

Long Rifles of the American Revolution

BY JEANMARIE ANDREWS

RIFLES PRODUCED BY 18TH-CENTURY GUNSMITHS WORKING IN AND AROUND LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA, HELPED AMERICAN PATRIOTS WIN CRUCIAL BATTLES DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR. A NEW EXHIBITION CELEBRATES THE WEAPON'S DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT.



In *1st Continental Rifle Regiment, Summer—Winter 1776*, by contemporary painter Don Troiani, an ensign and private raise their new standard. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Hand, commander of the new regiment, determined the design: “Our standard is to be a deep green ground, the device a tiger partly enclosed by toils, attempting the pass, defended by a hunter armed with a spear, on crimson field the motto ‘Domari nolo.’” Hand further ordered regimental uniforms of short green coats with scarlet facings and breeches, but they were never delivered.

COURTESY OF DONTROIANI

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Colonel Hand's regimental seal was lost to history until it recently emerged from a private collection. An inch in diameter with a turned mahogany handle, the silver seal depicts a tiger escaping a hunter's net, with the motto *Domari Nolo*, "I will not be subjugated." Its design mimics that on the 1st Regiment flag Hand commissioned after General George Washington's order on February 20, 1776, that "There must be to each Regiment, the Standard (or Regimental Colours) ... The Number of the Regiment is to be mark'd on the Colours, and such a Motto, as the Colonel may choose ..."

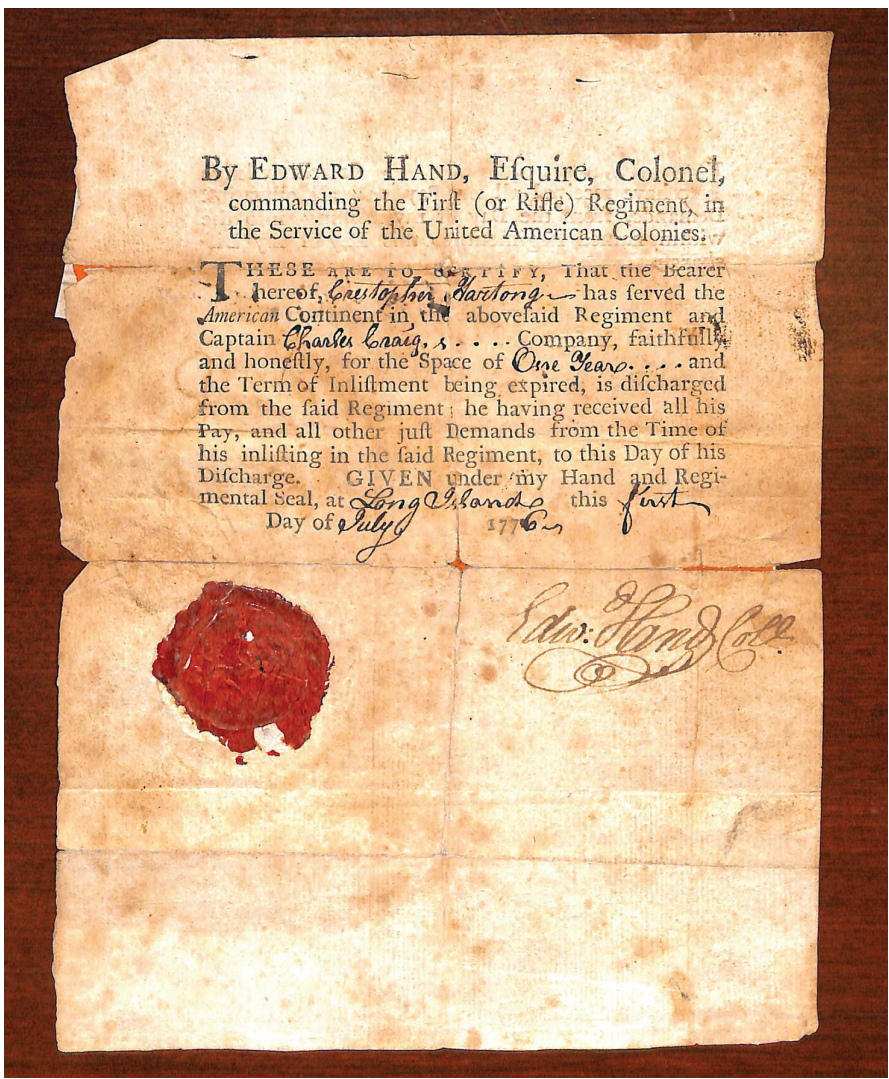
“THE AMERICAN long rifle was the wonder weapon of the American Revolution. And Lancaster became the development center. During the Revolution, the city was one of the first true arsenals of democracy,” said guest curator John Kolar, explaining why he approached Historic Rock Ford three years ago about hosting an exhibition examining the role of the long rifle during the war.

“We thought it was a perfect fit,” said Sarah Alberico, curator at Historic Rock Ford, the home Revolutionary War General Edward Hand built along the Conestoga River circa 1794. Hand, an Irish native who served as a surgeon's mate in the British Army on the Pennsylvania frontier, sold his military commission in 1774 and settled in Lancaster to

Historian James L. Kochan verified the authenticity of the seal, used to notarize important military documents such as often-forged discharge papers, by tracing its use on Soldier's Certificate No. 22810 in the National Archives' Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Revolutionary War. The discharge form for Sergeant Christopher Hartung of Colonel Hand's company of Pennsylvania militia bears Hand's signature, dated July 1, 1776, and a crisp red wax imprint matching the seal. Prior to departing for Fort Pitt in 1777, Hand left a letter to Colonel James Chambers, noting that "I leave it to Mrs. Hand to be Delivered to your Order, as also the Regimental Colours & Seal ..."



COURTESY OF SOTHEBY'S



RECORDS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, RECORD GROUP 15, NATIONAL ARCHIVES BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D.C.



The German Jaeger rifle was the forerunner of the American long rifle, with a shorter barrel, usually 28 inches or less, and heavier construction than the first rifles made in colonial America. This flintlock, made by a Bavarian gunsmith, is typical of early German rifles. It measures 41 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches long overall with a 26-inch octagonal .65-caliber barrel.

STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA, PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL & MUSEUM COMMISSION COLLECTION

practice medicine.

Little more than a year later, Hand returned to the military, this time on the patriot side, and helped to raise one of ten rifle companies commissioned by the Second Continental Congress on June 14, 1775, as part of the newly created U.S. Army under George Washington's command. Six companies came from Pennsylvania and two each from Maryland and Virginia.

Hand served as second in command of Colonel William Thompson's Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion and a year later was promoted to colonel to the by then nine companies of Pennsylvania riflemen who volunteered for service, re-formed as the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, or 1st Continental Regiment.

Historic Rock Ford's upcoming exhibition *Long Rifles of the American*

Revolution: How Lancaster County Craftsmen Helped Win the War will explore Hand's role in forming and leading one of the first rifle companies as well as factors that made Lancaster County central to the war effort.

The county—which in the mid-1700s encompassed acreage that later split into Lancaster, Lebanon, and Dauphin Counties—was home to the makers and materials needed to produce the rifles, an industry that continued into the 19th Century. By 1785, more than a hundred gunsmiths, rifle barrel makers, and locksmiths, many of them Swiss or German immigrants, were working there.

The county possessed an abundance of iron ore and other natural resources, along with numerous rivers and streams that provided power and transportation. With the Great Wagon Road running through the

region, farmers and tradesmen had access to markets from Pennsylvania to North Carolina and from Philadelphia west to Pittsburgh and the Ohio Valley.

"In addition to developing rifles here, many of the leather goods used by troops, like cartridge boxes, were also manufactured in Lancaster," Kolar noted.

