

Overall length: 52" (muzzle to anterior of butt plate spike)

Stock: dark curly maple; 13" length of pull from front trigger to center of butt plate; sculpted curved cheek piece 6 ½" by 2 5/8" (at widest)

Barrel: octagon, 13/16th" x 36"

Bore: .39 caliber

Brass fittings: rather fancy trigger guard; plain deeply curved butt plate; two plain ramrod thimbles; blade of front sight; tiny, hand-cut brass teardrop side plate; no toeplate



Cheekpiece of J. S. Fowler rifle, Belmont County, Ohio.

Iron: nicely dressed double-set triggers; thin iron trigger-plate; a pointed, scalloped tang/breech plug, 2 3/8" in length; rear sight, 9 ½" from breech; front sight base, 1 1/8" back from muzzle

Sources:

Hutslar, Donald A. (n.d.). *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen, Vol. I. Association of Ohio Long Rifle Collectors.* (printed by Josten's Printing, State College, PA).

Smith, Mark, John R. Coe, and James Biser Whisker (2018). *Arms Makers of West Virginia.* Bedford Village Press (Create Space Amazon).



Wrist of J. S. Fowler rifle, Belmont County, Ohio showing nose of stock.

THE BODENHEIMER VOLUTE: FUNCTIONAL SYMBOLISM

BY MARK BENDER

A large curling volute ending in a circle is an outstanding and often remarked upon feature of many cheekpieces of rifles signed by "W. Bodenheimer." Some barrel stampings, occasionally in pairs, also contain the attribution of Lancaster, Ohio (Everett 1982:4). Lancaster, of course, is the county seat of Fairfield County Ohio and was the home to several outstanding Ohio gunsmiths during the 19th century. These craftsmen include Martin Beeman, Peter King, John Lowmaster, Samuel S. Thompson, George W. Claspill, etc. (Hutslar 1973:111-115; Spiker and Whisker: 2013: 26). A William A. Bodenheimer is listed from the 1820s into the 1860s in local trade indexes, noted as a gunsmith and wheelwright (as well as a maker of spinning wheels). Examining the dates has sometimes been baffling, until it was understood that there was two William Bodenheimers, the elder with dates 1799-? and the son, William, with dates 1824-1882. The elder

Bodenheimer seems to have migrated to Lancaster from Adams County Pennsylvania with his wife Mary Ann around 1826, the same time the gunsmiths Thompson and Claspill were active in Lancaster.

The craft of wheelwright (that is someone who makes and repairs carriage and wagon wheels) is associated with both Williams during parts of their lives. Although it is unclear how the elder Bodenheimer learned his rifle building skills (beginning in Pennsylvania), the wheelwright trade shares many skills with that of gun making, especially in the precise wedding of wood and metal. Several sources note the use of globe sights on target rifles, which must have been produced in the later stages of the elder's career, or by William the younger. It is interesting to speculate on whether the double stamped rifles indicate that father and son contributed to the making of the guns, or whether it was an aesthetic choice or some unfathomable reason.

As demonstrated by the half dozen Bodenheimer marked rifles displayed at the April 2023 Annual Meeting of the Association of Ohio Long Rifle Collectors in Marietta (see accompanying photo essay), the Bodenheimer-made firearms range in quality and adornment from plain and utilitarian objects of folk art to exquisitely decorated works of art that, though stylistically different, are in terms of quality of execution on par with many Golden Age long rifles earlier in the century. As one experienced member noted to this author, one of the rifles on display was among the “top ten finest rifles” ever made in Ohio.

That rifle is in full stock configuration – rare for existing Bodenheimer rifles -- the tight curly maple is set with profuse, engraved German silver/silver inlays and inlaid wire. The rifle has an engraved lock with a fancy wrought hammer, fine brass furniture, and a 37 ¼ in. barrel of around .32 cal. Gracefully melded into the buttstock are two large carved volutes which swirl out from a round abalone inlay, which changes color depending upon the angle of light. Forward of the volute is an inlay pattern with six volutes rising from an empty circle, three to the left and three to the right (see illustrations). Behind each large, carved volute is an intricate floral inlay in the pattern of four blossoming flowers issuing from a stem that could be interpreted as the pistil of a flower, as well as a leaf issuing from between the flower stems on each end. Thus, the volute pattern is represented in three separate clusters upon the wooden stock, which integrates them into one work of art. Other inlays in white metal include an intricately lobed plate on the belly of the fore stock, acorn-like inlays directly after the lock, an engraved side plate, and barrel key inlays on the fore stock -- all made in symmetrical patterns.

Following the principle of form follows function, a close examination of the cheek pieces on a plain Bodenheimer rifle (see measurements below) that feature volutes and a stock configuration similar to the ornamented example just described, reveals that the double cheekpieces help hold the stock against a shooter's face in an angle that lines up well with the sights. In comparison to many mid-19th century half stock percussion sporting rifles that developed under Germanic and British influences, the wrist area of both the fancy and the plain Bodenheimer rifles are relatively high. In cross section, the wrist of the plain

Bodenheimer rifle under discussion measures about 1 1/8” in width by 1 ¾” in height and though appearing thin from a downwards look, seems substantial enough to resist breakage by the heavy 1 1/8” barrel of a gun weighing approximately 15 pounds. Besides effective engineering, a high wrist allows the lines of the volute to curve downwards and flow into a lengthy curl that ends with a circle in the middle of the cheekpiece. Instead of a piece of inlaid abalone, this circle on the plain gun is carved from the existing wood, as is its mirror image cheekpiece on the reverse side. On both rifles, incised lines help highlight the curve all the way around.

Symbols anyone?

Symbolism has been imbued in many firearms and earlier weapons far into antiquity. Like their peers the Bodenheimers were products of early to mid-19th century America, which in Ohio included many persons of Germanic and British Isles background, as was certainly the case in Fairfield County. It is likely that the Bodenheimers would have been subject to the moral, religious, and political winds of the day and may have incorporated certain symbolic elements into their work (assuming that we are referring to a father and son within their intersecting careers). The years leading up and through the Civil War (1860-1865) were times of dynamic change in Ohio and across the continent. Many new ideas and new knowledge were being created as scientific and industrial revolutions took place, not to mention the massive social changes brought about by settlement and immigration and internal migration. Firearms offered a medium in which artistic talent could be expressed, entwined with symbols of belief systems that made perilous existence (in a land of plenty) more certain and bearable. It is little wonder that symbols of personal protection, if not good luck, adorned various items of folk culture used in daily life, guns amongst them. In the case of the Bodenheimer rifles that exhibit patterns of volutes, whether in wood or metal, an underlying meaning may be at play.

Curved volute patterns are found on a variety of art and folk art from North Africa (especially Egyptian, with the “Eye of Horus” being an example), Middle East, Eastern Asia, Europe, the New World, and elsewhere. Many examples are found in arabesque and rococo art that influenced patterns used on American