

Identifying a Kentucky Longrifle: The George Schreyer–John Fondersmith–JFS Connection

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The following geneological information concerning John Fondersmith is known:

Born: June 6, 1746, at Pfüunstadt, Germany, twin brother of Valentine; brought to America by his parents, Ludwig and Isabel, on or about 1750. The family moved to Leacock Township, then to Strasburg Township, Lancaster County. Ludwig the father of John and Valentine is reported to have been a weaver by trade. Where his two sons learned the gunsmith's trade is unknown at this time. John shows up on the Strasburg Township tax returns for Lancaster County in 1773, 1779 and 1782. He is also noted on the first U.S. Census, 1790; married with 4 male children under age 16 and 3 females, one of which was his wife Rosina. John was listed as a private third class, in Captain William Smith's Company, Lancaster County militia, first battalion, in 1770, 1781 and 1782. The Pennsylvania Archives reports that John Fondersmith secured a contract to supply 500 muskets to the State of Pennsylvania in January 1799. He is listed as the recipient of another contract for 500 muskets in April 1801. The Lancaster County Historical Society states that John was one of the early gunsmiths in Strasburg Township, Lancaster County, and was in business with his sons George and John, Jr.

John and his wife Rosina had 4 sons: George, born 14 December 1780, a gunsmith; John, Jr., born approximately 1779, a gunsmith; Benjamin; and Valentine, born 2 November 1782. There was at least one daughter who survived into adulthood, Maria Magdalena; another daughter born into the family whose name is currently unknown. There is evidence that leads one to believe that Jacob and Lewis Fondersmith, both gunsmiths, may also be sons of John, Sr. Deeds of land and other property indicate that John went bankrupt between 1799 and 1805. He and his wife Rosina may have moved in with Jacob Fondersmith, as indicated by the 1830 U.S. Census. Several of John's neighbors and business associates were gunsmiths. Deeds show Sebastian Graff, Valentine Meyer [or Moyer], Michael Withers, John Miller, Jacob Barr [or Bear], Jacob Miller and Isaac Ferree. John died on 9 February 1821, age 75 years. His gravesite is unknown. Rosina died 15 September 1821, age 61 as noted in the Records of the Columbia Lutheran Church.¹



This article is analogous to a case report in medical literature and details an observation made and a conclusion reached, with supporting opinion by an expert from an entirely different field of endeavor. This article also contains illustrative photographs of the signed work of John Fondersmith as well as companion photographs of a rifle marked JFS. Both sets of illustrations show preponderant, if not totally conclusive, evidence that might lead one to believe that both rifles were made by the same hand. In the overall scheme of things, this information, although new, is but a blip on the screen of arms information, if you will. However, I understand that in the ASAC there are, for example, Colt collectors who become ecstatic and wax eloquent over the significance of whether this mass-produced arm has a three- or a four-screw frame. Perhaps this minutiae will appeal to them, and I suspect that, as collectors, this trait of wanting to know why the grass is green may be far more common among us than we realize—or admit.

Several years ago (perhaps even two decades) I purchased the JFS rifle pictured in Figures 1 and 2) at the Ohio Gun Collectors Show. It was represented to me as having been made by John Frederick Sell. I was dubious of this and, against my better judgment, purchased the piece anyway. Upon closer examination at home, I regretted the purchase and relegated the rifle to out-of-sight, out-of-mind status for a number of years. About 15 years ago, I purchased a signed John Fondersmith (Figures 3 and 4) and, in spite of the

minor but ugly surgery a target shooter had performed, it certainly had much to recommend it. About eight years ago I pulled the JFS gun from its place of dishonor and, while reexamining it, was surprised to observe numerous construction and architectural features that were distinctly similar to or even the same as the Fondersmith. Suddenly, that JFS rifle had new significance and relevance and, although it was still something of an ugly duckling, it began to look a bit more like the proverbial swan. Not a beautiful swan, understand, but a swan nonetheless, from which might be gained some beautiful knowledge to satisfy me personally and to broaden, with pride, our fund of knowledge when disseminated to fellow gun collectors.

In June 1987, a George Schreyer Sr. and Jr. rifle display was held in conjunction with the annual meeting of The

Kentucky Rifle Association. Forty-two guns were studied and most were photographed with multiple details shown. As a result of this study, George Shumway wrote and published a monograph on these father-son gun makers and their work. There were, as I recall, two rifles marked JFS. One of the JFS-marked rifles is pictured in the monograph (see Figure 5) and a written comment appropriate to this rifle states that "It is made very much in the Schreyer style with Schreyer architecture [and] is attributed to John Frederick Sell on the basis of the initials on the barrel and on the basis of the small four petal flower carved." Reservations on this attribution were expressed by Shumway, who mentions that the carving is not very well done and that "the piece does not exhibit very distinctive designing and workmanship that characterize Sell's usual work."²



Figure 1. Patchbox side view of JFS rifle.

