

Confederate Rifles & Muskets

Infantry Small Arms Manufactured
in the Southern Confederacy 1861–1865

A black and white photograph of a Confederate rifle and a portrait of a man, likely a general, set against a background of a Confederate battle flag. The rifle is positioned horizontally across the lower half of the image, with its barrel pointing to the right. A bayonet is attached to the front of the rifle. The portrait of the man, who has a beard and is wearing a military uniform, is positioned on the right side of the image. The background features the stars and stripes of the Confederate battle flag.

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XIV.

Dickson, Nelson & Co. Rifles

WILLIAM DICKSON, A PROMINENT NORTH Alabama planter, Owen Nelson, a Tuscumbia attorney, and Lewis H. Sadler, a physician from Leighton, formed the Shakanoosa Arms Company in 1861, and were awarded a contract to manufacture U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi"-type rifles for the state of Alabama.¹ The company's first plant, located in Buzzard Roost (later called Dickson, now Chisca), in Colbert County, was still under construction in the summer of 1862 when due to the changing tides of the Civil War the firm hastily moved to Rome, Georgia.² A large brick building was leased, but operations had hardly begun when the plant was destroyed by fire. Because of the fire at the armory, the machinery which had been completed and most of the gun parts were lost before any rifles could be made.³

Following the next move, to Adairsville, Georgia, rifles and carbines began to be made under the supervision of the inspecting officer, Captain B.J. McCormick.⁴ Rifles made at that time generally conform to the U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi" pattern. They are .58 caliber, have a 33 inch barrel, and are 48 inches in overall length. The furniture is of brass, and the flat brass barrel bands are spring-retained. The brass buttplate is straight. The stocks are of poorly seasoned walnut or cherry, and there is no patchbox. The barrel has no bayonet lug. The rear sight on the single specimen examined is a two-leaf type with a squared ramp and rounded "hump" to the rear. The lockplate forward of the hammer is stamped "DICKSON" over "NELSON & CO." over "C.S." To the rear of the hammer "ALA" over "1864" is stamped in two lines, vertically. The barrel is unmarked externally, except for Ala-

bama acceptance stampings on the upper left side of the barrel near the breech. Iron carrying swivels are positioned beneath the front barrel band and at the front of the triggerguard bow. There are Fayetteville-type brass washers around the flat-head bolts securing the lockplate. Rifles having these characteristics are designated as Type I. It is estimated that 3,600 arms of all descriptions were made at Adairsville through August, 1863.

Enemy activity again caused the firm to move, first to Macon, Georgia in August 1863, and in February 1864 to Dawson, Georgia.⁵ At this location a virtually new type of rifle was made, which was of vastly improved quality over the rifles made at Adairsville. These rifles generally were stocked with black walnut, but some were stocked with cherry wood. The furniture is of brass, often having a reddish coloration indicating high copper content. The oval brass barrel bands now are narrower and of the clamping type. The rear of the brass buttplate is straight in all specimens examined. Iron carrying swivels are positioned beneath the front barrel band and at the front of the triggerguard bow. The lockplates are stamped in a similar fashion to those rifles made at Adairsville. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction. The barrels have either a brown lacquer finish, or are finished in the bright. There are no external stampings on the barrels. The internal surface of the lockplate is unmarked. The under surface of the barrel of many specimens studied is stamped with a small "G". The significance of this marking is not known at this time, but it probably is the initial of one of the workmen who inspected finished arms at the plant. Like the rifles made at Adairsville the overall length is 49

inches, with some slight variation in different pieces. The barrel length is 33 inches. The barrel is rifled with three broad lands and grooves; the caliber is .58. Rifles having these characteristics are designated as Type II. An indication of the improved quality of these rifles is that 645 rifles passed inspection, with only 35 being rejected, within a six-month period.⁶ It is reported that a rifle of this type could deliver a one-and-one-half-ounce lead bullet of the Minié pattern 600 yards with great accuracy.

