

The Charleston City Guard and Their Muskets

By Mark G. Rentschler

Charleston, originally Charles Town, South Carolina, was founded and settled by English colonists in the 1670s. In its colonial period, 1670–1780, it became an active and flourishing coastal city, benefiting from large and free flowing rivers, a fine harbor, and productive crop lands nearby. It became a major trading center for the southern colonies. In 1776, South Carolina adopted its own Constitution. The city of Charleston was officially incorporated by the South Carolina State Legislature in 1783.¹ Ordinances of the City passed in the year of incorporation, 1783.²

Shipments out of the city through the port included rice, beef, indigo, naval stores, pitch, timber deer skins, and especially cotton.³ Arriving goods included rum, sugar, ironware, tools, silks, woolens, and similar materials. Wharves to handle the various cargos were extensive. Warehousemen and stevedores added to the hustle and bustle of the city. Charleston had ample time to develop a complex class makeup. Ship builders, government officials, wealthy merchants, planters, overseers, skilled craftsmen, and artisans all gave the city a distinctive genteel cultural foundation. Yet the majority of the population included laborers, servants, free blacks, and slaves, as well as seamen who came and went with the tides, so to speak.⁴

Charleston had a total population by 1790 of 16,000 inhabitants, of which 8,000 were slaves. It was the fourth most populated city in the new United States after New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.⁵ In the late 18th century, Charleston was a wealthy city with magnificent houses, charming streets, and commercial activity. But it was also a rough-and-tumble seaport, with brutal murders, robberies, assaults, arson, and the wealthy who feared attacks or slave uprisings.

The new city government organization consisted of designated wards and wardens who were elected from these respective areas. They become the Charleston City Council. In turn, they elected from their own an “Intendent” or chief executive. Charleston’s first Intendent had an immediate aim to establish good order. At the very outset, the initial city ordinances of October 1783 created a City Guard to enforce the laws for the “safety, convenience, benefit and advantage of said city.”⁶ The Guard consisted of one lieutenant, six non-commissioned officers (three sergeants and three corporals), one drummer and 24 privates. The lieutenant was appointed by the City Council and he would select his men of which three men would be designated sergeants. They were to be



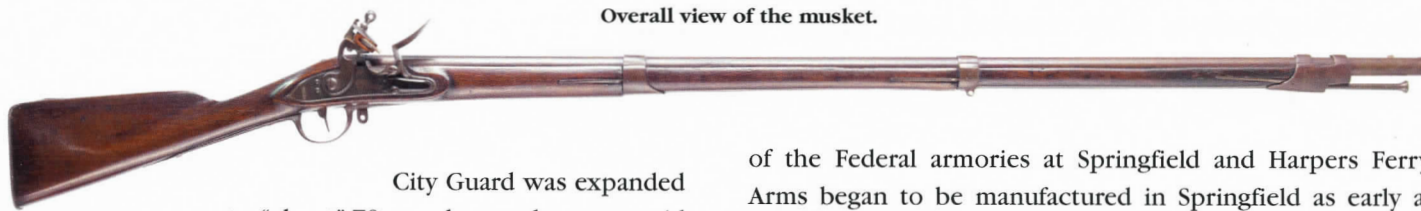
“properly armed and accoutered”⁷ and meet at the City Guard House every evening. The City Guard, sometimes referred to as the Night Watch, was to be vigilant, from 1 hour after sunset until sunrise, “in keeping peace and good order within the city” and authorized to use their best endeavors to “prevent fires, murders, robberies and other outrages and disorders.”⁸

The *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from 1783 to 1818* is the most complete accumulation of the laws of the city during this period and contains the earliest references to the City Guard. Throughout the years, various sources have used interchangeable terms for the City Guard such as Night Watch, City Watch, Nightly Guard, and Town Guard. Modern researchers have created ambiguity and sometimes created confusion around the history of the unit. Certainly by 1806 only the term “City Guard” is used to describe this unit in the city ordinances.

