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The U.S. Dragoons and Their Sabers

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The First Regiment of United States Dragoons, authorized by Congress in 1833, evolved from our first experience with mounted troops during the American Revolution. At that time there were three distinctive types of mounted command or horse (horse meaning essentially the same thing as cavalry): the heavy cavalry, used for shock effect in battles, the light cavalry, designed for reconnaissance and messenger service, and the dragoons, who could fight on foot or horseback.

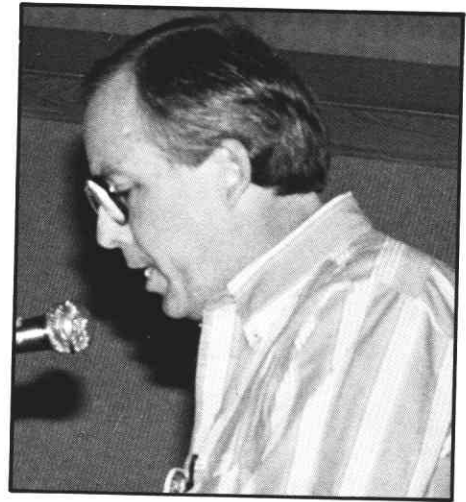
The Continental Army was composed mainly of infantry, with very little artillery and cavalry. In 1774, just before the Revolution, some colonies had volunteer mounted units, but these were as much social organizations as military commands. They had select memberships who elected their own officers and furnished their own horses, arms, and uniforms, and made their own regulations. The Continental Army fought through 1775 and 1776 with a few of the mounted militia commands as its only cavalry.

In December of 1776, Congress constituted a regiment of light dragoons and authorized a total of 3,000 light horse. During the winter and spring of 1777, the Army began organizing the four regiments. Due to difficulties in recruiting men, procuring horses, arms, and accoutrements, and retaining the men once they enlisted, the four regiments never reached full strength.

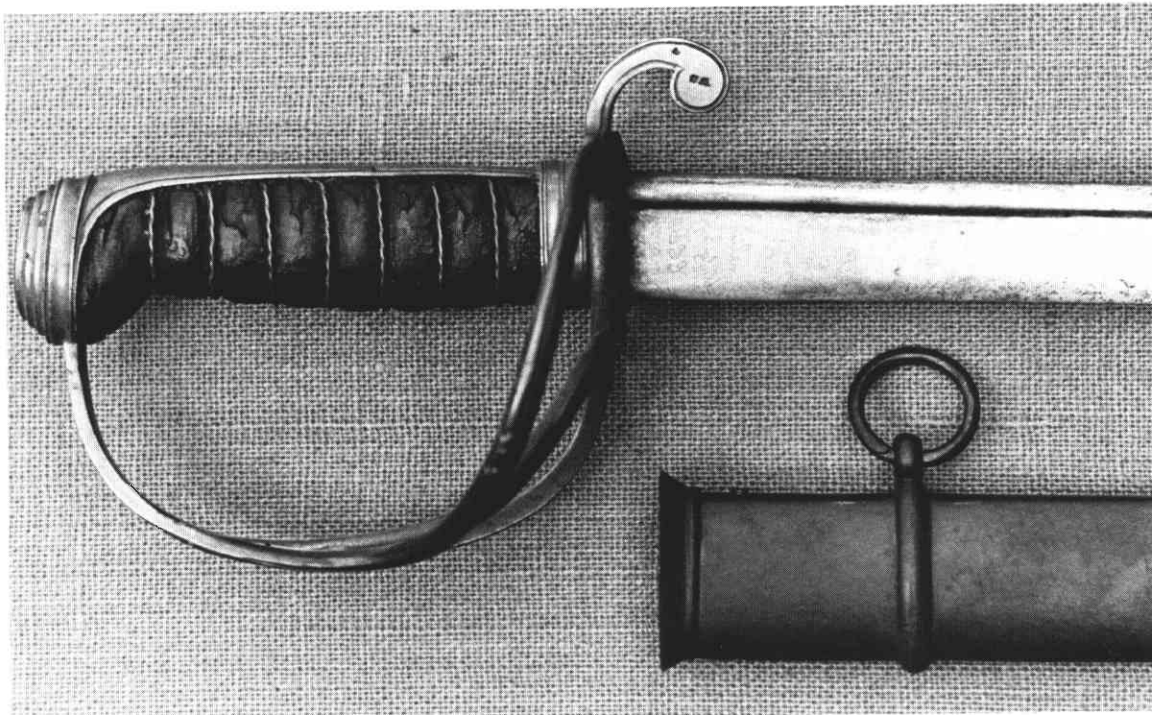
When Baron von Steuben, Inspector General of the Army, inspected the cavalry in 1780 he found only 1,000 men in all. In the same year Washington and von Steuben recommended that the four understrength cavalry regiments be converted to legions, organizations composed of both cavalry and infantry. A factor in the organizing of legions was the dragoons' limited firepower. The dragoons were armed with heavy sabers, flintlock pistols carried in saddle holsters, and, when available, carbines. Because of the shortage of carbines, the dragoons lacked the protection of long-range firearms and were unable to defend their own camps. Infantrymen were assigned to duty with the dragoons to protect them.

