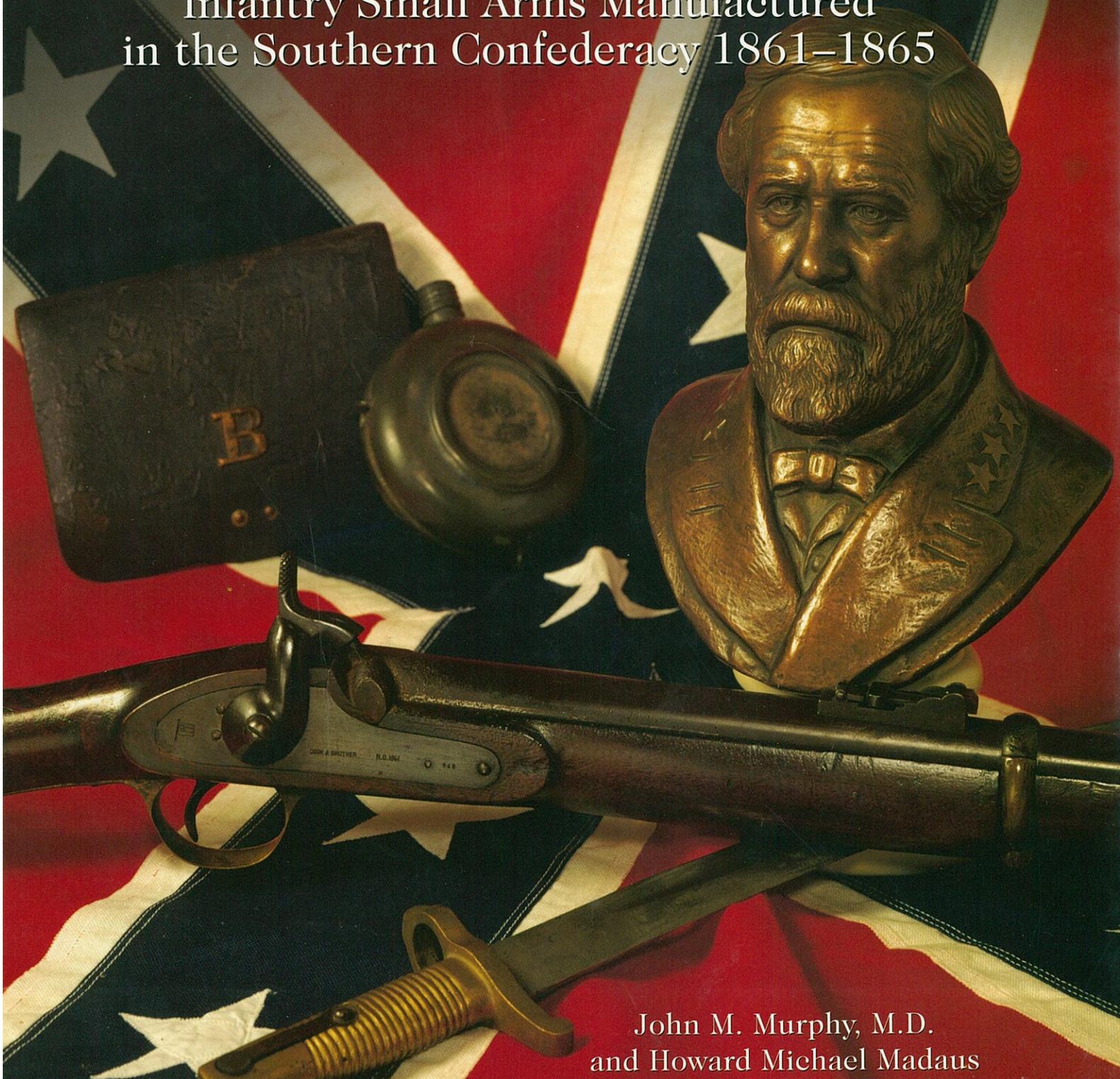


Confederate Rifles & Muskets

Infantry Small Arms Manufactured
in the Southern Confederacy 1861–1865



John M. Murphy, M.D.
and Howard Michael Madaus

XLIII.

John Overton (and other) Tennessee Contract Rifles

IN THE INTERVAL BETWEEN HER SECESSION ON 24 June 1861 and the formal transfer of her ordnance, quartermaster, and commissary supplies and equipment to the Confederate States of America on 16 September 1861, the State of Tennessee, through a "Military and Financial Board" comprised of Neill S. Brown, W.G. Harding, and James E. Bailey, entered into several agreements with state contractors to manufacture or alter arms for the state's defense.¹ While the state records prior to the September transfer seem to have been lost during the evacuation of Nashville in February of 1862, surviving Confederate records subsequent to the transfer yield a substantial amount of information regarding the delivery of a number of small arms from gunsmiths and makers in the Nashville area. Among these are references to deliveries of the "Harpers Ferry Rifle" by six individuals or partnerships. The six include: John Overton, Cauthorn & Company, Nix & Harlan(d), Michael Cody & Son, E.R. Waddy, and H.W. Sweeny.

