

THE FUNCTIONAL BRITISH POWDER HORN

by J. Craig Nannos

Collectors of both Colonial and early flintlock arms are well aware of a basic, common and universal British powder horn. It is one having a wood plug base with a removable dowel and a brass spout. These horns can be found and offered at most antique arms and militaria shows and they exist in collections in the United States, Canada and in England. In the early 20th century extensive numbers were available, at one time Bannerman's and other dealers of this material offered them and this continued into the mid and late 20th century. They are known to have been issued and in existence, from viewing period art work and marked examples, as early as the 1740s.

Based, primarily on the horn size, this standard issue item was used as priming horns for army artillery, a powder horn for light troops / riflemen, and issued out to numerous militia organizations in the Colonies. In addition, images exist, as well as examples, which were used on naval ships for naval priming horns. Examples are known with painted markings to specific ships or to commemorate naval engagements of the early 19th century. One finds evidence of them, in period art work, hanging over the naval gun and carriage above the gun port opening on the gun decks. One of the earliest documented Army paintings is a painting by David Morier of *The Royal Artillery in the Low Countries*. This was painted in the 1748 time period. It is a highly detailed painting showing the horns being carried by enlisted artillerymen on a large buff (white leather) shoulder belt and not a typical narrow shoulder strap noted in later period images.

This article will now provide images of “*Uncommon examples*” of these “*Common examples*” of accoutrements.

The brass banded with sling swivels pattern: Based on paintings, the few examples viewed and their markings this is believed to be a pre Revolution pattern. - “Uncommon example”

I have examined three horns having the brass bands and sling swivels. Based on the early painting, noted above, and engraving on one viewed example I believe these are a rare early pattern. At some point, prior to the Revolution, the extra labor and material costs for bands and swivels was determined not necessary. Two of the examples were once in the collection of Walter O'Conner with one engraved and showing the Forbes Road. It noted in the engraving all the forts including Fort Pitt. This would indicate it being carved and used on or after the year Fort Pitt was completed, 1761. Images of this example are in *American Engraved Powder Horns* by John duMont and Tom Grinslade's *Powder Horns Documents of History*. All three examples are of a large size (approximately 14 to 15 inches long) that could indicate use for artillery but obviously, other military elements could have obtained them. One of them is marked with unit numbers, indicating it was issued (Figure 1), All three examples had the same bands with swivels, one of the examples, shown in the noted publications had period carving. The example shown here (Figure 2) is missing the brass spout but one of the other examples noted retained the spout; basically the same spout construction as found on numerous later examples.



Figure 1. One of the 3 examples has unit marking engraved on the band.

Typical British pattern: Found with both Army and Navy markings, examples indicate usage from the late 18th century into the first 3 decades of the 19th century. - “Common example”

The following images show the typical construction features found in collections and at shows (Figure 3). This example has a Broad Arrow marking, thus indicating government ownership. One finds later 19th century markings such as B O and arrow, thus Board of Ordnance, and there are many with no markings. The unmarked examples could be excess and or not put into the British military system as they all appear to be of the same pattern. This basic type is believed to be used for artillery if the horn body is large, while the thinner/narrow examples are considered to be used by Light Infantry or riflemen. When issued to militia perhaps no specific size was ever considered or of concern. I should note the common features being the wood plug, the engraved brass spout & spoon, and iron eye rings for the carrying strap. These features are found on nearly, if not, all of the horns extant. The British government markings, on the 19th century examples vary based on the time period of manufacture or use. Please note the more slender or thinner horn shown in the drawing of the Light Infantry soldier (Figure 4). Also visible is the narrow strap ends coming to the iron eye rings.



Figure 2. Early banded priming horn. Note this example is missing the spout.

Figure 3. Typical British pattern priming horn, note the broad arrow ordinance mark near the base of the horn (lower right).





Figure 4. A drawing by Phillip De Louthembourg of British Light Infantry, note the positioning of the powder horn. Anne S.K Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Image is of the period of the American Revolution.

The Artillery priming horn attached to the Royal Artillery cartridge pouch shoulder belt. Carried by all members of a Royal Artillery gun crew. - “Uncommon example”

This small size horn is obviously an example of one of the rarer styles (Figure 5). They were attached with a red cord to the cartridge pouch strap and hung above the box flap, almost resting on the top of the exterior flap. Existing examples are found with unit markings engraved on the brass base. These indicate the artill-

ery battalion, the company and individual soldier’s number. The known examples provide unit markings from the Revolutionary War period as well as early 19th century Royal Artillery organizations. They are all small with a total length in the seven inch range. One should note the spout, reduced in size, is the same as the common examples and all known examples have the brass end. The example shown was originally found in Philadelphia. This City had a very large artillery element in the pre and Revolutionary War period. These pre War organization copied the Royal Artillery



Figure 5. Priming horn used by members of the Royal Artillery gun crew.



Figure 6. An example of a large American powder horn likely used by artillery. Note some features are similar to previously discussed British powder horns but there are some unique features that differentiate it.

uniforms and worked to excel and match the skills of the Royal Artillery. My opinion is that this example was used by an American Artillerist and thus no Royal Artillery markings on the base.

An American Example: Following the same design but with a more basic spout, of two different metals, and a butt plug. - “Uncommon example

When one examines this horn and compares it to the others shown or viewed in museums or collections it obviously does not conform to the features previously noted (Figure 6). It is a large size horn (approximately 15 inches long), thus considered to be used by artillery and it copies the features on the British examples

but contains unique characteristics that indicate it was not made to British standards. I believe this indicates American construction. The spout is copper with a brass spoon and lacks any engraving, the same style but very basic and the plug has a unique and different style dowel. In addition the wood base & plug were painted red and the horn body has a light coating of yellow/cream painting remaining. One other minor feature to note is the metal loops for the strap which again don't conform to the British examples. I doubt that the Colonies were manufacturing these after the Revolution based on the quantity of material obtained from the surrender and the significant reduction in our military force structure.

Endnotes

- ¹ Miller, A. E. Haswell and Dawnay, N. P. “The Royal Artillery in the Low Countries by David Morier, plate # 75” *Military Drawings and Paintings in the Royal Collection*. Volume one Plates. The Phaidon Press, London. 1970.
- ² du Mont, John S. *American Engraved Powder Horns: The Golden Age 1755/1783*. Phoenix Publishing, 1978, plate #46
- ³ Grinslade, Tom. *Powder Horn Documents of History*. Scurlock Publishing Co., 2009 P. 72.

