

Grandfather Beale's Rifle

Frederick R. Edmunds

The pundits claim that our country's character is defined by certain landmark events occurring at different stages throughout our history: there were many such events.

Those events, their effects upon the fabric of American society, and our ability to have dealt with them, or not to have dealt with them, have provided the substance for a better understanding of our nation and its people.

Just as the Revolutionary War was one such "defining" event, so was the War Between The States, which set brother against brother, and lasted for four long years.

There were many unresolved, "hot" issues dividing the North and South, which led to this so-called "Civil War": however, there were two events which helped immeasurably to precipitate the conflagration.

The first of these events was the publication of a novel named, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," published in 1852, at a time when the nation was wrought with abolitionist frenzy. The book was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, sister of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, an ardent Northern abolitionist, and purported to uncover all the cruelties and injustices of slavery. The author had never seen slavery firsthand, but drew her material from other abolitionist information and her own sense of "morality."

The book was a landslide success, outselling all other books of the period and inspiring many stage plays throughout the North, portraying its subject matter. Its hateful slave trader, Simon Legree, became identified with the South and its society.

The South was horrified, regarding the publication as an indictment upon the entire region and its way of life: the book coming during a period in our history already inflamed with passion.

The second such event was John Brown's raid on the U.S. Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, on October 16th, 1859.

John Brown was born a New Englander and was raised in Ohio, where his parents taught him Bible teachings and a hatred for the institution of slavery. He had two marriages and 20 children. He had experienced many failed business ventures when he turned his energies to becoming a militant abolitionist. On May 23rd, 1856, Brown and his small band slaughtered five pro-slavery men along Pottawatomie Creek, in Kansas, hacking them to death with swords. Brown's fame spread and he immediately became feared and hated by Southerners.

Conversely, he became a hero to Northern abolitionists, who provided funds and "moral" support to this crazed man, urging him to continue his crusade against slavery.



Developing an overly ambitious plan to free the slaves and entice them to join him in the fight for their freedom, he and his "army" of 21 men (**including five blacks**) raided and captured the U.S. Government Armory at Harper's Ferry, in the late night of October 16th and the early morning hours of October 17th, 1859. The intended revolt of the slaves never materialized, leaving the insurgents to fend for themselves. They managed to kill five men during the raid, then fled the streets, and holed up in the firehouse.

Word of the raid spread like wildfire among the local populace, who were shocked in stunned disbelief, fearful for their lives and property and of the carnage a slave insurrection would produce.

Many citizens armed themselves and surrounded the armory, seeking revenge, while others were furnished weapons and ammunition from armory stores, so they could help in the fight.

A few of Brown's men tried to escape by swimming across the Potomac River to Maryland. One of them, William Leeman, was stopped midstream, clinging to and partly protected by an exposed rock while being engulfed in a hail of bullets from enraged townspeople. Leeman was killed thereafter, when some enraged citizens swam out to him and shot him.

There is ample evidence that "**Grandfather Beale's Rifle**" was used by Thomas W. Beale, and that he was one of the citizens shooting at the escaping insurgents.

Of course, we all know that U.S. forces under Col. Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart stormed the fire engine house and captured Brown and his men on October 18th, 1859.

Brown was tried and found guilty of treason and murder and was hung on December 2nd, 1859.

Thomas W. Beale was born in Harper's Ferry on September 15th, 1830, and died there on September 17th, 1915. He married Julia Ann Holt at Harper's Ferry, on the 28th day of July, 1853.

Beale was a tinner by occupation and became a very prominent citizen, heavily involved in community affairs and, at one point, becoming Mayor of Harper's Ferry during his public career.

Ella M. Beale (Miskimon) was Thomas Beale's daughter and it was she who initiated the provenance on his rifle. Ella had a son named Robert Ray Miskimon. Robert Ray's son, named Robert Murray Miskimon, had a daughter named Mollie Marilyn Miskimon. Thus, it was Mollie, Thomas W. Beale's great, great granddaughter, who ultimately inherited "Grandfather Beale's Rifle," which had passed down through generations of the family.

Mollie was born on December 15, 1947, and lived in Richmond, Virginia. She decided to sell grandfather's rifle, in August, of 1986, and it was purchased by artifact dealer, Gary Thomas, who immediately sold it to a well-known collector, Bill Turner. Turner traded the rifle to dealer Dennis Lowe, who consigned it to the Horse Soldier, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1991. Antique arms dealer, David Kleiner, purchased the rifle from the Horse Soldier in 1992, and sold it to collector Gerald Bennett, on November 20, 1992.

