GUNSMITHS
in
Rockbridge County

Nickolas J. Lorentzatos
June 2, 1990
Gunsmiths have been around as long as the weapons they create and repair. During the course of research, it has become evident that many gunsmiths practiced other trades, and repaired or made guns as the need arose. Of the artisans investigated, blacksmiths, mill operators, a clock maker, and even a still operator were known to have repaired or built firearms. In times of war, the demand for gun production and repair increased, as did the number of artisans who promoted themselves as gunsmiths. During the American Revolution, many men came in contact with guns out of necessity, and may have maintained an affinity for them after the war. Indeed, after the war, many artisans advertised their gunsmithing talents in local publications, and listings of "gunsmith" as an occupation on government tax forms and censuses began to appear more frequently. The intent of this paper is to provide a background on the art of gunsmithing, discuss those who practiced it during the period beginning in the 1750's to the late 1800's, and examine what, if any, evidence exists that might lead to further investigation of the subject.

The type of weapon most common during this period was the flintlock rifle, known as such because of "the lock that produced a spark by causing a flint to strike a steel battery," which was "a reliable device that could stand hard usage." ¹ Its
predecessor was the matchlock, a device that relied on a match to ignite the priming powder. Its primary drawback was the fact that it was virtually obsolete in wet weather, as there was no way to keep the match lit in the rain. Though flintlocks became common during the 18th and 19th centuries, the guns on which they were found underwent some changes in design. Muskets gave way early on to rifled barrels that could be adjusted to accommodate different types of hunting, marksmanship, or combat depending on the technique employed by the particular smith. Two different types of flintlock barrels include straight cut and spiral rifling. The straight cut rifle employs six grooves down the length of the barrel, and can be used in a variety of ways that depend on how the balls and shot are packed. In John Dillin’s description of rifling techniques, he makes it clear that this method was inferior to others, but because of its ability to be used for big and small game was popular with many who did not consider themselves to be very accurate shots. Spiral rifling uses seven spiraled grooves in the barrel that spin the projectile in a manner that allows for a high degree of accuracy on the part of the marksman. This method of rifling barrels appears to be the most common during this period. Another type of rifle is known as the "smooth bore," meaning it has no rifling grooves of any sort. Dillin’s explanation for these rifles is that many so-called smooth bores were actually rifled at one
time, and subsequently re-rifled to the point of being stripped of their grooves. True smooth bores were "seldom encountered in original barrels." The importance of rifling techniques is that it is possible to have a barrel rifled according to personal preference on the size of the bore, and the type of groove. Once the grooves are worn down, a barrel can be rifled again. This creates the need for a gunsmith.

The tools used by gunsmiths are of great importance to the archaeologist due to the fact that they often provide evidence that gunsmithing actually took place at a given site. Forges were used to work the barrels into shape, and water-powered grindstones were used to finish the barrels. Therefore, a gunsmith's shop might be indistinguishable from a mill or blacksmith's shop. However, certain tools unique to the art of rifling barrels exist, such as the rifling bench used to bore the grooves that gave the firearm its character. This tool employs a rifling bit attached to a turning wheel. The entire structure sits on a stand, while the barrel rests on another stand with the bit placed in one end. Various woodworking and engraving tools are used in making and decorating the stock of the rifle. The process of making a rifle was described by Milton Warren, an apprentice to John M. Whiteside of Abingdon, Virginia. According to Warren, Whiteside began gunsmithing because he could not find a firearm suitable to his needs. He used a local charcoal
furnace to shape the barrel, but owned a rifling bench.
Whiteside made all of the locks used on his rifles and hammered lock plates on an anvil. A great deal of attention was placed on selecting the right piece of wood for the stock, as the beauty of the firearm was initially judged by its ornamentation and design. This abbreviated description allows for a general idea of the types of tools necessary to produce a rifle, such as hammers, chisels, saws, rods, and other items. Found alone, these tools might prove nothing, but found together near a forge or mill might lend strong evidence that gunsmithing took place on a particular sight.

