

# PRESENTATION SWORDS

Collecting America's Heritage

by Donald S. Ball

COLLECTING AMERICAN SWORDS of presentation quality, or those actually inscribed and presented, is both interesting and rewarding. This area of collecting-investing has experienced new and significant popularity in recent years. Since 1960, an increasing number of serious and advanced collectors have helped direct new attention to the field, and have established in the last decade a very competitive collector market.

A number of factors may be credited with this new interest. Prior to 1960, collectors were few in number, an exchange of information and knowledge was limited, and there were few opportunities to meet and share interest in the field. Few published references existed until *The American Sword, 1776-1945*, by the late Harold L. Peterson, perhaps the single most important contribution to the field of sword collecting in general.

The commemoration and observance of the Civil War Centennial in the early 1960's also stimulated and motivated many to enter the field of collecting. With a new and revitalized interest in our nation's heritage, a significant number of young collectors emerged. Many, who were just starting in their business and professional careers, found they could not financially compete in the area of antique firearms and so turned their attention toward the (then) less exorbitantly priced sword. And the collecting of presentation swords quickly became a specialty field.

The act of presenting swords as a token of esteem dates to the American Revolution. The Continental Congress voted to honor ten officers with elegant swords in recognition of their services. Ten swords, with silver hilts and bearing the coat of arms of the United States, were made in France and delivered by Colonel David Humphreys in 1786. Subsequently, a resolution recognized five additional officers with a sword. The swords voted to these fifteen officers of the American Revolution by the Continental Congress are considered to be the first American presentation swords, and are unquestionably among the most valuable and important swords associated with our national heritage.

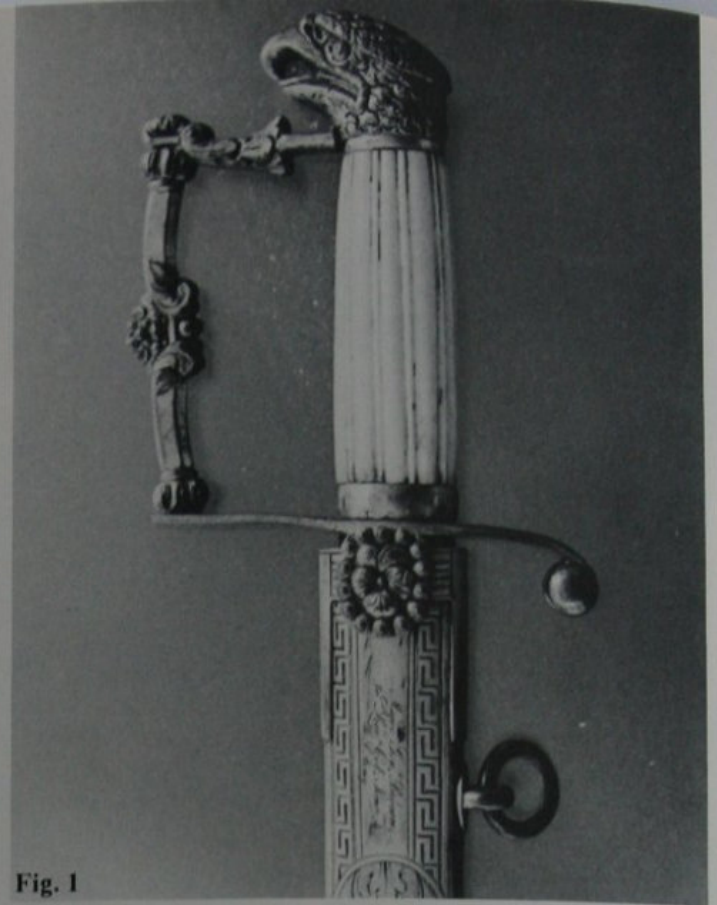


Fig. 1

The Congress of the new United States continued the practice of authorizing presentation swords on extremely rare occasions until the end of the Mexican War. The author is unaware of any further Congressional resolutions authorizing a presentation sword after this period.

States, cities, towns, and numerous organizations, as well as individuals, adopted the practice of presenting swords to military officers throughout the 19th century. The American involvement in Tripoli provided an occasion for recognizing the valor of American officers, but it was not until the War of 1812 that the practice of presenting swords gained significant popularity.

At the conclusion of the War of 1812, Congress voted to award swords to a number of naval officers for heroic action during that conflict. The swords were of a uniform pattern, with blades made by William Rose of Philadelphia. The State of Virginia also awarded a number of presentation swords to naval officers that were quite different in style, but were also of a uniform pattern and had blades made by William Rose. The states of New York and Maryland presented swords to prominent officers of the army and navy who demonstrated courage and valor in the defense of the nation.

Several outstanding examples of quality and workmanship during this period can be found in the collection of the National Museum. Another outstanding example is the sword presented by the Commonwealth of Virginia to Major General Winfield Scott, designed by Thomas, Fletcher and Gardner of Philadelphia in the early 1820's.

Following the War of 1812, the practice of presenting a sword to a fellow officer was established. Among the earliest examples of this is the sword presented by Major

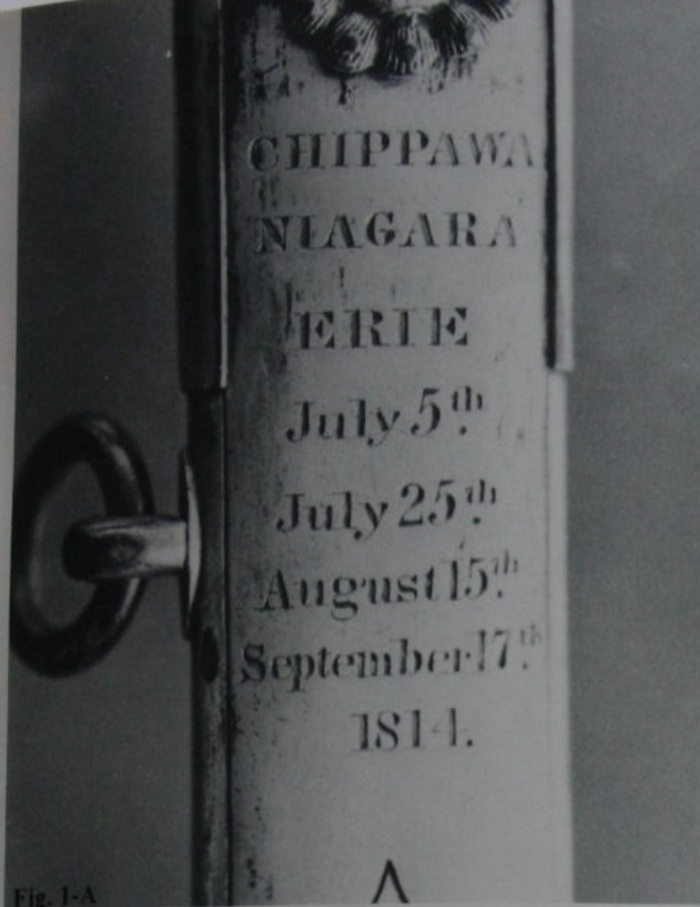


Fig. 1-A

General Jacob Brown to Lt. Col. Roger Jones, who had served on his staff during the War of 1812. Although not as elaborate as Congressional or state presentation swords, these were generally of higher quality than officers' issue swords. (Fig. 1, 1-A)

There appears to be a void in presentation quality swords during the period of 1830-1845. Those known to have been produced were done so, generally, in recognition of actions and achievements prior to this period.

By 1840 a new trend in design and style had emerged, and cross hilted swords became very prominent. Few examples exist after 1840 of the ever-so-popular eagle hilt style of the 1800-1830 era. Most of the presentation swords of the Mexican War period were elaborate, and yet retained a quality and elegance which showed the ability of American craftsmen and swordmakers to employ the same discriminating taste that had been demonstrated earlier. A fine example of the craftsmanship of this period is illustrated in the sword presented to "Bvt. Maj. Daniel H. McPhail by the citizens of Baltimore as a testimonial of their esteem for his services as a soldier in the war with Mexico and as a citizen of Baltimore, Feb. 22, 1849." On the reverse of the scabbard throat is a list of the battles in which Maj. McPhail saw action: "Monterey, Vera Cruz, San Antonia, Churubusco, Molino Del Rey, Chapultepec, Garita de Belin, Garita de San Cosme, City of Mexico." The sword was made by Samuel Jackson of Baltimore. It may be worth noting that Jackson was also commissioned to make the sword presented by Congress to Major General John E. Wool. (Fig. 2)

A second example, more characteristic and typical of

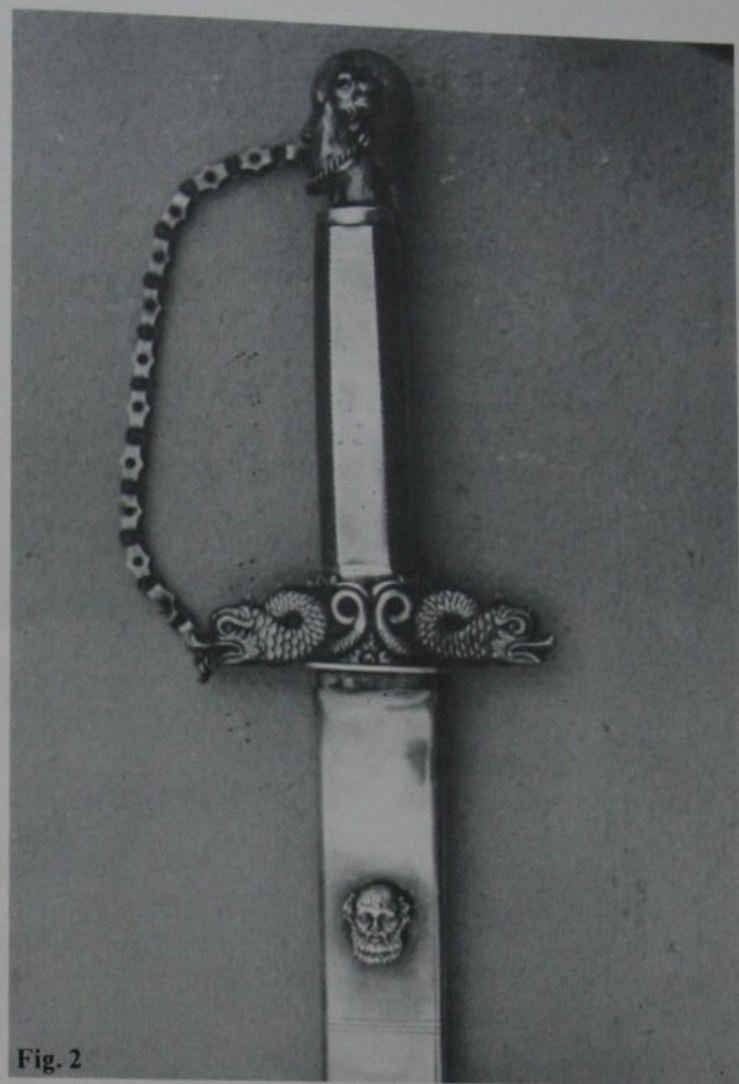


Fig. 2

the presentation swords of the Mexican War period, is the sword presented to "Major Edgar S. Hawkins, of the 7th Infantry, U.S.A., by the first and second regiments, U.S. Volunteers and other citizens of New York as a testimonial of their regard and admiration of his heroic conduct in command and defense of Fort Brown on the Rio Grande, New York, August 13th, 1846." Inscribed at the top of the scabbard are the names of the maker and dealer: "Hortsmann Sons & Drucker - N.P. Ames." (Fig. 3, 3A)

The cross hilted style remained popular through the 1850's and early 1860's, but during the War Between the States a new trend in style and taste rapidly developed.

Well over twenty sword manufacturers and dealers of rich presentation grade swords established themselves in the United States from 1860 to 1870. During the Civil War a trend toward gaudy and heavy ornamentation dominated the taste of military officers. Hilted became vastly encumbered with massive sculpture decorations. One does not need to look further than the illustrated catalogue of arms and military goods offered by the company of Schuyler, Hartley & Graham located in New York.

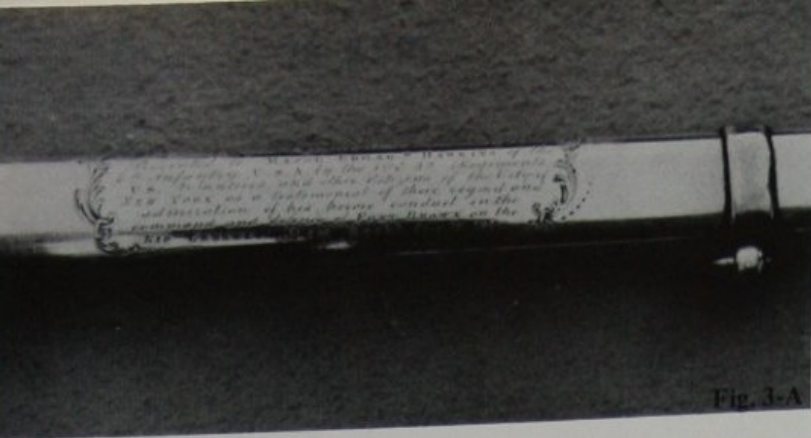


Fig. 3-A

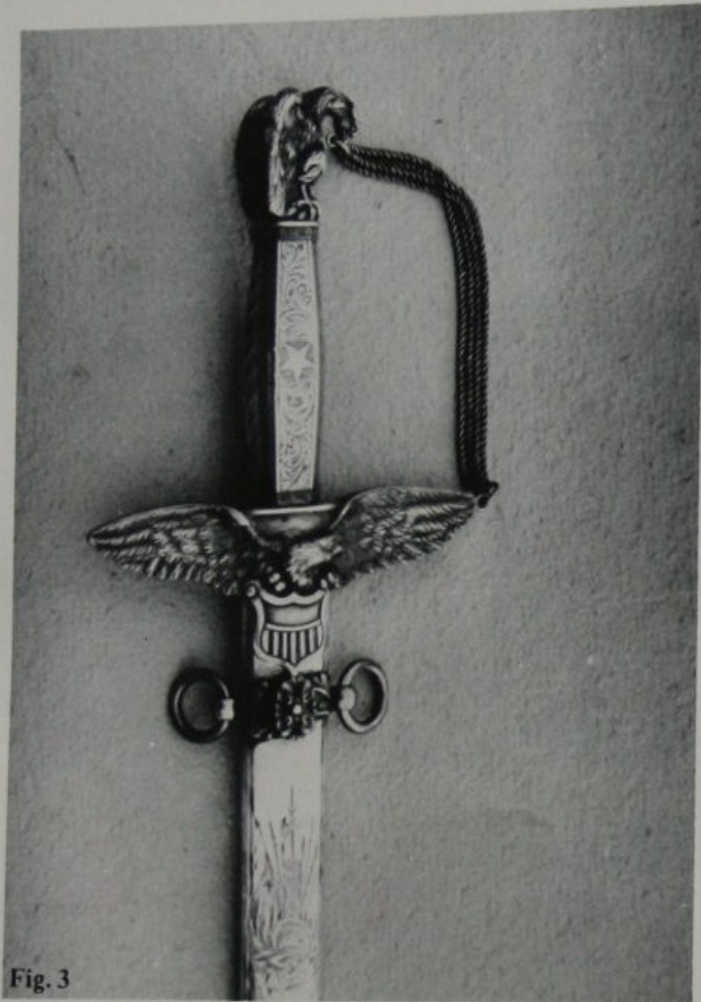


Fig. 3

A classic example of the gaudy presentation swords of the time is the sword presented to "Col. J. W. Hall by the Commissioned Officers of the 4th Michigan Infantry, Adrian, Oct. 8th, 1864." This sword is nearly identical to that offered by Schuyler, Hartley, & Graham, no. 435 on page 151 of their catalog. (Fig. 4)

