

# THE LONGRIFLE MAKERS OF THE DAVIDSON SCHOOL

by Michael Briggs



Figure 1. Map of North Carolina showing the different schools of longrifle makers.

Students and collectors of North Carolina longrifles divide them into nine regional styles referred to as schools (Figure 1). The purpose of this article is to examine the Davidson School that operated in Davidson County, North Carolina in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th century.

Davidson County was formed out of Rowan County in 1822. It was named for patriot General William Lee Davidson who was killed at the Battle of Cowan's Ford during the Revolutionary war. The county was originally populated in the middle of the eighteenth century by a group of German-Dutch settlers who migrated down the great wagon road from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley and settled in the Piedmont of North Carolina. They brought with them a rich decorative arts heritage that places Davidson County at the forefront of applied arts in this State.

The men who worked as gunsmiths in the Davidson longrifle school made many beautiful decorative art longrifles. The best examples are highly sought after by both collectors and museums. The photograph section of this article will document this. Most Davidson School longrifles have curly grain maple stocks. They have little drop to the stock. Most rifles have single or double incise carved lines that run along the comb and end with a beavertail tab at the wrist. The stock architecture is remarkably similar to the Salem School. Both schools share the same fore-stock molding.

Many Davidson School longrifles feature a patchbox with an eagle finial. The patchbox finial can be made of brass or silver. Several Davidson School rifles have a Distelfink patchbox finial. The "Distelfink" is a German-Dutch symbol often found on quilts, Fraktur art, hex signs, and barns. The bird is modeled on the American golden finch. On longrifles, it is seen as a bird pecking its tail. There was a sub-school of rifles made by an unidenti-

fied gunsmith who worked in Davidson County that made rifles that feature a pinwheel, edelweiss, or fylfot designs. I have seen at least four examples.

Many of the longrifles from the shops of Henry Ledford and Andrew Long feature silver inlays with elaborate engraving. Symbols were particularly important to the Davidson School gunsmiths. Many eagle patchboxes in this school have a symbol balanced on the eagle's nose or beak. This symbol sometimes looks to be a leaf and other times takes a different shape. One Henry Ledford rifle has a symbol of a woman holding a wreath over her head above the cheek-rest. The Solomon Farrington rifle has a similar shaped symbol of a tree above its cheek-rest. These symbols may have some religious meaning, but it has not been interpreted or identified.

James L. Smith was a blacksmith who worked in the north Davidson County community of Midway. He kept an account daybook for many years and wrote down every job he performed, who he did it for, the date, and the amount they owed him. His family donated three volumes of this daybook to the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. Most of the Davidson School gunsmiths in this manuscript had James L. Smith forge their triggers for them. By adding the number of triggers each gunsmith purchased per year, I was able to create a production record for each gun shop. James L. Smith also forged rifle and pistol barrels for these gunsmiths.

## The Gunsmiths: (Figure 2)

### 1. John Clodfelter

He worked as a part time gunsmith in northern Davidson County. In 1837, he made 10 rifles. In 1838, he made one rifle. In 1839, he made 12 rifles. In 1840, he made seven rifles.<sup>1</sup> He worked with Andrew Long. A fine short Davidson School buggy rifle exist that is signed "A.L. & J.C."



