A FOWLER AT MOUNT VERNON

MOUNT VERNON, the home of our first president George Washington and his family, is a place of inspiration for many. Washington’s remains are interred there, along with many of his immediate relatives. Located near Alexandria, Virginia on the Potomac River, this important historic place has been visited by people of all races, colors and creeds. They come from near and far to see this place and honor the man we call the father of our country. Since 1860, over eighty million people have visited Mount Vernon and around a million still do so annually. It is expertly maintained, the staff is polite and well-informed, and there is ongoing, progressive research and archeological digging at the site. Walking where our first president walked, seeing things he saw and viewing artifacts that he touched or existed during his time period fires peoples’ imagination, bringing a closer awareness of Washington, his family and our country’s early beginnings. I know it does mine.

In October of 2014, Larry Spisak and I had the unique opportunity to examine a fowler that might possibly have been owned at one time by our first president. It is on display in the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center, located within the Mount Vernon estate.

The origin of this story, however, goes back to 2003, when Larry Spisak, John Hayes, and I toured Mount Vernon. As we were walking through Washington's office, the tour guide, pointing to a pair of spectacles on Washington’s desk, mentioned that many of the items in the room actually had belonged to our first Commander-In-Chief when he lived there. My eyes quickly moved around the room where I spied a flintlock fowler leaning in a far corner. Right away I asked, “Did that firearm over there belong to Washington?” The tour guide did not know the answer for sure, but right then and there I determined that someday I would find out.

Well, years went by, and I continued to think about that gun from time to time. Had that fowling piece ever really belonged to


The fowler on display at Mount Vernon, made by Richard Wilson from London, England. It is stocked in walnut and appears to be original and in very good condition.
George Washington, I wondered? Was he ever even much of a hunter? My research surprised me:

"An avid hunter, Washington keenly stalked foxes, deer, ducks, quail, pheasant, and even occasional bears on his estate. On hunting days, his ritual was to rise before sunrise, breakfast by candlelight, then ride off with his hounds while it was still dark outside. For a man of Washington’s work ethic, it is striking how much time he dedicated to hunting, even in the dead of winter. "[During February, in 1768,] he killed five mallards in one day. (Chernow)

Finally, in 2014, I contacted Mount Vernon’s associate museum curator, Amanda Isaac, and asked if it might be possible to examine, photograph and write about the gun. Amanda replied, “We have a fowler on display here, but I am not sure it is the one you saw in 2003. We would be glad to show you the piece, share the information that we have concerning it and yes, you can write about it.”

As we corresponded back and forth, Amanda provided

sailing ship to the American shore from England. It is not known for certain who originally owned it. So our fowler’s line of definitive lineage begins with Washington’s nephew, Lawrence Lewis, who was briefly Washington’s secretary from 1797 to 1799 (Washington died on December 14 of that same year). Lawrence Lewis (1767-1839) was the son of Washington’s sister, Betty Washington Lewis and her husband Fielding Lewis. Lawrence married Martha Washington’s granddaughter Nelly Custis in February of 1799 at Mount Vernon and they lived there for a few years.

This begs the question; if George Washington did in fact own this fowler, did he give it (or sell it) to Lawrence some time before he died? Whatever the real story is, we do know that when Lawrence Lewis died, the fowler went to his son Lorenzo Lewis (1803-1847). From there, it went by descent to Lorenzo’s son Henry Llewellyn Dangerfield Lewis (1843-1893). Henry later had the gun sold through a Philadelphia firm (Stan Henkels) where it sold to Luther Kountze (1841-1918), a man with a passion for
collecting Washington artifacts. When Luther passed, the gun went to his son, William DeLancey Kountze, (1878-1946) who later presented it to Yale University in 1932.

So it was that beautiful October morning in 2014, that Larry Spisak and I showed up at Mount Vernon with cameras, a tape measure, magnifying glass, pen and paper. At nine o’clock sharp Amanda brought us down into a secure place to do our inspection and evaluation. As we put on the protective gloves provided, I glanced over to where the fowler was lying on a table. What I saw was a beautiful, high quality, flintlock fowler, stocked in walnut with the name Wilson engraved on the lockplate and top barrel flat of the octagon-to-round barrel, which was around fifty inches long and about .80-caliber. This was no average, commercial, run-of-the mill smoothbore. It was evident to both Larry and me that this was purchased by a man of status and means. For the next hour or so, Larry and I took measurements and photos, and thoroughly examined the fowler. It was in such good condition I think it could have been loaded and fired.

