

This most unusual horn, relieved on both ends to form a double fish-mouth effect, is probably the work of Francis Tansel prior to 1820. Roll-out drawing courtesy of Shelby Gallien.

The Tansel Family of Powder Horn Carvers

Jim Dresslar

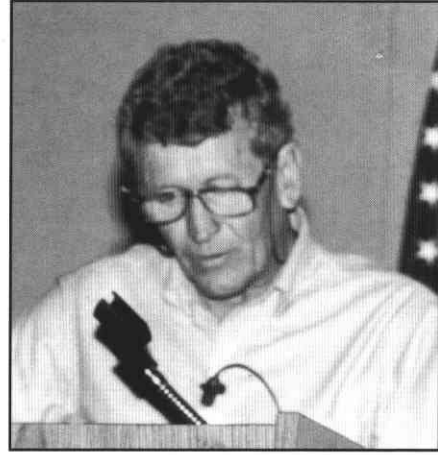
During the late 18th Century and the first half of the 19th Century the Tansel family produced a quantity of engraved powder horns of exceptional beauty.

Francis Tansel was the progenitor of the Tansel Family in America. According to family tradition, he was born in Southern France and engaged in the French wars of his time. He then went to sea and became a sea captain and eventually came to America and settled in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. He relocated near Georgetown, Scott County, Kentucky, in 1799. Francis and his wife had six sons and three daughters, all born in Scott county. During the War of 1812, Francis served a six month enlistment in Captain John Duvall's Company, Boswell's Kentucky Detached Militia Regiment. He was stationed at Fort Meigs near Maumee, Ohio, and experienced the siege of that Fort. While stationed there he made at least two engraved powder horns, one for James Arnold, a Kentucky militia man, dated September 12, 1813, which is in the collections of the Ohio Historical Society. The other one, made for Sam Arnold, was dated September 15, 1813, and is now in a private collection. Neither horn is engraved with the quality that one would expect from Francis Tansel.

Francis' oldest son, John, was born in Scott County, Kentucky, in 1800. Being the son of an artistic horn carver, he became quite proficient at engraving powder horns at a very early age. Some of his signed horns appear to have been made during the war of 1812. Horns by John are rather scarce, possibly because he just didn't sign them. He died June 5, 1872.

In 1828, Francis and son John sold their lands in Kentucky in order to relocate to central Indiana. John apparently preceded the rest of the family and on February 4, 1829, purchased 80 acres of land near Fall Creek, north of Indianapolis. The remainder of the family followed in 1829 and included Francis and his other sons, Timothy, Starke, Leland, Payton, and Knotley. In the early 1830s John sold the land north of Fall Creek and moved west to Brown Township near the Hendricks County Line. Later John, Francis and Payton moved their families to Wayne Township in Marion County (near present day Clermont, Indiana).

Signatures, initials or other attributions reveal that Francis, John, Timothy and possibly John's son George Tansel all engraved powder horns. One horn has been



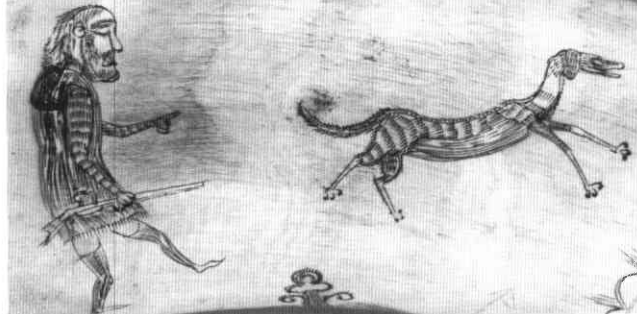
found signed by George Tansel. Since the census records show the Tansels listed as farmers, the folk art horns they produced were surely meant to supplement their incomes during slack periods. Slight differences in details and execution suggest that more than one person produced or worked on the horns, such as other family members. The women of the families could have helped with the preparation or even the art work, although there is no documentation to prove this theory. After comparing John Tansel's signature on his early horn with Timothy Tansel's signature on a horn of the 1820s it is obvious that both signatures are done by the same hand. The only conclusion that I can arrive at would be that John was working with Timothy up to the time of Timothy's death in 1852.

