

The Dickson, Nelson Company: Alabama Civil War Gunmakers

Douglas E. Jones

When the American Civil War began neither side was prepared for an all out conflict. In spite of its population and industrial advantage—over twice the people and five times the manufacturing capability of the South—the North had an army of less than 20,000 men, deployed mostly along the western frontier. Moreover, little had been done since the Mexican War to modernize the weapons issued to federal troops. Like the South, which had no army at all, the North had to enlist troops and develop procurement and manufacturing systems for all types of modern weaponry, equipment and supplies.

Particularly devastating was the fact that Southerners had no experience in making instruments of war. Other than a few crude efforts by Andrew Jackson's smiths in 1812, the South had not manufactured an arm, cannon or gun carriage. Except during the war with Mexico, the region had not prepared a single round of ammunition. Although the South had rich mineral resources, there was no skilled work force or industrial base to capitalize upon the opportunities.

The situation could not be remedied easily or quickly. In the entire Confederacy there were less than one million rounds of small arms ammunition, less than one-quarter million percussion caps and only 60,000 pounds of old cannon powder, captured at various arsenals and at Norfolk, Virginia. Only one government cannon factory, at Richmond, was in operation at the start of hostilities. Worst of all, former U.S. arsenals in the South had served only as distribution centers and, therefore, had no manufacturing capacity. Not a single machine more modern than a foot lathe existed at any arsenal in the South except the one at Fayetteville, North Carolina.¹

Hampered by shortages of every kind and unsure of materials from the North and overseas, newly-appointed Confederate Chief of Ordnance Josiah Gorgas ordered the gathering of any domestic materials that could be used for the manufacture of weapons and munitions. Lead water pipe and window weights became bullets and church bells became percussion caps and cannon. Agents were sent to Europe to buy weapons, gun-manufacturing machinery, and ammunitions of all kinds. Skilled labor was sought both in Europe and in the North early in the war.

Josiah Gorgas' technical knowledge and organizational ability led him to gather a fine staff of competent men and to establish by 1863 a highly effective ordnance system that stretched from Richmond to San Antonio. He set up eight new arsenals and four depots, installed new equipment in others, established bureaus of ordnance, nitre and mining and foreign supplies and made contracts with hundreds of private individuals and firms to provide war materials of a bewildering variety. Within two years the Confederacy had an impressive number of new blast furnaces, foundries, roll-



ing mills and smelting works, the best equipped powder mill in America and a system of arsenals, armories, laboratories and private contractors equal to any in the world.

All of this was accomplished in spite of the enormous difficulty of establishing a central government in the midst of war and struggling with a complex series of political problems, not the least of which was the issue of States' Rights. The near religious fervor with which most of the recently seceded states held the principle of independence from any central authority contributed to the ultimate defeat of the South. For all practical purposes, the individual states retained control over recruitment of troops, acquisition and manufacture of armaments, railroads, and mineral production, including iron.

In addition to a small inventory of mostly-obsolete, state-owned and controlled weapons seized at former federal arsenals across the South, the Confederacy in 1861 had to depend on arms purchased in the North and Europe until manufacturing capabilities could be created locally. Essential to this task was altering the output of private firms and stimulating the creation of new ones throughout the Southland for the production of war materials, ranging from cannon to horseshoe nails. Although producing much less than major manufacturing centers such as Fayetteville, Richmond, Macon and Selma, private contractors, especially those working for the central government, were critical to the Confederate ordnance operation.

Like other southern states, Alabama had organized militia units upon its admission to the Union in 1819 and armed them with state funds or with outmoded weapons from the U.S. Government. From the time Alabama seceded from the union in early 1861 until hostilities began in the spring of that year, efforts were undertaken to repossess arms assigned to former militiamen and to purchase private weapons from anyone willing to sell them. The only way the

state could equip its troops with any certainty was to contract with private firms to manufacture weapons within Alabama.

On December 7, 1861, the Alabama Legislature enacted a bill entitled, "An Act to Encourage the Manufacture of Fire Arms and Munitions of War in this State." The bill appropriated \$250,000, under control of the governor, for advance payments to individuals and firms proposing to manufacture firearms in the state. These loans were secured by bonded agreements and calculated to be repaid through the delivery of weapons, mostly rifles of the Mississippi or Enfield pattern, and munitions of all types. The act also provided \$50,000 to encourage the manufacture and preparation of powder, saltpetre, sulphur and lead.²

Alabama's first war-time contract was with three men of financial means, political clout and deep loyalty to the Southern Cause.³ Residents of northwest Alabama, prominent planter William Dickson (1798-1880), attorney and state legislator Owen O. Nelson (1823-1892) and physician Lewis H. Sadler (1818-1881) answered the call to arms by investing their financial resources and physical energy in an enterprise whose work force and machinery moved ahead of Union armies from Alabama to three different localities in Georgia before the war was over. Although plagued by the press of Union armies, fire, bankruptcy and the lack of materials and skilled labor, these men struggled to honor their obligation to the state which was the seat of the first Confederate government.

Considered to be among the finest longarms made in the South, rifles and carbines produced by the Shakanoosa Arms Company,⁴ more commonly known as the Dickson, Nelson Company, are familiar enough to serious students of Confederate weaponry to influence me not to lecture on the subject of physical characteristics and dates of manufacture. I shall attempt, however, to weave into the fabric of current knowledge on the subject new information about the operations of this enterprise, based primarily on heretofore unstudied records of the Shelby Iron Company, an Alabama firm which was the principal supplier to a number of southern manufacturers, including the Dickson, Nelson Company, Cook and Brother, Griswold and Gunnison, Sturdivant, and possibly others.

In addition to the Shelby Iron Company papers (UA-SIC) and the journal of Josiah Gorgas (UA-JG), held by the University of Alabama Library, other important original data were gleaned from the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery (ADAH) and the Tennessee Valley Historical Society, Tusculumbia, Alabama (TVHS). The TVHS collection contains first-hand accounts of some aspects of the Dickson, Nelson operation. Numbers in parentheses refer to Appendix typescripts of the most relevant documents used in the preparation of this paper, listed chronologically and numbered consecutively.

Dr. Jerry C. Oldshue, Archivist and Historian for the University of Alabama, provided much historical data and permitted access to papers of the Shelby Iron Company. Fellow Society member Roger Ballard, also the steward of a Dickson, Nelson rifle, joined me in reading through reams of documents in search of the few gems that related to our

favorite subject.

The Dickson, Nelson Company, then operating what seems to have been an iron foundry in Tusculumbia, signed a contract with the State of Alabama on January 22, 1862, to supply ". . . five thousand good army guns, of the value and description of the Mississippi or Enfield rifle, with sabre bayonets attached. . .", to be delivered in lots of one hundred by March 1, 1863, at a cost of \$33.00; an addendum to the contract extended the delivery date to May 1st. One of the conditions imposed by Governor John Gill Shorter in this contract, and others of its kind, was that the factory could not be removed from the state without his consent (another states' rights issue, one can suppose).

Fuller and Steuart, in *Firearms of the Confederacy*,⁵ stated that the contract with the firm was executed in 1861, but this obviously is incorrect. The State did not authorize such contracts until December, 1861, the same month that Governor Shorter assumed office. As additional corroboration for the 1862 date, Governor Shorter signed almost identical agreements with Lewis Sturdevant and Daniel Wallis of Talladega and the Alabama Arms Manufacturing Company of Montgomery between March and May, 1862, to produce copies of the Mississippi or Enfield rifles at costs ranging from \$33.00 to \$35.00 (ADAH).

The Dickson, Nelson contract provided for an advance of \$25,000, if desired by the company, to be paid off in guns by May 1, 1863. Other documents in the Shorter papers (ADAH) record advances totaling \$15,000 made to the company on January 22, April 28, and July 8, 1862. (1,4)

Based on the reviews of all available documentation, this contract may have been the only one executed between Dickson, Nelson and the State of Alabama during the entire war. It appears that Owen O. Nelson, president of the firm, was a close political associate of John Gill Shorter, who urged Nelson to undertake the production of firearms in the first place. As a consequence of this relationship, Shorter seems to have been particularly solicitous of the company's welfare throughout the war.

The rifle factory was to be built on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, now the Southern, some twelve miles south of the Tennessee River on William Dickson's large land holdings in Franklin County (now Colbert County), approximately twenty miles west of Tusculumbia, Alabama. It appears that the site was at or near Buzzard Roost, the former homeplace of Chief Levi Colbert, a mixed-blood Chickasaw Indian, after whom the modern county was named. The Natchez Trace Parkway is within a stone's throw of the spring where the plant is thought to have been situated.

Based on the contents of a letter from O. O. Nelson to Governor Shorter, dated February 22, 1862, the plant was under construction when permission was sought to move the operation to a safer location (2). The fall several weeks earlier of Fort Henry on the Tennessee River near the Kentucky-Tennessee line had opened up the big river to Yankee gunboats as far as the shoals upriver from, and far beyond, the plant site.

Nelson also reported to the governor on progress being made in acquiring machinery ". . . from our shop in

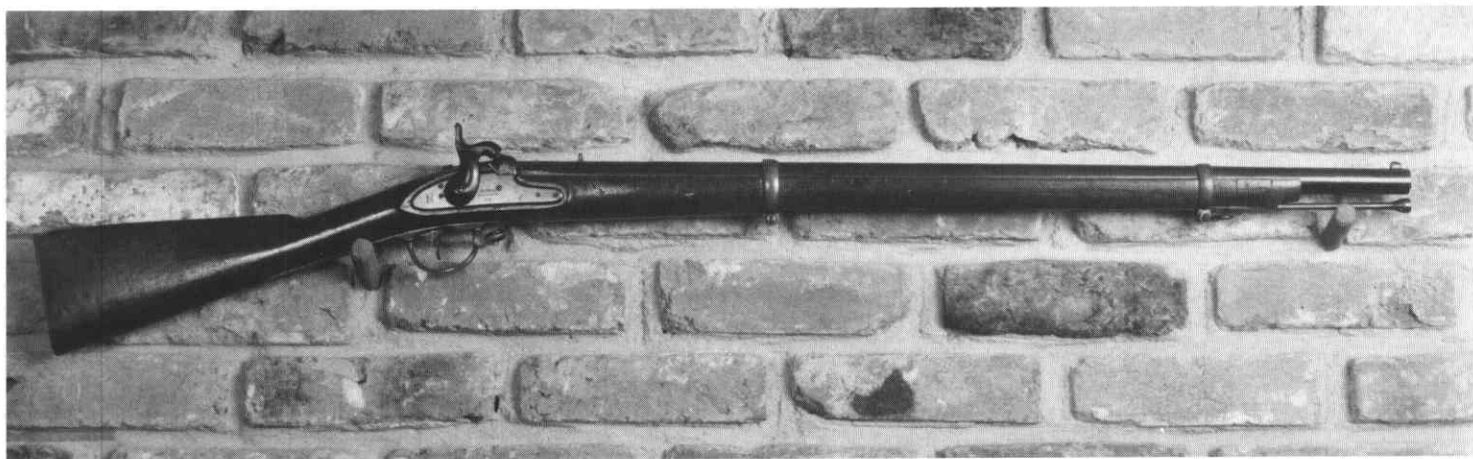
Hopefield, Arkansas (opposite Memphis), which is working exclusively for us, and other shops working also. . .". Based on this description of events, it is certain that no guns were made at the Alabama site.

Owen Nelson asked the governor to allow the company to manufacture the guns for the state ". . .at any point we may think best, in or out of the state;" but away from river communication (and Yankee gunboats). Tuscaloosa, Alabama's first capital, was mentioned as a likely spot, but it was on the navigable Black Warrior River. Marietta, Georgia, was a place ". . .peculiarly situated for an armory. It is far in the interior and has railroad communication with all parts of the Confederacy. . .". Having mentioned these sites, however, in March or April, 1862, Nelson and his associates loaded up equipment and workmen and headed east to Rome, Georgia.

The only account I have seen that describes the move to Georgia is that of ex-slave Bill Finley, who was the subject of an newspaper interview in the summer of 1929.⁶

Although situated on the Coosa River, Rome in the early spring of 1862 lay far beyond the reach of Yankee armies and gunboats until federal troops took Chattanooga a year later. More importantly, here were machine shops, primarily supporting local mining and riverboat operations, the Noble Brothers and Company being the principal enterprise. The company, founded in 1855 by ironmaster James Noble Sr. of Cornwall, England, had blast furnaces, a rolling mill, lathes, drills and other machinery used to build steam engines, iron bridges, boilers and mining machinery. Before the war, the company made the first railroad locomotive constructed south of Richmond.⁷

During the war, the Noble company made iron cannon, carriages and limbers complete with accessories.⁸ In this cited article, Anderson also reports that the Dickson, Nelson Company shared space with the Noble Brothers in the O. B. Eve carriage plant at Rome; however, a newspaper account of the plant's destruction by fire in August of 1862 does not mention the Noble Brothers as occupants (12).



1864 Dickson, Nelson Co. rifle.

Thought to be the only surviving member of the Dickson, Nelson workforce, Finley was a boy, and the property of Tuscumbia postmaster Sam Finley, when the war began. Trained in a shop operated by his master for the production of plow stocks, plow handles and other farm equipment, Bill Finley was a skilled woodworker, who spent the balance of the war making gunstocks and shipping crates for the finished products, packed "twelve to a case."

Finley reported that the company moved to Georgia after the battle at Shiloh Church, or Pittsburg Landing (April 6-8, 1862), on the Tennessee River, less than 40 miles from William Dickson's property. Finley told of the trip from Buzard Roost by wagon through Decatur, Alabama, and across Sand Mountain to "Adairsville, Georgia." It is likely that the company's heavy machinery was moved by rail to Chattanooga via the Memphis and Charleston line, then south on the Tennessee and Georgia line to Adairsville and hauled by wagon to Rome. Finley knew nothing about the operation at the first plant site, but his recollections of the Georgia operations included the comment that the company had trouble keeping labor, and many white men working there were taken away by conscription and placed in the ranks, a common dilemma for contractors throughout the war.

Based on an April 4, 1862, letter written at Rome to the Shelby County Iron Manufacturing Company (later the Shelby Iron Works) placing an order for ". . .Iron for Rifle barrels. . .", the Dickson, Nelson Company either was at Rome or its agent was there before the Shiloh battle (3). Governor Shorter lost little time in granting permission for the move from northwest Alabama.

Shorter also mentions this relocation in a May 2, 1862, letter to former Alabama Governor Israel Pickens (ADAH): ". . .one establishment with which I had contracted for the manufacture of 5,000 Mississippi rifles, the first of which were to have been delivered by this date, has been forced to remove its machinery to Georgia, in consequence of the invasion of our northern counties by the enemy, and I shall, on that account, be subjected to a considerable delay in receiving the arms."

A July 15th letter from Colin J. McRae, founder of the original Selma naval foundry and later an agent for the Confederate Ordnance Department, notified Governor Shorter that:

"I am instructed by Colonel Gorgas to fill your orders for iron to enable Messers. Dickson, Nelson & Co. to complete a contract with you for 5,000 rifles and bayonets. Please send an order for the quantity and description of iron wanted and I will have it executed at the Shelby works immediately. . ."(10).

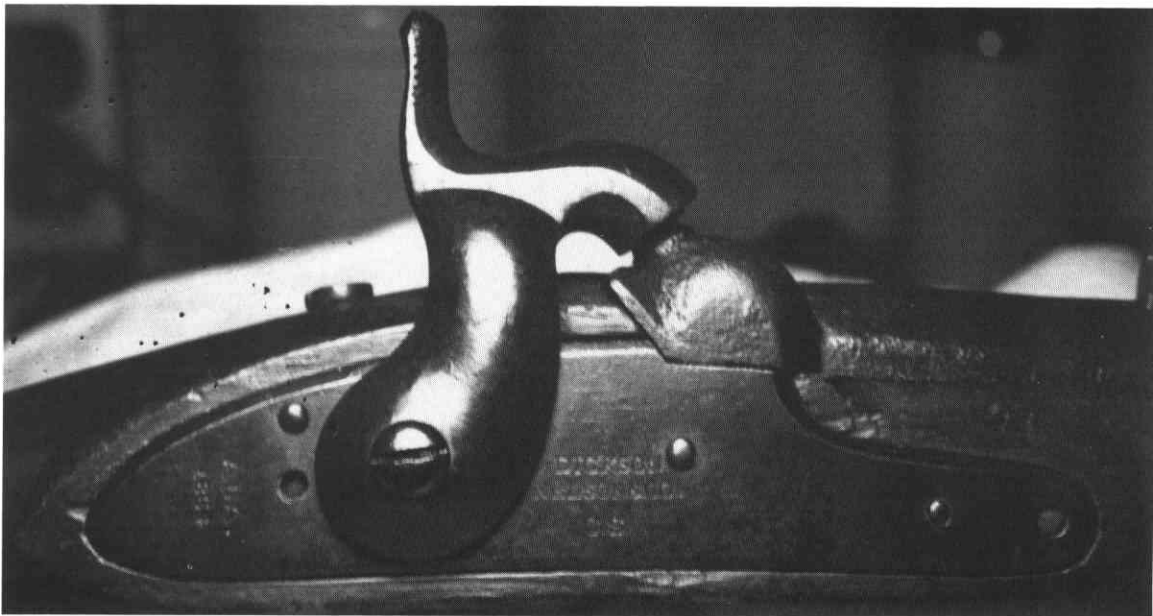
Established in the 1840s as the Shelby County Iron Manufacturing Company, at Columbiana, Alabama, thirty miles southeast of modern-day Birmingham, the Shelby works by 1862 was the most comprehensive manufacturing facility south of Richmond until completion of the major ordnance operation at Selma in 1863 (it operated as the Shelby Iron Company until 1929). At the time of the Dickson, Nelson order, the only two rolling mills in the Confederacy south of the Tredegar Works in Richmond were located here and at the Noble Brothers plant in Rome.

The April order for iron referenced by McRae probably was the first one made by the Dickson, Nelson company in its brief manufacturing existence. According to Anderson, barrels for Dickson, Nelson were made by John P. Murray of Columbus, Georgia; however, the order referenced above was for barrel iron, to be delivered to the firm in Rome by rail and wagon.

Letters from Dickson, Nelson to the Shelby Iron Com-

Nothing more is known about the Rome operation until The *Tri-Weekly Courier* reported on August 30, 1862, "On Thursday evening last (August 28th) the Armory caught on fire and was completely destroyed.¹⁰ Originating in the 'drying room' on the north end of the building, the wind-driven flames spread so rapidly that the building was gone in less than two hours. Workmen jumped to safety from the second floor windows, and no effort could be made to save any of the machinery, tools or gun parts. Mr. Eve, 'one of our patriotic martyrs,' also sustained a very serious loss (12)." It is reasonable to assume that no rifles were completed during this four or five-month tenure in Rome.

Seemingly ever mindful of the plight of his friend Owen Nelson, especially after the devastating fire, Governor Shorter in early September extended the delivery date of arms "... beyond the first of May, 1863, and such further time will be allowed for their delivery as may be reasonably required." (13)



The lock for the 1864 rifle.

pany during the summer of 1862 pleaded for the delivery of iron, most of which was 4 x 3/8" skelps of unspecified lengths (6-8). The Shelby Company had great difficulty meeting orders, both military and persistent civilian ones, during the early days of the war. The Confederate Ordnance Department, through the authority of Josiah Gorgas and executed by agent Colin J. McRae, essentially took over the assignment of priorities for the Shelby Works in 1863, and production and deliveries improved.⁹

One can only speculate when the Dickson, Nelson Company received its first iron shipment in Rome, but it is known that significant quantities of unassembled gun parts were lost when the plant burned in the late summer of 1862. Instructions to the Shelby Company were to ship the orders by rail through Talladega to the terminus of the Alabama and Tennessee Rivers Railroad at Blue Mountain, on the outskirts of modern-day Anniston, Alabama. The Dickson, Nelson Company arranged for wagons to haul the iron some sixty miles northeast to Rome, weather permitting.

An undated but apparent *post scriptum* to this letter authorized the substitution of the triangular concave bayonet for the sabre type at an added cost of two dollars apiece for guns thus finished.

It is clear that the Dickson, Nelson Company was ordering, and possibly receiving, a significant amount of iron from the Shelby works during its stay at Rome. At least three orders for not less than 5,000 pounds were in effect during the company's sojourn there.

Selling what machinery they could salvage from the fire to replenish a now empty war chest, the principals moved from Rome to Adairsville, Georgia, in September of 1862, to occupy the State Railroad Shops, abandoned since the early 1850s (14). Located on the Tennessee and Georgia Railroad in the hill country between Chattanooga and Atlanta, Adairsville was a fine manufacturing site with excellent transportation to points across the Confederacy.

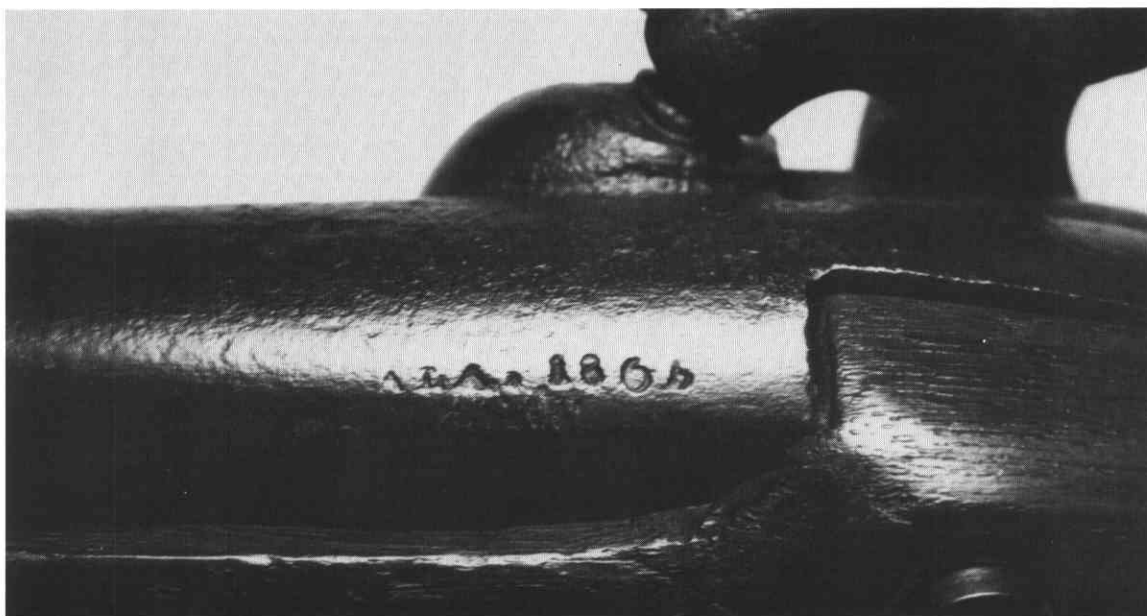
An undated, probably late-December, 1862, report from the CS government to the Shelby Iron Company includes

a notation that the outstanding bill for the Dickson, Nelson Company was more than \$22,000 (16). If the bill represented "gun iron," then selling at 15 cents per pound, this amount of money could account for more than seventy tons of iron made up for the company to this time, the end of its third month in Adairsville. Of course, much of this tonnage may have represented heavy equipment, although I am not aware that the Shelby works actually built machinery at its facility. Its primary product was pig iron which was rolled to the thickness or diameter required for the purpose intended, whether it be for smallarms, swords or armor plating for Confederate gunboats. The term "scalps" used in Dickson, Nelson correspondence should be "skelps," which refer to pieces of flattened, or rolled, iron.

Another recently-discovered manuscript in the Shelby papers, probably dating from late December, 1862, or early January, 1863, from Churchill and Company, Columbiana, Alabama, to the Shelby works contains a list of orders made

arms of all descriptions were made through August, 1863, including carbines made up from barrels salvaged from the fire at Rome. Although the contract does not mention carbines, economies involving utilization of scarce materials, even damaged ones, seem appropriate. The Shelby Iron Company Collection so far has yielded only one letter written from the Adairsville operation. Dated October 8, 1862, the communique inquired about the status of a tardy shipment of iron (15).

After a stay of about one year at Adairsville, troop concentrations for the battle of Chickamauga (September 19-20, 1863), forced the Dickson, Nelson Company to move again, this time to the relative safety of Dawson, in southwest Georgia. From W. H. Bailey in March, 1864, the partners purchased twenty-seven acres of land on the Central of Georgia Railroad near the depot,¹¹ where they erected gun shops, a foundry and other buildings which operated full blast until the end of the war. It is likely that production here did not



The barrel stamp on the 1864 rifle.

up for Dickson, Nelson on December 9, 13, 18 and 20, 1862, totaling 21,472 pounds of 4 x 3/8" gun iron. The cost of this amount of iron was \$3,220.80, or 15 cents per pound (17).

The C. B. Churchill Company, originally of Natchez, Mississippi, moved to Alabama after the fall of Corinth in early October, 1862. Prior to this move, the company had been associated with the McElwain iron works at nearby Holly Springs. According to Armes,⁷ in her fine book on the history of coal and iron in Alabama, the Churchill company still was on contract with the Confederate government when it moved to Shelby County. Either the Shelby Iron Works sub-contracted a number of orders to Churchill or Colin McRae assigned them directly to Churchill in an effort to meet the demand for iron.

No records are known to verify the production of the firm at Adairsville. Fuller and Steuart speculate that some rifles were made here, and Anderson estimates that 3,600

begin before the early summer of 1864; consequently, the company may have suffered a eight or nine-month lapse in the output of rifles.

Some years ago I discovered a small cache of Dickson, Nelson-related documents in the collection of the Tennessee Valley Historical Society, Tusculumbia, Alabama. Reflecting inquiries by the Society's president in the late 1920s regarding the history of the company after it left the state, the collection included interviews with people having personal knowledge of the Georgia chapters of the Dickson, Nelson story.

One of the accounts was by the daughter of Captain Frank Benjamin, a machinist and boatbuilder from Rome, who may have been associated with the Noble Brothers there. Miss Katherine Benjamin, quite old at the time of the interview in 1929, was a child during the days the Dickson, Nelson Company was at Dawson. She reported that the plant had moved from Adairsville to Dawson; her father was

superintendent, and Owen O. Nelson was the manager. She remembered seeing the guns—"rows and rows of them, hundreds and hundreds of them stacked overhead"—in the factory, a large frame building near the railroad depot. There were a lot of men working, she recalled, putting together "so exactly" gun parts which were lying in piles (TVHS).

Whether Frank Benjamin was associated with the Dickson, Nelson Company in Rome is not known, but it is difficult to imagine that a skilled machinist would have not been hired immediately by the expatriot Alabamians, whose gun-making talents probably were slight.

At the time of this writing, no documents relating to the Dawson days have emerged from the Shelby Iron Company Collection. It seems certain that the Dickson, Nelson Company maintained its operation at Dawson until the end of the war. A June 7, 1864, letter from newly-elected Alabama Governor Thomas H. Watts to Secretary of War Seddon complained that an enrolling officer (probably from the State of Georgia) had conscripted "several of the hands of the Shavanoosa Arms Manufacturing Company at Dawson, Ga., and threatens to take many more, this in effect destroying an establishment with which Alabama has a contract for a supply of arms."¹² (20)

Some students of Confederate arms, particularly Fuller and Steuart, conclude that the majority of the company's production came from the Dawson operation, between the early summer of 1864 and the end of the war in April, 1865. A report by Alabama Quartermaster General Duff C. Green accounts for the delivery of 645 rifles (at \$90.00 each) from Dickson, Nelson between October 1, 1863, and November 1, 1864 (ADAH). During this time the company moved from Adairsville to Dawson and built a new plant facility; consequently, production probably was quite limited. Although the Duff Green report is, to my knowledge, the only official and definitive account of deliveries to the State of Alabama by the company during the war, one cannot say that other guns were not produced and delivered.

A summary by state auditor John A. Graham of amounts loaned by the State of Alabama to companies and individuals for the manufacture of firearms and powder lists an amount of \$43,508.89, plus \$3,346 in interest, refunded by Dickson, Nelson up to November 19, 1863 (19). Whether this amount represents guns delivered or a cash refund against the loan balance is not certain. However, use of the phrase "Amt paid by them for interest" implies that cash money was the method of repayment. Also, entries for several other contractors make a distinction between cash refunded and products delivered; therefore, one can conclude that the Dickson, Nelson transaction was cash, not guns. If the refund indeed represented rifles delivered at \$80.00 or \$90.00 each, the company handed over to the State between 483 and 543 arms. If true, we still do not know if this number is included in Duff Green's report a year later. One must remember that the company had left Adairsville and probably still was without plant facilities at Dawson between September of 1863 and the early summer of 1864.

Excerpts from a report found recently at the Alabama Department of Archives and History present information of

real interest. The original documents on which the report was based have yet to be found and verified, but I trust that the contents will be of interest to Dickson, Nelson fans.

Prepared as a W. P. A. project in 1938, this summary² of the manufacture of arms and munitions in Alabama during the Civil War includes these two paragraphs about the Dickson, Nelson Company (emphases added):

The first of these contracts was made between Governor Shorter (who succeeded Gov. Moore on Dec. 2, 1861) and Dixon, Nelson & Co. (sic), who were at that time operating in Tusculumbia and had what seems to have been an extensive iron foundry. Their first advance was \$25,000.00 and they were to begin delivery within six months and after that time to continue to make deliveries of not less than *five hundred stand of arms* each calendar month. One of the conditions imposed by Governor Shorter in all contracts was that the factory must not at any time be removed beyond State lines without the consent of the Governor.

Before this firm got under way, the northern part of the State was occupied by the enemy armies and they obtained the permission of the governor to remove to Rome, Ga., but before they could begin shipments from that point they had again to move, this time to Adairsville and again from there to Dawson, all in the same State. In spite of these moves, they never lost their identity as an Alabama concern and were constantly asking the Governor of Alabama to intercede with the Governor of Georgia to have their employees exempted from the various drafts for military service. *The contract made with these people was a failure*, owing partly to so many moves and partly to inability to secure raw materials and labor. In a letter from Governor Watts (cited above) written during the summer of 1864 to the Secretary of War requesting exemptions for some employees, he makes the statement that the *firm had delivered less than 6000 stand of arms*. The records fail to disclose whether this firm survived until the end or whether they were captured and destroyed.

In June, 1866, the Dickson, Nelson Company sold, for \$12,000, eighteen acres of its holdings to the Dawson Manufacturing Company, Owen O. Nelson, President.¹¹ For many years, the company operated an extensive lumber business, a foundry and machine shops producing passenger and freight cars and building supplies.

Nelson conveyed this property in November, 1885, to the Dawson Variety Works which became one of the largest lumber industries in the South.¹¹ It appears that the buildings and other structures erected by the Dickson, Nelson Company during the war were torn down about 1915, leading one to conclude that Yankee raiders failed to include this stop on their itinerary in the spring of 1865. In the 1930s the Dawson Variety Works was still on the site selling lumber, and an occasional Dickson, Nelson stock blank (price \$1.00) from a large supply left from the wartime operation.

As is the case of so many Southern enterprises during the war, the Dickson, Nelson mystery persists. Was the original contract for 5,000 rifles completed? Was another executed and partially fulfilled before the war was over? What amounts of iron were delivered to the company at Dawson? Did the Shelby Works remain the sole supplier for the balance of the war, for this particular firm and others in the Southeast? The questions are legion.

I think that many of the answers exist in documents of the Shelby Iron Works collection at the University of Alabama. Curation of these papers is underway, but it is a

long and labor-intensive task. Already, a number of references to Griswold and Gunnison and Louis Haiman have emerged; others doubtless exist. In my judgment, this collection is important to the reconstruction of Confederate ordnance operations in the Southeast during the Civil War.

The lack of definitive answers to important questions always is both frustrating and challenging, evoking the same excitement Sherlock Holmes expressed in his phrase, "Watson, the game is afoot!"

NOTES

1 - Josiah Gorgas, "Ordnance Department of the Confederate Government," manuscript, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library, the University of Alabama.

2 - Clyde E. Wilson, *A Study of the Manufacture and other Methods of Procuring Arms and Munitions of War in Alabama During the Period of the War Between the States, 1861-1865*: dated March 15, 1938, and compiled under W.P.A. Project 3821 In Military Division, Acts of Alabama and Official Records, Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH), Montgomery, AL.

3 - Articles of Agreement between Wm. Dickson, Owen O. Nelson and L. H. Sadler and Gov. John Gill Shorter, State of Alabama, Jan. 22, 1862: Military Records Collection, ADAH.

4 - Jim Blackburn, "The Dickson, Nelson & Co. Rifle," *The Gun Report*, October, 1961

5 - Claud E. Fuller and Richard D. Steuart, *Firearms of the Confederacy* (Huntington, W. Va.: Standard Publications, Inc., 1944).

6 - *The Birmingham News*, June 30, 1929.

7 - Ethel Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama* (Cambridge, Mass. The University Press, 1910).

8 - Cecil Anderson, "Dickson, Nelson & Co.," *North-South Trader*, Jan. - Feb., 1976.

9 - Frank E. Vandiver, "The Shelby Iron Company in the Civil War: A Study of Confederate Industry," *Alabama Review I*, nos. 1,2 and 3, (Jan., Apr., Jul., 1948).

10 - *The Tri-Weekly Courier*, Rome, GA., Aug. 30, 1862.

11 - Deed, Clerk's Office, Terrell County, Georgia.

12 - Military Records Collection, ADAH (the typescript copy of this document, which I examined, apparently is incomplete; note 2 cites this same letter from Gov. Watts to Sec. of War Seddon, dated June 7, 1864, as the source of other specifics pertaining to total production of the Dickson, Nelson Company during the war -- DEJ).

APPENDIX

Listed in chronological order, by archival source, are the texts of documents of particular relevance to this paper.

1 (ADAH) Executive Department
Montgomery, Ala. Jany. 22, 1862

Received three thousand dollars advanced us this day on this contract to be accounted for with interest.

Dickson, Nelson and Company

2 (ADAH) Tuscombua, Ala Feby 22d 1862

Hon. Jno Gill Shorter
Montgomery

My Dear Sir

In view of the fall of Fort Henry it will most likely become necessary that we should change the location of our Armory. The enemy now has full possession of the Tenn river to Florence and it is no doubt his intention to try and effect a landing at some point near our works to obtain possession of the Memphis and Charleston railroad. We are but about twelve miles from the river.

I write to ask you to allow us to manufacture the guns for the state at any point we may think best, in or out of the state. We scarcely know where we would be safe now but will try to land at some point away from river communication. We have thought of Tuscaloosa but that is on the Warrior River, otherwise it would be a very suitable place.

Marietta Ga has been suggested to me as a place peculiarly situated for an Armory. It is far in the interior and has railroad communication with all parts of the Confederacy in a broken country with high bridges across streams on all sides. I have no doubt in view of the circumstances you will allow us to remove to any point where we will be safe and likely to turn out the greatest number of guns.

We have been busy at work ever since I returned home from Montgy [Montgomery, the state capital] and have accomplished much in the way of getting up machinery. We have one Machine shop at Hopefield Ark [opposite Memphis] working exclusively for us and other shops working also. In short we are driving ahead as rapidly as possible. Have commenced our building, purchased lumber for the whole and contracted for building. We will of course submit to a loss in what we have done in the way of building, purchasing lumber & etc.

I desire you will write me on receipt of this. I go to Memphis tomorrow to run off all machinery we have finished. I consider Memphis in great danger. The clouds look dark that overhangs our young Confederacy but we should not be discouraged. It will require only a stronger effort on our part to accomplish all we set out to do. Every man capable of bearing arms should now turn out to meet and drive back the invader of our soil. Were it not for the gun business I should be off myself.

One gun boat of the Lincoln fleet came up to Eastport two days ago. She returned without doing damage. I presume she was taking observations.

Hoping to hear from you at your earliest convenience, I am
Yours very truly,
O. O. Nelson

P. S. The gentleman that proposes to furnish gun scalps [skelps] for 25 cts per pound is charging too much.

(A note at the bottom of the original states that the Governor answered this letter Feb. 27th 1862)

3 (UA-SIC) Rome, Ga April 4th 1862
Shelby County Manufacturing Co.

Dear Sirs,

Can you furnish us with Iron for Rifle barrels and at what time and price. The Iron must be 3 1/2 x 3/8. Please inform us immediately and oblige.

Yours etc.
Dickson, Nelson & Co.

4 (ADAH) Executive Department
Montgomery, April 28, 1862

Received of John Gill Shorter, Governor of the State of Alabama, four thousand dollars advanced us this day on the within contract to be accounted for with interest.

Dickson, Nelson and Company.
Columbiana (Ala) May 2nd 1862

5 (UA-SIC)
Shelby Manufacturing Co.

Please ship three thousand lbs. of the iron we ordered instead of 2500. I made a mistake in my calculation.

Yours,
Dickson, Nelson & Co.

(Letter written by either Nelson or Sadler while in Columbiana, the town nearest the Shelby Works and on the route to Montgomery, which probably was visited frequently by the principals on company business)

6 (UA-SIC) Rome, Georgia May 27th 1862
Shelby Manufacturing Co.

Sirs please,

I send you the following bill of Iron which I hope you will fill at a very early date,

500 lbs 1 inch x 3/16
500 lbs 5/8 x 3/8
500 lbs 3/8 x 5/16
600 lbs iron rod

When will you send us the Iron for Gun barrels; we are ready now for it. Please let us hear from you so we may know when to look for it.

Very Respectfully,
Dickson Nelson Co.

7 (UA-SIC) Rome, Ga June 4th 1862

Mr. Jones, Agt. [Andrew T. Jones, President]
Shelby Iron Works

Dear Sir,

We are very much in need of the Iron for gun scalps [skelps] etc and as we have not heard from you on the subject we wish to ask you to please furnish us the Iron as soon as you **possibly can**. Indeed we don't know what we shall do if you don't let us have it soon as we have made no other arrangements for scalps etc and we are now ready for all Iron for which you have bills from us. Please let us hear from you by return mail. We are ready to pay for the Iron at any time.

You informed our Dr. Sadler you could furnish the bill he left with you for scalps in two weeks from the time he was with you which was more than four weeks ago. We hope the Iron has been shipped and is now on the way to us. Our country needs guns so badly we are using every exertion to furnish them at the earliest possible moment.

Yours truly,
Dickson Nelson Co.

P.S. The Iron should be shipped to Blue Mountain

8 (UA-SIC) Rome, Ga June 18th 1862

Mr. A. T. Jones
Prest.
Columbiana [post office for Shelby Iron Works]

Dear Sir,

We duly rec'd your fav'r of the 6th inst in which you said you expected to start the mill on small iron the following Monday and would let us know when our iron was ready. As we have not heard from you as yet we write asking that you will greatly oblige us if you can fill our bill at once or at least a portion of it. We shall be compelled to discharge hands that we have been holding onto until the iron from your works could be received unless we can get it soon. It will damage us much to let them go at this time.

Our Mr. Sadler may be at your place in a few days as he has gone to Montgomery. We would be glad if you could ship the iron to Blue Mountain by the time he reaches you as he could then make arrangements for bringing it through with him.

Yours very truly,
Dickson Nelson & Co.

9 (UA-SIC) C.S. War Department

Ordance Officer
Richmond, July 7th 1862

Yr Excellency,

I beg to acknowledge your letter of the 1st inst and to say that the necessary order has been given to the Shelby Iron Co to deliver to Dickson Nelson & Co. the balance of the iron contracted for by you on behalf of the State of Alabama. The order has been given through the Honorable C. J. McRae [Selma Arsenal]. I have the honor to be,

Very respectfully, etc
J. Gorgas, Colonel
Chief of Ordnance

Gov. J. Gill Shorter
Montgomery
Ala

10 (ADAH) Selma, July 15th, 1882

Sir: I am instructed by Colonel Gorgas to fill your orders for iron to enable Messers Dickson, Nelson & Co. to complete a contract with you for 5,000 rifles and baonets. Please send an order for the quantity and description of iron wanted and I will have it executed at the Shelby works immediately.

With much respect, your obedient servant.

C. J. McRae
His Excellency John Gill Shorter,
Governor of Alabama, Montgomery

11 (UA-SIC) Selma, Aug 9th 1862

A. T. Jones Esq. President
Shelby County Iron Manufacturing Co.

Dear Sir,

I enclose a bill of iron for Messers Dixon [sic] & Nelson, contractors with the state for the making of rifles. The Ordnance Dept. has instructed me to fill the order of the former for iron to complete such contracts as he has entered into in this part of the state. About one and a half tons of the iron in the enclosed bill is under the size included in the contract and you will be entitled to some advance in the price. When the order is completed please ship the iron up the road to Blue Mountain as per enclosed directions of the former. With much respect, your ob'd serv't,

C. J. McRae

Agt.

