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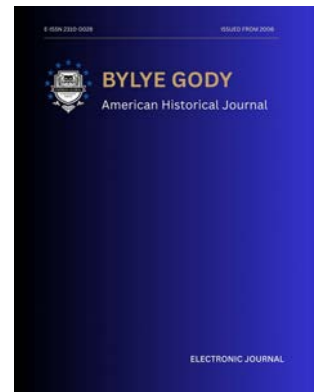
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Rare and Unique Artifacts of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar: A Source-Based and Historical-Typological Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines rare and unique artifacts held by the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University. The source base of the study consists of materials from six specialized museum collections, as well as rare editions from the P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library and documents from the Archive of Cherkas Global University. The museum's total holdings comprise approximately 1,000 artifacts. The study employs historical-systemic, historical-comparative, historical-biographical, and source-study methods.

As a result of the research, criteria were established for classifying museum objects as rare and unique, including early dating, personal attribution, association with prominent individuals and significant historical events, exceptional state of preservation, and the absence of known analogues. The study examines the fourth edition of *James Anderson's Masonic Constitutions* (1769), a document bearing the signature of De Witt Clinton, an autograph of Thomas Smith Webb, a book from the collection of Benjamin Brown French, and an early official edition of the *Proceedings* from 1835. Particular attention is given to personalized swords belonging to Civil War veterans Francis Laban Towne, Benjamin F. Howard, and Albert P. Bassett; an early ribbon of Raper Commandery No. 1; photographs of Knights Templar dating from 1869; and a surviving portion of the banner of Connecticut Valley Commandery No. 23.

The author concludes that museum artifacts possess considerable independent value as historical sources. Their comprehensive study in conjunction with written, visual, and biographical sources makes it possible to reconstruct little-studied aspects of the history, material culture, membership, and forms of public representation of the American Knights Templar in the eighteenth–twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar, P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library, Archive of Cherkas Global University, artifacts, books, documents.

1. Introduction

The history of the American Knights Templar represents an important area in the study of Masonic and social movements in the United States during the eighteenth–twentieth centuries. Alongside official documents, periodicals, and materials of individual commanderies, the organization's material heritage constitutes an important source for the study of this subject. Uniforms, swords, insignia, ribbons, photographs, banners, personal belongings, and other objects make it possible not only to reconstruct the development of the symbolism and material culture of the American Knights Templar, but also to trace the

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— 1213 —

biographies of individual members of the Order, the history of commanderies, and changes in the forms of public representation of the Templar movement.

The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar was established as part of Cherkas Global University on August 1, 2024 (Cherkasova, 2025: 189). Since then, six specialized collections comprising approximately 1,000 artifacts have been formed, about half of which are displayed in the permanent exhibition. The museum holdings are supplemented by books from the P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library and documents from the Archive of Cherkas Global University, making it possible to consider these materials as a unified historical and source-study complex.

Rare and unique artifacts occupy a special place within this collection. Their significance is determined not only by their age or monetary value, but also by their provenance, personal attribution, association with prominent individuals and events in American history, state of preservation, and research potential.

2. Materials and methods

The source base of the study consisted of objects from the collection of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar, a structural division of Cherkas Global University. The study draws on materials from six specialized museum collections, including uniforms and equipment, edged weapons, Masonic and Templar regalia, photographic materials, documents, and other artifacts. Additional sources included rare editions from the P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library and documents from the Archive of Cherkas Global University. This combination of sources made it possible to examine individual objects not in isolation, but within the broader context of the history of the American Knights Templar and the activities of specific Masonic organizations and individuals.

In selecting the materials, a combination of criteria was taken into account to determine the rarity or uniqueness of an artifact. These criteria included early dating, the limited number of surviving analogues, personal attribution, association with prominent figures of the Masonic movement, links to specific commanderies or significant historical events, distinctive features of symbolism and design, state of preservation, and the possibility of documentary verification of the object's provenance.

The methodological framework of the study comprised historical-systemic, historical-comparative, historical-biographical, and source-study methods. The historical-systemic method made it possible to examine museum artifacts as elements of the material culture of the American Knights Templar. The historical-comparative method was employed to compare objects according to their date of manufacture, typological characteristics, symbolism, and affiliation with different organizations. The historical-biographical method was used in the study of personalized artifacts and in reconstructing the biographies of their owners, including their military, public, and Masonic activities.

