

## The Wilsons: Gunmakers to Empire, 1730–1832

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The man who founded what was to become probably the largest single gunmaking firm in London until at, the very least, the final decades of the 18th Century was born of humble north-country yeoman stock late in 1702. Richard Wilson was the son of Richard Wilson of Kirkby Steven, in the county of Westmorland, and his wife Hester, and was baptized in the church of St. Bottolph's Aldgate, London, on 26 January 1703. This church is located only a hundred yards or so from the premises which the Wilson family were to occupy until 1833.

We know nothing of young Richard's life until he was apprenticed to the London gunmaker Thomas Green (free 1697–died 1728) on 16 January 1718 for the traditional period of seven years. Green had been working since the late 1690s and had only another decade of life at the time Richard became his apprentice. Not surprisingly Green's work foreshadows almost exactly the patterns to be followed by his apprentice, and indeed indicate clearly how Richard got his start in the business in so many areas at once. Thomas Green's wife Agnes was Richard Wilson's cousin, which almost certainly explains how he came into the business. Since 1697, Green had occupied premises in the Minories known as 'The Fowler'. Also since 1697, he had been a contractor for military arms to the Board of Ordnance, a position he was to retain until the close of the wars in 1715. Moving from one position to another, in 1715 he became Viewer and Proofmaster to the Hudson's Bay Company, and a gunmaker to the Royal African Company in 1721. So apprentice Richard's experience would have included working in some way on all of the types of guns which were to form the mainstay of his business throughout his working life of some thirty-five years.

Richard Wilson completed his apprenticeship with Green in January 1725, and with Green's recommendation, on 1 April of that year he was officially recognized as a journeyman gunmaker by the Worshipful Company of Gunmakers' of London, the craft guild which controlled, with an ever decreasing degree of effectiveness, the major part of London's gun trade. Wilson continued in Green's employ and by the time of Thomas' death in 1728 it seems likely that he was running much of the business, although it



was officially continued by Green's widow Agnes. She took over her deceased husband's contracts with the Hudson's Bay and Royal African companies.

The exact nature of Wilson's relationship to the actual working side of the business, the forge, file and rasp aspects of the job, is clearly illustrated at the very beginning of his independent career. On 2 April 1730 Wilson submitted his proof-piece to the Gunmakers' Company—a procedure which preceded his recognition as a Master Gunmaker—intending to prove to the assembled experts and future competitors that he was capable of manufacturing every part of a complete firearm. However, as the Gunmakers' Company records inform us:

Mr. Richard Wilson presented his Proofpiece with his Mistress' Mrs. Green's mark on it, for which reason it was refused and he was ordered to bring another next Court day with his own proper Mark struck on the same.

Wilson complied and presented a complete gun on 2 July 1730, which was accepted and he was henceforth considered as a Master Gunmaker. The point being that even before being recognized as a Master Gunmaker he was apparently not involved in the actual preparation and fabrication of parts into complete arms but was concentrating on the front-office, administrative and entrepreneurial aspects of the business from the very start. This fact was to be used against him at various points in his career.

Having achieved his Mastership Wilson wasted little time in expanding and building on the very substantial base which Thomas and Agnes Green had provided for him. His first step, not untypical of 18th Century craftsmen at this point in their career, was to get married. On 4 October 1730 in St. Botolph's Aldgate he married a local girl, Martha Barwell. It was often the case that gunmakers married into another gunmaking family, and it is possible that Martha was the daughter of one George Barwell. There is, however, no record of Barwell beyond his apprenticeship to Edward Nicholson in 1705, which is perhaps too close in time for him to have had a daughter of marriageable age.

Only three days later he was once again in very hot water with the Gunmakers' Company, who seized 59 pistol barrels which had been filed down after proof, a potentially serious weakening of the barrels, which might endanger the customer and the reputation of the Company whose marks the barrels bore. Wilson was hailed before a meeting of the Company and faced with his crime, denied any knowledge of the byelaw forbidding filing after proof. His judges ruled against him and initially levied a significant fine of 10/ per barrel or £29 10s. What this amounted to in purchasing power may be illustrated by the fact that a silver-mounted fowling piece could be purchased during this period for around £5. However, since Wilson was "a young member and promised not to offend again in the like kind" they dropped his fine to six Guineas [i.e., £6 6s] which he paid. He did in fact repeat the offense in 1740, when he was fined a mere £3 for 12 barrels filed after proof.

In the course of his first year as an independent gunmaker, having taken over both the business and the premises of cousin Agnes, Richard Wilson was confirmed as succeeding Agnes as a contractor to the Hudson's Bay Company; he took his first apprentice, Richard Sinclair of the London gunmaking family of Sinclairs, and he attended his first sale of ex-Government Ordnance stores at the Tower of London. Materials offered at these sales were purchased by a variety of gunmakers and reworked into various low-quality arms, chiefly guns for the African slave trade and commercial ships-muskets. Each of these activities taking place in his first year of independent business indicates that he was already possessed of a sufficient amount of capital, an experienced workforce, and adequate influence where it counted.

On 16 March 1732, Richard's eldest son, future partner and successor in the business, William (I), was born.

Another milestone was reached in 1733 with Richard's first contracts for the Honourable East India Company, the largest British chartered trading company. The connection with "John Company" was to be continued through all three generations of the Wilson gunmaking family. Also in 1733 Wilson began his career-long participation as an official of the London Gunmakers' Company by being elected a Steward in July, and in August being appointed as one of the assistants in the viewing and proving of barrels, a very responsible post. His superiors may have thought this an excellent way to give him some "on the job training" experience, but, as noted above it does not seem to have been an entirely successful endeavour on their part. In August 1734, he was elected one of three new members of the Company's ruling body, the Court of Assistants. He served as Deputy Master in 1750, 1760, and 1764 and was elected Master of the Company in 1741 and 1749. During this 30-year period no other member served so frequently in the higher offices of the Gunmakers' Company; he was also one of a small select group chosen to be the first Liverymen of the Company when it achieved Livery Company status in 1758. Apart from the offices he held, Richard Wilson was appointed to a number of committees, and his contributions seem to have been specialized in fiscal matters. He was also active on the committee for managing, carrying on, and defending lawsuits involving the seizure of unproved firearms for export.

In 1734 Wilson took his second apprentice (always a good sign of a growing business) Robert Wilson, a relative (exact relationship remains unclear) from Appleby. Robert was made free of the Company in 1742 and appears to have

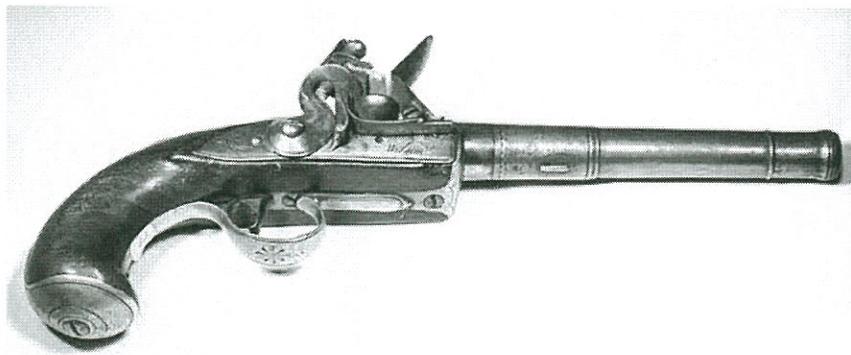


Figure 1. A rifled breech-loading pistol by Richard Wilson in an uncommon style which enjoyed but a brief popularity in the 1740s. Despite the advanced technology, note the absence of a pan-bridge. Private Collection.

worked for his Master from then until 1759 when his proof-piece and mark were submitted. Robert died in 1772.

