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Author(s): Elisabeth Iacono

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“Testimonies of Rank and Character”: An Examination of General John Brooks’ Blades and Masculine Values

By: Elisabeth Iacono

Abstract: Swords are often valued today as works of art and as the belongings of famous individuals, but these objects can also provide a deeper understanding of the time period in which they were created or used. The purpose of this research paper is to examine what values were transmitted by the ownership and wielding of blades, particularly as markers of genteel status. The swords studied in this paper were owned by American Revolutionary General John Brooks, and through an examination of his life and the matter in which blades were traditionally used, a connection between these weapons and masculine ideals can be traced. Ultimately it can be concluded that men had very personal relationships with their swords, even if they were not used in combat, as extensions of themselves. To the Early Americans, masculinity was associated with leading one’s family and bravery in combat. Likewise, blades were often associated with honor, as rewards for serving in the highest capacity and the embodiment of these ideals. Through both material culture and document analysis, this paper posits that swords were essentially a man’s military and political prowess in material form.

Key words: *swords, masculinity, Early America, American Revolution, John Brooks*

The American Revolution is a story told through objects. It is a tale of guns, books, pamphlets, uniforms, and, of course, swords. When one decides to unravel the history and tease out the many stories of this time period, objects can help explore the past from a new perspective. More specifically, by using items that belonged to lesser-known individuals, it is possible to learn more about aspects of history that may otherwise be overlooked. It is the intent of this paper to follow the stories of two swords belonging to Massachusetts' General John Brooks to not only examine the purpose blades had in the Revolution, but how Brooks and other men may have felt a connection to their weaponry.

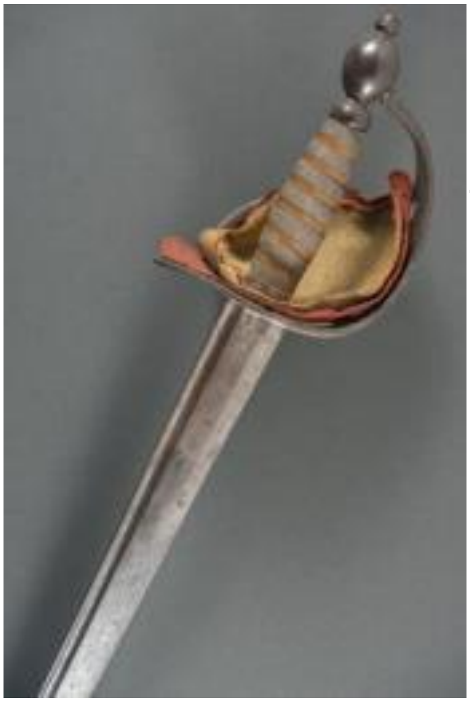

Figure 1: Short saber used by Colonel John Brooks during the Revolutionary War.[1]

The first sword of the duo belonging to General John Brooks is remarkably plain. It is relatively short, measuring just under three feet in length, with an unadorned silver blade, pommel and basket hilt. The inner layer of red cloth on the hilt was likely once beautiful and vibrant but has faded and now twists away from the metal to which it was once bonded. A layer of leather stitched into the red cloth has begun to curl, peeling away from the surface. The sharkskin grip is faded and seems to have flaked in several places around the copper band holding the fabric in place. A sword of this nature lacks any sort of frivolous ornamentation and appears primarily utilitarian in nature, with its hilt resembling that of other sabers used in this period.[2]

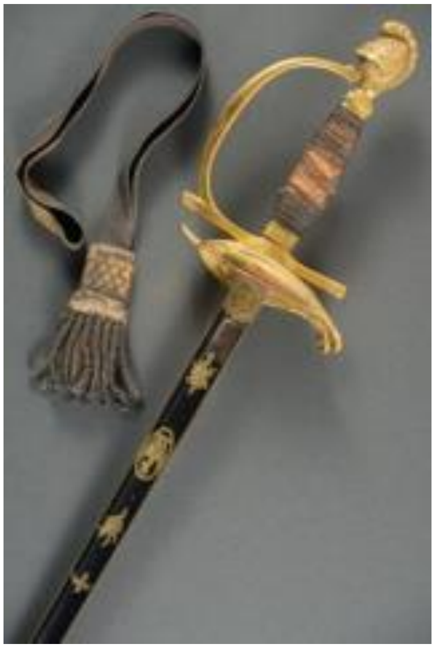

Figure 2: Dress sword worn by General John Brooks.[3]

