Toward the close of his third-class year he would write of his distaste for “rank abolitionists” and of his satisfaction that the few cadets who could be described as such “take very good care to keep quiet.” Later he railed to one of his cousins about schools of higher learning being “contaminated by abolitionism,” which he considered a blight upon the body politic and whose core principles appalled him. By then he had spent more than three years in the North, during which “I have seen more misery in a limited sphere . . . than I ever dreamed of seeing [in the] south during my lifetime. This shows how perfectly absurd are all the outcries and attacks of Yankees against southern institutions.”²⁶

Given these sentiments, it seems unlikely that Stuart was an early friend and supporter of Cadet Howard. His admiration for those who rose in his profession may have drawn him closer to the New Englander once the latter’s academic standing began to impress his professors and his refusal to submit to hateful personal attacks won the grudging respect of the corps. Eventually the tide of opinion turned in Howard’s favor: “The majority of those who opposed me were ashamed of the course they had pursued and before graduation there were few indeed with whom I was not on good terms.” Furthermore, by the outset of his second-class year Stuart would no longer have to tread carefully for fear of alienating his friend Custis Lee, one of the leaders of the group ostracizing Howard. In mid-1852 Custis’s father was appointed Academy superintendent. At that point the son’s role in exiling a classmate would have become unacceptable lest it reflect poorly on the colonel and the Lee family as a whole.²⁷

25 Oliver O. Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard*, 2 vols. (New York, 1907), 1:53, 54, 380; “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 298-299; Stuart, *Letters*, 85-86; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 24-25.

26 Howard, *Autobiography*, 1:48-49; Stuart, *Letters*, 32, 83; “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 270, 278.

27 Howard, *Autobiography*, 1:53-54.

Howard's position at the center of conflict and controversy formed a single facet of a wider, troubling picture of Academy life in the early- and mid-1850s as the cadet corps divided increasingly along sectional lines. More than once in his correspondence with family and friends Stuart would insist that "politics in general are things which cadets allow to trouble them very little." On another occasion, however, he would add a qualification: "As a *general* thing we, in the language of one worthy of being quoted, 'know no East, no West, no North, no South.'" To the best of its ability the administration strove to inhibit sectionalism and promote loyalty to the national government, but its efforts would fall short. Blessed with good eyesight and the powers of perception, Stuart discerned in their words and deeds the direction in which his fellow Southerners increasingly leaned in contrast to the course taken by their northern-born fellows, and the dichotomy must have made him at least somewhat uneasy.²⁸

* * *

Stuart began to make connections during his first summer encampment. The outdoor activities at adjacent Camp Gaines began on June 23 following his completion of an entrance examination scarcely more thorough than his physical had been. Three weeks later he wrote Alexander Brown that "camp life is glorious, but it is lazy business for all except the Plebians [plebes, also known in the local jargon as "animals?"] who have to drill in Infantry Tactics three a day and in Artillery once a day." This regimen, which took a toll on physically unfit cadets, did not faze him. By mid-August, as he informed another cousin, George Hairston, he was having "a glorious time, for I think I could live in camp the remainder of my days if it remained warm enough."²⁹

Aside from the intensive drilling, the daily schedule, which began at 5:00 a.m., included hours of police detail, unit inspection, and parade ground formation. Curiously, it also included instruction in dance. Dancing had been added to the curriculum as a means of developing the physicality required of military exercises as well as to instill in future officers sufficient grace, etiquette, and discipline to make them well-rounded members of society. Camp routine ended at 9:30 p.m., immediately after supper, the evening inspection calls, and "Tattoo."

28 "Stuart's Letters to Hairston Kin," 280; Stuart, *Letters*, 32, 48.

