

THE KENTUCKY RIFLE

by Dr. Harmon C. Leonard



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The Kentucky Rifle should probably be more appropriately named the First American Rifle, since it was not always rifled and rarely produced or used in Kentucky.

Pennsylvania was the first site of production, but for the last 200 years these guns have been produced in most parts of America. In terms of longevity of popularity, it is the favorite American gun. It has been used in war, to obtain food, for protection, for sport, and recreation. Currently they are enjoyed as a fascinating and exhilarating hobby. These guns have been a stimulating facet in research for facts and information of our great American heritage.

The production of the Kentucky Rifle falls into several periods. It is a challenge to the collector to the collector to try to identify the approximate date of the manufacture as well as the maker and area from which it came.

The division of periods of production may be approximated as: Revolutionary War or Colonial period; The Golden Age period, which is so well documented by Kendig; and the late Flintlock or Percussion period. None of these periods have an exact starting or stopping date, and they blend in with one another depending on the longevity of the individual maker and his ability to change with the times.

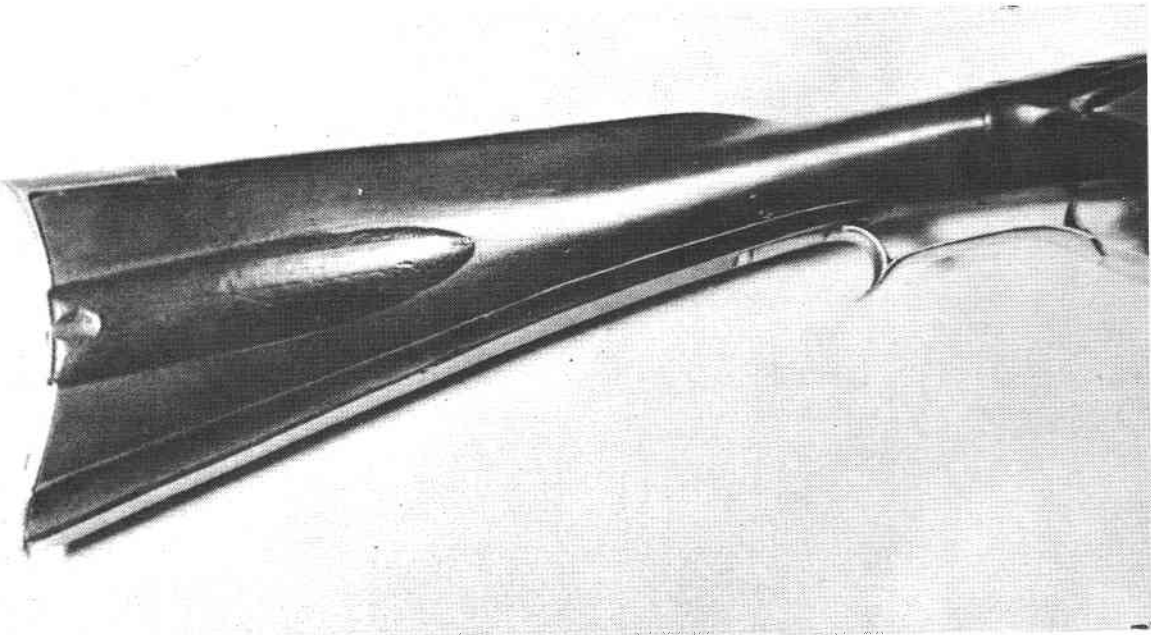


Figure 1: Revolutionary Kentucky - maker unknown - wooden patch box cover, cherry stocked. Note width of space between trigger guard grip and wrist. Relatively straight butt plate.

The Revolutionary or Colonial period would roughly terminate in mid 1780's. Up to that time and starting in the mid-eighteenth century the first Kentuckies were manufactured by the first and second generation German immigrant gunsmiths. These guns can be fairly easily identified by very characteristic features. Probably most characteristic is the thick butt with a nearly straight butt plate. Many had a patch box cover of wood, iron, or very plain brass. The trigger guard is broad and is broad and the grip portion is usually quite deep, i. e., there is considerable space between the grip of the trigger guard and the wrist of the gun. The wood on these early guns may be maple or walnut, but not much attention was paid to the grain of the wood as seen later on. Many were with half octagon - half round barrels. It would probably be better to express the

observation that it is rare to see a half octagon barrel on a later gun. These barrels usually were not rifled, but were made for ball or shot. These guns have as a rule a fairly straight stock with a fairly straight comb. The Roman nose type is a later feature and went on into the Golden Age.

