

THOUGHTS
ON THE
KENTUCKY RIFLE
IN ITS
GOLDEN AGE



All manifestation must be born through the heart



This book was born through the loving efforts of

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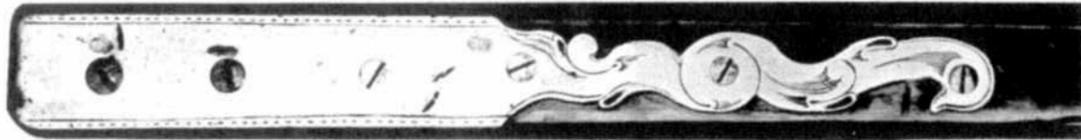
It could not have been conceived but for the pioneering of
HORACE KEPHART, CHARLES WINTHROP SAWYER, CAPT. JOHN G. W. DILLIN, JOHN HUSTON,
MARK WOODMANSEE, DR. THOMAS B. SAWYER, CHARLES D. COOK, WILLIAM JACOBS,
CARMAN MYERS *and many others.*



There is still much pleasant work to be done in this field for any who care to labor.

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Beautifully designed and engraved toe plate

John Philip Beck

Another fine gunsmith of the Lebanon school was John Philip Beck. From his known history and the style of his work, I believe that John Philip Beck worked from the late 1760s until his death in 1811. He is named in records at various dates from 1781 to 1810 in Lebanon Borough in what is now Lebanon County. There is a very extensive inventory of the "goods and chattel" of John Philip Beck of the Borough of Lebanon, Township of Lebanon, County of Dauphin, dated November 25, 1811. The original inventory is in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, but he apparently worked and died in Lebanon. The inventory states that John Philip Beck was a gunsmith, and it includes many items that also identify him as a gunsmith:

	£	s.	d.
1 new rifle	5	5	
21 screws for ramrods		18	9
24 tin charges		1	10
6 bullet molds		7	6
4 gun locks	1	10	
2 guns and 2 rifle barrels and 1 unfinished gun stock	4		
33 pieces of wood hewn for gun stocks pistol barrels	2	5	5
1 box and instrument for drawing rifles and for cutting screws and cherries or instruments to finish bullet molds	3		
1 lot of gunsmith tools		15	
ditto gunsmith's tools of various sorts	15	18	9
2 small boxes of silver wire, silver plates and pattern triggers and trigger plates engraving instruments		15	
		7	6
		7	6
6 musket locks	1	2	6
3 pistol barrels and sundries		8	

There are many other items in the inventory which would have been used by a gunsmith, but I am omitting them because other tradesmen such as blacksmiths would have used them also. There must have been a great many gunsmithing tools, because fifteen pounds is one of the largest amounts in the entire inventory. The inventory also includes equipment used in farming. The total value of the six page inventory was £244—5 s. This interesting document should be studied extensively for a more thorough understanding of John Philip Beck, an early and extremely fine maker.

Samuel E. Dyke of Lancaster who has done a great deal of research on the Becks believes that the following is the history of the Beck family. A John Christian Beck and his wife Rebecca arrived in America from Rotterdam in 1753 on the ship *Richard and Mary*. It is not known if this man was a gunsmith. He was, however, the father of John Philip Beck the gunsmith (born in 1751 and died in 1811) and also John Christian Beck, Jr., who was, I believe, the man of this Lebanon school who signed his guns Christian Beck. In other words, John Philip Beck and Christian Beck were brothers. John Christian Beck, Jr., had a son in 1787 who was given his father's name. I rather believe that this John Christian Beck III was the man that signed his guns Christian Beck who we associate with the Chambersburg school. The stylistic details in the work of the two Christian Becks indicate to me that Christian III did not learn the trade from his father but from Andrew Figthorn or some other member of the Womelsdorf-Reading school. I hope that someone will prove or disprove this information with further investigation.

