

Early Pistols

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

EUROPE'S FIRST HANDGUNS PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN SETTLING EARLY AMERICA AND SERVED AS MODELS FOR THE FAMED AMERICAN FLINTLOCK PISTOL. ALL OF THIS GIVES MODERN COLLECTORS A BROAD RANGE OF PISTOLS THEY CAN HUNT DOWN.



COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA

Arrah now, my Honey! and that Shot you! Cartoons such as this one, poking fun at dueling, were rare in the early 19th Century when the question of personal honor was pursued with grim seriousness. By mid-century, public sentiment had begun to turn against the practice. This engraving appeared in *God's Revenge Against Duelling: or, The Duelist's Looking Glass*, by Mason Locke Weems, 1821. (Weems is also the author of the George Washington biography that introduced the story of the honest lad who admitted to chopping down the cherry tree.)

British and French officers in the American Revolution carried ornate flintlock pistols as a distinction of their military rank and social standing. After the war, when the English crown was finally out of the hair of American gunsmiths, they created flintlock pistols so elegant that affluent gentlemen carried them solely to impress their peers. And if such gentlemen met with insult, they could turn to boxed pairs of fine flintlock dueling pistols to restore their honor.

Certainly these flintlock pistols carried considerable prestige, but American and European models alike were stunningly ineffective.

Their accuracy plummeted beyond a few feet, and moisture as fine as morning fog could render them useless.

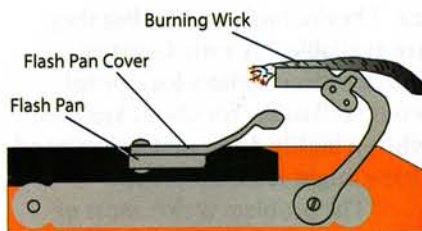
Still, collectors today avidly seek these early pistols for several reasons: they fall into historically fascinating groupings, an ample supply exists for purchase, many are affordable, and they exude an aura of romance.

"It's quite a large market, actually," according to Paul M. Ambrose of Trumbull, Connecticut, a noted collector and dealer. "There are literally thousands of pieces available, especially between the flintlocks and the early percussion pistols."

WICKS TO SPARKS

From the 1400s through the early 1800s, the mechanism for firing muzzle-loading guns was confined to two major types: the first relied on a lighted wick or “match”; the second borrowed the Stone Age principle that you could create fire by striking a piece of iron with a piece of flint.

The first firearm to appear in quantity on Europe’s fields of battle was a bulky contraption called the matchlock musket, so cumbersome it required a forked brace to support it. When a “musketeer” pulled the trigger, it brought a lighted wick in contact with a pan of priming powder that in turn ignited the powder in the barrel.



MATCHLOCK

The matchlock musket was the earliest firearm brought to the New World, first recorded in the 1520s as Spanish soldiers waded ashore on the Atlantic coast and again in 1540 as Francisco Vazquez de Coronado searched the southwestern American deserts for the Seven Cities of Cibola.

One account aptly sums up the matchlock in America. English explorer Henry Hudson suffered one of his worst encounters with Native Americans in 1609 as he explored the banks of the river that was to bear his name. Confronted with a hostile tribe, he ordered his troops to set up their matchlock muskets—which, if nothing else, had a reputation for frightening Indians with noise and smoke—and wait for the assault. The Indians looked skyward at the rain clouds and they too waited. When the downpour began, the warriors attacked and the English muskets failed to fire. Accordingly, Hudson’s men suffered heavy casualties.

Disasters such as Hudson’s en-

couraged European gunsmiths to do better. Using the spring-driven tinder-lighter as their model, gunsmiths in the mid-16th Century developed the wheel-lock ignition mechanism. The wheel lock resembles a modern cigarette lighter by incorporating a spring, set in motion by the gun’s trigger, to turn a rough metal wheel against a piece of flint. The action created a series of sparks that ignited the priming powder and fired the gun with far greater assurance than the matchlock ever could.

WORTH THE PRICE

Wheel-lock technology made possible the first functional pistol, a term believed to be derived from the 16th-Century French *pistole*, for “pipe.” Wheel-lock pistols were heavy, with long, straight grips favored by cavalrymen. Because their ignition mechanism proved superior to the matchlock, a number of early wheel-lock handguns made their way to the first English settlements in America. The earliest mention of any pistol in America is a 1586 journal entry by Ralph Lane, governor of the ill-fated Roanoke Island settlement, who cited several wheel-lock pistols in the Roanoke garrison.

Spanish explorer Don Juan de Onate led an expedition in 1597 into modern-day New Mexico, for which an inspection report certifies that he provided fifteen wheel-lock and nineteen matchlock guns to his men.

