

"THE NEW ENGLAND COMBINATION GUN. 1730 to 1775"

by Benjamin F. Hubbell

A brief revue of conditions in the New England Colonies at this time may give you a clearer picture.

After one hundred years of the most intensive hardships, the settlers were beginning to get their feet on the ground.

The small settlements along the coast line from Connecticut to Maine were more or less established. The Indians had been pushed back to some extent, but were still raiding the more inland communities. England controlled the coast line of the New England Colonies. The French, the St. Lawrence Valley and beyond Main, also the Great Lakes region and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers almost into the Spanish territory along the Gulf of Mexico.

There was continuous conflict for rule of North America for many years, especially between England and France.

England was at war with many of the countries in Europe also. She was heavily in debt as the result. Taxes (that evil word) were imposed on all her people including the colonies.

The colonies had had it hard enough in establishing themselves in our so called wilderness and found it almost impossible to pay any taxes to the Mother country.

Thus they began to try to find some means of trade among themselves, with small boats along the coastal settlements.



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The skills of our craftsmen began to develop. Many who had come to this Country were skilled in various trades, and soon found their places in the Colonies. The Craftsmen in the Mother Country were sensing the competition from our possible export and saw to it that Parliament enact more laws and more taxes for their protection in all industries, with the exception of timber and iron which they had to import to a large extent due to scarcities. Considerable iron and timber had been exported from Virginia to Maine for some time.

In spite of British governing agents in the Colonies there had developed a sizeable sea trade all along the Atlantic seaboard. This "boot leg" trade grew along with the development of fast sailing schooners etc., until it reached the West Indies where things began to hum and the Colonies began to really grow and expand in all directions, including the population and further inroads into the wilderness. The French and Indian War gave England the control of all of the northern part of North America but not the complete control of its people. They had found a way.

They had fought with the British against the French and Indians and had some idea of military tactics etc.

Their weapons had come mostly from Britain but some had come with the "Boot Leg" seacoast trade from many European Countries.

These early weapons have been described in Harold Peterson and others in their publications.

Their weapons were for the most part flint lock muskets of all types, British, French and those cobbled up by local gunsmiths from all kinds of parts. The barrels could be French with British locks

or visa versa. The stocks were usually of American woods such as walnut, cherry and maple and more or less of the musket style. These guns are most confusing to the collector today but they were cheap and answered the purpose at that time. They were heavy consumers of powder, shot or ball ammunition which was very scarce. They were clumsy, heavy and above all, not very accurate.

A few fowlers had drifted in, in one way or another from European makers and were very pleasing to handle.

Most of these guns were made for the gentry over there and many were quite fancy, however, they were not suited for ball use due to their thin walled barrels. It did not take long for the gun craftsmen to design an all purpose gun for the trade suitable for hunting the heavier as well as small game so essential for food and protection at a very early date, say around 1730 to 1750.

A similar gun had been developed in Pennsylvania, many of which were also smooth bore. The famous Pennsylvania rifle is another story and whose history is well established in our modern books.

As far as can be documented, there was no rifled gun made in New England at this time. This statement may prove false as time and research goes on. The New England combination gun had many advantages over the rifle. It was lighter, could handle either shot or ball or in combination as their barrels had a very heavy breech also a sufficiently heavy wall clear to the muzzle. The problem of powder fouling was much less than the rifle.

The barrels were carefully bored and with a good fitting ball were surprisingly accurate up to 100 yds., as has been proven. Most heavy game was shot well within this range in our wooded areas, as it is today.

The powder, ball or shot consumption was also much less than the old muskets. They could also use a plug bayonet if necessary.

Just when or where the first of these combination guns were made and by whom, is still unknown. Their early history, like the Pennsylvania rifles is still quite vague.

The probability is that they were made at our inland frontiers away from the scrutiny of the British agents who were living here to enforce the colonies to buy from the Mother Country whose craftsmen wanted all such trade, naturally, also the shipping interests had their hands in this export trade.

With this as a background, the story begins -----

My search for documented material on these combination guns has, for the most part, been done in Connecticut, which seems to have been the cradle of our vast gun industry over the years especially in America.

There were very few records kept in this early period. The people were too busy earning a living. Many of our early records, such as they are, can be found in various institutions, but are so poorly indexed for various reasons that it is difficult to find what you want.

