

# U. S. MARTIAL FLINTLOCK RIFLES

by John C. McMurray

## INTRODUCTION



JOHN C. McMURRAY

The field of U. S. Martial Flintlock Rifles has been neglected by both collector and arms historian. The relative scarcity of surviving rifles, compared to other U. S. martial weapons, probably discourages collectors from concentrating on this category of arm. The lack of source information about production quantities and military use of many weapons is also a collecting deterrent. Given this state of affairs, I think it very useful to catalog surviving rifles to guide the collector and stimulate the arms historian.

The rifles presented here represent, with one exception, single shot muzzle loading rifles made or purchased by the national or state governments for military or Indian use. I believe each rifle was made to an approved pattern — and is thereby distinguished from the privately-owned rifle which may have been carried by the rifleman.

I have enjoyed collecting these rifles because of the great variety of rifles encountered and the challenge of identifying types which can be only dimly recognized in this wide "spectrum" or field. The rifles of U.S. armory manufacture are well known and easily recognized, but there are some rather plain Kentucky types which can also be verified as distinct martial patterns.

My primary purpose here is to point out characteristics of these rifles, which may assist us in identifying other examples of the military rifles. Three waves of influence shaped the military rifle in the U. S.: (1) British rifle designs; (2) the Pennsylvania rifle makers; and (3) development of special rifles for the Indian trade.

## I. BRITISH AND FIRST U. S. ARMORY RIFLES

The first pattern of rifle with a U. S. association may well be the British rifles with which England armed some colonial troops during the French & Indian War. Several pre-revolutionary style Kentuckys are known with walnut stocks, English locks, and London-proved barrels of military caliber. This pattern may have been based on American Kentucky rifle designs or developed from German rifles. It is also interesting to see some non-Kentucky characteristics in the first rifles made in U. S. armories.

- 1.) Kentucky Type Rifle by Grice: So marked on lock and "WG" on rear barrel flat with London gunmaker proofs. Stock is relief carved, but the most distinctive characteristic is Baker style patch box appearing on a rifle 40 years before the rifle of that name was adopted in 1801 by England.
- 2.) Jaeger Type Rifle by Grice: Name on lock and private London proofs on rear barrel flat. Grice is known to have had a contract for muzzle-loading rifles (as well as Fergusons) in 1776. Barrel is stamped on the right side "RF" as is the stock on the left wrist.
- 3.) Harpers Ferry Rifle: Lock dated "1804" and barrel serial numbered "1237." Henry Dearborn specified in letter of May 25, 1803, 33 inch barrel, part round, iron rib, brass mountings. Four thousand were ordered and Lewis and Clark carried some of the first made.
- 4.) Virginia Manufactory Rifle: Lock dated 1806. Original barrel length was 42-44 inches. Part round barrel and scroll trigger guard show British influence. "Don't Tread on Me" and rattlesnake motif on patch box derive from the old Virginia Colonial flag and John Paul Jones Revolutionary flag.

## II. U. S. 1807 CONTRACT RIFLES

I believe the Model of 1807 U. S. Contract rifle has never been described. They were made by Lancaster makers to the general outline of the 18003 Harpers Ferry rifle, but were full-stocked. The 33 inch part round barrel was very close to the Harpers Ferry, and the patch-box without side pieces was similar to the Harpers Ferry.

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Differences were the use of; maple for stocks and imported German locks. Barrels are marked with the rifle makers name and the true U. S. 1807 contract specimens are stamped with an eagle head proof mark and the letters "US."

A total of 1778 of these rifles were delivered, proved, and accepted at the U. S. arsenal in Philadelphia. Most of these rifles were apparently poorly and cheaply made — owing largely to the low contract price of \$10.00 each. Many had to be repaired to make them fit for issue. The state of Pennsylvania reluctantly received most of these rifles when a British invasion was expected in 1814. After the close of the War of 1812 they appear to have been sold as surplus. Probably most were worn out in use — certainly few have survived.