The Jamestown colonists also possessed what historians have con-

cluded was an ample supply of wheel locks, based on the number of rusty wheel-lock parts archaeologists have unearthed there. Several accounts describe Captain John Smith wielding pistols against the Powhatan, most notably on an excursion up the Chickahominy River in 1607, when he allegedly killed two warriors with his pistol while holding his own Indian guide as a human shield. Smith eventually threw away the pistol and was captured.

Further evidence suggests that the wheel-lock pistol found favor in early American settlements. Virginia martial laws in 1611 required that all targeteers—shield-bearing foot soldiers—carry pistols in addition to swords. (At that time, use of targeteers had ceased in Europe because shields proved ineffective against muskets. However, shields made a comeback in America because they still could deflect the arrows of Native American warriors.) A 1625 military census in Virginia tallied fifty-five pistols among the colony’s armament.

All wheel-lock pistols present in the colonies came over with European settlers. Their highly complicated firing mechanism was expensive to manufacture and beyond the skill of most gunsmiths to even repair, much less create.

“It has long been the fashion to dismiss the subject of the wheel lock in the English colonies with the statement that since the wheel lock was an expensive weapon and since



Pistols from the 16th Century could be extraordinarily ornate, like this c. 1580 German model. Called a “puffer” because of its wheel-lock firing mechanism and ball-butt stock—favored by soldiers so the pistol would not slip easily from their grips—this example has a fruitwood stock with plain and engraved ivory panels with stag-horn inlays. The grip has stag-horn pellets for decoration and scrimshaw panels depicting classical grotesques. Manufactured in Saxony, this example is worth at least \$35,000.

COURTESY OF PAUL M. AMBROSE ANTIQUES

FLASH IN THE PAN

He's a flash in the pan, that fellow who boasts so much but accomplishes nothing.

That familiar phrase is rooted in the flintlock's tendency to do the same thing—come on strong but fail to fire. The “pan” is the small cup that holds the priming powder. The “flash” is when the spark created by the flint strikes the frizzen and ignites the powder in a bright flash, but the flame fails to reach the powder in the barrel, so the gun doesn't fire.

And that was just one of the common problems with flintlocks.

In 1643, a distraught Maryn Adrianzen attempted to assassinate New Netherland's genocidal governor, Willem Kieft, at close range. But a nearby councilman jammed his thumb into the pistol's firing mechanism so no spark occurred, sparing Kieft's life so he could continue to slaughter Indians.

Nearly 200 years later, the first attempted assassination of an American president occurred January 30, 1835, when a deranged Englishman named Richard Lawrence tried to kill Andrew Jackson in South Carolina. Lawrence got to within 5 feet of Jackson and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Lawrence repeated his attempt with a second pistol, but again, nothing happened. A crowd including Davy Crockett wrestled Lawrence to the ground. Everyone figured the guns failed to fire because the day was so humid the powder became damp.

Even when pistols were fired successfully, they were notoriously inaccurate because, unless the barrels were rifled, the flight of the bullet was determined by where it last bounced against the inside of the barrel.

Ironically, inaccuracy is one reason pistols became the preferred weapon for dueling. The Code Duello of 1777 concerned honor more than killing, and everyone knew duelers were less likely to get hurt with pistols than rapiers. By the time each duelist stepped off 10 paces, they ended up at least 50 feet apart, well beyond the range of accuracy.

Case in point: In 1826, Secretary of State Henry Clay of Kentucky challenged Senator John Randolph of Virginia to a duel because he believed Randolph had impugned his character on the Senate floor. Clay's friend, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, a witness to the duel, described the scene.

Clay was unfamiliar with pistols, so Randolph allotted him extra time to aim. But Randolph's gun accidentally went off first while pointed at the ground. Clay fired and hit some gravel behind Randolph. Randolph took his second shot and wounded a nearby stump. Clay fired again and nicked Randolph's coat-tail. Randolph was afforded an extra shot because of his earlier hair-trigger incident.

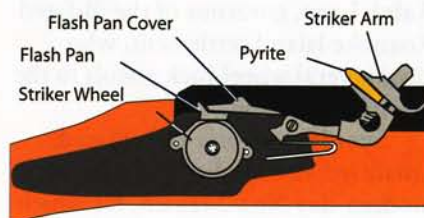
Randolph's final shot went high, so he extended his hand to Clay and, according to Benton, “Social relations were formally and courteously restored.”