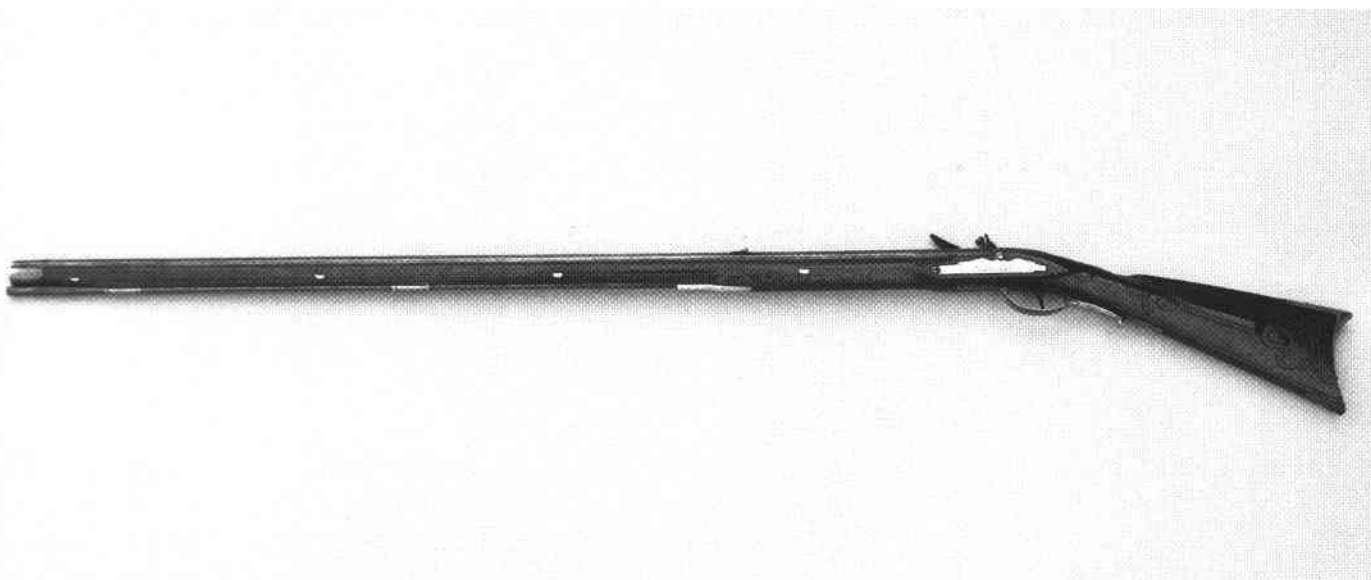


Figure 2. Cheek piece side view of JFS rifle. Both of these views (Figures 1 and 2) show the general characteristics one expects in a Kentucky rifle of Lancaster County origin.



Figure 3. Patchbox side view of J. Fondersmith rifle.

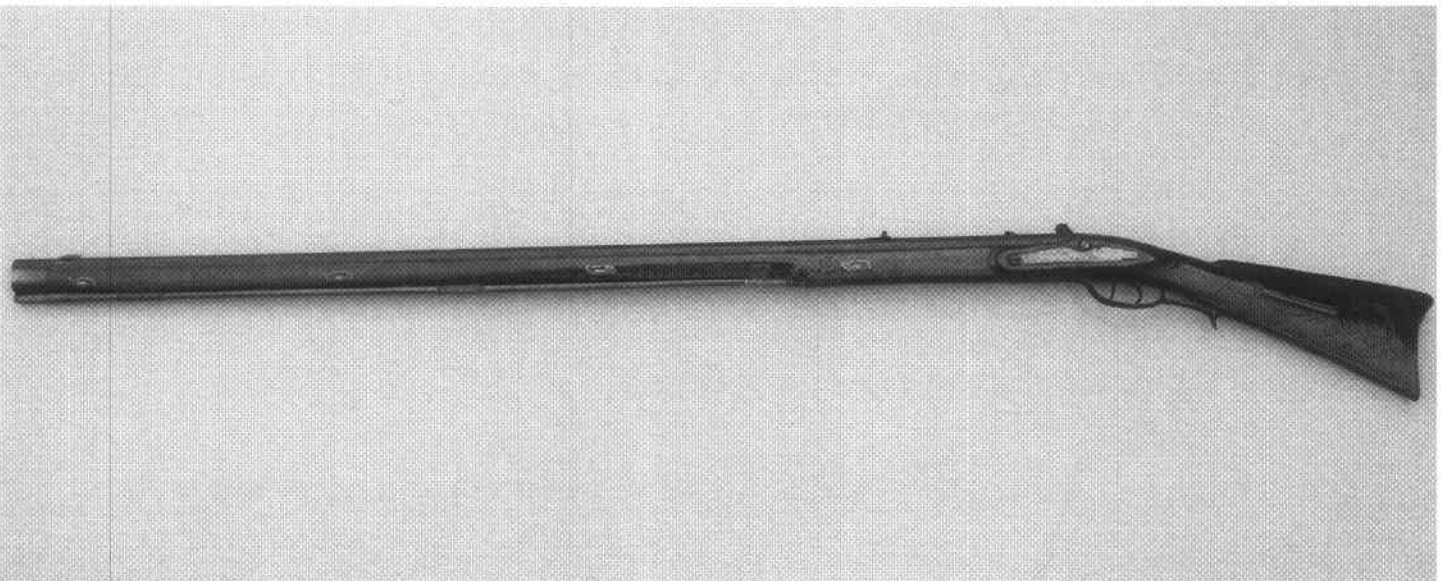


Figure 4. Check piece side view of J. Fondersmith signed rifle. Note the marked similarity (in outline as well as other features) to the JFS rifle.

A search for a listed maker who signed his work with the initials JFS has not been very successful. Sellers does list JFS as the maker of a percussion full-stock rifle.¹ John Fondersmith is listed in *Early American Gunsmiths*⁴ and in *The Kentucky Rifle* by Dillin,⁵ but is not illustrated in the two Kentucky Rifle Association pictorial publications *The Kentucky Rifle: A True American Heritage in Picture*⁶ and *Kentucky Rifles & Pistols: 1750-1850*,⁷ although a rifle made by his twin brother Valentine is pictured. This, the only known example of a Valentine Fondersmith rifle is also pictured in *Rifles in Colonial America*.⁸ Kauffman states, "Fondersmith guns are extremely rare; only a few—and they are of average quality—are known in the Lancaster area."⁹ Kindig, in his monumental work *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age*, in

commenting on John Fondersmith's work, a solitary example of which is pictured, states, "The patch box as well as some of the carving may indicate that Fondersmith had some association with George Schreyer."¹⁰

Moreover, the three JFS rifles that I have seen (including the one that I own), when compared with a signed rifle by John Fondersmith, cause me to believe most strongly that they are made by the same hand—especially after having studied side by side my two rifles marked J. Fondersmith and JFS.

Could possibly be that the answer to the JFS initials on the John Fondersmith look-alike is, in fact, that they are an alternate method of marking an authentic Fondersmith? I posed this question to Professor Ilmars Biersnick, a native

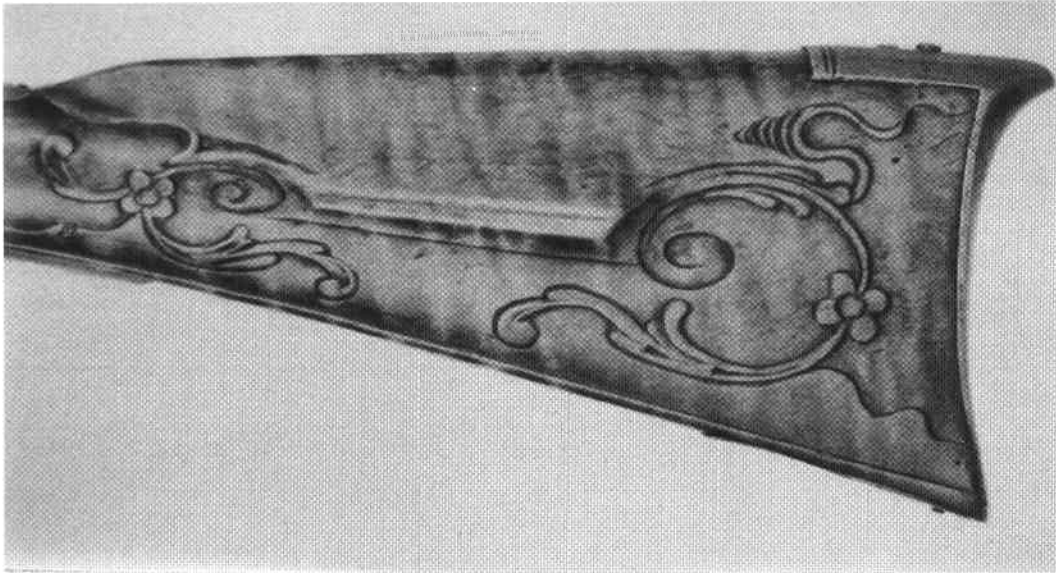


Figure 5. Cheek piece side of butt stock of JFS rifle #50, page 152 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway. Note closely the carving originating at the upper rear of the cheek piece and terminating in the angle between the butt plate and butt plate return.

of Latvia who taught German at Berea College. He assured me that this was not only possible but probable and was indeed a common practice.¹¹ A subsequent informal chat (referred to in medical circles as a “curbstone consultation”) with a professor who has a Ph.D. degree in German substantiated Professor Biersnick’s opinion. It was reiterated that my explanation of the JFS initials as really being an alternate form of marking for John Fondersmith is “plausi-

ble.” During the typing of this manuscript, when spell-check was being utilized and Fondersmith was highlighted as being misspelled, the alternate suggestion for spelling from the computer dictionary was “Fonder smith”—a proper name of *two* words.

Let us proceed now to an in-depth discussion of the features of these two rifles. In the side view, one notes the general similarity, i.e. the Lancaster-style stocks (Figure 6)

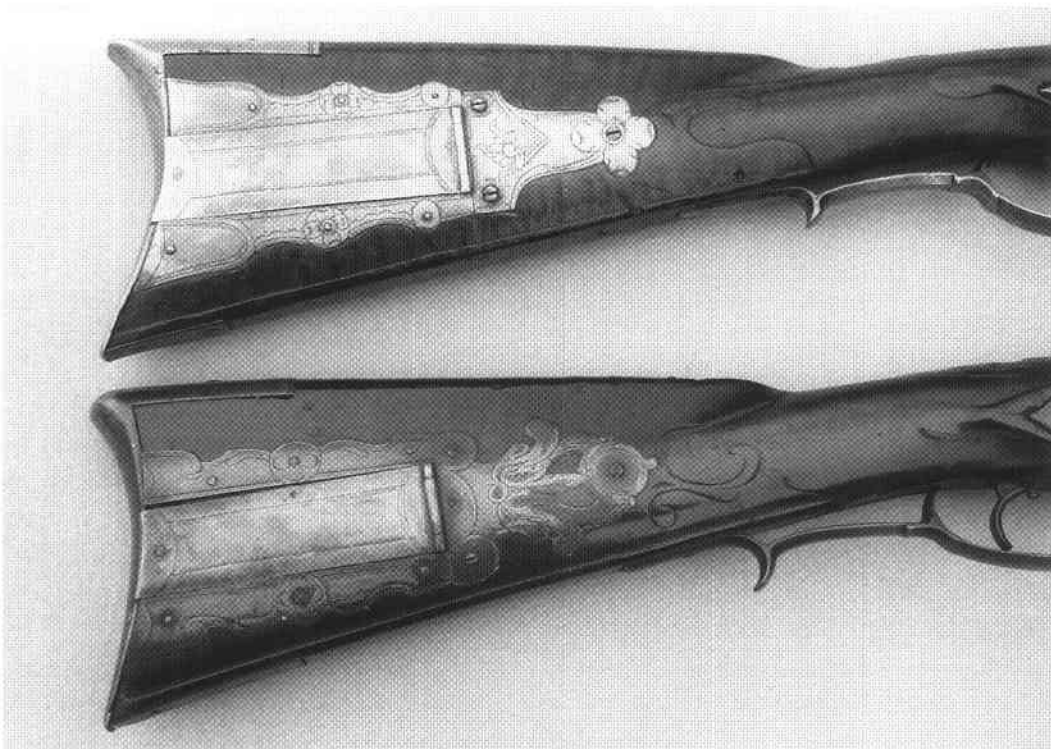


Figure 6. Overall butt stock areas from rear of lock plates to include butt plates (JFS at top of picture).

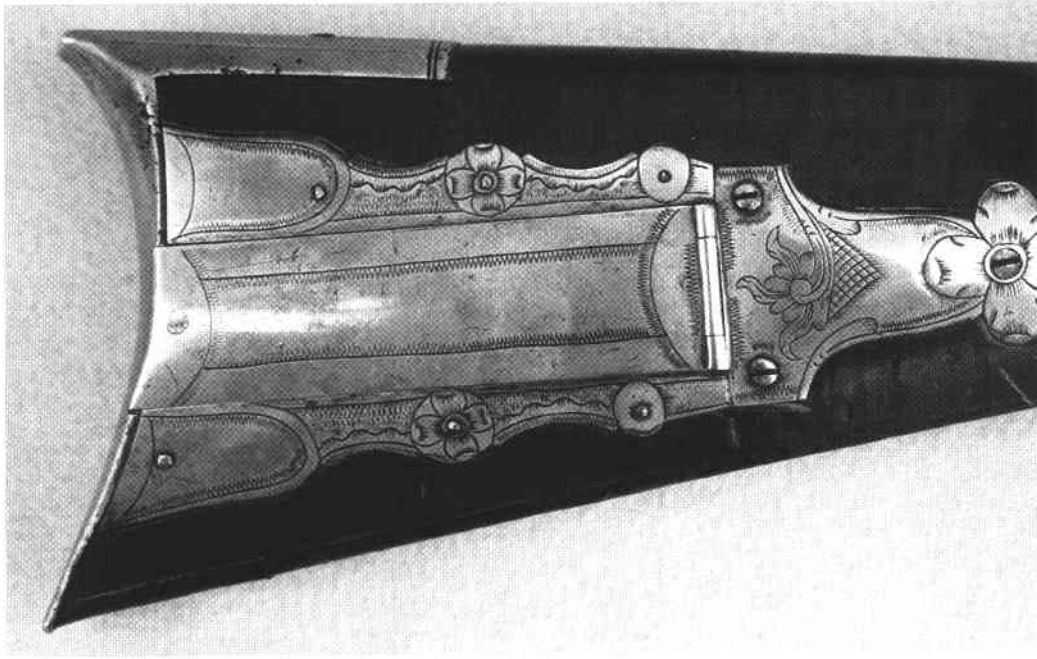


Figure 7. JFS rifle.

with typical architecture and styling and, in spite of the J. Fondersmith's considerably more massive target rifle proportions, the two present an overall assessment of being quite similar. In closer views (Figures 7 and 8), it is evident that the butt plates are quite similar as are the butt stock mouldings. The patch box dimensions are noticeably similar and the hinging constructions and the latching and release of the patch box lids are the same. The patch box side plates are quite similar, being secured with pins, not

screws, and the engraving is so unmistakably similar as to be essentially the same. The patch box finials are attached using three screws and the design is different, but the overall feel and especially the style of engraving is the same. The type of patch box finial on the JFS rifle is commonly referred to as the "Lancaster daisy-headed" and was "used by Lancaster County gunsmiths both before the Revolutionary War and during the Golden Age, and was particularly typical of a dozen or so Lancaster makers."¹²

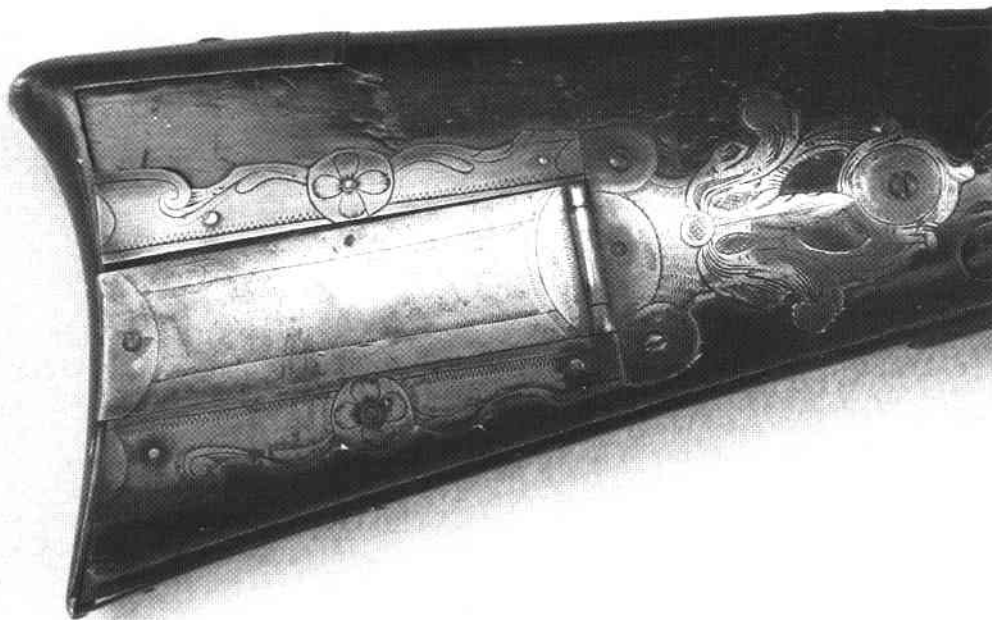


Figure 8. J. Fondersmith rifle. These enlarged views (Figures 7 and 8) show in greater detail the close similarities in size, design, and construction of the patchboxes.

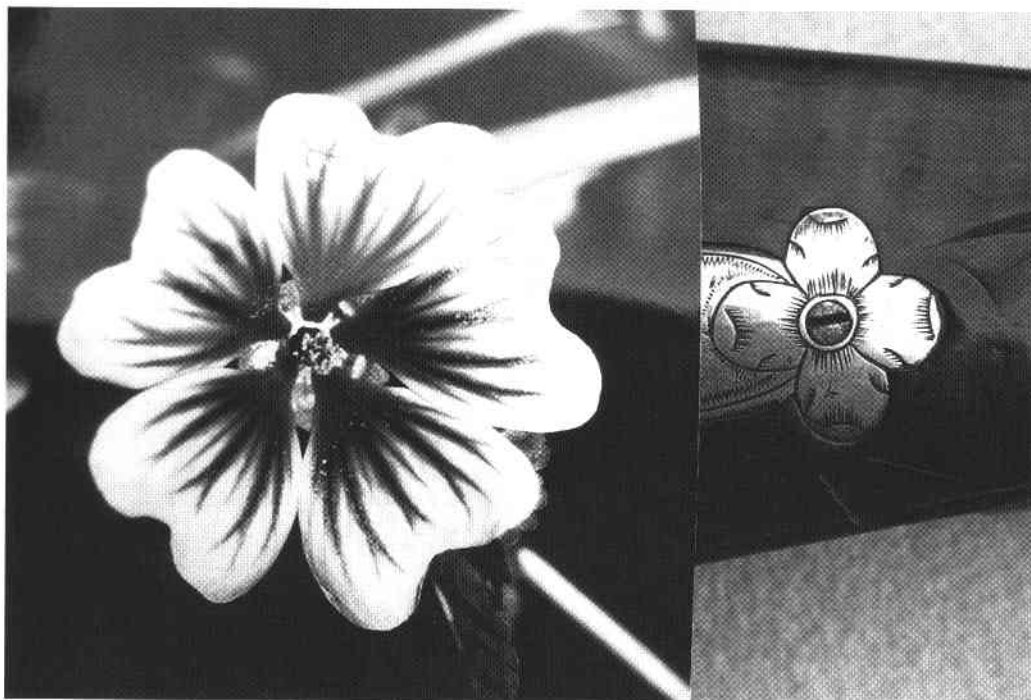


Figure 9. So-called "daisy-headed patchbox." Compare with high mallow flower (*althea*) superimposed on patchbox.

