

PENNSYLVANIA 1798 CONTRACT MUSKETS¹

by

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The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, on March 28, 1797, passed an act authorizing the purchase of 20,000 muskets to arm the State troops. In April and June of 1797, the Commonwealth advertised in the *Independent Gazetteer* and other Pennsylvania newspapers for bids on furnishing 20,000 stands of arms to be marked near the breech with the letters "CP".

Contracts were made with various firms and individuals. Let us consider a typical contract — that of the Ketlands. This is an *Article of Agreement*, dated November 15, 1797, between the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania signed by Governor Thomas Mifflin, and Thomas and John Ketland of Philadelphia. In this agreement, the Ketlands propose to furnish the Commonwealth with 10,000 stands of arms at \$10.25 per stand. The guns were to be made in England according to the following specifications:

“. . . the length of each barrel to be three feet eight inches, and to receive a ball of eighteen to the pound; each barrel to undergo the same degree of proof as is now in use for the proof on those made for the service of the United States, and to be stamped or marked near the breech with the letters CP; the locks to be upon the best construction, double bridled on a flat plate and marked with the letters aforesaid; the mounting Iron, with the bands and swivels and spring to each band; the ramrods to be of well tempered steel; the bayonets to be fifteen inches in the blade, made of steel well tempered and polished; the stocks to be made of well seasoned walnut; the length of the butt of the musquet to be fifteen and a half inches from the breech end of the barrel to the heel plate; the side pins, the breech pins and triggers to be case hardened; the weight of the musquet and bayonet thus completed not to exceed eleven pounds.”²

From this contract, it is logical to assume the "CP" to stand for *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*. Inasmuch as these arms were to be made in England and proof fired for "the same degree of proof as

those made for the service of the United States", why would a mark denoting *CITY PROOF* be placed upon them? It may be of interest to note that the British Government would not permit the export of these arms, so the contract was abrogated and the order placed with other firms.

Similar contracts were placed with other people. On December 13, 1797, William Henry II of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, contracted to furnish 2,000 stands of arms. Owen Evans of Evansburg, Pennsylvania, on December 7, 1797, agreed to furnish 1,000 muskets. Melchior Baker, Fayette County, had a contract dated February 1799 for 2,000 arms. Baker was associated with Albert Gallatin, who later was in Thomas Jefferson's cabinet and withdrew from the arms firm. John Miles of Northern Liberties, Philadelphia, contracted on September 3, 1798, for 2,000 muskets. Lether & Company of York, Pennsylvania, on April 11, 1798 agreed to furnish 1,200 arms.

Plate I shows an example of the arms manufactured by each of these contractors, as well as one by an unidentified maker.³ The latter, designated "a" in the Plate, is very interesting for it has the name "Sweitzer" on the inside of the lock plate, as shown in Plate III. There was a Sweitzer known as a lock maker, but it has not been ascertained whether he ever made any long guns. He probably made only the lock for some other manufacturer. In 1808, Daniel Sweitzer & Company was located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

There were additional firms and individuals who had contracts for arms under this act of 1797. Peter Brong, Henry De Huff, Jacob Dickert and Jacob Haefter, each, on April 17, 1801, agreed to furnish 500 arms. Abraham Henry, a brother of William Henry II, on April 11, 1798, contracted to furnish 2,000 arms. John Fondersmith on January 14, 1799, agreed to furnish 500 stands. The Kerlins, John Jr. and Samuel, contracted for 500 arms on May 2, 1801, and Robert McCormick proposed on April 11, 1801, to furnish 1,000 stands. On April 17, 1801, a firm composed of Conrad Welshanse, Jacob Doll

¹ From an address presented before the Society at the Chicago Meeting May 19-20, 1956.

² Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.

³ Editor's Note: The six muskets illustrated are all from Mr. Holt's Collection and represent the largest group of these arms known to collectors.