The iron for the fabrication of these rifles came from the Shelby Iron Works near Selma, Alabama, which also supplied iron for Cook & Brother arms made at Athens, Georgia, and for Griswold and Gunnison revolvers made at Griswoldville, Georgia. Five thousand rifles were contracted by Dickson, Nelson & Co. for delivery to the State of Alabama, but the delivery of 645 at a price of \$90 each is all that can be documented. It is reported that rifles were packed 20 to the case in strong boxes of dressed pine. Rifles of this type made by this small firm were among the best of Southern manufacture.⁷

Dickson, Nelson & Co. rifles dated "1864" have been examined. A DN&Co. lockplate dated "1863" exists, but no correct and complete rifle bearing that date has yet been observed. Most rifles studied have been dated "1865", and are products of the Dawson, Georgia factory. It is to be noted that dates on surviving rifles indicate a pronounced

delivery of rifles during the first quarter of 1865. Dickson, Nelson & Co. rifles were made exclusively for Alabama troops, but some also may have been issued to a Missouri regiment late in the war, as a number of these rifles have come to light in that state.

Plates 1 through 3 illustrate an early Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type I rifle. To date, only one specimen of this early production that is believed correct has been available to the authors for study. This rifle has an overall length of 48 inches and the barrel is 33 inches long. The caliber is .60 smoothbore, but it is probable that originally it was .58 rifled and was either shot out or bored out to the present caliber. The front sight is a small iron blade inletted into the top of the barrel 1¼ inch behind the muzzle; the rear sight is a two-leaf type with a high hump at the rear, similar to those seen on the U.S. Models 1861-1863, located 3 inches forward of the barrel breech. The upper leaf is now missing from this rear sight, which may be a period replacement. The upper left surface of the barrel near the breech is stamped "ALA 1864", the letters of which appear to have been individually stamped. The under surface of the barrel one inch ahead of the breech is stamped with a "windmill" armorer's mark (similar to those seen on other Alabama-produced arms), attributed to Nathaniel D. Cross, an inspector at the Selma Arsenal. The barrel is not fitted with a bayonet lug. All furniture is brass. Two



Plate 1. A Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type I rifle; right side. (Courtesy Lake Ray, Jr.)



Plate 2. Close-up view of lockplate area of the rifle shown in Plate 1. (Courtesy Lake Ray, Jr.)

