

United States Naval Academy Fencing Foils

By Henry A. Truslow

The silver mounted fencing foils discussed in this presentation began their life as the first prize in a fencing contest held in 1867 at the Naval Academy here in Annapolis. I say “here in Annapolis” because the Academy was moved to Newport, Rhode Island at the start of the Civil War.

As the country edged toward war in early 1861, many citizens of Maryland exhibited strong sympathy for the cause of the South. In spite of these feelings, Maryland did not secede from the Union and the United States government had no way of knowing on what side Maryland would fall. Consequently, plans were made to move the Naval Academy to the safety of Newport. The firing on Fort Sumter took place before the move was made. On April 25, 1861 the frigate USS Constitution carried the Midshipmen and staff of the Academy to Newport. They were to remain in Newport until August 9, 1865 when they returned to Annapolis.

During the course of the war, the Academy had 400 graduates serve in the Union Navy and 95 in the Confederate Navy. Of these 495 graduates, 23 were either killed in battle or died of wounds.

The job of rebuilding the Academy in Annapolis fell on the shoulders of Rear Admiral David D. Porter. He was appointed Superintendent on September 9, 1865. Porter is given credit for introducing a varied curriculum to the Midshipmen. One of the most innovative, was the inclusion of athletics as part of the regimen. The introduction of a fencing contest was part of this effort.

The subject foils were the first prize at a contest in 1867. Jennifer A. Bryan, Ph.D., and Head of Special Collections and Archivist at the Nimitz Library at the Academy provided the following information which appeared in the *Army and Navy Journal* of June 8, 1867:

“(May 29) . . . There was a contest between different members of the first class for a prize of two beautiful silver-mounted rapiers, which, after several trials to determine the victor, were carried off by Midshipman E. Dennison, Midshipman C.H. Arnold, being pronounced second best.” (Figure 1)

They are very definitely beautiful rapiers. The hand guard is made of silver and formed to spell out “U S N A.” (Figures 2 and 3) The grips are also made of silver. The most remarkable feature of these foils is the very fine engraving on the grips. It is hardly noticeable. As a matter of fact when these came up for sale at an auction house the catalog made no mention of the engraving. I am certain that the engraving was unseen.



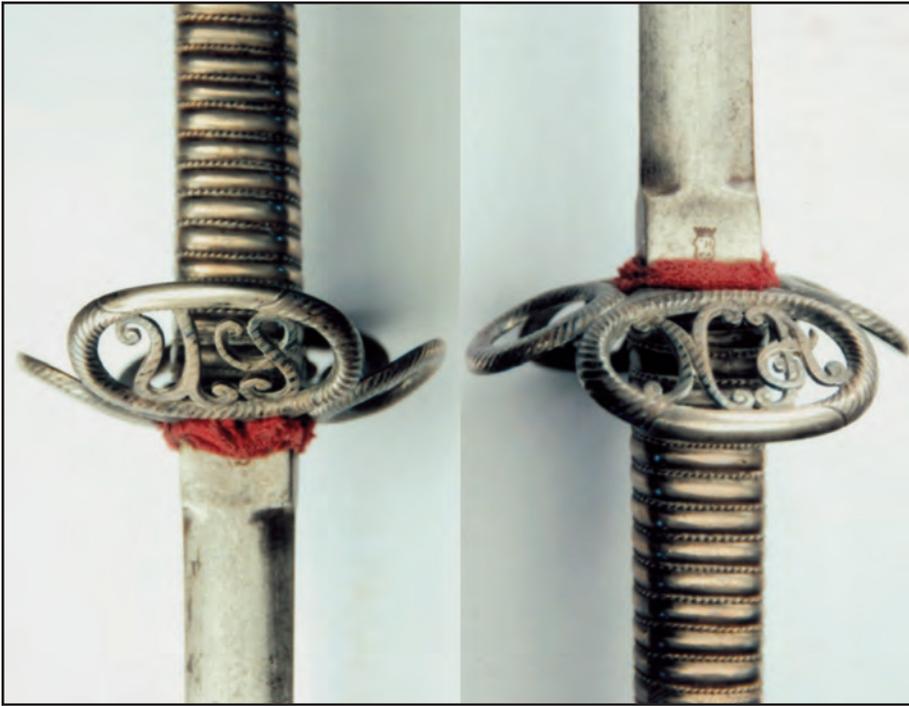
On the grip of one foil the following is engraved (Figure 4): “Presented to the Best Swordsman of the Class of ’67 by Vice Admiral D.D. Porter U.S.N.” On the grip of the other is engraved “Presented to Jessie Hawes by the Winner.”

