

# Ferguson and his Rifle Come to America

by Ricky Roberts and Bryan Brown

authors of

*Every Insult and Indignity: The Life, Genius and Legacy of Major Patrick Ferguson*

In 1775, as the British Army began to tool up for an almost inevitable war with the Americans, young Captain Patrick Ferguson of the 70th Regiment of Foot had the idea to supply the army with an advanced breech-loading rifle to counter the threat of the dreaded American Long rifle. Colloquially known as the 'Widow Maker', the American Long rifle was understandably feared by British officers who had heard stories of sharpshooters specifically targeting officers, and tales of the incredible shooting skill attributed to the American riflemen. The Crown responded by deploying specialized rifle troops, such as the Hessian Jaegers and Ferguson's Experimental Company, among several others. After repeated demonstrations of his Ordnance Rifle for fellow officers, general staff, and finally for the king himself, Pattie's idea was accepted, and he started building production prototypes, engaging several local London gunsmiths to do so.

Patrick Ferguson did not invent the screw breech breechloader, the patent he took out on December 2nd, 1776 was for "improvements on the breech-loading rifle." Thus he did not originate the concept, but did make refinements to the design. Well before Patrick Ferguson breechloaders appear periodically in history, Leonardo Davinci has some in his designs and even Henry the VIII favoured breechloaders in the 15th century for bird hunting on his estates.

The Ferguson rifle was the end result of much hard work, requiring several prototype versions to be built by unknown gun makers prior to Pattie approaching Durs Egg. As the famed Swiss gunsmith to the King and Master at the Tower of London Armoury, Egg was asked to build better quality rifles for the various tests that the weapon was soon to endure.

*At this period an improved rifle was just being brought to the attention of the military authorities. Major Patrick Ferguson (of King's Mountain fame), egged on by the boasted skill of the American marksmen, had invented a breech-loader. The breech was opened by a screw plug to allow admission of ball and cartridge; special arrangements were made to prevent the fouling of the plug and the accumulation of gas, and the piece was sighted for one hundred to three hundred yards. In June, 1776, he gave a demonstration at Woolwich before Lord Amherst, Viscount Townshend, General Harvey, and several other prominent officers. He astonished the beholders. "Notwithstanding a heavy rain and a high wind, he fired," according to a contemporary, ". . . after the rate of four shots per minute at a target two hundred yards distant. He next fired six shots in one minute. He also fired (while advancing after the rate of four miles per hour) four times in the minute. He then poured a bottle of water into the pan and barrel of the piece when loaded, so as to wet every grain of powder; and in less than half a minute, he fired with her, as well as ever, without*

*extracting the ball. Lastly, he hit the bull's eye, lying on his back on the ground. Incredible as it may seem to many, considering the variation of the wind, and wetness of the weather, he only missed the target three times, during the whole course of the experiment.*

*Ferguson took out a patent for his improvements, and was allowed to form a corps of riflemen composed of volunteers from regiments serving in America. While rifled flintlocks were not officially adopted by the regular army [end of sentence]*

*An excellent marksman, Patrick was familiar with the vertical breechloading mechanism designed over 50 years before by Issac De la Chaumette. It was sometimes used in sporting rifles, but not by the army. The regulation 'Brown Bess' smooth-bore musket loaded at the muzzle. Yet breech-loaders would enable soldiers to reload quickly, while lying prone or without breaking cover; rifling would improve accuracy of aim over greater distance. Chaumette's mechanism, modified by Georges Bidet, tended to foul, with powder clogging the threads of the breech plug. <sup>(i)</sup>*

*...He adapted the design of the breech-block and the plugs threading to minimize fouling, adding a grease-groove, and also a folding rear-sight. At his own expense he had prototypes made and began testing. <sup>(ii)</sup>*

Four shots a minute is an impressive number in and of itself for a period arm, especially in foul weather. General Hervey, watching Pattie's demonstration for the general staff officers, commented that the weather was "a bad day for your show," to which Pattie is reported to have replied, "On the contrary, sir, a splendid day to show you what I have in mind." <sup>(iii)</sup>

