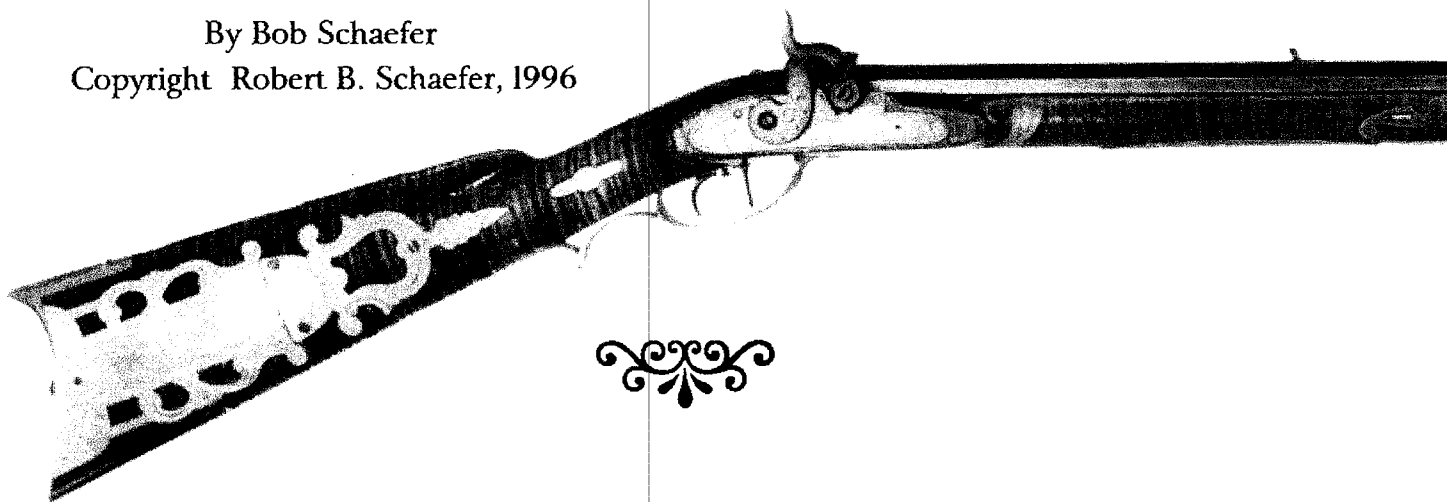


# A History of the Ross County Barnharts As Gunsmiths

By Bob Schaefer

Copyright Robert B. Schaefer, 1996



Johan Matthias Bernhard was born in 1730 in his native southern Germany, by some accounts in Bavaria and by others in what was known as the Palatinate. His father in Germany was Matthias Bernhard, and Johan Matthias, by almost all accounts, used Matthias as his given name (therefore, for purposes of this history, I will refer to Johan Matthias Bernhard as "Matthias Bernhard"). At the age of about 20 and presumably as a single man, he left his homeland for America.

Matthias Bernhard qualified as a proper person to enter Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 15, 1750, having sailed on the ship Royal Union, commanded by Clement Nicholson. The ship had sailed from Rotterdam, The Netherlands, with a port call at Portsmouth, England. On the same day, he swore allegiance to the King of England (as did all immigrants), an oath which was administered at the

Philadelphia court house by the mayor, Thomas Lawrence. (Pennsylvania Archives, Series II, Volume 17, Page 313; Pennsylvania German Pioneers, Volume I, Page 432.)

From 1750 to 1765, it is not known where Matthias lived or what he did, but he probably farmed in some manner, and may have been handy in other disciplines. There are no known listings of land ownership by Matthias during this time, but he probably resided in the area around or in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

On April 27, 1765, he married Anna Margaretha Biegel at Eppler's Church in Lancaster County. By 1768, the Bernhards were residents of Robeson Township in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Matthias owned 200 acres there, and must have lived in Berks County during the first years of the Revolutionary War, for he

received £4.6.11 for serving a tour of active duty with the Berks County Militia. During this time period, the Bernhards have the following children:

Magdalena (Born 1767)  
William Henry (Born 1769)  
Matthias (Born 1770)  
Lorentz (Born April 3, 1772)

Northumberland unit from 1778 to 1783, during the Revolutionary War, under the command of Captain John Foster. After his mustering out in 1783, Matthias received "depreciation pay" from Pennsylvania for his participation in the War.

After the War, in the year 1783,

On June 9, 1772, Matthias received a land grant, signed by Richard Penn, granting to him the right to purchase 100 acres in Turtle Creek Township, Northumberland County. On October 19, 1772, Matthias sold this land back to the Penns, possibly to secure land adjoining land that his brother-in-law had purchased by grant in Buffalo Township, Northumberland County. On March 31, 1775, he received a second land grant, signed by John Penn, granting to him the right to purchase 102 1/2 acres in Buffalo Township, adjoining the property of his brother-in-law, William Henry Biegel.

During this time, two other children were born to the Bernhards, George (birthdate unknown) and Margaret (Born 1776). George died in 1793, probably of the Yellow Fever.

