

# THE AMES CENTURY

## *1829-1929*



by  
JOHN D. HAMILTON

(Opposite page) Daguerreotype, c. 1845, NATHAN PEABODY AMES, Jnr. (1804-1847). Sword manufacturer, Cabotville, Massachusetts.  
(Photo courtesy Connecticut Valley Historical Society)

## PUBLICATION ANNOUNCEMENT

*Man at Arms* is pleased to announce that work has begun on John D. Hamilton's forthcoming book, to be entitled: *The Ames Sword Company 1829-1929*. Due to be released in the late spring, this important new work will answer a long-felt need among collectors of American arms as well as students of this country's 19th century industrial development.

*Watch these pages for further information.*

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JUST OVER 150 YEARS AGO, one of the most remarkable companies in American business history had its beginning in a chance encounter between two passengers aboard a New England stagecoach. One passenger, Edmund Dwight, scion of a textile manufacturing family in Springfield, Massachusetts, found a kindred soul in fellow traveller Nathan P. Ames, Jnr. (1804-1847), of Chelmsford, Mass. The Ames family were edged tool makers, a skill vital to the smooth operation of textile machinery. With an offer of rent-free space in the Dwight mills, Nathan persuaded his family to move to Springfield in 1829. There, a shop was set up where they could continue to produce edged tools and cutlery while servicing and repairing textile machinery. Proximity of the new location to the Federal arsenal, and ease of access to the shipping on the Connecticut River, must have been factors in considering relocation.

Almost from the outset at Springfield, Ames manufactured edged weapons. It was a field that had been dominated by Nathan Starr of Middletown, Conn., but vacated in 1828 after Starr began to concentrate fully on firearms production. In permitting his sword-making machinery to collect rust, Starr created a vacuum that irresistibly swept up Nathan Ames.

As with many "mechanics" of the time, Nathan and his brother James Tyler Ames (1810-1883), acquired practical engineering skills in the family cutlery business. Under their father's tutelage they were taught to forge, grind, temper, and polish edged tools; a transition to sword blades was not difficult. Success of the Ames firm was as much a result of the integrity, organizational skill, promotional hustle, and Yankee get-up-and-go of Nathan Jnr. as to the engineering abilities of younger brother James. Although neither man had benefit of formal technical education, both were products of that period of early 19th century industrialization when natural mechanical genius abounded throughout New England.

Nathan Ames Sr. died early in 1832, leaving the business in the capable hands of his sons. That year, nearly a dozen workmen were added to the payroll reflecting commitment to completion of Government sword contracts concluded in the spring for supplying the Ordnance Dept. with a new pattern Artillery sword.

Initial production was plagued with problems outside the normal scope of edged tool manufacturing. With the exception of blades forged at Springfield, work on the Artillery sword was initially done in different places under sub-contracts.

The signing of a second crucial sword contract occurred in February, 1834, when Nathan undertook to supply sabres for the newly formed regiments of dragoons. By securing these two "bread and butter" contracts for Artillery and Dragoon swords, Nathan had one foot firmly planted in the Ordnance Dept. door. Characteristically, Nathan plunged still further into what looked like a lucrative business by obtaining a cautious commitment from Col. George Bomford, Chief of Ordnance, to provide swords for all officers of the Infantry, Artillery and Engineers, Dragoons, Medical and Pay Departments, and the General Staff. These earliest Ames officer swords followed the design of pattern models Nathan deposited with Bomford in 1833 and 1834. Their designs exhibit a classicism and pride of quality that, with exception of later presentation pieces, place their limited numbers among the rarest and most desirable of United States Regulation swords. In acquiring what amounted to tacit sponsorship by the Ordnance Dept., special orders began to filter in for personalized swords for volunteer militia companies who competed with each other in acquiring distinctive uniforms and equipment.

As sword production gained momentum, so did the need for acquiring larger facilities. With additional financial backing, Nathan incorporated the business in 1834 as the Ames Manufacturing Company. Nathan used the fresh capital to purchase additional property, buildings and vital water power rights at Cabotville. All machinery, inventory, and operations were completely transferred there in September when water that provided power for the machinery, was let into the flumes. James assumed responsibility for management of the shops, while Nathan spent ever increasing amounts of time away from the works obtaining contracts in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. It became apparent that it would be much to their advantage to cast brass hilt components and scabbard trimmings in their own foundry.

