

Arms and Accoutrements of the Revolutionary Period

by: Bill Guthman

Unlike 18th Century European Warfare where opposing armies were equipped with standard weapons and accoutrements, and dressed handsomely in uniform clothing, the American Revolution presents a completely different picture. Weapons and equipment were acquired through imports, capture, domestic manufacture, impressment from Tories, impressment or rental from local inhabitants by the Committee of Safety, and reconstructing old, broken and worn out weapons and equipment.

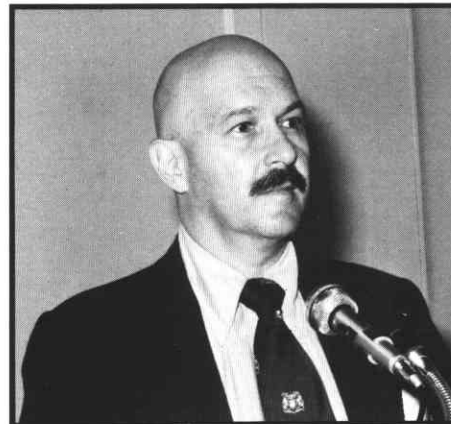
The uniforms were varied, mostly incomplete or even non-existent. Since the Continental Army was never able to fill its quota of enlistments, the militia was called upon to reinforce its incomplete ranks, usually on a short term basis, for the duration of a particular campaign.

Militia was usually called upon from towns closest to the campaign and therefore their weapons and accoutrements, which were supplied either by the individual soldier or by the officials of his town, varied according to the region in which the campaign was taking place. We find considerable variation of materials used throughout the war by American troops.

Each major battle or minor skirmish presents a separate study of arms, equipment and uniforms.

This is also true, in many instances, of the British forces. Great Britain, after a century of warfare, was financially strained. Besides America, she was facing the fleets of France and Spain, had difficulty raising enough troops for the unpopular American war, and had to hire mercenaries to supplement her regulars. Her supply depots were stretched across the Atlantic Ocean and whenever the British army in North America moved away from Coastal ports where the supply ships were anchored, they were in serious trouble. Local Tories failed to give the necessary support that was needed, and the British forces often had to depend upon captured American equipment, including clothing.

The Continental Army was formed in 1775 by assuming command of the New England militia army that had gathered around Boston. This army was an outgrowth of the militia system that began in the 17th Century in North America and grew along with the development of the colonies; it varied from colony to colony. Pennsylvania, because of its Quaker influence, was the only colony that had no compulsory militia law. Most colonies required all eligible males between the ages of 16-60, not engaged in essential work (such as constables, mariners, etc.), who were physically fit (excluding negroes, mulattos and Indians) to attend muster four times a year.



If there was an emergency the maximum time of service was limited to three months, because America was primarily agricultural and the men had to return to attend their farms. Only under extreme circumstances and with special consent could the militia go beyond the borders of their own colony. Therefore, the colonies still depended upon the British army for their protection, yet *they feared a large standing army*. In 1774 each New England colony began to strengthen its own militia and increase the supply of weapons and ammunition.

However, *three* factors had become an influential way of life in America and had a lasting effect not only on the militia but on the Continental army:

- 1) fear of a large standing army
- 2) limited time of service in order to return to harvest crops
- 3) autonomy between the different colonies, each colony setting its own standards and rules for its own militia — all similar but *none* standard. All maintained and jealously guarded their independence from one another.

Therefore, in 1775, when the Continental Congress in Philadelphia heeded the plea of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress to assume command and direction of the New England forces, they were actually forming a group of autonomous militia systems into one army — something that never really worked.

On June 14, 1775 the Continental Congress ordered 10 companies of expert riflemen be raised immediately, 6 from Pennsylvania, 2 from Maryland and 2 from Virginia. *These were the first soldiers to be enlisted directly into the Continental army*. The next day, June 15, 1775, Congress appointed George Washington Commander-in-Chief. The New England regiments were to be under his command

and become a part of the Continental Army, along with the 10 companies of riflemen. The New Englanders hoped that a Southern commander-in-chief, well liked and affluent, as was Washington, would bring the Southern colonies into the war. Congress also appointed a general staff consisting of 4 major generals and 8 brigadier generals.

