

DICKSON
NELSON & CO...
C. S.



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The
GUN
REPORT

**Civil War Prices of Arms,
Parts, And Appendages**

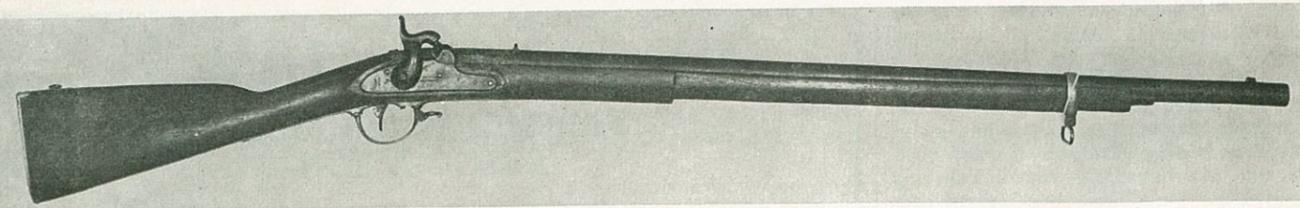
By

C. Meade Patterson

And

A. Sheldon Rich

OCTOBER
1961



Model 1864 Dickson-Nelson & Co. Rifle C. S.

The Dickson - Nelson & Co. Rifle

By

JIM BLACKBURN

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The cover photo shows the 1865 model. This gun was made after the 645 mentioned were made.

With the advent of the Civil War Centennial the preponderance of collectors of Confederate weapons and for that matter, Confederate weapons has been unusually great. When one comes to realize that many of these weapons were destroyed and that a greater number were simply worn out, it is amazing that so many can be found today. The case in point, Dickson-Nelson and Company arms are interesting indeed, since there were so few made in the first place.

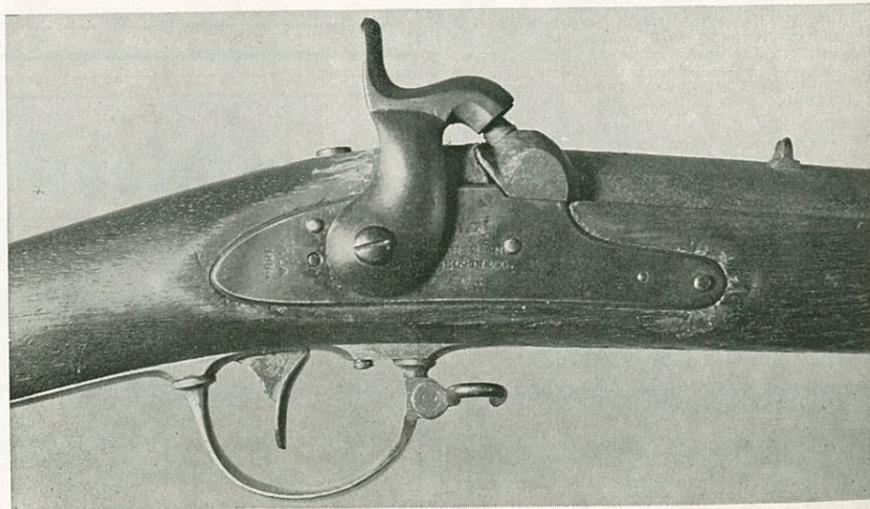
The Shakanoosa Arms Company was formed in 1861 by William Dickson, O. O. Nelson, and Dr. L. H. Sadler. The first two were from Tusculumbia, Alabama and the elderly physician was from Leighton, Alabama.¹ The contract which this company had with the State of Alabama was for 5,000 Mississippi type rifles.² Delivery was to have been started on May 2, 1862.³ However, due to the advancing enemy, the operations had to be moved to Rome, Georgia where they continued to produce arms for the state of Alabama. They had been in operation only a short time when the building in which they were located burned. From Rome, the company moved its plant to Adairsville, Georgia and from there the final move took them to Dawson, Georgia, where they were producing at full speed when the war was over.⁴

The arms produced by this little company were among the best, if not the best, produced in the South during

the war. The price received for these guns points this out. At least 645 were bought for \$90 each by the State of Alabama.⁵ These rifles were shipped in heavy pine crates or boxes to their destination,⁶ which was probably the ordnance department of the State of Alabama for issuance.