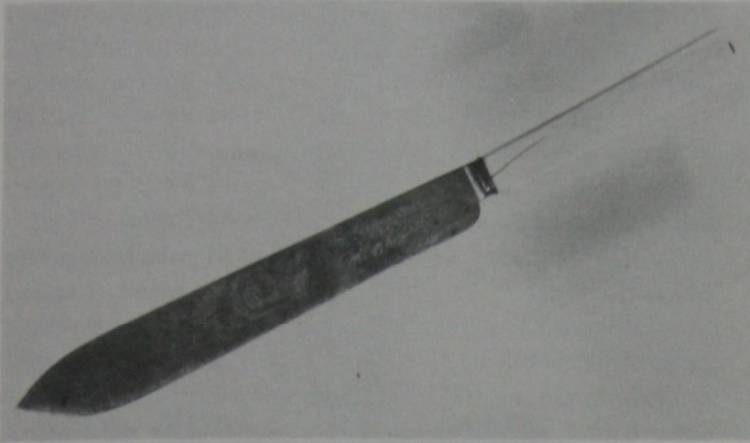


*(Left)* Uniform sword for the Jefferson Guard, a guide/patrol organized for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. Each sword issued was individually numbered. The etched blade is marked AMES/SWORD CO./CHICOPEE/MASS. (James B. Tillinghast collection)

In 1836, Nathan established a bronze foundry at Cabotville in which cannon could be cast as well as sword parts. The Ames foundry, under supervision of Abner Mossman, his son Silas, and grandson Melzar, became the first in the United States to case bronze statuary destined to be sculpted by eminent artists of the caliber of Daniel C. French, Augustus Saint Gaudens, H.K. Brown and Thomas Ball. The most famous Ames casting, French's statue of the Concord "Minuteman", was cast for the Centennial of 1875 from condemned Confederate cannon. Despite the worthiness of the cause, release of the cannon required an act of Congress and the authorizing signature of President Ulysses S. Grant. Several of Saint Gaudens's best American works were cast by Ames as were the Crawford Doors to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

To the Ames Mfg. Co. belongs the credit of having pioneered electro-plating in America. Thus, in striving to improve sword quality, Nathan gave rise to an industry that was destined to outlive all other Ames enterprises. Prior to 1838, base metal (brass) sword mounts were given a coating of silver by immersion in an electrolite bath in which atoms of silver were gradually deposited by chemical action. The immersion process had several drawbacks; it was time consuming, incapable of uniform precipitation, lacked depth of deposit, and the resulting grainy appearance was easily worn off unless burnished. Nathan was introduced to an alternative plating method in 1837, when on a trip to England he attended lectures on the subject of depositing silver by electricity. He returned home with a Smee galvanic battery which was turned over to Ames chief plater and gilder, John O. Mead. Mead experimented with the battery, using it to introduce DC electrical current to the bath, with a far from satisfactory result. However, in 1840 the process was improved by utilizing a cyanide electrolite that proved to be the best conductor of silver. As the Ames Mfg. Co. achieved renown for elaborate silver plated tableware, the value of presenting a silver tea service or set of table cutlery to the wives of Ordnance Board Officers, was discovered to promote a cordial atmosphere in which to negotiate arms contracts.

As a self-made expert in the manufacture of armaments, Nathan was appointed a member of an arms inspection commission that was formed by the Board of Ordnance in 1840. The Commission was instructed to visit the armories of Europe and obtain information about methods of manufacturing edged weapons and armament-producing tools and machinery. This task occupied much of Nathan's energy over a three year period. On these sojourns, he visited arsenals at Donai,



Large Table Knife, c. 1840. Made for John Mackay (John J. McKay served in the House of Representatives in 1845 and helped promote adoption of the Jenks carbine). Etched blade inscribed N.P. AMES / CUTLER / SPRINGFIELD. (Stanley A. Olpp collection)

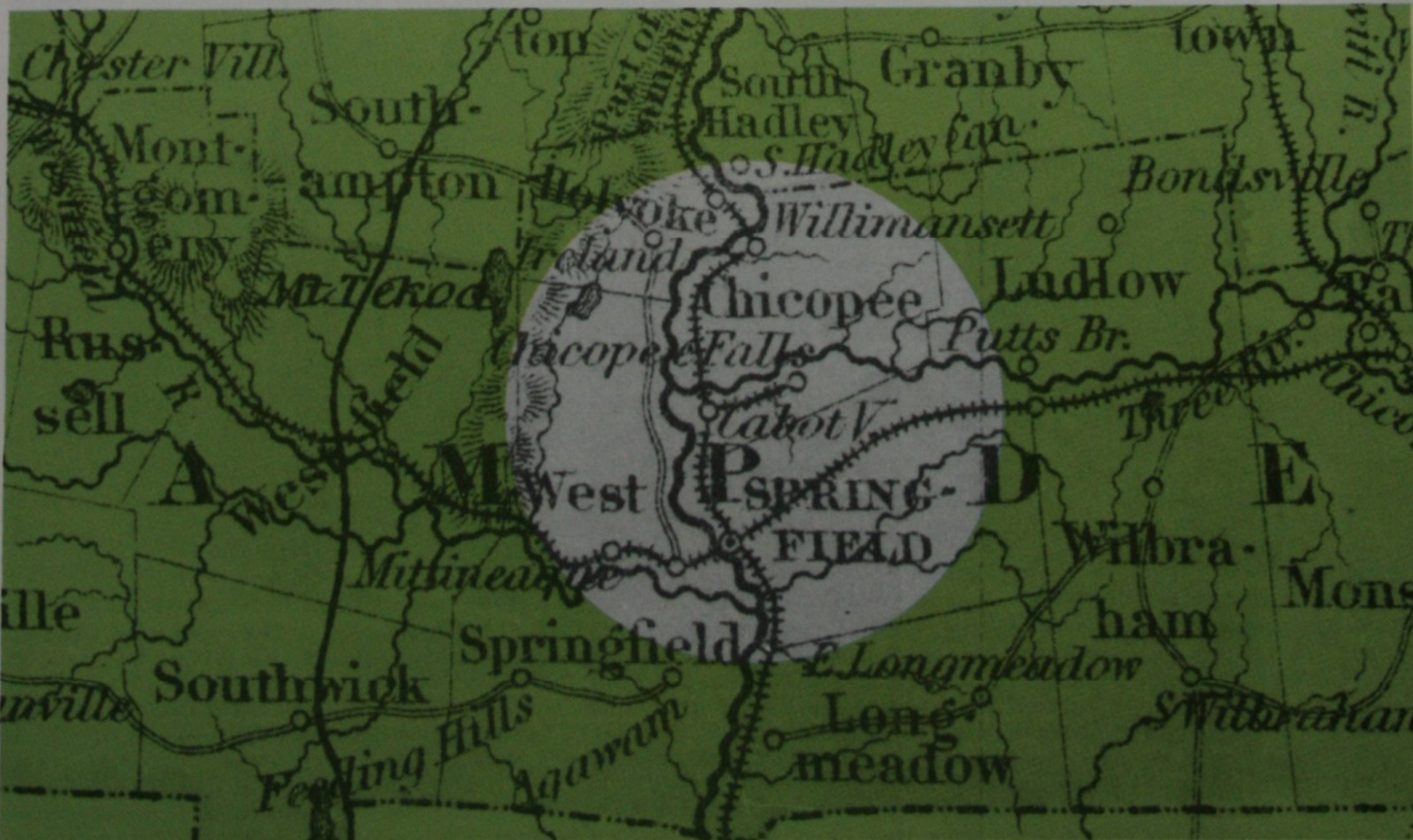


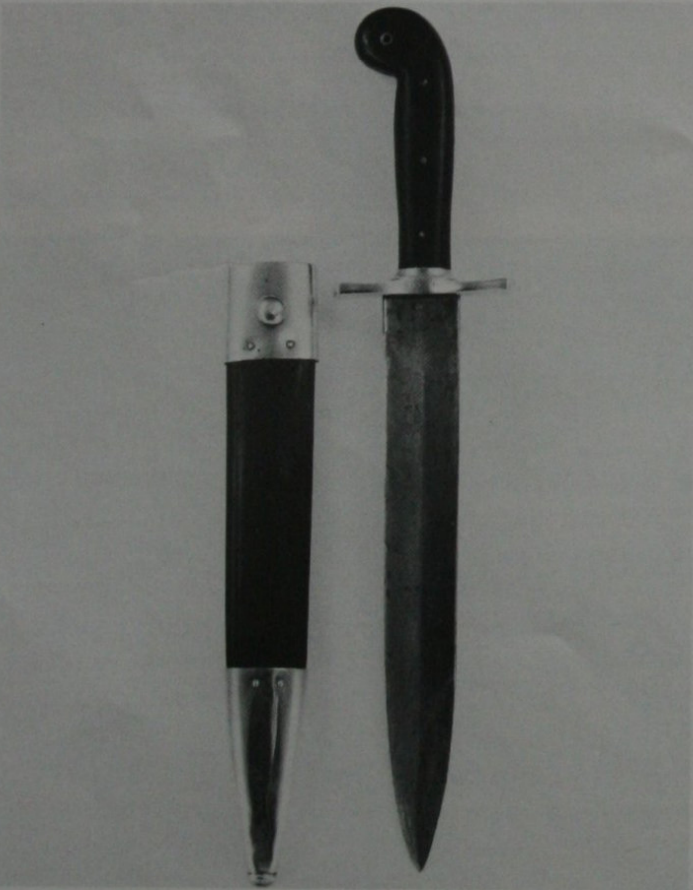
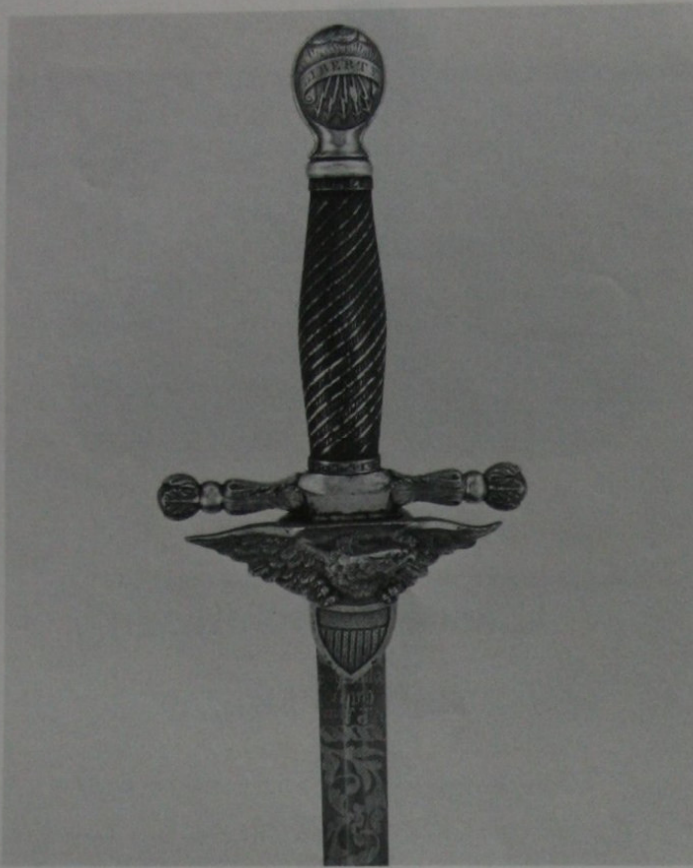
N. P. AMES, JR.  
 Cabotville Works.  
 SPRINGFIELD,  
 MASS.

(Right) Trade card of Nathan P. Ames, Jr., c. 1835. The engraved vignette shows a view of the sword shops at Cabotville. Text outlines the scope of production. (John H. Hintlian collection)

Manufacturer of SWORDS, Cutlery and  
 Edge Tools. Swords manufactured for the gen-  
 eral Staff and REGIMENTAL OFFICERS of the Ar-  
 my of the United States, or every pattern now  
 in Use. Also Dragon Sabres and Artillery Swords for the United  
 States Service of the latest patterns. Swords of any pattern made to  
 order or remounted, polished or varnished in the best manner.

Map of Western Massachusetts by J.H. Colton, c. 1855. Detail showing a branch railroad from Cabotville to Chicopee Falls, opened in September, 1846. (Photo courtesy of Museum of Our National Heritage)





*(Top left)* Officer's Sword, "Old Regulation", Revenue Cutter Service, c. 1834-1847. Etched blade inscribed N.P. AMES / CUTLER / SPRINGFIELD. The regulations of 1843 prescribed a small sword of a pattern furnished by Ames of Springfield. Prior to the Civil War, there were never more than 70 officers on the Cutter Service roster. (Robert Vanni collection) *(Top right)* Mexican War Presentation Sword, c. 1848. A splendid gift with silver and mother-of-pearl, gem encrusted hilt, presented to Maj. Montford S. Stokes, "The Soldier's Friend", by NCOs and Privates in his command of North Carolina Volunteers. The sword, ordered from Ames Sept., 4th, 1848, cost \$275. The blade is etched AMES MFG. CO. / CHICOPEE / MASS. (North Carolina Division of Archives & History) *(Lower left)* U.S. Mounted Rifleman's Knife, c. 1849. Blade stamped AMES MFG. CO. / CABOTVILLE / MASS. / 1849. The contract for 1,000 knives was signed in March, 1848 with delivery completed a year later. (Loring W. Coleman collection) *(Lower right)* Infantry Officer's Sword, c. 1835. The bright-etched blade is inscribed N.P. AMES / CUTLER / SPRINGFIELD. A similar pattern in gilt, with curved blade and 5-ball side-branch was made for officers of the Artillery and Engineers. (Victor Aksten collection)

Liege, and Solingen to observe each sword manufactory. From this period, U.S. Regulation swords were to follow French fashion. Returning from the Continent in 1841, Nathan was in time to be present for the purchase of property, shops, machinery, and dwellings previously owned by the Chicopee Falls Company.

In the fall of 1841, Nathan contemplated assuming a portion of the Model 1835 musket contract awarded Lemuel Pomeroy Jr. of Pittsfield, Mass. Nathan believed that obtaining the extra work and income would help make the question of purchasing additional shops of the "Falls Company", a simple one. This expansion of the Ames Mfg. Co. was earmarked to provide facilities for production of arms for the Navy; a breech-loading carbine designed by William Jenks, and a box-lock percussion pistol.

In 1845, the Company purchased additional physical assets of the Springfield Canal Co., and as a result, became the largest property owner at Cabotville. An iron foundry was then erected there where cannon were cast under the direction of foreman, S.B. Lanckton. The Connecticut River Railroad even ran a spur line to Cabotville to accommodate Ames shipments. In the foundry, artistic castings of Washington, Franklin and other eminent persons were executed as altorelievo medallions to decorate the interior of the Library of Congress.

Never robust, Nathan's health began to fail in 1843 and by autumn of 1845, a debilitated condition forced him to relinquish management of the Company in favor of James. Nathan died shortly afterward in April, 1847. That same year, the village of Cabotville lost its name as it became incorporated as part of the township of Chicopee. Thereafter, Ames markings bore the Chicopee placename. Under James' management the Company continued to prosper. The corporation divested itself of the bothersome Jenks contract and in 1849, sold property purchased earlier from the Chicopee Falls Co. to the Massachusetts Arms Co., on whose board of directors James served for many years. Consolidation of company assets placed Ames on a sound footing during the Mexican War. As wartime contracts brought fresh activity to the sword shops, an aroused patriotic fervor was reflected in orders for more than \$28,000 worth of presentation swords. These superb weapons varied in cost from \$30 to \$1,000.

Ames gained as high a reputation from magnificent swords made for presentation to popular heroes as for the quantity and variety of Regulation swords manufactured for the Government. As gold and silver tokens of esteem and appreciation from a grateful nation, state legislature, or local citizenry, they were especially ornate and bejeweled. The most extraordinary examples were the "thousand-dollar" swords awarded by Congressional resolution in 1848 to six officers who emerged with glory

from the Mexican War; Generals Butler, Quitman, Twiggs, Worth, Henderson, and Hamer whose sword was awarded posthumously. Considerable prestige was attached to being selected for this type work. Ames successfully vied with those sword makers and jewelers who limited themselves to such quality, i.e. W.H. Horstman of Philadelphia; Fletcher & Gardiner of Baltimore; and later, Schuyler, Hartley & Graham and Tiffany & Co. of New York. Presentation grade fraternal and society regalia swords received equally lavish attention, particularly in the post-Civil War period.

