

James Conning, Confederate Sword Maker

by R. E. Neville, Jr.

It is indeed appropriate, I think, that this famous old southern town, deeply steeped in the rich history and tradition of the American Civil War, or War Between the States, or Second War of Independence, or as my dear grandmother used to say "Our Late War of Northern Aggression", is the setting for these brief remarks about an obscure southern shop-keeper; a transplanted New Yorker, if you please, whose small sword factory was so typical of many scattered throughout the south. Though the entire output of the Conning Factory was in all probability not equal to the weekly production in one of the large northern establishments, Conning and his fellow makers did contribute significantly to the Southern war effort.

Young Mr. James Conning, silversmith, late of New York City, arrived in Mobile, Alabama, in late 1840 or early 1841. He lost no time in establishing himself in business as a dealer, importer and repairer of watches, jewelry, silver and "fancy goods of all description." This was no mean feat for a fellow barely twenty-one years old. Conning's operation seems to have prospered from the start as the Mobile City directories of the 1840's and 1850's show an ever increasing number of clerks, jewelers and bookkeepers employed at Conning's establishment. Even Williams Robertson, lithographer and master engraver, was employed by Conning in the mid 1850's. The romantic picture of the leather-aproned Paul Revere-like artisan toiling away in a small one man shop to produce masterpieces of American hand-wrought silver is appealing, but unfortunately quite far from the fact, as most of the pieces of silver bearing the Conning mark were produced in New York or other locations outside Mobile.

The Mexican War brought an intense ground swell of martial spirit to Mobile. The local militia companies drilled almost daily in the streets and grand reviews and military soirees were a weekly occurrence. The young gentry turned out with gusto and the Mobile newspapers gleefully reported the ceremony and pageantry of the send-offs given the militiamen as they left Mobile for Mexican Service.

Conning, always with an eye for things military, offered a wide variety of goods for the gentleman soldier and his "Military Emporium" was a bee-hive of martial activity. His ads of the period offer everything from buckles to braid. Conning himself served as Orderly Sergeant of the prestigious Washington Light Infantry.

The end of the Mexican War signaled the beginning of unparalleled prosperity for Mobile. Cotton was king and the city had the look of a boom town. Conning's business flourished and his establishment became a regular stop for the plantation owners along the Alabama and Tombig-

(Much of the descriptive material was inadvertently left out of this article in *Bulletin 38*. The article is here printed in its entirety, with thanks to Mr. Neville for resubmitting it.)

