

Photo by Eric Lambert

JACOB YOUNG

# Riflemen of the Cumberland

*and the guns that made them famous.*

BY MEL HANKLA, KRA

There are no words to properly express the excitement I felt that early spring day in 1984. My friend and mentor, North Carolinian Earl Lanning, was taking me to Danville, Kentucky, to introduce me to his dear friend and mentor, Clemens Caldwell, a well-known historian and collector of early frontier artifacts. I was not prepared for the life-changing experience of handling

several of America's finest Kentucky Rifles. I had studied the books of Joe Kindig and Dr. George Shumway and was familiar with most of Clem's rifles, but one in particular took my breath. It was different from the rest; long, slim, architecturally bold, its dramatically tapered and flared barrel was a full four feet long. Its condition was "like new" and was obviously made by a gifted craftsman, a true artist. Rolling it over in my lap, the graceful signature of its maker,

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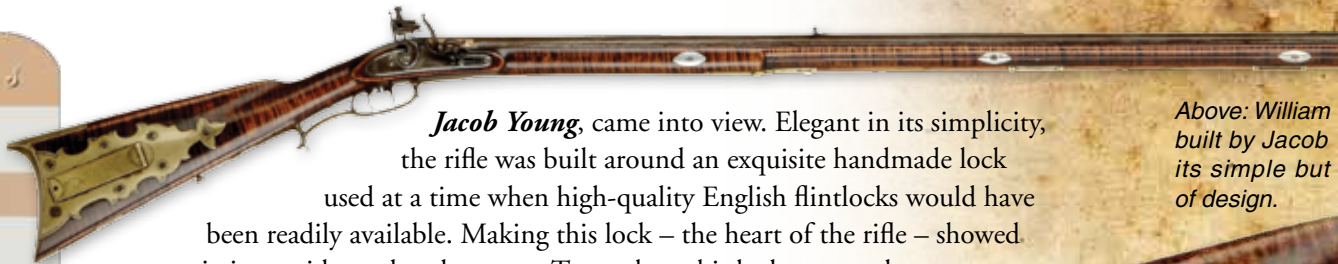
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**Jacob Young**, came into view. Elegant in its simplicity, the rifle was built around an exquisite handmade lock used at a time when high-quality English flintlocks would have been readily available. Making this lock – the heart of the rifle – showed conviction, pride, and perhaps ego. To produce this lock was surely more laborious than making all the other components of the rifle combined. Both the priming pan and the enclosure of the frizzen were lined with pure gold; a gold flash guard, dovetailed into the iron of the barrel, surrounded a gold touchhole liner. The bolts holding the lock were overlaid with silver and rested upon a silver sideplate designed with a heart-shaped finial. Upon this sideplate, beautiful script, proudly engraved, announced the owner's name - **Wm. Waid Woodfork**.

The patchbox was fashioned from a single piece of cast brass and expertly fitted with a "captured" lid, completely encircled by an intricately engraved brass surround. The trigger guard was also unique, constructed with a reverse curve at the termination of the grip rail kissing the rear support of the guard. The cheek held the largest of a dozen cast silver inlays, a large elongated diamond decorated with a meticulously engraved federal period eagle. No screws or pins visibly attached this inlay, and upon perusal I found it was held in place with a pin inserted from under the cheekpiece, an arduous task, but one obviously important to the maker so that nothing distracted his decoration.

This impressive rifle and its unique elements of design were the beginning of an exciting adventure. The adventure proved to be one not only concerning rifles, their makers, and the men whose lives depended upon them, but of a place, a region, a world within itself. The setting for this journey is the **Cumberland**. Tennessee Judge John Haywood, whose books were ground-breaking works in preserving and interpreting the state's history, wrote in his 1891 *Civil and*

Above: William built by Jacob its simple but of design.

The close-up of the butt stock details the unique patchbox and trigger guard.



Above: From Harriet Simpson Arnow's book, *Seedtime on the Cumberland*, this map of the Cumberland shows the "boot shaped" area of the region.

Waid Woodfork's rifle  
Young, exhibits  
elegant lines



Above: A finely engraved Federal Eagle adorns the cheekpiece. The photo below shows the sculpting of the lock region, stepped wrist, and comb. The owner's name, "Wm. Waid Woodfork", is engraved in beautiful script on the silver sideplate.