Congress, complying with Washington's recommendations, in October of 1780 directed that a legion would consist of 4 troops of mounted dragoons and 2 companies of dismounted dragoons; the dismounted dragoons to be armed as light infantry. The legionary organization was used to the end of the war.

When the Revolution ended in 1783, the remaining



fragments of the Continental Cavalry were discharged. During the next 50 years there were only small mounted units in the Regular Army, and then only for brief periods of time. The cavalry tradition was kept alive during this period by volunteer troops of horse in the various state militia organizations. During these years the western frontier moved west into the plains, where the Indian was at home on horseback. By 1830, 7 army posts, scattered for 800 miles from Fort Snelling on the upper Mississippi to Fort Gibson on the Arkansas river, formed the only defense against Indian attack. They were garrisoned by detachments of regular infantry and artillery. Finally in June, 1832, Congress authorized the organization of a Battalion of Mounted Rangers for defense of the frontier. Some 600 frontiersmen were enlisted. Due to their lack of military training and poor discipline, they proved to be ineffective. As a result, on March 2, 1833, Congress authorized a regiment of dragoons in lieu of the battalion of Mounted Rangers. The new organization, the Regiment of United States Dragoons, would fill the need for a force trained and equipped to fight both mounted and dismounted. The regiment was made up of 10 companies, including 34 officers and 714 enlisted men, many of whom came from the battalion of Mounted Rangers. The Ranger Commander, Major Henry Dodge, was promoted to colonel and given command of the new regiment. Among those on the commissioned staff were Jefferson Davis, afterwards President of the Confederacy, and Philip St. George Cooke of Virginia, who later became the grand old man of the U.S. Cavalry. The first 5 companies were organized at Jefferson Barracks, just outside St. Louis.



Model 1833 U.S. Dragoon enlisted man's saber, inscribed just above hilt, "N.P. Ames/Cutler/Springfield/1839." Two thousand were delivered in 1839, a total of 6,100 were manufactured.

