



LIBERTAS AMERICANA SABER

U.S. Presentation-grade saber: Benjamin Franklin Commemorative American Revolutionary War saber with scabbard (circa 1783-1790)

By Chris Grazzini



Figure 1. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, circa 1779 (Boston Public Library).



Benjamin Franklin (Figure 1) was the United States Minister to France during the American Revolution. He served in this position from March 23, 1779 until May 17, 1785. He worked tirelessly to strengthen the relationship between France and the United States.

Franklin often presented gifts to many prominent French officials to gain favor and to help secure French military support for the American Revolution, which would prove to be decisive as America sought its independence from Great Britain. He also purchased swords in France at the request of Congress to present to prominent American officers.

Before the Bald Eagle became the symbol of America, Benjamin Franklin commissioned what is referred to as the “Libertas Americana” image to symbolize the new nation of the United States emerging to power. To celebrate and further cement the alliance of France and the United States, Franklin wanted to produce a medal to commemorate France’s role in the American Revolution. Franklin sought the help of Alexandre-Theodore Brongniart, to find an artist worthy of this endeavor. Brongniart obtained preliminary sketches in 1782 from two French artists, Augustin Dupre and Esprit-Antoine Gibelin. Figure 2 is a drawing from Gibelin which depicts America as an infant Hercules wearing a headband with the Roman numeral XIII (13) to represent the 13 States. The infant is strangling two serpents representing the armies of Bur-

goyne and Cornwallis. France is represented by Minerva, clad in breastplate, helmet, and shield, is protecting the child from England, which is represented by a lion. The Latin inscription translates as ‘The courageous child was aided by the gods.’¹

The dates below the image correspond to the two key American victories. The date of 17 Oct 1777 represents the American victory over General Burgoyne at the Battle of Saratoga, New York (Figure 3). The date of 19 Oct 1781 is the date of the American and French victory over Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown, Virginia (Figure 4)¹.

LIBERTAS AMERICANA MEDAL

Benjamin Franklin commissioned the French artist, Augustin Dupre, in 1782 to produce a medal (Figures 5 and 6) based upon the drawing by Esprit-Antoine Gibelin (Figure 2), to commemorate France’s role in the American Revolution. Dupre engraved the dies for the medal in 1782 and the medals were produced at the Paris Mint in 1783. Figures 5 and 6 depict both the obverse and reverse of an original 1783 medal².

Franklin used gifts such as the “Libertas Americana” Medal to help secure French military support for the American Revolution. Franklin had gold medals struck with this design and presented to the King and Queen of France and had silver versions presented to prominent Americans including members of Congress.

Non-precious metal versions of this medal were also struck. The two gold medals have been lost to history, but some of the original silver and non-precious metal versions of this medal still exist and are highly prized by collectors². Bronze versions of the Libertas Americana are currently valued around \$50,000 depending upon condition and silver versions of the medal have been known to be valued for as much as \$200,000.



Figure 2. Libertas Americana engraving by Esprit-Antoine Gibelin.



Figure 3. John Trumbull's painting of the British surrender at the Battle of Saratoga (U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.)



Figure 4. John Trumbull's painting of the British Surrender at the Battle of Yorktown. (U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.)

The image was also used on items such as fabric for export from France to the United States in the mid 1780s. But the demand for

the image was short lived, a mere seven years (1783-1789). By this time the American eagle was now the symbol of America, and after 1789, France was consumed with the French Revolution³.



Figure 5. Reverse of the Libertas Americana Medal



Figure 6. Obverse of the Libertas Americana Medal

My interest in the Libertas Americana medal began when I came across an online advertisement for the sword described in this article. The listing stated that the image of the Libertas Americana medal was on the scabbard. At the time I had never heard of the Libertas Americana medal but I was intrigued because my field of collecting is American swords from the Federal period, especially those made in France for the American market. I scrutinized the online photos and description. It was evident from the photographs that the saber was a French manufactured saber from the late 18th or first decade of the 19th century. I also noticed that the sword was being listed by a pawn shop and the contact information in the listing stated that the pawn shop was located in Woodbridge, Virginia, less than 10 miles from my home in Virginia.

