

Plate 1. Two typical fighting dirks, c. 1780.

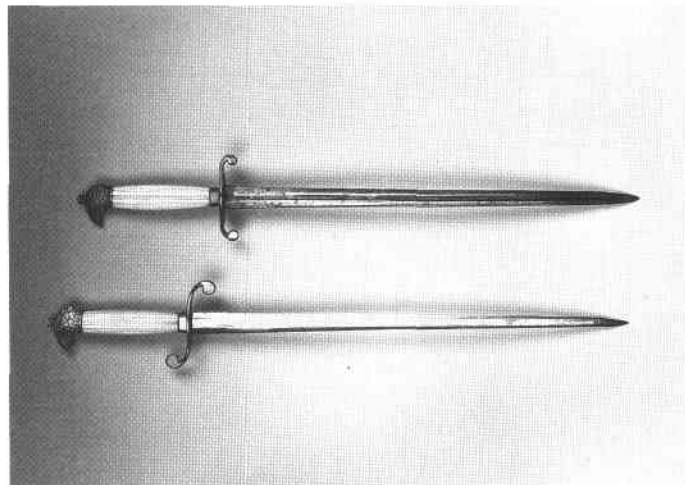


Plate 2. Two dirks by Francis Thurkle, c. 1790.



Plate 3. Thurkle eagle-pommel comparison.

# American Eagle Pommel Dirks—An Overview

Peter Tuite

## INTRODUCTION

Most historians agree that naval forces began to use dirks in the mid- to late 1700s. Despite the popular notion that only midshipmen used dirks, early paintings show dirks being worn by high-ranking naval officers as well as midshipmen. The U.S. Navy was formed in 1775, but it wasn't until 1869 that it prescribed a regulation dirk. This was long after dirks were in fashion for naval officers. This lack of pattern requirements until 1869 is one of the more interesting aspects of collecting early naval dirks. Each dirk is unique and its features are largely dependent on the wealth and interests of its owner, the country of its manufacture and the period in which it was made.

From about 1790 through 1850, American armed forces adapted the distinctly American eagle pommel for their officers' swords. Since dirk styles followed swords, it is not surprising that eagle pommels were also used on dirks. Although naval officers had to purchase their swords, the purchase of a dirk was not required and was probably whimsical. The U.S. Navy has always been small compared with the Army. From its initial strength of about 60 officers in 1775, it only increased to about 1300 officers and midshipmen in 1850. It is therefore not surprising that American dirks are very rare and that those with eagle pommels are the rarest of American naval edged weapons.

In this article the author traces the development of eagle pommel dirks from the period of their popularity in the last decade of the 18th century through about 1850. In the beginning, most dirks, like swords, were imported from England. Later, dirks were either made by American sword makers or imported from England or France. The stylistic differences of various periods and makers are illustrated and discussed. For completeness, the regulation dirk prescribed for midshipmen in 1869 is also discussed, but it was a dinosaur in the context of the post-Civil War Navy and was not widely used.

In some cases, the dirks described are not in the author's collection and the photographs and information provided by other collectors is acknowledged and appreciated. The author is also indebted to the Naval Historical Center website (<http://www.history.navy.mil/>) which contains a



wealth of information on the U.S. Navy and its history. The information presented concerning naval history would not have been possible without access to this website.

## BACKGROUND

Dirks represent a small niche in the field of arms collecting and very little has been written about them. They were made like swords and each dirk was typically the product of several different craftsmen, each with a specialty, with the final product being coordinated by the tradesman known as a cutler. Fortunately, the cutlers that made swords also made dirks and, therefore, the extensive resources on sword making that have been prepared over the past 45 years have some application to dirks. Unfortunately, there were no patterns or dirk contracts, which could provide a basis for identifying a maker or a period of manufacture. Very few dirks were marked and the dirk itself was the end product of many different craftsmen.

Throughout most of the 18th century, most blades and finished products came from England where blades were imported from Solingen by a London cutler who in turn exported them to America. In the late 18th century, Birmingham, England, began manufacturing its own high-quality blades and many dirk blades made for export were produced there. English cutlers also developed the bluing and gilding processes that are seen on swords and dirks. The cutlers were the only source for these

blades in the early 1800s, so all blued, and gilded blue blades came from Birmingham. After the Napoleonic era, the French made dirks with some very nice blue and gilded blades for export to the American market.

In the late 18th century, as the cutler trade developed in America it followed the practices of the English cutlers. American cutlers like the Rose family made blades with hilts provided by other craftsmen. Some American makers imported blades from Birmingham and Solingen and hilted them. Widmann made hilts with imported blades and sold swords and dirks under his name. Others, like A.W. Spies, had entire pieces made abroad and merely added their names before selling the weapons in this country.

Therefore, during the period of interest, American, British and French cutlers were all making dirks to sell to the American market. It is notable that this market was very limited; not all officers had the desire or need to purchase a dirk. After the War of 1812, America had 525 naval officers and midshipmen in service. This number increased to about 1300 in 1850, shortly after the Mexican War. After this, naval officers or midshipmen rarely wore dirks.

The eagle pommel was adopted by American armed forces around 1790 but the British, particularly the Scots, were using eagle pommels on swords both before and after this time. During the 60-year period of its popularity, the eagle pommel represented an American feature on naval swords and dirks. Similarly, the lion-head pommel, adopted by the Royal Navy in the early 1800s, remains in use to this day.

Initially, dirks had relatively long, straight, slender blades with central fullers and, typically, ivory or bone grips with brass or copper mountings for sea service. Scabbards for these early dirks were leather with brass mounts. These early dirks were relatively simple weapons designed for thrusting in hand-to-hand combat. Plate 1 illustrates two typical straight-bladed simple fighting dirks from about 1780.

The larger dirk in Plate 1 is 20 1/2-inches long overall with a 16 1/2-inch blade. It was made by Francis Thurkle, a London sword maker who supplied many surviving naval dirks. The smaller dirk has a 14-inch blade. These dirk configurations are relatively simple and evolved into dirks with relatively ornate hilts and blades. This is not surprising since dirks eventually became a substitute for swords on dress occasions and as such were a symbol of an officer's social status. The dirks discussed and illustrated herein depict this evolution over the 50-year period of dirk use.

The Continental Congress formed the Continental Navy on 13 October 1775. Some general uniform regulations were promulgated but neither swords nor dirks were mentioned. The navy initially consisted of about 60 officers and quickly increased in size to about 90 officers and 2500 enlisted men. Following the Revolutionary War, the Continental Navy was reduced in size to about 60 officers and 700 enlisted men. Shortly thereafter it was disbanded and the last ship was sold in 1785.

During this period, dirks were undoubtedly worn by U.S. naval officers and were probably furnished by one of several English craftsmen. Therefore, a fitting place to begin the history of eagle pommel dirks is with a sword maker named Francis Thurkle. He was a prominent supplier of edged weapons to the British and American navies and he also provided some naval accoutrements,<sup>1</sup> as evidenced by a belt plate marked *FT*. He was a "Master of the Cutlers Company" and his shop was initially located at 15 Great New Street Square and later at Fetter Lane, both in London.<sup>2</sup> The firm was founded in 1766. His son, Francis II, succeeded him in 1790, when the firm name was changed to Thurkle & Son. Francis died in 1801. In addition to having a distinctive style of eagle pommel, some of Thurkle's swords and dirks are marked with his cartouche, a stamped [*FT*] on the bottom of the guard. This was not typical for sword makers of the time and one view is that Thurkle only marked edged weapons intended for export. The author disagrees with this view because there are American and British naval edged weapons with the cartouche as well as other distinctly Thurkle eagle-pommel edged weapons without the cartouche.

Plate 2 illustrates two Thurkle eagle-pommel dirks with straight blades. These dirks have blades designed for thrusting and are considered to be fighting dirks, as are those in Plate 1, above. The dirk on the right has the Thurkle [*FT*] cartouche and the one of the left with reversed quillons does not. Both dirks are very simple with single fullered straight blades 14-15 inches long. The grips are reeded ivory with a simple brass ferrule and reverse and turned-down quillons. The dirk on the left probably had a five-ball guard, but this is missing. The use of a ribbed grip on both dirks indicates they are early for Thurkle (c. 1790) because on his later swords he adopted a checkered ivory grip.<sup>3</sup> Originally, both dirks had brass-mounted leather scabbards like the one shown in Plate 4 below. From Plate 2 it appears as though these dirks are almost identical. Plate 3 compares the eagle pommels and, on close examination, it can be seen that the quality of the pommels differs.

The dirk on the left in Plate 3 has the [*FT*] cartouche and the eagle pommel has much more detailed feathering

and chiseling than does the dirk on the right, which does not have the cartouche. Could the dirk on the right be a Thurkle copy or perhaps one made later by Francis II? This may never be known because it simply may be that Thurkle made them at different times.

Although he does not specifically identify it, Rankin<sup>4</sup> shows a Thurkle eagle-pommel dirk with a counter guard like the dirk on the left in Plate 2, but with a slightly curved blade. The Rankin dirk is also considered to be a fighting dirk.

The larger fighting dirk in Plate 1, above, was also made by Thurkle and has the [FT] cartouche. However, the two eagle-pommel dirks were made later because the U.S. Navy did not adopt the eagle pommel until the late 1700s, c. 1790, and the Plate 1 dirk is c. 1780.

Plate 4 illustrates the quintessential Thurkle-made American-eagle-pommel naval dirk. It is shown with its intact leather brass-mounted scabbard, which is rare. It has the distinct naval medallion with fouled anchor on the ribbed ivory grip as well as the [FT] cartouche on the underside of the turned-down quillon guard. The grip medallion with fouled anchor is identical to those on the Thurkle pillow-pommel five-ball-hilt swords made for the American Navy. This weapon is the only known Thurkle dirk with a blue blade. The bluing extends about halfway down its 16-inch length, with identical motifs on both sides. These include a stand of arms and a primitive American eagle with stars above. The blue blade indicates that this Thurkle dirk was made later than those illustrated above; the blade probably was made in Birmingham.