# Davidson County Longrifle Makers

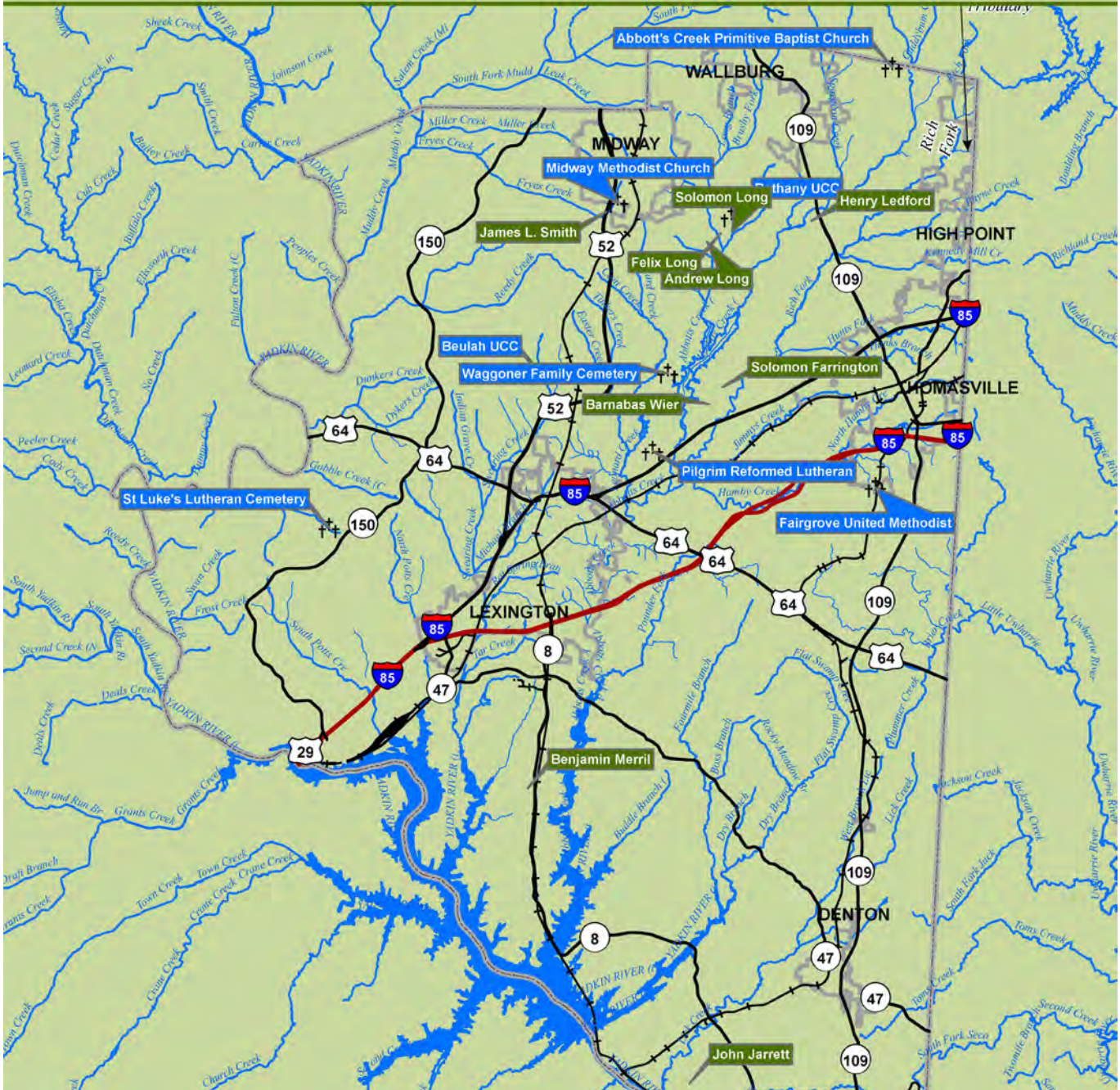


Figure 2. Location of the gunsmiths of the Davison School of longrifle style.

## 2. Solomon Farrington

He was born in 1772, and possibly began working as a gunsmith in the late 18th Century. In 1820, he was operating a gun shop in what became Davidson County in 1822. He had two sets of gunsmithing tools and was employing three persons. He had \$100 invested. His shop consumed annually five lbs. of steel and 1000 lbs. of iron valued at \$81.25 and produced guns valued at \$9.00 each. An outstanding eagle patchbox rifle signed by him exist (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup>

## 3. David Howard

He worked as a part time gunsmith in 1840 stocking five guns.<sup>1</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.



Figure 3. This is the only known signed rifle by Solomon Farrington. He was born in 1772 and lived and worked on Abbott's Creek. This cheek rest inlay is only found on Davidson School rifles. Note the Salem-Davison school fore-stock molding. S Farrington in silver plate on barrel.

