

Rice Duncan's Long Rifle: A Study of the East Tennessee Long Rifle Tradition

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His many descendants who filled the Virginia valleys and the beautiful big blue hills of North Carolina and spilled over the high dam of the Smokies were almost literally born with long rifles upon their shoulders...Almost from the time a boy was able to shoulder one of these deadly, heavy shooting weapons of the Decherd, or Leaman—of Charlottesville, North Carolina—or of the Bean or Duncan type, he was learning how to fire with 'p'in'-blank (point- blank) aim...¹

-Robert Lindsey Mason, *The Lure of the Great Smokies*

As the above quote implies the long rifle served as an integral tool for the pioneers who shaped the wilderness of the Southwest Territory in an area that would later become known as Tennessee.² These frontier people brought with them a tradition of long rifle making which they adapted to develop a uniquely Tennessee long rifle style.³ To better understand the importance of the Tennessee long rifle it is essential to examine significant stylistic variances in material, embellishment, and function when compared to other backcountry long rifles. Also key to this study is a close assessment of the blacksmiths and gun makers who constructed these weapons, as well as those for whom the rifles were made. One gunsmith in particular, Rice Duncan, offers insight into the long rifle tradition in Sullivan County, Tennessee. Through the examination of this representative East Tennessee piece one can begin to better understand the overall importance of the Tennessee long rifle and its place within backcountry culture.

By the early nineteenth century gunsmiths of Upper East Tennessee, in areas such as Sullivan County, developed a distinctive long rifle design.⁴ Known as the Tennessee long rifle, the Southern Mountain rifle, or the Kentucky rifle, these weapons served a practical purpose for those who possessed them.⁵ When compared to other backcountry rifle patterns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as the William Black rifle (1813) found in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina (Figures 1 and 2), it becomes apparent that

¹ Robert Lindsey Mason, *The Lure of the Great Smokies* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), 136.

² Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 48.

³ Harriet Arnow, *Seed Time on the Cumberland*, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 171; John Rice Irwin, *Guns and Gunmaking Tools of Southern Appalachia*, (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1980), 6.

⁴ Eliot Wigginton, and his students, *Firefox 5: Ironmaking, Blacksmithing, Flintlock Rifles, and Bear Hunting* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 215.

⁵ Irwin, 6.

these rifles could be both elegant and utilitarian.⁶ Abandoning the intricate and stylish carvings and metal detailing found on many northeastern rifles, the Tennessee long rifle primarily reflected its functional purpose as a hunting device that provided sustenance as well as protection. The carved and inlaid detailing, by comparison, were usually more restrained thus supporting the notion that form most definitely followed function on the frontier.⁷ Even within this small region of the country one can see the variations of style and design that demonstrate the diversity of the gun trade in the southern backcountry.



Figure 1. William Black gun butt and patch box. Mecklenburg County, NC.



Figure 2. William Black gun—lock plate. Mecklenburg County, NC.

Southern Mountain rifle stocks were typically made of walnut or maple, although cherry can be found in some rare cases. The metal portions of the gun, such as the barrel, butt plate, thimble, hammer, lock, patch box, trigger(s), and trigger guard were typically made of bar-and-sheet iron. Carvings found on either the wood or metal portions of the gun were usually simple in design if found at all.⁸ An elongated “cigar-shaped” patch box, also known as a banana patch box, and extended barrel tang were common features, while an extension of the top or heel of the butt plate and a scrolled iron guard could be seen as well. Many of the details found on the Tennessee long rifle have been attributed to a southwest Virginia influence.⁹

When the characteristics and style of the long rifle made by Rice Duncan, in the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts’ Tennessee Collection, are compared with those of the

⁶ Robert A. Leath, and William W. Ivey, "The Discovery of William Black: Master Gunsmith of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina," (*The Magazine Antiques*, July/August 2012), 128-130.

⁷ Irwin, 6.

⁸ Carroll Van West, ed., *A History of Tennessee Arts* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 155.

⁹ "Research cards: Accession # 3764," *MESDA Research Files: Object Files*, (Winston-Salem, NC: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts).

typical Southern Mountain rifle one can begin to see the commonalities (Figures 3).¹⁰ Measuring approximately 64” from muzzle to butt the Rice Duncan long rifle features a full-length iron octagon barrel (suggesting that it is a smooth bore rifle), a curly maple stock, iron mounts, a banana shaped patch box, a molded cheek piece, an iron side and toe plate, double-set triggers, and simple carving on both the wood and iron portions of the gun.¹¹ Physical evidence also shows that the gun was at one point converted from a flintlock to a percussion mechanism, a shift that was typically done in the mid- to late- nineteenth century. The gun was once again converted to a flintlock mechanism in the twenty-first century.¹² The culmination of these particular features reveals that the Rice Duncan rifle is a classic example of the Tennessee long rifle profile. Close examination of the rifle reveals copious amounts of scratches, scuffs, and dents, as well as a missing screw on the gun butt; this, coupled with the restrained design features, helps to reinforce the idea that the gun was used mainly as a utilitarian piece rather than a show piece.



Figure 3. Rice Duncan long rifle, circa 1820s-1830s. Sullivan County, TN

It is not the commonalities that the Duncan rifle shares with the larger schema, but the distinguishing features that help to broaden one’s understanding of the long rifle tradition in Tennessee. Several initials and names both scratched and stamped into portions of the gun aid in revealing more about the gun’s history.

The first name, “RICE DUNCAN,” was stamped into the barrel of the gun (Figure 4). Further research into the Duncan family history reveals two possible candidates for the gun’s maker, as well as the likely possibility of a family gunsmith tradition. Rice Duncan (1775-

¹⁰ Benjamin H. Caldwell Jr., Robert Hicks, and Mark W. Scala, *Art of Tennessee*, (Nashville, TN: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2003),37-38.

¹¹ *The Luminary: The Newsletter of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, (Winter 1986),

¹² "MESDA Catalogue of Earl Southern Decorative Arts Collections Object-- Research Room Worksheet: Accessions # 3764," (Winston-Salem, NC: The Museum of Early Southern DecorativeArts, August 25, 2010).

1831) lived in Washington County, Tennessee. He is listed in some documents as the maker of this particular rifle. Duncan had two sons Alfred, a well known gunsmith in Sullivan County, and George Rice Duncan. George Rice Duncan, the second likely candidate, was born on March 18, 1813 in Washington County and is listed in the family Bible as simply Rice Duncan. Shortly after he married Ellenor Snapp he moved to Sullivan County where her family resided. This explains why some references locate the gun in Sullivan County. Family tradition holds that George Rice learned the gun trade from his brother Alfred.¹³ A recent reassessment of the gun by the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art's gunsmith, Bill Bailey, reveals that the gun was made sometime between the 1820s-1830s.¹⁴ If the gun is dated closer to the 1830s there is a strong possibility that Rice, George and Alfred's father, or George Rice could have made the weapon. In either case this research has revealed the distinct possibility that the gun making trade may have been a family tradition. This is not a stretch when one looks at other gun-making families in Washington County, like the well-known Bean family. The Bean family gunsmith tradition can be traced back as early as the 1740s to William Bean. Since the 1740s nearly five generations of Beans have carried on the family gunsmith tradition.¹⁵



Figure 4. Name "Rice Duncan" stamped into the barrel of the long rifle.

The name "J.W. Ramsey" appears on the inside butt of the gun and may offer a clue as to the weapon's owner (Figure 5). A search of the 1840 Census shows that there were no

¹³ Dobson, *GenealogyBug*, July 1, 2000 <http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~dobson/book/bookib.htm> (accessed July 3, 2012), 12.

¹⁴ Bill Bailey, interview by Jessi White, *Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts: gunsmith* (July 17, 2012); Malcolm D. Rogers, interview by Jessi White, *Rice Duncan's Long Rifle* (October 27, 2012). After assessing images of the Rice Duncan long rifle, Malcolm D. Rogers, and East Tennessee gun enthusiast, posits that this particular weapon was likely built in the 1810s to 1820s, and was therefore built by Rice Duncan and not George Rice Duncan.