- 1.) J. Dickert Contract Rifle: Barrel marked with U. S. proofs and number "75." Plain imported German lock with two slashes at the tail.
- 2.) J. Henry Contract Rifle: Barrel marked with U. S. proofs. Lock is a percussion period replacement. Note that the patch box is plain, but distinctly different from the Harpers Ferry rifle or Dickert rifle.
- 3.) J. Henry 1807 Variant: Not a U. S. contract rifle, but having all the same characteristics — with high quality. Original flintlock showing gooseneck cock, on German import lock. Barrel is heavier and ramrod pipes are cast brass rather than sheet brass found on Contract Rifles.
- 4.) J. Dickert 1807 Variant: Not a U. S. rifle. Note the barrel is full octagon, turned down at the muzzle — probably to receive a bayonet. The Drepperd lock, made in Lancaster, was probably of better quality than the German and uses the stronger double-neck military cock.

### III. PHILADELPHIA-MADE MILITARY RIFLES

The fiasco with the 1807 Contract Rifles marked the virtual end of U. S. contracts with the Lancaster rifle makers. Philadelphia was the center for all Federal small arms contracts in the early 1800's and the advent of the War of 1812 stimulated a demand for a better grade of military rifle. Improved rifles had developed in that city by 1814.

Both Henry Deringer and George W. Tryon were interested in military contract work, and made contract arms for both the U. S. Navy and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania during the War of 1812. The Philadelphia rifles in this group show some interesting evolutionary changes — probably suggested by the two makers, but perhaps encouraged by the U. S. Commissary General of Purchases and U. S. arms inspectors.

The four rifles here all have substantial walnut stocks, durable locks made by the rifle maker, and simply strong brass mountings.

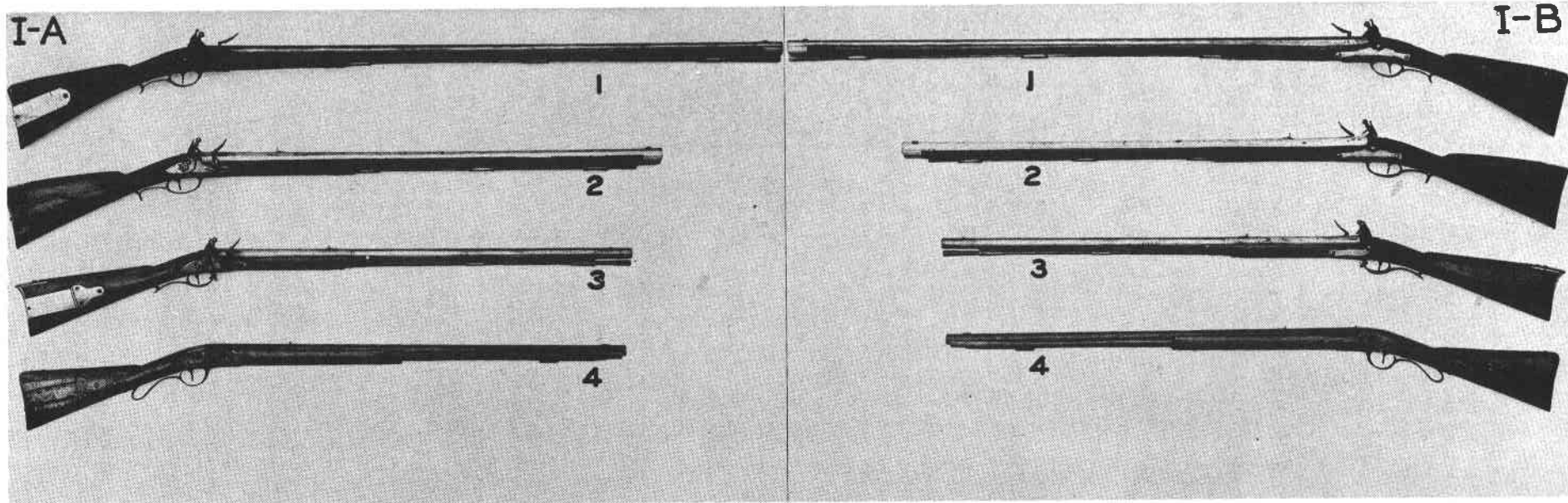
- 1.) Deringer U. S. Rifle (1810?): U. S. barrel proof mark such as found on 1807 U. S. Contract pistols. Most unusual feature is long 42 inch octagon barrel turned at the muzzle and fitted for a bayonet. This is the earliest U. S. bayonet-equipped rifle I have seen.
- 2.) Deringer "CP" Rifle: Barrel and stock are stamped "CP" denoting "Commonwealth of Pennsylvania." Barrel is part round following 1803 Harpers Ferry and 1807 Contract rifles, but is considerably heavier in this specimen. Perhaps a marksman's or long-range version of the following rifle.
- 3.) Deringer "CP" Rifle "77": The serial number 77 is stamped on barrel and stock. Believed to be one of 100 rifles ordered by Pennsylvania for arming a rifle regiment when a British invasion was expected in 1814. Note bayonet stud. These Deringers have no check pieces and have finger grooves in the trigger guard rather than the more elaborate guard.
- 4.) Tryon "CP" Rifle "172": Probably one of a Pennsylvania contract for 100 or more rifles. It is possible that Deringer and Tryon were assigned separate blocks of numbers. I have an iron rifle mold marked "CP" "176" indicating that a mold was issued with each rifle. This rifle shows the first appearance of the oval patchbox. The check piece is oval, suggesting an English influence.