In 1778, Matthias was listed as a private in the Rangers of the Northumberland, Pennsylvania County Militia, so apparently around this time the Bernhard family had moved from Berks County to Northumberland. In 1780, Matthias appears on the Northumberland tax lists, so by this time they had certainly moved west. Matthias served with the

Matthias and his wife Anna Margaret acquired her brother's 114 acres of ground in Buffalo Township of Northumberland County, Pennsylvania. Matthias lived out the rest of his days in Buffalo Township, and died without a will on April 1, 1794. After Matthias' death, his eldest son, William Henry bought out the interests of the other heirs, presumably to keep the farm intact.

It is probably safe to say that during this time period, the Bernhards farmed the soil, but it is also apparent that they were accomplished in other trades. After William Henry purchased the family farm and settled up on monies due to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, "[t]he other brothers, Lorentz and Matthias, Jr. obtained farms and settled nearby" ("Matthias Barnhardt," Earl Barnhart and Harold Barnhart, unpublished manuscript, 1942). The sisters, Magdalena and Margaret, married Peter and Adam Goetz, respectively, and also appear to have settled nearby. As the excerpt above refers to the younger Matthias as "Matthias, Jr.", we will also refer to him in this manner, even though it is not directly known if he or others referred to him as such. It is Matthias, Jr. and Lorentz who are the

forefathers of the Barnhart families of Ross County. Matthias, Jr. was married to Margaret Catherine Keller in Union County, presumably in Buffalo Township. Lorentz would later marry Elizabeth Keller (Margaret's sister) in 1802.

While in Buffalo Township, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, the following children were born to Matthias, Jr. and Margaret:

- George (Born 1798)
- William (later to be known as "William the Elder," Born November 12, 1802)
- John (Born February 23, 1806)
- Samuel (Born 1810)

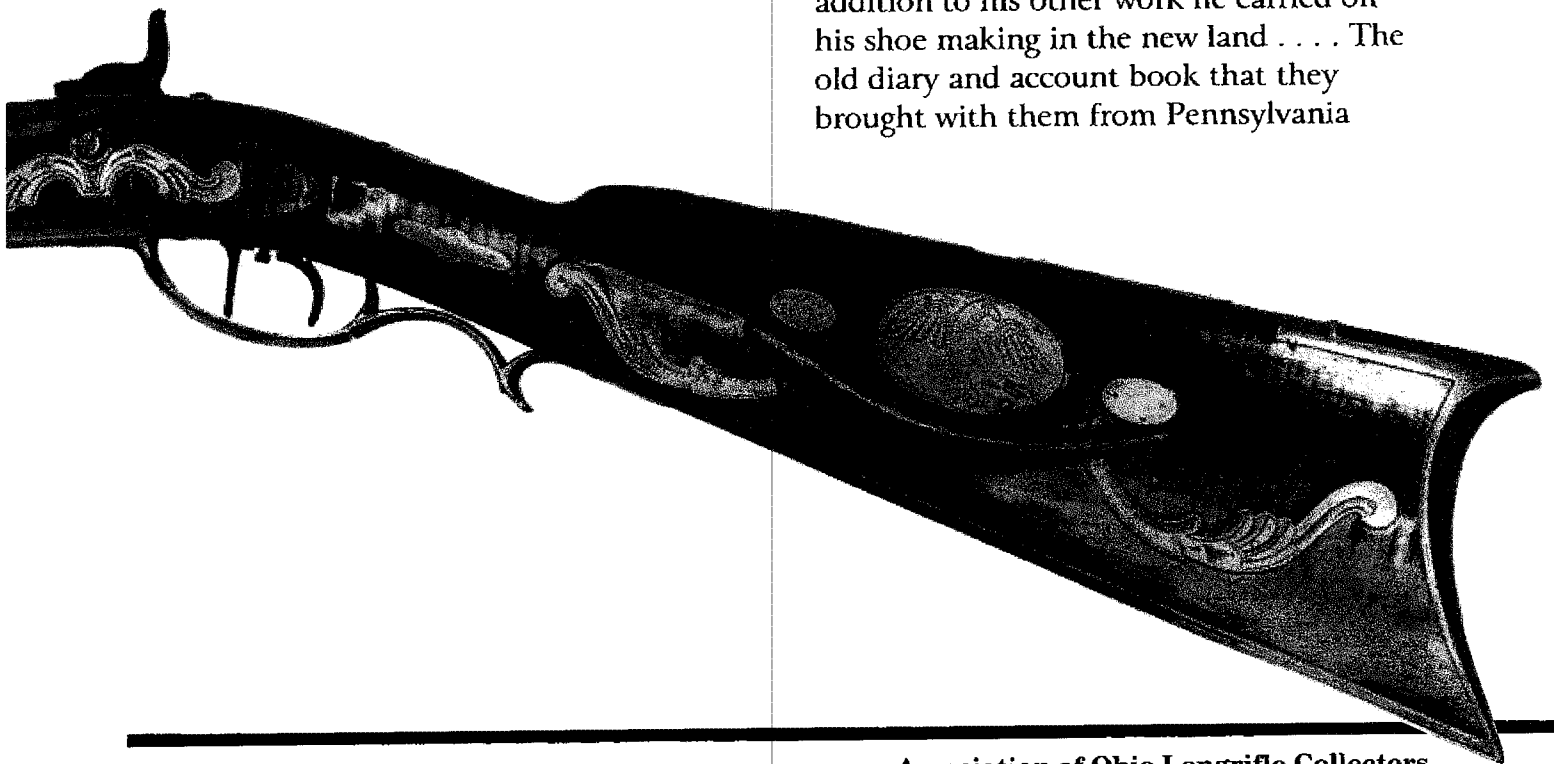
On July 28, 1803, William Keller (probably the brother of Margaret Keller Bernhard and Elizabeth Keller Barnhard) made a trip to Scioto in Ross County, but ultimately returned to Pennsylvania in 1805. On October 29, Adam Goetz (probably Margaret Barnhart Goetz's husband) moved to Scioto, Ross County,