COURTESY OF PAUL M. AMBROSE ANTIQUES

This c. 1620 wheel-lock military pistol, of German or Dutch origin, is typical of the earliest pistols brought to the New World by wealthy settlers. It has a plain stock of molded and carved fruitwood with unadorned iron mounts. The firing mechanism is typical of Dutch versions, with its exposed wheel and streamlined lock plate. Remnants of several similar wheel locks have been unearthed at early colonial settlements such as Jamestown, Virginia. Wheel locks are prized by collectors but difficult to find. This example is valued at \$15,000 or more.

the English colonies were generally poor, very few of these arms came to America as the private guns of the wealthy,” wrote Harold L. Peterson in his respected *Arms and Armor in Colonial America 1526-1783*. “Even though they were poor, the colonists were not always inclined to economize on matters which affected their life expectancy as closely as their weapons did.”



WHEEL LOCK

As rare as the wheel-lock pistol was during the 17th Century, a number survive, said Ambrose, himself a

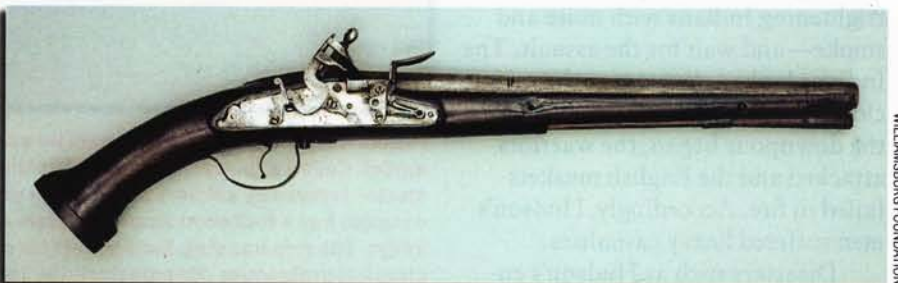
wheel-lock collector. “They’re mostly Dutch or German guns. No wheel lock was ever made in America. They’re fairly scarce, but they are available.” A 17th-Century Dutch officer's wheel-lock pistol would sell today for about \$10,000, while a highly decorated one in good shape might fetch \$30,000.

“The problem is that most of them are tied up in institutional collections,” Ambrose said. “Many are in the larger private collections and the owners are wealthy enough that they don't have to sell them for financial reasons, but only when they lose interest in them or want to upgrade their collections. Still, the wheel-lock pistol is a great investment piece. They go up in price every year and they're a very strong-selling gun.”

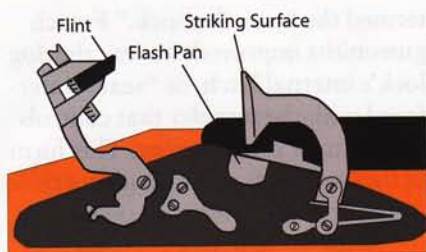
IMPROVING THE FLINTLOCK

Flintlock technology first appeared in the 1550s, when Dutch gunsmiths

So-called “dog lock” pistols, such as this one from Colonial Williamsburg, featured the addition of a small device that locked the hammer in either a cocked or half-cocked position to prohibit accidental discharge of the traditional flintlock. This English model is c. 1630, and similar examples have been found from early Virginia settlements up to Pilgrim sites in Plymouth, Massachusetts.



COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION



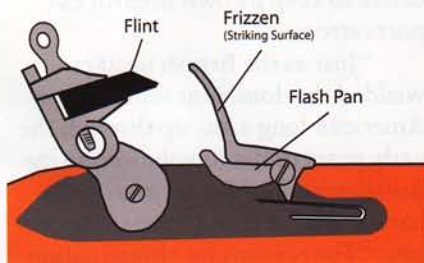
SNAPHAUNCE

attached a piece of flint to a spring-loaded cock that struck a metal plate over the pan and ignited the priming powder. Originally called a *snaphaunce*, for “snapping cock,” the beauty of this technology lay in its simplicity. More efficient than the wheel lock, it also cost considerably less to manufacture.

German gunsmiths remained wedded to the wheel lock and continued to enhance it for nearly another hundred years. Meanwhile, other European gunsmiths developed a number of enhancements to the new flintlock technology. These modifications cut short the reign of the *snaphaunce*, so that fewer of their remnants have been unearthed in America than any other form of flintlock.

English gunsmiths around 1610 developed the so-called English lock. It streamlined the firing mechanism by combining the priming pan and steel striking surface—which the English named a “frizzen”—into a single piece. The gun no longer needed a separate mechanism to slide the cover from the pan. The priming powder was exposed instantly when the hammer struck the frizzen.