Even though the company was primarily involved in the manufacture of rifles of the Mississippi type, they made a few carbines. However, there is reason to believe that the carbines were made from barrels which had

been damaged near the end but were still long enough for use in fabrication of carbines. This decision is reached through information in the Archives of Alabama, wherein there is no mention of the carbine by the Quartermaster General of the State of Alabama in his report covering the period from October 1, 1863 to November 1, 1864. There is mention of the shipment of carbines from some of the other manufacturers, but none from Dickson-Nelson.⁷ On the other hand, when the plant in Dawson was captured in 1865, there



Close up view of the 1864 Model.

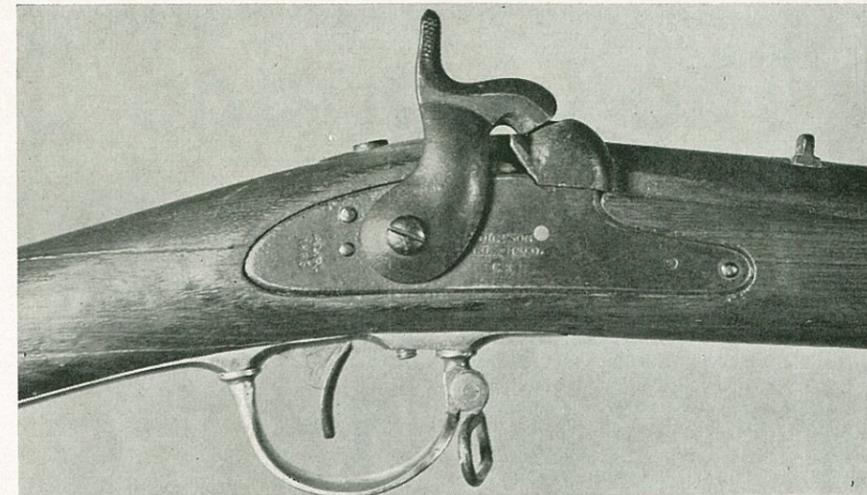
was a super-abundance of stocks for carbines. This would lead one to believe that a contract for the manufacture of carbines had been negotiated in the interim. Nevertheless, there seems to be no such contract on record.⁹ Surely they didn't foresee the ruination of that many barrels!

The metal for the guns was supplied by the Shelby Iron Works. This firm was supplier of the iron for the Griswold and Gunnison Revolver Works and the firm of Cook & Brothers.¹⁰ The stocks may have been made by F. Zundt for some of the carbine stocks have his name on them.¹¹

The gun which the company contracted to make was a modified 1841 U. S. Model, the rifle which had been made famous by Jefferson Davis in the Mexican conflict. This type or style rifle had been popular in the South for years. The Southerners appear never to have liked the Musket. The arm produced by Dickson-Nelson was different in at least five ways from the M1841. First, the calibre of the Confederate made gun was .58, whereas the original U.S. model 1841 was .54. (Many were later bored out to .58 by Harpers Ferry and Colt.)¹² Second, the cone and nipple arrangement of the Dickson-Nelson is not that of the Mississippi, but of the Model 1842 Musket. Third, the Dickson-Nelson has a plain band for its topmost fastener instead of the one-piece device used as band-nose-*ap* on the M1841. Fourth, there is no patchbox on the Confederate piece. The presence of a patchbox on a Confederate armory rifle (other than the Texas rifle and the Palmetto rifle) is a sure indication that the piece has been restocked or the patchbox has been added later. Fifth, the stock on some of the early Dickson-Nelsons appears to have been made of cherry. The stocks of the U. S. arms were of walnut.

The rifles fall into two groups. The first of these were made during the first few months of the period, (October 1, 1863-November 1, 1864) possibly before 1864, for I have never seen one stamped 1864 which had the characteristics of the first model. The characteristics are these. (1) The bands holding the barrel to the stock are the spring retaining type. (2) The stock is made of cherry. (3) The trigger guard and part which runs back from it toward the heel of the stock is about like the Mississippi. (4) The sight is of the two leaf variety, probably for 300 yards and 500 yards. (5) The trigger guard is almost like that of the U. S. Model of 1841; that is, it isn't rounded down, but is somewhat flattened. (6) The butt has the shape of the standard Fayetteville rifle; it is rounded to fit the shoulder.

The second variety is different in several ways. First, bands are of the clamping type, instead of spring retained and they are narrower.¹³ Second, the stock is made of walnut. Third,



Close-up view of the Model 1865

the trigger guard and part which runs toward the butt is longer; it measures 5½ inches from the back of the trigger guard to the end, and 9 inches from the front to the back. Fourth, the sight is fixed with a notch. Of the two specimens in my own collection,¹⁴ there is a difference in the notch, but this could have been done by the soldier who used the gun, since one is simply flared more. The one made in 1864 has the wider notch. Fifth, the trigger guard is rounded until it measures 1⅝ inches on the one made in 1865, and 1½ inches on the one made in 1864. Finally, the butt of this model is straight like the model of 1841 or the musket of 1842.

The markings appear identical, (probably made with the same die). It reads back of the hammer either 1863 (the first model), or 1864, 1865, (the second model) in a vertical line with Ala. over it. In front of the hammer horizontally it is marked:

Dickson
Nelson & Co. .
C.S.

Finally, we conclude that the guns made for the Confederacy by the firm of Dickson-Nelson and Co. are of importance, not of themselves, but in the overall picture. The firm was only one of the contractors who helped supply arms which in turn perpetrated the worst war ever seen by the American people until the time of the great world conflicts.

FOOTNOTES

1. William A. Albaugh III and Edward N. Simmons "Confederate Arms," (Harrisburg, Pa.; Stackpole, 1957), p. 215
2. C. J. McRae to governor of Alabama, John Gill Shorter; personal correspondence, July 15, 1862, cited in Claud E. Fuller and Richard D. Steuart "Firearms of the Confederacy" (Huntington, W. Va.; Standard, 1944), p. 160
3. J. G. Shorter to Governor Pickens, personal correspondence, May 2, 1862, cited in "Ibid.", p. 161
4. Albaugh III, "op. cit.," p. 215
5. Report of Duff C. Green, Quartermaster General of Alabama, in the Military Archives of the State of Alabama; cited in Fuller "op. cit.," p. 159
6. Albaugh III, "op. cit.," p. 215
7. Fuller, "op. cit.," p. 174
8. "Ibid.," p. 174



