

# The Sword Cane of Albert Smith Hastings

by Patricia Kelleher Bartram

*Among the collections of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum (BHSM), and currently on display in an exhibit about Boylston's part in the American Civil War, is a sword cane that belonged to Boylstonian Albert Smith Hastings (1840-1864).*



**Albert S. Hastings**

**1840-1864**

*BHSM Photograph Collection*

Also known as stick swords, sword canes were most popular in Europe in the 1800s, often carried by aristocrats or gentlemen travelers and adventurers as discreet self-defense weapons. They were designed to appear as regular walking canes but were weapons containing a concealed steel blade that could be quickly and easily drawn when needed.

Albert's sword cane was acquired by the BHSM in 1976 from the Sawyer Memorial Library. The Trustee records indicate the relics of the Levi M. Hastings family including items of his son, Albert S. Hastings, a Civil War veteran of Company E Twenty-first Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers, had been received by the will of Mrs. Mary Smith Morey in 1920.<sup>1</sup> It is not known if he carried this sword cane into military service, or if it was simply a possession of his.



**Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Sword Cane**

**Sword with wooden sheath used as a walking cane**

*BHSM Collection*

Albert was the youngest of the seven children of Levi Moore Hastings and his wife, Mary Fay Hastings. Albert's father was a farmer with a sizeable farm encompassing 170 acres of land mostly of corn and oat crops, along with some livestock. As evidence of their prosperity, the Hastings' farm was valued at \$4,150 in the 1860 federal census.

As a boy he helped out on the farm and attended local schools. Then, having studied at Eaton's College of Commerce, Science and Literature in Worcester, Albert became a civil engineer and worked as a land surveyor. Sadly, his career would not be a long one.

## **Enlisted in Union Army, 21<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Infantry**

Within three months of the start of the Civil War, 21-year-old Albert Hastings enlisted as a Private in the 21st Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, Captain Bradford's Company E, for a period of three years. This regiment was organized at Camp Lincoln in Worcester. After mustering in July 1861, the regiment joined General Ambrose E. Burnside's North Carolina campaign. They fought there

<sup>1</sup> Records of the Trustees of the Boylston Public Library Beginning March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1905, P 77

in the battles of Roanoke Island, New Bern, and Camden, unfortunately losing each of these actions with casualties. A year later Albert was furloughed to special duty work as an orderly in a hospital in Alexandria, Virginia and then transferred to the army hospital in Newport, Rhode Island. He was discharged by a Surgeon's Certificate of Disability from Typhoid Fever in November 1862.

### **A Second Tour of Duty**

After his release, Albert returned home to Boylston to continue to heal. However, by the next spring, this young veteran once again registered to serve the Union and in December 1863 he mustered in for the second time with the 21st Massachusetts Infantry, Company E. He participated with his regiment in the Knoxville Campaign and the Siege of Knoxville, but very sadly died of an infection of the lungs in the General Hospital at Camp Nelson, Kentucky on 12 March 1864. He was just 24 years old.

### **Commemoration**

Albert's body was buried in the Camp Nelson National Cemetery. Wishing, however, to locally commemorate her brother's life as a land surveyor and soldier, his eldest sister, Pamela (Hastings) Sanderson, later donated 90 acres of woodland of Boylston's East Woods to serve as a memorial forest to honor her brother who lost his life in service to his country.



**Civil War Monument**

*Outside Town Office Building, Boylston, Massachusetts*

Additional remembrances of Albert Smith Hastings include: a cenotaph in his honor in Pine Grove Cemetery; his name on the *Civil War Memorial* outside Boylston's town offices; and his name engraved in gilded lettering on the marble *Memorial Tablet* currently on display at the Boylston Historical Society Museum.

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- <https://fashionablecanes.com/pages/history-and-function-of-sword-canes>
- Vital Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts