

The Asheville Armory and Rifle

By William B. Floyd

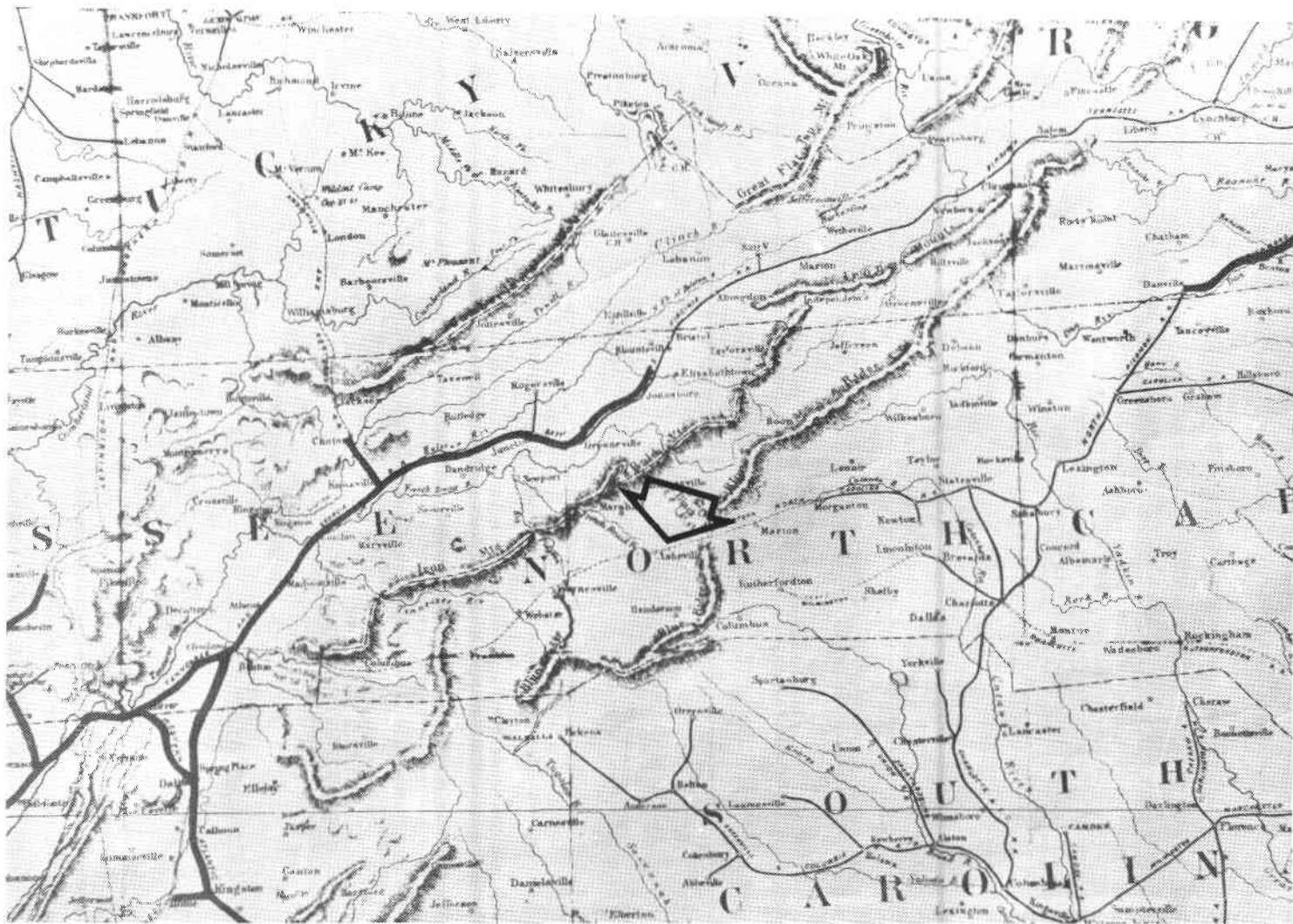
When I first started the project of locating data on the Asheville Armory, I was surprised at the lack of any readily available manuscripts: only newspaper articles, all of which were printed since 1900, and a few references in the official records. Most of these articles were hand-me-down stories, with the exception of an item written by Maj. Benjamin Sloan and printed in the *Asheville Citizen* in December, 1923. Knowing how newspapers can get things out of context, I began to try to locate as much material as I could from the original documents. This is no easy task if you don't have experience or know someone that can get you on the right track. I was very fortunate to have an old friend, Ralph Donnelly, who had been historian for the Marine Corps in Washington. Ralph and I were members of the same Civil War Round Table before the Centennial and I was impressed with his knowledge of Confederate ordnance and his published work on the Nitre and Mining Bureau and his most recent work on the Confederate States Marine Corps. Ralph told me where to start in search of materials and as a result I have been able to find much unpublished material. A search of the "Old Records Section" of the National Archives produced much material; this is a very time consuming and expensive project. Some valuable material was found in the personnel files of ordnance officers as well as the files of persons and contractors who supplied materials to the government. Other valuable material was located in the N.C. Archives and the Libraries of Asheville, Old Pendleton, S.C. and Oconee county. The most valuable material was located in the Virginia State Library; this was the original Armory Letter Book. The original agreement by the parties when they established the Armory was of much help. Some items, such as shipping bills of lading helped me know where some of the arms went. The Letter Book covered the period from the take over of the Armory by the Ordnance Department through the movement of the Armory to Columbia, S.C. into the last of May, 1864. I hope someday to be able to locate material from this point until the Armory was destroyed by Sherman. Today, I will cover only the Asheville Armory and some other day do the Columbia Armory story. Now let's begin . . .

To understand fully the operation and the final product of the Asheville, N.C. Armory, you first must have a bit of knowledge of the location of the village and other problems connected with the operation. Asheville, a village of about 1100 persons in 1860, was located in a valley along the French Broad River between two high mountain ranges of the great Smokies. To the west a high range of peaks separated North Carolina from Tennessee and on the east a range separating Asheville from the Piedmont sections of North Carolina and South Carolina. There were no railroads through the valley, only stage and wagon freight roads and trails. In most cases these roads forded the rivers and creeks; there were a few private plank roads and bridges near the towns. The only way



in or out was passable only in good weather. The nearest telegraph and railroad was over the west peaks at Greenville, Tennessee and to the southeast, Greenville, South Carolina, where the railroad connected Greenville with Columbia, S.C. The people of the mountains were of pioneer stock, descendants of veterans of the Revolutionary battles of Cowpens and King's Mountain. They were very independent. There were no industries except lumber mills and small foundries that supplied the valley and hill people with stoves, cookware and farming implements. Asheville, then, was a trading center for the valley and hill people.

In 1861, Col. R. W. Pulliam returned to his native area and became associated with the firm of Gaines Dever and Company, merchants in Asheville. At the same time he became an agent for the Ordnance Bureau of the Confederate States of America. His original agreement was for him to collect, purchase and repair small arms for the Confederate government. Col. Pulliam encouraged two local businessmen, Col. Ephiram Clayton, a builder and operator of a planing mill, and Dr. George Whitson, to form a partnership to repair and manufacture small arms and gave them a contract. From the inception of their agreement this operation was badly handled. Whether the blame was that of the Ordnance Bureau, or Pulliam's ignorance, or lack of guidelines is very difficult to determine. In the original agreement there were a lot of legal words with vague references to rents of property and tools and no fixed prices, only a promise to pay a fair price equal to that paid to other contractors. Pulliam failed to submit the contract to Richmond for approval and this later caused his own downfall. Pulliam ran the operation from his store, sometimes mixing up his charges by issuing script to the workers so they could make purchases from his store. Since there were no local quartermasters or other government suppliers, Pulliam made his own agreements with suppliers in the name of the Ordnance Bureau. The operation spent the time from the agreement of August 5, 1861, until November of 1862 getting up the



Civil War era railroad map showing Asheville area roads and railroads.

machinery and adding buildings to the 3½ acre tract. In the latter part of November, the master armourer, Mr. King, formally of Harpers Ferry Armory, notified Col. J. Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance in Richmond, that he had 200 rifles ready and wished instructions for shipping. This came as a surprise to the bureau and Gorgas sent W. S. Downer, Superintendent of Armories, on a visit to Asheville. Maj. Downer, also formerly of Harpers Ferry Armory, wrote the following report to Gorgas:

Richmond, Va., Nov. 22, 1862

Colonel:

