

# THE LANCASTER RIFLES.

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Gun-making was, no doubt, one of the earliest of the mechanical industries pursued at Lancaster, but I think the writer of "The Life of General Jackson," quoted in the preceding sketch, has fallen into error in ascribing as early a date as 1721 to it in this place; at any rate, it is open to question. At that time Lancaster was a mere hamlet, with perhaps a score or two of people, many of whom were Mennonites, and, therefore, non-combatants, and hardly likely to have engaged in the manufacture of firearms the instant they touched the soil of this county.

From its location as a frontier settlement, every settler, as a rule, was provided with firearms of some description, rifles or smooth-bores, because a gun was almost as much a necessity as the axe and the plow. It is more likely that these earliest weapons came with the earliest pioneers than that they should have been made on the spot at the earliest period of the settlement. Just how early their manufacture here began will, perhaps, never be known with positive certainty. Governor Pownall, of New Jersey, who passed through the place in 1754, says: "A manufactory is here of guns." That, however, was about thirty years after the founding of the place itself, and he speaks of one establishment only.

The outbreak of the Revolution stimulated the industry to a wonderful degree all over the State, but especially in our own borough. Philadelphia, Bedford, Carlisle, Chester and

other places were noted for the manufacture of arms for the patriot forces. It was slow work in the beginning, because, as a rule, the gunmakers had only their own labor and perhaps that of an apprentice or a journeyman to depend upon. In ordinary times that was sufficient, but when the war broke out and the State Government needed guns, the establishments were enlarged and more hands were taken on. Not only had new guns to be made, but thousands of old ones repaired.

On October 7, 1775, the Provincial Council, sitting at Philadelphia, resolved, "That application be made by this Board to the Committee of Lancaster County, to collect in the Provincial arms now in that County, And send them down to this Committee as soon as possible, and that Mr. Owen Biddle draw up a letter to said Committee setting forth the necessity and propriety of this measure." The names of the gunsmiths in Lancaster between 1775 and 1780, so far as I have been able to learn them, were John Miller, Joel Ferree, John Fondersmith, Charles Jones, George Baur, James Reed, Robert Jones, Philip Wolfheimer, Jacob Dickert, Peter Reigart, Michael Withers, Christian Isch, John Messersmith, Peter Gonter, Frederick Farnot and Peter Roeser. William Henry, perhaps the most noted of our gunsmiths, and whose services to the Province were very great in various directions, was bred to the trade, and followed that pursuit from 1750 until his death in 1786. He learned it with Peter Roeser. In 1789 there were seven master-gunsmiths in Lancaster.

These, or, at least, some of them, entered into a contract with the House of Assembly to make arms for the State, but seem not to have shown the

alacrity required by the circumstances, and they were called before the Assembly to explain why they did not comply with the agreement. They did appear later, when several of them did agree to go to work on November 20, 1775, to make muskets and bayonets for the county at the same prices as were paid in Philadelphia, and to complete as many as they could from that time until March 1, following. The Committee of Safety at the same time resolved that all gunsmiths in Lancaster county who should refuse to go to work at gunmaking on the request of the committee, within two weeks after having been asked, should "have their names inserted in the minutes of the committee as enemies of their country, and be published as such, and their tools be taken from them, and they should not be allowed to carry on their trade." The price paid the gunsmiths for muskets at that time was £4.5s; for a gun barrel only 24s.

From that time on the manufacture of muskets and rifles in Lancaster for the use of the patriots was continuous until the close of the war. The industry reached large proportions. Sometimes as many as 300 rifles were ordered at one time by the Committee of Safety. As every part of the guns then had to be forged by hand, such an order may be considered as a very large one.

It seems Lancaster county's quota of guns under the first order or contract was 600, to be completed by March 1, 1776. On the 16th of that month the local Committee of Safety sent a letter to the Provincial Committee of Safety, in which, among other things, the following statement is made: "With Some Difficulty we at length contracted with our Gun Smith, to supply us with Muskets, Bayonets

& Steel Rammers at £4.5s. agreeable to the Pattern sent up here. Should the Philada Prices of Work of equal quality exceed that sum, they were to be entitled to a like advance. In consequence hereof, we have now got 200 Muskets made, but still have a Deficiency of 400. The term to which we limited our workmen expired on the 1st Instant. It was lately the unanimous Sentiment of the County Committee, that the Term Should be prolonged. We are apprehensive of meeting with many Obstacles in making a new contract. Our Workmen universally complain, that the sums already fixed are inadequate to their Labour;—that the Sacrifice they make in quitting their Rifle Business is greater than they can well bear without some Equivalent;—that the Prices in the Western Counties are much higher than these we insisted on, and they cannot in Justice to their Families, provide the Muskets & Bayonets at a less sum than £4.10s. or £4.15s. \* \* \* We look up to your Respectable Body for a Solution of our present Doubts. Some one uniform price will probably be adopted throughout the Province. We wish to know your Sentiments, how far we can go with Propriety, as to the sums to be allowed our Gun Smiths, as early as you can possibly favor us with them. This Board will implicitly follow the Directions given us.”