Of these six suppliers, H.W. Sweeny seems to have delivered only an insignificant number—four rifles on 15 February 1862.² E.R. Waddy is recorded to have delivered ten on 6 January and ten on 24 January 1862, respectively. However, a receipt in his personnel file indicates that he also furnished another ten "Miss. Rifles" at \$20.00 each on 11 February 1862, for a minimum of thirty weapons.³ Michael Cody & Son delivered a minimum of forty-five rifles in December of 1861 and January of 1862, and based on serial numbers examined, probably more.⁴ Nix & Harlan (or Harland in some spellings) delivered twenty-three rifles on 23 December 1861, and another thirty-four

on 17 January 1862, for a total of fifty-seven.⁵ The true total, however, more likely was at least sixty-one, as "4 Mississ. rifles" purchased at \$20.00 each on 10 December 1861 from A. Fall are listed as "(per Harlan)".⁶ The deliveries by James L. Cauthorn & Company total a minimum of seventy-one rifles. Four of these, described as "Mississ. Rifles," were purchased on 10 December 1861 at \$20.00 each.⁷ Two other shipments, for thirty-one and thirty-six rifles respectively, similarly described and at the same \$20.00 each, were delivered on 1 January and 6 February 1862.⁸ The largest number of "Harpers Ferry Rifles" accounted for in 1862 were delivered by John Overton, who had been listed in the 1860 Census as an armorer at the U.S. Armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.⁹ Overton delivered a total of eighty-one rifles in four shipments (36 on 20 January 1862, 26 on 1 February 1862, 13 on 13 February 1862, and 6 on 26 February 1862).¹⁰

Except for the rifles made by Charles Chapman, none of the rifles delivered under the Tennessee "contracts" was marked with the name of its maker. The rifles, nevertheless, all seem to share several common characteristics. Most notable among the characteristics is the close resemblance of the rifles to the U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi" rifle, as manufactured at Harpers Ferry and by four northern contractors (Tryon, Whitney, Remington, and Robbins, Kendall & Lawrence and their successor, Robbins & Lawrence). While this rifle was widely copied by contractors to other Southern states as well, those made on contract with Tennessee are distinct in having the brass-lid implement and patchbox inletted into the right side of the buttstock, a feature generally eliminated in the rifles

produced elsewhere in the South. Despite the general lack of positive maker attributions on the Tennessee rifles, analysis of the serial numbers on surviving examples eliminates several of the "contractors" as makers of one of the characteristic types.

At least five rifles survive which share a common pattern, as well as other characteristics attributed to the Tennessee contractors. All generally conform to the design of the U.S. Model 1841 rifle and have overall lengths varying from $48\frac{9}{16}$ inches to 49 inches. The barrels measure between 33 inches and $33\frac{1}{8}$ inches in length and generally conform to the style of the U.S. Model 1841 rifle, though the bolster appears to project farther forward on the right side of the barrel (an illusion caused by the absence of the "fence" or flash guard on the rear of the bolster). The bores of the barrels vary considerably due to heavy wear, from caliber .56 to .61, and are now smooth. However, it is presumed that all originally were .54 caliber with seven-groove rifling, consistent in style with that of the U.S. Model 1841 rifle. On all examples, a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch-wide dovetailed slot for a bayonet lug was cut into the right side of the barrel $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the muzzle, but no examples are known with a lug actually affixed to the slot. At $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches from the breech on the top of the barrel, a $\frac{5}{16}$ inch-wide slot dovetails an open iron rear sight to the barrel. The barrels are unmarked on the exterior surface. However, their hidden undersides usually bear both the serial number (such as "50", "65" or "71") approximately one inch forward of the breech, and a Roman numeral (such as "XV", "VIII", "III", or "XI") anywhere from $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches to 17 inches forward of the breech, matching a corresponding Roman numeral cut into the stock channel anywhere from 3 inches to $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches forward of the breech tang inletting. The stock channel is inletted for a ramrod retaining spoon, but none of the surviving rifles is fitted with this device. Ramrods are iron with a slightly cupped brass tip, $\frac{7}{8}$ inch long at the nose and threaded for $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in the rear for cleaning implements.

In addition to the tang screw, the barrel of the rifle is joined to the stock by means of two brass bands. The upper band is double-strapped, with a lug for the forward sling swivel on its lower surface. It follows the general pattern of the U.S. Model 1841 rifle, but with the addition of a blade front sight soldered to and running the length of the rear strap of the front band (on three of the surviving examples this blade has broken away, leaving only the remnants of the solder mark). The rear band also conforms to the pattern used on the U.S. Model 1841 rifle, with projecting lip on the lower edge. Both bands are secured to the stock by means of iron band springs. The remainder of the brass furniture is also U.S. Model 1841 style. The

triggerguard is of two-piece construction, with the brass bow retaining the rear iron sling swivel by means of a rivet. The strap is of Model 1841 pattern and swells slightly near its tail. On at least one example (serial number "50"), the inner surface of the strap is crudely cut with the same Roman numeral that mates the stock to the barrel ("VIII"). The sideplate that prevents the lock bolts from compressing the left side of the stock if overtightened, is similarly of brass, and U.S. Model 1841 style. Likewise, the brass buttplate also is patterned after that on the U.S. Model 1841 rifle, including the cut on its side for the patchbox. This cut accommodates the Model 1841-style lid and support for the patchbox. The patch and implement recess was inletted into the right side of the buttstock by hand, and shows crude workmanship. No provision is made for a spare cone, as in the U.S. Model 1841 rifle. On two of the five surviving examples, a number is inscribed in pencil ("26" on serial number "50"; "71" on serial number "71") in the base of the cavity. This number in both cases agrees with a corresponding number inside the lock.