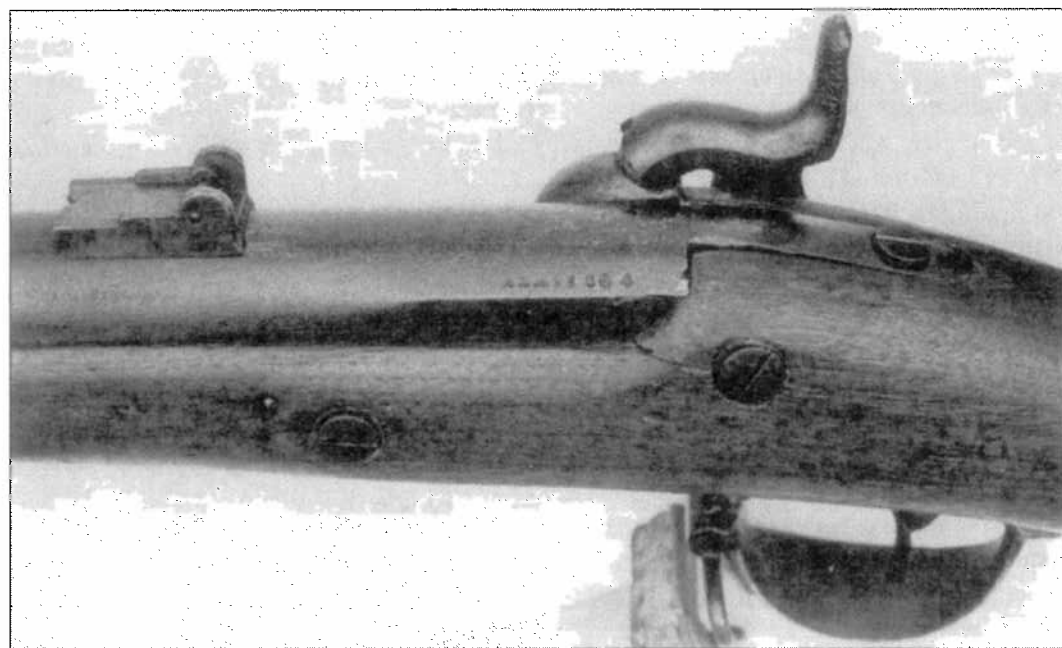


Plate 3. Left side of breech area of the rifle illustrated in Plate 1, showing "ALA.1864" marking and folding leaf rear sight. (Courtesy Lake Ray, Jr.)



Plate 4. An unusual Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle; right side. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)



Plate 5. Left side of the rifle shown in Plate 4. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)

flat brass barrel bands each $\frac{5}{8}$ inch wide and contoured to fit the barrel are retained by long iron springs on the right side of the stock. Iron carrying swivels are mounted under the front barrel band, and to a lug on the front of the triggerguard bow. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction; the rear of the brass buttplate is straight. The brass noscap, while of the same configuration as the later types, is shorter, being $\frac{7}{8}$ inch in length as compared to $1\frac{1}{16}$ inch. It is to be noted that the position of the front barrel band also is different, being $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches back from the rear of the noscap as compared to 2 inches on the later types. The lockplate forward of the hammer is stamped "DICKSON" over "NELSON & CO." over "C.S.". To the rear of the hammer is stamped "ALA" over "1864", in two lines vertically. The interior of the lockplate is unmarked. There are small, Fayetteville-style brass washers about the heads of the bolts securing the lockplate. The wood of the stock appears to be either walnut or dark cherry. The iron ramrod is a simple swell-tip type with cupping.

Plates 4 and 5 illustrate an early Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle having several unusual features. The overall length is $48\frac{7}{8}$ inches, and the barrel length is 33 inches. The caliber now is .61 smoothbore, the barrel having been either bored out or shot out. The front sight is a small iron-block blade located $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch back from the muzzle. The iron rear sight is fixed with rather pronounced notching, and is located $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches forward of the barrel breech. There is no provision for a bayonet lug. The exposed surfaces of the barrel are unmarked. The underside of the barrel 2 inches forward from the breech is stamped "7". Forward of the breech $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch is stamped a partially obliterated "windmill" or "Maltese cross" mark. The exterior of the lockplate forward of the hammer is stamped "DICKSON" over "NELSON & CO." over "C.S.". This stamping appears to be a unitary die, and is the same on all marked DN&Co. rifles observed by the authors. To the rear of the hammer is stamped "ALA." over "1864" in a vertical position. The interior surface of the lockplate is unmarked. The inner surface of the hammer is stamped

"B1". There is one rounded front barrel band of the clamping type, $\frac{7}{16}$ inch in width; the rear barrel band and noscap are missing. The original varnish finish on the stock is intact in these areas, perhaps indicating that these missing parts were never in place and that this rifle was assembled without them. From a functional standpoint these parts are not necessary. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction. There are small round brass washers or ferrules about the heads of the bolts securing the lockplate. The rear surface of the brass buttplate is straight. Iron carrying swivels are attached beneath the barrel band, and at the front of the triggerguard bow. The iron ramrod gradually enlarges at the front to terminate in a small swell tip with cupping. The rear of the rod is threaded.

