

Some Thoughts on the American Flintlock Pistol

by: Samuel E. Dyke

The American flintlock pistol was developed simultaneously with the Kentucky or Pennsylvania rifle. This development was not limited to Pennsylvania, alone, but wherever American long rifles were being made by colonial riflemakers or gunsmiths. The gunsmiths of Pennsylvania turned out more of the so-called Kentucky rifles and pistols than those of any other state.

The question has been raised many times: why did most of the early American rifles and pistols come from Eastern Pennsylvania. I think among the many reasons are two basic ones of equal and necessary importance. First, the gunsmiths of Central and Southern Europe migrated and settled in Pennsylvania, where the climate, soil and people were like their homeland where the markets for their skills were in great demand. Secondly, abundant iron made from local mines and furnaces were forged in great quantities, thus making the barrel and lock manufacture economical and desirable.

Pennsylvania had great tracts of wood available and necessary for the stocks of these rifles. Finally, there was a great demand for a gun that would shoot farther and straighter than the European arms.

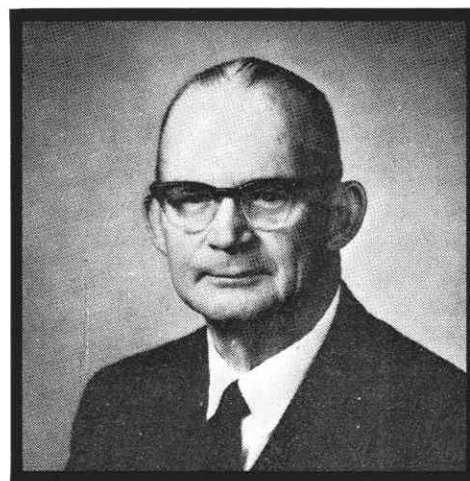
The Kentucky pistol, or, in fact, any hand gun, was usually carried for the protection of a person where a long rifle was impractical to use. However, the pistol, by comparison to the rifle, was ineffective at long range and was generally used at not more than 50 feet distance. Because its effectiveness was limited to fairly close range, the pistol was used primarily for personal combat.

The American Flintlock Pistol was made during three basic periods of American history: first, prior to and during the Revolutionary War; second, prior to and during the War of 1812, and third, during the beginning of the expansion of the West.

There are three persons whom I believe should be credited with the identification of this early pistol as a product of the same gunsmiths who made the Kentucky rifle: they are Mr. John Huston of Philadelphia; Mr. Joe Kindig, Jr. of York, Pennsylvania; and Mr. Calvin Hetrick of New Enterprise, Pennsylvania.

These men saw in the Kentucky pistol the same workmanship and nicety of stocking, engraving and lock details, as were found in the early rifles. They compared the long rifles and pistols, detail by detail, and satisfied themselves that the pistols were a product of the same gunsmiths who made the Kentucky rifle.

Gun collectors have accepted the fact that certain pistols, stocked in curly maple, were distinctly an American



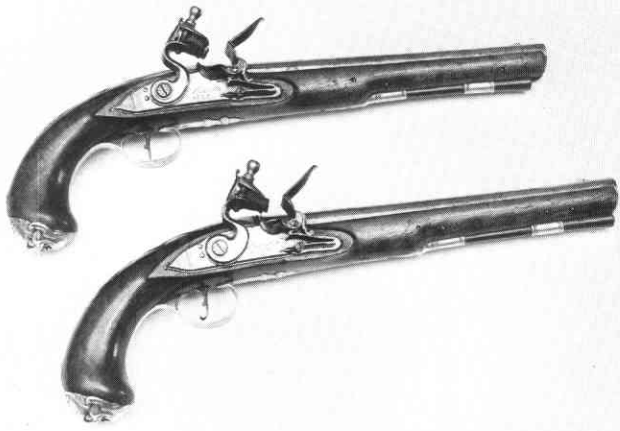
product. However, there were Kentucky rifles and pistols stocked, prior to the revolution, in walnut and cherry woods. These woods, plus curly maple, were native to France, England and Germany; however, they were seldom used by the leading European producers of similar arms. Therefore, the fact that a pistol is stocked in curly maple is not positive proof that it was made in America.

