

Carved Powder Horns

By William H. Guthman

I am going to speak to you about one of the most fascinating mediums of 18th Century American folk art. It is truly one of the last undiscovered and greatly undervalued art forms and one that is purely North American.

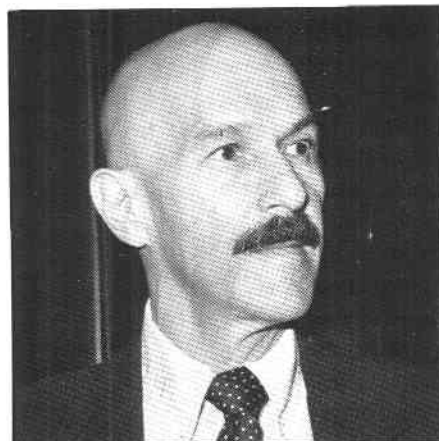
There is probably no category in the collecting of Americana as misunderstood as that of carved powder horns. They should have as important a place in every 18th Century collection of American weapons as marked silver swords or signed early rifles. Most collectors have been afraid to acquire any examples because they lacked confidence in their judgement. The majority of those that have purchased horns have never bothered to study them, or learn about them. I have always been under the impression that most collectors accept carving on a horn at face value. And, I believe most fakers have believed that, also, and have been able to take advantage for that reason.

From the days of Rufus Grider, who sketched hundreds of carved powder horns during the last quarter of the 19th Century, and who must be considered the first student of carved American powder horns, collectors have acquired horns for the wrong reasons, and this has played into the hands of the faker who has found a lucrative market amongst gullible collectors. Collecting powder horns intelligently presents a challenge that most collectors have not been willing to accept. It is difficult, it seems, for most collectors to look at a carved horn, NOT as an historical artifact, but rather as an art object. (Probably this is the reason I have never placed a high value on map horns—most of which I have felt were not of the period.) And, it is just as difficult for that collector to view the object for its artistic merit and, equally important, for its *authenticity*.

For years, fakers had neglected the aesthetic quality of horns and instead concentrated on the more dramatic battles, or well known names, as well as producing an overabundance of map horns with traceable names. Unfortunately, this is no longer true. After my article about French and Indian War powder horns appeared in the magazine *Antiques*, August, 1978, fakers began to incorporate the artistic characteristics of the more talented carvers of the period on spurious horns. I have seen at least a half dozen good fakes on the market in the last two years that incorporated major characteristics of horns that were illustrated in that article.

However, it is not the faker that I wish to concentrate on in this talk. We will save that subject for the seminar that follows. Rather, it is the artistic qualities of fine horns that I will illustrate and discuss. But first, I want to give you a brief introduction to the technique of examining a horn.

Adequate illumination and good magnification are essential. The best references are the examples of writing, doodling, engraving and sketching done during the period by contemporaries of those who carved the horns. Comparing the decorative motifs found on horns with those scribbled in the margins of account books, journals, diaries, letters, inside book

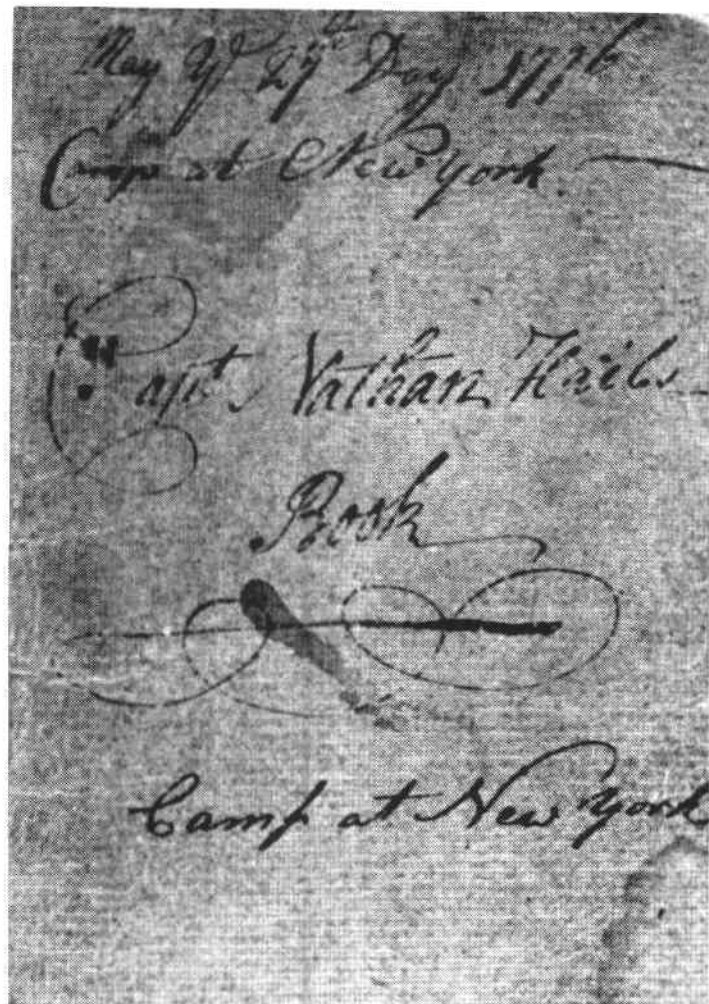
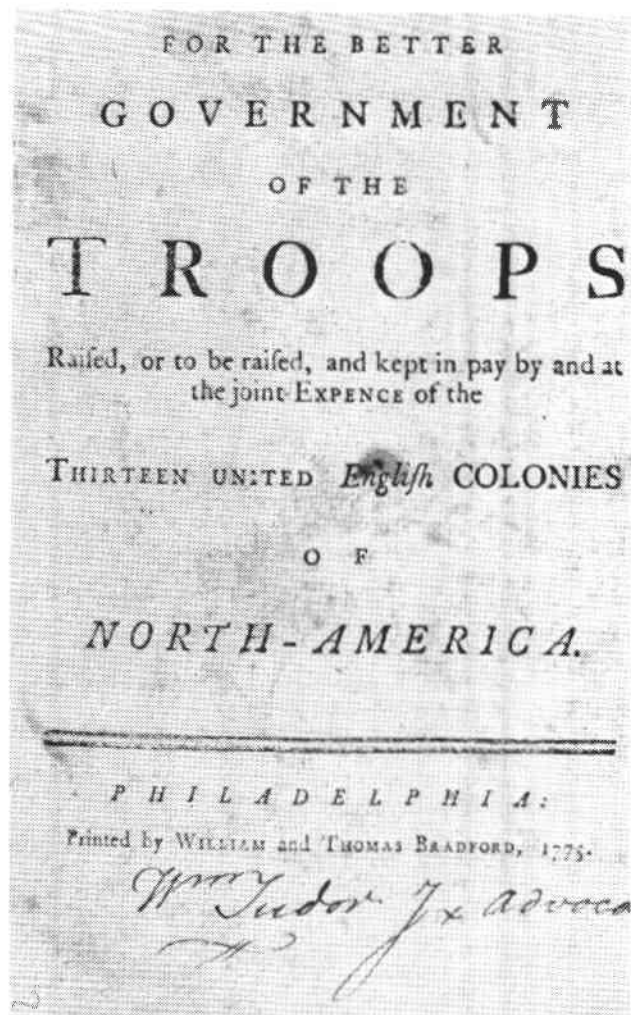


covers and fly leaves, reveals remarkable similarities. Also, studying books, magazines and letters of the period offers illuminating insight into the way people thought during the period. These are the best ways to judge whether an inscription on a horn was carved by an 18th Century hand or at a later date, pretending to be of the 18th Century. Learning to think the way in which an 18th Century soldier would have thought and not as a 20th Century collector is extremely important. The collector is interested in the battles and the glamour. The soldier was a militia man, not a professional soldier, and was probably serving because he was required to, during a period of emergency, with little, if any, reward, and considerable hardship.

Campaigns were almost always planned between late spring and early fall when water transportation was free of ice, and horses and cattle had an abundance of grazing. Most soldiers were farmers and this was the worst possible time of the year for them to serve. Rather than concentrate on the glamour of war, the homesick, undernourished, frightened and exhausted soldier was usually speculating on what might be happening at home.

His horn may have been functional. They were used during the French and Indian War if cartridge boxes were not available, and the Rangers did carry horns rather than cartridge boxes. But, by the time of the Revolution, the horn was used only by special troops except during the early months of the war when equipment of all kinds was extremely scarce. Therefore, many of the horns were mementos rather than necessary accoutrements. The soldier's choice of identifying inscriptions on horns was usually limited to name, rank, date and location, and not necessarily all four. The type and amount of decoration depended upon the carver's talent and the owner's taste.