Gunsmiths in Rockbridge County during this period have been traced through county records, newspaper clippings, individual accounts, and traces on firearms with maker’s marks. The topic is a difficult one to study simply because there seems to have been little documentation of guns and their makers on the part of the residents of the county. Royster Lyle has provided a general index of gunsmiths during the period with information primarily from the Gill book and public records. To his knowledge, there are two Zollman signature rifles, as well as two Clemmer signatures, and one Beeton signature rifle in the county (all owned by individuals, except the Beeton which is in display at Virginia Military Institute). My initial research involved tracing these particular gunsmiths in an effort to locate
possible gunsmith shops. In an interview with Waynelle Zollman of Rockbridge County, possibly the last direct descendant of gunsmith William Zollman, the location of the Zollman Mill on Buffalo Creek was confirmed. The site lies "at the north end of Short Hill"6 where William "developed a very fine gunsmith shop, a carding mill, and a distillery."7 He purchased the land in 1816 from Jesse Mathews and began producing rifles and sold them at Zollman's store, located across the street from what is now Zollman's Pavilion.8 The back corner of the store is extant, and is currently used as a car port by the residents who own the property.9 A ledger from the store is attached to Samuel R. Moore's ledger on reserve at Washington and Lee University, but makes no mention of any transaction of firearms, or alcohol for that matter.10 Upon William's death in 1834, Henry, one of eleven children, inherited the gunsmithing business, which he operated until his death in 1896. It is unclear which of his children took over the operation, but one account claims that the mill passed through three generations of Zollman's before it was sold to the Lee family, and other subsequent owners until a fire destroyed it in 1932.11 According to Waynelle, remains of the structure were present until sometime in 1989, when Mrs. Donald had the site bulldozed and covered with gravel for beautification purposes. One large wooden beam remains that may or may not have been part of Zollman's Mill. Waynelle possesses two Zollman
rifles and can account for at least five more in Virginia, bringing the total of firearms known to have been produced at this site to at least seven. Photographs were attempted of the two in his possession, and appear at the end of this paper. His attempts to purchase other Zollman guns have been unsuccessful due to the various owners' unwillingness to sell.

The existence of a rifle signed by J. Beeton at VMI has led to further investigation of the Beeton gun makers. John came to Lexington after 1731 and practiced the trade. He bought land on what is now North Main Street, and set up a shop in the backyard that was extant until 1983. Upon his death in 1848, he left "a set of gunsmith's tools" and "gun stock plank" to his son John Henry, who continued the family gunsmithing business. John Henry Beeton left everything to his 10 children to be divided equally among them, with the exception of certain cash amounts differing from sibling to sibling. However, in the appraisal of his estate, no mention was made of any weapon whatsoever, or any specific mention to gunsmithing tools or the shop in the backyard. The closest reference is to "one small tool chest and contents," valued at 50 cents, and "Tools Bellows etc., in shop" totalling ten dollars. According to Lyle, William Beeton was listed as a gunsmith in county records in 1885, '86, and '88. He began a laundry business, and it is not clear if he continued to work on guns. There is no will or
appraisal of estate in the county records for William Beeton.

Though two Clemmer rifles are known to exist, little is known about their maker. John Clemmer was thought to have been making rifles in the area of Walker's Creek during the mid-1800's, according to one source, but does not appear on any census for that period. In addition, no wills or appraisals of estate are present at the Rockbridge County Courthouse for Clemmer. John Davidson is known to have been a gunsmith in Rockbridge in 1782, when he was listed as one on tax records. He had purchased land on November 3, 1778, in the area and presumably set up his gunsmithing practice there. Mr. Grigsby of Lexington wrote then-Governor Cabell "that Mr. Davidson is Justly entitled to the first order of his profession," according to his "own knowledge, and information of Others." Various records concerning weapon repair also exist to prove Davidson's gunsmithing activity. No Davidson firearms are known to exist in Rockbridge County. William Lye was a gunsmith in the area from approximately 1765-1778. His father received land from Benjamin Borden's estate on Mill Creek at Timber Ridge. Evidence of William's gunsmithing activity comes from an appraisal of his estate which includes a gun and gunmaking tools.

One of the mysteries surrounding gunsmiths during the period in Rockbridge County involves the name John Walker. There may have been as many as four individuals with this name who produced
and repaired guns. All of the estimated dates of activity, according to Lyle, are from the early to middle 1790's. Two of the Walkers are known to have owned land that was adjoining.\textsuperscript{31} It seems a little curious that two John Walkers lived next to each other and held the same occupation. If they were not in fact the same person, it is possible that they were cousins who both practiced the art, possibly in addition to some other craft. The census for 1800 is unavailable, but the census for 1810 lists one John Walker in Rockbridge County at that time. Tax records for 1782-1787 reveal five men of that name in the county.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore it is very likely that more than one John Walker was a gunsmith in this area during that period, but it seems that only one survived until 1810.

