

A REVOLUTIONARY WAR “GON”

by Tom Grinslade

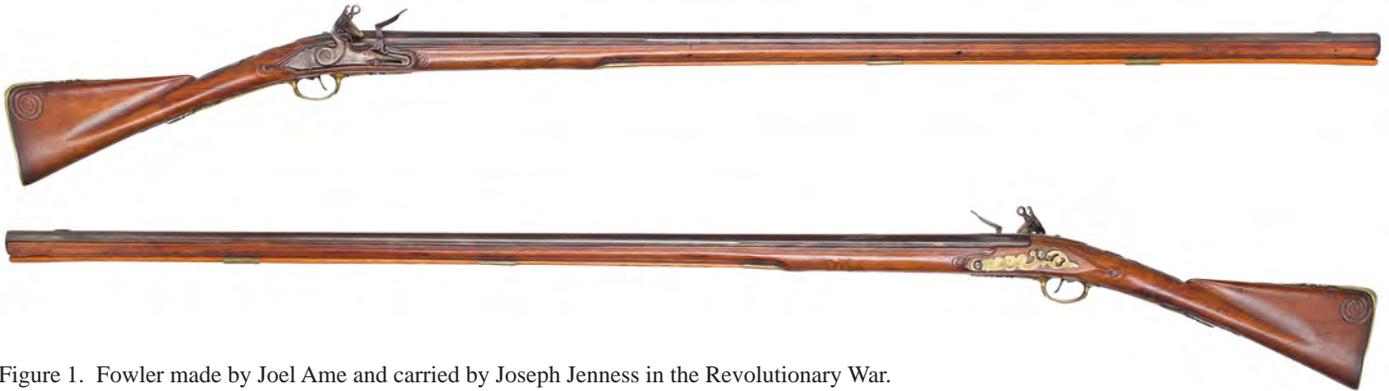


Figure 1. Fowler made by Joel Ame and carried by Joseph Jenness in the Revolutionary War.

At the time of the Revolutionary War the number of guns in America was small because Great Britain discouraged manufacturing of arms and all kinds of goods in the Colonies, keeping the production of finished products as a monopoly of the home land. In the first two years of the war the scarcity of weapons was so great that soldiers who were enlisted often brought their flintlock guns from home.¹ Those guns consisted mostly of light weight fowling guns that were not well suited to heavy use in wartime and had the disadvantage of not being equipped with a bayonet. Because their attrition rate was high, the guns that have survived and can be proven to be bona fide arms of the Revolutionary War now command great collector interest. Although thousands of long guns were used in the Revolutionary War, a scarce number of them were American made arms. Of those American made long guns, a small number of them have been identified as to the gunsmith who made them and even fewer of those identified guns are signed with an owner's name. The gunsmiths in the Colonies were few in number and records of them in 1775 from both Kauffmann's and Seller's books indicate only about one hundred gunsmiths existed in the Colonies at the time of the Revolutionary War.²

At the beginning of the war, in order to meet this scarcity of arms each Colony set up a Committee of Safety or Council of Safety to help procure supplies for the troops. The orders for muskets that were commissioned by individual Committees followed the design of the Brown Bess and were marked on the barrel with the initials of the maker's name.³ These initials identifying the maker of the gun furnished evidence that the gun was assembled for the Revolutionary War, making it very desirable.

The muskets of foreign makers that were used during the war are more plentiful. For example following the victory at Saratoga in 1777, France was encouraged by the Rebels success to begin supplying Charleville style muskets as well as gun powder and clothing to the Colonies.⁴ French muskets that were provided to New Hampshire in 1777 were marked with the letters "NH" on the barrel proving that they were assigned for use in the Revolutionary War. Also, Brown Bess muskets with regimental markings are sought after because they can be connected to units that had specific battles in the Revolutionary War.