In June 1737, Wilson took his third apprentice, Robert Barnett, and in so doing founded the beginnings of the dynasty of gunmakers who would succeed and eventually excel in the export market during the Nineteenth and first



Figure 2. A fine example of one of several varieties of Hudson Valley fowling piece produced by Richard Wilson ca. 1745. Some of this type were stocked in America using Wilson components, while others were entirely produced in Wilson's workshops. Courtesy Wester A. White.

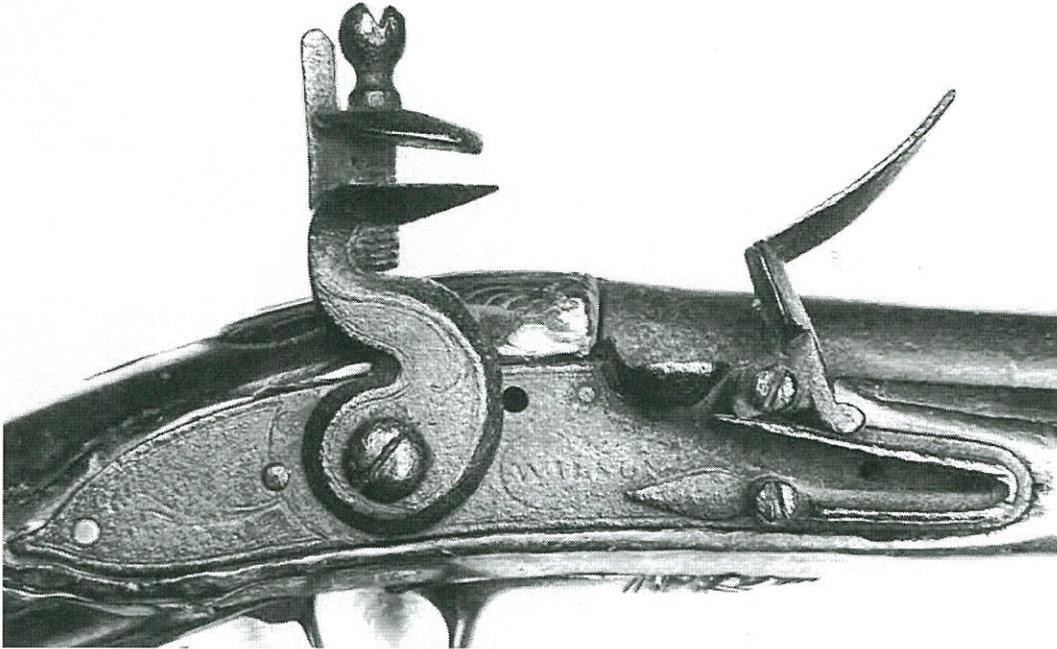


Figure 3. The lockplate of the Hudson Valley piece shown above.

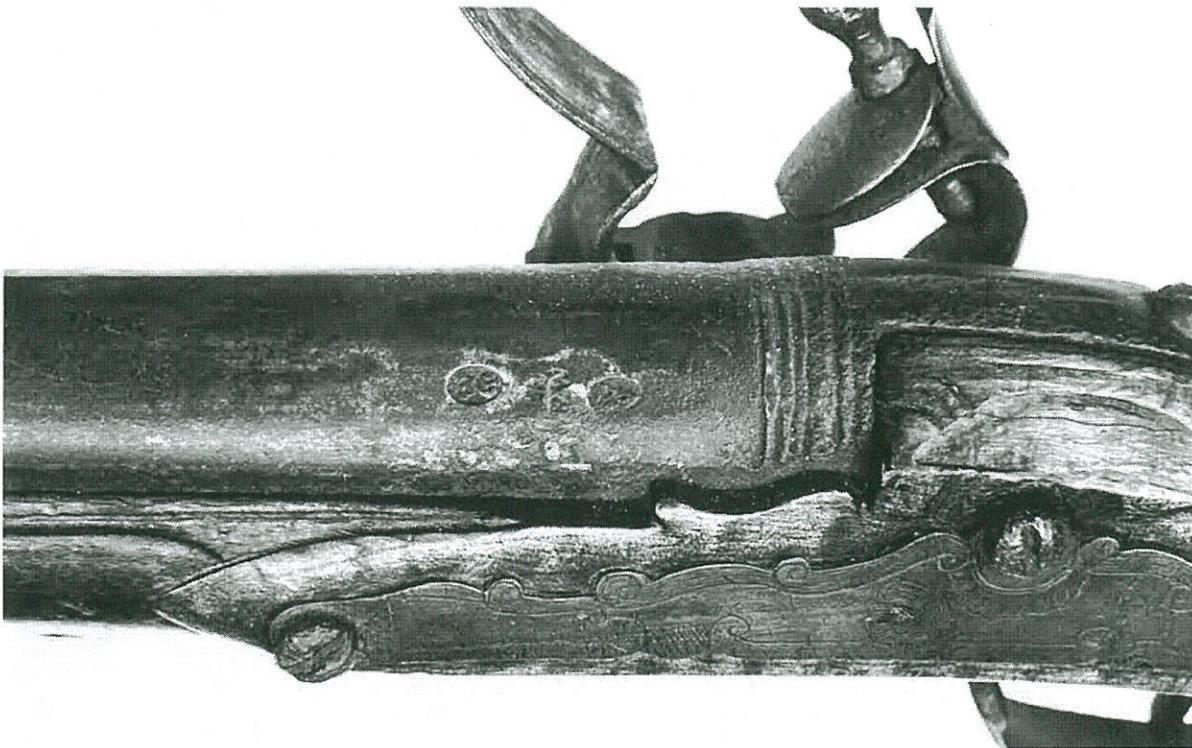


Figure 4. Barrel markings of the Hudson Valley fowler.



Figure 5. A typical Wilson trade gun lock used on the lowest grades of fuzees for the North American Indians for most of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The single border line on plate and cock body, the very simply engraved foliate scrolls and the name in plain block letters, arc, along with the "plain" lock mechanism (lacking either tumbler- or pan-bridle) and the straight "pillar" comb of the cock, characteristic of this grade of lock. This example still has three screws attaching it to the stock through its dragon sideplate. There are a great many structural variations found on Wilson trade-gun locks all within a broad general category. Private Collection.



Figure 6. A left-handed brass mounted fowling piece by Richard Wilson, ca. 1750. Courtesy of the Trustees, Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds.