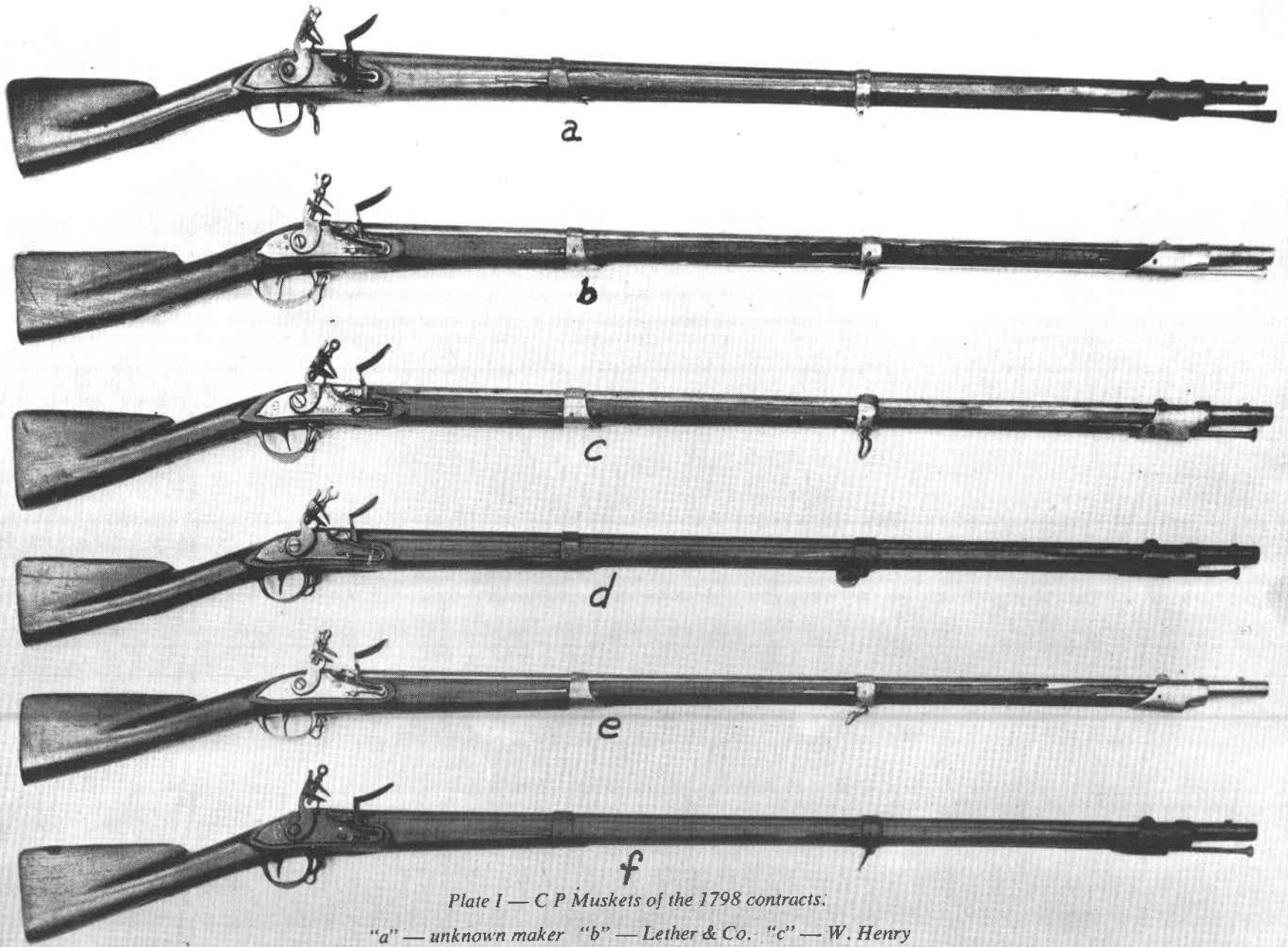


Plate I — C P Muskets of the 1798 contracts:
 "a" — unknown maker "b" — Lether & Co. "c" — W. Henry
 "d" — M. Baker "e" — Evans "f" — Miles

and Henry Pickell, proposed to furnish 1,000 stands to the Commonwealth. No guns by these makers are known to the writer.

