



A tableau of belt, sash, and sword.

The Last Confederate Sword

Donald R. Tharpe

On Wednesday, March 22, 1865, the Richmond [Va.] *Daily Dispatch* reported the presentation of a sword, belt, and sash to Maj. Gen. William Mahone by the citizens of Petersburg. "The presentation," the paper reported, "took place in the presence of a large assemblage of officers, soldiers, citizens, and ladies, who gathered together to witness the pleasing event."¹

Those embattled witnesses at Petersburg, a city under siege for ten months, would likely see little else that was pleasing in the next several weeks. On March 25th, just two days later, the final campaign of the Army of Northern Virginia began when Gen. Lee attempted to break Gen. Grant's tightening deathgrip on Petersburg by taking the Federal-held Fort Stedman, just east of the city. They initially met with success, but the relentless Federals retook the fort. The Confederates ultimately lost the strategic position as well as the lives of 3,500 of their already tragically depleted troops. Petersburg fell just one week later.

It was the twilight of the Confederacy; it was also the twilight of Richmond, Virginia, manufacturer Boyle & Gamble, military contractors to the Confederate government and makers of Mahone's presentation sword. Originally makers of circular saws for sawmills, Boyle & Gamble was first mentioned in an 1860 newspaper article in which reporters told of going into their extensive saw factory near the Shockoe Warehouse.² Their work as sword makers for the Confederacy clearly began early in the conflict: a May 27, 1861, article in the *Daily Missouri Republican* ran under the headline "Attack on a Secession Sword Factory."³ The story related that the factory of Boyle & Gamble had been set aflame the day before; perpetrators and extent of damages are unknown.

The firm's relationship with the new Southern government continued. On September 2, 1861, Boyle, Gamble & MacFee† were granted a patent (No. 18) by the Confederate States Patent Office to make sword bayonets that attached to shoulder arms.⁴ Further, the April 17, 1862, *Daily Enquirer* reported that Boyle, Gamble & Co. was making a large supply



of swords for the establishment of Mitchell & Tyler, which was under contract with the Confederate States government.⁵ The following September, a contract was made between Boyle, Gamble & Co. and Maj. Stansbury, commander of the Richmond Armory and Arsenal for the production of sword-sabre bayonets.⁶

The firm's products during the war years were not limited to edged weaponry. They also made axes, curry combs, shoe hammers, and—in a magnificent leap from the utilitarian to the unique—the handle for the seal used by the Confederate States Treasury Department.⁷ Still, they were known then and are known now for their high-grade swords. Of these, the most beautiful are the handsomely etched presentation swords bestowed upon Maj. Gen. William Mahone and other such personages as Brig. Gen. Thomas A. Harris,⁸ Gen. John McCausland,⁹ and Maj. J. Thompson Brown.¹⁰

On April 9, 1862, the *Daily Dispatch* reported having seen Maj. Brown's ornate sword and closed with: "The best of it is, that it was all made in the Southern Confederacy, and intended as an instrument to punish the enemies of that Confederacy."¹¹ It is quite likely that Maj. Gen. Mahone's sword is the last Boyle & Gamble blade of which that could be said. Presented as it was just weeks before the fall of Richmond, the flight of Jefferson Davis, and the surrender at Appomattox, it likely represents our last glimpse of the true Confederate-made swords of the war. Further, of the scores of blades of this type this author has examined, it is without equal in workmanship. It is not without irony that the Confederacy should reach its apex in sword-making as the government reached its nadir.

† According to William H. Albaugh's *A Photographic Supplement of Confederate Swords, with Addendum* (Orange, Va.: Moss Publications, 1979), the firm of Boyle & Gamble is distinguished from Boyle, Gamble & MacFee primarily in that Boyle & Gamble "sold their products privately to individuals and to such military outfitters as Mitchell & Tyler, while Boyle, Gamble & MacFee were strictly under government contract" (p. 11).



The diminutive Maj. Gen. William Mahone sits with military bearing in this wartime tintype.