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The Dickson Nelson Rifle

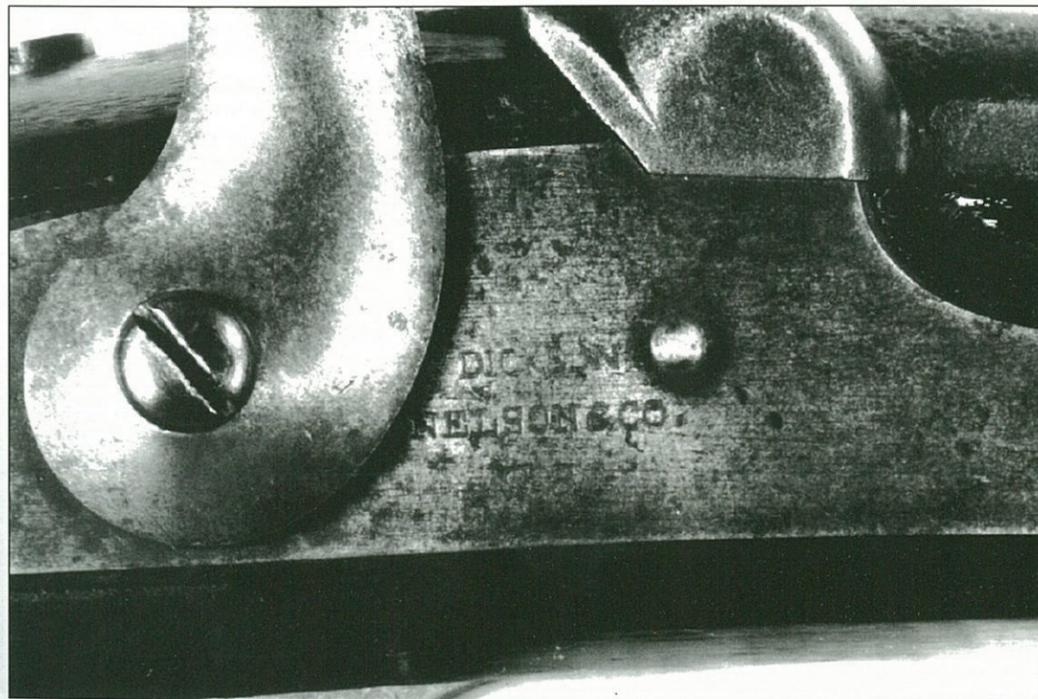
by Robert M. Jaffe, M.D.

Much of what is written about the products of Dickson, Nelson & Co. is a repeat of previously published material, and, unfortunately, some of the available information has no stated basis in fact. Let us reexamine what has been written to date, and I'll throw out some new theories for your consideration.

Dickson, Nelson & Co., originally called the Shakanoosa Arms Co., was founded in 1861 by principals William Dixon and Owen O. Nelson. A contract was signed on January 22, 1862, with the state of Alabama to supply "five thousand good army guns of the value and description of the Mississippi or Enfield rifle," to be delivered by May 1, 1863. This contract

may or may not be the only one Dickson Nelson had with the state of Alabama; it is, to date, the only one that has come to light.

The first factory for the production of rifles was approximately 20 miles west of Tuscumbia, Alabama. However, before the factory was completed, permission was sought to move the factory due to possible enemy interference. A factory was set up in Rome, Georgia, from April 1862 to August 28, 1862, when the factory burned. The next site was in Adairsville, Georgia, from September 1862 to September 1863. Because of the impending Battle of Chickamauga, which took place September 19-20, 1863, the factory was again moved, this time to



◀ Lockplate on 1863 Nelson Dickson, marked "DICKSON / NELSON & CO. / C.S." The "NELSON" marking measures 12mm.



▶ Lockplate on 1864 Nelson Dickson, marked "DICKSON / NELSON & CO. / C.S." The "NELSON" marking measures 14mm.

Dawson, Georgia. Production in Dawson apparently did not begin until the summer of 1864, and it continued until the end of the war.

The only known official report of arms delivery to the state of Alabama is a report by the Alabama quartermaster, Gen. Duff C. Green, accounting for delivery of 645 rifles from October 1, 1863 to November 1, 1864. While the factory was in Rome orders were placed for iron with the Shelby Iron Works, but no completed guns are believed to have been produced there. There were, however, parts produced at this location and lost when the factory burned. To my knowledge, there are no Dickson Nelson guns with lockplates dated 1862. Manuscripts exist of orders for gun iron during the firm's tenure at Adairsville, but no records are known that verify production.

In a 1976 article in this publication, well-known researcher Cecil Anderson estimated that 3,600 arms of all descriptions were made through August 1863, but there is, unfortunately, no corroborative source listed in his article for such an estimate. Based on surviving examples of Confederate weapons, this number makes no sense to me. If 3,600 guns were made at Adairsville, one would expect more of them to have survived. Also consider that the firm's move from Rome to Adairsville was the result of fire. There must have been a delay in replacing equipment that was necessary for the production of guns in a war-ravaged and supply-poor country. The stay in Adairsville was only one year and was probably enough time to replace machinery and produce parts but not enough to assemble a multitude of complete arms.