Hand considered the region so important that he wrote to Congress on March 17, 1789, extolling the borough's virtues as a potential national capital, citing its safe yet accessible location, a spacious court house to conduct federal business, affordable accommodations for government officials, and thriving industries. He particularly noted the "2 Boring and Grinding Mills for Gun Barrels and 8 Tan Yards."



This is one of the earliest rifles made in colonial America, possibly by the Baker family of English gunsmiths—the father and son were working in Lancaster in the 1740s. It has the style of a German Jaeger but is stocked in American maple without a cheek rail. The rifle also has a patch box with its original sliding wooden lid on the opposite side of the stock. Overall the rifle measures 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches long with a 32-inch .65-caliber barrel.

J. KOLAR COLLECTION



“I never in my life saw better rifles (or men who shot better) than those made in America.”—British Colonel George Hanger, 1780

THE RIFLES

Similar to the long rifle exhibition Kolar curated in 2012 for Landis Valley Village and Farm Museum (also in Lancaster), another section of the new exhibition will chronicle the evolution of the short-barrel German-made Jaeger to the lighter, longer rifle, which became a crucial tool for survival on the American frontier.

Accurate at 200 yards and beyond and with more firepower than a musket or Jaeger, the long rifle enabled backwoodsmen to shoot bear, elk, and other large game for food and hides and to protect their homes from attack. Approximately thirty long rifles made before or during the Revolutionary War will anchor the exhibition.

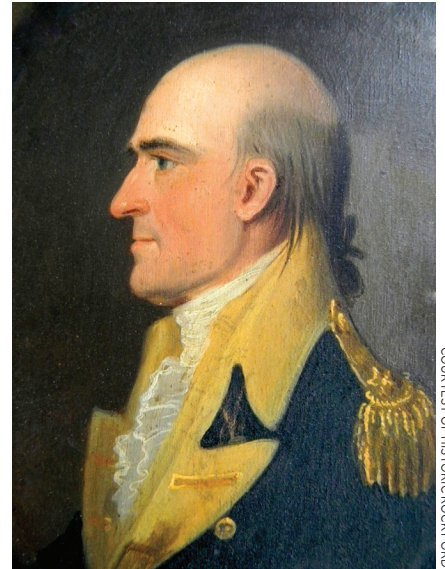
“Early American long rifles are pretty rare, but there are individuals and institutions that have them,” said Kolar, whose knowledge and familiarity with them will enable the

museum to display examples never seen publicly. Some bear the names of well-known Lancaster gunsmiths including Andreas Albrecht, J.P. Beck, Jacob Dickert, Joel Ferree, Heinnerich Fesler, and Isaac Haines.

“Even if people don’t recognize the names,” Alberico said, “we’re trying to emphasize how important Lancaster was in the American Revolution. Without the gunsmiths and these rifles, who knows if we would have won the war? We are so proud to be in Lancaster and represent these craftsmen.”

NEW TACTICS

General Washington and Congress knew of the long rifle’s effectiveness in experienced hands, but those experts were limited, and the cost of supplying the entire Continental Army with rifles was prohibitive. Further, it took a soldier at least twice as long to load a rifle than a musket, so he had to make



COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCKFORD

Edward Hand of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, helped organize the first Continental Army rifle company and later commanded the re-organized 1st Continental Regiment, consisting of nine Pennsylvania companies—the first unit to be raised, equipped, and paid directly by the Continental Congress. Hand rose to Brigadier General after being assigned to command Fort Pitt in 1777.

every shot count while avoiding close contact with the enemy because the rifle lacked a bayonet. The newly commissioned companies of riflemen were intended to serve as light infantry for





The Battle of Bunker Hill, painted c. 1897 by Howard Pyle, depicts the traditional European method of warfare, in which three rows of soldiers march in straight lines toward the enemy until the first-row men unleash a simultaneous volley of musket fire. (Because of uneven ground and obstacles in America, the British adapted the method to two rows spaced farther apart. Also likely inaccurate is the presence of drummers.) The painting appeared in the February 1898 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. The original was owned by the Delaware Art Museum until its apparent theft in 2001.

scouting, skirmishing, and screening duties for the main army.