Timothy Tansel is listed in the census records as a farmer and is buried in a private cemetery in Hendricks County, Indiana. His monument is marked "Timothy Tansel died June 25, 1852 in the 43 yr of his age". It hardly seems possible that he could have produced several hundred engraved powder horns in thirty working years and still have farmed for a living. Some of his horns are very artistic and would have required several days to lay out and engrave, not counting the time needed to prepare the horn, which would include boiling, scraping, carving the spout and preparing the butt plug. It seems very likely that several members of the family were engaged in the different details of manufacturing powder horns, horn cups and possibly other horn items. The fact that only a small percentage of their horns are marked with the owner's name would indicate the horns were made in the off season and sold at another location.



The very old writing on the butt of this horn indicates that it was taken at the Battle of River Raisin in 1812. This would imply that John carved this horn prior to the age of 12, since he was born in 1800. Not impossible, but it probably indicates that he was working with the help of his father. Note the ruffled feathers on the eagle, indicating that the horn was engraved during a time of conflict.

Drawing by Shelby Gallien.



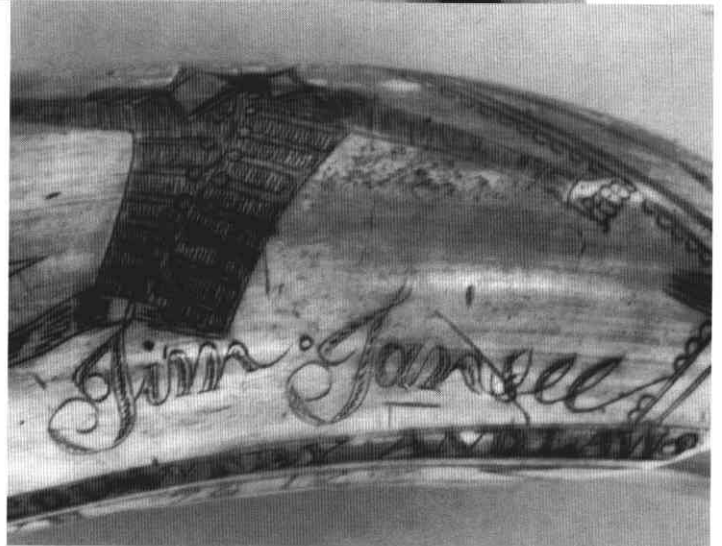
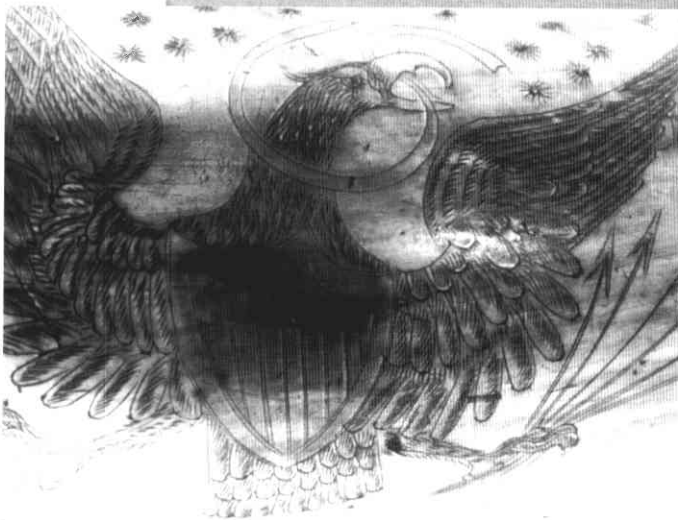
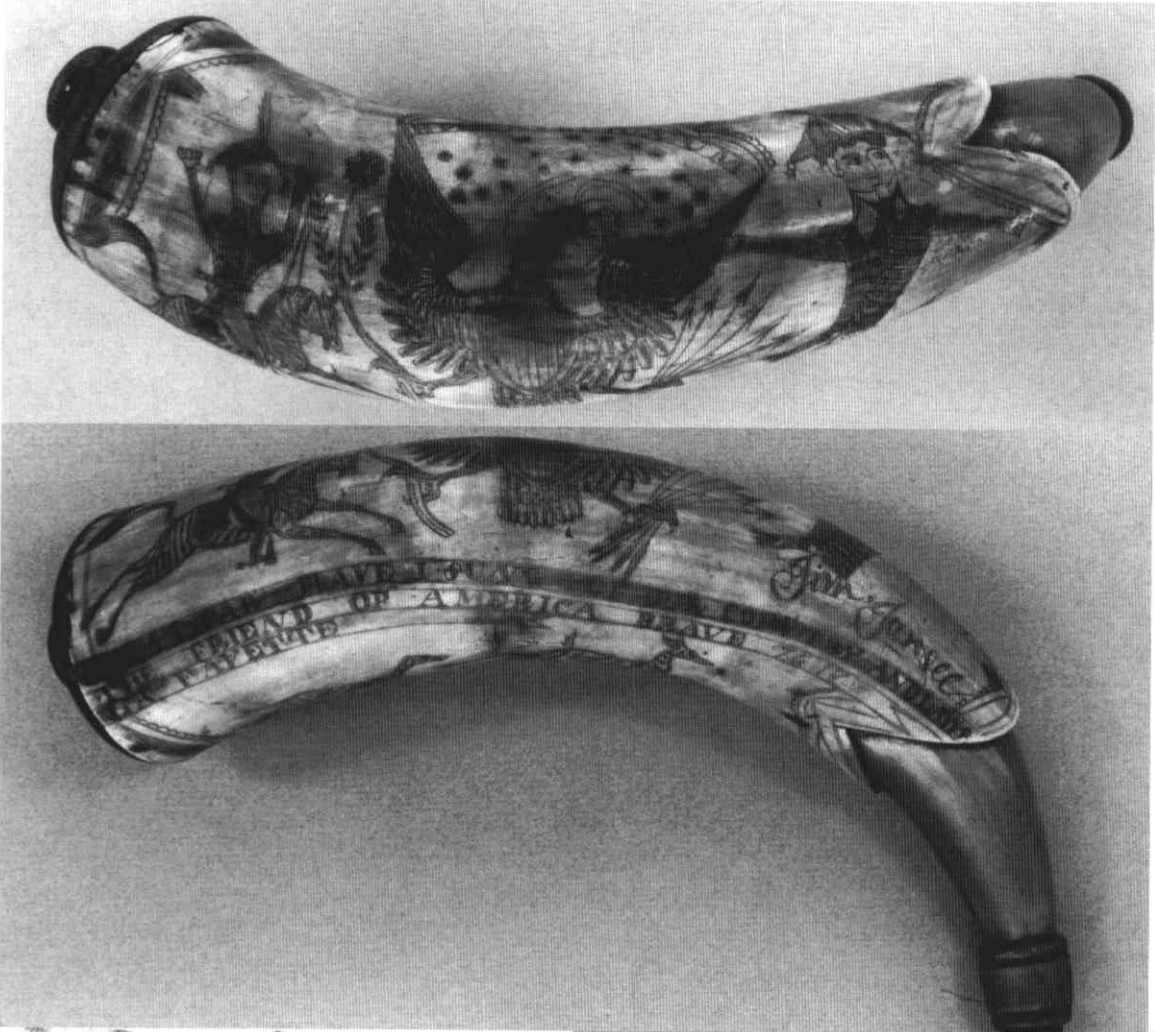
This horn was probably made by Francis Tansel while he was living in Scott County, Kentucky, circa 1820. It is often referred to as the “buck-skin horn” as it has the wonderful primitive engraving of a Kentucky frontiersman hunting with his dog and flintlock rifle.

