

From Confederate Gray To Union Blue

Alexander Frederick Fleet

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Legend and lore are built upon the flimsiest of incidents – a happenstance, death, and, in the case of the Missouri Military Academy, a late night fire that destroyed all its buildings just days after it opened for the 1896-97 school year.

That same month, Culver opened for its third year. It had struggled under ineffective leadership – first an Episcopal priest who was at odds with founder and owner Henry Harrison Culver, then a retired army officer who proved an ineffective recruiter. For practical purposes, Culver Military Academy was on the economic ropes. H. H. Culver's investment in land, his newly constructed Main Barrack, and several minor facilities were valued at \$70,000. Unless enrollment issues were resolved – and quickly – the school would be forced to close. The tragedy in Missouri provided Culver an opportunity to save his own school. He acted quickly.

He telegraphed Colonel Alexander Frederick Fleet, the superintendent of M M A: *“You have the boys and I have the buildings. Let's get together.”* Fleet, with more than 75 cadets, a small faculty, no buildings, and many financial obligations, was in dire need of a savior. He accepted after Culver agreed to underwrite the expenses of moving his students and faculty, excused the first semester fees and tuition Fleet had collected, and agreed to pay the M M A faculty for the first semester. Culver, rejoicing in this manna from heaven, responded: *“Veni, vidi, vici. The Academy is at your disposal. When will your party start? Answer quick.”*

He wired Fleet to expect a chartered train and on the evening of October 5, 1896, the transfusion that saved the Culver Military Academy arrived at the Marmont station (The town name was not changed to Culver until 1897).

H. H. Culver, an astute businessman who had parlayed a meager investment into a personal fortune through the manufacture of cook stoves in St. Louis, was taking a calculated gamble. In an instant, he entrusted the

leadership of his “castle in the sky” to a man known only by reputation. Would Fleet bring a magic wand to the north shore of Lake Maxinkuckee ?

Culver’s decision rested on Fleet’s reputation at the Missouri Military Academy and his proven credits as a scholar and educator. For the 53-year-old Fleet, a son of the Old South, it was his last chance at the big dance. Could he lead his own school or should he return to the classroom as a teacher of the classics? Had Culver known the lineage of his new superintendent, he would have had no uneasy moments.

To understand the devotion of Fleet to education, one needs only to read a recently discovered letter made available to the archives by collector Robert Cinabro, the city attorney for Kalamazoo , Michigan .

In a beautifully cursive script to David, his 10-year-old brother at the family home of Greenmont in King and Queen County, Virginia , Alexander F. Fleet, a 19-year-old Confederate lieutenant wrote: “that they expected [fighting] by land and water at any time [it would be known as the Battle of Fredericksburg],” but said little more about the war.

Already a graduate of the Aberdeen Academy near his eastern Virginian home, he had left the University of Virginia after one year to accept a commission in the Confederate army. His Sunday night letter was simply a reaffirmation of his academic bona fides. He wrote David with great passion about the value of education: “I am very glad that you have improved so much in your writing . . . [and] try to continue to improve . . . for it alone may be of good service to you. Write slowly at first . . . then increase your speed by degrees. By this alone, you might get a good position which you could not obtain if you had a [bad] hand.”

Parenthetically, David followed his brother’s admonition and graduated with a degree in civil engineering from the Virginia Military Institute before settling in Montesano , Washington , where he became a successful lumberman. His son, Reuben (right), graduated from Culver in 1906, became an aviation pioneer, created the U.S. Air Mail Service in 1918, and later founded the Consolidated Aviation Company, the manufacturer of the legendary B-24 bomber and the PBY Catalina patrol plane of World War II fame.

In his discourse on the study of Latin, Alexander showed a deep understanding of the classics, a subject he later taught at William Jewell

College and the University of Missouri . “Let me give you some advice about your Horace,” he wrote. “If you rely too much on notes . . . they are calculated to ruin a good student, by making him rely too little on himself, and when he comes to read Livy and Tacitus . . . he will have great difficulty in translating”

Fleet’s letter is all the more remarkable because of his introspection and his desire to teach. “I think Horace is as hard as any Latin I know, without a dictionary or notes.” He was sanguine in his view of French, “except as an assistant in the study of medicine or to finish off your education.” All of this was pretty heady stuff for a nineteen year-old soldier writing by the light of a campfire!

