

## THE AMERICAN CUTLASS

by John D. Hammer



JOHN D. HAMMER

The Cutlass, as we generally think of it, is a highly specialized naval weapon with a large guard that encloses the hand and a short heavy blade designed primarily for cutting. Actually this weapon developed through a long evolutionary process.

The name "Cutlass" appeared around the middle of the sixteenth century. As originally applied, it referred to any short cutting sword, as often used by infantry as by naval forces. Many of the cutlasses used by the early colonists were short bladed with a clam-shell guard that curved over the hand, and a narrow knuckle bow. They were as well suited to fighting Indians as to Naval Warfare.

As our main interest is in the naval cutlass, as made in the colonies, it is necessary to begin at the middle of the 18th century, and to understand the type of naval warfare engaged in at the time.

Although the 13 colonies were maritime by nature, they had no navy - this in spite of the fact that by 1770, almost 1/3 of the merchantmen sailing under the British Flag were American built. As our difficulties with the British increased, private owners began to arm their ships, and as privateers they took to sea. They were given letters of marque by the colonies which gave them the right to seize ships and divide the spoils among the crews - in reality they were half warship, half pirate. The Cutlasses, as well as other arms were obtained for individual ships through small contracts. Thus there was no single regulation cutlass, but a variety of weapons similar in nature but differing in detail. They were seldom marked making it almost impossible to identify the makers.

The first naval battle of the Revolution took place months before Bunker Hill. General Gage sent two sloops and the cutter *Margaretta* to Machias to commandeer lumber. Instead of lumber the British met local Partisans led by Jeremiah O'Brien who captured the first sloop and the cutter.

In 1775, George Washington appealed to the Continental Congress for Naval Forces. When his request bogged down in petty politics, he organized "Washington's Fleet" composed of 6 Schooners and a Brigantine. This was the forerunner of the Revenue Marine (now the Coast Guard). The weapons furnished these ships, both guns and cutlasses, as well as all other ships during the Revolutionary War, were of "Committee of Safety" type, made by a number of makers, and though similar in pattern they differed in detail. They usually had a "Figure Eight" guard, short cutting blade and grip sometimes wood and sometimes iron, cylindrical in shape. Few makers can be identified, one in the Chicago Historical Society is marked Gridley.

We had no official Navy until 1798 when the Navy Department was formed under President John Adams. During this period Cutlasses were obtained through small contracts, usually for one ship. In 1799 Nathan Starr provided the Cutlasses for the Sloop of War "*Connecticut*." Another similar type cutlass but with a ribbed grip patterned after the British, was made for another ship by an unknown maker. This ship was apparently later decommissioned in Baltimore, for the half dozen surviving specimens were all found there.

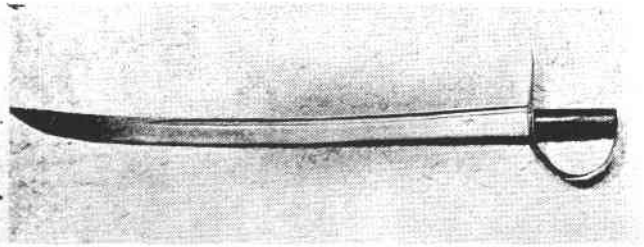
The importance of the Cutlass in the Naval Warfare of the early 1800's is graphically illustrated in an early account of the famous battle between the *Shannon* and the *Chesapeake* in 1813.

"Silently did the *Chesapeake* bear down upon her adversary. Gradually the American ship ranged alongside the *Shannon* at a distance of half pistol-shot and as her foremast came in line with the *Shannon's* mizzen Mast the latter opened fire. Fore moment the *Chesapeake* was silent, then with Sulfuric flashes she let fly her whole broadside. The first Broadside of the *Shannon* so swept the decks of the American Frigate, that of 150 men quartered on the upper deck not 50 remained upon their legs. In a moment the *Chesapeake* responded. The gunnery of the Americans was good but the broadsides of the *Shannon* swept the deck mowing down brave fellows by the score. Officers fell on every side. At a critical moment the 2 ships fouled exposing the *Chesapeake* to a raking broadside. Capt. Lawrence, wounded in the leg, ordered that the boarders be called up but unhappily a negro bugler had been detailed for the duty usually performed by drummers, and at this moment he could not be found. Later the Bugler was found skulking under the stem of a launch, so paralyzed by fear that he could give only a feeble blast. The moment of boarding was lost and at that instant Capt. Lawrence was mortally wounded by a musket ball. He fell to the deck and as he officers rushed to his side he cried "Tell the