I beg to report that on my visit to Asheville Armory, I became casually aware of many things in connection with the administration which it may be of interest for the Department to know. Not having been authorized to do so I did not feel at liberty to make any official enquiry but my general duty to the welfare of the service compelled me to notice what I herewith report. I find that the concern at Asheville was first conceived by Messrs. Clayton, Whitson and Pulliam. Mr. Clayton is a carpenter and owns the property. Dr. Whitson is a gentleman of general genius but no practical knowledge of mechanics. Mr. Pulliam was a member of the firm of Gaines Dever & Co., who are merchants of this place. Messrs. Whitson & Clayton were the superintendents of the mechanical operations and Mr. Pulliam the business man of the concern. As far as I can learn, the tools and machines, before Mr. King arrived at Asheville, were mere makeshifts and the work carried on almost at the discretion of the men employed. Consequently the guns were made worthless and the labor performed (at the expense of the Department) worse than thrown away. I find that Mr. King is a young man of a

good deal of talent, self confidence and energy but extremely ignorant of the rules of official etiquette. On his arrival there he took charge of the workshops and made his own appointments of foreman in a great measure. Mr. Clayton is now foreman of Carpenters and Dr. Whitson assistant foreman in the manufactory department. Mr. Pulliam has a great deal of private business to attend to, which from what I can learn, keeps him absent from the Armory the greater portion of the time. I believe that Mr. Pulliam has been in the habit of exercising too little authority and Mr. King too much. No official discipline has been enforced.

This state of things led to fault-finding and jealousy between Mr. King and Pulliam which caused the present unpleasant state of feelings. During Mr. Pulliam's absence at Charleston two weeks ago, a gentleman told Mr. King that Mr. Pulliam had said he was going to Richmond to make an effort for his removal. On this information Mr. King wrote you a foolish letter of which he informed me, the folly of which I explained to him. I find also from Mr. Pulliam's information that he is mixing up public affairs with his own business which will apt to lead to great confusion in his accounts. For instance, buying meal, flour, etc. to sell to the workmen at a price, as he states, to cover expenses, and accounting for the funds so expended, as cash on hand. He informs me also that he keeps his cash, etc. at the store and when the men have signed the roll, gives them an order on Gaines Dever & Co. for the money. The appointment of a military storekeeper, with stipulation that he is to have no clerk, would entail no extra expense on the Armory and would preclude any difficulty arising in regard to money matters. As to the conscript business, of which Mr. King also wrote you, Mr. Pulliam made an error, he stated the whole matter to me and I told him

frankly that I knew his intentions were correct but he had done wrong and I knew his action would not be sustained. He made application for the detail of the conscripts for Govt. business and then made him oversear on his place and put a negro slave in his place at the work for which he was detailed. I did not feel at liberty to offer advice to the officers except in cases in which it was asked. I would respectfully suggest also in regard to the property at that place that the Govt. is paying a large rent, over 20% on the value of the property, and at the same time making improvements which will more than double its value, which will by law revert to the owner of the land. The property can be bought now as is with all the machinery, including the steam engine (which is worth over \$1500) wood planner, whip saws, etc., for the sum of six thousand dollars. I would therefore respectfully recommend that it be purchased because if the Armory is merely a temporary thing it will ensure to the government the benefit of the increase value of the property by reason of the improvements made at our cost. The office and blacksmith shop now being erected will cost more than the price at which it is offered. Asking pardon for the lengthy communication, I am respectfully,

W. S. Downer, Supt. of Armories

Later on the Confederate Government did purchase the property.

It did not take Gorgas long to act. Within 30 days of Downer's report he had appointed Capt. Benjamin Sloan, who had been an Ordnance inspector at the Tredegar Works, the new commander at the Asheville Armory and relieved Mr. Pulliam from duty. Sloan, a young man of 26 years, was a graduate of the Citadel Military Academy and West Point, class of 1860. When Sloan left Richmond he stopped over in Old Pendelton, S.C., near Greenville, to marry his sweetheart, to whom he had been engaged for seven years. He then proceeded by stagecoach to Asheville, arriving there just before Christmas day. Leaving his new bride at the Eagle Hotel, he walked the one block to the Armory, which was located on what is now Valley Street. The Armory buildings, located on a 3½ acre plot, consisted of a large wooden building that had housed the planning mill and was now used as the factory and two new brick buildings under construction for the blacksmith shop, engine room and boiler room and a new office. This being Christmas eve, he made his first entry in the Armory Letter Book as follows:

Asheville, Dec. 24, 1862
Col. J. Gorgas
Chief of Ordnance
Richmond, Va.
Colonel,

I have the honor to report that I have arrived at the Asheville Armory, and assumed command of the same.

A copy of Major Downer's report of the rifle, manufactured at this Armory, has been received and the alterations suggested in obedience to your order shall receive prompt attention.

