

# Thomas Morse: A Yankee Confederate Yankee Gunsmith

By Michael Carroll and Gordon L. Jones

The starting point for this article was a presentation given by Gordon Jones of the Atlanta History Center at our society's 2008 meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia. The presentation was on the History Center's recently acquired George W. Wray, Jr. collection. After the talk, we had a rather interesting discussion as to whether two guns from the Wray collection were made by a gunsmith from New Hampshire or a gunsmith from Georgia or Virginia working for the Confederate government.

I have several guns made by Thomas Morse of Lancaster, New Hampshire, in my collection. My position during this discussion was that rifles from the Wray collection could have been made by Thomas Morse, a New Hampshire gunsmith, but there was initially no possibility that Thomas Morse made rifles for the Confederate States during the Civil War. However, based on what he had found in George Wray's research files, Gordon believed that the same Thomas Morse did indeed make guns for the Confederacy.

Gordon was very informative and willing to share information, files, and photographs from Wray's research files in the Center's collection. We agreed that further research was needed on the Morse rifles and the association of these guns with the Confederate war effort.

I soon received the Wray files from Gordon, which contained research material on Thomas Morse's activities in New Hampshire and his business affairs in Macon, Georgia. Gordon also sent a CD with photographs he had taken of two other rifles made by Thomas Morse that are in the collections of the Springfield Armory Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy. In addition, internet searches and the Lancaster Historical Society provided information for this article.

## WHO WAS THOMAS MORSE?

Lancaster is a town in the far northwest part of New Hampshire along the Connecticut River. Biographical information on Thomas Morse indicates that he was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 1812, and that he died in Lancaster. He was married to Harriet L. Mitchell of Chicopee, Massachusetts, in 1854. She died in Lancaster in 1889.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Morse is first listed as a gunsmith in a directory of the village of Lancaster in 1856.<sup>2</sup> The work of



Thomas Morse is seen in the daybook of another New Hampshire gunsmith, D.H. Hilliard. He lists entries of letters, gun parts, and supplies that were sent to Thomas Morse in Lancaster in 1856 and 1857.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows these entries from the Hilliard daybook. Also, Thomas Morse is mentioned in a scrapbook of Lancaster newspaper anecdotes as having worked in that town before the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> These entries clearly show that Thomas Morse had established himself as a gunsmith in Lancaster by 1856. The general location of Thomas Morse's shop, which was located on the town green, can be seen in Figure 2.<sup>5</sup>

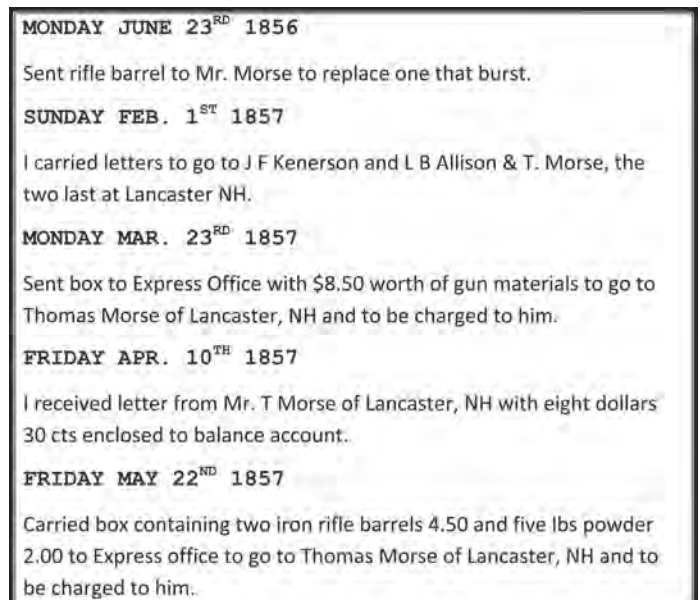


Figure 1. List of entries taken from the the Hilliard daybook showing Thomas Morse's activities.



Figure 2. View of Public Green, Lancaster, New Hampshire.

### THOMAS MORSE'S WORK IN LANCASTER

Thomas Morse was a skilled metalworking and wood working craftsman. His work at this time consisted of finely made percussion rifles and pistols usually stocked in bird's eye maple. His barrels were either full octagon or octagon

Figure 3. .44 caliber Thomas Morse percussion halfstock rifle made in Lancaster, New Hampshire (Michael R, Carroll collection, Michael R. Carroll, photographer).



Figure 4. .30 caliber Thomas Morse percussion pistol with detachable shoulder stock made in Lancaster, New Hampshire (Michael R, Carroll collection, Michael R. Carroll, photographer).

transitioning to round. His percussion guns also featured a turned down muzzle with a ring band so that a bullet starter could be used to load the gun. Figures 3 and 4 present examples of his percussion gun work done in Lancaster before the Civil War. Table 1 provides the dimensions and characteristics of these guns.

The percussion half stock rifle is die stamped "T. MORSE" on the lockplate and the barrel and the percussion pistol is die stamped "T. MORSE" on the barrel. Note the broken left inside leg of the letter "M" (Figures 5, 6 and 7).

### THOMAS MORSE'S WORK IN THE SOUTH

For reasons as yet unclear, Thomas Morse relocated to Macon, Georgia, at some point after 1857. The first indication of Morse working in Macon was found in the August 30, 1859, edition of *The Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, published in

**Table 1. Dimensions and Characteristics of the T. Morse .44 Caliber Percussion Rifle and the .30 Caliber Percussion Pistol**

Type	Cal.	O/A Length	Bbl. Length	Muzzle Turned	Rifling
Perc. Rifle	.44	43 3/4 Inches	27 Inches Octagon	Yes	5 Land & Groove Shallow
Perc. Pistol	.30	31 5/8 Inches	15 5/8 Inches Oct-round	Yes	4 Land & Groove Shallow

Macon.<sup>6</sup> Figure 8 shows an advertisement from this newspaper listing Morse working in partnership with William Markwalter. Advertisements indicate that Markwalter had established his business as of March of that year, with Morse joining him by August.

The gun shop of Markwalter & Morse was located on Third Street, near the corner of Mulberry, in what was



Figure 5. Name on New Hampshire percussion halfstock rifle lockplate.



Figure 6. Name on New Hampshire halfstock percussion rifle barrel.

known as the Floyd House. This location can be seen in Figures 9 and 10.<sup>7</sup> The Markwalter & Morse partnership was dissolved on June 8, 1860, and a notice for this change is shown in Figure 11.<sup>8</sup> Figure 12 is an advertisement dated



Figure 7. Name on New Hampshire percussion pistol.

June 12, 1860, showing Thomas Morse operating by himself in Macon.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Morse is also found in the *The Macon Directory for 1860*.<sup>10</sup> Here, Morse is listed as a gunsmith by the name of Moss, working in partnership with the same William Markwalter in the firm of Markwalter & Moss, located at the corner of Mulberry & Third Streets in Macon. The name Moss is believed to be a misspelling of Morse.

As seen in Figure 13, the 1860 US Census from Macon, Bibb County, Georgia, also lists a Thomas Moss as a gunsmith (age 48, born in Pennsylvania) with wife named Harriet (age 33, born in Massachusetts) and two children named Oscar and



Figure 8. Markwalter & Morse 1859 advertisement.

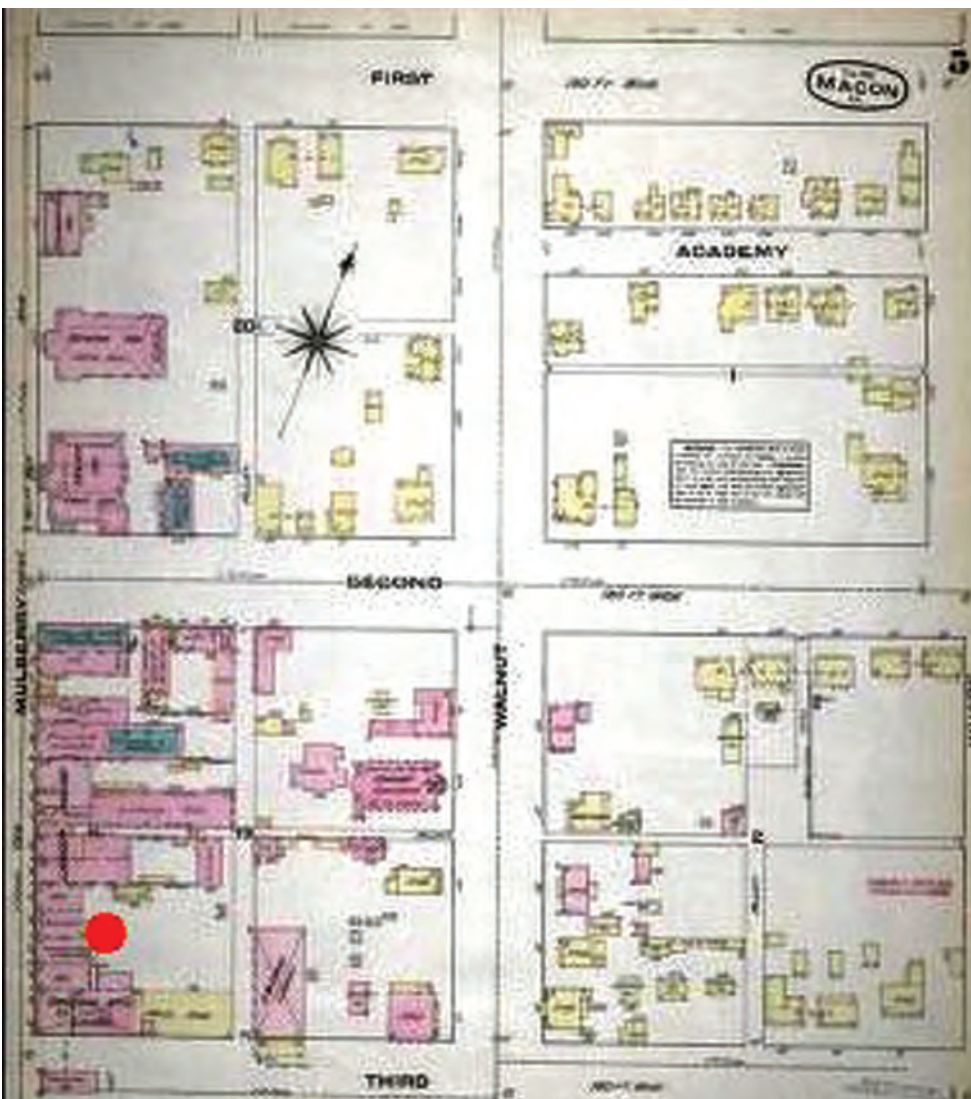


Figure 9. Macon, Georgia, business district map, 1860.

Charles (ages 5 and 3, respectively, both born in New Hampshire).<sup>11</sup>

An article in *The Macon Daily Telegraph* of June 20, 1861, boasts of Morse's mechanical ingenuity and personal marksmanship: "The public may not be aware that we have in Macon one of the best makers of Rifles and Pistols in this country—I believe in the world . . . in regard to range, accuracy of fire, and penetration. In addition to this he is one of the finest living shots himself." The author, identified only as "Southern Rifle," goes on to claim that Morse invented "a new kind of double bullet" and has also "discovered an easy method of loading five to six times a minute at the muzzle."<sup>12</sup> Although certainly exaggerated, this description suggests that Morse was experimenting with ways to increase the rate of fire of his highly accurate rifles. Also, the Macon newspaper advertisements for Morse's guns claim that they are manufactured on an "entirely new plan" (see Figures 8 and 12).

"Southern Rifle" concludes his article by recommending that Morse's talents "would be made use of more

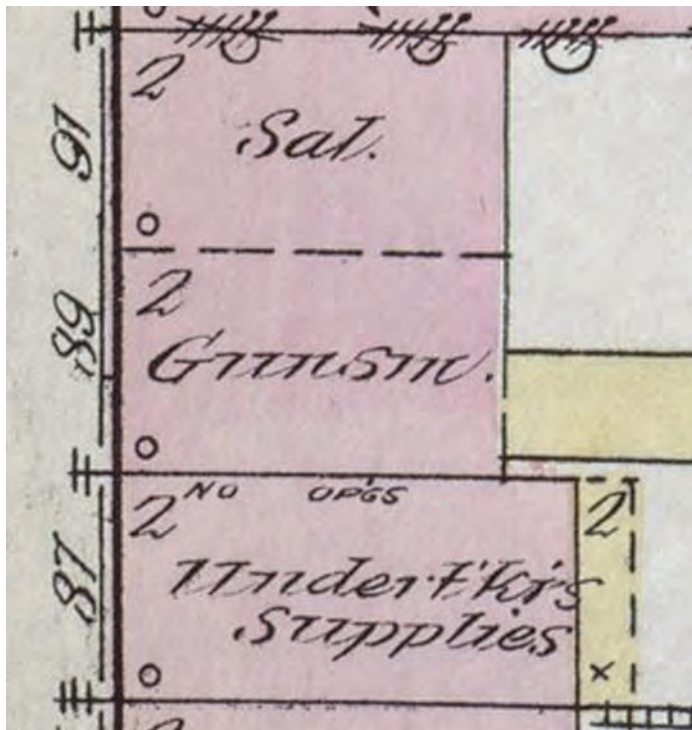


Figure 10. Detail of Macon, Georgia, business district map showing Markwalter & Morse gunsmith shop, 1860.



Figure 11. Markwalter & Morse notice of dissolution.

profitably” by the Confederate States, “than by the slow process of making one rifle at a time, although one that could hit a dollar every time at 500 yards.”<sup>13</sup> The gun making skills of Thomas Morse should have been very much in demand by the Confederacy. On May 5, 1862, Confederate Chief of Ordnance Josiah Gorgas wrote to Captain Richard M. Cuyler, commander of the newly established Macon Armory, stating: “It is highly desirable to get up some telescopic rifles for sharpshooters. If you can find any ingenious workmen to undertake them, do so. Let the barrel be



Figure 14. .577 caliber T. Morse, Macon, Georgia, percussion target rifle (Atlanta History Center, George W. Wray, Jr. Collection, Jack W. Melton Jr., Photographer).

26 inches, bore .577, and twist one turn in 30 inches. The heavy barrels of country rifles will do.”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, we were unable to find any documentation directly linking Thomas Morse to the Confederate States Ordnance Department in Macon, Georgia, or anywhere else.

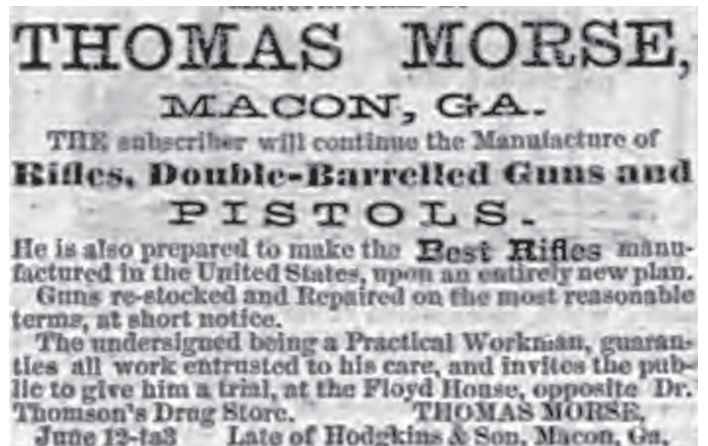


Figure 12. Advertisement showing Thomas Morse operating on his own.

Address	Name	Occupation	Age
914 999	Thomas Morse	48	W
	Marrist	33	L
	Oliver W.	57	F
	Charles H.	3	M

Figure 13. 1860 U.S. Census, Macon, Bibb County, Georgia.

However, Morse was personally connected with the Ordnance Department through Daniel C. Hodgkins, of Hodgkins and Sons, where Morse had once been employed (see Figures 8 and 12). In May 1862, this firm leased its entire facility in Macon to the Ordnance Department where Daniel's son Walter C. Hodgkins built sharpshooter rifles.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, William Markwalter, Morse's former business partner in Macon, worked as a machinist at the Richmond Armory. In June, 1862, he and his brother Martin were both detached for duty with the Ordnance Department from Company A of Phillips Legion (recruited in Greene County, Georgia, about 60 miles northeast of Macon).<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, it is known that Thomas Morse was issued Confederate States Patent Number 199 on September 10, 1863, for a breech loading rifle. Although a summary list of patentees is all that survives of the Confederate patent records, it does show Morse as being from Richmond, Virginia.<sup>17</sup> Was he working at the Confederate Armory there? So far, we do not know.



Four rifles made by Thomas Morse during the Civil War are known. Two of these, a percussion target rifle and a cartridge breech loading rifle, are in the Atlanta History Center's George W. Wray Jr. collection. These two rifles are shown in Figures 14 and 15. The third rifle, a half stock percussion rifle with telescope is in the collection of the Museum of the

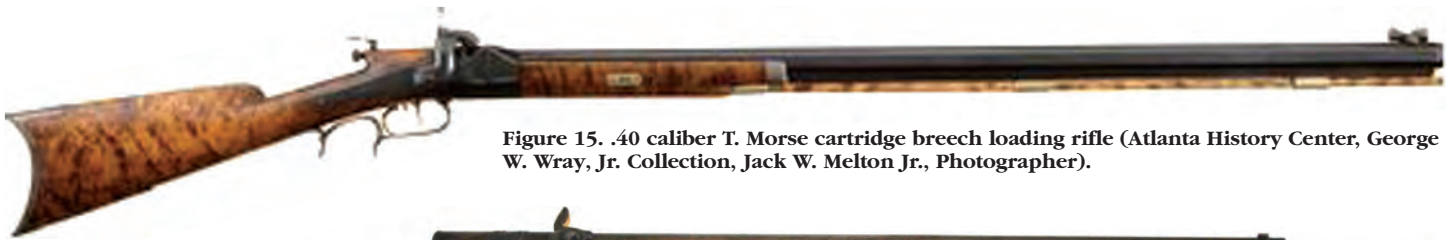


Figure 15. .40 caliber T. Morse cartridge breech loading rifle (Atlanta History Center, George W. Wray, Jr. Collection, Jack W. Melton Jr., Photographer).

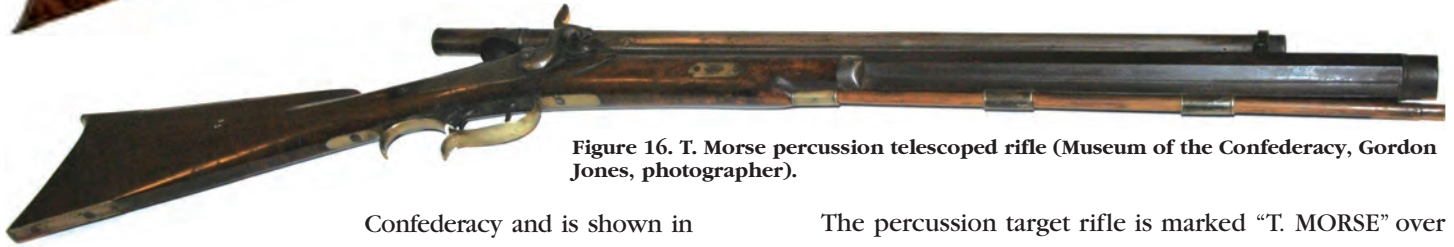


Figure 16. T. Morse percussion telescoped rifle (Museum of the Confederacy, Gordon Jones, photographer).

Confederacy and is shown in Figure 16. The telescope on this rifle is stamped with the name of "Allen & Wheelock," who made guns and related items in Worcester, Massachusetts, before, during, and after the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> Figure 17 shows this Allen & Wheelock stamp. Although it is categorized as a Civil War rifle, this gun could have been made in New Hampshire before the Civil War. A half stock rifle with left-handed lock, signed T. Morse and dated 1863, is referenced by William A. Albaugh as well, although its present location is unknown.<sup>19</sup>

A comparison of the dimensions and characteristics of the rifles shown in Figures 14 and 15 is presented in Table 2.



Figure 17. T. Morse percussion telescoped rifle Allen & Wheelock stamp.

The percussion target rifle is marked "T. MORSE" over "MACON, GA" on the right barrel flat, just forward of the nipple bolster. The breech loading rifle is marked "T. MORS" on the side of the lockplate and "T. MORSE 1863" on the right breech flat. It is interesting to note that the markings on the percussion target rifle are stamped using one die for "T. MORSE" and another for the "MACON, GA." On the breech loading rifle, the letters for "T. MORS" and "T. MORSE 1863" are individually stamped. Note the broken left inside leg of the letter "M" on the die stamp for the percussion target rifle and percussion telescoped rifle (Figures 18-21).



Figure 18. Name on percussion target rifle barrel.



Figure 19. Name on cartridge breech loading rifle lockplate.



Figure 20. Name on cartridge breech loading rifle breech flat.



Figure 21. Name on percussion telescoped rifle lock.

**Table 2. Dimensions and Characteristics of the .577 Caliber T. Morse, Macon, GA, Percussion Target Rifle and the .40 Caliber T. Morse Cartridge Breech Loading Rifle**

Type	Cal.	O/A Length	Bbl. Length	Muzzle Turned	Rifling
Perc. Target Rifle	.577	59 1/4 Inches	42 1/4 Inches Octagon	Yes False Muzzle	13 High Arch Polyland & Groove Deep
Perc. Cart. Breech Loader	.40	50 3/4 Inches	33 1/2 Inches Oct-round	yes	10 High Arch Land and Groove Shallow



Figure 22. Bolster flares on percussion guns: (A) percussion target rifle, Macon, Georgia; (B) percussion rifle, Lancaster, New Hampshire; (C) percussion pistol, Lancaster, New Hampshire; and (D) percussion telescope rifle, no manufacturer location.

The percussion target rifle and the breech loading rifle shown above certainly are the work of Thomas Morse, the same individual who made the Lancaster, New Hampshire, arms shown in Figures 3 and 4. Look closely at the T. Morse stamped on the barrel and lock plate of the rifle shown in Figures 5 and 6. Compare the “M” with the broken left inside leg on this die stamp to that on the percussion target rifle shown in Figure 16. They are the same. Thomas Morse obviously brought his name die with him to Macon.

Further evidence that the same individual made all of the percussion guns is found in the half circular flares on the bolster and the round and slotted hammer nuts of these arms (Figures 22 and 23).

Other than the fact that it was made in Macon, the rifling and caliber of the Morse percussion target rifle shown in Figure 14 is the most significant aspect of this arm. Figure 24 shows the 13 poly land and groove bore rifling. This high-arch poly land rifling, while not totally unique to Morse’s guns, is an early and new development for the period. It is

Morse’s first use of this type of rifling found thus far, and could possibly be part of the “entirely new plan” referenced in the 1861 Macon newspaper article. Evidently, this rifling technique proved beneficial, as it is found on Morse’s post-Civil War breech loading rifles as well. Additionally, the .577 caliber, conforming precisely to Confederate regulations of June 9, 1862, is strong evidence that this arm was produced for military purposes under a military contract.

The Morse breech loading rifle shown previously in Figure 15 may also be an example of the “entirely new plan.”

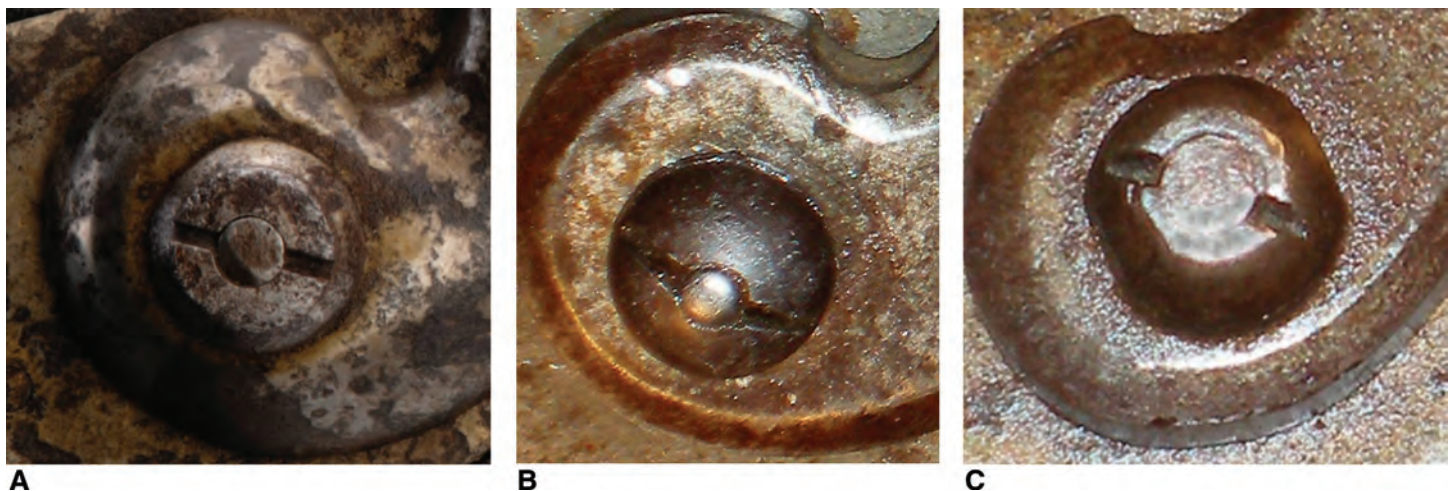


Figure 23. Slotted hammer nuts on percussion guns: (A) percussion target rifle, Macon, Georgia; (B) percussion rifle, Lancaster, New Hampshire; and (C) percussion pistol, Lancaster, New Hampshire.



Figure 24. 10 Poly groove and land rifling.

Figure 25 shows the “T. MORSE” name on the breech of this rifle, dated 1863.

Look closely at the individual letters used to stamp the markings in Figure 25. When these letters are compared to those in Figures 5, 6, 7, 18, 19, 20, and 21, it can be easily seen that the same style and size of letters were used for die stamps and individual letter stamps. It appears that Thomas Morse had a set of individual letter and number stamps, probably made by Morse himself, available to him when he worked in private business in Macon or if he worked for the Confederate States Ordnance Department.



Figure 25. Signature and date on cartridge breech loading rifle.

## THOMAS MORSE'S WORK AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

A directory of American gunsmiths shows Thomas Morse working in Lancaster, New Hampshire, from 1866 to 1882.<sup>20</sup> As seen in Figure 26, Thomas Morse and his wife Harriet are listed in the 1870 US Census for Lancaster, Coos County, New Hampshire.<sup>21</sup> Figure 27 shows Morse and his wife Harriet, along with his two sons, Charles and Oscar, listed in the 1880 US Census for Lancaster as well.<sup>22</sup> It is also known that Thomas Morse died in Lancaster in 1890.<sup>23</sup>

After the war, Thomas Morse was a respected citizen of Lancaster, known throughout the town as “gunsmith Morse.” A collection of town anecdotes from the local newspaper known

as “Fred Baker’s Scrapbook” (today housed at the Lancaster Historical Society) includes this story, dated May 13, 1874:

Thomas Morse, the gunsmith, shot a loon weighing 12 pounds, a few days since, at sixty rods [330 yards] with one of his famous breach-loading [sic] guns of his own invention and manufacture. The bird was swimming when shot and nothing was visible above the water but its head and neck, which was pierced by the bullet.<sup>24</sup>

An example of Thomas Morse’s fine post-Civil War gunsmithing is shown in Figure 28. This breech loading rifle is stocked in bird’s eye maple, the wood of choice for many of his guns. Also, the rifle has poly land rifling now with rounded edges to the lands. Note that the construction of

1870	Morse Thomas	65	W	Gunsmith
	Harriet	48	W	Keeping Home
9/10/70	Charles	17	M	16-21

Figure 26. 1870 U.S. Census, Lancaster, Coos County, New Hampshire.

85	Morse Thomas	72	W	63	Gunsmith
	Harriet	63	W	63	Keeping Home
	Charles	24	M	24	Printer
	Oscar	21	M	21	Printer

Figure 27. 1880 US Census, Lancaster, Coos County, New Hampshire.



Figure 28. Post-Civil War cartridge breech loading rifle (Michael R, Carroll collection, Michael R. Carroll, photographer).



Figure 29. Civil War cartridge breech loading rifle.

“Fred Baker’s Scrapbook” at the Lancaster Historical Society. Two witnesses tell the story of a group of local veterans congregated in Charles Howe’s harness shop sometime after the end of the Civil War. The topic of discussion was the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December 1862:

this gun is extremely similar to the cartridge breech loading rifle made by Morse in 1863 and shown in Figure 15.

Evidence that Thomas Morse made both cartridge breech loading rifles that feature percussion ignition can be seen in the following: Figures 29 and 30 show the breech design. Figures 31 and 32 show close up photographs of the breech chamber of each gun. Figures 33 and 34 are sketches of the chambers of the rifles.

The materials used in the fabrication of the cartridges used in the Thomas Morse cartridge breech loading rifles are not known. The case material was most probably brass or copper. There probably was a thin paper disc in the center of the cartridge base that had been treated with a flame-sensitive material to transfer the fire from the percussion cap through the paper to the gunpowder in the cartridge case.

#### A YANKEE CONFEDERATE YANKEE?

As if the story of Thomas Morse were not intriguing enough already, there is a fascinating anecdote about him in

Thomas ‘Gunsmith’ Morse, who had lived in Lancaster for several years before the war, but had been brought up as a boy in Mississippi where he had learned his trade, returned to the South at the breaking out of war, and enlisted in Barksdale’s Brigade of Longstreet’s army with his telescope-sight rifle, as a sharp-shooter.

While Col. Cross’s regiment [5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire] was undertaking the building of a pontoon bridge across the Rappahannock [*sic*] River opposite Fredericksburg, Cross, his boy, Michael Leary, and other Lancaster men were stationed under a pine tree near the river bank. Soon they noticed that a single gun fired from a white house on the opposite side of the river was lopping off branches from the pine tree too close for comfort. Cross remarked, ‘That looks to me like Gunsmith Morse. We’ll give him some artillery.’ He had Leary notify the officer in charge of the artillery to bring up a couple of guns . . . the artillery man landed his second shot on the roof of the house across the river and a bunch of Confederates ran out yelling and sought shelter. Cross said ‘I wonder if we got him.’<sup>25</sup>



Figure 30. Post-Civil War cartridge breech loading rifle.



Incredible as this story may be, it still tells us that “gunsmith” Morse was not attempting to hide anything about his Confederate past. And, for all we know, he did indeed make the short trip from Richmond to Fredericksburg in December 1862 to take a few shots across the river, with or without any formal military association or permission.

At this point, Thomas Morse, who had been sitting quietly listening to the story, spoke up and “admitted that it was he who did the firing from the house; but he recognized the Lancaster men through his lens and took care not to hit his former friends.”<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Morse was clearly a highly skilled gunsmith. He not only made fine percussion arms, but also some of the

Was this account truth or a tall tale? Perhaps it is a bit of both. There is no evidence that Morse ever lived in Mississippi or joined the Confederate Army (at the age of 49 years in 1861, he was probably too old for active service). Furthermore, the 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire was not directly engaged in building the pontoon bridges across the Rappahannock as stated. The 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire’s role that day was protecting the engineers building the bridges.<sup>27</sup> Finally, how would it have been possible to personally identify a sharpshooter hidden in a house across the river?



Figure 31. Civil War cartridge breech loading rifle chamber.



Figure 32. Post-Civil War cartridge breech loading rifle chamber.

earliest breech loading rifles, based on his own unique design. He worked in Lancaster before the Civil War, in Macon, and probably for the Confederacy during the war, then returned to New Hampshire after the war, perhaps as soon as 1866. Certainly there were many northerners who sided with the South (Josiah Gorgas, for example) and vice-versa, but most of them ended up staying in their region of choice after the war. Why would this Yankee-turned-Confederate return to his Yankee home town, especially if his Confederate past was so well known to his fellow townsmen? We may never know. The story challenges all our assumptions about ideals and loyalty during the Civil War.

