

United States Surcharges: Continental Ownership of Arms and Accoutrements

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Arms collectors have long been attracted to arms and accoutrements associated with the American Revolution, particularly those with surcharges. Surcharges are collectible both because of their rarity, and their documentation of an arms' or accoutrements' military use. My father-in-law, the late William Richard Gordon, was passionate about surcharges, and his collection includes excellent examples. Between my father-in-law's passion, the many examples I have seen exhibited by Society members, and the many examples we all have seen on our tours, I became interested in these markings. This article is a summary of my findings.

The need to identify arms and accoutrements as continental property was based on a shortage of these items after the Spring of 1776. The shortage was multifactorial, and although a lack of production is usually cited by historians, important contributory factors included soldiers not maintaining the weapons, a lack of sufficient field armorers to perform repairs, and the need for short-term militia soldiers who had a propensity for taking their arms and ammunition home with them. General George Washington attempted to overcome these problems by borrowing arms from the



States and purchasing weapons from private individuals¹. However, as the 1777 campaign commenced, weapons were scarce and foreign procurement of weapons remained problematic. Luckily, the crisis would be partially abated by the secret assistance of France and Spain. Washington and the Continental Congress could not count on this help at the start of the 1777 Campaign. To institute greater control over



Figure 1. 1774 French Charleville musket

arms, on February 14, 1777, the Board of War recommended to the Continental Congress that all Continental Arms be stamped "U States". On February 24, 1777, the Continental Congress resolved that Arms and Accoutrements shall be stamped with the words "United States". All arms already made would receive the impression, and those hereunder to be manufactured to be stamped with said words on every part comprising the stand. This resolution was implemented by George Washington who on March 31st, directed Benjamin Flower, of the Commissary general's department, to have all arms stamped. On April 18th, Washington also issued a general order from his headquarters in Morristown, New Jersey, directing that all arms in the hands of troops and in stores were to be marked immediately².

Based on my examination of surviving examples, surcharges can be divided into four periods.

Period 1—Brands

The earliest surcharges on muskets are brands, both **United States** and **U States**. These earliest surcharged weapons are only on the stock and are the rarest.

Period 2—Brands and Stamps

To conform to Washington's order, **U STATES** brands in combination with **U S lock** and barrel stamps, are used.

After the British evacuate Philadelphia, the Continental Armory returns and begins to stamp the barrels and locks of muskets which are coming into the Armory for repair under Joseph Perkin. These muskets are identified with both **US** brands and **US** stamps. An IP brand presumably Joseph Perkin's inspector mark, appears on the stock.

Period 3—Stamps only

After the Revolution, there was prolific stamping of muskets stored in the armories. These included new French muskets, repaired muskets and re-repaired muskets. These stamps are post-Revolutionary surcharges stamped by Continental armorers on existing locks and barrels of muskets and bayonets. The muskets are identified by surcharges on the barrel and lock, and a small inspector's mark branded on the stock, usually behind the trigger guard or adjacent to the side plate. John Nicholson, a continental armour, brands some muskets on the stock or behind the butt plate with the initials (IN).

Period 4—Federal Assembled muskets with Brands and Stamps

A 7/16" (48 point) stamp or brand has been identified (Note A). This surcharge most likely is associated with the purchase of arms by the State of Maryland in 1808.

The examples below will illustrate this classification.



Figure 2. 1772 French St. Etienne musket



Figure 3. 1763 French Charleville musket

Period 1

Figure 1 shows a model 1774 French Charleyville Musket. On the reverse of the stock is a 3/8" (36 point) **United States**. The letters appear to be individually branded. This example has faint markings on the side plate, which appear to be military and are similar to markings found on the Rappahannock Forge pistols. Thus, one can speculate that this musket may have a Virginia connection and might have been carried by one of Washington's Life Guards. Washington's earliest order was that muskets be marked United States, and pre-Revolutionary Virginia muskets, were marked in a similar fashion on the stock³.

Figure 2 shows the evolution of the United States brand. It has moved to the understock of this model 1772 St. Etienne musket. The size remains the same 3/8" (36 point) but the font is narrower to allow the brand to fit behind the trigger guard. There is a large 1 1/4" **US** branded into the butt stock. There are three other examples, that I am aware of that are similarly branded. This **US** marking is branded over what appear to be engraved initials. This **US** marking is not an arsenal mark, but that of a field armorer, and would indicate military use as late as the War of 1812.⁶

Figure 3 shows the **U States** brand (3/8"-36 point), which is probably the most common surviving brand of the Revolution. The **U States** brand is also seen on pistols (Figure 4), canteens (Figure 5), and cartridge boxes (Figure 6). Locks and barrels of these muskets may be stamped with a 3/8" (36 point) **US**.

Period 2

Figure 7 shows a model 1773 Charleville musket, with evidence of repair at the Continental Armory. This musket has been stamped on the lock and barrel with what has been

described as the "loopy US" (Note B) that is a U and an S, which are very thin, and individually stamped, such that on different examples, they will run together. The stamped **US** is 3/8" (36 point). In addition, there is a **US** branded into the stock, and an **IP** also branded into the stock. The **IP** presumably is Joseph Perkin, inspector of the Continental Armory. These letters, I, P, U, and S, appear to be from the same brand set. They are also 3/8" (36 point).⁷

Evidence that these surcharges are from the Revolutionary War period are supported by Figure 8, which is an excavated belt axe from Fort Hunterton, a site only used only during the Revolutionary War, which is located



Figure 5. "U. States" canteen

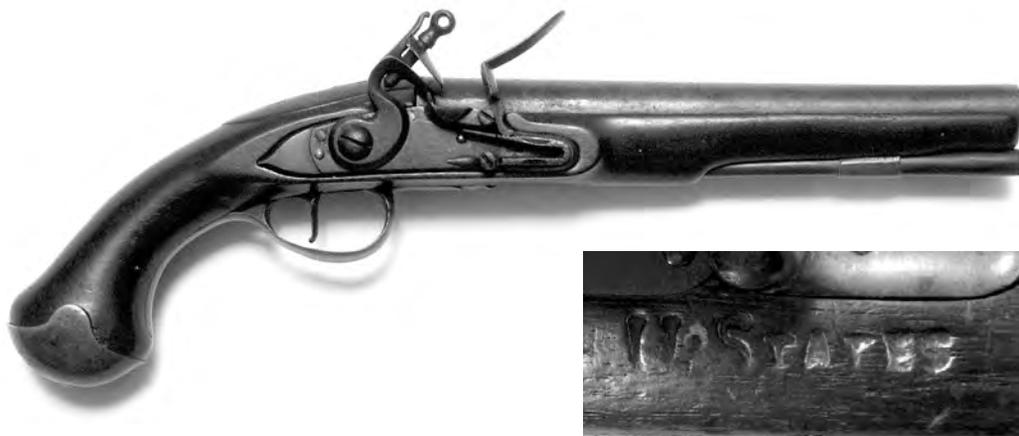


Figure 4. Revolutionary War pistol branded "U. States"

close to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The I and the S stampings are from the same brand set as the previous musket. Thus, we can be reasonably sure that the brand set used in the branding of this musket and stamping on the belt axe can only be from the Revolutionary War period.

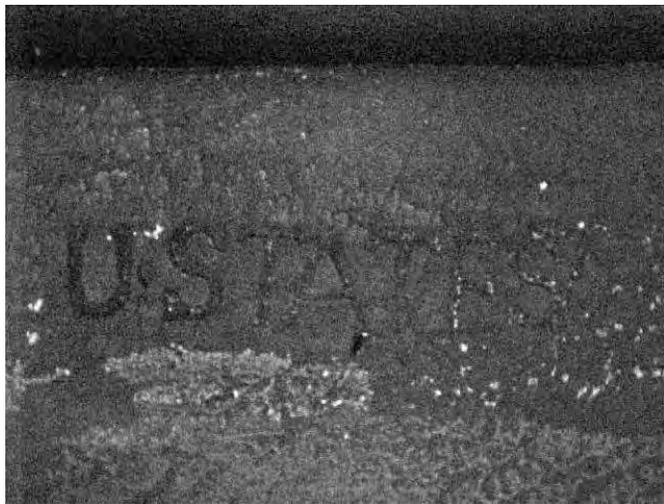


Figure 6. "U States" cartridge box

Period 3

Not to be confused with arms branded and stamped during the Revolutionary War, is the next example, Figure 9, which is a model 1766 Charleville, with stamped US on the lock and barrel. This US is the US of John Nicholson, who was a prolific Continental Armorer, stamping some 6,000 muskets from 1791 to 1794.³ We know that this musket was stamped by Nicholson by the IN, which is branded on the stock behind the butt plate (Figure 10). The U S is 1/4" (24 point). The IN is 5/16" (28 point).⁸

In addition to muskets, accoutrements also were stamped during these periods. Figures 11-13 show supply powder horns with military markings. There are very few horns that have been surcharged. Figures 11 and 12 surcharges are 3/8" (36 point) and Figure 13 shows a field armorer's mark. Figure 14 shows a belt axe with a large US, which appears to be a blacksmith type US rather than an arsenal US. Most likely, this US was placed by a field armorer between 1775 and 1825. Figure 15 shows a military belt axe, having the date 1777, with the number 3, the maker's mark Rutland, and a reverse IS 3/8" (36 point), in a heart-type cartouche. The IS as in the Fort Hunterton belt axe is a "Countrified" version of the arsenal US. William Richard Gordon believed that armorers may have confused the U for a J, and struck an I by mistake. The



Figure 8. Revolutionary War axe excavated from Fort Hunterton



Figure 7. 1773 French Charleville musket

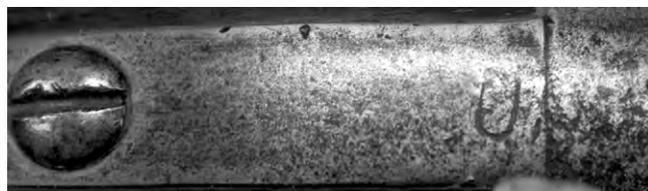


Figure 9. 1766 French Charleville musket



Figure 10. "IN" behind butt plate



Figure 11. "U. States" supply horn

3/8" (36 point) size of the stamp lends credence to his theory. Figures 16-18 show American bayonets, stamped with the 3/8" (36 point) US. The apparent size differences are due to stamping technique.⁹

Period 4

The Gordon collection has a Germantic lock with a 7/16" (48 point) stamped US. The hammer is a replacement (Figure 19). This lock was found doing the paving of a parking lot in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The remainder of the musket had been discarded. This US is identical to the US branded into one musket in the Benninghoff collection, and two muskets in the Flanagan collection. These three muskets are stamped with an "M" on the barrel; the stock on the Benninghoff musket has been confirmed as US black walnut by the United States Forrest Service, and it is felt that the Flannigan examples also are U.S. black walnut. These muskets have a 3/16" (18 point) IP branded on the stock, presumably Joseph Perkin. The Craig Nannos collection contains a broken first model British Brown Bess musket that also has a 3/16" (18 point) IP. The Benninghoff musket has a

post-Revolutionary War French lock, and a pin-fastened English barrel. The Flannigan muskets have Germantic locks similar to the Gordon collection. One Flannigan musket has a Germantic barrel which is banded; the other has a British barrel with an elephant engraving, which is pin fastened (Figure 20).

How can we reconcile these findings of American walnut stocks, branded with a 7/16" (48 point) US and a small IP, locks and barrels from Germany and France, some post-Revolutionary War, stamped with an "M" on the barrel? James Wertemberger has done extensive research, and found in the Maryland archives an 1808 contract in which arsenal weapons from Harper's Ferry were sold to the State of Maryland. These weapons were assembled from spare parts and broken muskets. Perkin probably put his inspection mark on the Nannos British musket, for use as parts. The US,



Figure 12. "US" supply horn



Figure 13. Supply horn with Field Armorer's markings



Figure 14. Belt axe with Field Armorer's markings



Figure 15. Military belt axe with arsenal "IS"

which is branded on the stocks, may be from a brand left over from the Revolution, but its size is the same as "Maryland" branded into the stocks of muskets used during the war of 1812. Thus, this U S most likely was not branded during the Revolutionary War period, but some 30 years later.¹⁰

To summarize, a musket or accoutrement which saw service in the Revolutionary War should have a 3/8" (36

point) branded **United States** or **U States**. Surcharged muskets with a stamped loopy 3/8" (36 point) US on locks or barrels, are weapons which were used and/or repaired during



Figure 16. "Wylie" bayonet



Figure 17. "Eckfelt" bayonet



Figure 18. "US" bayonet



Figure 19. German lock



Figure 20. Federal "US" musket (A-D)

the Revolution. Smaller US stamps should be considered post-Revolutionary War marks. Stamps or brands which are larger may be field armorers marks or Federal arsenal marks. This is not an exhaustive study on the subject, and I encourage research in this area to help current and future collectors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I deeply appreciate the support from my ASAC colleagues, without whose counsel, patience, and hospitality, this study would not have been possible.

Note A. Surcharges were measured with a caliper, both directly and from rubbings of the musket or accoutrement being studied. The caliper was then placed on an engineer's measure and the size recorded. Small size discrepancies were eliminated by matching the caliper measurement to a standard printers measure, a point. These discrepancies occur based on the angle stamped and age of the stamp. Both measurements are listed in the text.

Note B: The “loopy” designation most likely represents a courier font. The other font used during this period is Bookman Old Style.

Note C: Figures 3, 16, 17, 20D: J Craig Nannos Collection; Figures 4, 9, 11: Robert Sadler III Collection; Figure 6: Don Troiani Collection; Figure 20A: Herman Benninghoff III Collection; Figure 20B, C: Helen and Edward Flanagan Collection.

Note D: Photographs by CPT David J. Jackson, Director of Photography Valley Forge Military Academy and College

Note E: Surcharges Figures 1-5, 9-16, 18, actual size

NOTES

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