

# A.C. McGirr Half-stock, Marietta, Ohio

BY MARK BENDER

Alexander C. McGirr (1825-1895) was a well-known gunsmith in Marietta, Ohio in the mid-19th century. The city was the first permanent settlement in the Northwest Territory and an important jumping off place for settlers from the east moving into lands relinquished by the Shawnee and other tribes after the treaty of Greenville in 1795. McGirr was born in Belmont County, and likely traversed the winding roads through the forests of "dark" Monroe County either by foot, horseback, or wagon, or traveled downriver by boat to arrive in the administrative seat of Washington County. The son of immigrants from Scotland, McGirr soon married the daughter of gunsmith Elisha Pratt, of old New England stock. McGirr set up a shop near Front Street and set about making practical half-stock hunting rifles for customers in southeastern Ohio and neighboring West Virginia. The original shop burned in 1858. Badly injuring his spine in a catastrophic railroad accident in the Civil War, McGirr continued gun making as a disabled veteran, sometimes working with other smiths. He is said to have ended his practice in 1870. He was contemporary with John and Caleb Vincent, W. Shockey, and Alexander Applebay (of Wellsburg, West Virginia and later, Lowell, Ohio). David Sink is documented as briefly assisting McGirr in making a number of rifles after his injury; another helper was named Edward Arn (Offenberger 1979:10-11).

The present half-stock rifle has a robust, powerful appearance, with lots of character—its lines contrasting with the more gracile look of many rifles produced by the Vincents. That said, it shares certain features with guns made by other area makers in the treatment of the stock (especially the lock area), style of brass furniture, and lines. In his 1979 article Offenberger, observed that McGirr did not seem to have a basic pattern or style. Rather, his work exhibits a rather eclectic nature, with no pattern seeming to dominate. Several rifles, however, do fall into a rather distinct pattern – including the one under inspection here. That pattern includes a basic stock style of a high comb, sharp nose, very slight perch belly, heavy barrel, and brass fittings.

The present rifle is in shooting condition and may have been used in the twentieth century. It was recovered in late 2018 at a large gun show in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and repatriated to Ohio.

The heavy 1" by 32 ¼" full octagon barrel is held in the curly maple stock with two screws through the tang (rounded on the end and ever so slightly concaved on each side), and one pin through the fore stock, offset with 1<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" long brass inlays, as seen on several other McGirr rifles. The original finish is worn on the wrist and fore stock where it was handled over the generations. The right side of the fore stock has an old, well-done repair consisting of a sliver of wood replaced along the barrel channel, the stripes in the maple matching almost exactly with the original wood. The rifle is approximately .39 caliber, with a slight crowning of the muzzle and deep rifling. Although a plain gun, it is neatly crafted, with properly inlaid lock and set triggers, properly filed and dressed brass trigger guard and butt plate, tiny raindrop brass sheet metal side plate, and a smartly curved cast pewter nose cap. The dark amber curly maple stock may have been stained with nitric acid and has about 4-6 lines of curly per inch.

The gun has good heft, good lines, and balances well. It is no wonder that some McGirr rifles, and other Ohio guns, found their ways West in the mid-19th century, transported by settlers and homesteaders who needed home rifles and hunting pieces. In southeast Ohio such rifles were good for hunting squirrel, rabbits, other small game, varmints, the occasional deer, and participating in target shooting matches. Little wonder that the frontispiece of Ned Robert's classic *The Muzzle-loading Cap Lock Rifle* reads "The Author with a McGirr Squirrel Rifle" (1952). The rifle Ned Robert's so earnestly cradles was built in the same pattern – though with a decidedly longer barrel – as the piece described below. These dimensions are offered as information to collectors who might have comparable rifles, to researchers who wish to better understand the stylistic range and engineering of McGirr rifles, and to builders who may wish to recreate a McGirr rifle or

absorb influences for their own building projects.

