PORTALS IN TIME
By Mark Sage

A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF NORTHWEST TRADE GUNS: PART I

SOMETIMES DURING THE FALL of 1797, a wooden, wind-driven ship dropped anchor in the Thames River in London, England. There, a well-dressed gentleman stepped out onto the wharf and breathed a sigh of relief. He was an agent for the North West Company (NWC), based in Montreal, Canada. The trip across the Atlantic had been long and monotonous; now he was anxious to fulfill his two-fold mission. First, he needed to ensure that the cargo of furs that he had so carefully packed and guarded would be safely deposited at the warehouse of McTavish, Fraser and Company, a partner firm of the NWC whose main function was to market the furs brought from North America. They would also procure items for barter with the native people, with whom the NWC did a very profitable business, then process and pack those trade items for shipping back to Montreal in the spring. That was the agent’s second job while in England—to help purchase trade goods at an advantageous price.

After making sure that the furs were safely stored in the warehouse, he enjoyed a fine meal, washed down with Madeira wine, at the home of John Fraser. The agent brought news of the Canadian trade and letters from Simon McTavish, the chief partner in the NWC. After dinner, while smoking their pipes, Frasier outlined what the agent must do. He needed to travel “with all dispatch” to Birmingham and order a quantity of Northwest trade guns. Consequently, the next day the agent negotiated a ride by horse-drawn coach that took him on a two-day excursion through the picturesque English countryside to the town of Birmingham, right in the middle of England.

Birmingham, a leading manufacturing center had much going for it. With its rich deposits of coal and iron, it had developed over the past couple of centuries into a dynamic city of manufacturing—especially firearms.

Aside from the natural resources close by, Birmingham also sported a large labor force of skilled artisans who specialized in many different crafts. Canals were being built, as well as improved roads, helping to transport goods efficiently and economically to various English seaports. The net result being that Birmingham furnished an astonishing number of firearms and their components annually for the North American civilian and fur trade, the Royal African Company, the East India Company and, of course, the British military.

As the coach entered the great city and negotiated the labyrinth of crowded streets into what was called “the Gun Quarter,” the agent could not help but compare the noise, pungent smell of garbage, human and animal waste against the pristine Canadian wilderness that he had left behind only a month ago. Embedded in his mind were images of fresh air, majestic and ancient forests, wild animals and clear waters filled with all manner of fish. The agent smiled as he recalled the large bull moose he had seen near the nine-mile portage that extended from the North West Company’s

depot on the shore of Lake Superior to Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River. Big and powerful, the moose had stood passively watching and then in its own sweet time nonchalantly disappeared into the cedar and balsam forest. To the agent those misty and rocky shores of Lake Superior were sketched in a hauntingly beautiful manner on the canvas of his memory—along with the Ojibwe woman he had shared a blanket with at the Great Rendezvous last summer. Her name was Sha-wenn-ke-gun and he had understood the name to mean Southern Feather.

But now, he captured his thoughts to focus on the task at hand, which was to order a quantity of Northwest guns to take back to Canada on his return trip next spring. He wondered if he would encounter a rival agent from the Hudson’s Bay Company in the town as they also purchased Northwest guns in Birmingham. As a gentleman he would have to be civil, but the two companies were fierce rivals in the Indian trade, even cutthroat at times.

His immediate business was with the establishment of gunmaker Robert Wheeler. The carriage pulled up to 24 Snow Hill Street and the agent stepped down, paid the driver and looked at the sign over the door that said Robert Wheeler and Son. With a quick and determined step, he was at the door.

Robert Wheeler, by now an old man, was somewhat detached from the business. Therefore, it was his son who greeted the agent. Upon entering the building, the North West Company’s agent removed his fine beaver hat as he smiled and shook hands with the respected gunmaker. Then off came his great coat, and after amenities were exchanged, it was time to get down to dealing. The Wheelers were happy to have the NWC as customers. They were a respected and reliable firm when it came to prompt payment. The NWC had also come to trust the reliability, quality and consistency of firearms acquired from the Wheelers.

The order that the agent had in hand for firearms was a direct result of a complex process that involved an interaction between native customers and various partners the company employed in the field throughout the Great Lakes and Canada. Indians, in fact, were discerning customers when it came to guns and would give feedback to the company partners at the various trading locations. Since a firearm was an important tool for both hunting and war, Indian people were particular about quality in regards to the barrel, lock, length of pull and drop of the buttstock. Sometimes complaints were made and the agent would receive instructions for future purchases.