### IV. WAR OF 1812 RIFLES

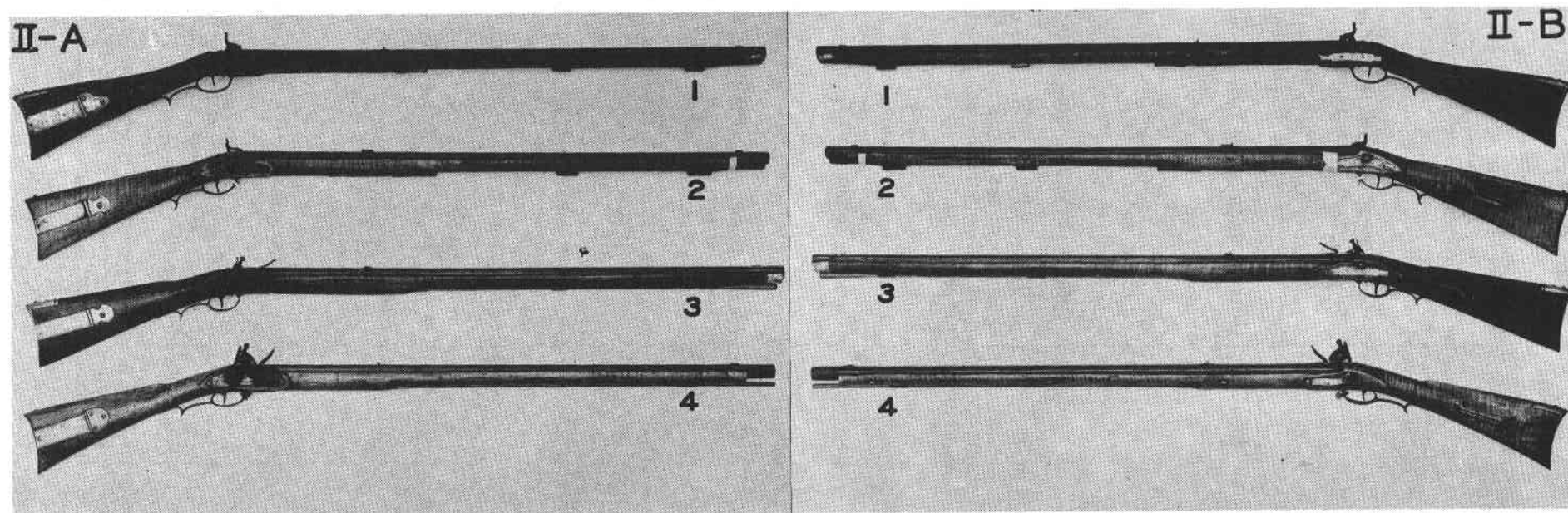
By 1814 the rifles in the arsenals had been issued and there was urgent need of new rifles for the rifle regiments being raised. Harpers Ferry started making the 1803 model again and Springfield also started work on the same model.

