

(From: *History of Troop F* — by Sidney A. Bull, Lowell, 1933.)

CHRISTOPHER ROBY and the CHELMSFORD SWORD

by *John D. Hamilton*

Photographs by the author,
courtesy of The Museum of Our National Heritage

Christopher Roby (1814-1897), sword manufacturer and Commanding Officer of Troop F, Mass. Volunteer Militia.



AT THE CONCLUSION of the Civil War, many small arms manufacturers succumbed to the economic realities of a glutted market. Frenetic production of edged weapons during the war years had resulted in a huge surplus that, in the face of a much reduced military establishment, netted only negative reaction in Washington to letting out further sword contracts. Some manufacturers were driven out of business; others continued apace on the strength of orders from militia and non-military social or fraternal organizations. Information on these small manufacturers is scant, reflecting how little research has been expended on them in proportion to that devoted to firearms manufacturers. Of all these, sword maker Christopher Roby (1814-1897) of West Chelmsford, Massachusetts, is one of the more interesting figures worthy of study.

As with a number of his contemporaries, Roby began a sword manufacturing career by making edged tools. His factory was located in a portion of Chelmsford that was once known as "Scythe Factory Village," from the small scythe industry started there in 1820 by Deacon John Farwell. Through a series of transactions, Farwell's business eventually passed to F.T. Sawyer in 1846, who in turn sold a half interest to Christopher Roby of Dunstable; the firm then being known as Roby, Sawyer & Co. While still a young man of 39, Roby bought out Sawyer in 1853 and changed the name of the firm to C. Roby & Co.

Roby scythes and machetes were in particular demand in the southern and border states, but by 1861 the embargo on trade with secessionist states caused a marked decline in sales. However, as war approached it became evident that there was a dire shortage of edged weapons in the North as well as the South. Even well established sword manufacturers such as Ames of Chicopee were unable to initially provide sufficient swords to meet government needs. So desperate was the Union for additional edged weapons that Ames, as well as Tiffany & Co. of New York, resorted to importing German cavalry sabres at the outset of the war. For these swords, the government paid premium prices. In December 1861, Roby had little difficulty in disposing of 410 cavalry sabres that had been on hand.

As early as April 1862, local uniform outfitters proudly advertised the sale of "Chelmsford" swords by C. Roby. In addition to swords made by other manufacturers, military "volunteers" were offered a wide selection of Roby weapons that would have included N.C.O., Musician, Horse Artillery, and Cavalry swords for enlisted personnel; a Foot Infantry Officer sword, model 1850; and large bowie-knives with inspiring brass, eagle-head pommels. It is not known if Roby made Naval Officer swords; the author knows of no examples extant.

Roby's first contract with the government called for delivery of N.C.O. and Musician swords and was signed on 29 August 1862 by the Chief of Ordnance, Brig. Gen. James W. Ripley. On this, and all subsequent contracts, Roby received slightly less in payment for the same type weapon than did Ames. Examples of Roby-made Horse Artillery sabres bear U.S. markings, arsenal inspector's initials "A.G.M." (Alfred G. Manning), and the date 1864, indicating that they had been subject to a government contract that was not included in those listed in Executive Document 99. This report, included in those listed in Executive Document 99. This report, made to Congress by the Sec. of War, lists Ordnance Department purchases of small arms, cannon, and projectiles during the period from April 1861 until the end of the war. Included are more than a quarter of a million dollars worth of swords purchased from Roby; approximately as many as were supplied by Emerson & Silver of Trenton, New Jersey. An analysis of Roby contracts reflects government purchase of three principal weapons: N.C.O. and Musician swords and Cavalry sabres.

The N.C.O. sword contracts:

2,000 delivered	1862
9,000 "	1863
1,000 "	1864
500 "	1865
12,500	Total

The first contract for 11,000, awarded 29 August 1862, was also the first contract completed (9 May 1863). A premium price of \$4.37½ was paid for the first 5,000 swords, then \$4.25 for each of the remaining 6,000. The second contract, calling for an additional 1,000, was awarded in July 1863, but completion was delayed for over a year. The third contract, for 500 swords, was awarded two days after the second contract, but was deferred for two years making it the last war contract that Roby completed (2 September 1865) — nearly four months after Appomattox.