After the conclusion of the American Revolution, creating a city must have been very difficult in 1785. Life in the city was increasingly complex as the city grew, making the duties of keeping the peace and good order more difficult. Taverns, inns, punch houses, gambling establishments, and brothels sprouted up in the city. Some said the water from the new public water works was so distasteful that it needed to be mixed with liquors.⁹ Public drunkenness increased. The City Guard patrolled the city and informed the City Marshal of any offenders.¹⁰

The Guard was amended, reauthorized, reorganized, and expanded as the city grew and prospered. By 1806, the

Overall view of the musket.

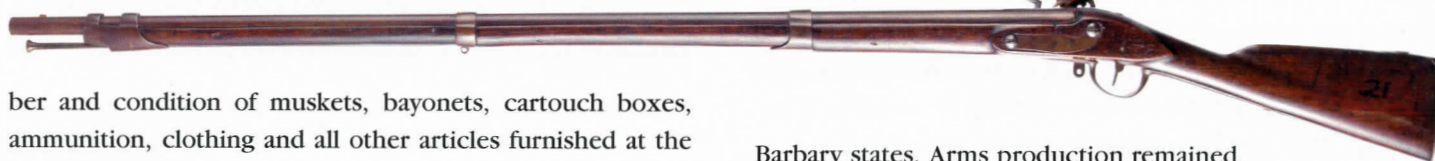


City Guard was expanded to “about” 70 members, who were paid a monthly salary. By 1816, an additional 20 members were added for a total of 90. The officers of the Guard, at their own expense, were to “provide himself with a uniform coat, of blue cloth with red facings and buttons of yellow metal, white underclothes having like buttons, a cocked hat and a sword or hanger.”¹¹ For the sergeants, privates, fifers, and drummers, the city provided once per year a short lapelled jacket or coattee. When the men were discharged from their daily duties, they returned their uniforms and equipment to the main guard house. Regular inspections occurred and a monthly accounting and return “of the num-

ber and condition of muskets, bayonets, cartouch boxes, ammunition, clothing and all other articles furnished at the expense of the city . . .” Each member could be fined for loss or damage to any of the arms or articles belonging to the City Guard.¹²

of the Federal armories at Springfield and Harpers Ferry. Arms began to be manufactured in Springfield as early as 1795; over 3,000 muskets were manufactured between 1795 and 1799 which today are not identifiable. Assembly of muskets at Harpers Ferry began in 1800. But supplemental contracts were required again in 1798.¹⁵ Numerous private contractors manufactured muskets during this period for the US Government, militia use, and for other private consumption. In the late 18th century, the international situation continued to deteriorate and our new nation faced multiple threats. War clouds loomed as the British, French, and United States each had conflicts with one another, often with three-way antagonisms, including the impressment of sailors and other severe problems with pirates, and the Algerians and other

Opposite side.



The City Guard was essentially a paramilitary force designed to awe both potential criminals and persons of color. The Guard conducted regular patrols, sometimes with as many as 20 or 30 members to keep law and order. Most patrols consisted of a sergeant and four or five men in each of the city’s districts or wards and operated on military lines of organization and command.¹³ Given the dangerous nature of the streets and alleys late at night, guardsmen on patrol also carried rattles to call for additional help. A Guardsman was frequently stationed as a sentinel in the steeple of St. Michaels Church.¹⁴

Barbary states. Arms production remained healthy.

So, we must ask ourselves, what specific arms did the City Guard carry, not only in 1783 but when the City Guard was expanded in 1806? There is simply a paucity of documentation that has survived in either original or secondary materials or in city records. Perhaps at the beginning, the City Guard was armed with Revolutionary War muskets, maybe the Charleville or Brown Bess? So, this researcher has endeavored to eliminate as many options, as to verify the surviving example is a musket used by the Charleston City Guard.

Survival rates of things, any things, provide scholars and collectors with fuel for fun conversations. Some things, such as military equipment, were never intended to survive far into the future. The War Department has learned from long experience that flintlock muskets had a finite life. So, now, even though there were tens of thousands of muskets made in the 1790s and into early 1800s by government armories and as many as 30 contractors, very few survive today.¹⁶ The needs of individual states militia, cadets, City Guards, and for trade with Indians had priority. Samuel Hodgdon explores delivery of military stores (muskets?) to Maryland for “those lost during the expedition against western insurgents.”¹⁷ Other needs had to be supplied by old

So a process of review is required. The earliest procurement of muskets by the US government was in 1794 via contracts with private individuals for Charleville pattern muskets. In 1794 Congress also authorized the construction

Lock with MILES mark.





Close-up of the Top of Barrel with CHARLESTON CITY GUARD and 7.

refurbished muskets and those made under contract by private contractors.¹⁸ In some cases, very little, if any, written record remains or an identifiable surviving example that can be associated with many of the private contractors. "Moonlight" construction is now thought to have been commonplace, often at a price higher than the federal government was willing to pay. Stuck with fixed prices and schedules, contractors may have welcomed and accommodated any orders for cash for small lots.¹⁸ Admittedly, some speculation is part of this puzzle and my conclusion.

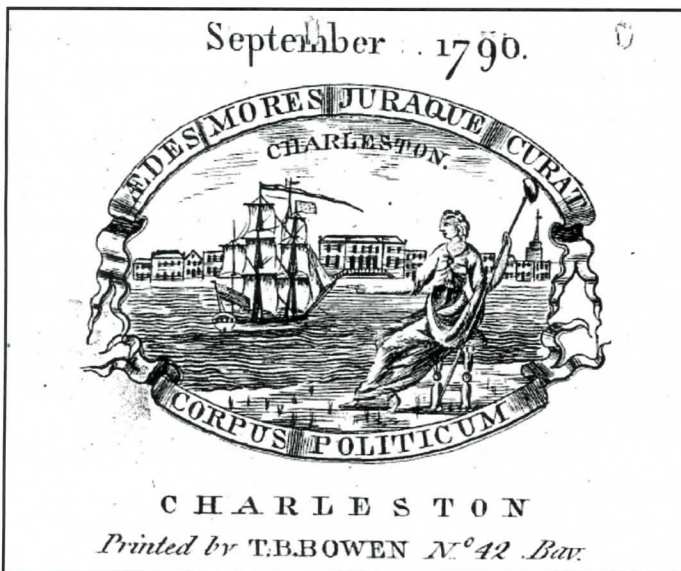
John Miles was a prolific private contractor and had several contracts for muskets with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Most are marked MILES and CP. The musket which is the focus of this article is stamped similarly in capital letters vertically on the tail of the lockplate, MILES. It is also marked CHARLESTON CITY GUARD on top of the barrel at the breech.

John Miles, Sr., was born in England in 1752. John Miles, Jr., was born in 1777, and they arrived in the United States at approximately 1790 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The senior Miles soon applied for and worked at the US government arsenal in New London, Virginia, in 1794 through 1796 under Joseph Perkins. He then decided to become an entrepreneur and opened his own gun making business located in the Northern Liberties section of Philadelphia.

Miles' shop was located at 500 North Second Street and he advertised his business "... where merchants, captains of vessels and others may be supplied with all sorts of small arms on the lowest terms and shortest notice..." Miles produced all forms of small arms including edged weapons.¹⁹ John Miles, Sr., died in 1808 and was buried in the

church yard of the Episcopal Church of All Saints in Philadelphia. His son John Jr. continued in the business.

