
“I Hope to Have Justice Done Me or I Can’t Get Along Here”: James Webster Smith and West Point



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Abstract

James W. Smith’s experience as West Point’s first Black cadet is a microcosm of Reconstruction and the struggle to integrate West Point. It began with the best of intentions, but ultimately failed due to a destructive combination of racist antipathy and the apathy of those who could have intervened on his behalf. His extraordinary persistence and perseverance changed the environment at the Academy, forcing the West Point community to shift from active to passive resistance. Although he did not reap the rewards himself, Smith made graduation possible, if still not probable, for those African American cadets who followed.

On 31 May 1870, James Webster Smith arrived at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, filled with hope and expectation. Coming from Washington, D.C., he would have made his way to New York City, and then north to the dock at Garrison’s Landing directly across the river from West Point to await a ferry that would

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bring him across the Hudson River for the last leg of his journey. Smith undoubtedly was the center of attention both at Garrison's Landing and on the ferry. He was Black. Thousands of aspiring cadets had made the crossing since the Academy's founding in 1802; but only one other had been an African American, and he had preceded Smith by only six days. No record exists of Smith's impressions as he made his way across the river, but they likely resembled those of Henry O. Flipper, the first Black graduate of West Point, who made the same journey three years later. Conveying the enormous weight of the moment, Flipper recalled an "auspicious day" and a "little ferry-boat" from whose deck he "viewed the hills about West Point, her stone structures perched thereon, thus rising still higher, as if providing access to the very pinnacle of fame, and shuddered."²

Smith became the first Black cadet admitted to West Point, but he never attained the "very pinnacle of fame" that Flipper envisioned in 1873 and ultimately achieved in 1877. Instead, Smith recrossed the Hudson to Garrison's Landing four years after he had arrived at the Academy, broken in spirit. He had endured four long years of physical and severe psychological torment only to be dismissed after the Academic Board declared him academically deficient. To Smith, the gray granite buildings perched upon West Point's gray granite heights must have had a gloomy appearance in that day's very different light and would forever represent an opportunity denied.

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2. Quotation from Henry O. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point: Autobiography of Lieut. Henry O. Flipper, U.S.A., First Graduate of Color from the U.S. Military Academy* (New York: Homer Lee & Co., 1878), 2. James W. Smith to "Friend and Benefactor," 1 June 1870, Exhibit A to Court of Inquiry Transcript addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, 18 July 1870, Roll 1, James W. Smith files, M1002 – Selected Documents Relating to Blacks Nominated for Appointment to the United States Military Academy during the Nineteenth Century, 1870–1887—USMA Special Collections and Archives (hereafter cited as USMA) pegs Smith's arrival at West Point to 31 May 1870. "The West Point Revels," *New*

With his ultimately tragic story so closely preceding Flipper's success, Smith has never emerged from Flipper's shadow. Two versions of James Webster Smith appear in histories of West Point and the experience of Black cadets at West Point in the late nineteenth century specifically. In the first, Smith appears fleetingly as an introductory also-ran to Flipper. He leaves the stage as soon as he appears, acknowledged as West Point's first Black cadet before being unceremoniously ushered out of the narrative to make way for Flipper.³ In the second, Smith appears as the antithesis of Flipper, a troublemaker and the author of his own tragedy, deliberately provoking the ordeals he endured. This latter interpretation has its roots in Flipper's memoir of his years at West Point, in which he alternates between genuine sympathy for Smith and insinuations that Smith brought trouble upon himself by responding to abuses in ways that Flipper did not. Historians developed this interpretation further in the twentieth century, with two prominent studies of West Point written in the mid-1960s explicitly comparing Smith to a thoroughly 1960s' White and middle-class view of Malcolm X while portraying Flipper as a late-nineteenth-century version of Martin Luther King Jr. This interpretation has had an outsized influence on more recent scholarship and is long overdue for correction.⁴

One interpretive strand common to both the Smith-as-unfortunate-prologue-to-Flipper and the Smith-as-antithesis-to-Flipper narratives is the view that the staff and faculty at West Point were exceptionally fair, professional, and correct in all their dealings with Smith and those Black

York Sun, 26 May 1870, included in Michael Howard files, M1002, USMA, shows that Howard arrived on 25 May 1870.

3. See, for example, Krewasky A. Salter, "Sable Officers: African-American Military Officers, 1861–1918" (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 1993), 62–64; and Theodore J. Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 145–46.

4. Thomas Fleming, *West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy* (New York: William Morrow, 1965), 213–31, and Stephen Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 231–37. For examples of later scholarship that is quite good but fails to challenge this interpretation, see William P. Vaughn, "West Point and the First Negro Cadet," *Military Affairs* 35:3 (October 1971): 100–102; and Brian G. Shellum, *Black Cadet in a White Bastion: Charles Young at West Point* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 41–47. Examples of later scholarship that generally sustain Fleming's and Ambrose's interpretations of Smith include Walter Dillard Scott, "The United States Military Academy, 1865–1900: The Uncertain Years," (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1972), chapter 7; and Tom Carhart, *Barricades: The First African American West Point Cadets and Their Constant Fight for Survival* (Las Vegas: Xlibris, 2020), chapter 3.

cadets who followed him throughout West Point's first period of integration (1870–1889). According to this interpretation, fault for Smith's troubles and those of other Black cadets lay either with the victims or with the corps of cadets, and West Point itself was blameless. This interpretation can be traced back to Flipper's memoir, in which professions that the West Point staff and faculty were perfectly fair and unbiased appear throughout the work. In one representative selection, Flipper writes: "The officers of the institution have never, so far as I can say, shown any prejudice at all. They have treated me with uniform courtesy and impartiality." Such a characterization has generally been accepted uncritically by later historians and incorporated into their own work. Their evidence supporting such an interpretation most often leads back to Flipper's published statements, sometimes offering White officers' statements about their own behavior as corroborating evidence.⁵

We have to consider, however, that Flipper wrote his memoir only one year after departing West Point. At that time, he was a lieutenant of cavalry with his whole career in front of him, not knowing that within four years he would be driven out of the army. An officer in Flipper's position had every reason to withhold criticism of West Point, then the crown jewel and beating heart of the U.S. Army officer corps. That Flipper wrote with his future career in mind is strongly suggested by the fact that while he enumerated myriad abuses fellow cadets subjected him to, he assiduously avoided naming any abuser who ultimately graduated, received a commission, and was still serving at the time he wrote the memoir. At what he hoped was the opening stages of a long career, Flipper had every reason to pull his punches when discussing West Point and its faculty.

West Point was far from blameless. As an institution, it was as much to blame for Smith's trials and troubles as any of the cadets actively tormenting him, and perhaps even more so. Although its officers prided themselves in outwardly treating Smith courteously and fairly, with few exceptions their judgments and their actions were fundamentally clouded by bias. Individual biases invariably became institutional biases that festered into structural impediments that made the path to graduation for Smith and later-matriculating Black cadets almost impassable.

In this way, Smith's story is not only a product but also a microcosm of Reconstruction. Its earliest stages feature much of Reconstruction's promise:

5. Quotation in Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 122. Examples of historians accepting and reinforcing this interpretation include Vaughn, "West Point and the First Negro Cadet," 100–102; Scott, "The United States Military Academy, 1865–1900," chapter 7; Carhart, *Barricades*, chapter 4.

education, philanthropy, social and political uplift, active and conscientious political sponsorship, civil rights, and expanded access to opportunities and spaces previously denied. Then Smith's tortured experiences at West Point feature traces of Reconstruction's ultimate failure. With Smith enduring isolation and abuse, seeing bias metastasize into structural barriers, and being criminalized when he did have the temerity to assert his rights or seek redress when he was wronged, West Point's response to integration displayed some marked similarities to southern counties' and states' responses to and undermining of Reconstruction.⁶

If Smith's experience reflects Reconstruction, however, it was also a "splendid failure" in the same way that historian Michael W. Fitzgerald argues Reconstruction was. Fitzgerald holds that Reconstruction was "a contest between those who attempted the doomed, but mostly right thing, and those who were doing the very wrong thing and prevailed ... only for a time."⁷ More than a foil to the deservedly celebrated Henry O. Flipper, James Webster Smith actually set the stage for Flipper, John Hanks Alexander, and Charles Young to become West Point's first three Black graduates in 1877, 1886, and 1889, respectively. By persisting at West Point for four long and grueling years, Smith changed the environment in ways that made it possible for later-arriving Black cadets to succeed and graduate.

When Smith arrived in 1870, the responses of the corps of cadets, collectively, and some of the staff and faculty individually were calibrated to drive him away. By refusing to resign, Smith ensured that those who followed him entered an environment defined more by passive resistance to their presence than by active measures intended to force them out, though such active measures were not entirely absent from the West Point careers of subsequent Black cadets. Because of Smith, Black cadets reporting to West Point after 1870 had a viable if still heavily contested and highly doubtful path to graduation and an officer's commission in the United States Army.

In recovering and presenting Smith's story in the following pages, we have made two important choices. First, Smith's first year at West Point is the primary focus. His first year was seminal because his survival is what changed the environment in ways that made graduation somewhat possible for Black cadets, and the preponderance of surviving archival

6. For general overviews of Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); and Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

7. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure*, 212.

material is from that year. Second, because we intend this article to correct the record by providing an unvarnished account of Smith's experiences at West Point, we have not softened or censored the source material in any way. Some sources include language, threats, and acts that may shock and upset modern readers; but such language, threats, and violence were critical components of Smith's cadet career and are necessary to more fully understand both Smith's experiences and the environment at West Point.

In 1870, West Point was unready and unwilling to both admit Black cadets and take steps to ensure that they would have as fair a chance to graduate as any other cadet. Smith's four years at West Point were defined by stifling isolation, occasional violence, countless actions and expressions of individual and collective racism, and a brand of institutional racism that enabled White cadets to act upon the worst of their instincts, rendered all the more insidious by the institution's public and private professions of fairness and impartiality. In fact, the reception West Point afforded Smith offered little in the way of fairness and nothing in the way of impartiality. At any given time, he faced a hostile corps of cadets, and a staff and faculty that neither believed he deserved to be among them nor recognized the degree to which their actions—and more frequently their inaction—sanctioned the malfeasance of those determined to keep Smith from graduating.

