



Mesheck Moxley, An African-American Gunsmith In Nineteenth Century Ohio

by Mark Bender

Several references to Meshal (sic) Moxley appear in Donald L. Hutslar's Gunsmiths of Ohio: 18th and 19th Centuries, Vol I (1973). Hutslar describes Moxley as being best known among the "several" African-American gunsmiths of the 19th century who worked in Ohio (1973:26). Warren Offenberger (Ohio Longrifle Collectors Association, personal communication) supplied me with material on Moxley, including copies of census and land records from the Bellfontaine area in Logan County, Ohio. Offenberger stressed in a letter that Moxley's first name has been mis-read in the literature - - that his given name was actually "Mesheck," rather than "Meshel" as appears in Hutslar (1973:238). Indeed, supporting records from Logan County, list Moxley's given name as "Meshec" or "Mesheck," describing him as a "mulatto farmer." Dates in the records range from 1850 to 1879. A record resolving property owned by Moxley's widow (and second wife), Martha, is dated 1881. Moxley's son, William, seems to have carried on the trade for some years after the elder Moxley's death (Hutslar 1973: 238).

Historical Context

Though little is known of Moxley's life, his experience and background were certainly different from gunsmiths of other ethnic groups in 19th century America. During much of Moxley's career, the majority of people of African-American descent were slaves.

According to information from the Center for African-American Decorative Arts (supplied by Derrick Beard), in 1860 there were four million slaves in the United States, compared to somewhat over four hundred thousand free African-Americans. It is not clear whether Moxley was born slave or free, but according to census records noted in Hutslar (p. 238), he was originally from Virginia and born around 1809.

Other circumstantial evidence seems to link Moxley with the former slave states, this being the name "R. Schneider" stamped on the left side of the barrel near the breech. Dr. James B. Whisker (personal correspondence), has suggested that the name "Schneider" is that of a white gunsmith working in Chambersburg, Va. or nearby Maryland. Schneider is known to have had a former African-American slave named Simes working as an apprentice in his shop. According to Whisker, it was usual for apprentices to do much the actual work on barrels, etc., while the name inscribed on such pieces would be that of the master craftsman. Somehow or other a barrel from the Schneider shop became a component of a Moxley gun.

This connection is a mystery, which if solved, might throw more light on Moxley's connections with that area and possibly his social status at various times. In a larger sense, the connection also suggests questions about what sort of

NOTICE OF APPRAISEMENT.

Estate of Meshech Moxley Deceased:

Notice is hereby given that an inventory and appraisement of the estate and property of Meshech Moxley late of Logan County, deceased, will be taken at his late residence in Sake Township, on the 10th day of July, 1880, commencing at 10 o'clock A.M., and continuing from day to day until completed.

Dated this 5th day of July 1880.

Philander Jones
Admin of said Estate

THE STATE OF OHIO, Logan COUNTY, ss.

Philander Jones Admin of the estate of Meshech Moxley deceased, make oath (affirmation) that copies of the above notice of the time and place of the making the within inventory and appraisement were posted up in two of the most public places in Sake Township, wherein the said deceased last dwelt, and ~~was served on~~ Martina Ann Moxley widow, and J. M. Moxley & J. Jackson ~~and~~ also had notice of said appraisement as ~~hears and~~ next of kin of said decedent, residing in said county, at least five days prior thereto.

Philander Jones
Admin

Subscribed in my presence and sworn July 5th 1880 to before me, this 13th day of July 1880.

R. B. Pettit Probate Judge

OATH OF APPRAISERS.

THE STATE OF OHIO Logan COUNTY, ss.

We, the undersigned, do make solemn oath (affirmation) that we will truly, honestly and impartially appraise the estate and property that may be exhibited to us, belonging to the estate of Meshech Moxley deceased, and perform the other duties required by law of us in the premises as appraisers, according to the best of our knowledge and ability.

W. S. Nelson
J. H. Stewart
John Lindsay

Subscribed in my presence and sworn July 10th 1880 to before me, by the said Appraisers on the 10th day of July A. D. 1880.

Fees, \$

R. B. Pettit Probate Judge

personal links African-Americans in the free and slave states maintained during the period, including the nature of networks for the flow of goods such as barrels and other gun parts.

African-American blacksmiths were a prominent and pervasive feature in the iron-working and woodworking crafts in the south. In some cases non-African-American journeymen could not find work due in part to the practice of white masters setting up forges for their slaves and netting "a large share of the profits" (Vlach 1983:313). The view that a master would often sign his name to a slave's work is well-supported in the research materials. In one example (Vlach 1983:313), a German immigrant named Christopher Werner ran a blacksmith shop in Charleston, South Carolina from 1828 to 1878. It is known that the actual execution of much of the best iron work from that shop was from the hand of a slave known only as "Uncle Toby."

As African-Americans moved out of the south during and after slave times, craftsmen among them set up their own shops in new areas. In the post-war period, many African-American smiths worked throughout the south in their own shops, keeping a steady business with white patrons who appreciated by long custom the combination of quality work and low price (Vlach 1983:313).

While attending a event concerning African-Americans and the Civil War at the Ohio Village historical park in Columbus in the fall of 1994, I was told that the community of Bellfontaine once had a number of African-American iron-workers. However, where and how Moxley learned his trade are in question,

though it is not unlikely that he acquired his skills in some facet of the iron or woodworking trade and possibly a gunshop.

Vlach (1983:312) has observed that iron-working has a very long history in the parts of Africa which were the source of slaves destined for New World markets. Though the vast majority of the surviving iron work (in which guns and components must be a part) follows Euro-American patterns and was produced for a general American market, Vlach has also stressed that questions can and should be raised over the contribution of African and African-American aesthetics in the material folk culture of the slave and post-slavery periods in the United States. He identifies one area as that of a "sense of innovation and improvisation" common among the works of African-American craftsmen and artists in a whole range of artistic and folk genres (Vlach 1983:324). Although a larger sampling of rifles are necessary to discuss what the "Moxley" aesthetic might be, a brief description of a one of his rifles recently in my possession is given to that end.

A Moxley Gun

The gun has a curly maple stock, with rather tight curl. The barrel is 15/16 inches wide and 36 inches long. It is marked "M. Moxley" on the upper flat five inches above the breech and "R. Scheinder" on the left side flat, about an inch above the breech. The caliber is approximately .28, with sharp rifling (for some reason the top of muzzle has been polished smooth, seemingly a recent modification). The lock is a good-quality mass-produced lock with a half-cock and fine machine engraving of two pheasants



The Moxley Halfstock Rifle as described in the article.
Front Cover: Another Halfstock Rifle by Moxley.

in front of a box-trap. The name on the lock-plate is "T. Davidson and Co." Besides a replaced drum and nipple, all parts on the gun are original.

There are several features on the gun which seem to indicate that it was a better than average piece of work. These include the silver blade front sight, which has no base and which seems to have been peened into the barrel and possibly soldered (though no trace of this operation is present). The brass work is carefully executed, though there is no engraving. The detail on the triggerguard is well filed, a small decorative lip exists on the rear ramrod pipe, and an overall fine finish was given to the metal, which for the most part retains a patina. The endcap is brass, rather than the more common pewter or soft-metal casting that appears in photos of another Moxley supplied to me by Offenberger.

The barrel is finely polished and the long, two-staged tang tapers out to a rounded end, extending almost to the comb of the stock. The rib is finished and sports two delicate brass ramrod ferrules with a line engraved at each end. The woodwork shows special detail on the upper mortise work on the sideplate side. This consist of two instances where the line of the mortise is "stepped" to present a line that give contrast, but continuity with the overall mortise line.

Most outstanding is the cheekpiece, which may indicate influence from Virginia gunsmiths (Whisker, personal communication 1994). In the form of a long scallop, the cheekpiece has a fluted lip and is carefully concaved on the upper half. The overall lines of the gun are flowing and the gun has a lean, light and

vibrant quality due to the thin stock, which is deceptively strong because of the contour of the thick oval wrist. Though lacking inlays and engraving, the overall attention to minor detail and clean, subtle lines make for an artistically interesting piece, aside from the its inherent historical worth.

In April 1995, the Moxley gun described above was photographed by Whisker at the annual Ohio Longrifles Collectors Association in Marietta, Ohio. Later in 1995, the gun was purchased by the Center for African-American Decorative Arts (based in Chicago) and is now part of a traveling exhibit of African-American folk art that is curated by Derrick Beard. The gun was most recently on display in the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

Sources:

Beard, Derrick (1995). Personal communication.

Hutslar, Donald A. (1973). Gunsmiths of Ohio, 18th and 19th centuries, Vol. I. York, Pennsylvania: George Shumway.

Offenberger, Warren (1994). Personal communication.

Vlach, John Michael (1991). By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.

_____. (1983). "Phillip Simmons: Afro-American Blacksmith," 301-330. Chap. in Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts, ed. William Ferris. Boston: G.K. Ferris.

Whisker, James B. (1994, 1995). Personal communication.

Note: Special thanks to William Reynolds and Nathan Bender in conjunction with this article.



Entries From The J.C. Vincent Pocket Diary For 1865 (Continued)



By William Reynolds

Friday, April 28

At work in the shop.
Appraiser, A. Lawton was on hand today.
For list of property see memoranda.

Memoranda. April 28, 1865

Arther Lawton Apraiser
Property valued at; _____ value

One horse	100.00
One silver watch	10.00
One half of cider mill	20.00
One rifle	20.00
Books	15.00
Monthly average of stock on hand for the purpose of manufacture.	
one half	8.00
Money on hand	146.00
Mechanical tools	
one half	50.00
One half of all coal	4.50
Total without expenses	455.50

Sat. 29

At work in shop.
repd. clock for Old Scott.
Elizabeth started for Iowa this evening on
the train.

Sun. 30

10 o'clock the usual grind ___ thus far.
Sing something of a success.
Temperence meeting a fizzle.
Rosie and ___ on guard from 8 until 1,
nothing more.

Monday, May 1

At work in the shop.
School commenced today.
Serena teacher.
A. Wolcott sent for the gun. Paid \$9.00
While ch \$6.50 all paid.

May 2

In the shop, nothing more.

May 3

At work in shop.
At work at rifle for D. Ellis.

May 4

At work in shop.

May 5

At work as usual. Finished guns for J.W.
Merill and David Ellis.

May 6

At work in the shop until 3 o'clock AM.
Sold gun to Wm. N. Frost. \$22.50 cash
rec'd.
Paid to sister Mary Jones \$50.00

May 7

Nothing unusual this morning.
Went to A. Lawtons afternoon to sing "a
fizzle".

May 8

Went to Barlow this morning.
Returned before 8 o'clock.
Done some repairing-sand stock for Maj.
Day.

May 9

Repaired revolver. In the shop at work.
Uncle and Aunt Marlan were here this
forenoon.

May 10

At work in the shop.
Caught a glimpse of R. B. as she was
passing.
Nothing more.

May 11

At work repairing gun for George
Wyatt.

May 12

In the shop.
Making a picture frame for Serena.
Went to Barlow, afternoon posted muster
notice.
Bought a lot - price \$ 4.00

May 13

Cut a sugar tree this morning to make
patent head wheels. In the
shop balance of day.
Recd' letter from Elizabeth dated
Bellville, Ill.

