




Tuscarawas Co. Gunsmith Levi Biddle

By Alfred Kaser

Photos Courtesy of Leslie Kaser



Frederick & George Biddle were among the first pioneers to settle in Sugarcreek Township - Tuscarawas County. Frederick arrived about 1812 and his brother George came to settle in 1815 after serving in the war of 1812.

They came from Chambersburg, Pa. where they had learned the gunsmithing trade. They worked for both white men and indians after coming to Ohio. Frederick died in 1868 & George in 1871.

George had four sons, two were ministers, Jacob was a farmer who lived in Crooked Run not far from New Philadelphia, Ohio and Levi a school teacher and later a gunsmith.

Levi was born on July 7, 1831. He lived on a farm, not too far from Shanesville, Ohio.

Levi taught school as a young man until he was about 30 years old. He then decided to go into the gunsmithing trade. He built and repaired muzzleloading rifles. His rifles were mostly of small caliber half stocks. They were used to hunt small game, shoot

hogs and an occasional beef on the farms. Many of his rifles show fine craftsmanship in the stock lines and the engraved silver inlays, which he installed on most of his rifles. Some of his rifles were rather plain with only a patchbox, but he used all curly maple wood stained dark.

All Biddle rifles are signed in script on top of the barrel. His rifles were not numbered.



Levi Biddle's Home



Biddle
Half-stock Rifles



Lefthand Levi Biddle. Maybe one of a kind.

Apparently Levi built very few fullstock rifles. Only 5 have been seen to date. The ones that have been observed were of very fine workmanship. One of these rifles is pictured with this article.

Another unusual rifle pictured is a left hand Biddle. The gun has a handmade lock, while most all of Biddle's other rifles had factory built locks. From the engraving on the lock it would appear that Levi made the lock special for this rifle. The gun contains several silver inlays and the name of the man the gun was made for appears on the top of the barrel.

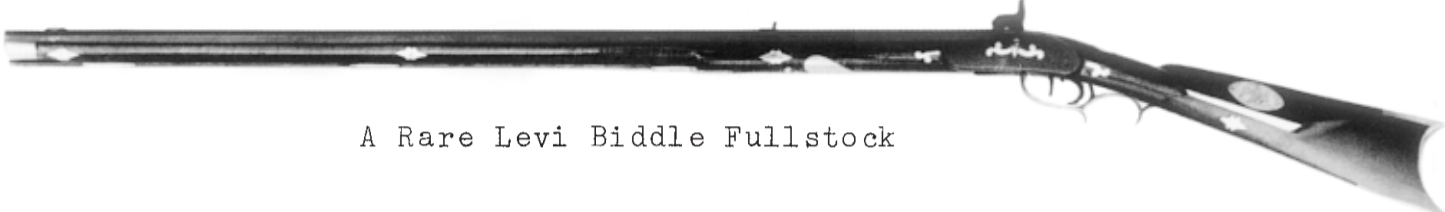

Levi served as Justice of the Peace of Sugarcreek Township from 1867-1869 & 1873-1875.

Biddle and his wife Susan had only one child, a daughter Mary Elizabeth. Mary was married to August Froelich. During the childbirth of their daughter, Mary Elizabeth died. Levi and his wife then raised their granddaughter.

During the year of 1894 Levi was having timber cut from a woods on the farm to have a new home built in Sugarcreek, but on Nov. 19, 1894 Levi Biddle died of a stroke. He was buried in the Old Reformed Church Cemetery at Shanesville. Susan Biddle decided to build the new home in Sugarcreek, where she lived until shortly before her death in 1929 at the age of 93.

Levi's obituary that run in the local paper in 1894 didn't even mention that Levi was a gunsmith. I guess so often a person is not recognized for their contributions to mankind until they are gone.

Thus ends another chapter in the history of early gunsmiths in Ohio. There is very little known about Levi Biddle, but one thing that is sure, as long as there are collectors of fine Ohio Muzzleloading rifles, this craftsman's rifles will be highly sought after. □

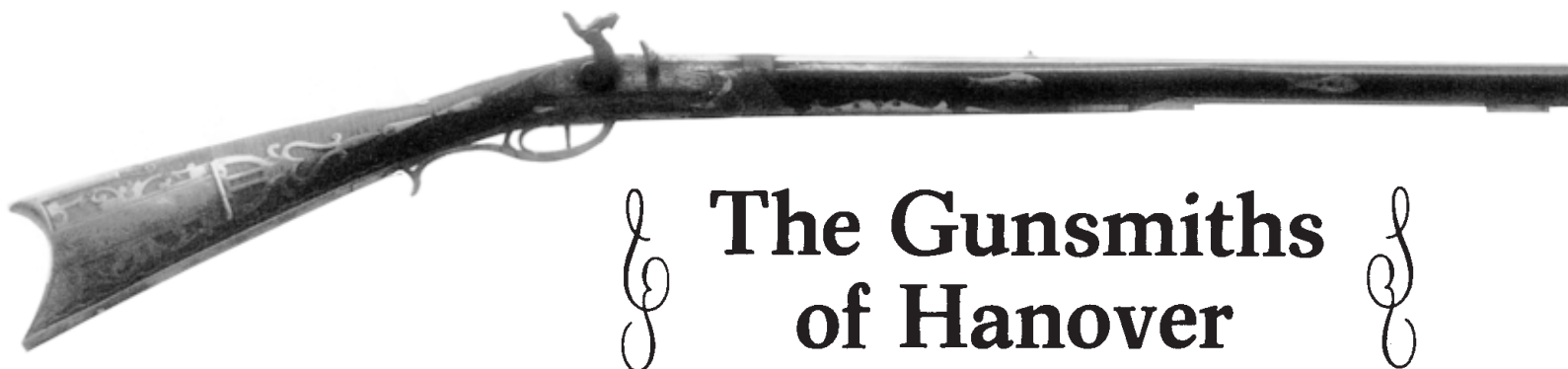


A Rare Levi Biddle Fullstock

The History of Hanover 1804-1913 states that Charles Pettit came to Hanover about 1805, a skilled mechanic who had the first set of joiners tools in the village. The History states the first school was opened in 1809 and that Andrew Pettit was the second teacher of the school. No place have I found whether Charles and Andrew were father-son or brothers, but at any rate they were grown men in 1810 period. The oldest date on an Andrew Pettit rifle, I have seen was 1828 on a rifle that had been flint lock originally. The only



The home of Andrew Pettit.



The Gunsmiths of Hanover

By Tom Pike

other date I ever saw on a Pettit was on a top grade percussion fullstock with about 75 inlays of silver, dated 1836. This rifle as most Pettit's had very curly wood and the inlay work was done in vines and flowers highly engraved.

Pettit made mostly plain full and half stock hunting or squirrel rifles of 32-38 caliber. Very neat and light with very good curl wood and signed on the top flat in Spencerian Script

A. Pettit.

There were certain characteristics that identified his work: ramrod thimbles round with one or two decorating rings at ends, small

carved or filed detail at trigger guard and at front comb of stock. He apparently bought bbls, locks, hardware and patch boxes from suppliers in Pittsburgh as some of the bbl's are marked, Pittsburgh. Patch boxes were keystone and heart cut out type. Pettit was a good engraver of metal. Pettit must have made guns for thirty years and been successful at it, as he owned several parcels of land, including a large colonial style brick house on a large farm. (This house is still in good repair.)

It was the custom to hold shooting matches at Pettit's farm. On January 1st 1854 Pettit was accidentally killed during the shooting match.

