

ARMED AMERICA: FIREARMS OWNERSHIP & MANUFACTURING IN EARLY AMERICA

V5.2

Mark Greif at <http://www.Britannica.com> called V4.1 of this document “a hastily assembled but quite professional document.” (<http://www.britannica.com/bcom/original/article/0,5744,15747,00.html>) I plead guilty to the “hastily assembled” charge. I have done my best to restructure it into a more organized form, but if you find something glaringly wrong or that doesn't seem to logically fit—let me know at clayton.cramer@callatg.com!

Major changes in this version include a complete restructuring of the Colonial America section, several dozen new primary sources in this area, Charles Heath's very instructive commentary on guns and American archaeology, and a quote from Aaron Burr's defense attorney. I am very interested in any examples of Colonial American hunting.

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Chuck Anesi sent a number of useful pages from Isaac Weld's *Travels Through the States of North America*. Philip F. Lee provided me with materials concerning Lord Baltimore's instructions for settlers in seventeenth century Maryland. Joseph Schechter filled in some missing documents from San Francisco State University's library. John Maraldo sent me the marvelously powerful statement by Aaron Burr's defense attorney. Certainly the greatest contributor in volume was Peter Buxtun, whose extensive library on early American gun ownership kept me reading for hundreds of hours. Many others, names now forgotten, have also provided useful suggestions as well for sources to check.

Disarming the American Past

Professor of History Michael A. Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* is a startling book that demolishes many long-cherished myths of early America about violence, guns, and the effectiveness of the militia. It is a novel work, in both senses of the word "novel": much of it is certainly "new," and much of it is highly imaginative fiction. Bellesiles argues that the militia was, throughout American history, an ineffective force; that guns were very scarce in America before about 1840; and that few Americans hunted.

The first of these claims—that the militia was quite ineffective—is really the least controversial (at least to historians). Many Americans have grown up with a vision of Minutemen, running out the door, Kentucky long rifle in hand to take on them "Redcoats." Historians have recognized for at least 40 years that for every success of the "citizen soldier" in defending home and nation, there were far more examples of militias turning tail in battle, or simply leaving for home, because harvest time had come.

Bellesiles argues that the notion that armed citizens would be a useful alternative to standing armies, or a restraint on tyranny, was a romantic delusion of the Framers of our Constitution. Bellesiles's goal in blackening the reputation of the militia is to demonstrate that the Second Amendment was a fantasy from the very beginning.

Bellesiles is correct that militias were never as well trained as standing armies, and seldom very effective in fighting against regular troops. Similarly, there was really no realistic alternative to at least a small standing army, especially on the sparsely populated frontiers.

But the ineffectiveness of the militia is really a sideshow in Bellesiles's book. The truly novel part is Bellesiles's claims that guns were scarce in America until nearly the Civil War.

Why were guns scarce? Because not only were guns expensive, but also because, "the majority of American men did not care about guns. They were indifferent to owning guns, and they had no apparent interest in learning how to use them."¹ Bellesiles claims that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor, and large numbers of adult men had no idea how to load a gun, or how to fire one.

To hear Bellesiles tell it, this lack of both interest and knowledge was because of the fundamentally peaceful nature of early America² and that hunting was very rare here until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans chose to ape their upper class British counterparts.³ Indeed, Professor Bellesiles would have us believe that by the 1830s, a pacifist movement, fiercely hostile to not only gun ownership, but also a military, and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.⁴

When Bellesiles first presented these ideas in a *Journal of American History* article in 1996, I was starting research on a related question: why did eight slave states take the lead in the development of concealed weapon regulation in the period 1813-1840? Bellesiles's claim that guns had been rare in America until the Mexican War was certainly intriguing. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appear at a time that Bellesiles claims America was changing from a peaceful, gentle, almost unarmed nation, into a land of violent gun owning hunters.

As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles was wrong—way wrong. The traditional view of early America, as a place where guns and hunting—and at least in some regions, violence—were common, appeared repeatedly in travel accounts, memoirs, and

¹ Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.

² Bellesiles, 314-15.

³ Bellesiles, 320-23.

⁴ Bellesiles, 300-1.

diaries. I at first assumed that Bellesiles was simply mistaken—that his choice of sources had been atypical, or that in his zeal to confirm a novel hypothesis, he had simply misread his sources. Unfortunately, novelty is, at times, of more value in the academic community than accuracy. Who wants to listen to a paper that confirms what is already conventional wisdom? The iconoclast is always more interesting!

Having now read Bellesiles's book-length treatment of his ideas, and checked his sources with great care, what is wrong with *Arming America* is a lot more serious than atypical sources, or even excessive zeal defending a mistaken hypothesis. Generally, the errors in *Arming America* can be divided into the following categories: out of context quotes; quotations that are simply wrong; using sources that confirm his thesis, while ignoring his sources that contradict it; zealous disregard for other explanations; and what appears, in a number of cases, to be intentional deception.

Concerning intentional deception, I am *not* suggesting that Bellesiles simply missed sources that might have contradicted his claims of an America with few guns and little hunting. Indeed, most of the examples that I cite of selective use of sources use Bellesiles's own citations—so I know that he read these documents. In many cases, what Bellesiles says that his sources say are completely opposite what the sources *actually* say—as you will see in the following pages.

Militia Competence & American Marksmanship

Bellesiles devotes enormous energy into blackening the reputation of the militia, as distinguished from professional soldiers. He argues that they were unreliable, undisciplined, usually more interested in socializing and drinking than in developing any useful military skills. Finally, Bellesiles argues that Americans were lousy shots, because they had little experience with guns; militia units did their best to avoid exhibitions of their marksmanship skills, because they were so embarrassingly poor.

Certainly, there are accounts from the colonial period that suggest that the militias did not compare well to professional soldiers. Jasper Danckaerts, a Dutchman visiting America, described an annual militia muster held on June 8, 1680 (O.S.) in New York City. “They were exercised in military tactics, but I have never seen anything worse of the kind.” In the course of this exercise, “two young men on horseback as hard as they could, to discharge their pistols, dashed against each other, and fell instantly with their horses.” At first taken for dead, both recovered.

Danckaerts was much more positively impressed with a militia muster near Boston on July 15, 1680 (O.S.) He described a total of eight infantry companies and one cavalry company, divided into two opposing forces, “and operated against each other in a sham battle, which was well performed.” The “sham battle” was fought with some seriousness, with at least one officer injured by a gunshot.¹

¹ Jasper Danckaerts, Barlett Burleigh James and J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts: 1679-1680* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 239, 271.

Exercises are one matter; real warfare is another. While there were few occasions when militias were called out to defend their territory, there are creditable examples, such as the attempted invasion by a French fleet in August, 1706. “After several days of fighting, the militia troops of South Carolina defeated the French, inflicting severe losses upon them.”²

Bellesiles has a strong opinion, and quotes from General Washington about militia failures. There are others do not share that view—including a few of those who had to confront these militias. The official British account of the events of April 19, 1775, suggest that that the militia were well-armed, and pretty effective with those guns: “As soon as the troops had got out of the town of Concord, they received a heavy fire, from all sides, from walls, fences, houses, trees, barns, &c., which continued without intermission, till they met the first brigade with two field pieces....”³

Charles Stedman, a British officer who served under General Howe in America, was certainly impressed with the abilities of American militias, not only in their first great success, at Lexington and Concord, but repeatedly throughout the war. He describes a battle of December 8, 1775 in Norfolk, Virginia, in which American militia ambushed 120 British soldiers, killing or wounding 30 of the unit, including its captain.⁴ Similarly, Stedman describes the great skill of a mixed force of Continentals and militia in defeating British and loyalist forces at Moore’s Creek Bridge, North Carolina in June 1776.⁵

While the militia was seldom very effective against British regulars in set battles, Stedman’s account makes it clear that guerrilla warfare was an area where the militiamen were quite effective. British soldiers retreating from Ridgefield, Connecticut in April 1777 were subject to a continual series of skirmishes of attacks by small militia units. This continual low-level warfare exhausted the British soldiers, killing or wounding 200 soldiers and ten

² Salley, 291 n. 2.

³ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838) (hereinafter cited as *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*), 681.

⁴ Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (London: J. Murray, 1794), 1:147-48.

⁵ Stedman, 1:178-82.

officers. “It may be reasonably doubted, whether the loss which the British sustained in this expedition, did not more than counterbalance the advantage derived from the complete attainment of their object.”⁶

General Charles Lee’s letter to George Washington of July 1, 1776, also portrays in a very favorable light the courage of militiamen fighting against the British in North Carolina. “The cool courage they displayed astonished and enraptured me; for I do assure you my dear General, I never experienced a better fire—twelve full hours it was continued without intermission. The noble fellows who were mortally wounded conjured their brethren never to abandon the standard of liberty. Those who lost their limbs deserted not their posts. Upon the whole, they acted like Romans in the third century.”⁷

Why does Bellesiles put such an emphasis on the failure of the militia? Because one of the reasons why the Second Amendment protected an individual right to keep and bear arms was a mistrust of professional soldiers.⁸ There was a belief among many of the Framers that the best security for a free society was a military that was one with the people. Patrick Henry, at the Virginia ratifying convention, argued that the new federal government represented too great a centralization of power in the hands of the new chief executive:

If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy is it for him to render himself absolute! The army is in his hands, and if be a man of address, it will be attached to him, and it will be the subject of long meditation with him to seize the first auspicious moment to accomplish his design; and, sir, will the American spirit solely relieve you when this happens?... [T]he President, in the field, at the head of his army, can prescribe the terms on which he shall reign master, so far that it will puzzle any American ever to get his neck from under the galling yoke.⁹

⁶ Stedman, 1:280-81.

⁷ July 1, 1776, Charles Lee to George Washington, William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: Josephus Daniels, 1890; reprinted New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1968) (hereinafter *Col.Rec.N.C.*), 10:618b.

⁸ A more detailed examination of the various threads underlying the Second Amendment can be found in Clayton E. Cramer, *For the Defense of Themselves and the State: The Original Intent and Judicial Interpretation of the Right to Keep and Bear Arms* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1994).

⁹ Jonathan Elliot, *The Debates of the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1888), 3:59-60.

One of the defenders of the new Constitution, James Madison, also believed that the militia, composed of the entire body of citizens, represented an effective force for restraining tyrannical government:

Let a regular army, fully equal to the resources of the country be formed; and let it be entirely at the devotion of the [Federal] Government; still it would not be going too far to say, that the State Governments with the people on their side would be able to repel the danger. The highest number to which, according to the best computation, a standing army can be carried in any country, does not exceed one hundredth part of the whole number of souls; or one twenty-fifth part of the number able to bear arms. This proportion would not yield in the United States an army of more than twenty-five or thirty thousand men. *To these would be opposed a militia amounting to near half a million of citizens with arms in their hands, officered by men chosen from among themselves, fighting for their common liberties, and united and conducted by governments possessing their affections and confidence. It may well be doubted whether a militia thus circumstanced could ever be conquered by such a proportion of regular troops.*¹⁰ [emphasis added]

If, as Madison and Henry believed, the militia represented an effective military force, then the “armed citizens restrain tyranny” argument had considerable force. Whatever the merits of restrictive gun control today might be for crime control today, it would be foolish to discard the protections of the Second Amendment without developing some other method of keeping tyranny in check. Auschwitz, the Khmer Rouge, and the Gulag Archipelago all provide sobering reminders of what happens when governments operate without checks.

If, as Bellesiles argues, the militia was never an effective military force, then the Second Amendment’s “armed citizens restrain tyranny” argument loses much of its power. Bellesiles regards it as a romantic delusion of the Framers, and sad to say, the history of the militia did not work out anywhere near as well as it was envisioned. But neither was it quite the unrelentingly incompetent and drunken mob that Bellesiles portrays.

Professor Bellesiles emphasizes—repeatedly—the poor marksmanship of not only Americans, but also of the British. It is true that the dominant military doctrine of the eighteenth century emphasized massed musket fire, not precision shooting. Considering the inherent accuracy limitations of the smoothbore musket, this is not surprising.¹¹ The

¹⁰ James Madison, “Federalist 46”, in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 320-1.

¹¹ It is perhaps worth defining these terms, since they will reappear throughout this book. A *musket* is a

emphasis on mass firing was not because accuracy was impossible, but because the goal was to fire many bullets at once—the machine gun approach in a single shot era.¹²

While most British soldiers were trained to fire rapidly, not accurately, those assigned to duty as flankers, pickets, and rangers practiced marksmanship. Frederick Mackenzie, a British officer stationed in Boston, described target practice in January 1775:

The Regiments are frequently practiced at firing with ball at marks. Six rounds [per] man at each time is usually allotted for this practice. As our Regiment is quartered on a Wharf which projects into part of the harbour, and there is a very considerable range without any obstruction, we have fixed figures of men as large as life, made of thin boards, on small stages, which are anchored at a proper distance from the end of the Wharf, at which the men fire. Objects afloat, which move up and down with the tide, are frequently pointed out for them to fire at, and Premiums are sometimes given for the best Shots, by which means some of our men have become excellent marksmen.¹³

Bellesiles, in addition to denigrating the ability of British soldiers to fire accurately, also claims that the Americans at Lexington and Concord were unable to do so:

Expert marksmanship requires training, good equipment, and a regular supply of ammunition for practice. These farmers rarely practiced, generally had no ammunition, and owned old muskets, not rifles, if they owned a gun at all.¹⁴

Bellesiles also claims that throughout the Revolutionary period and early Republic, American militias were noted for their poor shooting abilities.

By comparison, it has long been traditional in American histories of the Revolution to emphasize the high quality of marksmanship among ordinary Americans:

[A] martial spirit had been excited in the frequent trainings of the minute-men, while the habitual use of the fowling-piece made these raw militia superior to veteran troops in aiming the musket.¹⁵

smoothbore long gun, which means that the barrel is a hollow tube. It may be fired with either shot or round lead balls. A rifled barrel (from which our word *rifle* comes) has several spiral grooves cut inside the barrel that spin a ball or bullet as it leaves the barrel. This spinning stabilizes the bullet so that it is more accurate at long range than a musket.

¹² Harold L. Peterson, *Arms and Armor in Colonial America: 1526-1783* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Co., 1956), 160.

¹³ Frederick Mackenzie, *A British Fusilier in Revolutionary Boston*, Allen French, ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926), 28-29.

¹⁴ Bellesiles, 174.

¹⁵ Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill*, 6th ed. (Boston: 1903), 102-3.

Frothingham's account of the Battle of Bunker Hill emphasizes the tremendous effectiveness of the militia in cutting down the advancing British soldiers:

Many were marksmen, intent on cutting down the British officers; and when one was in sight, they exclaimed, "There! See that officer!" "Let us have a shot at him!" – when two or three would fire at the same moment. They used the fence as a rest for their pieces, and the bullets were true to their message.¹⁶

According to Frothingham, British journals sought to explain the enormous loss of life at the Battle of Bunker Hill as evidence of both uncommon valor by British troops, and remarkable shooting by the Americans:

Attempts were made to account for the facts that so many of the British, and so few of the Americans, fell. One officer writes of the former, that the American rifles "were peculiarly adapted to take off the officers of a whole line as it marches to an attack." Another writes, "That every rifleman was attended by two men, one of each side of him, to load pieces for him, so that he had nothing to do but fire as fast as a piece was put into his hand; and this is the real cause of so many of our brave officers falling."¹⁷

Coburn's description of Samuel Whittimore, shooting and killing a British soldier at 450 feet (discussed on page 79), makes him sound like a remarkable shot, especially since he was using a musket, and was advanced in years.

So who is right? That American historians, writing in a more patriotic age, might be inclined to assume the best of the Patriots is not surprising. When in doubt, trust those who were there. Charles Stedman, who fought under General Howe in America, and was not sympathetic to the American cause, described why even able officers and brave men were unable to fight back effectively against the Minutemen:

The people of the colonies are accustomed to the use of fire-arms from their earliest youth, and are, in general, good marksmen. Such men, placed in a house, behind a wall, or amongst trees, are capable of doing as much execution as regular soldiers: And to these advantages, which they possessed during the greatest part of the nineteenth of April, we may attribute the inconsiderable losses sustained by them, compared with that of our detachments.¹⁸

¹⁶ Frothingham, 141-42.

¹⁷ Frothingham, 197.

¹⁸ Stedman, 1:120. Also see the July 8, 1775, "The Twelve United Colonies, by their Delegates in Congress, to the Inhabitants of Great Britain," Worthington C. Ford, *et al.*, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, D.C., 1904-37) (hereinafter *JCC*), 169, "Should Victory declare in your Favour, yet Men trained to Arms from their Infancy, and animated by the Love of Liberty, will afford neither a cheap or easy Conquest."

Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, who was part of the expedition to Lexington and Concord, similarly seems to have been impressed with the skills of the militia:

During this time the Rebels endeavored to gain our flanks, and crept into the covered ground on either side, and as close as they could in front, firing now and then in perfect security.... [N]umbers of armed men on foot and on horseback, were continually coming from all parts guided by the fire, and before the Column had advanced a mile on the road, were were fired at from all quarters.... As the Rebels encreased, and altho they did not shew themselves openly in a body in any part, except on the road in our rear, our men threw away their fire very inconsiderately, and witout being certain of its effect....

During the whole of the march from Lexington the Rebels kept an incessant irregular fire from all points at the Column.... Our men had very few oppourtunities of getting good shots at the Rebels, as they hardly ever fired but under cover of a Stone wall, from behind a tree, or out of a house; and the moment they had fired they down out of sight until they had loaded again, or the Column had passed.¹⁹

Another officer's account, quoted at length by Mackenzie, gives a similar account, reporting that some of the rebels were on horseback, leaving their horses

at some little distance from the road, they crept down near enough to have a Shot; as soon as the Column had passed, they mounted again, and rode round until they got ahead of the Column, and found some convenient place from when they might fire again. These fellows were generally good marksmen, and many of them used long guns made for Duck-Shooting.²⁰

It is certainly true that it is easier for the losers to admit that the winners were good shots than to admit that there were serious supply errors and tactical mistakes on the British side that played a part. But it is hard to see British officers, who held the American militias in utter contempt, giving them credit for better weapons or better shooting if there was not some truth to it.

Most of the shooting in the initial engagements seems to have been with muskets, but by July, frontier riflemen had arrived. Frederick County, Maryland, raised two companies of riflemen to join the army forming outside of Boston. An eyewitness account of Captain Michael Cresap's rifle company of "upwards of 130 men" described a demonstration

to show the gentlemen of the town their dexterity at shooting. A clapboard, with a mark the size of a dollar, was put up; they began to fire off-hand, and the bystanders were surprised, so few shots being made that were not close to or in the paper.

¹⁹ Mackenzie, 55-58.

²⁰ Mackenzie, 67.

When they had shot for a time in this way, some lay on their backs, some of their breast or side, others ran twenty or thirty steps, and, firing, appeared to be equally certain of the mark. With this performance the company was more than satisfied, when a young man took up the board in his hand, not by the end, but by the side, and holding it up, his brother walked to the distance, and very coolly shot into the white; laying down his rifle, he took up the board, and, holding it as was held before, the second brother shot as the former had done.

By this exercise I was more astonished than pleased. But will you believe me, when I tell you, that one of the men took the board, and placing it between his legs, stood with his back to the tree, while another drove the center?²¹

Other eyewitness accounts of Cresap's company also report on their marksmanship:

[W]e mention a fact which can be fully attested by several of the reputable persons who were eye-witnesses of it. Two brothers in the company took a piece of board five inches broad and seven inches long, with a bit of white paper, about the size of a dollar, nailed in the centre; and while one of them supported this board perpendicularly between his knees, the other, at the distance of upwards of sixty yards, and without any kind of rest, shot eight bullets through it successively, and spared a brother's thigh!

Another of the company held a barrel stave perpendicularly in his hands with one edge close to his side, while one of his comrades, at the same distance, and in the manner before mentioned, shot several bullets through it, without any apprehension of danger on either side.

The spectators appearing to be amazed at these feats, were told that there were upwards of fifty persons in the same company who could do the same thing; that there was not one who could not plug nineteen bullets out of twenty, as they termed it, within an inch of the head of a tenpenny nail. In short, to prove the confidence they possessed in their dexterity at these kind of arms, some of them proposed to stand with apples on their heads, while others at the same distance, undertook to shoot them off; but the people who saw the other experiments declined to be witnesses of this.²²

M. L. Brown quotes from Thatcher's military journal of August 1775, apparently referring to this same group of frontier riflemen:

They had enlisted with great promptness, and had marched from four to seven hundred miles. In a short time, large bodies of them arrived in camp. They were remarkably stout, hardy men, dressed in white frocks or rifle-shirts, and round hats, and were skillful marksmen. 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 were stationed on the lines, and became terrible to the British. The accounts of their prowess were circulated over England.²³

²¹ J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland: Being a History of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties From the Earliest Period to the Present Day...* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts, 1882; reprinted Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1968), 1:130.

²² "From The Virginia Gazette (1775)" in Albert Bushnell Hart and Mabel Hill, *Camps and Firesides of the Revolution* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), 230.

²³ Frothingham, 227-8. Scharf, 1:131, also quotes Thatcher concerning the frontier riflemen.

Brown expresses his belief that this account is “apocryphal,” but he recounts John Harrower’s no less astonishing account of how a rifle company commander in Virginia sought to identify the best marksmen out of an overflow crowd of volunteers. The colonel’s solution was a shooting contest:

Col. Washington... made a demand of 500 Riflemen from the frontiers. But those that insisted on going far exceeded the number wanted when in order to avoid giving offence, the commanding officer chose his company by the following method, viz. He took a board of a foot square and with chalk drew the shape of a moderate nose in the center and nailed it up to a tree at 150 yards distance and those who came nighest the mark with a single ball was to go. But by the first 40 or 50 that fired the nose was all blown out of the board, and by the time his company was [filled] up, the board shared the same fate.²⁴

While not explicit that these riflemen brought their own guns, it seems likely that they did so.

Isaac Weld, a Briton traveling in North America two decades later, described how rifles worked for his British audience, who would have been unfamiliar with rifled weapons. Weld told how:

An experienced marksman, with one of these guns, will hit an object not larger than a crown piece, to a certainty, at the distance of one hundred yards. Two men belonging to the Virginia rifle regiment, a large division of which was quartered in this town during the war, had such a dependence on each other’s dexterity, that the one would hold a piece of board, not more than nine inches square, between his knees, whilst the other shot at it with a ball at the distance of one hundred paces. This they used to do alternately, for the amusement of the town’s people, as often as they were called upon. Numbers of people in Lancaster can vouch for the truth of this fact. Were I, however, to tell you all the stories that I have heard of the performance of riflemen, you would think the people were most abominably addicted to lying. A rifle gun will not carry shot, nor will it carry a ball much farther than one hundred yards with certainty.²⁵

Brown also accepts the plausibility of British Army Major George Hanger’s account. Hanger, who held the accuracy of the common soldier’s musket in contempt, had a different opinion about America’s riflemen. He described being on horseback with Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, preparing an attack on the Americans. A rifleman 400 yards away fired at Hanger and Tarleton, who were less than two feet apart. The shot killed the horse of the orderly standing between and just behind Hanger and Tarleton. Hanger was impressed.

²⁴ John Harrower, “Diary....1773-1776,” *American Historical Review* [October 1900]:100.

²⁵ Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: John Stockdale, 1807), 1:118-19.

Hanger became a prisoner of war at the battle of Saratoga. In conversations with the riflemen, they told him “than an expert rifleman...can hit the head of a man at 200 yards. I am certain that provided an American rifleman was to get a perfect aim at 300 yards at me standing still, he most undoubtedly would hit me, unless it was a very windy day....”²⁶

Bellesiles, by the way, tells us that concerning the rifle, “Daniel Morgan’s riflemen spread the fame of that weapon, all of which were provided by the government.”²⁷ Perhaps Morgan’s riflemen were armed with government provided rifles, but they would have been exceptional in that regard. General Washington on at least two occasions emphasized that riflemen should bring their *own* rifles,²⁸ and Pennsylvania required that enlisting riflemen have their own²⁹—the government had none to provide.

George Washington’s letter to John A. Washington of February 24, 1777, describes contacts between the Continental and British armies:

Our Scouts, and the Enemy's Foraging Parties, have frequent skirmishes; in which they always sustain the greatest loss in killed and Wounded, owing to our Superior skill in Fire arms...³⁰

A letter to Joseph Reed, requesting his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania, describes their mission as

to fire into the embrazures and to drive the enemy from their parapets when our approaches are carried very near their Works.... General Lincoln informs me that the enemy made use of this mode at the Siege of Charlestown, and that his Batteries were in a manner silenced, untill he opposed the same kind of troops and made it as dangerous for the enemy to shew their Men as it had been before for him to expose his.³¹

²⁶ Peterson, 197-98.

²⁷ Bellesiles, 202.

²⁸ George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44) (hereinafter *Writings of George Washington*) 22:258; George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.

²⁹ March 12, 1776, Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting Of A Collection Of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates, And Letters And Other Notices Of Publick Affairs...* (1837-53; reprinted New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1972) (hereinafter *American Archives*), 4th series, 5:681.

³⁰ George Washington to John A. Washington, February 24, 1777, *Writings of George Washington*, 7:198.

³¹ George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington*, 22:257.

Poor marksmanship? The people that lived in that time have a different opinion, and one that deserves a bit more weight than Bellesiles's claims.

Evaluating Gun Scarcity

By far the most amazing claim that Bellesiles makes is that guns were scarce in America, almost everywhere, until the 1840s, when modern manufacturing and marketing techniques finally made guns cheap and desired enough for them to become common. How does one measure the number of guns present in different periods of American history? Bellesiles's claims are based primarily on probate records, official records, and letters.

Bellesiles makes much of probate records that he claims show a scarcity of guns. Of course, deducing anything about gun density from probate records has some problems. How representative are probate records of what average Americans owned? Were probated estates unusual in terms of wealth, literacy, or urbanization? I make no pretense of having enough detailed knowledge to analyze Bellesiles's claims in this area, and he has not made publicly available much of the data from which he drew these conclusions.

At least *some* of the data sets from which Bellesiles draws these conclusions, however, are publicly available. Professor James Lindgren of Northwestern University School of Law and Justin Lee Heather, a law student at Northwestern, have examined some of these data sets in a yet unpublished paper, and Bellesiles's claims do not stand up to independent review:

One run of probate records that Bellesiles cites is a published set of about 186 decedents' estates in colonial Providence in 1679-1729. Even though he finds high gun ownership in Providence in this period (48%), he undercounts the percentage of estates listing guns substantially—according to our careful count, 63% of white male estates with itemized personal property inventories had guns.

Bellesiles also claims that most of the guns in the (approximately) 90 Providence inventories listing guns “are evaluated as old and of poor quality.” In fact, only about 9% of the guns are so listed. Bellesiles claims that he included only white males in his 186 Providence

estates when he apparently included 17 women. He claims that all 186 estates had both wills and inventories when less than half did.¹

Lindgren and Heather also examined other data sets of probate records and property inventories, and demonstrates that Bellesiles's claims about the completeness of probate records lead to some inescapable conclusions, one of which is that seventy percent of estates probated in 1774 had not even one penny in cash (a most unlikely possibility), and that twenty-three percent of colonial Americans apparently owned no clothing of any kind (an even more unlikely possibility).²

The Providence probate records, for which Bellesiles makes especially striking claims about the relative scarcity of guns, when reviewed by Lindgren and Heather are especially striking for how common guns are in these records.

Thus if axe and knife ownership was near universal in Providence, then gun ownership was probably near universal as well, since guns are as commonly listed as axes (65%) and more commonly listed than knives of all kinds, including table knives (36%). If one compares gun ownership (63%) with the ownership of swords, cutlasses, bayonets, and other edge weapons (30%), the difference is particularly striking. Indeed, the odds of finding a gun in a colonial Providence inventory are 4.1 times as high as the odds of finding a sword or other edge weapon.

Guns were as commonly listed in Providence estates (63%) as all lighting items combined (60%): candles, tallow, candlesticks, oil, lamps, and lanterns. Gun ownership is as common as book ownership (62%) and much more common than the ownership of Bibles (32%).³

Along with probate records, however, most of Bellesiles's argument for gun scarcity is derived from official records and readily available documents. Before examining how Bellesiles has misrepresented those materials, it is worth asking how one would recognize gun scarcity in primary sources.

It is perhaps wise to start out by understanding what contemporary sources can and cannot tell us about a period. The truly mundane objects and concerns of life may receive no mention at all (such as clothes, as in the example above). Objects that are unusual may be mentioned precisely because they are uncommon. When examining sources from early

¹ James Lindgren and Justin Lee Heather, "Counting Guns in Early America," unpublished paper presented at the Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting, January 4, 2001, 4.

² Lindgren and Heather, 10-11.

³ Lindgren and Heather, 24.

America, it is important to recognize that the *manner* in which writers mention firearms may tell us as much about their scarcity as the mention itself.

For example, a resident of modern New York City who encountered a deer on the streets would describe the experience far differently than might a resident of Cougar, Washington. The New Yorker would almost certainly comment on the presence of a deer with great amazement, perhaps writing a letter to the newspaper, leaving it for future historians to cite as evidence. The resident of Cougar, Washington, would find a deer in the streets so unremarkable that there would almost certainly be no written record. Yet we all recognize in which city today it is more likely that a deer would wander the streets.

Another problem with the use of what are necessarily impressionistic sources is the very human tendency to overgeneralize. If you were to ask most members of the academic community how many Americans own guns today, they would probably severely underestimate the actual percentage based upon their own circle of acquaintances. The results might be somewhat different the other direction if you asked people at a local shooting range.

If we find writers in early America identifying hunting and firearms as “common” or “widespread,” it might well be argued that they have overgeneralized from their experiences. For that reason we might, in good faith, reject one writer’s observations. We might especially reject the accuracy of such an observation if the writer came from a nation where both firearms and hunting were less common than in America. The novelty of seeing firearms when they are rare at home might cause such a foreigner to overgeneralize from a small number of personal experiences. We cannot, however, reject large numbers of independent observations for different regions of pre-1840 America, when the writers are both American and foreign, without assuming some sort of shared delirium.

If we find no discussions of guns at all from Americans, this could be an indication that guns were quite scarce—but it could also be an indication that guns were so common that they were unworthy of comment, unless there was something unusual about a particular gun,

or how that gun was used or misused. A dearth of discussion of guns or hunting could also be an indication that those classes most likely to write were those least likely to engage in shooting or hunting.

It is also important to distinguish those accounts that describe what *should* be from what *is*. Bellesiles's 1996 *Journal of American History* paper on this subject quotes from an 1843 children's book that condemns guns as evidence that the public was "completely uninterested in firearms."⁴ McGuffey's 1836 *Eclectic First Reader*, another children's book, heartily condemns rum and whiskey,⁵ but no one who has read *The Alcoholic Republic*⁶ would consider McGuffey's condemnation to be evidence about the scarcity of alcohol in antebellum America. Quite the opposite! Those who wrote children's literature often intended to discourage behaviors that were too common among the adult population or that were inappropriate for children.

Bellesiles relies heavily on official records to make his claims. These records include government contracts with arms makers, militia returns, and other primarily military data. A reliance on primarily military data carries an additional problem. If, as Bellesiles claims, there was little hunting or interest in guns in early America, then information tied to the military use of guns might well be an effective method of identifying patterns and levels of gun ownership and use. But if Bellesiles is incorrect, and guns were commonly used for sporting purposes, then records associated with military uses of guns will tend to distort and understate the number of guns in America, and the relationship that Americans had with guns. As we will see in later chapters, this emphasis on records associated with government contracts has indeed warped the picture that Bellesiles paints quite severely with respect to American gun manufacturing.

⁴ Michael Bellesiles, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865," *Journal of American History*, 83:2 [September 1996] (hereinafter Bellesiles, *JAH*), 439.

⁵ William H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic First Reader for Children* (Cincinnati, 1836; reprinted Milford, Mich, 1982), 138-40.

⁶ W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979).

One unsurprising difficulty with evaluating primary sources is that they were not written with the goal of assisting the historian, and often they are ambiguous. How an historian interprets a particular passage will often reflect the assumptions that he brings to the text. As an example, Samuel Wilson's account of Carolina, published in 1682, devotes a paragraph to discussing the available game: "The Woods abound with Hares, Squirrels, Racoons, Possums, Conyes and Deere, which last are so plenty that an Indian hunter hath kill'd nine fatt Deere in a day all shott by himself, and all the considerable Planters have an Indian hunter which they hire for less than twenty shillings a year, and one hunter will very well find a Family of thirty people with as much Venison and Foul, as they can well eat."⁷

Bellesiles could interpret this passage as indicating that whites didn't hunt in Carolina, but purchased wild game from Indians. An equally legitimate reading would argue that "all the considerable Planters" hire Indians to hunt their wild game, but this passage, by itself, tells us nothing about whether ordinary whites hunted wild game. The discussion of the abundance of wild game could be legitimately interpreted as an indication that wild game was available for the taking, since Wilson's account encourages immigration.

Another problem with evaluating the evidence is the question of what is meant by "arms." It certainly includes not only firearms but swords, pikes, clubs, and other weapons. Bellesiles makes the claim that historians have traditionally interpreted "arms" in primary sources to mean "firearms." Because guns were scarce in early America, Bellesiles argues that this interpretation is incorrect.

It is certainly true that there are many sources that mention only "arms" without specifying "firearms." But we will see examples of how Bellesiles assumes the non-specific "arms" to mean that there were no guns present—even when his own sources are specific that the "arms" mentioned included guns.

⁷ Samuel Wilson, *An Account of the Province of Carolina...* (London: G. Larkin, 1682), in Alexander S. Salley, Jr., ed., *Narratives of Early Carolina: 1650-1708* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 170. Other sources indicating that Indians sold game to the settlers: *A Relation of Maryland*, in Hall, 98.

We will also examine some accounts where the term “arms” almost certainly means “firearms” because the events described make no sense otherwise. “The People of this place and countrey... rose up in Arms.... The Fort being Surrounded with above Fifteen hundred men was Surrendered....”⁸ Why would a fort surrounded by people armed with swords and pikes surrender? Only if those “arms” included muskets would such a surrender make any sense.

One must examine the totality of evidence when studying what are necessarily incomplete documents. In particular, a recurring issue when examining Bellesiles’s claims of gun scarcity is to see what the people who lived in that time said and did. Did they take steps that indicated that they believed that guns were widely available? Or did they operate as though guns were relatively uncommon? If large numbers of documents indicate that Americans and visitors to America believed that guns were common items, the question becomes whether to believe Bellesiles’s claim that guns were not commonly owned, or believe the people who were there.

In some cases, the travel accounts that we will see make no statement about whether guns or hunting were common or not. There is no way of knowing whether a particular traveler’s mention of a gun, or of hunting, is unusual or not. But if we find multiple travel accounts for a particular period and location making reference to guns or hunting, and there is no indication that either is unusual, it requires substantial evidence to prove that so many travelers just happened upon something that was rare.

It is certainly true that an historian today has the advantage of hindsight, and the ability to marshal a variety of pieces of evidence in a way that those living in 1700, or 1800, did not, perhaps leading to a clearer, more accurate picture of life than the people of that time could see. But as the reader will see over the next few chapters, Professor Bellesiles’s evidence does

⁸ “Letter of Captain George to Pepys” (1689), in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 216. See also Governor Andros’s description of “the greatest part of the people, whereof appeared in arms at Boston....” In “Andros’s Report of his Administration,” in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 232.

not stand up to careful analysis. Indeed, much of his evidence turns out to be false—not misinterpreted, not atypical of other evidence, but utter fabrication. When Bellesiles's evidence simply evaporates under the most cursory examination, one is left with a logical argument based on smoke. Once the smoke on which his argument is built has been cleared away by the wind of critical examination, there is nothing left but arm waving and bluster.

In the following chapters, we will first examine Bellesiles's claims that guns were scarce in Colonial America, in Revolutionary America, and in the early Republic. Subsequent chapters will examine Bellesiles's claims that Americans were remarkably poor shots (because of their lack of experience with guns), and Bellesiles's claims that few guns were made in America. All will be found severely wanting, in a few cases because of logical errors, and in other cases, because Bellesiles's claims are based on misquotations and misrepresentations of his sources.

Guns and Militia Duty in Colonial America

There are five distinct, yet intertwined claims that Bellesiles makes about the scarcity of guns in Colonial America: colonial governments did not generally trust their free population with guns, except when actually engaged in militia duty; few Americans possessed guns except as part of militia duty; there was very little violence in America (at least between whites); until 1768, there was no deadly political violence involving colonists and guns; the only real gun culture in the colonial period was among the Indians—and even they owned few guns; and few Americans hunted with guns.

In the following four chapters, we will demonstrate that four of these five claims are clearly false. Most disturbingly, much of the evidence that these claims are false comes from Bellesiles's own sources that he has failed to read correctly. The fifth claim—concerning how many Americans hunted with guns—may be unknowable, but there is an abundance of evidence that suggests that hunting was, at least in some regions and some periods, common.

One of the more astonishing claims made by Bellesiles is the English law obligation of the militia to be armed for defense of the realm. Bellesiles makes the claim that because the royal government did not provide “anywhere near sufficient numbers of guns,” the Colonial governments were handed the responsibility by England. The Colonial governments in turn ordered freemen to own guns, but didn't trust them to actually possess them:

Few freemen welcomed this duty, and fewer still could afford firearms, so it became necessary for governments to supply them, with laws passed to effect that purpose. At the same time, legislators feared that gun-toting freemen might, under special circumstances, pose a threat to the very polity that they were supposed to defend. Colonial legislatures therefore strictly regulated the storage of firearms, with weapons kept in some central place,

to be produced only in emergencies or on muster day, or loaned to individuals living in outlying areas... The Duke of York's first laws for New York required that each town have a storehouse for arms and ammunition. Such legislation was on the books of colonies from New Hampshire to South Carolina.¹

Yet examination of the statutes shows that many of the colonial governments did generally trust the free population with guns, and that the militia was generally armed with their own, individually owned and possessed weapons.

A 1632 statute of Plymouth Colony ordered “that every freeman or other inhabitant of this colony provide for himselfe and each under him able to beare armes a sufficient musket and other serviceable peece for war with bandaleroes and other appurtenances with what speede may be....” By the end of the following May, each person was to own “two pounds of powder and ten pounds of bullets” with a fine of ten shillings per person who was not armed.²

The Massachusetts statutes are very clear that the entire adult male population was to be armed, and considered it at least plausible that this could be done. A March 22, 1630/1 order required that every town within Massachusetts Bay Colony “before the 5th of Aprill nexte” make sure that every person, including servants, “furnished with good & sufficient armes” of a type “allowable by the captain or other officers, those that want & are of abilitie to buy them themselves, others that unable to have them provided by the town....”

While the language is somewhat unclear, it appears that those who were armed by the town under the March 22 statute were to reimburse the town “when they shalbe able.”³ It is unclear whether “5th of Aprill nexte” meant the following month, or the following year, but in either case, there seems to be no great concern that guns were in short supply—and no apparent fear of the general population being armed. Indeed, the fear was that the population would not be sufficiently armed for the defense of the colony.

¹ Bellesiles, 73.

² William Brigham, ed., *The Compact with the Charter and Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth...* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1836), 31.

³ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: William White, 1853), 1:84.

The March 22, 1630/1 statute was modified two years later, on March 6, 1632/3. Any single person who had not provided himself with acceptable arms would be compelled to work for a master. The work earned him the cost of the arms provided to him.⁴

What sort of arms? The 1630/1 statutes are not specific that “arms” meant guns. Certainly, these orders could be read as requiring everyone to be armed with swords, halberds, or pikes. But as will be seen, the other statutes adopted in the following years, especially the March 9, 1636/7 statute requiring everyone to bring their muskets to church, shows that “arms” meant guns.

Guns were apparently widely distributed among the population, and available for purchase in Massachusetts Bay. An April 5, 1631 directive ordered every man that “findes a musket” to have ready one pound of gunpowder, “20 bullets, & 2 fathome of match....” Militia captains were ordered to train their companies every Saturday.⁵ Perhaps the ultimate statement about the level of trust of their population, is the order that no person was to travel singly between Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth, “nor without some armes, though 2 or 3 togeathr.”⁶

A September 3, 1634 order specified that the muskets and other firearms accessories “lately come over this yeare, shalbe equally devided amonst the severall plantacions; and the townes to have att all tymes soe many in a readynes as a towne stocke.”⁷ There seemed to be a need to identify that some arms were specifically for town stocks. This suggests that there were guns in private hands, and that this caused no difficulties for those in charge.

A March 9, 1636/7 ordinance takes an even stronger position requiring individuals be armed, and demonstrates that gun ownership was believed to be common. Because of the danger of Indian attack, and because much of the population was neglecting to carry guns,

⁴ Shurtleff, 1:93.

⁵ The training requirement appears to have been reduced to eight times a year on November 20, 1637, Shurtleff, 1:210. Plymouth’s training requirement was set at six times per year in 1639, according to Brigham, 68.

⁶ Shurtleff, 1:85.

⁷ Shurtleff, 1:125.

every person above eighteen years of age (except magistrates and elders of the churches) were ordered to “come to the publike assemblies with their muskets, or other peeces fit for servise, furnished with match, powder, & bullets, upon paine of 12*d.* for every default.... And no person shall travel above one mile from his dwelling house, except in places wheare other houses are neare together, without some armes, upon paine of 12*d.* for every default....”⁸ The requirement to bring guns to church—but apparently not the requirement to travel armed—was repealed November 20, 1637.⁹

A September 3, 1634 order specifies that every trained soldier, “as well pykemen as others, shalbe furnished with muskets... powder and shott, according to the order for musketeers....”¹⁰ While this order is not specific that the soldier is subject to fine for failing to furnish *himself* with arms, this is certainly who is obligated by the March 22, 1630/1, April 5, 1631, and March 6, 1632/3 orders.¹¹ At least some towns in Massachusetts Bay Colony also imposed fines for failing to arms and ammunition.¹²

We also have contemporary accounts that demonstrate that Massachusetts Bay Colony trusted the general population to be armed. *Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence* describes how the Massachusetts Bay Colony dealt with the antinomian heresy of Anne Hutchinson in 1637. Hutchinson's beliefs had spread rapidly through Puritan society, and “some persons being so hot headed for maintaining of these sinfull opinions, that they feared breach of peace, even among the Members of the superiour Court... those in place of government caused certain persons to be disarmed in the severall Townes, as in the Towne of Boston, to the number of 58, in the Towne of Salem 6, in the Towne of Newbery 3, in the Towne of Roxbury 5, in the Towne of Ipswitch 2, and Charles Towne 2.”¹³

⁸ Shurtleff, 1:190.

⁹ Shurtleff, 1:210.

¹⁰ Shurtleff, 1:125.

¹¹ Shurtleff, 1:84, 85, 93.

¹² Joseph H. Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts (1639-1702): The Pynchon Court Record, An Original Judges' Diary of the Administration of Justice in the Springfield Courts in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 124.

¹³ J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence: 1628-1651* (New York: Barnes & Noble,

While consistent with Bellesiles's claim that those that were not trusted were often disarmed by Colonial governments, that there was even a need to cause "certain persons to be disarmed" suggests that arms were *not* stored in central storehouses. Most people were armed, and only as punishment for a specific crime (heresy) were people disarmed (though our modern sensibilities might cringe at this as a bill of attainder). The number disarmed—77 out of a population then in the thousands—is far less than the percentage legally disarmed in America today.

There is certainly a point at which a central armory is established in Boston, but there is no indication in the statute that this reflected a mistrust of the population. There is no indication that privately owned arms were required to be stored there.¹⁴

In Massachusetts, an account published around 1650 is also very clear about where militia guns were located: "The Regiments are exercised once a year by turnes; they are also very observant to keep their armes in good order; every souldier is to keep constantly by him powder, bullet, and match, besides every Town is injoyned to have a common stock in like manner...."¹⁵

An October 13, 1675 statute of Massachusetts Bay provided for assessments on persons exempt from militia training of "so many fire armes, muskets, or carbines, with a proportionable stocke of [powder] & am[m]unition, as the said committees respectively shall appoint...." It appears that this was an assessment in kind, not of money. Another part of the same statute specifies that "all such persons as shall be assessed, and shall accordingly provide three fire armes, shall be freed from being sent abroad to the warrs, except in extreame & utmost necessity."¹⁶

Clearly, the government believed that there was some significant number of people who owned at least three guns that they were prepared to exempt them from the onerous duty to

Inc., 1959), 175. Shurtleff, 1:211-12, gives the disarming orders.

¹⁴ December 10, 1641, Shurtleff, 1:344.

¹⁵ Jameson, 231.

¹⁶ Shurtleff, 5:48-49.

fight overseas. It is also clear that as much as the government needed these guns, it did not believe that it had the authority to simply confiscate them. Instead, it needed to make a deal.

Other accounts, while not explicit as to how common guns were in private hands, seem to treat large bodies of armed colonists in Massachusetts as unsurprising. A description of a battle at Pemaquid in Maine discusses how the people of Falmouth turned out to respond to an Indian attack: “the whole number of Men being all called together had Ammunition delivered them....” Because the bullets were the wrong caliber for their guns, “they were forced to beat their Bullets into Slugs....”¹⁷ If the Massachusetts Bay Colony did not trust their population with guns, the historical record does not show it.

Unsurprisingly, since Connecticut was settled by Massachusetts Puritans, Connecticut's 1650 code specifies, “That all persons that are above the age of sixteene yeares, except magistrates and church officers, shall beare arms...; and every male person with this jurisdiction, above the said age, shall have in continuall readines, a good muskitt or other gunn, fitt for service, and allowed by the clark of the band....”

Much like Massachusetts, any person “who is to provide armes or ammunition, cannot purchase them by such means as he hath, hee shall bring to the clark so much corne or other merchantable goods” as was necessary to pay for them. The value of the arms was appraised by the clerk “and two others of the company, (whereof one to bee chosen by the party, and the other by the clarke,) as shall be judged of a greater value by a fifth parte, then such armes or ammunition is of, hee shall be excused of the penalty for want of armes, (but not for want of appearance) untill hee bee provided....” Thus, the man who would not purchase a gun and ammunition would have one provided by the government, but at a price as much as 20% above the market price, as an incentive to purchase the gun without government involvement. There were also provisions for hiring out any single men to earn the price of a gun and ammunition.¹⁸

¹⁷ [C.D.], “New England’s Faction Discovered, 1690,” in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 261-2.

¹⁸ *Code of 1650, Being a Compilation of the Earliest Laws and Orders of the General Court of Connecticut* (Hartford,

Maryland provides a somewhat similar example that the government trusted—indeed, required—most of its population to be armed, and these weapons were not kept in central storehouses. Lord Baltimore’s instructions to settlers emigrating to Maryland provides a very detailed list of tools, clothing, and food to bring with them. On that list, for each man, “Item, one musket... Item, 10 pound of Powder... Item, 40 pound of Lead, Bullets, Pistoll and Goose shot, of each sort some...”¹⁹

It would appear that Lord Baltimore believed that most settlers did as they were told, and brought guns with them to Maryland. “An Act for Military Discipline” enacted in February or March of 1638 (O.S.) required “that every house keeper or housekeepers within this Province shall have ready continually upon all occasions within his her or their house for him or themselves and for every person within his her or their house able to bear armes one Serviceable fixed gunne of bastard muskett boare...” along with a pound of gunpowder, four pounds of pistol or musket shot, “match for matchlocks and of flints for firelocks...”

Of course, laws were sometimes passed but not enforced in colonial times, just as happens now. But the provisions for enforcement in Maryland would seem likely to encourage enforcement for purely selfish reasons. The officers of the militia were required to verify compliance with the law by “a Sight or view of the said armes and ammunition” every month. Those who failed to possess arms and ammunition were to be fined thirty pounds of tobacco, payable to the militia officer responsible for the inspection. Anyone who lacked arms and ammunition was to be armed by their militia commander, who could force payment at “any price... not extending to above double the value of the said armes and ammunition according to the rate then usual in the Country.”²⁰

Conn.: Silas Andrus, 1822), 72-73.

¹⁹ *A Relation of Maryland; Together with a Map of the Countrey...* (London: William Peasley, 1635), in Clayton Colman Hall, ed., *Narratives of Early Maryland: 1633-1684* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 94; Matthew Page Andrews, *Tercentenary History of Maryland* (Chicago and Baltimore: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1925), 1:150.

²⁰ *Archives of Maryland*, 1:77.

Virginia's laws passed 1623-4 also suggest that guns were widely distributed, and that the government was not in any fear of its population having guns. "That no man go or send abroad without a sufficient parte will armed.... That go not to worke in the ground without their arms (and a centinell upon them.)... That the commander of every plantation take care that there be sufficient of powder and am[m]unition within the plantation under his command and their pieces fixt and their arms compleate.... That no commander of any plantation do either himselfe or suffer others to spend powder unnecessarily in drinking or entertainments, &c."²¹

Other evidence suggests that if all guns were stored in central storehouses in Colonial America, they must have been poorly secured. Nathanael Byfield's account of the overthrow of Governor Andros's authority in Boston in 1689 described how "the Town was generally in Arms, and so many of the Countrey came in, that there was twenty Companies in Boston, besides a great many that appeared at Charles Town that could not get over (some say fifteen hundred)."²² Governor's Andros's report described how "the greatest part of the people... appeared in arms at Boston... to the number of about two thousand horse and foote...."²³ Samuel Prince's description of the insurrection tells us:

I knew not any thing of what was intended, till it was begun; yet being at the north end of the town, where I saw boys run along the street with clubs in their hands, encouraging one another to fight, I began to mistrust what was intended; and, hasting towards the town-dock, I soon saw men running for their arms: but, ere I got to the Red Lion, I was told that Captain George and the master of the frigate was seized, and secured in Mr. Colman's house at the North End....

None of these accounts is explicit that the "arms" included guns, however. That these men soon took control of a British Navy frigate from its crew strongly suggests that they were armed with guns, not swords or pikes.²⁴

²¹ William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 1: 127.

²² Nathanael Byfield, *An Account of the Late Revolution in New-England....* (London: Ric. Chitwell, 1689), in Charles M. Andrews, ed., *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675-1690* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 170-3.

²³ "Andros's Report of his Administration, 1690," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 232.

²⁴ Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 186-90.

Other accounts of the day are more explicit. A British major, when told to turn over his regiment's "Colours and Drums" reprimanded the revolutionaries; "they threatened to shoot him down...." After taking custody of a number of officials, including the sheriff, this unsympathetic account describes a "guard of Musqueteers to prevent all escapes" from the jail. After ordering the governor "and other Gentlemen to withdraw to Mr. Usher's.... Thither they come, guarded with a full company of Musqueteers...."²⁵

There was a legal duty of individuals to be armed in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland. The inspection provisions make it clear that these arms were not in central magazines of any sort in Maryland, and in all three colonies, the individual was obligated to have his gun readily available to him. In Massachusetts, while individual heretics might be disarmed, the general population was legally *required* to be individually armed with firearms, and at times to carry them with them, in addition to any firearms stored in town stockpiles.

As we will see in later chapters, there is substantial evidence that guns were commonly owned by individuals, and were not locked up in government armories. Yet, none of this seems to have made it into Bellesiles's description—only central storehouses and mistrusting governments.

²⁵ Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 200, 202.

Hunting in Colonial America

Bellesiles makes the claim that colonists hunting with guns was rare in Colonial America.¹ How do we measure such a thing? Official records are most likely to record the regulation of hunting, not its presence. Nonetheless, there are many tantalizing hints and a few direct statements that guns and hunting were common.

Francis Higginson's 1630 description of Massachusetts includes this account:

Fowls of the air are plentiful here, and of all sorts as we have in England as far as I can learn, and a great many of strange fowls which we know not. Whilst I was writing these things, one of our men brought home an eagle which he had killed in the wood. They say they are good meat. Also here are many kinds of excellent hawks, both sea hawks and land hawks. And myself walking in the woods with another in company, sprung a partridge so big that through the heaviness of his body could fly but a little way. They that have killed them say they are as big as our hens. Here are likewise abundance of turkeys often killed in the woods, far greater than our English turkeys, and exceeding fat, sweet and fleshy, for here they have abundance of feeding all the year long, such as strawberries: in summer all places are full of them, and all manner of berries and fruits. In the winter time I have seen flocks of pigeons, and have eaten of them. They do fly from tree to tree as other birds do, which our pigeons will not do in England. They are of all colors as ours are, but their wings and tails are far longer, and therefore it is likely they fly swifter to escape the terrible hawks in this country. In winter time this country doth abound with wild geese, wild ducks, and other sea fowl, that a great part of winter the planters have eaten nothing but roastmeat of divers fowls which they have killed.²

One account of 1630s Maryland describes the profusion of wild game available. Some of these accounts refer to the Indians doing the hunting, and selling the meat to the settlers. There are other references to the wild game of Maryland that would seem to indicate that the

¹ Bellesiles, 320-23.

² Francis Higginson, *New England's Plantation Or A Short And True Description Of The Commodities And Discommodities Of That Country: Written By A Reverend Divine Now There Resident*. (London: Michael Sparke, 1630), quoted in <http://www.winthropsociety.org/higgnsn1.htm>.

abundance was a benefit to the settlers, although without any explicit indication that the settlers would be hunting them. But there are recommendations that all settlers should bring supplies appropriate for hunting. Among the items that are recommended for settlers under the heading “Provision for Fishing ad Fowling” are “Leade, Fowling-pieces of sixe foote; Powder and Shott, and Flint Stones; a good Water-Spaniell....”³

In Virginia, we have John Hammond’s 1656 account that indicates that while there was apparently little hunting when Jamestown was first settled, it was not for lack of interest: “for they durst neither hunt, fowl, nor Fish, for fear of the Indian, which they stood in aw of....”) But later, after the mismanagement of the original trustees was corrected, the common people felt free “to range the wood for flesh, the rivers for fowle and fish....” “Water-fowle of all sortes are (with admiration to be spoken of) plentiful and easie to be killed.... Deare all over the Country, and in many places so many that venison is accounted a tiresome meat; wilde Turkeys are frequent, and so large that I have seen weigh neer threescore pounds....”⁴

George Alsop’s 1666 description of Maryland is emphatic that not only did Indians hunt game for sale to the settlers, but also large numbers of animals were “killed by the Christian Inhabitant, that doth it more for recreation, than for the benefit they reap by it.” Alsop describes how his master’s house “had at one time in his house fourscore Venisons....” What was a delicacy in England had become dull: “plain bread was rather courted and desired than it.” Alsop also describes the use of guns to protect sheep from wolves, and to hunt waterfowl, with no indication that either was unusual.⁵

Most significantly with respect to how common gun ownership was, Alsop, who spent four years in Maryland as an indentured servant, explained that there was relatively little work to be done in winter, “unless their Ingenuity will prompt them to hunt the Deer, or Bear, or recreate themselves in Fowling, to slaughter the Swans, Geese, and Turkeys.... For every

³ *A Relation of Maryland*, in Hall, 80, 98.

⁴ John Hammond, *Leah and Rachel, Or, The Two Fruitfull Sisters Virginia and Mary-land...* (London: T. Mabb, 1656), in Hall, 285, 291.

⁵ George Alsop, *A Character of the Province of Mary-land...* (London: Peter Dring, 1666), in Hall, 345-8.

Servant has a Gun, Powder and Shot allowed him, to sport him withal on all Holidayes and leasureable times, if he be capable of using it, or be willing to learn.”⁶

It has been suggested that Alsop’s time as an indentured servant was with a “most humane and generous master” and that perhaps his experiences were unusual.⁷ Certainly, Alsop’s account seems as though it was intended to lure more indentured servants into Maryland. Nonetheless, it is consistent with both the Maryland militia law, which required every householder to have a gun for every man in the house, including servants,⁸ and the other Maryland and Virginia accounts that indicate that guns and hunting by the settlers were common.

Robert Horne’s description of Carolina, published in 1666, is explicit that every freeman who arrived before March 25, 1667 would receive a large allotment of land, “Provided always, That every Man be armed with a good Musquet full bore, [£]10 Powder, and [£]20 of Bullet, and six Months Provision for all, to serve them whilst they raise Provision in that Countrey.” While not explicit that settlers were required to bring a musket to feed themselves, the preceding pages go on at great length about the variety and abundance of game available in the Carolina woods.⁹

Other accounts of early Carolina are explicit that hunting was a source of both food and of sport: “Birds for Food, and pleasure of Game, are the Swan, Goose, Duck, Mallard, Wigeon, Teal, Curlew, Plover, Partridge, the Flesh of which is equally as good, tho’ smaller than ours in England.”¹⁰ Ashe also tells merchants planning to bring commodities over to sell to include “all kinds of Ammunition, Guns, Fowling-pieces, Powder, Match, Bullet....”

⁶ Alsop, in Hall, 357.

⁷ Hall, 338.

⁸ *Archives of Maryland*, 1:77.

⁹ Robert Horne, *A Brief Description of the Province of Carolina...* (London: n.p. 1666), in Salley, 68-71.

¹⁰ Thomas Ashe, *Carolina, or a Description of the Present State of that Country...* (London: Mrs. Grover, 1682), in Salley, 150-1.

Ashe is not explicit that these are for sale to the white population, but the other commodities Ashe lists seem to be similarly intended for the settlers, not the Indians.¹¹

William Penn's 1681 description of Pennsylvania included that "Fowl, Fish, and Wild-Deer... are reported to be plentiful..." Penn told settlers what they should plan to do on arrival. For the first year, he warned that settlers should plan on buying grain, since they would not yet have productive land. Livestock would be available for purchase at once, and would increase rapidly. But after the first year, "what with the Poorer sort, sometimes labouring to others, and the more able Fishing, Fowling and sometimes Buying; They may do very well, till their own Stocks are sufficient supply them, and their Families...."¹²

Penn's "Frame of the Government" for Pennsylvania makes a point of granting to the inhabitants of the province, "liberty to fowl and hunt upon the lands they hold, and all other lands therein not inclosed..."¹³ Almost twenty years later, in 1701, Penn reiterated, "They shall have Liberty to fish, fowle and hunt upon their own Land, and on all other lands that are mine untaken up."¹⁴ This is not evidence that many of the inhabitants actually hunted, of course, but it does suggest that Penn considered this an important enticement for settlers.

In 1683, Penn again described "Fish, Fowl, and the Beasts of the Wood, here are divers sorts, some for Food and Profit, and some for Profit only...." At no point in this later letter is Penn explicit that hunting was common; nor does he give any indication that these were hunted by professional hunters.¹⁵

Gabriel Thomas's 1698 account of Pennsylvania, however, is explicit: "Here is curious Diversion in Hunting, Fishing, and Fowling, especially upon that Great and Famous River Suskahanah...." Thomas describes purchasing deer from the Indians for gunpowder, but

¹¹ Ashe, 158. See also Thomas Newe, August 23, 1682, in Salley, 187, asking his father to send out 200 pounds of pigeon shot.

¹² William Penn, *Some Account of the Province of Pennsylvania in America...* (London: Benjamin Clark, 1681), in Salley, 207, 211.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Archives* (Philadelphia: J. Severns & Co., et al., 1852-1935), 4th series, 1:2.

¹⁴ *Pennsylvanai Archives*, 4th series, 1:116.

¹⁵ William Penn, *Letter From William Penn to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders* (London: Andrew Sowle, 1683), in Salley, 228-9.

also tells us, “There are vast Numbers of other Wild Creatures, as Elks, Bufalos, etc., all which as well Beasts, Fowl, and Fish, are free and common to any Person who can shoot or take them, without any lett, hinderance or Opposition whatsoever.”¹⁶

John Archdale’s 1707 description of Carolina mentions that whites purchased both skins and deer meat from the Indians, but also mentions, “vast Quantities or Numbers of wild Ducks, Geese, Teal” and that because there was no need to cut and store winter fodder, one “can employ their Hands in raising other Commodities as aforesaid.” The sentence is unclear, but seems to say that in winter, when there were few farm chores, the profusion of wild game meant that the hired hands could be out hunting food¹⁷—essentially what Alsop said Maryland servants did in winter, four decades earlier.

Travelers’ accounts of late seventeenth century America repeatedly refer to guns in private hands, usually used for hunting. Danckaerts described a marsh nearly Flatbush, New York, where the inhabitants “go mostly to shoot snipe and wild geese.”¹⁸ Danckaerts also describes how Shooter’s Island in New York (then Schutter’s Island) received its name: “This island is so called, because the Dutch, when they first settled on the North River, were in the practice of coming here to shoot wild geese, and other wild fowl, which resorted there in great numbers.”¹⁹ On Long Island, “We dined with Jaques; and his little son came and presented us a humming-bird he had shot.”²⁰

On Staten Island, Danckaerts reported, “Game of all kinds is plenty, and twenty-five and thirty deer are sometimes seen in a herd. A boy who came into a house where we were, told us he had shot ten the last winter himself, and more than forty in his life, and in the same manner other game.”²¹ Somewhere between New York City and Maryland, Danckaerts tells

¹⁶ Gabriel Thomas, *An Historical and Geographical Account of the Province and Country of Pensilvania...* (London: A. Baldwin, 1698), in Salley, 321-2.

¹⁷ John Archdale, *A New Description of That Fertile and Pleasant Province of Carolina...* (London: John Wyat, 1707), in Salley, 289.

