

## Murder Most Fowl:

# a centuries-spanning true story of teaching, vengeance, and several ducks, to which is appended an original role-playing game of the highest historical accuracy

Justine Meberg

United States Military Academy AP

Teaching History 48(1)

DOI: 10.33043/TH.48.1.106-124

© 2023 Meberg.

Distributed with CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 License.

I might have fallen in love with teaching for many reasons—the mentoring, the fellowship, the special moments where learning happens—but in the end, it was the ducks. I was in the archives at the United States Military Academy, fitting in dissertation research between classes and meetings with cadets, when I found the letters. In the fall of 1841, five cadets nursing offenses to their honor wrote to Secretary of War John Spencer to protest the Superintendent's alleged abuse of his authority in investigating the disappearance of several ducks. When Major Richard Delafield learned that cadets had stolen the birds from his property, he resolved to find the criminals. But when he began to ask questions, several cadets refused to answer them, citing the potential for self-incrimination.

Cadet Selden explained, “It is generally understood by the members of the Corps, that on, or about the night of the 14th instant two ducks were taken from the vicinity of the Superintendent’s quarters.”<sup>1</sup> Merely because “the head and feathers of one were found near the barracks the crime was laid to the charge of the Corps.” One can only marvel at the confidence of someone who argues to his country’s top military official that finding the carcass of a missing duck outside the barracks was not evidence that the cadets had cooked it for dinner.

The US military today has a phrase for exactly this kind of soldier: the barracks lawyer. The term describes someone who claims (and/or possesses) a thorough knowledge of rules and regulations and attempts to leverage those skills to wriggle themselves or their buddies out of trouble. The young men decided they had a responsibility to speak up. As Cadet Stewart put it,

*It has so seldom happened in the recent history of this academy, that difficulties of sufficient importance to be referred to the decision of the War Department have arisen between the Superintendent and the Cadets; that I hesitated some time, before availing myself of the privilege granted to me in the 139th Art. Academic Regulations, but the course pursued by Major Delafield in the case which I am about to submit to your consideration, has been such, that I think it a duty which I owe both to myself and my fellow Cadets, to hesitate no longer.*

Stewart described the facts of the case.

*A short time since and while I was ‘orderly’ of my room, one of the Assistant Instructors of Tactics entered my quarters and asked me, if any poultry had been cooked there on a certain night? As cooking in the barracks is forbidden by the Academic Regulations, and the question therefore being such as might have caused me by answering it, to report myself, I declined doing so. A day or two subsequently the same gentleman informed me that the Superintendent had given him directions to refer the question to me again. In the meantime however, I learned that Major Delafield, had lost some ducks of a very valuable species, and that he suspected the Corps of Cadets of having taken them; whence I concluded the object of his asking such a question to be, to ascertain the truth of his suspicions. As I thought in that case, that his question amounted to an accusation, and as I did not believe he had a right to require me to answer, when by doing so I might have given him sufficient reason to accuse one openly, of such a crime and as, moreover, the power of directing an inquiry such as he was then prosecuting, belongs not to Major Delafield, but to the President of the United States.*

In grave language—its grandiosity matched only by its sense of moral outrage—cadets gave rein to their

---

<sup>1</sup> “Letter to the Secretary of War, the Honorable John C. Spencer,” in *Adjutant Letter Book, Volume 1, 2 April 1838 to 30 October 1845* (West Point, New York: United States Military Academy, 1841), 118–23. The letters (five in total) to Spencer are recorded in the letter book in the following order and dated as follows: Selden, 24 October 1841; McLean, 02 November; Benjamin, 24 October; Chadbourne, 29 October; and Stewart, undated.

arguments in a series of what appear to be pre-coordinated talking points.

*It appears that some person or persons secretly took from the premises of the Supdt. some private property (several fowls) on or about the night of the 15th instant. For the purpose of detecting the offender or offenders the Supdt. availed himself of the 215th paragraph Acad. Regs. by placing a construction upon it which in my opinion and in that of every one whom I have consulted on the subject is no less novel than arbitrary.*  
-Cadet Eugene McLean

*In civil or a military court, a prisoner is not required to criminate himself, and he is always supposed innocent until proved guilty. Am I then as a Cadet to be denied the privilege which the Constitution of the U.S. guarantees to me as a Citizen?... I solemnly protest against his assuming such an inquisitioned [sic] right, a right never before assumed in the Mil. Acad. and one evidently hostile to the spirit of all free institutions. I make this protest in no capricious or contentious spirit, but conceive it to be a duty I have to myself to resist as far as possible all encroachments on my privileges as a Cadet, and a citizen of the U.S.*  
-Cadet Henry Selden

