

North Carolina Schools of Longrifles 1765–1865*

By William Ivey

The Kentucky longrifle is uniquely American. It evolved from European forms known as German Jaeger rifles and English and French fowlers (Figs 1 and 2) during the second quarter of the 18th century, probably in or around the Lancaster to Bethlehem area of Pennsylvania. By the 1760s it had emerged as strictly an American longrifle. It was mostly known in the 18th and 19th centuries as a “rifle gun.” However, early on it was sometimes referred to as a “Kentucky rifle” since it was produced in the “back country” away from the sea coast. “Kaintuck” or Kentucky was often the term used to describe the entire territory west of the eastern coastal developed areas in the 18th and 19th centuries. Captain John Dillin’s book *The Kentucky Rifle* published in 1924 certainly caused the term “Kentucky rifle” to be reinforced among the historical and collecting community. The Kentucky Rifle Association founded in 1962 is dedicated to the heritage of the Kentucky rifle. In their membership book it states, “Say ‘Kentucky rifle’ and people know what you are talking about. Say anything else, and you have to explain!”

To some, the use of the name Kentucky rifle is a misnomer, but the name is now generally accepted among writers, historians, and collectors. It should be pointed out that today we also distinguish the origin of these rifles by referring to them as Pennsylvania Kentucky rifles, Virginia Kentucky rifles, North Carolina Kentucky rifles, and so on. Present collectors and historians also use the words Kentucky rifle and longrifle synonymously. Longrifles truly are indigenous American weapons usually collected for their aesthetic qualities along with their historical value. Their sheer beauty and art work causes one to compare them with other art forms such as paintings or sculptures. Fortunately today, many in other decorative art fields such as furniture,



silver, pottery, and textiles have now recognized the longrifle as a major subject to be studied and preserved in American crafts. It is considered by many that the Kentucky rifle was the greatest of all the early American decorative arts since the creators of these rifles embodied so many disciplines such as being a blacksmith, mechanic, silversmith, engraver, wood worker, and wood carver. These early craftsmen had to put it all together and make it work while creating a thing of beauty.

The longrifle was generally stocked of native woods with maple being preferred by most makers (walnut was used in western North Carolina). In its early development, the Kentucky rifle had a sliding wood patchbox on the right side of the butt stock to hold cloth patches, grease or tallow, flints, and other accessories. This wooden cavity with a wooden cover was then referred to as a “tallow box” and was



Figure 1. German Jaeger rifle. (Owner: Neaves Collection.)

Figure 2. American maple stocked fowler circa 1750 in the manner of English and French fowlers with a Charleston, SC, history. (Owner: Ivey Collection.)

*This article contains excerpts from the book published by William Ivey entitled *North Carolina Schools of Longrifles 1765–1865*.

directly fashioned after European weapons. By the last quarter of the 18th century, brass patchboxes had become equally popular among the gunsmiths. These brass patchboxes were sometimes elaborately engraved with its cover (usually referred to as lid or door) hinged for easy accessibility. The patchbox of brass had become a very dominant decorative element of the American longrifle. The Kentucky rifle in North Carolina reached its height during the period 1790-1835 when some are seen with rococo style of rather sophisticated relief carving usually exemplified by “C” and “S” scroll motifs intertwined with foliage designs. Many North Carolina rifles were not relief carved, but the elaborate hardware with silver worked with brass, the carved forestock molding and the “high-combed” architecture contributed equally to the elegance and importance of the North Carolina rifle. The styles of carving as well as patchboxes, sideplates, inlays, and architecture often serve to identify origins or makers of otherwise unsigned rifles.

Just a word about signatures on North Carolina longrifles is important to note. The name on the lock plate is rarely that of the Kentucky rifle maker. That is not true of American military arms where almost always the gun’s contractor or maker’s name is on the lock along with the date of manufacture. Probably less than 50% of all longrifles are signed, but if they are, the signature usually is on the top flat of the octagonal barrel between the breech and the rear sight. Contrary to most Pennsylvania rifle makers, gunsmiths in North Carolina also frequently put their initials or signature on the lid of the patchbox, usually read from the left side of the rifle.

Another feature of Kentucky rifles is that the forestock is secured to the barrel (usually octagonal) by small iron wedges or pins. American military guns, on the other hand, usually have iron or brass bands holding the wood to the barrel. Of course both have tangs with screws extended back from the breech that further secure the barrel to the butt stock. North Carolina rifles with a few exceptions usually have two (or more) screw tangs, whereas almost all Pennsylvania rifles have one screw a tang.

North Carolina rifles used the flintlock ignition system until about 1840. The percussion cap lock had been invented much earlier, but probably was not used in North Carolina until circa 1840. The earliest dated Jamestown School rifle of the percussion period observed to date is from the year 1845. On the other hand, we know of North Carolina flintlock rifles dating to the early 1850s. Almost certainly some rifles made in the western North Carolina Mountains after the Confederate War (1861-1865) were probably flintlock ignition. After 1850, most Kentucky flintlock rifles were converted to percussion for more practical use. Most collectors find it very acceptable restoration to reconvert to flintlock these percussion-converted specimens.

The discovery and development of the metallic breech-loading cartridge in the 1860s and its subsequent popularity in the 1870s caused the demise of the longrifle.

When we speak of the “North Carolina schools of longrifles,” we are basically talking about piedmont North Carolina and west to the Appalachian Mountains. Central North Carolina became a cultural melting pot during the last quarter of the 18th century. The Moravians, Germans, and Scots-Irish settled the central and western piedmont, and the English Quakers settled the eastern piedmont in Guilford and Randolph counties. Thus, the piedmont region of North Carolina was settled mostly with people from southeastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. These new settlers brought with them a European and Pennsylvania artistic heritage that proved to be lasting — although the art has been continuously modified and rearranged in the Carolina back country. This influence can be seen on all Carolina applied art forms and crafts and caused social historian Carl Bridenbaugh to remark, “North Carolina was culturally an extension of southeastern Pennsylvania” (see *An Introduction to the Decorative Arts of North Carolina 1776-1976*, by John Bivins; 1976).

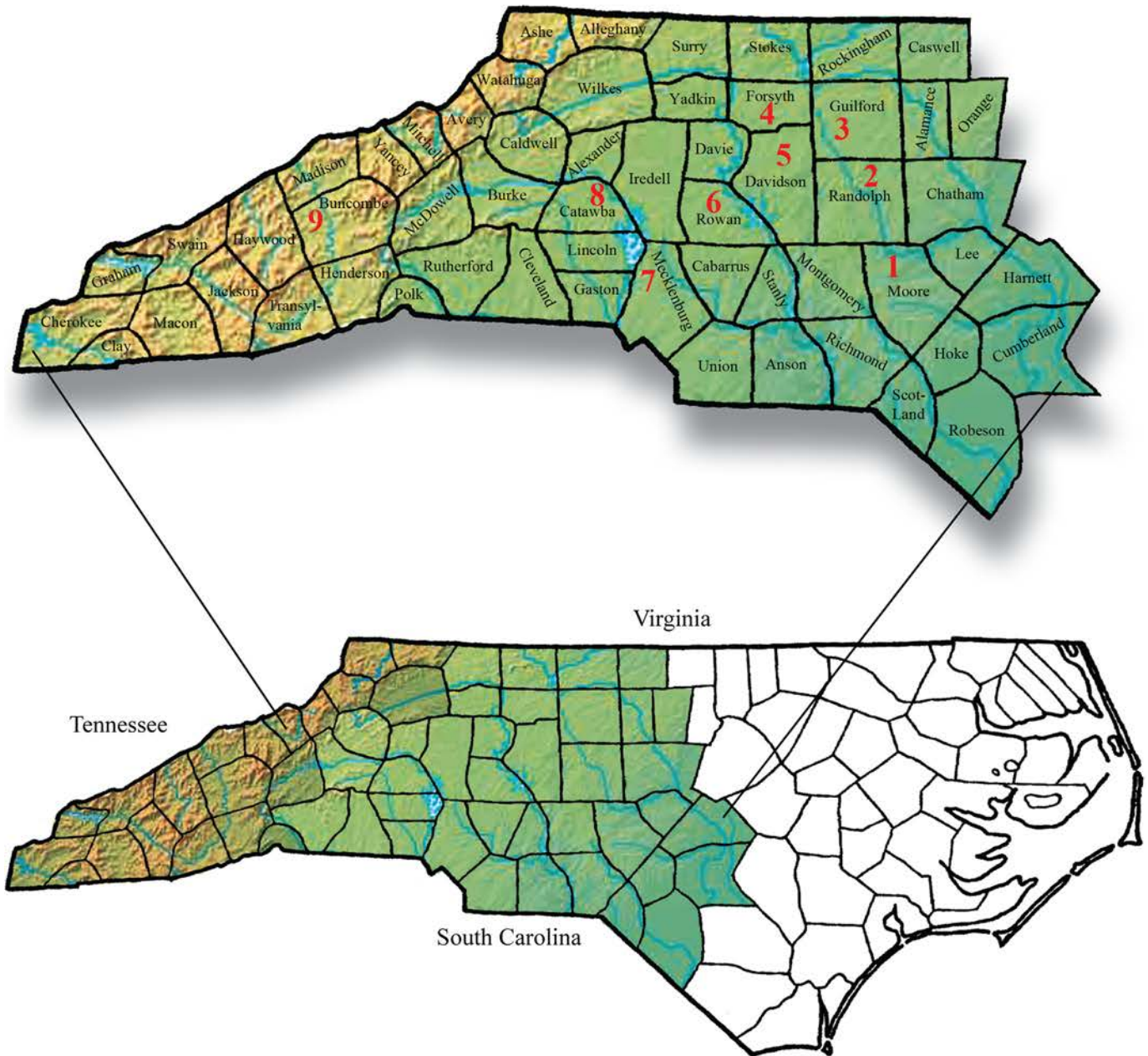
Thus, we come to the intent and purpose of my book — to compare some known North Carolina surviving rifles and see their relationship to each other. The approach was to examine and study a selected collection of North Carolina longrifles and note the similar features and characteristics that place them in groupings or “schools” with the commonality of location. From this study we identified nine major schools of North Carolina longrifles:

1. Bear Creek School
2. Early Deep River School
3. Jamestown School
4. Salem School
5. Davidson School
6. Rowan School
7. Mecklenburg School
8. Catawba Valley School
9. Appalachian School

These are some of the major North Carolina rifle characteristics that we observed during the survey and study. All schools do not have all these characteristics; however, many North Carolina rifles can be seen with some of the following:

1. A molded comb or incised line along the top of the comb.
2. Thinner and smaller butt stocks. Generally having more English influence than most Pennsylvania rifles.
3. High combs which are carried through and used on later guns.

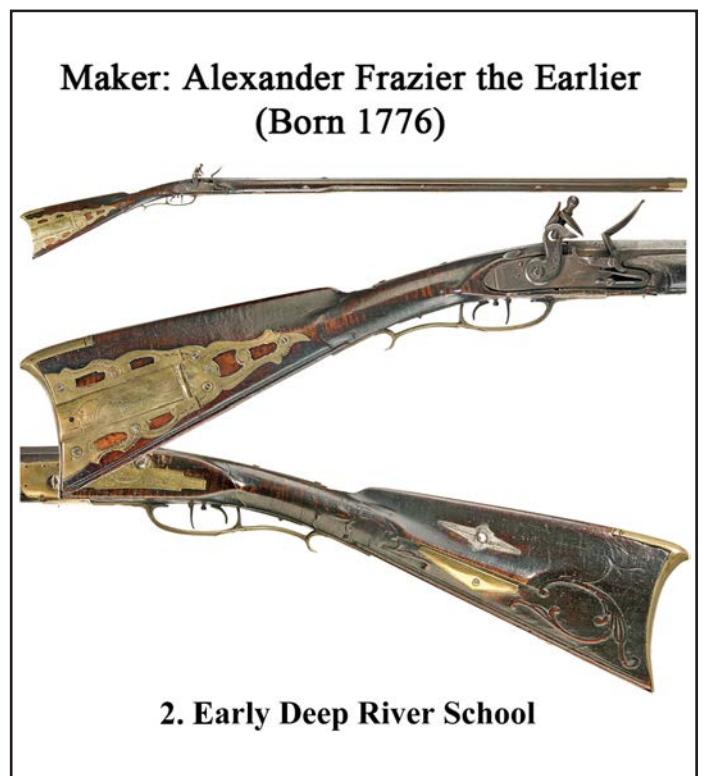
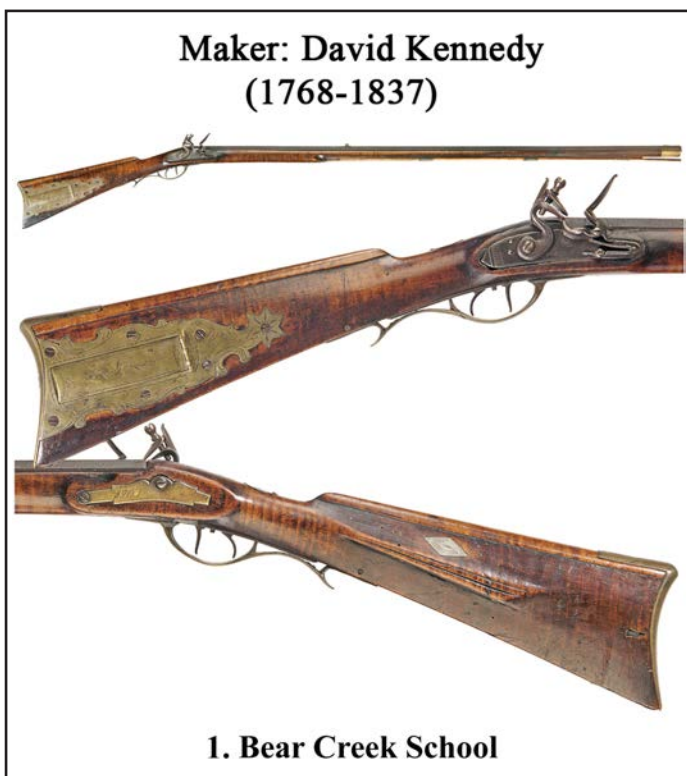
North Carolina Schools of Gunsmithing



- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Bear Creek | 6. Rowan |
| 2. Early Deep River | 7. Mecklenburg |
| 3. Jamestown | 8. Catawba Valley |
| 4. Salem | 9. Appalachian |
| 5. Davidson | |

4. Silver worked into the brass, including the patchboxes, trigger guards, thimbles, and toe plates. Also, we frequently see silver inlaid signatures on the barrels.
5. Toe plates extending from the butt plate to the trigger guard.
6. Names of makers on patchbox lids — usually read from left side of the gun.
7. Good forestock molding, which is a dominant decorative feature on most N.C. rifles. Many times you find good forestock molding even on lesser guns.
8. Silver false wedges out the forestock.
9. Powder-pick holders made out of brass and silver, which is also a dominant decorative feature found on N.C. rifles.
10. Lancaster features are found on many N.C. rifles, particularly the Bear Creek, Early Deep River, and the Catawba Valley schools.
11. Many guns have similar architecture and other characteristics found on the Virginia Valley rifles.
12. A prevalent repeated decoration on patchboxes is the guilloche or “intertwining rope work” on the side plates, particularly those in Salem or Davidson County.
13. The patchbox button release on the upper side plate near the butt particularly used on Salem, Davidson, Rowan, and Mecklenburg rifles.
14. Long tangs with more than one screw, that is, Jamestown rifles usually have three screw long tangs.
15. Iron mounted rifles are not unique to the mountain rifles and iron hardware is used in the piedmont area, especially in Moore, Chatham, and Randolph counties.
16. North Carolina rifles tended to have English locks and frequently used the double-set triggers even on the flintlock period pieces.

An example of a rifle from each school is illustrated



**Maker: Thaddeus Gardner
(1774-1851)**



3. Jamestown School

**Maker: Attributed Christopher Vogler
(1765-1827)**



4. Salem School

**Maker: Solomon Farrington
(Born 1772)**



5. Davidson School

**Maker: John Eagle
(Born 1790)**



6. Rowan School

**Maker: William Black
(1785-1827)**



7. Mecklenburg School

**Maker: Henry W. Huffman
(Born 1807)**



8. Catawba Valley School

**John R. Gillespie
(Born 1811)**



9. Appalachian School

North Carolina Powder Horns



NORTH CAROLINA IN THE CONFEDERACY

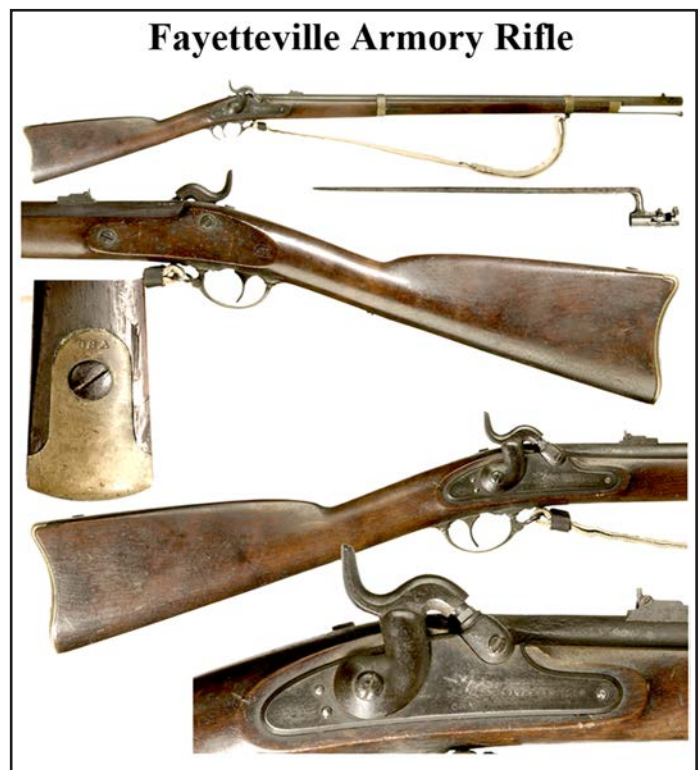
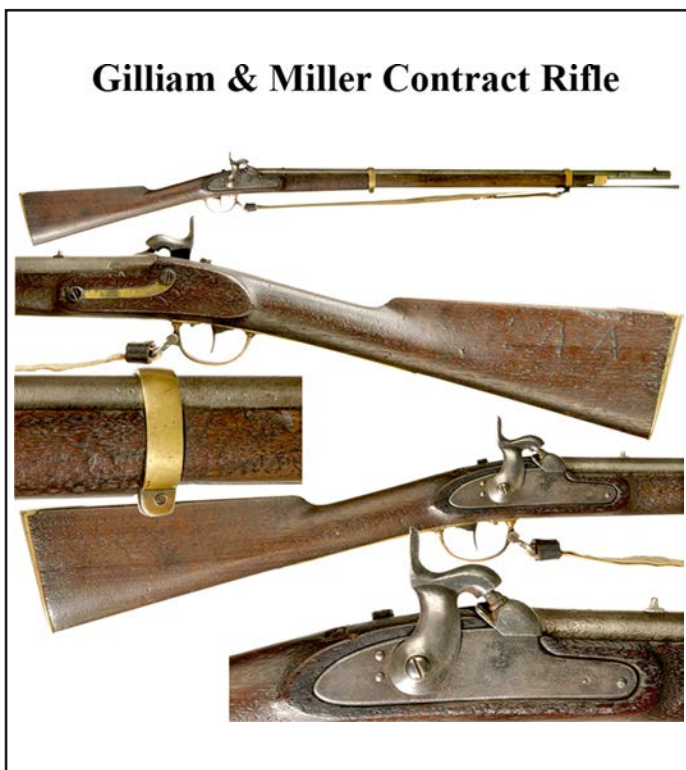
To complete the study of arms making in North Carolina, we included in the book a section on the guns, edge weapons, accoutrements, et cetera, that were manufactured in or associated with North Carolina for the Confederate War effort (1861-5). As one will see, many of the North Carolina longrifle makers turned their talents to manufacturing arms for the Southern Confederacy. A survey of all of the major North Carolina Confederate arms had never been undertaken in one publication, thus this addition to the book for the interested collector or historian.



Relics and artifacts of that bloody, and sometimes romantic period, are part of our heritage. The common soldier, both Northern and Southern, suffered more than we can know or place in print. In this field of study and collecting, there seems to be more associated emotion, romance, and tragedy than in other areas of interest. One cannot help but appreciate a known Confederate sword that is etched "Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God" that conveyed the attitude of many Southerners during that period. When you have a "feel" for Confederate artifacts, they seem to convey to you a lot of imagination about those who carried and used them in battle. Most Confederate soldiers fought for regionalism and knew little of the politics of the time.

The Confederate War and the cause of Southern Independence for which loyal North Carolinians died has long passed. Not a realistic or valid advocate remains. However, as long as valor, courage, loyalty, sacrifice, and hardship are remembered in the context of that time in history, it seems that all modern countrymen should appreciate the collecting and preserving of these historical Confederate artifacts.

A few examples of North Carolina Confederate guns, swords, and accoutrements



Louis Froelich Field & Staff Sword



The Thomas Gideon Furches Confederate Knife



Group of Confederate Accoutrements



North Carolina Confederate Uniform and Forage Cap Worn at the Battle of Gettysburg