But the innovation created a



FLINTLOCK

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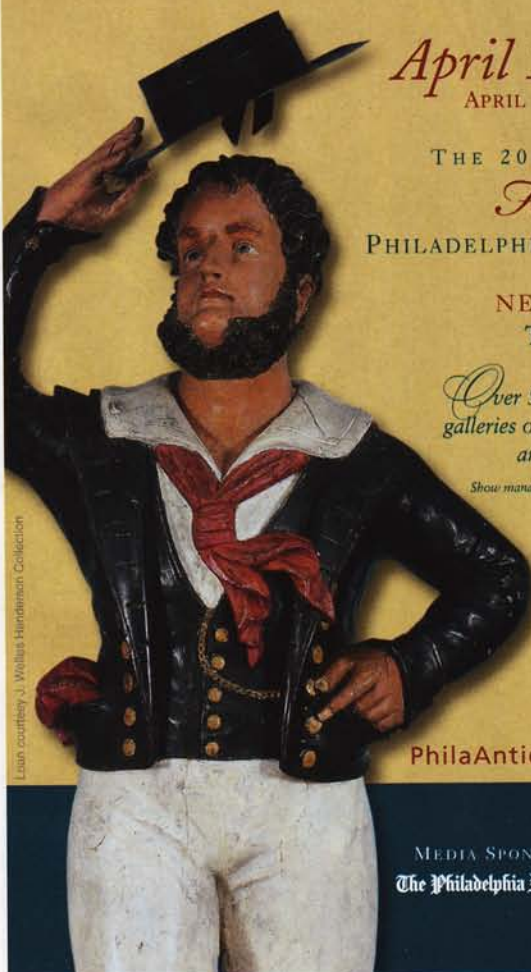
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Highland regiments around the time of the American Revolution carried the most peculiar flintlock pistols. Called “Scottish pistols” although they were made in London, they were all metal, including brass stocks. The ball-tipped triggers had no trigger guard. The pair pictured here are the most famous of the Scottish pistols, carried by Major John Pitcairn of the Royal Marines at the 1775 Battle of Lexington, Massachusetts, where some believe Pitcairn fired the legendary “shot heard ‘round the world” because of the distinctive sound a Scottish pistol makes when discharged.

hazard because the gun could no longer be carried in the cocked position without the danger of it accidentally discharging. So gunsmiths added a small latch called a “dog lock” to secure the hammer in either a cocked or half-cocked position. A prized artifact at Plymouth, Massachusetts, is the rare dog-lock pistol

belonging to Pilgrim John Thompson, who arrived at the colony in 1622. Within twenty-five years, the dog-lock had supplanted the English lock as the most common firearm in the colonies.

The final stage of flintlock development occurred in France about 1615, resulting in what is often

termed the “true flintlock.” French gunsmiths improved the way the dog lock’s internal latch, or “sear,” interfaced with the tumbler that controls the hammer’s mainspring. This form of flintlock began reaching American shores in quantity by 1660.

With the firing mechanism thus refined, the gun operated as follows: You loaded the flintlock by half-cocking the hammer and pouring a measure of gunpowder down the barrel. You then wrapped a lead ball in a small piece of cloth or paper and rammed it down the barrel until it reached the gunpowder. Then you put a small amount of gunpowder in the priming pan and snapped the frizzen in place to cover the pan. Finally, you fully cocked the hammer, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

EUROPEAN PREVALENCE

European flintlocks—pistols as well as muskets—surged through America as Britain and France shipped their well-equipped armies across the Atlantic to battle for dominion over the colonies, first in King William’s War from 1689 to 1697, then Queen Anne’s War from 1702 until 1713, King George’s War from 1740 to 1748, and finally the French and Indian War, starting in 1755.

By the time the French and Indian War concluded in 1763, Britain had won control of the American colonies and set into motion conditions that led to the eruption of the American Revolution twelve years later.

Pistols reached new levels of popularity in America during the pre-Revolutionary period, but it would be several years before they were being made in America due to a shortage of gunsmiths and England’s desire to keep its own firearm exports strong.

“Just as the British musket wielded the dominant influence on American long arms up through the early years of the Revolution, so the British pistol held sway among the hand guns,” wrote historian Peterson. “The reasons for this situation were the same: the predominance of imports from Great Britain and the

familiarity with British service arms through the frequent wars of the period."

As European manufacturing matured, producers of all types of goods began placing a greater emphasis on standardization, a trend that clearly affected firearms. During the reigns of William III and Queen Anne, barrels of British military pistols were usually fourteen inches long and the caliber was about .66, with wooden ramrods and brass mountings.

By George I in the 1720s the pistols uniformly had twelve-inch barrels and .60 caliber, with an ornamental raised band at the breech and brass-capped ramrods. By 1760, the barrel had standardized at nine inches and the caliber increased to .69. The grip grew thicker and shorter. Around the same time, the "box lock" came into prominence, moving the firing mechanism more to the center of the pistol, with the pan sitting directly on top of the barrel.



