



PHOTOS BY ERIC MORTENSON/MHS



ON APRIL 14, 1862, the Third Minnesota Regiment presented this magnificent Tiffany

and Company sword to their commanding officer, Col. Henry C. Lester, “in token of their high regard and confidence.” The gesture was a genuine expression of gratitude for a leader who had fashioned the regiment into a model of efficiency in a matter of months. A resident of Winona, Lester had entered the service in April 1861 and acquired his first taste of command as captain of Company K of the First Minnesota Regiment. His gentlemanly manner and skill as a drillmaster inspired Governor Alexander Ramsey to appoint him to head the newly formed Third in the fall of that year. But nearly three months to the day after receiving this sword, Lester’s reputation as a man of untarnished honor would be sullied in action against the notorious Confederate cavalry wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest.

The ill-fated event took place on July 13, 1862, when Forrest launched an attack against Union forces defending the railroad junction at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Taking the federal camps by surprise at dawn, the Con-

federates quickly captured more than 100 soldiers. With only the Third Minnesota remaining on the field, Forrest devised a plot. Under a flag of truce, he invited Lester to meet with captured Union officers in Murfreesboro. Forrest lined the streets with as many Confederate soldiers as he could muster, giving the Union commander the impression that he was desperately outnumbered.

Upon his return to camp, Lester put the decision to a vote among his officers. In the end, a secret ballot favored surrender, and the Third Minnesota was relinquished with scarcely a fight. The regiment was paroled and returned to Minnesota to participate in the Dakota War and subsequent campaigns in the South. Lester and the officers who voted for surrender, however, were held accountable for the debacle at Murfreesboro and were dismissed from the service in December 1862. Disgraced, Henry Lester left Minnesota and returned to his native state of New York, where he lived until his death in 1902.

The Minnesota Historical Society purchased Col. Lester’s sword at auction in March 2005. Thanks to the generous support of our donors, this important Civil War artifact will now be preserved for future generations to enjoy. —*Adam Scher, curator*



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).