

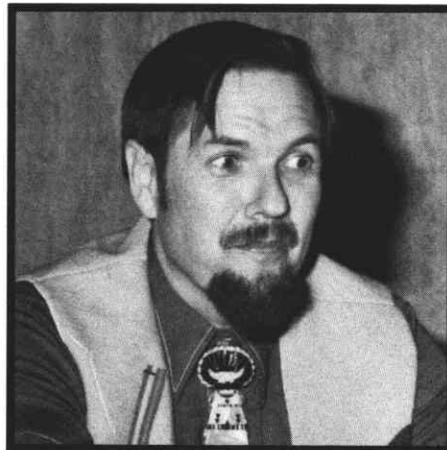
# Christian Sharps Was Born in Washington, New Jersey . . .

by Frank M. Sellers

Christian Sharps was born in Washington, New Jersey in 1811. Nobody seems to know much about Sharps' early life.

In that day and age, the way a man learned a trade was to apprentice himself to a master in whatever trade he wanted to learn. Sharps was apprenticed to a gunsmith in Washington, whose name was Speigle. But Sharps did not learn his trade and in 1830 he went to work at the arsenal at Harpers Ferry. There he came into contact with the first breechloader used by the U.S. Government in any quantity, the Hall rifle. These were made under the supervision of the inventor, John Hall. Sharps only lasted at Harpers Ferry about seven years and then moved to Cincinnati. As near as we can tell, he didn't do any gun work at all in Cincinnati. He worked for his brother on the repair of steam engines for boats and factories. As I say, we don't have any information on what he was doing as far as guns are concerned in Cincinnati, but in 1848, he applied for a patent on a breechloading gun, which was considerably different from the Hall, in that the charge was loaded completely at the breech of the barrel, instead of in front of the chamber which then closed down on the back end of the barrel. Basically, the Sharps action has a sliding breech block which slides up and down and closes off the rear end of the barrel. The patent model<sup>1</sup> was built on a Model 1842 Mississippi rifle and has a priming mechanism which is much like the capping device that people use today to shoot their muzzle loading revolvers. It is just a stick that the caps stand upright in and instead of passing the primer over the nipple each time, the nipple passed over the priming device. The first production model of the Sharps action was the Model 1849. It was made by Albert Nippes, in Philadelphia, and has a Sharps second idea on what a priming mechanism should look like. Again it takes the regular percussion caps mounted on a funny little wheel.<sup>2</sup> When it is loaded, you wind it up against a clock spring inside and it feeds the percussion caps through a little tunnel, under the nipple, and each time the breech block is powered and raised it picks up another percussion cap on the nipple. While it is a single shot rifle, it is an 18 shot repeater, as far as the priming mechanism is concerned. There weren't very many of these made. There was a contract for 100 of them let by Sharps to Nippes in 1849 and it was increased to 200, but the contract was never completed and only about 150 were made.

While Nippes was making this first model they decided the wheel primer was just a little cumbersome, and besides they don't work all that well, and there was a better priming mechanism available at that time. This was the Maynard tape primer device, which most of you are famil-



iar with, if not in the original guns, in their more popular form, the boy's cap gun. Combining the Maynard primer with the original Sharps actions gives us the Model 1850.<sup>3</sup> This again was made by Albert Nippes in Philadelphia (actually in Mill Creek, if you are familiar with the area) until late 1850, at which time Sharps decided that Nippes wasn't doing a good job and sold his patent to a man in Hartford. This man, whose name was George Penfield, started having rifles made in Hartford. Besides the 100 or so made by Nippes there were another 12 to 15 made by Penfield in Hartford and an additional 25 made by William Robertson, who bought out Penfield. Even with three makers there was total production on the first two models of only about 300 guns, so they are fairly scarce.

All the time this hand-manufacturing was going on in Philadelphia and Hartford, they were looking around for a manufacturer of some quality who could do quantity work for the Government contracts that they were hoping to get. Several of these early Nippes pieces were submitted to Government trials, and the Government, especially the Marines, liked the idea of a breechloader which didn't have the chamber that the Hall had on it. The only suitable manufacturer was Robbins and Lawrence of Windsor, Vermont. Robbins and Lawrence had been in the gun manufacturing business (as a Government contractor) for only about 10 years at that time. The company was originally founded by Asa Story in the 1820's, continued by Nicanor Kendall, and finally taken over by Robbins and Lawrence. One of the prevalent myths concerning these companies is that they operated for the most part on labor furnished by the Vermont State Prison.