William Mahone, recipient of the sword, was a true son of the Old Dominion. Born in Southampton County, Virginia, on December 1, 1826, and educated at Virginia Military Institute, he studied engineering while a teacher at Rappahannock Military Academy. He went on to engineer several Virginia railroads, and at the outbreak of war was President and Superintendent of the Norfolk & Petersburg Railroad. When Virginia seceded, he was quick to cast his lot with the fledgling Confederacy and was almost immediately appointed colonel of the 6th Virginia Infantry, in which capacity he commanded at the capture of Norfolk.¹²

Promoted to brigadier general on November 16, 1861, he served continuously with the Army of Northern Virginia throughout the rest of the war, from Seven Pines to the Crater. The only battle missing on his impressive wartime résumé is Antietam, at which time Mahone was recovering from wounds suffered at the Battle of Second Manassas. While physically small of stature, being referred to as "Little Billy Mahone," he seemed to grow with his responsibilities. By war's end, he had risen to the rank of major general and was one of only three division commanders still alive at Appomattox, by which time he had become one of Lee's

most trusted lieutenants. In the years after the war, Lee is said to have felt that of the surviving leaders in the army, Mahone made the largest contribution to organization and command.¹³

In fact, Mahone's contributions to the Cause did not precisely end with the surrender: a surviving manuscript he wrote between 1890 and 1894 sheds much light on the waning days of the war. Writing first in pencil, then in pen, on stationery from the Hotel Chamberlin on McPherson Square in Washington, Mahone began: "In compliance with your request†† I give you an account of what I saw and heard from Genl Lees lines covering Richmond and Petersburg to the close of his armys career at Appomattox."¹⁴

This document—in all, 73 pages of painstaking long-hand script—has come down to us as a model of recollective powers and careful description. It also reveals the scrappy attitude and dogged determination that made Mahone a valued fighter, a successful commander, and ultimately a survivor in the War Between the States. The document offers us the single best account of Appomattox as witnessed by a high-ranking officer of the Third Corps. It is, by turns, poignant and pugnacious:

After the completion of the details of surrender which were my part, I went over to Genl Lees Hdquarters to bid him good bye [April 10]. I sat with him in the front part of his tent. He was obviously full of grief—offering however no out[ward] sign beyond the watering eye. . . . Gen. Lee observed that he had advised the Confederate authorities at the start—that the contest on which we had entered could not be over estimated and our chance to win was to be found by throwing the whole military or fighting power of the Confederacy vigourously into the struggle—which while not saying so, he manifestly thought had not been done.¹⁵

Mahone continued:

In the winter preceding the evacuation he [Lee] said that he advised Mr. Davis to come to terms—that it would be impossible for him when spring came and the campaign opened, for him to get away. Roads bad and transportation poor, while the army confronting him was full handed and fresh with every means of earnest persuit at hand: and Mr.

† No attempt has been made to alter Mahone's original document to conform with standard grammar, punctuation, or spelling except in those cases when meaning might otherwise be unclear.

†† The recollections were undoubtedly written for Gen. James Longstreet, who was compiling his *From Manassas to Appomattox* at the time and had asked several of his old subordinates for similar input. Although Mahone's actual manuscript did not see light until well into this century, Longstreet clearly relied heavily on it for coverage of Lee's view of the aftermath of Saylor's Creek as Mahone's and Longstreet's passages concerning this are remarkably similar.

