



DAVID HUNTER

The General Who Burned VMI

By the Hon. Edward A. Miller, Jr. '50A

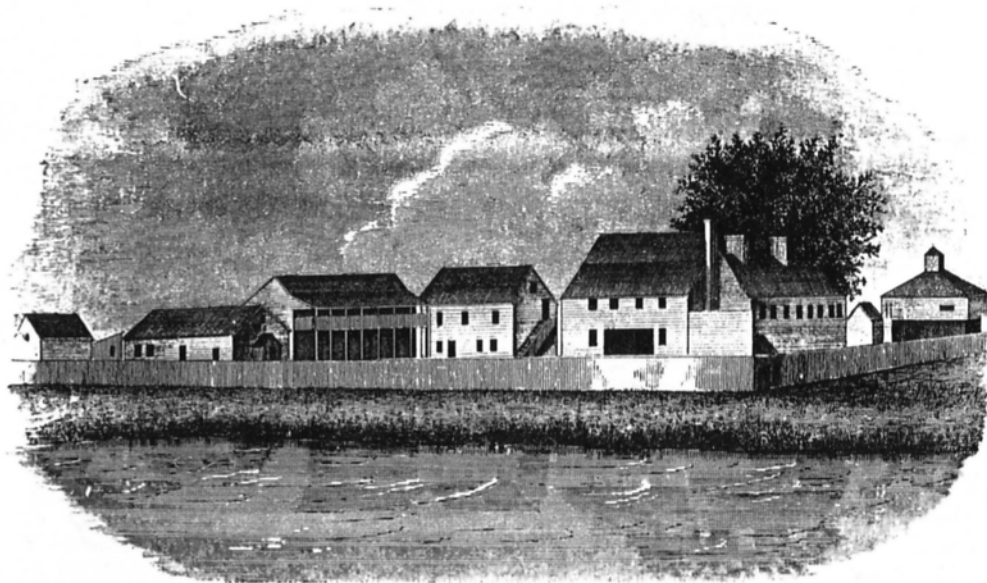
VMI men know who Maj. Gen. David Hunter was, but they know little about him beyond the fact that he burned the barracks in 1864, a month after the Battle of New Market. Southern lore has it that Hunter was a traitor to Virginia and that he made merciless war against his native state. The argument continues that he was therefore defective in character, a coward, and capable of any sort of treachery. Col. William Couper '04, VMI's long-time historian, obliquely gave this viper some humanity, however, because he said that Hunter, out of remorse for his wartime atrocities, shot himself long after the Civil War.

The old general was in his eighty-third year when he died of heart failure in Washington in 1886. His life as a soldier spanned a large part of the nation's formative years, and he had an important and sometimes pivotal role in American military and sometimes political affairs. Maj. Gen. David Hunter's Civil War service was filled with controversy, and he is still seen in many parts of the South as a heartless barbarian, who did not share a more common romantic view of war. Part of the criticism of him was based on a belief that he betrayed Virginia roots, and it appears that Hunter is remembered for the case the South made against him. The historian can conjecture that his reputation was a victim of attempts by supporters of the "Lost Cause" to use romantic myth to find nobility in the terrible sacrifices the rebels paid for secession and to blame the loss on villains.

Gen. Hunter was capable of excesses in the performance of his duty, but these did not exceed those of other leaders on both sides in the war. His real crime in the eyes of the South was that he believed strongly — long before it was accepted even in the North — that the real cause of the war was slavery. He had been an abolitionist before the war when such a stand in the Army made no friends and had few supporters. To those believing him a Virginian, Hunter's apparent apostasy was all the worse, but he was not a son of the South. He was born in 1803 at Princeton, New Jersey, where his father was a clergyman connected with the college. Rev. Hunter had been

