

# COMMODORE HULL'S PRESENTATION SWORD

by Ken Thomsen



In the ASAC Bulletin 122, published in the fall of 2020, I reported on the dueling pistols presented to Commodore Hull by the State of Connecticut (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> They were ordered in recognition of his engaging, capturing and sinking the British Frigate *HMS Guerriere*<sup>1</sup> on April 19, 1812. This engagement took place at the beginning of the War of 1812. The morale boost and political sig-

nificance of this action to a fledgling nation was enormous. The London Times reported *"he must be a weak politician who does not see how important the first triumph is in giving a tone and character to the war. Never before in the history of the world did an English frigate strike to an American."*<sup>2</sup>

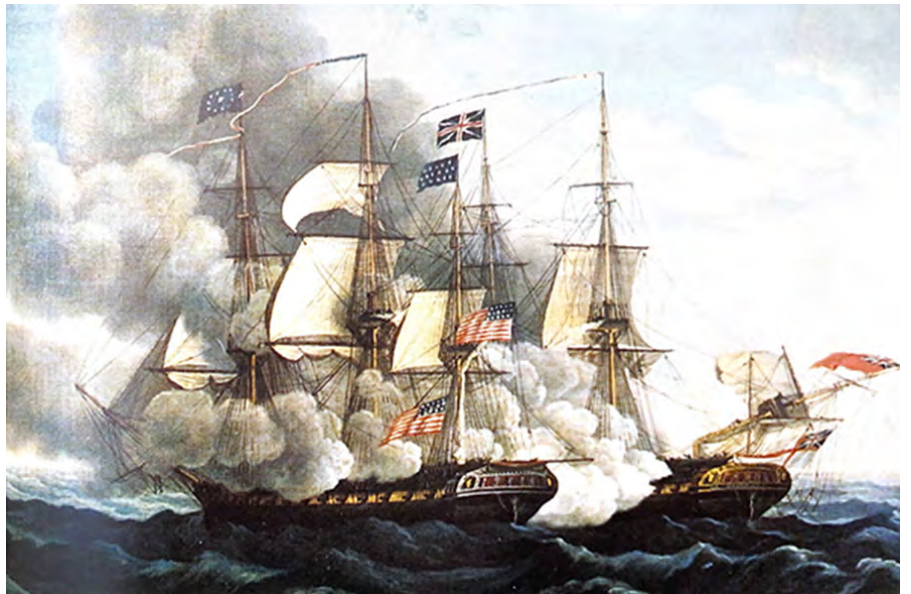


Figure 1. Captain Isaac Hull (1773-1843) by Orlando S. Lagman. US Navy, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (top left). *USS Constitution vs. HMS Guerriere*, by Michele Felice Corne (1752-1845), Wikimedia.org, public domain (top right). Presentation pair of North pistols for Captain Isaac Hull (bottom).<sup>1</sup>

Governor Walcott of Connecticut penned the following letter to Nathan Starr of Middletown, Connecticut which read in part: *“The General Assembly of the State of Connecticut has assigned me the pleasing duty, of preparing honorary tokens expressive of the sense which is entertained by his fellow citizens, of the virtues, gallantry, and naval skill of Commodore Isaac Hull. These tokens are to consist of an elegant sword, and pair of pistols, both mounted in gold, with suitable inscriptions, and manufactured in this State.”*<sup>3</sup> This letter was also sent to Eli Whitney in New Haven and Simeon North in Middletown. Ultimately North was chosen to fabricate the pistols and Starr the sword.

Nathan Starr’s ancestors had emigrated from England in 1638 and settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the 1670s a branch of the Starr family settled in Middletown, Connecticut. Nathan was

born there on April 14, 1755. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed to a blacksmith. During the revolutionary war he served in several volunteer companies. On July 5, 1776 Starr was appointed an armorer in Colonel Sage’s regiment of Connecticut militia, which was in the Second Battalion of Wadsworth’s Brigade.<sup>4</sup> Ledgers in the Connecticut State Library indicate that Starr was engaged in doing armorers work for the state. Notes there indicate he was paid on December 9, 1777 for smith work. He received his discharge in 1779 at age 24. Following discharge Nathan set up a shop in Hartford where he worked for about six years manufacturing and selling scythes. Ads in the Middlesex Gazette in the 1780s and 90s indicate the industrious Starr produced and sold a variety of items, including steel shod sleighs, scythes (single or by the dozen), nails of all kinds, Nova Scotia grinding stones, share molds, hardware of all kinds and iron by the pound or ton.