Approximate Dimensions in Inches

Overall length: 49" (butt plate toe to muzzle)

Length of pull: 13 ¼" (front trigger to middle of butt plate)

Length and width of barrel: 32¼"; 1" at breech; 1½" at muzzle; barrel flat at breech 7/16"

Tang: 5" x 7/16" (very slight concavity of sides in mid-section)

Caliber at muzzle (appears to be seven rifling grooves): .39"

Caliber 2" down the barrel: unknown

Signature (last letter) on top flat of barrel from breech: 3 ⅞"

Rib (visible under barrel): 21" length; 6/16" (width of barrel flat), by ¼" ramrod channel; end seems filled with pewter and slightly round off

Ramrod pipes: 1½" (upper); 1 1/16" (lower); both .643" in width

Drop of stock (barrel plane to butt plate): 4" (top of butt plate extension); 8" (bottom end extension).

Lock plate: 4 5/8" by 1"

Lock panel (wood), left side 5½" length, 1 3/8" (widest); right side (side with lock) 5 ½" length, 1 3/8" (widest)

Wrist circumference: 4 ¾"; 1¼" wide; 1 5/8" high (halfway between rear of wooden lock panel and nose of stock); the wrist extends about 2 ¾" past the front base of the nose into the stock

Length of comb: 7¾" (top of nose of stock to end of wood in butt plate); base of nose is about 1" high from the wrist with a 4 o'clock degree angle from wrist

Side plate (teardrop shape): 3¼" high, 9/16" wide

Trigger guard: 7¼" in length; center of anterior screw from end ¾"; center of posterior screw to end 9/16"

Set triggers: 5" long by 7/16" wide

Butt plate: top width 1 5/16"; top length 3 1/16": widest center width 1¼"; height between top and bottom tips 4"; toe width ½"; distance from forward end of butt plate to center of top screw 1"; distance of center of screw in butt plate curve to toe 2".

Barrel key escutcheons and pins: 1 13/16" length; ½" wide; center of each inlay pin 7/16" from end; barrel pin in middle (barrel pin larger diameter than inlay pins)

Pewter nose cap: 1 1/16" length (top); 1 1/16" center of curve; 1 1/2" length (bottom)

Toe plate: 4 9/16" in length, ½" (6 tiny iron pins spaced about ¾" apart [probably eye-balled as not perfectly in

line or spaced], larger iron pin near toe); slight radius on anterior end; thin brass sheet metal (about ten gauge)

Center of rear sight (buckhorn): 6 3/8" from rear of barrel; ¼" high; ½" wide at top of buckhorns

Front sight: 7/8" length; rear of base 2" from muzzle; low sight (about 1/8" high)

Weight: 10 lbs. 2 oz. (approximately)

Note: Please contact author if other measurements are needed.

Sources: Hutslar, Donald A. (1998). *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen 1750-1950, Volume 5. State College: Josten's, Inc. (AOLRC publication)*

Offenberger, Warren (1979). *A.C. McGirr Gunsmith 1825-1895. Association of Ohio Longrifle Collectors Newsletter 1(August):10-12.*

Roberts, Ned H. ([1940] 1952). *The Muzzle-loading Cap Lock Rifle. Mechanicsburg, Pa: Stackpole Press. (recently reprinted)*

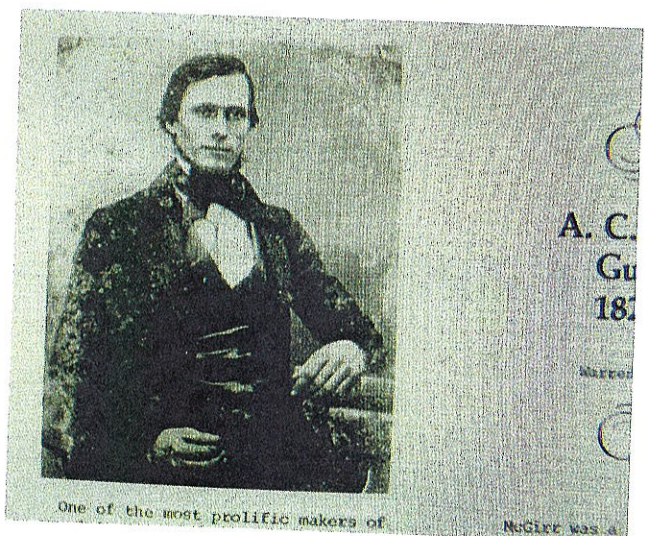
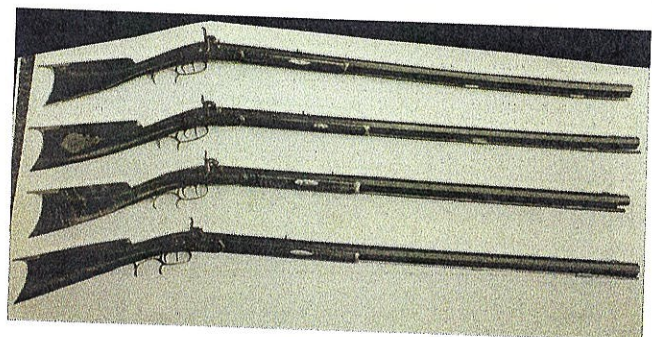
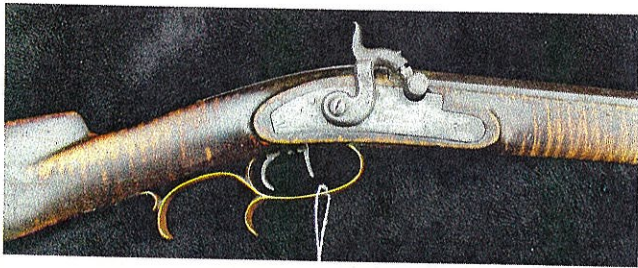


