

Rhode Island Military Artifact Figures in Case of The Missing Burnside Sword

An historically important military artifact once owned by former Rhode Island governor and Civil War General Ambrose Everett Burnside is back in the United States after apparently reposing mysteriously in Europe for over 100 years.

The artifact, a wooden, velvet-lined Tiffany & Co., New York, Civil War period sword case bearing the general's name and rank on a German silver identification plaque, was recently acquired by Beltrone & Co. of Keswick, Virginia, a firm that specializes in the location, acquisition, and placement of historical American and foreign military artifacts. The case was recently offered for sale by a French militaria dealer located near Lyon, France. The dealer reportedly acquired the piece in a nearby "flea market."

According to Art Beltrone, who operates the Keswick firm, Burnside was presented with a cased Tiffany sword of silver and gold by the Rhode Island legislature in May, 1862, following the military commander's successful expedition in early 1862 to secure a base of operations on the coast of North Carolina.

The action resulted in the capture of Roanoke Island with 2,600 prisoners and 32 heavy guns. The towns of New Bern and Beaufort were also seized, as was the permanent fortress of Fort Macon. Besides receiving the sword, which cost a reported \$800 in 1862, Burnside was commissioned a major general for his successful operation. Beltrone believes the Burnside sword case originally accompanied the Tiffany-made presentation sword.

The location of the sword remains a mystery to this day. A check with the Rhode Island Archives did not reveal its location, and a Rhode Island Historical Society assistant curator reported there was no Burnside presentation sword in the society's military collection, which includes two Burnside paintings, a sleeve from the general's uniform, correspondence, papers and, various printed and minted memorabilia. [221]Checks with the West Point Museum and Smithsonian Institution also proved fruitless.

Beltrone can offer one possible solution to the mystery. In 1870 Burnside was in Europe on business connected with the Covington and Vincennes Railroad and while there felt a strong desire to witness the hostilities between France and Germany, who were then engaged in the Franco Prussian War. During this period he served as a mediator in an attempt to end the hostilities, and he very likely carried his sword with him.

"Somehow, the sword and sword case may have become separated from the general, who most likely, because of his role as mediator, carried it with him," Beltrone explained. "This may be the reason why the sword case turned up in France.

The case is ideally suited for a museum exhibit, and according to Beltrone, several Rhode Island public museum facilities have been made aware of its availability. "Burnside was a great state hero," Beltrone said, "and this artifact associated with his military career should be part of a permanent Rhode Island exhibit for all to share."

Recently, the Beltrone & Co. firm has successfully placed historical military artifacts in the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas; Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico; Staten Island Historical Society, Staten Island, New York; and on the international level, the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria.