

# Collecting Confederate Swords . . . The Mystique

Fred Edmunds

“ . . . His marching over and his battles done, Robert E. Lee unbelted his sword forever.

“No scratch was on the sword that General Lee laid away that April day in Richmond. His weapon had never been raised except in salute. Rarely had it been drawn from its scabbard. Yet it was the symbol of a war, of an army and of a cause. Where it had been, the red banners of the South had flown. About it all the battles of the Army of Northern Virginia had surged. As he put it down, to wear it no more, the time has come, . . . to give an accounting of his service to the state in whose behalf alone he would ever have drawn his blade in fratricidal strife . . .”

This is a quotation from the monumental book, *R.E. Lee*, by Douglas Southall Freeman.

And from the late Bruce Catton's *Terrible Swift Sword*, “Both sides had heard the trumpet that would never sound retreat. The peace-makers could not be heard until the terrible swift sword had been sheathed; but the scabbard had been thrown away, and now the Confederacy was carrying the war into the enemy's country.”

And from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 2, Verse 4: “. . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

The sword has been a symbol of war and peace down through the centuries. In great literature it has been the noblest of weapons wielded by the noblest of persons in the noblest of causes: the sword of the just and righteous cause always had the truest blade.

The sword has been used to show rank and station and nobility through the ages.

In combat, it is the most personal of weapons, bringing its wielder face-to-face, eye-to-eye with his adversary. The faint of heart forebore attempting the use of so noble a weapon lest he be transfixed in frozen fear of the consequences!

There is probably no more appropriate place in the country than Natchez, Mississippi, to discuss with you my involvement with and feelings about the collecting of Confederate Swords, and the mystique surrounding it. Adding to the flavor of my subject is the ambiance of antebellum homes and mansions on the banks of the Mississippi River in the springtime, the moss on the great live oaks interspersed with formal gardens and beautiful flowering vegetation. Let us now journey back in time.



At the outbreak of the Civil War, the North was undergoing a rapid industrial revolution which had begun with the mechanization of its tremendous agricultural resources, largely implemented by McCormick's reaper, and continuing into the urban areas where standardized machine manufacturing procedures were being widely instituted and constantly improved. With the influx of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe into the Northeast, the North was provided with a cheap labor force to further enhance this industrial revolution. The North was indeed buzzing with activity.

The South, meanwhile, was a truly agrarian, static society. The Southern way of life, idyllic in many respects, proceeded at a gentle pace, with an easy, graceful and sometimes luxurious existence. The plantation life. A “Gone With the Wind” nostalgia.

True, there were many poor and middle-class whites in the South, but they seemed content with the system, most of them imbued with a quiet pride in being superior to the North, with its immigrant hordes.

However, Cotton was king in the South, and together with the institution of slavery, undermined any opportunity for the South to participate in the industrial revolution and mechanization of its society. The South was truly an agrarian society; there wasn't even a major weapons manufactory in the South at the outbreak of the Civil War. The problem of logistics was overwhelming.

Suddenly, there was an immediate necessity to arm the Southern soldier; to provide the total accoutrement of war for the protection of the homeland. Arms manufactories sprung up all over the South, seemingly overnight,

many of them producing edged weapons as well as guns. Some of the few existing factories were converted to produce firearms and/or edged weapons.

Indeed, the Nashville Plow Works, casting aside the prohibition contained in the Bible, actually created swords from plowshares.

It was within the framework of this historical background that I became interested in Confederate arms, and swords in particular. The tremendous effort and sacrifice put forth by the South in arming its sons sufficiently to carry on a major war for four long years with an adversary so vastly superior in equipment and manpower was as fascinating as it was incredible. The independent spirit of the people in the South became irrevocably a part of each artifact of war. Each sword, each gun, has something of the people infused in its makeup. Each reflects a certain ruggedness and simplicity and even a certain confident arrogance that was so evident in the Southerner's makeup.

I acquired my first Confederate Sword in 1961. It was a Cook & Brother Naval Cutlass made in New Orleans, Louisiana, just to the south of here, probably in late 1861 or early 1862. The name "Cook & Brother" was stamped on the top obverse portion of the guard. (The obverse side of the sword is the right side of the sword as you hold it by the grips and point it straight away from you. The reverse is the left side.)

The late Bill Albaugh's book, *Confederate Edged Weapons*, provided proper identification of the piece and a brief but colorful description of the operation of Ferdinand and Francis Cook, first at #1 Canal Street, New Orleans, and later at Athens, Georgia.

Having been fascinated with the history of the War for Southern Independence since my college days, the acquisition of this Confederate naval cutlass truly "did me in."

In my mind's eye, I could envision a rebel sailor on board the ironclad, "CSS Arkansas," armed with a naval cutlass just exactly like my "Cook & Brother": I could close my eyes and see the "Arkansas" coming down the Yazoo River, disabling the U.S. gunboat, Carondelet, chasing off two wooden craft, then coming out into the Mississippi and cruising past the Federal fleet, firing as she went and finally reaching the Vicksburg waterfront. What a nostalgic thought!

Twenty-four years later I stand here before you, hopelessly ensnarled in the Cult of the "Confederamania" of edged weapons. We are many in number in the Cult, and we are growing in Brobdingnagian strides.

In those same twenty-four years, I have carefully studied Confederate Swords and acquired them, seemingly one by one, each one in turn occupying its own very special place, some with special stories of their own.

During the same time span I have been approached with many specious examples which were being offered for sale. At times it was very difficult for me to make a decision as to the authenticity of a given sword; whether, in fact, it was Confederate.

If it weren't for the marvelous writings of Bill Albaugh, whom I mentioned before, and the kind advices and counsel of my many Confederate collecting friends, I am afraid I would have gotten discouraged at times. You have all heard the remark, "It's not a Union sword or not European. It must be Confederate." This is one of the most dangerous thoughts a prospective purchaser can entertain. If, indeed, a purchase is made on that basis, the collector winds up with a piece in his collection for which he is constantly apologizing to fellow collectors, and he is usually stuck with it!

We must realize that, generally, Union Swords were the models for their Confederate counterparts. Hence, most Confederate Swords are an attempt at duplication to a great extent, often, to the maximum extent that the South was able to duplicate them. Of course, there was some French influence as well as English and German, further complicating the picture at times.

Basically, what characteristics are we looking for in identifying a sword as Confederate? What are some ultimate determinates? Let us make some random observations: Confederate edged weapons usually have a certain crudeness in their appearance and many contain casting flaws that are obvious even upon a cursory examination. Casting flaws that are evident in the brass guards, grips and pommels; some of the more gaping flaws are lead filled.

Most Confederate blades have single unstopped fullers; some have flat blades without fullers. When sighting down the blade, the fullers usually appear wavy and are often of different lengths even on the same blade.

Grips are often wrapped with oilcloth instead of leather and are wound with single strand brass, copper or iron wire; sometimes heavy gauge iron wire. Of course you'll also see twisted brass and copper wire. The Confederates hardly ever used sharkskin. Beware of the presentation-grade Confederate officer's sword that has sharkskin grips!

The Navy Cutlasses and foot artillery swords generally have brass grips which are seldom riveted to the blade tangs; when you do see rivets, they are rarely evenly spaced, but appear random. Again, many casting flaws are noted, some lead filled.

Branches of guards are often irregular, flat or round in cross section: many are quite awkward in appearance.

Pommel caps are crude and many times without stepped encircling rings, some very heavy, others chopped off.

The Confederates used wood scabbards with tin mounts for many models of their foot artillery swords and some cavalry sabres. Usually the wood scabbards for the foot artillery swords are painted black.

Leather scabbards are usually sewn at the top or bottom of the blade rather than the reverse middle as in their Union counterparts. This is not always true, however. Metal scabbards are frequently joined at the reverse rear or are wrap-arounds and leaded or brazed. One can nearly always see the seam in a Rebel metal scabbard; in fact, even on some of the better quality pieces, the seam is often surprisingly crude.

Scabbards are nearly always brass mounted, often brass throated and sometimes, in addition, brass dragged. Many times even the carrying rings are of brass rather than iron.

Metal scabbards are usually covered with a red-varnished or black japanning. This japanning is nearly impossible to remove without using abrasives. (Of course, who would want to remove so fine an original finish!) Original scabbard japanning is to Confederate Sword collectors what original blue finish is to Gun Collectors.

Now, how about considering fakes? There are loads of them! They are relatively easy to sell and distribute because many collectors are fooled by them. There are several so-called legitimate businesses which have produced copies of certain more popular models, reproductions which carry no stamping to indicate they are replicas. We all have feelings about the people in this sort of business which I do not wish to discuss at this time. It is reprehensible conduct to say the least.

Even though I have tried, I have seldom heard the strains of "Dixie" emanating from even the purest of Confederate blades; sometimes I think I have smelled molasses and corn pone though. One must be very careful, lest one get carried away!

There are some further guidelines to follow so as not to be taken in by fakery with respect to collecting arms generally, which apply to Confederate swords. Many times a faked artifact will have an applied patina finish; a rusted fake patina will often be very uniform in appearance. This is also true of certain fine pitting falsely applied or etched. You'll sometimes find the pitting is very uniform on the entire blade or scabbard. Your own experience should tell you that something is amiss: metal hardly ever ages in an even fashion. Genuine antique artifacts have scattered patina, and if there is pitting present, it is also uneven, not uniform throughout.

The hurry-up false aging of brass usually leaves a "darker" and more vivid greenish color than the brownish-green blend of antiquity.

