

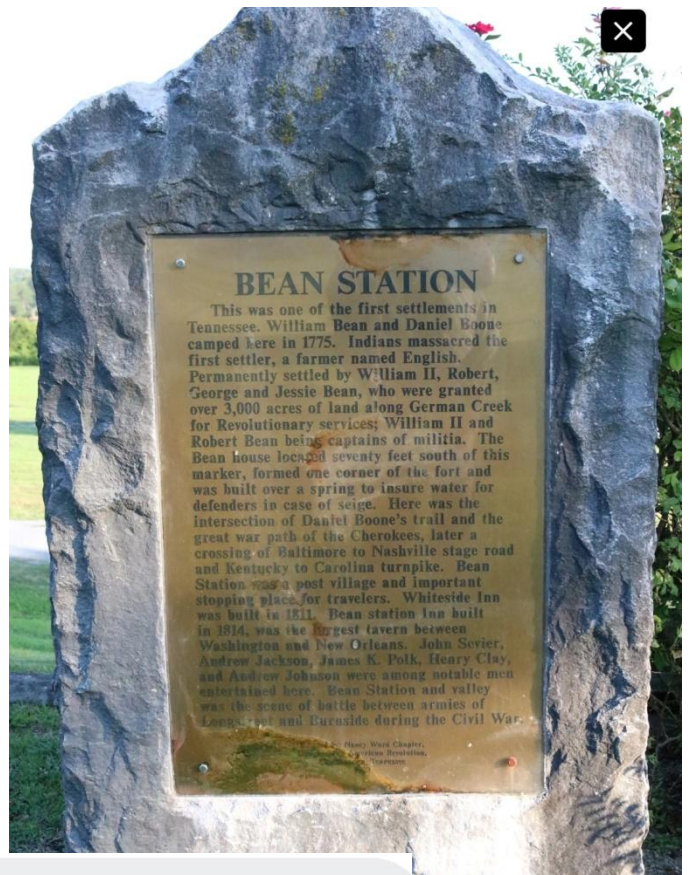
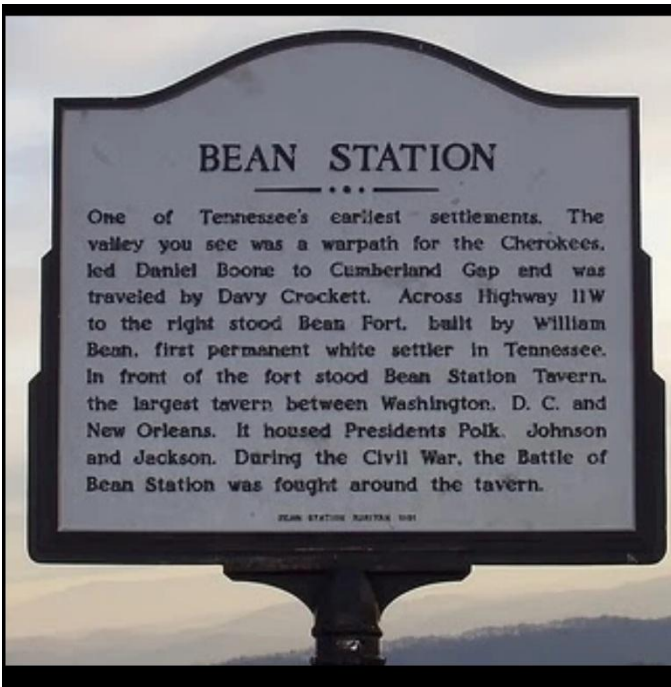
What the Russell ↔ Burleson Rifle Saw



We've probably all heard stories of the Russell -Burleson rifle "at the Alamo." This has generated more than usual myths; we hope to dispel those, replacing them with little known aspects of the weapon. First, the rifle is real...it was owned by William Russell @1760 Tryon, North Carolina- 1825 Franklin, Alabama. He was the son of George Russell, Sr. 1720 Loudon, King George, Virginia- 1797 German Creek, Grainger, Tennessee and Elizabeth Bean (Russell) 1723 St. Stephen's, Northumberland, Virginia- 1800 German Creek, Grainger, Tennessee. This Russell branch united with Burleson when John Burleson 1722-1812 married in 1750 at Tryon, Rutherford, North Carolina Henrietta "Dolly" Burleson 1724-1782. This is likely the earliest union of Russell/Burleson as allied families. A circumstance that lasted through pioneering days of early America and a long list of historic battles. The thread that intertwined these families were drawn tight into one of the closest, most enduring cousin relationships. And a witness to it ALL was "the rifle."



“When I was born around 1780 in the western North Carolina area of Watauga, an American colonists was assembling me. Rifles were made by only a few gun smiths near the Station...that's the Bean Station. My maker used only the highest grade hardwoods for his stocks like maple. I am really long, 5& ½ feet long, my moving parts are called flint lock action and my 40 “ octagonal barrel has a .52 caliber bore. I was designed after a popular Jaeger rifle , originally made by German and Moravian master craftsmen from Philadelphia. Most colonists used my type as they were accurate and readily made if the maker religiously followed the Jaeger methodology. The Philadelphia masters only released their apprentices to continue after a rigid training. Now these Jaeger disciples have spread throughout the Colonies. As I felt my assembly complete, I see my surroundings...I'm in a general store. Seeds, feed, implements, black powder and my brother & sister rifles are sold here. Oh yeah, there's a tavern in here. The owner, Bean has a barmaid/cashier working here; she's a real nice lady named Nancy Hanks. That pretty woman married a fella named Lincoln; they had a kid named Abraham. Many of my sibling rifles were sold by Bean and Miss Hanks at the station but I'm staying in the family; I am going with William Russell. He's gonna use me for game hunts but there's talk of going to war against them Brits.”



Nancy Hanks
Lincoln



Much of the documentation regarding gun smithing in 18th century Watauga can be found at the Tennessee Department of Conservation Division of Archaeology. Below you will find images of stock design and working action of flintlock rifles of the period. The stylistic preferences of the gun smiths then tended to fall between stock image 1 and two. One of the more distinctive characteristics of American rifles of mid to late 1700s is that instead of wooden patch box covers they usually have a hinged metal cover.

**A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF
HISTORIC PERIOD GUNMAKING IN
TENNESSEE**



TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
DIVISION OF ARCHAEOLOGY
REPORT OF INVESTIGATIONS NO. 8

1991

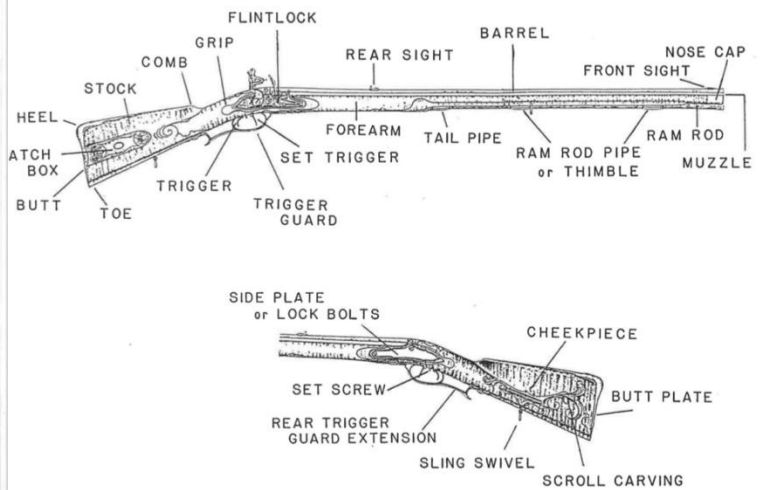


Figure 1. Nomenclature for an eighteenth-century muzzle-loading, flintlock long rifle (adapted from a drawing by Houston Harrison).