Ultimately he served as the adjutant to General Henry Wise. He accompanied his commander to Appomattox and was present at the surrender of the Confederate army in April of 1865.

There was no question for Fleet of his goal in life. He returned to the University of Virginia and graduated in 1867. Two years later he received certification in Latin, Greek, German, and French. After teaching several years at William Jewell College in Liberty , Missouri , he moved to the University of Missouri and became a Professor of Greek.

In 1890, Fleet departed the world of higher education and opened the Missouri Military Academy in partnership with the town-fathers of Mexico , Missouri . While such ventures were not uncommon in states where the Civil War had left the economy decimated and the social structure badly fractured, it was a leap for someone to gamble his life savings of \$7,000.

On the night of September 24, 1896, fire broke out in one of the barracks and flames soon engulfed the entire complex. By morning, Fleet looked at the decimated buildings and realized his dream had ended. *The* telegram from Culver arrived shortly thereafter, and with the death of one school another began.

Five days after Fleet arrived, he and Culver sat down to hammer out an agreement under which the school would function. Both men operated with strengths and weaknesses. Culver had a fine new building and few students and saw only red ink and possible failure ahead. Fleet had brought 72 boys and his faculty from Missouri and that was his leverage. He had little else with which to bargain. The fact that both men met as equals and

negotiated an agreement without acrimony is a tribute to respect for the other's position.

Opening legalese aside, it set forth the following conditions: H. H. Culver was to receive from the gross annual income of the school five percent interest in consideration for his investment of \$70,000. Fleet's return would be predicated upon his managerial successes, since it was drawn from the net income *after* Culver's share and *all other* expenses were paid. Tuition was set at \$375 and enrollment was approximately 100. Fleet would receive all net profits up to \$5,000, after which he and Culver would divide any excess equally. Improvements to facilities, new construction, etc., which were borne by Culver, would be subject to the same five percent conditions.

Parenthetically, Fleet was offered an equity position in all new construction during his 14-year tenure, but consistently rejected such entreaties. Perhaps his memories of the Missouri fire had left an indelible imprint and ownership was no longer an attraction. At 53 years of age, future risk taking apparently had little attraction for Fleet.

The agreement provided for a "board of managers" including H. H. Culver, W. L. Culver, H. H. Culver Jr., Fleet, and E. T. Neal, a valued employee of the Wrought Iron Range Company in St. Louis and the business manager for the Academy. Quite clearly, the founder intended to maintain final authority and was not going to be out-voted.

Fleet, for the months of October, November, and December in 1896, was to receive a monthly compensation of \$100. Thereafter, and for the remainder of the contract, he would receive \$300 per month, provided earnings justified such an allowance. Culver also provided, at no cost, a dwelling, meals for Fleet and his family in the Mess Hall, and authorized \$300 for "beds, bedding, carpets and other necessary furnishings" for their home. The dwelling specified in the contract was a large, white, clapboard structure that stood between Main Barrack and the lake.

Finally, it was agreed that both of the principals to the contract "be allowed to put into the Academy three boys free of expense, as to board and tuition." This provision was applied to Fleet's sons, John Sedden, William Frederick, and Reginald. Culver educated his youngest, Knight K., a nephew Wallace C., and a grandson Edwin R. Jr.

Fleet introduced an academic program befitting his educational background and philosophy. Four diplomas were offered. One certified completion of a classical diploma, a second designated the satisfactory completion of requirements in Latin, a third for boys pursuing a scientific diploma, and, lastly a commercial diploma for those who did not contemplate college.

During his 14 year tenure, Fleet devoted himself to the pursuit of academics and, for the most part, left the military equation to his young Virginia Military Institute commandant of cadets, Major Leigh R. Gignilliat. Positive karma between the two men was established quickly and Gignilliat pursued a variety of programs that enhanced the viability of the school. Perhaps there was an added measure of security when the commandant married Fleet's oldest daughter, Mary Sedden, in 1898!

By 1909, Gignilliat's star had risen to such a point that he was clearly the heir-apparent to the superintendency. Fleet was 67 in failing health. Retirement beckoned and the following year he moved to Atlanta to be near his youngest daughter, Belle and her husband, Dr. Kenneth Matheson, the president of the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Death came in 1911 to this gentleman of the old South who had worn the Confederate gray with great pride, then wore the post-war blue of the United States Army. In passing control of the Academy to Gignilliat, he looked with pride at an enrollment that stood at 361 and a school with bright prospects for the future.