



Lieutenant Alexander S. Webb, 2nd U.S. Artillery, ca. 1861. An 1855 graduate of West Point, Webb was one of the most promising young officers of the regular army. [U.S. Army Military History Institute collection]

Hallowed Metal: A Perspective on Historical Arms

Wiley Sword

If only that old gun could talk, the stories it might tell! How often have we heard that familiar adage? Certainly, everyone understands that inanimate objects don't speak, yet, based upon a combination of physical evidence and the written record, there *are* those few old weapons which are fully capable of telling an extraordinary story.

Most collectors are familiar with historically inscribed and documented weapons. Generally, they are the arms identified with specific individuals, organizations, or events, some of which involve noted personalities or elite military units. Beyond these direct personal associations, however, there are certain aspects that upon specialized analysis become of even greater importance.

A personally identified arm without associated history is in effect an incomplete and vaguely defined artifact. Pertinent questions involving the weapon's relationship to the individual thus are paramount. Was this specific weapon directly a part of the notable events in which the individual participated? Of what nature was the relationship between man and weapon? Was it superficial, as in the case of a little-used ceremonial type weapon? Or was it practical and fundamental, as exemplified by an arm personally carried into combat?

It should be noted that the subtleties of evaluating and collecting historical antique weapons are both multifaceted and of much significance.

From a long enlightening study of historical American arms it is apparent that not only a separate category of historical weapons exists, but that a few of these are among the most important and meaningful artifacts in existence. Those specific weapons which can be identified in the context of *historic usage* — being the arms actually used in the important and notable events of history — reflect not only an ultimate in historical potential, but are truly among the rarest and most desirable artifacts of the American past.

Interestingly, such pieces often have been misperceived by collectors. In fact, many of these arms have been regarded much as “ugly ducklings among other, more physically attractive antique weapons.” Historic-use arms are usually physically unappealing, and deficient in traditional collector criteria such as fine condition, elaborate decor, or model rarity. Thus, by their very appearance, they are frequently overlooked and relatively unappreciated.

One of my favorite pieces is a standard, well-used,



Colt Model 1851 Navy revolver, presented in 1861 by Samuel Colt to Lieutenant Alexander S. Webb, who later fought as General Lewis Armistead's opposite number in Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. While several former owners seemed to regard this revolver more from the fact that it was personally presented by Samuel Colt to a man who later became a prominent Union general, they all but overlooked its potential in terms of specific historic combat use.

From Webb's letters to his wife, detailing how he burned his hands casting bullets for his revolver, to his extraordinary eyewitness description of organizing the decisive countercharge while “within forty feet” of Lew Armistead during Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, General Webb's weapons appear prominently throughout his military career. Based upon a participant's description of Webb and other officers “using their pistols” in the furious hand to hand combat at Gettysburg, one envisions the most historic association possible for Webb's Navy Colt: actual use in Pickett's Charge, arguably the turning point of the Civil War, and a world famous event during which General Webb earned the Medal of Honor.¹

Although physically ordinary, with no remaining finish, and plainly showing wear and use, what truly sets this pistol apart is its hidden attribute of important historic usage. While in this case the intangibles far exceed the physical elements in importance, this is only one aspect. As extraordinary as it may seem, even this pistol's status as a Gettysburg-associated weapon is overshadowed by its power as an historical tool. Based upon the extensive information developed through research, this revolver is, in fact, both a resource and a catalyst — a means of histor-



Brigadier General Alexander S. Webb, ca. 1863. Promoted from Lieutenant Colonel a few days before Gettysburg, Webb won the Medal of Honor for his bravery during "Pickett's Charge." [National Archives]

ical insight and a tangible link to better understanding great events and key personalities. The net effect of "mining" this pistol and others like it through "micro-research" is a vivid personal experience in history, fully akin to recent high technology "virtual reality" computer concepts. Indeed, the insight and perspective that follows from discovering the often minute "hidden details" of the past, of being aware of that which few others perceive or know, provides a unique vantage point in understanding the American experience.

