

A LONG SEARCH THAT PAID OFF: ISAAC THOMPSON MECKLENBURG LONGRIFLE

By C. Michael Briggs

In 2009, Wallace Gusler wrote a two-part article in *Muzzle Blast* magazine^{1,2} on “A Rosetta Stone North Carolina Rifle” about a Mecklenburg School rifle he recently had purchased. In this article he included photos of other known rifles from this school by W.B. - S.M.B. - and Isaac Thompson. Wallace included photos of several rifles by Thompson. The last rifle he only used photos of the butt-stock, it had been converted to percussion during the period of use and was relief carved, but had obviously not been restored.

I later asked Wallace how he found the gun and who owned it? Wallace said the owner recently inherited the rifle and had taken it to Colonial Williamsburg to learn what it was. Wallace was notified of it, was able to photograph the rifle and help the owner identify who made it. Wallace said the owner asked to keep his information private.

The local group of longrifle collectors here in North Carolina was excited to learn a great new rifle had surfaced and none of us knew its location. It was the topic of conversation for a while.

In 2012, I started research for my book, *The Longrifle Makers of the Mecklenburg School*³ which I published in 2016. I used google

searches to see if I could find any information on each maker.

When I searched on [Isaac Thompson Mecklenburg gunsmith] I came up on two hits on genealogy web sites. The first hit was in 2008 by a man who had recently inherited an old longrifle that he took to Colonial Williamsburg and was told it was made by Isaac Thompson. He wanted to learn information about Thompson. He provided his email address which included his name and ended with @atmc.com. I sent him an email but received no response.

The second genealogy post was made in 2011. It was from a man who said he was a Thompson family genealogist. He provided helpful information on Isaac Thompson. That he was born in 1802 in Mecklenburg County, N.C. and was the son of Joseph Thompson. The father and son shared the same house located on 105 acres on Long creek, just west of Beatties Ford Road in the northern part of the county. I was able to communicate with him and he provided some information I was able to include in my book.

So how to find the man who had inherited the rifle? I have owned a communications company here in North Carolina for over forty years. There was something about the email address that seemed





to ring a distant bell with me. It took me several months to figure it out. The address atm was Atlantic Telephone and Membership Corporation. It is a mom and pop phone company for Brunswick County, N.C. down at the coast. I then google searched the man's name and learned he had lived at Ocean Isle Beach but had disappeared in a fishing accident 2010. That was why he had never responded to my emails.

I have two good friends that live at Ocean Isle Beach. I called and asked if either knew his widow and did she still live there? One of them was friends with her. I called her in 2014 and asked if I could come down and photograph the rifle. She consented.

When I met with her, I asked her about the family history of the rifle. Her late husband had been given the rifle by his aunt who had no children. She and her husband also had no children. I told her it had been a great rifle in its day and was an important piece of history. It was the earliest known dated rifle by Isaac Thompson and was dated 1818 under the cheek-rest. I told her the rifle needed an expensive restoration and be preserved to be enjoyed by future generations. I asked if she wanted to sell it and she did not. I left her with an open-ended offer of the most I have ever offered for an un-restored rifle. While I was photographing the rifle, she

got out the papers her late husband had collected. With this was an evaluation letter from Colonial Williamsburg. It valued the rifle at the same price I had just offered her. This told her I was not trying to steal it.

When the book was published in 2016, I mailed her a copy, but received no response. When the Charlotte Museum of History scheduled my program on Mecklenburg County Longrifle School in 2017, I sent her an invitation, but she did not come. I sent her a Christmas card each year.

In October of 2018, she called me on the phone. Her name sounded familiar, but I did not immediately place it. She asked me if I was still interested in purchasing her old longrifle? [I knew instantly who I was speaking with.] I said yes, I was. She asked if I would still pay her the price I had offered. I agreed. She told me it was mine. I told her I would meet her at her bank in the morning.

I took the rifle to my friend who does my restoration and left it with him. I received it back a few months ago. It is the most ornate rifle in my collection. The rifle does make me question the attribution to Isaac Thompson. If Isaac was born in 1802, he would have only been 16 in 1818 when this rifle was completed. Was he a prodigal genius? The other possibility is the maker of the other

rifles signed I.T. was the father Joseph Thompson. With engraving styles of that period, the initials would still be I.T.

This is one of three rifles signed I.T. on the patchbox lid with a silver plate on the barrel with the owner's name inscribed. One is engraved "Made for Samuel Hannegan." Another is engraved "Isaac J. Thompson." This was treated by local collectors as a rosetta stone and told what I.T. stood for.

This example is engraved "J. Gilmer." My local researcher looked up John Gilmer for me. He was a very wealthy man who lived in the Poplar Tent area of northern Mecklenburg County. When he died intestate in 1837, his estate papers totaled 391 pages. His estimated net worth was over \$20,000. A huge sum for that period. As he left no will, all of his estate had to be auctioned. His son, James F. Gilmer attended the auction and purchased his rifle gun for \$17.00.

The widow I purchased the rifle from told me her husband's aunt that he inherited the rifle from maiden name was Gilmer. It had stayed in the family for 180 years.

I am glad I did not give up on my search.

Endnotes

- 1 Gusler, Wallace. "A Rosetta Stone North Carolina Rifle Gun – Part 1" *Muzzle Blast* June, 2009. P 4.
- 2 Gusler, Wallace. "A Rosetta Stone North Carolina Rifle Gun – Part 2" *Muzzle Blast* June, 2009. P 50.
- 3 Briggs, Michael. *The Longrifle Makers of the Mecklenburg School*. NCRIFLES.COM. 2016