29 Stuart, *Letters*, 21, 23.

J. E. B. Stuart (center), G. W. Custis Lee (left), William Alexander Stuart (right), Richmond, VA, ca. 1854.

Confederate Memorial Literary Society Collection



Dancing was not the only social outlet that summer. Stuart enjoyed telling family members of the visits made to “the loveliest and most romantic spot” of the Academy plain by various members of Congress, foreign dignitaries, and Commanding General Winfield Scott and his family. Like every cadet, Stuart was impressed by the regal bearing of the six-foot-four-inch hero of the War of

1812 and the fighting in Mexico. A West Pointer of a later period recalled that the general “filled my eyes, and I believe those of all the cadets, with a kind of reverential awe.” Additionally, Stuart was charmed by Scott’s comely daughter Agnes, especially her skills as an equestrienne, which rendered her “quite a Belle among the ladies’ men of the Corps, among whom of course I do not number myself.” Other visitors brought welcome news from home, including Reverend Nicholas Chevalier, husband of Stuart’s sister Bethenia, who stopped by when passing through upstate New York that July.³⁰

Camp life ended in the first week of September with the cadets transitioning from tents to barracks as well as to the Academic Building, which housed the chemistry classroom, laboratories, and every department of study. By then, as a member of the Class of 1855 recalled, “we were physically in pretty good shape.” Now the emphasis shifted to intellectual development, mainly via classroom study.³¹

Although it seems unlikely that the young Virginian understood its ramifications, he had embarked upon a course of study at an establishment slowly

30 Ibid., 23-25; “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 263, 266-267; Morris Schaff, *The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1862* (Boston, 1907), 49-51.

31 Averell, *Ten Years in the Saddle*, 25.

but surely evolving from a mere technical school to an institution devoted to training students in all forms of warfare. Created by Congress in 1802, West Point had devoted its first 40-some years to the commissioning of officers in the engineer and artillery branches. By law, its operation and administration were overseen by officers of the engineer corps. Since the mid-1840s, however, under the direction of Superintendent Richard Delafield, the school's curriculum had been broadened and sharpened in order "to afford officers of all arms of the service an opportunity of gaining from such a nursery of their profession everything new in the lines of their respective arms."

The new mission statement gave West Point a distinction not shared by the better-known military academies of the world. In France and Great Britain, cadets seeking commissions in the infantry or cavalry attended different schools from those training to become engineers and artillerymen. As one historian of 1850s West Point notes, because the United States "could not afford the luxury of specialization . . . [the Academy] had to prepare cadets for service in all the arms and at the same time give them a scientific education."³²

This scientific emphasis was well represented in the institution's curriculum. The course-load Stuart and his classmates shouldered continued to emphasize algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. Reflecting the recent efforts to broaden and expand, cadets were also graded in geography, history, English, military drawing, foreign languages (French or Spanish), and ethics as well as in the general science courses known as natural and experimental philosophy. In their final (first-class) year of study, cadets would be introduced to West Point's signature course, Civil and Military Engineering and the Art (later the Science) of War, taught by Professor Dennis Hart Mahan. Grouped into small sections, cadets were required to recite their lessons and answer a professor's questions on a daily basis. To gauge their acquired knowledge, they would undergo a formal examination twice a year, the results to determine class standing. Some cadets criticized the grading system as mechanistic and outmoded, but Stuart applauded its effects. Soon after his first exam in January 1851, he wrote an Emory & Henry classmate that "here every man's grade, or 'standing,' as it is here called is definitely established at every Examination, it is not made out in decimals or by any complicated process of calculation but simply his *relative* standing in his class and this is published in a

32 Morrison, "The Best School in the World," 1-2.

Register to the world. So that if a man is [a] fool every body knows it, and if he is [a] head every body who wants to can know it.”³³

Early on, he proved himself neither a fool nor a head, but through rigorous attention to his studies he fared well enough to believe he could endure everything West Point threw at him. By the end of his fourth-class year, he ranked eighth in math in his class of 71, fifteenth in French, and twelfth in engineering studies. By then 22 of his classmates, found academically deficient, had been sent home to contemplate a lifetime of civilian employment.³⁴

