

A REVIEW OF ALL OF THE KNOWN SURVIVING SWORDS OF GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON

How Many Swords Did George Washington Wear at His Inauguration?

by Merrill Lindsay

In January of 1973 the U.S. Bicentennial Society asked me to identify and authenticate weapons which played a distinguished part in the history of the Revolutionary War period. After consulting with other arms experts, not the least of whom is sword specialist Harold L. Peterson, Chief Curator of the National Park Service, historian and author of *The American Sword 1775-1945*, *Arms and Armor in Colonial America*, etc. I proposed that the U.S. Bicentennial Society reproduce the silver hilted inaugural sword of George Washington which is in the Washington Headquarters Museum at Morristown, New Jersey. This sword is one of the best documented and authenticated of all of the surviving Washington possessions. (figures 1 through 4).

The sword remained in the Washington family, passing from eldest son to eldest son until the death of the latter in 1882. In 1889 the widow, Martha D. Washington, sold the sword to the Washington Association of New Jersey for display at Washington's Headquarters where it has remained until the present time. The sword has a solid silver boat-shell guard and knuckle guard, pommel pas-d'ane and quillons. The grip is silver wire wound over a wooden mandrel. It is a court sword typical of the latter third of the eighteenth century. It has a working colichemarde blade — wide at the forte for strength against a blow and light and narrow in the foible for ease of thrusting. General Washington seems to have favored this shape as several of his surviving sword blades are similar. The flattened hexagonal blade, 34¾" long, was etched, blued and gilt at the forte. The London furbisher, who struck the tang twice beside a filed out Solingen mark most probably was cutler William Loxham (1740-1811) as the bold stamped initials are "W.L.". The goldsmith who made the silver hilt has been identified by the London Goldsmiths' Company as James Perry (who worked 1767-1777 at 10 Crown Court, Fleet Street). Perry had listed himself with the Goldsmiths' Company as a sword hilt maker. The date stamp on the *entorsade* hilt (swirled grooves) is for the year 1769-1770. Because of the war, it must have come to



America before 1775. It is said to have been given to Washington by fellow Virginian, Major General William Darke (1736-1801) an old friend of Washington who served with him in the Braddock campaign and during the Revolution. A romantic account of the sword being used to kill Indians is undoubtedly apocryphal although Darke did serve under General Saint Clair in the campaign against the Seminoles in 1791 when he was wounded and his son killed.

Martha D. Washington, herself a descendant of Colonel Samuel Washington, youngest of Washington's nephews, provided a signed statement which accompanied the inaugural sword, small clothes, knee buckles and shoe buckles. She writes, "My husband, Dr. Lawrence Augustine Washington never put anything in writing about these relics, but he has always told me and our children that his father told him General Washington in person gave him the suit, etc. when he (L.A. Washington) was living at Mount Vernon because of their being worn on the day of his inauguration, and that they have never been out of the possession of the Washington family."

This statement signed by Martha D. Washington is dated "State of Texas, April 12, 1889."

The statement does have more than family tradition to go on. With the sword came the other articles that Washington had worn at the inauguration, including his inaugural suit now in Federal Hall National Memorial in New York and his shoe and knee buckles. Of equal importance in substantiating the authenticity of the inaugural sword is the relationship of the recipient of the sword from Washington. The General gave the sword to Lawrence Augustine Washington, his oldest brother's son and his eldest nephew — his nearest and closest collateral descendent. Washington, having been born an Englishman and