May 14

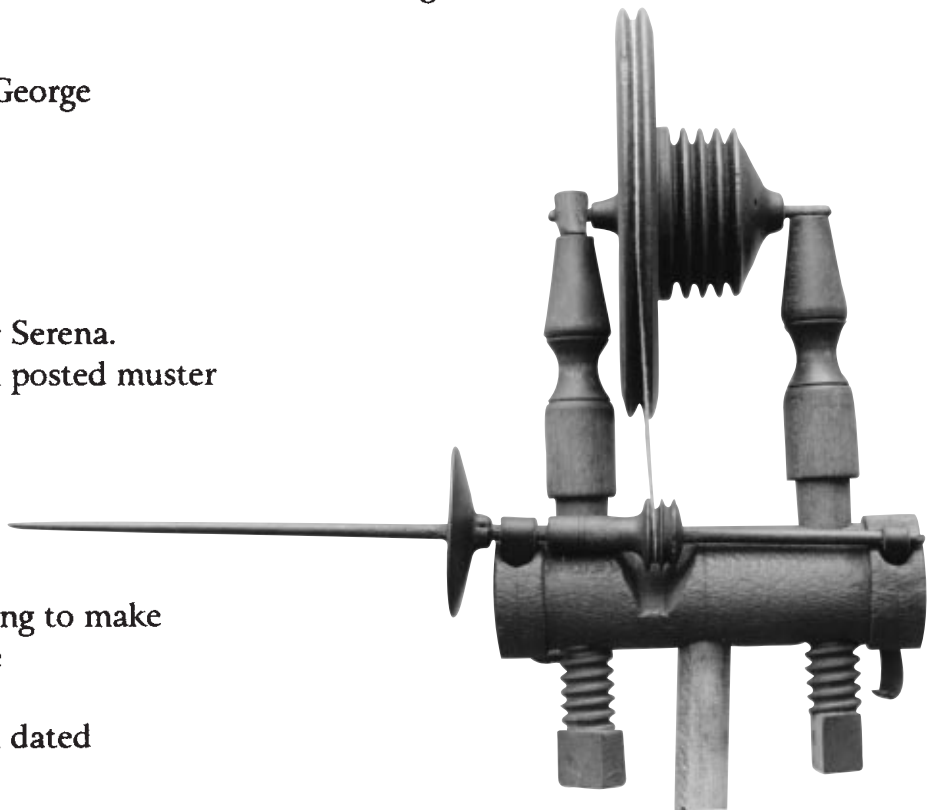
Nothing new this morning except
old Marion of Marietta came along
subpoenaing village to attend court.
Sing pretty near a fizzle.
Temperence meeting tolerable. Had
a pleasant walk with ___ Rosie
returned home at 7 o'clock.