West Point did not long anticipate the arrival of its first prospective Black cadets. Under normal circumstances, the War Department processed nominations of prospective cadets a full year prior to the date at which the nominees would report to West Point. Such advance notice allowed the Academy to forecast and manage the size of any given class and allowed prospective cadets time to prepare for the academic examination that, together with the physical examination, served as the final obstacle before formal admission. The War Department granted exceptions to the standard timeline in extenuating circumstances, usually in the form of vacancies created by unfortunate events such as the resignation, academic failure, debilitation, or death of previously admitted cadets. The first African Americans to report to West Point for examination were nominated under such extenuating circumstances. No part of the nomination process had been designed to gather or reveal a nominee's race. Any foreknowledge at West Point would have come through unofficial channels.⁸

8. Introduction, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Microfilm M1002, Selected Documents Relating to Blacks Nominated for Appointment to the United States Military Academy during the Nineteenth Century, 1870–1887 (hereafter

It therefore came almost as a surprise when two Black nominees arrived in May 1870. First to arrive was Michael Howard from Mississippi, who disembarked at West Point only one month after receiving his nomination. Mississippi was slow to accept and adhere to conditions for readmission to the Union after the Civil War. Congress did not recognize and seat a delegation from Mississippi until February 1870. Newly seated Congressman Legrand Perce nominated Howard on 20 April, and Howard accepted the nomination on 30 April.⁹

Described in the press as “a *full black*,” Howard caused quite a stir when he reported for duty at West Point on 25 May 1870. Famished after six days of traveling, according to one reporter’s account of his arrival, Howard sought dinner at the Rose Hotel overlooking the Hudson from its perch at the northern edge of the plain at West Point but was refused by a clerk who asserted that no Black man would ever dine at the hotel. The same reporter noted that Howard’s reception among the corps of cadets was worse. Although cadets assured themselves that Howard would certainly fail the entrance examination, they were incensed that he would “have to drill with us for four weeks before the examination.” He spoke with several cadets considering responses that ranged from resignation to murder.¹⁰

Into this environment only days later came James Webster Smith, whose path to West Point was uncommon, to say the least. He had been

cited as M1002), USMA. See also Legrand W. Perce to Secretary of War, 20 April 1870, and Michael Howard and Merriman Howard to Secretary of War, 30 April 1870, Michael Howard files, M1002, USMA; as well as Solomon Hogue to Secretary of War, 23–24 May 1870, and James W. Smith and Israel Smith to Secretary of War, 27–29 May 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

9. Legrand W. Perce to Secretary of War, 20 April 1870, and Michael Howard and Merriman Howard to Secretary of War, 30 April 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

10. “The West Point Reveals,” *New York Sun*, 26 May 1870, M1002, USMA. Emphasis on “*full black*” is included in the original. A letter to the editor of *The Daily Graphic* reprinted in Henry O. Flipper’s memoir states that it was James W. Smith who was denied a meal at the Rose Hotel. It is possible that both Howard and Smith suffered the same indignity from the same person, as the clerk in question is unlikely to have changed his views in the few days separating Howard’s arrival from Smith’s. It is also possible that the author of the letter—a reporter named Eli Perkins—misremembered the incident and confused James W. Smith for Michael Howard. The rest of the letter makes it clear that the cadet who was denied service from the Rose Hotel was the first Black cadet to arrive at West Point, making the latter possibility the more likely, as Howard arrived six days before Smith. See Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 312–13.

born into an enslaved family in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1850. His father was a skilled carpenter, and his mother was an “octoroon woman, who obtained a good education, at a private school, through her white father’s influence.”¹¹ His parents understood the importance of education and the opportunities that it would afford their child. Smith’s mother made efforts to educate Smith and his siblings at a time when educating enslaved African Americans was illegal. Her persistence made all the difference.

The Civil War came—and with it, emancipation. In the aftermath, education became one of the principal efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Smith had shown considerable promise as a student, and his parents enrolled him at a Freedmen’s Bureau school in Columbia. There Smith excelled for just over a year before catching the attention of David Clark, a philanthropist and former Union army officer from Connecticut who funded the salary of Smith’s Freedman’s Bureau-assigned teacher. As Clark recalled, the teacher “informed me of the remarkable aptness and eagerness of one of her pupils in particular, whose thirst for increased knowledge had led her to hope that some well-disposed and generous-hearted person in the North would take him and give him a thorough education.” Clark remembered the teacher feeling emboldened, having already breached the topic, recalling that she then “pressed me to take him to my own home, and give him the benefits of an education he so eagerly desired.”¹²

Clark did exactly that, moving Smith to his own home in Hartford, Connecticut, where he enrolled Smith at the elite Hartford High School—an integrated school—in 1867. Smith excelled during his first two years. The faculty then allowed him to complete his junior and senior years of study concurrently during the 1869–1870 academic year. Rising to the challenge and the opportunity, Smith graduated with highest honors. This was a formative experience for him—the generous and fair treatment he received in Hartford led him to believe that he would be treated fairly wherever he went. Shortly after graduating, Smith enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he did not remain for long.¹³

Solomon L. Hoge, a Civil War veteran and Radical Republican from Ohio, relocated after the war and was elected to represent South Carolina’s third congressional district. The third district’s slot at West Point was

11. *The Chicago Tribune*, 18 June 1870.

12. David A. Clark to Sayles J. Bowen, 23 July 1872, reprinted in “Grant vs. Smith,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1872.

13. David A. Clark to Sayles J. Bowen, 23 July 1872, reprinted in “Grant vs. Smith,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1872.

unexpectedly vacant in spring 1870. For reasons that remain unclear, Hoge nominated Smith, whose family continued to reside in Hoge's district. Smith's benefactor David Clark was not warm to the idea. It seems that Major General Oliver O. Howard, then serving as both commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau and president of Howard University, was the impetus for Hoge to nominate Smith. According to Clark, "I was adverse to the idea of his going, because I thought I could foresee the difficulties he would encounter at West Point on account of his color; but I left the whole matter with Gen. Howard, and he favoring the proposition, Smith accepted, and went to West Point." The nomination process came suddenly and resolved quickly. Hoge informed the War Department that he planned to nominate Smith on 23 May 1870. Smith formally accepted the nomination four days later and arrived at West Point only four days after that.¹⁴

Much like Michael Howard, Smith received a frigid reception when he disembarked at West Point's south dock on 31 May 1870, but he believed it would pass quickly if he displayed a dignified stoicism to any slights. In his first letter to Clark from West Point, Smith sounded an optimistic tone, reporting that he was "very well pleased with everything," and that "the situation is charming," with "drill both afternoon and forenoon." Smith happily noted that he and Howard "room together and get along very well."

Despite clear attempts to maintain a cheerful and optimistic tone and outlook though, Smith allowed the briefest of glimpses into his experience arriving at West Point. "The cadets call us 'niggers', of course," he wrote, commenting that on his first day, he and Howard "could hear nothing else but that word ringing out on all sides, from every window, and nook, and niche continually." Countering torment with optimism, Smith reported his belief that "it seems to be dying away" and that "it is not quite so bad today [1 June], for we don't say anything, but just walk as large and hold our heads as high as any of them."¹⁵ Smith was too conscious of

14. Quotation from David A. Clark to Sayles J. Bowen, 23 July 1872, reprinted in "Grant vs. Smith," *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1872. See also Solomon Hogue to Secretary of War, 23–24 May 1870, and James W. Smith and Israel Smith to Secretary of War, 27–29 May 1870, James W. Smith files, M1002, USMA. Israel Smith—James W. Smith's father—was serving as an alderman in Columbia at the time; but there is no firm evidence linking him to Hoge. Nor is there any evidence linking Clark to the South Carolina Congressional delegation or suggesting that Clark saw a better future for Smith at West Point and in the army than at Howard University. O.O. Howard is the only person we can definitively place in Smith's orbit who had sufficient political weight to secure a nomination for Smith; but we cannot definitively rule out Israel Smith's influence.

15. James W. Smith to "Friend and Benefactor" [David A. Clark], 1 June 1870, in-

the historic nature of his appointment, awed by the Academy, and quite understandably caught up in visions of a bright future at West Point and in the army to recognize that his optimism was misplaced.

In such a state and without any real means of knowing otherwise, Smith was oblivious to the more subtle and less overt differences between his experience and those of his White colleagues during his first days and perhaps weeks at West Point. Although the hazing of new cadets plagued West Point to the point of creating public scandals in the late 1860s and 1870s, new cadets were still considered legitimate if occasionally tormented members of the broader family that was the United States Corps of Cadets. As such, other members of that family took steps to ease new cadets' transition into life at West Point through favors small and large, advice, and instruction. Arriving at West Point only one year after Smith, Hugh Lennox Scott fondly remembered being "left to the tender mercies of Fred Grant and Tony Rucker," both sons of his uncle's old army friends who were about to graduate with the class of 1871 and could be relied upon to ease his transition into Academy life. "George Anderson from New Jersey of the same class," Scott recalled, "gave me his overcoat, dress-coat, and many pairs of white trousers" because regulations at the time placed "a low limit ... on the number of white trousers allowed, for otherwise no laundry could cope with them, but we were allowed then as many as anybody would give us." Notwithstanding some hazing, cadets typically looked after their newly arrived brethren. According to Scott, "Friends in different classes graduating gave me their trousers, and in my turn five years later I left my cousin, Charles Hunter, many pairs."¹⁶ Smith and Howard enjoyed no such favors. Instead, the corps of cadets moved to isolate them and ultimately force their departure from the Academy.

This marked a signal and systemic failure on the part of Academy leaders, who took no precautions to prepare for Howard's and Smith's

cluded as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. Emphasis on "quite" appears in the original.

16. On hazing, see Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 222–31; Crackel, *West Point*, 141–45; Lance Betros, *Carved from Granite: West Point since 1902* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 22–24; and Donald B. Connelly, "The Rocky Road to Reform: John M. Schofield at West Point, 1876–1881," in ed. Lance Betros, *West Point: Two Centuries and Beyond* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2004), 175–78. Quotations from Hugh Lennox Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 14. Scott spent five years at West Point because he was turned back a full year as punishment for hazing.

arrival or to ensure their fair treatment thereafter. West Point's leadership must have been aware that some members of Congress were striving to nominate suitable young Black men for cadetships. Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts had opened correspondence with the president of Oberlin College to find suitable candidates as early as 1867.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Colonel Henry M. Black—who served as the commandant of cadets until July 1870, presiding over the corps of cadets when Smith and Howard arrived—later testified to a court of inquiry that he took no “unusual precautions” on behalf of Smith and Howard because he was satisfied that he and other officers already “took every precaution in our power to prevent the ill-treatment of candidates for admission.” Dismissing the suggestion that he and others ought to have done more to ensure fair treatment for Smith and Howard, Black recalled that earlier in the year he had spoken “to a number of the cadets of each class on the subject of colored boys coming here, and was satisfied in my own mind that nothing would be done to them.”¹⁸

Black's statements do not clarify how many cadets he spoke to, when the discussions happened, or their substance. Yet because West Point officials could not possibly have learned of Smith's and Howard's appointments until May 1870—the same month they reported for duty—and would not have immediately recognized from those appointments that Smith and Howard were Black, Colonel Black's statement must fall somewhere between an overly charitable recollection of his actions and an outright lie.¹⁹

The Academy's failure to prepare for and protect Smith and Howard appears an error more of commission than omission. There is ample reason to believe that the commandant and others charged with leading the Academy thought that Smith and Howard had no place at the Academy, wanted them to fail, and allowed such views to influence their actions. Reporting on Howard's arrival at West Point, the *New York Sun* revealed a perception that the inspector of the Academy—Brevet Major General Edmund Schriver,

17. See Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Benjamin Franklin Butler: A Noisy, Fearless Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 175 and 182–83; and Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 231–32.