#### 4. John Jarrett

He was born and raised in Randolph County. He trained there to make rifles in the Early Deep River School style. On April 18, 1818, he purchased 250 acres for \$300 on the waters of Lick Creek in what was then Rowan County. In the 1820 Rowan Census of Manufacturing, he was working as a gunsmith with \$50 invested in the business. He was using 1000 lbs. of iron, and three lbs. of steel, valued at \$81.25. He produced locks valued at \$3 each and triggers valued at \$1.30 each. This part of Rowan County became Davidson County in 1822.

#### 5. Henry Ledford

He was born in 1796. John Bivins' speculated he may have apprenticed for Christoph Vogler in Salem,<sup>3</sup> but this has never been documented. He built a house and gun shop on the waters of Abbott's Creek near present day Hwy 109 and Ledford High School in North Davidson County. He became a prolific maker of fine longrifles. Many fine rifles by this gunsmith still survive (Figures 4, 5, and 6). His wife was named Catharine "Kate" Ledford [nee Stanley]. Local blacksmith James Smith in Midway

forged his double set triggers for him. Smith charged him .75 per set of triggers. His records give us an idea of Ledford's annual rifle production.<sup>1</sup>

1837 – 44 rifles	1845 – 29 rifles	1851 – 16 rifles
1838 – 16 rifles	1846 – 40 rifles	1852 – 48 rifles
1839 – 54 rifles	1848 – 51 rifles	1853 – 8 rifles
1840 – 36 rifles	1849 – 36 rifles	
1841 – 28 rifles	1850 – 26 rifles	

Henry Ledford is thought to have operated his own barrel mill for many years, but in later years also had James Smith make some barrels for him. Smith delivered 10 barrels in 1848, five in 1849, three in 1850, one in 1851, and seven in 1852. The price for a barrel was \$6. 00.

Henry Ledford died in 1856. He is buried at Bethany Church Cemetery.<sup>3</sup>

#### 6. Andrew Lindsay

He worked as a part time gun stocker in Northern Davidson County and had James Smith forge his triggers for him.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 4. This rifle is signed H L upside down on the patch-box lid and is the earliest known example of a Henry Ledford Davidson School longrifle. It is the only relief carved rifle known by this maker. This may have been Ledford's personal rifle Henry Ledford was born in 1796. He was a prolific maker of longrifles in the Davidson School. His gun shop was located where modern day Hwy 109 crosses Abbotts Creek. Note the raised-carved eagle and religious symbol inlay on the left side of the butt stock and the fore-stock molding ends without a "C" scroll.



1836 – 14 rifles      1840 – 25 rifles  
 1839 – 20 rifles      1842 – 12 rifles

I have not seen a signed example of his work.

**7. Andrew Long**

He was born in 1793. He lived in Midway near the Davidson/ Forsyth County border. There are several excellent examples of his work that exist (Figures 7 and 8). The best is photographed in Bivins *Longrifles of North Carolina*.<sup>3</sup> His rifles are of typical Davidson School architecture. The photographed rifle features a Distelfink bird rather than an eagle as its patchbox finial that are found on the best rifles of Henry Ledford and the Vogler's of Salem. He must have worked with Jonathon Clodfelter at some period as a fine buggy rifle exist signed "A.L. & J.C.". He also worked with his nephews Solomon Long and Felix Long in the rifle business. He also used local blacksmith James Smith to forge

his triggers for him.<sup>1</sup> Here are the number of rifles produced per year from his shop.

1836 – 19 rifles      1838 – 36 rifles  
 1837 – 44 rifles      1841- 18 rifles

**8. Felix Long**

He was born in 1811 and was the nephew of Andrew Long. He apprenticed under his uncle and ran his own shop in Midway in northern Davidson County. He had two brothers. Solomon Long worked as a gunsmith. Jonathon Long worked as a furniture maker in the John Swisegood School. His father was Barnet Long, and his mother was Catherine Livengood Long. James Smith also forged his triggers for him.<sup>1</sup> Here are the dates and rifles produced.



