

Virginia Militia Long Arms

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This paper will identify and describe the various muskets and rifles used by the Virginia militia during the federal period of American history.

Virginia was unique among the states in building a state armory for the production of arms and making a determined effort to develop and arm an effective statewide militia.

The state of Virginia had a long history of frontier troubles throughout the eighteenth century. The settlers in the areas that later became West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and parts of western Pennsylvania, once looked to Williamsburg, Virginia, for their protection. These settlers fought the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War literally on their doorstep. In between wars, they fought the Indians for the land during the entire 18th century. This long history of frontier troubles and two serious wars made the people conscious of the need for a strong, well armed militia. With this historic background, the people of Virginia were ready to serve in the militia and to properly arm themselves. Because of this, Virginia, more than any other state, purchased arms systematically by contract and finally became the only state to manufacture arms on a large scale in the federal period.

During the Revolutionary War, Virginia, like most states, obtained arms when and wherever they could be purchased. Among several sources of arms was the Rappahannock Forge. The muskets manufactured at the Rappahannock Forge were basically first model Brown Bess muskets. However, there is some variation in barrel lengths as the two known full length examples have barrel lengths of approximately 44 and 40 inches. The example pictured in Figure 1 and Figure 2 was cut down when it was converted to a percussion shotgun. This gun, like the other known example, is marked RAPA FORGE on the lock and I. HUNTER on the barrel. I Hunter stands for James Hunter, the owner of the Rappahannock Forge. These sturdy muskets undoubtedly remained in service with the Virginia militia after the War. In fact, some of them were probably part of the 9,600 muskets owned by Virginia and listed in storage at the Point of Forks Arsenal in 1792.

The first attempt to obtain arms for the Virginia militia after the Revolutionary War was in 1785. Governor Patrick Henry and the Council of State appropriated 10,000 pounds towards the purchase of arms. These muskets were to be purchased abroad and Thomas Barclay and Thomas Jefferson, who was Minister Plenipotentiary to France, negotiated the purchase of muskets from the Manufacture Royale d'Arms a Feu at Tulle. The muskets were to be identical to those used by Louis XVI's Swiss Guard Regiment. The muskets were called Fusil Model 1777 on the shipping papers. The first 1,500 muskets arrived in Virginia in 1786 and were stored in the Point of Forks Arsenal. The rest of the muskets, 1,900, were delayed by the French authorities until Jefferson interceded and then they were shipped to



Virginia in March 1787. These 3,400 French made muskets were part of the previously mentioned 9,600 muskets in storage at Point of Forks Arsenal in 1792. The rest of the 9,600 muskets probably consisted of miscellaneous arms remaining from the Revolutionary War.

One of these muskets is shown full length in Figure 3. The barrel length is 44 inches and the overall length is 60 inches. The lock plate markings are shown in Figure 4 and the county regiment markings on the barrel are shown in Figure 5. The gun has been converted to percussion and the conversion is an arsenal type, probably done in Richmond during the Civil War. The Virginia government ordered the county regimental markings to be stamped on all state-owned arms in 1800. The marking order included all previously owned arms as well as all future arms. The markings were to consist of the regiment and county designation stamped in the manner shown in Figure 5. Thus, these French arms were stamped for the regiments after 1800. This law was not rigorously enforced and some Virginia made arms do not appear to ever have been marked. In fact, there is documentary evidence that a few arms were not stamped before they were issued.

Virginia militia laws as they existed throughout the late 18th Century required each Private to provide his own equipment including musket and bayonet. This resulted in a collection of weapons that would have delighted a gun collector but it did not do much for the supply officer. The state decided to remedy this situation in 1795 by procuring 4,000 muskets on a yearly basis until the militia was fully armed. To accomplish this, advertisements were placed in newspapers for either imported European muskets or American manufactured muskets.

Most replies were too high in price for Virginia until the state received an offer from a Colonel James Swan of Boston in September 1796. He offered to supply from 4,000 to 20,000 muskets over a period of four years at \$12.00 each.

Colonel James Swan was a prominent Massachusetts resident originally from Scotland. He married the beautiful and wealthy Hepzibah Clark of Boston in 1776. Swan used his wife's money to speculate in real estate and lost all the money by 1787. In 1788 he sailed to France, and using French connections he had made during the



Figures 1 and 2. Converted Rappahannock Forge musket; Below, the barrel marking of Rappahannock Forge musket.

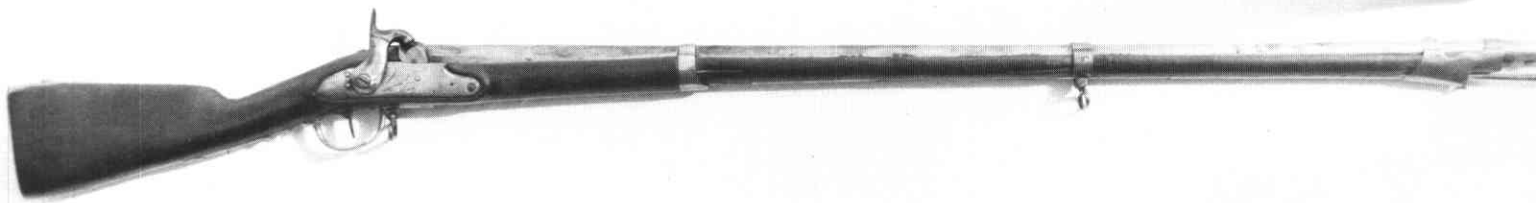


Figure 3. French Contract musket.