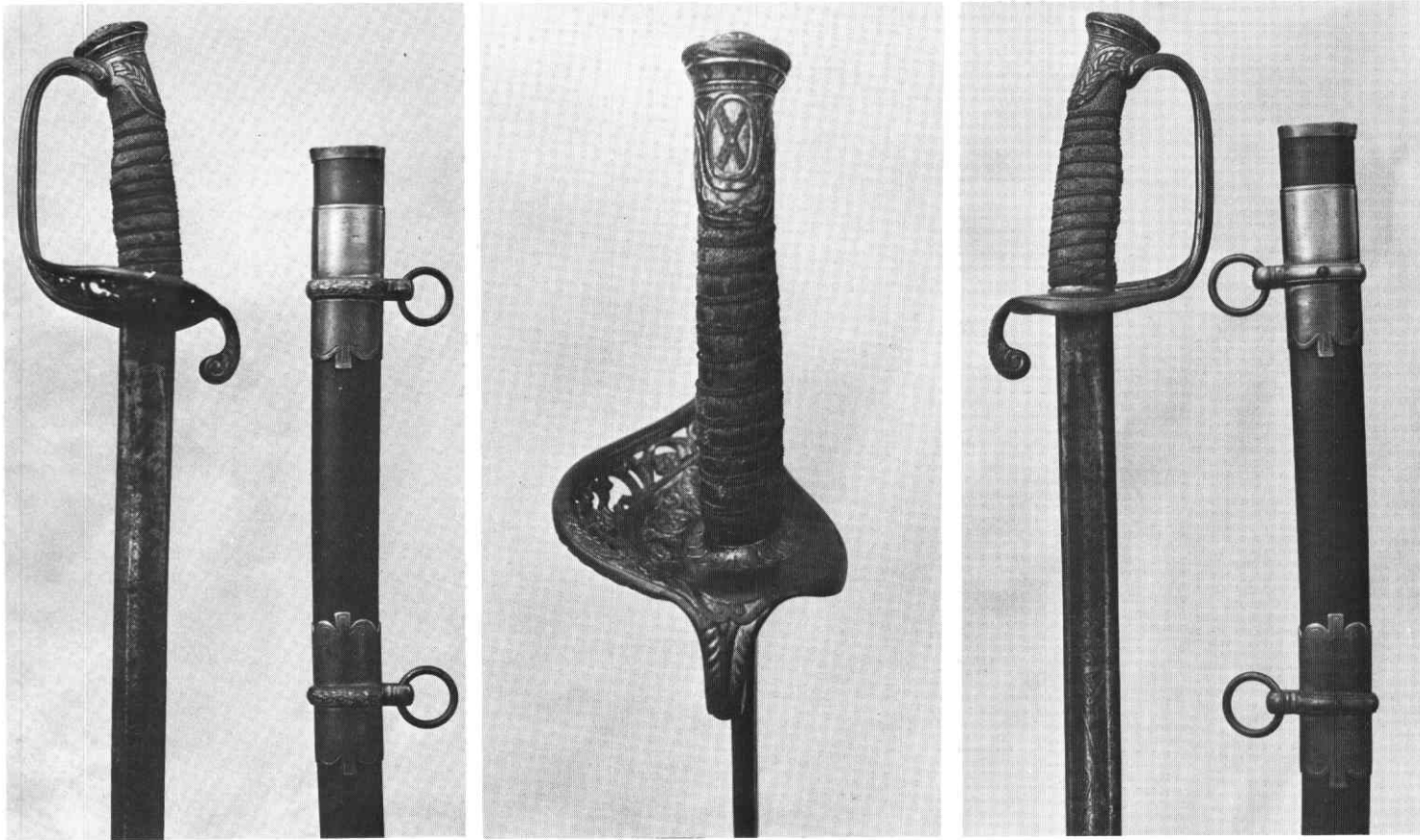


bee Rivers on their visits to Mobile. As the 1850's drew to a close Conning's newspaper ads began to reflect an at first subtle change. Gradually the Navy Colt and Sharps Rifle became as much or more of a stock item as the silver service or other so-called "fancy goods". By late 1860 Conning was advertising a complete line of military goods including buttons, braid, swords, firearms and just about anything else that the young members of the newly formed Alabama Volunteer Corps would want to give themselves just that extra bit of dash or ferocity.

The secession of Alabama and the formation of the Confederate States of America turned Mobile into an armed camp overnight. Military companies sprang up with amazing speed and the demand for arms and equipment was enough to warm the heart of any merchant. At about this time, faced with a shutoff of his supplies from the north, Conning decided to become a sword manufacturer himself.

Through the influence of his good friend Col. William A. Buck of Mobile, Conning was able to secure the services of one Jacob Faser of Macon, Mississippi. Had this happy circumstance not come about, there would have in all probability never been any swords produced in Mobile bearing Conning's name. From here on the story of Conning and his sword manufacturing is the story of Jacob Faser, and this remarkable and talented man bears a much closer look.

Jacob Faser: artist, goldsmith, musician, silversmith, gunsmith, politician and sword maker - quite a few hats for one individual to wear, but surprisingly he seems to have achieved better than average proficiency in all of these fields. Faser, a German emigrant, came to the U.S. in 1828 with his family. They settled in Philadelphia and when he was old enough, Jacob was apprenticed to F. W. Widmann, whose sword making activities have been so well documented by our esteemed fellow member Ralph



The sword making ability of Jacob Faser is well demonstrated by this example of a Confederate Field Officer Sword produced by Faser after his return to Macon. Note the quality of the casting and finishing. A particularly fine feature is the cameo-like representation of the Confederate St. Andrews Cross on the pommel cap. The blade is nicely etched in military and floral motifs including a large "CS" in a sunburst design. The etching includes "J Faser Macon Miss" in two lines on the obverse ricasso. The grips are covered in shark skin wrapped with twisted brass wire. Unfortunately, the scabbard is a replacement.

Arnold. Faser and Widmann must have been rather close as Widmann amended his will to bequeath his pattern books and certain other items to Faser. After Widmann's death Faser worked for the Philadelphia firm of Wm. H. Horstmann for a time then moved to Macon, Mississippi, where he resided, working as a silversmith and gunsmith until he came into Conning's employment.