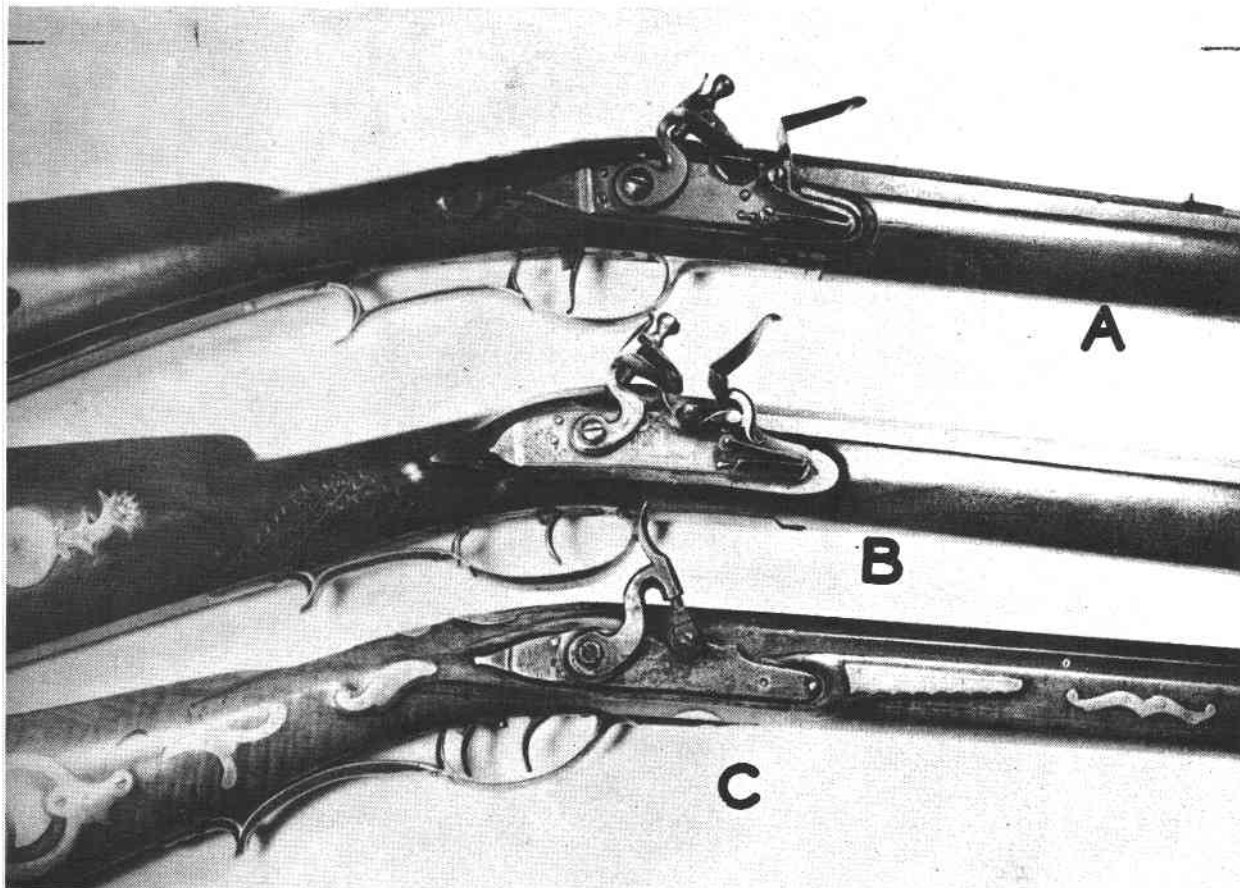


Figure 2: A - Lockplate of Revolutionary rifle - hand forged. Triangle shaped pan, no roller on frizzen, no bridle between pan and frizzen. B - Typical late flintlock of English manufacture. C - Percussion lock - typical of Bedford County makers - note long spur on hammer and long pointed tail to lock plate.

When fortunate enough to find one of these early guns with its original lock, the locks are usually hand forged, quite slender, pointed at the rear end with a plain goose neck hammer. The pan is triangular shaped with no roller on the frizzen spring.

