

IT WAS A ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD: A COMPARISON OF THE STARR 1808 CUTLASS

by Mike Edwards



Figure 1. British double-disk cutlass made by Thomas Hollier, pre-1750.

Notwithstanding winning our independence from Great Britain in the Revolutionary War, the late 1700s and early 1800s continued to be dangerously challenging times for the young United States. We remained entangled with both Britain and our once wartime ally, France. The undeclared Quasi War against Revolutionary France, over her seizure of American ships, was ending in late 1800, just as the string of Barbary Wars started with Tripoli in 1801.¹ Immediately following France's Revolutionary Period wars, the Napoleonic Wars created further disruptions for a neutral United States. Seeking to prevent the other's trade with the United States, both France and Britain imposed countervailing trade embargoes, which greatly harmed our merchant shipping.²

Additionally, with Britain's huge need for sailors, increasing impressment of American seamen was another source of growing tension. The very serious *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair in June, 1807, stirred outrage here when *HMS Leopard* fired on and boarded *USS Chesapeake* in search of British deserters. Later, in 1811, in a misadventure to *HMS Guerriere's* pressing an American seaman out of a coastal vessel, *USS President* fired on and badly damaged Britain's sloop-of-war *HMS Little Belt*, inflaming tensions in Britain.³ Eventually, trade and impressment would be prominent among the primary issues leading to the War of 1812.⁴

The constant and seemingly all-encompassing warfare in the

late 1700s and early 1800s, with significant naval activity, was the backdrop for changes toward an improved cutlass. By 1800, the British had used the double-disk cutlass for well over 50 years (Figure 1).⁵ Similarly, the double-disk had been used in America since Colonial times. The long-serving and widely used double-disk cutlass was about to be eclipsed by other, more progressive designs.

In 1808, the U.S. moved away from the double-disk and adopted a new cutlass designed by Nathan Starr (Figure 2). The 2,000 cutlasses bought by the Navy Department have achieved iconic status as the cutlass we used in the "Naval War of 1812".⁶ Unfortunately, few examples remain and they have become among the rarest of American naval swords.

The question is, how does the 1808 Starr measure up against its British and French peers?⁷ The Starr 1808 was simply made. It has a plain, round wooden grip with top and bottom ferrules. The straight blade is 29-1/2" long by 1-3/8" wide, with a narrow fuller along the spine. The large bowl-shaped guard was new, and by design it promised considerably more hand protection than the double-disk. The blade is quite serviceable, but, at 1 mm thick, the guard is surprisingly thin. In all, the sword weighs just over a pound.⁸ As a prevailing pattern, the 1808 lasted until it was succeeded by Starr's Model 1816 cutlass.⁹

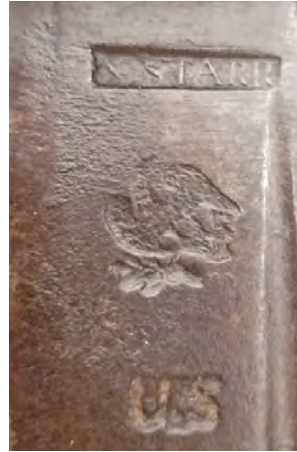


Figure 2. United States model 1808 cutlass made by Nathan Starr. Note the unique blade stamping in the lower right.

But arguably, it was Great Britain that led the transition to improved cutlasses. In 1804, charged with outfitting the world's largest navy, the British Board of Ordnance adopted Henry Osborn's new design and ordered 10,000 of his cutlasses from among five sword makers (Figure 3). In 1808, the Board followed up by ordering 20,000 more cutlasses, this time from among eight makers.¹⁰

The British 1804 cutlass is considerably more substantial than the Starr 1808. The blade is straight and flat, 29" long and 1-7/16"

wide, with a spear point. Reminiscent of the old double-disk, the hilt comprises a round counter guard with a broad strap leading to a teardrop-shaped knucklebow disk. The iron grip's deep vertical and horizontal grooves result in a novel "corn cob" appearance. Notably, the 1804's guard is 2 mm thick. The sword weighs 2.6 pounds. This leads to the obvious: the 1808 Starr with its lightweight and thin guard would have a tough time standing up against the heavier 1804.



Figure 3. British model 1804 cutlass.

The old naval adage is that nothing is wasted. Damaged, but serviceable, material would be reused until used up. Perhaps this point is best made by example - the marriage of a surviving Starr 1808 blade to a British 1804 hilt (Figure 4). The assumption is that the thin 1808 guard was irreparably damaged, leaving a perfectly good blade in search of a better hilt. The 1804 was clearly a good and readily available alternative.