Figure 4. Close-up of converted French musket Lockplate.

Figure 5. Barrel marking of French musket.



American Revolution as a start, he became wealthy again by supplying stores to the French Navy. After the French revolution, when the authorities auctioned the confiscated property of the crown, church and emigres, Swan began buying and sending French furniture to America for his Boston home. Some of this great French furniture is now known as the Swan collection and may be seen at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In 1794 Swan returned to America as an agent of the French government in charge of buying supplies in America. Swan was so successful that in 1795 he was authorized to negotiate the settlement of the American Revolutionary War debt to France. He soon accomplished this by settling for \$2,024,900. Thus Swan was well known and had all the proper international connections to purchase arms abroad and import them for Virginia.

By the time Virginia had decided on a Brown Bess type pattern musket, Swan had raised the price from \$12.00 to \$13.00 each plus 15% for importation charges. Thus, as you can see, military contract cost escalation is not a 20th century invention. The first contract for 4,000 muskets was signed in May 1797, and Swan's European agent placed the order with some Dutch arsenals. This contract was unsuccessful and the order was finally placed with gunmakers in Liege. While this was going on Swan signed a second contract for 4,000 additional muskets.

The first delivery date was January 1799, but it became apparent to Swan that because of diplomatic troubles he would be unable to meet the date. He persuaded Virginia to extend the delivery date by three months and went to Europe to expedite the arms shipment. About this time, the French captured Liege and along with it Swan's muskets. Swan tried to get the muskets shipped out of Liege as Dutch property but that did not succeed. Next, in order to meet the delivery date, he went to England to buy muskets. Swan was unsuccessful in this endeavor as the English government had contracted for the entire musket production of the English gunmakers. England needed all the muskets that could be found to arm her troops for the French Wars.

Swan and his agents, by resorting to bribery, finally managed to get the Belgian guns out of the country and the first consignment on the way to Virginia within the extended time limit.

Swan placed orders for the second 4,000 muskets with Danish and German gunmakers. This was not an easy task because of the demand for guns throughout Europe occasioned by the French and Napoleon. In fact, one maker produced the locks while different makers produced the rest of the gun. Finally, the 4,000 muskets were loaded aboard a ship which promptly became frozen in the Elbe river where it remained for the winter.

This was only the start of Swan's troubles over the guns. In 1799 Virginia had decided on the Charleville type musket for all future musket contracts. This made Swan's Brown Bess type musket obsolete even before the second shipment was received in Virginia.

A government committee was formed to inspect the Swan muskets and they decided that the muskets were all inferior to the pattern. In fact, out of the first 4,000 muskets, 108 burst when proof fired and only 739 completely passed inspection. The second 4,000 muskets were of even poorer quality than the first lot. Major John

Clark, Superintendent of Public Edifices, and George Williamson, master armorer for Virginia, valued the entire shipment at \$5.75 per gun. However, they recommended purchase because, while not worth it, the muskets were needed for the militia.

Swan's Virginia agent, Robert Pollard, did not agree with the \$5.75 price fixed by Clark and Williamson and asked for \$9.00 per gun. Swan had become sick of the whole business and extricated himself by selling the contracts to a French officer, General Victor Callot, who knew nothing about the price and condition controversy. Finally, 7,831 of the 8,000 muskets were accepted by Virginia at \$7.50 each. Beginning in November of 1801, George Williamson stamped the muskets for the militia units and began distribution.

The Swan musket pictured in Figures 6, 7 and 8 is 59½ inches overall with a 42½ inch barrel and is marked for the 109th Regiment of Middlesex County. The government committee was certainly correct in their opinion as surviving examples of these muskets are inferior to the other contract guns obtained by Virginia.

The Virginia arms contract was only a small part of Swan's numerous financial activities at this time. When the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon and agreed to assume the claims of U.S. citizens against France, the largest claim was James Swan's. In 1808 a German firm brought a small claim against him which he refused to pay. Rather than settle or permit his wife to settle the claim, he went to debtor's prison in Paris. He remained in prison for 22 years in what must have been pleasant surroundings as French law permitted prisoners to live as well as they could afford. He entertained many French and American visitors often and graciously in his prison apartment. His prison life ended in 1830 when, apparently against his will, he was freed by the French government. He died in 1831 without returning to America.

Virginia's importation of European muskets ended when they decided on the Charleville type musket rather than the Brown Bess type. Contracts for Charleville type muskets were placed with McCormick, Wheeler, and later Haslett.