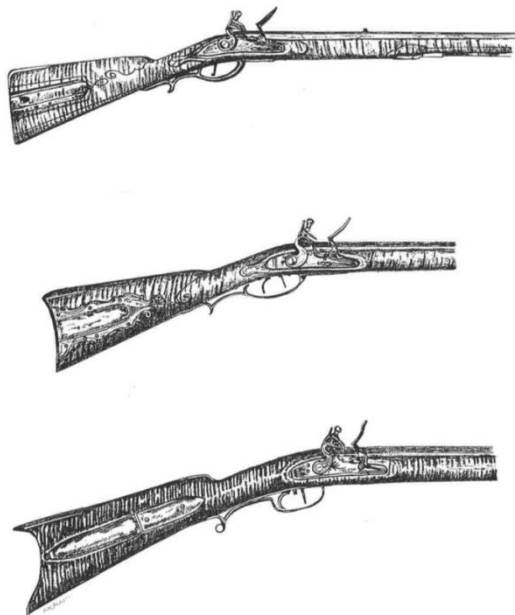


Figure 5. Stylistic development of the American long rifle. Top to bottom: Pennsylvania rifle dated 1761; Pennsylvania rifle, ca. late 1700s; Tennessee rifle made by J. G. Gross, ca. early 1800s (drawings based on photographs of the originals).

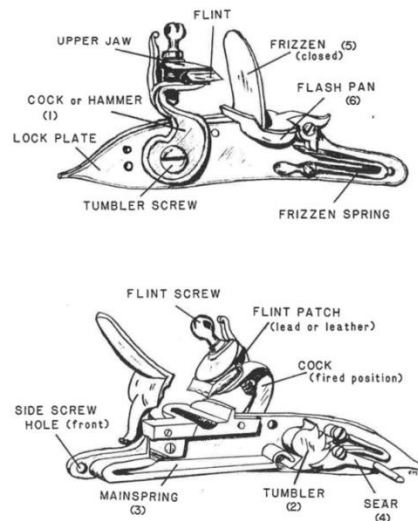
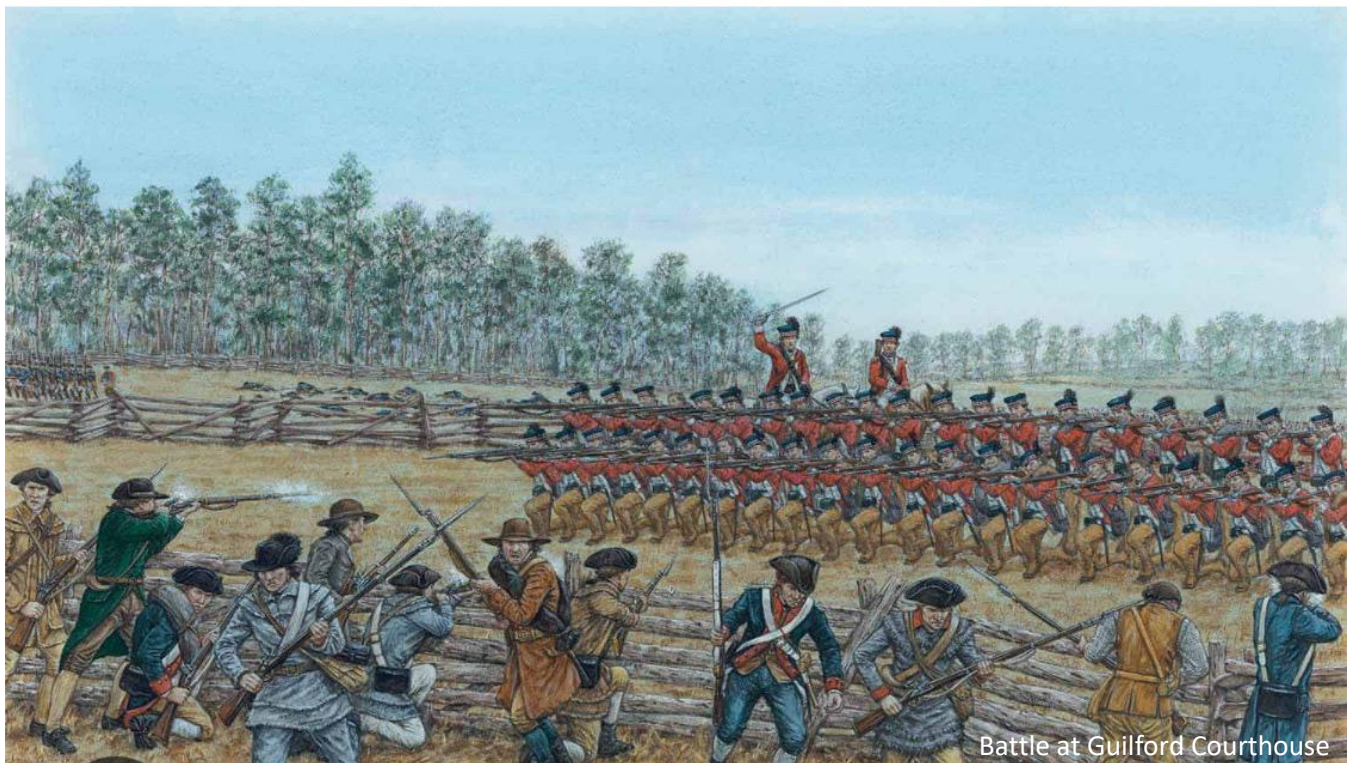
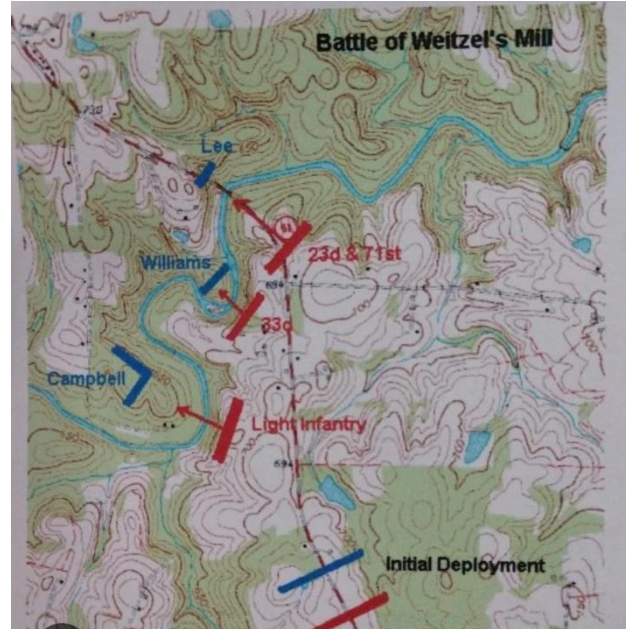


Figure 2. Exterior and interior views of a flintlock mechanism: Pulling back the COCK (1) rotates its pivot and the attached TUMBLER (2). This compresses the MAINSPRING (3), and when reaching the half cock position, the sharp edge of the SEAR (4) slides into the first notch of the Tumbler (loading position). For firing, the Cock is pulled back further until the Sear catches in the second notch of the Tumbler. Squeezing the trigger raises the horizontal arm of the Sear and disengages its edge from the Tumbler notch. The Cock then snaps forward, hitting the FRIZZEN (5) with its flint, and dropping sparks into the priming powder of the PAN (6). Its flash ignites the main charge through the touchhole in the barrel.

“Not long after I was put into the hands of young twenty year old William Russell, he had become a private in the Virginia militia under the command of Col. William Campbell. Russell and I found ourselves traveling fast to Kings Mountain to take on the very insulting and brash Major Patrick Ferguson and his loyalists. As Private Russell gazed across my sights, we could see that monstrous Major cut down from his horse. His troops were disheartened at his loss. William, I and the rest of us routed them loyalists but good. Their bodies were lifeless, strewn about that steep hill. Private Russell also brought me with him to battles at Wetzel Mills and Guilford Courthouse during the Revolutionary War. It was a busy 1781 for us; we didn't do as well at Wetzel and Guilford...they were rough.”



