Firearms Ownership & Manufacturing in Early America

V4.0

Contents

Disarming the American Past

Professor of History Michael A. Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* is a startling book that demolishes many long-cherished myths of early America about violence, guns, and the effectiveness of the militia. It is a novel work, in both senses of the word "novel": much of it is certainly "new," and much of it is highly imaginative fiction. Bellesiles argues that the militia was, throughout American history, an ineffective force; that guns were very scarce in America before about 1840; and that few Americans hunted.

The first of these claims—that the militia was quite ineffective—is really the least controversial (at least to historians). Many Americans have grown up with a vision of Minutemen, running out the door, Kentucky long rifle in hand to take on them "Redcoats." Historians have recognized for at least 40 years that for every success of the "citizen soldier" in defending home and nation, there were far more examples of militias turning tail in battle, or simply leaving for home, because harvest time had come.

Bellesiles argues that the notion that armed citizens would be a useful alternative to standing armies, or a restraint on tyranny, was a romantic delusion of the Framers of our Constitution. Bellesiles's goal in blackening the reputation of the militia is to demonstrate that the Second Amendment was a fantasy from the very beginning.

Bellesiles is correct that militias were never as well trained as standing armies, and seldom very effective in fighting against regular troops. Similarly, there was really no

realistic alternative to at least a small standing army, especially on the sparsely populated frontiers. But the ineffectiveness of the militia is really a sideshow in Bellesiles's book. The truly novel part is Bellesiles's claims that guns were scarce in America until nearly the Civil War.

Why were guns scarce? Because not only were guns expensive, but also because, "the majority of American men did not care about guns. They were indifferent to owning guns, and they had no apparent interest in learning how to use them."[1] Bellesiles claims that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor, and large numbers of adult men had no idea how to load a gun, or how to fire one.

To hear Bellesiles tell it, this lack of both interest and knowledge was because of the fundamentally peaceful nature of early America[2] and that hunting was very rare here until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans chose to ape their upper class British counterparts.[3] Indeed, Professor Bellesiles would have us believe that by the 1830s, a pacifist movement, fiercely hostile to not only gun ownership, but also a military, and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.[4]

When Bellesiles first presented these ideas in a *Journal of American History* article in 1996, I was starting research on a related question: why did eight slave states take the lead in the development of concealed weapon regulation in the period 1813-1840? Bellesiles's claim that guns had been rare in America until the Mexican War was certainly intriguing. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appear at a time that Bellesiles claims America was changing from a peaceful, gentle land almost unarmed nation into a land of violent gun owning hunters.

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[1] Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.

[2] Bellesiles, 314-15.

[3] Bellesiles, 320-23.

[4] Bellesiles, 300-1.

As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles was wrong–way wrong. The traditional view of early America, as a place where guns and hunting were common, appeared repeatedly in travel accounts, memoirs, and diaries. I at first assumed that Bellesiles was simply mistaken–that his choice of sources had been atypical, or that in his zeal to confirm a novel hypothesis, he had simply misread his sources. Unfortunately, novelty is, at times, of more value in the academic community than accuracy. Who wants to listen to a paper that confirms what is already conventional wisdom? The iconoclast is always more interesting!

Having now read Bellesiles's book-length treatment of his ideas, and checked his sources with great care, I am sorry to report that what is wrong here is a lot more serious than atypical sources, or even excessive zeal defending a mistaken hypothesis. Generally, the errors in *Arming America* can be divided into the following categories: out of context quotes; using sources that confirm his thesis, while ignoring sources that contradict his thesis; zealous disregard for other explanations; and intentional deception.

Concerning intentional deception, I am *not* suggesting that Bellesiles simply missed sources that might have contradicted his claims of an America with few guns and little hunting. Indeed, most of the examples that I cite of selective use of sources use Bellesiles's own citations–so I know that he read these documents. His use of the sources is so biased that one is hard pressed to take seriously any claim that he considered both sides of his argument.

Exaggerating the Failure of the Militia

Bellesiles devotes enormous energy into blackening the reputation of the militia, as distinguished from professional soldiers. Bellesiles quotes George Washington, concerning the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia:

> Colonel Washington reported on the militia to Governor Dinwiddie: "Many of them [are] unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision." In one company of more than seventy men, he reported, only twenty-five had any sort of firearms. Washington found such militia "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy."[1]

But when you examine what Washington *actually* wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has misquoted Washington. Bellesiles leads the reader to believe that Washington was complaining that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington was clearly referring to only *some* militia units:

> I think myself under the necessity of informing your Honor, of the odd behaviour of the few Militia that were marched hither from Fairfax, Culpeper, and Prince William counties. Many of them unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision. Those of Culpeper behaved particularly ill: Out of the hundred that were draughted, seventy-odd arrived here; of which only twenty-five were tolerably armed.

Washington considered the militia arriving inadequately armed to be "odd behaviour," and worth mentioning. This suggests that other militia units were adequately armed, and brought ammunition. Washington sought to have the unarmed militiamen punished, which suggests that their behavior--arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical.[2] And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a "few"

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[1] Bellesiles, 159.

[2] George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 2:78-

of Washington's militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Charles Stedman, a British officer who served under General Howe in America, was certainly positively impressed with the abilities of American militias, not only in their first great success, at Lexington and Concord, but repeatedly throughout the war. He describes a battle of December 8, 1775 in Norfolk, Virginia, in which American militia ambushed 120 British soldiers, killing or wounding 30 of the unit, including its captain.[3] Similarly, Stedman describes the great skill of a mixed force of Continentals and militia in defeating British and loyalist forces at Moore's Creek Bridge, North Carolina in June 1776.[4]

While the militia was seldom very effective against British regulars in set battles, Stedman's account makes it clear that guerrilla warfare was an area where the militiamen were quite effective. British soldiers retreating from Ridgefield, Connecticut April, 1777, were subject to a continual series of skirmishes of attacks by small militia units. This continual low level warfare exhausted the British soldiers, killing or wounding 200 soldiers and ten officers. "It may be reasonably doubted, whether the loss which the British sustained in this expedition, did not more than counterbalance the advantage derived from the complete attainment of their object."[5]

Why does Bellesiles put such an emphasis on the failure of the militia? Because one of the reasons why the Second Amendment protected an individual right to keep and bear arms was a mistrust of professional soldiers.[6] There was a belief among many of the Framers that the best security for a free society was a military that was one with the people. Patrick Henry, at the Virginia ratifying convention, argued that the new federal

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79, hereinafter *Writings of George Washington*.

[3] Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (London: J. Murray, 1794), 1:147-48.

[4] Stedman, 1:178-82.

[5] Stedman, 1:280-81.

[6] A more detailed examination of the various threads underlying the Second Amendment can be found in Clayton E. Cramer, *For the Defense of Themselves and the State: Thr Original Intent and Judicial Interpretation of the Right to Keep and Bear Arms* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1994).

government represented too great a centralization of power in the hands of the new chief executive:

> If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy is it for him to render himself absolute! The army is in his hands, and if be a man of address, it will be attached to him, and it will be the subject of long meditation with him to seize the first auspicious moment to accomplish his design; and, sir, will the American spirit solely relieve you when this happens?… [T]he President, in the field, at the head of his army, can prescribe the terms on which he shall reign master, so far that it will puzzle any American ever to get his neck from under the galling yoke.[7]

One of the defenders of the new Constitution, James Madison, also believed that the militia, composed of the entire body of citizens, represented an effective force for restraining tyrannical government:

> Let a regular army, fully equal to the resources of the country be formed; and let it be entirely at the devotion of the [Federal] Government; still it would not be going too far to say, that the State Governments with the people on their side would be able to repel the danger. The highest number to which, according to the best computation, a standing army can be carried in any country, does not exceed one hundredth part of the whole number of souls; or one twenty-fifth part of the number able to bear arms. This proportion would not yield in the United States an army of more than twenty-five or thirty thousand men. *To these would be opposed a militia amounting to near half a million of citizens with arms in their hands,* officered by men chosen from among themselves, fighting for their common liberties, and united and conducted by governments possessing their affections and confidence. It may well be doubted whether a militia thus circumstanced could ever be conquered by such a proportion of regular troops.[8] [emphasis added]

If, as Madison and Henry believed, the militia represented an effective military force, then the "armed citizens restrain tyranny" argument had considerable force. Whatever the merits of restrictive gun control today might be for crime control today, it would be foolish to discard the protections of the Second Amendment without developing some other method of keeping tyranny in check. Auschwitz, the Khmer Rouge, and the Gulag Archipelago all provide sobering reminders of what happens when governments operate without checks.

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[7] Jonathan Elliot, *The Debates of the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1888), 3:59-60.

[8] James Madison, "Federalist 46", in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 320-1.

If, as Bellesiles argues, the militia was never an effective military force, then the Second Amendment's "armed citizens restrain tyranny" argument loses much of its power. Bellesiles regards it as a romantic delusion of the Framers, and sad to say, the history of the militia did not work out anywhere near as well as it was envisioned. But neither was it quite the unrelenting, incompetent, drunken mob that Bellesiles portrays.

Gun Scarcity

By far the most amazing claim that Bellesiles makes is that guns were scarce in America, almost everywhere, until the 1840s, when modern manufacturing and marketing techniques finally made guns cheap and desired enough for them to become common. How does one measure the number of guns present in different periods of American history? Bellesiles makes much of probate records that he claims show a scarcity of guns.

Of course, deducing anything about gun density from probate records has some problems. How representative are probate records of what average Americans owned? Were probated estates unusual in terms of wealth, literacy, or urbanization? I make no pretense of having enough detailed knowledge to analyze Bellesiles's claims in this area, and he has not made publicly available the data from which he drew these conclusions.

Much of Bellesiles's argument for gun scarcity is derived from official records and readily available documents. Examination of these records demonstrates that he is, at best, reading these records and documents to fit his thesis without any evidence to back up his claim. In some cases, he is *clearly* misrepresenting his sources.

Colonial Gun Scarcity

Bellesiles emphasizes that from the very beginning, the English colonies in America had few firearms, and that the few firearms that they had were beyond the ability of the vast majority of the colonists to use competently. Bellesiles portrays the Plymouth Colony

as remarkably poorly armed: "[Myles Standish's] was one of only four snaphances held by the settlers, though there were also some battered old matchlocks."[1]

How many guns did the Pilgrims have? You might assume, from Bellesiles's description, that there were only four useful guns, and a few other, out of date weapons. Yet when a party of twenty went ashore at Cape Cod on November 11, 1620, every man carried a firearm.[2] The snaphance (or snaphaunce) was a new technology; but matchlocks were still considered an appropriate weapon, and were in use at Jamestown as well.[3] Describing them as "battered" and "old" creates a pejorative image to the reader.

Similarly, Bellesiles describes the first defensive use of guns by Plymouth Colony this way: "Arrows flew and the Pilgrims fired their four snaphances while the rest of the force lit their matches with a brand from the fire. They then let off a volley from these muskets and the Indians fled. No one was hurt, though the Nauset learned that the Europeans could make very loud noises."[4] The sarcastic description of making "very loud noises" is clearly intended to portray the Europeans as incompetent with guns—unable to even kill an Indian with a gun in a battle.

Yet in reading William Bradford's eyewitness account of the battle, it is clear that the failure of the Pilgrims to kill the Indians at whom they shot was not a sign of incompetence, but that the fight was fierce and unexpected, and poor tactical planning. While most of the attacking Indians retreated a short distance, one brave member of the band, perhaps their leader, stood behind a tree, "within half a musket shot of us," and fired arrows repeatedly at the Pilgrims. The Indian was thus far enough way, and making sufficiently good use of cover, that Myles Standish had little opportunity of hitting him.

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[1] Bellesiles, 59.

[2] [William Bradford], "A Relation, or Journal, of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation settled at Plymouth," in Edward Arber, ed., *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623 A.D.; as told by Themselves, their Friends, and their Enemies* (London: 1897), 432.

[3] M.L. Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 83-84.

[4] Bellesiles, 60.

Contrary to Bellesiles's description of the Indians being frightened off by the noise, Standish's last shot at the Indian behind the tree, after taking "full aim at him," "made the barke or splinters of the tree fly about his ears, after which he gave an extraordinary shrike, and away they wente all of them."[5] The lack of fatalities among the Indians was not because of poor accuracy, but good use of cover by its intended target. It also appears that Standish and company may have, by the time the incident came to an end, sought to scare the Indians away more than kill them:

> We followed them about a quarter of a mile; but we left six to keep our shallop; for we were careful of our business. Then we shouted all together, two several times; and shot off a couple of muskets, and so returned. This we did that they might see that were not afraid of them, nor discouraged.[6]

Bellesiles devotes considerable energy to telling us how incompetent with a gun even Myles Standish, the professional soldier of Plymouth Colony was, how incompetent the first settlers were in using guns for self-defense, and how short of firearms both Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colony were.[7] But how interesting it is that he neglects to mention in 1630, only ten years after his arrival at Plymouth, John Billington was convicted of murdering a newcomer named John Newcomen by shooting him with a blunderbuss.[8] A dispute over beaver trapping rights on the Kennebec River in 1634 led to the shooting death of Moses Talbot by a Captain Hocking, and in turn the shooting death of Hocking by Talbot's partner.[9]

One would think if the goal was to give a full and accurate picture of gun availability and use in America, he would include these two troubling incidents. Of course, such incidents might raise some questions about how scarce guns really were in Plymouth Colony and its environs. It would also raise some questions about Bellesiles's claim about the England from which the Pilgrims came: "Most personal violence in early modern

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[5] William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* Harvey Wish, ed. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 66.
[6] [Bradford], 433.
[7] Bellesiles, 60-61.
[8] George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers*. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1981), 308.
[9] Willison, 320-21.

England occurred not on lonely highways but at public festivals, often between competing teams of Morris dancers and such other representatives of communal pride."[10] This is so laughable as to hardly need refutation, but there is no shortage of scholarly study of the problems of personal violence in early modern England, especially along the border counties between England and Scotland.[11]

Gun Scarcity During the American Revolution

Bellesiles claims that there were very few guns in the American colonies at the outbreak of the American Revolution, partly because Americans had little interest or need for guns, and partly because there was effectively no manufacturing of guns in the United States. Of the guns that were here, Bellesiles claims that most had been supplied by the British government for military purposes: "Most of the guns in private and public hands came from the twenty thousand Brown Besses supplied by the British government during the Seven Years' War."[12]

A contemporary account—and not a friendly one to America—tells us that in the latter part of 1774, "the inhabitants of the middle and southern colonies began to arm themselves individually… But the business of arming and putting the country in a state of defence was now taken up by the provincial conventions…"[13] Perhaps Stedman refers only to swords, pitchforks, and pikes. But in conjunction with Stedman's remarks about the accuracy of American marksmen (see page 56), this seems implausible. Stedman seemed

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[10] Bellesiles, 36. See George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) for a discussion of violence in the border counties of northern England and southern Scotland during this time;

[11] David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 621-632; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 21-23; James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 3-13, 147-148, 157-168; R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 84-85, 96-97; Carlton Jackson, *A Social History of the Scotch-Irish* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1993), 82-83, 112-113.

[12] Bellesiles, 183.

[13] Stedman, 115.

to think that Americans were capable of arming themselves individually. This does not suggest a scarcity of guns in America.

Bellesiles claims that, immediately before the American Revolution, "Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people."[14] If "most of the guns" in America were from the 20,000 Brown Besses,[15] then there could not have been more than 40,000 guns in all of America–and more than half were in Massachusetts!

Bellesiles does not directly say that this included all privately owned firearms, but in conjunction with the rest of his discussion of the rarity of privately owned firearms, this is the clear implication.[16] Bellesiles's source for this claim is an inventory of "Warlike Stores in Massachusetts, 1774" contained in the *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*. But that inventory, dated April 14, 1775, does not tell us what categories of privately owned firearms were counted. Certainly, it includes stockpiles owned by towns.[17] But does it include all privately owned arms as well?

The sources that Bellesiles lists for this arms censuses are largely silent as to what categories of firearms were counted. None of the pages that Bellesiles lists tell us that all privately owned firearms were included in that inventory. The only information in Bellesiles's sources that describe this arms census is a minute of February 13, 1775 directing a committee to inquire "into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress."[18] This seems to say that only military weapons possessed by enrolled

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[14] Bellesiles, 181.

[15] Bellesiles, 183.

[16] Bellesiles, 181.

[17] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838) (hereinafter *MJEPC*), 756.

[18] *MJEPC*, 98.

militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted. There is nothing that indicates that all privately owned arms in Massachusetts were counted.

The evidence from Bellesiles's own sources suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the inventory recorded only a small part of all firearms in the province. An entry for October 27, 1774 directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be "properly and effectually armed and equipped" and that "if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law" the town was to arm them.[19] If guns were really in such short supply, as Bellesiles claims, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn't have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve? If guns were scarce, from whom were the local governments buying guns? The town of Lunenburg "assembled in legal town-meeting, and voted £100… for the purpose of purchasing fire-arms with bayonets, and other implements of war…."[20] Perhaps the provincial congress of Massachusetts, and the Lunenberg town meeting, did not know that guns were scarce.

Other pages in this same book that Bellesiles lists as a source show quite clearly that firearms were *not* scarce. A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775:

> Whereas, a few of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements;
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> *Resolved*, That the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this colony be, and hereby are, directed and empowered to examine into the state of the equipment of such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as are, or may be, enlisted into the service of this colony, and where any are deficient in arms or accoutrements, as aforesaid, it is recommended to the selectmen to supply them out of the town stock, and in case of a deficiency there, to apply to such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as, in their opinions, can best spare their arms or accoutrements, and to borrow or purchase the same for the use of said inhabitants so enlisted: and the selectmen are also directed to take a bill from such persons as shall sell their arms and accoutrements, in the name of this

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[19] *MJEPC*, 34.

[20] *Essex Gazette*, January 17, 1775, quoted in Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill*, 6th ed. (Boston: 1903), 43 n.1.

colony….[21]

Not "most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service" are without firearms; not "many"; not "some" but "a few"–and it isn't clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or "accoutrements" (for example, cartridge pouches). Perhaps the committee was deluded about how scarce guns were.

Harold L. Peterson's discussion of American-made guns points out that while every man was required to own a gun by the militia laws, there was little uniformity of weapons, other than the requirement that it be a flintlock, leading to an interesting characteristic of American militia weapons:

> The average colonist could not afford to own a selection of guns, and so he normally chose one which would serve him well in hunting and also pass inspection on muster days. Thus the distinction between military and sporting arms is almost lost. Some examples of each, of course, are quite obvious, but a great many fall in between and are known to collectors generally as "semi-military." These arms are usually sturdy pieces. Their caliber varies normally between .70 and .75. They do not have sling swivels, and since a man was allowed his choice between a sword and a bayonet, they usually do not have bayonet studs.[22]

Interestingly enough, one account of the Battle of Bunker Hill refers to "the few who had bayonets" as distinguished from the mass of the militia.[23] If, as Bellesiles claims, the militia were largely armed with military muskets supplied and owned by the British government, it is a little strange that only a few militiamen had bayonets. But if most militia were armed with privately owned "semi-military" muskets that lacked bayonet lugs, then this lack of bayonets at Bunker Hill is not a surprise.

As the Revolutionary War continued, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress again discusses the need to arm those soldiers "who are destitute of arms," but there is no indication that this was a problem of great concern.[24] If there were a serious shortage of firearms or ammunition for the militia, as Bellesiles claims, it seems strange that the

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[21] *MJEPC*, 209-10.

[22] Harold L. Peterson, *Arms and Armor in Colonial America: 1526-1783* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Co., 1956), 179; Whisker, 164, takes essentially the same position.

[23] Frothingham, 148.

[24] *MJEPC*, 332.

Provincial Congress on June 17, 1775 (almost two months after Redcoats fired on Minutemen at Lexington) recommended to non-militia members "living on the sea coasts, or within twenty miles of them, that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship."[25] Somehow, there was a shortage of guns and ammunition for the militiamen, but non-militia members still had enough arms and ammunition that they were encouraged to bring them to all public meetings.

Were guns rare in colonial Massachusetts, as Bellesiles claims? If so, you would expect the value of guns to be high, especially once the Revolutionary War started, and there was no way to import more guns from Europe. (Bellesiles claims that there were almost no guns made in the colonies.)[26] The Provincial Congress of Massachusetts bought weapons from many private owners in the first few months of the war, sometimes purchasing as many as 100 weapons in a single transaction. Interestingly enough, they appear not to have seized these weapons, but repeatedly appealed to the patriotism of private gun owners.[27] The *Journals* that Bellesiles uses had records of at least 483 guns, "fire-arms," and "small arms" purchased from private parties by the Provincial Congress.[28]

The average appraised value of these weapons comes to just under £2. Perhaps some of these weapons contained in transactions labeled "small arms" were actually pikes or swords; let's give the benefit of the doubt to Bellesiles, only look at transactions labeled "fire-arms" or "guns," and assume that *none* of the weapons in the transactions labeled "small arms" were guns. Even the "fire-arms" and "guns" transactions (total of 89 weapons) show an average price of £2, 5 *s.* 1 *d.*—not a trivial amount of money for the

[25] *MJEPC*, 348-49.
[26] Bellesiles, 188-91.
[27] *MJEPC*, 210, 336-37.
[28] *MJEPC*, 536-37, 584-93.

time, but about the same as a sergeant's monthly wages in the Massachusetts army.[29] If guns were scarce, it doesn't show up in their valuation.

If the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts were desperately short of arms for its soldiers, one would expect them to have used their power of eminent domain to obtain privately owned firearms. Instead, the private owners were told, "[I]t is strongly recommended to such inhabitants…, that they supply the colony with same."[30] A request of June 15, 1775 for individuals to sell their arms is also phrased in terms that seem quite voluntary. "*Resolved*, that any person or persons, who may have such to sell, shall receive so much for them, as the selectmen of the town or district in which or they may dwell, shall appraise such arms at…."[31] Perhaps there was some veiled threat contained in those seemingly voluntary requests, but it certainly doesn't seem like it.

Another piece of evidence about gun scarcity in Massachusetts is the stock of arms surrendered by the people of Boston to General Gage. In the days after Lexington and Concord, General Gage was understandably nervous about being attacked from the rear by armed Patriots. Many Bostonians were also deeply interested in leaving town, both because of the increasing poverty caused by the Boston Port Act of 1774, and the increasing likelihood that the Revolutionaries would attack Boston. General Gage consequently ordered the people of Boston to turn in their arms.

As an incentive, General Gage offered passes to leave Boston to all who turned in their weapons—and no weapons or ammunition were allowed to leave Boston. The arms were to be "marked with the names of the respective owners…that the arms aforesaid, at a suitable time, would be returned to the owners." The marking of the arms demonstrates that these were personally owned, not public arms. On April 27th, "the people delivered to the selectman 1778 fire-arms, 634 pistols, 973 bayonets, and 38 blunderbusses…."[32]

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[29] *MJEPC*, 413.
[30] *MJEPC*, 210.
[31] *MJEPC*, 336-37.
[32] Frothingham, 94-95.

(Bellesiles, however, simply leaves out the pistols and blunderbusses when he claims that Gage captured or expropriated "1,778 of these in the immediate aftermath of the Concord campaign."[33] He lists the pistols and blunderbusses in the endnote,[34] showing that he knows that there were a lot more firearms in Massachusetts than he is choosing to count.)

Here we find an interesting issue of definition that might explain *some* of Bellesiles's confusion. The term "fire-arm" was distinguished from "pistols" and "blunderbusses"—both of which would considered "firearms" in the modern sense. Similarly, an 1806 Congressional committee report used the phrase "fire arms and rifles,"[35] suggesting that "fire arm" may have been used in a narrower sense than "firearm" is used today. Was there a colloquial sense that a "fire arm" meant a military musket? (In the interests of clarity, "firearm," except when quoted, is always used in the modern sense of the word in this work.)

At first glance, this count of firearms (in the modern, more inclusive sense of the word) doesn't sound so impressive: 2,450, in a town that had, before the Boston Port Act, a population of 17,000 people or less.[36] If averaged over the entire population, this would mean that 14.4% of the population owned a gun. But this overlooks several important qualifiers.

First of all, many Bostonians had left town in the weeks before Lexington, as it became increasingly apparent that war was coming.[37] Ammunition, military stores, muskets, and even publicly owned cannon "were carried secretly out of Boston."[38] It seems unlikely that Patriot forces would have left large numbers of guns in Boston, where they would be most easily seized by British soldiers, and even less likely that Loyalists would have removed their guns to the countryside. The count of guns surrendered to General Gage must

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[33] Bellesiles, 181.
[34] Bellesiles, 505 n.29.
[35] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.
[36] Frothingham, 19.
[37] Frothingham, 54-55.
[38] Frothingham, 15.

therefore be regarded as only a part of the guns that had been in Boston before the crisis began.