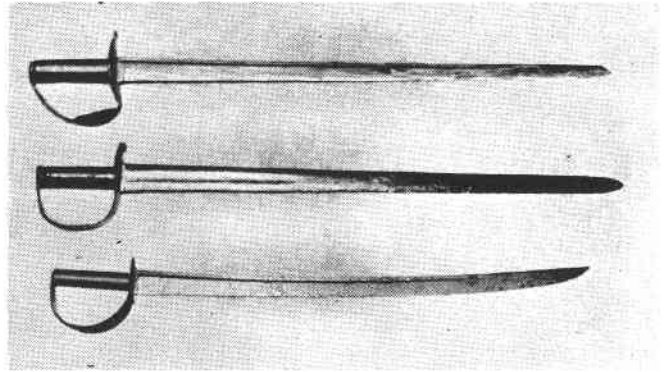
Reprinted from the American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin 12:19-22

Additional articles available at <http://americansocietyofarmscollectors.org/resources/articles/>

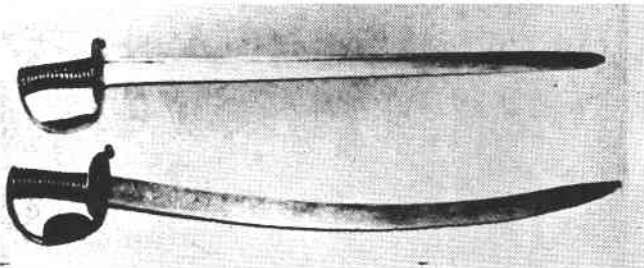
“JOHN HAMMER’S CUTLASSES”



