

“View of the Fort of the Natchez” much as DuPratz saw it in 1720.

Natchez: Its Glory and Its Guns

. Logan Sewell

At last we arrived at the Natchez, after a voyage of twenty four leagues; and we put on shore at a landing place which is at the foot of a hill two hundred feet high, upon the top of which Fort Rosalie is built, surrounded only with pallasadoes. When you are upon the top of this hill you discover the whole country, which is an extensive beautiful plain, with several little hills, interspersed here and there, upon which the inhabitants have built and made their settlements. The prospect of it so charming.

These words by M. LePage DuPratz in his *History of Louisiana*, written on January 5, 1720, express the feeling of beauty experienced by all of the early explorers of the Mississippi.

This is Natchez: born of the American Indian, nurtured by the French, English and Spanish and glorified by a wide spectrum of Americana, ranging from a knife-wielding American adventurer named Jim Bowie to a renowned wildlife artist named John James Audubon.

As early as 1542, Hernando DeSoto visited the Natchez Indians and sought their assistance in his on-going search for gold. How could he know that in 1682 LaSalle would claim the land for France and that it would be known as Louisiana?

Though the Natchez Indians provided its name, the founding of Fort Rosalie began its existence. Following the desire of Iberville to build a city here, it fell the lot of Beinville to establish a fort and name it Rosalie, doing so in 1716. It was shortly after this, in 1720, that DuPratz made his residence among the Natchez. For a period of eight years he observed and recorded their customs and ceremonials and gave us our most accurate account of those original inhabitants of Louisiana.

As a result of the establishment of Fort Rosalie, a town was laid out just to the north and would be called Natchez.

Unfortunately, nothing remains of Fort Rosalie, as the Natchez Indians sealed their fate by attacking and destroying the fort on November 29, 1729. Because of this massacre of the occupants, the French retaliated by driving the Natchez across the river to what is now the small town of Sicily Island, Louisiana, where the Natchez made their last stand; the Natchez, as a tribe, ceased to exist.

We are, however, provided a landmark of the fort, for upon its site in 1820, Peter Little built the present mansion, Rosalie. It was here, during the war in 1863, that Union General Walter Gresham set up headquarters. During the Union occupation he lived here with his wife.



For you Union enthusiasts, it is interesting to note that General Grant spent three days at Rosalie and you may view the bed in which he slept.

The glory days of Natchez began shortly after the turn of the 19th Century, with both ends of the spectrum of Americana providing its most famous moments.

On September 19, 1827, there occurred an event destined to provide any weapons enthusiast with a lasting impression of the violence and customs of early America. Natchez was on this date chosen to be the rendezvous of two groups of Louisianians, thirsting for honor, and some for revenge. A duel had been arranged between Dr. Maddox and Samuel Levy Wells of Alexandria, Louisiana. (Samuel Levy Wells was a great great uncle of your speaker.) In company with Samuel Wells was his close friend of long standing, James Bowie. Much has been written about this duel and rather than repeat all of the details, I will read to you from a diary written by John B. Nevitt of Natchez whose entry on the date of September 19, 1827, is as follows:

The gentlemen from Alexandria left my house to meet Mr. Samuel L. Wells and his party in an affair of honor on the sandbar above my bayou (Schillings Bayou). The former party was accompanied as spectators by Dr. Provan, Dr. Cox, Colonel Barnard, David Wood and myself. The affair was commenced by Dr. Maddox and Sam L. Wells who, after the exchange of two shots, each settled their differences to the satisfaction of both parties when as they advanced up to the woods to join the friends of each party an affray commenced between Col. Crain and one of the opposite party which I did not see the commencement of but which soon became general and which terminated in the death of General Cunney and Mr. Wright and the wounding

very dangerously of James Bowie and less so of Alfred Blanchard and Dr. Denny of Natchez (who had officiated as surgeon of Dr. Maddox). The parties then left the sand bar for the opposite shore. Mr. D. Wood, Col. Barnard, Dr. Provan and myself returned home. Dr. Maddox's party consisted of himself, Col. Crain, Alfred and Cary Blanchard, Mr. Norris Wright, and Dr. Denny, the opposing party of Samuel L. Wells, Jefferson Wells, General Cunney, James Bowie, Major MacWhorter and Dr. Cunney. Weather clear dry and warm, wind north and west.

As a result of this affair, which was widely publicized in all national newspapers, James Bowie became a legend and left his legacy, the Bowie Knife. This famous knife was designed by his brother, Rezin P. Bowie, who later presented several to special friends, one of whom was Jesse Perkins of Natchez, who was a member of the Natchez Fencibles. This knife is on exhibit in the Mississippi State Museum in Jackson; a replica made by Jimmy Lile is on exhibit at my table.

Moving to a more pleasant episode, we must mention the stay in Natchez of the famous John J. Audubon. Audubon lived in Natchez, taught dancing after being bankrupt in early 1820s and more importantly painted a landscape of the city of Natchez. This painting was commissioned for the sum of \$300.00 but the party of order died and it went unsold for some time. Audubon, however, had left his mark on Natchez and added in a prestigious way to its Glory Days.

Many other notables visited Natchez during the first half of the nineteenth century, among them Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay and Abraham Lincoln.