The gun described in this article is unusual as it has a known American maker, Joel Ame (Amy) signed on the lock and the barrel as well as the owners name "Joseph Jenness" engraved on the silver wristplate. Joel Ame is noted in the publication "History of the town of Rye, New Hampshire, from its discovery and settlement, to December, 1903" as living in Rye New Hampshire at the time of his marriage in 1776.⁵ Further records showing his residence in Rye are Provincial Papers of 1776 that list Joel Ame with a group of others as subscribers opposing the hostile proceedings of the British fleets and armies against the united American colonies.⁴ Although the history of Joel Amy is difficult to trace, there is one account in the 1930's by a gunsmith named Roger Soucy. He resided in Georgetown, Massachusetts, and stated in part that "Joel Ame was born in England about 1700. He came to this country as a young boy, circa 1710-13, and settled in Virginia. He served an apprenticeship under an English gunsmith, who was possibly a relative. He later set up his own gun shop in the area of what is now Richmond, Virginia about 1725. He may have arrived in Rye, New Hampshire in 1774 and it is recorded that he was married in Rye in 1776."⁵ As a prominent citizen of Rye, he is listed in 1776 as a subscriber to "hereby solemnly engage and promise, that we will to the utmost of our Power at the Risque of our Lives And Fortunes ... oppose ... British Fleets and Armies"⁶ After Rye, further records from Epsom, New Hampshire list him from there as head of a family in the National Census in 1790; the year in which he died.

His early training by English gun makers in Virginia and later exposure to French style guns in New England are combined in this fowler which has a stock shaped with British influence, French style hardware and American style engraving. The overall length is 66 ¾ inches with barrel of 49 ¾ inches (Figure 1). The silver escutcheon on the wrist is engraved with the name of the owner, Captain Joseph Jenness, with this inscription "ryE / MAy 1775 / josEph / jEnnEss / his gon" (Figure 2). The engraving on the wrist plate is interesting because it appears to have been done by a less professional hand, possibly that of the owner. The other engraving on the side plate, the butt plate, the trigger guard with a face on it and the name "Joel Ame" on the lock and on the barrel (Figure 2) are suggestive of American engraving while the engrav-

ing on the lock plate appears to be of French design indicating the lock was probably an imported part.⁷ The stock has been identified as cherry with seven inches replaced at the muzzle and a four inch diameter spiral possibly carved later in the left side of the butt.

This American made fowler is very unusual with both the owner of the gun as well as the maker being well documented. The

owner, Joseph Jenness, was born February 27, 1727 and has a record of military service from the age of 17 when he was commissioned as a Captain of the 2nd Independent Company of Infantry in 1744.⁸ In 1775 at the age of 48 he became a part of the Town of Rye's Committee of Safety and on May 24, 1775 he enlisted as a private in Captain Wentworth Stuart's Company of Colonel Phinney Regiment for a period of three years.⁷ According to muster



Figure 2. The French engraved lock with the American gunsmith's name, "Joel Amy", engraved under the pan has a decorative raised wood molding around it (top left, clockwise). The side plate has engraving that appears to be done in an American style rather than French. The trigger guard is French in style with the engraved design on the butt plate tang repeated on the bow of the trigger guard. The upper finial of the trigger guard is decorated with a whimsical face. The barrel tang and the butt of the barrel both have engraving that looks different from the maker's name of "JOEL+AME" engraved on the top barrel flat. The wrist plate has the owner's name in a non-professional engraving "ryE / MAY 1775 / JOSEPH JENNESS / HIS GON". The engraved tang of the butt plate has an elongated spear point form in a raised outline of wood on the stock.

rolls, Colonel Phinney's Regiment was at Cambridge early in the war and in garrison at Fort George on December 8, 1776.⁹ Joseph Jenness was in Captain Stewart's company in Colonel Phinney's regiment and therefore he probably served in those locations.