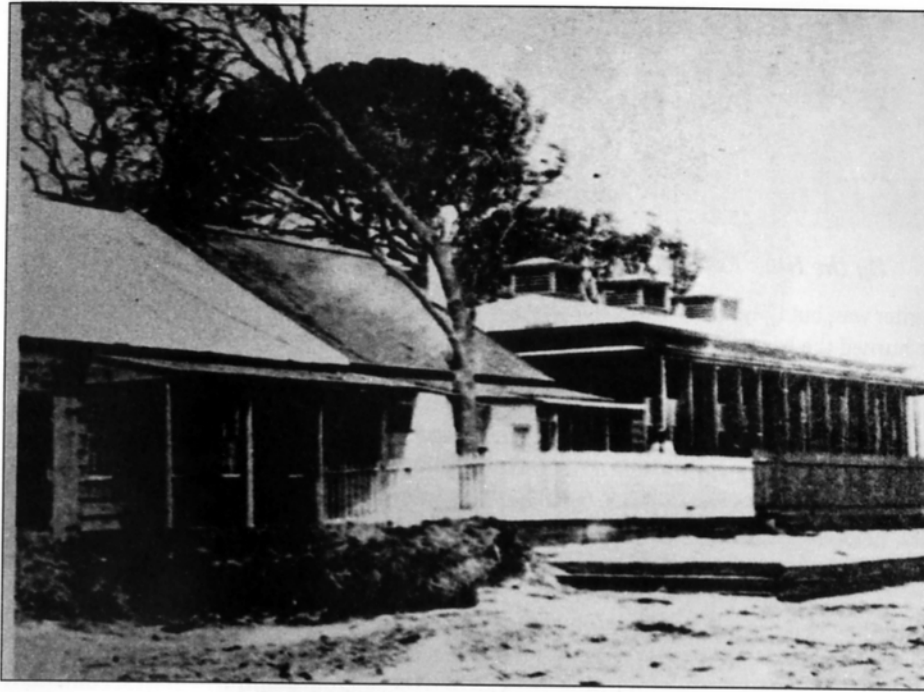
a chaplain in the Revolution and his wife, Mary Stockton, was the daughter of a signer of the Declaration of Independence for which crime he was imprisoned and ill-treated by the British. Thus, Hunter's family tradition was intensely patriotic, at least that of the Jersey branch. Another Hunter family, related distantly but closely associated on a regular basis, lived in the lower Shenandoah Valley, generally in Jefferson County near Martinsburg in what was then Virginia.

Rev. Hunter, short of money despite his wife's family's wealth, accepted a job as chaplain of the Washington Navy Yard when David and his siblings were very young. Because he had limited means, he sought a way of educating his sons whom he had been tutoring. In 1818, he obtained an appointment to West Point from Secretary of War John C. Calhoun for young David but not for another son thought too young. Confusing David's first two years at the military academy was yet another David Hunter in the same class, this man from the Virginia branch. West Point solved the problem by calling the Jersey man Junior and his slightly older cousin Senior. Cadets, then as now less formal than academy administrators, labeled the two "Little Dave" and "Big Dave." Big Dave left the academy before his second class year for some reason other than failure at academics or excess demerits. Paths of the



Above: First Lt. Hunter was assigned to Fort Dearborn, now the city of Chicago, in 1828 when it was a village with only 24 taxpayers. (Etching from History of Chicago, 1884-85, by Alfred T. Andreas.)

Left: Hunter in the uniform of a cavalry colonel in late spring 1861. The number 1 on the hat is unexplained, but it may have designated the First Dragoons, later the First Cavalry, in which Hunter had served 30 years earlier. (Photo: U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.)



Hunter's South Carolina headquarters at Hilton Head in 1862 and 1863. While at Hilton Head, Hunter organized the first black regiment in the U.S. service and was sentenced to death by Jefferson Davis, a former army associate and friend. (Photo: U.S. Army Military History Institute.)

two Daves would indirectly cross again.

