

Pre-1814 U.S. Martial Contract Rifles

Richard A. Holt

Rifles in general in this period are inconsistent, in that they do not conform to any strict description. From example to example they may vary in being rifled or smoothbored, may or may not have an accessory or patch box, can be of large or small bore size, with exceptionally short to excessively long barrel length. Rifles may be found either full or half stocked, and will full round, full octagon or octagon to round barrel section or shape. About the only rule that may usually be applied is that a rifle is fired from the shoulder and has both front and rear sights.

For this presentation we shall examine only rifles made in “reasonable” quantity for the U.S. Government under specific dimensional standards and specified delivery dates.

In researching contemporary correspondence, we find many contradictions pertaining to the rifle and its place in military usage. I would like to make a note of a few that I find of interest.

June 14, 1775, the Continental Congress, facing war, issued its first call for troops, that six companies be raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland and two in Virginia. Each Company to consist of a Captain, three Lieutenants, four Sergeants, four Corporals and a Drummer or Trumpeter and sixty-eight Privates. These being the first levied actually predated the appointment of George Washington as Commanding General. If this number of Riflemen were actually raised, there would have been required six-hundred and eighty rifles to supply them. Of course, many would have their own arms.

The Bradford Brothers, who were printers in Philadelphia, posted in *The London Chronicle* in August of 1775 the following: “This Province has raised one-thousand Riflemen, the worst of whom will put a ball into a man’s head at a distance of a hundred and fifty or two-hundred yards, therefore, advise your Officers who shall hereafter come out to America to settle their affairs in England before their departure.”

For the flip side, we have an excerpt from General Anthony Wayne, dated June 3rd, 1777:

“The conduct of the Pennsylvanians the other day



in forcing General Grant to retire, with circumstances of shame and disgrace, into the very lines of the Enemy, has gained them the esteem and confidence of His Excellency, who wishes to have our Rifles exchanged for good Muskets and Bayonets—experience has taught us that they are not fit for the field. And only a few will be retained in each Regiment and those placed in the hands of each real Marksman.”

And for the Riflemen we find: Morgan’s Riflemen marched six hundred miles in twenty-one days, foraged supplies during their march and on their arrival in Lancaster staged the following exhibition: two brothers in a company took a piece of board five inches broad and seven inches tall with a bit of paper about the size of a dollar in the center, and while one of them supported this board perpendicularly between his knees, the other, at a distance of sixty yards, and without rest, successfully shot eight balls through the board and spared his brother’s knees. Another of the company held a barrel stave perpendicularly in his hands, with one side of the stave close to his side, while one of his comrades, at the same distance, shot several balls through it, without apprehension of danger to either party.

Another from General Wayne, February 8, 1778, to Mr. Richard Peters, the Secretary of War: “I would also wish to change a number of rifles for Muskets and Bayonets—I do not like Rifles—I would almost as soon face an enemy with a good Musket and Bayonet without ammunition, as ammunition without a Bayonet.”

Riflemen in the War of 1812. At the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson used 2500 Riflemen. The total of the forces engaged were approximately 4,000 Americans against 10,000 British troops. The battle losses were less than 100 Americans killed to Great Britain's 3,000 killed or wounded. Stories like this have been retold to the glamour of the Riflemen. The Riflemen do deserve the glory, but, unfortunately the Riflemen didn't always use the rifle, as in New Orleans: after a forced march, the Kentucky Frontier Militiamen were found to be either completely lacking arms or what arms they brought were in many cases in unservicable condition. Consequently, they were issued arms on hand, generally muskets.

Back for a final look in General Wayne's feelings about the bayonetless rifle:

"The enemy knowing the defenselessness of our Riflemen rush on, they fly, mix with, or pass through the other troops and communicate fears that is ever inciting to a retiring Corps—this would not be if the Rifles had Bayonets—but it would be still better if good Muskets and Bayonets were put into the hands of good marksmen and Rifles entirely laid aside—I never wish to see one—at least without a Bayonet."

There is no recorded fact or reason why rifles were not purchased with bayonets: they just weren't. This is one of several idiosyncrasies surrounding U.S. Martial Rifles. I might add that in March of 1778, General Wayne instructed Col. Bayard to proceed to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he obtained muskets from Wm. Henry. Whether these muskets replaced rifles or were in addition to them, I do not know.

As to the preferences and prejudices just mentioned, somewhere between the lines of the incomplete data of this presentation are leads to the truth.

The "State of the Art" of 18th and early 19th Century warfare made the musket in the hands of a marksman far more effective than the most accurate rifle used by a man untrained or inexperienced in the use of it. However, frontier life required an entirely different approach to survival, one that the accuracy and economical aspects of a rifle helped provide. A man provided food and protection with one basic weapon: if warring with the Indian, he fought Indian style, requiring an independent and instant adjustment to an ever changing set of circumstances. I believe that as much as the rifle was disliked by some as not fitting to the disciplined requirements of

War-department,
Feb. 7th 1792.

Sir.

I received your standard rifle, upon which I beg leave to remark, —

First— That instead of the barrel being only three feet six inches in length, ~~that it is~~ ^{it is} three feet nine inches, which upon your information, and other good judges, is three inches too long— Please therefore to have all the barrels in your contracts, reduced to three feet six inches.

Second— The bore is rather too small— It seems to be the result, that a bore carrying balls of thirty two to the pound would be the most philosophical, and the best in practice, as less liable to foul than a smaller bore— But, as prejudices are formed by the

Photocopy of

formal armed and ever maneuvering bodies of troops, that the successful Rifleman (he being an experienced frontiersman that survived by his own self-appraisal of danger and the required countermoves) was both unwilling and unable to wait for the decision of a superior officer, whose concern was the overall result, not the individual engagement! Probably this was the very thing that drove the frontiersman from the settlements in the first place.

I would like to see martial flintlock rifles classified into three categories. First, *the Common Rifle*, this being ANY muzzleloading rifle that is full

the frontier people in favor of small bores,
it has been decided, that the standard
should carry balls, foote to the pound.

Third — The gun you sent was not
well stocked, especially about the lock, which
was not well fitted, although the lock in
general is a good one; but it wants a
fly, to prevent its catching at half-cock.

Fourth The trigger, side and breech
pins, may be hardened.

Fifth — The spring opening the
box to be higher, so as to receive the im-
pression of the thumb more easily.

Sixth The ~~locks~~ ^{leaf} to be maple.

— In all other respects, the gun
you sent seems to be excellent — I beg you
to have the goodness to stipulate the above
with the gun smiths, as I have done with
the

the contracts at Reading, and in this city, having
formed contracts at each place for three
hundred — But, I wish for about three
hundred more.

I am
Sir,

with great esteem,

Your very humble

Servant
A. M. C.

General Hand.

the letter from Sec'y Knox to Gen'l Hand regarding the U.S. Contract Rifle, Model 1792.

stocked. Second, *Armory Rifles*, these being ANY
rifle manufactured at a National Armory, and the
third type being *Breech Loading Rifles*, mainly those
of John Hall, which we may disregard for this paper.

The first rifle contracted for by the United
States Government, that has to my knowledge been
documented, is the model of 1792. The next, the
Contract Model of 1807. The following models of
1814 are not included in this presentation.

The U.S. Contract Rifle, Model 1792, until
recent years a complete mystery, is a researcher's
headache. Let us start on January 4, 1792, when the
then Secretary of War, Henry Knox, in

correspondence to Militia General Edward Hand
related the following:

War Department, 4, January, 1792

Sir:

I have just received your letter of the 1st instant,
together with the proposals of manufacturers.

As no time is to be lost, on this occasion, do
embrace the offer representing the rifle-guns at
twelve dollars—you will therefore pledge to enter
into a written contract with them, for five-hundred
certain, to be paid for in this city, on your
certification of having received one-hundred of
each hundred.

As you are experienced in this business, I shall take
the liberty of relying on your inspection of them—

let them be the best arms in all respects, and such as all men shall approve. Have a sample or standard gun first made, as you shall entirely approve, and let the contract conform to it.

Although five-hundred is mentioned, I wish the number of one-thousand could be made, at Lancaster, so as all to be delivered as early as possible, not exceeding however, the fifth of May, in parcels a hundred each.

You will enter into suitable penalties for the nonperformance of either side.

I am Sir with Great Esteem

Your Very Humble Servant

H. Knox, Secretary of War

I note in paragraph three "as you are experienced in this business." Could it be that General Hand had at an earlier date procured rifles or other arms under contract or in sundry lots for the Government? Also note that a pattern arm is called for as a standard.