Today, this historical linkage of artifact and the original written word provides not only an actual "hands on" type association with the past, but develops and perpetuates a significant part of an historic event itself. We can actually hold in our hand a prominent piece of history — in the case of the Webb Colt, perhaps one of the few surviving original components of Pickett's Charge. Such arms actually become more than artifacts: they represent a graphic and precise bond with the personalized past, and

a priceless legacy for all generations of Americans.

Ironically, however, many similar historical weapons have been all but overlooked or misperceived by the average collector. Too often, many collectors seem to embrace mostly the physical aspects of the arms they collect — for example, the particular grace of a Kentucky-Pennsylvania rifle, the extraordinary eye appeal of an engraved, mint conditioned Colt, or the fascinating mechanical oddity of a flintlock Collier revolver. An arm that is physically often worn and well used, marred and disfigured, may seem not particularly appealing or noteworthy.

Historically identified antique weapons involving actual use in the prominent events of our past characteristically show worn or corroded surfaces, often have broken or replaced parts, and bear disfiguring scratches and abrasions. Their appearance is very much that of practical implements which have seen active, sustained use under severe conditions. Furthermore, they are usually the standard models and plainly finished. Contrasted to other arms, such as those with artistic embellishment, they may seem uninspiring, being set apart from ordinary antiques with perhaps little more than a simple inscription or an accompanying sheaf of documents.

In the traditional sense, condition, embellishment, and rarity of make or model are of paramount importance in a collector's weapon. The amount of attention, the topic of conversation, and award recognition generally evolves around pieces most reflective of these attributes when in a typical collector's forum. Using a hypothetical example, consider what various dealers' displays at a top quality show might reveal. A Colt Model 1860 Army revolver in nearly mint, unfired condition certainly will be priced many times higher than the same pistol with little remaining finish and considerable evidence of wear. An original factory engraved Winchester Model 1866 rifle will not only carry a four or five figure price tag, but will probably garner ten times the interest from would-be buyers than the plain, veteran '66 with a saddle-worn forestock displayed next to it. The display of an original "Buntline Special" Colt Single Action Army revolver might be expected to command so much attention that relatively few would seriously regard the holster-worn, standard production model Peacemaker placed nearby.

From a collector's viewpoint, these premium weapons represent some of the very best traditionally valued antique weapons, both in popularity and investment value. A Colt Model 1860 Army revolver that is in better condition than 99% of the surviving examples of this pistol is a pleasure to behold; it is easy to consider the engraved Winchester '66 rifle with extraordinary pride, it being a superb example of artistry in a most popular model of

firearm, and few would consider an original "Buntline Special" as anything other than the ultimate in a Single Action Colt collection.

Yet the rationale behind these collector value judgments is worthy of scrutiny. In the sense that a general attitude exists popularizing the more dramatically associated artifacts of our past, we tend to exalt those specific items. The Colt revolvers and Winchester rifles of the dime store novels and Hollywood Westerns have benefited from a variety of mass publicity, their popular appeal being the by-product of both fact and fiction.

Since great numbers of collectors are active in the most popular fields, generally the object is to acquire the very best conditioned example or outstanding rarity within one's particular specialty. Great lengths are sometimes resorted to, as well as substantial sums of money expended, to upgrade a particular item, or perhaps obtain a slight model variation.

For this reason pressures are disproportionate within the various fields of collecting antique arms. In the past this has resulted in a demand that exceeds the supply of premium type popular category weapons, and has led to exorbitant prices, as well as abuses such as fakery.

What proves to be popular in the market place is largely a reflection of collector attitudes. Although perceptions of what to purchase are occasionally influenced unduly by individuals with a profit motive, attitudes generally are a by-product of information, or a lack thereof. What is or isn't appealing is often a matter of applied knowledge. For this reason we have seen substantial fluctuations in the value of collector weapons based upon the publication and acceptance of specific new data, as in the case of Japanese samurai swords.

