

Over many years I have seen quite a few quality long rifles signed J. Clark without being certain until very recently who that maker really was. The late William S. Bowers illustrated one J. Clark which he owned, calling the gunsmith John not James. We discussed this matter over many years and we agreed that one of the makers of the splendid long rifle in the collection of the late Joe Kindig, Jr., signed Sheetz & Clark was also the gunsmith who made the several arms signed simply J. Clark. One possible candidate for the very talented maker was James Clark of Bedford Co., Pa. Two recent discoveries have settled this issue for all times.

Arms dealer Mike D'Ambra of San Diego acquired a gun marked James Clark in script in a silver inlay plate in the barrel. Thus, I was correct, it was James Clark. Now which James Clark, the man from Bedford or a man from Lebanon, Ohio. A splendid midwestern collection contains a J. Clark long rifle of considerable artistic merit marked Lebanon, O.

Captain Fred Schroyer a few years ago gave to Dan Hartzler and me copies of apprenticeship papers for a James Clark who studied the arts and mysteries of the gunmaking trade under George Rizer in Cumberland, Md. Warren Offenberger located a Ph. D. dissertation by Charles Martin Cummings, submitted to the faculty at Ohio State and entitled, "Seven Ohio Confederate Generals." One of these men was a Charles Clark. Weaving together family and oral genealogical information with hard research, Dr. Cummings had provided us with the biography of James Clark, master gunsmith.

James Clark was born on January 11, 1784, a son of Jacob N. Clark (1754-1833), a Revolutionary War soldier, and his wife Tabitha Dennis. After the war, Jacob moved to West Virginia, but resettled near Cumberland where James was born. His apprenticeship indenture with George Rizer reads as follows:

This indenture witnesseth that I, Jacob Clark, of Allegany County and state of Maryland hath put, placed and bound and by these presents hath put, place and bind out my son James Clark and he the said James Clark hath hereby put, place and bind out himself as an apprentice to George Rizer of the County and State aforesaid to learn the art and trade of a gunsmith in its various branches. The said James Clark after the manner of an apprentice to dwell with and serve the said George Rizer from the day of the date hereof until the Eleventh day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five at which time the said Apprentice will have served the said George Rizer five years and five months if he should be living during all time or term of years. The said Apprentice his master well and faithfully shall serve his secrets keep and his lawful command carry. When and at all times readily obey he shall do no damage to his said master nor willfully suffer any to be done by others and if any to his knowledge be intended he shall give timely notice to his master thereof he shall not waste his said masters goods nor lend them unlawfully to any at cards, dice or any other unlawful game he shall not play fornication he shall not commit no matrimony contract during said term taverns, ale houses or places of gaming he shall not haunt or frequent from the service of his master he shall not absent himself but in all things and at all times he shall carry and behave himself as a good and faithful apprentice ought during the which time or term aforesaid. And the said George Rizer on his part doth hereby covenant and agree to teach



Photos By  
George Shumway

and instruct the said apprentice or cause him to be instructed or taught in the art and casting of a Gunsmith in its various branches by the best way and means he can and also to give the said apprentice eight months schooling in the manner following to wit three months day schooling and five months night schooling during said term aforesaid and shall well and faithfully provide for the said apprentice good and sufficient meat, drink, clothing, lodging, washing and mending, other necessaries fit and convenient for said apprentice during the term aforesaid and at the expiration thereof shall give unto the said apprentice twenty dollars in cash or in any kind of goods at the option of the boy. In Testimony whereof the said parties have hereunto interchangeably set their hands and seal this eighteenth day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety nine. James Clark. George Rizer.

After learning the gunsmith trade from George Rizer I, Clark was released from his apprenticeship in 1805. His younger brother, Hiram, was also apprenticed to George Rizer I. In 1821 this James Clark, or another man with the same name, was employed at the Harpers Ferry Armory. He rented one of the government homes in the village. This must have been quite a large house because his rent was \$7.44 per quarter.

If our James Clark did indeed work at Harper's Ferry, it was probably during this period that he associated with one of the several members of the Sheetz family who lived in nearby Charles Town or Shepherdstown, [West] Virginia. The existence of the Sheetz and Clark gun (made in his style) suggests that he may



well have worked there. At that time his brother Hiram lived in Hancock, Md., perhaps 50 miles away.

James married Charlotte Alter. Their children included: James, Jr., Charles (1811-1877), William, John, Mary Ann, Harriet and Matilda. We note that his one fine gun (with a cheekpiece inlay identical to the Sheetz & Clark rifle) carries the name of his son William engraved on the counter-plate.

A James Clark was noted as one of the pioneer settlers of Cincinnati where he was noted on voter registration lists of 1798 and 1799. In 1810 he was noted in U. S. Census and tax lists in Anderson Township, Hamilton County.

About 1811, James moved to Lebanon, Ohio, where his parents-in-law already lived. He bought a lot on Silver St. and on 18 January 1818 the Alter family deeded him lots 50 and 52 in Lebanon. He also owned 123 acres, purchased for a total of \$1740. His family was known to be active in the temperance movement and in the Methodist Church.

The gunshop employed James and his son, James, Jr. James in his early years described himself as both an artificer and a potato farmer. By the autumn of 1831 Charlotte's parents had died and his wife inherited between \$2000 and \$3000. The money was important since the





J. Clark Flintlock Converted  
to Percussion Photos by Jim Whisker

gunsmithing business had grown stagnant. James, Jr., took an extended trip to sell guns he and his father had made, with plain rifles bringing \$25 to \$30.

A second box of guns were brass-mounted and presumably would bring more money. "I must do something to get cash better than I am now doing," James wrote. Charles had left Ohio and migrated to Natchez, Mississippi, in 1830, and he attempted to find a market for the guns. On 28 March 1831, James wrote to Charles, "My shop burned down on 28 of Jan. Everything above was destroyed. The tools and bellows were all saved. The first of April we shall have the boring mill ready to commence again."

A traveling physician-dentist offered to train Charles, who refused, then James, Jr., in dentistry for \$150 and 10 to 12 weeks of "close application." James found the money and his eldest son James Jr. then became a dentist. James Jr. undertook a trip to sell guns and spent six months in the Deep South, selling his dental services along with guns. He netted \$800 and made a profit of \$350.

James, Sr., then decided in the spring of 1832 to take a gun selling trip of his own. He sold 3 percussion rifles in Natchez for \$27 and another man purchased several at \$30 each. The youngest son, William ran the gunshop while father and brother James, Jr. were away peddling arms.

Charles sold several guns that James had left in Natchez. James, Jr., traded \$130 in guns for a buckboard and spent another \$50 having it reconditioned. Charles invited his family to move to Mississippi, and the father replied that he wanted to get out of debt and had hopes of selling

guns at \$800 to \$1000. In 1836, excepting only James, Jr. the dentist, the whole Clark family moved to Mississippi, disposing of the gunshop in Ohio.

James Clark, Sr. prospered in Fayette, Jefferson County, Mississippi. James apparently abandoned his trade entirely and established a cotton plantation named Hawthordon where he lived until 1850. He prospered, sold the plantation, moved in 1850 to Bolivar County, Mississippi, where he die in 1859.

James Clark's work resembles the Bedford County, Pa., school of gunsmithing. His carving was certainly among the best of that style. Several other of George Rizer's apprentices, notably Benjamin Franklin Troutman, also made guns in the same style. I have noted some 14 guns of superior artistic merit signed by J. or James Clark, in addition to the Sheetz and Clark rifle noted. There are also some plainer J. Clark rifles which may or may not have been his work. These rifles could have been made by James, Sr. before he left of Mississippi in 1836 or by James, Jr. who remained in Ohio, or by someone else named J. Clark.

One small note. On at least two of his rifles, James' signature seems to read Clarke. I believe that he had just added a fancy curlycue to the end of the K.





J. Clark Flintlock    Photos By Jim Whisker





# Issac Keller Machinist - Inventor - Gunsmith



By William Walker

The earliest mention of Isaac Keller that I found, was when his parents came to Randolph in 1841.