The Musician sword contracts:

3,500 total, delivered 1863

An initial contract for 3,000 was awarded in August 1863 and rapidly completed in two months immediately following delivery of the first increment of N.C.O. swords. The second contract, for 500 swords, was given out in July 1863 and completed in just a little over a month before work began on the Cavalry sabres.

The Cavalry sabre contracts:

410 purchased	1861
3,000 delivered	1863
14,000 "	1864
15,000 "	1865
32,410	Total



Map of West Chelmsford, c.1870, showing location and extent of factory buildings of the Roby Manufacturing Company. Also shown is location of Christopher Roby's home which is still within view of the factory ruins.

Advertisement for Roby Swords as appeared in the Lowell Daily Citizen & News, 2 April, 1862.

It be used separately for BAKING and ROASTING, or by the removal of a simple plate, not requiring a moments time, can be used as one oven. The Stove is a beautiful specimen of mechanical skill, simple in its construction, and remarkably quick and economical in its operation. For sale by CUSHING & MACK, mar15dtf Nos. 123 & 125 Market st., Lowell.

SWORDS, BELTS, SASHES, &c.—The largest assortment in Lowell. We can show you Swords of half a dozen different makers including the **CHELMSFORD SWORD** manufactured by C. Roby & Co., West Chelmsford. We have all kinds of Military Goods direct from the manufacturers and can and will sell at the lowest cash prices. Please call and examine. **JOS. RAYNES & CO.,** oct2 43 Central street, Tyler's Block.

COUGH PREPARATIONS.—Mrs. Gard ner's Balsam Liverwort and Hoarhound, Masta's Balsam, Ayer's Pectoral, Schenck's Pulmonic Syrup, Wistar's Balsam, Mowe's Cough Balsam, Stone's Cough Elixir, Skelton's Pectoral Balsam, Cod Liver Oil and Cod Liver Oil Jelly, White Pine Compound, &c. All the above for



Horse Artillery Sabre, model 1840. Blade marked "C. ROBY/W. CHELMSFORD/MASS." and "US/1864/AGM".

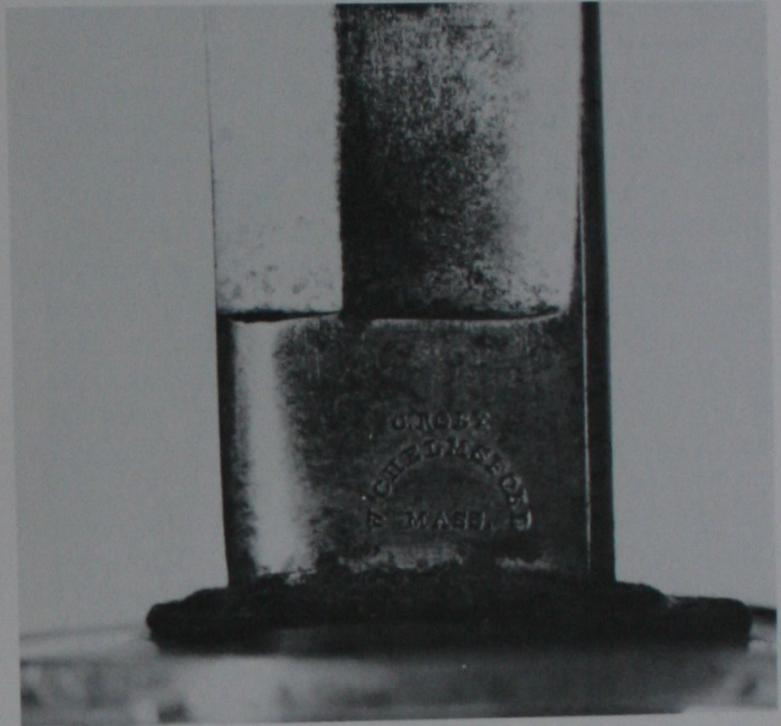
Detail, blade marking, Artillery Sabre, model 1840. Semi-circular marking (Type II) found on cavalry and artillery sabres.

(E.P. Richardson Collection)



(J.P. Richardson Collection)

Detail, blade marking, Cavalry Sabre. "C. ROBY" above semi-circular (Type II) marking "W. CHELMSFORD/MASS.", found on cavalry and artillery sabres.