On swords with leather grips wound with wire, many fakes will reveal that the wire is just wound around the

leather and is not indented into the leather to any extent and hasn't been there for long; but is just lying on the surface, appearing newly applied. Also, check the pommel and the peened-over tang: you may see evidence of a recent unseating of the blade.

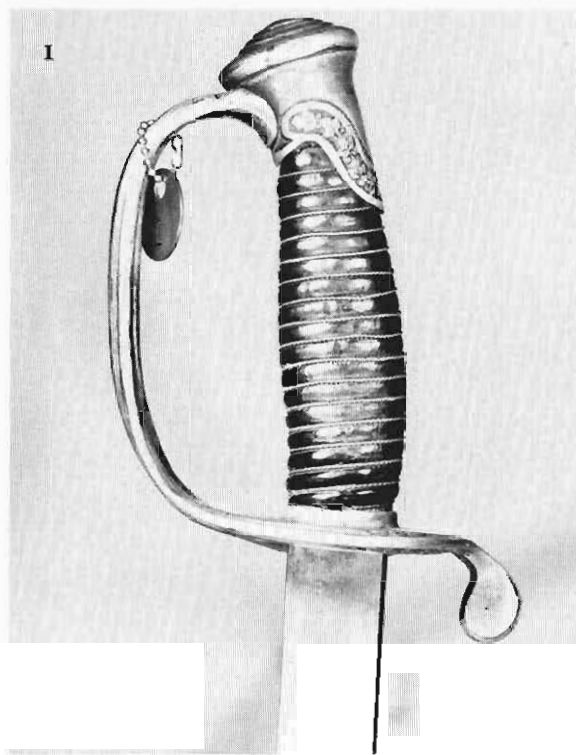
Of course, the best way to determine a fake is to become knowledgeable about Confederate swords, the real products. The more experience we have in seeing and handling the genuine article, the more we'll gain a knowledge and understanding of that and similar objects.

Most people in the antique collecting field, because of their individual expertise, have a "feel" for antique goods and a kind of sixth sense when it comes to recognizing a potential problem with a certain piece they are examining.

We will try to supplement that expertise by presenting photos of a reasonably wide selection of swords which have become accepted by collectors as Confederate.

While perusing these photos, don't be surprised if you hear the faint but familiar strains of "Dixie," for these are *true Rebel Swords* and their mystique will direct your thoughts back to other times and places, when the Old South lived and Cotton was King.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



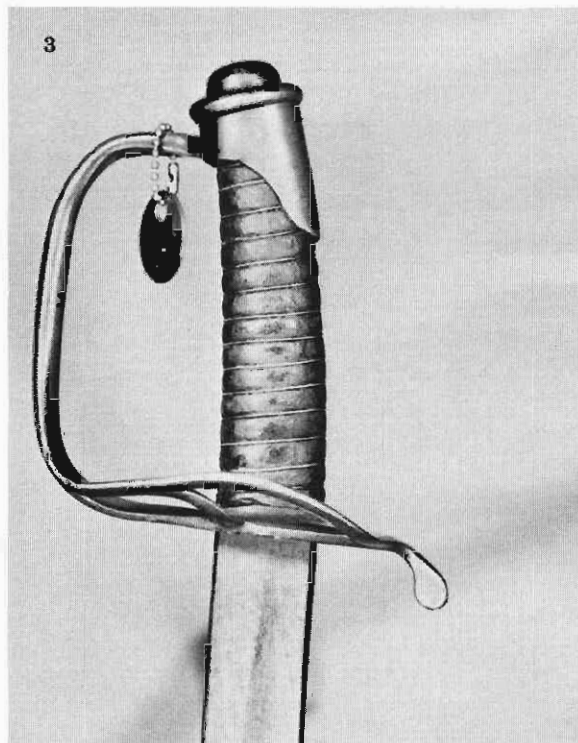
*Boyle & Gamble Foot Officer's Sabre Made in Richmond, Virginia. Brass guard; obverse pierced with rose design, pommel with series of stepped encircling rings, decorated with ivy leaf; grip is wrapped with leather and closely wound with fine twisted brass wire; blade has unstopped shallow single fuller; scabbard dark leather with all brass mounts; seam sewn along back edge of scabbard; usually of the type made for Mitchell & Tyler, military outfitters located in Richmond.*

2



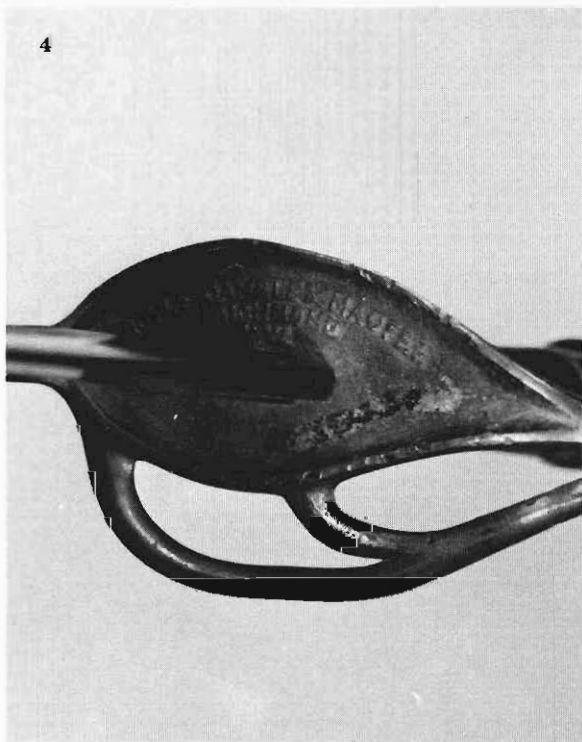
*Boyle & Gamble Staff Officer's Sabre Brass guard with "CS" and star in wreath on obverse counter-guard; pommel with laurel leaf design; leather grip with single strand brass wire; etched blade with unstopped fuller; leather scabbard, all brass mounts, seam sewn along back edge.*

3



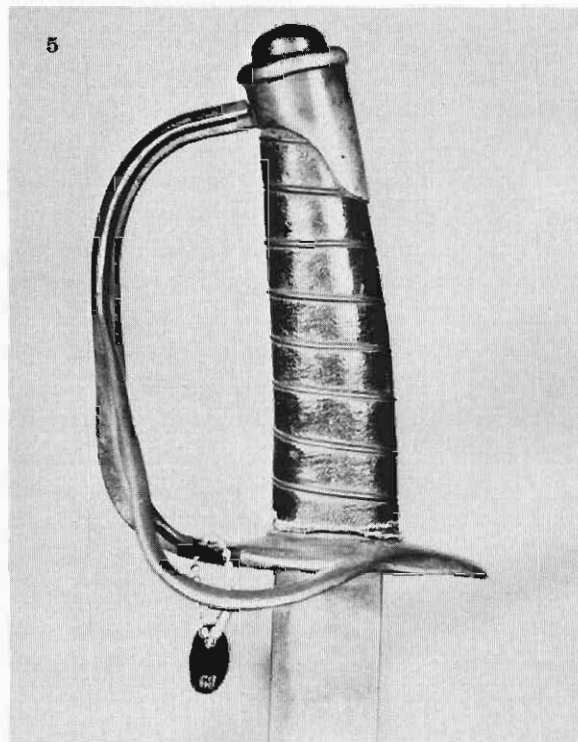
*Boyle, Gamble & MacFee Foot Officer's Sabre Brass guard with open spaces between branches; counter-guard turned down and "Boyle, Gamble & MacFee, Richmond, VA" cast integral with guard; leather wrapped with single strand fine brass wire; leather scabbard, brass mounted.*

4



*Same as previous photo showing legend.*

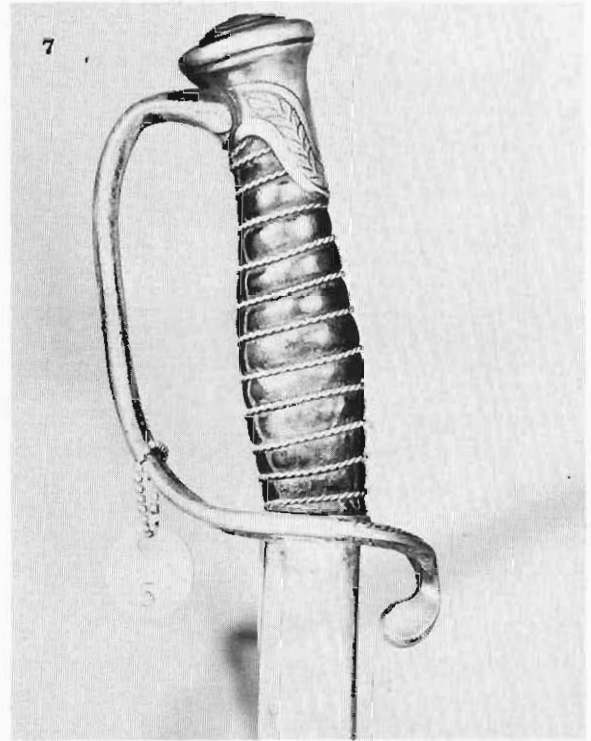
5



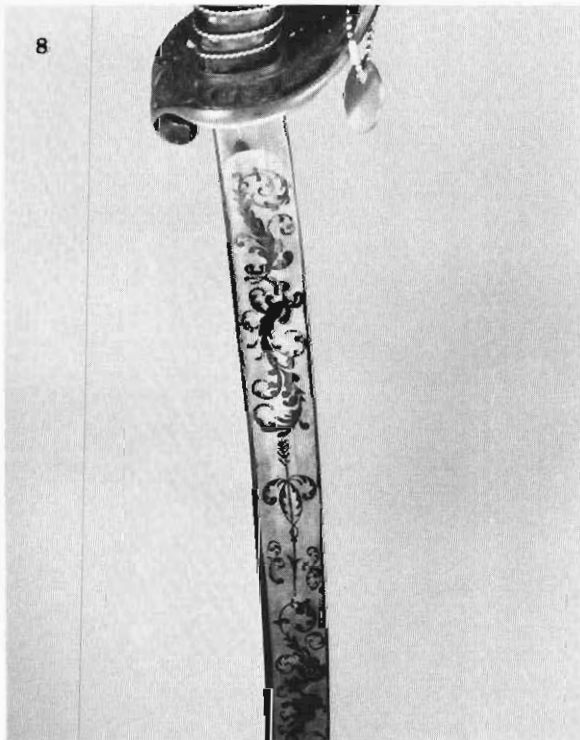
*Boyle, Gamble & MacFee Cavalry Sabre Brass guard; oilcloth grip, iron wire wound; flat blade; leather scabbard copper mounted.*