*I believe that he has arrogated a power which has no legitimate existence in this country as the assumption of which is in violation of the 92nd Article of War; that his proceedings in this case were highly inquisitorial and hostile to the discipline of the Corps and pernicious to the morals of the Cadets, especially with respect to a regard for truth, and averse to the formation of that manliness and independence of character, and the inculcation of those high principles and that pride of spirit which are essential to the Soldier.*  
-Cadet Calvin Benjamin

*He has it in his power to compel us to accuse ourselves; which I do not believe can be done anywhere else, or by any other person in the United States.*  
-Cadet Alexander Stewart

*I protest against this proceeding as eminently unjust, unprecedented, and inquisitorial as directly opposed to the spirit of our free institutions, to the principle of common justice and to the 92nd Art. Of War framed to protect those under military rule from unusual inquisitorial action. To give up the right of keeping our misdeeds to ourselves were to yield all freedom and put unheard of power into the hands of superiors.*  
-Cadet Theodore Lincoln Chadbourne

It just so happened that I was, that very semester, teaching a class on the shifting relationship between the US Army and American society, so I got to work on a lesson plan.

The class was HI101, Army of the Republic: Leading Citizen Soldiers. West Point freshmen, known as plebes, take it their first semester. Because it was a required course, my students were a cross-section of the general student population at the United States Military Academy (USMA). The Corps of Cadets includes representatives from every state and US territory. It is about three-quarters men and one-quarter women. More than one-third identify as minorities, and around one in eight cadets is a first-generation college student.<sup>2</sup> My cadets would play participants in the scenario, and those acting as the five letter writers would seek to convince the Secretary of War to take their desired course of action.<sup>3</sup> Potential outcomes included punishing or dismissing the cadets involved,

<sup>2</sup> HI101 entered the curriculum in 2019. It inaugurates a four-year program of engagement with what it means to be a leader of character in the US Army that culminates with MX400, Officership, a capstone course. The figures in this paragraph reflect the profiles for the Classes of 2023, 2024, 2025, and 2026. Office of Institutional Research, "Class Profile" *United States Military Academy West Point*, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.westpoint.edu/about/west-point-staff/g5/institutional-research/class-profiles>.

<sup>3</sup> I developed the lesson format on my own but have since learned more about role-playing systems designed for classroom use such as Reacting to the Past. For more on these games, see: Mark Christopher Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Harvard University Press, 2014). For the results of research into the value of these teaching methods, see: Jan L. Plass, Bruce D. Homer, and Charles K. Kinzer, "Foundations of Game-Based Learning," *Educational Psychologist* 50, no. 4 (2015): 258–83; Meihua Qian and Karen R. Clark, "Game-Based Learning and 21st Century Skills: A Review of Recent Research," *Computers in Human Behavior* 63 (2016): 50–58.

punishing the Superintendent, taking no action, or changing USMA regulations.

Those were interesting classes. They included hasty crime scene sketches, fiery oratory, and a mix of verdicts. Some classes punished the Supe, and others found the cadets in the wrong. This very silly case produced big questions. We talked about what honor meant to the letter writers. We considered how their conception of it compared to ours. We asked how our responses to the documents revealed our views of officership today and considered what it meant, then and now, to be an officer as opposed to a civilian.

One student researched John Spencer and discovered that a year after the cadets sent their letters, the captain of the *USS Somers* executed Spencer's son, a midshipman, after the ship's officers convicted him of mutiny. The young Philip Spencer and his compatriots intended to take control of the ship to become pirates. The case generated public outcry and a consensus on the need to educate naval officers, which allowed Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft to establish the US Naval Academy.<sup>4</sup> We talked about how knowing that changed how we interpreted cadet resistance.

Likewise, in the years that followed, the cadets were no strangers to violence. During the Mexican-American War a few years later, Lieutenant Chadbourne died fighting in the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, one of the war's earliest US casualties. Lieutenant Benjamin died assaulting Mexico City. Selden, too, fought in Mexico and then spent much of his army career fighting the so-called Indian Wars. He campaigned against the Navajo, Comanche, and Kiowa before dying of illness in 1865 at Fort Union, New Mexico. McLean and Stewart fought for the Confederacy, becoming generals.<sup>5</sup> Did knowing these outcomes revise our opinions?

Later that academic year, cadets from West Point's oldest club, the Theater Arts Guild and Dialectic Society, volunteered to perform the letters as monologues for a short video—yes, a duckumentary.<sup>6</sup> The club began in 1816 as the Amosophic Society and combined with several other groups in 1837 to become the Dialectic Society. The 2021 cadets wore the same full-dress uniforms as their counterparts in 1841, still made by hand with cadet gray wool and covered in rows of distinctive spherical buttons.<sup>7</sup> It was a deeply personal piece of living history. During our best moments, an arc of historical empathy crackled across one hundred and eighty years.<sup>8</sup> West Point still enshrines honor as a cardinal value. Cadets still complain about the rules.

The fate of Delafield's ducks not only provides evidence of our earliest barracks lawyers. It also offers proof that illicit cooking is one of West Point's longest-standing traditions. In my cadet years, there were covert George Foreman grills, concealed hot plates, and hidden Crockpots. Now there are probably Instant Pots and air fryers. After our role-playing lesson, some of my students later told me about holiday food they made, special dinners and baked treats to share with friends. Perhaps this act of community, breaking the rules to feed your comrades in arms, meant something more as pandemic restrictions wrapped cadet life in increasing layers of restriction, isolating them from contact with much of the outside world.

People used these things in the service of others and as tokens of friendship. In discussing this piece with a friend, I learned that he and his roommate hatched a plan to raise chickens in Pershing Barracks: "There are so many cabinets and weird cupboards in Pershing. You can hide anything there." Every graduate has a story like that. Others conjured homemade chilis, pancake breakfasts, or kettles of tea. I like to imagine that someone had

---

4 John V. Quarstein, "Mutiny at Sea: Death and Destruction on USS Somers," *The Mariners' Museum and Park*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.marinersmuseum.org/2022/12/mutiny-at-sea-death-and-destruction-on-uss-somers/>.

5 George Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy* (New York: J. Miller, 1879), 46, 47, 66, 82, 93.

6 James L. Morrison Jr., *"The Best School in the World" West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1986), 75–76.

7 "Fact Sheet," Directorate of Public Affairs & Communications, *West Point Cadet Uniforms*, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.westpoint.edu/about/public-affairs/news/fact-sheets>.

8 For more on using games and role-playing to teach historical empathy, see: C. Edward Watson and Thomas Chase Hagood, *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Karen Schrier, *We the Gamers: How Games Teach Ethics and Civics* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Active Learning Practices} (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

an Easy Bake oven, pumping out tiny cakes for birthdays (something I did as a platoon leader in Iraq).

My secret appliance was a rice cooker, which I still have. I bought it at the Post Exchange. It fit perfectly into the lower left drawer of my standard issue desk, which was meant for hanging file folders but accommodated the device's dimensions as though made for it. I never had cause to kill any ducks to make my dinner—such are the conveniences of the modern world—but I once brought a bag of apples picked that day in a Hudson Valley orchard back to my room and cooked them down into applesauce.

Graduates invoke a Long Gray Line that stretches in solemn reverence across the centuries, blessed by institutional authority. Yet, these secret meals are also a part of West Point's legacy. Cadets have always broken rules to take care of one another, always bedeviled the administration, always balanced mischief and sincerity. That is as it should be. In this spirit, I developed a simple role-playing game (included as an appendix to this essay) so that readers can explore this odd bit of history for themselves. Rather than seeing things from the vantage point of cadets, players are ducks on a quest for revenge.

Did Spencer respond to the letters? The answer may lie waiting in the archives. As for Delafield, some historians of West Point today might recall his early Superintendency, but most West Pointers know him for the place that bears his name.

Delafield Pond.

## Appendix: Murder Most Fowl, the Game

**How to Play.** This game draws on Dungeons & Dragons. The person leading the game, the Duck Master (DM), describes the environment. The players communicate what they want to do, and roll a 20-sided die (a d20). Using the result of that roll, the DM describes what happens.<sup>9</sup> If a player rolls well (that is, a high number), they are more likely to succeed. If a player rolls poorly (a low number) they may fail. A roll of 1 is a critical failure. The player will fail spectacularly. A roll of 20 is a critical success. The player will be extraordinarily successful. Ducks have five different abilities. They are constitution, dexterity, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma. Different ducks are better or worse at certain things, so they have different scores for each ability. Therefore, the role sheet for each duck includes modifiers. A charismatic but foolish duck could have a +2 modifier for charisma, but a -2 modifier for wisdom. If that duck wants to charm someone, they get to add +2 to their roll, giving them a higher chance of success, but if that duck wants to apply wisdom, say to perceive whether cadets are nearby, they subtract -2 from their roll, meaning they are more likely to fail. Each one-page role sheet has the basic information a player needs to participate. Players should *not* read past their role sheet. The final pages of the game are *for the DM only* and have secret information such as the identities of the guilty cadets.