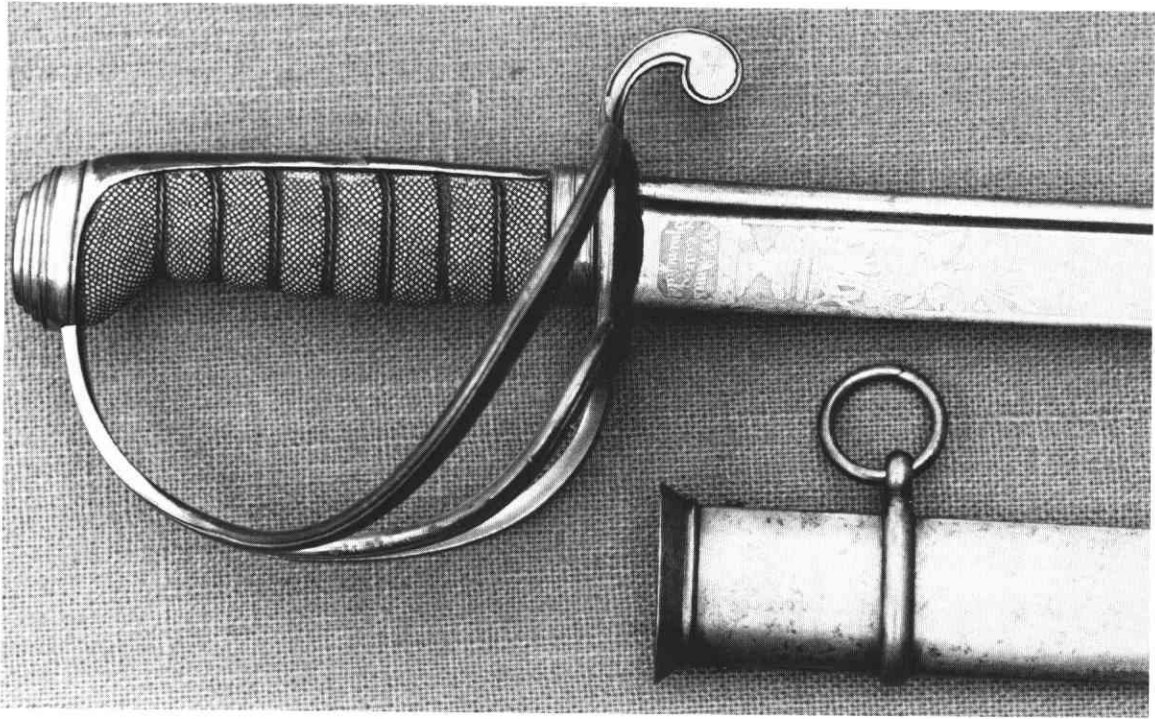


Inscription on reverse side of Model 1833 Dragoon enlisted man's saber. Those dated 1834, 1835, and 1836 are inscribed "United States Dragoons," while those dated 1837 and 1839 are inscribed "United States."

In February of 1834, Nathan P. Ames, Jr. of Springfield, Massachusetts, submitted his proposal to the U.S. Ordnance Department for sabers for the new dragoon regiment. The saber pattern was very similar to the British Light Cavalry saber of 1822, with some minor changes made by the U.S. Ordnance Department. The overall length is 39", with a pipe or quill-shaped blade 33¾" long and 1½" wide at the hilt. The handles are wood covered with leather and wound with coiled brass wire. The blades are inscribed on the obverse side near the hilt, "N.P. AMES/CUTLER/SPRINGFIELD/(the year of manufacture) date." The reverse of the blade is found with two different inscriptions, depending on the year of manufacture. Those dated 1834, 1835, and 1836 are etched in script, "United States Dragoons." Sabers dated 1837 and 1839 have "United States" in script. The top of the brass crossguard is stamped with military

ordnance inspector's initials. The officers assigned were Major Craig (H.K.C.) and Major Mann Paige Lomax (M.P.L.). Civilian sub-inspectors at Springfield Arsenal stamped their initials (JM (Justin Murphy), or WS (William Smith) on the disc of one quillon. The scabbard is steel, with two suspension rings, browned, and with a flared throat and large drag. The reverse side of the drag is also stamped with a rectangular cartouche with the military ordnance inspector's initials, while the obverse side bears either JM or WS.

The initial contract of 1,000 sabers for enlisted men was awarded to Ames in February, 1834, to be delivered by November 1, 1834. Ames completed this contract and received three additional orders: 1,400, February, 1835, all delivered late 1835; 1,700 November, 1835, unknown quantity delivered by June, 1836, remainder delivered in early 1837; 2,000, March 1839, 1,500 delivered Septem-



Model 1833 Dragoon Officer's saber. Considered very rare: records show that only 34 were ordered.