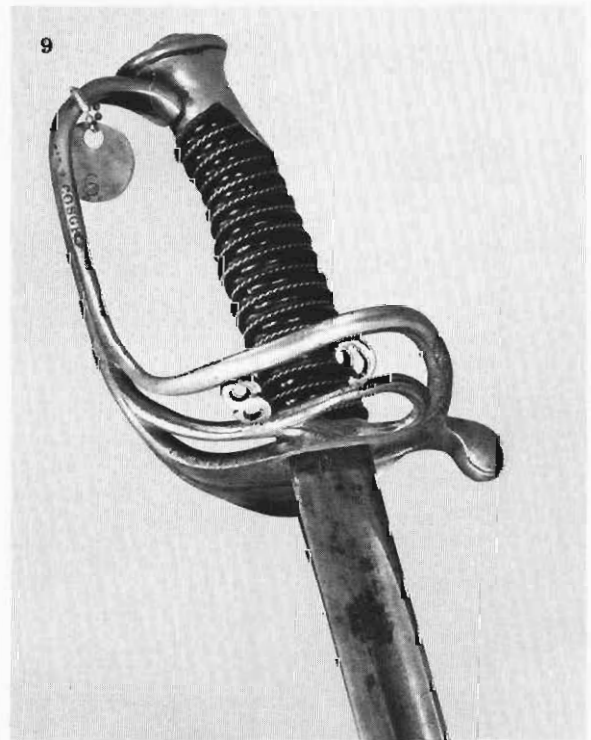
*Leech & Rigdon Staff Officer's Sabre* Brass guard with "CS" cast with pierced rose design; leather grip with twisted brass wire; etched floral design on blade; unstopped single fuller; leather scabbard, all brass mounted, seam sewn at top.



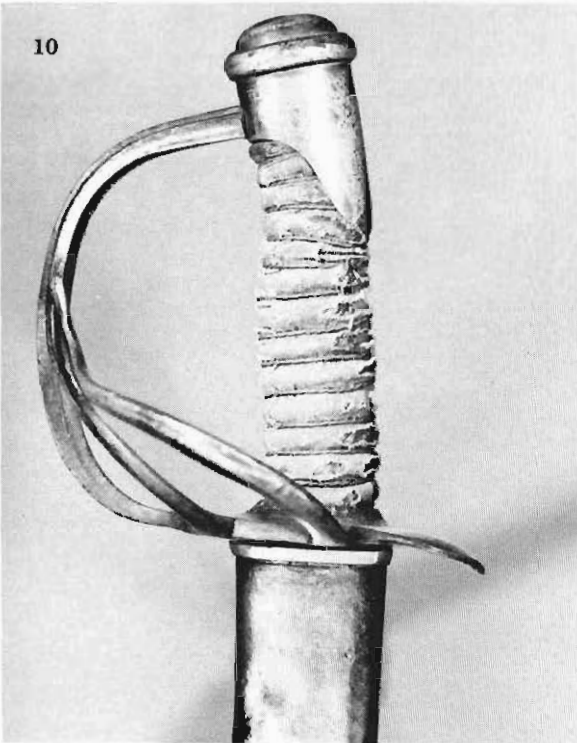
*Leech & Rigdon Foot Officer's Sabre* Brass guard; pierced rose design with cast "CS" on top reverse of guard; laurel leaf design in pommel; leather grip with twisted brass wire; etched blade with flower and vine design; leather scabbard, brass mounted, sewn at reverse middle.



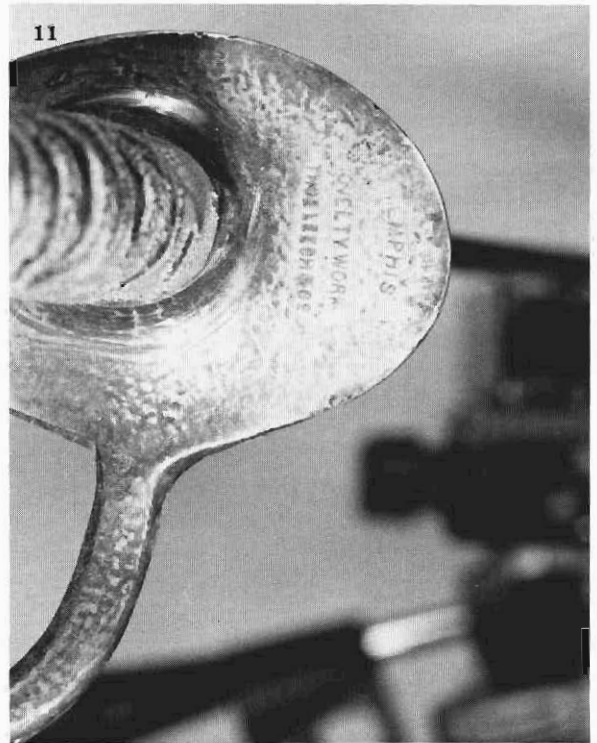
Same sabre as photo #7 showing reverse.



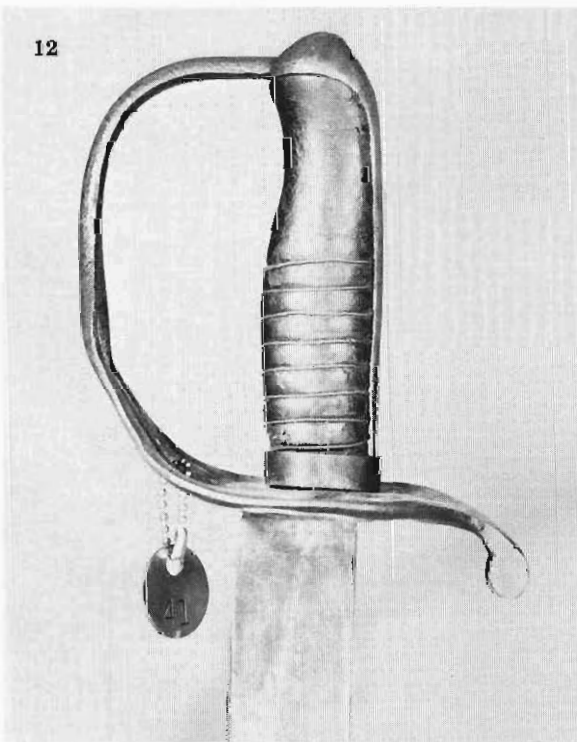
*Leech & Rigdon Staff and Field Officer's Sabre* Brass guard with undecorated pommel; open branches with "CS" in obverse portion; single unstopped fuller; leather grip with twisted brass wire; leather scabbard brass mounted, seam sewn at reverse middle.



*Memphis Novelty Works Cavalry Sabre* Brass guard with Phrygian helmet pommel design; oilcloth grip over wound with twine and twisted copper wire; single unstoppered fuller; iron scabbard, brass mounted.



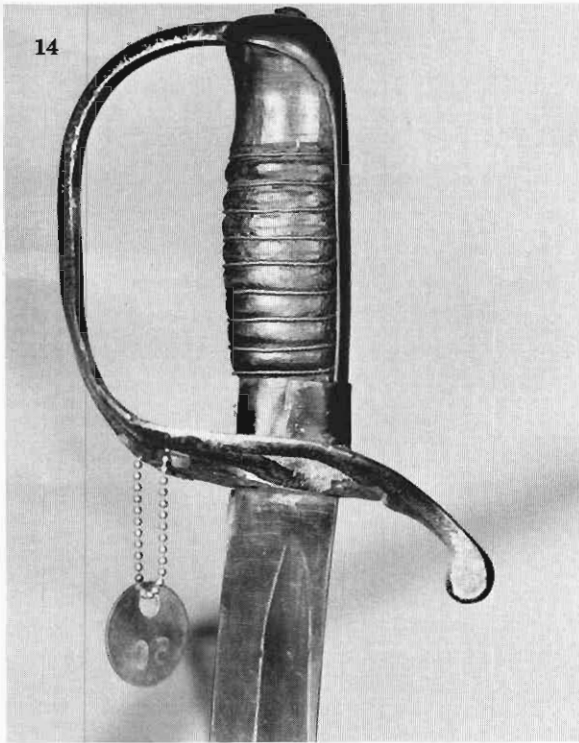
Same sabre as photo #10, showing stamping on top side of quillon.