Particular importance was attached to source analysis aimed at establishing the date, provenance, ownership, and historical context of each object under consideration. The information obtained was compared with inscriptions and markings on the artifacts themselves, published *Proceedings* of Masonic organizations, biographical materials, historical photographs, and other available sources. This approach made it possible to use museum objects not merely as illustrative material, but as independent material sources for the history of the American Knights Templar in the eighteenth–twentieth centuries.

3. Results

Criteria for the Selection of Rare and Unique Objects. Artifacts were included in the sample if they met one or more of the following criteria: early dating (200 years or older); a known owner; an association with a Grand Master; the owner's participation in the Civil War; an exceptional state of preservation; or the absence of known analogues. The presence of one of these criteria classifies an artifact as a rare object, while the presence of two or more criteria places it in the category of unique objects.

Some rare and unique objects, such as books, are held in the P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library but are exhibited in the Museum. One such unique artifact is the fourth edition of *James Anderson's Masonic Constitutions* (Figure 1), published in London in 1769. The uniqueness of this book lies in the fact that, prior to American independence, it served as the principal constitutional and regulatory work for Freemasons in the Thirteen Colonies that subsequently formed the United States. In 1769, the first two known Knight Templar initiations* in the territory of the future United States also took place in Boston. Considering that no separate Templar constitutional or regulatory literature existed at that time, it is highly probable that the fourth or an earlier edition of *James Anderson's Masonic Constitutions* was used as a constitutional basis. Thus, this book provides a tangible connection to the period of the earliest Knight Templar initiations in America.

* Captain William Davis and Paul Revere were initiated as Knights Templar in 1769 (Dull, 2008: 16–17).

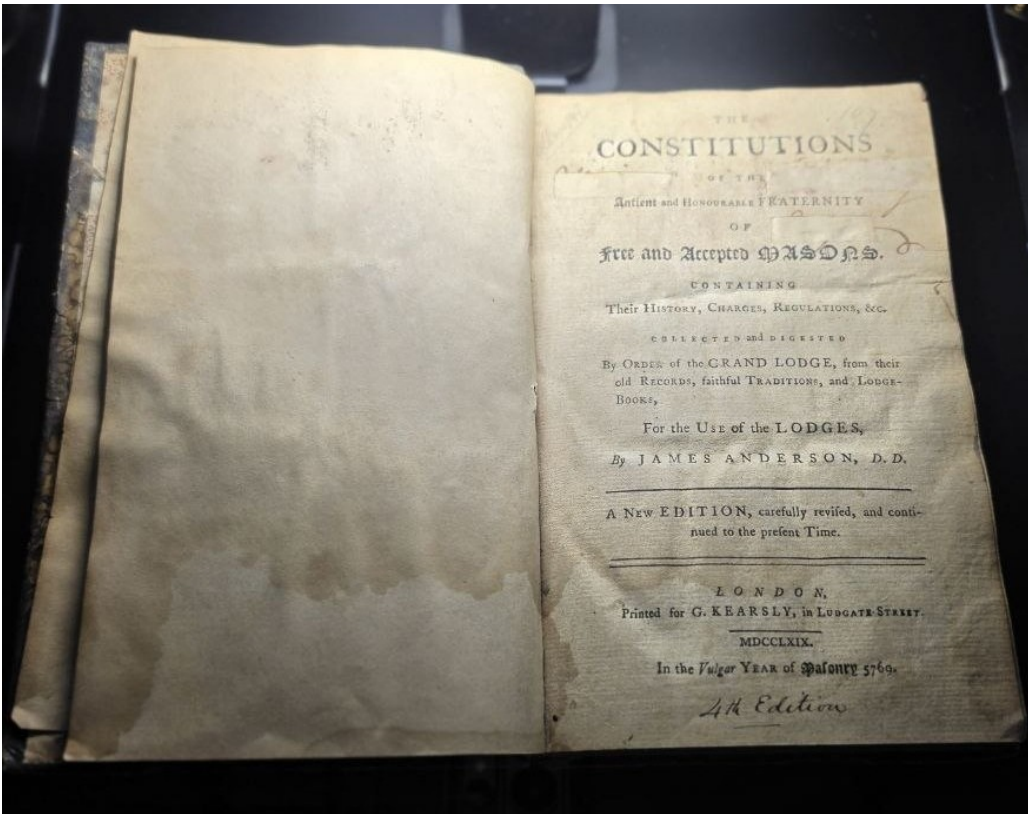


Fig. 1. James Anderson's Masonic Constitutions. London, 1769 ([Anderson, 1769: 1](#)).