I acquired "Grandfather Beale's Rifle" from Bennett in 1993.

Accompanying the rifle, and attached to it by twine, was a small tag, measuring 2 and 3/8 by 4 and 3/4 inches, upon which was typed on both sides:

This is Grandfather Beale's Rifle. The barrel and lock were bought at the United States Rifle Works (Armory which was at Harper's Ferry until the Civil War then moved to Springfield, Mass.) Grandfather Beale made the stock and put the rifle together. Grandfather Beal used this rifle to shoot at John Brown's followers when they were escaping to Maryland (by swimming the Potomac river) in their Effort to reach the North

(see other side)-handwritten

After the RAID at Harper's Ferry.

John Brown took some of his men into the Engine House (after the raid known as John Brown's Fort) with him, and of course those not killed were captured.

(see other side)-handwritten

The tag itself is made out of some lightweight oil cloth, and has a metal grommet at one end.

Acquiring Beale's extraordinary rifle with its tag, along with many accompanying family records and family Bible entries, has provided me with many pleasant moments, my mind often wandering back in time to that exciting period in our history, envisioning what the experience might have been like when Thomas W. Beale used his rifle:

The blast from the muzzle set Beale's ears to ringing and the recoil mauled his already sore shoulder. He had no expectation that he had hit his man, and didn't bother looking through the smoke to see, if by chance, his shot had found its target. Keeping a man's outline in the sights was nearly impossible. First, the big military rifle was heavy and difficult to keep steady for very long. Second, the targets were constantly moving as the raiders swam, crawled on rocks and waded in their haste to cross the river and escape the trap that was Harper's Ferry. The steady report of nearby rifles made it difficult for him to concentrate. A vast, spreading cloud of gunsmoke was beginning to screen a clear view of the river. Just as he had been doing since the three raiders fled the rifle armory for the river, Thomas Beale just guessed and pulled the trigger. Wearily, he reached into his pocket for another round and clumsily began to reload. When he finally brought the rifle back up to his shoulder and looked out over the barrel towards the middle of the river, the scene had changed dramatically. Two of the three fugitives were no longer visible. The third was clinging to a rock in mid-stream, making no further attempt to continue flight. The shooting from the river bank sputtered to a halt. Off to Beale's right, an armed man began wading out toward the waiting, exhausted raider, and brought him back to shore. Later, the captive, John Copeland, would be tried and hanged in Charlestown for his transgressions against the Commonwealth of Virginia. (Reminiscences with Historian Gerald R. Bennett and Jack Daniels)

EXAMINATION AND DESCRIPTION OF "GRANDFATHER BEALE'S RIFLE"

When Mollie sold the rifle in 1986, it was coated with layers of dirt and dust which had accumulated over the years. When that cover of dirt was carefully removed, it unmasked a gun in almost unused condition and some very puzzling anomalies. While the piece generally conforms to the characteristics of the 2nd, or iron-mounted U.S. Model 1855 Rifle, it clearly deviates from the standard issue weapon in the following respects:

1. The iron mountings all contain considerable portions of original blue finish, rather than the standard bright finish.
2. The iron butt plate tang is not stamped, "U.S."
3. The barrel bands are not stamped with a "U."
4. The lock plate, Maynard primer door, and the hammer are case hardened.
5. The lock plate is stamped with the Harper's Ferry eagle and "1858," but is not stamped "Harper's Ferry."
6. The barrel is browned (original) in the same manner as the 1st Model Brass mounted 1855 and the earlier Mississippi Rifles. (However, as with the regular models, the barrel is stamped with "1858," and the usual "V," "P," and HF eagle head.)
7. The barrel does not have the usual saber bayonet

stud. It was initially mortised for the study, but the cut was filled before the brown finish was applied. Close examination of the quality workmanship indicates that the fill was an armory modification.

A comparison of "Grandfather Beale's" Harper's Ferry U.S. Model 1855 Rifle and a Harper's Ferry U.S. Model 1855 Rifle, Type I, brass mounted with browned parts follows. The photographs 1-11 are of "Grandfather Beale's" rifle and 1A-12A (excluding 4A) are of the Type I rifle.

All the remaining features of the rifle, except those noted above, are standard 2nd Model, i.e., two-leaf M1855 rear sight (stamped, "R"); oil-finished stock; iron patchbox cover; full patchbox cavity in stock; front sight; iron trigger-guard tang and bow; and iron nose cap.