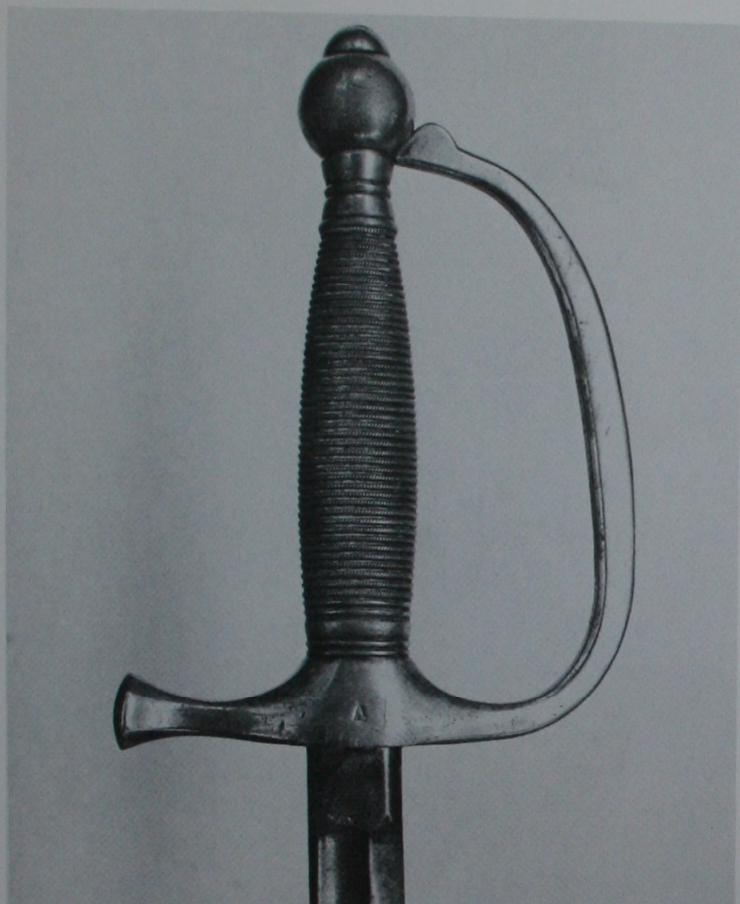


(Chelmsford Historical Society)

Heavy Cavalry Sabre, model 1840. Blade marked "C. ROBY/W. CHELMSFORD/MASS." and "US/1864/AGM" (arsenal inspector Alfred G. Manning).



(Chelmsford Historical Soc



Musician's Sword, model 1840, blade marked "C. ROBY/W. CHELMSFORD, MS./US/1863/FSS".

The sale of 410 sabres from stock-on-hand was not by contract, but by open "panic" purchase. Once the less combative type N.C.O. and Musician swords were in hand, Roby geared production to the making of Cavalry sabres from July 1863 at a unit price of \$5.75 with completion taking place before the year ended. In October, a second contract was awarded for 10,000 sabres, and was completed the following June. A third contract for an additional 10,000 sabres was awarded in July 1864 at an increased price of \$6.50. This contract specified that the sabres were to be made to the standard pattern deposited at the New York arsenal and that the first 800 were to be delivered by the beginning of August 1864. In actuality, the first increment of 1,000 was turned over a month late. The entire contract was not completed until mid-March 1865. During the greater part of 1863, Roby seems to have been the only sword manufacturer producing Cavalry sabres; neither Ames nor Emerson & Silver received significant Cavalry sabre contracts during this period. Ames imported 5,000 sabres from Germany for resale to the government, and Emerson & Silver produced none at all that year. Fourth and fifth contracts, each for 5,000 additional sabres, were awarded in January and March 1865. These were not begun until the previous third contract had been completed in March. Only the first 2,000 sabres of the fourth contract were delivered in time to have possibly been in service during the conflict. All remaining in production,



Detail, blade markings, Musician's Sword, model 1840. Circular (Type I) marking.

Detail, blade marking, Musician's Sword, model 1840. "US/1863" above Inspector's initials, FSS (Frederic S. Strong).



including the entire fifth sabre contract and the second N.C.O. contract, were delivered after cessation of hostilities, 4 May 1865.