Very Respectively,
Your Obt. Ser.
B. Sloan, Capt.
Commanding Armory

Asheville Armory

C.S. Armory
Dec. 24, 1862

Order #1

1. In obedience to orders received from the Bureau of Ordnance, the undersigned assumes command of the C.S. Armory at Asheville.
2. Tomorrow being Christmas day, all operations at the Armory will be suspended. The guard will be posted as usual.

B. Sloan, Capt.
Commanding Armory

Early on the 26th of December, Sloan was back at work, "trying to get a handle on things." He dashed off three letters to Gorgas covering appointments of MSK,¹ Master Armorer and the need of supplies. Also a letter to Downer concerning a number of short rifle barrels at the Richmond Armory.

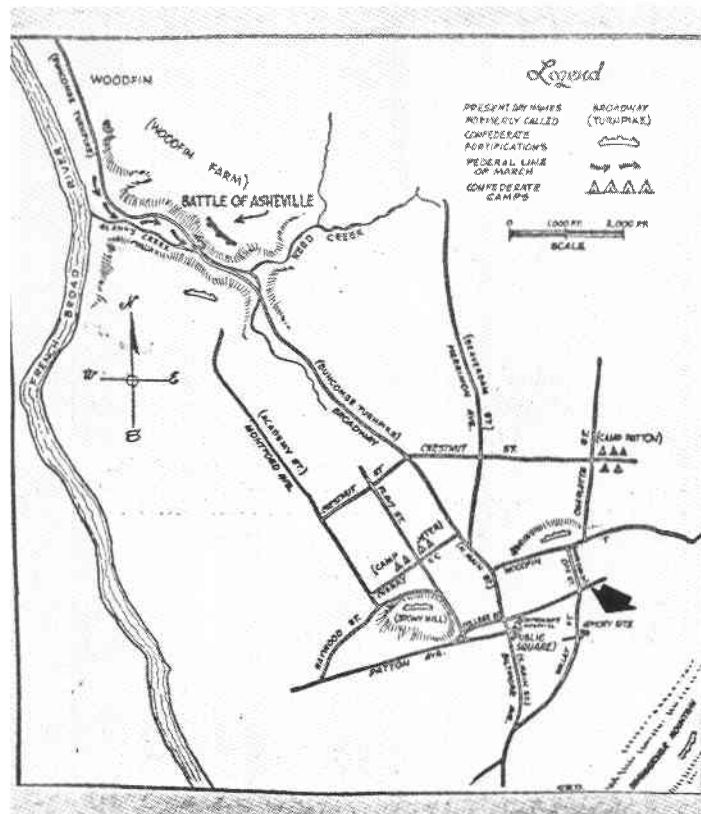
The next three days must have been on a weekend since his next entry was on the 29th, letters to Pulliam concerning his account and letters to suppliers of iron ore. The next two days Sloan continued to work on his staff and to review pressing problems. After New Year's day, Sloan began a mass laying off of persons considered not needed, many of whom were conscripts.

By the end of January, Sloan must have gotten "a handle on things," since he wrote Gorgas a letter advising him that he had 200 rifles ready except the stocks, which were made entirely by hand and were a major holdup, and sought stock making machinery to speed up his operation.

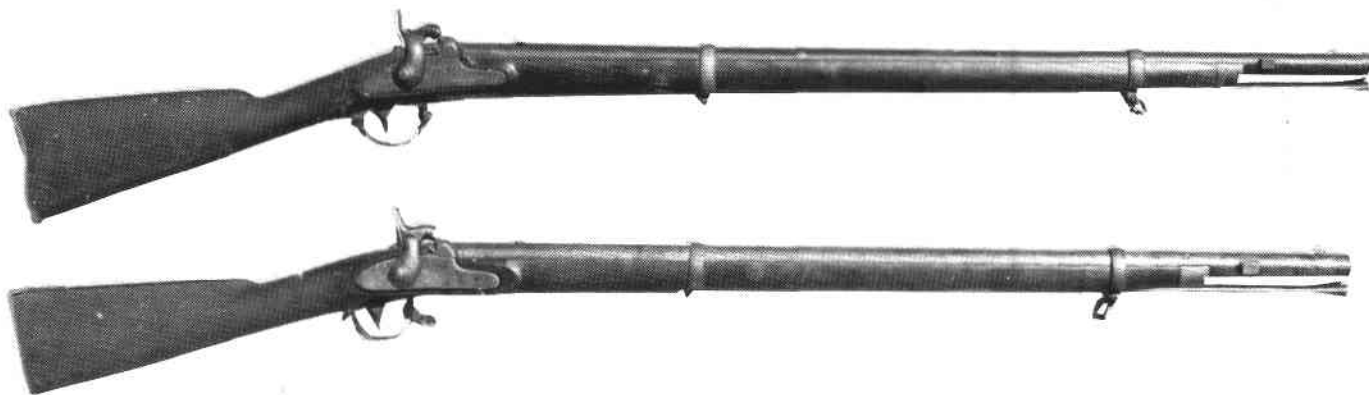
By the 15th of February, he again wrote Gorgas that stocking was a major problem and that he only had 100 of the 200 ready to ship, but that the rest would be ready soon. On the 21st, he advised that 200 would be ready by March 10th.