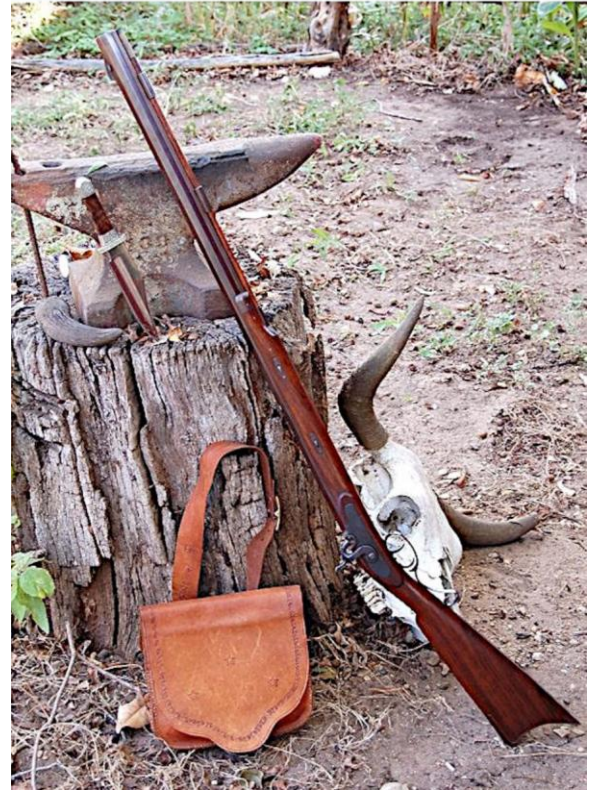
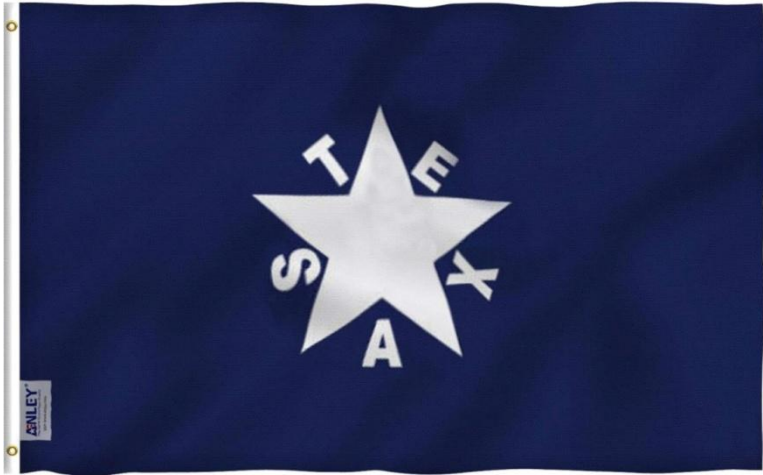
“ For forty five years Major William “ Bill” Russell and I went everywhere together. I tried to serve him well and he provided for my care. Sadly, in 1825 he passed. Together we participated also in the War of 1812, Creek Indian Battles, Tallushatchee in 1813, Talladega later in 1813 and Horseshoe Bend in 1814. I saw Andrew Jackson, Sam Houston , John Sevier and Davy Crockett fighting alongside us.



Following Bill's death I was adopted by Captain James “Jim” Burleson 1775-1836. He took me into battle during the Texas Revolution 1835-1836. He squeezed my trigger at the enemy at the Grass Fight and at San Jacinto where we, with Edward and Aaron B. Burleson captured Mexico's General Santa Ana. General Sam Houston last saw me in this condition there. Before Capt. James passed in 1839, he had me restocked making me look like folks today see me. Now I had the outward appearance of a plains rifle like a Hawken’s.”



Hawken Type Plains Rifle



“Next I made it into the possession of Joseph “Joe” Burleson 1770-1849. I stayed in his care from 1839-1860 when we went to war while aimed by his son, Joe Burleson, Jr. He took me to the Mexican-American War 1846-1848. Before that we warmed up fighting Comanche Indians and at 1840, the Plum Creek battle.

