



INSIDE THE VAULT

The First Black Cadets at West Point
with LTC Rory McGovern

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2024



How to Participate

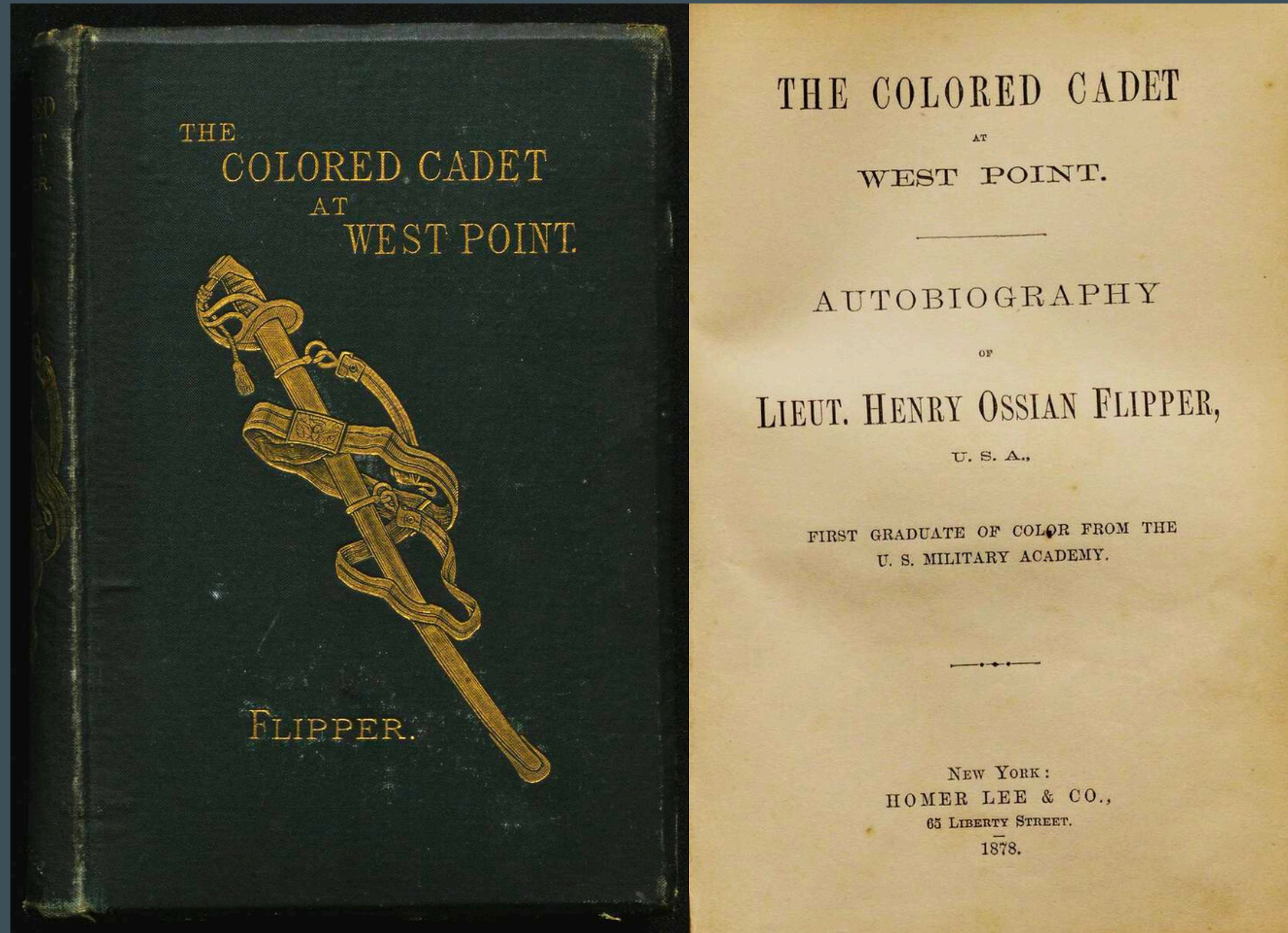


- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.
- The views expressed here are those of the historian.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.