Being a romantic, I thought these engraved sentiments would lead to a great story of romance and the sea. This was not to be. (Figures 5 and 6)

Erasmus Dennison was born in Ohio and was appointed to the Academy from there. He was admitted on September 26, 1863 at the age of 16 years, 9 months. His career as a Midshipman was without note. His records indicate that throughout his years at the Academy he was put on



Figure 1. 1st prize silver mounted rapiers.



Figures 2 and 3. Silver hand guard.

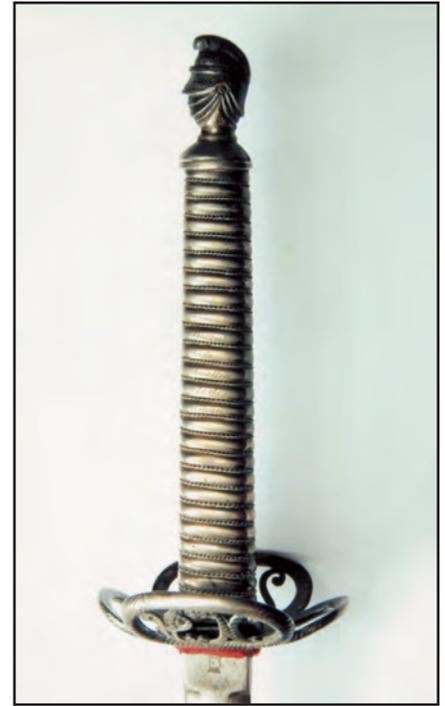
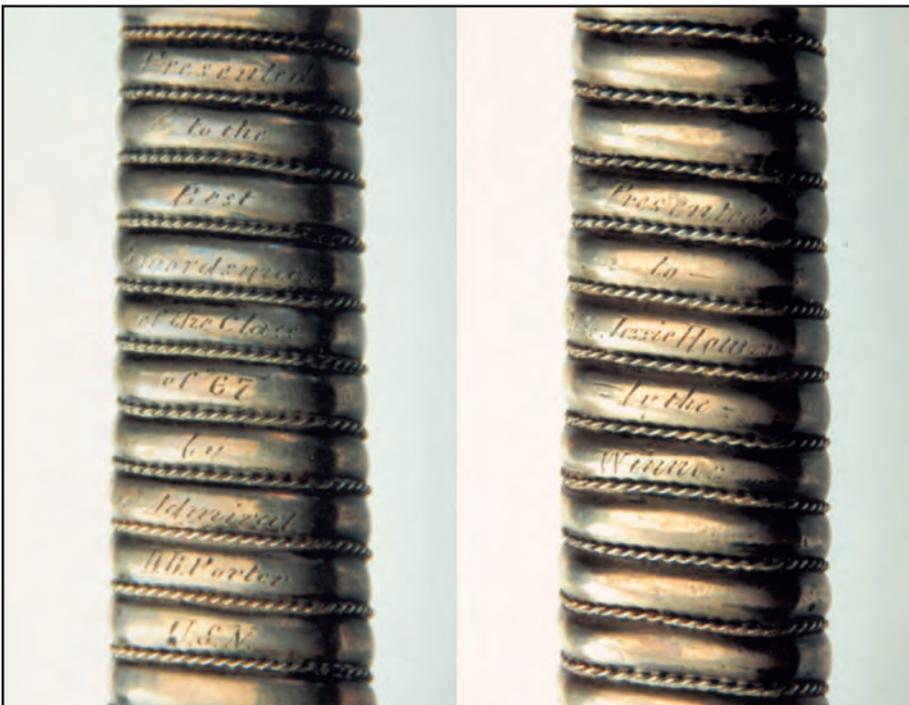


Figure 4. Engraved hand guard.

report frequently for sleeping in church, talking in study hall, being out of uniform, not making his bed properly, not signing the liberty book, and loitering on the fore castle.

In spite of these missteps, he received the following report: "Conduct very good, very attentive on duty, truthful and reliable, attitude good."



Figures 5 and 6. Engraving texts.

Nothing is known of Jessie Hawes. I had hoped that she would have been Dennison's fiancée but have found no such connection.

A search of Dennison's service record has afforded little detail. Instead of a romantic story, Dennison's is tragic. The one letter in his service record is from Captain Phelps of the U.S. Steamer Saranac to the Secretary of the Navy. It reads:

"Sir, I have respectfully to report that Mater Erasmus Dennison, U.S. Navy, attached to this ship, committed suicide in San Francisco, Cal. On the 18th instant, by shooting himself with a pistol."

The date of the letter was April 21, 1873 just six years after he won the prize as the best swordsman of his class.