*Political History of the State of Tennessee*, "The Cumberland, it is not just the famous river; it's not Tennessee nor Kentucky; however each and all help make up this unique place." Harriette Simpson Arnow, a novelist and social historian born in Wayne County, Kentucky, is chiefly known for her novels portraying the people of Appalachia; they are noted works of the Southern Renaissance. Her history book *Seedtime on the Cumberland* describes the beginnings of the Appalachian region of her youth through its pioneer days. She titled the first chapter, "The Old Boot", and wrote,

*"The drainage basin of the Cumberland River forms a curious, shoe-like shape, something like an old-time buskin, badly worn and wrinkled, with a gob of mud caught in the instep, blurring the heel, yet with all the parts of a foot covering. The long and narrow toe, lifted as if for kicking, touches the Ohio, the wrinkled heel goes southward onto the high tableland of the Cumberland Plateau and is shaped by the Caney Fork river and its tributaries. The top of the shoe is formed by the Rockcastle and its many crooked creeks, a rough country the old ones found as they went through it on their way to the Kentucky Bluegrass. The Rockcastle region is still less rough and wild than the country of the upper Cumberland; here the river flows for sixty miles or so in the narrow valley, often scarcely ten miles wide, between Pine and Cumberland mountains."*

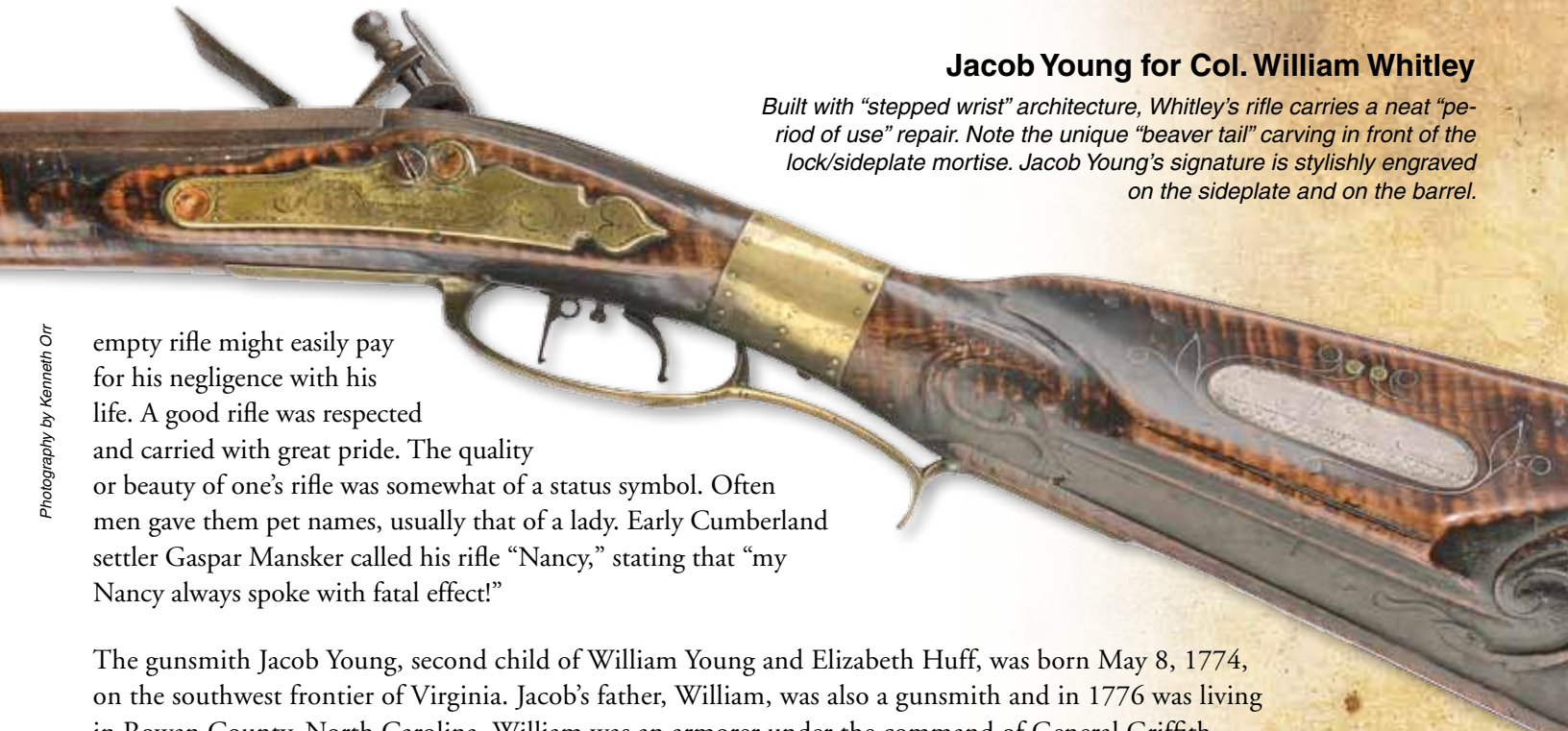
Both Haywood and Arnow found it important to identify this unique place in their landmark publications. These authors realized that the Cumberland had lost its identity when Kentucky and Tennessee were formed and felt it necessary to distinguish this region and point out its historical significance.

