

Past in Review



CADET GRAY

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Graduates of West Point are called the Long Gray Line in a nod to the iconic gray cadet uniforms, but they weren't always gray. Early cadets were soldiers and wore uniforms associated with their regiments. Further, engineers and artillerymen all wore different colors, caps, buttons, and other details representing their branch affiliation. It wasn't until the early 19th century that cadets wore gray uniforms. What changed? And why gray, when Army uniforms were mostly blue? There are two basic theories about the choice of gray for cadet uniforms: inspiration and economics. History points to the latter. An American victory at the Battle of Chippawa provides the former, if not more romantic, way to look at it.

1812 marked the beginning of another major conflict between the United States and Britain. Resources were being consumed quickly and supply could not meet demand in many areas. By 1814, all stores of blue

fabric (dyed with imported indigo) for Army uniforms had run out. What was available and abundant? An inexpensive rough gray cloth, normally used as work clothes for slaves. Many poorer volunteer units had already adopted such fabric for their uniforms, and the regular Army followed suit.

In the spring of 1814, Brigadier General Winfield Scott was in Buffalo, New York, training his brigade of Infantry soldiers when a shipment of the gray uniforms arrived for them. The soldiers balked, mainly because they did not want to be associated with the volunteer units who, while wearing gray, displayed cowardice in the line of duty. Scott knew that the uniform was not the key to success and continued to prepare his soldiers for the task at hand. In July, he led his brigade to victory against an ill-prepared British force at the Battle of Chippawa. Evidently, the British mistook them for volunteers and underestimated their will and discipline. It is storied that when he realized defeat, the British commander, Major General Phineas Riall, exclaimed "Those are regulars, by God!"

At the time, the Superintendent of the Academy was Captain Alden Partridge 1806. And for whatever reason, he had a gray uniform tailored for himself. Was it because he saw the Army moving in that direction? Or was he inspired by Scott's triumph at Chippawa? Whatever the case, the cadets began referring to him as "Old Pewter." What they did not know was that Partridge had approved an order of new cadet coats of that very same gray. It was fashioned after his own, and had many of the distinctive features of the modern Full Dress coat: the black braid, buttons, and "swallowtail" coattails. The design remains largely unchanged today.

At the time, Jonathan Swift 1802 (the first West Point graduate) was commanding the defense of New York City and its harbors. During this period he also had oversight for Partridge and West Point. In 1816, Swift requested the gray uniform be formalized as the official uniform of the Academy, citing practical reasons. It was less expensive than the blue, and had been in use for more than a

year already. However, Scott always took credit for the choice of gray uniforms, even claiming in his memoirs that they were adopted in honor of his victory at Chippawa. Either way, it was approved.

In 1817, Major Sylvanus Thayer 1808—then Superintendent—introduced chevrons to the uniform to indicate cadet rank. There were now enough cadets enrolled to necessitate leaders and officers in the Corps. The placement of the chevrons fluctuated for over a decade until the present system was established in about 1830. Circa 1820 the Army adopted chevrons on uniforms. Since the 1950s they have been reserved solely for non-commissioned officers. Only on West Point uniforms do chevrons indicate officer ranks (cadet lieutenants and cadet captains).

In 1889, the Dress Gray coat was designed. It was intended to replace the riding jackets and for many years was worn most of the day, including in the classroom. Then in 1899, narrow braids were added to the lower sleeve of Full Dress and Dress Gray to help identify class affiliation. Plebes wore the basic style with no additional stripes. Yearlings received a single narrow braid above that. A cow received a second, and firsties earned their third and final stripe. In 1910, the "service stripes" were added to the overcoat.

At the turn of the 20th century, just prior to the Academy's centennial, the United States had become a prominent world power, and the Army was modernizing. West Point knew it had decidedly proved its worth and would endure long into the future. Officials felt it would be a good time to think about generating a balance between forward-thinking changes and tradition. During these years the Academy adopted the current crest, the helmet of Pallas Athena (representing wisdom and the arts of war), and the motto "Duty, Honor, Country." It is interesting to note that the original design of the crest had the eagle and helmet facing to the wearer's left—quite backward in terms of heraldry. Since medieval times, animals and other devices were depicted facing to the wearer's right—or dexter—the side of honor. The crest was corrected in 1923. These items, along with cadet gray, will endure.