After assembling, the riflemen made their mark in skirmishes with British troops besieging Boston. A regiment of Virginia riflemen under Captain Daniel Morgan arrived in Massachusetts in August 1775, and immediately they started picking off anyone in a red uniform within 200 yards. Daily casualty reports from units under General Sir William Howe listed artillerymen, pickets, and particularly officers (easily recognizable

by their gold epaulettes) killed or wounded by a single sniper's bullet.

"These are said to be all expert riflemen, and by means of the excellence of their firelocks, as well as their skill in the use of them, to send sure destruction at great distances," noted John Adams when the companies were formed.

In his diary that August, local physician and later Continental Army surgeon James Thacher wrote: "Several companies of riflemen, amounting, it is said, to more than fourteen

hundred men, have arrived here from Pennsylvania and Maryland ... They are remarkably stout and hardy men; many of them exceeding six feet in height. They are dressed in white frocks, or rifle-shirts, and round hats.

"These men are remarkable for the accuracy of their aim; striking a mark with great certainty at two hundred yards distance," Thacher continued. "At a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter, at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards. They are now stationed on our lines, and their shot have frequently proved fatal to British officers and soldiers who expose themselves

Another early rifle, likely made between 1750 and 1760 by Lancaster gunsmith Heinnerich Fesler, is one of more than 20 in the Henry J. Kauffman Collection donated to Historic Rock Ford. This rifle has a patch box with an early cast-brass lid and a Lancaster-style daisy finial. The flintlock is 61½ inches long overall with a 44-inch .56-caliber barrel.

COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD





LEFT Many riflemen carried pipe tomahawks in addition to long rifles. This engraved and silver inlaid tomahawk, c. 1775, belonged to Absalom Baird. Born in 1755 in Chester County, Pennsylvania, Baird was a surgeon's mate in Colonel Baldwin's Pennsylvania Regiment. He treated Major Anthony Wayne for a head wound at the Battle of Stony Point.

RIGHT Each rifleman carried a hunting bag, which held a bullet mold, lead balls, a small priming horn, patching material of buckskin or linen, and such incidentals as a compass and eating utensils. The horn contained the black powder for his rifle and a knife to cut bullet patches; the knife was often attached to the strap.



Andreas Albrecht was born in 1718 in the German mountain town of Zella near Suhl, which had had become an arms manufacturing center during the Renaissance because of nearby iron deposits. At age 13, Albrecht became an apprentice for a gun stocker and later served as an armorer in the German army. He immigrated to Pennsylvania in about 1750 and became the first master gunsmith in the Moravian settlement at Christian's Spring in the Lehigh Valley. Albrecht moved to Bethlehem in 1766 and later to the Moravian community in Lititz, Lancaster County. The architecture and dimensions of this rifle suggest he made it in the early 1770s in Lititz. It measures 58 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches long overall with a 42 $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch octagonal .55-caliber barrel.

DR. DOUGLAS PFEIFFER COLLECTION

COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD



COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD



John Philip Beck is considered one of the great early artisans working in Pennsylvania, and his name is most often associated with the American long rifle. His parents arrived in America from Holland in 1753, two years after his birth. It is unknown whether his father, John Christian Beck, was a gunsmith. J.P. Beck started working in Lebanon in the late 1760s or early 1770s. This c. 1772 rifle, with silver-mounted furniture, is 63½ inches long overall with a 47½-inch octagonal .57-caliber barrel.

COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD



to view, even at more than double the distance of common musket-shot.”

Newspaper stories about the accuracy of the rifle were part propaganda, meant to cow the British. Philadelphia publishers William and Thomas Bradford told the *London Chronicle*, “This province has raised one thousand riflemen, the worst of whom will put a ball into a man’s head at a distance of 200 yards, therefore advise your officers who shall hereafter come out to America to settle their affairs in England before their departure.”