His early contract was with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1798, 2,000 arms, followed by another contract in 1801 for a similar quantity. In mid-1801 he purchased gun making equipment from Robert McCormick and agreed to produce 3,025 muskets for the state of Virginia with regimental and county markings on the top of their barrels, similar to this arm with the CHARLESTON CITY GUARD markings. About that time, he also contracted with the early US federal government for 400 muskets. Best for comparison in this case are the muskets Miles delivered to Pennsylvania and Virginia. They carry such characteristics as a similar thin frizzen spring finial and the integral round iron pan with flat outer edge. Also noted are no inspector marks, no proof marks, no US or eagle marks, and similar trigger guard, trigger shape and size, and the absence of a brass front sight on the forward barrel band. The bayonet lug is on the top of the barrel and dimensions overall are similar. Iron furniture finished bright, three barrel bands with retaining springs, 60 inches overall and a 44³/₄-inch barrel. One significant difference is that the Virginia county marks on the top of the barrel leave a small gap at the breech for the specific regimental stamp. The county marks were placed by McCormick in his early contract with Virginia, and then Miles, the manufacturers, based on the list provided by the state of Virginia.²⁰ In fact, the similarity of the die stamp size and font used by both McCormick and Miles for these muskets looks similar to the CHARLESTON CITY GUARD mark, only this mark begins at the breech, with no gap for the regimental stamps. There is only a small number "7" located on the breech plug, barrel at the breech, and also the barrel just forward of the front



City Sealcharleston.



Miles Bayonet overall view.



Close up of bayonet MILES mark.

band. Furthermore, the list specifies “Charles City” not Charleston as the specific requirement. It seems logical that the manufacturer would mark barrels for other private purchases, in this case the city of Charleston? Dies had limited life and were expensive to manufacture, so gun manufacturers were more able to either produce or purchase these tools.

Miles produced muskets for sale to others and examples of other arms bearing his stamp appear. These include pistols, blunderbusses, and muskets — some under government contracts, some for privateers or civilian purchase. So far, I have been unable to locate specific contract or archival records between John Miles and the City of Charleston. I have found no physical evidence, other than comparisons to other arms; so what the Charleston City Guard used between 1783 and 1806 is speculative. However, we can make some reasonable conclusions. Charleston as a city had the means and need to provide for an armed body patrolling the streets keeping good order. If the number “7” is a serial number, then perhaps it could be that each private of the Guard had a musket, and this could go as high as 70 in 1806 or even conceivably 90. But one number does not make a sequence. We know John Miles was making muskets for Virginia and Pennsylvania and blending production would have been easily accomplished. It is possible to impute that this musket was provided to the City between 1798 and 1802 or perhaps as late as the Guard’s expansion in 1806. One thing is certain; this is a rare and possibly unique and exceptional survivor from an important time in our history and from an important city. There is no evidence that this musket was stamped later by the other city of Charleston, now West Virginia, prior to the Civil War or during. There is no supporting information that this author has located in archival materials that indicates any association with this city or later events.

In 1846 the Charleston City Guard changed its name to Charleston City Police. By the mid-1850s the force had grown to 250 members. Officers were often graduates of the Citadel or had related military experience. By then, the flintlock musket was obsolete and the police carried pistols, not muskets.²¹

MUSKET PROVENANCE

- Collection of Milton R. MacIntosh, Pawtuxet, Rhode Island. Inventory Number 223.
- Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester Massachusetts, December 1970. Accession number 3572.
- Exhibition: Conquistador to Patriot, Arms and Armor in Colonial America, June 30, 2007, to January 5, 2008, Higgins Armory Museum.

- John Woodman Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Property sold by Order of the Trustees To Benefit its Ongoing Study and Display, auction by Thomas Del Mar, London, in association with Sotheby’s, March, 2013. Lot 474.
- A & A Gaines Antiques; Newport Rhode Island, 2014.
- Author’s collection.

NOTES

1. *Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston in the State of South Carolina, Passed in the Year of the Incorporation of the City, August 1783*. Printed in Charleston. J. Miller, 1784. Copies located at South Caroliniana Library (University of South Carolina) and Library of Congress. This printing of 1784 also includes all the ordinances of the South Carolina General Assembly for incorporating the city. And included are the Acts relating to the city and the wardens, stating their authority and empowerments. Digitized copy courtesy of Nicholas Butler, Ph.D., Public Historian, Charleston County Public Library.