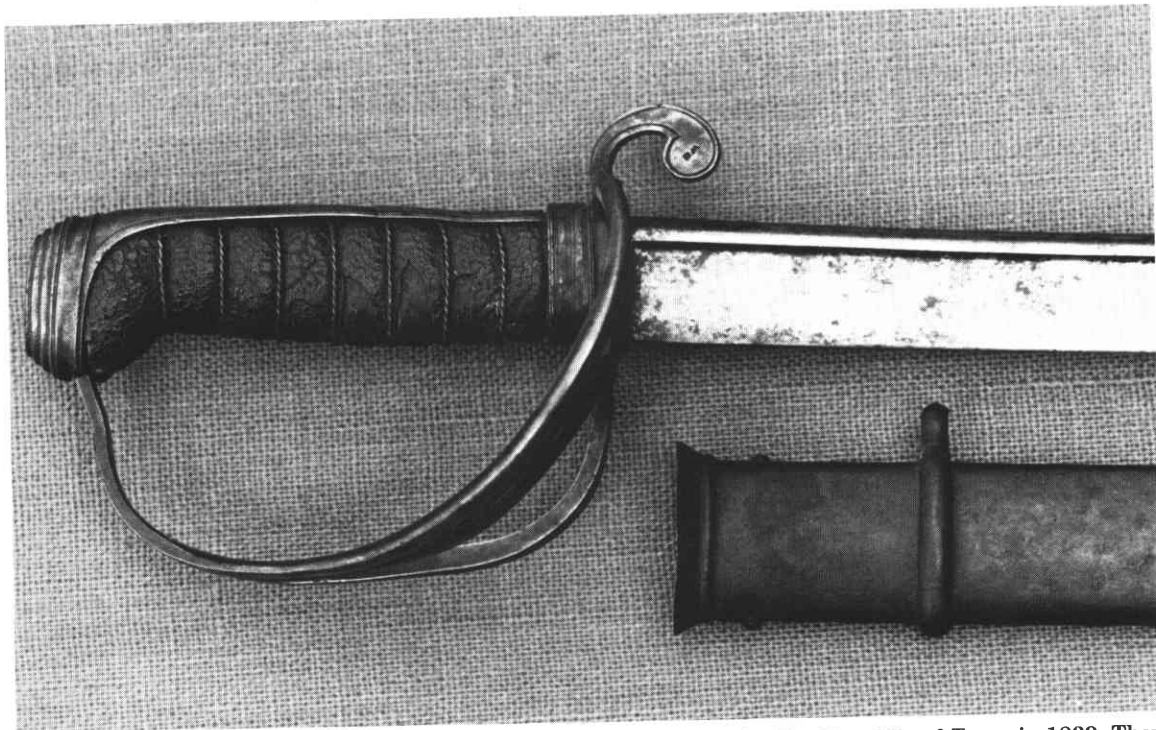


Inscription on reverse side of Model 1833 Dragoon Officer's saber. The blade is fully etched on both sides.

ber, 1839, 500 in November, 1839. A total of 6100 were manufactured.

The Model 1833 Dragoon Officer's saber was the same pattern as the enlisted man's, with a gold gilt hilt and shagreen (ray or sharkskin) covered handle wound with coiled gilt wire. The blade is fully etched on both sides. On the reverse side is a panel encircled by half-sunbursts and a wreath of laurel leaves, etched in script "United States Dragoon." On the obverse side just below the hilt is "N.P. Ames/Cutler/Springfield." Other portions of the blade were decorated with etched floral designs, a Federal eagle and banderole inscribed "LIBERTY," and an Indian holding in one hand a bow and arrow and in the other a raised tomahawk. The scabbard is also steel. No ordnance inspector's initials are found on the guard or on the scabbard. The officer's sabers were ordered by the Ordnance Department, but purchased by each individual officer. The Dragoon Officer's sabers are quite rare: records show that only 34 were ordered.

