Discipline, during the 19th century, was considered essential for a young lad’s proper upbringing. And with this in mind and the prodding of monied San Mateo families, the Rev. Alfred Lee Brewer, named rector of the new Episcopal Church of St. Matthew in 1865, the following year established what he called an “English and Classical School for Boys,” commonly referred to as St. Matthew’s Hall.

But, within five years, having grown increasingly dissatisfied with a universal disregard for his strict rules, the Connecticut-born priest, who fashioned himself a “benevolent despot,” advertised that thenceforth instruction would be presented “under military discipline.” The original gentler moniker, St. Matthew’s Hall, was supplanted by St. Matthew’s Military School. By whatever name it was officially known, San Mateo residents most frequently called it, more simply, “the Brewer school.”

During its first decade, classes were held in a building at 415 South Ellsworth in San Mateo. However, in 1878, the school, considered overly cramped, moved to a new three-story structure on Baldwin Avenue on church property, directly adjacent to the stone church edifice. This school building served until 1892 when, a victim of Brewer’s extraordinary success, it, too, had been outgrown.

Prosperity and a continually growing number of applications, along with Brewer’s desire for a larger and more isolated location, made a new campus imperative. At that time, an 80-acre tract along Barroilhet Avenue in Burlingame was purchased, and an all-new campus opened.

Accepted from kindergarten through high school, boys, sharply dressed in West Point gray, wore uniforms at all times. Under military discipline, between classes, lads never walked, they marched. During meals, which boys found a dreaded ritual, faculty and cadets ate together. Cadets ate “square meals.” All newspapers, books, and letters from families were first reviewed and approved by Brewer and not uncommonly censored. Periods of the day were set aside when no conversation was permitted. Days commenced precisely at 5 AM with the firing of a cannon and the rolling of drums. A bugle call ended the day at 8:30 PM, and precisely 30 minutes later, lights were to be extinguished. No exceptions.

Such an institution had been lacking in California and longed for by elite families who had ventured west during and after the Gold Rush. While a few Peninsula boys were allowed to live at home, the vast majority of cadets boarded.

Boys enrolled from San Francisco and all over the Pacific Slope. Some years, as many as a quarter of all in attendance hailed from Nevada. The planter elite of the Hawaiian Islands agreed that St. Matthew’s was the place where their sons should be educated.
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The Rev. Alfred Lee Brewer, rector of St. Matthew’s Church beginning in 1865, was the founder of an “English classical school for boys.” He became notorious for his “fatherly discipline.”

King David Kalakaua of Hawaii visited California in 1881 and inspected facilities of the military school at San Mateo. Thereafter, several young Hawaiian princes, nephews of Queen Kapiolani, enrolled at St. Matthew’s.

Young lads who along the way had demonstrated “excessive independence” or committed any social infractions, although rarely happily, found themselves subjected to Mr. Brewer’s “fatherly discipline,” from which, the cleric guaranteed anxious parents, students would surely profit. Such fatherly ways often included sound whippings, stern lectures, and sermons. Miscreants, in full dress uniform with rifles on their shoulders, were required to spend weekends marching endlessly on the gravelled quadrangle.

St. Matthew’s Military School acquired prominence, in part from the distinguished names of its cadets. Ogden Mills, son of Comstock millionaire and banker Darius Ogden Mills, and William Ralston, Jr., attended. Also on the rolls was Lincoln Steffens, a San Francisco boy considered by his family as “excessively non-conformist.” Years later, Steffens achieved recognition among the nation’s leading reform journalists. In his autobiography, Steffens commented about his interaction with Brewer.

As a senior, so recognized by his distinguished cadet rank, Steffens repeatedly felt the brunt of Brewer’s unremitting wrath. After having been caught consuming alcohol and, moreover, accused of encouraging younger boys to participate in this disgusting and forbidden behavior, Steffens was stripped of his rank and tossed in the “guardhouse” where, on limited rations, he languished in “solitary confinement” behind a bolted door for 22 days.

Also among the graduates was Sacramento-born Henry J. Crocker, later a prominent businessman as well as the nephew of the transcontinental railroad builder and a cousin of banker William H. Crocker. He regaled alumni at a downtown San Francisco restaurant convocation in 1912, vividly conjuring up intimate recollections of the interior of Brewer’s infamous guardhouse.

Comparing itself to an “English classical school for boys,” the emphasis at St. Matthew’s was on history.