Our examination of this fine smoothbore left me puzzled as to the time frame it was made. True, there were proof marks on the barrel and we had the name of the gunmaker, Richard Wilson, but some aspects of the fowler seemed eighteenth century, other’s early nineteenth century. Fortunately, a thorough investigation had been made previously by a very knowledgeable and respected firearm historian named Bill Ahearn. The following is his report in full.

GEORGE WASHINGTON’S
WILSON FOWLER

“On August 24, 1989, at Mount Vernon, Virginia, an eighteenth century flintlock firearm was examined. This weapon is believed to be the only authenticated survivor of the seven long guns that George Washington possessed at his death. It is a half-stocked flintlock fowling piece made by the firm of Richard Wilson from London. All components of the weapon appear to be original to it and the fowler as a whole appears to be unaltered in any way. While there are several aspects of the weapon which help to pinpoint its origin and age it must be kept in mind that dating one of these old pieces is an inexact science at best. Styles of the individual components which make up the long arm evolved slowly and for the most part no specific dates exist as to when one style commenced and another style stopped. An attempt to place an exact date on the manufacture of an eighteenth century British firearm by identifying the component parts is a difficult, if not impossible, task. This weapon has no engraved dates or hallmark silver parts and so we are really dealing with speculation. However, the results of an examination of the lock, stock, barrel, and brass furniture of this sporting arm are listed and do show tendencies which will better help date this firearm.

The Lock

The 3-1/2 inch lock plate and the gooseneck cock are typical of those used on nearly all British sporting arms throughout the eighteenth century. The slide safety latch fitted behind the cock appears to be an offshoot of the vestigial dog-lock safety, a mechanism which became popular on flintlock ignition firearms in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and was in general use for about fifty years. The safety catch however did remain in use on some civilian arms throughout the
A brass barreled musketoon made by Daniel Moore of London dated circa 1750 has a lock incorporating a slide safety latch almost identical to the safety catch on the Wilson fowler. A picture of the musketoon can be seen in D.R. Baxter’s “Blunderbuss,” page 44. Another slide safety latch nearly identical to that on the Wilson fowler appeared on a British pistol offered for sale by Norm Faydherbe some years ago. He dated the pistol as circa 1730-1740. An examination of the flashpan area shows characteristics which tend to date the lock as being made prior to 1750. The fit between the flashpan cover and the pan shows no overlap of the cover. It would appear that most British fowlers manufactured after 1750 incorporated this improvement (this overlap was thought to be an improvement made to allow for any condensed moisture to drip off the end of the cover rather than seep into the priming pan and thus ruin the shot.) In addition, the absence of a roller type mechanism on the frizzen spring again gives evidence of pre-1750 manufacture. An exterior bridle is used to reinforce the flashpan and this type of bridle is commonly found on all of the better made fowling pieces throughout the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most important aspect of the lock for investigative purposes is the name WILSON engraved in script on the face of the lock beneath the pan. The name Wilson appears on many British firearms made throughout the eighteenth century and indeed the earliest form of Brown Bess musket known to exist is marked WILSON 1718. However, the only Wilson to sign his work in script rather than the standard block lettering has been identified as Richard Wilson. He was born in 1703 and was apprenticed to his uncle Thomas Green, a noted London musket maker, in 1718. Wilson began gunsmithing in his shop at 157 Minories, London in 1730, and was considered among the first rank of gunmakers. He worked for the Hudson Bay Company, the East India Company as well as the British Ordnance Department. Many of his weapons were exported to the American Colonies—he died in 1766.

The Stock

The wooden stock of this firearm is made of walnut. A fowler dated 1744, made by Coombs of Bath, England has a half stock whose shape is almost identical to the fowler at Mount Vernon. A photograph of the Coombs gun can be found on page 87 of George’s English Guns and Rifles. The design of these weapons was thought best for duck hunting. The balance between the half stock, with its heavy butt and the long barrel, was thought best for hunting ducks.