With this aspect in mind, an awareness of the underlying foundation upon which our collecting interests rest is of much importance. Considering that many of today's most popular antique weapons relate to the colorful and dramatic events of our past, it is ironic that this fundamental attribute *is often missing* in the actual items that many collectors obtain.

Specifically, while excellence of condition has long been recognized as one of the most important criteria in evaluating an antique weapon, there is a corollary aspect that is often overlooked. Logic tells us that the near mint, unfired Colt M1860 Army Revolver mentioned has laid unused in some drawer, trunk, or storage area for more than a century. Not having been exposed to the elements, it has survived in like-new condition. Accordingly, this specific pistol can be logically assessed as having a completely bland history.

In fact, although a weapon of the type which played



Brigadier General Alexander S. Webb, ca. 1863, much as he looked at Gettysburg while commanding the "Philadelphia Brigade," and as Confederate Brigadier General Lew Armistead's opposite number. [Library of Congress]

a colorful role in U.S. history, and which is the basis for most of the collector interest, this particular Colt reflects about as much history as the interior of the trunk or drawer that contained it over the years.

Chances are great that the engraved Winchester Model 1866 rifle was considered too valuable as a work of art or a private treasure to be used in anything more than a superficial manner. Thus, probably, it, too, lurked quietly in the corner of a closet for more than a century.

Also, consider the practical utility of the rare "Buntline Special" Colt Single Action Army Revolver. With its outlandish barrel length, the "Buntline Special" was a most impractical sidearm, and ineffective as a carbine. An example surviving in its original configuration can be regarded as an odd curio, of doubtful practical value during its contemporary period.

These examples are cited not in any disparaging sense, nor to belittle the many outstanding collections or knowledgeable individuals specializing in such weapons.



Colt Model 1851 Navy Revolver, serial number 106168, given to Alexander S. Webb by Samuel Colt in 1861, and extensively used by Webb during the Civil War, and the inscription on the backstrap, which was perhaps the last Model 1851 Navy revolver presented by Samuel Colt prior to his death. [author's collection]

Rather, this perspective is intended to define some of the less understood and emphasized aspects of collecting antique arms. That even the very best collector's weapons are lacking in some element of desirability is a common reality.

Simply stated, there are fundamental truths that all arms students and collectors should understand. Fine condition in an antique weapon is not generally compatible with historic usage. Decorative type weapons were often regarded as too valuable for ordinary field service, and accordingly were generally non-utilitarian. Rarities and curios were often just what their nature implied: too limited or impractical in function to have seen widespread popular use. Conversely, historic service weapons can be expected to show the scars of their active use, and generally be of a practical or utilitarian type.

There are, of course, exceptions to each generality. Yet, as collectors, we should fully understand the implications of what we study and collect. Recognition of the often hidden intrinsic value in a collector's weapon involves a discerning awareness of many factors. That is to say, knowledge extending beyond that which is obvious, such as condition, decor, or unique configuration, is fundamental if we are to truly grasp the ultimate worth of any specific artifact.

Since most firearms or edged weapons were intended to be deadly weapons — the instruments of death or serious bodily injury — their ultimate measure, in a certain perspective, is the extent to which they fulfilled this specific role. Historic usage arms directly relate to this criteria.

One definition of an historic antique weapon is that it is an arm for which there is a valid basis for a specific association with either a particular person, organized unit, event, or unique historical circumstance.

Yet, to the extent that an arm is of historic *significance* is a measure not of only who possessed the item, but of when, how, and in what manner it was *used*. Accordingly, a rather physically unappealing weapon, through research, actually might be determined to be something of an historical crown jewel. This hidden, intensely exciting element, involving a profound sense of discovery, might be best illustrated by another specific example.