Many of the arms furnished under these contracts were marked on the barrel, near the breech, with a "P" and a Liberty Cap, as well as the "CP", as shown on Plate II.

Why was the Liberty Cap used as a proof mark and what was its significance?

The Liberty Cap, from time immemorial, has been an insignia of Freedom. In the Roman Empire, slaves who were freed were given this distinctive head gear to wear. In the French Revolution, the red Liberty Cap came to be the accepted device of the people — the *Third Estate* — and was officially recognized at the birth of the First Republic in 1792. The United States was much interested in and sympathetic to the French Revolution, and the Liberty Cap came to be a popular insignia of Freedom here. Several of our coins in the 1790 period bore this symbol so its use as a mark of proof was quite acceptable. In 1798, however, it fell into disfavor because of our strained relations with France over our inability, or lack of desire, to live up to our treaty of 1778 with France. Hence, it is safe to assume that a gun bearing the Liberty Cap proof mark was made before 1800.

What is the meaning of the "CP"? To answer that, I believe one must consider the period — it may have two meanings. On the muskets covered in this article, I think it stands for *Commonwealth*

of Pennsylvania. There are many able proponents of the City Proof definition — and on earlier guns I could agree with that meaning. However, there are later examples of the "CP" mark on guns manufactured for the United States which I feel definitely must be *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, as a mark denoting ownership. For example, in the magazine *Antiques* for July 1926, in an article by Walter H. Kelly, is an illustration of a Whitney improved model 1801, marked "U. States" on the lock plate but also having "CP" on the barrel. In the Nunnemacher Collection is a U. S. Springfield musket, dated 1815, with the barrel marked "CP" and "US". In the same collection is a musket by J. Henry, Philadelphia, model 1808, with the lock plate marked "US" and the usual eagle of the 1808 contracts, while the barrel is marked "CP". These, I think, can only be *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*. Why would a mark meaning *City Proof* be put on guns which had obviously been made and proof fired by the United States and then turned over to Pennsylvania?

Plates IV to IX, inclusive, show the lock plate markings of the muskets which appear on Plate I.

All the muskets shown on Plate I have the Liberty Cap over "P" in a sunken oval on the barrel. Several are marked with "V" over "CP" on the stock.

The controversy over the meaning of the "CP" has been going on for a long time and probably will continue for many years to come. I hope this article will stimulate fresh interest in these guns and bring forth additional material on the subject.

PLATE II — Detail of a musket by "LEATHER & CO." (see "b" on Plate I) showing a particularly well-defined Liberty Cap proof mark as well as the CP on the breech of the barrel.





PLATE III — Inside view of the lock from a musket by an unknown maker (see "a" on Plate I). Little is known about SWEITZER'S activities beyond the fact that he was a lock maker.

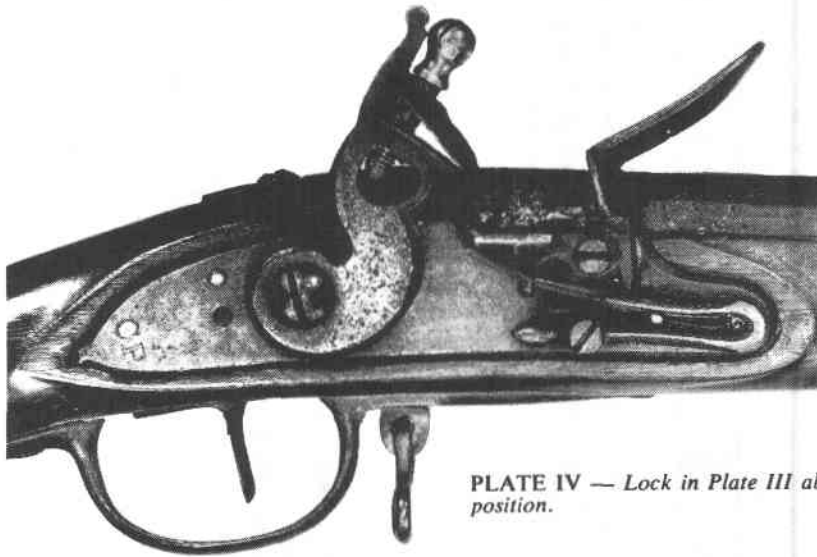


PLATE IV — Lock in Plate III above shown here in mounted position.

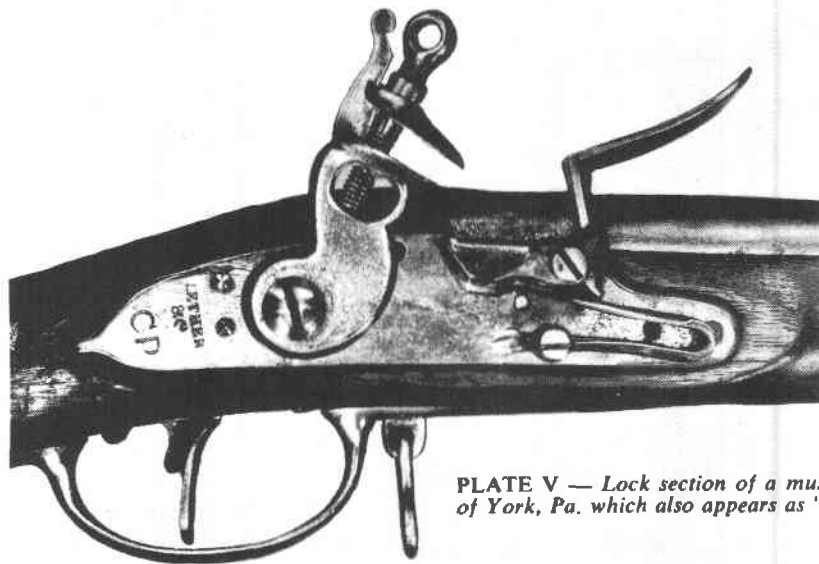


PLATE V — Lock section of a musket by "LEATHER & CO." of York, Pa. which also appears as "b" on Plate I.

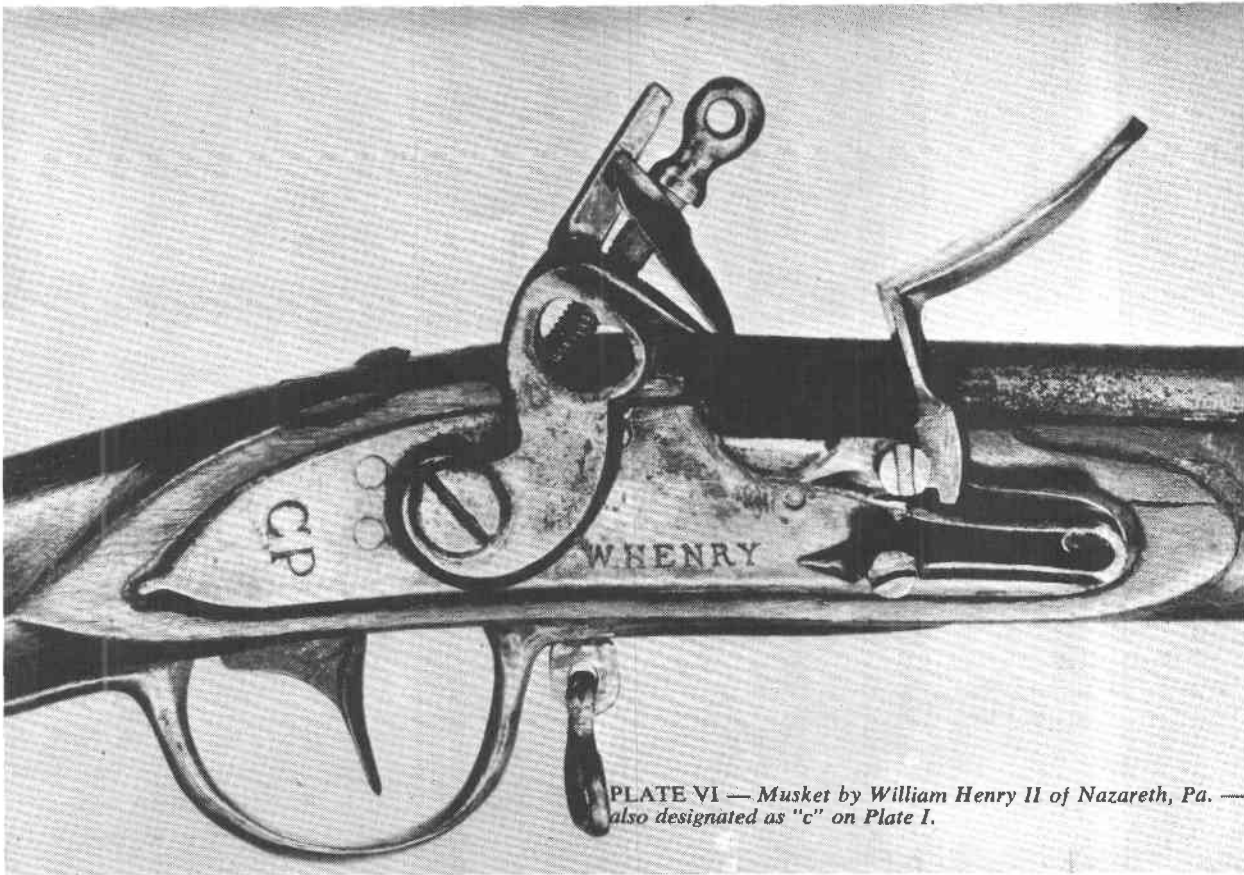


PLATE VI — Musket by William Henry II of Nazareth, Pa. — also designated as "c" on Plate I.

