

but holes on the aft side for the smaller ends. The brass butt plate and trigger guard are common patterns of the mid to late 19th century in Ohio and the Midwest. The ramrod pipes are sheet iron, and the tiny teardrop side plate is of brass, along with a 2 ½ “toe plate held by three iron screws. The 4” tang is a continuous 3/8” width and is held with two screws – with a hole for a peep sight between them. There are two slots for a front sight, that forward one filled with a low brass and iron sight. The rear sight seems to have been broken or roughly trimmed, as it lies close the barrel – possibly to better facilitate the use of a peep sight. The high-hammered back action percussion lock is marked “Atkinson Warranted,” with the tiny figure of a hunter.

The unmarked rifle accompanying the Wm Rife has a 38” barrel (slightly flaring near the muzzle, and with evidence that the breech – which was likely cut off an inch or two when being converted to percussion is also slightly flared. The barrel has deep cut rifling and low rear and front sights. The rifle once had several holes indicating it once had a metal rib and stock pin holders on the fore stock, though all are now missing – it is possible the gun was half-stocked. The buttstock is of rather tight curly maple with a tobacco brown hue. A bit of the toe piece broke off in the period of use and the end of the butt plate is slightly curved up into the vacant space – a homemade fix occasionally seen on period rifles, maybe more often on the frontier. The finely finished trigger guard indicates that it and the barrel were once on a nice full stock flintlock or early percussion rifle. The brass sheet flash guard/repair



Closeup of stock of Wm Rife rifle with silver escutcheons and unique nose cap.

is held on with small screws. It seems a practical design and may have also helped guard against the inevitable wood-weakening soakings that occurred when users cleaned their rifles by pouring hot water down the barrel without removing it from the stock. The overall profile and shaping of the stock, quality of workmanship, design of the cast nose cap, back-action lock, the small teardrop side plate, and a few small details in stock architecture strongly suggest the work of a maker in the Siebert clan. Whoever restocked the old barrel was following a common practice of the times – many older barrels (some which still bear the original makers signatures) and parts were recycled by the same makers who were producing newly built guns – which they would have more of an inclination to mark.

Thus, by examining these two rifles, in particular the marked Wm Rife gun, our knowledge of gun making and use in mid- to late central Ohio is slightly expanded.

Sources:

Hutslar, Donald (1973). Gunsmiths of Ohio, 18th and 19th Centuries, Vol. 1. York: George Shumway Publisher.

Spiker, Kevin R. and James B. Whisker (2013). Arms Makers of Ohio. The Association of Ohio Longrifle Collectors.



Top rifle, unmarked but possibly of the Siebert clan, it has a unique brass repair/flash guard; note the heavy, early trigger guard; Wm Rife rifle below.

J.S. FOWLER, BELMONT COUNTY, OHIO AND VIRGINIA

BY MARK BENDER

A rifle stamped J.S. Fowler surfaced from obscurity this year and adds something to our understanding of rifle-making in the borders of southeast Ohio and West Virginia in the mid to late 19th century. Overall, the rifle exhibits certain features that were common to some of the gracile half stock rifles of the area and era by makers on both sides of the river.

When compared to photos of a Fowler marked rifle in Vol. 1 of the AOLRC Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen series, the recent find shows distinct similarities, especially the curved cheekpiece (Hutslar (n.d.:45, 53). Another source mentioning J.S. Fowler (1808-?) is recorded at 105 Water St., South Wheeling, Virginia in 1839, and between 1840-1850 just across the Ohio River in West Wheeling, located in Putney Township, Belmont County (Smith, Coe, and Whisker 2018:39). The source notes a rifle marked "J.S. Fowler/Wheeling/Virginia" and "has a 42 inch barrel and 15 silver inlays, a silver wear plate and acorn design inlays (this may be the rifle illustrated in Vol. 1). Other information in that source mentions a gunsmith named Fowler in Cameron, Marshall County, West Virginia in 1870, who was born in Pennsylvania and was married in Ohio County in 1833 to Sarah Arbuthnot, having two daughters, Mary and Rosetta. Fowler is listed in the census as having \$1800 in real estate and \$100 in "personal value" (p. 39).

The Ohio River forms the eastern border of Belmont County, dotted with cities and towns with historic or scenic names like Martins Ferry, Shadyside, and Powhatan Point of the Ohio side and Wheeling and Moundsville on the West Virginia side. The county

was established in 1801, two years before statehood, its county seat being St. Clairsville. Harrison and Jefferson counties lie to the north, Guernsey and Noble to the west, and the once remote Monroe County to the south. The river, of course connects these areas to points north and south, especially to areas that produced well-known gunmakers such as Marietta, Portsmouth, and Cincinnati.

The rifle illustrated on p. 53 of Vol. 1, is ornamented with what appear (from the black and white photos) to be silver or German silver inlays (several in the "acorn" shapes common on rifles from the area), an unengraved patch box with five piercings, and a curved cheekpiece adorned with an oval inlay. The overall configuration includes a slightly curved lower stock profile (a mild "fish belly") and includes a lower ramrod pipe inlaid in the stock and poured nose cap. The recently surfaced rifle is plainer in that it has no inlays and no lower ramrod pipe. Among the similarities are the anterior profiles of the lock mouldings, the curved cheekpiece, which includes an incised line that wraps along the nose of the stock comb to the lock side (see illustration), and rounded wrists (in cross section).

The plainer rifle appears to have an original finish on the curly maple stock and was scraped rather than sanded (possibly with a piece of glass as happened sometimes) before being dyed with a dark stain. The lightweight barrel, low sights, and sleek form beckons one to carry it to the squirrel woods.

The plain half stock has the following features:



Full length view (obverse) of J. S. Fowler rifle, Belmont County, Ohio.



Lock area of J. S. Fowler rifle, Belmont County, Ohio.