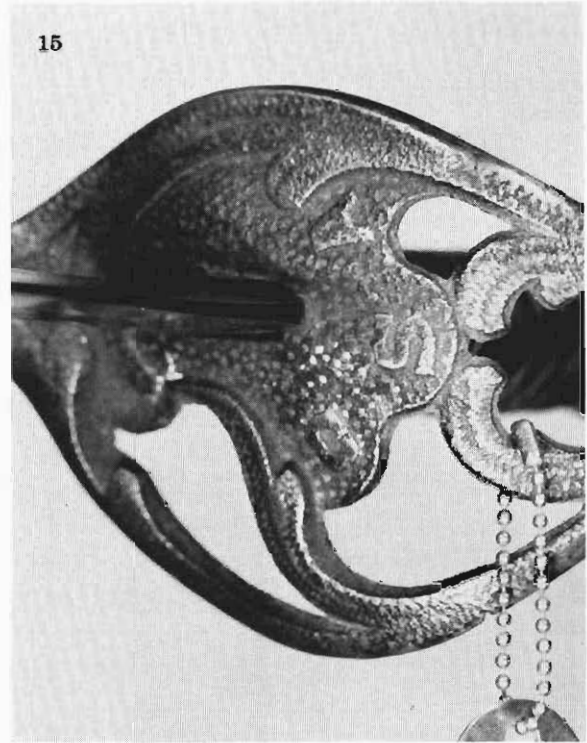
*Nashville Plow Works Cavalry Sabre* Nashville, Tennessee. Cast brass guard and knucklebow; iron ferrule at base of grip; one-piece brass backstrap and pommel; grip leather wrapped with fine twisted brass wire; iron blade with unstoppered fuller.



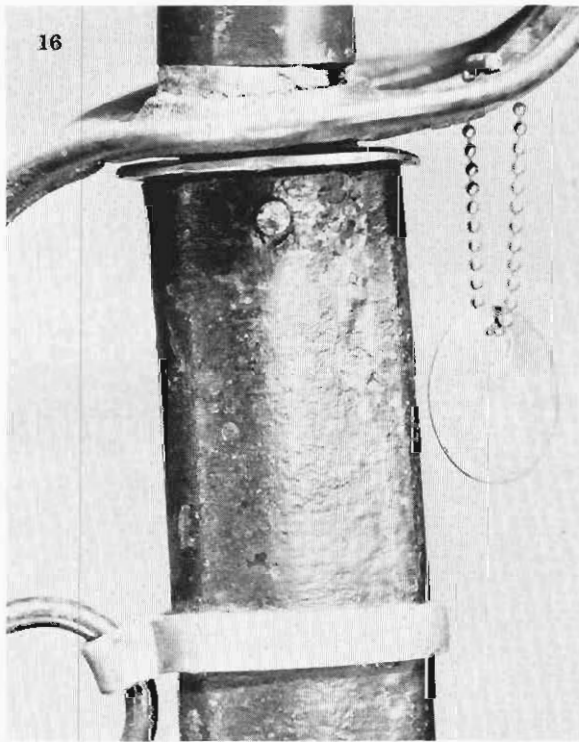
Same sword as photo #12, showing "Nashville Plow Works" cast integral in guard.



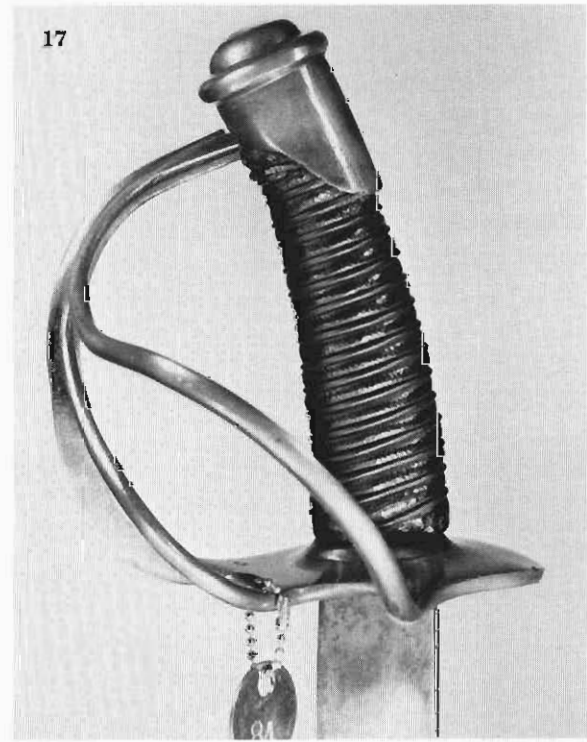
*College Hill Arsenal Cavalry Sabre* Nashville, Tennessee. Cast brass guard and knucklebow; iron ferule at base of grip; one-piece iron backstrap and pommel; grip leather wrapped with fine twisted wire; iron blade with unstopped fuller.



Same sword as photo #14, showing counter guard with stippled casting and "CSA" below blade, as well as open branches of guard.



Same sword as photo #14, showing throat of iron scabbard and first brass mount on reverse side; wrap-around filled seam also visible.



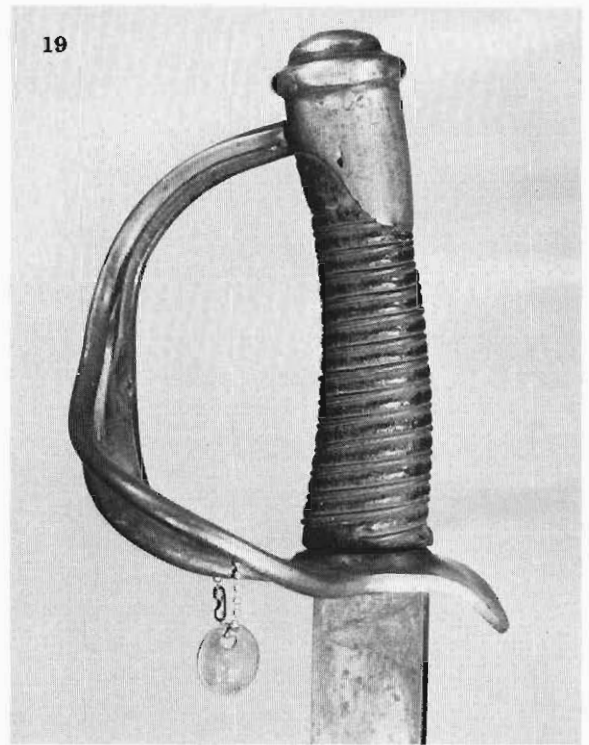
*Unmarked Cavalry Sabre* Brass guard with typical Phrygian helmet shaped pommel, undecorated; grip wrapped with heavy gauge oilcloth and wound with heavy gauge single strand iron wire; blade with shallow single unstopped fuller; iron scabbard with brass mounts.

18



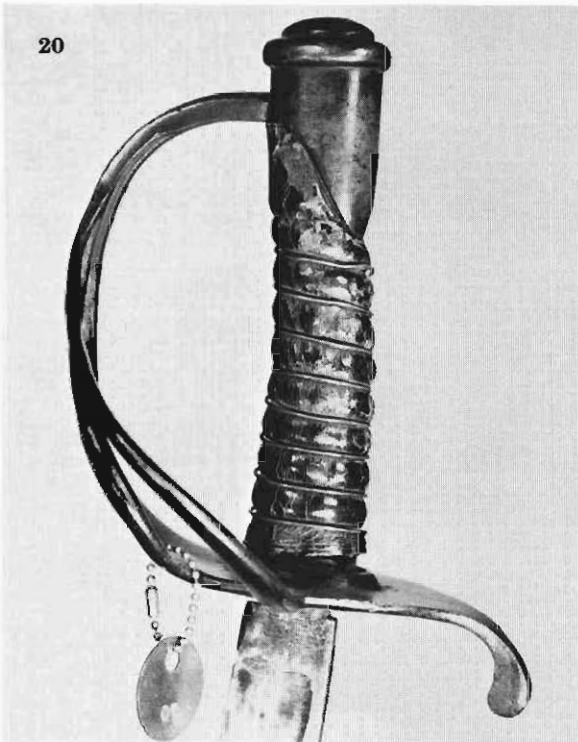
*Unmarked Cavalry Sabre* Brass guard with cone shaped plain pommel; knucklebow divides into three branches about midway; grip leather wrapped with iron wire winding; blade with single unstopped fuller; iron scabbard brass mounted.

19



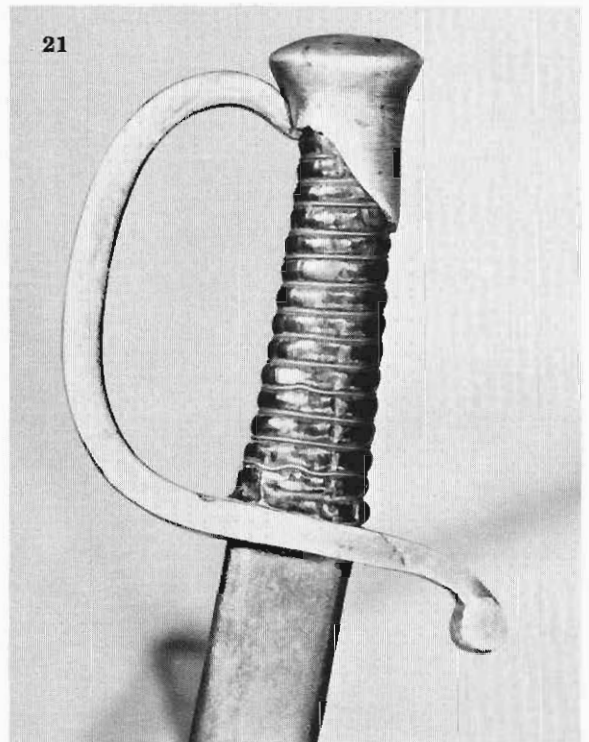
*Unmarked Cavalry Sabre* Typical three branch brass guard with undecorated pommel; oilcloth wrapped grip with heavy single strand iron winding; blade with unstopped single fuller; iron scabbard with brass mounts.

