

# James Conning, Confederate Sword Maker

by: R.E. Neville, Jr.

It is indeed appropriate, I think, that this famous old southern town, deeply steeped in the rich history and tradition of the American Civil War, or War Between the States, or Second War of Independence, or as my dear grandmother used to say "Our Late War of Northern Aggression", is the setting for these brief remarks about an obscure southern shop-keeper; a transplanted New Yorker, if you please, whose small sword factory was so typical of many scattered throughout the south. Though the entire output of the Conning Factory was in all probability not equal to the weekly production in one of the large northern establishments, Conning and his fellow makers did contribute significantly to the southern war effort.

Young Mr. James Conning, Silversmith, late of New York City, arrived in Mobile, Alabama, in late 1840 or early 1841. He lost no time in establishing himself in business as a dealer, importer and repairer of watches, jewelry, silver and "fancy goods of all description". This was no mean feat for a fellow barely twenty-one years old. Conning's operation seems to have prospered from the start, as the Mobile City Directories of the 1840's and 1850's show an ever increasing number of clerks, jewelers and book-keepers employed at Conning's establishment. Even William Robertson, lithographer and master engraver, was employed by Conning in the mid 1850's. The romantic picture of the leather-aproned Paul Revere-like artisan tolling away in a small one man shop to produce masterpieces of American hand-wrought silver is appealing, but unfortunately quite far from the fact, as most of the pieces of silver bearing the Conning mark were produced in New York or other locations outside Mobile.

The Mexican War brought an intense ground swell of martial spirit to Mobile. The local militia companies drilled almost daily in the streets and grand reviews and military soirees were a weekly occurrence. The young gentry turned out with gusto and the Mobile newspapers gleefully reported the ceremony and pageantry of the send-offs given the militiamen as they left Mobile for Mexican Service.

Conning, always with an eye for things military, offered a wide variety of goods for the gentleman soldier and his "Military Emporium" was a bee-hive of martial activity. His ads of the period offer everything from buckles to braid. Conning himself served as Orderly Sergeant of the prestigious Washington Light Infantry.

The end of the Mexican War signaled the beginning of unparalleled prosperity for Mobile. Cotton was king and the city had the look of a boom town. Conning's business flourished and his establishment became a regular stop for the plantation owners along the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers on their visits to Mobile. As the 1850's drew to a close, Conning's newspaper ads began to reflect an at-first



subtle change: gradually the Navy Colt and Sharps Rifle became as much or more of a stock item as the silver service or other so-called "fancy goods". By late 1860 Conning was advertising a complete line of military goods including buttons, braid, swords, firearms and just about anything else that the young members of the newly formed Alabama Volunteer Corps would want to give themselves just that extra bit of dash or ferocity.

The secession of Alabama and the formation of the Confederate States of America turned Mobile into an armed camp overnight. Military companies sprang up with amazing speed and the demand for arms and equipment was enough to warm the heart of any merchant. At about this time, faced with a shutoff of his supplies from the North, Conning decided to become a sword manufacturer himself.

Through the influence of his good friend Col. William A. Buck of Mobile, Conning was able to secure the services of one Jacob Faser of Macon, Mississippi. Had this happy circumstance not come about, there would have in all probability never been any swords produced in Mobile bearing Conning's name. From here on the story of Conning and his sword manufacturing is the story of Jacob Faser, and this remarkable and talented man bears a much closer look.

Jacob Faser; artist, goldsmith, musician, silversmith, gunsmith, politician and sword maker: quite a few hats for one individual to wear, but surprisingly he seems to have achieved better than average proficiency in all of these fields. Faser, a German emigrant, came to the U.S. in 1828 with his family. They settled in Philadelphia and when he was old enough, Jacob apprenticed to F.W. Widmann, whose sword making activities have been so well documented by our esteemed fellow-member Ralph Arnold. Faser and Widmann must have been rather close, as Widmann amended his will to bequeath his pattern books and

certain other items to Faser. After Widmann's death Faser worked for the Philadelphia firm of Wm. H. Hortsman for a time, then moved to Macon, Mississippi, where he resided, working as a silversmith and gunsmith until he came into Conning's employment.