The first model made by Robbins and Lawrence was the Model 1851,<sup>4</sup> which is as you can see, considerably different from earlier Nippes products. It is more streamlined, smaller in overall size, but it has larger and stronger parts. The lever is stronger and thicker and the breech block is both wider and thicker, all to meet government specifications for hard usage. The Army contracted for 200 of them, but only accepted 150; the Navy purchased 12 of them.



Sharp's patent model, built on M1842 Mississippi rifle.



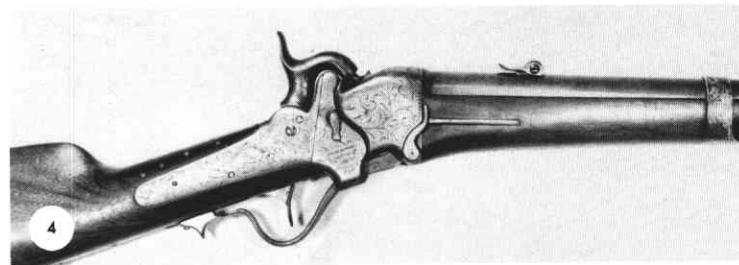
2nd model Sharps priming mechanism



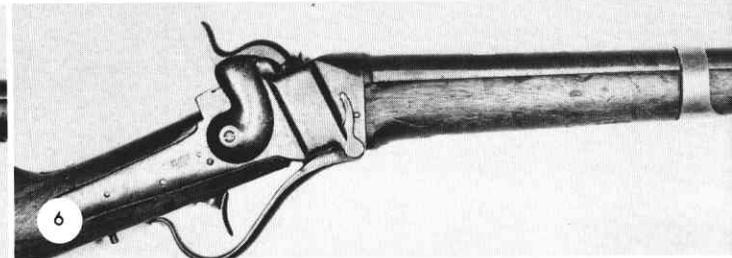
Maynard tape primer on M1850 Sharps.



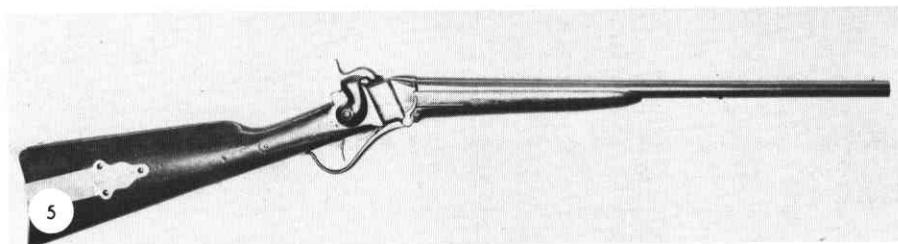
Sharps Model 1850 by Nipples.



Sharps Model 1851, Robbins & Lawrence.



Model 1853 with button lever pin retainer.



Model 1852 Sharps carbine.

The Model 1851 again had the Maynard tape primer, slightly different from the earlier Nippes Model 1850, but still the Maynard tape primer. They had to pay a royalty to Maynard for the use of this. Sharps invented another type of priming device which, while not as successful as the Maynard, was used on a large number of guns. It involved the use of a little pellet of fulminate of mercury. It looks kind of like an aspirin tablet, only much thinner. A whole tube of these primers are loaded in the front of the lock. As the hammer falls, it moves a mechanism which tosses the little pellet out through the air. As it is going out through the air, the hammer comes down and catches it. It sounds quite complicated, and actually it is, but it works very well. I couldn't believe it myself, so I took some out in a later model which I have a lot of, just to see what they would do, and it doesn't make any difference, you can hold them upside down, sideways, straight up straight down, high wind — it'll catch them every time! It just seems complicated. The government thought that maybe they should try that, so they canceled 50 of the 200 on their 1851 contract and took 50 of the new Sharps' primer instead. These were Model 1852 carbines and were considerably different from the Model 1851.<sup>5</sup>

The Model 1853 is the same as the Model 1852. I brought two carbines because they more or less look the same. The only difference between the Model 1852 and the Model 1853 is the way the lever retainer pin is held in. On the 1852 it is held by a spring mounted in the forearm; on the 1853 there is a spring loaded button in the frame itself.<sup>6</sup> The Model 1853 is an improvement, but Sharps didn't differentiate between the two models and the only difference is the Model 1852 was made by Robbins & Lawrence in Windsor, Vermont and the Model 1853 was made by Sharps in their own factory in Hartford. They had the same tooling basically, and a lot of the 52's were finished in Hartford after the plant did get started.