Also, many early American made arms, not stocked in curly maple or cherry, have been neglected by collectors and students who assumed them to be of European origin. Further, these early pistols were stocked in walnut and other fruit woods and had the lion mask or bear-faced butt cap, which features earmarked the arms as European. Further, silver hardware rather than brass or iron identified these arms as possibly European origin.

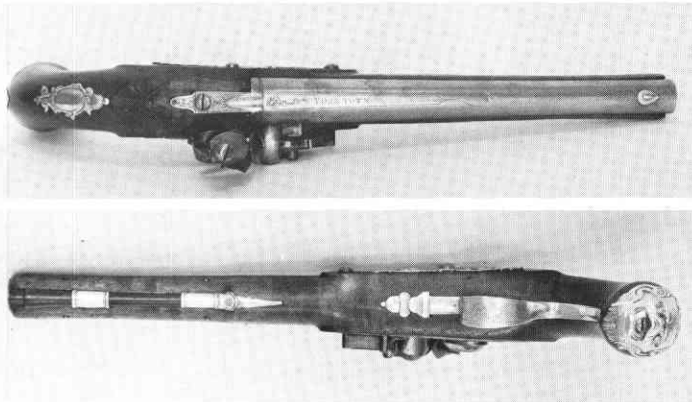
In my research into the makers of Pennsylvania rifles (or Kentucky rifles) in the eastern portion of Pennsylvania, I found facts that indicate to me that there were many early pistols made in this area which were not stocked in maple. I have some 50 inventories of gunsmiths of Eastern Pennsylvania, which inventories were taken after their death, by court order, to settle their estates. In these inventories for the period from 1766 to 1811, listed below, there are many pistols and barrels shown, and I assume that these were made by the following gunsmiths:

Philip Lefever	3 Pistols in Inventory of 1766
Mathew Roesser	1 Pair in Inventory of 1771
David Roesser	1 Pistol in Inventory of 1774
John Henry	5 Pistols in Inventory of 1777
Wm. Henry	1 Pair in Inventory of 1790
H. Mauger	1 Pistol in Inventory of 1778
A. Henry	15 Pistols in Inventory of 1807
J. P. Beck	2 Pistols in Inventory of 1811
Benedict Imhoff	1 Pistol in Inventory of 1800
Henry Dehuff	2 Pair in Inventory of 1808

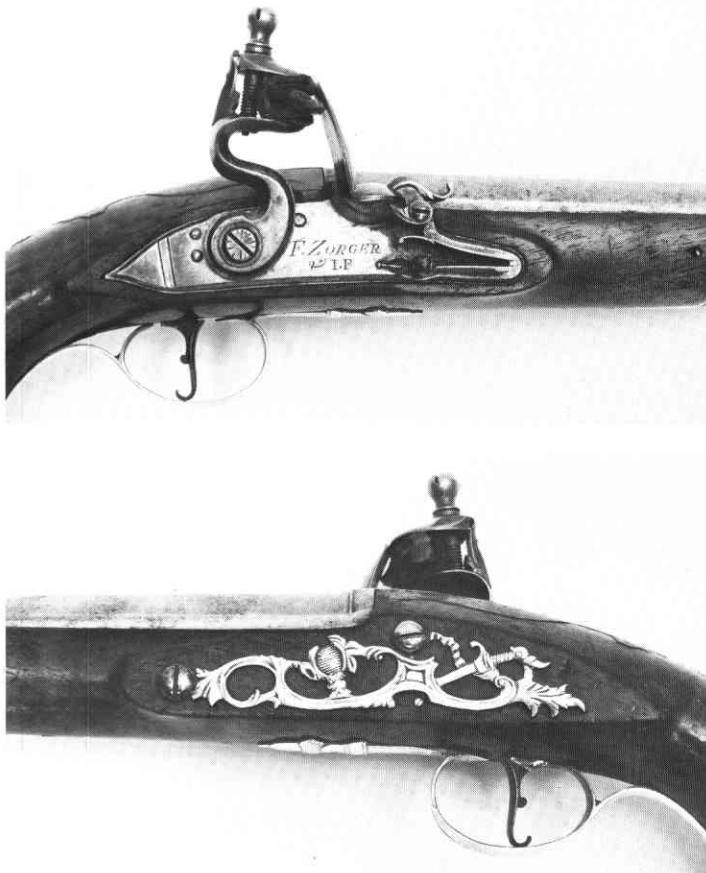
This talk was given by Mr. Dyke at the meeting of the ASAC at Kansas City, Missouri, on May 23, 1959. It has not previously been printed in the *Bulletin*, and is printed here at his request, with permission of the copyright holder. (Mr. George Shumway of York, Pa.)



