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Source: *The Journal of the American Military History Foundation*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1937), pp. 75-79

Published by: Society for Military History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3038722>

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## UNITED STATES MILITARY SHOULDER ARMS, 1795-1935

### *2. The French Military Musket as an American Weapon*

BY JAMES E. HICKS AND FRED PORTER TODD

The French musket duly deserves recognition as one of our standard military arms, indeed as the actual grandsire of our long line of infantry weapons. Its wide, almost exclusive, use in our first two major wars and its adoption as a pattern for the American arms of four decades entitle its story to be given in some detail.

Since 1718, the French armories at Charleville, Saint-Etienne and Maubeuge had been manufacturing infantry muskets, as well as other weapons, under the control of the *Corps royal de l'artillerie*. Rigorous inspections were conducted by its officers, experiments were constantly being made to develop new designs and methods of manufacture, and uniformity of fabrication was insisted upon.<sup>1</sup> As a result of these far-sighted policies the French musket gradually became accepted as superior to all other government-manufactured arms. This superiority existed in its range and general sturdiness and, consequently, to some degree, in accuracy as well. In the later models careful boring of the barrel, together with the use of a somewhat lighter ball than was customary at the period, gave the bullet an average flight of 200 yards when the musket was fired with a regulation charge from a horizontal position five feet above the ground. This range more than doubled that of the British Brown Bess, while the range of the Prussian musket was somewhat less than that of the British.<sup>2</sup> Important also was the added strength gained by securing the barrel to the forestock with metal bands instead of with pins, and by improving the neck of the cock.

During this regulated manufacture under the Royal government, the armories issued twelve successive models, each embracing certain improvements in design.<sup>3</sup> It is with the models of 1763, 1766 and 1776 (these last two containing sufficiently fundamental changes to entitle them to be called "systems") that we will be most concerned. All of the armories functioned normally until 1792 when the exigencies of the French Revolution required forced, and necessarily inferior, production.

Early in the American Revolution the Continental Congress cast about for means of supplementing the limited production of arms in this country.<sup>4</sup> Before its Secret Committee in January, 1776, appeared two aggressive Frenchmen, styling themselves Pliarne, Penet et Cie. and unfolding an interesting offer.<sup>5</sup> The French armories it seemed had a considerable stock of muskets in the best of condition that they could be persuaded to sell—muskets, furthermore, it was added with pardonable exaggeration, of the latest model. Up to this time the Committee had been able to obtain only a few hundred guns,

chiefly from the West Indies, and here they were being offered in lots of a thousand. The members hesitated, for Pliarne and Penet could give little proof of their ability to carry out the bargain. But not for long as the need for arms was growing more acute with each day and in a few months the Frenchmen sailed with the contracts.

Fortunately they took also a good suggestion of Benjamin Franklin's that they communicate with Dr. Barbeu Dubourg of Paris, an active enthusiast for the American cause. This Penet did upon his arrival in May. Dubourg instantly began to pull wires and by June 10 was able to write Franklin that he and Penet had arranged with a manufacturer of arms to obtain from the arsenal at Lyons 15,000 muskets of the model 1763. "The first part of these muskets," the letter ran, "is already on the road to Nantes, where M. Penet looks for the vessels which your Secret Committee is to send thither. I hope your brave soldiers will be pleased with these muskets; but you must caution them not to trust to the ordinary commercial weapons which are called *fusils de traite* and which are almost as dangerous to friend as to foe."<sup>6</sup> These arms were actually loaded aboard a French vessel when the contractors disagreed on the price causing the scheme to fall through. Yet Dubourg and Penet had seen what could be accomplished and within a short time had procured another 10,000 stands.<sup>7</sup> These men were the first to ship arms to this country in any quantity and while they were later to prove most troublesome to the Americans it must, in fairness, be stated that in the beginning they were untiring in their efforts to secure a high grade of weapon.<sup>8</sup>

Space does not allow us to go, beyond a few meagre observations, into the involved history of these arms contracts. By August 17, 1776, Silas Deane, our agent in France, had learned that the reason behind the sale of these French weapons was the development of the improved musket of the system of 1776 and its intended issue to the entire French army. Of the older and heavier models, most of which were in almost new condition, some seventy or eighty thousand lay useless in the magazines.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Deane had commenced to work with another even greater and more influential enthusiast, the incredible Caron de Beaumarchais. Through his theatrically fictitious house of Roderigue Hortalès et Cie. America secured the bulk of the arms imported during the Revolutionary period.<sup>9</sup> By his extraordinary efforts, aided surreptitiously by the French government, eight ships loaded with 37,000 muskets and other military supplies (including an assortment of French officers) were ready to sail by December 1, 1776. In all, ten of the Hortalès ships were able to slip through the British blockade and reach this country in the following year.<sup>10</sup> The arms aboard the *Amphitrite* and the *Mercure*, which together transported more than 18,000 complete stands, arrived in time to be used at Saratoga. Indeed, in this year enough French arms were imported to equip the entire American army.<sup>11</sup>