Some years ago I found almost obscured on a dealer's table a Colt Model 1851 Navy revolver bearing a simple inscription to a Union lieutenant on the backstrap, accompanied by only a few documents from the man's military service records. Unfortunately, the weapon seemed to be in collector's jargon, "a dog." Jokingly, the man who offered this tired old Colt remarked, "too bad this gun isn't in better condition, but it'll make a good paper weight for your desk." Indeed, while complete and with matching numbers, the Colt had worn and scratched surfaces, with patterns of severe pitting. From the wear evident at the muzzle and other contact parts, it was plainly a veteran of extensive service.

Over the period of several months, this battered old Colt became the inspiration for research that revealed a fascinating story. The man who originally owned it, Lieutenant Charles Flemming Miller, a twenty year old youth from Columbus, Ohio, had enlisted as a sergeant in the 19th U.S. Infantry in October, 1861. Following the Battle of Shiloh he was promoted in the field to 2nd Lt. and participated in the bloody combat at Stones River. Ultimately he saw action in 1863 at Chickamauga, where his Regular battalion served as the backbone of George H. Thomas's 14th Corps, and fought almost continuously over two days. On the first day, assailed by Arkansas and Mississippi troops, the Regulars were eventually overrun with the loss of Battery H, 5th U.S. Artillery, and nearly a third of the 19th regiment's 204 men. In the melee about the cannon, a lieutenant watched as a sergeant stood with a taut lanyard in the face of the onrushing Confederates. "Fire that gun and you will be killed," shouted the Rebels. "Kill and be damned," screamed the sergeant, who yanked the lanyard, mowing a wide lane thorough the charging enemy. In an instant the sergeant was pinioned to the ground on the points of a dozen bayonets.²

Lt. Miller and the survivors quickly scrambled away to safety, only to face a second disaster on the following day. During Longstreet's breakthrough on the Union right, Thomas's troops were called upon to save the entire army. Again Miller and his Company E fought like wild animals from behind breastworks of felled timber on Snodgrass Hill. In hand-to-hand fighting, the Arkansas and Tennessee troops of Polk's brigade virtually wiped out the Regulars. Only 51 enlisted men and 3 officers of the regiment survived unscathed. Lt. Miller was shot through the right thigh, and although carried to the rear, was finally left by the side of the road when his wound pained him too severely.³

Soon captured by pursuing Confederates, probably Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalymen, Lieutenant Miller, it was later learned, died of an infection two days following the battle. His inscribed Colt Navy revolver, #111674, shipped from the factory in September, 1861, is believed to have subsequently served the Confederacy, as suggested by the crudely scratched initials "JWB" on the buttstrap.

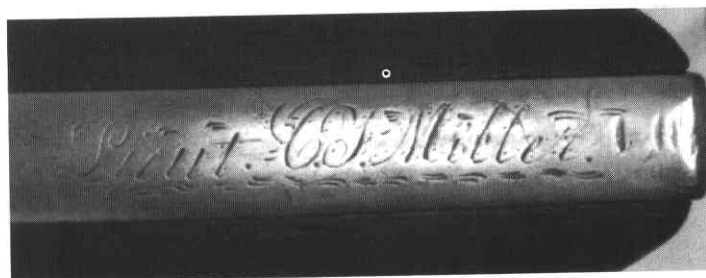
Today, to grasp the Miller Colt and be aware of its dramatic past is to experience a unique thrill, an awareness of holding in hand a permanent part of the famous stand that helped save the Federal Army at Chickamauga, and earned Thomas his revered reputation as the "Rock of Chickamauga." Needless to say, today the Miller Colt occupies a far more prominent place in my gun room than as a paper weight!

Being aware, as I have pointed out, is the key to all of this. To one who is unknowing, the well-worn old Colt is merely a rather unattractive mass of iron lying on a table. To the informed, it is far more: a window into some of the most fascinating history of the American experience.

As such, historic-use weapons reflect both an opportunity and a difficulty. The opportunity, as we have seen, often translates into valid identification with an historical entity or event. The difficulty is translating that association into specific detail.