Nathan married Polly Pomeroy on July 5, 1781. They had four children one of whom, Nathan Jr., would join his father in arms manufacturing. Nathan's grandson, Elihu William Nathan Starr (EWN) would continue the arms manufacture and another grandson, Ebenezer Townsend Starr, would patent and manufacturer arms in Yonkers, New York.<sup>5</sup>

Nathan Starr Jr. was 14 when the senior Starr was awarded his first U.S. government military contract. The year was 1798, Nathan's contract called for 2,000 cavalry sabers with leather covered wood grips wound with brass wire; embossed leather scabbard with iron throat and tail; and a white leather belt (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> His background in scythe manufacturing had encouraged him to apply for the contract. In view of the urgent need for these weapons, Starr involved a number of local craftsman, whose work he was familiar with, and respected, as subcontractors to produce various parts of the sabers.

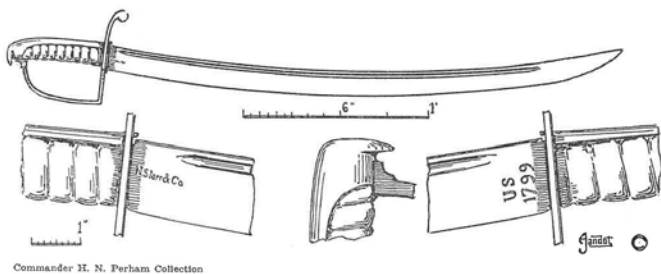


Figure 2. Star Model 1798 cavalry sword.<sup>6</sup>

For a brief period Starr and Co. was a partnership comprised of Francis Sage, William Worner and Starr. They had perfected a method of welding steel (cast type) to iron to provide a better cutting edge for tools.<sup>6</sup> They parted ways by 1804. All of the 1798 cavalry swords carry the date 1799 and are stamped N. Starr & Co. The contract consisting of swords, scabbards and belts was completed in 1802. Following this contract, the company name would become N. Starr. With the 1798 contract delivered, Starr would become the prime government contractor for swords, cutlasses, sabers and pikes for the next 23 years.

Since the power for most shops and mills in New England was provided by waterwheels, a reliable source of water was a major criteria for successful manufacturing. Nathan had moved his shop from Hartford to Pine Brook in Middle Haddam, Connecticut in 1799 where he continued making scythes and axes. Another item Starr manufactured in Middle Haddam was fire engines. Many entries in Starr's logs note materials bought, wages paid and sale of the engines to nearby towns, but no detailed descriptions are available. It is known from other sources that fire engines at the time were wooden tanks, mounted on wheels, which were kept filled

with water by bucket brigade lines from a water source. A system of pistons operating in cylinders was actuated by hand and forced the pressurized water through the hose and nozzle.<sup>5</sup>

As the need for a larger factory arose Starr decided to purchase land on the West River in the Stadel Hill section of Middletown. This site would provide the necessary water volume for his permanent factory. Here in 1801, he had a dam built along with mill buildings and homes for his workers. The main factory building was 81 feet x 33 feet in an L shape, with an extension of 35 feet. The foundation was built of brownstone quarried on the south side of the mill pond. The wooden building was three stories high, which was unusual in that most mills of the time were only one story in height.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent to France's defeat at the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, the British Navy had become the undisputable global power at sea. They were stopping U.S. vessels with impunity, impressing the crews and capturing or destroying the vessels. The loss of U.S. merchant shipping had reached an intolerable level by 1807. "From 1805 thru 1807, 469 ships, or approximately half of the merchant fleet, fell into British hands".<sup>7</sup> The small U.S. Navy had been augmenting its fleet with coastal gunboats, primarily designed to protect near coastal waters.

Isaac Hull's father had been appointed agent in charge of small arms for the Navy. In that capacity he approached Starr in 1808 and signed a contract for 2000 cutlasses and 2000 boarding pikes (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> The government had requested the badly needed arms in 100 working days. Starr miraculously delivered the entire order in 76 days, 24 days shorter than requested. The last of these was inspected by none other than Isaac Hull, who issued them for service immediately.

In 1812 Starr received a contract for 5000 horseman's sabers (Figure 4). That contract was followed by many contracts for cavalry sabers, horseman sabers, pikes, dirks, bayonets officers' swords and noncommissioned officers' swords over the next 14 years.

