



Fig. 1. English silver-mounted hanger, c.1770. The eagle pommel shows characteristics shared with later Federal types. As is commonly the case for many of these hangers, the eaglehead motif repeats on the counterguard terminals. Decorated panels in center of guard show stag being brought to bay, on obverse, and bull being baited on reverse.

Figure 3. Silver-mounted officer's hanger, 1780. An attractive and well-made, yet primitive, eagle with suggestion of crest at back of skull. Likely American made and similar in many respects to No. 42 in Peterson's *American Silver Mounted Swords 1700-1815*. Note eaglehead terminals on guard similar to Figure 1.

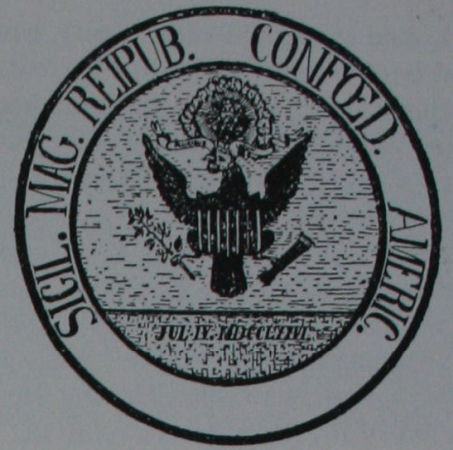


Figure 2. An eagle-pommelled military hanger of a type usually encountered possessing a lionhead. Believed by some collectors to have been manufactured in the vicinity of Providence, Rhode Island. While often considered a silver-hilt (see similar sword in Peterson), some of the mountings are actually plated in the Sheffield manner; most unusual for an American-made item of this period. One well-known and nearly identical example was carried by a Rhode Island officer, Colonel Wickes Gardiner, of the Pawtuxet Rangers, at least as early as 1772.

Figure 4. A well executed and artistic silver pommel featuring a fine crested eagle. Like many, if not most, of specimens typical to this style, the pommel is secured by a prominent capstan. Unmarked. While American manufacture is not out of the question, the weapon may have been made in Britain, c.1775.



Will Barton's first design for the obverse side of the Great Seal of the United States. This design, which was subsequently much changed, is apparently the point at which the eagle appeared in American heraldry.



THOUGHTS ON

The Eaglehead Hanger

by E. Andrew Mowbray

Photographs by author.

IN MAY 1947, PHILIP MEDICUS informed the sword collecting fraternity of what he believed was a breakthrough in determining the roots of the so-called "American" eagleheaded pommel. Writing in *The Bulletin of the Society of American Sword Collectors*, Medicus cited an entry in the monumental *Annotated Bibliography of American Swords* compiled by Stephen V. Grancsay a year earlier. This document — which is at the present time badly in need of updating — contained among its treasury of valuable references a listing of one Deodat Williams, a Hartford silversmith, who advertised in 1776, that he had set up in business to make and sell "officers' silver-mounted hangers with either lions, eagles, panthers or plain heads, etc.)* Using this entry as a basis, the pioneer collector offered a theory that "consequently, it would be possible to class many of the early eagleheaded swords as revolutionary," thus upsetting, to further quote Medicus, the then popular premise that "the eagleheaded sword, as a purely American weapon, did not date much before 1781."

In such a manner, Medicus added his "two cents" to an area that, despite his personal thoughts, will likely remain conjectural as long as there is an interest in the subject. Before going into the reasons — or at least some of them — for the conjecture, it might be wise to consider the weapon which was to a large degree responsible for the furor.

With the development of the *Couteau-de-chasse*, known in England first as the *cuttloe* and eventually as the *hanger*, an ideal medium was provided for the widespread use of all sorts of animalistic and game-associated heads as pommel decorations. While the style was not universal — many hangers being fabricated with pommels hardly more than flat discs — it was popular, and gained favor from the early 16th century until the hanger disappeared from ordinary use late in the 18th century. Probably descended from the *Falchion*, these short, straight-bladed sidearms were intended to be used in the hunt for dispatching wounded prey.

Although game keepers and other servants of the hunt sometimes carried hangers as part of their working equipment, in England, as in most European countries of the time, the hunt — particularly the chase — was one of the more visible privileges of gentry. As a result, simply wearing a hanger was in some measure a symbol of social

*Medicus has misquoted Grancsay here. The entry in the bibliography actually reads, "Deodat Williams (Hartford, —1781). In 1776 he advertised 'has set up his business . . . where he makes and sells . . . Officers Silver Mounted Hangers with either lions, eagles, panthers or plain heads, etc.', p. 115. Curtis George M. *Early Silver of Connecticut and Its Makers*. Meriden, Conn., 1913."

rank. And by the mid-18th century, partly to distinguish those born to rank from those risen to it, the affecting of a hunting hanger while in uniform had become a fad among many European army officers who found that it made an attractive alternative to the smallsword, particularly on cramped or informal occasions such as aboard ship or while riding in carriages. The snobbish implications were not lost upon the American colonists and the hanger, especially the silver-mounted variety, quickly became part of the local social and military scene. It was a well established element of fashion by the outbreak of the American Revolution.