Later, things seem to have moved along more satisfactorily. On May 19, 1778, the Board of War instructed William Henry, Esq., as follows: “You will please to deliver to the order of the Hon. Council of Pennsylvania, one hundred common Rifles (without Bayonets), if you have or can procure that number speedily. A light Corps from Camp is expected at Lancaster & you will keep in view the providing them with what they want for further

Business. We mention this, as we have written to the Council, lest your stock should be exhausted by this Order." (Signed, Richard Peters.) Two months later, on July 15, the Council again wrote to William Henry, as follows: "The Council have ordered the Lieutenants of the county of Lancaster and Berks to call on you for what arms may be necessary to put into the hands of the militia now ordered into service from these Counties, and if arms cannot be had at Carlisle, the Lieut's of York and Cumberland will also apply to you to make up their deficiencies. These demands you will please to comply with as far as may be in your power." The number of militia called into service and alluded to in the above letter was 2,370. Of course, a majority already had arms, but the unarmed were, no doubt, numerous enough to give Mr. Henry work and worry enough to last him for some time.

Mr. Buell has either fallen into an error concerning Mr. Henry C. Leman, perhaps our best known rifle manufacturer, or there has been an error in transcribing his statement. As Mr. Leman was not born until March 8, 1812, Mr. Buell certainly cannot have a rifle made by him in 1800, as he states, and it cannot have been used at the battle of New Orleans. In correcting that mistake, a brief sketch of Mr. Leman's career as a rifle-maker in this city—the last person who carried it on on an extended scale—may not be out of place in a sketch of the rifle industry of this city, more especially as he was personally known to most of us assembled here.

As already stated, Mr. Leman was born in 1812, in this city. He became an apprentice to Melchoir Fordney, also a noted gunsmith—the Fordneys

have been a family of gunsmiths, and one of the name still follows the family trade—at the age of sixteen years, and served three years. Later he went to Philadelphia and for three years was a journeyman in the shop of George W. Tryon, a prominent gun-maker. In 1834 he returned to Lancaster and began business on his own account, first in part of his father's brewery, then at the corner of Walnut street and Cherry alley, and lastly on the south side of East James street, near Duke.

His first considerable order came from the well-known Lancaster merchant, John N. Lane, who, it seems, had a southwestern trade that called for rifles. The order was for fifty guns. During his first year his entire output was 250 rifles. In later years, when he manufactured on Government account, it reached thousands annually. In 1837 he got his first Government contract; it was for 1,000 rifles, and they were part of the bounty that was given certain Indians under treaties made with the Government. From that time until 1860, Mr. Leman had contracts with the Government continuously. His rifles became noted for their excellent shooting qualities and durability all over the West and Southwest, and Indians and Indian traders alike wanted them in preference to all others. The Hawkins rifle, made, I believe, in Missouri, was, however, a very prominent rival and an excellent weapon.

In 1861, after the breaking out of the Civil War, General Simon Cameron, then Secretary of War, offered him a contract for 250,000 rifles. This profitable contract was declined, because of the uncertainty of the duration of the war, and also because it would have detailed a heavy expense in the purchase of new and extensive

machinery. He, however, during the course of the war, converted thousands of old flint-lock guns into percussion ones for the Government, and did for it, in addition, an immense amount of repairing. His factory was carried on continuously after the war until his death, in 1887.

It is in my power to add personal testimony of the high esteem in which the Lemman rifle was held in the West and Southwest fifty years ago. Between 1857 and 1870 I was engaged in trade in those localities, making trips across the plains from Missouri to Mexico and also from the Gulf of Mexico into Arizona. During that time it was my fortune to meet many tribes of Indians, Apaches, Navajos, Comanches, Cheyennes, Kaws and Arapahoes, and most of them carried guns, as well as bows and arrows. When occasion offered, I took pains to look at the names of the makers, stamped on the weapons. By far the largest number were Lemman rifles, and inquiry always revealed the preference of these Indians for the Lancaster made guns over all others. It was possible to barter with the Indians for almost any of their possessions, but never for a Lemman rifle. I took occasion to tell these experiences to Mr. Lemman in later years, and the fact gave him no little pleasure. Mr. Lemman also told me that at one time the Government paid him a very large sum on a gun contract. Of course, payment was made in greenbacks. Gold was selling at about 220 above greenbacks. He did not know what to do with the money—how best to invest it. Finally, he turned it into gold, hoping to save it in that way. Peace came, the premium on gold fell rapidly, and he suffered a very large loss.

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