Campaign details were seldom recorded on horns but they do appear occasionally. Details of forts sometimes appear, and quite accurately, probably because the soldier spent so many



Cover and title page of rare military manual showing inscription erroneously attributed to Nathan Hale. "Maye 27, 1776, Camp at New York" in an unknown hand. 'Capt Nathan Hail's Book' is the same hand as 'Wm Tudor J X Advocate'. Bottom inscription, Camp at New York, is probably that of Nathan Hale.

hours in and around the fort, with instructions not to stray beyond hearing of the drum beat from within the fort. Decoration was not restricted exclusively to the body of the horn; sometimes, the horn has an interesting decoration on the plug. Become familiar with all of these characteristics so that you are able to be your own expert, enabling you to confidently detect fraudulent examples is a prime requisite. To illustrate, I show the front cover of probably the first military book published by the Continental Congress, *Rules and Articles for the Better Government of the Troops*, Philadelphia, 1775. It is a rare book, but the inscriptions on the cover add a great deal more to its rarity. According to Nathan Hale's biographer, George Dudley Seymour, one of the original collectors of Americana, this particular book can be traced back to Hale's family as early as 1817, and the inscriptions are described in his published biography of Hale as completely in Hale's hand. Subsequently, this exact book has been described in other books of American autographs, and sold in at least three major autograph auctions, beginning in 1965, all of which attributed the handwriting to Hale.

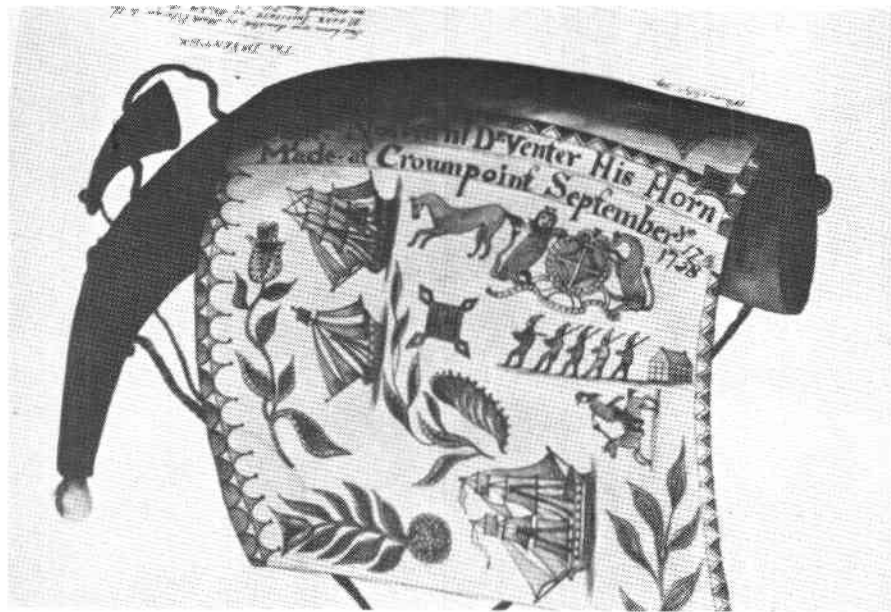
It was sold at Park Bernet last November and offered to me in January. After comparing the handwriting with original Hale documents at the Yale Library, I find that ALL THREE

INSCRIPTIONS are of a different hand; the top unknown, the center by the man who inscribed the title page, William Tudor, a judge advocate during the Revolution and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the bottom inscription, in all probability, that of Hale.

How Tudor acquired the book is open to speculation, but since he was interested in the Massachusetts Historical Society, which is a repository of historical documents, it is possible he did acquire this book after Hale was hung in New York in 1776, and afterward sent it back to Hale's family, where Seymour traced it as early as 1817.

At any rate, had I accepted the judgement of a succession of experts, spanning a half a century, I would have paid a great deal of money for something that is not what it has been advertised to be, nor claimed to be by Hale's chief biographer, and the man who donated his Hale manuscript collection to Yale University; his is the largest collection of Hale documents.

Some of the most knowledgeable collectors of Americana I have known have taken powder horns for granted, accepting the carving at face value. They neglected the painstaking caution and study they so expertly utilized in other areas and accepted interesting-looking historical horns for the content of the inscription rather than the quality of the engraving of the



Rufus Grider drawing of the Nathaniel Porter horn, with the wrong name, Nathl DeVenter.



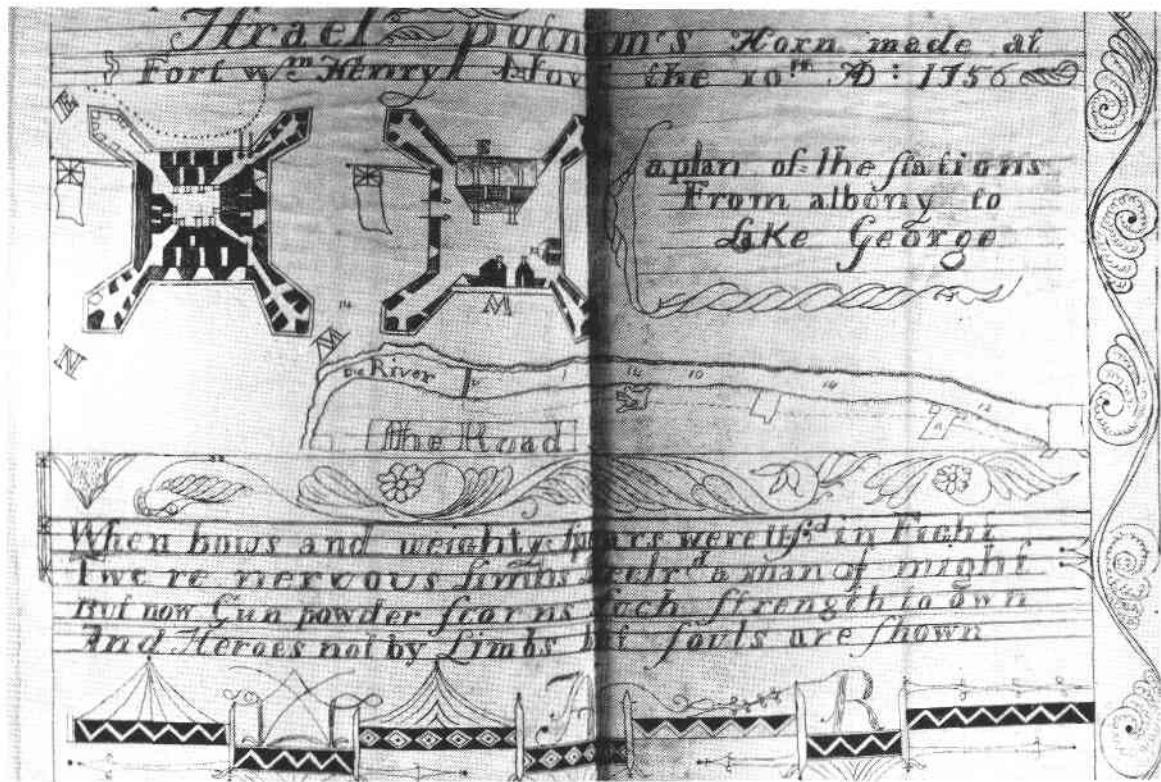
Enlargement of the inscription of Nathaniel Porter horn showing the well-worn lettering 'Porter'. The bottom serif of the 'P' is shown midway between the 'N' and "T" in Point, the lower serif of the 'T' comes just above the 'S'. The upper half of the 'E' in Porter comes just above the 'E' in September, the 'R' in Porter comes above the 'P' in September, which is not visible in the photograph.

inscription. Harold Peterson's books provided my basic training in Colonial Americana. He later became a close friend and, when his brilliant life ended too abruptly, I proudly served as a pallbearer. In spite of his careful scholarship, he was, in one instance, one of a succession of experts who accepted a particular horn at face value.

The horn I illustrate was donated to the Essex Institute (Salem, Mass.) in 1840 and was accessioned as "Captain Nathan'l DeVenter—His Horn." When it was sketched by

Rufus Grider in 1888, he illustrated this horn as "Capt Nathan'l Deventer," and the late Stephen V. Grancsay, a former member of this organization, listed the horn in his *American Engraved Powder Horns* in 1946 as "Capt. Nathan'l De Venter."

Sometime during the 1950's, Harold Peterson acquired the horn after it had been de-accessioned by the Essex Institute. He later illustrated the horn in his monumental *Arms and Armor in Colonial America*, captioning the photograph, "Capt



Drawing of the carving on the Israel Putnam horn, by John Bush, from the frontispiece in volume II of "The American Pioneer", Cincinnati 1843. The artist captured the artistic details of Bush's carving.