A completely new design of rifle, known as the 1814 Contract Rifle, was developed in Philadelphia by Marine T. Wickham — and the pattern rifle was made by Deringer. This is the first iron-mounted rifle having barrel bands, and represents an interesting synthesis of earlier ideas from several sources.

The barrel is of Harpers Ferry length and part round form. The lock has the first brass pan on a rifle — an idea Whitney had introduced on muskets. The stock has the oval patch box and checkpiece of Tryon. The band stud retainers were Wickham's development as had been used on some North pistols about 1813. The finger

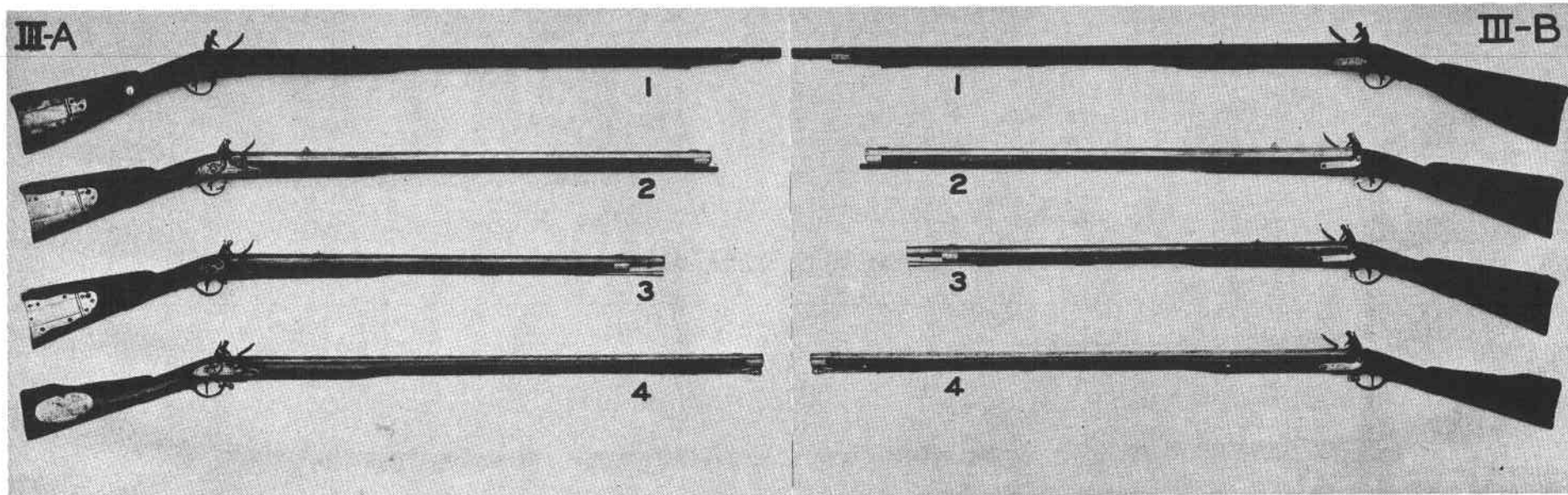


I BRITISH AND FIRST U.S. ARMORY RIFLES

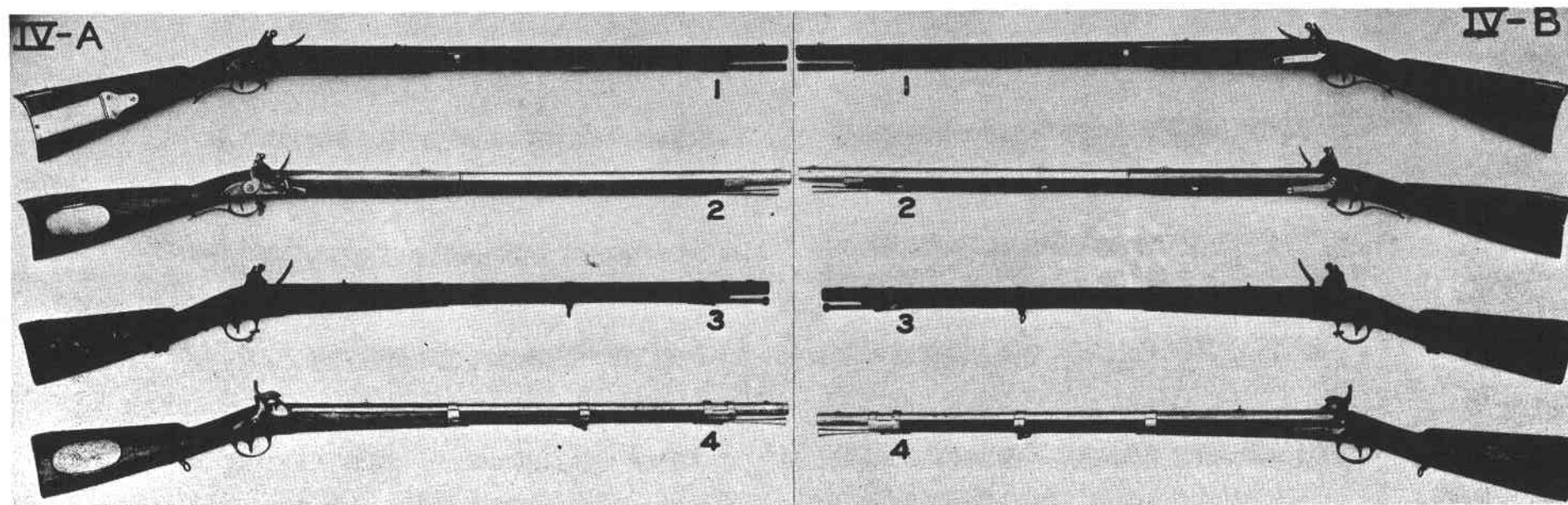


II U.S. 1807 CONTRACT RIFLES



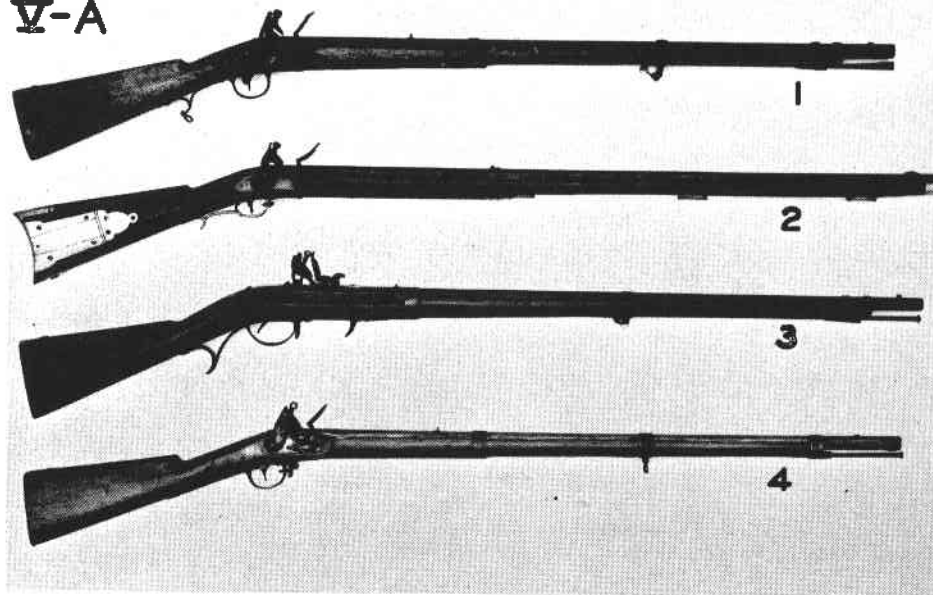


III PHILADELPHIA-MADE MILITARY RIFLES



IV WAR OF 1812 RIFLES

V-A



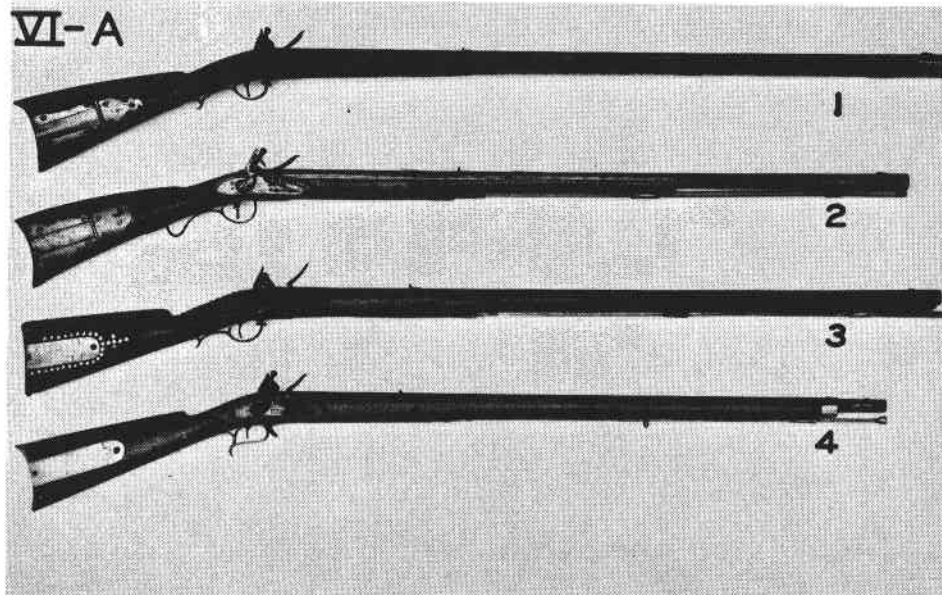
V-B



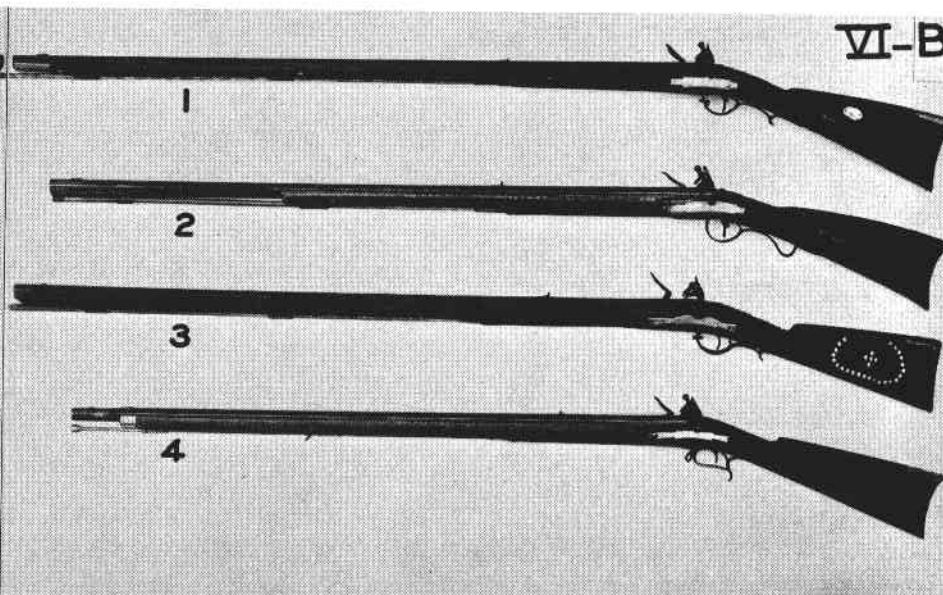
V

POST WAR OF 1812 RIFLES

VI-A



VI-B



VI

INDIAN-MILITARY RIFLES

ridges on the trigger guard are the same as found on Deringers earlier brass-mounted rifles.