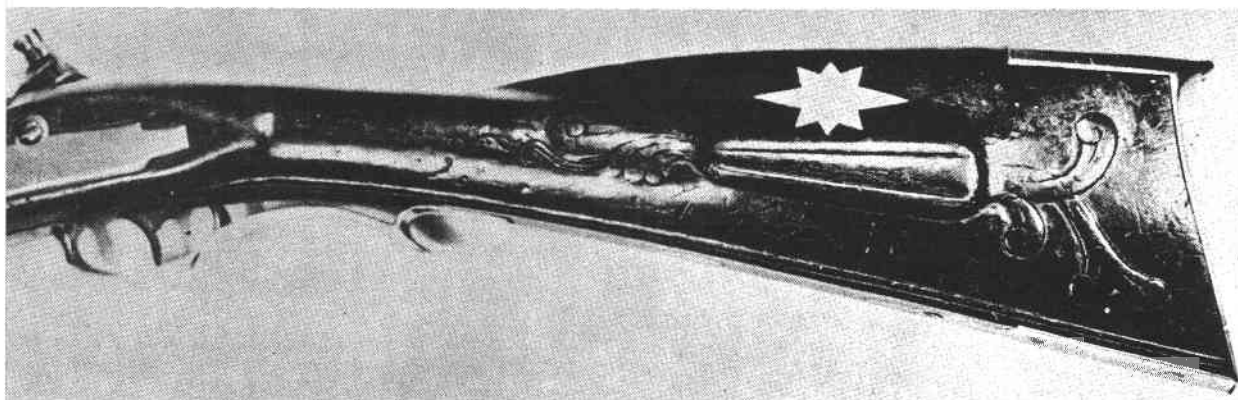


Figure 3: Revolutionary Kentucky - probably made by Wolfgang Haga, note simple design of carving and very straight butt plate.

It is well to state here that no single feature can accurately date the gun. It must be given a general review by placing each feature in the proper perspective and trying to visualize which are its most modern features. Most of these guns have been altered to percussion and many have now been reconverted back to flintlock. So as Kendig states in his book, the lock is probably the least important feature in attempting to date the gun. When carving on the stock is present in pre-Revolutionary guns, it is usually relatively plain, raised in nature and of simple design. As most guns which had tremendous use in this period, they are seldom found with the original rifling.

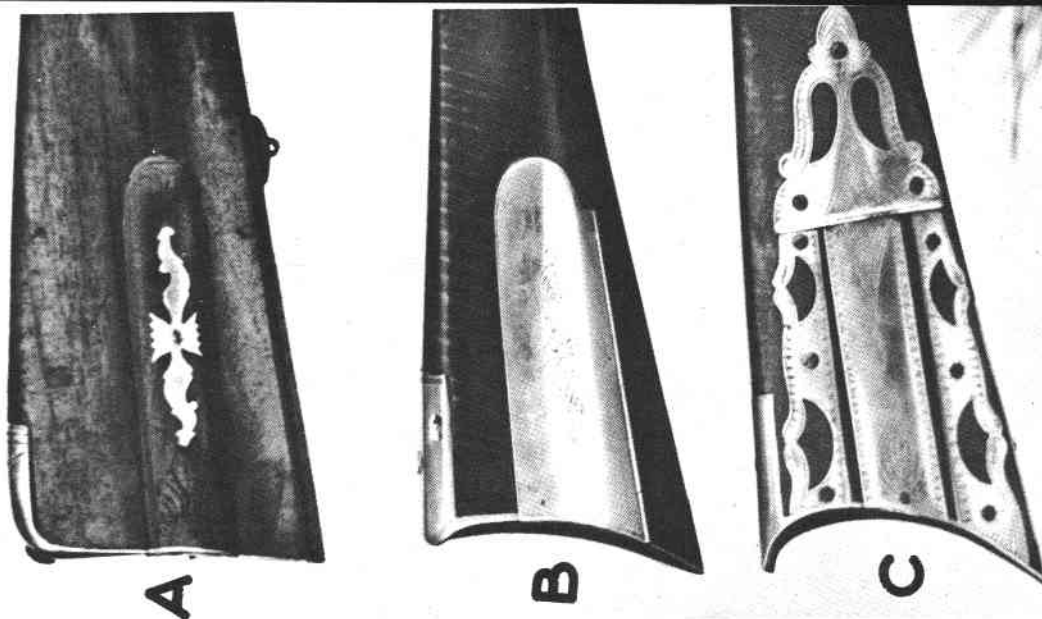


Figure 4: A - Butt plate of European make - Jager - dated 1768. B - Revolutionary period Kentucky made by A. Verner. C - Marked C-shaped butt plate of late Flintlock period. Rifle made by Gibbs.

Kendig's "Golden Age" rifle is certainly the most colorful. The fine ones are truly a piece of art. They represent the craft of gun smithing in its finest years. The wood is usually carefully selected with a fine grain. The engraving on the stock, whether in relief or incised, is usually very ornate. The stock is thin and is more gracefully shaped. The butt plate is curved. (See Figure #3) Patch boxes are almost always brass, frequently pierced and carefully inlaid in the stock. Trigger guards are not as broad nor as deep. Barrels are usually quite long and octagonal. The carving on the stock extends to the area around the tang and frequently they are carved around the trigger guard and ram rod pipes. The original locks, when present, are usually more ornately engraved, frequently of English manufacture. (See Figure 2) Some of the finest guns have silver inlays and occasionally ivory or bone may be inlaid in the stock. Patch box lids are frequently engraved. These guns are often signed by the maker and easy to identify.