Enlistments expired at the end of 1775 and a new army had to be created, their enlistments to begin Jan. 1, 1776, *but only for one year*. This time they were enlisted directly into the Continental army, which would now consist of 26 regiments of infantry, 728 men each, plus 1 regiment of artillery and 1 regiment of riflemen, a total on paper of 20,000 men. Only about 8,000 enlisted, so the militia had to be called up again to supplement the deficiency. Washington found he never had sufficient numbers of trained men, and had to depend upon militia to supplement the Continental forces too often. He asked Congress for an army to be *enlisted for the duration* and in October, 1776, Congress voted for a New establishment. This one to consist of 88 battalions (or regiments) of infantry, about 60,000 men, *enlisted to serve 3 years beginning Jan. 1, 1777*. Each state was assigned a *quota to supply men in proportion to its population*. After Washington's victory at Trenton in Dec., 1776, Congress authorized an additional 16 battalions of infantry, 3 regiments of artillery, 3,000 light horse, and a

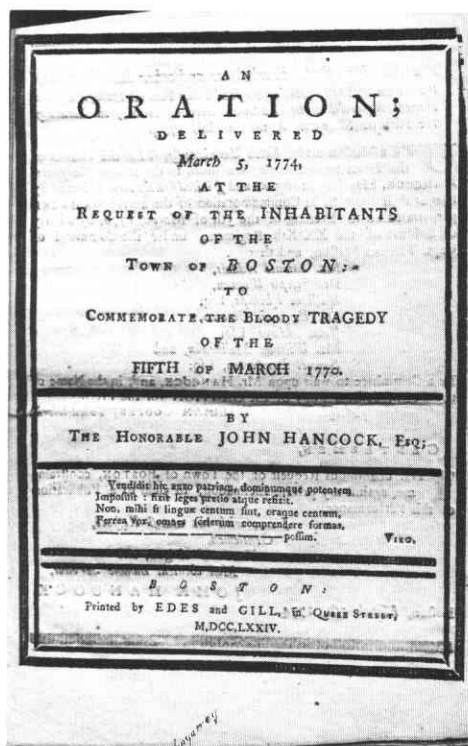
corps of engineers, making a total of 108 battalions of over 80,000 men. These battalions, or regiments, remained the *paper strength* of the Continental Army until January, 1781 when the army was consolidated and the army reduced to a total of 58 regiments.

However, no matter what the paper strength of the army appeared, there never were enough enlistments to fill the required quotas.

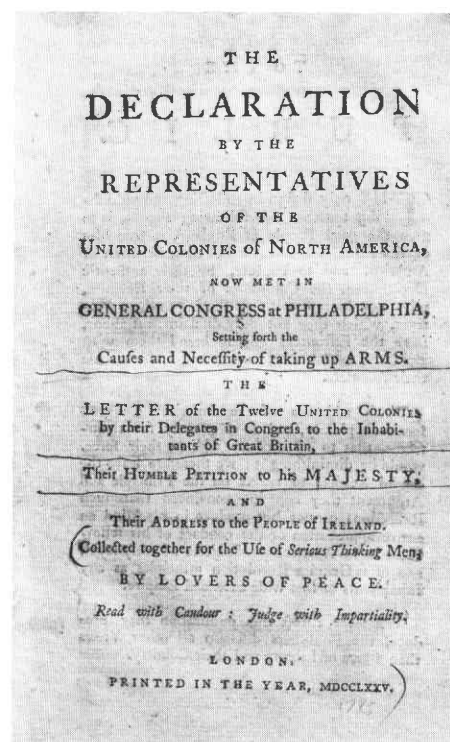
Congress therefore resolved, in February, 1778, that the several states fill up the quotas of their Continental battalions with 'draughts' and that these shall serve for 9 months. "Draughts to be drawn from the Militia or any other means, and that each person draughted who shall supply himself a good firelock and bayonet, cartouche box, haversack or blanket shall receive at the end of his term for the use of his firelock, bayonet and cartouche box, \$2.00 and for the use of his blanket, \$4.00".

I will attempt to cover a broad range of some of the types of materials I feel might have been used, or are similar to those that might have been used, during the American Revolution.

The examples are from my collection and illustrate my strong feeling that weapons in a collection become so much more a part of the period in which they were used when they are accompanied by the artifacts that were used with them.



Patriotic sermon given by John Hancock in Boston on March 5, 1774, to Commemorate the anniversary of the Boston Massacre and to arouse patriotism.

