

THE
HUDSON
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VALLEY
REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

MARIST

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From the Editors

The historical net in this issue of *The Hudson River Valley Review* has been cast especially wide, spanning from the early eighteenth century right up to the twenty-first. The range of topics—from linguistics and engineering to urban geography—is also unusually broad. Taken together, these articles comprise a fascinating tapestry that truly represents the diversity of thought and activity that has always been a distinguishing characteristic of life in the Hudson Valley. Such diversity is what continues to make the region a center for creativity and makes *The Hudson River Valley Review* so much fun to edit—and, we hope, fun and informative to read.

Reed Sparling

Christopher Pryslopsi

Letter To the Editors

One note regarding Christopher Pryslopsi's intriguing article on the Orange County Government Center. The description of Goshen's main street as "...an historic island in a growing sea of suburban sprawl with endless stretches of red lights, turning lanes, and big-box retail centers" is quite simply well-over-the-top hyperbole—and not justifiable by any real review of the full Goshen area landscape. As a leading anti-sprawl advocate, I know it when I see it. This hyperbole blemishes the article, regurgitates popular PR/media terminology, and certainly is not based on research or analysis.

Back to Rudolph's design: for now I will stay out of the debate on the merits of this example of modernist architecture or its functional use as a public facility. It is unique, but many of us have our own practical frustrations with the building. Its one element that particularly frustrates me, and many others, is that most of the stairwells were not designed or built wide enough to accommodate two people side-by-side. So when someone goes up or down the stairs, they typically have to wait, or go flat against the wall, to allow another person to go down or up. This just isn't practical in a heavily used public building.

David Church, Commissioner

Orange County Planning Department, Goshen

Call for Essays

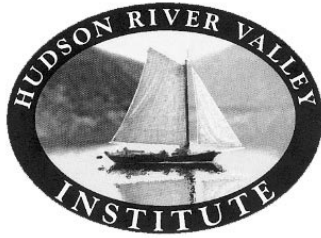
The Hudson River Valley Review is anxious to consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself.

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HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as two double-spaced typescripts, generally no more than thirty pages long, along with a computer disk with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk. Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Otherwise, the submission of visual materials should be cleared with the editors beforehand. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. No materials will be returned unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is provided. No responsibility is assumed for their loss. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

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John Evangelist Walsh, former senior editor at *Reader's Digest*, has authored some twenty books of biography and history. One of his two works on Edgar Allen Poe—*Poe the Detective*—received an Edgar Award, and *The Shadows Rise: Abraham Lincoln and the Ann Rutledge Legend*, was a finalist for the prestigious Gettysburg Prize.

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On the cover: *West Point Looking South* by George Catlin; circa 1828
Courtesy of West Point Museum Art Collection, United States Military Academy

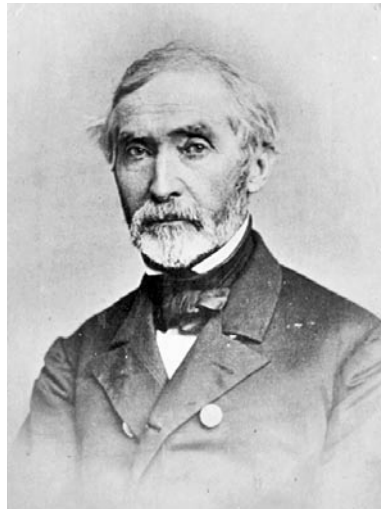
Dennis Hart Mahan and the Early Development of Engineering Education

Col. Kip P. Nygren

Born less than a month after the United States Military Academy was founded, Dennis Hart Mahan arrived at West Point in the summer of 1820 to begin his plebe year. The following year, he began teaching fourth-class mathematics as an acting assistant professor, and except for a four-year period in Europe to further his education, he continued to teach at the Military Academy until his death fifty years later.

During that half-century span, West Point was the premier engineering institution in the nation, and Dennis Hart Mahan was the embodiment of the Military Academy for both its graduates and the general public. He was America's preeminent engineering professor and a prolific author of many of the textbooks used in a growing number of engineering programs at other colleges. A national figure in science and engineering, he was one of the fifty original incorporators of the National Academy of Science in 1863, one of only six honorary charter members of the American Society of Civil Engineers when it was formed in 1853, and the recipient of honorary degrees from Princeton, Brown, Columbia, and Dartmouth. Mahan was a larger-than-life academic figure with the credibility, academic experience, body of written work, and disciples spread throughout higher education to influence the direction of engineering education well into the following century.