Plate 5 compares one of Thurkle's eagle-pommel naval dirks to a sword he made during the same period. This Plate illustrates the scaling down that some sword makers utilized on their dirks—a similarly proportioned eagle pommel but of smaller

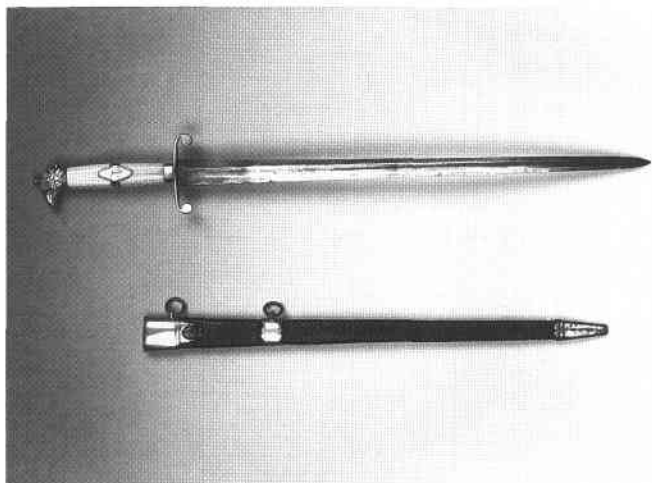


Plate 4. Naval dirk, with scabbard, by Francis Thurkle. Courtesy of S. Handelsman.

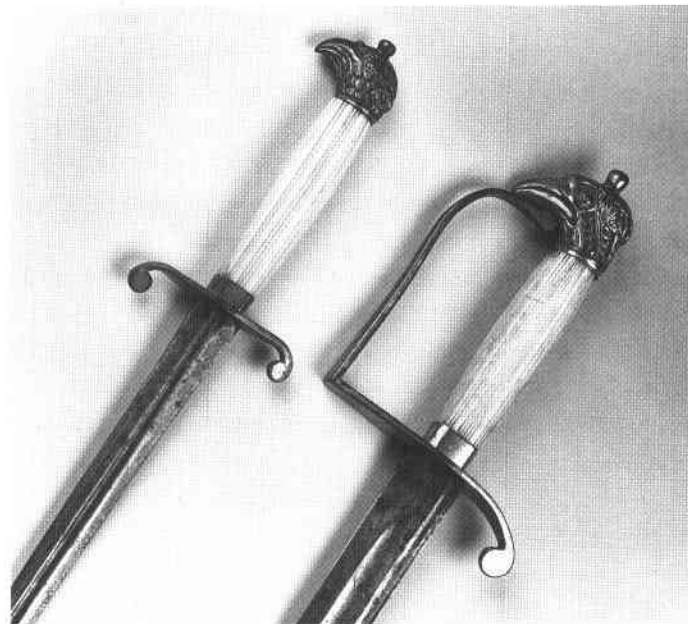


Plate 5. Thurkle sword and dirk, hilt comparison.

scale. This was not always the case, as will be shown later, because some dirk hilts are comparable in size and scale to sword hilts.

When the American Federal Government was formed in 1789, there was no apparent need for a navy and no ships were available. However, Barbary pirates were regularly disrupting sea commerce in the Mediterranean so, on 27 March 1794, Congress passed a bill to “provide a naval armament” against Algiers, thus forming a new navy.<sup>5</sup> This new navy had an initial strength of 150 officers and about 1700 men. It also had midshipmen whose training was largely based on the system in effect for the Royal Navy.

Shortly after its formation, the U.S. Navy published the Uniform Regulations of 1797.<sup>6</sup> In addition to defining what officers were to wear on various occasions, these regulations are the first of many which would mention the swords to be worn by naval officers: “small swords (yellow mounted).” There was no mention of dirks even though both officers and midshipmen were wearing them. There is evidence that some midshipmen also wore curved-bladed dirks at this early date. An engraving in Tily,<sup>7</sup> which purports to represent the issuance of the 1797 naval regulations, shows a midshipman wearing a curved eagle-pommel dirk. There is some question about the date of this engraving, but it is not later than the early 1800s.

Shortly after these regulations, the quasi-war with France was fought. French privateers had been harassing U.S. commerce in the Caribbean and off the southern coasts. To counter these activities, Congress authorized 12 new ships in 1798 to bring the U.S. Navy's strength to 18 ships. The dispute lasted from 1798 to 1801 and was fought entirely at sea. Successful sea actions made Congress realize that the navy was an important factor in supporting the commerce needed

by the new nation. However, as would become typical throughout American history, Congress reduced naval strength to 45 officers and 150 midshipmen just after the war, reducing the navy's war-time strength by about 40 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Plate 6 shows an early relatively crude dirk that was probably American-made. This dirk has a primitive small eagle pommel with checkered ivory grip and simple brass ferrule. The reverse quillon with a missing chain knuckle-bow is typical of early hunting swords. The blade is relatively wide, 1 3/8-inches, and is 12 1/2-inches long and slightly curved. Its simplicity and blade configuration indicate that it was a fighting dirk, not a dress dirk. It is certainly late 18th century and, like the curved-blade Thurkle dirk in Rankin and the engraving in Tily, indicates that Americans may have adopted the curved blade almost a decade before the British.

A similar imported dirk with scabbard is shown in Plate 7. Like the dirk in Plate 6, this dirk has a small eagle pommel, but it also has a large capstan. The grip is made of reeded black wood tapered toward the pommel, like the Plate 6 dirk, and ends in a simple turned brass ferrule. The dirk also has a reverse quillon with a chain knucklebow like the one in Plate 6. The blade is 1 1/4-inches wide, slightly curved and 12 1/2-inches long. It is bright-etched with scrolled foliage and stands of arms on both sides. The obverse blade is marked with a *G*, indicating manufacture by Gill. Thomas Gill was a major Birmingham sword and cutlass manufacturer from 1783 through his death in 1801, when his son John succeeded him. He led the efforts of English cutlers to get the Ordnance Department to abandon Solingen blades and use Birmingham-manufactured blades. To show his confidence in Birmingham-made blades, he marked his blades *warranted never to fail*.<sup>9</sup> The scabbard has two brass ring mounts with a frog stud on the top mount. The reverse of the top mount is engraved with the maker's name, *W. Parker/233 Holborn/London*. Parker was at this address from 1797 through 1840.<sup>10</sup> He was primarily a sword maker from 1797 through about 1802. Thereafter, it appears that the firm concentrated on guns because later advertisements show the firm as gun makers. This dirk dates c. 1800.

The two dirks from Plates 6 and 7 are shown together on Plate 8. Although the Parker dirk is not as crudely made as

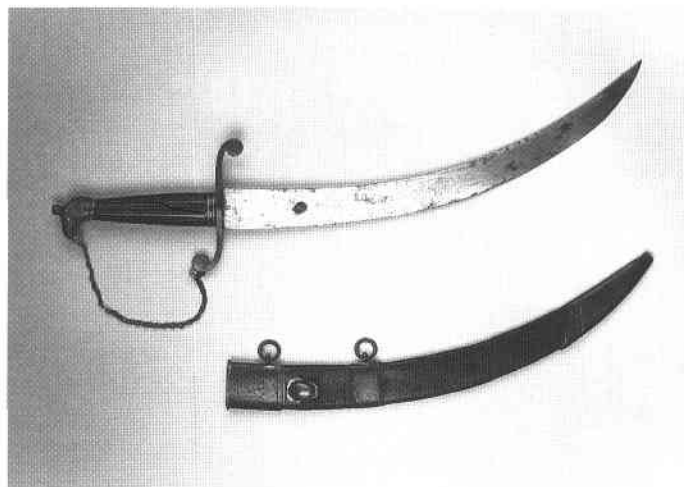


Plate 7. Early British-made dirk by W. Parker, c. 1800.

the Plate 6 dirk, the similarities in design and scale support the conclusion that both British and American cutlers copied popular designs and tried to make dirks that sold.

A very unusual early dirk is shown in Plate 9. This dirk has what appears to be a wire-wrapped silver grip like the wraps used on early small swords. On close examination, the grip turns out to be a single sheet of silver formed to depict wire wrapping. Mowbray<sup>11</sup> describes a sword with a similar grip attributed to Richard Bolton & Co., c. 1805. Bolton did not make this eagle pommel, but the use of this type of grip on a dirk attests to this practice being used for dirks as well as swords. This dirk has a simple reverse guard terminating in relatively large round balls, which gives it an awkward, unbalanced look. The chain guard is missing—a common feature of these early dirks. The 11-inch-long slightly curved blade is blue and is gilded with nautical motifs, including a fouled anchor and a stand of arms, which confirms its naval use. The obverse blade mark is unusual in that it is stamped *Gill* instead of the more common *G* for Gill (see Plate 7 dirk, above). Thomas' son John

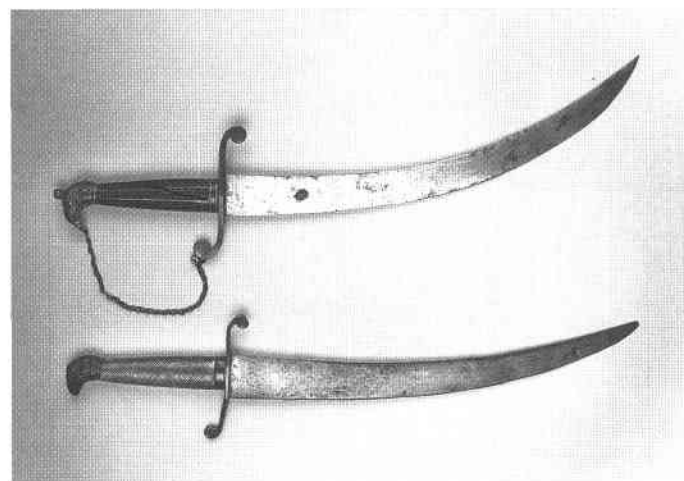


Plate 8. Small eagle-pommel dirk, comparison.