**Easter eggs.** There are easter eggs spread across locations in the game. When players are nearby, they notice the egg. Each easter egg grants its finder (not the group) a special, temporary ability.

**Mission.** Find the guilty. The year is 1841. The place, the United States Military Academy at West Point. And you are a vengeful duck. On October 14th under the cover of a moonless midnight cadets snuck into the Superintendent's garden and duck-napped a sweet drake and a little hen. You fear the worst. The Supe, Major Richard Delafield, is certain the cadets killed and ate them. It should have been a cold-cut case, but the cadets refuse to answer his questions, and military justice is not all that it is quacked up to be. Your goal is to identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like. Will you grant forgiveness or exact retribution? Are your yearnings to punish your kin's captors a flight of fancy? Will the guilty duck the truth? Or will you see their geese cooked? Find out as your quest takes wing.<sup>10</sup>

**Who you are.** You are one of the earliest Cayuga ducks, an American breed recently domesticated from wild stock. Your plumage is black with iridescent green, much like the feathers on the cadets' dress hats. Your bills, legs, and feet are black. Your eyes are dark brown. Just a year ago, in 1840, a breeder purchased some of your ilk in Dutchess County, New York, a few miles across the river from your home, and brought them to Cayuga County farther upstate—hence the name.<sup>11</sup> You do not know this. You consider yourself to be Delafield's Ducks. He raised you from ducklings and maintained a pleasant area for you in the garden. You like to explore your highland home, full of mountains and valleys, streams flowing down to a mighty river, but you always return. You like to eat dandelions, clover, and bugs.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast Publishing, 2014), 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Colonel Retd. Ray Kimball, who developed many of these puns.

<sup>11</sup> "Cayuga Duck," The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, accessed March 12, 2023, <http://albc-usa.org/cpl/waterfowl/cayuga.html>. I chose this breed because the cadet letters refer to the ducks as belonging to "a very valuable species," and in 1841 the ducks soon to be known as Cayuga Ducks were a new breed that emerged from the Hudson Valley at exactly the right time for this story. Stewart, "Letter to the Secretary of War, the Honorable John C. Spencer." It is an interesting coincidence that the black, iridescent plumage of the Cayuga Duck is a close match for the cadet shako, known as the tar bucket, a hat worn with the cadet full dress uniform that features a plume of iridescent black feathers. However, the hat never actually included duck feathers, and today's tar buckets use rooster feathers.

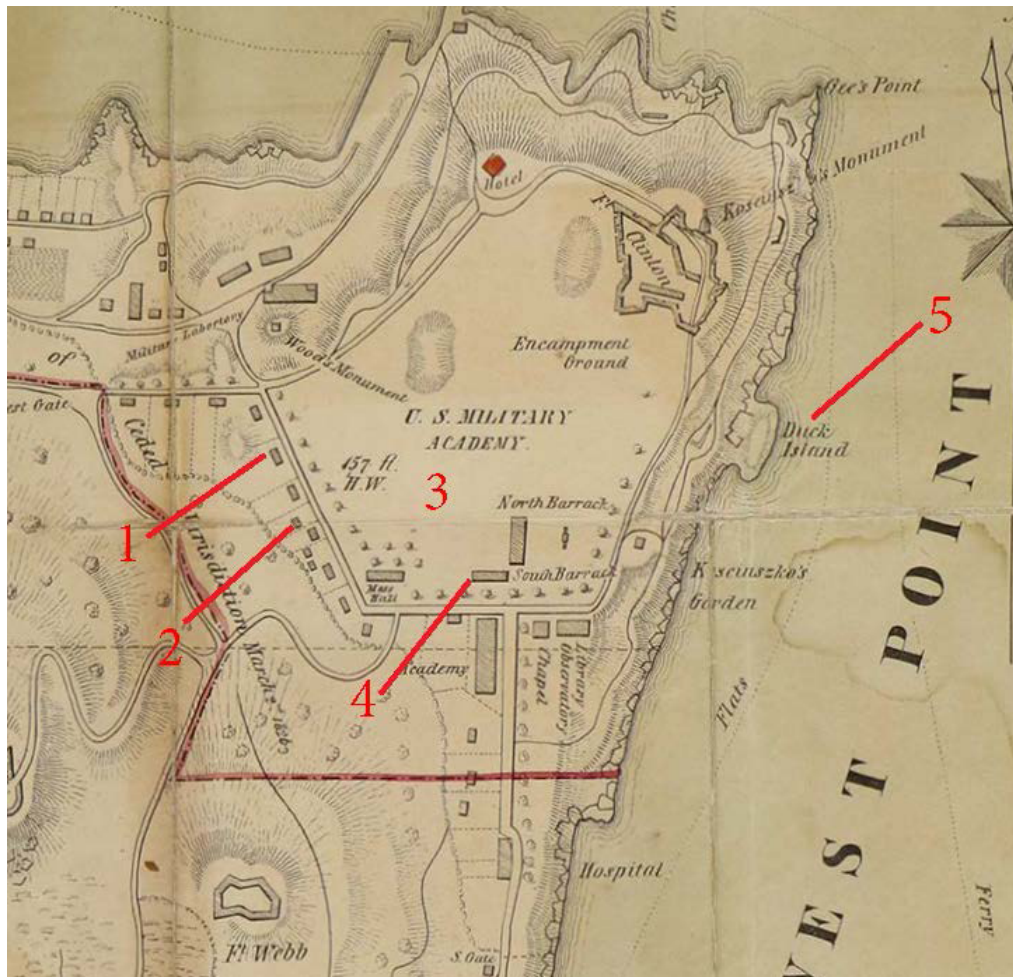


Figure 1: This is a historical map of West Point from 1844. Courtesy of the West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy.<sup>12</sup>

### Locations

1. **The Supe's House:** Ducks can go into the Supe's house, but they must avoid Delafield himself so he does not shoo them outside. The ducks suspect there are clues in the study.
2. **The Thompson Dining Hall.** Ducks can listen for clues that help identify the guilty cadets.
3. **The Plain.** Another location where ducks can interact with NPCs.
4. **The Barracks.** If it is night, the cadets are there, if day, there are few or no humans present.
5. **Duck Island.** On this secluded island, the ducks can regroup and interact with wild ducks.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Hutchins Colton, "Map of West Point" (New York: Endicott and Company, 1844), West Point Museum, Art Collection. I confirmed these locations by cross-referencing the Endicott map with Cracker's *Illustrated History*, which is a useful reference for anyone interested in how West Point changed over time: Theodore J. Cracker, *The Illustrated History of West Point* (West Point, New York: The Association of Graduates, 1991), *Map of West Point, 1833-1865*.

## Role Sheets

DM assigns roles at random, perhaps by having players roll a d8 (a dice with 8 sides) because there are 8 possible ducks. Each player should be a different duck. Role sheets are mostly the same from duck to duck, with small variations in modifiers, so that different ducks are good at different things. Also, females (hens) can lay eggs, while males (drakes) cannot.

### Name: Magret, drake, 7 lbs

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

+2	Constitution
-1	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-2	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
+1	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
0	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

### Powers

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.

### Roll a d20 to:

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: Mrs. Duckfire, hen, 7 lbs, +1 on persuasion**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

+1	Constitution
-1	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-2	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
-1	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
+3	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.
- Lay Egg: Females can lay 1 egg per long rest. Eggs are black when you lay them and lighten to pale green-blue over time.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.



**Name: Release the Quacken, hen, 6 lbs, +1 on stealth**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

-3	Constitution
+2	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
+1	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
0	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
0	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.
- Lay Egg: Females can lay 1 egg per long rest. Eggs are black when you lay them and lighten to pale green-blue over time.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: Mr. Duckles, drake, 8 lbs**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

+3	Constitution
-2	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
+1	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
0	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
-2	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: Drake, drake, 7 lbs, +1 on performance checks**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

0	Constitution
+1	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-2	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
-2	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
+3	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: Lady Featherington, hen, 6 lbs, +1 deception checks**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

0	Constitution
+1	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-1	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
-3	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
+3	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.
- Lay Egg: Females can lay 1 egg per long rest. Eggs are black when you lay them and lighten to pale green-blue over time.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: Duckworth, drake, 8 lbs**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

+1	Constitution
+2	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-1	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
0	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
-1	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

**Name: The Befouler, hen, 7 lbs, +1 on befouling the waters, as described below in powers**

**Mission:** Identify the guilty cadets. Once you discover that information, you can act on it however you like.

**Hit points:** You have 6 hit points. If you fail a dangerous task, the DM can have you roll for damage. You can regain 1 hit point if you spend 1 hour eating bugs and/or plants. If you reach zero hit points, you die.