Stuart did not fear ending up the same way. “The more I see of West Point,” he wrote following his first semi-annual examination, “the better I am pleased with the Institution. Indeed no consideration would make me willingly exchange my present situation for another.” He had gained an expansive view of the Academy as “foster-child of the Nation enjoying privileges eminently superior to any other in the world, and presenting inducements the most favorable for intellectual improvement and success in the world.” Despite difficulties and setbacks, his faith in the value of the Military Academy would not waver throughout his cadetship.³⁵

His determination to succeed enabled him to endure with equanimity the hardships and trials to which he was subjected, not solely those in the classroom. By the early 1850s the practice of student hazing—known to those upperclassmen who inflicted it and the plebes and third-year cadets who endured it as “devilings”—had taken on the status of a hallowed tradition. While he would certainly have been a target of such treatment, probably on a consistent basis for at least a large portion of his time on the Hudson, Stuart’s extant writings make no mention of it. This suggests that he accepted the practice as its perpetrators professed it to be, a means of weeding out those incapable of adjusting to discipline while creating a lasting bond among its victims.

He also learned to live by the Academy’s stringent standards of behavior. Although he did his best to avoid them, like virtually every cadet who trod West Point’s hallowed campus over the previous 48 years, he accumulated his share of demerits for violating the lengthy, arcane, and often arbitrarily applied list of infractions against the school’s conduct roll. Stuart’s offenses were those a majority

33 Ibid., 52, 54-59, 65, 76, 91-101, 105, 111, 148, 153-165, 171; Stuart to “Milt,” January 25, 1851, Stuart Papers, VHSC.

34 Stuart, *Letters*, 30-31; *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.* (West Point, 1851-54), 1851 vol., 15.

35 Stuart, *Letters*, 31-32.

of his fellows committed: uniform out of order during inspection, a less than pristine musket or bayonet, reading or visiting in his barracks room after “lights out,” inattention to a classroom lecture. Many delinquencies appear to have sprung from a defective body-clock: late for reveille, inspection, formation, dinner, and, strangely, given his religious zeal, for church services. He rarely incurred high-point demerits such as failing to keep his section properly closed up when acting as a squad marcher or visiting restricted areas of his barracks. Given his unwillingness to imbibe, it can be assumed that he never visited that off-limits den of cadet dissipation, Benny Havens’s Tavern in nearby Buttermilk Falls. His accumulation of transgressions did not come close to the 200 per year that could trigger immediate expulsion. He collected 43 as a plebe, 49 as a third classman, and 48 in his junior year at the school. Only in his final year, 1853-54, a period when cadets certain to graduate were likely to loosen their grip on rectitude, did he rack up an unusual number of black marks—129, all told—which placed him 103rd on the Academy-wide roll of 203 cadets.³⁶

Stuart’s life as a cadet improved during his second year at West Point. He was appointed a cadet corporal, the third-highest rank a member of his class could aspire to, and during his second summer encampment he acted as first sergeant of his cadet company while the full-time noncom was on furlough. Perhaps as a result, his social life improved, especially after he met Mary, the sister of his intimate friend John Pegram, the first of a number of young women to whom he would be introduced at the Point and one of the first to stir his innate romanticism. As he informed cousin George Hairston that “Miss Mary is intelligent, fascinating, beautiful and modest and that she is a *Virginian* is an enumeration of by no means half of her excellent qualities.”³⁷

Soon after beginning his second-class year, and having spent time with other pretty young visitors to the Point, the most recent being Eliza Meene of Lynchburg, Virginia (“how I suffered with the ‘blues’ after her departure”), he was rethinking his tendency to fall in love so easily. As he wrote to another cousin who occupied an especially fond place in his heart, Elizabeth “Bettie” Hairston, “I suppose you received the usual number of Valentines this year. For my part, I did not receive any, thus showing that after all my devotion to the ladies during last

36 Morrison, “*The Best School in the World*,” 66-68, 73-74, 78-80, 84; Register of Delinquencies, Cadet J. E. B. Stuart, 1850-52, Series 102, Record Group 404, U.S.M.A. Archives; *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets*, 1851 vol., 21; 1852 vol., 17; 1853 vol., 21; 1854 vol., 18.