In November of 1799 Virginia contracted to purchase 4,000 muskets from Robert McCormick of Globe Mill, Pennsylvania. These were to be like the Charleville pattern except Virginia agreed to a round pan and hammer. However, only round pan locks with flat hammers are known. Virginia supplied McCormick with a list of regimental markings so he could stamp the guns before shipping them to Richmond. At this time McCormick also had a U.S. contract for 1,000 1795-type muskets. McCormick's business failed and he supplied only 925 muskets to Virginia and a few to the U.S. before going bankrupt.

James Haslett was McCormick's foreman and he finished 50 more muskets for Virginia under McCormick's contract and marked these 50 muskets with both his name and McCormick's. Thus only 975 muskets out of 4,000 were delivered under the original McCormick contract.

A typical McCormick contract musket is shown in Figures 9, 10 and 11. This gun has a 44½ inch barrel and an overall length is 59½ inches. Note in Figure 9 that the frizzen is made without a curl on the toe and the pan is



Figure 6. Swan contract musket.



Figure 7. Unmarked Swan musket lock.

Figure 8. Barrel marking of Swan musket.



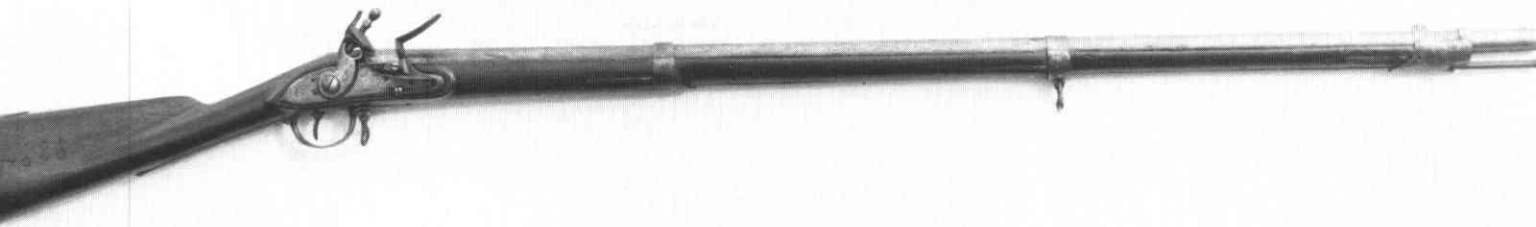


Figure 9. McCormack contract musket.



Figure 10. McCormick musket lock, showing the round pan and the frizzen with a straight toe.

Figure 11. Barrel markings of McCormick musket.



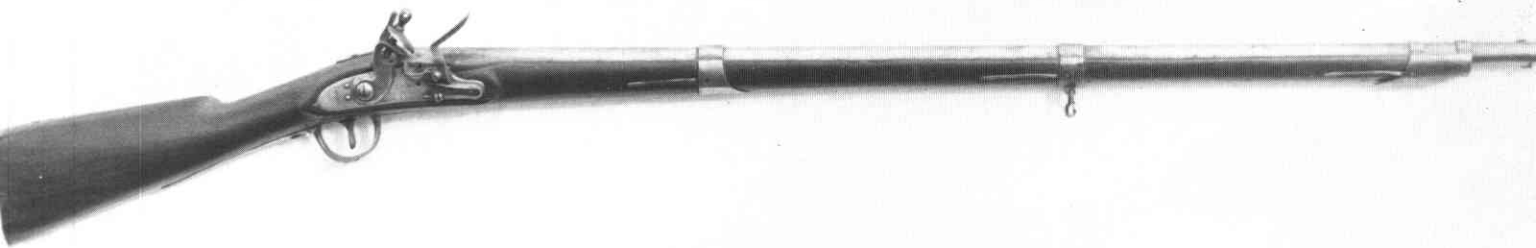
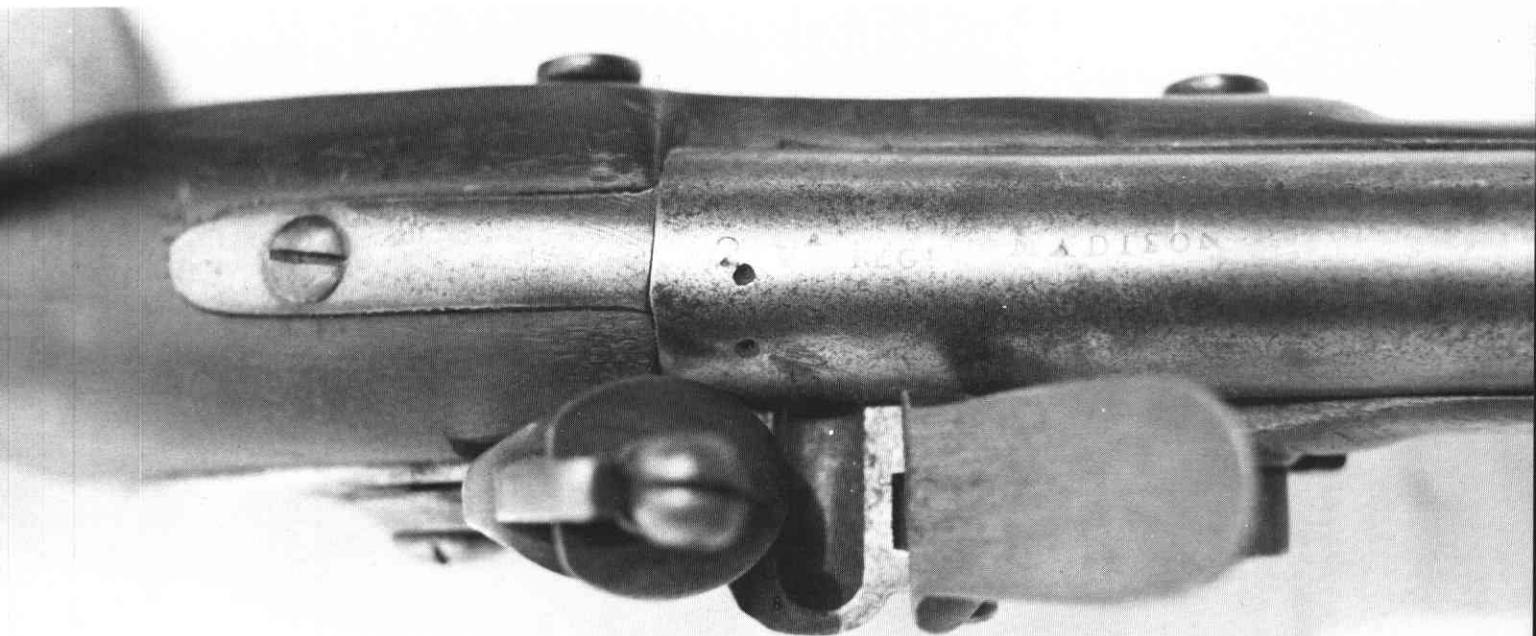