Furthermore, General Gage's proclamation of June 19, 1775 complained that contrary to the claims of the selectmen of Boston that "all the inhabitants had delivered up their fire-arms" he had suspected, and now had proof, "that many had been perfidious in this respect, and had secreted great numbers."[39]

If Gage's claim was accurate—and not just an excuse by him to keep civilians from leaving Boston, the 2,450 firearms (in the modern sense of the word) surrendered on April 27th were probably not just a fraction of the privately owned weapons that had been in Boston before the Battle of Lexington; they were probably a fraction of the privately owned weapons that had been in Boston on April 27th, when Gage ordered the people of Boston to turn in their guns. How many guns were there in Boston on April 27, 1775? How many were there in Boston on April 27, 1774? To make any claim at all is just guessing; we can only say that 2,450 firearms is a bare minimum. It does seem like a good guess that if Gage was telling the truth, and was correct, he wasn't upset because just a few dozen guns were still in hiding. It also seems unlikely that only a few dozen privately owned guns left Boston before the Battle of Lexington.

Finally, it is important to look at an important set of demographic differences between Boston in 1775 and any American city today that makes a 14.4% gun ownership rate misleading. Families were larger, and the average lifespan was substantially shorter than today. At least some part of the population were slaves. The number of free adult males (those most likely to possess a gun for either hunting or militia duty) was a relatively smaller percentage of the population than today. A town of 17,000 people today would have about 5000 households, and perhaps 3000 male heads of household. Boston likely had less than 2500 households, and perhaps as little as 2000 to 2200 male heads of

[39] Frothingham, 208.

household. Using Madison's formula for guessing the number of those "able to bear arms" in *Federalist* 46 would suggest that no more than 4,250 Bostonians would have qualified as members of the militia. The surrender of 2,450 guns suddenly seems quite impressive—enough guns to arm more than half of the militia were surrendered to a British general by a population that would have been overwhelmingly suspicious of his actions.

We have other anecdotal evidence that suggests that guns were readily available, and that there were enough of them that people other than the enrolled militia were armed. The baggage train of the British soldiers marching towards Concord had only twelve men guarding it. On the road, "about a dozen of the elderly men of Menotomy, exempts [from militia duty] mostly, assembled near the center of the village and awaited the arrival of the baggage train…." They shot and killed two British soldiers, wounded several others, took the rest prisoner, captured the baggage train, and obliterated all marks of the struggle from the road. There is nothing that identifies how many of these non-militiamen had guns, but the implication is that many of them did, if not all.[40] It seems unlikely that twelve British soldiers could be rendered dead, wounded, or captured if only one or two of their attackers had guns.

There were other individual attacks by non-militiamen with guns on British soldiers. "Jason Russell, aged fifty-eight years" unsuccessfully defended his home from British soldiers on the Concord road with a gun.[41] "Samuel Whittemore, aged eighty years," upon seeing British soldiers marching towards Concord, prepared by oiling "his musket and pistols and sharpening his sword." When the soldiers returned,

> Whittemore had posted himself behind a stone wall, down Mystic Street about four hundred and fifty feet…. The distance seemed an easy range for him, and he opened fire, killing the soldier he aimed at. They must have discovered his hiding place from the smoke-puff, and hastened to close in on him. With one pistol he killed the second Briton, and with his other fatally wounded a third one. In the meantime, the ever vigilant flank guard were attracted to the contest, and a ball from one of their muskets struck his head and rendered

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[40] Frank Warren Coburn, *The Battle of April 19, 1775*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: n.p. 1922; reprinted Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 119-20.

[41] Coburn, 139-40.

> him unconscious. They rushed to the spot, and clubbed him with their muskets and pierced him with their bayonets until they felt sure he was dead…. Whittemore lived eighteen more years, dying in 1793 at the age of ninety-eight.[42]

As the retreat reached Somerville, "James Miller, about sixty-six years old, stood there awaiting the British. With him was a companion, and both fired with deadly effect, again and again, as the British marched by in the road below."[43]

It is certainly true that the plural of anecdote is not data; a collection of such examples does not give us much evidence of the number of the guns in private hands. But it does raise serious questions as to whether it is credible that guns were scarce, when so many examples of non-militiamen turning out to fire at retreating British soldiers have been preserved.

In addition, there were 3,763 militiamen who turned out along the road to Concord to fight against 1,800 British soldiers on April 19, 1775. Bellesiles claims that many of the Americans were not armed with guns, and many that were armed did not fire, making the British casualties of 273 not terribly impressive evidence of American marksmanship.[44]

How many of the 3,763 militiamen had guns? If Bellesiles is correct, and some large number of them were unarmed, then the British casualties become more impressive, and makes unpersuasive Bellesiles's claim:

> Expert marksmanship requires training, good equipment, and a regular supply of ammunition for practice. These farmers rarely practiced, generally had no ammunition, and owned old muskets, not rifles, if they owned a gun at all.[45]

If the militiamen were not well-armed, as Bellesiles claims, then the high British casualty rate shows considerable shooting or tactical skill. If, as seems more likely, nearly all of these militiamen showed up with guns, it suggests that the count of 21,549 guns in the entire province is unlikely, because it would mean that more than 15% of the guns of the province were close enough to the Concord road to reach it in a few hours.

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[42] Coburn, 141-42.

[43] Coburn, 151-52.

[44] Bellesiles, 174. Coburn, 159, uses 3,733 for his count of American militiamen, 1,800 for the British soldiers involved in the operation..

[45] Bellesiles, 174.

In his effort to denigrate the military value of the militias, Bellesiles has forced himself to choose between a well armed but unskilled militia, or highly skilled, but poorly armed militia. A poorly armed and poorly skilled militia would not have generated the terror among the British officers that they did (as will be discussed in the Marksmanship chapter, starting on page 49).

In Pennsylvania, guns were also not scarce. A minute of July 4, 1775 of the Committee of Safety directs the committee in charge of obtaining gunpowder and saltpeter to "procure at the same time two thousand Stand of good Fire Arms."[46] It is not clear whether this was new manufacture, or existing privately owned guns. It demonstrates that the Committee of Safety, unless it was partial to passing impossible resolutions, believed that there were private firearms out there that they would be able to purchase. Indeed, we have a few records indicating that the Committee of Safety, like the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, purchased firearms in the free market, along with contracting for new manufacture (discussed starting on page 86). While some of these purchases are for definite amounts, others are unspecific as to the number of firearms purchased, or the total price paid.[47]

An entity calling itself the Association of Inhabitants of Donegal, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania complained about those not prepared to join the patriot Association, "some for scruple of conscience, some for the loss of time and expenses, and others being disaffected at the cause…." They asked the Lancaster Committee of Observation, Inspection, and Correspondence that those who would not join be obligated to pay "for the finding of arms and other accessories to those who are willing to do it, who are not of ability to provide themselves with such." Significantly for the question of whether guns were available or not, "We request of you that it be allowed that all the landholders and

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[46] July 4, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1970) (hereinafter *CRPA*), 10:233.

[47] February 7, 1776, *CRPA* 10:478; February 9, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:481; April 9, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:537; April 10, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:537; July 30, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:471; August 23, 1776, *Ibid.*, 10:698.

farmers in the County of Lancaster be obliged to find at least one good gun each, and that every other person, who is judged by the Committee to be of ability, likewise find a good gun, whether they be joined in Association or not. This will put the county in a state of defence."[48] Even as late as July of 1776, there were enough firearms in private hands to make such a demand, and expect that it would be considered a plausible request.

New Hampshire also believed that there were firearms in private hands available for purchase. On January 23, 1776, the New Hampshire House of Representatives voted that "Deacon Nahum Baldwin receive out of the Treasury thirty-five Pounds, to purchase Fire-Arms for this Colony…."[49] The small quantity of money provided, especially since New Hampshire was prepared to pay three pounds each for newly manufactured muskets,[50] suggests several alternative explanations. One possibility is that New Hampshire required relatively few firearms to be purchased. Another possibility is that used firearms were very, very inexpensive—dramatically cheaper than in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Neither indicates a scarcity of guns.

Similarly, the New York Provincial Congress seems to have thought that firearms were available for purchase by private citizens. There were localized shortages of arms once troops had been armed and sent off to fight. Orange County sent a letter to the Provincial Congress on February 9, 1776, in which they indicated that they could raise more soldiers, "but think it will out of their power to arm any considerable part of the men they raise, on account of the quantity they furnished last year – none of which have been returned, and must therefore leave that matter with Congress…."[51]

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[48] July 12, 1776, "Lancaster Committee," *American Archives* 5th series, 1:221.

[49] Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting Of A Collection Of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates, And Letters And Other Notices Of Publick Affairs…* (1837-53; reprinted New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1972) (hereinafter *American Archives*), 4th series, 5:16.

[50] *American Archives* 4th series, 5:7-8.

[51] February 12, 1776, *Proceedings of the Provincial Congress*, in Berthold Fernow, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1887; reprinted New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1969) (hereinafter *NYPC*), 15:57; March 13, 1776, *NYPC* 15:83.

But the general picture, especially at the very beginning of the war, shows that guns were not scarce. On May 30, 1775, the New York Provincial Congress recommended "to the Inhabitants of this Colony in general, immediately to furnish themselves with necessary Arms & Ammunition…."[52] On August 22, 1775, it ordered "That every man between the ages of 16 and 50 do with all convenient speed furnish himself with a good Musket or firelock" and provided for a fine "of five shillings for the want of a musket or firelock…." Every man "shall at his place of abode be also provided with one pound of powder and three pounds of bullets of proper size to his musket or firelock."

Calvarymen were obligated to provide themselves with a horse, saddle, "a case of pistols… one pound of gunpowder and 3 lbs. Of sizeable bullets,… and a carabine….." Like the infantry, calvarymen were to "be provided… with 1 lb of pow[d]er and 3 lbs of bullets." While not explicit as to who would provide the gunpowder and bullets, it is clear that all men ages 16 to 50 were to provide themselves with either a long gun or pistols.

There were some men who were too poor to buy themselves "Arms, Am[m]unition, and Accoutrements" and these were to be purchased for them out of fines imposed on those who failed to report for militia duty.[53] Suffolk County reported on February 5, 1776, that there were "poor men in this County, who are good Soldiers and friends to the Cause… but have no guns – we should be glad to know if a number can be procured at the public Expense for such persons as are unable to purchase them."[54] A letter sent to the counties on February 18, 1776 seems to have dealt with this question: "It is expected that each man furnishes himself with a good Gun and Bayonet…but those who are not able to furnish these arms and accoutrements, will be supplied at the public expense…." The cost would be deducted out of each soldier's monthly pay "'till the whole are paid for, then they are to remain the property of the men."[55]

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[52] May 30, 1775, *NYPC* 15:5.
[53] August 22, 1775, *NYPC* 15:31-32.
[54] February 5, 1776, *NYPC* 15:54.
[55] February 18, 1776, *NYPC* 15:67.

A directive of March 21, 1776 to the commander of the 2nd Battalion indicated that there were at least some privates that "cannot be supplied with Arms immediately," and should therefore be put to work on fortifications. The use of the word "immediately" suggests that this was not a general problem of New York, but specific to a particular battalion's location.[56] Poverty might disarm a man, but if guns were generally in short supply, Suffolk County and the Provincial Congress were not aware of it.

A minute of April 18, 1776, reports that Colonel Ritzema requested that the government supply "Arms for some of the Men" of his regiment "who are destitute."[57] That Ritzema's request was carried out suggests that guns were readily available; only those who were "destitute" could not purchase a gun of their own.

Bellesiles argues that many laws were passed in the early martial enthusiasm that could not be carried out. Indeed, we find a few months later some revisions to the militia law reflecting the reality of the times—but these revisions seem not to be a problem of guns. The December 20, 1775 revision specified "that no man shall be fined for want of powder and ball, who shall produce a receipt from his Captain of his having deposited in his hand Six Shillings and Nine pence for the purchase of these articles." Demonstrating that bayonets were in short supply, "That it be earnestly recommended to every man in the Militia, to provide himself with a bayonet properly fitted to his musket or firelock."

There are, however, no changes to the requirements that every member of the militia provide himself with firearms. Indeed, as evidence that firearms were *not* in short supply, a new provision specifies, "That although persons above 50 years of age are not required to be enrolled in the Mlitia, yet is most earnestly recommended to them, that they be respectively provided with arms, accoutrements & ammunition, as though they were required to be enrolled."[58]

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[56] March 21, 1776, *NYPC* 15:89.
[57] April 18, 1776, *NYPC* 15:95.
[58] December 20, 1775, *NYPC* 15:42-43.

One would expect, if guns were in short supply in New York at the start of hostilities, that they would have all been snapped up as late as July 23, 1776. Yet on this date, the Provincial Congress directed the hiring of seventy-five soldiers to protect vessels and stores at Albany. They were to "furnish themselves each with a Gun or Musket…."[59] Similar orders appear on August 29, 1776 and July 17, 1777.[60]

The Provincial Congress also gave orders June 28, 1775, to its commissary, Peter T. Curtenius, to order up cloth for uniforms, "1000 Stand of Arms," 20,000 flints, 8000 pounds of lead, cartridge paper, tents, and other army gear.[61] But did they get the arms?

A letter sent to New York's delegates at the Continental Congress reported that they had successfully armed four regiments, though not all with military arms. "The first and second Regiments and some part of the other Regiments are armed with the best of muskets and bayonets and the others with firelocks of the widest bore, which could be found, repaired where it was necessary, and fitted…"

Clearly, there were many civilian firearms used to supplement the military muskets. Where did these firearms come from? "A great part of our arms have been procured by purchase; some have been hired—and from necessity, to compleat some Companies, a few arms have in some places been impressed."[62] (There seems some shame about impressing arms.)

Instructions for the raising of the four regiments also shows that the Continental Congress and the New York Provincial Congress believed that soldiers could buy their own guns, or bring their own from home. Instructions from the Continental Congress specified that New York should pay a "bounty of 6 2/3 dollars to every ablebodied effective man, properly cloathed for the service and having a good firelock with a bayonet and other

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[59] July 23, 1776, *NYPC* 15:118.

[60] August 29, 1776, *NYPC* 15:127; July 17, 1777, *Ibid.*, 15:157. July 18, 1777, *Ibid.*, 15:159, demonstrates by the ordering of delivery of gunpowder and lead that this frontier Ranger unit was successfully organized.

[61] June 28, 1775, *NYPC* 15:12-13.

[62] October 4, 1775, *NYPC* 15:38-39.

accoutrements, and 4 dollars to every soldier not having the like arms and accoutrements…."[63]

The Provincial Congress's instructions for the raising of regiments modified this somewhat, specifying that "each of the Private be allowed, instead of a bounty, a felt hat, a pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes, they to find their own arms."[64] It appears that the Provincial Congress considered that it was a fair trade to provide three articles of clothing for those who brought their own guns. This does not sound like a scarcity of guns in private hands.

There are clearly some periods when the supply of arms runs short. On February 22, 1776, the Provincial Congress refused a request to supply arms, blankets, and clothing to General Schuyler's forces because New York had "by no means a sufficiency for the equipment of those Troops, we are about to raise."[65] If we take this letter at face value, it would appear that New York's efforts to arm its own four regiments had exhausted the local supply of arms—but also of blankets and clothing, neither of which are generally considered scarce items in colonial America. Most likely, this was a temporary shortage, as evidenced by the subsequent successful efforts to locate firearms for New York's militia.

On May 4, 1776, orders were given to Dutchess and Ulster Counties to complete the arming of a Continental Army regiment with arms "collected by disarming disaffected persons in their respective Counties & districts…." Westchester County received similar orders concerning arms confiscated from "disaffected persons." That these arms were firearms is made explicit: "Gun Musket or Firelock." Arms confiscated from the disaffected in Suffolk County were used to arm New York troops of that county.[66]

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[63] January 24, 1776, *NYPC* 15:47-48.

[64] January 26, 1776, *NYPC* 15:49.

[65] February 22, 1776, *NYPC* 15:72. Also see General Schuyler's letter at *NYPC* 15:82, in which he complains about soldiers arriving "only half armed…; none of them had [moccasins] and great Number wanted Shoes, Mittens, Caps, Stockings &c." General Schuyler to General Washington, Mach 9, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:147-148, similarly complains about a shortage of arms and provisions for the Canada expedition.

[66] May 4, 1776, *NYPC* 15:99; May 21, 1776, *ibid.*, 15:103.

If this disarming was really carried out, it may not have been entirely effective, or there were arms seeping in from elsewhere. Less than two months later, there was again concern expressed about "sundry disaffected and dangerous persons in the Counties of Dutchess and Westchester, who do now greatly disturb the peace of the said Counties and will probably take up arms, whenever the Enemy shall make a Descent upon this Colony…."[67]

And yet in spite of disarming the disloyal, there were still more firearms out there in private hands—enough of them that a number of officers were directed

> in the respective Townships and Districts in which they respectively reside to proceed from House to House thro' their respective districts and purchase at the cheapest Rate they can be obtained for ready money all such good musketts and firelocks fit for the use of Soldiers, as can be spared by the Inhabitants of the Townships – That those Gentlemen respectively be requested not only to purchase arms as cheap as they can, but in no case to exceed the price of four pounds for any one Gun Muskett or Firelock…. And it is hereby recommended to the Inhabitants of the said Townships to sell such muskets or firelocks as they can spare retaining arms for their own use.[68]

The June 9, 1776 orders concerning the dispatch of detachments to Canada also gives evidence that there were enough firearms left in private hands that an order was given that each unit "be completely provided with Arms, Accoutrements & Ammunition." Each unit's "deficiencies in these particulars if any such there be" were to be made up from the other men in each battalion "either by purchase to be deducted out of the pay of the several person detached… or by Loan as the respective Owners shall chuse…." There were apparently enough militiamen who owned multiple firearms that those lacking guns were directed to either buy or borrow them from those who had more than one.[69] This does not sound like a severe shortage of guns.

As late as August 10, 1776, there were still some guns in private hands. Orders for mobilizing militia regiments direct the regimental commanders "to furnish all has have no arms by taking them from those who are not drafted and such other persons in the districts

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[67] June 20, 1776, *NYPC* 15:113. A report of September 4, 1776, *Ibid.*, 15:127-128, reports that West Chester, Orange, Dutchess, and Ulster Counties contained 3100 "Armed and well affected Militia," 2300 "disarmed and disaffected," and 2300 slaves.

[68] May 21, 1776, *NYPC* 13:103.

[69] June 9, 1776, *NYPC* 15:111.

as have arms…." The commanders were to assess the value of the arms taken from private parties for reimbursement in the event that the arms could not be restored to them later. Does "arms" here mean guns? Apparently so, because "each man who shall not have arms bring with a Shovel, Spade or Pick axe or a Scythe straightened and fixed on a Pole." The first three items would be useful for building fortifications; the straightened scythe is clearly a weapon.[70]

At various times, there are shortages of guns for particular regiments. But examining the particulars of these shortages suggests that problem may have been not a shortage of guns, but a shortage of the right type of guns, or guns in the needed places. A "Return of Arms, Accoutrements, Campa and Barrach Furniture" and accompanying report for the Earl of Stirling's New Jersey regiment shows that 99 firelocks were still required—but so were 234 bayonets, 685 tomahawks, 72 axes, 578 knapsacks, 218 hats, and 266 blankets.[71] Unless Professor Bellesiles wishes to claim that hats and blankets were also rarely owned by Americans, assuming that this shortage was because guns were scarce in America seems a highly arguable claim.

On March 14, 1776, Maryland's Council of Safety directed a Major Price "to purchase contract for the making of two hundred Rifles, with proper Powder-horns and Pouches." Apparently, he found a supplier, because three days later, the Council directed the Treasurer "pay to Major Price five hundred Pounds, currency, for Rifles." Perhaps these rifles were merely promised—but the same day that the Council ordered payment to Major Price, it also ordered delivery of 1500 flints, five thousand pounds of lead bullets, swords, cutlasses, "all the Arms belonging to the Province that are fit for service."[72] If he didn't actually find the rifles, was it just a coincidence that he was reimbursed for them on the same day that he was supplied with flints and bullets that would complement the rifles?

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[70] August 10, 1776, *NYPC* 15:123.
[71] March 3, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:134-36.
[72] March 14, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1544; March 17, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:1546.

The North Carolina Provincial Congress on September 10, 1775 issued a variety of orders, including a recommendation "to such of the inhabitants of this Province as many not be provided with Bayonets to their Guns, to procure the same as soon as possible, and be otherwise provided to turn out at a minute's warning." There is no suggestion that the people of North Carolina procure guns. It is possible that guns were simply not available, and so there was no point in making such a suggestion. But they were expected to turn out at a minute's warning for warfare. It is far more plausible that the population was armed with guns, but not bayonets—a military-only accessory. Significantly, the same set of resolutions that recommended procuring bayonets provided a long list of subsidies to encourage various forms of domestic manufacturing, including saltpeter, gunpowder, rolling and slitting mills for producing iron for making nails, pins, needles, steel, and paper—but not guns.[73]

Bellesiles makes much of George Washington's complaints about inadequately armed soldiers. While it is possible to quote Washington such that it appears that guns of all types were scarce, a more detailed review of Washington's writings on the subject presents a more complex picture. Washington complained to the Continental Congress on February 18, 1776, that the "Militia, contrary to an express requisition, are come, and coming in without ammunition; to supply them alone, with 24 Rounds, which is less by 3/5th than the Regulars are served with, will take between fifty and 60 Barrels of Powder…."[74]

If the militia was so poorly supplied with firearms, why was their arrival such an ammunition problem for Washington? Washington complained that they showed up without ammunition, and he had to provide it to them; clearly, many of the militia brought guns with them, or he wouldn't need to supply ammunition.

More evidence that guns were widely distributed in America comes from the Continental Congress, which ordered, "That all the Militia take proper care to acquire

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[73] September 10, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:209-10.

[74] George Washington to Continental Congress, February 18, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:337-38.

military skill, and be well prepared for defence by being each man provided with one pound of good gun powder, and four pounds of ball, fitted to his gun."[75] Perhaps they meant "to the gun issued to him by the government," but if, as Bellesiles claims, the majority of the guns in America were Brown Besses, [76] why make a point of ordering that the militiamen own bullets "fitted to his gun"? Brown Besses were a standard caliber. Why order militiamen to supply ammunition specific to their guns, unless large numbers of them were bringing their own guns, in non-standard calibers?

Baron von Steuben, attempting to drill Continentals at Valley Forge in 1778 complained about the lack of uniformity of the firearms the soldiers carried: "muskets, carbines, fowling pieces, and rifles were found in the same company."[77] This suggests that there was a shortage of muskets, but not necessarily a shortage of firearms. While large numbers of guns were being imported from Europe at this point, these were largely the French Charleville muskets—a different caliber from the Brown Bess, but hardly the multiple calibers and types about which von Steuben complained.

Bellesiles spends several pages telling us that guns were in extraordinarily short supply during the Revolution, with example after example of the inability of militias and Continentals to find usable firearms.[78] Indeed, one can find letters that can be quoted to show a general shortage of guns, such as Washington's letter of August 28, 1777 to John D. Thompson: "I wish it was in my power to furnish every man with a firelock that is willing to use one, but that is so far from being the Case that I have scarcely sufficient for the Continental Troops."[79]

But later in the same letter, it appears that Washington believed that there were some significant number of guns still at home that, while not well-suited to military use, were

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[75] *Journals Continental Congress*, July 18, 1775, 188.

[76] Bellesiles, 182.

[77] Brown, 306.

[78] Bellesiles, 184-88.

[79] George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41; see also George Washington to Philip J. Schuyler, February 9, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:123.

certainly functional: "It is to be wished, that every Man could bring a good Musket and Bayonet into the field, but in times like the present, we must make the best shift we can, and I wou'd therefore advise you to exhort every Man to bring the best he has. A good fowling Piece will do execution in the hands of a Marksman."[80]

General Charles Lee's April 5, 1775, letter to General Washington might be read as indicating a serious gun shortage among the Virginia regiments. At the same time, Lee seems to contradict himself, or at least indicate that if guns were in short supply among the soldiers, it was more of a distribution problem than an actual shortage of guns: "a most horrid deficiency of arms—no intrenching tools, no guns (although the Province is pretty well stocked) meet for service." Later sentences seem to imply that Lee is referring to artillery, however, not small arms.[81] Other letters also suggest that guns (though perhaps not military muskets) were available in the free market. A letter from Washington to Elisha Sheldon, directing him to raise a cavalry regiment, suggests what type of horses he should purchase, and how he should pay for them. In the same tone, Washington instructs Sheldon:

> Saddles, Bridles, Carbines, Broadswords, Pistols and every other Accoutrement necessary (agreeable to a pattern herewith given you,) you will procure as cheap as possible.[82]

There is nothing in the letter that indicates any of these items are going to be unusually difficult to obtain, nor any suggestion that Sheldon would have any more difficulty purchasing guns than saddles.

Washington in December, 1776 warned the Pennsylvania Safety Council:

> I have not a Musket to furnish the Militia who are without Arms; this demand upon me makes it necessary to remind you, that it will be needless for those to come down who have no Arms, except they will consent to work upon the Fortifications instead of taking their Tour of Military Duty; if they will do that, they may be most usefully employed. I would recommend to you to call in as many Men as can be got, for the express purpose of

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[80] George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41. Frothingham, 285, thus described Washington's army in early 1776: "A large number had brought into the field their own fire-arms."

[81] April 5, 1776, *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:792-3.

[82] George Washington to Elisha Sheldon, December 16, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:386-7.

> Working for we shall most undoubtedly have occasion for every Man who can procure or bear a Musket.[83]

Why would Washington request that they call in men "who can procure or bear a Musket" if he had none to issue? Washington obviously thought that there was some realistic chance of men showing up with a musket of their own.

Similarly, the Pennsylvania Assembly on March 29, 1776, debated a resolution implementing the Continental Congress's request that each government take steps "disarming disaffected persons." However, "many Fire-Arms may be taken which may not be fit for use" by either the Continental Army or Pennsylvania's troops. There were apparently enough of these non-military weapons that the Pennsylvania government believed that it needed to pass legislation describing what to do with them. The "disaffected persons" were to be paid only for the military arms; the others were to be stored "for the owners, to be delivered to them when the Congress shall direct." Later revisions of the resolution specified that the firearms to be involuntarily purchased from the disaffected were those "fit for the use of the Troops, or could be conveniently made so…." While the "disaffected" were to be disarmed against their will, "well-affected Non-Associators" (those who were neutral) "possessed of good Arms" were encouraged—but not required—to sell their weapons to the government.[84]

North Carolina likewise provided for confiscation of arms from the disaffected, specifying that they were to be returned to the owners at a later date. A committee of seventy men—two in each of thirty-five counties—was appointed to "purchase all Fire-Arms which are good and sufficient and fit for immediate use; and also such as may be repaired, and put in such order as to be made useful." It appears that these seventy men were to purchase not only arms confiscated from Tories, but also other arms that were available. Quakers, Moravians, and Dunkards, "who conscientiously scruple bearing arms,

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[83] George Washington to Pennsylvania Safety Council, December 22, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:422.

[84] March 29, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:693-4; April 6, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:713-14.

and as such have no occasion for Fire-Arms" were encouraged to sell their guns to the firearms purchasing commissioners. This was explicitly a voluntary transaction: "no compulsion be exercised to induce them to this duty."

Clearly, the North Carolina Provincial Congress was prepared to take extraordinary steps to arm its troops, but this is not necessarily evidence of a severe shortage of guns. The same resolution specified that once all regiments were armed, the surplus arms were to be delivered to the Commissary of Stores.[85] The severe and crippling shortages that Bellesiles tells us about don't seem to have been visible to the North Carolina legislators, who made provision for what to do with the leftovers.

Baltimore County disarmed "such persons as have refused to enroll as Militia." Reports listing the confiscated weapons show a total of thirteen guns.[86] This is not an enormous number of guns, indicating either that relatively few Tories remained in the area, or that relatively few were identified by refusing to enroll in the militia. Similarly, on July 8, 1776, the Maryland Council of Safety paid William Thomas £6 for two muskets.[87] The assessed value of the purchased and confiscated muskets, blunderbusses, fowling pieces, and fusees averaged £2 9*s*. 2 *d*.—the low price yet another indication that guns were not terribly scarce. Another purchase, on July 16, from James Tilghman, was for £300, "for the purchase of Fire-Arms…."[88]

Washington's letter of February 14, 1780 also suggests that there were some significant number of soldiers who brought their own guns with them into service:

> There does not appear to me any reason, upon which the soldiers are intitled to, or can claim the Continental fire arms at the expiration of their times of service. The act of Assembly is very plain. As an incouragement for men to bring their own arms into the army, it offers a certain bounty, and to such who do not, a lesser sum. The difference which is given to the former, appears to have been designed as a compensation for the use of the arms; nor can any construction whatsoever authorise the latter to carry off arms &c. the

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[85] April 19, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1329-30.
[86] March 8, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1509; March 22, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:1514.
[87] July 8, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1331.
[88] July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337.

property of the Continent.[89]

What is one to make of Washington's letter of April 29, 1778? He complains, as Bellesiles would have us believe, "I am as much at a loss as you can possibly be how to procure Arms for the Cavalry…" But the rest of the sentence tells the rest of the story: "there are 107 Carbines in Camp but no Swords or Pistols of any consequence. General Knox informs me, that the 1100 Carbines which came in to the Eastward and were said to be fit for Horsemen were only a lighter kind of Musket."[90]

Bellesiles tells us that Washington ordered his officers to start carrying half-pikes, and suggests that the motivation was partly to deal with the shortage of arms.[91] But as usual, a careful reading shows that what Washington ordered was not driven by a shortage of firearms, but the different needs that officers had for arms compared to the privates:

> As the proper arming of the officers would add considerable strength to the army, and the officers themselves derive great confidence from being armed in time of action, the General orders every one of them to provide himself with a half-pike or spear, as soon as possible; firearms when made use of with drawing their attention too much from the men; and to be without either, has a very aukward and unofficerlike appearance.[92]

There is nothing in Washington's statement that indicates that firearms weren't available for the officers; Washington's concern was that the time required to load and fire them was a distraction for officers from leading the soldiers.

A somewhat similar issue appears in Pennsylvania, where the use of the pike is suggested as a solution to the problem that "the Spirit of our People supplies more Men than we can furnish with Fire Arms, a deficiency which all the Industry of our ingenious Gunsmiths cannot suddenly supply…" But a little later in the same paragraph, we see evidence that it was not all firearms that were in sort supply, because "Each Pikeman to have a cutting Sword, and where it can be procured, a Pistol."[93] On March 12, 1776, the Pennsylvania Assembly gave recruiting officers instructions for "recruiting Riflemen" that

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[89] George Washington to Henry Jackson, February 14, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:9.
[90] George Washington to Stephen Moylan, April 29, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 11:322-3.
[91] Bellesiles, 187.
[92] George Washington, December 22, 1777, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 10:190.
[93] August 26, 1775, *CRPA* 10:322.

included, 'You are to take the utmost care… that you inlist no man who is not provided with a good rifle-gun, perfectly fit for service, and very expert in the use of it."[94] The Pennsylvania government was clearly short of rifles, but did not consider it would impossible to find men already armed with rifles "and very expert in the use of it."

Washington complained at various times that his forces had been well armed, but that various public arms had drifted away with the soldiers.[95] Unsurprisingly, he criticized, "The scandalous Loss, waste, and private appropriation of Public Arms, during the last Campaign is beyond all conception." He asked the state governments to ask for an accounting of the public arms that had been issued to various regiments, but also made another request that shows that Washington believed that there were large numbers of privately owned firearms in America: "I beg you will not only do this, but purchase all, fit for the field, that can be procured from private persons, of which there must be a vast Number in the Government."[96]

Similarly, Washington's letter to the Continental Congress War Board of March 8, 1780, concerning two regiments of dragoons that were to be outfitted seems to indicate that pistols were available for them: "There are pistols in the Magazine, but the Horsemens swords must be made, as there are none proper for the purpose on hand, that I know of."[97] It appears that pistols were available; this is not an indication that all types of firearms were scarce in America.

Bellesiles tells us "the frontier regions were worst hit by this scarcity of firearms."[98] There are certainly complaints from the frontier, such as the July 20, 1779 complaint of Colonel Archibald Lochry of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, who complained about

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[94] March 12, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:681.
[95] George Washington to the New York Legislature, March 1, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:215-16.
[96] George Washington to the Massachusetts Council, February 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:209.
[97] George Washington to the Board of War, March 8, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:86.
[98] Bellesiles, 185-86.

a shortage of arms, and "What few we still have are so out of repair that they are almost useless and it is out of my power to get them repaired this quarter."[99]

Yet instructions from the Continental Congress and letters from Washington suggest that they were unaware of such shortages. On June 16, 1778, the Continental Congress, discussed "the reward offered in March last to such drafts as should bring firelocks &c with them into the field" because the government owned too few "arms and accountrements." They therefore increased the reward offered to the two new regiments "to be raised in Virginia and Pennsylvania, to induce them to come armed and accoutred…."

If the soldier brought "a good serviceable rifle, with a powder horn, bullet pouch, and mould, eight dollars; for a good serviceable musket, with a bayonet and a powder horn, and bullet pouch, or a good cartouch box, six dollars; for a like musket and accoutrements, without a bayonet, five dollars; for a knapsack, two dollars; for a haversack, one dollar; for a blanket, eight dollars."[100] If guns were so seriously scarce on the frontier, why was a rifle with all the accessories worth only three times what a knapsack was—and the same as a blanket?

Another example is Washington's letter of July 28, 1781 to Thomas Parr, asking him to recruit riflemen from Pennsylvania: "I observe by the Recruiting instructions that the Men are to be paid for the use of their Rifles if they bring them into the field; this leaves the matter optional, and if a considerable part of them should come unarmed we shall be put to very great difficulties on that account, as we have but few Rifles belonging to the Continent."[101] If rifles were really so incredibly scarce, this would not be "optional."

A somewhat similar letter to Joseph Reed the previous month requests his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania. Washington expected these men to bring their own rifles:

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[99] Whisker, 169.

[100] June 16, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 611-12.

[101] George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.

> One of the terms should be that they are to find their own Rifles, as we have none in Store. I shall be glad to hear as soon as possible what probability there will be of succeeding in this undertaking. The greater part of the Men, must be with the Army by the 1st. of Augt. or their services will be useless afterwards.[102]

In a bit more than a month, Washington had a realistic hope that Reed would be able to raise perhaps 300 men with their own rifles—and have them with the Continental Army. If firearms were actually scarce on the frontier, someone seems to have not told Washington, who assumed that many could be persuaded to bring their rifles with them.

In the vicinity of Charlotte, North Carolina, British occupation forces found themselves confronting a difficult problem: armed and hostile civilians. "So inveterate was their rancour, that the messengers, with expresses for the commander in chief, were frequently murdered; and the inhabitants, instead of remaining quietly at home to receive payment for the produce of their plantations, made it a practice to way-lay the British foraging parties, fire their rifles from concealed places, and then fly into the woods."[103]

In 1780, North Carolina militia organized to resist British forces, consisting of "the wild and fierce inhabitants of Kentucky, and other settlements westward of the [Allegheny] Mountains," followers of a Colonel Williams, and other militia of the upcountry parts of North Carolina. "These men were all well mounted on horseback and armed with rifles…. When the different divisions of mountaineers reached Gilbert-town, they amounted to upwards of three thousand men."[104] If rifles were in short supply, from where did these 3,000 militiamen get their guns?

It was not only Patriots who were armed in America; so were Loyalists. Stedman describes how, after British troops took control of South Carolina in 1778: "A great majority of the inhabitants came in, and having taken the oath of allegiance, submitted themselves again to the authority of the mother-country. Rifle companies of dragoons were formed out of those who came in to renew their allegiance…."[105] Rifles were almost

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[102] George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:258.
[103] Stedman, 2:216.
[104] Stedman, 2:222.
[105] Stedman, 2:72.

certainly locally supplied. If rifles were in short supply, from where were these rifle companies armed?

The strength of the rifle was its accuracy; its slowness of fire made it a poor choice for large units. The Secretary of the Board of War, in requesting that a rifle company from Maryland be armed with muskets instead, complained that there was "a superabundance of riflemen in the Army." They wanted less rifles, and more muskets, "as they are more easily kept in order, can be fired oftener and have the advantage of Bayonetts." But even more interesting is that the Secretary of the Board of War put more emphasis on clothing this rifle company before they came to Philadelphia than arming them: "They might be armed and accoutred, but might lie here a very considerable time before cloathes and blankets could be furnished."[106] Rifles had their place, but muskets were preferred, not because Americans weren't good shots, but because muskets were a better choice for massed battles.[107]

This also explains why Americans were heavily armed—but not well-armed for combat as part of the Continental Army. The equivalent today would be if Americans were asked to show up for combat duty with their personal weapons.

Americans would show up with many small handguns, not very useful for anything but highly specialized missions. They would show up with lots of .22 rifles—really only useful for training. Shotguns would be useful for guard duty and perhaps trench warfare. Many hunters would show up with hunting rifles in a bewildering array of calibers. These hunting guns would be useful for specialized military functions, such as sniping, but their slow reloading and problems of ammunition resupply would make them difficult to integrate into a modern military. Two centuries later, one could read complaints about "not enough rifles" or "not enough military arms" and based on those complaints alone, conclude that

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[106] Richard Peters to the Council of Safety, October 26, 1776, William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1892), 12:404-5.

[107] Peterson, 200-3.

there were few guns in America today—and be just as wrong as Bellesiles is when he claims that there were few guns in America before the Revolution.

Gun Scarcity in the Early Republic?

Intentional deception is by far the most serious problem with *Arming America*. One can sympathize with the historian whose choice of sources is deficient, or whose sources are atypical of a period. One can even understand the historian who allows his biases concerning political controversies ancient or modern to influence how he reads the evidence. There comes a point, however, where the misreading of a source becomes so flagrant that it can only be called dishonest.

One category of sources that Bellesiles uses to prove that guns were in very short supply in the early Republic is arms censuses, which Bellesiles purports included not only publicly owned arms, but also privately owned arms. Bellesiles tells us that in 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted "a careful census of firearms in America, with the intention of demonstrating that the America militia owned sufficient firearms." After reporting that there were 235,831 guns, Bellesiles claims that, "Half of all these guns were in the hands of the federal government, with about one-quarter in state arsenals. The remainder were privately owned."[108]

But when you examine the sources that Bellesiles cites for this statement, there is nothing to support his claim that this census included all privately owned guns. The circular letter from Secretary of War Dearborn to the state and territorial governors is explicit, asking them to provide information "stating the military strength of each State, the actual situation of the arms, accoutrements, and ammunition of the several corps, with the same, and every other thing which may relate to their government, and the general advantage of good order and military discipline."[109] There is no division contained in the

[108] Bellesiles, 241.

[109] United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.

"Return of the Militia" tables that distinguish between those "in the hands of the federal government" and those in state arsenals. There is nothing in the militia return that indicates how many of the arms were privately owned. There is nothing that indicates how many arms there were in the United States, other than those in the hands of the militia.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that any arms "in the hands of the federal government" would be listed in a "Return of the Militia," based on the language of the circular letter. The similar 1810 and 1811 Returns of the Militia,[110] by contradistinction with the 1811 inventory of federal military stores,[111] strongly implies that a "Return of the Militia" included no federal arms at all. Nor is there anything in the 1803, 1810, or 1811 "Return of the Militia" supporting circular letters, or explanatory notes that identifies or even suggests how many of the arms so listed are privately owned.[112]

Had Bellesiles turned even three more pages, he would have found somewhat larger numbers of firearms in a "Return of the Militia" compiled less than two months later, after New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky sent in their returns.[113] This increases the number of firearms a bit, but does nothing to support Bellesiles's claim that these are comprehensive censuses of firearms in the United States, or that they list all privately owned firearms.

Another interesting point is that the firearms listed in these censuses are "pairs of pistols," muskets, and rifles. From the categories, it would seem that this census was only of military arms, and could not have included all privately owned arms, many of which would have been inappropriate for militia use.

So where does Bellesiles get these numbers from? A report in 1806 that Bellesiles cites as evidence of the scarcity of guns in private hands is quite explicit: After explaining that the laws of the United States required every "citizen enrolled in the militia" to "provide

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[110] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.
[111] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.
[112] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301.
[113] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:165, 168-72.

himself with a good musket or rifle," the report explains, "From the best estimates which the committee has been able to form, there is upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles in the hands of the militia, which have, a few instances excepted, been provided by, and are the property of, the individuals who hold them."[114] This is explicitly a statement that were *at least* 250,000 privately owned guns in the hands of the militia alone. The following paragraph, on the same page (where Bellesiles could not have missed it) gives a count of the number of guns in the federal magazines: 132,000.

Yet Bellesiles claims, based on this report, that "a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America."[115] To actually determine how many guns there were in America, the 120,000 fire arms and rifles "fit for use" and 12,000 "which need repairs" in the magazines of the United States would need to be added. The guns in the state magazines would have to be added—and the report is explicit that these were not counted. If there were a count of guns in the hands of non-militia members (which there is not in this report), this would also need to be added. Depending on how one interprets the congressional committee report, it is possible that there were also large numbers of firearms owned by militia members that were not considered to be military weapons, and thus not included in this estimate of "upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles…." Bellesiles's mischaracterization of this report is fraud.

Bellesiles also claims that the severe shortage of arms for the militia was a source of continual complaint by public officials. "One can examine the records kept by any public official associated with the militia in the early nineteenth century and find similar complaints of the lack of firearms and the general failure of the system."[116] Bellesiles points to W.C.C. Claiborne, governor of Mississippi Territory 1801-1803, and of Orleans Territory starting in 1812, as an example of such a public official. Bellesiles quotes

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[114] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.
[115] Bellesiles, 240 n. 123.
[116] Bellesiles, 248.

Claiborne that his efforts to organize the Mississippi militia had met "many obstacles…the greatest of which are the want of arms and the means of obtaining a supply."[117] Indeed, Claiborne did write that to Secretary of State Madison.[118]

Yet, within a few months, Claiborne wrote to the Secretary of War, "The prospect of organizing the militia is flattering: the different Counties are laid off into regiments, battalions and company Districts: the officers are all appointed, and the men enrolled: a great degree of rivalry exists between the different corps: and I flatter myself that in a little time I shall have a well-armed and well disciplined militia."[119] Later in the week, Claiborne finishes his letter, "In the course of this week, I have reviewed the militia of Jefferson and Adams Counties; and can assure you that the prospect of having a well-armed militia, exceeds my most sanguine expectations."[120]

Were guns in short supply? Bellesiles tells us that, in response to Governor Claiborne's need for arms, "The government helped by sending 163 rifles and one hundred muskets to be stored for the militia's use, increasing the number of guns in the territory by 47 percent to 820, enough for 31.7 percent of the registered militia."[121] Yet, by reading what Claiborne *actually* wrote, we find a considerably different situation.

There is nothing in the sources that Bellesiles cites that indicates that the guns listed on the Return of the Militia were the only firearms in the territory–certainly, nothing to justify Bellesiles's claim of increasing the number of guns in the territory "by 47 percent to 820." The shortage of militia arms that Governor Claiborne complained about at the start of his militia organizing effort seems to have been a short-lived problem, and not the chronic difficulty that Bellesiles would have us believe: "You will discover that many of the privates are yet unarmed, but I flatter myself, this Inconvenience will soon be remedied–

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[117] Bellesiles, 248.

[118] William C. Claiborne, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1917), 1:39.

[119] Claiborne, 1:152.

[120] Claiborne, 1:155.

[121] Bellesiles, 248.

the Rifles (which were sent to me) are in high Estimation among the Militia, and the probability is, they will all be sold, upon the conditions, I have prescribed…."

Those conditions included a certificate from the captain that "Every Citizen applying for a Rifle" "is regularly inrolled on his Company, and in want of Arms," and that the applicant must pay $14 for it–a sizable sum of money for most Americans in 1802. "Upon those conditions I suppose the Rifles will speedily be disposed of to the Militia…. As to the Muskets, they are in no demand among the Citizen Soldiers, and I cannot persuade them of their utility…." Instead, Governor Claiborne planned to store the muskets in a warehouse, apparently because demand was so low for them.[122] So much for the shortage of firearms!

Governor Claiborne also reported, "I received, the other day, sixty stands of muskets from Fort Adams. They have been heretofore used, and are not in good order: I propose therefore to sell them at the moderate sum of eight dollars apiece. At this reduced price I expect the militia will speedily purchase them. But I find the people here are much prejudiced against muskets, and are unwilling to depend on any other arms but rifles."[123] How interesting that Bellesiles neglects to mention this fact! If the militia was insufficiently armed, this was apparently a temporary condition, and reflective not of a shortage of firearms, but a desire by the militia for rifles, not muskets.

Bellesiles would have us believe that Claiborne, like most public officials, complained about "the general failure of the system."[124] But this is not an accurate statement of Claiborne's beliefs. According to even the pages that Bellesiles cites, Claiborne's concern was not a "general failure" of the militia system, but defects in the militia law of Mississippi Territory: "The exertions of the Officers to organize and discipline the Militia, have been accompanied with great success, and authorize a hope that *this best resource*, of a

[122] Claiborne, 1:182-83.
[123] Claiborne, 1:152.
[124] Bellesiles, 248.

free people, will shortly become an efficient means of defence. Experience, however, has proven, that our militia laws are still defective." [emphasis in original] Claiborne asked the Mississippi Territorial Legislature to correct the territory's militia laws;[125] his speech to the legislators shows that he did not see the militia system as a "general failure."

[125] "Address to Mississippi Legislature," December 9, 1802, Claiborne, 1:237.

Gun Demand

Bellesiles claims that few Americans wanted guns, and few owned them in early America. The evidence of the time shows otherwise. As the negotiations at the end of the Revolutionary War dragged on, Congress provided an incentive for soldiers to stay on until the final treaty was signed:

> That such of the non-commissioned officers and privates soldiers of the above description, as continue in service to that period, shall be allowed their fire arms and accoutrements, as an extra reward for their long and faithful services.[1]

This suggests that there was demand for guns from ordinary soldiers—enough so that this would be considered an incentive to stay.

There are other fascinating glimpses into the private market for firearms in America,. The federal government's surplus sales are probably just a keyhole look. On May 2, 1787, the Continental Congress ordered public auction of an interesting collection of military odds and ends: "413 old militia Arms… 365 old militia gun barrels… 985 old gun locks… 2000 damaged muskets… 700 pistols… 1194 damaged muskets… 1066 damaged carbines… 4446 damaged musket barrels…" and a bit more than thirteen tons of damaged powder.[2] A single day's surplus sale included 4200 damaged firearms, 413 old, but apparently functional militia arms, 700 apparently functional pistols, and large numbers of gun parts. Perhaps the government was deluding itself, thinking that there would be a market for all these firearms and parts in America.

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[1] George Washington, May 1, 1783, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 26:372.

[2] May 2, 1787, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 244-246.

The Norwegian immigrant Ole Rynning told those in the old country considering a move to bring "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."[3] This suggests both strong demand for guns here, and a ready market for them.

Bellesiles claims that, "Few pistols had been made in the United States prior to the opening of the [Colt] Hartford factory [in 1848], pistols having found little market beyond the officers in the army and navy."[4] While some pistols were made in America early in the eighteenth century, most Americans that bought pistols preferred to buy imports from Britain. American-made pistols have survived, however, that were manufactured before and during the Revolutionary War. Some show interesting innovations, such as sights and rifled barrels at a time when both were uncommon in British pistols.[5]

There were pistols offered for sale in colonial and Revolutionary America. Samuel Miller of Boston, gunsmith, advertised in 1742 "Neat Fire Arms of all sorts, Pistols, Swords…."[6] Perhaps these pistols were intended for the military officer market—but in 1742, this would not have been a particularly large market. In 1772 and 1773, Heinrich Diebenberger advertised that he sold pistols.[7] John Nicholson, gunsmith, offered a variety of firearms for sale in November of 1781, including "Pistols…upon the most reasonable terms."[8] These might have been for the military officer market—but the hostilities had ceased by this point. Isaac King advertised in the January 8, 1818 *Somerset* [Pennsylvania] *Whig* that he was opening a business, and, "He has and expects to have on hand, for sale,

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[3] Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (1926; Freeport, N.Y., 1971), 99.

[4] Bellesiles, 378.

[5] Peterson, 213-14. See 202, 205, and 209 for photographs of American-made pistols of the Revolutionary period. See Brown, 312, for photographs of American-made pistols that are believed to be pre-war. Deyrup, 34, confirms that, "Few pistols were made here before the Revolution…."

[6] May 11, 1742, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 67.

[7] September 4, 1772 and September 14, 1773 *Wochtenlichter Pennsylvanische Staatsbote*, translated and quoted in Whisker, 159-160.

[8] November 24, 1781, *Pennsylvania Journal*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 71.

GUNS of all descriptions, Pistols…."[9] Perhaps the market for pistols wasn't as narrow as Bellesiles claims.