The British 1804 remained in service for a very long time. There were so many of them that May and Annis report the Board of Ordnance did not purchase any "Swords for Sea Service" from 1814 until 1841.¹⁰ There were numerous proposals and trials of modified cutlass designs in that period. But, the next true iteration of the British cutlass was the 1845 pattern which emanated from designs and some small production in 1841.¹¹

In contrast to the British and American long reliance on the classic double-disk, the French were more proactive in developing "naval boarding swords," their term for cutlasses. From 1700 to 1779, the French boarding sword was one developed under the Marquis de Louvois and based on the 1680 French grenadier's sword.¹² In 1779, the "Louvois" was replaced by a series of "Sartines" cutlass styles, named after Gabriel de Sartine, a minister then overseeing the French Navy. The first of these was the 1779 Sartines cutlass (frequently called the "1782"). It became the standard boarding sword across all French fleets (Figure 5).

This long design evolution settled down in the 1800-1801 "year" with the AN IX model.¹³ The AN IX is a massive sword (Figure 6). The hilt has an octagonal iron grip with a full basket guard and a distinctive five-lobed quillon. The blade is 25-1/2" long by 2" wide with a broad central fuller and a sharply clipped point. The

guard is 3.5 mm thick. The sword weighs in at 2.11 lbs. The blade narrowed in the next year, but the change didn't impair the sword's effectiveness. The AN IX hilt and the slimmer AN X blade configuration eventually resulted in the model 1811 cutlass (Figure 7). With insignificant changes this design lasted all the way through the French model 1833's long service life. The model 1833 was ultimately replaced by the last French cutlass, the very different, and largely experimental, model 1872 cutlass.

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, France fought just about everybody, but most especially Great Britain. Other European countries aligned and realigned, while some others were caught in the middle, somewhat like the more remote United States. Denmark was a prime example, and, in 1807, its delicate balancing act came to an end. Fearing that the Danes would align with, or fall to, France, the British sought to neutralize the Danish fleet. When the Danes refused to intern their fleet with Britain, a large British fleet under Admiral Gambier, along with a sizeable army, invested and shelled Copenhagen, firing the city. At the mercy of British shelling, the Danes capitulated. Britain seized and removed the Danish fleet and all of Denmark's military and naval stores.¹⁴ As a primary weapon of an important but lesser naval power, what was the Danish cutlass?

In 1807, the Danes were using their 1802 cutlass (Figure 8). While plain in appearance, it is a formidable weapon. The heavy iron hilt has a flat, circular counterguard and a round knucklebow to the pommel. The straight blade is 29-3/8" long by 1-5/8" wide, single edged with a narrow fuller along the spine and an upswept point. The counterguard is 2 mm thick. The sword weighs 2.1 lbs.



Figure 4. Marriage of convenience; British model 1804 grip and guard with United States model 1808 blade.



Figure 5. French model 1779 Sartines cutlass.



Figure 6. French model AN IX cutlass.



With the loss of its fleet and naval stores, Denmark was left without an indigenous cutlass. This situation lasted for years and was not remedied until Denmark introduced its new and improved cutlass in 1845.

From a competitive standpoint the Starr 1808 was outmatched until near the end of the War of 1812, when American cutlasses began to improve. While not completely understood, the heavy and impressive “Baltimore” cutlass reputedly appeared in 1814.¹⁵

Nathan Starr improved on the 1808 with his more nimble 1816 cutlass, which incorporated a stronger guard and a shorter, stouter blade. Moving past the Starr 1826 and the 1841 Ames cutlasses,

the United States eventually adopted the Ames 1861 cutlass. It traces its design origins from the French AN IX cutlass through to its model 1833.



Figure 7. French model 1811 cutlass.



Figure 8. Danish model 1802 cutlass.

Table 1. Measurements of the different cutlass examples discussed in this manuscript.

SWORD	DATE	OVERALL LENGTH	HILT	BLADE LENGTH	BLADE WIDTH	BLADE THICKNESS	GUARD THICKNESS	WEIGHT
Hollier Double-Disk	Pre-1750	33-3/8	5	28-3/8	1-3/16	1/4	2 mm	1.14 lb
U.S. Starr 1808	1808 - 1816	34-5/8	5-1/8	29-1/2	1-3/8	1/4	1 mm	1.11 lb
U.S. Starr 1816	1816 - 1826	31	5-1/2	25-1/2	1-1/4	1/4	1.15 mm	1.12 lb
British 1804	1804 - 1845	33-9/16	4-9/16	29	1-7/16	5/16	2 mm	2.6 lb
1804/1808	N/A	34-7/16	4-9/16	29-13/16	1-3/8	5/16	2.1 mm	2.25 lb
French "Sartines"	1779 - 1800	30	5-1/2	24-1/2	1-7/16	3/8	4.2 mm	1.1 lb
French AN IX	1800 - 1801	30-3/4	5-1/4	25-1/2	2	3/8	3.5 mm	2.11 lb
French 1811	1811 - 1833	32	5-1/2	26-1/2	1-7/16	3/8	3.2 mm	2.0 lb
Danish 1802	1802 - 1807	35-3/8	6	29-3/8	1-5/8	5/16	2 mm	2.1 lb

Note: The measurements are taken from issued weapons; they may vary from pattern specifications given losses during service. Dimensions are in inches unless otherwise noted. Guard thickness is measured at the edge; in some cases, thickness is slightly irregular and may also increase toward the guard's center. Weight is rounded down to nearest .00 of a pound.