Figure 7. A fine brass mounted Officer's Fusil by Richard Wilson ca. 1755. The .69 calibre barrel is 42-in. long. Despite the elaborate military-motif brass furniture, the lock has no pan-bridle and the rammer is wooden. Courtesy of George Shumway.

half of the Twentieth Century. It is of particular interest that Robert Barnett came from the same town, Kirkby Steven in Westmorland, from which the Wilsons had emigrated and that at the end of his career in 1781 he retired again to it. Robert Barnett was to begin the manufacture of trade fusils and rifles while working for Richard Wilson, first as apprentice, and then for 15 years as a journeyman gunmaker. Even after he set up on his own, probably in 1759, Barnett continued to make components and complete arms for the Wilson firm, and was almost undoubtedly a member of "Wilson & Co." which functioned from 1755 when William Wilson was taken into partnership. Richard Wilson took a total of eight apprentices: Robert Barnett (1737), Benjamin Hartwell (1741), Robert Loy (1744), William Wilson, John Rookin/Rukin and Robert Yeatts (1747), Thomas Rukin and Anthony Barnes (1755). All but two of these (Loy and Hartwell) are subsequently recorded as gunmakers, although none save the younger Wilson and Barnett achieved any longevity or standing in business. Nothing more is recorded of Loy after his freedom of the Company was granted in 1752 and his proof-piece and mark accepted the following year.

Richard Wilson took over the premises of his late Master, Thomas Green. It was an old building known as "The Antient Fowler" at the upper end and west side of a long straight road heading due north from the Tower of London, known as The Minories. Under various changes of name, e.g., The Fowler, the three generations of Wilsons operated from these premises, known as 154 Minories from at least the 1760s. The building underwent several refurbishments and restructurings, ultimately becoming a three storey double-fronted structure with two bow-windows for display.

It is in 1737 that the first records of Wilson's activities in the American Colonies is noted, strongly suggesting that he was established in that trade from at least 1735. Charleston merchant Robert Pringle wrote to his London factor Thomas Williams in April 1737 that

There are a great many guns &c that come over here of Messrs Halfhide and Willsons make, & Hawkins, tho' I think some of them very indifferent, and I hope yours will exceed them in every respect.

The order sent by Williams turned out to contain the highest-priced guns ever seen in Charleston, especially the Indian Trading Guns, and he noted ruefully in May 1739 that "Mr. Wilson's guns come here charged at 10/ only & are esteemed the Best Guns that come here and are most in demand." Such an accolade to be given only seven years after the producer had entered into business must have been considered significant, especially in light of what followed.

In May 1737 the Georgia Commons House of Assembly received a bill from Mr. Richard Wilson, Gun Maker, for £102.5.9. for arms, which they ordered paid. This probably

represents about one hundred muskets with bayonets. The correspondence preceding this notice indicates that Wilson had been the source of Indian trading guns purchased by the Trustees of the colony in 1735 and 1736.

In June 1741, after war between Britain and Spain had been in progress for 21 months, the Georgia assembly noted "That they had ordered Mr Richard Wilson to furnish the Trust with 75 muskets and bayonets of the best sort in List Cases and Chests with Locks" as well as with FF grade gunpowder and ball.

It seems that, contrary to the usual pattern of activity, it was Georgia who led South Carolina to Richard Wilson's door, for it is not until January 1744 that the older colony recorded its first dealings with the gunmaker. The order was for 500 muskets and bayonets for the militia, at a cost of £500, and the Assembly specifically desired "his Excellency to give Directions that Mr Richard Wilson of London, Gunmaker, may be employed to send the same hither." They gave their reasons for this request as "being informed that he will furnish the same upon the easiest terms (he usually allowing a Discount of five per Centum for prompt Payment, and ships his own Guns without taking Commissions." It may be of interest to note here that a Board of Ordnance musket and bayonet at this date cost £1 12s 6d as opposed to the £1 of Wilson's muskets and bayonets. Given South Carolina's turbulent political history in colonial times, it is not surprising to find that by April 1745 the Assembly instructed a subcommittee to enquire whether there were any Wilson muskets in Charleston and if so to compare them with those lately brought over by the Governor's directions in HMS *Marlborough* to see whether they are as cheap and fit for the service of the militia as those previously supplied by Wilson. As with so many of these governmental instructions, no follow-up was recorded.

Wilson expanded his business into another potentially lucrative area when he received his first contract for King's Pattern military small arms from the Board of Ordnance on 15 April 1746. Between this time and October 1749 he supplied the Board with some 3,700 Pattern 1742 Long Land muskets and 900 pairs of Pattern 1738 Land Service pistols. Although both father and son supplied arms to the Board of Ordnance during the Seven Years (or French & Indian) War and the American War for Independence, they were never popular with the Board and did not figure among the large-scale contractors. This was probably due to two factors. In the first place it is unlikely that Wilson's workforce were particularly skilled at working strictly to a pattern. None of the other types of arms in which they specialized were made rigidly to carefully inspected patterns as were all Ordnance weapons. In fact the Board commented that 3/4 of the London gun trade was incapable of working to a pattern. The other factor was probably that the Wilsons were a sig-

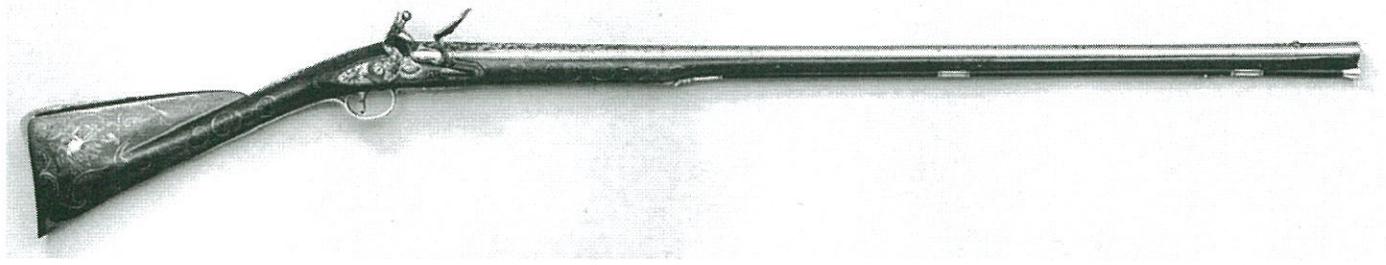


Figure 8. One of the finest pieces produced by Richard Wilson: a silver mounted fowling piece with silver wire and cut and engraved sheet silver inlay, the furniture by Jaconiah Ashley hallmarked for 1750. The lower barrel and lock are high-relief chiselled with a gold background, and the stock is beautifully carved at the barrel tang and around the side flats. The military motifs of all forms of its decoration indicate a high-ranking officer customer who, judging from the refaced steel, gave it considerable use. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 9. Close-up of lock plate.



Figure 10. Barrel engraving.

nificant presence in the London Gunmakers' Company, and since the breakaway of the Board from the Company's influence in the period before 1720, there was always an "atmosphere" between the two even when there was not active friction. The Wilson's military small arms production from 1746 to 1803 covers most of the standard patterns: Long and Short Land muskets, Marine or Militia muskets, Sea Service muskets and pistols, and latterly, India Pattern muskets. In military style, Wilson also produced carbines and fusils.