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mathematics, science, and English. Cadets studied Latin and Greek, while German, French, and Spanish were considered electives, as were bookkeeping and music. A diploma from St. Matthew’s, regarded as an accomplishment, did not go without rewards. It assured acceptance by the State University in Berkeley and, later, at Stanford University. St. Matthew’s came to be considered a western prep school for West Point and Annapolis. The graduates were promised admission into an Episcopal seminary. In the late 1890s, the annual cost of tuition, room, and board, was $500 per boy.

Even the youngest boys were issued heavy Springfield rifles and, four days of the week, participated in rigorous close-order drill. Each Friday afternoon was a full dress parade conducted by senior cadets. Student officers strutted about carrying sabers, barking crisp commands.

Writers inspecting the Burlingame campus found it difficult finding words to adequately describe its wonders. They declared that the school was the best arranged academic military institution west of the Mississippi River. Large buildings were placed on three sides of a quadrangle. One, Tyler Hall, was exclusively for the youngest boys. A playground was also created especially for them.
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Cadet officers, circa 1914, when traditional uniforms were supplanted by a style more appropriate of the modern Army. The school graduated approximately 3,000 young men. The number who served in World War I is unknown.

Rather than separate rooms, cadets slept in large alcoves furnished with wardrobes and shelves, providing adequate comfort, albeit no privacy. School advertising, disseminated throughout the West and the islands of the Pacific, promised modern plumbing, including hot and cold running water.

The principal structure, a massive multi-storied Victorian, used primarily for offices, classrooms, library, and dining facilities, was Kip Hall, named for California’s first Episcopal bishop, the Rt. Rev. William Ingraham Kip. A second classroom structure for older cadets was Nichols Hall, named for Kip’s successor, California’s second Episcopal bishop, William Ford Nichols. Two additional structures, Seabury and Coleman Hall, served as dormitories. A matron assigned to each building monitored deportment and a nurse was on duty to look after health needs of cadets.

Sports participation was a requirement. A modern gymnasium was part of the 80-acre campus. There were handball and tennis courts, a baseball diamond, football field, and a quarter-mile running track. Instructors, many retired Army officers, taught the fine arts of fencing and boxing. Shooting proficiency, clearly imperative for all qualified Army officers, was required. Every graduate achieved expert marksmanship.

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also a “finishing school for boys.” St. Matthew’s boys graduated as both “gentlemen and scholars.” Each was introduced to manners and etiquette. Brewer considered ballroom dancing as essential as marksmanship. Except for parades, graduations, and other ceremonial occasions, there was a no-girl-on-campus policy. Thus, during weekly dance classes, boys rotated between male and female roles.

During the course of the school’s half-century of existence, St. Matthew’s had only two headmasters. The Rev. Alfred Lee Brewer maintained an iron grip from 1866 until retiring in 1890. Nevertheless, he continued in the ceremonial positions of Rector and Principal. Subsequently, he served as Chaplin of the Bishop Armitage Orphanage of San Mateo and taught as a professor at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, an Episcopal seminary established in the town of San Mateo for the training of clergy. Brewer passed away in 1899.

Upon his departure from the school, the headmaster position was taken over by his son, the Rev. William A. Brewer, D.D. This Brewer also served as mayor of Hillsborough from 1910 to 1926. With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, William Brewer had begun training cadets for ultimate involvement on the Western Front. Uniforms changed from West Point gray to khaki. Gasmasks and entrenching tools were issued, preparing boys for a new type of modern warfare that they were soon almost certain to encounter.

Both headmasters fanaticaly committed themselves to the notion that success of St. Matthew’s depended upon isolation. But civilization continued to encroach on school property. The new town of Hillsborough began surrounding the campus in 1910. In 1915, the town council released plans for a new road, Barroilhet, which, upon completion, would bisect the campus, a concept William Brewer found repugnant

The school ended suddenly and, like most things in Hillsborough, quietly. Shuttering the institution seemed the only option. Without fanfare, closure notices were sent to families, and campus property was advertised for sale.

Relieved of responsibilities, the Rev. William Brewer accepted a position as Rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, a new congregation in Burlingame. He assured school alumni that no merger with any other academic institution of any kind would ever be made in order to perpetuate the venerable name St. Matthew’s.

During the school’s 50-year history, approximately 3,000 young men graduated.

Historians Michael Svanevik and Shirley Burgett have reported on the history of the Greater San Francisco Peninsula for almost three decades.

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