Figure 12. Miles contract musket.



Figure 13. Miles musket showing the pan and frizzen similar to the McCormick musket in Figure 10.

Figure 14. Barrel markings of Miles musket.



round. These are two differences from the Charleville pattern. McCormick muskets made under contract to the U.S. also have these two features. This musket is marked for Culpeper County and was either one of 13 shipped from Philadelphia on October 2, 1800, in Chest Number 6 aboard the sloop *Little Jem*, or it was one of 22 in Chest number 7 shipped November 5, 1800, aboard the sloop *Sally*.

After McCormick went bankrupt, John Miles purchased the McCormick business and agreed to complete the Virginia contract of 3,025 muskets at \$11.00 per gun.

A Miles Virginia contract musket is shown in Figures 12, 13 and 14. Note in Figure 13 that the round pan and frizzen are like the McCormick lock in Figure 9. The barrel length is 41¾ inches and the overall length is 57¾ inches. The barrel is marked for the 82nd Regiment of Madison County.

Virginia also placed a contract for 1,000 muskets with George Wheeler of Washington, Virginia, in what is now Culpeper County. The contract was filled by October 14, 1803. The only musket located for this paper is shown in Figures 15 and 16 and is marked VIRGINIA in the center of the lock and WHEELER MANUFACTORY on the barrel in block letters. The barrel marking was too faint to photograph. It has been shortened and converted to percussion so that details of the lock and length of the gun are unknown.

James Haslett also contracted on his own to supply 600 muskets to Virginia after the failure of McCormick. James Haslett was born in 1773 in Ireland and came to America to be superintendent of McCormick's musket factory. After completing the contract for 600 muskets, Haslett and family moved from Philadelphia to Baltimore. He placed his first advertisement in the *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser* on June 3, 1803, when he was living and working at 64 North Gay Street in Baltimore. During the War of 1812 he became Brigade Major of the 11th Militia Brigade. After the war he worked at various locations in Baltimore as a gunsmith until 1822 when he is listed both as a gunsmith at 22 Water Street and as a grocer at 82 Pratt Street. His son probably was the grocer as subsequent entries list him as James Haslett and Son. The last directory entry for James Haslett as a gunsmith was in the 1829 edition. Haslett died on August 15, 1833, at his estate at Drum Point, Calvert County, Maryland.

A Haslett musket is shown in Figures 17, 18 and 19. The overall length is 60 inches with a barrel length of 44½ inches. This musket was marked in Richmond for the 42nd Regiment of Pittsylvania County. The conversion of this musket, like the French musket, was probably done in Richmond at the time of the Civil War for use by the Confederate Army.

The delivery of muskets by the five contractors Swan, McCormick, Miles, Haslett, and Wheeler, marked the end of Virginia's attempts to purchase arms by contract. The Virginia experience was paralleled by United States government experiences with arms contracts. Both were plagued with late deliveries, substandard arms and unfulfilled contracts, and both began to rely on their own armories — Virginia with the Virginia Manufactory Armory at Richmond, and the United States with the federal armories at Harper's Ferry and Springfield. The Virginia Manufactory began with a law authorizing

the establishment of an armory in Richmond in 1798. The armory was built and the first 38 muskets were finished by October 1802. This just about coincided with the last of deliveries of muskets from the various contractors.