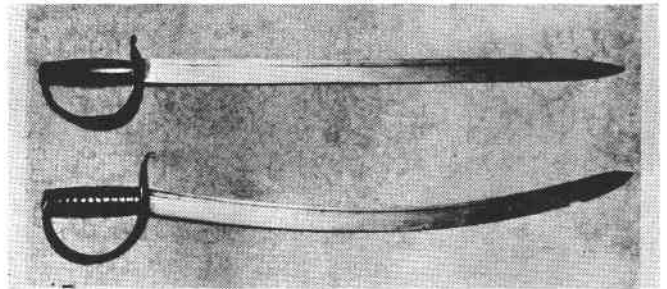
FRENCH & INDIAN WAR



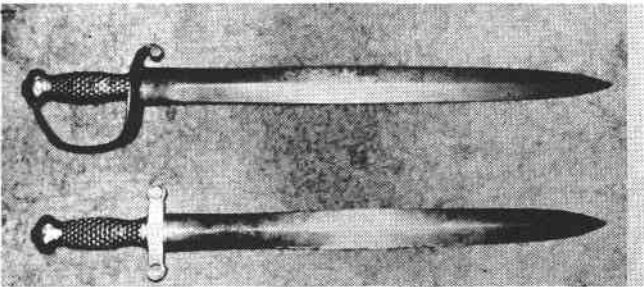
REVOLUTIONARY WAR



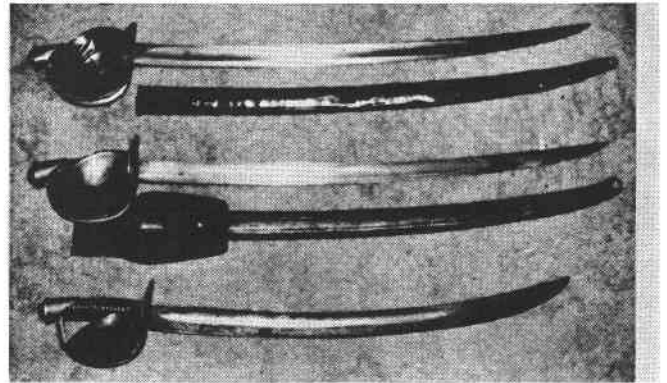
1800 PERIOD CUTLASSES



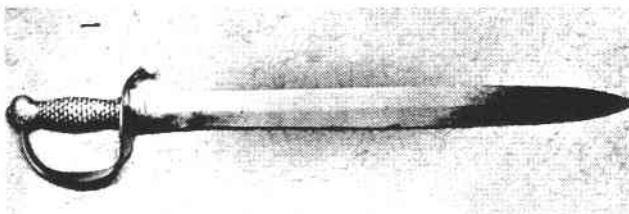
1826 N. STARR CUTLASSES



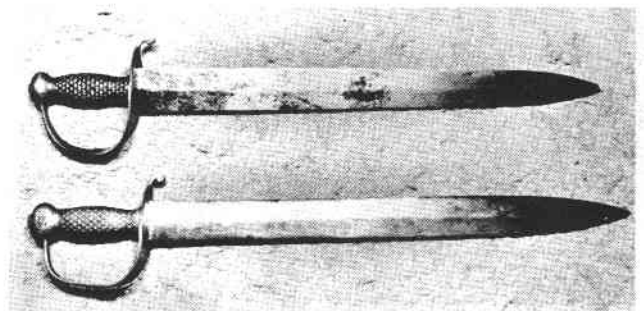
1841 AMES CUTLASSES



TOP: 1860 OFFICERS  
MIDDLE: 1860 AMES  
BOTTOM: EXPERIMENTAL



THOMAS GRISWOLD NEW ORLEANS, LA.



TOP: COOK & BROTHER  
BOTTOM: UNKNOWN, RICHMOND

men to fire faster and not give up the ship - fight her till she sinks." Cap't Broke perceived the confusion on the decks of the American Frigate. He instantly ordered that the ships be lashed together and the boarders called up. An old Quartermaster set about lashing the ships together, and accomplished his task although his arm was hacked off by the Cutlass of an American Sailor. Broke led his men straight for the quarter deck of the American Frigate. Here stood Mr. Livermore, Chaplain of the Chesapeake who, determined to avenge his fallen Captain, fired a pistol at Broke's head but missed him. Broke sprang forward and dealt a mighty blow of his keen cutlass at the Chaplain's head, who saved himself by taking the blow on his arm. Lt. Budd called upon his men to follow him and drive the boarders back to their ship whereupon they attacked fiercely. Broke threw himself upon the Americans, and with his Cutlass he cut down the first man who attacked him and fore down on the others dealing deadly blows left and right, although he had received a cutlass slash across his head from Lt. Budd, that was to incapacitate him for the rest of his life. Up from the wardroom came Lt. Ludlow. Already suffering from two dangerous wounds, he soon fell with a gaping wound across his forehead. Budd was cut down and fell through a hatchway to the deck below. The sailors, seeing both officers fall, gave way in confusion and the ship was in British hands."

This account graphically shows the importance of the cutlass in determining the issue of Battle, when Pistols and Muskets could not be reloaded, and despite the terrible damage inflicted by cannon fire.

The first regulation cutlass was the contract of 1808 which was awarded to Nathan Starr. This contract called for 2,000 cutlasses at \$2.50 each. The pattern was selected by Commodore John Rodgers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The last of the Cutlasses was completed and inspected by Capt. Isaac Hull on Aug. 14, 1808. This Cutlass had a straight 30" blade, a sheet iron cup guard and maple grip. In spite of the relatively large number made these are quite rare - probably due to loss during the war of 1812. There were Cutlasses made under small contracts such as with Prahl of Philadelphia and Dingee of New York. But none survive.

The next contract for 1,000 Cutlasses at \$3.00 each was awarded to Starr and signed Jan. 15, 1816. The contract was completed Sept. 24 of that year. These Cutlasses closely resemble the 1808 contract except for shorter 25" blade, thicker grip, turned out edges of guard and slightly different markings. They were inspected by Thomas H. Stevens. No scabbards were called for in either of these two contracts. Cutlasses were carried in Racks on Boad Ships.

In 1826, Aug. 21, Nathan Starr was awarded a contract for 2,000 Cutlasses. They were inspected by Elish Tobey and completed on June 7, 1827. No scabbards were called for in the original contract but as they are listed in the receipt at time of delivery, they were apparently added later. Price was increased from \$3.00 each to \$4.25 to include cost of scabbards.

In 1841 the Navy Department decided upon a new Cutlass patterned after the 1833 foot artillery sword, one of the most useless weapons ever designed. It was short, heavy and unwieldy with 21" double edged blade, brass grip and wide brass guard. Contract for these cutlasses was signed in 1842 with Ames Manufacturing Co.