We also have scattered evidence of pistol manufacturing during the period before 1848, based on advertising, such as John Miles's 1798 add in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, which makes it clear that there was a market beyond military officers: "Gun and Pistol Manufactory… Where Merchants, Captains of vessels, and others may be supplied with all sorts of small arms, on the lowest terms and shortest notice."[10] Similarly, in 1785, Anthony Desverneys, Jr., of South Carolina advertised that he "continues to make and repair all sorts of guns, Pistols and generally everything that belongs to the Gunsmith's Business."[11] Francis Brooks in 1791 Philadelphia advertised himself as a "Pistol Maker."[12] Aaron Hart, in 1812 Pittsburgh, advertised his ability to furnish "Rifles, Fowling pieces, and Pistols, equal in goodness and workmanship to any made in the state."[13]

J. Bolton and J. McNaught advertised in 1816 Richmond that there were recently arrived from England, and that their services included "All kinds of GUNS and PISTOLS made, altered and repaired in a perfect manner…." The inventory of James McNaught's estate in 1826 showed a "pair of dueling pistols… 6 pair small dirk pistols… 2 pair best round stock pistols with flints… 2 pair percussion pistols, plain secret triggers… 3 pair rifle barrel pistols… 5 pair secret trigger pistols…."[14] It seems a good assumption that these were unsold inventory, and the descriptions of the pistols do not sound like they were intended for military use. A list of debts owed to the estate of James Ross, a Steubenville, Ohio gunsmith who died in 1816 showed that along with a number of outstanding debts

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[9] January 8, 1818 *Somerset* [Pennsylvania] *Whig*, quoted in Whisker, 155.

[10] April 26, 1798, *Pennsylvania Packet (Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser)*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 66.

[11] October 13, 1785, *South Carolina Gazette & Public Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 23.

[12] September 21, 1791, *Federal Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 14.

[13] December 18, 1812, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 45.

[14] September 21, 1816 and October 4, 1816, *Richmond Commercial Compiler*, quoted in Whisker, 163; Whisker, 203-204.

for repairs of guns, and apparently purchases of guns, there was also $45 owed by John Miller for a "pair of pistols."[15]

Jacob S. Baker's "Rifle Manufactory" advertised in Whitely's Philadelphia Directory of 1820 that "All orders for Rifles, Pistols, Fowling Pieces and Muskets, will be punctually attended to…."[16] A Cleveland, Ohio gunsmith in 1823 advertised that "Rifles, Fowling pieces, and Pistols will be furnished on short notice." While the ad is ambiguous as to whether Andrews made all of these items, or simply sold and repaired them, it is clear that he sold pistols, and considered that there was enough demand to bother listing them for sale.[17] Similarly, Francis Areis advertised in 1831 that his firm were "Manufacturers and Repairer of all kinds of Fire Arms; Pistols, Guns, Swords, Gunlocks."[18] This can be read as either manufacturing or repair of pistols; either way, it appears that there was either enough demand for pistols, or enough pistols in need of repair, that Areis considered this ad worth running. Henry A. Cargill, a Nashville merchant, advertised for almost two months on the front page of the Nashville *Daily Republican Banner* "Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives. A large and splendid assortment of the above articles. . . ."[19]

The pistols weren't just manufactured, then squirreled away in closets, or sold in gun buyback programs. Pistols appear repeatedly in travel accounts of this period, and newspaper stories, and are *never* identified as surprising, startling, or unusual in the American context. In a few cases, they are explicitly declared to be common.

Pim Fordham, while staying at Princeton, Indiana, in 1817-18, reported that, "Yesterday 8 men on foot armed with pistols and rifles came into the town from Harmony. They had been in pursuit of an absconded debtor from Vincennes."[20] There was no

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[15] Whisker, 200.

[16] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 6.

[17] May 8, 1823, *Cleveland Herald*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 4.

[18] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 5.

[19] "Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives," Nashville *Daily Republican Banner*, October 2, 1837, through November 25, 1837, 1.

[20] Elias Pim Fordham, ed. Frederic Austin Ogg, *Personal Narrative: Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817-1818* (Cleveland, 1906), 137.

problem persuading eight men armed with pistols and rifles to pursue a mere debtor, and Fordham found nothing surprising about them being so armed.

Fordham describes an associate judge as carrying "a pair of pistols at his saddle bow; and altogether [he] looks more like a Dragoon Officer in plain clothes, than a Judge."[21] There is nothing remarkable about the pistols; what is remarkable, at least to a transplanted Englishman, is that a *judge* was carrying them. If military officers were the market for pistols in America, as Bellesîles claims, Fordham's description does not suggest it.

Fordham also describes a party in the Illinois Territory which had excluded some "vulgar" party-crashers. Some of Fordham's party "armed themselves with Dirks (poignards worn under the clothes)" to resist another such attempt, but later, "In going away some of the gentlemen were insulted by the rabble, but the rumour that they were armed with dirks and pistols prevented serious mischief."[22] While the antecedent of "they were armed" is somewhat unclear, that it prevented serious mischief by "the rabble" suggests that Fordham's party were the ones armed. Pistols were weapons commonly enough carried to be a realistic deterrent to "the rabble."[23]

Fordham described the flatboat men who worked the Mississippi River as a wild and dangerous population. Fordham warned, "But I would advise all travellers going alone down the river, to get one man at least that they can depend upon, and to wear a dagger or *a brace of pistols*; for there are no desperadoes more savage in their anger than these men." [emphasis added][24]

The Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright described a journey through the Allegheny Mountains to Baltimore in April, 1820 that shows that pistols were not startling discoveries, even when found lying in the road:

In passing on our journey going down the mountains, on Monday, we met several wagons

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[21] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 155.
[22] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 219-20.
[23] *Laws of the State of Indiana, Passed at the Fourth Session of the General Assembly* (Jeffersonville, Ind., 1820), 39.
[24]. Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, 195-6.

> and carriages moving west. Shortly after we had passed them, I saw lying in the road a very neat pocket-pistol. I picked it up, and found it heavily loaded and freshly primed. Supposing it to have been dropped by some of these movers, I said to brother Walker, "This looks providential;" for the road across these mountains was, at this time, infested by many robbers, and several daring murders and robberies had lately been committed.[25]

Cartwright then recounted his use of this pistol shortly thereafter to defend himself against a robber.[26] On his return trip, he described his carrying of a pistol to defend himself from robbery during a dispute at a toll gate. The owner of the toll gate "called for his pistols," apparently with the aim of shooting at Cartwright.[27] In other incidents from the 1820s, Cartwright makes references to pistols in a manner that suggests that they were not at all unusual items, even if the *use* of them was dramatic.[28]

Cartwright described two young men reduced to deadly enemies as a result of rivalry over a young lady:

> They quarreled, and finally fought; both armed themselves, and each bound himself in a solemn oath to kill the other. Thus sworn, and armed with pistols and dirks, they attended camp meeting.[29]

Cartwright found neither the pistols, nor the threats of death, surprising.

In 1820, two young men were competing for the affections of a young lady in Lawrenceburgh, Indiana. Mr. Fuller offered Mr. Warren the chance to write a note disclaiming any interest in her, or engage in a duel. Mr. Warren declined to do either, at which point Fuller shot and killed Warren with a pistol. The report emphasized that Warren was "highly respected" and Fuller, his murderer, was "pleasing in his address, intelligence, and communicative." The report closes with, "Great God! Is this human nature? When the restraining power of offended Heaven is withdrawn, man becomes desperate, and dies by his own hand."[30] The newspaper editorializes about this senseless murder, but says nothing that indicates the pistol was remarkable.

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[25] Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1856), 200.

[26] Cartwright, 201.

[27] Cartwright, 206.

[28] Cartwright, 223-225.

[29] Cartwright, 238.

[30]. "Communicated," *Brookville Enquirer & Indiana Telegraph* (hereinafter *BE&IT*), January 14, 1820, 3.

William Oliver Stevens described 1820s Georgia as a place so brutal and lawless that:

> [N]o adult male ever went abroad unarmed. Whether it was to attend church, a social affair, or a political meeting, the Georgians carried loaded pistols, bowie knives, and sword canes. The pistols rested in the breast pockets of the coat and could be drawn quickly by both hands.[31]

Few pistols in America? Even *slaves* in some places had pistols—or at least, newspapers reported that they did. An article from the Chickasaw, Mississippi, *Union* reprinted in the *North Alabamian* reported that, "And many of our negroes . . . fancy that, in defence of their *honors* [*sic*], they must carry loaded pistols and long knives! We do things on a magnicent [*sic*] scale here in Pontotoc!—Negroes going armed. . . . It was but last week that a negro gave a very fashionable stab in the side to a *gem'man* of the same color, who had won his clothes at cards!"[32] The *North Alabamian* also reprinted from the Chickasaw *Union* a report of, "little boys, just out of swaddling clothes, wielding dirk-knives and pistols with as much *sang-froid*, and manifesting as familiar an acquaintance with their use, as if they had been born with weapons in their hands."[33]

> Mr. B. D. Boyd, a highly respectable and correct young man, and an officer in the Commercial Bank, together with an [*sic*] another young man in the room, interfered to prevent further aggressions by either party. Stewart, however, drew a pistol, and, in mistake we presume, shot Boyd in the lower part of the abdomen. Stewart is said to be from Mississippi, and about 17 years of age.
>
> We regret the necessity that calls for the publication of these facts, but public opinion must be made to bear upon the common practice among our young men of carrying deadly weapons in a peaceably [*sic*] community.[34]

An Alabama paper from February 1837 reported a quarrel in Columbus, Georgia, between "Col. Felix Lewis and a Doctor Sullivan, the latter drew a pistol and attempted to shoot the former, when Lewis produced a Bowie knife, and stabbed Sullivan to the heart, who died in two minutes."[35]

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31. William Oliver Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces: The Story of the Code of Honor in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1940), 39-40.

32. "Our Town," (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 24, 1837, 2.

33. "Our Town," (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 24, 1837, 2.

34. "More of the Effects of Carrying Concealed Weapons," (Milledgeville, Ga.) *Southern Recorder*, January 16, 1838, 3. The same article appears as "More of the Effects of Carrying Concealed Weapons," (Milledgeville) *Georgia Journal*, January 9, 1838, 2.

35. "Fatal Rencontre at Columbus, Geo.," (Tuscumbia) *North Alabamian*, February 17, 1837, 2.

Henry A. Cargill, a Nashville merchant, advertised for almost two months on the front page of the Nashville *Daily Republican Banner* "Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives. A large and splendid assortment of the above articles. . . ."[36]

An incident from Missouri involved an Alexander H. Dixon, who drew a sword cane on a man named Flasser. Flasser drew a pistol, and shot Dixon to death.[37] Near Natchez, Captain Crosly of the steamboat *Galenian* had a difficulty with one of his passengers, during which Crosly "drew a Bowie knife, and made a pass at the throat of the passenger," but without causing any injury. Crosly ordered the passenger to leave the boat. As the passenger was leaving, Crosly retrieved a pistol from his cabin, pointed it at the passenger, and apparently accidentally shot him.[38]

Thomas Cather, an Ulster Scot traveler to America in the 1830s, commented on the reluctance of the criminal justice system in the South and West to interfere in violence: "Everyone goes armed with dagger, Boey [Bowie] knife, or pistols, and sometimes with all three, and in a society where the passions are so little under control it is not to be wondered . . . that murderous affrays should so often take place in the streets."[39] British naval officer and novelist Frederick Maryatt described America as he found it in 1837 this way: "The majority of the editors of the newspapers in America are constantly practicing with the pistol, that they may be ready when called upon, and are most of them very good shots."[40]

In 1831, Arkansas Territorial Governor Pope expressed his concern about passions out of control, arguing that the willingness of juries to reduce murder to manslaughter encouraged killing: "Men should be brought to bridle their passions when life is at stake,

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[36]. "Guns, Pistols, Bowie Knives," *NDRB*, October 2, 1837, through November 25, 1837, 1.

[37]. "A young man by the name of Alexander H. Dixon . . . ," *NDRB*, October 13, 1837, 2.

[38]. "Horrid Rencontre," *NDRB*, October 7, 1837, 2.

[39].Thomas Cather, *Voyage to America: The Journals of Thomas Cather*, edited by Thomas Yoseloff (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961; reprinted Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 143-144.

[40]. Frederick Marryat, *Diary in America*, edited by Jules Zanger (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1839; reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 195-6.

and no excuse for shedding blood should be received but that of *absolute necessity*. The distinction between murder and manslaughter should be abolished in all cases where a dirk, pistol or other deadly weapon is used, except in cases of *self-defense* [emphasis in original]."[41]

On February 3, 1835, "a distinguished lawyer of New Orleans" entered the Louisiana House of Representatives chamber and struck the Speaker of the House with a cane. The Speaker drew a pistol and fired through the lawyer's coat, without hitting the lawyer. The lawyer then drew a pistol and wounded the Speaker.[42]

Few pistols in America before 1848? Dueling oaths were a hot topic of discussion at the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849. One delegate argued that dueling was preferable to sudden attacks in the streets. While he was only 31 years old, he lamented that of his boyhood friends,

> some twelve or fourteen have perished in violent affrays in the streets, and I have never known one who fell in fair and honorable duel. And why is this? It is because a thousand opportunities exist of effecting a reconciliation between parties where a challenge has passed and a duel is proposed, and the difficulty by the interference of friends may be adjusted; but in the murderous street fight the parties excited with passion, heed no one, and arming themselves, go forth in the thoroughfares and the by-ways, and there in a bloody affray, to the terror of every passer-by, settle their quarrel with the knife and the pistol.[43]

Frederick Law Olmsted's description of a not completely concealed Colt revolver on a Kentucky railroad in 1853 strongly suggested that concealed carrying of handguns was at least common, if not widespread, less than five years after Bellesiles claimed that there was no market for pistols:

> In the cars in Kentucky a modest young man was walking through with the hand[le] of a Colt out of his pocket-skirt behind. It made some laugh & a gentleman with us called out, "You'll lose your Colt, Sir." The man turned and after a moment joined the laugh and pushed the handle into the pocket.
>
> John said, "There might be danger in laughing at him." "Oh no," replied our companion, evidently supposing him serious, "he would not mind a laugh." "It's the best place to carry your pistol, after all," said he. "It's less in your way than anywhere else. And as good a place for your knife as anywhere else is down your back, so you can draw over your shoulder."

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41. Pope, *Early Days*, 103.
42. Murray, *Travels*, 1:142-143.
43. *Kentucky Constitutional Convention Debates 1849*, 822.

"Are pistols generally carried here?"

"Yes, very generally."

Allison said *commonly*, but he thought not generally [emphasis in original].[44]

Kentucky, Louisiana, Indiana, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, and Arkansas all passed laws between 1813 and 1840 that prohibited the carrying of concealed pistols (among other deadly weapons)[45]—when there was apparently "little market beyond the officers in the army and navy." This sounds more like wishful thinking than history.

[44]. Olmsted, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, 2:232-3.

[45] Clayton E. Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1999).

Marksmanship

Professor Bellesiles emphasizes—repeatedly—the poor marksmanship of not only Americans, but also of the British. It is true that the dominant military doctrine of the eighteenth century emphasized massed musket fire, not precision shooting. Considering the inherent limitations of the smoothbore musket, this is not surprising. The emphasis on mass firing was not because accuracy was impossible, but because the goal was to fire many bullets at once—the machine gun approach in a single shot era.[1]

While most British soldiers were trained to fire rapidly, not accurately, those assigned to duty as flankers, pickets, and rangers practiced marksmanship. Frederick Mackenzie, a British officer stationed in Boston, described target practice in January 1775:

> As our Regiment is quartered on a Wharf which projects into part of the harbour, and there is a very considerable range without any obstruction, we have fixed figures of men as large as life, made of thin boards, on small stages, which are anchored at a proper distance from the end of the Wharf, at which the men fire. Objects afloat, which move up and down with the tide, are frequently pointed out for them to fire at, and Premiums are sometimes given for the best Shots, by which means some of our men have become excellent marksmen.[2]

Bellesiles, in addition to denigrating the ability of British soldiers to fire accurately, also claims that the Americans at Lexington and Concord were unable to do so:

> Expert marksmanship requires training, good equipment, and a regular supply of ammunition for practice. These farmers rarely practiced, generally had no ammunition, and

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[1] Peterson, 160.

[2] Frederick Mackenzie, *A British Fusilier in Revolutionary Boston*, Allen French, ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: 1926), 28-29, quoted in Peterson, 163.

> owned old muskets, not rifles, if they owned a gun at all.[3]

Bellesiles also claims that throughout the Revolutionary period and early Republic, America militias were noted for their poor shooting abilities.

By comparison, it has long been traditional in American histories of the Revolution to emphasize the high quality of marksmanship among ordinary Americans:

> [A] martial spirit had been excited in the frequent trainings of the minute-men, while the habitual use of the fowling-piece made these raw militia superior to veteran troops in aiming the musket.[4]

Frothingham's account of the Battle of Bunker Hill emphasizes the tremendous effectiveness of the militia in cutting down the advancing British soldiers:

> Many were marksmen, intent on cutting down the British officers; and when one was in sight, they exclaimed, "There! See that officer!" "Let us have a shot at him!" – when two or three would fire at the same moment. They used the fence as a rest for their pieces, and the bullets were true to their message.[5]

According to Frothingham, British journals sought to explain the enormous loss of life at the Battle of Bunker Hill as evidence of both uncommon valor by British troops, and remarkable shooting by the Americans:

> Attempts were made to account for the facts that so many of the British, and so few of the Americans, fell. One officer writes of the former, that the American rifles "were peculiarly adapted to take off the officers of a whole line as it marches to an attack." Another writes, "That every rifleman was attended by two men, one of each side of him, to load pieces for him, so that he had nothing to do but fire as fast as a piece was put into his hand; and this is the real cause of so many of our brave officers falling."[6]

Coburn's description of Samuel Whittemore, shooting and killing a British soldier at 450 feet (discussed on page 19), makes him sound like a remarkable shot, especially since he was using a musket, and was advanced in years.

So who is right? That American historians, writing in a more patriotic age, might be inclined to assume the best of the Patriots is not surprising. When in doubt, trust those who were there. Charles Stedman, who fought under General Howe in America, and was

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[3] Bellesiles, 174.
[4] Frothingham, 102-3.
[5] Frothingham, 141-42.
[6] Frothingham, 197.

not sympathetic to the American cause, described why even able officers and brave men were unable to fight back effectively against the Minutemen:

> The people of the colonies are accustomed to the use of fire-arms from their earliest youth, and are, in general, good marksmen. Such men, placed in a house, behind a wall, or amongst trees, are capable of doing as much execution as regular soldiers: And to these advantages, which they possessed during the greatest part of the nineteenth of April, we may attribute the inconsiderable losses sustained by them, compared with that of our detachments.[7]

It is certainly true that it is easier for the losers to admit that the winners were good shots than to admit that there were serious supply errors and tactical mistakes on the British side that played a part. But it is hard to see British officers, who held the American militias in utter contempt, giving them credit for better weapons or better shooting if there was not some truth to it.

Most of the shooting in the initial engagements seems to have been with muskets, but by July, frontier riflemen had arrived:

> They had enlisted with great promptness, and had marched from four to seven hundred miles. In a short time, large bodies of them arrived in camp. They were remarkably stout, hardy men, dressed in white frocks or rifle-shirts, and round hats, and were skillful marksmen. At a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter, at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards. They were stationed on the lines, and became terrible to the British. The accounts of their prowess were circulated over England.[8]

M. L. Brown expresses his belief that this account is "apocryphal," and yet recounts John Harrower's no less astonishing account of how a rifle company commander in Virginia sought to identify the best marksmen out of an overflow crowd of volunteers. His solution was a shooting contest:

> Col. Washington… made a demand of 500 Riflemen from the frontiers. But those that insisted on going far exceeded the number wanted when in order to avoid giving offence, the commanding officer chose his company by the following method, viz. He took a board of a foot square and with chalk drew the shape of a moderate nose in the center and nailed it up to a tree at 150 yards distance and those who came nighest the mark with a single ball was to go. But by the first 40 or 50 that fired the nose was all blown out of the board, and by the time his company was [filled] up, the board shared the same fate.[9]

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[7] Stedman, 120.

[8] Frothingham, 227-8.

[9] John Harrower, "Diary….1773-1776," *American Historical Review* [October 1900]:100.

While not explicit that these riflemen brought their own guns, it seems likely that they did so.

Brown also accepts the plausibility of Major George Hanger's account. Hanger, who held the accuracy of the common soldier's musket in contempt, had a different opinion about America's riflemen. He described being on horseback with Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, preparing an attack on the Americans. A rifleman 400 yards away fired at Hanger and Tarleton, who were less than two feet apart. The shot hit and killed the horse of the orderly standing between and just behind them. Hanger was impressed.

Hanger became a prisoner of war at the battle of Saratoga. In conversations with the riflemen, they told him "than an expert rifleman…can hit the head of a man at 200 yards. I am certain that provided an American rifleman was to get a perfect aim at 300 yards at me standing still, he most undoubtedly would hit me, unless it was a very windy day…."[10]

Bellesiles, by the way, tells us that concerning the rifle, "Daniel Morgan's riflemen spread the fame of that weapon, all of which were provided by the government."[11] As we saw previously, General Washington on at least two occasions emphasized that riflemen should bring their *own* rifles,[12] and Pennsylvania required that enlisting riflemen have their own[13]—the government had none to provide.

George Washington's letter to John A. Washington of February 24, 1777, describes contacts between the Continental and British armies:

> Our Scouts, and the Enemy's Foraging Parties, have frequent skirmishes; in which they always sustain the greatest loss in killed and Wounded, owing to our Superior skill in Fire arms…[14]

A letter to Joseph Reed, requesting his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania, describes their mission as

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[10] Peterson, 197-98.

[11] Bellesiles, 202.

[12] George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:258; George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.

[13] March 12, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:681.

[14] George Washington to John A. Washington, February 24, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:198.

> to fire into the embrazures and to drive the enemy from their parapets when our approaches are carried very near their Works…. General Lincoln informs me that the enemy made use of this mode at the Siege of Charlestown, and that his Batteries were in a manner silenced, untill he opposed the same kind of troops and made it as dangerous for the enemy to shew their Men as it had been before for him to expose his.[15]

Poor marksmanship? The people that lived in that time have a different opinion, and one that deserves a bit more weight than Belleisles's claims.

[15] George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:257.

Gunsmiths & Gunmakers: Rare As Hen's Teeth?

The Nature of American Gunsmithing

Harold L. Peterson's discussion of American-made guns points out that American gunsmiths "had made and repaired military firearms" from the very beginning. Peterson also observes that colonial period American-made guns were patterned generally on the Brown Bess, and often reused parts from British or French muskets. "The thrifty colonist would not think of throwing away anything so valuable as a gun part, and consequently these parts were used over and over again in many different combinations until they finally wore out."[1]

By contrast, Bellesiles tells us that both gunsmiths and gun manufacturing were quite rare in America before the American Revolution, and remained so for the first few decades of the Republic. While acknowledging that Americans often restocked existing guns, and sometimes assembled guns from foreign parts, Bellesiles rejects the notion that Americans had the capacity to produce guns in any real quantity, and that this therefore demonstrates that the market for guns in the colonies was small.

Limited capacity to produce guns from scratch does not mean that America was a limited market for guns, of course. The American colonies suffered a chronic labor shortage, encouraging skilled labor to be done in Britain, where labor was not in short

[1] Peterson, 179.

supply. Especially because of mercantilist efforts to discourage industrial development in the colonies, Britain remained a major source of manufactured goods of all sorts for Americans.

Efficiencies of production in Britain might be another reason why Americans imported guns in preference to building them locally. In the modern context, there are very, very few American-made consumer electronics products today, but this is hardly evidence that Americans don't buy such products, or couldn't produce them if needed. It is simply more cost efficient to buy them from other countries.

In evaluating American gun manufacturing capabilities, the first problem to be resolved is the word "gunsmith," which contains many nuances of meaning. It can mean a person who repaired broken guns. It can mean someone who assembled guns from parts produced by others, all the way through to manufacturing of individual components, or manufacture and assembly of all components.

There were large numbers of "gunsmiths" in colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic America, as attested to by contracts, advertisements, wills, deeds, population censuses, and surviving guns that they built. Determining exactly which functions a particular gunsmith performed is a difficult problem, because the information that we have concerning many of these gunsmiths is so scanty.