The Model 1853 is probably the most famous of the early slant breech mechanisms, mostly through a misnomer. It's called a John Brown carbine, because John Brown had something to do with a few hundred of them. The name has stuck through popular writing over the last 40 or 50 years. The earliest reference that I can recall is Eisley's article in the American Historical Journal of 1909, and the story started that a lot of these guns were shipped to Kansas in the free state-slave state period, which was from 1856 to the start of the Civil War. They were shipped to Kansas in crates marked "Bibles" and one of the more famous people who was involved in the anti-slavery movement, Henry Ward Beecher, who was a preacher from Brooklyn, made a statement in New York that there was "more moral force in a Sharps carbine than in a whole case of Bibles!"

The last of the slant breech was the Model 1855, and here again we have the Maynard primer.<sup>7</sup> They could hardly get settled on one thing, when the government wanted something else. In this case it was British government, who decided that the pellet primer wasn't a good idea, so they went back and requested the Maynard

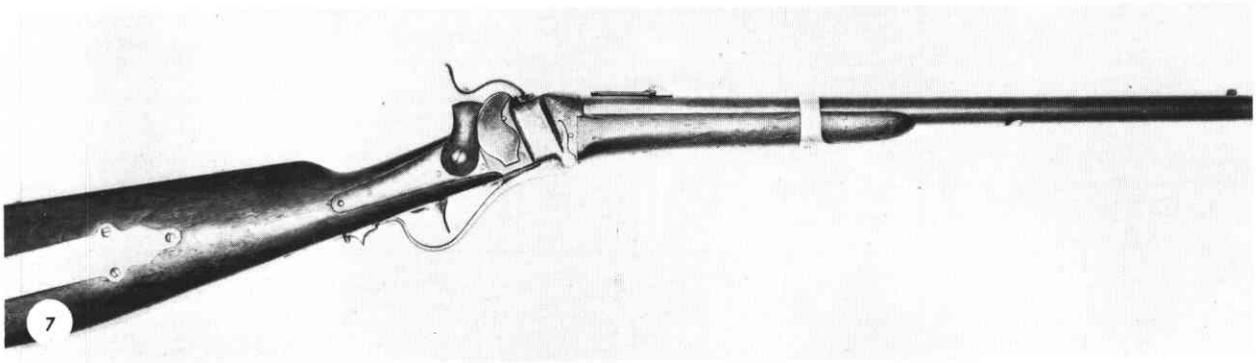
primer. The U.S. Government thought it might be a good idea to have a few of these new guns so they ordered a few. This particular one is a rifle rather than a carbine. This one also has another little feature which you don't find on too many Sharps. That is the self-cocking device. Fifty of these were made for the U.S. Navy on Rollin White's patent. Rollin White was the man who invented the cartridge revolver (at least he held the patent for it, which Smith & Wesson used to keep everyone else out of the revolver business for 15 years).

Starting with the Model 1859,<sup>8</sup> the first of the straight breech actions, they finally hit something that the Government liked and possibly there was a reason for it: there was a war going on. The Civil War of course started in '61, and the Model 1859 was well into production. The Government took virtually all of the Sharps made during the Civil War. As a matter of fact, they had some very interesting contracts, which read: "entire product of the factory for a period of 90 days . . ." In other words they took everything that was available, so when you see a '59 or '63 model you can fairly well be assured that the Government bought it. During this entire period (1859-1865) there were only 16 sporting rifles made, so they are fairly scarce. They were made from reject parts that the Government turned down for some reason. There were over 100,000 of these rifles and carbines made and purchased by the Government, and they were fairly popular among the troops. The troops took them home after the war, which they were allowed to do. Not only that, the Confederates liked them so they made them also.<sup>9</sup> The Confederates didn't have much faith in catching little aspirin pellets as they flew past in the wind, so they used regular musket caps on theirs. They made about 5,000 of them which, except for the priming mechanism, were just like the Hartford production. Considering the problems they had, and lack of skilled help, 5,000 in the two years they were in production is a pretty good turnout.

