David Bates Douglass

- Born 21 March 1790
- 18 Sep 1813: graduated Yale College
- 1 Oct 1813: obtained the commission of a Second Lieutenant of Engineers in the U.S. Army
- Jan 1815-Aug 1820: Assistant Professor of Natural Philosophy, USMA
- Aug 1820-May 1823: Professor and Head of Mathematics Department, USMA
- May 1823-Mar 1831: Professor and Head of Civil and Military Engineering Department, USMA
- 1832-1833: Professor of Natural Philosophy in the University of the City of New York
- 1841-1845: President of Kenyon College
- 1848: Chairman of Mathematics, Hobart College
- Died 21 October 1849, age 59

David Bates Douglass was born in Pompton, New Jersey on 21 March 1790. The iron-mining region in which he grew up was not well provided with schools, but Douglass was well instructed and disciplined by his mother, Sarah, a woman of unusual intellectual gifts. Reverend Samuel Whelpley assisted the family in Douglass’ preparation for college. Thus, Douglass was able to enter the sophomore class at Yale College. He pursued a course in civil engineering and was graduated with high standing on 18 September 1813. As Douglass graduated, engineer officers were in demand as the country was in the midst of its second war with Great Britain. On 1 October 1813, Douglass was accepted and commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Engineers in the United States Army. He was appointed to duty at West Point as commander of sappers and miners, eventually being named commander of the post.

In 1814, Lieutenant Douglass commanded his engineer company on the northern frontier as they participated in the battles of Niagara and Lundy’s Lane. During the siege of Fort Erie, Lieutenant Douglass conducted repairs on its outworks under fire, and on its assault by the British troops, he commanded an artillery battery with such skill as to break the enemies lines and compel them to retire. For his heroics, he was promoted to First Lieutenant and Brevet Captain.

In January 1815, Captain Douglass was assigned to USMA as Assistant Professor of Natural Philosophy. During the next fifteen years, he took a very prominent part in reorganizing the Military Academy. Captain Douglass was immediately recognized as one the more progressive and efficient instructors at USMA. From August 1820 until May 1823, he was Head of the Mathematics Department. Serving in this position, Captain Douglass was instrumental in instituting many of the policies and procedures demanded by the Superintendent, Colonel Sylvanus Thayer. Colonel Thayer has been called the "Father of the Academy." It was his insistence of incorporating the honor concept as a way of life at USMA that distinguished the Academy from other institutions. In May 1823, Major Douglass was appointed Head of the Civil and Military Engineering Department. He served in this capacity until March 1831. Once again, this tenure was spent implementing into practice and improving many of the systems developed by Colonel Thayer.
Throughout the fifteen years that Douglass spent at West Point, he received many important outside assignments from the government. He served with surveys of the defenses of Long Island Sound, as astronomical surveyor with a commission to determine the Canadian boundary from Niagara to Detroit, and in the exploration of the Lake Superior region in 1820. He also worked as a consulting engineer for the state of Pennsylvania. The number of such engagements is what led Douglass to resign from the Army in March 1831.

Upon his resignation from the Army, Douglass accepted the post of chief engineer of the Morris canal. It was his idea to renovate and modernize canals by introducing inclined planes in place of locks for canal navigation. At the same time, he was elected Professor of Natural Philosophy and Civil Engineering to the newly founded University of the City of New York. He would later become Professor of Civil Engineering and Architecture.

In 1833, Douglass began "his most memorable service" in surveying and estimating for the construction of the water supply system of New York City. His efforts as chief engineer were so successful that his system was able to supply New York City with water for seventy-five years. In October 1836, Douglass was hired to plan and lay out the burial grounds in Brooklyn, New York known as Greenwood Cemetery. This work occupied him until 1841 when he was called to the presidency of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Douglass' administration "was characterized by several marked improvements in studies and discipline. He became popular with students, winning at once their respect and affection." An equally noteworthy accomplishment, as a benefit to the college, was Douglass' services in laying out the college grounds.

In 1845, Douglass resigned his college presidency and returned to laying out cemeteries in New York and Canada. He also designed the supporting wall for Brooklyn Heights and the supplying of that city with water. In 1848, Douglass accepted the chair of mathematics in Hobart College, Geneva, New York. Yale College conferred on him the degree of LL.D for his exceptional achievements in his profession. David Bates Douglass died on 21 October 1849, as the result of a paralytic stroke, in Geneva, New York.

References:


Cullum's Register, Volume I, pages 35-36.


Additions: