

# A Closer Look at Lehigh County Kentuckies

by: Ronald C. Gabel

I like to tell the story of the hunter who asked his guide if he had ever been lost in the woods. "No," the old guide replied, "but I was bewildered once for five days!" Like that old guide I'm sure none of you here today is "lost" when it comes to the subject of Kentucky rifles, but some of you may be just a bit bewildered as to how their place of origin and authenticity can be established.

In 1969 Mr. Albert Sullivan, in a talk before this society, demonstrated the importance of profiles in determining the areas where particular rifles were manufactured. Mr. Sullivan spoke to you concerning what he called "The five basic and original profiles of the Kentucky Rifle." In his talk he noted, however, that "these shapes will identify the origin of the rifle only if the gun has clean blood lines," and as he pointed out, "there are many more mongrels than there are thoroughbreds." The mongrels, he admitted, require *A Closer Look*.

The Lehigh County stock profile, as described by Sully, has two curved lines; these lines, top and bottom, blending into a Roman-style nose and a rather sharp drop. The bottom curve changes more rapidly than the top. Mr. Sullivan mentioned two additional variants which, he suggested, were quite old but seldom seen.

These "classic" shapes may often identify the very old "thoroughbred" but will not be of much use when looking at the later, and more common, "mongrel."

At this point in our story we should pause for a moment to realize certain difficulties we will encounter in our attempts to identify these rifles. Gunsmiths many times moved from one area to another, and in so doing, often modified their style to conform to the characteristics of arms manufactured in the new area.

It was common practice for the gunsmith of the early nineteenth century to modify difficult-to-manufacture parts from earlier rifles for reuse. These parts were often removed from rifles made in a distant location and therefore will tell us nothing about the origin of the resulting later rifle.

Even a signature on a barrel, therefore, often identifies only the maker of the barrel and not necessarily the maker of the rifle.

To add to the confusion, over the years, as a matter of personal preference or as a means of increasing the value of the weapon, parts were sometimes added which had no relation to the rifle or to features unique to its place of origin.

All these facts add weight to the argument that no *single* feature, including the profile, can be used to identify the origin or the maker of many Kentucky Rifles.



What standard of proof then should we apply to our search into the ancestry of these weapons? Our courts require the party seeking to establish facts or prove the case to do so by submitting a preponderance of evidence. Webster tells us the difference between evidence and proof is that evidence is information received from all sources, whereas proof is the effect produced by the accumulation of this information. When sufficient evidence is presented, proof is established. Today I would like to offer an accumulation of evidence sufficient to prove how to correctly identify a rifle manufactured in the Lehigh County area.

This action, unfortunately, will bring us to still one more obstacle. How do we define "point of origin," if and when we have found it? Kentucky Rifles have been identified and their places of manufacture pinpointed by referring to towns, counties, townships, master gunsmith schools, and regions.

Regretfully, townships merge, city lines move, master gunsmiths relocate and all in all the whole thing becomes a bit fuzzy and confusing. So, before we go any further, let me define the area we are investigating in this talk as the confines of the present county called Lehigh in the State of Pennsylvania. (Pic. #1)

If I have done my job I have nearly convinced you by this time that identification of these rifles is surely impossible. Perhaps not! Let's take that *Closer Look* at just a few characteristics of rifles from this area which are unique.

Since our first exposure to the identification of these rifles was by their profile, let's take our first look at the stock. We already know we should look for the previously mentioned classic profile with its Roman nose created by the concave underside and the convex comb. (Pic. #2) We should also be aware that the bottom curve often drops rather sharply to almost a point at the butt end and extends forward to the rear of the triggerguard. (Pic. #3)

Many of the earlier rifles, and a few of the later ones, had still another bottom curve beginning where the larger curve left off, at the triggerguard, and extending up to and under the lockplate.

The wrist of our classic stock was broader than it was high, creating an area which was egg-shaped in cross section. The fore-end of many of the rifles made in this area was sharply cut into a V-shaped cross section.

Many gunsmiths used these traditional styles, or some variation of them, quite late. Others did not. The absence of these features would tell us very little; however, their presence would almost positively identify a Lehigh County rifle.

Rifles of this school often displayed an intriguing feature in the incised carved, inlaid, or engraved "Indian Head" located forward of the triggerguard or, more rarely, engraved on the patchbox lid. These faces are all very similar in design, even on rifles made by a number of area gunsmiths. They are distinctly different in style from those sometimes found incorporated into the artwork of rifles manufactured in other locations.

These heads have been the subject of a great deal of controversy. It has been theorized they were to symbolize the "Sons of Liberty Head," the guardian angel, or simply to depict the head of an Indian common to the area. One thing is certain, they were used exclusively in and around the Lehigh County. (Pictures 4, 5, 6, 7)

How about a *Closer Look* at the design of the hardware found on our "typical" Lehigh County area rifle? Perhaps our Indian friend had an influence on techniques applied in this area as well. The "arrowhead" shape or point was used extensively in the design of area sideplates and, to a lesser degree, on barrel tangs, rear entrance furels and toeplates. The exact contour of these points, and indeed the use of them at all, seems to vary from one sector of the county to another. The design is only seldom found on rifles made in the northern sector of the county (and then usually on the toeplate), while the central and southern sections generally ended their sideplates in a distinct arrowhead shape. Sideplates in the west end of the county tended to end only in a sharp point, while those on rifles made in the eastern areas ended more often with a blunted point. (Pic. 8-25)

Even the seemingly insignificant triggerguard, which no one would expect could ever have its ancestry traced, has a style unique to the area. The outstanding features found on triggerguards made locally are (a) they are normally broader than average, and (b) they have a brass stud incorporated into the bow just forward of the trigger. (Pic. #34 thru 37) A stud of this type is often found on European rifles or on very early American rifles where it was used for the attachment of a rear sling swivel. But the stud as it evolved into the design of our Lehigh County rifle is found without the hole required for swivel mounting. It is still another of the features popular on rifles made quite late in the area.

Our "typical" rifle even has its very own nosecap and buttplate. Lehigh County is one of the few areas where

nosecaps were often left open-ended, allowing the rifle's forestock wood to show through at the muzzle. The bottom of the nosecap was generally contoured to follow the upper curve of the ramrod.

The buttplate was often designed so that portion which extends over the top of the stock was tapered and inletted. The inletting caused the overlapping portion of the buttplate to become nearly invisible from the side view.

Buttplates from other areas were formed so that they followed the upper curve of the stock and were clearly visible when viewed from the side.

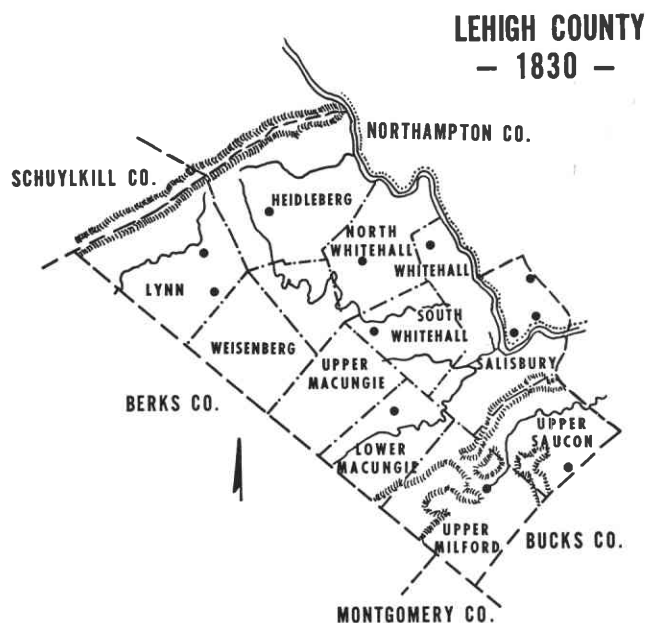
The area generally retained, until the end of the Kentucky era, a preference for the two-piece patchbox popular in many areas on very early rifles. The most common finiel design was the fleur-de-lis. An undetermined number of modifications of this design are found on area rifles. (Pic. 26 to 33)

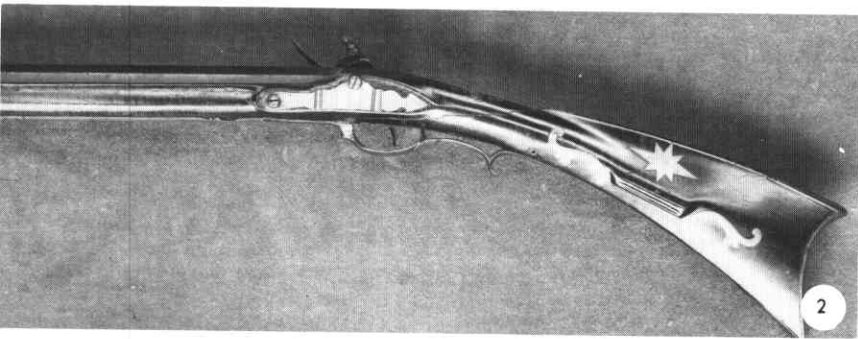
In this talk we have not mentioned local types of carving or engraving, nor have we made any attempt to attribute any of the features discussed to particular gunsmiths of the area. This would require another equally long talk, as I have a list of over 150 documented gunsmiths who worked in the area from 1750 — 1850.

My effort today has been to give some insight into methods used by students of the Kentucky rifle to identify their "point of origin."

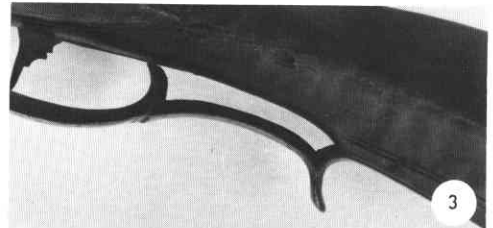
You can be reasonably sure that your Lehigh County rifle, thoroughbred or mongrel, will have at least a few of the features we have discussed. The more of them you find, the surer you are that your rifle was created in this area, as features were seldom used elsewhere.

If, on the other hand, none of these features is present, take a closer look. Perhaps those that are present will pinpoint another area, and possibly the gunsmith as well.





An example of the Lehigh County Stock Profile



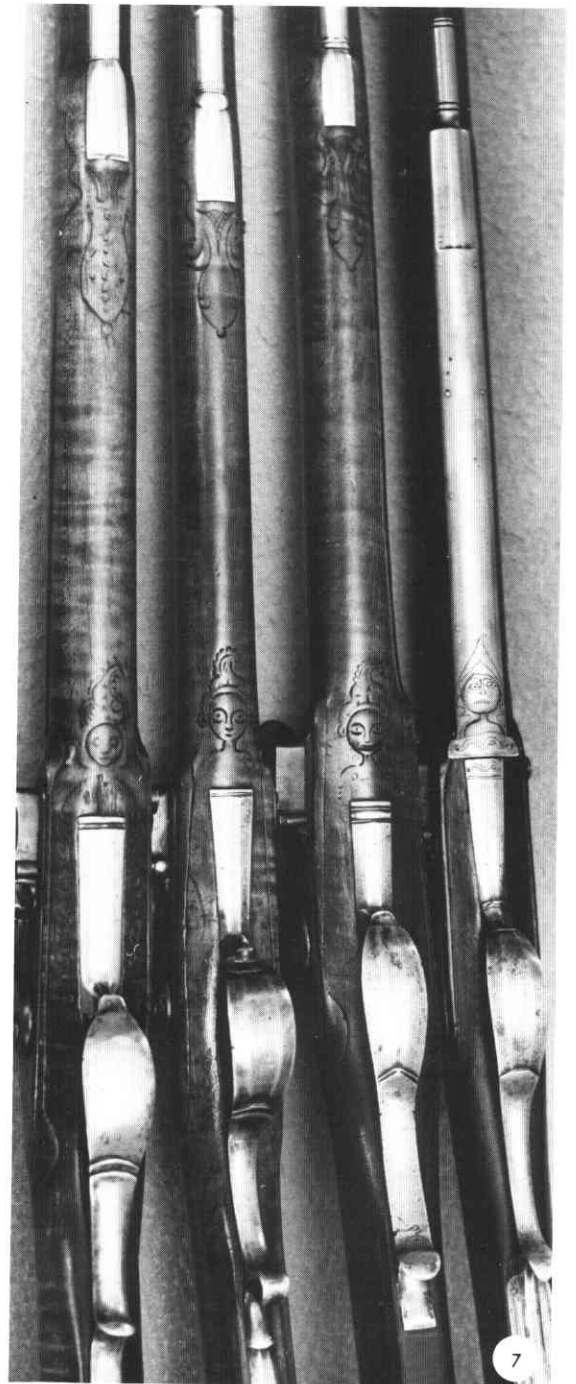
The "Second Curve" on the underside of many area rifles



"Patch Box" Indian Heads



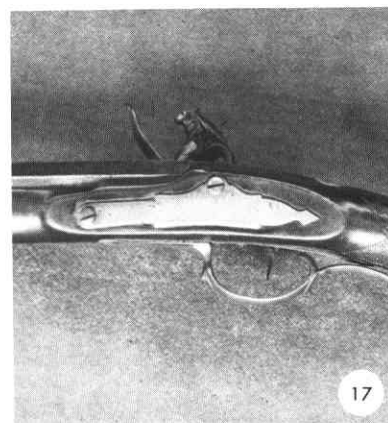
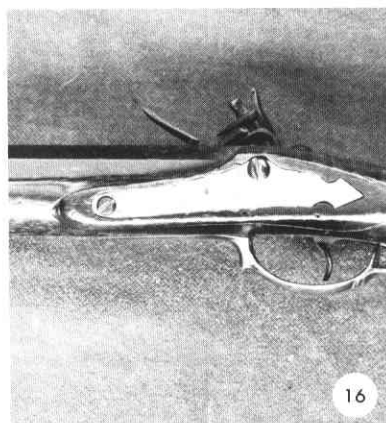
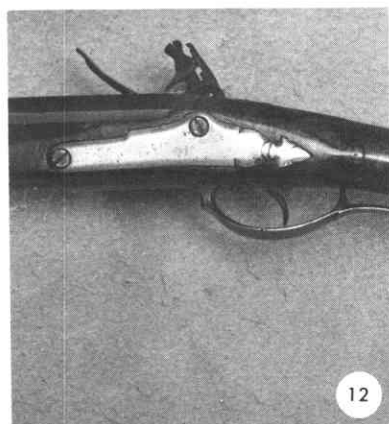
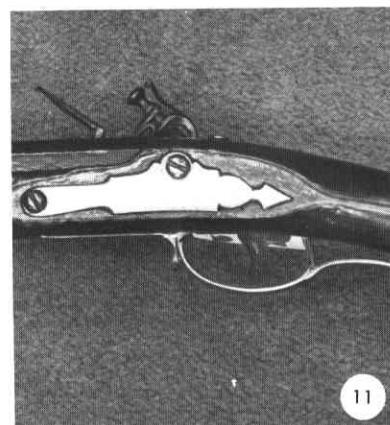
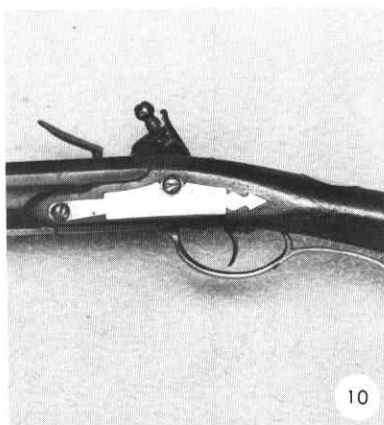
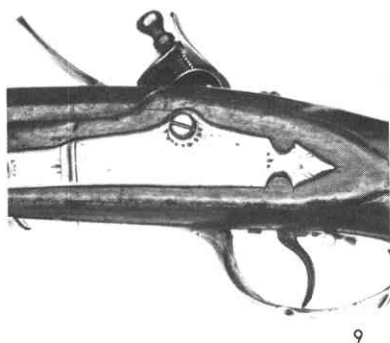
A double head — this feature is on a double barreled Lehigh County rifle



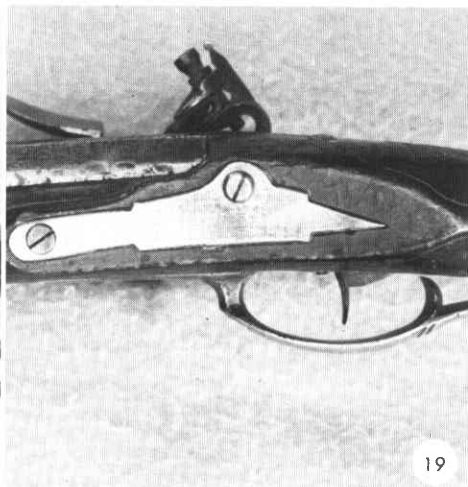
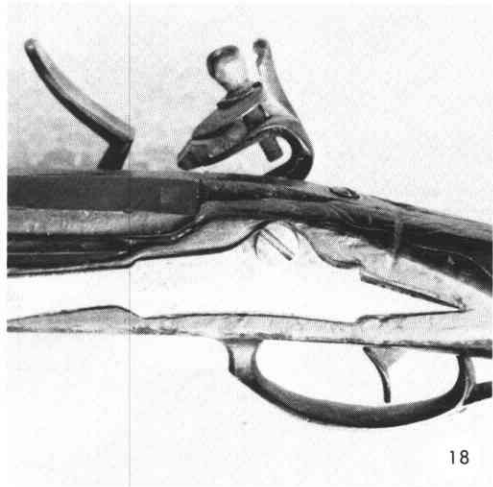
Examples of the Lehigh County "Indian"



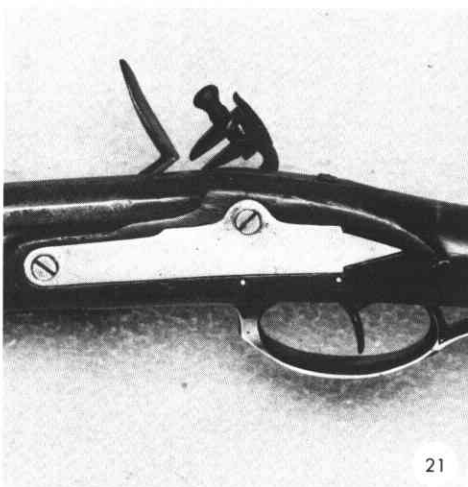
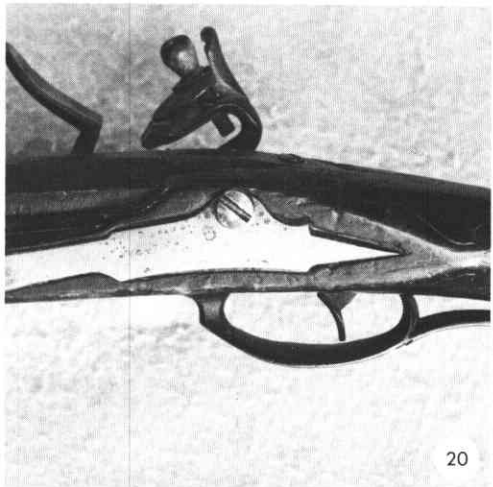
The Lehigh County Arrowhead sideplate (central and southern part of county)



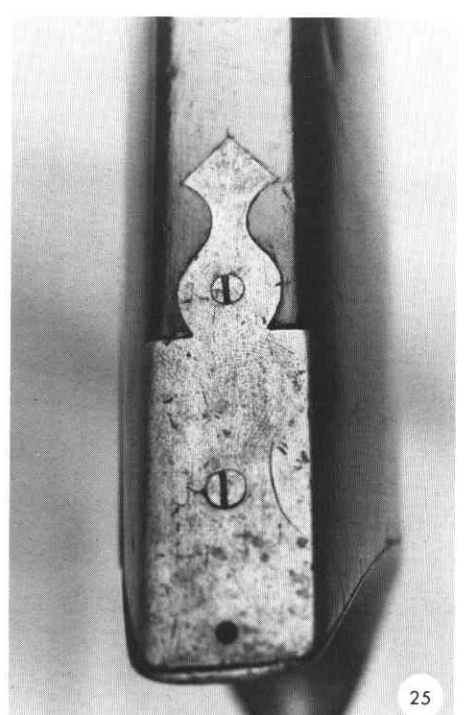
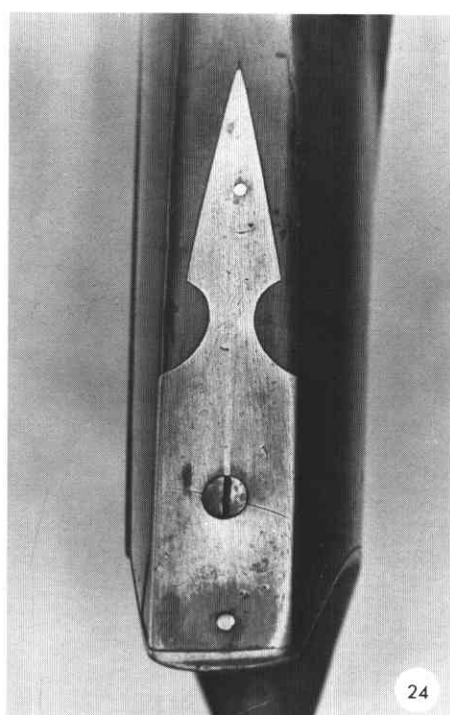
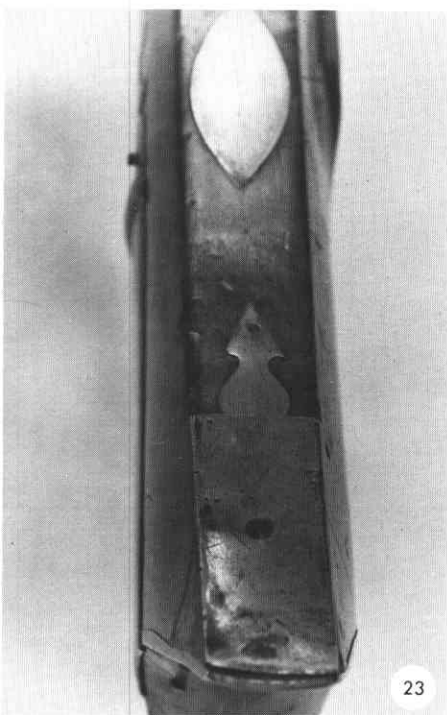




The Lehigh County "Pointed" Sideplate (western and southwestern part of county)

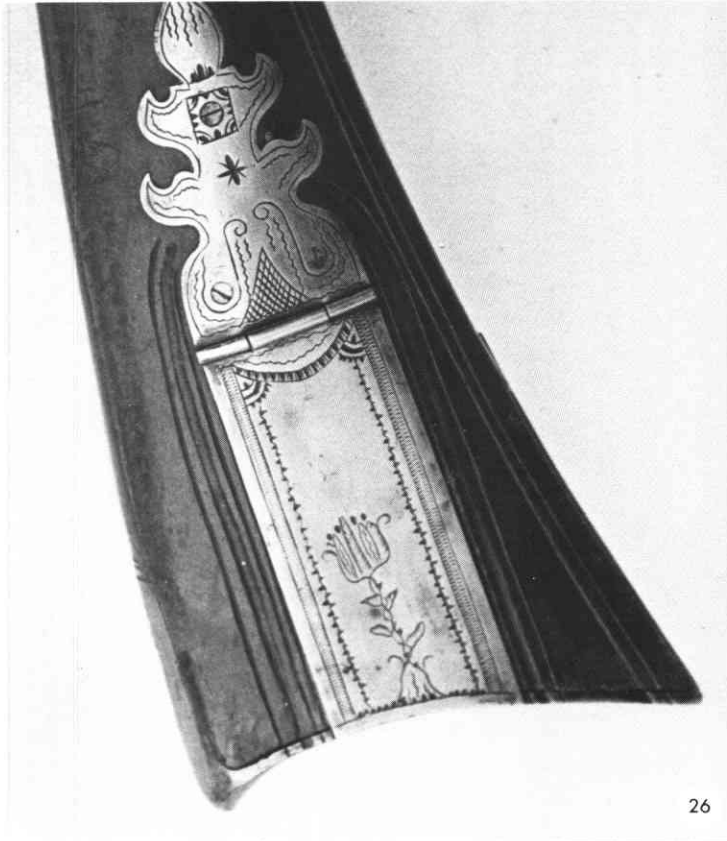


The "Blunted" Point. (eastern end of county)