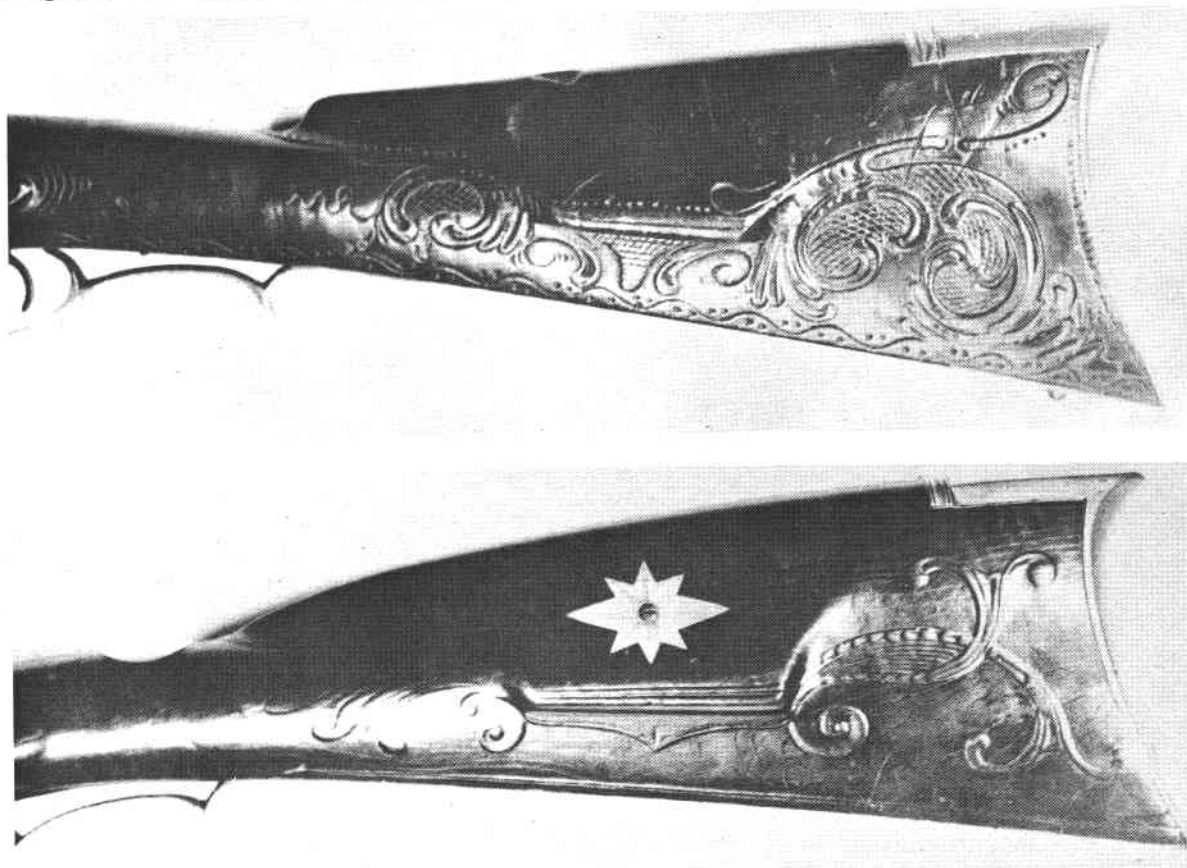


Figure 5: Typical ornate relief carving of Golden Age Kentucky - Gun signed by C. Gumph.
 Figure 6: Golden Age relief carving on rifle - plainly identifying the work of Leonard Reedy.