Bellesiles's argument includes the assertion that gunsmiths had so little work to do that most worked as blacksmiths as well. But this is not necessarily evidence that there was little demand for gunsmithing. It might equally be evidence that in an era when most Americans lived in small towns, because narrow specialization was economically unproductive, a person skilled at any form of metalworking would have to perform whatever work was in demand at the moment. Indeed, works with no ax to grind on the subject of gun ownership in America are explicit: the two related trades of gunsmithing and blacksmithing were often followed by one man, and for a very good reason:

> It is known that, at times, a gun was made by a number of craftsmen; and that at other

> times, a complete gun was made by one man. It is also apparent that much forge work was required to forge and weld a gun barrel, to forge and fit the lock parts, and to forge iron mountings such as the trigger guard, the butt plates and other small parts.[2]

This combining of the two trades, or alternating the two trades from year to year, was apparently common during both the Revolutionary War period, and in peacetime.[3] Deyrup indicates that the combination of gunsmithing and blacksmithing was common throughout New England because gunsmithing as an occupation was limited by population density.[4] Significantly, Deyrup comes to a very different conclusion from Bellesiles concerning colonial New England gunsmithing, asserting that guns were often manufactured and assembled entirely by one person or with an apprentice or two. Even in bigger American cities, where there was some division of labor, a single shop would often make all the components of a gun (with the exception of gunlocks, usually, though not always imported). "Though apparently few early colonial smiths made their own gun locks, by 1770 the colonies were probably self-sufficing in the production of hunting weapons."[5]

Other combined trades are also in evidence, such as "W. Clevell, a gun- and locksmith who worked in Bushkill Township, Northampton County, Pennsylvania, in 1820."[6] Henry Dippeberger, a Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised his trade as "making and repairing arms and bleeding instruments, also instruments for cupping and for use on the teeth. He sells also pistols, guns, and gun barrels, also all kinds of flint and gun locks…."[7] In 1774, Walter Dick of South Carolina advertised himself as "Gunsmith and Cutler… Makes and dresses all manner of [surgical] and other instruments; makes cork screws and Pen-

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[2] Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Ironware: Cast and Wrought* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1956), 111-113.

[3] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 113.

[4] Felicia Johnson Deyrup, *Arms Makers of the Connecticut Valley: A Regional Study of the Economic Development of the Small Arms Industry, 1798-1870* (Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1948), 33-34.

[5] Deyrup, 34. Whisker, 5, also emphasizes that small shops built the entire gun.

[6] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 107.

[7] September 14, 1773, *Staatsbote*, quoted in Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths: 1650-1850* (New York: Bramhall House, 1952), 25.

Knives… Gold and other Scales and Beams made and adjusted with the greatest exactness. Locks and keys of all kinds made and mended."[8]

Another expression of this broad approach to smithing is an ad from the *New Hampshire Gazette* of July 17, 1767 that simply described Joseph Hammond's trade as, "Smith," who "performs all Sorts of the Iron of Boat Work, Chaise and Chair Work cleaning and mending of Guns, Pistols, Locks and Keys, cleans and mends Jacks, Shoes Horses, and makes all sorts of Kitchen furniture, and sorts of Hinges for Houses, &c."[9] It seems doubtful if Joseph Hammond would appear in any list of "gunsmiths," but he certainly found it worth his while to advertise his ability to mend guns.

Whisker devotes an entire chapter to examining gunsmiths who worked at other trades, sometimes at different times, sometimes at the same time. While many of the other trades are unsurprising (clock makers, locksmiths, blacksmiths), others are quite far removed from the metal trades, including potters, doctors, and umbrella makers.[10] The combination of lawyer and gunsmith seems to be the most unusual of all:

> Ignatius Leitner.... [describes his new business location, then] Where he continues to draw deeds, mortgages, Power of Attorney, apprentice indentures, Bills, Notes, State executor and adminstrators accounts. He will as usual clerk at vendues and take inventories and all other instruments of writing done on shortest notice. N.B. He continues and keeps hands at work in his former branches as making rifles, still cocks, casting rivets, gun mountings, etc. at the lowest prices.[11]

To add to the problem of identifying blacksmiths who were also gunsmiths, blacksmiths were by far the most common metal craftsmen in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[12] If even a fraction of blacksmiths also did some gun repair, this would be a huge number of part-time gunsmiths.

Professor Bellesiles claims that gunsmithing was such a poor method of making a living that few gunsmiths were able to stay in business. Why, then, do we find gunsmiths

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[8] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 24.
[9] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 52.
[10] Whisker, 145-163.
[11] May 2, 1800, *York Recorder* [Yorktown, Pennsylvania], quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 61.
[12] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 52.

advertising for help? Francis Brooks, a Philadelphia gunsmith, advertised in 1791 for an apprentice.[13] Peter Brong, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised for "Lock filers: Such as soon apply will receive the highest Wages." Apparently Brong sought craftsmen skilled at filing gunlocks to fit.[14] Henry Albright of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, advertised in 1796 that he would take on "A Lad from 12 to 15 years of age" as an apprentice for the gunsmithing business.[15] John Gonter in Hagerstown, Maryland, is known to have had at least five apprentices in his gunsmithing business between 1794 and 1799.[16] Ralph Atmar, Jr., a Charleston goldsmith, engraver, and gunsmith, advertised in 1800 for an apprentice to learn goldsmithing, "and may gain an insight in the Mechanism of Guns."[17] Indentured servant gunsmiths also appear in the records, such as runaway John Kenster, "born in London… He is a gunsmith by trade."[18]

James Whisker devotes forty-six pages to an examination of gunsmithing and apprentices, with dozens of examples of orphans, minors, and even adults apprenticed to learn this trade.[19] It seems most unlikely that a profession with little or no employment opportunity would induce so many to accept apprenticeship. Similarly, if gunsmiths were actually so short of work, it is a bit odd that so many were interested in taking on apprentices who had to be fed, boarded, and clothed, if the gunsmith didn't have work to keep the apprentice busy.

Another problem with identifying gunsmiths and gunmakers is the paucity of complete records of the time. Kauffman's *Early American Gunsmiths: 1650-1850*, gathered information from city directories, wills, population censuses, and advertisements. That this

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[13] September 21, 1791, *Federal Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 14.

[14] September 23, 1801, *Lancaster Intelligencer and Weekly Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 13.

[15] June 1, 1796, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, quoted in Whisker, 34.

[16] Whisker, 35.

[17] October 23, 1800, *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 5.

[18] April 15, 1777, *Maryland Jouranl and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 57.

[19] Whisker, 1-46.

method gathers information on only a small part of the gunsmiths who worked in early America should be clear. Many of the early newspapers from which we might gather advertisements are gone forever. A gunsmith would have advertised when business was slow, and he needed more business, or when starting or moving his business. A paucity of ads, rather than being an indication that there was little demand for gunsmiths or gunmakers, might actually be an indication that business was good, and word of mouth was sufficient advertising to keep a gunsmith employed.

We have evidence that suggests relying on advertising and official records misses a great many such merchants. Jacob Dickert is represented in *Early American Gunsmiths* by three entries: a death notice from the Moravian Church Archives, that tells us he moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1758, and died in 1822; an advertisement on November 10, 1800, announcing the breakup of the partnership of Dickert & Gill, a gunsmithing business; and a rifle marked "J. Dickert."[20]

It seems most unlikely that Jacob Dickert was only in the gunsmithing business in 1800, but in the absence of any other evidence, we cannot prove any other years. How many other gunsmiths were Dickert's contemporaries, whose guns have not survived, and whose ads and records have been lost for all time? We don't know, but it seems likely that there were others, perhaps many others.

An advertisement of 1737 describes where a sale of merchandise would be held by "William Cathcart next door to Mr. Miller's the Gun-smith in Church-street…"[21] This is the only reference to Mr. Miller "the Gun-smith." How many other colonial gunsmiths were there who have disappeared from history forever because none of their neighbors had occasion to mention the gunsmith next door in an ad?

A slave gunsmith named Caesar was responsible for cleaning and repairing the arms of the South Carolina militia stored in the magazine in Charleston. How do we know that he

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[20] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 24.

[21] December 15, 1737, *The South Carolina Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 67.

was a gunsmith? Only because he was caught by his master with a duplicate key to the public magazine, and Caesar was deported. Whisker has a considerable discussion of black gunsmiths in the colonial period, both free and slave.[22]

Many of the gunsmiths we know of only because their occupation is identified in a single document, such as the identification of Peter Elsworth and Samuel Ploug as gunsmiths in a 1775 Continental Army muster roll from New York,[23] or Hugh McCain's entry in the 1800 Pennsylvania census, or Warren Lyon, in the 1824 Providence, Rhode Island directory, [24] or Christian Kline's appearance in an 1817 tax list in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania.[25] How many years before and after 1800, 1817, and 1824, did each of these gunsmiths work at that trade? We don't know, but it seems unlikely that we were fortunate enough to freeze these gunsmiths in time in the only year in which they worked.

In other cases, we have records of gunsmiths in two scattered years. As an example, Robert McCartney is listed as a gunsmith at Theater Alley, Boston, Massachusetts, in the Boston Directories of 1805 and 1816.[26] It seems unlikely that he worked only in those two listed years, pursuing some other profession from 1806 to 1815. Did he work as a gunsmith before 1805 and after 1816? Perhaps, but this takes us from the realm of interpolation into extrapolation. When our data base demonstrates that a gunsmith was present at his occupation in several different years, it seems a good bet that he worked continuously at that profession throughout that period, absent other evidence.

We know of some gunsmiths only by casual reference in other documents, such as John Fraser (or Frazier) "a Pennsylvania gunsmith and Indian trader" who set up shop on the Monongahela River in 1753.[27] James Anderson, described as "a blacksmith and gunsmith"

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[22] Whisker, 104-111.

[23] *NYPC*, 172.

[24] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 63.

[25] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 58.

[26] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 63.

[27] George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 1:130.

who in 1771 purchased "Mrs. Campbell's old place" near the Capitol in Williamsburg.[28] Anderson by 1777 had contracted with Virginia to do "Blacksmith's work," but the details of the contract indicate that he was to be paid for the use of tools and vices for gunsmithing, as well as the use of two forges.[29] In 1773, Jacob Allen, "Gun-smith" had a shop in Maiden Lane, New York City—and the only clue to his business is that another merchant's ad described his location as "between the House of Mr. Jacob Allen's, Gun-smith and Mr. John Taylor Brass-Founder."[30] John Cutler advertised himself as a "Black and Gunsmith" in 1757 Boston.[31]

Jacob Loesch, Jr. was a gunsmith in the Moravian community of Salem, North Carolina. We know that he worked as a gunsmith in 1782 and 1783, and may have worked as one before and after those years. The Moravian community prohibited him from working as a gunsmith on December 28, 1781, for fear that it would attract soldiers to town, but lifted the prohibition on March 5, 1782, at Loesch's request. Loesch died in "Fayittville" in 1821. It seems most likely that he had worked as gunsmith in Philadelphia before 1781, and likely that he worked as a gunsmith in various locations in North Carolina from 1783 to 1821.[32] But we really don't know for sure about any years except 1782 and 1783. It would be foolish to claim that we know that he worked any years but 1782 and 1783. But it would also be foolish to claim that we know that he only worked for those two years.

A number of gunsmiths are known to have worked in the early Republic, but we know of them only by a few scattered American-made firearms with their names on them, and references to them that do not precisely tell us dates. There are many such gunsmiths, such as the Sheetz (or Sheets) family of Lancaster and York Counties in Pennsylvania. We

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[28] George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 3:25.

[29] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 111.

[30] February 25 1773, *The New York Journal* or *General Advertiser*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 2.

[31] June 27, 1757, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 21.

[32] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 62.

have dates for Philip Sheetz, but for fifteen of his descendants and cousins who worked as gunsmiths in the Revolutionary period and early Republic, we know only that they worked as gunsmiths, but not the exact years. Similarly, the Hertzog family produced at least three generations of gunsmiths from 1776 through the 1840s, but we have only partial dates for three of the five Hertzogs known to have worked as gunsmiths.[33] Kauffman lists Christian Paulsey as a gunsmith in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, but does not provide any dates.[34]

Similarly, Gluckman and Satterlee's *American Gun Makers* lists dozens to hundreds of makers who are known from surviving guns, but about whom we know nothing except that they must have worked in the colonial or early Republic period, based on the design of the gun. As an example, "Follect—or Follecht. Lancaster, Pa. Kentucky rifles, about 1770…. Fordney, I.—Unlocated. Flintlock and percussion Kentucky rifles…. Millbenz—1825. Unidentified…. Miller, W. G.—Unlocated. Late period flintlock and percussion Kentucky rifles."[35] Whisker quotes from William Foulkes's account book for a variety of gunsmithing services provided to a Samuel Harris, sometime between 1763 and 1812, but there is simply not enough information to add Foulkes to the data base, because we don't exact the exact years during which Foulkes provided these services.

It would be useful to have a population survey with occupations that was sufficiently representative of the population in colonial America that we could sample it, and determine the number of gunsmiths present. One available sample is the list of men raised for four companies of the Continental Army between July 22 and August 10, 1775. It includes 288 men. The occupation of two of the men are listed as "gunsmith." This sample may be atypical because at least two of the companies are from a single county, and it is unclear if Orange County, New York, was unusually rich in gunsmiths, or unusually

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[33] Whisker, 14-15.

[34] Kauffman, 73.

[35] Arcadi Gluckman and L. D. Satterlee, *American Gun Makers*, 2nd ed., (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Co., 1953), 66-67, 143.

poor in them.[36] It may be atypical because it would have included those most prone to volunteer for military duty, though there is nothing that would seem to make a gunsmith either more or less prone to volunteer for military duty. But as a first approximation, it suggests that 0.69% of white males in New York were gunsmiths. If this percentage were typical of the United States, it would suggest that there were thousands of gunsmiths in 1775.

And yet even this incomplete body of knowledge demonstrates that Bellesiles is wrong about the scarcity of gunsmiths. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of gunsmiths in the colonial period whose work left some sort of record that survives to the present day, and far more in the early Republic. (I am currently compiling a comprehensive data base of all gunsmiths in the United States before 1840.) How many more left no traces?

Colonial Gunsmiths & Makers

Professor Bellesiles would have us believe that gunsmiths were rare before the Revolution, and gun makers almost unknown in America. "There were only a handful of gunsmiths in America in its first century and a half of settlement."[37] Bellesiles claims that, "there was only a single gunsmith in South Carolina's first quarter-century of European settlement," a man named Thomas Archcraft.[38] A more accurate statement is that Bellesiles only knows of one. But one of the books that Bellesiles used as a source, M. L. Brown's *Firearms in Colonial America* lists two other gunsmiths who worked at Charles Town (as Charleston then was named) from approximately 1685 to 1700.[39] Bellesiles speaks with certainty about information that is, at best, incomplete. To make such definitive statements of how few gunsmiths there were, especially in the first century, is foolish.

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[36] *NYPC*, 15:166-173.
[37] Bellesiles, 106.
[38] Bellesiles, 106.
[39] Brown, 151.

Others who have examined the question with less of an ax to grind—and upon whom Bellesiles often relies for facts when convenient—tell a different story:

> The influence of the gunsmith and the production of firearms on nearly every aspect of colonial endeavor in North America cannot be overstated, and that pervasive influence continuously escalated following the colonial era….
>
> Of all the creative craftsmen identified with colonial America the gunsmith can be considered foremost among them, for he frequently labored with the most basic hand tools under the most primitive conditions to fashion or repair a complex and inordinately vital commodity needed for survival in a pristine and generally hostile environment.[40]

The Plymouth Company "hired London armorer William Pitt who arrived on the *Fortune* in November, 1621…." There is no record of him working as a gunsmith, although he was at Plymouth Colony until 1627.

Eltweed Pomeroy, however, set up gunsmithing at Dorchester in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, and and male members of his line continued in that line of work until 1849.[41] There were gunsmiths making and repairing firearms in what is now Maryland in 1631, and Richard Waters operated as a gunsmith starting in 1632, at Salem, Massachusetts. Thomas Nash (my ancestor, 19 generations back) "served as town and colony armorer at New Haven" starting in 1640. James Phips worked as a gunsmith on the Kennebec River from 1643 to 1663.

By 1650, Boston had at least three gunsmiths: William Davies, Herman Garret, and Richard Leader. Covert Barent was a gunsmith in New Amsterdam from 1646 to 1650. Francis Soleil started working as a gunsmith in New Amsterdam in 1655. The list goes on and on; M. L. Brown reports "probably fewer than 100 had arrived prior to 1700…."[42] Somehow, this doesn't sound like Bellesiles's description of "only a handful of gunsmiths in America in its first century and a half of settlement."[43] A far from complete data base of early American gunsmiths shows that at least 85 gunsmiths were working in America in

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[40] Brown, 149.
[41] Brown, 149-150; Deyrup, 33.
[42] Brown, 150.
[43] Bellesiles, 106.

that first century and a half. How many were there for whom we have no documentary evidence? Five times that number? Ten times? We don't really know, and the most that we can say is that this is the minimum. This is a "a handful of gunsmiths" only if you are an alien with an unusual number of fingers.

Bellesiles also claims:

> Harold B. Gill's exhaustive search of Virginia records found three, possibly four, gunsmiths in the years from 1607 to 1676, with two additional artisans who performed the task of gunsmiths. In the following six decades, 1677 through 1739, there were seven gunsmiths and seven--possibly eight--more artisans working on guns. At it was one of these men, Charles Parkes, who is the first known to have made a gun in Virginia, though he probably stocked only parts made in England. The thirty years from 1740 through 1770 witnessed a jump to seven gunsmiths and seventeen artisans in a colony with a population of 447,000 in 1770 (259,000 white), including the Geddy brothers, the first Virginians able to rifle gun barrels. In other words, no more than eighteen gunsmiths served Virginia in its first 150 years.[44]

However, Gill makes no claim that his book was an "exhaustive search of Virginia records." On the contrary, when I asked him about his book:

> I made no real effort to identify all Virginia gunsmiths in my book which was written as an aid for the people working in Colonial Williamsburg's gunsmith shop. It was intended as an interpretative tool. It was actually published in its first draft form.[45]

More important than the question of how comprehensive Gill's search for Virginia gunsmiths was, is that Bellesiles is again making false statements. Gill's introduction is emphatic that:

> The importance of gunsmithing in Virginia during the colonial period is clear. Gunsmiths were found nearly everywhere: in port towns along the coast, in settled inland areas, and—probably the busiest ones—on the frontier. As with most craftsmen, many of these men remain obscure. They left little trace and the records reveal their names only incidentally.[46]

Contrary to Bellesiles's claim that "Gill's exhaustive search of Virginia records found three, possibly four, gunsmiths in the years from 1607 to 1676, with two additional artisans

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[44] Bellesiles, 107.

[45] Email from Harold B. Gill to the author, October 25, 2000.

[46] Harold B. Gill, Jr., *The Gunsmith in Colonial Virginia* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1974), vii.

who performed the task of gunsmiths," Gill's list of Virginia gunsmiths and the years that they were active, lists eight men who worked in that capacity in the period 1607 to 1676:[47]

name	location	known starting year	known ending year	activity
Peter Keefer	Jamestown	1608	1608	"a gunsmith, arrived in Virginia with the supply"
Charles Coyfe	Jamestown	1619	1619	"gunmaker and Smyth"
George Clarke	Jamestown	1623	1623	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
John Jackson	Jamestown	1623	1629	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
"indentured gunsmith" of John Jackson	Jamestown	1628	1628	"an indentured gunsmith"
John Jefferson	unknown	1625	1626	"mentioned as 'the Smith'" and "mended the breech of a gun" but not very well, leading to injury
George Fort	"the Eastern Shore"	1636	1636	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
Charles Parkes	"the Eastern Shore"	1675	1694	"mentioned as a gunsmith"

While Bellesiles puts Parkes in the period 1677 through 1739,[48] this appears to be simple carelessness on Bellesiles's part—there would be no advantage to Bellesiles moving Parkes forward only from 1675 to 1677.

"In the following six decades, 1677 through 1739, there were seven gunsmiths and seven--possibly eight--more artisans working on guns." Again, Bellesiles misrepresents. Gill lists sixteen people as "gunsmiths" active in this era:[49]

name	location	known starting year	known ending year	activity
Charles Parkes	"the Eastern Shore"	1675	1694	"mentioned as a gunsmith"
John Asnahl	Charles City Co.	1677	1677	indentured servant "described as a gunsmith"
George Hardy	Isle of Wight Co.	1695	1695	estate inventory includes tools for "stocking guns"
Henry Byrom	Essex Co.	1696	1718	"he engaged in the gunsmith's trade"
Peter Byrom	Essex Co.	1696	1719	gunsmith who made at least "Hunting Gun" for Thomas Meador
Bartholomew Figures	Surry Co.	1699	1699	inventory included gunstocking tools

[47] Gill, 76, 77, 82, 91, 96.

[48] Bellesiles, 107.

[49] Gill, 70, 74, 75, 77, 79, 81-84, 87, 89, 91, 96, 99.

Peter Gibson	Surry Co.	1699	1706	"mentioned as a gunsmith in Yorktown with two apprentices"
Charles Hansford	York Co.	1706	1706	"apprenticed to Peter Gibson, of York County, to learn the 'Art of a Gun Smith'"
Anthony North	Essex Co.	1706	1707	"apprenticed to Henry Byrom in 1706 to be taught the trade of a gunsmith"
Edward Powers	York Co.	1706	1706	"apprenticed to Peter Gibson of York County to learn the 'Art of a Gun Smith'"
William Evans	York Co.	1712	1712	"blacksmith, was paid for cleaning arms by the York County Court"
Salathiel Quinnie	Williamsburg	1713	1714	"armorer at the Public Magazine"
John Brush	Williamsburg	1717	1726	"gunsmith to Col. Spotswood" "used to clean the magazine & the Governors arms"
Samuel Cobbs	Williamsburg	1726	1726	"armorer and keeper of the Public Magazine"
Morgan Darnell	King George Co.	1726	1726	inventory of his estate "included 'a parsell of Gunsmiths Tools'"
James Isdel	Princess Anne Co.	1727	1731	"David James, a free negro" was bound to Isdel as an apprentice to learn "Trade of a gunsmith"
James Geddy	Williamsburg	1736	1744	"gunsmith" "may have been the armorer for the Williamsburg Magazine"
Edmond Hazell	Richmond Co.	1737	1737	estate inventory include gunstocking tools

Bellesiles perhaps considers the apprentices not to be "gunsmiths" but mere "artisans," but unless he believes that none of these apprentices would ever become a "gunsmith," this is misleading. Gill certainly regarded the apprentices as "gunsmiths."

Since, by Bellesiles's own admission, many gunsmiths worked at other trades, his characterization of the number of gunsmiths working in Virginia based on Gill's work is almost certainly a great understatement of the actual number of gunsmiths. As an example that suggests that gunsmiths were not all that rare in Virginia, during the French & Indian War, George Washington complained to Governor Dinwiddie about the severe problems he was experiencing concerning supplies and gun repairs:

> Six or eight Smiths who are now at Work, repairing the fire Arms that are here, which are all that we have to depend on. A man was hired the 24th of last Month, to do the whole, but neglected and was just moving off in Wagons to Pennsylvania.[50]

If there were really only seven gunsmiths in Virginia from 1740 to 1770, as Bellesiles claims, then Washington had every single one of them on his expedition. Now, it is true that these were not full-time gunsmiths, but Bellesiles's failure to make the distinction

[50] George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, October 11, 1755, *Writings of George Washington* 1:201.

explicit misleads the reader into thinking that there were far fewer gunsmiths in Virginia than there really were.

How many gunsmiths have disappeared from history because they were property? The 1749 will of John Milnor, Sr., of Charlestown, South Carolina bequeathed to this son John, "my negro Fellow Prince, a Gunsmith…"[51]

Of course, repairing guns is not the same as making them. As mentioned above, Charles Coyfe and Peter Byrom were known to have made guns in America. Whisker believes that John Dandy of Saint Mary's County, Maryland, may have been the first gunsmith to make a gun in colonial America. Dandy was paid for having made a gun to order in 1644, and apparently made a gunlock in 1639, as discussed in a deposition taken in 1647. (Dandy's career as a gunsmith was cut short by the rope; he was executed for beating to death an indentured servant.)[52]

There are gunsmiths advertising in the colonial period, and some of these ads are explicit that the smith also made guns. In 1748 New York City, Edward Annely advertised his services as a gunsmith and dealer in imported guns. He also advertised guns made to order: "He likewise makes guns and pistols as any gentleman shall like…."[53] John Cookson, a Boston gun maker, advertised his wares in the April 13, 1756 *Boston Gazette*.[54] Are these merely assemblers of guns, or true manufacturers? There is not enough information to know for sure, and to claim otherwise is inaccurate.

Bishop reports that Hugh Orr, a Scotsman who settled in Massachusetts, made five hundred stand of arms for Massachusetts Bay province in 1748, which were stored in Castle William, and carried off when the British evacuated Boston at the start of the Revolution. Orr again made small arms once the Revolution began, and cast cannon as

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[51] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 67.

[52] Whisker, 72-73.

[53] August 1, 1748, *The New York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 4.

[54] April 13, 1756, *Boston Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 20.

well at Bridgewater.[55] Yet again demonstrating how inadequate our knowledge of the past is, there are only two sources that I can find that mention Orr's work as a gunsmith[56]—and only Bishop tells us that he made 500 muskets in colonial New England. How many colonial gunmakers were there that made a tenth that number over a lifetime, for individual non-governmental customers, and therefore have left no trace at all?