Nathan Deventer." The horn was offered for sale in 1978 in the silent auction conducted by this organization at the request of Pete's widow, and was listed in the catalogue as "Nathan Deventer."

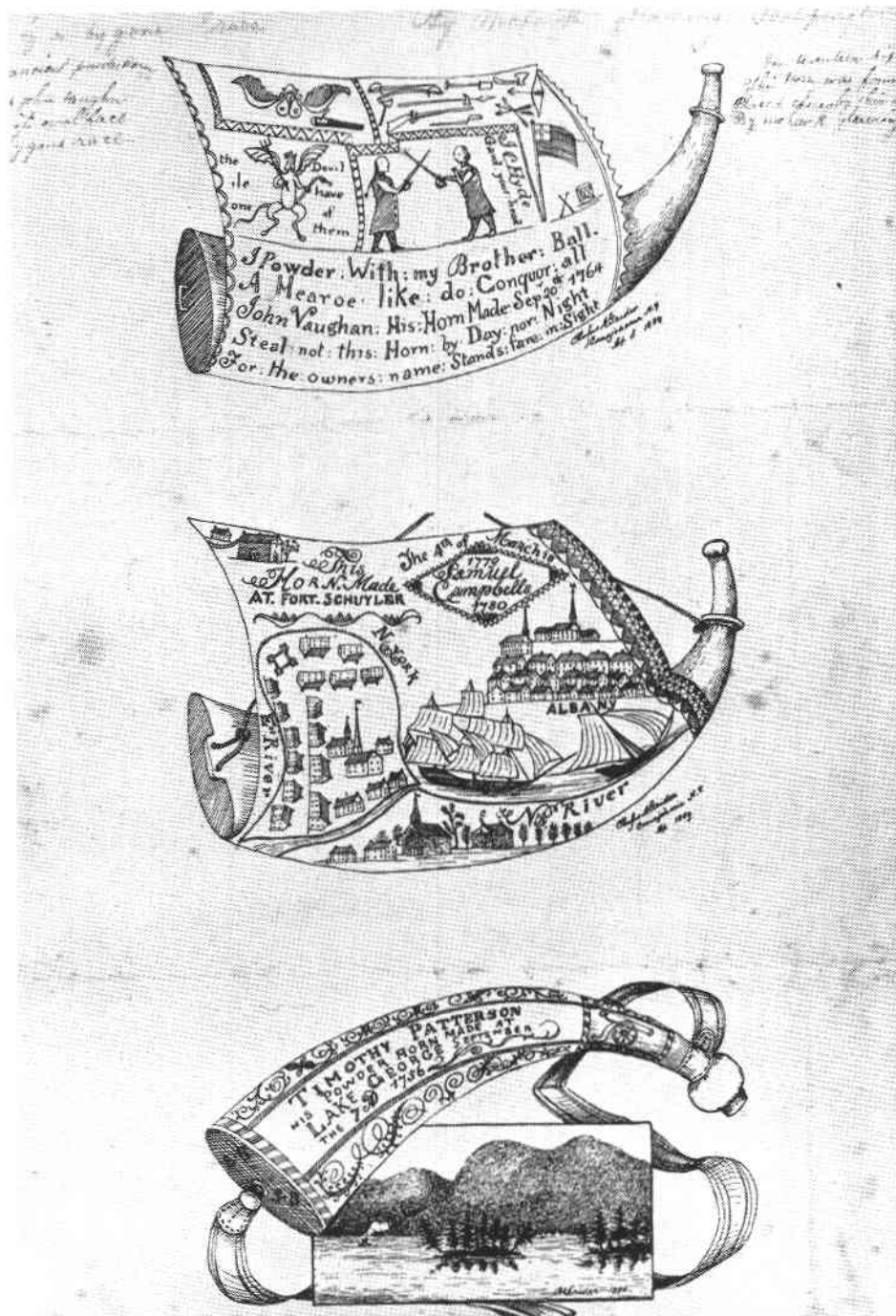
In over 130 years (1840-1978) not one of the known people who had become involved with the horn bothered to examine it carefully. Indeed, it *is not* a fake, but the original owner was, and *is* so inscribed, although almost illegible through wear, "Nathaniel Porter." Each of the people who had in one way or another become involved with the horn had accepted the provenance handed down with the horn without an examination. A strong magnifying glass and a good light would have proved the provenance wrong, but the motive for the 1840 accession under the wrong name will probably always remain a mystery. There is the possibility that the donor, in 1840, might have had a specific reason for the change in names, such as claiming a pension or bounty land for an ancestor's military service.

I have seen a horn recently that I felt was not carved in the 18th Century, but sometime during the first half of the 19th Century, yet the date was November, 1775, and the horn depicted fortifications in and around Boston and Roxbury. The horn was offered to me for sale; therefore, I had the opportunity to study all of the details. It did not have the style or express the thinking of a soldier serving during the Revolution. When I looked up the owner's record, I found he had deserted and thought that possibly the horn was carved about 75 years later in order for the family to request a Revolutionary War Veteran's pension. It is not unrealistic to speculate that many horns were carved later than their dates proclaim in order for their owners to claim their own or ancestral participation in former wars, thus establishing unofficial 'proof' that could

secure financial reward as well as social status.

Horns were used during the early stages of the Revolution when all types of equipment was scarce. But, when supplies became more plentiful in 1776, the pre-fixed cartridge and cartridge box were standard equipment and the powder horn was used, in most instances, only by riflemen, specialized light troops and artillery. Therefore, it is my opinion that most Revolutionary War period carved horns, dated after the 1776 New York campaign, were carved as mementos of a tour of service. And, it is probably safe to assume that a veteran might have carved a horn proclaiming his tour of duty many years after the war in order to provide his family with a memento. I have seen some good early-looking horns with locations of forts and encampments, and even crude maps, of French-Indian or Revolutionary War sites, and yet they were dated in the late 1780's and 1790's. I have seen only two legitimate horns belonging to famous people of the 18th Century, and both are illustrated in this talk: Robert Rogers and Israel Putnam, both rangers during the French-Indian War, and both horns attributed to the carver, John Bush.

The map of North America, drawn by John Mitchell and published in 1755, is probably the most important map of North America dating to the French and Indian War and would have served both Rogers and Putnam much more efficiently than a map horn. Fortifying this projection is the fact that neither Rogers' nor Putnam's horns are map horns. (Putnam's does exhibit a simple map showing the road from Albany to Lake George, but does not have the elaborate map from New York City to Canada found on most map horns.) Again, I repeat, I have seen, and now own, examples of map horns that are legitimate, but I do feel the vast



Three examples of Rufus Grider's drawings of powder horns.

majority are fake. An interesting sidelight to the Putnam horn is the drawing of that horn which appeared as the frontispiece of a magazine published in Cincinnati in 1843, "The American Pioneer." The article describing the horn was titled, "Ancient Relic." As early as 1843 the artist who had drawn the illustration of the horn perceived the artistic merit in Bush's work, and prominently copied the designs typical of Bush horns. Unfortunately, this type of artistic appreciation became lost in the quest for historic identity.

However, Bush's work typifies the highest quality carving of the period. His design motifs, as well as those of the other fine carvers, were copied, in a non-academic way, from the work of master European engravers. Renaissance, baroque and rococo engraving styles were combined with imaginative versions of

book illustrations of monsters and animals inspired by the East India trade. We can only speculate how the engravers at remote forts such as Crown Point, Ticonderoga, and Fort Edward knew about the three styles of engraving. The most accessible models to copy would have been the mountings and lockplates of officers' pistols and fusils and the chasing on the sword hilts. Most of the better quality officers' weapons were produced on the continent and in England and the majority of them were embellished by accomplished craftsmen who were influenced by the design books of 17th and 18th Century French gunsmiths. The exquisite designs that had been chiseled into steel in England and Europe were translated into less complicated versions on horn by the carvers in North America.

Amusing verses are frequently engraved on the horns and



Illustration of New Zealand war canoe from a 1751 *Gentlemen's Magazine* from London from which the horn shown was copied and the warriors were changed to American Indians from South Pacific natives.

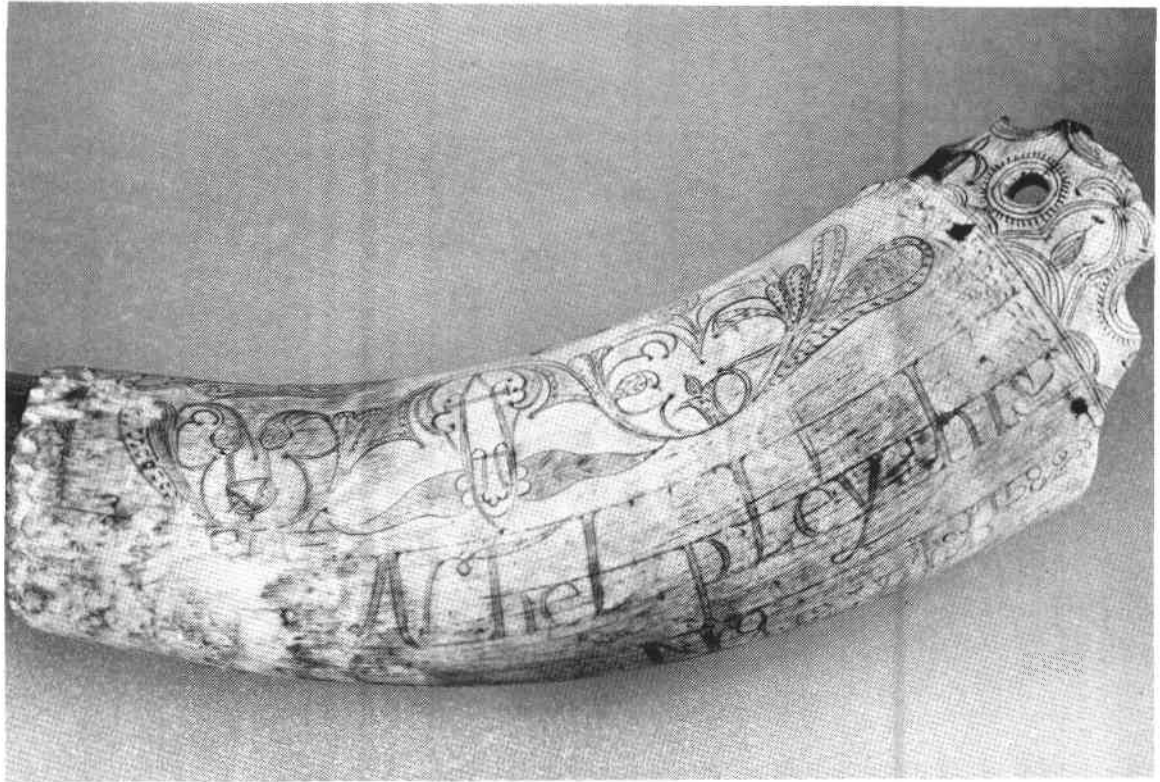
essentially the same verses appear on many different horns. Examples of these rhymes are: "I Powder with my brother ball/A Hero like do conquer all" and "A man of words and not of deeds/Is like a garden full of weeds" or "Drums a-beating colors flying/Trumpets sounding men a-dying/These are the bloody effects of war." Stylish calligraphy and embellished letters predominate. Decoration includes floral, geometric and architectural designs, scrollwork, amusing animals as well as human figures and faces, birds, fish, and only occasionally the British coat of arms. Sometimes ships are incorporated, and only rarely are formations of soldiers opposing each other in battle depicted. The ships are occasionally named, but the soldiers are never identified, and the battles always remain anonymous. The drawings seldom are detailed and the vast majority can not be used for reference. Sometimes an Indian is represented but only as a naked barbarian. The majestic warrior so often portrayed in paintings of the period was seen in a different light by the soldiers who fought against him, feared him, lost members of their family through his massacres, and thereby hated him, and considered the Indian inferior to the whites.

Almost as rare as the Indian is the detailed plan of a fort. When one does appear, in contrast to other horn carving, it is usually fairly accurately depicted and is useful for studying the location of buildings, palisades, bastions and the placement of

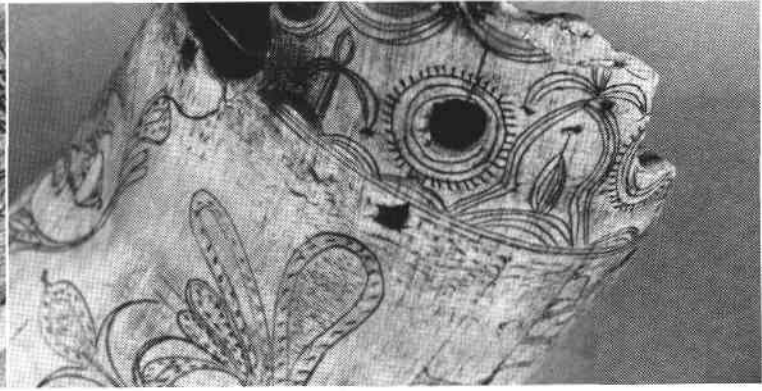
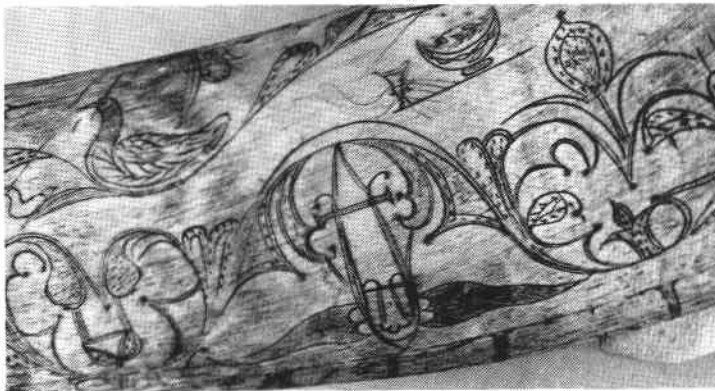
artillery. Other appealing decorative devices sometimes used are outline drawings of swords, halberds, tomahawks, muskets, pistols, drums, flags and cannon. Sometimes these devices appear as a border, other times to fill empty spaces instead of a geometric design.

Deeds are never proclaimed and the heroes of the day are never portrayed on any legitimate horns that I have seen. Famous events that are depicted on horns have always remained suspicious to me. I don't think I have seen two horns that depict major events, contemporary to the horn, that I believed were legitimate. Even though the Death of Wolfe, Boston Massacre, Battle of Lexington and Bunker Hill were depicted in many drawings, woodcuts and engravings of the period, I do not believe they were the subject matter desired by the horn carvers or the men for whom the horns were carved. One of the best reference books for a realistic overall view of the types of horns carved during the French-Indian War and The Revolution is Nathan Swayze's book, *Engraved Powder Horns*. Nathan restricted his selection of horns to those which reflected the taste and feeling of the 18th Century.

There is a great deal to be learned about carved powder horns, and the best way to start is to look at as many as possible, studying the details of the various artists. I would like to show a few at this time, limiting my own comments, and allowing the horns to speak for themselves.

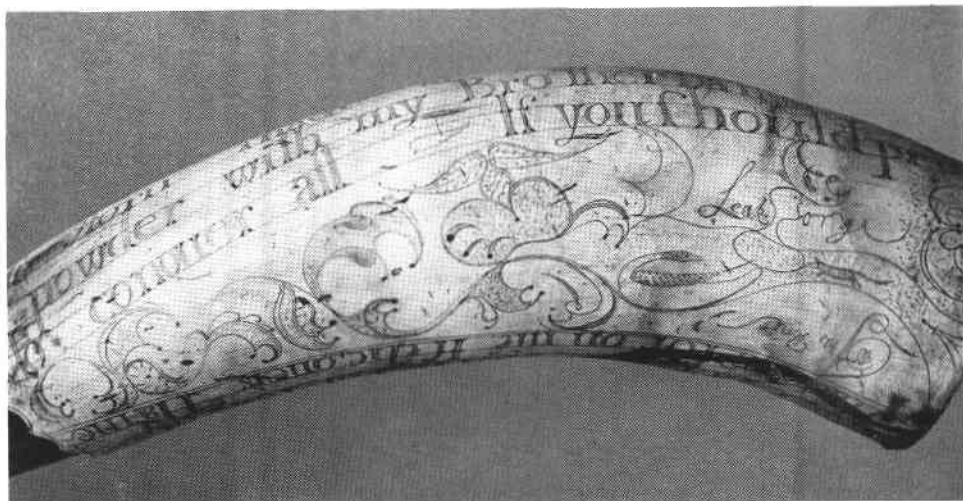


Overall view of the decoration on Sgt. Isaac Whelpley's horn carved by "J.W.", whose spelling is phonetic and whose decorative style is casual and flowing, with the ends of letters and motifs becoming birds, animals, leaves and wings.

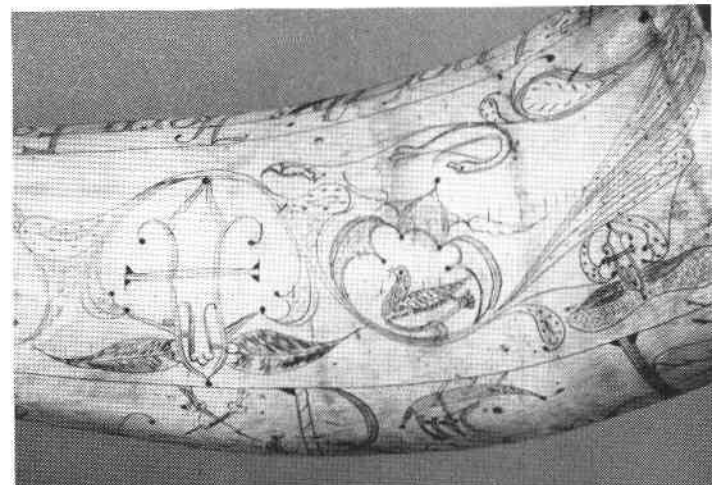


Closeup of identifying motif used by Whelpley. Whelpley was at Fort #4 when this horn was carved in 1758 and served in the Connecticut Militia with Baird and Wheeler whose horns also were carved by "J.W."

Close-up of the lobe decoration on the Whelpley horn.



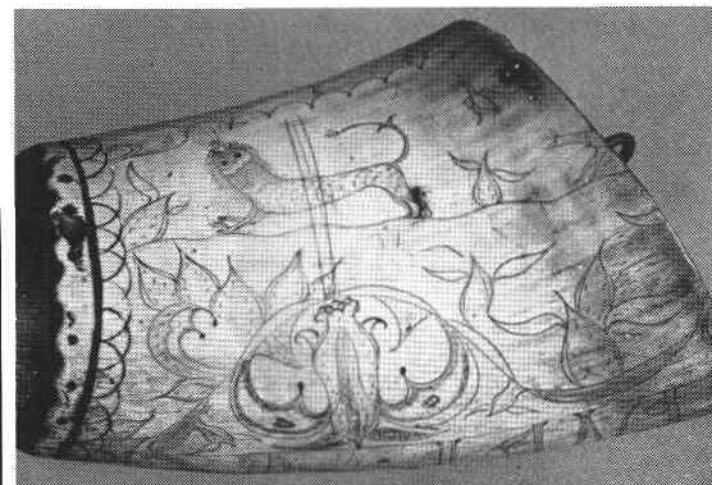
Robert Baird's horn, also by "J.W.". Baird's horn, dated 1758, is a fine example of the Lake George School of Horn Carving.



Closeup of "J.W.'s" stylized signature motif on the Baird horn.



Detail of the flowing leaves and flying birds of "J.W.'s" work on Wheeler's horn.



Detail of "J.W.'s" signature device.



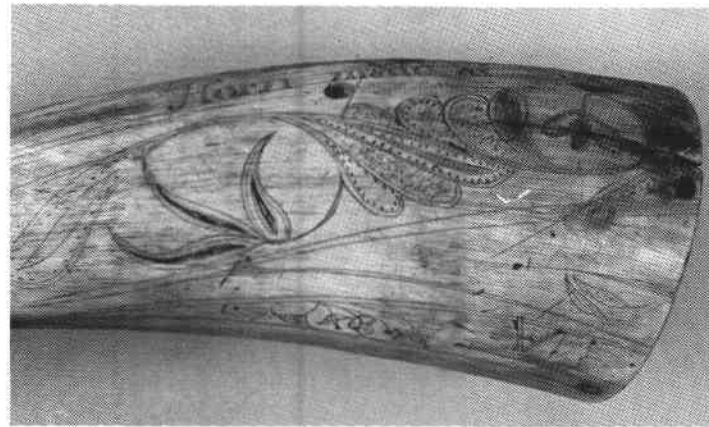
Fragment of David Wheeler's powder horn carved by "J.W." at Lake George, probably during the 1757/1758 Campaigns. Wheeler served with Baird and Whelpley. The "1776" was added at a later date by a different hand.



Part of the horn of David Hamilton, Connecticut Ranger, who served in the same regiment as Nathaniel Selkirk and Aaron Page in 1757, whose horns were carved by the same hand. The horn was made at Fort #4, probably during the 1757 campaign. The horn was cut, because of unknown damage, probably during its period of use.



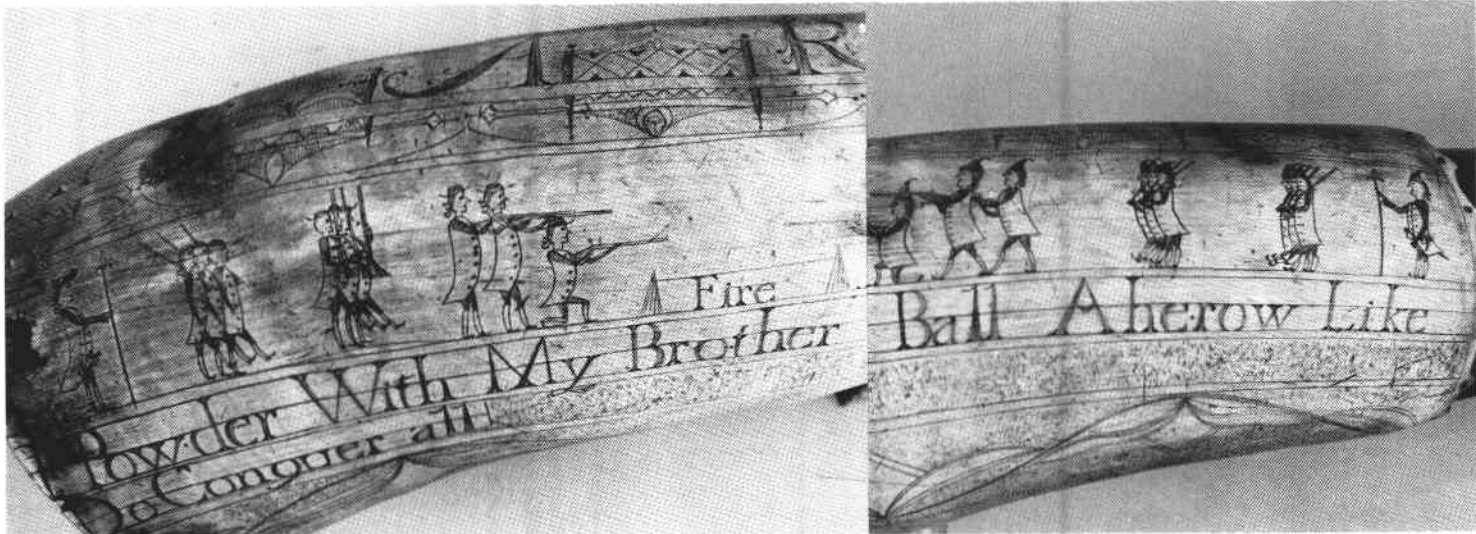
Detailed view of the lettering by the carver of David Hamilton's horn, who also carved the Selkrig and Page horns. The stylized lettering (W A R) and the precise carving and flowing letters are similar to the work of John Bush.



Detail of floral design on the Hamilton horn, 1757/1758.



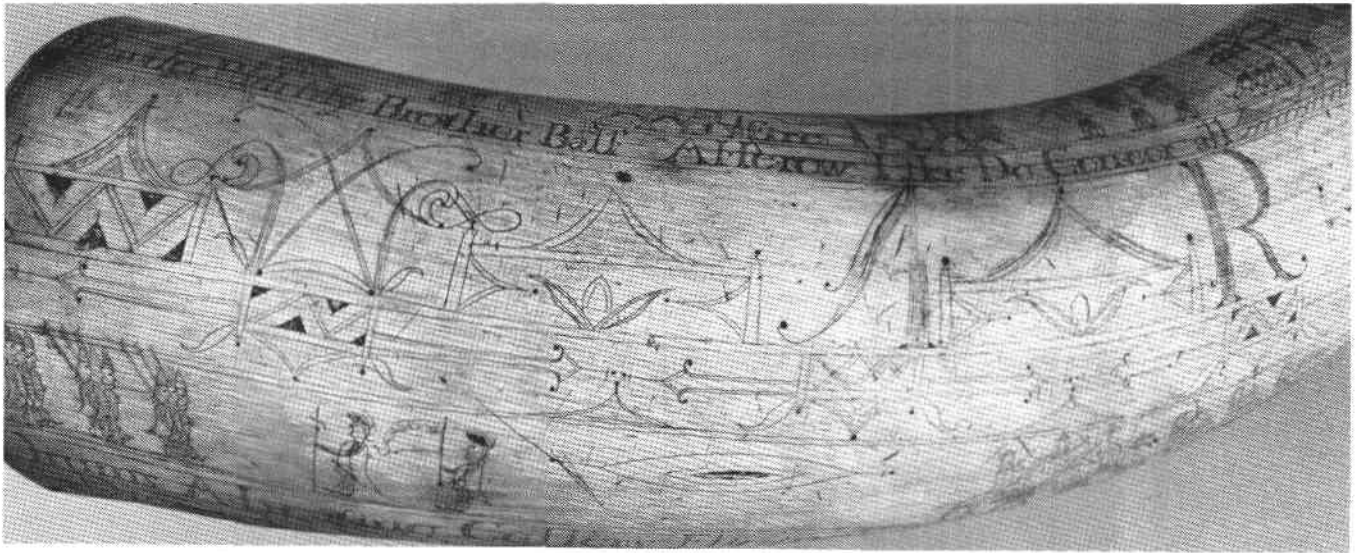
Horn of Aaron Page dated in the Lake George period, July 8, 1758, by the same hand as the Selkrig and Hamilton horns. Page was a Connecticut ranger in the Campaign of 1757/1758, in the same regiment as Selkrig and Hamilton. Note the stylized W A R and floral design between and under the letters.



Soldiers in formation on the Page horn, typical of this particular Lake George school. The assembled photos show opposing troops firing at each other, their sergeants with spontoons in the rear. Note also the rhyme below.



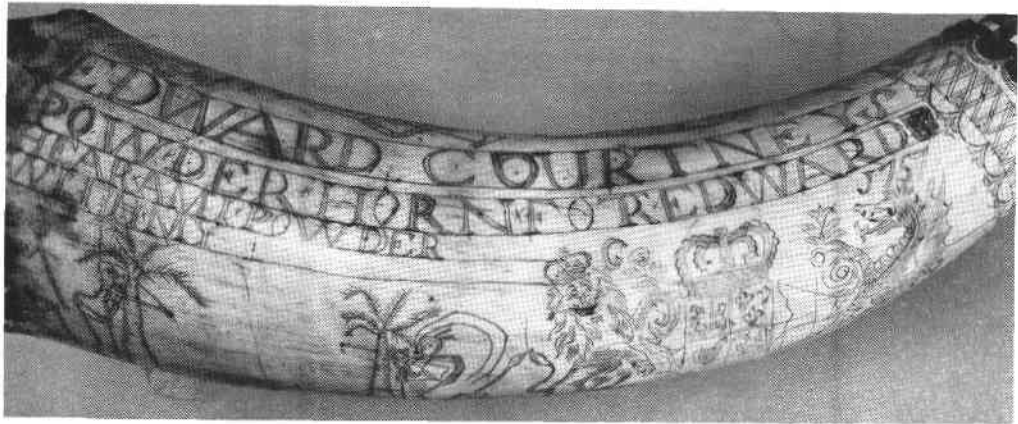
Nathaniel Selkrig's horn, carved at Fort #4, March 17, 1758, by the same hand that carved the Page and Hamilton horns. Selkrig was a Connecticut ranger.



Detail of the Selkrig horn showing the stylized W A R and the decorative carving between and underneath.



Another detail of the Selkrig horn showing closeup of the troop formations and the rhyme, "Drums A beating Collers Flicsing Trumpets Sounding Men/A Dieing These are The Bloodde Affects of Wars".



Detail of Edward Courtney horn, Ford Edward, 1757.



Naked savages shooting at each other from behind trees on the Courtney horn.

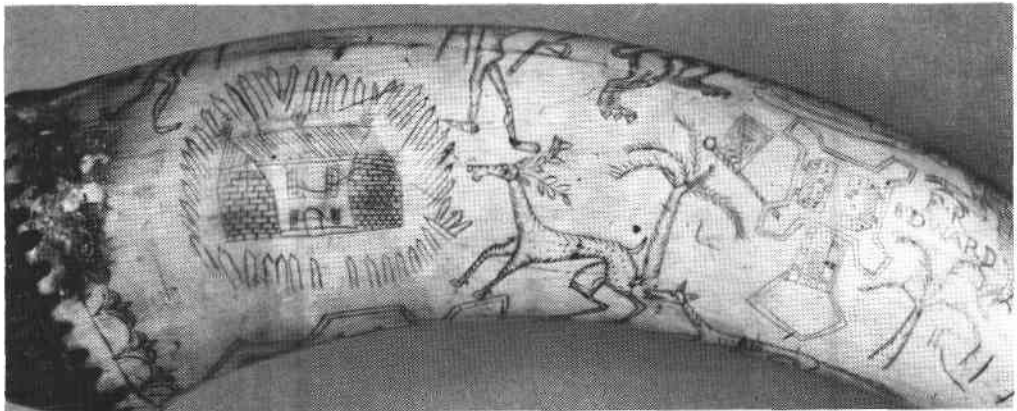
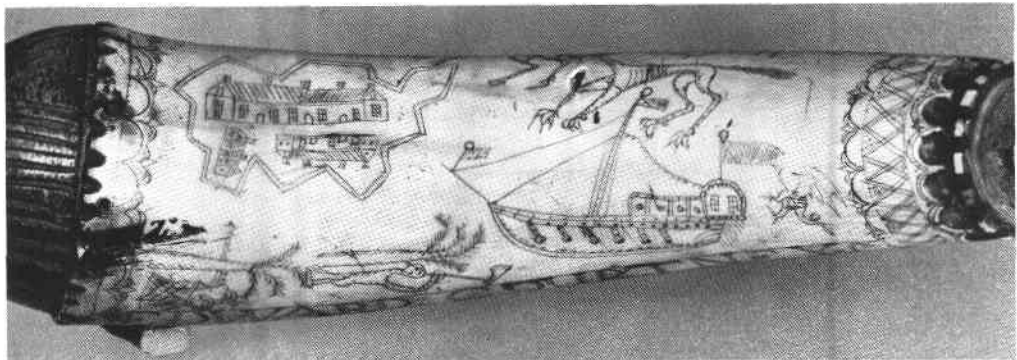
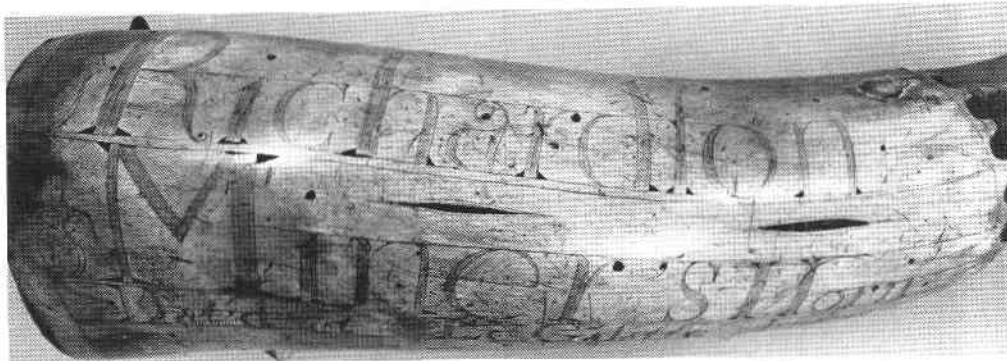


Diagram of Fort Edward and a brick house within the stockade on the Courtney horn.



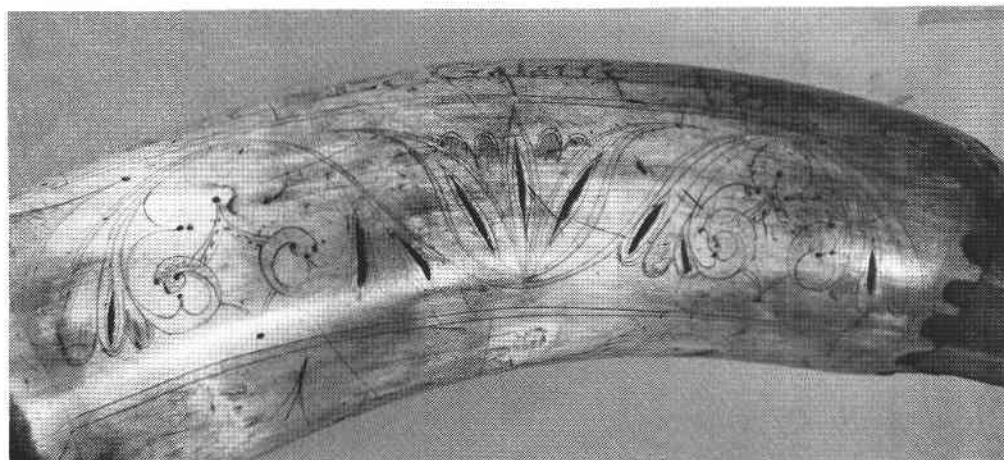
Other details on the Courtney horn.



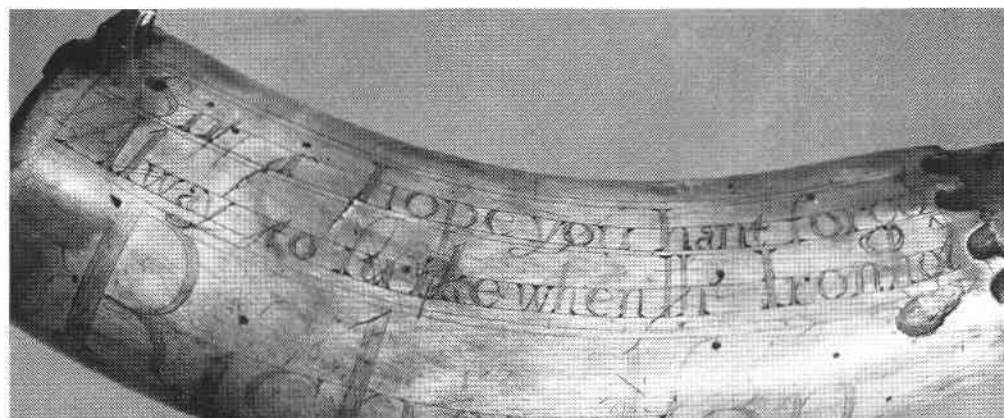
Richardson Miner's powder horn. Miner was a silversmith from Stratford, Connecticut.



Closeup detail of the miner horn showing place and date, Le Galatte, August 29, 1760.



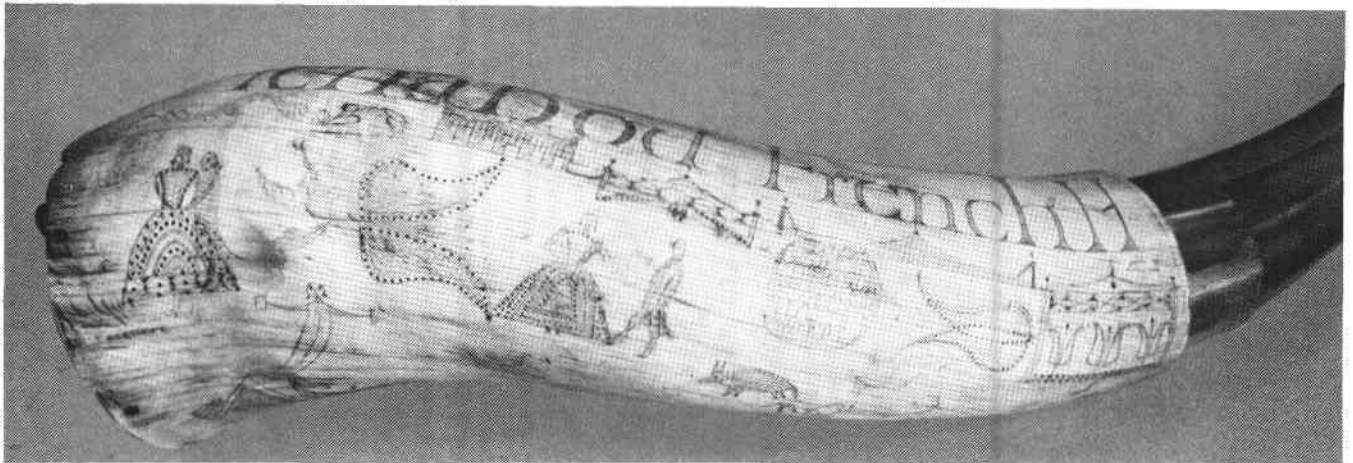
Detail of the incise design on the Miner horn. Because he was a silversmith, Miner probably engraved his own horn.



Detail of poem on miner's horn. "Sir i hope yu hant forgot/Always to strike when Th' iron hot".



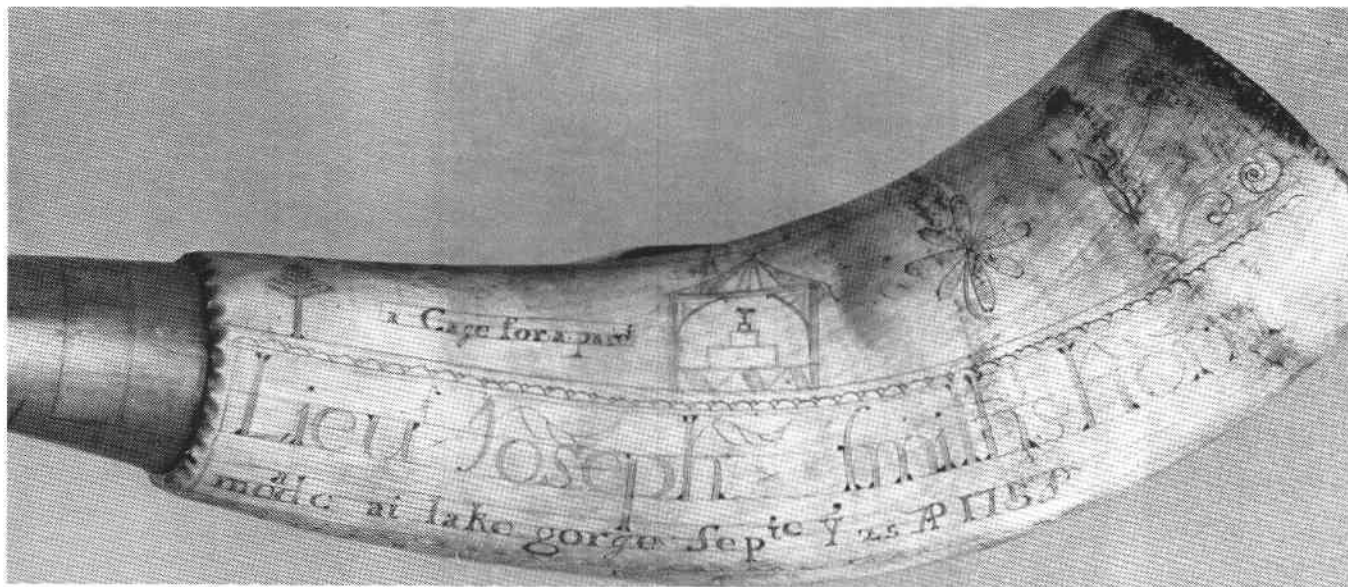
Sgt. Ichabod French's horn. Although the horn is not dated, it was carved between 1755-1758 and is the style of the Lake George/Lake Champlain horn carvers. During the 1757-1758 winter campaign, French served in the same company of rangers as Whelpley, Hamilton & Selkrig.



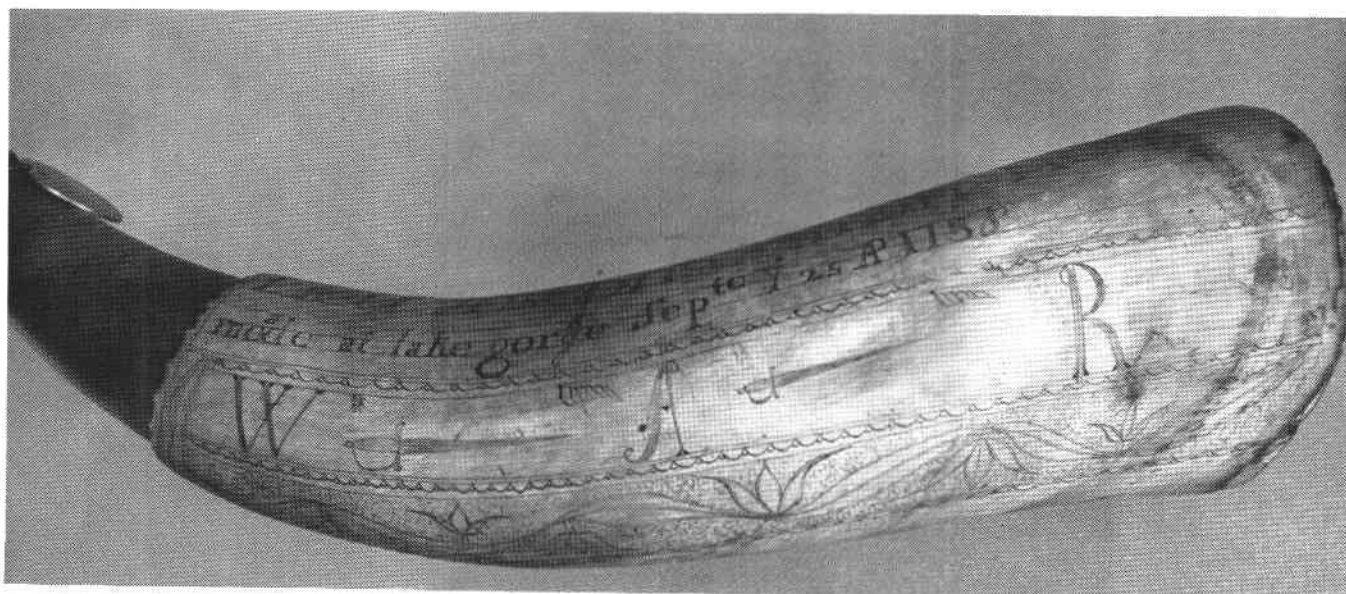
Back side of the French horn with the Rhyme, 'A Man of/words/And not of/Deeds Is Like/a Garden/Ful of/Weeds.'