Accordingly, there are increasingly pertinent evaluations to be made in determining an historical weapon's significance. Given the physical criteria of wear and use, and too often a meager written record, it is apparent why most inscribed arms cannot be validly identified with important historical usage. As a matter of logic, certain personally identified historical weapons remaining in excellent condition, even if appropriately dated, must be regarded as of limited historical significance. Consider, for example, the essential difference between two important Civil War officer's swords.

On display at the William Penn Memorial Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is an elaborate, inscribed, Tiffany & Co. sword, presented on February 18, 1862, to



Colt Model 1851 Navy Revolver, serial number 111674, inscribed to Lieutenant Charles Flemming Miller of Columbus, Ohio, mortally wounded September 20, 1863, during the famous stand that earned George H. Thomas his reputation as the "Rock of Chickamauga," and the inscription on the backstrap. From the initials "JWB" crudely scratched on the buttstrap and Lieutenant Miller's fate, it appears this revolver was captured at Chickamauga and saw subsequent service in the Confederate army. [author's collection]

Colonel Hugh McNeil of the 1st Pennsylvania Rifles, the famous "Bucktail" regiment. Writing to his sister on March 6th, McNeil said: "Did I tell you of receiving a magnificent sword, belt and sash from Company D? It was ordered from Tiffany & Co. N.Y. and is the finest thing I ever saw. Too nice for ordinary wear. I have sent it to Washington for safe keeping . . . If I should not come back from the war you might like to find it." Six months later Colonel McNeil was killed at Antietam, and his deluxe Tiffany presentation sword remains today virtually unused, having been only superficially possessed by McNeil, since it was considered too valuable to be carried in the field.⁵

Contrast this rather unremarkable history with the sword carried by Colonel Turner B. Morehead of the 106th Pennsylvania at Antietam. Presented in January, 1862, with a sword, sash, and belt by Company F of his regiment, Morehead promised to wear it with the greatest honor. At Antietam, after his horse was shot from under him, Colonel Morehead found that he had lost his presentation sword and concluded it remained near his dead horse. Although the enemy was advancing, Morehead said he was going back after his sword. When several of his men pleaded



Colonel Hugh McNeil, 1st Pennsylvania Rifles, commander of the famous "Bucktail" regiment. McNeil was killed at Antietam about seven months after receiving a deluxe, inscribed, Tiffany & Co. sword from his men. [William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pa.]

with him not to go, that it was too dangerous, Morehead replied: "Yes, I will, that sword was given [to] me by my men and I told them I would protect it with my life and never see it dishonored, and I am not going to let them damn[ed] Rebels get it!" Morehead dashed off, found his sword, and ran back to his lines despite a fusillade of Minie balls from pursuing Confederates who were so close as to demand his surrender.⁶

Obviously, the vital difference between these two swords is measured not by make, condition, configuration, or who possessed them, but of when, where, how, and in what manner they were used. Indeed, despite having been owned by a celebrated personality, and being of ornate design and remaining in excellent condition, it is debat-

able if the McNeil sword is truly as valuable or as important as Morehead's well-used weapon.

Unfortunately, over the span of many years the personalization or detailed history has been lost for all but a minuscule few of the many thousands of antique weapons that played an important role in the most dramatic events of our past. With the practical utility of the weapons they carried uppermost in the minds of our forefathers, those who carried these arms through some of the most significant events of the past often had little thought of preserving an arm's historic identification.

The Civil War soldier who staked his life on the performance of his .58 caliber Springfield rifle musket was far more likely to keep the arm in top notch functional condition than to mark it for historical identification. That particular piece may have helped turn the tide during "Pickett's Charge" at Gettysburg, yet once removed from active service, it was no more identifiable than an identical model arm that may have served on garrison duty with some nine months regiment. Add to this circumstance the attrition occurring from the rigors of the battlefield and prolonged active service and it is apparent why so few antique arms have survived with valid identification of their historic usage. Today, the net result is the survival of only a few of the actual implements of our most dramatic history, and a minuscule handful of those which can be identified as such.

