

Society of Gentlemen: Midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, 1845-1861

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Review

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Hunter, Mark *Society of Gentlemen: Midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, 1845-1861*. Naval Institute Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-1-5911-4397-0

Exploring the First Years of the United States Naval Academy

In October 1845, the United States Naval School began operations at Fort Severn in Annapolis, Maryland. Rechristened the United States Naval Academy in 1850, the Annapolis institution brought together young men from the far reaches of the nation and prepared them for an officer's life in the navy. In *Society of Gentlemen*, freelance historian Mark Hunter chronicles the academy's formative period, focusing on the organizational structure of the school, the Annapolis administration, and how young midshipmen acclimated to and sometimes challenged the institution's rigorous academic and military regimen. Joining the historical debate about when the American armed forces became professional organizations, Hunter contends that the Naval Academy produced a competent, specialized junior officer corps in the antebellum years. Prodigious research in the official records of the Naval Academy allows the author to present a convincing case: readers will certainly rethink the arguments of previous historians who have situated the navy's professionalization between the end of the Civil War and the onset of World War I.

The book contains six chapters in addition to an introduction, conclusion, and two appendices that contain the school's antebellum disciplinary records and an assessment log for the academy's 1860 summer cruise. Chapters one through three proceed chronologically, covering the impetus for establishing the Naval Academy, the implementation of policy during the Naval School era, and the realization of a full-fledged professional naval school in the 1850s. Hunter offers an interesting discussion of discipline and law at Annapolis in chapters four and five. The final chapter illuminates the purpose for instituting summer cruises and keeping a permanent school ship docked near the academy and also provides a short discussion of how midshipmen and the academy administration attempted

to cope with the onset of the Civil War. Throughout, Hunter utilizes academy records to offer a glimpse of life at Annapolis from the institution's superintendent down to the lowliest fourth-class midshipman. Short vignettes, often drawn from post-Civil War memoirs, complement Hunter's largely statistical evidence.

The author fits the establishment of the academy into a myriad of topics that concern scholars of the antebellum period, including class anxieties, partisan politics, and the transportation revolution. A scattering of unofficial naval schools existed prior to the establishment of the academy, yet the geographic dispersal and the lack of uniform curriculum offered most prospective naval officers only a rudimentary understanding of the requisite skills needed to flourish in their profession. As early as 1841, Secretary of the Navy Abel Upshur pushed for the establishment of a central academy, citing the success of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Hunter notes that the academy became a Jacksonian-era political football, with most Whigs supporting the school. Democrats often opposed creating an academy because it would favor the few at the expense of the many and create an elite officer corps. Academy advocates proposed that a central school could help midshipmen develop the mandatory technical skills that came with the navy's transition to steam power in the 1840s. Still others believed that training in a professional institutional climate might eliminate junior officer insubordination.

To avoid the partisan wrangling of Congress, Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft in 1845 utilized the Navy Department's instruction budget and established the Naval School. During the Naval School period, the quest for professionalization suffered because many midshipmen went to sea immediately after obtaining appointments. Not until the academy period would midshipmen be required to attend classes in the controlled, structured environment of Annapolis before setting sail. Moreover, the Naval School brought in midshipmen of many different ages, which hampered the ability to arrange a uniform curriculum.

The navy implemented a series of reforms in 1849 and 1850 and renamed the school the United States Naval Academy. Potential candidates now had to be between ages fourteen and seventeen and, once enrolled, reported directly to Annapolis rather than being placed on active duty. The academy installed a curriculum with nine departments that ranged from functional skills like practical seamanship and mathematics to aptitudes designed to cultivate polished

gentlemen such as ethics, French, and Spanish. A dress code, regulations pertaining to personal appearance, and a demerit system further regimented Annapolis and contributed to the navy's professionalization. The author contends that the introduction of the summer cruise program in the 1850s served as a capstone to the professionalization of the navy's junior office corps. The summer cruises, which Hunter terms "living textbooks," allowed midshipmen to apply their learned skills in a controlled environment and refine their gentlemanly bearing in foreign ports.

Hunter provides a wealth of data about attendees to the Naval School and Academy. Twenty-eight attractive tables provide information such as the family occupational background and ages of midshipmen, course grading, midshipmen offenses, and the ultimate fate that befell the academy's antebellum graduates. A majority of the academy's enrollees had a father who practiced a commercial or professional trade, and during the 1850s an almost even number of midshipmen had grown up in the North and the South, though far fewer attendees came from the Midwest.

Some historians have suggested that the Naval School period suffered from lax discipline because many of the students already had sea experience and considered themselves above the institution's rules and regulations. Based on a random 20-percent sample of the 202 midshipmen accused of committing offenses from 1845 to 1850, Hunter argues otherwise. The evidence reveals that the school era midshipmen behaved more orderly than once assumed: the most common infraction was breaking liberty, while only 2 out of the 111 infractions were for behavior unbecoming an officer. During the Naval Academy period, the midshipmen displayed good conduct overall. Drinking posed some difficulties at Annapolis, but Hunter does not suggest that the experience with this youthful pursuit differed from any other antebellum educational institutions.

An 1848 incident in which a group of midshipmen hung an effigy of Professor Henry Lockwood effectively demonstrates how midshipmen could sometimes contest the school's strict disciplinary regimen. Hunter notes that the midshipmen asked to testify against their comrades carefully chose their words so as to avoid implicating those charged with hanging the effigy. This vignette illustrates the intersection of midshipman camaraderie and officer honor: when later subjected to specific questioning the students felt it their obligation to tell the truth. The author ably integrates several other brief sketches into the narrative to give his largely statistical evidence a humanistic touch.

A valuable contribution, the book suffers from a few flaws. Hunter often relies upon the memoirs of academy graduates to complement his quantitative evidence. For instance, Alfred Thayer Mahan's contention that no hazing existed at Annapolis in the 1850s is taken at face value. Mahan quipped that hazing did not fit the gentlemanly status of naval officers, but seemed quite normal at rival West Point. Does this represent reliable proof of a lack of hazing, or could it simply be the product of interservice competition? Hunter's main contemporary manuscript sources are letters sent to the secretary of the navy and the superintendent of the academy. This correspondence, written in official capacity, might not always reflect the inner workings of academy life. Locating the extant letters or diaries of some of the academy's attendees and instructors might have better reflected how the academy truly operated. Additionally, Hunter could have broadened his interesting discussion of the political crisis of 1860-1861 and its influence upon academy life. More attention to this trying period might have captured the essence of the numerous pressures the midshipmen faced on a daily basis during the 1850s, including the clash between professional and sectional identity, the collision of honor and obligation, and the nature of *esprit de corps* at the academy.

Along with Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh's recent study about the professional nature of the antebellum army (*West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* [2009]), *Society of Gentlemen* makes a convincing case for repositioning the professionalization of the armed forces in the decades before the Civil War. Specialists and general readers alike will surely gain a greater understanding of the antebellum naval academy, the school's attendees, and the process of creating a professional curriculum after reading Mark Hunter's fine social history.

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