¹⁸ Danckaerts, 60.

¹⁹ Danckaerts, 92.

²⁰ Danckaerts, 230.

²¹ Danckaerts, 70.

of a miller with whom he had stayed: "The miller had shot an animal they call a muskrat, the skin of which we saw hanging up to dry."²²

At a plantation on Chesapeake Bay, Danckaerts stayed the night. In the morning, he and his traveling companion were given directions by, "The son, who went out to shoot at daylight...." Danckaerts expressed amazement at the number of ducks together in front of the house.

The son was not alone. "There was a boy about twelve years old who took aim at them from the shore, not being able to get within good shooting distance of them, but nevertheless shot loosely before they flew away, and hit only three or four, complained of his shot, as they are accustomed to shoot from six to twelve and even eighteen or more at one shot."²³

This was not peculiar to this one plantation, apparently, because Danckaerts described a few days later the noise from flocks of waterfowl. "[I]t is not peculiar to this place alone, but it occurred on all the creeks and rivers we crossed, though they were most numerous in the morning and evening when they are most easily shot."²⁴

One of the more remarkable anecdotes in Danckaerts's journal describes the conflict between a Christian Indian named Wouter and his white uncle, who believed that "a mere stupid Indian, could not shoot...." The account describes how the two of them, both armed with guns, went deer hunting together in upstate New York. (Wouter bagged a deer; his uncle did not.)²⁵

David Humphreys's *circa* 1740 account of a Connecticut wolf hunt indicates that when a particular wolf's predations became serious enough,

Mr. Putnam entered into a combination with five of his neighbors to hunt alternately until they could destroy her.... By ten o'clock the next morning the bloodhounds had driven her into a den, about three miles distant from the house of Mr. Putnam.

The people soon collected with dogs, guns, straw, fire, and sulphur, to attack the common

²² Danckaerts, 108.

²³ Danckaerts, 123.

²⁴ Danckaerts, 126.

²⁵ Danckaerts, 206-8.

enemy.²⁶

If guns were scarce, or hunting unusual, there is nothing in Humphreys account that would indicate so.

A 1760 account describes why white pines in New York, New England, and New Jersey were protected for the use of the Royal Navy:

This restriction is absolutely necessary, whether considered as securing a provision for the navy, or as a check upon that very destructive practice, taken from the Indians, of fire-hunting. It used to be the custom for large companies to go into the woods in the winter, and to set fire to the brush and underwood in a circle of several miles. This circle gradually contracting itself, the deer, and other wild animals inclosed, naturally retired from the flames, till at length they got herded together in a very small compass.

Then, blinded and suffocated by the smoke, and scorched by the fire, which every moment came nearer to them, they forced their way, under the greatest trepidation and dismay, through the flames. As soon as they got into the open daylight again, they were shot by the hunters, who stood without and were in readiness to fire upon them.²⁷

There is nothing in Burnaby's description that indicates that hunting was widespread—but in forests as large as Colonial America, the imposition of such restrictions suggests that there must have been a lot of people engaged in such practices, both to justify the prohibition, and for it to become widely known.

Scharf's *History of Western Maryland* describes how frontier Marylanders lived at the time of the French & Indian War, and quotes one of the settlers of the time about the early education of boys in imitating the various animals of the forest:

This faculty was not merely a pastime, but a very necessary part of education, on account of its utility in certain circumstances. The imitations of the gobbling and other sounds of wild turkeys often brought those keen-eyed and ever-watchful tenants of the forest within reach of the rifle. The bleating of the fawn brought its [mother] to her death in the same way....

A well-grown boy at the age of twelve or thirteen years was furnished with a small rifle and shot-pouch.... Hunting squirrels, turkeys, and raccoons soon made him expert in the use of his gun.... Shooting at a mark was a common diversion among the men when their stock of ammunition would allow it.²⁸

²⁶ David Humphreys, "Israel Putnam and the Wolf" in Hart and Hill, 9-11.

²⁷ Andrew Burnaby, "In the Woods" in Hart and Hill, 51. See also Jameson, 85, for what *may* be a description of Indian fire-hunting of deer in seventeenth century New England.

²⁸ Scharf, 70-71.

At about the same time, describing growing up in Philadelphia *circa* 1765, Alexander Graydon gives this picture of his boyhood pleasures:

For those of running, leaping, swimming and skating, no one had more appetite; and for the enjoyment of these, fatigue and hunger were disregarded. To these succeeded a passion for fowling and boating; fishing being too sedentary and inactive for my taste. If furnished, on Saturday afternoon or other holyday, with cash enough for the purchase of powder and shot, or the hire of a batteau or skiff, as the propensity of the day might incline, I had nothing more to wish for....

In my water excursions, the sedgy shores of the Delaware, as well as the reedy cover of Petty's, League and Mud Islands, were pervaded and explored in pursuit of ducks, reed-bird and rail.²⁹

The Cherokees complained to the North Carolina colonial government in 1769 of “numerous bodys of hunters from North Carolina having this year infested their hunting Grounds and destroyed their game....”³⁰ It is hard to imagine that the Cherokees were complaining about just a few hunters.

How common was hunting in Colonial America? It is difficult to say with any certainty. The evidence, however, suggests what common sense would also suggest: in a country where there were no legal restrictions prohibiting hunting, game was abundant, and many settlers had some leisure time in which to engage in a traditional sport, hunting appears to have been common.

²⁹ Alexander Graydon, “A Philadelphia Boy's Sports” in Hart and Hill, 184.

³⁰ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:26.

Gun Possession & Gun Violence in Colonial America

Bellesiles emphasizes that from the very beginning, the English colonies in America had few firearms, and that the few guns that they had were beyond the ability of the vast majority of the colonists to use competently. Bellesiles also makes the claim that gun violence (at least between whites) was rare in early America, and political violence, especially involving guns, almost unheard of, before the Revolution.

For example, Bellesiles portrays the Plymouth Colony as remarkably poorly armed: “[Myles Standish’s] was one of only four snaphances held by the settlers, though there were also some battered old matchlocks.”¹ How many guns did the Pilgrims have that first year? You might assume, from Bellesiles’s description, that there were only four useful guns, and a few other, out of date weapons.

Reading the sources that Bellesiles cites tells perhaps not a different story, but one that can be read with a rather different conclusion about gun scarcity and competence. When a party of twenty went ashore at Cape Cod on November 11, 1620, every man carried a firearm.² The snaphance (or snaphaunce) was a new technology; but matchlocks were still considered an appropriate weapon, and were in use at Jamestown as well.³

¹ Bellesiles, 59.

² [William Bradford], “A Relation, or Journal, of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation settled at Plymouth,” in Edward Arber, ed., *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623 A.D.; as told by Themselves, their Friends, and their Enemies* (London: 1897), 432.

³ M.L. Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 83-84.

Similarly, Bellesiles describes the first defensive use of guns by Plymouth Colony this way: “Arrows flew and the Pilgrims fired their four snaphances while the rest of the force lit their matches with a brand from the fire. They then let off a volley from these muskets and the Indians fled. No one was hurt, though the Nauset learned that the Europeans could make very loud noises.”⁴ The sarcastic description of making “very loud noises” is clearly intended to portray the Europeans as incompetent with guns—unable to even kill an Indian with a gun in a battle.

Yet in reading William Bradford’s eyewitness account of the battle that Bellesiles cites, it is clear that the failure of the Pilgrims to kill the Indians at whom they shot was not a sign of firearms incompetence, but because the fight was fierce and unexpected, and because of poor tactical planning. While most of the attacking Indians retreated a short distance, one brave member of the band, perhaps their leader, stood behind a tree, “within half a musket shot of us,” and fired arrows repeatedly at the Pilgrims. The Indian was thus far enough way, and making sufficiently good use of cover, that Myles Standish had little opportunity of hitting him.

Contrary to Bellesiles’s description of the Indians being frightened off by the noise, Standish’s last shot at the Indian behind the tree, after taking “full aim at him,” “made the barke or splinters of the tree fly about his ears, after which he gave an extraordinary shriek, and away they wente all of them.”⁵ The lack of fatalities among the Indians was not because of poor accuracy, but good use of cover by Standish’s intended target. It also appears that Standish and company may have, at least by the time the incident came to an end, sought to scare the Indians away more than kill them:

We followed them about a quarter of a mile; but we left six to keep our shallop; for we were careful of our business. Then we shouted all together, two several times; and shot off a couple of muskets, and so returned. This we did that they might see that were not afraid of them, nor discouraged.⁶

⁴ Bellesiles, 60.

⁵ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Harvey Wish, ed. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 66.

⁶ [Bradford], 433.

Bellesiles devotes considerable energy to telling us how incompetent with a gun even Myles Standish, the professional soldier of Plymouth Colony was; how incompetent the first settlers were in using guns for self-defense; and how short of firearms both Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colony were.⁷ But how interesting it is that he neglects to mention in 1630, only ten years after his arrival at Plymouth, John Billington was convicted of murdering a newcomer named John Newcomen by shooting him with a blunderbuss.⁸ (According to Bellesiles, “in forty-six years Plymouth Colony’s courts heard five cases of assault, and not a single homicide.”)⁹ In a community that averaged only a few hundred souls, one murder in ten years is quite dramatic. A dispute over beaver trapping rights on the Kennebec River in 1634 led to the shooting death of Moses Talbot by a Captain Hocking, and in turn the shooting death of Hocking by Talbot’s partner.¹⁰

One would think if the goal were to give a full and accurate picture of gun availability and use in America, Bellesiles would include these two troubling incidents. Of course, such incidents might raise some questions about how scarce guns really were in Plymouth Colony and its environs. It would also raise some questions about Bellesiles’s claim about the England from which the Pilgrims came: “Most personal violence in early modern England occurred not on lonely highways but at public festivals, often between competing teams of Morris dancers and such other representatives of communal pride.”¹¹

This claim is so laughable as to hardly need refutation, but there is no shortage of scholarly study of the problems of personal violence in early modern England, especially along the border counties between England and Scotland. This culture of violence

⁷ Bellesiles, 60-61.

⁸ George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers*. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1981), 308.

⁹ Bellesiles, 82.

¹⁰ Willison, 320-21.

¹¹ Bellesiles, 36. Joyce Malcolm, “Concealed Weapons”, *Reason*, January, 2001, 47-49, reports that the two sources cited by Bellesiles for this claim make no such statement.

transplanted from Britain played a major part in creating a similar culture of violence in the backcountry parts of the United States.¹²

Thomas Morton's description of the erection of the Maypole at Merrymount (a hedonistic trading post established on Massachusetts Bay in the 1620s) tells us that, "And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drumes, gunnes, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose..."¹³ Both guns and pistols were apparently present at Merrymount, and more importantly, Morton found no need to explain the presence of long guns and pistols there.

What Morton might have needed to explain—and chose not to—was his trade with the Indians. When Miles Standish led an expedition to arrest Morton and close down his scandalous establishment, the primary motivation was not licentious living, but arming the Indians. Morton bartered guns for furs with the Indians, violating royal proclamation against supplying firearms, powder, or shot. When the Pilgrims arrived in 1620, the Indians had no guns. By 1627, the Indians of Massachusetts Bay were believed to have at least sixty guns, largely supplied by Morton.¹⁴

Concerning the scarcity of guns in Massachusetts Bay, Bellesiles writes:

In 1630 the Massachusetts Bay Company reported in their possession: "80 bastard musketts, with snaphances, 4 Foote in the barrill without rests, 6 long Fowlinge peeces...6 foote longe; 4 longe Fowlinge peeces... 5-1/2 foote longe; 10 Full musketts, 4 Foote barrill, with

¹² See George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) for a discussion of violence in the border counties of northern England and southern Scotland during this time. Also on the same subject, David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 621-632; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 21-23; James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 3-13, 147-148, 157-168; R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 84-85, 96-97; Carlton Jackson, *A Social History of the Scotch-Irish* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1993), 82-83, 112-113.

¹³ Thomas Morton, *A New English Canaan* (Amsterdam: Jacob Frederick Stam, 1637), 132, in Charles Francis Adams, Jr., ed., *New English Canaan of Thomas Morton* (Boston: The Prince Society, 1883; reprinted New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), 276-7. Also in Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *American History Told by Contemporaries* (New York, 1898), 1:361-63.

¹⁴ Adams, 21-28. Even after Morton's banishment to England, there was apparently a problem with Englishmen selling guns to the Indians. See Shurtleff, 1:196 for the May 17, 1637 ordinance prohibiting sale of guns, gunpowder, shot, lead, or shot molds, or repair of guns, for the Indians.

matchlocks and rests,” one hundred swords, and “5 peeces of ordnance, long sence bowght and paid For.” There were thus exactly one hundred firearms for use among seven towns with a population of about one thousand.¹⁵

The source cited for this claim is “Shurtleff, ed., *Records of Massachusetts Bay* 1:25-26.” But when you look up the cited source, it says something completely different. It is *not* a list of weapons in Massachusetts Bay colony. It is not even a list of guns owned by the company. It is a list of “Necessaries conseaued [conceived?] meete for o[u]r intended voidage for New England to bee prepared forthwith”: a list of arms to be brought over by the company, only some of which were already owned.

There is nothing on the cited pages that indicates that this is a list of *all* the guns in the colony, or that it includes privately owned guns, as Bellesiles implies when he says “one hundred firearms” for a population “of about one thousand.” Finally, even the year that Bellesiles gives is wrong. The dates on the document Bellesiles cites are February 26 and March 2 1628/9 (Old Style). The year 1630 does not appear. (Of course, if Bellesiles had given the correct year, most historians would have immediately wondered how the Massachusetts Bay Company could have done an inventory of guns in the colony before the colony existed.) The only part of Bellesiles’ claim that is correct is the list of weapons.¹⁶

Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence of Sion’s Saviour in New England, published circa 1650, lists a variety of statistics about the great Puritan migration between 1629 and 1642 to Massachusetts Bay. Over this thirteen year period, according to Johnson, £22,000 was spent on “Armes, Powder, Bullet and Match, together with their great Artillery....”¹⁷ This was more than one pound per man, woman, and child, and it would appear that the majority of this was small arms and ammunition.

While not explicit that all of this was privately purchased and owned, it seems unlikely that the government of Charles I, that was somewhat reluctant to see this great migration

¹⁵ Bellesiles, 63.

¹⁶ Shurtleff, 1:25-26.

¹⁷ J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence: 1628-1651* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1959), 54, 58.

happen in the first place, would have supplied so much in the way of weapons to a group that would, a few years later, overthrow his government and make him a head shorter. Other documents are clear that at least the first shipment of arms was the property of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and were not provided by the royal government.¹⁸

Shooting was apparently a common enough pastime in 1638 that when an Emanuell Downing had “brought over, at his great charges, all things fitting for takeing wild foule by way of [decoy],” the General Court ordered “that it shall not bee lawfull for any person to shoote in any gun within halfe a mile of the pond where such [decoy] shalbee placed....”¹⁹

Examination of records of the Springfield, Massachusetts court from 1639 through 1702 provides a number of examples of guns present, and in every case, treated as an ordinary item, not at all unusual in any respect. There is trial of a woman in 1640 accused of selling her late husband’s gun to an Indian. Her defense was that she did not sell it, but lent it to the Indian, “for it lay [spoiling] in her [cellar],” and she expected to reclaim it shortly. The judge warned her that she should get it home again speedily, “for no commonwealth would allow of such a misdemeanor.”²⁰

A few months later, there is a civil suit between two men, “for a gunn that he bought of him and paid 22*s.* 6*d.*” but had not been delivered.²¹ There is a criminal case in 1650 involving Thomas Miller, convicted of striking an Indian “with the butt end of his gunn.”²² Two Indians are fined for drunkenness in 1662, and not having the money for the fine, one of them “Left a gun with the County Treasurer till they make payment.”²³

In 1680, Isack Gleson complains that Isack Morgan beat his servant and “took away his Gun and knife.”²⁴ There are at least two other cases involving prosecutions for theft of guns,

¹⁸ Shurtleff, 1:25-26.

¹⁹ September 6, 1638, Shurtleff, 1:236.

²⁰ Smith, 208.

²¹ Smith, 209.

²² Smith, 223.

²³ Smith, 263.

²⁴ Smith, 294.

one involving a runaway slave who “stole a Gun in the next Town viz Southfeild” in 1681,²⁵ and another theft in 1699, in which the stolen gun was found in the gunsmith’s shop.²⁶ Another theft in 1697 involving lead and powder would suggest that the victim owned a gun.²⁷ (A civil suit involving “Rifles” in 1661/2 may be a misreading of the manuscript, since rifles were quite rare this early in New England.)²⁸

Even though this court did not normally handle probate,²⁹ there are at least three estate inventories contained in the court records. One in 1641/2 lists “peeeces powder and shott” valued at £3:1:0. Another in 1654/5 lists “a Muskett Sword bandaliers” valued at £1:2:0. The third estate inventory lists no guns.³⁰

Springfield was still a tiny frontier village at this point, and it would be difficult to draw too many inferences about how well armed its people were. Nonetheless, considering that months sometimes elapsed in this journal of the Springfield courts without any entries at all, it seems as though guns appear as bystanders in an astonishing number of cases, if guns were rare.

Accounts of early Virginia routinely mention guns. Augustine Herrman, a Dutch diplomat en route from New Netherlands to Maryland in 1659 describes large numbers of guns in use and unremarkable by their presence. “Nothing occurred on the way except hearing a shot fired to the north of us, which the Indians doubted not was by an Englishman. Whereupon we fired three shots, to see if we should be answered, but heard nothing.”

Two days later, having stopped at a Swedish settlement, Herrman was in a dispute as to the ownership of a boat. “Abraham with one Marcus, a Finn, came to our side in a canoe, and would not let us pass... and this Marcus drew a pocket-pistol and threatened to fire if we would not stop. They had, besides, two snaphances... On leaving the river, we heard heavy

²⁵ Smith, 298.

²⁶ Smith, 362-3.

²⁷ Smith, 349.

²⁸ Smith, 256.

²⁹ Smith, 172-3.

³⁰ Smith, 212-3, 232, 241-2.

volley firing on Colonel Utie's island... which we presumed must have proceeded from fifty or sixty men; it was mingled with music. This lasted until night...."³¹

One early account of Bacon's Rebellion describes an incident that led to war between Bacon's men and the Indians. In a dispute about a murderer sought among the Indians, "the King [chief] pleaded Ignorance and Slipt loos[e], whom Brent shot Dead with his Pistoll. Th' Indians Shot Two or Three Guns out of the Cabin, th' English shot into it...."³² There is no surprise expressed that the Indians were shooting back, or that they had two or three guns in one cabin. Similarly, a battle between Bacon's force and the Pamunkey Indians involving gunfire from the Indians is unsurprising.³³

While a description of frontier Virginians during Bacon's Rebellion "taking their Arms into the Fields... no Man Stirrd out of Door unarm'd"³⁴ could be interpreted to refer to swords or pikes, it is a strained reading. The Indians had guns—lots of them. It seems unlikely that if the whites were afraid, that they would be working in their fields with swords, not guns.

Similarly, a contemporary description of Bacon first organizing of men to follow him against the Indians describes them as "about 300 men together in armes...."³⁵ When Bacon later marched into the capital to demand a commission from the governor, he confronted a force of "1000 men well arm'd and resolute..." Other references refer to guns in the hands of both Bacon's men, and the governor's force.³⁶

These could be read as 1300 weapons of various sorts, not all of them necessarily guns, but it again seems unlikely that the whites were planning an expedition against a vastly larger

³¹ Augustine Herrman, "Journal of the Dutch Embassy to Maryland," in Hall, 314, 316.

³² "The Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion, 1675-1676," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 17.

³³ "A True Narrative of the Late Rebellion in Virginia, by the Royal Commissioners, 1677," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 124-5.

³⁴ "The Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion, 1675-1676," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 20.

³⁵ "A True Narrative of the Late Rebellion in Virginia, by the Royal Commissioners, 1677," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-1.

force of Indians without guns. If Bacon's men were armed with guns, it seems a bit unlikely that the governor's forces would plan to resist such a force unless they were also armed with guns.

Other accounts of seventeenth century rebellions also mention guns with no indication that they are at all unusual. A description of a 1677 insurrection in North Carolina describes how a Captain Gilliam with thirty to forty men, "with armes of the [said] Gilliam, and headed by one Valentine Bird and Edward Wells... with force and arms *vid.* Swords, guns, and pistols, violently rush into the house...." The author also describes threats he received from others of "hanging, pistolling, or poisoning...."³⁷

Many other accounts and statutes suggest, in an incremental way, that guns must have been pretty commonly owned items. A statute adopted at the Massachusetts 1713-14 legislative session complained, "Whereas by the indiscreet firing of guns laden with shot[t] and ball within the town and harbour of Boston, the lives and limbs of many persons have been lost, and others have been in great danger, as well as other damage has been sustained," the firing of any "gun or pistol" in Boston ("the islands thereto belonging excepted") was prohibited.³⁸

In 1722, Governor William Keith of Pennsylvania offered to the Indians who would assist in capturing runaway slaves "one Good Gun and two Blankets for each Negro" whom they captured and returned to his master.³⁹ This tells us nothing by itself, but does suggest that either there were few runaway slaves, or guns were not scarce.

William Black's 1744 description of a practical joke played on some Maryland fisherman also suggests that guns were not scarce:

Towards the going down of the sun we saw a boat and canoe fishing inshore. We hailed them with, "Have you got any fish?" They returned with, "Have you got any rum?" We answered,

³⁷ "Narratives of Thomas Miller, Sir Peter Colleton, and the Carolina Proprietors," in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 152, 156.

³⁸ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay...* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, 1878), 3:305-6.

³⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:412.

"Yes, will you come on board and taste it?"

Then they untied and made directly for us, but were very much surprised with the manner of reception they met with. We had the [blunderbuss] ready loaded and aimed on the side while they were to board us. Mr. Littlepage, who was to act the part of the lieutenant of a man of war, was furnished with four loaded pistols and the like number of swords.

With his laced hat and romantic countenance he made an appearance much like another Black-beard. Several more of our company were armed each with a drawn sword and cocked pistol. Several pistols, three fowling pieces loaded, and some drawn swords were lying in view on a table on the main deck.

In this manner were we equipped and stationed ready to receive the poor fishermen. When they came near enough to observe our postures, they immediately lay on their oars and paddles with no small concern to know what we were. In a little time the ebb tide drew them alongside, and Littlepage asked them in a sailor-like manner if they would come on board and serve his majesty. To this they made no reply, but kept gazing at us like so many thunderstruck persons. At last, with a discharge of our great gun and small arms, flourishing our swords round our heads, we asked them to come on board directly, else we would sink them....

A call was made to haul up the barge and man her. This being done, Littlepage and myself got in with each a pair of pistols and a sword and made directly after them. Upon this, they quickened if possible their strokes, pulling for life directly to the shore. Now and then one or other of them would look behind and then cry out, "Pull away! Pull away! or we are all taken."⁴⁰

Yale's 1745 regulations for students include the following:

If any Scholar Shall keep a Gun or Pistol, or Fire one in the College-Yard or College, or Shall Go a Gunning, Fishing or Sailing, or Shall Go more than Two Miles from College upon any Occasion whatsoever: or Shall be present at any Court, Election, Town-Meeting, Wedding, or Meeting of young People for Diversion or any Such-like Meeting which may Occasion Mispence of precious Time without Liberty first obtain'd from the President or his Tutor, in any of the cases abovesaid he Shall be fined not exceeding Two Shillings.⁴¹

If guns were scarce, why did Yale feel a need to pass such regulations?

If guns were scarce, why did Yale feel a need to pass such regulations? We know at least that Nathaniel Ames, a Harvard student, "went a gunning after Robins" one April day in 1758. It was worth noting in his diary, but so was the arrival of a relative from home with linen, a funeral, and going fishing.⁴²

⁴⁰ William Black, "A Practical Joke" in Hart and Hill, 43-45.

⁴¹ Franklin B. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College* (New York: H. Holt & Co, 1896), 2:8.

⁴² Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *American History told by Contemporaries* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1890), 267-8.

Analogies involving guns can also be an indication that guns were common enough that the writer expected others to understand such uses. Benjamin Franklin's letter of December 25, 1750 [Old Style], describes "an Experiment in Electricity that I desire never to repeat." Franklin attempted to electrocute a turkey with his static electricity capacitors, and distracted by his audience, shocked himself into unconsciousness. "The Company present... Say that the flash was very great and the crack as loud as a Pistol..." Where the shock entered his finger, "I afterwards found it raised a round swelling where the fire enter'd as big as half a Pistol Bullet..."⁴³ Franklin clearly expected the recipient of the letter, believed to be a relative, to know how loud a pistol would be, and the size of a pistol bullet.

A letter two months later to Peter Collinson in London, however, uses somewhat different language for describing the sound and the size of the swelling: "nor did I hear the Crack tho' the By-standers say it was a loud one; nor did I particularly feel the Stroke on my Hand, tho' I afterwards found it had rais'd a Swelling there the bigness of half a Swan Shot or pistol Bullet."⁴⁴ To an Englishman, Franklin did not use an analogy involving the sound of a pistol, and even his use of a "pistol Bullet" as an indicator of size first says, "half a Swan Shot"—perhaps indicating that while Americans could be relied upon to know how big a pistol bullet was, an Englishman would need a description that equated to sporting shot.

Franklin, in 1753, while castigating the German immigrants to Pennsylvania for their lack of patriotism, observes that in a war scare some years before, that Pennsylvania and the lower counties, presumably of Delaware, "raised armed and Disciplined [near] 10,000 men..."⁴⁵ Yet Bellesiles tells us that at the start of the American Revolution, more than half of the guns

⁴³ Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree, ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1961), 4:82-83.

⁴⁴ Franklin, 4:113.

⁴⁵ Franklin, 4:485. *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:831, may be referring to this when Governor Thomas indicated in 1743 that all the Assembly need do is "prepare a Bill for obliging them to appear well Armed and Accoutred..." There is no indication that the Assembly needed to provide them with arms. The following year, *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:851, Governor Thomas complained that without a militia law to compel it, "the Inhabitants will not appear... for their Instruction in Military Discipline, nor provide themselves with Arms or Ammunition." It appears that the problem was "would not," not "could not."

in America were 20,000 Brown Besses sent over during the French & Indian War (1755-1763). A little arithmetic shows that less than 20,000 guns were therefore present before the French & Indian War—and Pennsylvania and Delaware alone somehow managed to raise and arm 10,000 men more than 20 years earlier. From this, one can draw one of several possible conclusions.

1. Pennsylvania and Delaware had more than half of the guns in the entire American colonies.
2. There had been a lot of guns in the American colonies before the French & Indian War that had somehow been broken, lost, or exported.
3. Franklin wasn't talking about guns when he said "armed."
4. Bellesiles is wrong about the scarcity of guns in America before the Revolution.

Another example of Bellesiles's curious misreading of sources is concerning the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia:

Colonel Washington reported on the militia to Governor Dinwiddie: "Many of them [are] unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision." In one company of more than seventy men, he reported, only twenty-five had any sort of firearms. Washington found such militia "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy."⁴⁶

But when you examine what Washington *actually* wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has misquoted Washington. Bellesiles leads the reader to believe that Washington was complaining that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington was clearly referring to only *some* militia units:

I think myself under the necessity of informing your Honor, of the odd behaviour of the few Militia that were marched hither from Fairfax, Culpeper, and Prince William counties. Many of them unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision. Those of Culpeper behaved particularly ill: Out of the hundred that were draughted, seventy-odd arrived here; of which only twenty-five were tolerably armed.

Washington considered the militia arriving inadequately armed to be "odd behaviour," and worth mentioning. This suggests that other militia units *were* adequately armed, and brought ammunition. Washington sought to have the unarmed militiamen punished, which

⁴⁶ Bellesiles, 159.

suggests that their behavior--arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical.⁴⁷ And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a “few” of Washington’s militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Governor Tryon’s struggle against the Regulators of the backcountry of North Carolina in the decade before the Revolution provides a number of clues to the level of gun ownership in the colony, and in a way that might not have otherwise ended up in any official records. There *are* occasional hints that gunpowder is scarce in North Carolina in 1769, with Governor Tryon complaining, “in case of war, I could not purchase here twenty barrels of powder....”⁴⁸ But more careful reading suggests that Governor Tryon’s problems had more to do with a reluctance of the legislature to provide ammunition for the governor’s troops. Governor Tryon made several requests to the legislature, asking them to pay for ammunition “for the protection of the Country,” and found himself carefully rebuffed at first.⁴⁹ When the legislature finally acceded to Tryon’s request, the language used suggests that the gunpowder and musket balls were to be purchased locally: “the Governor be empowered to draw upon either of the public Treasurers for money to purchase the same.”⁵⁰

Other evidence from a thorough reading of the *Colonial Records of North Carolina* for 1769-1771 shows that guns appear in a number of contexts, and they are not regarded as startling or unusual. One example is the depositions concerning murders committed by felons being pursued by the Sheriff of Dobbs County.⁵¹

Governor Tryon’s order of February 7, 1771, prohibited “for a reasonable time from vending or disposing of any fire arms and ammunition least the same should come into the hands of the said people called Regulators or the Mob....” This order applied to “all Merchants, Traders and others... till further notice.”⁵²

⁴⁷ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *Writings of George Washington*, 2:78-79.

⁴⁸ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:30.

⁴⁹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:114, 130-1, 285.

⁵⁰ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:368, 436, 440.

⁵¹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:200-1.

⁵² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:498.

Of course, the Regulators were already armed with guns, and this was not considered remarkable. Colonel Spencer's letter to Governor Tryon of April 28, 1768 describes how the Regulators "came up to the Court House to the number of about forty armed with Clubs and some Fire Arms...."⁵³ As a general rule, however, the Regulators were careful to keep guns out of town when engaged in violent disruptions of the court system, and some contemporary accounts express some uncertainty as to whether their men out of town have guns or not. But what is interesting is that the men having guns out of town is expressed as a possibility, and not a startling one.⁵⁴ If guns were actually scarce in 1769 North Carolina the writers of these accounts were apparently not aware of it.

As the crisis with the Regulators came to a head, there are other indications that guns were common items. An Anglican minister named Cupples describes the difficulties in mustering the militia in Bute County for an expedition against the Regulators: "The Col. of this county was by his instructions only to raise Fifty men exclusive of officers, yet he told me, when he called a general muster that though there were betwixt eight or nine hundred men under arms, there was not any would list... and proclaimed themselves for the Regulators...."⁵⁵ It is possible that not all of these "arms" were guns, but it is a strained reading, especially as we see later discussions of the gun battle between the Regulators and Governor Tryon's militia.

Bellesiles claims that at the start of the American Revolution in 1775, "Most of the guns in private and public hands [in America] came from the twenty thousand Brown Besses supplied by the British government during the Seven Years' War."⁵⁶ This means that there were *no more* than 40,000 guns in the American colonies in 1775. Yet in Bute County, North Carolina, alone there appear to have been at least eight hundred guns in private hands—or five percent of *all the guns* in the American colonies.

⁵³ *Col. Rec. N.C.*, 7:722.

⁵⁴ *Col. Rec. N.C.*, 8:243.

⁵⁵ *Col. Rec. N.C.*, 8:552.

⁵⁶ Bellesiles, 183.

Other evidence that there was a wide variety of guns in private hands can be found in the order from General Waddell, commanding Tryon's forces, that twenty-four rounds of ammunition be supplied to each soldier, "Bullets, Lead or Swan Shot at the discretion of the Captain of each company."⁵⁷ If the majority of guns in America were "Brown Besses," of a standard caliber, then it makes little sense to distribute such a variety of projectiles. Giving the choice of lead suggests that rifles and muskets of non-standard calibers were commonly possessed by the militia.

Militiamen were certainly armed with their own guns. The only mention of unarmed militiamen is the levying of fines on May 8, 1771, against some militiamen that showed up "without Arms..."⁵⁸ Governor Tryon complains that "this service was undertaken without money in the Treasury to support it, no armory to furnish arms, nor magazines from whence we could be supplied with ammunition..."⁵⁹ Orders to various militia colonels indicate that they were to purchase provisions, gunpowder, and lead for their soldiers, "and to defray the expence thereof I will give you a Draft on the Treasury." "Ammunition to be provided by the men agreeable to Law and what is further wanting will be supplied from the Magazine in Newbern."⁶⁰ The only logical reading of such documents is that guns and ammunition were commonly available and widely owned within North Carolina.

Once Governor Tryon's forces were mobilized, there are repeated accounts that demonstrate that the Regulators had guns—lots of them. Contemporary accounts are in agreement that about 4,000 men were part of the Regulator force that battled against Governor Tryon.⁶¹ Governor Tryon described how the offer of amnesty, provided "the rebels... surrender up their arms, take the oath of allegiance and oath of obligation to pay all taxes" had led 3,300 to surrender themselves. While these 3,300 had only surrendered 500

⁵⁷ May 5, 1771, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:601.

⁵⁸ May 8, 1771, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:577.

⁵⁹ August 1, 1771, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:651.

⁶⁰ February 7, 1771, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:687-9.

⁶¹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:647, 655.

arms (presumably firearms, from the accounts of the battle), Tryon clearly knew that far more had failed to do so: “many of those that surrendered asserted that they were not in the battle, while others pretended to be in the battle without arms.”⁶² At least twenty-five guns were taken from the rebels immediately after the battle.⁶³

Morgan Edwards toured North Carolina the year following the battle. He described the results of the battle as 4,000 Regulators fighting 2,000 of Governor Tryon’s men, but that many shots hit no one: “lodging in the trees an incredible [*sic*] number of balls which the hunters have since picked out and killed more deer and turkies than they killed of their antagonists.”⁶⁴ Perhaps as Bellesiles claims, Americans were lousy shots, but since the weapons of the time were slow to reload single shot muskets and rifles, there must have been a *lot* of Regulators firing guns.

Another contemporary account, from the *Boston Gazette* of July, 1771, and more favorable to Tryon, similarly leads one to believe that the Regulators were well-armed, and with guns. It describes how, “the Almighty Ruler of Heaven and Earth could guide the Balls from the Rifles of the Regulators to fly over the Heads of our Troops in the Day of Battle, as they did by ten Thousands; which otherwise, as they were at least five Times the Number of our Troops, must have cut them off by Hundreds, and left the Field a dismal Scene of Blood and Carnage.”⁶⁵ The *Gazette’s* account would suggest that there was something rather miraculous about so many shots going astray. The Regulators might have been bad shots, but in the American context, this was regarded as miraculous, not the norm—and there were *lots* of guns being fired.

It would be foolish to claim to know how many of the Regulators were armed with guns. But as contemporary accounts make clear, the Regulators at that battle had, at a minimum,

⁶² August 1, 1771, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:649. See also 8:608-11, 613, 615-16, 637, 642, 647, 693, for other evidence that the Regulators were armed with guns, and this was not regarded as unusual.

⁶³ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:671.

⁶⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:655.

⁶⁵ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 8:615-6.

many hundreds of guns—or several percent of all the guns in the American colonies, according to Bellesiles.

Bellesiles's account of the Regulators is also remarkable because he claims that, "White Americans had long demonstrated a capacity for violence against Indians and blacks, but, at least in the Colonial period, indicated a remarkable hesitance to kill one another.... Political and social conflicts among whites almost never involved violence—until 1768. In that year English colonists exchanged deadly gunfire with other colonists for the first time."⁶⁶

This is a most amazing claim by Bellesiles, especially since he previously informs his reader of the Battle of Severn in 1655 Maryland, but his version of that battle—in which Royalist colonists seize public arms from the provincial armory, and are defeated by "well-trained troops from a Commonwealth ship"—and thus not colonists—does not match the eyewitness accounts that Bellesiles cites.⁶⁷

By eyewitness accounts, 200 to 250 men "mustered in Arms," on the Royalist side, and at least 120 on the Puritan side. The 120 on the Puritan side were not "well-trained troops from a Commonwealth ship," but local Marylanders. The ship on the Puritan side, contrary to Bellesiles's term "Commonwealth ship" was a merchant ship with cannon, not a naval vessel at all.

According to the Puritans, they commandeered the ship, claiming that they were acting under Parliamentary authority. According to the Royalists, the ship's captain was paid for his services. Neither side claimed that the ship, or those fighting on the Puritan side, were soldiers.⁶⁸

The Royalists had plundered many homes for guns and ammunition, "taking all the Guns, Powder, Shot, and Provision, they could anywhere finde," not "from the provincial armory"

⁶⁶ Bellesiles, 175.

⁶⁷ Bellesiles, 84.

⁶⁸ Leonard Strong, *Babylon's Fall in Maryland: a Fair Warning to Lord Baltimore...* (London: Leonard Strong, 1655), in Hall, 242; John Langford, *A Just and Cleere Refutation of a False and Scandalous Pamphlet Entitled Babylons Fall in Maryland...* (London: John Langford, 1655), in Hall, 266.

as Bellesiles claims. Dozens were killed or wounded. A Puritan account described how the Royalists had stripped the Country bare of men, “as also of Arms and Ammunition; the poor women urging this to them, What should they do if the Indians come upon them, being thus strip’d of men and Arms to defend them....”⁶⁹ A Royalist account does not dispute that they took “Arms from those of Patuxent,”⁷⁰ and no point even implies that public arms were used. This suggests that guns were regarded by at least the author, who lived in Maryland, as a normal and necessary part of one’s home.

None of the primary sources that Bellesiles cites for the claim that the Royalist used “public arms” seized from the “provincial armory”⁷¹ makes any reference to either; every reference to a gun seized by the Royalists is either silent as to its origin, or is explicit that the gun was seized from an individual’s home.⁷² The only public items seized by the Royalists were records, not guns.⁷³

Bellesiles’s depiction of Leisler’s overthrow of the government of New York in 1689 is similarly odd. He characterizes Leisler’s forces as armed with swords and clubs, based on one incident in which they drove four customs commissioners out of the customs collector’s office with swords, and the continuing use of the unspecific “arms” to refer to Leisler’s men being armed. In a like manner, Bellesiles’s description of Leisler’s men taking control of the fort, “They had hoped for a stockpile of English guns, but found instead... only fifteen useable cannon” and one barrel of gunpowder” gives the impression that Leisler’s men, before and after taking over the fort, had no guns.⁷⁴

It is certainly true that if the accounts of Leisler’s forces had only used the word “arms” it would be unclear if this included guns. Another account in Bellesiles’s source for this

⁶⁹ Strong, in Hall, 240-4 contains a Puritan account of the battle; Langford, in Hall, 260, provides a Cavalier version of events.

⁷⁰ Langford, in Hall, 261.

⁷¹ Bellesiles, 84.

⁷² *Virginia and Maryland, or The Lord Baltimore’s printed CASE...* (London: n.p. 1655), in Hall, 204; Strong, in Hall, 239-41.

⁷³ Strong, in Hall, 239.

⁷⁴ Bellesiles, 89.

incident describes how Leisler's men fired into the city, "whereby several of his Majesties Subjects were killed and wounded as they passed in the street..."⁷⁵ Other accounts in that same source, seeking to justify Leisler's actions, reduce the number killed by gunfire from Leisler's men, but do not dispute that it happened.⁷⁶

Yet another account in that same source, and this one that portrays Leisler very darkly, describes how men under Leisler's command went to him "and threatened to shoot him if he did not head them." (Leisler was believed to have contrived this threat by his men.) Other section describes how Leisler "sends severall Armed men, with no other warrant their Swords and Guns" to arrest a prominent merchant.⁷⁷ To assert that "arms" did not include guns in these accounts is disingenuous.

Bellesiles's depiction of Colonial America as a place where whites were almost never violent to whites seems hard to believe. While I was not looking specifically for such incidents, the Battle of Severn was not the only such example of political violence that I came across. The accounts of political violence, riot, and murder in Charleston between Dissenters and Anglicans in 1701/2 are still somewhat shocking today. Daniel Defoe quoted a petition to the England-based proprietors of Carolina: "some of the said Rioters, whilst the Riot was at the Church, went one Night to the House of John Smith, a Butcher in Charles Town; and there being a Woman big with Child in the said House, they with Force open'd the door, threw her down, and otherwise mis-used her, that she brought forth a dead Child, with the Back and Skull broken."⁷⁸

Disputes over the borderline between Pennsylvania and Maryland turned into deadly gunfire in 1736. "[A]n armed Force of about three hundred Men was sent up by our

⁷⁵ *A Letter From a Gentleman of the City of New-York To Another...* (New York: William Bradford, 1698), in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 369.

⁷⁶ *Loyalty Vindicated from the Reflections of a Virulent Pamphlet...* (Boston: n.p., 1698), in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 391.

⁷⁷ [Nicholas Bayard], *A Modest and Impartial Narrative Of several Grievances and Great Oppressions...* (London: 1690), in Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 333.

⁷⁸ Daniel Defoe, *Party-Tyranny, or an Occasional Bill in Miniature...* (London: n.p., 1705), in Salley, 244; John Ash, "The Present State of Affairs in Carolina," in Salley, 273-4.

Governor in a Hostile Manner....” Cressap, leading the Maryland forces, brought “a large Quantity of Arms and Ammunition.” By the time the dispute was over, at least one person had been killed by gunfire, apparently by one of Cressap’s men.⁷⁹ There is horror that lives were lost, but the presence of the guns is not worthy of special note.

Bellesiles certainly implies that the scarcity of gun violence in Colonial America was because guns were scarce. Since it is apparent that guns were not especially scarce—and pistols of various sorts appear pretty commonly—another explanation may be more appropriate. Misson de Valbourg’s 1695 description of the English love of fighting, after observing that even among adults, minor disputes would turn into fights with large crowds gathered to egg on the participants, made the point that, “They use neither sword nor stick against a man that is unarmed; and if any unfortunate stranger (for an Englishman would never take it into his head) should draw his sword upon one that had none, he’d have a hundred people upon him in a moment.”⁸⁰ A description of the riots in 1746 New Jersey quotes the rebels, “And that they were resolved [should] they be opposed by Fire Arms, to take up Fire Arms to defend themselves.”⁸¹ It would appear that the rebels had guns, and were prepared to use them only if guns were used against them; like the Englishmen that Misson de Valbourg described, there was a notion of proportionate response in the type of arms to be used. This might also explain the North Carolina Regulators limiting themselves to clubs in Colonel Spencer’s account, discussed on page 54.

Pennsylvania Governor Thomas’s efforts to persuade the Assembly to pass a militia law emphasizes that there will be little expense to the public in establishing a militia. There would be no need to raise even “One Shilling upon the People... and but little to each private Man, and much less if they are already Provided with Arms....”⁸² Thomas, of course, would have an interest in exaggerating the number of Pennsylvanians who already owned a

⁷⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:586-95.

⁸⁰ John Carey, ed., *Eyewitness to History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 192-3.

⁸¹ Hart, 2:83.

⁸² *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:700.

gun—but it does seem unlikely, if guns were actually quite scarce in Pennsylvania, that he would make an appeal based on the presumption that some significant number of the proposed militia were already armed.

There are *many* accounts from the Colonial period that mention guns, even pistols, in contexts that suggest that they were not considered particularly unusual items. A 1743 ad in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertised for the return of two runaway indentured servants. “They took with them two Guns, one long the other short...”⁸³ John Andrews’s 1773 description of the Boston Tea Party describes the “Indians” as, “Each was armed with a hatchet or axe or pair of pistols.”⁸⁴ There is no surprise that they are thus armed.

On June 4, 1774, the people of Hanover, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania met “to express their sentiments on the present critical state of affairs...” Among their resolves, “That in the event of Great Britain attempting to force unjust laws upon us by the strength of arms, our cause we leave to heaven and our rifles.”⁸⁵ It seems a strange construction, if guns were scarce in early America—and, as Bellesiles claims, more than half were British Army muskets, not rifles.

A loyalist account of mob violence just before the Revolution describes how, “At Worcester, a mob of about five thousand collected, prevented the court of Common Pleas from sitting, (about one thousand of them had fire-arms,)...”⁸⁶ According to Bellesiles, almost 5% of all the guns in Massachusetts, and 2.5% of all the guns in America were present at this *one* event in Worcester.

The Committee of Observation for Lancaster County on May 1, 1775, shortly after the start of the war, made some interesting resolutions that, at a minimum, suggest that guns were believed to be available for purchase: “it be most heartily recommended to the

⁸³ Hart, 2:300.

⁸⁴ John Andrews, “Another Account of the Tea Party” in Mabel and Hill, 166.

⁸⁵ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2nd series, 13:271.

⁸⁶ Hart, 459.

inhabitants of the county of Lancaster, immediately to associate and provide themselves with arms and ammunition....”⁸⁷

All of these accounts give evidence that guns were not unusual items in America, and strongly suggest that Bellesiles’s claim about 40,000 guns in America before the Revolution is far too low.

⁸⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives 2nd series*, 13:292.

Indians, Guns, and Colonial America

Bellesiles acknowledges that the Indians acquired guns from the Europeans quite quickly. Indeed, he asserts that the first “gun culture” in America was Indian, not European.¹ But even on this point, Bellesiles gives a number of examples of travelers reporting that guns were still quite rare among the Native Americans.²

It would be surprising indeed to find that the Indians were better armed with guns than the European settlers, since the Indians were completely dependent on European settlers and traders for guns and gunpowder. Furthermore, there were laws that intermittently sought to control or prevent the sale of guns and gunpowder to Indians. But how credibly one take Bellesiles’s claims draw about gun scarcity among the Indians when one finds a report such as Joseph B. Mayer’s *Flintlocks of the Iroquois: 1620-1687?*

Mayer examined 198 gun artifacts, focusing on “fifty-three more or less complete flintlocks of the period of c. 1620-1690, all recovered within twenty miles of the City of Rochester.” These guns are remarkable survivors because they were excavated from archaeological digs, unlike other “worn-out and obsolete guns [that] were like old shoes thrown away.”³ The collection of other gun artifacts found is also interesting, including five pistol butts, eleven trigger guards, thirty-six hammers, eleven barrels, and many other odds

¹ Generally, see Bellesiles’s chapter, “Creation of the First American Gun Culture: Indians and Firearms”, 111-141.

² Bellesiles, 134.

³ Joseph B. Mayer, *Flintlocks of the Iroquois: 1620-1687* (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, 1943), 5-6.

and ends.⁴ This enormous miscellany of parts suggests a probably even larger number of guns in Indian hands that were *not* found “more or less complete.”

Mayer also mentions a remarkable discovery in an Indian burial unearthed in 1934 in the Rochester area—a collection of 426 flintlock parts, that was “deposited at the back of the head and presumably was at one time the contents of a sack.” Many of the parts were in sufficiently good condition that they “were assembled into completely functioning locks with which muskets were fired.” Based on the design of the locks, and the number of them, Mayer suggests that the grave was an Indian gunsmith, operating “between 1650 and 1670,” although the lack of gunsmith’s tools in the grave raises questions as to how likely this was.⁵

Perhaps the Indians around Rochester were remarkably well armed. Perhaps the soil around Rochester is especially well suited to preservation of such artifacts, and an astonishingly high percentage of Indian guns of the period have been recovered. Or perhaps Bellesiles is wrong, and guns were not scarce among the Indians—or among the European settlers, either.

Certainly, Europeans were selling guns to the Indians. Danckaerts describes his difficulty in hiring a guide on the upper Delaware River, but eventually they found an Indian willing to do so for twenty-four guilders: “but he had a fowling-piece with him which he desired first to take and have repaired at Burlington, and would then come back.”⁶ Danckaerts complains about the immorality of the whites, selling alcohol to the Indians, and thus corrupting them: “for they all solicit the Indians as much as they can, and after begging their money from them, compel them to leave their blankets, leggings, and coverings of their bodies in pawn, yes, their guns and hatchets, the very instruments by which they obtain their subsistence.”⁷

One of Thomas Newe’s letters written in 1682 mentions one of the hostile Indian tribes of Carolina that had recently committed atrocities against the settlers. “There is a small party

⁴ Mayer, 18.

⁵ Mayer, 32-33.

⁶ Danckaerts, 149.

⁷ Danckaerts, 179-80.

of English out after them, and the most potent Kingdome of the Indians armed by us and continually in pursuit of them.”⁸ It doesn’t say, “armed by us with guns,” but it’s hard to imagine that the Indians were asking the English to supply them with bows.

Another account that suggests that Indians had become highly dependent on guns and gunpowder is “A Particular Account of the Revolution at Boston,” describing events in 1689. Defending Governor Andros’s actions to pacify the Indians, it describes how he “took from them... their powder, some pistols and Musquet barrels and about thirty of their Canons, whereby they were reduced to very great poverty and forc[ed] to the use of their bows and arrows again, soe that in a little time they must have rendered themselves to his Mercy...”⁹

Pennsylvania Archives is full of references to guns, gunpowder, lead, and flints being given to various Indian tribes as tokens of friendship during the colonial period. The quantities involved do not suggest that the Indians had few guns. One parcel delivered in 1728 contained 100 pounds of gunpowder, 200 pounds of lead, and 500 flints.¹⁰ Another parcel, delivered in 1736, included 100 pounds of gunpowder, 150 pounds of lead, and 200 flints.¹¹ In 1740, “Three Barrels of Gunpowder. Five Hundredweight of Lead... Three Guns. Five Hundred Flints.”¹² In 1742, “600 Lead. 600 Powder.... 1,000 Flints.... 24 Guns.”¹³

Less peaceful accounts suggest that both Indians and settlers were well-armed. One incident in 1728 starts out with “Eleven foreign Indians... armed with Guns, Pistoles and Swords were come amongst our Inhabitants, plundering them..... twenty men, with Arms, went to speak to them Civilly but the Indians fired upon them & wounded some of them; Our men likewise fired on the Indians & wounded some of them also, but the Indians fired

⁸ Thomas Newe, May 17, 1682, in Salley, 182.

⁹ Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 198.

¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:445.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:581.

¹² *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:746.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:794.

first.... [S]ome Hundreds mett together with their Arms to defend themselves in case the Indians should attack them.”¹⁴

In 1751, Benjamin Franklin suggested

Every one must approve the proposal of encouraging a Number of sober discreet Smiths to reside among the Indians. They would doubtless be of great Service. The whole Subsistance of Indians depends on keeping their guns in order; and if they are obliged to make a Journey of two or three hundred miles to an English Settlement to get a Lock mended; it may, besides the Trouble, occasion the Loss of their Hunting Season.¹⁵

Somehow, it is hard to imagine that the Indians were dependent on guns for subsistence if, as Bellesiles claims, guns were scarce among them. Perhaps Franklin did not accurately know the level of dependence of the Indians on guns; but at least it suggests that Franklin thought that there were “a Number” of gunsmiths available that could be encouraged to live among the Indians in 1751; this does not suggest a scarcity of either guns or gunsmiths in Colonial America.

The archaeological record also suggests that guns were very common among Indians in the colonial period. According to Charles Heath, an archaeologist with the Center for the Environmental Management of Military Lands at Colorado State University:

As a professional archaeologist, I have conducted archaeological fieldwork in various capacities (e.g., graduate assistant, project or site director, etc.) on Colonial period, Antebellum period and Postbellum period Euro-American and Native-American sites in eastern North Carolina. Beyond my personal fieldwork experience, and perhaps more significantly, I am familiar with published archaeological literature on many previously excavated historic sites located in the Middle-Atlantic and Southeast geographic regions of the United States. Anyone who concludes that firearms ownership or firearms access was not generally ubiquitous in eastern North America during the colonial era, or in later time periods for that matter, is essentially ignorant of the archaeological record.

In my experience, it is readily evident that ammunition and firearms related accoutrements (e.g., gun parts, gunflints, percussion caps, etc.), as well as faunal remains from hunted game, are quite common in artifact assemblages recovered from the historic period archaeological sites (ca. 1584-1860) where I have worked. I actually find it somewhat unusual when at least some quantities of such materials are not recovered from either Colonial or post-Colonial period habitation sites, be they Euro-American, Native-American, or even enslaved African-American sites. Although firearms related artifacts may be more common on “frontier” or rural sites (I have not actually conducted comparative statistical analyses), I have even recovered weapons related accoutrements (e.g., ammunition and gunflints) from early 19th

¹⁴ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4th series, 1:445-6.

¹⁵ Franklin, 4:121.

century, middle-class urban sites. I recently canvassed several colleagues about this issue and they generally concur with my observations. A cursory review of archaeological site reports, journal articles and books that describe historic period material culture recovered from sites ranging from Delaware down to Florida further confirms my general observations.

I should also note that I have conducted excavations on several post-Contact period Native-American sites (Tuscarora and Carolina Algonkian habitation sites, ca. 1650-1760) in eastern North Carolina where firearms, gun parts, ammunition and other related accoutrements are commonly recovered. It defies logic to suggest that European settlers, who actively participated in the "global economy" of the Colonial period -- as actively, if not more so than their Indian neighbors -- could not afford to purchase the same European produced weapons that were traded to the Indians in return for deerskins or other animal pelts.

While there were no major weapons production facilities in colonial North America, any local blacksmith with basic skills could repair European produced weapons or forge and fit replacement parts. Archaeologists often find "spare" trade gun parts on 17th and 18th century Indian habitation sites in the Southeast and Middle-Atlantic regions of North America. The presence of such parts certainly suggests that Native-Americans quickly developed the basic weapons maintenance and repair skills necessary to keep their firearms functional for hunting, raiding, or defense. European produced firearms, particularly export guns shipped to North America for the Indian trade, were readily available and comparatively inexpensive.

As indicated by the archaeological record, firearms seem to have been commonly possessed and frequently used for various purposes by ethnically diverse peoples during both the Colonial and Antebellum periods in eastern North America. While there are certainly exceptions to my generalizations, it appears to me, in my limited experience, that any claim which suggests firearms were not commonly owned or used in Colonial America is problematic.

Perhaps some future interdisciplinary study of the problem from a combined archaeological and historical perspective might shed additional light on this controversial issue.¹⁶

The ball is back in Professor Bellesiles's court; if we wishes to argue that even the Indians had few guns, there are too many documents and archaeological digs that must be explained away.

¹⁶ Charles Heath to author, March 20, 2001.

Gun Scarcity in Revolutionary New England

Bellesiles claims that there were very few guns in the American colonies at the outbreak of the American Revolution, partly because Americans had little interest or need for guns, and partly because there was effectively no manufacturing of guns in the United States. Of the guns that were here, Bellesiles claims that most had been supplied by the British government for military purposes: “Most of the guns in private and public hands came from the twenty thousand Brown Besses supplied by the British government during the Seven Years’ War.”¹ (We will keep repeating this sentence, because it is so clearly wrong.)

A contemporary account—and not a friendly one to America—tells us that in the latter part of 1774, “the inhabitants of the middle and southern colonies began to arm themselves individually... But the business of arming and putting the country in a state of defence was now taken up by the provincial conventions...”² Perhaps Stedman refers only to swords, pitchforks, and pikes. But in conjunction with Stedman’s remarks about the accuracy of American marksmen (see page 9), this seems implausible. Stedman seemed to think that Americans were capable of arming themselves individually. This does not suggest a scarcity of guns in America.

¹ Bellesiles, 183.

² Stedman, 1:115.

Massachusetts

Bellesiles claims that, immediately before the American Revolution, “Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people.”³ If “most of the guns” in America were from the 20,000 Brown Besses,⁴ then there could not have been more than 40,000 guns in all of America—and more than half were in Massachusetts!

Bellesiles does not directly say that this included all privately owned firearms, but in conjunction with the rest of his discussion of the rarity of privately owned firearms, this is the clear implication.⁵ Bellesiles’s source for this claim is an inventory of “Warlike Stores in Massachusetts, 1774” contained in the *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*. But that inventory, dated April 14, 1775, does not tell us what categories of privately owned firearms were counted. Certainly, it includes stockpiles owned by towns.⁶ But does it include all privately owned arms as well?

The sources that Bellesiles lists for this arms census are largely silent as to what categories of firearms were counted. None of the pages that Bellesiles lists tell us that *all* privately owned firearms were included in that inventory. The only information in Bellesiles’s sources that describes this arms census are directives to a committee gathering the information. One, on February 13, 1775, directed a committee to inquire “into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress.”⁷ The following day, the resolve is made more explicit: the inquiry is “the state of the militia” and directs that “an exact state of the their numbers and

³ Bellesiles, 181. From where Bellesiles drew this population figure is an excellent question. *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 755, reports a population of 349,094 (including 5,249 blacks) in 1776; the 1790 census shows 378,556, consistent with the *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.* figure, but not with Bellesiles.

⁴ Bellesiles, 183.

⁵ Bellesiles, 181.

⁶ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 756.

⁷ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 98.

equipments” be taken—not a comprehensive census of arms of the entire Massachusetts population.⁸

Another order on March 22, 1775, directed a committee “to receive the returns of the several officers of militia, of their numbers and equipage, and the returns from the several towns of their town stock of ammunition.”⁹ This seems to confirm that only military weapons possessed by enrolled militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted. There is nothing that indicates that all privately owned arms in Massachusetts were counted.

The evidence from Bellesiles’s own sources suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the arms census recorded only a small part of all firearms in the province. On October 25, 1774, a committee “appointed to take into consideration and determine what number of ordnance, [and what] quantity of powder and ordnance stores will be necessary for the province stock” came up with a fairly extensive and expensive wish list, including twenty cannon, four mortars, “10 tons bomb-shells,” one thousand barrels of powder, 75,000 flints—and only “5,000 arms and bayonets,” at £2 each.¹⁰

It seems a bit odd, if guns were actually quite scarce just before the Revolution, that the elected government of Massachusetts, which seemed painfully aware of their need for artillery, gunpowder, and flints, would conclude that 5,000 “arms and bayonets” would be sufficient for a province with almost 350,000 people, and only 21,549 guns. If, as Bellesiles claims, there were very few guns in Massachusetts, from where was the Provincial Congress planning to buy 5,000 guns? Perhaps this was just wishful thinking on their part?

If so, the wishful thinking kept going. An entry for October 27, 1774 directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be “properly and effectually armed and equipped” and that “if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law” the town was to arm them.¹¹ These resolutions are repeated at later times in similar form, sometimes limited

⁸ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 99.

⁹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 109.

¹⁰ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 30.

¹¹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 34.

to militiamen and Minutemen,¹² other times addressed to all the “inhabitants of this colony....”¹³ If guns were really in such short supply, as Bellesiles claims, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn’t have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve?

If guns were scarce, from whom were the local governments buying guns? The town of Lunenburg “assembled in legal town-meeting, and voted £100... for the purpose of purchasing fire-arms with bayonets, and other implements of war....”¹⁴ Perhaps the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, and the Lunenburg town meeting, did not know that guns were scarce.

Other pages in the Provincial Congress’s journals show quite clearly that firearms were *not* scarce. A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775:

Whereas, *a few* of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements;

Resolved, That the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this colony be, and hereby are, directed and empowered to examine into the state of the equipment of such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as are, or may be, enlisted into the service of this colony, and where any are deficient in arms or accoutrements, as aforesaid, it is recommended to the selectmen to supply them out of the town stock, and *in case of a deficiency there, to apply to such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as, in their opinions, can best spare their arms or accoutrements*, and to borrow or purchase the same for the use of said inhabitants so enlisted: and the selectmen are also directed to take a bill from such persons as shall sell their arms and accoutrements, in the name of this colony....¹⁵ [emphasis added]

Not “most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service” are without firearms; not “many”; not “some” but “a few”—and it isn’t clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or “accoutrements” (for example, cartridge pouches). Perhaps the committee was deluded about how scarce guns were in their time and place.

¹² *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 48, 71.

¹³ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 103.

¹⁴ *Essex Gazette*, January 17, 1775, quoted in Frothingham, 43 n.1.

¹⁵ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 209-10.

Harold L. Peterson's discussion of American-made guns points out that while every man was required to own a gun by the militia laws, there was little uniformity of weapons, other than the requirement that it be a flintlock, leading to an interesting characteristic of American militia weapons:

The average colonist could not afford to own a selection of guns, and so he normally chose one which would serve him well in hunting and also pass inspection on muster days. Thus the distinction between military and sporting arms is almost lost. Some examples of each, of course, are quite obvious, but a great many fall in between and are known to collectors generally as "semi-military." These arms are usually sturdy pieces. Their caliber varies normally between .70 and .75. They do not have sling swivels, and since a man was allowed his choice between a sword and a bayonet, they usually do not have bayonet studs.¹⁶

One account of the Battle of Bunker Hill refers to "the few who had bayonets" as distinguished from the mass of the militia.¹⁷ There are also a few discussions in the months before the Battle of Lexington that discuss procuring and protecting bayonets, but no similar discussion of muskets upon which to mount those bayonets. One resolve in particular is emphatic that the Provincial Congress "possess themselves of all the same bayonets and implements of war" to be distributed "for the use of the province, to such persons... as they shall think proper."¹⁸ It seems most unlikely that firearms were less important than bayonets. It appears that the energies of the Provincial Congress were more focused on acquiring an accessory only useful for muskets, than on acquiring muskets.

If, as Bellesiles claims, the militia were largely armed with military muskets supplied and owned by the British government, it is a little strange that only a few militiamen had bayonets. But if most militia were armed with privately owned "semi-military" muskets that lacked bayonet lugs, then this lack of bayonets at Bunker Hill is not a surprise.

