

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

Introduction

In 1839, seventeen-year-old Hiram Ulysses Grant received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. It changed the course of his life—and his name. Grant always disliked his first name and was commonly known by his middle name. He wanted to swap his first and middle names when he entered the Academy. However, Congressman Thomas Hamer had submitted Grant's application to West Point under the name "Ulysses S. Grant." Hamer knew the boy as Ulysses and, at a loss for his middle name, chose "S" because Grant's mother's maiden name was Simpson.

On September 22, 1839, shortly after his arrival at West Point, Cadet Grant wrote the letter below to his cousin, R. McKinstry Griffith. In it, Grant reveals his first impressions of West Point, his sense of humor, and a bit of a midwestern dialect. The letter provides insight into the life of a West Point cadet and Grant's transition into military life. At the time this letter was written, Grant was still trying to use his given name and signed the letter "U. H. Grant." However, army bureaucracy prevailed and he learned to accept his now famous initials, U. S. Grant.

Excerpt

First, I slept for two months upon one single pair of blankets, now this sounds romantic and you may think it very easy, but I tell you what coz, it is tremendous hard. suppose you try it by way of experiment for a night or two. I am pretty shure that you would be perfectly satisfied that is no easy matter, but glad am I, these things are over. we are now in our quarters. I have a spleanded bed and get along very well. Our pay is nominally about twenty eight dollars a month, but we never see one cent of it. if we want any thing from a shoestring to a coat we must go to the commadant of the post and get an order for it or we cannot have it. We have tremendous long and hard lessons to get in both French and Algebra. I study hard and hope to get along so as to pass the examination in January. this examination is a hard one they say, but I am not freyhened yet. If I am successful here you will not see me for two long years.

Questions for Discussion

1. Briefly describe the challenges and inconveniences that Ulysses S. Grant encountered as a new West Point cadet.

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

2. Based on this 1839 letter to his cousin, how well do you think Grant transitioned to life as a West Point cadet?
3. How did Hiram Ulysses Grant come to be known as Ulysses S. Grant?

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

Image

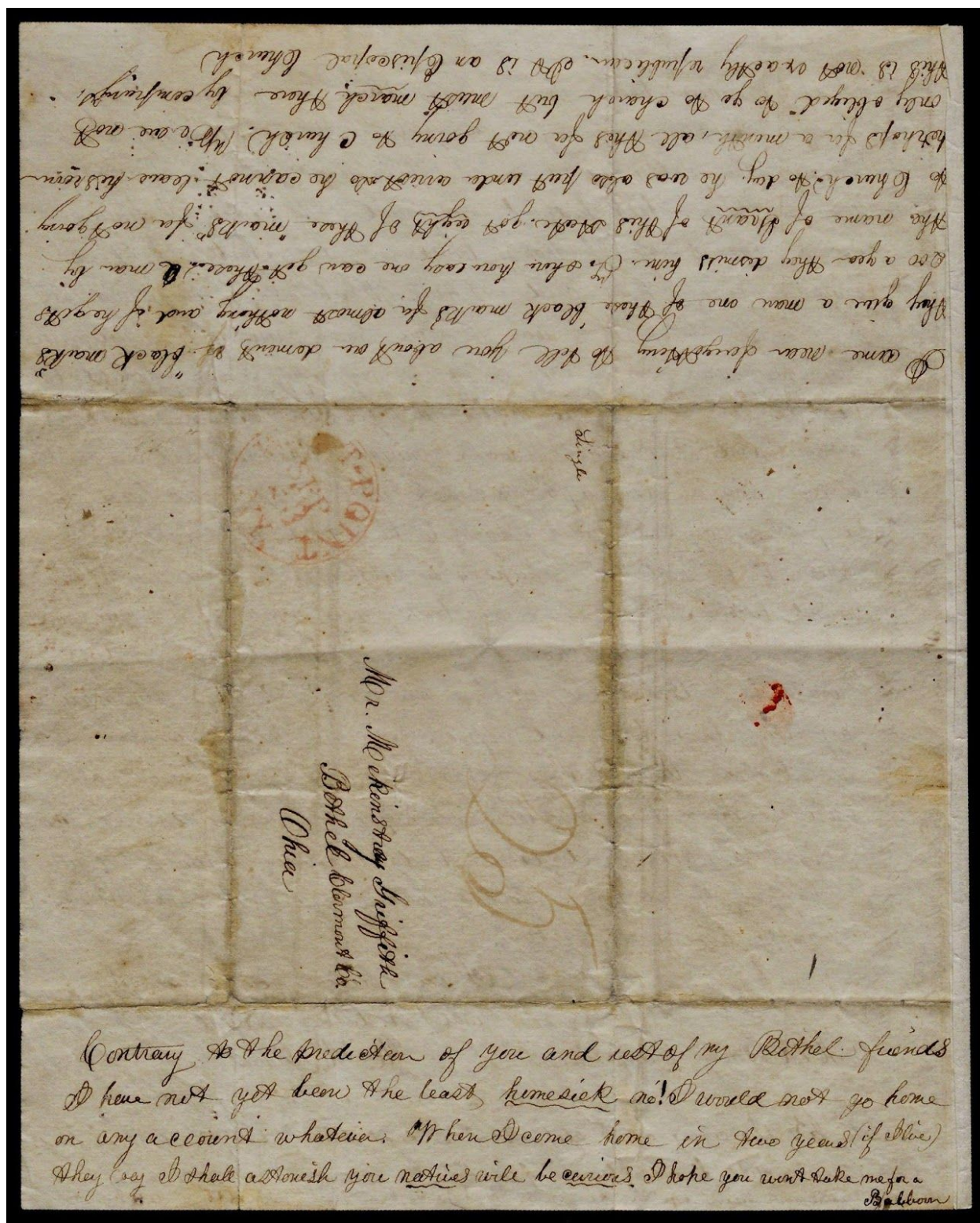
Military Academy
West Point N.Y.
Sept. 22^d 1839.