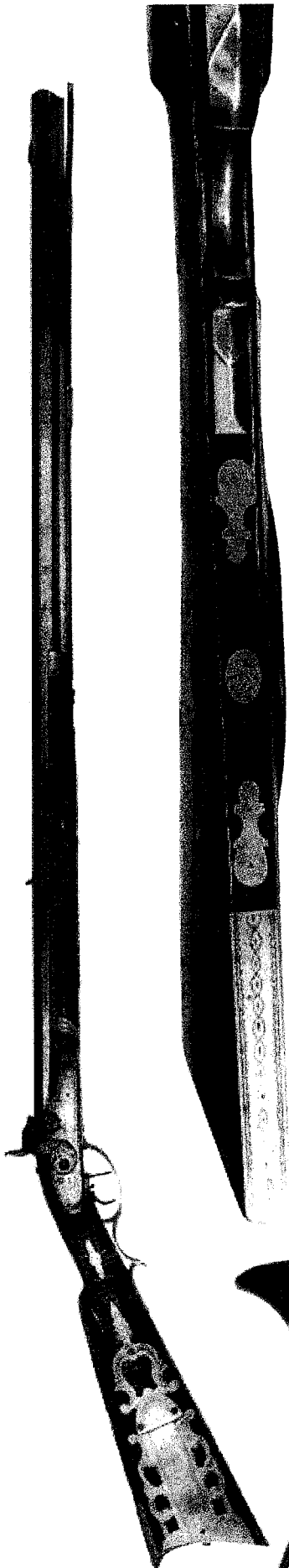
Ohio, and therefore Margaret probably was the first of the family members to settle in Ross County.

On June 8, 1810, Matthias Jr. sold all of his property, and on September 25, 1810 Matthias and Lorentz began the move with their families to the Scioto Valley. They settled in Ross County in 1811. Subsequently, Matthias and Margaret would have one more child, Catherine. Lorentz brought with him 5 children, and would have 10 more with his wife Elizabeth after their move to Ross County.

The following account is offered of the two brothers Matthias, Jr. and Lorentz ("Matthias Barnhardt," by Barnhart & Barnhart):

Lorentzo seemed to have been a worker in iron and was probably the more prosperous of the two as he at one time owned about 800 acres of excellent ground east of Kinnikinnick. Matthias seemed to be a very handy man and must have been a shoemaker by trade as in addition to his other work he carried on his shoe making in the new land . . . . The old diary and account book that they brought with them from Pennsylvania



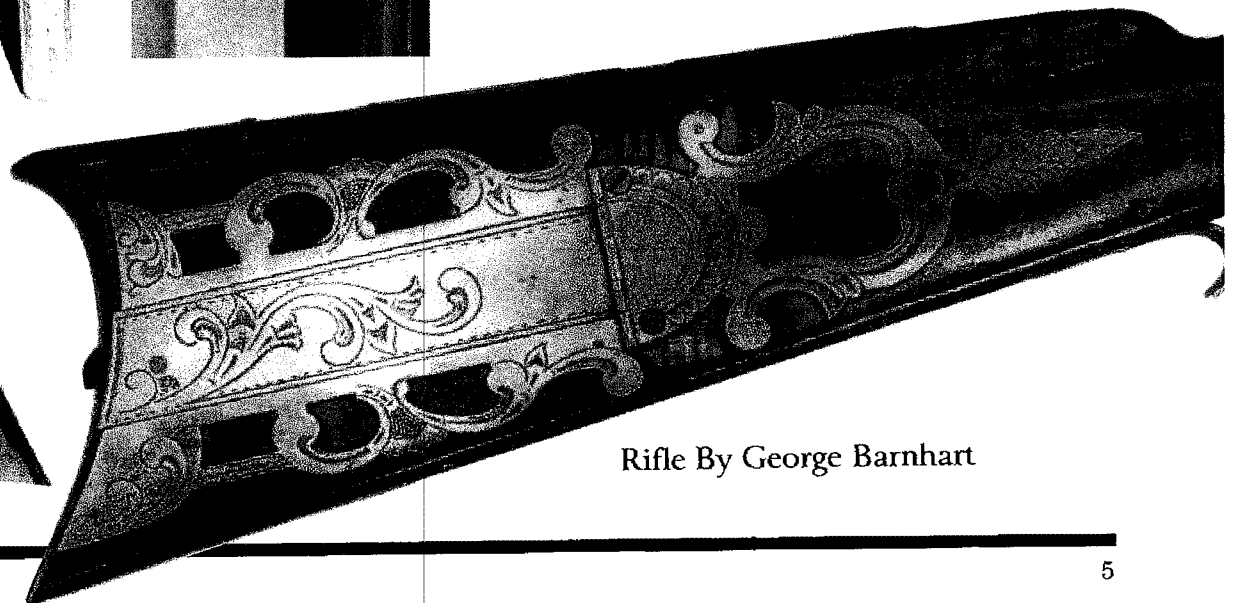


contains many interesting formulas on how to make stains and varnishes and how to soften bone or horn so that it could be moulded. These were all written in German and very likely were brought from Germany at some earlier date . . . In the old diary of Matthias he mentions several times making shoes for 3 shilling 9 pence. He also mentions labor at the rate of 3 shillings per day.

Matthias, Jr. settled on Dry Run in Springfield Township and Lorentz just east of Kinnekinnick in Green Township. Their first houses were temporary dwellings of bark (it is believed that this refers to slabs of wood still covered by bark).

Two sons of Matthias, Jr., George and William, were probably the first of the family to become riflemakers:

It is said that these boys wanted a rifle so badly that they journeyed to Jackson County and located an old gunsmith. They were too timid to ask him how to go about this work and contented themselves by looking thru the cracks in his work shop . . . He noticed the boys and took them inside to find out what they wanted.



Rifle By George Barnhart

He then showed them as much as possible about making a rifle in the short time they were there. They purchased a keg of soft iron and brought it home with them and from it they made the first Barnhart rifle. A nephew of these old Riflemakers told me in later years he had often seen this same rifle at the shoots they would have and that it still gave a good account of itself. It was very roughly finished. ("Matthias Barnhardt," by Barnhart & Barnhart)

Little more is known about William the Elder and George. According to Harold Barnhart, George set up a shop at Jackson in 1818 where they went to perfect their trade. According to Bob Barnhart ("Barnhart Family History," Martha Gerber Rittinger, unpublished manuscript):

George marked his rifles with a "G" or "George Barnhart." William, the Elder, marked his with "WM" in script . . . . The first rifles made were flint lock. They are now rare and very old. They went to Kentucky at the border of Kentucky and Tennessee where they learned the cap and ball style. They also made shotguns. For the special rifles, they took silver inlay and put it on the barrel and put their signatures on it.

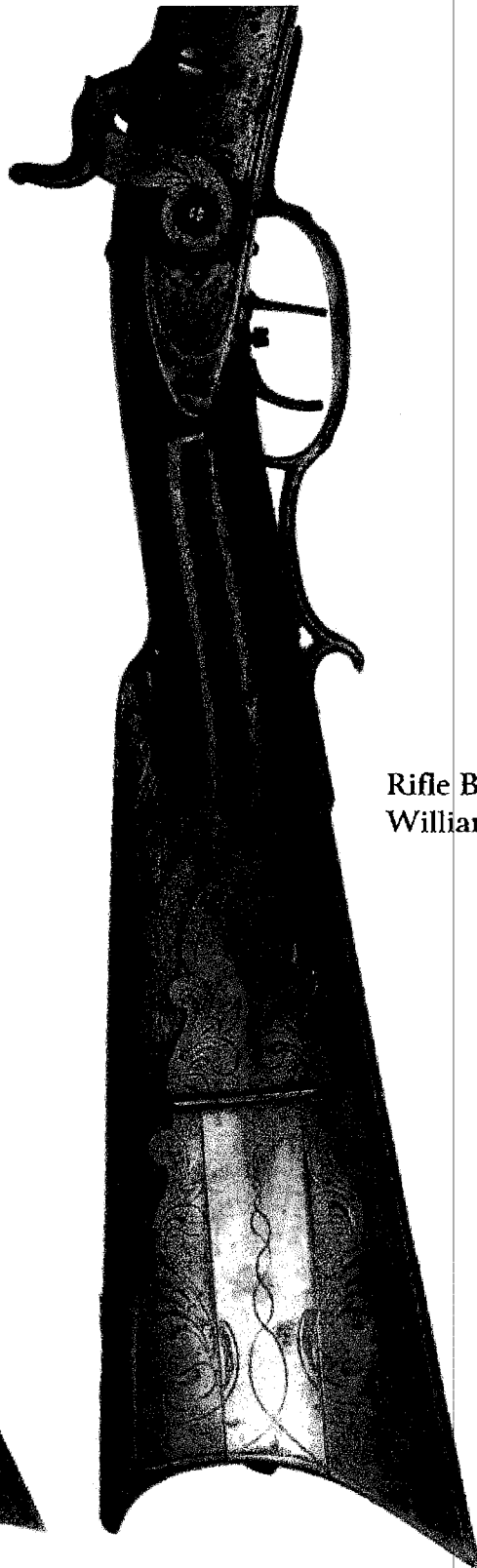
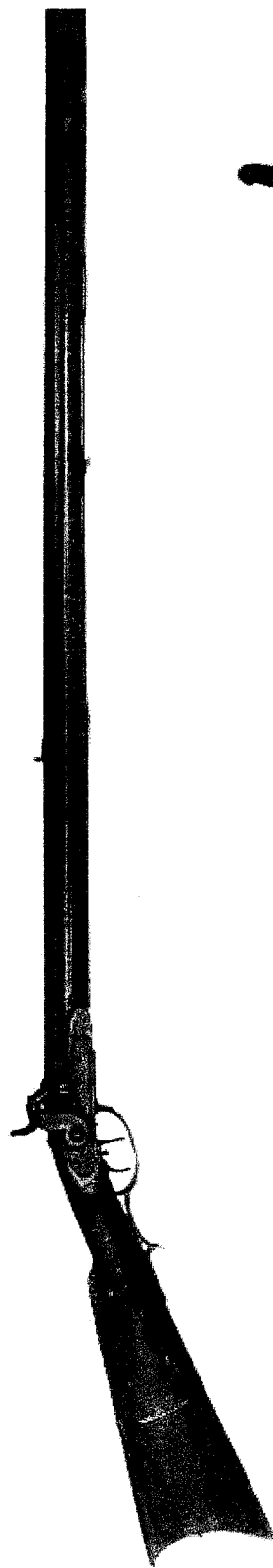
According to Harold A. Barnhart ("History of the Barnhart Rifle," unpublished manuscript):