As the Revolutionary War continued, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress again discusses the need to arm those soldiers "who are destitute of arms," but there is no

¹⁶ Peterson, 179; James Whisker, *The Gunsmith's Trade* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 164, takes essentially the same position.

¹⁷ Frothingham, 148.

¹⁸ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 41, 50, 97.

indication that this was a problem of great concern.¹⁹ If there were a serious shortage of firearms or ammunition for the militia, as Bellesiles claims, it seems strange that the Provincial Congress on June 17, 1775 (almost two months after Redcoats fired on Minutemen at Lexington) recommended to non-militia members “living on the sea coasts, or within twenty miles of them, that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship.”²⁰ Somehow, there was a shortage of guns and ammunition for the militiamen, but non-militia members still had enough arms and ammunition that they were encouraged to bring them to all public meetings.

Were guns rare in colonial Massachusetts, as Bellesiles claims? If so, you would expect the value of guns to be high, especially once the Revolutionary War started, and there was no way to import more guns from Europe. (Bellesiles claims that there were almost no guns made in the colonies—a claim that will be thoroughly demolished in later chapters.)²¹

The Provincial Congress of Massachusetts bought weapons from many private owners in the first few months of the war, sometimes purchasing as many as 100 weapons in a single transaction. Interestingly enough, they appear not to have seized these weapons, but repeatedly appealed to the patriotism of private gun owners.²² The *Journals* has records of at least 482 guns, “fire-arms,” and “small arms” purchased from private parties by the Provincial Congress for which both a count and total price was recorded.²³ (There are other transactions totaling 148 small arms or guns for which a total price is not recorded.)²⁴

The average appraised value of these guns and small arms comes to £1:19:10. Perhaps some of these weapons contained in transactions labeled “small arms” were actually pikes or

¹⁹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 332.

²⁰ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 348-49.

²¹ Bellesiles, 188-91.

²² *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 210, 336-37.

²³ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 536-37, 584-93.

²⁴ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 584 (107 “small arms”); 585 (13 “guns”); 591 (28 “guns, for the use of the colony, collected by order of Congress”).

swords; let's give the benefit of the doubt to Bellesiles, only look at transactions labeled "fire-arms" or "guns," and assume that *none* of the weapons in the transactions labeled "small arms" were guns. Even the "fire-arms" and "guns" transactions (total of 240 guns) show an average price of £1:19:8—not a trivial amount of money for the time, but less than a sergeant's monthly wages in the Massachusetts army,²⁵ less than one-third the price of a suit.²⁶ If guns were scarce, it doesn't show up in their valuation.

If the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts were desperately short of arms for its soldiers, one might expect them to have used their power of eminent domain to obtain privately owned firearms. Instead, the private owners were told, "[I]t is strongly recommended to such inhabitants..., that they supply the colony with same."²⁷ A request of June 15, 1775 for individuals to sell their arms is also phrased in terms that seem quite voluntary. "*Resolved*, that any person or persons, who may have such to sell, shall receive so much for them, as the selectmen of the town or district in which or they may dwell, shall appraise such arms at...."²⁸ Perhaps there was some veiled threat contained in those seemingly voluntary requests, but if so, it is well-hidden.

Another piece of evidence about gun scarcity in Massachusetts is the stock of arms surrendered by the people of Boston to British General Gage. In the days after Lexington and Concord, General Gage was understandably nervous about being attacked from the rear by armed rebels. Many Bostonians were also deeply interested in leaving town, both because of the increasing poverty caused by the Boston Port Act of 1774, and the increasing

²⁵ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 413. Throughout this book, I use the notation with two colons for pounds, shillings, pence, both because it is simpler and because it was used in at least some contemporary documents. Due to ambiguities in the original documents, it is sometimes unclear whether these currency amounts are pounds sterling or the local currency of each colony. The reader is cautioned against comparing gun prices between colonies. The joy I experienced creating a spreadsheet to correctly perform arithmetic on pounds, shillings, and pence is yet another argument for the adoption of decimal currency!

²⁶ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 692.

²⁷ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 210.

²⁸ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 336-37.

likelihood that the rebel army would attack Boston. General Gage consequently ordered the people of Boston to turn in their arms.

As an incentive, General Gage offered passes to leave Boston to all who turned in their weapons—and no weapons or ammunition were allowed to leave Boston. The arms were to be “marked with the names of the respective owners...that the arms aforesaid, at a suitable time, would be returned to the owners.” The marking of the arms demonstrates that these were personally owned, not public arms. On April 27th, “the people delivered to the selectman 1778 fire-arms, 634 pistols, 973 bayonets, and 38 blunderbusses....”²⁹ (Bellesiles, however, simply leaves out the pistols and blunderbusses when he claims that Gage captured or expropriated “1,778 of these in the immediate aftermath of the Concord campaign.”³⁰ He lists the pistols and blunderbusses in the endnote,³¹ showing that he knows that there were a lot more firearms in Massachusetts than he is choosing to count.)

Here we find an interesting issue of definition that might explain *some* of Bellesiles’s many mistakes. The term “fire-arm” was distinguished from “pistols” and “blunderbusses”—both of which would be considered “firearms” in the modern sense. Similarly, an 1806 Congressional committee report used the phrase “fire arms and rifles,”³² suggesting that “fire arm” may have been used in a narrower sense than “firearm” is used today. Was there a colloquial sense that a “fire arm” meant a military musket? If so, this usage does not appear in the OED.³³ (In the interests of darity, “firearm” in this work, except when quoted, is always used in the modern, inclusive sense of the word.)

At first glance, this count of firearms doesn’t sound so impressive: 2,450, in a town that had, before the Boston Port Act, a population of 17,000 people or less.³⁴ If averaged over the

²⁹ Frothingham, 94-95.

³⁰ Bellesiles, 181.

³¹ Bellesiles, 505 n.29.

³² United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.

³³ J. A. Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 5:948.

³⁴ Frothingham, 19.

entire population, this would mean that 14.4% of the population owned a gun. But this overlooks several important qualifiers.

First of all, many Bostonians had left town in the weeks before Lexington, as it became increasingly apparent that war was coming.³⁵ Ammunition, military stores, muskets, and even publicly owned cannon “were carried secretly out of Boston.”³⁶ The quantities involved seemed to have been quite large; Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie’s diary describes one amusing example:

A Country man was Stopped at the Lines, going out of town with 19,000 ball Cartridges, which were taken from him. When liberated, he had the insolence to go to Head quarters to demand the redelivery of them. When asked who they were for, he said they were for his own use; and on being refused them, he said he could not help it, but they were the last parcel of a large quantity which he had carried out at different times. Great numbers of Arms have been carried out of town during the Winter; and if more strict search had been made at the Lines, many of them, and much Ammunition might have been seized.³⁷

It seems unlikely that rebel forces would have left large numbers of guns in Boston, where they would be most easily seized by British soldiers, and even less likely that Loyalists would have removed their guns to the countryside. The count of guns surrendered to General Gage must therefore be regarded as only a *part* of the guns that had been in Boston before the crisis began. Furthermore, General Gage’s proclamation of June 19, 1775 complained that contrary to the claims of the selectmen of Boston that “all the inhabitants had delivered up their fire-arms” he had suspected, and now had proof, “that many had been perfidious in this respect, and had secreted great numbers.”³⁸

If Gage’s claim was accurate—and not just an excuse by him to keep civilians from leaving Boston, the 2,450 firearms (in the modern sense of the word) surrendered on April 27th were probably not just a fraction of the privately owned weapons that had been in Boston before the Battle of Lexington; they were probably a fraction of the privately owned

³⁵ Frothingham, 54-55.

³⁶ Frothingham, 15. See Mackenzie, 31-33, 39-40, for accounts of gun smuggling out of Boston, and soldiers court-martialed and convicted for selling guns and gunlocks “to the Country people.”

³⁷ Mackenzie, 42.

³⁸ Frothingham, 208.

weapons that had been in Boston on April 27th, when Gage ordered the people of Boston to turn in their guns.

How many guns were there in Boston on April 27, 1775? How many were there in Boston on April 27, 1774? To make any claim at all is just guessing; we can only say that 2,450 firearms is a bare minimum. It does seem like a good guess that if Gage was both telling the truth and correct, he wasn't upset because just a *few* guns were still in hiding. It also seems unlikely that only a few privately owned guns left Boston before the Battle of Lexington.

Finally, it is important to look at an important set of demographic differences between Boston in 1775 and any American city today that makes a 14.4 percent gun ownership rate misleading. Families were larger, and the average lifespan was substantially shorter than today. At least some part of the population were slaves. The number of free adult males (those most likely to possess a gun for either hunting or militia duty) was a relatively smaller percentage of the population than today. A town of 17,000 people today would have about 5000 households, and perhaps 3000 male heads of household. Boston likely had less than 2500 households, and perhaps as little as 2000 to 2200 male heads of household. Using Madison's formula for guessing the number of those "able to bear arms" in *Federalist 46* would suggest that no more than 4,250 Bostonians would have qualified as members of the militia. The surrender of 2,450 guns suddenly seems quite impressive—enough guns to arm more than half of the militia were surrendered to a British general by a population that would have been overwhelmingly suspicious of his actions.

We have other anecdotal evidence that suggests that guns were readily available, and that there were enough of them that many people other than the enrolled militia were armed. The baggage train of the British soldiers marching towards Concord had only twelve men guarding it. On the road, "about a dozen of the elderly men of Menotomy, exempts [from militia duty] mostly, assembled near the center of the village and awaited the arrival of the baggage train...." They shot and killed two British soldiers, wounded several others, took the

rest prisoner, captured the baggage train, and obliterated all marks of the struggle from the road. There is nothing that identifies how many of these non-militiamen had guns, but the implication is that many of them did, if not all.³⁹ It seems unlikely that twelve British soldiers could be rendered dead, wounded, or captured if only one or two of their attackers had guns.

There were other individual attacks on British soldiers by non-militiamen with guns. “Jason Russell, aged fifty-eight years” unsuccessfully defended his home from British soldiers on the Concord road with a gun.⁴⁰ “Samuel Whittemore, aged eighty years,” upon seeing British soldiers marching towards Concord, prepared by oiling “his musket and pistols and sharpening his sword.” When the soldiers returned,

Whittemore had posted himself behind a stone wall, down Mystic Street about four hundred and fifty feet.... The distance seemed an easy range for him, and he opened fire, killing the soldier he aimed at. They must have discovered his hiding place from the smoke-puff, and hastened to close in on him. With one pistol he killed the second Briton, and with his other fatally wounded a third one. In the meantime, the ever vigilant flank guard were attracted to the contest, and a ball from one of their muskets struck his head and rendered him unconscious. They rushed to the spot, and clubbed him with their muskets and pierced him with their bayonets until they felt sure he was dead.... Whittemore lived eighteen more years, dying in 1793 at the age of ninety-eight.⁴¹

As the retreat reached Somerville, “James Miller, about sixty-six years old, stood there awaiting the British. With him was a companion, and both fired with deadly effect, again and again, as the British marched by in the road below.”⁴²

In Charlestown, the opening shot of a gun battle involving British troops retreating from Concord was described by Mercy Tufts Boylston as started when, “A careless, excited [N]egro discharged his musket....” The British troops returned fire, killing Mrs. Boylston’s cousin.⁴³

³⁹ Frank Warren Coburn, *The Battle of April 19, 1775*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: n.p. 1922; reprinted Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 119-20. Abram English Brown, *Beneath Old Roof Trees* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1896), 252-4 tells roughly the same story, though Brown’s book is based almost entirely on oral histories collected from *grandchildren* of the participants, and should be regarded with skepticism accordingly.

⁴⁰ Coburn, 139-40.

⁴¹ Coburn, 141-42. Brown, 262-3, recounts much the same story, but along with the stories told by Whittemore’s descendants, Brown also quotes Whittemore’s February 6, 1793 *Columbia Sentinel* obituary, which reports very nearly the same facts as Coburn.

⁴² Coburn, 151-52.

⁴³ Brown, 306-7.

If guns were in scarce supply, how was that a black person, by law not a member of the militia, was carrying a musket?

Brown's romantic and sentimental retelling of family traditions (and therefore, perhaps less trustworthy than first-hand accounts) also tells of the Thompson family. Samuel Thompson, the eldest of three brothers told his fifteen year-old son Jonathan to stay home and take care of his mother, while Samuel went off to fight the British. "But the father had hardly gone before the boy borrowed an old musket and a horn of powder... and thus armed and equipped, he, too, set off for Concord."⁴⁴

It is certainly true that the plural of anecdote is not data; a collection of such examples does not give us much evidence of the number of the guns in private hands. But it does raise serious questions as to whether it is credible that guns were scarce, when so many examples of non-militiamen turning out to fire at retreating British soldiers have been preserved.

There were 3,763 militiamen who turned out along the road to Concord to fight against 1,800 British soldiers on April 19, 1775. Bellesiles claims that many of the militiamen were not armed with guns, and many that were armed did not fire, making the British casualties of 273 not terribly impressive evidence of American marksmanship.⁴⁵

How many of the 3,763 militiamen had guns? If Bellesiles is correct, and some large number were unarmed, then the British casualties become more impressive, and makes unpersuasive Bellesiles's claim:

Expert marksmanship requires training, good equipment, and a regular supply of ammunition for practice. These farmers rarely practiced, generally had no ammunition, and owned old muskets, not rifles, if they owned a gun at all.⁴⁶

If the militiamen were not well armed, as Bellesiles claims, then the high British casualty rate shows considerable shooting or tactical skill. If, as seems more likely, nearly all of these militiamen showed up with guns, it suggests that the count of 21,549 guns in the entire

⁴⁴ Brown, 315.

⁴⁵ Bellesiles, 174. Coburn, 159, uses 3,733 for his count of American militiamen, 1,800 for the British soldiers involved in the operation.

⁴⁶ Bellesiles, 174.

province is unlikely, because it would mean that more than 15 percent of the guns of the province—and eight percent of all the guns in the American colonies—were close enough to the Concord road to reach it in a few hours!

In his effort to denigrate the military value of the militias, Bellesiles has forced himself to choose between a well armed but unskilled militia, or highly skilled, but poorly armed militia. A poorly armed and poorly skilled militia would not have generated the terror among the British officers that they did.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire also believed that there were firearms in private hands. On January 23, 1776, the New Hampshire House of Representatives voted that “Deacon Nahum Baldwin receive out of the Treasury thirty-five Pounds, to purchase Fire-Arms for this Colony....”⁴⁷ The small quantity of money provided, especially since New Hampshire was prepared to pay three pounds each for newly manufactured muskets,⁴⁸ suggests at least two alternative explanations. One possibility is that New Hampshire needed to purchase relatively few firearms for its militia. Another possibility is that used firearms were very, very inexpensive—dramatically cheaper than in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Neither possibility indicates a scarcity of guns.

Professor Bellesiles claims that guns were in scarce supply in America, and is prepared to misrepresent the substance of documents in the case of Massachusetts. The evidence is clear that guns were not particularly scarce in Massachusetts, and if they were scarce in New Hampshire, you would not know it from the manner in which the legislature attempted to procure arms for their militia.

⁴⁷ *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:16.

⁴⁸ *American Archives* 4th series, 5:7-8.

Gun Scarcity in the Revolutionary Middle Colonies

Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, guns were also not scarce. A minute of July 4, 1775 of the Committee of Safety directs the committee in charge of obtaining gunpowder and saltpeter to “procure at the same time two thousand Stand of good Fire Arms.”¹ It is not clear whether this was new manufacture, or existing privately owned guns. It demonstrates that the Committee of Safety, unless it was partial to passing impossible resolutions, believed that there were private firearms out there that they would be able to purchase, or manufacture.

Indeed, we have a few records indicating that the Committee of Safety, like the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, purchased existing firearms, along with contracting for new manufacture (discussed starting on page 203). While some of these purchases are for definite amounts, others are unspecific as to the number of firearms purchased, or the total price paid.² The most that we can say is that of these purchases is that a minimum of 189 firearms were purchased at an average price of £2:14:5, with many hundreds of pounds spent for firearms in other transactions. This price is hardly evidence of guns being scarce.

¹ July 4, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1970) (hereinafter *Col.Rec.Penn.*), 10:233.

² February 7, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:478; February 9, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:481; April 9, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:537; April 10, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:537; July 30, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:471; July 24, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:653; August 23, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:698. November 29, 1775, *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1852) (hereinafter *Min.Sup.Penn.*), 10:416-7, 10:550-1, 686-7, 700.

There are requests for guns that suggest that while not everyone owned a gun, poverty was the principal reason, and that the officers making these requests believed that guns were available for the asking—and even available for purchase, if you had the money. Two officers named Trench Francis and Bache “made application to this Board for 30 or 40 Rifle Barrel Guns, for a Number of Men in their Company who have not Rifles, neither can they afford to purchase them.” The Committee of Safety responded by directing Robert Morris to provide “Eighty good Rifles” for Francis and Bache’s men.³

A few months later there is another indication that while the Pennsylvania government was concerned that gunsmiths were in short supply, guns themselves were still available for purchase.

The Committee of Safety are of opinion, that it is not improper for Mr. James Innes to purchase any second hand Arms which he may find in the hands of Individuals of this Province, and therefore have no objection to his buying them; But as they have employed, and are endeavouring to employ, all the Artificers that can be procured in making new arms for the public, they apprehend any application by Mr. Innes to such Artificers, will be attended with bad consequences to the general Cause by enhancing the Price of arms....⁴

Similarly, when Brigadier General McKinley asked for permission to purchase fifty rifles in Lancaster, the Council of Safety granted it.⁵ Colonel William Irvine of the 6th Pennsylvania Battalion informed John Hancock on March 22, 1776, “Many of the arms are old, and want bayonets and other repairs.... I have been obliged to purchase many rifles, but they, I presume, may be changed for muskets, should the service require it....”⁶

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that if guns were in scarce supply, the people who lived in Pennsylvania didn’t know it. The Liberty Company of Londonderry, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, organized itself on May 17, 1775, with ninety privates on its muster roll. Among its articles, “That each Person of the Company shall (if not already done) as soon as possible, provide, himself with a good Gun or Musket, in good order and repair....”⁷ There

³ July 17, 1775, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:288.

⁴ November 30, 1775, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 418.

⁵ July 20, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:651.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th series, 2:194.

⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th series, 2:4-7.

are a number of references in 1775 and 1776 to the enlisting of soldiers in Pennsylvania that are explicit that they were “to find their own arms and clothes.”⁸

Colonel Irvine’s letter of March 22, 1776 to John Hancock describes how his battalion suffers from old guns, “and want bayonets and other repairs.... I have been obliged to purchase many rifles, but they, I presume, may be changed for muskets, should the service require it....”⁹ It would appear that Irvine purchased these guns privately, and were not supplied by the government. Clearly, there were enough rifles in private hands to purchase.

An entity calling itself the Association of Inhabitants of Donegal, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, complained about those not prepared to join the patriot Association, “some for scruple of conscience, some for the loss of time and expenses, and others being disaffected at the cause....” They asked the Lancaster Committee of Observation, Inspection, and Correspondence to compel those who would not join to pay “for the finding of arms and other accessories to those who are willing to do it, who are not of ability to provide themselves with such.”

Significantly for the question of whether guns were available or not, “We request of you that it be allowed that all the landholders and farmers in the County of Lancaster be obliged to find at least one good gun each, and that every other person, who is judged by the Committee to be of ability, likewise find a good gun, whether they be joined in Association or not. This will put the county in a state of defence.”¹⁰ Even as late as July of 1776, there were enough firearms in private hands to make such a demand, and expect that it would be considered a plausible request.

⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th series, 1:4, 2:56.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th series, 2:194.

¹⁰ July 12, 1776, “Lancaster Committee,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:221.

New York

Similarly, the New York Provincial Congress seems to have thought that firearms were available for purchase from private citizens. There *were* localized shortages of arms once troops had been armed and sent off to fight. Orange County sent a letter to the Provincial Congress on February 9, 1776, in which they indicated that they could raise more soldiers, “but think it will out of their power to arm any considerable part of the men they raise, on account of the quantity they furnished last year – none of which have been returned, and must therefore leave that matter with Congress....”¹¹

But the general picture, especially at the very beginning of the war, shows that guns were *not* scarce. On May 30, 1775, the New York Provincial Congress recommended “to the Inhabitants of this Colony in general, immediately to furnish themselves with necessary Arms & Ammunition....”¹² On August 22, 1775, it ordered “That every man between the ages of 16 and 50 do with all convenient speed furnish himself with a good Musket or firelock” and provided for a fine “of five shillings for the want of a musket or firelock....” Every man “shall at his place of abode be also provided with one pound of powder and three pounds of bullets of proper size to his musket or firelock.”

Calvarymen were obligated to provide themselves with a horse, saddle, “a case of pistols... one pound of gunpowder and 3 lbs. Of sizeable bullets,... and a carabine....” Like the infantry, calvarymen were to “be provided... with 1 lb of pow[d]er and 3 lbs of bullets.” While not explicit as to who would provide the gunpowder and bullets, it is clear that all men ages 16 to 50 were to provide *themselves* with either a long gun or “a case of pistols.”

There were some men who were too poor to buy themselves “Arms, Am[m]unition, and Accoutrements” and these were to be purchased for them out of fines imposed on those who

¹¹ February 12, 1776, *Proceedings of the Provincial Congress*, in Berthold Fernow, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1887; reprinted New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1969) (hereinafter *Col.Hist.NY*), 15:57; March 13, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:83.

¹² May 30, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:5.

failed to report for militia duty.¹³ Suffolk County reported on February 5, 1776, that there were “poor men in this County, who are good Soldiers and friends to the Cause... but have no guns – we should be glad to know if a number can be procured at the public Expense for such persons as are unable to purchase them.”¹⁴

A letter sent to the counties on February 18, 1776 seems to have dealt with this question: “It is expected that each man furnishes himself with a good Gun and Bayonet...but those who are not able to furnish these arms and accoutrements, will be supplied at the public expense....” The cost would be deducted out of each soldier’s monthly pay “till the whole are paid for, then they are to remain the property of the men.”¹⁵

A directive of March 21, 1776 to the commander of the 2nd Battalion indicated that there were at least some privates that “cannot be supplied with Arms immediately,” and should therefore be put to work on fortifications. The use of the word “immediately” suggests that this was not a general problem of New York, but specific to a particular battalion’s location.¹⁶ Poverty might disarm a man, but if guns were *generally* in short supply, Suffolk County and the Provincial Congress were not aware of it.

A minute of April 18, 1776, reports that Colonel Ritzema requested that the government supply “Arms for some of the Men” of his regiment “who are destitute.”¹⁷ That Ritzema’s request was carried out suggests that guns were readily available; only those who were “destitute” could not purchase a gun of their own.

Bellesiles argues that many laws were passed in the early martial enthusiasm that could not be carried out. Indeed, we find a few months later some revisions to the militia law reflecting the reality of the times—but these revisions seem not to be driven by a shortage of guns. The December 20, 1775 revision specified “that no man shall be fined for want of

¹³ August 22, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:31-32.

¹⁴ February 5, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:54.

¹⁵ February 18, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:67.

¹⁶ March 21, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:89.

¹⁷ April 18, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:95.

powder and ball, who shall produce a receipt from his Captain of his having deposited in his hand Six Shillings and Nine pence for the purchase of these articles.” Demonstrating that bayonets were in short supply, “That it be earnestly recommended to every man in the Militia, to provide himself with a bayonet properly fitted to his musket or firelock.”

There are, however, no changes to the requirements that every member of the militia provide himself with firearms. Indeed, as evidence that firearms were *not* in short supply, a new provision specifies, “That although persons above 50 years of age are not required to be enrolled in the Militia, yet is most earnestly recommended to them, that they be respectively provided with arms, accoutrements & ammunition, as though they were required to be enrolled.”¹⁸

One would expect, if guns were in short supply in New York at the start of hostilities, that they would have all been snapped up as late as July 23, 1776. Yet on this date, the Provincial Congress directed the hiring of seventy-five soldiers to protect vessels and stores at Albany. They were to “furnish themselves each with a Gun or Musket...”¹⁹ Similar orders appear on August 29, 1776 and July 17, 1777.²⁰

The Provincial Congress also gave orders June 28, 1775, to its commissary, Peter T. Curtenius, to order up cloth for uniforms, “1000 Stand of Arms,” 20,000 flints, 8000 pounds of lead, cartridge paper, tents, and other army gear.²¹ But did they get the arms? A letter sent to New York’s delegates at the Continental Congress reported that they had successfully armed four regiments, though not all with military arms. “The first and second Regiments and some part of the other Regiments are armed with the best of muskets and bayonets and the others with firelocks of the widest bore, which could be found, repaired where it was necessary, and fitted...”

¹⁸ December 20, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:42-43.

¹⁹ July 23, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:118.

²⁰ August 29, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:127; July 17, 1777, *Ibid.*, 15:157. July 18, 1777, *Ibid.*, 15:159, demonstrates by the ordering of delivery of gunpowder and lead that this frontier Ranger unit was successfully organized.

²¹ June 28, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:12-13.

Clearly, there were many civilian firearms used to supplement the military muskets. Where did these firearms come from? “A great part of our arms have been procured by purchase; some have been hired—and from necessity, to compleat some Companies, a few arms have in some places been impressed.”²² (There seems some shame about impressing arms.)

Instructions for the raising of the four regiments also shows that the Continental Congress and the New York Provincial Congress believed that soldiers could buy their own guns, or bring their own from home. Instructions from the Continental Congress specified that New York should pay a “bounty of 6 2/3 dollars to every ablebodied effective man, properly cloathed for the service and having a good firelock with a bayonet and other accoutrements, and 4 dollars to every soldier not having the like arms and accoutrements....”²³

The Provincial Congress’s instructions for the raising of regiments modified this somewhat, specifying that “each of the Private be allowed, instead of a bounty, a felt hat, a pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes, they to find their own arms.”²⁴ It appears that the Provincial Congress considered that it was a fair trade to provide three articles of clothing for those who brought their own guns. This does not sound like a scarcity of guns in private hands.

There are clearly some periods when the supply of arms runs short. On February 22, 1776, the Provincial Congress refused a request to supply arms, blankets, and clothing to General Schuyler’s forces because New York had “by no means a sufficiency for the equipment of those Troops, we are about to raise.”²⁵ If we take this letter at face value, it

²² October 4, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:38-39.

²³ January 24, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:47-48.

²⁴ January 26, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:49.

²⁵ February 22, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:72. Also see General Schuyler’s letter at *Col.Hist.NY* 15:82, in which he complains about soldiers arriving “only half armed...; none of them had [moccasins] and great Number wanted Shoes, Mittens, Caps, Stockings &c.” General Schuyler to General Washington, Mach 9, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:147-148, similarly complains about a shortage of arms and provisions for the Canada expedition.

would appear that New York's efforts to arm its own four regiments had exhausted the local supply of arms—but also of blankets and clothing, neither of which are generally considered scarce items in colonial America. Most likely, this was a temporary shortage, as evidenced by the subsequent successful efforts to locate firearms for New York's militia.

On May 4, 1776, orders were given to Dutchess and Ulster Counties to complete the arming of a Continental Army regiment with arms “collected by disarming disaffected persons in their respective Counties & districts...” Westchester County received similar orders concerning arms confiscated from “disaffected persons.” That these arms were firearms is made explicit: “Gun Musket or Firelock.” Arms confiscated from the disaffected in Suffolk County were used to arm New York troops of that county.²⁶

If this disarming was really carried out, it may not have been entirely effective, or there were arms seeping in from elsewhere. Less than two months later, there was again concern expressed about “sundry disaffected and dangerous persons in the Counties of Dutchess and Westchester, who do now greatly disturb the peace of the said Counties and will probably take up arms, whenever the Enemy shall make a Descent upon this Colony....”²⁷

And yet in spite of disarming the disloyal, there were still more firearms out there in private hands—enough of them that a number of officers were directed

in the respective Townships and Districts in which they respectively reside to proceed from House to House thro' their respective districts and purchase at the cheapest Rate they can be obtained for ready money all such good musketts and firelocks fit for the use of Soldiers, as can be spared by the Inhabitants of the Townships – That those Gentlemen respectively be requested not only to purchase arms as cheap as they can, but in no case to exceed the price of four pounds for any one Gun Muskett or Firelock.... And it is hereby recommended to the Inhabitants of the said Townships to sell such muskets or firelocks as they can spare retaining arms for their own use.²⁸

The June 9, 1776 orders concerning the dispatch of detachments to Canada also gives evidence that there were enough firearms left in private hands that an order was given that

²⁶ May 4, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:99; May 21, 1776, *Ibid.*, 15:103.

²⁷ June 20, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:113. A report of September 4, 1776, *Ibid.*, 15:127-128, reports that West Chester, Orange, Dutchess, and Ulster Counties contained 3100 “Armed and well affected Militia,” 2300 “disarmed and disaffected,” and 2300 slaves.

²⁸ May 21, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 13:103.

each unit “be completely provided with Arms, Accoutrements & Ammunition.” Each unit’s “deficiencies in these particulars if any such there be” were to be made up from the other men in each battalion “either by purchase to be deducted out of the pay of the several person detached... or by Loan as the respective Owners shall chuse....” There were apparently enough militiamen who owned multiple firearms that those lacking guns were directed to either buy or borrow them from those who had more than one.²⁹ This does not sound like a severe shortage of guns.

As late as August 10, 1776, there were still some guns in private hands. Orders for mobilizing militia regiments direct the regimental commanders “to furnish all has have no arms by taking them from those who are not drafted and such other persons in the districts as have arms....” The commanders were to assess the value of the arms taken from private parties for reimbursement in the event that the arms could not later be restored to them. Does “arms” here mean guns? Apparently so, because “each man who shall not have arms bring with a Shovel, Spade or Pick axe or a Scythe straightened and fixed on a Pole.” The first three items would be useful for building fortifications; the straightened scythe is clearly a weapon—and yet not “arms” within the meaning of this order.³⁰

New Jersey

Like New York, in New Jersey at various times, there are shortages of guns for particular regiments. But examining the particulars of these shortages suggests that problem may have been not a shortage of guns, but a shortage of the right type of guns, or guns in the needed places. A “Return of Arms, Accoutrements, Camp and Barrack Furniture” and accompanying report for the Earl of Stirling’s New Jersey regiment shows that 99 firelocks were still required—but so were 234 bayonets, 685 tomahawks, 72 axes, 578 knapsacks, 218

²⁹ June 9, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:111.

³⁰ August 10, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:123.

hats, and 266 blankets.³¹ Unless Professor Bellesiles wishes to claim that hats and blankets were also rarely owned by Americans, assuming that this shortage was because guns were scarce in America seems a highly arguable claim.

Maryland

Frederick County's convention held on December 8, 1774, passed a resolution ordering, "That each man be provided with a good firelock and bayonet fixed thereon, half a pound of powder, two pounds of lead, and a cartouch-box or powder-horn...." They also recommended raising £1333 by subscription to purchase arms and ammunition.³² Britain had already prohibited the export of arms to the colonies; how did Frederick County expect its militia to arm themselves if guns were scarce? Perhaps the Revolutionary government of Frederick County was deluding itself about how common guns were, as Bellesiles claims many of the governments did, but I am inclined to believe that the people of Frederick County better knew how many guns were available, than an historian working two centuries later.

Like some other Revolutionary governments, Frederick County's Committee of Observation ordered those not prepared to associate with the Revolutionary cause to turn over their guns for the use of the militia. Interestingly enough, when militia captains were ordered to go and enforce this order against non-Associators (as those who would not declare their support for the rebel cause were known), pistols were excepted. Most probably, pistols were not in short supply for military purposes. That pistols were explicitly exempted suggests that they were not rare or unusual items to own.

On March 14, 1776, Maryland's Council of Safety directed a Major Price "to purchase or contract for the making of two hundred Rifles, with proper Powder-horns and Pouches." Apparently, he found a supplier, because three days later, the Council directed the Treasurer

³¹ March 3, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:134-36.

³² Scharf, 1:128.

“pay to Major Price five hundred Pounds, currency, for Rifles.” Perhaps these rifles were merely promised—but the same day that the Council ordered payment to Major Price, it also ordered delivery of 1500 flints, five thousand pounds of lead bullets, swords, cutlasses, “all the Arms belonging to the Province that are fit for service.”³³ If he didn’t actually find the rifles, was it just a coincidence that he was reimbursed for them on the same day that he was supplied with flints and bullets that would complement the rifles?

There are a number of references to officers and local committees of safety being paid sizeable sums for the purchase of either “Arms” or mixtures of arms and blankets, or arms and knapsacks. While every purchase includes arms, there is no count of arms to be purchased, no details on how many were actually purchased, and nothing that clearly establishes that all transactions involving “arms” means guns.³⁴ At a minimum, these records suggest that the Council of Safety believed that there were guns available for purchase in Maryland—almost fourteen months after the start of the war.

Similarly, Captain Alexander H. Magruder was given “£300, for the purchase of Arms”; Lieutenant George Dent, “for the purchase of Arms, £200”; and Captain Thomas Smyth was given £350 “for the purchase of Muskets.” That the Council of Safety was confident that Smyth would be able to buy muskets may be deduced from their orders on the same day for the Commissary of Stores to deliver “400 Cartouch-Boxes and Slings, 688 Bayonet-Belts, and 688 Gun-Slings” to Captain Smyth.³⁵ It seems unlikely, if guns were in short supply, and there was serious question in the minds of the Council of Safety about whether Captain Smyth would be able to buy muskets with that £350, that they would ship so much in the way of “accoutrements” to Smyth.

³³ March 14, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1544; March 17, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:1546.

³⁴ July 16, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:54 (£300 specifically for “Fire Arms”); July 29, 1776, *Ibid.*, 12:134 (£400 and £500); September 6, 1776, *Ibid.*, 12:260 (£400); August 8, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1351 (£300); August 9, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1351 (£300); August 12, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1352 (£76:6:6); August 15, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1353 (£50 and £14:3:0); August 16, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1354 (£300); August 17, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1354 (£200, £143:15:1.5, £250); August 21, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1356 (£34:2:3 & £500); August 22, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1357 (£287:6:6); August 23, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1358 (£500); August 24, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1358 (£47:11:6 & £300).

³⁵ August 3, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1347; August 5, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1348..

Similarly interesting for what was *not* delivered is an order to the Commissary to “deliver to Colonel Griffith 588 Knapsacks and Haversacks, 110 Camp-Kettles, 105 Tents, 678 Priming-Wires with Brushes, 658 Canteens, 50 pounds Gunpowder and Lead in proportion, 100 Gun-Flints, and as many Cartouch-Boxes, with Slings, Bayonet-Belts, and Gun-Slings, not exceeding 588 of each, as may be necessary for his Corps.”³⁶ A similar order to deliver to Captain John Dean “eight-six Priming Wires and Brushes,” gun slings, and bayonet belts,³⁷ suggests that his company had eighty-six guns—but not the accoutrements of military use of them. There is no mention of supplying guns—and that gunpowder, lead, cartridge boxes, gun flints, slings, and bayonet belts were to be supplied suggests that the regiment already had guns—or else, why bother with supplies that were only necessary for guns?

There are reports from the Maryland Council of Safety and various officers that complain about the difficulty in obtaining guns—though even these reports acknowledge that there were guns being made, and that guns were available for purchase, even as late as August of 1776. Guns were also available for purchase in Virginia for “£4 5s. in Virginia, for muskets, that currency.”³⁸ The problem, however, was not necessarily that guns were scarce, but that it was difficult to borrow “firelocks from such of the Militia as will lend, on the publick faith that the same shall be returned in the like good order as received, or, in case of loss, the value thereof, in having them valued...” The concern was that the government might not return them in good order, or pay the full value of the guns if lost.³⁹ This difficulty in borrowing

³⁶ August 7, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1350.

³⁷ August 19, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1355-6. See also August 24, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1358 involving military accoutrements for 100 long guns—but no long guns, and September 28, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:308, for orders to get cartridge boxes, kettles, canteen, and flints—but no guns.

³⁸ August 11, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:892.

³⁹ July 16, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Committees on the Eastern Shore,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:365. Similar problems getting the militia to lend arms to regular troops appear in July 30, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Major Price,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:667. See also August 16, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1354 for a request to local authorities “to assist in borrowing Arms from the Militia, to be used by said Company whilst at that station.” July 30, 1776, “Council to Commissioners of Gun Lock Manufactory,” *Archives of Maryland*, 12:142, complains about a shortage of arms, “few of the Troops raised for the flying Camp are supply’d with them, & the Militia will not lend theirs.”

guns could be characterized as a shortage of guns in government hands, but not a shortage of guns in private hands.

Later in the same report, the Council of Safety informed the Eastern Shore committees:

We will send you, by the first opportunity, some cash to buy guns and blankets with, which we request you will lay out accordingly. We have not exceeded £4 5s. for a musket, with a steel ramrod and bayonet, but upon this occasion would have you go as high as £4 10s. Guns which you may purchase without either, ought not to cost so much that the necessary repairs and providing ramrods and bayonets will carry them above £4 5s., unless they are very good, in which case we will also allow £4 10s.⁴⁰

Similar instructions, with the identical amounts, were sent to the Committees of Safety for the Western Shore.⁴¹ Other records indicate that guns were being purchased by individual officers for their units, suggesting that these purchases were from individuals. Captain Philip Meroney was given “£500, common money, to be lodged with Messrs. John Hanson, Jun., and Christopher Edelen, for the purchase of Fire-Arms.”⁴² Oliver Wheddon (probably the same as the Oliver Whiddon who also assembled guns for Maryland) sold a musket to Maryland on July 20, 1776, for £3:15:0.⁴³ A total of sixty-one firearms, nearly all muskets, were purchased from private owners at an average price of £3:6:11. While most of these were apparently used, the records are not completely clear on this. In some cases, we have examples of single firearms purchased from known gunsmiths, such as Oliver Whiddon.⁴⁴

An October 28, 1776 report concerning the raising of two companies of riflemen and four companies of Germans (weapon type unspecified) describes reimbursement of the captains for various expenses “for their use and for arms and blankets” but there is not sufficient detail to figure out how many arms were purchased, and how many blankets. (The

⁴⁰ July 16, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Committees on the Eastern Shore,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:365.

⁴¹ July 16, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Committees on the Western Shore,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:366.

⁴² July 19, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1339.

⁴³ July 20, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1340.

⁴⁴ *American Archives* 4th series, 1:1509; *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1331, 1340, 1349-50; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:9, 47, 134, 174, 179, 242, 252, 256-7, 263, 267, 269. *Archives of Maryland* 12:179 is the same document as *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1350, but shows £59:10:0 for fourteen muskets, instead of £9:10:0, and is more likely correct.

accounts rendered by some of these officers are described as “so confused” as to make it difficult for the Committee to report as accurately as they would wish.⁴⁵ It would appear that even a year and a half into the war that these captains were purchasing at least some arms on their own, suggesting that either there were still arms in private hands, or there were manufacturers making them for private purchase.

In New Jersey and Maryland, the evidence is scanty, but there is at least a credible case that guns were not particularly scarce, but that the right sort of guns were often in short supply. Especially for Pennsylvania and New York, the evidence is quite clear: guns were often in short supply in particular locations or at particular times, but not *generally* in short supply. There were enough guns in private hands to purchase them, rent, impress them, and even expect soldiers who owned more than one to loan to their comrades without arms. The scarcity of guns that Professor Bellesiles finds seems to have escaped the notice of the Middle Colonies at the start of the Revolution.

⁴⁵ October 28, 1776, *American Archives*, 5th series, 3:131-2.

Gun Scarcity in the Revolutionary South

Virginia

Were guns scarce in Virginia? As saw in the chapter on militias and marksmanship, the frontiers of Virginia produced riflemen who were the terror of British soldiers besieged in Boston.¹ When the request for 500 riflemen was made at the beginning of the war, there were so many more than 500 available that the colonel used a shooting competition to make his selection—and there was no shortage of crack shots from which to pick.²

General Charles Lee's April 5, 1776, letter to General Washington might be read as indicating a serious gun shortage among the Virginia regiments. At the same time, Lee seems to contradict himself, or at least indicate that if guns were in short supply among the soldiers, it was more of a distribution problem than an actual shortage of guns: "a most horrid deficiency of arms—no intrenching tools, no guns (although the Province is pretty well stocked) meet for service." Later sentences seem to imply that Lee is referring to artillery, however, not small arms.³

A petition to Congress of May 20, 1777, tells the story of a regiment "raised by the convention of the State of Virginia, for the defence of the frontiers, and not to be drawn

¹ Frothingham, 227-8.

² John Harrower, "Diary....1773-1776," *American Historical Review* [October 1900]:100.

³ April 5, 1776, *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:792-3.

from thence without their consent, and each to receive, for the use of their rifles, 20 [dollars? pounds? Shillings?] per annum” who had been taken into the Continental Army.

[H]aving agreed to march with the regiment, fourteen of them have brought their own arms with them, not having had time or opportunity to dispose of them before they began their march; Whereupon, Resolved, That the said arms be received by the commissary general of military stores; and that they be appraised, and the appraised price paid to the men; also that the difference between the appraisal and what the said arms cost the men, be also paid them as a compensation for the use of the arms.⁴

If guns were in short supply in Virginia at the beginning of the Revolution, one would be hard pressed to see evidence of it from these documents.

North Carolina

The North Carolina Provincial Congress on September 10, 1775 issued a variety of orders, including a recommendation “to such of the inhabitants of this Province as many not be provided with Bayonets to their Guns, to procure the same as soon as possible, and be otherwise provided to turn out at a minute’s warning.” There is no suggestion that the people of North Carolina procure guns as well as bayonets. It is possible that guns were simply not available, and so there was no point in making such a suggestion. But why ask the people of North Carolina to buy bayonets for their guns, if guns were scarce? The Provincial Congress also expected the inhabitants “to turn out at a minute’s warning” for warfare, a measure unlikely to be useful without guns. It is far more plausible that the population was armed with hunting guns, but not bayonets—a military-only accessory.

Significantly, the same set of resolutions that recommended procuring bayonets provided a long list of subsidies to encourage various forms of domestic manufacturing, including saltpeter, gunpowder, rolling and slitting mills for producing iron for making nails, pins, needles, steel, and paper—but not guns (unlike New York).⁵ As late as December 23, 1776, the state was still discussing subsidies for the refining of iron from iron ore, so that making

⁴ May 20, 1777, *JCC*, 372.

⁵ September 10, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:209-10; September 10, 1775, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:215-20.

cannon, “Cannon Ball, Iron Hollow Ware (including Pots, &c.)... and every other Article in that species of Manufactory, necessary for the Inhabitants of this State may be supplied.”⁶ Curious, small arms are not mentioned.

A careful, page by page reading of *Colonial Records of North Carolina* for 1775 and 1776 suggests that guns were sometimes in short supply in some counties at the start of the Revolution, but abundant in others. While large quantities of lead and gunpowder were being purchased and disbursed by both the state and county governments for use of the militia—who, presumably, had guns in which to fire all this ammunition—there are only occasional discussions of a shortage of guns.⁷ Even these raise interesting questions as to how many people were already armed.

A letter of Donald McLeod, a recent immigrant from Scotland, sought approval for a group of recently arrived Highlanders to form military units of their own, at least partly because many spoke no English. But arms would not be a problem, “the said Highlanders are already furnished with guns, swords, pistols and Highland dirks... as all of the above are at this time very difficult to be had.”⁸ While more arms were difficult to obtain, these Highlanders had plenty of guns. According to Bellesiles, guns were pretty scarce in Britain, as well as in America—so where did these Highlanders get their guns? Did they bring them from home, or buy them in North Carolina?

North Carolina’s Royal Governor Josiah Martin gave us a description of arms shortage in the backcountry that suggests that while arms were scarce, they were not as scarce as Bellesiles would have us believe. The backcountry counties of North Carolina had been the scene of a series of violent and lethal confrontations in the years 1768 to 1771 first between the Regulators and corrupt county officials, and then with the militia, led by the governor.

⁶ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:993-4.

⁷ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:13, 113, 314, 447, 719.

⁸ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:13.

Astonishingly enough, many of the Regulators sided with the British government at the start of the Revolution. Governor Martin, writing from a Royal Navy warship off Cape Fear on January 12, 1776, informed the Earl of Dartmouth that between two and three thousand of the former Regulators were ready to join the Loyalist cause, “although not half of them are provided with arms....”⁹ The Regulators were generally poor, remote from the ports from which Bellesiles asserts nearly all American guns must have come, and least five hundred had voluntarily turned in their arms in 1771 (as discussed on page 55). Yet, somewhat less than half of them were armed *before* the British government could supply them with weapons. This suggests that guns were not scarce in the backcountry.

A description of the arms captured from the Regulators turned Loyalists two months later is ambiguous as to whether the captured arms were supplied by the British government. The letter is clear that the patriots had “already taken 350 guns and shot-bags; about 150 swords and dirks; 1,500 excellent rifles....” There is also evidence that *some* captured materials were recently arrived from Britain, and may have been supplied to the Regulators. The rifles, however, and the description of “shot-bags” (more appropriate to fowling pieces than military muskets) suggest that the Regulators were armed with the traditional hunting weapons of the American frontier.¹⁰ Royal Governor Martin’s letter of March 21 to Lord George Germain, claiming that two to three thousand Regulators were “well armed,” is consistent with his letter of January 12.¹¹ It suggests that the captured arms were mostly or entirely personal property—not government-supplied arms.

More commonly, however, these documents suggest a view of gun ownership that Bellesiles would consider the martial self-delusion that was common among patriots at the start of the Revolution. North Carolina’s delegates to the Continental Congress sent a

⁹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:406.

¹⁰ March 10, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:485-6.

¹¹ March 21, 1776, Governor Martin to Lord George Germain, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:489. See also 10:491 for Martin’s discussion of the failure of many of the Highlanders and Regulators to show up. Martin’s continued self-justification and toadying makes him a less than trustworthy source, and someone that I would *not* invite over for dinner.

circular letter “to the Committees of the several Towns and Counties of the Province of North Carolina” on June 19, 1775, that strongly suggests that gun ownership was recognized as a right, that sporting use of guns was common, and that gunpowder was scarce not because guns were rare, because gunpowder was almost entirely imported:

It is the Right of every English Subject to be prepared with Weapons for his defence. We conjure you by the Ties of Religion Virtue and Love of your Country to follow the Example of your sister Colonies and to form yourselves into a Militia....

Carefully preserve the small quantity of gunpowder which you have amongst you; it will be the last Resource when every other means of Safety fail you – Great Britain has cut you off from further supplies. We enjoin you as you tender the safety of yourselves and Fellow Colonists as you would wish to live and die free that you would reserve what Ammunition you have as a sacred Deposit. He in part betrays his Country who sports it away, perhaps in every Charge he fires he gives with it the means of preserving the life of a fellow being.¹²

There are many, many references to the need to buy lead and gunpowder, or the actual purchase of it.¹³ In many cases, as will be seen, the quantities involved are quite substantial. This suggests that North Carolina’s delegates to the Continental Congress knew well the state they represented. When they asked their people to preserve the “small quantity of gunpowder” in North Carolina, it would appear that the quantity was “small” only relative to the amount of it that was commonly used for sporting purposes.

The Wilmington Safety Committee paid a number of people for gunpowder and flints at the very start of the war in 1775, and the quantities are large enough—especially for a single county—that it raises serious questions about how scarce guns could have been, if merchants had this much powder and flints available to sell—and after almost a year in which Britain had prohibited the export of powder to America. William Mactier sold 200 pounds of gunpowder in March; Burgwin, Humphrey & Co. sold 350 pounds on June 20; 133 ¼pounds were purchased from Yelverton Fowkes on July 18. Charles Jewkes received payment August 12 for 300 flints.¹⁴ And all this in one county!

¹² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:22-23.

¹³ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:10, 29, 135-37, 163-64, 186, 230, 247, 253-4, 312, 316, 321, 337-8, 346-7, 350-1, 356-8, 394, 524, 565-6.

¹⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:437-9.

New Hanover County purchased 400 pounds of gunpowder from two parties (merchants, perhaps) on or before June 19, 1775—and in a county that 15 years later, still only had 6,837 people.¹⁵ Tryon County disbursed 500 pounds of gunpowder, 600 pounds of lead, and 600 gun flints to Daniel McKissick on August 14, 1775.¹⁶ If guns were uncommon in New Hanover and Tryon counties, why was there so much gunpowder available to purchase at the very start of the war?

On February 6, 1776, the Rowan County Safety Committee ordered confiscation of gunpowder from a James Cook for public use. The quantity was apparently large enough that if he did not turn it over voluntarily, that two militia captains were ordered to raise whatever number of militia were required to take it from Cook.¹⁷ The quantity is never directly stated, but it is hard to imagine that they were going after a pound or two of gunpowder with a detachment of militia. This suggests that while the war made gunpowder scarce, there had been quite a bit of it around before the war started—a most unlikely possibility, if guns were scarce.

Even as late as May 8, 1776, when gunpowder from abroad would not have been arriving in quantity, Rowan County's Safety Committee decided to apply to neighboring counties for 500 pounds of gunpowder, and flints, apparently thinking it possible that such would be available for purchase.¹⁸ On July 9, 1776, the North Carolina Provincial Congress gave orders for moving a total of six tons of gunpowder.¹⁹ On July 23, 1776, the Halifax Council of Safety gave directions for what to do with two tons of gunpowder recently arrived by wagon from Virginia.²⁰

¹⁵ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:29.

¹⁶ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:163.

¹⁷ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:433.

¹⁸ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:593.

¹⁹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:643-4.

²⁰ July 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:683. Other large shipments of gunpowder can be found at 10:719-20, 755 (four tons); 10:727-8 (half a ton).

A June 25, 1776 letter from William Purviance describes his trip into town for ammunition and provisions for his soldiers. Ammunition was easy to get, but only with great work did he obtain pork and bread.²¹ More than a year into the war, and almost two years after the shut off of exports of powder from Britain, ammunition was easier to obtain than meat and bread.

General Griffith Rutherford, begging the Provincial Congress for gunpowder on July 12, 1776, asked for at least “1000 lbs. More Powder, besides what you first Voted, for People in the [frontiers] will move off if not [supplied] with that article.”²² If guns were scarce, especially on the frontier, why was gunpowder so important?

Hugh Montgomery and Matthew Lock were authorized by the North Carolina Provincial Congress on May 6, 1776, to purchase “any quantity of lead, not exceeding 20 tons....”²³ On July 26, 1776, President Page of Virginia acknowledged having sent at least two tons of lead at the request of the North Carolina Council of Safety, and promised to send everything immediately needed in response to a request for five tons more.²⁴ These are sizeable quantities of lead for a population with few guns.

There are many incidents in *Colonial Records of North Carolina* that suggest that guns in private hands were common. Joseph Cotton of Anson County’s deposition describing his arrest by members of the Anson County Safety Committee in early July 1775, indicates that all members of the committee who arrived at his house were armed with guns, at least one with a rifle, and that Cotton asked permission to arm himself, which was denied. Anson escaped from his captors. In a very short time, Anson somewhere acquired a gun, and later fired at one of the rebels.²⁵ Another example is the Provincial Congress’s order that anyone who possessed “Horses, Guns or other Articles” impressed into public service in a recent

²¹ June 25, 1776, Captain William Purviance to Council of Safety, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:615.

²² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:662.

²³ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:566.

²⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:671.

²⁵ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:128-9.

campaign against the Tories should turn those weapons over for return to their rightful owners.²⁶

After the Continental Congress ordered the states to disarm Loyalists, the North Carolina Provincial Congress appointed officials to “to receive, procure and purchase fire arms for the use of the troops....” This included confiscation of arms from the disaffected, specifying that they were to be returned to the owners at a later date. A committee of seventy men—two in each of thirty-five counties—was appointed to “purchase all Fire-Arms which are good and sufficient and fit for immediate use; and also such as may be repaired, and put in such order as to be made useful.”

It appears that these seventy men were to purchase not only arms confiscated from Tories, but also other arms that were available. Quakers, Moravians, and Dunkards, “who conscientiously scruple bearing arms, and as such have no occasion for Fire-Arms” were encouraged to sell their guns to the firearms purchasing commissioners. This was explicitly a voluntary transaction: “no compulsion be exercised to induce them to this duty.”

Clearly, the North Carolina Provincial Congress was prepared to take extraordinary steps to arm its troops, but this is not necessarily evidence of a severe shortage of guns. The same resolution specified that once all regiments were armed, the surplus arms were to be delivered to the Commissary of Stores.²⁷ The severe and crippling shortages that Bellesiles tells us about don't seem to have been visible to the North Carolina legislators, who made provision for what to do with the leftovers.

The Provincial Congress gave orders for the purchase of firearms and ammunition, with the expectation that these purchases could be made in North Carolina or neighboring provinces.²⁸ (By comparison, international trading expeditions were often approved, and with a very different procedure described.)²⁹ On October 21, 1775, the Provincial Council directed

²⁶ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:640.

²⁷ April 19, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1329-30; April 19, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:524-6.

²⁸ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:192-3, 555-6, 989.

²⁹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:173, 288-9, 339, 353-4, 642-3, 964, 969.

Richard Caswell to “purchase from David Baron of Newbern all the new serviceable Guns, and all the Gunpowder he may have for sale at the lowest price they can be had for....”³⁰ Six months into the war, and there were believed to still be “new serviceable Guns” for sale!

On January 17, 1776—nine months into the war—the Wilmington Safety Committee responded to a request for “50 stand of Arms” from Colonel Moore by sending a committee out “to call respectively on the inhabitants of this town tomorrow and borrow from them such guns as they can spare... they having such guns valued and giving proper receipts for them to their owners.”³¹ The guns were not impressed—and one may presume that the Wilmington Safety Committee would not have wasted everyone’s time sending people out door to door to borrow guns, if guns were actually scarce.

On June 12, 1776, Colonel William Bryan complains of his difficulty in borrowing guns for his militia. “I have Indeavoured to borrow or hire Guns though in vain; I then ordered the [captain] to send out his S[e]argants to [im]press Guns, but the people Hides their guns and would not show them and says They don’t know how soon they may have Occasion to turn [out] with them themselves....” Bryan then complains that Congress (perhaps the Continental Congress, but more likely the Provincial Congress) has purchased all the spare arms in the county, apparently for North Carolina’s contribution to the Continental Army, “so close that it is Impossible to furnish the militia with arms....”³² This is not evidence that guns were scarce before the Revolution, but that they were common.

On July 27, 1776, the Halifax Council of Safety directed payment of £200 to Captain James Anderson, “for the purpose of procuring good and sufficient Guns, Drums and Colours for the use of his Independent Company on the Sea Coast in this Colony.”³³ On December 4, 1776, when one would expect that, if guns were scarce, nearly all would have

³⁰ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:291-2.

³¹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:418.

³² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:611.

³³ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:687.

been snapped up for military use, a Zedekiah Stone was appointed “a Commissioner to purchase Guns for the use of the Public.”³⁴

Of course, orders might have been issued to buy or borrow guns that weren't actually available. But we do have what seem to be fragmentary records indicating that guns were successfully purchased. The Wilmington Safety Committee purchased at least thirty-three muskets sometime before December 22, 1775, for less than £90.³⁵ On January 23, 1776, the Pitt County Safety Committee gave a receipt “for arms Received from Mr. Robt Jameson for the use of the Continental Army” but without any information on the number of arms, or the price.³⁶ Charles Jacocks was reimbursed for “arms, camp kettles and camp equipage” that he purchased sometime before May 2, 1776.³⁷ Arthur Moore of Orange County was paid £56 for seven rifles, sometime before May 9, 1776.³⁸

On June 12, 1776, the Provincial Congress directed Colonel Ebenezer Folesome, “one of the Commissioners for purchasing Guns in Cumberland County, deliver to Captain Arthur Council as many of the said Arms as shall be sufficient to Arm his said Company.”³⁹ Folesome had apparently purchased *more* than enough to arm Captain Council's company.

John Easton, who was primarily working on a salt works for the Provincial Congress, mentions that he delivered guns “I have purchased for the Publick” to Captain Ward's independent company. There is no mention of the amount of the purchase, or the number of guns, but the very casual manner in which he discusses it makes it sound unremarkable.⁴⁰ On June 26, 1776, Joseph Green, one of the commissions for purchasing guns in Dobbs County received reimbursement of £149:9:4 for 40 guns.⁴¹ Green had paid a bit less than four pounds

³⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:952.

³⁵ December 22, 1775, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:358.

³⁶ January 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:422.

³⁷ May 2, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:556.

³⁸ May 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:571.

³⁹ June 12, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:627.

⁴⁰ August 6, 1776, John Easton to the Council of Safety, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:724-5.

⁴¹ June 26, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:635.

each for guns that were supposedly scarce—and this more than a year after the start of the war.

On September 7, 1775, the Provincial Congress issued orders for the enrolling of Minutemen, requiring:

[T]he Captains, or persons appointed to enlist, in enlisting Men, give a preference to those who have guns of their own; but if it be found necessary to take such as have none,

That then the Captains certify the same to the Committees of the Countys to which they belong who shall thereupon borrow such guns as are fit for Service, giving receipts, describing such Guns, and the value thereof; to the owners, that they may hereafter get them again or the value of them....

That an allowance be made after the rate of ten Shillings per Annum for a good smooth bore or Musket, and twenty shillings for a Rifle, to the owners for the use of their Guns, in the Case above mentioned.⁴²

Clearly, most of the Minutemen were expected to have guns; only “if it be found necessary” would they be enrolling men without guns.

On November 13, 1775, the Wilmington Safety Committee directed:

Messrs. Forster, Mallett, Wilkinson and Jewkes, go round the town and examine the arms that may be in each Family; after reserving one gun for each white man that may be in the House, the remainder shall be valued by the above Gentlemen, and a receipt given for them, mentioning their value. Those who have new Guns to dispose of shall be allowed three for one (in order to obtain an immediate supply of arms on this immergent occasion) a receipt shall also be given for such Guns on account of the public, and for the use of the first Regiment under the command of Col. James Moore.”⁴³

What is interesting is not only the assumption that there were likely to be homes with more than one gun per white man (or else it was a waste of time to do the inventory), but that there were a number of *new* guns available for purchase. Each of these individual incidents and orders doesn't mean much by itself, but all combined suggest a society where guns were common—not scarce.

On August 14, 1775, the New Bern Safety Committee ordered militia captains to disarm those suspected of Loyalist sympathies of “their Fire-arms... Swords, Cutlasses... and all Gun powder, Lead and other Military Stores,” and to deliver those arms to militiamen “not

⁴² *Col. Rec. N. C.*, 10:197-8.

⁴³ *Col. Rec. N. C.*, 10:328.

having Arms... as may be willing to serve in the American Cause.”⁴⁴ The Provincial Congress directed Colonel Long to “collect all the arms which may have been taken from the Regulators and Tories, and hold them ready to be delivered to new recruits, as the officers may apply for them.”⁴⁵ As late as May 8, 1776, there were still guns in private hands, with the Rowan County Safety Committee dealing with complaints from the inhabitants of Muddy Creek that the militia had taken their guns from them during an expedition. The same committee also ordered the disarming of a suspected Loyalist.⁴⁶

On May 4, 1776, the Provincial Congress issued orders concerning the militia, which “shall consist of all the effective men from 16 to 60 years of age....” Each militia member “shall be furnished with a good gun, bayonet, cartouch box, shot bag and powder horn, a cutlass or tomahawk....” But who was to furnish the gun? “[W]here any person shall appear to the field officers not possessed of sufficient property to afford such arms and accoutrements, the same shall be procured at the public expence....” These guns for the poor men were to be issued when the militia were called into service, and recovered when the militia was no longer in service.⁴⁷ Clearly, there were North Carolinians too poor to own a gun—but it would take a rather extraordinary reading of this statute to conclude that those too poor to own a gun were the rule, not the exception.

This is all abstraction; what were the actual numbers of armed militia? We have the records of Colonel Thomas Brown’s militia battalion and Colonel Dauge’s militia regiment dated July 31, 1776, and it tells us how many of the militia were armed with guns. Brown’s battalion included 659 “rank and file” of whom only 447 were “Present fit for Duty.” (The remainder were either sick and wounded, on furlough, absent, deserted, or “On Command.”)

⁴⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:158. See also November 25, 1776 Provincial Congress hearings concerning an August, 1776 armed robbery in Chatham County involving a rifle, pistol, and dirk, and how the two victims then went out and *bought* two guns with which to protect themselves in the future.

⁴⁵ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:555-6. Also see Colonel William Purviance to the Provincial Council, February 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:467, concerning disarming of Tories.

⁴⁶ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:593. Also see *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:472, for details of disarming Tories ordered by the Provincial Council on March 2, 1776.

⁴⁷ May 4, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:560-2.

These 447 available soldiers had 519 “Guns Fixed” and 10 “Guns not Fixed.” Every man had a gun—though ammunition was clearly in very short supply. Colonel Dauge’s regiment had 491 “Present fit for Duty” and 551 “Guns Fixed” and “35 “Guns out of Fix.”⁴⁸ At least in North Carolina, Bellesiles’s claim that militias were largely unarmed flies in the face of this return—and there are no other North Carolina returns that I have found in my research.