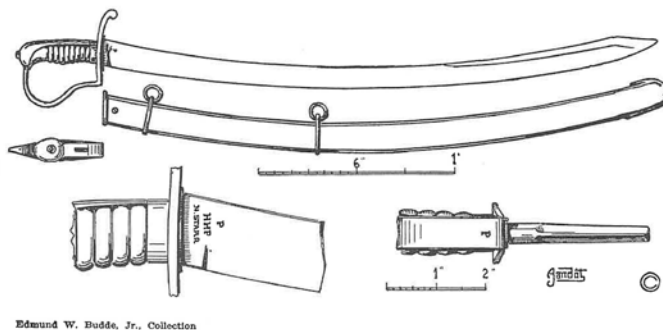


Figure 4. Star Model 1812 cavalry saber.<sup>9</sup>

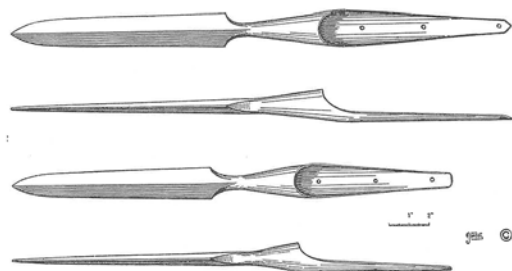
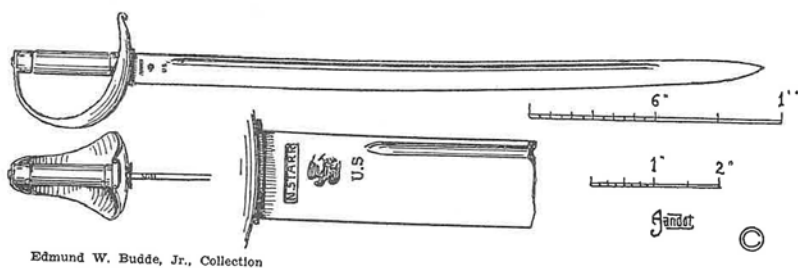


Figure 3. Star Model 1808 naval cutlass and Model 1808 boarding pike.<sup>8</sup>

By the time Nathan Starr had been given the opportunity to create the presentation sword for Isaac Hull he had established himself as a respected sword maker. He had not however, been called upon to make a presentation sword, yet alone, one as elaborate as that expected by the Connecticut Legislature. He obviously considered this a personal challenge as he is quoted with saying “I determined that no man but a native of Connecticut should have anything whatsoever to do with making this sword”.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the commission for the sword had been awarded in 1817 it appears that by 1819 the government was getting anxious for its delivery. A letter dated August 16, 1819 written on behalf of the governor reads in part. “A period of nearly 2 years has elapsed since the resolution was passed, and the governor is very desirous that its execution should be no longer delayed. And you will much obliged him, by informing him of the progress which has been made in the manufacture of the articles to be presented, and when it may be expected they will be finished.”<sup>11</sup> This letter also mentioned that similar tokens were being considered for Commodore Macdonough. McDonough was also a War of 1812 hero that was credited with defeating the British Fleet in the battle of Lake Champlain. This letter must have instilled a sense of urgency in Starr, it appears that shortly after this letter Starr was looking for an engraver.

According to an interview with Miss Ada Aston in 1941, Henry Hungerford Aston came to the United States with his father on the ship Amy in 1819.<sup>12</sup> Joseph Aston came to the United States with the idea of investing in real estate, but according to Miss Aston, when he saw rail fences and pigsties within a mile of the battery in New York City he was disgusted and vowed to return to London. While waiting in New York for passage to London the Astons were introduced to Nathan Starr. Starr was in New York with the explicit purpose of looking for an engraver for the sword he was making for the State of Connecticut to be presented to Commodore Isaac Hull. Joseph Aston had been an engraver and gunsmith in London.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, Starr was able to convince Joseph and his young son Henry to come to Middletown to work for him. They would both become permanent residents and work as gunsmiths there. Both Joseph and Henry would also find employment with Simeon North.

The sword was completed and paid for on May 29, 1820 at a cost to the State of Connecticut of \$1,000.00 (Figure 5 and 6). The profit to Starr was not huge; but the notoriety he gained from this magnificent work was immense. The pride and prestige he gleaned from being able to claim as he did, “every part and parcel made in my factory”.<sup>13</sup>

On June 6, 1820 the following description was published in the New Haven Herald, the following day it was published state wide:

*“Elegant Specimens — We have seen the sword and pistols. Which, arguably to a resolve of the legislature of the state, are to be presented to our gallant countryman, Commodore Isaac Hull, as testimonials of the high respect which the citizens of his native state entertain for his valor and accomplishments as a naval officer. The workmanship of these weapons reflects credit not only on the ingenious artist who made them, but in the country in which they were produced. — They are the most elegant specimens of domestic manufacture, that we ever saw. The scabbard and handle of the sword are of pure gold, beautifully wrought with appropriate devices.”* The article includes the following description of the blade – “The blade is a cut and thrust of the modern plan, and is pronounced by those who are judges, to be as well tempered as the best Toledos. The sword was manufactured by Mr. Nathan Starr, and the pistols by Mr. North, both of Middletown, Connecticut. The amount of each bill was \$1000. We have not heard when they will be presented.”<sup>14</sup>