## The Dread Terrifick Ball

Both Jacob Young and William Waid Woodfork lived in the Cumberland, as did each of the other four characters in this story, but it is their rifles that brought attention to their pioneer lives. The iconic longrifle was the very center of frontier life. Men lived with their rifles in their hand, ready to mount and ride to the aid of a distant station or to pursue an Indian war party making for their lair with prisoners and/or stolen horses. A man often stood guard with a rifle while others milked the cows or plowed the fields. It was unusual to see a man without a rifle and it was always "loaded and primed". Ready! A man caught with an

## Jacob Young for Col. William Whitley

Built with “stepped wrist” architecture, Whitley’s rifle carries a neat “period of use” repair. Note the unique “beaver tail” carving in front of the lock/sideplate mortise. Jacob Young’s signature is stylishly engraved on the sideplate and on the barrel.



Photography by Kenneth Orr

empty rifle might easily pay for his negligence with his life. A good rifle was respected and carried with great pride. The quality or beauty of one’s rifle was somewhat of a status symbol. Often men gave them pet names, usually that of a lady. Early Cumberland settler Gaspar Mansker called his rifle “Nancy,” stating that “my Nancy always spoke with fatal effect!”

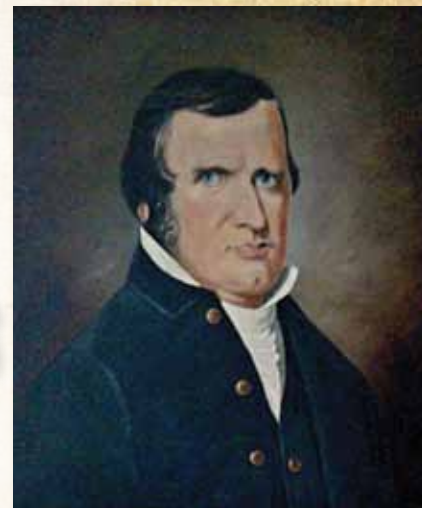
The gunsmith Jacob Young, second child of William Young and Elizabeth Huff, was born May 8, 1774, on the southwest frontier of Virginia. Jacob’s father, William, was also a gunsmith and in 1776 was living in Rowan County, North Carolina. William was an armorer under the command of General Griffith Rutherford. In 1779 he moved his family to the Cumberland, settling on Indian Creek near modern-day Boma, Tennessee. It was then Sumner County, North Carolina.

William Waid Woodfork, (also spelled Woodfolk, Woolfork, Woolfolk) for whom Jacob Young made the earlier described rifle (circa 1815), was an early pioneer in Jackson County, Tennessee, a large planter and a very influential man. Woodfork was a surveyor and in 1806 was paid by the state of Tennessee to separate White County out of Jackson County. William H. Speer, in *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans* writes that Woodfork “was a man of fine ability and large fortune, being one of the richest men in Tennessee...” He was also a noted horseman, with Speer’s stating, “Tennessee was far in advance of Kentucky prior to the war [1812] in thoroughbred horses, the development of this animal dating back to 1808 in the vicinity of Nashville and the breed improved by the judicious expenditures of money by such men as the immortal Andrew Jackson... and William Waid Woolfolk, of Davidson county.”

The initials “W.W.” and “E.W.” are found engraved on the elongated oval silver cheekpiece inlay. William Whitley’s wife Esther, was famous for her marksmanship!

Jacob Young also made a rifle for early Kentucky frontiersman **William Whitley**.