Figure 5. This eagle patch-box Davidson rifle is attributed to Henry Ledford and has 24 silver inlays. With the patchbox lid engraved with the owner's name, G.W. Jones. Note the Fore-stock molding without "C" scroll termination (bottom).

There is one signed rifle by him, it is in the authors collection (Figure 9).<sup>3</sup>

**9. Hamilton Long**

He was a son of Andrew Long. He also used James Smith to make his triggers for him.<sup>1</sup>

- |                  |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1841 – 5 rifles  | 1846 – 16 rifles | 1851 – 26 rifles |
| 1842 – 30 rifles | 1847 – 34 rifles | 1852 – 14 rifles |
| 1843 – 4 pistol  | 1848 – 18 rifles | 1853 – 3 rifles  |
| 1844 – 10 rifles | 1849 – 28 rifles |                  |
| 1845 – 11 rifles | 1850 – 17 rifles |                  |

- |                  |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1839 – 27 rifles | 1842 – 14 rifles | 1845 – 28 rifles |
| 1840 - 25 rifles | 1843 – 10 rifles | 1846 - 7 rifles  |
| 1841 – 30 rifles | 1844 – 28 rifles |                  |

I have not seen a signed example of his work.



Figure 6. This eagle patchbox Davidson rifle is attributed to Henry Ledford and has great architecture. Note the eagle patchbox finial with flying wing.

#### 10. Solomon Long

He was born in 1814 and was the nephew of Andrew Long. He apprenticed with his uncle and had a gun shop in Midway. He had at least two brothers. Felix Long worked as a gunsmith. Jonathon Long worked as a cabinet maker in the John Swisegood Furniture School. He also used James Smith to make his triggers and other gun parts for him.<sup>1</sup>

James Smith records also show that Solomon Long was also making pistols and that Smith had him make several rifles for himself.<sup>3</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.

1836 – 18 rifles	1844 – 25 rifles	1853 – 12 rifles
1837 - 34 rifles	1845 – 11 rifles	1854 – 17 rifles
1838 – 22 rifles	1846 – 14 rifles	1855 – 26 rifles
1839 – 2 rifles	1848 – 13 rifles	1857 – 6 rifles
1840 – 37 rifles	1849 – 12 rifles	1858 – 8 rifles
1841 – 13 rifles	1850 – 25 rifles	1859 – 8 rifles
1842 – 13 rifles	1851 – 6 rifles	1860 – 5 rifles
1843 – 18 rifles	1852 – 22 rifles	1861 – 18 rifles

#### 11. Benjamin Merrill

John Bivins lists him working as a gunsmith and blacksmith from 1740 to 1771 in the Swearing Creek section of what became Davidson County in 1822.<sup>4</sup> It is not known if he made longrifles or military guns.

Benjamin Merrill got caught up in what became known as the Regulator Movement in 1771. He was named captain. This resulted in the May 14, 1771, Battle of Alamance with the King's forces under Governor Tryon. Merrill was captured after the battle and was one of six men found guilty of treason in a trial in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

*“King’s Chief Justice passed the following sentence of Capt. Merrill and five others which was ‘that you be taken from the place whence you came, that you be drawn from thence*

*to the place of execution, where you are to be hanged by the Neck; that you be cut down while yet alive, that your Bowels be taken out and burnt before your Face, that your head be cut off, your Body divided into Four Quarters, and this be at his Majesty’s Disposal; and the Lord have Mercy on your Soul.” The sentence was carried out on June 1, 1771.*<sup>4</sup>

#### 12. Jesse Osborn

Bivins list him as being born in 1820 and working as a gunsmith in Davidson County.<sup>5</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.

#### 13. Jesse Reagan

Bivins list him as being born in 1815 and working as a gunsmith in Davidson County.<sup>6</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work. Bill Ivey says he was related to Henry Ledford.<sup>7</sup>

#### 14. James L. Smith

He made five guns in 1839. He forged triggers for most of the other Davidson gunsmiths.<sup>1</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.