Perhaps the point should be made here that certain individuals may tend to regard the specific association of a weapon with death and destruction as particularly gruesome. Rather than to exalt or glorify an arm that was carried in a particularly bloody combat, or perhaps involved in the death of an individual, the proper emphasis, instead, is on interrelating history with an artifact. To the extent that certain antique arms contribute to a better understanding of the dramatic events that shaped our past is truly a measure of their ultimate value. The people and dramatic events were real; their existence cannot be ignored. Today the surviving weapons not only perpetuate their memory, but serve as an enduring reminder of the personal sacrifice and ordeal involved.

Consider the intense meaning and historic value involved in the presentation sword of a Massachusetts officer, Captain Henry C. Ward, which was captured at Fort Stedman. The Confederate officer who obtained it, noting the Worcester, Massachusetts, engraved name, sent a letter in November, 1892, addressed in care of the postmaster at Worcester. The story of the sword and the emotions it aroused are revealed by the correspondence between two former antagonists, as reported by the regimental history of the 57th Massachusetts:

Cleveland, Rowan County, N.C.
November 26, 1892

Captain H.C. Ward:

Dear Sir: On the 26th of March, 1865, I captured from an officer in front of Petersburg, Va. a sword. There is engraved on the upper band of the scabbard the following: "Presented to Lieutenant H. C. Ward, Company G, Fifty-Seventh Massachusetts Volunteers Veterans, by his friends, Worcester, March 28th, 1864." I have always intended to keep it as a memorial of the late contest . . . But as . . . sectional bitterness is almost obliterated, and . . . we are brothers of one common country, . . . I have concluded to return the sword to its proper owner . . . I will send [it] by express as soon as I can get your address.

Yours respectfully,
Phil Alexander

Captain Ward's reply was as follows:

Nashville, Tenn. Dec. 3rd, 1892

Major Phil. Alexander:

My Dear Major:

I have your letter of the 26th ultimo . . . forwarded to me by the postmaster of Worcester, Mass. At the Battle of Fort Stedman before Petersburg, Va., about 3:30 a.m. I was captured while . . . in command of the pickets on the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, of the 9th Corps. . . . I was taken to General Gordon, commanding the Confederate troops making the attack. I had the sword referred to at the time of my capture, it having been presented to me by friends of mine [young ladies of Worcester]. I was very glad to learn the whereabouts of the sword, and also proud to hear that it has been in such brave and gallant hands . . .

Very sincerely yours,
Henry C. Ward

Thereafter Major Alexander replied:

Maysfield, Texas, May 4th, 1893

Captain Ward:

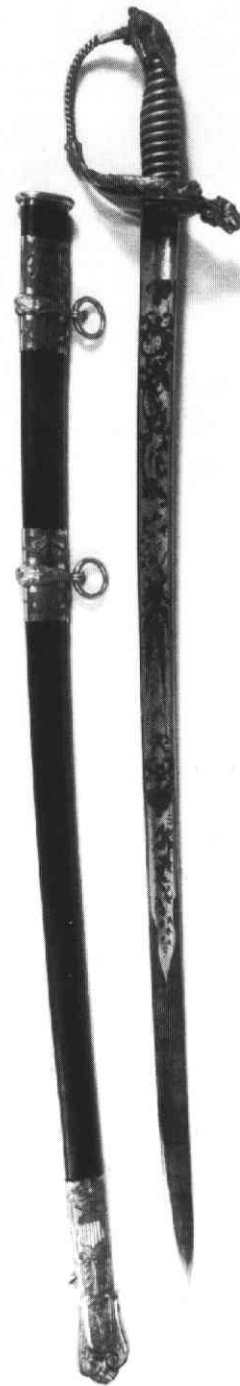
Dear Sir: . . . I heartily wish that an opportunity may present itself that we meet at some time and talk over our great experiences as soldiers . . .