20



*Unmarked Cavalry Sabre* Tall brass guard undecorated pommel; long extending downturned quillon; brown leather covered grip wound with single strand copper wire; crude slender blade with crude stopped fuller; brass mounted iron scabbard.

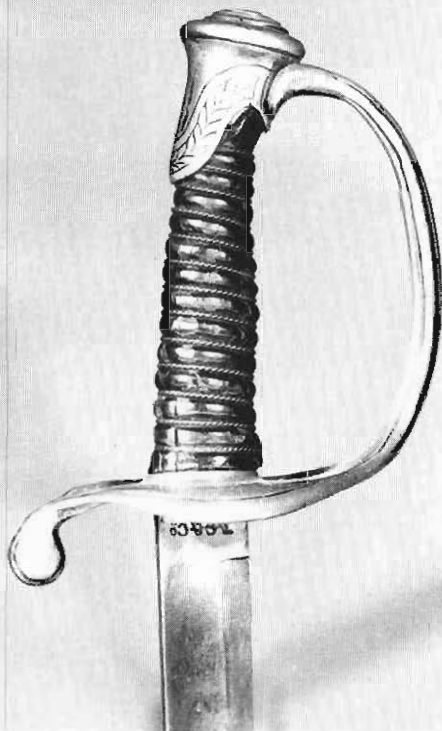
21



*Unmarked Light Artillery Sabre* Crude brass guard with undecorated pommel and knucklebow; grip oilcloth wrapped and wound with single strand iron wire; bottom of guard crudely carved-out to accept throat of iron scabbard; scabbard with crude brass mounts and wrap-around brazed seam.

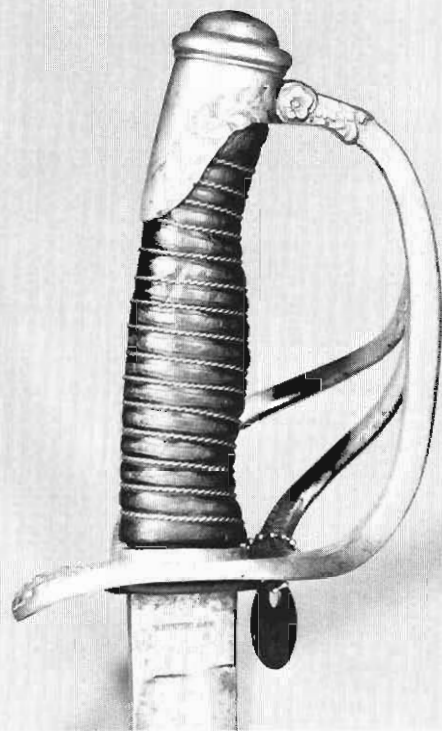


22



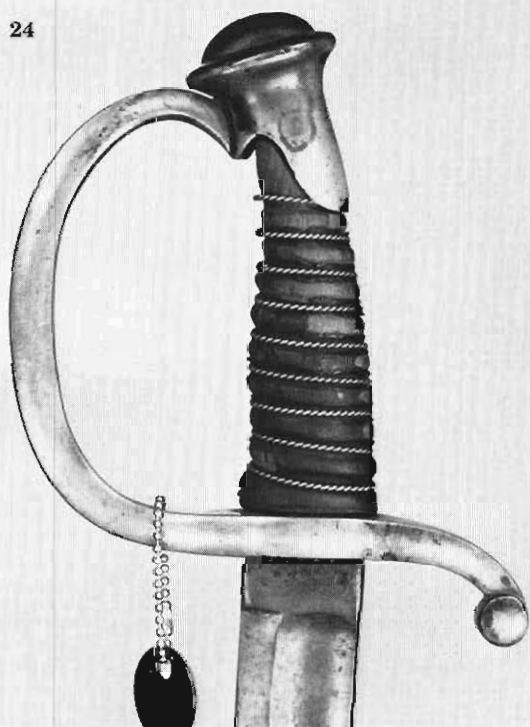
*Thomas, Griswold & Co. Foot Officer's Sabre* Brass guard with stepped, decorated pommel; leather wrapped with twisted brass wire; blade with stopped fuller and stamped, "T, G & Co., N.O." on reverse ricasso; all brass scabbard.

23



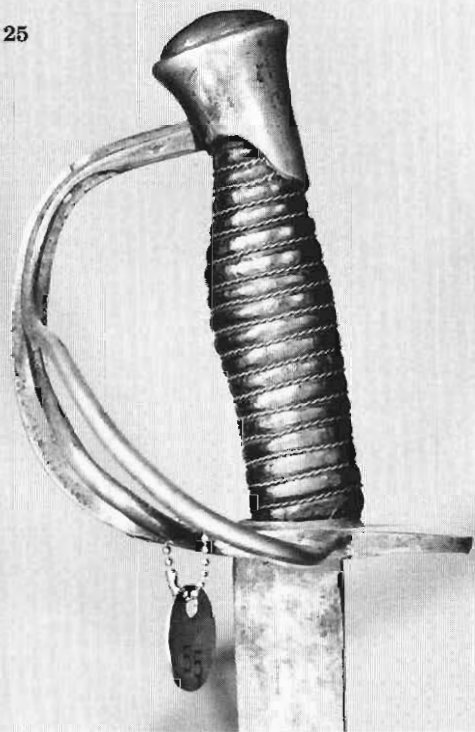
*Thomas, Griswold & Co. Cavalry Officer's Sabre* Brass guard; laurel leaf decoration on pommel, fancy cast guard raised design on top of quillon and top of knucklebow; leather grip with twisted brass wire; blade with firm name stamped on reverse ricasso; stopped fuller; all brass scabbard.

24



*Thomas, Griswold & Co. Light Artillery Sabre* Brass guard; undecorated pommel; leather grip with twisted brass wire; blade with stopped fuller; all brass scabbard; a good attempt at copying U.S. Model 1840 Light Artillery Sabre.

25



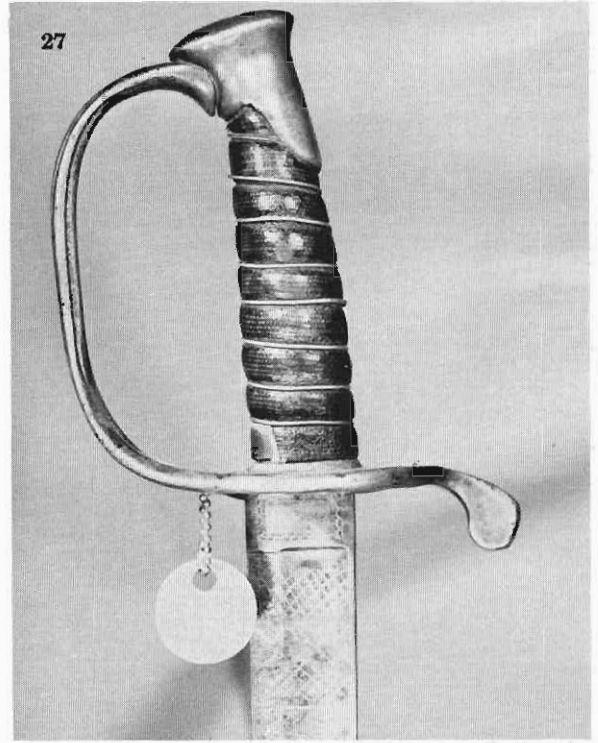
*B. Douglas & Co. Cavalry Sabre* Columbia, South Carolina. Brass guard and pommel; leather wraps with twisted brass wire; iron blade with unstoppered single shallow fuller.

26



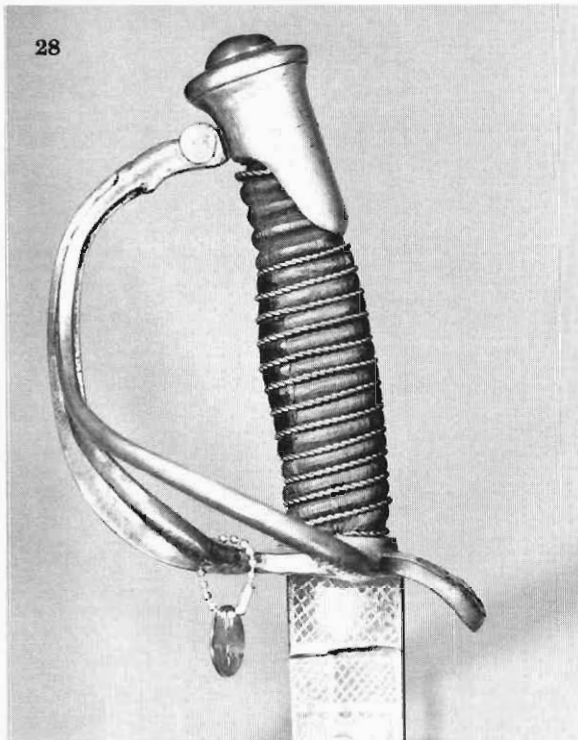
*James Conning, Cavalry Sabre* Made in Mobile Alabama. Rather heavy brass guard of typical Confederate design; grip leather wrapped with twisted brass winding; blade stamped "James Conning, Mobile," on reverse ricasso; blade with single unstopped fullers; iron scabbard with iron ring mounts and rings.