None, however, touched the hearts of Dixieland as did the beloved president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. It was here that he married Varina Howell, daughter of William B. Howell of Natchez. They were married at the Briars on February 26, 1845.

Prominent as President of the Confederacy, but more appropriately to this group, Davis was made Colonel of the Mississippi Regiment which answered a call to join General Zachary Taylor in the Mexican War. Before proceeding, Davis made a requisition for a thousand percussion rifles of the Whitney model, which were then manufactured at New Haven. General Scott objected to the use of a gun which had never been used by the army, much preferring the flintlock musket. However, upon Davis's insistence, he relented and Davis got his rifles. After gallantry at Monterey and Buena Vista, Davis received the plaudits of General Taylor in a written report:

The Mississippi riflemen, under the command of Colonel Davis, were highly conspicuous for gallantry and steadiness, and sustained throughout the engagement the reputation of veteran troops . . . His distinguished coolness and gallantry, and the heavy loss of his regiment on this day, entitle him to the particular notice of the government.

Thus was born the "Mississippi" Rifle.

The Mexican War touched Natchez again, in a similar way: General John A. Quitman heroically served in that same war and, as a resident of Natchez, brought more fame and glory to his home town. Quitman was born in Rinebeck, New York on December 3, 1798, and came to Natchez from Ohio in 1821. In a letter to his brother, he stated that his worldly possessions consisted of \$15.00. In 1824 he married Elizabeth Turner of Natchez and in 1826 purchased Monmouth, which was built in 1818 and will be toured by our group. General Quitman was extremely popular and was at various times a member of the state legislature, governor of Mississippi and a member of the U.S. Congress. He was presented an elaborate sword by President Polk in recognition of his service in the Mexican War; this sword is on exhibit in Monmouth.

A cased pair of Henry Deringers presented by General Quitman to a Natchez native, Farrah B. Conner is illustrated. Mr. Conner was an alderman of the City of Natchez and an avid supporter of General Quitman. In gratitude for his political help, he presented these deringers to F.B. Conner, whose initials are engraved in a silver plate on the stock. General Quitman died on July 17, 1858, as one of the most popular of all Mississippians.

Glory and Guns: what is the connection? By the middle 1830s Natchez had established itself as a romantic city, wealthy beyond its dream. Cotton had become King and had lined its palace with antebellum homes, lavishly furnished and built high above the flood waters of the Louisiana plains. Money was circulating, guns were necessary and gunsmiths were at a premium. Seizing the opportunity for a market, these artisans of steel and wood sought a site in Natchez, coming here from New York, Ohio and various distant cities.

Most prominent among the gunsmiths in Natchez during the 1840-1860 years were Henry G. Newcomb, Stephen Odell and Rees Fitzpatrick. I must add the name of another, C.Y. Piper, of whom I know little, but whose product on exhibit exemplifies a craftsmanship worthy of note.

Though reports say C.Y. Piper worked for H.G. Newcomb, so far I have not found substantiation. Apparently Gluckman and Satterlee in their "American Gunmakers" only recorded his name in their second edition as a result of having seen the rifle on exhibit here. They described the rifle as follows:

Unique brass half-stock percussion rifle, with patent breech and breechplate hook. Six gold bands at breech, one at muzzle, one in muzzle. Cast brass skeleton half-stock with engraved silver inlays in the brass. Burl walnut insert with silver patch box and cheekpiece inlay engraved with 13 stars, eagle, "E Pluribus Unum", flowers and scroll wire inlay."

This is an apt description of the gun, which also has a silver name plate on top of barrel with "C.Y. Pipe

Natchez" inscribed thereon. This is the only known gun by Piper.

H.G. Newcomb was born April 19, 1811, and died May 28, 1877. He came to Natchez from New York; his earliest advertisement is dated 1845, when he was located on the corner of Commerce and Franklin Streets, Cotton Square. In 1859 he purchased one half of what is now George's Department Store from Silas Marsh for \$1,750.00; in 1862 he purchased the other half. The site of this building was used as the center of a survey in laying out the town in 1803. Newcomb apparently was of rather modest means and did not acquire property as did some of his contemporaries. It is unfair to conclude that Newcomb's guns did not measure up to those of Piper, Odell and Fitzpatrick; it may be one has just not turned up.

Stephen Odell was also lured to Natchez from New York. He was born about 1817 and arrived in Natchez as early as 1842, a young man in his early or middle twenties. Probably the most active of all gunsmiths in Natchez, his advertisements locate him at the corner of Main and Commerce and later, "next door to his old stand."

It is interesting to note the variety of merchandise he offered; advertising in the Natchez paper of December 6, 1850, he lists, among other things, 3 double guns, London mahogany cases; 18 doz. double guns, assorted sizes and quality; 4 doz. singles; 4 only extra fine rifles; 4 doz. Allen revolvers; 12 doz. powder flasks, and 12 doz. sets of German silver, iron and brass rifle mountings. Apparently he had a thriving business. He was also agent for Henry Deringer and Colt.