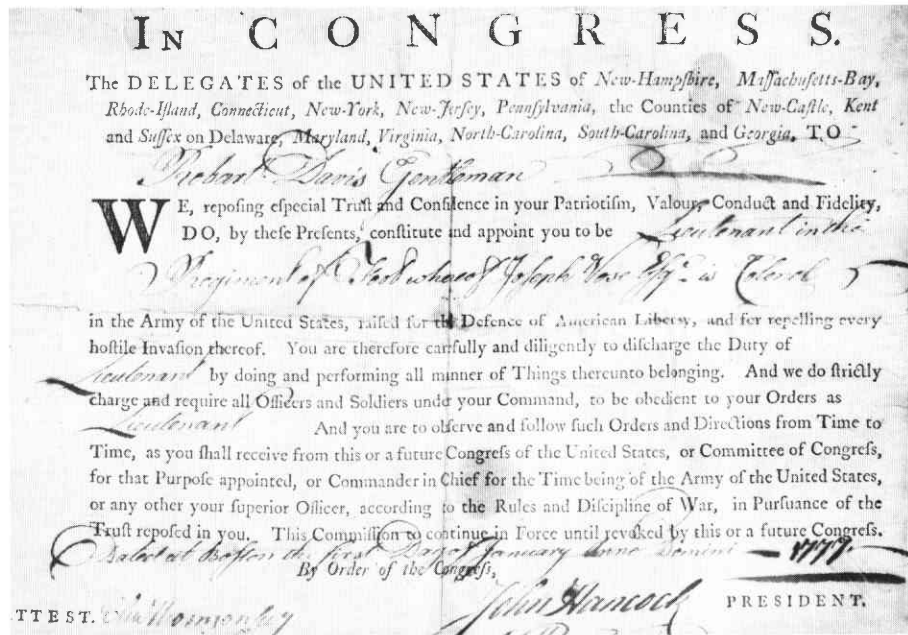


First printed in America, this pamphlet of the proceedings of the Continental Congress was quickly reprinted in London in 1775, indicating the deep concern in England over American affairs at that time.

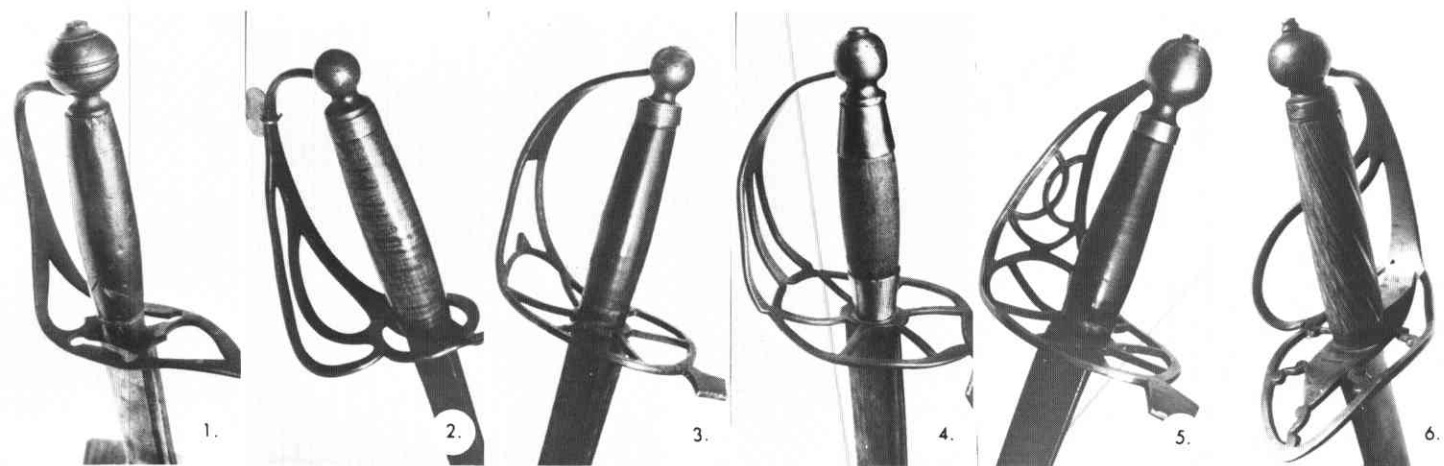
Colonial American brass-hilted sword with Colonial commission engraved by silversmith Nathaniel Hurd, Boston. The commission, dated 1771, for the Massachusetts-Bay Militia, and the allegiance to King George III it proclaims, was renounced in 1775 by most of the Mass. Militia, as well as the other New England Colony militia, as each colony formed its own militia regiments. The men brought with them swords, such as the example illustrated.



An unsophisticated American attempt to copy a continental court sword of the period, combining features of the small sword and hunting sword. The silver hilt is a charming, and unique example of American craftsmanship of the period of the Revolution. It lies on top of a printed enlistment broadside, published in 1775 by the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. Those that enlisted signed their names below the printing. This illustrates the use of documents to illuminate weapons in a Revolutionary collection.



Commission dated 1777, signed by President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock.



American Swords: In their attempt to copy sophisticated British and European styles, American cutlers and blacksmiths ended up with quaint, charming and completely unsophisticated weapons, falling into the category of folk-art.

1. This example has a brass cast hilt, the knuckle bow and counter guard pierced with a heart-design, a fairly common motif during that period. The grips are cherry and the pommel is shaped like an andrion finial.

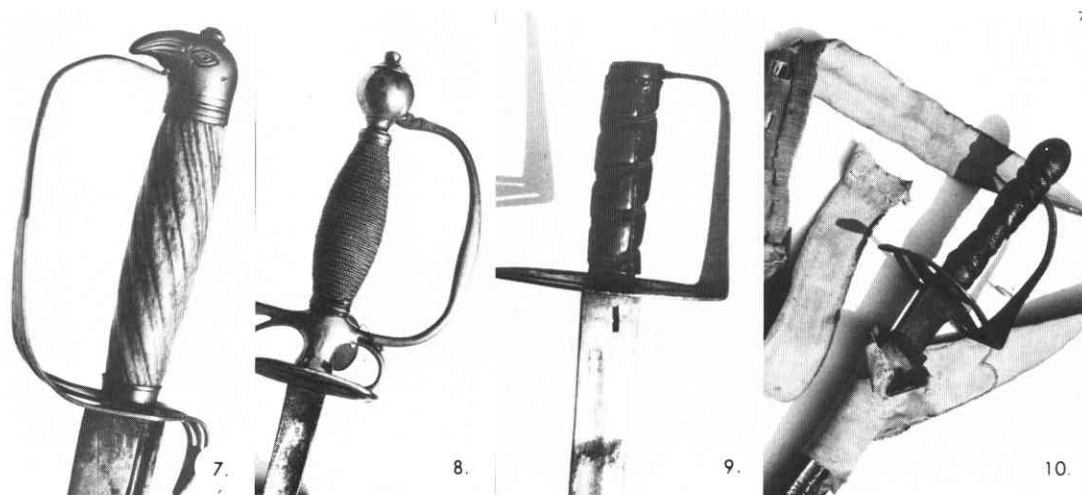
2. Another brass hilt, cast, with the divided branches of the knuckle bow terminating at a circular counter guard that is much too small and out of proportion to the rest of the sword. The curly maple grips are incised with the name 'Wolcott', probably the sword's owner.

3. This cast brass guard which divides at the knuckle bow and terminates in an arrow-head shaped finial at on the quillon, develops into spokes radiating from the hub in a circular design. The grips are maple.

4. An example with the cast brass knuckle bow dividing into three branches, then developing into the radiating spokes around the hub, and terminating with the arrow head finial at the quillon.

5. The full wagon wheel, the cast brass knuckle bow dividing into intertwined semi-circles, the counter guard circular with branches radiating from the hub at the ferrule at the base of the maple grips, and the quillon terminating with an arrow head finial.

6. Found near Hartford, Conn., this cast brass divided guard with the wiggly spokes radiating from the hub on the counter guard is fairly sophisticated. The guard is marked 'A. PEASE'. Another example of this maker's work is known, similar in style, but silver hilted. The grips, ivory, stained green, were probably imported.

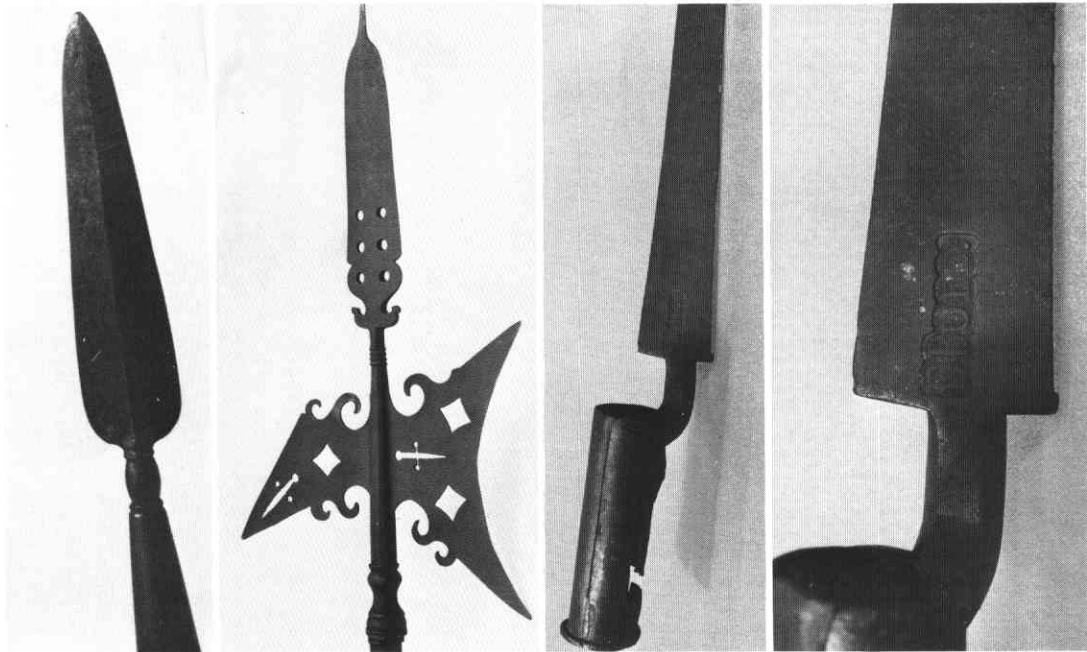


7. Primitive eagle head, patterned after more sophisticated European pommels of the 18th Century, cast brass, turned bone grips, solid strap brass guard divides at point where it bends forming the counter guard.

8. Extremely sophisticated silver small sword made by William Cowell, Boston, 1682-1736. The maker's mark, WC in a rectangular cartouche, appears on the obverse side of the knuckle bow near the pommel.

9. Strap iron, stirrup grip saber, the knuckle bow cut into four rectangular slots; turned wooden grips, leather wrapped, and the blade marked 'PRAHL'. Lewis Prahl worked in Philadelphia and had a contract for pikes and muskets in 1775, swords and bayonets in 1776, and continued to manufacture weapons throughout the war.

10. British pattern dragoon saber made in New York by James Potter who worked in New York City before, during and after the Revolution. This is considered an American-made sword, which it is, but Potter had to have been making his swords for the British, who occupied New York City during the Revolution. This iron hilted, wooden grips, leather wrapped, the blade marked 'POTTER' under the guard. The sword has leather scabbard and buff and linen sling and throat.



1. Pike or spear, original red-painted haft, iron head, marked on strap, 'PRAHL' (see slide #27). Another example of Lewis Prah's work (see sword described earlier made by Prah).
2. Two piece pierced New England halberd, a form of polearm weapon that, by the time of the Revolution, had degenerated to a symbol of rank carried by subalternate officers and sergeants. A delightful example of the Colonial blacksmith's workmanship.
3. Bayonet patterned after British Brown Bess bayonet, marked (see #4) E. Buell. Elisha Buell, Hebron, Conn., had a contract for muskets, patterned after the brown bess, for the privateer Oliver Cromwell. Later made contract muskets for the United States.



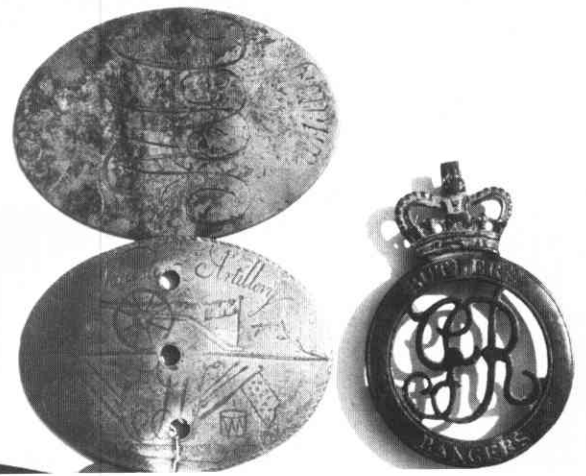
5-6. Silver peace medals were struck during the Revolution and given to their Indian allies by the British. This medal shows the bust of George III on the obverse side, and the British royal arms on the reverse.



Two silver English gorgets, period of the Revolution. Left, repoussé coat of arms, right, engraved coat of arms.



Embossed leather wallet with raised word 'LIBERTY', 18th Century, period of the Revolution, with two pocket knives of the same period.



Insignia of the Revolution: upper left, unidentified brass artillery cross belt plate; lower left, Worcester Artillery cross belt plate, established in 1783, Worcester, Mass.; lower right, Butler's Rangers' cartridge box plate, excavated at Niagara.



Close-up of the Worcester Artillery cross belt plate, showing the primitive, but charming, country engraving. Not as sophisticated as Revere and Herd of Boston, but extremely collectible.



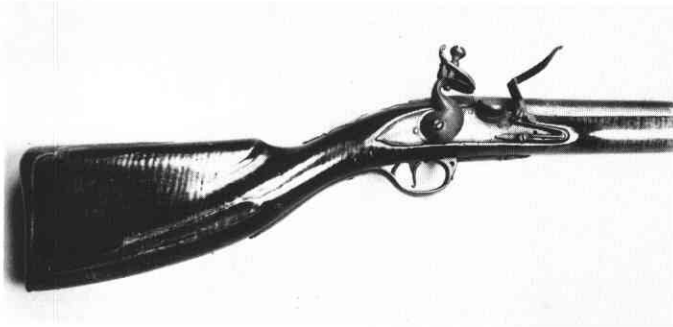
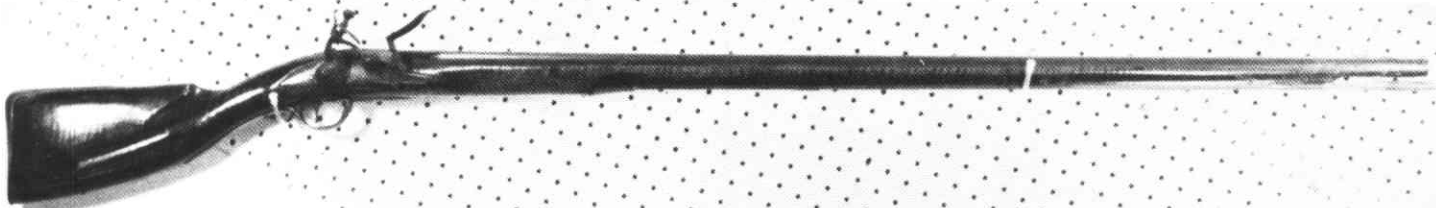
Wooden canteen, inscribed "1775 John GeEEty". Painted red, wrapped hoops.



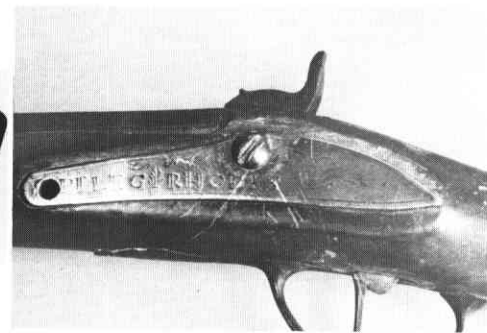
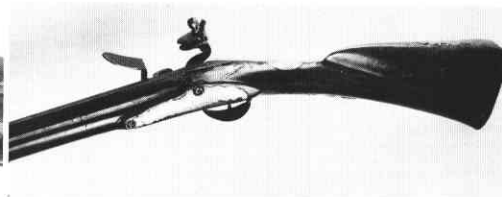
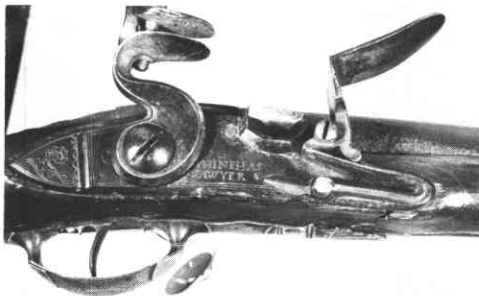
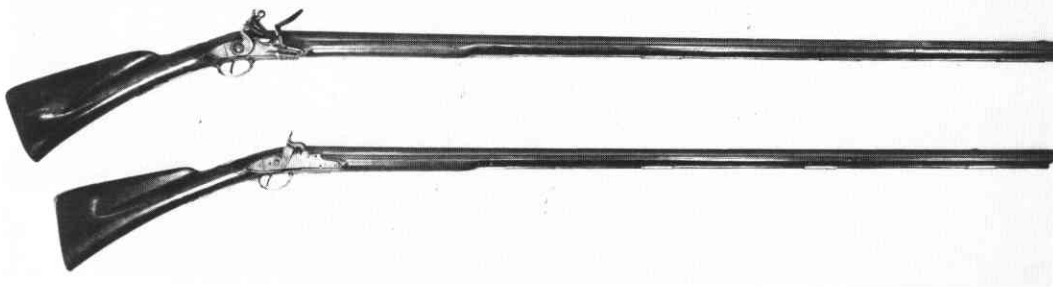
Wooden rundlet, painted red, inscribed "MP 3 1772".