There were just two basic types of muskets made at the Virginia Manufactory. The first type of musket made at the Virginia Manufactory had a gooseneck hammer and was made from 1802 through 1809. The second type had a reinforced hammer and was made with minor variations from 1810 until 1821. These muskets can be found in original barrel lengths varying from 36 to 44 inches. The short barrel muskets were called either carbines or short muskets and resulted from efforts to use barrels that did not finish out 44 inches or burst in proof.

A musket of the first type is shown in Figures 20, 21 and 22. As can be seen in Figure 21, the lock is marked Virginia in Roman capitals and Manufactory in script between the hammer and frizzen spring. The date and the work Richmond appear on the rear of the lock plate. The barrels are usually marked for the county unit and this one is marked for Prince Williams. The W mark is probably for George Williamson, the master armorer.

The Virginia militia had rifle companies to supply meat to the troops in the field as the militia was supposed to be able to live off the land. In order to supply rifles to the rifle companies, Clark, the superintendent, was directed to begin making rifles at the armory.

Rifle production began at the Virginia Manufactory in 1803 with apparently a brass mounted rifle being produced. In 1805 a few brass mounted rifles with the famous rattlesnake patchbox were produced for the first time. The iron mounted, rattlesnake patchbox rifle was first produced in 1806 and remained in production through 1808. In 1809 a few plain patchbox, iron mounted rifles were produced.

A typical iron mounted rattlesnake patchbox rifle is shown in Figures 23, 24 and 25. Although not shown, this particular rifle is stamped for the City of Richmond on the top of the barrel. As shown in Figure 25, a rattlesnake and the words "Don't tread on me" are engraved on the patchbox. The lock is marked the same as the musket lock shown in Figure 21. The overall length of the rifle is 58¾ inches and the half round, half octagonal barrel is 43 inches long.

Of particular interest in connection with the rifles are some of the men who made them. Some of the employees of the Virginia Manufactory were recruited by Clark on trips through Maryland and Pennsylvania. Henry Deringer worked at the Virginia Manufactory making various partitions of the rifles from 1807 through 1808. The list of his tasks as recorded in the papers reads like lessons on how to make rifles. Deringer rifled barrels, stocked rifles, engraved patchboxes, made ram rods and finished rifles during these years.

A man named Daniel Border engraved patchboxes in 1807. He is probably the same Daniel Border who was Philip Cramer's apprentice in 1802 in Taneytown, Maryland, as Taneytown was one of Clark's stops on his trips through Maryland.

Another who became a rifle maker in Pennsylvania was William Wiess. Wiess is listed as working on rifles from 1804 through 1807. In fact, the rifle shown in Figures 23, 24 and 25 was probably engraved by Wiess. It is interesting in



Figure 15. Wheeler contract musket (barrel and stock cut off to make carbine); DuBose Collection.

Figure 16. Wheeler lock marking, DuBose Collection.