On 8 January 1747, Wilson's eldest son William was signed on as his eighth and last apprentice. William achieved his status of journeyman gunmaker on 28 March 1754, and such was his father's influence in the Gunmakers' Company that he was recognized as a Master Gunmaker in December 1755. Reacting to his new status even more rapidly than his father had done, William married Mary Munn, in the family church of St. Botolph's Aldgate, on 3 January 1756, there being no recorded members of the Munn family involved in gunmaking. Young Wilson was made a partner in the newly reorganized firm of Richard Wilson & Company early in 1756. It seems likely that apart from Richard and his son, the other partners in the firm were Robert Wilson and Robert Barnett, both former apprentices; it was in fact a legal recognition of a pre-existing situation.

Crossing the sea once again and reverting to the final year of King George's War, 1748, we find Charleston merchant Henry Laurens writing to a friend, Francis Bremar, whom he is supporting in establishing a business and sending him a list of those firms in London with whom he, Laurens, normally dealt; "some of my friends who do business with Carolina." Among them is found Richard Wilson, Gunmaker, in the Minories.

Part of the great system of both Great Britain and France for managing their empires in North America was the attempt to gain and bind various Indian tribes to one side or the other. Part of the diplomatic process involved the giving of gifts by the colonial representatives of the two kings, normally the governors of the various provinces with Indian populations. Two conflicting basic facts roughly neutralized each other and made necessary a continuing effort by both sides. On the one hand Britain's manufacturing and commercial capacity was far superior to that of the French so that a wider variety of better quality items was available at a cheaper first-cost price. On the other hand, the French never made any attempt to expand their colonial populations into Indian country, and were satisfied to establish trading-post forts which served as commercial centres for the exchange of Indian furs and hides and no more. British settlers constantly pushed at the frontiers in the attempt to gain land by clearing away the Indians, and by so doing largely negated the peaceful intentions of the governments in London and the several colonial capitols.

In Britain the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations were in charge of carrying out the King's and the Secretaries of State's instructions for ruling the colonies, and they were also loosely in charge of Indian diplomacy. With the situation in the early 1750s obviously warming-up again in the on-going Anglo-French conflict, it became obvious that a general tightening-up of control over Indian affairs in North America was essential. To this end the so-called Albany Congress was convened in the little frontier town of Albany on the upper Hudson River in New York in mid-1754. It failed in its major objectives of colonial cooperation but brought about the counterproposal by the Board of Trade for a unified Indian Department to deal with frontier diplomacy at imperial level. William (shortly to be Sir William) Johnson in New York's Mohawk Valley was appointed Superintendent for the Northern District, and Edmond Atkin of Charleston Superintendent for the Southern District. Thus there was superimposed upon the existing individual colonial Indian trade and diplomatic structures an imperial structure with its own requirements, among them guns to be given as gifts to the Indians.

It was the habit of the individual colonies to instruct their London agents to purchase annually what was required for the coming year's Indian management. Thus it was in January 1755, under an agreement with the Board of Trade of 1749, that Georgia's colonial agent, Benjamin Martyn, submitted a list of Indian presents to the Board to be sent out in the Spring, including "150 Wilson's Trading Guns and 40 fowling pieces." This was in fact the list for 1750 which Martyn sent as a guide for the coming year.

The first supply of Indian presents to be sent to America under the new imperial system accompanied Lord Loudoun the new Commander in Chief, who arrived at New York City in June 1756 with £4000 in Indian presents in his baggage. Included were Indian guns from Richard Wilson & Son: 600 fowling pieces with brass furniture at 24/- and 100 fine fowling pieces with wrought brass furniture at 40/-. In this context wrought brass indicates furniture which had been worked on, i.e., engraved, no matter how cheaply.

Atkin submitted a list of presents for the Southern District for 1757 which includes the following guns:

800 to be all light, the Barrels blue, and to have a Mark of Distinction both on the Barrel and the Lock, vizt a Hand in Hand (Wilson best maker).

50 pair of Pistols (with ramrods) same bore as the Best arms and same mark, low price about 20/-.

Guns given to the Indians as coming from the King were always of a slightly, and sometimes considerably, better quality than the ordinary trading guns. Archeological evidence shows that some of the Government gift guns had the Royal Cypher engraved on their thumbpieces.

This separation between imperial and colonial gift guns is borne out by a 1758 £2000 invoice of James Wright, colonial agent for South Carolina which includes from

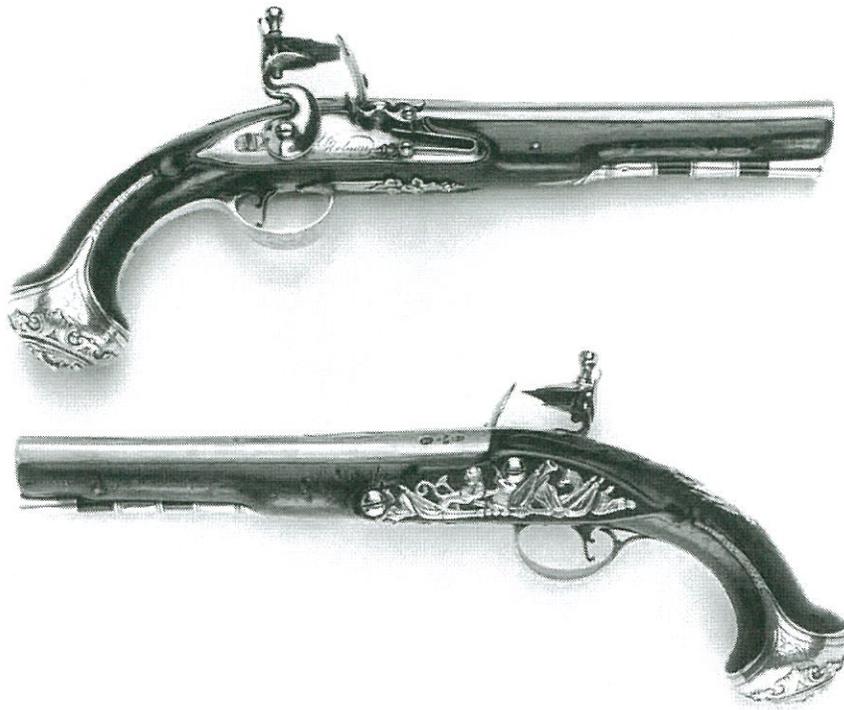


Figure 11. A fine example of Richard Wilson's top-quality silver mounted holster pistols, the high-relief chased silver furniture hallmarked for 1755. The presence of a sliding safety bolt on the locks is unusual for this period. Courtesy Robin Dale.



Figure 12. Breech markings on a pistol by William (I) Wilson. Note the full address engraved on the tapering flat of the brass barrel. It is probably significant that most of these full addresses are found on brass barrels which were softer and therefore cheaper to engrave. Private Collection.

Richard Wilson & Co. gunsmiths: 863 Trading Guns and 20 fowling pieces at a cost of £441.9.2.

At this same period Wilson was also supplying arms for customers in Britain, not least among them pairs of pistols to be carried by officers in their saddle holsters and officers' fusils, some with silver furniture, during the coming war in Europe as well as in America.

