NOTES ON TOMAHAWKS, HATCHETS AND BOARDING AXES USED BY AMERICANS

By.....Harold L. Peterson

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The Indians were by no means the only groups in America to use the tomahawk. Explorers, colonists, soldiers and sailors, trappers and fur traders all found it a useful tool and weapon. Military use of the axe in America, of course, dates back to the Vikings who favored it as a weapon, and even one mass murder of five women with an axe among the Vikings on American soil is recorded in the sagas. Spanish soldiers of the early 16th century also carried battle axes through the southern states.

When the English and Dutch colonists arrived in the next century the tradition of the axe as a military weapon had become obsolete in their native land. Yet, in 1641, Director Kieft of New Netherlands directed that Negroes in the colony were to be armed with "small axes" and half-picks to aid in the war against the Indians. Soldiers on the other hand, were normally armed with a gun and a sword. Experiences here, however, soon demonstrated that the hatchet was in many ways a more useful weapon to carry on expeditions into the wilderness than the sword, for it could serve utilitarian purposes as well. At first it was decided that a certain number of men in each unit would exchange their swords for hatchets as for instance the decree of the Council of the colony of Connecticut in 1675: "It is ordered that ten good serviceable hatchets be provided in each county for the use of the army, and ten soldiers to carry them instead of swords." Before the end of the century militia laws almost universally specified that either a sword or a hatchet would be acceptable for military purpose. Since militiamen had to provide their own weapons, there was an understandable tendency to select the hatchet which was cheaper than the sword and which could also be used around the house when not needed for military service.

The 18th centruy brought some modifications to this trend in military regulations, but did not change it materially, until the Revolutionary War. Militia laws began to specify bayonets as well as swords or tomahawks. Then the swords began to disappear from the lists leaving only the bayonet and tomahawk which were sometimes carried in a double frog on a shoulder belt. For a time in 1776 Virginia even directed its cavalry to carry tomahawks. During the Reolutionary War regular infantry generally abandoned the hatchet, but light infantry and riflemen who did not have bayonets continued to carry tomahawks throughout the conflict.

The American colonials were not alone in their use of the tomahawk in warfare. French troops and their Indian allies alike who moved against Fort Clinton in Washington County, New York in 1747 were instructed to fire a volley then charge axe in hand. The British light infantry adopted the tomahawk in 1759 and carried it in a rough buttoned case hung in a fron on the left side of the belt between the coat and waistcoat. This tomahawk became a standard part of the British light infantry equipment and was carried by them throughout the Revolution.

Following the Revolution, riflemen in the American Army continued to carry tomahawks. In 1793 the quantities of tomahawks in various arsenals was listed:

West Point	45
Philadelphia	6
Carlisle, Pa.	1007 with handles
	1019 without handles
Ft. Washington, Western Territory	236

Compared with other arms available, this was an impressive inventory. As late as 1819 there were still 1,074 tomahawks at Carlisle Barracks.

Soldiers on the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806 to explore the newly acquired Louisiana Territory from St. Louis to the Pacific carried tomahawks believed to have been made in the national armory at Harpers Ferry. At this time there were no regualr riflemen in the American Army, such troops having been discontinued with the abandonment of the Legion system in 1796. But when riflemen were reintroduced in 1808 they were again issued tomahawks and tomahawk belts which they continued to use throughout the War of 1812. Following the War, special units of riflemen were again discontinued, and with them the tomahawks disappeared from the Army as a regulation weapon, though the hatchet still continues to be issued as a tool to the present day.