COURTESY OF PAUL M. AMBROSE ANTIQUES

Although beautifully crafted, dueling pistols were notoriously inaccurate firearms. One of London's finest gunsmiths of the flintlock era, W. H. Mortimer, created this cased pair of classic English dueling pistols, c. 1790, at the height of the dueling era. The mahogany-veneered, brass-mounted, Chippendale wooden case is lined with green baize. It holds dueling accessories, including a cleaning rod, powder flask, and bullet mold. The cased set has its original maker's trade label with Mortimer's address and a list of his various royal appointments. The set is worth approximately \$25,000.

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WASHINGTON'S PISTOLS END TREK AT WEST POINT

Two ornate flintlock pistols now housed in the museum at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point illustrate the long and winding road prized guns can sometimes travel in 250 years.

The perfectly matched pistols—created in 1748 by London gunsmiths John Hawkins and Richard Wilson—are superb examples of high-end flintlock pistols of the mid-18th Century. They are 14 inches long and feature brass barrels, full-length stocks of top grade English walnut, engraved trigger guards, and seven solid-silver inlays, including grotesques' masks on the handle butts. Their cutout silver side panels portray flags, cannons, drums, lions, and unicorns.

The pistols were first acquired by a man named Thomas Turner, whose grandfather had known George Washington when Washington was a boy. Turner gave the pistols to Washington in 1778, and the guns remained in the general's possession throughout the Revolutionary War. Shortly before he died in 1799, Washington bequeathed the pair to Bartholomew Dandridge, nephew of Martha Washington and his own secretary for six years. Dandridge died a few years later and Bushrod Washington—a U. S. Supreme Court justice and one of Washington's nephews—ordered Dandridge's belongings sold at a public sale.

Colonel Philip Marsteller of Alexandria, Virginia, a decorated Revolutionary War veteran, good friend of Washington, and the only non-Masonic pallbearer at his funeral, purchased the guns at the public sale "for a few pounds," according to court records. The pistols remained with the Marsteller family for the rest of the century, first with the colonel and then his son, Samuel Marsteller of Prince William County, Virginia. When the latter died around 1902, the guns were passed to his daughter, Miss Monnie Marsteller of Washington, D. C., by one of her brothers. Other relatives, however, brought the matter to court in Virginia, demanding that the pistols, whose value was now more accurately realized, be publicly sold.

For the next 50 years, the pistols traveled through the collections of Francis Bannerman, Edward Litchfield, and Clendennin Ryan until Ryan in 1953 presented them to the museum at West Point. In 1978, the U. S. Historical Society of Richmond, Virginia, commissioned a 975-pair limited edition of commemorative replicas of the pistols, offering the reproductions to the public for \$2,600, while the originals remained on display at West Point.

At the height of the Revolution, the French pistol became dominant, with large quantities imported and used by the Continental army and state militias. The French had no standard pistol until 1763, when the Royal manufactories produced standard pistols in two versions, one with iron mountings for the cavalry

and one with brass mountings for naval use. The barrel on both was nine inches and round for its entire length. Both versions were .67 caliber. The long, straight walnut stock had a slight swell at the butt. The ramrod was iron.

In 1777, the French began manufacturing a second standardized pis-

tol that resembled no other pistol of the day. The .67-caliber handgun had a barrel only seven and a half inches long tapering toward the muzzle. The butt dropped sharply and was covered with a brass butt cap. It had no fore stock under the barrel, giving the pistol a sleeker, less intricate profile. This pistol became the prototype for the first pistols made under contract to the new United States government after the Revolution.

Although Germans also made flintlock pistols, the few brought to America came with officers of the Hessian regiments supporting British troops during the Revolution. The guns were brass mounted and had round barrels and a larger caliber, generally .75.

"European flintlocks are a good market for collectors," Ambrose said. "Prices are all across the board. You can go from several hundred dollars for a small English or Belgium box-lock, say, up to several thousand dollars." For example, a 1763 model French pistol in good condition lists for just under \$4,000, while an English Queen Anne-style pistol runs about \$2,500 because they are more plentiful.

AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

A few European gunsmiths migrated to the colonies but found themselves confined to cleaning and repairing guns, frequently leaving the trade for more lucrative jobs. An analysis of early Virginia census information showed only eighteen gunsmiths serving about a half million colonists over a 150-year period. The earliest American-made pistols imitated English models and often used English gun parts.

The exception was eastern Pennsylvania—the Lancaster County area in particular—where a concentration of German and French gunsmiths settled and would play the leading role in developing the famed American flintlock.

"Rarely is there a name found on the barrels during this period because the English crown did not look with favor upon American gun-

smiths producing arms and possibly hurting their export trade of such arms to the colonies,” according to S. E. Dyke, a noted American fire-arm historian. “Further, as we approached the Revolutionary War, the gunsmiths would not put their names on their arms because of possible retaliation on the part of the crown government.”

The years following the Revolution—from about 1781 through about 1814—are the heyday of the American flintlock, often referred to as the “Kentucky pistol” or the “Pennsylvania pistol.” (The name, as with the corresponding “Kentucky rifle,” is the source of much speculation. Many historians conclude that most of the guns bearing these names were made in Pennsylvania but immortalized in a rousing song praising the Kentucky militia during the War of 1812—“the Kentucky men and their Kentucky rifles”—hence their popularity as “Kentucky” rifles or pistols.)

This distinctive pistol had a uniquely curved stock usually of curly maple or cherry. American makers abandoned the use of European-based designs such as a lion or dog’s face on the butt cap in favor of a plain or engraved surface. They frequently used rolled brass, which became available during this period,



COURTESY OF PAUL M. AMBROSE ANTIQUES

This flintlock, exhibiting many of the characteristics of a typical Kentucky pistol, came from New England, made by a gunsmith known only as “McDermott.” Recently discovered in Middletown, Connecticut, it dates from about 1800. Its stock is a typical Federal design with the “cane handle” grip found on most Kentucky pistols, but its stock is black walnut rather than the maple used in Kentucky examples. The gun is valued at about \$2,700.

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This excellent example of a War of 1812-era brass-barreled flintlock is called an "American Secondary Martial Flintlock" because, while made in America, it incorporates an English firing mechanism and barrel, the latter marked "London." T. Ketland & Company, which had shops in London and Philadelphia, made the flintlock. Its molded and carved full stock is American black walnut in typical Federal style. It's valued at about \$2,600.

for the pistol's side plates and fashioned fully octagonal, rifled barrels engraved with the maker's name.

"Like the Kentucky rifle, the pistol was streamlined, made lighter and more graceful looking," Dyke stated in his tract, *Thoughts on the American Flintlock Pistol*. In the world of pistols, the American flintlock of this period has the same cachet as the celebrated Kentucky or Pennsylvania rifle—that of a beautiful and distinctive firearm of exceptional performance.

"The Kentucky or Pennsylvania pistol has a true style to it," Ambrose stressed. "There are several definitive shapes and, among experts, some can tell you what town the gun was made in based on the particular shape, though this holds true more with the rifles than with the pistols."

From 1814 to 1825, the American military pistol was standardized in both appearance and manufacture, becoming less expensive and more popular. Consequently the popularity of the "Kentucky" pistol waned.

"What few Kentucky pistols were made (during this later period) were for gentlemen and officers," Dyke noted. "I have noticed that the Kentucky pistols of this latter period seem to be either very plain and well made, or extremely highly inlaid and engraved."

Collectors' prices for the "Kentucky" pistol begin at about \$5,000

and can climb considerably higher depending on style and condition.

END OF AN ERA

Needing to arm its new military, Congress in 1798 contracted for the mass production of firearms. Congress awarded the contract for U. S. military pistols to Simeon North of Middletown, Connecticut, just twenty miles up the road from New Haven, where Eli Whitney got a contract to build muskets. North borrowed the practice from European clockmakers of using interchangeable parts. From 1799 until 1836, he produced a line of military pistols that were dependable and durable. Today they are highly collectible.

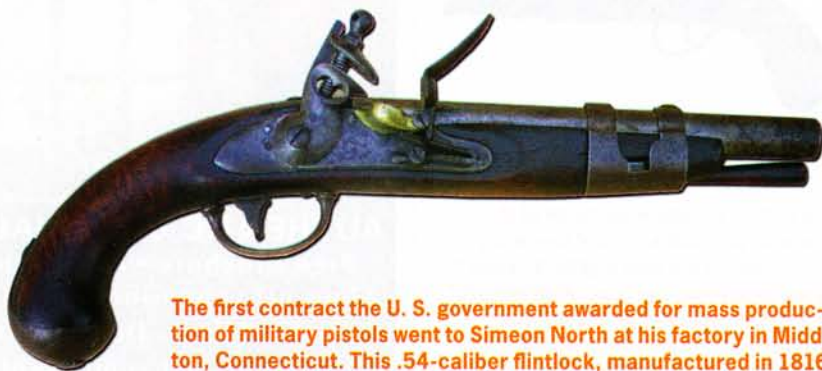
"Many collectors want U. S. martial flintlock pistols because you

can get an example of each model, like collecting coins," Ambrose noted. "The nice thing about the U. S. martial pistols is that there are only two or three models that are prohibitively expensive. The rest are all affordable at about \$3,000, though some might run as much as \$10,000." The exception is the first line North produced, the 1799 model pistol, which is extremely rare and worth about \$60,000.