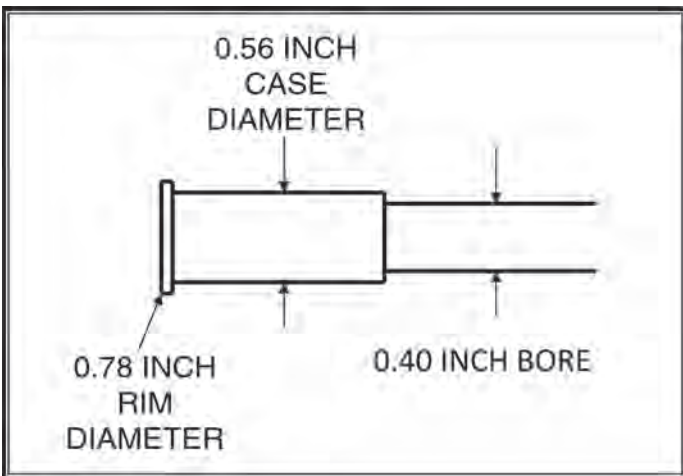


Figure 33. Chamber dimensions for Civil War breechloader.

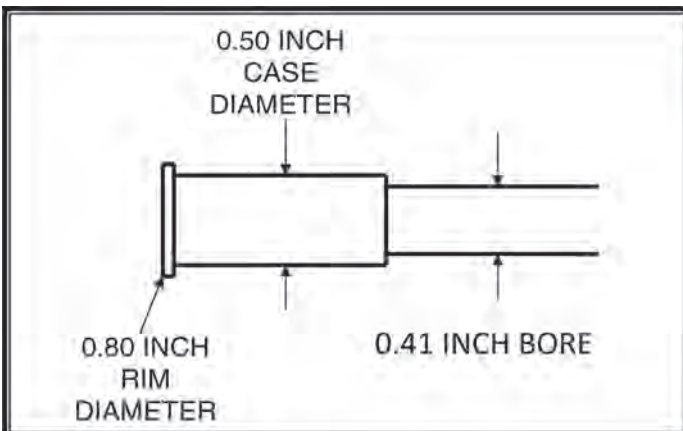


Figure 34. Chamber dimensions for post-Civil War breechloader.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Faith M. Kent, Lancaster [New Hampshire] Historical Society, to George W. Wray, Jr., Atlanta, Georgia, May 15, 2000.
2. Richard P. Kent, *Statistics & Directory of Lancaster, NH Listed for Year 1856*, Lancaster [New Hampshire] Historical Society, p. 335.
3. David H. Hilliard Daybook, Cornish, New Hampshire, 1856-1857, unpublished manuscript, private collection.
4. "Fred Baker's Scrapbook," unpublished manuscript, Lancaster, [New Hampshire] Historical Society, undated.
5. Postcard of Lancaster, New Hampshire, G.W. Morris Publisher, Portland, Maine, 1912.
6. *The Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, August 30, 1859, p. 1.
7. Map of Macon, Georgia, Sanborn Map Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1884.
8. *Macon Daily Telegraph*, June 8, 1860, p. 1.
9. *Ibid*, June 12, 1860, p. 2.
10. Mears & Company, *The Macon Directory for 1860* (Macon, Georgia: Andrews Book & Job Printing Office, 1860), pp. 53-54, 56, 90.
11. Ancestry.com, U.S. Census 1860, Macon, Bibb County, GA.
12. *The Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, June 20, 1861.
13. *Ibid*.
14. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 109, "Letters Received, Richard M. Cuyler - Savannah, Macon," Chapter IV, Volume 36, page 43, quoted

in John M. Murphy and Howard M. Madaus, *Confederate Rifles & Muskets* (Newport Beach, California: Graphic Publishers, 1996), p. 439. Walter C. Hodgkins recommended that these sharpshooter rifles be made in .48 caliber, but the uniform caliber of .577 was officially adopted for all Confederate arms on June 9, 1862 - see Madaus and Murphy, p. 440.

15. Madaus and Murphy, pp. 380-381, 439-441.

16. "Phillip's Georgia Legion - Infantry Battalion," roster and brief biographical sketch available at <<http://www.angelfire.com/ga2/PhillipsLegion/InfCoA.html>>. According to Armory records, both brothers were employed straightening old barrels. See Paul J. Davies, *C.S. Armory Richmond* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Paul J. Davies), 2000, pp. 104, 118, 146.

17. Kenneth W. Dobyns, *The Patent Office Pony: A History of the Early Patent Office* (Newville, Pennsylvania:

Sergeant Kirkland's Press, 1997), p. 207, available at <<http://www.myoutbox.net/popchapx.htm>>.

18. "American Firearms-Allen & Wheelock", <<http://www.american-firearms.com>>.

19. William Albaugh and Edward N. Simmons, *Confederate Arms* (New York: Stackpole Books, 1957), p. 248.

20. Frank Sellers, *American Gunsmiths* (Highland Park, New Jersey: The Gun Room Press, 1983), p. 136.

21. Ancestry.com, U.S. Census 1870, Lancaster, Coos County, New Hampshire.

22. *Ibid*, 1880.

23. Faith M. Kent to George Wray, May 15, 2000.

24. "Fred Baker's Scrapbook," May 13, 1874.

25. "Fred Baker's Scrapbook, undated.

26. *Ibid*.

27. *Ibid*.