

Figure 1: *The Glade blade. General view. Photograph by the author.*

The Blade from Glade¹

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Introduction

In March of 2004 I published an article ² in *The Smithfield Review* summarizing the considerable evidence that Spanish conquistadors had twice entered southwestern Virginia in the sixteenth century: In 1540, when a scouting party from the De Soto *entrada* made its way north from Tennessee, and in 1567, when a gold-seeking expedition came north along the old Cherokee Trail from a base of Spanish operations near present-day Morganton, North Carolina. During the latter expedition the Spanish attacked a palisaded Native American village, probably located at what is now Saltville in Smyth County.

After its publication, no one challenged the conclusions of the article, and I received a number of communications describing direct archeological evidence of a sixteenth-century Spanish presence in Virginia. If such physical evidence could be found and validated, it would provide dramatic proof of my conclusions.

Whenever anyone approached me with a claim of such physical evidence, I immediately responded. I offered to travel anywhere on short notice to examine personally what any informant had to show. Sadly, until recently, all reports of evidence evaporated; objects that had been described to me vanished; alleged sightings were recanted; and scheduled meetings to examine artifacts were canceled.*

*Perhaps the most amusing of these many nonstarters was the description of a bowl-like metal object, putatively a Spanish helmet, said to have been for many years in the possession of a prominent Marion, Virginia, family. "Perhaps a Cadillac hubcap?" I inquired rather archly of the intermediary who brought me the news. "More like a De Soto hubcap," he replied. But it turned out there wasn't even a hubcap to be examined, let alone a helmet. This object proved as ephemeral as the rest.

I kept hoping, however, knowing that, even if an artifact did show up, the chances of its being the real McCoy would be very slim.

The Blade Makes its Appearance

Finally, after more than a year had passed, a trusted informant³ who lives in Southwest Virginia told me that he had personally seen an unusual blade – possibly Spanish – and that he could have it available at his home whenever I was ready to drive down to Washington County. Furthermore, he said that when I came I could examine it, handle it, and photograph it. It was, he said, a blade made of steel with a curious form. As a man with a many-year interest in antique weapons, my informant was certain it was not a Civil War bayonet, nor a knife from the Western Virginia frontier. It was, he reported, unlike anything in his experience to be found traditionally in local collections.

He further said that the blade had a detailed provenience, and told the following tale: Some fifty years ago a neighbor of his who lives in Washington County, not far from Glade Spring, was burning wood from an old chestnut tree. As the wood burned, an eighteen inch long steel blade emerged among the ashes. From the embers of the fire, his neighbor rescued and lovingly preserved the blade, which the neighbor judged must have been deeply embedded in the chestnut wood.

Over the years, the blade's owner had made some efforts to have the blade identified, but without success. A few years back, knowledgeable associates of the traveling television program *The Antiques Road Show* had assembled in nearby Abingdon to look at local collectibles. But when presented with the blade for examination and identification, none of the gathered experts had been prepared to offer an opinion as to its nature or origin.

Inspecting the Blade

So on May 10, 2005, I drove down to inspect the blade. Sure enough it was a real object. It is pictured in Figure 1.

The blade is just one-eighth inch shy of being eighteen inches long and appears to be made of carbon steel. It is double edged, and it is quite sharp. I didn't actually try to shave with it, but I believe I

could have. My notes made on that day record that “the blade has blood grooves on both sides and is 5 mm thick at the *ricasso*.” My informant and I looked up that word *ricasso* in Harold Peterson’s 1958 book *American Knives*.⁴ It’s the thick part at the base of the blade. I noted further that the “median strip” at the blade’s central axis is about 5 mm thick and the tapering blades (both edged) that come from that central strip are of roughly half that thickness and are offset along the central axis of the blade. The blade has distinctive markings near its hilt end, as shown in Figure 2.

So since a real blade had proved to exist, now came the job of identifying it.

Investigating the Blade

Not unnaturally, I began my task with the assumption that I was dealing with a European blade from the sixteenth or seventeenth century. When an internet search failed to reveal anything that looked like the blade in question, I extended my search to the stacks of Newman Library at Virginia Tech. In the online library catalog, my quest soon narrowed to Ewart Oakeshott’s book⁵ that features many