In the muzzle-loading/black powder era keeping your powder dry could mean the difference between life and death. With muzzle-loading arms, becoming fouled with wet powder was a major problem which could easily result in wasting half an hour to pull a ball from the muzzle clear and reload a standard issue musket. This process often required several people and/or specialized tools to accomplish. Patrick Ferguson was able to do this with his weapon in half a minute, a truly impressive aspect which never fails to impress black powder shooters when we demonstrate this particular feature.

Ferguson's Uncle Jamie served with Lord Townsend during the Quebec Campaign and introduced him to his nephew. Here is an excerpt from Patrick Ferguson's letter to Lord Townsend, Master General of Ordnance, Colonel in Chief of the Royal Regiment of Artillery:

*But My Lord I here present your Lordship with an arm which fires with twice the Expedition & five times the certainty, it is several pounds lighter and requires only a forth part of the Powder of a common firelock, as can be testify'd by many*

*officers in town who have repeatedly seen it at a Considerable distance throw five balls into a small mark in a minute, where as you have not a man in your army who will fire a musket half so quick and scarce put every fifth ball into a target at that distance – I shall only say that I will undertake to have the arms to be ready to be thrown into America before the arrival of your Germans, without interfering wit your other operations” April 1776*<sup>(iv)</sup>

The comment on the “forth part” powder would seem to indicate a charge of approximately 65 grains if the “common firelock” in question had a 300-yard range like the Ferguson Ordnance Rifle, e.g. an Amusette or wall gun. If that is what he is referring to, the math works out nicely. If it is a Brown Bess or Long Land Pattern Musket reference, then the comment is a trifle exaggerated.

*June 1776*

*In Birmingham he supervised the manufacture of the first Ferguson rifles made for military service. The contracts had been given to Barker & Whatley, Galton & Sons, William Grice, Benjamin Willets each to make 25 rifles.*<sup>(v)</sup>

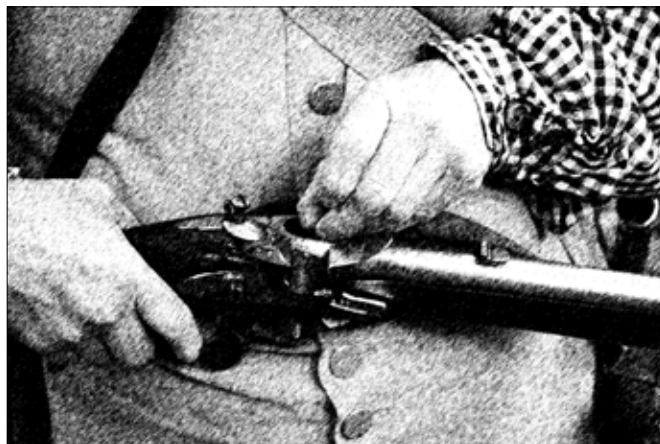
Ferguson also reported a number of private orders for his rifles, including eighteen for General Frazier, who wanted to equip his officers and NCOs out of his own pocket<sup>(vi)</sup>. Through Lord Germain General Frazier also requested the Crown to equip his two light companies with Ferguson’s rifles.

With interest from the East India Company to purchase arms made to his design and gunsmiths already copying it to compete for the East India business, Pattie tried throughout the winter to secure a patent for his rifle.