Odell purchased much property in Natchez, leaving a large estate upon his death. He purchased his last residence on July 14, 1862, on the corner of Canal and Franklin streets for \$7,500.00. Among other property he owned at one time was the antebellum home, Choctaw, now the headquarters of the Natchez Art Association; he almost immediately sold this house to George Malin Davis. Transactions of property to and from Odell are too numerous to list, and what he eventually would have owned, had he not come to an untimely death, can only be imagined. While in his home on the corner of Canal and Franklin he was brutally murdered on March 16, 1862, at the age of 45. A \$1,000.00 reward was offered by the Mayor of Natchez for the apprehension of his murderer but to no avail. This remains a mystery. His work leaves a testimony to his talents as shown in the following.

He ornamented and engraved a Mississippi rifle which is symbolic of its importance to all Mississippians and especially to students of Jeff Davis or the Mexican War. His derringers were his most popular items; he made them both simple and elaborate. Probably the finest pair of derringers made in the South or elsewhere were the gold mounted, highly engraved beautifully stocked pair

shown on the cover of *Man at Arms*, Jan.-Feb. 1984, and the back of this *Bulletin*.

The last of the gunsmiths to be dealt with here is Rees Fitzpatrick. A silversmith, watch-maker, lock-maker and gunsmith, all portray his exceptional talents. A native of Ohio, coming to Natchez from Baton Rouge, he was not long in making his mark, both locally and nationally. Born November 2, 1808, he actively pursued his craft until his death on October 2, 1868. Unlike his contemporaries, he left a going business to his son, Louis Albert Fitzpatrick, who continued his father's business, but to what degree we have been unable to determine. His sign advertising "Guns and Ammunition" is shown in early photos of his establishment. Many stories were circulated about Rees Fitzpatrick's accomplishments, among them that he made the first Bowie knife and that he made a unique bayonet to attach to a rifle barrel. Most notable among his work, and fully documented, is a beautiful sword made for the citizens of Natchez for presentation to General Quitman. This sword is on exhibit in the Mississippi State Museum, Jackson, Mississippi, and is truly a work of art. He also was commissioned by Governor Pettus to make a sword for Major Van Dorn. Letters dated November 15, 1860, and March 18, 1861, addressed to the governor by Fitzpatrick attest to the fact that his was a "labor of love" as he put it:

To His Excellency:

Governor: I am in receipt of your letter respecting the manufacture of a Sword for Maj. Vandorn to cost three or four hundred dollars.

In reply I would respectfully state that I was entrusted with a similiar commission by the Citizens of Natchez to make a Sword of Honor for General Quitman on his return from his Mexican triumphs at an expense of \$500. It was with me a labor of love and I put nearly the entire amount into the material. The fine Damascus blade and the massive gold alone costing more than \$300. The jewell at the end of the hilt and the etchings of inscriptions and battle scenes both on the blade and scabbard were all expensive. It was my good fortune to give unbounded satisfaction both to the donors and the gallant receiver. Officers of high rank in the US Army who have seen it have given it a marked preference over the Swords which were presented to Gen. Quitman by the States of South Carolina, by Congress and the State of New York the latter costing \$1400.00.

I retain all the dies, stamps and patterns of the Quitman Sword, and thus could make a handsome saving by not having to make new ones. I could also make a saving in not using such thick and massive gold as I did in Quitman's, and could make it as servicable and look as well at an expense of \$400, the highest sum you mentioned. I could have it finished and delivered to your Excellency during first week in Jan. next.

It would be necessary to furnish me the Inscription for engraving on the blade and scabbard as well as the designs or scenes for etching.

I will do the work well and artistically knowing as I do that it will be subject to the scrutiny of members of the

Legislature and good judges of such work. If I can find the faithful descriptions of the Quitman Sword which were published in the journals here at that time among the old files I will send your Excellency a copy of the same either enclosed or by next mail.

And respectfully ever your obliged friend
R. Fitzpatrick

Natchez March 18, 1861

Gov. Pettus: Your Excellency's letter dated the 13th has just come to hand.

I had delayed to finish the Sword of Honor to Gen. VanDorn only because it had been so long since I heard from your Executive Office that I did not know but the press of the great matters of the revolution had put the matter out of mind.

I have the work in such preparation that I cannot finish it without delay of a few weeks; but I want the inscription to engrave and the designs to be etched immediately, as they require both skill and time to execute in the style I will do them.

Please accompany them with full directions how and where to be placed. The work is still more a work of love with me since it is to honor a native Mississippian who surrendered office in the ranks of the Oppression to join his oppressed fellow citizens and who is now most worthily the second in command to your Excellency in the Army of Mississippi.

Ever your obedient servant
R. Fitzpatrick

Examination of his work leaves us spellbound by his meticulous handwork with gold and silver and particularly impressed with his engravings. Though some gunsmiths had engravings done by others and more are suspected to have had a majority of their work done elsewhere, we note by his letters evidence of his dedication to do the whole work himself. Fortunately we can examine a pistol and a rifle of his design, both of which portray an abundance of talent.

The pistol is a pleasure to handle, not awkward to hold, and balanced superbly. With a silver trigger guard and fore-end cap, both finely engraved, the butt is capped with ivory and gold. The breech has four gold and two silver bands, with one gold and one silver band at the muzzle. The lockplate, hammer, and tang are all beautifully engraved.