¹⁵ James B. Whisker, *Gunsmith and Allied Tradesmen of Tennessee*, (Everett, PA: Bedford Village Press, 2009), 8-12.

Ramseys living in Sullivan County or Washington County, Tennessee at that time. A name closely matching the name on the rifle, John W. Ramsey, does not appear in the Sullivan County Census until 1900, well past Rice Duncan's date of death.¹⁶ Further research into John Ramsey's history shows that his family was from Virginia proving unlikely that the gun was passed down to him. Another likely hypothesis is that the gun was made for someone from a neighboring county, perhaps a member of the well-known Ramsey family out of Knoxville, Tennessee. There is a listing for a James W. Ramsey in the 1900 Census for Unicoi County. A second set of initials, "W.H." or "H.M.," also appear on the butt of the gun. It will be highly difficult, if not impossible to determine who these initials represent. In any case the crude method in which the names are scrawled coupled with the lack of documentary evidence for either a J.W. Ramsey, or a W.H. or H.M. makes it apparent that this gun was not made for either of these individuals but was probably purchased by them at a much later date.



Figure 5. "J.W. Ramsey" carved into the inside butt of the gun just above the cheek mold.

A final look at the gun's materials, especially its iron fittings, uncovers several more questions. Did Rice Duncan make the iron gun parts himself? Did he order the parts locally,

¹⁶ "1900 United States Federal Census," *James W. Ramsey Civil District 10, Sullivan, Tennessee*.

or did he order them from outside of the county? If he did make the iron parts, or if someone locally made the parts for him where did they get the iron to make the pieces? The answers to these questions not only offer further insight into the Tennessee long rifle, but also help to explain the intricate process of rifle production by individual artisans and the large network of laborers that aided in its construction. Most if not all of these questions cannot be definitively answered, but a careful examination of the local iron industry could prove useful in developing a viable theory. This study's examination of the iron industry will be limited to the Beaver Creek Ironworks in Sullivan County, Tennessee.

