



In Search of Jeremiah Snow — Revolutionary War Sword Cutler

by E. Andrew Mowbray

ONE OF THE FRUSTRATIONS besetting the collector of American swords of the revolutionary period — other than the obvious problem of not being able to own all the existing specimens — is the almost total lack of information surrounding them. The list of known makers is a short one and details of their lives and methods are meager.

The absence of this vital and humanizing ingredient has left a portion of the collecting spectrum blank, robbing the field of some of its satisfaction and a good deal of its romance. Only by a grasp of the personalities involved, no matter how tenuous, can a proper appreciation of the specialty be gained. And when, as occasionally happens, the mists part momentarily permitting a glimpse of one of these makers, the excitement among collectors is keen. Recently, the bits fell into place and we have acquired a hazy view of Jeremiah Snow, a Revolutionary War sword cutler who worked in Springfield, Massachusetts.

The risk involved in putting one's name on military goods during this period was considerable. The much-discussed fear of reprisal was the most important negative factor. After all, being visibly engaged in the manufacture of arms for a rebel cause was in itself enough to bring down the wrath of a vengeful Crown should the rebellion be put down. Pride in workmanship may account for those signed pieces that do exist, although why a highly skilled artist in metal would place a value on having his name attached to a relatively crude item such as a utilitarian sword is a mystery. Even the operation of stamping his name into the hilt was a costly and unnecessary frill in serving a weapon-starved market. For some reason known only to himself, and in defiance of all this, Jeremiah Snow, goldsmith, whitesmith, and sometime sword cutler chose to apply his touchmark to at least two of his hilts.

One theory that agrees with the surviving evidence is that Snow only marked his wares when circumstances indicated that to do so would be safe. And because only fully developed swords have been located to date bearing his name, it may well be that he applied his identity late in the war when the outcome of the struggle left little doubt as to the ultimate victor.



(Figure 2) Touchmark as found on "Glastonbury" saber.

Pioneer American sword collector Philip A. Medicus sometime around 1950, may have been the first modern arms student to take note of Snow's name contained in a sunken rectangular cartouche reading "I • SNOW". The mark, in the form of a silversmith's touchmark, was stamped into the underside of the guard of a large, brass hilted horseman's saber of the second half of the 18th century. There is no indication that Medicus went on to pursue research in the matter. The sword in question along with the balance of the awesome Medicus collection, passed to Norm Flayderman, was subsequently sold, and its present whereabouts are unknown.

Last Spring, at the Connecticut Gun Guild's Glastonbury Show, a second marked specimen appeared upon the always interesting tables of Bill Guthman. Of the stirrup-hilted horseman's variety and identical in all basic respects to the Medicus arm, this sword served to prove that here was an important Revolutionary War cutler with his cover blown. Research begun in the 1950's was dusted off and a serious attempt was launched to uncover what could be learned about "I • SNOW".

Early indications were that the touchmark in question originated in the workshop of John Snow of Newport, Rhode Island, (1740-later than 1803) whose mark, other than the use of two "bullets" in the manner of a colon between the initial and the surname, closely resembled that found on the swords. While the qualifications and working period of John Snow seemed to fit the requirements, he was quickly discarded in favor of another Snow, Jeremiah, goldsmith of Springfield, Massachusetts (c. 1735 - ?). The production of this latter Snow is obscure, yet he has left us a number of silver teaspoons bearing exactly the same touch as the swords. Seeking out Jeremiah, however, was not going to be easy. Early in the game it became apparent that there were two Jeremiahs, Senior and Junior, and both had been silversmiths. However, Jeremiah Senior seemed to be the man.



(Norm Flayderman)

(Figure 3) The "Medicus" saber.



(George Neumann)

(Figure 4) A short saber for an officer of foot. Note the single fuller construction of the blade which Snow favored for this style of weapon.