John Philip Beck's work consistently exhibits the characteristics of the Lebanon school. The rivet which holds his patch box latch is found in the upper rear corner of the lid, and pressure on a stud in the butt plate releases the patch box latch. His ramrod pipes are noticeably shorter than most and have heavily molded ends. Three rivets placed at the points of a triangle fasten each of his muzzle caps to the stock. He also filed two deep lines which form a sort of molding across the forward end of his trigger guards. And of course he sometimes used the patch box head also found on guns by the other Lebanon makers N. Beyer and one Christian Beck.

We illustrate four of the seven rifles to be studied. All are signed "J. P. Beck" in script on the barrel. They are stocked with from plain to very beautiful curly maple. The stocks are thick and have cheek pieces with nicely molded edges that rise high above the surrounding stock. All have beautiful high combs and very flat broad butt plates.

Two of the rifles have beautifully molded wooden patch box lids. Three have brass patch boxes with heads like Nos. 99 and 100. They are almost identical in outline to N. Beyer's No. 92 and very similar to No. 102 by Christian Beck. The upper and lower plates show a close similarity to some by N. Beyer. Two others have patch box heads like No. 101, but the one not shown lacks the piercings. All the brass patch boxes are beautifully engraved, and the outlines are determined by the engraved scrolls. J. P. Beck was as fine a designer of engraving as N. Beyer, but as a rule he did not engrave as deeply. The upper and lower plates show much similarity on all his brass patch boxes.

The very thick side plates with heavily beveled edges are almost identical on all seven guns. J. P. Beck seldom used silver inlays; none of these guns have more than two—a thumb plate and an inlay on the cheek piece. There are only five inlays altogether on these seven rifles.

Five of the barrels are fastened to the stock with pins, and two, with keys. The two guns with key fastened barrels are stylistically earlier than the others. This is an exception, since we expect the earliest barrels to be fastened by pins.

All of these J. P. Beck rifles are carved in beautifully designed and well executed high relief. It would be difficult to praise this man's carving too much. All seven have details which vary in design, but are similar in feeling, carved in fine high relief to the rear of the barrel tang. The two rifles with wooden patch boxes have no carving forward of the patch box, but those with brass patch boxes have some at this position which varies in design from gun to gun but is similar in feeling. The details carved in front of the cheek pieces are also very fine and are somewhat more standardized than the others. All except No. 101 have somewhat similar scrolls carved to the rear of the cheek piece. Three of these guns have carved details to the rear of the rear ramrod pipe. The same three guns also have a carved detail forward of the trigger guard, an area very few gunsmiths ever carved. There is more than enough evidence in these rifles to establish that J. P. Beck was a truly masterful woodworker in both design and execution.

No. 98 is a very fine early specimen of J. P. Beck's work with a nicely molded wooden patch box lid. The stock is very plain maple. It has fine crisp high relief carving.

No. 99 is stocked with the finest curly maple of the group. It probably was made slightly later than No. 98, although both guns show many early characteristics. A silver thumb plate is inlaid at the wrist.

No. 100 has an unusually well defined high comb. The carving is J. P. Beck's usual fine quality in high relief. This rifle has the rare religious inscription "INRI" engraved on the underside of the barrel.