Figure 1. Case-hardened lockplate, hammer, and Maynard Tape Primer cover with stamped eagle and "1858" date, but without "U.S." and "Harper's Ferry" Stamping.



Figure 1A. Lockplate, hammer, and Maynard Tape Primer cover, with stamped eagle. Lockplate stamped "1858 U.S. Harper's Ferry."

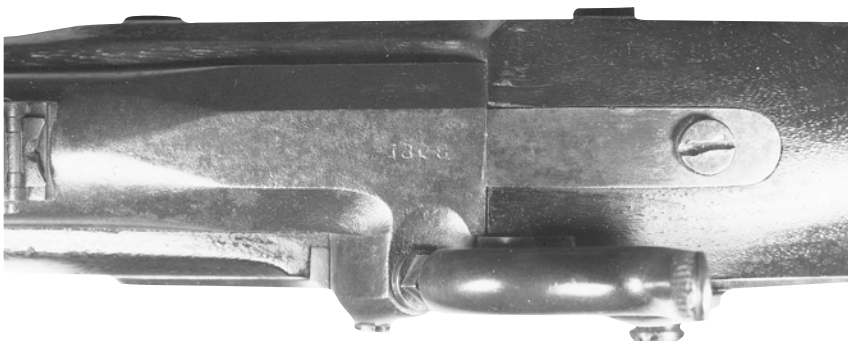


Figure 2. Top view of breech end, with date stamping "1858."

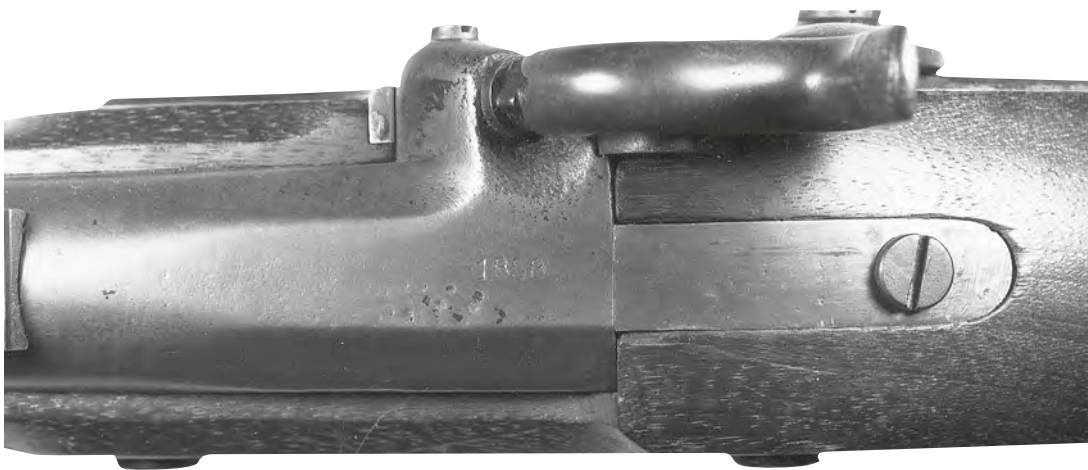


Figure 2A. Top view of breech end, with date stamping "1858" on top barrel flat.



Figure 3. Blued two-leaf rear sight.



Figure 3A. Long-range rear sight and front part of lockplate with "U.S. Harper's Ferry" stamping.



Figure 4. Reverse side from lockplate, with iron escutcheons and blued screw head.

There is no question, after complete disassembly of the rifle, that it is in the same original condition as when it left the Harper's Ferry Armory.

By all appearances, "Grandfather Beale's Rifle" is one of a kind! Just how could this come to be?

If Ella Miskimon's early provenance (passed down through generations of her family) is taken literally, the rifle is a pieced-together, partially homemade rifle, constructed by her father sometime before October 16th-17th, 1859, the date of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. The appearance of the rifle itself contra-



Figure 5. Blued patchbox cover with blued rounded head screws.



Figure 5A. Brass patchbox cover with rounded-head screws and brass buttplate.

dicts that story. It is obviously of armory-manufactured quality.

The tag attached to the gun says that Grandfather Beale “made the stock.” Examination shows that the stock is a machine-milled, oil-finished armory product. Investigation into armory payroll records of the period provides no evidence that Thomas W. Beale ever worked at the rifle works or the musket factory. This eliminates the possibility that he made stocks at the armory and appropriated this one for his own use.

