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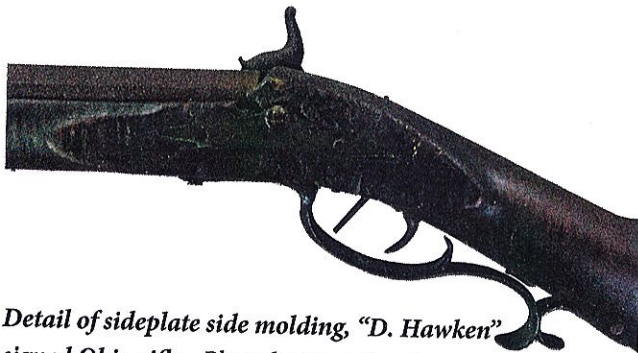
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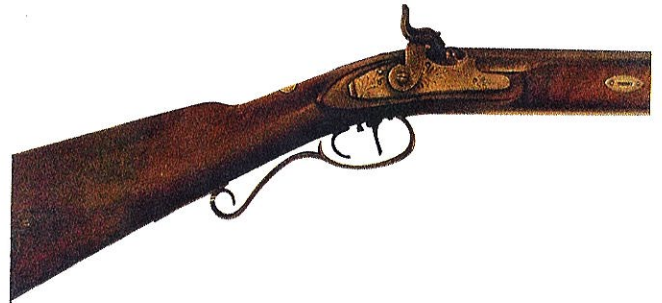
*Detail of sideplate side molding, "D. Hawken" signed Ohio rifle. Photo by Mark Bender, courtesy of Old Barn Auction*



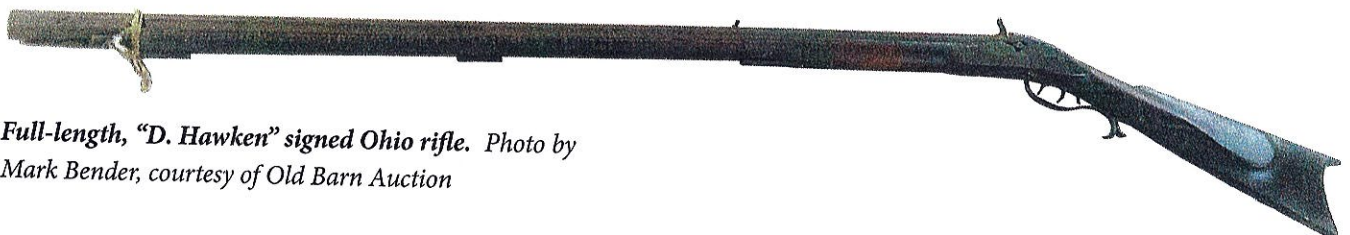
*Note floral engraving on patchbox on J. & S. Hawken held by Montana Historical Society, Helena . Photo by Robert Tetro, Bozeman , Montana*



*Sideplate side (note repair) of J. & S. Hawken held by Montana Historical Society, Helena . Photo by Robert Tetro, Bozeman , Montana*



*Lock side of J. & S. Hawken rifle. Photo by Robert Tetro, Bozeman, Montana*



*Full-length, "D. Hawken" signed Ohio rifle. Photo by Mark Bender, courtesy of Old Barn Auction*

# TAKING (RE)STOCK: A RIFLE SIGNED “LEVI BIDDLE”

MARK BENDER

The replacing of broken gunstocks was a common practice in early America, including Ohio. Collections of 18th century flintlocks often contain specimens termed “assembled” muskets, fowlers, or rifles—meaning that the gun was put together and restocked with whatever pieces were at hand, sometimes with parts from several countries (English, Dutch, French, etc.). Restocking was widespread on the frontier. Trading posts hired gunsmiths to restock Native American trade muskets and the journals of explorers, including Lewis and Clark, tell of guns being restocked in the wilds. Gunstocks could be broken in many ways—hunting accidents, battle, domestic altercations, carousing, falling out of wagons or off horses, being run over, or for the heavy barreled Ohio style half-stocks, simply falling to the floor. Many 18th and 19th century guns have broken wrists that were repaired, and many were restocked. Some surviving gund still carry the names or initials—especially on the upper barrel flats—of people who did not make the present stock.

Levi Biddle (1831-1894) former school teacher, and a son of gunsmith George Biddle (1791-1871), made rifles in Sugarcreek Twp, Ohio in Tuscarawas County in the late 19th century and is well known among collectors for his fancy grade rifles with silver inlays (Kaser 1982:2; Kaser 1983:7; Spiker and Whisker n.d.:22-23). I recently examined a simple half-stock rifle signed “L. Biddle” in script on the top barrel flat. The owner said that the signature and hardware “was right,” but the stock just couldn’t be a Biddle. In other words, it was a restock with a Biddle name.

As I stared at the dark stained stock something tickled the deep recesses of my brain and the question popped up: “Well, if it not Biddle—and of course he can’t be completely ruled out as the maker—who restocked the rifle? Following the “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree theory” (which sometimes works) I paged through volumes of Ohio Gunsmiths & Allied Tradesmen, seeking for evidence of what gunsmith from the immediate area might have restocked it and looked closely at the restock to see if there were any clues. I also examined overall profile of the restock (which could have been used by several area gunsmiths who made diminutive halfstock rifles), the brass hardware and lock, inletting cuts, nose cap, screws, toe-pieces, and lock panels.

After these cursory investigations, I dug around in the “toy room” and came up with a small half-stock rifle on which the front end of the lock panels -- of a distinct style—are very similar in form and cut to those of the restocked Biddle (see Figures 1 and 2). The petite rifle has a similar stock profile as the restock, though the end of the comb is handled slightly differently. The toe-pieces, of both guns are of the same sort of thin brass sheet, and are held in place with what seem to be identical small, headless nails. (see Figures 3 and 4)

The barrel is marked “A.S.” for Adam Stilgenbauer, who immigrated with his family from Bavaria, Germany, and settled in Holmes County Ohio in 1840 (Mast 1981:2-3; Spiker and Whisker n.d.:228). He was denied enlistment in the Union forces during the Civil War because his left arm was injured in his youth. Despite the disability, he produced an array of squirrel rifles, target rifles, single shot cartridge rifles, and at least one pistol in his shop near Winesburg, Ohio. His dates are an astonishing 1805-1907.

Searching online I also found an image of a “bicycle pistol” marked “A.S” and attributed to Stilgenbauer on an auction website post in 2015. The image shows a similar treatment of lock panels as the restock (the rear molding recedes seamlessly into the wrist) and what seems to be a similar dark finish.

Thus, based on the evidence at hand, my theory is that Adam Stilgenbauer (or someone else using that lock panel pattern, possibly son Adolph) may have had a hand in restocking the Biddle marked rifle. Anyway, it is fun to speculate—and to realize that every rifle, made of wood, brass, and steel, whether signed, unsigned, or signed and restocked—was actually made my someone (or someones), and can still be appreciated on its artistic merits and as a vehicle of folk knowledge.

Note: If any readers have their own theories on who made or restocked the rifle signed Biddle, please let this author know.

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