The rifle exhibits the touch of a true craftsman even more. Its silver patchbox with a running deer and two cornucopias blend with a profusely engraved lockplate and trigger guard; a fluted barrel is set off with seven gold bands at the breech, six at the rear sight, four at the front sight and three at the muzzle. The toe piece is elongated and engraved to flow into the tang. A unique breechblock makes it hard to identify where the fluted barrel ends and the block begins. To finish it off he has four gold key escutcheons and a gold cornucopia inlet into the cheek-piece. The name "Fitzpatrick" is engraved in a banner on the lockplate.

Many times, in doing research, we come upon the unusual. This happened when this speaker was becoming acquainted with Odell and Fitzpatrick. While reeling off the microfilm of what seemed to be thousands of early issues of Natchez newspapers, there suddenly appeared an advertisement notifying of the dissolution of the partnership of "Fitzpatrick and Odell." Two great artists having set up shop together, now under date of September 7, 1843, were announcing their separation. Reeling further along to the year 1845, an advertisement by Odell on September 23 of previous year announces continuance as gunsmith with prices "*as reasonable as any other establishment in the city.*" Just below Odell's ad, Fitzpatrick, under date of January 21, 1845, states his terms to be "*twenty five percent cheaper than any other establishment in the city.*" Apparently the rift was made.

All stories must end well, however, and you will be pleased to know that after the death of both Odell and Fitzpatrick, under date of November, 1872, a bill was submitted to S. Odell Estate, Corner Canal Street and Franklin, by L. Fitzpatrick, son of Rees Fitzpatrick, for fitting two keys, together with job work, in the amount of \$3.00. Since it is marked paid, we can only assume all ended well with the Fitzpatricks and the Odells.

So, too, can we assume that just as its glory days brought the guns, so do its guns add to the glory of Natchez.

Acknowledgements:

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Natchez Historical Society
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References:

History of Louisiana by M. LePage DuPratz
Diary of John B. Nevitt, 1826-1832
The Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, 1908
Various Natchez newspapers, circa 1840-1865
Natchez Democrat, December 26, 1984



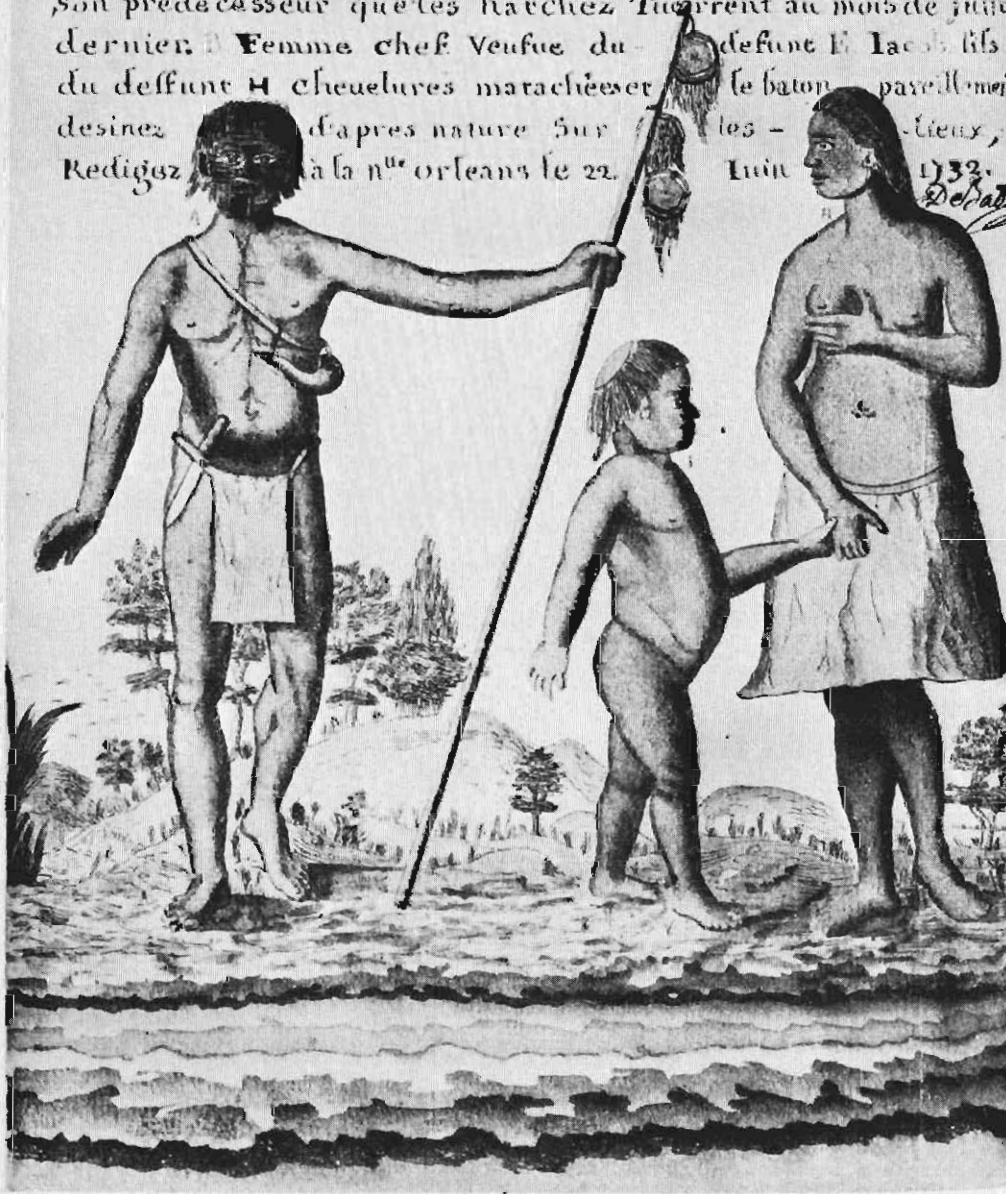
Pottery done by the Natchez. Author's collection.