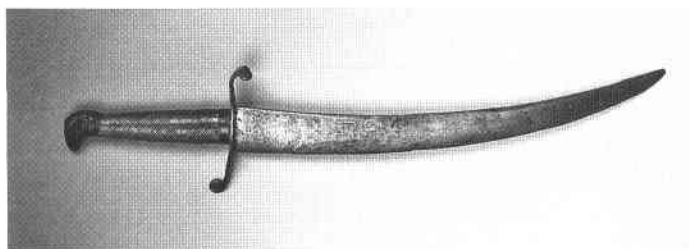


Plate 6. Early American-made dirk, c. 1800.

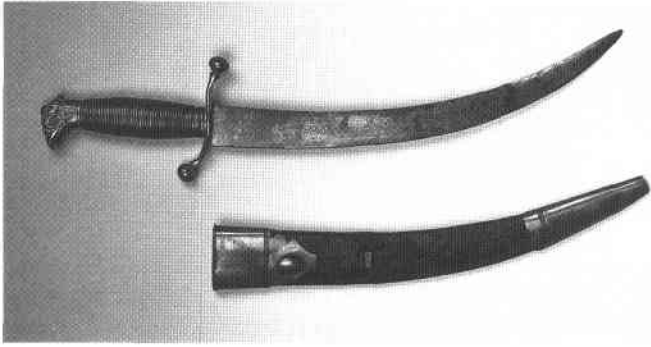


Plate 9. Silver-grip dirk with naval motifs, c. 1800. Courtesy of S. Handelsman.

succeeded him and ran the firm from 1802 through 1826.<sup>12</sup> The more common *G* is also seen on earlier and later sword and dirk blades. The use of the *Gill* stamp on this dirk blade might indicate the mark of the London branch of the firm.

Following the turn of the 19th century, the U.S. Navy fought what became known as the Barbary Wars. During 1802-1805, naval squadrons under Commodores Richard Dale and Edward Preble were sent to Tripoli to engage the Barbary pirates. Preble's actions led to cessation of the tribute that had been demanded of American merchant ships. When the Barbary wars ended in 1805, naval strength was about 190 officers and 3000 men.

In 1802, the U.S. Navy issued another set of Uniform Regulations.<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that dirks were in widespread use because these regulations specifically provide, "Dirks not to be worn ashore by any officer." It has been posited that this requirement arose because dirks were often used for settling quarrels ashore.<sup>14</sup>

Plate 10 shows a typical early fighting dirk with a straight blade that could be American-made. This dirk has a 16-inch long, 1-inch wide blade with an unstopped fuller extending about two-thirds the length of the blade. The crested, relatively small eagle pommel is similar to those in Plates 6 and 7 above. The grip is a relatively long, smooth ivory cylinder tapered at both ends with a simple brass ferrule. Scratched into the grip are two dates, 1776 over 1876; there is no knucklebow. The guard has an oval cross-section adorned with irregular small, stamped ovals with reverse quillons. This dirk dates to 1800-1810.

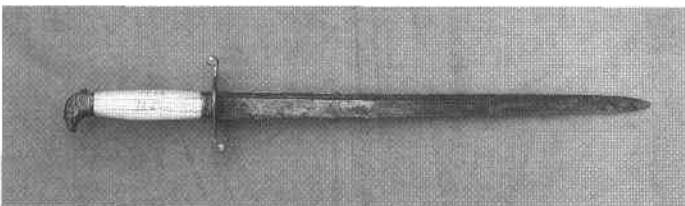


Plate 10. American-made fighting dirk with straight blade, 1805-1810. Courtesy of S. Mowbray.

Another fighting dirk with a straight blade is shown in Plate 11. This dirk also has a relatively long, 16-inch, 1-inch wide blade with an unstopped fuller extending about three-quarters the length of the blade. The eagle pommel is relatively large and is not typical of those seen on American swords. The grip is a turned ebony wood cylinder tapered at both ends that was probably wrapped with flat copper wire in its original form. The ferrule is simple unadorned brass. There is no knucklebow and the guard is straight, terminating in reverse quillons chased with lion-paw-like motifs. This dirk also dates to 1800-1810.

One of the most prominent sword-making families in America was the Rose family. Philadelphia-born William Rose (1754-1810)<sup>15</sup> founded the firm. He was listed as a smith in Blockley Township in 1782. Three of William's sons, Joseph (1778-1819), William (1783-1854) and Benjamin F. followed their father's trade. William, typically referred to as William, Sr., had a son, William, Jr. (1810-1883), who also was a cutler. The Roses were primarily blade makers and many of their blades are marked with *William Rose & Sons*, *Rose* or *W. Rose*. They presumably started making blades in the 1780s. Beginning in 1807, they made sabers under contract for the U.S. Army and various militias; following the War of 1812, they made signed blades for some of the finer naval presentation swords.

Plate 12 illustrates the only known dirk with a blade made by the Roses. Its blade spine is marked *Rose*. This dirk has a relatively long, 15-3/4 inch, 1-1/8 inch wide slightly curved blade with a central fuller extending almost to the tip and a second fuller terminating at the 5-1/4 inch false edge. It is definitely designed for fighting. The crested eagle pommel is of the Philadelphia style but its American maker is unknown. The grip is made of turned ivory and ends in a simple brass ferrule. The hand-formed grip may have had a wire wrap. There is no knucklebow and the guard has reverse quillons and is crudely engraved on its top surfaces. The scabbard is engraved leather and has three period brass mounts with a frog stud on the upper mount. The pommel, grip style and scabbard date this dirk c. 1805-1810. There are no naval motifs and the only indicators of possible naval use are the brass mounts.

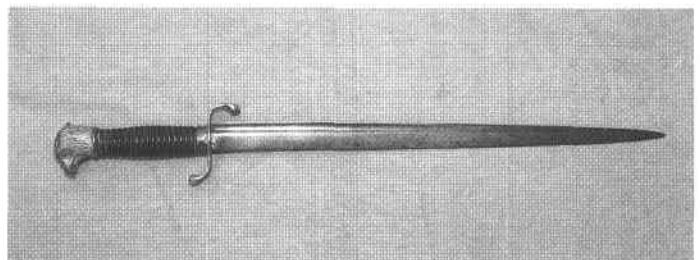


Plate 11. British-made fighting dirk with straight blade, 1805-1810. Courtesy of S. Mowbray.

Another early 19th century American dirk with a Philadelphia-style eagle pommel is shown in Plate 13. This dirk is silver-mounted and the owner's initials, *JM*, are engraved in cursive letters on the top scabbard mount. The styling of this dirk is classic American from the eagle pommel to the tip of the blade. The pommel is the extended crested eagle typical of the 1805-1810 period.<sup>16</sup> The hand-formed bone grip is crudely crosshatched at its center section and is enclosed within double vertical lines that conform to the grip shape. The ferrule is a plain silver band. Like the dirk in Plate 12 above, there is no knucklebow. A close-up of the guard is shown in Plate 14. It consists of two intertwined snakes with the reverse quillons terminating in elongated eagle heads. The blade is straight, 13-½ inches long, with a spear point. It has a single central fuller almost to its tip and is finely etched over most of its length with geometrics and florals. The etching is typical of that done later by John Meer<sup>17</sup> on naval presentation swords. The scabbard has three ornate silver mounts but no frog stud. Like so many others, this dirk has no naval motifs. Its classic style and silver mounts make it suitable to be worn as a dress dirk by high-ranking army or navy officers. It dates from 1805-1815. Rankin<sup>18</sup> illustrates a dirk with an identical hilt and dates it 1810-1830. The Rankin dirk is brass-mounted, which might give it a naval association, and also has a curved blade. The same anonymous American maker undoubtedly made both dirk hilts.

Plate 15 shows a dirk made by I & G Hutton of Albany, New York. The firm of Isaac and George Hutton is known to have produced several unique silver-mounted eagle-pommel swords from 1808 to 1816.<sup>19</sup> The Hutton dirk and sword in Plates 15 and 16 are both brass-mounted and their style is not similar to those in silver attributed to the Huttons. This particular dirk is brass-mounted and has a deeply chiseled eagle pommel with feathering down the backstrap. The chain guard is missing and the grip is smooth hand-shaped ivory with a simple brass ferrule. The cross guard is slightly reversed and ends in three ball finials. The bottom of the

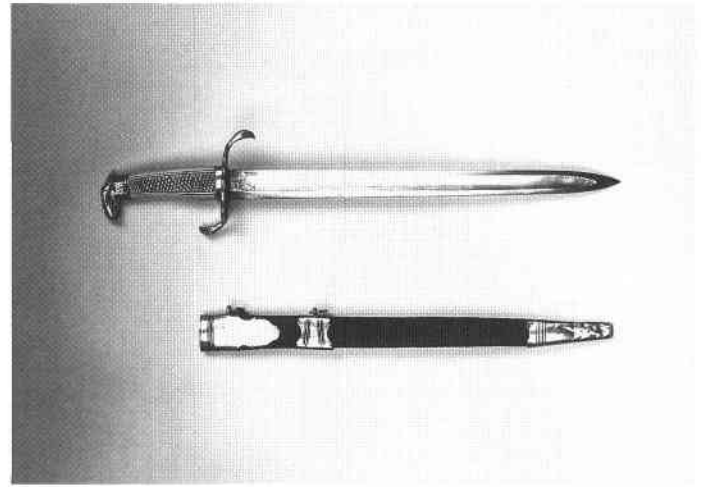


Plate 13. Silver-mounted dirk with Philadelphia eagle, 1805-1815.

cross guard is stamped with the maker's name, *Hutton*, in two places: just below the grip and adjacent to the blade spine. The slightly curved blade is 13 ¼-inches long and 1 ⅛-inches wide. It has a flattened oval cross-section white etched over 5 ¼-inches. The obverse blade is etched with a floral wreath containing the maker's name, *I & G Hutton/Albany*, and a stand of arms comprised of two flags and pikes with an oval inset topped by a liberty torch. The etchings are the same on both sides, the reverse-side oval having an indecipherable name scratched in it. The scabbard is engraved black leather with two brass mounts with rings. The bottom mount is missing. This dirk dates from 1810-1815.