#### 15. Philip Stanly

He was born in 1796 and is listed as living with Henry Ledford. Bivins list him as a gunsmith, but family records show he was an idiot and Henry and Catherine Ledford were his guardians.<sup>8</sup>

#### 16. Barnubas Wier

He was born in 1797. Bivins list him as a gunsmith in Davidson County.<sup>9</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.

#### 17. Christian Wier

He was born in 1820. We worked in the Davidson School part time. He used James Smith to forge his triggers.<sup>1</sup>

1839 – 3 rifles                      1847 – 8 rifles.

I have not seen a signed example of his work.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 7. This Davidson School flintlock rifle is attributed to Andrew Long with James L. Smith made triggers. Note eagle patchbox finial with symbol balanced on head, two screw side plates, fore-stock molding terminating with a volute (bottom) and full length toe plate.



**18. Hamilton Wier**

He was born in 1823. He worked in Midway as a part time gunsmith.<sup>9</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.

**19. Jacob Wier**

He was born in 1821 and worked in Midway. In 1853, he had James Smith make him five sets of triggers for rifles.<sup>1</sup> I have not seen a signed example of his work.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 8. The late John Bivins attributed this longrifle to Andrew Long in the late 1970's when he saw it (John Bivens, personal communication). The rifle combines features found on both Davidson School and Salem School longrifles and stands on it's own as an outstanding example of these two schools. Note the eagle patchbox finial (center left), Davidson School fore-stock molding that flowers out (bottom right) and Davidson School barrel tang (bottom left).

## 20. John Wier

He worked in Midway. In 1838 he had James Smith<sup>1</sup> make him one gun wiper for .62, repair one gun lock for .06, bushing one gun for .12, and repair a set of triggers for .05. In 1841, he paid him .15 to repair a gunlock.

I have not seen a signed example of his work.<sup>9</sup>

### Other artistic endeavors

*"Students of material culture in North Carolina and collectors of decorative arts from this state recognize Davidson County as one of the leading counties in its history of creating objects of beauty for everyday life.....At the forefront of this was a school of cabinet makers who worked in the county between 1810 and 1850. This has come to be known as the Swisegood School. June Lucas explains the Swisegood school of cabinet making was started by Jacob Clodfelter (1770 – 1837), the son of Felix Clodfelter (1727 – 1814).<sup>10</sup> Jacob Clodfelter's son Joseph Clodfelter (1801 – 1872) also worked in this school along with Henry Rupert, Mordecai Collins (1785 – 1864), John Swisegood (1796 – 1874), Jonathon Long (1803 – 1858), and Jesse Clodfelter (1804 – 1871). She examines known examples of their furniture in greater detail and provides a tie in between the Swisegood school cabinet makers and the pierced tombstones detailed in Ruth Little's book Sticks & Stones Three*

*Centuries Of North Carolina Gravemarkers.<sup>11</sup> The pierced tombstones are unique in America. There are approximately 100 of them in cemeteries of Reformed Lutheran, Church of Christ, and Baptist Churches in Davidson County. They were carved by the same men who made the furniture in this school. They also built coffins. The pierced tombstones take on many forms. Most are pierced with a fylfot cross (a Germanic symbol for infinity.) Little explains the difference between a negative fylfot (the cross is pierced through the stone), and a positive fylfot (the stone around the fylfot is cut away; Figures 10 and 11). Some are pierced with a tulip, a flower, and in one a "Lover's Knot." The most elaborate tombstones feature similar architectural features and designs as found on the Swisegood school corner cupboards.....The largest group of these pierced tombstones are located at Abbott's Creek Primitive Baptist Church. You can also find them at Bethany United Church of Christ (formally Bethany Reformed Lutheran, Pilgrim Reformed Lutheran, Beck's Reformed Lutheran, Beulah Reformed Lutheran, and a group of them at Wagoner Family Cemetery. There are approximately 100 pierced tombstones in all, and they make up a wonderful memorial to the early German families who settled in Davidson County... Two of the men who worked in the Swisegood School of cabinet making were closely related to men who worked in the Davidson*





Figure 9. This is the only known signed Felix Long rifle from the Davidson School. Felix Long was born in 1811. His brother Solomon Long and uncle Andrew Long also worked as gunsmiths in the school. Note the Salem School fore-stock molding (bottom right) and Davidson School barrel tang (bottom left).