Tiffany & Company is considered by many to have been the leader in the industry during this period and afterwards. It is known that Tiffany maintained a line of rich presentation quality swords in stock, and offered a variety of styles to choose from. Perhaps one of their most popular styles, as the author is aware of numerous examples with only slight variations, is that illustrated in the presentation sword to "Lt. Col Henry C. Hodge, U.S.A., by his friend Capt. John Wright, Jan. 18th, 1863. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 4

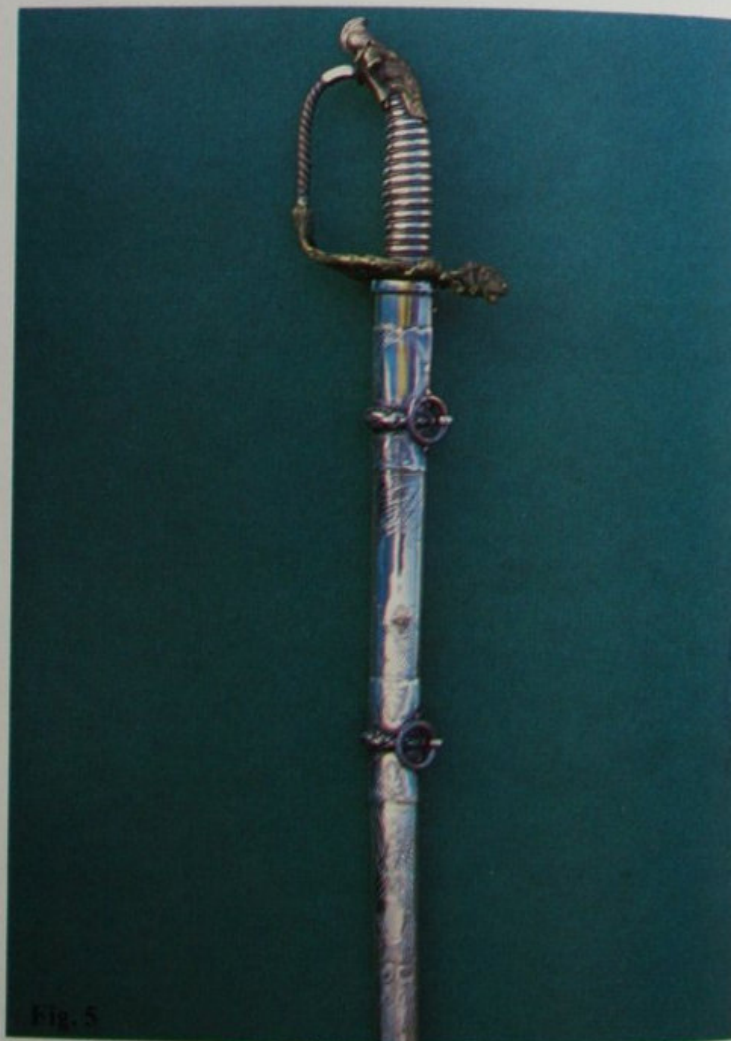


Fig. 5



Tiffany & Company also executed unique and individualized designs by special order, designs from which only a few were made, if not one of a kind. It is believed that the presentation sword to "Brig. Gen. A.G. Edwards from his friends Nov. 26th, 1862" fits this category. (Figs. 6, 6-A, 6-B)

Following the Civil War, rich presentation grade swords continued to be offered and remained a popular tradition into the early 1870's. Most post-war presentation swords were representative of overstocked supplies when the war ended. Few, if any, presentation quality swords were produced during the post-war period.

After 1870 there appears to be a rapid decline in interest. The style and tastes of the military changed and new styles and designs were offered in the 1870-1900 period. With the decline in interest came a decline as well in the quality of workmanship. The Spanish-American War prompted a brief revival of presentation quality swords but not to nearly the extent witnessed during the Civil War. The presentation swords of the Spanish-American War and early 20th century basically conformed to the standard officer's dress sword of the period. The significance of these late presentation swords is that they marked the end of a proud and important tradition in our nation's heritage.