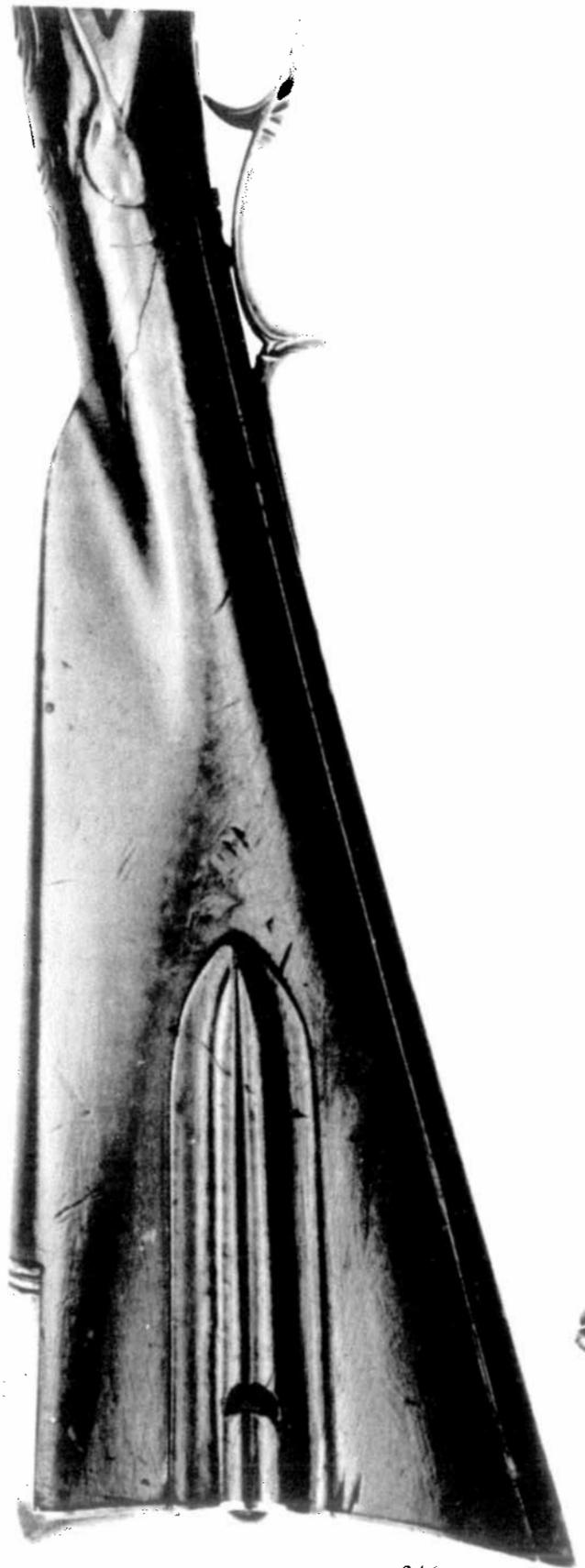
No. 101 is one of the really grand Kentucky rifles. I believe this is the finest specimen of J. P. Beck's work that I have seen thus far. The flower head on the patch box is somewhat reminiscent of those on Lancaster County guns although basically different. This is the most ornate patch box by J. P. Beck that I remember having seen. It is beautifully designed, and the engraving is finer than on many of his patch boxes. The initials "S.B." engraved on the patch box lid are probably those of the person for whom the rifle was made. This is the only patch box of the seven that has piercings.

The stock is magnificent curly maple and bears a beautifully engraved flint lock of an early period. The butt plate is broader and flatter, the stock thicker, and the cheek piece higher on this gun than the others. I believe that guns made before the Revolution generally have no piercings in the patch box and seldom have fine curly maple wood. This gun may be an exception to the rule however, for the stock and many details are definitely pre-Revolutionary in style. The quality of the carving—its design and execution—is early carving at its very best. In addition to other fine details there is a magnificent lion standing on his hind legs carved to the rear of the cheek piece. Since the days of heraldry this has been termed a "lion rampant." He has brass nails for eyes. If well done in relief, animal carving is a rare and very desirable detail. This is one of the best examples of animal carving on Kentuckys.

Inlaid on the cheek piece is a beautifully engraved silver double-headed eagle (also reminiscent of European heraldry) with silver wire inlaid around it. This eagle indicates the gun's earliness because the double-headed eagle disappeared in this country when the American eagle was adopted as the Great Seal of the United States at the close of the Revolutionary War. This rifle also displays a silver thumb plate as well as a beautifully designed and engraved brass toe plate.

The ramrod pipes on this gun display a detail that I remember seeing on only one other Kentucky even though it was used frequently on continental European rifles. That is, the ramrod pipes are faceted like a diamond instead of being the usual octagonal shape.

I consider this rifle one of the very grandest early Kentuckys. I cannot speak too highly of J. P. Beck as an early gunsmith, and this rifle far surpasses the rest of his work that I have seen. It is a very grand gun by a grand early gunsmith.