*My Rifle is in a fair way—by the unanimous suffrages of every officer who has seen it, has it been recommended as superior to any Musket Rifle or other fire arm now in use, & Lord Townsend now talks of having some hundreds made.*

*Every defect is now got the better off, & those very faults which serv’d as Jibs to the whole being now corrected, I have nothing to fear. As to promotion, I do not expect any; & yet I think something may be perhaps done, If I was supported by any Interest. I mean if possible to attract his Majestys attention next Week, & as my Labors have been very disinterested, perhaps if properly supported I might get rank. I write Jamie on this subject this night & shall be obliged to you to enquire whither or not he receives my Letter. I have declined every kind of Interest untill the merit of my invention should make its own way - that time is now arrived, & freinds may be of most essential use - I wish to be introduced to his Majesty, which the Privy Seal can easily bring about, & then if I am thought to deserve it rank may be allow’d me, if I meet with support. -*

*I am almost decided to take out a patent. I foresee that the East India Company, the west India Militias, as well as the army & Militias at home will come into it, & it is only £70 ventured for a great Object. - altho the invention is not entirely my own, yet*



*its application to the only Arm where it can be of use is mine, & moreover there are several original improvements (without which it will not Answer) which are entirely mine. - I shall also have the Custom of all nick-nacky People & Gentlemen who have deer parks or keep Game keepers in the Highlands.*<sup>(vii)</sup>

Having funded all the trials and test from his own pay, he was running up debts of £8 to £10 per month by December, 1776. Room and board in London was expensive and he had to economize:

*...by means of my lodging and servant washing &c: my subsistence which 7/6 per day is swallow’d up nearly by the time I have eat my breakfast*

*...a tavern I never enter & can scarce a afford a coffee house dinner every other day*<sup>(viii)</sup>

*Wed 19 Feb 1777 [in a letter to his sister]*

*Genl: Harvey told me that his Majesty had directed him to propose to me to go to America – ‘was I willing?’ ‘certainly to go where his Majesty pleases’ – a report was accordingly made to the King, & orders issued for forming a Company of 100 Men from the Chatham recruits for that Service, to embark as this Day- the warning was short, the Command not very flattering for an Old Capt.n of 18 years Service, & I had been Obligated to take whatever Men were pointed out to me – they have neither Cloathes for that Service, nor are in any respect to my wish”..... I shall endeavour to have 60 men more (which there are rifles for) thrown into the same ship.....<snip>.....The King proposes giving me £100 to equip me*<sup>(ix)</sup>

Patrick Ferguson brought his Experimental Rifle Company to the American Colonies in March of 1777. He reported to the Ordnance Store Keeper, (similar to a supply office in modern military terminology) in New York City:

*26 Mar 1777*

*Ltr to the Board with a Certificate of the Number of Rifle Guns produced here by Cptn Ferguson of the 70th Regiment together with a copy of his Letter of the 23rd Inst respecting Powder Flasks. Rifle Guns 67 Bayonets*

There was a shortage of powder flasks at the time, in fact there were less than even this small number of Rifle Guns<sup>(x)</sup>. He did not yet have all 100 rifles, only having 67 at this point, but he doesn’t even have enough powder flasks for those 67 rifles.

There is evidence that an additional thirty-three rifled guns were completed and shipped to the Americas, but there is no evidence that they ever reached Ferguson.<sup>(xi)</sup>

*May-June 1777*

*We who belong to the Light Troops sometimes come into sight of them, & exchange a few distant innocent Shots – My Lads were only concern’d in one Skirmish in a wood, where we had Six kill’d & wounded as they have never exceeded 90 under arms, it is a slice from my small command which I can ill afford*

The two quotes from Ferguson's letters to home put the amount of men in the unit at between sixty and ninety. His use of the term "under arms" versus commenting about his rifles in particular makes one suspect that some of his men carried muskets. We have not found concrete evidence that more than the sixty rifles he had on hand when they embarked for American shores ever actually reached his company. Therefore, we do not know if his command was entirely armed with the Ferguson rifle or a mix including muskets and/or carbines. On July 4, 1777, while in the American colonies, he tested his artillery piece he designed based on the same technology as his rifle. Unfortunately it failed and exploded due to an iron barrel and over sized ball. He did order others made with bronze (brass) barrels but there is no record he ever received them. This is important for 2 reasons. First, we know the artillery did not ship with him when he left England; and secondly, this may be the strongest evidence that he may have had his full 100 rifles.

