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Researching Early Maine Craftsmen: John H. Hall and the Gunsmith's Trade

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Maine State Museum

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century were the most cosmopolitan of all Maine workers. The shifting recruitment of native Maine, Canadian, and recently arrived European workers is a distinctive feature of the state's woods industry. Nineteenth-century newspapers often listed the names and destinations of local men going into the woods seasonally; these lists provide a glimpse of changing nineteenth-century, recruitment patterns. Business records — again, in abundance in Maine repositories — could tell us more about this. They could also put us in contact with the very obscure Maine sawmill worker and suggest the impact of changing technology and seasonality upon this important labor force.

Forest history, conservation history, and environmental history in Maine have exciting potential. They build upon a solid scholarly tradition and have a wealth of documentation at their disposal. The material is available, and the possibilities in a state with a longstanding commitment to forest research, conservation, and environmental protection, are limitless.

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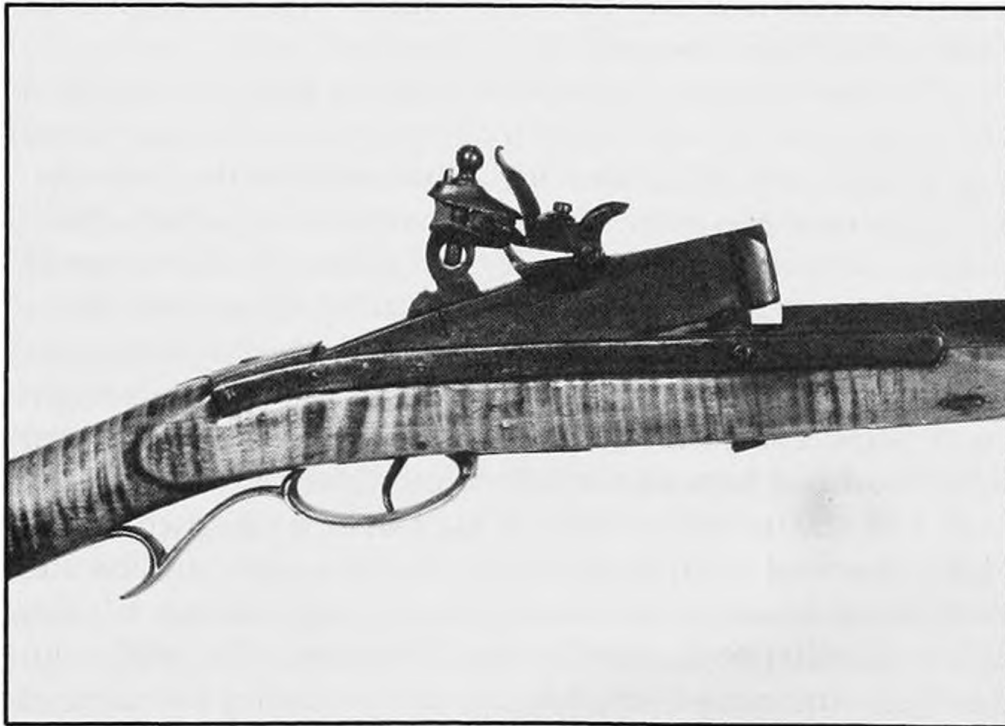
RON KLEY

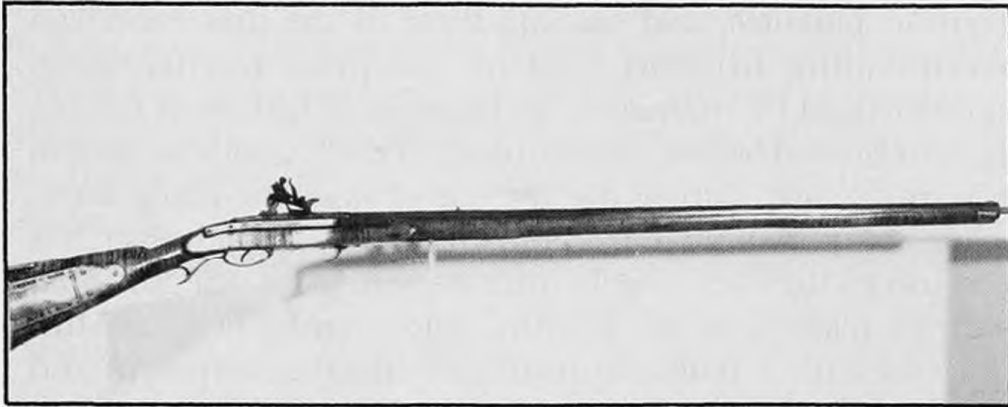
RESEARCHING EARLY MAINE CRAFTSMEN:
JOHN H. HALL AND THE GUNSMITH'S TRADE

John H. Hall is, paradoxically, one of the best known and one of the most enigmatic figures to emerge from the history of the District of Maine. Hall has long been recognized as the

inventor, patentee, and manufacturer of the first American breechloading firearms, and he has more recently been acknowledged by students of technological history as having played a pivotal role in the evolution of the “American System of Manufacture” (involving the use of machine-made interchangeable parts). What has been known of Hall, however, has been pieced together largely from documents in the National Archives relating to his lengthy (and eventually successful) efforts to sell his patent arms to the federal government and from records of the Rifle Works at the Harpers Ferry Armory, which Hall established in 1819 and superintended until 1840.

