

LECTURE 3

CRAFTS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP IN COLONIAL & REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

A. Things to keep in mind about the film "The Williamsburg Gunsmith"

1. Making a "Kentucky" rifle c. 1776

--one master craftsman (Wallace Gusler), assisted by an apprentice or journeyman made the entire rifle. Skills involved: forging, filing, machining, casting, woodworking, and engraving.

--making a high quality rifle required over 300 hours of labor [1 rifle every 25 to 27 working days consisting of 11-12 hour days]
Productivity: c. 13 rifles a year max.

2. Is this demonstration typical of the gunmaker's art c. 1770-1800?

No. Very few master gunsmiths made the entire rifle. Rather they took on one or two apprentices and perhaps as many as 3 or 4 journeymen while dividing the labor on manufacturing the various parts of the rifle. Only the most demanding aspects of the work would have involved the master. What is more, most gun makers c. 1776-1800 purchased parts already finished, made a few on their own, and assembled them.

Examples: Silas Allen of Shrewsbury, Mass. (1780s-1840s)

The Resor and Gumpf families of Lancaster, PA (1770s-1830s)

John Armstrong of Emitsburg, MD and his apprentice, Marine T. Wickham (Emitsburg, Harpers Ferry, and Philadelphia), c. 1800-1835.

3. When did armsmaking become mechanized?

An incremental, cumulative process that began in the 1790s and continued well into the 1850s.

The most important innovators were not craft-trained gunsmiths:

Examples: Eli Whitney of New Haven, CT

Simeon North of Middletown, CT

John H. Hall of Portland, ME

B. Artifact: a "Pennsylvania-Kentucky" rifle made by S. Mewhirter c. 1810

Note the differences between it and the rifle produced by the Williamsburg gunsmith:

- purchased parts
- minimal decoration & engraving
- identifying marks indicate that Mewhirter made the gun around the time of the War of 1812.

C. Other crafts in early America (see Cowan):

- craft hierarchies (silver smiths, printers, etc.)
- craft precursors of industrialization: blacksmiths, millwrights
- Paul Revere (1734-1818): from craftsman to industrialist
- the iron plantation as industrial prototype:
 - involved huge investment of \$ in land and equipment
[Cowan notes that a forge alone could cost well over 3500 British pounds]
 - often combined iron making with farming

D. Implications:

1. 1730S-1770S: constraints imposed by British mercantile system
Example: the Iron Act of 1750
 2. 1770s-1780s: the problem of raising capital to build large furnaces and forges
- ***LOCAL POLITICS AND THE INVENTION OF THE CORPORATION*****
(its association with constitution making during and after the American Revolution)
3. Labor scarcity: did it retard or encourage innovation?
 - "the density of artisans . . . was too low to encourage technological change" (Cowan, p. 63)
 - "Since artisans of all types were in short supply . . . colonial artisans tended, on the whole, to re-create that with which they were already familiar." (Cowan, p. 64)