Between 1755 and 1763 the overall number of civilian arms shipped from England to the colonies amounted to at least 40,600 muskets and 18,900 Indian trading guns. Existing records strongly suggest that the Wilson firm supplied the majority of Indian trading guns and at least a proportion of the muskets including shipments for the Province and City of New York (at least 1000), as well as New Jersey (at least 500), Georgia, South Carolina, and possibly Massachusetts. From these latter three colonies no marked examples of Wilson muskets have been identified at the time of writing.

The ejection of the French from the North American continent at the close of the war brought, apart from Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763-4, general peace.

Three years later, Richard Wilson was laid to rest in the churchyard of St. Botolph's Aldgate on 29 August 1766. As late as 1764 he had been appointed Deputy Master of the Gunmakers' Company and he attended his last meeting at the end of June, less than two months before his death. Wilson had enjoyed 36 years of an independent career, which is a little less than average for those English 18th Century gunmakers for whom we have clear information. But during those 36 years Wilson had achieved far more than any other British gunmaker to that time. In addition to working for the two largest chartered trading companies, he had established himself very early in the largest free export market of the British Empire, North America, and appears to have been firmly in possession of the largest part of its firearms market. It is a great tragedy that Richard died intestate and that the inventory of his estate which his widow was ordered to, and did supply, has not survived. As a fitting finale to Richard Wilson's career, there is here illustrated one of the finest pieces he ever made.

Son William and his silent partners continued the business. The second William, usually referred to as William the younger or William (II), and the final leader of the three-generation business, was baptized at the usual church on 13 March 1765. He was not apprenticed to his father until April 1779. The elder William, Richard's son, did not die until January 1808, and excelled his father's record of service in the Gunmakers' Company, including a five-year term as Treasurer in the 1780s. He succeeded his father as contractor to the East India Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, and he also inherited the dislike of the Board of Ordnance. He retained the business of the Board of Trade and appears to have enjoyed a monopoly of the Government Indian gun business as well as a large proportion of the private business during the

American War for Independence, after which his business gradually lost ground to the Ketlands of Birmingham.

The inter-war years (1763-1774) saw the continued colonial importation of Wilson arms, particularly into the Southern colonies. Falmouth Virginia merchant William Allason, operated several stores in the colony, and was a steady customer of Wilsons. He was buying from Wilson from at least 1760; an invoice of 1761 itemizes the contents of a case of guns bought of Richard and William Wilson & Co. containing the following:

12 Trading Guns London proved barrels, white stocks &c 8/-

12 ditto better sort with spotted stocks &c 10/6.

A second invoice of early 1772 shows a fine variety of Wilson guns:

3 fowling pieces with London proved barrels, walnut stocks polished locks and brass furniture, No. 1 15/-

3 fowling pieces with London proved barrels, walnut stocks bridle locks and brass furniture, No. 2 18/-

3 ditto, better No. 3 21/-

10 neat fowling pieces, London proved blue barrels, silver sights,

Walnut stocks, bridle locks and wrought brass furniture, No. 4 31/6

20 more of the same @ 31/6

Apart from one later wartime invoice this is the most descriptive document we have on the varieties of guns being sent to the colonies by the Wilson firm. An earlier but less detailed invoice of 1771 shows that the Numbers 1, 2, and 3 have prices the same as the 1772 invoice and are a very early confirmation of the use of numbers in differentiating grades of guns.

Although there was peace in America for 10 years, the Indians still had to hunt to feed their families, and many guns continued to be supplied by both the British government and by the private traders, and Government guns at least continued to come through the Wilson firm.

In May 1764, 200 Indian trading guns arrived at Charleston via the firm of Row & Jackson at £5 South Carolina currency each, for the new Southern Superintendent John Stuart. During the same year 300 trading guns and 15 fowling pieces were sent to Pensacola in the newly acquired colony of West Florida.

By August 1765, Stuart felt that he could economize in the gun line as regarded his native charges, and he wrote the Board of Trade:

Common trading guns are the most esteemed by, and the best calculated for all the Indians, so that Fuzees or fine arms may be entirely saved.

The Board of Trade appears to have disagreed with him, for the £1 and even higher priced guns continued to be sent over in small numbers.

If economies were theoretically possible with the trading guns, there was another category which was far more

Figure 13. A fowling piece by William (I) Wilson with silver furniture by Charles Freeth of Birmingham, hallmarked 1776, and top-quality silver-wire and cut and engraved sheet silver inlay. Courtesy Messrs. Phillips.

