

A GENERAL OFFICERS' SWORD BY SPRINGFIELD ARMORY

by Jack Bethune



Although Army regulations had long established specific features of swords to be worn by General Officers, as far back as the 1830s, no pattern sword had been proposed or produced by the venerable National Armory at Springfield, Massachusetts, until 1872. It was then that the Armory began developing and introducing a series of new-regulation sword designs that, when adopted, would supersede several familiar patterns carried by Army officers before and during the Civil War. Among these new sword designs developed in 1872 was one intended to supersede the Army's 1860 and earlier sword patterns for General Officers. The new design bore obvious family resemblance to the swords also newly adopted in 1872 for Army Staff & Foot Officers. The most visible difference in the General Officers' version was not only the silvered-bronze grip but also the bold display of one or more large, gilt-bronze stars on the scabbard indicating the wearer's commanding rank.

General Orders 76 of 1872 prescribed the new sword pattern for General Officers in traditionally sparse terms: *Straight sword, gilt hilt, silver grip; brass or steel scabbard, same as now worn.* These vague instructions little differed from those loosely specifying earlier General Officers' swords, or even those describing the new 1872 pattern for Staff & Foot Officers, so an Ordnance Memorandum in 1878 included a drawing and this further requirement: *NOTE. – The scabbard of a general officer's sword has a number of stars placed between the bands corresponding to the officer's rank. The grip of the handle is of silver.* Expanding on Army regulations of 1889, a pamphlet bearing an extensive description and clearer drawing of the General Officers' sword finally revealed complete details of the new regulation pattern.

After the Civil War, the size of the Army was greatly reduced, thereby shrinking the number of Army officers of General rank potentially considering the Armory's new sword design. Some General Officers simply ignored the new pattern and continued to wear their earlier regulation swords. Others had their similar Civil War and post-Civil War pattern swords modified to incorporate visible key features, such as adding a silver-finished grip to the hilt and a gilt star to the nicked scabbard. For these reasons, the number of newly designed swords made by Springfield Armory for private purchase by General Officers was very small. From surviving records, it appears that only 21 swords for General Officers were made, making them the scarcest regulation sword pattern produced by Springfield Armory. Today, the names of 16 original purchasers can be accounted for, leaving five swords in Armory records without known original owners.

What distinguishes swords made by Springfield Armory for General Officers (GO) from the very similar and numerous swords made by Springfield Armory for Staff & Foot Officers (S&FO)? The differences are small enough to perhaps escape casual notice, but there are significant details that set the two patterns apart:

The gilt-bronze hilts of GO swords basically follow the designs of the regulation S&FO sword patterns of 1872 and 1878, the hilt on this example with its fixed rear counterguard reflecting the latter. The most prominent difference was the silvered-bronze or occasionally gilt-metal grips on GO hilts rather than the sharkskin or leather-wrapped grips usually associated with lower-ranking officers.



Blade etchings and markings on GO swords varied over the years but are always of high quality, sometimes with matte-gold backgrounds added to the designs. In addition, the etched designs on GO blades extend almost the entire blade length, or about twice as far as the etched designs typically found on S&FO swords.

The GO scabbard is identical to the S&FO scabbard in almost all respects, except for the noticeably longer gilt-bronze scabbard tip fitted to the GO scabbard. This distinctive tip with its rounded drag appears to be identical to those used on the regulation swords then worn by West Point Cadet Officers.

All GO swords made by Springfield Armory should display one or more chased, gilt-bronze stars fastened to the nickel-plated scabbard and placed midway between the gilt-brass ring bands.

The presence of silver grips and gilt-bronze stars, as mentioned earlier, does not always signify manufacture by Springfield Armory. That's because some General Officers chose to upgrade their older regulation swords or their similar Staff & Foot Officers' swords by adding these distinctive and visible features. These same "upgrades" could possibly be added later by others, so a close look is warranted if a sword with such GO features is encountered.



Brigadier General Clement R. Schaer as Major, 1st Arkansas Infantry, U.S. Volunteers

The General Officers' sword presented here was once owned by Brigadier General Clement R. Schaer of the Arkansas State Guard and was indirectly acquired from family descendants. Schaer received his Brigadier General's commission in 1897, and his sword is thought to be one of three made at Springfield Armory in 1893. His regulation sword suggests that General Officers with state commissions as well as Regular Army General Officers could purchase these costly and distinctive swords from Springfield Armory.

General Officers' swords, with only slight variations in blade etching, markings and other minor details, were produced by Springfield Armory from 1872 to 1902, a period of 30 years. They are among the scarcest and handsomest of the new regulation patterns adopted after the Civil War. It is hoped that more examples can be found and accounted for, so that the full story of these important swords can be added to American sword history.

Sources

For the student and collector of swords and sabers made by Springfield Armory, these references are invaluable:

Farrington, Dušan. *Swords & Sabers of the United States Army, 1867–1918: The New Regulation Models*. Woonsocket, RI: Mowbray Publishing, 2015.

Kellerstedt, Burton A. *Swords and Sabers of the Armory at Springfield*. Appleton, WI: Custom Printing Inc., 1998.

Wiltzius, Thomas J., and John Siekierka. *Swords and Sabers from the Springfield Armory: A Collectors Guidebook*. Appleton, WI: SpringfieldEdge, 2018.