The configuration is, to me, not suggestive at all of a daisy with its many rays or petals. I believe it to be most likely the flower of a member of the mallow family of plants called *althea* generically and known commonly as high mallow (botanical name *malva sylvestris*)¹³ (Figure 9). Another mem-

ber of the *althea* family (botanical name *althea officinalis*) with a reasonably similar flower "is a perennial herb indigenous to Central Europe and has been naturalized in the United States, occurring in marshes from Massachusetts to Pennsylvania."¹⁴ Being common in central Europe, whence



Figure 10. Obverse side of butt stocks. Note details of construction from rear of lock side plate to butt stock (JFS at top of picture).

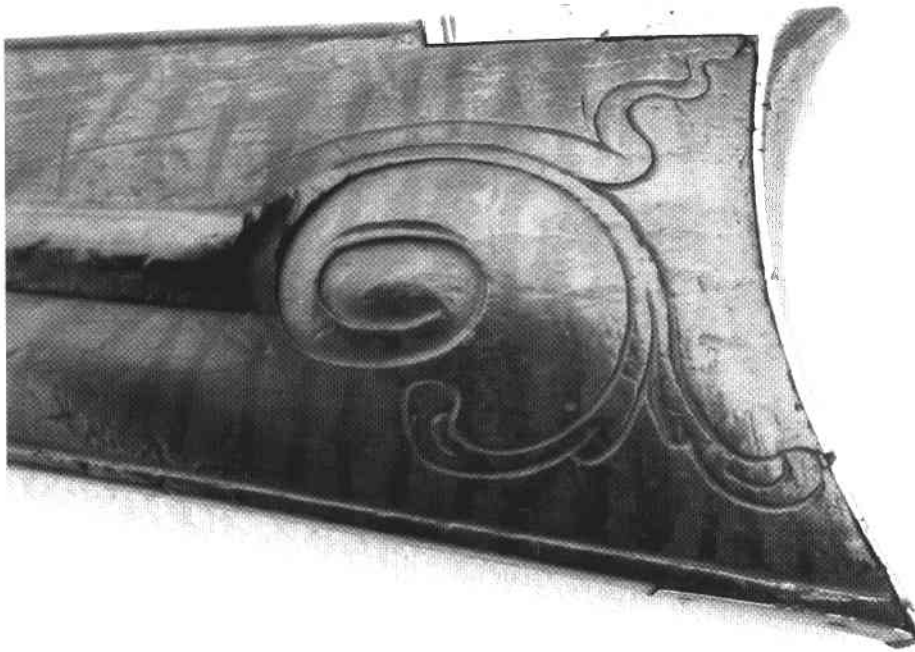


Figure 11. JFS rifle. Note the carving on the upper aspect of the butt stock and compare with Figure 12.

many immigrants including gunmakers had come to colonial America, this plant was quite familiar to them and was known commonly as the marshmallow plant.

Let us now be concerned with the obverse of the butt stock (Figures 10-12). Note the similar shape and location of the cheek piece but, most importantly, focus on the configuration of the carving. The pattern of the carving to the rear of the cheek piece is essentially the same in the use of C scrolls, but note the striking and precisely identical carv-

ing on both rifles as it originates just above the rear upper limit of the cheek piece and terminates after a serpentine journey to the juncture of the upper butt plate and butt plate return. Recall that this feature was shown earlier as being present in the JFS rifle in the Shumway monograph on the Schreyers (Figure 5). This feature is a most important finding in establishing the premise that JFS and John Fondersmith are one and the same. Now, note the incised fleur-de-lis at the lower part of the cheek piece side of the

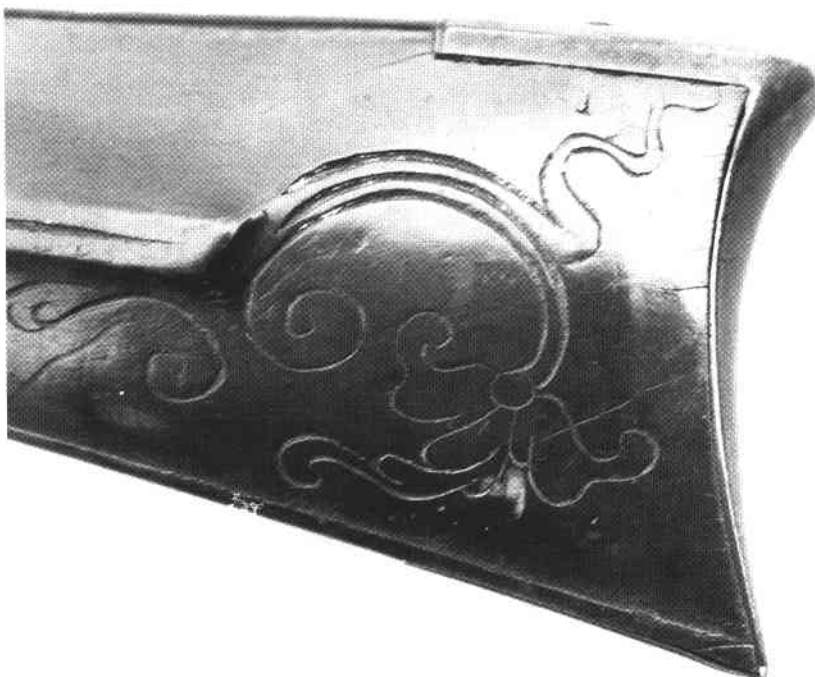


Figure 12. J. Fondersmith rifle. Note similarity in carving with Figure 11. Also note fleur-de-lis carving on the lower aspect of the butt stock.

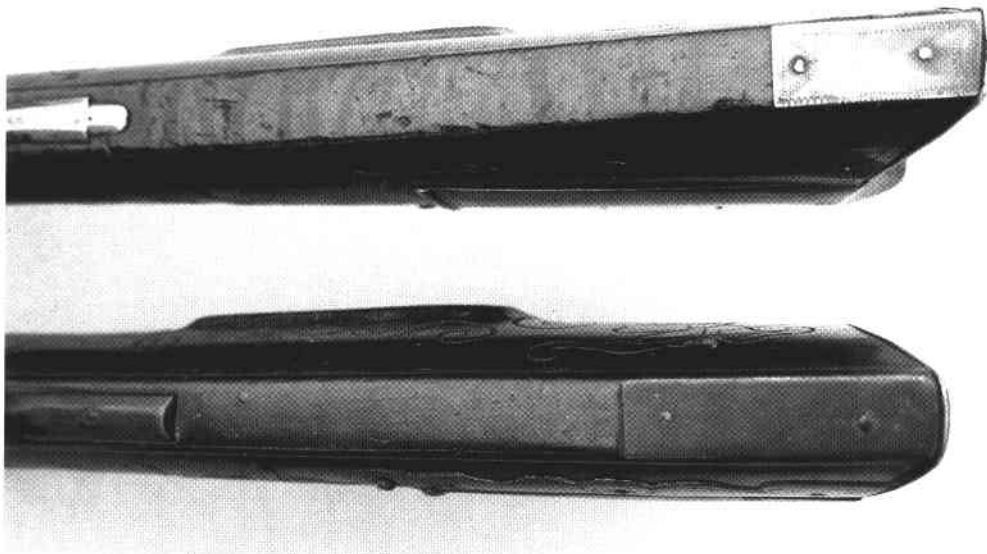


Figure 13. Note similar configuration of bottom view of butt stocks—note especially the projection of the rear trigger guard on the JFS rifle (top). This is the only noticeable difference (other than length) between the two trigger guards.