Some historians from the 19th and 20th centuries take great lengths in an attempt to vilify Patrick Ferguson, painting him as some sort of rabid, tyrannical lunatic bent on the wholesale slaughter of the American colonists. This could not be further from the truth. Only about one-third of colonists were pro-Congress (Whig) and anti-King George, about the same fervently pro-King, and anti-Congress (Tory), and the rest neutral. Most people simply wanted to be left alone to support their families and pursue their livelihood. Pattie had no tolerance for abuse of the colonists or their families, but had no love for those he saw as traitors:

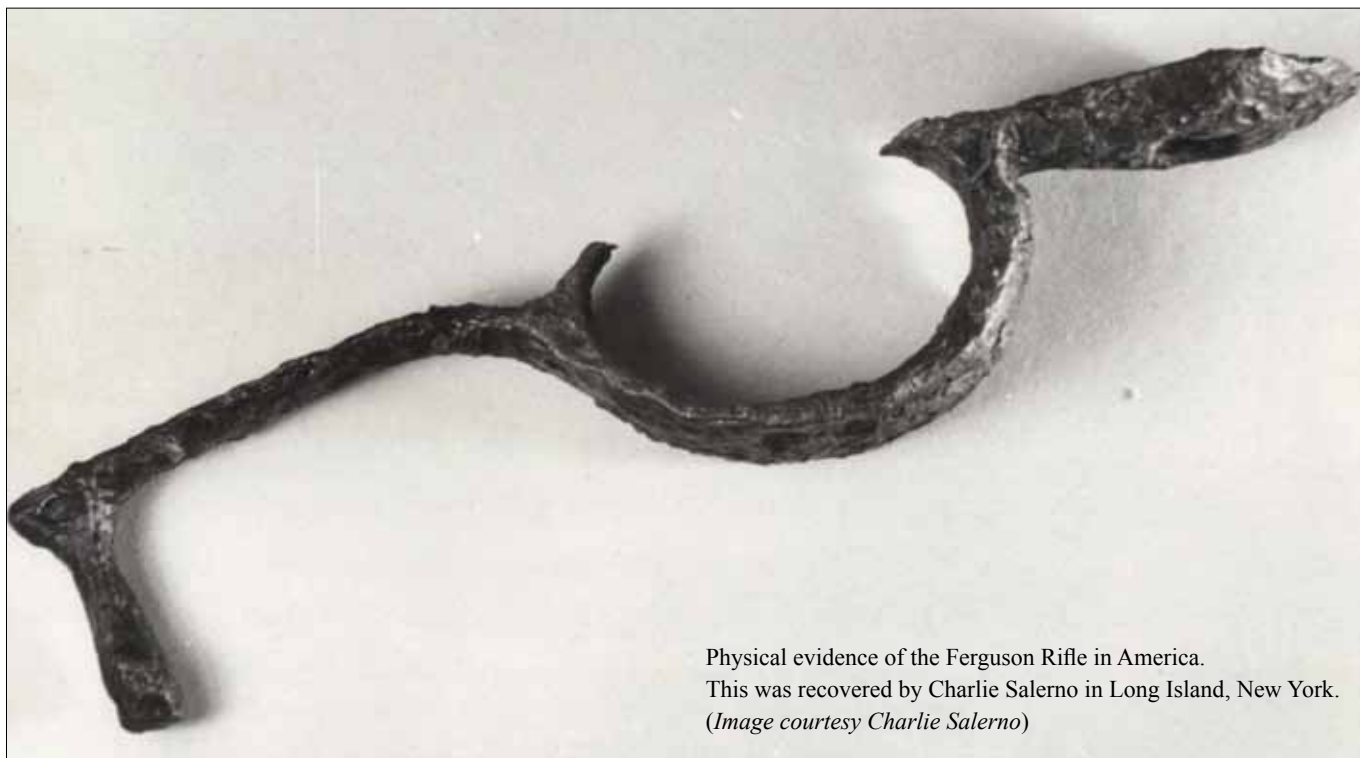
*In the Skirmish abovemention'd the rebels very soon Sicken'd, (altho in their favorite Ground,) - & left us. - they are not very Generous, & of Course the troops have adopted their Manners - two days ago, my company forming the rear Guard, We employd ourselves for two hours in Saving a family from being pillaged by the Hessians; with that view we remain'd rather long, & in a minute afterwards 3 Shot were fired at a Sergeant & me who were a few yards behind from the House - they fire most infamously ill - I return'd one Shot upon which*