Henry Keller (1811-1884) a farmer and blacksmith, his wife Elizabeth (Fouts) Keller (1812-1894), and their two sons, John age five and Isaac age four, settled in Randolph Twp. in Portage Co. Ohio in 1841.

Henry purchased lot 23 in Sub. Dist. No. 6, consisting of 100 acres. Present day location would be where Unger Rd. meets New Milford Rd. on the west side.

Mr. Keller built a log home and started a business. He was as mentioned before, a blacksmith by trade, also a shoemaker, carriage and wagon maker and maker of shoepegs and vises. (From Pioneer History 1802-1865).

When the two boys, John and Isaac came of age, they joined their father in his shop, which had grown from a blacksmith shop to a machine shop, and soon was known as the "Keller Bros." In no time at all, they established a reputation of excellency.

The shop, pictured here had grown into a two story building, with departments for pattern making, woodworking, foundry work, machining metal, watch repair and gunsmithing.

Isaac had a number of patents, from plows to machinery. A horse power drive



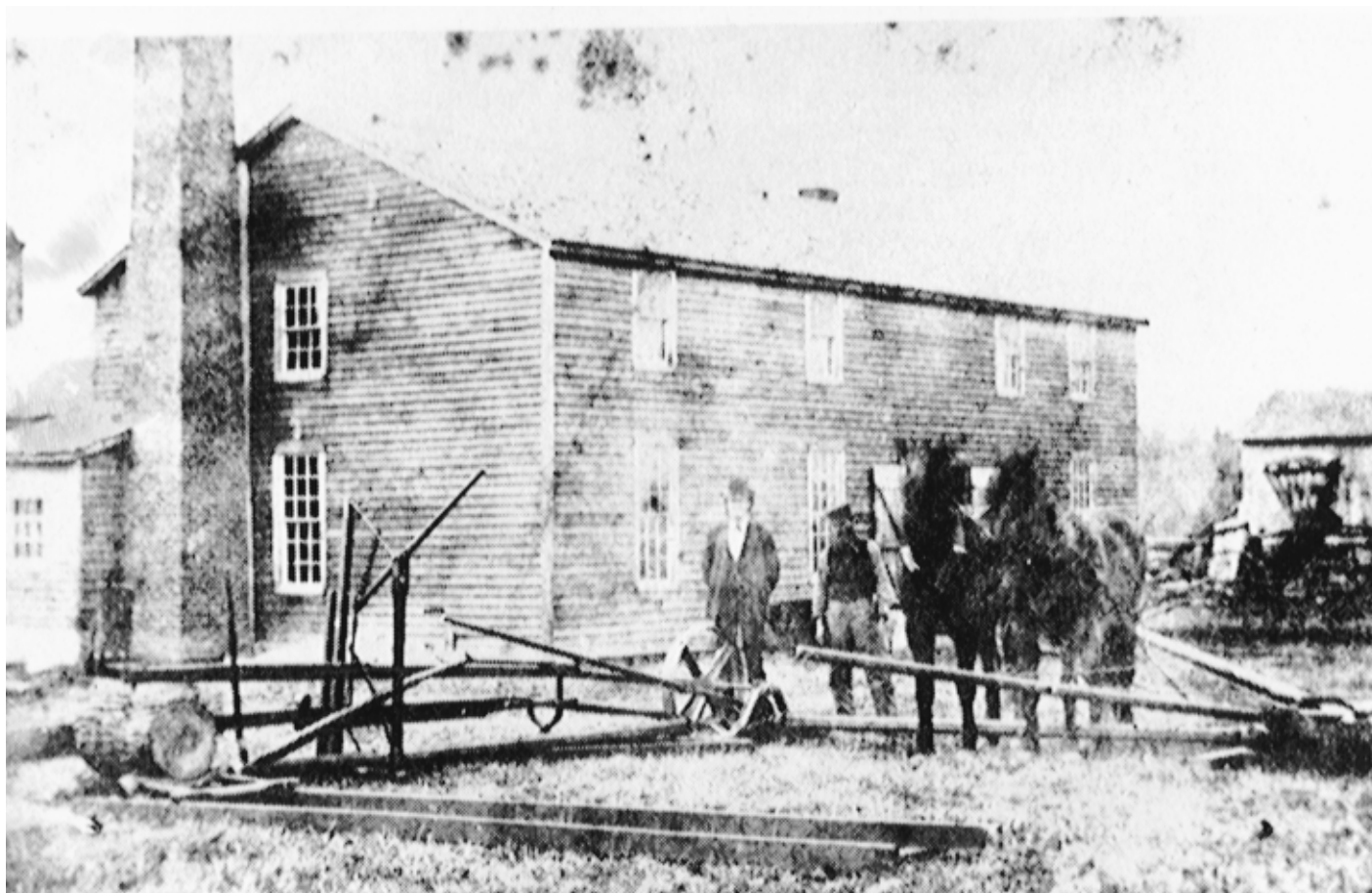
Issac and Catharine Keller

of their own design (patent No. 79476) and a sawing machine (patent No. 91,544), both granted to Isaac Keller. They produced wagons, sleighs, iron pots, and skillets, school bells, threading dies, steam engines and fine guns.

When Keller Bros. made a product, they produced the design, wood patterns, sand molds, castings, machined work, gear shafts and gears, and threaded screws. In short, they made it all, lock stock and barrel.

I don't know where Isaac acquired his many talents, probably from his father, but he was an extremely talented and gifted man.

The old log home still stands, only it is



Keller Brothers Shop in Southeast Randolph

now covered with siding. The old shop was closed and torn down around 1900, due to competition, transportation, and the decision of the succeeding generation to dissolve partnership.

The Ohio census (1840-1880) list all the Kellers as born in Ohio, but I can not find out where in Ohio.

Isaac married a Susannah in the early 1860's and had two children, Howard A. (1865-1867) and Bertha E. (1866-?). Howard died at age two and is buried next to his grandparents, Henry and Elizabeth. Susannah, I believe, died a few years later and is believed to be buried next to Howard, her son. I have found no information on Susannah, absolutely none. In fact, most of the family members