Zorger Pistols made in York, PA. Courtesy Winterthur Museum.



Above and below: details of the Zorger pistols.



All of the above gunsmiths made pistols in what I call the early period. This fact led me to study pistols which I believed to be made in this first period and to try to prove them distinctly American. From various collections I examined pistols mounted with the English lion mask type butt cap and have reasons to believe the following pistols are American made pistols.

First, the Peter Grubb pistol which was purchased in Philadelphia in 1768 and we believe made by I. Perkins in Philadelphia. Second, the Wm. Henry of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, pistols in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, are marked Wm. Henry, Jr. on locks and barrels "Nazareth". Third, the Zorger pistols in Winterthur Museum at Wilmington, Delaware, which pistols were made in York, Pennsylvania. Fourth, a recently discovered colonial pistol signed J. P. Beck on the cannon barrel and mounted in silver with a lion face butt cap adds a new important American made Pennsylvania pistol to the above group. All of these American pistols are mounted with the silver lion mask butt caps and some have silver hardware throughout. All are walnut stocked. All of the barrels are round or octagon to round in either brass or iron and one barrel is rifled. All of these pistols, I am sure, were made between the years 1750 and 1789.

The second group of pistols examined were those having the bear face or dog face type of butt cap. These pistols are usually associated with French or German origin. I have documented one of these dog-face butt cap pistols as being American, namely, the Wm. Antes pistol in my collection. The D. Krim pistol which is in the Berks County Historical Society, Reading, Pennsylvania, is certified by former owners as American but I have not been able to prove him a gunsmith.

These dog-face butt cap pistols are stocked in curly maple or walnut, and sometimes fruit wood. I am sure that a very close analysis of the wood should be made on this type of pistol and documented, if possible, when one is determining whether it is of American origin or not.

Generally speaking, the *early period pistols* (that is from 1750-1776) were made with round or octagon to round barrels in either brass or iron. I have not found a single pistol with a full octagon barrel that I could document as having been made in this first period. The wood is usually walnut, sometimes cherry.

The hardware was cast in the lion or bear face mask butt caps; and cast side plates were commonly used. These were copied definitely from the British or French hardware. The shape of the stock is also identical to the English and European pistols. Few of these early pistols were rifled. The I. Perkins pistol I have was made about 1768, is rifled and I believe it is the earliest known rifled American pistol. The caliber in these early period pistols runs from 40 to 70 caliber. Rarely is there a name found on the barrels in this period, because the English crown did not look with favor upon American gunsmiths producing arms and possibly hurting their export trade of such arms to the colonies. Further, as we approached the Revolutionary War, the gunsmiths would not put their names on their arms

because of possible retaliation on the part of the Crown government.

In the middle period, from 1780-1812. I think we can truthfully say that this period brought out the true American flintlock pistol. They were beautifully stocked, in curly maple and cherry, and mounted with brass or silver hardware. A great many of these middle period guns were full octagon barrels, rifled, and the makers often put their names on the barrels. Like the Kentucky rifle, the pistol was streamlined, made lighter, more graceful looking.

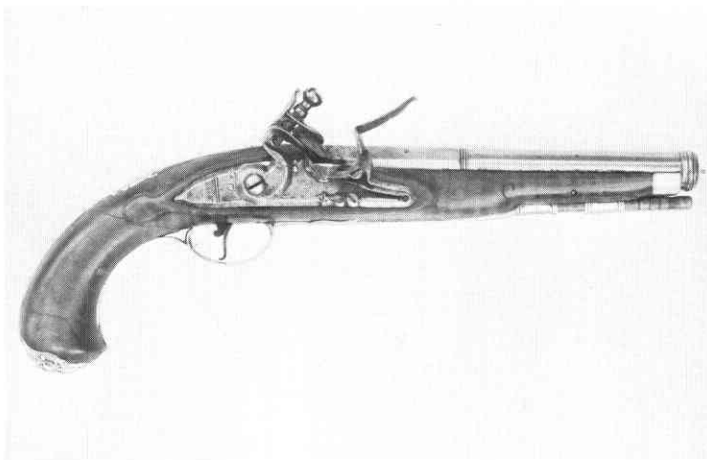
Some of the straight lines of the stock made in the early period were changed in the middle period to a curved graceful stock, with a rounded butt cap. In a great many cases the cast lion mask or dog face butt cap was eliminated in favor of the smooth cast butt cap that could be engraved or left plain. Side plates were commonly made out of rolled brass which became available in this period, rather than the cast plate side plates. Calibers remained pretty much the same in this period, namely, 40 to 70.