As tension increased between North and South in 1860, Ames received heavy sabre orders from Virginia, Mississippi, Maryland, and Georgia. Brass cannon were also ordered for shipment south, but the Federal Government quickly curtailed this traffic by imposing an embargo on arms shipments to states threatening secession. As the storm of civil war burst in 1861, arms orders were frantically placed with any contractor who could deliver the goods. In June, 1861, Ames received a record breaking contract for 17,000 swords which included: 10,000 Cavalry sabres, 5,000 Artillery sabres, 1,000 Artillery swords, 3,000 Non-Commissioned Officer swords, 3,000 Musician swords, 1,500 Mounted Officer swords, 3,000 Foot Officer swords, and 300 Staff Officer swords. James even resorted to acting as an intermediate agent for the purchase of 5,000 Cavalry sabres from Germany.

A flood of other contracts followed, eventually amounting to 154,224 swords by the end of the war, or 34 percent of the Ordnance Office sword purchases during the period from 1861 to 1865. From the Ames foundries also poured a cascade of bronze howitzers, heavy iron siege and coastal defense guns, coehorn mortars and a variety of ordnance projectiles that would insure Northern victory. Chicopee Indians, living on the bluffs opposite the gun factory, found life safer elsewhere as Ames ordnance was test-fired across the river and into the embankment beneath them.

As the final outcome of the war became apparent in 1865, the Federal Government began reducing armament purchases. The resulting decrease of lucrative contracts left the Ames Mfg. Co. facing a tenuous future. Enormous stock dividends had been paid during the war, but the company failed to set aside sufficient capital reserve with which to meet peacetime diversification. In 1866, the Company was forced to turn to ventures which were hoped would be economically profitable; mail-boxes, ticket punches, screw-making machines, ice skates, lighthouse lanterns, and hydraulic weighing scales. Professor T.S.C. Lowe, the famous aerial balloonist, interested James in trying to develop refrigerated cattle cars using ammonia gas as a refrigerant. As soon as one endeavor became established, they would undertake other enterprises that extended resources and





*(Upper Left)* Regalia Sword, "Societie B. Lafayette", c. 1890, "AMES SWORD CO. / CHICOPEE / MASS". A stock pattern sword with Virgù Price type pommel and interchangeable counterguard. The griffon shaped quillon were derived from a design on a calling card James acquired from one of his many foreign contacts.

*(Photo courtesy Museum of Our National Heritage)*



*(Upper Right)* Masonic Knights Templar Presentation Sword, c. 1905, "AMES SWORD CO. / CHICOPEE / MASS". Burnished gilt hilt with "ivoried" celluloid grip. *(Photo courtesy Museum of Our National Heritage)*

*(Right)* Model 1833 Foot Artillery Sword, "N. P. AMES / SPRINGFIELD-UNITED STATES / 1833". Blade engraved "NASHUA ARTILLERY". *(Stanley A. Olpp collection)*



*(Opposite)* Militia Officer Sword, c. 1840-1845, "N. P. AMES / CUTLER / SPRINGFIELD". Belonged to Colonel William D. Winchester, Commandant, First Corps of Cadets, Boston.

*(Photo courtesy of First Corps of Cadets Museum, Boston)*

facilities. Crank inventors were attracted to Chicopee like iron filings to a magnet. The Company had many successes and a generous share of failures which in themselves, reveal the extent to which the Company pursued intriguing ideas.