A later letter from General Hand informs Secretary of War Knox:

Lancaster, January 13, 1792

Sir:

On the 8th and 9th instant I had the honor to receive your letter of the 4th and a duplicate of the same, which I immediately communicated to the gun smiths. In consequence, the barrel makers have been set to work and the gun smiths, that they might not be idle until a supply of barrels can be obtained, are busy in preparing mountings, locks, ram rods and next week they expect to finish some rifles, and I only wait the completing of a standard to enter into a written contract on the terms you have described.

After carefully examining a number of guns found in different workshops I have fixed on three feet eight and a half inches for the barrel, to carry a ball of 45 to the pound and I am pretty confident the arms will be well finished, and be in every respect such that will please any person who is a judge of rifles.

I am Sir & Etc.

Edward Hand

This letter suggests that General Hand went to see several examples of riflemaking, and in talking to the smiths, had their input as to what would constitute a utilitarian or "working" rifle. This is something to bear in mind if any of us are ever offered an embellished or delicate rifle bearing U.S. stamped marks.

General Hand to Secretary of War Knox, January 15, 1792: Hand notified Knox that he is having two pattern rifles made, one to keep as a manufacturing standard and the other to be sent to

Knox for his approval or changes he might see fit to make.

General hand to Secretary of War Knox, January 23, 1792: Hand mentions negotiations between himself (for the U.S. Government) and gunsmiths of York, Pennsylvania, for more rifles. He expects 150 from the York makers and 500 from the gunsmiths of Lancaster by May 1st.

Kindly bear with me: this is the last letter in its entirety. Until recently this correspondence lay in a document collection and the importance of its content was unknown to collectors of martial rifles.

War Department
February 4th, 1792

Sir:

I received your standard rifle upon which I beg to remark: first—that instead of the barrel being only three feet six inches in length, it is three feet nine inches, which upon your information, and other good judgement, is three inches too long—please therefore to have all the barrels in your contract, reduced to three feet six inches.

Second—the bore is rather too small—it seems to be the result, that a bore carrying balls of thirty-two to the pound would be the most philosophical, and the best in practice, as less liable to foul than a smaller bore—but as prejudices are formed by the frontier people in favor of small bores, it has been decided, that the standard should carry balls forty to the pound.

Third—the gun you sent was not well stocked, especially around the lock, which is not well fitted, although the lock in general is a good one, but wants a fly, to prevent its catching at half cock.

Fourth—the trigger, side and breech pins must be hardened.

Fifth—the spring opening the box to be higher, so as to receive the impression of the thumb more easily.

Sixth—the stocks to be of seasoned maple.

In all other respects, the gun you sent seems to be excellent—I beg you to have the goodness to stipulate the above to the gunsmiths, as I have done with the contract at Reading, and in this city, having formed contracts at each place for three-hundred—but I wish for about three-hundred more.

I am Sir

With Great Esteem

Your Very Humble Servant

H. Knox

Referring to the 1st and 2nd paragraphs, "the barrels in your contract," this would include those that the barrel makers had started in the middle of January. They were to be both shortened and rebored and re-rifled to approximately .50 caliber. I

would believe that under the economic conditions of the period the already completed barrels were modified rather than replaced with a larger diameter barrel to accept the large bore size, and since all rifles were to be manufactured to a "standard" and no correspondence has yet been found to accept "non-conforming examples" that the Model 1792 Rifle if and when found will be of rather delicate proportion in the barrel and forestock areas relative to the bore size. For the gunsmiths this was a blessing, less iron for the barrels, a little less wood possibly, this minimal savings multiplied by the number of arms in the contract would amount to a noticeable savings. The second paragraph also suggests that the "prejudices" of the frontier people were to be considered: this is an important side issue to consider when determining where the rifles were to be used, as I doubt that the powers-that-be were too concerned about the feelings of the general populace if the rifles were intended for strictly U.S. Government troops.