The tag further states that he bought the barrel and lock at the United States Rifle Works Armory at Harper’s Ferry. Ordnance records lend no credence to such a statement. No parts of guns made at any National Armories were ever sold to private citizens.

It is certain that a M1855 rifle was not constructed by an armory workman for personal use or sale after his monthly quota was fulfilled. Such a practice apparently did exist at the Harper’s Ferry mus-

ket armory in the early and undisciplined years of operation (pre-1840); before mechanization and interchangeable component technology replaced individual craftsmanship as the basic manufacturing process. With the inception of the rifle factory, and during the early 1840’s, at the musket armory, came the disciplined, mechanized, “time-oriented” work environment, which completely superseded the earlier artisan-controlled “task-oriented” process which had fostered such a practice.

In the production sequence at the rifle armory, components passing gauge inspection were next polished, stamped, and then final finished, i.e., browned, blued, case-hardened, or bright finished. They were then placed in an audited inventory of finished components awaiting assembly into the completed rifle. Parts

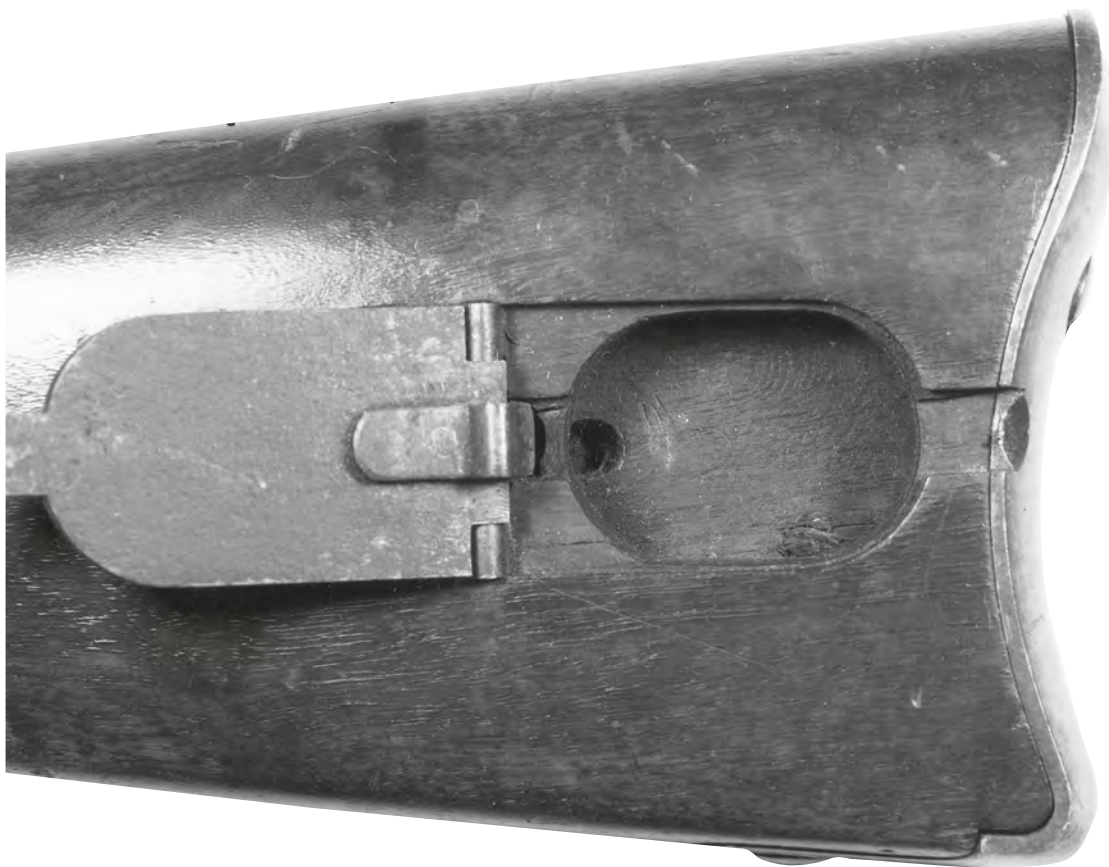


Figure 6. Open patchbox with typical Harper's Ferry milled-out section with cutout for extra nipple.

rejected during this process were set aside before the stamping and final finishing stages. The iron furnishings on Beale's rifle are finished components with a combination of brown, blue, and case-hardened colors. In view of the above, any theory that this rifle could be a "lunch-box" special, is very remote.

The examination of annual Ordnance Reports, however, does offer a plausible explanation for the existence of this unique version of the U.S. Model 1855 Rifle.

The Harper's Ferry production records for the year 1857-58, list, "1 percussion (*pattern*) rifle iron mountings." Could this be Thomas Beale's rifle?

Col. H.K. Craig, Chief of Ordnance, strongly backed the introduction of the U.S. Model 1855 Rifle and liked its shiny fittings (brass, case-hardening, and brown) for their positive effect on troop morale. In proposing the 2nd Model for Ordnance Board approval, Craig had the Beale rifle made

up to reflect the same. Thus, we have the blued iron furnishings replacing the brass and the retention of the eye-pleasing browned barrel and case-hardened lock assembly.

The absence of the bayonet stud can be reasonably explained thus: In early 1860, the Ordnance Board recommended the elimination of the use of the sword bayonet with the Model 1855 because it was "too unwieldy and cumbersome." It is quite possible that the sword bayonet had drawn similar criticism from the militia units who had been issued the 1st Model 1855. Perhaps Col. Craig's *pattern* rifle reflected such field input and he

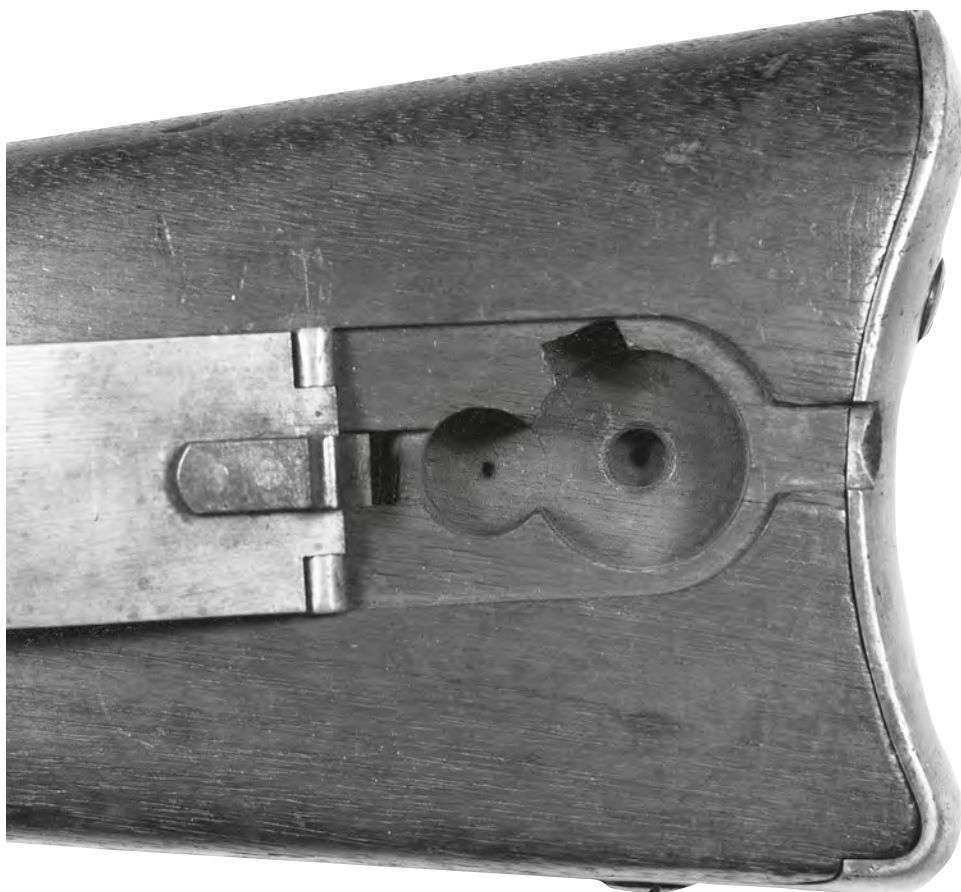


Figure 6A. Patchbox cavity for front sight.



Figure 7. Top view of blued buttplate.