37 “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 272; Stuart, *Letters*, 39.

summer they have forgotten me in so short a time. Such is the inconstancy of the sex to which my dear cousin belongs.” Six months after this, he put an exclamation point on his rambles on love’s byways that included West Point’s iconic “Flirtation Walk”: “They say that to be in love is a *glorious* predicament, but if it costs as much sleep as they lose in midnight communications with the stars . . . save me from such a monster.”³⁸

* * *

Early on, Stuart discovered the key to academic success at West Point: constant, devoted attention to one’s studies. As he informed George Hairston on Christmas Day 1851, “all that is required is an ordinary mind and application, the latter is by far the most important and desirable of the two. For men of rather obtuse intellect, by indomitable perseverance, have been known to graduate with honor; while some of the greatest geniuses of the country have been found deficient for want of application.” Among the latter he cited the already celebrated Edgar Allan Poe, who had matriculated in July 1830 and engineered his own dismissal seven months later.³⁹

His plan and his adherence to it paid dividends. Although he never rose on the academic roll above the top 10 percent of his class, he did not have to settle for the “gentleman’s ‘C.’” At times, in fact, his grades, at least in certain subjects, may have been high enough, had he maintained them, to recommend him for a berth in a service he did not covet. Those cadets who finished at or near the top of their graduating classes were regularly commissioned into the army’s elite organizations, the corps of construction and topographical engineers. Stuart family tradition holds that because he wished to be posted to the cavalry, a berth considered less desirable than engineers and artillerymen, he “sabotaged his schoolwork.” Given his deep-seated determination to succeed, this rumor lacks credibility.⁴⁰

Even so, he fared well enough for a scion of rural isolation confined to an environment largely populated by Yankees who enjoyed advantages of upbringing that he lacked. At the end of his third-class year (June 1852) he ranked seventh in his reduced class of 60. His grades in mathematics and French had improved slightly over his plebe year—seventh and eighth, respectively—though he placed

38 Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 27-29; Stuart, *Letters*, 54-61, 67, 70, 86-88.

39 Stuart, *Letters*, 42-43.

40 Davis, *The Last Cavalier*, 27; Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 86.

twenty-first in what had become his most difficult subject, military drawing. He had a tougher go of it during his junior year, given the expanded curriculum he faced. Following the 1853 examinations he ranked eleventh out of 54 in his class: fourteenth in the philosophy (science) courses, twenty-first in chemistry, and nineteenth in drawing.⁴¹

Stuart did not spend every hour apart from the classroom poring over textbooks and lesson notes. A voracious reader, when time permitted he haunted the Academy library and withdrew works of literature that matched his interests, including books on chivalry, volumes of ancient history, and an English translation of the memoirs of a famous French soldier-statesman, the Duke of Sully. On Saturdays, the only day of the week when fictional works were available, he enjoyed the comic and historical novels of Washington Irving and lesser American literary lights (“I believe Irving’s works are the best American works”). Stuart also lost himself in the plays of the Bard of Avon. Beginning in his plebe year he “took Shakespeare to bed with me with a lamp by my side and read for hours.”⁴²

Given his outgoing personality, interest in national affairs, and gift for oratory, it is no surprise that during his second-class year Stuart, the former Hermesian, joined the literary and debating club known as the West Point Dialectic Society. He placed highly enough in the estimation of his fellow Dialecticians that during the festivities on the Fourth of July 1853 he was chosen to read the Declaration of Independence before the assembled corps and a throng of visitors. The assignment left him, as he told Bettie Hairston, “quite embarrassed, and [I] would have willingly ‘crawfished’ if it had been possible. . . . I put on a bold face and drove ahead.” His effort drew compliments from many in the audience, which relieved residual stress. He relaxed through an afternoon “devoted to recreation,” and especially at a dance at the West Point Hotel that did not break up until midnight. He apparently had not yet renounced his pursuit of romantic entanglements; he

41 *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets*, 1852 vol., 11; 1853 vol., 9.