While most of the Eastern Department had been cleared of Indians, there still remained the troublesome Seminoles in Florida. In 1835, eleven companies of artillery and infantry, commanded by Major General Winfield Scott, were sent south to subdue them. After some experience, Scott realized that mounted troops would be essential to the campaign and in May of 1836, at his request, Congress authorized the raising of 10,000 volunteers and a second regiment of dragoons. The dragoon regiment was to be a duplicate of the regiment of dragoons already in the service. To get the organization of the new regular regiment started, a detachment of the 1st Regiment of Dragoons, already in Florida, was reorganized as a company of the 2nd Regiment of Dragoons and recruiting stations were opened at various places in the East. In December, 1836, five companies, organized in New York and South Carolina, sailed to Savannah, Georgia, where they mounted the horses they brought with them and proceeded to Florida. The men of the remaining companies went to Jefferson Barracks, Mis-



Model 1833 U.S. Dragoon enlisted man's saber. One of 280 ordered by The Republic of Texas in 1839. They were inspected and approved by William Smith, "United States Inspector of Arms" on January 22, 1840. The initials "W S" are found stamped on the obverse quillon disc.



Inscription found on reverse side of blade of the Texas Dragoon saber.

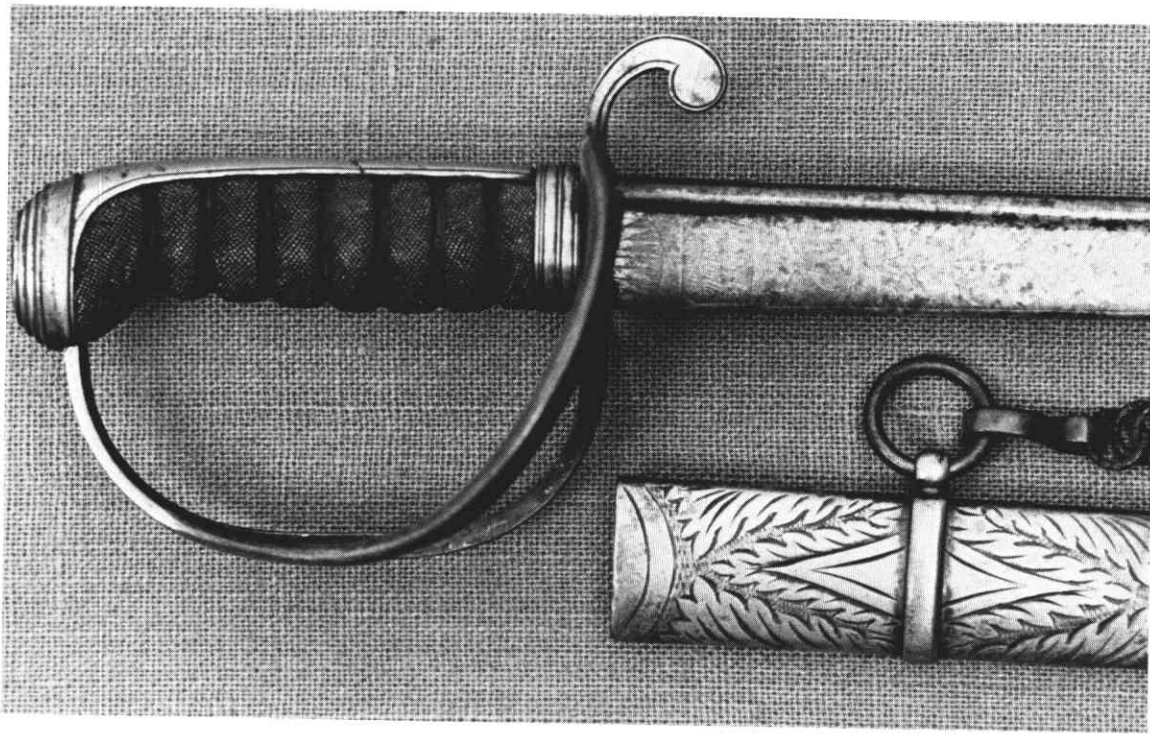
souri, where the Regimental Commander opened a school of instruction for them. In October, 1837, the trained companies joined the others in Florida, traveling 1,200 miles overland in 55 days.