Within the area of presentation swords as a specialty, there are many interests for the collector. He is concerned with the terminology, and with understanding the sword as a weapon. He is interested in the maker or manufacturer (it is estimated that approximately fifty dealers, manufacturers, and makers are responsible for creating and producing all American swords of presentation quality). The appreciation of the sword as a work of art has directed attention to both design and the quality of craftsmanship, a fine example of which can be



seen in the sculptured grip of the sword of Captain William Nippins, 34th Reg't., N.J. Volunteers (Fig. 7). Finally, the collector is interested in the biography of the person to whom the sword was presented, and the historical association.

There are two very basic categories in which American presentation swords should be classified. One applies to regulation swords, and some non-regulation swords, which were produced in large quantities to the specifications of U.S. government contracts. These swords, by reason of an inscription or dedication, are considered by some collectors today to be presentation swords. The more advanced collectors, however, disagree, since they were not originally designed for presentation purposes. Although both attractive and interesting in their own right, these swords lack the quality of materials and the special attention to design and craftsmanship found in those swords made specifically for presentation purposes. Standard regulation officer's swords, dating mostly from the Civil War period and after, are often found inscribed with a presentation from friends, cities and towns, fellow officers, or various military and non-military organizations. The majority of these swords were presented to officers of lesser rank, and seldom does one observe a presentation of real historical significance. Although identification and research can be extremely interesting in uncovering the historical association of the weapon to the individual who carried it, the market value is generally not affected by any great amount. The collector may add 20%-30% to the value of a sword, which seems to be an acceptable range in most cases. Caution is well advised in the purchase of identified and inscribed regulation swords. Since inscribed swords are in greater demand, more and more questionable inscriptions have been observed over the past five years.

The second classification of American presentation swords applies to those which, by reason of style and design, materials and craftsmanship, were made expressly for the purpose of being presented. The task of establishing specific sub-categories and value ranges to these is not only challenging but near impossible! Opinions and judgements will vary based on one's interest and experience, and the purpose of this article is merely to offer some guidance based on period, quality, and the historical significance of an inscription.

#### **Congressional Presentation Swords**

Based on the superior quality of craftsmanship of the period, and the historical importance of those who received these swords, few presentation swords can be considered to equal these in interest or value. The extreme rarity of association with an Act of Congress alone sets these known and identified swords into a class of their own. Values will range from the mid-five to six figure area.



Fig. 7

#### **National Treasure Swords**

Based upon association with our nation's leaders, there are a few and select number of swords which may be considered for such a category. These are predominantly of high presentation quality, the product of superior craftsmen. They were presented to key generals and admirals from the Revolution through the Civil War. Examples are presentations to Captain John Paul Jones from Louis XVI (U.S. Naval Academy), George Washington's silver hilted sword (National Museum), General Robert E. Lee's sword, made by Devisme (Confederate Museum), and others to be found largely in public museums or exceptional private collections. Values range in the mid-five to six figure area.

#### **Superior High Grade Presentations &**

#### **Historically Significant Presentations**

Generally, these swords date from the War of 1812 through the Civil War. The design and craftsmanship is of the highest quality and may even surpass some examples in the above classifications. The significant factor to be considered is the stature of the recipient and the historical association of the inscribed presentation.

These swords were presented to high-ranking and well-known military and naval officers, often by state governments. A cased, jeweled, high quality sword presented to General Joseph Hooker by the citizens of San Francisco commanded \$34,000 at public auction in the fall of 1978. This category has a value range from the low to mid-five figures.