A Type I rifle made in 1863 is alluded to in several reference works. However, after research and personal communication with author and firearms curator Howard Madaus, I have come to the conclusion that there is some doubt as to whether the Type I pictured in Fuller and Stuart's *Firearms of the Confed-*

Timeline of Documented Facts Regarding Nelson, Dickson & Co. Production

- 1861
Dickson, Nelson & Co. founded by William Dixon and Owen O. Nelson; first factory site west of Tuscumbia, Alabama
- January 22, 1862
Contract with Alabama to supply 5,000 guns
- April 1862
Factory moved to Rome, Georgia
- August 28, 1862
Factory in Rome burns
- September 1862-September 1863
Factory in Adairsville, Georgia
- Post-September 1863
Factory in Dawson, Georgia; confirmation of delivery of 645 rifles between October 1, 1863, to November 1, 1864, to the state of Alabama

eracy is correctly identified. An October 1961 article by Jim Blackburn in *The Gun Report* lists this rifle as having barrel bands with spring retainers, stock of cherry wood, trigger guard like the Mississippi rifle, two leaf rear sights, and a butt rounded like the Fayetteville rifle. Unfortunately, this article offers neither pictures of this type of gun nor information or estimates concerning quantity produced. In their *Confederate Rifles & Muskets*, Madaus and John Murphy show an example of a gun with these characteristics and dated 1864 on the lock and barrel. The gun pictured in their book is noted as the only authentic Type I



View of the "ALA / 1863" stamping on the end of the lockplate on a Nelson Dickson rifle produced for the state of Alabama.

rifle they have seen. To me it seems doubtful that a gun marked 1864 on the barrel and lockplate was made in 1863.

In the final analysis, it does not seem to me that there is presently enough solid evidence to confirm a production line Type I Dickson Nelson rifle. I prefer to err on the side of caution, and I think it wise to reserve judgment on whether or not there was a Type I produced in any quantity.

There are dated 1863 locks on a sharpshooter's-type rifle, one that is on a Mississippi-type rifle with a .58 calibre bore, "Confederate modified front barrel band," and patchbox perhaps made from a "reworked Mississippi rifle" or "parts" and an 1863-marked lockplate on an otherwise typical so-called Type II rifle with clamping barrel bands, 9" long trigger guard, notched rear sight, and straight butt like the Model 1841 rifle.

A new observation is that on all the 1863 lockplates I have examined, the stamping is slightly different from that on the 1864 or 1865 lockplates. In the 1863 lockplate, the "Dickson" measures 12mm, while on the later locks it measures 14mm. Perhaps a new die was cut when the firm moved to Dawson.

In conclusion, I find it doubtful that 3,600 arms were produced by Dickson, Nelson & Co. before their move to Dawson. Probably no arms were produced in any quantity before the firm moved to Adairsville. Further, it is uncertain that any complete arms were produced at Adairsville. Although lockplates with the 1863 date exist, it is most likely that completed arms were made only in Dawson.

Existing records show only 645 rifles received by the state of Alabama from October 1, 1863, to November 1, 1864. The existence of a true Type I is still, to my mind, doubtful. Early rifles with 1863 lockplates may have been made from parts of captured rifles and not wholly manufactured by Dickson, Nelson

& Co. until 1864 at Dawson, when parts made in 1863 were incorporated.

And again, the 1863 lockplates have a foreshortened stamp of "Dickson" when compared to those on the 1864 and 1865 lockplates.

There are other questions about the Dickson Nelson rifle. For instance, why are some barrels marked "Ala." and others not?

