



Daguerreotype of Jacob Faser ca. 1850 at age 26. In the back of the case, "Thos. Cooley, Daguerreotypist, Phila., Jacob Faser" is written in two lines. Courtesy Ms. Mary Bess Kirksey.

The Obscure Confederate Sword Maker Jacob Faser

James C. Harris

Little has been recorded about Jacob Faser's contribution to the Confederate sword-making effort, and even then it is always overshadowed by James Conning of Mobile, Alabama, his employer for approximately nine and one half months. Faser, from all accounts, was much more than an employee in the firm of James Conning: he was, in fact, the design engineer and manufacturing manager behind the success and reputation which Conning grew to enjoy.

Only recently has it been established that Jacob Faser was a sword maker in his own right. Two Confederate Staff and Field Officer styled swords, similar in design to those attributed to Conning, have surfaced in unrelated areas and circumstances, one in Louisiana and one in Arkansas. Both swords have etched blades which bear the maker's name, "J. Faser". The more elaborate of the two, which will be discussed in some detail here today also has, in addition to the name, the maker's location, "Macon, Miss." and the year of manufacture, "1862", etched on the blade.

Both of these edged weapons, as well as two examples of Jacob Faser's earlier artistic endeavors recently came together for the first time in well over a century in an exhibition exclusively dedicated to him at the Mississippi State Historical Museum in Jackson. The event was coordinated and supervised by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; their fine museum staff is to be commended for the excellent display which resulted. One of the two previously mentioned surviving swords is featured in this presentation as a testimonial to Faser's craftsmanship:

The cast brass guard is typical of the style and regulation used by Confederate staff and field officers made under the pattern formulated by Jacob Faser while in the employment of James Conning. It features a half basket design similar to the U.S. M1850 except with the letters "CS" cast into the center. The most apparent difference is in its embellishment. The Faser guard and pommel have been finished with a great deal of flair, attention to detail and aesthetic value. The pommel cap is uniquely designed and executed, revealing the talent and creativity of its maker. Its decoration leaves nothing to be desired, from the laurel wreath crown on top to the newly implemented St. Andrews cross Confederate battleflag on its front. The carved wooden grips are covered *not* with the normally encountered bottom-seamed black leather but sharkskin, a prized and rare commodity in the blockaded Confederacy. This was probably a premier keepsake from the Conning days, for in 1861 Conning was advertising for sharkskin,



apparently with little success judging from its lack of use. The grip wrapping is embellished and secured with eleven (11) turns of medium gage twisted brass wire. The blade and the guard, which retains much of its heavy giltting, are both devoid of any assembly/serial numbers such as were common to Conning manufacture. The 30 x 1-1/16 inch semi-curved blade has an unique unstopped fuller running to the extreme tip of the blade. The blade is rounded at the top and bottom, typical in style to both the firms of Conning and Leech & Rigdon. Uncommon to Conning, however, is the etched blade which reveals on the obverse side, starting at what would be the ricasso, the maker's name and address: "J. Faser, Macon, Miss." in two lines, a military motif and the large letters "C.S." The reverse side contains the year of manufacture, "1862", stands of arms, flags, a cross and pineapple design worked into the etching. The scabbard, which may be a period replacement necessitated by the rigor of battle is a standard metal M1850 staff and field officer's with brass fittings. This particular weapon was purchased in August or September, 1862, by newly promoted Lt. Col. Joseph Collins of the 18th La. Inf. while in route to Pollard, Alabama, to rejoin his regiment. Colonel Collins had been on leave convalescing from a severe wound received at the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, the previous April.

A persistent rumor prevails of a third such sword but to my knowledge at this moment it is only a rumor. I have, however, only recently encountered a piece which is a composite of both Conning and Leech & Rigdon brass fittings with an almost rapier-style blade which may also prove to be a Faser product.

During the first two years of the Civil War Southern volunteers were more plentiful than equipment. Many Confederate units were sent to the front poorly armed and some regiments had to wait months before being equipped. Prior to October, 1861, several thousand men



Elaborate Confederate Staff and Field Officer's sword made by Jacob Faser of Macon, Mississippi, for Colonel Joseph Collins of the 18th Louisiana Infantry Regiment.

had left Alabama unarmed and several thousand more remained in State camps awaiting weapons. This condition was repeated virtually throughout the Confederacy. In an attempt to ease this armament shortage, the Alabama State Legislature in the fall of 1861 appropriated the sum of \$250,000 to lend to those businesses who would commence the manufacture of arms for the government.¹

One Mississippi armorer who subsequently answered Alabama's call for craftsmen was Jacob Faser. Born in Wurtemberg, Germany, on October 22, 1823, Faser at the age of five accompanied his parents to America, crossing the Atlantic in 1828. Aboard the same ship was the Mentzinger family from near Wurtemberg. Before land-



