

MUZZLE BLASTS: THE PENNSYLVANIA LONGRIFLE MUSEUM AT BOULTON By Dave Ehrig

North of Easton, Pennsylvania, in the historic little town of Boulton, is the historic Henry Family of Gunsmiths Homestead. Known as the Pennsylvania Longrifle Museum, the site includes the largest collection of Henry muzzleloaders, as well as a priceless collection of antique and historic firearms. More than 200 years have passed since the first muzzleloaders of the Henry gunsmiths' rifles, pistols and muskets assisted to the United States in defining a country from the frontiers of North America. Today, their contributions and history are prominently displayed in the Longrifle Museum.



The banks of the Bushkill creek, a tributary of the mighty and historic Delaware River, are alive with the sounds of muzzleloaders. Twice a year, in June and October, families gather on the 40 acres of the Henry Homestead to celebrate past rifle frolics and rendezvous. Scenes reminiscent of colonial Committee on Safety agents; Native American Indian councils of the Leni Lenape and Delaware Nation of Native Americans; General Ashley's Fur Trade Company; and delegations from Europe and South America are played out in real time drama. The gun, a Henry muzzleloader in all of its many variations, is still the focus of those who reenact or visit.

Kevin McDonald, the featured artist on this month's cover of Muzzle Blasts, lives near the banks of the Bushkill and the Pennsylvania Longrifle Museum. His "On New Headwaters" is a popular and first limited edition featured by the Jacobsburg Historical Society at the "Pennsylvania Longrifle Museum." The painting depicts trappers and traders, like those of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. Cradled in the hunter's arm is a Henry Longrifle. Astor was a frequent visitor to the Henry Gun Works and purchased many of their trade rifles. John Jacob even gave gifts of elm and other

hardwood trees to the Henry family, many of which still grow along Boulton's roads and pathways.

Jacobsburg, Boulton and the Henry Homestead have become prominent landmarks, once again, thanks to the efforts of many volunteers who would not allow the legacy of this great family and its gun building industry to fade into obscurity. Mary Henry Stites, the last of the direct descendants of William Henry I of Lancaster, had a hope and a vision for students of history, art, and gun building. She would leave behind all of her family's holdings, land, buildings, books, records and artifacts to the Jacobsburg Historical Society for public display and research.

A museum now welcomes all. The Pennsylvania Longrifle Museum showcases the finest collection of Henry firearms in America. This museum is a fitting tribute to the early-Pennsylvania and Henry family of rifle makers. A unique and one-of-a-kind center offers a unique opportunity to experience exhibits which tell the story of this uniquely early-American art form. The evolution of the Pennsylvania Longrifle is showcased in dioramas, Plexiglas show cases, and informative interpretive displays. All of this is presented by the non-profit Jacobsburg Historical Society at the Henry Homestead. The Society is dedicated to preserving Pennsylvania's proud heritage of early-American rifle industry.



The evolution of the Pennsylvania Longrifle commenced in four centers of frontier farm communities. This was probably a result of the water-powered iron forges. One found near Lancaster (Old Hickory Town) was on the Pequea Creek. Here at the Catelin Forge, pig iron billets were heated and hammered in the strips known as "gun scallops." Another barrel-making center was in Berks County's "Schmutz Deich," or

“Greasy Valley,” along the Wyomissing Creek. The Little Lehigh Creek in Lehigh County provided energy for several forges to supply iron for early gunsmiths in the Allentown/Bethlehem area, as well as in Christian Springs to the north, near Bath.

William Henry I of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, opened his gun factory in 1750. His knowledge of metallurgy and his ability to produce large numbers of rifles under contract led him to become the armorer for the (English Generals) Braddock Campaign of 1755 and the Forbes Expedition of 1758. These two efforts were attempts at removing the French from Fort Duquesne, later known as Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh, PA). Aside from being a highly regarded gunsmith, William was also credited with the invention of the screw auger and a model of the first steam propelled boat, a fact admitted by both Fulton and Fitch.

