

being broken, but the ice was so beautiful  
that I could not resist the temptation,  
so borrowed a pair from one of the boys  
and spent the rest of the morning on  
the ice. It was really elegant fun, could  
go down the river as far as you wished  
Then were also a great many ladies on  
the ice, who were evidently think there  
was more fun in falling down than sliding  
up. But unfortunately, in the height of their  
enjoyment one of them (perhaps) fell rather  
too hard and almost broke her nose.  
Poor girl, I guess it will spoil her nose, yes,  
And I trust will teach her a lesson how  
to run on ice again. The fall of this impor-  
tant lady, of course, intimidated and  
what marred the pleasure of the remainder  
of the party. My friend Miss L. P. was  
among the row and was looking as  
well as usual. To morrow being the an-  
niversary of the birth day of the father of

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**An early letter reveals some of the pre-Civil War VMI Corps' use of Jordan's Point and the River. Learn more below about how an ice-skating outing and the Battle of New Market are connected – and how today's cadets view the Trail, and more.**

“Trail, Point and River”

By Joshua Pardew

Jordan's Point Park, the Chessie Trail, and the Maury River all have a deep connection to the Virginia Military Institute, and have since the Institute's founding in 1839. The atmosphere of VMI is one of military bearing, physical activity, and studious, hard study of many subjects. While the school produces men and women who are known for their ability to handle stressful situations and react calmly under pressure, even the most hardened people need stress relief. For nearly two centuries, the Trail, Point and River have not only provided training grounds necessary for VMI to carry out the activities it requires to produce the caliber of men and women it is famous for, but also for cadets to take a respite from their spartan and challenging lifestyle. The purpose of this paper will be to tell a story in a retrograde fashion, sharing with you the story of how VMI and the Trail, Point and River are tied together, from the author's experiences in the past few years, to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the decades preceding the First World War, and finally to the experiences gleaned from the letters of Cadet Stanard, one of the cadets killed in the Battle of New Market during the Civil War.

The author matriculated to VMI on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. A member of the then Rat Mass of "2015+3," as is the tradition at VMI of referring to the incoming class. As with many of these "Rat Masses" to come to VMI, that young bright faced group of young men and women became quickly affiliated with the Maury River and Jordan's Point in that sweltering hot and humid month of August. During the inauspicious period of training called Hell Week, a length of ten days not seven, there is an event called The Crucible (forgive the sudden and forceful introduction to terms, it is the only name the author has for these events), a nearly ten hour session of intense physical training during which every Rat must swim a stretch of the Maury River in boots and ACU's (the green and grey army digital camouflage uniforms) totaling about 300 yards. Unfortunately for the author, his company was the second to swim the river in the

early morning, and thus had to trudge through the rest of the day in soaked boots and uniforms. Immediately following the swim and exiting the river, the companies would form up on the field at the Point and would conduct physical training until the remainder of the company exited the river, at which point they moved off to complete the rest of the Crucible.

Beyond the first ten days of your cadetship, freshman at VMI become very familiar with both the Point and the Trail, and in some cases the River. Either with their respective ROTC's or through Rat Mass wide events, cadets would run, march, ruck march (marching with a pack weighing 45 pounds or more for several miles), or otherwise move along the Trail for extended periods of time, building group unity and physical strength and endurance. During your third year as an Army ROTC cadet you are required to take a combat swim test in the Maury River. As a rat there are twice a week sessions with the cadre of Rat Challenge, which takes the companies of rats around the ridge, called North Post, which runs parallel to the Maury. Several times during this two month period of Rat Challenge the companies will perform high jumps from a platform into the river, practice rappelling from the rocky face of the ridge, or once again swim a stretch of the river. In addition to these, the various NCAA teams use the Trail and River extensively for their activities, running and swimming to improve their endurance.

There is more interaction with these places than just mandatory activity however. Many of the experiences may be negative in the memories of cadets, long after they have left. At the same time, there are many positive memories associated with these places. In the hotter months, usually in the early fall semester or late spring, cadets will swim and fish in the river to take a break from their studies or long busy days. Other cadets, looking to improve their run and marching times for ROTC or sports teams will run and march on their own time along the Trail, or simply do it for fun, taking the opportunity on a nice Sunday to spend time outside of barracks

and off post. Learning to manage time and stress is an integral part of the VMI experience, and many cadets choose to take time out of their packed weeks to spend time thinking about nothing related to school, reducing stress through physical activity at their own pace rather than a pace set by their ROTC or cadre or sport.

But these are the author of this paper's experiences, and may not reflect the experience of everyone who has attended VMI. As stated previously, cadets have used the River, Trail and Point for some time. Col. (U.S.M.C. Ret.) John Piedmont, Class of 1989, discussed snowball fights of epic proportions on weekends, cadets were organized by their platoons and, utilizing civil war tactics, they waged massive battles across the post, occasionally ending in massive brawls in the open field down at the Point. "Officers would call column movements, flanks, charges, retreats... First Battalion would fight Second, or individual companies would settle grudges... The regimental staff acted as referees."

These winter time antics of cadets continue the further back in time the research goes. Photos found in the Preston Library show cadets skating on the frozen river, or playing games of hockey. These events were fairly common, an easy way for Cadets to take advantage of the weather in the area to blow off steam, and escape the Spartan lifestyle for a few hours. While the river doesn't freeze over like it used to – thanks global warming – cadets still form pickup games of various sports, including football, rugby, soccer and baseball.



