

Curator's Choice

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Getting the Point Across: A Gentleman's Smallsword in the Cellar

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“Knowledge of the Small-Sword...is an Art so necessary to be known, and so proper a Qualification for the constituting of a Man a Gentleman, that I had almost said, he can be none that is not skill'd therein.” - Henry Blackwell

While swords are often seen today purely as weapons of war, beginning in the late medieval period noblemen began carrying shorter, more ornate side swords that served primarily as symbols of social status rather than instruments of combat. As opposed to the heavier, larger blades of traditional battlefield weapons, the smallsword was a light, nimble weapon intended largely for civilian life (Pulaczewski, 2024). The hanging of a sword at a gentleman's side was not a latent threat of violence, but instead a projection of aristocratic identity, an expectation for men of noble status.

“The smallsword is really a species of rapier, in the sense that it originated as a civilian's weapon...it is a weapon of simple elegance and, no matter that it required athleticism and practiced skill to manage it effectively, it nonetheless became the essential everyday dress accessory for urban fop and portly squire alike, whether he knew how to use it or not.” (Loades, 2011)



Figure 1: “Noon” by William Hogarth, 1736. Both father and son wear smallswords on their person.

An 18th century gentleman brandishing such a smallsword may be skilled in the art of defense, but their sword may as well just be a fashion accessory with no true offensive use. In William Hogarth's series of paintings, “Four Times of the Day” depicting daily life in London circa 1736, his piece “Noon” (Figure 1) features a family strolling along the street. Both father and son of the well-heeled noble family are wearing smallswords on their person, clear signifiers of social status. Maryland colonists, such as Col. John Addison, would follow these same fashion conventions in North America. Archaeological evidence of this can be found in the form of multiple sword components excavated from the Addison Plantation site.

Several cast metal sword components were found during excavations of Col. John Addison's original post-in-ground house and associated cellar. The smallsword components were found in the wood-lined passageway to the cellar, which extended 25 feet away from the original post-in-ground house site. This passageway may have had objects hanging from the walls or tucked against the sides of the passage for storage. The sword components, which included two identical counterguard fragments, a knuckle guard, as well as a quillon block, were all made of cast brass and featured similar ornate designs (Figures 2 and 3). These components were likely fragments of infantry

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try hangers, which were lower quality imitations of a gentleman's smallsword (Pulaczewski, 2024). Due to casting the metal hilts using molds, elaborate decoration was possible while keeping production cheap. (Rivers Cofield)

The presence of these smallsword components in a Maryland plantation house demonstrates the cultural bonds between the Old and New Worlds. Carrying a smallsword in colonial America was not merely a matter of fashion or defense; it was a deliberate statement of identity.



Figure 2: Smallsword components from the Addison plantation, ca 1690-1730.

Top: Brass quillon block

Left: Brass knuckle guard;

Right: Brass counterguard fragments

Parts of a Smallsword Hilt

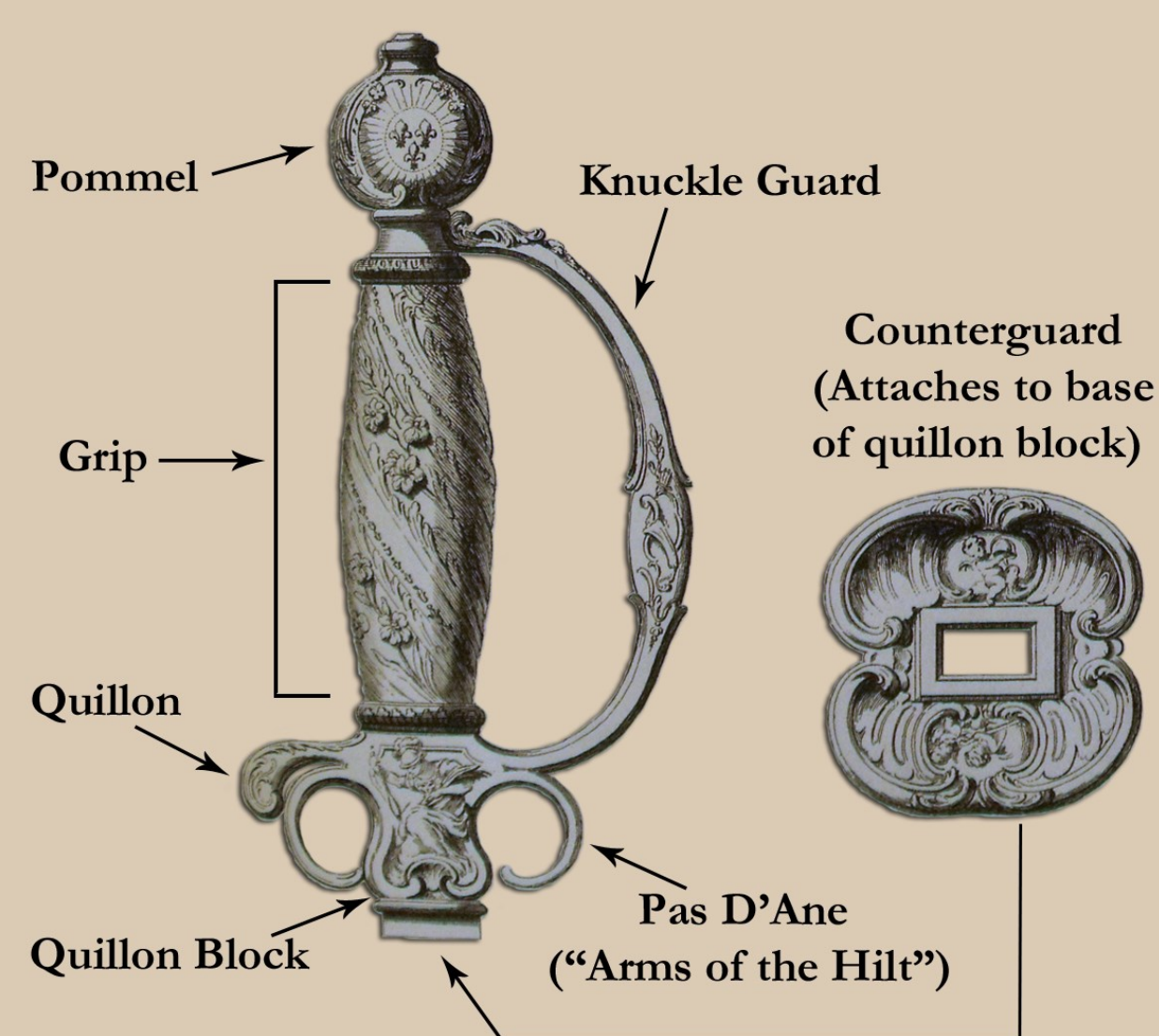


Figure 3. Hilt engraving adapted from Diderot and Alembert's (1751-1765) *Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences: Des Arts et des Metiers*. Figure adapted by Sara Rivers Cofield for “Artifacts of Outlander” online exhibit. <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/outlander/index.html>



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