18. Testimony of Henry M. Black, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 42–43, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

19. Nothing on the nominations process or paperwork identified the race of the nominee. See Legrand W. Perce to Secretary of War, 20 April 1870, and Michael Howard and Merriman Howard to Secretary of War, 30 April 1870, Michael Howard files, M1002, USMA; as well as Solomon Hogue to Secretary of War, 23–24 May 1870, and James W. Smith and Israel Smith to Secretary of War, 27–29 May 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

who served in Washington, D.C., and advised the Secretary of War and Congress on all things related to West Point—and Colonel Black “are against the African, and while they are at the head of the National Academy, the black boy will remain on the plantation.”²⁰ Colonel Black demonstrated this charge to be true in testimony at a court of inquiry in July. While an unspecified number of conversations with an unspecified number of cadets had left Black “satisfied in my own mind that nothing would be done” to Smith and Howard, his reactions to specific charges of mistreatment leveled by Smith included different variations of “I do not believe a word of it” and “I pronounce it a base falsehood.” More to the point, Colonel Black denied any knowledge of Smith ever complaining to proper authorities about mistreatment from cadets or prospective cadets. Black made this denial despite having served as the reviewing officer for multiple investigations of cruel treatment that Smith had initiated due to his abiding faith that officers would ensure the system would protect him.²¹ Without any visible safeguards from West Point’s high command, members of the corps of cadets began to respond consciously and subconsciously to the introduction of Black cadets in ways calibrated to drive them away.

Those who arrived with Howard and Smith were the first to act. On 7 June 1870, a squad of prospective cadets marched to the “bootblack,” a local civilian paid to shine shoes and blacken boots. Officers had given a fellow prospective cadet, Robert McChord of Kentucky, charge of the squad with instructions to move it to and from the bootblack’s in an orderly and soldierly manner. Once there, the space became quite crowded. Not everyone could fit inside, and Smith and Howard stood at the back of the line in the doorway. McChord wandered back and forth, pulling out his pocketknife to clean his boots on the porch and put it away again as he went to check on the progress of the cadets. Entering the bootblack’s, McChord pushed roughly through the doorway, shouldering Howard and muttering as he did so that Howard and Smith needed to move. When

20. “The West Point Revels,” *New York Sun*, 26 May 1870, M1002, USMA.

21. Testimony of Henry M. Black, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 42–48, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. Quotations from pages 46 and 47. Black denies knowledge of Smith’s complaints to proper authorities on page 43 but reveals the existence of one investigation, apparently attributing the source of the complaint to one of his officers rather than to Smith, in the very next question on page 44. The second complaint that Colonel Black undoubtedly knew about is outlined in Capt. A. Clarke to Col. H.M. Black, 7 June 1870, in “Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob’t C. McChord, U.S.M.A.,” 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA. These incidents are described below.

they did not move, McChord returned and slapped Howard on the side of his face, yelling for Howard to get out of the doorway.

Outraged, Smith challenged McChord, "What right have you to strike anyone?" McChord responded that he was an officer, to which Smith rejoined, "Officers do not strike their soldiers." Enraged by Smith's boldness, McChord reached into the pocket holding his knife and growled, "I ought to cut you open." Though he did not pull the knife out, the threat was clear as several prospective cadets in the room crowded in, giving voice to simmering animosity for Smith and Howard with shouts of "cut them open," and "kill the d—d niggers."²²

Cooler heads prevailed as a few members of the squad advised the rest to back down, and the prospective cadets continued to get their boots blacked. There was another fracas when Howard climbed the bench to take his turn and McChord pushed him off the bench to take his place. Neither Howard nor Smith confronted McChord further, though they did try to report the incident to cadet officers—upperclassmen assigned to oversee the training of prospective cadets and new cadets—when they returned from the bootblack's. The cadet officers made it clear that Smith and Howard would get no help from them, replying coldly, "So what if he did hit you?"²³

Finding the cadet chain of command unmoved, Smith and Howard then brought their complaint to Captain A.L. Clarke, detailed to serve as commandant of new cadets. Clarke grudgingly brought the matter to Colonel Black, who ordered a formal investigation, that generally corroborated Smith's and Howard's allegations.

It also showed Smith to be the more active party in resisting such persecution. Although Howard was the target of the attack, it was Smith who confronted McChord. Trusting that officials would treat them fairly, Smith pushed Howard to report the incident. Clarke directed Howard to produce a written statement, but Smith wrote it. He wrote the first part of the statement at Howard's dictation but completed the statement on his own after Howard left the room, apparently to review that day's log of

22. See "Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob't C. McChord, U.S.M.A.," 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA. The report includes several attached files. Quotations are from Statement [of Michael Howard], 6 June 1870 and A. Clarke, "Statements of Cadets," both of which are appended to the report. See also Michael Howard to Adelbert Ames, 9 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

23. Michael Howard to Adelbert Ames, 9 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

delinquencies.²⁴ Although Howard reviewed and signed the statement, a difference between Smith's and Howard's perspectives produced a minor discrepancy between Howard's written and oral statements—with Howard being grabbed by the shirt and thrown off the bench as Smith observed it in the former, and having a hand placed on his chest which then pushed him off the bench as Howard experienced it in the latter.

Clarke used this minor inconsistency to discredit the accusers. Although his investigation found ample evidence corroborating Smith's and Howard's claims, Clarke reported to Colonel Black that he was "of the opinion that both of these youths have greatly exaggerated an insignificant affair" and conspired to cause trouble for the Academy. Tellingly, Clarke confirmed that McChord had assaulted Howard but argued that the greater offenses in the whole matter were when Howard attempted to get his shoes blacked before a White cadet, and that Smith and Howard reported the event with an extremely minor discrepancy in their statements. "I do not regard Mr. Howard's testimony as at all worthy of credence," Clarke wrote. He characterized the assault upon Howard as "the inevitable result of his attempting to push himself in the way of his white comrades," opining that "the same thing would doubtless have occurred had any white boy who was unpopular with his class have put himself in the same position." As for McChord's actions, Clarke wrote to Colonel Black, "While I do not attempt to uphold Mr. McChord, I think the mitigating circumstances such, as to require no further action to be taken in the matter, except a private reprimand from yourself to Mr. McC[hord]."²⁵

West Point's senior leaders supported Clarke's findings. McChord received no formal punishment from the commandant or the superintendent. Reviewing the case in Washington for the secretary of war, Edmund Schriver casually dismissed the whole affair, noting Howard's account of the incident "omits to state that his assailant was in command and authorized to give him orders."²⁶ At no time did any official involved

24. See A. Clarke, "Statement of Cadets," appended to "Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob't C. McChord, U.S.M.A.," 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

25. It is worth noting that the words "aggravate" and "annoy" tended to be used in contexts with which we would currently use the word "haze," thus indicating that the words carried a heavier meaning than we would presently associate with them. See "Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob't C. McChord, U.S.M.A.," 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

26. E. Schriver, "Memorandum," 20 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA.

in the investigation of the incident at the bootblack's—from the cadet officer who received the first report of it up to the War Department's Inspector of the Military Academy—consider that Howard and Smith suffered injustices on 6 June 1870. Beyond the findings of the investigation, this simple fact is all the more evident because several documents repeat Smith's and Howard's assertion of cadets' cries to "kill the d—d nigger"—a phrase with two epithets, but only one that officers blotted out to preserve gentlemanly dignity and propriety in official documents.²⁷

Sensing in his interactions with Captain Clarke that the investigation was not being conducted fairly and impartially, Smith drafted a letter on Howard's behalf to Adelbert Ames, a West Point graduate, Civil War general, and Radical Republican then serving as senator from Howard's home state of Mississippi. In the letter, Smith explained the importance he placed on both the incident and the need for swift punishment for McChord and others who threatened Smith and Howard. Smith wrote, "I hope to have justice done me or I can't get along here." He explained: "They think we are cowardly and afraid to stand on our dignity, and if they find that one can abuse and insult us with impunity they will soon take for granted that they can all do likewise." Establishing early precedents was of the utmost importance, Smith argued. Even as the investigation was proceeding, he registered a chilling effect in the wake of the incident at the bootblack's. "The ill feeling seems to increase daily and is growing unbearable," he wrote, sensing "partiality on the side of the officers," as well as "ill feeling and hatred on that of the cadets."²⁸

Smith was right. The incident at the bootblack's established multiple precedents that framed and informed the rest of his career at West Point.

27. The phrase appears throughout "Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob't C. McChord, U.S.M.A.," 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA, and its appended documents.

28. Michael Howard to Adelbert Ames, 9 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA. Though Howard allowed the letter to be written in his name and signed it once complete, James W. Smith was the author. The handwriting in the letter is identical to the handwriting in Michael Howard's statement about the incident at the bootblack's, and Howard admitted during the investigation into that incident that Smith had written the statement. The handwriting is likewise identical to that in a letter that James W. Smith wrote to David A. Clark two days later. See Statement [of Michael Howard], 6 June 1870 appended to "Report of Difficulty between New Cadets Michael Howard and Rob't C. McChord, U.S.M.A.," 17 June 1870, Michael Howard Files, M1002, USMA; and James W. Smith to "My Kind Benefactor" [David A. Clark], 11 June 1870 included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Cadets learned that there would be no repercussions for abuse of Black cadets. West Point's senior leaders signaled that in their view Smith and Howard had no claim to equal treatment; and the notion began to take root among some officers at West Point—in this case, Colonel Black and Captain Clarke specifically—that Smith and Howard were liars and troublemakers.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that shortly after the incident at the bootblack's, Smith and Howard were awakened at two o'clock in the morning by an unseen intruder dashing into their room and emptying the contents of his slop pail all over them and their beds. Slop pails collected all manner of waste products and byproducts over the course of a day and night in barracks that did not yet enjoy indoor plumbing. Smith characterized it charitably as "very filthy water," and reported the matter to his chain of command.²⁹ Colonel Black later noted being aware "that some dirty water had been thrown on one or both of the colored boys" and directed Captain Clarke to "make a full and thorough" investigation. Clarke later reported that he had investigated the matter and "could not fix it upon anyone."³⁰ No record of that investigation exists.