butt stock. We are accustomed to seeing this carved feature on Schreyer rifles—it being almost a hallmark—ordinarily located at the barrel tang and stock forearm at the ramrod entry pipe tang. There is at least one example of the fleur-de-lis carving being used by Schreyer in this same general area of the butt stock.¹⁵

Toe plates (Figures 13–15) are rectangular, affixed with two pins each, and have very simple “wiggle” engraving outlining their borders.

Lock size, style, and configuration are equally similar (Figures 16 and 17) and, although not precisely the same,

the mouldings about the locks and beavertail details are quite similar. The lock side plates (Figures 19–21) on the two rifles are similar in outline; but the side plate on the J. Fondersmith is a replacement as the engraving is quite dissimilar to the other engraving on this rifle. Also, the engraving on the JFS side plate, which has very simple “wiggle” engraving wherein the graver makes a characteristic pattern by being “walked” along the border, is perfectly consistent with the overall engraving style of *both* rifles.

The trigger guards (Figures 16, 17, 22, and 23) are the same in outline (allowing for the longer trigger bow

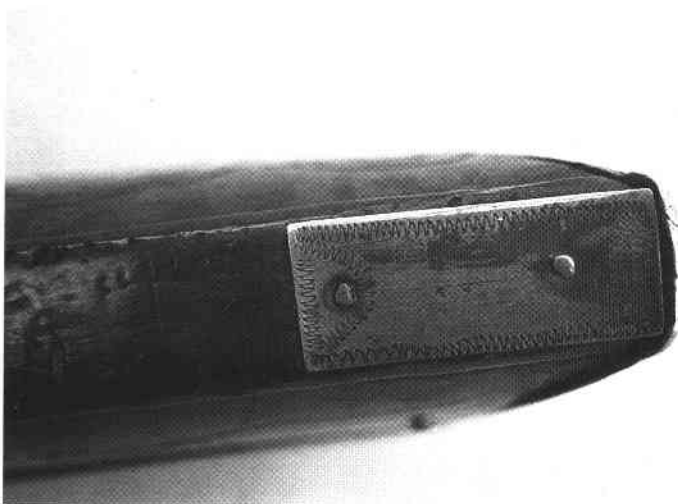


Figure 14. JFS rifle. Enlarged view of toe plate to show “wiggle” pattern of engraving.



Figure 15. J. Fondersmith rifle. Enlarged view to show faint traces of same “wiggle” pattern of engraving as on JFS toe plate (Figure 14).

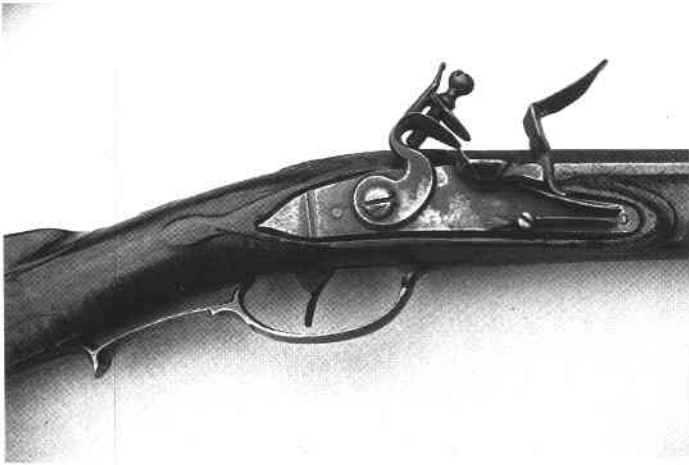


Figure 16. JFS rifle. Lock plate and immediate surrounding area. Note outline and details of trigger guard.

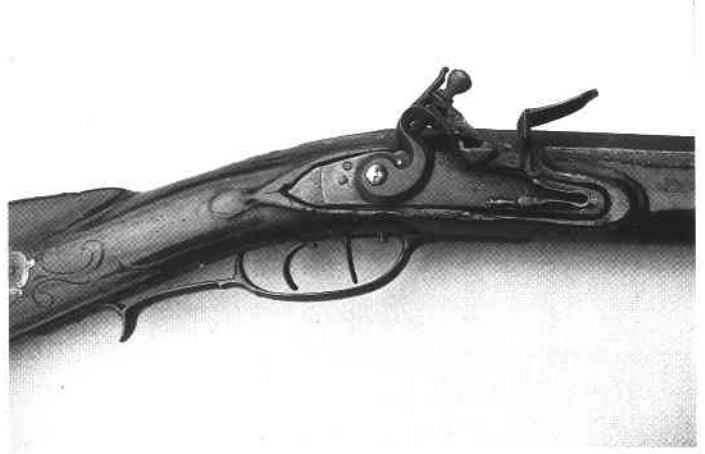


Figure 17. John Fondersmith rifle. Compare trigger guards and other details with Figure 16.