By this time Sloan was really bogged down trying to get a supply of barrels and stocks from Richmond as well as other necessary items. He complained to Gorgas that Downer had discouraged him from setting up furnaces to make his own barrels and that he could supply these better from Richmond since rolling mills were available there. After studying correspondence from Downer to Asheville and Fayetteville Armories, one finds the same problems existed at both places; one must come to the conclusion that the output of both Asheville

¹Military Store Keeper



Map of Asheville, N.C., showing location of the armory.



Top, late version of the Asheville rifle; below, unmarked rifle believed to be an early Asheville. W.B. Floyd collection.

and Fayetteville Armories was greatly reduced due to Downer's actions. In due course, Sloan did succeed in getting several hundred condemned musket barrels from Richmond.

Finally Sloan did set up furnaces and forges and received his ore from nearby Cranberry Works and other mines in North Carolina. Also, he made his own stocking machinery and produced his own stocks.

By summer of 1863, Sloan had 151 persons working under the Armory name. He had much criticism from Richmond due to the fact he produced so few arms yet had so many employees. This didn't go over so well with Sloan, since he had at least one-third of his hands getting supplies, building a sawmill, making his own charcoal, supplying his own transportation to rail centers and hauling iron from mines as far away as 80 mountain miles. Also the lack of local troops to guard the Armory that was threatened by raiders consisting of deserters, mountain people who resented the war, and the federals as well. This threat was more felt when the village of Marshal, some 20 miles away, was sacked by raiders which caused Sloan to request two field guns to protect the area. He formed a company of workers to defend the Armory should the rebels attack. This threat was not long in coming, when the enemy was reported to the west near the bottom of the mountains. The company, in conjunction with local home guard, caught the raiders at Hot Springs, some 25 miles to the west, and completely routed them. This ended the raids for the time being but this constant threat plus the loss of the main road to the railroad and telegraph in Tennessee and the main route to Knoxville added another burden.

By June, 1863, Richmond began to question the operation and its product and caused Sloan to respond by the following letter:

Col.,

In answer to a letter received from the Ordnance Bureau, dated May 22nd, 1863, I have to say — the barrel cannot be conveniently shortened from 33 inches to 28 or even 30 inches. The stocking machinery, which is just completed, will have to be changed as well as all the tools, bands, etc. This change in length of the arm would cause a just delay in the manufacture of the rifle.

It is my opinion that a regular product of arms from this Armory can be relied on provided the necessary assistance is given.

The work is behind now, because my requisition for barrels has not been fulfilled. Preparations for making barrels were not made because

Major Downer suggested when on a visit to this Armory, official, that it would be better for him to supply the barrels from Richmond. I beg leave to call your attention to my letter of March 28th, therein reference to the subject. A monthly supply of iron (3000 lbs.) is now received from the Cranberry Works and we are making our own barrels. As soon as the barrel department gets under headway again there will be nothing to prevent the fabrication of from 150 to 200 rifles monthly.

Twelve months ago (June, '62) there were no tools and but little machinery at this Armory. Since that time all the tools necessary for the manufacture of the arm have been fabricated here. But a few pieces are yet to be added. Some of these are in process of construction. The stocking machinery entirely will be completed before long. The turning machine for the first and 2nd turning is now completed.

In addition to the tools and machinery fabricated, 400 rifles have been put into service and 200 others will be ready for shipment on your order.

I beg Colonel, to return the enclosed letter for your signature in order that I may place it on file with other official letters.

Very respectfully,
B. Sloan, Capt.