Production throughout the 1861-65 period remained at an average rate of 1,000 swords every two weeks. Annual sword production amounted to 410 in 1861; 2,000 in 1862; 15,500 in 1863; 15,000 in 1864; and 15,500 in 1865 for a war-time total of 48,410 contract swords. Two types of Roby marking appear on the contract blades. Type 1, consisting of "C. ROBY / W."

CHELMSFORD, MS.” in a circular format, appears on N.C.O. and Musician swords. A second style of mark, found on Cavalry and Horse Artillery sabres, is designated as Type II and consists of “C. ROBY” above W. CHELMSFORD/MASS.” in a semi-circular format.

In 1864, Copperhead agitation posed a threat to the safety of northern Massachusetts towns. As a result, Roby petitioned the state of Massachusetts for authorization to raise a troop of cavalry for home defense. Roby had gained cavalry experience as a member of the New Hampshire “Governor’s Horse Guards,” and was granted the authority to enlist a company of cavalry, to consist of 100 men or more, in the Independent Division of the Militia of Massachusetts. They were organized to repel invasion, suppress insurrection, and defend the Commonwealth. The terms of enlistment were such that, if called upon, they could be obligated for 30 days active duty within the state borders.

Roby received his commission on 5 September 1864, and that same day election of officers took place in Chelmsford Center. Roby, as would be expected, was elected to the rank of Captain of the Troop. A great majority of the rank and file were men of Chelmsford, although a smattering were from adjacent towns of Carlisle, Billerica, Dracut, and Westford. Of the original eighty-five men enrolled, eighteen were employees of the Roby Company, and listed their profession as “sword

Non-Commissioned Officer Sword, model 1840, marked “C. ROBY/W. CHELMSFORD, MS./US/1863”. Arsenal inspector’s initials, FSS (Fredrick S. Strong) appear on the knuckle-bow.



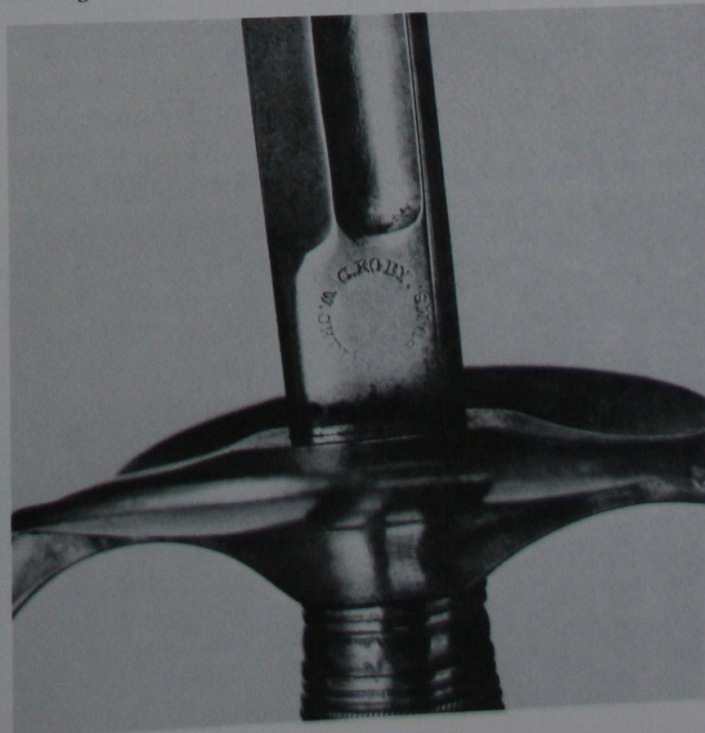
(Chelmsford Historical Society)

maker.” Their organization was given real purpose when, in October, a daring Confederate force crossed the Canadian border and raided St. Albans, Vermont.