View of the Faser Staff and Field Officer's sword hilt showing the elaborately carved pommel, sharkskin grips, and decorated guard.

ing, the parents, as was the custom in their homeland, pledged the future marriage of their children, Louisa Elizabeth Mentzinger and Jacob Faser. The Faser family settled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.² Here Faser at age 15 was apprenticed to F.W. Widmann, who manufactured ornamental sword mounts, operating at 98 N. 3rd Street. In appreciation for his studiousness and quickness to learn Widmann bequeathed him his pattern and design books. After Widmann's death in the late 1840s Faser entered the employment of another prominent Philadelphia sword maker, William H. Horstmann.³ In the 1850 Pennsylvania Census for the City of Philadelphia, Faser's occupation is recorded as a sword maker and according to a recently discovered letter, he maintained a residence at 485 N. 10th Street. In addition to his proficiency in metal working, Faser was well tutored as a musician, had the ability to play several different instruments, including acting as a church organist.⁴

In 1854, after the untimely death of a young daughter and under the influence of a Mr. Grossman, Jacob Faser was persuaded to visit Mississippi, where he elected to relocate, moving to Macon⁵ at the age of thirty with Louisa, his wife of six years, and their infant daughter, Pamela.⁶ The balance of his relatives remained in the Pennsylvania and New York areas where descendants can be found today. In the 1860 Mississippi census he is listed as a silversmith. By the 1870 Census, he reports his principal occupation as that of a gunsmith. Many of the older residents of Macon still remember their parents relating stories of Mr. Faser's artistry as a jewelry maker and gunsmith. Unfortunately, very little evidence of his skill survived the ravages of time and use.

In the interim, another character emerges in our story. By 1842, James Conning, originally from New York, had established a profitable business at No. 12 Dauphin Street in Mobile, Alabama. His advertisements of the period show that Conning dealt in gold and silver handled canes, all types of Masonic regalia, swords, guns, silver flatware and silver serving pieces of every description. Apparently the scarcity of merchandise and precious metals brought about by the war's virtual curtailment of the import trade and the offering of generous State contracts brought the two kindred spirits, Jacob Faser and James Conning, together.⁷

Faser commenced work for Conning on June 28, 1861. A sword factory was quickly established at the corner of Dauphin and Water Streets in downtown Mobile, where it remained until 1862, when it was moved to a more spacious location at No. 41 St. Francis Street. Initially fourteen workmen were employed by Conning with Faser as superintendent. Within a matter of weeks the factory was in production, a testimony to Faser's ability and expertise.⁸

According to an article in the Macon (Mississippi) *Beacon* dated December 9, 1932, Faser had been recommended to Conning by a mutual friend, Colonel William A. Buck of Mobile, Commander of the 24th Alabama Volunteer Infantry Regiment, who obviously knew first-hand of Faser's skill as a sword maker. Faser's reputation was more than locally known, as shown by an editorial comment appearing on August 3, 1861, in the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*:

We have seen at Conning's three elegant swords made at his establishment . . . They are entirely of Mobile manufacture, from the blade to the scabbard, and are not only highly finished specimens of work, but what is more important, are of excellent temper. Army officers who have examined them speak highly of them, as superior to most others in being well balanced and consequently the more serviceable . . . He (Conning) is now completing a lot of 150 which he considers only a beginning. The blades are forged of the best cast steel by Messrs. Parker (Parks) & Lyons but everything else — the polishing, gliding, mounting, &c. — is done at his place. His principal workman in this department, Mr. J. Faser, was employed for fifteen years in one of the first establishments in the United States, and has turned out some of the most costly weapons ordered for presentation to distinguished personages.

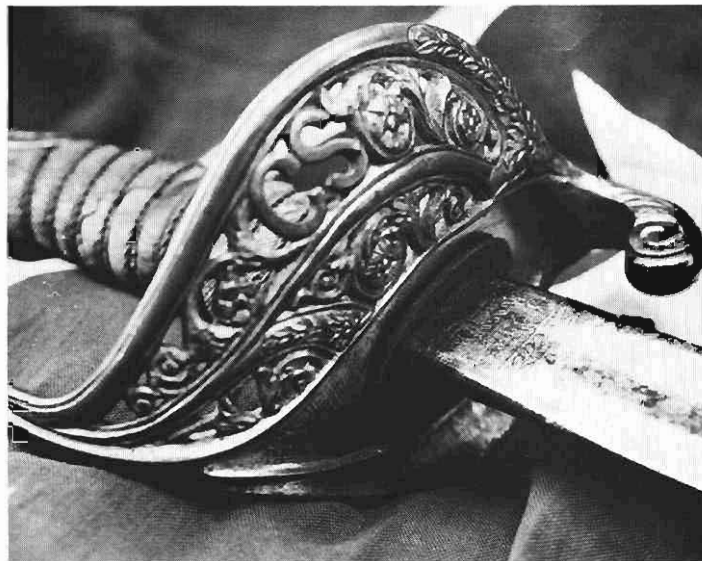
Thirteen letters written by Faser from Mobile to his wife in Macon, Mississippi, have been preserved by the family. The letters begin June 21, 1861, with Faser's arrival in Mobile and continue through March 8, 1862. In the letter dated July 4, 1861, Faser comments on the thriving arms trade in Mobile:

. . . I have seen no less than half dozen different Persons a Sword Making here, one Man wanted me as a Partner, but I shal try one month where I am, and after that I doe not know as yet what I will doe . . . I am Chasing Patterns fore swords, he has no one else yet, but he has advertised fore some Brass filers, there are some 2 or 3 hundred swords to be made, the man that workes on the blades has commenced several days ago but have not finished any yet, they are confident that they can make them, however we are hard at work.⁹

In the course of his subsequent correspondence he referred to several offers made him to join other arms manufacturers in the Mobile area. His letter of December 21, 1861, discussed salary problems he was having with Mr. Conning and comments again on a partnership offer made him from another Mobile firm (Parks and Lyons) which he states had several government contracts, one in particular to make a thousand cavalry sabers.

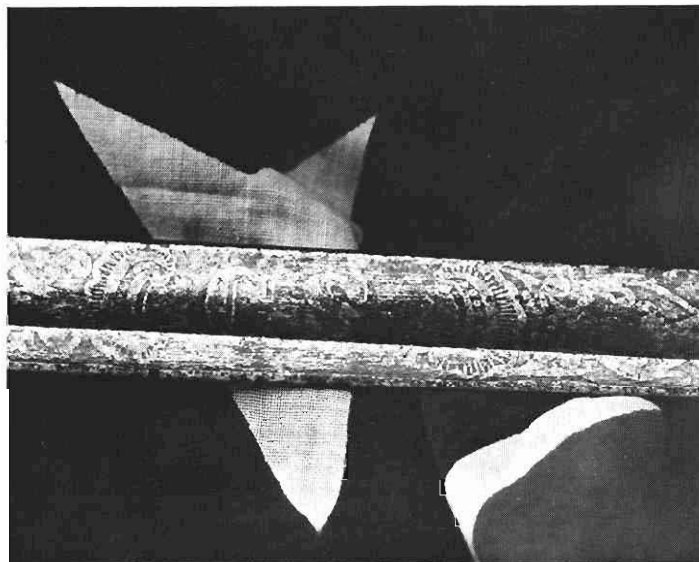
On March 8, he wrote, ". . . The soldiers are all leaving Pensacola (Florida) and going to Corinth (Mississippi) . . . we have now more work than we can doe, we sell the swords as fast as we can make them . . ."

Conning, a rather tight-fisted individual, was reluctant to compensate Faser to the extent he thought proper for his contribution to the association and by early April, 1862, Faser apparently severed his ties with Conning and



Close up of the finely detailed guard.

returned to the Macon area.¹⁰ It is at this point in his career that he produced the beautiful sword previously described and sold to Colonel Collins. Here also he had no problem securing a position as gunsmith at the large, newly established Confederate Arsenal located just twenty miles away in Columbus, Mississippi.¹¹ In addition to his duties at the arsenal and the securing of free-lance sword work, Faser obviously performed subcontract and consultation work for the firm of Leech & Rigdon, then in full operation adjacent to the Columbus arsenal.¹² His style and influence is evident in some of their later pieces. He also was logically given unrestricted access to their facility and use of their equipment. While in Columbus Faser produced a small quantity of custom Confederate staff and field officer's swords, including the Collins'



Typical of Faser's products is his unique etching style.



The maker's name and address "J. Faser/Macon, Miss" are on the obverse side of the ricasso. The reverse is etched with the year of manufacture, "1862".

piece, and was engaged to etch the blades of others. At this time Columbus was a hub of activity, utilized by the Confederacy as an organization, staging, and rest area for its western army. Faser remained in Columbus, continuing the performance of his multiple skills until late December, 1862, when the arsenal, threatened by Union advances in Mississippi and Tennessee, moved to Selma, Alabama.¹³ The firm of Leech & Rigdon, now believing a more profitable future lay in making navy-style revolvers under contract to the Confederate Government, made preparation to move to Greensboro, Georgia, and commenced selling their equipment, inventory of castings and raw materials related to the production of swords,¹⁴ even though the firm continued to assemble some few swords from pre-existing components after reaching Greensboro. To provide for his wife and four children and perhaps preserve his military exemption Faser followed the arsenal to Selma and continued in the government's employment as a master gunsmith;¹⁵ as far as is now known, Faser produced no further swords for the Confederate Officer Corps.