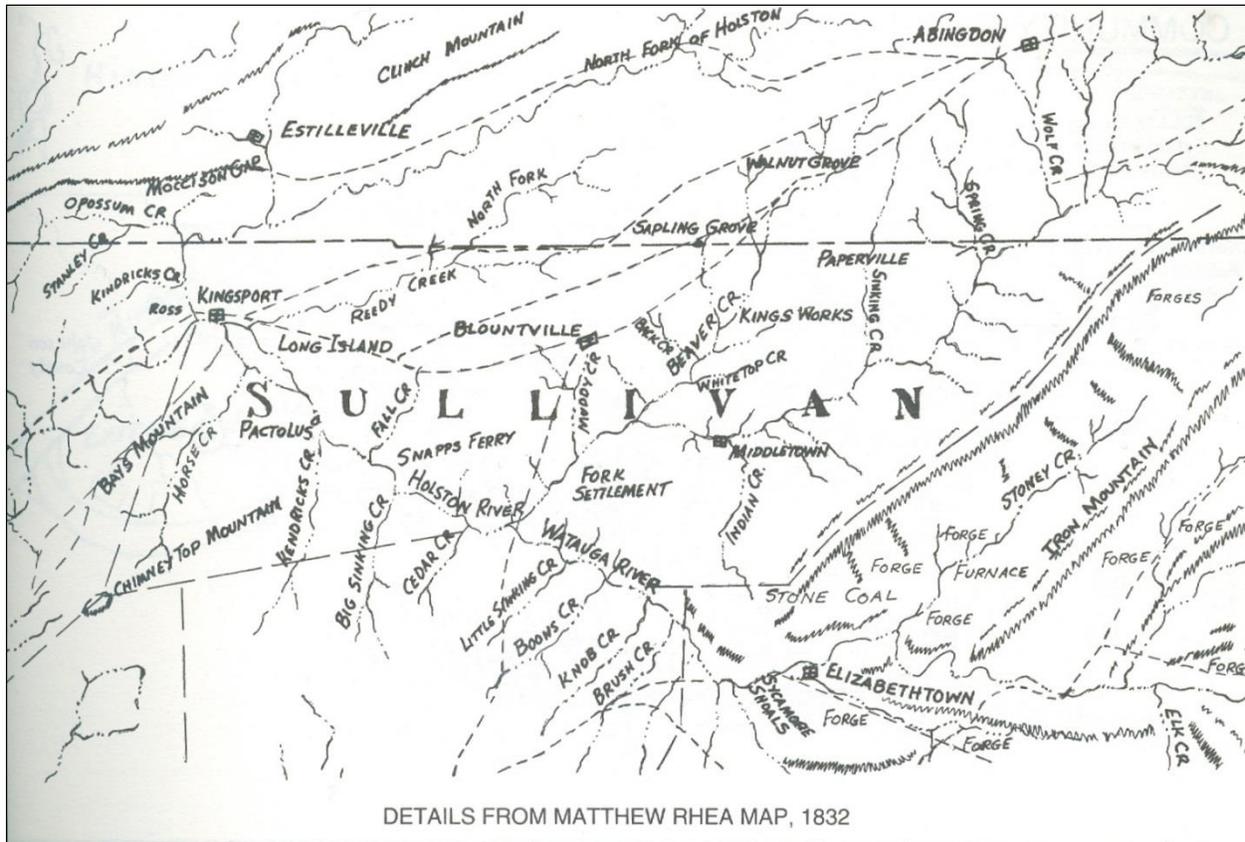


Figure 6. 1832 map of Sullivan County, TN. The blue star marks the Beaver Creek Iron Works. The red star marks the approximate location of George Rice Duncan's home.

The Beaver Creek Iron Works was established by Colonel James King sometime in the mid-1790s. The Iron Works produced primarily bar iron, but also made castings and nails.¹⁷ King sold his iron products via several routes: 1. He had merchandise shipped down river to a large community center where it was sold in bulk; 2. He had a large amount of bar iron and

¹⁷*The Luminary : The Newsletter of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, "New in the Collection," (Spring 1995), 8.

castings sent by wagon to Boat Yard (now Kingsport) where it was sent down the Holston River for distribution. Finally, and most importantly for this argument, King sold bar iron to local merchants who then sold it to local individuals proving that both Rice and George Rice Duncan would have had easy access to iron for parts construction. In all likelihood neither Duncan made the parts, but contracted the work out to a local blacksmith. The distribution of these materials to a local market proves that it was possible for Rice or George Rice Duncan or a local smith to easily acquire bar iron to make the gun's parts. The Beaver Creek Iron Works, located on the Southeast side of the Beaver Creek Knobs where the Steele Creek empties into the Beaver Creek,¹⁸ was close enough to George Rice Duncan's home, located on the Sinking Creek on the north side of the Holston River (Figure 6).¹⁹ The availability of iron bar coupled with the proximity of Beaver Creek Iron Work to Rice Duncan's home makes it plausible that Duncan could have acquired the iron to make the gun parts from this iron works. Even if the rifle was made by Rice Duncan in Washington County the Beaver Creek Iron Works use of various trade routes would have made bar iron easy to obtain.

In conclusion, a closer examination of the Rice Duncan rifle reveals several things about the long rifle tradition in Sullivan County. First, the design, material, and wear of the piece informs us that the gun was a utilitarian piece, as were the vast majority of Tennessee long rifles, but the restrained detailing alludes to the idea that this piece also boasted aesthetic appeal. Second, research into possible makers and owners reveals information about the construction and use of the weapon. Finally, the connection of the Rice Duncan rifle parts to the Beaver Creek Iron Works shows that the rifle's production was not the work of a single person, but a larger network of laborers and artisans from the Sullivan County area. All of this research aids in providing insight into the Tennessee long rifle tradition.

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¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹ Dobson, 13.

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