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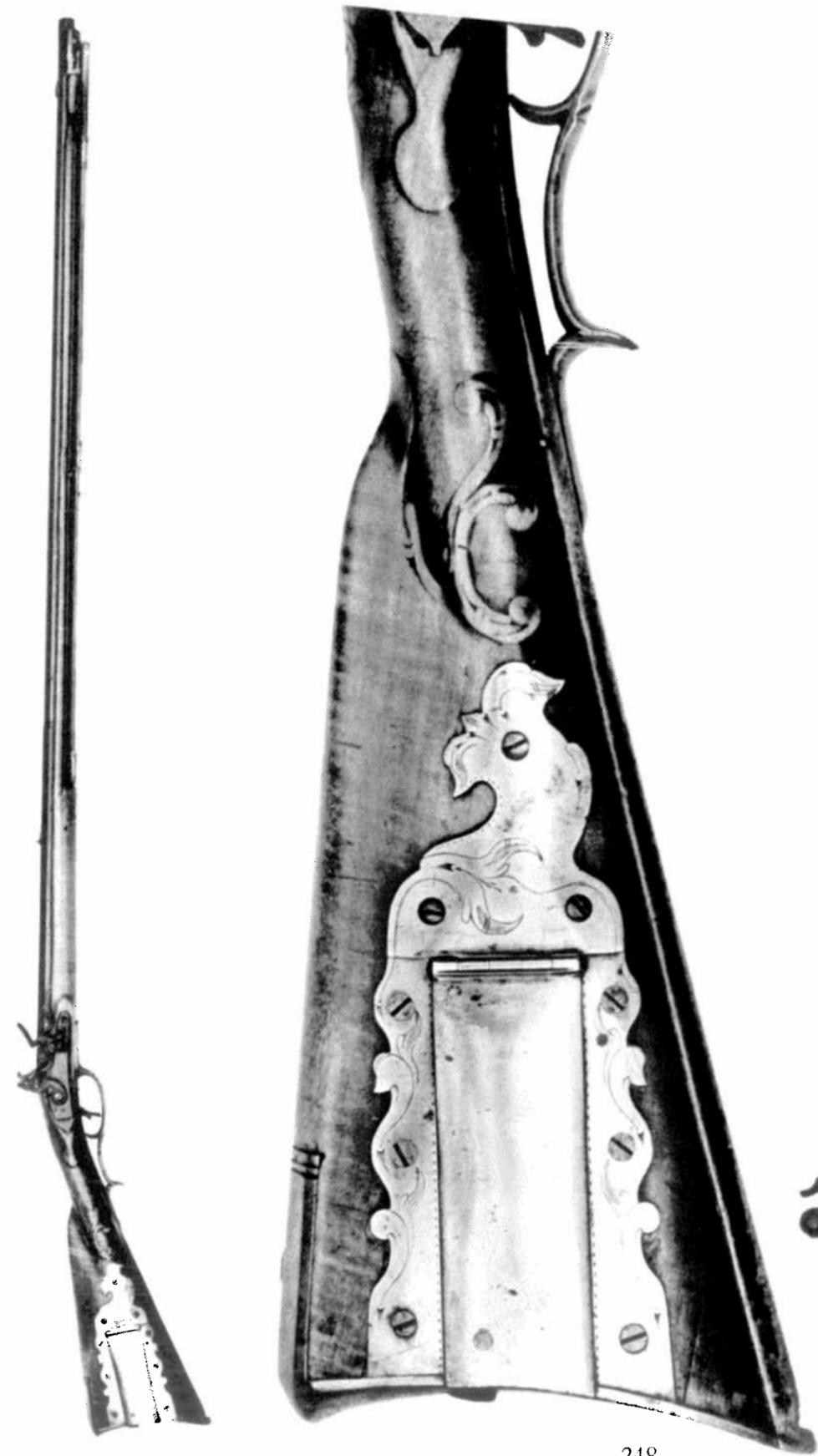


No. 98. Signed "J. P. Beck"; length 57½ inches; octagonal smooth-bore 4¼ inch barrel, 42 caliber; weight 8½ pounds.