As if these achievements were not enough, Mahan was also the major figure in the development of military art and



COURTESY UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY AT WEST POINT

Dennis Hart Mahan

science in the U.S. Army. He wrote the majority of the Army texts on military tactics and fortifications used during both the Mexican and Civil Wars. (Much to Mahan's chagrin, even the Confederate government published his military books.) Many of the major national figures during and immediately after the Civil War—including Ulysses Grant—had been his pupils. As a further indicator of Mahan's innate brilliance, his son, Alfred Thayer Mahan, became the most influential naval theorist of the early twentieth century.

Though only five feet six inches tall—small even by the standards of the early nineteenth century—Mahan was a brilliant and diligent student. In November 1821, he was appointed an acting assistant professor. He taught a section of plebe mathematics every morning, an assignment that continued until his graduation in 1824. As an instructor, Mahan had several privileges: a special room, an extra ten dollars a month, excusal from most military duties and inspections, and authority to wear a distinctive uniform.

The extra teaching burden and the need to make up work his classmates received during the formal instruction he missed required Mahan to labor even harder. In the 1824 graduation class, he was the top cadet in every subject except French (where he ranked third) and conduct (ninth). A good indicator of the quality of his intellect was the Academic Board's recommendation that Mahan alone be appointed to the Corps of Engineers. Most significant for his future was the impression Mahan made on Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer. Even at this early stage, Thayer believed that he had discovered a budding star for his faculty upon which he could continue to expand his vision for West Point. He would continue to mentor and develop the qualities of this young teacher over the next forty-seven years.

Immediately after graduation, Mahan took up his first and only Army assignment other than teaching at West Point when he reported for duty in New York City to perform several engineering surveys. However, that July he received orders to report back to West Point to become an assistant professor of mathematics. After a year spent mainly in scholarly pursuits, Thayer appointed Mahan principal assistant professor of engineering. He worked closely with the other assistant engineering professor, Alexander Bache, who had just graduated. Thus began a lifelong friendship between two of the most important scientific and engineering leaders of nineteenth-century America.

During 1825, Mahan's health, always frail, deteriorated. In March of the following year, he was unable to teach for two weeks. He requested a leave of absence for a year to visit Europe and regain his health. The leave, which turned into a four-year professional visit to observe engineering practice and education,

included sixteen months at the French Military School of Application in Metz. This experience with certain aspects of the French educational system undoubtedly contributed to the formulation of Mahan's educational philosophy, as it had Thayer's a decade previous. "These aspects were: a small student body and small classes, a closely prescribed curriculum with a heavy mathematical bias, an arduous daily program of frequent grading and recitation, spirited competition for class standing, professors with prestige and considerable power where their courses were concerned, and a director of studies who supervised all aspects of instruction."¹

Mahan finished his studies in France and arrived back in New York on July 1, 1830. He was promptly assigned to West Point with duty as assistant professor of engineering. The current professor, David B. Douglass, resigned that September, after a dispute over a desired one-year leave of absence. Within a week of receiving Douglass's resignation, the chief of the engineers offered the professorship to Mahan. Thus began the longest tenure of a department head in the history of the Military Academy.

Mahan's extensive and momentous professional contributions during his long career can be categorized as shown below. Only the first two areas of contribution will be addressed in this article.

- Creating an engineering education program
- National leadership and influence in engineering education
- Creating a military art and science education program
- Serving as West Point leader and academy spokesman

At the time Mahan became the Professor of Engineering, no other college in the nation had yet graduated an engineer, although Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute had already initiated its engineering program. The distinction between military and civilian engineer was only recently becoming recognized and would be aided by the expansion of railroads for purely civilian purposes. With no other American engineering programs to use as a model, Mahan was forced to organize both military and civilian engineering in the best manner to support the mission of the Military Academy. "Though able men like Professors [Claudius] Crozet and Douglass had preceded, such were the advancing requirements of the engineering art that it may be said Mahan had to almost recreate his entire course of instruction."²

More than almost any other aspect of his service to West Point and the engineering profession, Mahan saw the writing of textbooks—and, therefore, the creation of the structure of engineering education—as his lifetime work. Initially, he used a lithograph press that he purchased for the academy while in France as a means of providing his students with the written information they needed to

study before class. During his entire tenure as professor, Mahan never stopped publishing and revising his long list of textbooks. During summers, he traveled to other colleges and engineering sites to gather the knowledge required to keep his engineering courses current. His textbook, *Course in Civil Engineering*, first published in 1837, sold more than 15,000 copies over its lifetime, with numerous updates and new editions from Mahan.