Fellow prospective cadets became even more hostile to Smith and Howard. In a letter to his benefactor, Smith observed that "the cadets (especially the new ones) are down on us," and recounted how when he and Howard were "put into the squad to drill, one of the white boys (Crane from Ohio) refused to drill with us." This time, however, "the officer told him he must either drill where he was put or return home," and in the end Crane "submitted to his adverse fate." Referring not just to Crane but to his fellow prospective cadets as a collective group, Smith reported that "they have been consoling themselves with the possibility that we would fail on examination," but "when they heard that I had studied Latin and Greek, and was a graduate [of] the Hartford High School, they dispelled their hopes on failing" and redirected their hopes toward a rejection from the medical board.³¹ While the medical board did not reject either Howard or Smith, cadets' hopes of seeing Smith and Howard denied admission to West Point persisted.

29. Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 11, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

30. Testimony of Henry M. Black, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 44, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

31. James W. Smith to "My Kind Benefactor" [David A. Clark], 11 June 1870, included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Like all other prospective cadets, Smith and Howard meanwhile awaited the academic examination that was the final gate looming before admission. Still attempting to drive Smith and Howard to resign, cadets and prospective cadets went so far as to deny them food. In a bold power play at the mess table, Crane—the same prospective cadet who attempted to refuse to drill with Smith and Howard—and several others demanded to serve themselves before Howard and Smith could eat, and then passed all the food to the other end of the table, well out of their reach. The cadet officer in charge of that mess table refused to intervene. Smith wanted to report the matter, but Howard prevailed upon him that “if we complained about it, they would think we were greedy.” According to Smith, the situation at the mess table got so bad that “what I get to eat I must snatch for like a dog.”³² Crane confirmed that it happened but laughed it off as something “of the nature of a joke,” that “was not continued for any length of time, only for a few days.”³³

Under such torment and increasingly aware of his lack of access to recourse, Smith’s only companion and source of solace was Michael Howard. Prior to the academic examination, his interactions with the broader corps of cadets would have been limited. Officers and cadet officers dealt with him in an official capacity only, and White prospective cadets either shunned him or were openly hostile toward him. According to Smith, cadets and prospective cadets alike “were generally in the habit of cursing me on every occasion,” and some “did it every time they met me.”³⁴ Beyond Howard, Smith had friendly interactions with West Point’s barber—a Black man—and his family, and most likely with Louis Bentz, the long-serving bugler at West Point.³⁵ Smith also had limited interactions with the myriad visitors

32. Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 21–25, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. See also “West Point Gentlemen,” *New York Herald*, 7 July 1870.

33. Testimony of James Crane, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 75–76, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

34. Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 16, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

35. Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 145, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; and Testimony of Quincy A. Gillmore, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 78, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. On Bentz’s sociability with Black cadets, see Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 107.

who came to West Point, but these weren't social calls. Smith recognized the gawkers for what they were, noting in a candid moment that "it is curiosity that brings visitors." The isolation was not total, however. "My friend, Howard," he wrote in a letter as the academic exam was imminent, "is a very good companion to me in my loneliness, and I hope he will pass also, as I would miss him very much."³⁶ Unfortunately, Howard failed and was dismissed from the Academy, leaving Smith to face his most trying times at West Point alone.

The academic examination was administered on 23 June 1870 and was actually an oasis of fairness and impartiality, despite the carnage and controversy it caused. Of those taking the exam that day, the Academic Board failed and dismissed 47 out of 85 prospective cadets, with Michael Howard among them. Throughout 1870—prospective cadets reporting late for various reasons were examined in September—138 prospective cadets took the academic exam, with 73 failing some or all of it and being rejected by the Academic Board. A failure rate of 52.9 percent on the 1870 entrance examination was extremely unusual. In the two decades prior, the average annual failure rate was 15.58 percent, and the highest annual failure rate was 30.2 percent in 1859.³⁷ It would be easy to conclude, as some observers did at the time, that the grossly high attrition rate in 1870 sprang from a last-ditch effort by the academic board to ensure that West Point remained an all-White institution. Newspapers reported that Smith told his benefactor: "They had prepared it to fix the colored candidates, but it proved most disastrous to the whites."³⁸

36. James W. Smith to "My Kind Friend" [David A. Clark], 20 June 1870, included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

37. Minutes of the Academic Board, 31 August 1870, *U.S. Military Academy Staff Records*, vol. 8, 287, USMA. Statistical data derived from "Statement showing number of candidates for cadetships appointed to the United States Military Academy, number rejected, and number admitted, from 1838 to 1901, inclusive" in *List of Cadets Admitted to the United States Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., From its Origin till September 1, 1901, with Tables Exhibiting the Results of Examinations for Admission, and the Corps to which the Graduates have been Promoted* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 116.

38. "West Point Gentlemen," *New York Herald*, 7 July 1870. Smith denied having written that particular sentence, but David A. Clark who received the letter and published it in an effort to call attention to Smith's plight testified that he had. See Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, 9 and 30–31; and Testimony of David A. Clark, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 56 and 58–59, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA, as well as a copy of the original letter

That was not the case. Superintendent Thomas J. Pitcher had determined in the fall of 1869 that the oral entrance examinations that had been in place were insufficient and began planning to replace them with more rigorous written examinations. The new examination had been drafted by December 1869, revised and submitted to the Academic Board in March 1870, and was approved by the secretary of war shortly thereafter—all predating Howard's and Smith's nominations on 20 April and 23 May 1870, respectively. Although it is possible that bias influenced Pitcher's changes in the examinations, it seems unlikely. Howard and Smith had not been nominated at the time that he directed and approved plans for the new written entrance examination. He would have known that Radical Republicans were eager to nominate the first Black cadets, and thus it would be only a matter of time. Archival records reveal that whenever Pitcher addressed changing the entrance examinations though, he framed it in terms of making the examinations more consistent with other colleges.³⁹

Having passed the physical and academic entrance examinations, Smith had overcome concerted efforts to drive him away and an exceptionally difficult entrance examination to become the first Black cadet admitted to West Point. His ordeal was only entering a new phase, however. Smith was now subject to torment not only from his classmates, but also from upperclassmen; and the officers assigned to the Academy would do little, if anything, to ensure he was taken care of.

After the entrance examinations, prospective cadets officially became new cadets and joined the wider corps for the annual summer encampment that was a staple of life at nineteenth-century West Point. The fourth (new cadets), third (cadets entering their second year), and first (cadets entering their fourth year) classes occupied a tent city established adjacent to the ruins of the revolutionary era Ft. Clinton on the northeast side of the plain overlooking the Hudson at West Point. Second-class cadets soon to enter their third year at the academy spent the summer at home or with friends on their sole authorized furlough. The camp served several purposes, in

in question that Smith transcribed from memory and introduced as evidence—James W. Smith to “Friend” [David A. Clark], 29 June 1870, included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

39. Testimony of Thomas Pitcher, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 35–37, James W. Smith Files, M1002 USMA; Special Meeting of the Academic Board, 28 March 1870, *U.S. Military Academy Staff Records*, vol. 8, 255–59, USMA.

theory: new cadets became acclimated to life at West Point and learned the basics of drill and discipline; third-class cadets learned leadership skills by training new cadets; and first-class cadets both refined leadership skills by administering the camp and received training on more advanced tactics. In practice, however, cadets did more lounging and waiting than training and occupied a fair amount of their downtime by hazing new cadets.⁴⁰

On 28 June 1870, approximately half of what would become the West Point class of 1874, with James W. Smith conspicuously among them, marched from their barracks into the summer encampment. As West Point's first Black cadet, Smith became the object of a form of hazing so unique that most cadets did not recognize it as such, and later insisted that Smith was getting over easy because he was not subject to the same kind of hazing that befell White cadets. Some of Smith's colleagues likely had their sleep interrupted by upperclassmen running into their tents and pulling their bedding out from under and around them while they dozed—a fairly common practice known as “yanking.”⁴¹ Smith, however, spent a sleepless first night in his tent frozen in terror as two cadets stood outside loudly discussing plans to place gunpowder under the wooden platform it stood upon, debating when to light a fuse and from where to watch the explosion. They went so far as to raise the floor on one side of the tent several inches, pretended to shove gunpowder underneath it, and yell to each other to ignite it.⁴² “I did not sleep two hours all night,” Smith reported.⁴³

His situation did not improve the next morning. Smith was one of seven cadets assigned to a squad over which Cadet Quincy O. Gillmore served as drillmaster. Cadet Gillmore was the son of Major General Quincy A. Gillmore. The general had commanded the Department of the South during the Civil War and witnessed the heroics of the famed and segregated 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment as it spearheaded the assault on Ft. Wagner in Charleston harbor in July 1863; he later made effective use of a number of segregated regiments

40. A good and nearly contemporaneous account of the summer encampment may be found in Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 57–72.

41. Unpublished memoir, p. 11, Eben Swift Files, USMA.

42. See Testimony of Charles A. Wooden, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 89, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; which is corroborated in Testimony of James Edward Shortelle, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 80–81, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

43. “West Point Gentlemen,” *New York Herald*, undated clipping included in James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

throughout South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Any respect that General Gillmore had gained for the soldierly qualities of Black troops, however, was entirely absent in his son. "Stand off one side from the line, you d---d black son of a b---h," he barked as Smith fell in with the rest of the squad. "I want you to remember that you are not on an equal footing with the white men in your class, and what you learn here you will have to pick up, for I won't teach you a d---d thing." Having thus thoroughly shattered Smith's hopes for life as a cadet after the entrance examinations, Gillmore proceeded to drill the squad with Smith standing awkwardly to one side. When Captain Clarke arrived to inspect the squad, Gillmore pretended he had separated Smith to provide individual instruction on a point of drill Smith had failed to pick up.⁴⁴

Coming on the heels of Howard's dismissal for academic deficiency and a sleepless night of terror, as well as myriad other daily indignities, Gillmore's callous and bigoted refusal to train him pushed a despondent Smith to the brink of resignation. That afternoon, Smith wrote a long letter devoid of the ebullience and confidence in his earlier letters to his benefactor in Hartford. Smith described his sorrow at seeing Howard go and the utter loneliness he had felt since. He wrote of his troubles at the mess table, and of the insults constantly hurled at him. Holding back little other than names identifying his persecutors, he narrated his sleepless night and his reception at drill that morning.