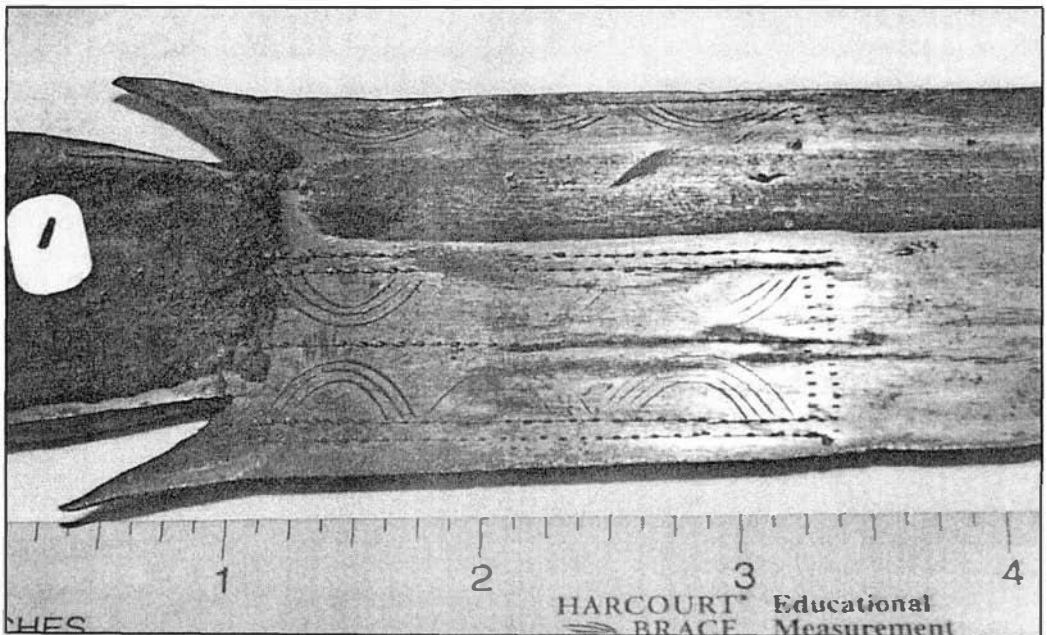


Figure 2: The Glade blade. Close up view of the markings at the hilt end. Photograph by the author.

sketches by its author of Europeans' bladed weapons from medieval times to the Industrial Revolution. Unfortunately, I couldn't get immediate access to the book; it was checked out to another library patron. Confident that this was the book I needed to examine, I initiated a book recall and waited with anticipation. In the meantime, not to be idle, I emailed a Spanish-period historian of my acquaintance, asking for the names of Spanish weapons experts in the Southeast. I explained the reason for my request, but told the historian that I wasn't jumping to any conclusions.

During this period of waiting, an archeologist expert in the colonial American period quite coincidentally arrived to lecture in Blackburg under the auspices of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), which both owns and maintains the Smithfield Plantation in Blacksburg and supervises the massive excavation project currently ongoing in tidewater Virginia under the banner of the Jamestown Rediscovery project. "Yes," said this Jamestown specialist, "I can put you in touch with an arms expert from the period you are researching. Send me an email." However, my email went unanswered.

At length, a couple of weeks after my recall request, I received email notification that the Oakeshott book had been returned. Aha! I jumped in the car and drove down to Newman Library, hopeful that at last the mystery would be solved. But repeated thumbing through the Oakeshott volume only complicated the puzzle. I read about, and studied pictures of, dirks and dudgeons and fusetos and flamberges, and not a one of them looked anything like the blade from Glade. The blade was something unusual, and I was convinced by now that experts from Jamestown and from university archeology departments in the Southeast were not likely to be much help – even when, and if, I got in contact with them. Obviously, the search had to broaden. So where next to turn?

Identifying the Blade

Stymied in the library, I went back to the internet, and in due course found www.knife-expert.com and its guru Bernard R. Levine of Eugene, Oregon. Levine is the author of several books about knives⁶ and has written more than 500 knife-related articles.

The email message I sent him on May 28, 2005, was short and to the point: "Dear Mr. Levine: Can you tell me anything about the attached blade? Thanks. Jim." I sent an electronic image of the blade along with the message.

The reply came after only eight hours and was equally short and equally to the point: "I'm not certain, but it appears to be a sub-Saharan African spear or lance blade. If the cross-section of the blade is stepped, kind of like this



that confirms it. BRL..." Bingo! The blade was indeed stepped, exactly as described. A sub-Saharan African blade it is.

In a follow-up phone conversation, Mr. Levine suggested the date of the blade as possibly the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.⁷

Not that I needed additional convincing, but purely coincidental visits to two artifact collectors over the following few weeks added further weight to the conclusion. The first collector⁸ amazed me by suggesting a sub-Saharan African origin after I merely waved a general outline of the blade in the air with my fingers. The second collector⁹ actually produced for my inspection an African spear with a gigantic spear point, about three feet long, with the characteristic curved profile and L-stepped blade (Figure 3).

