



# **The Father of Virginia Military Institute: A Biography of Colonel J.T.L. Preston, CSA**

*Randolph P. Shaffner*

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The Virginia Military Institute launched an educational revolution when it became the first school in the American South to combine classical and practical courses under an effective system of military discipline. It pioneered free schooling for the poor and exemption from tuition and board in exchange for two years of teaching. It has furnished fully qualified citizen-soldiers for both civilian and military life since before the Civil War. Who first conceived of VMI has been the subject of multiple claims since the school's founding in 1839. Attempting to answer that problem, this biography of Col. J.T.L. Preston unfolds the life of a teacher and soldier, husband and father, who defined the school as it exists today, served Stonewall Jackson as his first adjutant general, married the Poetess of the Confederacy and sired a family whose members bore the stamp of their father's character. Preston is revealed as a man of faith who suffered "anguish beyond remedy" under "the bloody, remorseless hand of war," which "tore from his heart what, to him, was more precious than liberty, home, or anything but heaven."

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