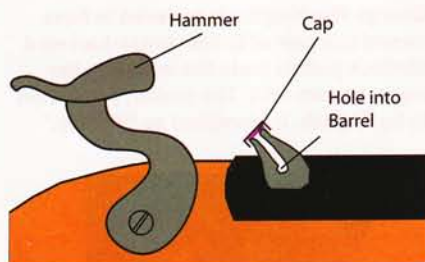
The era of the flintlock ended with adoption of the percussion-cap ignition mechanism. John Forsyth, a Scottish clergyman, invented the concept in 1805. Others later improved upon it, including an American named Joshua Shaw, who patented the mechanism in 1822.

The percussion cap, made of brass or copper, contained fulminate of mercury—which explodes when struck—placed on the top of a small tube, or nipple, on the firing mechanism. When the percussion cap is struck by the gun's hammer, the spark flies into the barrel and ignites the gunpowder. This method was considerably more reliable than the previous spark-and-pan method and far less vulnerable to inclement weather.

In America, the percussion cap first appeared on military carbines and pistols about 1833. Within two decades, the armies on both sides of the Civil War were using the percussion firing system with devastating reliability.



The first contract the U. S. government awarded for mass production of military pistols went to Simeon North at his factory in Middletown, Connecticut. This .54-caliber flintlock, manufactured in 1816, has a band-fastened iron barrel and nicely figured walnut stock. Its original firing mechanism bears a lock plate marked with an eagle and "S. North US Midl.Con" stamped under the brass powder pan. These early U. S. military pistols are among the most collectible of early American firearms. This one is valued at about \$3,000.



PERCUSSION

CONFUSING ORIGINS

Collectors of American flintlock pistols often face the challenge of determining whether the gun's origin is American or European.

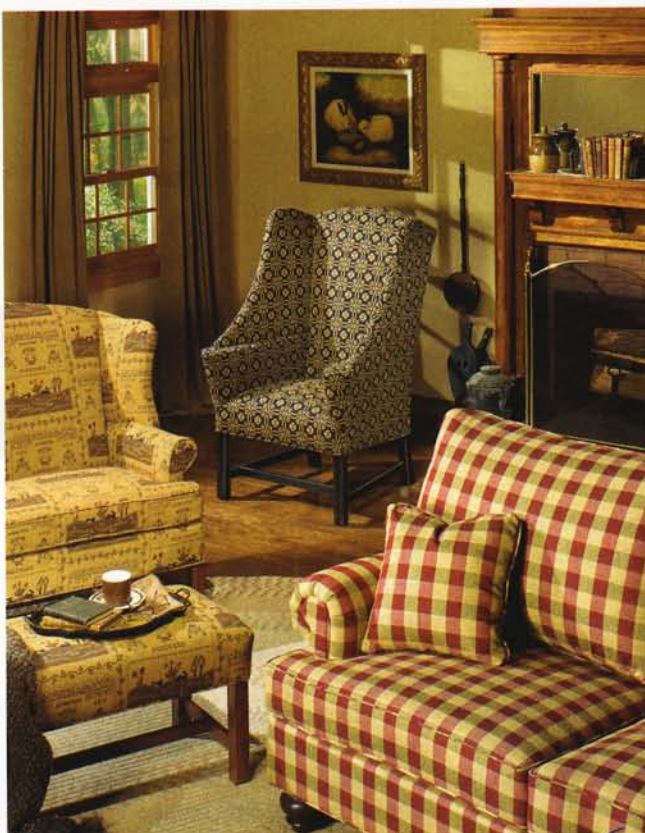
"There can be some difficulty, because many of the American pistols manufactured here during the colonial period—especially in the 1730s and 1740s—were made from European parts," Ambrose said. "They were usually styled after the English or French pistols, which were the most common pistols found here during that timeframe. So the stock might be American but the hardware European and the gun would have a European appearance."

Quality of workmanship can be a clue to origin, but one with a twist. "Sometimes, on the guns of the early colonial period, the crudeness of the work is a dead giveaway," Ambrose noted. "The early American gunsmiths just were not as skilled as the English, who had their guild system."

Pennsylvania gunsmiths proved the exception. Some circa 1750 Pennsylvania-made pistols were attributed to the English because the workmanship was considered too good to have been colonial.