Another important point is that De Witt Clinton (1769–1828), the future first Grand Master of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America, was also born in 1769.

In 1816, the Knights Templar established their national organization, with De Witt Clinton, then Governor of the State of New York, appointed as its Grand Master. He remained in this position until his death in 1828.

Another unique artifact displayed in the Museum is a document signed by De Witt Clinton in his capacity as Governor of the State of New York on March 18, 1820 ([Figure 2](#)).

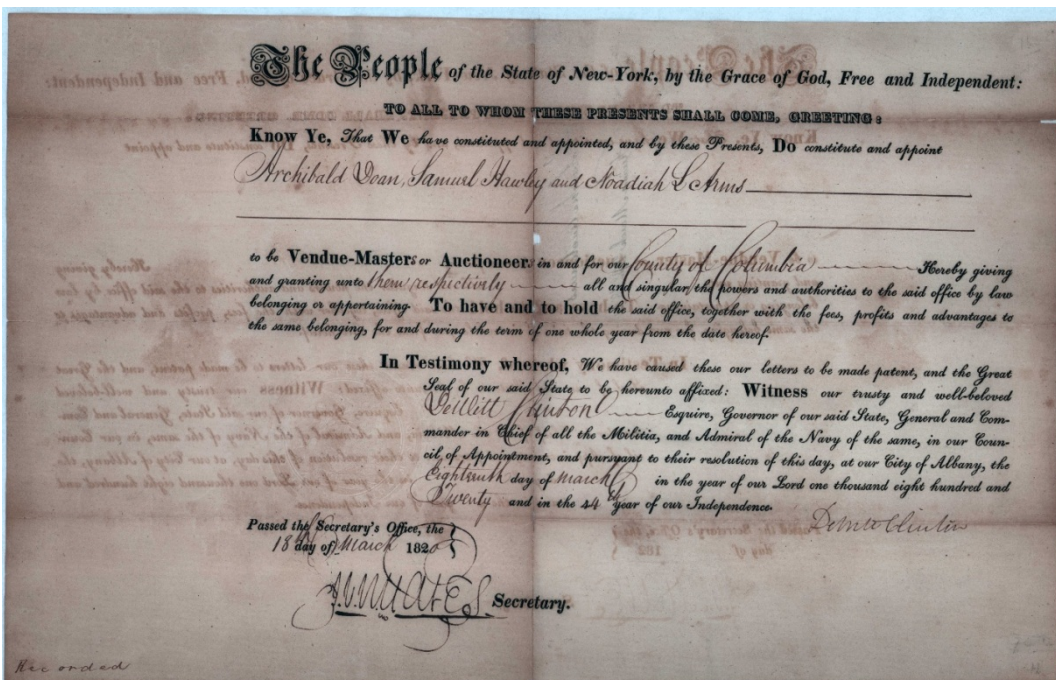


Fig. 2. Document bearing the signature of De Witt Clinton, March 18, 1820 ([Archive CGU. F. 3. Inv. 1. File 6. Fol. 1](#))

The establishment of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America was closely associated with the activities of another prominent figure in the American Masonic movement, Thomas Smith Webb (1771–1819). It would not be an exaggeration to describe Thomas Smith Webb as one of the principal ideologists of American Templarism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He was the author of the famous *The Freemason's Monitor*, first published in 1797 and subsequently reissued many times during his lifetime, as well as by his followers after his death.

The Museum's exhibition includes a personal autograph of Thomas Smith Webb, preserved on a letter that can be dated approximately to 1804–1808.