Today's Document



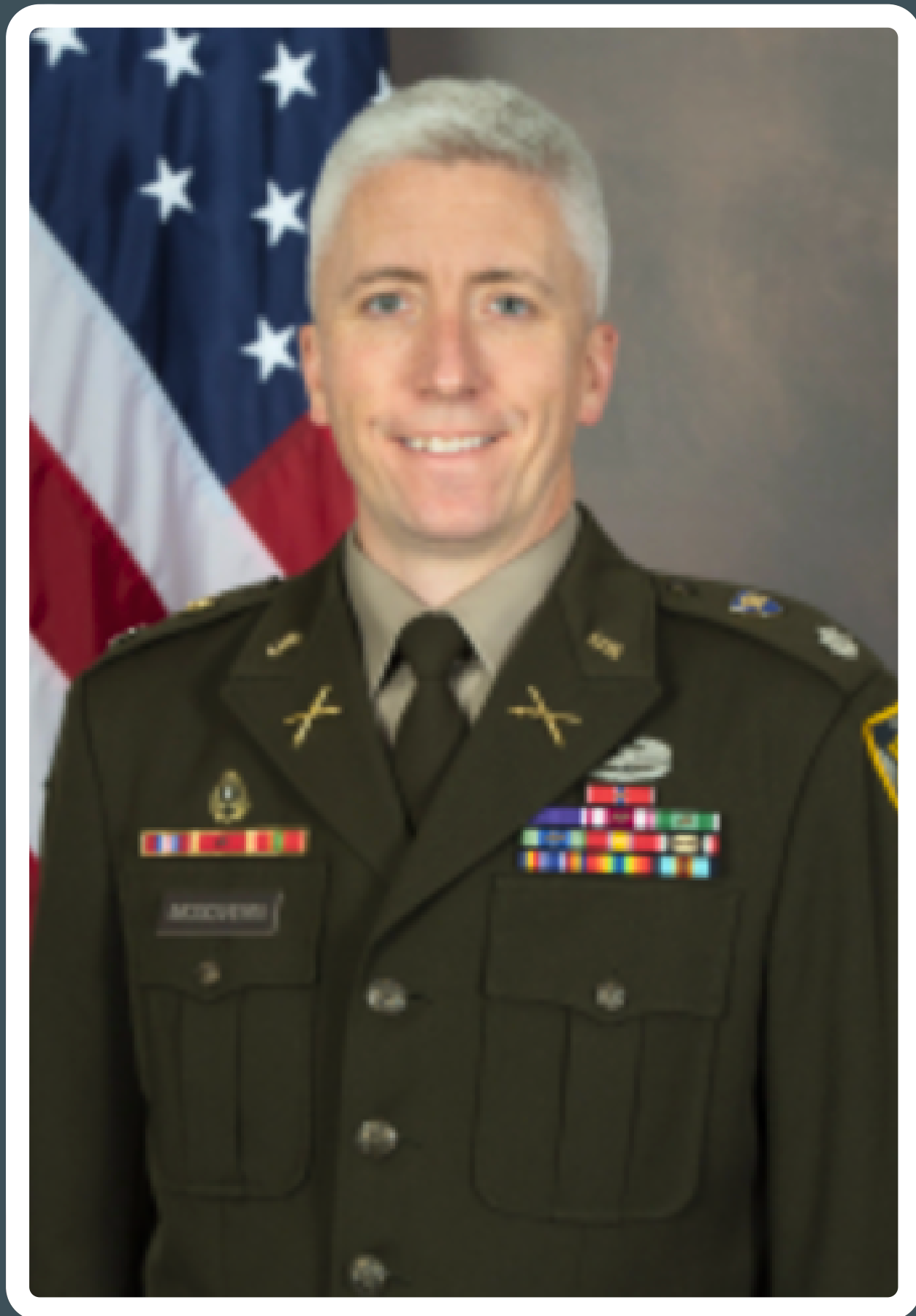
*The Colored Cadet at West Point. Autobiography of Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper,
First Graduate of Color from the U.S. Military Academy, New York, 1878.*

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06832)

LTC Rory McGovern



LTC Rory McGovern is an Academy Professor in the Department of History at West Point, currently leading the American History Division. He served as a field artillery officer in the 1st Cavalry Division, 3rd Infantry Division, and 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command. He holds a BA in Political Science from Boston College and a PhD in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He recently co-edited *Race, Politics, and Reconstruction: The First Black Cadets at Old West Point*, which discusses the context, course, and responses to integration at West Point during Reconstruction.





Hospital and detail of a laborer to the side of the hospital, 1875.
(United States Military Academy Library Special Collections and Archives)

Black Candidate Admissions to West Point



*Statement Showing the number of colored persons appointed candidates for Admission to the U.S. Military Academy,
Called for by Letter of October 12, 1886, from the Adjutant General of the Army.*

No.	Names.	State appointed from	Date of report as the Academy.	Rejected at Initiatory Examination.	Number Admitted.	Rejected by Board on account of deficiency.	Number Graduated.	Number Present.	Time at the Academy.	Manner of leaving the Academy.
1	James Webster Smith,	S.C.	May 31, 1870.	-	1	1	-	-	4 years.	Passed Examination of 4 th class June, 1871. Turned back to join next 4 th class, by Sentence of a General Court Martial - Deficient in Philosophy June 5 th 1874 - Discharged June 26, 1874.
2	Michael Howard,	Miss.	May 30, 1870.	1	-	-	-	-	-	Deficient in Arithmetic, Reading, History, Geography, Grammar, & Writing & Orthography.
3	Henry George Sapier,	Tenn.	May 24, 1871	-	1	1	-	-	1 year.	Deficient in Mathematics & Branch, June 5 th 1872.
4	James Elias Rector	Ark.	Aug. 29, 1871	1	-	-	-	-	-	Deficient in Arithmetic, Grammar & History.
5	Thomas Van Rensselaer Gibbs,	Fla.	May 27, 1872	-	1	1	-	-	6 months	Deficient in Mathematics, January Examination, 1873.
6	Henry Ossian Flipper	Ga.	May 29, 1873	-	1	-	1	-	4 years.	Graduated June 1877 (1 st 50 in class of 77 members) Promoted 2 nd Lieut. 10 th Cavalry.
7	John Washington Williams,	Va.	May 24, 1873	-	1	1	-	-	6 months.	Deficient in Branch January Examination, 1874.
8	William Narcise Herles,	Miss.	May 26, 1874	1	-	-	-	-	-	Deficient in Arithmetic, Grammar & Geography.
9	William Henry Jarvis, Jr.	Mass.	May 21, 1874	1	-	-	-	-	-	Deficient in History.
10	William Henry White,	S.C.	May 25, 1874	1	-	-	-	-	-	Def. in Writing & Orthography, Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography & History.
11	Johnson Chesnut Whittaker,	S.C.	Aug. 25, 1876	-	1	1	-	-	4 years.	Deficient in Philosophy (2 nd class) January Exam 1879. Turned back to join 3 rd class Jan. 17, 1879. Deficient in Philosophy (2 nd class) June Exam 1880. Absent with leave, on trip, from August 21, 1880 to March 23, 1882. Discharged. Tried by a General Court Martial, January 20, 1881. (See General Court Martial Order No. 18, A.G.O. March 22, 1882.)
12	Charles Augustus Minnie,	N.Y.	Aug. 28, 1877	-	1	1	-	-	6 months.	Deficient in Mathematics January Exam 1878. Discharged Jan. 18, 1878.
13	John Hanks Alexander,	Ohio,	June 12, 1883	-	1	-	-	1	3 yrs. 6 mos.	Member of present 1 st Class. Well graduated June 1887
14	Charles Young,	Ohio.	June 10, 1884	-	1.	-	-	1.	2 yrs. 6 mos.	Member of present 3 rd Class - Deficient in Mathematics, June Exam 1885. Turned back.
15	Julius Mitchell,	S.C.	Aug 28, 1884	1	-	-	-	-	-	Def. in arithmetic, Grammar, Geography & History
16	Samuel Cato Sugg,	S.C.	June 12, 1884	1	-	-	-	-	-	Def. in arithmetic, Grammar & History
17	Robert Isaac Wilkerson,	S.C.	June 13, 1884	1	-	-	-	-	-	Deficient by the Medical Board.
18	William Brent Andrews.	S.C.	June 11, 1885	-	1	1	-	-	6 months	Deficient in Mathematics January Exam, 1886. Discharged Jan. 21, 1886
19	William Achilles Hare ?	Ohio.	June 12 1885	-	1	1	-	-	6 months	Deficient in Mathematics, English & Discipline (1 st 2 nd Exam) Discharged Jan. 21, 1886.
20	Henry Wilson Holloway ?	D.C.	Aug 27, 1886.	-	1	-	-	1	4 mos.	Member of present Fourth Class. (1887. Both Jan. 1887. Disch. Jan. 26, 1887)
	Total		20	8	12.	8	1	3		

Oct. 21, 1886

(Names marked with ?) are probably known to be of colored descent, or not enough known by general appearance to be of colored extraction.