2. Chronological comments are presented for perspective. South Carolina enacted its first militia law in 1671. This militia was throughout the colony and it served in Indian wars and foreign governments’ colonizing attempts. The colony of South Carolina adopted its own Constitution in 1776. This made it a “state” with its own Legislature. The Revolutionary War was not yet over, and the British occupied Charleston in 1780. The Treaty of Paris in 1783 officially ended the American Revolutionary War. The United States Constitution was adopted in 1787, and it established a sovereign national government and defined rights of the states. South Carolina ratified the US Constitution in 1788. The Northwest Territory was acquired in 1787. The British continued to hold sway in much of Canada, Detroit, and the upper Ohio Valley, and they retained a strong confederation with Indians. They controlled much of that territory until the end of the War of 1812. After several American defeats during British and Indian warfare in the 1770s through the 1790s in western Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley, the United States was able to displace native tribes, and the Ohio territory was opened for settlement in 1795 with the Treaty of Greenville. The Louisiana Purchase was made in 1803. The Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery Expedition started in 1804. The United States was busy on all fronts and coasts.

3. Indigo is a vine-like plant whose pea-like seeds were a major worldwide source of deep blue dye.

4. Fraser, Walter J, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City*. University of South Carolina, Columbia SC, 1989, 1991. Perhaps the greatest hazard “. . .

was drunken sailors whose favorite sport was beating up the night watch. . . . swaggering sailors, trappers, and Indians needed policing. . . ." p 10.

5. US Census Bureau 1790 census. *Population of 24 Urban Places*. Census.gov.

6. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston (South Carolina), 1818. Digitized using the 1818 version of the compiled ordinances. From Joseph Sabin's famed *Bibliotheca Americana*, Sabin Americana 1500-1926.

7. Accoutred, accoutrement, Sheridan, Thomas, *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language, Both with regard to SOUND and MEANING. The Fourth Edition, Revised, Corrected, and Enlarged*. Dublin, 1790. And Sheridan, Thomas, *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, London, 1797. Tenth Edition, 1793. Accoutered, a soldier's outfit.

8. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston: Published Agreeably to a Resolution of Council. Archibald E. Miller, Printer. July 15, 1818. Title (C), page 41 refers to the City Guard. This is the most complete accumulation of ordinances relating to the City Guard including some of the earliest statements in 1783 and later amendments to 1818.

9. Fraser, Walter J, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City*. University of South Carolina, Columbia SC, 1989, 1991. p 22.

10. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston: Published Agreeably to a Resolution of Council. Archibald E. Miller, Printer. July 15, 1818. p 41.

11. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston: Published Agreeably to a Resolution of Council. Archibald E. Miller, Printer. July 15, 1818. pp 104-5.

12. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston: Published Agreeably to a Resolution of Council. Archibald E. Miller, Printer. July 15, 1818. p 106.

13. Johnson, Herbert A., Nancy Travis Wolfe, Mark Jones. *History of Criminal Justice, Fourth Edition*.

Copyright, 1988, 1996, 2003, 2008. Mathew Bender & Co. Inc. Newark, NJ. p 225.

14. *Charleston, City of, Digest of ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the year 1783 to July 1818; to which are annexed extracts from the acts of the Legislature which relate to the city of Charleston*, Charleston: Published Agreeably to a Resolution of Council. Archibald E. Miller, Printer. July 15, 1818. pp 104-19.

15. Flayderman, Norm, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms . . . and their Values*. 9th Edition. F+W Publications, Iola Wisconsin, 2007. Chapter IX-A, U.S. Issue/Primary Military Longarms. Chapter IX-B Secondary Military Longarms. pp 530-636.

16. Flayderman, Norm, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms . . . and their Values*. 9th Edition. F+W Publications, Iola Wisconsin, 2007. Chapter IX-A, U.S. Issue/Primary Military Longarms. Chapter IX-B Secondary Military Longarms. Pages 530-636. Over 101,000 French muskets were left over after the Revolution with many unsuitable for rehabilitation. A six-year long inventory of flintlock muskets on hand in the National and private armories was started in 1842. By 1848, over 700,000 muskets were tallied, over 100,000 were considered unserviceable or damaged and not worth repairing.

17. War Department, *Papers of the War Department, 1784 to 1800*. Roy Rosenzweig Center of History and New Media, Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. 2012. Dated correspondence: July 5, 1798.