"Let the guns you send next be not altogether so big in the bore, for the Indians complain of the wideness thereof. Let the bore be of that size as to take a low East India shot and let the grasp of the stock be somewhat smaller than the last, for the Indians complain of the clumsiness of them." (Gooding 68)

And just like today, when people go shopping, they like to have variety and different choices, so native people liked options of barrel length and metal finish.

"Of late years our common Indian Guns have not given satisfaction. Indians complain of the stocks as being clumsy and finished without taste and also that the cocks are weak in the spring. We request that those now ordered may have the stock of a nearer shape and coated with a fine sable brown varnish and with double neck cocks and the priming guns perfectly powder tight." (Gooding 69)

All of this field-garnered information and more would be discussed when the partners congregated in the great house at Grand Portage during the mid-summer rendezvous on the north shore of Lake Superior in present-day Minnesota. The partners and voyageurs from various far western posts ("Norwester’s" or "Hivemants") would bring the furs they had bartered for since the rendezvous of the previous year and exchange them for new trade goods brought from Montreal (via England) by the company’s partners and voyageurs ("Fork Eaters" or "Mangeurs du Lard") who resided there. Of course, the yearly rendezvous was a grand time for drinking, dancing and unbridled debauchery, but it would also be a time of business discussions and planning for next year’s trade. At Grand Portage
input would be given by the partners in the field concerning the types of trade goods and the quantity of trade items that might be needed for the following year, including firearms. From that meeting and later discussions back in Montreal, an itemized purchase plan would be drafted with notations and specifications. The Northwest trade gun played an important part in this system of commerce.

Simon McTavish, the senior partner in the NWC, had given the agent final and strict instructions the day before his departure from Montreal and then wished him a safe journey. Next year’s success would rest firmly in the hands of the agent and he knew he must not fail. Simon McTavish, although fair, was not a man to let down.

Back in London over the winter months the purchasing agent helped market the furs that had come so far across the globe. As a dedicated Freemason (as were both Robert Wheeler and his son), he frequently would attend lodge meetings or attend other social functions. A staunch Presbyterian, he would attend church on Sundays. But his main occupation was spending time at the company’s warehouse in London diligently assembling all the trade goods that he would take back across the Atlantic next spring. Every item had to be carefully itemized and packed securely in marked and numbered crates. Paperwork needed to be checked and double-checked for accuracy and stored in waterproof satchels. The Northwest guns got special attention. They were carefully inspected, oiled (rusting could be a real problem) and then wrapped and placed in long wooden boxes with the company’s name and the box number painted on the side.

At long last, in late winter or early spring, the agent boarded a sailing vessel to return across the temperamental Atlantic, enduring storms with cold, damp temperatures and finally traveling up the Saint Lawrence to Montreal. It was time to start the whole process of trade and barter once more. Soon the voyageurs and company partners would be congregating at a place named Lachine, where the large 36-foot birchbark canoes would be carefully packed and loaded for the trip to the interior of the continent via the Great Lakes. The Northwest guns ordered from Robert Wheeler would be a part of the cargo. The agent imagined seeing the long string of canoes, sometimes as many as 200, disappearing into the western horizon and hearing the voyageurs loudly sing their songs of cadence as their paddles in unison dipped quickly and efficiently into the icy spring water. He hoped his efforts would please Simon McTavish and he prayed for a safe voyage across the Atlantic—and he looked forward to seeing Sha-wen-ne-gun once again. Canada awaited him.

The above story is a representation of the process by which a Northwest trade gun in the late 18th century came to the shores of North America under the auspices of the NWC. This course of action would also have been similar for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), the difference being that the trade goods being shipped for the HBC would have been transported from England to the Canadian interior by Hudson’s Bay instead of the St. Lawrence River. The NWC and HBC were bitter trading rivals till their merger in 1821.

The Northwest gun came into being sometime before the American Revolution. We have no exact date, and the HBC gets the nod for its initial development and deployment. The HBC is the oldest commercial corporation in North America and one of the oldest in the world. Now it is
simply called “The Bay.” At one time it was the de facto government in certain parts of our continent and the largest corporate landowner in the world. Through the efforts of two Frenchmen, Groseilliers and Radisson, a Royal Charter was granted by King Charles II on May 2, 1670, establishing the company and giving it trading rights to all of the lands draining into Hudson’s Bay. Although we don’t know the exact birthdate of the Northwest gun, thanks to some surviving letters from the HBC archives, we can narrow down the time period. In November of 1753, Thomas Hartwell, who made Indian guns, was ordered by the Ordnance department to make:

20 Best NW Barrels of 4 feet at 6/6 each and 380 four feet ditto made to Pattern at 4/- each. (Gooding 53)

In 1760, the armourer at York Factory included in his requirements for 1761:

...a Britich Screw Plate & Taps for Britiching Gun Barrels of the same third [thread] as the NW Barrels are and a boreing Bitt same Size as the NW Guns have for boreing the hole for the ram rod. (Gooding 53)

It should be noted that when the Northwest Company came into being in 1779, they merely adopted the highly successful Northwest gun pattern the HBC was already using, had it fabricated in Birmingham by their own gunmakers and then marketed those guns for their own exclusive trading purposes.