The lockplates of these rifles follow the pattern of the U.S. Model 1841 rifle, including the beveled edges. Their exteriors are unmarked, although one of the surviving examples has been speciously stamped with the initials of a North Carolina contractor, and a date. The interior face of three of the rifles, on the other hand, is marked with a pair of digits, such as "26" (serial number "50"), "00" (serial number "65"), and "17" (serial number "71"), in fairly large figures. This same set of figures repeats on the inner face of the hammer (the single example without interior lock digits bears the figure "21" on the inner face of its hammer; it is likely that the workman simply failed to stamp the corresponding number in the lock during assembly). In addition to the lock-to-hammer mating number, the inner face of the hammer of two of the rifles bears a smaller number ("3" on serial number "50", "6" on serial number "71") that also is found on the tumbler and bridle, all evidencing much hand-fitting of the final product. The spur of the hammer is not knurled, but has been left smooth.

Plates 1 through 4 illustrate a rifle, serial number "50", attributed to John Overton. The overall length is $48\frac{7}{8}$ inches and the barrel length is $33\frac{1}{8}$ inches. The caliber is .58 smoothbore, probably rifled originally, and now shot out. An iron fixed-and-notched rear sight is located $4\frac{5}{16}$ inches forward of the barrel breech. There is no front sight, but what may have been an iron blade sight brazed onto the top of the rear strap of the double-strap, brass front barrel band has been filed flat. A slot for a bayonet stud $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in width is located on the right side of the barrel $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches from the muzzle. There are no markings on the



Plate 1. John Overton rifle serial number "50"; right side. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)



Plate 2. Left side of the rifle shown in Plate 1. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)

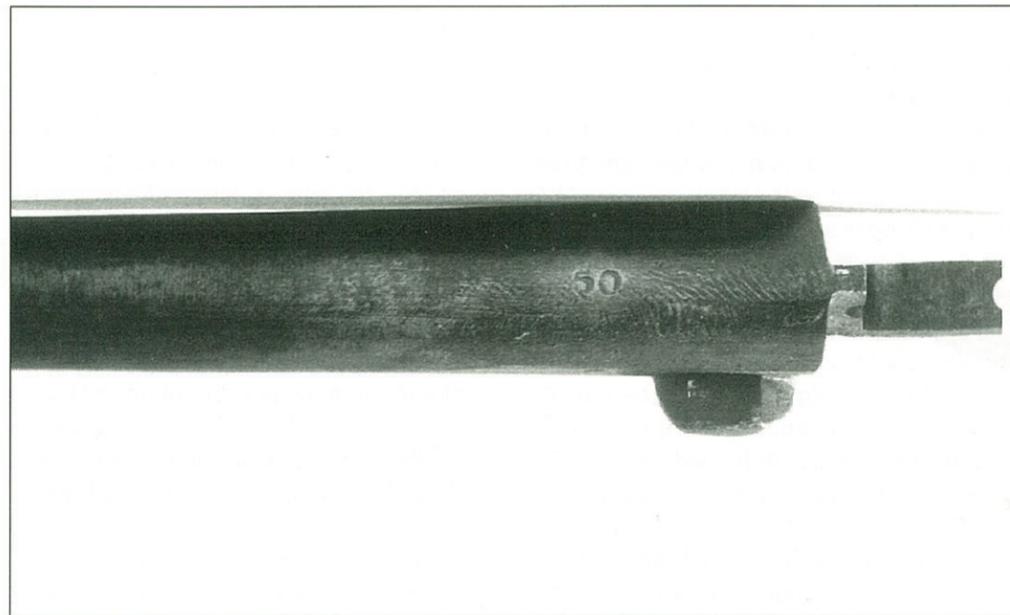


Plate 3. Close-up view of bottom of barrel breech of the rifle illustrated in Plate 1, showing serial number "50". (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)

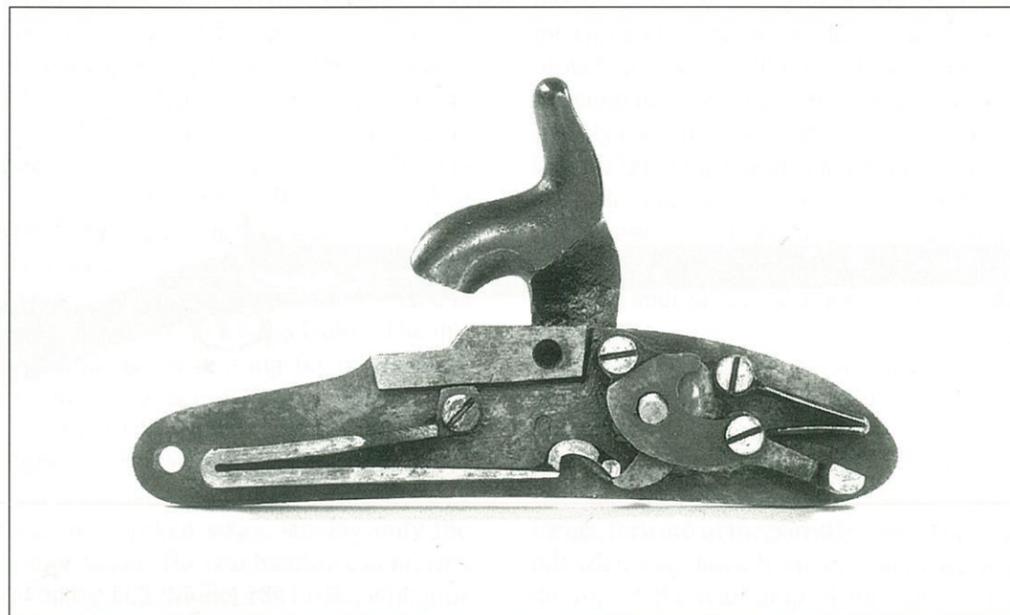


Plate 4. Close-up view of interior of lockplate of the rifle illustrated in Plate 1, showing large number "26" stamped on its inner surface. (Dr. John M. Murphy Collection)