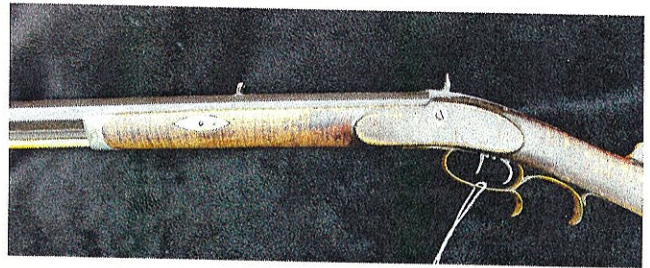
Photo of Alexander McGirr that appeared in the first issue of the newsletter, printed in 1979, by Warren Offenberger.



Several rifles marked as made by Alexander McGirr (AOLRC archives).



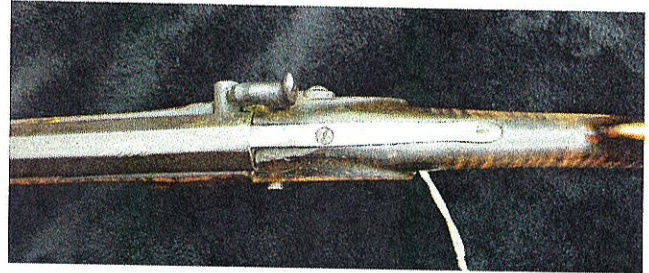
*Lock and lock panels of the McGirr rifle described in this article. (Mark Bender).*



*Pewter nose-cap, brass inlay, and rear sight of the McGirr rifle described in this article (Mark Bender).*



*Underside of lock area of McGirr rifle (Mark Bender).*



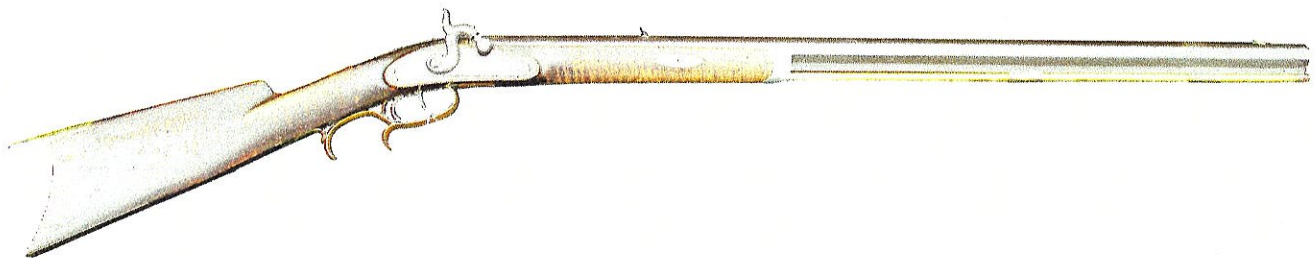
*Tang configuration of the McGirr rifle described in this article. (Mark Bender).*



*Sideplate view of the McGirr rifle described in this article (Mark Bender).*



*Left side of the McGirr rifle described in this article (Mark Bender).*



*Overall view of the McGirr rifle described in this article. (Mark Bender).*