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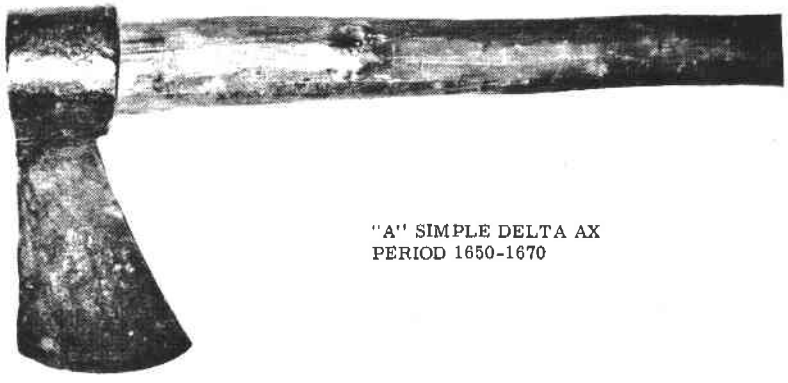
Outside the military, hatchets or tomahawks were long carried by traders, trappers, explorers and frontiersman of all sorts. This continued well into the 19th century when the trapper, Osborne Russell, noted that his associates frequently carried a hatchet fastened to the pommels of their saddles. Leaders of wagon trains following the Santa Fe trail in the 1840's advised each man in the companies to provide himself with a tomahawk. Still later the professional buffalo hunters who almost exterminated the great beasts in the West clung to their hatchets just as they did to their knives and rifles.

For the most part, the tomahawks carried by both soldiers and civilians were the typical simple hatchet or belt axe of the period. Hordes of hatchet heads from such military sites as Fort Ticonderoga reveal clearly the types of hatchet carried by both militiaman and regular. All kinds are there from the polless European styles through American types with well developed polls and ears. There are also doumented European styles through American types with well developed polls and ears. There are also documented specimens of spiked axes in such museums as Fort Ticonderoga, the Rhode Island Historical Society and Washington's Headquarters at Newburg, New York, which are known to have been used by whites. In the United States National Museum there is a hammer axe presented to Davy Crockett by the young men of Philadelphia, and there are other hammer specimens bearing U. S. marks indicating official issue. There are no extant specifications covering the tomahawks issued to United States riflemen at any period, and it may well be that some of these were either spiked or hammer axes. Formerly in the Norm Flayderman collection there is one unique tomahawk bearing a splendidly forged eagle head on its poll and the name "Jas. McTear", apparently the owner, engraved upon it.

Finally, it has long been thought that the pipe tomahawks were strictly for Indian use, but this is not entirely true either. In the Museum of the American Indian there is a specimen with inscriptions which would indicate it was owned by a colonial soldier. In the Hugh Fitzgerald collection is a more elaborate pipe tomahawk of 1800-1815 inlaid in gold and silver and engraved with an eagle and military trophies. This one is engraved "American Hose" along the edge and would seem to be intended for White use as were the swords of approximately the same period marked "American Light Horse".

Aside from these and other specimens of the pipe axe which appear to have been owned by men other than Indians there are persistent stories and legends that the white frontiersman and soldier frequently enjoyed the combination of weapon, tool and pipe in one implement, sometimes splitting the haft and chewing the wood for its tobacco flavor when his supply became exhausted and he could not replenish it.



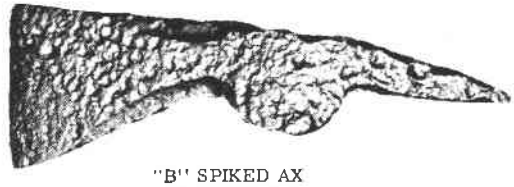
"A" SIMPLE DELTA AX
PERIOD 1650-1670

So much for the general discussion on the use of tomahawks by the whites, now let me show you a couple with comments on them. The simple Delta axe or hatchet (Pic. A.) which was most commonly used form- from the time it first appeared about 1700 until, (and that is being used by whites because it is still being used in Canada and Mexico) the American form with a poll, the thickened part at the top developed about the 18th century then the American form began to become more popular with the whites and this one remained popular with the Indians. The earliest version of this that you begin to find in sites around 1650-70 are about two to three times this size and the inventories refer to them weighing 2, 3, and 4 # apeace and still being called hatches, this one possibly weighs about a pound or very little more if any. All of the early ones before 1700 are big and when these lighter ones came along that you could carry easily and could be used for chopping kindling and swing much more easily as a weapon, the bigger ones got left home and consigned to more utilitarian tasks among the Indians and they began to call them Squaw axes and this stuck. You will find that the big one developed the name Squaw axes sometime during the 18th century and you will find the term used in documents at least the middle of the 1700s on, I haven't been able to get it back any further than that. Everytime you can pin it down it is one of the big ones and I have seen pictures taken as late as 1900 of Indian Squaws with these big axes. But prior to 1700 this was the only type (A) and is the type that Morgan's Riflemen carried in gread abundance and other riflemen and up until 1800 it is possibly the most common single type.