Just before the Civil War the Navy Department adopted a Cutlass patterned after a model that had been used by the French Navy for some 40 years. It was well designed with curved 26" blade and large brass handguard. Ames was awarded the contract for these Cutlasses which were to remain in use on American ships for over 80 years. They were still to be found on some ships during World War II. An officer's Cutlass was made during the Civil War that had a fluted handguard with cut out letters U.S.N. These are extremely rare.

The Confederate States Navy used a variety of Cutlasses. But most of those manufactured in the South were closely patterned after the 1841 design, the poorest ever used. Why this design was chosen has always been a puzzle to me. The only reason I can think of is that the solid brass hilts were easily made by casting in sand molds. There is one characteristic of these Confederate Cutlasses, apart from their markings, that make them easily recognized - they never have the 3 iron rivets through the brass grip that are always found on the Ames Cutlasses.

Three makers manufactured this pattern Cutlass - Thomas Griswold of New Orleans which resemble the Ames most closely, even having the Eagle cast in both sides of the pommel. They are marked on the blade with full name and address, Dr. T. G. & Co., N.O. Cook and Brother Cutlasses are cruder and the pommel is plain. They are stamped Cook & Bro. on the upper surface of the wide knuckle guard, and are quite rare.

A third type was made in Richmond but the maker is not known. These have a fouled anchor cast in one side of the Pommel and C.S.N. on the other side.

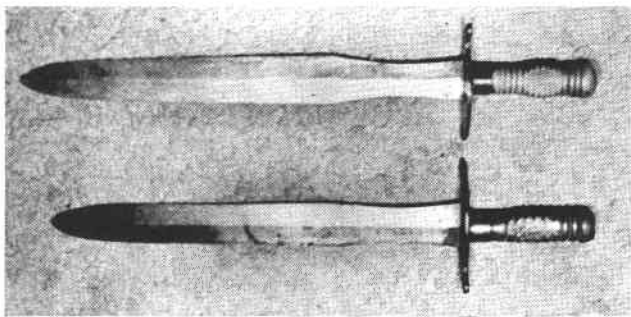
Another Cutlass that is quite frequently found had a double edged blade, turned wood grip, and S shaped iron or Brass Cross Guard. These are believed to have been made at the Union Car Works, Portsmouth, Va.

In addition many Cutlasses were imported from England. Those seen most often have blades like the above, Gutta Percha grips and branch guards like a Calvary saber. Some few have solid iron guards. These were made by mold and are marked in 2 lines on the blade "Courtney & Tennant, Charleston, S. C." It is my belief that few of these actually got through the blockade, as most that are found are in nearly mint condition - ordinarily a confederate weapon in fine condition is rare.

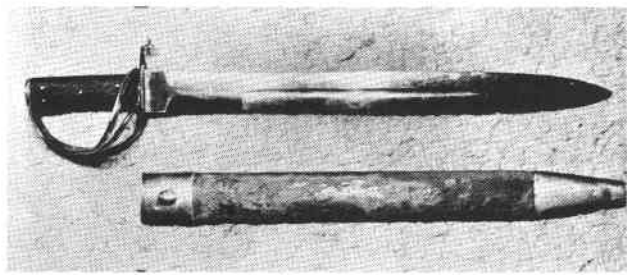
This, in brief is the story of the Picturesque Cutlass that went out with wooden ships and iron men. So as the little boy said when he sat on a cake of ice, "My tale is told."



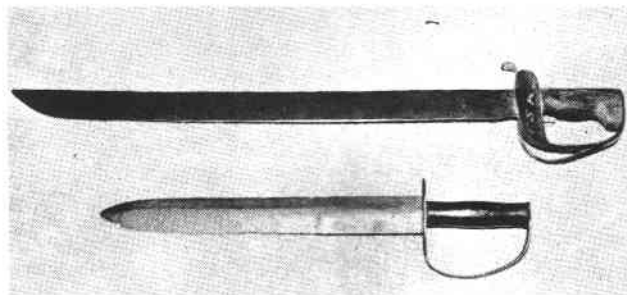
“JOHN HAMMER’S CUTLASSES”



BELIEVE MADE IN NORFOLD, VA.



MOLE (ENGLISH) COURTNEY & TENNANT  
CHARLESTON, S. C.



CONFEDERATE STATES SMALL CONTRACTS