Top view of the barrel and tang area showing the gunmakers name WILSON, next to the word LONDON. The proof stamps and Richard Wilson's touch mark (an asterisk over the letters RW) are on the adjoining barrel flat. Note the nicely engraved barrel tang. Even the barrel tang screw is engraved.
[or larger water fowl]. The rather straight form of the wrist and the butt, with a lack of deep fluting, suggests early manufacture. Stocks like this were common before 1725 and are rarely seen on models made after 1740. Two flat bolts [barrel retention keys] are inserted through the stock to secure the barrel. On most British hunting arms after 1750, the holes through which these bolts passed were protected with metal shields. This gun has no such protection. While the stock condition of this gun would be rated as good there is a certain amount of damage. The nosecap and the stock ramrod thimble which were most probably made of brass, are missing.

THE BARREL

The 48-1/2 inch barrel is of .81 caliber or the standard nine gauge. Long barrels such as this were common on firearms in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and gradually became shorter as the century wore on. The barrel is equipped with a silver front sight. The rather large silver sight on this fowler might suggest manufacture in the first half of the eighteenth century. There are two British proof marks struck near the breech of the barrel. These marks appear on eighteenth century privately made British arms manufacture after 1702. The "V" shaped stamp signifies the first viewing or rough proofing and the "GP" represents the gunmaker's or final proof. The initials "RW," below an asterisk, are also stamped on the barrel and this identifies the firm of Richard Wilson as the barrel maker. The words "WILSON" and "LONDON," in block letters, are additionally engraved. The fact that the name "WILSON" is still legible in an area of the barrel near the vent hole suggest that the arm was well kept. Many military arms of the period are regimentally marked in this area and in many cases the markings have become illegible. The Wilson gun shows moderate to heavy pitting around the touch hole, evidence that it was used often. If this was the case, only frequent cleaning could save the barrel markings from the ravishing of burnt gunpowder mixed with natural humidity. The decorative barrel engravings are like those commonly found on fowlers made in the 1730-1750 period. There is some evidence of damage to the barrel in the fact that the second ramrod thimble, which was attached to the bottom of the barrel, is missing. The wooden ramrod on this gun is common to those found on British sporting arms throughout the 1770's. It appears in every aspect to be original to the gun.

THE BRASS FURNITURE

The brass trigger guard of this fowler measures approximately eleven inches overall and has a solid rear section to the bow of the guard as opposed to the forward inside curl. This solid bow feature is often found on firearms produced in the early part of the eighteenth century as well as some weapons made after 1740. The forward part of the trigger guard is topped by an ornamental finial, the design of which is found on many sporting arms made between 1720 and 1750. The five and one half inch brass sideplate of this weapon shows a foliated type design and was common to many sporting arms of the 1725-1750 period. The brass escutcheon or wrist plate measures approximately two and three quarter inches and is of the design most used in the 1725-1750 time period, although buttplates such as this are found on later made firearms. John Rigell George in his epic work on British firearms, English Guns and Rifles states that thousands of hunting weapons with brasswork following nearly a set pattern were manufactured in London during

A top view of the Wilson fowler's buttplate.
Almost all other features of this long arm which have been examined show evidence of manufacture in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Specifically, the barrel length, brass design, and the shape of the stock, all suggest 1720-1750 manufacture. It is believed that this fouling piece was made by the gunmaking firm owned by Richard Wilson of London circa 1750 or possibly earlier. If this is the case then the weapon was produced while George Washington was still a boy and the question is raised of its original ownership. It is at least possible that the fouler was a family possession and owned by either George's father Augustine (died 1743) or his half-brother Lawrence (died 1752) and perhaps a study of their wills might show a greater provenance for the weapon."

-Compiled by Bill Ahearn, Brooklyn, New York, August 30, 1989

As we contemplate the connection of George Washington to this fouler we need to define the possibilities. Assuming Bill Ahearn's evaluation as to the date the gun was made is correct, (mid-eighteenth century) Washington could have purchased it new or used when he was younger. But, this seems unlikely; in 1750 he would only have been eighteen years old. Perhaps it was handed down to him from his father Augustine, or one of his two older brothers, Lawrence or Augustine Jr. In either of the above scenarios, it would have been in his power to give or bequeath the fouler to his brother-in-law, Lawrence Lewis later in life.