42 “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin,” 326; Boyd, “Boyhood,” 18-19; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 31-32; Wert, *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause*, 19. Because he would make references to Irving’s short story, “The Bold Dragoon,” some historians have suggested that the title describes Stuart’s penchant for drama and his affinity for war. In fact, as the cadet would have realized upon reading it, rather than a paean to the glories of soldiering on horseback, Irving’s is a ghost story, for whose heavy-handed “burlesque tendency” the author apologized. Irving’s comic tale, written under the pseudonym “Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.,” was first published in *Tales of a Traveller, Part I* (Philadelphia, 1824).

escorted two “excellent girls,” visitors from New York, but because neither danced he spent most of the night “as a spectator.”⁴³

* * *

It is difficult to judge the nature of the relationships Stuart forged with his teachers and the officers of the Academy’s military staff. Some of the leading lights of the faculty, notably Mahan, were severe taskmasters in the classroom and aloof and unapproachable outside of it. Other professors were more congenial, willing to help their students through the stress of daily recitation and frequent quizzes. These included Albert E. Church, professor of mathematics; William H. C. Bartlett, an internationally known authority on optics and astronomy who taught practical and experimental philosophy; and especially the kindly, patient Jacob W. Bailey, professor of chemistry, mineralogy, and geology. Stuart’s closest relationship within the faculty was with Chaplain Sprole, whom he came to consider a personal friend. So close was their association that Stuart sought favors from the clergyman, including the running of errands. In December 1853 Sprole, while in New York, visited a clothing store to pick up a pair of dress pants Stuart planned to wear at a holiday party.⁴⁴

Another superior with whom Stuart forged a relationship beyond the classroom was Brevet Colonel Lee. He was introduced to the master engineer and war hero in September 1852 soon after returning from the two-month furlough he had spent largely in North Carolina where he helped his sister, Columbia Lafayette (“Lummie”) Stuart Hairston and her husband build the manor house of their Davie County plantation, Cooleemee. In a sense, the two men were not strangers, for the Stuart and Lee families were blood-related through Stuart’s grandmother, the former Anne Dabney of Hanover County, Virginia, first wife of Judge Alexander Stuart. This was the same connection that linked the Stuarts to such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and John Randolph of Roanoke. Moreover, years earlier Stuart’s father had acted as the Lee family attorney in Patrick County.⁴⁵

43 Stuart, *Letters*, 85-86; Morrison, “*The Best School in the World*,” 75-76.

44 Morrison, “*The Best School in the World*,” 25, 50-53, 55-57, 85, 91-92; Stuart to “Dear Sir [Chaplain Sprole],” December 20, 1853, Ferdinand J. Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as HSP).

45 Perry, *Ascent to Glory*, 52, 73; Perry, *Stuart’s Birthplace*, 50, 85.

At the time of his selection as titular head of the Academy, the 45-year-old Lee was already one of the army's brightest lights. Tales of his distinguished service in Mexico on the staff of General Scott and in the field—especially when leading an extended personal reconnaissance of the enemy's lines after the battle of Cerro Gordo during which he spent several hours hiding behind a log within earshot of Mexican soldiers—were the stuff of legend. A graduate of the Class of 1829 (second in his class, his conduct record soiled by nary a single demerit during four years of study), Lee was physical perfection to his superiors, colleagues, and especially the cadets. William Woods Averell of New York, who would graduate one year after Stuart, recalled observing Lee as he strode through the campus with “natural unaffected dignity and grace of manner. . . . There is nothing more attractive than a superb man in motion.”⁴⁶