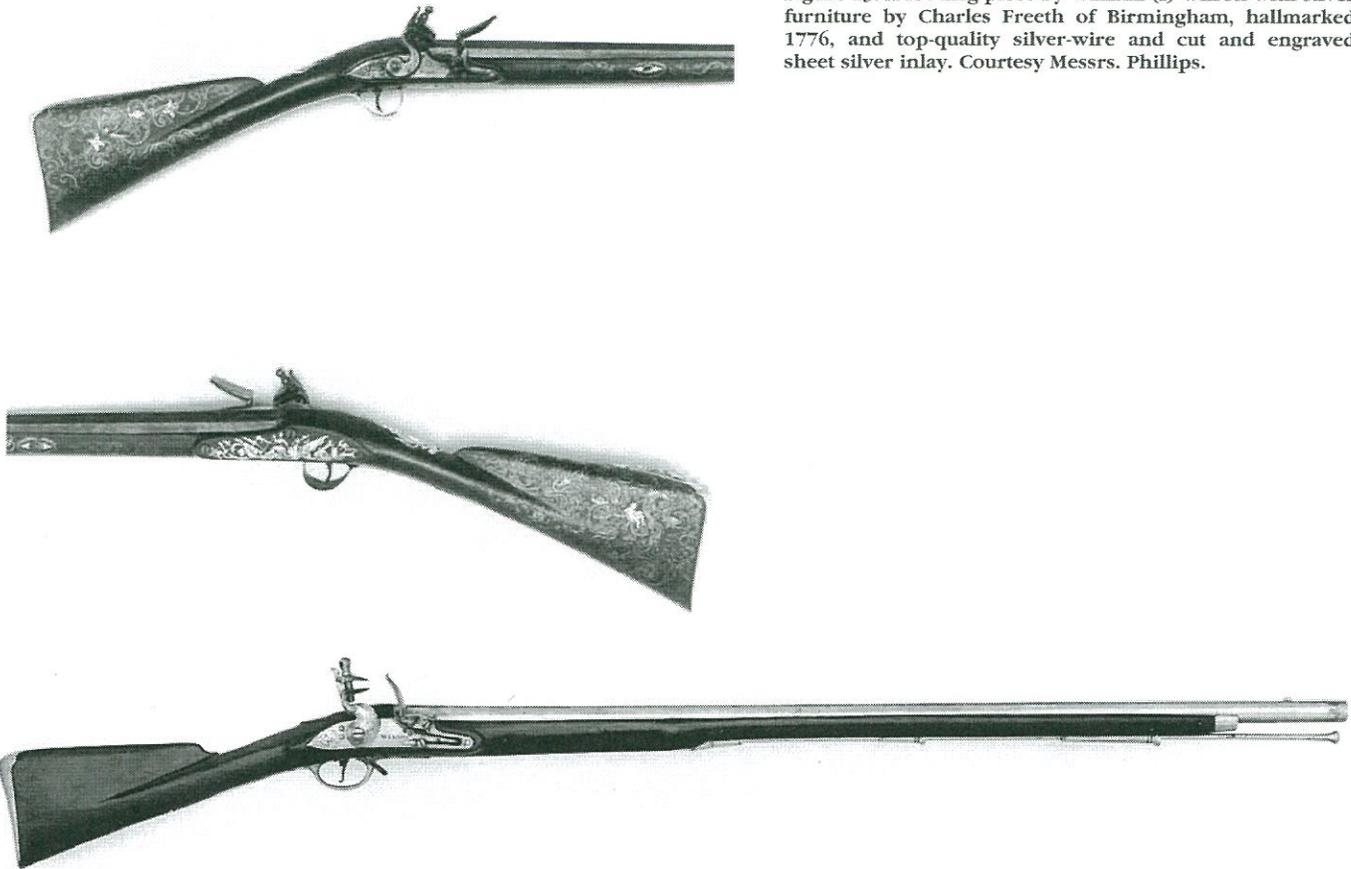


Figure 14. A Windus's Pattern East India Company musket by William (I) Wilson dated 1779. The breech markings are a typical set of correct Wilson markings for the hundred-year period of their operations, with some variations in the style of the London Gunmakers' Company proof and view marks. Courtesy of the Trustees, Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds.

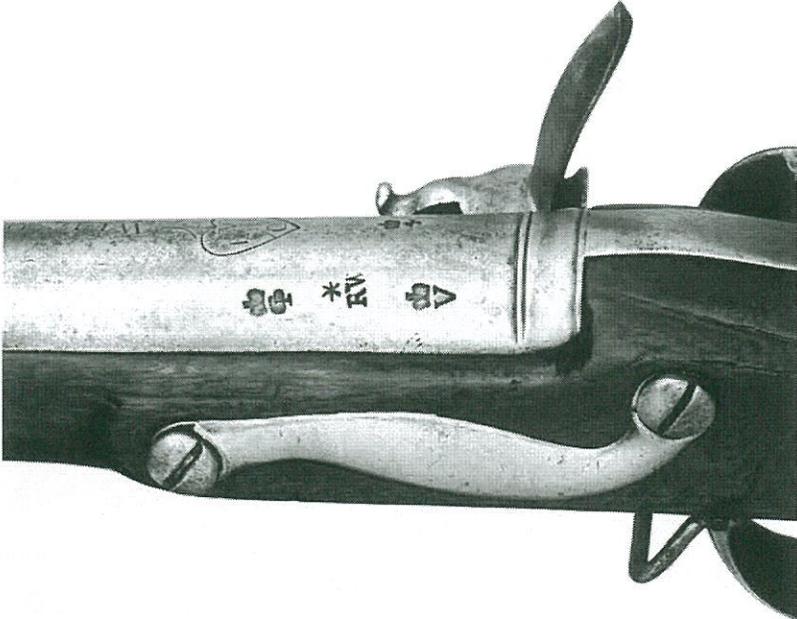


Figure 15. A close-up of breech markings.

expensive, and which gained in popularity among the Indians from the early 1750s. This was the rifle, commonly known as the 'riffling-barrel gun.' Comments on Indian possession and use of rifles occur as early as 1754, particularly among the Delaware and Shawnee west of Pennsylvania. By March 1757, the South Carolina Indian agent, Daniel Pepper, wrote his boss Governor Lyttleton,

I am highly pleased your Excellency has taken into consideration the use of Riffle Guns in this Nation (the Upper Creeks at Ockchoys).

I shall restrain the practice of vending them here in this Nation all in my power, till a method is fallen upon to prevent them.

However, it is not until the next war that there is clear evidence of Wilson supplying rifles for the Indian trade.

In addition to his valuable trade with North America, William Wilson was not idle in other areas of the gun trade. In 1775 and 1776, he applied for and received permission to export gunlocks (based on the early snaphaunce pattern), sword blades and muskets to Africa. During this period he also produced a variety of breech-loading guns and rifles, among them examples of the Lorenzoni system and the Ferguson rifle, as well as ball-reservoir air guns and rifles, and at least one duck's-foot pistol.

With the outbreak of the American War for Independence most of the larger pre-war Indian traders in the colonies remained loyal and some were put out of business by the local rebels. The focus shifted to Quebec, Montreal, St. Augustine, and Pensacola where goods could be sent to Government representatives and loyal merchants directly from London, often in the case of the Southern destinations, via New York. In the north, Guy Johnson and Sir John Butler, and in the South, John Stuart and his subagents, were responsible for the distribution of Government guns and other supplies to their respective Indian clients. While it is clear that William Wilson & Co. continued to supply all of the Government purchased Indian guns, it is only probable that Wilson was the sole supplier to the surviving private merchants who were effectively controlled by the imperial licensing structure.

Wilson's first wartime invoice for guns to the Board of Trade is dated 9 August 1775, and lists a total of 625 guns.

- 100 fowling pieces London proved barrels Walnut stocks, bridle locks and brass furniture @ 21/-
- 100 Indian fuzees London proved barrels of the Northwest kind also at 21/-
- 225 fowling pieces, London proved glazed bores barrels, walnut stocks, bridle locks and brass furniture @ 24/-
- 200 fine fowling pieces London proved blue barrels with silver sights, Walnut stocks, double-bridle locks, and wrought brass furniture @ 40/-

This is, incidentally, the second earliest occurrence of the descriptive term "Northwest kind" for barrels, and since there was no obvious alteration in the three-stage configuration of barrels the meaning remains unclear. Note that it is the only grade not described as a fowling piece. In the above list "bridle locks" refers to those having only a bridle over the tumbler, while "double-bridle locks" indicates a bridle over the tumbler and one supporting the frizzen. Note that three of the four types specify walnut stocks, and that only the most expensive "fine" grade includes wrought brass furniture as well as silver "spider" foresights.

The list of presents to be sent to the Southern District in May 1777 included guns priced at 21/- 24/- and 40/- each to a total of £ 2000.

Governor Patrick Tonyn of East Florida requested on 1 November 1776 only 4 chests (100) of trading guns.

John Stuart sent in at least two demands during 1778, one for a Choctaw Congress at Pensacola in November in which he ordered 1000 Common trading guns with painted stocks, and a second general list including 1200 guns.

There were sent to New York for West Florida, on the *Earl Bathurst*, 6 November 1778, 53 chests (1,325 guns) by Wilson, which were not forwarded from New York until April 1779, and received into Savannah Stores on 7 August 1779.

In October 1780 the Government sent to West Florida 2400 trading guns.