Bishop discusses the encouragement of manufacturing by the Massachusetts Provincial Congress in the months before the outbreak of hostilities. In that regard, he tells us, "Steel, tin plates, fire-arms, which had been made in several parts of the Colony previously, gun and other locks… were also commended as deserving of special attention…."[57] Stephen Jenks of North Providence, Connecticut, is listed as a maker of muskets "as early as 1775," and "Small arms were at th same time pretty extensively made by several other persons in the Colony."[58] Albany, New York, was engaged at least in gunstock making as early as 1740, and muskets or rifles were apparently made during colonial times "in considerable quantity for the Indian trade."[59] The closer you get to the time, the more evidence there is that guns were made in colonial America.

What are we to make of William Grayson's letter to George Washington, on the eve of the Revolution? Grayson appears to have been encouraged by Washington to organize an "independant Company." If guns were in short supply, why did Grayson report "several of the soldiers had purchas'd muskets in the Country, and that some others had imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms"?[60]

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[55] Bishop, 1:486-7.
[56] Deyrup, 35.
[57] Bishop, 1:498.
[58] Bishop, 1:504.
[59] Bishop, 1:538.
[60] William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers*, Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1902), (hereinafter *Letters to Washington*) 5:78-79.

What should we make of Bellesiles's claim that gunsmiths were in short supply, with only "thirteen smiths and armorers" in Massachusetts "capable of repairing firearms"?[61] Gunsmiths keep appearing in histories of the start of the Revolutionary War, unsurprisingly, but apparently as common bystanders. One of the first warnings that the British were about to march on Lexington and Concord came from, "A gunsmith named Jasper [who] lost no time in informing Colonel Waters of the Committee of Safety…."[62] In Concord there was a gun factory operated by Samuel Barrett.[63] John Cobb, a gunsmith in Taunton, Massachusetts, was struck dead by lightning in early July, 1775.[64] What are the chances that three out of thirteen of Massachusetts's gunsmiths just happen to be mentioned in documents that came so readily to hand?

What about Bellesiles's claim that "Domestic production of firearms remained almost non-existent" during the Revolutionary War? Grayson makes clear that several members of his "independant Company" "imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms." Perhaps Virginia was uniquely awash in gunsmiths. But Grayson's letter also "return their thanks" to Washington "for your kind offer, and will be much oblig'd to you, to write to Philada. for forty muskets with bayonets, Cartouch [cartridge] boxes, or Pouches, and slings, to be made in such a manner, as you shall think proper to direct;… I can venture to assure you, that the gunsmith who undertakes the business, will be paid on demand…."[65] If Bellesiles is right, Grayson and his friends were remarkable not only in having their "own gunsmiths," but they were under a serious delusion that they would be able to order muskets made to order in Philadelphia.

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[61] Bellesiles, 189.
[62] Coburn, 18.
[63] Coburn, 79.
[64] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 18.
[65] William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.

Another letter to Washington, from William Milnor in Philadelphia, the previous month, also demonstrates that there were a number of gunsmiths in the City of Brotherly Love, and while guns could still be made to order, time was running out to place orders:

> I have Applyed to two Gunsmiths, -- One palmer tells me he Can make one hundred by May next, And Nicholson says he Can make the like Number by March, they both agree in the price at £3..15.. this Currcy. Palmer says Mr Cadvalder had agreed With him for 100 at that price, a Jersy Musquet was brought to palmer for a patern, Mr. Shreive Hatter of Allexandira has one of that sort, which you may see, & if you Conclude to have any, please to inform me by the first post, as the Gunsmiths I blieve will soon be preengaged, & there is not one Musquet to be bought in this City at present, if you should Chose any Alteration, from that Musquet please to let us know…[66]

In 1774 South Carolina, Burger & Smith advertised themselves as "Gunsmiths from New York." They offered their services in the making of custom guns.[67] That guns were made in America is evidenced in all sorts of accidental references. John Cobb, a gunsmith in Taunton, Massachusetts, was struck dead by lightning in early July, 1775. The letter describing this event called it "a loss to the town as many are unprovided with Arms."[68] It is not clear whether this indicates that all types of firearms were in short supply in Taunton, or only military arms, which would have been in high demand at that time because of the start of the Revolution.

That there *were* guns made in America is demonstrated by the number of such guns in collections today. While often recycling parts from European manufactured guns, there are both smoothbore fowling pieces and rifles that have American wood for the stocks, and barrels that appear to have been made in colonial America.[69]

We have a number of accounts documenting gun making in colonial America. Richard Waters, who emigrated to Massachusetts from England about 1632. A descendant in 1878 observed that he "was by profession a gun manufacturer; married the daughter of a gun

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[66] William Milnor to George Washington, November 29, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:65-66.

[67] April 15, 1774, *South Carolina & American General Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 15.

[68] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 18.

[69] George C. Neuman, "Firearms of the American Revolution: Part I," *American Rifleman* July 1967, 18; Peterson, 178-9.

maker, and it is a noteworthy fact that the business of gun making has been hereditary in some branch of the Waters families almost continuously since."

His descendants, Asa and Andrus Waters, built a gun factory in Sutton, Massachusetts at the start of the American Revolution, replacing the hand powered manufacture of guns with water power. (They had apparently made guns at a fairly slow pace before the start of hostilities.) Asa and Andrus Waters purchased pig iron in Connecticut, had it refined at a forge in Douglas, and manufactured it into barrels and other parts of the gun in Sutton.[70]

While gun manufacturing in colonial America appears to have primarily used hand powered tools, there are some machine tools in use before the Revolution. By 1719, a boring mill was in use at Lancaster, Pennsylvania to smooth the interior of barrels after they had been welded together from strips of iron.[71]

How many guns were made in colonial America? It is impossible to say for sure. To say that there were very few made is an arrogantly certain statement. But it is a bit odd, if few guns were made in colonial America, that collectors had so many still in existence.

Revolutionary War

Bellesiles would have us believe that Americans built almost no guns before the war started, and were unable to correct this problem once hostilities were underway. Furthermore, gunsmiths were extraordinarily rare, causing great problems for the American cause. Other historians, a bit closer in time to the Revolution, have held different opinions. J. Leander Bishop's 1868 history of American manufacturing reports that cannon were cast in Pennsylvania during the Revolution, and that,

> Small arms were also made in considerable quantity at Philadelphia, Lancaster, and elsewhere. The general insecurity of the frontier settlements, especially during the French and Indian wars, the temptations of the chase, and particularly the Indian trade, rendered fire-arms a necessary appendage to every household, and created a steady demand for rifles and

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[70] Asa H. Waters, *Gun Making in Sutton and Millbury* (Worcester, Mass.: Lucius P. Goddard, 1878), 3-5; Deyrup, 33.

[71] Deyrup, 35.

> other defensive weapons. The manufacture received a great impulse during the Revolution. The exportation of firearms, gunpowder, and other military stores from Great Britain was prohibited in 1774…. Governor Richard Penn, in his examination before the House of Lords in November, 1775, stated, in reply to the inquiries of the Duke of Richmond on the subject, that the casting of cannon, including brass, which were cast in Philadelphia, had been carried to a great perfection; and also that small arms were made in as great perfection as could be imagined. The workmanship and finish of the small arms were universally admired for their excellence…. Rifles were made in many places in the Provinces at that date, which were though equal to any imported.[72]

It seems likely that the demands of warfare would dramatically increase the need for gunsmiths, simply because guns were far more regularly fired in battles than would happen in hunting. Guns of questionable reliability, while a nuisance for hunting, would become a positive hazard in warfare, and so it seems plausible that guns that were marginal for hunting would have been repaired once the owner feared that he had to rely upon his gun. Also, the use of bayonets would seem like an opportunity for physical damage to a musket for which there is no obvious hunting equivalent. Shortages of gunsmiths during the war are therefore not an indication alone that America had few gunsmiths before the war only that warfare dramatically increased the need for them.

Bellesiles gives a description of the state of gunsmithing in Massachusetts at the start of the Revolution that is a masterpiece of not quite lying, but that certainly misleads the reader. After describing the failures of Pennsylvania to make enough guns to supply an army:

> Massachusetts was somewhat more successful. In June 1775 a special committee of the Provincial Congress reported that there were thirteen smiths and armorers in the state capable of repairing firearms, which they thought "sufficient" for current needs. But they added two significant caveats: all of these smiths are "in want of tools and stock," and all but one "are very imperfect in the business they profess." The exception, Richard Falley, "is a complete master," and the committee recommended his appointment as official state armorer.[73]

But when you look up the cited pages (291, 330, 474, 476, 498-99, 540, 542, 548-53, 562, 565, 590, 592, 595) in *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*, you find a somewhat different story. On p. 291, we find out where the number "thirteen" came from:

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[72] J. Leander Bishop, *A History of American Manufactures From 1608 to 1860* (1868; reprinted New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966), 1:572.

[73] Bellesiles, 190.

> The committee appointed to inquire how many armorers were appointed, &c., reported, that the committee of safety informed them that there were thirteen appointed, and several others nominated, and that the general officers had agreed that thirteen was a sufficient number, but that they were in want of tools and stock.[74]

Note the difference between Bellesiles's account, and what the source actually says. The committee did *not* report that there were "thirteen smiths and armorers in the state capable of repairing firearms" but that they had appointed thirteen, and there were others nominated. There is *nothing* at page 291 that suggests that there were only thirteen in the state capable of repairing firearms. Indeed, it is clear that there were more than thirteen armorers, because thirteen were appointed, and "several others nominated."

The appointments of many of these thirteen armorers are reported on the pages cited by Bellesiles—but nothing on those pages discusses the number of armorers in Massachusetts, or their competence. May 10, 1775: "Voted, That Nathan Cushing, Esq. Be desired forthwith to engage four armorers, for the service of this colony, and order them immediately to repair to the town of Cambridge, with their tools and other matters necessary for that purpose." May 12, 1775: "Voted, That Mr. Joseph Branch be, and he hereby is appointed, one of the armorers for the colony forces." May 15, 1775: "Voted, that Jonathan Blaisdel of Amesbury, be appointed an armorer for the army…. Voted, That Thomas Austin, of Charlestown, be, and hereby is appointed an armorer for the army. Voted, That the above vote, appointing Mr. Thomas Austin one of the armorers for the army, be, and hereby is reconsidered." May 17, 1775: "Mr. William Beman, in Col. Fellows' regiment, is appointed by the committee to act as an armorer for the forces posted at Roxbury…. Voted, That Col. Fellows be directed to procure a shop and tools and every material necessary for an armorer, at Roxbury, to work immediately in the colony service." May 19, 1775: "Voted, That Mr. John Wood, of Roxbury, be, and hereby is appointed, an

[74] *MJEPC*, 291.

armorer for the army. Voted, That Mr. Dike, of Bridgewater, be, and he hereby is appointed, an armorer for the army."[75]

On June 12 is an entry describing the addition of three more armorers, and one that may explain the shortage of tools and stock: "Shuabel and Joseph Sever, of Framingham, entered into the colony service, as armorers, the 10th instant. Capt. Lawrence, in Col. Prescott's regiment, offered to act as an armorer without any pay for his labor, and to return home for some tools which are necessary to effect the repairs of the muskets, it was consented to by the committee, and the said Lawrence was desired to procure his tools as soon as may be."[76] Lawrence's tools were home; certainly, it would not be surprising if other gunsmiths were without their "tools and stock" because of the disruptions caused by the war.

A report from May 19 casts even more doubt on Bellesiles's claims that gunsmiths were in short supply: "General Thomas was informed, by letter, that the committee had appointed Messrs. Beman, Shaw, Wood and Dike, as armorers for the forces posted at Roxbury, and [was] desired to acquaint the committee if any further appointments were necessary."[77] Four of the thirteen armorers in the entire province of Massachusetts had now been posted to Roxbury, if we are to believe Bellesiles, and the committee is asking if General Thomas would like some more!

On June 9, 1775, orders are given, "That the armorers repair no fire-arms for any soldier, without a certificate from his commanding officer, and that they keep an exact account of what arms they repair, and the soldiers' names to whom they belong; also what regiment they belong to; and also that the arms that first come be first repaired; and that this vote be transmitted to the several armorers in the colony service."[78] This citation is

[75] *MJEPC*, 540, 542, 548-9, 551-3.
[76] *MJEPC*, 565.
[77] *MJEPC*, 553.
[78] *MJEPC*, 562.

rather typical of Bellesiles's larding up of his citations. It tells us nothing that supports his claims about a scarcity of gunsmiths, or anything about their competence.

On p. 330 (June 13, 1775):

> That, whereas, it has been represented to your committee, that the armorers, or many of them, who are already established, are very imperfect in the business they profess, and that the above said Falley is a complete master of the same; in consideration of which, your committee think it of the highest importance, that he (the said Falley) should be employed in said department, and be allowed and paid forty shillings per month, in addition to his pay as an ensign, and be under the same rules and regulations as the other armorers already appointed, or to be appointed; all which is humbly submitted.[79]

Here the gap between Bellesiles and his source is less dramatic; one might argue as to whether "the armorers, or many of them" really includes all of them except for Falley, but let's continue, looking for evidence on other pages that might save Bellesiles.

On p. 474 (July 8, 1775):

> Ordered, that Mr. Hall, Capt. Batchelder, and Mr. Ellis, be a committee to consider a resolve of the committee of safety, recommending to this Congress to make an establishment for four master armorers.[80]

So, if there are only thirteen armorers in the state, and all of them except Falley were "very imperfect in the business which they profess" on June 13, from where would the other three master armorers come in less than a month? On July 6, 1775: "Voted, That Mr. John Steel and his two sons be appointed armorers for this colony's forces."[81]

On p. 476 (July 9, 1775):

> The committee appointed to consider a resolve of the committee of safety, recommending the appointment of four master armorers, reported. The report was ordered to lie on the table, till the committee for revising the commission of the committee of safety, and the commission of the committee of supplies, reported.[82]

On pp. 498-9 (July 13, 1775):

> Also, that the said committee are hereby empowered, during the time last mentioned, to procure, and employ for that period of the said continental army raised by this colony, all such armorers and other tradesmen and artificers, as they shall suppose and judge to be needed, to further and promote the operations of the said army, and them, as also all such

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[79] *MJEPC*, 330.
[80] *MJEPC*, 474.
[81] *MJEPC*, 590.
[82] *MJEPC*, 476.

> tradesmen and artificers as are now retained and employed for that part of the said army, to regulate, arrange, remove, dismiss, and discharge, for unskilfulness, unfaithfulness, or whenever the service may not require the further retaining them, or any of them. And the said committee are hereby desired to be attentive to the behavior and performances of such tradesmen and artificers as are now, or shall be in the service and employ of the colony in the said army, that the colony be not defrauded by unfaithful, and incompetent persons.[83]

These last two sentences certainly could be read as a criticism of the competence of the gunsmiths in the service of the colony, but it could also be read as a general warning that *anyone* working for the army was expected to perform well, or be fired. It says nothing about the number of gunsmiths available.

So, from where are all these additional armorers going to come, if there are only thirteen in Massachusetts, and only one of them was competent? On July 8, 1775, the Committee of Safety must have concluded that there were going to be plenty of gunsmiths available to them in the future—many more than thirteen:

> Whereas, many complaints have been made to this committee, that the armorers frequently deliver the arms out of their shops unfit for service, and delay the work unnecessarily; in order to prevent occasion for such complaints in future, and to hasten the public service in an orderly manner, which has not yet been provided for, it is Resolved, that it be, and it is hereby is, recommended to the honorable Congress, to make an establishment for, at least, four master armorers, each one of whom shall work and superintend one shop, each of which shops, as we apprehend, may well accommodate eight men, including the master.[84]

The committee decided that each of these four shops should handle eight men—or thirty-two armorers in all. The last of Bellesiles's citations is to p. 595, and again the entire discussion of armorers is presented to demonstrate that Bellesiles has misrepresented his sources:

> July 12, 1775.
>
> Whereas, frequent complaints have been made to this committee, that many of the arms returned from the armorers have not been sufficiently repaired, which error may have arisen from ignorant or careless persons being employed as armorers, for want of a master workman or superintendent in each shop, therefore, Resolved, that Benjamin Guillam, an armorer in the shop belonging to Gideon Frost, be, and he hereby is directed, to work as a master armorer in said shop, and to superintend the other armorers in that shop, whose duty it shall be to receive into said shop such arms as may, at any time, be sent there, by any of the colonels in that part of the American army belonging to this colony, in order to be repaired: to see that such arms are properly repaired; to deliver the same, when so repaired,

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[83] *MJEPC*, 498-9.

[84] *MEJPC*, 592.

> to the persons from whom they were received; to see that no persons employed in said shop, as armorers, are either ignorant of said business, or careless, or idle; and if such shall be employed in the shop, such Guillam shall, without delay, inform the committee thereof; and that he suffer no more than eight armorers, including himself, to be employed at any one time, in said shop.
>
> July 13, 1775.
>
> Mr. Benjamin Guillam, an armorer, had an order on the committee of supplies for two hundred pounds of iron, and what files and old brass he has occasion for, for himself and others that work in his shop.
>
> Mr. Monroe recommended Seth Johnson, of Old Rutland, and Enoch Putnam, of Granby, as proper persons for armorers.[85]

A far from complete data base of gunsmiths reveals that at least 530 gunsmiths were working between 1775 and 1783. How many are undocumented? Five times that number? Ten times that number? Gunsmiths were apparently present in Pennsylvania; we have records of a number of them being paid for their services repairing guns. Jacob Baldwin was paid £8, 9 *s.* for repairing provincial firelocks.[86] A few days later, John Willis was paid £21, 17 *s.*, 9 *d.* for repairing firelocks.[87] A few weeks later, Jacob Baldwin receives another £4, 12 *s.* for repair work; and a Thomas Palmer similarly receives £25, 19 *s.*[88] John Fox received £94, 1 *s.*, 11 *d.*, for repairing firelocks belonging to four different companies.[89] A Dr. Potts received £19, 12 *s.* for repairing provincial arms.[90] John Handlyn received £22, 16 *s.* for "repairing a number of Firelocks for Cap't Dorsey's Comp'y…"[91] "Baldwin & Tyler" received £28, 13 *s.*, 9 *d.* for repairing arms.[92] This is doubtless a very incomplete list of gunsmiths paid by the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, and for only a short period of time. (The next volume of *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* was unreadable on the microfiche.)

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[85] *MEJPC*, 595.
[86] Feruary 9, 1776, *CRPA* 10:480.
[87] February 13, 1776, *CRPA* 10:483.
[88] March 4, 1776, *CRPA* 10:502.
[89] March 14, 1776, *CRPA* 10:514.
[90] April 9, 1776, *CRPA* 10:537.
[91] July 30, 1776, *CRPA* 10:471.
[92] August 23, 1776, *CRPA* 10:697.

The Maryland Council of Safety paid a John Youst (or Yost) £2, 11 *s.*, 7 *d.* for gun repairs, and Samuel Messersmith £7 1*s.* 9*d.* for mending muskets.[93] Was this the only gunsmith that they hired? Unfortunately, there are many other records of payments made that provide no information about the services provided.[94]

When the North Carolina Provincial Congress established a commission to purchase guns—with two commissioners in each of thirty-five counties—they also provided that firearms not fit for military use were to be repaired, and, "That if Armourers cannot be found in each County, sufficient for repairing such Arms, that they sent into such publick Armoury as shall be established hereafter by this Congress."[95] Their assumption was that in many, perhaps most counties, gunsmiths would be found capable of repairing guns, and only if a county did not have enough gunsmiths would the government have to do the work. (New York's Committee of Safety made similar provisions.)[96] This does not sound like a severe shortage of gunsmiths.

Washington in 1778 complained "that there were 5000 Muskets unfit for service in the Magazine at Albany. I most earnestly desire that you will use your utmost endeavours to have them put into repair by the opening of the next Campaign."[97] Why would Washington make a request to repair 5000 muskets "unfit for service," if gunsmiths were actually in such short supply?

We also have evidence of large numbers of gunsmiths moving as groups, as described in this letter from Washington to Henry Knox:

> The Bearer Mr. Buel, who is recommended to me by Governor Trumbull, will undertake to stock a number of the Gun Barrels at Springfield, and repair the old Arms. He has a set of Workmen of his own and will go on with the Business upon Credit, which is a very material consideration. But to prevent the matter being made a job, I think it will be best for

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[93] ***Go back and find the date*** *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:1543; July 17, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1338.

[94] See March 13, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1544, for some examples of these uninformative transactions.

[95] April 19, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1330.

[96] March 27, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1409-10.

[97] George Washington to Philip van Rensselaer, February 8, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 10:431.

> you to give orders to the Officer superintending the Laboratory to have the Barrels sufficiently proved before they are delivered to Mr. Buel, as I suspect that they are most of them of the trash kind which Mr. [Arthur] Lee charges Mr. [Silas] Deane[']s Agent with purchasing.[98]

The notes describe Benjamin Buell as "a gunsmith of Hebron, Conn."[99] Clearly, Buell was more than a single craftsman, but an entrepreneur prepared to bring his workmen with him to build guns on credit. Gunsmiths were *not* in short supply.

Examination of the papers of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety suggests that Pennsylvania had a substantial gunmaking industry—or at least the people that lived in Pennsylvania thought there was one there. Among the Committee of Safety resolutions of June 30, 1775, is instruction to the various counties of Pennsylvania that they were "immediately to provide a proper number of good, new Firelocks, with Bayonets fitted to them;" cartridge boxes with 23 rounds in each box, and knapsacks, "not less than 1500 of each article for the City and County of Philadelphia; 300 for the County of Bucks; 500 for the County of Chester; 600 for the County of Lancaster; 300 for the County of York; 300 for the County of Cumberland; 400 for the County of Berks; 300 for the County of Northampton; 100 for the County of Bedford; 100 for the County of Northumberland; & 100 for the County of Westmoreland…."[100] Significantly, this order is to provide *new* firelocks, not used ones, and not ones purchased from the civilian market.

From where were these new firelocks to come? "That the Firelocks to be provided as aforesaid, be of one Bore, with Steel Rammers, well fitted to the same, and that Patterns of the said Firelocks, Rammers and Bayonets, be immediately made in the city of Philadelphia, and sent to the different Counties."[101] On July 21, 1775, the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety directed a subcommittee to apply to three gunsmiths named James Pearson, Tomlinson, and Wiley, to find out "if they can be engaged to advantage" to "Compleating the Fire Arms that may be wanted." The following day, the Committee of

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[98] George Washington to Henry Knox, November 30, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 20:423-4.
[99] *Writings of George Washington* 20:423 n.34.
[100] June 30, 1775, *CRPA* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1970), 10:229.
[101] June 30, 1775, *CRPA* 10:230.

Safety directed that "a messenger be sent to Joel Ferree, of Lancaster County… requesting him immediately to complete the Guns wrote for as patterns and to know how many he can furnish of the same kind and at what price."[102] On March 23, 1776, they Committee of Safety directed negotiating a contract "with William Henry for making 200 Rifles."[103] In July, 1776, The Committee contracted with John Kerlin "for fifty Muskets and Bayonets, to be made according to Pattern, at Eighty-five Shillings each."[104]

Some frontier Pennsylvania counties made arrangements for hiring gunsmiths at the public expense to make rifles, suggesting that while gun makers were lacking, it was not considered impossible to attract them. Bedford County, Pennsylvania, responded to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety's request that each county make muskets by explaining that they only had one gunsmith, and he was unable to hire sufficient help to make them. But it would appear that the request for Bedford County to make muskets was not considered absurd, merely impossible under the conditions of the local labor market. Yet by 1780, Bedford County had acquired a runaway gunlock maker, and he was apparently making muskets for the Bedford Committee of Safety.[105] Bellesiles believes that this production capacity did not exist, and that the various orders from governments and private individuals that are documented above reflect delusions about this matter.

New York's Provincial Congress was also apparently deluded about the possibility of having guns made in America. A series of discussions with Robert Boyd and Henry Watkeys starting June 13, 1775, concerned the making of one thousand muskets for the soldiers of New York. (Since New York was planning to raise and equip three thousand soldiers,[106] this suggests that the Provincial Congress believed that it already had, or could

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[102] July 21, 1775, *CRPA* 10:289; July 22, 1775, *Ibid.* 10:290.
[103] March 23, 1776, *CRPA* 10:523.
[104] ***Still missing the date on this one – go back to library*** *CRPA* 10:650.
[105] Whisker, 170-171.
[106] June 9, 1775, *NYPC* 15:8.

purchase, at least two thousand muskets.) At first the price agreed upon was £3, 15 *s.* per musket.

On June 23, it negotiated with Robert Boyd to manufacture "Gun Barrells, Bayonets and Steel Ramrods", and with Henry Watkeys to provide gunlocks, stock and finish muskets within six months.[107] The final contract required Watkeys to manufacture gunlocks on the pattern of one provided to him "marked *Grice* 1760." Watkeys was to be paid £2, 5 *s.* for each musket delivered. Boyd seems to have not been included in this contract.[108] Watkeys apparently failed to deliver on the guns, and the manner in which Bellesiles tells us about his failure raises questions about Bellesiles's accuracy.