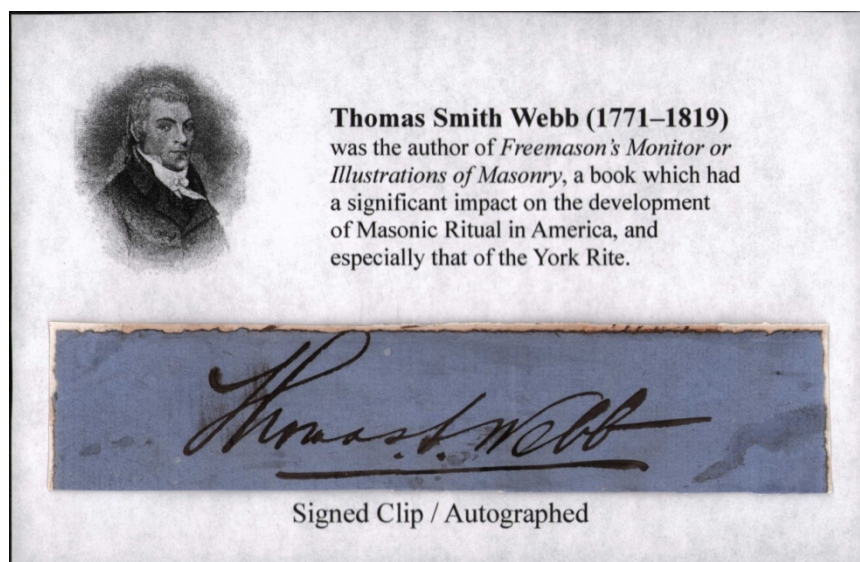


Fig. 3. Autograph of Thomas Smith Webb. 1804–1808 ([Archive CGU. F. 3. Inv. 13. File 8. Fol. 1](#))

Another unique object displayed in the Museum is William Duncan's *Cicero's Select Orations* ([Duncan, 1811](#)) ([Figure 4](#)), which belonged to the prominent American politician Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870).

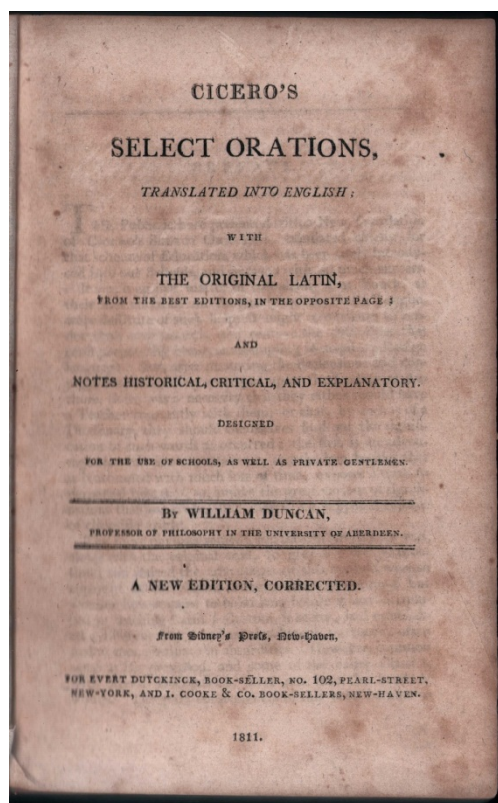


Fig. 4. «Cicero's Select Orations» by William Duncan. 1811

The book was part of the library of Francis Ormond French, the son of Benjamin Brown French (Figure 5).

The book contains Benjamin Brown French's bookplate, dated January 18, 1818 (Figure 6). It should be noted that Benjamin Brown French served as the sixth Grand Master of the Knights Templar, holding this office from 1859 to 1865 (Cherkas, 2026: 113-118).



Fig. 5. Information about the Owner of the Library – Francis Ormond French



Fig. 6. Benjamin Brown French's Bookplate, 1818

The next item is a rare artifact – one of the earliest official publications, *Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of the United States* ([Proceedings..., 1835](#)) ([Figure 7](#)). This volume of the *Proceedings* consisted of only 31 pages, 15 of which contained the Constitution of the General Grand Encampment.