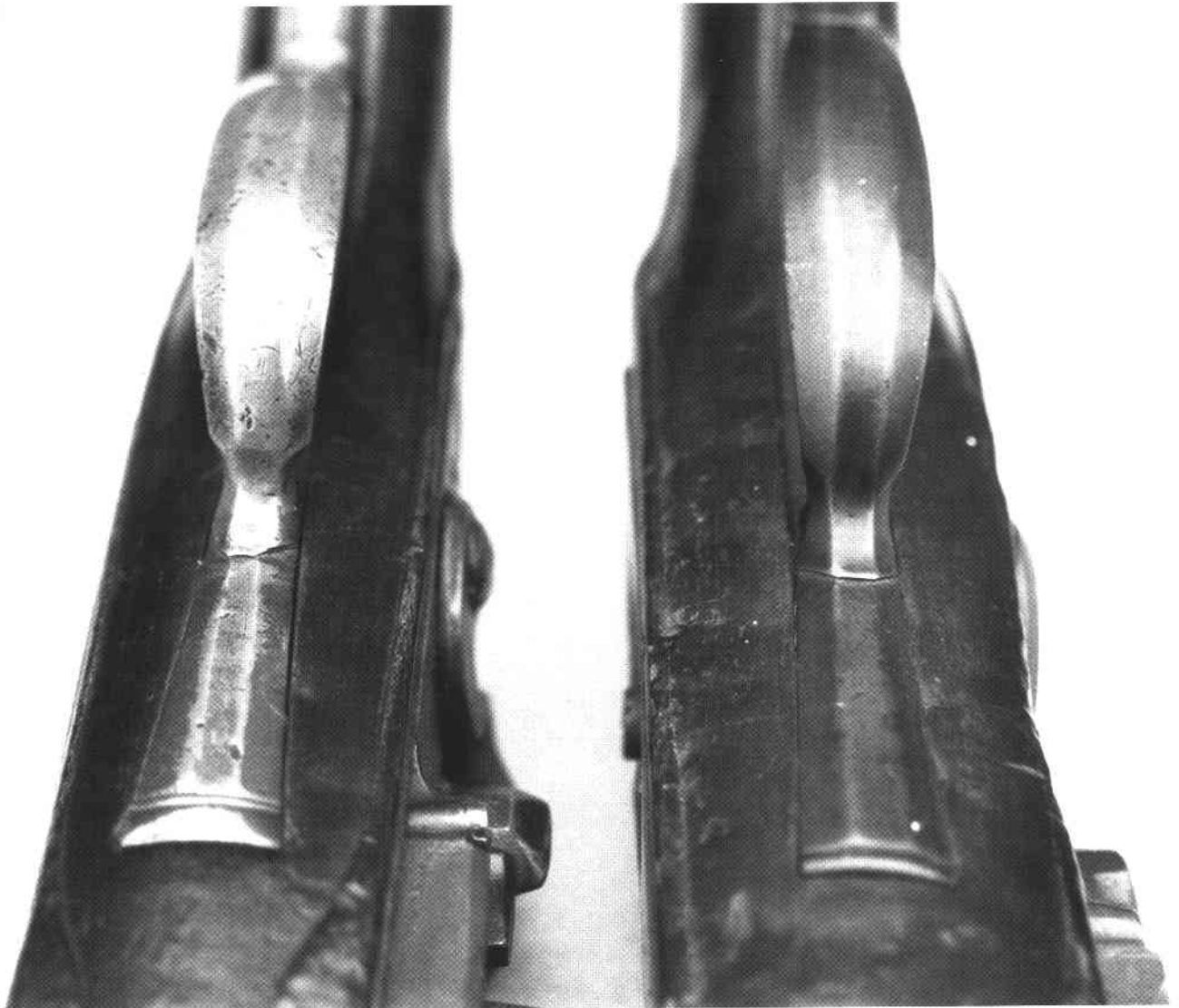


Figure 18. JFS on left. Frontal view shows maintenance of design and style in both rifles.

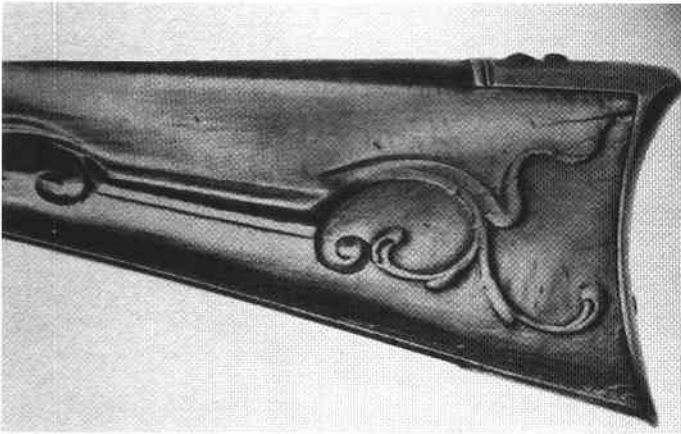


Figure 34. Rifle #8, page 56 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway.

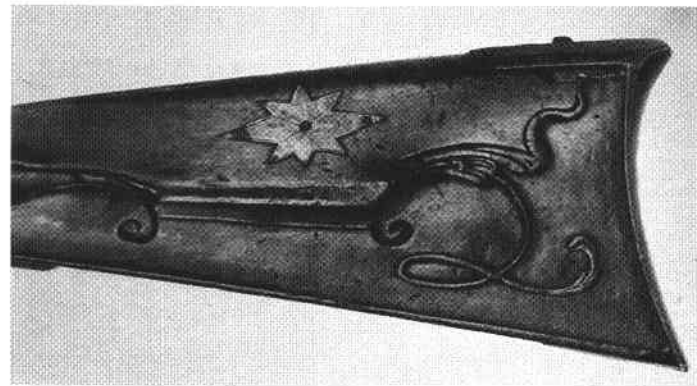


Figure 35. Rifle #24, page 92 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway.

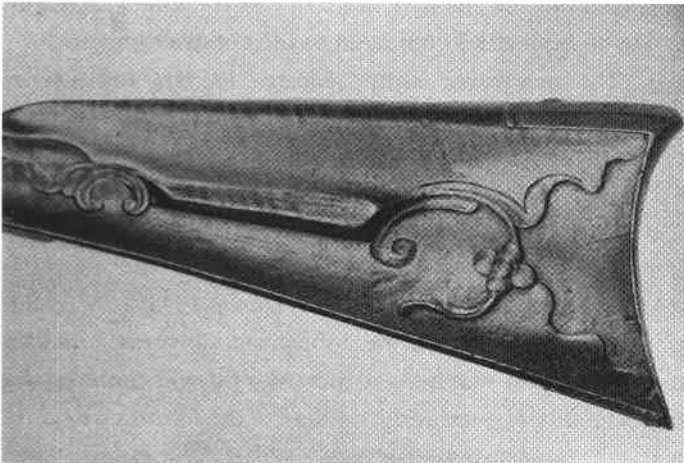


Figure 36. Rifle #26, page 96 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway.

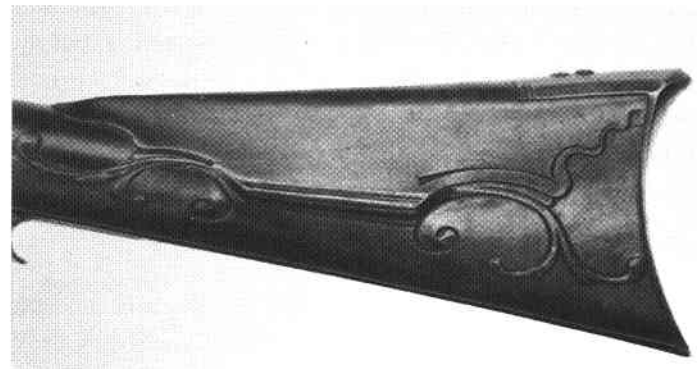


Figure 37. Rifle #31, page 107 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway.

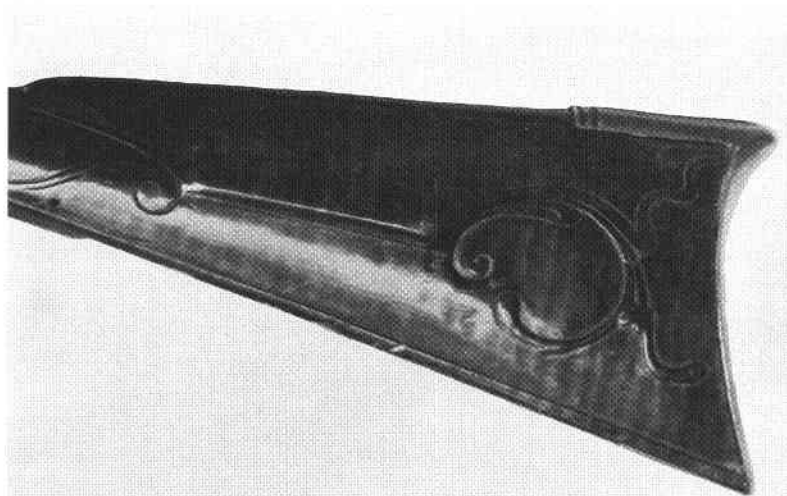


Figure 38. Rifle #38, page 119 in *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania* by George Shumway.

They have a noticeable but not unattractive bulge at the beginning of the swell of the pipe tail where the ramrod enters the stock.

In addition to the salient aspects listed above, the following additional features of design and construction on these rifles (although they may be viewed as traditional) serve in their individuality to vindicate even further the premise that John Fondersmith is also the maker of the JFS because the following *combinations of details* are alike in so many respects as to defy chance, i.e., the barrels are anchored to the stocks by four flat keys (the J. Fondersmith rifle has brass escutcheons slotted to receive them) (Figures 30 and fig. 31), filed details on ramrod pipes (Figure 33) are identical and are secured with one pin each, and the nose caps (Figure 33) are identical in construction and are secured by one rivet located in the center bottom of this item.

Having considered these two rifles in intimate detail, I feel that they were made by the same hand. Having said this, I would like to mention the possibility that some unsigned rifles attributed to George Schreyer (especially those that don't quite "fit") might just as easily have been made by J. Fondersmith. For example, there are several unsigned rifles, among which are numbers 8 (Figure 34), 24 (Figure 35), 26 (Figure 36), 31 (Figure 37), and 38 (Figure 38) in Shumway's monograph, that are attributed to Schreyer. All of these have the same unique carving of the cheek-piece side of butt stock already described in detail and, in addition, rifle 39 has this carving as well as the cross hatching at the barrel tang and it is a signed G. Schreyer.¹⁶

We have now come full circle and although I reiterate the wisdom of Kindig's premise that J. Fondersmith "had some association with George Schreyer," I also hold that John Fondersmith had more than an association with JFS. I repeat my assertion that J. Fondersmith and JFS *are one and the same*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The cliché "third time is a charm" is appropriate here as this is the third time I have relied upon the photographic ability, organizational skills, encouragement, and support of my wife to guide and assist me in the preparation of a paper for the ASAC. Thank you, Judy.

Also, I wish to acknowledge Mr. Ray McKnight in regard to his biographical research on the Fondersmiths and his willingness to present his research dealing with the symbolism found in John Fondersmith's work.

An additional acknowledgment must go to Mr. Don Bryan for his gracious agreement to display his John Fondersmith rifle.

1. Ray McKnight, *The Kentucky Rifle Association Bulletin*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter 1994), pp. 2-4.

2. George Shumway, *George Schreyer, Sr & Jr, Gunmakers of Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania*. York, PA: George Shumway Publisher, 1990, pp. 152-53.

3. Frank M. Sellers, *American Gunsmiths*. Highland Park, NJ: The Gun Room Press, 1983, p. 262.

4. Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths: 1650-1850*. New York: Bramhall House, 1952, p. 32.

5. John G. W. Dillin, *The Kentucky Rifle*. Edited by George Hyatt, 4th ed. York, PA: Trimmer Printing, 1959, p. 104.

6. The Kentucky Rifle Association. *The Kentucky Rifle: A True American Heritage in Picture*. Washington, DC: The Kentucky Rifle Association, 1967. This publication lists no pictorial representation of any guns made by any member of the Fondersmith family.

7. The Golden Age Arms Company and James R. Johnston, *Kentucky Rifles & Pistols: 1750-1850*. Columbus, OH: Repro Group Ltd., 1976. This publication lists no pictorial representation of any John Fondersmith gun; however, it does list an example of a Valentine Fondersmith rifle.

8. George Shumway, *Rifles in Colonial America*, 2 vols. York, PA: George Shumway Publisher, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 312.

9. Henry J. Kauffman, *The Pennsylvania-Kentucky Rifle*. Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Company, 1960, p. 229.

10. Joe Kindig, Jr., *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age*. York, PA: Trimmer Printing, Inc., 1960, pp. 113-14.

11. Ilmars Biersnick, personal interview, 29 October 1992.

12. Kindig, p. 35.

13. Steven Foster and James A. Duke, *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America*, 2nd ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 171.

14. Edmund N. Gathercoal and Elmer H. Wirth, *Pharmacognosy*. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1948, pp. 422-23.

15. Shumway, *George Schreyer*, pp. 68-70.

16. Shumway, *George Schreyer*, pp. 120-21.

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