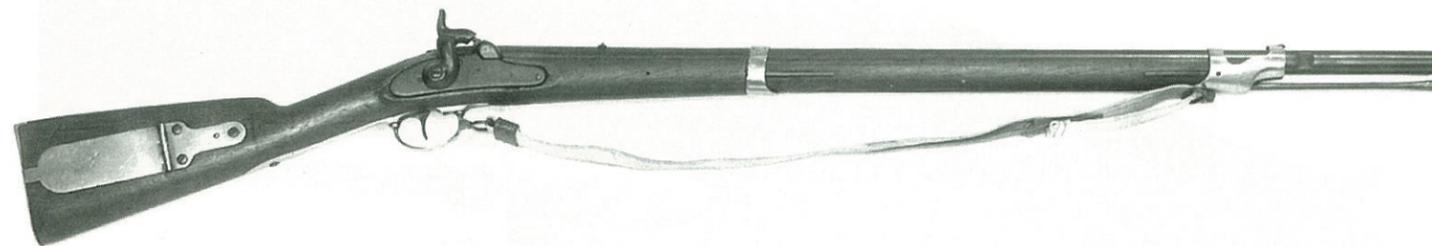


Plate 5. John Overton rifle serial number "65"; right side. (Courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum)

external top surface of the barrel. The under surface of the barrel near the breech is stamped with a fairly large "50". The same surface near its mid-section is cut or stamped with a large, crude "VIII". The lockplate is unmarked externally. The inner surface of the lockplate is stamped with a fairly large "26". There is no knurling on the thumb spur of the hammer; the inner surface of the hammer is stamped with a fairly large "26". A smaller "3" is stamped over the "6" of the "26". The furniture is of brass. The front barrel band is of the U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi" pattern; the flat, brass rear band has a forward-facing projection on its underside, also of the U.S. Model 1841 style. Both bands are spring-retained. The brass triggerguard is of one-piece construction. A large "VIII" is cut into the underside of the rear triggerguard tang. The small round sections of the triggerguard bow that project through the triggerguard plate are retained by iron pins which pass through the projections, a feature consistent in all specimens examined. Iron carrying swivels are attached to the front of the triggerguard bow, and beneath the front barrel band. The brass sideplate is of the U.S. Model 1841 pattern. There is a large brass patchbox

$7\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, inletted into the right side of the buttstock. A large "26" is penciled inside the patchbox cavity, in two places. The rear edge of the brass buttplate is straight. A large "VIII" is stamped or cut into the wood of the barrel channeling. The iron ramrod has a progressive swell tip, with shallow cupping.

Plates 5 through 7 illustrate a rifle, serial number "65", that is very similar in many respects to the rifle described above and also attributed to John Overton. The overall length is $48\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and the barrel length is 33 inches. The caliber is .58. A low iron, fixed-and-notched rear sight is located $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches forward of the barrel breech. The front sight is a crude, nail-like piece of iron mounted to the forward strap of the double-strap front barrel band. A slot for a bayonet stud $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in width is located on the right side of the barrel $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches from the muzzle. There are no markings on the external top surface of the barrel. The under surface of the barrel near the breech is stamped with a fairly large "65". The exterior of the lockplate is unmarked. The inner surface of the lockplate is stamped with two large "0"s adjacent to each other. There is no knurling on the thumb spur of the hammer; the inner sur-



Plate 6. Close-up view of lockplate area of the rifle shown in Plate 5. (Courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum)

