



THE MECKLENBURG LONGRIFLE SCHOOL

By C. Michael Briggs



Figure 1. Zenas Alexander signed Longrifle.

The Mecklenburg School was one of nine Longrifle Schools that operated in Piedmont and Western North Carolina during the period between 1770 and 1835.

The gunsmith most responsible for starting the school was Isaac Price^{1,2}. Isaac was born in Anson County [later Mecklenburg] on March 6, 1747. Isaac Price was the oldest son of John Price and Mary White. John Price purchased three tracts of land on the east bank of the Catawba River in the Steele Creek community. It is not known if John Price, Sr. worked as a gunsmith but it has been documented that his oldest son Isaac Price did. Isaac Price and his brother John Price, Jr. made guns and swords for General Thomas Sumter during the Revolutionary War.

While working as a gunsmith, goldsmith and sword maker Isaac Price took on a number of apprentices. "In 1776, the Mecklenburg Court ordered that Abraham Henderson be bonded to Isaac Price

to learn the "Art and Mystery of a gunsmith" for a term of 10 years, 8 months. Price obligates himself to pay ten pounds above what the law directs at expirations of term. Present age: 14 years, 4 months."²

"January 1778 – the Mecklenburg County ordered that John Black, an orphan of Thomas Black, be bound to Isaac Price. Age 14 years and 3 months to learn the Gunsmiths Trade and at the expiration of said term the said Isaac Price promised to give the said orphan one pair of bellows and ten pounds currency."

"In July 1787, the Mecklenburg Court ordered that Thomas Price, orphan of John Price, Jr. deceased be bound to Isaac Price to learn the Gun & Gold Smiths trade and to pay him ten pounds in tools and the said Isaac is also appointed Guardian to said Thomas Price, his nephew."³



Figure 2. Patchbox lid signed Z A – Note mirrored engraving on both sides of patchbox lid hinge. This is a trademark of this school.

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Figure 3. Mecklenburg School rifle by William Black.

In July 1787, the court also ordered that Zenas Alexander, orphan of Zebulon Alexander, deceased, be bound unto Isaac Price to learn the Gun and Gold Smiths trade. Price is to give him 13 pounds value in tools for the business.²

Zenas Alexander did complete his apprenticeship under Isaac Price and became a master gunsmith and silversmith in Charlotte (Figures 1 and 2). Zenas was born on December 21, 1771, the son of Zebulon Alexander. Zebulon had moved to Charlotte from Cecil County, Maryland and died on March 3, 1784, when Zenas was only 13 years of age. The family lived on Sugar Creek. Linda Blackwelder writes that Zenas would have completed his apprenticeship in 1792.⁴

Zenas Alexander became a master gunsmith and took on a number of apprentices between 1798 and 1810. Mecklenburg County Court Minutes state: "July 1798, Zenas Alexander takes James Mitchell, orphan of Richard Mitchell, as apprentice to learn the art of stocking of guns complete and also common silver work." The Mecklenburg Court in January 1805, recorded that "Zenas Alexander takes James McKee (age 17) apprentice to the trades of silversmith and stocking guns." The Mecklenburg County recorded on July 24, 1810, that "Zenas Alexander takes Elisha Smartt, (age 15) as apprentice to the trades of stocking and mounting guns and silversmith."²

The Mecklenburg Longrifle School reached its peak in the period between 1810 and 1835, with the work of William Black, S.M. Black (Figures 3, 4 and 5), and Isaac Thompson (Figures 6 and 7). The nine outstanding Longrifles known to have survived by these makers are some of the best examples of North Carolina Longrifles.

The development of the larger Jamestown Longrifle School in Guilford County in the 1820 period seems to have had an adverse economic impact on the Mecklenburg School. Simply stated, the Jamestown School put the Mecklenburg School and several other North Carolina Longrifle Schools out of business by 1850.

Architecture Features

The wood stock used on Mecklenburg School Longrifles was made of maple. The stock usually had little drop in its architecture. There is little or no rise on the comb. Most will have an incised carved line along the comb that runs from the butt-plate to the wrist that ends with a beaver-tail tab at the wrist.

Most Mecklenburg School Longrifles have a brass patchbox. Most of those have a scroll finial on the patchbox, but there are several exceptions to this. Some local rifles have a patchbox release button in the rear of the upper sideplate; other examples placed the release button on the toe plate.

One unique feature seen on Mecklenburg School patchbox Longrifles is an unusual engraved cartouche on the patchbox lid. The cartouche is mirrored or reflected on the other side of the hinge on the bottom of the finial. Many Longrifles from this school have a "Hunter's Star" placed on the cheek-rest of the stock.

Another unique feature often found on Longrifles from this school is decorative tabs added to the front and rear of the trigger guard, toe plate, or the ramrod entry pipe. Many rifles also are found with a nice fore-stock molding that ends with a single scroll or volute.

Most Mecklenburg School Longrifles are signed with their maker's initials on the patchbox lid. This feature is often found on rifles from the Rowan School as well. Often the initials are placed upside down so they can be read by the person holding the rifle.