Faser commenced work for Conning on June 28, 1861. A sword factory was established at the corner of Dauphin and Water Sts. in downtown Mobile. Fourteen workmen were employed with Faser as Foreman. The Mobile Foundry of Parks (or Parker) and Lyons was contracted with to produce the blades, the rest of the manufacturing and assembling being carried out in Conning's factory under the direct supervision of Faser. All patterns and tooling-up

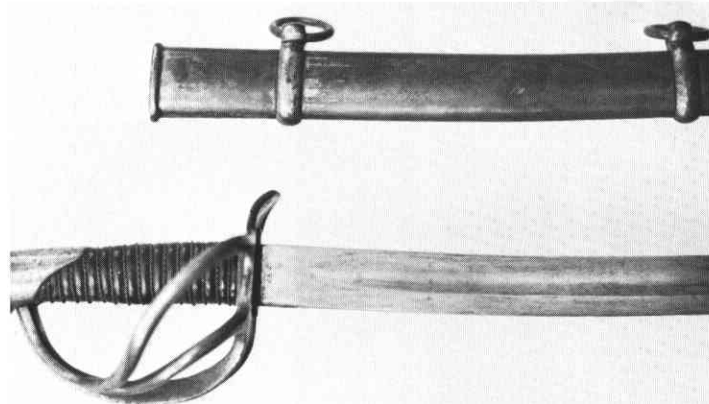
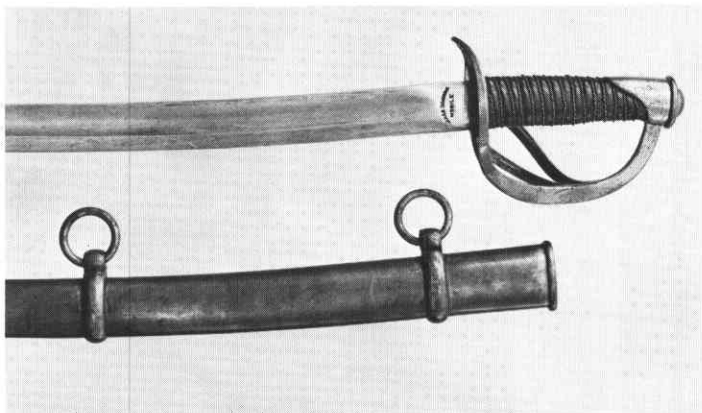
procedures were also the work of Faser. Within a matter of weeks the factory was in production — a testimony to Faser's ability and expertise.

The relationship between Conning and Faser seems to have been stormy from the first, with the main bone of contention being money. Conning, a rather tight-fisted individual, was reluctant to compensate Faser to the extent that Faser thought proper and by the end of 1862 Faser seems to have severed his ties with Conning and returned to Macon, where he lived for many years, serving as Mayor of that fair city in the 1870's.

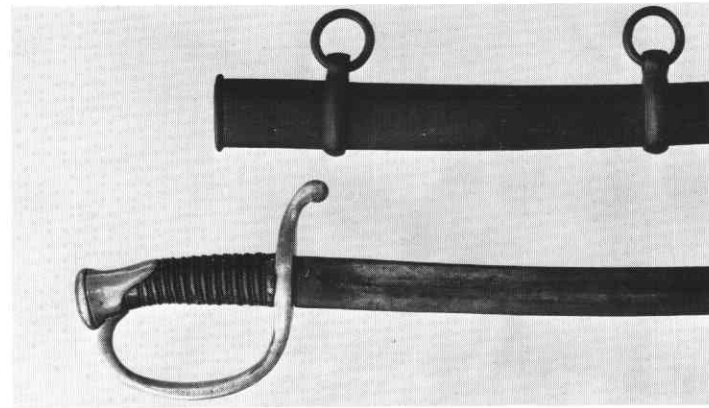
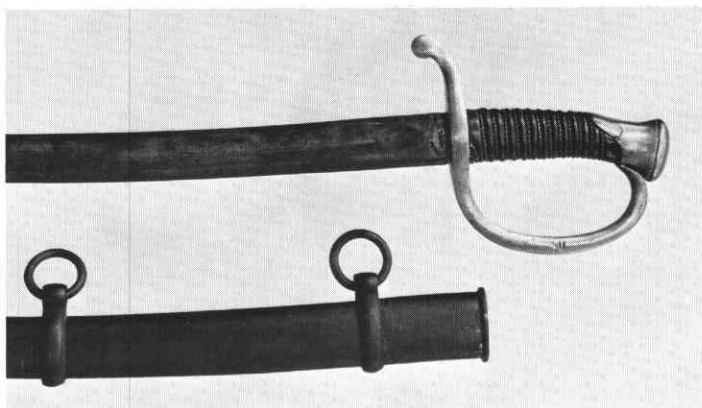
It is my belief that most, if not all Conning swords were produced during that period when Faser was employed by Conning.