27



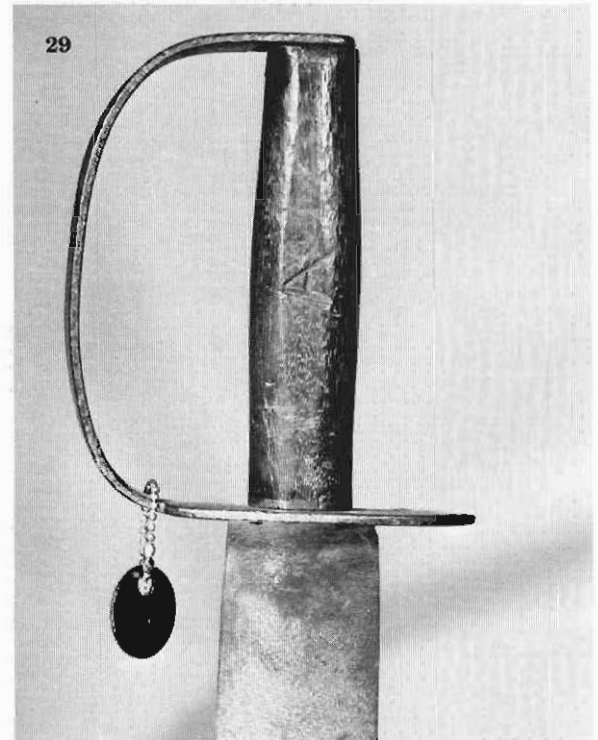
*W.J. McElroy Foot Officer's Sabre* Brass guard with pierced vine design on obverse; undecorated pommel; oilcloth grip with single strand brass wire; iron blade profusely etched with stopped single fuller; panels in etching read "W.J. McElroy, Macon, Geo."; "Be Faithful to thy Trust"; "Independence, Now and Forever"; and an old English "CS".

28



*W.J. McElroy Cavalry Sabre* Brass guard and undecorated pommel; leather wraps with twisted brass wire; single stopped fuller in profusely etched blade, with maker's name and old English "CS".

29



*Confederate Bowie Knife* Iron guard, double edged blade, wood grip, believed to be made by Confederate States Armory (Louis Froelich), Kenansville, North Carolina.

30



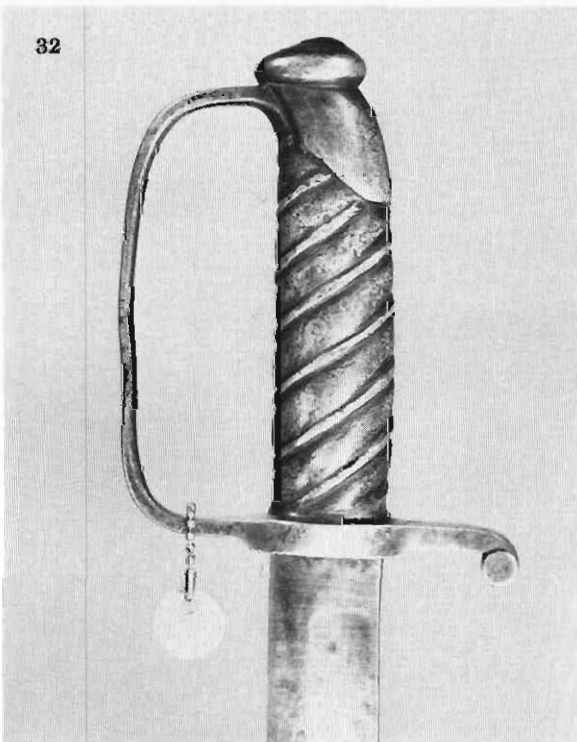
*Thomas, Griswold & Co. New Orleans Naval Cutlass*  
 Stamped on reverse ricasso, "T, G & Co. N.O.",  
 unriveted brass guard with eagle decoration on  
 pommel; sheet brass guard with edges folded over  
 and quillon formed by brass sides brazed on ends.

31



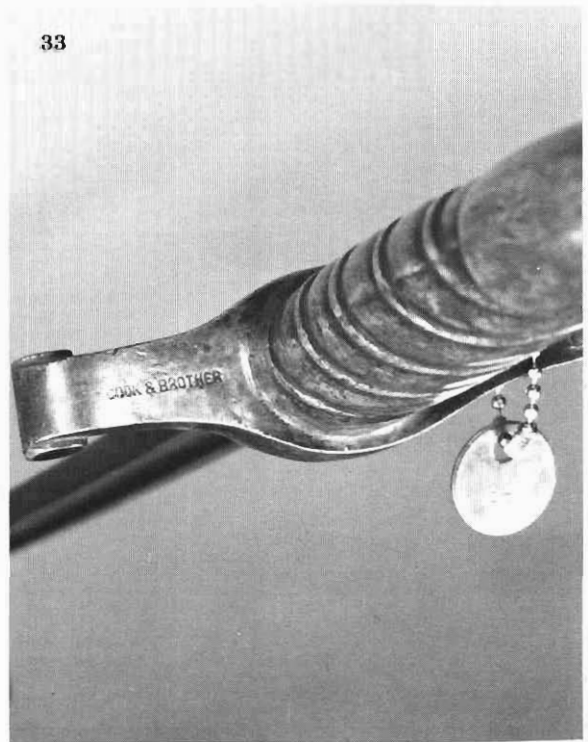
*Cook & Brother Naval Cutlass Made in New Orleans,*  
 Louisiana. Cast brass guard and grip; iron blade, no  
 fuller. "Cook & Brother" stamping on top obverse of  
 guard; leather scabbard, brass mounted with stud for  
 frog.

32

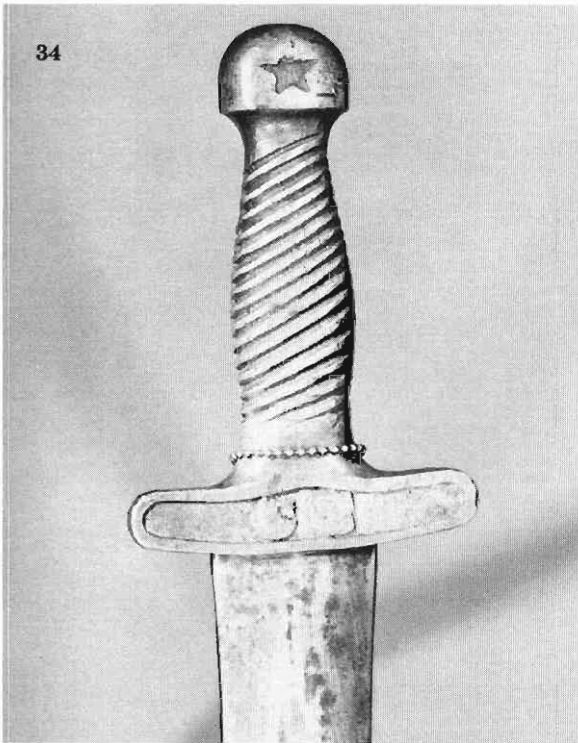


*Cook & Brother "D" Guard Short Artillery Hanger*  
 Made in New Orleans, Louisiana. One piece brass  
 cast D guard artillery hanger; guard cast to create  
 appearance of separate pommel, knucklebow, grip  
 and winding; iron artillery shaped short blade with  
 single fuller, partially stopped.

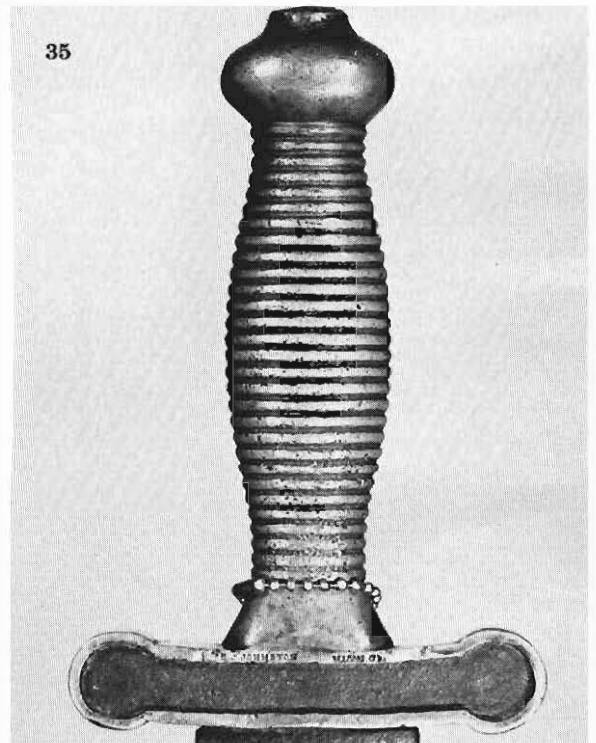
33



Same sword as in photo 32 , showing markings on  
 quillon.