By 1838, the Chief of Ordnance had received from several dragoon officers letters of criticism regarding the performance of the saber in the field, the blades described as being "of very poor inferior quality." In December of 1838, the Ordnance Department was instructed to purchase British, French and Prussian sabers for evaluation, and in July of 1840, Colonel George Groghan, U.S. Inspector General, favorably reported on the performance of the 1822 pattern French sabers which had been previously issued to the 1st Dragoon Regiment stationed on the Western frontier. An order for 2,000 sabers of the 1822 French pattern was given to the Prussian firm of Schnitzler & Kirschbaum (S&K),

Solingen. The 2,000 sabers, shipped to New York in April and May of 1841, had no U.S. markings or U.S. inspector's initials.

Not until June, 1844, did the Ordnance Department give Ames a sample on which to base a price. Ames received an order for 2,000 sabers with scabbards in August, 1844; delivery was not completed until April, 1846.

The Model 1840 Dragoon enlisted man's saber had an overall length of 41½", with a flat back blade 35¾" long by 1¼" wide at the hilt. The handle is wood covered with leather and wound with twisted brass wire. The pommel is of the Phrygian helmet pattern, and the guard is a half-basket type with a knuckle bow and two branches. The ricasso on the obverse side of the blade is stamped "US/(ordnance inspector's initials)," and on the reverse side, "AMES MFG CO/CABOTVILLE/(year of



Model 1833 U.S. Dragoon Officer's saber used by a South Carolina Militia Officer. Blade is inscribed just above hilt on obverse side, "Ames Mfg. Co./Cabotville/Mass." The blade is etched on both sides the same as regulation U.S. Dragoon Officers but lacks the panel inscribed, "United States Dragoon."



Center panel, obverse side, South Carolina Militia Dragoon Officer's brass scabbard, showing the South Carolina palmetto tree.

manufacture)." The scabbard is iron with two suspension rings and a drag which is stamped with the ordnance inspector's initials on the obverse side.

The Officer's version of the 1840 Dragoon saber was the same pattern with the hilt gilded and chased with oak and acanthus leaf motifs. The blade is etched just above the ricasso on the obverse side, "N.P. AMES/Cutler/Springfield." The rest of the blade is etched on both sides, with a large "US", mounted officer, and an Indian with raised tomahawk on the reverse side. On the obverse side is a large Federal eagle. The iron scabbard is identical to the enlisted man's. No contracts or orders from the government for the 1840 Dragoon Officer's sabers have been found, indicating that dragoon officers purchased them directly from Ames or other firms.

Ames continued to manufacture the Model 1840 Dragoon saber until August, 1858. A total of 23,700 were manufactured under contract for the U.S. Government.

At the end of the Seminole War, the Army was greatly reduced. Effective March, 1843, the 2nd Dragoons were dismounted and reorganized as the Regiment of Riflemen. The mounted force of the Army was again reduced to one regiment. However, in 1844, as a result of pressure from the frontier states, Congress passed legislation to remount the riflemen and to restore the regiment to its original designation. Instead of moving to the Western frontier, however, the 2nd Dragoons joined Brigadier General Zachary Taylor in Texas in 1845.