The second sword owned by Brooks is thinner and longer than the first, and is coated black with intricate golden designs. The brass hilt is narrow and the pommel is decorated with the image of a plumed helmet. The wooden grip of the blade is wrapped in silver wire that has begun to fray and loosen. A metallic sword knot, an object meant to be looped around the owner's hand to prevent it from being lost, likely was tied onto the weapon's knuckle guard but now rests by its side, the once glimmering sheen of its material having dulled over the years. Its design seems to suggest that, unlike the other blade, it was a dress sword that was likely not carried into battle. Or, if it was, it probably did not leave its scabbard.

These swords present a host of questions, foremost among them: why were swords still employed during a period when firearms were seeing widespread use? Both swords date back to the American Revolutionary period, a period where swords such as these were starting to fall out of use in favor of other infantry weapons, such as bayonets and rifles. However, although they had become less practical in combat, their existence was still unnecessary. Edged weapons have historically carried messages of masculinity, power, and authority, and these messages were communicated both when swords were secured on soldiers' hips and found in gentlemen's dining rooms. A close examination of these two weapons, how they were created and used, and the man to whom they belonged, reveals how clearly ideas about masculinity were presented in these seemingly outdated objects and how swords and masculine ideology shared an explicit bond.

Swords Craftsmanship

Swords were immensely personal objects, suited to personal taste, social standing, or military rank. Although blades during the eighteenth century often came from European manufacturers, their hilts were sometimes locally made to reflect their owner's needs. Blades were made in the British American colonies as well, but many swords were not inscribed with makers' names. This, combined with the sheer number of hilts that existed during the colonial American period, makes it difficult for historians to identify exact swords or makers.[4] One of the most well-known American sword makers was Nathan Starr of Connecticut who was primarily active from 1798 to 1830, after the Revolutionary War. Starr is considered the nation's first sword manufacturer and produced regulation Navy cutlasses with straight, 30-inch blades that were easy for sailors to handle on boats due to their smaller size. These cutlasses were built of sheet iron with maple wood handles and saw heavy usage during the War of 1812.[5] Before Starr heralded the start of American blade production, most swords were produced by local blacksmiths who typically did not sign their work.[6] European blades were primarily used before the Revolution, with major production centers in Germany and England. London was the English center of production until 1515 or 1517, when King Henry VIII established the Royal Workshops in Greenwich, right outside the city.[7]

Swords may have been produced in a uniform way, but it was their use that defined their character. Even in a period such as the American Revolution, which saw the increased use of mechanical weaponry, colonial and British troops wielded blades. The two swords that are the focus of this paper were owned by one such soldier and help to explain the different roles that blades played during this time period.

John Brooks: Colonel, General, and Governor

John Brooks, the owner of the two swords that inspired this research, was born in Medford, Massachusetts on May 31, 1752.[8] At the age of fourteen he entered into an apprenticeship under Dr. Simon Tufts, and after seven years, at the age of twenty-one, he began the practice of medicine in the nearby town of Reading, Massachusetts. As a child, Brooks acquired knowledge of drilling by watching British soldiers' maneuvers and, during his time at Reading, he rose to the rank of major in the local militia. He was twenty-two when the news of the Battle of Lexington reached him in Reading. Gathering his troops, he marched to Concord and cut off the British troops as they attempted to flee. He gave chase as far as Charlestown Neck, doing considerable damage to the British force.[9]

Brooks' success in Concord launched a military career that would be admired by many. At Bunker Hill, Brooks proved himself by efficiently delivering special messages from Colonel William Prescott to Major General Artemas Ward, and in January 1776 he was appointed to the rank of major. The following year, Brooks was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, the rank he possessed during the Battle of Saratoga.[10] Major and lieutenant colonel were two of the top ranks in the regiments of the Continental Army at this time, outranked only by the colonel.[11] While serving in Saratoga, according to *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*, Brooks' "gallant" behavior contributed to the success of the American forces.[12] Eyewitnesses recalled that, "When Colonel Brooks saw that the decisive moment had come, he lifted his sword in the air, and cried, 'Follow your colonel at double quick!' He immediately led the way to the top of the entrenchments…This order they obeyed with great gallantry, and the most violent and bloody conflict ensued, in which they decided the fate of the day."[13]