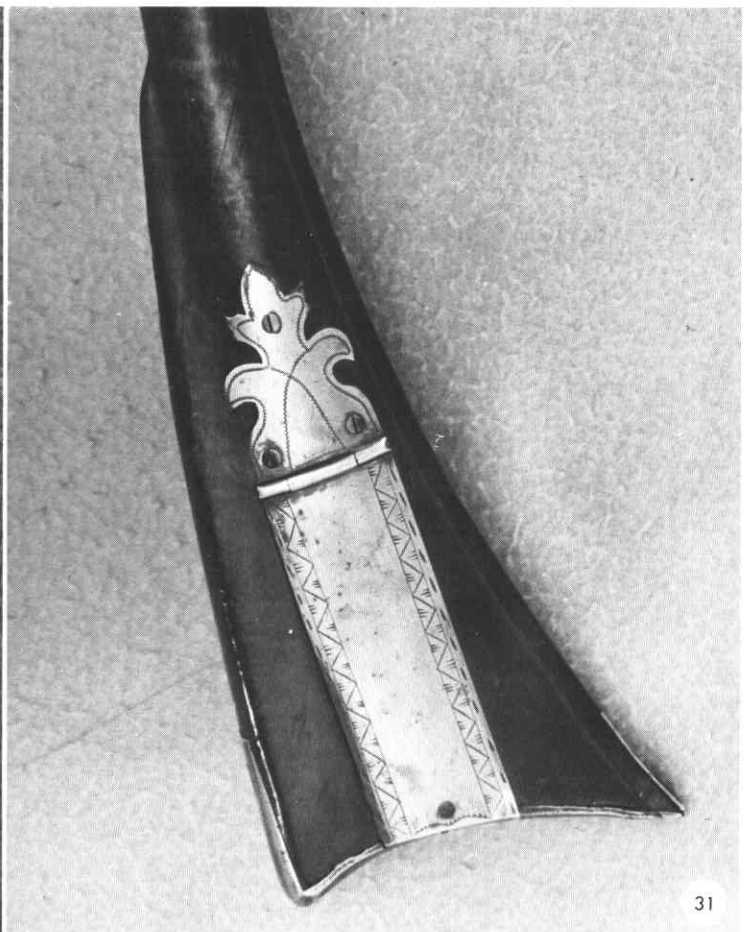
Examples of Lehigh County Toeplates

Modifications of the popular Lehigh County Fleur-de-Lis

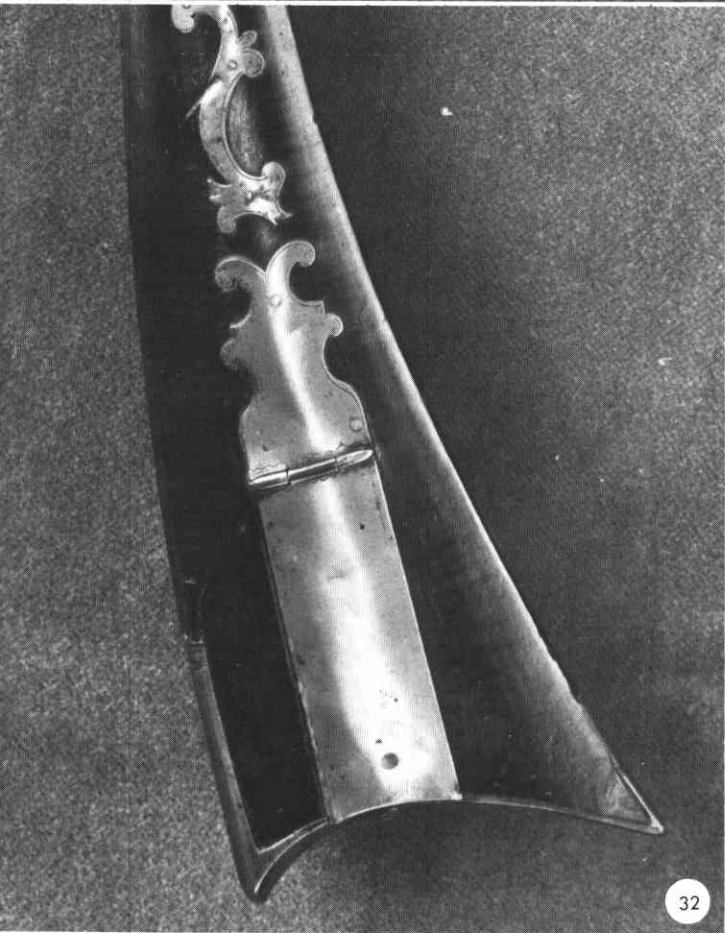




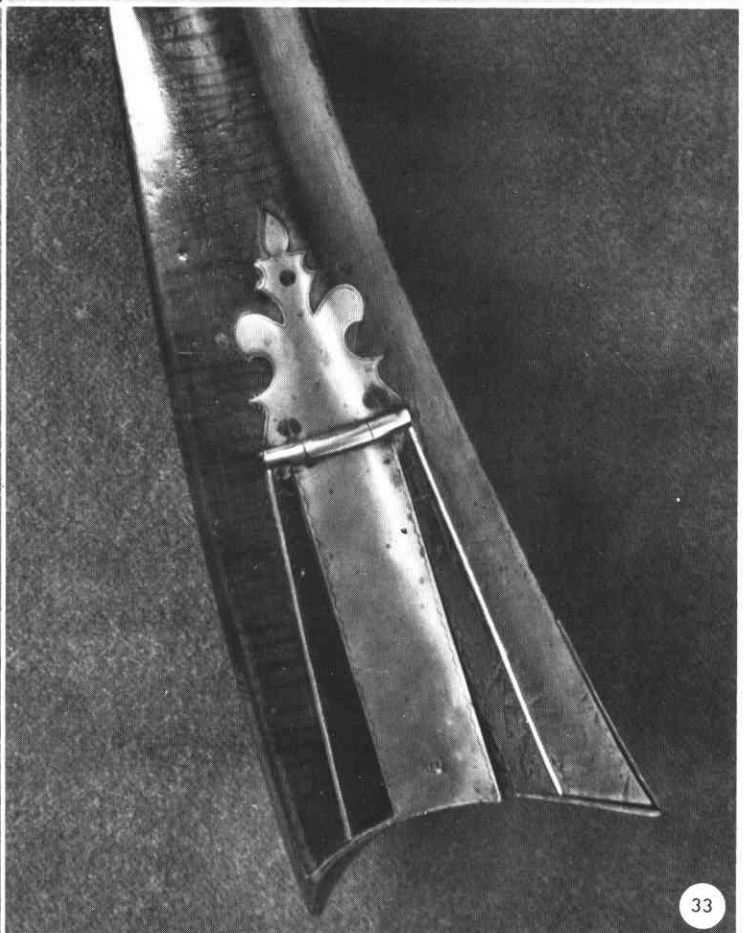
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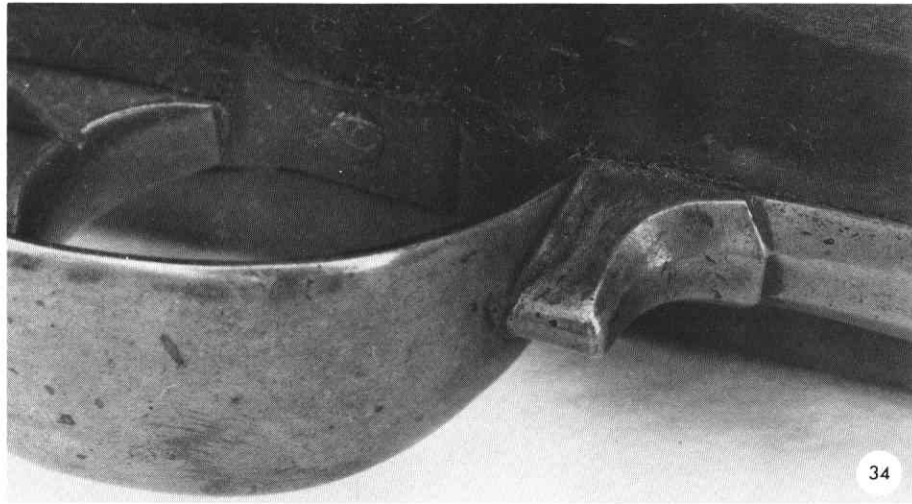


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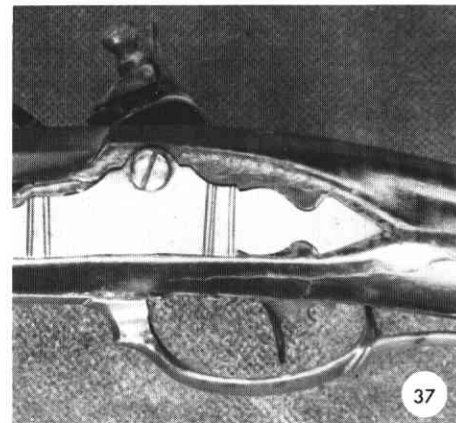
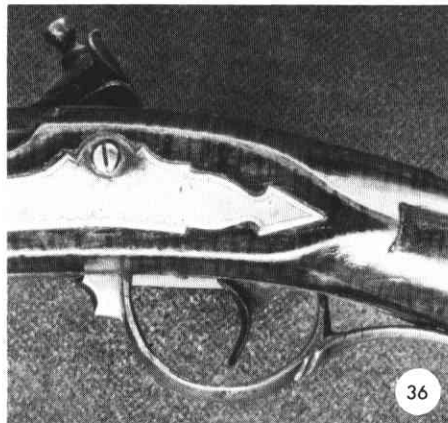


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The Lehigh County "Stud" Triggerguard



Photos by Larry Buss

Note — I want to thank all my friends and members of the Kentucky Rifle Assn. for allowing me to study and photograph their treasures over the years. Without the opportunity to study a great number of individual pieces, detailed research is impossible.