This one is interesting because of its lines of construction are very easily seen if you look at it. They took a strip of wrought iron wrapped it around a rod of some kind to make the eye and brought it around even

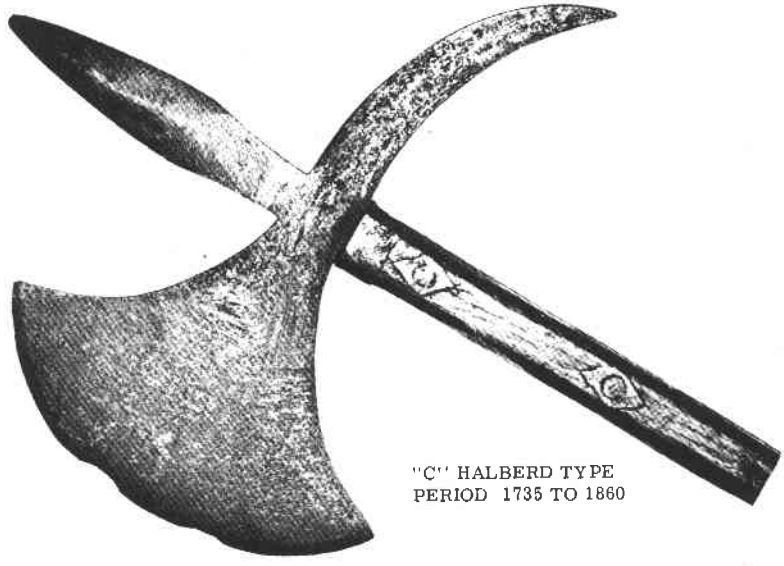
with the other end. Then they inserted a small piece of steel, forged it into one piece by hammering and dressed it off. This insertion of the steel edge is very important because "away back when" your shoddy dealers, fast buck artists (even in those days) were making them without putting the steel edge in and you find complaints to the Indian Commissioners as early as 1740 saying that "the axes you are giving us are no good, we take them home and cut with them and they won't hold an edge", let's look into it, and reports come back, "these are faulty axes without steel edges, made of nothing but wrought iron." You also found the same thing at Fort Laramie in the 1850's when the blacksmith at the fort, I think his name was John Beaudreaux, who used to make axes out of wagon tires, he even had the effrontery to stamp his initials on them, J. B.

Probably the next most common type of ax to be used in the 18th century by the Colonists and Frontiersmen was the Spiked Ax. (Pic. B.) There are infinite varieties of these spiked axes, in the Rhode Island Historical Society there is one documented as having been carried by a Rhode Island soldier in King George's War



"B" SPIKED AX
18th CENTURY

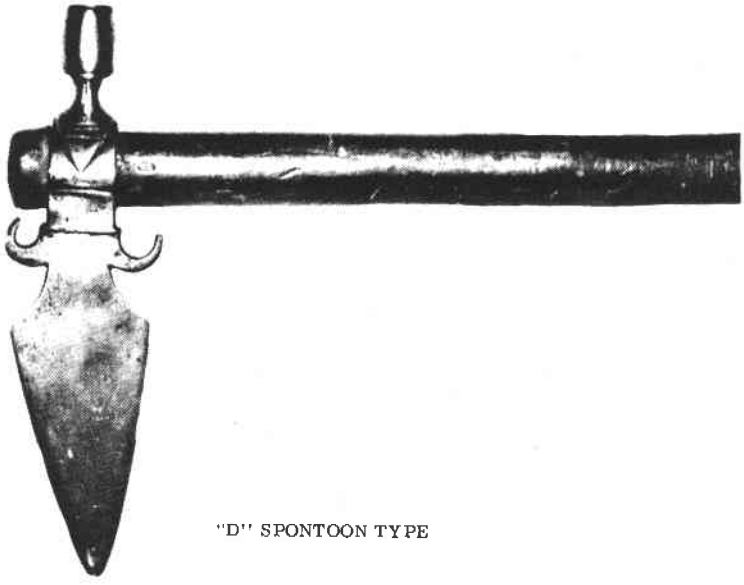
and there are other instances. I have run into only one account of the use of these in a fight which was in West Virginia where it was rested from an Indian by a defender of a blockhouse and drove the spike part into the Indian's back. This one was also popular among the Whites.