A full stock Kentucky of each make is on display in the State Museum at Columbus, Ohio, together with the original stock pattern of old George Barnhart. [These have since been moved to the Ross County Museum]. Two of these rifles have been converted from flint to

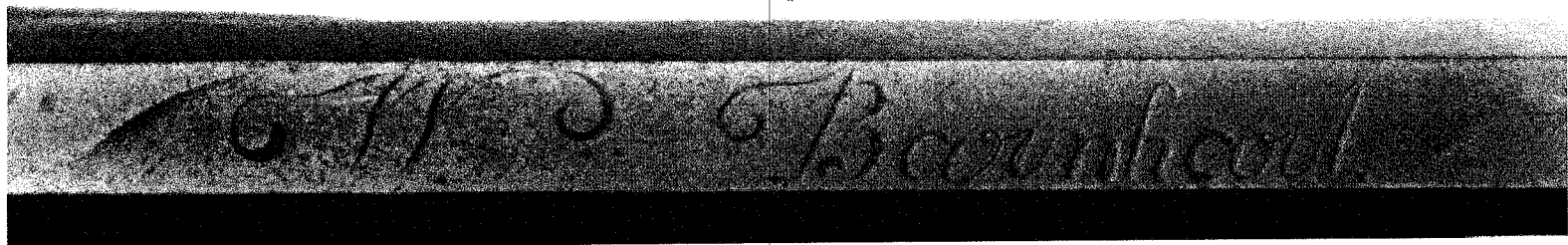
percussion and the others were made as percussion originally. . . . Pictures of two of William Barnhart's rifles are listed in Captain J.G.W. Dillin's book, "The Kentucky Rifle." I do not believe that they were of Pennsylvania origin. I feel safe in stating the first of these rifles were made around 1812 and they bear a very great resemblance to the Rifle made by Nathan Kile on Raccoon Creek, Jackson County, Ohio. One of [Kile's] rifles is on display at the Smithsonian and is dated around 1815. It has so many of the Barnhart characteristics that I feel he must have been the old Gunsmith who instructed them in making rifles.

The above account by Harold Barnhart would have the two boys, George and William learning how to make rifles when George was about 14 and William about 10, and therefore Harold's history is probably not completely accurate. Another family member, John M. ("Barney") Barnhart of Lancaster, gives another version. He recollects hearing that the two boys apprenticed with a gunmaker from around 1820 to 1822. He did not know who the riflemaker was, but he recounts that the two boys first spent a winter with the gunmaker, but had to return home in the Spring to help put out the crops. Then during the Summer growing season, they were able to spend more time with the gunmaker, returning in the fall to help take the crops off. They did this for two or three years, and when they completed their work with the gunmaker, the two boys returned home each with a rifle that still needed to be completed.

Barney has in his possession a very interesting rifle which according to his family history is Georges' personal rifle. It



Rifle By  
William(The Elder)Barnhart



is also in his family history that this was the first rifle that George ever made, but this probably is not the case. I would characterize it as a fancy rifle. An analysis of this rifle tell us a lot about the Barnharts as gunmakers.