After consulting with numerous sword expert friends of mine, namely Jack Bethune, John Thillmann, John Depue, and Jim Brown, I went down to the shop and purchased the sword. All the experts I spoke with agreed with my opinion that this was a French made saber from the late 18th century to commemorate the American Revolution. None of the experts had ever seen the use of the Libertas Americana symbol on any other sword specimens. This was no small thing as the experts had a combined 150 years of experience collecting and/or selling antique swords.

In addition, none of the French sword books referenced the use of this symbol on any French swords of the period ^{4,5,6}. Even Andrew Mowbray's acclaimed *The American Eagle-Pommel Sword The Early Years – 1794-1830*⁷, had no reference to this image on the swords of the period.

What is most interesting is that the significance of this sword might have been lost had it not been in the possession of a pawn shop that traded in American coins and medals and understood the importance of the *Libertas Americana* medal. This is a great example of the cross-flow of information from one field of collecting into the field of arms collecting.

This saber is the only known saber to have the image of the "*Libertas Americana* medal" incorporated into its design. This saber was made in France for either an American Officer or a French Officer who served in the American Revolution. Because it was found in Northern Virginia, an American officer seems to be the most likely recipient of this grand presentation saber. The saber itself is 38 ¼" overall. It dates to no earlier than 1783 because it could not predate the creation of the *Libertas Americana* image. By 1790 the image fell out of favor and was replaced by other American images such as the bald eagle and French interest would be replaced at this time with the French Revolution which began in 1789. Based upon this information, along with the construction and style of the saber, the best estimate for the date of manufacture is sometime between 1783-1790.

Hilt (Figure 7): Flat pommel with capstan, stirrup guard, quillon, and two double langets. Langets have panoply of arms with a sun. Quillon is flat and ends with a shell design finial. Knucklebow has a sun in the center. All metal parts of the hilt are gilded brass (traces of gilt remains in recessed areas). Grip is finely checkered ivory.



Figure 7. Close-up of the hilt (A) and one scabbard panel (B) of only known saber to have the image of the "*Libertas Americana* medal" incorporated into its design.

Blade (Figure 8): Long, thin, and curved blade with central fuller and false edge. Blade has traces of gilt under the langets. Part of original leather washer remains. Blade is 33" long by 1" wide.

Scabbard (Figures 9 and 10): Gilded brass with French drag, and two decorated bands with leaf designs that hold two suspension rings. Scabbard is heavily chased throughout on both obverse

and reverse. The obverse has four pressed-brass plaques applied. The image on the top plaque is well known to early-American coin collectors as it is a copy of a medal originally conceived by Benjamin Franklin, referred to as the "*Libertas Americana* medal" (Figure 9A). The second plaque has two mounted dragoons in combat (Figure 9B). The third plaque depicts a standing officer in cocked hat in front of his horse (Figure 9C). The bottom plaque depicts the thunderbolt of Zeus (Figure 9D).



Figure 8. The blade drawn.



Figure 9. Close-ups of the four pressed-brass plaques applied to the scabbard.

In summary, the known facts of this saber are:

1. Benjamin Franklin designed the *Libertas Americana* Medal.
2. He had medals struck in gold, silver, and non-precious metals that he presented to the King and Queen of France, ministers of France, members of Congress, etc.



Figure 10. Photograph of the overall saber in scabbard.

3. Franklin purchased swords at the request of Congress for American Officers.
4. This saber is the only known example to incorporate Benjamin Franklin's Libertas Americana design.
5. This saber was made in France around the same time Franklin was serving as the U.S. Ambassador to France.

All of the research presented here leaves one unanswered question for further study. Did Benjamin Franklin purchase this sword and, if so, did he present it to an American or French officer of the American Revolution? It is entirely plausible that Franklin did purchase this sword for an American or French officer and the author hopes that future readers and research will help tell the full story of this most historically significant relic of our American Revolution.

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