“Statement Showing the Number of Colored Persons Appointed Candidates for Admission to the U.S. Military Academy,” October 21, 1886.

(United States Military Academy Library Special Collections and Archives)

Newspapers on the Integration Issue



THE COLORED CADET PERSECUTION.
To the Editor of The Tribune.

SIR: It is difficult for one who is inside the West Point Academy to give to the public outside a clear idea of the state of feeling which has existed about the "Colored Cadet." Some facts may, however, serve to indicate it. A man has to my knowledge been practically ostracised for merely speaking to Cadet Smith; others openly boasting that they "cut" the man "for speaking to the d—d [redacted]." I know that one Cadet can swear that he has seen Cadet Anderson leave his "set of fours," and run up into the next set and try to trip Cadet Smith. I think that another Cadet can swear that he has seen Cadet Anderson, not at guard-mounting, but at other times—such as when marching to meals, &c.—kick Cadet Smith, and step upon his toes. These facts have come to my knowledge since the trial. I can give you the names of the Cadets I refer to, and it might be worth while for Gen. Upton to question them as to their knowledge. It is my honest conviction that if Cadet Smith leaves this Academy before his graduation, he will be the victim of prejudice and intolerance. FAIR PLAY.
West Point, N. Y., Jan. 18 1871.

"A man has to my knowledge been practically ostracised for merely speaking to Cadet Smith. . . . It is my honest conviction that if Cadet Smith leaves this Academy before his graduation, he will be the victim of prejudice and intolerance."

Colored cadets at West Point are not in these relations to the white cadets there. The laws of the Army, the regulations of the Military Academy, and the very rudiments of discipline, fix unalterably the social relation of cadets, and put the Anglo-Saxon and African on equality. They must sleep together, mess together, room together, drill and march together, and associate together. This is forcing the social problem in the wrong place and by wrong means—the law. In the nature of things it is creating mischief, and must prove on trial damaging to the very purpose the friends of the African race intend to promote—the elevation of the colored race.

"The Colored Cadet Persecution," *New York Daily Tribune*, January 23, 1871, p. 5. (The Library of Congress)

"The Army and West Point," *Army and Navy Journal*, February 25, 1871, p. 444. (Hathi Trust)

James W. Smith's Experiences at West Point



“ While we were there we could not meet a cadet anywhere without having the most opprobrious epithets applied to us ; but after complaining two or three times, we concluded to pay no attention to such things, for, as we did not know these cadets, we could get no satisfaction.

“ One night about twelve o'clock some one came into our room, and threw the contents of his slop-pail over us while we were asleep. We got to our door just in time to hear the ‘gentleman’ go into his room on the floor above us.

The Colored Cadet at West Point, p. 297.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06832)

“ When we came back from dinner, as I was going into my room, Cadet Clark struck at me from behind. He hit me on the back of my neck, causing me to get into my room with a little more haste than I anticipated, but he did not knock me down. He came into my room, following up his advantage, and attempted to take me by the throat, but he only succeeded in scratching me a little with his nails,

The Colored Cadet at West Point, p. 291.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06832)

“ A few days after the settlement of our dispute I found, on my return from fencing one day, that some one had entered my room and had thrown all my clothes and other property around the floor, and had thrown the water out of my water-pail upon my bed.

The Commandant of the Cadets made an investigation of the matter, but could not find out what young ‘gentleman’ did it, for every cadet stated that he knew nothing of it, although the corps of cadets has the reputation of being a truthful set of young men.

The Colored Cadet at West Point, p. 298.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06832)

James W. Smith Defends Himself Before a Court Martial



WEST POINT, NEW YORK.—COURT-MARTIAL OF JAMES W. SMITH, THE COLORED CADET—SMITH READING HIS DEFENSE, JANUARY 12TH.—SEE PAGE 331.