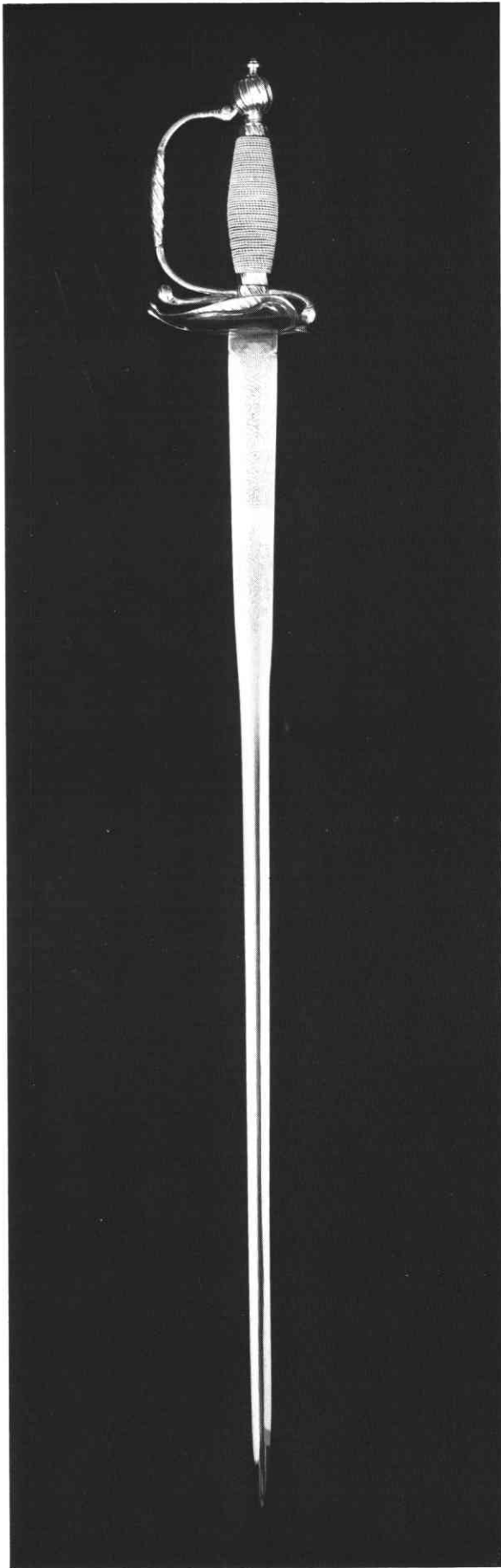
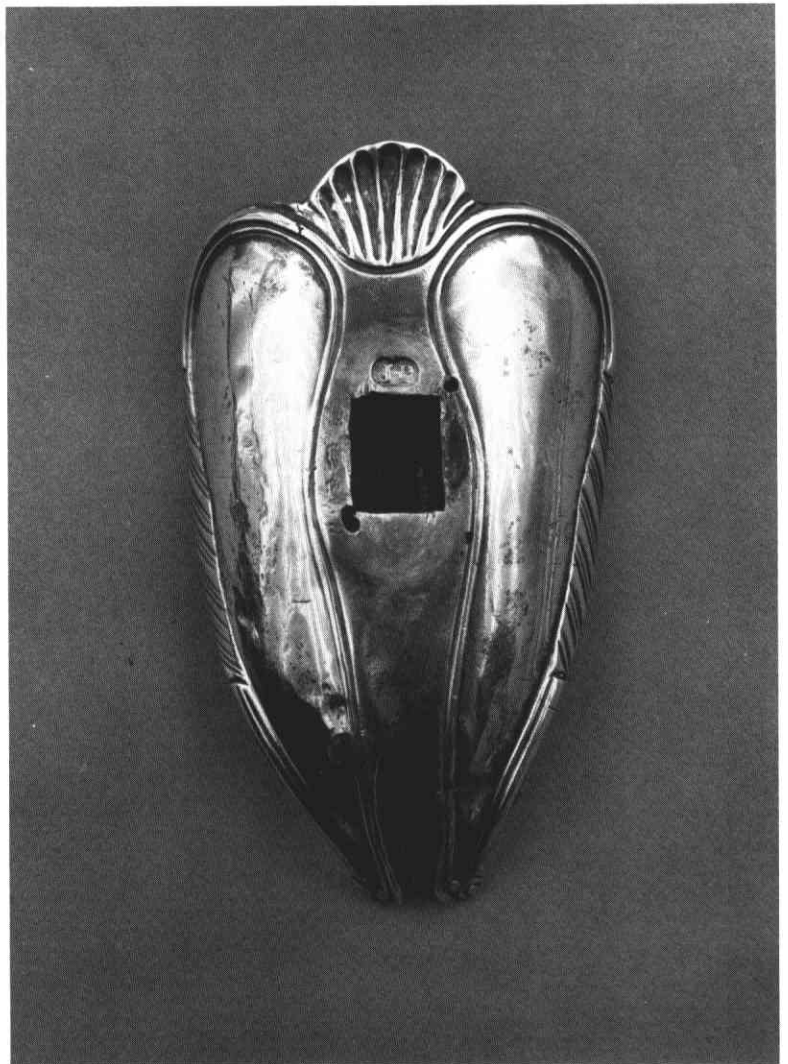


Figure 1. This is the new inaugural sword, showing the rediscovered etching on the blade.

Figure 2. (Below) The boat shell guard of the inaugural sword at Morristown showing the touch mark of James Perry which was concealed by the grip.



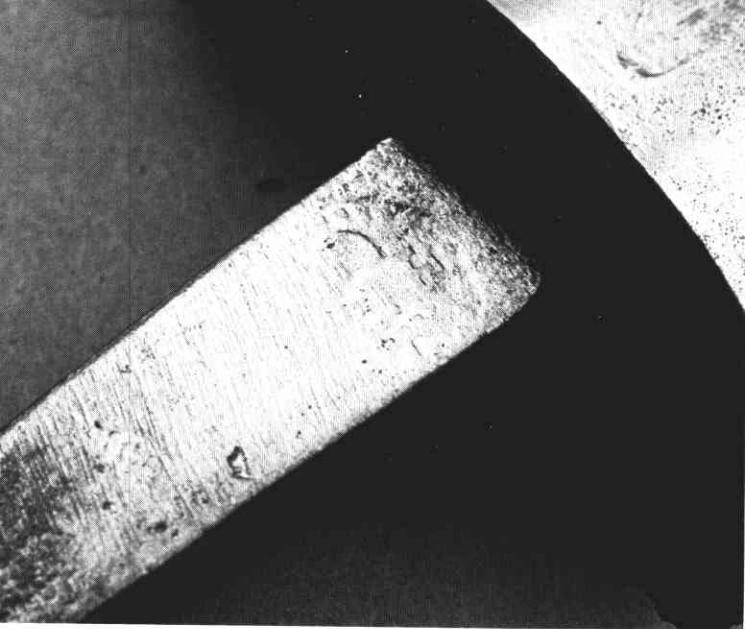


Figure 3. The filed out and nearly obliterated mark of the Solingen blade maker on the inaugural sword at Morristown.



