The Youngs at West Point

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Duty, Honor, Country—
a Lifelong Pledge of Faith

By J. Michael Hunter

In March 1802, Congress established the United States Military Academy on an army site at West Point, New York. The academy's purpose was to prepare young men to serve as officers in the United States Army. Students at the academy were called cadets. To be considered for admission to the academy, a candidate had to be nominated by a government official, usually a United States senator or representative. It was considered a great honor to be nominated. It was also considered an opportunity for a young man to increase his social standing. After four years, the cadet earned a Bachelor of Science degree and received a commission in the U.S. Army.

In 1871, when Brigham Young's son, Willard, was nominated to attend West Point, Latter-day Saints viewed it not only as an opportunity for Willard, but as an opportunity for the Mormons in general to advance their social standing in the country. After Willard, other descendants of Brigham Young would attend the academy in what would become somewhat of a family tradition.

Willard Young was born in Salt Lake City on 30 April 1852. He was the third child of Clarissa Ross Young and the eleventh son of Brigham Young. At the age of thirteen, Willard asked his father if he could leave school and to work. Brigham was an advocate of formal education, but he also believed strongly in practical education. He hoped that Willard would work for a few years and then "be willing to go to school and work hard at that." After a year of working on a farm in teaming and wood hauling, Willard was "eager enough to get back in school." Willard enrolled at Deseret University (forerunner of the University of Utah). In June 1871, the Deseret Evening News declared that Willard was the United States Military Academy was established at West Point, New York, in 1802 to prepare young men to serve as officers in the United States Army (pictured in background).
Willard was nineteen at the time, when his nephew was born, and the two Youngs would follow very similar life courses.

Richard's father, Joseph A., was engaged in many building projects in the Salt Lake Valley, including the building of the Salt Lake Theatre and the construction of the Utah Central Railroad from Ogden to Salt Lake City. From 1871 to 1873, Richard worked as a telegraph operator in Richfield. In 1872, Joseph A. was called to preside over the Church in Utah's Sevier district.

Moving there with his family, Richard worked as a telegraph operator in Richfield from 1873 to 1874. In 1875, the family moved to Manti, where Joseph A. supervised the construction of the Manti Temple. That summer, Utah's congressional delegate, George Q. Cannon, made his first nomination of Richard as a cadet to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. However, a family tragedy prevented Richard from accepting the appointment. On 5 August 1875, Richard's father, Joseph A. Young, age forty-one, died suddenly of an apparent heart attack.

Joseph A.'s family returned to Salt Lake City, and Brigham took a fatherly interest in his fatherless grandsons. In September 1875, in a letter to his son, Alfales, Brigham wrote, "Of Joseph A.'s sons, Brigham T. has chosen surveying as a business, whilst Richard W. is preparing to conquer both the theoretical and practical parts of the duties of an architect." In preparation for this, Brigham arranged for Richard to work in the carpenter shop on Temple Square. According to Orson F. Whitney, Brigham's aspirations for Richard to become an architect did not match Richard's personal interests. In December 1875, Richard went down to Manti to take charge of the high school. During this time Richard also worked as a carpenter and was employed on the railroads.

By 1877, George Q. Cannon again offered the cadetship to Richard, but Richard was reluctant to accept it because he had the possibility of a large promotion in a railroad company. When a larger company suddenly bought out the railroad company Richard was working for, he saw his chances at promotion dim and accepted the appointment to West Point.

Willard Young (left) in Cuba, ca. 1899.
wanting to avoid paying officer salaries, wel­
come resignations from the graduates. After consul­ting with his uncle Willard, Richard decided to resign from the military and purs­ue a law degree. Learning that it would cost him to six thousand dollars to attend Howard and law school, Richard secured funding from friends like Heber J. Grant. Yet Richard was no fool about resigning from the army. “Ehbe,” he asked his friend, “inasmuch as Grandfather blessed me and set me apart as an army missionary, do you think it is proper for me to resign that missionary labor without consulting his successor, President John Taylor?” Heber J. Grant recommended that he talk with President Taylor. When President Taylor told him to stay in the army, Richard did so, being assigned to Governor’s Island, not far from New York City. He entered Columbia Law School and graduated with honors in 1884 and was admitted to the Bar of the State of New York.