Nathan Starr Sr. passed away on July 29, 1821. Nathan Jr. would continue the business with the help of his son Elihu (EWN). In the years to come they would receive many government and private contracts for swords, pikes, and firearms. There would also be an ongoing demand for presentation swords. With the magnificent Hull Sword to their credit, they had established themselves as master sword makers.

With the sinking of the *HMS Guerriere* Isaac Hull had become a celebrity. There were celebrations for him, dinners in his honor and gold and silver gifts of all manner. On January 29, 1813 he was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal. Silver ones were awarded to his commissioned officers. The following years would see Hull in command, at one time or another of the Boston, Massachusetts, Portsmouth, Maine and Washington Navy Yards. In 1838, while under command of the *USS Ohio*, he took responsibility for the Mediterranean Station. He left Gibraltar Bay on the *USS Ohio* on June 5, 1841 - and returned to Boston on the 17th of July 1841. On July 27 Hull took down his ship flag for the last time. After a long leave and subsequent illness, Hull passed away a year and a half later, at age 69, a National Hero.



Figure 5. Presentation sword presented to Isaac Hull in honor of the victory of the USS Constitution over the HMS Guerriere, Courtesy of the USS Constitution Museum. Photo by David Bohl.





Figure 6. Details of the Hull presentation sword produced by Star. Courtesy of the USS Constitution Museum. Photo by David Bohl.

## References

- Martin, Tyrone G., *A Most Fortunate Ship*. Naval Institute Press, 2003  
 Toll, Ian W., *The Six Frigates*, W. W. Norton and Co., 2006  
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## Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the *USS Constitution Museum*. To Kate Monea, manager of Cultural Affairs. I express my gratitude making access to the photographs of David Bohl possible. I wish to extend a special acknowledgement to the owner of the sword for granting permission for access and for his valuable input in understanding its history and chain of ownership. Also, a special thanks to Jesse Nasta, PhD. Of the Middlesex Historical Society for allowing me access to their archives. Thanks to Bernadette Prue for making her father's work and notes available to me.

**Note:** The pair of pistols in Figure 1 was selected to be presented with the fifth National Treasure Award by the Awards Committee of the NRA in 2020 at the Baltimore Antique Arms Show. Due to cancellation of the show, we believe the ceremony will take place at the 2020 show. We hope to have the sword there as well.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomsen, Ken, "Presentation pair of North pistols for Captain Isaac Hull." *Bulletin of the American Society of Arms Collectors* 122:50-57.
- <sup>2</sup> *The London Times*, August 1812
- <sup>3</sup> North, S. N. D. and North, Ralph. *Simeon North, First Official Pistol Maker of the United States*, Rumford press, p. 194.
- <sup>4</sup> Hicks, James E. *Nathan Starr (the First Official Sword Maker) U.S. Sword and Arms Maker*. James E. Hicks, Mt. Vernon, NY. 1940. p. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Prue, Bernard P. and Prue, Bernadette S. *Nathan Starr Arms*. Higginson Book Company, Salem, MA. 1999. p. 12.
- <sup>6</sup> Hicks, *Op Cit.* p. 19, Illustration by Andre Jandot
- <sup>7</sup> Mariners Museum, *Jefferson's Gunboat Navy, 1805-1812*
- <sup>8</sup> Hicks, *Op Cit.* p. 25 Illustration by Andre Jandot
- <sup>9</sup> Hicks, *Op Cit.* p. 31 Illustration by Andre Jandot
- <sup>10</sup> Diana Ross McCain, Correspondent, Hartford Courant; Report on exhibit "Rum, Rubber and Rat Traps", Middlesex Historical Society, Middletown, CT. 1998.
- <sup>11</sup> North, S.N.D. and North, Ralph: *Simeon North, the First Official Pistol Maker, Pp196*, Rumford Press, 1913.
- <sup>12</sup> Unpublished work of Lewis Southard, ASAC member, files of Middlesex Historical Society, Middletown, CT.
- <sup>13</sup> Diana Ross McCain, Correspondent, Hartford Courant: Report on exhibit "Rum, Rubber and Rat Traps", Middlesex Historical Society, Middletown, CT. 1998.
- <sup>14</sup> *The New Haven Herald*, June 6, 1820