By August 6th, Sloan telegraphed his Master Armorer, who was in Richmond, to ask Col. Gorgas what to do with the rifles now finished and that they had better keep 100 on hand (for defense).

On August 25th, Sloan had had enough and wrote Gorgas to assign him to some other duty.

By September, Sloan again wrote Gorgas to recommend the removal of the Armory from Asheville since the federals by then had captured Knoxville and were in striking distance.

It was not until October 15th that a replacement arrived to relieve Sloan. Captain C.C. McPhail was an artillery officer and former ordnance officer under T.J. Jackson at Harpers Ferry after its capture.

McPhail instantly reported to Gorgas on the state of things at Asheville and explained that in his opinion Sloan had done all in his power to make a go of the Armory under very adverse conditions. His remarks were very frank, and clearly stated that if Richmond would remove the causes of the complaints of the operatives that the effectiveness and efficiency of the works would improve.

By the 19th of October, McPhail notified Gorgas that the danger to the Armory was serious and without waiting for a reply ordered boxes to be made for the machinery should the occasion arise. It didn't take long for the answer to come from



Top, Asheville rifle from the John Murphy collection; lower, one in the collection of the N. Carolina Division of Archives and History.

Gorgas and on the 24th a special order was issued suspending operations of the Armory. Two days later the first wagon train, under control of E. W. Maxwell, was on its way to Greenville, S.C. Arrangements were made to move the Armory to Columbia, S.C., next door to the C.S. Arsenal and Depot and the Naval Powder Works. Since no buildings existed suitable for the Armory, plans were made to erect them and most of the machinery was stored. All hands not needed to move the machinery were either moved to Columbia, with their families, or were released to conscript officers. The best men were loaned to other Armories until needed again.

Two days later, on October 28th, the second wagon train left Asheville with other valuable machinery and supplies. It was not until six months later that the boiler and engine were removed. This then ended the Asheville Armory. Later the buildings were used for prisoners by a commander of local forces. Still later, on April 28, 1865, the buildings were destroyed by Stoneman's federal cavalry.

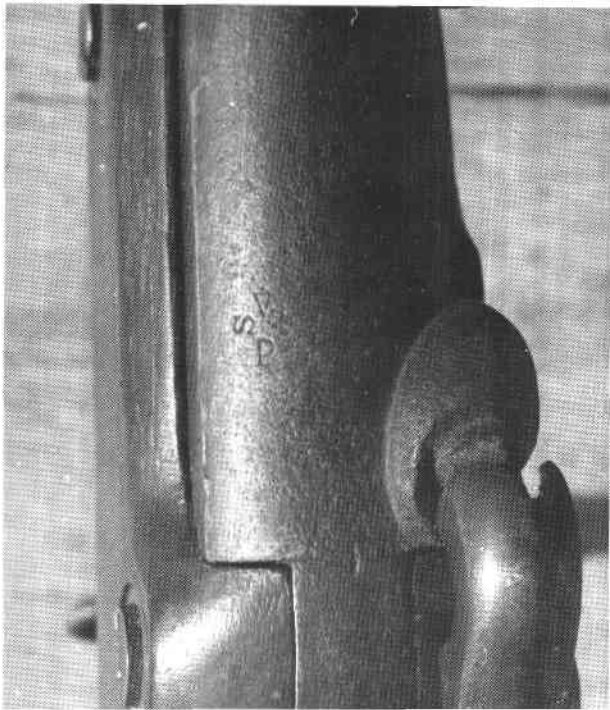
Surviving specimens of the Asheville rifle show some variation. This should be so, since the first 200 were made almost entirely by hand and no provision was made for a bayonet and it is not clear who finally did install a lug for the sword bayonet. A sample bayonet was sent from Richmond Armory but it was explained later that since the barrel was too large at the end, the barrel would have to be turned down. All known rifles use the sabre lug. Barrel lengths vary from 33 inches to 33 5/8 inches. Some barrels have the Richmond VP and some have none. The Asheville rifle on display has the VP and an S. This may have stood for Sloan, Stubbs or Stradley; the last two worked in the barrel department. All guns have the same fixed rear sight and the front blade sight. The stocks of several rifles have flat buttplates and others have the standard curved plate. This suggests to me that all the flat buttplate rifles are the early ones and the curved ones, the later ones. Also most of the flat plate rifles have "Asheville, N.C." stamped in the stock, whereas the curved ones have "Asheville, N.C." on the lock

plate. All known rifles have brass butt plates, brass clamping bands, brass trigger guard and nose cap. The brass varies in color, indicating variation in the mixture of copper and zinc. The copper pigs and bars were obtained from the copper mines in southeastern Tennessee, known today as Ducktown and Copper Hill. The locks all seem to be made by the same die but one difference is noted in that the screw that holds the main spring onto the plate is missing on two rifles.

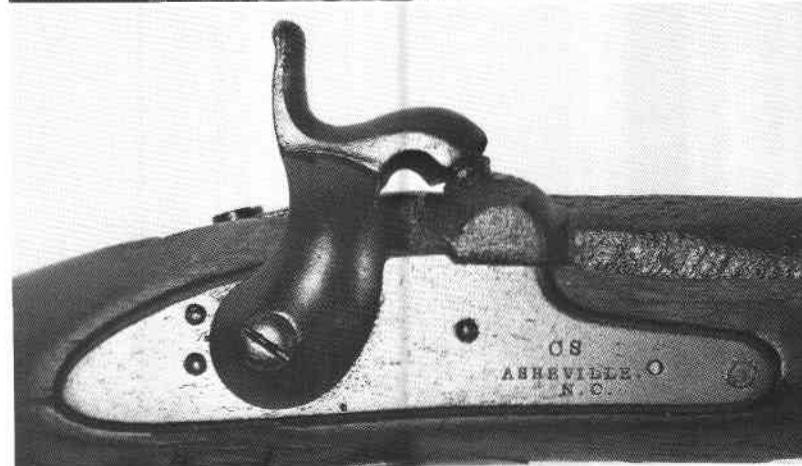
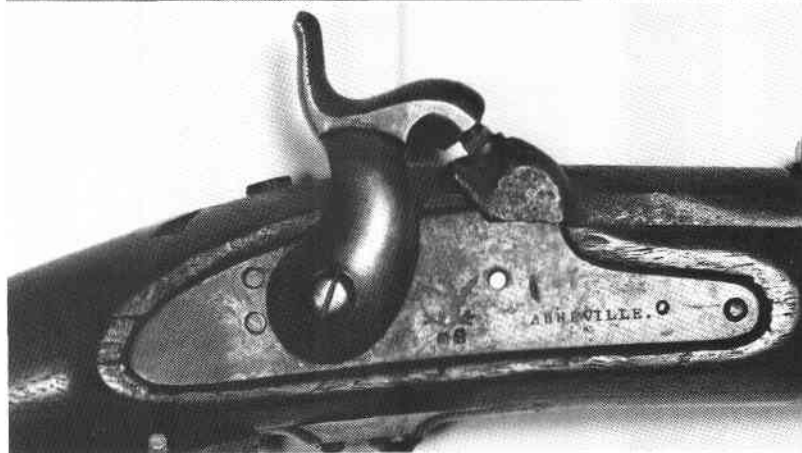
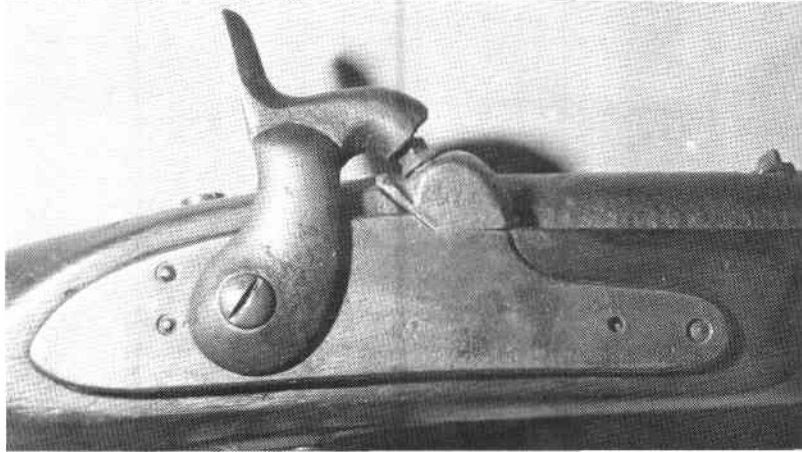
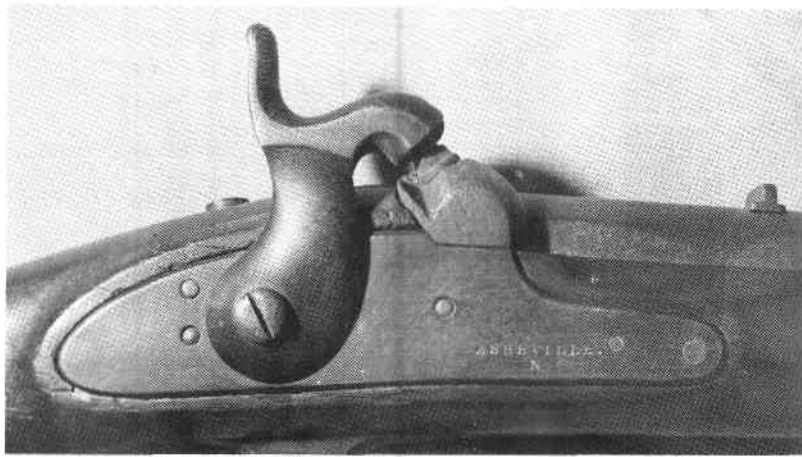
How many rifles were produced? Referring back to Sloan's letter to Gorgas dated June 2, 1863, he stated that 400 rifles were placed into service and 200 would be ready by the end of the month. The quarterly report of September 30, 1863, clearly shows 200 guns as having been produced during the 3rd quarter. Sloan does not make clear, but he does suggest that the 400 was a total from July 1862 to July 1863 and would include the 200 made before he took over the Armory. This then would be a total of 800 rifles through the 30th of September. From October 1st until the 24th, when the Armory stopped production, we can safely estimate not more than 100 additional rifles were made at Asheville, making a grand total of less than 900.