Richard was later assigned to Fort Douglas in Utah. In 1888 while visiting with Heber J. Grant in his office, President John Taylor said, “I see by the morning paper that your dear friend Richard W. Young’s term has expired at Fort Douglas and he is about to go East. You may tell him that the time has now arrived for his missionary labors in the army to end, and he is at liberty to resign.”

Richard resigned that year and took up a private law practice in Salt Lake City. His Uncle Willard would retire from the army three years later to take a position as the prin­cipal of what was called Young University in Salt Lake City.

In April 1898, a conflict broke out between the United States and Spain over the liberation of Cuba. The conflict escalated into the Spanish-American War. “When the trouble broke out between the United States and Spain,” Heber J. Grant wrote, “I was vis­iting Richard in his office. He remarked that as a member of the West Point it was his duty to volunteer again to enter the army.” Heber J. Grant advised Richard to consult with President Wilford Woodruff. Richard replied that President Woodruff said “one of the most tender-hearted men in the world . . . I feel sure he would not advise me to volunteer.”

Heber J. Grant replied, “Do you accept me, Richard, as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, with authority to call people on mis­sions?” Richard replied, “Father, I accept you.” Heber J. Grant said, “All right . . . call you on a mission to go to President Woodruff, and ask for his advice.” Richard said, “Darn you, Wood­ruff, I am going!” Howard was surprised when Richard returned from his interview with President Woodruff and reported, “President Woodruff put me in for a fight as an egg is full of meat. He remarked, ‘If you don’t go back to the army, Brother Young, after graduating from West Point, you will disgrace the name you bear, and it will be a reflection upon your dear, dead grandfa­ther, President Brigham Young.”

Richard enlisted as a volunteer and was made captain of Battery A, Utah Light Artillery. Two months later, he was appointed a major, commanding Utah Light Artillery. Richard participated in the capture of Manila and twenty-five other engagements in the Spanish-American War and the Filipino Insurrection. From May 1899 to June 1901, Richard served as associate justice and presi­dent of the criminal branch of the Supreme Court of the Philippines. Richard’s service would earn him the Medal of Honor.

Willard Young also volunteered for the war. He served as colonel of the Second Regiment of the U.S. Volunteer Engineers in Havana from May 1898 to May 1899. President McKinley commended Willard for valiant service in connection with the provi­sion of sanitary works in Cuba. After the war, Willard served as president of the National Contracting Company, supervising the con­struction of the Niagara Falls Power Company, the drainage works of the city of New Orleans, the tunnels of the Boston sub­way, the Boston sewer system, and the Hudson River Power Company dam.

In 1906, the First Presidency called Willard to be president of the Latter-day Saints University in Salt Lake City. In 1915, the First Presidency called him to serve as a counselor in the Logan Temple Presidency. Meanwhile, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Richard to the Board of Visitors at West Point in 1902. Richard also served as Regent of University of Utah (1905–1915), trustee of Brigham Young University (1916–1920), President of Brigham Young College, and President of International Army Congress (1912–1914). He also served as president of the Ensign Stake and on the general board of the YMMLA. During this time he contin­ued to practice law in Salt Lake City.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Willard and Richard again vol­un­teered their services. The army appointed Willard as United States Agent in charge of all army engineering work on the Missouri River. He served from 1917 to 1919. The army made Richard a brigadier-general in charge of training soldiers at Fort Kearney.

Richard W. Young died from compli­cations following an appendectomy on 27 December 1919. At his funeral, Heber J. Grant said, “I have referred to him, all my life, in public and in private, as my most im­mate, my nearest and dearest friend! . . . He was my near and dear friend because I never discovered in him a thought or a desire that I did not feel in my heart was a desire to do the right thing.”

Willard Young returned to Salt Lake City and served the remainder of his life as Superintendent of Church Building Construction. He died in Salt Lake City on 23 July 1916 at the age eighty-four. He had been the oldest surviving son of Brigham Young. The Salt Lake Tribune stated, “He was courageous and he was determined. When he set his eye upon a goal he was deter­mined to reach it. His West Point days were attended by jibes and jibes from his classmates which would have conquered a less deter­mined soul.”

The Young legacy lived on at West Point long after the deaths of Willard and Richard. Willard’s son, Sidney Hooper Young, attended, as did Sidney Hooper Young, Jr. The Military Academy motto of “Duty, Honor, Country” became a lifelong pledge of faith exemplified by the descend­ants of the Young family for years to come.