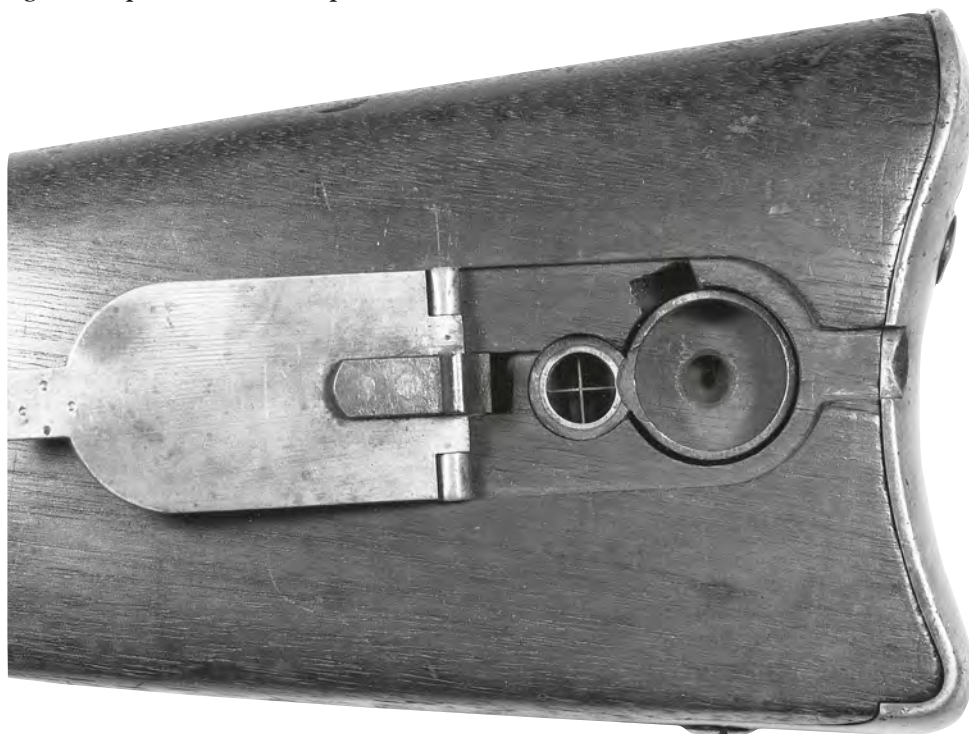


Figure 7A. Brass patchbox open with double-ring crosshair in place.

preempted the Board's ultimate conclusion by removing the bayonet stud.

As would probably be the case with a *pattern* rifle, the iron furnishings and the lock plate assembly would be purposefully finished without the stamping used on the standard production weapons (the inclusion of the date on the lock and barrel would fix the year of submission for approval).

It is a fact that, in 1858, the Ordnance Board adopted all the hardware features and design modifications displayed in the Beale rifle, except the elimination of the sword bayonet mounting stud and color finish.

As plausible as the pattern rifle theory might appear, it is still based upon speculation. There is no documentation

found thus far that establishes the Beale rifle as the iron-mounted *pattern* rifle produced at Harper's Ferry in 1858.

But, back to speculation: If it is a *pattern* weapon, how did Thomas Beale wind up with it in October of 1859? At the time of Brown's raid, Beale and his family were residents of Bolivar, a village adjacent to Harper's Ferry. At the time word got around that Brown's insurgents had taken over the armory and killed some local townspeople, with no militia or Federal troops in sight, an angry cry went out for local citizens to arm themselves and resist.

Few people owned effective arms of any kind, certainly not military-type arms. While many folks worked at the armory, few had guns of any kind, other than fowling pieces used for hunting. These were totally inadequate to stand up to the heavy-caliber Sharp's carbines furnished Brown by his abolitionist backers in species and arms and equipment.

Figure 8. Blued front barrel band (without "U" stamping), sling swivel, and retaining spring.



According to testimony given in U.S. Senate Investigation proceedings following the raid, local citizens gained access to a small remote auxiliary arsenal building where government arms and ammunition were stored, and helped themselves. Becoming adequately armed, local citizens joined with arriving militia troops in a continuous, if not a very effective, duel with Brown and his men, until relieved



Figure 8A. Double-ring crosshair front sight, lying on stock.

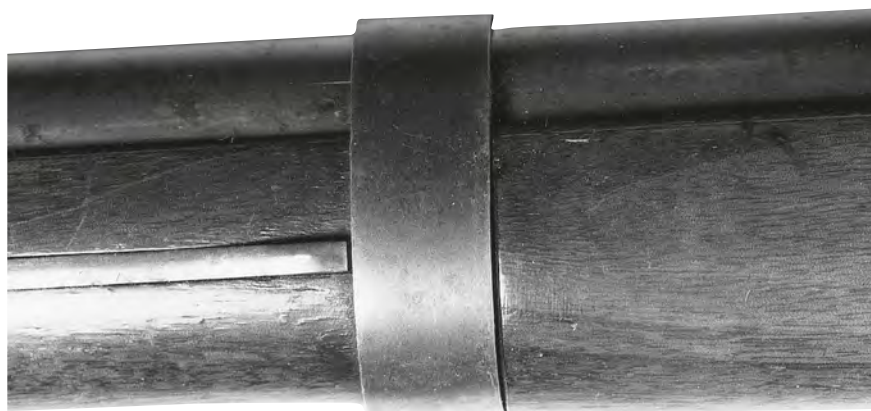


Figure 9. Blued rear barrel band (without "U" stamping), and retaining spring.