<p>The Hilt</p>	<p>Of the stirrup variety, the metal portions of the hilt are of heavy, flat brass. A small urn-shaped pommel is featured as is an unusual open counterguard with an interesting "finger loop". A pair of 1/2" ferrules are employed above and below the grip. A simple button-like quillon is used.</p>
<p>Blades</p>	<p>The Short Officer's Sabers use a European blade of the common infantry pattern. No blade markings have been noted. Single fuller. Length - approx. 26 1/2 inches.</p> <p>The Horseman's Sabers employ a variety of tri-fullered blades; at least one early example having stamped decorations of stars and moons in the Spanish manner. Length - approx. 33 inches.</p>
<p>The Touchmark</p>	<p>When marked, the stamped device is to be found on the blade side of the counterguard some 1/2" from the quillon.</p>
<p>The Grip</p>	<p>Almost always of cherry. The grips swell slightly as they develop toward the blade. A distinctive shallow carved spiral channel was intended to contain a tightly twisted double strand of brass wire. Because of the shallow nature of the grooves, and because no leather was provided to give a proper "seat", this wire shifted in the hand and was soon lost. To date, only one specimen has been noted with grips having their original wire.</p>
<p>The Scabbard</p>	<p>The survival rate among scabbards of this period is generally poor and Snow swords still associated with their original scabbards are quite rare. The one example of the horseman's variety seen to date is of black leather with a relatively elaborate diamond pattern tooled-in for most of its length. The mounts are of brass, two in number, the upper having an unusual diamond-shaped stud en suite with the tooled decoration.</p>
<p>Quality</p>	<p>The swords cutlered by Snow are of exceptional quality for the period. In a day and age when the American weapon-making scene was dominated by honest, sturdy, yet frequently unsophisticated, even grotesque efforts, the Snow swords offer a graceful and functionally proper expression of the swordmaker's art. The detailing and general care in manufacture are of a very high order.</p>
<p>Production</p>	<p>It is apparent that Snow was a major producer of swords. Hardly a collection of any importance dealing with the period fails but to have at least one, and sometimes several examples. Period of production would appear to include both pre- and post-Revolutionary manufacture. Because of the extraordinary standardization observed, it is almost certain some sort of assembly line was used in the production. Estimated production — several hundred swords.</p>



(Figure 6) A group of four Snow horseman's sabers arranged with the earliest on the left and the "Glastonbury" saber on the right.

(Figure 5) An example of what may be one of the earliest horseman's sabers produced by I. Snow. The mid-18th century Spanish blade is decorated with crescent moons and stars and features unstopped fullers at both extremes. The hilt is somewhat lighter in construction than later specimens.

Born probably in Northampton, Massachusetts, Jeremiah Snow was conducting business by 1760 as a fine metalsmith in a home workshop somewhere on the east side of the Connecticut River in Springfield. He was working in both gold and silver and specialized in the smaller, cheaper items of his trade such as spoons and jewelry. Hampshire County records show the transfer of a lot of land belonging to Jeremiah Snow of Springfield, goldsmith, to one Benjamin Pierpont, jeweler of Boston. It is possible at this time, in the midst of the uneasiness following the recent French and Indian Wars, that Snow in order to support himself in lean times first tried his hand at mounting sword blades with hilts of his own manufacture. (see Fig. 5) The skills gained would serve him in good stead during the critical arms shortages of the Revolution.

Snow produced two distinct styles of weapons:

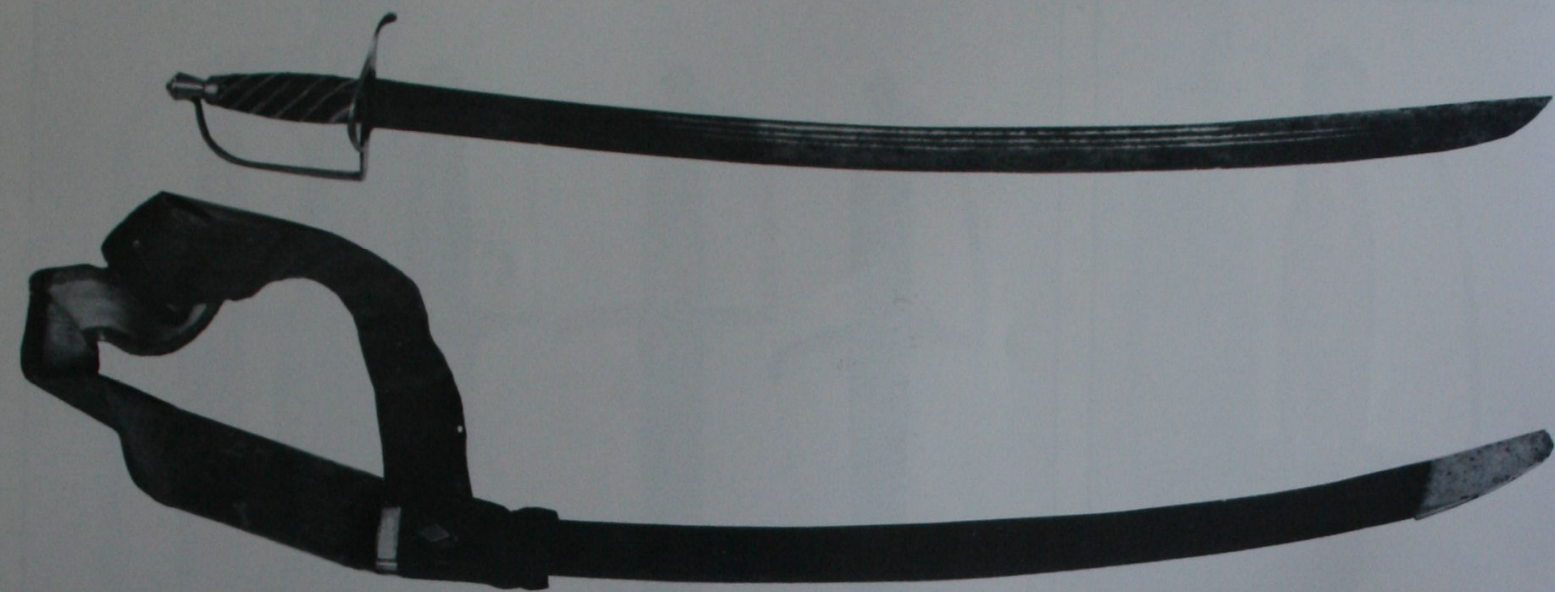
A Short Officer's Saber (see Neumann S.55). All of these weapons noted to date feature slightly curved, cut and thrust blades of the infantry type. A typical specimen would have a blade about 26½" long with a single narrow fuller near the flat edge running for some 20" or more.