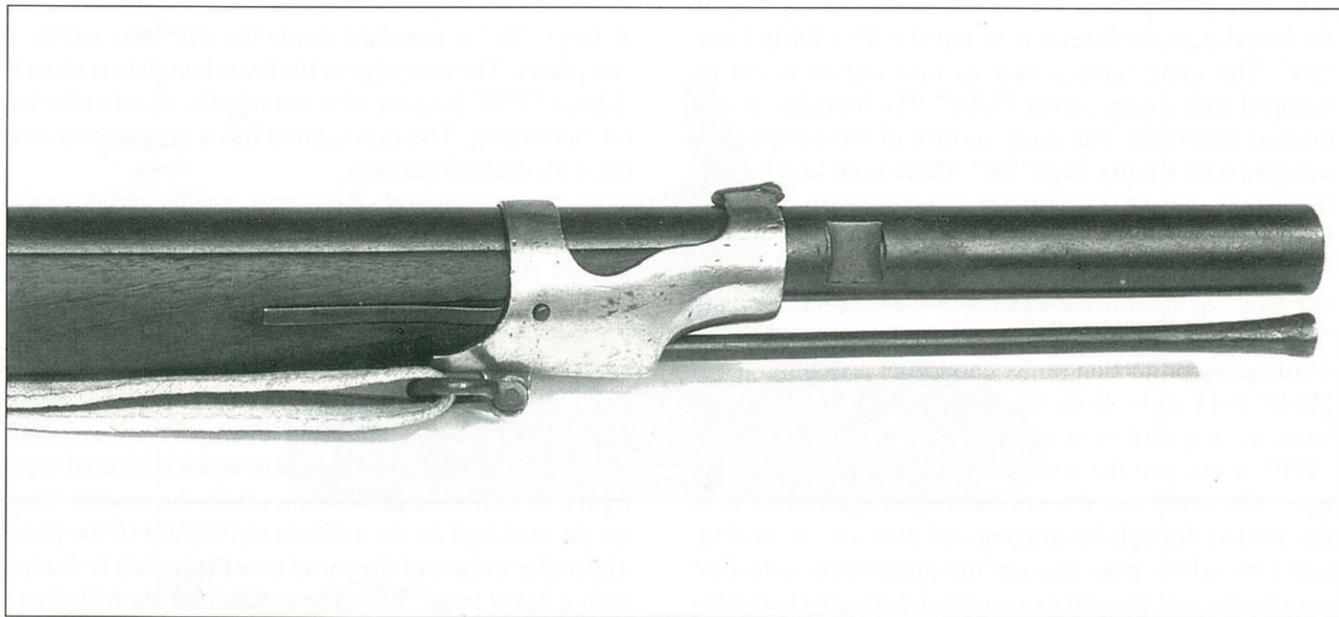


Plate 7. Close-up view of double-strap front barrel band with sight and sling swivel and bayonet lug slot in side of barrel, of the rifle shown in Plate 5. (Courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum)

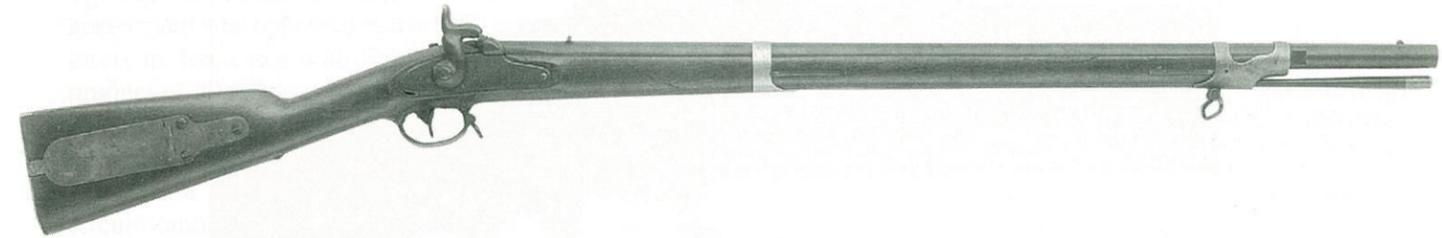


Plate 8. A newly-discovered "Tennessee" rifle attributed to the shop of John Overton; right side. (Courtesy Donald E. Bryan)

face of the hammer is stamped with an indistinct "65". The furniture is of brass. The flat, brass barrel bands are of the U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi" pattern, and are spring-retained. The brass triggerguard is of two-piece construction. Iron carrying swivels are attached to the front of the triggerguard bow, and beneath the front barrel band. The brass sideplate is of the U.S. Model 1841 pattern. There is a large, brass patchbox inletted into the right side of the walnut buttstock. The rear edge of the brass buttplate is straight. The iron ramrod has a swell tip.

Plates 8 through 10 illustrate another rifle attributed to the gun manufactory of John Overton, this example having been just recently discovered by collectors. The overall length is $48\frac{3}{4}$ inches and the barrel length is $33\frac{1}{8}$ inches. The caliber is .575, smoothbore. A small brass blade front sight is positioned atop the barrel $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch back from the muzzle. There is no evidence of a sight having been removed from the top of the rear strap of the double-strap front barrel band, despite that location having been noted on previously-described specimens. A low, fixed-and-notched rear sight is located $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches forward of the barrel breech. A slot for a bayonet lug $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in width

appears on the right side of the barrel, $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches back from the muzzle. All furniture is brass. Both barrel bands are retained by long, slender springs; the rear band projects forward on its underside. The triggerguard is of two-piece construction; its bow has two projections extending through the triggerguard plate that are secured by small iron pins which extend through the projections. There are no markings on the underside of the triggerguard tang. The lockplate is unmarked externally; the internal face of the lockplate is stamped with the number "24". The number "34" is stamped on the underside of the barrel $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch forward of the breech, and the same number "34" is penciled in the wood of the barrel channel. On this particular specimen there is a long flaw at the mid-section of the barrel. The brass sideplate is of the U.S. Model 1841 "Mississippi" pattern. There is a large brass patchbox with hinged lid $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length, inletted into the right side of the buttstock. The cavity for the patchbox has a circular depression $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter; just ahead of this depression some rather indistinct numbers are penciled in the wood, which may be "36" and "34", or perhaps "304." The rear face of the buttplate is straight. The ramrod has a



Plate 9. Close-up view of side opposite lock of the rifle illustrated in Plate 8, showing brass "Mississippi"-style sideplate and fixed rear sight. (Courtesy Donald E. Bryan)