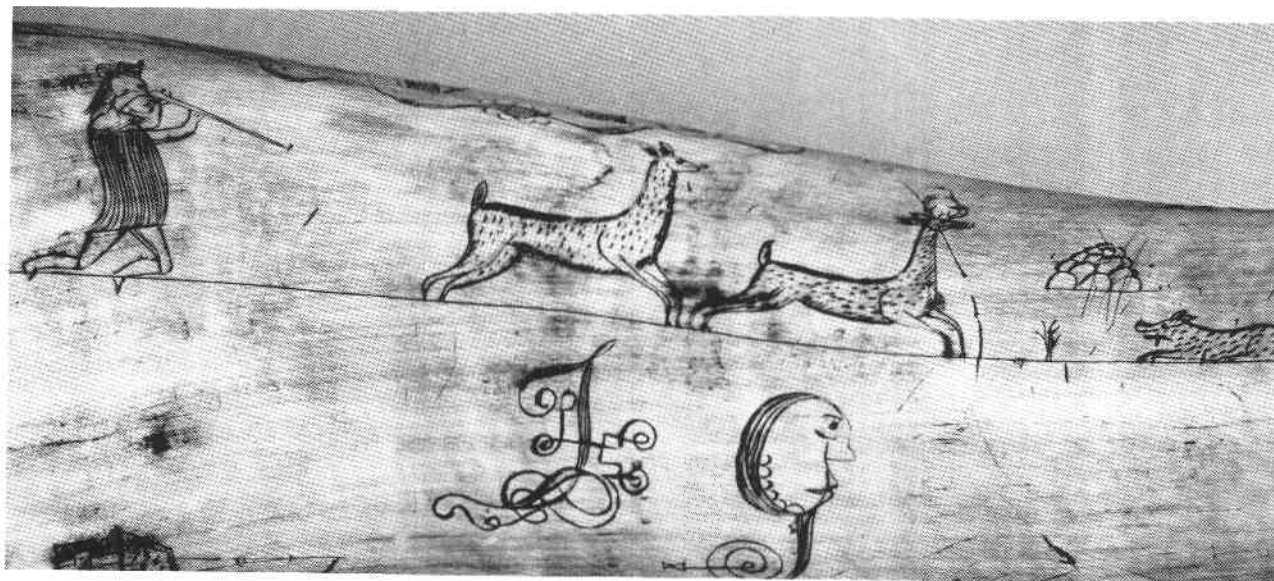
Close-up of John Mills' horn made at Crown Point, November 4, 1760, and carved by Jacob Gay.



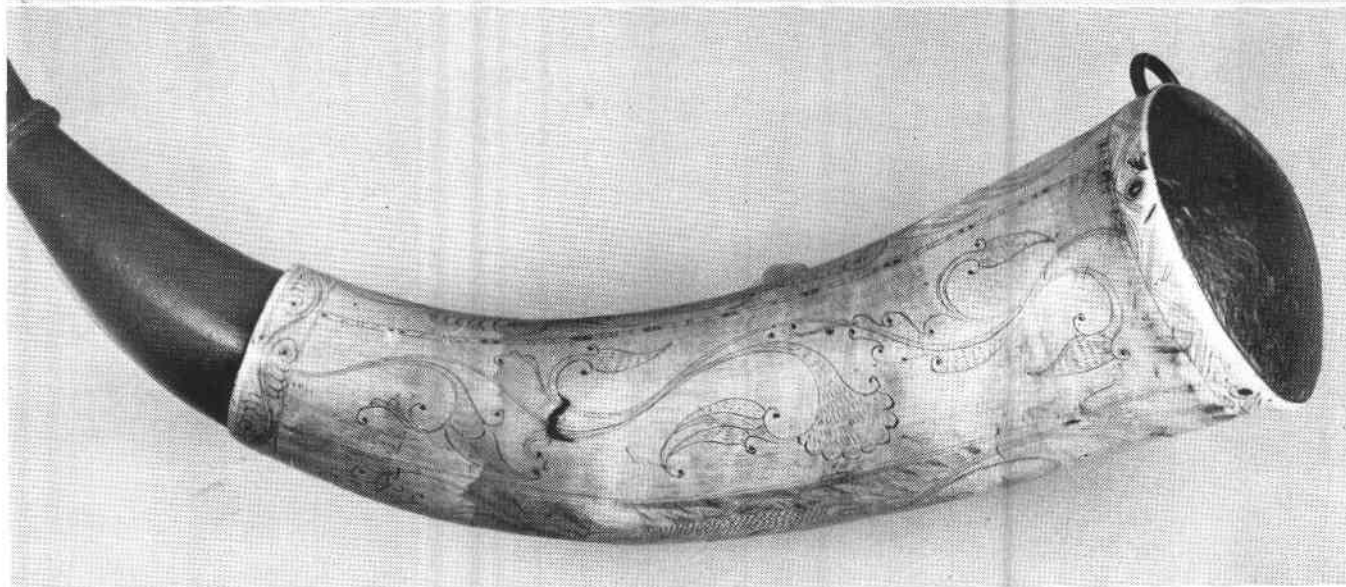
Lt. Joseph Smith's horn dated at Lake George, September 25, 1758.



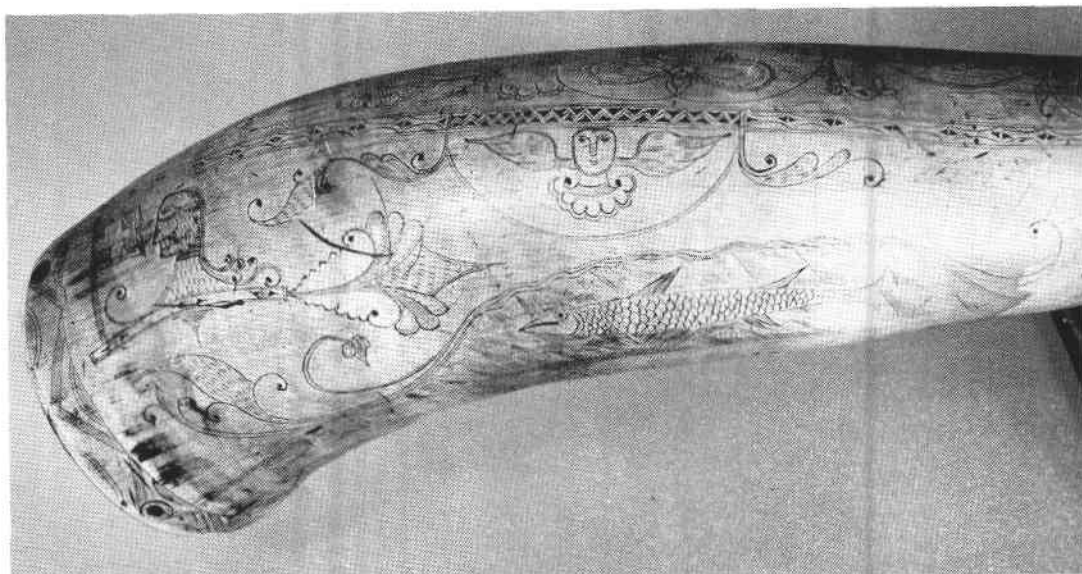
Back side of Lt. Joseph Smith's horn showing a different version of the letters W A R, these being separated by wonderful examples of French-Indian war period swords.



Back side view of Mills' horn (opposite page) showing the wonderful animals, a hunter and the initials of the carver, "J.G."



William Williams' horn, carved by John Bush. Williams served in the Lake George Campaign of 1757-1759.



Detail of Bush's carving on the Williams horn. Note winged head often found on tombstones.