New York long fowling piece, ca. 1760, the type of weapon carried by the militia early in the war. Maple wood, brass repair at wrist. British barrel, brass mounts.



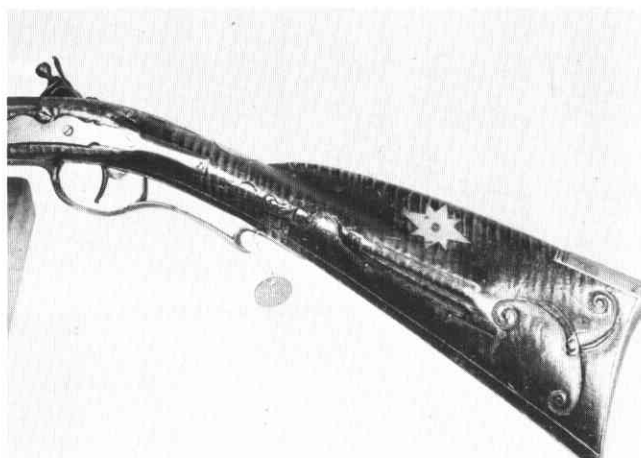
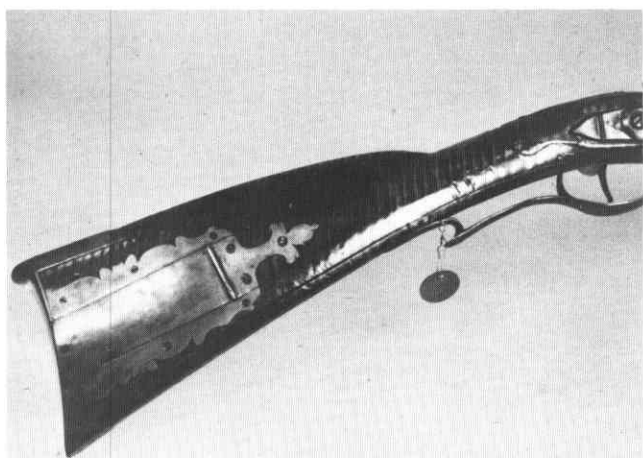
Restocked 1st model British Brown Bess, restocked around the period of the Revolution in typical Massachusetts club-butt fowling piece fashion. However, this was restocked as a military gun and not a fowler. The barrel (see close-up right) is marked 'K: OWN REG', or King's Own Regiment (British 4th). They had been stationed in America since the French-Indian War.



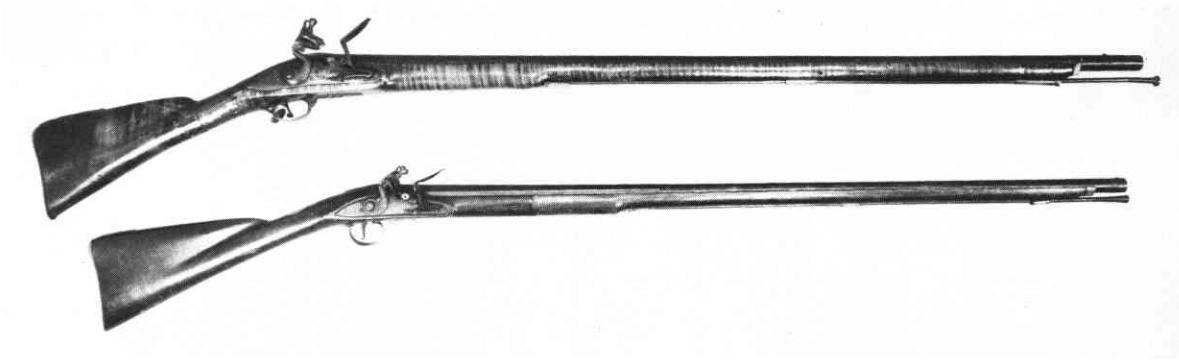
Two long cherry-stocked Massachusetts fowling pieces, ca. period of the Revolution. The top fowler is marked on the lock, Phineas Sawyer (see close-up). Sawyer was a gunsmith working in Harvard, Massachusetts at the time of the Revolution. The brass side plate of the lower fowler is inscribed with the name of the owner, "PELEG RHODES" (see close-up). These Worcester County fowling pieces are extremely graceful, usually carved behind the barrel tang, with nicely carved fore-end mouldings, and carving around the trigger guard and where the long, wide wrist extends and meets the high comb. Note the scalloped carving at that point. The butts always have a graceful drop and the side plates are usually cloud-like.