**Modifiers:** add this number to your d20 roll.

+2	Constitution
0	Dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth)
-1	Intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion)
+1	Wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival)
-2	Charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion)

You are not strong. You are a duck. No strength checks.

**Powers**

- Move. You can waddle or fly as much as you want unless restrained.
- Lay Egg: Females can lay 1 egg per long rest. Eggs are black when you lay them and lighten to pale green-blue over time.

**Roll a d20 to:**

- Quack (charisma): Your roll determines the volume and tenor of your quack in accordance with your intent.
- Muck Up (constitution): You create an instantaneous and horrible brown muck for square footage equal to your roll.
- Befoul the Waters (constitution): You ruin a surface area with square footage equal to your roll. In an enclosed body of water (bathtub to very small pond) this effect lingers for several days. In a large or fast-moving one, it lasts minutes to hours at the DM's discretion.

### Duck Master (DM) Only

The game establishes the minimum context necessary to play along with some historical vignettes and figures to add detail. The DM determines everything else. Do the players want to know whether it is day or night? You decide. If you want to add uncertainty, you can try rolling a die to determine an outcome. For instance, you can say an even-numbered roll means it is day, and an odd-numbered roll means it is night. You can determine whether a player succeeds in an action by using the difficulty class table below. If you decide the task is easy, then the player only needs a 10 or higher. If you believe a task is difficult, they need a 20, and so on. You can use physical dice or virtual ones.

**Difficulty Class (DC).** The DM assigns a DC for tasks based on the numbers below.

Difficulty	The player must roll this number or higher to succeed.
Very easy	5
Easy	10
Moderate	15
Hard	20

**The Cadets:** The Corps of Cadets includes about 200 young men, but there are only 5 cadet suspects in the game. Each cadet has 16 hit points. They have no modifiers, and use straight d20 rolls for constitution, strength (acrobatics), dexterity (acrobatics, sleight of hand, stealth), intelligence (arcana, history, investigation, nature, religion), wisdom (animal handling, insight, medicine, perception, survival), and charisma (deception, intimidation, performance, persuasion). The DM provides information on the guilt or innocence of cadets through NPCs. If the ducks engage the cadets in combat, the cadets can make a single unarmed strike or a single attack with a cadet sword per turn.

**Cadet sword:** +3 to hit, reach 5 ft one target, 1d6 piercing damage. +3 to hit means that you roll a d20 and add 3 to the result. If the duck tries to get out of the way, the player rolls a d20 for the applicable skill (say, acrobatics to dodge the attack). If the cadet's roll is higher than the duck's, the cadet hits, at which point you calculate damage. 1d6 means you roll 1 standard die with 6 sides. That number is how much damage the duck takes. Subtract that amount from the duck's total hit points.

**Unarmed strike:** +0 to hit, reach 5ft, one target, 1d4 bludgeoning damage.

**Theodore Lincoln Chadbourne (Graduate #1181).** Chadbourne is not guilty. He just loves an underdog, saw his chance to challenge the Supé's authority, and shot his shot.

**Calvin Benjamin (Graduate #1120).** Benjamin is not guilty. He is Chadbourne's best friend and very loyal.

**Henry R. Selden (Graduate #1197).** Selden did not capture or kill the ducks, but he knows who did, and he ate some of the duck dinner.

**Eugene McLean (Graduate #1157).** Mclean is guilty. He killed the drake.

**Alexander P. Stewart (Graduate #1122).** Stewart is guilty. He killed the hen.

## Locations and Non-Player Characters (NPCs)

**Location 1:** The Supe's House. Ducks can go into the Supe's house, but they must avoid Delafield so he does not shoo them outside. The ducks suspect that the study contains clues. The house, known as Quarters 100, dates to 1820. It is a three-story house with a basement and four chimneys. The ducks are mostly interested in the first floor, which has four rooms. As you enter the front door, there are two connected rooms on the right and two connected rooms on the left.<sup>13</sup> For simplicity's sake, tell players the parlor is on the right and the study is on the left.

**NPC present:** Major Richard Delafield, Superintendent. Delafield loves the ducks and treats them with kindness, but if he sees he will gently move them outside. Roll a d4 to determine Delafield's location (1 = first floor, 2 = second floor, 3 = third floor, 4 = not home). If the ducks can sneak into his study, they will find Delafield's list of the 5 cadets he suspects: Chadbourne, Benjamin, Selden, McLean, and Stewart. On an intelligence roll of 10 or higher, they notice a note in the margins that reads "I believe Cadet Selden knows more than he has said."