On August 16, 1775, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported that “a gentleman from the American camp says – last Wednesday some rifleman, on the Charlestown side, shot an officer of note in the ministerial service, a Major Small, or Bruce, and killed three men on board a ship at Charlestown Ferry, at a distance of a full half mile.”

The British felt the riflemen’s tactics of concealment, ambush, and surprise violated traditional European methods of war, in which soldiers stood side by side in the open and fired

a volley in the general direction of the similarly arrayed enemy. A second line behind the first would then fire a second volley when the first group knelt to reload. As men fell, the combatant lines would advance until they were close enough to charge with bayonets.

The success of this method of warfare required complex troop movements directed by experienced officers. As American riflemen wounded or killed officers from afar, British foot soldiers often broke ranks and retreated.





ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Surrender of General Burgoyne, painted by John Trumbull in 1821, shows British General John Burgoyne surrendering to American General Horatio Gates on October 17, 1777, after two battles at Saratoga. The newly formed provisional Corps of Rangers, comprised of riflemen led by Colonel Daniel Morgan, played a significant role in both. Morgan, dressed in white, stands to the right of Gates, with one of his riflemen just behind him. A turning point in the Revolutionary War, the American victories prevented the British from dividing New England from the rest of the colonies.

ON THE BATTLEFIELD

These tactics proved particularly effective in battles from Saratoga to the Southern campaign to frontier skirmishes.

In October 1776, under Colonel Edward Hand’s command, twenty-five men from the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment helped keep the British from isolating Washington’s troops on Manhattan Island by halting the advance of 4,000 Royal troops at

Throg’s Neck peninsula. Howe’s retreat to await reinforcements enabled the Continental Army to reach a more defensible location.

A year later, during battles near Saratoga, New York, Morgan’s riflemen hid in and around trees to attack the lines of British officers, killing several, including General Simon Fraser, along with Native American guides and British artillerymen.

Fraser’s commanding officer,

General John Burgoyne, later wrote of the sudden deadly impact: “The enemy had with their army great numbers of marksmen, armed with rifle-barrel pieces; these, during an engagement, hovered upon the flanks in small detachments, and were very expert in securing themselves, and in shifting their ground. In this action many placed themselves in high trees in the rear of their own line, and there was seldom a minute’s interval of smoke,



Joel Ferree, born in 1731, was the first in his family to make guns. He probably learned the trade from his cousin, Philip LeFevre, a French Huguenot who immigrated to Pennsylvania. Ferree became one of the most prominent gunsmiths of the Revolution, making both guns and barrels for the Committee of Safety. This c. 1770-75 flintlock, 55¹/₁₆ inches long overall, has a wooden patch box lid and a 39⁷/₁₆-inch octagonal .58-caliber barrel.

COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD



COURTESY OF DON TROIANI

Overmountain men from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas surrounded the perimeter of Kings Mountain in South Carolina on October 7, 1780, determined to defeat the American loyalists under British Major Patrick Ferguson, who had been ravaging the South. Under cover of darkness and heavy rain, the patriots “were able to advance in three divisions ... to the crest of the hill in perfect safety until they took post and opened an irregular but destructive fire from behind trees and other cover,” reported Alexander Chesney, a loyalist militia captain. The loyalists suffered heavy casualties, including Ferguson, shown on horseback with a sword in hand trying to cut a swath through the advancing patriot riflemen in Don Troiani’s painting *The Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7, 1780*.

in any part of our line without officers being taken off by a single shot.”

The surrender of Burgoyne’s troops and their return to Great Britain persuaded the French to recognize America’s independence and provide military aid.

Historians credit the American victory at the Battle of Kings Mountain on October 7, 1780, to the accuracy of the riflemen. During the battle, some 900 militia “Overmountain Men” marching from western North Carolina defeated 1,100 loyalists under British Major Patrick Ferguson on a hilltop in western South Carolina.