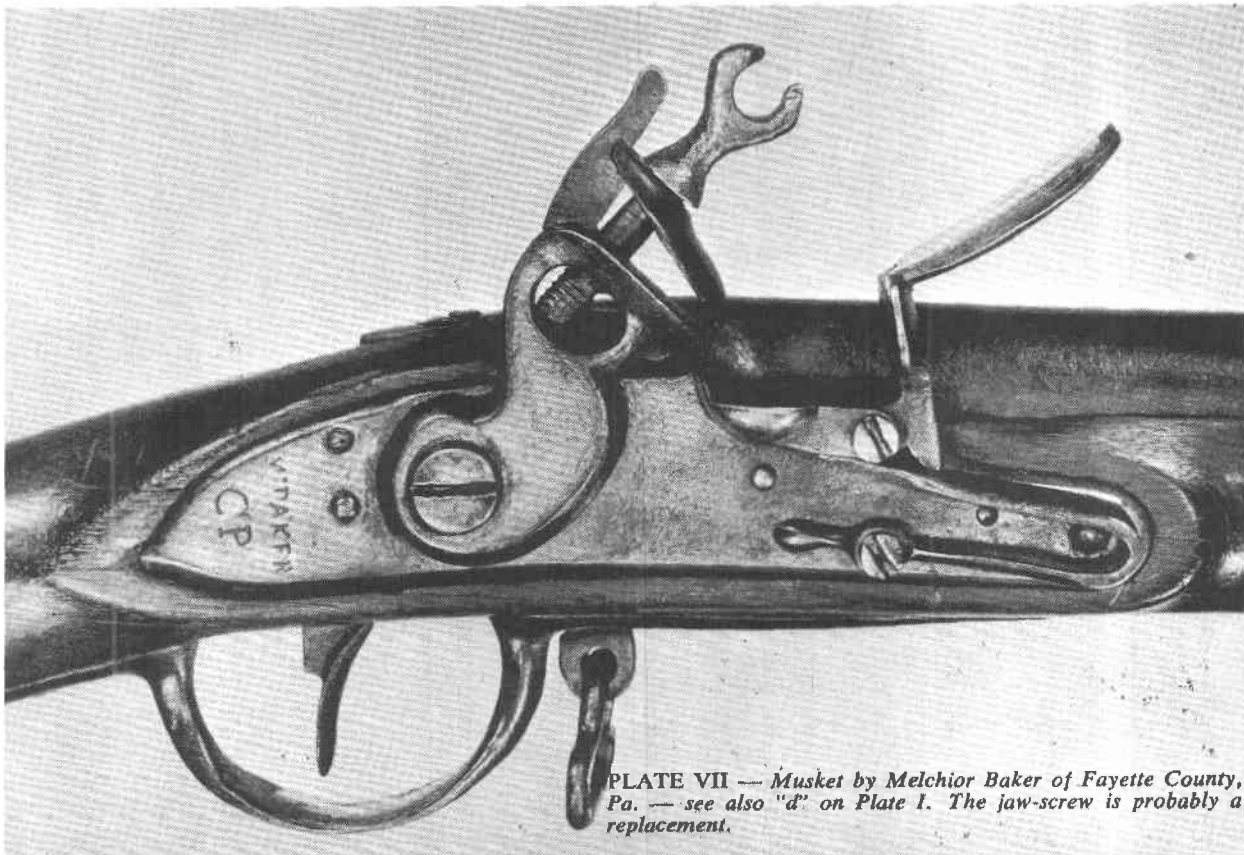


PLATE VII — Musket by Melchior Baker of Fayette County, Pa. — see also "d" on Plate I. The jaw-screw is probably a replacement.