**Fine High Grade and Historically Important Presentations**

This classification includes numerous high quality swords of ornate design and style. The majority of these date from the War of 1812 through the Civil War, with some exceptions. Due to the elaborate design, some which lack inscribed presentations or historical association are still considered to fall within this category. The gaudy, statue-hilted swords of the 1860-70 period and the elegant, ornamented swords of earlier design are included. Several examples of these swords are illustrated. Value of swords in this category ranges from the mid-four figures to low five figures. It is from this category that the advanced collector, on rare occasions, has an opportunity to secure swords for his personal collection. (Figs. 8-11)



**Fig. 8 Brig. Gen. Kenner Garrard Sword**

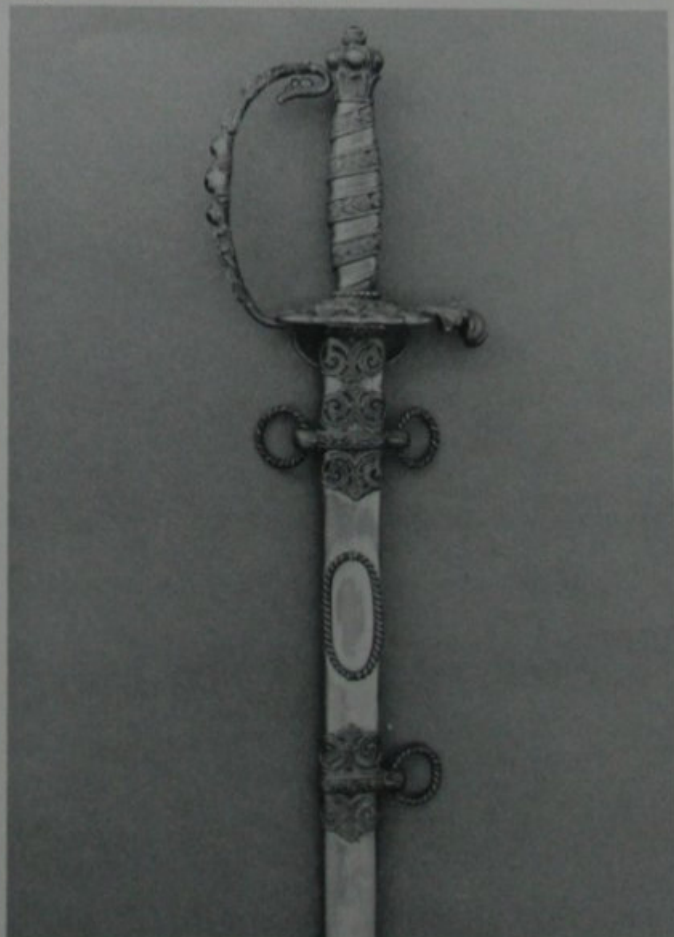


**Fig. 9 Brig. Gen John H. Ward Sword (A.L. Bogg Coll.)**



**Fig. 10 Statue Hilt Sword**

**Fig. 11 Gov. Andrews Sword**



### Medium Grade Presentations

Although ornate in design, and occasionally rich in materials and quality of craftsmanship, there exists a definite distinction between these and the previously described swords. Historical associations are generally far less significant, and while they are by no means common, these represent the majority of presentation quality swords offered to the collector in today's market. Due to the scarcity of the previously described categories, this continues to be the area of greatest interest for the collector, and is an excellent field for investment. Many swords of this class, offered in the early 1970's in the hundreds or low thousands of dollars, are seldom found under four figures today. Some swords have increased two to four times in market value over the past decade, and these generally range from the low to middle four figures currently. The swords in this category vary greatly in style and design. The use of silver as well as semi-precious stones is often found. (Figs. 12-16)