Figure 4. The tang of the inaugural sword with the initials of William Loxham, London Cutler.

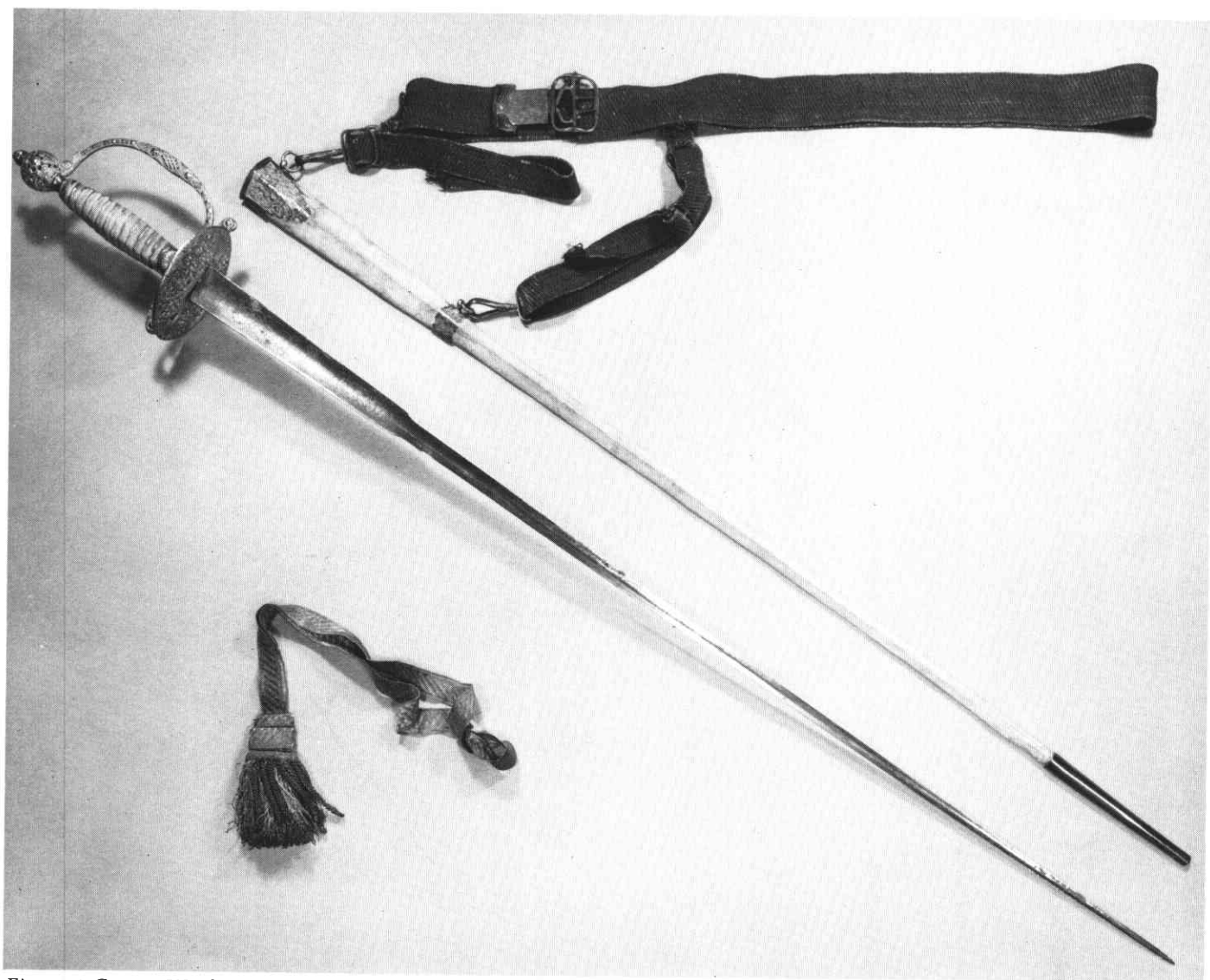


Figure 5. George Washington's court sword, scabbard, and sword belt at Mount Vernon.