Figure 10. Front sight, end of tulip ramrod, and filled-in mortise-cut which was originally meant for a saber bayonet stud. The filled-in area was polished and browned at the armory.

by the arrival that night of the U.S. Marines under Col. Robert E. Lee.

It is certainly plausible that a one-of-a-kind, *pattern* rifle could have ended up in storage at a location separate from the main body of standard arms, awaiting shipment to regular army units and state militia arsenals. Carrying this a step further, we have the plausible means by which Thomas Beale came into possession of this unusual Model 1855 Rifle.

There is nothing in the Senate Investigation testimony to suggest that this distribution of arms to local citizens was controlled or that the arms were accounted for by the government after the crisis passed. In fact, the War Department continued to supply the citizenry with government ammunition following Brown's raid, in case there should be any further necessity to protect themselves and their property in any future crisis, whether related to Brown's actions or not.

The story of "Grandfather Beale" assembling the rifle himself from purchased parts and then making the stock is an easily acceptable story, satisfying the curiosities of the family, and gaining further credence as years passed and



Figure 9A. Brass front barrel band with "U" stamping, and with sling swivel attached; band retaining spring and rear part of brass noscap also visible.

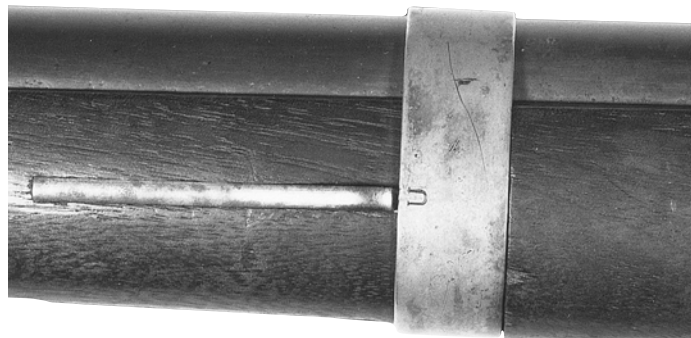


Figure 10A. Right side of brass rear barrel band, with "U" stamping and retaining spring.



Figure 11. Blued noscap and filled-in mortise.



Figure 11A. Bottom view of brass noscap and swelled ramrod area; also mortised stud for saber bayonet.



Figure 12A. Right-side view of brass noscap, mortised stud for saber bayonet, front sight, and tulip head ramrod.

future generations became aware of granddad's rifle and its small but proud role in history.

Frederick R. Edmunds in close collaboration with
Gerald R. Bennett, Historian

February 21st, 2005

Gettysburg, PA and Vero Beach, FL

NOTES AND SOURCES

Rather than using footnotes, the author(s) has listed a general bibliography of source material. Listings are not in any particular order.

U.S. Congress. Senate. *Report of the Committee of the*

Senate Appointed to Inquire Into the Invasion and Seizure of the Public Property at Harper's Ferry. 36th Congress, 1st Session, 1860. Testimony of Dr. John Starry. *The Raid*; Laurence Greene, Henry Holt & Co. publisher, 1953; *Allies For Freedom*; Benjamin Quarles, Oxford University Press, publisher, 1974.

Harper's Ferry Armory and the New Technology; Merritt Roe Smith, The Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1977.

In 1954, Congress repealed the 1841 law that had placed the national armories under the direct management of military personnel from the Ordnance Department. At Harper's Ferry this repeal was a signal for some disgruntled workers to return to some of their pre-1841 undisciplined work habits, but it did not alter the mechanized process which had been initiated dur-

ing the military's management. Machines had largely replaced craftsmen as the makers of arms: this change was irreversible, once instituted.

The work force now consisted mainly of semi-skilled machine operators. The old practice of an individual craftsman making a complete arm was gone forever. Gone also was the early custom of craftsmen working at the musket armory on their own time, using armory tools and resources to make weapons for private use or sale to other civilians.