Whitley was born in Virginia in 1749 and moved to Kentucky in 1775. Whitley served under George Rogers Clark during the Revolutionary War, was a state legislator, and fought multiple campaigns against several Native American tribes. He was also famous as a horseman, a commonality between him and William Waid Woodfork. Built in 1787, Whitley called his Cumberland home “Sportsmans Hill”. It was the first brick house west of the Allegheny Mountains, but more importantly it was home to the first circular racetrack for horses. In defiance to the British norm, Whitley arrogantly raced horses “counter-clockwise”, which America still does today. Whitley’s estate was dubbed, “Guardian of Wilderness Road” and was a gathering place for early frontiersmen including Gaspar Mansker,



Col. William Whitley



Jacob Young made this large gracefully curved powder horn for Wm. Whitley.



The design and engraving of the patchbox on Whitley's rifle is very similar to the one on Woodfork's rifle, but with a heart shaped piercing accenting its finial.

Isaac Shelby, John Sevier, William Fleming, John Floyd, James Harrod, Benjamin Logan, George Rogers Clark, Simon Kenton and Daniel Boone.

Stylistically, William Whitley's Jacob Young rifle appears to have been made several years earlier than the Woodfork rifle, probably around 1800. The butt is considerably thicker and is designed with a stepped wrist. It has been broken through the wrist and carries a neat brass repair. The "H.Deringer-Philad" flintlock is a "period of use" replacement. Although not as elegant as Woodfork's rifle, it is decorated with bold relief rococo carving, blatantly showing another facet of Jacob Young's talent and artistry.

The script engraved on Whitley's rifle mirrors the large gracefully-curved powder horn that Jacob Young made to accompany it. It is inscribed:

*Wm. Whitley I am your horn  
The truth I love, A lie I scorn  
Fill me with the best of powder  
He make your rifle crack the louder  
See how the dread terrifick ball  
Make Indians bleed and Tories fall  
You with powder He supply  
For to defend your Liberty*

Family legend is that William Whitley carried this rifle and powderhorn to the Battle of the Thames, where he lost his life on October 5, 1813. Although he was in his sixty-fourth year and a veteran of more than twenty Indian engagements, Whitley answered Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby's call for volunteers during the War of 1812. He enlisted as a private in John Davidson's company that formed a part of Richard M. Johnson's Kentucky Mounted Infantry. In all of his campaigns he had been wounded only once, but he had often said that, "the death I crave is to die in my country's

defense." The night before the Battle of the Thames, Whitley is said to have expressed the belief to his friend, John Preston that he would die on the following day. Boldly, a short time before the battle he brazenly swam his horse across the river to get scalps from three Indians whom he had just killed. At the onset of the battle, to avoid sending the entire regiment into an ambush, Commander Johnson called for twenty volunteers to draw fire from the savages. The group riding out to almost certain death has been called by many historians, "The Forlorn Hope." Johnson himself rode beside the little band, but at its head rode William Whitley. At the first volley, nineteen of the group was unhorsed and fifteen were mortally wounded. When the skirmish ended, both Tecumseh and William Whitley were dead. Richard Spurr of Fayette County, a private in Samuel Comb's company, was one of the twenty members of the Forlorn Hope. He stated in later life that he had seen Whitley and an Indian fire at one another, that each was killed and that he carried both Whitley's and the Indian's bodies into camp with General Harrison, recognizing the Indian as the Shawnee leader Tecumseh. John Preston survived the conflict and returned Whitley's horse, his gun, and powder horn to his wife Ester.

## Thomas Simpson for Gasper Mansker

Thomas Simpson's longrifle for G. Mankser is truly a masterpiece, exhibiting three important features rarely found together on a firearm – the maker's name, the name of the client, and the date of origin. The date 1791 is engraved on the silver oval inlay of the brass sideplate.