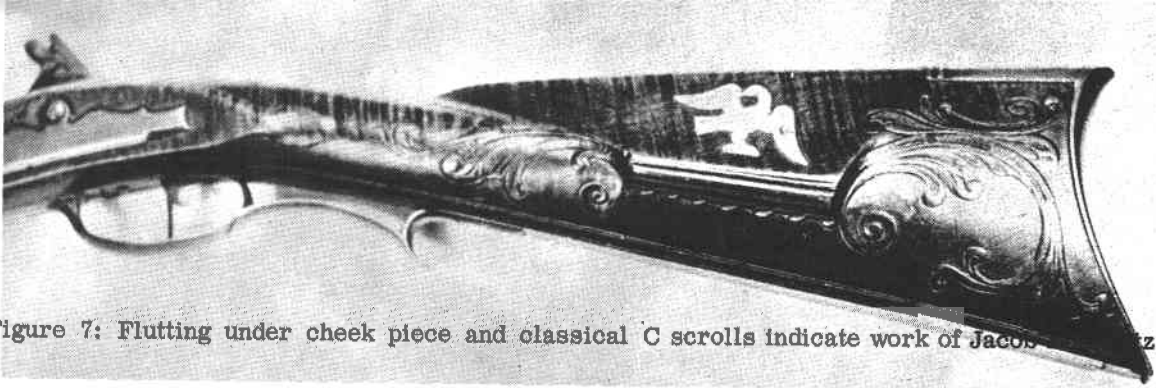


Figure 7: Fluting under cheek piece and classical C scrolls indicate work of Jacob ... z.

Because of the distinctive style of many of the finest gunsmiths of this period, and thanks to the apprentice system of learning the craft, the identity of the maker can be made with reasonable assurance in unsigned pieces.

The guns of the late Flintlock period 1820-1835 lose much of their graceful appearance. Most have no carving, or if any it is of the simple incised type. Those of higher quality depended more on brass or silver inlays for ornamentation rather than carving on the stock. These rifles were usually shorter and made with smaller bore.

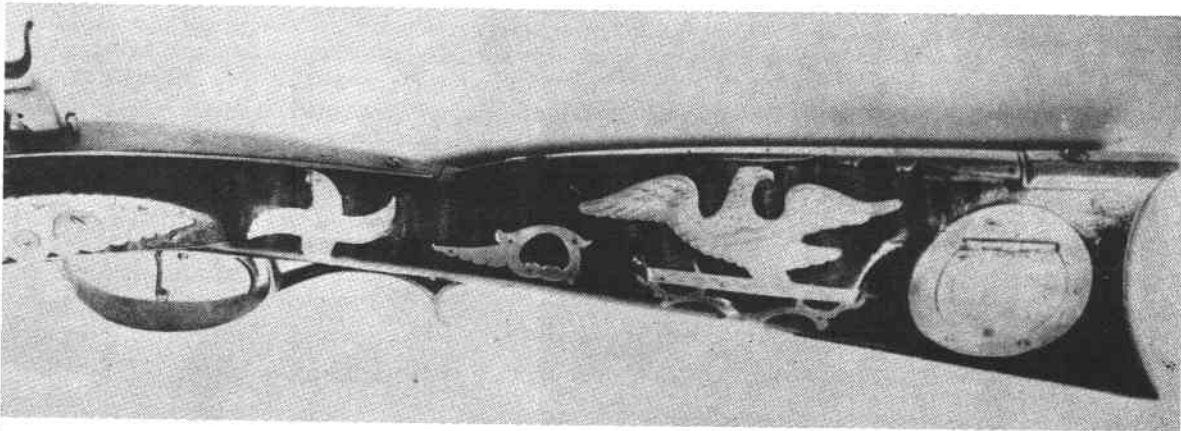


Figure 8: Use of German silver inlays to ornament gun of Percussion periods.

The one exception, to this trend toward severity in workmanship in the late flint and percussion period, was the type of rifles made in Bedford County, Penn. The Bedford County rifle is very distinctive. Its lock is long and narrow with an accentuated tail on the rear of the plate. The percussion hammer has a very (See Figure 2) long thin spur. The gun is long and graceful. The stock has a pronounced drop at the comb. The butt plate has a pronounced deep profile. The patch boxes are usually quite ornate being long and tapered to conform to the shape of the stock. Frequently these patch boxes are pierced and inlaid with silver. When the cheek piece was carved, it was either incised or raised. Many have coin inlay in the carving itself.

This percussion period witnesses the decline of the gunsmith art in eastern Pennsylvania. Western Pennsylvania turned its attention toward half stocked and plains rifle to meet the demand for a cheaper rifle to be used in the rapid expansion of the west.

While the golden age was drawing to a close in Pennsylvania, rifles, which we now include in the ranks of Kentuckies, were being produced in other parts of the country. These have definite area characteristics and are of interest to the collector in an attempt to classify them and learn the origin.

To the south two distinct guns appeared which we call southern Kentuckies. These can be divided into those made in the coastal states, and those that came from the mountainous areas.