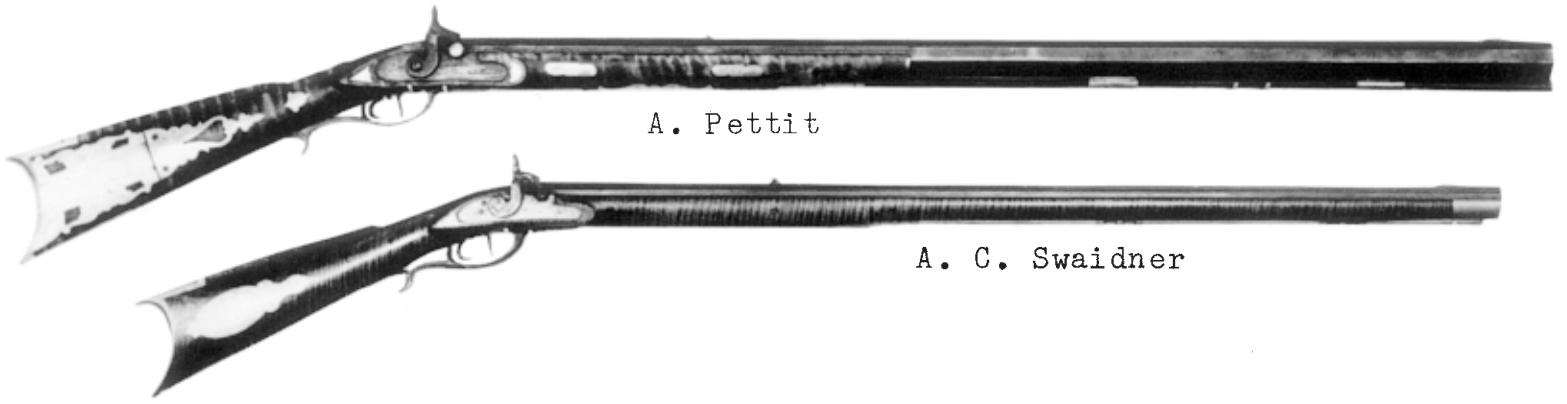


Six views of an Andrew Pettit silver mounted fullstock.

At the time of his death there were four children under 16 years of age, one over 16 and his wife in the Pettit household.

His estate was settled through the probate court and it took, until the youngest of his children reached 16 years of age that it was settled. During this settlement every cent that was handled for the minor children and upkeep of the properties had to have a paper receipt for the court. Many times written on a scrap of paper or sack, but handled by a court appointed administrator.

When Pettit died, a gunsmith at nearby Salem finished up the rifles Pettit had under construc-