The Troop was officially designated Company F, Unattached Cavalry, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia (M.V.M.). According to inspection reports, troopers were armed with carbines and sabres of one pattern “which are well cared for.” Doubtless the sabres were made in West Chelmsford. Troop colours were presented with ceremony by Noah Spaulding, who had previously commanded a troop of Chelmsford’s dragoons during the Mexican War. In recognition of such, Troop F was thereafter known as the “Spaulding Light Cavalry.” An Officer’s Cavalry sabre, with etched blade bearing the name “EMERSON” and “Co. F, SPAULDING LIGHT CAVALRY M.V.M.”, was made for Troop F Adjutant, Lt. H.H. Emerson (1866-74). It represents a transitional-style sabre that bridges the design gap between the regulation cavalry sabre of 1860 and the emasculated 1872 version. The use of Roby’s personal name in the format of the manufacturer’s blade mark, i.e. C. ROBY & Co. rather than Roby Manufacturing Co., would point to a production date between 1866, when Emerson received his commission, and late 1867, when Roby lost ownership of the company.

According to town records, Roby filed for bankruptcy in September 1867 with the court selling factory, mill site, and water privileges for a mere \$2,000. Subsequently, the property was operated as the Roby Manufacturing Company. If Roby felt that this personal failure disqualified him from holding a position of responsibility

Detail, blade markings, NCO Sword, model 1840. Circular (Type I) marking found on NCO and Musicians swords.



(Chelmsford Historical Society)



(Stanley A. Olpp Collection)

Hilt detail of Foot Officers Sword, model 1850.

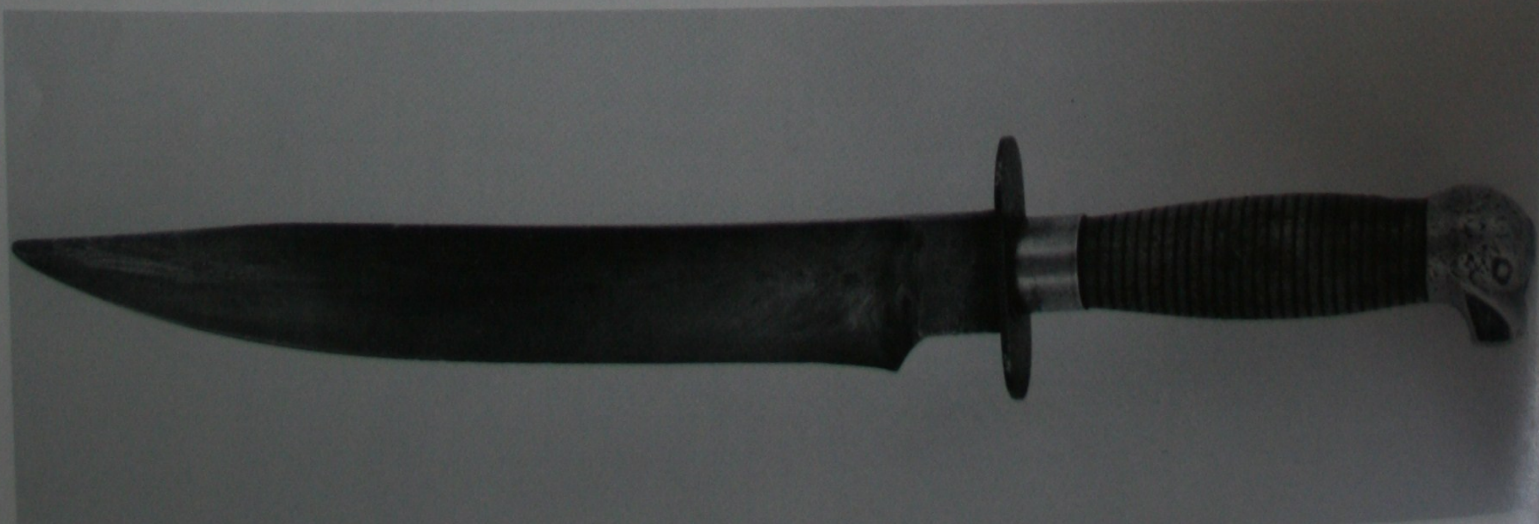


(Stanley A. Olpp Collection)

C. Roby & Co., manufacturer's blade markings, Foot Officers Sword, model 1850.

Eagle-hilt Bowie Knife, manufactured by C. Roby. c.1860.