*Made by
James Conning
Mobile*

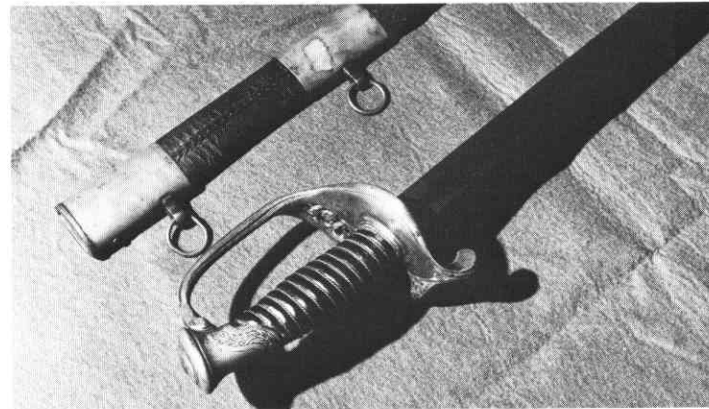
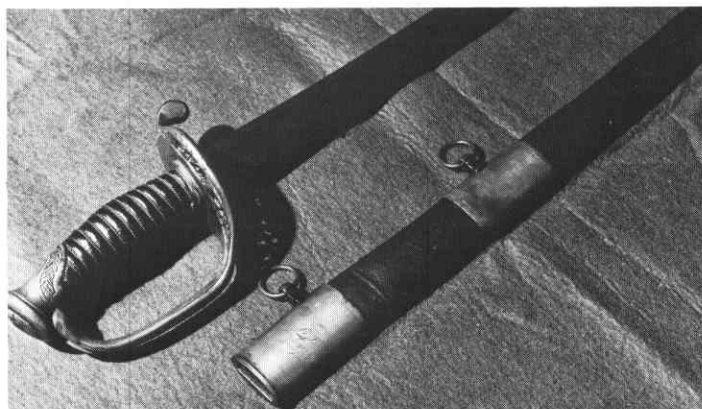
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*James Conning
Mobile
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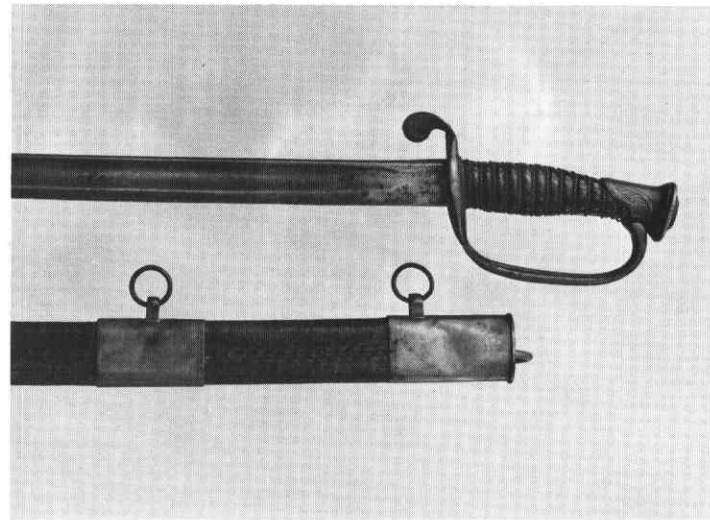
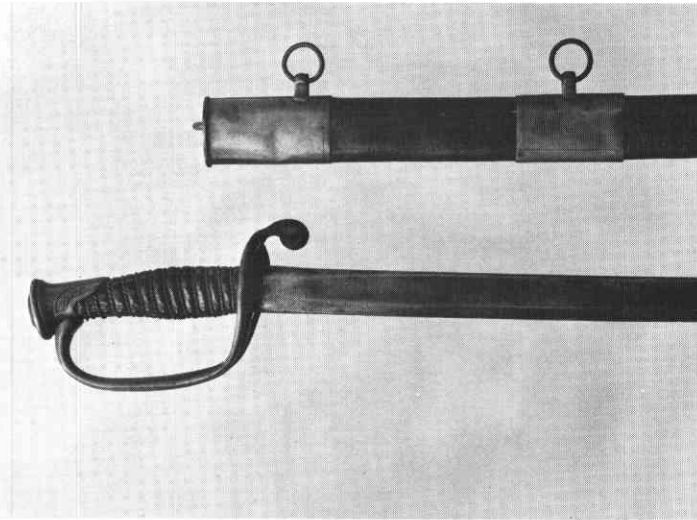
The most common Conning sword, if any can be called that, is the cavalry saber. It is basically a copy of the U.S. Pattern of 1840 Heavy Dragoon Saber. The illustrated example, serial no. 252 shows the Conning Cavalry Saber as it is usually found. The blade is 36 inches long and the 20 or so other Conning Sabers known to me also conform to this blade length. The maker's name in a semi-circle over "Mobile" is deeply stamped on the reverse ricasso. All genuine Conning Cavalry Sabers seen have been marked in this manner. In addition to the maker's name, the blade is also marked with the number 252 on the obverse ricasso. On some examples, this number is found on the back of the blade where it butts up against the guard. It is my belief that this is a true serial number indicative of number made up to that point. This number is also found on the pommel cap and on the top rear of the guard near the grip. The leather covered grip is wrapped with twisted brass wire, usually of a high copper content. The scabbard is completely unmarked. Lowest serial no. observed on a Conning Cavalry Saber thus far is 8; the highest is 497. For some reason most surviving examples seem to fall into the 200 serial range. It is tempting to speculate that perhaps 500 were produced.



