

1794/1798 U.S. CONTRACT MUSKETS

The Political and Military Situation That Precipitated These Contracts and a Summary of the Contracts and Contractors

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THE BACKGROUND

In the 1790s, the United States could be roughly divided into two economies and political areas. The East Coast area was primarily dependent on sea trade (lumber, cotton, tobacco, whale oil, fish, etc.) and the developing “Northwest” was dependent on agriculture. The Northwest area is now known to us as the Great Lakes Basin.

THE EAST

1783-1794. England continues harassing the United States commercial shipping. This included confiscating cargo and impressing seamen onto their ships claiming they were British citizens (almost all were British citizens prior to the Revolutionary War).

1793. France declares war on England. The United States fears being drawn into the European war. General Knox inventories arms in storage. He finds 31,000 serviceable muskets. Not enough to arm troops to defend the United States. He asks Congress for funds to purchase domestic and foreign arms.

1794. Congress authorizes building two National Armories to manufacture small arms (muskets and pistols). President Washington is to pick locations. He chooses Springfield and Harpers Ferry. Congress also included in this authorization \$144,000 for the purchase of arms and ammunition from foreign and domestic sources. These were the funds used for the 1794 and 1798 muskets and the “U. States” locks from Kentland. The Jay Treaty ended the shipping confrontation with England. However, the “friend of my enemy is my enemy” and France now begin taking cargo and seamen from U.S. commercial ships. This confrontation is known as the “Quasi War.” Sea engagements were fought, but war was never declared.

1795. France refused to meet with a U.S. delegation sent to negotiate an end to the Quasi War unless U.S. pays bribes — the “Talleyrand Affair.”

THE WEST

1783-1795. England continues to arm native raiding parties by sending arms and supplies into the Great Lakes area of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. There was



very little population at this time. It was impossible to defend scattered small settlements.

1790-1794. President Washington, Commander-in-Chief, sends several armies to end the raids. General Harmer and later General St. Clair’s armies are badly defeated. General Wayne finally wins the Battle of Fallen Timbers in northwest Ohio.

1795. As a result of Wayne’s victory at Fallen Timbers, the treaty of Greenville ends the Indian raids in the Great Lakes area. The loss of arms in these engagements further reduces U.S. small arms inventories.

1794 U.S. CONTRACT MUSKETS

Single-shot muzzle-loading flintlock muskets were the primary weapon of war. The manufacture of muskets in the mid-1790s in the U.S. was limited to individual gun makers, many concentrated in eastern Pennsylvania. Each part was handmade then assembled. This was a slow, labor-intensive process. The U.S. Government apparently contacted known gunsmiths and negotiated the purchase of muskets for \$12.30 each. This included bayonet and scabbard. No written contracts have been found, only random records of payments to various gunsmiths (contractors). A French 1766-style musket was to be the pattern; however, no record of pattern muskets being issued has been found. Contractors were issued and charged for salvaged French musket parts from U.S. storage depots. They then made what they were



Figure 1. Note the “x” over “V” markings on the left stock flat to the rear of the side plate denoting Philadelphia Depot. The “RxR” is probably a previous owner. Other marks are unknown.

missing and assembled the muskets. The 1794 musket contractors were to deliver completed muskets to the nearest U.S. depot or arms storage facility. We estimate 7,000 were produced. Nothing is documented of inspection or proofing procedures and there is no record of rejections. Observation of known 1794 Contract Muskets indicates that they are primarily assembled from reclaimed French musket parts. How do we identify 1794 Contract Muskets? It is done by the process of association. Known 1794 contractors are identified by records noting payment or delivery for completed arms. Of the 11 known to have delivered muskets, only 4 (Henry, Evans, McCormick and Miles) delivered muskets with their identification. These muskets on the left stock flat all have a small x over a larger V (see Figure 1).

This x over V is associated with the Philadelphia Depot and after 1800 the Schuylkill Arsenal. Are all muskets marked x over V 1794 contract muskets? Possibly they are, but probably not. The x over V could also be an inventory mark. There are at least two muskets assembled with French parts with “U. States” Kentland locks made by McCormick marked with x over V and two known French parts assembled muskets with x over V with James Nicholson’s large IN stamped

in the stock. One is a refurbished 1763 French musket. There is a lot we do not know about U.S. 1794 Contract Muskets. Were there only 11 contractors? How many muskets were produced? To what other U.S. facilities were they delivered? Future research may answer some of these questions.

We know that the Philadelphia Depot and Schuylkill Arsenal shipped salvage French parts to the Springfield Armory. Springfield was a repair/storage facility prior to

being designated one of the two major armories by President Washington. They would not have originally had the capability to manufacture complete muskets. Early Springfield muskets prior to 1799 may look like 1794 assembled muskets.

1798 U.S. CONTRACT MUSKETS

In 1798, the U.S. Government advertised for additional contractors. The process was much more formal this time. There was a standard contract and inspectors were hired to inspect and proof muskets at the contractor’s facilities. The 1794 contractors were allowed to continue to deliver muskets through the 1798 contract period. It is difficult to draw a distinct line between the 1794 and 1798 muskets delivered to the U.S. Government.

The 1798 contractors who contracted for less than 1,000 muskets apparently were not issued a contract. A total of approximately 40,000 arms were contracted. The 1798 contractors were issued a Charleville type pattern musket (see Figure 2) and required to have more assets than the 1794 contractors. This resulted in what we would now call

Contractors Known to Have Delivered 1794 Muskets¹

William Henry I	Owen Evans	Robert McCormick	Jacob Dickert
John Miles	James R. Nicholson	Anthony Butler	Peter Brong
Daniel Rottenviel	Christian Cline	Thomas Annely	



Figure 2. U.S. Contract musket of 1798 patterned after a 1766 French Charleville musket by Daniel Gilbert.



Figure 3. Barrel proofs for a 1798 contract musket, note the “Pw,” which stands for proofed by Decius Wadsworth.



Figure 4. Lock plate markings typical of a 1798 U.S. contract musket (Daniel Gilbert).



Figure 5. Forward barrel band of 1798 U.S. contract musket with button ramrod (Gilbert).

joint ventures. Two musket makers on one contract (Kinsley & Perkin) who both made and marked their own muskets, or a musket maker with partners who could provide financial support (Huntington in association with Bellows, Livingston, & Smith).

Payment was \$13.40 with bayonet and scabbard with the exception of Whitney who negotiated other terms. Like the 1794 contractors, not all 1798 contractors identified their muskets, and some were still using salvaged French musket parts. With the advent of field inspectors who in most cases marked

the muskets (see Figure 3) they inspected, we can identify some muskets without contractor identification. In addition, Springfield Armory marked delivered 1798 contract muskets with x over M on the left stock flat.

We can positively identify many more 1798 muskets than 1794 muskets. Some contractors had their names on the musket like Gilbert (see Figures 4, 5, 6), whereas others had initials (“T.B” —Tomas Bicknell), and still others have the town that they worked near (“Norwich”— Cobb). It is estimated that over 40,000 muskets were delivered.²

Contractors Known to Have 1798 Musket Contracts or Delivered Muskets³

Amasa Allen & Co.	Elijah Baggett	Thomas Bicknell	Elisha Brown
Alexander Claggett	Owen Evans	Richard Falley	Daniel Gilbert
William Henry	Joshua Henshaw	Robert McCormick	Abijah Peck
Mathias Shroyer	Amos Stillman	Ard Welton	Eli Whitney
Eli Williams	Joseph Clark (Clark & Peck)		
Nathan & Henry Cobb	Matthew & Nathan Eliot		
Stephen Jenks & Hosea	Adam Kinsley & James Perkins		
William Rhodes & William Tyler			
Samuel Townsey & Samuel Chipman			
Darius Chipman, in association with Royal Crofts, Thomas. Hooker & John Smith			
Gurdon Huntingdon, in association with Joshua Bellows, John Livingston, & David Stone			
Nicholas White, in association with Thomas Crabb, Jacob Mitzger, & Christopher Bernhizle			



Figure 6. Trigger guard of 1798 U.S. contract musket, note long French style (Gilbert).

IN SUMMARY

The 1794-1798 U.S. Musket Contracts were amazingly successful considering the fragmented state of the U.S. arms manufacturing industry in the 1790s. These two contracts allowed some relatively small arms suppliers to develop into major arms manufacturers (e.g., Whitney, Henry). These contracts were the first large-scale U.S. Arms Contracts issued and were the start of the U.S. Military and Civilian Defense Industry. Additional details on 1794 and 1798 U.S.

Muskets can be found in Moller, *American Military Shoulder Arms, Volume II* and Schmidt *U.S. Military Flintlock Muskets, The Early Years*.

REFERENCES

¹⁻³. Compiled from Moller, *American Military Shoulder Arms, Volume II* and Schmidt *U.S. Military Flintlocks the Early Years*.

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