Davis he said replied no you must fight. I stated to Gen Lee that just then he had made a mistake. That he was in fact the Confederacy—enjoying the affectionat confidence of all that there was of it—and he should have taken matters in [his] own hands—held a conference with his officers—told them the situation and they would have commissioned him in behalf of the army to see Grant and effect a settlement. He replied, but there was the government at Richmond and I said yes, and I would have taken my division down and dispersed it.¹⁶

Mahone's reminiscence of Lee in those last days is plain-spoken yet eloquent:

He was the most [handsome] specimine and proudest man I ever saw. He had no appreciation of a joke. Polite, but stern and matter of fact in all things. His long service in the regular army had [left] him with a reverence for authority and a rigid respect for rules and regulation which were unfortunate and hurt full for one in command of [an] army of revolution. He should have gone to the field unfettered and his mere [wish] should have been the law.¹⁷

The manuscript contains a host of such gems, not the least of which is a suggestion that Lee may have had a premonition of his own death, a notion that more than one contemporary writer has made much of:¹⁸

At Amelia Co Ho early next morning [April 5]. . . . He wore all his best clothes—including his gold spurs and magnificent sword and belt. It impressed me that he anticipated some accident to himself and desired to be found in that dress.¹⁹

Mahone himself likely had no premonition whatsoever of the events that occurred the previous summer at Petersburg, Virginia—events unlike any other in the war, events that helped endear him to Lee, events that led the grateful people of the beleaguered town of Petersburg to present him with the Boyle & Gamble sword. On June 25, 1864, a Union regiment made up of pre-war coal miners from Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, took shovels in hand and began to dig in the red clay of Virginia. They dug for nearly a month, completing a 586' tunnel that was 5' in height and had two lateral galleries totalling 75'—right under the Confederate trenches at Petersburg. "Claptrap and nonsense," the Union engineers had initially said of the plan to blast the Confederate lines from beneath. Nevertheless, for the next four days the subterranean chambers were filled with 320 kegs of powder. Union Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside had three division commanders draw straws for who would spearhead the assault after the explosion. Brig. Gen. James H. Ledlie, perhaps the worst general ever to don a blue uniform, picked the short one.²⁰

At 4:45 on the morning of July 30, over a month after the first earth was turned for the tunnel, four tons of powder

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PRESENTATION OF A SWORD TO MAJOR-GENERAL MAHONS.—The sword, belt and sash, ordered by the citizens of Petersburg for Major General William Mahone, was presented to that brave and veteran officer on Saturday afternoon, near his headquarters, in Chesterfield county. The presentation took place in the presence of a large assemblage of officers, soldiers, citizens and ladies, who gathered together to witness the pleasing event.

The following figures from the official report of Major-General William Mahone, give the operations of his division during the campaign of 1864, from the time he assumed command down to the battle of Burgess's Mill, on the 27th of October.

The command has captured:
Prisoners, 6,704; pieces of artillery, 15; colors, 42; small arms, 4,867; horses, 285; wagons and ambulances, 40; slaves, 237.

According to the enemy's own statements to collect, which, particular care has been taken, the losses in killed and wounded in these commands which, at different times, fought Mahone's division, sum up 11,000. By these figures, and for certain reasons, it is believed that the loss in killed and wounded is underestimated. It will be seen that, during the spring and summer campaigns of last year, General Mahone inflicted upon the enemy a loss of 17,704 men.

The loss of his own command, during this time, in killed, wounded and missing, was 5,248.

THE RICHMOND TOBACCO SYRUP

E with gas, and furnis
single gentlemen, with a
No. 172 Broad street, near S
ROOMS FOR RENT
Jefferson and Franklin
FOR RENT, a 6
HOUSE, on Broadway
Church Hill, containing
with all the necessary out
fitted up for the owner's use
Also, for rent, a LOT OF
first street, between 6 and
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A top number street, v
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ROOMS FOR RENT
IN PARLOR, with a pian
and valuable library; a
BED, and a LITTLE WID
UNFURNISHED ROOMS.
table—in the Mechanics
and a half from Richmond,
Call! (m 11-27)