Two more New England fowlers. the top is quite early, ca. 1720, with a three screw lock and barrel tang screw that comes up from the bottom. The lower fowler is cherry, extreme drop to the butt, and quite unsophisticated.



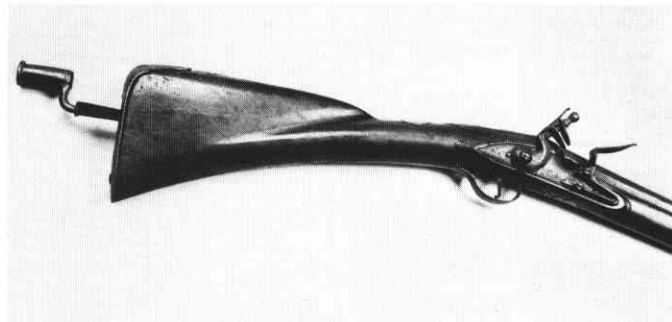
Brass mounted Pennsylvania rifle, Reading area, attributed to Wolfgang Haga, ca. period of the Revolution, the type of rifle that might have been carried by some of those first 10 companies of expert riflemen called up by Congress June 14, 1775. This rifle has no engraving, and simple relief carving on the cheek side of the butt. There is an interesting iron repair replacing the original side plate, but following the original lines of inletting.



Top: musket patterned after British Brown Bess, stocked in maple, made by Abijah Thompson, Woburn, Mass., a Minute Man and in 1776 a Continental armorer. *Bottom:* officer's fusil, walnut, silver mounted, made by Henry Watkeys, New York City prior to the war, New Windsor, New York during the Revolution where he had a contract for muskets.



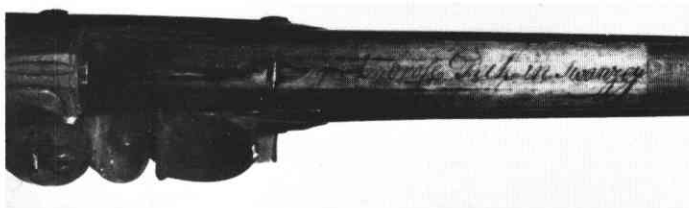
Close-up of the lock of the Abijah Thompson musket, an extremely crude attempt to copy the first model Brown Bess.



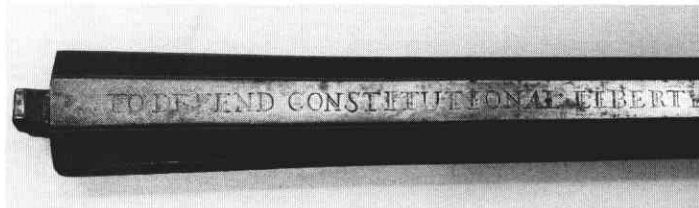
Officer's fusil, cherry stocked, with compartment in the butt for the bayonet, made by Ambrose Peck, Swazey, Mass. Peck had a contract for muskets for the Committee of Safety of Rhode Island in 1776, and probably made muskets for Massachusetts, also.



Close-up of the silver escutcheon on the wrist of the Peck fusil, engraved with the same device found on the Continental Currency Three Dollar bill. The name 'A. Carpenter' was that of the fusil's owner.



Paper glued to barrel inletting of the stock, with inscription in brown ink "Made by Ambrose Peck in Swazey".



Close up of a portion of the barrel which is engraved with the slogan "TO DEFEND CONSTITUTIONAL LIBERTY AND PROPERTY".