"C" HALBERD TYPE
PERIOD 1735 TO 1860

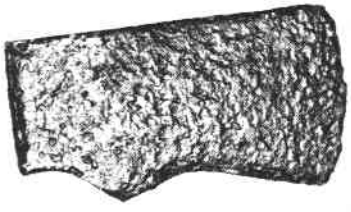
One of the few types that I think no White man ever used is the Halberd Type. (Pic. C.) This type developed probably between 1735 and 1740 and lasted maybe as late as 1860, this is the type you see in many 18th century prints. There is one very well known one of King Hendrick, Chief of the Mohawks, standing holding one like this and it was long the custom to make fun of the print saying that they were drawn by one who had never saw a tomahawk and was thinking of an oriental battle ax. This isn't true, the man knew exactly what he was drawing, he was drawing this type of a halberd battle ax and these type turn out in profusion in Indian sites and I know of about 20 of them. This is the only one that I have seen with it's original haft but they are shown in pictures and a number of them have come up from documented sites. They were obviously impractical, the Indian normally carried his tomahawk across his back in his belt and this extra point would stick him in the arm or stab him in the back and he quickly got tired of it. The white settlers were even quicker to sense that this was no good as it was almost impossible to use it as a weapon as it just wasn't efficient.

The other types that no White man ever used that the Indians did use were those made entirely of brass, pewter and other materials that were of no use as a weapon. Also I have never heard of the White use of the Spontoon Type tomahawk (Pic. D.). Again this was a fairly efficient weapon but the White soldier generally wanted something that he could use as a tool too and this is absolutely no good as a tool, whether it was the pipe variety or made without the pipe, so that this one was almost never used by the White soldiers.

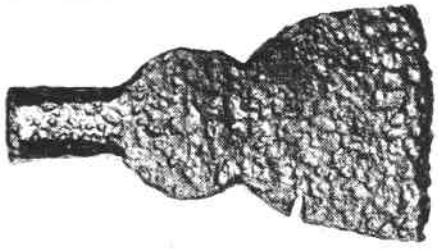


"D" SPONTOON TYPE

When you got into the 19th Century there is a hammer poll specimen marked U. S. Marked in big letters and each one has a makers mark but in every case they are to indistinct to decipher, there a couple in the Museum of American Indian and a couple in private collections. (Editors note.....the POLL is the head or heavy part of the ax opposite the blade) These were apparently the type issued about 1800, between 1790 and 1810. (Pic. E.) Then you began to get the full use of the American type with the heavy poll to counter-balance the blade. In Europe the felling ax stayed this way as they didn't have to do as much chopping as the Americans did, they didn't need the weight at the poll and as a result their axes had a tendency to wobble and the stroke didn't drive deeply. The Americans who were used to working with big timber soon began to put weight at the poll, so you begin to find American axes with this typical heavy top developing about 1850 to 1870. This one is quite fully developed, I have a number at home from Ticonderoga and other places where this (poll) is still thinner but this one is Civil War. At the time of the Civil War you have two