Plates 6 and 7 illustrate a Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle. The overall length is $48\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and the barrel length is 33 inches. The caliber is .58 and the barrel is rifled with three broad lands and grooves. The front sight is a small iron-block blade located $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch back from the muzzle. The iron fixed-and-notched rear sight is located 3 inches forward of the breech. There is no provision for a bayonet lug on the barrel. The exposed surfaces of the barrel are unmarked. The underside of the barrel $2\frac{3}{16}$ inches forward of the breech is stamped with a small "G". The barrel has retained virtually all of its original brown lacquer finish. The lockplate forward of the hammer has the characteristic stampings of "DICKSON" over "NELSON & CO." over "C.S.". Stampings of "ALA." over "1865" appear to the rear of the hammer in a vertical position. There are no markings on the interiors of the lockplate or hammer. The brass noscap is of the U.S. Model 1855 style, and is fastened to the stock by a rivet. There are two rounded brass barrel bands of the clamping type. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction. There are round brass washers or ferrules about the heads of the bolts securing the lockplate. The buttplate is of brass and its rear surface is straight. The wood of the stock is walnut. Letter carvings have been made on either side of the stock just to the rear of the noscap, "H" on the left and "F" on the right. These initial carvings are filled in with red wax. The iron ramrod has a simple swell tip without cupping.

Plates 8 and 9 illustrate a Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle. The overall length is $48\frac{7}{8}$ inches and the barrel length is 33 inches. The caliber is .58 and the barrel is rifled with three broad lands and grooves. The front sight is a small iron-block blade located $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch back from the muzzle. The iron fixed-and-notched rear sight is located 3 inches forward of the barrel breech. There is no provision for a bayonet lug. The exposed surfaces of the barrel are unmarked. The underside of the barrel $1\frac{7}{16}$ inch

forward of the barrel breech is stamped with "R". The under surface of the barrel $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches forward of the breech also is stamped with a small "G". This marking has been observed on several DN&Co. rifles during the course of this study. The barrel of this rifle originally was finished in the bright, but exposed surfaces have turned a deep brown. The lockplate forward of the hammer has typical stampings of "DICKSON" over "NELSON & CO." over "C.S.". To the rear of the hammer is stamped "ALA." over "1865" in a vertical position. There are two rounded brass barrel bands of the clamping type. The brass noscap is one inch in length and is of the U.S. Model 1855 style. It is fastened to the stock by a rivet. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction. The round brass washers or ferrules about the heads of the bolts securing the lockplate are of U.S. Model 1855 style. The rear surface of the brass buttplate is straight. The wood of the stock is cherry. The iron ramrod is rather crude, having a swell tip with cupping. There is a hole through the rod near the front tip; the rear of the rod is threaded.

Plates 10 and 11 illustrate a halfstock rifle made by Dickson, Nelson & Co., incorporating such sporting-style features as crescent buttplate, double-set triggers and triggerguard with finger spurs, but having a Dickson, Nelson & Co.-marked lock and military hammer, barrel, and sling swivels. It apparently was made this way originally, and is considered by the authors to be a sharpshooter's rifle.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Anderson, Cecil W., "Dickson, Nelson & Co.," in *North South Trader*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Nov-Dec 1975), p.14; Claud E. Fuller and Richard D. Steuart, *Firearms of the Confederacy* (Huntington, WV: Standard Publications, Inc., 1944), p. 160; Confederate Citizens & Business File, War Department Collection of Captured Confederate Records, National Archives.
2. The Rome (GA) *Tri-Weekly Courier*, 28 October 1861.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Bartow Superior Court, W.C. Watson, 11 May 1929.
5. Duff C. Green, Quartermaster General of Alabama, Abstract of Arms Received, 29 November 1864.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Albaugh, William A. III, and Edward N. Simmons, *Confederate Arms* (Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Company, 1957), p. 215.