Quickly going over documented records of delivery we find:

1. 12 June 1792	
Acknowledges having shipped rifles, totaling	<u>590</u>
2. 12 July 1792	
Sam Mercer (cartage) to General Hand Receipt for rifles to be delivered to Staunton Virginia, totaling	<u>100</u>
3. 8 Aug. 1792	
Major Issac Craig to Charles Anderson (cartage) Receipt for rifles sent by General Hand, totaling	<u>132</u>
4. 25 Aug. 1792	
Major Issac Craig to Joseph Dobbin (cartage) Receipt for rifles from General Hand, totaling	<u>110</u>
5. Thos. Martine (cartage) to General Hand Receipt for rifles to be delivered to Pittsburgh, totaling	<u>180</u>
6. 22 Oct. 1792	
Thos Martine (cartage) to General Hand Receipt for rifles, Delivery to Pittsburgh, totaling	<u>140</u>
7. Chas. Anderson (cartage) to General Hand. Receipt for rifles, delivery to Pittsburgh, totaling	<u>30</u>

This gives a "found" documented delivery of

1282 rifles for the year 1792 alone (actual number might be plus or minus a few as two lots were signed for in weight alone and the figures shown are calculated).

The year 1793, NO FOUND documents of *delivery*; however, there were inquiries of speed of delivery and prices:

1. General Hand from H. Knox inquiry for rifles totaling:	<u>1,000</u>
2. Tenche Coxe (purveyor of Mil. Supplies) to Hand inquiry about the price and delivery of rifles totaling:	<u>500</u>
3. Tenche Coxe to independent contractors asks about delivery of rifles totaling:	<u>134</u>

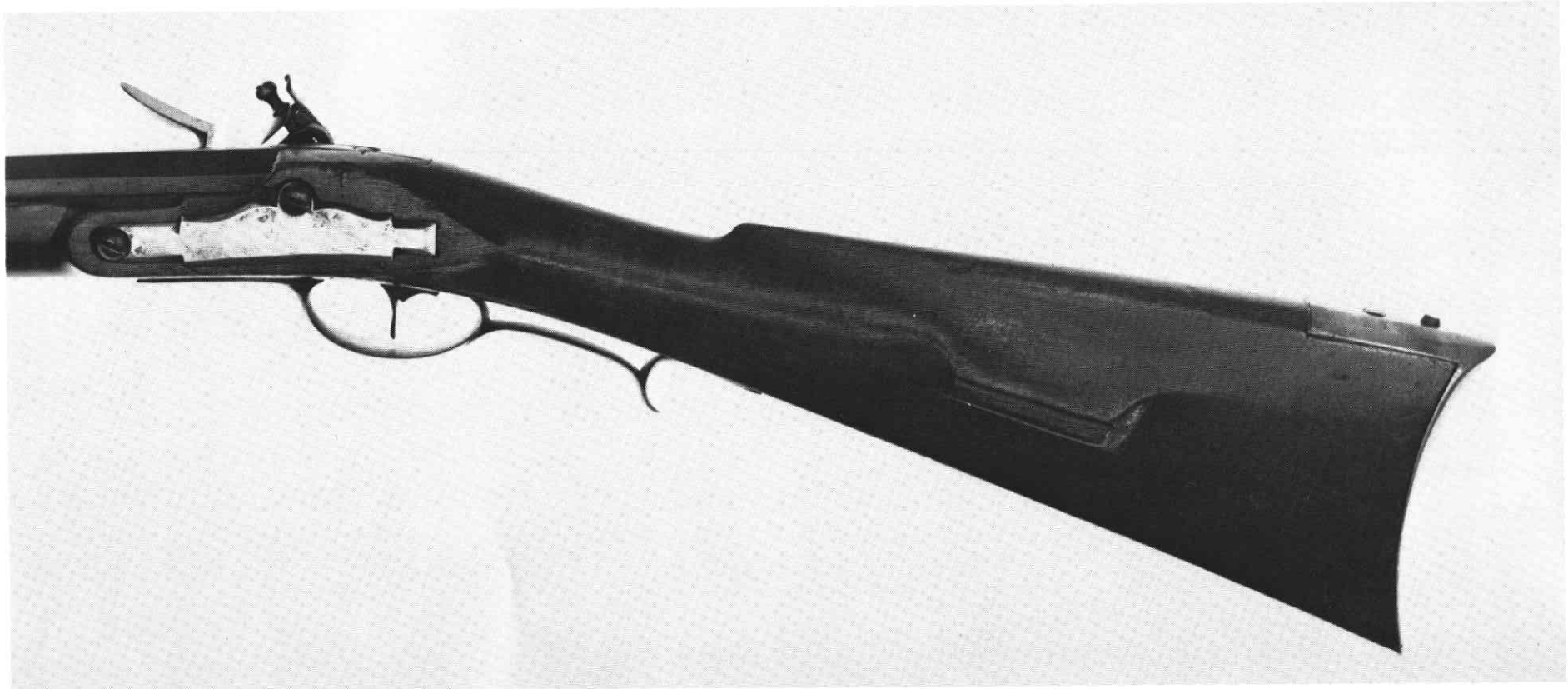
These inquiries do not constitute orders, but are mentioned to show the continued business attitude of the Government, partially to dispel some of the overall economic conditions and at the same time fill a real need.

The year 1794 shows documented receipt of Contracted Rifles from both Lancaster and York County makers totaling: 1,844

1794 is the first year that documented evidence appears that the same rifles being purchased for the frontier campaigns and military usage were being sent to friendly Indian settlements. There has been and still is great confusion when attempting to differentiate the rifles purchased by the Government for the Army/Militia and those purchased for the Indian Department. Records show that there were shipments of the "common" brass mounted rifle along with a small percentage of the same rifle that had only additional decoration of a silver thumb-piece and star, the silver mounted or decorated rifles being sent in the same shipment as the plain brass ones.

At present, due to the non-continuity of the records, I would like to skip to the year 1800. I can find only 35 rifles documented as received; however, there are inquiries into unspecified lots. 1803 shows inquiries for 307 rifles, 1805 shows only 2 rifles being delivered and 1806 documents delivery of 88 rifles. I would like to note that the numbers here do not represent the total possible numbers, only those that to date I have documented.

The Model 1792 Rifle probably started as a moderate-or light-barreled arm, producing excessive recoil when fired. The rifle was initially and through its production equipped with a single-throated cock.



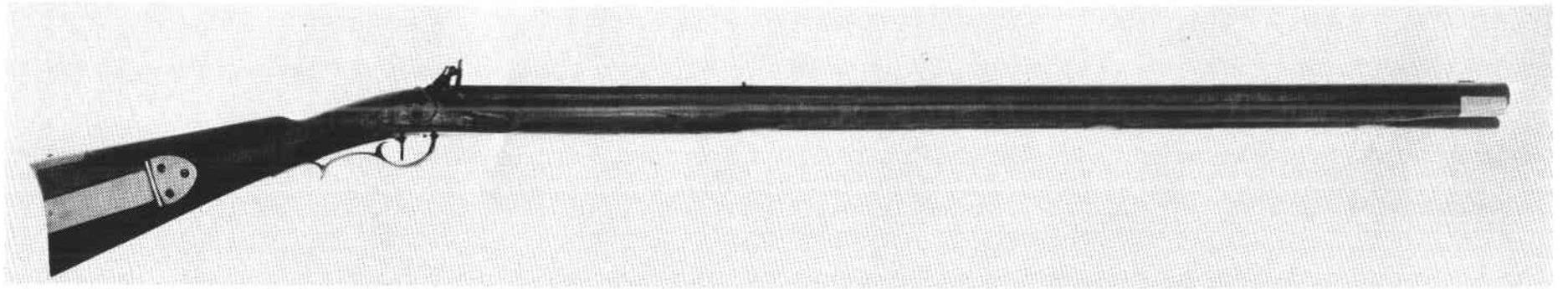
1803 Harpers Ferry Armory Rifle, Harpers Ferry, Virginia.



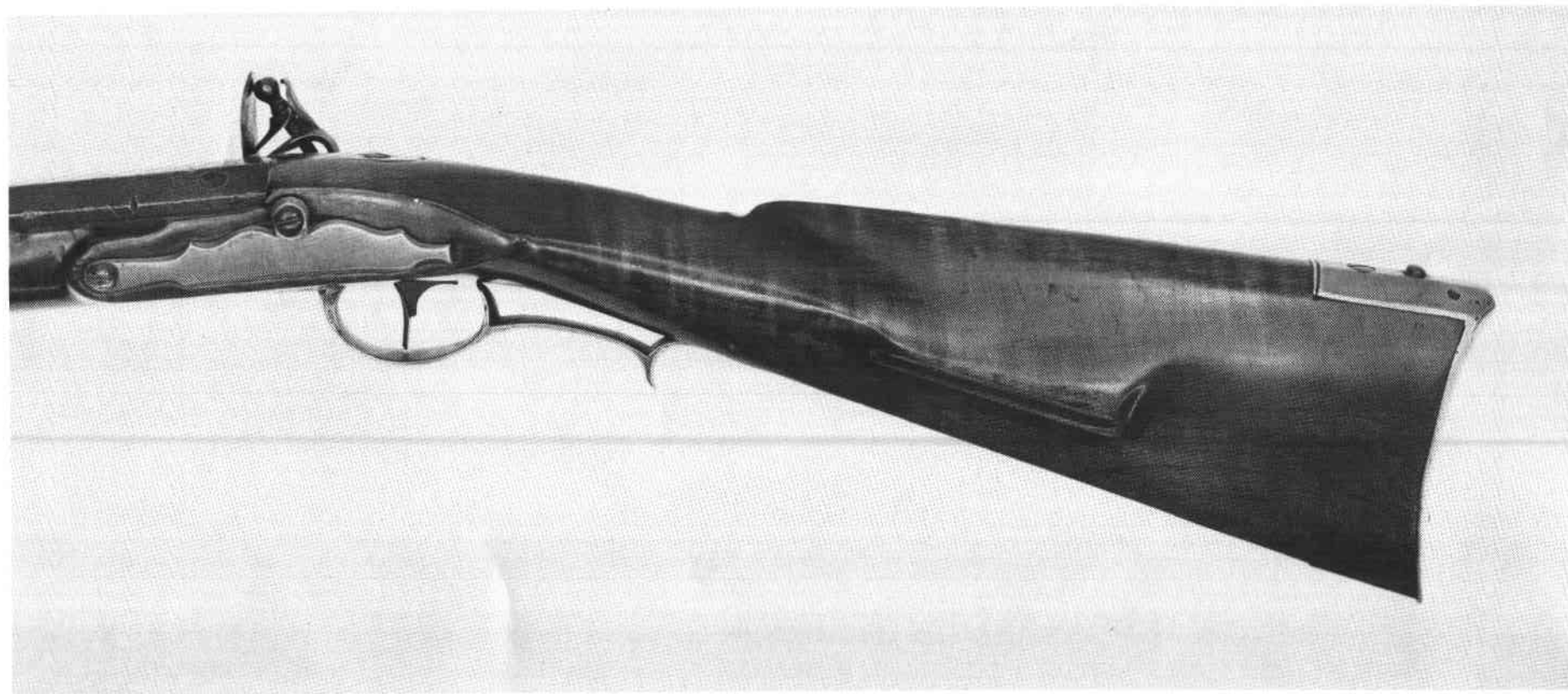
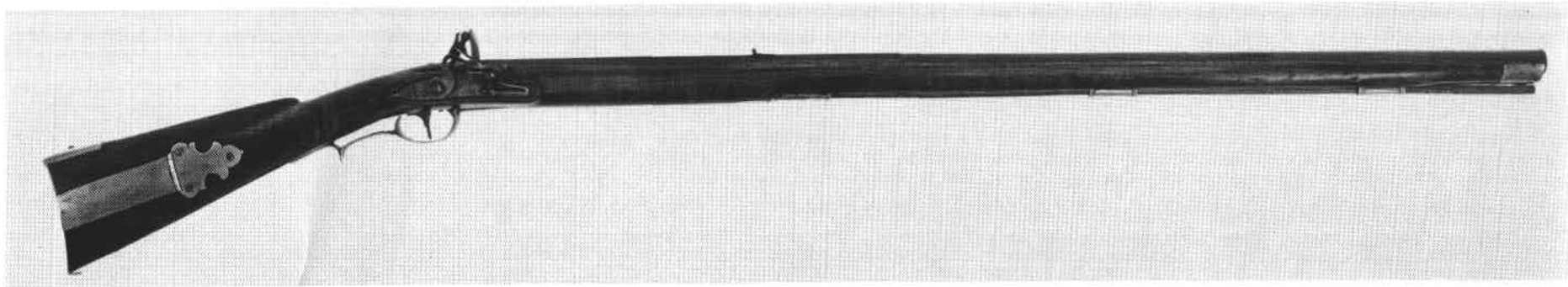
1807 Contract Rifle by Jacob Dickert, Lancaster, Penna.