Photo Credit: Preston Library Digital Archives

In addition to winter activities, Cadets used the river for a variety of different things. Before the installation of showers – the date of which is unknown to the author – cadets used the river to bathe. When the Institute still had horses and a stable to house them, there was a horse company who cared for and trained with the horses. Below is a picture of one such cadet and his horse, fording the Maury River, during a dry spell since the water is low enough for such a thing to be possible.



Photo Credit: Preston Library Digital Archives

Going further back, we have letters from Cadet Stanard, one of the cadets killed in the Battle of New Market in 1864. The first of his letters that the Preston Library have start in 1863, and the last one is written two weeks before his death. In his letters he talks about things that most Cadets still lament on, the classes, tuition, missing home, whether or not he will make it home for certain holidays, and what is going on in his day to day. Two particular instances discuss ice skating on the river. He borrows skates from one of his classmates and goes down to the Maury to take a break from his studies. During one such instance he arrives at the same time a group of girls from the town of Lexington do, one of whom Stanard had a desire to court. He notes with humor that they are not the most graceful skaters.

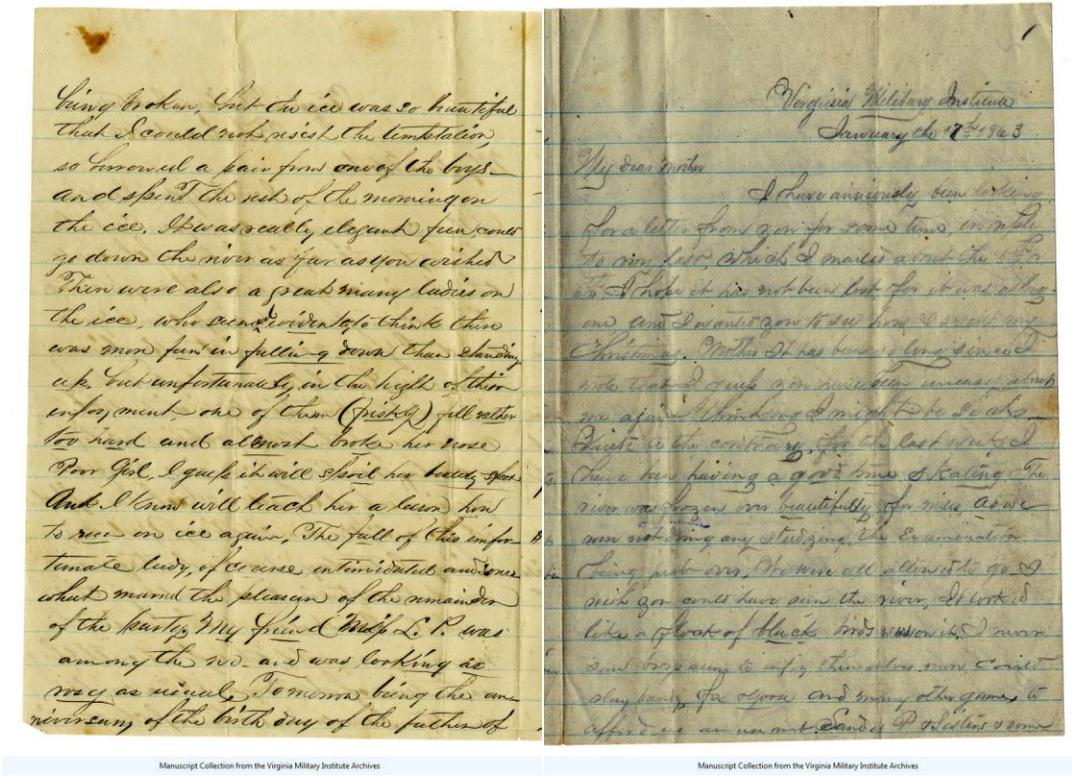


Photo Credit: Preston Library Digital Archives

This story is perhaps interesting, but why is it important? To the VMI community this is absolutely interesting, as all alumni are connected by the legacy and difficulty of this place, and every one of them understands the need to escape the environment, even for just a few hours. For the outside world, not only is the environment of VMI foreign and strange, and perhaps even unnecessarily harsh. Setting all of that aside, the real point is that for anyone who holds the goal of maintaining and improving the Chessie Trail, Jordan's Point Park, and Maury River, they would be remiss to not call upon help from VMI. One of the greatest sources of help in any endeavor of conservation in these areas can be helped along by the VMI community. All cadets, past, present, and hopefully future, are aware of the necessity and helpful influence of these

places, not only as a place to train and improve, but also as a place for relaxation or stress relief. More than the cadets, the Institute itself understands the necessity of these areas, and the value they have as training areas as well as areas for stress relief of cadets. Many of the corps-wide activities that VMI conducts would not be possible without these areas, and as we go further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Corps will continue to grow, and the need for well-maintained areas will increase as the Institute gets larger and larger.

## Works Cited

VMI Preston Library Digital Archives for Pictures used

VMI Preston Library for Letters by Cadet Stanard

Conversational Interview with Col. (U.S.M.C. Ret.) John Piedmont, VMI Class of 1989.