

The Museum at West Point

The staff of the West Point Museum is passionate about their maxim... "Preserving America's Military Heritage." For as long as American democracy has been entrenched at West Point, so have the collections of artifacts and art that aid in the development of the Long Grey Line. Today these historic relics of our past are preserved by a highly trained staff of museum professionals who have achieved accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the highest national recognition for a museum.

Although the date of the founding of the West Point Museum is usually given as 1854 (the date the Museum officially opened to the public), some items in its collection predate the founding of the Academy in 1802. During the American Revolution, captured cannon, arms and munitions from the American victory at Saratoga in 1777 were brought to West Point. In 1784, one visitor described "20,000 infantry rifles...with bayonet and sling" along with "artillerymen's tools, pikes, sabers, etc." in two windowless warehouses. He also mentioned "160 [artillery pieces], munitions wagons, limbers, etc., most of them captured at Saratoga and Yorktown" stored at Fort Clinton.

With the founding of the Academy in 1802, the ordnance stores also became tools of instruction. Joseph G. Swift, Class of 1802, wrote of the trophies under the care of MAJ George Fleming. By 1843 the military artifacts had been organized into some sort of collection. In that year LT Miner Knowlton, Class of 1829 wrote to LT James Duncan, Class of 1834, Second U.S. Artillery, asking for an artifact to be placed in "our Musee d'Artillerie." Duncan promised to send an artillery sponge staff personally recovered from the site of the 1835 Dade Massacre in Florida "about six weeks after the massacre when the dead were buried." Now this sponge staff from the Dade Massacre helps to establish the West Point Museum as the oldest federal museum, predating even the Smithsonian Institution.

During the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, General Winfield Scott sent Superintendent Henry Brewerton, sections of flagpoles from captured Mexican forts, calling them "precious trophies of the valor and skill of our gallant little army." At the same time, under the provisions of an Act passed in 1814, President James K. Polk directed that trophies from the war be sent to West Point. By February of 1849, the flags captured from the Mexican Army were deposited at West Point, until they were returned to Mexico. By the 1850s there was so much public attention given to the historic holdings at the Academy that the Board of Visitors again recommended that a proper museum be established and opened to the general public. Thus, in 1854, while Robert E. Lee, Class of 1829, was Superintendent, a public museum, known as the Ordnance Museum, was opened.

Since 1854, the museum has been housed in several sites. Until the Headquarters Building (now Taylor Hall) was finished in 1909, the museum was located in several academic buildings. In 1858, the War Department sent a British color of the Seventh Regiment of Foot captured in 1775 and an Anspach-Bayreuth color surrendered at Yorktown to West Point. The Civil War brought so many artillery projectiles that their weight threatened to collapse the floor of the museum.

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After World War I, the Ordnance Museum in Building 600 (now Taylor Hall) featured the French "75" cannon which fired the first American shot of the war and numerous examples of the machine guns that made it so deadly. World War II saw the first closure of the public museum and a disastrous scrap drive which eliminated many irreplaceable pieces of ordnance from the collections. Its victorious conclusion brought new trophies such as Nazi Field Marshal Hermann Goering's diamond-encrusted baton and the flag flying over the Dachau concentration camp when it was liberated. General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Class of 1915, brought a gift from France – a sword carried by Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul of France. The Museum also was given the field boots and campaign hat worn by General Joseph W. Stilwell, Class of 1904, when he marched out of Burma and the Medal of Honor awarded Alexander Nininger, Class of 1941. The old name of Ordnance Museum was now inappropriate, and in 1942 it was renamed the "USMA Museum." In 1948, it received its current name, the "West Point Museum."

The renovation of the Riding Hall in 1958 into an academic building provided an opportunity to place the museum in a space specifically designed as a modern, fully functional museum with separate display, storage, research and fabrication facilities. The Thayer Hall site placed the museum adjacent to the Department of History, and its classes were steady visitors for lectures and demonstrations of original artifacts by the museum staff.

With the purchase of the Ladycliff College grounds in the early 1980's a plan was devised to enhance public access by co-locating the Museum with a Visitor Center. In July of 1988 the museum in Thayer Hall closed to reopen on 1 September 1989 at its new site in Olmsted Hall, Pershing Center. For the first time all of the collections of the West Point Museum were incorporated under one roof. More secure and separate areas were created to store the uniforms, weapons and arts holdings. Exhibitions are shown in six galleries, with a large gallery dedicated to the history of the Military Academy and a wing devoted exclusively to instruction. In 2006, the Andre Lucas Military Heritage Center was added to the north end of the Museum and provides a state-of-the-art learning environment for Cadets, faculty and the American public.

The Museum continually exhibits its impressive collection of historical artifacts in rotating exhibitions in three specially designed display galleries. Each item in the collection is prized for its provenance and connection to our Nation's rich history.

The West Point Museum is open daily from 10:30am to 4:15pm (Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years day). Admission is FREE.

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