



1. Benjamin Mills 1810—1888.

Benjamin Mills, 19th Century Kentucky Gunmaker

Glenn Marsh, M.D.

"...I say again, it's a beautiful piece."

"Old Ben Mills made it hisself, at Harrodsburg. She's true as could be. That rabbit, I took the eye right out of him. I reckon you heard of old Ben Mills?"

Bedwell turned his face toward Boone. It was a sharp face, lined around the eyes and mouth, as if smiles had worn creases in it. "I reckon I have! So Mills made it! Mills himself!"

"Yep, it's a Mills." Boone took the jug that Bedwell held out to him.

"You ought to take good care of it friend. You ought to keep it cleaned and shined up and be careful nobody steals it. There's men would give a pretty lot for that rifle."

Boone said, "I watch over it, all right."

from *The Big Sky*
by A.B. Guthrie, Jr.¹

Now this is not Daniel Boone, but Boone Caudill, the fictional protagonist of the novel. More than forty years ago I first read this narrative and for some unknown reason was fascinated by the concept of such a rifle. I knew not, at the time, whether this "Ben Mills" represented a real person or was a character born of the Kentucky background and genius of the 1950 Pulitzer prize winning author A.B. Guthrie, Jr.² A decade or slightly more passed and, while competing in the Texas State Muzzle Loading shoot at San Angelo, Texas, a rifle of unusual line and distinctive design being shot in competition caught my eye. I asked to examine the arm and was greatly surprised and excited to read both on the lock and barrel the unexpected stamped marking of "B. Mills, Harrodsburg, Ky!" I was invited to shoot the gun and did so. Within a couple of years the owner was killed in an accident and after the passage of a respectful period of time, I approached his widow relative to purchasing the Mills, but found it already sold and experienced the keen disappointment of having missed the opportunity of ownership. Over the next forty years there would be a few more opportunities of ownership, some successful, some not.

As fellow arms collectors, you will understand that possession of an item, while pleasing, does not bring ultimate pride of ownership until we *know* the artisan. Here is what I have learned of one Benjamin Mills.

Mills was born in Palmyra, New York,³ on February 8, 1810.⁴ He married Jane O'Connor of Ireland in Toronto, Canada⁵ and of this union, there were four, or perhaps five children. The Kentucky Census of 1840 lists two children, one male and one female, under the respective columns of



"Males in the Household Under Five" and "Females in the Household Under Five."⁶ A subsequent Kentucky Census, that of 1860 in which all the Mills' children are listed, lists four children by name and age: Elizabeth (Lizzie), Charles, Mary (Jennie), and Lucy.⁷ Obviously, from the dates of the censuses and the age of the male child listed in each, the Charles listed in the 1860 Census could not be the same male child listed in the 1840 census because of the discrepancy in age. Thus, one can see that one of two possibilities exists: either the male child included in the 1840 Census died or the compiler of the 1840 Census was in error.

Just why or how Benjamin Mills chose Kentucky as residence is not known. As it is clear from Kentucky Census records spanning four decades, Mills became an "entrenched" Kentuckian and was to remain so the rest of his life. However, he was not Kentucky's sole gunsmith of the Mills surname. In the tax list of Mayslick, Mason County of 1838, there is listed the name Hamilton Mills, gunsmith who had four persons in his employ engaged in manufacturing with a property valuation of \$19,625.⁸ In the tax list of the following year, 1839, there is one A.H. Mills, gunsmith, followed immediately on the non-alphabetized list by Benjamin Mills. However, in this listing, property valuation was assigned to neither. For some unexplained reason, in 1839 they are again listed consecutively with no property valuation.⁹

Interestingly, there is listed, in the earlier 1820 Kentucky Census of Lincoln County, which is some ninety miles from Mayslick, one Alexander Mills, who is stated to

KY Census--1850

Census file # 1165

[Mercer County, Harrodsburg, KY]

[Records found in Filson Club in Louisville, KY]

Mills, Benjamine [sic]	40	M	NY	gunsmith
Jane	31	F	Ire	
Elizabeth	10	F	KY	
Charles	5	M	KY	
Mary	1	F	KY	
Love, Lucian	21	M	KY	gunsmith
Brass, Andrew	18	M	KY	gunsmith
Stone, Henry	17	M	KY	gunsmith/stage driver

KY Census--1860

Census file # 163

[Mercer County, Harrodsburg, KY]

[Records found in Filson Club in Louisville, KY]

Mills, Benjamin	50	M	NY	gun mkr
Jane	41	F	Ire	
Lizzie	20	F	KY	
Charles	15	M	KY	
Jennie	11	F	KY	
Lucy	7	F	KY	
Kline, Edward	24	M	Pa	gun mkr
Haden, Thomas J	30	M	Eng	gun mkr
Margaret	25	F	NY	
Giles, George	24	M	Eng	carr. trm'r
Brickey, Virgil	22	M	KY	gun mkr
Junius, Henry	17	M	Holl	gun mkr

2. Census records of 1850 and 1860 listing members and names of immediate family as well as apprentices.

have two slaves and three persons engaged in manufacturing.¹⁰ This same Alexander Mills is again listed in the Kentucky Census of 1830 as still residing in Lincoln County and having four slaves with 15 members in his household.¹¹ In the 1840 Kentucky Census, Mr. Alexander Mills (A.H.?) is no longer listed among the residents of Lincoln County. However, in this same census, Mr. Benjamin Mills is listed in Mason County; there was no A.H. or Hamilton Mills listed.¹² Also, interestingly, the 1841 tax list for Lincoln County lists Benjamin Mills with \$100 property valuation.¹³

Is it purely coincidence that Benjamin Mills came to Mason County, Kentucky in 1839, when Hamilton Mills, wealthy gunsmith, was already there, that their names are consecutively listed twice on the tax rolls, that Benjamin Mills moved to Lincoln County in 1841 where there had been living, according to the census of 1820 and 1830, one wealthy Alexander Mills? Are Alexander Mills, Hamilton Mills, and A.H. (perhaps Alexander Hamilton?) Mills one and the same? Could this Mills be a wealthy relative who was instrumental in Benjamin Mills settling in Kentucky, and could he have played a part in the design and evolution of the distinctive Mills rifle and pistol?

While the above is mere speculation, it is widely accepted that Ben Mills likely learned the gunsmith

profession from his father, F.M. Mills, a gunsmith of Charlottesville, North Carolina, who had been born in New York, while Ben's mother was from Rhode Island.¹⁴

I have seen a picture of, but not examined, a rifle marked with the name of B. Mills, of Canadian provenance. This rifle bears no resemblance to his characteristic Kentucky design but appears as a full stocked rifle with a lock compatible with Mill's pattern, but other hardware is distinctly different. The rifle could have been restocked, or this rifle could have been made during his period of residence in Canada prior to moving to Mayslick, Mason County, Kentucky.

His next residence was Stanford, Lincoln County, Kentucky, and an over and under double rifle exists so marked.¹⁵ Mills then moved about 20 miles northwest to Harrodsburg, Mercer County, Kentucky, and is listed as residing there in the census of 1850 (U.S. Census and Kentucky Census¹⁶), 1860 (Kentucky Census¹⁷), 1870 (Kentucky Census¹⁸), but in 1880 is listed as residing in Lexington, Kentucky.¹⁹ Mills was in Harrodsburg by late 1841 or early 1842, as Kit Carson journeyed to Harrodsburg with two friends, all three purchasing guns of Mills in February, 1842.²⁰ "He [Carson] spent several days there testing the guns to his fullest satisfaction and returned as he came by stage to Cogars Landing and then down the Kentucky River to Louisville. It further states that the rifles were used to pilot General John C. Fremont over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean."²¹

With a clientele including people as famous as Kit Carson, who chose a Mills rifle over all others, including Hawken, his business prospered, and in 1852, he purchased a lot for \$1,400 from the heirs of Beriah Magoffin, Sr., the father of Beriah Magoffin, Kentucky's Civil War governor-to-be.²² Mills' new property was located at the head of Main Street, at the forks of the Perryville-Danville Turnpike, now called Moreland Avenue. Behind the property was the town pond and rifle firing and testing was allowed prior to 8:30 a.m. by special permission of [the] board of trustees, one of whom was Beriah Magoffin.²³ It does help to have friends in high places! Another friend in high places was Dr. C.C. Graham, who purchased Harrodsburg Springs, which was a spa of wide renown. The location of the resort was very close (about a hundred yards) to Mills' shop and thus they were friends and neighbors, as the following contemporary account by Allen depicts:

I have omitted as yet to mention the proficiency which the Doctor attained in the use of the rifle, especially as a marksman. Benjamin Mills, of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, was regarded by many as the best rifle-maker in the United States, and it was universally conceded that Dr. Graham was the best shot. He has had matches with all the most noted off-hand rifle-shooters in the United States, and never found a man who could equal him. This fact was well established and



3. Typical B. Mills percussion rifle with characteristic half stock, back action lock, set triggers, "saw handle" tang, unusual grip rail of trigger guard, and fancy grain walnut wood.

known to target-shooters, North, South, East, and West. Dr. Graham was at the head of the noted club formed at Harrodsburg, and of which Governor Magoffin was a member, known as the Boone Club of Kentucky, which was, perhaps, the best shooting club in the world. It consisted of twelve members, all men of the highest respectability, and in every way responsible. Such was the confidence of the shooting men of Kentucky in the skill of the Doctor, that they challenged the world on a ten thousand dollar wager, and no one dared to take it up; and this fact did much to establish Kentucky's skill with the rifle. He has been published in papers and magazines as the William Tell of Kentucky. Dr. Graham says, in speaking on the subject of rifles, that he had tried the rifles of Manton of London, Wesson of Massachusetts, and Morgan James of New York, the most celebrated gunsmiths in the world, but gives it as his opinion that Mills's make is superior to them all. The challenge made was to shoot a Kentuckian, and a Kentucky rifle, against the world, which challenge was published in Europe as well as throughout the United States. Mr. Mills had kept and published a record of the Doctor's target-shooting for the space of some ten years, and it being so superior to any ever known, forced a conviction as to his marvelous skill, and is the reason the challenge was never accepted."²⁴

While the above may have been believed true in Kentucky, it was not, however, a national consensus.

"One of the most obscure, early makers of single shots was B. Mills"²⁵ and he did not become an entry in Grant's series of books on single shots until the second volume, and then rated but five sentences. Mills is also listed as a gunmaker by Hanson,²⁶ Sellers,²⁷ Albaugh and Simmons,²⁸ Bivins,²⁹ and Carey³⁰ The last four sources as well as the

historical marker at the site of Mills' shop in Harrodsburg state that he worked at the Fayetteville Armory in North Carolina after the armory machinery was moved to that place from Harper's Ferry, Virginia.³¹ I can find no primary source to establish this, and, in fact, Mills' name is not listed in the Armory Battalion, a roster of workers at this (Fayetteville) facility.³² The only record discovered showing work done for the military concerned payment of \$151.70 for inspecting, repairing, and sighting arms in the hands of the 19th Regiment, Kentucky Volunteers training at Camp Harrod. Eight men were on the job of making special lathe tools for aligning barrels and sights perfectly, and they worked on the regiment's arms from about 3:30 p.m. of a Saturday, all of Saturday night, and Sunday until 2 p.m. "for which we had to pay double wages," as stated in Edwards.³³ He is also "stated to have served in Morgan's Rifles at the time of the Revolutionary War."³⁴ This is incorrect, as the Mills serving in the military is Ben's son, Charles, who enlisted in Company G, 2nd Regiment, commanded by Captain Robert McFarland, John Hunt Morgan's Cavalry.³⁵ His (Charles') daughter wrote to the Filson Club, "I have some old cabinet size (small) [pictures-sic] of Civil War leaders in a pocketbook which father carried when he was in the 2nd Cavalry, CSA, under General Morgan and if you would care for that let me know."³⁶ To add to the confusion, there was a Benjamin Mills in Harrodsburg, also a gunsmith, who worked in Harrodsburg 1790-1814, coming to that area from Charlottesville, North Carolina where he worked 1784-1790 (as listed by the following: Sellers,³⁷ Albaugh and



4. Typical lock marking of arms made during Harrodsburg period.



5. Usual barrel marking of a Mills rifle during the Harrodsburg period. Occasionally the marking will be Mills, Harrodsburg, Ky, rather than B. Mills followed by the address.



7. Mills pistol from cased set—0.53 cal. with typical saw handle stock and set triggers. Lock marked Mills, Harrodsburg, Ky.; barrel unmarked.

Simmons,³⁸ and Vanarsdale³⁹). His relation, if any, to the subject of this paper is unknown.

There were two other Benjamin Mills encountered and confused with our Mr. Mills. One, whose name often appeared in the newspapers of Mercer, Franklin, and Woodford Counties, was a respected jurist from neighboring Franklin County. The other Benjamin Mills was a “man of color,” an appellation frequently given slaves.⁴⁰ Slaves were often given the name of their master, but no listing of Mills’ property indicated that he owned a slave, nor does he appear in the 1850 Census of Slaves and Slave owners.⁴¹ The person referred to as a man of color died a pauper and was buried at county expense in 1898.⁴²

Incidentally, in going through the research material, no instance came to light where Benjamin Mills referred to himself other than B. Mills or Benj. Mills—no middle initial and no Jr. were ever used. In two original documents found in the Mercer Court records (not in Benjamin Mills’ hand, however), the middle initial F. was used by other than Mills himself and subsequently lined out with ink of a different color, strongly suggesting this change being a correction.

Mills’ politics are unknown but his allegiance probably lay with the South especially since his son joined those forces. There is also mention of someone’s firing at a Union picket from Mills’ gunshop.⁴³ This, too, would support the above opinion.

From Mills’ letter to Secretary of War, John B. Floyd, of October 8, 1859, he writes concerning his appointment as Master Armorer at Harper’s Ferry:

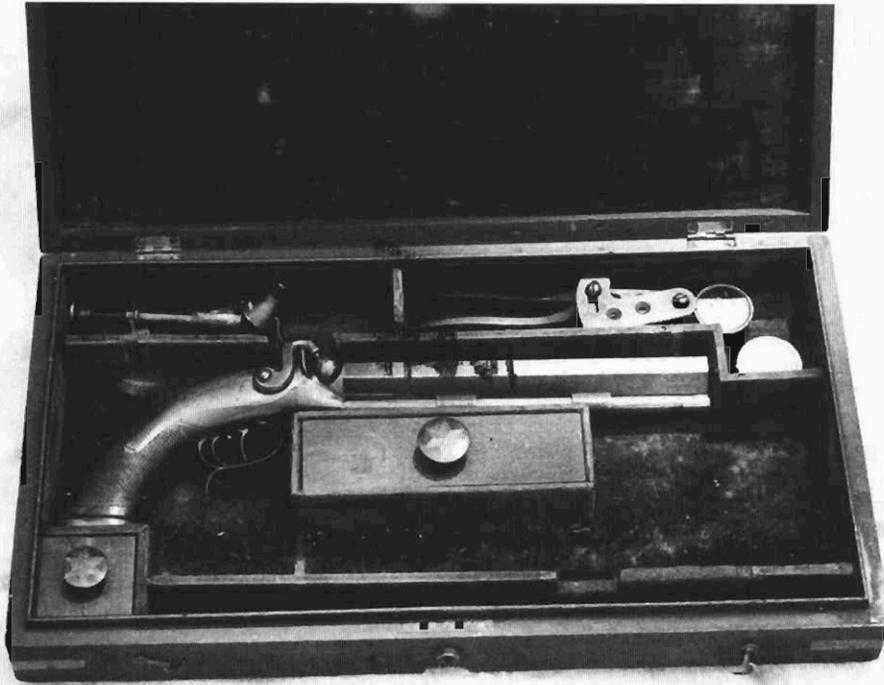
When you offered me the situation [Master Armorer] to me I considered it an honour as I had not asked for anything or had any idea of my appointment and you will recollect that it was some time before that [I] concluded to accept it.⁴⁴

This quote, taken at face value, would suggest that

Mills was more the sought after than the seeker, and “B. Mills, a practical gunsmith, of Harrodsburg, Kentucky succeeded Samuel Byington as Master Armorer in [October 29] 1858.”⁴⁵

“Originally the Superintendents were styled Master Armorers, and Messrs. Perkins and Stubblefield went by this appellation officially. In 1815, however, the latter gentleman was allowed an assistant to whom that title was transferred, and that of Superintendent was given to the principal officer.”⁴⁶ In those halcyon days the Superintendent was required to be able to make a gun, and, in fact, this performance was required of Mr. Stubblefield before he was allowed to assume responsibility as Superintendent.⁴⁷

Since Mills was Master Armorer, a de facto term for Assistant Superintendent, he was Acting Superintendent prior to the appointment of Alfred M. Barbour to that post in January, 1859. However, in his absence because of a trip to Springfield Armory, Barbour appointed Chief Clerk A.M. Kitzmiller as Acting Superintendent, thus passing over Master Armorer Benjamin Mills. Mills took strong exception to this, and, bypassing the usual military chain of command, wrote directly to Secretary of War Floyd stating, “Now[,] sir this I consider a direct insult from the Chief of the Board of Ordinance [sic] and the Superintendent.”⁴⁸ He (Mills) mentioned that there had not been any difficulty between himself and the superintendent and that no fault had been found with his work. Mills further stated that, “I think this is a matured plan between the Superintendent and the Chief of Ordinance [sic] to degrade me. I have never been looked down on in my life and cannot stand it now.”⁴⁹ In concluding the two-and-one-half-page letter, he expressed gratitude for the honour that had been conferred upon him and further stated, “I would feel that I had been some benefit to my country, but I prefer anything to malicious



6. Double casing of Mills pistols (one missing—accouterments not all original to the set.) (H. H. Thomas Collection)

degradation." He concluded by asking that his resignation take place the first day of November [1859].⁵⁰

The ink had been dry on his letter of resignation less than a fortnight when the most traumatic event of Benjamin Mills' life occurred. On October 17, 1859, John Brown's raid plunged the armory into chaos. In the sequence of events, eleven citizens were initially held hostage, but during the siege two, including A.M. Kitzmiller, Mills' old rival for authority, were released by Brown under a flag of truce in order to attempt to gain free passage for himself (Brown) and followers. This effort failed and "nine citizens who were confined as hostages in the engine house were as follows: Colonel Lewis W. Washington and John Alstadt, planters; John E.P. Dangerfield, Paymaster's Clerk; Armistead M. Ball, Master Machinist; Benjamin Mills, Master Armorer; John Donohoo, assistant agent of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad at Harper's Ferry; Terence O'Byrne, a farmer residing in Washington County, Maryland; Israel Russell, a merchant of Harper's Ferry; and a Mr. Schoppe, of Frederick City, Maryland, who happened to be on a business visit that day at the scene of the trouble."⁵¹ Colonel Lewis W. Washington, the great grandnephew of President George Washington, had been seized at his home a few miles away and forcibly brought to Harper's Ferry. Absolutely refusing to leave his master in spite of the effort of John Brown, the Colonel's dog, a surly, ill-dispositioned bulldog named Bob, born without a tail, was the only willing occupant of the engine house.⁵² This was one day when nothing went right for Mr. John Brown! During the time of

the imprisonment in the engine house, Col. Washington was engaged in conversation with Benjamin Mills, "their faces not four inches apart" when "through this narrow passage passed a bullet and the conversants finding one place as safe as another continued their conversation."⁵³

We all remember the outcome: that, on the morning of October 18th, Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee, in charge of a detachment of marines, captured the insurgents, ended the siege, and freed the hostages. According to a list of those who testified in the investigation of the John Brown incident, Benjamin Mills did not give testimony.⁵⁴ However, both Mills and Colonel Washington, in a statement to Henry A. Wise, the governor of Virginia, related that they were "treated humanely" by Brown.⁵⁵ Barry, from whom most of this information is derived, in a word-picture describes Benjamin Mills as "a man of about fifty years of age at the time of the Brown raid, low in stature but muscular and active."⁵⁶ "As before stated, he soon after returned to Harrodsburg, Kentucky, from which place he had come to Harper's Ferry. The writer knows not whether he yet survives or not [sic]."⁵⁷ (Please note that the author wrote this in 1903.)

Smith, in describing the day following the raid, writes: "Acting Superintendent Archibald Kitzmiller, Master Armorer, Benjamin Mills, and Master Machinist Armistead Ball, all of whom had been held hostage by Brown, were physically exhausted and emotionally drained. Although Kitzmiller rang the bell at the usual hours and attempted to resume operations on the morning after Brown's capture, the armorers were unable to work. All of the men had been deeply shaken by the experience and needed time to calm



8. A group of arms by Mills apprentices; from top to bottom: 1. J. H. Wood, 2. T. Wilson, 3. T. Wilson, 4. W. W. Meglone

their nerves and collect their thoughts..., adding to the turmoil, Mills, whose resignation as Master Armorer had already been accepted by the Secretary of War, hastened his departure."⁵⁸

What of the engine house—John Brown's "fort"—in reality, a prison house for Benjamin Mills and his fellow hostages? "In late 1891, the Fort was dismantled and transported to Chicago for display at the Chicago Exposition. Exhibited for ten days, it closed after attracting only eleven people who paid fifty cents each to see it."⁵⁹ The fort was rescued, dismantled, and moved in 1895 to a farm in the vicinity of the armory, again dismantled fourteen years later and moved to the campus of Storer College in the nearby village of Bolivar, and finally, in 1963 was once more dismantled and moved to the present location less than 200 feet from its original location.⁶⁰

The next factual information concerning Mills, after his leaving John Brown's Fort in particular and the armory in general, is the Kentucky Census of 1860.⁶¹ Note that the Mills family now lists four children and Charles, age 15, is but one year from joining Morgan's Cavalry. During the year since his return to Kentucky, Mills has secured four apprentices of whom only one is a Kentuckian. The others are from Pennsylvania, England (two) and Holland. Harrodsburg was considered "frontier," being the first permanent settlement west of the Alleghenies. With the subsequent tide of humanity passing through this state heading west and now with probability of civil war being recognized, this diversity of apprentices was unusual in this

hamlet and perhaps a compliment to Mills' reputation. Incidentally, there is something of an analogy here as St. Louis, acknowledged as the Gateway to the West, where the Hawken rifle was made, shared this distinction on a much grander scale with Harrodsburg, Kentucky's Gateway to the West, where B. Mills rifles reigned supreme. Comparison, though, as far as impact on history is concerned, would be something like comparing mist to rain.

Ben Mills left a legacy of numerous well-trained apprentices. Ironically, those mentioned in the various census lists are not the ones recognized on the basis of surviving specimens of their work.

The most prominent gunmakers using Mills' style and possibly his apprentices are:

T. Wilson	Fayette County
J.H. Wood	Mason County
J. Petty	Lincoln County
W.W. Meglone	Jefferson County/Fayette County
J.S. Short	Boyle County

It is obvious that the Mills' gunshop was very busy in the early 1860s with his 8-10 workmen busily engaged in making and repairing guns. Trying to supply the needs of a public arming itself, Mills would not have found it to his financial interest to have been anywhere else at the time. We have already discussed, in a negative sense, the absence of evidence to prove his wartime armory employment. We have also some positive written evidence that he opened the war years in Harrodsburg. Kelly,⁶² Vanarsdale (Mills' grandson),⁶³ and Roddy⁶⁴ all believe he was in Harrodsburg.



9. A group of three Mills double shotguns. Top two represent a top break and side lever respectively made in Lexington and bottom gun is percussion made in Harrodsburg. (Middle gun from Thomas "Mickey" Brackett Collection)

He purchased one hundred acres with Kentucky River frontage where he had a mill and distillery. This land was purchased from Samuel W. Jones and sold to Mills on the 23rd of September, 1863, for three thousand dollars. The deed was not recorded until 1866.⁶⁵ It is highly unlikely that he would be involved in new enterprises involving this amount of money if he were away from Harrodsburg. He also apparently made purchases during the war years from John P. Moore's Sons of New York but was negligent in the extreme in settling his accounts.⁶⁶ Of course, the demand for arms all but ceased after the war, with a glut of surplus army weapons about, plus the inroads being made by the new breechloaders which rendered muzzle loaders, at least, obsolescent if not obsolete. It is also significant that while Charles returned to work in the gunshop after the war, Mills had no apprentices in 1870.⁶⁷ At this time, Mr. Mills' financial world crumbled. He had had a few lawsuits up to 1867 for notes not paid⁶⁸ and in 1868 he owed J.J. Spears \$775 in payment for one half of his sawmill.⁶⁹ Mr. Mills might be characterized as a good buyer but poor payer. For example, he owed \$235 for a pair of mules, \$30 to the Harrodsburg Female College for Lucy's tuition, had unpaid

doctors' bills along with many other unpaid personal notes.⁷⁰ The trickle of debt then turned to a torrent when the government placed a lien on his whiskey for \$2,250 for nonpayment of taxes.⁷¹ Perhaps he went into the sawmill and whiskey business because his gunshop was in decline. We'll never know, but he was awash in a sea of debt to the extent that R.A. Grimes was appointed trustee of Benjamin Mills, October 16, 1867.⁷² The debts were many and it is difficult to follow the paper trail, but Master Commissioner John B.T. Davies ordered that his assets be sold and the proceeds distributed. His wife Jane signed over her interest in the mill and distillery and 100 acres more or less on the Kentucky River.⁷³ The town lot he had originally bought was surveyed, divided into four lots, and sold by auction at the courthouse door. Lot number four sold for \$500 and was known as the gunsmith shop lot. Lot number one, consisting of the Mills' dwelling, was sold to E. Hutchison. This tract was conveyed to Benj. Mills and Jane Mills on the 20th of September 1869, by Elijah Hutchison for \$300.⁷⁴ The deed was approved by the master commissioner.

Jane Mills purchased for \$500 and was deeded lot



10. A 12 gauge Mills top break double shotgun made during his residence in Lexington, Ky.

number 4 (the gunsmith shop lot).⁷⁵ There is a long and involved legal transfer and on September 6, 1869, the sale was originally made to Phil B. Thompson on the basis of the plat drawn by J.J. Halsey. The sale was approved by the master commissioner, May 16, 1870,⁷⁶ so the Mills reclaimed their dwelling and the gunshop, which explains how Mills was able to continue his work.

Mills apparently continued his work in Harrodsburg until 1873, when he moved to Lexington. One would think a combination of factors, including his poor financial record (which would be completely known throughout the county) and the overall marked decline in the need for gunsmiths were involved. Perhaps he reasoned that moving to a much larger city, Lexington, county seat of Fayette County, would provide the larger trade area to draw from and enable a fresh start. The last mention of Mills in Harrodsburg prior to this move was found in a local newspaper in 1873 (no other date shown) where it was stated, "the pleasant face of Ben Mills, the celebrated gun-maker, appeared on our streets last Thursday."⁷⁷ This, plus the property transfer in 1870 and the census of the same year establish Mills' presence in Harrodsburg until the early 1870s.

Kelly thought Mills moved to Lexington in 1874, but according to the Lexington City directories, the Mills were in Lexington from 1873-1882.⁷⁸ At this time, the breech loading rifles and shotguns were marked B. Mills and Son. Their shop was located at 55 E. Main Street, Benjamin Mills living at 19 1/2 N. Upper St. and Charles living at 19 E. High St.⁷⁹ The Mills are listed by two other city directories in 1879, 1880.⁸⁰ In 1883 the Mills left Lexington, Ben returning

to Harrodsburg and Charles going to Louisville.⁸¹

Ben mortgaged his tools in January, 1883 for \$275 to J.G. Sandusky. The tools included the following:

one large Shepperd lathe, 1 small drilling lathe, 1 planing machine, 1 rifling machine, 1 forge, 2 vices, 1 large anvil, 1 small anvil, 1 lot of chisels, 1 lot of files and all the other tools, implements and materials.⁸²

Charles opened a gunshop at 735 W. Market St. in Louisville, Kentucky, and in 1885 he moved to 340 E. Main St., where he was associated with Alexander L. Semple. This firm operated some two years, and in 1887, a new company of Griffith, Semple, and Mills was located at 812 N. Main Street. Charles Mills left this firm in 1888, and reopened his shop at 321 South Third St. where he was in business until his death of typhoid in 1895.⁸³

Ben Mills died of paralysis on August 6, 1888, and was buried in Springhill Cemetery, Section H. Lot 56, a plot belonging to Charles, his son, who was interred in the same section on May 7, 1895. In the same plot also lies the unmarked grave of Jane Mills, his wife, who was buried November 5, 1896.⁸⁴ The last written record of Jane before her death concerns the selling of the town property on August 16, 1892, for \$1200. An entry in the 1892 Mercer County deed book states, "Jane Mills, widow of Benjamin Mills sold to Dr. James H. Moore the house and lot where she now lives."⁸⁵ The graves of Jane and Benjamin still remain unmarked; however, last year (1992) a marker was erected in the honor of Charles, who was a Confederate veteran.⁸⁶

The last written evidence in regard to the work of



11. This fine three barrel gun was made by Mills during the Lexington period and so marked. Two 14 gauge side by side shotgun barrels and 0.42 caliber bottle-neck rifle barrel on top. (H. H. Thomas Collection)

Benjamin Mills that I have discovered, a bill noting the repair of a door lock dated January 12, 1883, reveals our Mr. Mills near the end, doing odd jobs to get by.⁸⁷

Gone are the days when B. Mills stamped on a barrel or lock meant a characteristic, unique arm, made of the best materials of the time, fashioned by careful workmen, finished well, accurate and not likely to get out of order.

May the memory of Mr. Benjamin Mills, gunmaker, master-armorier, and Kentuckian be preserved.

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NOTES

¹ A.B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Big Sky* (Thorndike, Maine: Thorndike Press, 1947) 68.

² A.B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Way West* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949).

³ Mabel Mills, granddaughter of Benjamin Mills: letter to Ludie Kinkead, Curator, Filson Club, 10 Feb. 1932, Benjamin Mills File, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.

⁴ Benjamin Mills File; reprint of an article from the *Louisville Evening Times*, by the *Harrodsburg Democrat* loaned to the Filson Club by Mr. Brent Altscheller, 11 Feb. 1932.

⁵ R. Vanarsdale of Burgin, Ky; grandson of Benjamin Mills. Letter to W.H. Kelly of Louisville, Ky 1 Aug. 1959: *Arms, Arms Makers, and Arms History in Kentucky: 1769-1915*, W.H. Kelly Manuscript (unpublished), Rare Books, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.

⁶ Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1840, Harrodsburg Public Library.

⁷ Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1860, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Ky.

⁸ Kentucky Tax List, Mason Co., Mayslick, 1838, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Ky.

⁹ Kentucky Tax List, Mason Co., Mayslick, Ky, 1839.

¹⁰ Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1820, Special Collections, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky.

¹¹ Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1830, Special Collections, Wilson Library, University of Kentucky.

¹² Ky Census of 1840.

¹³ Ky Tax List, Lincoln Co., 1841.

¹⁴ W.H. Kelly, *Arms, Arms Makers, and Arms History in Kentucky: 1769-1915*, Unpublished Manuscript, File #50, Rare Books, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, Ky.



12. Typical marking of Mills guns made during the Lexington period.

- 15 William Wheeler of Danville, Ky telephone interview, 29 Mar. 1993.
- 16 Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1850, Special Collections, Wilson Library, University of Kentucky.
- 17 Ky Census of 1860.
- 18 Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1870, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Ky.
- 19 Bureau of the Census, Ky Census of 1880 Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Ky.
- 20 William C. Almquist, "Kit Carson Guns," *Muzzle Blasts* Sept. 1943: 5.
- 21 Charles E. Hanson, Jr., *The Plains Rifle* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Stackpole Co., 1960) 84.
- 22 Mercer County Court Records, 1852; Deed Book 29: 84.
- 23 Trustees Minute Book 1844: 145; quoted in George M. Chinn, *The History of Harrodsburg and The Great Settlement Area of Kentucky 1774-1900*, (n.p.: Edwards Brothers, 1985) 299.
- 24 William B. Allen, *A History of Kentucky: Embracing Gleanings, Reminiscences, Antiquities, Natural Curiosities, Statistics and Biographical Sketches of Pioneers, Soldiers, Jurists, etc.* (Louisville, Ky: Bradley and Gilbert, 1872) 307.
- 25 James J. Grant, *More Single Shot Rifles* (Highland Park, NJ: The Gun Room Press, 1959) 167.
- 26 Hanson 15, 84, 159.
- 27 Frank M. Sellers, *American Gunsmiths* (Highland Park, NJ: The Gun Room Press, 1983) 211.
- 28 William A. Albaugh and Edward N. Simmons, *Confederate Arms* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1957) 246.
- 29 John Bivins, Jr., *Longrifles of North Carolina* (New York: George Shumway, 1968) 184.
- 30 A. Merwyn Carey, *American Firearms Makers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1953) 79.
- 31 Historical Marker at the site of Mills' gunshop, Moreland Ave., Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 32 Howard Madaus, Curator, Firearms Collection at William F. Cody Museum, Cody, WY. Telephone interview, 22 Mar. 1993.
- 33 William B. Edwards, *Civil War Guns* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, 1982) 29.
- 34 Albaugh 246.
- 35 Adjutant General's Report (Volunteers, Confederate States Army 1861-1865) 572, 594.
- 36 Mabel Mills.
- 37 Sellers 211.
- 38 Albaugh 246.
- 39 Vanarsdale.
- 40 Benjamin Mills Folder, The Harrodsburg Historical Society, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 41 Census of Slaves and Slave Holders—1850, The Harrodsburg Historical Society, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 42 Benjamin Mills File, The Harrodsburg Historical Society, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 43 Vanarsdale.
- 44 Benjamin Mills, letter to Secretary of War John B. Floyd, 8 Oct. 1859, Harper's Ferry National Historical Park.
- 45 Joseph Barry, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry: with the Legends of the Surrounding Country* (Martinsburg, WV: Thompson Brothers, 1903, reprint by Woman's Club of Harper's Ferry, District, Shepherdstown, WV, 1958, 1959) 45.
- 46 Barry 44.
- 47 Barry 20.
- 48 Benjamin Mills, letter to Floyd.
- 49 Benjamin Mills, letter to Floyd.
- 50 Benjamin Mills, letter to Floyd.
- 51 Barry 86.
- 52 Barry 90.
- 53 Barry 89.
- 54 Barry 95.
- 55 Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859; a Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 455.
- 56 Barry 92.
- 57 Barry 92.
- 58 Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry and the New Technology: A Challenge of Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 307.
- 59 Martin Conway, *Harper's Ferry: Time Remembered* (Reston, Va: Carabelle Books, 1981) 62.
- 60 Conway 62.
- 61 Kentucky Census of 1860.
- 62 Kelly Manuscript File 65.
- 63 Vanarsdale.
- 64 A.F. Roddy, letter to W.H. Kelly, 5 Jan. 1962, W.H. Kelly Manuscript, Rare Books, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.
- 65 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 36, page 246. Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 66 Mercer County Court Records, File M-122 (Judgments) Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 67 Kentucky Census of 1870.
- 68 Mercer County Court Records, File Box P-48, (Judgments) Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 69 Mercer County Court Records, File Boxes S-82, S-84 (Judgments) Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 70 Mercer County Court Records, File Box N-18 (Judgments) Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 71 Mercer County Court Records, File Box M-122 (Judgments) Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 72 Mercer County Court Records, File Box M-122.
- 73 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 38, page 107, Harrodsburg, Ky.

- 74 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 39 page 156, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 75 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 40, page 23, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 76 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 40, pages 24-25.
- 77 *Kentucky People Newspaper*, 1873 (incomplete date). The Harrodsburg Historical Society, Harrodsburg, Kentucky.
- 78 Kelly Manuscript File #63.
- 79 Kelly Manuscript File #63.
- 80 Kelly Manuscript File #63, 65.
- 81 Kelly Manuscript File #54A.
- 82 Mercer County Court Records, Mortgage book 7, page 95, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 83 Kelly Manuscript File #54A.
- 84 Springhill Cemetery Records, City Hall, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 85 Mercer County Records, Deed Book 60, page 253, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 86 Bill Crabtree, Sexton, Springhill Cemetery, Harrodsburg, Ky, telephone interview, 29 Mar. 1993.
- 87 Benjamin Mills folder, The Harrodsburg Historical Society, Harrodsburg, Ky.
- 88 Maj. R.O. Ackerman, *Shooting Times*, PJS Publications, Apr. 1964, Vol. 5 No. 4.

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- . Harrodsburg, Ky. Deed Book 36, page 246.
- . Harrodsburg, Ky. Deed Book 38, page 107.
- . Harrodsburg, Ky. Deed Book 39, page 156.
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- Mills, Mabel; granddaughter of Benjamin Mills. Letter to Ludie Kinkead, Former Curator, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky. 10 Feb. 1932.

Harrodsburg, January 12th 1853
 Mercer County Pa
 B Mills Dr
 Taking off Lock, and making both lock and key work well \$ 5.00

13. Last known written record of work performed by B. Mills

Roddy, A.F. Letter to W.H. Kelly. 5 Jan. 1962. (quoted in *Arms, Arms Makers, and Arms History in Kentucky: 1769–1915*.) W.H. Kelly Manuscript (unpublished), Rare Books, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.

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Vanarsdale, R. of Burgin, Ky; grandson of Benjamin Mills. Letter to W.H. Kelly of Louisville, Ky. 1 Aug. 1959. *Arms, Arms Makers, and Arms History in Kentucky: 1769–1915*, W.H. Kelly Manuscript (unpublished). Rare Books, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.

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According to Maj. R.O. Ackerman in an article published in the April 1964 issue Shooting Times, the following instruction sheet which was originally published on a 7 3/4 x 10 3/4 white card accompanied a Mills' target rifle. (I wish to express my gratitude to PJS Publications, News Plaza, Peoria, Illinois, and Mr. Jim Angell, Editorial Assistant, for permission to use this excerpt from Maj. Ackerman's article.)

Directions for Using

A man wishing to keep a good rifle, and to become expert in the use of it, will do well to observe the following directions:

The Rifle should be kept in a case that is lined with either velvet or some woolen goods, and remain in a room when there is fire, as it will be less liable to rust. —When it is required for use, open your case; take out the stock, cock it and draw out the slide as far as the groove will admit, then take out the barrel, draw out the rod, and hook the breech into the break off and gradually press the barrel in the stock grasp the barrel and stock between the slide and tailpipe, and when the barrel is pressed firmly down into the stock then push the slide in with the thumb; let the cock on the nipple by pulling the front trigger without setting [sic] the triggers, you will pull equally as hard as would require to pull off a shot gun, and is less likely to produce accidents, and does not injure the lock, then put in your rod and your gun is together.

The gun should then be wiped. I much prefer a wooden rod as there is less liability to wear the muzzle, which is very injurious to the shooting. —Canton Flannel [sic], as it is soft and spongy and wipes the bottom of the furrows which is necessary. The flannel [sic] should be cut in squares one and a half inches, or perhaps larger or smaller according to the size of the bore. Any kind of rags or even fine tow [sic] would answer, but the former is greatly preferred.

Flash a cap on the nipple, then blow through and if your first fire is of much importance I would advise you to put in some powder and shoot it out.

For all shooting over sixty yards I would advise to shoot the picket balls, although the balls will shoot with great certainty, but there is not that precision that there is in the picket. The stronger the wind and longer the distance, the more advantage in the picket; the picket being double the weight of the ball, of course should have double the quantity of powder. Coarse Sea-shooting powder is much the best for pickets. —Brown Holland is perhaps as good for patching as any. In selecting patching, however, great care should be taken to get that which is very fine, even, and round thread. —See the sample.

