

Tories, Traitors, and the Birth-Pains of a Nation: British Pattern 1776 Rifles in the American Revolution



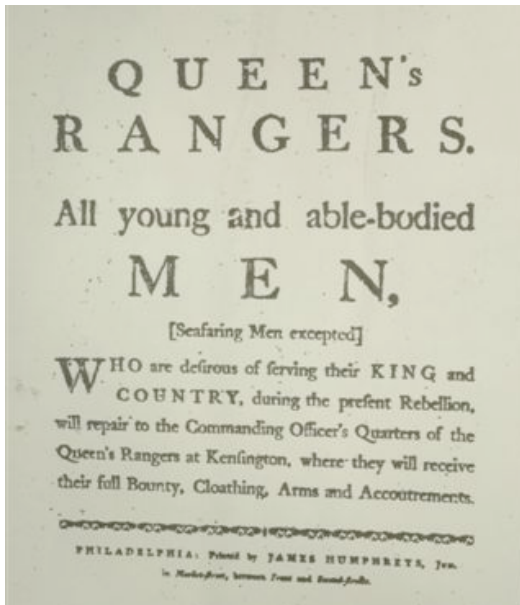
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The American Revolution was a civil war in which Americans fought Americans, sometimes using that deadly accurate and quintessentially American weapon, the rifle, against each other. While the regular infantry used easily loaded smooth-bore muskets, rifles were reserved for elite, fast moving, sometimes mounted, light units, often called rangers or ‘hunters’ (chasseurs and jaegers). In 1776, the British Army in America received 1000 “turncoat” (Pattern 1776) rifles, inspired by American rifles but made in Germany and England specifically to fight rebel American riflemen. It was the first official “pattern” of military rifle to be used in America and in the British Empire. Of nine survivors, two bear unit markings attributed to the Queen’s Rangers, a regiment of Loyalist Americans that served under turncoat General Benedict Arnold in Virginia in 1781, including the final and decisive combat of the War for American Independence at Yorktown.

By some estimates, at the beginning of the war, one-third of the population was “disaffected” from the revolutionary cause; Loyalist or Tories whose property was confiscated and sold to finance the Revolution. Many fled, often to the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Others fought first, in Loyalist provincial units of the British Army, then fled when they lost the war. And some, like Benedict Arnold, and the rifles of the elite light units, fought on both sides.

I. Benedict Arnold, the Queen’s Rangers, and Yorktown

Arnold, always controversial, was a Revolutionary hero early in the war. He marched to Quebec through the freezing Maine wilderness in 1775, leading American riflemen from Pennsylvania and Virginia, among others, in a mid-night, blizzard-swept assault on the walled city. The next year Arnold stalled a British invasion with his “first American Navy” at Valcour Island. Then, in 1777, came Ft. Stanwix and Saratoga, where he came to the rescue of his old friend Daniel Morgan and his Virginia Riflemen. But after Arnold married 16-year old Peggy Shippen, daughter of a wealthy Loyalist, he switched sides, selling out West Point, then a critical link between the northern and southern colonies, in conjunction with a plot to capture George Washington.



In 1781, Arnold led a British “blitzkrieg” invasion of Virginia, pushing his Loyalist American troops to the limit of their endurance. Among them were the famed Queen’s Rangers, raised by legendary American ranger Robert Rogers and commanded in Virginia by Lt. Col. Simcoe. The regiment included mounted “hussars” as well as riflemen, who were themselves often mounted. Those who weren’t were trained to ride into action clinging to the stirrups of their mounted comrades, and to lie flat on the ground as their own cavalry charged over them. Appropriately enough, these riflemen were armed with the “turncoat” P 1776 Rifle. They fought at Burrell’s Ferry, Petersburg, Osborne’s, and Point of Fork, where an important Revolutionary arsenal was destroyed. At Spencer’s Tavern, six miles northwest of Williamsburg, they were attacked by Virginia riflemen, pitting American rifles against British ones.

Washington wanted to capture Arnold in Virginia, and had ordered his immediate hanging. But as Revolutionary troops began to close the “noose” on their Loyalist countrymen, Sir Henry Clinton sent General Charles Cornwallis to the rescue. Clinton ordered Arnold back to New York, and while Arnold plundered his native Connecticut, Cornwallis and the Queen’s Rangers were caught in the trap set for Arnold. They surrendered at Yorktown, the fighting was over, and American independence was effectively won. More than any other individual, Arnold had prevented a British victory in the first two years of the new nation’s existence, and now it was Arnold, ironically on the other side, who set the stage for the ultimate defeat of the British in 1781.

II. The P1776 Rifles and their combat history

After all one thousand of the P1776 rifles were shipped to North America, production shifted totally to the famous Fergusson rifle, which was essentially a breech-loading version of the P1776 (Bailey, 2002). Consequently, the P1776 rifle is rare and desirable, and information about the survivors is closely guarded. For example, only nine P1776 Rifles are known and most have been greatly altered during the intervening two centuries. One of them is German. Of the eight English survivors, two were made by William Grice, four by Mathias Barker & John Whately, and one by Benjamin Willetts. Rifles by the fourth firm, Galton & Sons, are seemingly unknown, but due to the secrecy that surrounds these objects, one cannot conclude that they do not exist.

The two P1776 Rifles by Grice bear an “R” and a number, “23” and “33,” respectively, engraved in identical fashion on the butt-plate tang. Arms scholars regard the “R” as the mark of a Rifle Company, analogous to the “LI” for Light Infantry Company and the “GR” for Grenadier Company. These are the only two P1776 Rifles known with “R” markings, and from the similarity of those markings, these two rifles must have served in the same Rifle Company.

Only two rifle companies, both in loyalist American regiments, are documented as having received rifles: One was Althause’s Rifle Company (50 rifles) in Emmerich’s Chasseurs They fought in the area of New York City until August, 1779. Then the regiment disbanded and Althause’s Rifle Company joined Trumbull’s New York Volunteers, then the Provincial Light Infantry Corps, and finally, for Arnold’s Virginia expedition, they served with the Queen’s Rangers. The other Rifle Company (33 rifles) was in the Queen’s Rangers. Because both of these companies served together under Simcoe in 1781, the Virginia history of the two Grice “R-marked” rifles is the same, regardless of company attribution.

The rest of Sir William Howe’s P1776 rifles were issued five to each company of Light Dragoons, Light Infantry, and Highlanders, where they were evidently used by selected marksmen. Clearly, there was no point in marking such guns with an “R.”

As the siege dragged on at Yorktown, Simcoe proposed to ride and fight his way back to Clinton’s enclave in New York. His fast moving Rangers, including mounted riflemen with their short P1776 rifles, were well equipped for the mission, but Cornwallis “saw no light in it.” By the terms of the surrender, Cornwallis was permitted to evacuate one ship and its unspecified contents. Because Althause’s Rifle Company was composed mostly of Americans, who faced hanging if captured, they boarded that single ship and sailed to New Brunswick, where they disbanded in 1783, and where Benedict Arnold himself eventually settled. The 600 or so Queen’s Ranger’s, in contrast, were 75% English; 300 of them surrendered at Yorktown. (Randall; Locke, p. 8; Simcoe).



Both “Yorktown” Grice rifles bear the same “YM” brand for the Yarmouth [County] Militia of Nova Scotia (Joe Salter, pers. com., 2007). This is consistent with the flight of Althouse’s Company to New Brunswick, but as P1776 rifles that lack the rifle company “R” have turned up in the Maritime Provinces, it does not prove the attribution. “C.M.P” is stamped with single characters on “Yorktown” rifle “R No. 23;” otherwise unknown, this mark is likely that of a private owner.

These two rifles are especially important because only one other rifle survives from the American Revolution with a credible and specific combat history: a Pennsylvania Rifle made by Christian Oerter and used at the Battle of Springfield, NJ, in 1780. If these “Yorktown” “R”-marked Grice rifles were originally issued to the Queen’s Rangers, then the result is a fascinating convergence, for the Queen’s Rangers fought at Springfield.