Smith was well aware of what was going on. Having passed the entrance examination, "now these fellows appear to be trying their utmost to run me off," he wrote, "and I fear they will succeed if they continue as they have been." He was not inclined to resign but felt that he was near the breaking point. "I don't wish to resign if I can get along at all," Smith explained to Clark, "but I don't think it will be best for me to stay and take all the abuses and insults

44. The incident is recounted in a 29 June 1870, letter from James W. Smith to David A. Clark, reprinted in "West Point Gentlemen," *New York Herald*, undated clipping included in James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. These quotations are unchanged in the copy of the original letter that Smith transcribed from memory and introduced as evidence in a court of inquiry—James W. Smith to "Friend" [David A. Clark], 29 June 1870, included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. Although many cadets and the commandant himself flatly denied Smith's allegations, the first-class cadet serving as quartermaster of the summer encampment definitively corroborated them. See Testimony of Andrew H. Russell, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 93–95 and 147, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. Russell's testimony is quite convincing.

that are heaped upon me.” He was near the end of his tether. “I have borne insult upon insult until I am completely worn out,” he concluded.⁴⁵

Shocked after reading the letter, Clark forwarded it to the *Hartford Courant* in the hopes that publicizing the problem would either give Smith reasonable justification to resign or generate enough pressure to move West Point and army leadership to act on Smith’s behalf. Eyeing the highest possible point of influence, Clark arranged for the *Courant* to publish the letter before President Ulysses S. Grant’s expected visit to Hartford, during which he hoped to meet with the president. The letter gained traction quickly. The *Courant* printed it on 2 July and it spread far and wide. Within two weeks, the letter appeared in the *Boston Herald*, the *New York Daily Tribune*, and the *Washington Chronicle*, among others. Clark was successful in garnering public attention, though not in the way he had anticipated—ultimately the attention did much more harm than good.⁴⁶

President Grant expressed nothing but support for Smith. According to Clark, when he suggested “that Smith could never remain at West Point in peace, and that he had better resign his position at once and return to Howard University,” the president urged instead: “Let him remain there, and I will do all that I can to protect him in his rights, and so shall the officers of the Academy.” The meeting also showed, however, that there were limits to Grant’s ability to influence the environment at West Point.

Frederick Dent Grant, the president’s son and a member of the West Point class of 1871, was present and contributed to the conversation in ways that revealed the harsh reality Smith faced. According to Clark, young Cadet Grant “said he had never spoken to Cadet Smith, nor had he any knowledge of any indignities heaped upon him, though he had heard about them,” and then asserted that “he should take neither one side nor the other in the quarrel, if one existed.” Frederick Grant’s statements revealed that he had participated in silencing Smith and demonstrated an ability common among cadets to remain silent about abuse toward Smith—but to do so in a way that carefully avoided being caught in a lie if the abuse was discovered. Then, despite his father’s presence and the fact that it was the policy of the government that his father headed,

45. “West Point Gentlemen,” *New York Herald*, undated clipping included in James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; and James W. Smith to “Friend” [David A. Clark], 29 June 1870, included as an exhibit appended to Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

46. “Grant vs. Smith,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1872; Morning transcript from 19 July 1870, July Court of Inquiry, p. 34, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Frederick Grant stated flatly that “he thought that it was premature to admit colored cadets at this time.”⁴⁷

Shortly after the letter’s initial publication in the *Courant*, Superintendent Thomas Pitcher requested and received authorization from Secretary of War William Belknap to open a formal court of inquiry into Smith’s 29 June letter to Clark. Pitcher was concerned about the accusations Smith had leveled in the letter but was somewhat more alarmed that they had been made public to begin with. “I admonished him kindly,” Pitcher wrote to authorities in Washington, “that he had taken the wrong course to get redress for his grievances.” He warned Smith that writing letters for publication was against Academy regulations and left him liable to “serious charges,” but “in consideration of his peculiar position, I should overlook it this time,” as long as it never happened again. Having demonstrated what he believed to be magnanimity, Pitcher then alerted the War Department, “That there are some grounds for his [Smith’s] charges is highly probable, but at the same time ... I am satisfied that he has greatly exaggerated them.” Pitcher therefore had organized the court of inquiry around a presupposition that Smith had lied, but convinced himself that he was acting with fairness and impartiality.⁴⁸

The court of inquiry convened from 16 July through 21 July 1870, ultimately resulting in a widespread belief that Pitcher was correct, and Smith had exaggerated the accusations. Such an outcome was largely the result of a problem that Smith had pointed out in his letter. “If I complain of their conduct to the commandant,” he had written, “I must prove the charges or nothing can be done; and where am I to find one from so many to testify in my behalf?” For each of his claims—that he was regularly insulted and demeaned, that his messmates conspired to deny him food, that he was terrorized on the first night in camp, and that Gillmore refused to train him at drill—multiple White cadets denied Smith’s version of events. Their denials, however, were almost always couched with careful qualifiers such as “I cannot say positively,” “I do not remember exactly,” or “to the best of my recollection”—all seemingly meant to safeguard against possible charges of perjury.⁴⁹

47. “Grant vs. Smith,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1872.

48. Thomas Pitcher to E. Schriver, 10 July and 11 July 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

49. Examples taken from Testimony of Henry S. Taber, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 65; Testimony of George R. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M.

At the same time, each of Smith's claims was corroborated by at least one White cadet. No cadet was willing to corroborate more than one claim, though, and usually became suddenly unable to remember things after corroborating an important detail.⁵⁰ West Point leaders and court officials, however, were more swayed by the preponderance of testimony than by the somewhat exceptional points of corroboration.⁵¹

The weight of testimony against Smith and the outcome of the court of inquiry did grave harm to Smith's future at West Point. Members of the court were unable or unwilling to conclude that Smith had been wronged other than at drill. Although willing to concede that Gillmore had acted improperly, the court recommended that both Gillmore and Smith face courts martial for dishonorable conduct, and that several other cadets face minor reprimands for various infractions and discrepancies that came up in their testimony.

Upon review of the proceedings, Secretary of War Belknap declined to convene courts martial, directing instead "that Cadets Gillmore and Smith be severely reprimanded by the Superintendent of the Academy for the misdemeanors shown to have been by them committed, and that Cadets Dyer, Crane, Barnes, Howe and Reid be also reprimanded according to the degree of their several offenses." Belknap then signaled the administration's support for Smith: "Should the reasonable expectations of the Department, that no further troubles are to ensue from the presence of any lawfully appointed cadets at the Academy, meet with further disappointment, the

Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 114; and Testimony of Quincy O. Gillmore, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, p. 50, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

50. Notable exceptions were Cadets Andrew H. Russell and Charles Woodruff, both of the class of 1871, whose willingness to state in detail what they saw of Gillmore's treatment of Smith were likely the reason why the secretary of war ultimately ordered Superintendent Pitcher to reprimand Gillmore as well as Smith. This seems to have taken a fair amount of personal courage, as it directly refuted testimony from Colonel Henry Black, who had until recently served as commandant of cadets. See Testimony of Andrew H. Russell, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 93–95 and 146–147; Testimony of Charles Woodruff, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 124–27; and Testimony of Henry M. Black, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 42–46, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

51. Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

most rigorous measures will be devised and enforced for their suppression.”⁵² To War Department and Academy leaders alike, the proceedings and their outcome had the appearance of impartiality, perhaps even colorblind justice. The view was different from Smith’s perspective. He had barely been a cadet for a month, and none of his own “reasonable expectations” had been realized; and he had been branded a liar.

At West Point, a reputation for lying was a dangerous thing. Discipline was at a nadir in the aftermath of the Civil War and the corps of cadets was notoriously prone to vigilantism, inflicting various forms of extrajudicial punishment on fellow cadets deemed to have somehow dishonored the broader group. Smith entered the Academy when this problem was at its worst. Civil War hero and strict disciplinarian Emory Upton was assigned to replace Colonel Black as commandant of cadets in July 1870 specifically to stamp out indiscipline.⁵³ He found the problem worse than expected. It was so out of hand that in January 1871, Frederick D. Grant and his colleagues in the class of 1871 seized three fourth-class cadets under investigation for giving a false report, marched them to an unguarded entrance, gave them changes of clothes and fifty dollars “to sustain them until they could get assistance from their friends,” and expelled them from West Point. This caused a national scandal and widespread public denunciations of the Academy, prompting fast action from Academy leadership. Officials tracked the three cadets to lodgings several miles upriver and brought them back to West Point. Once there, one of the three was dismissed for academic deficiencies. Upton successfully persuaded the other two that “under the circumstances it was best for them to resign,” an act that inadvertently ratified the extrajudicial action of the class of 1871.⁵⁴

In less extreme cases, cadets suspected to have lied—or, paradoxically, to have cooperated too readily and spoken too freely in investigations of other cadets—would be silenced by the broader corps. Ostracization not infrequently, and probably by design, led to resignation or academic failure.

52. Transcript from the morning of 21 July 1870, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; William Belknap, Memorandum, 10 August 1870, M1002, USMA.

53. See Rory McGovern, *George W. Goethals and the Army: Change and Continuity in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 8; Betros, *Carved from Granite*, 23–24; David J. Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 128–30.

54. Peter S. Michie, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton, Colonel of the Fourth Regiment of Artillery and Brevet Major-General, U.S. Army* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885), 257–72 (first quotation from page 259); Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton*, 132 (including second quotation).

Eben Swift, a member of the class of 1876, described an aborted fight between two cadets that he had witnessed as “a critical moment for me in my career,” noting that “if the fight had come off and I had told the truth at any investigation it would have created a prejudice against me, which might have seriously interfered in my future life.” He also noted that in his final year at West Point, his entire class voted to silence a fourth-class cadet who answered truthfully to an officer inquiring about how he had been treated at the summer encampment. The silenced cadet “was found deficient in his studies,” and Swift maintained “a suspicion that it was caused by the treatment he received.” Notably, Swift observed that the incident showed “the inability of the youthful mind to work things out,” and stated flatly that “a crowd of boys acts like any other kind of a mob, acts on suggestion, and each one surrenders his own personality.” Such behavior appears moblike not only to the twenty-first-century mind, but also to the nineteenth-century mind.⁵⁵

Beyond their inability or unwillingness to enforce discipline, West Point’s leaders and faculty quietly tolerated, sometimes encouraged, and even celebrated such moblike behavior. Peter S. Michie, who served for so long and so well as the Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy at West Point that he became an institution unto himself, believed that extrajudicial action by cadets was a reasonable means of preserving the honor of the corps. He wrote approvingly that cadets in general and first-class cadets in particular “conceive that the good name of the corps is in their keeping, and they jealously guard it as their own.” He continued, “To lie, prevaricate, cheat, or steal, are actions that no cadet could be guilty of without at once being put beyond the pale of comradeship, and subjected to complete ostracism.” The ostracism Michie pointed to is obviously the practice of silencing; but he did not expand upon cadets’ means and modes other than to say that serious offenses to rules of conduct written and unwritten would spark “the most severe manifestation of wounded personal feeling” within the corps of cadets.⁵⁶

Having been labeled a liar in such an environment, conditions deteriorated rapidly and severely for Smith. He had already been silenced just for being Black—indicating that the corps of cadets thought that fact alone placed him upon a level with liars, cheats, and thieves—but to be both Black and

55. Unpublished memoir, pp. 12–13 and 22–25, Eben Swift Files, USMA. See also Michie, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*, 252; and Shellum, *Black Cadet in a White Bastion*, 40.