SAUVAGE matachez en guerrier, ayant fait trois Chevelure
 cest a dire ayant tuez trois Hommes Natchez.

↳ Brida les Beufs Chef des Thonicas, il remply la place de
 son predecesseur que les natchez Tuerrent au mois de juin

dernier. ↳ Femme chef veufue du defunt E. Iacob fils
 du defunt H chevelures matachiees et le baton pareil men

desinez d'apres nature sur les lieux, Redigez à la n^o orleans le 22 Juin 1732.



Early drawing of Natchez Indians.



Rosalie, built in 1820.

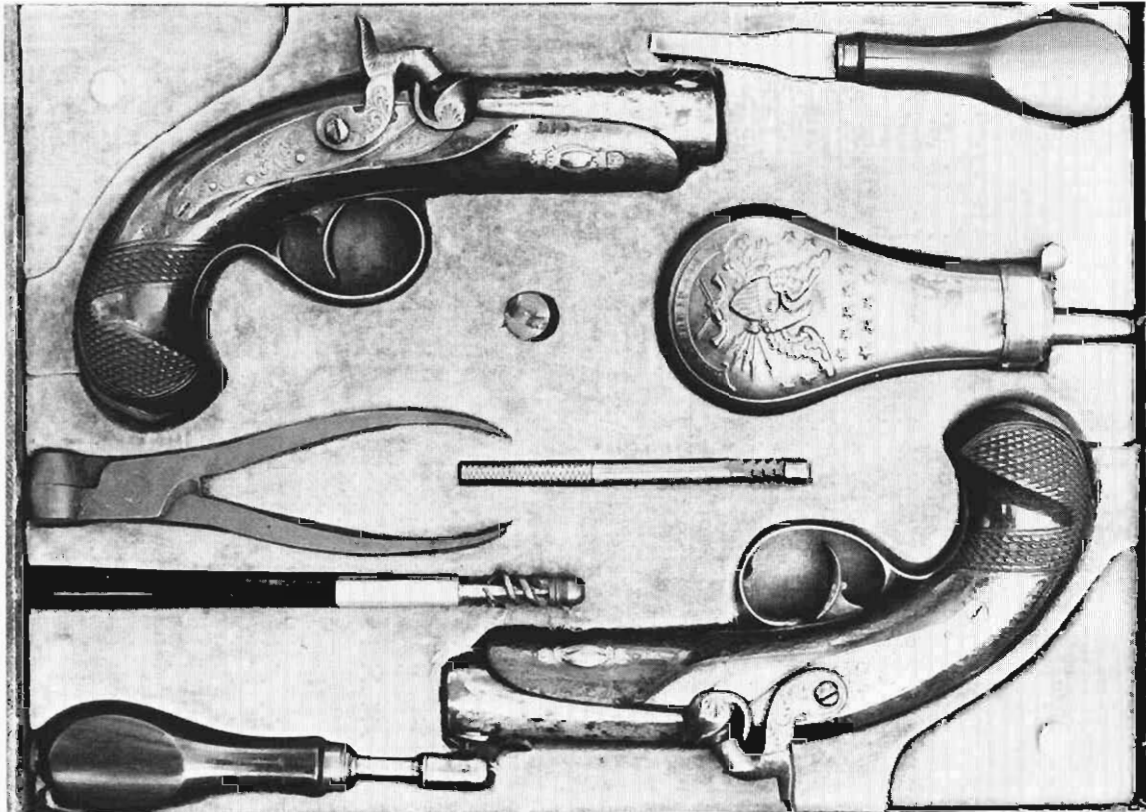
The Briars, where Jefferson Davis married
Varina Howell in 1845.



Monmouth, home of General John A. Quit-
man, purchased by him in 1826.