**Location 2:** The Barracks. Ducks can search for information in the barracks about five cadets who may have been involved with the duck-napping. There are two sets of barracks, South Barracks and North Barracks, both labeled on the map. For the sake of simplicity, South Barracks is the only one in play for this game. It is a long, narrow, three-story stone building made of gray granite with a slate roof. It has 48 rooms that house 2 cadets each. Each cadet room has 2 iron-frame beds with trunks underneath for storage, as well as books, muskets, bayonets, swords, and miscellaneous other items.<sup>14</sup>

**NPCs present:** If it is night, the cadets are there, if day, there are few or no humans. All of the five named cadets—McLean, Stewart, Chadbourne, Benjamin, and Selden—live in the barracks.

**Location 3: The Thompson Dining Hall.** This simple restaurant, an extension of the Thompson women's boarding house, serves cadets who want to eat outside of the mess hall. Ducks can listen for clues that help identify the guilty cadets.

**NPCs present: Souverine, Amelia, Mary, and up to 12 cadets.** Mrs. Amelia Thompson, the widow of Captain Alexander Thompson (a Revolutionary War veteran who died in 1809) established the dining hall, but her adult daughter and namesake Amelia runs it these days. Amelia hired a woman of color to run the Thompson dining room. Souverine is from Haiti and speaks French and English. She works as the maitresse d'hotel and chief waiter. One cadet wrote that after he missed dinner and wandered into the Thompson dining room, Souverine generously fed him an "abundant supper."<sup>15</sup> She has a great sense of humor and engages customers in lively, witty conversation. About a dozen cadets at a time had permission from the academy to eat at Mrs. Thompson's boarding house, so if the ducks arrive during a meal, up to 12 cadets may be present. Cadets chosen for this privilege relished the home-like and relaxed atmosphere and the escape from mess hall food. This became such a highly prized honor that each graduating cadet passed on his seat to a chosen successor.<sup>16</sup>

---

13 Sherman Fleek, "Quarters 100: The House That Thayer Built" (West Point, New York, April 2020), 23, 25.

14 Theodore J. Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 74, 121.

15 George Cullum and George Ramsay, "Recollections of the Cadet Life of George D. Ramsay," in *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy, 1802-1867*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868), 615-17. Ramsay describes Souverine as he found her in 1814. I assume for the sake of the story that she still worked for the Thompsons in 1841.

16 Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History*, 89-90, 113, 138-39.



Amelia's widowed sister-in-law Mary Thompson (née Nexsen) also resides here. Mary's husband Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Ramsey Thompson died in combat during the Second Seminole War on Christmas Day, 1837. While fighting at the front of his regiment during the Battle of Okeechobee in Florida, the Seminoles shot Thompson twice. Thompson continued to advance with his soldiers, but a third shot mortally wounded him. He propped himself against a nearby tree, still facing the enemy, and shouted his last words to his soldiers: "Keep steady men. Charge the hammock. Remember the regiment to which you belong!"<sup>17</sup> The word hammock refers to a small hill covered in dense vegetation, a typical terrain feature of the region. News of this misfortune prompted Mary to memorialize her husband. Her tireless work eventually secured a monument to his memory in the West Point cemetery with the inscription "This monument is the joint tribute of his affectionate widow and admiring regiment."<sup>18</sup>

**Location 4:** The Plain. This is another location where ducks can interact with NPCs. The Plain is a flat, grassy area where the cadets practice marching and conduct other military training.

**NPCs present:** Any NPC can be in the vicinity of the Plain at the DM's discretion.

**Location 5:** Duck Island. This small rock is a real island that happens, by glorious coincidence, to make a lot of sense in this game. It is a secluded place where the ducks can regroup. If the DM wants, they can describe a small duck-built altar (maybe a cairn of rocks, or a ring of driftwood) at the island's center, which contains the Giant Duck easter egg (the most powerful easter egg, described last in the list below).

**NPCs present:** Players can interact with wild ducks and/or other animals here.

---

<sup>17</sup> John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967), 228.

<sup>18</sup> Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy*, 123; The Historical Marker Database, *Lt. Col. Alex. R. Thompson U. States 6th Infantry*, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=216888>; Morrison Jr., "The Best School in the World" *West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866*, 78.

## Easter Eggs.

The DM places each egg in a location from the game. If a duck passes within 10 ft of an easter egg, they find it. There are 6 eggs and 5 locations in total.

**Easter Egg: Seductive.** Humans find the player to be the most beautiful duck they have ever seen. +4 on charisma checks for 1 hour.

**Easter Egg: Eggcellent.** If a female, the player gains the ability to shoot out eggs at the velocity of artillery. Player can fire 1d6 of 3-egg bursts before returning to normal laying capabilities.