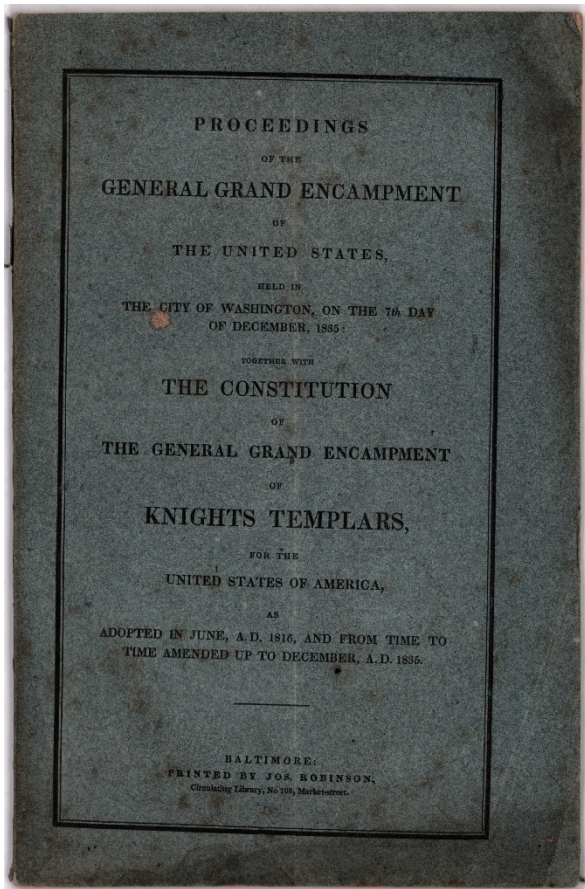


Fig. 7. One of the Earliest Official Editions of the *Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of the United States*, 1835 ([Proceedings..., 1835](#))

The next artifacts presented in the exhibition are rare objects from the Museum's collections.

Among the Museum's collection of swords, we would like to highlight the sword of Knight Templar and Medical Corps Colonel Francis Laban Towne (1836–1922) ([Figure 7](#))



Fig. 7. Sword of Francis Laban Towne ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 092/KT081](#))

Francis Laban Towne ([Figure 8](#)) was a veteran of the American Civil War, serving in the Union Army, where he rose from Assistant Surgeon, Medical Staff, to the rank of Major. After the Civil War, Towne continued his military service and eventually attained the rank of Colonel. During this period, he also joined the Masonic Order of Knights Templar and was a member of North Star Commandery No. 4 in Lancaster, New Hampshire.

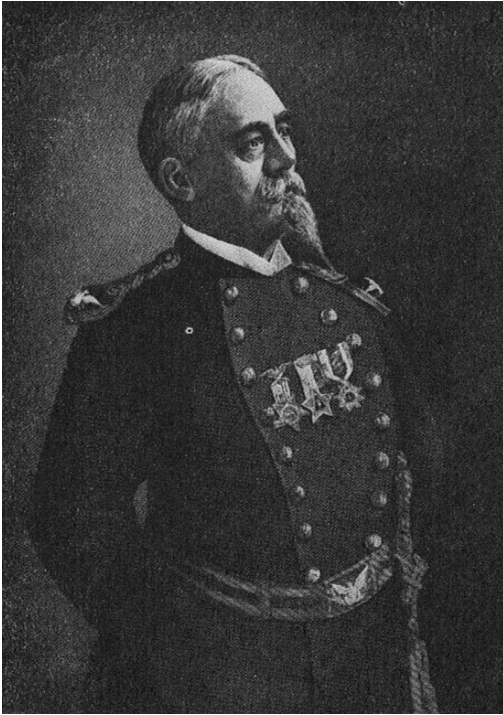


Fig. 8. Francis Laban Towne (1836–1922)

The next artifact is a rare presentation sword that belonged to another veteran of the American Civil War, Benjamin F. Howard (1835–1908), who served in the Confederate Army ([Figure 9](#)). The sword entered the Museum's collection without its scabbard.



Fig. 9. Sword of Benjamin F. Howard ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 075/KT068](#))

Benjamin F. Howard was a veteran of the American Civil War, during which he served as a company commander in the 1st Virginia Infantry Regiment. After the Civil War, he served as Chief of Police of Richmond, Virginia. At the same time, he was a member of Richmond Commandery No. 2 (Richmond, Virginia).

In 1879, the officers and men of the police district presented him with a Knights Templar sword bearing the inscription: "By the Officers and men of the 1st police district us a token of esteem. Jan. 1st 1879." ([Figure 10](#)).



Fig. 10. Presentation Inscription on the Sword Blade

The sword collection of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar includes several dozen swords that belonged to veterans of the American Civil War. For obvious reasons, it is not possible to examine all of them within the scope of this study; therefore, we will present a third and final example.

This sword belonged to Albert P. Bassett (1850–1931), who enlisted at the age of 14 and served in the 12th Maine Infantry Regiment of the Union Army ([Figure 11](#)). Albert P. Bassett was one of the youngest soldiers from the state of Maine to serve in the Civil War. After the war, he became a member of Lewiston Commandery No. 6 (Lewiston, Maine).