Like Thurkle, the Huttons used scaled-down sword hilts for their dirk hilts. Plate 16 shows the dirk from Plate 15 along with a brass-mounted sword by Hutton. Note the similarity in eagle pommels and grips. The sword is also double-marked *Hutton* on the cross guard bottom, but the blue and gilded blade is marked *G* for Gill.

During this early period, many dirks were still being imported from England. Plate 17 shows one such import that

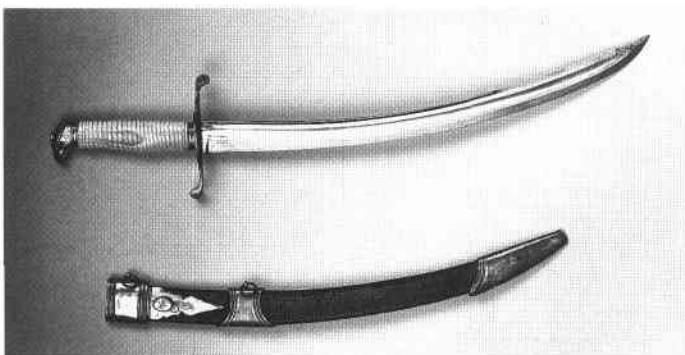


Plate 12. Large dirk with Rose blade, 1805-1810.

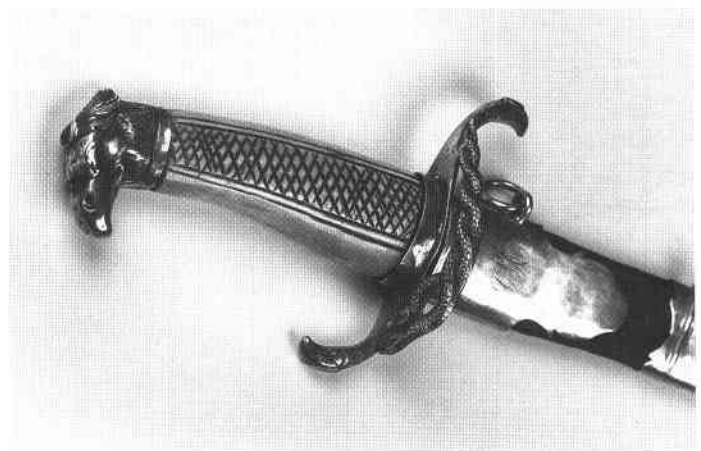


Plate 14. Entwined snake guard of silver-mounted dirk.

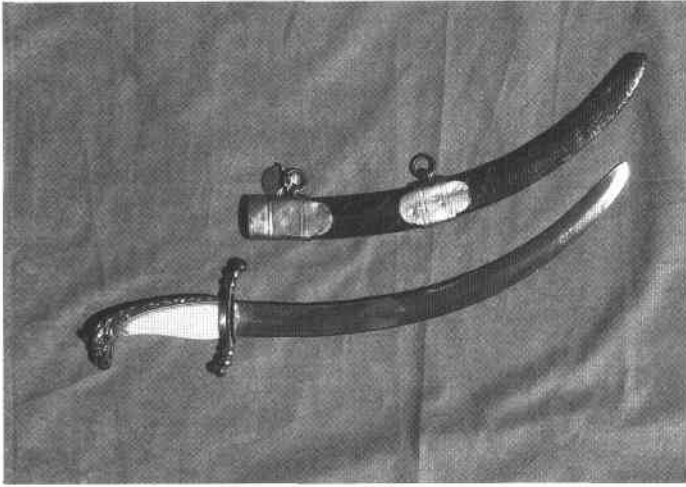


Plate 15. American dirk by I & G Hutton, 1805-1815. Courtesy of W. Guthman.

has an abundance of naval motifs. The crested eagle pommel is typical of those made by Bolton that Mowbray<sup>20</sup> refers to as the "Bolton/Upson" style. It has been posited that Thomas Bate, a prominent London cutler, made this style of eagle pommel and that Bolton, an entrepreneur and Birmingham sword maker, arranged for the pommels to be exported to the American market. The Upson connection is from the New York firm of Richards, Upson & Co. that sold many swords with this style of eagle pommel and Bolton-marked blades.

The Plate 17 dirk has a checkered bone grip with reeded panels at the front and rear ending in a simple brass ferrule. The knucklebow and guard are the distinguishing features of this dirk. Plate 18 shows a close-up of the knucklebow. It has a large, cutout fouled anchor within a laurel wreath topped with a federal eagle and shield. The cutout scrollwork on the guard is similar to that of another Richards & Upson imported sword with a Salter eagle pommel.<sup>21</sup> The

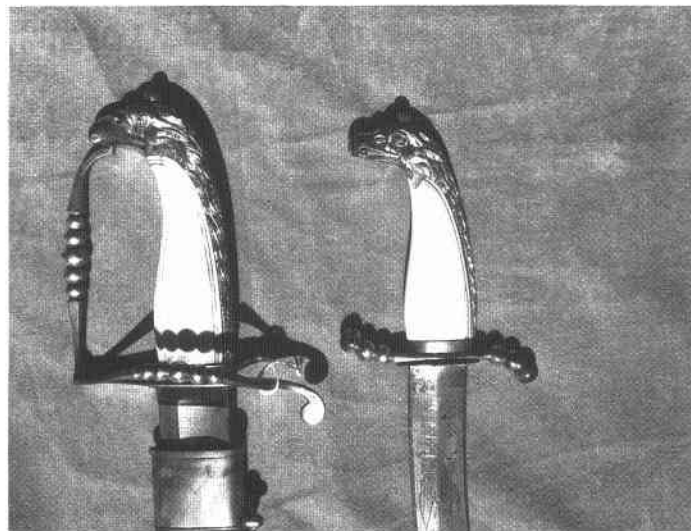


Plate 16. Comparison of Hutton dirk and sword hilts. Courtesy of W. Guthman.

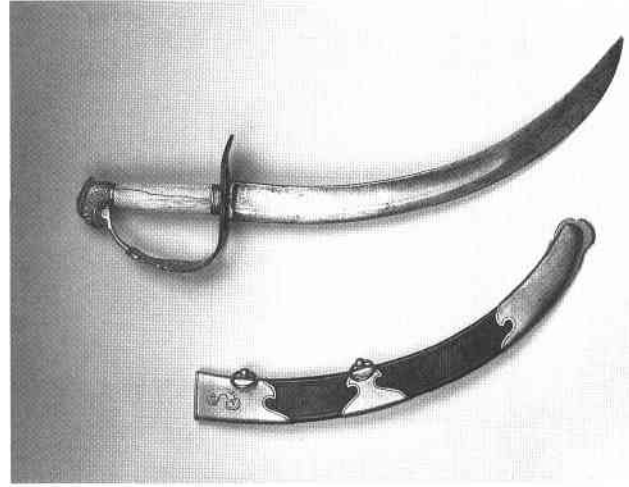


Plate 17. Bolton/Upson-style dirk, 1805-1810.

1 1/2-inch wide, 14 3/4-inch long deeply curved blade has a single central fuller and faint traces of blue and gilding. The hilt is sword-sized and the dirk may have been made en suite with a similarly hilted sword. The scabbard is brown leather with once-gilded brass mounts, the top mount having an engraved fouled anchor. The dirk dates from 1805-1810.

These early 1800s dirks have relatively large eagle pommels and sword-sized hilts compared to those made in the late 1700s. Plate 19 compares several dirks from both periods.

#### THE WAR OF 1812

From 1805 to 1812, the U.S. Navy fought several isolated successful actions with Spanish and French privateers. It was during this same period that Great Britain, engaged in yet another war with France, began seizing American ships and seamen and blockading what would otherwise have been free ports. These actions led America to declare war on Great



Plate 18. American/naval motifs on Bolton dirk knucklebow.



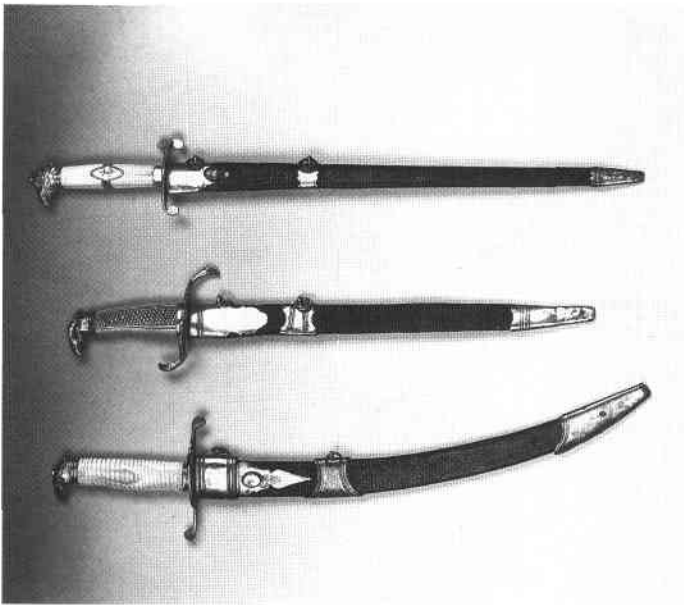


Plate 19. Some early large dirks.