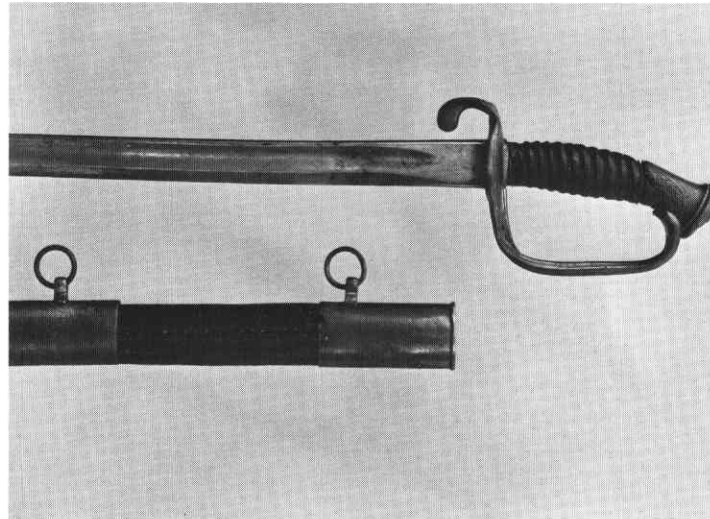
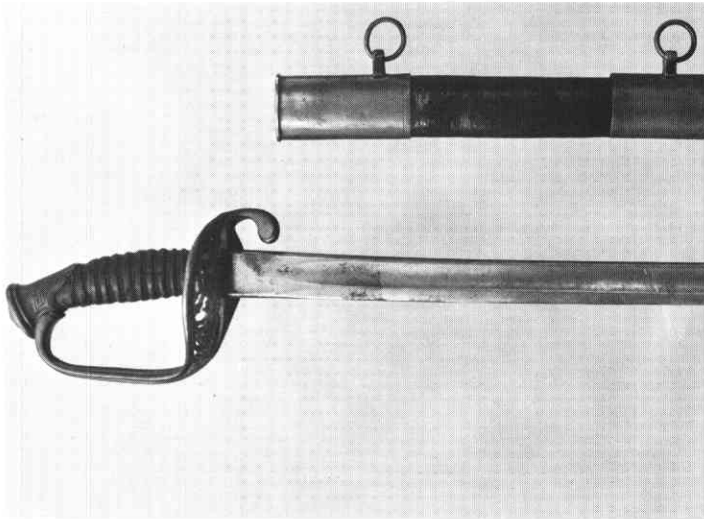
From the most common type of Conning Sword, we move to the scarcest; the mounted artillery saber. The few known examples are almost identical. The blades are a uniform 28 inches, this one unfortunately having been shortened slightly at some time during its use. The maker's marks are applied to the reverse ricasso exactly as in the case of the cavalry saber, but no serial number is found, though a large two or three digit number is found stamped on the reverse side of the knucklebow. This is believed to be a rack number or unit number of some sort and not a serial number. One other interesting marking is found on these sabers. The obverse side of the knucklebow is stamped "State Of Alabama 1862" in one line, indicating production under contract to the state. As with the cavalry sabers, the scabbards are completely unmarked. Grips are varnished and wrapped with twisted brass wire, never having been leather wrapped. Original production is unknown but judging from the survivors, it must have been small indeed.