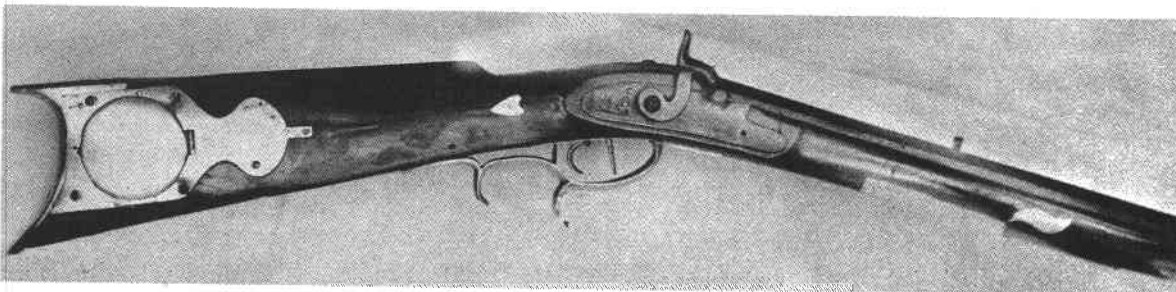


Figure 9: Typical Carolina rifle - german silver patch box and inlays.

The coastal types or Carolina gun is quite ornate, usually trimmed in German silver with English lock plates. They had very thin stocks with a pronounced drop to the butt and very sharp curved butt plates. Many were signed.

The southern mountain rifle is the product of crude blacksmith or gunsmith shops. Usually very plain. The trigger guard, patch box, and butt plate (if present) were usually iron. The barrel was of large bore and rarely signed. The stock was very long in length with little attention paid to the grain of the wood, except that it was straight and strong. These had less of a drop to the butt than the coastal gun.

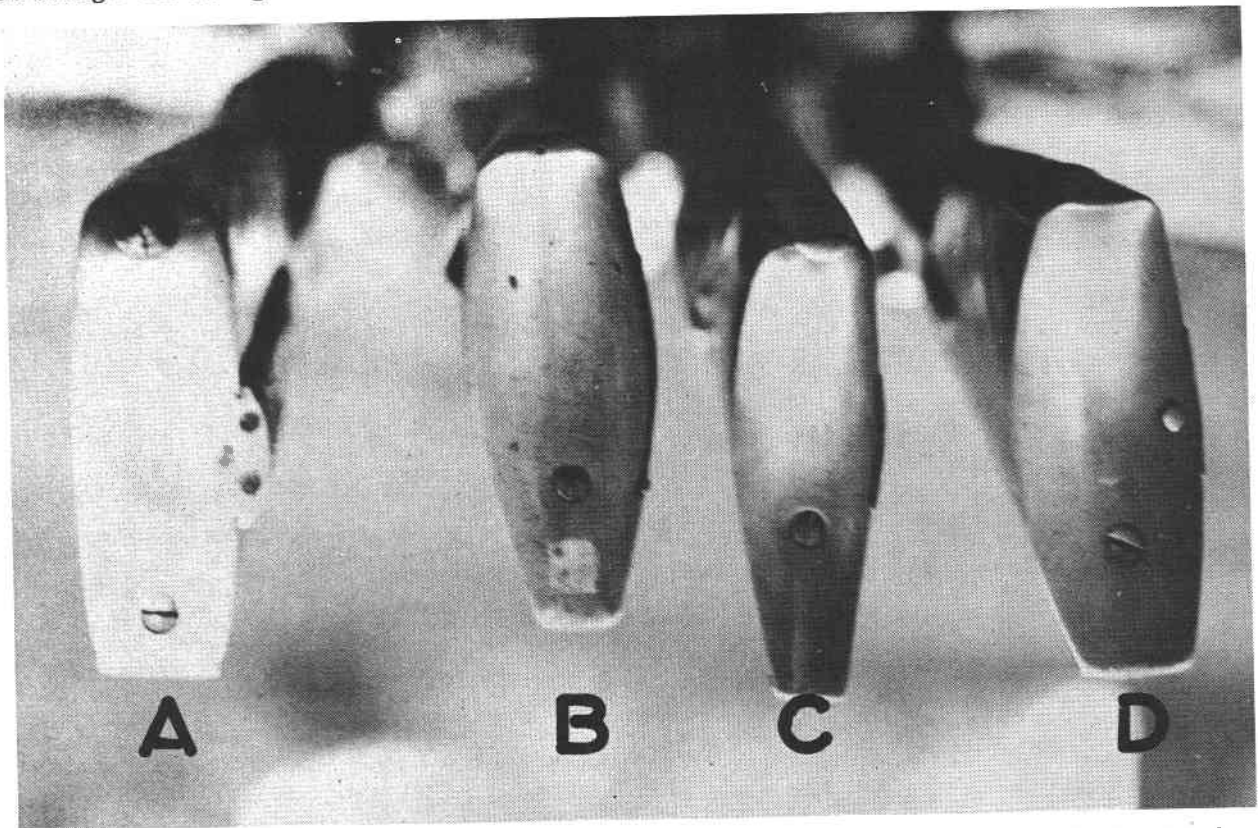


Figure 10: Note thickness of butts. A- Jaeger 1768. B - Pennsylvania Revolutionary period. C - Golden Age. D - New England rifle - 1820 - signed W. Allen.