This reprieve from military-type control of armory operations was short lived, for in 1858, Alfred M. Barbour was appointed superintendent of the armory and he reinstated strict rules and regulations, restoring strict and efficient order to the manufacturing process.

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Civil War Guns; William B. Edwards. Stackpole Co., publisher, 1962. p 23.

The Rifled Musket; Claude E. Fuller. The Stackpole Co., publisher, 1958. Records and Opinions of the Ordnance Board Feb-June 1860, p 143. *National Archives*, Records of the War Dept., Office of the Chief of Ordnance, Special File, Box 26, p 3.

The Old Man; Truman Nelson. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, publisher, 1973. pp. 11,124; Greene, p 105. *Man on Fire*; Jules Abels. The McMillan Co., publisher, 1971. p 278.

Thunder at Harper's Ferry; Allan Keller. Prentice Hall Inc., publisher, 1958. p 55; Nelson, p 124; Greene, p 134; Abels, p 286.

The Virginia Free Press, Nov. 10, 1859 (published Charlestown, VA.); Microfilm files, Shepard College Library, Shepardstown, W. VA.

Merritt Roe Smith, p 309.

Other Sources Consulted:

National Archives: Records of the U.S. Accounting Office, Record Group 217; Payrolls and Accounts of the Harper's Ferry Armory.

National Park Service: Harper's Ferry National Historical Park, office of the Historian, Jeffrey Bowers, Shepherdstown, W. Va. Microfilm from the Computer Book: C:/CRUNCHER/NEWSPAPR.BYB, Reference List:

There is a plethora of information referencing Thomas W. Beale, showing his lengthy career as follows: an alternate del-

egate to the Democratic Convention in 1859; a grand juror, in 1868; a delegate to the state convention in 1868; a manufacturer and dealer in stoves, tinware, sheet iron ware, spouting, tin roofing with business at corner of Shenandoah Street and High Street, Bolivar, in 1870; elected as delegate to Conservative Nominating Convention in 1871; marriage of daughter, Ella Murray Beale at Harper's Ferry Methodist Church, to H.E. Miskimon, in 1873; installing new roof on jail in 1873; a commissioner of elections for Bolivar District in 1874; Democratic District Delegate in 1876; Bolivar incorporated; Beale a Councilman in 1877; Harper's Ferry Lutheran Church Elder in 1877; Beale incorporates as HF Bridge Co., to build proposed new iron bridge near mouth of Shenandoah River in 1879.

Many other entries from this source too numerous to mention (55 pages), except certain highlights:

Beale becomes Vice-President of HF Mining, Manufacturing & Improvement Co. in 1890; Beale becomes Mayor of Harper's Ferry (Democrat) in 1895; Republican Col. Richard McMahon defeats Democrat, Beale for Mayor of HF, by 16 votes, in 1897; Beale appointed Overseer for poor HF district in 1897; 400 "colored" excursionists from Frederick (Md) came to HF; "some imbibed too freely of whiskey & got into general rows" (arrests were made and some violence ensued). Mayor Beale conducted a hearing on the matter; Beale appointed member of the District Board of Education in 1900; Beale and others obtained charter for the HF and Bolivar Board of trade in 1902.

Jefferson County, Virginia Census, for 1860, shows Thomas W. Beale as 28 years old, living with his wife, Julia, as residents of Bolivar. His occupation is given as a tinner.

The Beale-Miskimon Family Bible lists dates of births and deaths of Thomas W. Beale and Beale relatives as well as the Miskimon Family. Bible contains record of Beale's marriage to Julia Ann Holt on July 28th, 1853.

Information concerning the provenance of the Beale rifle and its passage of ownership is based upon first-hand, face-to-face contact with and by each successive owner.

Personal visits to Harper's Cemetery and viewing the marked graves of Thomas W. Beale and his wife, Julia Ann (Holt) Beale, and daughter, Ella M. Beale Miskimon and other family members.

Personal visits to Jefferson County Clerk's records, researching real estate deeds and records of real property and houses owned by Thomas W. Beale.

Visits to Jefferson County Courthouse and Museum, Charlestown, West Virginia.

Virginia Free Press (Charlestown), Thursday, November 10th, 1859. *Ammunition for Harper's Ferry*, article reports that 200,000 rounds of ammunition were sent to Harper's Ferry on Tuesday to replace that dispensed to the citizens and the military since the conspiracy. Citizens, concerned about reoccurrence, armed themselves for protection.