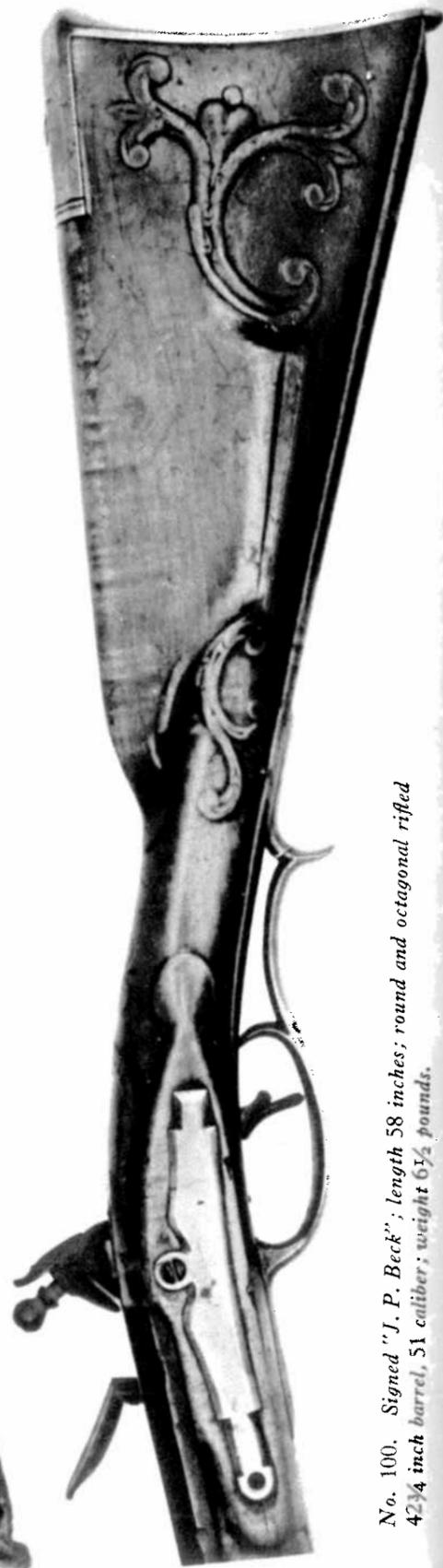


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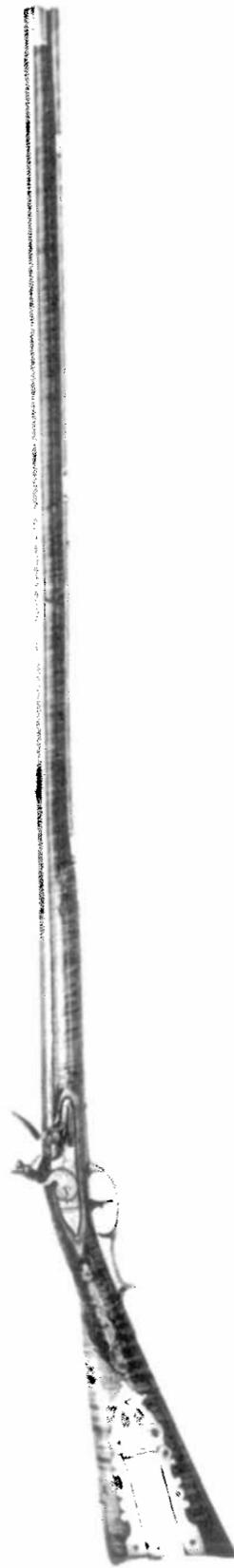




