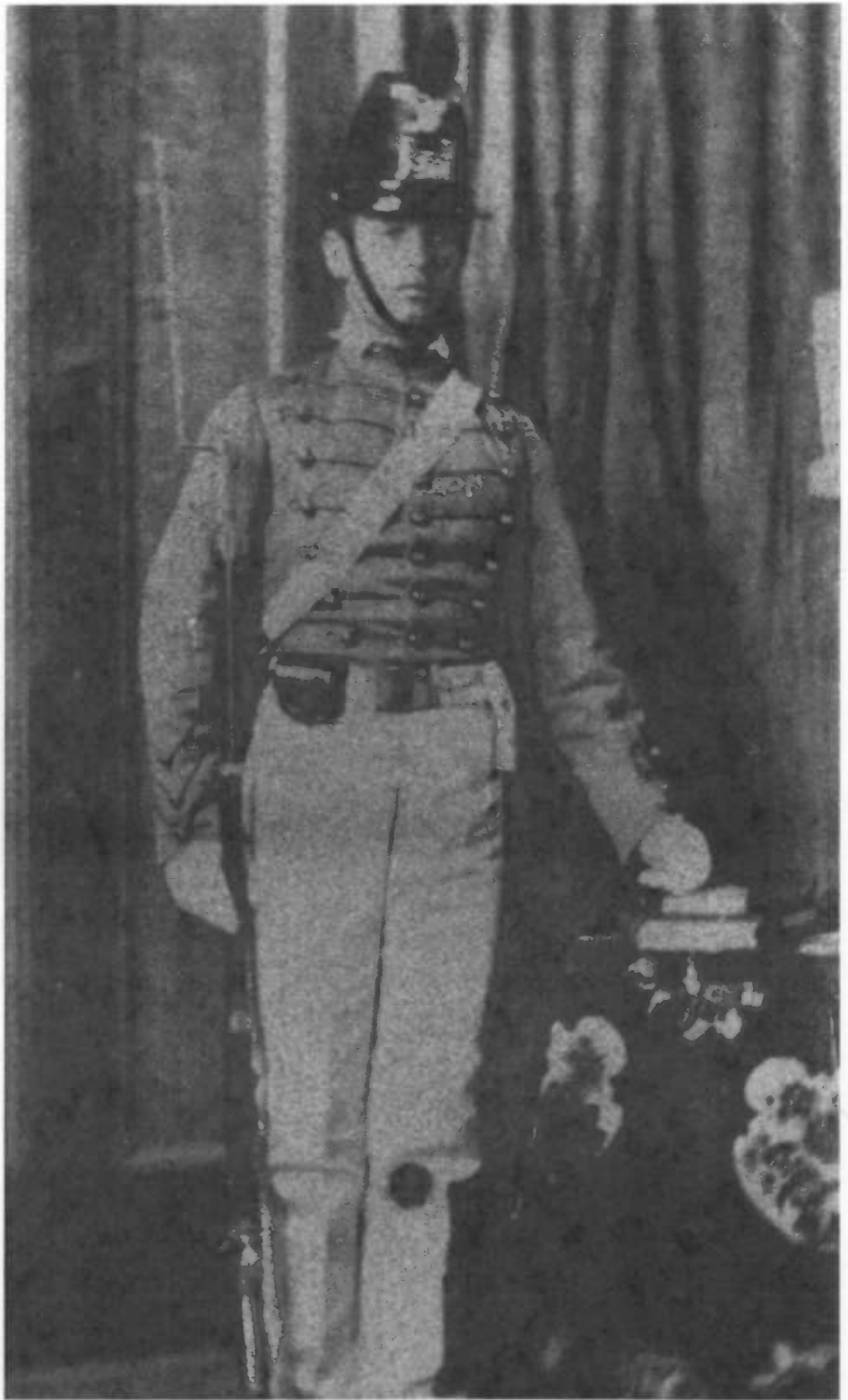


The U.S.M.A. Corps of Cadets

While “Dark blue is the National color” is a statement that held true for the uniform of the United States Army in the nineteenth century, there was a long-standing counter-tradition for the use of gray as well. Nowhere, perhaps, was this national dichotomy better seen than in the uniforms of the Corps of Cadets of the United States Military Academy.