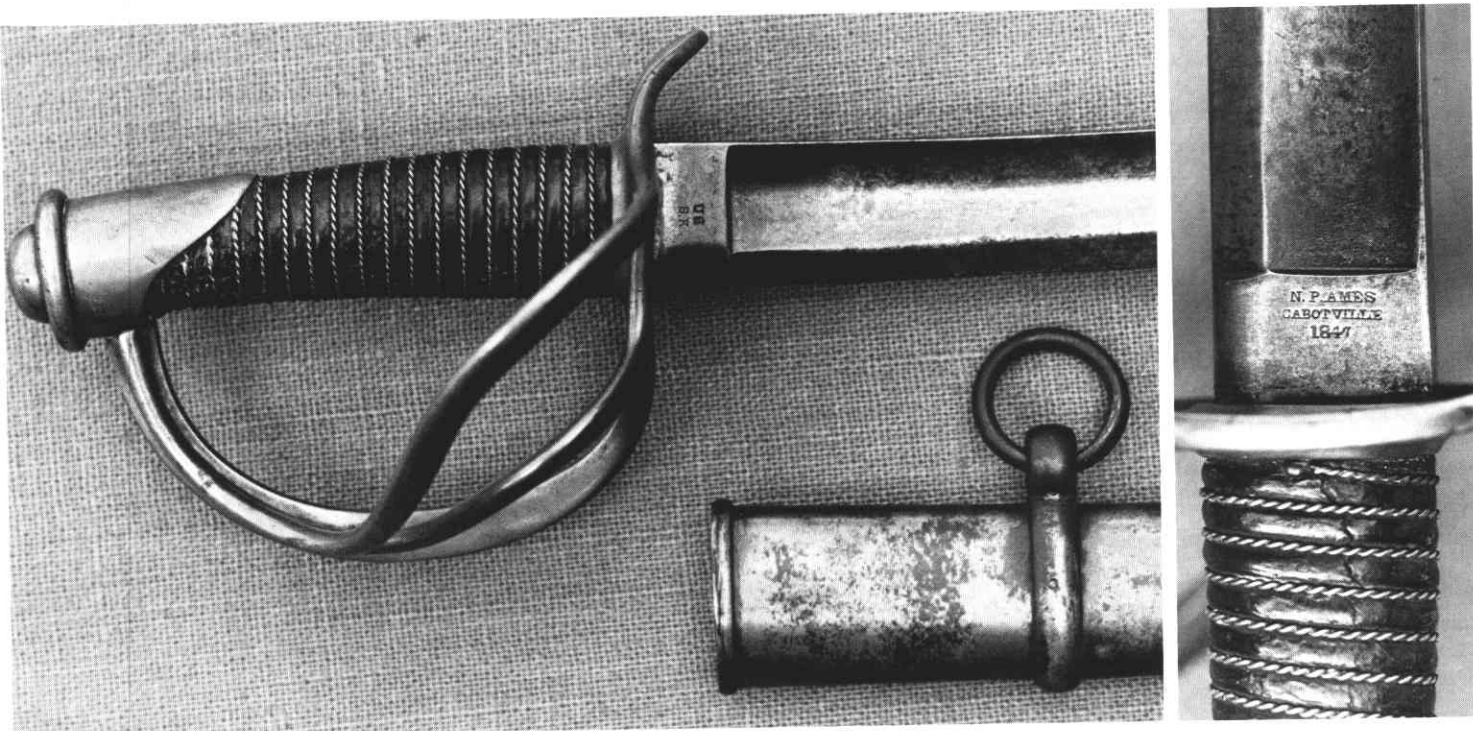
In 1846, after war with Mexico had begun, the

mounted force was further increased. Legislation passed in May of that year to strengthen the entire Army included: provisions for seven regiments of cavalry manned by 12-month volunteers, a regular regiment designated the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen, and an increase in the number of privates in each cavalry company. The Regiment of Mounted Riflemen was constituted to help establish a protected military road to the Oregon Territory.

Because of the Mexican War, the Regular establishment was further increased by 10 new regiments in 1847; 9 were infantry and the 10th was designated the 3rd Regiment of Dragoons. Even though classed as Regular, these 10 units were formed only for the duration and were disbanded at the close of the war.

The Mexican War provided U.S. mounted troops the first opportunity since the Revolution to engage mounted troops of a foreign Army. They took part in all of the major campaigns of the war. The 2nd Dragoons were in every battle from Palo Alto to Chapultepec. Several small engagements were decided by traditional cavalry charges. At the same time, Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny and Captain John C. Fremont were securing California and New Mexico for the United States. Colonel Kearny's force included his own 1st Regiment of Dragoons.

When the war with Mexico came to an end, the usual postwar reduction of the Army occurred. By 1853, the Army of 15 regiments, 4 artillery, 8 infantry, and 3 cavalry were thinly distributed over a greatly expanded country. Infantry and cavalrymen in companies and



Model 1840 U.S. Dragoon enlisted man's saber; right, ricasso on reverse side.

troops dotted the area westward from the Mississippi River. Seldom were more than 2 cavalry troops stationed together.