While all of this is going on in Hartford, Sharps decided it wasn't such a good idea to be working for them, so he quit. He went to Philadelphia and formed another com-



Model 1859 — the first straight breech.



Model 1855 — the last slant breech.



Confederate Sharps carbine.



Sharps' Philadelphia pistol rifle.



Sharps Model 1869 — the first cartridge gun.

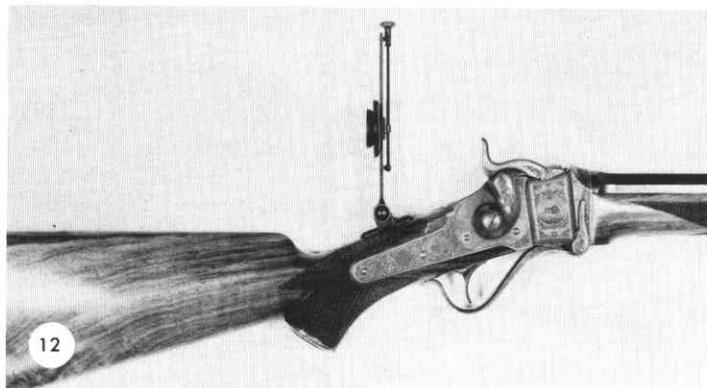
any of his own. He started making "pistol rifles", a very light diminutive thing.<sup>10</sup> It was not of sufficient size to meet the Government requirements, so his next product in Philadelphia was made in partnership with William Hankins. They made the Sharps & Hankins carbine and rifles, which are entirely different from those made in Hartford. Instead of a breech block moving up and down, it has the whole barrel moving back and forth. Only about 15,000 were made.

At the end of the Civil War, there was a large amount of ordnance material available on the market, due to the numbers the U.S. Government had bought during the war. Sharps at 100,000 roughly was one of the major gunmakers. In carbines only Spencer sold more. In addition there were 20 other makers of carbines and 30 musket makers, so there were several million weapons of various kinds available and this sort of killed the market for gun makers. They didn't make any great quantities for several years.

In 1867 the Government decided that all the Sharps they had around were obsolete, since they were all percussion. The metallic cartridge was fairly well accepted by that time, so they wrote a contract with Sharps to convert the carbines and rifles that were on hand from the percussion to metallic cartridge. In a little over a year and a half Sharps converted 32,000 carbines and 1,000 rifles, and this accounts for the 50-70 carbines which you see laying around at the shows today.

The first cartridge gun made by the Sharps rifle Manufacturing Company was the Model 1869, which looks just like the earlier Models of 1859 and 1863: a straight breech gun, the only difference being instead of the large percussion hammer it has a small cartridge type hammer which sits lower on the gun and it doesn't, of course, have the timing mechanism, as it's not required. The Model 1869<sup>11</sup> is a fairly scarce gun because it developed immediately into the Model 1874, which came out in 1871! I'll explain that in a minute, believe it or not. The Model 1869 has a very thick lockplate (the same thickness as the percussion, a little over ¼ inch thick) whereas the Model 1874 is exactly the same thing, except the lockplate is only ¼ of an inch thick. The Model 1874 is what is commonly referred to as the "Buffalo Rifle"; in contour it looks just like the '69 model.

The Model 1874<sup>12</sup> was the most popular of the cartridge guns, until the "new fangled" hammerless model was invented by Hugo Borchardt in 1877. This works just the same, a breech block drops vertically operated by the lever, and except that it has no hammer, it is basically the same. When this came out in 1878, they had a problem in their cataloging, because they had this model which they hadn't named and they had the Model 1874 which they also hadn't named. So instead of calling them the old model and the new model, they chose to call this one the Model 1878<sup>13</sup> and the other one the Model 1874, although it had come out in 1871. The reason for the 1874 date is that was the date of the reorganization of the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company into the Sharps Rifle Company, which is hardly important to anybody; some people