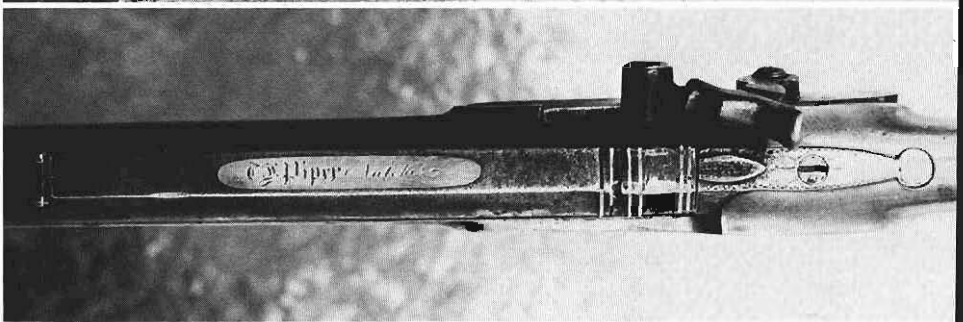
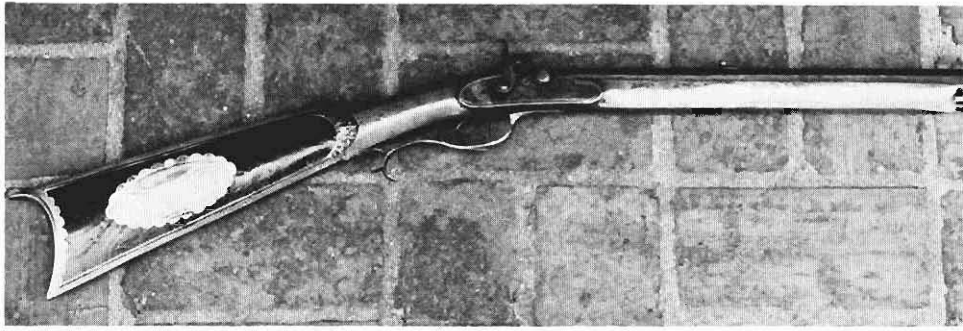


A replica by Jimmy Lile: Rezin P. Bowie's personal knife presented to Jesse Perkins of Natchez.



Cased pair Henry Deringers presented by General Quitman to F.B. Conner of Natchez, and, below, the silver plate on rear of stock with F.B. Conner's initials.

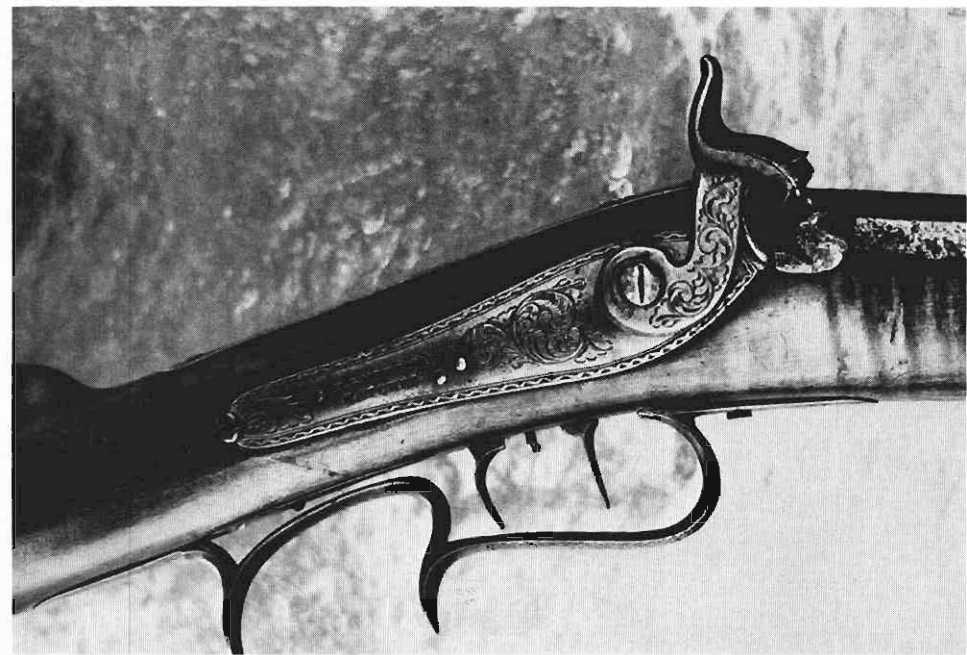




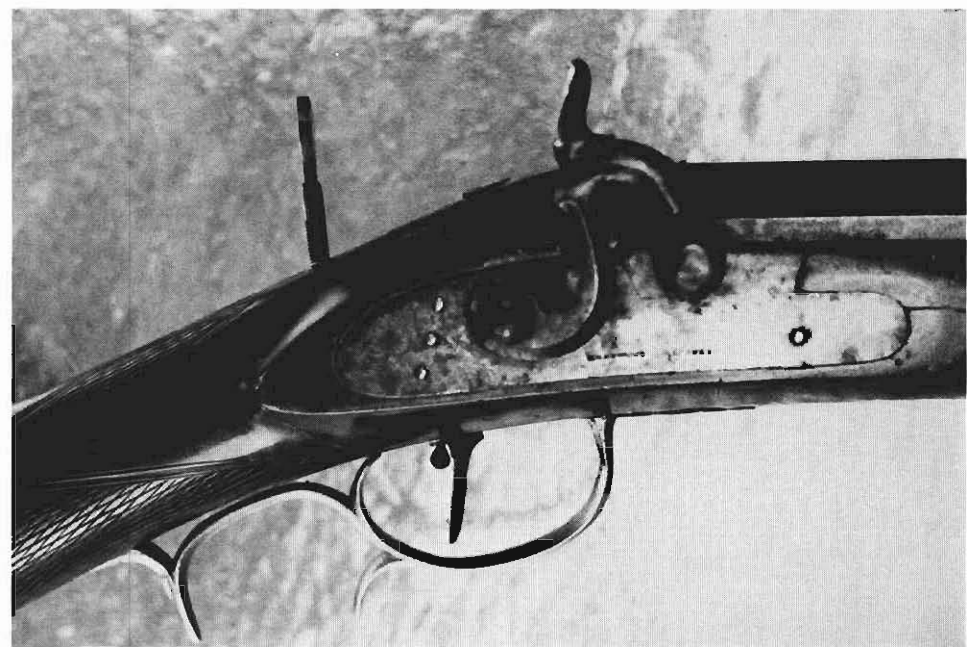
Rifle by C.Y. Piper, Natchez, its patch-box, cheek-piece, and silver name plate inscribed "C.Y. Piper, Natchez."