*the man (who was behind a tree) drop'd, & a 2d was Shot two minutes after by four of my people; so their virtue was rewarded. The night before last, I placed a guard to protect the furniture & Stock of a seemingly well disposed family, whilst the man of the house was employ'd in informing our Enemys, & his Sons in conducting some riflemen upon my Post. We paid more than they ask'd for everything to make up for the little Pillage which we could not prevent, & the Scoundrel was secured as a traytor before we had been a Quarter of an hour out of his house. (xii)*

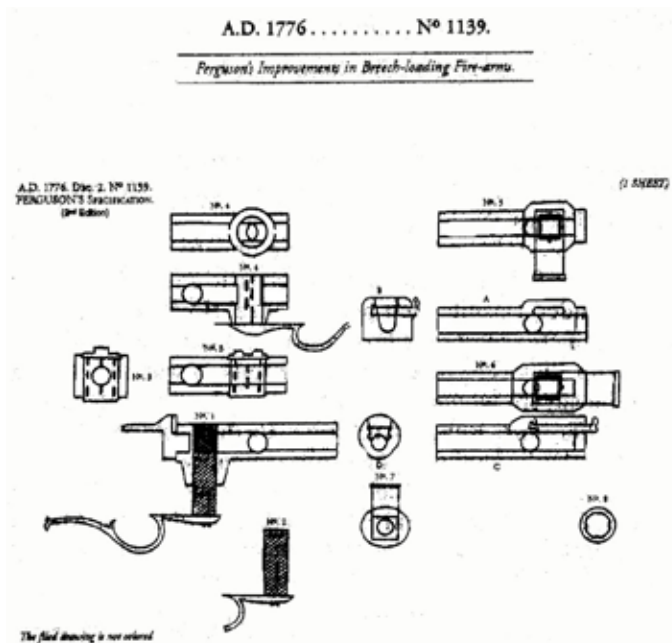
Ferguson was appalled when the rebels shot at the king's men with their paroles' still in their pockets, considering it a lack of honor on their parts. This was a serious breach of the Articles of War, offenses punishable by immediate execution as a traitor. Having a 'parole' meant a man had already been captured bearing arms against the king, and had been given another chance if he promised to return home to take care of his family and stay out of the fight.

*To George Ferguson, 8 October 1777, Wilmington, Delaware - 21 January 1778, Philadelphia*

*Our Soldiers irritated by the duplicity, treachery and the base Cruelty of the Inhabitants of the Jerseys (Who have been repeatedly detected in firing at our Centrys with the Gener:ls Protections in their pockets &c) had taken libertys there which the General was always averse to and had it particularly at heart to put a Stop to upon our entering a new Country: and as every man of common humanity must be happy in exhering himself for so virtuous a purpose, you may believe I obey'd his Commands with diligence and alacrity and I have the Satisfaction of knowing that I have protected a number of innocent familys from outrage of other Corps and that not a Soldier of my detachment has been detected in marauding whilst under my Command - and by God I will never Suffer it or Serve in an Army where it is allow'd. (xiii)*



Physical evidence of the Ferguson Rifle in America. This was recovered by Charlie Salerno in Long Island, New York. (Image courtesy Charlie Salerno)



Patrick Fergusons's Patent

Ferguson was frustrated by the unwillingness of the American rebels to follow the recognized Articles of War, with their allowance of parole and limited war. The American rebels were colloquially referred to as “brother Jonathan” by the British, since they were still viewed as British subjects, and the Crown did not want to indulge in the total war that surely would have followed on the European Continent. Living off of the land and destroying all the enemy farms and livestock in the process, the Crown did not want to inflict this sort of devastation on what they saw as their own colonies populated by their own people.