To the north of Pennsylvania, another distinctive type of rifle appeared and is called the New England rifle. This too is not very specific for the vast majority if these came from a relatively small area either near Worcester or Pittsfield, Mass. These had features which make them easy to identify even though they are products of the late flint period. They have several characteristics (See Figure 10) of the early Pennsylvania rifle: - thick in the butt; straight in the butt plate; broad trigger guard; usually thick and well defined cheek piece; and large bore. They were usually cheery or walnut stocked. Though a few maple stocks were seen.

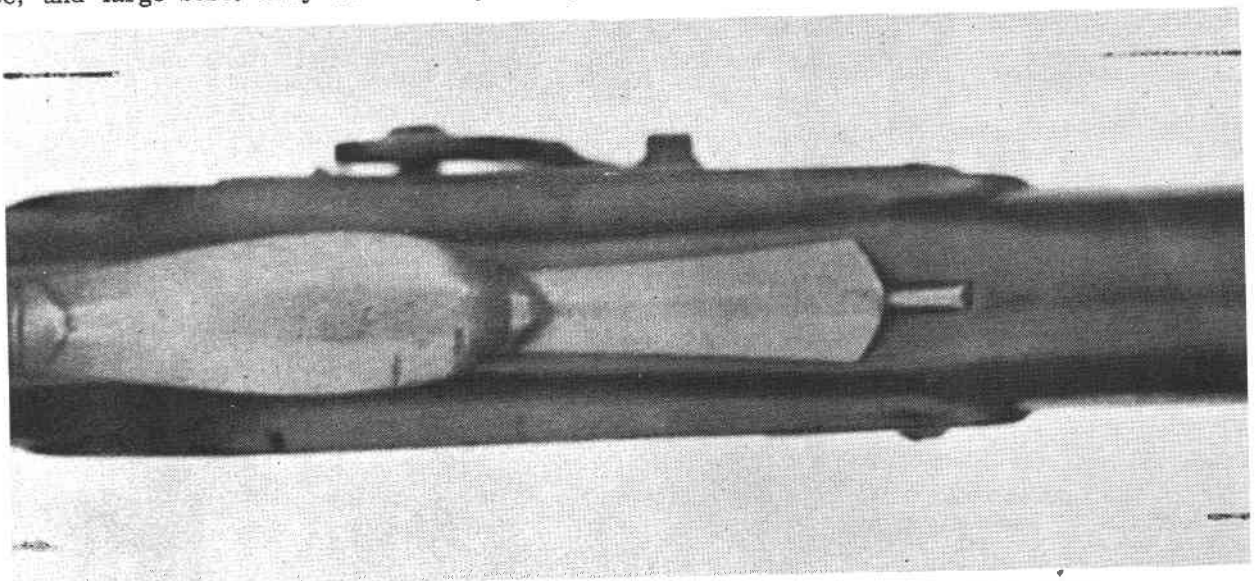


Figure 11: Protrusion of fore of trigger guard - New England rifle - signed W. Allen.

Many have an unusual feature rarely seen on other guns, a marked square protruding tip on the fore part of the trigger guard. This is not always present, but I have never seen it on a gun that was not made in Massachusetts.