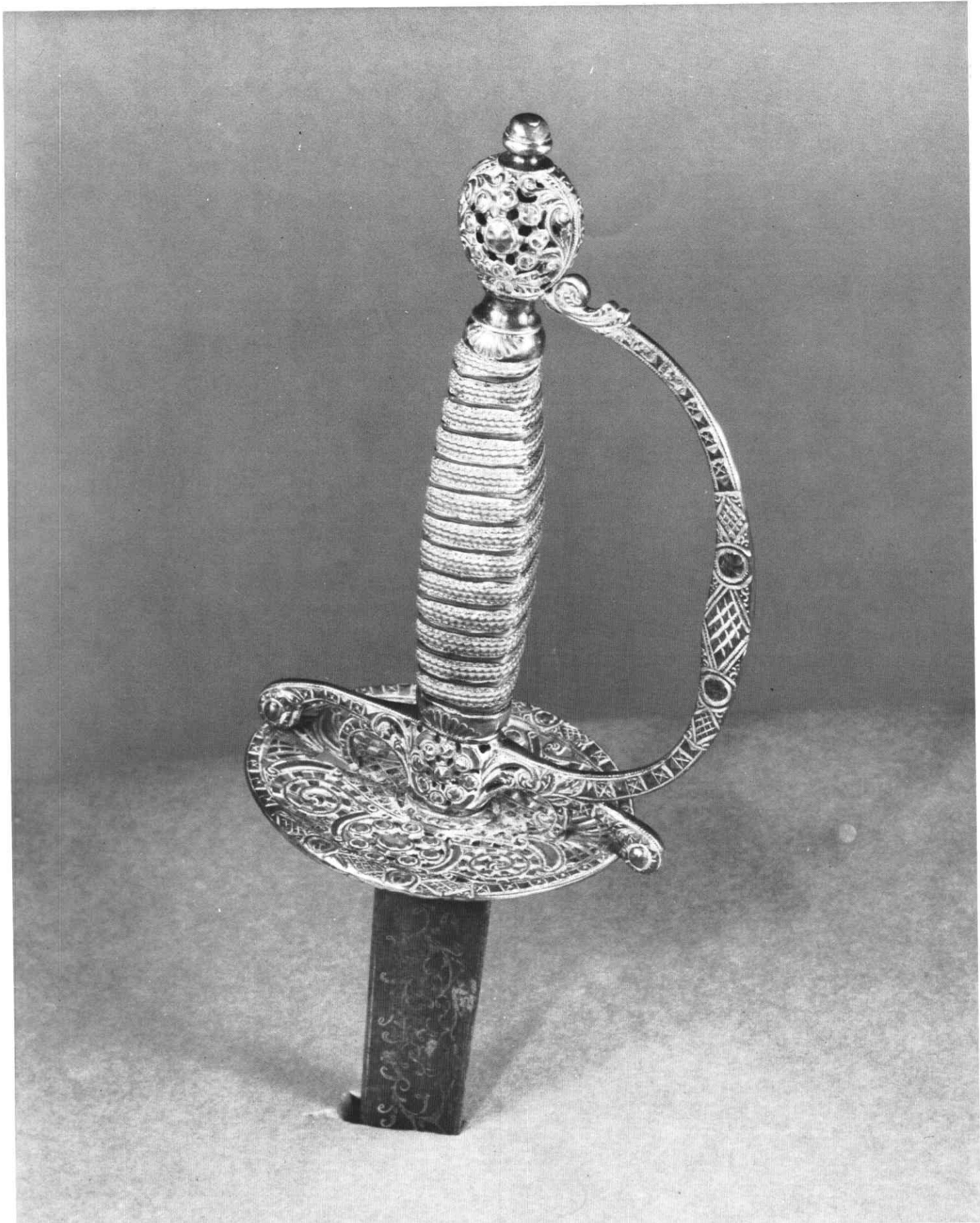


Figure 6. Hilt of Washington's court sword showing perforations, cut steel design and clam shell guard.

a Virginia Colonial, had a deep sense of propriety and one of the British proprietaries was primogeniture, the line of first born male descent. Having no children of his own, Lawrence Augustine was as close as George Washington could come in selecting a fit heir for his favorite and most historic sword. This is not a hypothesis on my part. Washington left his next most valuable sword to Lawrence's younger brother William in his will.

The General, who set great store by his swords and their significance, defined the duties of his heirs to the swords and lists the order in which the swords were to be chosen. The only sword, not left to this selection, and given away in person before Washington died is the Morristown Museum sword which George gave to Lawrence sometime between the inauguration in 1789 when Lawrence was twelve and the General's death in 1799.*

Here a conflict arises. Worth Bailey, former Mount Vernon curator says in his handbook of *George Washington's Military Equipment*, that Mount Vernon has a sword (figures 5 and 6), a gift of J.P. Morgan in 1909, which "is traditionally identified as the one worn when he (Washington) resigned his commission in 1783 and when he was inaugurated as President in 1789." The "tradition" is as unarguable and unprovable as are the traditions of the beds and inns in which Washington slept. Had the author of the Mount Vernon pamphlet stopped there he would have done tradition a favor. Instead, he attempts to identify this sword with one mentioned in early correspondence between Washington and his London factor and with a Charles Willson Peale painting of a youthful Washington wearing a sword.