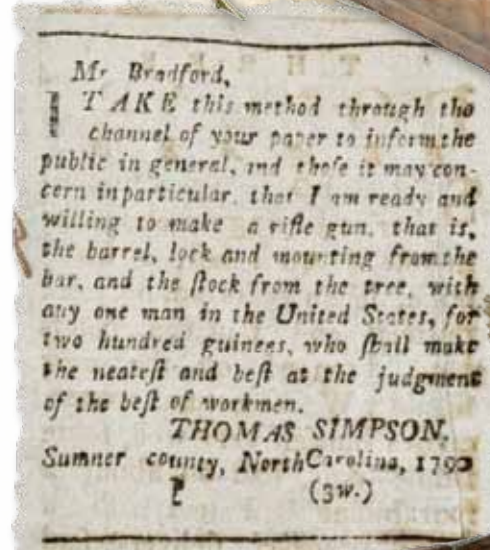
## Kindred Spirits

As previously discussed, in 1776 Jacob Young's father, William Young, was in the Watauga region and an armorer under Gen. Rutherford. Also in the Watauga in 1776 was **Thomas Simpson**. Importantly, the pension application for Joseph Luske reveals that both he and Simpson were in Captain John Sevier's company on William Christian's campaign against the Cherokee. Luske declared that his messmates were, "*Thomas Simpson - armorer, Felix Walker, Julius Robinson and William Dodd.*" All of these men were signers of the July 5, 1776 "Watauga Petition" for annexation of the region into North Carolina. In May of 1772, for the mutual protection of the settlements along the Watauga, Holston, and Nolichucky rivers, the frontier settlers had created a semi-autonomous government called the Watauga Association. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "the Watauga settlers were the first men of American birth to establish a free and independent community on the continent." A court of law was formed, consisting of five magistrates, a clerk for recording, and a sheriff. This federation gave them authority to manage land affairs, sanctify marriages, raise a militia, and deal with crime. Its functions were numerous, and frontier justice was harsh. Hanging was the sentence for murder, and horse thieves had the letters "H" and "T" branded on each cheek. With bravery and fortitude these patriots defended defiance to outside foes. On September 25, 1780, they joined other volunteers at Sycamore Shoals, creating a force of over 1100 riflemen to rebut the threat of British Major Patrick Ferguson. These patriots were spurred by Reverend Samuel Doak's battle cry, "wield the sword of the Lord and Gideon" and marched to King's Mountain, soundly defeating Ferguson and his loyalist troops. This decisive battle was the beginning of the final chapter of the American Revolution. Although only lasting a few years, the Watauga Association provided a firm foundation for what later developed into the state of Tennessee.

The geographic association of these two "armorers" is mentioned to bring



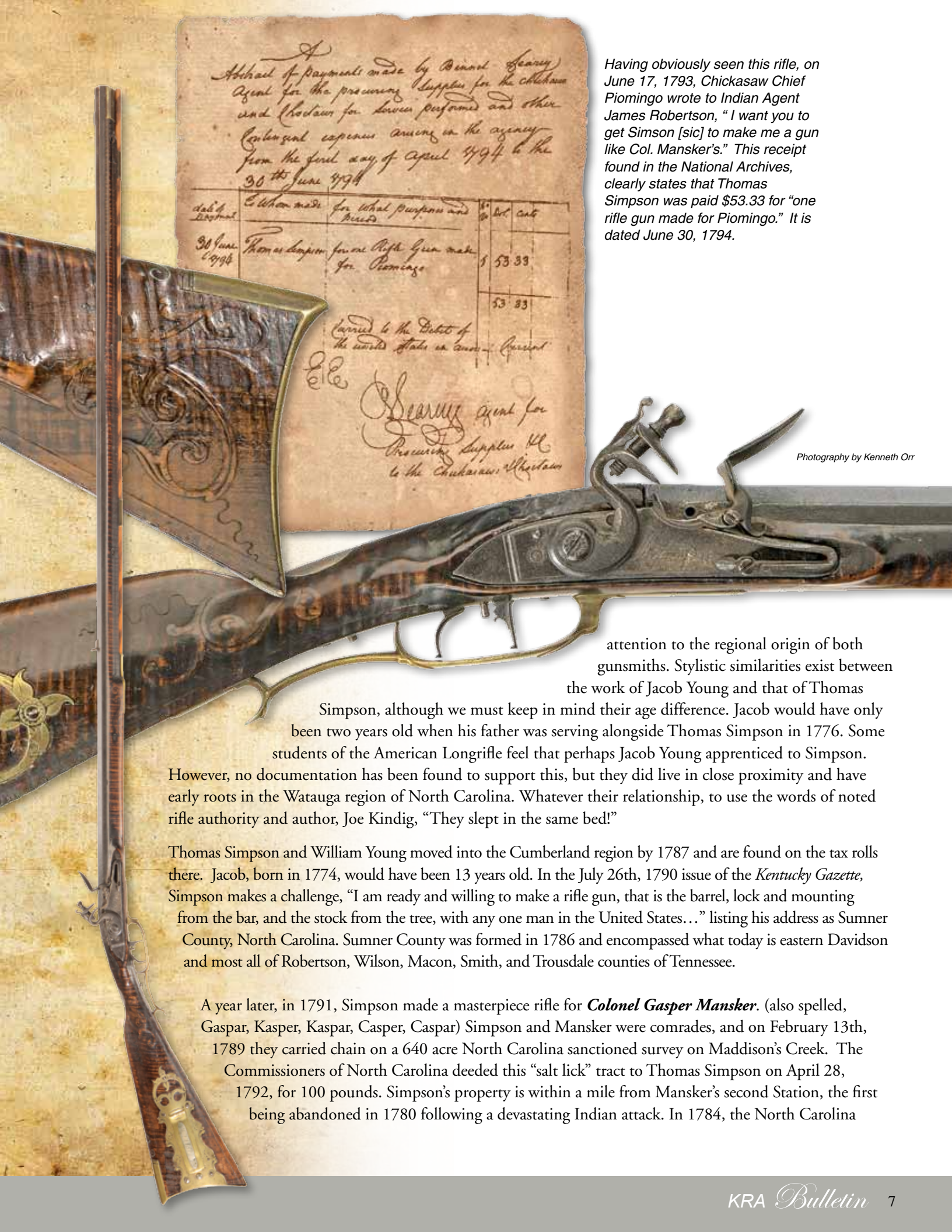
So there was no doubt about the maker of this rifle, Thomas Simpson used the Latin term "fecit" meaning he did it, adjacent to his signature.