A. Pettit

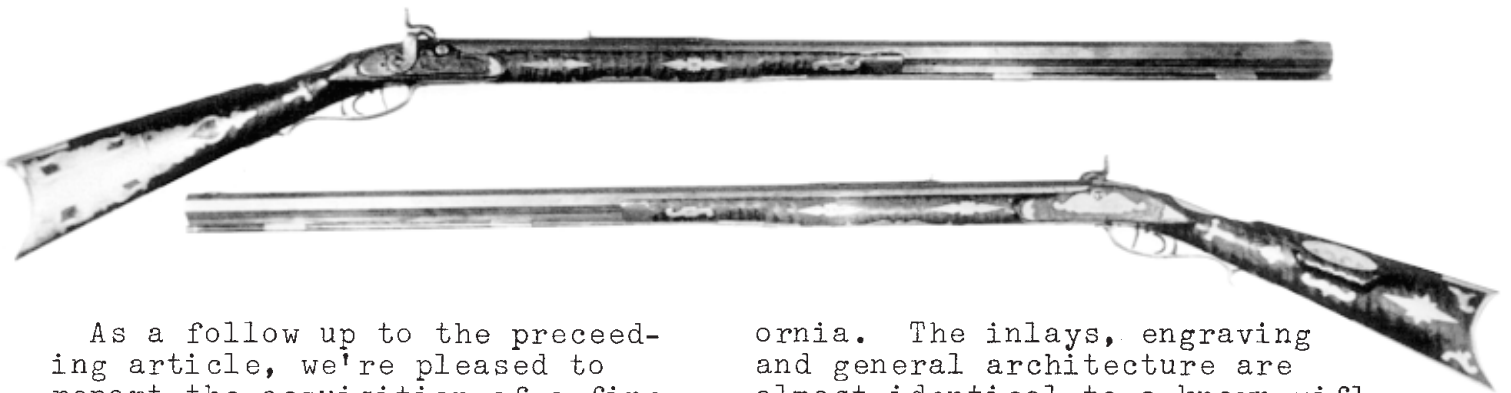
A. C. Swaidner

tion. Also the repairs he had started. It is possible that (the Salem smith) A. C. Swaidner had been an apprentice of Pettit's, as the character of his work and engraving suggest association with Pettit, especially the flowing script signatures and decorations. This is also recorded in estate settlement. There have been several other locations given as Pettit's place of business. I doubt if he ever worked at another location than Hanover, because of known dates he was there.

In the late 1930's I was getting interested in shooting and collecting M.L.'s. An old gentleman who had been collecting guns all his life showed me two Pettit rifles, and told me the story of Pettit's death. This man lived on the same

street as Pettit's place. Later I also obtained the court records of Pettit's estate which bore out the things the old gentleman told me.

He also told me the story of "Wm. Johnson" the gunsmith who came to Hanover from Pa. about 1860 to fill Hanovers need for a gunsmith after Pettit's death. Johnson was a top craftsman who continued much the same style of rifles. I have seen several very ornate highly decorated rifles with silver wire inlay. He used a violin type oil varnish in several colors, seeming to prefer red. He seemed to be a prolific maker as his guns were common forty years ago. He worked until his death March 9, 1885. □



As a follow up to the preceding article, we're pleased to report the acquisition of a fine silver mounted rifle by Salem, Columbiana Co. gunsmith Ephrian Sonedecker. Member Ted Dixon is the new owner and the rifle was reportedly discovered in Calif-

ornia. The inlays, engraving and general architecture are almost identical to a known rifle by Salem gunsmith A. C. Swaidner, while the patchbox and other inlays are identical to the Pettit rifles pictured.

W.E.O.

An outstanding display of 13 Humberger rifles, covering three tables, was presented as a special attraction at the April Exhibit of the Association of Ohio Longrifle Collectors.

It is believed that these 13 rifles made by the Humberger Gunmaking Family is the largest display of their work ever assembled for exhibit. It is interesting to note that there were 6 members of the Humberger family to follow the gunsmithing trade. This is a record for family participation in Ohio and it is further interesting as there were three Peters and two Adams and at times it is quite difficult to determine which man made which rifle.

A special thank you is extended to F. G. Tilton who conceived the Humberger display and spent considerable time in rounding up these fine rifles. Also thanks to the Ohio Historical Society, Jim Frenz, Gary Smith, F. G. Tilton and John Hudson who so graciously loaned their valuable pieces for this outstanding display.

The rifles on display were made by the following:



Peter Humberger Sr. or I	(1767-1838)
Peter Humberger Jr. or II	(1796-1852)
Adam Humberger	(1806-1865)
Henry Humberger	(1811-1879)
Samuel Humberger	(1815-1886)
Peter Humberger III	(1826-1899)
Adam, Peter, and Samuel Humberger -	
	A + P + S + H

The Humberger

Gunsmithing Family



Adam Humberger left his home in the Rhineland during the Palatine war and came to America in 1749 with 400 other refugees on the "St. Andrew." Peter Humberger, Sr., a descendant of this immigrant, made guns in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, from 1774 to 1791. His birthplace is unknown. Oscar Humberger, Adam's great grandson, found the dates 1767-1838 on the monument in Zion Ridge Cemetery.