PAYMENTS TO DICKSON, NELSON & CO. BY THE STATE OF ALABAMA			
(Source: Alabama Treasurers Records, Military Department Ledger, 1861-1864; Alabama Department of Archives & History)			
Date	Voucher	Purpose	Amount
22 Jan. 1862	#433	Advance on contract for the manufacture of arms this day made with the Governor of Alabama	\$3,000.00
28 Apr. 1862	#541	Advance on contract for manufacturing arms, out of fund appropriated to the Ordnance Department	\$4,000.00
18 June 1862	#606	For making guns, out of fund appropriated to Ordnance Department	\$8,000.00
16 Sept. 1862	#659	Advance on contract for arms under an act of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama, approved December 7, 1861, entitled "an act to encourage the manufacture of firearms, &c."	\$10,000.00
11 Nov. 1862	# 43	Bill of iron bought by Dickson, Nelson & Co.	\$2,930.30
15 Nov. 1862	# 50	Advance on contract for arms out of fund appropriated for the Ordnance Department.	\$6,000.00
19 Dec. 1862	# 98	Advance on contract for arms out of fund appropriated to Ordnance Department under the acts of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama approved Feb'y 6, 1861 and Dec. 7, 1862.	\$5,000.00
7 Apr. 1863	#243	Iron furnished Messrs. Dickson, Nelson & Co. out of fund appropriated to Ordnance Department under act approved Oct. 31, 1862.	\$3,220.80
19 Jan. 1864	#117	A/C arms manufactured for the state out of Ordnance Department by act approved Dec. 7th 1863.	\$15,000.00
26 Feb. 1864	#139	A/C firearms manufactured for the state.	\$13,800.00
30 Mar. 1864	#147	Payment in a/c for arms	\$5,400.00
19 Apr. 1864	#152	Advance on contract for arms.	\$5,000.00
27 Aug. 1864	#196	Advance on contract for arms out of ... Quartermasters Department.	\$14,800.00
		TOTAL:	\$96,151.10

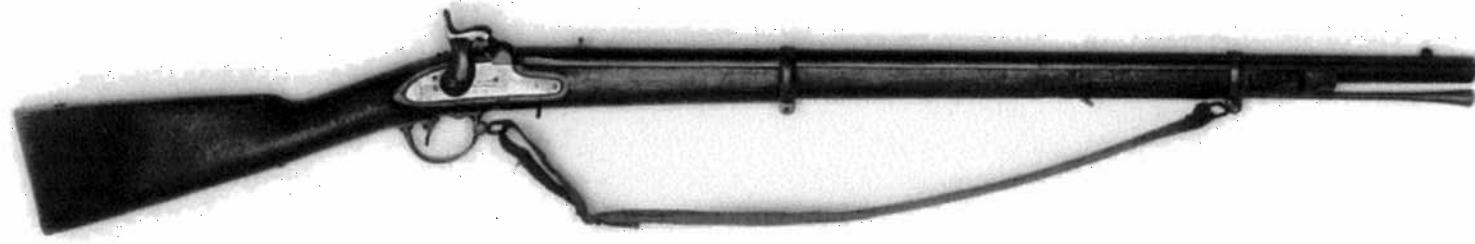


Plate 6. *A Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle; right side. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*



Plate 7. *Left side of the rifle shown in Plate 6. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*

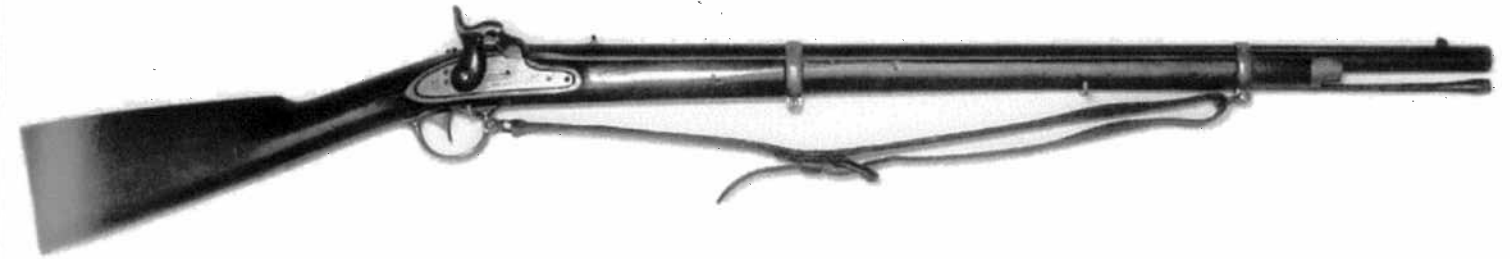


Plate 8. *A Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle; right side. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*



Plate 9. *Left side of rifle shown in Plate 8. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*