Derringer by H.G. Newcomb, Natchez.



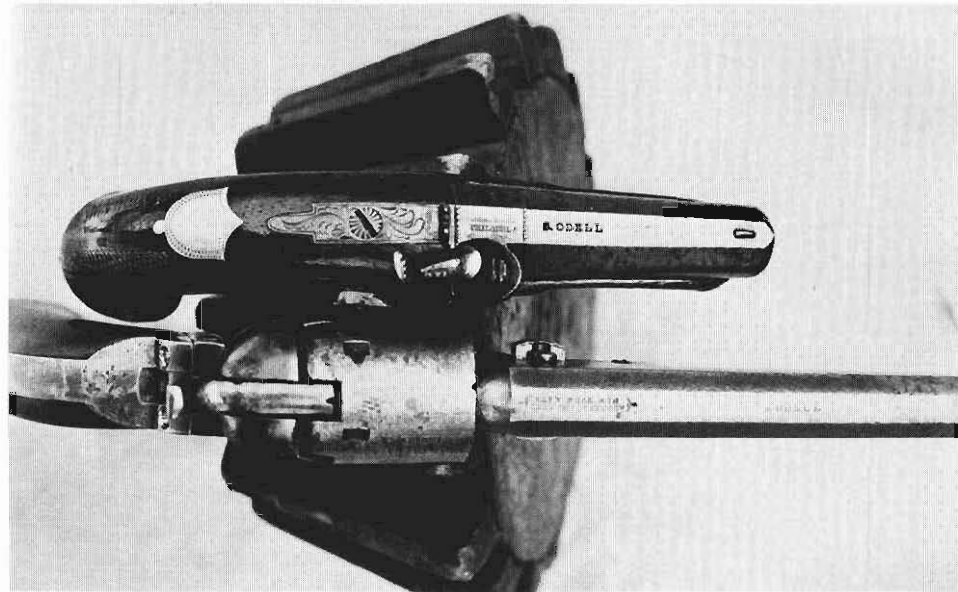
Two rifles by H.G. Newcomb, the lower one a bench rifle; the lockplate of the half-stock rifle by Newcomb, and the lockplate of the bench rifle by Newcomb.



Odell's residence at corner of Canal and Franklin, now destroyed, in which he was murdered in 1862.



Deringer & Colt sold by S. Odell as agent and stamped on top of barrel, "S. Odell".



RECEIVED. APR-4 1862

One Thousand Dollars Reward!
THE MAYOR AND SELECTMEN OF THE
 City of Natchez, in Common Council convened, have authorized, &c. &c. hereby
Offer a Reward of
ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS
 for the discovery, and apprehension of the person or persons by whom STEPHEN ODELL was brutally murdered, while asleep in his own house, in this city, on the night of the 12th of March last.

All communications on the subject addressed to the undersigned, will receive prompt attention.
JOHN HUNTER, Mayor.
 Natchez, April 2, 1862.

Notice.
 THE Board of Police of Adams County, Mississippi, will, on the next Monday in April,

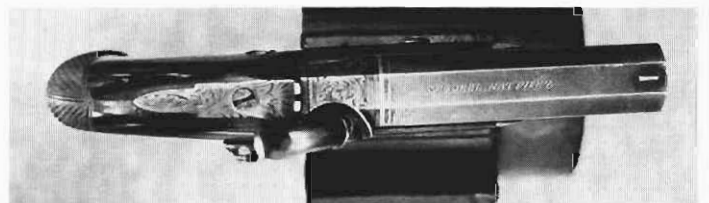
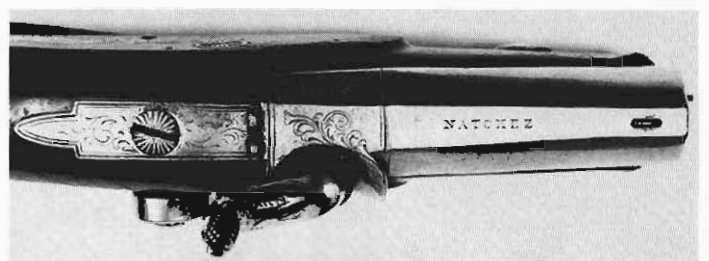
Reward notice for apprehension of Odell's murderer which appeared in Natchez paper.



A Mississippi rifle, with brass mountings silvered and engraved, and 20 inlaid silver stars, eagles, deer, etc., which was done by S. Odell, Natchez. Shown are the patchbox, top of buttplate, trigger guard, and left side of stock with eagle with banners and eight of the twenty inlaid silver stars. He also engraved his name on the lockplate and barrel.