As to the details of the night attack upon Fort Stedman . . . it was about daylight and I was passing up our line . . . I came on the scene of your capture. You had already been disarmed, and the "Johnny Reb" who had you in charge was just on the point of passing to the rear with you when he handed me your sword. . . . The glory of [the soldiers'] brilliant achievements . . . are enshrined in the hearts of our old men and women, our young men and maidens. It will need no monuments of brass or tablets of marble to perpetuate . . . because it will be handed down to succeeding generations as a precious heirloom . . .

Yours truly,
Phil Alexander

Captain Ward received his sword on Christmas Day, 1892.⁷

Intense personal meaning was very often an inherent if intangible part of the historic weapons found scattered



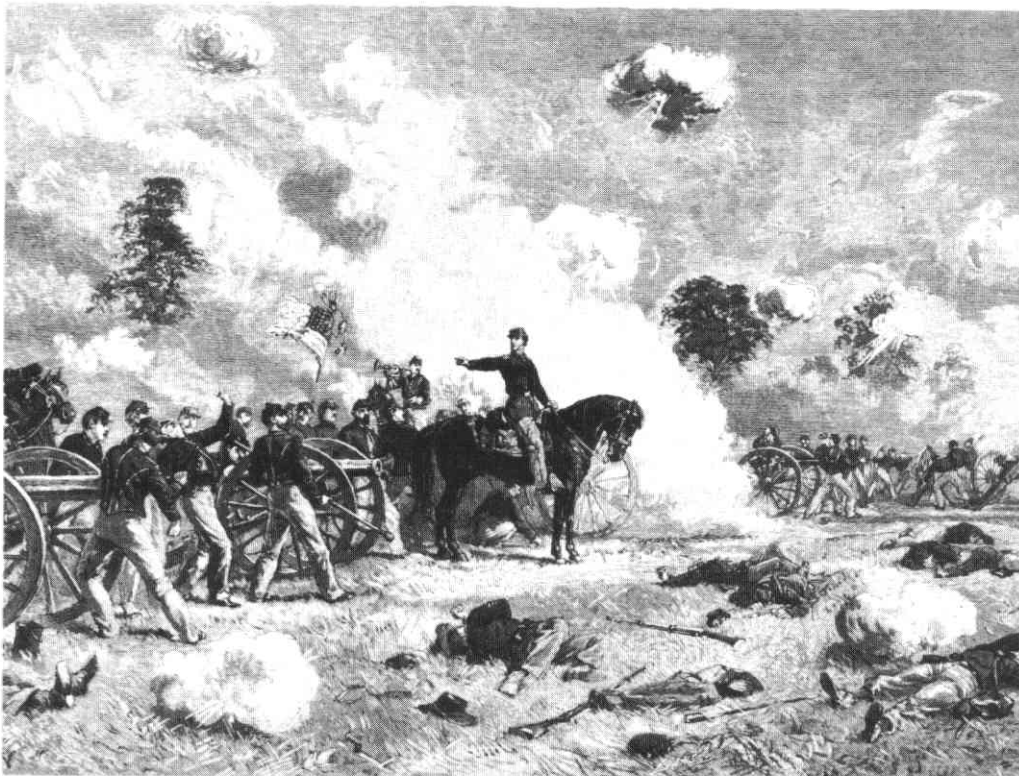
Colonel Hugh McNeil's fancy Tiffany & Co. sword, presented to him by the men of Company D, 1st Pennsylvania Rifles. This sword was in McNeil's possession only for about two weeks before it was sent to Washington, D.C. for safe keeping. [William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pa.]

in various locations today. It seems not only ironic but somehow tragic that many of these artifacts have lost the vivid history that caused their original owners to value them so highly. Perhaps as we understand more, we will more seriously consider those same aspects, and realize that intense meaning need not be lost, for it is often only superficially hidden in the dusty ledgers of the past.

NOTES

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Gettysburg, The First Day

A.R. Waud, Engraving