Thomas Simpson offers 200 guineas in a challenge that he can build the "neatest and best" rifle in the United States. - July 26, 1791 the Kentucky Gazette.



The "captured lid" of the patchbox has a silver overlay engraved with G. Mansker.



Having obviously seen this rifle, on June 17, 1793, Chickasaw Chief Piomingo wrote to Indian Agent James Robertson, "I want you to get Simson [sic] to make me a gun like Col. Mansker's." This receipt found in the National Archives, clearly states that Thomas Simpson was paid \$53.33 for "one rifle gun made for Piomingo." It is dated June 30, 1794.

Photography by Kenneth Orr

attention to the regional origin of both gunsmiths. Stylistic similarities exist between the work of Jacob Young and that of Thomas Simpson, although we must keep in mind their age difference. Jacob would have only been two years old when his father was serving alongside Thomas Simpson in 1776. Some students of the American Longrifle feel that perhaps Jacob Young apprenticed to Simpson. However, no documentation has been found to support this, but they did live in close proximity and have early roots in the Watauga region of North Carolina. Whatever their relationship, to use the words of noted rifle authority and author, Joe Kindig, "They slept in the same bed!"

Thomas Simpson and William Young moved into the Cumberland region by 1787 and are found on the tax rolls there. Jacob, born in 1774, would have been 13 years old. In the July 26th, 1790 issue of the *Kentucky Gazette*, Simpson makes a challenge, "I am ready and willing to make a rifle gun, that is the barrel, lock and mounting from the bar, and the stock from the tree, with any one man in the United States..." listing his address as Sumner County, North Carolina. Sumner County was formed in 1786 and encompassed what today is eastern Davidson and most all of Robertson, Wilson, Macon, Smith, and Trousdale counties of Tennessee.

A year later, in 1791, Simpson made a masterpiece rifle for **Colonel Gasper Mansker**. (also spelled, Gaspar, Kasper, Kaspar, Casper, Caspar) Simpson and Mansker were comrades, and on February 13th, 1789 they carried chain on a 640 acre North Carolina sanctioned survey on Maddison's Creek. The Commissioners of North Carolina deeded this "salt lick" tract to Thomas Simpson on April 28, 1792, for 100 pounds. Simpson's property is within a mile from Mansker's second Station, the first being abandoned in 1780 following a devastating Indian attack. In 1784, the North Carolina

The butt of the Mansker rifle is a full two inches in width and tapers to a delightfully slim wrist. Silver wire inlay decorates the top of the comb.



Photography by Kenneth Orr



David Wright's painting, *The Station Camp*, inspired by Gasper Mansker and his longhunters, provides us with an accurate visual of the place and time.

government passed an act of legislation granting preemption rights to those men who had come into and settled the Middle Cumberland Valley prior to 1780. "The Immortal Seventy" were those who were still alive and/or the heirs of those who had been killed defending their homes and land during conflicts with the Indians. Gasper Mansker received one of these 640 acre Preemptive Land Grants and it is the location of his second Station.