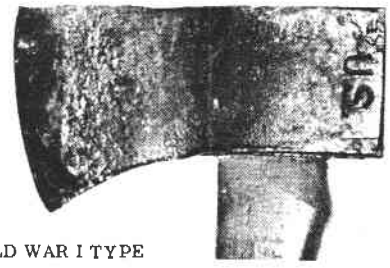


"E" HAMMER POLL TYPE
ISSUED ABOUT 1800

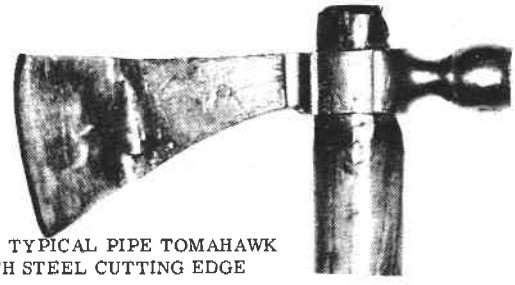


"F" CIVIL WAR HATCHET

principal hatchets issued by the Army, this one (Pic. E.) and this one (Pic. F.) and almost any time that you excavate a Civil War camp site or a battle-field, any place where there were large numbers of troops, if axes turn up they are these two forms. These both came from Brandy Station and used in 1863. It is interesting that although these were primarily tools I know of at least one instance where it was a weapon. Speaking from memory now and I may not have all the details exactly right, but in general this is the way it happened, one soldier in a Vermont Regiment was placed under arrest just before the Battle of Gettysburg, his sword was taken away from him, I have forgotten the charge against him but it was not very serious, but he was there and the third day, as he was obviously a part of Picketts Charge, he couldn't stand it any longer, technically breaking his arrest he grabbed a hatchet and went out with his unit to meet part of the charge. He succedded in finding a Confederate officer who he took over with the hatchet and secured a sword that way which he used for the rest of the battle. There is a statue to him on the field of Gettysburg showing him with an empty scabbard at his side and hatchet of this form lying at his feet. Here is the final form of the army ax (Pic. G.) this is World War I, you can see the differences the poll is even heavier, the ears have disappeared and there are other changes on it. This is the last type of army ax.



"G" WORLD WAR I TYPE



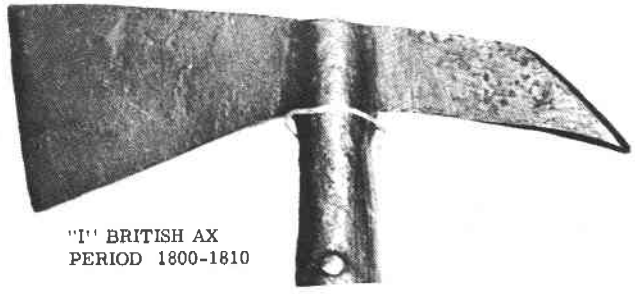
"H" TYPICAL PIPE TOMAHAWK
WITH STEEL CUTTING EDGE

I did want to say something while we are on the subject about the manufacture of hatchets. In this day and age as tomohawks have become more popular there has been greater and greater production of modern ones. I want to point out some of the things that are wrong with these replicas, you can either pass the word on or keep it to yourself. Indian tomahawks and American ones, when they were hafted almost invariably had a tapered eye and the handle was put in like a pick. It was put in from the top with a tapered haft just like a pick ax so when you swung it the head went up against a swelling portion of the haft so that it wouldn't come out. If you see a haft that is cut down in front and put in from the bottom side, look out for it. There are very few of them of that type that are right, at least it is a very sure sign that you want to be very careful that everything else on the specimen is right. And another characteristic that I have never seen done yet on a reproduction is that among your early axes, pipe axes that is, there is a thin shim of leather always inveriably between the head and the haft, it is characteristicly charred and almost carbonized, if that shim isn't there be very careful too. I have never seen a bonafide one that I can think of that didn't have this, they needed this as a gasket or seal. Another check is that if a tomahawk was used a long time and was allowed to sit the tast and the aroma of the tobacco will work it's way out of the wood into the hole in the stem and if you pick it up and inhale it you will get a very, very strong tobacco smell, you will recognize it as a very strong rancid tobacco smell. This isn't always true but will generally hold. Other aspects to look at of course are the way the piece is made, again all generalizations are false, including this one, but a pipe bowl on an original specimen will almost always be smoothed and dressed out, so will the inside of the eye. If you find a pipe bowl or the inside of the eye that is rough it is a time to be cautious and look at it very carefully, also look for the steel edge on a tomahawk that was made for use as a weapon. This will apply to those with the steel edge to those made before 1820. When you get into the ones used by the Plains Indians, the Plains Indians never went in forwarefare with a tomahawk to any great degree.