As a testimonial to Faser's skills, Colonel Lawrence Orton Williams, who was headquartered in Columbus, Mississippi, for a time, states he "had a very fine sword he desired to have some etching done on and was referred to Mr. Faser, who was there (Columbus) at the time as an

armoror for the Government . . ." The colonel had serious reservations as to Faser's ability, and, having personally served on General Winfield Scott's staff as a weapon's inspector, his standards would be demanding. "The sword was left with Mr. Faser and in a few days returned to its owner, who was greatly surprised at the superior workmanship. Colonel Orton declared there was not a more skillful artisan in the Confederate or Federal service . . ."¹⁶

Faser's distinctive contribution to James Conning's product was a pattern for the "regulation" swords, upon which pioneer Confederate weapon researchers Steuart and Albaugh comment: "Conning's field officer's sword of the Civil War period is a creditable imitation of its U.S. Counterpart."¹⁷ Conning had tried unsuccessfully to obtain a pattern to begin manufacture of "regulation" swords for the Confederacy. While he was encountering numerous difficulties, Jacob Faser was already making the sword. In response to Conning's astonishment, Faser replied, "I made the pattern myself in Philadelphia before the war,"¹⁸ alluding to his pre-war experiences under Widmann and Hortsmann.

As the war drew to a conclusion, Faser returned to Macon, Mississippi, reopened his silver and gunsmith operation, and became actively involved in the affairs of his adopted community. As a result, in 1871, he was elected Mayor. As Mayor, later as alderman (in which capacity he was serving at the time of his death), and school trustee, he was prominent in establishing the city free school system. Faser died at his home on Hale Street in Macon, August 4, 1891, just two months prior to his sixty-eighth birthday, and is buried there in the Odd Fellows Cemetery.¹⁹

His surviving pieces attest to his skill as an artist and craftsman. One such piece, a silver plated bronze statue of Hermann, the deliverer of Germany from Roman oppression, remains in the family's possession. More recently a 24K gold overlaid framed self portrait, a miniature bust and wreath of Faser, was donated by a family member to the State of Mississippi and now hangs in the newly renovated Governor's Mansion. A brace of cased duelling pistols was also reportedly made by him for President Jefferson Davis, as well as an elaborately carved silver hilted sword. However, the location of these pieces remains a mystery.²⁰

Surely, this too often overlooked artisan has earned a distinctive place in the annals of Confederate sword makers.

The nucleus of this material is derived from an article I recently wrote on the subject which appeared in fellow-member Andrew Mowbray's magazine, *Man-At-Arms*. This presentation is made possible by the permission and through the cooperation of that fine magazine.

NOTES

¹Walter Lynwood Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1905. Reprint ed., Spartanburg, S.C., The Reprint Company, 1978), p. 149-150.

²Willie D. Halsell, ed., "Letters of Jacob Faser, Confederate Armorer," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 3 (Summer, 1941), p. 193.

³R.E. Neville, Jr., "James Conning, Confederate Sword Maker," *American Society of Arms Collectors*, Bulletin 39, Fall 1978, p. 35.

⁴Halsell, op. cit., p. 193.

⁵Interview with Mrs. William R. Rainey, Great-granddaughter of Jacob Faser, Macon, Mississippi, November 29, 1981.

⁶Halsell, op. cit., p. 193.

⁷Frances Rudolph Summers, "James Conning, Southern Silversmith-Armorer," *Antiques* 74 (August, 1958), p. 142.

⁸Neville, op. cit., p. 36.

⁹The original Jacob Faser letters are in possession of Mrs. Robert H. Kirksey, Aliceville, Alabama. Photocopies of the letters have been placed in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹William A. Albaugh III and Richard D. Steuart, *The Original Confederate Colt*, New York, Greenburg Publishers, 1953, p. 21-24.

¹²Ibid, and opinion of author after extensive research.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Halsell, op. cit., p. 193, and 1860 U.S. Census for Noxubee County, Mississippi.

¹⁶*The Beacon*, Macon, Mississippi, Friday, December 9, 1932.

¹⁷William A. Albaugh, III, *Handbook of Confederate Swords*, Harriman, Tennessee, Pioneer Press, 1951, p. 13.

¹⁸*Beacon*, op. cit.

¹⁹*The Beacon*, Macon, Mississippi, Friday, August 7, 1891.

²⁰*Antiques*, op. cit., p. 142.

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Jacob Faser Letters. In the possession of Mrs. Robert Hugh Kirksey, Aliceville, Alabama.



Another example of a Confederate Staff and Field Officer's sword made by Jacob Faser, conforming closely to the style associated with James Conning, Mobile. Note, however, the scabbard deviation mentioned in the text.

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