

1808 United States Contract Muskets

William M. Reid

THE BACKGROUND-FROM 1800 TO 1812

The Napoleonic Wars (1793–1814) were being fought in Europe primarily between France and England. The war brought conflict to the United States in the Atlantic as American merchant ships were being boarded by both British and French vessels; impressment of sailors took place and sometimes entire vessels were seized. During the early 1800s, in the American West, now known as Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan, battles between westward migrating Americans and British backed Native Americans were frequent. This peaked at the battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 and greatly aroused American sentiment.¹

With warclouds rumbling, the United States was in short supply of the basic infantry fighting weapon—flintlock muskets. After all, it had been 25 years since the Revolutionary War, the captured British muskets and muskets given to us by the French had been in storage with virtually no maintenance. Most were unusable. Two National Armories were in production, Springfield in 1795 and Harpers Ferry in 1800. In 1807, Springfield produced about 5700 muskets and Harpers Ferry produced 50.² This would not equip much of an army. The United States needed flintlock muskets.

THE CONTRACT

In April 1808, Congress approved the purchase of material to arm the militia of the United States³—the militia being defined as the individual States Militia. The U.S. Government had no reserve Federal troops, which made state and regional politics a significant factor in the Federal government. The United States Government decided to issue



contracts for the purchase of muskets that would be issued to the various states, who in turn would arm their militia. Federal troops were to be armed with Springfield or Harper Ferry Muskets.

Between 1808 and 1810 contracts were let to nineteen contractors for 85,200 flintlock muskets, each with a bayonet, for \$10.75 each. The muskets were to conform to a pattern musket issued to each contractor. Both Springfield and Harpers Ferry muskets were issued as patterns. Ten to twenty per cent of the dollar value of the contract could be advanced to the contractor under certain circumstances.⁴ In general, the pattern muskets had barrels 44 1/2 inches long, walnut stocks and iron furniture and were 69 caliber, with three bands holding the barrel to the stock, which weighed about 10 pounds (Figure 1). Inspectors were employed to do on site inspections of components and completed muskets prior to delivery to designated Federal Armories.

THE CONTRACTORS

In 1808, the United States Government advertised for contractors to furnish muskets. Nineteen contractors were signed (see Table). Some of the contracts were given to individuals, some to partnerships with all the partners involved in the manufacturing, some were partnerships with partners supplying financial backing and the others producing arms. There are muskets surviving from fifteen of the nineteen original contractors. Seven contractors, Evans, Gilbert, Henry, Jenks, Miles, Perkins, and Stillman, had previously



Figure 1. Profile of U.S. 1808 contract musket.

produced United States contract muskets under either the 1794 or 1798 musket contracts.

One other contractor of the 1808 era deserves to be mentioned. Eli Whitney was a 1798 contractor who was not issued an 1808 contract but instead received extensions on his 1798 contract. He continued to deliver muskets through 1809 for which he was paid \$13.50 per musket compared to the \$10.75 for the 1808 contract muskets.

THE LOCK MARKINGS

The lock has an eagle over U.S. in front of the cock under the pan. Each contractor provided his own stamps, therefore there was a great variety of eagles among contractors and even on muskets from the same contractor. The contractor's identification was usually his name, initials, or city/town where the muskets were manufactured (Figure 2); however, there are muskets without identification (Figure 3). A date may be on the lockface. A musket by a joint venture contractor like Getz and Westfall may be marked Getz, Westfall or Getz and Westfall. *United States Martial*

Flintlocks by Reilly has an excellent section on different lock markings of 1808 contract muskets.⁵

THE BARREL MARKINGS

An eagle head over "CT" in a sunken oval was stamped on the rear left side. CT stands for "contract" and is believed to represent the proofing of the barrel by the Federal Government. "U S" and usually a "V" are also located in the rear top or left side of the barrel (Figure 4). Other stamps may be present.

THE LEFT STOCK FLAT MARKINGS

The left stock is where the Federal Inspector placed his stamp indicating that the completed musket was approved and could be sent to the designated Federal Armory. There were several inspectors in different areas. All Federally accepted Arms had a cartouche on the left stock flat with the inspectors initials (Figure 5). There are probably as many or more 1808 contract muskets with Federally inspected bar-

Table—1808 United States Musket Contractors

Contractor	Muskets Contracted
Barstow, Exeter, NH	2,500
Bartlett, Springfield, MA	2,500
Bidwell, Middletown, CT	4,000
Brooke, Chester Township, PA	4,000
Evans, Evansburg, PA	4,000
French, Blake & Kinsley, Canton, MA	4,000
Gilbert*, Mansfield, MA	5,000
Goetz & Westphal, Philadelphia, PA	2,500
Henry, Philadelphia, PA	10,000
Jenks, Providence, RI	4,000
Leonard, Canton, MA	5,000
Miles, Bordertown, NJ	9,200
Perkins*, Bridgewater, CT	2,500
Shannon, Philadelphia, PA	4,000
Stillman, Burlington, CT	2,500
Sweet & Jenks*, N. Providence, RI	3,000
Waters & Whitmore, Sutton, MA	5,000
Wheeler & Morrison*, Stevensburg, VA	2,500
Winner, Nippes & Steinman, Philadelphia, PA	9,000

*No known surviving examples.



