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Firearms in American History

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The discovery of America occurred a century and a half after European nations had discovered the principle of the propulsion of missiles by explosives. During this century and a half, however, and during the first century after the discovery of America, namely from 1350 to 1600, the development of firearms had been very slow indeed. For the most part it had been confined to the development of large or small cannon. In only small areas of Europe had any considerable progress been made in small calibre shoulder weapons or pistols. This was principally in northern Italy, Austria, southern Germany, and Switzerland. The hand firearms of this period were inferior in many respects to the bow and arrow. Being of smooth bore they were but little more accurate than the arrow. Their reloading was very slow as compared with the re-loading of the bow. The striking energy of the bullets was not much more than that of the arrow, and in the pursuit of game the noise and smoke were a detriment as compared with the silence of the bow and arrow. Their advantages were that they commonly fired several slugs at a time, and their noise and flash frightened people not familiar with them.

For the first hundred years after the discovery of North America these last two advantages of the firearm scarcely balanced the superior speed of fire of the bow and arrow of the native Indians. Indeed had it not been for the metallic armor, particularly of the Spaniards and early colonials, the conquest of North and Central America would have been longer delayed than it was. One is most impressed with this fact in the accounts of the early Spanish expeditions. Time and time again the Spaniards were driven off by arrow flights despite their firearms and metallic armor. The greatest advantage of firearms to the Spaniards was their noise, flame, and smoke which the natives considered evidence of magic.

The early English and French settlers on the Atlantic Coast of North America brought with them probably the best of the English and French types of firearms. During the seventeenth century, however, these were for the most part but little developed. They were unwieldy weapons of large calibre, slow to load, with uncertain firing mechanism (the match lock), and very inaccurate. At short ranges they were effective on game and, in addition, by their "magic" on Indian enemies. The most significant fact of this period of the settlement of America is the use of firearms for procuring food. Game was inconceivably abundant and unscared. For the first time in the history of mankind firearms became the principal means of a people for procuring their food. The hunters of Europe and Asia were archers and trappers. In these continents the gun had been but slightly used for shooting game. Since the time the gun was developed game in Europe and Asia had been so much hunted that for the most part it was too wary to be shot.
by noisy, inaccurate, short range firearms. The conditions were quite different on the North American continent, and for the first two hundred years of the settlement of America the principal food supply was wild game killed by firearms, while the principal clothing supplied was fur and leather obtained by trapping. It is interesting to note that of the early colonists those who in this respect most closely simulated the Indians in their mode of living survived the best.

Out of this widespread familiarity with the dependence for sustenance on firearms among the early North American colonists there naturally grew up improvements in the weapons themselves. These were reductions in weight for the ready transportation and convenience in handling. The size of the bore was reduced to save load and powder, and the uncertain match lock was rapidly replaced with the snap haunce and flint lock which were vastly more reliable fire mechanisms.

These changes were brought about slowly throughout the seventeenth century because the settlers for the most part relied upon European gun manufacturers for their supply of weapons. Probably not a single firearm was made in the colonies until about 1630 though firearms were much more abundant than tools. With the advent of the Puritans in 1630 gunsmiths from Europe began to arrive in the colonies to provide for the great demand for firearms. By the end of the seventeenth century probably one-third of the firearms used in the Colonies were made by these English and French gunsmiths who had learned their trade in the old country. They were, however, bound by tradition of their early apprenticeships, and, as a result, firearms made little advance at their hands. But the advance was sufficient so that between the period of the Pequot War in 1637 and King Phillip's War in 1676 the improvement was so great that the Indians with their bows and arrows no longer held the coign of vantage in weapons.

Early in the first half of the eighteenth century the most significant immigration to the American colonists from the standpoint of firearms occurred. A considerable number of German, Alsatian, and Swiss colonists came to Pennsylvania and Virginia. Among them were a few expert gunsmiths. These for the most part settled in or around Lancaster, Pennsylvania. They had come from European shops where rifles of smooth bore had long been made. They introduced into America for the first time the rifle as distinguished from the smooth bore. The rifles which they first built were heavy, short-barreled flint locks taking round bullets almost three-quarters of an inch in diameter and weighing more than an ounce. These bullets were driven down the barrels of the rifles with a steel ram rod and a heavy mallet. They were fairly accurate for only eight or ten rounds. They were heavy to carry, very slow to load, and required large amounts of powder and lead. They were equipped with rear sights, an attachment usually absent from early smooth bores as is still the case with
shot guns. Though the short barrels of these guns were quickly fouled with unburnt powder and lead detached by ramming in the bullets, they were for a few rounds before cleaning such a great improvement over the accuracy of the smooth bore that they rapidly became popular among hunters of game which had by this time become more scarce in the middle colonies. The demands of their users for lighter guns easier to load and using less powder and lead early resulted in the development of the long rifle. This was some time after the end of the first quarter of the 18th century. The guns produced were of much smaller calibre using round bullets of one-half ounce in weight and with proportionately slender barrels. The barrels were made one-half longer than those of the rifles of Central European manufacture. This was done primarily to give complete combustion of the defective black powder. It, incidentally, almost doubled the sight radius (the distance between the front and rear sights of the gun). About the same time some genius, whose name is lost, in an attempt to overcome the loading difficulties conceived the idea of making the bullet slightly smaller than the bore of the gun and wrapping it in a bit of oiled cloth, thin buckskin, or pig bladder. The bullet could then be forced down the rifle barrel with a light hickory ramrod, thus dispensing with the heavy iron ram rod and mallet necessary for the European type of rifle. But aside from the ease of loading, this greased patch gave three other important results. The gun barrel was cleaned by the patch each time it was loaded by the powder fouling being forced through the chamber of the barrel; the barrel was lubricated; and most of all the power cases were prevented by the greased patch from escaping around the bullet. Thus for the first time after nearly four hundred years a firearm was produced with which its user might hope to place a single missile on a target with considerable accuracy.