18. Gilkerson, William, *Boarders Away II, Firearms of the Age of Fighting Sail*. Andrew Mowbray, Inc., Lincoln, Rhode Island, 1993. p 211.

19. SABC Journal Vol. 48 Summer of 2004. *The Bayonets of John Miles Sr. Pennsylvania Armorer*. Joe Serbaroli Jr.

20. Cromwell, Giles, *The Virginia Manufactory of Arms*. The University Press of Virginia, 1975. Pages, 6-9; 161. Interestingly, there are 75 muskets shipped to Richmond in November of 1801 that are not identified as to their barrel marks stamp. Were they sent onto Charleston?

21. Fraser, Walter J, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City*. University of South Carolina, Columbia SC, 1989, 1991. p 238.

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These sources were selectively mined to gather enough snippets that relate to the substance of Charleston life, commerce, and crime leading up to the establishment of the Charleston City Guard. Copyright material is used with permission or as accustomed in the Share Alike or "Fair Use"

provisions of the Copyright Acts. Some original sentences have been amended, some partially combined from similar sources, and literary license used to create a better flow of clarity and thought. Not every source is endnoted to a specific page because some sentences are combined from various sources to make a compact legible new sentence, readability being the goal. Ambiguity or uncertainty and inexactness of meanings in references are to be expected when crossing several centuries. Finally, in some of the Charleston Ordinances, several refer to a section that was reinstated without direct reference in the new ordinance. And some of the reprints are segmented and virtually impossible to utilize. Searching and finding is what makes research fun and interesting. Misinterpretations are the author's.

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nance to amend an ordinance. From Sabin Americana, Print Editions, 1500-1926. (Not as complete as next following.)

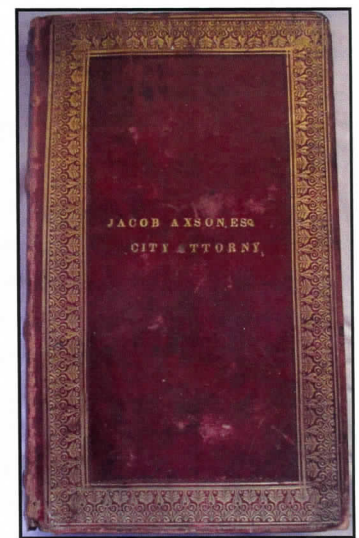
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important "amended ordinance of 1806" to amend an ordinance regarding the City Guard.) Original edition. Leather bound with cover designs in gold and gold page edges. Impressed on the spine in gold lettering CITY LAWS, and on the front cover JACOB AXSON, ESQ/CITY ATTORNEY (See illustration). This is the primary source of city ordinances used for this essay because some later versions were previously edited and not as complete. This copy even has an extensive appendix and, importantly, there is a several-page index to help the original attorneys and modern researchers.

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Worcester Art Museum, Worcester MA, Kate Dalton, Curator, personal correspondence and supplemental documentation. John Woodman Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. (musket sold as) Property sold by Order of the Trustees To Benefit its Ongoing Study and



Cover of the Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston From 1783 to July 1818.

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Some examples:

Accoutrement, dress, equipage, trappings, ornaments. Modern spelling, with the same meaning is accoutered.

Bayonet, A short sword fixed at the end of a musket.

Constable, A peace officer, formerly one of the officers of the state (note: duties also included serving summons and warrants and subpoenas. (There were usually two per Ward.)

Guard, A man or body of men, whose business is to watch . . . by way of defense and security.

Intendant, An officer of the highest class who oversees any particular allotment of the public business. (Think Mayor, today)

Marshall. The chief officer of arms. One who regulates combatants (meaning combatants) in the lists.

Musket, A soldiers handgun.

Sheriff, An officer to whom is entrusted in each county the execution of the laws. Note: duties included making proclamations, carrying out the orders of the Indendant, including advertising for sale property lawfully taken.

Tumult, A promiscuous commotion in a multitude.

Watch, A guard.

Warden, A keeper, a guardian, a head officer. (Think City Council, today.)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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