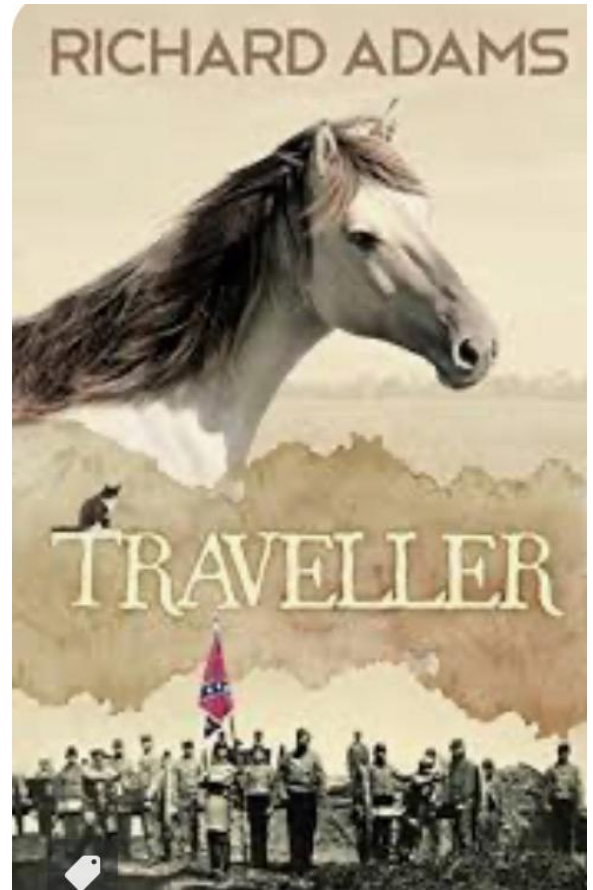


By 1860 the Burleson ownership continued as I went to John Fawcett Burleson 1846-1932. Before marching off to the Civil War my flintlock firing mechanism was converted into a percussion modified rifle. We joined the Company G -6th Infantry in the Confederate Army. This Burleson carried me into the Civil War 1861-1865. In 1849 I was given to Murray Burleson 1949-1953 then Joseph Burleson III 1883-1953. In this period the Burleson family donated me to the Alamo Trust in 1917. I've been there since. “



Now a discussion of what we're doing... We're generally following the method of Richard Adams, famous author of "Watership Down." Adams also wrote a book, "Traveller", based on Robert E. Lee's gray American Saddle horse's perspective of Lee's history. We believe what Russell's rifle saw will be insightful.

"By the time Major William Russell passed in 1825 this is pretty much how I looked."

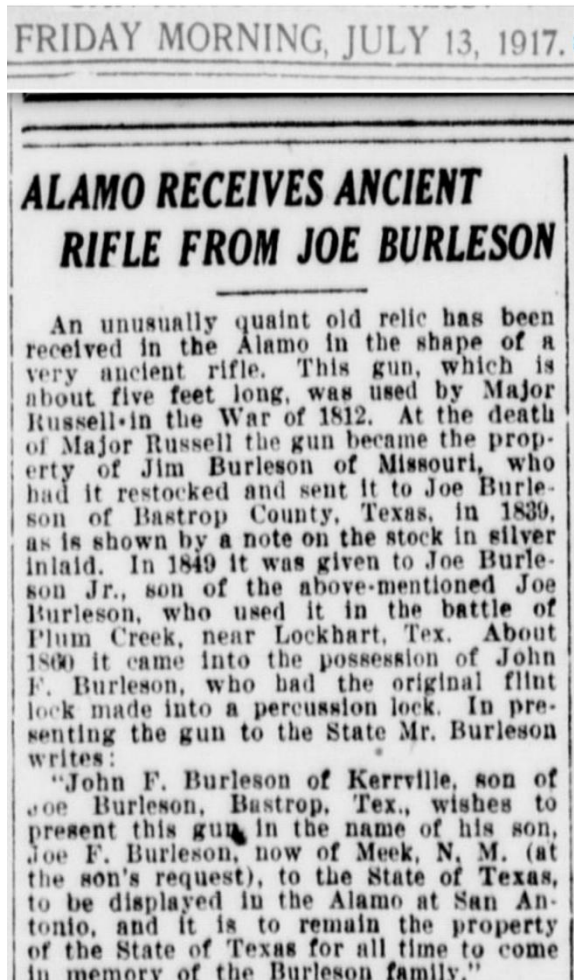


Final Resting Spot

"No, I didn't die at the Alamo. Heck, I wasn't even there in any battle. Let's be clear on these oft repeated myths. No Bursleson was at the battle at the Alamo. No, the Russell- Bursleson was never at that battle. Like a couple of thousand rifles, I was donated to the Alamo museum. Only a few hundred were kept because of `some' historic value other than the San Antonio massacre."