The eaglehead as a pommel inspiration was never more than a distant second to the far more popular lionhead, which had rapidly gained favor in England (perhaps as a result of the arrival of Hanoverians upon the throne: the symbol was somewhat more widely used among the Germanic states than elsewhere). In any case, it is almost certain that some form of the eaglehead pommel was being employed on hangers either imported to, or manufactured in, the American colonies by the mid-point of the 18th century. An example of an English-made eagle pommel hanger, c. 1770, is illustrated (figure 1). This very typical and not uncommon weapon is frequently mistaken by American collectors as being of American manufacture. Such optimism is understandable because the style of eaglehead shown has many of the characteristics normally attributed to the later nationalistic variety that developed following the adoption of the eagle as part of U.S. heraldry. Also, many of these instruments are found unmarked — whether because they were assembled by cutlers who were not qualified for guild touchmarks, because they were fabricated with mountings of less than pure silver in order to lend strength or cheapness, or because of some other reason is seldom considered. And of course any unmarked silver-mounted eaglehead is fair game to be considered as having American origins, even when the weapon is still in possession of its proper scabbard, also unmarked. Such is the power of wishful thinking. The fact that many legitimate American silver-hilted hangers do have touchmarks, and a sizable portion of those that don't once had the maker's name engraved upon the chape of the scabbard, seems to be of little bother.

As a result of this understandable frame of mind, a number of these very British swords have been carried to the States in recent years apparently under the illusion they were being returned home. The specimen illustrated is one such example. A number of others that likely found their way in this direction are to be seen listed in British auction catalogs of the 60's and 70's. It is even possible that a few of these swords have been doctored-up, usually with genuine touchmarks lifted from silver spoons, as this odious practice was not unknown even in the relatively pure pre-war days. No matter what threats exist to authenticity or scholarship, these are interesting, even

important swords as this type of English (and occasionally Continental) silver-mounted eagle pommel hanger was exported to the colonies and, once there, was the inspiration for many a local smith or cutler. (See sword of Michael Whitley, following.) However, at what point in time the production of these eagle embellished hangers became "American" in a national heraldic sense rather than American (manufactured) is where the mystery lies. Certainly those mountings turned out, say, in the early 1770's must be excused any patriotic association.

Just when the first "official" eagle appeared is a tantalizing subject. Until primary evidence appears conclusively tying down the event, we are doomed to guesswork. Most American sword collectors hold to the view that the Bald Eagle, as a national symbol did not exist until it appeared from the pen of amateur heraldic artist, Will Barton, as the last in a string of suggestions to Congress for devices to appear on the Great Seal of the United States. Barton's design, both offered and approved in June 1782, was perhaps the sixth major design offered Congress since 1776, and the first to feature the Bald Eagle. Another form of the eagle, the European two-headed variety, had been suggested and strongly rejected quite early in the search. At what point the bird first appeared in a more nationally acceptable form is where the mystery lies. The respected work by Quaife, Weigand and Appleman, entitled *The History of the United States Flag*, may shed some light as it states, referring to the 1782 committee, that: "Congress still had reservations about the design, however, and on June 13 following turned over to Charles Thomson, its secretary, the entire collection of reports and designs prepared by all three committees . . ." The authors then say that Thomson went on to adopt certain items from the different reports and designs previously submitted and came up with a combination of elements which he then turned over to Barton for delineation. Whether Thomson, Barton or parties unknown first thought of supplanting the offending two-headed eagle with a native bird may never be known.

Getting back to Medicus, it was an effort to provide at least a partial answer to all this that led the respected collector to his rash assumption, probably resulting from his thinking that the adoption of the eagle was in some way connected with the Declaration of Independence. As it happens, the Deodat Williams listing, which stems from a 1913 book on silver, does not even mention which part of 1776 the advertisement appeared in precisely. (Supposing it appeared before the 4th of July?)

We can sense to some degree Medicus' frustration with the situation and his desperation to find an answer, which resulted in his singling out the eagle from a list of other sword mountings being offered by Williams. After all, why the discrimination? Why not an "American" panther? Williams made those, too.