A close up of the Wilson fouler's wrist escutcheon.

the years 1730-1750. His illustrations describe the brass components of these firearms and they are nearly identical to the brasswork of this fouler.

Conclusions

Although the safety slide latch and the half stock are features predominately found on fouling pieces made after 1775, they are characteristics that are found on some firearms dating from earlier periods.

Above: The eleven and one half inch trigger guard on the Wilson fouler.
Right: The Wilson fouler sideplate showing a foliated design common on many sporting arms of the 1720-1750 time frame.
As Washington grew older and his financial situation improved, he did order guns from England for himself and on behalf of friends, going through the London firm of Robert Cary and Company that acted as a purchasing agent for whatever goods he requested. For instance, in an invoice dated January 23, 1770, a firearm ordered by Washington and made by Francis Brazier is described as:


All told, the cost for this fowler came to three pounds, three shillings.

In an earlier invoice, dated 1766, there is a description of four fowling guns, made by John Brazier:

“4 fowling pieces, 4 foot in the barrel, [barrel] small bore, brass mounted with walnut “stocks, screw pin locks list cases & ca 15/6. (The Papers of George Washington, Digital Edition)

This is not our Wilson gun, but is another example of some of the guns Washington acquired by purchase. To date, the Wilson fowler has not been located in the records of Washington’s purchases. This does not mean that at some time he did not buy the gun, it just means there is no record of it.

Did a friend, colleague or admirer give him the fowler? So far there is no journal entry or any correspondence that supports this idea either.

If the fowling piece was bequeathed to Washington, there is no record of it. The staff at Mount Vernon graciously provided electronic copies of a number of important documents and resource materials for me to look through. Among them was the will of Augustine Washington (George’s Father,) Lawrence Washington (George’s oldest brother) and Fielding Lewis, George’s brother-in-law and the father of George’s nephew, Lawrence, an owner of the Wilson fowler. I also checked Washington’s estate inventory, compiled in 1800 and though it was fascinating to read, the Wilson gun was not described there either. Again, bringing us back to the idea that our first president might have
old or gifted the gun to his
and he might well have done
use Lawrence worked two
Washington as his personal
without pay, receiving only
board. Washington wrote

it is convenient to you to make
Mount Vernon your home, I shall
you at it for that purpose, and
may be no misunderstanding in
I shall inform you beforehand,
will fare in all respects as we
do [household comforts], but
I expect no services from you
ecuniary compensation will be
odenhamel)

n up this investigation into
: tion of the Wilson Fowler to
resident we have this to go
earm in question was made
period that Washington
owned it. It is of a quality
one of his wealth and social
would have proudly carried.
resting is that it was owned
phew Lawrence who lived
Vernon while Washington
, retired from public service,
after he died. Finally, we
oral testimony of Lawrence
family that the Wilson
been passed down from
1 to generation. But here we
top. Every antique firearm
and on its own buttplate,
zk. There are still some
ieces to this puzzle, some
ence is absent that would
ly and indisputably verify
on’s ownership, like a record
se, or maybe a diary entry
one that could connect the
rence Lewis. If Lawrence
ad sworn an affidavit
to Washington’s ownership
ld also help. However,
this juncture we remain
ly close to the true history
artifact, there still exists
ween our speculations and
idence to support them.

: now, the Wilson Fowler
on will remain quietly in
full display case, awaiting
of its complete vindication
once owned by George
. I look towards that
ause I would consider it
the greatest privileges in
: life to have handled a
at the father of our country
once owned and hunted with.

I asked Larry Spišak to write
down his thoughts on our experience
at Mount Vernon. He wrote:

“I know that I am not alone among
many who love history to simply say
that I am emotionally transported every
time I walk in the footsteps of those
that lived before. My quest for time
travel is not always rewarded, and yet
time it comes without bidding.
Visiting Mt. Vernon and the grave of
Washington, and to have the incredible
opportunity to handle an everyday
tool that he [possibly] owned and used
produced a tingling sensation that
comes from knowing that I am enjoying
the freedoms that this great man risked
his life to establish. That sensation is
a connection through the ages that I
am shaking hands with perhaps our
greatest American, and it is a chance
to show my gratitude, and vow to
encourage others to do the same.”

Finally, if you have never
visited Mount Vernon, put it on your
bucket list. There is much to see and
learn there; you will
not be disappointed.

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