Britain and Ireland on 18 June 1812. This was to be the war where the U.S. Navy established itself as a world sea power.

Plate 20 shows what is probably an American-made dirk. The pommel is the small crested eagle typical of either the Philadelphia or Baltimore area. The rectangular, slightly tapered ivory grip is partially ribbed and the ferrule is a plain brass band. Like other dirks of the period, there is no knucklebow. The simple brass cross guard is relatively small, slightly turned down and pierced with a geometric design. The blade is straight, 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inches long, with a spear point. It has a single central fuller almost to its tip and was once blue and gilded. The leather scabbard has two simple silver mounts with a frog stud on the top mount. There are no carrying rings and their absence dates the scabbard early. It is also unusual for a brass-mounted dirk to have a silver-mounted scabbard, so they have no doubt been associated over the years. This dirk dates from 1805-1815.

Another curved-blade dirk that was probably made in America is shown in Plate 21. This dirk also has a 15-inch long, 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch wide slightly curved blade with a 5-inch false edge, but this blade has an unstopped top fuller extending about two-thirds of its length and was designed for fighting. This blade

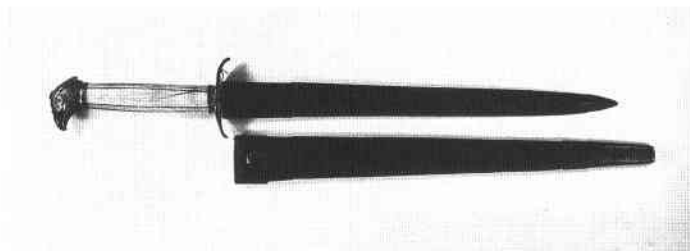


Plate 20. Early American dirk, 1805-1815. Courtesy of R. Ulbrich.

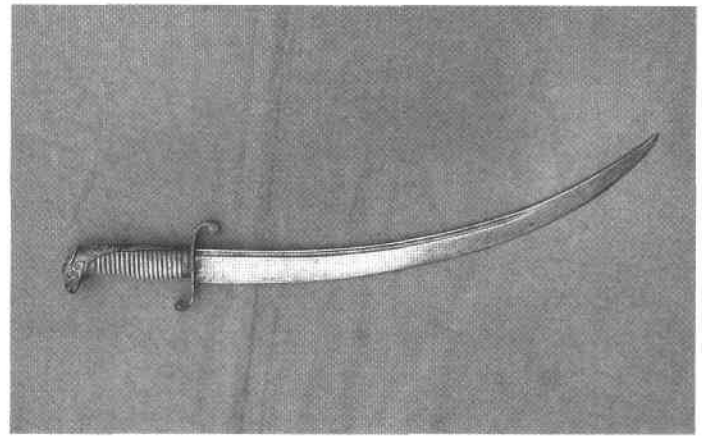


Plate 21. Curve-bladed fighting dirk, 1805-1815. Courtesy of S. Mowbray.

configuration is very similar to that on the Rose dirk in Plate 12, above. The crested eagle pommel has a back strap extending the full length of the grip. The grip is made of ribbed ivory and ends in a simple brass ferrule. It once had a chain knucklebow. The simple straight guard terminates in flat, circular reverse finials. This dirk also dates from 1805-1815.

Plate 22 shows a British naval eagle-pommel dirk that, without the blade motifs, could easily pass as American. This dirk has a 15-inch long, 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch wide slightly curved blade with a 5 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch false edge. The blue and gilt blade has generic military motifs on both sides over about half its length. The obverse side, however, has the royal coat of arms and the reverse side has the Georgian crown and cypher. The crested eagle pommel is unique and is not usually associated with American swords. The grip is made of diagonally ribbed ivory and ends in a simple brass ferrule. It does not appear to have had a copper wire wrap. It has a chain knucklebow and the straight guard has unadorned langets and simple reverse finials. The leather scabbard has three simple brass mounts with

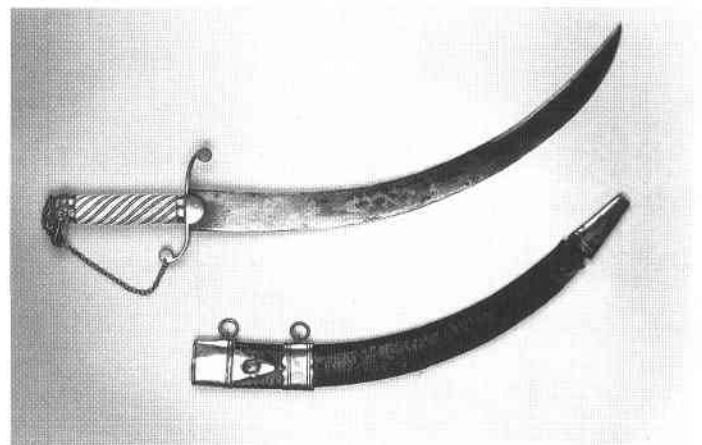


Plate 22. British naval eagle-pommel dirk, c. 1815.

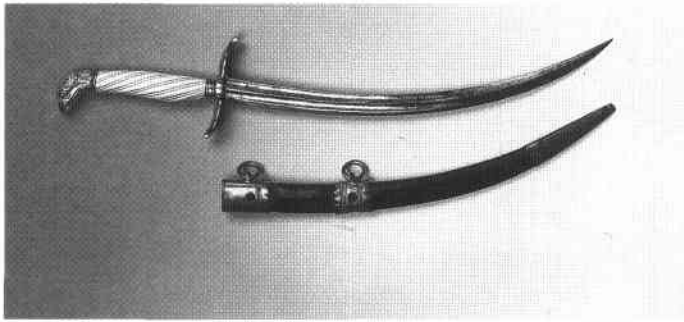


Plate 23. Small-scale British-made dirk, 1805-1815.

two rings and a frog stud on the top mount. This dirk dates 1805-1820.

Following the War of 1812, the U.S. Navy issued the first set of regulations that acknowledged the dirk in naval dress. On 23 November 1813, the Navy Department issued the Uniform Regulations of 1814.<sup>22</sup> These provided that surgeon's mates and pursers were to wear dirks in full dress uniform. For undress, they provided that all officers were permitted to wear dirks.

The next 15 years were a time of relative peace for the United States and its naval forces. However, there were two noteworthy naval conflicts. The first was with the Barbary pirates in 1815 when Commodores Decatur and Bainbridge returned to the Mediterranean and again defeated the pirates to gain area acceptance of U.S. naval power.

Two dirks, both of which were certainly made by the same unknown British maker, are shown in Plates 23 and 24. The dirk in Plate 23, because of its relatively small scale, was most certainly made for a midshipman. The pommel is an upswept eagle, small and almost dainty. The grip is spirally fluted ivory, formed to the hand, ending in a simple ribbed brass ferrule. The almost straight guard is cutout and deeply chiseled with a leaf design and is slightly reversed. The slightly curved blade is 9 3/8-inches long and 1/2 inch wide with two relatively deep central fullers extending almost to its tip. It is white-etched with generic military motifs comprised of foliage and stands of arms. The leather scabbard has three scalloped brass mounts with circular cutouts in the top two. This dirk dates from 1805-1815.

Plate 24 shows another dirk by the same British maker. It has a similar small, upswept eagle pommel and a grip of thinly reeded octagonal ivory ending in a tapered brass ferrule. Its cross guard is decorated with sprays of pierced acanthus leaves. The curved flat blade is 8 3/4-inches long, about 5/8 inch wide with a 4-inch false edge. This blade is blued over about 5 1/2-inches and is etched with gilt cross lances and kettledrums within foliage sprays. The leather scabbard

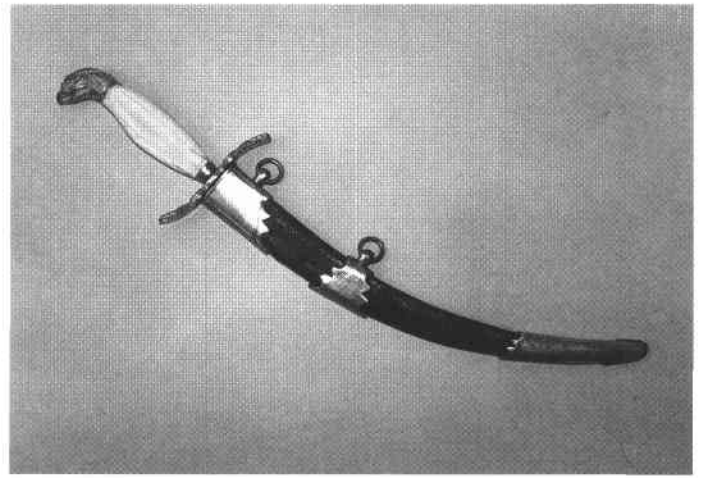


Plate 24. Another British-made dirk, same maker, c. 1805-1815. Courtesy of J. Bethune.

has three scalloped brass mounts with two carrying rings. This dirk also dates from 1805-1815.

A dirk with a distinct naval mark, an anchor on the cross guard, is shown in Plate 25. This dirk has a cross-hatched hand-fitted grip with a plain section, separated by lines above, and a simple turned brass ferrule. The chain guard is missing and the crossguard has simple reverse quillons and a center medallion with a raised anchor on it. The 16-inch long, 1 1/4-inch wide curved blade is stamped with a gilded *G* on the obverse side, signifying it was made by Gill, probably John, in Birmingham. The blade is blue and is gilded with generic motifs, including florals and stands of arms. The scabbard has three simple brass mounts with rings on the upper two. This dirk's features are similar to the eagle-pommel swords made by John Salter.<sup>23</sup> These features include the ivory grip styling, the simple brass ferrule and the posture and chasing of the eagle pommel. Use of the Gill blade is also consistent with

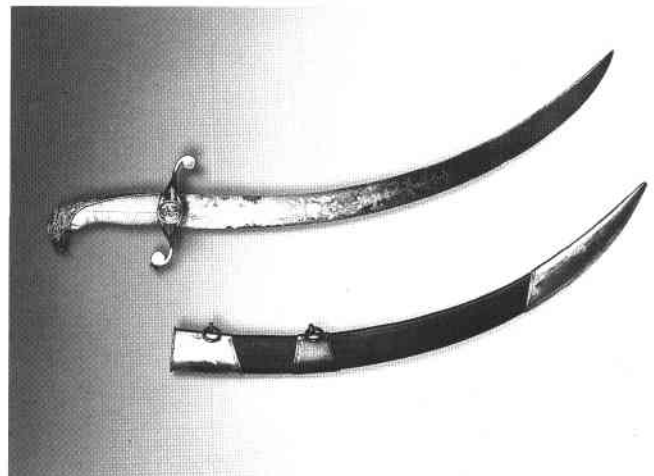


Plate 25. Slater dirk with naval motifs, c. 1815. Courtesy of S. Handelsman.

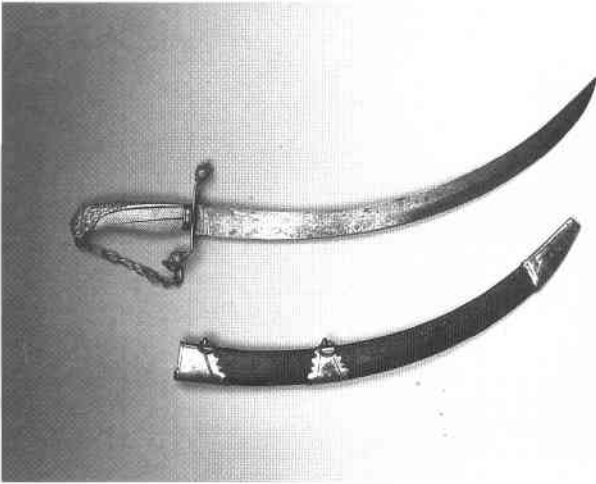


Plate 26. Dirk of William Radford, c. 1825.

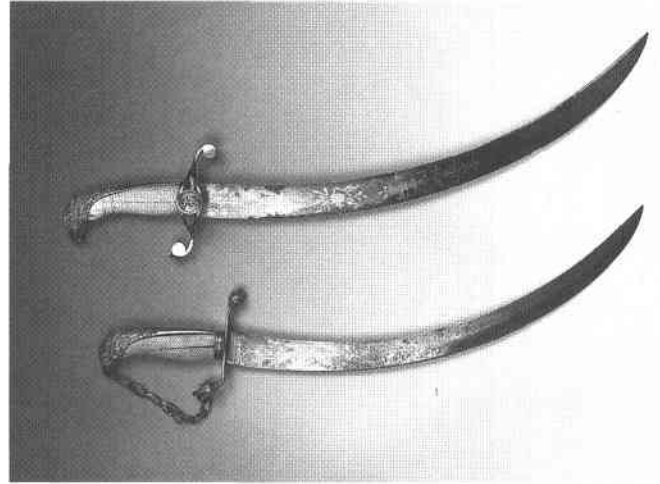


Plate 27. Comparison of Salter-like dirks.

a John Salter piece. Salter was Lord Nelson's cutler in London and was located at 35 Strand (1801-1824) and later at 73 Strand (1825-1829).<sup>24</sup> The pommel and grip styling indicate that it is early 19th century, say 1810-1820.

Dirks were next mentioned in the Uniform Regulations of 1820.<sup>25</sup> These provided that midshipmen and pursers were to wear dirks and that all other officers could carry dirks in undress. Dirks would not be mentioned again in naval uniform regulations for 50 years.

The second noteworthy naval action during this time of peace took place during the 1820s. A considerable number of merchant ships were being lost to pirates in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. In 1822, a West India squadron was created under the leadership of Commodores James Biddle, David Porter (of Civil War fame) and Lewis Warrington, and the pirates were virtually eliminated over a 10-year period. During this relatively peaceful time, dirks, like naval swords, would become more ornate and be worn exclusively for dress.

Plate 26 illustrates a dirk very similar to that in Plate 25, without naval motifs. The grip differs slightly but the eagle-head pommel and backstrap are very similar. This dirk has an unmarked blue and gilded 15-inch long, 1 1/8-inch wide curved blade. It has generic military motifs that include florals and stands of arms. The chain guard is intact and fairly elaborate and the simple crossguard has relatively large reverse quillons with acorn finials. The scabbard has three brass scalloped mounts with rings on the upper two. This dirk also has the name *Radford* in cursive letters on the reverse of the top scabbard mount. Since there were no British cutlers or U.S. makers named Radford, this indicates apparent ownership by William Radford, who was a midshipman in 1825. Radford was a very prominent naval officer with a career spanning 45 years.<sup>26</sup> Porter's book on the

Civil War shows a picture of Radford<sup>27</sup> drawn during or after the Civil War, when he had the rank of Captain and then Commodore. He retired as a rear admiral in 1870 and died 20 years later. This association with Radford dates the dirk post-1825. This dirk and the one in Plate 25 above are separated by at least a decade but are very similar. Plate 27 illustrates both dirks and, although the eagle-pommel designs differ slightly, their overall styles are almost identical. This is another indication of British cutlers making what was popular among naval officers.

Around 1820, shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, the beginnings of French influence on naval swords as well as dirks can be seen. Naval swords became increasingly ornate and brass scabbards replaced leather. Ornate brass scabbards were also adopted for dirks.

Plate 28 shows what is probably the finest-quality eagle-pommel dirk extant. Its blue and gilt slightly curved blade is 12-inches long, 1 1/8-inches wide. It has generic motifs comprised of foliage and stands of arms on both sides. The obverse



Plate 28. Fine dirk with brass scabbard, c. 1810-1820. Courtesy of USNA.

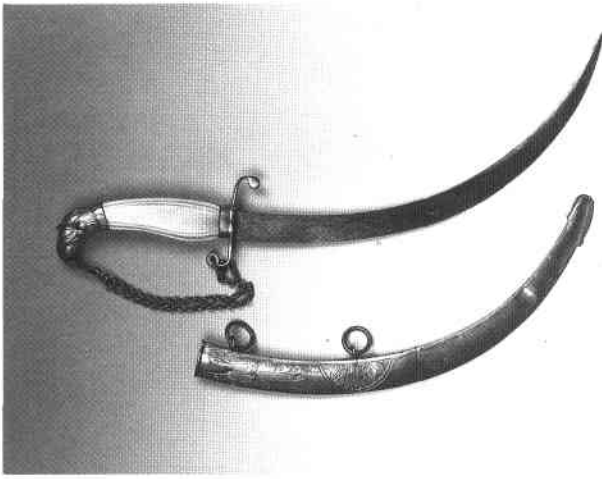


Plate 29. Imported dirk with brass scabbard, c. 1820. Courtesy of S. Handelsman.

is stamped *G* for Gill, the Birmingham, England, blade manufacturer mentioned above. The eagle pommel with capstan is of the configuration associated with Thomas Salter. The grip is hand-formed checkered ivory with plain sections at its top, a Salter trademark. The back strap is finely feathered about one-third of the way down. The guard is a triple chain and the ferule is turned brass. The ornate scalloped and cut-out cross guard is slightly reversed with double ball finials. The scabbard is solid smooth brass with several diagonal bands. The dirk includes a rare, brass dirk belt-clip with chains. The presence of the capstan dates the dirk very early, but the brass scabbard dates it around 1815–1820. This later date is consistent with it having a Gill blade and Salter-like hilt.

Plate 29 shows what is either a French or British import dirk with a brass scabbard. It has a simple reverse quillon guard with chain knucklebow and a simple ivory hand-formed grip with a rectangular cross section. The eagle pommel is exaggerated with a large beak like those on the earlier Philadelphia-style pommels. The blade is  $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch wide with significant curvature over its  $9\frac{1}{2}$ -inch length and a false edge of about  $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inches. It is blue and gilded with generic military motifs. The brass scabbard is simply engraved with floral motifs, has two upper ring mounts and ends in a drag. This dirk dates no later than 1820.

An ornate, probably British-made, dirk hilt with associated blue and gilded blade is shown in Plate 30. This dirk is

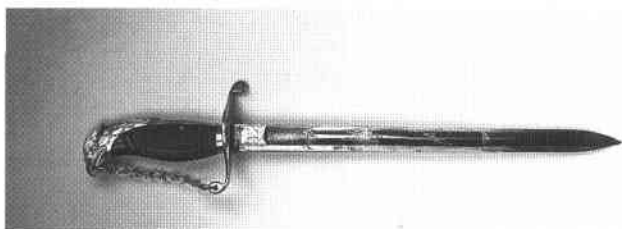


Plate 30. Ornate imported dirk with associated blade, c. 1830.