- 1.) Harpers Ferry Rifle: These were very close to the 1803 rifles but not serial numbered. Rifles made in 1814 and 1815 were the original 33 inch length. The order specifying 36 inch barrels was not issued until late in 1815.
- 2.) Cogswell "SNY" Rifle: The State of New York was the Northern Frontier and the invasion route of the British from Canada. New York probably found U. S. arms issues inadequate and ordered this distinctive rifle from Cogswell in Troy in some quantity. The barrel is of Harpers Ferry form, and the walnut stock is unusually fine. The mountings and pan are brass and the patchbox is of the Tryon pattern.
- 3.) Deringer 1814 Contract Rifle: This rifle established Deringer as a U. S. rifle contractor, and he continued as the primary contractor through the flintlock period. The U. S. need for these rifles was so great that Deringer was threatened with a law suit for failure to deliver the rifles to the Government when he was making the brass mounted "CP" rifles for Pennsylvania.
- 4.) Cogswell "SNY" Rifle: Cogswell's version of the 1814 rifle was made on a New York contract but exhibits two interesting differences from the standard Deringer pattern. First, the Wickham stud-type band retainers are not used and the band springs to the rear of the bands are of the 1808 musket type. Secondly, the Deringer-type finger grooves are omitted from the trigger guard.

## V. POST WAR OF 1812 RIFLES

The close of the War of 1812 ushered in the period of westward expansion in the U. S. and marked the beginning of the last 25 years for the U. S. flintlock rifle. The job of the Army was keeping peace on the expanding frontiers.

Although the years between 1815 and 1840 saw the U. S. in no major military struggles, there were a few interesting developments in military rifles. By 1821 Harpers Ferry had produced its last muzzle-loading flintlock rifle after making nearly 20,000 of the 1803 Model. A year later the Virginia Manufactory had closed down its military arms plant which had operated for 20 years.

Rifle contracts were let on a continuing basis with such well known makers as Deringer, North, Starr, and Johnson for the Model of 1817 "Common Rifle." An interesting variant of this rifle was the 4-shot Ellis rifle produced for the State of New York.

Most significant was the development of the military rifle model of 1819 at the Harpers Ferry Armory and the production of 20,000 by 1842 with full interchangeability.

- 1.) Deringer Model 1817 Rifle: The first U. S. rifle with a full round barrel — 36 inches. Otherwise the rifle is like the 1814 contract rifle with minor change in the trigger guard. Early specimens, like this one, have no date on barrel or lock.
- 2.) Virginia Manufactory Rifle (1821): This rifle is closer to the Kentucky form than almost any other U. S. military rifle. This particular rifle was in the Snyder collection and illustrated in "The Kentucky Rifle" by Dillin. The lock was restored to flint before Dillin's photograph.
- 3.) Hall Rifle Model 1819: This specimen was made in 1826 and is one of the second thousand produced at Harpers Ferry. Band springs identify it as of early manufacture. North made rifles on contract, and in the early 1840's Harpers Ferry made them in percussion.
- 4.) Chicopee Falls Rifle: Several specimens of this rifle are known but nothing is known about its use. The rifle is distinctly military in all of its detail, and was probably made about 1840. The lock in design and marking appears to be identical to that used on the flintlock Jenks breechloading carbine. The barrel bears a U. S. proof and initials "JH." The top of the stock near the butt plate has inspector's initials "JSW."