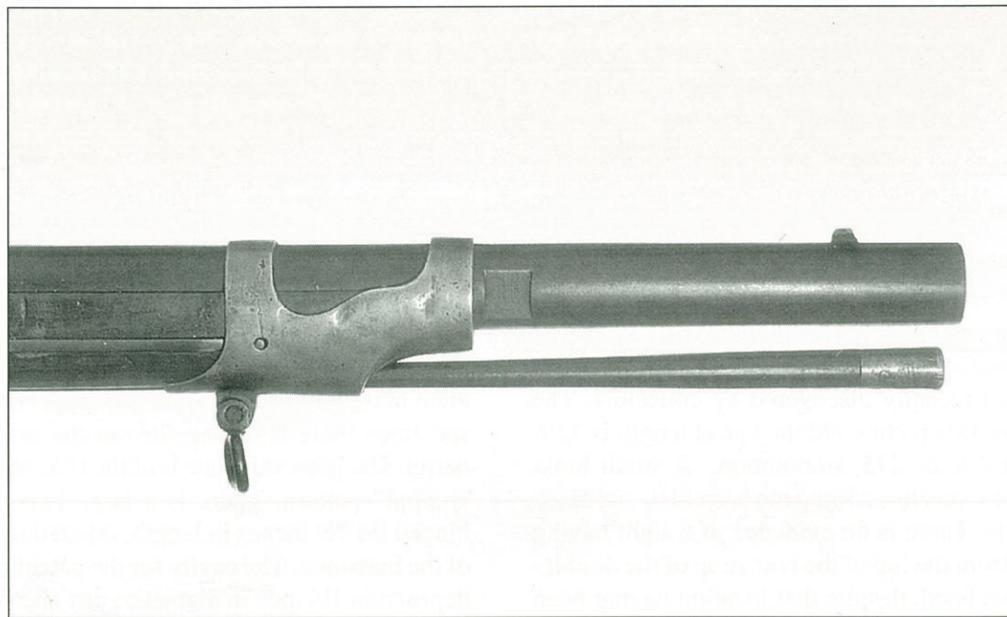


Plate 10. Close-up view of muzzle area of the rifle illustrated in Plate 8, showing milled bayonet lug slot on side of barrel, atypical front sight location, double-strap brass front barrel band with sling swivel underneath, and brass-tipped ramrod. (Courtesy Donald E. Bryan)

gradual swell tip with shallow cupping; the ¾ inch-long forward section of the rod is brass.

Plates 11 through 16 illustrate two additional rifles attributed to the arms manufactory of John Overton.

Given the serial numbers of surviving examples, only two of the Tennessee "contractors" would appear to have been the probable makers of these rifles: John Overton, who delivered a minimum of 81 rifles, and Cauthorn & Company, who delivered between 67 and 71 rifles. Although James L. Cauthorn was an established gunsmith listed as such in the 1860 census of Cannon County, Tennessee, and who appeared in the 1850 census of manufacturers in Tennessee with five employees and an annual product of 80 rifles valued at \$1,700.00, he seems a far-less-likely candidate for the manufacture of this rifle than former Harpers Ferry armorer John Overton. As a caveat, it should be noted that this determination of the maker is circumstantial, and based solely on delivery records that survive.

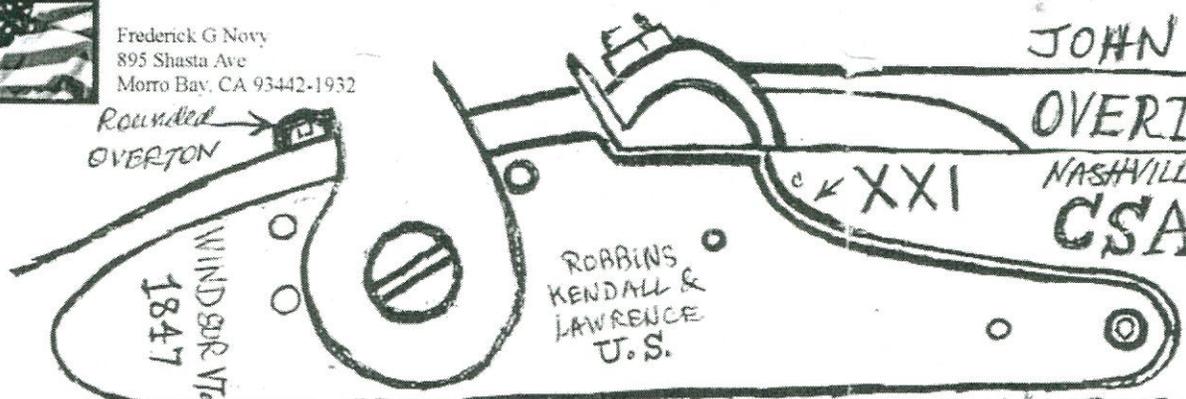
FOOTNOTES:

1. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series I, vol. 4, pp. 410-411; Kensey Johns, Assistant Quartermaster of Tennessee to L.P. Walker, Secretary of War, September 16, 1861, and series I, vol. 52, pt. 2, pp. 158-163; Report of the Military and Financial Board to the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, October 1, 1861.
2. Record of Ordnance & Ordnance Stores Received & Issued, Nashville & Atlanta, 1862, War Department Collection of Captured Confederate Records (record group no. 109), National Archives; chapter IV, vol. 104, p. 205, under headings class VI, "Harpers Ferry Rifle." The authors have not been able to identify Sweeny's pre-war occupation.
3. *Ibid.* See also Confederate Citizens & Business File (entry no. 80), War Department Collection of Captured Confederate Records (record group no. 109), National Archives; microcopy M346, roll 1059, voucher of 11 February 1862.
4. For a detailed analysis of the "Mississippi rifles" delivered by Michael Cody & Son, see chapter X.
5. Record of Ordnance & Ordnance Stores Received & Issued, Nashville & Atlanta, 1862; see footnote 1 for full citation.
6. List of Ordnance & Ordnance Stores purchased by Lieut. M.H. Wright, Commanding, Sept. 25, 1861, Records of Stores Purchased, Received, & Issued at Nashville & Atlanta Arsenals, 1861-1862, War Department Collection of Captured Confederate Records (record group no. 109), National Archives; chapter IV, vol. 19, p. 30. The authors have been unable to ascertain the pre-war occupation or initials of the principals in Nix & Harlan(d). It is suspected that the Harlan(d) of the partnership earlier had been associated with the firm of Harlan & Manson, who delivered 60 "Lebanon Rifles" and a total of 127 "Tenn. Rifles" all at \$16.00 each between 1 October and 1 November 1861; see pp. 2-3, 4, and 15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30. See also Confederate Citizens & Business File (entry no. 180), War Department Collection of Captured Confederate Records (record group no. 109), National Archives; microcopy 346, roll 154, voucher of 10 December 1861.
8. Record of Ordnance & Ordnance Stores Received & Issued, Nashville & Atlanta, 1862, p. 205; for full citation see footnote 1. See also Confederate Business & Personnel File, microcopy 246, roll 154; for full citation see footnote 7.
9. Whisker, James Biser, *Arms Makers of Virginia and West Virginia* (Lewiston, New York and Queenston, Ontario: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 144. Overton may have journeyed to Tennessee in accompaniment of the Morse machinery loaned by the Confederacy to Tennessee.
10. Record of Ordnance & Ordnance Stores Received & Issued, Nashville & Atlanta, 1862, p. 205; for full citation, see footnote 1.

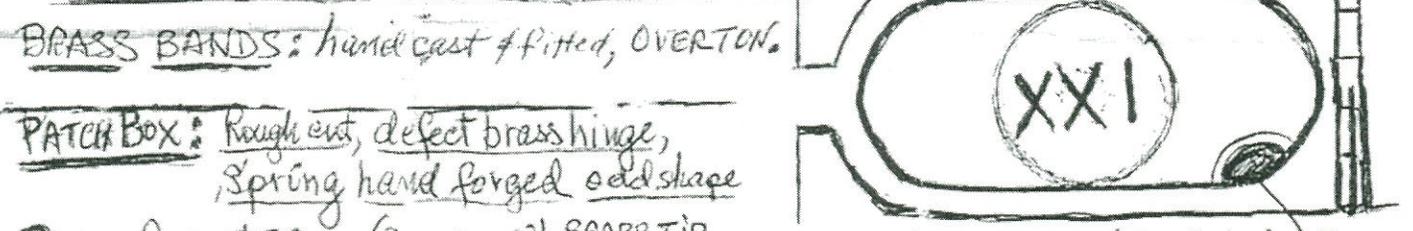
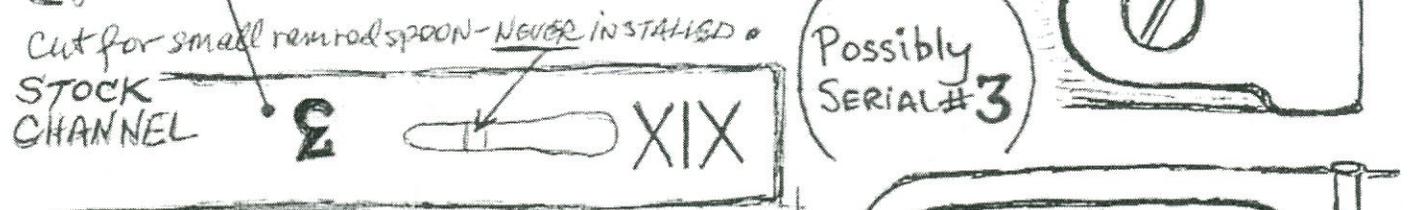
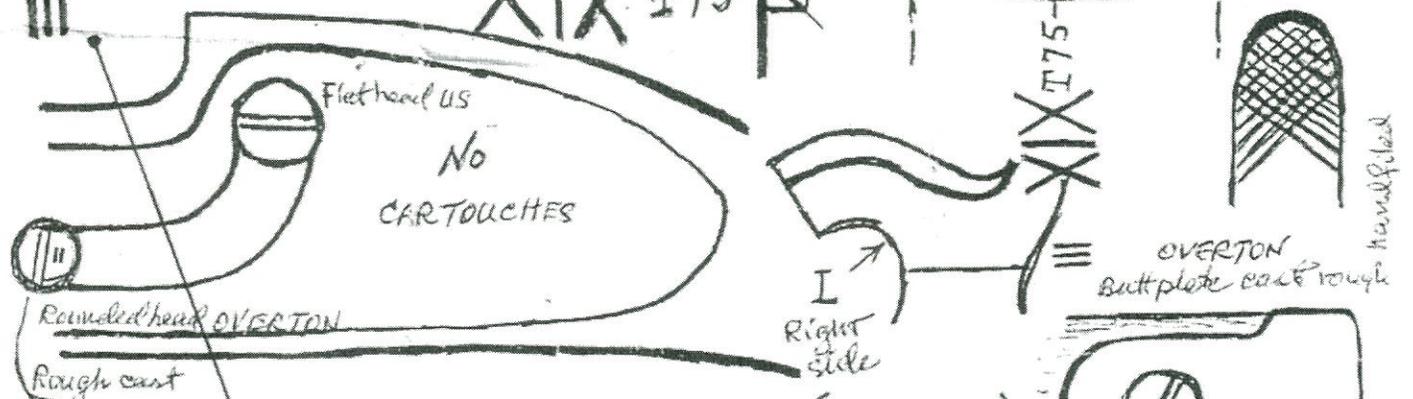
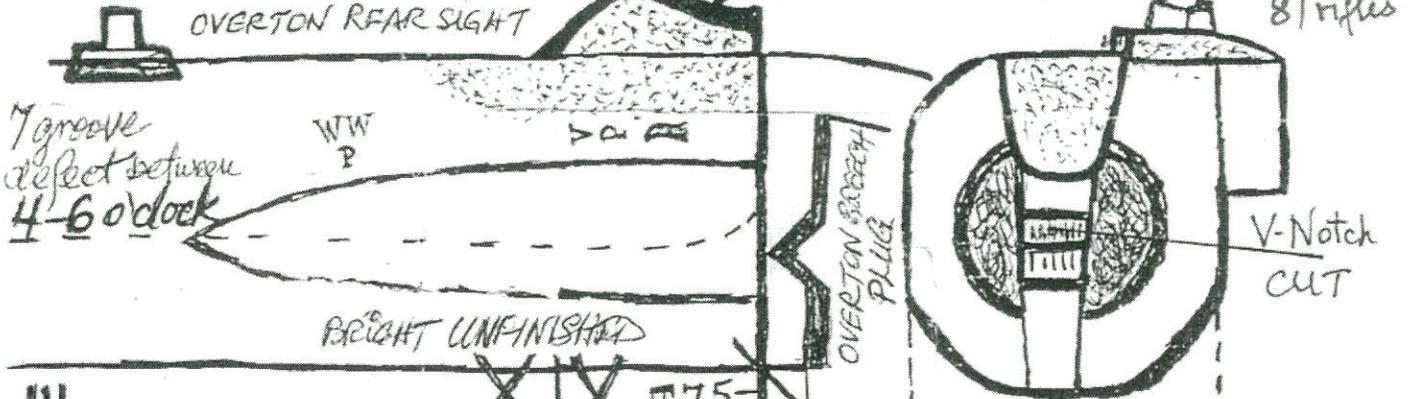