“The Whigs surrounded the mountain,” according to a National Park Service report, “and, in spite of a few bayonet charges made by the Tories, pressed up the slopes and poured into the Loyalist lines such

deadly fire from the long rifles that in less than an hour 225 had been killed, 163 wounded, and 716 made prisoners. Major Ferguson fell with eight bullets in his body. The Whigs lost 28 killed and 62 wounded.”

(Casualty numbers vary by source; *Encyclopedia Britannica* lists 250 dead, 163 wounded, and 668 captured among the British, with 29 dead and 58 wounded Americans.)

The report concluded, “The extraordinary action is memorable primarily as an example of the personal valor and resourcefulness of the American frontier fighter, particularly the Scotch-Irish, during the Revolution. ... The resulting casualties clearly exhibited the unerring accuracy of the long rifle used in skilled hands, even when confronted with the menace of Ferguson’s bayonet charges.”

The victory undermined loyalist support in the Carolinas, leaving the piedmont in control of the patriots, and helped renew American resistance that ultimately led to the British surrender at Yorktown.

THE EXHIBITION

These stories and others, illustrated through rifles, accoutrements, maps, paintings, uniform displays, and other artifacts, reinforce the importance of Rock Ford owner Edward Hand, Lancaster County, and the long rifles its citizens produced to the success of American independence.

The exhibition will be on view from June 1 to October 30 in the museum’s new John J. Snyder Jr. Gallery of Early Lancaster County Decorative Arts, which opened in April 2021. The flexible space, occupying

the second level of a reconstructed 18th-Century bank barn, allows for changing exhibitions related to the objects that remain on permanent display throughout the space.

“We wanted to avoid having a static collection of objects,” explained Samuel Slaymaker, executive director of Historic Rock Ford. “We call it a gallery because these objects are works of art, and to emphasize the role of Lancaster Countians in the art, culture, and industry of early America.”

To further complement the exhibition, the museum is planning to host talks on different aspects of the war soon after the exhibition opens and a possible re-enactment or encampment in the fall.

“Because there were no battles here during the Revolution, people think Lancaster is not really important,” Slaymaker said. “We hope that after they visit they will realize that Lancaster was in many ways the arsenal of democracy. It played a pivotal role in the eventual outcome of the war.”

John G.W. Dillin reached a similar conclusion a century ago when he penned this ode to what he called “the Kentucky rifle” in his 1924 book of the same name: “From a flat bar of soft iron, hand forged into a gun barrel; laboriously bored and rifled with crude tools; fitted with a stock hewn from a maple tree in the neighboring forest; and supplied with a lock hammered to shape on the anvil; an unknown smith, in a shop long since silent, fashioned a rifle which changed the whole course of world history; made possible the settlement of a continent; and ultimately freed our country of foreign domination. Light in weight; graceful in line; economical in consumption of powder and lead; fatally precise; distinctly American; it sprang into immediate popularity; and for a hundred years was a model often slightly varied but never radically changed.” *

Movable display cases throughout the John J. Snyder Jr. Gallery of Early Lancaster County Decorative Arts will enable visitors to examine the rifles from all sides and see other firearms in Historic Rock Ford’s collection that are not part of the new exhibition.



J. KOLAR COLLECTION

Jacob Dickert was born in Mainz, Germany, in 1740, and immigrated to Berks County, Pennsylvania, with his family in 1748. By 1756, the family had moved to Lancaster County, probably when Jacob began his apprenticeship—Moravian Church records and early tax records list him as a gunsmith in Lancaster Borough in 1769. On this c. 1770 rifle, Dickert signed both the barrel, with his crossed arrow/pipe tomahawk touch mark, and the lock. Taken to England during the Revolution as a war trophy, the rifle was brought back to America about 60 years ago. It is 57 inches long overall with a 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch octagonal .52-caliber rifle barrel. In March 1776, Dickert partnered with gunsmith John Henry to build a barrel mill north of Lancaster, along the Conestoga River.



COURTESY OF HISTORIC ROCK FORD