The third period, from 1812-1825, was the final period of the Kentucky pistol. In this period the regulation military pistol was born and the need for making Kentucky pistols of the type we had in the second period ceased. These military pistols were made in mass production from standard parts and had a great appeal to the military personnel. Many of these martial arms were retained by that personnel after the war. They were made cheaper and more durable by having more iron mountings, and were equipped with brass pans, iron ramrods, etc.

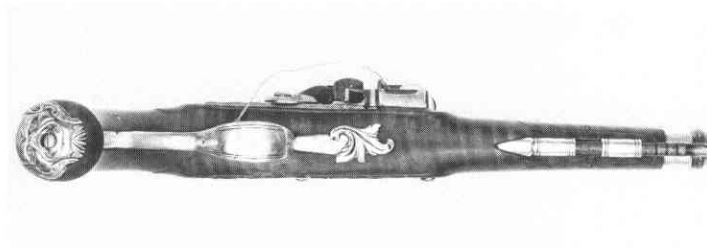
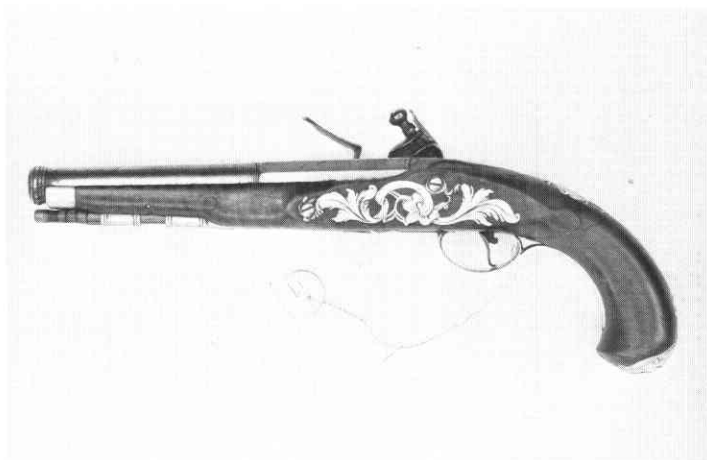
What few Kentucky pistols were made in the latter period were for the gentlemen and officers of the newly formed republic. In this final period of the Kentucky pistol we find that the butt cap was dropped, in a great number of instances, and the wood butt was flattened or rounded. The stocks were checkered and the inlays became less apparent. We also produced pistols with a half stock at this time, and it was the beginning of the percussion ignition system for all guns.

I have noticed that the Kentucky pistols of this latter period seem to be either very plain and well made, or extremely highly inlaid and engraved. I have recently seen a pair of Peter White flintlock pistols in this period that are probably the finest pair of pistols that exist today as far as inlay, engraving and workmanship is concerned. Likewise, I have a pair of Resor pistols made in Cincinnati, Ohio, in this period that are so plain that you would not look at them the second time until you examine the fine workmanship, the inletting of the lock, hardware, etc.