**Easter Egg: What the Duck Was That?** Your iridescent black feathers turn matte black, and you gain +4 on stealth checks for 1 hour.

**Easter Egg: Undead Sheep Army.** The ducks gain the allegiance of a flock of ghostly sheep murdered by cadets decades ago. The sheep must fulfill their need for vengeance so that their souls can journey to Baaa-lhalla, the afterlife. According to then-cadet George Ramsay, in 1816, a mess hall steward named Divins kept a flock of sheep on the Plain. The sheep kept the grass short and Divins fed the cadets mutton. But the cadets quickly tired of it. Ramsay wrote that “On one occasion, as we marched into dinner and discovered on the tables the ever-present mutton, we were seized with a feeling of disgust, and without preconcerted action marched round the tables and out of doors. This muttonous maneuver was construed into mutinous by Captain Partridge,” then the Superintendent, “who was always on hand, and caused us to return to the mess hall, when some compromise was made with the steward, and bread, butter, and molasses substituted as a peace-offering. This flock of sheep held the undisputed pasturage of the Plain, and it was a lucky straggler found near the precipitous cliffs that escaped being hurled into the depths below. In this war of extermination, the cadets became expert, and the flock was thus more than decimated.”<sup>19</sup>

**Easter Egg: Spirit of Margaret Corbin.** Player channels the spirit of Margaret Corbin to triple their hit points to 18 for one hour. They also gain advantage on all actions taken in combat for one hour. That means they get to roll twice and choose the higher roll. Margaret was a Revolutionary War heroine. She lived out her years at West Point, a poor woman known for swearing and drinking, much like the other soldiers who fought and won the Revolution. The player channels her rough manners and fighting spirit. Camp followers performed important military labor like laundry, cooking, sewing, and nursing. Like Margaret, many camp followers served alongside husbands who had enlisted to fight. Margaret’s husband John was an artilleryman. By November of 1776, the Continental Army had suffered defeats at the Battles of Long Island and White Plains. Several artillery batteries remained in possession of Fort Washington, on the northern tip of Manhattan, and continued to fight. On November 16th the British attacked. John took up his position as an assistant gunner, with Margaret beside him. When British fire killed the gunner, John took over the cannon and Margaret stepped in as assistant gunner. When British fire killed John, Margaret took over the cannon and continued loading and firing it alone. Grapeshot from a British cannon struck her shoulder, chest, and jaw, and she collapsed. Soldiers rushed her off the front lines and placed her in the care of other camp followers, who tended her wounds as the battle raged. After the Battle of Fort Washington, the British paroled wounded soldiers, including Margaret, who permanently lost the use of her left arm because of her wounds. She made her way to the invalid regiment at West Point, where Congress granted her a veteran’s pension in recognition of her service and sacrifice. She drew rations and clothing from West Point and lived out her life in the village of Highland Falls.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Cullum and Ramsay, “Recollections of the Cadet Life of George D. Ramsay” 618.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence*, version First Vintage Books Edition, February 2006, First Vintage Books Edition, February 2006 (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 60, 138–39, 151. For more on

**Easter Egg: Giant Duck.** Player becomes a giant duck for 1 hour. Stats are comparable to a giant eagle. Armor Class 12, Hit Points 26, Speed 10 ft, fly 80 ft. Modifiers are +3 for strength, +3 dexterity, +1 constitution, -1 intelligence, +2 wisdom, and 0 charisma.

### **Actions.**

- Multiattack. The giant duck makes two attacks, one with its bill and one with its feet.
- Bill. +5 to hit, reach 5 ft, one target, 1d6+3 bludgeoning damage.
- Feet. +5 to hit, reach 5 ft, one target, 1d6+3 slapping damage. Feet make a wet slapping noise when they hit a target. Roll a d20 to determine how embarrassing the slapping noise is. On a roll of 10 or higher, the target takes an additional 1d4 emotional damage.
- Emotional support duck. Costs 2 actions. Duck creates a shimmering, magical shield around a creature that it wishes to protect within 60 ft of it. Attacks against the target have disadvantage until the end of the giant duck's next turn.

### **Ending the Quest**

The quest ends when the ducks find the guilty cadets and carry out a plan based on that information. Whether they expose, fight, or forgive the cadets, the DM can end the story with a final scene where the descendants of Delafield's ducks land on the surface of Delafield Pond one hundred years later, telling stories of their heroic ancestors. The DM can ask players to describe the legends their descendants invoke.