So rapid was the development of the long rifle with its greased patch in the American colonies that by the time of the French and Indian War it had become a weapon of great accuracy and widespread use among the colonists of Pennsylvania, southern New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. The best guns were made for the most part in and around Lancaster, Pennsylvania though some fairly good ones were made in blacksmith shops scattered throughout the middle colonies.

From this time on the accurate rifle became the most important single instrument in every war in which Americans have engaged. In the French and Indian War, Braddock's English veterans trained to point their smooth bore muskets without rear sights in the general direction of visible enemy and fire in volleys at the word of command, were wholly helpless before enemies who fought from behind trees with bows and arrows and a few inferior smooth bore guns. Braddock's 1,300 huddled veterans would have been slaughtered to a man by the ambushed savages (as it was only about 400 escaped) but for the small company of George Washington's
backwoodsmen armed with rifles who from behind trees in Indian fashion fired at hand, or shoulder, or tuft of hair, saved the day, and permitted the remnant of the English troops to retreat.

At the siege of Quebec the English commander Wolfe doubtfully placed his Pennsylvania provincials in a position which permitted their deadly rifle fire to mow down the French Regulars in a swath. The French faltering rear guard was overcome by the bayonet charge of the English regulars, but there would have been no such charge except for the rifle fire of the colonists. The experience of this war was so convincing even to the conservative British authorities of the superiority of the colonists' long rifles that on Christmas day 1755 the first rifle brigade ever formed in the British empire was organized in Philadelphia. The organization has been continuous since that time and gave a good account of itself at the first battle of the Marne.

Historians who are not rifle men have never given adequate credit to the rifle as a factor in winning the Revolutionary War, though the accounts of British army officers of the period teem with reference to the deadly effect of the American colonist's rifle. They were relatively very few in number, almost none of them from New England but mostly from Pennsylvania and Virginia. The story is too long than to more than touch upon, but from the time of Howe's first contact with the Pennsylvania provincials in the operations around Boston through Burgoyne's disaster at Saratoga and the constant harassment and reduction of Cornwallis' forces in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the history of the colonials' success when properly studied rests very largely upon the small bands of middle colonial riflemen. One historian has said that the turning point of the war of the Revolution rested upon the point of Tim Murphy's bullet which killed General Frazier at Burgoyne's first contact with colonial riflemen. His troops were forced into inactivity in Saratoga, and France for the first time dared to show her sympathy.

The untrained colonists of the war of 1812 have been unjustly derided for their inability to stand against the bayonet charges of British regulars, but it must not be forgotten that the colonial rifles were never fitted with bayonets, and the rifleman's advantage lay in keeping the distance greater between the enemy and himself than the danger zone of the enemy firearms and yet within his own effective firing range. Nor must we forget the terrific toll in dead and wounded which the British regulars paid for their advance on Washington despite the few riflemen who sought to obstruct them. The most marked superiority of the rifle during the War of 1812 was at the battle of New Orleans when the southern riflemen under Andrew Jackson drove into panic a numerically greatly superior force of seasoned British veterans by the deadly accuracy of their rifle fire.

The long rifle during the first half of the 19th century pushed the frontier of the Atlantic states westward across the continent
to the Rocky mountains. Within this period the greatest military superiority of American firearms was the enormous part played during the Mexican war by the Colt revolver. Revolving firearms of many crude varieties had been developed in Europe even during the flint lock period. With the coming of the percussion lock in the early part of the 19th century it became possible to make multiple fire small side arms not only less cumbersome and more safe but also much more reliable. The greatest development in the percussion gun was in 1832 when Colonel Colt brought out his first Colt revolver. Since 1832 more than 400 different models of Colt revolvers and pistols have been made. By the time of the Mexican War the percussion cap six shooter Colt revolver was in the hands of American cavalrmen and of infantry and artillery officers. This weapon in these hands played a tremendous part in the success of the American troops in Mexico.

During the Civil War no preponderating superiority of firearms was held by either side except in the fact that most of the military armories were in the north. Guns of every conceivable sort and kind were obtained from every available source. During the war the most significant development was in repeating shoulder rifles. The Colt revolver was made into a revolving rifle. The Spencer rifle was developed and became a most effective weapon. The Henry, afterwards the Winchester, was developed. These were all made possible by the great improvement in cartridge guns which during the Civil War came in large measure to replace the muzzle loaders.

In the Spanish-American war the American Krag rifle was superior to the Spanish Mauser only because the latter was so often deteriorated by climate and neglect. The Spanish soldier has never been a rifleman.

In the Great War the one arm of the American troops in which they were superior to all other engaged nations was the rifle. The stalemate of trench warfare during the middle three years of the war had caused the English and French and, to a lesser extent, the Germans to emphasize other weapons of defense and offense. Indeed, the French soldier had always looked upon his rifle merely as a handle for his bayonet. But Pershing in assured anticipation of the final decision by methods of open warfare had scarcely landed in France before he began cabling back to the authorities at home to train our soldiers in the use of the rifle as a weapon of precision. The greatest single result of his repeated and emphatic insistence on this point perhaps was the usual American method in the final offensives of silencing machine guns by two or three riflemen rather than by the French method with artillery—a method much simpler and much quicker than that of the French.