

COMMODORE PERRY HATCHER RIFLE DETAILS

BY MARK BENDER

Regional Background

The small community of Morristown lies just north of Rte. 70 East in Belmont County, Ohio, on what was once the National Road from 1811-1827, that connected the Potomac River in Maryland across a 620 mile strip westwards across to the Ohio river clear to Vandalia, Illinois. The road was the first major public highway in the US and served as a conduit for settlers seeking to populate the new states formed after the Northwest Territory era (National Road, Wikipedia). It was also the route that many gunsmiths used to enter Ohio and consequently share influences along the road and the major and minor waterways it crossed. Attesting to their legacy is the term “National Road” style of patch box that in various forms appears on numerous rifles of the mid-Ohio Valley and connecting land and water routes in the early 19th century when full stock flintlock rifles were still king into the percussion period.

By examining the records and existing rifles, it becomes apparent that by mid-century that another wave of influences occurred among gunsmiths in the area along the National Road and its later replacements that can be traced on the map from Wheeling, then St. Clairsville on through Belmont County that shared certain features with certain rifles by other makers in the mid-Ohio Valley down at least to Marietta. These rifles tend to be in half-stock percussion format, with less elaborate patch or cap boxes and ranging from having no adornment other than form to being embedded with numerous white metal (German silver or silver) inlays and featuring certain equations of stock features. Although more organized research needs to be done, it is interesting to ponder what seem to be certain stylistic connections among certain rifles of several gunmakers of the area. However, it must be admitted that many features could appear literally anywhere in Ohio and surrounding areas due to the shifts in technology, styles, ease of movement across the land and waterways, and availability of increasingly standardized parts from suppliers like Tryon of Philadelphia. It is also recognized that certain maker created rifles in a variety of styles and formats, ranging from plain squirrel rifles

to elaborate virtuoso pieces. This article will take a close look at a rifle produced probably in the 1850s by a gunsmith working in Morristown named Commodore Perry was, Hatcher (Fig. 1). The name is somewhat of a mystery, as Hatcher was born in 1817 and died in 1888.



Fig. 1. Commodore Perry half stock rifle, patch box side.

What is in a name?

There were two prominent naval officers – both brothers who served in the war of 1812 and were of New England Pilgrim stock. The elder was Oliver Hazard Perry, known as the “Hero of the Battle of Lake Erie” and the namesake of the Perry’s Victory and International Peace monument near Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie. This Perry would certainly have been known to Hatcher’s parents in 1817. Oliver’s sibling was Matthew Calbraith Perry, who served briefly in the war of 1812, and later in the Mexican-war and other events. He was most notably the commander of the fleet of “black ships” (one was a smoke-belching steam powered ship) that appeared in Tokyo Bay in 1852 and demanded on behalf of the United States that that Japan, which had been closed to most foreign trade for 250 years, be opened for business. What is puzzling is that this Perry was not made a “commodore” until 1840, well after Hatcher’s birth. A look at the Hatcher website did not bring this writer any additional insights into the naming question. Was Commodore Perry Hatcher the birth name, or a later appellation? It is interesting that one of Hatcher’s sons was named Zachary Taylor Hatcher, which seems to show a family proclivity (not uncommon in the era) for naming children after famous people. In this case it was the ill-fated 12th president of the United States (1849-1850), a military man of the War of 1812 through the Mexican-

American War, who died suddenly in office of stomach cancer (Wikipedia).

Whatever the case with his name, Donald A. Hutslar in Vol. 1 (p. 46) of *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen* notes that the name was recorded in various ways in the U.S. Census records in the 1850 recording as "Commodore Hatcher" and in 1860 as "Commodore P. Hatcher, both records recording his residence as Union Township, the site of Morristown. The records indicate he married Sarah A. Tener from Maryland, the wedding taking place in Goshen Township, Belmont County on December 14, 1837. The couple had several boys and girls, all but one born in Ohio.

In an article in the September 2015 issue of *Muzzle Blasts*, Dr. James B. Whisker gives detailed information on Hatcher and his family, noting like Hutslar that the gunsmith was born on September 15, 1817 in Belmont County, Ohio, son of "William and Mary Smith Hatcher" (Whisker, p. 49). (It should be noted that the birthplace attribution in the Find A Grave site [January 2024] differs from Hutslar and Whisker, indicating Hatcher was born on February 4, 1817 in Virginia.)

Whisker notes that he "first encountered Hatcher while researching his book on West Virginia gunsmiths. He was listed in 1839 as P. Commodore Hatcher in J.B. Bowen's *Wheeling Directory* ... as a gunsmith at 25 Water St., South of Wheeling." Whisker also speculates that the son, Josiah, the son not born in Ohio, was born in Virginia - most likely being born in Wheeling (now in West Virginia). Thus, we have another instance of a gunsmith in the Tri-State area working in more than one state. The article also has pictures of the fancy full stock rifle illustrated in Vol. 1 discussed below (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Fancy Hatcher rifle* (James B. Whisker photo)

Hutslar notes that Hatcher's house and the foundation of his rifle shop was still standing in 1973, and that "many firearms are known, including a late flintlock" (p. 46). Also, Hatcher's "personal rifle has no patch box but has 40 inlays" that was stamped "C.P. Hatcher". Two other full stock rifles were similarly stamped, one with brass and silver inlays and another with a back action percussion lock are listed. A half stock rifle

with a configuration similar to the one described later in this article, which sold recently on the Old Barn Auction site, was listed as being marked "P.P. Hatcher".

Hatcher Rifles

Vol. I of Hutslar includes photographs by James B. Whisker of an ornate Hatcher full stock rifle with crisp, gracile lines, tight curly maple stock figure, a National Road style patch box in German silver, and numerous ornate German silver inlays, some in curvilinear style, and all (as Whisker notes in his article) unengraved (Hutslar, Vol. 1, p. 58). Whisker notes the coating of orange shellac, common in the era, and the inlays on the wrist which he describes as a regional feature of the Tri-State area guns produced around 1860 (Whisker, p. 49).

Hutslar (p. 46) also notes that there is a record from 1833 of a person named John Hatcher - who might have been somehow related to Commodore -- who "bought several gunsmithing tools at the estate auction of Otho Sheetz". The Sheetz family being known as a huge family of gunsmiths in the Tri-State area), and Otho moved from the famous rifle making area of Hampshire County (West) Virginia to Flushing Township in Belmont County, Ohio in 1824 (Hutslar p. 49). According to Find A Grave, Hatcher died of heart disease on September 15, 1888 and was interred in the St. Clairsville Union Cemetery, where a headstone can be found today. An auction of Hatcher's estate held in 1889 lists numerous tools, including a grindstone (10 cents), a vise, bench planes, auger, anvil, saws, etc. as well as two rifles, one "taken by the widow" valued at \$2.50 (Hutslar p. 46). It is interesting that the tools listed are similar to those listed in the 1833 estate auction of Sheetz (Smith, Coe, and Whisker 2018: 90).

A Robust Half Stock Rifle

The rifle under examination in this article is a robust example of a mid-19th century percussion half stock rifle that would have been used for shooting matches and, although a weighty piece, for hunting in the hills and valleys of the area. The heavy 36 ½ inch barrel is deeply rifled in about .41 caliber. The modestly figured curly maple stock is inlaid with eight white metal inlays in simple geometrical patterns. The inlays are unengraved, the largest being an oval on the sharply curved cheekpiece. One inlay on the side opposite the lock is a plain rectangle which contrasts with the four elliptical inlays on the fore stock and the