From the Washington District, in what is now Tennessee, came a petition to the Provincial Council asking for annexation. Along with explaining their reasons, the petition explained that they had raised a “[c]ompany of fine riflemen” for the defense of the North Carolina shore, but that the circumstances of pending war with the Indians obliged them to keep this company of riflemen at home. There is nothing to indicate that rifles were scarce.⁴⁹

In the vicinity of Charlotte, North Carolina, British occupation forces found themselves confronting a difficult problem: armed and hostile civilians. “So inveterate was their rancour, that the messengers, with expresses for the commander in chief, were frequently murdered; and the inhabitants, instead of remaining quietly at home to receive payment for the produce of their plantations, made it a practice to way-lay the British foraging parties, fire their rifles from concealed places, and then fly into the woods.”⁵⁰

In 1780, North Carolina militia organized to resist British forces, consisting of “the wild and fierce inhabitants of Kentucky, and other settlements westward of the [Allegheny] Mountains,” followers of a Colonel Williams, and other militia of the upcountry parts of North Carolina. A British officer who was there described them as, “These men were all well mounted on horseback and armed with rifles.... When the different divisions of mountaineers reached Gilbert-town, they amounted to upwards of three thousand men.”⁵¹ If rifles were in short supply, from where did these 3,000 militiamen get their guns?

⁴⁸ July 31, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:680 overleaf.

⁴⁹ August 22, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:710.

⁵⁰ Stedman, 2:216.

⁵¹ Stedman, 2:222. See Bivins for surviving examples of American-made rifles of the colonial and Revolutionary era of the sort that would have been carried by these backwoodsmen—there are dozens of them still in existence.

At least part of why the frontiersmen had guns was for protection from the Indians—who also had many guns. The North Carolina Council of Safety reported on July 30, 1776, while planning military strategy with Virginia, “The Cherokees as we are told, can muster about 2,000 Gun Men in the whole...”⁵² How well armed were the Cherokees? They had something under 2500 warriors at that point⁵³—so about 80% of their warriors had guns. Indeed, reports of one battle between North Carolina troops and Indians described a battle at which a Cherokee and Creek war party retreated after great losses: “we took a great number of Guns...”⁵⁴

There is other evidence that guns were very, very common among the Cherokees. At the start of the Revolution, Colonel William Christian of the Virginia troops directed against the Cherokees observed that the Indians depended on “ammunition to get meat” and that burning their villages and cornfields would starve them into submission.⁵⁵ Guns were not in short supply among the Cherokee; it would appear that their traditional methods of hunting had either proved inadequate to their population, or had been abandoned.

One of the startling aspects of reading through *Colonial Records of North Carolina* is how little discussion there is of acquiring, distributing, making, or purchasing of guns—and how much time was spent discussing the importance of making, importing, and distributing *salt* or equipment for making salt. While the importance of salt did not become apparent until partway through volume 10, even a partial listing of the pages on which salt appears as an important subject of discussion is fairly startling.⁵⁶ One example:

⁵² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:680.

⁵³ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:881-2.

⁵⁴ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:729.

⁵⁵ October 15, 1776, William Christian to Governor Patrick Henry, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:846.

⁵⁶ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:629, 716-7, 723-4, 754-5, 811-13, 840, 869-70, 963, 985-8, 999-1000. Similar problems of salt shortages appear in Maryland and Kentucky during the Revolution. See December 1, 1776, “Thomas Smith to Maryland Council of Safety,” *American Archives*, 5th series, 3:1025 and August 14, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1353; June 8, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:472; June 14, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:489; James Rood Robertson, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia 1769 to 1792* (Louisville, Ky.: John P. Morton & Co., 1914; reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1971), 43-44.

That Colonel Ebenezer Folesome immediately call on the several Merchants and Factors in Cumberland County, whom he suspects of having Salt in their Hands and make enquiry for any that may be concealed, and take an Inventory and stop the sale of the same; and return an Account thereof to this Board: Provided, That this Resolve shall not extend to such Salt as have been purchased for the use of private Families and that he call on the Commissioners to render an Account of all the Salt delivered out and to whom, and make return thereof to the Council.⁵⁷

That North Carolina had been dependent on salt imported from abroad is very clear, and it was now in short supply. Doubtless there are very few probate records that list salt; yet no one would suggest that Americans didn't own salt before the Revolution.

South Carolina

A careful reading of the surviving journals of the South Carolina legislature also provides little evidence of a shortage of guns. Patriot General Robert Howe wrote in an October 6, 1776 letter to the legislature of the need for more wagons, clothes, blankets, and the establishment of "minute battalions": more highly trained militia, comparable to the Minutemen of Massachusetts. But he says nothing about a need for more muskets or rifles.⁵⁸

When, on October 19, the House of Representatives took action on General Howe's request, they did indicate that along with the wagons and the minute battalions, there was a need for some more muskets, but the language used is hardly the language of crisis: "The Committee cannot conclude their Report without desiring that it may be recommended to the President [of South Carolina] to use every means in his power to procure us a quantity of ammunition and a number of good muskets with bayonets and iron ramrods, large cannon, some light field pieces, and a few mortars and howitzers with shells."⁵⁹ This is the *only* discussion of a small arms shortage contained in the surviving records of the South Carolina legislature, which cover 1776 and 1779-80.

⁵⁷ June 13, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:629. See also 10:719 for a discussion of the difficulties of obtaining clothes for the troops, another recurring problem at the start of the war, and yet not evidence that colonial Americans didn't own clothes.

⁵⁸ William Edwin Hemphill, Wylma Anne Wates, and R. Nicholas Olsberg, ed., *Journals of the General Assembly and House of Representatives 1776-1780* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 129-30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

It was not only Patriots who were armed in America; so were Loyalists. Stedman describes how, after British troops took control of South Carolina in 1778: “A great majority of the inhabitants came in, and having taken the oath of allegiance, submitted themselves again to the authority of the mother-country. Rifle companies of dragoons were formed out of those who came in to renew their allegiance....”⁶⁰ Rifles were almost certainly locally supplied (although the British Army did possess and use small numbers of rifles in America). If rifles were in short supply, from where were these rifle companies armed?

It would not appear that guns were particularly in short supply in North Carolina or South Carolina, and the evidence from Virginia suggests that guns were not scarce in the frontier regions.

⁶⁰ Stedman, 2:72.

Gun Scarcity in the Continental Army

Bellesiles makes much of George Washington's complaints about inadequately armed soldiers. While it is possible to quote Washington so that it appears that guns of all types were scarce, a more detailed review of Washington's writings on the subject presents a more complex picture. Washington complained to the Continental Congress on February 18, 1776, that the "Militia, contrary to an express requisition, are come, and coming in without ammunition; to supply them alone, with 24 Rounds, which is less by 3/5th than the Regulars are served with, will take between fifty and 60 Barrels of Powder...."¹

If the militia was so poorly supplied with firearms, why was their arrival such an ammunition problem for Washington? Washington complained that they showed up without ammunition, and he had to provide it to them; clearly, many of the militia brought guns with them, or he wouldn't need to supply ammunition.

More evidence that guns were widely distributed in America comes from the Continental Congress, which ordered, "That all the Militia take proper care to acquire military skill, and be well prepared for defence by being each man provided with one pound of good gun powder, and four pounds of ball, fitted to his gun."² Perhaps they meant four pounds of balls fitted to the gun issued to him by the government, but if, as Bellesiles claims, the majority of the guns in America were Brown Besses,³ why make a point of ordering that the militiamen

¹ George Washington to Continental Congress, February 18, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:337-38.

² *JCC*, July 18, 1775, 188.

³ Bellesiles, 182.

own bullets “fitted to his gun”? Why order militiamen to supply ammunition specific to their guns, unless large numbers of them were bringing their own guns, in non-standard calibers?

Baron von Steuben, attempting to drill Continentals at Valley Forge in 1778 complained about the lack of uniformity of the firearms the soldiers carried: “muskets, carbines, fowling pieces, and rifles were found in the same company.”⁴ This suggests that there was a shortage of *muskets*, but not necessarily a shortage of *firearms*. Large numbers of guns *were* being imported from Europe at this point. These were largely the French Charleville muskets, the same caliber as the Brown Bess. So if, as Bellesiles claims, the majority of guns in America at the start of the Revolution were Brown Besses, and most of the imported muskets were the same caliber, what are these multiple calibers and types about which von Steuben complained?

Bellesiles spends several pages telling us that guns were in extraordinarily short supply during the Revolution, with example after example of the inability of militias and Continentals to find usable firearms.⁵ Indeed, one can find letters that can be quoted to show a general shortage of guns, such as Washington’s letter of August 28, 1777 to John D. Thompson: “I wish it was in my power to furnish every man with a firelock that is willing to use one, but that is so far from being the Case that I have scarcely sufficient for the Continental Troops.”⁶

But later in the same letter, it appears that Washington believed that there were some significant number of guns still at home that, while not well-suited to military use, were certainly functional: “It is to be wished, that every Man could bring a good Musket and Bayonet into the field, but in times like the present, we must make the best shift we can, and I

⁴ Brown, 306.

⁵ Bellesiles, 184-88.

⁶ George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41; see also George Washington to Philip J. Schuyler, February 9, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:123.

wou'd therefore advise you to exhort every Man to bring the best he has. A good fowling Piece will do execution in the hands of a Marksman.”⁷

Other letters also suggest that guns (though perhaps not military muskets) were available in the free market. A letter from Washington to Elisha Sheldon, directing him to raise a cavalry regiment, suggests what type of horses he should purchase, and how he should pay for them. In the same tone, Washington instructs Sheldon: “Saddles, Bridles, Carbines, Broadswords, Pistols and every other Accoutrement necessary (agreeable to a pattern herewith given you,) you will procure as cheap as possible.”⁸ There is nothing in the letter that indicates any of these items were going to be unusually difficult to obtain, nor any suggestion that Sheldon would have any more difficulty purchasing guns than saddles.

Washington in December 1776 warned the Pennsylvania Safety Council:

I have not a Musket to furnish the Militia who are without Arms; this demand upon me makes it necessary to remind you, that it will be needless for those to come down who have no Arms, except they will consent to work upon the Fortifications instead of taking their Tour of Military Duty; if they will do that, they may be most usefully employed. I would recommend to you to call in as many Men as can be got, for the express purpose of Working for we shall most undoubtedly have occasion for every Man who can procure or bear a Musket.⁹

Why would Washington request that they call in men “who can procure or bear a Musket” if he had none to issue? Washington obviously thought that there was some realistic chance of men showing up with a musket of their own.

We know that there were men who did show up with guns of their own, because we have the occasional records of the Continental Congress reimbursing individuals for the loss of personally owned weapons. “That there is due to Philip Melton, late a private in Captain Rippey's company of the 6th Pen[n]sylvania regiment, for a rifle-gun of his taken by the

⁷ George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41. Frothingham, 285, thus described Washington's army in early 1776: “A large number had brought into the field their own fire-arms.”

⁸ George Washington to Elisha Sheldon, December 16, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:386-7.

⁹ George Washington to Pennsylvania Safety Council, December 22, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:422.

enemy, 13 60/90 dollars....”¹⁰ “That there is due to Henry Frict, a private in Captain Hay's company of the 6th Pen[n]sylvania regiment, for a rifle gun belonging to him, and lost in the public service, the sum of 14 30/90 dollars”¹¹ “That there is due to John Byrn, late a soldier in Captain Morgan's company of riflemen, for a rifle belonging to him which was lost at the attack on Quebec, the sum of 16 60/90 dollars....”¹² “That there is due to Captain William Houston, of Colonel Frederick Watts's batallion, flying camp, for 27 rifles guns and one drum, lost at Fort Washington, the sum of 376 42/90 dollars....”¹³

Other documents establish that guns were available for purchase, because the Continental Congress reimbursed military officers for guns purchased for their units, such as, “there is due, to Robert Stephens, for four rifles delivered to Captain H. Stevenson, for the use of his rifle company, the sum of 55 30/90 dollars....”¹⁴ “That there should be paid to James Young, for 51 rifle and smooth-bore guns, 22 of which was delivered to Robert Towers and Samuel Appleton, 7 lost, and 22 delivered at Fort Washington, the sum of 571 25/90 dollars....”¹⁵ “To John Cox, for eight rifle guns, supplied by Edward Snicker, for the use of Captain Gabriel Long's company, of Virginia riflemen, 146 60/90 dollars....”¹⁶ “That there is due to sundry persons of Northumberland county, belonging to Colonel Potter's batallion of militia, for rifles, guns, blankets, taken and appraised for the use of Captain William Gray's company of the said batallion, some time in December last, which articles were not returned to the owners, but delivered up to the continental store, as appears by certificates, 1,208 12/90 dollars, and that the same ought to be paid to Brigadier Potter, or his order.”¹⁷

We get some evidence that there were many guns in America—and guns of a type not suitable for military use—from examining the manner in which the Continental Congress

¹⁰ May 10, 1777, *JCC*, 345.

¹¹ May 15, 1777, *JCC*, 362.

¹² June 9, 1777, *JCC*, 429.

¹³ May 19, 1777, *JCC*, 370-1.

¹⁴ May 13, 1777, *JCC*, 351.

¹⁵ April 26, 1777, *JCC*, 303.

¹⁶ November 23, 1776, *JCC*, 977.

¹⁷ August 26, 1777, *JCC*, 680.

dealt with the problem of disarming Tories. The Pennsylvania Assembly on March 29, 1776, debated a resolution implementing the Continental Congress's request that each government take steps "disarming disaffected persons." However, "many Fire-Arms may be taken which may not be fit for use" by either the Continental Army or Pennsylvania's troops.

There were apparently enough of these non-military weapons that the Pennsylvania government believed that it needed to pass legislation describing what to do with them. The "disaffected persons" were to be paid only for the military arms; the others were to be stored "for the owners, to be delivered to them when the Congress shall direct." Later revisions of the resolution specified that the firearms to be involuntarily purchased from the disaffected were those "fit for the use of the Troops, or could be conveniently made so...." While the "disaffected" were to be disarmed against their will, "well-affected Non-Associators" (those who were neutral) "possessed of good Arms" were encouraged—but not required—to sell their weapons to the government.¹⁸

Significantly, Bellesiles claims that, "Congress and most of the states disarmed all 'disaffected persons' without recompense, and gave their arms to the Continental Army."¹⁹ But it turns out, when one reads Bellesiles's source for that claim, that his source says exactly the opposite. Bellesiles's cited source, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 4:220-21, shows that they did compensate "disaffected persons" for arms taken for public use; only arms unfit for the military were not compensated, because these arms were not permanently confiscated:

Whereas in the execution of the resolve of Congress of the 14th of March, respecting the disarming disaffected persons, many fire arms may be taken, which may not be fit for use to arm any of the troops mentioned therein: Therefore, Resolved, That all the fire arms so taken, being appraised according to said resolve, none of them shall be paid for, but those that are fit for the use of such troops, or that may conveniently be so made, and *the remainder shall be safely kept by the said assemblies, conventions, councils or committees of safety, for the owners, to be delivered to them when the Congress shall direct.*²⁰ [emphasis added]

The resolution of March 14th was also explicit about compensation for confiscated arms:

¹⁸ March 29, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:693-4; April 6, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:713-14.

¹⁹ Bellesiles, 192-3.

²⁰ *JCC*, 4:220-21.

Resolved, That it be recommended to the several assemblies, conventions, and councils or committees of safety of the United Colonies, immediately to cause all persons to be disarmed within their respective colonies, who are notoriously disaffected to the cause of America, or who have not associated, and shall refuse to associate, to defend, by arms, these United Colonies...; and to apply the arms taken from such persons... in the first place to the arming the continental troops raised in said colony; in the next, to the arming such troops as are raised by the colony for its own defence, and the residue to be applied to the arming the associators; that the arms when taken be appraised by indifferent persons, and *such as are applied to the arming the continental troops, be paid for by Congress, and the residue by the respective assemblies, conventions, or councils, or committees of safety.*²¹ [emphasis added]

Baltimore County, Maryland, disarmed “such persons as have refused to enroll as Militia.” Reports listing the confiscated weapons show a total of thirteen guns.²² This is not an enormous number of guns, indicating either that relatively few Tories remained in the area; that relatively few were identified by refusing to enroll in the militia; or that there were few guns still in Tory hands. Similarly, on July 8, 1776, the Maryland Council of Safety paid William Thomas £6 for two muskets.²³ The assessed value of the purchased and confiscated muskets, blunderbusses, fowling pieces, and fusees averaged £2:9:2—the low price yet another indication that guns were not terribly scarce.

Washington’s letter of February 14, 1780 also suggests that there were some significant number of soldiers who brought their own guns with them into service:

There does not appear to me any reason, upon which the soldiers are intitled to, or can claim the Continental fire arms at the expiration of their times of service. The act of Assembly is very plain. *As an incouragement for men to bring their own arms into the army, it offers a certain bounty, and to such who do not, a lesser sum.* The difference which is given to the former, appears to have been designed as a compensation for the use of the arms; nor can any construction whatsoever authorise the latter to carry off arms &c. the property of the Continent.²⁴ [emphasis added]

What is one to make of Washington’s letter of April 29, 1778? He complains, as Bellesiles would have us believe, “I am as much at a loss as you can possibly be how to procure Arms for the Cavalry...” But the rest of the sentence tells the rest of the story: “there are 107 Carbines in Camp but no Swords or Pistols of any consequence. General Knox informs me,

²¹ JCC 4:205.

²² March 8, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1509; March 22, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:1514.

²³ July 8, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1331. See July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337, or *Archives of Maryland*, 12:54, for another purchase, on July 16, from James Tilghman, for £300, “for the purchase of Fire-Arms....” Unfortunately, the quantity of arms is not specified.

²⁴ George Washington to Henry Jackson, February 14, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:9.

that the 1100 Carbines which came in to the Eastward and were said to be fit for Horsemen were only a lighter kind of Musket.”²⁵ Guns weren’t necessarily scarce; the right sort of guns were scarce.

In 1778 Alexander Graydon described a group of cavalry from Connecticut that had an almost comic aspect to them:

They consisted of a considerable number of old-fashioned men, probably farmers and heads of families, as they were generally middle-aged, and many of them apparently beyond the meridian of life....

Instead of carbines..., they generally carried fowling pieces; some of them very long, and such as in Pennsylvania are used for shooting ducks.²⁶

While Graydon gently ridiculed their military effectiveness, though not their good intentions, his description suggests that they came armed with their personal hunting weapons. If Connecticut’s soldiers were desperately short of firearms, it seems strange that these Don Quixote-like figures would bring guns with them, instead of turning them over to more effective soldiers.

Bellesiles tells us that Washington ordered his officers to start carrying half-pikes, and suggests that the motivation was partly to deal with the shortage of arms.²⁷ But as usual, a careful reading shows that what Washington ordered was not driven by a shortage of firearms, but the different needs that officers had for arms compared to the men:

As the proper arming of the officers would add considerable strength to the army, and the officers themselves derive great confidence from being armed in time of action, the General orders every one of them to provide himself with a half-pike or spear, as soon as possible; firearms when made use of with drawing their attention too much from the men; and to be without either, has a very awkward and unofficerlike appearance.²⁸

There is nothing in Washington’s statement that indicates that firearms weren’t available for the officers; Washington’s concern was that the time required to load and fire them was a distraction for officers from leading soldiers.

²⁵ George Washington to Stephen Moylan, April 29, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 11:322-3.

²⁶ Alexander Graydon, “Queer Cavalry” in Hart & Hill, 235-6.

²⁷ Bellesiles, 187.

²⁸ George Washington, December 22, 1777, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 10:190.

A somewhat similar issue appears in Pennsylvania, where the use of the pike is suggested as a solution to the problem that “the Spirit of our People supplies more Men than we can furnish with Fire Arms, a deficiency which all the Industry of our ingenious Gunsmiths cannot suddenly supply...” But a little later in the same paragraph, we see evidence that it was not *all* firearms that were in as short supply as muskets, because “Each Pikeman to have a cutting Sword, and where it can be procured, a Pistol.”²⁹ On March 12, 1776, the Pennsylvania Assembly gave recruiting officers instructions for “recruiting Riflemen” that included, “You are to take the utmost care... that you inlist no man who is not provided with a good rifle-gun, perfectly fit for service, and very expert in the use of it.”³⁰ The Pennsylvania government was clearly short of rifles, but did not consider it would impossible to find men already armed with a rifle “and very expert in the use of it.”

Washington complained at various times that his forces had been well armed, but that various public arms had drifted away with the soldiers.³¹ Unsurprisingly, he criticized, “The scandalous Loss, waste, and private appropriation of Public Arms, during the last Campaign is beyond all conception.” He asked the state governments to ask for an accounting of the public arms that had been issued to various regiments, but also made another request that shows that Washington believed that there were large numbers of privately owned firearms in America: “I beg you will not only do this, but purchase all, fit for the field, that can be procured from private persons, of which there must be a vast Number in the Government.”³²

Similarly, Washington’s letter to the Continental Congress War Board of March 8, 1780, concerning two regiments of dragoons that were to be outfitted seems to indicate that pistols were available for them: “There are pistols in the Magazine, but the Horsemens swords must

²⁹ August 26, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:322.

³⁰ March 12, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:681.

³¹ George Washington to the New York Legislature, March 1, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:215-16.

³² George Washington to the Massachusetts Council, February 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:209.

be made, as there are none proper for the purpose on hand, that I know of.”³³ It appears that pistols were available.

Bellesiles tells us “the frontier regions were worst hit by this scarcity of firearms.”³⁴ There are certainly complaints from the frontier, such as the July 20, 1779 letter of Colonel Archibald Lochry of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, who complained about a shortage of arms, and “What few we still have are so out of repair that they are almost useless and it is out of my power to get them repaired this quarter.”³⁵

Yet instructions from the Continental Congress and letters from Washington suggest that they were unaware of such shortages, or that such shortages were localized. On June 16, 1778, the Continental Congress, discussed “the reward offered in March last to such drafts as should bring firelocks &c with them into the field” because the government owned too few “arms and accoutrements.” They therefore increased the reward offered to the two new regiments “to be raised in Virginia and Pennsylvania, to induce them to come armed and accoutred....”

If the soldier brought “a good serviceable rifle, with a powder horn, bullet pouch, and mould, eight dollars; for a good serviceable musket, with a bayonet and a powder horn, and bullet pouch, or a good cartouch box, six dollars; for a like musket and accoutrements, without a bayonet, five dollars; for a knapsack, two dollars; for a haversack, one dollar; for a blanket, eight dollars.”³⁶ If guns were so seriously scarce on the frontier, why was a rifle with all the accessories worth only three times what a knapsack was—and the same as a blanket?

Another example is Washington’s letter of July 28, 1781 to Thomas Parr, asking him to recruit riflemen from Pennsylvania: “I observe by the Recruiting instructions that the Men are to be paid for the use of their Rifles if they bring them into the field; this leaves the matter optional, and if a considerable part of them should come unarmed we shall be put to

³³ George Washington to the Board of War, March 8, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:86.

³⁴ Bellesiles, 185-86.

³⁵ Whisker, 169.

³⁶ June 16, 1778, *JCC*, 611-12. Also see June 8, 1778, *JCC*, 577, for similar incentives.

very great difficulties on that account, as we have but few Rifles belonging to the Continent.”³⁷ If rifles were really so incredibly scarce, this would not be “optional.”

A somewhat similar letter to Joseph Reed the previous month requests Reed’s help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania. Washington expected these men to bring their own rifles:

One of the terms should be that they are to find their own Rifles, as we have none in Store. I shall be glad to hear as soon as possible what probability there will be of succeeding in this undertaking. The greater part of the Men, must be with the Army by the 1st. of Augt. or their services will be useless afterwards.³⁸

In a bit more than a month, Washington had a realistic hope that Reed would be able to raise perhaps 300 men with their own rifles—and have them with the Continental Army. If firearms were actually scarce on the frontier, someone seems to have not told Washington, who assumed that many could be persuaded to bring their rifles with them.

At the encouragement of the British, Indians representing the Mohawks, Ottowas, Nantucas, Shawnees and Delawares traveled south to meet with the Cherokees in 1776. According to Henry Stuart, the British government’s representative to the Cherokees, the Indian ambassadors described what they saw as they headed south. “[W]hen they attempted to pass through that Country from Pittsburgh to their Nation... they found the Country thickly inhabited and the people all in arms....” They listed several forts that contained a total of 6500 men, apparently armed, and that there were other forts that they did not enumerate that were also filled with armed men.³⁹

Isaac Thomas, a Loyalist present at the same conference, claimed “that there were about six thousand men in Arms on the Frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina which were intended to have gone to oppose the King’s Troops but they had determined to stay and opposed the Indians....”⁴⁰ Perhaps the Indian ambassadors, on their way to a war council,

³⁷ George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.

³⁸ George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:258.

³⁹ August 25, 1776, Henry Stuart’s Account of his Proceedings with the Cherokee Indians, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:773.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10:782.

were wrong about the number of armed Americans present on the frontier; perhaps the guns that the Indians saw were all the guns available on the frontier. Perhaps Thomas, a Loyalist with no reason to discourage the Indians from attacking the rebels, was mistaken about the number of militiamen with guns in the frontier areas. But it is certainly more likely that these Indians, representatives of a warrior society, and Thomas, knew more accurately than Bellesiles how heavily armed the American colonists were.

An interesting associated issue is the use of rifles in the Continental Army. The strength of the rifle was its accuracy, which suited it for both hunting and sniper work. But rifles were slow to load, and for the massed fire that was the norm for large units, muskets were clearly preferred. The Secretary of the Board of War, in requesting that a rifle company from Maryland be armed with muskets instead, complained that there was “a superabundance of riflemen in the Army.” They wanted less rifles, and more muskets, “as they are more easily kept in order, can be fired oftener and have the advantage of Bayonets.” Rifles had their place, but muskets were preferred, not because Americans weren’t good shots, but because muskets were a better choice for massed battles.⁴¹

Even more interesting, from the standpoint of gun scarcity, is that the Secretary of the Board of War put more emphasis on *clothing* this rifle company before they came to Philadelphia than arming them: “They might be armed and accoutred, but might lie here a very considerable time before cloathes [*sic*] and blankets could be furnished.”⁴²

Rifles seem to have been common hunting weapons in some parts of America—more common than muskets, in spite of being much more expensive. The disadvantage of the rifle for massed fire, however, meant that Americans could be heavily armed, and yet not well-armed for combat as part of the Continental Army. The equivalent today would be if Americans were asked to show up for combat duty with their personal weapons.

⁴¹ Peterson, 200-3.

⁴² Richard Peters to the Council of Safety, October 26, 1776, William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1892), 12:404-5.

Americans would show up with many small handguns, not very useful for anything but highly specialized missions. They would show up with lots of .22 rifles—really only useful for training. Shotguns would be useful for guard duty, and jungle warfare, or certain types of urban combat, but not generally useful for the U.S. Army’s primary mission. Many hunters would show up with hunting rifles in a bewildering array of calibers. Some of these hunting guns might be useful for specialized military functions, such as sniping, but their slow reloading and problems of ammunition resupply would make them difficult to integrate into a modern military. (Of course, many of these hunting rifles would be neither accurate enough, nor reliable enough for military use.) Two centuries later, one could read complaints about “not enough rifles” or “not enough military arms” and based on those complaints alone, conclude that there were few guns in America today—and be just as wrong as Bellesiles is when he claims that there were few guns in America before the Revolution.

Gun Scarcity and Militias in the Early Republic

One category of sources that Bellesiles uses to prove that guns were in very short supply in the early Republic is arms censuses, which Bellesiles purports included not only publicly owned arms, but also privately owned arms. Bellesiles tells us that in 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted “a careful census of firearms in America, with the intention of demonstrating that the America militia owned sufficient firearms.” After reporting that there were 235,831 guns, Bellesiles claims that, “Half of all these guns were in the hands of the federal government, with about one-quarter in state arsenals. The remainder were privately owned.”¹

But when you examine the sources that Bellesiles cites for this statement, there is nothing to support his claim that this census included all privately owned guns. The circular letter from Secretary of War Dearborn to the state and territorial governors is explicit, asking them to provide information “stating the military strength of each State, the actual situation of the arms, accoutrements, and ammunition of the several corps, with the same, and every other thing which may relate to their government, and the general advantage of good order and military discipline.”² There is no division contained in the “Return of the Militia” tables that distinguish between those “in the hands of the federal government” and those in state arsenals. There is nothing in the militia return that indicates how many of the arms were

¹ Bellesiles, 241.

² United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.

privately owned. There is nothing that indicates how many arms there were in the United States, other than those in the hands of the militia.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that any arms “in the hands of the federal government” would be listed in a “Return of the Militia,” based on the language of the circular letter. The 1810 and 1811 Returns of the Militia³ are quite similar in form and method to the 1803 Return of the Militia. The 1811 inventory of federal military stores,⁴ which clearly is not included in the totals contained in the 1810 or 1811 militia returns, strongly implies that a “Return of the Militia” included no federal arms at all. Nor is there anything in the 1803, 1810, or 1811 “Return of the Militia” supporting circular letters, or explanatory notes that identifies or even suggests how many of the arms so listed are privately owned, or that these returns included all privately owned guns.⁵

Had Bellesiles turned even three more pages, he would have found somewhat larger numbers of firearms in a “Return of the Militia” compiled less than two months later, after New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky sent in their returns.⁶ This increases the number of firearms a bit, but does nothing to support Bellesiles’s claim that these are comprehensive censuses of firearms in the United States, or that they list all privately owned firearms.

Another interesting point is that the firearms listed in these censuses are “pairs of pistols,” muskets, and rifles. From the categories, it would seem that this census was only of military arms, and could not have included all privately owned arms, many of which would have been inappropriate for militia use.

So where does Bellesiles get these numbers from? Bellesiles claims that in 1806 “a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America.”⁷ It is clear

³ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.

⁴ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.

⁵ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301.

⁶ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:165, 168-72.

⁷ Bellesiles, 241 n. 123.

from his statement on page 241 that Bellesiles means that this included all guns in America, both publicly and privately owned. The 1806 congressional committee report that Bellesiles cites, however, is quite explicit: After explaining that the laws of the United States required every “citizen enrolled in the militia” to “provide himself with a good musket or rifle,” the report explains, “From the best estimates which the committee has been able to form, there is upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles in the hands of the militia, which have, a few instances excepted, been provided by, and are the property of, the individuals who hold them.”⁸ This is explicitly a statement that there were *at least* 250,000 guns in the hands of the militia alone—and nearly all of them were privately owned.

The following paragraph of the 1806 report, on the same page (where Bellesiles could not have missed it) gives a count of the number of guns in the federal magazines: 132,000, of which 120,000 were “fit for use” and 12,000 “which need repairs.” To figure out how many guns there were in the United States, one would need to add the “upwards of 250,000” that were privately owned to the 132,000 guns in the magazines of the United States. The guns in the state magazines would have to be added—and the report is explicit that these were not counted. If there were a count of guns in the hands of non-militia members (which there is not in this report), this would also need to be added. Depending on how one interprets the congressional committee report, it is possible that there were also large numbers of firearms owned by militia members that were not considered to be military weapons, and thus not included in this estimate of “upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles....” Bellesiles’s characterization of this report is utterly wrong; indeed, one is hard pressed to see how anyone could honestly read that report, and describe it the way that Bellesiles does.

Bellesiles also claims that the severe shortage of arms for the militia was a source of continual complaint by public officials. “One can examine the records kept by any public official associated with the militia in the early nineteenth century and find similar complaints

⁸ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198. There four examples of Pennsylvania militiamen receiving payment “for the use of my gun” while on militia duty in 1794 at *Pennsylvania Archives*, 6th series, 5:70-71.

of the lack of firearms and the general failure of the system.”⁹ Bellesiles points to W.C.C. Claiborne, governor of Mississippi Territory 1801-1803, and of Orleans Territory starting in 1812, as such an example.

Bellesiles quotes Claiborne that his efforts to organize the Mississippi militia had met “many obstacles...the greatest of which are the want of arms and the means of obtaining a supply.”¹⁰ Indeed, Claiborne did write that to Secretary of State Madison.¹¹ Yet, within a few months, Claiborne wrote to the Secretary of War, “The prospect of organizing the militia is flattering: the different Counties are laid off into regiments, battalions and company Districts: the officers are all appointed, and the men enrolled: a great degree of rivalry exists between the different corps: and I flatter myself that in a little time I shall have a well-armed and well disciplined militia.”¹² Later in the week, Claiborne finished his letter, “In the course of this week, I have reviewed the militia of Jefferson and Adams Counties; and can assure you that the prospect of having a well-armed militia, exceeds my most sanguine expectations.”¹³

Were guns in short supply? Bellesiles tells us that, in response to Governor Claiborne’s need for arms, “The government helped by sending 163 rifles and one hundred muskets to be stored for the militia’s use, increasing the number of guns in the territory by 47 percent to 820, enough for 31.7 percent of the registered militia.”¹⁴ Yet, by reading what Claiborne *actually* wrote, we find a considerably different situation.

There is nothing in the sources that Bellesiles cites that indicates that the guns listed on the Return of the Militia were the only firearms in the territory—certainly, nothing to justify Bellesiles’s claim of increasing the number of guns in the territory “by 47 percent to 820.” The shortage of militia arms that Governor Claiborne complained about at the start of his

⁹ Bellesiles, 248.

¹⁰ Bellesiles, 248.

¹¹ William C. Claiborne, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1917), 1:39.

¹² Claiborne, 1:152.

¹³ Claiborne, 1:155.

¹⁴ Bellesiles, 248.

militia organizing effort seems to have been a short-lived problem, and not the chronic difficulty that Bellesiles would have us believe: “You will discover that many of the privates are yet unarmed, but I flatter myself, this Inconvenience will soon be remedied—the Rifles (which were sent to me) are in high Estimation among the Militia, and the probability is, they will all be sold, upon the conditions, I have prescribed....”

Those conditions included a certificate from the captain that “Every Citizen applying for a Rifle” “is regularly inrolled on his Company, and in want of Arms,” and that the applicant must pay \$14 for it—a sizable sum of money for most Americans in 1802. “Upon those conditions I suppose the Rifles will speedily be disposed of to the Militia.... As to the Muskets, they are in no demand among the Citizen Soldiers, and I cannot persuade them of their utility....” Instead, Governor Claiborne planned to store the muskets in a warehouse, apparently because demand was so low for them.¹⁵ So much for the shortage of firearms!

Governor Claiborne also reported, “I received, the other day, sixty stands of muskets from Fort Adams. They have been heretofore used, and are not in good order: I propose therefore to sell them at the moderate sum of eight dollars apiece. At this reduced price I expect the militia will speedily purchase them. But I find the people here are much prejudiced against muskets, and are unwilling to depend on any other arms but rifles.”¹⁶ How interesting that Bellesiles neglects to mention this fact! If the militia was insufficiently armed, this was apparently a temporary condition, and reflective not of a shortage of firearms, but a desire by the militia for rifles, not muskets.

Bellesiles would have us believe that Claiborne, like most public officials, complained about “the general failure of the system.”¹⁷ But this is not an accurate statement of Claiborne’s beliefs. According to even the pages that Bellesiles cites, Claiborne’s concern was not a “general failure” of the militia system, but specific defects in the militia law of

¹⁵ Claiborne, 1:182-83.

¹⁶ Claiborne, 1:152.

¹⁷ Bellesiles, 248.

Mississippi Territory: “The exertions of the Officers to organize and discipline the Militia, have been accompanied with great success, and authorize a hope that *this best resource*, of a free people, will shortly become an efficient means of defence. Experience, however, has proven, that our militia laws are still defective.” [emphasis in original] Claiborne asked the Mississippi Territorial Legislature to correct the territory’s militia laws;¹⁸ his speech to the legislators shows that he did not see the militia system as a “general failure.”

Gunpowder production data also suggests that Bellesiles’s claims about gun scarcity are wrong. Cuming’s description of 1807 Lexington, Kentucky lists six gunpowder mills “that make about twenty thousand pounds of powder yearly.”¹⁹ Ten years later, Henry Bradshaw Fearon’s *Sketches of America* describes gunpowder mills in the same area that made £9000 worth of goods annually.²⁰ U.S. exports of gunpowder for 1817 were worth \$356,522.²¹ While the gunpowder manufacturing data in the 1810 census appears to be more complete than the firearms manufacturing data, there are still some states where the census gives a total dollar valuation of gunpowder manufactured, but not a total weight. Even with these missing numbers, the U.S. manufactured at least 1,397,111 pounds of gunpowder in 1810.²²

This data is somewhat less useful than it first appears, since Americans used gunpowder not only for small arms, but also cannon, and blasting. Coarse-grained gunpowder was better suited to cannon than to small arms.²³ Unfortunately, there is nothing in the 1810 census data that distinguish for which weapons the gunpowder was manufactured, or to distinguish that intended for weapons from that used for demolition.

¹⁸ “Address to Mississippi Legislature,” December 9, 1802, Claiborne, 1:237.

¹⁹ Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country Through the States of Ohio and Kentucky; A Voyage Down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers...* (Pittsburgh, 1810), 163.

²⁰ Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States* (London, 1818; reprint New York, 1969), 245.

²¹ Fearon, 383.

²² Albert Gallatin, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States of America* (Washington, 1812), 33.

²³ Berkeley R. Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition in the United States Service, 1776-1865* (Washington, 1956), 20-22.

It also seems impossible at this late date to make any authoritative statements distinguishing military from civilian consumption of gunpowder in the period 1800-1840, but during the American Revolution, 2,349,210 pounds of gunpowder were consumed (of which 2/3 was imported),²⁴ or about 335,000 pounds of gunpowder per year. Per capita U.S. production of gunpowder in 1810 was at least comparable to per capita U.S. military consumption during the American Revolution. At a minimum, the burden of proof is on those who argue against widespread gun use during this period to explain this astonishing rate of gunpowder production in peacetime.

Without question, the militia system never worked out quite as well in the United States as its proponents had hoped. It is also clear that militias, especially in the North, degenerated into primarily social organizations by the time of the Mexican War, and even earlier back from the frontiers. But Bellesiles's claims about gun scarcity based on militia records do not stand up to even the most cursory examination.

²⁴ Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition*, 24.

Long Guns and Hunting in the Early Republic

Bellesiles claims that in the early Republic few Americans hunted, few Americans wanted guns, and few Americans owned them. As evidence for this claim, Bellesiles reports, “an examination of eighty travel accounts written in America from 1750 to 1860 indicate that the travelers did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence.”¹ Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the 1840s was done almost entirely by a small number of professional market hunters, or by Indians. Most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt.²

The evidence of the time shows otherwise. The evidence consists of eyewitness accounts by travelers, descriptions of life in the early Republic, and the occasional evidence from government documents. Unsurprisingly, government documents provide scarce evidence concerning private ownership and use of guns. For the most part, this evidence is only suggestive, but in combination with travel accounts of the time *including at least some of the travel accounts that Bellesiles claims to have read*, it provides a devastating response to Bellesiles’s claims.

As the negotiations at the end of the Revolutionary War dragged on, the Continental Congress provided an incentive for soldiers to stay on until the final treaty was signed: “That such of the non-commissioned officers and privates soldiers of the above description, as continue in service to that period, shall be allowed their fire arms and accoutrements, as an

¹ Bellesiles, 304.

² Bellesiles, 320-23.

extra reward for their long and faithful services.”³ This suggests that there was demand for guns from ordinary soldiers—enough so that this would be considered an incentive to stay. Perhaps the Continental Congress was deluding itself about the interest of soldiers in taking their guns home with them.

There are other fascinating glimpses into the private market for firearms in the early Republic. The federal government’s surplus sales are probably just a narrow look, like peeking through a keyhole. On May 2, 1787, the Continental Congress ordered public auction of an interesting collection of military odds and ends: “413 old militia Arms... 365 old militia gun barrels... 985 old gun locks... 2000 damaged muskets... 700 pistols... 1194 damaged muskets... 1066 damaged carbines... 4446 damaged musket barrels...” and a bit more than thirteen tons of damaged powder.⁴ A single day’s surplus sale included 4200 damaged firearms, 413 old, but apparently functional militia arms, 700 apparently functional pistols, and large numbers of gun parts. Perhaps the government was deluding itself, thinking that there would be a market for all these firearms and parts in America.

While these government documents are merely suggestive that Americans wanted guns, they are not terribly persuasive. What is persuasive are the accounts of those who lived in or visited the early Republic. Bellesiles’s romantic, nearly gunless America where few non-Indians hunted (and then, almost entirely with knives), is intriguing. But as I read travel accounts from the early Republic, I came to the realization that if Bellesiles is right about this rarity of guns and hunting, not only will a lot of our textbooks have to be rewritten, but dozens of books written by people who lived in the period 1790-1840 will have to be rewritten as well, to bring them into conformity with Bellesiles’s highly selective, often grossly misquoted “scholarship.”

In my examination of the contemporary eyewitness accounts that mention firearms, indications that firearms were scarce are non-existent (though particular *types* of firearms

³ George Washington, May 1, 1783, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 26:372.

⁴ May 2, 1787, *JCC*, 244-246.

might be rare). Indeed, of more than two dozen published travel accounts and memoirs of the early Republic that I read during my research into antebellum concealed weapon statutes, twenty-four mentioned firearms and sport or subsistence hunting as unsurprising; in very few accounts was there no mention of firearms and hunting. *None* of these sources claimed or even implied that privately owned firearms, subsistence hunting, or sport hunting was rare, unusual, or stigmatized. Marksmanship, according to many of the accounts, was highly prized, and high competence with firearms was widespread. Furthermore, these accounts make it appear that this was true for all regions of the United States.

Let me be very clear on this: I am not saying that Bellesiles simply hasn't read the same sources that I have. It is very easy, with the enormous supply of books, diaries, and government reports from that time, to find two different historians coming to very different conclusions by reading different sources. One can be led astray by focusing entirely on one region of the country, and assuming that this region typifies America. For example, in my research for a previous book, I found that there were significant differences between the back country South and the rest of the United States with respect to violence, murder, and the concealed carrying of deadly weapons.

Had Bellesiles read a *completely* different set of travel accounts from the ones that I had read, I could wonder about the odds of his travelers not noticing that they "were surrounded by guns and violence," while so many other travelers noticed and wrote about it at length. But there are enough sources that Bellesiles has read (or claims to have read) that I have read as well—and that make it very clear that before 1840, guns, murder, mayhem, and hunting were widespread on at least some parts of the frontier, and not unknown or even startling in the settled and urban East.

Rev. William C. Smith's frontier account, *Indiana Miscellany*, describes settlers who are heavily armed with guns for self-defense against Indians—because the Indians commonly

carried guns.⁵ Smith also describes the morality of the early Indiana settlements by telling us “it was a rare thing to hear... the report of a hunter’s gun on the holy Sabbath day....”⁶ Smith thus implies that gunfire was *not* rare the rest of the week.

During the War of 1812, Smith tells us of a shortage of provisions for the settlers, who had fortified their villages,

but usually they had plenty of meat. All the men were excellent hunters—some of them real experts. The country abounding in game, they kept the forts well supplied with venison and bear-meat.... When considered at all admissible to venture outside the fort to labor, the men went in company, taking their trusty rifles with them.... Some of [the women] could handle the rifle with great skill, and bring down the game in the absence of their husbands....⁷

Pim Fordham’s arrival at St. Vincennes in Indiana in 1817 gives us some idea of what was considered appropriate paraphernalia for traveling in the Indiana wilderness. “We were furnished with guns and tomohawks [*sic*], and all things necessary to encamp in the woods....” Fordham also describes Indiana’s “back-wood settlers, who are half hunters, half farmers.”⁸ He divides the frontier population of Illinois into four categories:

1st. The hunters, a daring, hardy, race of men, who live in miserable cabins, which they fortify in times of War with the Indians, whom they hate but much resemble in dress and manners.... But their rifle is their principal means of support. They are the best marksmen in the world, and such is their dexterity that they will shoot an apple off the head of a companion. Some few use the bow and arrow.

2nd. class. First settlers;—a mixed set of hunters and farmers....⁹

Fordham’s letter to his brother back in Britain describes his style of dress when traveling, and in a manner that suggests that this is the norm in Illinois Territory: “I wish you could see your brother mount his horse to morrow morning. I will give you a sketch. A broad-brimmed straw hat,—long trousers and moccasins,—shot pouch and powder horn slung from a belt,—rifle at his back, in a sling....”¹⁰ Fordham also observed that “should a war

⁵ William C. Smith, *Indiana Miscellany* (Cincinnati: 1867), 18-22.

⁶ Smith, 39.

⁷ Smith, 77-78.

⁸ Elias Pim Fordham, ed. Frederic Austin Ogg, *Personal Narrative: Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817-1818* (Cleveland, 1906), 95-96.

⁹ Fordham, 125-6.

¹⁰ Fordham, 109.

break out on our frontiers, I hope that there is not nor will be, a young Englishman among us, who would hesitate to turn out with his gun and blanket.”¹¹ It appears that Fordham assumed that every “young Englishman” settled on the Illinois frontier would own at least one gun appropriate for war.

While Fordham describes people who hunted at least partly to sell the game to others,¹² he also gives us evidence that hunting for one’s own table was common. Fordham’s account of a Christmas Day village feast lists a variety of game being cooked, including wild turkeys. That the game were hunted, not trapped, may be inferred from the following description:

The young men had their rifles out, and were firing *feux de joi* almost all the preceding night, all the day till late into the evening. It reminded me of Byron’s description of the Moslems firing at the feast of the Ramadan in Constantinople—but we backwoodsmen never fire a gun loaded with *ball* into the town,—only from all parts of it, out towards the woods.¹³

Indeed, Fordham’s account is filled with descriptions of settlers (including himself) engaged in hunting for sport and for food.¹⁴ Most significantly of all, with respect to the supposed rarity of firearms in America, Fordham wrote a letter to his brother telling him what he should bring to America, and what was not needed: “Do not bring with you any English rifles, or indeed any firearms but a pair of pistols. A good rifle gunlock would be valuable.”¹⁵ While pistols might be expensive or rare, firearms in general were readily available and were as cheap or cheaper than in England, which was at the time a major firearms manufacturing nation.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s 1818 journey through the Ozarks also provides evidence that, contrary to Bellesiles’s claims, firearms ownership, sport hunting, and subsistence hunting, were all common. His description of the frontier settlement of Sugar-Loaf Prairie shows that guns and hunting were the norm:

These people subsist partly by agriculture, and partly by hunting.... Hunting is the principal,

¹¹ Fordham, 205.

¹² Fordham, 143.

¹³ Fordham, 147.

¹⁴ Fordham, 181, 200, 213, 223-225.

¹⁵ Fordham, 237.

the most honourable, and the most profitable employment. To excel in the chase [sic] procures fame, and a man's reputation is measured by his skill as a marksman, his agility and strength, his boldness and dexterity in killing game, and his patient endurance and contempt of the hardships of the hunter's life.... They... can subsist any where in the woods, and would form the most efficient military corps in frontier warfare which can possibly exist. Ready trained, they require no discipline, inured to danger, and perfect in the use of the rifle.¹⁶

At least some of Sugar-Loaf Prairie's hunting was commercial fur trapping, and so perhaps this was not typical of the region—but Schoolcraft's description of other frontier settlements shows that hunting was a common part of how settlers obtained their meat.¹⁷ By the time frontier Ozark children reached fourteen years of age, they “have completely learned the use of the rifle, the arts of dressing skins and making [moccasins] and leather clothes.”¹⁸ Early in his journey, much to Schoolcraft's chagrin, he failed

to engage our hostess and her daughters in small-talk, such as passes current in every social corner; but, for the first time, found I should not recommend myself in that way. They could only talk of bears, hunting, and the like. The rude pursuits, and the coarse enjoyments of the hunter state, were all they knew.¹⁹

Schoolcraft also expresses amazement that at one isolated cabin, the lady of the house was home alone, and instructed Schoolcraft and his companion not only about “errors in our dress, equipments, and mode of travelling,” but also “that our [shotguns] were not well adapted to our journey; that we should have rifles....” Schoolcraft and his companion were astonished “to hear a woman direct us in matters which we had before thought the peculiar and exclusive province of men.”²⁰

It is very clear that Ozark women as hunters surprised a New Englander like Schoolcraft, but his comments also imply that what was surprising was the sex of his instructor, not widespread knowledge of hunting and firearms. Perhaps Schoolcraft's New England was relatively free of guns and hunting in the period that Bellesiles describes, but clearly the Ozarks were not.

¹⁶ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, intro. by Milton D. Rafferty, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks: Schoolcraft's Ozark Journal 1818-1819* (Fayetteville, Ark.: 1996), 63.

¹⁷ Schoolcraft, 54-56, 60-62, 72-73.

¹⁸ Schoolcraft, 74.

¹⁹ Schoolcraft, 54-55.

²⁰ Schoolcraft, 23.

New Yorker John Stillman Wright's acidic *Letters from the West* (1819) describes the early farmers of southern Indiana as, "mostly, of indolent slovenly habits, devoting the chief part of their time to hunting, and drinking whiskey...."²¹ While Wright is not explicit that these farmers hunted with *firearms*, he is explicit that hunting was not an upper class phenomenon in southern Indiana, nor was it rare.

Abraham Lincoln's autobiographical sketch, prepared in 1860, describes his family's removal from Kentucky to Indiana around 1816, and how, "A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log-cabin, and A. with a rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack, and killed one of them." While Lincoln did not continue as a hunter, that even in his family, which was not wealthy by any means, there was a rifle, and hunting was considered an appropriate action for an eight year old.²²

A poem by Lincoln, "The Bear Hunt," written apparently in 1847, describes, "When first my father settled here,/ 'Twas then the frontier line:/ The panther's scream, filled night with fear/ And bears preyed on the swine./ But wo for Bruin's short lived fun,/ When rose the squealing cry;/ Now man and horse, with dog and gun,/ For vengeance, at him fly." Another line of the poem refer to "Bang,---bang---the rifles go."²³ Hunting and guns were at least not uncommon parts on Lincoln's frontier.

Sandford C. Cox's *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* describes Indiana in the 1820s and 1830s using the journals and memoirs of the early settlers. The settlers use guns for hunting, self-defense, assisting law enforcement, and criminally. The references to firearms and subsistence hunting in Cox's book are so common that there is no point in

²¹ John Stillman Wright, *Letters from the West; or a Caution to Emigrants* (Salem, N.Y.: n.p., 1819; reprint, Ann Arbor, Mich.: n.p., 1966), 21.

²² Abraham Lincoln, Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 4:62.

²³ Lincoln, 1:386-8.

giving page numbers, nor do the journal-keepers and memoir-writers give the reader any reason to be surprised about the presence or use of guns.²⁴

Philip Gosse, an English naturalist visiting Alabama in the 1830s provides one of the more complete descriptions of the attitude of the population towards hunting and firearms:

Self-defence, and the natural craving for excitement, compel him to be a hunter; it is the appropriate occupation of a new, grand, luxuriant country like this, and one which seems natural to man, to judge from the eagerness and zest with which every one engages in it when he has the opportunity. The long rifle is familiar to every hand; skill in the use of it is the highest accomplishment which a southern gentleman glories in; even the children acquire an astonishing expertness in handling this deadly weapon at a very early age.²⁵

Bellesiles's claims about the poor marksmanship of militias would startle Gosse:

But skill as a marksman is not estimated by quite the same standard as in the old country. Pre-eminence in any art must bear a certain relation to the average attainment; and where this is universally high, distinction can be won only by something very exalted. Hence, when the young men meet together to display their skill, curious tests are employed, which remind one of the days of old English archery.... Some of these practices I have read of, but here I find them in frequent use. "Driving the nail" is one of these; a stout nail is hammered into a post about half way up to the head; the riflemen then stand at an immense distance, and fire at the nail; the object is to hit the nail so truly on the head with the ball as to drive it home. To hit at all on one side, so as to cause it to bend or swerve, is failure; missing it altogether is out of the question.²⁶

Gosse also describes widespread hunting of squirrels, wild hog, and varmints with rifles. According to Gosse's account, the Alabamans hunted for sport, food, and to protect their crops from damage.²⁷

Harriet Martineau's account of mid-1830s America gives us reason to believe that firearms, target shooting, and sport hunting were common occurrences along the Mississippi, and unsurprising to her:

While I was reading on the morning of the 12th, the report of a rifle from the lower deck summoned me to look out. There were frequent rifle-shots, and they always betokened our being near shore; generally under the bank, where the eye of the sportsman was in the way of temptation from some objection in the forest.²⁸

²⁴ Sandford C. Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (n.p., 1860; reprinted Freeport, N.Y.: n.p., 1970).

²⁵ Philip Gosse, *Letters from Alabama* (London: n.p., 1859), 130-1.

²⁶ Gosse, 130-1.

²⁷ Gosse, 132-3, 226-34, 256-72.

²⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London: n.p., 1838, reprinted New York: n.p., 1969), 2:20.

Bellesiles agrees that gun ownership was *more* common in the South than in the North, but even Northern accounts of life in the period 1800-1840 clearly show that the U.S. was already a “gun culture.”

Frances Wright is certainly one of the most extremely pro-American British visitors of the early Republic, and her claims should be regarded with somewhat greater care than many of the other visitors. Nonetheless, her assertion, “Every man, or nearly every man, in these states knows how to handle the axe, the hammer, the plane, all the mechanic’s tools in short, besides the musket, to the use of which he is not only regularly trained as a man but practised as a boy”²⁹ suggests that the use of firearms was widespread. Even granting hyperbole on Wright’s part, firearms knowledge was apparently common in America.

Two different travelers in 1830s America make reference to emigrants headed to the frontier, and in a way that suggests that rifles were the norm, not the exception. The Anglo-Irishman Thomas Cather describes while crossing Michigan in 1836:

[E]migrants from the old states on their way to settle in the Western forests. Each emigrant generally had a wagon or two, drawn by oxen. These wagons contained their wives, children, and *rest of their baggage*. The man walked by the side of his team with his rifle over his shoulder....³⁰

Harriet Williams Sawyer of Maine described life in 1840 Indiana, and complained about how the Lord’s Day was treated:

The Sabbath in the West is much desecrated; trades are transacted; labor, it is true, is generally suspended, but the Sabbath is regarded by most as a day of recreation. Hunting and intemperance are common.³¹

During this same period “Christmas shooting” took the same place on the frontier that Christmas caroling did in the America of my youth. Gert Göbel’s description of the Missouri frontier in the 1830s tells us that at Christmas, there were no religious observances, and no gifts exchanged:

²⁹ Frances Wright, ed. Paul R. Baker, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 150.

³⁰ Thomas Cather, Thomas Yoseloff, ed., *Voyage to America: The Journals of Thomas Cather* (New York: n.p., 1961; reprinted Westport, Conn.: *find publisher*, 1973), 132.

³¹ Shirley S. McCord, ed., *Travel Accounts of Indiana, 1679-1961* (Indianapolis: *find publisher*, 1970), 183.

There was just shooting. On Christmas Eve, a number of young fellows from the neighborhood banded together, and, after they had gathered together not only their hunting rifles but also old muskets and horse pistols from the Revolutionary War and had loaded them almost to the bursting point, they went from house to house. They approached the house as quietly as possible and then fired a mighty volley, to the fright of the women and children, and, if someone did not appear then, another volley no doubt followed. But usually the man of the house opened the door immediately, fired his own gun in greeting and invited the whole company into the house.... After everyone had chatted for a little while, the whole band set out for the next farm, where the same racket started up anew. In this way, this mischief was carried on until morning, and since, as a rule, a number of such bands were out and about, one could often hear all night the roaring and rattling of guns from all directions.³²

Accounts of similar practices—apparently of German origin—appear in many states, both frontier and settled, in the 1830s.³³

Rebecca Burlend's narrative of the Missouri frontier in 1831 describes hunting game birds in a way that suggests it was not only common among British emigrants, but also among Americans. Her husband had successfully hunted a turkey, and she had it mostly ready for Sunday dinner, when their guest arrived and expressed surprise, "as those birds are difficult to obtain with a common fowling-piece...." (Mr. Burlend had bagged a vulture, not a turkey—definitely not fit for the table.)³⁴

While unpersuasive by itself, the appearance of hunting as ordinary and commonplace activities in speeches and writings of the period is also evidence that hunting was not particularly unusual. A February 26, 1841 speech by Abraham Lincoln in the Illinois Legislature includes a fellow shooting furiously at an imagined squirrel in a tree—which turns out to be a louse on his eyelash.³⁵ There is nothing in Lincoln's humorous tale that suggests that hunting was unusual; indeed, his use of the analogy would suggest that hunting was common.

³² Gert Göbel, *Länger als ein Menschenleben in Missouri* (St. Louis, [1877]), 80-81, quoted in Walter L. Robbins, "Christmas Shooting Rounds in America and Their Background," *Journal of American Folklore*, 86:339 (1973) 48-52.

³³ Robbins, 49-51.

³⁴ Rebecca Burlend, *A True Picture of Emigration: Or Fourteen Years in the Interior of North America...* (London: n.p., 1848), 29-30.

³⁵ Lincoln, 1:244.

The frontier, of course, would have more reason for firearms ownership than settled areas of the Eastern U.S., but even from the most settled parts of pre-1840 America we have memoirs and travel accounts that treat gun ownership as unremarkable. Charles H. Haswell's *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* describes New York City life from 1816 to 1860. The incidents and tone suggest that guns, even in the 1830s, were an ordinary, not contemptible part of life. Haswell's entry for November 1830 tells of shooting a "ruffed grouse" at 144th Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan, "and it was believed by sportsmen to be the last one to suffer a like fate on the island." Haswell describes the opening of commercial hunting facilities on Manhattan. This suggests that sport hunting on Manhattan was already common at a time when Bellesiles argues that sport hunting was still unusual in America.³⁶

Haswell's memoirs also describe a widely reported 1830 incident in the District of Columbia. A prominent Washington newspaper editor, Duff Green, drew a concealed handgun to deter attack by a New York City newspaper editor at the U.S. Capitol. Haswell's account of subsequent events suggests that instead of regarding this as dastardly, criminal, unrespectable, or surprising, Green's acquaintances engaged in good-natured ribbing of him about the incident.³⁷ Green appears to have earned no infamy for his actions; two years later he published the 1830 census for the federal government.³⁸

There is no shortage of handguns in private hands in this period, and they appear in acts of violence at the highest levels of American society. The U.S. House of Representatives tried Samuel Houston for "a breach of the privileges of the House of Representatives, by assaulting and beating Mr. Stanbery, a member of that House." The testimony included that Rep. Stanbery, "had a consultation with some of my friends, who agreed with me upon the answer which was sent. It was the opinion of one of my friends (Mr. Ewing, of Ohio,) that it was proper I should be armed; that, immediately upon the reception of my note, Mr. Houston

³⁶ Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* (New York: find publisher, 1896), 261.

³⁷ Haswell, 244.

³⁸ *Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, 1830* (Washington: Duff Green, 1832).

would probably make an assault upon me. Mr. Ewing, accordingly, procured for me a pair of pistols, and a dirk; and, on the morning on which the answer was sent, I was prepared to meet Mr. Houston if he should assault me.”³⁹

Haswell’s February 1836 entry describes a mob that gathered to burn “Saint Patrick’s Church in Mott Street.” The effort came to naught, however, because “the Catholics... not only filled the church with armed men” but put so many men on the walls, presumably armed with long guns, that he described the walls as “crenellated.”⁴⁰ The attempt to burn the church is worthy of note; that the church was defended with armed men was worthy of note; that there were men armed, apparently with long guns, is treated as unsurprising.

Another example of what makes *Arming America* not simply wrong, but intentionally deceptive, is the claim, “an examination of eighty travel accounts written in America from 1750 to 1860 indicate that the travelers did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence.”⁴¹ Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the 1840s was done almost entirely by a small number of professional market hunters, or by Indians. Most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt.⁴²

What can one say when Bellesiles reads Fortescue Cuming’s *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* describing his journey through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky from 1807 to 1809, and claims that Cuming is one of these travelers who “did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence”? Throughout his journey Cuming mentions, with no particular surprise, widespread use of guns for sport, subsistence hunting, and self-defense. Cuming also distinguishes between subsistence hunting and hunting for market, and still suggests that subsistence hunting was common, not rare.⁴³ In Kentucky, Cuming describes how abundant the wildlife of the area remained, even after settlement by telling us “that little

³⁹ April 19, 1832, U.S. Congress, *House Journal* 25:611.

⁴⁰ Haswell, 312-3.

⁴¹ Bellesiles, 304.

⁴² Bellesiles, 320-3.

⁴³ Cuming, 30, 42, 114, 118, 135.

or no bread was used, but that even the children were fed on game; the facility of gaining which prevented the progress of agriculture....”⁴⁴

Even though Cuming was a hunter,⁴⁵ he expressed his admiration for the superior marksmanship of Western Pennsylvanians and Virginians:

Apropos of the rifle.—The inhabitants of this country in common with the Virginians, and all the back woods people, Indians as well as whites, are wonderfully expert in the use of it: thinking it a bad shot if they miss the very head of a squirrel, or a wild turkey, on the top of the highest forest tree with a single ball; though they generally load with a few grains of swan shot, with which they are equally sure of hitting the head of the bird or animal they fire at.⁴⁶

Cuming also makes occasional references to use of firearms for law enforcement. When two Western Pennsylvanians discovered a murder (committed with a gun and a knife), they “rode on to the next house and gave an alarm, which soon mustered the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who arming themselves, went in pursuit of the murderers. One of them resisting, when discovered, was shot, and the other apprehended....”⁴⁷

Cuming also describes meeting in Kentucky “straggling parties above fifty horsemen with rifles... at a militia muster,” apparently mostly drunk, which led to fights later in the evening.⁴⁸ Militias armed with cornstalks and brooms were more the rule away from the frontier, as Bellesiles claims, but we have examples like this one that suggest that frontier militias in 1807 were capable of showing up armed with rifles, and this was not surprising to a traveler.