Further library searching, this time with African weapons as the objective, finally produced documentary evidence of the blade's provenience. A Smithsonian Institution publication¹⁰ pictures two blades from the Fang people of Gabon in West Africa that are, with their median strips and backwards pointing spikes, of the same style as the Glade blade.

The African Background

Unlike in the Middle East or the Mediterranean, there was no Bronze Age in sub-Saharan Africa, and evidence for iron working appears very early. Radiocarbon dates ranging from 1,000 BC-1,500 BC have been established for a dozen or more iron-making sites in central Africa, a time period long before iron was being made in En-

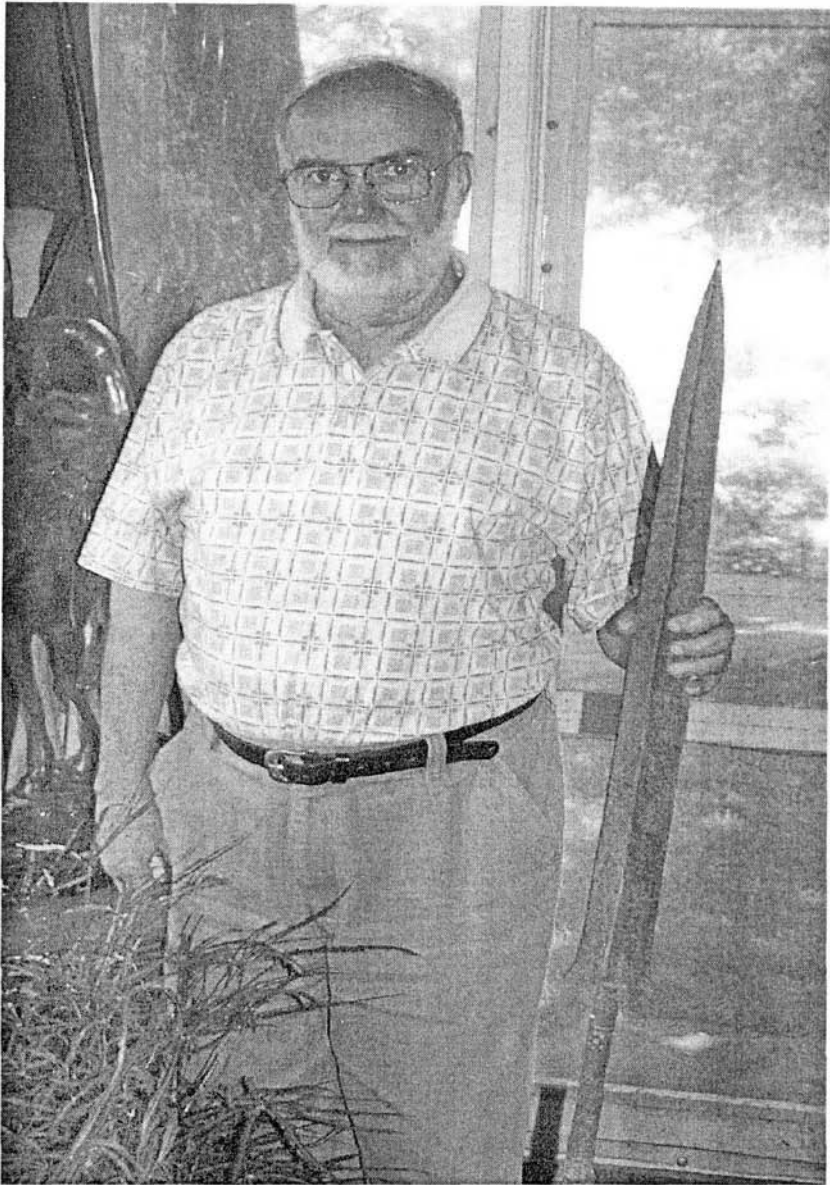


Figure 3. A large African blade similar in style to the one from Glade being held by its owner, Tommy Beutell. The blade of this weapon is identical in style to the Glade blade but over twice the size.

Photograph by the author.

gland, for example. Many additional sites all across Africa south of the Sahara have yielded radiocarbon dates from the first millennium BC, between 0 BC and 1,000 BC.¹¹

The same source referenced in the previous paragraph tells (on page 31) that an iron furnace at Otumbi in central Gabon, a country on the African west coast at the southeastern end of the Gulf of Guinea, has been independently radiocarbon dated to both 690 BC and 450 BC. Gabon is the traditional homeland of the Fang people. So, while the blade from Glade is likely of relatively modern manufacture, it was produced in a part of Africa with a 2,500 year history of iron making.