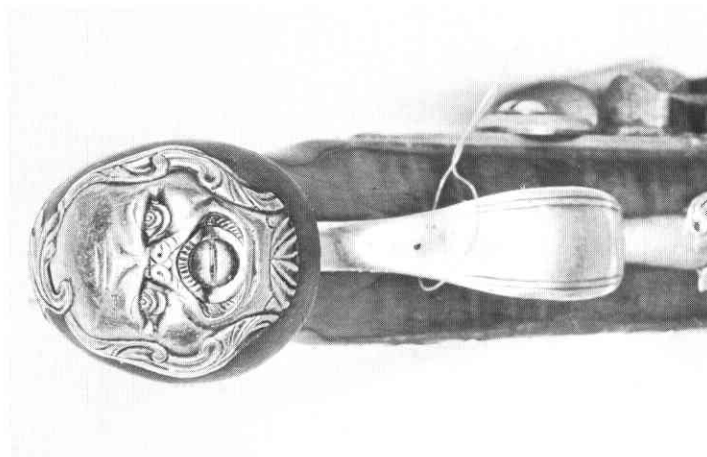
The condition in which a collector finds a Kentucky pistol today varies as does the long rifle. However, it has been my observation that the pistols, made in the same period as the rifles, are generally in better condition than rifles. This probably is because they have been protected by a holster, or stored in bureau drawers when they were not used, whereas the rifle has been carried, under all weather conditions, and exposed to all of the abrasion of the trail with little or no protection. Also, rifles have been hung over a fireplace to dry out or allowed to stand in the

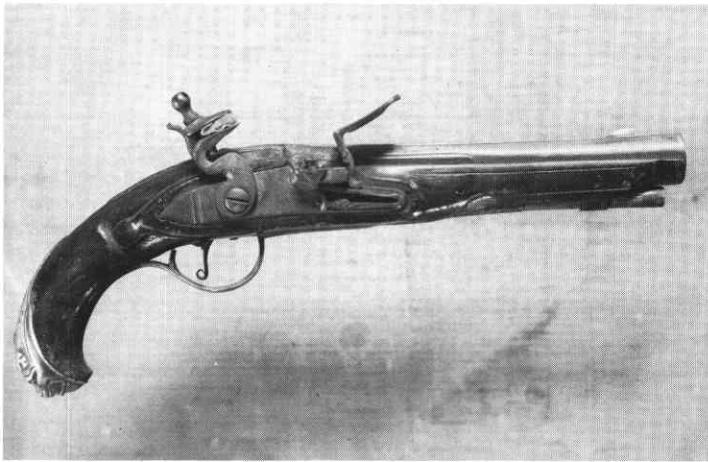


J.P. Beck, Lebanon, PA. Silver mounted, cannon barrel.

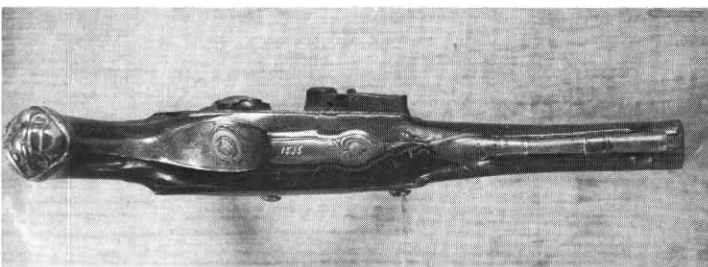
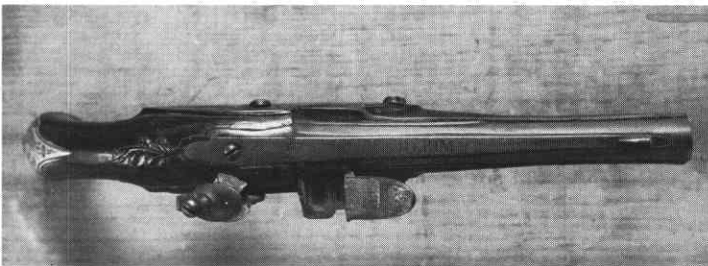


Details of the J.P. Beck pistol.





Pistol marked "D. Krim" on top of barrel and "W.H.O." on bottom. Berks, Co. Historical Society.



corner to be ruined by having been dislodged and fallen to the floor.

More pistols are found, I believe, in the original flintlock condition than is the case in Kentucky rifles of the same period. This is perhaps because they were used less as a game getter than was the case of a rifle. The rifle was indispensable for procurement of game for the table, and for the safety of the carrier. A pistol, as stated before, was only a protective arm for close range. Further, an early lack of appreciation of these arms made them disappear. We are grateful for the few that survived.

In studying many Kentucky rifles and pistols that are scattered in the various collections of the country, I have come to the conclusion that the flintlock pistol is found in a ratio of one flintlock pistol to every 250 flintlock rifles. This is following an original mathematical pattern, because there were always fewer pistols made than rifles so the ratio existence generally follows in that pattern.