Hunter was an average student at West Point, and he was graduated in 1822 with a commission in the Fifth Infantry Regiment. The new second lieutenant was one of the army's 540 officers. The Fifth was assigned to Fort Snelling on the remote Northwestern frontier, then at the Mississippi River near St. Paul, now Minnesota. The small frontier army spent most of its days building its own quarters, farming for its own support, and keeping white men from encroaching on Indian territory.

Lt. Hunter's service with the Fifth Infantry was mainly routine, but he earned a reputation as a duelist. A challenge to his commanding officer resulted in a court-martial that recommended he be cashiered. Taking note of extenuating circumstances, President John Quincy Adams remitted the penalty, and the young officer returned to his regiment. In 1828, now 1st Lt. Hunter was assigned to Fort Dearborn, site of the future Chicago when it was a rough village with but 24 taxpayers. Here he met Maria Indiana Kinzie, the daughter of the town's first white settler, and the couple, married in 1832, remained devoted to each other — although without children — for the rest of the soldier's long life.

Although there was some native unrest in the Fifth Regiment's area of responsibility, northern Illinois and what is now Wisconsin—one-sided encounters called the Winnebago and Black Hawk "Wars"—Hunter himself was not directly involved, and he was assigned to other regimental garrisons at Green Bay and Portage. Hunter was soon to see field service when he was offered a captain's commission in an elite new mounted regiment, the Dragoons, being organized for duty on the western prairie.

Capt. Hunter was assigned command of a company at Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis, and the regiment commanded by Col. Henry Dodge soon left for Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River. The

march to the fort and the winter spent there were hard on the men and horses, but by June, with the regiment at full strength, the dragoons set out to meet the Pawnee-Picts and Comanche Indians to induce them to sign treaties with Washington and not to interfere with commerce on the Santa Fe Trail.

The mission was carried out, but the regiment was badly used up from the hardships of a march in the extreme heat of summer — not by the Indians who were friendly. The Regiment of Dragoons returned to Fort Gibson and reached its permanent headquarters at Fort Leavenworth on the Missouri River by fall. Sent on another Indian mission, Hunter — and likely Maria — grew dissatisfied with army life, and the captain resigned his commission after 14 years as an officer. He saw opportunity in the booming town of Chicago where his entrepreneurial in-laws were important figures.

In his wife's hometown he engaged in real estate and other trading with a brother-in-law, and he invested in the best hotel in the town. The Panic of 1837 — caused mainly by land speculation — hit Chicago hard, inducing Hunter to seek to return to the army. His cause was solidly backed by Illinois's Whig politicians and the support of War of 1812 hero Gen. Winfield Scott, Henry Clay, and others, and he was recommissioned in a temporary job. He could not secure his old position, but the new one, soon made permanent, was as an additional paymaster with the rank of major.

Stationed at Fort Smith, Arkansas, from 1842 to 1846, Hunter rode the circuit of frontier forts, paying troops as he went. When the independent Texas Republic was accepted into the Union, the frontier army was redeployed into the new state in anticipation of war with Mexico. Paymaster Hunter was posted to San Antonio, and he accompanied Gen. John E. Wool's column which joined with Gen. Zachary Taylor's invading troops near Monterey. Hunter was in that city when the battle of Buena Vista was fought a few miles south in February 1847, one of the outstanding feats of American arms. Major Hunter's duties paying troops in northern Mexico remained the same until after the peace; he was not part of Gen. Scott's decisive Mexico City campaign.

Over the next few years, Hunter remained a paymaster major, serving at New Orleans, Detroit, New York, and finally Fort Leavenworth in 1859. Hunter reached Kansas in a critical time; the struggle between slavery advocates and their opponents was so violent as to label the territory "Bleeding Kansas." The army's role was keeping the peace between the factions, and, unlike the majority of his brother officers, Hunter developed a strong anti-slavery position. This was in keeping with the political stance of his Whig friends in Illinois — who were the core of the new Republican party — and reflected the egalitarian views of the Kinzie family. Nomination for the presidency of Abraham Lin-

coln, an Illinoisan, by the Republicans in 1861 promised national division, and Hunter was strongly on the side of the party that opposed the spread of bondage into new territories. Hearing of plots to assassinate Lincoln should he be elected, Hunter wrote to Lincoln about the rumors, and the two exchanged other correspondence.