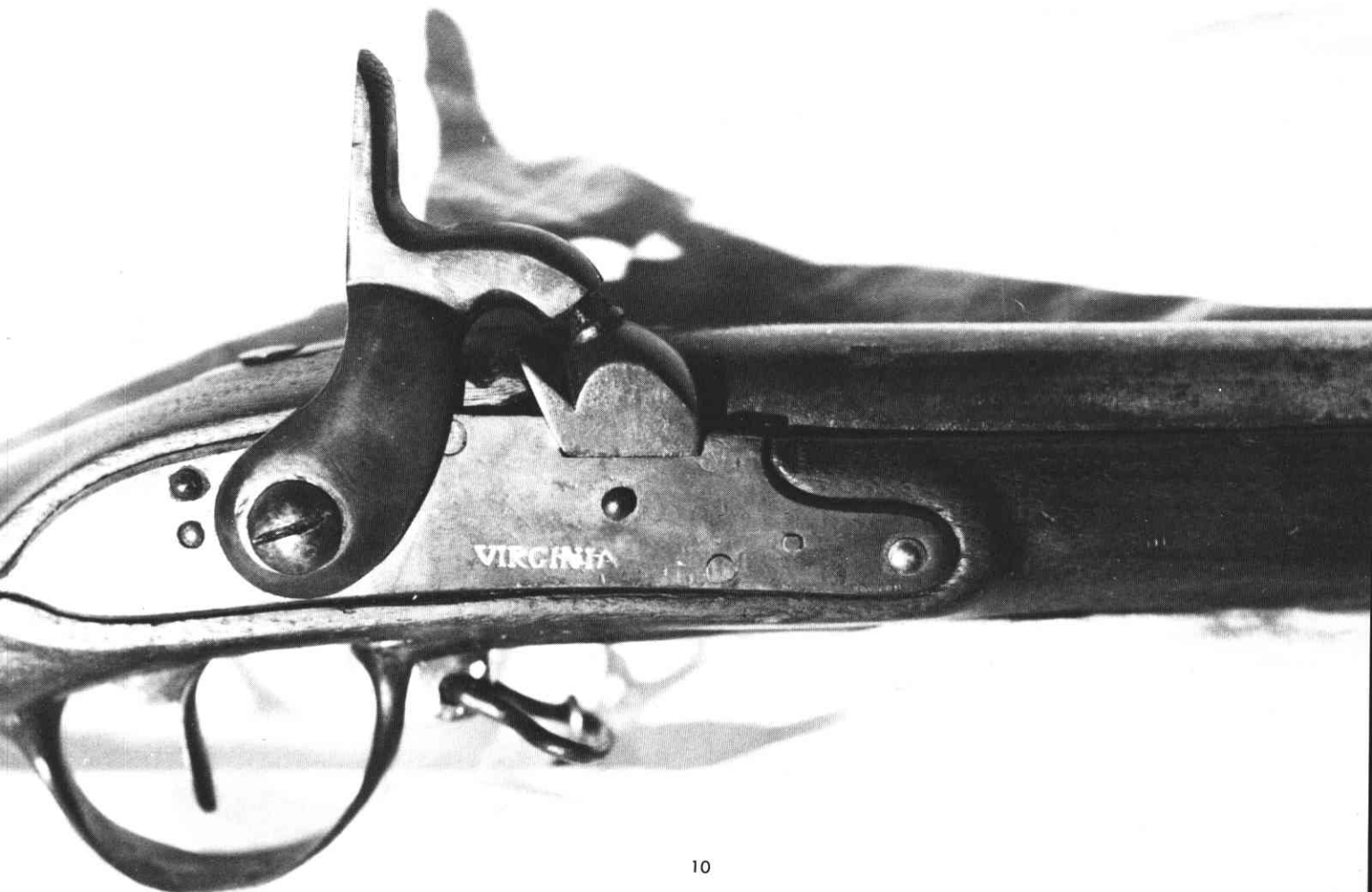




Figure 17. Haslett contract musket.



Figure 18. Converted Haslett musket lock.

Figure 19. Barrel markings of Haslett musket.





Figure 20. Virginia Manufactory musket.



Figure 21. Virginia Manufactory musket lock.

Figure 22. Prince William County barrel marking on Virginia Manufactory musket.