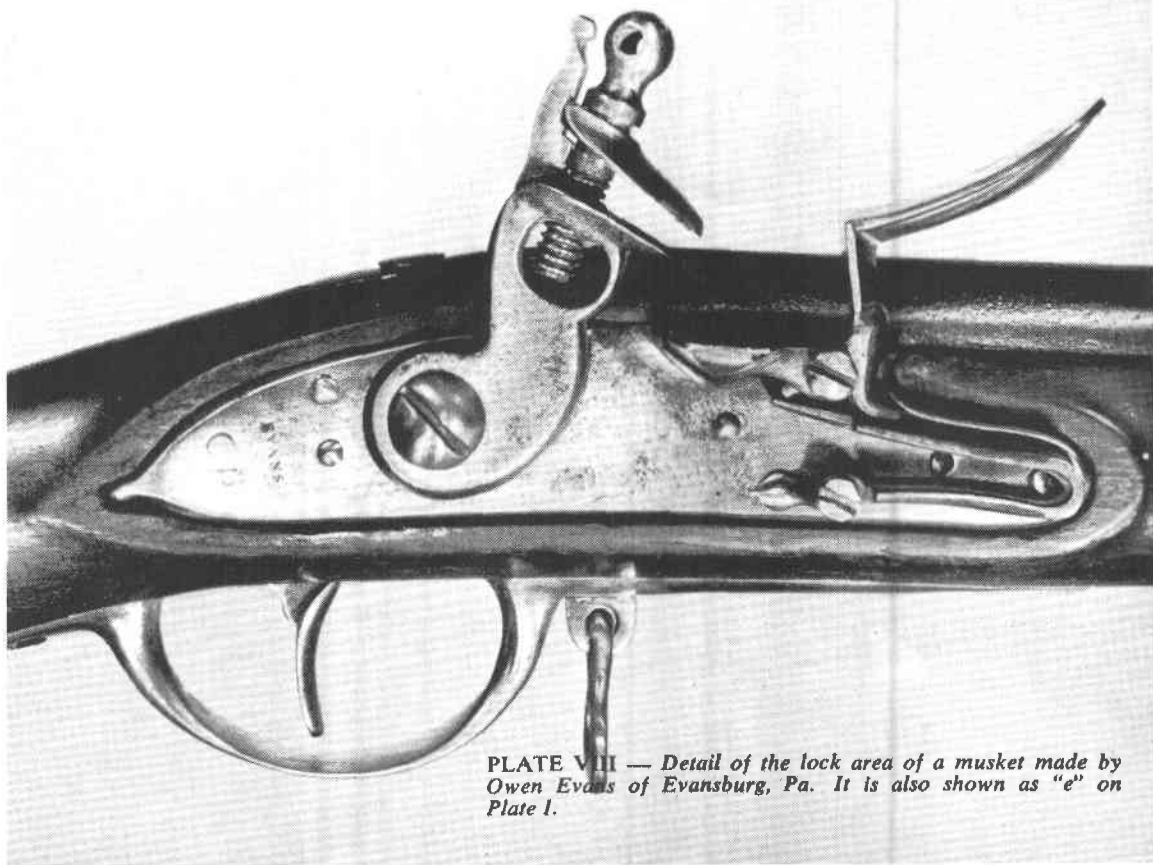


PLATE VIII — Detail of the lock area of a musket made by Owen Evans of Evansburg, Pa. It is also shown as "e" on Plate I.

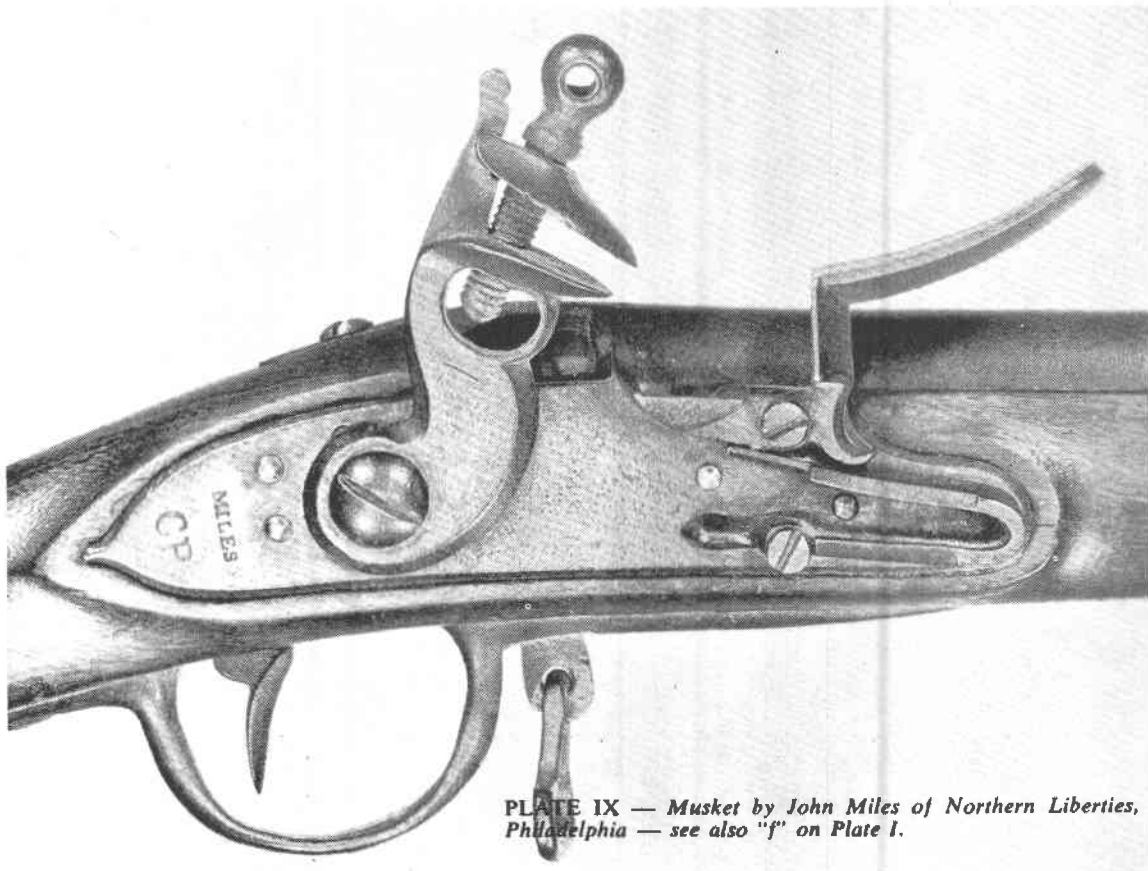


PLATE IX — Musket by John Miles of Northern Liberties, Philadelphia — see also "f" on Plate I.