Not only was Brooks admired by his troops, but sources suggest that he was also respected by George Washington. Reverend Charles Brooks, who, despite the same name, may not have been related to the General, recalls one particular event at Newburgh in March 1783, where the commander-in-chief sought to quell an insurgent meeting held by several officers. When Washington requested that Lieutenant Colonel Brooks keep his troops in their quarters, the soldier replied, "— ' Sir, I have anticipated your wishes, and my orders ai'e given.' Washington, with tears in his eyes, took him by the hand and said, — Colonel Brooks, this is just what I expected from you.'"[14] The general's esteem for Brooks was further demonstrated when he offered the position of sub-inspector to the lieutenant colonel. Congress established the inspector general position on February 18, 1779. Congress authorized the inspector, (in this case, Baron von Steuben), to form, "a system of regulations for maneuvers and discipline" and to "inspect troops for efficiency and appearance."[15] Washington was allowed to appoint as many sub-inspectors as he felt necessary, and on March 24, 1778 he penned a letter expressing his intention to offer the position to Brooks, writing that, "As the office of Sub-inspector cannot be filled with propriety but by men whose character and abilities will…ensure their success, I would make choice of gentlemen who unite those advantages; and in my own mind have fixed you as one."[16] Washington was correct in believing that Brooks would be a good fit for this post; he was praised by his troops for possessing a "Gentlemanly mildness as very few men can. His uniform and efficient love of his men, caring for them and doing for them as if each was a brother, won the hearts of his soldiers."[17] It is clear from this that both his superiors and inferiors respected him and saw him as an individual who was dutiful and controlled in his behavior.

After the war, Brooks returned to Medford where he accepted an invitation by Simon Tufts to take over his medical practice. Brooks' medical skill, much like his military prowess, was praised:

> As a physician he ranked in the first class of practitioners. (He) possessed in an eminent degree those qualities which were calculated to i-ender him the most useful in his professional labors, and the delight of those to whom he administered relief. His manners were dignified, courteous and be-nign. He was sympathetic, patient and attentive. His mind was well furnished with scientific and practical knowledge.[18]

In 1786, he was elected member of the Massachusetts Medical Society and considered one of its top practitioners. The same year he was also appointed major-general in the Massachusetts militia and helped suppress Shay's Rebellion, a series of farmer revolts against courthouses and government properties in response to a lack of compensation after they served in the Revolution.[19] Brooks continued to gain status in the political arena and in 1791 was appointed United States Marshal of the District of Massachusetts. Five years later, he was also selected as Inspector of Internal Revenue for the state.[20] Finally, he was elected governor in 1816. Brooks served seven years and was reelected six times – yet another testament to how admired he was by the people of Massachusetts.

John Brooks passed away at the age of seventy-three on March 1, 1825, having served his state and country in many capacities. His last words were recorded as, "I have received orders and am ready to march" – a fitting statement for a man admired by his troops and George Washington.[21]

During his life, Brooks owned many swords, as was typical for high-ranking officers in the Continental Army. It is quite likely that not all of the swords he used were preserved, or even recorded, but Reverend Charles Brooks took note of several in his own memoir regarding the colonel and governor:

> In Gov. Brooks's family are several comme-morative swords. One called the 'straight gilt scabbard sword,' has the following engraved inscription: — 'To Ilio Excellency John Brooks, Commander in Chief of the Militia of Massachusetts, and twice Commander of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, this Sword is most respect-fully presented by that Ancient Corps, in full confidence that it will be wielded with glory and

> success in War, and be preserved untar-nished in Peace.' ... The sword, worn by Col. Brooks in the battle at Saratoga…has been presented by A. L. Rawson, Esq., to the “Mass. His torical Society." It is called ‘The sword of Saratoga.’[22]

It is extremely likely that the unassuming sword first discussed in this paper is this so-called “Sword of Saratoga,” although there seem to be no papers connecting the dress blade to the “straight gilt scabbard sword” mentioned by Charles Brooks.

Brooks was perceived as a courageous, mild-mannered and dutiful individual – the true tenants of a gentleman. Although he is a lesser-known historical individual, he embodied the ideal masculine ideology of the American Revolutionary period.