Our journey into the world of Northwest guns would not be complete without a thorough description of this firearm. Just what are the defining or identifying features of a Northwest gun?

A critically important identifying feature of a Northwest gun is the side plate. Referred to as “the serpent,” or some say “dragon,” side plate, these are made of cast brass and have raised scales on the surface that can easily be felt upon examination. Earlier trade guns like the English Type G sported a serpent/dragon-style side plate in various forms; however, those were smooth on the surface with the serpent (or dragon) scale lines engraved on them rather than cast. The side plate (as well as other features on the Northwest gun) can be traced from early military muskets, according to Charles Hanson. He comments:

The early Dutch pieces and their later English counterparts are of more interest to the student of trade guns than the products of France because

Identifying features of a Northwest gun include the serpent side plate and large-bowed trigger guard (top photo) and the sheet brass butt plate (right). Earlier butt plates were nailed on while later ones were affixed with screws.

Light colonial muskets of the pattern popular in the reigns of King William and Queen Anne were the prototypes for later trade guns... (7)

Another distinctive characteristic is the overly large, bowed trigger guard. I cannot think of any other trade gun that has this prominent feature. There are some different theories about why the trigger guard is made so big. The assumption has been that the large trigger guard was developed to help facilitate shooting with mittens during those long, cold northern winters. That could be a side benefit of the design but perhaps not the original driver. Some feel that it had to do with the trigger pull. In 1740 a letter was written from the Hudson’s Bay Company to an agent in London with this request:

...To have the guard [made] larger, it being usual to draw the trigger with two fingers, which our [present] guns will not admit of. (Gooding 74)

Ryan Gale suggests:

As you probably know there is an ongoing debate about the enlarged trigger guards. I don’t go with the horrendous trigger-pull theory. Most trade guns were made with moderate trigger-pulls. Instead, I believe the Indians were using two fingers because they were accustomed to shooting bows, and the strings were drawn with two fingers—that’s my personal opinion.

The butt plate, utilitarian in design, was constructed of sheet
brass, rounded at the heel and secured with small square nails. These were economical to fabricate and easy to install, yet durable. Around the 1840s screws began to be used to attach the butt plate, usually five in number.

The early HBC Northwest gun locks would have been flintlock, round-faced, with an unbridled frizzen and secured to the stock (at least in the 18th century) with three lock bolts. The gunmaker’s name was either stamped or engraved behind the cock. In front of the cocking mechanism and behind the frizzen spring would be a very important stamp, that of a sitting fox over a set of initials, set in a sort of tombstone frame. Those initials were probably those of the company’s viewmaster. From 1790 to 1890 HBC locks would utilize the initials “EB.” Ryan Gale explains:

The Hudson’s Bay Company maintained a viewmaster virtually from its inception. The viewmaster was an experienced gunsmith who oversaw firearm quality and uniformity. (4)

It should be noted that the “tombstone fox” stamped on HBC guns will always face left toward the buttstock, even through the percussion era. There is little doubt that the “sitting fox” emblem/stamp originated with the HBC (Gale 5; Gooding 18).

The NWC also utilized a “sitting fox” emblem stamped on their locks (an obvious rip off from their northern competitor), only the fox was placed within a circle and the fox always faced right. Locks produced in later years became flat-faced during the percussion era.

I find it interesting, when comparing the sitting tombstone fox to the sitting fox in the circle stamp/emblem, that the tombstone fox always has his tail up in the air while the fox-in-the-circle’s tail is always down by his feet.

A design feature that I think is quite clever revolves around how the barrel is secured to the stock in the tang area. It did not originate with the Northwest gun but can also be found on earlier English trade guns like the Type G. Instead of a wood screw going through the barrel tang into the wrist area from the top, a threaded bolt was used that went up from the bottom of the stock, starting through the trigger guard where the bow meets the finial. The bolt then passes through the wrist proper at a slight angle and was threaded into the barrel tang. This method really holds the barrel firmly to the stock, strengthens the wrist area and holds the front part of the trigger guard in place.