Fig. 12 Lt. J.E.M. Washington Sword

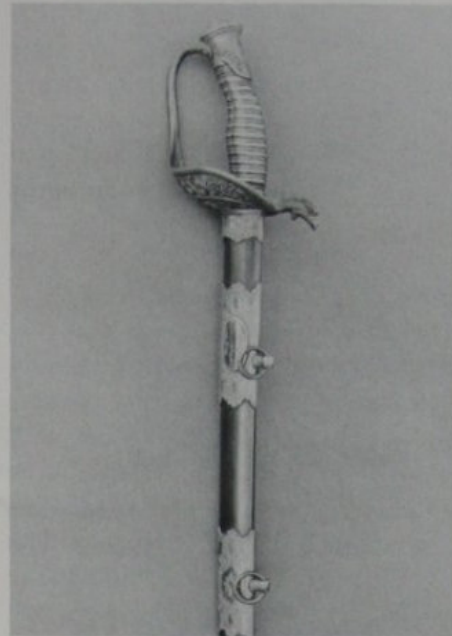


Fig. 13 Capt. L.W. Jones Sword



Fig. 14 Uninscribed

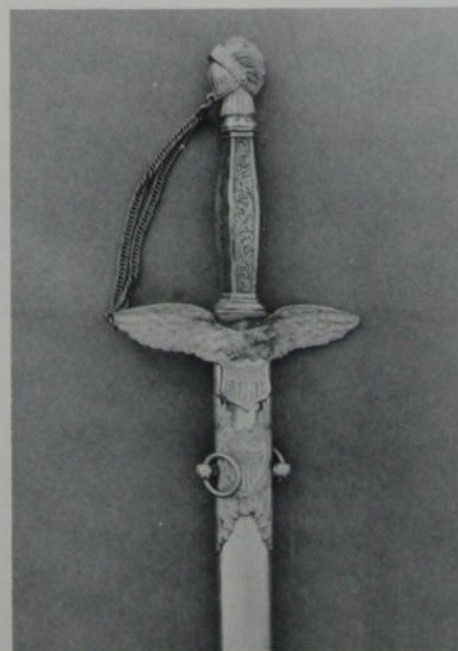


Fig. 15 Uninscribed



Fig. 16 Uninscribed



Fig. 17 Mounted Officer's Sword

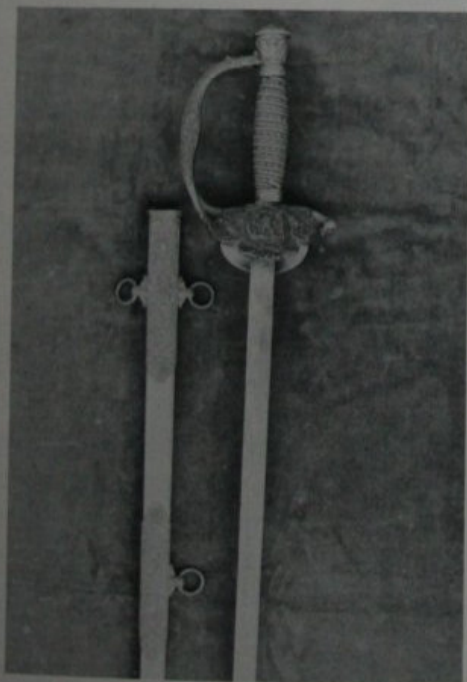


Fig. 18 1860 Staff Sword



Fig. 19

### Lesser Grade Presentations

While swords generally associated with this category often conform to regulation models, with some moderate variations, the application of fancy engraving and occasional added ornamentation places them in the presentation-quality class. There is generally more intricate and heavier casting to the hilt, as well as to the mountings on the scabbard. Most of the Spanish-American War period and later presentation quality swords fall into this category, as well as a number of earlier swords. The value range is \$300 to \$1,000, depending on condition, style, and period. An inscription or presentation can raise the figure by 20% to 30%. (Figs. 17-18)

### Inscriptions

Commemorative inscriptions are often difficult to evaluate. Since swords bearing them inevitably command a higher price, they require greater examination, documentation, and judgement. Collectors and dealers alike must be cautious when assigning substantial value to an inscription.

The following guidelines may help, but the collector must often rely on the integrity of the source of the sword and his own sense of judgement.

- Establish the originality and authenticity of the weapon itself.
- Consider if the weapon relates to the period with which it is being associated. Does it merit such association?
- Careful examination of the engraving or etching is most important, and this is perhaps the most challenging aspect for many collectors. Freshness of engraving, the quality of the engraving or etching, and the style can sometimes indicate a misrepresentation or spurious inscription. (Fig. 19)

Given the necessary precautions, American presentation swords continue to be an excellent investment in collecting weapons of our heritage.