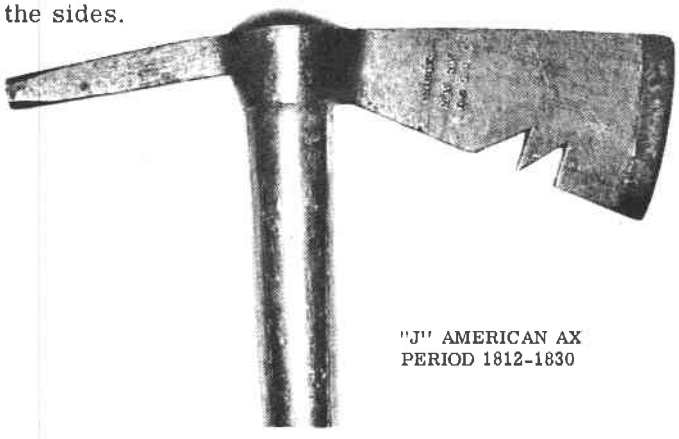
It is true that there are occasions where they were used, Marcus Whitman was killed in 1847 with a tomahawk, the Army Medical Museum has two skull collected in 1869 with tomahawk wounds but it is unusual as the Plains Indians on horse-back wanted a weapon for close combat he normally used the long double-pointed war club and it's supple handle. Thus you will find that from about 1840-50 on the tomahawk has a thin blade and look like they have never been sharpened as the blade is sometime about an eighth of an inch thick. This is the period when you get most of the solid brass and pewter heads and etc. So the fact that one of these axes is not functional is nothing to worry about but the earlier ones should be.

Now to switch from land warfare over to Navy, the sailors too for centuries have looked upon the hatchet as an essential tool and weapon and used in much the same way as the soldier used his. On sailing ships the rigging frequently became tangled as masts or arms were shattered in battle, ropes had to be cut quickly to clear out the debris and the hatchet was the obvious answer. Such naval battles also frequently ended as the vessels came together and the crew from one boarded the other to finish the action in hand-to-hand fighting. Here the hatchet, or boarding axe as it was usually called, was especially important. Nets or other obstructions were frequently raised to hinder any such boarding attempt, and these had to be cut and cleared away with the axe which then became a weapon in the fighting that followed. Landing parties also normally carried such axes as a tool or defensive weapon in any emergency they might encounter.

Little is known about the naval boarding axes of the 17th and early 18th centuries, but by the late 18th century established patterns had developed which seem to have been based on long tradition. The spiked axe was almost universal, and there were iron straps either forged as part of the head or passing through the eye which ran back along the haft to protect it against cuts and to add strength. On British and American boarding axes these straps were normally on the sides.