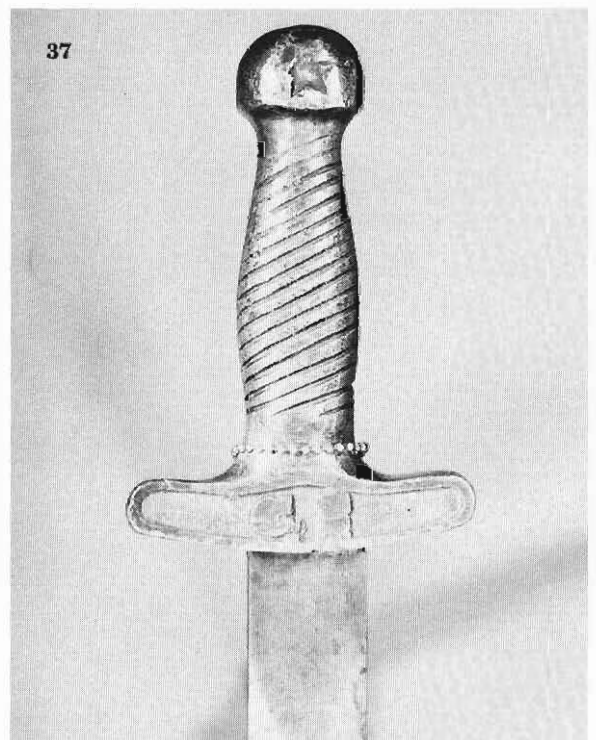
34  
*Foot Artillery Sword Classic model; brass grip with poorly cast star on either side of pommel and crude "CS" in cross guard area; poor casting, lead-filled in places.*



35  
*Foot Artillery Sword Brass grip; French design; stamped "E.J. Johnston, Macon, Ga." cast in top ridge of cross guard; wasp waisted blade; triangular fuller near ricasso; additional fuller beneath.*

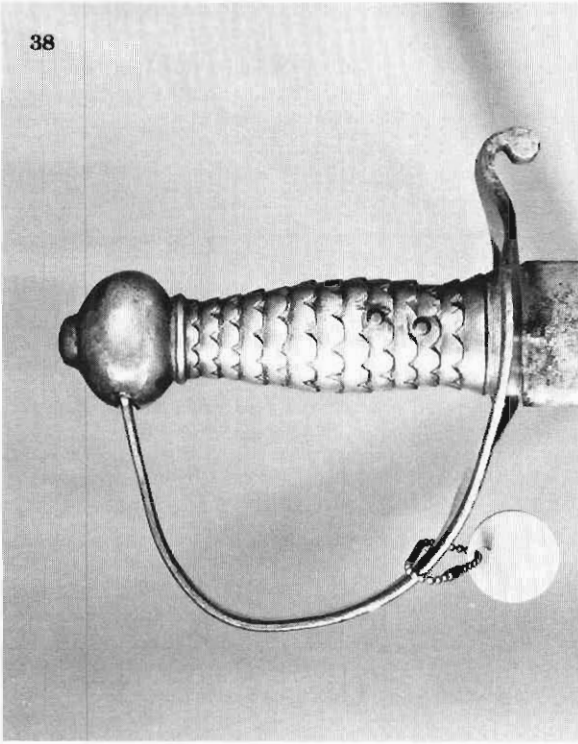


36  
*Foot Artillery Sword Brass grip; no rivets; "CS" cast into ends of cross guard; tin mounted wood scabbard painted black with a brass stud for frog.*



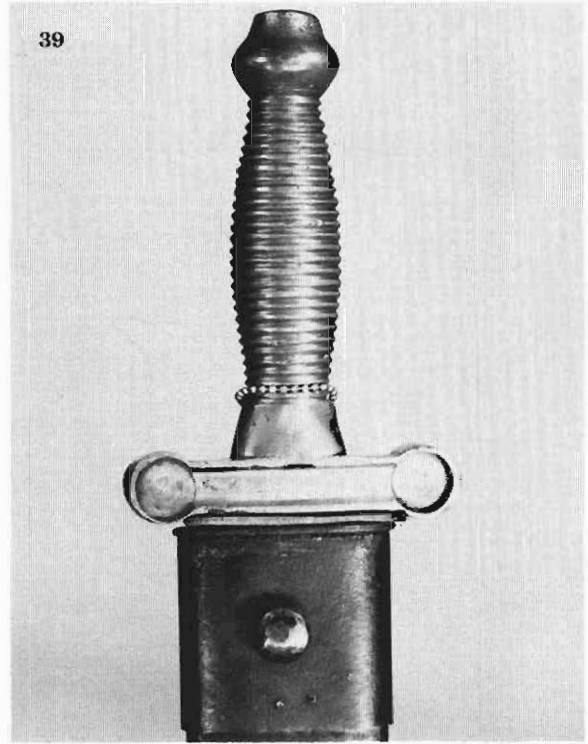
37  
*Side Knife With same type grip as photo #34, except blade is made from a Georgia Pike; blade has single, large stamped star below ricasso. Because of the quality of this piece, it could well have been made at the Georgia Armory.*

38



*Naval Cutlass* Brass cast grip, undecorated ball pommel; two random rivets in grip; cast guard-knucklebow with heart-shaped cut out in obverse; iron blade, no fuller.

39



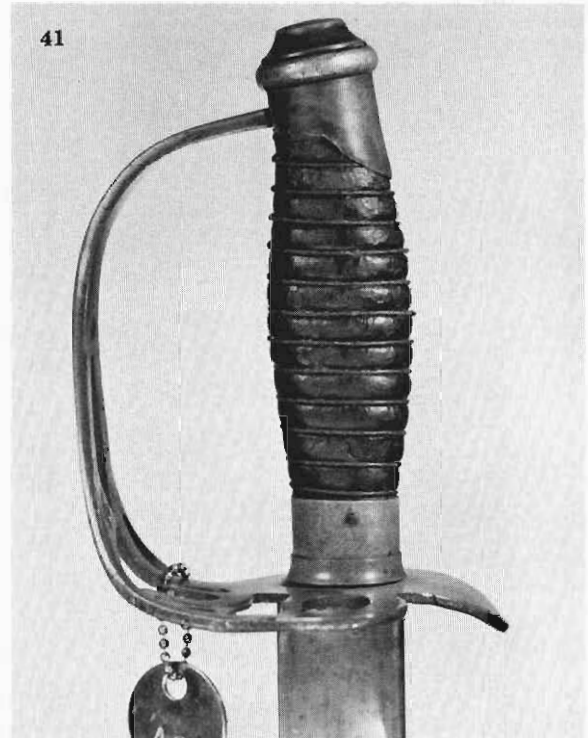
*Foot Artillery Short Sword* Brass grip; no rivets in grip; French style; wood scabbard tin mounted with brass stud for frog; entire scabbard painted black.

40

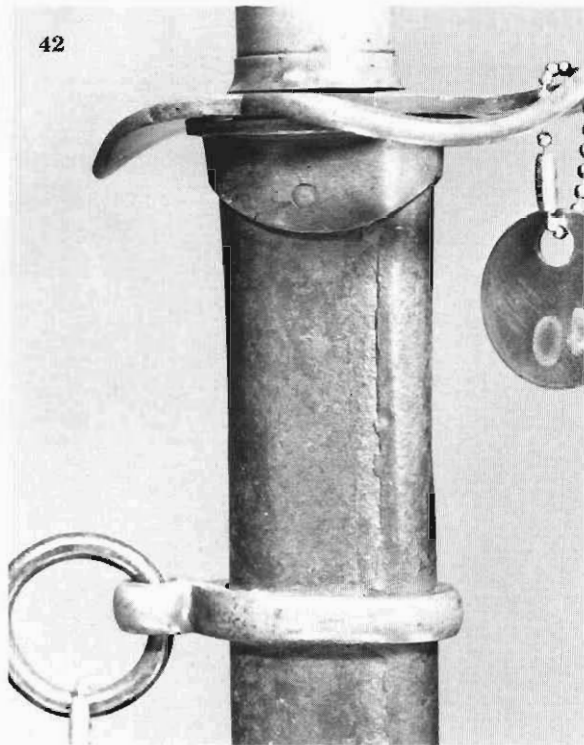


*Confederate States Armory Foot Officer's Sabre* Made by Louis Froelich, Kenansville, North Carolina. Picture showing guard of most well recognized, and most faked of all Confederate swords. Brass guard is cast and nearly always shows casting flaws.