P.S. Please return us the Gov's letter

12 (TVHS) *Tri-Weekly Courier*, Rome, Georgia, August 30, 1862

FIRE

On Thursday evening last [August 28th], the Armory caught on fire and was completely destroyed. The fire originated in the drying room, which was at the north end of the building, and the wind was blowing heavily at the moment from that quarter; the flames spread with inconceivable rapidity, and in less than an hour and a half the woodwork was in ashes. The fire spread so rapidly that some of the workmen were compelled to jump from the second story windows, and no efforts could be made to save any of the machinery.

Most providentially the wind was from such a quarter as to blow the flames from town, which with the exertions of the citizens at some exposed points, saved a large portion of it from destruction. The machinery had just been entirely completed, and a large lot of the parts of a gun had been made and they intended to commence putting them together the next day.

The loss of Messers Dickson, Nelson & Co. is estimated at \$55,000 in machinery and manufactured articles, and Eve & Bro. about \$50,000 in the building and a large lot of machinery and carriage stock that had been left there. Many of the workmen lost their tools, which will be severely felt by them, as it will be difficult to procure proper supplies just now. We sympathize with the energetic proprietors of this establishment, who have had several drawbacks in their enterprise here, and especially with our friend, Dr. Sadler, who, in addition to his present misfortune, was nigh ruined in worldly effects last Spring by the yankees in North Alabama, in the destruction of his home, household effects, books & C., and also with the family of one our patriot martyrs, O. B. Eve, who will sustain a very serious loss.

No insurance was on the building or any portion of the contents.

13 (ADAH) Executive Department
Montgomery, Ala. Sep. 3, 1862

On account of the incursion of the enemy into North Alabama and the recent destruction by fire at Rome, Ga. of the machinery of Dickson, Nelson and Company, the time for delivery for the arms under this contract is hereby extended beyond the first of May, 1863, and such further time will be allowed for their delivery as may be reasonably required.

John Gill Shorter
Governor of Alabama

14 (TVHS) *Tri-Weekly Courier*, Rome, Georgia, Sept. 12, 1862

We learned that Messers. Dickson, Nelson & Company intend to commence operating again in Adairsville. They have been able to obtain a good deal of machinery and will soon be underway again.

We regret very much that they have decided on leaving Rome, but they can obtain a shop suitable for their purposes in Adairsville, which they cannot do here now.

15 (UA-SIC) Adairsville, Ga Oct. 8th 1862

A. T. Jones, Esqr. Pres.

Dear Sir,

We will be much obliged to you if you can fill our bill (for) Iron soon. As we have to wagon from Blue Mountain to Rome we are anxious to receive the Iron before the bad weather sets in. The roads will soon be bad and we are fearful we may find some difficulty in having the hauling done. Hoping we may soon hear from you that you have shipped the Iron, we remain,

Yours very truly,
Dickson Nelson Co.

16 (US-SIC) Report from the Confederate States of America to the Shelby County Iron Manufacturing Company [undated but apparently executed in late December, 1862] includes this notation at the end:

Dickson Nelson Co. bill dft on IJS Dec 1/62	1227.30
21,209.41 their bill	
1,227.30 Dickson N & Co.	
22,436.71	

17 (UA-SIC) Report from Churchill & Co. to Shelby Iron Co. probably dating from late January or early February, 1863, contains this reference:

1862 Dickson Nelson & Co.
Dec. 9 4359 lbs gun iron 4 x 3/8
Dec. 13 3979 lbs gun iron 4 x 3/8
Dec. 18 8920 lbs gun iron 4 x 3/8
Dec. 20 4214 lbs gun iron 4 x 3/8
Dec. 21,472 lbs \$3,220.80

Sent account to Gov. Shorter

18 (UA-SIC) Selma, April 3rd 1863

Hon. John Gill Shorter
Montgomery, Ala

Dear Sir,

I enclose the bill of Messers Dickson Nelson & Co with the affidavit on the back, also power of attorney to [?]. We furnished them with the iron as ordered by Genl McRae and had no discretion [?] as to the time of making it. Had it been otherwise, we could have completed the entire requisition long since. John B. Taylor to receipt for the money to the treasurer and deposit the same in the Farmers Bank Montgomery to the credit of the Bank of Selma. Mr. Taylor will request the Bank to send certificate of the deposit to Bank of Selma. Amt of account \$3,220.80. [no signature]

19 (ADAH) Statement of amounts loaned by the state to companies and individuals for the manufacture of fire arms and powder and amounts refunded up to 19 day of November 1863, by John A. Graham, Auditor & c:

	Amount Refunded	Balance Due State
Dickson Nelson & Co.		
Amount loaned in cash	40,157.60	40,157.60
Amt. paid by them for interest	3,346.29	
	<hr/>	
	43,503.89	
Wm. B. Gilmer Tres' in State Bonds		
	250,000.00	250,000.00
L. V. B. Martin in cash	40,000.00	9,820.00
Amt. refunded in powder	30,180.00	
	<hr/>	
	40,000.00	
Daniel Walls in cash	2,000.00	2,000.00

20 (ADAH) Executive Department
Montgomery, Ala. June 7, 1864

Hon. J. A. Seddon,
Secretary of War:

The enrolling officer, Colonel Browne, of Macon, Ga., has enrolled several of the hands of the Shakanoosa Arms Manufacturing Company at Dawson, Ga., and threatens to take many more, thus in effect destroying an establishment with which Alabama has a contract for a supply of arms. This establishment is of common and great utility to the Confederate States and the States of Georgia and Alabama. Arms are a necessity, and Alabama has a very inadequate supply. I request, therefore, that no further conscription from that factory be made, or that of those making arms such may be returned or detailed as may under oath by the superintendent be deemed necessary to the successful working of the establishment.

T. H. Watts,
Governor