"Henry Watkeys appears to have been entirely sincere when he took New York's money in June 1775, but discovered that making guns was much harder than he had initially suspected. Sixteen months later, after producing only six inferior gun barrels, he informed the New York legislature he was "poor and now removed to Brunswick in Jersey."[109] Why does Bellesiles make a point of saying that Watkeys appears to have been sincere? Because one of Bellesiles's sources about Watkeys points out that he deserted to the British, and ended up after the war as a gunsmith in Canada.[110] At a minimum, it gives us a different possible explanation for Watkeys's failure to make guns.

This wasn't the end of the New York Provincial Congress's attempts to have guns made. They ordered on March 30, 1776 that "all the public News-Papers in this Colony" run an advertisement asking for "proposals from & treat with any Person or Persons who are willing to engage in manufacturing good Muskets or the Locks Barrels or any necessary parts thereof…."[111] They also provided a bounty for those who erected gunpowder mills, made gunlocks, or musket barrels, and no interest loans. But they were also careful to

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[107] June 13, 1775, *NYPC* 15:8; June 23, 1775, *NYPC* 15:9-10.
[108] June 30, 1775, *NYPC* 15:13-14.
[109] Bellesiles, 191.
[110] Whisker, 178-179.
[111] March 30, 1776, *NYPC* 15:92.

specify that these incentives were not available for gunpowder mills already erected, or for gunlock, musket barrel, or bayonet makers "with whom the Congress or Committee of Safety of this Colony have already contracted, or to any person in their behalf…."[112] Clearly, there were already gunpowder mills in operation, and these incentives were intended to create more manufacturing capacity. It appears that the incentives for gunlock makers and musket barrel makers were similarly intended for those not already in the business. This implies that there were already people in New York already contracted to make gunlocks and musket barrels.

Other Revolutionary governments, while lacking quite as much detail on their plans to have guns made, also seemed to believe that guns could be made in America. The New Hampshire House of Representatives in January, 1776, discussed "a plan for providing Fire-Arms for a Colony stock…." They proposed that for every musket with a barrel "three feet nine inches long, to carry an ounce ball, a good bayonet with blade eighteen inches long, iron ramrod" (what is generally known as the Committee of Safety specification) "manufactured in this Colony" delivered "on or before the 1st of May next, the owner of such fire-arms receive three pounds for each…." These muskets were to be proofed, and only if they passed was the maker to be paid.

Furthermore, "that there be appointed one good man, in each County" to receive and proof such muskets.[113] *Every county* was to have a man to receive such muskets. New Hampshire's government seemed to think that there was enough gun manufacturing capacity that within three months there would be so many gunsmiths making muskets, and that they would be so widely distributed, that someone might be required "in each County" to receive and proof them.

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[112] *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:390-92. The Provincial Congress on this same page also provided very similar loan and bounty programs for the making of "Salt out of seawater" as well—and no one has suggested that Americans were short of salt in the colonial period.

[113] January 12, 1775, *American Archives*, 4th series, 5:7-8.

On February 24, 1776, South Carolina's Provincial Congress directed a subcommittee "to contract for the making, or purchasing already made, any number, not exceeding one thousand stand, or good Rifles, with good bridle-locks… not exceeding the price of thirty Pounds each… Also for the making, or purchasing already made, one thousand stand of good smooth-bored Muskets, carrying an ounce ball… at a price not exceeding twenty Pounds each…."[114]

Maryland also believed that guns could be made there. An August, 1775 Maryland Convention committee appointed to "inquire into the practicability of establishing a Manufactory of Arms within this Province" concluded that it made more sense to contract out these services to the existing gun making industry. The committee reported that there were twelve gunsmiths in the province capable of making guns: three in Baltimore, one in Georgetown, four in Fredericktown, one near Fredericktown, two in Hagerstown, and one in Jerusalem, and "several gunsmiths on the Eastern Shore, and in other places." Each shop was believed to be capable of making twenty muskets a month at a cost of about £4 each.[115]

On August 30, 1775, the Maryland Council of Safety contracted with these gun makers. Charles Beatty of Fredericktown was "empowered to contract for the making and delivery of six hundred and fifty good substantial proved Muskets… for a sum not exceeding ten Dollars and two-thirds of a Dollar in Bills of Credit…." A third were to be delivered by January 1, 1776, another third by March 1, 1776, and the final third by May 1, 1776. Robert Alexander of Baltimore was similarly empowered to contract for five hundred muskets under similar terms. The following day, three other officials, apparently in other areas of Maryland, were authorized to contract for "making and delivery of any

[114] February 24, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:580-1. Also see February 25, 1776, *Ibid.*, 5:581, for an extension of their authority to include other rifle designs.

[115] August 2, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:130-1.

number, not exceeding one thousand, good substantial proved Muskets" of the same specifications.

Also on August 1, 1775, the gunsmith Isaac Harris of Savage Town contracted to supply musket barrels and bullet moulds at $4 2/3 each. The terms indicate "agreeable to the one now made and delivered," which would seem to indicate that Harris had actually made a sample. Thomas Johnson was authorized to purchase gunlocks, stocks, bayonets, and ramrods "for five hundred muskets."[116] From the count, it would appear that these items were intended to support the Baltimore musket making contract. Other records show that the Maryland Council of Safety was buying other items required to complete the muskets, such as "one thousand Priming-Wires and Brushes at 7*s.* 6*d.* per dozen…."[117]

Perhaps these contracts for the making of muskets were highly speculative—but if so, it seems a bit odd that the Maryland Council of Safety would pay for a great many parts that might or might not be assembled into functioning guns. It is also interesting that there is no comparable purchase of gunlocks, stocks, bayonets, and ramrods for the 650 muskets contracted for in Fredericktown, or the 1000 muskets contracted for in other parts of Maryland.

Perhaps in response to an ad placed in the *Maryland Gazette* by the Maryland Council of Safety,[118] a Henry Hollingsworth of Cecil County on February 6, 1776, offered to make muskets, "any quantity, from two hundred to two thousand," promising delivery of one hundred by April 10, and another one hundred per month thereafter. He apparently could not produce or buy the gunlocks, and needed these supplied.[119]

The next mention of Hollinsworth's proposal seems to be May 22, 1776, when the Maryland Convention agreed to purchase musket barrels from him at 20 *s.* each, and

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[116] August 30, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:448-9; Brown, 351, 407, identifies Harris's place of business as Savage Town, Maryland.

[117] July 17, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1338.

[118] August 31, 1775, *American Archives* 4th series, 3:449.

[119] *American Archives* 4th series, 3:947.

bayonets at 8 *s.* each, advancing him £500 for that purpose—enough to pay for 357 barrels and bayonets. Hollingsworth was obligated to provide a bond "in double that sum" in the event that he failed to meet the contract. Perhaps, as Bellesiles claims, few of these contracts were fulfilled. But if so, where are the records of upset governments demanding their money back? There are certainly much small financial transactions recorded, such as £10 "to be deducted out of William Niven's Account against the publick, for not enrolling agreeable to the Resolutions of Convention."[120]

Elisha Winters of Kent County agreed to assemble six hundred stand of muskets, forty a month, using barrels and bayonets provided by the government. Winters agreed to make these muskets for £4 5 *s.* each, purchasing the barrels and bayonets from the government for 28 *s.* The standard of production was "a sample this day produced to the Convention." It is not clear whether Winters supplied this sample or not. Unlike Hollingsworth, who required the government supply gunlocks, there is no mention of them in the Winters contract, suggesting that Winters either had a large supply of gunlocks, or could make them.[121] A letter of July 27, 1776 from Winters informed them that he would be delivering twenty-eight muskets "ready to your order by Monday 3d August, making up forty muskets per month, agreeable to my contract."[122] It would appear that Winters had already delivered another twelve muskets that month, though documentation has not been located to establish this. It is one of the reminders of the problems of relying on written sources from the time to document all the weapons actually made.

Other gunsmiths contracted with the Maryland Council of Safety to make guns, but for whom we have no record of delivery, and no record of failure, either. John Yost, for example, contracted to make 300 muskets, at £4 5*s.* each, and 100 rifles, at £4 15*s.* each, "to be delivered at the times and in the proportions expressed in his bond." Yost was

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[120] July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337.
[121] May 22, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1590-2.
[122] July 27, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:613-4.

advanced £150 "to enable him to comply with his contract."[123] The following day, Oliver Whiddon was paid £3 15*s.* for stocking six muskets.[124]

We don't know what the actual production total of these muskets. It would appear to have been less than these optimistic projections, perhaps far less. But either there was some gun manufacturing capacity in Maryland, or the Maryland government was, like New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, engaged in self-delusion.

John Hancock's March 6, 1776 letter to George Washington observes, "With regard to arms, I am afraid we shall, for a time, be under some difficulty. The importation is now precarious and dangerous. To remedy this, a Committee is appointed to contract for the making arms; and, as there is a great number of gunsmiths in this and the neighboring Colonies, I flatter myself we shall soon be able to provide ourselves without risk or danger."[125]

It is true that governments have been known to place orders for goods based on incorrect information, and it is entirely possible that there simply wasn't the manufacturing capacity for guns that these contracts and orders imply. This is quite a strong claim to make however—that the government of Pennsylvania's knowledge of the state of arms manufacturing was incorrect. An historian today who claims to have a clearer understanding of the true state of colonial arms manufacturing capabilities than the people who lived there needs extraordinary evidence to back such claims.

We have plenty of evidence that there were gunsmiths hard at work making the contracted guns. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety evidently believed that guns not only *could* be made, but *were* being made. On February 13, 1776, they directed that two hundred pounds of brass be supplied to "Lewis Grant…for making furniture for Firelocks…." Gouger, Dunwick, and Kinder received £150 "for which they are to deliver

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[123] July 7, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1331.
[124] July 8, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1332.
[125] *American Archives* 4th series, 5:83.

thirty five stand of arms…."[126] Lewis Prahl was to receive 100 pounds of brass "for mounting to the Firelocks making by him for the use of this province."[127] Peter De Haven was to receive "100 lbs. Copper, for mounting of Firelocks, for the use of this Province."[128] Northampton County received a quarter cask of gunpowder to proof "the Firelocks making for the use of this Province."[129] An August 24, 1775 meeting directed "Mr. George Gray procure 1500 Brushes an priming wires, for the Provincial Firelocks…."[130]

On October 30, 1777, the employees of the Pennsylvania State Gun Factory at French's Creek, Chester County, complained that their wages were too low for stocking guns, and asked for a raise.[131] It seems most unlikely, if the workmen were not actually stocking guns, that they would ask for a raise. Perhaps, as Bellesiles claims, guns weren't really being made during the Revolution. But it does seem a little unlikely that the workmen would ask for a raise, with the approval of their superintendent, if they weren't really making guns.

Northampton County was given £300 "for the payment of Firelocks…making in that County for the use of this Province…."[132] (It is not clear whether this was an advance to gun makers, or reimbursement for guns already made.) A minute of February 6, 1776, directs payment for £150 for "Gunlocks & Files….."[133] A gunsmith named Lewis Prahl did some sort of work for the Committee of Safety that required delivery of "any number of Gunlocks he may find necessary…."[134] These are all evidence that the Committee of Safety believed that firearms manufacturing was taking place (though the gunlocks for Lewis Prahl might have been imported).

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[126] February 13, 1776, *CRPA* 10:484.
[127] April 20, 1776, *CRPA* 10:550.
[128] July 19, 1776, *CRPA* 10:650.
[129] April 9, 1776, *CRPA* 10:536-37.
[130] August 24, 1775, *CRPA* 10:314.
[131] Whisker, 224.
[132] March 4, 1776, *CRPA* 10:502.
[133] February 6, 1776, *CRPA* 10:477.
[134] March 4, 1776, *CRPA* 10:502.

A "gunlock" is the trigger lockwork mechanism. Bellesiles emphasizes that gunlocks were very complex to make, and claims, "No one in America could make the key part of the gun, its lock, until the Revolutionary era…."[135] Later he expands on that claim, asserting that American gunmakers were unable to make gunlocks before the Revolution.[136] He also claims that were few made in America until Samuel Colt freed American makers "from the long-term dependence of all American gunmakers on English locks" in the middle of the nineteenth century.[137]

While gunlocks were indeed imported in large numbers from Britain during the colonial and early Republic periods, they were made in the United States as well, at least in small quantities. There were certainly people that contracted to make gunlocks, or are identified in various records as makers of gunlocks; whether they actually made gunlocks seems like a legitimate question.

That the war with Britain created shortages of gunlocks would appear to be true. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety on February 9, 1776, asked gunsmith Benjamin Rittenhouse to confer with them "respecting the mode & terms on which he would undertake to carry on a Manufactory of Gun Lock making in an extensive manner."[138] This request can be read in several ways; that gunlocks weren't manufactured in Pennsylvania yet; that they were, but "not in an extensive manner," and more volume was required; or that they were manufactured in large quantities, and the demands of the war, and the cutoff of trade with Britain, required higher volume of production. On March 9, 1776, it appears that a "Committee appoint to direct the Manufactory of Gun Locks" existed, and was provided with £300 with which to carry on this apparently strategic effort.[139] The Maryland Council of Safety similarly appropriated funds with which to establish a gunlock

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[135] Bellesiles, 106.
[136] Bellesiles, 184.
[137] Bellesiles, 380.
[138] February 9, 1776, *CRPA* 10:481.
[139] March 9, 1776, *CRPA* 10:509; Peterson, 185.

factory at Fredericktown, though in this case, it appears that the factory was unsuccessful, and was closed in 1778. A gunsmith named Messersmith presented samples of gunlocks that he had made, and offered to make ten a week at $3 each.[140]

A curious letter of March 6, 1776, from the Newark Committee to President of Congress John Hancock makes references to two prisoners of war named Brown and Thompson who were working for a Mr. Alling in the making of guns and gunlocks. Apparently, there was some interest in moving these POWs away from Mr. Alling's gun manufacturing operation, and the Newark Committee was attempting to keep them. "Alling, in consequence of the leave obtained from Congress, had contracted to supply upwards of two hundred gun-locks for the use of the United Colonies, which contract was in part executed, but he would very unable to fulfill his contracts, if Thompson should be taken from him."[141] Alling was making gunlocks; his contract 'was in part executed."

Samuel Wigfal and Marmaduke Blackwood contracted with the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania "for two hundred Gun-locks to be made according to Pattern."[142] Samuel Kinder and James Walsh are described as "Philadelphia gunlock-makers" in December 1776.[143] The New Jersey Committee of Safety established the New Jersey State Gunlock Factory at Trenton late in 1775; whether it successfully made gunlocks before Trenton was occupied by Lord Cornwallis in December 1776 is unclear.[144]

The Connecticut Assembly provided for a premium "for every double-bridled good and well-made Gunlock that shall be made and manufactured within the Colony after the 10th day of June instant, and before the 20th day of October next, in addition to the premium or bounty of one Shilling and sex Pence heretofore granted by this Assembly."[145] Whether any

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[140] Bishop, 1:592-3; *American Archives* 4th series, 4:725-6.

[141] March 6, 1776, "Newark (New-Jersey) Committee to President of Congress," *American Archives* 4th series, 5:89.

[142] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 10.

[143] Brown, 310.

[144] Brown, 315.

[145] *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1621.

gunlocks were actually made in response to this premium is unclear; it certainly suggests that gunlocks were in short supply. That it provided this premium only for those made after June 10th, however, indicates that the goal was to encourage new manufacture only. Any gunlocks made in Connecticut beforehand would not receive the extra payment. It also strongly suggests that someone was making guns in Connecticut, because gunlocks were in short supply, and high demand.

In the July 17, 1775 *Pennsylvania Packet*, "Sarah Jones, widow" advertised for the return of a runaway servant, described as "by trade a gunlock maker." The servant's last name, William Jones, suggests that he may have been a slave.[146] Samuel Boone manufactured gunlocks in Maryland starting before June, 1777, and continued to make gunlocks and firearms at least as late as 1782.[147] At least one surviving European pistol bears a Revolutionary War era gunlock made by Rappahannock Forge.[148] There is a late flint lockwork made by P.A. & S. Small of York, Pennsylvania, which could be colonial or as late as the early Republic.[149] A Charleville pattern flintlock made by Evans, with a Philadelphia or Pennsylvania proof mark survives, demonstrating early gunlock making in America.[150] When Daniel Borden was apprenticed to "Philip Creamer of Tancy Town, Gun Smith," in 1799, one of the terms of the contract required Creamer to supply 40 of the gun locks that Creamer made.[151] Similarly, Peter Piper was apprenticed in 1801 to "John Armstrong of Frederick County, Maryland, Gun Smith and Gun Lock Maker, to learn the said mystery and occupation of a Gun Maker and Gun Lock Maker…."[152]

At least part of why gunlocks were generally imported may not have been because Americans could not make them—because we know that Americans did make them—but

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[146] July 17, 1775, *Pennsylvania Packet*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 56.
[147] Brown, 314-15.
[148] Peterson, 207.
[149] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware*, 116.
[150] Robert Ditchburn, "Three CPs?" 29.
[151] Whisker, 18.
[152] Whisker, 31.

because there was little advantage to doing so. George Moyer of Lancaster Borough, Pennsylvania, is listed as a "Gun Lock Maker" in tax lists from 1819 and 1821.[153] Andrew Klinedinst, a York, Pennsylvania gunsmith, advertised in 1825 that "he also makes locks,"[154] which would seem to indicate gunlocks.

A percussion rifle made, apparently, by Jacob Kunz of Philadelphia was marked with his name on both the barrels and the gunlock, strongly implying that he was the maker of both. Kunz was certainly working in Philadelphia in 1817; this one written record, and a surviving rifle, is all the evidence we have for his work as a gunlock maker.[155] One article examining the curious history of a musket found in an Arkansas state museum observed that the musket was "assembled by a rural gunsmith" from a variety of recycled parts. Because "Firearms components, especially barrels and lock assemblies, were extremely difficult to obtain in colonial America…the recycling of the still functional parts from various European produced damaged firearms was a common practice."[156]

The musket in question was assembled from an early British Long Land Pattern musket barrel, a French Model 1763 Charleville musket lock, and British ramrod thimbles. The stock was made from a North American hardwood—the last pretty definitive evidence of American assembly. From a variety of pieces of evidence, including the name scribed into the barrel, a brass plaque on the buttstock, and the report of the person who donated it, the musket appears to have been used during the Revolutionary War by a Massachusetts soldier.[157]

The manufacturing of gunlocks, however, is no more relevant to the quantity of guns in America, than the manufacturing capacity of CD players today in America is relevant to

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[153] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 69.

[154] August 16, 1825, *York* (Pennsylvania) *Gazette*, quoted in Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 58.

[155] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 59-60.

[156] Michael H. Lewis, "An 18th Century 'American' Musket," *The Gun Report*, November 1997, 19. See also George C. Neuman, "Firearms of the American Revolution: Part I," *American Rifleman* July 1967, 17, and Peterson, 178-9, concerning the recycling of gun parts.

[157] Lewis, "An 18th Century 'American' Musket," *The Gun Report*, November 1997, 18-19.

the number of CD players in America. Gunlocks were an English specialty, as Bellesiles acknowledges, and involved significant skill in making them. They were also small and light, making it practical for them to be manufactured in England, and then imported, since shipping costs would have been minimal.

A curious reminder that the traditional manufacturing processes for guns in America were probably inadequate under wartime conditions is a minute of April 2, 1776, in which a Mr. Tomlinson is to be paid £50 "for making Publick the Art of boreing and Grinding Gun Barrels, and instructing such persons as they shall require to be taught that Art…."[158] Gun barrels were still made by a process of welding together several strips of steel. Boring a gun barrel in a single piece of steel would have produced stronger barrels, and perhaps more quickly as well. How long could this delusion that guns were actually being made continue?

Peterson is clear that the Committee of Safety muskets were not simply ordered, but actually manufactured, and in spite of conditions not well suited to their preservation, we have a number of examples that have survived to the present day. It is certainly the case that when arms became available for importation from Europe that these replaced many of these hurriedly manufactured muskets, and the Committee of Safety muskets, which received hard use at the beginning of the war, were unlikely to survive to be sold off as surplus after the war.[159]

Bellesiles makes much of low production rates of Committee of Safety muskets, suggesting that Americans simply lacked the ability to produce guns in any quantity. M. L. Brown gives a more detailed description of the problems confronting Pennsylvania manufacturing, which included not only a shortage of gunlocks, but also low prices offered by the government.

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[158] April 2, 1776, *CRPA* 10:535.
[159] Peterson, 180-90.

The Lancaster County Committee of Safety complained to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety on March 16, 1776 that they were having trouble making new contracts: "Our workmen universally complain that the sums already fixed are inadequate to their Labours; that the Sacrifice they made in quitting their rifle business is greater than they can bear without some equivalent…."[160] The problem was not that Americans couldn't make guns, but that it was more profitable to make guns for the private market. Nonetheless, Committee of Safety muskets were made.

Matthias Keely, who delivered 31 new firelocks as contracted, was to be given "as much powder as will prove one hundred Firelocks, making by him for the use of this Province."[161] On October 27, 1775, the Committee of Safety directed that Mr. Towers "prove all the Muskets made in this City for the Provincial Service, and to Stamp such of as are proof, with the letters P; and that a Copy of this Minute be handed to the County Commissioners, who are to notify the Smiths they contract with for said Muskets, of this Resolve, and that none of their Guns will be receiv'd or paid for by this Board, but such as have been so proved and Stampt as aforesaid."[162]

Medad Hills of Goshen, Connecticut, received a Connecticut Committee of Safety musket contract, and on February 4, 1776, delivered forty muskets and bayonets.[163] At least one of Medad Hills's muskets has survived, though whether it is one of those made under this contract is unclear.[164] Samuel Hall also received a contract from the Connecticut Committee of Safety. While he apparently delivered at least 69 guns, "military duty and sickness" prevented him from completing his contract.[165] Baltimore gunsmiths delivered at

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[160] Brown, 310; Bishop, 1:573, confirms that the commercial demand for rifles interfered with colonial contracting for muskets.

[161] March 2, 1776, *CRPA* 10:502.

[162] October 27, 1775, *CRPA* 10:383.

[163] Brown, 325.

[164] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 51.

[165] Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths*, 41.

least 131 Committee of Safety muskets that we know about because the proof test results were reported on February 12, 1776.[166]

Bellesiles, who would have us believe that the manufacturing of guns was an entirely new activity for Americans, reports that Maryland's inspector "tested seventy-two muskets from the shop of Baltimore's leading gunsmith, Peter Lydig. Eight of them promptly burst."[167] Once again, Bellesiles's credibility collapses when you check his claimed source. The gunsmith's name in the source that Bellesiles claims to have read is Lydick, not Lydig. While the spelling of Lydick's name changes in various places in the *Archives of Maryland*, the spelling is consistent on the page of the *Archives of Maryland* that Bellesiles cites. When you read James Whisker's description of the failure of Lydick's muskets, you can see that the spelling and the claim of burst barrels comes from Whisker's account, not the *Archives of Maryland.*[168]

The report in *Archives of Maryland* that Bellesiles cites doesn't say that eight muskets burst. It says that of 72 guns, "64 good, 8 bad." Proofing might, indeed, cause a musket to "burst." But there are other forms of failure besides bursting that would cause a gun to fail the proof test. Bellesiles apparently uses "burst" because it creates a negative image in the reader's mind, and because a secondary source made that claim,[169] and with no more information than that which Bellesiles cited. But more disturbing is that Bellesiles cited a report that he didn't read very carefully, or we can presume that he would have mentioned the even higher failure rate of Sam Keener's muskets: "13 good 19 bad" that appears within three lines of the Lydick musket failure report.[170]

Apparently these failures weren't considered a big problem—the following year, Keener was paid £187 "on his Contract for making Arms." A Peter Littig (probably an

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[166] February 12, 1776, *Archives of Maryland,* 11:155.

[167] Bellesiles, 186.

[168] Whisker, 167-168.

[169] Whisker, 168, citing *Archives of Maryland,* 11:155, and only that source, says, "64 of which had proved to be good on proof-testing, and 8 of which had failed when the barrels burst."