The author of the booklet, not knowing arms terminology and not realizing that painters like Peale were as careful with their delineation of sword hilts as they were of faces, has attempted to relate this sword with a 1757 written description and the sword in the Peale painting.

The pamphlet relates that in 1756 when Colonel George Washington was 24 he ordered a "Small Sword of 8 or 10 Guins. price" from his agent in London. The following year he received the sword accompanied by the bill for it . . . L 7.7 for "a fine strong silver pierced Boat-Shell two edged sword, silver and gold grip (sc.), spare and false scabbard . . ." No known surviving sword of Washington fits this description exactly including the sword with a boat shell grip in Morristown or the boat shell grip on the sword represented in the painting of Washington now at Washington and Lee University, done by Peale in 1772 depicting the General as a young Colonel of his Virginia Regiment.

The points of dissimilarity between the description, the painting and the surviving sword should have been obvious even to a layman. The

surviving pierced hilted sword does not have a "fine strong silver pierced Boat Shell". The guard of the existing sword is cut in imitation of steel and bilobate, like an open clam shell, not boat shaped, i.e., turned up and bifurcating below the knuckle guard. This Mount Vernon sword, given by Washington to his nephew George Lewis who had second choice of the five swords mentioned in Washington's will, does not have a "silver and gold gripe". Instead, the Mount Vernon sword has a conventional wooden mandrel wrapped with silver wire and tinsel for a grip. A silver and gold grip suggests a cast silver gilt grip or a cast silver grip set with gold medallions, both of which the continental European hilt makers were fashioning for their carriage trade at that time but were not being made in England until the last decade of the XVIIIth Century. However, the scabbard for this existing sword has a silver mouth with the partially defaced signature of Feeseey, a known London cutler (1758-1759). The Peale portrait shows a wire wound grip. If the Peale-painted sword is the one that Washington bought in 1757, gold and silver wire might have been alternated in the winding. If this were the case, it would be unique among sword hilts. I, for one, have never seen such a hilt and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which has the finest collection of small or court swords in America, has no such example according to Dr. Helmut Nickel, the Arms and Armor Curator. I can find no alternative to a cast grip which would fit this description. At the risk of having all of George Washington's collateral descendants' ghosts come to haunt me nightly, I can find none of the surviving swords at Mount Vernon, or the Smithsonian, or the fire damaged sword in the New York State Library or the Washington sword in the collection of Dr. John Lattimer which remotely fits the quoted description. This eliminates the possibility of relating any surviving sword to the Peale painting or the London factor's invoice. We are thrown back, then, to the Morristown sword which belonged to the General's oldest and favorite nephew and was the sword which George Washington thought the most of, as being the only logical contender for the title of "Washington's Inaugural Sword."

Let us examine the remaining Washington swords. The damaged sword in Albany belonged to William Augustine Washington, Lawrence's younger brother who had first choice of the swords after Lawrence. This sword does not fit the description at all as it has a cut steel hilt including both guards, grip and pommel, the only reason that it survived the fire in the Albany State Capitol in 1911. It is a reputed gift from Frederick the Great who is supposed to have said, "From the oldest general of the World to the greatest", *New Jersey Journal*, August 2, 1780. The third choice in the General's will went to George Steptoe Washington.

*Worthington C. Ford, "Writings of George Washington, N.Y. 1889-1893", also W. Lanier Washington's letter to Henry C. Pitney, Jr., Secretary, *The Washington Assn. of New Jersey*, 19 December 1914.