Fame and dignity notwithstanding, Lee was approachable even to the lowest-ranking “animal,” to the point of inviting them to his home on weekends. There he, his wife, Mary Anne Randolph Custis Lee, and some of their children welcomed a steady flow of visitors that included not only their eldest son and nephew but also Custis's and Fitz's friends, Stuart among them. Over the next two years the latter became a frequent guest at meals and entertainments. Unsurprisingly he acquired a “high regard” for the Lees, including their pretty eighteen-year-old daughter Mary, and his feelings were fully reciprocated. He would claim that Mary's mother “treated me as kindly as if I were her own Son,” and Mrs. Lee would write that Stuart “has ever been to me as one of my own family. . . . we had no where a truer friend.” Stuart's attachment to the Lee family only deepened when during his final term at the Academy he heartily but unsuccessfully endorsed the cadet application of the colonel's second son, William Henry Fitzhugh “Rooney” Lee. Some gossips may have viewed the gesture as currying additional favor with Rooney's father, but there is no evidence that Stuart made it for any reason other than friendship.⁴⁷

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46 Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York, 1934-35), 1:203-248, 319-322; Averell, *Ten Years in the Saddle*, 31.

47 Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 1:323-324; Stuart, *Letters*, 104-105, 110-111; “Stuart's Letters to Hairston Kin,” 297, 311; Wert, *Cavalryman of the Lost Cause*, 18; Mary Bandy Daughtry, *Gray Cavalier: The Life and Wars of General W. H. F. “Rooney” Lee* (New York, 2002), 15-17.

As one historian has written, fighting was a “popular pastime” at the West Point Stuart knew: “The antebellum cadet was pugnacious; his sense of honor was prickly, and an insult or injustice almost invariably provoked a scuffle. In all probability students also fought in order to release pent-up energy and to entertain and impress their comrades as well.” Stuart, always ready to defend the concept of honor—one’s own, his family’s, and that of his state and region—entered wholeheartedly into this culture of physical confrontation.⁴⁸

His West Point career was notable for two fights with fellow cadets. Contrary to expectations, however, neither appears to have stemmed from conflicting political or social convictions. The first occurred during his third year at the school, March 1853, with an upperclassman, John L. Grattan of New Hampshire, stemming from what classmate Cyrus B. Comstock called “Grattan’s having his name put on [the] sick book by Stuart,” apparently against the New Englander’s wishes. “Grattan replied ironically or insultingly, & Stuart struck him. They then clinched but were separated at once.” Later in the day, after ranks had been dismissed, they went at it again outside the cadet barracks, whereupon Grattan “fairly floored” Stuart. This time the antagonists were placed in arrest. Comstock was certain that “Beauty Stuart has at least lost his chevrons” as cadet first sergeant. Five days later he and other classmates were surprised to learn that Colonel Lee had issued an order releasing both pugilists. The punishment he levied was unexpectedly light: Stuart to be confined to quarters for six consecutive Saturdays, Grattan for as many Sundays. “Rather queer justice,” thought Comstock, who believed he saw favoritism in the superintendent’s verdict: “If there had been a Gen[eral] Court Martial Stuart would have been suspended.”⁴⁹

The second violent clash, shortly before Christmas that year, pitted Stuart against William P. Sanders of Kentucky, whom he had reported for letting loose with “a tremendous yell” while on evening dress parade. The taller and heavier Sanders took offense, confronted his superior in a verdant glade off the main campus known as “Kosciuszko’s Garden,” and left him with numerous bruises and a black eye. From his bed in the academy infirmary the beaten man assured his father that “as regards public opinion in the Corps it is said to be in my favor, but the majority condemn my consenting to fight him *even-handed*.” His explanation satisfied Arch, who could “excuse more readily a fault of the sort you have

48 Morrison, “*The Best School in the World*,” 79-81.

49 Ibid., 80; Cyrus Ballou Comstock, *The Diary of Cyrus B. Comstock*, ed. by Merlin E. Sumner (Dayton, OH, 1987), 109-110.

committed, in which you maintained your character as a man of honor and courage, than almost any other.” Stuart’s bitterest regret was that his condition prevented him from attending a holiday party for officers, cadets, and other guests thrown by Mrs. Lee. The pants Chaplain Sprole had brought him from New York were remanded to a hangar in his barracks room.⁵⁰