[170] February 12, 1776, *Archives of Maryland,* 11:155.

alternate spelling of Peter Lydick) was paid £281, 5 *s.* on his arms-making contract. Both agreed to contracts for more muskets: 150 from Littig, and 100 from Keener, at a price of £3, 15 *s.* The government was to supply both locks and barrels, so Littig and Keener were apparently more assemblers than gun makers. If the barrels that failed in 1776 had been supplied by outside vendors, this might explain the willingness of the Committee of Safety to again contract with them for more guns.[171]

Other suppliers of muskets and rifles to the Maryland Committee of Safety included John Yost and Richard Dallam. At least some guns were made on the Eastern Shore of Maryland as well at £4 5*s*. each, "and probably in several other parts of the Province."[172]

But perhaps we are simply applying our modern assumptions about metallurgy to the wrong era. As late as 1837, without the supply problems of the Revolutionary War, Springfield Armory experienced a 12.15 percent failure rate for gun barrels, and apparently considered this acceptable.[173]

Samuel Dewey of Hebron, Connecticut, demanded payment from the state Assembly for "46 gun barrels and 21 bayonets, and that they are all in the public service." Richard Dallam of Harford County, Maryland, reported that he had finished twenty-two muskets, and had "fifteen more ready for stocking, six of which will be finished this week." Maryland's Council of Safety paid the partnership of John Shaw and Archibald Chisholm on May 8 and June 19, 1776 for assembling guns from barrels made by Isaac Harris and stocks made by Chisholm.[174] A July 16, 1776 order from the Maryland Council of Safety ordered delivery to Harris of "half a faggot of Steel; also, eighty-four Muskets, to be repaired."[175]

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[171] September 17, 1777, *Archive of Maryland*, 16:377-8.
[172] Bishop, 1:593.
[173] Deyrup, 136.
[174] Brown, 350-351.
[175] July 16, 1776, *American Archives* 5th series, 1:1337.

A number of gun factories operated during the Revolutionary War, some continuing manufacturing operations from before the war, such as North Carolina's Charlottsville Rifle Works. It was established in 1740 to produce public arms, and produced muskets from 1775 to 1777. It receives no mention from Bellesiles.

Bellesiles does mention the successful Martinsburg, Virginia factory of Stephen & Noble, which was "capable of making as many as eighteen muskets in a single week." Yet, rather than acknowledge that this was an impressive performance for a factory of thirty workers, he derides its effectiveness by observing, "If they maintained that rate, they could have armed the Virginia militia in twenty-one years, assuming no gun loss or population growth."[176] There is no reason to assume that a single factory was intended to arm the entire Virginia militia, or that the Virginia militia was devoid of arms when the factory opened. The tone of that remark demonstrates something of Bellesiles's lack of objectivity about arms manufacturing in Revolutionary America.

Bellesiles describes North Carolina's Public Gun Factory as having "produced one hundred rifles during the war and then closed shop."[177] A more complete statement—and one that shows that there was a bit more involved than just closing down operations, is that it started operations in May 1776, and delivered "one hundred muskets with bayonets, three rifles and six smooth [bore] guns. That afterwards the said Factory, with a quantity of gun barrels were destroyed by the Tories." Destroyed factories have a hard time operating, no matter what quality of guns they make.[178]

Somehow, Bellesiles neglects to mention the North Carolina Gun Works established by that state's Committee of Safety in 1776, under the direction of Master Armorer James Ransom, in 1776. It operated until 1778, producing muskets and bayonets.[179] When authorized by the North Carolina Provincial Congress, it directed that "all Gunsmiths, and

[176] Bellesiles, 192.
[177] Bellesiles, 192.
[178] Brown, 315.
[179] Brown, 315.

other mechanicks, who have been accustomed to make, or assist in making Muskets" be collected to work there.[180] Perhaps the North Carolina Provincial Congress was misinformed, thinking that there were gunsmiths "accustomed to make, or assist in making Muskets." Bellesiles, after heaping scorn on state efforts to produce guns, neglects to mention the Continental Gun Factory, for which the Continental Congress appropriated $10,000, and which seems, like some of its state counterparts, to have actually produced muskets.[181]

Bellesiles tells us that "New Jersey's State Gun Factory closed in December 1776, a few weeks after its completion…."[182] Other sources tell a somewhat different story, and one that reflects on strategic problems, not manufacturing difficulties. The New Jersey Committee of Safety "established the State Gun Lock Factory at Trenton late in 1775…. The State Gun Lock Factory was forced to close shortly after December 8, 1776, when Washington hastily retreated beyond the Delaware River, hotly pursued by Lord Cornwallis. Hessian and Highland troops occupied Trenton…."[183]

The Early Republic

Even in the early Republic, and with larger gun factories, there are still some substantial gaps in our knowledge that tend to hide small scale gun making operations from the historian's gaze. Felicia Johnson Deyrup's detailed study of Connecticut Valley firearms manufacturing makes the point that "until the emergence of the federal contract system in 1798," gun manufacturing was primarily a handicraft in America. This doesn't mean that there were few guns manufactured in America. Rather, there were many small gun makers, perhaps a gunsmith working by himself, or with a journeyman gunsmith, and a small number of apprentices. The system relied on masters and apprentices sworn to secrecy

[180] April 24, 1776, *American Archives* 4th series, 5:1337-8.
[181] Brown, 316.
[182] Bellesiles, 192.
[183] Brown, 315.

about the craft, with arms making often a family tradition, "occasionally remaining in one family for several generations."[184]

Bishop describes the state of the iron and steel industry in Massachusetts in 1798. In Plymouth and Bristol counties there were many steel mills, forges, and associated industries, including the production of consumer products. Bishop lists "fire-arms" along with nails, spades, shovels, saws, and scythes among the items that "were made in large quantities." In the area of Springfield, Massachusetts, Bishop reports that a gun factory was erected on Mill Brook in 1776 to make arms, "which, after the war, was converted into a manufactory of scythes, axes, mill irons…."[185] Bishop's description of 1791 Pittsburgh reports that of 130 families, there were 37 engaged in some form of manufacturing, of which two were gunsmiths.[186] Yet Bellesiles's focus on the government contract arms industries seems to miss the existence of these small firms.

Whisker gives the details of several such small operations based on the 1820 U.S. Census of Industry. These were firms large enough that they were required to report their activities, yet still small enough to leave few traces in other official documents. Samuel Baum of Columbia County, Pennsylvania, reported that in the year ending June 30, 1820, he employed two workers, had a $550 capital investment, and made guns valued at $1200. John Bayles of Georgia employed three journeymen gunsmiths during that same period. Joseph Shelton of Lewis County, Virginia, employed two men, and made guns valued at $520. He also made gun repairs that he valued at $150.

There are many other similar examples that Whisker reports of small operations that made a small number of guns—and it would appear that there were lots of such small scale gun makers in America in 1820.[187] Otho Sheets of Frankford, Virginia, employed three men and had made 90 firearms in the year previous to the census date, "each valued at

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[184] Deyrup, 33.
[185] Bishop, 1:492, 494.
[186] Bishop, 1:568.
[187] Whisker, 47-51.

$18."[188] Whisker describes how Lancaster and Berks Counties, Pennsylvania, specialized in the manufacturing of gun barrels from the time of the Revolutionary War onward, with these barrels found on guns "made in Ohio, Kentucky, New York, Indiana, Illinois, and elsewhere." Daniel Cryscher was one of these specialists in the making of gun barrels. Some surviving records show that he made barrels to order for gunsmiths in other counties, and one transaction in 1830 involves an order for fifteen gun barrels, with Cryscher offering ten more if wanted.[189]

Whisker also claims that

> Cottage industry gunsmiths supplied the militia needs of most states well through the War of 1812. Many Civil War militia regiments were armed with sniper and common weapons made by individual gunsmiths in their small shops…. Despite the growth of large industrial facilities for the manufacture of arms in the post Civil War era, the cottage industry remained a primary source of weapons until well after 1870.[190]

It appears that while Bellesiles has focused on the arms manufacturing performed under federal contracts, there were many gun makers supplying arms under state militia contracts. Henry DeHuff, Jr., for example, contracted on April 17, 1801 to make 500 muskets for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In association with Peter Brong and Abraham Henry, DeHuff submitted an unsuccessful bid on a contract with the state of Virginia for pistols and long guns.[191]

While the Springfield Armory made use of the apprentice system, much like the traditional gun making industry of America, it was almost immediately focused on specialized skills. When a father in 1825 asked the superintendent of the Springfield Armory about apprenticing his son there to look the gunsmith's trade, he was encouraged to apprentice his son to an individual tradesman, as he would more likely learn all the skills

[188] Whisker, 207.
[189] Whisker, 225-230.
[190] Whisker, 67.
[191] Whisker, 193-194.

required to become a gunsmith there. Springfield Armory was already well on its way towards specialization and division of labor.[192]

Deyrup's detailed examination of the Connecticut Valley arms manufacturing industry acknowledges that there are records of arms manufacturers of the period that were known to exist, but were unavailable, and that the early records of predecessor firms of Winchester and Smith & Wesson were destroyed.[193] Deyrup's study was "based in large part upon the records of the federal Armory at Springfield, Mass." This is not surprising, the government's armories have a very detailed set of records, "kept with a preciseness and detail uncommon in early American enterprise, and unique as far as New England arms manufacture is concerned."[194] Deyrup observes that before 1800, few businesses, aside from money-lenders and merchandisers kept detailed records, and consequently, "Little is known of the details of arms making in the Connecticut River Valley in the late eighteenth century."[195]

Bellesiles's study of gun manufacturing in the early Republic is associated with government contracts, at least partly because he assumes that there was no significant civilian market for guns in the early Republic. At the same time, governments being among the best keepers of records, reliance on official records will tend to overstate the importance of government contracts relative to the private sector. An additional problem that tends to understate smaller gun manufacturing operations in the United States Censuses of Manufactures included only firms grossing more than $500 a year, or employing more than one person. We know of at least one illiterate Virginia gunsmith, Joseph Shelton, who made guns for at least three decades starting in 1820, but appeared only in the 1820 Industrial Census.[196] It seems likely that many other small gun makers are

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[192] Whisker, 4-5.
[193] Deyrup, vii.
[194] Deyrup, 5.
[195] Deyrup, 33.
[196] Deyrup, 7, n. **; James Whisker, *The Gunsmith's Trade* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 47-48.

also missing from the censuses, but this in no way indicates that they were not making guns.

Unsurprisingly, the sort of firms that grew up around federal gun contracts starting in the 1790s have high visibility in records, for the same reason that a large textile mill with hundreds of workers is more visible than hundreds of individual weavers working at home. Bellesiles, with his focus on government contracts, consequently only sees these large firms.

In the early Republic, Bellesiles does admit that some guns were manufactured in the United States, mostly at government arsenals, but downplays the number of both makers and guns made. But before we get to the question of how effective private gun manufacturers are, we have to confront yet another example of intentional fraud, and this is a most egregious case. Bellesiles discusses the Militia Act of 1792, and how it obligated every able-bodied free white male between 18 and 45 to enroll in the militia:

> Further, "every citizen so enrolled, shall...be constantly provided with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints," and other accoutrements. Congress took upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns, and specified that within five years all muskets "shall be of bores sufficient for balls of the eighteenth part of a pound."

He cites this as *U.S. Statutes* 1:271-74. But that isn't what the Militia Act of 1792 says. The actual text is:

> That every citizen so enrolled *and notified, shall within six months thereafter, provide himself* with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints, and a knapsack, a pouch with a box therein to contain not less than twenty-four cartridges, suited to the bore of his musket or firelock: or with a good rifle, knapsack, shot-pouch and powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder....[197] [missing text emphasized]

Not only does he leave out the words "provide himself" that demonstrate that Congress did *not* take "upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns," but he added the words "constantly provided" to cover that he had changed the tense of the verb.

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[197] *Statutes at Large*, 2nd Cong., sess. 1, Ch. 33 (1792), 1:271-74. *Statutes at Large* is identical to *U.S. Statutes*. Why he uses this title escapes me.

There is an 1803 Militia Act that says, "That every citizen duly enrolled in the militia, shall be constantly provided with arms, accoutrements, and ammunition…"[198] But this doesn't match Bellesiles's "quote" either; Bellesiles doesn't cite the 1803 Militia Act; and even it doesn't specify that *Congress* is to supply the arms; it seems to leave it a bit open as to who is obligated to keep the militiamen supplied.

Most interesting are Bellesiles's claims about the inability of private gun manufacturers to build to government contracts, and how differently less partisan authors report the same facts. After reporting that Congress decided to supply all the arms of the militia, "Congress ordered the purchase of seven thousand muskets. Over the next two years, the government was able to purchase only 480 'rifle guns.'"[199]

M. L. Brown gives a very different description of the 1792 contract:

> In 1792 Congress, further alarmed by increasing British and Spanish activity along the vast frontier, raised a battalion of riflemen consisting of four companies each comprised of 82 privates which were to be armed with the American rifle….
>
> The contract rifles…were purchased from Pennsylvania riflesmiths between September 12, 1792, and May 5, 1793, at an average cost of $10.00 per stand….[200]

A total of 436 rifles were produced and delivered in less than nine months[201] to arm 328 soldiers. The limitation was not that private industry could not supply enough rifles, as Bellesiles's use of "only" seems to imply, but that the government was only buying enough guns for four companies of riflemen.

Concerning the 7,000 muskets that Bellesiles represents as being ordered by Congress in 1792, Deyrup cites the same source, but reports that the contract was in 1794, and that the government successfully bought 2,000 rifles that same year.[202] If the primary source cited by Bellesiles and Deyrup were readily available, it would be interesting to see if

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[198] *Statutes at Large*, 7th Cong., sess. 2, Ch. 15 (1803), 2:207
[199] Bellesiles, 230.
[200] Brown, 361-62.
[201] Brown, 362.
[202] Deyrup, 42-43.

Bellesiles is correct, or Deyrup, but with Bellesiles's track record of careful and honest scholarship, why bother?

A report of firearms received "to the 1st of January 1803" showed a total of 24,136 muskets, rifles, and pistols manufactured by at least 35 different contract manufacturers.[203] A total of 31,030 muskets were delivered by 19 different private gun makers under government contract between 1808 and October, 1812.[204] Why did the government make use of this contract system instead of purchasing arms on the open market?

Bellesiles portrays this as recognition that American gunmakers "could not collectively produce in a reasonable period the fourteen thousand arms [the federal government] hoped to buy."[205] But Deyrup gives another explanation, and one that explains how the government was able to order and received 436 rifles in less than nine months, and 2,000 more rifles during 1794, but preferred a contract system instead. The federal government was reluctant to purchase large numbers of muskets over which they had no quality control, and only limited opportunity to inspect the guns during production. The contract system, as well as government production of muskets, provided an opportunity for the government to have more control over the production process.[206]

Bellesiles portrays the failure of the federal contractors to fulfill their contracts as indicative of a fundamental lack of knowledge of gun manufacturing in America, claiming that Eli Whitney "recognized the basic problem with large-scale arms production in the United States; there were not enough trained gunsmiths."[207] But what Whitney was attempting to do was to create a division of labor that allowed interchangeable gun parts to be made by less skilled workers. As Bellesiles recognizes, Whitney never really made this

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[203] Arthur Nehrbass, "Notes on Early U. S. Rifle and Musket Production," *The Gun Report*, October, 1972, 25.

[204] George C. Maynard, "Notes on the Manufacture of Small Arms for the United States Army by the Government and Private Makers in the Nineteenth Century," *Stock and Steel*, June 1923, 9-10.

[205] Bellesiles, 232.

[206] Deyrup, 42-43.

[207] Bellesiles, 233.

idea work. Whitney's problem was not a lack of trained gunsmiths, but an inability to develop the technology that allowed him to *not* hire trained gunsmiths.

Other manufacturers, while not trying to lead the technology as aggressively as Whitney, were attempting to transform a traditional, small-scale handicraft industry—gun making—into a large factory system. "[C]ontractors were forced into division of labor and the invention of machine tools, which, though of incalculable benefit to the industry, delayed them in filling their contracts."[208]

Bellesiles also portrays the failure of contract manufacturers as government largesse without any acknowledgment of the unusual circumstances under which the contract manufacturers operated, claiming that, "It never seemed to occur to any contemporary that gun manufacturing should be left to the vagaries of the free market, perhaps because they all knew that the public was not sufficiently interested in guns."[209] Everything about the government contracts, however, was an attempt to defeat a free market.

Contractors were not allowed to use imported parts, because that would defeat the government's goal—creation of a large scale factory system for making military weapons. The government was very selective to whom they gave arms contracts, excluding those who had gunsmithing experience, but not property. The government's goal seems to have been to make recovery of damages for non-performance easier. Government contractors were also prohibited from doing business with any other customers, leading to serious problems when a contract had been fulfilled, but a new one had not yet been granted.[210]

Perhaps the hardest problem to understand in an age when accountants calculate manufacturing costs to the penny is that cost accounting was still in its infancy. The contractors—and the government—were still learning how to deal with overhead, depreciation of tools, distinguishing investments in factories from investments in the land

[208] Deyrup, 48.
[209] Bellesiles, 235.
[210] Deyrup, 44-47.

on which the factory was built. It appears that along with the surprises and delays associated with pioneering large scale gun manufacturing in the United States, the government contractors in the period 1798-1830 were building muskets for an average cost of $12.88. Yet from 1807 to 1810, the contracted price the government paid contractors was $10.75. Many of the early contractors lost money on every musket delivered.

Even the government's own Springfield Armory, a model of success to Bellesiles, figured its production costs in the early years as high as $16.48 per musket, and usually exceeding $13.00 each.[211] Springfield Armory's success in making guns was consistent with the $300 hammer horror stories of the modern age. This explains also why, as Bellesiles smugly notes, a number of contractors asked to be let out of their federal contracts.[212] If contracts were money-losing propositions, the temptation to manufacture for the more lucrative private sector would have been very strong.

What do we know about firearms manufacturing in the early Republic? Relatively little, except for that which we can find with respect to government contractors. We do know that there were Americans making gunlocks, but apparently not in connection with the government contractors. Robert McCormick advertised for "Lock forgers, lock filers" among other "Gun-Smiths wanted" in the *Pennsylvania Herald and York General Advertiser* of May 25, 1798.[213] Daniel Sweitzer advertised for mechanics to work at his "Gun Lock Manufactory" in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania newspaper on August 23, 1808.[214]

The government's musket contractors are probably no more typical of gun manufacturing in the early Republic than defense industries in the late twentieth century were typical of private sector manufacturing companies. By focusing attention on the emerging large firearms factories, Bellesiles has completely missed the small, decentralized, still largely handicraft gun making business in America.

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[211] Deyrup, 48-54.
[212] Bellesiles, 242.
[213] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware,* 115.
[214] Kauffman, *Early American Ironware,* 115.

Travel Accounts

Another example of what makes *Arming America*–and the author–not simply wrong, but intentionally deceptive, is the claim, "an examination of eighty travel accounts written in America from 1750 to 1860 indicate that the travelers did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence."[1] Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the 1840s was done almost entirely by a small number of professional market hunters, or by Indians. Most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt.[2]

Bellesiles's romantic, nearly gunless America where few non-Indians hunted (and then, almost entirely with knives), is intriguing. But as I started to read travel accounts from the first 40 years of the nineteenth century, I came to the realization that if Bellesiles is right about this rarity of guns and hunting, not only will a lot of our textbooks have to be rewritten, but dozens of books written by people who lived in the period 1800-1840 will have to be rewritten as well, to bring them into conformity with Bellesiles's highly selective, often grossly misquoted "scholarship."

Let us be very clear on this: I am not saying that Bellesiles simply hasn't read the same sources that I have. It is very easy, with the enormous supply of books, diaries, and government reports from that time, to find two different historians coming to very different conclusions by reading different sources. One can be led astray by focusing entirely on one region of the country, and assuming that this region typifies America. Indeed, if Bellesiles

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[1] Bellesiles, 304.
[2] Bellesiles, 320-23.

had read only sources associated with the North, or perhaps even the coastal lowlands of the South, I could accept the possibility that he simply over generalized from the relatively peaceful nature of those regions.

Had Bellesiles read a *completely* different set of travel accounts, I could wonder about the odds of his travelers not noticing that they "were surrounded by guns and violence," while so many other travelers noticed and wrote about it at length. But there are enough sources that Bellesiles has read (or claims to have read) that I have read as well–and that make it very clear that before 1840, guns, murder, mayhem, and hunting were widespread on the frontier, and not unknown or even startling in the settled and urban East.

What can one say when Bellesiles reads Baynard Rush Hall's memoir of frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816)–and misses Hall's detailed description of how hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh meat at very little expense.[3] Not surrounded by guns? Hall devotes an entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

> Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated….[4]

Hall also describes target shooting matches as common, and takes pride in participating in a match that he happened upon where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As the president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the ground.[5] (See also the account of Richard Flower describing the 1820-21 Illinois Territory–one of many that Bellesiles didn't read. At the frontier village of Albion, Sunday amusements included that "the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport….")[6]

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[3] Robert Carleton [Baynard Rush Hall], *The New Purchase, or Early Years in the Far West*, 2nd ed. (New Albany, Ind., 1855), 66, 82, 139-49, 153, 160-3, 375, 448-51.

[4] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 100-113.

[5] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 104.

[6] Richard Flower, *Letters from the Illinois, 1820-1821: Containing An Account of the English Settlement at Albion and Its Vicinity*… (London, 1822), 14.

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience. They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but rifle matches they understood.[7] Hall also describes the use of rifles both by settlers pursuing criminals, and by criminals trying to avoid arrest.[8]

Hunting and target shooting were common enough that Hall describes non-lethal hunting and target shooting accidents.[9] Hall also makes occasional references to pistols with no indication that they were either rare or regarded with any particular concern.[10] Yet Hall's references to pistols are far exceeded by mentions of rifles and shotguns. Hall's discussions of hunting, use and misuse of guns, and target shooting take up 41 pages of Hall's book–all of which Bellesiles seems to have either missed, or disregarded.

Bellesiles read Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama, and missed her discussion of the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events, incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also refers to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car. [11]

Even when Bellesiles admits that there is a mention of guns in one of these travel accounts, he distorts what it says to fit his novel claims. As an example, "Similarly, Ole Rynning advised his Norwegian readers to bring 'good rifles with percussion locks,' as such good guns are far too expensive in America and can be sold there for a good profit. Guns thus had an economic value, but if thought requisite for self-protection, it remained an unstated assumption."[12]

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[7] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 228-30.
[8] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 189-90.
[9] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 262-3.
[10] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 449, 452.
[11] Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-189, 203.
[12] Bellesiles, 339.

But unlike the vast majority of those who will read Bellesiles, and accept the accuracy of Bellesiles's statement, I had already read Rynning's book, and knew what it *actually* said there. Rynning said to bring "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."[13] Bellesiles didn't actually lie, and say that the *only* possible value of a gun for a Norwegian immigrant was to sell it here; instead, he misleads, by giving the impression that the value of bringing a good gun to America was to sell it, not to use it yourself. Rynning is clear that one should bring guns both to sell, and because you would need them here.

Bellesiles is really a master of this sort of careful mischaracterization of sources that doesn't quite cross the line into lying. Another example is Charles Augustus Murray's description of his hunting trip from Britain to America in the late 1830s. Bellesiles tells us that, "Hunting in America disappointed Murray. He had expected more gentlemen hunters, but only army officers on frontier posts seemed to fit that description."[14] Having spent great energy in promoting the idea that hunting was a rare activity, done only by professional market hunters and Indians, the reader not familiar with Murray's book will slide right past that sentence and conclude that there weren't many hunters in America. But Murray met *lots* of hunters–they just weren't "gentlemen" hunters. Murray shows his understanding of how common both firearms ownership and sport hunting were in rural Virginia–and these were ordinary farmers, not "gentlemen" of the sort that Bellesiles claims were overwhelmingly the sport hunters of that time:

> I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, "I guess I could beat you to a mark."[15]

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[13] Rynning, 99.

[14] Bellesiles, 309.

[15] Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London, 1839, reprinted New York, 1974), 118-19.

Bellesiles read Murray, Rynning, Royall, and Hall; he quotes selectively and out of context from some, and mischaracterizes others, when he tells us that the travel accounts generally show no evidence that the travelers were "surrounded by guns."

I could belabor the point, and point to the dozens of other travel accounts that Bellesiles seems to have missed–including common works such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Journey to America*. A young Alabama lawyer that Alexis de Tocqueville spoke with in 1831 asserted, "There is no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society."[16] While it is possible that most of these concealed weapons were knives, it requires a strained reading of Tocqueville's text to hold that handguns were scarce–or that America was the peaceful, almost pacifist nation that Bellesiles describes.

Tocqueville also presents evidence that widespread gun ownership was not peculiar to Alabama; he quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

> [T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting.… There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.[17]

Tocqueville also describes a usual "peasant's cabin" in Kentucky or Tennessee: "There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a newspaper…."[18] Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

Perhaps Bellesiles is right, and dozens of eyewitnesses of the time are wrong. But when an historian repeatedly mischaracterizes, quotes out of context, or simply ignores sources because they do not fit his claims–well, let's just say that it's bit early to start revising textbooks to fit the new wisdom from *Arming America*.

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[16] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven, 1960), 103.
[17] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 95.
[18] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 281.

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