Before we continue, however, there is a required history lesson. The dress blue uniform of a regular soldier was his only “uniform.” In earlier days the soldier wore discarded or largely worn-out dress coats, often cut down into jackets of one sort or another, whenever he had to do any fatigue duty or hard labor. This saved his uniform from undue wear and tear. He could proudly wear it into battle and have it torn to pieces honorably. By the War of 1812 the U.S. Army wised up and issued actual fatigue garments to its soldiers. There were white linen jackets for southern-based troops and gray woolen jackets for troops in the north, or for everybody when it actually got cold. Gray cloth was generally cheaper than blue that required expensive dyes, hence it made better fatigue uniforms. Moreover, at this time most of our proper military blue cloth was still imported from Europe or England.

To get to the point, during the War of 1812, the British successfully cut off our commerce with Europe, made blue cloth hard to procure, and for a time put the United States Army in uniforms of assorted colors from gray to brown to drab. Gray fatigue jackets were more readily obtainable on the local market, so they were worn



Cadet W.R. Rowell. Wearing the full dress uniform under arms, Rowell displays not only the uniform but the cadet accouterments as well. Rowell failed to graduate with his class, the Class of 1865. Carte de visite, collection of the author.

into battle on occasion, replacing the proper blue dress uniforms. This happened at a victory at Chippewa in 1814 and would spawn a legend still being spread at West Point to this day: That the

Corps of Cadets wears gray uniforms to honor Winfield Scott's victory at Chippewa.

Sorry, it really is not so. Captain Alden Partridge had gray uniforms made in New York City

in 1815 because of the blue cloth shortage. Then in 1816, when the War Department decided to select a new Cadet uniform, gray was chosen because "it better suits the finance of the Cadets than one of blue." That is pretty straightforward -- it was cheaper!

That gets us to 1861 and a Corps of Cadets wearing gray uniforms. By 1861 the gray Cadet uniform was pretty well codified. When the Army switched to frock or uniform coats in 1851 the question had been raised of putting the Corps in gray frock coats. The Corps of Engineers, the governing agency of the Corps, rejected this idea in favor of retaining the traditional tailed coat. In 1852 the coat was modified to the extent that an open, V-necked collar was adopted. Then in 1853 the 1830s style shako was changed, reducing its size and making it more in line with the uniform cap of the 1851 Army regulations.

So, in 1861 the uniform of the Corps of Cadets was as illustrated here with the portrait of Cadet W.R. Roswell. The dress coat was trimmed with three rows of ball buttons down the front, three on each cuff, one on each side of the collar, and twelve more arranged decoratively on the tails of the coat. What is not seen in today's Cadet dress is the practice of changing the uniform for Cadets who served as Acting Assistant Professors when there was a faculty shortage. In the nineteenth century these acting instructors were authorized to wear 14 instead of eight rows of buttons on their coats, and this distinction is occasionally seen. The trousers were white linen in the summer and gray wool with black stripes in the winter. The 1853 dress cap was black fur felt with leather top, band at bottom, and visor. It was trimmed with the national eagle, castle insignia of the Corps of



Cadet Charles L. Fitzhugh. Wearing the furlough uniform of Army Blue, Fitzhugh holds his chasseur pattern cap, adopted at the beginning of the Civil War. Fitzhugh failed to graduate with his class, the Class of 1863. Carte de visite, collection of author.

Engineers, and a black pompon or feather plume, depending on the Cadet's rank. With modifications made in 1899, it is essentially what is worn for full dress to this day.

Oh, yes, the "Army Blue," where does that come in? Well, eventually the Corps was allowed a leave or furlough uniform. When off post officially Cadets were allowed to wear what was essentially the uniform of a second lieutenant, but without rank. This uniform could, upon graduation, then, become the Cadet's first Army uni-

form by adding the proper buttons and insignia of branch of service. The cap was decorated with a distinctive furlough insignia, evidently often designed by the class itself. Cadet Charles L. Fitzhugh wears his furlough uniform in his portrait.

Cadet Gray and Army Blue -- all part of the same history. It was a national story that would be given even greater meaning during the years from 1861 to 1865.

- Michael J. McAfee