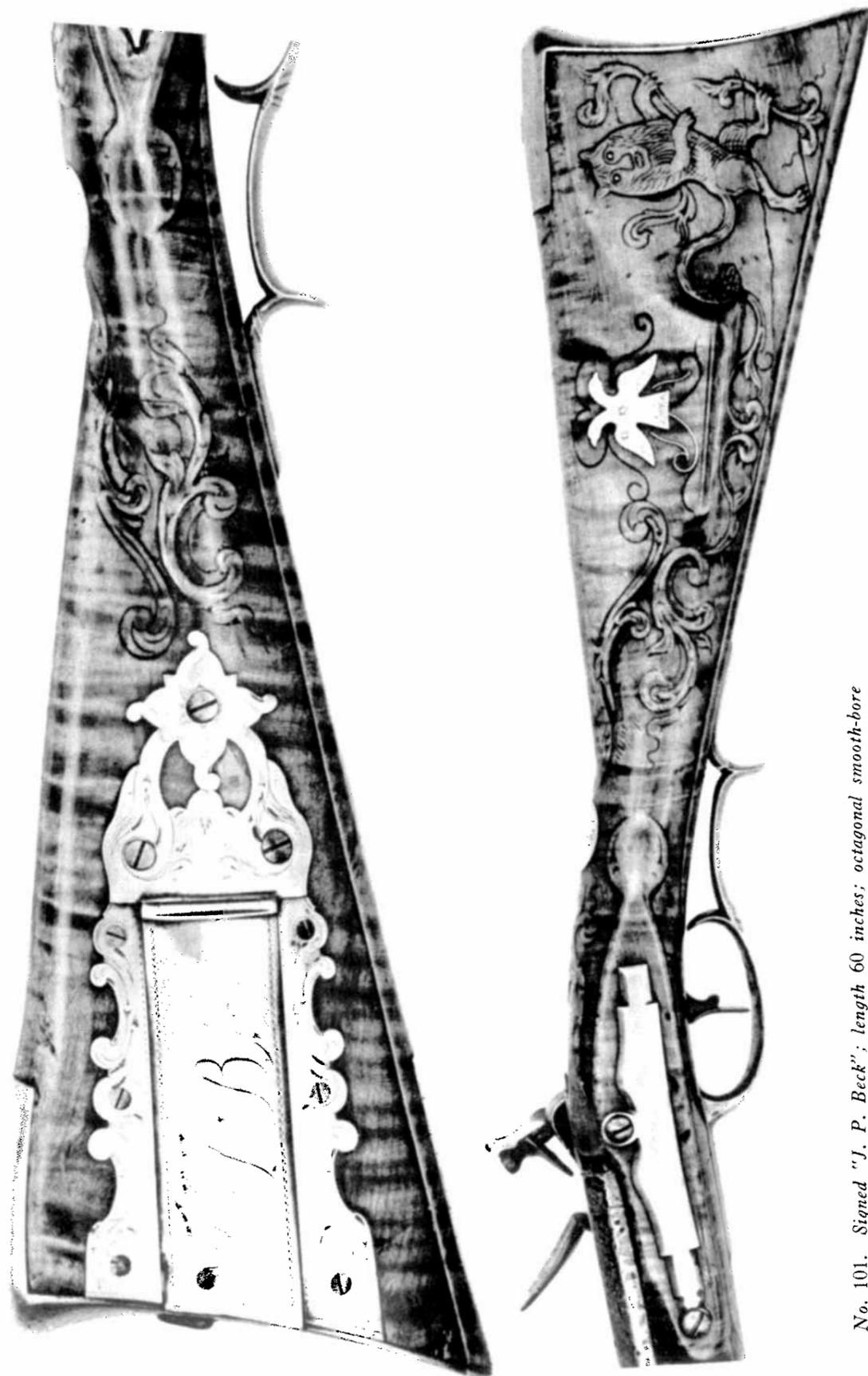
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No. 100. Signed "J. P. Beck"; length 58 inches; round and octagonal rifled 42/4 inch barrel, 51 caliber; weight 6 1/2 pounds.



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No. 101. Signed "J. P. Beck"; length 60 inches; octagonal smooth-bore 44 1/4 inch barrel 50 caliber; weight 8 pounds.