After his election, Lincoln asked Maj. Hunter to join him as part of the president-elect's small bodyguard on a two-week ceremonial train journey from Illinois to Washington. In the capital Hunter was assigned command of volunteers defending the White House from expected Virginia assassins reacting to Lincoln's attempt to relieve Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. Hunter and his untrained but politically important militia slept on the East Room carpet until the crisis was eased by the arrival of volunteer regiments from the North.

Lincoln, encouraged by Illinois congressmen and other state officials, appointed Hunter a colonel of cavalry in the regular army, and he was assigned to command a brigade in the Washington defenses. Hunter was elevated to a divisional command and at the war's first battle, Bull Run, was (on his 59th birthday) wounded and carried from the field untainted by incompetence as were other leaders. He was at once made a brigadier and in a few days a major general of volunteers, the fourth senior officer of that rank in the army.

At Lincoln's personal request Hunter agreed to accept an inferior position under Gen. John C. Frémont at St. Louis, but he soon replaced that controversial officer in command and found himself again at Fort Leavenworth heading the Department of Kansas. Hunter complained at once to Lincoln that the posting was too minor for an officer of his rank, and he asked reassignment to a place and position where he could inflict the most damage on enemies of the Union.

Hunter was ordered to command the Department of the South, based at Hilton Head, South Carolina. Here he undertook to impose his own views on the solution of a major issue of the war, slavery. He issued a proclamation declaring all slaves in South

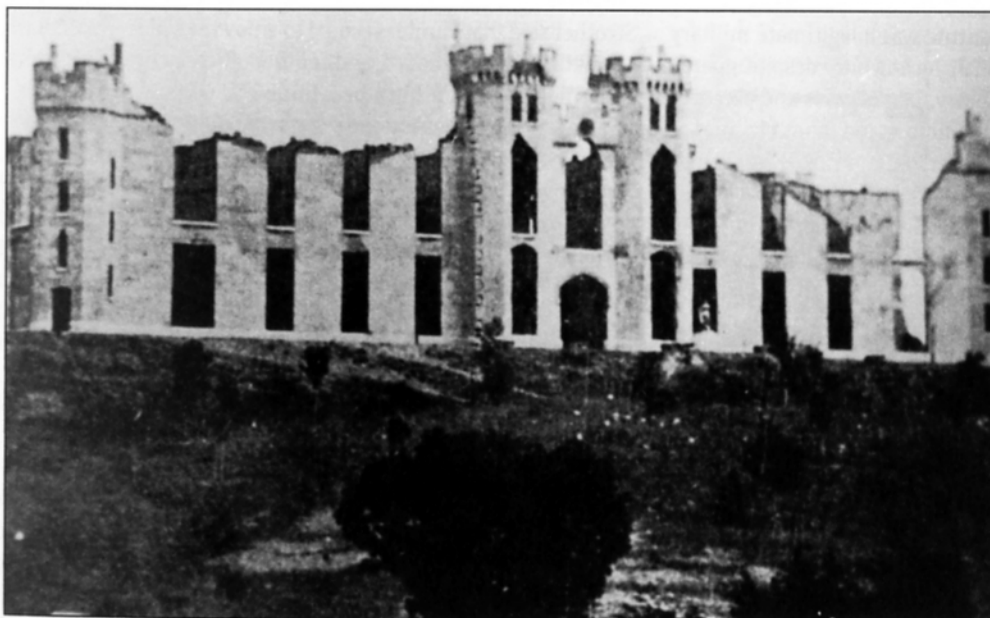
Carolina, Georgia, and Florida — the limits of his command — free, but Lincoln, with a cautious eye on the wavering border states, had to repudiate the action. The general, supposing himself facing overwhelming odds with too few troops, decided that slaves in Union hands should defend their de facto freedom with army duty, and he organized the first black regiment in U.S. service. Although Hunter's initiative was not immediately approved, the black soldier was soon accepted in the army. As a result of his activities giving blacks military status, Hunter was sentenced to death by Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president and a former army associate and friend, and the rebel congress passed legislation likewise calling for capital punishment for Hunter and any white officers captured with black troops.