Some authorities say that Peter Humberger, Sr., came to Perry County in 1791. This does not seem probable for several reasons: Indians were hostile then, legal settlements were not being made that far north of the Ohio River, and no known settlers came to Perry County before 1800. E. S. Colborn said in his History of Perry County that Peter, Sr., came in 1802 with his brothers, John and Henry. Peter Humberger, Sr., secured a deed for his farm in Thorn Township from the Chillicothe land office in 1806. It was signed by President Thomas Jefferson. On this farm he reared ten children, three of whom learned gunsmithing from their father and followed the trade. They were Peter, Jr., Adam, and Henry.

Peter, Jr., or Peter II as he is sometimes called, was born in Pennsylvania, December 13, 1795. As the oldest son he was the first to go into business for himself. He opened a shop in Hopewell Township, Perry County, a few miles east of his father's farm, and worked there until his death on April 19, 1852.

Several national authorities on gun makers say that Adam Humberger was the son of Peter II. But an article in the Thornville News for October 1, 1903, by a nephew of the men said that Peter II, Adam, and Henry were brothers. According to that account, Adam was the son of Peter, Sr. Oscar Humberger's notes agree with the nephew. Adam was born in Thorn Township in 1806. He is the subject of a long biog-

raphy in the county history by Colborn, who married Adam's daughter, Mary. Adam learned the gunsmith trade in his father's shop. After completing his apprenticeship, he started in business for himself in the town of Somerset where he worked for the rest of his life.

Although Adam was a skilled workman, his poor judgment caused the loss of one of his eyes. It seems that news of a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi River started an argument in Somerset about the relative strength of steam and steel. Adam "allowed as how his steel barrels was stronger than steam" and he set about to prove it. He breeched both ends of a heavy Remington blank and filled it partly full of water before he plugged it. Then he laid the barrel across a bed of charcoal on his forge. By an ingenious remote control device he operated the big leather bellows from a position outside his shop to bring the charcoal to a white heat.

You might think that if Adam had faith in his steel he would scorn the protection of a wall. But he was working on the frontiers of science, and he wanted to live to experiment another day. He operated the bellows, the charcoal blazed hotter and hotter, and the barrel turned red. The steel was holding. It seemed that Adam was right. But suddenly there was an explosion like a cannon shot. A piece of metal ripped through the side of the shop and put out one of Adam's eyes. The barrel had burst in the center where the fire was hottest.

Bystanders put out the fire that started and carried several kegs of powder to safety. Adam survived with the loss of one eye and a considerable amount of his self-confidence. In his later years he invented and took out three patents on a corn harvester. He died in May, 1865, at the home of

his daughter, Mrs. Colborn, in New Lexington.

Henry, the third son of Peter, Sr., to become a gunsmith, was born on the Thorn Township farm on August 29, 1811. Like all the boys of the family he inherited mechanical ability and worked in his father's shop. As a part-time cabinet maker he built a pipe organ for the Lutheran Church at Somerset. But Henry is best known as a gunsmith. He worked in Perry County until his wife died. Then he went to California in the Gold Rush. When he came back in 1851, he married his second wife and bought a farm in Whitley County, Indiana. His nephew said in the Thornville News, "He still worked at his trade, and one day he finished a gun and retired as usual for the night. Towards morning his wife found him cold

in death, with his little boy resting on his arm."

Peter Humberger III was born in 1826. He learned the gunsmith trade from his father, Peter II. He established a business of his own in the town of Glenford, Hopewell Township, Perry County, and worked there until his death in 1899. Another son of Peter II was Samuel. He was the sixth and last of the family to work at the gunsmith trade. The national authorities on gun makers have overlooked him. Because there were already several members of the family working in Perry County, Samuel went across the line to Kirkersville in Licking County to work. He was listed as a gunsmith at that place in 1853 and 1859. Six gunsmiths in one family. How far would we have to travel to match that record? □

Norris Schneider