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Norman Desmarais

Providence College, normd@providence.edu

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2nd Rhode Island Musket

Norman Desmarais, 2nd Rhode Island Regiment
Paul Ackermann, 1st New York Regiment
Carl Becker, 2nd Rhode Island Regiment
John Cook, 2nd Rhode Island Regiment
Kirk Hindman, 2nd Rhode Island Regiment

The 225th anniversary of the Battle of Springfield (NJ) the weekend of June 25-26, 2005, was a very special event for the 2nd RI Regiment. First, the reenactment was fought on the actual ground where our ancestors suffered twenty percent casualties. Second, the ceremony at the graves of the fallen soldiers and the church service on Sunday morning were very moving experiences. Not only we, but also other re-enactors reported getting choked up during the singing of the anthems “America the Beautiful” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” making it difficult to finish the hymns. We also got to see one of the Watts hymnals that Rev. Caldwell did not give the troops for wadding. Third, the staff at the Hutching House, better known as the Cannonball House, gave re-enactors special treatment, providing personal guided tours and letting them handle materials and to them carefully.

Of particular interest to us was Bill Gras’s display of firearms. Bill is a gun collector who had several interesting items for examination. One of these pieces, which we’ll call the “2nd RI musket,” held a special fascination for us because of its uniqueness.

Overview

The 2nd RI musket is now an American fowler most likely assembled in the early nineteenth century using old parts, most of which were probably made in England. If these parts are from the same firearm, that piece most likely began service

as a second model short land pattern flint lock musket, and judging by some of its unique features, noted collector and author De Witt Bailey, in his book *Pattern Dates for British Ordnance Small Arms 1718-1783* (1), identifies this pattern as the Model 1779-S made by John Pratt. It was later modified to percussion ignition between 1830 and 1850.

Lock and Furniture

The lock, butt plate, trigger guard, and thimbles are consistent with other second model short land pattern muskets. While all the hardware plausibly dates from the same period and may have come from the same musket, there is no way to be certain since it was taken apart at the time of re-stocking. If the original musket had a wrist escutcheon and a nose cap, which would have been common on this type of military weapon, we don’t know what happened to them. The butt plate tang is of the Short New Land Pattern which continued in use only until the 1790s. There is evidence of an ownership engraving on the tang that has been removed or worn off.

The lock (figure 1) is of the type introduced in 1777 and was probably made by Samuel Galton and Son who were registered gun makers in 1774. The back side of the lockplate bears a stamp that looks like a mis-struck SGS (2). The SG is clearly visible but the terminal S is not completely formed (figure 2).



Figure 1. Lock probably made by Samuel Galton and Son

Whoever converted the lock from flint to percussion did a fine job. The touch hole was drilled to enlarge it and a bolster screwed into the barrel. The hammer is whimsically shaped like a dolphin. When it strikes the percussion cap, the dolphin appears to eat the cap.

Most British military muskets were made in the Ordnance system (i.e. parts previously procured by government contract and in storage were given to an approved stocker who assembled them and returned the finished arms to the government for payment). However, the Ordnance system could not keep up with demand at that time and the Board of Ordnance resorted to employing contractors who made muskets outside the Ordnance system. John Pratt was one of these contractors who delivered complete muskets to the Government. He may have supplied arms to the Admiralty as well as to the army. He made most of his

own parts, drawing maybe only the locks and barrels but not the furniture (brass parts) from Ordnance stores—hence his arms exhibit some variations.

The “S” shaped brass side plate is the most interesting feature. It follows a pattern which John Pratt produced between April, 1779 and July, 1780. This type of side plate was initially made by Pratt for trading companies in India; and the British army started using the “India” pattern on a limited number of Short New Land Pattern muskets beginning in 1793. Later, in 1797, because of the expedience to produce, all British muskets were of the “India” pattern (which Pratt partially developed.) These muskets became the standard for the British army during the Napoleonic wars. However, the use of the “India” pattern side plate in America at the time of the Revolutionary War is very rare.



Figure 2. Apparently mis-struck SGS mark.

Stock

The nicely crafted stock is not original to the musket. The stock is often the weakest part of a musket, susceptible to the abuse of campaigning or damage from weather, worms, or other hazards. Many muskets break at the wrist and need repairs.

It is common for weapons to be fitted with a new stock, particularly when their purpose changed from military to civilian use. This stock probably dates from around 1795-1810 when the weapon was converted from a musket to a fowler. It now extends the full length of the barrel. The butt does not have a rail at the comb which was common for military weapons of the Revolutionary War period. There is

considerable deterioration or erosion of the wood near the firing mechanism. This indicates that the musket was well-used after its re-stocking.

Barrel

The 42 inch barrel is a British-made style typically found on the second model short land pattern musket. It has crisp proof marks that appear to be late eighteenth century. The barrel maker's mark, T*H (figure 3), does not appear in the standard sources (3), and the AD mark may date from a later time, possibly from the time of re-stocking. The most interesting mark and the

one that intrigues us here is the 2 RI mark on the upper part of the barrel slightly forward of the trigger guard (figure 4). The finely engraved characters are nicely curved, consistent with eighteenth century script. The mark is also consistent with the British

marking style in general use during the war. This type of mark indicated the regiment on the top of the barrel, usually in the form 24 Regt but sometimes with the word regiment spelled out and occasionally with only the numerals.



Figure 3. Barrel maker's mark.



Figure 4. The 2 RI mark.

The marking of muskets was usually done shortly after their time of delivery as a mark of ownership. The scripted mark shows a level of skill that would require an engraver to perform as the common soldier would not have the skills or the tools to do this work in the field. There are signs of pitting inside the mark consistent with the general patina of the barrel. This indicates a long history of the mark on the barrel. In any case, the 2 RI engraving was most likely done before the musket was re-stocked. The mark makes this musket unique.

Conclusion

The original musket, of a style produced during a very small window of time, may have been shipped by the British to America as a replacement weapon during the Revolutionary War, captured, and reissued to the Continental Army prior to the Battle of Yorktown. We would appreciate hearing from anybody who knows of firearms with similar marks.

Notes

1. Bailey, De Witt. *Pattern Dates For British Ordnance Small Arms, 1718-1783*. Gettysburg, Pa. :

Thomas Publications, 1997.

2. Internationales Lexikon der Büchsenmacher, Feuerwaffenfabrikanten und Armbrustmacher von 1400-1900. Herausgeber: Journal-Verlag Schwend GmbH, Schwäbisch Hall, 1978.

3. Blackmore, Howard L *British Military Firearms [1650-1850]*. New York, Arco Pub. Co. [1962, c1961]; Neumann, George C. *The History of Weapons of the American Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row [1967]; Neumann, George C. *Collector's Illustrated Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*. Harrisburg, Pa. : Stackpole Books, [1975]; Moller, George D. *American Military Shoulder Arms*. Niwot, Colo. : University Press of Colorado, 1993-

Photos courtesy of Bill Gras.