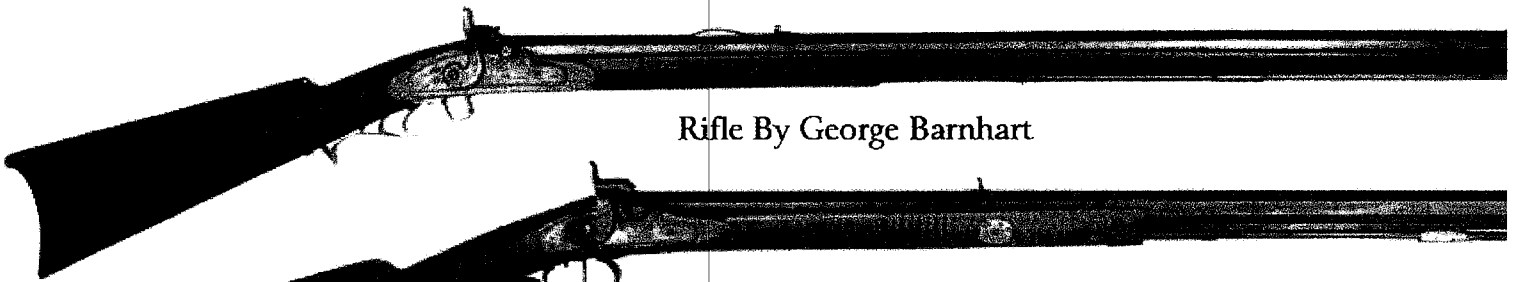
According to Barney's family history, the Barnhart brothers won a national shooting match with this particular gun. It is unknown which brother did the shooting, but assuming that George would be shooting his own rifle, it is more likely than not that George was doing the shooting. This rifle has a 35 1/2 inch barrel, which was reportedly shortened once by 6 inches and a second time by 2 inches, so it was originally approximately 43 1/2 inches long. The rifle is a half stock, so apparently the original forestock was shortened at some point. The barrel has a rubbed lead finish, as opposed to a browned finish, so it is silvery in appearance (I have noted that this is a common treatment of George's rifles), and has a rib underneath. I believe that the barrel is a commercially prepared barrel with a very slight swamp to it. It is a 33 caliber, with a 13 1/2 inch length of pull, and a 4 inch drop, with the common Barnhart 2 trigger set trigger setup. The trigger guard is consistent with the period of time in which George was producing rifles.

The lock is by J. Bishop of Cincinnati, and was originally a flintlock, because one can see where the pan was cut out. However, the sideplate, which is highly stylized and engraved of brass, has no extant hole where the forward bolt would have come through. The rifle has a large, Pennsylvania style patchbox, fashioned of brass and beautifully engraved, with seven piercings. There are also 23 separate silver inlays on the stock, including one set of

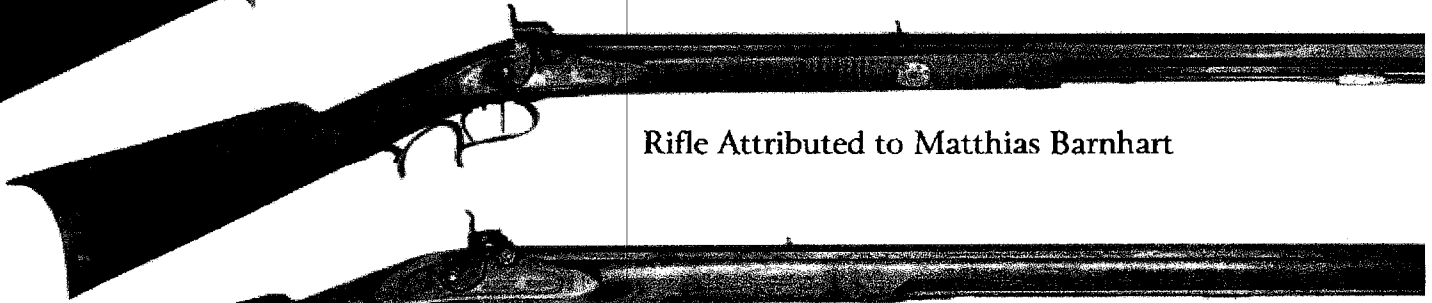
escutcheons for a barrel pin, and one set of escutcheons for a barrel key. Finally, the barrel has a chiseled signature on top as "G Barnhart, " but the writing appears to be William the Elder's!

According to Barney's family history, a person other than George did the engraving on the rifle (which is consistent with my observation that the writing is that of William the Elder's), and George had taken the rifle back to Pennsylvania (possibly to family members) at one point for some additional inlay or engraving work. It is by no means clear why the Barnharts would farm out work, so this is an interesting twist to the story. The elaborate patchbox (which I assume is what they would go to Pennsylvania for) does not seem to have any particular ties to riflemakers in the Northumberland or Berks County areas, but it does seem to favor some of the work done in the Allegheny County area by the Jacob Ferree and Thomas Allison schools. If the work was in fact done by Allegheny County makers, it probably would have been done after Ferree's and Allison's time, but perhaps one of the several makers originally apprenticed to these two men had a hand in working on George's rifle. Contemporary makers that come to mind are John Fleeger, A. B. Smith and Charles Cheney. Each of these makers did work similar to that found on the patchbox of George's rifle.