Over his fifty years as a teacher, Mahan saw the amount of engineering information, especially as applied to the military, literally explode. He understood that one could not teach students all the information they needed; therefore, he concentrated on the teaching of fundamentals and depth over breadth of topics covered. He believed that if a man really understood his principles, he would seldom have difficulty applying them. Mahan often reminded his son, Frederick: “My boy, remember one thing—the only really practical man is the one who is thoroughly grounded in his theory.”³

All departments at West Point taught cadets in accordance with Thayer’s basic concepts. Obviously, after teaching for many years, Mahan had developed his own interpretations of this philosophy. “His cardinal principle was that the studies of the cadets, to be thorough, must be restricted to but a few subjects, that the mind that may act healthfully and be developed by their study in its proper sense, and not merely the memory crammed.”⁴ Rather than promote superficiality, Mahan omitted material from his curriculum and would advocate extensive individual background readings for the further development of cadets and faculty alike. Today, we call this the independent learning process.

According to George Cullum, one of Mahan’s students, the professor was a master at in-class assessment techniques. “He had an almost intuitive perception of the exact amount of information possessed by each cadet on the subject matter of the lesson in hand, and by a few dexterous questions would quickly winnow the kernel of knowledge from the chaff of pretension.”⁵ Mahan had very high expectations of cadets and he would not tolerate inadequate preparation for class. The students demonstrated their understanding of the important concepts of the lesson either at the blackboard or through oral questioning. “He was stern and unyielding where duty was concerned. There was nothing involving the cadet’s responsibilities, which irritated professor Mahan more than neglect of studies and attendant slipshod performance in the section room.”⁶ By the time a class reached its final year, it was rare that a cadet was discharged for academic failure. It is an indication of Mahan’s serious attitude toward education that the only first class (senior) cadets separated from the Academy for academics from 1832 to 1870 were four recommended by him in his course.

Mahan's primary influence on both engineering education and practice was through the impact of his students as they came to develop other engineering programs. "Six of the nine [engineering] schools springing up later than the Military Academy and prior to the Civil War were launched in successful careers with West Pointers in key positions on their respective faculties. And of the total nineteen other [engineering] schools up to 1870, at least ten had direct West Point pedagogical affiliations."⁷ Another telling measure of Mahan's influence can be deduced from *West Point's Scientific 200: Celebration of the Bicentennial Biographies of 200 of West Point's Most Successful and Influential Mathematicians, Scientists, Engineers, and Technologists*. Of the graduates listed, eighty-eight were taught and inspired by Dennis Mahan. Sixty-six of these became professors, either at the Military Academy (thirty-nine) or at other universities (thirty-seven), and continued the model of engineering education they had learned from Mahan.⁸

Morrison's examination of the Register of Graduates found that of 1,449 graduates between 1833 and 1866, forty-three were college professors at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Michigan, Lehigh, California, the University of the South, the University of Georgia, the Virginia Military Institute, the U.S. Naval Academy, Seton Hall, Louisiana State University, Missouri State University, the University of Rochester, and the University of Mississippi. An additional fifteen graduates served as heads of colleges and universities, including VMI, Girard College, the University of Alabama, Washington and Lee, Mississippi A&M, Norwich University, and the University of South Carolina, as well as the state military institutes of Maryland, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina.⁹ When one considers that West Point graduates—and Mahan's students in particular—became the foundation for a majority of U.S. engineering education programs, the reach of the curriculum and pedagogy of this exceptional professor is broad, indeed. "Technical education everywhere in the early United States showed the pervasive influence of West Point and the Thayer System."¹⁰ "Faculty and graduates of the Military Academy were sought by other colleges and universities, not only because of their knowledge of science, mathematics and engineering, but also because of their familiarity with Thayer's system of rigid discipline, departmentalized study, and intense academic pressure exerted on students."¹¹