56. Michie, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*, 252.

thought a liar made things much worse. As the incident at the bootblack's shows, Smith had faced the threat of violence since his arrival. Cadets began to act on the threat after Secretary of War William Belknap's decision of 10 August 1870 to order a reprimand for Smith and Gillmore rather than a court martial as the members of the court of inquiry had recommended.

On 13 August 1870, Smith endured a rather brutal fight in which both he and his antagonist exchanged blows with heavy wooden ladles. Smith was under the misapprehension that he was on a time-limited task to retrieve water, and the White cadet already at the well refused to allow Smith access to the water until he had drunk his fill at a more than leisurely pace. A scuffle began and quickly escalated when Smith's ladle broke during the course of the fight, inflicting a particularly bloody head wound in his opponent. Others intervened to end the brawl as Smith gained the upper hand, after which both he and his opponent would face an investigation and charges.⁵⁷

The water ladle brawl led to Smith's first court martial, but it was not the only charge he faced. Only days after the fight, Cadet Edgar Beacom alleged that Smith directed a disrespectful retort toward him after he ordered Smith to close ranks while serving as drillmaster. This was a minor infraction that would result in Smith accumulating additional demerits and light punishment. Demerits mattered; any cadet who accumulated more than 100 in a semester would be found deficient in discipline and expelled from the Academy. When Smith reviewed the delinquency book at the end of the day and saw this report, he challenged it as something that had not occurred, which was part of the process for removing or appealing demerits. Commandant of Cadets Upton investigated and, predictably, found multiple witnesses corroborating Beacom's story and none corroborating Smith's. Upton then leveled against Smith the much more serious charge of making a false statement.⁵⁸

A general court martial convened in late October 1870 charging James W. Smith with conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline, due to his participation in the water ladle fight, and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentlemen due to Upton's conviction that Smith had made false statements about being disrespectful in the ranks on 18 August. A professor from the Department of Law agreed to represent Smith. Testimony about the water ladle fight hovered around questions of who struck first and whether

57. Court-Martial Case Files, Transcript of Second Day, 21 October 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

58. Court-Martial Case Files, Transcript of Third Day, 22 October 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Smith was subject to a torrent of racial epithets from both his assailant and onlookers. Unsurprisingly, White cadets testified that Smith was the unprovoked aggressor. The court convicted Smith of the first charge.

The surprise came with the second charge. Smith proved that he could not have disrespected Beacom at drill on 18 August because Beacom was on guard duty and not at drill that day. Beacom had submitted the report on the 18th but had noted that it was accidentally left out of the report for the 17th. The adjutant who compiled the reports for the delinquency book missed the notation and thus it appeared as though the infraction had occurred on the 18th. When reviewing the delinquency books on the 18th, which was a daily practice for all cadets, Smith saw several charges that he could not contest; but when he saw the charges of disrespecting Beacom, he knew definitively that that had not happened because Beacom was on guard duty. It is entirely possible that the incident had happened the day before, and Smith did not think of it while focusing on that day's demerits. It is also possible that Smith seized an opportunity to get off on a technicality, or that Beacom's charges were entirely fabricated. Regardless, it was impossible for the court to convict Smith for making false statements about events that that could not have taken place on 18 August. In a twist of events that Smith must have enjoyed immensely, Cadet Quincy Gillmore was serving as Cadet First Sergeant of his company, and on the fourth day of the trial was compelled to confirm the clerical error to the court, helping ensure Smith's acquittal on the second charge.⁵⁹

The court therefore found Smith guilty of conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline for assaulting a fellow cadet, and not guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman in making a false statement. In its report, the court made clear that it believed Smith had disrespected Beacom on 17 August rather than 18 August, and that he was guilty of "unofficerlike prevarication" in exploiting a mere technicality. The court recommended a sentence of walking hours for several consecutive Saturdays, a common punishment meant to impose discipline by consuming otherwise free time with a requirement to march back and forth across a pavilion outside the barracks.⁶⁰

59. Court-Martial Case Files, Transcript of Fourth Day, 23 October 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; Court-Martial Case Files, Appendix P James W. Smith Statement of Defense, Undated, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

60. Court-Martial Case Files, Untitled Letter to the Secretary of War Summarizing Findings of James W. Smith Court Martial from Judge Advocate General J. Mott, 20 November 1870, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Upon sending the court proceedings to the secretary of war, the army's judge advocate general wrote a lengthy summary of the proceedings, echoing the court's sentiment that Smith was guilty of the spirit of the more substantial charge of making a false statement, if not the letter of it. Believing Smith deserved but could not receive a more severe sentence, he recommended that "it is better that this sentence should be disapproved than that the sanction of the Government should be given to a punishment so utterly insufficient as that proposed to be inflicted." The secretary agreed and disapproved the sentence, further isolating Smith from the corps. While Wilson walked hours for his part in the fight, Smith faced no court-imposed punishment and was perceived to have gotten away with lying to the commandant.⁶¹

Though the court martial concluded in late October, it took nearly a month for the final results to be approved and published. In the interim, Smith continued to face violent assaults. Cadet William Harding Carter, one class senior to Smith and another member of Smith's mess table, opened his diary entry for 10 November 1870 by casually noting, "My roommate has just skinned the 'nigger'." Carter then added, by way of justification, "He [Smith] is saucy and impudent, and a confirmed liar."⁶² This entry can only refer to Smith, then the only Black cadet at the Academy. In a separate incident, Smith was assaulted in his barracks room by a messmate who took offense to Smith taking a helping of soup before him and then became incensed when Smith brushed against him when passing in the hall. The cadet hit Smith on the back of the neck to propel him into the barracks room, then followed into the room and went for Smith's throat. Smith later recalled, "I defended myself as well as possible until I succeeded in getting near my bayonet, which I snatched from its scabbard and then tried to put it through him." The larger and stronger of the two, Smith's assailant held him off and made for the door, fleeing into the hallway and the protection of other cadets who had gathered to cheer their friend and urge him to "kill the d----d nigger."⁶³

61. Unsigned Memorandum from Secretary of War, William Belknap, Undated, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

62. William Harding Carter Diary, 10 November 1870, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA (hereafter referred to as USAHEC). When accessed in the fall of 2021, USAHEC had not yet fully processed this somewhat recently donated collection; we cannot guarantee that this material will remain in Box 6 once the collection is processed. The same applies for subsequent citations from this collection.

63. James W. Smith to the editor of *The New National Era*, reprinted in Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 297–99. The exact timing of this incident is unclear, but Smith

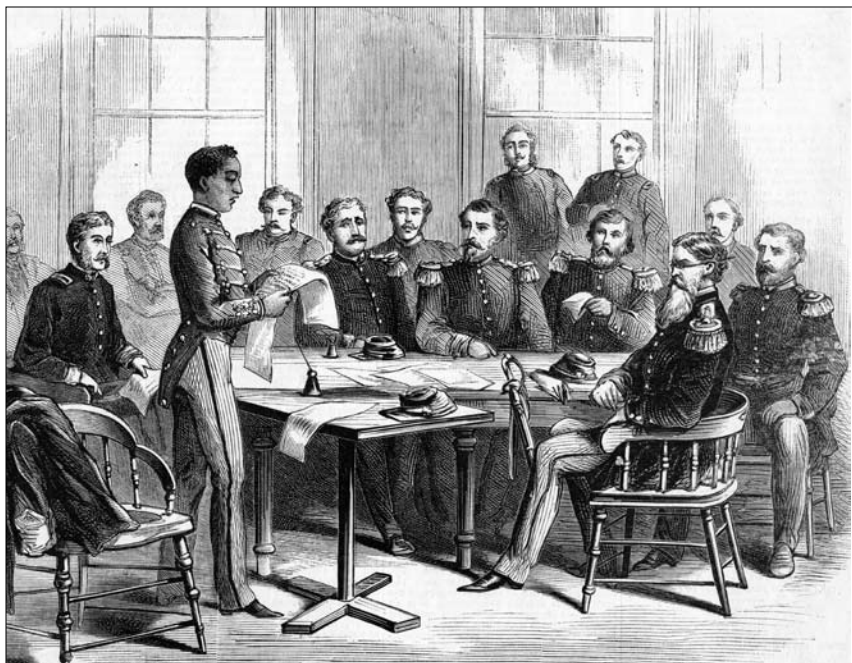
Less than a month later, Smith was again arrested and awaiting court martial. As he reviewed the delinquency report for 13 December 1870, he saw that he had been charged with inattention in the ranks. He did not deny that he had broken formation but offered an explanation—another means for appealing the demerit. Cadet George Anderson had stepped on his toes, causing him to break formation. Smith spoke to Anderson, saying he wished Anderson would not step on his toes, to which Anderson replied, “Keep your damned toes out of the way.” Smith claimed another onlooker, Cadet W. G. Birney, then said, “It, or the thing, is speaking to Mister Anderson; if he were to speak so to me, I would knock him down.” Commandant of Cadets Upton questioned Smith, Anderson, and Birney, and when the two White cadets’ versions of events matched, Upton charged Smith with three counts of making false statements.⁶⁴

Upton’s treatment of Smith is one of the great paradoxes of Smith’s West Point experience. A confirmed abolitionist before the Civil War whose views never moderated, Upton’s appointment as commandant of cadets should have been a godsend for Smith. If any officer could have been expected to ensure fairness and justice for James W. Smith or any other Black cadet, it was Emory Upton; and Upton had every intention of being that officer. Smith testified that Upton had, shortly after becoming the commandant, “told me that if I wished to find out anything or make any complaints to come to him as a friend and he would always see that I was justified in everything that was right,” and that he had addressed the corps of cadets to remind them that Smith had earned the right to be at West Point and must be treated fairly by them.⁶⁵ Upton was also a creature of the institution which he had so long served, however. He believed, as his friend Peter Michie stated, that West Point cadets clung firmly to “the principle that a cadet’s word is to be unquestioned,” and that “the perfect

introduces it in this letter in a way that makes it certain it happened during his first year at West Point and seems to suggest it happened at some point proximate to his two courts martial, which will be discussed shortly. This incident does not appear in the archives as Smith accepted a written apology from his assailant in lieu of asking the commandant to investigate and press charges, as he had discerned the fact that investigations opened in response to his complaints only resulted in getting him in more trouble.