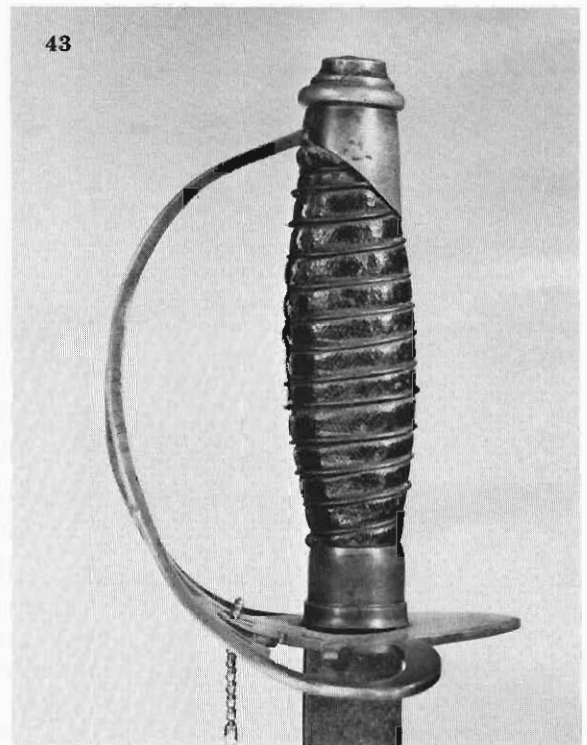
41



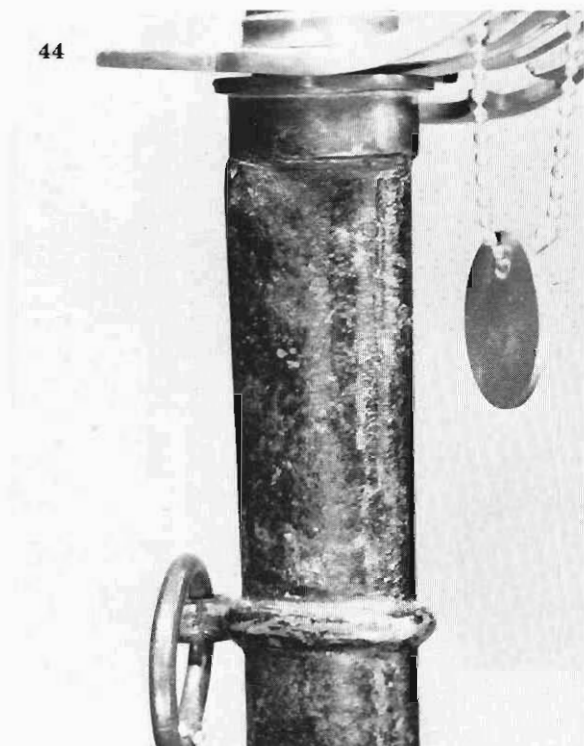
This "Kenansville" is of the shorter, heavier variety; leather covered grip with single strand iron wire; Roman numerals on obverse side of quillon; and top flat of brass throat of scabbard; grip wider as well as blade wider, heavier and shorter than standard model.



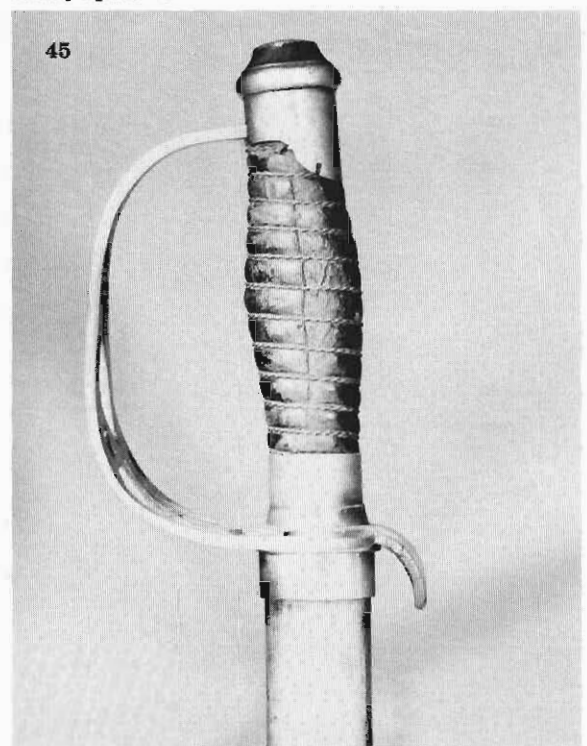
42 Same sabre as in photo #41, showing details of brass ferrule, rocker-shaped brass throat of scabbard and wrap-around brazen seam; red lacquered or japanned scabbard, brass mounted.



43 Another "Kenansville" showing slightly different configuration of brass pommel and ferrule at bottom of grip; no Roman numerals on this piece, oilcloth wrapped and wound with single strand iron wire; narrow blade with single unstopped fuller; a rather flimsy specimen.

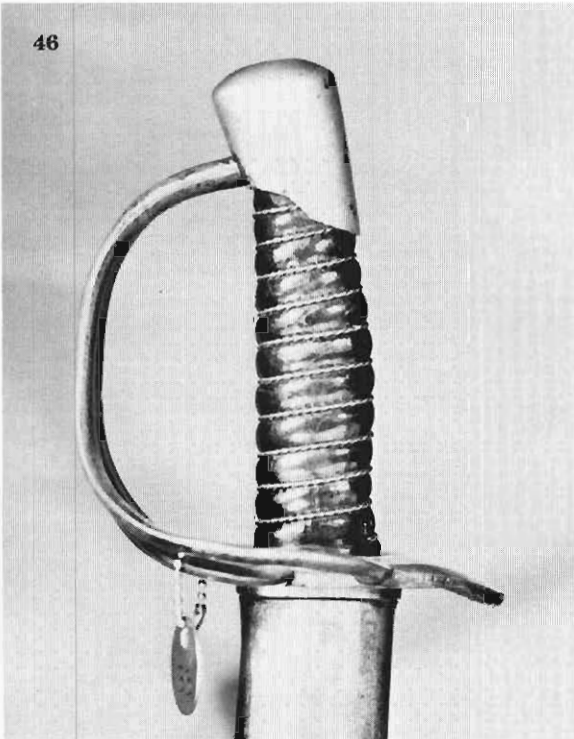


44 Same sabre as in photo #43, showing narrow brass throat of scabbard as well as wrap-around brazen seam of scabbard; black japanning on entire scabbard; still rather flimsy.



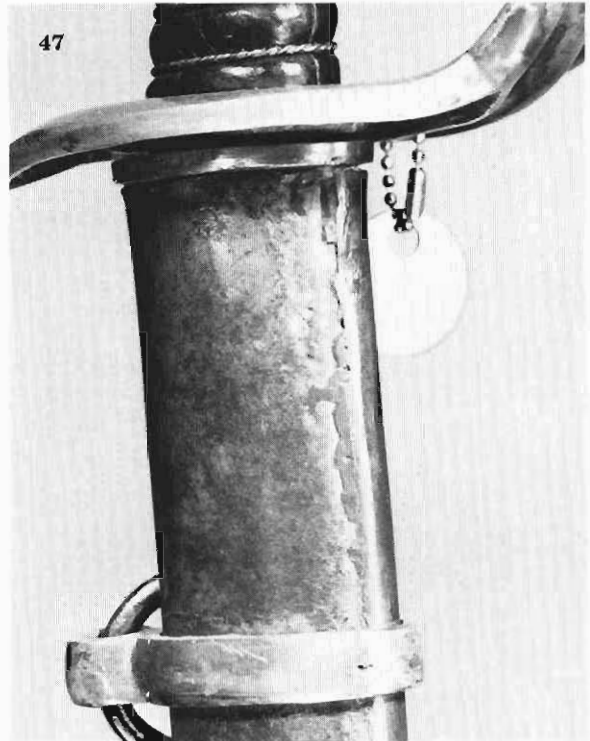
45 Same model as in photos #41 and #43, showing casting flaw in pommel, leather wrap and twisted brass winding with brass ferrule at base of grip. Roman numerals can be seen in obverse side of quillon (they are also on top of throat of scabbard); scabbard is of iron and brass mounted.

46



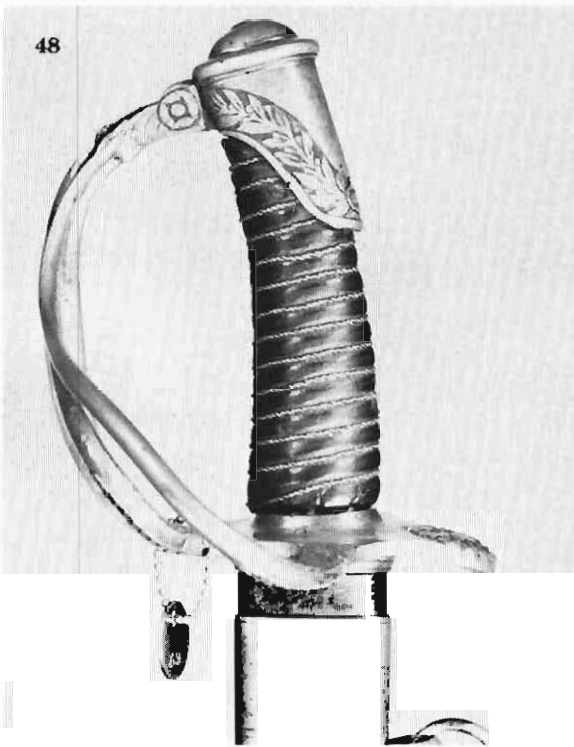
*Confederate States Army Cavalry Sabre Made by L. Froelich, Kenansville, North Carolina. Brass guard with huge, crude undecorated pommel; Roman numerals in obverse side of quillon matched on top flat of brass throat of scabbard; leather wrapping on grips wound with twisted brass wire; typical long, slightly curved cavalry blade with unstopped single fuller.*

47



Same sabre as in photo #46, showing details of brass throat and mounts of scabbard as well as brazed seam at rear reverse.

48



*Louis Haiman & Bro. Cavalry Officer's Sabre Columbus, Georgia. Decorated brass guard; pommel decorated with laurel leaves; leather wrapped with fine twisted brass wire; much gold gilt still evident; finely etched blade with "Deo Vindice" (God will judge). This piece presented to Alex H. Bright, Capt. Co. C., 7th Ala. Regt; iron scabbard completely brass mounted.*



Not sword points, but trees in a Louisiana cypress swamp.