Where did they all go? 200 were shipped to Col. White at Selma, Alabama, and from the records we know that the boxes were broken open in Knoxville, Tennessee, and guns distributed to citizens. It took almost a week to recover these guns and get them on the way again. 200 more were shipped to the Atlanta Arsenal; we have a copy of the shipping invoice. This means that about one-half were known to have been shipped to Georgia and Alabama; I hope to locate where the others were shipped.

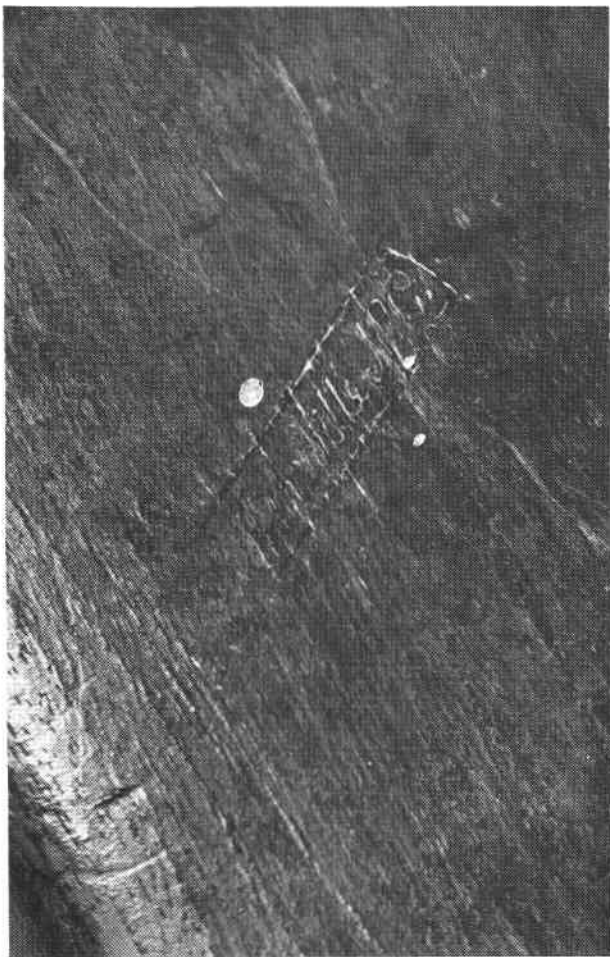
Why are these guns so rare today? Again we must examine surviving rifles. At least three known guns have "Asheville, N.C." on the lock plate and three have "Asheville, N.C." stamped in the stock only. My guess is that there are many of these rifles in collections today without visible markings, like the unmarked rifle shown. I would appreciate knowing about any you may know of for further study.



Proof marks on rifle in W.B. Floyd collection.



Lockplates from Asheville rifles: top two, page 24; third, rifle in John Murphy collection; bottom, N. Carolina State collection.



Stock stamp: "Asheville, N.C." in rectangle. John Murphy's rifle.