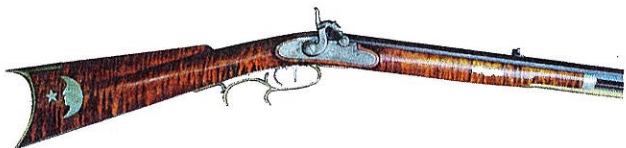






designed by Rod England. Johnston had a large store of super-grade “JJ” curly maple half stock blanks he had cut for to make pre-carved Hawken rifle stocks. But with the “Hawken craze” of the 1960s-1970s dying down somewhat, he took a chance on producing the Vincent kits. The kits were very well received due in part to the success of the earlier custom guns he offered, strong collector interest in original Vincent rifles, and shooters and hunters wanting a mid-19th century Ohio-style rifle (figure 4).



4. Golden Age Arms Vincent rifle kit assembled by Dan Aubhil, Sycamore, Ohio, for the author, c. 1993. (Stock broken through wrist in wild woodchuck attack.)

Catalog 18, offered about 1991, reflects the business in its maturity. Besides several options for basic pre-carved stocks for Kentucky/Pennsylvania, Mountain, and Hawken rifles, the full pre-carved stock option was now available for several styles of firearm: a Lancaster pattern stock (featuring “90% of the shaping finished for a true Lancaster style Kentucky rifle”), the Vincent kits, a pistol kit with stock inlet for a small flintlock by the Siler company, and a Northwest smoothbore trade musket kit with North Star Company parts (offered in the catalog for \$350.00). In even later catalogs, the full pre-carved Andrew Verner kit was offered, based on a Pennsylvania rifle that Johnston owned and which the dimensions were meticulously followed in the making of the kit. All the pre-carved stocks were made by a contractor in Pennsylvania (who bought the rights when Johnston sold the business) and transported to Ohio.

Besides pre-carved stocks, Johnston always carried diverse supplies of maple, walnut, cherry, and ash stock blanks of the highest quality. Stock wood was offered in grades from Grade S-p (the best, tightly curled maple), to P-plus-plus, P-plus, Grade A, and Grade B (plain grade) – the grades dependent on the amount of curl or figure in the wood and priced accordingly. Johnston cut all of the stock blanks (from huge planks) on a bandsaw by himself (sometimes with a helper).

He is an accomplished woodworker and has a fine eye for wood. (He has built many pieces of 18th century-patterned furniture, often direct copies of originals.) Two of Johnston’s several publications were thin paperbacks entitled Building the Kentucky Rifle and Building the Kentucky Pistol, which step by step detailed the basics of assembling muzzleloaders either from a stock blank or a pre-carved stock.

As mentioned, Golden Age Arms, Inc. offered custom rifle building services. Among the talented persons who, over the years, contracted to build rifles were his brother-in-law Ron Beebe, Tom White, Mark Wheland, Dick Bingham, Larry Bryner, and Don King. The prices in the c. 1991 catalog (which sold for \$4.00) are well below those of today’s market, with the price for “custom made Kentucky rifles” ranging from \$800-\$1000 for a “plain, without carving” rifle, to “\$1,000 - \$1,500” for one with “incised carving, to “\$1500 and up” for one with “raised carving, the price “confirmed upon specification” (p. 107). Unfinished guns were offered at a lower price, with \$300 charged for basic assembly. The shop sometimes offered guns, powder horns, knives, or metal work by contemporary frontier-era artists, including Ohio blacksmith Mark Bokenkamp.

Johnston is well-known for his line of richly illustrated books, the first being Kentucky Rifles and Pistols, 1750-1850, published in 1976 (just in time for the Bi-centennial), which featured over 300 antique firearms owned by members of the exclusive Kentucky Rifle Association, several of whom participated in vetting the book project. In assembling the photos, Johnston rented two rooms at a meeting venue and members brought in their guns to be photographed. He asked that each participant estimate the age of their guns, which sometimes proved problematic, as there is a tendency to date some items earlier than they actually are – though many factors make guessing age an inexact art at best. He also discovered that guns with shiny brass and brightly varnished stocks were much harder to photograph than those with the original finish. The rifles were photographed in an intense, “assembly-line manner.” The constant flashing is said to have “sun-burnt” one photographer.

The most popular of his highly illustrated books are the series entitled Accoutrements, which contains volumes I-V. published between 1993/4 and 2018.