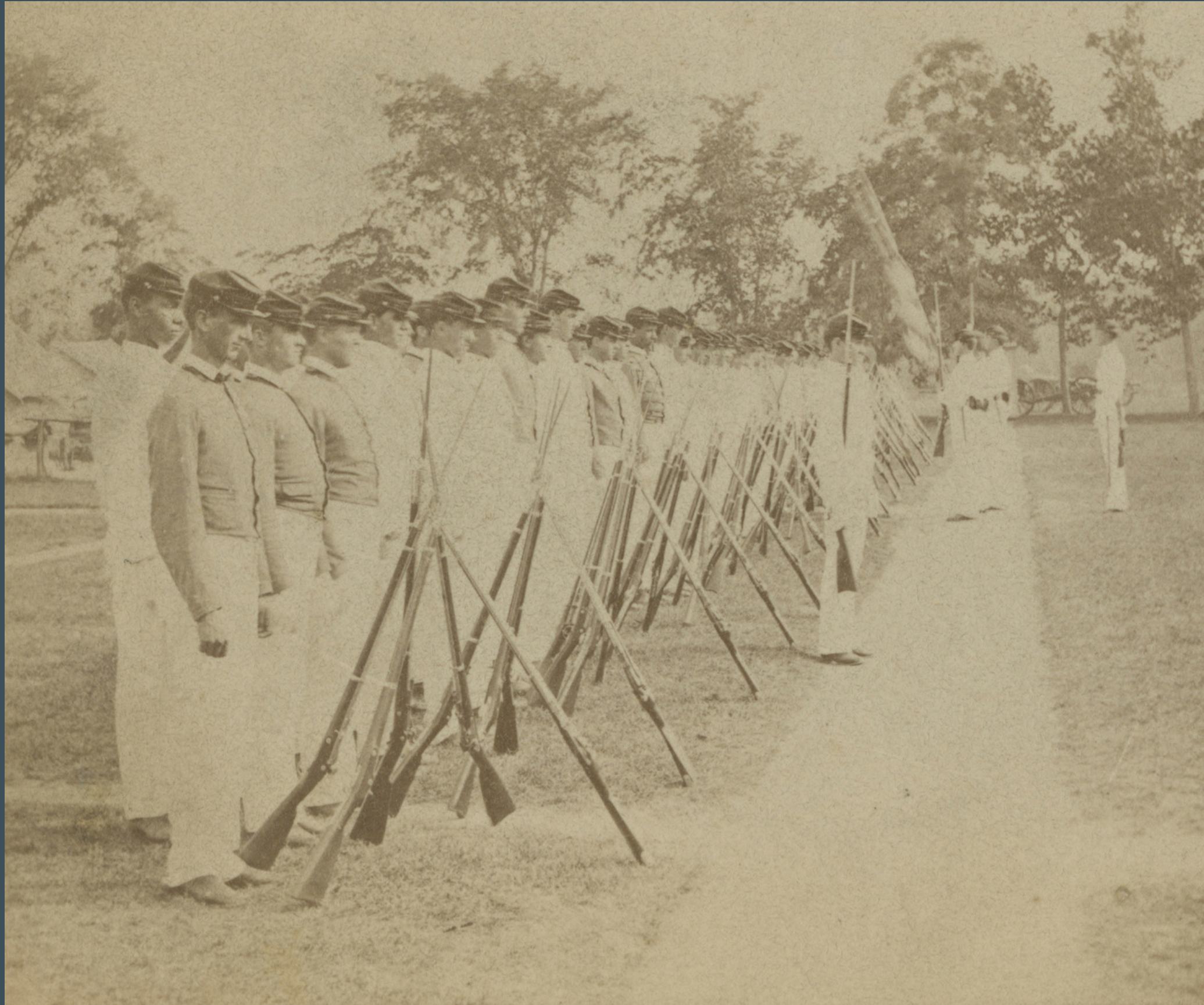
“West Point, New York. Court-Martial of James W. Smith, the colored cadet—Smith reading his defense, January 12th, 1871,” in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 28, 1871. (The New York Public Library Digital Collections)

Flipper Among West Point Cadets



West Point Cadets, circa 1870.
(USMA Bicentennial Website)

Cadet Flipper Standing at Attention



“Views of West Point. Hudson River Scenery,” 1873 -1877.

(Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Henry Flipper and Louis Bentz, "The Bugler"



Henry O. Flipper, cadet at U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 1877.
(United States Military Academy Library Special Collections and Archives)

The West Point Outrage and Johnson C. Whittaker



W. A. Rogers, "The West Point Outrage," illustrated in *Harper's Weekly*, May 1, 1880.
(The Library of Congress)

Upcoming Free Programs

INSIDE THE VAULT: December 5 at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT)

- We will discuss President Truman and National Healthcare with Professor Barbara A. Perry.

BOOK BREAKS: November 10 at 2 p.m. ET (11 a.m. PT)

- Dr. Leonne Hudson will discuss his book *Black Americans in Mourning*

BOOK DISCOUNT: Get Rory's book *Race, Politics and Reconstruction* for 30% off using the code 10CADET [at this link](#).