* * *

Cadet Stuart’s last year at West Point was a busy and rewarding one, his unpleasant experience at Kosciuszko’s Garden notwithstanding. He was rising steadily in the estimation of his superiors. Now he not only held the rank of captain in the corps but had been appointed one of eight cadets proficient enough in the school’s equitation program (established 15 years earlier but permitted to languish until Colonel Lee revived it) to wear specialized chevrons on their riding jackets. By early October the program, which included lessons not only in saddling, mounting, and the intricacies of tack but also in maneuvering over an obstacle course and sabering straw-filled dummies at the gallop, was in full operation. “We ride every other day,” Stuart informed his father, “and fence alternately. . . . that part of the exercise is very exciting.”⁵¹

In addition to the first-year tactics courses, Stuart had to absorb the body of the regular curriculum, which was crammed with engineering-related classes. His grasp of military drawing, still required of him, did not improve much. He fared only slightly better in Professor Mahan’s course in the art of war despite describing it as “the most interesting study I have ever pursued.” He considered “quite flattering” his progress in some of the remaining courses including mineralogy/geology; logic, which explored patterns of reasoning in pursuit of truth; and the political science course that covered American constitutional law, Supreme Court decisions, and international law.

Even so, as his first-class year wound down, he regarded himself as confronting “the *important crisis* of my life.” All along he had assumed that upon

50 Stuart to “Dear Pa,” December 23, 1853, Stuart Papers, OC; McClellan, *Life and Campaigns of Stuart*, 7-8; Stuart, *Letters*, 101-105.

51 Stuart, *Letters*, 85, 93, 109; Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 1:320-324; Morrison, “*The Best School in the World*,” 98-100, 218 fn. 48; McClellan, *Life and Campaigns of Stuart*, 9; Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York, 1995), 179-180; Theodore J. Crackel, *The Illustrated History of West Point* (New York, 1991), 139, 144.

graduation and commissioning he would enter fully into the life of a career officer, at least for the eight years to which his West Point entrance oath bound him. As he wrote his father in the autumn of 1853, his “inclination at present” was to “continue in the Army. It has attractions which to one who has seen a little of the ‘elephant’ [i.e., active military service] are overpowering.” To help him decide his future course he intended to call upon a power higher than any family member, friend, or teacher could wield: “I will rely upon the guidance of Him whose judgment cannot err. . . .”⁵²

Conference with the Lord revealed his proper path. On June 1, 1854, he graduated thirteenth in his pared-down class of 46. His final rankings were twenty-ninth in engineering, ninth in geology, thirteenth in artillery, and fourteenth in infantry tactics. Curiously, he finished no higher than tenth in the tactics of the mounted arm. His performance, however, was not an unheard-of anomaly. When he graduated from West Point seven years later, another born horseman, George Armstrong Custer, would rank even lower in cavalry tactics.⁵³

Following the elaborate graduation ceremonies, he saluted for the last time his cadet superiors, bade farewell to friends including the Lee family, and shook the hands of classmates with whom he had drawn close, many of whom he did not expect to meet again for an extended period, if ever. Then it was off by boat and rail toward home, diploma carefully tucked away in his luggage. By now he was confident that he had made some correct decisions. As he informed his brother-in-law Peter Hairston with the memory of his separation from the Academy fresh in mind and perhaps gazing at his West Point ring (gold, with a green stone, a gift from his parents), “I sometimes think that the taste of classmates for each other’s society particularly West Pointers is unequalled by the strongest attachment and what is more remarkable, it becomes more and more intense as time continues. A thought which makes me fear that *out of the army* I will be miserably unhappy.”⁵⁴

52 Stuart, *Letters*, 91, 94-96; McClellan, *Life and Campaigns of Stuart*, 9.

53 *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets*, 1854 vol., 7, 18.

54 “Stuart’s Letters to Hairston Kin, 1850-1855,” 311-314. A photo of Stuart’s class ring is in Tom Slater et al., eds., *Heritage Inaugural Auction of Civil War History #642—Session 2* (Dallas, TX, 2006), 54.