Several points are clear regarding the character of these muskets imported from France. Although Pliarne and Penet always maintained that their guns were "the last mode for the Infantry of France," this we know was not precisely true.<sup>12</sup> Although doubtless some of the much older types were included it seems fair to assume that the vast majority were of the model of 1763. Of the twenty-four specimens in the museum at Washington's Headquarters, Newburgh, N. Y., twenty-one are of this model, while the remaining three are of the system of 1766. An even more important fact seems equally clear, that few if any of the guns manufactured under the system of 1776 were included in these shipments. Most of the weapons imported appear to have been fabricated at the Charleville armory and for this reason they came to be known in America by the all-embracing title of "Charleville."<sup>13</sup> The name clung even to the copies manufactured in our own shops. Occasionally they were called "Lafayette muskets"—owing perhaps to the fact that the Marquis stood for all things French in the eyes of the Continental soldier. The guns were, by and large, in excellent condition and there are but few recorded complaints about their performance in the American service.

At the termination of the Revolution the Charleville continued to be used by what remained of our regular army and by most of the infantry militia units. A considerable supply was stored away in our various arsenals for future use and it is interesting to observe that, in 1791, a thousand of these muskets were resold to France for use in her colonies.<sup>14</sup> They apparently formed a large proportion of the weapons used in the War of 1812, for we find New York requisitioning 2,000 additional in the first year of that conflict and the Commissary General of Pennsylvania with "French muskets" on hand in 1814.<sup>15</sup> But let us glance backward a few years toward another equally important use to which the Charleville was put; its employment as the pattern for our own weapons.

The year 1794 bringing with it certain rumors of war, the Secretary of War recommended to the Third Congress that steps be taken to obtain additional weapons and to insure the regular manufacture of arms in this country.<sup>16</sup> With its familiar trend towards materiel as against personnel, that body directed, by the Act of April 2, 1794, the establishment of three or four arsenals with magazines for the safekeeping of military stores and the establishment of a national armory for the fabrication of small arms at each of these arsenals, the locations to be selected by President Washington.<sup>17</sup> Two were chosen: Springfield, Massachusetts, which had been associated with the manufacture of arms since 1776 and already contained a considerable number of shops and warehouses, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia, presumably because its location was suited to the needs of the South. Actual production was commenced at the former place in 1795 and at the latter in 1801, though the erection of shops was started there in 1796.<sup>18</sup> On December 12, 1795, the Secretary of War reported:

“To increase the stock of small arms and to render serviceable those already in the public store, two sets of armorers have been employed, to wit: at Springfield, Mass. and at New London, Va., in repairing arms and *preparing* to manufacture the most essential parts of muskets; and some specimens have been produced which prove their capacity to equal, in that article, the manufacture of any country in the world . . . Such muskets as are manufactured are after the model of the French arms, which compose, by far, the greatest part of those in our magazines. For this reason, and because they are preferable to those of any other nation known in the United States, it was apparently inexpedient to make an importation of arms from Europe; seeing a supply was not to be expected from France, and the situation of the United States not rendering the measure of an immediate importation indispensable.”<sup>19</sup>

In other words they were about to take the old Charleville of the model of 1763 as a pattern.

This decision indeed is curious. Between 1763 and 1794 the French armories had issued seven successive infantry models under the Royal government and one under the republican regime.<sup>20</sup> Even if many of the changes involved in each model were slight, the fact remains that the musket then in common use in France was a considerably more advanced weapon than the one produced thirty-one years earlier. That its superiority must have appeared striking to an American is indicated by the action of Eli Whitney, manufacturing under the government contracts of 1798. He had been given the model of 1763 as a pattern and was in the midst of his first order when he saw a French weapon dated 1797, sent back by James Monroe, then envoy extraordinary to France. Its advancements so impressed Whitney that he immediately tried for and obtained government permission to substitute it as the model.<sup>21</sup> He continued to use it as the pattern in his contract of 1808 with the State of New York, his specifications distinctly calling for improvements over the U. S. regulation musket.<sup>22</sup>