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JOHN
OVERTON
NASHVILLE 1861-
CSA 1862



CROWN UNFINISHED OVERTON REAR SIGHT STATE OF TENNESSEE CONTRACT 81 rifles



Rounded: CSA (? OVERTON?) BRASS TIP.
TRIGGER GUARD PINNED TO BASE.
TRIGGER PINNED TO BASE.
Spare cone/nipple hole? YES
PATCH BOX + Tg screws OVERTON
NASHVILLE 2 DEC 2005 10 OCT 22 2013

This M1841 style rifle is certainly one of the finest surviving State of Tennessee contract rifles, commonly known as "OVERTON". Documentary evidence indicates that only 292 of these rifles were delivered to the Confederacy before Nashville fell to the Federals in 1862. See chapter XLIII, John Overton (and others) Tennessee Contract Rifles in Murphy and Madaus Confederate Rifles & Muskets, 1996, pages 555-566.

These Tennessee Contract rifles were manufactured or assembled by six Nashville contractors between 1861 and 1862. John Overton's name is generally used to designate these unmarked rifles because he produced the greatest number (81) of these rifles. Before secession, John Overton worked as an armorer at the Federal Armory at Harpers Ferry, VA. With the outbreak of war, he left for Nashville taking Harpers Ferry parts, tools and machinery. These rifles were made in the style of the popular US M1841 "Mississippi" rifle and at first various US component parts were used in their manufacture.

This rifle (probably number 3) was manufactured using US barrel and lock.

The barrel was made at Harpers Ferry and bears V P and Eagle head proof marks as well as the inspectors marks WW/P. The rifling is standard .54 caliber, 7 groove with an odd cutting between 4-6 o'clock. The breech plug is uniquely Overton. The bottom of the barrel is marked with the Harpers Ferry mark T 75 and the Overton number III and the assembly mark XIX. The rear sight is Overton. The finish is bright.

The stock and all brass parts are Overton manufacture and resemble M1841 parts. However, careful examination shows these items to be also of uniquely Overton construction. The stock channel bears the marks 3 XIX while inside the patch box is the assembly marking XXI. As noted on page 556, the channel has been cut for a small ramrod spring however the spoon was never installed. The Overton trigger and the triggerguard are uniquely pinned to the brass baseplate.

The lock was made by Robbins Kendall & Lawrence 1847 and bears the Overton assembly mark XXI.

The number 3 in the stock channel and the III on the bottom of the barrel....may indicate rifle number 3, see page 556. It is likely that earlier rifles would have incorporated existing Federal parts on hand.

The ramrod resembles the M1841 and is of Confederate manufacture possibly of John Overton.