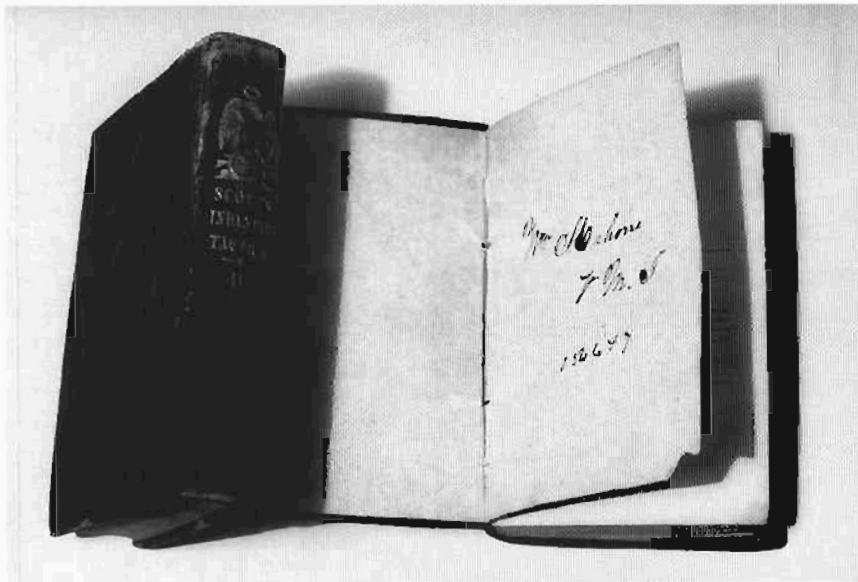
FOR RENT, a
ROOMS, furnished
scrupulous, a good view
of the town and harbor
FURNISHED BARRACKS

The March 22, 1865, Richmond [Va.] *Daily Dispatch* article concerning the presentation of the Boyle & Gamble sword to Maj. Gen. William Mahone. The newspaper reported that the blade was presented at a well-attended event at Mahone's headquarters in Chesterfield County the previous Saturday afternoon, March 18th, just a few weeks before the Confederacy drew its last breath.

exploded, tossing nine companies of the 19th and 22nd South Carolina into the air. The crater that resulted from the blast measured 170' long and 30' deep.²¹ The shocked Confederates on either side fled in panic.

Into the valley of death rushed Ledlie's division—a grievous tactical error. Had they formed around the crater instead of rushing into it, the outcome might have been different. The Confederates regrouped, and soon Southern artillery was raking the Federals trapped in the hollowed-out bowl of earth. It was rather like shooting ducks in a barrel when, by 8:00 that morning, Mahone's seasoned men had sealed the breach in the Confederate lines and surrounded the crater, which was becoming a gaping grave. By 1:00 PM, the Confederates had successfully pushed the surviving Yankees back to their lines. The Union forces suffered 3,798 losses; the Confederacy, some 1,500.²²

The Crater was only one—if inarguably the loudest—action in the ten-month siege that was the Petersburg Campaign, the longest sustained operation of the war. As the war drew to a close, the grateful citizenry of Petersburg



Among Mahone's surviving artifacts is this copy of *Scott's Infantry Tactics, Vol. II*, which bears the inscription "Wm. Mahone, V.M.I." on its frontispiece.



A pin commemorating the Battle of the Crater, scene of one of many of Mahone's successes. It reads, from top: "THE CHARGE OF THE CRATER/JULY 30TH 1864/PETERSBURG VA./MAHONE'S BRIGADE."

responded to Mahone's consistent displays of leadership in the campaign by commissioning the Boyle & Gamble sword, appropriately etched:

PRESENTED TO
MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM MAHONE
BY THE CITIZENS OF PETERSBURG VA
IN APPRECIATION OF HIS SKILL ENERGY
AND GALLANTRY

IN DEFENSE OF THEIR CITY DURING THE CAMPAIGN OF
1864

The sword was presented in a black walnut box lined in blue fabric, and it was accompanied by a red sash and general officer's sword belt replete with an interlocking Virginia buckle. The sword was wrapped in a green wool casing with a drawstring top.

The slightly curved scabbard measures 35" and has a steel body brazed along the lower reverse side. It is complemented by a gilded throat, top mount (with ring), center mount (with ring), and drag. All of these are gently scalloped.