Somehow, Bellesiles reads Rush Baynard Hall’s memoir of frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816)—and misses Hall’s detailed description of how hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh meat at very little expense.⁴⁹ Not surrounded by guns? Hall devotes an entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

⁴⁴ Cuming, 156.

⁴⁵ Cuming, 42.

⁴⁶ Cuming, 30.

⁴⁷ Cuming, 54.

⁴⁸ Cuming, 209.

⁴⁹ Robert Carleton [Rush Baynard Hall], *The New Purchase, or Early Years in the Far West*, 2nd ed. (New

Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated....⁵⁰

Hall also describes target shooting matches as common, and takes pride in participating in a match that he happened upon where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As the president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the ground.⁵¹ (See also the account of Richard Flower describing the 1820-21 Illinois Territory—one of many travel accounts that Bellesiles doesn't claim to have read. At the frontier village of Albion, Sunday amusements included that “the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport....”⁵²)

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience. They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but rifle matches they understood. Hall also describes the use of rifles both by settlers pursuing criminals, and by criminals trying to avoid arrest.⁵³

Hunting and target shooting were common enough that Hall describes non-lethal hunting and target shooting accidents. Hall also makes occasional references to pistols with no indication that they were either rare or regarded with any particular concern.⁵⁴ Yet Hall's references to pistols are far exceeded by mentions of rifles and shotguns. Hall's discussions of hunting, use and misuse of guns, and target shooting occur on forty-one pages of Hall's book—all of which Bellesiles seems to have either missed, or disregarded.

Albany, Ind.: *find publisher*, 1855), 66, 82, 139-49, 153, 160-3, 375, 448-51.

⁵⁰ [Hall], 100-113.

⁵¹ [Hall], 104.

⁵² Richard Flower, *Letters from the Illinois, 1820-1821: Containing An Account of the English Settlement at Albion and Its Vicinity...* (London: *find publisher*, 1822), 14.

⁵³ [Hall], 228-30, 189-90.

⁵⁴ [Hall], 262-3, 449, 452.

Isaac Weld's account of his travels in North America 1795-1797 is another of those that Bellesiles claims shows an "absence of discussion about guns..."⁵⁵ As we have previously seen, Weld discusses rifle manufacturing, and the use of rifles for hunting.⁵⁶ Weld also describes how in the backcountry, "The people all travel on horseback, with pistols and swords..."⁵⁷

Concerning hunting, Weld's description of Canadian hunting compares it the American hunters: "The people here, as in the back parts of the United States, devote a very great part of their time to hunting, and they are well skilled in the pursuit of game of every description. They shoot almost universally with the rifle gun, and are as dexterous at the use of it as any men can be. Their guns used by them [the Canadians] are all imported from England. Those in most estimation carry balls of the size of thirty to the pound; in the States the hunters very commonly shoot with balls of a much smaller size, sixty of them not weighing more than one pound..."⁵⁸ Americans, like Canadians, "devote a very great part of their time to hunting..." The difference was that Canadians imported their rifles from England, and preferred larger caliber hunting weapons.

Bellesiles read Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama, and missed her discussion of the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events, incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also refers to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car.⁵⁹

Bellesiles claims to have read British naval officer and novelist Frederick Marryat's account of his journey to North America, and that this was one of these eighty accounts that

⁵⁵ Bellesiles, 306.

⁵⁶ Weld, 1:117-19.

⁵⁷ Weld, 1:234.

⁵⁸ Weld, 2:150.

⁵⁹ Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (find city, University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-9, 203.

show an “absence of discussion about guns....”⁶⁰ Marryat described North Carolinians emigrating west in 1837:

These caravans consist of two or three covered wagons, full of women and children, furniture, and other necessaries, each drawn by a team of horses; brood mares, with foals by their sides, following; half a dozen or more cows, flanked on each side by the men, with their long rifles on their shoulders; sometimes a boy or two, or a half-grown girl on horseback.⁶¹

Marryat’s account of his journey to America includes many references to his own hunting with firearms, but this is not necessarily indicative of how common hunting was by Americans. Marryat does, however, make a number of references to Americans hunting and shooting that suggest that there was nothing particularly unusual about it. He describes how hunting was the “principal amusement of the officers” at Fort Snelling. Captain Scott, one of those officers, had a reputation as a very great marksman, based on his ability to throw two potatoes in the air, and puncture both of them with a single rifle bullet.

Nor was Captain Scott’s hunting a peculiarity of Fort Snelling being on the frontier. Marryat recounts Scott’s hunting anecdotes as a 12-year-old in Vermont, and these accounts indicate that not only was hunting common in Scott’s youth in Vermont, but so was gun ownership.⁶²

Among the other curious claims that Bellesiles makes is that there was very little violence in America before 1850. Bellesiles describes how Francis Trollope, Thomas Hamilton, and Frederick Marryat, all of whom left travel accounts about America, hated the United States. Bellesiles claims:

But the nature of the contempt in which some visitors held the Americans reveals striking differences between current perceptions of early America and those of contemporaries attuned to any difference from the European norm. Thus Marryat sneered in 1837 that the “unwillingness to take away life is a very remarkable feature in America, and were it not carried to such an extreme length, would be a very commendable one.” He was speaking of the American hesitance to use capital punishment compared to the more strenuous criminal justice system of England. But Marryat attributed a general squeamishness and even feebleness to Americans based on their faith in equality: they did not want to commit murder,

⁶⁰ Bellesiles, 306.

⁶¹ Frederick Marryat, ed. Jules Zanger, *Diary in America* (London: *find publisher*, 1839; reprinted Bloomington, Ind.: *find publisher*, 1960), 288-9.

⁶² Marryat, 237-42.

even legal murder, for fear of violating the notion that one person is as good as another.⁶³

But what did Marryat, who wrote one of those eighty travel accounts that Bellesiles says failed to see much in the way of guns and violence, have to say?

Slander and detraction are the inseparable [sic] evils of a democracy, and as neither public nor private characters are spared, and the law is impotent to protect them, men have no other recourse than to defend their reputations with their lives, or to deter the defamer by the risk which he must incur.

And where political animosities are carried to such a length as they are in this exciting climate, there is no time given for coolness and reflection. Indeed, for one American who would attempt to prevent a duel, there are ten who would urge the parties on to the conflict.... The majority of the editors of the newspapers in America are constantly practicing with the pistol, that they may be ready when called upon, and are most of them very good shots.... But the worst feature in the American system of duelling is, that they do not go out, as we do in this country, to satisfy honour, but with the determination to kill.⁶⁴

Somehow, Bellesiles's description of Marryat's view of American squeamishness about killing—and the widespread use and misuse of pistols—doesn't quite match Marryat.

Even when Bellesiles admits that there is a mention of guns in one of these travel accounts, he distorts what it says to fit his novel claims, by claiming that the account's mention of guns or hunting indicate that it was rare. As an example, "Similarly, Ole Rynning advised his Norwegian readers to bring 'good rifles with percussion locks,' as such good guns are far too expensive in America and can be sold there for a good profit. Guns thus had an economic value, but if thought requisite for self-protection, it remained an unstated assumption."⁶⁵

But unlike the vast majority of those who will read Bellesiles, and accept the accuracy of Bellesiles's statement, I had already read Rynning's book, and knew what it *actually* said there. Rynning said to bring "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."⁶⁶

⁶³ Bellesiles, 307. This use of the term "legal murder" to describe capital punishment gives something of a taste of Bellesiles's misuse of language. One can be an opponent of the death penalty (as I am) without abusing the language. *By definition*, murder is an unlawful killing. Capital punishment could be called "legal homicide," but "legal murder" is just tendentious and provocative.

⁶⁴ Maryatt, 195-6.

⁶⁵ Bellesiles, 341.

⁶⁶ Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (find publisher, 1926; Freeport, N.Y.: find publisher, 1971), 99.

Bellesiles didn't actually lie, and say that the *only* possible value of a gun for a Norwegian immigrant was to sell it here; instead, he misleads, by giving the impression that the value of bringing a good gun to America was to sell it, not to use it yourself. Rynning is clear that one should bring guns both to sell (indicating that there was a demand for guns in America), and because you would need them here.

Bellesiles is really a master of this sort of careful mischaracterization of sources that doesn't quite cross the line into lying, but is certainly deceptive. Another example is Charles Augustus Murray's description of his hunting trip from Britain to America in the late 1830s. Bellesiles tells us that, "Hunting in America disappointed Murray. He had expected more gentlemen hunters, but only army officers on frontier posts seemed to fit that description."⁶⁷

Having spent great energy in promoting the idea that hunting was a rare activity, done only by professional market hunters and Indians, the reader not familiar with Murray's book will slide right past Bellesiles's sentence and conclude that there weren't many hunters in America. But Murray met *lots* of hunters—they just weren't "gentlemen" hunters. Murray shows his understanding of how common both firearms ownership and sport hunting were in rural Virginia—and these were ordinary farmers, not "gentlemen" of the sort that Bellesiles claims were overwhelmingly the sport hunters of that time:

I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, "I guess I could beat you to a mark."⁶⁸

Of course, Murray recounted a number of incidents of guns and violence that occurred during his journey, but that Bellesiles somehow missed in reading Murray. On February 3, 1835, "a distinguished lawyer of New Orleans" entered the Louisiana House of Representatives chamber and struck the Speaker of the House with a cane. The Speaker drew

⁶⁷ Bellesiles, 309.

⁶⁸ Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London: *find publisher*, 1839; reprinted New York: *find publisher*, 1974), 118-19.

a pistol and fired through the lawyer's coat, without hitting the lawyer. The lawyer then drew a pistol and wounded the Speaker.⁶⁹

Murray didn't notice that he was surrounded by violence? Murray criticized the widespread practice of carrying deadly weapons and the related problems of "rough and tumble" (as no-limits, eye-gouging, hand-to-hand combat was called). Murray suggested that "constantly carrying a weapon, when their houses and families were hourly liable to be surprised by the war-whoop of the Indian" made sense, but now, "against whom is the dirk-knife now sharpened? against brothers, cousins, and neighbours! . . . I trust that the progress of civilization, and increasing weight of a sounder public opinion, will soon put a stop to the custom above censured, which is not confined to Kentucky, but is more or less prevalent in the whole valley of the Mississippi, especially in Louisiana."⁷⁰

Bellesiles read Cuming, Hall, Weld, Royall, Maryatt, Rynning, and Murray; he quotes selectively and out of context from some, mischaracterizes others—and apparently skipped whole sections of Cuming, Murray, and Hall's books—when he tells us that the travel accounts generally show no evidence that the travelers were "surrounded by guns and violence."⁷¹ Of the eighty travel accounts that Bellesiles claims to have read, seven are among the twenty-five travel accounts that I have read. All seven of the travel accounts that both us have read show that guns, violence, and hunting were either common or unremarkable, exactly opposite to Bellesiles's claims. It would be interesting to read the other seventy-three travel accounts, and see how many others Bellesiles read so inaccurately.

The sources from the early Republic certainly provide persuasive evidence that firearms and hunting were the norm—not the exception. Is this simply a characteristic of the sources that I examined? No. Careful examination of Bellesiles's evidence shows that there is less present than a cursory reading suggests. Bellesiles's *Journal of American History* paper quotes an

⁶⁹ Murray, 142-3.

⁷⁰ Murray, 214-15.

⁷¹ Bellesiles, 304.

article from the *Athenum* that warns that “citizens of Philadelphia interested in a walk in the country” should walk well out of town “to avoid the showers of shot’ sent skyward by a few overenthusiastic bird hunters.”⁷² If hunting were the rarity that Bellesiles claims, from whence came these “showers of shot”? In an era before repeating shotguns, it would take a lot of hunters to create “showers of shot.”

I could belabor the point, and point to the dozens of other travel accounts that Bellesiles seems to have missed—including common works such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Journey to America*. A young Alabama lawyer that Alexis de Tocqueville spoke with in 1831 asserted, “There is no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society.”⁷³ While it is possible that most of these concealed weapons were knives, it requires a strained reading of Tocqueville’s text to hold that handguns were scarce—or that America was the peaceful, almost pacifist nation that Bellesiles describes.

Tocqueville also presents evidence that widespread gun ownership was not peculiar to Alabama; he quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

[T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting.... There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.⁷⁴

Tocqueville also describes a usual “peasant’s cabin” in Kentucky or Tennessee: “There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a newspaper....”⁷⁵ Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

When in doubt, trust the people that lived in early America; they would certainly know best how widespread gun ownership was. When Aaron Burr was tried for his criminal

⁷² Bellesiles, *JAH*, 439.

⁷³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven: *find publisher*, 1960), 103.

⁷⁴ Tocqueville, 95.

⁷⁵ Tocqueville, 281.

conspiracy to detach the Southwest into its own country, one of the pieces of evidence used against him was a meeting of one Blannerhassett with a number of others, while armed:

If there were evidence of a merely friendly meeting, it would be the same as if there were no assemblage. If they were to give evidence that Blannerhassett and some of those with him were in possession of arms, as people in this country usually are, it would not be sufficient of itself, to prove that the meeting was military.

Arms are not necessarily military weapons. Rifles, shot guns and fowling pieces are used commonly by the people of this country in hunting and for domestic purposes; they are generally in the habit of pursuing game. In the upper country every man has a gun; a majority of the people have guns every where, for peaceful purposes. Rifles and shot guns are no more evidence of military weapons than pistols or dirks used for personal defence, or common fowling pieces kept for the amusement of taking game. It is lawful for every man in this country to keep such weapons.⁷⁶

It is certainly possible that Burr's defense attorney was mistaken, but it seems most unlikely that he would make such claims if he did not believe that this argument would be compelling. Certainly, if the choice is to believe Bellesiles, or the dozens of people that lived in that time as to whether "a majority of the people have guns" in the United States, Bellesiles needs powerful evidence of widespread self-delusion. Perhaps Bellesiles is right, and dozens of eyewitnesses of the time are wrong. But Bellesiles seems to have a very severe reading deficiency—one that causes him to misread books that make it clear that guns, violence, and hunting were common in America.

⁷⁶ David Robertson, *Reports of the Trials of Colonel Aaron Burr...* (Philadelphia: Hopkins and Earle, 1808; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 1:582.

Handguns

Bellesiles claims that, “Few pistols had been made in the United States prior to the opening of the [Colt] Hartford factory [in 1848], pistols having found little market beyond the officers in the army and navy.”¹ While some pistols were made in America early in the eighteenth century, most Americans in the colonial period that bought pistols preferred to buy imports from Britain. A number of American-made pistols have survived, however, that were manufactured before and during the Revolutionary War. Some show interesting innovations, such as sights and rifled barrels at a time when both were uncommon in British pistols.²

There were pistols offered for sale in colonial and Revolutionary America. Samuel Miller of Boston, gunsmith, advertised in 1742 “Neat Fire Arms of all sorts, Pistols, Swords....”³ Perhaps these pistols were intended for military officers—but in 1742, this would not have been a particularly large market. In 1772 and 1773, Heinrich Diebenberger advertised that he sold pistols.⁴ John Nicholson, gunsmith, offered a variety of firearms for sale in November of

¹ Bellesiles, 378.

² Peterson, 213-14. See Peterson, 202, 205, and 209 for photographs of American-made pistols of the Revolutionary period. See Brown, 312, for photographs of American-made pistols that are believed to be pre-war. Frank Klay, *The Samuel E. Dyke Collection of Kentucky Pistols* (Highland Park, N.J.: The Gun Room Press, 1972), 4-15, shows several surviving American-made pistols of the colonial and Revolutionary period. Felicia Johnson Deyrup, *Arms Makers of the Connecticut Valley: A Regional Study of the Economic Development of the Small Arms Industry, 1798-1870* (Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1948), 34, confirms that, “Few pistols were made here before the Revolution....”

³ May 11, 1742, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths: 1650-1850* (New York: Bramhall House, 1952), 67.

⁴ September 4, 1772 and September 14, 1773 *Wochtenlichter Pennsylvanische Staatsbote*, translated and quoted in Whisker, 159-160.

1781, including “Pistols...upon the most reasonable terms.”⁵ These might have been for the military officer market—but the hostilities had ceased by this point. Edward Pole advertised his “Military Laboratory” where “Owners and Commanders of Armed Vessels may be supplied, for either the use of Small Arms or Cannon, at the shortest notice, with ever species of Military Stores.” Among the items for sale included “Musket’s and pistol’s.” That there were customers other than ship captains is suggested by the offering of “Musket cartridges in blank, for the exercise of the militia.”⁶ Isaac King advertised in the January 8, 1818 *Somerset* [Pennsylvania] *Whig* that he was opening a business, and, “He has and expects to have on hand, for sale, GUNS of all descriptions, Pistols....”⁷ Perhaps the market for pistols wasn’t as narrow as Bellesiles claims.

We also have scattered evidence of pistol manufacturing after the Revolution, but before 1848, based on advertising. Perkins & Coutty of Philadelphia advertised in 1781 that they made guns and pistols “in all its branches, where Gentlemen may be supplied with Guns and Pistols of the neatest and best quality on the shortest notice....”⁸ Similarly, in 1785, Anthony Desverneys, Jr., of South Carolina advertised that he “continues to make and repair all sorts of guns, Pistols and generally everything that belongs to the Gunsmith’s Business.”⁹ Francis Brooks in 1791 Philadelphia advertised himself as a “Pistol Maker.”¹⁰ John Miles’s 1798 advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Packet* makes it clear that there was a market beyond military officers: “Gun and Pistol Manufactory... Where Merchants, Captains of vessels, and others may be supplied with all sorts of small arms, on the lowest terms and shortest notice.”¹¹

⁵ November 24, 1781, *Pennsylvania Journal*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 71.

⁶ Edward Pole, *Military Laboratory, at No. 34...* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, [1789]), in Library of Congress Printed Ephemera Collection, Portfolio 147, Folder 9a.

⁷ January 8, 1818 *Somerset* [Pennsylvania] *Whig* quoted in Whisker, 155.

⁸ May 2, 1781, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 74.

⁹ October 13, 1785, *South Carolina Gazette & Public Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 23.

¹⁰ September 21, 1791, *Federal Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 14.

¹¹ April 26, 1798, *Pennsylvania Packet (Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser)*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 66.

Aaron Hart, in 1812 Pittsburgh, advertised his ability to furnish “Rifles, Fowling pieces, and Pistols, equal in goodness and workmanship to any made in the state.”¹²

A letter of November 9, 1807 from Benjamin Prescott, Superintendent of the Springfield Armory to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn provides some indirect evidence that pistols were being made for non-governmental purposes in America. In that letter, Prescott responds to Dearborn’s request for pistols: “I believe Pistols and horsemens Swords can be made here as advantageously as in any other part of the country and I think I may venture to say better....”¹³

A number of American-made pistols from the early Republic have survived, including a pair made by J. Resor, who is among a small number of gunsmiths known to have made a large quantity of pistols in the period around the War of 1812. (Most gunsmiths who made pistols apparently made only small numbers.) Other pistols of American manufacture that have survived include one apparently made by Nicholas Hawk of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, and another made by John Armstrong of Bedford County, Pennsylvania. The lock on the Armstrong pistol appears to be Armstrong’s work, based on his signature of it. A pistol from the period after the War of 1812 also has survived, believed to be the work of one of the Angstadt family of gunsmiths of Pennsylvania, using an imported lock.¹⁴

These are military pistols, based on who owned them, but there are other surviving pistols of the early Republic that were apparently not made under government contract, or for military purposes, including dueling pistols. Lindsay shows a number of these survivors from the first few decades of the nineteenth century, unmistakably American-made, by makers such as Silas Allen, Asa Waters, and Simeon North. While some have English-made gunlocks, the Asa Waters pistol is signed by Waters on the lockplate, suggesting that it was made by Waters along with the rest of the pistol.¹⁵

¹² December 18, 1812, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 45.

¹³ James E. Hicks, *Notes on United States Ordnance* (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: James E. Hicks, 1940), 1:28.

¹⁴ Klay, 18-27.

¹⁵ Merrill Lindsay, *The New England Gun: The First Two Hundred Years* (New Haven, Conn.: New Haven

James Haslett, who made muskets for Virginia, also made pistols and sold imported pistols in Baltimore at least as early as 1806. He advertised in the November 12, 1806 *Federal Gazette & Baltimore Daily Advertiser* that he offered dueling pistols for sale, some which were made by him, and others were imported from London. His pistols were apparently of very high quality, and his customers included the governors of both Maryland and Virginia. Gun dealers such as Halbach & Sons sold imported pistols, and a number of pistols have survived from the period 1824-1833 with gunlocks stamped “McKim and Brother Baltimore.” As was common at the time, some gunlocks imported from Britain were stamped with the American importer’s name. These gunlocks were apparently made into pistols for the civilian market after arrival in America.¹⁶

Francis D. Poyas advertised his services as a gunsmith in 1825 Charleston, South Carolina—but the Charleston Museum has a pair of percussion lock pistols stamped with Poyas name on the frame. It seems likely that they are his manufacture, and they are not government contract pistols.¹⁷ A list of debts owed to the estate of James Ross, a Steubenville, Ohio gunsmith who died in 1816 showed that along with a number of outstanding debts for repairs of guns, and apparently purchases of guns, there was also \$45 owed by John Miller for a “pair of pistols.”¹⁸ S. E. Dyke’s *Thoughts on the American Flintlock Pistol* shows ninety-one surviving flintlock pistols that are unquestionably of American manufacture in the period before 1840—and none of them appear to be government contract pistols.¹⁹

J. Bolton and J. McNaught advertised in 1816 Richmond that there were recently arrived from England, and that their services included “All kinds of GUNS and PISTOLS made, altered and repaired in a perfect manner....” The inventory of James McNaught’s estate in

Colony Historical Society, 1975), 85-91.

¹⁶ Daniel D. Hartzler, *Arms Makers of Maryland* (George Shumway: York, Penn. 1977), 61. See Hartzler, 65-68, for photographs of a number of surviving Haslett pistols.

¹⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 76.

¹⁸ Whisker, 200.

¹⁹ S. E. Dyke, *Thoughts on the American Flintlock Pistol* (York, Penn.: George Shumway, 1974), 13-60.

1826 showed a “pair of dueling pistols... 6 pair small dirk pistols... 2 pair best round stock pistols with flints... 2 pair percussion pistols, plain secret triggers... 3 pair rifle barrel pistols... 5 pair secret trigger pistols...”²⁰ It seems a good assumption that these were unsold inventory, and the descriptions of the pistols do not sound like they were intended for military use.

Jacob S. Baker’s “Rifle Manufactory” advertised in Whitely’s Philadelphia Directory of 1820 that “All orders for Rifles, Pistols, Fowling Pieces and Muskets, will be punctually attended to....”²¹ A Cleveland, Ohio gunsmith in 1823 advertised that “Rifles, Fowling pieces, and Pistols will be furnished on short notice.” While the ad is ambiguous as to whether Andrews made all of these items, or simply sold and repaired them, it is clear that he sold pistols, and considered that there was enough demand to bother listing them for sale.²²

Similarly, Francis Areis advertised in 1831 that his firm were “Manufacturers and Repairer of all kinds of Fire Arms; Pistols, Guns, Swords, Gunlocks.”²³ This can be read as either manufacturing or repair of pistols; either way, it appears that there was either enough demand for pistols, or enough pistols in need of repair, that Areis considered this ad worth running. Henry A. Cargill, a Nashville merchant, advertised for almost two months on the front page of the Nashville *Daily Republican Banner* “Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives. A large and splendid assortment of the above articles. . . .”²⁴

The pistols weren’t just manufactured, then squirreled away in closets, or sold to the government in gun buyback programs. Pistols appear repeatedly in travel accounts of this period and newspaper stories. They are *never* identified as surprising, startling, or unusual in the American context. In a few cases, they are explicitly declared to be common.

²⁰ September 21, 1816 and October 4, 1816, *Richmond Commercial Compiler*, quoted in Whisker, 163; Whisker, 203-204.

²¹ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 6.

²² May 8, 1823, *Cleveland Herald*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 4.

²³ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 5.

²⁴ “Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives,” *Nashville Daily Republican Banner*, October 2, 1837, through November 25, 1837, 1.

Pim Fordham, while staying at Princeton, Indiana, in 1817-18, reported that, “Yesterday 8 men on foot armed with pistols and rifles came into the town from Harmony. They had been in pursuit of an absconded debtor from Vincennes.”²⁵ There was no problem persuading eight men armed with pistols and rifles to pursue a mere debtor, and Fordham found nothing surprising about them being so armed.

Fordham describes an associate judge as carrying “a pair of pistols at his saddle bow; and altogether [he] looks more like a Dragoon Officer in plain clothes, than a Judge.”²⁶ There is nothing remarkable about the pistols; what is remarkable, at least to a transplanted Englishman, is that a *judge* was carrying them. If military officers were the market for pistols in America, as Bellesiles claims, Fordham’s description does not suggest it.

Fordham also describes a party in the Illinois Territory that had excluded some “vulgar” party-crashers. Some of Fordham’s party “armed themselves with Dirks (poignards worn under the clothes)” to resist another such attempt, but later, “In going away some of the gentlemen were insulted by the rabble, but the rumour that they were armed with dirks and pistols prevented serious mischief.”²⁷ While the antecedent of “they were armed” is somewhat unclear, that it prevented serious mischief by “the rabble” suggests that Fordham’s party were the ones armed. Pistols were weapons commonly enough carried to be a realistic deterrent to “the rabble.”

Fordham described the flatboat men who worked the Mississippi River as a wild and dangerous population. Fordham warned, “But I would advise all travellers going alone down the river, to get one man at least that they can depend upon, and to wear a dagger or *a brace of pistols*; for there are no desperadoes more savage in their anger than these men.” [emphasis added]²⁸

²⁵ Fordham, 137.

²⁶ Fordham, 155.

²⁷ Fordham, 219-20.

²⁸ Fordham, 195-6.

The Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright described a journey through the Allegheny Mountains to Baltimore in April, 1820 that shows that pistols were not startling discoveries, even when found lying in the road:

In passing on our journey going down the mountains, on Monday, we met several wagons and carriages moving west. Shortly after we had passed them, I saw lying in the road a very neat pocket-pistol. I picked it up, and found it heavily loaded and freshly primed. Supposing it to have been dropped by some of these movers, I said to brother Walker, "This looks providential;" for the road across these mountains was, at this time, infested by many robbers, and several daring murders and robberies had lately been committed.²⁹

Cartwright then recounted his use of this pistol shortly thereafter to defend himself against a robber.³⁰ On his return trip, he described his carrying of a pistol to defend himself from robbery during a dispute at a toll gate. The owner of the tollgate "called for his pistols," apparently with the aim of shooting at Cartwright.³¹ In other incidents from the 1820s, Cartwright makes references to pistols in a manner that suggests that they were not at all unusual items, even if the *use* of them was dramatic.³²

Cartwright described two young men reduced to deadly enemies as a result of rivalry over a young lady:

They quarreled, and finally fought; both armed themselves, and each bound himself in a solemn oath to kill the other. Thus sworn, and armed with pistols and dirks, they attended camp meeting.³³

Cartwright found neither the pistols, nor the threats of death, surprising.

In 1820, two young men were competing for the affections of a young lady in Lawrenceburgh, Indiana. Mr. Fuller offered Mr. Warren the chance to write a note disclaiming any interest in her, or engage in a duel. Mr. Warren declined to do either, at which point Fuller shot and killed Warren with a pistol. The report emphasized that Warren was "highly respected" and Fuller, his murderer, was "pleasing in his address, intelligence,

²⁹ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1856), 200.

³⁰ Cartwright, 201.

³¹ Cartwright, 206.

³² Cartwright, 223-225.

³³ Cartwright, 238.

and communicative.” The report closes with, “Great God! Is this human nature? When the restraining power of offended Heaven is withdrawn, man becomes desperate, and dies by his own hand.”³⁴ The newspaper editorializes about this senseless murder, but says nothing that indicates the presence of a pistol was remarkable.

William Oliver Stevens described 1820s Georgia as a place so brutal and lawless that:

[N]o adult male ever went abroad unarmed. Whether it was to attend church, a social affair, or a political meeting, the Georgians carried loaded pistols, bowie knives, and sword canes. The pistols rested in the breast pockets of the coat and could be drawn quickly by both hands.³⁵

Two days before Christmas, 1828, Mayor Joseph Gales of Washington, D.C. issued a proclamation that suggests that guns and specifically pistols must have been pretty common:

WHEREAS it has been too much the habit of idle and inconsiderate persons, on Christmas and New Year's Day and Eve to indulge in firing off guns, pistols, squibs, and crackers, and burning of gun-powder in divers other ways, to the great annoyance of the peaceable inhabitants of this city, and to the manifest danger of their persons and property--all which practices, where they are not contrary to the express ordinances of the corporation, amount to "disorderly conduct," and as such are punishable by law:

Now, therefore, with a view to prevent such disorderly practices, I, Joseph Gales, jr. Mayor of Washington, do enjoin upon all Police Constables, Ward Commissioners, and others, whose duty it is to preserve peace and good order, to be diligent in the execution of their several duties, and to apprehend and bring to justice all persons so offending against the laws.³⁶

Few pistols in America? Even *slaves* in some places had pistols—or at least, newspapers reported that they did. An article from the Chickasaw, Mississippi, *Union* reprinted in the *North Alabamian* reported that, “And many of our negroes . . . fancy that, in defence of their *honors [sic]*, they must carry loaded pistols and long knives! We do things on a magnificent [*sic*] scale here in Pontotoc!—Negroes going armed. . . . It was but last week that a negro gave a very fashionable stab in the side to a *gem'man* of the same color, who had won his clothes at cards!”³⁷ The *North Alabamian* also reprinted from the Chickasaw *Union* a report of, “little

³⁴ “Communicated,” *Brookville Enquirer & Indiana Telegraph* (hereinafter *BE&IT*), January 14, 1820, 3.

³⁵ William Oliver Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces: The Story of the Code of Honor in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1940), 39-40.

³⁶ “A proclamation. Mayor's office, Washington Dec. 23, 1828.” Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 193, Folder 10, Library of Congress.

³⁷ “Our Town,” (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 24, 1837, 2.

boys, just out of swaddling clothes, wielding dirk-knives and pistols with as much *sang-froid*, and manifesting as familiar an acquaintance with their use, as if they had been born with weapons in their hands.”³⁸

Mr. B. D. Boyd, a highly respectable and correct young man, and an officer in the Commercial Bank, together with an [*sic*] another young man in the room, interfered to prevent further aggressions by either party. Stewart, however, drew a pistol, and, in mistake we presume, shot Boyd in the lower part of the abdomen. Stewart is said to be from Mississippi, and about 17 years of age.

We regret the necessity that calls for the publication of these facts, but public opinion must be made to bear upon the common practice among our young men of carrying deadly weapons in a peaceably [*sic*] community.³⁹

The editorializing is clear; young men were carrying deadly weapons far too much, but the existence of the pistol is not worthy of note.

An Alabama paper from February 1837 reported a quarrel in Columbus, Georgia, between “Col. Felix Lewis and a Doctor Sullivan, the latter drew a pistol and attempted to shoot the former, when Lewis produced a Bowie knife, and stabbed Sullivan to the heart, who died in two minutes.”⁴⁰ An incident from Missouri involved an Alexander H. Dixon, who drew a sword cane on a man named Flasser. Flasser drew a pistol, and shot Dixon to death.⁴¹

Near Natchez, Captain Crosly of the steamboat *Galenian* had a difficulty with one of his passengers, during which Crosly “drew a Bowie knife, and made a pass at the throat of the passenger,” but without causing any injury. Crosly ordered the passenger to leave the boat. As the passenger was leaving, Crosly retrieved a pistol from his cabin, pointed it at the passenger, and apparently accidentally shot him.⁴²

Thomas Cather, an Ulster Scot traveler to America in the 1830s, commented on the reluctance of the criminal justice system in the South and West to interfere in violence:

³⁸. “Our Town,” (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 24, 1837, 2.

³⁹. “More of the Effects of Carrying Concealed Weapons,” (Milledgeville, Ga.) *Southern Recorder*, January 16, 1838, 3. The same article appears as “More of the Effects of Carrying Concealed Weapons,” (Milledgeville) *Georgia Journal*, January 9, 1838, 2.

⁴⁰ “Fatal Rencontre at Columbus, Geo.,” (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 17, 1837, 2.

⁴¹ “A young man by the name of Alexander H. Dixon . . .,” *NDRB*, October 13, 1837, 2.

⁴² “Horrid Rencontre,” *NDRB*, October 7, 1837, 2.

“Everyone goes armed with dagger, Boey [Bowie] knife, or pistols, and sometimes with all three, and in a society where the passions are so little under control it is not to be wondered . . . that murderous affrays should so often take place in the streets.”⁴³ British naval officer and novelist Frederick Maryatt described America as he found it in 1837 this way: “The majority of the editors of the newspapers in America are constantly practicing with the pistol, that they may be ready when called upon, and are most of them very good shots.”⁴⁴

In 1831, Arkansas Territorial Governor Pope expressed his concern about passions out of control, arguing that the willingness of juries to reduce murder to manslaughter encouraged killing: “Men should be brought to bridle their passions when life is at stake, and no excuse for shedding blood should be received but that of *absolute necessity*. The distinction between murder and manslaughter should be abolished in all cases where a dirk, pistol or other deadly weapon is used, except in cases of *self-defense* [emphasis in original].”⁴⁵

Elijah P. Lovejoy, clergyman and abolitionist newspaper editor of the 1830s, and his friends defended his printing press in Alton, Illinois, with pistols, the mob of “respectable gentlemen” of Alton murdered Lovejoy. Lovejoy died with a pistol in his hand.⁴⁶ Significantly, the contemporary accounts gave no indication that a pistol was an unusual item to own.

Other abolitionists also regarded pistols as common items to possess. Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Clay was keenly aware of the effects of mob violence against abolitionists:

We say, that when *society fails to protect us*, we are authorized by the laws of God and nature to defend ourselves; based upon *the right*, “the pistol and Bowie knife” are to us as sacred as the gown and the pulpit; and the Omnipresent God of battles is our hope and trust for victorious vindication. “Moral power” is much; with great, good, true-souled men, it is stronger than the bayonet! But with the cowardly and debased it is an “unknown God.” Experience

⁴³ Thomas Cather, *Voyage to America: The Journals of Thomas Cather*, edited by Thomas Yoseloff (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961; reprinted Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 143-144.

⁴⁴ Frederick Marryat, *Diary in America*, edited by Jules Zanger (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1839; reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 195-6.

⁴⁵ William F. Pope, *Early Days in Arkansas* (Little Rock, Ark.: Frederick W. Allsopp, 1895), 103.

⁴⁶ Edward Beecher, *Narrative of Riots at Alton* (Alton, Ill.: 1838; reprinted New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1965), 14, 64, 75, 84. Edward Beecher was one of the siblings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent abolitionist clergyman.

teaches us, common sense teaches us, instinct teaches us, *religion* teaches us, that it loses none of its force by being backed with “cold steel and the flashing blade,” “the pistol and the Bowie knife” [emphasis in original].⁴⁷

Few pistols in America before 1848? What can one make of an incident such as William S. Moore taking a shot with a pistol at a member of the House of Representatives in 1844?⁴⁸

Dueling oaths were a hot topic of discussion at the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849. One delegate argued that dueling was preferable to sudden attacks in the streets. While he was only 31 years old, he lamented that of his boyhood friends,

some twelve or fourteen have perished in violent affrays in the streets, and I have never known one who fell in fair and honorable duel. And why is this? It is because a thousand opportunities exist of effecting a reconciliation between parties where a challenge has passed and a duel is proposed, and the difficulty by the interference of friends may be adjusted; but in the murderous street fight the parties excited with passion, heed no one, and arming themselves, go forth in the thoroughfares and the by-ways, and there in a bloody affray, to the terror of every passer-by, settle their quarrel with the knife and the pistol.⁴⁹

Frederick Law Olmsted’s description of a not completely concealed Colt revolver on a Kentucky railroad in 1853 strongly suggested that concealed carrying of handguns was at least common, if not widespread, less than five years after Bellesiles claimed that there was no market for pistols:

In the cars in Kentucky a modest young man was walking through with the hand[le] of a Colt out of his pocket-skirt behind. It made some laugh & a gentleman with us called out, “You’ll lose your Colt, Sir.” The man turned and after a moment joined the laugh and pushed the handle into the pocket.

John said, “There might be danger in laughing at him.” “Oh no,” replied our companion, evidently supposing him serious, “he would not mind a laugh.” “It’s the best place to carry your pistol, after all,” said he. “It’s less in your way than anywhere else. And as good a place for your knife as anywhere else is down your back, so you can draw over your shoulder.”

“Are pistols generally carried here?”

“Yes, very generally.”

Allison said *commonly*, but he thought not generally [emphasis in original].⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cassius Marcellus Clay, *The Writings of Cassius Marcellus Clay*, edited by Horace Greeley (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848; reprinted New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 257.

⁴⁸ April 24, 1844, U.S. Congress, *House Journal*. 39:848.

⁴⁹ *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Kentucky 1849* (Frankfort, Ky.: A. G. Hodges & Co., 1849), 822.

⁵⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed., *The Papers of*

Kentucky, Louisiana, Indiana, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, and Arkansas all passed laws between 1813 and 1840 that prohibited the carrying of concealed pistols (among other deadly weapons)⁵¹—when there was apparently “little market beyond the officers in the army and navy.” There are newspaper ads offering handguns for sale and repair of handguns in profusion. There are travel accounts and newspaper accounts in large numbers that demonstrate that handguns were commonly carried in at least some parts of the United States, and the presence of handguns is *never* presented as a surprise. Little market for handguns beyond army and navy officers? This sounds more like wishful thinking than history.

Frederick Law Olmsted (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 2:232-3.

⁵¹ Clayton E. Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1999).

Counting Gunsmiths

In evaluating American gunsmithing capabilities, the first problem to be resolved is the word “gunsmith,” which contains many nuances of meaning. It can mean a person who repaired broken guns. It can mean someone who assembled guns from parts produced by others, all the way through to manufacturing of individual components, or manufacture and assembly of all components.

There were large numbers of “gunsmiths” in Colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic America, as attested to by contracts, advertisements, wills, deeds, population censuses, and surviving guns that they built (as will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters). Determining exactly which functions a particular gunsmith performed is a difficult problem, because the information that we have concerning many of these gunsmiths is so scanty.

Bellesiles’s argument includes the assertion that gunsmiths had so little work to do that most worked as blacksmiths as well. But this is not necessarily evidence that there was little demand for gunsmithing. It might equally be evidence that in an era when most Americans lived in small towns, and narrow specialization was economically unproductive, a person skilled at any form of metalworking would have to perform whatever work was in demand at the moment. Indeed, works with no axe to grind on the subject of gun ownership in America are explicit: the two related trades of gunsmithing and blacksmithing were often followed by one man, and for a very good reason:

It is known that, at times, a gun was made by a number of craftsmen; and that at other times, a complete gun was made by one man. It is also apparent that much forge work was required to forge and weld a gun barrel, to forge and fit the lock parts, and to forge iron mountings

such as the trigger guard, the butt plates and other small parts.¹

This combining of the two trades, or alternating the two trades from year to year, was apparently common during both the Revolutionary War period, and in peacetime.² Deyrup indicates that the combination of gunsmithing and blacksmithing was common throughout New England because gunsmithing as an occupation was limited by population density.³

Other combined trades are also in evidence, such as “W. Clevell, a gun- and locksmith who worked in Bushkill Township, Northampton County, Pennsylvania, in 1820.”⁴ Henry Dippeberger, a Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised his trade as “making and repairing arms and bleeding instruments, also instruments for cupping and for use on the teeth. He sells also pistols, guns, and gun barrels, also all kinds of flint and gun locks....”⁵ In 1774, Walter Dick of South Carolina advertised himself as “Gunsmith and Cutler... Makes and dresses all manner of [surgical] and other instruments; makes cork screws and Pen-Knives... Gold and other Scales and Beams made and adjusted with the greatest exactness. Locks and keys of all kinds made and mended.”⁶

Another expression of this broad approach to smithing is an ad from the *New Hampshire Gazette* of July 17, 1767 that simply described Joseph Hammond’s trade as, “Smith,” who “performs all Sorts of the Iron of Boat Work, Chaise and Chair Work cleaning and mending of Guns, Pistols, Locks and Keys, cleans and mends Jacks, Shoes Horses, and makes all sorts of Kitchen furniture, and sorts of Hinges for Houses, &c.”⁷ It seems doubtful if Joseph Hammond would appear in any list of “gunsmiths,” but he certainly found it worth his while to advertise his ability to mend guns.

¹ Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Ironware: Cast and Wrought* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1956), 111-113.

² Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 113; Hartzler, 45.

³ Deyrup, 33-34.

⁴ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 107.

⁵ September 14, 1773, *Staatsbote*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 25.

⁶ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 24.

⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 52.

Whisker devotes an entire chapter to examining gunsmiths who worked at other trades, sometimes at different times, sometimes at the same time. While many of the other trades are unsurprising (clock makers, locksmiths, blacksmiths), others are quite far removed from the metal trades, including potters, doctors, and umbrella makers.⁸ The combination of lawyer and gunsmith seems to be the most unusual of all:

Ignatius Leitner.... [describes his new business location, then] Where he continues to draw deeds, mortgages, Power of Attorney, apprentice indentures, Bills, Notes, State executor and administrators accounts. He will as usual clerk at vendues and take inventories and all other instruments of writing done on shortest notice. N.B. He continues and keeps hands at work in his former branches as making rifles, still cocks, casting rivets, gun mountings, etc. at the lowest prices.⁹

To add to the problem of identifying blacksmiths who were also gunsmiths, blacksmiths were by far the most common metal craftsmen in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ If even a fraction of blacksmiths also did some gun repair, this would be a huge number of part-time gunsmiths.

A number of the gunsmiths that we know about are from tax lists than identify a person by his trade. But how many of these craftsmen were primarily some other occupation (such as blacksmith), but also did gunsmithing as well? James Hadden is identified in a City of Philadelphia tax list of 1769 as a gunsmith. On the same page, there are fifteen other taxpayers with no trade or occupation listed.¹¹ It seems likely that many of them were common laborers, but this is only an assumption. Our knowledge of the number of gunsmiths based on tax lists is, at best, a minimum count.

There are some highly ambiguous trades listed as well. A Lewis Brall, smith, also shows up in the City of Philadelphia tax list for 1769.¹² What kind of smith was he? Blacksmith, gunsmith, tinsmith, or perhaps all three? In 1776, a gunsmith named Lewis Prah did work

⁸ Whisker, 145-163.

⁹ May 2, 1800, *York Recorder* [Yorktown, Pennsylvania], quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 61.

¹⁰ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 52.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Archives* (Philadelphia: J. Severns & Co., et al., 1852-1935), 3rd ser 14:153.

¹² *Penn. Arch.* 3rd ser., 14:202.

for the Pennsylvania government.¹³ It would appear that Brall is an alternate spelling of Prah. What about Jacob Brown, also listed on that same page with the ambiguous “smith”?

To alleviate this shortage of records, Appendix A lists all gunsmiths for whom we have years and locations in which they performed their trade. In many cases, we know nothing about them but that they were a “gunsmith” or apprenticed to a gunsmith to learn that trade. In other cases, we know that they made guns, or made guns of a particular type. Many of these gunsmiths are identified from surviving examples of guns, or from references to them in documents.

There is a large existing literature on early American gunsmiths, originally created for the interests of those who collect early American guns. The quality of the research done for these books varies; some are primarily lists based on surviving guns that are identified by the maker’s marks, and often provide us nothing more than evidence that a certain person made or repaired guns in a particular era. Others make extensive use of business directories, census records, and government contracts. Appendix A is derived from a combination of the most careful of this existing literature, and primary sources located during my research.

It does seem likely that at least some of the early American gunsmiths literature is in error, failing to recognize that a particular gun maker may have used different marks or spellings of his name in different records or on different guns. It also seems likely that some of this existing literature, since it was not produced under the exacting standards of citation required of historians, is erroneous. Some of it may even be as careless as *Arming America*—though it seems unlikely that any of it is as negligent, or intentionally deceptive. At a minimum, it seems likely that for every gunsmith included in Appendix A that should not be there, there was probably at least one gunsmith who actually worked at his craft in early America, but is not represented in this list.

¹³ CRPA, 10:550.

One measure of the completeness of the various lists of gunsmiths is the amount of overlap. Are there gunsmiths that appear in only one or two sources, but are missing from others? If so, it suggests that there is still a lot of research to be done. As Appendix A makes clear, there *is* significant overlap—and yet there are still gunsmiths that appear in one, and only one source. For example, the Buffalo, New York directory published by L.P. Crary in 1832 includes nine gunsmiths—none of whom appear in any other lists of gunsmiths.¹⁴ It would appear that none of the compilers of these lists had access to Crary’s directory. On the other hand, an 1800 Boston directory listed four gunsmiths, three of whom appeared in other lists—and one of whom appeared nowhere else. The same is true for an 1805 Boston directory—three that appear elsewhere, and one that appears nowhere else.¹⁵

Professor Bellesiles claims that gunsmithing was such a poor method of making a living that few gunsmiths were able to stay in business. Why, then, do we find gunsmiths advertising for help? Francis Brooks, a Philadelphia gunsmith, advertised in 1791 for an apprentice.¹⁶ Peter Brong, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised for “Lock filers: Such as soon apply will receive the highest Wages.” Apparently Brong sought craftsmen skilled at filing gunlocks to fit.¹⁷ Henry Albright of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, advertised in 1796 that he would take on “A Lad from 12 to 15 years of age” as an apprentice for the gunsmithing business.¹⁸ Isaac Price took on at least four apprentices between 1776 and 1787. One of these apprentices, Zenos Alexander, in turn took on at least three apprentices in the period 1805-1810.¹⁹ John Gonter in Hagerstown, Maryland, is known to have had at least five

¹⁴ Sheila Bass, comp., *Buffalo, Erie County, New York Directory, 1832* [database online] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com, 2001). Original data: *Buffalo, New York Directory, 1832* (Buffalo, N.Y.: L.P. Crary, 1832).

¹⁵ Steven Jacobs, comp., *Boston City Directory, 1800* [database online] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com, 2000). Original data: *Directory of Boston City Residents* (Boston: n.p., 1800); Steven Jacobs, comp., *Boston City Directory, 1805* [database online] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com, 2000). Original data: *Directory of Boston City Residents* (Boston: n.p., 1805).

¹⁶ September 21, 1791, *Federal Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 14.

¹⁷ September 23, 1801, *Lancaster Intelligencer and Weekly Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 13.

¹⁸ June 1, 1796, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, quoted in Whisker, 34.

¹⁹ Bivins, 166-7; 143.

apprentices in his gunsmithing business between 1794 and 1799.²⁰ Ralph Atmar, Jr., a Charleston goldsmith, engraver, and gunsmith, advertised in 1800 for an apprentice to learn goldsmithing, “and may gain an insight in the Mechanism of Guns.”²¹ Indentured servant gunsmiths also appear in the records, such as runaway John Kenster, “born in London... He is a gunsmith by trade.”²²

John Armstrong, a gunsmith who made rifles in Emmitsburg, Maryland from 1793 or 1794 to at least 1837 had at least four apprentices that we know about. They were bound to Armstrong in 1799, 1801, 1804, and about 1837. There were doubtless other apprentices during Armstrong’s career, but because Frederick County stopped recording most apprentice indentures in 1805, the rest are lost to history.²³ At least two of the apprentices show up in other accounts as gunsmiths. It is not certain that the George Piper who was apprenticed to Armstrong in 1801 at age 18 is the same George Piper who worked 1834-1843 in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.²⁴ The Marine Tiler Wickham apprenticed to Armstrong in 1799 at age 19 eventually became a government arms inspector, and designed the U.S. Model 1812 Musket and Model 1813 pistol, as well as working as a gunsmith in private practice in later years.²⁵

James Whisker devotes forty-six pages to an examination of gunsmithing and apprentices, with dozens of examples of orphans, minors, and even adults apprenticed to learn this trade.²⁶ It seems most unlikely that a profession with little or no employment opportunity would induce so many to accept apprenticeship. Similarly, if gunsmiths were actually so short of work, it is a bit odd that so many were interested in taking on apprentices who had to be fed, boarded, and clothed, if the gunsmith didn’t have work to keep the apprentice busy.

²⁰ Whisker, 35.

²¹ October 23, 1800, *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 5.

²² April 15, 1777, *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 57.

²³ Hartzler, 45.

²⁴ Whisker, 31-32.

²⁵ Hartzler, 49.

²⁶ Whisker, 1-46.

Another problem with identifying gunsmiths and gunmakers is the paucity of complete records of the time. Kauffman's *Early American Gunsmiths: 1650-1850*, gathered information from city directories, wills, population censuses, and advertisements. That this method gathers information on only a small part of the gunsmiths who worked in early America should be clear. Many of the early newspapers from which we might gather advertisements are gone forever. A gunsmith would have advertised when business was slow, and he needed more business, or when starting or moving his business. A paucity of ads, rather than being an indication that there was little demand for gunsmiths or gunmakers, might actually be an indication that business was good, and word of mouth was sufficient advertising to keep a gunsmith employed.

We have evidence that suggests relying on advertising and official records misses a great many such craftsmen. Jacob Dickert is represented in *Early American Gunsmiths* by three entries: a death notice from the Moravian Church Archives, that tells us he moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1758, and died in 1822; an advertisement on November 10, 1800, announcing the breakup of the partnership of Dickert & Gill, a gunsmithing business; and a rifle marked "J. Dickert."²⁷

It seems most unlikely that Jacob Dickert was only in the gunsmithing business in 1800, but in the absence of any other evidence, we cannot prove any other years. How many other gunsmiths were Dickert's contemporaries, whose guns have not survived, and whose ads and records have been lost for all time? We don't know, but it seems likely that there were others, perhaps many others.

Especially in the early colonial period, our records are very incomplete. We know of James Phips, a gunsmith who settled on the Maine coast in 1643 because his son William became governor of Massachusetts after an illustrious military career. Had Sir William Phips not made a place for himself in history, it is likely that we would not know about his obscure

²⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 24.

father, colonial gunsmith.²⁸ Other early gunsmiths on the coast of Maine are known only by official records that refer to their involvement with the military or Indian trade.²⁹ Any gunsmith of that time and place whose trade was entirely private has probably escaped our attention forever.

An advertisement of 1737 describes where a sale of merchandise would be held by “William Cathcart next door to Mr. Miller’s the Gun-smith in Church-street...”³⁰ This is the only reference to Mr. Miller “the Gun-smith.” We know about gunsmith Daniel Nash who worked in Southfield, Massachusetts in 1699 only because a stolen gun was found in his shop, and Nash’s shop was mentioned in a criminal case.³¹ How many other colonial gunsmiths were there who have disappeared from history forever because none of their neighbors had occasion to mention the gunsmith next door in an ad?

A slave gunsmith named Caesar was responsible for cleaning and repairing the arms of the South Carolina militia stored in the magazine in Charleston. How do we know that he was a gunsmith? Only because he was caught by his master with a duplicate key to the public magazine, and Caesar was deported. Whisker has a considerable discussion of black gunsmiths in the colonial period, both free and slave.³²

Many of the gunsmiths we know of only because their occupation is identified in a single document, such as the identification of Peter Elsworth and Samuel Ploug as gunsmiths in a 1775 Continental Army muster roll from New York,³³ or Hugh McCain’s entry in the 1800 Pennsylvania census, or Warren Lyon, in the 1824 Providence, Rhode Island directory,³⁴ or Christian Kline’s appearance in an 1817 tax list in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania.³⁵ How

²⁸ Dwight B. Demeritt, Jr., *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers* (Hallowell, Me.: Paul S. Plumer, Jr., 1973), 3.

²⁹ Demeritt, 3-11.

³⁰ December 15, 1737, *The South Carolina Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 67.

³¹ Smith, 363.

³² Whisker, 104-111.

³³ *Col.Hist.NY*, 172.

³⁴ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 63.

³⁵ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 58.

many years before and after 1775, 1800, 1817, and 1824, did each of these gunsmiths work at that trade? We don't know, but it seems unlikely that we were fortunate enough to catch each of these gunsmiths in the only year in which they worked.

In other cases, we have records of gunsmiths in two scattered years. As an example, Robert McCartney is listed as a gunsmith at Theater Alley, Boston, Massachusetts, in the Boston Directories of 1805 and 1816.³⁶ It seems unlikely that he worked only in those two listed years, pursuing some other profession from 1806 to 1815. Did he work as a gunsmith before 1805 and after 1816? Perhaps, but this takes us from the realm of interpolation into extrapolation. When the surviving records demonstrate that a gunsmith was present at his occupation in several different years, it seems a good bet that he worked continuously at that profession throughout that period, absent other evidence.

We know of some gunsmiths only by casual reference in other documents, such as John Fraser (or Frazier) “a Pennsylvania gunsmith and Indian trader” who set up shop on the Monongahela River in 1753.³⁷ James Anderson, described as “a blacksmith and gunsmith” who in 1771 purchased “Mrs. Campbell's old place” near the Capitol in Williamsburg.³⁸ Anderson by 1777 had contracted with Virginia to do “Blacksmith's work,” but the details of the contract indicate that he was to be paid for the use of tools and vices for gunsmithing, as well as the use of two forges.³⁹ In 1773, Jacob Allen, “Gun-smith” had a shop in Maiden Lane, New York City—and the only clue to his business is that another merchant's ad described his location as “between the House of Mr. Jacob Allen's, Gun-smith and Mr. John

³⁶ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 63.

³⁷ George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 1:130.

³⁸ George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 3:25.

³⁹ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 111.

Taylor Brass-Founder.”⁴⁰ John Cutler advertised himself as a “Black and Gunsmith” in 1757 Boston.⁴¹

Jacob Loesch, Jr. was a gunsmith in the Moravian community of Salem, North Carolina. We know that he worked as a gunsmith in 1782 and 1783, and may have worked as one before and after those years. The Moravian community prohibited him from working as a gunsmith on December 28, 1781, for fear that it would attract soldiers to town, but lifted the prohibition on March 5, 1782, at Loesch’s request. Loesch died in “Fayittville” in 1821. It seems most likely that he had worked as gunsmith in Philadelphia before 1781, and likely that he worked as a gunsmith in various locations in North Carolina from 1783 to 1821.⁴² But we really don’t know for sure about any years except 1782 and 1783. It would be foolish to claim that we know that he worked any years *but* 1782 and 1783. But it would also be foolish to claim that we know that he worked for *only* those two years.

A number of gunsmiths are known to have worked in the early Republic, but we know of them only by a few scattered American-made firearms with their names on them, and references to them that do not precisely tell us dates. There are many such gunsmiths, such as the Sheetz (or Sheets) family of Lancaster and York Counties in Pennsylvania. We have dates for Philip Sheetz, but for fifteen of his descendants and cousins in the Revolutionary period and early Republic, we know only that they worked as gunsmiths, but not the exact years.

Similarly, the Hertzog family produced at least three generations of gunsmiths from 1776 through the 1840s, but we have only partial dates for three of the five Hertzogs known to have worked as gunsmiths.⁴³ The Hawken family of gunsmiths included at least fifteen gunsmiths in early America, but firm date information is only available for ten of them.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ February 25 1773, *The New York Journal or General Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 2.

⁴¹ June 27, 1757, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 21.

⁴² Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 62.

⁴³ Whisker, 14-15.

⁴⁴ Hartzler, 169-92.

The Rizer family of gunsmiths suffers from too many cousins with the same first and last name, living too close to each other, making a real mess of the records. This greatly complicates the process of figuring out who worked as a gunsmith, and in what years.⁴⁵

North Carolina seems to have a wealth of gunmakers whose activities are known from surviving rifles, but no documents. Because these guns can only be dated to general periods such as “Revolutionary period,” they have not been included in the data base. In North Carolina, these undocumented gunsmiths were often whole families of gunmakers, such as the Kennedy family of Moore County that made guns from the Revolutionary period until after the Civil War.⁴⁶

Kauffman lists Christian Paulsey as a gunsmith in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, but does not provide any dates.⁴⁷ Hartzler tells us about the Marker family of gunsmiths: Daniel Marker, George Marker, Jr., and Paul Marker who made rifles that have survived—but gives us nothing more definite than “during the flintlock period....”⁴⁸

Similarly, Gluckman and Satterlee’s *American Gun Makers* lists dozens to hundreds of makers who are known from surviving guns, but about whom we know nothing except that they must have worked in the colonial or early Republic period, based on the design of the gun. As an example, “Follet—or Follecht. Lancaster, Pa. Kentucky rifles, about 1770.... Fordney, I.—Unlocated. Flintlock and percussion Kentucky rifles.... Millbenz—1825. Unidentified.... Miller, W. G.—Unlocated. Late period flintlock and percussion Kentucky rifles.”⁴⁹ Whisker quotes from William Foulkes’s account book for a variety of gunsmithing services provided to a Samuel Harris, sometime between 1763 and 1812, but there is simply not enough information to add Foulkes to our appendix, because we don’t know the exact years during which Foulkes provided these services.

⁴⁵ Hartzler, 238-44.

⁴⁶ Bivins, 158.

⁴⁷ Kauffman, 73.

⁴⁸ Hartzler, 51, 212-16.

⁴⁹ Arcadi Gluckman and L. D. Satterlee, *American Gun Makers*, 2nd ed., (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Co., 1953), 66-67, 143.

Similarly, there are some early American-made pistols where the maker is known (some using imported gunlocks, some using American-made ones), but we simply lack the date information required to add them to the data base.⁵⁰ We have a number of pistols that are unsigned, but clearly American-made. While surmises can be made as to their maker, based on similarities to other firearms made by that gunsmith, it would be simply conjecture to add them to the list of pistol makers.⁵¹

It would be useful to have a population survey with occupations that was sufficiently representative of the population in colonial America that we could sample it, and determine the number of gunsmiths present. One available sample is the list of men raised for four companies of the Continental Army between July 22 and August 10, 1775. It includes 288 men. The occupation of two of the men are listed as “gunsmith.”

This sample is probably atypical because at least two of the companies are from a single county, and it is unclear if Orange County, New York, was unusually rich in gunsmiths, or unusually poor in them.⁵² It may be atypical because it would have included those most prone to volunteer for military duty, though there is nothing that would seem to make a gunsmith either more or less prone to volunteer for military duty. But as a first approximation, it suggests that 0.69% of white males in New York were gunsmiths. If this percentage were typical of the United States, it would suggest that there were thousands of gunsmiths in 1775.

And yet even the incomplete body of knowledge in Appendix A demonstrates that Bellesiles is wrong about the scarcity of gunsmiths. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of gunsmiths in the colonial period whose work left some sort of record that survives to the present day, and far more in the early Republic. How many more left no traces?

⁵⁰ Klay, 22-23, shows a pistol known to have been made by John Armstrong, and Lindsay, 64, shows a pistol made by Matthew Sadd of Hartford, Connecticut “in the middle 1700s.”

⁵¹ Klay, 20-21, 24-27.

⁵² *Col.Hist.NY*, 15:166-173.

Colonial Gunsmiths & Makers

Bellesiles tells us, “There were only a handful of gunsmiths in America in its first century and a half of settlement.”¹ Bellesiles also claims that, “there was only a single gunsmith in South Carolina’s first quarter-century of European settlement,” a man named Thomas Archcraft.² A more accurate statement is that Bellesiles only knows of one. But one of the books that Bellesiles used as a source, M. L. Brown’s *Firearms in Colonial America* lists two other gunsmiths who worked at Charles Town (as Charleston then was named) from approximately 1685 to 1700, John Hawkins and John Jones.³ Other sources list at least two other gunsmiths working in South Carolina before 1700: Anthony Boureau and Augustus Mesmin.⁴ Bellesiles speaks with certainty about information that is, at best, incomplete. To make such definitive statements of how few gunsmiths there were, especially in the first century, is foolish.

Others who have examined the question with less of an ax to grind—and upon whom Bellesiles often relies for facts when convenient—tell a different story:

The influence of the gunsmith and the production of firearms on nearly every aspect of colonial endeavor in North America cannot be overstated, and that pervasive influence continuously escalated following the colonial era....

Of all the creative craftsmen identified with colonial America the gunsmith can be considered foremost among them, for he frequently labored with the most basic hand tools

¹ Bellesiles, 106.

² Bellesiles, 106.

³ Brown, 151; also listed in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*.

⁴ Brown, 151; Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*; Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, *Index of Early Southern Artists and Artisans*, extract of gunsmiths, January 17, 2001 (hereinafter cited as *MESDA*).

under the most primitive conditions to fashion or repair a complex and inordinately vital commodity needed for survival in a pristine and generally hostile environment.⁵

The Plymouth Company “hired London armorer William Pitt who arrived on the *Fortune* in November, 1621....” There is no record of him working as a gunsmith, although he was at Plymouth Colony until 1627.