An early (ca. 1814) breechloading flintlock rifle invented, patented, manufactured, and sold by John H. Hall. The key feature of Hall’s rifles (and pistols) was a pivoting breechlock which tipped upward (as shown here) to permit loading of powder and ball at the rear of the barrel rather than from the muzzle as in more conventional arms of the period. The breechloading feature made it possible to reload Hall’s rifles much more rapidly (and more safely, in a military situation) than a typical “muzzle loader.” Maine State Museum by Greg Hart.





As a consequence, virtually nothing has been written about the more personal side of Hall's life, or about his early formative years in Maine.

Thus, when the Maine State Museum elected to include a re-creation of Hall's Maine-based gun-making establishment as a part of its major "Made in Maine" exhibition, it was initially assumed that the representation of this shop and of its proprietor would be based almost entirely upon conjecture. Nevertheless, a bit of research "postholing" was done just to be sure that significant informational sources had not escaped the notice of previous researchers.

The results were astounding! There was, it seemed, a whole universe of Hall-related sources and data that had somehow avoided historical scrutiny. The center of this informational universe was the personal account book of John H. Hall, found in Missouri and now incorporated into the collections of the Maine State Museum. The rich detail of the account book, integrated with data from other sources, including deeds, tax records, court records, and family correspondence, has brought a new picture of John Hall into focus — a picture of a man whose boyhood hopes for a university education were bitterly dashed by the untimely death of his Harvard-educated father; who completed an apprenticeship in the cooper's trade and established himself as a journeyman practitioner of this ancient handicraft on the Portland waterfront in 1802; who also built and rented small boats, maintained a commercial

“truck garden,” built a family home, and served as a member and officer of a local militia company on his way to his industrial/technological accomplishments.

In addition to offering new insights into the early life and work of John Hall, the account book provides much valuable detail regarding the commercial economy of Portland in the Federal period. Its pages define the business relationships between tradesmen, apprentices, hired help, entrepreneurs, and capitalists of the Portland area during the period from 1802 to 1818, including several who (like Hall himself) were among the founders or earliest members of Portland’s Charitable Mechanic Association. Also vividly etched in the pages of the account book is the devastating impact of the Embargo Act upon commerce-related trades and mercantile interests of this maritime-oriented seaport community.

The economic infrastructure of Federal Portland, as viewed through the “window” of the Hall account book, involved a great deal of interdependence among members of the local community; yet the city was by no means parochial or ingrown. On the contrary, there is evidence that Hall (and one may presume that the same was true of his Maine contemporaries) had a sophisticated awareness of markets and of sources of supplies and services on a regional, national, and international basis.

A full exploration of this aspect of Hall’s business dealings is beyond the scope of any brief research summary, but the following salient points might be cited:

- Hall is known to have drawn upon sources of raw materials and/or the services of specialized craftsmen not only within the Portland area but in Hebron, Maine; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Boston and Canton, Massachusetts; Albany, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and possibly Richmond, Virginia.
- Hall is known to have employed sales agents to assist with the marketing of his patent rifles in major cities, including Albany, Philadelphia, Alexandria, and possibly Richmond.

- Hall is known to have used cast steel in the manufacture of some of his rifles and to have sold the cast steel rifles at a substantial premium, reflecting the costliness of this material and/or the special difficulties involved in working it. (So far as is known, cast steel was not being produced in America at this time and would have had to be imported from Europe. The fact that Hall chose to use this material, and the fact that he found customers willing to pay a substantial price for it, bespeaks a sophisticated awareness of state-of-the-art technology in Federal Portland.)

In short, the evidence of the Hall account book indisputably refutes any notions of early nineteenth-century Portland as a quaint village economy. Local needs may have been largely met by local tradesmen and merchants (as indeed they are today), but this was a manifestation of logistical factors and financial considerations, and certainly not a reflection of a provincialism resulting from conscious avoidance or unconscious ignorance of a larger commercial universe.

Finally (and somewhat paradoxically, in view of the foregoing evidence of a sophisticated and specialized economic network), a detailed examination of John Hall's early life and work in Maine reveals an individual of rather diverse skills and interests — a personification of the "self-sufficient Yankee" stereotype, as characterized in generally ill-documented myths of pioneer life on the northeastern frontier. Hall emerges from the pages of his account book, and from other primary sources (including correspondence and tax records), as an individual who had not only mastered the cooper's trade and developed the specialized skills of a gunsmith, but who could function competently as a millwright and housewright, a boatbuilder, a retail merchant, a military leader, an effective participant in organizational governance and activities, a public official, and proprietor of a commercial produce garden. What seems most remarkable about all this is not the eclectic scope of Hall's interests and abilities, but the fact that this scope seems not to have been regarded as singular or even noteworthy by any of his Maine contemporaries. In his later years at Harpers Ferry, Hall

was recognized (with somewhat grudging admiration) as a versatile, ambitious, energetic, impatient and innovative individual — a quintessential “Yankee.” One southern observer noted in 1828 that it seemed essential (if perhaps regrettable) to rely upon such “Yankees” as the motivating force for progress amid the tradition-bound society and economy of the southern states.

Here at home, however, Hall’s “Yankee-ness” seems to have gone unnoticed amid the general tenor of the time and place. The drive, initiative, and adaptability which seemed extraordinary on the banks of the Shenandoah River were apparently accepted as the norm on the shores of Casco Bay — essential prerequisites for “making do” in Maine.

A more detailed analysis of John H. Hall’s early life and work in Maine (1781-1818) is developed in a manuscript based upon the Hall account book and other previously unpublished sources, which I am presently preparing for publication at the Maine State Museum. The manuscript, tentatively titled *Buckets to Breechloaders: John H. Hall in Maine*, is scheduled for publication in 1986.

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