*Longrifle School. Jonathon Long was the brother of gunsmiths Felix Long and Solomon Long. Gunsmith John Clodfelter was related to Jacob, Joseph, and Jesse Clodfelter.*"<sup>12</sup>



Figure 10. Wagoner headstone



Figure 11. Headstone made by Joseph Clodfelter.

Trained by Mordicai Collins, who immigrated to North Carolina from New Market, Virginia, in 1803, John Swisegood was part of a cabinetmaking school working in northeastern Davidson County in the first half of the nineteenth century. Jonathan Long and Jesse Clodfelter were also part of the Collins-Swisegood School. Although Collins was not of Germanic descent, the three men associated with him were, and most of the surviving furniture from this group with known histories descended in German families. This corner cupboard exhibits the group's characteristic urn-shaped finials, fan-shaped plinth, applied pilasters on each side of the door, barber pole inlay, and lower door panels with

lunetted corners (Figure 12). The applied heart on the plinth is a rare but very desirable form of decoration on pieces in this group



Figure 12. Corner Cupboard, John Swisegood (1796–1874), Davidson County, North Carolina, 1820–1830. Walnut, light and dark wood inlay, yellow pine, tulip poplar. H. 95½, W. 36½ in. Gift of the Estate of Elizabeth Motzinger (4980).

John Swisegood made this flat back cupboard (Figure 13), probably for Susannah Sink, who married David H. Leonard in 1832. The cupboard may have been a wedding gift for the new bride, or it may have been a slightly later acquisition for the Leonard household. In the 1870s the cupboard descended to Susannah and David’s youngest daughter, Crissie Jane, perhaps on the occasion of her 1871 marriage to Robert Julian Wagner. According to Crissie Jane’s son, it was one of his mother’s most treasured possessions. The cupboard boasts one of the signature characteristics

associated with Collins-Swisegood School pieces, “comma” inlay on the four corners of the drawers. As with most cupboards in the group, the backboards were painted, but in this instance, paint analysis revealed that they were originally a slate gray rather than the more common Prussian blue. Prized white dishes would have popped on this exceptionally dark background.



Figure 13. Cupboard, John Swisegood (1796–1874), Davidson County, North Carolina, 1820–1835. Walnut, light wood inlay, cherry, yellow pine, tulip poplar. H. 85¾, W. 62, D. 20⅞ in. MESDA Purchase Fund (2127).

#### Historical Documents

Tonya R. Hensley provided reports on Henry Ledford, Andrew Long, Charles Long, Barnabas Weir, Felix Long, Solomon Long, Mary Ledford Long, Phillip Stanley,

Account Day Book of blacksmith James L. Smith at Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts Library.

#### Web Searches

Backcountry Bartleby: The Account Books of James L. Smith 1836-1898 by Myra DeLapp Moffett

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Account Day Book of blacksmith James L. Smith at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts Library.
- <sup>2</sup> Bivins, John. *The Longrifles of North Carolina*. George Schumway Publishing. 1988. p. 152.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 160.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 163.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 165.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 168.
- <sup>7</sup> Ivey, William W. *North Carolina Schools of Longrifles 1765 – 1865*. Self Published. 2010. p. 165.
- <sup>8</sup> Bivins, John. op. cit.. p. 171.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 176.
- <sup>10</sup> Lucas, June –“Piedmont North Carolina’s Swisegood School of Cabinetmaking: Expanding the Narrative, 1770–1858.” *MES-DA Journal* 2015 Volume 36
- <sup>11</sup> Little, Ruth *Sticks & Stones Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers*. University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- <sup>12</sup> Briggs, C. Michael. *The Longrifle Makers of the Davidson School*. NCRIFLE Books, 2021. p. 232.