Eltweed Pomeroy, however, set up gunsmithing at Dorchester in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, and male members of his line continued in that line of work until 1849.⁶ Without giving names or numbers, *Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence* lists “Gun-smiths” among the many professions that were working at their trade in Boston, no later than 1651.⁷ In 1675, Massachusetts colony ordered Captain Timothy Wheeler to “imprese an able gunsmith, who is to reparaire to Concorde” to repair guns.⁸ There is no evidence that Wheeler impressed a gunsmith, but it seems unlikely that an order to do that would have been issued if gunsmiths were actually scarce.

There were gunsmiths making and repairing firearms in what is now Maryland in 1631, and Richard Waters operated as a gunsmith starting in 1632, at Salem, Massachusetts. Thomas Nash (my ancestor, 19 generations back) “served as town and colony armorer at New Haven” starting in 1640.⁹ James Phips worked as a gunsmith on the Kennebec River from 1643 to 1654. (There are at least a few guns in existence that purport to have been made by Phips; Demeritt believes them to be twentieth century forgeries.)¹⁰

By 1650, Boston had at least three gunsmiths: William Davies, Herman Garret, and Richard Leader. Covert Barent was a gunsmith in New Amsterdam from 1646 to 1650. Francis Soleil started working as a gunsmith in New Amsterdam in 1655.¹¹ Alexander

⁵ Brown, 149.

⁶ Brown, 149-150; Deyrup, 33.

⁷ Jameson, 248.

⁸ Shurtleff, 5:54.

⁹ Brown, 150.

¹⁰ Demeritt, 2-3. Brown, 150, gives Phips’s date of gunsmithing continuing as late as 1663; Demeritt says that Phips was dead in 1654, doubtless causing many years of complaints from customers about slow repairs.

¹¹ Brown, 150.

Toulson was working as a gunsmith at St. Mary's, Maryland, as early as 1663.¹² John Martin billed the Maryland government for "Scowering, Cleansing and fixing of Arms" in 1682.¹³ Gabriel Thomas's 1698 description lists gunsmiths among the professions at work in Philadelphia—a city not founded until 1681.¹⁴

Bellesiles also makes the claim that gunsmiths were in such short supply, and gun making was so far beyond the capabilities of Colonial Americans, that, "Repeatedly through the Colonial period governments turned to artisans in other trades for assistance with their firearms. These artisans cleaned and repaired guns; they did not make them."¹⁵

Yet the Maryland government on February 2, 1688, "Ordered that what publick Armes shall be or are Conveyed to Mattapany be put to William Haines Gun Maker at Harvey Towne to be fixed and made fit for service and he to doe noe other business in the way of his trade till those be done [mended] and finished."¹⁶ Haines is described as a "Gun Maker," not even a simple repairer of guns. Significantly with respect to demand for gunsmithing services, which Bellesiles claims were not in high demand in America, Haines was prohibited from doing any other business "in the way of his trade" until he had finished repairing the government's guns.

The list of Colonial American gunsmiths goes on and on; M. L. Brown reports "probably fewer than 100 had arrived prior to 1700...."¹⁷ Somehow, this doesn't sound like Bellesiles's description of "only a handful of gunsmiths in America in its first century and a half of settlement."¹⁸ A far from complete list of early American gunsmiths (in Appendix A) shows that *at least* 140, and perhaps 142 gunsmiths were working in America in that first century and a half. How many were there for whom we have no documentary evidence? Five times that

¹² Hartzler, 21.

¹³ *Archives of Maryland*, 7:336.

¹⁴ Salley, 328.

¹⁵ Bellesiles, 109.

¹⁶ *Archives of Maryland*, 8:67.

¹⁷ Brown, 150.

¹⁸ Bellesiles, 106.

number? Ten times? We don't really know, and the most that we can say is that this is the minimum.

Bellesiles also claims:

Harold B. Gill's exhaustive search of Virginia records found three, possibly four, gunsmiths in the years from 1607 to 1676, with two additional artisans who performed the task of gunsmiths. In the following six decades, 1677 through 1739, there were seven gunsmiths and seven--possibly eight--more artisans working on guns. At it was one of these men, Charles Parkes, who is the first known to have made a gun in Virginia, though he probably stocked only parts made in England. The thirty years from 1740 through 1770 witnessed a jump to seven gunsmiths and seventeen artisans in a colony with a population of 447,000 in 1770 (259,000 white), including the Geddy brothers, the first Virginians able to rifle gun barrels. In other words, no more than eighteen gunsmiths served Virginia in its first 150 years.¹⁹

However, Gill makes no claim that his book was an "exhaustive search of Virginia records." On the contrary, when I asked him about his book:

I made no real effort to identify all Virginia gunsmiths in my book which was written as an aid for the people working in Colonial Williamsburg's gunsmith shop. It was intended as an interpretative tool. It was actually published in its first draft form.²⁰

More important than the question of how comprehensive Gill's search for Virginia gunsmiths was, is that Bellesiles is again making false statements. Gill's introduction is emphatic that:

The importance of gunsmithing in Virginia during the colonial period is clear. Gunsmiths were found nearly everywhere: in port towns along the coast, in settled inland areas, and—probably the busiest ones—on the frontier. As with most craftsmen, many of these men remain obscure. They left little trace and the records reveal their names only incidentally.²¹

Contrary to Bellesiles's claim that "Gill's exhaustive search of Virginia records found three, possibly four, gunsmiths in the years from 1607 to 1676, with two additional artisans who performed the task of gunsmiths," Gill's list of Virginia gunsmiths and the years that they were active, lists eight men who worked in that capacity in the period 1607 to 1676:²²

¹⁹ Bellesiles, 107.

²⁰ Email from Harold B. Gill to the author, October 25, 2000.

²¹ Harold B. Gill, Jr., *The Gunsmith in Colonial Virginia* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1974), vii.

²² Gill, 76, 77, 82, 91, 96.

name	location	known starting year	known ending year	activity
Peter Keefer	Jamestown	1608	1608	"a gunsmith, arrived in Virginia with the supply"
Charles Coyfe	Jamestown	1619	1619	"gunmaker and Smyth"
George Clarke	Jamestown	1623	1623	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
John Jackson	Jamestown	1623	1629	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
"indentured gunsmith" of John Jackson	Jamestown	1628	1628	"an indentured gunsmith"
John Jefferson	unknown	1625	1626	"mentioned as 'the Smith'" and "mended the breech of a gun" but not very well, leading to injury
George Fort	"the Eastern Shore"	1636	1636	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
Charles Parkes	"the Eastern Shore"	1675	1694	"mentioned as a gunsmith"

While Bellesiles puts Parkes in the period 1677 through 1739,²³ this appears to be simple carelessness on Bellesiles's part—there would be no advantage to Bellesiles moving Parkes forward only from 1675 to 1677.

"In the following six decades, 1677 through 1739, there were seven gunsmiths and seven—possibly eight--more artisans working on guns." Again, Bellesiles misrepresents. Gill lists sixteen people as "gunsmiths" active in this era:²⁴

name	location	known starting year	known ending year	activity
Charles Parkes	"the Eastern Shore"	1675	1694	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
John Asnahl	Charles City Co.	1677	1677	indentured servant "described as a gunsmith"
George Hardy	Isle of Wight Co.	1695	1695	estate inventory includes tools for "stocking guns"
Henry Byrom	Essex Co.	1696	1718	"he engaged in the gunsmith's trade"
Peter Byrom	Essex Co.	1696	1719	gunsmith who made at least "Hunting Gun" for Thomas Meador
Bartholomew Figures	Surry Co.	1699	1699	inventory included gunstocking tools
Peter Gibson	Surry Co.	1699	1706	"mentioned as a gunsmith in Yorktown with two apprentices"
Charles Hansford	York Co.	1706	1706	"apprenticed to Peter Gibson, of York County, to learn the 'Art of a Gun Smith'"
Anthony North	Essex Co.	1706	1707	"apprenticed to Henry Byrom in 1706 to be taught the trade of a gunsmith"
Edward Powers	York Co.	1706	1706	"apprenticed to Peter Gibson of York County to learn the 'Art of a Gun Smith'"
William Evans	York Co.	1712	1712	"blacksmith, was paid for cleaning arms by the York County Court"
Salathiel Quinnie	Williamsburg	1713	1714	"armorer at the Public Magazine"
John Brush	Williamsburg	1717	1726	"gunsmith to Col. Spotswood" "used to clean the magazine & the Governors arms"

²³ Bellesiles, 107.

²⁴ Gill, 70, 74, 75, 77, 79, 81-84, 87, 89, 91, 96, 99.

Samuel Cobbs	Williamsburg	1726	1726	“armorer and keeper of the Public Magazine”
Morgan Darnell	King George Co.	1726	1726	inventory of his estate “included ‘a parsell of Gunsmiths Tools’”
James Isdel	Princess Anne Co.	1727	1731	“David James, a free negro” was bound to Isdel as an apprentice to learn “Trade of a gunsmith”
James Geddy	Williamsburg	1736	1744	“gunsmith” “may have been the armorer for the Williamsburg Magazine”
Edmond Hazell	Richmond Co.	1737	1737	estate inventory include gunstocking tools

Bellesiles perhaps considers the apprentices not to be “gunsmiths” but mere “artisans,” but unless he believes that none of these apprentices would ever become a “gunsmith,” this is misleading. Gill certainly regarded the apprentices as “gunsmiths.”

Since, by Bellesiles’s own admission, many gunsmiths worked at other trades, his characterization of the number of gunsmiths working in Virginia based on Gill’s work is almost certainly a great understatement of the actual number of gunsmiths. As an example that suggests that gunsmiths were not all that rare in Virginia, during the French & Indian War, George Washington complained to Governor Dinwiddie about the severe problems he was experiencing concerning supplies and gun repairs:

Six or eight Smiths who are now at Work, repairing the fire Arms that are here, which are all that we have to depend on. A man was hired the 24th of last Month, to do the whole, but neglected and was just moving off in Wagons to Pennsylvania.²⁵

If there were really only seven gunsmiths in Virginia from 1740 to 1770, as Bellesiles claims, then Washington had every single one of them on his expedition. Now, it is true that these were not full-time gunsmiths, but Bellesiles’s failure to make the distinction explicit misleads the reader into thinking that there were far fewer gunsmiths in Virginia than there really were.

How many gunsmiths have disappeared from history because they were property? The 1749 will of John Milnor, Sr., of Charlestown, South Carolina bequeathed to this son John, “my negro Fellow Prince, a Gunsmith. . .”²⁶

²⁵ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, October 11, 1755, *Writings of George Washington* 1:201.

²⁶ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 67.

Gunsmiths are certainly far more common in the records than Bellesiles acknowledges. The presence of gunsmiths is an indicator that guns were being repaired and therefore, probably be used by the population of Colonial America. Bellesiles must therefore make the bizarre claim of only a handful of gunsmiths in the 150 years of settlement.

Of course, repairing guns is not the same as making them. While acknowledging that Americans often restocked existing guns, and sometimes assembled guns from foreign parts, Bellesiles rejects the notion that Americans had the capacity to produce guns in any real quantity, and that this therefore demonstrates that the non-governmental market for guns before 1840 was small.

Other historians hold a different view. Deyrup concludes, concerning colonial New England gunsmithing, that guns were often manufactured and assembled entirely by one person, or with an apprentice or two. Even in bigger American cities, where there was some division of labor, a single shop would often make all the components of a gun (with the exception of gunlocks, usually, though not always imported). “Though apparently few early colonial smiths made their own gun locks, by 1770 the colonies were probably self-sufficing in the production of hunting weapons.”²⁷

Gunlocks are an interesting tangent, and indicative of the poor quality of research done by Bellesiles. A “gunlock” is the trigger lockwork mechanism. Bellesiles emphasizes that gunlocks were very complex to make, and claims, “No one in America could make the key part of the gun, its lock, until the Revolutionary era....”²⁸ Later he expands on that claim, asserting that American gunmakers were unable to make gunlocks before the Revolution.²⁹ He also claims that were few made in America until Samuel Colt freed American makers “from the long-term dependence of all American gunmakers on English locks” in the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁰

²⁷ Deyrup, 34. Whisker, 5, also emphasizes that small shops built the entire gun.

²⁸ Bellesiles, 106.

²⁹ Bellesiles, 184.

³⁰ Bellesiles, 380.

It is certainly true that gunlocks on American-made guns usually used imported gunlocks, often reusing gunlocks from existing guns. Harold L. Peterson points out that American gunsmiths “had made and repaired military firearms” from the very beginning. In the colonial period, American-made guns were patterned generally on the Brown Bess, and often reused parts from British or French muskets. “The thrifty colonist would not think of throwing away anything so valuable as a gun part, and consequently these parts were used over and over again in many different combinations until they finally wore out.”³¹

Another article examining the curious history of a musket found in an Arkansas state museum observed that the musket was “assembled by a rural gunsmith” from a variety of recycled parts. Because “Firearms components, especially barrels and lock assemblies, were extremely difficult to obtain in colonial America...the recycling of the still functional parts from various European produced damaged firearms was a common practice.”³² There is general agreement that gunlocks were far more likely to be imported than made in America during the colonial period.³³

The musket in question was assembled from an early British Long Land Pattern musket barrel, a French Model 1763 Charleville musket lock, and British ramrod thimbles. The stock was made from a North American hardwood—the last pretty definitive evidence of American assembly. From a variety of pieces of evidence, including the name scribed into the barrel, a brass plaque on the buttstock, and the report of the person who donated it, the musket appears to have been used during the Revolutionary War by a Massachusetts soldier.³⁴

³¹ Peterson, 179.

³² Michael H. Lewis, “An 18th Century ‘American’ Musket,” *The Gun Report*, November 1997, 19. See also George C. Neuman, “Firearms of the American Revolution: Part I,” *American Rifleman* July 1967, 17, and Peterson, 178-9, concerning the recycling of gun parts. Lindsay, 42-52, shows several surviving examples of these mix and match guns.

³³ John Bivins, Jr., *Longrifles of North Carolina*, 2nd ed. (York, Penn.: George Shumway, 1988), 9.

³⁴ Lewis, “An 18th Century ‘American’ Musket,” *The Gun Report*, November 1997, 18-19. Also see Lindsay, 42-52, for examples of guns assembled from a combination of American stocks, furniture and locks of European origin, and occasionally, an American-made barrel.

Limited gun component manufacturing capacity, then, might be an indication that Americans *could* make guns, but preferred to reuse existing components, rather than waste them.

Even before examining the question of whether Colonial Americans made guns, or could have made guns, it is important to recognize that this entire question of manufacturing capacity is one of Bellesiles's most serious logical errors. Even if, as Bellesiles incorrectly claims, Americans *manufactured* nearly no guns during the colonial period, this does not necessarily mean that America was a limited *market* for guns. The American colonies suffered a chronic labor shortage, which encouraged skilled labor to be done in Britain, where labor was not in short supply. Especially because of mercantilist efforts to discourage industrial development in the colonies, Britain remained a major source of manufactured goods of all sorts for Americans, right up to the Revolution.

Efficiencies of production in Britain might be another reason why Americans imported guns in preference to building them locally. In the modern context, there are very, very few American-made consumer electronics products today, but this is hardly evidence that Americans don't buy such products, or couldn't produce them if needed. It is simply more cost efficient to buy them from other countries.

As mentioned above, Charles Coyfe and Peter Byrom were known to have made guns in America. Whisker believes that John Dandy of Saint Mary's County, Maryland, may have been the first gunsmith to make a gun in colonial America. Dandy was paid for having made a gun to order in 1644, and apparently made a gunlock in 1639, as discussed in a deposition taken in 1647. (Dandy's career as a gunsmith was cut short by the rope; he was executed for beating to death an indentured servant.)³⁵

There are gunsmiths advertising in the colonial period, and some of these ads are explicit that the gunsmith made guns. In 1748 New York City, Edward Annely advertised his services as a gunsmith and dealer in imported guns. He also advertised guns made to order:

³⁵ Whisker, 72-73.

“He likewise makes guns and pistols as any gentleman shall like....”³⁶ John Cookson, a Boston gun maker, advertised his wares in the April 13, 1756 *Boston Gazette*.³⁷ Are these merely assemblers of guns, or true manufacturers? There is not enough information to know for sure, and to claim otherwise is inaccurate.

Bishop reports that Hugh Orr, a Scotsman who settled in Massachusetts, made five hundred stand of arms for Massachusetts Bay province in 1748, which were stored in Castle William, and carried off when the British evacuated Boston at the start of the Revolution. Orr again made small arms once the Revolution began, and cast cannon as well at Bridgewater.³⁸ Yet again demonstrating how inadequate our knowledge of the past is, there are only two sources that I can find that mention Orr’s work as a gunsmith³⁹—and only Bishop tells us that he made 500 muskets in colonial New England. How many colonial gunmakers were there that made a tenth that number over a lifetime, for individual non-governmental customers, and therefore have left no trace at all?

We have a few examples of such American-made guns. Merrill Lindsay’s *The New England Gun: The First Two Hundred Years* shows dozens of surviving guns from this period. While iron was produced in small quantities in New England throughout the seventeenth century, the first clearly American-made barrels date from the 1730s, when iron from the Salisbury region of Connecticut comes into production. “Before that we find an occasional barrel with no marks, which may have had a colonial origin, or we find a fowler with British marks on the lock and barrel but with ingenious and sometimes unusual furniture nailed onto the cherry stocks.” The New England fowlers of the 1730s, however, are clearly American-made,

³⁶ August 1, 1748, *The New York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 4.

³⁷ April 13, 1756, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 20.

³⁸ J. Leander Bishop, *A History of American Manufactures From 1608 to 1860* (1868; reprinted New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966), 1:486-7.

³⁹ Deyrup, 35.

not simply restocking of existing guns. Most surviving American-made guns before the Revolution, however, have French or English barrels.⁴⁰

Other parts, however, seem to be colonially made. While England's ability to make inexpensive gunlocks meant that these parts were usually imported, and other parts were often recycled from imported guns, "Some brass, especially trigger guards, are so heavy and crudely made that they most certainly must be the work of heavy-handed country gunsmiths." Some New England fowling pieces use a mixture of American stocks, French locks, and furniture that is "a mixture of iron and brass suggesting that the gunsmith who put it together made up the parts which he did not have on hand." Another musket, apparently made by a finer craftsman, uses not only an American stock, but an apparently American-made gunlock.⁴¹

In the several decades before the Revolution, the number of surviving firearms that are clearly American-made increases. A 1685 fowler by Gilbert is clearly identified as being of Boston manufacture from the maker's marks. Phineas Sawyer built at least one fowler at Harvard, apparently around 1770; we know because we have one surviving. Benoni Hills, father of Revolutionary gunsmiths Medad and John Hills, made at least one fowler, because it exists today. Thomas Earl (or Earle, or Earll) made fowlers and muskets at least as early as 1760, because several have survived. These survivors are American-made, sometimes with gunlocks that are "probably English but possibly American." A Medad Hills long fowler dated August 26, 1758 survives as well.⁴²

While some American-made guns recycled parts from European guns, there are both smoothbore fowling pieces and rifles that have American wood for the stocks, and barrels

⁴⁰ Lindsay, 3, 11.

⁴¹ Lindsay, 25, 27, 31.

⁴² Lindsay, 34, 38, 40, 52-55.

that appear to have been made in colonial America.⁴³ In March 1775, George Schmidt, one of the Moravian craftsmen of Salem, North Carolina, sold eighty rifle barrels that he had made.⁴⁴

Surviving pistols that were apparently made in colonial America include a pistol owned by Peter Grubb, who made gun barrels for the Lancaster Committee of Safety during the Revolution. The lock is apparently English-made, but the rest of the pistol appears to have been made in Pennsylvania, perhaps by I. Perkins of Philadelphia, or by Grubb himself. While other pistols are uncertain as to maker, William Antes is clearly the maker of one surviving colonial period American-made pistol. Antes signed both the barrel and the hand forged lock, suggesting that he made the entire pistol.⁴⁵ Another surviving signed pistol of the colonial period was made by Matthew Sadd of Hartford, Connecticut, “in the middle 1700s.”⁴⁶

North Carolina Governor Dobbs wrote a lengthy letter to the Board of Trade on December 26, 1755, in which he requests a new law regulating the sale of guns to the Indians:

That no Guns should be sold to our Indian Friends or other Indians that were not proved it being a great loss to the Indians in their hunting and maiming many of them, and alienates their affects from the English--If the Traders do not follow the Regulations these Inspectors are to acquaint the Board in order to have them prosecuted upon their Return upon their Bonds and Securities.⁴⁷

Britain had required all gun barrels to be proofed since 1672, as did most European nations by the close of the seventeenth century. So from where were these unproofed barrels coming? The logical assumption is that they were of local manufacture.

Guns had been made in Massachusetts before the Revolution. On December 8, 1774, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress recommended “to the people” that they should enlarge their production of a number of commodities on which they were dependent upon Britain. These including improving sheep breeding, “raising of hemp and flax,” the production of

⁴³ Neuman, 18; Peterson, 178-9; Lindsay, 55-56.

⁴⁴ Bivins, 170.

⁴⁵ Klay, 4-9.

⁴⁶ Lindsay, 64.

⁴⁷ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 5:479.

flaxseed oil, nails, steel, saltpeter, gunpowder, glass, buttons, salt, stockings, and firearms.⁴⁸ Unlike these other commodities, the Provincial Congress was explicit that firearms manufacturing was not new: “As fire arms have been manufactured in several parts of this colony, we do recommend the use of such in preference to any imported; and we do recommend the making gun-locks, and furniture....”⁴⁹ That this was not the distant past, but continued into the present, may be deduced from the Provincial Congress’s call of February 15, 1775, for the inhabitants to arm themselves, and directing the towns to “encourage such persons as are skilled in the manufacturing of firearms and bayonets, diligently to apply themselves thereto, for supplying such of the inhabitants as may still be deficient.” Unsurprisingly, the Provincial Congress declared that it would give preference to American-made “arms and bayonets.”⁵⁰ On March 23, 1775, the Provincial Congress directed that its committee on ordnance, in addition to finding out how many cannon were in private hands, also find out how “what number of men in the province [were] acquainted with the business of making firearms.”⁵¹ The Provincial Congress did not know how many gun makers there were in Massachusetts, but they clearly believed that there were gun makers in the province.

Bishop lists Stephen Jenks of North Providence, Connecticut, as a maker of muskets “as early as 1775,” and “Small arms were at the same time pretty extensively made by several other persons in the Colony.”⁵² Albany, New York, was engaged at least in gunstock making as early as 1740, and muskets or rifles were apparently made during colonial times “in considerable quantity for the Indian trade.”⁵³

What are we to make of William Grayson’s letter to George Washington, on the eve of the Revolution? Grayson appears to have been encouraged by Washington to organize an “independant Company.” If gun making was almost unknown in colonial America, why did

⁴⁸ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 62-64.

⁴⁹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 63.

⁵⁰ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 103.

⁵¹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 110.

⁵² Bishop, 1:504.

⁵³ Bishop, 1:538.

Grayson report “several of the soldiers had purchas’d muskets in the Country, and that some others had employ’d our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms”?⁵⁴

What about Bellesiles’s claim that “Domestic production of firearms remained almost non-existent” during the Revolutionary War? Grayson makes clear that several members of his “independant Company” “employ’d our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms.” Perhaps Virginia was uniquely awash in gunsmiths. But Grayson’s letter also “return their thanks” to Washington “for your kind offer, and will be much oblig’d to you, to write to Philada. for forty muskets with bayonets, Cartouch [cartridge] boxes, or Pouches, and slings, to be made in such a manner, as you shall think proper to direct;... I can venture to assure you, that the gunsmith who undertakes the business, will be paid on demand....”⁵⁵ If Bellesiles is right, Grayson and his friends were remarkable not only in having their “own gunsmiths,” but they were under a serious delusion that they would be able to order muskets made to order in Philadelphia.

Another letter to Washington, from William Milnor in Philadelphia, the previous month, also demonstrates that there were a number of gunsmiths in the City of Brotherly Love, and while guns could still be made to order, time was running out to place orders:

I have Applied to two Gunsmiths, -- One palmer tells me he Can make one hundred by May next, And Nicholson says he Can make the like Number by March, they both agree in the price at £3..15.. this Curry. Palmer says Mr Cadvalder had agreed With him for 100 at that price, a Jersey Musquet was brought to palmer for a patern, Mr. Shreive Hatter of Allexandira has one of that sort, which you may see, & if you Conclude to have any, please to inform me by the first post, as the Gunsmiths I blieve will soon be preengaged, & there is not one Musquet to be bought in this City at present, if you should Chose any Alteration, from that Musquet please to let us know...⁵⁶

In 1774 South Carolina, Burger & Smith advertised themselves as “Gunsmiths from New York.” They offered their services in the making of custom guns.⁵⁷ That guns were made in

⁵⁴ William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers*, Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1902), (hereinafter *Letters to Washington*) 5:78-79.

⁵⁵ William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.

⁵⁶ William Milnor to George Washington, November 29, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:65-66.

⁵⁷ April 15, 1774, *South Carolina & American General Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 15.

America is evidenced in all sorts of accidental references. John Cobb, a gunsmith in Taunton, Massachusetts, was struck dead by lightning in early July, 1775. The letter describing this event called it “a loss to the town as many are unprovided with Arms.”⁵⁸ It is not clear whether this indicates that all types of firearms were in short supply in Taunton, or only military arms, which would have been in high demand at that time because of the start of the Revolution.

We have a number of accounts documenting gun making in colonial America. Richard Waters, who emigrated to Massachusetts from England about 1632. A descendant in 1878 observed that he “was by profession a gun manufacturer; married the daughter of a gun maker, and it is a noteworthy fact that the business of gun making has been hereditary in some branch of the Waters families almost continuously since.”

His descendants, Asa and Andrus Waters, built a gun factory in Sutton, Massachusetts at the start of the American Revolution, replacing the hand powered manufacture of guns with water power. (They had apparently made guns at a fairly slow pace before the start of hostilities.) Asa and Andrus Waters purchased pig iron in Connecticut, had it refined at a forge in Douglas, and manufactured it into barrels and other parts of the gun in Sutton.⁵⁹

While gun manufacturing in colonial America appears to have primarily used hand powered tools, there are some machine tools in use before the Revolution. By 1719, a boring mill was in use at Lancaster, Pennsylvania to smooth the interior of barrels after they had been welded together from strips of iron.⁶⁰

How many guns were made in colonial America? It is impossible to say for sure. To say that there were very few made is an arrogantly certain statement. But it is a bit odd, if few guns were made in colonial America, that collectors have so many still in existence.

⁵⁸ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 18.

⁵⁹ Asa H. Waters, *Gun Making in Sutton and Millbury* (Worcester, Mass.: Lucius P. Goddard, 1878), 3-5; Deyrup, 33.

⁶⁰ Deyrup, 35.

Repairing Guns During the Revolutionary War Era

Bellesiles claims that gunsmiths were extraordinarily rare not only during the colonial period, but also during the Revolutionary War, causing great problems for the American cause. Certainly, there are a number of circumstances under which various officials complain of the difficulty in finding enough gunsmiths to take care of the needs of the army. But this is not necessarily an indication that there were few gunsmiths in America.

First of all, it is worthwhile to examine just the question of gunsmiths *repairing* guns. (Gunsmiths *making* guns during the Revolution are covered in the next chapter.) It seems likely that the demands of warfare would dramatically increase the need for gunsmiths, simply because guns were far more regularly fired in battles than would happen in hunting. Guns of questionable reliability, while a nuisance for hunting, would become a positive hazard in warfare, and so it seems plausible that guns that were marginal for hunting would have been repaired once the owner feared that he had to rely upon his gun. The use of bayonets would also seem like an opportunity for physical damage to a musket, increasing the demand for repair services. Shortages of gunsmiths during the war are therefore not necessarily an indication that America had few gunsmiths before the Revolution, only that warfare dramatically increased the need for them.

Another problem is that the Revolution created difficult situations for gunsmiths. Those that were loyal to the Crown, or feared that the Crown might prevail, would have had a powerful reason to not work for the Revolutionary governments. Even those who simply wished to be neutral sometimes found themselves forced to move. Hartzler describes how

the Frederick, Maryland area lost at least eight gunsmiths because they were members of denominations that refused to serve in the military or pay taxes—and had no interest in choosing sides. Henry Roth, Sr. moved to Pennsylvania in 1776 because of increasing disturbances. Jacob Mier and his son Samuel did likewise shortly before the Revolution, for similar reasons.¹

Establishing how many gunsmiths there were during the Revolution runs into the same problems that we have previously seen with respect to determining gun ownership. The sources most complete on this subject are those that are official in nature, and their very nature will tend to focus on military needs for gunsmithing—likely much different, and more extreme, than the needs of ordinary citizens.

As it happens, one of Bellesiles's claims about gunsmith scarcity during the Revolution is very easy to study in detail. Bellesiles's description of the state of gunsmithing in Massachusetts at the start of the Revolution is a masterpiece of not quite lying, but that certainly misleads the reader, and gives strong reason to mistrust Bellesiles's representations of the number of gunsmiths in America on the eve of the Revolution.

After Bellesiles describes the failures of Pennsylvania to make enough guns to supply an army:

Massachusetts was somewhat more successful. In June 1775 a special committee of the Provincial Congress reported that there were thirteen smiths and armorers in the state capable of repairing firearms, which they thought "sufficient" for current needs. But they added two significant caveats: all of these smiths are "in want of tools and stock," and all but one "are very imperfect in the business they profess." The exception, Richard Falley, "is a complete master," and the committee recommended his appointment as official state armorer.²

But when you look up the cited pages (291, 330, 474, 476, 498-99, 540, 542, 548-53, 562, 565, 590, 592, 595) in *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*, you find a somewhat different story. On p. 291, we find out where the number "thirteen" came from:

The committee appointed to inquire how many armorers were appointed, &c., reported, that

¹ Hartzler, 51.

² Bellesiles, 190.

the committee of safety informed them that *there were thirteen appointed, and several others nominated*, and that the general officers had agreed that thirteen was a sufficient number, but that they were in want of tools and stock.³ [emphasis added]

Note the difference between Bellesiles's description, and what the source actually says. The committee did *not* report that there were "thirteen smiths and armorers in the state capable of repairing firearms" but that they had appointed thirteen, "that thirteen was a sufficient number," and there were others nominated. There is *nothing* at page 291 that suggests that there were only thirteen gunsmiths in the state capable of repairing firearms. Indeed, it is clear that there were more than thirteen armorers, because thirteen were appointed, and "several others nominated."

The appointments of many of these thirteen armorers are reported on the pages cited by Bellesiles—but nothing on those pages discusses the number of armorers in Massachusetts, or their competence. May 10, 1775: "Voted, That Nathan Cushing, Esq. Be desired forthwith to engage four armorers, for the service of this colony, and order them immediately to repair to the town of Cambridge, with their tools and other matters necessary for that purpose." May 12, 1775: "Voted, That Mr. Joseph Branch be, and he hereby is appointed, one of the armorers for the colony forces." May 15, 1775: "Voted, that Jonathan Blaisdel of Amesbury, be appointed an armorer for the army.... Voted, That Thomas Austin, of Charlestown, be, and hereby is appointed an armorer for the army. Voted, That the above vote, appointing Mr. Thomas Austin one of the armorers for the army, be, and hereby is reconsidered." May 17, 1775: "Mr. William Beman, in Col. Fellows' regiment, is appointed by the committee to act as an armorer for the forces posted at Roxbury.... Voted, That Col. Fellows be directed to procure a shop and tools and every material necessary for an armorer, at Roxbury, to work immediately in the colony service." May 19, 1775: "Voted, That Mr. John Wood, of Roxbury, be, and hereby is appointed, an armorer for the army. Voted, That Mr. Dike, of Bridgewater, be, and he hereby is appointed, an armorer for the army."⁴

³ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 291.

⁴ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 540, 542, 548-9, 551-3.

On June 12 is an entry describing the addition of three more armorers, and one that may explain the shortage of tools and stock: “Shuabel and Joseph Sever, of Framingham, entered into the colony service, as armorers, the 10th instant. Capt. Lawrence, in Col. Prescott’s regiment, offered to act as an armorer without any pay for his labor, and to return home for some tools which are necessary to effect the repairs of the muskets, it was consented to by the committee, and the said Lawrence was desired to procure his tools as soon as may be.”⁵ Lawrence’s tools were home; certainly, it would not be surprising if other gunsmiths were without their “tools and stock” because of the disruptions caused by the war.

A report from May 19 casts even more doubt on Bellesiles’s claims that gunsmiths were in short supply: “General Thomas was informed, by letter, that the committee had appointed Messrs. Beman, Shaw, Wood and Dike, as armorers for the forces posted at Roxbury, and [was] desired to acquaint the committee if any further appointments were necessary.”⁶ Four of the thirteen armorers in the entire province of Massachusetts had now been posted to Roxbury, if we are to believe Bellesiles, and the committee is asking if General Thomas would like some more!

On June 9, 1775, orders are given, “That the armorers repair no fire-arms for any soldier, without a certificate from his commanding officer, and that they keep an exact account of what arms they repair, and the soldiers’ names to whom they belong; also what regiment they belong to; and also that the arms that first come be first repaired; and that this vote be transmitted to the several armorers in the colony service.”⁷ This citation is rather typical of Bellesiles’s larding up of his citations. It tells us nothing that supports his claims about a scarcity of gunsmiths, or anything about their competence.

On p. 330 (June 13, 1775):

That, whereas, it has been represented to your committee, that the armorers, or many of them, who are already established, are very imperfect in the business they profess, and that

⁵ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 565.

⁶ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 553.

⁷ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 562.

the above said Falley is a complete master of the same; in consideration of which, your committee think it of the highest importance, that he (the said Falley) should be employed in said department, and be allowed and paid forty shillings per month, in addition to his pay as an ensign, and be under the same rules and regulations as the other armorers already appointed, or to be appointed; all which is humbly submitted.⁸

Here the gap between Bellesiles and his source is less dramatic; one might argue as to whether “the armorers, or many of them” really includes all of them except for Falley, but let’s continue, looking for evidence on other pages that might save Bellesiles.

On p. 474 (July 8, 1775):

Ordered, that Mr. Hall, Capt. Batchelder, and Mr. Ellis, be a committee to consider a resolve of the committee of safety, recommending to this Congress to make an establishment for four master armorers.⁹

So, if there are only thirteen armorers in the state, and all of them except Falley were “very imperfect in the business which they profess” on June 13, from where would the other three master armorers come in less than a month? On July 6, 1775: “Voted, That Mr. John Steel and his two sons be appointed armorers for this colony’s forces.”¹⁰

On p. 476 (July 9, 1775):

The committee appointed to consider a resolve of the committee of safety, recommending the appointment of four master armorers, reported. The report was ordered to lie on the table, till the committee for revising the commission of the committee of safety, and the commission of the committee of supplies, reported.¹¹

On pp. 498-9 (July 13, 1775):

Also, that the said committee are hereby empowered, during the time last mentioned, to procure, and employ for that period of the said continental army raised by this colony, all such armorers and other tradesmen and artificers, as they shall suppose and judge to be needed, to further and promote the operations of the said army, and them, as also all such tradesmen and artificers as are now retained and employed for that part of the said army, to regulate, arrange, remove, dismiss, and discharge, for unskilfulness, unfaithfulness, or whenever the service may not require the further retaining them, or any of them. And the said committee are hereby desired to be attentive to the behavior and performances of such tradesmen and artificers as are now, or shall be in the service and employ of the colony in the said army, that the colony be not defrauded by unfaithful, and incompetent persons.¹²

⁸ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 330.

⁹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 474.

¹⁰ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 590.

¹¹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 476.

¹² *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 498-9.

These last two sentences certainly could be read as a criticism of the competence of the gunsmiths in the service of the colony, but it could also be read as a general warning that *anyone* working for the army was expected to perform well, or be fired. It says nothing about the number of gunsmiths available.

So, from where are all these additional armorers going to come, if there are only thirteen in Massachusetts, and only one of them was competent? On July 8, 1775, the Committee of Safety must have concluded that there were going to be plenty of gunsmiths available to them in the future—many more than thirteen:

Whereas, many complaints have been made to this committee, that the armorers frequently deliver the arms out of their shops unfit for service, and delay the work unnecessarily; in order to prevent occasion for such complaints in future, and to hasten the public service in an orderly manner, which has not yet been provided for, it is Resolved, that it be, and it is hereby is, recommended to the honorable Congress, to make an establishment for, at least, four master armorers, each one of whom shall work and superintend one shop, each of which shops, as we apprehend, may well accommodate eight men, including the master.¹³

The committee decided that each of these four shops should handle eight men—or thirty-two armorers in all. The last of Bellesiles's citations is to p. 595, and again the entire discussion of armorers is presented to demonstrate that Bellesiles has misrepresented his sources:

July 12, 1775.

Whereas, frequent complaints have been made to this committee, that many of the arms returned from the armorers have not been sufficiently repaired, which error may have arisen from ignorant or careless persons being employed as armorers, for want of a master workman or superintendent in each shop, therefore, Resolved, that Benjamin Guillam, an armorer in the shop belonging to Gideon Frost, be, and he hereby is directed, to work as a master armorer in said shop, and to superintend the other armorers in that shop, whose duty it shall be to receive into said shop such arms as may, at any time, be sent there, by any of the colonels in that part of the American army belonging to this colony, in order to be repaired; to see that such arms are properly repaired; to deliver the same, when so repaired, to the persons from whom they were received; to see that no persons employed in said shop, as armorers, are either ignorant of said business, or careless, or idle; and if such shall be employed in the shop, such Guillam shall, without delay, inform the committee thereof; and that he suffer no more than eight armorers, including himself, to be employed at any one time, in said shop.

July 13, 1775.

¹³ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 592.

Mr. Benjamin Guillam, an armorer, had an order on the committee of supplies for two hundred pounds of iron, and what files and old brass he has occasion for, for himself and others that work in his shop.

Mr. Monroe recommended Seth Johnson, of Old Rutland, and Enoch Putnam, of Granby, as proper persons for armorers.¹⁴

Gunsmiths keep appearing in histories of the start of the Revolutionary War, unsurprisingly, but apparently as common bystanders. One of the first warnings that the British were about to march on Lexington and Concord came from, “A gunsmith named Jasper [who] lost no time in informing Colonel Waters of the Committee of Safety....”¹⁵ In Concord there was a gun factory operated by Samuel Barrett.¹⁶ John Cobb, a gunsmith in Taunton, Massachusetts, was struck dead by lightning in early July, 1775.¹⁷ What are the chances that three out of thirteen of Massachusetts’s gunsmiths just happen to be mentioned in documents that came so readily to hand?

A far from complete list of gunsmiths reveals that at least 612 were working in America between 1775 and 1783. How many are undocumented? Five times that number? Ten times that number? Gunsmiths were apparently present in Pennsylvania; we have records of a number of them being paid for their services repairing guns. Jacob Baldwin was paid £8:9:0 for repairing provincial firelocks.¹⁸ A few days later, John Willis was paid £21:17:9 for repairing firelocks.¹⁹ A few weeks later, Jacob Baldwin receives another £4:12:0 for repair work; and a Thomas Palmer similarly receives £25:19:0.²⁰ John Fox received £94:1:11 for repairing firelocks belonging to four different companies.²¹ A Dr. Potts received £19:12:0 for repairing provincial arms.²² John Handlyn received £22:16:0 for “repairing a number of

¹⁴ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 595.

¹⁵ Coburn, 18.

¹⁶ Coburn, 79.

¹⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 18.

¹⁸ February 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:480.

¹⁹ February 13, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:483.

²⁰ March 4, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:502.

²¹ March 14, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:514.

²² April 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:537.

Firelocks for Cap't Dorsey's Comp'y..."²³ "Baldwin & Tyler" received £28:13:9 for repairing arms.²⁴ A John Tyler received £11:5:9 for repairing "a Number of Firelocks."²⁵ Ludwig Fohrer received £93:11:1 "for Firelocks, purchased of him... & for the repairs of sundry others..."²⁶

Captain James Wilson received £3750 "to discharge bills for repairing arms" on December 12, 1780, perhaps representing several years worth of work. Wolfgang Haga also received £649:3:7 "for repairing arms" on August 12, 1779. One bill, a bit too omnibus to satisfy a modern account, "Paid sundry persons for arms and accoutrements, and for repairing and hauling arms, per account settled by Assembly, Oct. 1778, £725:14:0"—a very sizeable sum.²⁷ This is doubtless a very incomplete list of gunsmiths paid by the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, and for only a short period of time. (The next volume of *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* was unreadable on the microfiche.)

There are doubtless records of other gunsmiths paid by local governments in Pennsylvania. Lancaster County, for example, paid a John Miller £25:17:7 "for repairing public arms" on August 18, 1777.²⁸ Discovery of this payment was a happy coincidence; an exhaustive search of *Pennsylvania Archives* would probably uncover more such gunsmiths.

The Maryland Council of Safety paid John Youst (or Yost) £2:11:7 for gun repairs, and Samuel Messersmith £7:1:9 for mending muskets.²⁹ There are a number of gunsmiths—in some cases, also known to be gunmakers—who were provided public guns for repair in 1776. Edward Timmons was delivered six muskets on July 15, 1776 to be repaired; George Gordon was delivered twelve muskets on the same date for repair.³⁰ Timmons was given eighteen

²³ July 30, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:471.

²⁴ August 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:697.

²⁵ February 1, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:473.

²⁶ April 26, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:550.

²⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives* 3rd series, 6:358.

²⁸ *Penn.Arch.*, 3rd ser., 6:376.

²⁹ March 8, 1776, *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:1543; July 17, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1338; *Archives of Maryland*, 11:214.

³⁰ *Archives of Maryland*, 12:47.

more muskets a few days later, “to be repaired,” and paid 22s. for it. Gordon was given another twenty-four muskets to repair, and paid £5:6:6 for those repairs the following day, another 40s. on August 3, and £3 more on August 24.³¹ Shaw & Chisholme were paid £72:12:11 “for repairing and stocking guns” on August 17, 1776. Isaac Harris received £46:3:0 and £95:11:0 “for his services as Armourer.”³² Oliver Whiddon, who also made guns for Maryland, received £2:17:8 for repairing guns on August 30, 1776.³³ Gordon and Whiddon, apparently collectively, received £10:8:11 for gun repairs on September 3, 1776.³⁴ Were these the only gunsmiths that the Maryland Council of Safety hired? Unfortunately, there are many other records of payments made that provide no information about the services provided.³⁵

North Carolina’s records suggest that gunsmiths were common throughout the state. On December 21, 1775, the Provincial Council appointed twenty-six officials in six different districts to “purchase materials and employ proper persons to make and mend Guns and Bayonets and also to purchase good serviceable Guns, Gun Barrels, Stocks and Locks, Lead and Flints and have them repaired for the use of this province....”³⁶

When the North Carolina Provincial Congress established a commission to purchase guns—with two commissioners in each of thirty-five counties—they also provided that firearms not fit for military use were to be repaired, and, “That if Armourers cannot be found in each County, sufficient for repairing such Arms, that they sent into such publick Armoury as shall be established hereafter by this Congress.”³⁷ The Provincial Congress directed Colonel Nicholas Long to “employ at the Public Expense some Person or Persons to mend

³¹ July 19, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1339-40; August 3, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1347; August 23, 1776, *Ibid.*, 1:1358.

³² June 27, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:524; August 17, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1354.

³³ August 30, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:248.

³⁴ September 3, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:255.

³⁵ See March 13, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1544, for some examples of these uninformative transaction records.

³⁶ December 21, 1775, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:354-5.

³⁷ April 19, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1330.

and put in fix sundry Guns now in his Possession, and in the Town of Halifax.”³⁸ The assumption was that in many, perhaps most counties, gunsmiths would be found capable of repairing guns, and only if a county did not have enough gunsmiths would the government armory have to do the work. (New York’s Committee of Safety made similar provisions.)³⁹ This does not sound like a severe shortage of gunsmiths.

The records, however, list only few examples of gunsmiths being paid for their work. The Wilmington committee was reimbursed £83:15:10 for purchasing “thirty-one Guns, stocking four Guns, repairing three Guns, and twelve Gun Locks” and a later transaction of £7:1:0 “for two Muskets, repairing one gun and two gun locks....”⁴⁰

There are other transactions that indicate that there were gunsmiths present,⁴¹ though the small number of such transactions suggests that either there were very few gunsmiths present in North Carolina, and the Provincial Council was deluded about this, or, consistent with the other evidence, that the records of publicly paid gunsmithing are very incomplete. One piece of evidence of this incompleteness to the records is that the Wilmington Safety Committee paid Richard Player five shilling on January 30, 1776, “for repairing 1 gun more than in the account rendered against the public”⁴² but there is no other description of Player repairing guns.

Washington in 1778 complained “that there were 5000 Muskets unfit for service in the Magazine at Albany. I most earnestly desire that you will use your utmost endeavours to have them put into repair by the opening of the next Campaign.”⁴³ Why would Washington make a request to repair 5000 muskets “unfit for service,” if gunsmiths were actually in such short supply?

³⁸ December 4, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:952.

³⁹ March 27, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1409-10.

⁴⁰ December 22, 1775, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:358.

⁴¹ June 15, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:631; December 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:1002.

⁴² *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:439.

⁴³ George Washington to Philip van Rensselaer, February 8, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 10:431.

We also have evidence of large numbers of gunsmiths moving as groups, as described in this letter from Washington to Henry Knox:

The Bearer Mr. Buel, who is recommended to me by Governor Trumbull, will undertake to stock a number of the Gun Barrels at Springfield, and repair the old Arms. He has a set of Workmen of his own and will go on with the Business upon Credit, which is a very material consideration. But to prevent the matter being made a job, I think it will be best for you to give orders to the Officer superintending the Laboratory to have the Barrels sufficiently proved before they are delivered to Mr. Buel, as I suspect that they are most of them of the trash kind which Mr. [Arthur] Lee charges Mr. [Silas] Deane['s Agent with purchasing.⁴⁴

The notes describe Benjamin Buell as “a gunsmith of Hebron, Conn.”⁴⁵ Clearly, Buell was more than a single craftsman, but an entrepreneur prepared to bring his workmen with him to build guns on credit.

Were gunsmiths in short supply during the Revolution? In some places, at some times, certainly. But the evidence suggests that the shortage of gunsmiths was comparable to shortage of soldiers, of clothes, and many other commodities rendered scarce and hard to make because of the sudden change in trade conditions induced by the war.

⁴⁴ George Washington to Henry Knox, November 30, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 20:423-4.

⁴⁵ *Writings of George Washington* 20:423 n.34.

Gunmaking During the Revolutionary Era

Bellesiles would have us believe that Americans not only built almost no guns before the war started, and were unable to correct this problem once hostilities were underway. Others, a bit closer in time to the Revolution, have held different opinions. J. Leander Bishop's 1868 history of American manufacturing reports that cannon were cast in Pennsylvania during the Revolution, and that,

Small arms were also made in considerable quantity at Philadelphia, Lancaster, and elsewhere. The general insecurity of the frontier settlements, especially during the French and Indian wars, the temptations of the chase, and particularly the Indian trade, rendered fire-arms a necessary appendage to every household, and created a steady demand for rifles and other defensive weapons. The manufacture received a great impulse during the Revolution. The exportation of firearms, gunpowder, and other military stores from Great Britain was prohibited in 1774.... Governor Richard Penn, in his examination before the House of Lords in November, 1775, stated, in reply to the inquiries of the Duke of Richmond on the subject, that the casting of cannon, including brass, which were cast in Philadelphia, had been carried to a great perfection; and also that small arms were made in as great perfection as could be imagined. The workmanship and finish of the small arms were universally admired for their excellence.... Rifles were made in many places in the Provinces at that date, which were thought equal to any imported.¹

Who is correct, Bellesiles or Governor Penn and J. Leander Bishop? We will examine evidence in several categories for each state. First, are there any surviving guns made during the Revolution? Yes, but this turns out to be a bit less helpful to answering the question than it appears. We have surviving American-made firearms, such as Philip Greever's rifle, used at the 1780 Battle of King's Mountain. The gun is marked with "J. Shaffer," probably Jacob Shaffer of Wythe County, Virginia, or Joseph Shafer of Snyder County, Pennsylvania. Robert

¹ Bishop, 1:572.

Young's rifle from that same battle has also survived, and it is also American made.² A pistol and some rifles made by Cornelius Atherton in New England during the Revolutionary War era also exist, as do pistols by Henry Mauger of Berks County, Pennsylvania, and a pair of pistols believed to be by William Shenner of Reading, Pennsylvania. (The Mauger and Shenner pistols used imported Ketland gunlocks.)³ A Nathan Bailey pistol apparently made for the State of Connecticut also survives.⁴ A Connecticut Committee of Safety musket made by Stephen Chandler "seems to be entirely American except for some of the furniture which is British."⁵ An Abijah Thompson musket uses a British barrel, but "the rest of the gun—lock, escutcheon, side and butt plates—is American and the stock is American curly maple."⁶

While these surviving rifles and pistols are clear proof that Americans made guns in the late colonial or Revolutionary period, their continuing existence is less useful than it might at first appear. No one denies that at least a few guns were made colonial and Revolutionary America. If we had some method of estimating the survival rate of guns from that period, the number that remain in museums today might be used to estimate how many guns were originally present. North & Cheney made 2000 pistols under the 1799 federal contract. About 20 of those 2000 have survived to the present day—or roughly 1%.⁷

Have 1% of the American-made guns of the colonial period survived? Is the survival rate 0.1%? We really don't know, because there are really no useful measures of colonial and Revolutionary gun production, and so the survivors are mute witnesses to their brothers that have since been buried or melted down—and they tell us nothing about how many of those brothers there were.

² James C. Kelly and William C. Baker, *The Sword of the Lord and Gideon: A Catalogue of Historical Objects Related to the Battle of King's Mountain* (Boone, N.C.: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980), 9, 21.

³ Klay, 10-15; Michael H. Lewis, *The Gunsmiths of Manhattan 1625-1900: A Checklist of Tradesmen* (Alexandria Bay, N.Y.: Museum Restoration Service, 1991), 6..

⁴ Lindsay, 61, 64.

⁵ Lindsay, 52, 54.

⁶ Lindsay, 56, 64.

⁷ Lindsay, 82.

There is strong reason to believe that nearly all of the guns actually made during this time have been destroyed as they became obsolete or too damaged to bother repairing. But the presence of surviving guns, even in small quantities, does demonstrate that the other forms of evidence are not delusions or errors. As is usually the case, artifacts are interesting and suggestive, but far less conclusive than written sources.

Second, did the people who lived in Revolutionary America believe that guns could be made there? Individuals might be mistaken, or suffering from what Bellesiles considers patriotic self-delusion. If large numbers of Americans, especially the well-educated and presumably intelligent people in the Revolutionary governments believed that guns could be made in America, it requires very strong evidence that they were mistaken before we can believe that Bellesiles is right, and all of them were wrong.

It is important to distinguish between what people *wished* to happen, and what they *believed* could happen. Bellesiles writes of the *rage militaire* that swept across America, deluding many Americans into believing that their countrymen were widely armed.⁸ But was this delusion, as Bellesiles claims?

The importation of guns from abroad was a difficult situation in the first year of hostilities, at least partly because the United States did not yet exist, and the British government was successful in blocking many European nations from selling munitions to what was still just a bunch of rebels.⁹ John Hancock's March 6, 1776 letter to George Washington observes, "With regard to arms, I am afraid we shall, for a time, be under some difficulty. The importation is now precarious and dangerous. To remedy this, a Committee is appointed to contract for the making arms; and, as there is a great number of gunsmiths in this and the neighboring Colonies, I flatter myself we shall soon be able to provide ourselves

⁸ Bellesiles, 178-9.

⁹ John Penn to Thomas Person, February 14, 1776, *Col. Rec. N.C.*, 10:455.

without risk or danger.”¹⁰ John Hancock seemed to think that gun making was within the capabilities of the American colonists. Was he the only one that thought this?

There is a curious piece of evidence that Americans believed that they could make guns from Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie’s diary. Mackenzie, a British officer stationed in Boston at the start of the Revolution, described how the “the people are evidently making every preparation for resistance. They are taking every means to provide themselves with Arms; and are particularly desirous of procuring the Locks of firelocks, which are easily conveyed out of town without being discovered by the Guards.”¹¹

As we will see later, gunlocks were the one significant component imported in large numbers during the colonial period, and this desire for gunlocks makes sense if the other components of a gun were being made outside of Boston. However, it might also make sense if there were large numbers of existing guns out of Boston with broken gunlocks. It does seem unlikely, however, that widespread smuggling of gunlocks would be worth the risks unless there were either gunsmiths in large quantities repairing or making guns. We know of at least one business described as a “gun factory” in Concord, operated by Deacon Thomas Barrett.¹²

One of North Carolina’s delegates to the Continental Congress, Joseph Hewes, wrote a depressing letter back home complaining of the gap between their resolutions and results: “We resolve to raise regiments, resolve to make cannon, resolve make and import muskets, powder and cloathing, but it is a melancholly fact that near half of our men, Cannon, muskets, powder, cloathes, &c., is to be found nowhere but on paper.”¹³

¹⁰ *American Archives* 4th series, 5:83.

¹¹ Mackenzie, 31-32.

¹² Ezra Ripley, *A History of the Fight at Concord on the 19th of April, 1775* (Concord: Allen & Atwill, 1827), 20.

¹³ Joseph Hewes to James Iredell, May 17, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:458. See Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, May 16, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:605, for another depressing letter complaining about the problems of making or purchasing firearms and cannon, either in America, or in Europe.

It is true that governments have been known to place orders for goods based on incorrect information, and it is entirely possible that there simply wasn't the manufacturing capacity for guns that the contracts and orders we will examine imply. This is quite a strong claim to make however—that the Revolutionary era government's knowledge of the state of arms manufacturing was incorrect. An historian today who claims to have a clearer understanding of the true state of colonial arms manufacturing capabilities than the people who lived there needs extraordinary evidence to back such claims.

If no or few guns had been made in America during the Revolution, Hewes's letter might be a strong piece of evidence to back Bellesiles's claims. But as we will see, guns were made, though perhaps in smaller numbers than the surviving contracts and resolutions would suggest. It is important to also note that the gap between resolutions and results to which Hewes refers includes not only guns, but also men and clothing—and no one would seriously argue that men and clothing were in short supply in colonial America, nor that Americans lacked the knowledge of how to make both! The most that might be said is that the government could not dramatically expand America's manufacturing base for guns, men, and clothing on short notice, nor could it rent, purchase, or hire these guns, men, and clothing on the terms it could afford.

It is clear that large numbers of firearms were imported during the Revolution, many of them from France. Arcadi Gluckman points out while “individually owned rifles and fowling pieces” were used, “by far the greater part of the arms used by Continental troops during the Revolutionary War, were regulation French army muskets....” From existing records, it appears that the vast majority of these imported firearms (of which records exist of 101,918 delivered from February 1776 through August 1781) arrived from 1777 onward—at a time when domestic manufacturing of the Committee of Safety muskets began to taper off.

While Bellesiles portrays this primary reliance on imported arms as a sign of the inability of Americans to make guns in quantity, Gluckman points to a simpler explanation: the guns being imported from France were purchased at an average price of about \$5 each, compared

to an average price of \$12.30 for muskets made in the United States. The lower price for these French guns is not surprising; while many were unused, they were also obsolete government arms, and may well have been acquired at a substantial discount for this very reason, and because it suited the French government's foreign policy interests. An inventory of long guns remaining in the arsenals after the war found that while most were model 1763 Charlevilles, some dated as early as 1718.¹⁴ If the choice was having new guns made for \$12.30, or buying surplus, sometimes unused muskets for \$5, it is no surprise that the American government chose to buy foreign, especially from 1777 onward.

Third, we will look at documents that indicate that guns were actually being made. Contracts might be drawn up for the making of guns, but if that the task was harder than it first appeared, these contracts would be simply scraps of worthless paper. If we find evidence that once the manufacturing process was under way, that necessary and expensive components were being delivered to those who were contracted to make guns, it would be evidence that at least the gunsmiths involved in the process believed that guns could be made.

Fourth, we will look at documents that demonstrate that completed guns were delivered, and gun makers were paid for them. We should not expect that every such delivery was adequately documented; indeed, we will see records that guns were made and delivered, while the production of other guns are only known by indirect evidence.

Pennsylvania

Examination of the papers of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety suggests that Pennsylvania had a substantial gunmaking industry at the start of the Revolution—or at least the people that lived in Pennsylvania thought so. Among the Committee of Safety resolutions of June 30, 1775 is an order to the various counties of Pennsylvania that they were “immediately to provide a proper number of good, new Firelocks, with Bayonets fitted to

¹⁴ Gluckman, 60-61.

them;” cartridge boxes with 23 rounds in each box, and knapsacks. The list that follows specifies for each county that it is to supply “not less” than a specified number “of each article”:

Entity	Count
City and County of Philadelphia	1500
County of Bucks	300
County of Chester	500
County of Lancaster	600
County of York	300
County of Cumberland	300
County of Berks	400
County of Northampton	300
County of Bedford	100
County of Northumberland	100
County of Westmoreland	100 ¹⁵

Significantly, this order was to provide *new* firelocks, not used ones, and not existing ones purchased from the civilian market. How were these new firelocks to be made? “That the Firelocks to be provided as aforesaid, be of one Bore, with Steel Rammers, well fitted to the same, and that Patterns of the said Firelocks, Rammers and Bayonets, be immediately made in the city of Philadelphia, and sent to the different Counties.”¹⁶

Bellesiles believes that this production capacity did not exist, and that the various orders from governments and private individuals that are documented above reflect delusions about this matter. He tells us that the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety requested two hundred muskets from William Henry, and it took eighteen months to get them.¹⁷

Bellesiles has relied on secondary sources for this claim, however, and the sources are wrong on at least one significant count: On March 23, 1776, the Committee of Safety directed negotiating a contract “with William Henry for making 200 Rifles”¹⁸—not muskets, as Bellesiles says, but rifles—considerably harder to make than muskets because of the rifling of the barrels.

¹⁵ June 30, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:229.

¹⁶ June 30, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:230.

¹⁷ Bellesiles, 184.

¹⁸ March 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:523.

There is certainly a minute of June 3, 1778 in which we are informed that William Henry “has about fifty Riffles in his possession” and he was directed to deliver them to Colonel Arthur Buchanan. But there is nothing that clearly identifies if this was a delivery under the March 23, 1776 contract. Henry was also requested to deliver fifty muskets “belonging to this state,” that he might have made, stored, or perhaps repaired.¹⁹

Bellesiles gives no other examples of contracts in Pennsylvania, and thus leaves the reader with the impression that muskets were very hard to come by. Not all of the contract details are visible from the available sources, but for at least a few of these contracts we can see the sequence. On July 21, 1775, the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety directed a subcommittee to apply to three gunsmiths named James Pearson, Tomlinson, and Wiley, to find out “if they can be engaged to advantage” to “Compleating the Fire Arms that may be wanted.”²⁰ On July 27, Pearson and now “Whiley” did contract for the making of gun barrels.²¹ Tomlinson apparently engaged in some similar contract, because an order to pay Joshua Tomlinson £200 “advanced him towards Gun Barrel Making” appears on July 15, 1776.²²

On July 22, 1775, the Committee of Safety directed that “a messenger be sent to Joel Ferree, of Lancaster County... requesting him immediately to complete the Guns wrote for as patterns and to know how many he can furnish of the same kind and at what price.”²³ In July, 1776, The Committee contracted with John Kerlin “for fifty Muskets and Bayonets, to be made according to Pattern, at Eighty-five Shillings each.”²⁴

Bedford County, Pennsylvania, responded to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety’s request that each county make muskets by explaining that they only had one gunsmith, and he was unable to hire sufficient help to make the 100 firelocks required of Bedford County. The request was not absurd, merely impossible under the conditions of the local labor market.

¹⁹ *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 11:506.

²⁰ July 21, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:289; July 22, 1775, *Ibid.* 10:290.

²¹ *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:291.

²² *Col.Rec.Penn.*, 10:648.

²³ July 21, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:289; July 22, 1775, *Ibid.* 10:290.

²⁴ July 18, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:650.

Yet by 1780, Bedford County had acquired a runaway gunlock maker, and he was apparently making muskets for the Bedford Committee of Safety.²⁵

We have plenty of evidence that there were gunsmiths hard at work making the contracted guns. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety evidently believed that guns not only *could* be made, but *were* being made. On February 13, 1776, they directed that two hundred pounds of brass be supplied to “Lewis Grant...for making furniture for Firelocks....” Gouger, Dunwick, and Kinder received £150 “for which they are to deliver thirty five stand of arms....”²⁶ Lewis Prah was to receive 100 pounds of brass “for mounting to the Firelocks making by him for the use of this province.”²⁷

On March 26, 1776, Peter De Haven received £150 “for the payment of Fire Arms making for the use of this County.”²⁸ A few months later he was to receive “100 lbs. Copper, for mounting of Firelocks, for the use of this Province.”²⁹ Northampton County received a quarter cask of gunpowder to proof “the Firelocks making for the use of this Province.”³⁰ An August 24, 1775 meeting directed “Mr. George Gray procure 1500 Brushes and priming wires, for the Provincial Firelocks....”³¹

By October 7, 1775, the guns were apparently being made—or there is no point in an order from the Committee of Safety, “That Colo. Cadawalader be desired to deliver to the Master at Arms, what Muskets, with the Bayonets, he can spare out of a Number he has order’d to be made; And that this Board pay him four Pounds five Shillings for each, being the price he agreed for.” It would even appear that there might have been gunsmiths still not busy making guns for the government: “*Resolved*, That the Master at Arms go to the different

²⁵ Whisker, 170-171.