"I" BRITISH AX
PERIOD 1800-1810

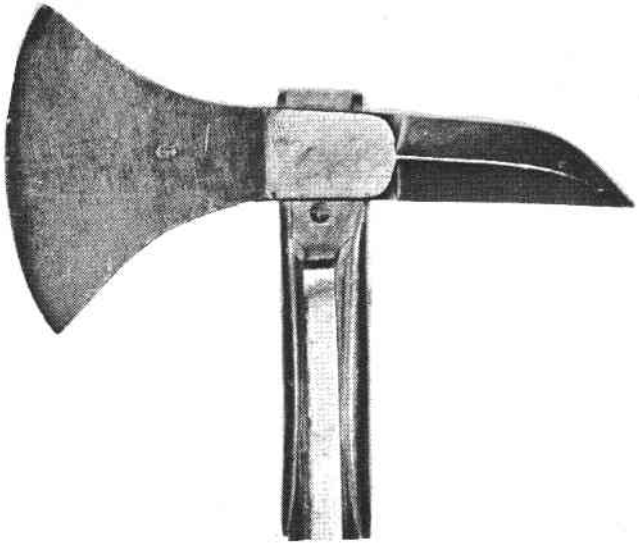


"J" AMERICAN AX
PERIOD 1812-1830

On French specimens they were often along the top and bottom. During the 19th century British and American axes usually had notches cut in the back of the blade above the (Picture "H" shows a British specimen with the strap forged on the sides of the haft to give it strength. Picture "I" is an American one, again the straps are on the sides but these go inside the eye. Picture "J" is a French one and here you have the straps as separate pieces that come thru the eye but they are on the top and bottom of the haft, not on the

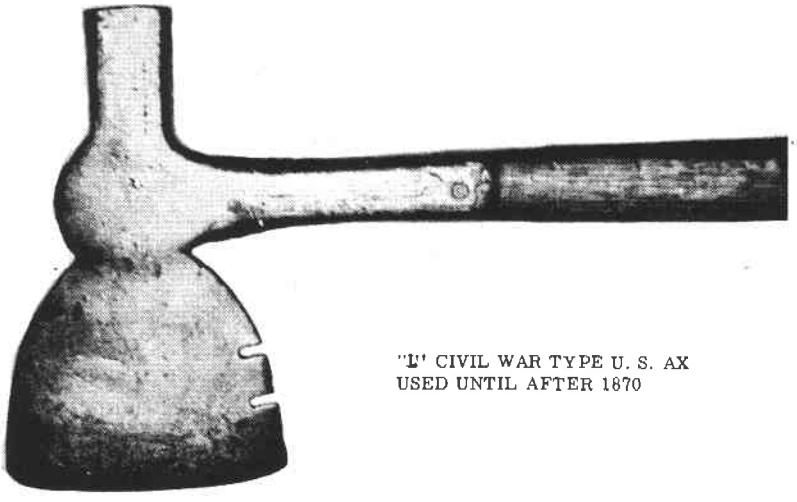
sides as the American and British ones. You will also note on the French ax that it has a belt hook.) heel for use in snarling lines or gripping gunwales or, in later types, as nail pullers. Aboard ship boarding axes were kept in racks, issued as need arose, then returned to the racks. Some few were provided with belt hooks, notably by the French, but this does not seem to have been the practice either in Great Britain or the United States. About the time of the Civil War, the United States abandoned the spiked axe in favor of one with a hammer head and at the same time adopted a leather frog with a button-over strap so that it could be carried securely on the waistbelt. During the Civil War, boarding axes were issued to specified crew members, but soon the boarding axe ceased to be a weapon. Naval tactics changed with the introduction of steam ships and long range cannon. Boarding actions were no longer practical and wooden masts and rope rigging also disappeared. The boarding axe of the late 19th century was a vestiege, useful only for emegencies and as such soon relegated to the tool box.

These statements concerning the evolution of the boarding axe in the United States Navy have necessarily been general and somewhat vague. Such axes were not covered in regulations. In the early years of the new nation, contracts were usually let for the outfitting of a specific ship, but the language in these agreements stated only that the axes were to be made according to a pattern which was to be supplied to the contractor and has since vanished. Thus it is known, for instance, that in 1797 the Constitution and the Constellation each received 100 boarding axes, and it also possible to know that in 1816 various contractors from Massachusetts to Virginia were offering to supply such axes at prices ranging from 62-1/2 cents to seven dollars each. But it is impossible to determine the exact pattern in any given case. Dated specimens and collateral evidence supply the principal data, and though the outlines are clear, the details are missing.



"K" FRENCH AX
PERIOD 1828

This about covers my subject of Tomahawks and Naval Boarding Axes and I hope that it has proven of some interest to you. I thank you for your attention.



"L" CIVIL WAR TYPE U. S. AX
USED UNTIL AFTER 1870