Thomas Simpson wanted there to be no doubt that "he" built this rifle, and used the Latin term "fecit" meaning, *he did it*, adjacent to his signature. G. Mansker is inscribed on a silver overlay on the patchbox door. Mansker's ownership is further documented by a letter from **Chickasaw Chief Piomingo** to Indian Agent General James Robertson dated June 17, 1793, stating, "I want you to get Simson [sic] to make me a gun like Col. [Gasper] Mansker's." By June 30, 1794, Thomas Simpson had completed construction of this rifle, submitting his invoice to Bennet Searcy, agent for procuring supplies. The invoice states: "Thomas Simpson for one Rifle gun made for Piomingo - \$53.33." This cost is unusually high as a typical rifle at the time sold for no more than about \$13. Perhaps part of this cost was that Simpson had agreed to build the rifle quickly but would also indicate that the rifle was of a better quality than average, as is the rifle he made for Gasper Mansker.



William Whitley's





Simpson made a companion powder horn that is engraved with polychrome decoration matching the engraving and carving on Mansker's rifle.



Thomas Simpson's

Simpson's rifle also has an accompanying powder horn. It is decorated with floral engraving that matches both the carved and engraved designs on Mansker's rifle. It is obvious that this horn or others like it inspired Jacob Young when he made William Whitley's horn. The turned butts of the two horns are very similar, each with a silver inlay surrounded with a turned cow horn decorative band. Simpson, boldly engraved his initials, "T.S." on the butt of his horn, once again leaving no doubt that he was the maker.

Gaspar Mansker was one of the earliest explorers of the Cumberland. In June 1769, he and a company of long-hunters set off for the western wilderness. From Abingdon, Virginia, they went to the north fork of the Holston River, crossed to Moccasin Gap and traveled on to the Clinch River. Traveling through Powell's Valley and the Cumberland Gap, they reached the Cumberland River. They crossed into Kentucky at "a remarkable fish dam, which had been made in very ancient times." The hunters headed south and soon found the south fork of the Cumberland River and followed it to Price's Meadow that is in modern-day Wayne County, Kentucky. Here they made their first base camp, hunting and exploring the surrounding territory for eight or nine months.

In the fall of 1771, Mansker set out again for the western wilderness, this time in the company of Isaac Bledsoe, Joseph Drake, John Montgomery, Henry Skaggs, James Knox, and others, including an old man by the name of Russell, so "dim sighted" that he tied a white rag on the muzzle of his rifle to direct his sight towards game and "thus killed a number of deer." The group encamped on what they named "Russell's Creek" in what is now Adair County, Kentucky. They built a "skin-house" to store the pelts and hunted in the surrounding country until February 1772, when they were raided by Indians. Most of the men were out hunting; however three had been left behind to tend camp and salt down hides. Two of the three were captured by the Indians and never heard from again; the third managed to escape and met the rest of the company as they were returning to camp.

In embittered commemoration of the plunder of their camp and the destruction of the peltries, they inscribed upon a beech tree the emphatic record, "2300 Deer Skins lost Ruination by God". Mansker and the hunters pushed further west, arriving in the middle Cumberland late in May. A station camp was established on a northern tributary of the Cumberland River at a point near Pilot Knob in Sumner County, known today as Station Camp Creek.

Gaspar Mansker fell in love with the Cumberland region, and in the early fall of 1779 he and his wife Elizabeth moved there from Fincastle County, Virginia. With a small company of emigrants they left the Holston settlements, followed the Kentucky Trail, and arrived in the middle Cumberland Valley mid-winter of 1779-1780. The Mansker party settled on a tributary of the Cumberland River. Today it's called Mansker's Creek, and the Mansker party is considered the founders and first citizens of Goodlettsville, Tennessee.

## Rifles and Region

In the world of the Kentucky rifle, there has always been the urge to categorize guns by their style, often placing them in a specific county or "school". In Pennsylvania, the regional classification of rifles is relatively cut and dried, but in the South it's not that simple. The southwestern frontier was in a state of flux. Until the admittance of Kentucky as the 15th state in 1792 all of the northern section of the Cumberland was part of Virginia. The entire southern half was part of North Carolina until 1796 when Tennessee (16th

state) was formed. By this time the northeast was well established, not only with firm boundaries for the original thirteen states but their county precincts as well.