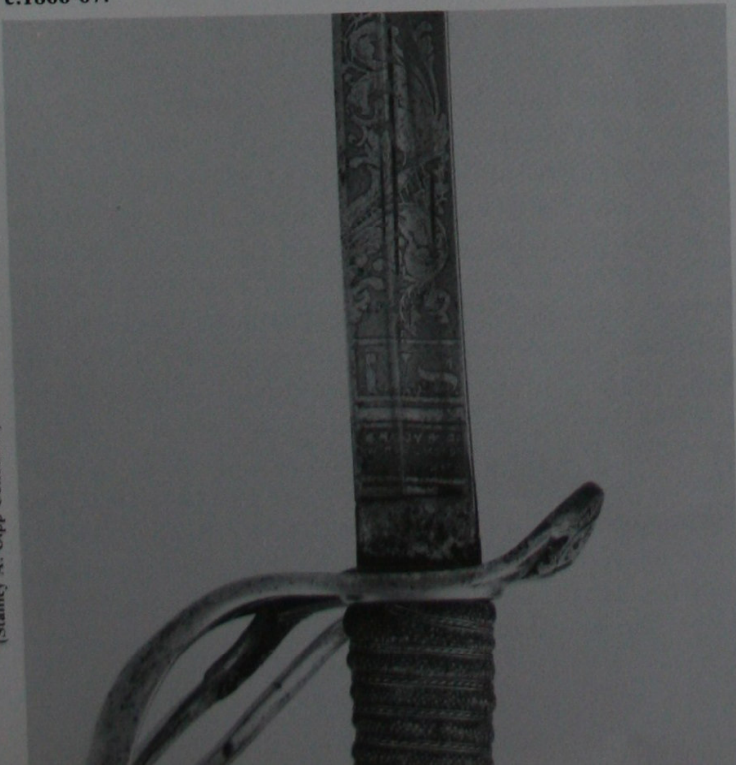
(Stanley A. Olpp Collection)





Officer's Sabre, Spaulding Light Cavalry. Manufactured by C. Roby & Co., W. Chelmsford, Mass. c.1866-67.

Detail of engraved blade, Officer's Sabre, Spaulding Light Cavalry, M.V.M. Manufactured by C. Roby of W. Chelmsford, Mass. c.1866-67.



in the Troop, he was mistaken. He submitted a resignation of command in 1868, but it was refused by unanimous vote. With that vote of confidence Roby continued to command the troop until finally stepping down in 1877. Meanwhile, the factory operated on a reduced scale, producing edged tools for agricultural use and the textile industry. Militia swords, including sabres such as that presented by Troop F. to General Chamberlain in 1871, were still manufactured by the company. These, as well as Masonic regalia swords, were manufactured until 1875, when the factory was sold to the Hiscox File Co., and sword production ceased there altogether. The site was subsequently used until the industrial depression of 1889, at which time it was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt.

Roby had been raised a Master Mason in 1862 and continued his masonic affiliation as an active member of Mount Horeb, Royal Arch Chapter in Lowell, Massachusetts. As a sword manufacturer and staunch Freemason, it is small wonder that numerous Masonic swords, having Roby markings, turn up in the Chelmsford/Lowell/Worcester area. Unique varieties appear from time to time. One of the earliest and perhaps rarest is a Scottish Rite sword made for Dr. James H. Freeland of Lowell, who was elevated to the 33rd Degree in 1863. The high quality blade, decorated with bright-etched and engraved floral strapwork, is marked "C. ROBY & Co./W. CHELMSFORD", indicating manufacture prior to 1867. The gift of a sword by friends was customary on such an occasion.

Roby's enthusiasm in Masonry extended to his duties as West Chelmsford's Postmaster, an appointment he held from 1852 until 1885. During that period, postmasters provided their own cancelling devices which were hand-carved from blocks of wood or cork. It was a practice that resulted in some highly original and individualized postal cancellations. Occasionally, cancels used by Postmaster brethren such as Roby, incorporated designs of the square and compasses or other Masonic symbols. Consequently, such cancellations are considered true philatelic rarities. Advertising covers (envelopes with commercial logo) from the Roby Mfg. Co. are known to bear the West Chelmsford postmark (dated July 18, 1870) and a Masonic cancellation whose design is in the shape of Masonic square and compasses. Roby maintained his Masonic affiliation until 1891, when he demitted (relinquished membership) for what were probably reasons of ill-health or infirmity. When Christopher Roby died in 1897, he left his entire estate in trust, to be used for the benefit of West Chelmsford.