Endnotes

- 1 France maintained that the 1794 Jay Treaty between the U.S. and Britain contravened France's 1778 Treaty of Alliance with the U.S. and in 1796 began seizing U.S. merchant ships in retribution. In 1798 the XYZ Affair provoked U.S. naval operations against France. The conflict ended with the Convention of 1800/the Treaty of Mortefontaine, ratified December 18, 1801.
The war with Tripoli was about our payment of tribute to preclude the seizure of U.S. ships and seamen being held for ransom. The war with Tripoli ended in 1805, but in 1812 with British encouragement and timing, Algiers declared war on the U.S. claiming insufficient tribute. Preoccupied with the British during the War of 1812, America's war with Algiers did not end until 1815.
- 2 France's Berlin Decree, 1806: France embargoes trade with Britain; Britain's Orders in Council, 1807: blockade of French ports; France's Milan Decree, 1807: vessels complying with the Orders in Counsel subject to seizure by the French; U.S. Embargo Act, 1807: American ships limited to coastal trade; U.S. Non-Intercourse Act, 1809: non-coastal trade allowed with nations other than Britain and France.
- 3 Hitsman, J. M. *The Incredible War of 1812*, Robin Brass Studio, Toronto, 1965, p. 23. HMS *Little Belt* was the former Danish ship *Lille Belt* captured by the British at Copenhagen in 1807. Clowes, W. L. *The Royal Navy*, Vol. V, Chatham Publishing, London, 1997, p. 565.
- 4 The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 1, 1812; the war ended with the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814, ratified on February 16, 1815.
- 5 Thomas Hollier worked in England c. 1716-1750 and is said to be the likely father of the double-disk cutlass design. Comfort, Sim. *Naval Swords & Dirks*, Vol. 1, Sim Comfort Associates, London, 2008, pp. 30-41. Harold Blackmore cites Hollier as a "contractor to Ordnance for ... swords ... , 1716-1750". Blackmore, Harold L., *Gunmakers of London 1350-1850*, George Shumway, York, Pennsylvania, 1986, p. 116. Erik Goldstein also discusses Hollier and notes his mark "observed on sword blades c.1716-1754", 1754 being the year of his death. Goldstein, Erik, *The Socket Bayonet in the British Army 1687-1783*, Andrew Mowbray, Lincoln, Rhode Island, 2000, pp. 37-39. The pre-1750 date for the illustrated sword is based on Hollier's reportedly ceasing to be a contractor to the Ordnance in 1750.
- 6 Understandably, images of early cutlasses in situ are "uncommon." However, underwater archaeology on the American armed schooner *Scourge* yielded a number of photographs showing 1808 cutlasses. *Scourge*, on a mission in August, 1813, sunk in a squall on Lake Ontario and now rests, well preserved and upright, on the bottom at 300 feet. See, for example, Gilkerson, William, *Boarders Away, with Steel – Edged Weapons and Polearms*. Andrew Mowbray, Lincoln, Rhode Island, 1991, pp. 97- 98.

- 7 The comparisons herein are based on contemporaneous/ overlapping patterns and do not take into account a sword's frequently much longer service life. For example, the French model 1779 remained in use until 1842. Petard, M. *Le Sabre d'Abordage*, Editions du Canonnier, Nantes, 2006, p.55.
- 8 Hicks, James. *Nathan Starr Arms Maker 1776-1845*, Mt. Vernon, N.Y., 1940, pp. 25-30.
- 9 Hicks, James. Ibid. pp. 85-93. The order called for 1,000 of Starr's "Ship Cutlasses."
- 10 May, W. E. and Annis, P. G. W. *Swords for Sea Service*, Vol. 1, National Maritime Museum/HMSO, London, 1970, p. 79. "Swords for Sea Service" was the official name for British cutlasses.
- 11 For a full discussion, see *Swords for Sea Service*, Vol. 1. pp. 78-92 and Vol. 2, plate 68.
- 12 Louvois was Louis XIV's Minister of War. The sword was iron mounted, with a twisted wire grip and a knucklebow leading to a single-shell counterguard. The blade was about 30" by about 1". Petard, M. *Le Sabre d'Abordage*, pp 40-45.
- 13 The French Revolutionary Calendar started on 22 September 1792 and ran to the succeeding September. Hence, each Revolutionary year spanned part of two Gregorian calendar years. Except for a brief period in 1877, the system ended in 1805.
- 14 Brenton, E. P. *Naval History of Great Britain the years 1783-1836*, Vol. II, Henry Colburn, London, 1837, p.176.
- 15 Gilkerson, William. "The U.S. Navy Model 1814 Cutlass," *Man at Arms*, Vol. 21, number 2, Lincoln, Rhode Island, 1999, pp. 23-31.

