

## A History of Antique Arms and Armor Collecting in America

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This paper provides a brief account of arms and armor collecting in America from its origins in the late nineteenth century until the present day. Over this time period institutional and private collectors have specialized in different types of weapons, protective accouterments, historical periods, countries of origin, and manufacturers' brands. Their enthusiasm has fueled a commercial market provisioned by dealers and auction houses, and has stimulated the creation of an extensive literature on arms history. Museum exhibits have visually presented arms, armor, and their histories to wider publics, while collector communities have used firearms as means for social bonding and as interpretive tools for understanding the past. Since World War II, antique guns have become the primary focus of most private American collectors, with armor and edged weapons (swords, knives, battle axes, pole arms) of secondary interest. The research aims to expand temporal knowledge of American arms and armor collecting, its associated market processes, and its consumption communities. The study also approaches collecting as a cultural process whereby over time market participants interpret artifacts in meaningful ways.

After first examining some definitional issues and data sources, the paper provides an account of arms and armor collecting in the periods before and after 1945. This date was chosen for a periodization break because 1) the American prewar and postwar economic environments differed appreciably and 2) the number of arms collectors appears to have risen quickly during the postwar economic boom. Subsequent sections revisit this history as a social project in which collectors in both periods have formed consumption and brand communities, and then show how these collectors have created meaning in material artifacts through interpretations of the past.

The meaning of "antique" depends upon when the term is applied. Newly made goods in the late 1800s, when this history begins, would be considered antiques in the early twenty-first century. At present, armor and edged weapons from the nineteenth century and older certainly qualify as antiques, as might World War I helmets and other military goods that are now a century old. Antique firearms, in contrast, have a precise meaning under federal law. The U.S. Gun Control Act of 1968 designated as antique those guns manufactured before 1899. Federal and parallel state regulations generally allow them to be bought and sold freely. Modern replicas of weapons with matchlock, flintlock, and percussion cap ignition systems are also exempt. Federal law defines Curios and Relics (C&Rs) as firearms at least 50 years old or having other special attributes, such as rarity, novelty, or association with a historical figure, period, or event (ATF, 2019). These are also quite collectible, but are subject to a host of federal and state regulations. Some vintage but especially dangerous firearms, such as machine guns and sawed-off shotguns, were listed as Title II weapons under the 1934 National Firearms Act and have since required a special Class 3 license to be bought and sold. Military machine guns from the World Wars have fetched high prices because of their relative rarity. Although an assemblage of weapons less than 50 years old could also be considered a collection, this paper stresses collecting in the antique and C&R categories.

The study draws from the literature on arms and armor, and from primary written, visual, and material evidence. Research and writing on antique arms and armor have served the needs of museum curators, private collectors, and dealers. It has focused on describing the physical characteristics of objects and where, when, and by whom they were made. Identification and pricing guides have emphasized condition since this attribute affects market value. Museum records, as well as auction catalogs, often have included information on provenance, an object's history of ownership. The societal and cultural contexts and impacts of historical weapons, especially firearms, have been of lesser interest and more likely to be pursued by academic historians and other scholars (see, e.g. Gilmore, 1999; Johnson, 2014; Rose, 2008; Silverman, 2016). Some of the more popular titles in the arms history literature have not been sufficiently sourced, while some books have reproduced page after page of primary company and government documents with only scant interpretation.

Primary written sources for this research have included vintage newspaper and magazine articles and exhibition and dealer catalogs. Visually, arms and armor are quite photogenic and museums and libraries have created extensive and easily accessible online archives of their holdings. Auction companies

regularly hold sales of antique arms, digitally publish increasingly better-illustrated catalogs, and even maintain archives of past sales. Seeing museum installations in person and physically examining antique arms at auction previews provide added perspective. Arms and armor exist in three dimensions, have weight and texture, and can be operated mechanically. However, museum exhibits may be deceiving in that they may not be representative of the full range of arms and armor in a given period. Objects of high artistic merit and historical significance have been more likely to survive over the centuries than have more ordinary specimens.

My personal experiences as an arms collector greatly inform this research. In 1960 at age eleven, I purchased an 1868 Austrian Werndl rifle for \$15 from a small antique shop in Chicago. The following year I spent \$95 on a pair of Belgian percussion dueling pistols plus my first American sword. Carefully husbanding my allowance, gift, and job money, I continued collecting through high school, but then entered a long hiatus while pursuing my higher education. In 1980 I took up the hobby again and, save a shortage of funds in the 1990s – I had a young family to support – have been collecting guns and swords more or less continuously ever since. My interests include American firearms from the nineteenth century, English and European flintlocks from the 1740s to the 1830s, and European and American swords from the Revolutionary period through the Civil War. Like many other collectors I have immersed myself in the arms literature and over the years have physically examined numerous arms at auction previews. I peruse online auction catalogs and subscribe to two collector magazines. In terms of collector sociability, I have pretty much been a loner, but in June 2017, in order to develop a better appreciation of gun collectors as a consumption and brand community, I joined the Remington Society of America (RSA) and have attended meetings and a historical seminar held in my area. I own five Remington rifles, revolvers, and a pistol made between 1849 and 1870, but am not passionate about the brand.

#### **Selected References**

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A copy of the full paper can be obtained from the author ([terrence.witkowski@csulb.edu](mailto:terrence.witkowski@csulb.edu)). Below are a few selected images.





A.E. Brooks in his “den” or workshop, ca. 1899. Source: Brooks (1899).



Dealer Robert Abels taking aim with an antique flintlock grenade launcher, 1946. Courtesy of *Arms Heritage Magazine*.



**PRIZED ITEMS** include (top) sword presented to Brig. General John Reynolds, killed at Gettysburg. Sword in middle belonged to aide of General Winfield Scott. A knight ornaments the sword of Major General George H. Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga."



Held on wires, 800 swords in his collection surround Norman Flayderman. Many are worth over \$1,000.

## A Hoard of Swords

### BIGGEST COLLECTION OF U.S. BLADES HAS FIRST SHOWING

Standing in a forest of blades at his home in Kennebunk, Maine, an antique dealer named Norman Flayderman contemplated the acquisition of a lifetime—the world's largest collection of American swords. The collection was gathered over 20 years by New York Manufacturer Philip Medicus, who refused to exhibit it.

When Medicus died Flayderman bought the collection for over \$20,000 and recently held a first showing.

The collection includes ornamental swords, swords used in the Revolutionary, Mexican and Civil wars and blades used by some Confederates. Flayderman may sell a few swords but plans to show the rest in museums.

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Dealer Norm Flayderman standing among the Philip Medicus sword collection, 1956. Source: *Life*, May 14, 1956, p. 171.