I would like to issue a word of caution to those collectors who would be disposed to go out and buy any pistol that is stocked in curly maple and having a lion face or a dog face butt cap as being a distinctly American arm. The comments that I have made may be disproved by tomorrow's research, and this is as it should be. However, it is my earnest desire to point out to collectors that because of the great similarities between the American pistol of the period and its European counterparts, one cannot catalog them as all American or as being all European. Many European pistols, having this type of hardware, were imported or brought into this country by the early settlers. They became broken in use and were taken to local gunsmiths to be restocked, or a new lock fitted. Therefore, many a European pistol, no doubt, has been rebuilt in the colonies of American woods, and this requires extreme caution in cataloging pistols of a certain type of hardware as being American.

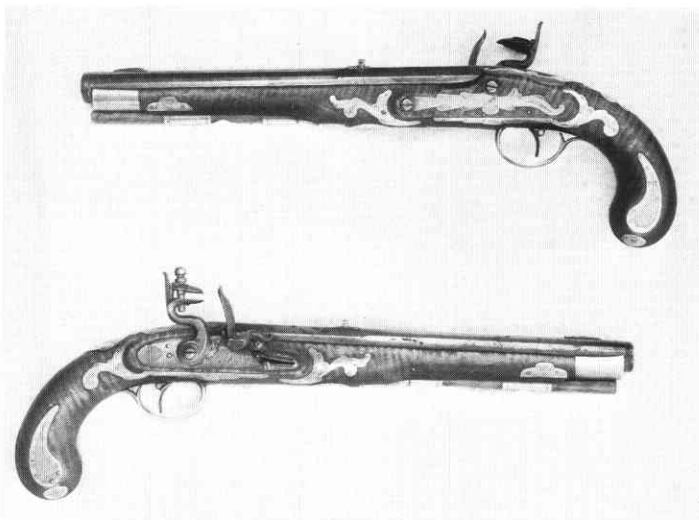
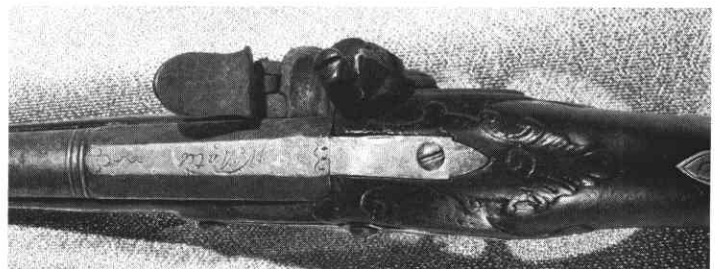
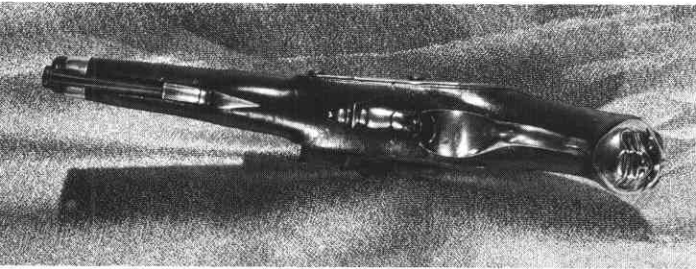
Particularly is this true of pistols in the early period. The author has bought, and studied, and discarded many pistols, whose hardware and general style was so close to the English or French, that only the analysis of the wood by an expert could identify the origin of the pistol.

Therefore, I have felt sure that a pistol of this early period was definitely American only when by research, I documented the name of the maker found on the barrel, or there were any identifications or initials or names of the owner on the thumbplate or on the side plate. I realize that not every collector of these early period American pistols is equipped with time and patience or with available research material to prove a pistol American. Therefore, it is my fond hope that we can continue the research that we have done on these pistols, and in years to come accumulate more documented proof of American pistols than we have at the moment. Until that time, please proceed with caution.

I hope younger generations will continue this research on pistols now, before these records are lost to us forever and documentation impossible. "It is later than you think."



William Antes, Frederick Twp, Philadelphia, PA. Details below.



Peter White silver mounted pistols. Lockplate details below.