“Today I am carefully stored in the climate controlled vault at the Alamo. I'm catalogued and string-tagged. The temperature, humidity are constant in my zero-dust environment. When I come out to greet tourists I ride in a cart as I lay on a satin-like cloth. My caretakers lift me gently wearing cloth gloves to be seen. Only an exclusive group of my owners' cousins can touch me...even then with close supervision. The cousin that brought me to this place by a Russell cousin, Joe Burleson, Jr. who wished it to be donated in the name of John F. Burleson of Meek, New Mexico. The hope was for history enthusiasts would forever recall the honor of Major William Russell, Edward, Burleson, James Burleson, John Burleson, Joe Burleson and others who cleaned, carried and made me to good use in battle .I knew them all and they knew me. Come on out and see me sometime, we'll swap stories. At 243 years young, I still look good.”



BFRGs research team will include a stop in early May at the Alamo and Daughters of the Texas Republic facilities to view the Russell- Burleson rifle, the Joseph Burleson Bible, papers referring to his black and white children and a variety of Burleson memorabilia. Our approach will be much different this time...like the early Russells and Burlesons...we'll be better armed!



Special Thanks to Texas State Handbook, Daughters of Republic of Texas, Alamo Museum, Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons, National Rifle Association, San Antonio Express, True West Magazine, Texas State Historical Association and Tennessee Dept. of Conservation.

“Parts is Parts”

A clear explanation of our chain of custody of the Russell-Burleson rifle is within the article; it's thorough and logical. A tougher concept to grasp is how to explain “our gun as the same gun as history passed.” It's easier if we begin with a car analogy. If you bought a 1969 Ford Mustang , it came on a Ford chassis, had a 200ci Thriftpower engine and a fastback body. It's YOUR car. After a wreck, you replace the entire body...it's still your car. Much later you desire increased power so you replace the old 200 ci with the 428 ci V8...it's still your car, right?

You need to use the same analysis on this rifle. In about 1780 it was handcrafted into a 5'6" long, 40" .52 caliber octagonal barreled Jaeger styled (Pennsylvania/Kentucky) American gunsmithed with a flintlock “action” firing mechanism. After a hundred plus years passed the new owner decided to change out the stock (the body) and the firing mechanism to a percussion action (the engine)... it's still the our gun. The original octagonal 40 inch .52 caliber barrel (the chassis) remains, even today; it's our gun!

We shared the images of the rifle and its specifications with three experts. First Steve Ricker, Overmountain Trail/Revolutionary War expert said it was a Samuel Hawken's 19th century rifle. Dan Hopping of Custom Gunsmithing, Raleigh, North Carolina also said without hesitation it was a “plains rifle” consistent with Samuel Hawken's rifles of the mid 1800s. Bill Roney of the “Outdoorsman” Santa Fe, New Mexico said immediately it was an American crafted Jaeger style long rifle, likely made in 1770-1780s. I told him about the other expert opinions, asking how he was so certain. He said , “Well we're ALL right and let me tell you why.” The others looked simply at the stock which was certainly in keeping with Hawken's plains rifles of the 1830-1860s as were many retrofits in the middle 19th century. Roney could tell the percussion action did not match the barrel's era. The barrel length, bore, caliber, shape and other characteristics led to his final rendering. “It all depends where on the rifle you're looking.” Roney stated that if left in its original flintlock and stock, the weapon would garnish \$20,000 easily at auction. In its current configuration, less than \$2000. Consequently, the state of the rifle completely matches the history as laid out in the story in every way.



Other Gun/Other Myths

In our research of the Russell/Burleson Rifle we came across information that can put 2 myths to rest. Some preliminary finds of John Hoyle Burleson indicated this rifle was a sister weapon to a long rifle in possession of the Castle Family (which also connects to Burleson). At the time of the surrender by the British under the command of Lord Cornwallis, his soldier relinquished their issue rifles. Those weapons were doled out to each Colonial Troop, two each. At one time a believe was held that Thomas Castle brought home two such rifles, one being the Russell/Burleson rifle. Futher investigation revealed neither the Castle or Russell/Burleson rifles were of British orgin. English troops were issued much shorter Pattern .62 caliber rifles.

The Pattern 1776 Rifle - the British Army's First Service Rifle



British Rifles were intentionally short to accommodate fixing bayonets and they little need for long range shooting.

You can see the Russell/Burleson Rifle holds a prominent place, front and center, on the Burleson Family Research Group Logo. It symbolizes the struggle our extended family experienced as they pioneered America. Our Burlesons and Russells were joined almost three hundred years ago.