Figure 2. Typical lock markings on Henry manufactured musket.



Figure 3. Lock of U.S. accepted musket with no maker identification.

rels, and/or eagles/U.S. on lock plates without the left stock flat cartouche than with them. Muskets without the inspection cartouche on the left stock flat are not United States accepted arms.

THE STATE MARKINGS

As previously mentioned, the intent was to issue 1808 contract muskets to state militia. Some states identified their muskets with markings distinctive to their state (Figure 6, 7, 8). There were, of course, exceptions and some 1808 contract muskets were issued to Federal troops (Figure 9).

THE PROBLEMS

Sounds easy, contract for 85,000 plus flintlock muskets, give each contractor a pattern, inspect on site as they manufacture and pay \$10.75 each when delivered. What

really happened? First, this was a huge contract for 1808. Two million dollars per year for 5 years was authorized by Congress.⁶ Second, the private arms industry was not prepared: all arms were to be delivered within 5 years. Each musket had to be handmade, each part of the lock was hand filed and fitted, then hardened by heating and quenching (there were no interchangeable parts in 1808, talk about labor intensive!). Third, the United States Government was not ready. They could hire men to be inspectors but basically sent them to the field without training. One inspector would tell a contractor to make a part this way, the next inspector would inform the contractor to stop or would not accept work completed under the first inspectors instructions. Fourth, inflation was on the rise between 1808 and 1810, but with the onset of the War of 1812, it exploded⁷ and contractors had to compete for craftsmen. There was also a British naval blockade which reduced other supplies. The fixed price of \$10.75 per musket was not negotiable.



Figure 4. Barrel markings showing CT/eagle head and V.



Figure 6. Maryland marked musket.



Figure 5. U.S. inspector cartouche, V over CW, on left wood flat.



Figure 7. Massachusetts marked musket.



Figure 8. Pennsylvania marked musket.



Figure 9. 1808 contract musket issued to U.S. Artillery.

THE RESULTS

Faced with selling each musket delivered to the United States Government at a loss; other options were found. South America was in rebellion against Spain and Portugal. Their agents were willing to pay more than \$10.75 for a musket. After the start of the War of 1812, many local state militia units and state chartered privateers needed muskets in a hurry.⁸ Probably more 1808 contract arms were sold by the contractors to other users than were delivered to the United States Government, which is why we have 1808 muskets with the United States proofed barrels and/or eagle U. S. lock plates, but no final acceptance United States inspectors

cartouche on the left flat. Late in the contract period subcontracting was in greater use. Surviving records indicate barrels and other furniture were bought from other suppliers or traded among contractors.⁹

IN SUMMARY

The 1808 United States Musket Contract could be considered a failure. Legal hassles continued into the 1820s with lawsuits or the threat of lawsuits and countersuits between the government and contractors. Only about 42,700, or approximately 50%, of the 85,200 flintlock muskets were delivered to the United States Government¹⁰ and they were of dubious quality as indicated in contemporary United States government correspondence.¹¹ However, this contract was a major step in the evolution of the military and industrial contractor relationship—both the United States Government and private contractors learned more about dealing with each other.

NOTES

1. *History Channel.com*, War of 1812
2. Moller, Vol II, p. 34
3. Glockman, p. 79
4. Moller, p. 165
5. Reilly
6. Gluckman, p. 79
7. BCA Publication, p. 20
8. Moller, p. 169
9. Moller, p. 196
10. Moller, p. 175
11. Hicks, p. 36

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BCA Publications Ltd. *The Bank Credit Analysis*, Oct 2002.
- Gluckman, Colonel Arcadi *Identifying old U.S. Muskets, Rifles & Carbines*, Bonanza Books.
- Hicks, Major James E. *U.S. Military Firearms 1776—1756*, Borden Publishing Co.
- History Channel.com *The Expanded Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Moller, George D. *American Military Shoulder Armes Vol II*, University of Colorado, 1993.
- Reilly, Robert M. *United States Martial Flintlocks* Andrew Mowbray, Inc.