Dear Coz,

I was just thinking that you would be right, glad to hear from one of your relations who is so far away as Sam. So, I have put aside my *Alybia* and *Phonix* and am going to tell you a long story about this prettiest of places West Point. So far as it regards natural attractions it is decidedly the most beautiful place that I have ever seen; here are hills and dales, rocks and river; all pleasant to look upon. From the window near I can see the Hudson; that, far famed, that beautiful river with its bosom studded with hundreds of snow ~~white~~ sails. Again if I look another way I can see Fort Putnam forming for above; a stern monument of a stern eye, which seems placed there on purpose to tell us of the glorious deeds of our fathers and to bid us remember their sufferings - to follow their example. In short this is the best of all places - the place of all places for an instruction like this. I have not told you half its attractions. Here is the house Mr. Washington used to live in - there Mr. Kosciuszko used to walk and think of his own day and of ours. Over the river we are shown the dwelling house of Arnold, that brave and headless knave to his country and his God. I do love the place. It seems as though I could live here forever if my friends would only come too. You might search the wide world over and then not find a better

Ulysses S. Grant to R. McKinstry Griffith, September 22, 1839. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03632 p. 1)

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839



Ulysses S. Grant to R. McKinstry Griffith, September 22, 1839. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03632 p. 4)

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

Transcript

Ulysses S. Grant to R. McKinstry Griffith, September 22, 1839.

Military Academy,

West Point N.Y.

Sept. 22.^d 1839.

Dear Coz,

I was just thinking that you would be right glad to hear from one of your relations who is so far away as I am. So, I have put asaid my Algebra and French and am going to tell you a long story about this prettiest of places West Point. So far as it regards natural attractions it is decidedly the most beautiful place that I have ever seen; here are hills and dales, rocks and river; all pleasant to look upon. From the window near I can see the Hudson; that far famed, that beautiful river with its bosom studded with hundreds of snow sails. Again if I look another way I can see Fort Putnam frowning far above: a stern monument of a sterner age, which seems placed there on purpose to tell us of the glorious deeds of our fathers, and to bid us remember their sufferings—to follow their examples. In short this is the best of all places—the place of all places for an institution like this. I have not told you half its attractions. here is the house Washington used to live in—there Kosisuseko [Kościuszko] used to walk and think of his country and of ours. Over the river we are shown the dwelling house of Arnold, that base and heartless traitor to his country and his God. I do love the place. it seems as though I could live here forever, if my friends would only come too. You might search the wide world over and then not find a better. [2] Now all this sounds nice, very nice, ‘what a happy fellow you are’ you will say. but I am not one to show fals colors, the brightest side of the picture—So I will tell you about a few of the drawbacks. First, I slept for two months upon one single pair of blankets, now this sounds romantic and you may think it very easy, but I tell you what coz, it is tremendous hard. suppose you try it by way of experiment for a night or two. I am pretty shure that you would be perfectly satisfied that is no easy matter, but glad am I, these things are over. we are now in our quarters. I have a spleanded bed and get along very well. Our pay is nominally about

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

twenty eight dollars a month, but we never see one cent of it. if we want any thing from a shoestring to a coat we must go to the commadant of the post and get an order for it or we cannot have it. We have tremendous long and hard lessons to get in both French and Algebra. I study hard and hope to get along so as to pass the examination in January. this examination is a hard one they say, but I am not freyhtened yet. If I am successful here you will not see me for two long years. it seems a long while to me, but time passes off very fast. it seems but a few days since I came here. it is because every hour has its duty which must be performed. On the whole I like the place very much, so much that I would not go away on any account. The fact is if a man graduates here he safe for life. let him go where he will. There is much to dislike but more to like. I mean to study hard and stay if it be possible. if I cannot—very well—the world is wide. [3] I have now been here about four months and have not seen a single familiar face or spoken to a single lady. I wish some of the pretty girles of Bethel were here just so I might look at them, but fudge! confound the girles. I have seen great men plenty of them. let us see. Gen Scott, M. Van Buren, Sec of War and Navy, Washington Irving and lots of other big bugs. If I were to come home now with my uniform on, they way you would laugh at my appearance would be curious. My pants sit as tight to my skin as the bark to a tree and if I do not walk military, that is if I bend over quickly or run, they are very apt to crack with a report as loud as a pistol. my coat must always be buttoned up tight to the chin. it is made of sheeps grey cloth all covered with big round buttons. it makes me look very singular. If you were to see me at a distance, the first question you would ask would be, ‘is that a Fish or an animal’? You must give my very best love and respects to all my friends particularly your brothers, Uncle Ross & Sam’l Simpson. You must also write me a long, long letter in reply to this and tell me about every thing and every body including yourself. If you happen to see my folks just till them that I am happy, alive and kicking.

I am truly your cousin
and obedient servant

McKinstrey Griffith.

U. H. Grant

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

N. B. In coming on I stopped five days in Philidelphia with my friends they are all well. tell Grandmother Simpson that they always have expected to see here before, but have almost given up the idea now. they hope to hear from her often.

U. H. Grant

[4] I came near forgetting to tell you about our demerit or “black marks” they give a man one of these ‘black marks’ for almost nothing and if he gets 200 a year they dismiss him. To show how easy one can get these, a man by the name of Grant of this state got eight of these “marks” for not going to Church to day. he was also put under arrest, so he cannot leave his room perhaps for a month, all this for not going to Church. We are not only obliged to go to church but must march there by companys. this is not exactly republican. It is an Episcopal Church

Contrary to the prediction of you and rest of my Bethel friends I have not yet been the least homesick no! I would not go home on any account whatever. When I come home in two years (if I live) they say I shall astonish you natives will be curious. I hope you wont take me for a Babboon

[address leaf]

Single

Mr. McKinstrey Griffith

Bethel Clermont Co.

Ohio

[written on left hand margin of page 2]

I am going to write to some of my friends in Philidelphia soon when they answer I shall write you again, to tell you about them &c. &c. remember and write me very soon for I want to here much

[written on left hand margin of page 3]

Cadet Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, 1839

My very best respects to Grandmother Simpson. I think often her, I put this on the margin so that you may remember it better. I want you to show this letter and all others that I may write to you, to her.