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Jim Burleson
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Direct Descendants of EDWARD BURLESON

EDWARD BURLESON
b: 23 Jan 1650/51
d: Jun 1698 in SUFFIELD, (PRESENT DAY CT)

SARAH OWEN
b: 1656
d: 09 May 1707 in SUFFIELD, (PRESENT DAY CT)

JOHN BURLESON
b: 09 Oct 1677 in SUFFIELD (PRESENT DAY CT) Massachusetts Bay Colony
d: 1763

SARAH HALLADAY
b: 08 Feb 1681/82 in SUFFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY
d: 1756 in SUFFIELD, HAMPSHIRE CO, MASSACHUSETTS

JONATHAN BURLESON
b: 11 Jun 1704 in SUFFIELD (PRESENT DAY CT) Massachusetts Bay Colony
d: 1775

SARAH CAMP
b: 1698
d: 1756

HENRIETTA (DOLLY) BURLESON
b: 1726
d: 1789

JOHN (CAPT) RUSSELL
b: 1722 in DORSET, ENGLAND
d: 1812 in FRANKLIN CO, TN

WILLIAM (MAJ) RUSSELL
b: 1760 in TRYON CO, NC
d: 1825 in NEWBERG, AL

AGNES H McCULLOUGH
b: 1754 in WATAGUA CO, NC
d: 1840 in NEWBERG, FRANKLIN CO, AL

WILLIAM (CAPT) JR RUSSELL
b: 1789 in RUTHERFORD CO, NC
d: 03 May 1860 in LITTLE MULBERRY, AR

LYDIA AGNES BEAN
b: 15 Feb 1791 in WASHINGTON CO, TN
d: 03 May 1860 in LITTLE MULBERRY, AR

WILLIAM HENDERSON RUSSELL
b: 1819 in ALABAMA
d: 18 Sep 1860 in JACKSBORO, TX

MARY JANE QUESENBURY
b: 23 Apr 1827 in TN
d: 23 Aug 1868 in CHICO, TX

MAJOR BRAN RUSSELL
b: 20 Nov 1846 in LAFAYETTE, AR
d: 26 Jul 1883 in LOCO, OK

CLARA CATHERINE CORNELL
b: 11 Jul 1853 in LAFAYETTE, IN
d: 05 Feb 1897 in VELMA, OK

GUY MERRITT RUSSELL
b: 21 Oct 1882 in JACKSBORO, TX
d: 06 Feb 1962 in EL CENTRO, CA

MINNIE MAE RODGERS
b: 06 May 1884 in ARDMORE, OK
d: 02 Jan 1973 in ARDMORE, OK

GUY MARVIN RUSSELL
b: 17 Dec 1908 in ARDMORE, OK
d: 06 Jun 1969 in WICHITA FALLS, TX

LORENA MAE BOWLING
b: 30 Jul 1911 in ARDMORE, OK
d: 12 Nov 2001 in WICHITA FALLS, TX

DONALD MARVIN RUSSELL
b: 31 Dec 1934 in ARDMORE, OK
d: 28 Jan 2012 in WICHITA FALLS, TX

JOYLIECE McDONALD
b: 17 Jul 1935 in NORGE, OK
d: 17 Jan 1988 in WICHITA FALLS, TX

JIMMY DON RUSSELL
b: Mar 1956 in WICHITA FALLS, TX

Epilogue

“Oh yeah...I meant to tell ya’... there’s another story coming soon about how Russells and Burlesons cousin-up again and again. Did you know I was there in a tent with the future president of the United States, Andrew Jackson. He had summoned my Major William Russell in order to appoint him as his commissary. Now William respectfully declined saying his best use was elsewhere. Since William had walked in with James and Joseph Burleson, he looked at them then Jackson, saying you should pick one of my cousins as they are far more honest than me. As a matter of fact, if either of them foul this up, you should hang the three of us. The Burlesons looked in amazement at Ol’ Andy. Nobody was laughing. I will fill you in on more next time we talk.”



Major Russell's signature (in cursive) and donated by Joseph Burleson inscribed in silver inlay on barrel of rifle.