III. Production and delivery

All 800 of the English-produced P1776 Rifles were delivered to Howe in New York late in 1776, about a year and a half after his army first felt the sting of American long-rifles at the Siege of Boston. This is actually a phenomenally rapid delivery for a new military arm. It was accomplished by ordering the first 200 from experienced rifle makers in Germany, the ancestral home of the American rifles. These had wooden patch-box covers and short barrels with swiveled rods. British production anglicized the stock profile and omitted the patch-box but retained the short barrel and captive ramrod. In a major deviation from the normal Ordnance system, four separate contractors were in simultaneous production, each firm evidently making all major components of the 200 rifles it delivered. Locks and barrels are maker-marked. In normal circumstances, the Ordnance assembled stock-piled components produced by specialized contractors, so each arm contained parts made by numerous firms.

Also unique among British Ordnance firearms of the period is the fastening of the barrel to the stock. Instead of pins, three sliding keys are employed. They remain captive on the left side of the stock while the muzzle is lifted upwards to disengage the hooked breech plug from the standing breech, which remains in the stock. This arrangement was standard in finer sporting arms of the time, because it permitted easy disassembly and cleaning. And cleaning is especially important with a rifle, for its tightly fitting bullets can not be rammed down a fouled barrel.

The attachment of the ramrod was doubtless intended to prevent its loss when carried on horseback. However, the design was defective, and only one P1776 Rifle retains its original swivel. The problem was caused by the fact that the rod was never intended to be inverted. In other words, it did not function like the typical swiveled rod of later “horse” pistols (e.g., US M. 1842). The large end that contacted the bullet (a smaller rod would deform it) was always towards the breech. This required an extra-wide ramrod channel in the stock, and thimbles with a large inside diameter. To prevent rattling, a long flat spring was riveted inside the top thimble, its extremity nestled within the middle thimble. The French had tried this with a non-captive rod in the M1763 musket, and quickly abandoned the arrangement. In the British arm, the spring and rivet tend to catch the end of the rod, and the rod also tends to bind in the swivel. The offending parts were doubtless removed early in the service life of these rifles. The alternative design used on pistols, with 180 degree swivels, would have been very awkward with a longer ramrod.

The original rear sight may also have been problematic. Its dove-tailed mortise is vacant on at least two specimens, including Grice 'R no. 23,' and a modern replacement occurs on another. A groove is filed in the breech-plug tang of "No. 33," providing a crisp sight picture in conjunction with the narrow brass blade at the muzzle. Perhaps the original rear sight, certainly higher than the groove in the tang, caused the shots to go too high. The tang sight, of course, provides a greater sighting radius, and on a short-barreled gun like this, sighting radius could be a concern.

IV. Surviving P1776 Rifles

One of the guns by Barker & Whately (in a Canadian collection) was restocked with a Grice-marked lock (evidently a P1776 lock) in the 20th Century, the stock of another (Benninghoff collection) was greatly altered, and the lock of a third (in a Massachusetts collection) was replaced with the original from the rifle in the Canadian collection.

Only two of these "rifles" are known to retain their rifling, and "Yorktown" rifle "R No. 23," is one of them. It is also the only complete Grice rifle. The other, "R No. 33," (Benninghoff collection, illustrated in Neumann's *Battle Weapons*, 15RR.) has a reproduction lock.

The alteration of 'R No. 23' from flint-lock to percussion utilizes a percussion hammer with a double line engraved on its margin, to match the marginal engraving on the lock plate. At least two British military conversions have marginally engraved hammers (Moore, Hayward; Blackmore, p. 194-5). Yet the screw-in bolster and the flower-like engraving on its face seem totally civilian. Quite likely this modernization was done in Canada for the Yarmouth Militia. In any case, it is a significant record of the rifle's history, which would be destroyed by "restoring" it to flintlock.

"Yorktown" Grice rifle "R No. 23" is the most published of P1776 rifles, appearing in Darling's pioneer work in *Canadian Journal of Arms Collecting*, Moller's monumental *American Military Shoulder Arms*, and Lindsay's *New England Gun*. Evidently the best privately held British-made P1776 in North America, it was displayed at the New Haven Colony Historical Society in 1975, and the Maryland Arm's Collectors Show, Timonium, where it won the Judge's Choice Award in 2004. It was owned by John Bicknell (ME and MA), then by John Callan, and now by Charles Thayer.

The other "Yortown" Grice Rifle "R No. 33," with newly made lock, was conveyed by Bob Cheel (MD) to Herman Benninghoff.

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