The Jenness family has a long history in America starting with a Francis Jenness who appeared "on the Hampton records in 1670 ---and moved up to what is Rye in 1674".¹⁰ Members of the Jenness family continued living in Rye until 1924¹¹ when the house burned. This disaster was noted on the back of a photograph of the Jenness home, which was taken in Rye in 1893 (Figure 3). Before the fire the gun was mounted over the doorway to the dining room and narrowly missed destruction before it was rescued. The Joel Ame fowler was passed down in the Jenness / Drake family from the Revolutionary War until it was obtained by the present owner. A time-line starts with the original owner, Captain Joseph Jenness (1727 – 1815) to his son Lieutenant Joseph Jenness Jr. (1771 – 1845) who had a daughter, Mary Jenness (1811) who married Abraham Drake and had a son named Joseph Jenness Drake (1816 – 1897). Joseph Jenness Drake received the fowler from grandfather Joseph Jenness Jr. Joseph Jenness Drake had a son Abraham Jenness Drake whose son Abbot Benjamin Drake received the gun from his grandfather Joseph Jenness Drake. Then it continued to descend from Abbot Benjamin Drake to Herbert Drake to his son Thomas Drake, the last Jenness/Drake owner.¹²



Figure 3. The Jenness family home in Rye New Hampshire taken in 1893 before the fire in 1924.

This fowler is truly a very scarce surviving artifact of the Revolutionary War. Not only is it an American made weapon, but it was built by an identified gun maker with his name signed twice on the gun and the owner's name, date and location engraved on the wristplate. The Joel Amy fowler with a known American maker and strong genealogical provenance is one of an infinitely small number of bona fide remaining weapons of the Revolutionary War.

Endnotes

- 1 "many of their brothers-in-arms would fight with old hunting rifles", from *Washington's Immortals: The Untold Story of an Elite Regiment Who Changed the Course of the Revolution.* by Patrick K. O'Donnel. Grove/Atlantic 2017. p. 9
- 2 Kauffman, Henry J. *Early American Gunsmiths 1650-1850* Literary Licensing, 2011 and Sellers, Frank. *American Gunsmiths* Gun Room Press, 1983.
- 3 Boehert, Pail C. *Arming The Troops 1775-1815: Arms Makers and Comments.* Hobson, 1967
- 4 "Saratoga changed everything. For the Americans, the victory gave them hope---it also convinced the French that the revolutionaries had a chance to succeed.", from *Washington's Immortals: The Untold Story of an Elite Regiment Who Changed the Course of the Revolution.* by Patrick K. O'Donnel. Grove/Atlantic 2017. p. 171. Also, "In February 1777 he arrived in America with a ship packed with gunpowder, weapons, and fabric for uniforms" p. 135.
- 5 "Amy Joel, m. Jan. 22, 1776, Elizabeth Dowst." Church Records from Early Days of Rye, NH in New Hampshire Historical Society
- 6 Parsons, Langdon Brown. *History of the Town of Rye, New Hampshire : from its discovery and settlement to December 31, 1903.* Rumford Printing Co., Concord, N.H. 1905. p. 262 lists Joel Ame as a subscriber to the pledge in 1776.
Digital copy: <https://library.unh.edu/digitalcollections/find/digital/object/digital%3A00128>
- 7 Ibid, p. 389, see also *Miscellaneous revolutionary documents of New Hampshire, including the association test, the pension rolls, and other important papers.* Vol. 30 state papers series. Digital version - <https://library.unh.edu/digitalcollections/find/digital/object/propapers%3A0030> p. 185
- 8 Parsons, Langdon Brown. 1905. p. 385
- 9 Massachusetts Office of the Secretary of State. *Massachusetts soldiers and sailors of the Revolutionary War: a compilation from the archives.* Wright and Potter Printing Co., 1896. "Stuart, Wentworth, Captain...petition addressed to the Council dated Oct. 4 1775 stating that he had commanded a regiment in the army at Cambridge during the present campaign" also, a muster roll dated Garrison at Fort George, Dec. 8, 1776. p. 210.
- 10 Parsons, Langdon Brown. 1905. p. 765.
- 11 Hampton, NH Genological Database - <https://gw.geneanet.org/hamptongenealogy>
- 12 From a letter titled the "Jenness / Drake Family Line of Succession" furnished by Tom Drake