As the Henry fame grew, so did his status as a politician. William became the Treasurer of Lancaster County and later, a member of the Continental Congress. During this time period, his son established a gun factory in the Jacobsburg area of Northampton County in 1776. It should also be noted that William discovered a young sign painter with exceptional talent. William provided room and board for the artisan, materials, and encouraged him to pursue a fine arts career. Today we know this artist as Benjamin West. While less famous than West’s rendition of “The Death of Socrates,” and his “Death of Wolf,” his portraiture of William and his wife Ann now hang in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

William Henry I, a member of the Moravian Church, sent his son William, Jr. to Lititz, a Moravian Settlement, to study under the gunsmith Andrew Albright. Later, William, Jr. continued his craft in Christian Springs, another church settlement, but this time in Northampton County. By 1780, William, Jr. was serving the Nazareth area community as an architect and carpenter, as well as a gunsmith. But, the noise of testing guns in the center of town eventually caused him to purchase land on the banks of the Bushkill Creek, an area known as Jacobsburg.

By 1793, the Henry Gun Works was in production, in spite of the barrels still being marked “Nazareth.” This custom continued even after 1798 when the Nazareth gun shop was closed.

William, Jr. had three sons, one of which established a gun business in Philadelphia in 1807. This son, John Joseph, had gun parts shipped from his father’s Jacobsburg factory to “The American Rifle Manufactory” in Philadelphia. But in 1810, John Joseph was joined by his brother, William Henry III, and they returned back home to establish the gun factory known as Boulton. This was located about a half-mile downstream from the Henry’s Forge.

The War of 1812 saw Henry guns in action. The most famous person of that period to use Henry arms was Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, who won the Battle of Lake Erie (with two Henry pistols tucked in his belt!)

The construction of the Boulton Gun Works by Wm. III marked the beginning of the golden years of firearms manufacturing by the Henrys. It was under the management of John Joseph that the Gun Works began one of the most successful phases of its history. This was the start of the gun production for the Indian Fur Trade.

In 1826, the Boulton Gun Works became the predominant supplier of small arms to the largest American business enterprise of the early 19th century, John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company. The Henry firearm became one of the most desirable weapons

of the western frontier due to its durability, accuracy, and relatively low cost. These guns cost the fur company about \$7.00 each, but were traded to the Indians for about \$14.00 worth of furs. Records from 1829 show that the factory produced about 600 of these “North West” guns.

What all of these Early American gunsmiths shared in common was the ability to bore smaller-calibered, long barrels with slow twist rifling. The longer barrels generated greater velocities for the slow-burning black powder, about 10 feet per second per inch beyond a normal 26 inch barrel. It also gave a side benefit of a longer sighting plane for the open iron sights. Both of these American improvements increased their accuracy, just as did the invention of the greased, patched roundball. Pennsylvania Rifles soon became legendary for their accuracy.

Original Pennsylvania Rifles were utilitarian tools. But the demand for rifles during and after the Revolutionary War caused a huge competition amongst gunsmiths. One of the first purely American improvements to the flintlock rifle was the replacement of the wooden patchbox lid, with a hinged brass patchbox. More than a secure compartment for storing ramrod jags, patches, lubricant, prayer scripts (in case the “Longhunter” farmer died in the forests during one of his hunting/trapping winter forays), silver bullet (the only thing that could kill a witch!), these new two and four-piece patchboxes now carried folk-art designs of daisy, horse, eagle, star, and heart-motifs.

The Golden Age of Pennsylvania Longrifles evolved at the hands of gunsmiths from about 1776 to 1825. They were trained as apprentices by the masters in Lancaster, Allentown/Bethlehem, Womelsdorf-Reading, Lebanon, Dauphin, York, Littlestown, Emmitsburg and Chambersburg schools of longrifle styles. Using the same hand tools, native hardwoods and wrought iron, training and competition led to the development of highly artistic locks, stocks and barrels.

While most of the early longrifles carried simple incised carvings, Golden Age Longrifles exhibited intricate, raised relief carvings on the forearm, lock/tang and under the cheekpiece. Engraved lock plates, brass thimbles, trigger guards, barrels, and particularly the patch boxes exemplified the typical American Rifle. Precious metals of gold, silver and even platinum were inlaid into the barrels, as well as into the intricate relief carvings.

A typical Pennsylvania rifle weighed from seven to nine pounds, with an overall length of a symmetrical fifty-five inches from muzzle to butt plate. Supposedly its 45 caliber ball could kill man or beast at 300 yards or “bark” a squirrel from the tallest tree. Known also, at a later time, as the “Kentucky” rifle because of the feats performed with it by Daniel Boone and other woodsmen in winning the land beyond the mountains, this superb weapon was the handiwork of several generations of Pennsylvania gunsmiths.

