

U.S. NAVAL ENLISTEDMEN'S CUTLASSES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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At the start of the Civil War the small United States Navy underwent a very rapid expansion. Not only were ships quickly being built but many civilian vessels were bought and converted for military missions including blockade and harbor duty. Needless to say, in outfitting these ships the Navy experienced shortages of almost every type of equipment. The main battle cutlass at the time was the Model 1841 Cutlass which took its basic design from the U.S. Model 1832 Foot Artillery Sword but with a hand guard added. The Navy had ordered a total 6,600 of these cutlasses from the N. P. Ames Company of Cabotville, Massachusetts. Deliveries began in 1841 with the last batch of 800 delivered in September of 1846. Since these cutlasses served in the fleet through the Mexican War as well as expeditions, the number remaining at the dawn of the Civil War may have been well



reduced.

Fig.1 M1841 Cutlass with scabbard most likely manufactured prior to the start of the Civil War but which would have been in use during the war. (Bull Collection)



Fig.2 M1841 Cutlass with a scabbard manufactured during the Civil War. The back of the scabbard is inspected and stamped with “New York Navy Yard” and “1861.”

With this insufficient number of cutlasses the Navy searched for a quick fix. The Army came to the rescue since they had over 19,000 Model 1832 Foot Artillery swords and a decreasing need for them. A large number of these swords were transferred to the Navy where they saw immediate service, especially in the gunboats that were rapidly coming out of the ship yards. In a classic case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing, the Army let a contract for another 1,000 of these foot artillery swords in 1861 but canceled the contract in 1862 after 300 had been delivered. This batch was also quickly turned over to the Navy where they were of use. These cutlass/foot artillery swords remained in service throughout the war, and as late as March 1865, the new gunboats, Colossus, Gamage, and Oriole were each issued 40. After the war, a December 1866, inventory of Navy Ordnance Stores still listed 1,399 of these swords on hand.



Fig. 3 Typical Model 1832 Foot Artillery Sword/Naval Cutlass

With the obvious need of a new cutlass the Navy settled on a design derived from the excellent French Model 1833 Cutlass. The main difference, other than purely cosmetic, was that in the American cutlass the metal used in the hilt was brass instead of iron and the blade was slightly lighter. This French/American combination resulted in what is arguably the most visually pleasing and well balanced battle cutlass ever produced.



Fig.4 French Model 1833 Boarding Cutlass. This example was manufactured at the French Arsenal at Chatellerault in 1841.

The Bureau of Naval Ordnance let a series of contracts to the Ames Company, which by this time had moved to Chicopee, Massachusetts. 3,600 cutlasses were delivered in 1861, 16,400 in 1862, and 2,000 in 1864 for a total of 22,000. The Model 1861 Cutlass has the distinction of being the only United States cutlass to have been serial numbered. An afterthought, the order to stamp serial numbers went out after 600 cutlasses were delivered. As a result the serial numbers start at 601. The thousand figure is indicated by an "M." Serial number 1,222 was stamped 1M over 222, serial number 17,666 stamped 17M over 666 and so on. (See Fig. 5A for serial number 19,725) These cutlasses originally had wire wrapped leather grips but some time after the Civil War most grips were "jacked" (the wire removed and the grip coated with a tar solution). A long-lived cutlass, many were found aboard Navy ships and at Naval training bases as World War II began.



Fig.5 Typical Model 1861 Cutlass



Fig.5A Serial number 19,725

Variations of this model of cutlass exist, of which the cutlass below is an example. The cutlass pictured below is of a standard form in every way except that the blade is tinned and

the end rivet of the scabbard has a simple aster or flower shaped decoration. The markings on the obverse side of the blades ricasso (part of the blade next to the hilt) on a standard issue cutlass consist of an anchor, a capital P, U.S.N, an inspector stamp, and a date. This variant only has an anchor and the date of 1862 with no Navy property marks. It is, however, serial numbered within the Federal Contract numbers. The why, when, and where of these cutlasses remain a mystery. Notice that the grip still has the original wire wrapped grip.



Fig. 6 Original wire wrapped grip on variant cutlass.

Other variations exist that are beyond the scope of this article. There is a Civil War Officer's Cutlass that has a swirled decoration on the bowl shaped hand guard. The letters USN are cut out of the bowl shaped hand guard, or in some extremely rare cases the letters USR (for the Revenue Marine Cutter Service). Unfortunately some good fakes exist of the Navy Officer's Cutlass, possibly using original spare hilt parts. Surprisingly, the U.S. Army contracted for 300 enlisted cutlasses on January 18, 1864, receiving them that February. Blades are marked U.S. / A.D.K./ 1864.

Another style of Officer's Cutlass has a floral decoration on the bowl with a cut out USN. These were likely made up by the Bannerman Company of New York for private purchase after the Civil War.

A rather curious case involves Model 1861 cutlasses found with "NIAGARA" etched on the blade. The USN Niagara was a distillery and supply ship that served during the Spanish/American War for all of six months in 1898 and was then sold for scrap in 1899. The ship was outfitted by private funds with prominent members of New York society leading the effort in a highly publicized patriotic campaign. As a result the Niagara was fitted out in a luxurious manner that likely no other U.S. Navy ship has enjoyed before or since. Weapons and much equipment were special ordered by this group and etched or engraved with the ship's name.

Last, there are enlisted cutlasses with most of the bowl cut away. Photographs seen so far indicate that the cutlasses were altered during the first half of the 1900s and were used at training bases. Why the Navy felt the need to modify them is unknown, possibly the bowl parts were damaged in rough handling at these bases. The only example I've held in my hands does show evidence of hard use.

Additional facts and/or corrections are always welcomed.

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Ref:

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