64. “Copy of Charge Specifications,” undated [January 1871 Court Martial], James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

65. Testimony of James W. Smith, Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, pp. 32–33, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. For Upton’s abolitionism, see Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton*, 12–24; and Michie, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*, 2–7.



Court martial of James W. Smith, West Point, New York; Smith reading his defense, 19 January 1871. [Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 28, 1871, p. 329]

trust that exists among comrades, their faith in one another's word, the reliance on one another's charitable assistance in distress, all serve to give this trait a healthy growth and a real existence."⁶⁶

Upton had such faith in West Point and the cadets in his charge that he could not fathom that any of them would ignore his advice, deliberately mistreat a fellow cadet or, most significantly, lie about it when asked. Accordingly, these investigations became a simple math problem for him. Smith stated one version of events, and multiple cadets offered contradictory accounts. Without any corroboration for Smith's story, Upton was unwilling to even consider the possibility that White cadets colluded to keep their stories consistent, hoping that a conviction for making false statements would result in Smith's dismissal from the Academy.

Lie and dissemble they did, though, and they did it prodigiously. There was a conspiracy of silence about the abuse Smith faced, usually conditioned—as noted earlier—with phrases like “to the best of my

66. Michie, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*, 252.

recollection” meant to safeguard against charges of making false statements.⁶⁷ Furthermore, during cross examination in the court martial that tried Smith for these most recent charges in January 1871, Cadet Birney even admitted that he had discussed the trial with other White cadets involved in it before the court martial proceedings began and expressed hopes that the trial would cause Smith’s dismissal from the Academy.⁶⁸

Like Upton, members of the court refused to consider that cadets could have conspired to lie. Unlike at the previous court martial, Smith represented himself. He posed questions in cross examination meant to prove that the witnesses condemning him had colluded prior to the trial. While the court made pretenses to impartiality by registering their opinion of the irrelevance of such questions but allowing them to proceed anyway, it failed to consider the possibility of collusion, even when Birney admitted it. Smith stuck to his story. White cadets stuck to theirs. In the court’s view, the preponderance of the evidence was damning. It convicted Smith on all counts and recommended his expulsion.⁶⁹

The army’s judge advocate general again intervened after reviewing the trial. He questioned the propriety of the prosecution calling only three witnesses, each of whom was accused of wrongdoing in Smith’s rebuttal of the initial report. He pointed out that records indicated that Anderson had a history of deliberately attempting to trip Smith at drill, that Birney had “expressed a desire to have Smith expelled from the Academy,” and that “the presence of prejudice in the minds of the principal witnesses was decidedly manifested.” Ultimately, he recommended that “the ends of public justice will be better subserved, and the policy of the Government—of which the presence of this Cadet in the Military Academy is a signal illustration—be better maintained, by a commutation of the sentence.”⁷⁰

After mulling the matter over until June 1871, Secretary of War Belknap and President Grant agreed. While he upheld Smith’s conviction,

67. See paragraphs ending with footnotes 47 and 49 above. For some cadets, this was a matter of self-preservation, as the broader corps of cadets was quick to ostracize those too willing or eager to cooperate with investigations against other cadets.

68. Testimony of W.G. Birney, January 1871 Court Martial Transcript, p. 57, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; J. Mott to Secretary of War, 23 January 1871, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

69. January 1871 Court Martial Transcript, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA. See also “The Colored Cadet,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1871, James W. Smith Vertical File, USMA.

70. J. Mott to Secretary of War, 23 January 1871, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

Secretary Belknap reduced the sentence and forced Smith to repeat his fourth-class year at the Academy rather than dismiss him from it.⁷¹

The effect of this verdict and the collective effect of the courts martial and court of inquiry that defined his first year at West Point were utterly poisonous to Smith's future as a cadet. Cadets and faculty alike came to believe that Smith was a habitual liar, completely undeserving of a cadetship, who went among them with nefarious intentions as part of a larger scheme to discredit or even dismantle the U.S. Military Academy. As the year progressed, cadets suggested that Congressmen who spoke out in support of Smith "ought to be hung, if not really at least killed politically."⁷² In March 1871, while still awaiting the War Department's decision and orders from the second court martial, one cadet wrote of Smith: "He still survives, but no one ever takes any notice of him because we are so disgusted with the authorities at Washington ... The sentence of the last Court-Martial was sent to the War Department several months ago, and should, in the natural course of pigeon holes, have found its way out in two weeks; hence we can only conclude that there's foul play." Upon reading orders that turned Smith back one year rather than expelling him, the same cadet wrote home in exasperation, "his lying is overlooked because he is a negro who must be kept here at all hazards."⁷³

That opinion never faded. George Andrews, West Point's long-serving professor of French, published an essay in 1880 in which he opined that in James W. Smith "a worse selection for the first colored cadet could not have been made," describing him as "malicious, vindictive, and untruthful."⁷⁴ Writing in the 1920s, retired Major General Eben Swift, who arrived at West Point in 1872—more than a year after Smith's tumultuous first year—described Smith as "a repulsive looking, freckled faced negro, who had probably been appointed by an enemy of the academy, as a living caricature upon its lofty ideals and clean record."⁷⁵

Such a hardening of opinion was not immediately fatal for Smith. In fact, it at first seemed to help, although in a somewhat perverse way. In

71. General Court Martial Orders No. 6, 18 June 1871, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

72. William Harding Carter to "Ma," 12 February 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

73. William Harding Carter to "Ma," 19 March and 17 June 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

74. George L. Andrews, "West Point and the Colored Cadets" *The International Review*, IX (November 1880): 479.

75. Unpublished memoir, pg 48, Eben Swift Files, USMA.

the midst of Smith's first year, cadets actively strove to drive Smith out of the Academy through a variety of means. Having spent a year trying and failing, they gave up—opting instead to wait for what they expected would be an eventual academic failure that would achieve the same end. At the onset of Smith's second court martial, cadets were so infuriated by the prospect of authorities in Washington once again downgrading the sentence that they considered taking matters into their own hands, as they had only days earlier with the three cadets forcibly removed from the Academy by Frederick Grant and the class of 1871. "There is a silent determination gaining hold of the Corps every day," Cadet William H. Carter wrote, "that if such an occurrence verifies itself, it behooves us to 'spirit him [Smith] off to the Mountains' also." He then explained, "The firm discipline here makes men bear a great deal, but there is a point when forbearance is no longer a virtue," declaring that "an impudent negro liar protected by the authorities is too much for anybody to stand."⁷⁶

They did not act upon the urge. By March, Carter noted that Smith had been "tried so often and the sentences so smothered down in Washington that we have given up all hopes." Instead, they doubled down on isolating Smith—his messmates began to refer to Smith only and coldly as "the anomaly"—waiting for him to resign or fail.⁷⁷

This marked no real improvement in Smith's condition at West Point. He had learned from his trials that reporting problems to West Point's leaders only brought more trouble and carried a risk of expulsion. Smith had stated in his most recent court martial that he never would have noted that his toes had been stepped on if he had anticipated that Anderson would deny it, knowing full well that no cadet would be willing to corroborate his claims and he would ultimately be charged with a false statement.⁷⁸ Thus, even as cadets redoubled efforts to isolate him, Smith withdrew even more. It is at this point that we begin to lose the paper trail that illuminates Smith's experiences at West Point. The fragments that exist suggest that isolation did not constitute the end of harassment and was both crushing and crippling.

The corps continued to dehumanize and abuse Smith. Cadets satirized him in blackface for their own entertainment. Deficiency records note that at

76. William Harding Carter to "Ma," 9 January 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

77. William Harding Carter to "Ma," 19 March 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

78. See J. Mott to Secretary of War, 23 January 1871, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA.

artillery drill one day in 1873, Cadet William Davies was reprimanded after he had “disfigured his face” with black powder from the artillery charges. The simple notation in the record books does not record his motives, but it is not difficult to interpret this as a blackface incident. More concretely, there is documented proof that cadets wrote at least one doggerel about Smith titled “Nigger Jim” and performed it in blackface, strumming a broom as though it were a banjo—a minstrel show in miniature.⁷⁹

Lyrics make it clear that the doggerel was written at some point after Smith’s failed academic examination, so it is unclear if it was ever performed in his presence. We know it was performed often enough before Eben Swift graduated in 1876 that he remembered the tune and lyrics precisely when he wrote his memoir in 1926, which means that even if it was not performed in front of James W. Smith, it likely was performed in front of Henry O. Flipper. As recorded by Swift, the doggerel went as follows: “I’m de noted Cullerd Ca-det / And from Dixie land I came / Where I used to hoe de cotton / And de cane, all de day / All de day (basso profundo) / Old Davy’s done it for you now / “Dis Nigga’ he has found / And you wont see any more of this yere chile / Dis yere chile (basso profundo) / But I’ll write a book on West Point / And for Congress I will run / And I’ll engineer a bill to hang old Lyle / G—D—old Lyle (basso profundo).”⁸⁰

Smith most likely continued to experience some amount of violence as well—though calibrated more to assert a claim to social superiority than to seriously injure, compel a resignation, or create an incident serious enough to lead to expulsion. In 1876, Johnson C. Whittaker, the sixth Black cadet admitted to West Point, was struck in the face hard enough to draw blood by a cadet who took umbrage over Whittaker stepping in front of him in line.⁸¹ More tellingly, Henry O. Flipper—James W. Smith’s roommate during the 1873–1874 academic year—recalled being advised by Smith in the summer of 1873 “not to fear any blows or violence,” implying that he should expect them.⁸² Low levels of violence were a normal experience for Flipper from 1873–1877, as they apparently also were for Whittaker starting in 1876. They almost certainly featured in Smith’s remaining three years at West Point as well.

79. Unpublished memoir, pp. 48–49, Eben Swift Files, USMA.

80. Unpublished memoir, pp. 48–49, Eben Swift Files, USMA. Note: in a different song recorded on page 47 of the memoir, “Davy” refers to Lieutenant David S. Lyle who worked for Prof. Peter Michie in the Department of Natural and Experimental Philosophy.