The answer appears to be that there probably was no decision made. The official records of the Ordnance Department for that period are so confusing that they seem only to establish, as Mr. Claude E. Fuller has said, “the fact that there were no regularly adopted models during the first years.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it was found impossible to import any of the newer models from France but rather does it appear that the chief difficulty lay with the inexperience of our armorers. The old Charleville had given good service and there were numerous examples of it to use as models; that was the limit of their vision. Not until much later were the French improvements embodied in our own weapons. Only in 1810, after a careful investigation, could the Secretary of War report that “it appears that, in the early stages of that manufactory, muskets of an inferior quality were made; that improvements have been gradually making; and that those manufactured within the last year are of superior quality.”<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

1. Maurice Bottet, *Monographie de l'Arme a Feu Portative* . . . (Paris, 1886).
2. Armand Julin, *Monographies des Ouvriers des Canons de Fusil*. C. W. Sawyer, *Fire-arms in American History*, I, 200 *et seq.* *Bull. Milwaukee Pub. Mus.*, "The Rudolph J. Nunnemacher Collection of Projectile Arms," I, 105-108. See also notes by Major G. Tylden in *Jour. Soc. Army Hist. Research*, Vol. XIV, No. 56, pp. 225-227.
3. These models were: 1717, 1728, 1746, 1754, 1763, 1766, 1768, 1770, 1771, 1773, 1774, 1776 (marked 1777), Bottet.
4. *Jour. Cont. Cong.*, II, 253; III, 280, 336, 453; IV, 24.
5. Force, 4th, IV, 660; Burnett, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, p. 299.
6. Dubourg to Franklin, June 10, 1776, Force, 4th, VI, 774. Henri Doniol, *Histoire de la Participation de la France* . . . , I, 508-509. For some details of this contract see also B. F. Stevens, *Facsimiles* . . . , 574.
7. Stevens, *Facsimiles* . . . , 887, 888.
8. Deane to Com. Sec. Corr., August 18, 1776, Force, 5th, I, 1014.
9. Beaumarchais to Com. Sec. Corr., August 18, 1776, Force, 5th, I, 1022. Doniol, vols. I and II, *passim*.
10. Beaumarchais to Vergennes, March 7, 1777, Doniol, II, 315.
11. G. L. Clark, *Silas Deane*, pp. 89-90. The value of the supplies shipped by Beaumarchais to this country at our time of greatest need has been estimated at over two million, two hundred thousand francs. He died in 1795, unpaid and in great poverty. His experience was, moreover, common to almost all who at that period had business relations with this country. Narratives of these debts reflect little glory on the United States.
12. Pliarne, Penet et Cie. to the New York Convention, Force, 5th, II, 1147. *Ibid.*, III, 610.
13. The reason for this disproportionment of Charlevilles is obscure and may well be less of an accident than it now appears. Did the Charleville armory fabricate most of the muskets of 1763 and were these of a superior quality? When the first shipment contracted for by Dubourg and Penet arrived at Nantes the latter wisely opened a case and found that the weapons were inferior in quality to what had been ordered. He removed one musket from the box and, bringing it to Dubourg, compared it with one "from Charleville." Discussion by Dubourg, August 1776, Stevens, *Facsimiles* . . . , 574. This subject would bear more research.
14. Returns of Ordnance . . . , December 14, 1793; *Amer. State Papers*, Mil. Aff., I, 44-60.
15. *Pub. Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins*, Military, III, 365-366. *Penn. Archives*, Second Series, XII, 738.
16. Report of the Sect. of War, March 4, 1794, *Amer. State Papers*, Mil. Aff., I, 65-66.
17. *Public Statutes at Large*, I, 352.
18. Joseph Barry, *The Annals of Harpers Ferry*.
19. Report of the Sect. of War, December 12, 1795. *Amer. State Papers*, Mil. Aff., I, 110.
20. This last was the infantry carbine, model 1793 (of Versailles). The republican government contented itself chiefly with the manufacture of older models until 1802, when it produced its "Model 1777, corrected in the year IX." Bottet, pp. 13-26.
21. Decius Wadsworth to the Sect. of War, June 6, 1814, reproduced in Claude E. Fuller, *Springfield Shoulder Arms, 1795-1865*, p. 29.
22. *Pub. Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins*, Military, II, 200, 258.
23. Fuller, p. 26 *et seq.* Mr. Fuller's valuable book is the starting point of all research on early Springfield weapons.
24. Report of the Sect. of War, February 27, 1810, *Amer. State Papers*, Mil. Aff., I, 255.