Faser commenced work for Conning on June 28, 1861. A sword factory was established at the corner of Dauphin and Water Sts. in downtown Mobile. Fourteen workmen were employed with Faser as Foreman. The Mobile Foundry of Parks (or Parker) and Lyons was contracted with to produce the blades, the rest of the manufacturing and assembling being carried out in Conning's factory under the direct supervision of Faser. All patterns and tooling-up procedures were also the work of Faser. Within a matter of weeks the factory was in production, a testimony to Faser's ability and expertise.

The relationship between Conning and Faser seems to have been stormy from the first, with the main bone of contention being money. Conning, a rather tight-fisted individual, was reluctant to compensate Faser to the extent that Faser thought proper and by the end of 1862 Faser seems to have severed his ties with Conning and returned to Macon where he lived for many years, serving as Mayor of that fair city in the 1870's.

It is my belief that most, if not all, Conning swords were

produced during the period when Faser was employed by Conning.

These then are the basic types of swords which were produced in Conning's Factory. Swords bearing Conning's name which do not conform to these types fall into one of three categories. Swords of other makers have been observed bearing Conning markings. These are noted mostly on eagle head Mexican War Period pieces. I believe that such marks indicate a sword which was sold through Conning's "Military Emporium". Secondly, Conning, or at least Jacob Faser, surely produced some few one of a kind special order pieces. Extreme care should be taken to ascertain if such purported swords do indeed exhibit the manufacturing characteristics of Conning's Factory. The third and unfortunately largest category of these non conforming Connings is that of fakes and fabrications.

After the war Conning lost no time in re-establishing his retail business. By the first of 1866, he had moved back to his old location and his ads for silver, watches and fancy goods once again appear regularly in the local papers. Conning continued in business until his death in the early 1870's. At that time the business passed to his nephew who apparently lacked the business acumen of his uncle: by 1880 a local institution had passed from the Mobile scene forever.

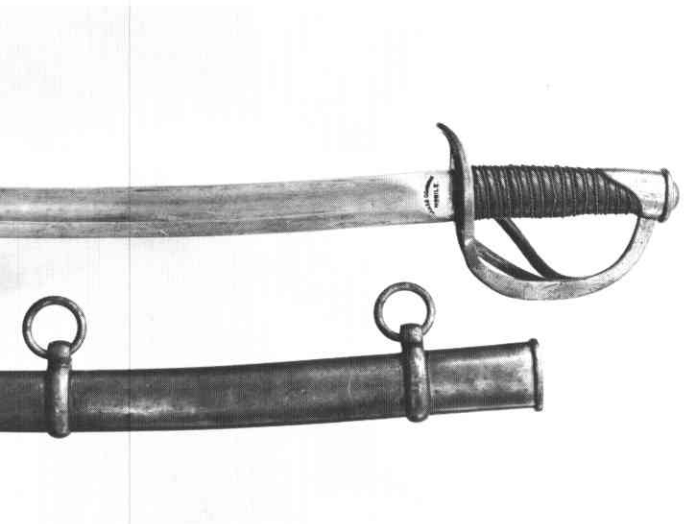


Confederate Field Officer sword by Jacob Faser, Macon, Mississippi. Made after Faser returned to Macon in late 1862.

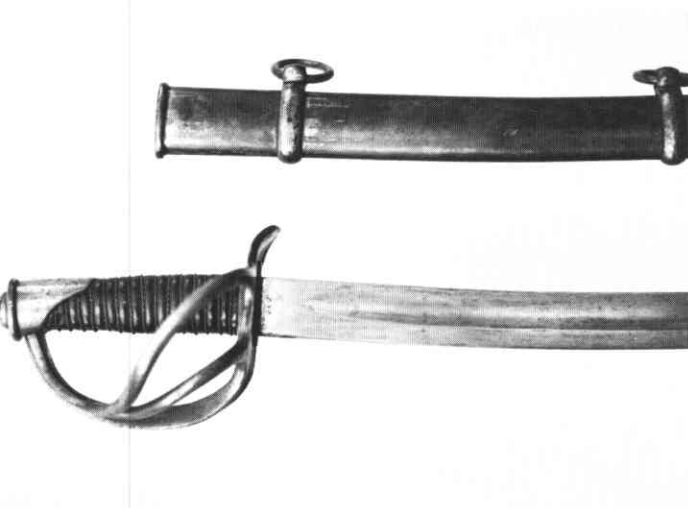
Made by  
James Conning  
Mobile

MADE BY  
James Conning  
Mobile  
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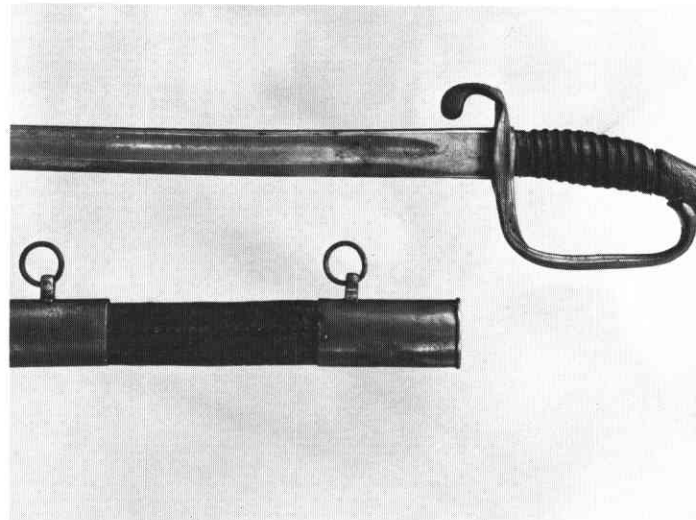
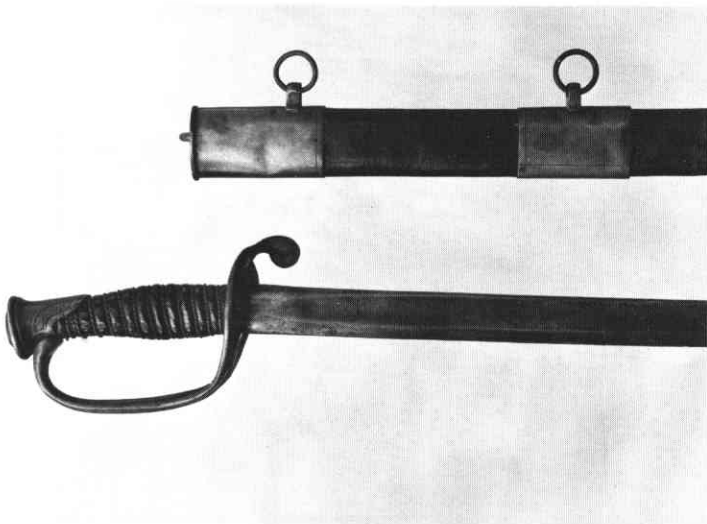
Drawings of maker's marks as found engraved on scabbard throats of Conning officer swords.