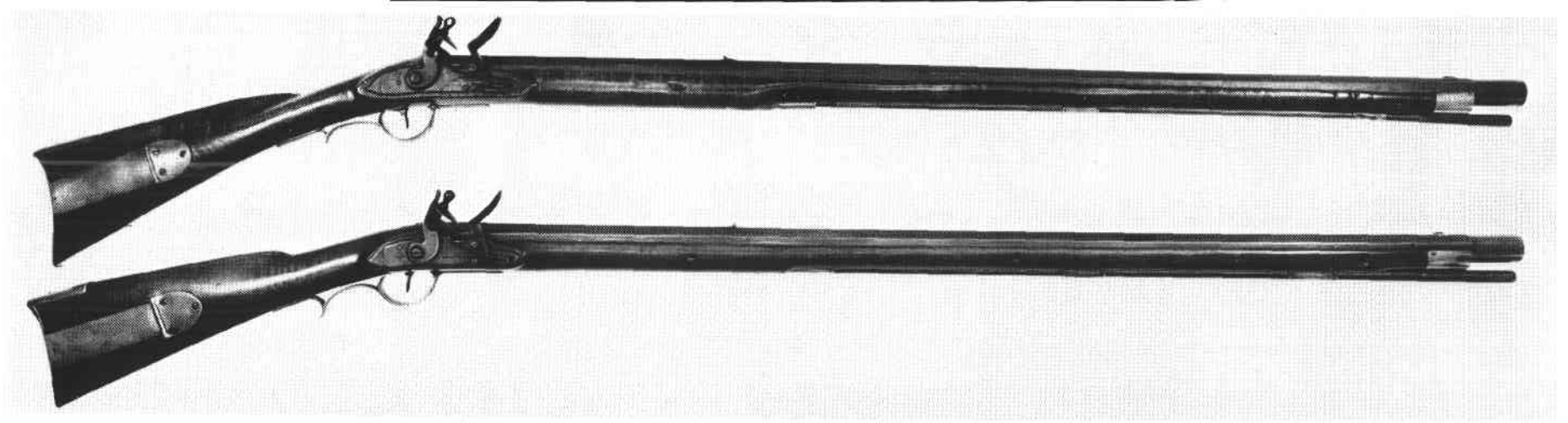
1807 Contract Rifle by J. Henry, Lancaster, Penna.



1807 Contract Rifle by Christian Gumph, Lancaster, Penna.



1807 Contract Rifle by Henry Pickle, York, Penna.



Two Militia/Martial style rifles by Jacob Dickert, Lancaster, Penna.

This is a weak point of reliability of any lock mechanism, which should have been upgraded immediately if allowed initially, as double throated hammers were used and proven by the French better than 30 years prior to the inception of the model. I believe the majority of these rifles went to the frontier posts of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Georgia and Kentucky. Many were issued to friendly Indians, many were lost in battle, and surely many went home with the veteran.

But the most amazing single item in the saga of the Model 1792 Contract Rifle is that while the "to date," but assuredly incomplete, documented delivery of arms totals 3,261, with over half of the total production years unreported, there remains NOT ONE KNOWN example of this rifle today.

I was fortunate to acquire a barrel some years ago, which I purchased only because it was marked U.S. and stamped HECKERT. It sat in the garage for several years before I took note of the oft-published fact that Phillip Heckert of York County Pennsylvania, was a contributor of the "York Armory" and a supplier of rifles to the Government under contract. That made the barrel of more interest; however, the letter of February 4, 1792, really brought me to life. Unfortunate though it may be, the Heckert barrel had been smooth bored, probably at the time it was in an arm that was converted to percussion and shortened. However, by the original barrel-keeper-escutcheon locations, it is possible to "imagine" this barrel back to 42" length: then the missing (when shortened) escutcheon, nose cap and barrel overhang would be correct. The barrel is of light section or diameter for a large bore, as I suspect all of the '92's were; it is full octagon, and so could not comply with the later contracts. Perhaps it was made for one of the many "sundry" lots that were purchased, but it may well be the remnants of a Model 1792. Only the discovery of a complete arm will tell.