It is clear that Mahan, as the senior member of West Point's Academic Board for more than thirty years, exerted a strong influence over the development of the curriculum. "From the surviving evidence it is a fair guess that three men—Mahan, [William] Bartlett, and [Albert] Church—dominated the Academic Board. One of these three headed every committee of the Board from 1833 through 1854, and bearing in mind that most of the substantive work of the Board

was accomplished through committees, the conclusion is irresistible that Mahan, Bartlett, and Church governed the academic side of West Point.”¹² Mahan was the clear leader of this group; some records even refer to him at the “Dean” of the Academic Board.¹³ Morrison concludes that, “The ubiquitous and gifted Dennis Hart Mahan was undoubtedly the pre-eminent figure of the entire group of professors and instructors.”¹⁴

During his years at the academy, Mahan was also the most prolific writer in defense of the institution as it trod through some troubled times, and he identified with West Point in a very personal manner. “Possessed of a brilliant intellect and a facile pen, Mahan employed both to add to the luster of the Military Academy and to the Army in a way none of his colleagues ever did.”¹⁵ “As the senior graduate who had not been retired, and the educator of all then in active service, Mahan naturally felt that the Army was in no small measure his own creation, and he was somewhat the foster-father of a numerous progeny of which he was justly proud; hence he was quick to shield worthy officers from unmerited reproach, or sound the praises of...his distinguished children well known to fame.”¹⁶

While Mahan and his West Point colleagues led the academic program, they continued to revise the curriculum, write textbooks, and provide the Army and the nation with technically qualified military officers, engineers, and leaders. An example of their willingness to consider change was the experiment with a five-year curriculum from 1855 to 1860. Ultimately, this failed to produce the desired effects, but such an extensive attempt to overhaul the curriculum was not to be seen again until the First World War. The vitality of Professor Mahan remained at a high level, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to the superintendent in 1867, recommending changes to the role of the Academic Board. While not a new suggestion, Mahan proposed the creation of the position of Dean:

Fearing West Point was becoming a closed corporation ruled by professors and immune to outside influences, he proposed a Dean between the Supt and the Academic Board, while the Academic Board would only determine proficiency on the examinations. Prophetically, the old professor warned that the governmental structure of West Point has not vitality within itself and cannot have as under a certain set of men everything must be kept stationary, or retrograde.¹⁷

With the death of Mahan in 1871, and Thayer in 1872, the last links with the reality of Thayer’s system was cut. “The Thayer System which had once been a pragmatic approach to academic problems and national demands eventually assumed the status of holy dogma.”¹⁸ Not one of the successors to Mahan,

Bartlett, and Church over the next half-century and beyond had both the vision and the standing to make major changes to the venerated academic structure, as the future would demand.

Given the extensive, original, and important accomplishments of Dennis Hart Mahan over the longest tenure of any department head at the United States Military Academy, it is difficult to ascertain why he is not held in greater esteem in academy history. He is the single most important figure in the initial development of engineering education in this country, and he substantially advanced the development of military art and science for the U.S. Army. Probably no single member of the faculty and staff of West Point embodied the academy so well and so long as he did. In many ways, Mahan's accomplishments on behalf of the institution to which he dedicated his life rival—or even exceed—those of his mentor and idol, Sylvanus Thayer.

Notes

1. Thomas E. Griess, "Dennis Hart Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism, 1830-1871" (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1968), p. 131.
2. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York from Establishment in 1802 to 1890 with Early History of the U.S. Military Academy*, 2 vols., vol. I (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1891), p. 320.
3. Frederick A. Mahan, "Professor Dennis Hart Mahan," *Professional Memoires, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army and Engineer Department at Large IX* (1917): p. 74.
4. Griess, p. 181.
5. George W. Cullum, "Professor D. H. Mahan," *Army and Navy Journal IX* (1871).
6. Griess, p. 191.
7. R.E. Dupuy, *Sylvanus Thayer: Educator* (West Point: 1940), p. 10.
8. David C. Arney, *West Point's Scientific 200: Celebration of the Bicentennial Biographies of 200 of West Point's Most Successful and Influential Mathematicians, Scientists, Engineers, and Technologists* (Unpublished, 2002).
9. James L. Morrison, *The United States Military Academy, 1833-1866: Years of Progress and Turmoil* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1970), p. 175.
10. William B. Streett, "Military Enterprise and Engineering Education: The American Experience," *Cornell Engineering Quarterly* (1993), p. 10.
11. Ibid.
12. Morrison, p. 92.
13. Cullum, *Biographical Register*, p. 322.
14. Morrison, p. 80.
15. Ibid.
16. Cullum, *Biographical Register*, p. 322.
17. Morrison, p. 283.
18. Ibid.

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