

A GUNSMITH TRY PLATE

BY MARK BENDER

Percussion locks were produced and marketed in major Ohio cities in the 19th century, including Cincinnati and Dayton. Some were sourced from companies in Pennsylvania such as Leman, Tryon, and Truitt Brothers; some were likely assembled from parts by individuals or work groups in Ohio that may have entered the state in ports and crossing points along the Ohio River. Many locks are stamped with the names of assemblers or companies, sometimes connected with stores. Certainly there were common procedures for finishing locks for sale, along with specialized tools. It is likely that in some cases small teams assembled and finished the locks.

The photos here illustrate a tool that could be described as a “try plate” for making sure the profile of the lock plate conformed to standards and that the insides were aligned to fit properly within the lock cavity in the stock, insuring that the main spring, tumbler, or other parts did not put undue pressure on the the stock (I have examined several old guns in which the thin wood along the bottom of the stock has split because of ill-seated innards). Similar try plates, as well as special swage plates for forging hammers, and lock plates, etc., were developed over time in Europe, and later America, in efforts to mass produce “pattern” military muskets and rifles. The provenance off the illustrated item is unknown, though it was recovered in central Ohio.

The dimensions are as follows:

22 mm wide (outer shell)

15.92 mm wide (actual try plate inside the shell)

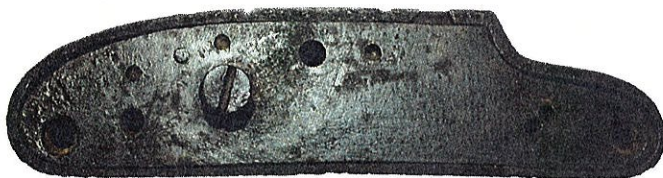
4.87 mm thick (outer shell)

114.80 length

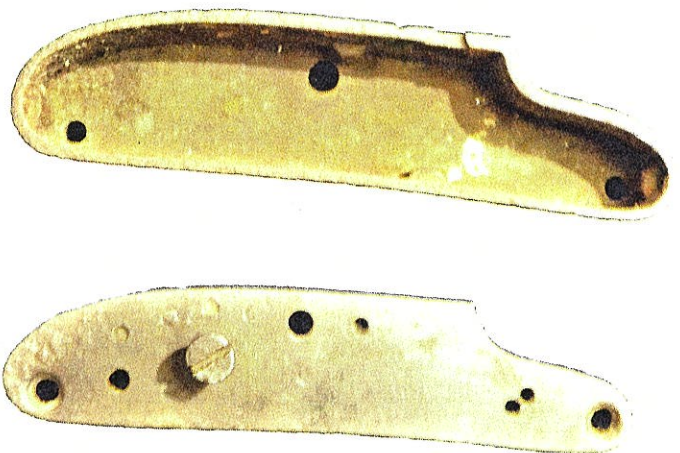
-6.28 mm shell thickness

As the photos show, there are three screw holes that penetrate the lock try plate – the anterior and posterior ones may be for attaching it to a workbench or other solid surface, but could also be options for spacing lockbolt holes on actual lock plates. The front of the try plate also has a screw and protruding tumbler that could be used in trying the fit of hammers, set triggers, etc. A small “depth-stop” is cast into the inside of the cavity to prevent a lock plate from going too deep inside. In all, a fascinating, and likely useful, tool.

(Note: The author wishes to thank Bob Williams, for help with the material aspects of this article. For several years he had an antique gun shop in the Hilltop area of Columbus with Gabby Cathers, which was often frequented by AOLRC members. If any reader has other ideas about the function, provenance, etc. of the “try plate,” please let me know.)



“Try plate” with lock plate in place.



Empty “try plate showing depth-stop, and percussion lock-plate found in the plate

PATCHBOX COMPARISON: GORSUCH AND RIGHTER

BY MARK BENDER

The original photos of the rifles appearing in volumes I-V of *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesman*, edited by Donald Hutslar, constitute a large portion of AOLRC archives (which are stored in manila envelopes according to county). Though most of these photos, taken over the years by Dr. James Whisker, have been published, the collection still contains unpublished photos of several rifles. While digging through the archive photos (after paging through all 5 of the Hutslar volumes) looking for clues as to the maker of a rifle I acquired a few years ago – a stout, unmarked half-stock rifle with distinctive lock panels and a back-action lock. I found photos of a signed rifle attributed to John Manchester Gorsuch of Jefferson County, which had similar lines, brass hardware, and lock panels (shaped something like the prow of a boat). But the Gorsuch photos took me in an unexpected direction: the photos of the patchbox of the unpublished Gorsuch were similar to the patchbox on a rifle by John Righter, pictured in Hutslar Vol. III – and patchboxes on rifles by other makers in neighboring Jefferson, Harrison, and other counties in Ohio (examples include guns by J. Hefner, Marion and J. Ritcher, Cadiz, Harrison, Co. – see AOLRC, Newsletter, February, 1982, p. 11, for side by side photos [along with a Gorsuch with a different styled patchbox]; and Samuel Devore, p. 167, of Hutslar Vol. II, of New Rumley). Rifles with similar patchbox patterns were also made earlier in Pennsylvania, and maybe elsewhere. For instance, the patchbox on a rifle by John Newcomer, active in eastern Pennsylvania in the 1760s and '70s, that features a brass patchbox with a heart-shaped cutout in the finial (Kindig 1983: 117). Online searches will also show several trade rifles by Henry Gibbs of Lancaster, dating to the early 1830s, with similar shaped and pierced patchboxes.

John M. Gorsuch (1821-1895) is listed as working in Mt. Pleasant. Both full and half-stock rifles have survived, some with rather elaborate inlays and engraving (Hutslar, Vol. III, p. 10; photos of some guns can be found in online searches). The rifle in the previously unpublished photo (Figs. 1, 2, 3) has a distinctly styled patchbox with a “heart-like” cutout in

the finial. It is interesting that photos (Hutslar Vol. II, p. 172; bio on p. 158) of a rifle by John G. Righter, of Cadiz (born in Pennsylvania; lived 1816-?) feature a patchbox of similar design, though more finely made. A rifle on p. 161 of Vol. III, shows a half-stock rifle (and his 1884 clapboard gun shop), with back-action lock, that is similar style to some Gorsuch rifles and the unmarked rifle in my possession.) In the 1870 is listed that Righter “employed one hand”, and purchased \$50 worth of materials and made \$650 worth of guns and other articles (Hutslar Vol. II, p. 158.) Both full-stock and half-stock are known, including one half-stock with no butt plate made from a cut-down flintlock barrel, as well as more fancy guns. (See Fig. 4)

Although no real conclusions can be drawn from these intersecting similarities, this brief comparison does serve to remind us that influences, probably made through many sorts of channels, were a real and significant part of the production of rifles among mid-19th century Ohio gunsmiths and allied tradesmen. At very least, the patchbox pattern was one used by several gunsmiths in the area of Harrison and Jefferson counties, and opens some avenues for queries into mutual influences and transmission of not only patchbox patterns, but other structural and artistic elements. As for the unmarked rifle in my possession, I am still pondering, awaiting more evidence ...

Sources:

AOLRC Newsletter <https://www.aolrc.com/newsletters>
Hutslar, Donald (n.d.). *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesman*, Vol. III. State College, Pennsylvania: Josten's Printing (for the Association of Ohio Longrifle Collectors). (In a 5 volume series)

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Kindig, Joe, Jr. (1983). *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in Its Golden Age*. George Shumway Publisher. (2nd edition)