Figure 4. Relief carving on cheek rest of William Black rifle.

Mecklenburg School Longrifles are found with two different forms of two-screw sideplates. Some are faceted, while others are flat. Most gunsmiths from this school used a sine-wave engraving style with uniform lines.

To date, only 22 rifles and one pistol (Figures 8 and 9) have surfaced from the Mecklenburg Longrifle School. It is hoped that additional examples will be discovered in the future to allow for further study on this subject.



Figure 5. Mecklenburg “S” scroll finial with patchbox lid signed W B – Note mirrored engraving on both sides of lid hinge.



Figure 6. Close up of Mecklenburg School rifle patchbox signed I T for



Figure 7. Relief carving by Isaac Thompson



Figure 8. Zenas Alexander attributed Mecklenburg School Pistol.



Figure 9. This pistol features Mecklenburg School forestock molding.



Figure 10. Mecklenburg School rifle signed S M B by Samuel Black.

List of Mecklenburg School Gunsmiths

1. Zenas Alexander: Apprenticed under Isaac Price in 1787. He died in 1826. One signed rifle exist. He worked as a gunstocker and silver-smith.
2. Christian Arney: He was born in 1795 and died in 1840. He lived just west of the Catawba River in Lincoln County. Two signed rifles exist.
3. Henry Bernhart: He was hired by Thomas Polk in 1792 to make a new gun lock, trigger, and trigger plate.
4. John Black: He was born in 1763. He apprenticed under Isaac Price in 1778.
5. S. M. Black: It is not known whom he trained under. Two signed rifles as known to exist (Figures 10 and 11).
6. William Black: He was born in 1785 and died in 1827. It is not known whom he trained under. Two signed rifles are known to exist. His gun shop was located on McAlpine Creek between Monroe Rd. and Independence Rd.
7. CG: A Mecklenburg School rifle exists that is signed "CG" on the patchbox lid. CG has not been identified at this time.
8. Abraham Henderson: He was born in 1762 and apprenticed under Isaac Price in 1776.
9. LH: Two Mecklenburg School rifles exist that are signed "LH" on the patchbox lid. It is possible that Logan Henderson was the gunsmith "L.H." He was the son of Abraham Henderson, but this has not been documented.
10. Henry McBride: He was born in 1797. He apprenticed under Zenas Alexander in 1810.
11. Andrew McClenachan was hired by John Rogers to work on guns in 1775.
12. James McKee: He was born in 1788. He apprenticed under Zenas Alexander in 1805. One signed rifle Appalachian School rifle known.
13. James Mitchell: He apprenticed under Zenas Alexander in 1798.
14. John Penney: In 1777, he was hired by Joseph Wallace to stock three guns, one with brass patchbox.
15. Isaac Price: He was born in 1747 and died in 1811. He is believed to have been the founder of the school.
16. John Price, Jr: He was the brother of Isaac Price. He was born in 1749 and died in 1787.
17. Thomas Price: He was the son of John Price, Jr. When his father died in 1787, he was bound as an apprentice under his uncle Isaac.
18. Elisha Smartt: He was born in 1795. He apprenticed under Zenas Alexander in 1810.
19. Isaac Thompson: he was born in 1802. He lived on 105 acres of land inherited from his father Joseph Thompson. The land was located on the north bank of Long Creek, and on the west side of Beatties Ford Road. Five signed rifles are known to exist.
20. David Youmens: He is listed in several records as being a gunsmith in Mecklenburg County.

Post Mecklenburg School Gun Smiths that worked in Mecklenburg County.

I believe the Mecklenburg Longrifle School ended by 1835. No one is thought to have worked in that style after that date. The following gunsmiths may have made Longrifles in Mecklenburg County after that date, but they were of a different style.

1. Thomas Gluyas: He was born in England in 1826 and died in Charlotte in 1912. His family moved to Mecklenburg County in the 1840's. He moved to Jamestown, N.C. in 1846 and trained to make Longrifles there. He married his wife Letitia there in 1847. They moved back to Mecklenburg County in 1857 and later built a house on the Mt. Holly – Huntersville Road. He worked making Jamestown style Longrifles for many years. Many signed flintlock and percussion rifles by him exist.

2. J. Knister: Bivins claims he is listed, in a state business directory, as working in Charlotte as a gunsmith after the Civil War.⁵
3. D. Snyder & Son: In 1870, these two men were employed together in a small shop doing gun and locksmith work. They produced 250 guns and rifles valued at \$2,500 as well as repair work worth \$200 annually.⁵

The gunsmiths of the Mecklenburg Longrifle School achieved the highest art form to be found in North Carolina. The best Longrifles from this school are very prized today by museums and collectors for both their history and decorative art aspect.



Figure 11. Relief carving on Samuel Black rifle.

¹ Briggs, C. Michael. *The Longrifle Makers of the Mecklenburg School*. Published by the author, 2016. P101-105.

² *Ibid.* p.111-154.

³ *Ibid.* p.155.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 106-110.

⁵ Bivins, John. *The Longrifles of North Carolina*. Shumway Publishing, York, Penn. 1988.

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