

# REVOLUTIONARY WAR POWDER HORNS

By Tom Grinslade



Figure 1. On the throat of this horn are three raised oblique rings with lines carved on them. This view of the base of the horn shows that the butt plug is slightly dome shaped, which is an early feature compared to the flat butt plug observed in later horns.

Last summer at the Contemporary Longrifle Show, there was a very attractive display of plain, uncarved American Revolutionary War powder horns. The display prompted a discussion of the difficulty of identifying unsigned Rev War powder horns from those horns that were made at a later date. Some Rev War horns have distinguishing features that can help to separate them from those made in the nineteenth century. Four features, of unidentified horns from the Rev War period, that help to distinguish them from the ones made later are listed below.

- First, designs carved into the butt plug.
- Second, shaping of the body of the horn with flat panels around the spout.
- Third, fancy details carved in the tip of the horn.
- Fourth, a lobe extended from the body of the horn with holes for the carrying strap; these are found mainly on eighteenth century horns.

The following six powder horns all have some features that help distinguish them from horns that were made in the 1800's. The first horn has three oblique rings carved on the spout, similar to the diagonal rings found on some early horns that in the author's experience are thought to have been made in England (Figure 1). The three rings have a flat surface with lines inscribed on them, four lines on the first ring, three lines on the second ring and one groove on the third ring. The tip also has a raised ring with two lines around it. Between the first and second ring, nine faceted areas have been shaped around the horn. The overall length of

the horn is 13 inches with a slightly dome shaped butt plug fastened with four wooden pins. Two metal staples were nailed on to provide anchoring spots for attaching the carrying strap.

The second horn has a dark colored surface and is 16 inches long (Figure 2). A noticeable feature is the butt plug that has a circular design consisting of twelve curved rays carved in the wood. They start from the center of the plug and curve outward to the edge of the horn body forming a symmetrical geometric pattern. A small lobe of the horn is decorated with a serrated edge and has two holes to provide for a carrying strap. There are six wooden pins securing the plug. On the spout end is a half inch wide raised band at the tip that has an engrailed edge with small triangles carved on the band.

The next powder horn's unusual identifying feature is a half inch wide raised butt plug forming a cap with a dome shape that has a circular design carved on it (Figure 3). The design on the dome is a combination of fifteen small curved rays in the center of the plug surrounded by eight concentric circles engraved into the plug (this same entire design has been observed on another powder horn possibly made by the same carver). The curved rays on the butt plug are similar to the ones carved on the previous horn only smaller. The butt plug is fastened to the horn with ten wooden pins. The coloring on this 16 inch long horn is a dark green color and on the tip is a combination of two raised rings separated by a half inch space with the remaining two inch tip having eight facets.

The fourth powder horn has the spout end of the horn carved with eight facets surrounding the horn (Figure 4). Horns with eight facets covering about a third of the spout end of the horn are



Figure 2. On the tip of the horn is a one half-inch wide raised band that has an engrailed edge and small triangles carved on it. The design of the curved rays carved into the butt plug form a symmetrical pattern.





Figure 3. The detailed carving at the end of the spout is followed by an octagon shaped tip. The large butt plug has a design formed by curved rays in the center surrounded by eight concentric circles.



Figure 4. About a third of the length of the horn was carved with flat facets shaped octagonally around the spout end of the horn. The body of the horn has six ships lightly engraved on it and seven on the faceted panels.

often seen and in the author's experience that design is thought to have originated in New England. The main body of the horn next to the faceted spout is separated by two narrow bands a half of an inch apart and at the butt end is another small one eighth of an inch wide band. These bands have seven triangular petals adjacent to the spout end and eight semicircular petals at the ring on the butt end. The body of the horn has six very lightly inscribed sailing ships on it along with the initials "EB" and there are seven sailing ships on the facets of the spout. The dome shaped plug is fastened by four wooden pins and has four half-circle lines inscribed on it together with the initials "CB" branded on it. There is a small five sided lobe extension with two holes for a carrying strap.

The fifth powder horn is 14 inches long with eight facets covering about a third of the horn on the spout end that blend into the body of the horn without any separating rings (Figure 5). The butt plug has a flat surface that extends three-eighths of an inch past the end of the horn following the contour of the horn's body. Eighteen wooden pins in two staggered rows fasten the plug and a nail is used for the strap. On the tip end of the spout are two one quarter inch wide rings with a one eighth of an inch gap between them for the strap with two lines inscribed around each one. The rings are

unusual because their surfaces are flat and eight sided instead of round and match the facets on the spout. The round tip extends an inch and a half to the end of the horn.

The attractive sixth powder horn is 16 inches long with a generous curve and an unusual butt plug along with a tip that is designed in an unusual manner for attaching the carrying strap (Figure 6). The plug is dome shaped with an extension of the wood under the projecting lobe of the horn. This wooden reinforcing helped to protect the lobe of the horn from breaking off and has been observed on a few other horns. There are two holes in the plug going through the lobe of the horn and also through the wooden plug. The plug is fastened with five wooden pins. The spout end of the horn is decorated with eight fancy fluted facets that are separated from the body of the horn with two small rings and at the tip end with a one inch wide raised ring. This ring is different because it has two parallel holes drilled through the horn for attaching the strap, a rarely seen method for securing the strap. The unusual shape of the plug plus the decorated facets and the unique way provided for attaching the strap at the tip end make this a very different style of powder horn.



Figure 5. The flat surface of the butt plug extends three-eighths of an inch past the end of the horn following the shape of the horn and is fastened with eighteen wooden pins. The eight facets on the spout end of the horn are about a third of the length of the horn as observed on other New England horns





Figure 6. The unusually shaped butt plug is carved in a manner that reinforces the extended lobe of the horn used to attach the carrying strap and has two parallel holes drilled through the lobe and the butt plug for the strap. The panels on the spout end of the horn are separated with raised ribs in an attractive manner.

For comparison a very plain Rev War powder horn is pictured to show that it would be impossible to discern the period of its manufacture if it did not have an identifying date on it (Figure 7). The horn has none of the four distinctive features to help indicate its age; only the fact that the horn is marked with a Rev War soldier's name and the date places it in the eighteenth century; otherwise it could not be differentiated from a later horn. The name of the Rev War soldier is William Calwell and is punch marked into the horn along with the date 1786<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, it is usually impossible to separate early unmarked powder horns from later examples unless they have identifying features on them. Four early features to look for that help to date the horn are carving on the butt plug, facets shaped on the body of the horn, distinctive rings carved on the spout and lobe extensions at the butt plug. These characteristics, which most often appear on Rev War horns will help to provide a clue as to their age.

#### **Powder Horn Reference Books**

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Figure 7. A plain horn showing how difficult it is to date a horn that has no identifying features carved on it. Because this horn was marked with a name and a date of 1786, it is known to be a Rev War horn otherwise it would be impossible to tell from it's plain shape when it was made.

### Endnotes

- 1 William Calwell. Billerica, Massachusetts. Pvt in Capt Benjamin Walker's Co. Col Ebenezer Brigade's 27 Regt company return (probably 1775). *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* Boston, Potter Printing Company. 1897. p. 37.