Among the better known, in addition to Meylin, were Andreas Albrecht; Henry Albright; Daniel Boyer; Peter, John (I & II & III) and David Moll; John Frederick, and Philip (& Jr.), Thomas, David, and Jonas Hess; several Pannabeckers; Peter Newhard; Peter and Jacob Kuntz; Matthew and Peter Roesser; Adam Herman and John Rupp; Thomas Butler; Jacob Decherd; Peter and Henry Leman; Philip Lefevre; Henry Dreppard; numerous members of the William Henry family.

Ned Smith's Pennsylvania Game News cover of December 1974, (Pennsylvania's renowned wildlife artist) depicted a Golden Age Pennsylvania Longrifle. Perhaps this rifle struck Ned as an “ideal” type of flintlock rifle. He wrote, “A splendid example of

the Pennsylvania gun maker's art which I sketched from the collection of Joe Kindig, Jr., of York, can be seen in the cover painting on this issue. It was built in the early 1800s by David Cooley, who is thought to have worked in Adams County. The drawing shows this rifle to be a slender 58 1/2 inches in overall length with a 41 caliber octagon barrel 41 3/4 inches long. The inlays, including a brass patchbox and a silver cheekpiece oval, are beautifully engraved. The richly figured maple stock is embellished with scroll and boasts cross-hatched carving typical of that era."

Two years later, at the height of the US Bicentennial Celebration, Ned expressed his feelings about this native folk art in the July 1976 Game News: "Notes on the Evolution of the Pennsylvania Longrifle." He wrote, "For generations it's been known as the "Kentucky Rifle." The reference is to that wild country beyond the Alleghenies where it proved its worth. But it's really the 'Pennsylvania Rifle,' often called the 'Pennsylvania Long Rifle,' for Pennsylvania is where it originated and, with very few exceptions, that's where it was made. I guess it shouldn't matter, but it does. After all, that old flintlock not only was the first truly American firearm, but it also played an important role in shaping a wilderness into what is now the United States of America. And that's something we Pennsylvanians shouldn't shrug off."



The Pennsylvania Longrifle never really left the hearts and minds of artisans, gunsmiths, collectors, hunters and those who cherish this early American legacy. Ned never forgot, Pennsylvanians never forgot, and today, all Americans are remembering and thrilling to the sight of this purely American folk art.



The Pennsylvania Flintlock Longrifle is celebrated as one of the finest works of folk art to have ever come out of Colonial America. But, its history did not end in the 18th Century. Contemporary artisans studied the works of the old master gunsmiths and faithfully recreated contemporary works of art that rival the originals. Hunters have kept the faith by establishing deer seasons which would honor the contributions of their forefathers.

The Pennsylvania Longrifle Museum displays original, handcrafted firearms from the 18th and 19th centuries. Displays feature Henry firearms dating from the American Fur Trade, 1812 War, Civil War, American West and the early 20th Century. These and related exhibits are housed in special galleries at the historic Henry Homestead at Boulton. This area produced guns for more than 100 years. With more than 34 guns on permanent display, and another 100-plus historic firearms in a secure and atmospheric-controlled environment for 403 Henry Road, Bushkill Township, preservation and temporary displays, this invaluable collection and interpretative museum is a “must see” for all students of history, gun collectors, and lovers of American enterprise and genius.



Researchers are invited to learn of the stories of the descendants of William Henry (1734-1799) of Lancaster through their extensive correspondence, writings,

biographical items, business records, genealogical materials, financial and legal papers, and photographs. Highlights of the collection include: Boulton gun works records, including orders, sent and received by James Henry & Son, as well as an 1819 shop blotter book, which contains ideas by William Henry II (1757-1821), John Joseph Henry (1786-1836), and others, for expanding and improving Boulton. Over 1,000 photographs dating from the 1850s through the 1970s depict family members and friends, the Henry Woods, the Henry Gun Factory, and surrounding local communities.

Firearms of other notable Pennsylvania Rifle makers, on loan from institutions and private collections, are on exhibit during special events, such as the Society's Annual Kentucky Rifle Frolic, each Father's Day Weekend in June; or the October Rendezvous held on the grounds each Halloween Weekend at Boulton.

Boulton is part of the Jacobsburg National Historic District, which is administered in partnership by the Jacobsburg Historical Society and the Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks, Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center. The Museum of the Pennsylvania Longrifle is located at the Henry Homestead, just west of the Belfast Interchange of PA Route 33 in Northampton County. For more information, contact the JHS Executive Director, Ira Hiberan 610-759-9029; or visit the web at www.jacobsburghistory.com ; emails Jacobsburg@rcn.com.