The Wilson invoice of March 1781 for that year's annual shipment is the largest and the most diverse made during the war. It consisted of:

- 4000 Indian fuzees with London proved barrels @ 21/-
- 100 fowling pieces with glazed bore barrels @ 24/-
- 45 fine fowling pieces, silver sights, and double bridle locks @ 40/-
- 156 Best Rifle Guns wood boxes, moulds and cases 52/6
- 108 Best Rifle Guns with brass boxes, moulds & cases 53/-
- 48 Best Rifle Guns wood boxes, moulds & cases @ 50/-
- 50 pair of plain brass mounted pistols @ 23/6
- 38 pair of Pistols with ribs for belts @ 25/-
- 12 pair of officers pistols handsomely mounted with best double bridle locks @ 63/-

138 gunlocks screwed, engraved, hardened & polished @ 2/9 making a total for 4,657 guns plus a good assortment of hangers, hunting swords, gunworms and flints, amounting to £5,798.12.6. shipped to North America on Government account in 1781. The several types of smoothbore guns are all familiar by their prices from earlier detailed invoices, but the rifles are newcomers, and this is the first reference in Wilson's Indian goods invoices to pistols. Of Wilson-made trade pistols, none have, to date, been positively identified as being directly connected with the American Indian trade,



Figure 16. A Lorenzoni-system breech-loading repeating rifle by William Wilson (I) ca. 1770. Private Collection.

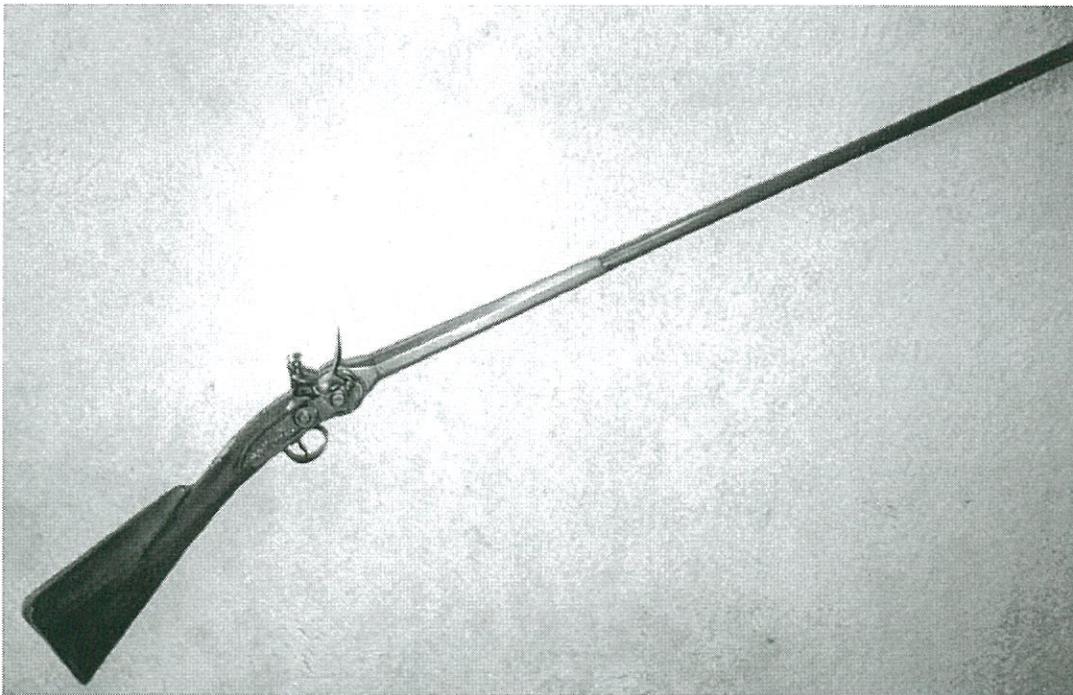


Figure17. The Lorenzoni-system rifle profile.

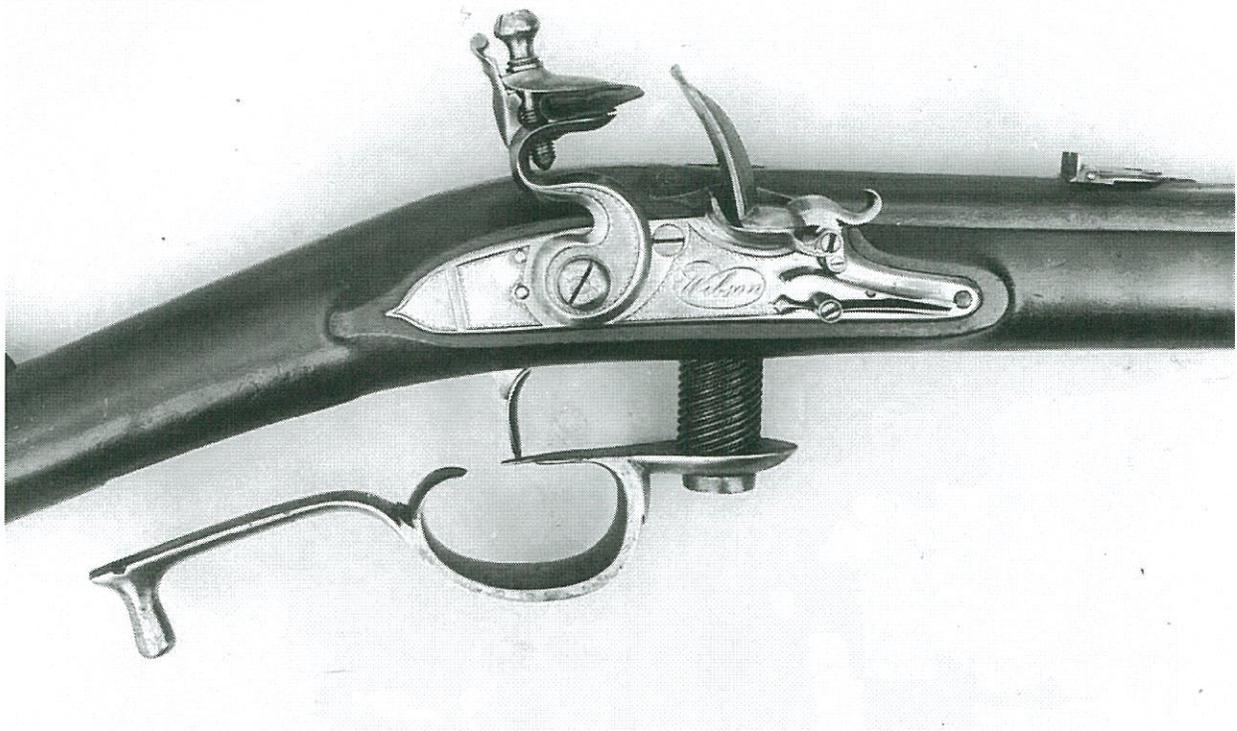


Figure 18. A Ferguson rifled carbine by William Wilson (I) ca. 1777. Courtesy of the late W. Keith Neal.

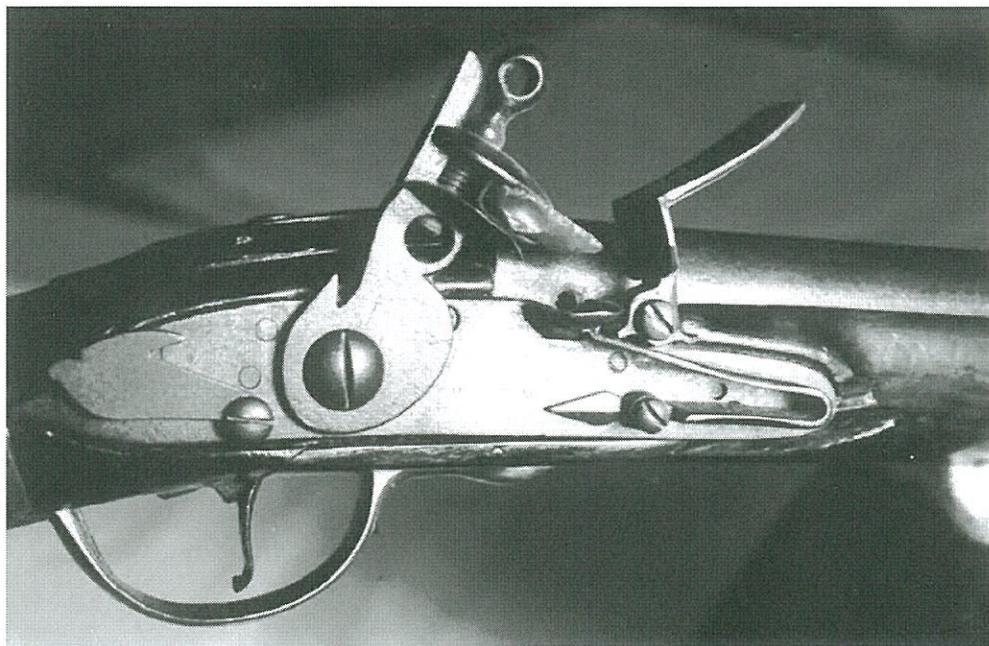


Figure 19. A Dog-lock musket of the pattern discontinued by the Board of Ordnance after 1715 remained a popular design for export arms into at least the 1740s. All the tools and jiggers existed, and they were cheap and strong. Courtesy The Valley Forge Historical Society.

but there is every reason to believe that his product did not differ from the typical trade pistol of the period.

In 1775, official British guestimates of Southern Indian warrior strength showed 3,500 Creeks & Seminoles, 3,100 Choctaws, 3,000 Cherokees, and 475 Chickasaws (10,075 total). Government accounts list a total of more than 43,800 Indian guns supplied during the war, as well as 1,700 rifles and some 1,600 pistols, giving a total of 47,200 arms supplied by Wilson for the Indians during this period.

After the close of the American War the old Indian trade structure fell apart and was taken into new hands. Pantou, Leslie & Co. established a near monopoly over much of the Southeastern Indian trade. Researchers of this company's history have not found any connection between it and the Wilson firm of gunmakers, although Wilson did continue to supply the British Government with Indian guns well into the 1790s and perhaps beyond. Most of these entered through Quebec. There was of course a great slump in military firearms production following the end of the American War, which did not revive until the war against France was renewed in 1793.

Richard's son William the elder led the Wilson firm from before his father's death in 1766 until two years before his own death in 1808. Apart from lesser officers in the Company hierarchy, he was elected Master of the Gunmakers' Company four times, in 1760, 1769, 1772 and 1774. He became a Liveryman of the Company in 1778. William's only recorded apprentice was Thomas Barnett, who was turned over to William by Thomas's father Robert in 1780, and was made free of the Company in 1786, continuing the Barnett line. The firm style of Wilson & Co. was retained until after the entry of his son William into the firm in 1787, not changing to Wilson & Son until 1794.

These changes in firm style are academic since no change was made in the way their products were marked. Barrels continued to be stamped with a six-pointed star over RW and locks to be engraved WILSON in either block letters or script depending on the grade and quality of the piece. On some better-grade examples an address of 'Minories London' or just 'London' was engraved on the top of the barrel.

Guns made by William (I) Wilson the elder or William (II) the younger are relatively scarce. Identifying them is not made easier by the retention throughout the three generations of the same lock and barrel markings. Identification has to be made on the basis of the general style of the gun, its furniture and decoration. They produced a wide variety of arms including duck's-foot pistols and Ferguson rifles. William Wilson the younger completed his apprenticeship to his father William and was made free of the Company in March 1787 and appears to have gone straight to work in the

family firm. He became a Liveryman of the Gunmakers' Company in 1789, and an Assistant the following year. He was subsequently elected Master in 1794, 1796, 1817, and finally in 1830. William took over full management of the firm on his father's retirement in 1806. The firm continued to be unpopular with the Board of Ordnance and despite the great need for arms during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793-1815) Wilson supplied only some 1500 "Davison's Pattern" (unidentified) commercial muskets in 1804 and 512 India Pattern muskets between October 1803 and August 1805. They held the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly until 1822 and retained an average of 4% of East India Company work until William the younger's death in December 1832 when their contract was taken over by William Parker. William (II) Wilson's will directed that the firm be sold and the proceeds invested in Parliamentary funds, bringing to an abrupt close a productive career of three generations and just over 100 years.

Looking at the 100 years of their production it is clear that while the three Wilsons could not be considered as innovators of new firearms technology or design, they did cover the entire spectrum of small arms production during their respective periods of operation. Much of their market was of a "traditional" nature, but they were happy to produce whatever the customer was willing to pay for, and the full variety of breech loading, revolving and repeating weapons (as these terms were understood at the time) were produced. They do not seem to have specialized in any one area, but judging by the surviving examples their output was generally aimed at the middle and export markets, rather than the top-end of the trade. The Wilson name was so sufficiently well established that it was used from at least the 1780s by Liège and French gunmakers in marketing a variety of weapons from "Fusils Bord Wilson" [ship's muskets] to garishly silver-mounted and wire inlaid pistols and blunderbusses for the Levantine trade, all of them very convincing copies of Wilson's own work.

It has long been my conviction, and I wonder whether, having read the above, the reader may tend towards agreeing with me, that the first two generations of Wilson's, gunmakers in the Minories, London, were the most important and broadly based of London gunmakers, and certainly the most important single supplier of military-style and Indian guns to all of Britain's North American colonies from the 1740s until the end of the war in 1783.

I trust my fellow members will forgive the lack of footnotes; work is still in progress for a book on the Wilsons, and since almost all the sources are primary and located in England, footnotes would only clutter the text and not provide ready access.

Revolutionary War Musket Cal. .70 Committee of Safety

Tag 159

Made: ca. 1775 S/N: None

An important example of a hurriedly produced Revolutionary War military musket used by Colonial forces. The barrel and some lock parts were taken from 1750-55 First model British "Brown Bess" muskets, and were probably "cannibalized" from damaged leftover muskets provided by the British government for use by Colonial Militia in the French and Indian War.

Restocked by a Patriot gunsmith in plain American maple, no metal butt plate was attached to the rifle - a reflection of the great shortage of parts available to American gunsmiths. The trigger guard bow is a typically crude Revolutionary War period "homemade" item. The wooden ramrod also reflects the shortage of metal gun parts. Proper British proofs on the salvaged barrel, plus "Wilson" (the maker) stamped on the lock plate, which is gunsmith made. Condition: Fine Plus.