²⁶ February 13, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:484.

²⁷ April 20, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:550.

²⁸ March 26, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:525.

²⁹ July 19, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:650.

³⁰ April 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:536-37.

³¹ August 24, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:314.

Smiths in and about this City, who are capable of making Fire Arms & Gun Locks, and desire them that are out of employ to attend this Board.”³²

A February 14, 1776 order directs payment of £500 “for the payment of Firelocks, &c.” Unfortunately, there is nothing that tells if this was payment towards manufacture, or for actual delivery.³³ An August 15, 1776 order is more explicit: Abraham Moore of Chester County was to be paid £30 “on account of arms to be made for the Service of this State.”³⁴ Thomas Palmer (perhaps the same Philadelphia gunsmith to which William Milnor refers³⁵) was directed to deliver seventeen rifles to Robert Towers, and a Mr. Balwin (probably Jacob Baldwin) was similarly directed to deliver eight rifles, on or after July 24, 1776.³⁶

The discouraged North Carolina delegate Joseph Hewes, upset about the gap between resolutions and results, reported that arms were not available for purchase in the Philadelphia area: “these articles are very scarce throughout all the Colonies. I find on enquiry that neither can be got here, all the Gunsmiths in this Province are engaged and cannot make Arms near so fast as they are wanted.”³⁷ Hewes was certainly not suffering from the *rage militaire*—and yet he recognized that gunsmiths in the Philadelphia area were making guns—just not fast enough.

Perhaps Hewes was deluding himself that guns were being made in America. If so, he seems not to have wised up over the next few months. On February 13, 1776, he again wrote about the shortage of guns and powder for the army, and the success of the British government in blocking shipments of both from Europe. “Americans ought to be more industrious in making those articles at home, every Family should make saltpeter, every Province have powder Mills and every body encourage the making of Arms.”³⁸ Clearly,

³² *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:357-8.

³³ February 14, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:485.

³⁴ August 15, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:687.

³⁵ William Milnor to George Washington, November 29, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:65-66.

³⁶ July 24, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.*, 10:653.

³⁷ November 9, 1775, Letter from Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:314.

³⁸ February 13, 1776, Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:447.

Americans were making guns; Hewes had stated that in November; they just weren't doing it fast enough to meet the demand.

On October 30, 1777, the employees of the Pennsylvania State Gun Factory at French's Creek, Chester County, complained that their wages were too low for stocking guns, and asked for a raise.³⁹ It seems most unlikely, if the workmen were not actually stocking guns that they would ask for a raise. Perhaps, as Bellesiles claims, guns weren't really being made during the Revolution. But it does seem a little unlikely that the workmen would ask for a raise, with the approval of their superintendent, if they weren't really making guns.

The Pennsylvania government seems to have thought that their factory made guns. On October 10, 1778, they asked Congress if they wanted to take over the state gun factory, having run out of money to operate it. "The State of Pennsylvania has for some time past supported a factory for the making of arms, which has been conducted with care and attention by Mr. Peter De Haven and Mr. Benj'n Rittenhouse."⁴⁰

Northampton County was given £300 "for the payment of Firelocks...making in that County for the use of this Province...."⁴¹ (It is not clear whether this was an advance to gun makers, or reimbursement for guns already made.) A minute of February 6, 1776, directs payment for £150 for "Gunlocks & Files...."⁴² A gunsmith named Lewis Prahll did some sort of work for the Committee of Safety that required delivery of "any number of Gunlocks he may find necessary...."⁴³ These are all evidence that the Committee of Safety believed that firearms manufacturing was taking place (though the gunlocks for Lewis Prahll might have been imported).

Peterson is clear that the Committee of Safety muskets were not simply ordered, but actually manufactured, and in spite of conditions not well suited to their preservation, we

³⁹ Whisker, 224.

⁴⁰ *Penn. Arch.*, 1st ser., 7:12.

⁴¹ March 4, 1776, *Col. Rec. Penn.* 10:502.

⁴² February 6, 1776, *Col. Rec. Penn.* 10:477.

⁴³ March 4, 1776, *Col. Rec. Penn.* 10:502.

have a number of examples that have survived to the present day. It is certainly the case that when arms became available for importation from Europe that these replaced many of these hurriedly manufactured muskets, and the Committee of Safety muskets, which received hard use at the beginning of the war, were unlikely to survive to be sold off as surplus after the war.⁴⁴

Bellesiles makes much of low production rates of Committee of Safety muskets, suggesting that Americans simply lacked the ability to produce guns in any quantity. M. L. Brown gives a more detailed description of the problems confronting Pennsylvania manufacturing, which included not only a shortage of gunlocks, but also low prices offered by the government.

The Lancaster County Committee of Safety complained to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety on March 16, 1776 that they were having trouble making new contracts: “Our workmen universally complain that the sums already fixed are inadequate to their Labours; that the Sacrifice they made in quitting their rifle business is greater than they can bear without some equivalent....”⁴⁵ The problem was not that Americans couldn’t make guns, but that it was more profitable to make guns for the private market.

How many guns were made? Gluckman asserts that in spite of the difficulties involved, 4,000 of the 4,500 muskets ordered by the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety were completed and delivered between October 1775 and April 1776. Unfortunately, Gluckman provides no verifiable source for that claim.⁴⁶ Attempts to verify this number against *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, *Pennsylvania Archives*, and *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania*

⁴⁴ Peterson, 180-90. See Bivins, 12, for a picture of one of the Committee of Safety muskets made in Philadelphia (according to the barrel), with Philadelphia proof marks and John Nicholson’s name on the gunlock, perhaps indicating that he made the gunlock, but certainly indicating that he assembled the gun.

⁴⁵ Brown, 310; Arcadi Gluckman, *United States Muskets, Rifles and Carbines* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Otto Ulbrich Co., 1948), 45, reproduces the entire letter, along with others on 43-46 that discuss problems of rising prices and wages preventing production of the full number of muskets required. Bishop, 1:573, confirms that the commercial demand for rifles interfered with colonial contracting for muskets. See Letter from the North Carolina Delegates to the Continental Congress, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:806, for confirmation of the high demand and rising wages of “workmen in every branch of the Iron manufactory....”

⁴⁶ Gluckman, 47-48.

have been less than conclusive. We have records that show that muskets and rifles were made and delivered, but relatively few of these records provide any quantities.

Nonetheless, we do know that Committee of Safety muskets were made. On October 27, 1775, the Committee of Safety directed that Mr. Towers “prove all the Muskets made in this City for the Provincial Service, and to Stamp such of as are proof, with the letters P; and that a Copy of this Minute be handed to the County Commissioners, who are to notify the Smiths they contract with for said Muskets, of this Resolve, and that none of their Guns will be receiv’d or paid for by this Board, but such as have been so proved and Stamp’t as aforesaid.”⁴⁷ In 1776, a Robert Peebles was paid £200 “being in part for 100 muskets made by Col. Peebles” by order of Cumberland County.⁴⁸

Matthias Keely, who delivered 31 new firelocks as contracted, was to be given “as much powder as will prove one hundred Firelocks, making by him for the use of this Province.”⁴⁹ On April 4, 1776, Matthias Keeler (apparently the same gunsmith) received £50 advance “towards the payment of Firelocks making by him....” In addition, “Robert Towers, Comissary” was told to provide Keeler with fifty-six musket balls “for proving Firelocks....”⁵⁰ Towers was apparently purchasing guns. Later that month, he was reimbursed £160:13:4 for “Firelocks, Salt Petre, &c., purchased and paid for by him....”⁵¹

New York

New York’s Provincial Congress was also apparently deluded about the possibility of having guns made in America. A series of discussions with Robert Boyd and Henry Watkeys starting June 13, 1775, concerned the making of one thousand muskets for the soldiers of

⁴⁷ October 27, 1775, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:383.

⁴⁸ *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, Penn.: 1852), 10:700, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 74.

⁴⁹ March 2, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:502.

⁵⁰ April 4, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:535.

⁵¹ April 25, 1776, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:550.

New York. (Since New York was planning to raise and equip three thousand soldiers,⁵² this suggests that the Provincial Congress believed that it already had, or could purchase, at least two thousand muskets.) At first the price agreed upon was £3:15:0 per musket.

On June 23, it negotiated with Robert Boyd to manufacture “Gun Barrells, Bayonets and Steel Ramrods”, and with Henry Watkeys to provide gunlocks, stock and finish muskets within six months.⁵³ The final contract required Watkeys to manufacture gunlocks on the pattern of one provided to him “marked *Grice 1760.*” Watkeys was to be paid £2:5:0 for each musket delivered. Boyd seems to have not been included in this contract.⁵⁴ Watkeys apparently failed to deliver on the guns, and the manner in which Bellesiles tells us about his failure raises questions about Bellesiles’s accuracy.

“Henry Watkeys appears to have been entirely sincere when he took New York’s money in June 1775, but discovered that making guns was much harder than he had initially suspected. Sixteen months later, after producing only six inferior gun barrels, he informed the New York legislature he was ‘poor and now removed to Brunswick in Jersey.’”⁵⁵ Why does Bellesiles make a point of saying that Watkeys appears to have been sincere? Because one of Bellesiles’s sources about Watkeys points out that he deserted to the British, and ended up after the war as a gunsmith in Canada.⁵⁶ At a minimum, it gives us a different possible explanation for Watkeys’s failure to make guns. Watkeys’s failure to make guns may reflect his political sympathies as much as his technical inadequacies.

This wasn’t the end of the New York Provincial Congress’s attempts to have guns made. They ordered on March 30, 1776 that “all the public News-Papers in this Colony” run an advertisement asking for “proposals from & treat with any Person or Persons who are willing to engage in manufacturing good Muskets or the Locks Barrells or any necessary parts

⁵² June 9, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:8.

⁵³ June 13, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:8; June 23, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:9-10.

⁵⁴ June 30, 1775, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:13-14.

⁵⁵ Bellesiles, 191.

⁵⁶ Whisker, 178-179.

thereof....”⁵⁷ New York also provided a bounty for those who erected gunpowder mills, made gunlocks, or musket barrels, and no interest loans.

But they were also careful to specify that these incentives were not available for gunpowder mills already erected, or for gunlock, musket barrel, or bayonet makers “with whom the Congress or Committee of Safety of this Colony have already contracted, or to any person in their behalf....”⁵⁸ Clearly, there were already gunpowder mills in operation, and these incentives were intended to create more manufacturing capacity. It appears that the incentives for gunlock makers and musket barrel makers were similarly intended for those not already in the business. This suggests that there were craftsmen in New York already contracted to make gunlocks and musket barrels.

Cornelius Atherton contracted with New York for muskets during this time, and apparently delivered at least twenty-two muskets sometime during this period.⁵⁹

New Hampshire

Other Revolutionary governments, while lacking quite as much detail on their plans to have guns made, also seemed to believe that guns could be made in America. The New Hampshire House of Representatives in January, 1776, discussed “a plan for providing Fire-Arms for a Colony stock....” They proposed that for every musket with a barrel “three feet nine inches long, to carry an ounce ball, a good bayonet with blade eighteen inches long, iron ramrod” (what is generally known as the Committee of Safety specification) “manufactured in this Colony” delivered “on or before the 1st of May next, the owner of such fire-arms receive three pounds for each....” These muskets were to be proofed, and only if they passed was the maker to be paid.

⁵⁷ March 30, 1776, *Col.Hist.NY* 15:92.

⁵⁸ *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:390-92. The Provincial Congress on this same page also provided very similar loan and bounty programs for the making of “Salt out of seawater” as well—and no one has suggested that Americans were short of salt in the colonial period.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Gunsmiths of Manhattan*, 6.

Furthermore, “that there be appointed one good man, in each County” to receive and proof such muskets.⁶⁰ *Every county* was to have a man to receive such muskets. New Hampshire’s government seemed to think that there was enough gun manufacturing capacity that within three months there would be so many gunsmiths making muskets, and that they would be so widely distributed, that someone would be required “in each County” to receive and proof them.

Connecticut

Medad Hills of Goshen, Connecticut, received a Connecticut Committee of Safety musket contract, and on February 4, 1776, delivered forty muskets and bayonets.⁶¹ At least one of Medad Hills’s muskets has survived, though whether it is one of those made under this contract is unclear.⁶² Samuel Hall also received a contract from the Connecticut Committee of Safety. While he apparently delivered at least 69 guns, “military duty and sickness” prevented him from completing his contract.⁶³ Other Committee of Safety muskets have survived, such as an unmarked musket made in New England (based on the wood), and a Committee of Safety fusil made by Elisha Childs and Nathan Frink in 1778 in Goshen, Connecticut.⁶⁴ Samuel Dewey of Hebron, Connecticut, demanded payment from the state Assembly for “46 gun barrels and 21 bayonets, and that they are all in the public service.”⁶⁵

Virginia

There are certainly gunsmiths in Virginia who believed that they could make guns. Thomas Worley, Philip Sheetz, and Henry Sheetz “of Mecklenburg in the County of Berkley” signed a document May 28, 1776, offering to make guns for the Committee of Safety,

⁶⁰ January 12, 1775, *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:7-8.

⁶¹ Brown, 325.

⁶² Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 51. Lindsay, 55, 57, describes what may be the same surviving Medad Hills musket.

⁶³ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 41.

⁶⁴ Lindsay, 55.

⁶⁵ Brown, 350-351.

“twenty-four good and well fixt Rifle guns per month, at the rate of Four Pounds and Ten Shillings Virginia Currency each, or in lieu thereof twenty-four good and well fixt muskets with sufficient bayonets at the rate of Four Pounds....”⁶⁶

Bellesiles does mention the successful Martinsburg, Virginia factory of Stephen & Noble, which was “capable of making as many as eighteen muskets in a single week.” Yet, rather than acknowledge that this was an impressive performance for a factory of thirty workers, he derides its effectiveness by observing, “If they maintained that rate, they could have armed the Virginia militia in twenty-one years, assuming no gun loss or population growth.”⁶⁷ There is no reason to assume that a single factory was intended to arm the entire Virginia militia, or that the Virginia militia was devoid of arms when the factory opened. The tone of that remark demonstrates something of Bellesiles’s lack of objectivity about arms manufacturing in Revolutionary America.

The Rappahannock Forge in Virginia made guns, without question, because we have some of their production. Nathan Swayze, an arms collector specializing in Rappahannock Forge’s production has found at least eighteen surviving guns produced during the Revolution: ten pistols, four muskets, and four “wall guns” (a type of very large musket used for defending fixed positions).⁶⁸ Unfortunately for its proprietor, the chaos caused in Virginia by the British invasion disrupted production and scattered his workmen.⁶⁹

North Carolina

North Carolina’s Provincial Congress also made provision for the making of guns, naming eighteen men in six different districts “to direct the establishing of public manufactories in their respective districts, of good and sufficient muskets and bayonets” roughly following the specifications laid down by the Continental Congress. These men were

⁶⁶ Hartzler, 275.

⁶⁷ Bellesiles, 192.

⁶⁸ Nathan Swayze, *The Rappahannock Forge* (American Society of Arms Collectors, 1976), 1-31.

⁶⁹ Swayze, 5.

to ‘collect from the different parts of their respective districts all gunsmiths, and other mechanicks, who have been accustomed to make, or assist in making muskets, or who may in their opinion be useful in carrying on such manufactory....’ Musket and bayonet together were not to exceed £5.⁷⁰ It is unclear how many guns were actually made in such public factories, but it is clear that the Provincial Congress believed that there were gunsmiths “accustomed to make, or assist in making muskets” living in North Carolina.

There is a curious silence in the North Carolina records about these public gun factories. The Provincial Congress in November of 1776 charged three members to “Inquire into the state of the Gun Manufacture in the District of Halifax, and make Report thereon.”⁷¹ A few weeks later, they reported back it appeared that muskets could not be made for £5 each, but that at \$20 each it was possible. There is no explanation why the House considered the report, and rejected it.⁷² Did the House consider the report was nonsense? Did they decide that it was best not to try and make guns in public factories? We really don’t know. We also don’t know if the problem was specific to Halifax or not. A few weeks later, Nathaniel Rochester was added to the Hillsborough District’s firearms manufacture commission, suggesting that the Provincial Congress had not abandoned the notion of making guns.⁷³

The Continental Congress clearly believed that guns could be made in North Carolina. A November 4, 1775 resolution directed, “Resolved, That it be recommended to the several Assemblies or conventions of the colonies respectively, to set and keep their gunsmiths at work, to manufacture good fire locks, with bayonets....”⁷⁴ A November 28, 1775 resolution directed, “That the convention or committee of safety of North Carolina be desired to

⁷⁰ April 24, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:539. An undated letter from North Carolina’s delegates to the Continental Congress some months later suggests that either these public gun factories did not come into existence, or that the delegates were not aware of them.

⁷¹ November 22, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:929.

⁷² December 7, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:958.

⁷³ December 23, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:1001.

⁷⁴ *JCC*, 322.

employ, immediately, all the gunsmiths in that colony, in the making of Musquets and bayonets....”⁷⁵

Examination of *Colonial Records of North Carolina* shows surprisingly little discussion of the making of guns. On June 14, 1776, the North Provincial Congress promised Timothy Bloodworth £5 for each Committee of Safety musket made and delivered within four months. Bloodworth and his workmen were exempted from militia duty, and Bloodworth was advanced £100 to make the muskets and bayonets.⁷⁶ (The Provincial Congress raised its offering price to £6 a few months later, with no explanation of why.)⁷⁷

Apparently Bloodworth’s operation was successful, as was that of James Dupre. Factories in Hillsborough and Halifax started, respectively, in April and November of 1776, apparently making guns until 1778. The arrival of inexpensive surplus French muskets may have contributed to the closing of these factories; the drought of 1778, by stopping water power at the Hillsborough factory, forced it to stop production.⁷⁸

A curious complaint of May 3, 1776, suggests that guns were being made in North Carolina, and that it was not generally important enough to be recorded, unless there was some dispute associated with the guns. An Abraham Childers “in the first troop of Light Horse commanded by Capt. Dickerson... had taken seven new rifle guns, with their [bullet] moulds and wipers, from Arthur Morse, of the county of Orange, for the use of the Continental Army....” The Provincial Congress resolved, “That the said Abraham Childers has acted without authority, and with violence, evil in its example, and dangerous to the security of private property....” The guns were ordered restored to Moore, and Childers was ordered to report to the Provincial Congress “to answer for the said misbehaviour...”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ JCC, 388.

⁷⁶ June 14, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:630.

⁷⁷ December 21, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:981.

⁷⁸ Bivins, 16, 18.

⁷⁹ May 3, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:559.

Perhaps this was a misunderstanding; a few days later, Childers apparently escaped punishment, and Moore was given £56 for the seven rifles.⁸⁰

There are other references to guns purchased, repaired, and perhaps made under contract with the North Carolina state and county governments, but what is startling is how few such references there are, if guns were an extraordinarily scarce commodity. On December 22, 1775, the North Carolina Provincial Council (the executive branch, apparently, while the Provincial Congress was not in session) reimbursed the Wilmington Safety Committee for £83:15:10. “for thirty-one Guns, stocking four Guns, repairing three Guns, and twelve Gun Locks for the use of the first Regiment....” They were also reimbursed £7:1:0 “for two Muskets, repairing one gun and two gun locks, for the first Regiment....”⁸¹ One could interpret the very, very few references to gun purchases as evidence that guns were in short supply; one could also interpret it as evidence that guns were so widely distributed as to not be worth a great deal of discussion.

A number of gun factories operated during the Revolutionary War, some continuing manufacturing operations from before the war, such as North Carolina’s Charlottesville Rifle Works. It was established in 1740 to produce public arms, and produced muskets from 1775 to 1777. It receives no mention from Bellesiles.

Bellesiles describes North Carolina’s Public Gun Factory as having “produced one hundred rifles during the war and then closed shop.”⁸² A more complete statement—and one that shows that there was a bit more involved than just closing down operations, is that it started operations in May 1776, and delivered “one hundred muskets with bayonets, three rifles and six smooth [bore] guns. That afterwards the said Factory, with a quantity of gun barrels were destroyed by the Tories.” Destroyed factories have a hard time operating, no matter what quality of guns they make.⁸³

⁸⁰ May 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:571.

⁸¹ *Col.Rec.N.C.*, 10:358.

⁸² Bellesiles, 192.

⁸³ Brown, 315. Bivins, 16, gives a bit more detail about the location and the principals, but the same

Somehow, Bellesiles neglects to mention the North Carolina Gun Works established by that state's Committee of Safety in 1776, under the direction of Master Armorer James Ransom, in 1776. It operated until 1778, producing muskets and bayonets.⁸⁴ When authorized by the North Carolina Provincial Congress, it directed that "all Gunsmiths, and other mechanicks, who have been accustomed to make, or assist in making Muskets" be collected to work there.⁸⁵ Perhaps the North Carolina Provincial Congress was misinformed, thinking that there were gunsmiths "accustomed to make, or assist in making Muskets."

Bute County seems also to have had a gun manufacturing facility during the war. On January 26, 1779, the North Carolina government directed that "the remainder of the Guns, Gun Locks and & every other Thing belonging to the Gun Manufactory in Bute County" be sold.⁸⁶

South Carolina

On February 24, 1776, South Carolina's Provincial Congress directed a subcommittee "to contract for the making, or purchasing already made, any number, not exceeding one thousand stand, or good Rifles, with good bridle-locks... not exceeding the price of thirty Pounds each... Also for the making, or purchasing already made, one thousand stand of good smooth-bored Muskets, carrying an ounce ball... at a price not exceeding twenty Pounds each...."⁸⁷

Maryland

Maryland also believed that guns could be made there. An August, 1775, Maryland Convention committee appointed to "inquire into the practicability of establishing a

reason why the factory closed down.

⁸⁴ Brown, 315.

⁸⁵ April 24, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1337-8.

⁸⁶ Bivins, 17.

⁸⁷ February 24, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:580-1. Also see February 25, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:581, for an extension of their authority to include other rifle designs.

Manufactory of Arms within this Province” concluded that it made more sense to contract out these services to the existing gun making industry. The committee reported that there were twelve gunsmiths in the province capable of making guns: three in Baltimore, one in Georgetown, four in Fredericktown, one near Fredericktown, two in Hagerstown, and one in Jerusalem, and “several gunsmiths on the Eastern Shore, and in other places.” Each shop was believed to be capable of making twenty muskets a month at a cost of about £4 each.⁸⁸

On August 29, 1775, the Maryland Council of Safety contracted with these gun makers. Charles Beatty of Fredericktown was “empowered to contract for the making and Delivery of 650 good substantial proved Musquets... for a sum not exceeding Ten Dollars and two-thirds of a Dollar in Bills of Credit...” A third were to be delivered by January 1, 1776, another third by March 1, 1776, and the final third by May 1, 1776.⁸⁹ Beatty had some difficulties with the contracts, but not because there were no gun makers. The gun makers insisted on a slight difference in the gunlocks, and “2/3 of the Musketts to be delivered by the first of March next the remainder by the first of May following...”⁹⁰

Robert Alexander of Baltimore was similarly empowered to contract for five hundred muskets under similar terms. On September 1, three other officials, apparently in other areas of Maryland, were authorized to contract for “making and Delivery of any number, not exceeding 1000 good substantial proved Musquets” of the same specifications.⁹¹

Thomas Johnson, Jr. was authorized to purchase gunlocks, stocks, bayonets, and ramrods “for five hundred muskets.”⁹² From the count, it would appear that these items were intended to support Robert Alexander’s Baltimore musket making contract. Other records show that the Maryland Council of Safety was buying other items required to complete the

⁸⁸ August 2, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:130-1.

⁸⁹ August 29, 1775, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:75.

⁹⁰ September 20, 1775, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:81.

⁹¹ September 1, 1775, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:77.

⁹² August 30, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:448-9; Brown, 351, 407, identifies Harris’s place of business as Savage Town, Maryland; *Archives of Maryland*, 11:76.

muskets, such as “one thousand Priming-Wires and Brushes at 7s. 6d. per dozen....”⁹³ Edward Timmins received £7:5:5 for thirty-two steel ramrods on May 3, 1776.⁹⁴ In January of 1776, Charles Beatty and Baker Johnson were advanced £60 for the purchase of gunlocks, and £100 “to enable them to advance for Rifles....”⁹⁵ Michael Cochinderfer of Frederick County was given £300 “to enable him to carry on a Stocking manufactory.”⁹⁶

On August 31, 1775, the gunsmith Isaac Harris of Savage Town contracted to supply musket barrels and bullet moulds at \$4 2/3 each. The terms indicate “agreeable to the one now made and delivered,” which would seem to indicate that Harris had actually made a sample.⁹⁷ Gun locks stored in Baltimore were ordered delivered to Harris on May 25, 1776,⁹⁸ suggesting that he was actually making guns.

Other contract negotiations suggest that gun makers were not in short supply. A letter from Georgetown, Virginia of October 20, while somewhat unclear, seems to indicate that the Council of Safety of Virginia was prepared to purchase rifles and smoothbores from a Mr. Richardson if Maryland chose not to buy them.⁹⁹

Certainly, the existing gun makers of Maryland did not have enough workers to make enough muskets and rifles for warfare, and we find discussions of contract guarantees, such as one of October 21, 1775. The Maryland Council of Safety promised that if William Whetcroft imported sufficient workmen the following spring, and would delivered “fifty good substantial proved Musquets” every week for two years, the province would promise to take over the workmen’s contracts in the event that peace broke out in the next two years. The first 800 muskets to be made would be fitted with imported locks.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ July 17, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1338.

⁹⁴ May 3, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:402.

⁹⁵ *Archives of Maryland*, 11:108.

⁹⁶ July 29, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:134.

⁹⁷ August 30, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:448-9; Brown, 351, 407, identifies Harris’s place of business as Savage Town, Maryland; *Archives of Maryland*, 11:76.

⁹⁸ May 25, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:444.

⁹⁹ October 2, 1775, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:81-82.

¹⁰⁰ October 21, 1775, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:84-85.

Perhaps these contracts for the making of muskets were highly speculative—but if so, it seems a bit odd that the Maryland Council of Safety would pay for a great many parts that might or might not be assembled into functioning guns. It is also interesting that there is no comparable purchase of gunlocks, stocks, bayonets, and ramrods to complete the 650 muskets contracted for in Fredericktown, or the 1000 muskets contracted for in other parts of Maryland. These other gunmakers apparently had their sources for these components.

In any case, guns were being made, because by January 20, 1776, there are orders to deliver to John Youst “ten Pounds weight of Gunpowder... to prove the Musquets made by the said Youst for the use of this Province.” Richard Thompson and Thomas Richardson were appointed to prove those muskets.¹⁰¹ The making of guns continues; on February 23, Isaac Harris was directed to request Stephen West to send up “all the Gunlocks... now in his Possession....”¹⁰² An order of May 4 directs delivery of “all the small Arms which were brought from Frederick County”¹⁰³ where some of the contractors were based. Jacob Schley, another rifle contractor, was directed July 30, 1776, “send to this place, with all the expedition you can, the rifle you made for the use of the Province; also, the ten large rifles contracted by you to be made and delivered on the first day of August next.”¹⁰⁴ Major Price is directed to deliver thirty-eight gun locks “for the rifles made at Frederick County.” One the same day, the Frederick Town Gun Lock Manufactory is told to “furnish and make for Jacob Schley ten large Gun Locks agreeable to a pattern they will receive....”¹⁰⁵

There are entrepreneurs who pop up, proposing to make guns, and asking for assistance, such as Richard Bond, who announced, “I am setting up a Gun factory, which I expect will

¹⁰¹ January 20, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:99. See January 17, 1776, *Ibid.*, 11:100 for more correspondence about this.

¹⁰² February 23, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:181.

¹⁰³ May 4, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:406.

¹⁰⁴ July 30, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:667.

¹⁰⁵ June 27, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:525-6.

be ready to go about Crismas, where work will be done in the best manner, where gunbarrels may be had ready for stocking—any quality.”¹⁰⁶

Perhaps, as Bellesiles claims, few of these contracts were fulfilled. But if so, where are the records of upset governments demanding their money back? There are certainly much smaller financial transactions recorded, such as £10 “to be deducted out of William Niven’s Account against the publick, for not enrolling agreeable to the Resolutions of Convention.”¹⁰⁷

Elisha Winters of Kent County agreed to assemble six hundred stands of muskets, forty a month, using barrels and bayonets provided by the government. Winters contracted to make these muskets for £4:5:0 each, purchasing the barrels and bayonets from the government for 28s. The standard of production was “a sample this day produced to the Convention.” It is not clear whether Winters supplied this sample or not. (This is apparently the same Winters referred to the following year as, “Mr. Winters, of Maryland, who has carried on a manufactory of small arms...” in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*.)¹⁰⁸ Unlike Hollingsworth, who required the government supply gunlocks, there is no mention of them in the Winters contract, suggesting that Winters either had a large supply of gunlocks, or could make them.¹⁰⁹

Winters was certainly making muskets a few months later. The Council of Safety complains that while Winters was “the only person we know of on the Eastern-Shore capable” of repairing an entire battalion’s arms, he was “already engaged in making arms for the Province, [and] we should be sorry to take him from that business, unless through absolute necessity....” The Eastern Shore Committees of Safety were encouraged to find others to do the repair work required, and to apply to Winters for repairs only as a last resort.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ October 30, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:412.

¹⁰⁷ July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337.

¹⁰⁸ May 22, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1590-2; March 13, 1777, *JCC*, 174.

¹⁰⁹ May 22, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1590-2.

¹¹⁰ July 16, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Committees of the Eastern Shore,” *American Archives*, 5th series, 1:365.

There are a number of indications that guns were being assembled, such as payment on April 6, 1776 to Oliver Whiddon of £8:15:0 for stocking fourteen muskets, on May 25, 1776 of £10:15:0 for “stocking 20 Musketts & finding 2 Gun Locks @ 12/6 each,” and £5 for stocking eight muskets on June 8, 1776. Whiddon received another £3:15:0 for stocking six muskets on July 8, 1776.¹¹¹

On April 11, Isaac Harris was directed to fit steel ramrods to all the muskets in the magazine.¹¹² An order of June 29, 1776, directs Harris to “furnish Mr. Samuel Dorsey with the Dimensions, and sizes of the Gun Barrels... sufficient for his guidance in manufacturing Bayonets.”¹¹³ If Harris wasn’t making gun barrels, the people of the time were fooled.

Perhaps in response to an ad placed in the *Maryland Gazette* by the Maryland Council of Safety,¹¹⁴ a Henry Hollingsworth of Cecil County on February 6, 1776, offered to make muskets, “any quantity, from two hundred to two thousand,” promising delivery of one hundred by April 10, and another one hundred per month thereafter. He apparently could not produce or buy the gunlocks, and needed these supplied.¹¹⁵

The next mention of Hollingsworth’s proposal seems to be May 22, 1776, when the Maryland Convention agreed to purchase musket barrels from him at 20s. each, and bayonets at 8s. each, advancing him £500 for that purpose—enough to pay for 357 barrels and bayonets. Hollingsworth was obligated to provide a bond “in double that sum” in the event that he failed to meet the contract, and received payment of £500 for that purpose.¹¹⁶ Did Hollingsworth actually make guns?

Elisha Winters offered to deliver “50 stand of Arms... which I think will be highly approved of.” After complaining that Hollingsworth was not delivering gun barrels

¹¹¹ April 6, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:314; May 25, 1776, *Ibid.*, 11:444; June 8, 1776, *Ibid.*, 11:472; July 8, 1776, *Ibid.*, 12:10.

¹¹² April 11, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:326.

¹¹³ June 29, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:535.

¹¹⁴ August 31, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:449.

¹¹⁵ *American Archives* 4th series, 3:947.

¹¹⁶ May 31, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:454.

“agreeable to his contract,” Winters recommends that Samuel Dorsey could make the barrels.¹¹⁷

Apparently in response, the Council ordered Hollingsworth to deliver musket barrels and bayonets to Winters.¹¹⁸ Apparently Hollingsworth resolved the problem, for a letter from him to the Council on August 24, 1776, informed them that, “the Guns, Bayonets and Cartouch Boxes are ready, as also are the Blankets....”¹¹⁹ A letter from Hollingsworth dated September 28, 1776 discusses his forging of barrels and bayonets, and that he had now made more than Elisha Winter would be able to use: “as I sent him seventy Bbls and ninety Bayonets the other day.” Hollingsworth was making six barrels a week, but the limiting factor on gun production was the locks.¹²⁰

A letter of July 27, 1776 from Winters informed the Council that he would be delivering twenty-eight muskets “ready to your order by Monday 3d August, making up forty muskets per month, agreeable to my contract.”¹²¹ It would appear that Winters had already delivered another twelve muskets that month, though documentation has not been located to establish this. Winters delivers muskets, but we have no records to prove their delivery. It is one of the reminders of the problems of relying on written sources from the Revolutionary War to document all the weapons actually made.

A letter of August 24, 1776 to Colonel William Richardson stated that a Captain Dames had “an order on Mr. Winters for Forty Musquets which will completely furnish his Company and enable him to supply Captain Dean’s with some.”¹²² It would appear that Winters had made another forty muskets, and that this would “completely furnish his Company” and leave some left over would suggest that most of Dames’s company was already armed.

¹¹⁷ July 2, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:544.

¹¹⁸ July 5, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:550.

¹¹⁹ *Archives of Maryland*, 12:238.

¹²⁰ September 28, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:309.

¹²¹ July 27, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:613-4.

¹²² August 24, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:238.

Other gunsmiths contracted with the Maryland Council of Safety to make guns, but for whom the records are incomplete and confusing. On July 8, 1776, Oliver Whiddon, for example, was paid £3:15:0 for stocking six muskets.¹²³ James Boyd of St. Mary's County contracted to make muskets "completely fitted in the usual manner" for £4:5:0 each, "The Council engaging to take any quantity of him, & find Powder for their Proof."¹²⁴ On July 7, John Yost contracted to make 300 muskets, at £4:5:0 each, and 100 rifles, at £4:15:0 each, "to be delivered at the times and in the proportions expressed in his bond." Yost was advanced £150 "to enable him to comply with his contract."¹²⁵

Less than a month later, in response to a request of July 23 to know what arms were now available, "I have them all ready of the first contract, including the bayonets, which I expect this day with an express which I have sent for them. I have also been much detained in the last contract, by repairing old arms for the Militia, the Colonel finding it very necessary." Yost hoped to dispatch all the arms of the first contract by "the latter end of this week."¹²⁶

It seems unlikely that Yost had made 300 muskets in less than a month, so this shipment of "the first contract" would seem to refer to some previous arrangement, perhaps the "November last" contract referred to on August 10. On that date, Yost was paid "£50, common money, being the balance due him on his contract... in November last." On the same day, he was advanced £400 for his next musket contract.¹²⁷

A letter from Yost on September 13, 1776 reported that he had built a horse-driven mill for boring gun barrels; "that I am now employed with all the Workmen I have in making Locks, Screws, Mounting and forging Barrels ready for boring, but cannot proceed to that Part of the Work before I receive the Materials (Steel in particular,) which I purchased at Philadelphia sometime ago...." Apparently, a merchant who was supposed to deliver them

¹²³ July 8, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1332.

¹²⁴ September 13, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:269.

¹²⁵ July 7, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1331.

¹²⁶ August 1, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:707; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:159.

¹²⁷ August 9, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1352.

had failed to do so.¹²⁸ By all indications, Yost had significantly expanded his operations, but it would not appear that gunmaking was a new activity.

It is interesting that Yost was apparently making gunlocks, or at least parts for them. An August 16, 1776 meeting of the Maryland Convention had resulted in an order “That the Council of Safety be directed to purchase of the Managers of the Gun Manufactory of Dorchester County, all the Muskets they have by them, both finished and unfinished....”¹²⁹

A less successful operation was apparently a publicly owned gunlock factory in Fredericktown. A committee of the Maryland Convention appointed to look into “the state and condition of Manufactories” reported that it had been a disappointment, with £1200 advanced, but no more than £82:19:7 “has been returned in work, valued, in the opinion of your Committee, at high prices, and only thirty-eight gun-locks have been produced....” The Committee believed that the results did not justify the investment.

The Committee did, however, recommend that the Convention accept Elisha Winters’s proposal to take over the factory, install his own workers, and produce muskets for the state. Winters’s would be obligated to produce at least 125 muskets at £4:5:0 each monthly. The barrels for Winters’s factory would be provided by Henry Hollingsworth of Cecil County, at a price of “twenty shillings common money per barrel.” The proposal, however, seems to have been rejected, with no explanation as to why.¹³⁰ The Committee’s report, however, establishes that while inefficient, gunlocks were being made. At least to the Committee members, Elisha Winters had established his ability to make muskets, and 125 muskets per month seemed in the realm of possibility.

Yost’s letter of September 13 told a somewhat different story about the Fredericktown gunlock factory. “I was told by the Manager of the Gun Lock Manufactory at Frederick Town, that they forge Gun Locks much faster than they can finish them off; as that is the

¹²⁸ September 13, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:271.

¹²⁹ August 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 3:88.

¹³⁰ September 4, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 3:99-100. See a letter of July 30, 1776 to “Gun-Lock Commissioners,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:667

Case, I should be glad to furnish myself from thence with 300 ready forged Locks, provided the Terms are admissible.”¹³¹ It would appear, if the Manager of the Fredericktown factory was telling Yost the truth, that Fredericktown was capable of forging the parts of gunlocks, but not assembling them; Yost seems to have had workmen capable of assembling the parts.

Gunlocks, unsurprisingly, appear to have been the limiting factor in the making of guns. A letter to the “Gun-Lock Commissioners” (apparently those in charge of the public gunlock factory in Fredericktown) several weeks earlier had asked “how many locks you make per week. We have barrels enough here and in Kent for the locks you can make.”¹³²

We don’t know the actual production total of muskets. It would appear to have been less than these optimistic projections, perhaps far less. There are letters suggesting that guns were not being produced as fast desired, though still within contract, such as one to John Youst (as his name was now spelled) asking him “to be as expeditious as you possibly can in supplying the Muskets....”¹³³

Other letters demonstrate that some of the contractors were failing to meet their contracts—and by the absence of such letters to the other contractors, we can infer that either they met those contracts, or those letters did not survive. A letter to Henry Yost of Frederick County complains about his failure to fulfill his contract for seventy-five muskets: “We are much surprised that we have not had some Guns delivered us heretofore from your Shop.” A similarly scolding letter to John Unsel of Fredericktown complains about how his original contract for eighty muskets with bayonets and bullet moulds had so far yielded only “Twenty nine Muskets very roughly made... and one Bullet Mould have been delivered but

¹³¹ September 13, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:271. See also May 25, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:444, directing shipment of gunlocks from the Gun Lock Manufactory.

¹³² July 30, 1776, “Maryland Council of Safety to Gun-Lock Commissioners,” *American Archives* 5th series, 1:667; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:142.

¹³³ *Archives of Maryland*, 11:293.

not one Bayonet.”¹³⁴ Unlike other makers, Henry Yost and John Unseld’s muskets were returned to them “as unfit for Service.”¹³⁵

Other gun makers seem to appear out of nowhere, making small quantities of muskets. Thomas Smith of Chestertown wrote to the Maryland Council of Safety introducing a Robert Read, “a blacksmith of this town, who waits on the Council to sell them seventeen muskets which he has made, and carries with him. They seem to be strong and substantial. He proposes contracting with your Board for a good many. He bears the character of an honest man; has some real property in this town, and, I believe, would be pretty punctual.”¹³⁶

At least some of the accessories for these muskets were only serviceable. Stephen West’s letter of May 4, 1776 refers to, “Your Rammers and Bayonets of your Country-made Arms I am told are rough Trash, & the Rammers fly out in Exercise....” West continues his sales presentation by emphasizing that while the guns he makes are better than his London-made carbine, “We cannot make them so cheap as [the country craftsmen] do” and asked for £6 each, plus supply of gunlocks: “it would expedite matters.” To justify this price, he pointed out that Pennsylvania gun makers received £5:6:3 from Virginia, “and their Guns are not equal any way to those of mine.”¹³⁷

Hartzler’s *Arms Makers of Maryland* shows a flintlock musket made in the style of the English Brown Bess, but showing a proof mark believed to have been used by Ewing and Gist for the musket barrels made in Maryland—and this is not the only musket known with this proof mark and Maryland government ownership markings.¹³⁸ Ewing apparently was in charge of proving the 127 muskets made by Keener, Messersmith, and Riddick.¹³⁹

Baltimore gunsmiths delivered at least 131 Committee of Safety muskets (some which were clearly part of the 127 muskets mentioned in the in previous paragraph) that we know

¹³⁴ May 3, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:400-1.

¹³⁵ June 14, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:489.

¹³⁶ December 1, 1776, *American Archives*, 5th series, 3:1025.

¹³⁷ May 4, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:406-8.

¹³⁸ Hartzler, 22.

¹³⁹ *Archives of Maryland*, 11:127.

about because the proof test results were reported on February 12, 1776.¹⁴⁰ Bellesiles, who would have us believe that the manufacturing of guns was an entirely new activity for Americans, reports that Maryland's inspector "tested seventy-two muskets from the shop of Baltimore's leading gunsmith, Peter Lydig. Eight of them promptly burst."¹⁴¹ Once again, Bellesiles's credibility collapses when you check his claimed source. The gunsmith's name in the source that Bellesiles claims to have read is Lydick, not Lydig. While the spelling of Lydick's name changes in various places in the *Archives of Maryland*, the spelling is consistent on the page of the *Archives of Maryland* that Bellesiles cites. When you read James Whisker's description of the failure of Lydick's muskets, you can see that the spelling and the claim of burst barrels comes from Whisker's account, not the source that Bellesiles cites, *Archives of Maryland*.¹⁴²

The report in *Archives of Maryland* that Bellesiles cites doesn't say that eight muskets burst. It says that of 72 guns, "64 good, 8 bad." Proofing might, indeed, cause a musket to "burst." But there are other forms of failure besides bursting that would cause a gun to fail the proof test. Bellesiles apparently uses "burst" because it creates a negative image in the reader's mind, and because a secondary source made that claim,¹⁴³ and with no more information than the source that Whisker cited. But even if Bellesiles did look up the source he cited—*Archives of Maryland*—he must not have read it very carefully, or we can presume that he would have mentioned the even higher failure rate of Sam Keener's muskets: "13 good 19 bad" that appears within three lines of the Lydick musket failure report.¹⁴⁴

Apparently these failures weren't considered a big problem. A Peter Littig (probably an alternate spelling of Peter Lydick) was paid £50 for making muskets on May 31, 1776,¹⁴⁵ and

¹⁴⁰ February 12, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:155.

¹⁴¹ Bellesiles, 186.

¹⁴² Whisker, 167-168.

¹⁴³ Whisker, 168, citing *Archives of Maryland*, 11:155, and only that source, says, "64 of which had proved to be good on proof-testing, and 8 of which had failed when the barrels burst."

¹⁴⁴ February 12, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:155.

¹⁴⁵ May 31, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:455.

another £281:5:0 on his arms-making contract the following year. Keener was also paid £187 “on his Contract for making ArmsBoth agreed to contracts for more muskets: 150 from Littig, and 100 from Keener, at a price of £3:15:0. The government was to supply both locks and barrels, so Littig and Keener were apparently more assemblers than gun makers. If the barrels that failed in 1776 had been supplied by outside vendors, this might explain the willingness of the Committee of Safety to again contract with them for more guns.¹⁴⁶ (Other suppliers of muskets and rifles to the Maryland Committee of Safety included John Yost and Richard Dallam. At least some guns were made on the Eastern Shore of Maryland as well at £4:5:0 each, “and probably in several other parts of the Province.”¹⁴⁷)

But perhaps we are simply applying our modern assumptions about metallurgy to the wrong era. As late as 1837, without the supply problems of the Revolutionary War, Springfield Armory experienced a 12.15 percent failure rate for gun barrels, and apparently considered this acceptable.¹⁴⁸

Gun making continued in Maryland, however. On April 4, the Commissary of Stores was directed to supply five pounds of powder to Isaac Harris “to prove Musquets.”¹⁴⁹ Again on July 6, 1776, Harris was given two pounds of powder “to prove his rifles and Musquets.”¹⁵⁰ Maryland’s Council of Safety paid the partnership of John Shaw and Archibald Chisholm £22:6:8 for stocking muskets.¹⁵¹ Again, on May 8 and June 19, 1776 the Council of Safety paid them for assembling guns from 50 barrels made by Isaac Harris and stocks made by Chisholm.¹⁵² On July 5, 1776 and July 16, 1776 the Maryland Council of Safety ordered

¹⁴⁶ September 17, 1777, *Archives of Maryland*, 16:377-8.

¹⁴⁷ Bishop, 1:593. See July 5, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:549, for payment to Dallam of £150 “for Musquets per Agreement.”

¹⁴⁸ Deyrup, 136.

¹⁴⁹ April 4, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:308.

¹⁵⁰ July 6, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:553.

¹⁵¹ Brown, 350-351; April 16, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:333; June 19, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:499.

¹⁵² Brown, 350-351. See February 23, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:180, for the origination of the contract.

delivery to Harris of “one Faggett of steel” and “half a faggot of Steel” apparently for the making of guns; “also, eighty-four Muskets, to be repaired.”¹⁵³

Elisha Winters wrote to the Council of Safety on July 27, 1776, informing them, “I shall have twenty-eight muskets ready to your order by Monday, 3d August, making up forty muskets per month, agreeable to my contract.”¹⁵⁴ Thomas Smyth’s letter of May 23, 1776, reports that Robert Reed of Chester Town had already made 10 muskets, and was prepared to sell them, with bayonets, at “85/ each.”¹⁵⁵ (This may be a typo for £5—a typical price for the time.)

Richard Dallam of Harford County, Maryland, reported on July 16, 1776, that he had finished twenty-two muskets, and had “fifteen more ready for stocking, six of which will be finished this week.” Dallam apologized for his slow production based on “Harvest & sickness of two of my best hands and the bursting of twelve or thirteen of my barrels....”¹⁵⁶ A week later, Dallam reported that five more guns were complete, and by the following week would have made enough to complete his contract. Dallam was reluctant to make any more muskets at the contracted price, and complained that the Committee of Observation had paid £4:10:0 “for guns worse than mine.”¹⁵⁷ On August 11, a Colonel Ewing reported that “Dallam had thirty more stand completed.”¹⁵⁸

Apparently the Council of Safety was willing to pay a higher price for subsequent guns from Dallam. A letter of July 27, 1776 to Dallam informed him: “The price you ask is high for Guns, but we want them at present, and therefore will take any number you may make in

¹⁵³ July 5, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:550; July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:54.

¹⁵⁴ July 27, 1776, *American Archives*, 5th series, 1:613-14; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:129. June 10, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:473, documents payment of £855 for “manufacturing Fire Arms.”

¹⁵⁵ May 23, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:440.

¹⁵⁶ July 16, 1776, *American Archives*, 5th series, 1:363; *Archives of Maryland*, 12:59.

¹⁵⁷ July 23, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:93.

¹⁵⁸ August 11, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:892.

six Weeks from this time, and give you four pounds ten shillings currency for them completely finished.”¹⁵⁹

Even as late as April 18, 1777, when guns were being delivered at bargain prices from Europe, there are still guns being made in Maryland. George Gordon received £4 for a musket; Richard Bond signs a contract to make 1000 gun barrels for the state, “not less than sixty two Barrels per month....” More than a year later, Bond is making gun barrels, and receives exemption from militia duty for his workers.

As something of a reminder of how incomplete these records are, Isaac Harris, known to have made guns in 1776, receives payment of £155 “due to him per Account” but with no explanation as to the nature of the account.¹⁶⁰ A more thorough examination of the *Archives of Maryland* might reveal even more evidence of Revolutionary gunmaking there.

Gunlocks

Bellesiles claims that Americans could not make gunlocks before the Revolution, and were unable to make them in quantity until 1848. While gunlocks were indeed imported in large numbers from Britain during the colonial and early Republic periods, they were made in the United States as well. There were certainly people that contracted to make gunlocks, or who are identified in various records as makers of gunlocks. We also have surviving American-made guns with American-made gunlocks from the Revolutionary War period, such as a Medad Hills Committee of Safety musket.¹⁶¹

That the war with Britain created shortages of gunlocks would appear to be true. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety on February 9, 1776, asked gunsmith Benjamin Rittenhouse to confer with them “respecting the mode & terms on which he would undertake to carry on a Manufactory of Gun Lock making in an extensive manner.”¹⁶² This

¹⁵⁹ July 27, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 12:128.

¹⁶⁰ April 18, 1777, *Archives of Maryland*, 16:219; May 6, 1778, *Archives of Maryland*, 21:68-69.

¹⁶¹ Lindsay, 55, 57.

¹⁶² February 9, 1776, *Col.Rec.Penn.* 10:481.

request can be read in several ways; that gunlocks weren't manufactured in Pennsylvania yet; that they were, but "not in an extensive manner," and more volume was required; or that they were manufactured in large quantities, and the demands of the war, and the cutoff of trade with Britain, required higher volume of production.

On March 9, 1776, it appears that a "Committee appoint to direct the Manufactory of Gun Locks" existed, and was provided with £300 with which to carry on this apparently strategic effort¹⁶³—and one that only made sense if there were guns being made that required those gunlocks. The Maryland Council of Safety similarly appropriated funds with which to establish a gunlock factory at Fredericktown, though in this case, the factory was unsuccessful, and was closed in 1778. Instead, a gunsmith named Messersmith presented samples of gunlocks that he had made, and offered to make ten a week at \$3 each.¹⁶⁴

Hartzler, however, presents evidence that the gunlock factory did forge the parts required, but was unable to turn these parts into completed gunlocks quickly. At least one of the gun makers in Maryland, John Yost, asked to have the gunlock parts sets provided to him for completion for use in the muskets he was making. Other correspondence quoted by Hartzler suggests that the factory did make gunlocks, but that financial difficulties more than technical problems caused its demise.¹⁶⁵

A curious letter of March 6, 1776, from the Newark Committee to President of Congress John Hancock makes references to two prisoners of war named Brown and Thompson who were working for a Mr. Alling in the making of guns and gunlocks. Apparently, there was

¹⁶³ March 9, 1776, *Col. Rec. Penn.* 10:509; Peterson, 185.

¹⁶⁴ Bishop, 1:592-3; *American Archives* 4th series, 4:725-6; May 31, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:456. See September 4, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 3:99-100. See a letter of July 30, 1776 to "Gun-Lock Commissioners," *American Archives* 5th series, 1:667 for more discussion of the problems of the public gunlock factory—and that they did at least make some gunlocks. February 3, 1776, *Archives of Maryland*, 11:137 contains a letter to Stephen West asking to buy gunlocks from him, but letters of February 12 and 14 at 11:154-55, 161 make it clear that he purchased these gunlocks for repairing guns, and did not make them. They seem to raise the possibility that the gunlocks were made in America, "tolerable good, but not equal to the English Musket locks...." *Archives of Maryland*, 11:265 documents the payment of West of £95 for the gunlocks and some knives.

¹⁶⁵ Hartzler, 23-24.

some interest in moving these POWs away from Mr. Alling's gun manufacturing operation, and the Newark Committee was attempting to keep them. "Alling, in consequence of the leave obtained from Congress, had contracted to supply upwards of two hundred gun-locks for the use of the United Colonies, which contract was in part executed, but he would very unable to fulfill his contracts, if Thompson should be taken from him."¹⁶⁶ Alling was making gunlocks; his contract 'was in part executed.'

Samuel Wigfal and Marmaduke Blackwood contracted with the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania "for two hundred Gun-locks to be made according to Pattern."¹⁶⁷ Samuel Kinder and James Walsh are described as "Philadelphia gunlock-makers" in December 1776.¹⁶⁸ The New Jersey Committee of Safety established the New Jersey State Gunlock Factory at Trenton late in 1775; whether it successfully made gunlocks before Trenton was occupied by Lord Cornwallis in December 1776 is unclear.¹⁶⁹

The Connecticut Assembly provided for a premium "for every double-bridled good and well-made Gunlock that shall be made and manufactured within the Colony after the 10th day of June instant, and before the 20th day of October next, in addition to the premium or bounty of one Shilling and sex Pence heretofore granted by this Assembly."¹⁷⁰ It appears that at least Silas Phelps of Lebanon, Connecticut, was successful. In November of 1776, he was allowed 3s. each for fifty-five gunlocks that he made—but the premium for gunlocks made after June 10 was not allowed to him.¹⁷¹ That it provided this premium only for those made after June 10th, however, indicates that the goal was to encourage *new* manufacture only. Any gunlocks made in Connecticut beforehand would not receive the extra payment. It also

¹⁶⁶ March 6, 1776, "Newark (New-Jersey) Committee to President of Congress," *American Archives* 4th series, 5:89.

¹⁶⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 10. See November 30, 1775, *Min.Sup.Penn.*, 10:417, for what may be this contract.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, 310.

¹⁶⁹ Brown, 315.

¹⁷⁰ *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1621.

¹⁷¹ *Connecticut Archives*, Revolutionary War Series, 5:117-121, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 75.

strongly suggests that someone was making guns in Connecticut, because gunlocks were in short supply, and high demand.

In the July 17, 1775 *Pennsylvania Packet*, “Sarah Jones, widow” advertised for the return of a runaway servant, described as “by trade a gunlock maker.” The servant’s last name, William Jones, suggests that he may have been a slave.¹⁷² Samuel Boone manufactured gunlocks in Maryland starting before June, 1777, and continued to make gunlocks and firearms at least as late as 1782.¹⁷³ At least one surviving European pistol bears a Revolutionary War era gunlock made by Rappahannock Forge, and arms collectors are of the opinion that at least some surviving muskets used gunlocks made by Rappahannock Forge.¹⁷⁴ There is a late flint lockwork made by P.A. & S. Small of York, Pennsylvania, which could be colonial or as late as the early Republic.¹⁷⁵ A Charleville pattern flintlock made by Evans, with a Philadelphia or Pennsylvania proof mark survives, demonstrating early gunlock making in America.¹⁷⁶

Summary

Bellesiles, after heaping scorn on state efforts to produce guns, neglects to mention the Continental Gun Factory, for which the Continental Congress appropriated \$10,000, and which seems, like some of its state counterparts, to have actually produced muskets.¹⁷⁷ Gluckman reports that while muskets were produced by the Continental Gun Factory—in spite of having to relocate from Philadelphia to avoid capture by the British, “few new arms were made subsequent to 1778 and prior to 1795. There was an adequacy of arms on inventory what repair work was required, was done at the Congressional arms repair shop at

¹⁷² July 17, 1775, *Pennsylvania Packet*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 56.

¹⁷³ Brown, 314-15.

¹⁷⁴ Peterson, 207; Swayze, 31.

¹⁷⁵ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 116.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Ditchburn, “Three CPs?” *The Gun Report*, July, 1962, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Brown, 316.

Carlisle, Pennsylvania.”¹⁷⁸ Of course, some of the “adequacy of arms” was because of the importation of muskets from Europe.

Bellesiles tells us that “New Jersey’s State Gun Factory closed in December 1776, a few weeks after its completion....”¹⁷⁹ Other sources tell a somewhat different story, and one that reflects on strategic problems, not manufacturing difficulties. The New Jersey Committee of Safety “established the State Gun Lock Factory at Trenton late in 1775.... The State Gun Lock Factory was forced to close shortly after December 8, 1776, when Washington hastily retreated beyond the Delaware River, hotly pursued by Lord Cornwallis. Hessian and Highland troops occupied Trenton....”¹⁸⁰

The evidence is clear: guns were manufactured during the Revolution, and the surviving records, which are necessarily fragmentary, suggest that there were considerable numbers of such manufacturers. How many? We don’t really know. We do know that there are a surprising number of surviving guns made in the United States during the Revolution, under conditions of invasion, labor shortages, and shortages of gunlocks, which were largely imported. Bellesiles’s claim that Colonial America lacked a gun industry, and was unable to correct this problem during the Revolution, fails to stand up to even the most elementary analysis.

¹⁷⁸ Gluckman, 49.

¹⁷⁹ Bellesiles, 192.

¹⁸⁰ Brown, 315.

Federal Gun Contracts in the Early Republic

Bellesiles makes a number of extraordinary claims about the making of guns in the early Republic. The most amazing claim is that there was so little gun making capacity in the United States that the government had to strongly encourage and even subsidize the manufacturing of guns for military use. After describing how rising tensions led Congress to establish national armories at Springfield, Massachusetts, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to build guns, Bellesiles claims, “Congress knew from the start that American gunmakers could not collectively produce in a reasonable period the fourteen thousand arms they hoped to buy.”¹

Even with subsidies and encouragement, according to Bellesiles, the companies that chose to make guns for the United States were nearly incompetent to do so. “Nonetheless, American gunmakers had troubles producing their seven thousand muskets.” According to Bellesiles, this was because there was effectively no expertise or interest in the making of guns in America.²

Others who have examining the gun making business in the early Republic have come to very different conclusions. Deyrup makes the point that “until the emergence of the federal contract system in 1798,” gun manufacturing was primarily a handicraft in America. This doesn’t mean that there were few guns manufactured in America. Rather, there were many small gun makers, perhaps a gunsmith working by himself, or with a journeyman gunsmith,

¹ Bellesiles, 232.

² Bellesiles, 232-3.

and a small number of apprentices. The system relied on masters and apprentices sworn to secrecy about the craft, with arms making often a family tradition, “occasionally remaining in one family for several generations.”³

Deyrup is not the only writer who studied arms manufacturing in the early Republic and came to rather different conclusions from Bellesiles. Bishop describes the state of the iron and steel industry in Massachusetts in 1798. In Plymouth and Bristol counties there were many steel mills, forges, and associated industries, including the production of consumer products. Bishop lists “fire-arms” along with nails, spades, shovels, saws, and scythes among the items that “were made in large quantities.” In the area of Springfield, Massachusetts, Bishop reports that a gun factory was erected on Mill Brook in 1776 to make arms, “which, after the war, was converted into a manufactory of scythes, axes, mill irons....”⁴

Bishop’s description of 1791 Pittsburgh reports that of 130 families, there were 37 engaged in some form of manufacturing, of which two were gunsmiths.⁵ About 1.5 percent of the families in what was still a frontier community were therefore making their living as gunsmiths. Cuming still lists two gunsmiths in 1807 Pittsburgh.⁶ Fearon includes a table of “Manufactories in and near the city of Pittsburgh, in the State of Pennsylvania, in the year 1817” listing 14 men employed as “Gun-smiths, and bridlebit-makers” with a yearly value of \$13,800.⁷

Isaac Weld’s description of his trip through North America in the year 1795-1797 describes how “German mechanics” of Lancaster, Pennsylvania manufactured a variety of goods, “principally for the people of the town and the neighborhood. Rifled barrel guns however are to be excepted, which, although not as handsome as those imported from England, are more esteemed by the hunters, and are sent to every part of the country.”⁸

³ Deyrup, 33.

⁴ Bishop, 1:492, 494.

⁵ Bishop, 1:568.

⁶ Cuming, 222.

⁷ Fearon, 203.

⁸ Weld, 1:117.

The most complete statement of firearms manufacturing comes from the 1810 manufacturing census. Inconsistencies in the data clearly demonstrate that this survey was haphazard and incomplete. As an example, Massachusetts manufactured 19,095 guns classified as “other”—but listed no gun manufactories, and no gunsmiths. Only nine of the seventeen states are listed as having made any guns at all, and there is no firearms manufacturing listed in any of the five territories, or the District of Columbia. Only Maryland, South Carolina, and the territories of Orleans and Louisiana reported any gunsmiths. In spite of the 1807 and 1817 data from Fearon and Cuming for Pittsburgh showing a growing community of gunsmiths there, there are no gunsmiths listed in Pennsylvania at the 1810 manufacturing census. New York, at the time one of the great manufacturing states of the Union, showed no gun manufacturing or gunsmithing at all. Even with these clearly incomplete records, however, there were 117 “Gun manufactories” in the U.S., 37 gunsmiths (a severe undercount, based on Fearon and Cuming’s reports for 1807 and 1817 for Pittsburgh alone), and 42,853 firearms manufactured.⁹

It is always hazardous to make comparisons between such different times as 1810 and the present. Firearms manufactured in 1810 were far less precise than modern weapons, and of shorter useful lifetime as well. During this period, “it was assumed that a musket would have a life of 12 years in the regular service or 10 years if in use by State militia.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, it is intriguing to compare 1810 production rates per population with modern production rates.

The *minimum* 1810 U.S. production rate was 592 guns per 100,000 people. By comparison, in 1969, U.S. production of firearms was only 2,605 guns per 100,000 people.¹¹ To add to the impressiveness of this per capita gun manufacturing rate, the United States in

⁹ Albert Gallatin, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States of America* (Washington, 1812), 11. Secretary of the Treasury Tench Coxe’s admission that the manufacturing census was very incomplete can be found in Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 19.

¹⁰ Berkeley R. Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition in the United States Service, 1776-1865* (Washington, 1956), 47.