In 1855, the mounted force was increased by 2 regiments. The new organizations were called cavalry. The 1st and 2nd Cavalry were constituted on March 3, 1855. General Orders prescribed them as a distinct and separate arm.

The 1st and 2nd Cavalry were armed and equipped with the weapons then available. They received various carbines, including some breech loading (for trial purposes), Navy-pattern Colt revolvers, and the Model 1840 Dragoon saber. The Dragoons remained armed with their Mexican War weapons, Hall carbines, sabers, and horse pistols. The mounted riflemen had their Colt revolvers and percussion rifles. The riflemen were expected to do most of their fighting dismounted.

The years between 1848 and 1860 were marked by a succession of marches, expeditions, and campaigns against the Indians. In this period, too, the slavery problem increased in intensity, and when open warfare broke out in Kansas territory between slavery and anti-slavery factions, nearly all the 1st Cavalry and the 2nd

Dragoons, together with some infantry companies, were sent to keep the peace.

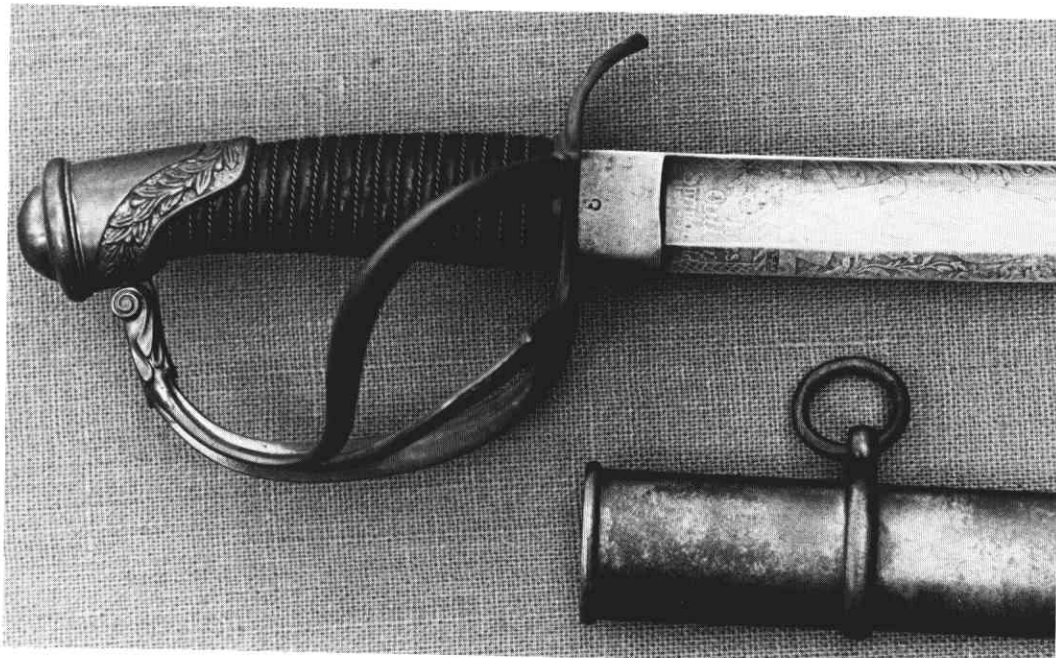
At the outbreak of the War Between the States in 1861, the mounted forces in the Regular Army consisted of the five regiments mentioned, still bearing their different names (dragoons, riflemen, and cavalry) and still considered three separate arms. Only one regiment was added to the Regular mounted establishment during the entire four years of the war. This was designated the 3rd Cavalry.

Finally in August, 1861, all six Regular horse regiments were redesignated cavalry and numbered according to their dates of organization. The 1st and 2nd Dragoons became the 1st and 2nd Cavalry; the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen became the 3rd Cavalry.

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(one more sword) ➔



Model 1840 U.S. Dragoon officer's saber. Etched just above ricasso on obverse side, "N.P. Ames/Cutler/Springfield."

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