We now move to the officer's swords produced in Conning's Factory. Two variants of foot officer swords are known. The type most frequently seen, though both types are scarce; is illustrated by this fine specimen from the collection of Mr. Jim Harris. The guard casting is of a floral design reminiscent of the U.S. Pattern of 1850 Foot Officer Sword of which it is a creditable copy. The blade is 30 inches long and unetched as are most Conning Swords. Other examples known to me have blades varying in length from 29½ inches to 31 inches. The grips are leather covered and wrapped with twisted brass wire. The serial number, in this case 204 is found stamped on the under front of the guard near the blade. This number is repeated on the brass mounts of the leather scabbard. Note that the lugs for the carrying rings are soldered directly to the mounts with no encircling band. This arrangement would appear to be rather flimsy, but I have never encountered a Conning with one or both of these lugs missing. The maker's name and "Mobile" is hand engraved on the reverse scabbard throat. These markings vary slightly from sword to sword though all are basically the same general style. These drawings (page 36) illustrate two typical examples of these markings. The obverse scabbard throat is often engraved with a presentation inscription or at least the original owner's name or initials. Total production of this pattern is unknown but I estimate it to be somewhat under 500.



A second type of foot officer sword bearing Conning's name is known. I have observed five examples, just about all identical. This one is typical. The blade is 29½ inches long, etched in a floral pattern which includes the original owner's name. Other examples known to me have blades varying from 29½ inches to 30 inches. The guard is cast in a floral design differing somewhat from the other pattern of Conning Foot Officer Sword. This design is suggestive of the work of Leech and Rigdon, but enough other characteristics are Conning that I believe it to be of Mobile manufacture. Scabbard and markings are of the same type and style as of the other Conning Foot Officer Pattern. The serial number 38 is stamped on the brass scabbard mounts and on the under front of the guard where it is just about obscured by the blade. The grips are leather covered and wrapped with twisted brass wire. Total production is unknown, though it may be significant to note that no example has been observed with serial number above two digits.



This brings us to the final basic pattern of Conning sword: the field and staff officer pattern. Conning's Field and Staff is a creditable copy of the U.S. 1850 issue and as with his other types conforms fairly well with Confederate Regulations which were largely copied from those of the U.S. A typical example shown here has a 32 inch blade, unetched. The brass basket guard is cast in a floral-rose design with the letters "CS" between the branches of the guard. The grips are leather covered, and wrapped with twisted brass wire. Serial number 260 is found on the lower front of the guard, reverse ricasso of blade and on the brass scabbard mounts. Maker's marks are of the same style and location as those of the foot officer pattern. The brass mounted leather scabbard is also the same as that of the foot officer sword. Original production is unknown, a fair guess is probably around 250.

These then are the basic types of swords which were produced in Conning's Factory. Swords bearing Conning's name which do not conform to these types fall into one of three categories. First, swords of other makers have been observed bearing Conning markings. These are noted mostly on eagle head Mexican War Period pieces. I believe that such marks indicate a sword which was sold through Conning's "Military Emporium". Secondly, Conning, or at least Jacob Faser, surely produced some few one of a kind special order pieces. Extreme care should be taken to ascertain if such purported swords do indeed exhibit the manufacturing characteristics of Conning's Factory. The third

and unfortunately largest category of these non-conforming Connings is that of fakes and fabrications.

After the war Conning lost no time in re-establishing his retail business. By the first of 1866, he had moved back to his old location and his ads for silver, watches and fancy goods once again appear regularly in the local papers. Conning continued in business until his death in the early 1870's. At that time the business passed to his nephew who apparently lacked the business acumen of his uncle: by 1880 a local institution had passed from the Mobile scene forever.