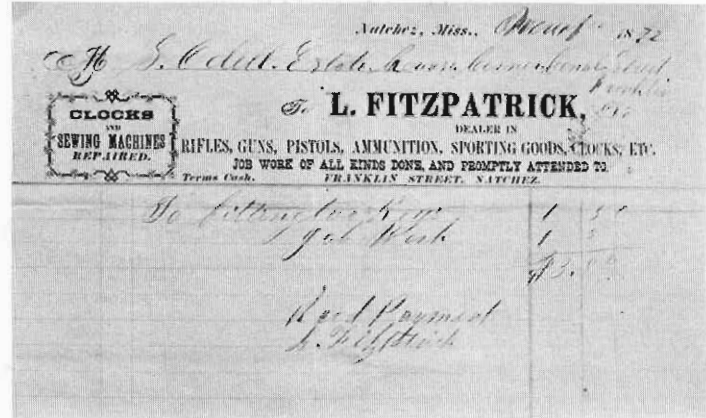
Derringer by Odell with name on lockplate, the reverse side with plate engraved, "Molly G", and top of barrel showing "Natchez".



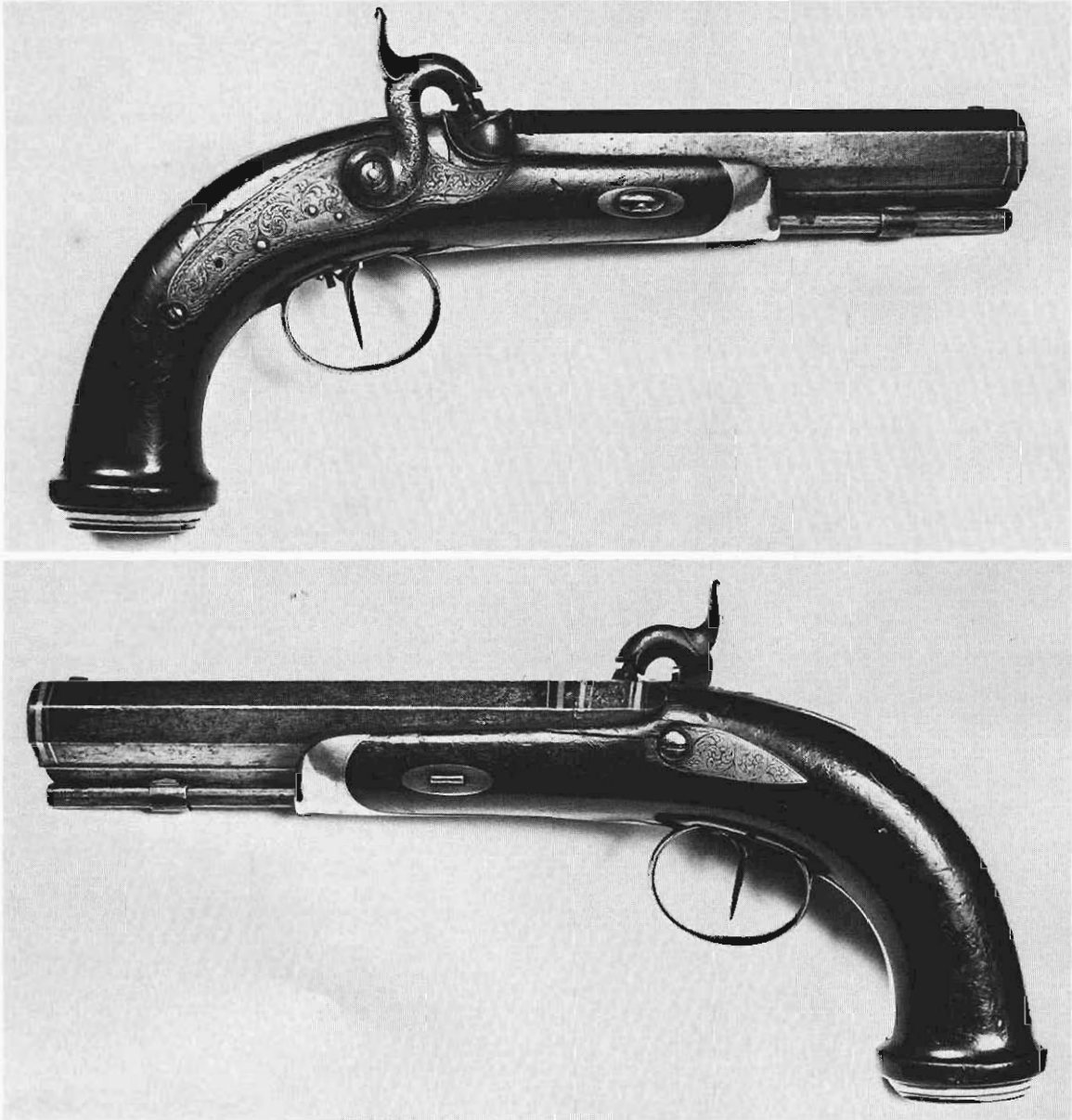
Derringer by S. Odell, Natchez, and, right, a top view showing the barrel marking.



The Fitzpatrick gun shop during proprietorship of Louis Albert Fitzpatrick, son of Rees Fitzpatrick.



Invoice dated Nov., 1872, from L. Fitzpatrick to S. Odell Estate for keywork done at residence, corner Canal and Franklin.



Pistol by Rees Fitzpatrick, Natchez.