The throat shows a "C"-scroll and floral motif engraving, and the top mount of the sword bears a rendition of the state seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia and a sword-and-wreath motif. This coppery hue of the top mount gives ample evidence that it possesses a greater copper content than the other mountings. (Copper was in relatively good supply in the South and was put to uses both practical and decorative.)

The center mount is emblazoned atop with the Confederate battle flag within a wreath; the lower motif is a bugle and bayonet crossed in front of a drum.

The drag features a plumed helmet as the centerpiece in a panoply of symbols: an array of lances and trophy flags, a shield bearing the sign of the rising sun of the Confederacy, a quiver of arrows, and a mace. Below this intricate assemblage is yet another highly decorative design that terminates the engraved beauty of the scabbard.

The regulation slightly curved blade measures 33¾", and the maker's name—"BOYLE & GAMBLE/RICHMOND VA"—appears proudly on the ricasso of the reverse. Unlike most other Boyle & Gamble blades, the fuller is stopped rather than tapered. Continuing toward its point, the ornately etched blade bears a floral motif, a border of cross-hatching, and a depiction of various military symbols that include a shield, drums, a quiver of arrows, a crossbow, a highly stylized furled Confederate flag, and a pennant on a staff. Further up is the aforementioned presentation panel. Decorative diagonal etching appears on the back of blade along its length.

On the hiltmost end of the blade's obverse there is a floral design and cross-hatching that echoes that on the reverse. The letters "CS" are topped by a standing figure described as the Goddess of Liberty, who carries a drawn dagger in her right hand and holds an unfurled Confederate flag in her left. Flowing up from that design is more floral work which terminates in the symbol of the rising sun of the Confederacy, much as it appeared on the aforementioned drag of the scabbard. It is worthy of note here that an 1863 *Richmond Enquirer* article concerning the presentation of a Boyle & Gamble sword to Col. R.W. Martin, 53rd Virginia Regiment, carries the following description: "The scabbard is of steel, and the tail bands and bars plated with gold and

carved with ingenious devices on either side, such as the Goddess of Liberty with drawn dagger, the rising sun of the Confederacy, together with the Confederate flag and battle flag crossed . . .²³ The similarities in motif are striking.

The hilt, which measures 6", is of the staff officer's style, which boasts one more branch than that of a foot officer's sword. Within the upper branches is the openwork CS; floral openwork appears between both branches. (These sword hilts echo those of the regulation Union staff officer's swords—with, of course, the substitution of "CS" for the Federal "US.") The quillion terminates with a scroll motif, and the knuckle bow terminates at the rear of the hilt at the pommel cap, which displays a floral motif along its front edge. The pommel cap is domed to receive the tang of the blade, which was peened over to seat it. The grip is wrapped with black leather and has a fine-grade twisted wire bordered by a single strand of wire on either side.

* * * * *

Having done his part for his home state when it was part of the short-lived Confederacy, Mahone went on to serve Virginia after the war as well. He returned to his railroad, which is today known as the Norfolk & Western system, and became active in politics. Although defeated several times in his bid for office, he characteristically persevered and in 1880 was elected senator on the Readjuster ticket, which was essentially the Virginia version of Republican. He was active in Virginia political affairs until his death in Washington, D.C., on October 8, 1895. Little Billy Mahone was laid to rest at Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia.²⁴

Boyle & Gamble continued to operate after the war, as they are present in the Tredegar Company's business records of 1866²⁵ and in post-war Richmond business directories,²⁶ but their products after Appomattox cannot, of course, be called Confederate.

Just as William Mahone was a survivor, several of his possessions survive, which this writer is very fortunate to own. Among these are his copy of *Scott's Infantry Tactics, Vol. I*, inscribed "William Mahone, V.M.I."; his Brooks Brothers, New York, boots; his gold suspender clasps with his name engraved; and a gold watch marked Mitchell & Tyler, Richmond, Virginia. But it is his presentation sword that is the finest of these artifacts. The exceptionally fine workmanship alone puts it without peer, and the sterling reputation of its original owner adds extra luster. Even so, its greatest significance lies in the fact that it is likely the last truly Confederate-made sword, skillfully fashioned of enduring metal even as the Confederacy itself dissolved.