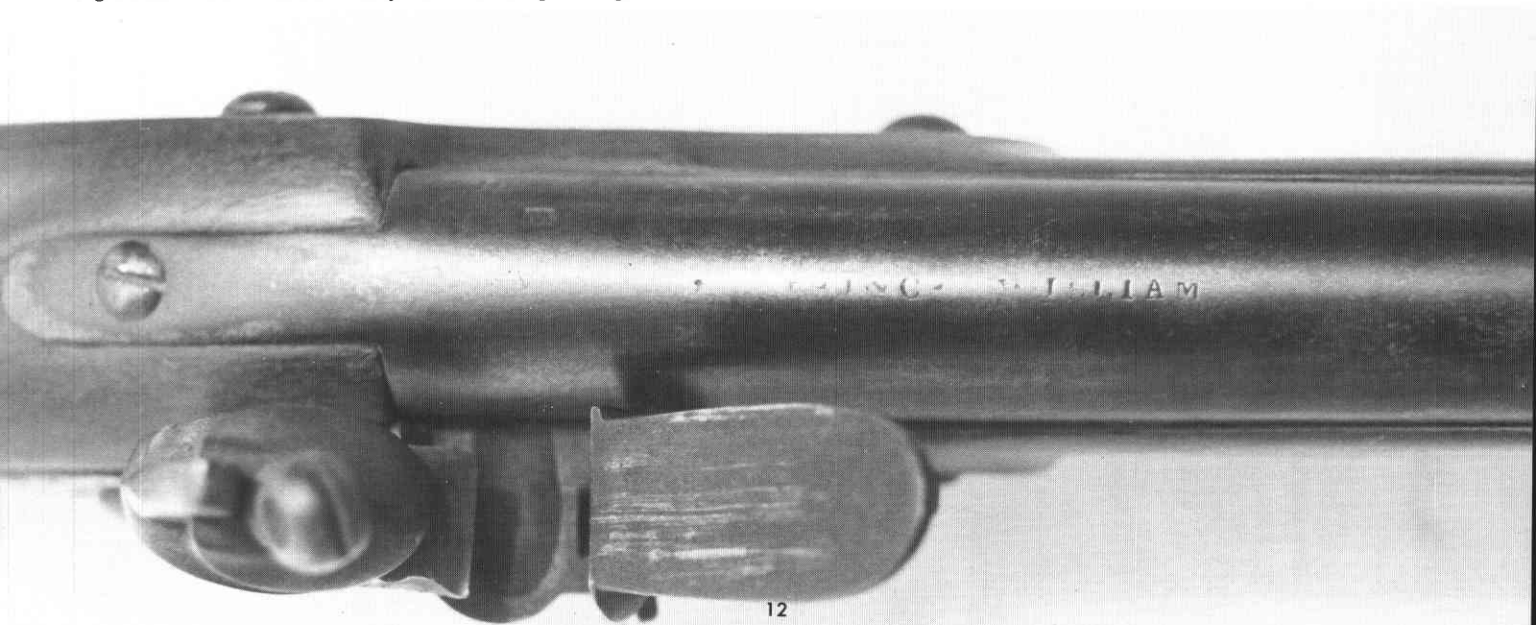


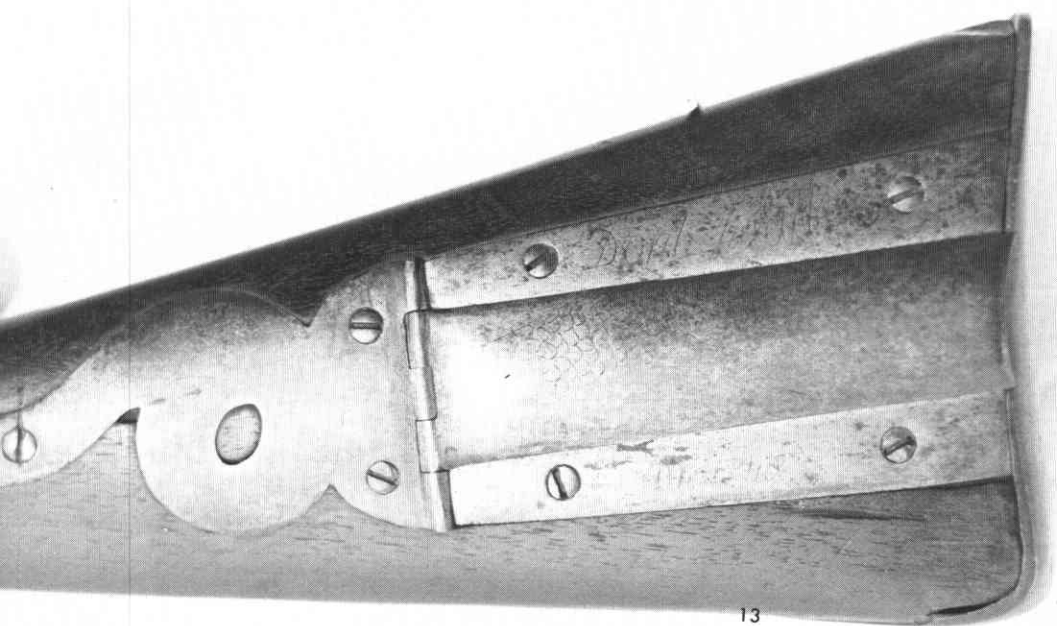


Figure 23. Rattlesnake patchbox first model Virginia Manufactory rifle.



Figure 24. Virginia Manufactory rifle lock dated 1806.

Figure 25. Rattlesnake patchbox with legend "Don't Tread on Me."



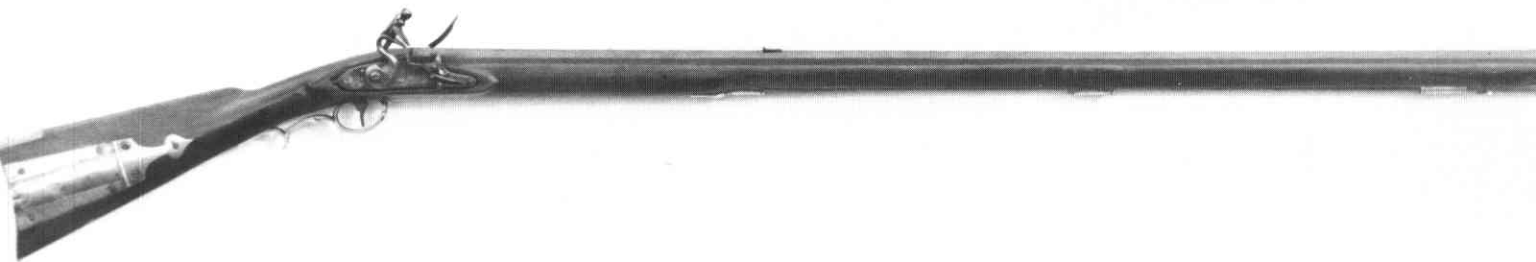
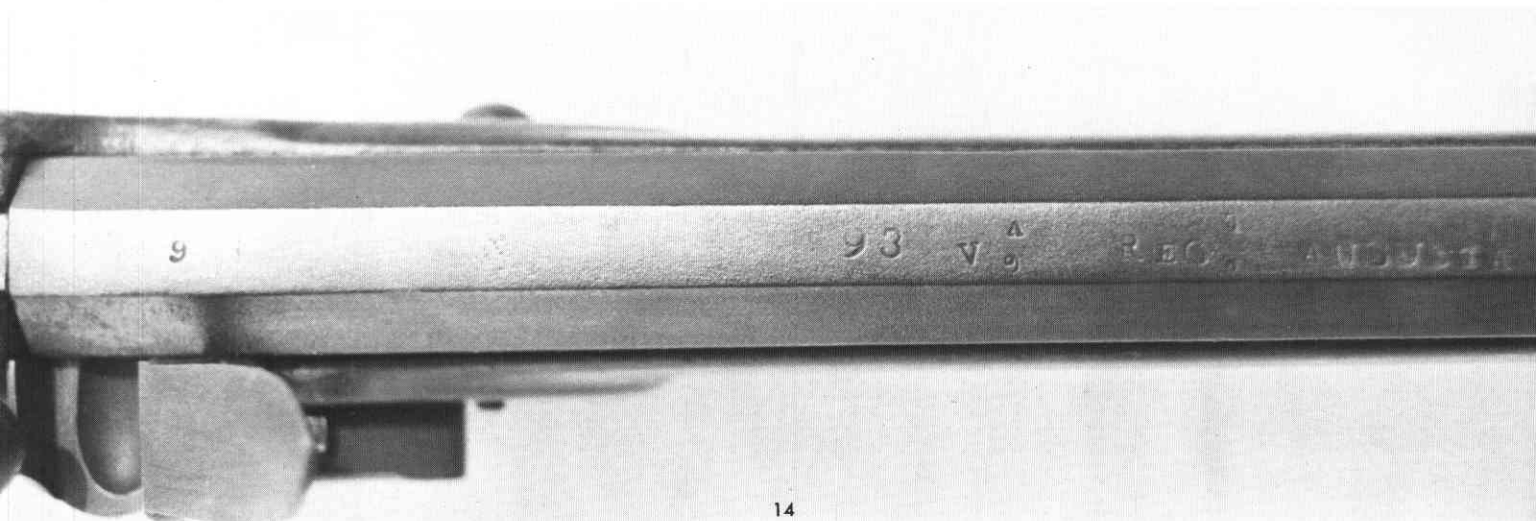