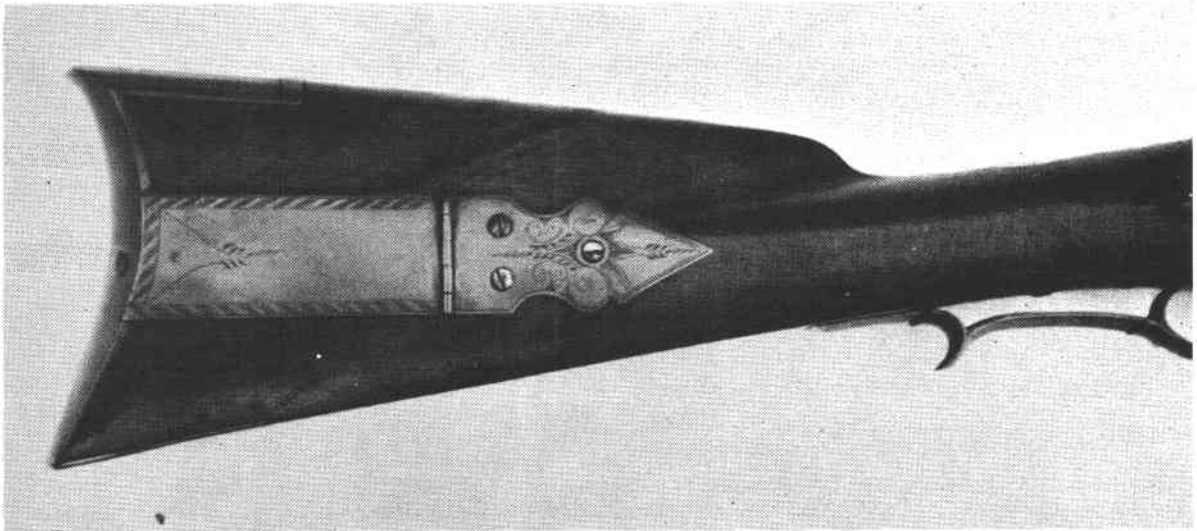


Figure 12: Typical patch box - New England rifle - cherry stocked - signed W. Allen.

These guns are usually very plain. When ornamented, they have simple engraving on the brass patch box or may have fine wire inlays. This more closely resembles the fine silver wire work on the English fowlers of the same period, than the heavy silver wire work on comparable Penn. rifles. The patch boxes are plain and made of two pieces. The brass used for the butt and toe plates is usually much heavier than those in the Penn. rifles.

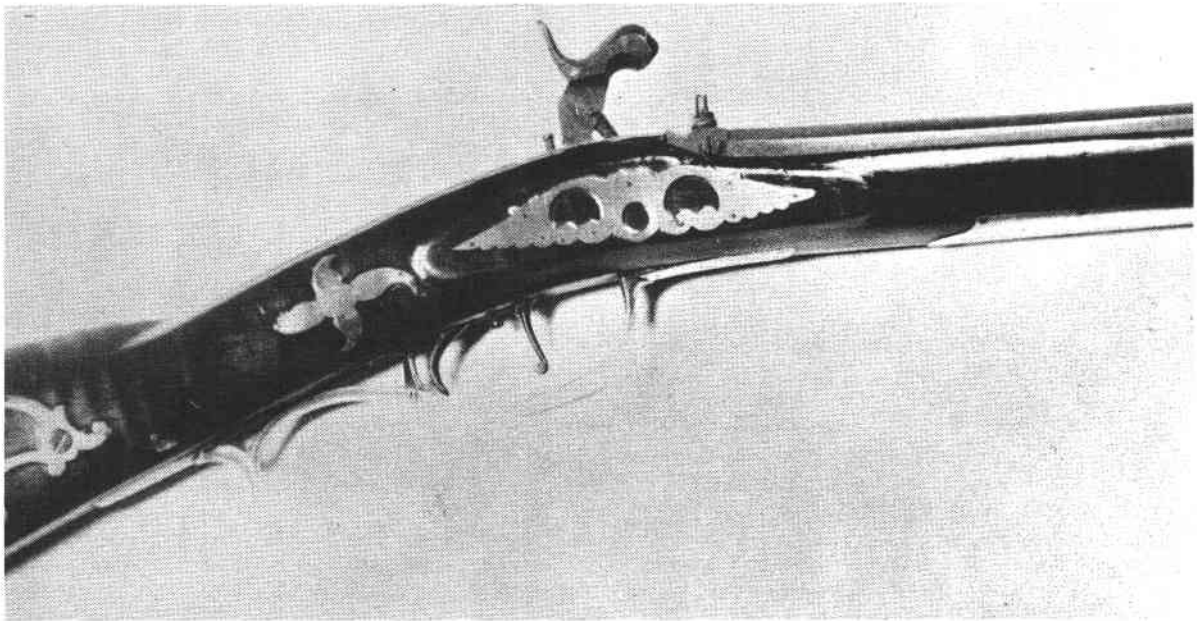


Figure 13: Box Lock - unsigned - rifle has patch box on right side of stock with cap box on left side - 1840 period.

In the percussion and late flint period many variations of the rifle appeared; over and under combinations; side by side rifles; swivel breech with either both barrels rifled; or combination with one smooth and one barrel rifled. Various types of ignition were attempted; box lock, mule ear, pill lock, etc..



Figure 14: Unsigned mule ear rifle - 1840 period.

The past few years have found a regeneration of interest in Kentuckies and they are again being produced. These are largely to meet the demands for muzzle loading shooters. The demands of the collector can never be met. In the shops of the master gunsmiths, production was never rushed. They were carefully designed and skillfully made. The increasing demand, after 150 to 200 years, is a living testimony to their artistry.