Hunter, who thought he was not being treated fairly in the South Carolina position, went to Washington seeking a more responsible assignment, but was only asked to preside over the court martial of Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter. Because of the death from yellow fever of his Hilton Head replacement, Hunter was back in South Carolina in January 1863. Complaining again about the size of his command and reception of his ideas about marching through the heart of the South, bringing destruction to slaveowners, and enlisting blacks in the Union army, Hunter was once again relieved in June.

Given minor duties, such as further court-martial presidencies and inspections of remote commands, Hunter was asked by the secretary of war to give his impression of Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who was about to fight the battle for Chattanooga at Missionary Ridge. Hunter spent several weeks with the general who was being considered for overall Union command. He recommended Grant highly, and the two developed a strong personal relationship.

This paid off for Hunter in May 1864 when Grant, now lieutenant general commanding all Union armies, chose him to replace Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel, the inept general who had lost the May 15, 1864, battle of New Market in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Taking over at Cedar Creek ten days later, Hunter was anxious to

prove his military competence in what was an important part of Grant's new and relentless strategy. Ordered to move south in the valley, destroying transportation systems and food supplies on which Gen. Lee's Confederate army opposing Grant heavily depended, Hunter's advance was bothered by small rebel guerrilla bands led by Lt. Col. John S. Mosby and Maj. John H. McNeill. Hunter considered these raiders as outlaws, not soldiers, and he was forced to use heavy escorts to protect his supply lines. In his frustration, Hunter ordered fines of rebel sympathizers and directed the burning of buildings in towns where guerrillas were operating.



The VMI barracks after the statue of Washington was returned in September 1866. (Photo: VMI Archives.)

Hunter's move up the valley was slow, and on June 5 he ran into the first organized Confederate opposition at Piedmont, a village north of his immediate objective, Staunton. At Piedmont, Hunter defeated a somewhat inferior force commanded by Brig. Gen. William E. Jones, who was killed in the action. At Piedmont, most of the same units which had been defeated at New Market avenged their defeat. The victory left open Hunter's advance south, giving him the option of moving on Charlottesville or Lynchburg. The Union army was strengthened considerably by the arrival at Staunton of Brig. Gens. George Crook's and William W. Averell's infantry and cavalry divisions. With his augmented force, Hunter marched on Lexington, intending to attack Lynchburg because it promised to put more pressure on Lee. Arriving at Lexington on June 11, Hunter was opposed by the only organized Confederate unit remaining in the Valley, a 1,500-man cavalry force commanded by Brig. Gen. John McCausland, an 1857 VMI graduate. Resistance was minor, however, and did not involve the Corps of Cadets, which had returned to Lexington only a few days earlier. Outflanked by Averell's crossing of the North (now Maury) River at Rockbridge Springs, McCausland retreated from the town accompanied by the VMI cadets.

Hunter was angered that McCausland chose to endanger the town and its noncombatant inhabitants with useless resistance, but he did not take revenge when Lexington was occupied. Although his artillery had fired on McCausland's positions, no military or civilian casualties resulted. Hunter made his headquarters that Saturday night in the house of the VMI superintendent, then located on the parade ground, while he considered his further moves. He did not order the destruction of VMI or of any other structures that night, but discussed the matter with his officers. It was clear that the Institute was a legitimate military target since it was a state arsenal. Meanwhile, despite guards posted to prevent looting, the library, laboratories and personal possessions of cadets, as well as the library and other facilities at neighboring Washington College, were all thoroughly sacked by soldiers and citizens of the town.

Hunter's staff did not agree on what should be done with VMI. His chief of staff, Col. David Hunter Strother, a distant relative married to Big Dave Hunter's daughter, was in favor of destruction because he thought that the school was a place "where treason was systematically taught." Others saw military factors as more compelling reasons to destroy VMI, and so it was decided to burn the barracks the next morning. The job was put in the hands of the engineer officer, Lt. John R. Meigs, a brilliant West Point graduate. Hunter and his staff repaired to the hill overlooking the campus. Here Hunter was informed that an incendiary flyer had been discovered in which former Virginia governor John Letcher called on all citizens to "arise and slay the foul Yankee invader" by any means. Hunter was incensed at this call for guerrilla warfare, and he ordered Letcher's house also to be destroyed. Letcher himself had left Lexington before the Union forces arrived, leav-



The military commission that tried and convicted the conspirators in the Lincoln assassination. From left, Bvt. Maj. Gen. T.M. Harris, Maj. Gen. David Hunter, Bvt. Maj. Gen. A.V. Kautz, Bvt. Brig. Gen. J.A. Ekin, Maj. Gen. Lew Wallace and the Hon. John A. Bingham. (Photo: U.S. Army Military History Institute.)

ing behind his family in his home, which Hunter had ordered protected the day before.

In total, Hunter's burnings at Lexington were five structures: the barracks, Letcher's house, two sets of VMI faculty quarters, and possibly the cadet hospital. In future years the destroyed structures took on more monumental dimensions, but the real damage was to the library and scientific equipment and specimens (for which VMI was reimbursed years later, the money going to construct Jackson Memorial Hall). Of course, some officers, such as Col. Rutherford B. Hayes, a future president; Capt. Henry A. Du Pont, a future senator; and Lt. Col. Charles G. Halpine, Hunter's adjutant, opposed the destruction. The latter wrote in his diary that he was heartsick to see the Institute destroyed but that he could not change Hunter's decision. Halpine was on the hill to view the spectacle, and he wrote, "How I wish it were over." Strother said that Hunter seemed to enjoy the scene, particularly when the arsenal exploded, and another officer quoted the general as saying, "Doesn't it burn beautifully?"

Seized as a prize of war was the bronze statue of Washington then, as now, located on the south side of barracks. Strother said, "I felt indignant that this effigy should be left to adorn a country whose inhabitants were striving to destroy a government he founded." He recommended that the statue be sent to Wheeling as a trophy for West Virginia, which state's troops made up so much of Hunter's army. Engineer Meigs, charged with the crating and shipping, thought its proper destination was his and Hunter's alma mater, West Point. In the end, the work reached Wheeling, and after the war Strother, for a brief time adjutant general of Virginia (and thus ex officio a member of VMI's Board of Visitors), saw its return.

Hunter delayed his departure from Lexington until supplies could reach him, but he and his officers were growing more and more apprehensive that Gen. Lee would deduce his Lynchburg objective and would send a strong force to oppose the Union army. Proceeding to Buchanan on the 14th, the Union army broke all contact with the North. The army crossed the Blue Ridge Moun-

tains next day via the steep and winding Peaks of Otter road, reaching Liberty (now Bedford) on the 16th. Although he was at the approaches to Lynchburg before the Confederates could muster a strong force to oppose him, Hunter decided (incorrectly) that he was outnumbered, was too far and cut off from his base, and had too little ammunition for a fight. His withdrawal was slow through West Virginia to the Ohio River, a rate of progress and direction that allowed Confederate Gen. Jubal Early to proceed without opposition from Lynchburg and down the valley to the Potomac.

Before Hunter could react, Early crossed into Maryland and appeared before the thin defenses of Washington. Hunter was criticized for not bringing Early to battle and in his frustration engaged in activities that eventually got him relieved. Among these were burning houses of a few rebel sympathizers in West Virginia — two of whom were his own distant relatives — and deporting Maryland citizens accused of disloyalty to behind Confederate lines.