Not surprisingly, iron making, blacksmithing, and iron trading took on important cultural and socioeconomic aspects in sub-Saharan African societies. The societal role played by iron in its many aspects has become a major focus of study for modern archeologists and ethnohistorians.¹² Interestingly, some of the issues involved and some of the questions raised by these studies of iron show parallels with questions we ask and would like to answer about the comparable time period for the Native American inhabitants of the Southeast United States. In the Southeast, rather than iron, it is the uses and economy of objects made from steatite, marine shell, and copper we'd like to understand. The problems of interpreting and understanding ancient societies that left an archeological record – but not a written one – are universal.

Conclusion

The Glade blade is an interesting object. But its place and probable date of manufacture place it one continent and three centuries distant from the Virginia conquistadors.

What may we conclude about how the blade came to be in the embers of a fire near Glade Spring? Nothing. We might speculate that some attorney from nearby Abingdon, who perhaps served as an officer during World War One (there were such men), picked up the blade in a London curio shop on his way home. How the blade wound up stuck in a chestnut tree is anyone's guess. My guess is teenage sons of the attorney and horseplay (there were such teenagers).

There's the pity and the glory of archeology. After a lot of hard work, sometimes just telling a plausible story is the best result that can be achieved.

Final Comments

My retirement career as an amateur historian and improper archeologist has led me down some enchanting byways and brought me into contact with some fascinating people. Life once again teaches the old lesson: it is about the journey, not about the destination.

In my earlier article about the Virginia conquistadors I wrote: "It seems highly unlikely that direct archeological evidence of a Spanish presence in Saltville will ever be found. Together, the impaired nature of the Saltville environs, and what would have been very brief sixteenth-century encounters between Spaniards and Native Americans, weigh heavily against detecting a Spanish presence – but anything is possible; and those of us who live west of the Blue Ridge can hope."

So I continue to hope, and the saga of the search for Spanish artifacts in southwestern Virginia goes on. I've recently seen and photographed a curious dime-sized, apparently silver, coin with an unusual design. It was found after a rainfall on the surface of a newly plowed field in the Broadford section of Smyth County. I am still not jumping to any conclusions, but stay tuned...

Acknowledgments

Thanks first to Tom Merrihue, who located the blade, brought it to the author's attention, and arranged for the author to see it. Thanks to Bernard R. Levine, who provided the African identification of the blade and an interesting discussion of its probable background. Thanks to Gordon Barlow for confirming the African origin of the blade. Thanks to Tommy Beutell for hospitality and for showing the author his African blade. Thanks to Hugh Campbell, David Brown, and Michael Barber, who read and commented on earlier drafts of this article. For helpful discussions and sound editorial advice, thanks to Deena Flinchum. Thanks to the staff of Newman Library at Virginia Tech for their ongoing cooperation and support. All the mistakes, infelicities, and embarrassments that remain are the sole responsibility of the author.

Endnotes

1. Glade Spring is a small town in Washington County, Virginia, just off of Interstate Highway 81. It was once an important railroad junction of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad and the takeoff point of a branch line to Saltville.
2. Jim Glanville, "Conquistadors at Saltville in 1567? A Review of the Archeological and Documentary Evidence," *Smithfield Review*, vol. 8 (2004): pp. 70-108.
3. Tom Merrihue, Emory, Virginia.
4. Harold Peterson, *American Knives: The First History and Collectors' Guide* (New York: Scribners, 1958; reprint edition published by the Gun Room Press, 1980).
5. R. Ewart Oakeshott. *European Weapons and Armour: From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution* (Guildford, UK: Lutterworth Press, 1978). With line illustrations by the author.
6. Bernard R. Levine, *Levine's Guide to Knives and their Values*, 4th edition (Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 1997); *Knifemakers of Old San Francisco* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1998); and *Pocket Knives: The Collector's Guide to Identifying Buying and Enjoying Pocket Knives* (Scranton, Pennsylvania: Courage Books, 1994).
7. Bernard R. Levine, personal communications, May and June 2005.
8. Gordon Barlow, Staunton, Virginia.
9. Tommy Beutell, Tuckasegee, North Carolina.
10. Christopher Spring, *African Arms and Armour* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). The two blades very similar in appearance to the Glade blade are pictured on page 16 of this book.
11. Pierre de Maret and G. Thiry, "How Old is the Iron Age in Central Africa?" chapter 2, pp. 29-39, in *The Culture and Technology of African Iron Production*, ed. Peter R. Schmidt (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996).
12. Michael S. Bisson, S. Terry Childs, Philip De Barros, and Augustin F. C. Holl. *Ancient African Metallurgy: The Sociocultural Context*, edited and with a foreword by Joseph O. Vogel (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2000).