Masculinity in the American Revolution

Growth within the field of women's history has generated intense discussion of gender studies in the American Revolutionary period. However, many historians have, in the process of highlighting women, often excluded men. Shifting focus to the stories of historically marginalized or ignored groups is a movement that should be celebrated. Yet in the process, men have become genderless beings, excluded from new analyses due to their overwhelming presence in the past. The story of masculinity does not have to run opposite to women’s history – they can both demonstrate how gender exerted a role in early America.

Religion was one aspect of American society that established precedents for proper masculine behavior. Although preachers in this period echoed timeless sentiments, such as praising God and embracing the nobility of humankind, the onset of the Revolution also encouraged them to stir their congregation to action. In his 1776 sermon, “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” John Witherspoon decried the perceived feminine trait of idleness, stating that it “is the mother or nurse of almost every vice; and want, which is its inseparable companion, urges men on to the most abandoned and destructive courses. Industry therefore is a moral duty of the greatest moment.”[23] Preacher Nathanael Emmons further called upon men to improve themselves by reading and learning, as they were “made for usefulness and not for amusement...made to live an active, diligent, and useful life."[24] Furthermore, men were to “flee youthful lusts...(and) avoid bad company and unmanly diversions.”[25] During this time of war, men could not sit idly by as their fellow citizens joined the American force. To do so would not just be “unmanly”, it would be shameful to God.

Other sources tend not to directly state the proper way men should act, but instead describe inappropriate behaviors. Drawing these comparisons makes it possible to imagine a picture of ideal masculine behaviors. For example, literature and newspapers of the period offered sensationalized, negative images of men that helped to exemplify how proper men should behave.

The Coquette was a popular novel published in 1797 by Hanna W. Foster. It describes the tragic life of Eliza Warton, a woman whose life was destroyed by a flirtatious man called Major Peter Sanford. Sanford plays the role of a mischievous womanizer, a man who showers Eliza in affection, but refuses to commit to a relationship with her. He is described as a “rake”, a man who is “deficient in one of the great essentials of character...virtue...having but too successfully practiced the arts of seduction; by triumphing in the destruction of innocence and the peace of families!”[26] A true gentleman would not act so flirtatious. He would conduct his business of romance in a far more respectful way, wooing a woman without destroying her innocence.

Conversely, there was also the popular image of the “hen-pecked husband.” A “hen-pecked husband” was nagged and bossed around by his wife and lacked the willingness to oppose her. Historian Benjamin H. Irvin describes the creation of hen-pecked husbands in popular culture as an attempt to “define the American community by distinguishing selflessness, a masculine virtue, from self-indulgence, an effeminate vice."[27] One such example of this phenomenon appears in a piece of satire published in a 1775 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* entitled “Arabella’s Complaint to the Congress.” In this letter an individual by the pen name “Arabella” plays the role of the nagging wife, complaining that she cannot shop for nice objects with the Revolution era embargoes in place. “The gentlemen of the Congress are, no doubt, very good sort of men, but how the duce should they know anything about fashions?” Arabella writes. “When will these troublesome times have an end? Are we forever to be debarred the use of India Teas? Are we to have no more new fashions? Are we to have no more plays, nor balls, nor feats, nor parties of pleasure, nor concerts of music?”[28] By airing out her grievances in a circulated work read by many, Arabella not only called attention to her own spoiled behavior, but also exposed the faults of her husband who was unable to control her. By reading this dramatic letter, men would likely wish to become what this fictionalized husband could not – a self-willed man who shed feminine timidity to take control of his wife and household.

Examples of feminine behaviors were often used to demonstrate how men should not behave. Weak-willed men, such as rakes, hen-pecked husbands, and deceitful men, were frequently effeminized, sometimes referred to as “harpies” when acting dishonorably.[29] To retain masculinity, a man had to distinguish between "servile, effeminate supplication from honorable, manly mutual service, and connections,” and beware of “the distortion of masculinity by the corrupting love of luxury."[30]

However, it was not just feminine behaviors that were considered negative – anger and violence were viewed as negative traits as well. At least, they were before the outbreak of the Revolution. Native Americans were considered masculine in the way that they were perceived as savage and susceptible to fiery emotions such as rage. Words such as “fury” and “anger”, which had once been considered ungentlemanly, received positive connotations in the 1750s and 1760s as Americans entered into conflict with England.[31] Historian Nicole Eustace notes that it was the "desire for strength, and the crises over self-defense (that transformed) anger into an acceptable and even desirable emotion."[32] However, emotion could not be unrestrained. To harm indiscriminately was not masculinity, and to grieve without anger was shameful. As patriots devoted to liberty, men had to combine the "genteel values of sensibility with the vigorous assertion of masculinity."[33]

The Sword and the Man

In Alfred F. Young's classic, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution,* Young focused on how events are remembered by someone who has hitherto been overlooked by history. The subject of Young's research, George Robert Twelve Hewes, had to be separated from his biographies, and, in the process, the shoemaker's memory became the most important aspect of this historian's examination of the Revolution.[34] Young's book looks at personal vs. public memory, exploring how one individual experienced a defining event in American history and how historical context affects the space "in which remembering takes place."[35]

Such an approach can also be taken with Colonel, General, and Massachusetts Governor John Brooks. Through the person of John Brooks – his behavior and perception by his peers – we can investigate and analyze masculinity during the American Revolution. Although Brooks was governor, the amount of published works that discuss his life cannot be compared to the interest invested in America's more prominent figures. He may be less known but his selflessness and restrained fury is the very definition of masculinity in this time period. However, it is not just biographical books and newspapers that contain the memory of this historical figure – memory is also found in the two swords displayed at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Swords were just as much art as they were weapons. The care that was taken decorating their hilts displays this sentimentality well. Even Brooks' swords, as faded and damaged as they are, retain forms that are appealing. These weapons had to be appealing because they were "testimonies of rank and character."[36] Charles Brooks made a telling statement when he noted that, "Among military men swords are often the brightest records of their character and success" – these beautiful and yet dangerous tools were firmly objects meant to reflect social standing and achievements.[37] Yet, if these blades did not belong to a founding father or other influential figure, their meanings are often ignored in the overall historical record.

Washington's swords have likely received the most attention among historians, but the meanings that can be taken from them is not so different from what they teach us about John Brooks. Erik Goldstein, a curator at Colonial Williamsburg and author of *The Swords of George Washington*, pays careful attention to the manner in which Washington wore his swords, as well as how he chose which to display at certain times. In an interview at Mount Vernon, Goldstein described the choice of swords as keeping with the trends of a time period and place, "Just as one wouldn't wear dirty old sneakers to a business meeting, George Washington would not have chosen to wear an out-of-style and worn fighting sword to address Congress."[38] As for the question of whether these swords were ever used in combat, Goldstein believes that, "it would be a mistake to imagine Washington brandishing his sword like a brigand and slicing his way through a line of hapless 'redcoats'... As a proper gentleman, he was well aware of what and what not to do with a sword."[39]

A proper gentleman's sword never saw combat, unless it was for a duel or in extremis.

Despite what sensationalized stories of duels might suggest – such as the infamous encounter between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr – not all duels were carried out with pistols. Words were quite popular when it came to defending a man's honor, since pistols were quite inaccurate. Victims who would take such insults without reacting were seen as the feminine, weak characters that were so pervasive in American literature. General Philip Schuyler bluntly described the concept, "a man's character ought not to be sported with, and he that suffers stains to lay on it with impunity really deserves none – nor will he long enjoy one."[40] Author Philip G. Smucker describes Washington's own interest in swordplay in *Riding with George,* noting that, "Gentlemen did not often unsheathe their swords over a small dispute but rather kept them on hand as showpieces or for ready use in case of a great insult to their honor."[41]

The personal bond a man had with his swords is difficult for modern society to appreciate. They were objects of honor, rewards for serving in the highest capacity, and they embodied masculine ideals of bravery and ambition. Today swords may primarily be appreciated for their beauty, but they were once objects held in the highest regard. Swords were a man's military and political prowess in material form. Objects that may be seen as insignificant, or as belonging to figures regarded as unworthy of study, can still tell an important story of a time period. In this case, the swords that belonged to John Brooks, a man so great that he could reduce even the great George Washington to tears, demonstrate values of masculinity in the Revolutionary era – a message that was transmitted and is preserved to this day in the swords he received.

Endnotes

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