"Many of the gunsmiths who made these guns were immigrants who had left Europe for religious protection. Some were guild trained or the descendants of guild-trained gunsmiths and they knew what they were doing," Ambrose explained.

Wood is another indication of origin, but one also requiring caution. "One giveaway is if the gun is stocked in tiger or curly maple, which is an exclusively American wood," Ambrose said. "Also, guns stocked in cherry are, generally



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George Washington is believed to have owned this pair of British brass-barreled flintlock pistols (note the initials in the inset, bottom left). The maker, presumed to be English, is identified as "Woolley."



speaking, American guns. Most of the guns in Europe during this period are stocked in what is called European walnut, while some American gunsmiths used American, or black, walnut for stocks."

Ambrose pointed out that modern analysis equipment can be a final arbiter: "Sometimes to be absolutely sure, you actually have to take a small piece of wood from the barrel channel or someplace else where it would never be noticed and have it analyzed. In fact it can be done free of charge, if you're an American citizen, by the U. S. Forest Service."

KNOWLEDGE IS KEY

The more you know about early pistols, the more fulfilling collecting them will be. You can focus on any of several categories and subcategories in varying price ranges and degrees of availability. Building a fundamental library and visiting museums are the biggest aids to the new collector, Ambrose explained.

"I always stress getting some

books beforehand," he said. "For most of these pieces, the entry-level price is about \$2,000. If you're going to be making investments of that nature, the cost of the books pales in comparison."

He recommends examining vintage firearms firsthand and lists Colonial Williamsburg, Winterthur Museum, Old Sturbridge Village, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cody Firearms Museum in Cody, Wyoming, and Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, as worthy places to visit.

"One value of looking at guns in the museums is that you get an eye for patina," Ambrose noted. "There's a certain way they look after 150 or 200 years. The wood has a certain color to it. The metal has a certain patina to it. These are the things that are very difficult for a forger to fake."

So, are fakes a problem? It might be difficult to tell an original from a quality reproduction, but most of the latter have "something on them to

indicate they're reproductions," Ambrose answered. "Some might say 'Black Power Only,' or some might have the caliber stamped on the barrel—things that don't appear on the originals." The area of greatest risk is at the very high end, such as the 1799 Simeon North martial flintlock pistol, a temptation for an unscrupulous maker when the original is valued at \$60,000.

But collectors face another hazard, one that can cut the value of a supposed flintlock in half. "The biggest problem when it comes to flintlocks is what is called a 'reconversion,' which is a gun that started its life as a flintlock, but during the 1830s or 1840s was converted to percussion when the technology switched over and the owners wanted to give the gun the longest possible lifespan," Ambrose said.

"Then, about sixty years ago, when people really started collecting antique guns, they realized that flintlocks were worth more than the percussion models, simply by numbers

Esteemed London gunsmith Daniel Goff created this fine Revolutionary-period English flintlock pistol with a slightly flared, .62 caliber, 5-inch, smoothbore barrel. Its nicely figured walnut grip has a pronounced pommel and English-silver hallmark mounts of classic Queen Anne design. The pistol features an unusual box-lock firing mechanism with finely engraved borders and central panels. Goff worked in London from 1775 to 1839 and was also a gun maker for the East India Company. It is worth about \$2,300.



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alone. Some people then reconverted them—put parts back on them to make them flintlocks again. It's not really a fake, but it's not what it's being described as either."

The way around issues of origin, authenticity, and reconversion is for a collector to do business with a knowledgeable and reputable dealer, who usually can be found through gun shows, gun clubs, and on the Internet. Ambrose encourages collectors to check out the dealer's reputation as much as possible. That's also why he's wary of auctions and estate sales.

"They're much riskier," he explained. "My caveat to a novice who buys at an estate sale or auction is that most of them sell things 'as is' and have no return policy whatsoever. If you're a gambler, you can sometimes do pretty well at estate sales if you know what you're buying."

"However, I always recommend that novices do business with knowledgeable dealers, someone they can trust, someone who's been in business for a while, and someone who will be there tomorrow if a problem arises," he continued. "You may have to pay a bit more by going to a dealer—obviously the dealer needs to stay in business—but you're going to get what you're expecting to get." ★

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*. In researching this article, he learned that an early Pennsylvania ancestor, Philip LeFevre (1710-66), was one of Lancaster County's first gunsmiths and created a number of pre-Revolutionary muskets and pistols.

Drawings of the pistols' firing mechanisms are courtesy of Viken Nokhodian, www.sca-isles.org

SOURCES

Paul M. Ambrose Antiques
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www.ambroseantiques.com

For further reading, see book list on www.EarlyAmericanLife.com/sources

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