Recently, thanks to the Minnesota Historical Society, I had the opportunity to examine an original North West trade gun produced in Birmingham, England, sometime in the 1790s for the NWC. The name on the lock plate was Robert Wheeler. Reconstructing the journey of a North West trade gun in the late 1700s to our present century has provided a catalyst for my own personal understanding of the English gun building empire and the process by which fur trading companies acquired and distributed firearms during the fur trade era. Developed first by the British and later copied by American gun builders, this well-designed, inexpensive, rugged and practical smoothbore was traded throughout the Great Lakes, Canada and the American West during the fur trade era starting in the mid- to late-18th century. Although it is a bare bones, humble sort of firearm, its plainness only underscores the iconic status it has achieved over the years. We cannot think of the fur trade era without considering the Northwest gun’s place in its history. It was the right firearm at an optimal price with an efficient design targeted for the correct market and was a smashing success! The longevity of this firearm’s
popularity speaks for itself. As such, the Northwest gun is deserving of our study, recognition and respect.

For years now I have sported an affinity for smoothbore firearms produced for the North American fur trade. Certainly, the Northwest trade gun holds a special, unique and dominant place in the commerce of that lucrative enterprise. Charles Hanson comments:

Probably no other model of gun in American history had such widespread use for so long a period...a hundred years ago they were in daily use from the Ohio Valley to peaks of the Rockies and from Mexican border to the Arctic Circle. (2; Hanson's book was published in 1955)

It is interesting to note that the HBC was still advertising a few Northwest guns in their catalog (percussion models) in the first decade of the 20th century. Just how many of these guns were produced? Nobody really knows, but I believe there were many. They are still found here in Minnesota. A friend of mine bought a flintlock Northwest gun at a local rummage sale. Another friend, Lenny Clark, acquired a complete set of North West gun parts (minus the stock) of a Barnett, percussion (1874) model, also at a rummage sale. In a nearby town, a local Hardware Hank store has an original Barnett Northwest gun (circa 1862) hanging on a wall. Originally a flintlock, this gun was converted to percussion sometime in its long life. This gun is graced with its original horn and shot pouch, making it more valuable for study. It has a solid written provenance, once belonging to a local Ojibwe Indian. Charles Hanson, in talking about Northwest guns, writes:

The number of specimens found indicates that a very large number of guns were originally made, when the estimated 'rate of survival' is applied. (16)

Somewhere, these Indian trade guns stimulate images of birch-bark canoes, bales of prime beaver pelts being packed for their destination across the Atlantic, lusty singing voyageurs, Europeans and Indians intermingling their cultures. The fur trade was the harbinger of North America's Western expansion and the North West trade gun played an important role in those colorful times.

Examining the Wheeler firearm was an interesting experience. One can certainly learn much from the examination of an artifact. I want to thank the Minnesota Historical Society for their friendly cooperation in allowing me the opportunity to handle this piece of antiquity. Matt Anderson was especially helpful. The Minnesota Historical Society's building is located in St. Paul, and on the appointed day, I made the 120-mile trip from my home in Grand Rapids. Matt greeted me and ushered me down to the lowest level of the building where artifacts are archived in a temperature and light-controlled environment.

I had seen pictures of this gun before, but examining it was enlightening in two areas. First, when I shouldered the gun, I found that the 13-1/2 inch trigger pull and the
homemade concoction. I would take a stout ramrod and drive the bullet down on the powder charge. The gun would shoot well at the range, but it was not practical for hunting, especially here in the cold North Country where lubricants can freeze, making tight-fitting loads hard to push down the barrel after a few shots. In my opinion, I could see no way that the ramrod on the Wheeler gun was designed for tight fitting bullet charges. This train of thought led me to an experiment that I will cover in the second installment of this series.

The .58 caliber (24-gauge) barrel, 41 inches long, octagon-to-round, was stepped down from the breech plug in three stages. Northwest guns came in a number of calibers, but 24-gauge was a very common one. Two London proof marks were located on one of the side barrel flats, with the letters R and W (for Robert Wheeler) stamped between them. On the top barrel flat toward the breech, the word “LONDON” had been stamped. The gun lock measured six inches by 1-1/8 inches. The name “Wheeler” was stamped behind the cock and a sitting fox (in a circle) was stamped forward of the cock and behind the frizzed spring.

Have you ever wondered what those barrel proof marks actually mean? Proof marks are indentations that are imbedded on a barrel to certify that it has been tested and found to be compliant with established quality and safety standards.