Fig. 11. Sword of Albert P. Bassett ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1. Swords. Exhibit No. 123/KT105](#))

Among the rare artifacts in the Museum's badge and ribbon collection, we would like to highlight the earliest Knights Templar ribbon represented in the collection, associated with Raper Commandery No. 1 ([Figure 12](#)).

This ribbon was produced to commemorate the 26th anniversary of the Commandery on May 1, 1874. Following this event, ribbons became widely represented at the Triennial Conclave of the Knights Templar, held in New Orleans on December 1, 1874 ([Taran, 2026: 292-316](#)).



Fig. 12. Ribbon of Raper Commandery No. 1, May 14, 1874 ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 349](#))

Among the rare exhibits in the Museum's photographic collection, we would like to highlight one of the earliest photographs of American Knights Templar: a photograph of Mount Horeb Commandery No. 3, taken in August 1869 and entitled "*Views of Masonic Encampment at Centre Harbor.*"



Fig. 13. Mount Horeb Commandery No. 3 (Concord, N.H.) 1869 ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 4. Photographic Materials. Exhibit No. 082](#))

Another photograph of a group of Knights Templar was taken at the same location ([Figure 14](#)).



Fig. 14. Group of Knights Templar (Concord, N.H.) 1869 ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 4. Photographic Materials. Exhibit No. 086](#))

An extremely rare exhibit on display at the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar is the upper portion of the banner of Connecticut Valley Commandery No. 23, dating from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century (Figure 15). The banner retains its original staff.



Fig. 15. Upper part of Flag of Connecticut Valley Commandery No. 23, KT (MHAKT CGU. Collection 5. *Personal Belongings and Souvenirs*. Exhibit No. 016)

This commandery was established shortly after the American Civil War, on December 22, 1866, in Greenfield, Massachusetts (Catalog..., 2026: 59).

4. Conclusion

As a result of the study, rare and unique artifacts displayed at the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University were examined. The development of the Museum's holdings, which began in 2024, has resulted in the formation of six specialized collections comprising approximately 1,000 artifacts. The Museum's exhibition is supplemented by materials from the P.A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library and the Archive of Cherkas Global University, making it possible to combine material, written, and visual sources within a unified research complex.

It has been established that the rarity and uniqueness of a museum object cannot be determined solely by its age or monetary value. Of considerable importance are the object's provenance, personal attribution, association with prominent figures in American Freemasonry and the Knights Templar, the owner's participation in significant historical events, its state of preservation, and the presence or absence of known analogues. The application of these criteria makes it possible to consider museum objects not merely as collectibles, but also as independent historical sources.

The study demonstrated the broad chronological range of the materials represented in the collections. The earliest of them date back to the period of the British colonies in North America. A special place is occupied by the fourth edition of *James Anderson's Masonic Constitutions*, published in 1769. Another group consists of materials directly associated with individuals who played an important role in the development of the American Templar movement: a document bearing the signature of De Witt Clinton from 1820, an autograph of Thomas Smith Webb from the early nineteenth century, and a book from the collection of Benjamin Brown French. The early stage of the institutional development of the General Grand Encampment is represented by one of its earliest official volumes of the *Proceedings*, published in 1835.

Personalized objects from the second half of the nineteenth century are of particular value as historical sources. The swords of Francis Laban Towne, Benjamin F. Howard, and Albert P. Bassett make it possible to trace the relationship between the history of the American Knights Templar and the biographies of Civil War veterans. In these cases, a museum object simultaneously serves as a source for the military, social, and Masonic history of a particular individual.

Equally significant are the early ribbon of Raper Commandery No. 1, photographs of Knights Templar taken at Centre Harbor in 1869, and the surviving portion of the historic banner of Connecticut Valley Commandery No. 23. These objects make it possible to study not only the organizational history of individual commanderies, but also the evolution of uniforms, symbolism, visual representation, and commemorative culture of the American Knights Templar from the second half of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

Thus, the materials examined demonstrate that the collections of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar possess not only considerable exhibition value but also significant scholarly importance. The comprehensive study of artifacts in conjunction with biographical, archival, and published

sources makes it possible to reconstruct aspects of the history of American Templarism that are not always reflected in the official *Proceedings*. In this regard, the further attribution, cataloguing, and introduction of museum objects into scholarly circulation represent an important direction for the study of the material heritage of the American Knights Templar in the eighteenth–twentieth centuries.

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