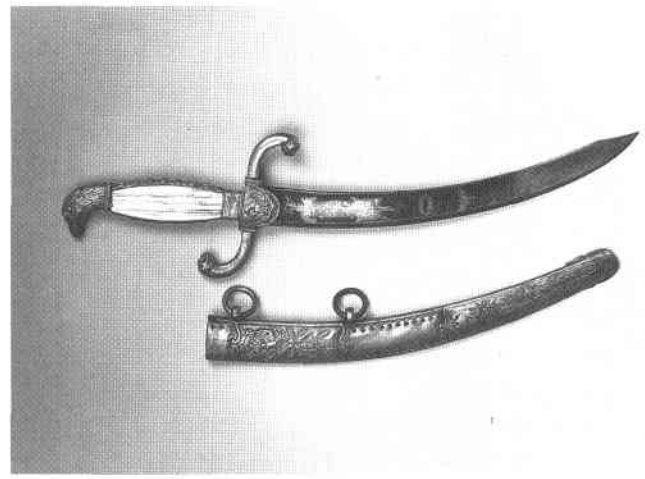


Plate 31. French-made dirk with American motifs, 1825–1835.

included because of its hilt and ornate cross guard. The crested eagle pommel is Salter-like and the back strap is feathered about halfway down. The grip is exaggerated, hand-formed, ebonized checkered ivory with a ribbed central section and the smooth top section associated with Salter. The reverse quillon is inset with a mermaid playing a lyre, its only nautical motif. The straight blue and gilded blade is a replacement not typical of what was used for a dirk. This dirk dates 1820–1830.

Two clearly French-made dirks are shown in Plates 31 and 32. They have classical French features including the reverse guard terminating in lion-head finials and the blue and gilded clip-point curved blade. All of their features are elaborate and exaggerated. The dirk in Plate 31 has a finely chiseled stylized eagle pommel with a furrow in its brow. The pearl grip has elaborately chased straps on both sides terminating in a finely chased ferrule with grape leaf designs. The obverse langet is chased with a federal eagle and shield and the reverse langet has a clamshell and floral motif. The



Plate 32. French-made dirk with naval motifs, 1825–1835. Courtesy of J. Bethune.

clamshell is a favorite French motif. The  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide,  $9\frac{1}{4}$ -inches long slightly curved blade is blue and gilded over about three-fourths of its length. It is decorated with gilded generic military motifs in the form of florals and stands of arms. The scabbard is engraved on its obverse with motifs including a federal eagle and shield within an elaborate stand of arms and a long geometric topped with a cornucopia containing flowers. Its midsection has a blank name plate bordered by florals. This dirk dates 1825–1835.

Another dirk with French characteristics and naval motifs is shown in Plate 32. The eagle pommel is cast and hand-chiseled. The grip is swelled, rectangular vertically fluted ivory ending in a tapered brass ferrule with neo-classical leaf designs. The cross guard is classic French, ending in reverse lion-head finials. Its langets have different motifs on each side, the obverse having a fouled anchor and the reverse having crossed boarding axes and a vertical pike. Unlike the somewhat noncommittal motifs on the Plate 33 dirk, this dirk was specifically made for naval use. The Damascus curved blade is  $10\frac{1}{4}$ -inches long and about 1-inch wide with a single fuller and a clipped point. It has no motifs except for the watered pattern arising from the hand forging. Its gilt brass scabbard is also adorned with naval motifs. It has a central cartouche with a raised fouled anchor and crossed halberds surrounded by foliage. The reverse is partially engraved with foliage and arrows. The plate also shows the gilt-brass suspension chains with line-like outer surfaces that once attached the dirk to a belt or belt clip. A typical suspension chain and belt clip is shown in Plate 28 above.

The U.S. Naval Department addressed the subject of swords in the Naval General Order of 1 May 1830,<sup>28</sup> which

provided “all to be yellow mounted, and with eagle heads and black leather scabbards.” It is noteworthy that this is the first mention of eagle-pommel swords, but these regulations did not mention dirks. U.S. naval forces, which peaked at a strength of 8024 men, including 524 officers, in 1814, consisted of only 4915 men, including 615 officers, in 1830.

As dirks became more ornate their popularity seemed to decline. Plate 33 shows four curved-blade dirks of varying sizes dating from about 1800 to about 1835. Each dirk represents the style of its time; the most ornate one being the latest one (see Plate 33 above).

From 1835 to 1842, the U.S. Navy, U.S. Army, and U.S. Marines fought what are referred to as the Seminole Indian wars. Actions were fought with the Seminoles in the Everglades and with the Creeks in southern Alabama and Georgia. These riverine actions involved the use of small steamers on rivers and shallow draft boats in swamps. U.S. Navy strength at the beginning of these actions was about 750 officers and increased to about 1000 officers in 1842.

In 1816, a German emigrant, Frederick W. Widmann, arrived in Philadelphia.<sup>29</sup> He probably worked in that area in his trade, but he is not listed in the city directories until 1828 when he is listed as a sword mounter and die sinker. To collectors he is known as the designer of some of the most fanciful eagle-pommel swords of the period. He designed and made hilts and mounted them on imported blades. He advertised himself as an ornamental sword maker and much has been written about his work. Aside from his distinctive eagle-pommel styles, he marked most of his work on the hilt, scabbard and occasionally on the blade. Fortunately, he also made some dirks; two of his three known dirks are discussed below.

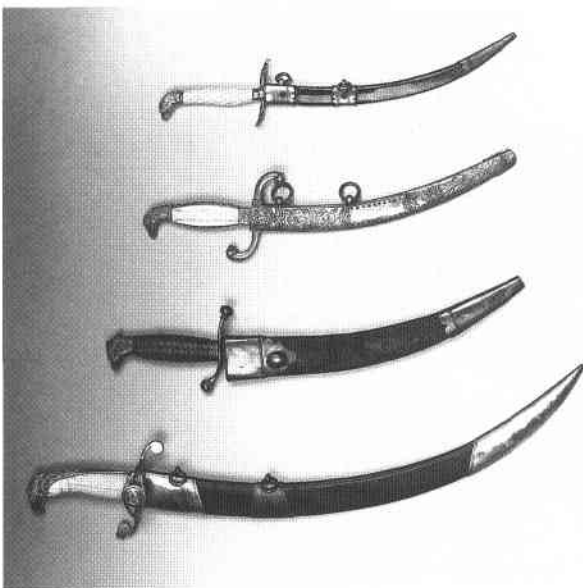


Plate 33. Four dirk styles from 1800 to 1835.

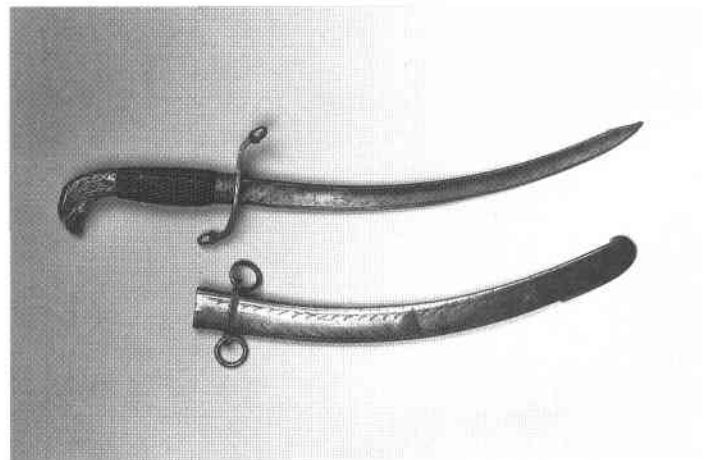


Plate 34. Curved-blade dirk by Frederick Widmann, c. 1835. Courtesy of S. Handelsman.

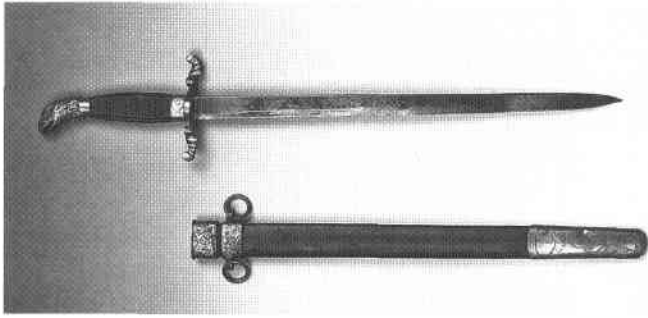


Plate 35. Artillery officer's dirk by Frederick Widmann, c. 1840.

Plate 34 illustrates a Widmann curved-bladed dirk. It has many of the stylistic features attributed to Widmann: the distinctive eagle pommel, the use of grape-leaf motifs on the ferrule and a finely engraved scabbard. This dirk has a 9-inch long,  $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch wide slightly curved blade with a clipped point. It is lightly etched in gold with generic military stands of arms and florals. The obverse blade has the *W* Widmann mark that was used on some sword blades. The eagle pommel is of a type described by Mowbray as Type VI.<sup>30</sup> It has a checkered ebony grip with ribbed sides ending in a wide ferrule engraved with grape leaves, another Widmann trademark. The simple reverse guard ends in acorn finials. The brass scabbard is finely engraved with a simple geometric and has a single finely engraved mount with double rings. The author believes that the scabbard once had a similar top mount as the one shown in the Widmann dirk shown in Plate 35, below. If the Widmann eagle-pommel style is used to date this dirk, it dates to 1835–1840.

Another very different Widmann dirk is shown in Plate 35. This dirk is illustrated in Mowbray's book,<sup>31</sup> where he describes it as being made for a militia artillery officer c. 1835. The dirk therefore probably has no naval connection. The uplifted Widmann eagle pommel is unique to this dirk and is not seen on any of Widmann's swords. The ebony ribbed grip is identical to that of the Widmann dirk in Plate 35 and it also terminates in a grape-leaf-motif ferrule. The

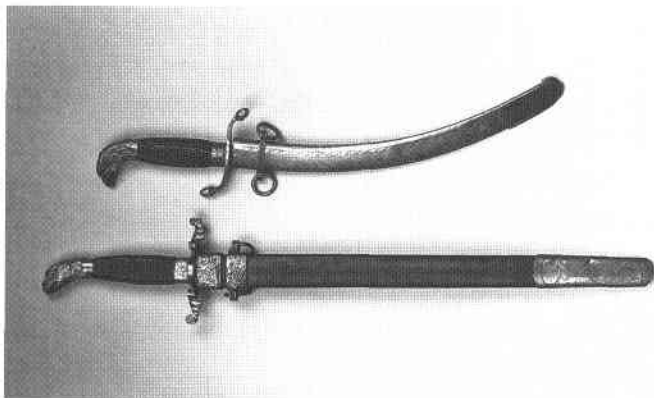


Plate 36. Comparison of Widmann dirks.

guard is rather elaborate, which is consistent with Widmann's stylistic bent. The blade is straight,  $13\frac{3}{4}$ -inches long with a  $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch false edge. It is blue and gilded up to the false edge with floral motifs. The obverse blade is gold etched with *F.W./Widmann/Philadelphia*. The scabbard is japanned metal with two brass mounts and an engraved drag. The top and middle mounts are decorated with grape-leaf motifs and the drag is finely engraved with geometrics. The bottom mount engraving style is identical to that on the other Widmann dirk scabbard. Plate 36 illustrates both Widmann dirks. Even though they were probably made at different stages of Widmann's production, note the similarities in the grips and the scabbard mountings.

