

The Other Side of Ames Sword Company

By Don Silvey

As antique arms collectors build their collection, they assemble examples of all the variants and study diligently to learn about the technology in their collection. Whether the areas of interest are tanks, guns, swords, bayonets, knives or uniforms, they accumulate not only the arms, but also reference books and volumes of research. Their families enjoy learning about the details and living with the displays.

Researching Ames Manufacturing Company, my favorite manufacturer of guns, I learned they also made other tools and brought new technology to this country, managing to control its use for decades.

As an Ames sword collector (Figure 1) smitten with the story told by John Hamilton in his wonderful book, I drooled over the pictures of each and every example of the sword-makers art. When I noticed the tools, the pictures of beautiful silver dishes, statues, bronze doors, cannons and bicycles, I began searching for items other than swords. Then disaster hit. I began finding Ames silver, tools, fishing poles, advertising castings, locks and knives (Figures 2 and 3). When I found a spoon marked N.P. Ames and realized I had never seen one pictured in a book, I felt like planting a flag and declaring the new country as mine. Then I found a gilded silver basket marked Ames Manufacturing Co. and realized the color of the gilding on the basket and the spoon are the same (Figure 4). Now I was motivated to document that the two were manufactured between 1840 and 1847.

The ability to expand from manufactured items to advertising, salesman's samples, display and presentation awards (Figure 5) kept me intrigued. There are many ways to discover a new collection: gun shows, favorite dealers, friends who search for the perfect present, the internet, EBay and the next issue of *Man at Arms*.



Figure 1. Selection of Militia Staff Officers Swords, eight N.P. Ames or Ames Manufacturing Company and one Horstmann.



Figure 2. N.P. Ames tools including screw drivers, chisels and knives.



Figure 3. Ames Manufacturing Company hammer, drill, knife, street sign and advertising brush.



Figure 4. Ames silver plated tray, butter dish, gilded silver basket with silver plated and gilded eagle pommel Ames swords.



Figure 7. Eagle foot on an Ames cruet set.



Figure 5. Political plaques of Cleveland, Blaine and Hendricks by Ames Sword Company and cast busts of Generals Grant and Butler.

Once I found the first piece of Ames silver plate, my research uncovered a limited amount of documentation on the subject of bringing electroplating technology to America. The first item I found was the gilded spoon marked N.P. Ames (Figure 6). Next was a coin silver serving spoon marked Ames Manufacturing Co. followed by the cruet set



Figure 6. Small gilded spoon marked N.P. Ames.

with feet of eagles straight from the 1840's sword guards (Figure 7). I was hooked.

A one-page ad (Figure 8) from the 1876 *Asber & Adams Railroad Atlas* found on EBay detailed the story of Ames technological progress. The ad documents the accomplishments of Ames bringing electroplating to America (1839), manufacturing lathes (1849), 100-500 horsepower



Figure 8. 1876 Ames Manufacturing Company ad in the *Asber & Adams Railroad Atlas*.



Figure 9. Wine cooler, cruet set and oyster server by Ames Manufacturing Company with an 1840's silver-plated Mexican naval sword by N.P. Ames. Note the eagle wings and the similarity to modern US Air Force wings.

Boyden Water Wheel Turbines (1849) and bronze statuary casting (1853).

Production of silver plate by Ames Manufacturing continued until 1883 when the silver plating operations were sold. The innovation used by Ames to make swords, scabbards, sets, silver bride's baskets, buckets, pitchers and silver trays (Figures 9 and 10) can be compared to innovative benefits of the space program: calculators, computers and micro-technology. The transition in markings opens a whole new area of research to assist in dating items from this period.

The story of Nathan Ames making edged tools is set in the heart of American history. Knives provide distinct areas of collecting: skinning, kitchen use and hunting. Tools such as a simple screw driver show the workmanship and pride of the people who worked in that time. They proudly displayed their products for competition. Nathan Ames Jr. won the Silver Medal for Edged Tools in 1837.

In 1893, Ames opened a manufacturing facility in Chicago. Items from that facility are limited. During the 1893 Columbian Exposition World's Fair in Chicago, Ames distributed small booklets to guide customers through the Fair. Guards for the Fair carried swords with sword belts and buckles by Ames. In my observation, most of the swords carrying the Chicago mark have been 1872 cavalry officers, GAR and fraternal. Ultimately, the Chicago operation was sold to Henderson, changing the company's name to Henderson-Ames.

I have been blessed with a wife who allows me to display these pieces of history as part of our daily life; however, I am tempted to move into new territory to test our marital bliss. There is an attorney whose wife physically blocked the door to prevent a cannon from being brought into her home. She now not only supports her husband's collections, she also accompanies him to meet with other collectors in the "Society". She has resisted my requests for assistance in convincing my wife that I need a cannon to cover the area of bronze casting in my collection. If you are blessed with a spouse who is also addicted to modern collecting, you should be granted additional tax deductions and

required to say additional prayers of thanks daily while working overtime to pay for your acquisitions. I have had the honor of visiting a home where both husband and wife were collectors. The lady of the house not only knew her Kentucky rifles, swords and uniforms; she was much better looking than her spouse.

Displaying my collection can be problematic: furniture more than 8 feet tall (Figure 11) creates space planning problems and decorating with Ames silver items can be hazardous with grandchildren—shiny items do draw attention. But there is hope, not only for the collector but also for future family heirlooms. Our family has another generation interested in swords, as well as guns and decoys (Figure 12).



Figure 10. Ames silver plated cruet set, wine cooler oyster basket and unplated cruet set.



Figure 11. Ames Sword Company display cabinet with Ames swords. Left display case: Ames 1840 Medical Staff, 1840 Pay Department, 1840 Storekeepers and 1832 Medical Staff; Center display case: Louisiana Militia Sword, 1860 Presentation Cavalry Sword, 1850 Presentation Foot Officers Sword, 1840 Cavalry Officers sword with 1840 Officers blade, 1840 Artillery Officers Sword, 1832 Nashua Artillery Sword, 1840 Militia Staff Sword; Right display case: Non-regulation Naval sword, 1852 Naval Sword, 1840 Navy Sword, 1837 Revenue Cutter Service Sword, 1872 Revenue Cutter Sword, 1860 Officers Cutlass.



Figure 12. The next generation is learning both naval cutlass history and cavalry saber appreciation.