These frustrations coloured Patrick Ferguson’s dealing with Congressional troops and irregular militia throughout the rest of the war, leading up to his death at Kings Mountain. The war in the American colonies was as much a civil war as a war of rebellion, with brother fighting brother, and in some regions it was also a religious war. The brutality of the war can be exemplified by the case of one Captain Sherrill, a militia officer in the Carolinas, who rode two horses to death trying to get to the Battle of the Waxhaws, all in an effort to have an opportunity to kill his brother, who fought for the other side. Depending who they wanted to requisition supplies from, some of the militia were known for switching sides regularly. Thus a number of battles of the American Revolution had less to do with any real political or military goals, but rather were vendetta or feuds much like the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s of the late 19th century. At least one series of battles was over an unpaid gambling debt. Is it any surprise Patrick Ferguson considered many of these men to be little more than “damned Banditti” (bandits). Banditti who would go on to end the life of Patrick Ferguson there on the Carolina Mountain where he remains today struck down by the rifles of the Overmountain Men. Having both begun and ended his career as a soldier of the Crown on a Grey horse. But he left behind a legacy of invention and dedication we can draw inspiration from today.

## End Notes

- (i) Gilchrist, M. M., Patrick Ferguson “A man of some genius”: NMS Publishing Ltd (16 Jun 2003)...Pg 24 & 25
- (ii) ibid ...Pg 24 & 25
- (iii) Klein, Lance. This Barbarous Weapon” Muzzle Blasts 2000
- (iv) Gilchrist, M. M., Patrick Ferguson “A man of some genius”: NMS Publishing Ltd (16 Jun 2003)...Pg 24 & 25
- (v) Ibid...Pg 28
- (vi) Ibid... Pg 28
- (vii) Scythmore-Wedderburn papers: The National Archives of Scotland, H.M. General Register House, 2 Princes Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YY...783, 140/2/50
- (viii) Scythmore-Wedderburn papers: The National Archives of Scotland, H.M. General Register House, 2 Princes Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YY ...783, 140/2/64-65
- (ix) Gilchrist, M. M. Patrick Ferguson “A man of some genius” ...Pg 33
- (x) Canfield, Bruce N. ; Lamoreaux, Robert L.; Johnson, Edward R.; Bailey, De Witt British Military Flintlock Rifles, 1740-1840 Pg 44
- (xi) ibid Pg 44-45
- (xii) Scrymgeour-Wedderburn Papers, NRA(S) 783, 140/2/70-71
- (xiii) Edinburgh University Library, Laing MSS, La 11, 456

This article is based on the research and material for the book **Every Insult and Indignity: The Life, Genius and Legacy of Major Patrick Ferguson**. Available from Amazon and at [www.everyinsultandindignity.com](http://www.everyinsultandindignity.com)



Every Insult and Indignity is an intriguing study of Major Patrick Ferguson's famed breechloading rifle and a fine example of what experimental archaeology can achieve. The authors, Bryan Brown and Ricky Roberts, are well-respected members of the Revolutionary War living history community who together have more than sixty years of experience in the hobby. They have produced a much needed and welcomed treatise.

--- Anthony J. Scotti, Jr., Ph.D., author of **Brutal Virtue: The Myth and Reality of Banastre Tarleton**

This is an important work that furthers scholarship on Ferguson, his rifle, and the battle of Kings Mountain. The authors have combined historical research with archaeology and field testing to re-analyze several long standing myths and misconceptions about Ferguson and his rifle.

Robert M Dunkerly, author of **The Battle of Kings Mountain: Eyewitness Accounts**

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