

Union County Gunsmithing

By Josh Custer, Bucknell University student, work-study intern at UCHS

For at least a century after its founding, Pennsylvania remained an American frontier, wild and uncharted. The Bowie knife was the hunting weapon of choice for many years until a reliable rifling system was developed that made rifles available and practical to the numerous Pennsylvania frontiersmen, not only for hunting, but for defense as well.

The earliest local gunsmiths, many of whom were German and Swiss immigrants, began their craft around the start of the 19th century. Two of the first and most renowned gunsmiths were George Smith and Samuel Baum Sr., both known for their artistic detail and flawless craftsmanship. For Smith, Baum and many of the other early gunsmiths, gun making was considered an art. Each rifle would take over a week to construct, with additional time being invested to decoratively carve the stock and etch their initials into their work.

Up through the Civil War, gunsmithing grew in importance, and as a result, many young men entered the trade. More variety began to emerge opposing the flintlock as the weapon of choice. Gunsmiths such as George Calpetzer, Peter Kuntz, and Fredrick Beerstcher were all known for their pistols, which became popular because of the increased utility they offered. Additionally, gun makers such as Charles Baum, Samuel Dreisbach, and Isaac Beck introduced several new types of rifle design. The improved flint as well as inlaid rifles provided improved reliability. The mid 19th century was also when the shotgun made its entrance into the gun market.

The story of New Berlin's last gunsmith is a cherished one. According to "A Bicentennial History" by the New Berlin Heritage Association, it is likely that George P. Long was the last gunsmith of the area spanning Union, Snyder, and Northumberland counties due to the age of industry dawning in the northern U.S. He recounts his own tale, beginning when his Great-Grandfather emigrating from Germany to the United States. Long's family relocated to Union County, where he was born. He was raised on a farm, and at age 18, became an apprentice to a local gunsmith. He entered the trade on his own a year later, got married, and operated his own farm. After serving in the Civil War in Company G. 172nd Regiment, Long sold his farm and moved to New Berlin, where he continued crafting guns through the end of the 19th century. He is known for making flintlock and percussion rifles, as well as shotguns. He died soon before the outbreak of World War I.

“Gunsmiths of Union County” is the program offered at the Union County Historical Society's Annual John B. Deans Dinner on Thursday, November 7, at 7:30 PM. Presenter Jeffrey Spotts of Mifflinburg has studied and collected items of local origin, including rifles and powder horns. Those attending the program will become acquainted with the Kentucky rifle and how common rifle characteristics came together to form what is now known as the Upper Susquehanna school of gun-making that spans the area north of Harrisburg from Hazleton in the east to State College in the west. The program will conclude with information about the men (and rumored to be at least one woman) that worked as gunsmiths in Union County.

Prepaid reservations at \$20 per person are required for the dinner/program, which will be held at the Carriage Corner Restaurant in Mifflinburg. Please contact the Historical Society at 570-524-8666 if you are interested in attending.



Buffalo Valley Militiaman [Sketched by John W. Downie]



Early Rifles