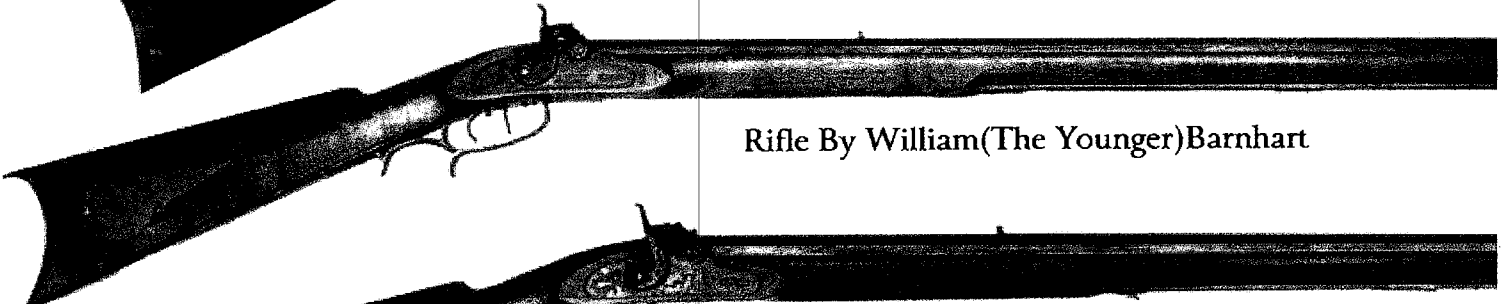
What we can learn from George's rifle, together with other observations, is that George probably did not favor or feel confident doing fancy engraving work. We can also see that the two brothers are very close, since it appears that George asked William to do the engraving of his name on the barrel. We can also infer that George enjoyed riflemaking more for



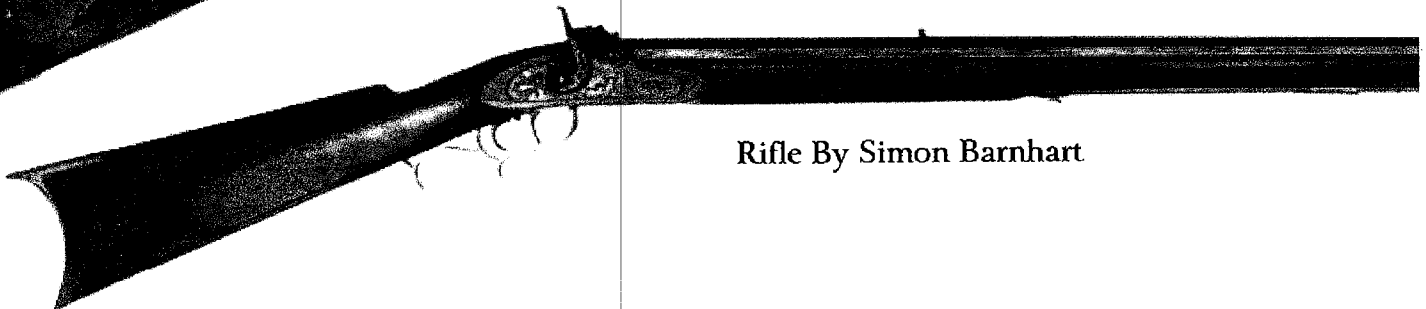
Rifle By George Barnhart



Rifle Attributed to Matthias Barnhart



Rifle By William(The Younger)Barnhart



Rifle By Simon Barnhart

function and accuracy, than for show. George was also practical, reusing an old lock that functioned according to his expectations. It is also clear that this rifle has been modified by more than one set of hands. After George's death in 1844, the rifle probably would have gone to William the Younger, Georges's son. Perhaps William the Younger added some of the silver inlay, converted it to a halfstock, and competed with the rifle himself.

I have also heard another account of a rifle by George Barnhart, which is an iron mounted Poor Boy originally constructed as a flintlock. This rifle is lacking in adornment, and sports a tallow hole in the buttstock. At some point, the barrel has been cut way down, to about two feet in length. I have not seen the rifle, but this certainly sounds like a very unusual Barnhart rifle, and underscores that the Barnharts produced functional rifles as well as fancy rifles.

It has also been observed that the sideplate style used on the conventional Barnhart rifles is very similar to the sideplates made by John and John Caleb Vincent in Washington County. Harold Barnhart also felt that there were significant design similarities between the Barnhart rifles and Nathan Kile's rifle owned by the Smithsonian. We may also infer from George's gun that there was stylistic influence from makers in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. As gunsmiths, they evidently travelled to other maker's shops to observe new styles and technologies.

Each brother passed on the gunsmithing trade to a son. George passed on his trade to William the Younger (Born September 1, 1825), and William the Elder brought into his business Nehemiah (Born 1831). Another son of George, Simon, also produced rifles, but in smaller quantities at his own shop. George died on February



17, 1844, much earlier than William the Elder, and George's son William the Younger inherited the business:

William Barnhart Jr. the last of the riflemakers occupied the shop of his father George Barnhart after his death in 1844. The old log house adjoining it was built by his father in 1834 and this was his second home as the first house had been destroyed by fire . . . The old rifle shop was not very large and was of course made of logs. After making the rifle barrels and while they were very hot he would push them against the log and leave the imprint of the muzzle burnt in the face of the log. . . . His rifles were always tested by shooting from the rest at [his] well at a target as far as they would throw a ball. The stocks were hewed from the native maple trees and the first barrels were hammered out by themselves. The trigger guards and butt plates were made of brass or silver and filed into shape. During the process of rifling the guns he would frequently have to leave his work and return to it. In order that he might know exactly where he left off he had bored holes at regular intervals in the barrel vise which was made of wood and he would stick a wooden pin in the nearest hole and resume his task from there when he returned. A plain rifle cost around \$20.00 to make and took about a month's time to complete. There were always other necessary things to do and all of the time could not of course be used for this single purpose. During the winter months, they would split seasoned hickory and make rods for guns as these were often broken. All of their tools were made and tempered by themselves.

In later years the barrel blanks were purchased from E. Remington and J. A.

Reynolds, of Steubenville. Most of the locks were purchased. Some were Golchers, others were Remington, and some were from Lancaster, Pa. and Philadelphia, Pa. One was stamped D. A. Schutte, Chillicothe, Ohio. D. A. Schuttee operated a hardware store on North Paint Street during the early days.

These rifles were all built to whatever specifications the purchaser desired and some were finished with a fine clear varnish and handsomely inlaid with silver. These silver mountings were artistically engraved in their own designs by the riflemaker himself and the Barnharts seemed to prefer the engraving of an eagle to anything else. Some of these eagles were carved out of silver and mounted in the stock while others were engraved on oval silver plated and mounted in the stock.

They devised many ingenious tools for their work and they made the only sight gauge that I have ever seen. This gauge made it possible for each sight to be finished in exactly the same dimensions. Their motive power for drilling consisted of a large wheel to a drill which bored and smoothed the inside of the barrel before it could be rifled. The son of the riflemaker would usually turn this wheel while the gunsmith was looking after more intricate details which could not be entrusted to anyone else.

In my collection is a small bore shotgun completely made by hand by Wm. Barnhart for his own personal use. The stock is of cherry and it bears as much resemblance to a rifle as it does a shotgun . . . . ("History of the Barnhart Rifle").

George Barnhart and his brother William

the Elder produced rifles at the same time from about 1820 to George's death in 1844. However, William the Elder produced for many more years, as he did not die until 1867, on October 6 (We know that he continued to produce into his later years because he listed himself as a gunsmith in the 1860 census). When William the Younger acquired his father's business, he was only 18 years old but presumably had been an apprentice for many years. It is therefore apparent why the two were distinguished as William the Elder and William the Younger, as they produced as contemporaries for about 20 years.

Even though William the Elder's son, Nehemiah, would not inherit his father's business for many years, Nehemiah also became a prolific gunmaker in his own right, setting up his own shop in Hallsville in 1851, when the town was known as "Economy." Each fashioned his own signature on the rifles he produced. According to Harold A. Barnhart ("History of the Barnhart Rifle," unpublished manuscript):

William Barnhart [the Elder] placed his name on his rifles in script . . . His son Nehemiah Barnhart . . . also placed his name in script on his rifles using the abbreviation "N. Barnhart." At one time [Nehemiah] travelled to Columbus, Nebraska when it was only a frontier post and made rifles there, later his shop was at Hallsville, Ohio.

George Barnhart['s] . . . name was placed on his rifle by means of a steel die, abbreviated as follows: "G. Barnhart." His son, W. Barnhart, the last of the riflemakers, was born in 1825 and died in 1891. His other son, Simon Barnhart, also

made a few very nice rifles. I have seen only one, that in my collection.

There are likely other Barnhart rifle makers but these are the only ones who made a real business of it.

In the case of the one rifle discussed above, George's personal rifle, the maker's name was signed in script. This is the only known example where George's name is known to have been chiselled in script. In most cases, George used a steel die made up as "G. Barnhart." After George passed away, the "G" was reportedly filed off, and William the Younger and Simon, George's two gunmaking sons, used the die for their last name, with individual dies for their first initials.

Simon was a very interesting individual. He invented the circular saw and exchanged the patent for a few acres of ground and a cabin. He was also reputed to be a very good watchmaker.

The present Court House Clock was installed by C. F. DeFeu who operated a watch shop at 72 North Paint Street [Chillicothe]. Shortly after installation it stopped and they were unable to start it again. After trying in vain Mr. DuFeu sent to Cincinnati for assistance and the men who were sent tried in vain to get it started. The commissioner instructed Mr. DuFeu to start it or take it down and he sent his horse and buggy after Simon Barnhart to repair the clock if possible. He returned with a small kit of tools and looked over the clock. When they asked if he thought he could fix it he replied that he was sure he could. He had already discovered the trouble and it was a small rod that had been bent. He instructed them to go below and start the clock and