If a survey were taken of nineteenth century American military knives and bayonets, one might readily conclude that the manufacture of weapons having a distinctive and altogether unique design was an Ames hallmark. Many of these are closely identified with the colorful figures who designed them, or are associated with the specific firearm or special purpose for which they were intended: the blade of the Elgin Cutlass Pistol carried in the South Seas Exploring Expedition of 1837; the sword bayonet for the Sapper's and Miner's Musketoon, model 1847; the Mounted Rifleman's Knife of 1849; the knife-bayonet designed by Admiral John A. Dahlgren for the Whitneyville/Plymouth Navy Rifle model 1861; the sword bayonet for the Remington Navy Rifle model 1870, the sabre-bayonet for the Winchester Repeating Rifle model 1873; and an intrenching knife bayonet designed by Lt. Edmund Rice in 1874. Ames also made brass hilted sword bayonets for the Sharps Navy Rifle model 1860, the Spencer Navy Rifle model 1863, and several varieties of Enfield pattern bayonets for the Peabody-Martini Rifle manufactured by the Providence Tool Company in the late 1870s.

Continued development of self-contained metallic cartridges and rapid-fire, breechloading, magazine-fed rifles further reduced having to resort to hand-to-hand combat with sword or bayonet. Chief of Ordnance, Brig. Gen. Steven Vincent Benet, led influential military circles in downgrading the role of the sword. Ames was thus forced to concentrate on other areas in which use of the sword continued to find acceptance; i.e. fraternal and social regalia, theatrical and movie use, and as ornate presentation gifts.

In 1867, the Company began the specific manufacture of ornamental and regalia swords. Hilt designs were derived from components of military regulation swords, but with addition of some iconography associated with each fraternal or social organization. In order to accommodate the demand for myriad designs, stock patterns were adapted with modeling wax, sculpted with the desired insignia, and recast as a new master mold. In 1873, Virgil Price patented a sword hilt counterguard that permitted greater flexibility in the use of interchangeable components. The counterguard, bearing the logo of an organization, could be cast separately and assembled in combination with any crossguard of standard pattern. The same patent also covered a helmet head pommel surmounted by an eagle, which the late Harold L. Peterson pithily dubbed the "crapping eagle." It was an era of stock swords at cut-rate prices.

For reasons of ill health and dissatisfaction over the

way in which the company was being run, James extracted himself from the firm in 1872, leaving Emerson Gaylord as President. A.C. Woodworth, James' son-in-law and major stockholder, waited in the wings to take over. Woodworth, backed by a Boston based consortium of stockholders in the Eagle Lock Co. of Terryville, Connecticut, seized a chance to buy out the Gaylord Manufacturing Co. which held the U.S. Mail bag contract, patents on "Perfection" brand bronze padlocks and small cabinet locks. This takeover meant that Woodworth's group gained control of the lock industry. They then separated the sword and lock business from the Ames Manufacturing Co. in 1881; forming the Ames Sword Company to accommodate sword operations, plating works, and lock business which were removed to the former Gaylord buildings. The ailing Ames Manufacturing Company was unscrupulously cut adrift to flounder in 1898 on the rocks and shoals of their bicycle and sewing machine contracts.

As popular interest arose in fraternal and beneficial societies after the war, it became apparent that there was a solid market for the regalia industry. Wartime swordmakers were joined by Mitchel C. Lilley of Columbus, Ohio, Frank Henderson of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and other regalia manufacturers whose entry into sword making emphasized a shift from traditional domination by the cutlers. In 1893, Henderson consolidated his regalia company with the Chicago-based branch of the Ames Sword Co. forming the Henderson-Ames Company. When Henderson died in 1899, his firm continued until it was purchased and dissolved by Lilley in 1923. Meanwhile the Ames Sword Company was in financial trouble, making its acquisition by Lilley an easy matter.

The Sword making operation was transferred piecemeal to Ohio. An auditor's inventory of the Chicopee plant equipment, taken in 1925, revealed that specialized sword making machinery was shipped to the Lilley Co. where metal articles such as swords, badges, fraternal and service insignia were manufactured under a Lilley-Ames label. Only a local sales and repair service for swords and uniforms continued to be carried on at Chicopee. By 1929, the transfer of business was nearly completed; dissolution of the Ames Sword Co. was merely a matter of time, and was not long in coming. Thomas H. Boeshaar, last President of the Ames Sword Co. acknowledged in 1930 that a reorganization was in progress that was intended to ". . . better coordinate the company's production units," which when translated from corporate language, meant that the shift to Ohio had in fact, already taken place. The final death knell sounded in 1932, when it was announced that the Ames Sword Company factory would be razed to the ground, all save the main office building which still stands today at the foot of Grape Street.