With the introduction of the Model 1803 (Armory) rifle at the Harpers Ferry Armory, the production years of 1804 through 1807 and 1814 through 1820, a total of 4,023 rifles were produced. This quantity of rifles probably accounts for the small lot purchases from the private contractors during this period.

However, the accelerated demand for muskets in 1807 and '08 forced the Harpers Ferry Armory to cease production of rifles and the government again turned to the gunsmiths of Lancaster and York

Counties, Pennsylvania as shown in the following excerpts from correspondence:

Purveyors Office
Phila: Nov. 16th, 1807

Messrs. Jacob Dickert
Henry De Huff
Gentlemen:

The rifles I am instructed to purchase are to follow the following description. They are to be common, plain rifles substantially made. The barrels to be three feet-two inches in length. The caliber such as to fit balls of half an ounce in weight. The barrels would be preferred round (instead of eight squared) from the tail pipe or lower thimble to the muzzle. The price to be paid for the rifle complete will be ten dollars cash.

I am Sirs:
Tench Coxe

We might note that the contracts for the "new" Model 1807 Contract Rifles were let late in the year, records also show that the deliveries were:

1. J. Henry — Lancaster, Penna., Nov. 19, 1807 — 898 rifles
2. Henry De Huff & Co. — Lancaster, Penna., Dec. 7, 1807 — 557 rifles
3. Abraham Henry & Co. — Lancaster, Penna., Dec. 29, 1807 — 169 rifles
4. Henry Pickle — York, Penna., Dec. 19, 1807 — 155 rifles

Note:

Henry De Huff & Co. consisted of Jacob Dickert, Peter Gonter, Christian Gumph, John Bender, George Miller and of course De Huff. It is questionable that all of these men supplied finished rifles; some may have supplied only particular parts for final assembly or contributed other services as required.

The Abraham Henry & Co. included Henry, John Guest and Peter Brong. These at least are some of the names of men involved. Correspondence shows that these rifles were produced somewhat under the "cottage industry" principal with individual suppliers for various parts. This put the initial contractor in the unenviable position of being at the mercy of his secondary suppliers and at the same time responsible to the government for delivery and quality of product.

The quantities listed are reported in a letter by Tench Coxe noting the unsuitability and general poor quality of arms to the different contractors, however, it is unclear to me whether the numbers

listed are the total deliveries or the rifles remaining in inventory at the Schuylkill Arsenal. They do show however, that at least these numbers were purchased.

Of interest is the fact that after three years of rifle production at a National Armory (Harpers Ferry), the Harpers Ferry rifles being stocked in walnut and having a high quality but plain lock with a double throated hammer, the resumption of contracted rifles allowed stocks of maple and the earlier style locks having single throated hammers, and unbridled frizzen springs in the styles of 18th century sporting arms.

Dissatisfaction with the quality of the Model 1807 Rifle appears to have been the reason for the expiration in late 1809 or early 1810 of large "lot" contracts, however, records show sporadic purchases of the same rifles through later years, but do not differentiate between rifles purchased for Indian usage and those purchased for Military use.

Another rifle of interest, although whether it actually fits in the "contract" rifle category is questionable, is shown in Plate VII. These rifles from the shop of Jacob Dickert are two of a half dozen known. All conform to each other, (with the

exception of the individual workmanship), and might be considered a style or model. However, they have no military acceptance or unit designation markings. They are found with locks by Drepert and Sweitzer, both locks being the same size and configuration. Hopefully they will be placed in their proper prospective at some future date. They are mentioned here as a casual item of interest and they do conform to each other and are of a martial pattern or style. The locks are well proportioned, having bridled frizzen springs and double throated cocks or hammers. They are of better quality than those found on the true 1807/1792 contract rifles. The .58 caliber barrels are full octagonal to within 2 inches of the muzzle, where they are turned round as if to accept a bayonet, yet they are not fitted with a bayonet locking lug as was the practice of the day.

This, gentlemen, will cover what I might add to the "pre1814" contract rifle story at this time. I would like to thank, alphabetically: Ed Flanagan, John C. McMurray, Walter O'Connor, and Robert M. Reilly for their interest, encouragement and assistance. I also would like to thank Chuck and Merrie Suydam for the "prodding" that saw this project through and their grammatical and editorial assistances.



Rifleman, 1775, 1st Penna. Rifle Battalion.