Relieved in August 1864, Hunter complained to Lincoln that he was made a scapegoat but to no avail, for he did not get another command. He was assigned to the White House honor guard for the murdered Lincoln's funeral, and he went on the train returning the late president's body to Illinois. Recalled at Chicago, Hunter was assigned as president of the military commission in Washington that tried and sentenced the conspirators in the assassination. Hunter retired from the army in 1866, and he and Maria spent the rest of their lives in Washington, active to the last and socially acquainted with national Republican figures.

Hunter is remembered in the South for house-burnings and excesses, and it is true that his impetuous nature sometimes caused him to act without due consideration. His military achievements were modest, for he did not command an army corps in a major operation. In all his career he was never fairly accused of dishonesty or cowardice and was admired for his loyalty and kindness to friends and subordinates. Hunter was in advance of Lincoln's administration in freeing slaves, arming the black man,

and promoting bold invasions of the central South, none of which initiatives got immediate support. They did, however, move emancipation forward on the president's agenda, and they showed that the black man made a dependable soldier. Despite a lack of opportunities to perform substantial military deeds and sometimes deserved criticism of his actions, David Hunter was a distinguished soldier who served his nation loyally and well.



**About the Author, Edward A. Miller, Jr. '50A,
and His Latest Book,
*A Biography of Gen. David Hunter***

Miller, who was appointed to the VMI Board of Visitors in 1993, is a researcher and writer who concentrates primarily on contributions made by African-Americans to the nation. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in history from VMI and a master of arts and doctoral degree from the University of Denver. A career Air Force officer, he taught military, modern Far East, and American history at the Air Force Academy. Following his retirement as a lieutenant colonel in 1972, he directed a Washington policy study organization, held political appointments on Capitol Hill and at the Pentagon, and managed a computer consulting firm.

Miller's article, *VMI Men Who Wore Yankee Blue, 1861-1865*, appeared in the spring 1996 issue of the *VMI Alumni Review*. He is the author of *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915*, which was published in 1995 by the University of South Carolina Press. In February 1997 that same press published Miller's 293-page biography of David Hunter, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, which tells the life story of a general who operated on the vanguard of the advance toward emancipation and the enlistment of African-American soldiers. It is from this book that Miller's article herein was adapted by the author.

Though not nearly as well known as other senior Union generals, Hunter participated in signal events of Lincoln's presidency and the Civil War and took advantage of his position to champion the rights of African-Americans. Miller's examination of Hunter's life looks closely at the convictions and controversial actions of a man reviled in the Confederacy and never fully appreciated by the Union.

Though Hunter was significantly more radical in his abolitionist sentiments than Lincoln, the two developed a friendship that lasted until Lincoln's death. Miller details the evolution of their relationship, from their early correspondence to Hunter's leading role in the trial of those accused of Lincoln's assassination. Miller tells of their mutual respect, which prompted Lincoln to appoint Hunter as his escort during his inaugural trip to Washington and as the chief guard of the White House.

Dealing extensively with Hunter's Civil War experience, Miller recounts the general's wounding at Bull Run and leadership of the Department of the South at Hilton Head Island, where he issued an order to free the slaves and attempted to enlist the first African-American Union soldiers. Crediting Hunter with early advocacy of the "hard war" policies for which William Tecumseh Sherman later became famous, Miller evaluates Hunter's command of the Shenandoah Valley and sheds light both on Hunter's seemingly vindictive treatment of rebel sympathizers and on his puzzling retreat in the Shenandoah campaign of 1864.

Lincoln's Abolitionist General is available from the University of South Carolina Press for \$29.95 plus shipping and handling. To order by phone, call 1-800/768-2500 (MasterCard and Visa accepted).



The hanging of four of the Lincoln assassination conspirators, July 7, 1865.
(Photo: Library of Congress.)