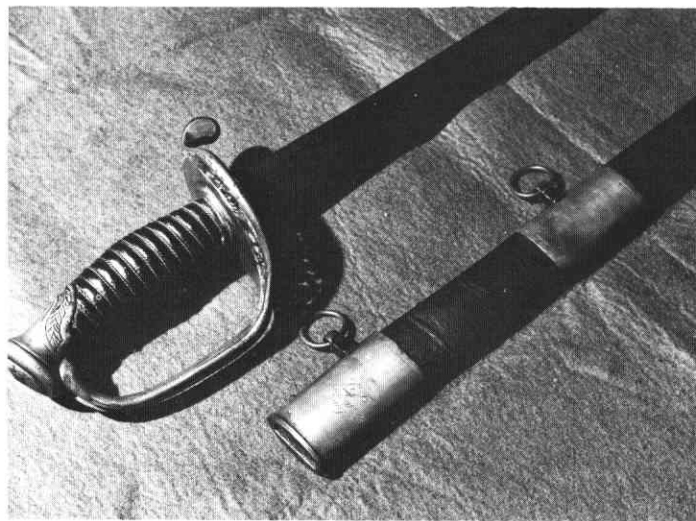
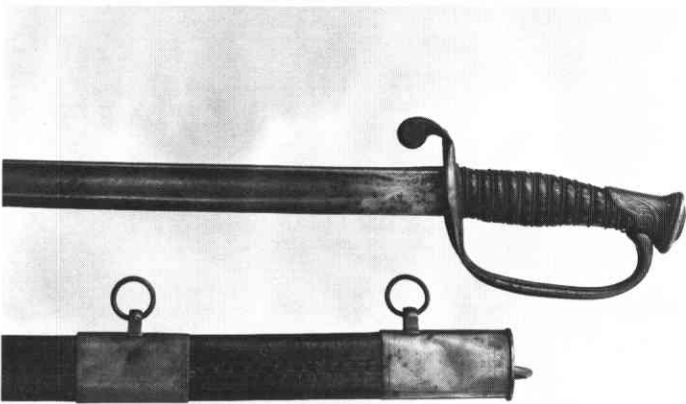
Conning Cavalry Saber, ser. no. 252.



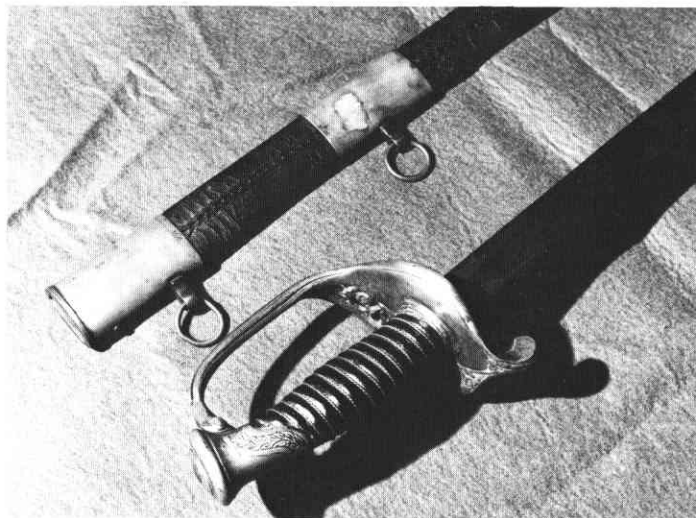
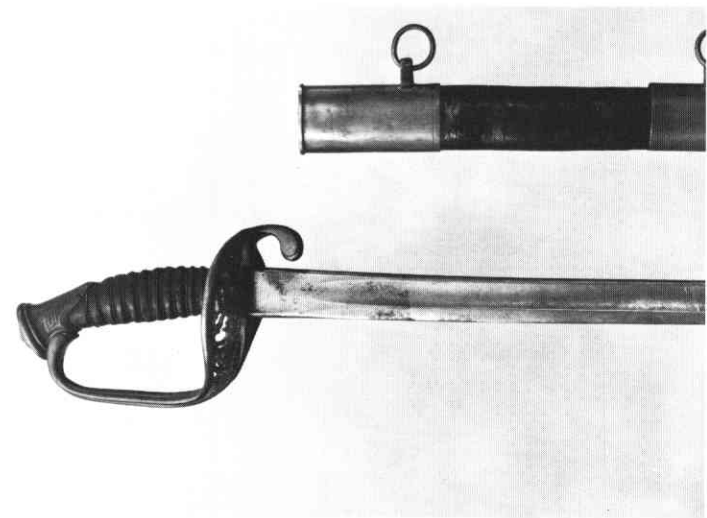
Mounted Artillery Saber made under contract to State of Alabama.



Variant Conning foot officer sword. All known have very low serial numbers.



Conning Field and Staff Officers sword, ser. no. 260.



Conning Presentation Foot Officer sword ser. no. 204.