Drawing by Shelby Gallien.

It is interesting to note that Timothy Tansel was possibly dyslexic. Quite a few of his letters were made backwards, and sometimes even complete words. Also, according to census records, he was illiterate, unable to read or write, yet he created beautifully carved horns. He used political sentiments of different periods of history to make his horns more marketable.

With the introduction of the powder flask they were

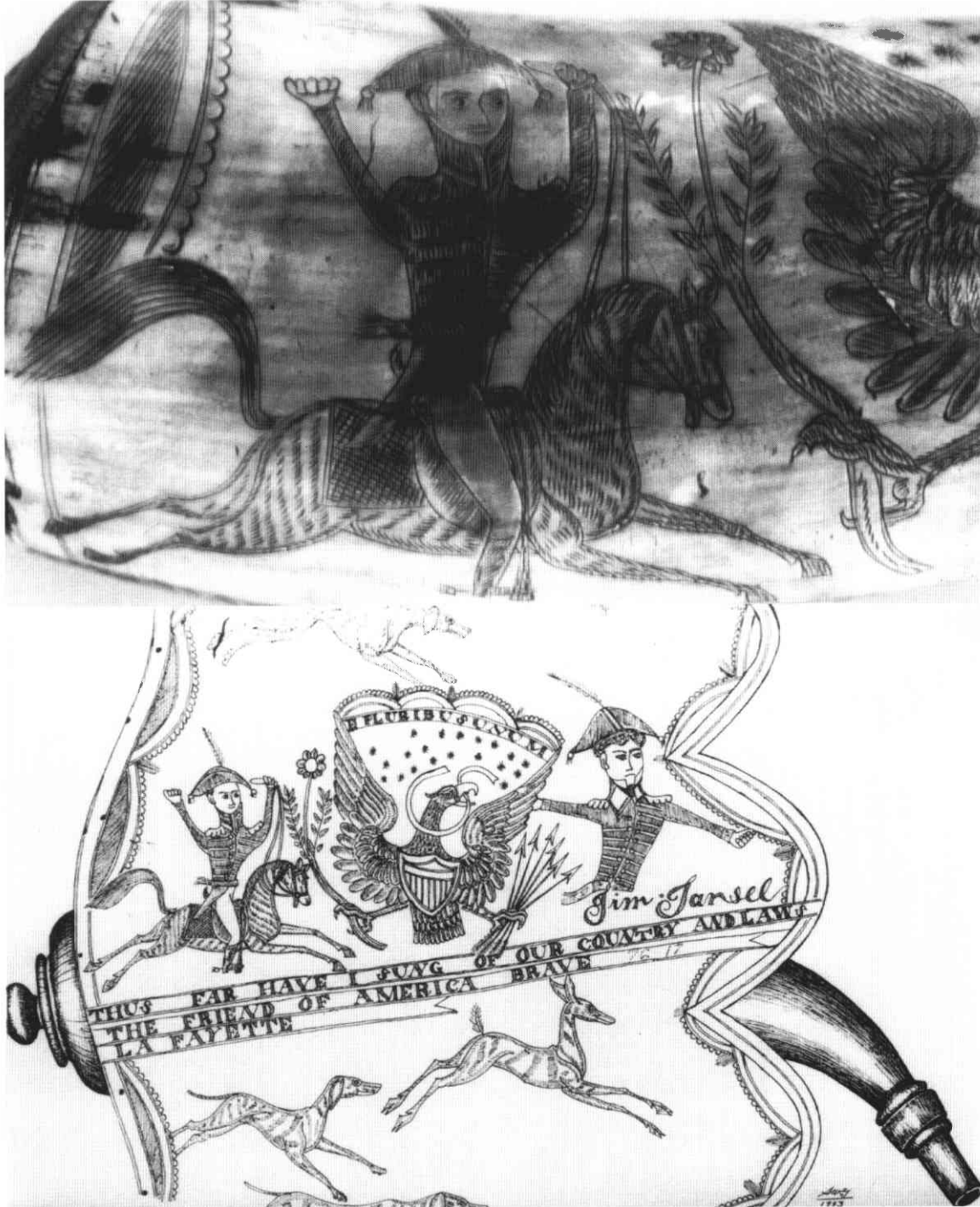
forced to make smaller and less expensive horns. The Tansel horns that have shown up this far have all had a military theme. They captured the patriotic sentiments of the times by using important military figures, including General Andrew Jackson, General William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, James Polk, Colonel Richard Johnson, Lafayette, George Washington, Tecumseh, Black Hawk and many others of lesser fame.



Most of us who have an interest in powder horns have usually preferred the French and Indian War horns and the Revolutionary War era horns. They certainly convey the spirit of the forlorn soldier facing life on the frontier. How fortunate we are that the Tansel family revitalized an art form that preserves the American spirit in a way that we all will enjoy for years to come.

Acknowledgment

The majority of the research was undertaken by Shelby Gallien and Burt Hamrick. They checked census, tax, deed, birth and death records that were available from Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and even Kansas. So it would seem that information from these sources is more or less exhausted, which leaves us only the horns themselves from which to learn more of this interesting family.



This horn shows Lafayette in his dress uniform, engraved in Tansel's folk art fashion. The horn was probably made in 1820s, during Lafayette's visit to America, using the strong public sentiment to commemorate Lafayette's service to this country during the Revolutionary War.

One of the mysteries of the Tansel family is how they produced so many horns if they farmed for a living. Comparing the signature on this horn to John's on the River Raisin horn, it seems that they were signed by the same hand. This could mean that John and Timothy were working together in the manufacture of their powder horns.

Drawing by Shelby Gallien.