The G D. Caps are as good for all uses as any, so that the composition is of a redish [sic] color, but if they are of a green or blue, they are bad and ought not to be used. The pickets after they are cast should be slightly oiled, then taken out the pistern [sic] of the swedge, and put in the picket, and then put the pister [sic] in the swedge, put the lower end on a plank and strike on the upper end with a hammer three or four light blows, then take out the pistern, turn the open end on the plank and strike the opposite end with the hammer and the picket will ball out [sic], and if it is not swedged full you will put it back and swedge it over. But if you strike it to [sic] hard you will raise and [sic] edge, but a little practice will correct you. —When you load, you will be sure to fill your charge level full; put it in the gun, then take your patch wet in your mouth, lay it on the muzzle and put the base of the picket on the patch over the muzzle, then put the concave end of the starter on the picket and gently and firmly let it down over the muzzle; then strike it with the hand and drive it down to the nob [sic]; then take hold of the nob and pull the starter off by it; push the picket down with the ramrod gently, and not ram after it is down, as that is sure to disfigure the picket and injure the shooting. Then put on the cap and ease the cock down on the nipple, so as to be sure to cap it down, as you are more certain of a good fire. —When shooting at a target, I would advise to wipe clean every shot; but shooting at turkeys or game, with good powder, I have shot twenty times without inconvenience, and have shot fifty shots without wiping and did good shooting, but I would advise to wipe as often as convenient.

Shooting at a target at a rest, I use both globe sights, and prefer a sitting posture with a place to rest both elbows—such as a carpenter's bench, or a large table. The muzzle should rest on its plank about three inches from the muzzle; —the hollow of the breech should be placed against the arm or near the body as can be with the right hand grasped around the stock, with the fore finger to the trigger [sic] —the left hand should be put in front of the gard [sic], with the fingers pressing against it, by this means the rifle is pressed snugly [sic] against the shoulder which in a great measure prevents the recoil. Great care should be taken to hold the gun true or not to let it lean to the right or left as a little incline makes quite a difference in shooting. —To shoot the globe, I use either square or round target of white paper on a dark plank. For full globe for 50 yds., the white paper should be 4 inches square—for 100 yds., 7 inches—for 150 yds., 10 inches, &c.; but for the silver front sight, the target

may be less, so by looking through the middle of the back globe and then for the front globe to form a black spot in the center of the target and having a white rim with equal distance from the center.

Now if a man with good eyes and nerve will follow the above directions in a good day he will average $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch 50 yds. —1 inch 100 yds. and 1 1/2 inches 150 yds. and some times better than that.

I use the back globe and silver front sight for turkey and game shooting except in very dark woods, then I use the plain notch sights. Great care should be taken to have the bead end of the back globe towards you for there is but few guns but will vary to the right or left by changing end of the back globe. You will have the back globe screwed clear down for 50 yds.; one turn up for 100; two turns 150, and four turns for two hundred yds. For 250 yds. you will see a mark on the stem of the sight, another for 300 yds., &c. Those marks answer for either the silver or globe sight. To shoot offhand a man should stand straight and natural bearing equal weight on his feet—the breech of the gun against his arm and grasping the small of the stock the same as with rest shooting—the right elbow raised as high as the right eye—the left hand supporting the gun at the tailpipe. Most of the weight of the gun should be supported by the right hand by grasping it tightly and pressing it against the shoulder.

If a man will have a small object in his room and as often as convenient, take his gun and sight at it, he will get so that he will hold it with great steadiness. A marksman thus skilled, in a good still day will hit his turkey every third shot off hand, 200 yards, and sometimes oftener. After about 100 shots the guns should be washed; heat the water hot, draw out the ramrod, cock the lock, take your screw driver handle and strike it gently on the point of the slide until it is driven back even with the stock, then push it back with the point of the driver as far as the groove will admit; then the left hand grasping the small of the stock, the right grasping the barrel between the tail pipe and second thimble; and then strike the under side of the muzzle of the gun on a plank or any kind of wood and one or two light blows will start it out; then put the breech of the gun in the hot water. Put the rag on the wiper and wet it and insert it in the gun and keep working it up and down until it is clean, —take the barrel and wipe it dry both inside and out and oil it inside, every part of the gun: take the nipple driver and unscrew the nipple and oil that, and as often as necessary take off the lock, wipe all the old oil off and put on a little new.

In taking off the lock unscrew the front screw only, —then cock it and strike the head of the screw with the screw-driver handle which will start the lock out; —then take hold of the cock and carefully take the lock off. And when you wish to put the lock on, hook the small end of the tail of the lock under the screw head and put it in and screw it until it is to its place. If the triggers are too hard you will screw in the set-screw and if too easy unscrew it. When you take out or change the sights you will strictly observe the direction; The silver sight should be drove in from the left to the right and drove out from the right to the left. The globe must be drove in from the right to the left, and drive [sic] out the opposite way. The Notch sight to be put in and out the same as the silver sight—the notch sight is always regulated for a short distance except the leaf sight, the first leaf is for —yards, the second for—, the third for —yards.

If by chance or otherwise a ball should be run down without powder you can draw it out with the ball screw or unscrew the nipple put in powder and blow it out.

A rifle should never be put away dirty or suffered to remain after shooting without cleaning, and should always be wiped twice a week so as to prevent rust; as a rusty gun will never shoot correct.

The best of winter's strained sperm oil is preferred, other oil is subject to rust the gun.

N.B. Strict care should be taken to keep the swedge from rusting.

I keep on hand and make to order all kinds of guns and pistols and warrant them until they are lent or sold—for when a gun is loaned it is sure to be neglected and missused [sic].

B. Mills

Harrodsburg, KY



Cased set with two barrels. Target barrel is .32 caliber conical with target sights. Hunting barrel with open sights is .40 caliber for round ball. Note the printed instructions taped and tacked to inside of lid of case. The text of these instructions is reprinted above. (Walter Crutcher Collection)