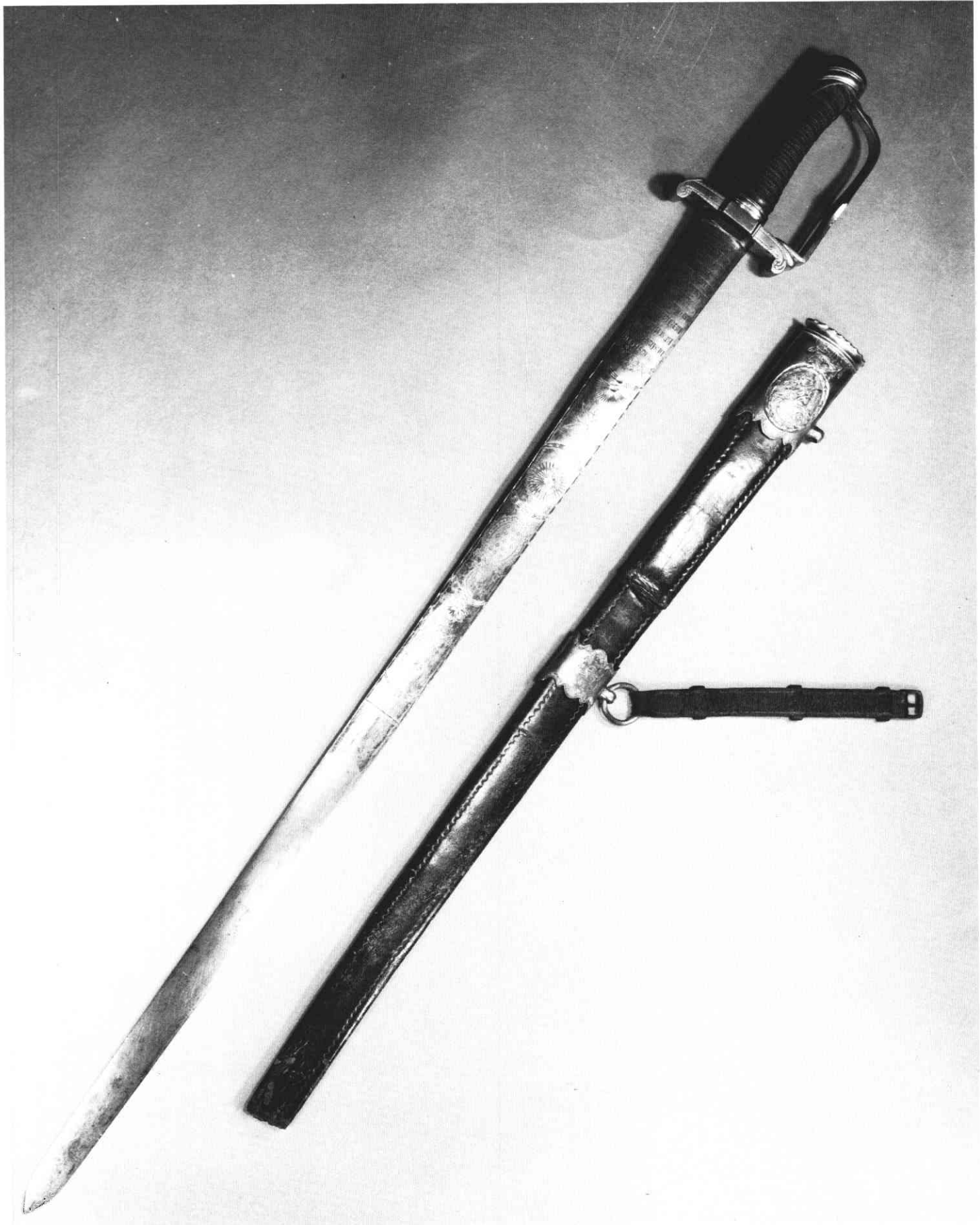


Figure 7. German sword and scabbard.



Figure 8. Hilt of German hunting sword with the inscription which starts "Destroyer of despotism" at Mount Vernon.