Rifles built by Jacob Young and Thomas Simpson and the whereabouts of these gunsmiths have been controversial topics for the last several years. Jacob Young is a rather common name and as many as four different “Jacob Young’s” were encountered while doing research. Genealogy reveals that the “gunmaker” married twice, thus separating him from the others. His first wife was Mary Boren, and they settled (by 1796) in Springfield, Robertson County, Tennessee. However, they divorced in 1808. Three years later, on August 16, 1811, Jacob purchased a 640-acre Revolutionary War Grant in Smith County, Tennessee. He then married Mary (Polly) Huff and their first child, Jacob Young Jr., was born in 1813. This tract of property places Jacob Young within 10 miles of Thomas Simpson’s Mill near present-day Sparta, in White county, Tennessee. Westin A. Goodspeed, in his *History of White County*, states, “The Calf Killer Valley was the scene of the first settlements in the county, the neighborhood of what is now Sparta being in all probability the first, though Thomas Simpson settled on the Calf Killer River four miles below Sparta”. White County court minutes report that Simpson’s mill was built in 1808. In 1810, Simpson sold his Sumner county, Maddison Creek property, with the deed stating, “*Thomas Simpson, of the county of White and state of Tennessee,*” verifying that he had moved from Sumner to White County where he lived the rest of his life. Although his gravesite has not been located, a family account reports he is buried on the hill above the mill.

The name Thomas Simpson is also common and a second “Thomas Simpson” who by 1790 had settled in Nelson County, Kentucky, creates confusion. This Kentucky “Thomas” had a son named Jonathan, a well-documented 19th century Bardstown, Kentucky silversmith known for his high quality surveying compasses. Genealogy has yet to prove a kinship between the Kentucky and Tennessee “Thomas Simpsons”; however, when studying the engraving style used on Jonathan Simpson’s compasses, it’s hard not to assume a working relationship between Jonathan Simpson, Jacob Young, and/or Tennessee’s Thomas Simpson.

Another confusing issue is that the unique design elements described at the beginning of this article are also found on many rifles built in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has been theorized that the work of Jacob Young and/or Thomas Simpson was the basis for this, but recent research has revealed that William Bryan, (brother-in-law to Daniel Boone) the patriarch of one of Kentucky’s predominant gunbuilding families, was also an armorer and served alongside William Young in 1776 in the Cherokee campaigns. Thus, a good case can be made that this artistic association goes back to the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in North Carolina and was inspired by gun-building trends shared by William Young, Thomas Simpson, and William Bryan.

## Summing Up

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Cumberland was a region sought by many pioneers for its rich resources and easily traveled water thoroughfares. It spanned from modern day southwest Virginia westward to the southeast tip of Illinois, encompassing all of the Cumberland River, its tributaries, and drainage basin. Jacob Young, William Waid Woodfork, William Whitley, Thomas Simpson, Gaspar Mansker and Chickasaw Chief Piomingo, were all riflemen in the Cumberland. Rifles made by two of these men stand as historic icons for a misunderstood region that today is split in half by the boundary separating Kentucky and Tennessee. The other four men owned masterpiece rifles built by Thomas Simpson and Jacob Young and no doubt carried them with great pride. Each used his rifle to fight for personal beliefs; consequentially, each has gone down in history as a hero. These riflemen were integral to the development and evolution of the iconic Kentucky Rifle and fearless pioneers in the westward expansion of the United States of America. ■

— Mel Stewart Hankla



*Compass  
by Jonathan  
Simpson, 1819,  
Bardstown, KY.  
Collection of  
the Museum of  
Early Southern  
Decorative Arts.  
Photography by  
Wes Stewart.*



**“Could I once see the day that whites and reds were all friends it would be like getting new eye sight.”**  
*Piomingo – August 8, 1792.*

Chickasaw Chief Piomingo, the “Mountain Leader,” was born about 1750. An early diplomat, he established a government-to-government relationship with state governors and President George Washington, reaching agreements that benefitted both the Chickasaw and the Americans. He and Chickasaw Indian Agent Colonel James Robertson, co-founder of Nashville, Tennessee, formed an alliance that gave the pioneers everlasting friendship of this famous warrior and his people.

Because of his unyielding peace initiatives, on July 11, 1794, President George Washington awarded Piomingo a silver Peace Medal, promised the Chickasaw land and commissioned Piomingo as an officer of the militia. Piomingo truly believed President Washington, and Washington was

indeed sincere in his promises, although his successors acted differently. Only months before Washington’s death in 1799, Piomingo died, believing that peace was coming.



Sculpture representing “Piomingo” by William Beckwith, Tupelo, Mississippi.

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