Figure 26. Contract rifle.



Figure 27. Virginia Manufactory rifle lock used on contract rifle.

Figure 28. Augusta Co. barrel marking on the Archibald Rutherford contract rifle.



that William Wiess produced a few rattlesnake patchbox Kentucky rifles in Lancaster, Pa., apparently after returning from Richmond.

These men appear to have worked at the Armory after they were gunsmiths, but before they started their own businesses.

No more complete rifles were manufactured at the armory until 1812. However, some component parts were manufactured and a large stock of rifle locks had been produced.

Since rifle production at the armory was slow, the Virginia General Assembly starting in 1808 authorized the contracting of 300 rifles annually. Rifle contracts were placed with a number of Virginia rifle makers such as Frederick Sheets and Archibald Rutherford.

Archibald Rutherford worked in Harrisonburg and his contracts were unique in that he obtained complete Virginia Manufactory rifle locks at \$2.00 apiece for use on his contract rifles. A Rutherford contract rifle is shown in Figures 26, 27 and 28. The barrel is full octagon and is 44¼ inches long and the complete gun is 60¾ inches long. As can be seen in Figure 28, this rifle is marked for the 93rd Regiment of Augusta County.

A brass mounted second model Virginia Manufactory rifle was introduced in 1812 and remained in production until 1821. From 1812 until 1817 old rifle locks that were on hand were used on these rifles so that the lock plate date is meaningless for dating the rifle. Rifle lock production was resumed in 1817 so that beginning with 1817, rifle lock dates can be used to date the rifles. Most of the locks made after 1817 were marked similarly to the early locks except

the word Manufactory in script was not used.

A typical second model rifle is shown in Figures 29 and 30. The rifle is brass mounted with a 39 inch full octagon barrel and has an overall length of 54¾ inches.

The Virginia Manufactory produced many arms in addition to the three types briefly discussed in this paper. The full story is told in Gilles Cromwell's definitive work "The Virginia Manufactory of Arms" published by the University Press in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The arms procurement for the Commonwealth of Virginia for the period of this paper is summarized in Table I.

Table I shows that a total of 79,497 long arms were obtained by the state from 1786 through 1821 and today any Virginia gun is considered rare. The natural question is what happened to them over the years. First, some were used in the War of 1812 and all the state could find were used in the Civil War. However, some of their rarity is due to Virginia's own efforts. In 1833 all the Swan muskets were deemed "not worth repairing" and sold for scrap. But before they were sold for scrap, the muskets were unbreeched and the barrels hammered and broken to prevent their use as firearms. In addition, the state had a great deal of trouble in both getting the militiaman to take care of his musket and also to get him to return it to the state. Many Virginia muskets show evidence of their civilian use as cut down shotguns. The rifles must have been very popular as hunting guns as many surviving examples show civilian modifications and evidence of much use.

TABLE I

French Contract	3,400
Swan	7,831
Miles	3,025
McCormick	975
Haslett	600
Wheeler	1,000
Virginia Manufactory	<u>58,248</u>
Total Muskets	75,259
Rifles (Contract)	2,145
Rifles (Manufactory)	<u>2,093</u>
Total Rifles	4,238



Figure 29. Brass mounted model Virginia Manufacture rifle.



Figure 30. Second model rifle lock dated 1817.

I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Giles Cromwell for his kind assistance in supplying information on some of the more obscure Virginia long arms.

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