I have talked to, didn't know Isaac was married twice.

Isaac then married Catharine Moose in 1873, and they had three children, George W. (1875-?), Fred M. (1878-1955) and Wilson H. (1881-1958).

During all this time, (two wives and five children), Isaac continued to live at home. He never left home till he died.

When Henry died the property went to his wife, Elizabeth. When she died, the property was divided equally between Isaac and John, his brother.

Isaac died in 1922, his wife in 1932. Both are buried at Hillside Cemetery in Randolph, Ohio, as are most of the Kellers.



During my research for this article on Isaac Keller, I came across a violin he had made. The craftsmanship on both rifle and violin is excellent.

The rifle I have, is signed "I. K." on top of the barrel in script. It is also signed on one of the silver inlays "Manufactured By Isaac Keller" in script. It has a brass patchbox and a silver capbox on one side of the stock and silver inlays of an eagle, head of a moose and a full deer (with inscription) on the other side. All the hardware is brass and engraved, even the pipes. And very well done. It has no cheek piece. The stock is figured walnut with a pewter cap. The barrel is 37 1/2" long, 38 cal., and with a turned muzzle. Total length of the rifle is 52 1/2 inches.

I know of two more Keller rifles, both owned by family members. None are numbered and all are a little different.

A number of the tools used and items made by Isaac Keller are in the possession

of Mr. Chester H. Keller, a grandson of Isaac.

The rifle I have will be passed on to Cody Allen Mathia, Great, Great, Great Grandson of Isaac.

I would very much like to see more of Isaac's work. I think he deserves to be known as "Isaac Keller, Gunsmith".

P.S.

For what it is worth. During my research I came across another gunsmith from Randolph Twp., Portage Co. Ohio. Elisha Strong. He lived and had a shop on Butternut Hill (1837-1848). Married Betsy Faught of Marlboro Ohio in 1840. Returned to Claridon, Ohio in 1848.

From the diary of Reverend Joseph Meriam for 1840, the following, "Wed. Sept. 14, at my house, Mr. Elisha Strong to Miss Betsy Faught of Marlborol." He also lists Elisha Strong as a member of the Congregational Church in Randolph in 1841. (From Pioneer History 1802-1865)