81. George W. Goethals to “Friend Hank,” 28 April and 19 May 1877, George W. Goethals Files, USMA.

82. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 37.

What affected Smith most, however, was the continued experience of being silenced. To others, he had a name only when they had to deal with him in an official capacity, as in when directing him to guard duty or arranging duties in the summer encampment. More commonly, cadets spoke around and about him as though he were not even there.⁸³ They used the most demeaning terms possible, making sure he knew that to them he was not James, Jim, or Jimmy. Instead, they called him “nigger,” “the negro,” “the darkey,” “Nigger Jim,” “the thing,” “it,” “Spots,” “damned spotted nigger,” “Skunk,” and “the anomaly,” among others.⁸⁴

Thus isolated, Smith was denied the friendships and social intercourse that alumni usually counted as the most cherished part of their cadet years, and often cited as the factor that allowed them to survive the experience and graduate. As a retired major general looking a half century back, Eben Swift wrote in his memoir that the memory of “three years of close companionship” with his roommate “has stood with me as the greatest thought that I retain of my cadetship.” Swift further recalled another friend deliberately leaving him off the company’s guard roster for an entire year, giving Swift considerably more time to study than the average cadet. Smith enjoyed no such pleasures and no such advantages. Denied a roommate unless other Black cadets were at the Academy, Smith developed no long-term friendships because no Black cadet lasted longer than six months or one academic year during his four years at West Point.⁸⁵ He was painfully

83. William H. Carter wrote home, “The ‘anomaly’ as we call him at the table when speaking of him, (no one ever speaks to him), has been tried so often and the sentences so smothered down in Washington that we have given up all hopes.” See William Harding Carter to “Ma,” 19 March 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

84. Most of these names and epithets appear throughout the many documents from Smith’s first year at the Academy, and there is no doubt that labels continued throughout his tenure at West Point, as can be seen in Swift’s memoirs and in the fact that subsequent Black cadets faced similar problems. For the names and epithets quoted here: “Nigger Jim” is the title of the doggerel about Smith in unpublished memoir, Eben Swift Files, pp. 48–49, USMA; “the anomaly” appears in William Harding Carter to “Ma,” 19 March and 2 April 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC; and all other epithets are littered throughout Untitled Transcript of Court of Inquiry addressed to Thomas M. Vincent, Assistant Adjutant General, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA, among others.

85. Henry Alonzo Napier attended West Point during Smith’s second year but was found deficient in math and French during the June 1872 exams and dismissed. Thomas Van Renssalaer Gibbs gained admission during Smith’s third year but was dismissed in January 1873 for failing the midyear examination in math. Smith’s fourth year saw the admission of Henry O. Flipper and John W. Williams. Williams departed after failing the midyear French examination in January 1874. Flipper went on to become the first Black graduate of West Point in June 1877. See “Statement Showing the Number of Colored Persons Appointed to the U.S. Military Academy,” 21 October 1886, USMA.

lonely. When other Black cadets reported, he warned them about their environment in ways that revealed just how deeply the environment had affected him.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, those other Black cadets were too few and too short-lived at West Point to alter the situation for Smith. Of four admitted during Smith's tenure, two were dismissed for academic deficiencies after only six months, and one was dismissed for academic deficiencies after one year. Only Flipper would enjoy a multi-year career at West Point, but he and Smith overlapped at the Academy for only one year.⁸⁷

Importantly, however, the impact of being silenced was not limited to the social sphere. Cadets depended upon other cadets to survive academically. When not tormenting Smith, William Harding Carter leaned on his classmates to help him pass philosophy when he came dangerously close to failing. West Point at that time arranged its sections according to performance. When Carter found himself in the last section of natural and experimental philosophy (physics) in the fall of 1871, it meant that he was in the bottom tier of his class and in danger of failing. Having been turned back a year himself, Carter then "determined to use my best exertions and avail myself of the assistance of my old classmates who had been over the subject."⁸⁸ No such assistance was available to Smith when his performance in the classroom began to slip.

Smith performed well in his second year at the Academy, finishing the year in June 1872 ranked 15th out of 66 cadets in his class. He had been turned back a year in June 1871, however, so every class he took in the 1871–1872 academic year was entirely familiar. By June 1873, Smith had fallen to 37th out of 56, having struggled especially in math and drawing. The bottom fell out in his fourth year. Smith dropped into the last section in every class he took. During the June examinations in 1874, he failed natural and experimental philosophy, and was dismissed from West Point. After leaving, Smith alleged that his natural and experimental philosophy examination was administered improperly to ensure he could be declared academically deficient. The evidence extant in the archives today does not corroborate that accusation.⁸⁹

86. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 37.

87. "Statement Showing the Number of Colored Persons Appointed to the U.S. Military Academy," 21 October 1886, USMA.

88. William Harding Carter to "Ma," 5 November 1871, Box 6, William Harding Carter Papers, USAHEC.

89. James Webster Smith Vertical File, USMA. West Point dismissed all cadets who failed any part of the annual examinations—or in the case of newly arrived cadets, either the midyear or the annual examinations. On the latter points, see Flipper, *The Colored Ca-*

After his dismissal, Smith returned to South Carolina. In 1875, he accepted a position as the commandant of cadets and instructor of tactics at the South Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical Institute, which later became South Carolina State University. His years of experience at West Point made him exceptionally well-qualified for the position, even if he had not graduated. Smith was on his way to moving beyond his experiences at West Point, marrying and starting a life in South Carolina. Unfortunately, his life was cut short when he contracted tuberculosis and passed away on 30 November 1876; but his legacy belies his death at the tragically young age of 26.⁹⁰

That legacy is rooted in James W. Smith's unparalleled resilience. Few could have endured the constant harassment, threats, and violence he suffered for so long. Despite the tangible opposition from the corps of cadets, Smith not only maintained a generally positive outlook during his painfully eventful first year but continued to advocate for himself by pursuing justice and redress through official channels. He clearly believed in the promise of Reconstruction and a world of new opportunities, even as those opportunities slowly and too often violently closed for him. Confident in himself, the Academy, the army, and the nation, Smith was a true agent of change, though not necessarily the change for which he had so earnestly hoped.

Enduring harassment, threats, and violence, his sheer perseverance proved to the corps of cadets and the Academy writ large that he would not be forced out. Tempted but ultimately refusing to resign, Smith instead forced the corps to alter its stance toward Black cadets. After their many and varied attempts to force Smith to resign, fail, or be expelled, the corps of cadets adopted a more passively hostile posture toward Smith and other Black cadets, waiting him out, convinced that he would fail on his own, as he was so often completely on his own. In turn, Smith concluded that he had no reliable access to justice and that the best path to a commission was to grit his teeth and brace himself to simply persevere.

Persevere he did. Though Smith ultimately failed his natural and experimental philosophy exam and did not graduate, his perseverance

det at West Point, 304–8; William Belknap to Professor Francis Weyland, 3 August 1874, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; Francis Weyland to William Belknap, 8 August 1874, James W. Smith Files, M1002, USMA; and June 1874 Examinations, U.S. Military Academy Staff Records, Vol. 9 1872–1875, 233–36, USMA.

90. William P. Vaughn, "West Point and the First Negro Cadet," *Military Affairs* 35:3 (October 1971): 102; Richard Reid, "Breaking Ground: State College Professor Was First Black Enrolled at West Point," *The Times and Democrat*, 10 June 2012.

alone set conditions that ultimately allowed Henry O. Flipper to complete the trail that Smith had blazed. Flipper's first introduction to Smith was a letter upon arrival to West Point, warning Flipper "not to fear blows or insults," and to "avoid any forward conduct." In both the content and tone of the advice, Flipper perceived an admission that Smith had made mistakes that carried grave consequences, and a sincere attempt by Smith to allow Flipper to benefit from his sad experience. Flipper later asserted that this was the most important and influential advice he received at West Point, framing and informing his behavior as he strove to become West Point's first Black graduate.⁹¹

Flipper did not fully understand and appreciate that Smith was responsible not only for the advice and guidance that informed Flipper's behavior and experiences at West Point, but also for having altered the environment at West Point in a way that left Flipper and those who followed him with a viable path to graduation and a commission in the U.S. Army. While hostilities and antagonisms still brewed, James Webster Smith had absorbed and sapped the strength of cadets' most egregious resistance to the introduction of Black cadets in their midst. Adapting, the corps instead isolated Black cadets and waited for them to fail, which in turn granted Black cadets a modicum of space and relief that Smith never knew, making a successful path to graduation at least somewhat possible, if still far from probable.

It is a tragic irony, then, that Smith went to his grave believing his resistance had been futile.⁹² That could not be further from the truth. His fortitude forged a path that Henry O. Flipper, John Hanks Alexander, and Charles Young later followed and expanded, bringing new life to the long gray line.

Therein lies a microcosm of Reconstruction. James W. Smith's cadetship began with the best of intentions and unbounded potential; but the Grant administration was no better able to force the United States Military Academy to embrace the spirit of its policy of integration than it was to influence the South to embrace the principle of equal rights under the law for freedpeople. Like Reconstruction itself, Smith's admission

91. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, 37. In addition to Flipper's account, it is worth noting that the other Black cadets who did pass the entrance exam and overlapped with Smith did not initiate any investigations or push back against the corps as Smith had done. It is likely that they had been influenced by Smith not to resist actively while at the Academy.

92. See Smith's letters written for publication after he departed West Point, included in Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, ch. XVII.

to West Point caused a reactionary backlash rooted in racism and bias that then hardened into significant structural barriers to progress. Just as Reconstruction withered and ended in the face of rising levels of apathy among those best positioned to support and sustain it, so too were Smith's torturous experiences and eventual dismissal from West Point a result of apathy—and in some cases hostility—from those officers charged with supporting and sustaining him at the Academy.

Reactionaries were ascendant only for a time, however, just as in Reconstruction. Smith's perseverance allowed three Black cadets to graduate in West Point's first period of racial integration. Despite a period of pronounced regression—nearly half a century separated Charles Young (class of 1889) and Benjamin O. Davis Jr. (class of 1936), West Point's third and fourth Black graduates, respectively—Smith altered the United States Military Academy in ways that could not be completely undone. The U.S. Army, in fact, awarded a posthumous commission to James Webster Smith in 1997 after members of South Carolina's congressional delegation successfully advocated for a formal review of the expulsions of both Smith and Johnson Chestnut Whittaker, and Smith's legacy lives on at West Point today.⁹³

93. Dave Moniz, "Cadet Honored 123 Years Later: West Point Mistreated Black Columbia Man," *The State* (Columbia, SC), 21 September 1997.

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