The gunsmiths of this period are difficult to trace in many instances due to a profound lack of written records. This does in no way imply that guns are not some of the most highly valued possessions of many men. Gunsmiths were often exempted from agriculture quotas, due to the enormous demand for their services.\textsuperscript{33} Gun makers went to great lengths to decorate their weapons, through choosing the finest wood for the stocks, and ornamenting them with gold and silver in some cases.\textsuperscript{34} The problem is that as these gun producers, with their elaborate forges and grindstone mills were considered gunsmiths, so were the individuals who repaired guns occasionally in their homes in
order to repay an outstanding debt. These artisans are the most difficult to trace due to the fact that they might at one time have advertised themselves as being gunsmiths, without ever having built a gun. Without an actual gun, there is no testament to the quality of craftsmanship other than mere word of mouth. This brings to light the fact that a gun is the most valuable artifact that can be found when researching gunsmiths. A maker’s mark provides a starting point to tracing a product known to exist. The variables remain to be discovered, such as where, and for what purpose the gun was produced. Lacking an actual gun, an investigation could be initiated through excavation of a presumed gunsmithing shop. However, as previously mentioned, it is difficult to conclude that a particular set of tools was employed in the production of guns rather than some other craft. More conclusive evidence can be produced through wills and estate appraisals, if they exist. Ledgers detailing transactions for repair and production of weapons are invaluable in determining whether or not an individual was a smith. In many cases, however, these records simply do not exist. For the period of 1750-1800’s, it seems as though the best sources of information have been oral histories. Once an interview is completed, the facts can usually be proven or disproven through cross-referencing with whatever public records do exist. Obviously if none are present, then at least
some background has been obtained through the interview, even though it is may be speculation. In this case, the interviews have proven enormously helpful in researching in that they provided an opportunity to examine rifles produced by these gunsmiths. Genealogies were proven by actually visiting family cemeteries, and then double-checking them with county records. The gunsmiths discussed above are those who have at least some written record on file in the county. They are only a handful of the number of men who actually practiced gunsmithing in Rockbridge County, but they have histories that are traceable to an extent.

It would be a rarity to find a gun on an archaeological site due to the value that man has placed on them. With a firearm, man can protect himself, feed himself, and entertain himself, therefore, it is unlikely that he would allow one to find its way under a rock. Even during war, dead soldiers are often stripped of their weapons. Guns are considered family treasures and are passed down from generation to generation. This is not to say that it is impossible for guns to be present on a site, as this has obviously occurred more than once (a gun was excavated at Bobby Moore’s barn, 44RB65, in 1989, but it is believed to have been a toy280). The fact is that in most cases, these weapons were the result of fine craftsmanship that was valued and maintained over the years. Researching the art of gunsmithing
is, in fact, researching an art.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

[Signature]


3. Ibid., p. 42

4. Ibid., p. 39.

5. Ibid., pp. 30-33.


10. Rockbridge Historical Society Ledgers


12. Ibid., p. 2-3.

13. Ibid., p. 2-3.


15. Ibid., book 32.

16. Ibid., p. 2.
17. Ibid., p.2.

18. Rockbridge County Wills, book I.

19. Lyle, p. 3.

20. Lyle, p.5.


Bibliography


Watson, Merrill. Personal interview. 20 May 1990.

Waynlee Zollman. Personal interview. 27 May 1990.

Two signature Zollman rifles currently owned by Waynlee Zollman of Rockbridge County. Five more are known to be in existence in Virginia.

William Zollman's maker's mark on one of the rifles.
This car port was once the back corner of Zollman's store, which sold products from the mill, as well as firearms and alcohol. It served as a post office for the area as well.

The flintlock system that was popular during the 1750's to the late 1800's.
Examples of the ornamentation on the stocks and lock plates of guns made in Rockbridge County.
Waynlee Zollman and Niko Lorentzatos holding Zollman rifles in June of 1990.