## VI. INDIAN-MILITARY RIFLES

From the early 1800's the U. S. Army distributed rifles to "friendly" Indians for purposes of diplomacy, treaty commitments, and to counterbalance the influences of Britain and the British and American fur trade companies.

The Indian was a discriminating rifle customer and there is ample documentary evidence that he would refuse to accept rifles that were unserviceable or of a length, bore, or style which he considered unsuitable. The U. S. agents responsible for specifying, purchasing, and inspecting rifles for Indians took the business quite as seriously as contracting for the Army's own arms.

The rifles in this group are of military caliber and are suitable for that use by either Indian or soldier. The Indian had a preference for the long rifle of Lancaster pattern rather than the Harpers Ferry rifle. Some

Indians liked the same long rifle, but of the "English" pattern. It is interesting that a composite pattern of Indian rifle was purchased as a military rifle by the State of South Carolina about 1830.

- 1.) Ghriskey Rifle: This rifle has a "P" proof mark at the barrel breech and a small eagle head stamped on the lockplate. I believe this is one of 100 rifles made on verbal agreement with the U. S. Commissary General of Purchases in 1815.
- 2.) Deringer Indian Rifle: Henry Deringer is known to have had contracts with the U. S. for Indian rifles in the 1820 period and this may be one of them. Three features suggest this: The scroll trigger guard is of English style and quite unlike the Lancaster pattern or Deringer's military rifle types. The flat lock with double-neck cock is different from any other military or commercial Deringer rifle I have seen. The stock is stamped "V" "by" "IM" probably designating acceptance by an Indian Department agent or inspector.
- 3.) J. Henry English Pattern Indian Rifle: Although this has the Lancaster trigger guard, I believe the rifle is one of the "English Pattern" referred to in Indian trade correspondence, and probably dates about 1825. Its most distinctive characteristics, aside from the tack-work decorations, are the British styles of oval check-piece and Baker-rifle patch-box.
- 4.) Tryon New-English Pattern Military Rifle: Henry made an Indian rifle to a "New-English Pattern" and both he and Tryon contracted to make slightly variant models as military rifles for the State of South Carolina. The Baker-rifle patch-box is retained, but the trigger guard is different from all earlier rifles. The octagon barrel is turned for bayonet and is marked "S. Carolina," "D-33," and Inspector's initials "WSG."

I hope that this review of "Common" and un-common U. S. military flintlock rifles will stimulate your interest and lead to new discoveries in what I consider the most fascinating field of U. S. military arms.

There are two major gaps in our knowledge before 1800. These are the rifles which were purchased by the Colonies or Congress during the Revolutionary War; and the rifles made by the Lancaster makers under U. S. contract in 1792. If I should not have the good luck to locate examples of these rifles, I hope that some of you may. Of course, I would be delighted to hear from you about any "find" in this field.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In closing I wish to acknowledge that I could not have assembled this collection nor made this presentation without the help and encouragement of many members of this fine society. First of these is my Father, John H. McMurray, who indulged my congenital weakness for arms collecting when it became evident twenty-five years ago, and who has continued to be my collecting buddy and advisor to our mutual enjoyment. We both owe our membership in the ASAC to Bob Abels and Lewis Winant who sponsored us in 1953.

Rifles in this group have come in part from the collections of members; Gerald Fox, Ben Hubbell, Red Jackson, Pierce MacKenzie, Glode Requa, and Jim Serven. I mention this in appreciation of having been given the opportunities to add rifles to this collection.

For the inspiration to concentrate on this field of U. S. martial long arms I would acknowledge the encouragement and writings of President Tom Holt.

Assistance and information for this presentation were generously given by members Bill Grose, Tom Hall, Harmon Leonard, and Crosby Milliman.

The excellent photographs were taken by the courtesy of the Winchester Gun Museum, arranged by President Tom Hall, Curator.