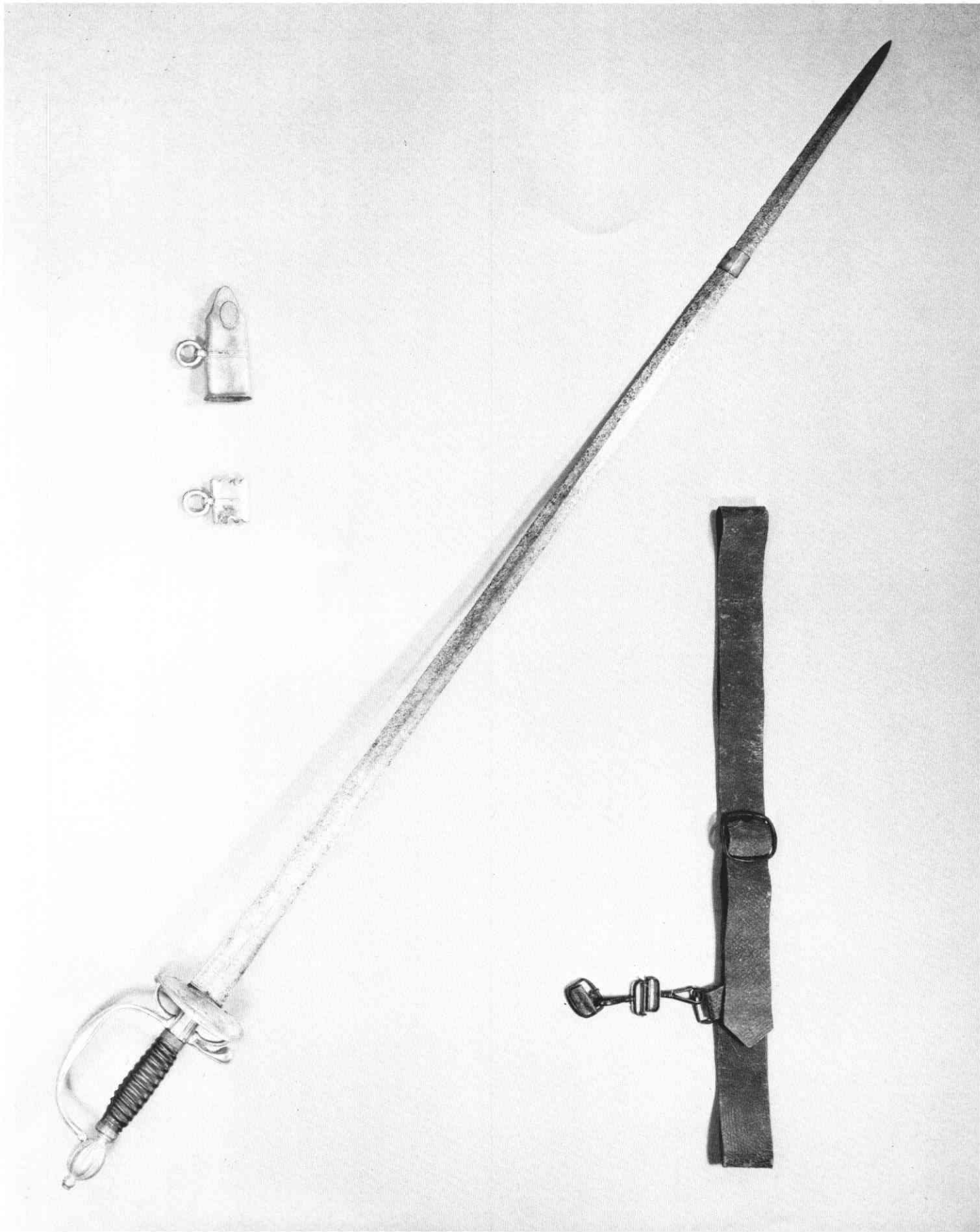
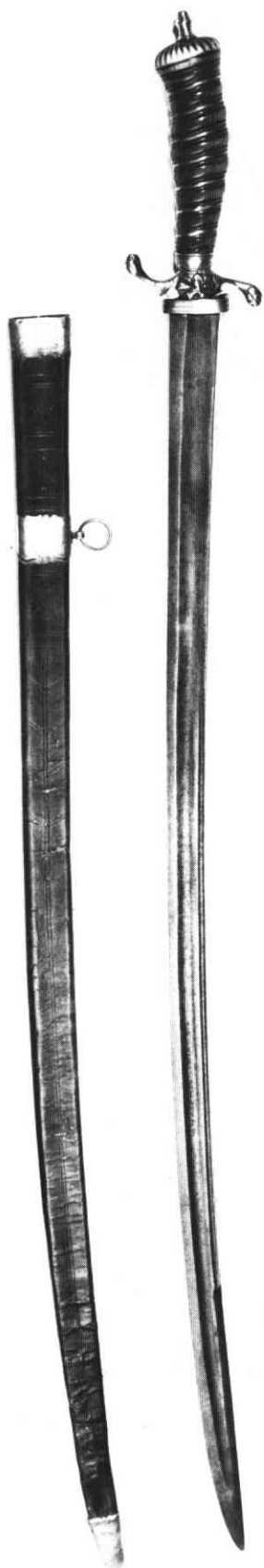


Figure 9. Washington's Mourning Sword, sword belt and scabbard hardware at Mount Vernon.



Figure 10. Mourning swordbelt, showing black leather grip.



He selected a single edged German hunting sword with a stirrup guard and back strap of gilt brass (figures 7 and 8). The grip is made of leather wound with copper wire. The blade of this sword has a long etched dedicatory legend in German which translates, "DESTROYER OF DESPOTISM, PROTECTOR OF FREEDOM, STEADFAST MAN, TAKE FROM MY SON'S HAND THIS SWORD, I PRAY THEE, THEOPHILUS ALTE AT SOLINGEN". The sword has a lot of history – Alte's son left the sword as a pledge at a tavern – and Washington wrote to John Quincy Adams, then U.S. Minister to the Netherlands, to inquire about the maker. The fourth choice of swords went to nephew Bushrod Washington. He selected a small sword known as Washington's "Mourning" sword. The General is supposed to have worn this weapon to funerals (figures 9 and 10). It does have a black leather scabbard and grips. It has neither a boat shell guard or gold and silver grips. An inscription on the blade is now obliterated by rust, but it was inscribed "RECTE FACE JCE" and "NEMINE TIMEAS" (Do what is right and fear no man).*

The fifth sword of the will went to Colonel Samuel Washington, This nephew got what was left but he seems to have made out well, as number five is a silver mounted, curved-bladed hunting sword with green ivory grips (figure 11). It has no shell or knuckle guard as none are needed on a hunting weapon. By some mysterious transfer this sword, now in the Smithsonian, won the description of "Washington's Great Battle Sword". It is supposed to have been the principal sword worn by Washington during the Revolutionary War, and to have been selected by Colonel Samuel who was the only nephew who had seen military service. Dr. John K. Lattimer has a silver mounted hunting sword with a ribbed ivory grip, a silver lion's head pommel and a guard chain. It is reputed to have been given to Washington by one of his younger brothers, John Augustine, who later got it back.