When a barrel had passed proof in London it was stamped with the marks of the London Gunmaker’s Company. The first, known as the “View” mark (a crown over V) was a [preliminary] proof; the second (a crown over GP) was the [final] “Proof” mark.” (Gooding 26)

In the very early days of English gunmaking, most barrels were proofed in London by the London Gunmakers Company. Later in 1813 an act of Parliament was passed authorizing a proof house in Birmingham (Gooding 24). But wherever the gun was proofed, the process was the same. Gooding wrote:

With regard to the complaints you have received, the guns shipped to the R.R. (Red River) market, we can only say that every barrel is proved at the London Proof house, with a bullet fitting the barrel, without windage and 6 3/4 drachms of Tower proof powder, being nearly three ordinary charges. (25; from a letter to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s secretary)

One of the very first things I learned from my investigation of this gunmaking process for the fur trade was that in England a person called a “gunmaker” might not be a gunmaker at all.

The terms “gunmaker” and “gunsmith” are inextricably confused in the historical record and in the minds of collectors and some students of firearms history. Too often they have been used interchangeably with the result that neither can be taken at face value and should be taken only as indicating some connection with fabrication or distribution of firearms on the retail level. “Gunmakers” were in fact merchants located strategically between the material men (who made locks, barrels, furniture and stocks) and the fabricators (who assembled the components into complete arms.) “Gunmakers” usually possessed no shops of their own, but rather owned a warehouse where completed arms were stored for delivery to various customers. They might in some instances own a series of workshop spaces with basic tools which they would hire out to individuals working for them on sub-

Steve Jurvelin in his Hardware Hank store showing the 1862 Barnet Northwest gun that hangs in the store.
contract, but this was not invariably the situation... (Bailey and Nie 13)

I had operated under the presumption that the English gunmakers I had been acquainted with (Wilson, Ketland, Sandwell, Barnett, Wheeler, Whatley, Grice and others) each had their own cottage shop sort of business. That is, an in-house factory with many trades employed under one roof. Not true! The gunmaker was in fact the person who coordinated the assembly and marketing of a specific firearm—a sort of point man or contractor. Dewitt Bailey underscores this again when he says:

It should at least be clear that the man whose name appears on the outside of the finished gun was not the one who sat down in his shop and with various machines and hand tools shaped and completed the finished arm and that, in fact, such a complete facility rarely existed. The "gunmaker" often had little if any technical training in the intricacies of arms fabrication; he was a businessman or merchant who may sometimes have worked for a time in one of the many branches of the trade and possessed a thorough knowledge of the coordinative and "time and motion" factors in the business. (13)

Bailey further states:

The workers whom we have just described, working in their rabbit warrens of workshops were able to produce surprising quantities of arms in a pre-technological, non-machine oriented complex through the device of extreme specialization of labor. From start to finish a single piece might pass through as many as fifty hands. (20)

The table above shows some of the highly specialized crafts that went into building a firearm in those days.

Our journey into the world of Northwest trade guns so far has given us a glimpse of the North American fur trade and the important role this firearm played in its history. We have discussed the manufacturing side of the Northwest gun's production in England and considered its unique identifying characteristics. Finally, we looked at an original Northwest gun, made in the 1790s, attributed to the English firm of Robert Wheeler and Son. Examining that original gun inspired me to recreate my own copy of it to experiment with and use in the field, all of which produced some interesting results. All this and more will be covered in part two. The journey continues!

Author's note:

I want to thank both Ryan Gale and Dave RIPPELINGER from Track of the Wolf for their help in providing some of the graphic images used in this article and also some helpful suggestions. I highly recommend Ryan Gale's book, For Trade and Treaty, available from Track of the Wolf, for those interested in Indian trade guns. It has good information and excellent photos. I also wish to thank KARL KOSTER, ranger at the Grand Portage National Monument for contributing his expertise.

References:


The tale of the first organized settlement in the old NW Territory.

Opening The Door West

This award winning PBS documentary chronicles the opening of the Ohio frontier with careful attention to historical accuracy. The combination of realistic re-enactor portrayals and highly detailed 3D computer images of the settlements makes this a MUST SEE for every re-enactor and student of American history!

Opening The Door West - 119 mins.
VHS Video tape $27.95
DVD Video disk $29.95
Music of an Emerging Nation - 62 mins.
Soundtrack Audio CD $16.95
Add Shipping: $4.95

Get your copy at
Sheleburne Films
PO Box 6
Readsville, Ohio 45772
740-378-6297
www.OpeningTheDoorWest.com

Your #1 Source for Wampum

Now available: Glass Wampum straps, cuffs, garters and sashes

Custom orders welcome
wanderingbull.com

Visit us for all your reenactment needs. Leather to Wampum, we have it all!