A Horseman's Saber. This style sword employed the tri-fullered blade so common on American edged weapons of the period (discussed below) and normally measuring in the vicinity of 33". Most of the blades have a rather cleaver-like point and were once blued with a straight "stop" for 11" or more over the portion of the blade nearest the hilt. Both marked examples found to date are of this variety.

Both styles of sword feature the same distinctive form of brass hilt and grip, although some of the smaller weapons employ hilts that are a bit lighter in size and construction.

The blades favored by Snow, particularly those of the tri-fullered type, were a common commodity throughout most of the Colonies, even though their traffic was a somewhat illegal one. Of Spanish origin (they continued to produce them well into the 19th century), these blades were shipped in quantity to the West Indies, especially Cuba, where one version -- an early form of the machete -- was used to cut sugar cane. Barrels of blades similar to Snow's were used as barter goods serving the fringes of the odious "triangle trade", and frequently ended up in the holds of Yankee vessels alongside the primary cargo of sugar needed by northern distilleries for the making of rum. This traffic continued to flourish despite wartime embargoes and many a New England privateer turned a pretty penny with the sideline.

In 1764, a son, also named Jeremiah, was born to Snow and two years later a second son, Ralph, was born. Both



(Figure 7) A Snow horseman's saber complete with its wire wrapping of the grips, its original scabbard, and including a very interesting baldric of dark red plush with natural-colored lining of coarse-woven linen strapping.

were destined for their father's trade, and it is certain that, as teenagers by the time of the Revolution, they were an important part of the labor force at the sword works.

The elder Snow saw brief service as a private in Captain Walton's Company of the Massachusetts Militia in September, 1778. Walton's Company was part of the "Troops of Convention" guarding the prisoners taken at Saratoga. It would seem, because of a receipt given, that both Snow and his wagon were pressed into service during the march to Cambridge.

As the war drew to a close, business began to dry up and Snow had to seek work elsewhere. Salisbury account books have a man of this name working in Worcester in 1783.

After his stint at Worcester, Snow returned to Springfield as a played-out and aging man. With three males in the same household all dependent upon the same trade, things could become grim. Although no time was lost in returning to peacetime pursuits, the economy was in a sad state and there was little demand for the light luxuries that Snow was so skilled in fabricating. So upon their father's return, Jeremiah, Jr. was sent to Amherst to set up in the trade while brother Ralph was encouraged to move to another part of Springfield where he could make his way by doing repairs and producing those goods that were within his talents. According to Nichol's *Springfield 1636-1886*, Ralph carried on silversmithing in a first floor room of the Luke Bliss house. He eventually moved to Williamsburg, Massachusetts, where he bought land on Goshen Road from his brother in August of 1821. He died in Troy, New York, December 7, 1839 at the age of 73.

The younger Jeremiah seems to have prospered in

Amherst. An advertisement in the January 8, 1806 *Hampshire Gazette* has him offering for sale "many articles in the gold and silversmith's line." Three years later the same paper tells of a new factory, "lately opened in Williamsburg on Goshen Road where they make and keep on hand Brass and Eight Day clocks and time pieces, large and small, silver spoons, etc." In the same year he advertised for an apprentice. It may well be that the family had operated a mill and brass foundry in Williamsburg at an earlier date to produce hilts for their swords. If this is so, the skills acquired during this period would have made it a simple affair to re-open the factory to capitalize upon the national shortage of English brass clock movements brought about by the impending War of 1812.

The touchmark used by Jeremiah, Jr., was similar to his father's except for the use of a "J" instead of the archaic "I". The mark is further distinguished by a five pointed star before and after the name.

As for Jeremiah, Senior, other than his appearance in the census of 1790, where he is reported as the head of a household including two white females (his daughter-in-law and granddaughter apparently stayed with him while Jeremiah, Jr., was in Amherst), he has left us no further trace. His place and time of death are unknown.

The registry of deeds in Springfield shows Elizabeth Snow, Administratrix, settling the estate of her late husband, Jeremiah Snow, Jr., on May 5, 1823. Neither son had produced male issue and the Snow family of Springfield, Massachusetts, who had been struggling, perhaps even indifferent silversmiths and who had for a short time become exceptional sword cutlers, soon disappeared.