The account of another hunting sword in the Morristown Museum is that it was given by General Washington to a Revolutionary War General, Alexander Spotswood, Jr. A Spotswood descendant sold it via the Anderson Gallery to collector Lloyd Smith in 1926. It came as a gift along with the Smith Library to Washington Headquarters in the 1950's. The hunting weapon has a characteristic saw back and a slightly curved blade. The grip is onyx and the hilt of gilt bronze.

Member and Collector Eugene Miller of Nutley, New Jersey has a sword whose cut silver hilt is marked "CLARE" and scabbard mouth "Feesey, Cutler to His Majesty". This sword is quite similar to the George Lewis sword in Mount Vernon and both scabbards have similar markings and were made by the same London furbisher but there is no family tradition to go with Gene's weapon.

Figure 11. Washington hanger. The "Great Battle Sword" in the Smithsonian.

*According to Albert R. Beatty's "The Personal Swords of George Washington", *The Antiquarian*, Feb. 1931, Vol. 16, No. 2, pages 34, 35, 54 & 56.

FACSIMILE QUOTATION

WILL*

To each of my Nephews, Willi-
am Augustine Washington, George
Lewis, George Steptoe Washington
Bushrod Washington and Samuel
Washington, I give one of the Swords
or Cutleaus of which I may die pos-
sessed; and they are to chuse in the or-
der they are named. — These Swords
are accompanied with an injuncti-
on not to unsheath them for the pur-
pose of shedding blood, except it be
for self defence, or in defence of this
Country and its rights; and in the lat-
ter case, to keep them unsheathed,
and prefer falling with them in their
hands, to the relinquishment thereof

G. Washington

Figure 12. Excerpt bequeathing swords to his nephews from George Washington's will.

... to each of my nephews, William Augustine Washington, George Lewis, George Steptoe Washington, Bushrod Washington and Samuel Washington, I give one of the swords or cutreaux of which I may die possessed; and they are to chuse in the order they are named. These swords are accompanied with an injunction not to unsheath them for the purpose of shedding blood, except it be for self defence or in defence of their country and its rights; and in the latter case, to keep them unsheathed and prefer falling with them in their hands, to the relinquishment thereof.

(signed) G. Washington



Figure 13. Washington Inaugural Sword – Merrill Lindsay, arms authority, inspects the first of one thousand reproductions of the George Washington Inaugural Sword crafted by Wilkinson Sword Limited in London. The \$925 sword has been commissioned by the U. S. Bicentennial Society, headquartered in Richmond, Virginia.

Having accounted for all of the known Washington swords with historical pretension including those in private and public collections as well as those mentioned in Washington's will, I would like to return to the booklet, *General Washington's Military Equipment*. On page 41 it quotes from the Washington Estate Executor's Inventory under the heading "In the study". Seven swords and one blade are listed. Five of the swords are accounted for in the will. The remaining two are not in the will for an obvious reason. They were service swords of little value. The bare blade was sold in 1802 for \$2.00 and the two swords for \$6.25 and \$1.00. By comparison, the other five swords averaged \$22.00 as the total appraisal of the swords came to \$120.00, and we know that many years before, Washington had paid the equivalent of \$37.00 for his London small sword.

Finally, the author of the Mount Vernon pamphlet describes a "Main Gauche" which descended from Washington to Robert E. Lee via Nelly Custis Lee, one of Washington's collateral descendants. Of course it is not a main gauche from 1580 but a plain infantry sword of the 1790-1810 period with a brass pommel and guard, a broken and shortened blade. Too bad though, if it had really been a main gauche or left handed dagger, we could conjure up the picture of George

Washington in cap-a-pie armor, blade in either hand, engaged in mortal combat with Cornwallis.

Also, as the main gauche had its heyday around and before 1600 we could stretch a point and perhaps find a family tradition which would trace this historic weapon from Columbus to Captain John Smith to Washington to General Robert E. Lee.

Seriously, I want to lay these honorable and historic Washington swords with their varying known backgrounds and family traditions to rest in their cases. The Morristown silver-hilted boat shell guard colichimarde-bladed sword by William Loxham made around 1770 has been chosen by the U.S. Bicentennial Society to symbolize the Revolution and the life of Washington. It has the best logical as well as documented claim to have been Washington's favorite sword as well as having been the side arm which he wore on that historic occasion when he became President of the United States.

Without further evidence in the form of correspondence or contemporary painting we must reject the unsubstantial claims for other weapons for this honor. Otherwise we will wind up indeed with as many Washington Inaugural Swords as there are beds that the General slept in.

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- (5) See "New Jersey Journal," August 2, 1870, regarding the William Augustine Washington rapier.
- (6) *Bulletin 163 of the United States National Museum*, entitled "American and European Swords in the Historical Collections of the United States National Museum," by Theodore T. Belote, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1932, U.S. Government Printing Office. Pages 15, 16, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156; also plate 1, fig. 2, opposite title page. Pertains to the sword left to Samuel Washington, son of Charles.
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- (8) Article "The Personal Swords of George Washington," by Albert R. Beatty in *The Antiquarian*, Feb. 1931, Vol. XVI, No. 2, p. 34, 35, 54 and 56.
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