This article is by no means the definitive word on the subject, and I hope it will stimulate thought on the matter. Readers are encouraged to contribute any information or opinions they have concerning these Southern arms. ■

Sources

- Albaugh, William A., and Edward N. Simmons. *Confederate Arms*.
 Anderson, Cecil. "Nelson & Co." *North South Trader*, Jan.-Feb. 1976.
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 David Condon, Inc., retail sales catalogue, Oct.-Nov. 1997.
 Fuller, Claud E., and Richard D. Steuart. *Firearms of the Confederacy*.
 Jones, Douglas E. "The Dickson, Nelson Company: Alabama Civil War Gunmakers," *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin* #60.
 Murphy, Dr. John M., and Howard Michael Madaus. *Confederate Rifles & Muskets*.

The author expresses his gratitude to Roger Ballard, Michael L. Vice, George Wray, John Murphy, and Howard Madaus for their assistance in compiling this information.

New York-based ophthalmologist Jaffee is an avid Civil War collector and a frequent contributor to NSTCW.

DICKSON, NELSON & CO. RIFLES

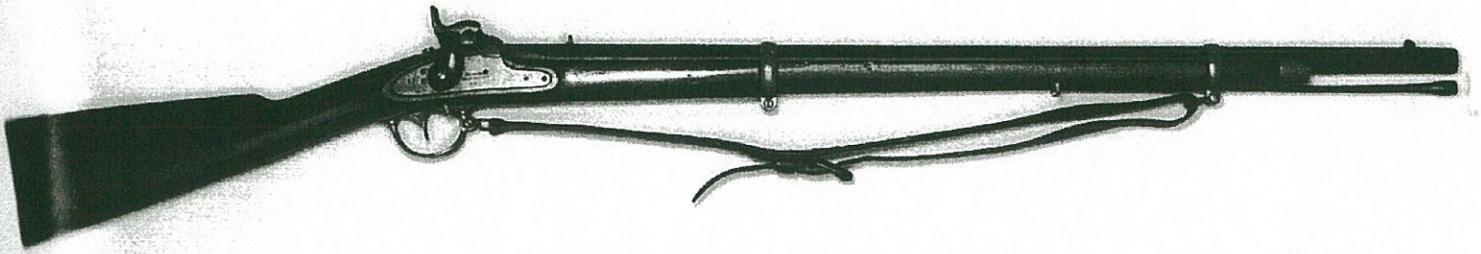


Plate 8. *A Dickson, Nelson & Co. Type II rifle; right side. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*

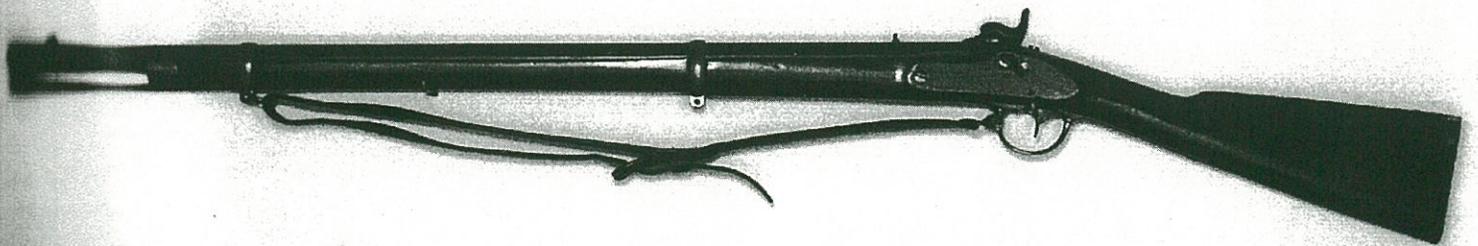


Plate 9. *Left side of rifle shown in Plate 8. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)*

“B1”. There is one rounded front barrel band of the clamping type, $\frac{7}{16}$ inch in width; the rear barrel band and nose cap 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 trigger guard 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 trigger guard 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 nose cap 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 trigger guard 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 nose cap, “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 nose cap 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 trigger guard 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 trigger guard 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.