

Union County Gunsmiths and the Development of the Upper Susquehanna School

By

Richard Nornhold

Probably few craftsmen required more skills than the early gunsmiths. They had to be both a blacksmith and a woodworker and many also rivaled the finest silver smiths and carvers in the creation of what is often today seen more as an object of art than a weapon. The role that old Union County (Union County before Snyder County was created from it in 1855) played in this industry has seldom been recognized by many residents of the area, but one that is well known to numerous collectors across the U.S. More than 100 gunsmiths worked in every part of the old county producing some of the finest specimens of what is often referred to as the “Kentucky Rifle” while creating a unique style known today as the “Upper Susquehanna School.”



Rifle signed “I. M.” attributed to Jacob Markley ca. 1780. In the 18th Century “I” and “J” were interchangeable.

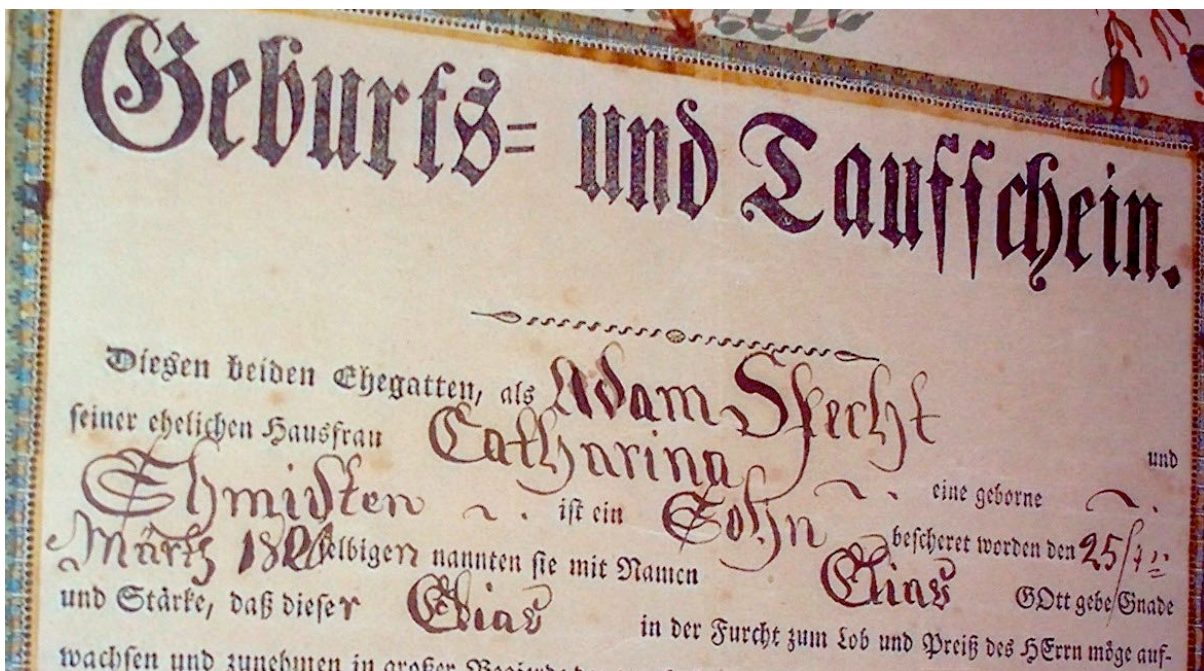
Who were the most influential of these “smiths” and where did they live? These questions haven long been a subject of debate and conjecture among numerous students of this trade, and while this essay is not meant to be the final word on a topic that clearly needs more research, it is an attempt to bring some clarity to the development of this School.

The earliest gunsmiths to ply their craft in central Pennsylvania seem to have been associated with Fort Augusta. William Antes, his son-in-law Jacob Markley, and a few others fall into this category and their efforts were most commonly directed at the repair of weapons for Indians, soldiers, and local settlers. The few pieces known by these early artisans show little or no resemblance to the “school” that would develop in the 1790-1830 period. Therefore, it is the period after the Revolutionary War, when more inhabitants settled in this area and a greater need was created for a tool necessary to put food on the table, that a style that has come to be associated with central Pennsylvania began to develop.

Various regions of Pennsylvania created guns that had characteristics of their particular area, and guns created in York, Lancaster, or Berks Counties, or the Lehigh Valley all have distinguishing characteristics which make them quite different from each other. These differences place them in their respective “schools”, and makes their area of origin easily recognizable to collectors. The characteristics of the school of gunsmithing that developed in old Union County are readily apparent to students of this craft, but these quantifying features have not been nearly as well identified and publicized as other Pennsylvania regions. Among the features important to Upper Susquehanna guns are the shape of the stock, if a patchbox exists, the mechanism by which it is opened, the method by which many gunsmiths made the rear ramrod pipe, and often the use of inlays and carving. It is the totality of these features that forms the “Upper Susquehanna School.”

Since it was within the Pennsylvania German community that the gunsmithing trade was most commonly found, it is no surprise that most of Union County’s earliest smiths were of German extraction. Much of the migration into

the center of the state came from the southeastern German-speaking counties, and Berks County in particular has generally been cited as the region having the greatest influence on the Union County style. However, of the three earliest artisans cited as the most influential, only two have connections to Berks County while the other came from the county of Bucks. Those three are Peter Shmidt from White Deer (husband of Widow Catherine Shmidt) whose name was later anglicized to Smith, John Dreisbach from the Mifflinburg area, and Samuel Baum of New Berlin who had connections to Bucks County. All three had descendants who were accomplished gunsmiths and all three undoubtedly trained many apprentices in their shops. It is from this training that the unique Upper Susquehanna style developed.



Birth certificate of gunsmith Adam Specht – great-grandson of Widow Catharina Shmidt

The earliest of these was the Shmidt/Smith family who had settled in the White Deer area by the time of the Revolutionary War. While no rifles produced by Peter Smith have been observed by the author and little is known about him personally, his descendants include gunsmiths Jacob Smith, probably George Smith, three members of the Specht family, and numerous others, some of whom

relocated to the Huntingdon County area. The members of this family who remained in the area produced rifles that clearly showed the Upper Susquehanna style. Interestingly, this family is seldom credited with being an important influence on the creation of this school. Jacob Smith was for a time living in New Berlin and later in Beavertown where his daughter, Catharina, married gunsmith Adam Specht and gave birth to three who became gunsmiths – Adam, Moses, and Elias. The Shmidt/Smith family should not be ignored when looking at the connections to the development of local rifle style.

All of the earliest gunsmiths have a connection to New Berlin, which seems to be the epicenter of the gunsmithing trade for the Upper Susquehanna School. Jacob Smith, John Dreisbach (or perhaps his son – John, Jr.), and Samuel Baum all lived in New Berlin at some point and probably trained many apprentices there during their time of residence. No other community in the old county has a greater claim to this trade than New Berlin and it would be difficult to find another community that has more gunsmiths that lived or trained there.



Obverse of this rifle is on the following page



Rifle by George Kolpitzer of New Berlin showing strong influences of the Smith Family under whom he probably apprenticed.

Linn's *Annals of the Buffalo Valley* states that John Dreisbach, Sr. was living in the Buffalo Valley by 1789 where he had moved with his father, Martin, also a gunsmith, from Alsace Township, Berks County. He married Catherine Youngman the daughter of Elias Youngman, the founder of Mifflinburg, and according to the census of 1810 he was living in West Buffalo Township and had perhaps as many as six sons and three daughters. Dreisbach is found living in various places at different times and this movement seems to fit a pattern that many gunsmiths followed, living in various communities and even other states throughout their life.

According to Linn, Dreisbach was in West Buffalo Township in 1796 where he had a "hewed log house, stable, brick kitchen and a frame shop." In 1802 he was in



Rifle signed "J.D." for John Dreisbach ca. 1800

East Buffalo Township and by 1810 he was back in West Buffalo Township. In all of these locations however, he was always identified as a gunsmith. The importance of Dreisbach to the development of the Upper Susquehanna School should not be underestimated. His earliest identified guns show a strong styling that changed little throughout the years and, like the early Smith rifles, his features seem to have been copied by ensuing gunsmiths. His work exhibited a fine selection of wood, well executed incised carving, and excellent craftsmanship. He was clearly one of the finest gunsmiths to live in the area. He had two sons, John Jr. and Samuel, who also produced nice rifles although not as fine as those produced by their father. John Jr., lived in East Buffalo Township while his

brother Samuel set up shop in Mifflinburg where he worked for a number of years before moving to Ohio. John Senior's daughter, Mary, married Isaac Beck from Mifflinburg who was also part of a large gunsmithing family in that community.



Rifle signed "J.D." and attributed to John Dreisbach, Jr. ca. 1835

Samuel Baum, Sr., the third of the early gunsmiths, is considered by some to be the most influential of the Upper Susquehanna gunsmiths. This acclaim may be the result of the number of apprentices and journeymen he had working in his shops rather than his contributions to the development of the Upper Susquehanna style. Like Dreisbach he is believed to have moved to what is now Union County about 1789 and over the years he had a shop in New Berlin and later a second shop, operated by his son, near Danville in what is today Montour County. He is believed to have trained and employed more gunsmiths than anyone else in the area and while many rifles are known that are signed "S.B.", most were probably made by one of his apprentices or journeymen and are only the product of his shops. Baum's earliest pieces do not show the characteristic features of what would later become common in Union County. Instead his early production showed a style more common to the Lehigh Valley which was near to where he probably learned the trade in Bucks County. His style did change to more closely resemble the work of the Smiths and the Dreisbachs and none of the

smiths that are believed to have worked in Baum's shops are known to have made pieces reflecting his earliest work.



Early Samuel Baum Rifle showing a strong Lehigh Valley influence ca. 1800. Notice how the stock differs from the Dreisbach and Kolpitzer rifles shown

From these pioneers of old Union County gunsmithing, a plethora of gunsmiths spread into many local communities and indeed to many other counties and states. Thus the legacy of their training spread far beyond the shops where they plied their trade. In an effort to show the scope of their importance, the following list of local communities and smiths known to have worked in each is shown. Note that some smiths worked at various times in different communities and therefore show up multiple times on the lists. No attempt is made to identify who trained them, but it must be assumed that many learned their trade from the smiths already identified or from a second generation

smith who learned the trade from these earliest craftsmen. At the very least, most were influenced by the Smiths, Dreisbach, or Baum. This list is compiled from census and tax records, and the following books: *The Pennsylvania/Kentucky Rifle* by Henry Kauffman, *Arms Makers of Pennsylvania* by James Whisker, *American Gun Makers* by Arcadi Gluckman, *Early Riflemakers of Snyder and Union Counties, Pennsylvania*, by Dalas Ewing published in the *Snyder County Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. IV, Number 7, and family information and research provided by Mark Loudenslager. In order to more clearly show regions within the old county, often several towns and townships are grouped together. As there are Upper Susquehanna guns known with initials from as yet unidentified smiths, this list is incomplete and will surely grow in the future as more research leads to their identification.

Currently Known Gunsmiths of Old Union County

Adam, Beaver, and Spring Townships:

Amos Benfer, Arnig Benfer, Moses Benfer, Jacob Grimm, Isaiah Kuhns, George Long, James Long, Jesse Long, Joseph Long, Josiah B. Long, William Long, Edward Rothrock, Jacob Shmidt (Smith), Adam Specht, Jr., Adam Specht, Sr., Elias Specht, John Specht, Moses Specht, John Try, Isaac Unagst, and John Worley

Buffalo Townships (ALL of the Buffalo Townships):

George Betzer Sr., Christian Derr, John Dreisbach Jr., John Dreisbach Sr., John Ehrenhart, Jacob Frock, Isaac Hanna, Amos Kauffman, Samuel Kauffman, Levi Kaup, George Kolpitzer, Levi Long, Joseph Shaffer, and George Smith

Hartley Township:

Jacob Barnet, Henry Hunsicker, David Kline, George Sheesley, William Weirick, and Adam Wiker

Kratzerville and Jackson and Middlecreek Townships:

George Boyer, Perry Fetter, Samuel St. Clair, Jonathan Wetzel, and Henry Wetzel

Lewisburg:

David Angstadt, Gideon Angstadt, Frederick Beerstecher, Frederick Dreisbach, Johan Albright, Samuel Frederick, and Philip Kockler

Limestone Township:

George Boyer and Peter Bowman

Middleburg and Centre Township:

Alexander Bishop, Edward Bishop, George Kolpitzer, George Kain (Keen), William Lloyd, John Siefred, Jonathan Wetzler, A. Young, and David Young

Mifflinburg:

David Angstadt, Isaac Beck, Henry Doebler, John Dreisbach Jr., John Dreisbach Sr., George Dreisbach, Henry Beck, Jacob Barnett, Samuel Dreisbach, Thomas Dreisbach, John Ehrenhart, and Henry Lapkeler

Monroe Township:

Jacob Baum, George Kain (Keen), John Straub, and John George Ulrich

New Berlin:

John Baker Jr., Charles Baum, Samuel Baum Jr., Samuel Baum Sr., George Kolpitzer, Henry Doebler, John Dreisbach Jr., Henry Maize, Joseph Shaffer, Franklin Slauffer, Jacob Smith, George Smith, Peter Smith Jr., Peter Smith Sr., and Adam Specht Sr.

Perry and Washington Townships:

Isaac Hanna, John Siefred, and David Roush

Selinsgrove and Penn Township:

Nicholas Gaugler, John Ehrenhart, John Jacob Hummel, George Kain (Keen), Henry Laudenslager, Jacob Laudenslager, John Laudenslager, Samuel Laudenslager, William Laudenslager, John Parks Jr., John Parks Sr., Edward Row, Elias Row, Jacob Row, John Row, and Alexander Siefried

Union Township (Union County):

Charles Gross, Henry Gross Jr., Henry Gross Sr., Samuel Gross, George Kolpitzer, and Isaac Hanna

White Deer and Gregg Townships:

John Jacob Hummel, Paul Fisher, Daniel Fisher, Joseph Long, Jacob Rate, and Catharine Shmidt (Smith)

Unknown:

J.P. Beck, Adam Daniels, Samuel Morrison, and Jacob Bates

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