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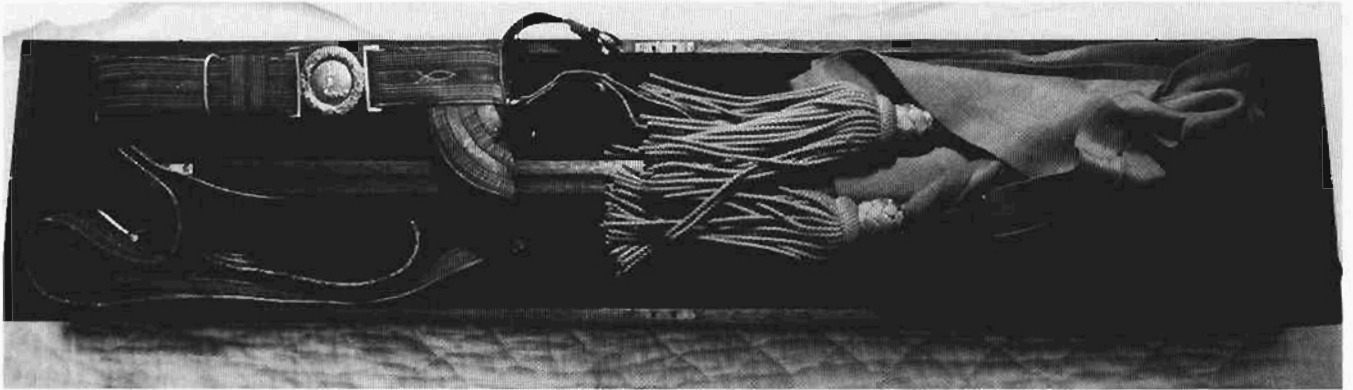
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With the sword, Mahone was given a red sash and a general officer's sword belt with an interlocking Virginia belt buckle. The items were presented in a handsome black walnut box lined with blue fabric.



The top mount of the scabbard.



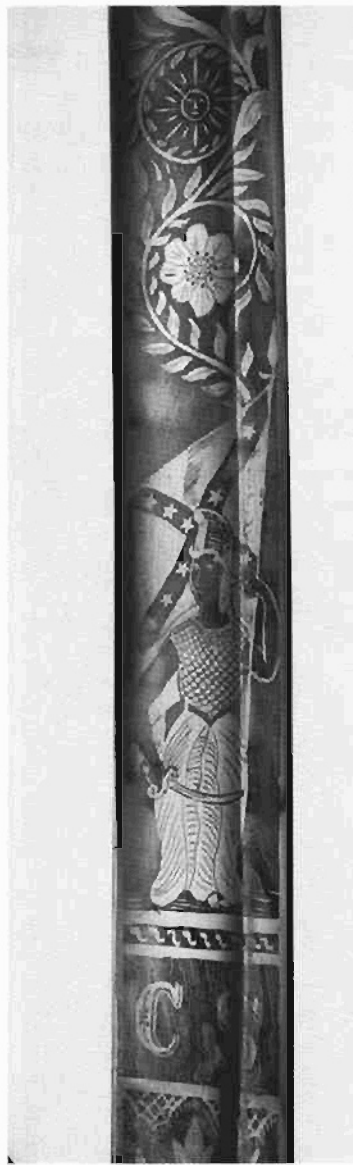
The center mount of the scabbard.



The drag of the scabbard.



The ricasso of the reverse of the blade, bearing the Boyle & Gamble marking. (in the shadow at top)



The obverse of the blade nearest the hilt, bearing the letters "CS," the Goddess of Liberty, and the rising sun of the Confederacy.



The presentation etching on the reverse of the blade.



A view of the sword's hilt and scabbard.