When Widmann died in 1848, the era of dirks had passed. His widow sold his holdings, consisting of designs and equipment, to Horstmann, who continued to make Widmann-like eagle-pommel swords, but there are no indications of any Horstmann-made dirks.

#### THE MEXICAN WAR THROUGH THE 20TH CENTURY

The U.S. Navy expanded during the Mexican War to about 1140 officers and again during the Civil War to about 6500 officers, but there is no evidence that naval officers or midshipmen wore dirks during this period. Their use as ornamental weapons for dress occasions apparently lost favor before the Mexican War ended in 1848.

After an absence of more than 20 years, dirks are once again not only mentioned but also prescribed with a pattern in the U.S. Navy's uniform regulations of 1869.<sup>32</sup> Under the requirements for swords, these regulations provide that "Midshipmen, may wear, on boat duty, a dirk, as per pattern." The pattern that accompanied these regulations is shown in Plate 37. An example of the pattern dirk, which belonged to Midshipman (later Admiral) Thomas B. Howard, who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, class of 1873,<sup>33</sup> is shown in Plate 38. This dirk has an eagle pommel looking up, like the Widmann artillery dirk, with a gilded-wire-wrapped fish-skin grip and a simple straight guard engraved with anchors and florals. The diamond-shaped blade is 11-inches long,  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inches wide. The scabbard is leather

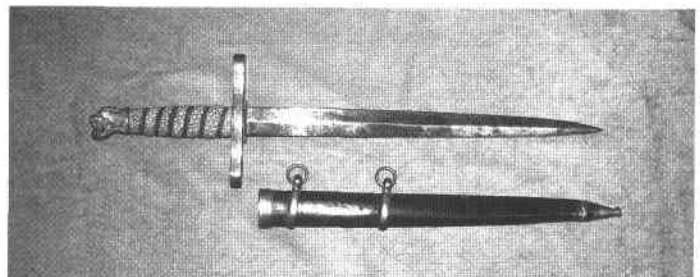


Plate 37. 1869 regulation pattern for midshipman's dirk.

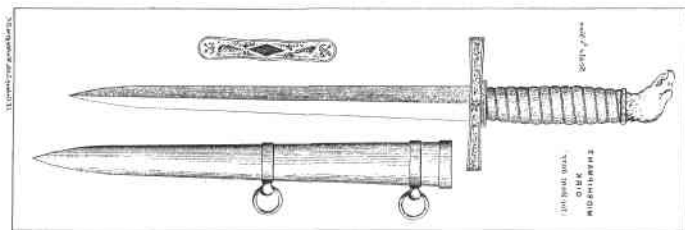


Plate 38. 1869 regulation-pattern dirk of Admiral Howard. Courtesy of USNA.

with two simple brass ring mounts, differing from the pattern, which appears to be brass. The features of this pattern naval dirk bear little resemblance to its predecessors except for its having an eagle pommel. The obverse blade is marked *Joseph/Starkey/Conduit/-St.-/London*. Starkey was a London supplier of military goods from 1835 to 1969.<sup>34</sup> The firm was located at Conduit St. from 1859 to 1918. His name also appears on Civil War-period naval swords and buttons.

The last dirk to be discussed is one made in 1905–1910. This example is the last known American naval dirk and it is shown in Plate 39. Although very elaborate and ornate, it differs markedly from the 1869 pattern. Its styling is similar to that of the Imperial German dirks and daggers made in the early 1900s. The screaming eagle pommel and simulated ivory fingered grip are almost identical to those on the presentation-grade U.S. Army 1902 pattern sword for all officers. The back strap is feathered about one-third down and the gilded brass ferrule is chased with an oak-leaf-and-acorn motif. The straight cross guard has insets with *USN* (obverse) and a fouled anchor (reverse) on a stippled background and follows the Germanic style. The 13½-inch long, ¾-inch wide straight double-edged blade is bright etched and frosted over about 9½-inches. The etchings consist of most of the popular naval motifs found on naval sword blades dating from the early 1830s. The obverse shows a fouled anchor with a shield, an American eagle with an *e pluribus Unum* banner topped with 13 stars and a stand of arms topped with a banner reading *USN*. The reverse shows an eagle atop a cannon with sunburst above, another fouled anchor, *USN* within a ribband along the blade and oak leaf and acorn foliage within a line. The obverse is stamped *Germany* across the blade and the

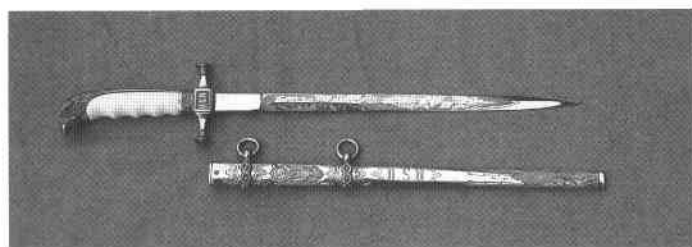


Plate 39. Early 20th century naval dirk, c. 1900–1910. Courtesy of J. Marino.

reverse is etched *Henry V. Allien & Co./New-York*. Allien was the successor to the New York branch of Horstmann. Henry Allien joined Horstmann in 1850 and the firm name was changed to Horstmann Bros. & Allien in 1852. On 31 December 1876, the firm became H.V. Allien & Co. and remained in the military goods business through 1948.<sup>35</sup> The brass scabbard is as elaborate as the dirk. It is engraved on both sides with motifs including an American eagle with shield, *USN* along its length and geometrics and foliage. It also has the distinctive thunderbolts used on German dirks and daggers of the period. Since dirks and daggers were the fashion in Germany during this period, this ornamental, distinctly American dirk was probably owned by a naval attaché to the American embassy in Germany.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this monograph, the author presented a representative sampling of dirks with eagle pommels. Twenty-seven eagle-pommel dirks are illustrated and examined, but few are marked, are specifically identifiable as American or have definitive naval motifs. Yet, the author believes that those shown are truly representative and that most of these dirks were used by American naval officers or midshipmen.

Despite the absence of marks or motifs, some conclusions can be drawn. First, many of the eagle heads shown are without explicit American motifs. Even though the United States adopted the eagle as its national symbol in 1782, eagle-head pommel swords were used by both American and British army and navy officers before and after this date. The dirk in Plate 22 was included to illustrate that British naval officers were using eagle-pommel dirks through the early 1800s. If it were not for its blade motifs, this dirk could, and would, be considered American by the collecting community solely because of its eagle pommel.

Second, many of the blades are either plain or decorated with generic motifs. The use of generic motifs enabled the cutler to use the same blade for any nationality of officer in any service who was willing to purchase the dirk. Thus the blade motifs themselves, unless they are specifically American, such as the eagle in the Plate 4 Thurkle dirk, or naval, such as the anchor on the silver-grip dirk in Plate 9, are merely the cutler's way of enlarging his market for a blade.

Third, a dirk with a plain blade is probably American-made. Three such dirks are shown in Plates 12, 15 and 21. Two of these dirks are identifiable as American-made and the third unmarked dirk in Plate 21 is probably American made. All three have curved blades that are well-suited for fighting. Thus, the conclusion could also be drawn that eagle-pommel dirks with plain curved blades are American fighting dirks. Does this mean that blue and gilded curved blades were not considered

suitable for fighting? This doesn't necessarily follow because bluing and gilding was just another means used by British cutlers to increase their sales. The large number of surviving dirks with once blue- and gilded blades demonstrates the success of these blades. The author suggests that blade configuration dictates functional use, not the presence or absence of bluing and gilding. The once blue- and gilded blades on the dirks in Plates 17 and 20 seem to support this conclusion.

Generally, the use of brass fittings indicates naval service, but many of the dirks discussed have no naval motifs. It is usually assumed that dirks with brass fittings were made for naval use and those that are silver-mounted are presumed to have been worn by other service officers. There are exceptions to both of these general rules. The Widmann dirk in Plate 35 is brass-mounted but attributed to an artillery officer and the silver-grip dirk in Plate 9 has an anchor on the blade. The author also owns a silver-mounted pillow-pommel dirk with both American and naval motifs—another exception to these premises.

Much of the information used for this discussion was obtained from British and American sources on swords. There are few source materials on dirks and there were few American makers or suppliers of these weapons during the period of their popularity. It is not surprising then that only four of the dirks discussed can be positively attributed to American blade or hilt makers: the Rose (see Plate 12), the Hutton (see Plate 15) and the two Widmanns (see Plate 36). Apparently, either American tradesman could not match the quality or price of British and later French-made dirks, or the relatively small market for essentially custom-made dirks did not interest them.

As noted, there are exceptions to each of the author's conclusions. Readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions from the illustrations and information presented, other sources like those listed in the bibliography and their personal knowledge. One of the delights of dirk collecting is that there is very little information available and every time you think you have an answer, something contradictory appears.

#### NOTES

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