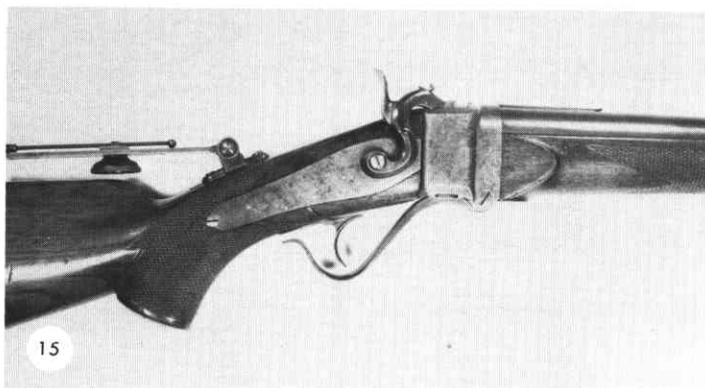
Model 1874 — the "Buffalo rifle"



Model 1878 — the Borchardt Sharps.



The rare Sharps shotgun.



Model 1877: Sharps' last rifle.

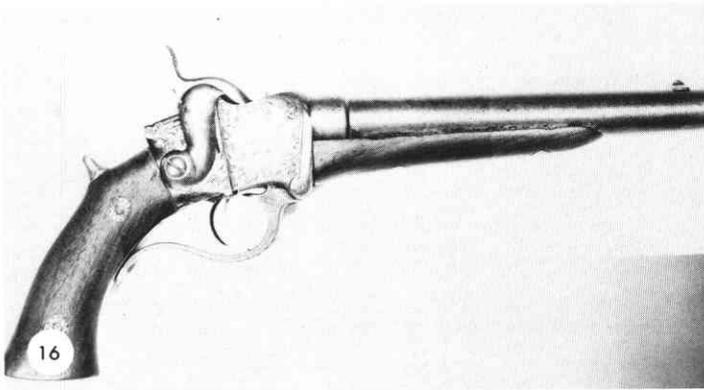
involved, same factory and everything, but they thought it was neat.

Except for some low production items, such as the bolt action rifle, the double barrel<sup>14</sup> shotgun and the Models of 1875 and 1877,<sup>15</sup> that finishes the long gun production of both the Sharps Rifle Co. and Christian Sharps.

The hand guns all were made at Philadelphia with one exception, the single shot pistol made at Hartford for Army trials.<sup>16</sup> Those were made shortly before Sharps left Hartford to go to Philadelphia; in Philadelphia he made the same basic thing, only more refined.<sup>17</sup> Only about 800 of these pistols were made.

In 1849, at the same time he got his basic patent, he also received another patent on a four barrel repeating pistol,

which he tried to get the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company to make and they said there wasn't a market for it, so he decided to go and make it himself in Philadelphia. I'm sure you are all familiar with the basic Sharps four barrel pistol. Sharps made about 150,000 of them, which is more product than the total of all models put together at Hartford. But it is a very simple thing and they were made in four basic models; .22 caliber,<sup>18</sup> the .30 caliber, the .30 short, or Sharps & Hankins type, which is a large gun and the .32 long or birds head grip,<sup>19</sup> which is the final production model. These were made in relatively small quantities, whereas the first two, the .22 caliber and the .30 caliber were made in large quantities.



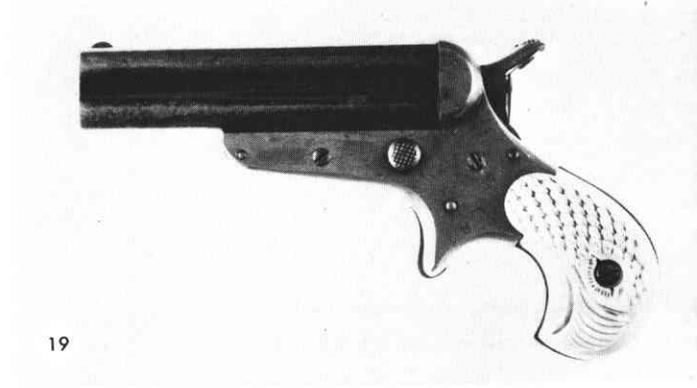
Hartford single shot pistol.



Philadelphia single shot pistol.



22 calibre 4-shot pistol.



32 calibre 4-shot pistol.