May 15

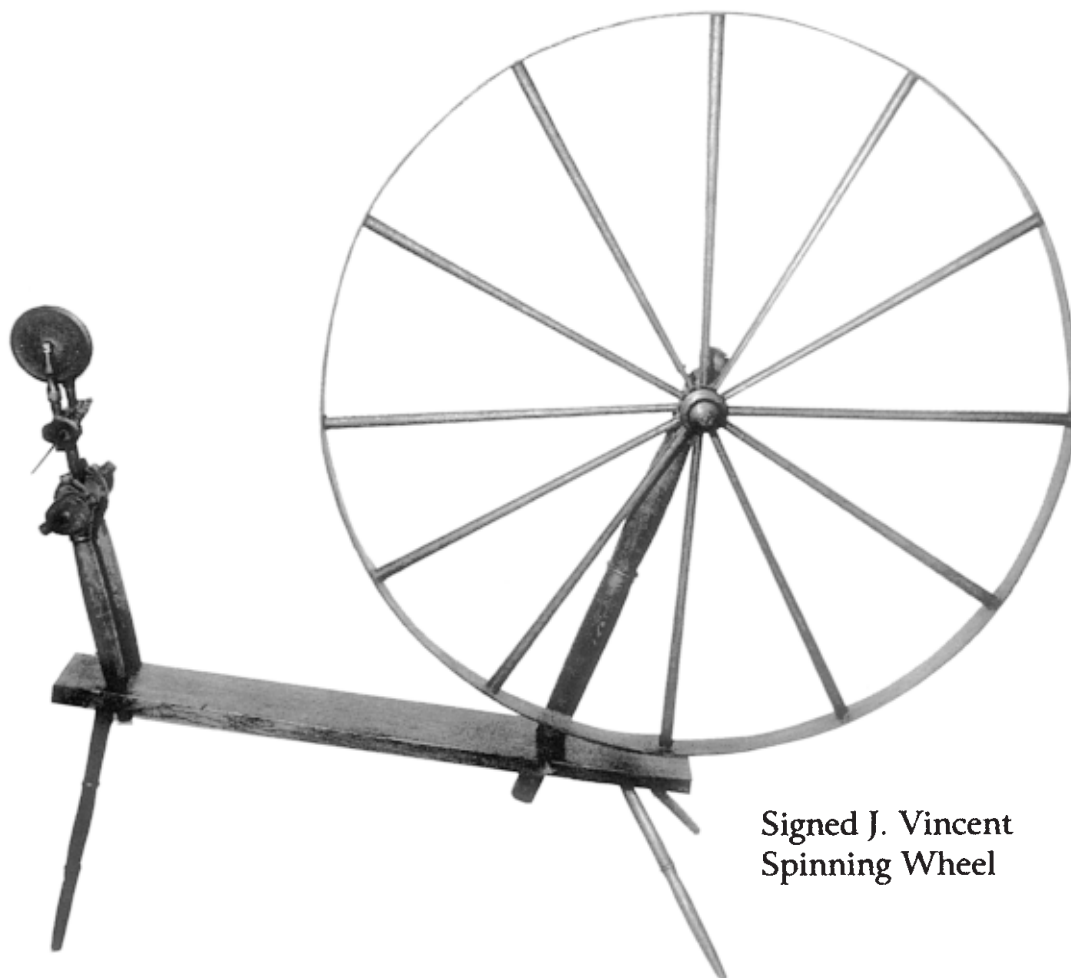
Made patent head for C. B. H. not quite
made though.
Planted some peach blue potatoes in the
garden, also corn and melons.
Afternoon cut some trees for saw logs.

May 16

In the shop at work. Not hurting myself
though.



Amos Minor Patent Head Made
By J.C. Vincent.



Signed J. Vincent
Spinning Wheel

May 17

In the shop at work.
Recd. letter from Lib.

May 18

Getting out wheel stuff. Mrs. S. F. _____
gave us a call.
Wrote letter to Lib.

May 19

In the shop turning wheel posts. Just
took a drink of beer.

May 20

In the shop at work.
John O. finishes hauling lumber for us.
His charge for hauling logs and
returning the lumber \$4.00.

Sunday May 21

This is the day I went "arvi arvi"
We parted at 1 o'clock.
Transcribers note - this must have been
quite a date as there are flowers drawn all
over the entry and words underlined and
boxed.

May 22

Repaired our yard fence today. Could
not keep my eyes open without difficulty.

May 23

In the shop repairing gun for Ca__
Smith. I'm going to Marietta this
evening. No preventing providence.
Went to Marietta. Train ran off the track
between store and tank.

May 24

Returned from Marietta this morning. Bought two hymn books, one for O. B. the other for myself. Left my watches with D. Anderson.

C. B. was here today.

May 25

Went over to M. Dunbais this morning and helped to cut twenty locust posts. Returned home at 9 o'clock and went to work in the shop. Commenced repairing gun for Mr. Frozer who came yesterday with C. B. Hitchcock.

May 26

Finished repairing gun for Frozer who came with C. B. Went to turning wheel parts.

May 27

Drill at Barlow - a success - home at 5 o'clock.

May 28

Went to church - Mothers' Day - returned home at 12 1/2 o'clock. Temperance meeting of little account.

May 29

In the shop, turning, turning, turning.

May 30

Turning away. Tired today.

May 31

Turning legs, _____, etc.

June 1

In the shop turning away.

June 2

In the shop. _____ wheels and heads finished the first of the season.

June 3

In the shop a little while, then went to the muster at Barlow. A devil of a warm day. _____ Sold wheel and two heads to Simeon Drain.



J. Vincent signature and date on Patent Head. Most surviving examples date from the 1860's