Many town records were destroyed or lost to fire and various causes. Newspapers were almost non-existent in this early period. The craftsmen seldom advertised in those that did exist for fear of reprisals. Very few of the craftsmen's account books survived for us to search. Many gunsmiths are mentioned, but there is a vast difference between a gunsmith and a documented gun maker.

The Pomeroy family of Boston, Hartford, Springfield and Northampton would be a good subject for some ambitious person to study.

The Hills family of Connecticut is the one I have been interested in for many reasons. The first, having a family gun, which I have here and the fact that there is some documented information to be found in our State. This gun is typical of most all of the New England combination type pieces.

Benoni Hills, the father of this family of gun makers was born near Hartford, in 1701. He went to Northampton Massachusetts and served his time as an apprentice with the famous Pomeroy family of our earliest gun makers, blacksmiths, tool makers and jack of all trades in the metal working field as was common at the time.

His training served him well as we shall see.

He married into a prominent Northampton family and came back to Durham, Connecticut. They had several children two of which followed his trade, namely, Medad and John.

After several years in Durham, he moved to the northwestern part of the State in the new frontier settlement of Goshen, in 1741 or 1742. The principal reason being the new discovery of very fine bog iron deposits in the nearby town of Salisbury, Connecticut. The quality of this iron deposit seems to have been the best so far found in the Colonies. It was especially tough, therefore well suited for gun barrels and the tools needed by the early settlers.

The ore was smelted and cast into pig iron billets of about 60 pounds each, then transported in heavy saddle bags and brought over the Indian trail on pack horses to a fabricating mill. By some mysterious means a small mill developed on a fine water power stream nearby where the billets were further processed into suitable sizes for the tradesmen in the area.

There had been a few such mills scattered around the colonies in spite of British restrictions which were not too stiff on iron products as mentioned before. With this fine material and the help of his two sons at hand, Hills was able to get into the business of making guns and tools which were in great demand. His reputation of making these fine combination guns soon spread as shown by this gun made for a relative of mine in Derby, Connecticut, which was about fifty miles away. The gun was made for Nathan Hubbel in 1757. He was a Captain in the British-American army during the French and Indian War. As far as I know this is the only gun made by Benoni Hills. Another similar gun was made by his son Medad for Noah North and is dated 1758. This gun made by his son, Medad for Noah North and is dated 1758. This gun was written up by Dr. J.R. Mayer in Antiques Magazine of July 1943.

There are a few Medad Hills guns around of similarly fine workmanship. Probably these finer guns were made on special order.

Dr. Mayer stated these guns were "all-around shooters" equally efficient for hunting, home defense or war.

These guns are all six footers, about .60 caliber, very fine brass hardware, brass or silver elongated front sight set back about four inches from the muzzle and a notched rear sight in most cases integral with the barrel and breech plug. The barrels are pin fastened to the stock which, in all cases known, are good curly maple, very slender and graceful, similar to the French style fowlers.

There seems to be some variation in the locks found on these Hills guns. Some are of the flat faced type and some curved but all very graceful and well engraved.

Fortunately most of the Hills pieces were so well made and durable that they survived into the percussion period and had been converted to this modern method of ignition.

This includes my gun also, when it finally came to me. It is now reconverted back to flint in a manner near the original, I hope.

Flint locks on all of our old guns were probably repaired or even replaced several times during the life of the gun.

The Hills family had the intestinal fortitude to put their name on their guns. In most cases their names appear on the long tang of the butt plate also they engraved the name of the owner on the side plate.

As far as I can find out, they were the only ones to do so among the various makers of this special type New England gun. We are very fortunate to have at least one of their makers in this early period to work with.

Both sons, Medad and John, carried on their gun and tool work after their father's death. Medad may have received the first contract for making muskets in this Country at the beginning of the Revolutionary War from Connecticut's War governor Jonathan Trumbull. With the help of his brother John, and their apprentices they were big producers of muskets complete with bayonets, etc. History states that there were twenty-eight gun makers in Goshen at that time working on guns.

Whether these muskets were marked as to who made them is hard to tell as none, except obvious fakes have been found.

After the War, John went to Charlotte, Vermont to carry on the business. Some of his guns and pistols are known. There are some other Hills pistols known that are original.

We hope that some interested person will carry on the search for more information on the Hills family as well as the unknown makers of the combination gun makers of New England.

Sources of information are as follows:

- The archives of The Connecticut State Library, Hartford
- The Library of The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford
- Also the study of these combination guns in New England Collections