¹¹ James D. Wright, Peter H. Rossi, and Kathleen Daly, *Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America* (New York, 1983), 30, provides production and importation figures from which this data was calculated.

1969 had an army that approached 1% of the total population, and was actively at war in Vietnam; by comparison, in the 1820s, the United States had an army of 6000 men out of a population of 13,000,000¹²—or 0.04%. In spite of a far larger military, with a active war consuming small arms, the United States manufactured *no* more than 4.5 times as many small arms per capita in 1969 as it did in 1810. The 1810 manufacturing census is unquestionably incomplete in a way that the 1969 manufacturing records are not; it is likely that the *actual* number of guns manufactured in 1810 would raise the per capita rate close to 1969 levels.

Whisker gives the details of several small gun makers based on the 1820 U.S. Census of Industry. Because the United States Censuses of Manufactures included only firms grossing more than \$500 a year, or employing more than one person, reliance on it gives a false impression of the number of gunsmiths making guns in America, tending to underreport the one man gunmaker. We know of at least one illiterate Virginia gunsmith, Joseph Shelton, who made guns for at least three decades starting in 1820, but appeared only in the 1820 Census of Industry.¹³ It seems inevitable that many other small gun makers are also missing from the censuses, but this in no way indicates that they were not making guns. Considering that new guns often sold for as little as \$10, a gun maker who made a few dozen guns a year by himself would simply not show up in the Census of Manufactures—even if every gun maker that was supposed to be counted actually was.

These were firms large enough that they were required to report their activities, yet still small enough to leave few traces in other official documents. Samuel Baum of Columbia County, Pennsylvania, reported that in the year ending June 30, 1820, he employed two workers, had a \$550 capital investment, and made guns valued at \$1200. John Bayles of Georgia employed three journeymen gunsmiths during that same period. Joseph Shelton of

¹² William G. Ouseley, *Remarks on the Statistics and Political Institutions of the United States, with Some Observations on the Ecclesiastical System of America, Her Sources of Revenue, &c* (1832; reprinted Freeport, N.Y., 1970), 32. That the U.S. Army was still only 6000 men in the 1830s is confirmed in Lorenzo de Zavala, Wallace Woolsey trans., *Journey to the United States of North America* (Austin, Tex., 1980), 23, and Murray, 1:176.

¹³ Deyrup, 7, n. **; Whisker, 47-48.

Lewis County, Virginia, employed two men, and made guns valued at \$520. He also made gun repairs that he valued at \$150.

There are many other similar examples that Whisker reports of small operations that made a small number of guns—and it would appear that there were many such gun makers in America in 1820.¹⁴ Otho Sheets of Frankford, Virginia, employed three men and had made 90 firearms in the year previous to the census date, “each valued at \$18.”¹⁵ Whisker describes how Lancaster and Berks Counties, Pennsylvania, specialized in the manufacturing of gun barrels from the time of the Revolutionary War onward, with these barrels found on guns “made in Ohio, Kentucky, New York, Indiana, Illinois, and elsewhere.” Daniel Cryscher was one of these specialists in the making of gun barrels. Some surviving records show that he made barrels to order for gunsmiths in other counties, and one transaction in 1830 involves an order for fifteen gun barrels, with Cryscher offering ten more if wanted.¹⁶

In addition to guns produced under government contracts, we have scattered surviving guns that demonstrate that there were a number of gun makers in New England that seem to have escaped Bellesiles’s jaundiced eye. Welcome Mathewson made both fowlers and rifles in the early nineteenth century. Lindsay shows dozens of clearly American-made sporting guns and military-style long guns from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century made in New England (though often with imported English locks).¹⁷

Whisker also claims that

Cottage industry gunsmiths supplied the militia needs of most states well through the War of 1812. Many Civil War militia regiments were armed with sniper and common weapons made by individual gunsmiths in their small shops.... Despite the growth of large industrial facilities for the manufacture of arms in the post Civil War era, the cottage industry remained a primary source of weapons until well after 1870.¹⁸

Who is correct? Bellesiles, or Bishop, Deyrup, and Whisker?

¹⁴ Whisker, 47-51.

¹⁵ Whisker, 207.

¹⁶ Whisker, 225-230.

¹⁷ Lindsay, 113-25.

¹⁸ Whisker, 67.

Bellesiles's examination of gunsmithing in the early Republic is focused heavily on the manufacturers who worked under contracts to supply arms to the United States government. This is not surprising; the most detailed records in early American history tend to be governmental. Had Bellesiles's goal been to write a history of government arms making, this would have been a very useful strategy to take. In so doing, however, Bellesiles, at least by implication, gives the impression that this was almost the entire gun industry in the United States—and this is *not* the case.

Bellesiles's focus on federal arms contracts appears to be at least partly because he assumes that there was no significant civilian market for guns in the early Republic. But because governments are among the best keepers of records, reliance on official records tends to overstate the importance of government contracts relative to the private sector.

Unsurprisingly, the sort of firms that grew up around federal gun contracts starting in the 1790s have high visibility in records, for the same reason that a large textile mill with hundreds of workers is more visible than hundreds of individual weavers working at home. Bellesiles, with his focus on government contracts, consequently only sees these large firms.

Another area where the traditional American gun industry was substantially different from the new, larger and more sophisticated gun manufacturing system developed under U.S. government contracts is the nature of the workers. While the Springfield Armory made use of the apprentice system, much like the traditional gun making industry of America, it was almost immediately focused on specialized skills. When a father in 1825 asked the superintendent of the Springfield Armory about apprenticing his son there to learn the gunsmith's trade, he was encouraged to apprentice his son to an individual tradesman, as he would more likely learn all the skills required to become a gunsmith there. Springfield Armory was already well on its way towards specialization and division of labor.¹⁹

¹⁹ Whisker, 4-5.

Other historians recognize the problems associated with government contracts as a source of information, and are considerably more careful than Bellesiles about the conclusions that can be drawn from governmental sources. Deyrup's detailed examination of the Connecticut Valley arms manufacturing industry acknowledges that she knew of other records of arms manufacturers of the period, but these were unavailable, and that the early records of predecessor firms of Winchester and Smith & Wesson were destroyed and therefore unavailable.²⁰

Deyrup's study was therefore "based in large part upon the records of the federal Armory at Springfield, Mass." This is not surprising; the government's armories have a very detailed set of records, "kept with a preciseness and detail uncommon in early American enterprise, and unique as far as New England arms manufacture is concerned."²¹ Deyrup observes that before 1800, few businesses, aside from money-lenders and merchandisers kept detailed records, and consequently, "Little is known of the details of arms making in the Connecticut River Valley in the late eighteenth century."²²

In the early Republic, Bellesiles does admit that some guns were manufactured in the United States, mostly at government arsenals, but downplays the number of both makers and guns made. But before we get to the question of how effective private gun manufacturers were (either under federal contract or for the private sector), we have to confront yet another example of intentional fraud, and this is a most egregious case. Bellesiles discusses the Militia Act of 1792, and how it obligated every able-bodied free white male between 18 and 45 to enroll in the militia:

Further, "every citizen so enrolled, shall...be constantly provided with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints," and other accoutrements. Congress took upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns, and specified that within five years all muskets "shall be of bores sufficient for balls of the eighteenth part of a pound."

²⁰ Deyrup, vii.

²¹ Deyrup, 5.

²² Deyrup, 33.

He cites this as *U.S. Statutes* 1:271-74. But that isn't what the Militia Act of 1792 says.

The actual text is:

That every citizen so enrolled *and notified, shall within six months thereafter, provide himself* with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints, and a knapsack, a pouch with a box therein to contain not less than twenty-four cartridges, suited to the bore of his musket or firelock: or with a good rifle, knapsack, shot-pouch and powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder....²³ [missing text emphasized]

Not only does he leave out the words “provide himself” that demonstrate that Congress did *not* take “upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns,” but he added the words “constantly provided” to cover that he had changed the tense of the verb.

When confronted with this very dramatic error, Bellesiles first denied that there was any error at all, but eventually, as the weight of evidence accumulated, he admitted that the text was incorrect, and explained his error as:

It took me a while to find my original source at a library in South Carolina, but the phrase "shall...be constantly provided with" is in the 1792 militia act. But you are right that it is not in any version I could find from the 1790s. So I then went carefully through the legislative records and found an 1803 Amendment to the 1792 Act ("An Act in addition to an Act entitled 'An Act More effectually to provide for the National Defence.'") Checking further, I found it as US Statutes II: 207, passed March 2, 1803.

So I was at fault in not reconciling the 1815 version I used with the 1792 version I also read (I assumed that they were just different versions of the same act).²⁴

In spite of explicitly listing his source for the quotation as *US Statutes* 1:271-74, as well as providing the corresponding citations in *Annals of Congress* that match that text, he actually quoted a later document with what Bellesiles says was the 1803 Militia Act.

There is an 1803 Militia Act that says, “That every citizen duly enrolled in the militia, shall be constantly provided with arms, accoutrements, and ammunition...”²⁵ But this doesn't match Bellesiles's “quote” either; Bellesiles doesn't cite the 1803 Militia Act; and even that statute doesn't specify that *Congress* is to supply the arms; it seems to leave it a bit open as

²³ *Statutes at Large*, 2nd Cong., sess. 1, Ch. 33 (1792), 1:271-74. *Statutes at Large* is identical to *U.S. Statutes*. Why Bellesiles uses this non-standard title escapes me.

²⁴ Michael A. Bellesiles to Professor Eugene Volokh, November 10, 2000, distributed on firearmsconlawprof@listserv.ucla.edu, November 13, 2000.

²⁵ *Statutes at Large*, 7th Cong., sess. 2, Ch. 15 (1803), 2:207

to who is obligated to keep the militiamen supplied. Indeed, prosecutions of militiamen for failure to “be constantly provided” under the 1803 Militia Act are very clear on two points: the 1803 Militia Act was in addition to the 1792 Militia Act, and the individual militiaman was still obligated to provide himself with these arms and accoutrements.²⁶

Even worse, the context in which Bellesiles misquotes the Militia Act of 1792 is specific to the situation of the militia’s state of arms in the 1790s. Even if the quotation were from the 1803 Militia Act, the following paragraphs are now chronologically incorrect, seeking to explain actions of 1792 and 1794 based on a law not yet written.

Also interesting are Bellesiles’s claims about the inability of private gun manufacturers to build to government contracts, and how differently less ideological historians report the same facts. After reporting that Congress decided to supply all the arms of the militia, “Congress ordered the purchase of seven thousand muskets. Over the next two years, the government was able to purchase only 480 ‘rifle guns.’”²⁷

M. L. Brown gives a very different description of the 1792 contract:

In 1792 Congress, further alarmed by increasing British and Spanish activity along the vast frontier, raised a battalion of riflemen consisting of four companies each comprised of 82 privates which were to be armed with the American rifle....

The contract rifles...were purchased from Pennsylvania riflesmiths between September 12, 1792, and May 5, 1793, at an average cost of \$10.00 per stand....²⁸

A total of 436 rifles were produced and delivered in less than nine months²⁹ to arm 328 soldiers. The limitation was not that private industry could not supply enough rifles, as Bellesiles’s use of “only” seems to imply, but that the government was only buying enough rifles for four companies of riflemen.

Concerning the 7,000 muskets that Bellesiles represents as being ordered by Congress at the same time as the rifles, in 1792, Deyrup cites the same source (Hicks’s *Notes on United*

²⁶ *Commonwealth v. Stephen Annis*, 9 Mass. 31 (1812).

²⁷ Bellesiles, 230.

²⁸ Brown, 361-62.

²⁹ Brown, 362.

States Ordnance), but reports that the order was in 1794, and that the government successfully bought 2,000 rifles that same year.³⁰ Examination of Bellesiles and Deyrup's common source shows that, once again, Bellesiles has misread his source. The muskets were ordered in 1794, not in 1792. According to Hicks, the 7,000 muskets were ordered from abroad, "[t]here not being any source of domestic supply of muskets at that time." Rifles were available from domestic manufacturers, and they continued to meet the relatively low volume of rifles for the Army and for supply to friendly Indians until 1810.³¹ Hartzler gives examples of the federal government contracting with small gunsmiths for rifles intended for distribution to friendly Indians as late as 1811.³²

While Bellesiles describes Congress as "ordering" 7,000 muskets from Britain, and suggests that 480 rifles delivered by American makers represented some sort of failure to make guns quickly, Bellesiles buried in the endnote that it was five years before the muskets ordered from Britain were delivered. After a scathing criticism of the slowness of the American rifle makers, it seems a bit misleading to hide the slowness of the British musket makers in the endnote.³³

While the federal government continued to buy small quantities of rifles from established gunsmiths, they developed a combination of a contract system and national armories at Springfield, Massachusetts and Harpers Ferry, Virginia for making muskets. The contract system with private firms was complex and involved substantial advances and subsidies to the makers. Why did the government make use of this contract and national armories system instead of purchasing muskets and pistols on the open market, as they did with rifles? Bellesiles portrays this as recognition that American gunmakers "could not collectively

³⁰ Deyrup, 42-43.

³¹ James E. Hicks, *Notes on United States Ordnance* (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: James E. Hicks, 1940), 1:14. See *Statutes at Large*, 3rd Cong., Sess. 1, ch. 14, 1:352 for the text of the statute that authorized the purchase—though without specifying either domestic or foreign sourcing for the weapons.

³² Hicks, 1:30, lists contracts, largely with the Lancaster County rifle makers, for rifles, pistols, and a few muskets in 1807 and 1808. Hartzler, 207-8, quotes letters from the Superintendent of Indian Trade to George Kreps, Jr., complaining about the poor finish of rifles made by Kreps under contract.

³³ See Hicks, 1:14-15, for details on the slow deliveries.

produce in a reasonable period the fourteen thousand arms [the federal government] hoped to buy.”³⁴

Deyrup gives another explanation, and one that explains how the government was able to order and received 436 rifles in less than nine months, and 2,000 more rifles during 1794, but preferred a contract system instead for muskets. The federal government was reluctant to purchase large numbers of muskets over which they had no quality control, and only limited opportunity to inspect the guns during production. The contract system, as well as government production of muskets, provided an opportunity for the government to have more control over the production process.³⁵

How many guns did private contractors make for the government? The question is of some importance, since Bellesiles makes the argument that the poor quality and quantity of arms delivered by these contractors reflected the infant state of gunmaking in the early Republic. Unfortunately, the quality of the data for the number of arms manufactured by contractors for the federal government is mixed—or perhaps the quality of the research done by those who have attempted to retrieve this information is mixed. Those who have taken the time to dig through the records have often been more gun enthusiasts or professional soldiers than historians, and one must wonder if the seemingly contradictory numbers reflect errors or differing measurement periods.

Colonel Arcadi Gluckman’s seemingly authoritative, but insufficiently footnoted history of U.S. military long arms reports that Congress authorized contracts in 1798 for 30,000 stands of arms—but that the Ordnance Department actually contracted for 40,200 stands, divided among twenty-seven contractors. It appears that only twenty-one of the contractors actually delivered arms through June 10, 1801, for a total of 14,032 stands. At least one of these contractors—the only one known to the average American today, Eli Whitney—had delivered no arms at all.

³⁴ Bellesiles, 232.

³⁵ Deyrup, 42-43.

Gluckman's total of arms delivered—14,032—is a little higher than the sum of the individual contractors he lists—13,234.³⁶ (The complete list is in Appendix B.) Another source tells us that a report of firearms received “to the 1st of January 1803” showed a total of 24,136 muskets, rifles, and pistols manufactured by at least 35 different contract manufacturers.³⁷

Concerning the 1808 musket contract, there are more discrepancies among the various sources. One source reports that a total of 31,030 muskets were delivered by 19 different private gun makers under government contract between 1808 and October, 1812,³⁸ providing yet another discrepancy with Gluckman's totals. Hartzler, generally quite careful in his citations, reports that Maryland gunsmiths Nicholas White, Thomas Crabb, Jacob Metzger and Christopher Barnhizle's delivered 548 muskets out of their contract for 1000,³⁹ again substantially higher than Gluckman's data.

Were Bellesiles's conclusions concerning the failure of federal musket contractors the result of trusting one set of sources over another, it would be very easy to sympathize with his situation. Unfortunately, Bellesiles conclusions appear to be derived from very sloppy research on his part, as once again, Bellesiles's representations of his sources bear little or no connection to what his sources say.

Bellesiles criticizes the firms that contracted to make muskets in 1798 as evidence that there was no real knowledge of how to make guns in the United States:

The government's continuing financial support of private gunmakers flew in the face of results. Just under 1000 had been delivered by September 30, 1800, the date on which the government was supposed to have received the forty thousand muskets commissioned from twenty-seven gunmakers.⁴⁰

³⁶ Gluckman, 69-81.

³⁷ Arthur Nehrbass, “Notes on Early U. S. Rifle and Musket Production,” *The Gun Report*, October, 1972, 25.

³⁸ George C. Maynard, “Notes on the Manufacture of Small Arms for the United States Army by the Government and Private Makers in the Nineteenth Century,” *Stock and Steel*, June 1923, 9-10.

³⁹ Hartzler, 27-33.

⁴⁰ Bellesiles, 237.

Bellesiles's endnote cites Hicks, *Notes on U.S. Ordnance*, 1:42-43. *Nothing* at 1:42-43 relates to the 1798 contracts—it's all 1812 and later. There is a discussion of the 1798 contracts on pages 1:19-23, but the only table that shows delivery counts reports that 2,646 muskets had been received as of September 26, 1801—not 1800—and this appears to be a count only of arms received by one set of government inspectors,⁴¹ since Gluckman reports that arms actually delivered by contractors through June 10, 1801 totaled 14,032 stands.⁴²

Nor is there anything in Hicks that indicates that all the muskets were to be delivered by September 30, 1800. The only contract date in Hicks's discussion is a copy of the contract between the partnership of Nicholas White, Thomas Crabb, Jacob Mitzger, and Christopher Barnhizle of Frederick Town, Maryland—and that specifies that all of the muskets were to be delivered no later than March of 1800.⁴³

Bellesiles's exercise in incorrect citation continues:

Many gun factories turned out to be flash-in-the-pan operations, taking advantage of government contracts and then vanishing.⁴⁴

In the endnote, Bellesiles tells us,

For instance, twelve Massachusetts gunmakers failed to fulfill their government contracts: Silas Allen of Shrewsbury; Asher Bartlett, Henry Osborne, and Caswell & Dodge of Springfield; Thomas French, Adam Kinsley, and Rudolph & Charles S. Leonard of Canton; Rufus Perkins of Bridgewater; Alvin Pratt, Elijah and Asa Waters, and Luke Wood of Sutton; Lemuel Pomeroy of Pittsfield.⁴⁵

Bellesiles is still using the same source, Hicks, 1:42-43, and again, those aren't the right pages for that contract, the names aren't on those pages, and the correct pages for the 1798 contract say absolutely nothing about the failure of these contractors to fulfill their contracts.⁴⁶ These names and failures to fulfill their contracts would be correct for the 1808 contract, discussed at Hicks, 1:32-33—but the dates are of course much different than

⁴¹ Hicks, 1:19-23.

⁴² Gluckman, 69.

⁴³ Hicks, 1:19-23.

⁴⁴ Bellesiles, 237.

⁴⁵ Bellesiles, 522-3 n. 111.

⁴⁶ Hicks, 1:19-23, 42-43.

Bellesiles says, and the statement about “under one thousand had been delivered” doesn’t fit any date in the table of musket deliveries for the 1808 contract.⁴⁷

Bellesiles goes on to tell us that Eli Whitney did not complete his contracted 10,000 muskets until “late in 1809, nine years behind schedule. The other twenty-six gunmakers produced just two thousand muskets—twenty-eight thousand (93 percent) short of their goal—only one of them fulfilling his contract with the government, and that five years late.”⁴⁸

Bellesiles has confused two different contracts, and two different sets of contractors. Whitney’s muskets for the 1798 contract were indeed delivered nine years late (in January, 1809, not “late in 1809”),⁴⁹ but the other 1798 contractors had delivered at least 13,234 muskets by January 1, 1803⁵⁰—not “just two thousand muskets” as Bellesiles claims. Furthermore, as detailed in Appendix B, at least three of the contractors for 1798 had either completed or overfilled their contracts by January 1, 1803: Nathan and Henry Cobb (100%); Huntington, Livingston, Bellows, and Stone (122%); and Amos Stillman & Co. (105%). One other contractor was close: Allen, Grant, and Bernard delivered 93% of their contracted amount. Bellesiles’s source (or more likely, Bellesiles) may have confused the deliveries by contractors under the 1808 contract—which of course, was still in process when Whitney completed his late deliveries from the 1798 contract.

Worse than the confused citations, and the confusion of the 1798 and 1808 contract deliveries, is that his characterization of these twelve musket makers as “flash-in-the-pan operations” makes them sound like they were set up to get the contract, and then went bankrupt. Henry Osborne appears to have been in the gun making business at least until 1821.⁵¹ Adam Kinsley had delivered muskets for the 1798 contract,⁵² Rufus Perkins was in

⁴⁷ Hicks, 1:32-33.

⁴⁸ Bellesiles, 237.

⁴⁹ Gluckman, 78.

⁵⁰ Gluckman, 69-81.

⁵¹ Deyrup, 225.

⁵² Hicks, 1:20 for contract; Gluckman, 75 for deliveries.

business from 1799 through 1812,⁵³ Asa Waters had been a gun maker as early as 1776, and delivered muskets as part of the 1818 and 1823 contracts.⁵⁴

Furthermore, the statement “failed to fulfill their government contracts” really means that they did not deliver the full number of muskets specified in the contracts—not that they failed to deliver guns. The characterization of “delivered just a few guns and then abandoned the business” is also misleading. Appendix B.1 shows the number of guns contracted and the number delivered as of October 7, 1812, for the 1808 contract.

Only three of the contractors could with any accuracy be said to have “delivered just a few guns and then abandoned the business”: Rufus Perkins; Wheeler & Morrison; and Sweet, Jenks & Sons. Concerning Wheeler & Morrison, however, a more accurate statement is that Wheeler abandoned his partner Morrison by dying in 1809, and I suppose in that sense could be considered to have “abandoned the business.” Sweet, Jenks & Sons is an interesting case because Jenks & Sons had a completely separate musket contract as well, and they certainly did not abandon that contract, fighting a continuing battle for compensation as late as 1820—and that battle is a reminder that the problems of making muskets was *not* a deficiency of gunmaking skills in America, as Bellesiles claims.

The firm of Jenks and Son of Providence, Rhode Island, contracted in October of 1808 to make 4,000 Model 1808 muskets at the rate of 800 per year. In an era before blueprints and written specifications, the government supplied a pattern musket, which the contractor was supposed to disassemble and use for producing tooling, in much the same way in which paper dress patterns are used today.

The pattern musket supplied by the government to Jenks and Son was defective, and these defects were not discovered until well into the manufacturing process. When Jenks sought reimbursement for the substantial expenses involved in correcting these problems, the federal government refused. Though Jenks and Son made a number of poor decisions as well

⁵³ Lindsay, 92; Deyrup, 225.

⁵⁴ Gluckman, 146; Deyrup, 226; Lindsay, 74, 77.

during the process, it clear that the primary reason that Jenks & Sons's failed to complete their 1808 contract was not an inability to make guns, but a series of management mistakes by both the government and the contractor.

At least 1,000 of the contracted 4,000 muskets were delivered to the federal government, and were determined to be “of good quality” by the Superintendent of Springfield Armory. The muskets rejected by the federal government's arms inspector were sold—at a higher price than the government paid—for export. It is not clear that all of these arms were actually defective; it would appear that many of Jenks & Sons rejected arms were completely functional, but out of specification, unlike some of the other contractors in this period.⁵⁵

Hicks reproduces a letter from Callender Irvine, the Commisary General, to Secretary of War John Armstrong of April 5, 1813, in which Irvine explains some of the problems that the contractors were having in filling their contracts: “Those Contracts were founded on imperfect Muskets as Standards, and at prices for which it was impossible to have made good Muskets so that if the Contracts are complied with strictly by individuals, the Government will be saddled with so many defective Arms of which description there are enough already in store near this City....” Irvine then went on to blame his predecessor, Tench Coxe, for having made contracts that produced a large pile of guns only suited for scrap.⁵⁶

Bellesiles portrays the failure of the federal contractors to fulfill their contracts as indicative of a fundamental lack of knowledge of gun manufacturing in America, claiming that Eli Whitney “recognized the basic problem with large-scale arms production in the United States; there were not enough trained gunsmiths.”⁵⁷ But what Whitney was attempting to do was to create a division of labor that allowed interchangeable gun parts to be made by less skilled workers. As Bellesiles recognizes, Whitney never really made this idea work.

⁵⁵ William O. Achtermier, *Rhode Island Arms Makers & Gunsmiths: 1643-1883* (Providence, R.I.: Man at Arms, 1980), 21-24.

⁵⁶ Callender Irvine to John Armstrong, April 5, 1813, quoted in Gluckman, 36.

⁵⁷ Bellesiles, 233.

Whitney's problem was not a lack of trained gunsmiths, but an inability to develop the technology that allowed him to *not* hire trained gunsmiths.

A letter from Col. Decius Wadsworth of the Ordnance Office to Secretary of War John Armstrong, dated June 6, 1814, reproduced in Gluckman, gives a bit more detail about the problems that confronted not only Whitney but the other contractors as well. It also provides another explanation for why the government was so tolerant of late and incomplete deliveries than the one that Bellesiles suggests, of a government that let the contractors take terrible advantage of it. Irvine's letter gives a very different picture than Bellesiles's description of Whitney's muskets as "dreadful", and also explains why some (but only some) contractors delivered just a few guns, or went bankrupt:⁵⁸

Most of the individuals of small property who engaged in these contracts were absolutely ruined thereby, and the difficulties were so much greater than had been apprehended, it proved in general losing business to the concerned. Mr. Whitney having never before engaged in such a business, and *not having workmen brought up to the trade, was under the necessity of executing various parts of the work adapted to the inexperience of his hands, and calculated to obviate the necessity of employing men alone who had been bred to the trade....*

It may not be amiss to state that I think *his arms as good, if not superior, to those which have in general been made anywhere else in the United States, not excepting those which have been made at the public armories.*⁵⁹ [emphasis added]

Other manufacturers, while not trying to lead the technology as aggressively as Whitney, were attempting to transform a traditional, small-scale handicraft industry—gun making—into a large factory system. "[C]ontractors were forced into division of labor and the invention of machine tools, which, though of incalculable benefit to the industry, delayed them in filling their contracts."⁶⁰

Bellesiles also portrays the failure of contract manufacturers as government largesse without any acknowledgment of the unusual circumstances under which the contract manufacturers operated, claiming that, "It never seemed to occur to any contemporary that

⁵⁸ Bellesiles, 238.

⁵⁹ Gluckman, 80-81.

⁶⁰ Deyrup, 48.

gun manufacturing should be left to the vagaries of the free market, perhaps because they all knew that the public was not sufficiently interested in guns.”⁶¹

Everything about the government contracts, however, was an attempt to defeat a free market. Contractors were not allowed to use imported parts, because that would defeat the government’s goal—creation of a large-scale factory system for making military weapons. The government was very selective to whom they gave arms contracts, excluding those who had gunsmithing experience, but not property. The government’s goal seems to have been to make recovery of damages for non-performance easier. Government contractors were also prohibited from doing business with any other customers, leading to serious problems when a contract had been fulfilled, but a new one had not yet been granted,⁶² though at least some contractors seem to have either violated this requirement, or were not contractually bound to do so.⁶³

Perhaps the hardest problem to understand in an age when accountants calculate manufacturing costs to the penny is that cost accounting was still in its infancy. The contractors—and the government—were still learning how to deal with overhead, depreciation of tools, distinguishing investments in factories from investments in the land on which the factory was built. It appears that along with the surprises and delays associated with pioneering large-scale gun manufacturing in the United States, the government contractors in the period 1798-1830 were building muskets for an average cost of \$12.88. Yet from 1807 to 1810, the price the government paid contractors was \$10.75. Many of the early contractors lost money on every musket delivered—and that some went out of business is therefore no great surprise.

Even the government’s own Springfield Armory, a model of success to Bellesiles, figured its production costs in the early years as high as \$16.48 per musket, and usually exceeding

⁶¹ Bellesiles, 235.

⁶² Deyrup, 44-47.

⁶³ Achtermier, 23.

\$13.00 each.⁶⁴ Springfield Armory's success in making guns was consistent with the \$300 hammer horror stories of the modern Department of Defense contractors. This explains also why, as Bellesiles smugly notes, a number of contractors asked to be let out of their federal contracts.⁶⁵ If contracts were money-losing propositions, the temptation to manufacture for the more lucrative private sector would have been very strong.

The government's musket contractors are probably no more typical of gun manufacturing in the early Republic than defense industries in the late twentieth century were typical of private sector manufacturing companies. By focusing attention on the emerging large firearms factories, Bellesiles has completely missed the decentralized, still largely handicraft civilian gun making business in America.

⁶⁴ Deyrup, 48-54.

⁶⁵ Bellesiles, 242.

State Militia Contractors in the Early Republic

In addition to the dichotomy between contractors to the federal government, and gunmakers who produced for the private sector, Bellesiles has largely missed the substantial industry making guns under *state* contracts. Along with Thomas and John Ketland's November 15, 1797 contract with Pennsylvania to make 10,000 firearms in Britain (voided by the British government), there were a number of contracts with American gunsmiths as well, totaling 11,200, 19,000, or 19,200 guns, depending on whose version you believe. (The details of the contractors and the contract can be found in Appendix B.) At least some of these arms were actually made, and Holt provides photographs of surviving muskets, some with government proof marks, produced under these contracts by Lether & Co., William Henry, Melchior Baker, Owen Evans, and John Miles.¹

Other muskets made for the Pennsylvania militia have survived as well, including one (based on markings inside the gunlock) believed to have been made by Adam Angstadt. Another surviving musket was made by one Joseph Miles (perhaps John Miles's brother, or an error reading the maker's mark). An 1814 Pennsylvania militia contract for 200 rifles is represented by two surviving examples, one made by Henry Deringer, another made by George Tyron.²

¹ Thomas E. Holt, "Pennsylvania 1798 Contract Muskets," *American Society of Arms Collectors* 2 [November, 1956], 19-20, gives the 11,200 count; Gluckman, 81-82, indicates that 20,000 muskets were contracted. The 10,000 to be made in Britain were reallocated to American contractors, of which the contract details for only 19,000 have survived. The total of Gluckman's counts by contractor, however, total 19,200.

² Bruce S. Bazelon, *Defending the Commonwealth: Catalogue of the Militia Exhibit at the William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania* (Providence, R.I.: Mowbray Co., 1980), 16-17.

How many other contracts are there? The records are somewhat scattered. For instance, we know of a contract with Joseph G. Chambers of Washington County, January 2, 1815, to make twenty-five “Swivel Guns” of a proprietary design, and “alteration of five hundred muskets belonging to the State....”³

Other silent survivors tell us of contracts for which the paperwork has not surfaced. Lindsay lists a surviving pistol signed “Land & Read Boston” made for the Massachusetts Militia, apparently in the middle 1820s to the 1830s.⁴ How many other gunsmiths made guns for state militias, for which neither guns nor contracts have survived? We don’t know, and it would be presumptuous to guess.

Virginia also armed its militia through a combination of private contracts and a state gun factory, and *Arming America* does describe Virginia’s attempt to arm its militia with uniform weapons. As is usual with Bellesiles’s work, there is a near-complete disconnect between what Bellesiles’s sources say, and what Bellesiles says that they say. The entire paragraph to be dissected below from page 236 of *Arming America* has a single footnote. The source Bellesiles lists is Giles Cromwell’s marvelously detailed history of the Virginia Manufactory of Arms, pages 2-57:

The shortage of gunmakers in the early republic is clearly illustrated in the history of Virginia's effort to establish an armory. In 1797 Governor James Wood informed the legislature that his government had searched the state to find anyone who could make arms for the militia, without success.⁵

Bellesiles’s source for this claim, Cromwell’s book, tells a somewhat different story:

At the junction of the Rivanna and Fluvanna Rivers, the Point of Fork Arsenal centered around the storing of munitions and repairing arms, and a small force of artificers was maintained there from 1781 to 1801. Furthermore, scattered throughout the mountain and valley regions were many individual rifle makers who advanced their skills by making exceptionally fine rifles.⁶

³ 9th series *Pennsylvania Archives* 6:4231.

⁴ Lindsay, 82, 85. Deyrup, 224, lists a “Lane and Read” in Boston, 1826-1836, that might be the maker in question.

⁵ Bellesiles, 236.

⁶ Giles Cromwell, *The Virginia Manufactory of Arms* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 2.

Bellesiles describes how Governor Wood of Virginia sought to obtain more arms for the state militia:

Wood therefore contracted to purchase four thousand stands of arms from England and another four thousand muskets from the Globe Mills in Pennsylvania. The latter source made just 925 arms over the next five years and then went bankrupt.⁷

Cromwell's account matches this, in part, but then describes how after McCormick went into bankruptcy, his foreman James Haslett finished another 50 arms, bringing the total up to 975. Then Cromwell describes how John Miles, Sr., completed the original 4,000 musket contract, and made 250 pairs of pistols for Virginia. George Wheeler of Culpeper County also made at least 1,000 muskets for Virginia, and James Haslett completed another contract for 600 muskets.⁸

In addition, Virginia also contracted with a number of gunsmiths to make 2,145 rifles in the years 1809-19—and Cromwell makes the point that these contracts were “generally limited...to residents of Virginia...”⁹ (Cromwell's Appendix B.8 lists the twenty Virginia contract rifle makers, and the number of guns actually completed and delivered.)¹⁰

Bellesiles, by leaving out these other contracts for muskets and rifles, misleads the reader into thinking that gun makers were so scarce that when Virginia's one private American contractor went bankrupt, Virginia was left in the lurch, and were forced to start a state gun factory for this reason:

It was at this point that the Virginia government agreed with a plan that John Clarke had been promoting for several years to build an armory in Virginia to make guns for state use.¹¹

Cromwell discuss Clarke's involvement, and at *no point* does Cromwell suggest that the armory was Clarke's idea; quite the opposite. The sequence as described by Cromwell was that the Virginia government came up with the idea. After discussing the “mammoth task”

⁷ Bellesiles, 236.

⁸ Cromwell, 6-9. Whisker, 193-4, reports that Peter Brong, Abraham Henry, and Henry DeHuff, Jr. also submitted an unsuccessful bid on the contract with the state of Virginia for pistols and long guns.

⁹ Cromwell, 85-87.

¹⁰ Cromwell, 174.

¹¹ Bellesiles, 236.

and “special and selected skills” that would be required, Cromwell says: “By whatever methods employed, however, the Executive ultimately chose John Clarke of Powhatan County.” There is *no* indication in Cromwell that Clarke's involvement predates the decision of Virginia to go into the gunmaking business. *None.*¹² Maybe there is some evidence out there somewhere, but Bellesiles doesn't cite it, and what Bellesiles does cite—Cromwell—indicates just the opposite.

In creating the Virginia Manufactory of Arms, Clarke found it necessary to buy all his tools in England.¹³

Cromwell agrees that Clarke bought all his tools in England, but not the reason that Bellesiles implies—that there was not much of a gun industry in America. “Clarke favored purchasing such implements as vises, anvils, bellows, and files from Europe, where he believed better terms could be arranged. He felt that there were no tool manufacturers large enough in the United States to meet the requirements of the armory.”¹⁴

The armory was a large-scale gun manufacturing operation, much like the federal government's arsenals at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and Springfield, Massachusetts, and the number of tools required was quite large. But the inability of American toolmakers to produce enough gun making tools is not an indication that there was not a large American gun making industry—many of whom doubtless also purchased their tools from England. It is only an indication that the tools for making guns were not made in America in sufficient quantity.

More frustrating, he quickly discovered that there were only a few gunsmiths in Virginia and they all did exclusively repair work.¹⁵

Cromwell does mention that Virginia was short of “skilled artificers,” but then goes on to explain the problems that Clarke was having, and in terms that do not fit Bellesiles's characterization very well:

¹² Cromwell, 11-14.

¹³ Bellesiles, 236.

¹⁴ Cromwell, 31.

¹⁵ Bellesiles, 236.

The various gunsmiths in the different sections of the state were restricted primarily to limited repair work and in some instances to rifle making itself, and while some of these rifle makers would eventually seek employment in the armory, in most instances they were financially better off remaining in their own independent shops.

Consequently, Clarke defended his travels by saying that had he remained in Richmond and advertised for gunsmiths most probably he would have acquired the most indifferent workmen who were unable to find employment at other works."¹⁶

So the problem was not that Virginia lacked gunsmiths, but that the terms that Clarke was prepared to offer would not attract the better Virginia gun makers, who were, presumably making a decent income from their own shops. Somehow, this doesn't sound like a scarcity of gunsmiths, nor a shortage of demand for their products.

Clarke ended up hiring sixty-eight workers, all of them from outside Virginia and a dozen brought over from Ireland.¹⁷

The reason that Cromwell gives for hiring outside of Virginia is very different from Bellesiles's claims about a scarcity of gunsmiths in Virginia. "Clarke had found during his travels that the lowest wages were paid in Massachusetts and Rhode Island; so he concentrated on hiring people in those areas."¹⁸ Hartzler quotes a letter in full from Clarke that confirms that he "found the wages of such men lower in Massachusetts and Rhode Island than in any other of the States. I therefore engaged in those states all the workmen of the desired description I could find, and on my return back again to the works I first visited [in Philadelphia], the workmen were induced to fall in their prices...."¹⁹

Concerning those "dozen brought over from Ireland," Cromwell's account is quite a bit different from Bellesiles's representation of it. According to Cromwell, "He was also successful in hiring artificers from Pennsylvania, where they had previously been employed by Haslett, and of the nineteen workmen who came to Richmond from this source, the majority were originally natives of Ireland."²⁰ Clarke's letter reproduced in Hartzler also is clear on

¹⁶ Cromwell, 37.

¹⁷ Bellesiles, 236.

¹⁸ Cromwell, 37.

¹⁹ Hartzler, 164.

²⁰ Cromwell, 37.

this: of the gunsmiths that Clarke hired in Philadelphia, the “greater number of these men are natives of Ireland” but they were not “brought over” from Ireland to work in the Virginia Gun Manufactory.²¹ This is an important point. Bellesiles’s claim was that gunsmiths were so scarce in America that Clarke had to bring over a “dozen” from Ireland to work at the Virginia Manufactory of Arms. This is simply not so; they were already at work in Pennsylvania when Clarke hired them.

Bellesiles continues:

For the rest of its brief history, this need to find skilled gunsmiths prevented the armory from ever producing many arms. Virginia’s was the only state armory in antebellum America, averaging 2,130 muskets per year, or twenty-six guns per worker.²²

What Bellesiles doesn’t tell you, however, is that the Manufactory made a lot more than muskets--and had he read beyond the fifty-five pages that he cited (or just flipped through the rest of the book, looking at the pictures and chapter titles), he would know that. Significantly, the reason Cromwell gives why Virginia shut down its Manufactory in 1821 doesn’t match Bellesiles’s claims about a factory that had problems “producing many arms”; it almost directly contradicts it. What Cromwell describes as an important factor was that,

By 1821 the armory had produced enough small arms to equip most of the state’s militia, for from the beginning of operations in 1802 until its closing in 1821, the Virginia Manufactory of Arms had produced approximately 58,428 muskets and bayonets, 2,093 rifles, 10,309 swords, and 4,252 pistols for a total of 75,082 small arms.... The annual federal quota of new firearms began arriving regularly in the state by 1820. Thus the armory was slowly outgrowing its reason for existence.²³

Concerning the shortage of gunsmiths impairing their operations, it is worthwhile to examine Cromwell’s Appendix D. It takes up fourteen pages listing gunsmiths who worked at the Manufactory during its less than twenty year period of operation. This does not sound like a serious shortage of gunsmiths!

Bellesiles’s claims about the reliance of American gun makers on imported gunlocks also collapses. All the muskets made at the Manufactory, from the very beginning, used lock

²¹ Hartzler, 164.

²² Bellesiles, 236.

²³ Cromwell, 150.

plates stamped with its name, and by the Manufactory. The spare parts collection shown in an inventory after it closed reveals that lock plates and sears (both fundamental parts of a gunlock) were made there.²⁴ It does not appear that the Manufactory imported gunlocks at all. An examination of the list of suppliers to the Manufactory for the years 1798-1809 reveals no gunlocks. The only complete subassembly of guns listed among the suppliers are gunstocks.²⁵

Hartzler's *Arms Makers of Maryland* agrees with Bellesiles that "the great majority of gunsmiths who made longrifles in America used flintlocks, and later percussion locks, that were made in Europe." But Hartzler's description of John Armstrong's practices shows that importation was more driven by economics than technical limitations:

John Armstrong stands out as a gunsmith who usually made and signed his own flintlocks, contrary to the usual practice. His apprentices learned to make gun locks as well as the other parts of the rifle and the apprentice indentures make specific mention of the lock making instruction. It is noteworthy that Peter White, who probably worked with Armstrong and who possibly apprenticed under him, also made most of his own flintlocks until his later years.²⁶

At least part of why gunlocks were generally imported may not have been because Americans could not make them—because we know that Americans did make them—but because there was little advantage to doing so. Jacob Dickert and other Lancaster County, Pennsylvania gun makers, in their letter to Congress requesting that the tariff on guns not be reduced, described how they were just completing 20,000 guns for Pennsylvania. They made a point of describing how they had made "gun locks, and every other article in a gun, have been made in the best manner..."²⁷ (Since Professor Bellesiles cites this letter, he can't claim that he didn't know this.) George Moyer of Lancaster Borough, Pennsylvania, is listed as a "Gun Lock Maker" in tax lists from 1819 and 1821.²⁸ Andrew Klinedinst, a York,

²⁴ Cromwell, 44-46, 64-65.

²⁵ Cromwell, 177-84.

²⁶ Hartzler, 49.

²⁷ February 4, 1803, *Annals of Congress*, 7th Cong., 2nd sess., 1282.

²⁸ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 69.

Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised in 1825 that “he also makes locks,”²⁹ which would seem to indicate gunlocks.

Robert McCormick advertised for “Lock forgers, lock filers” among other “Gun-Smiths wanted” in the *Pennsylvania Herald and York General Advertiser* of May 25, 1798.³⁰ Daniel Sweitzer advertised for mechanics to work at his “Gun Lock Manufactory” in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania newspaper on August 23, 1808.³¹ It would appear that he was successful; there is at least one surviving pistol with a Sweitzer gunlock.³² When Daniel Borden was apprenticed to “Philip Creamer of Tancy Town, Gun Smith,” in 1799, one of the terms of the contract required Creamer to supply 40 of the gunlocks that Creamer made.³³ Similarly, Peter Piper was apprenticed in 1801 to “John Armstrong of Frederick County, Maryland, Gun Smith and Gun Lock Maker, to learn the said mystery and occupation of a Gun Maker and Gun Lock Maker....”³⁴

Gunlocks were made in America for military arms as well. A surviving musket, apparently made by Adam Angstadt for the Pennsylvania militia at the close of the eighteenth century, shows a maker’s mark AA inside the gunlock—suggesting that Angstadt made not only the musket, but also the gunlock.³⁵ Hicks reports that gunlocks made by Samuel Dale for Springfield Armory were not, as some have believed, imported from England. Samuel Dale was employed at Springfield Armory.³⁶

Along with documents that indicate that gunlocks were being made by American gunsmiths, we also have surviving guns. A percussion rifle made, apparently, by Jacob Kunz of Philadelphia was marked with his name on both the barrels and the gunlock, strongly

²⁹ August 16, 1825, *York (Pennsylvania) Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 58.

³⁰ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 115.

³¹ Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 115.

³² Dyke, 58.

³³ Whisker, 18.

³⁴ Whisker, 31.

³⁵ Bruce S. Bazelon, *Defending the Commonwealth: Catalogue of the Militia Exhibit at the William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania* (Providence, R.I.: Mowbray Co., 1980), 16-17.

³⁶ Hicks, 1:29.

implying that he was the maker of both. (I will only say, “implying,” because we know that some importers had gunlocks stamped with their name, either in America, or at the factory in England.) Kunz was certainly working in Philadelphia in 1817; this one surviving rifle is the only evidence we have for his work as a gunlock maker.³⁷ It certainly suggests that there were other gunlock makers in America in this time whose guns did not survive.

How many guns were made for state militias by private gun makers? We really don't know—but we do know that Bellesiles seems to have a serious problem reading his sources accurately, and like his inability to accurately quote statutes, the mistakes are all in favor of his highly peculiar interpretation of the history of American gun making.

³⁷ Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 59-60.

A Failure of Critical Thinking By America's Historians

Had Professor Bellesiles's book been like one of the countless strange exercises in historical revisionism that try to "prove" that the Holocaust didn't happen, or that Jews were responsible for the American slave trade, or that a massive centuries-old conspiracy controls the world's governments, it would be tempting to just laugh it off. Like those sort of works, *Arming America* has the form of scholarship, but not the substance. There are accurately represented facts scattered here and about, like lumps of cheese amid the rat poison. Like those other works, careful examination of the footnotes, and the manner in which the author misquotes, twists, and misrepresents sources, leads one to one of several possible conclusions.

One possibility is that the author is so intent on proving a particular theory for its current political value that he is unable to accurately read even the simplest documents. There are certainly a few places, as we have seen, where one might be able to give Professor Bellesiles the benefit of the doubt, and conclude that his desire to find a peaceful early America (at least, towards whites) with almost no guns, few hunters, and almost no violence, has prevented him reading his sources with the skill one expects of a bright high school graduate.

Another possibility is that Professor Bellesiles was in such a big hurry that he read through this enormous blizzard of sources, caught a few words that sounded like they might fit his thesis, and scribbled those words down for later typing. If so, he needs to aim somewhat lower in his goals, so as not to overtax his ability to handle such a complex task.

Perhaps Professor Bellesiles's next book should be an introduction to American history, limited to perhaps ten sources, so as not to make so many mistakes, and all in the same direction.

There comes a certain moment, however, when as much as you would like to believe that the problem is zealotry, or incompetence, that the overwhelming quantity of the "errors," and the astonishingly one-sided direction that those errors lead, should make almost every reasonably cautious person think, "Hoax." This is the conclusion that I have reached. *Arming America* is not entirely false. There are many individual statements of fact contained within it that are true, though sometimes misleading. But there are so many statements that are not only wrong, but that Professor Bellesiles, unless he has the reading skills of a high school dropout, *knows are wrong*.

So how did *Arming America* receive such a sterling collection of reviews from some of America's most respected historians? First and foremost, the historical profession is based on trust and integrity. If a history professor at a prestigious university tells you a series of facts—even a very surprising series of facts—most historians assume that they are being told the truth.

Over the course of my undergraduate and graduate studies in history, I have read a lot of journal articles and a lot of books. I have often checked footnotes, especially when the facts were odd, bizarre, or contradicted other sources. While I have often found errors, I have very seldom found anything that looked like intentional deception. Even though much of my previously published work has been in the sometimes heated and controversial subject of the history of gun control, and I have therefore read sometimes heated papers on this subject, I have never seen anything like *Arming America*. All of the suspicious errors and altered quotations that I have found in dozens of papers and dozens of books over ten years of research *combined* don't equal the number that can be found on a number of single pages in *Arming America*.

A second reason that *Arming America* received such glowing reviews, I fear, is that there is a distinct lack of diversity among historians today. While history departments pride themselves on the diversity of their faculty in the areas of sex, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity, there is really no *political* diversity. (While I often hear this denied by history professors, when pressed, their response is reminiscent of the barkeeper in *The Blues Brothers* when asked what kinds of music they play. “We play *both* kinds: country and western.”)

It should not be a surprise to anyone who reads *Arming America* that there is a clear-cut public policy conclusion to it. As Stewart Udall says on the back dust jacket of the book, “Thinking people who deplore Americans’ addiction to gun violence have been waiting a long time for this information.” The idea that *Arming America* is intended to promote—that the Second Amendment’s guarantee of a right to keep and bear arms is not only an anachronism today, but was stillborn—is very popular in academic circles these days. Unsurprisingly, nearly every historian who reviewed *Arming America* simply felt no need to check the accuracy of Bellesiles’s more controversial claims. It takes a rare person indeed to check the accuracy of books with which one agrees—and that’s quite unfortunate.

So here I reach my conclusion: *Arming America* is not a wrong-headed analysis. It is not a book written by an historian whose zealotry caused him to misread a few sources. It is a hoax, with a brazen quality more appropriate to guys who wear swastika armbands, or wait for the Space Brothers to return and give us more of the same wonderful technology they gave us at Roswell.

Professor Bellesiles should be ashamed, embarrassed, and fired from his job. But it doesn’t say much for the quality of the rest of the American academic community that a fraud this gross received such glowing praise.

Appendix A: Gunsmiths In Early America

In the following tables, I have combined information from a variety of sources of varying quality. Some of the sources which are collections of early American gunsmiths are less likely to consistently give proper citations. In a few cases, these are works produced by well-intentioned gun collectors who are, unfortunately, amateurs when it comes to history. While the information contained therein is interesting, not obviously wrong, and probably quite useful for gun collectors, I have been reluctant to use these as sources.¹

Other books produced by gun collectors, however, have turned out to be quite useful because they were created with attention to sources and citations. I have generally found, however, when I was able to verify these books against scholarly works that they were accurate. If a source is listed in this appendix with only an author's name or title abbreviation, the source is an alphabetical list of gunsmiths or gun makers, and a page number seemed superfluous.

Several of the sources, however, either conform to proper standards of citation, such as Hartzler's *Arms Makers of Maryland* (with the maddening exception of using dates instead of volume numbers for references to *Archives of Maryland*), Demeritt's *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers*, and Achtermier's *Rhode Island Arms Makers & Gunsmiths 1643-1883*. Kauffman's *Early American Gunsmiths*, while somewhat unconventional in its citation style, was clearly produced to high standards. Every gunsmith's entry is identified as to the specific document or set of

¹ Albert W. Lindert, *Gunmakers of Indiana*, 3^d ed. (Sheffield Press, Inc., 1968). Donald A. Hutslar, *Gunsmiths of Ohio: 18th and 19th Centuries* (York, Penn.: George Shumway, 1973).

documents from which the information came: a tax list; a state census; a deed; or a business directory.

Excluded from this list are all gunsmiths or gun makers where there are no actual dates of operation listed. This, unfortunately, excludes a very large number of gunsmiths known only from surviving guns, and about whom we can only guess as to their years of operation. This list of gunsmiths should be regarded as a fraction of the gunsmiths that actually operated in early America—perhaps a very small fraction.

Some of the compilers of early gunsmiths list a variety of sources that document the existence of a gunsmith—but only some of the sources clearly indicate that the person was a gunsmith. In those cases, I have used only the range of years during which the person was identified as a gunsmith in the documents listed by the compiler. In some cases, this is probably understating the actual years of operation.

Many gunsmiths are known by only a single reference. Consequently, this list certainly understates the years in which many of these gunsmiths operated. It is also a certainty that many gunsmiths came and went out of business without ever leaving a trace. A number of regional lists of gunsmiths that were available were not consulted, because of exhaustion of the researcher.

Attempts to sample the data and draw conclusions about the number of gunsmiths present in the United States as a whole are doomed to inaccuracy. At least some of the gunsmiths in this list come from either explicitly regional books, such as *The Gunsmiths of Manhattan 1625-1900* or from books written by authors who have worked disproportionately in particular regions, such as Henry J. Kauffman.

In cases where two different sources give slightly different names for a gunsmith in roughly the same years and location, and the name is not common, I have combined them into a single gunsmith. As an example, two different sources list what is almost certainly a single gunsmith. In one source he is Joseph Mullen, a gunsmith in Salem, North Carolina in 1774. In the other a Joseph Muller is listed in Salem, North Carolina during the Revolution.

Where the gap of time between two different sources is dramatic, such that is unlikely that two gunsmiths references could be one and the same man, I have left them as two separate records, since they may be father and son or father and grandson. If the names are common (e.g., John Moore) and there is no other basis for concluding that these are only one man, I have generally left multiple entries in the list.

In several cases, the same gunsmith appears in two entries, in different locations, at different times. In a few of these cases, I know that this is one gunsmith who moved. In other cases, the connection is uncertain. This may inflate the number of gunsmiths listed very slightly.

Examination of the family names in these lists shows, not surprisingly, a strong tendency for gunsmithing to run in families, and this is especially apparent for the more unusual family names. As discussed previously, the later the year, the more gunsmiths appear, and it is not at all clear whether this is because of improved record keeping, or because the number of gunsmiths increases.

One source that adds a significant dose of imprecision is M.L. Brown's *Firearms in Colonial America*. While a scholarly work, there was an appendix in which Brown listed gunsmiths who worked for the American Revolutionary cause. The number of names was dramatic, and the list included details of what sort of work they did: general gunsmith; musket maker, riflesmith. It was difficult to leave out such a large body of data. Unfortunately, there was nothing to indicate during exactly what years each of these gunsmiths operated. I have taken the liberty of using the dates 1775 to 1783 for those gunsmiths listed in Brown's list for which there is no other date information. If another source provides dates, I have limited that entry to those dates. Any entry that uses Brown 404-409, and only that source, should be regarded as approximate as to date.

A similar problem exists with Arcadi Gluckman's list of Committee of Safety musket makers. It is dated 1775-1777, and while generally consistent with other such lists (with a few interesting differences), it also suffers the problem that it does not narrow down the

operating dates completely. It does, however, narrow down the dates of those Committee of Safety musket makers from Brown's list. Any entry that uses Brown 404-409 and Gluckman, 50-51, and only those two sources, should be regarded as approximate as to date.

In a few cases, I found that Brown's information conflicted quite dramatically as to location, and in those cases, I have given precedence to more detailed statements of who worked as a gunsmith, where, and when. Thus Emanuel Pincall is shown by Brown as a gunsmith in Pennsylvania during the Revolution. However, Kauffman's *Early American Gunsmiths* lists an Emanuel Pincall working as a gunsmith in 1777 Charleston, South Carolina. It being unlikely that there were two gunsmiths of such an unusual name working at the same time in America, I discarded the data from Brown's appendix for Pincall.

In a few cases, there are makers listed in Kauffman's *Early American Gunsmiths* who were probably *capable* of making small arms, but whose listing indicates that they were in the business of making and selling cannon to the general public, such as Russel & Co.² These have been excluded. Those gunsmiths who made only stocks, or whose descriptions suggested that they were entirely gun merchants, have also been excluded. Similarly, those people whose involvement with gunmaking is ambiguous (and may actually have been procuring guns for governments) such as John Hanson, Jr., have also been excluded.³

It worth mentioning that while many of the gunsmiths in this list may have been individual craftsmen, working by themselves, we know that some of them had apprentices, and some of them were apprentices to others. In a few cases, we have gunsmiths for whom the individual name is the name on a contract, such as James Haslett. He made and delivered 600 muskets to Virginia over a period of six months.⁴ It seems most unlikely that he made all of these muskets himself, and one must conclude that there many other gunsmiths working for Haslett during this time whose names are lost to history.

² Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 80.

³ Hartzler, 161.

⁴ Cromwell, 9.

There are a number of large gun factories in the early Republic period, such as the federal arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Virginia Manufactory of Arms at Richmond, Virginia. In the case of the Manufactory, we have a detailed list of operatives involved in the making of guns, with detailed descriptions of their tasks—hundreds of them over a period of less than twenty years. Few of them, however, would be considered, “gunsmiths” in the all-inclusive sense of the craftsmen in this list, and even fewer would be consider gun makers, since most made only one small part of a gun. It is worth remembering, however, that leaving such factory operatives off the list tends to understate the number of workers involved in the manufacturing of guns in early America.

One decision that I made in compiling these lists was difficult. If someone was apprenticed to a gunsmith, explicitly to learn the gunsmith’s trade, I have included him as a gunsmith. It is certainly true that at least some of these apprentices may have ended up in another profession after completing his term. Others almost certainly died before completing their apprenticeship. But even apprentices were working as gunsmiths, either making parts of guns, or repairing guns. Including apprentices gives a fuller picture of the number of Americans engaged in the day to day business of making or repairing guns. In a few cases, there are children bound as apprentices to gunsmiths at such a young age that I have not included them in this list, such as “John Connor aged three years old” who was bound to David Grass in 1805.⁵

If a gunsmith was apprenticed to a gunsmith known to have made guns during the period of the apprenticeship, the apprentice is listed as a maker, not a gunsmith, unless there is evidence that the apprentice did *not* make guns on the completion of his term.

This data base will be in the print version. For the moment, an incomplete and experimental version can be found at <http://www.danlo.com/cramer>.

⁵ Bivins, 155.

Appendix B: Partial List of Government Arms Contracts

Pennsylvania Militia Contract of 1797¹

Contractor	Location	Contract Date	Quantity
Owen Evans	Evansburg, Penn.	1797/12/07	1,000
William Henry II	Nazareth	1797/12/13	2,000
Lether & Co.	York, Penn.	1798/04/11	1,200
Abraham Henry & John Graeff	Lancaster	1798/04/11	2,000
John Miles	Philadelphia	1798/09/03	2,000
John Fondersmith	Lancaster	1799/01/14	500
Melchior Baker & Albert Gallatin	Fayette County, Penn.	1799/02/05	2,000
John Miles	Philadelphia	1801/04/16	2,000
John Fondersmith	Lancaster	1801/04/16	500
Jacob Haeffler	Lancaster	1801/04/17	500
Henry DeHuff, Jr.	Lancaster	1801/04/17	500
Peter Brong	Lancaster	1801/04/17	500
Jacob Dickert & Matthew Llewellyn	Lancaster	1801/04/17	1,000
Conrad Welshanse, Jacob Doll, & Henry Pickell	York, Penn.	1801/04/17	1,000
John Jr. & Samuel Kerlin	Bucks Co.	1801/05/02	500
Edward & James Evans	Evansburg, Penn.	1801/05/02	1,000
Robert McCormick & Richard B. Johnston	Philadelphia	1801/05/04	1,000
John Jr. & Samuel Kerlin	Bucks Co.	1801/06/30	500
total			19,700

McCormick went bankrupt, apparently without delivering any muskets.

¹ 9 ser. *Pennsylvania Archives* 2:1433-7, 3:1730-2, 1741-2; Holt, 19; Gluckman, 81-88. Holt lists several other makers as having “proposed to furnish” arms, but is unclear on whether these proposals led to contracts, and acknowledges that no such arms by those makers have come to his attention. Whisker, 193-194.

Federal Musket Contract of 1798Contracts and deliveries through January 1, 1803:²

contractor	contracted	delivered	%
Allen, Grant, and Bernard	1,500	1,396	93%
Elijah Baggett	500	-	0%
Thomas Bicknell	2,000	1,300	65%
Elisha Brown	1,000	775	78%
Chipman, Crafts, Hooker, and Smith	1,000	575	58%
Alexander Clagett	1,000	433	43%
Joseph Clark	500	325	65%
Nathan and Henry Cobb	200	200	100%
Matthew and Nathan Elliott	500	235	47%
Owen Evans	1,000	-	0%
Richard Falley	1,000	750	75%
Daniel Gilbert	2,000	875	44%
William Henry II	500	252	50%
Huntington, Livingston, Bellows, and Stone	500	608	122%
Stephen Jenks and Hosea Humphries	1,500	1,050	70%
Adam Kinsley and James Perkins	2,000	1,550	78%
Robert McCormick	3,000	-	0%
Jonathan Nichols, Jr.	1,000	-	0%
Abijah Peck	1,000	775	78%
William Rhodes and William Tyler	2,000	950	48%
Mathias Shroyer	1,000	150	15%
Amos Stillman & Co.	500	525	105%
Thomas Townsey and Samuel Chipman	1,000	275	28%
Ard Welton	1,000	-	0%
Eli Williams	2,000	-	0%
White, Crabb, Mitzger, and Barnhizle	1,000	235	24%
Eli Whitney	10,000	-	0%
total	40,200	13,234	33%

Federal Musket Contract of 1808Contractors and deliveries through October 7, 1812.³

contractor	contracted	delivered	%
Joshua and Charles Barstow	2,500	1,625	65%
A. & P. Bartlett	2,500	1,500	60%
Oliver Bidwell	4,000	750	19%
I. I. & N. Brooke	4,000	1,257	31%
O. & E. Evans	4,000	1,960	49%
French, Blake & Kinsley	4,000	2,175	54%

² Gluckman, 69-81.³ Gluckman, 104-116.

Daniel Gilbert	5,000	875	18%
Goetz & Westphall	2,500	1,019	41%
W. & I. I. Henry	10,000	4,246	42%
Stephen Jenks & Sons	4,000	2,300	58%
R. & C. Leonard	5,000	2,125	43%
John Miles, Jr.	9,000	2,407	27%
Rufus Perkins	2,500	200	8%
W. & H. Shannon	4,000	1,001	25%
Ethan Stillman	2,500	825	33%
Waters & Whitmore	5,000	3,000	60%
Wheeler & Morrison	2,500	125	5%
Winner, Nippes & Co.	9,000	3,900	43%
Sweet, Jenks & Sons	3,000	250	8%
total	85,000	31,540	37%

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