

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN FIREARMS DECORATED WITH INLAID GLASS BEADS

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Over the millennia, glass beads have been used to ornament a wide array of objects. A rare application in the 18th century was their use to personalize and adorn firearms used on the North American continent. Only five examples have been encountered so far.

THE FIREARMS

From the collection of the late Walter O'Connor, the first example is a better-quality flintlock Northwest trade gun with a cast brass serpent side plate. It was made by Wilson of London (Bradley and Karklins 2012:93-94; O'Connor 1980). The buttstock exhibits the initials GG6 on the right side and the date 1777 on the other (Figures 1-2). These are formed of 147 white glass seed beads pressed into pre-drilled holes. A row of beads outlines the fancy butt plate tang. The 1777 date fits well with the attributes of the gun

and suggests it was used during the American Revolutionary War, but by whom and on which side remains undetermined.

A second example, from the Walter O'Connor collection, was recently auctioned by Morphy Auctions (2018) of Denver, PA. It is a *fusil du chasse* produced by Tulle, a principal French weapons manufacturer. It is similar to the first example in that the right side of the butt bears the fancy initials IW while the other side exhibits the date 1759, all formed by white glass seed beads set in the wood (Figures 3-4). White beads also extend along the top of the butt comb, and form a curvilinear decoration around the front of the comb as well. Three rows of beads run along the bottom of the butt, becoming two that run along either side of the trigger guard (Figure 5). At the front of the guard, the beads (all now missing) formed a single line that extended along the base of the fore-stock to the ramrod entry thimble.



Figure 1. The right side of the Wilson Northwest trade gun stock exhibiting the initials GG6 (courtesy: T.M. Hamilton and Pioneer Press, a Division of Dixie Gun Works, Inc.).



Figure 2. The left side of the Wilson gun stock with the 1777 date (courtesy: T.M. Hamilton and Pioneer Press, a Division of Dixie Gun Works, Inc.).

It is estimated that 244 beads originally ornamented the fusil, 152 of which remain. O'Connor believed that the gun may have been in the possession of someone in Captain Hezekiah Dunn's New Jersey Ranging Company which was active on the New York frontier during the French and Indian Wars between 1756 and 1760.

The third example is a club butt fowler from the collection of the late Tom Patton (Riser, Riser, and Weil

2022). Based on the club butt and the flat cock with a reinforcing ring below the lower jaw, the gun likely dates to ca. 1690-1715 (Jones 2019:39). The right side of the butt is decorated with two crosses composed of white beads. While the rear cross simply consists of two intersecting lines, the smaller front one has an additional bead inserted in each corner where the lines cross (Figure 6). As this description is based solely on the image, it is unknown if the same configuration appears on the other side of the stock.



Figure 3. The right side of the Tulle fowler stock with the fancy initials IW (courtesy: Morphy Auctions, www.morphyauctions.com).



Figure 4. The 1759 date on the left side of the Tulle fowler stock (courtesy: Morphy Auctions, www.morphyauctions.com).

The bead inlay on a Wilson trade gun dating to about 1765-1780 is restricted to three vertical rows on the right side of the stock (Figure 7) and an elongated “T” configuration on the upper part of the wrist (Gale 2010:135-136). Unlike the other guns discussed herein where the beads are set so the hole is visible, the beads on this example are inserted sideways. It is believed that this fowler was among those imported by Sir William Johnson while he was Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies from 1755 to 1774 (Gale 2010:135).

The final example is what might best be called a fowler. Auctioned by Jeffrey S. Evans & Associates (2020) of Mt. Crawford, VA, it is a relatively recent reconversion to flintlock.

In addition, the ca. .68 cal. barrel (marked LONDON) is a replacement, as are some of the white glass beads that form the inlays. A row of beads extends along the comb as well as the underside of the butt. The date 1769 is on the left side of the buttstock (Figure 8) and what appear to be initials on the other (Figure 9). The left initial (a barred I) and the bead configuration to the right of it are reminiscent of the fancy IW on the Thulle fowler discussed above. The size and style of the date are also similar to that on the Thulle gun. Are these two firearms related, possibly owned and/or personalized by the same person... or has the present fowler been enhanced at some point, possibly based on the Thulle inlay? Only closer examination of the piece will reveal the answer.



Figure 5. The beads set into the underside of the Tulle stock (courtesy: Morphy Auctions, www.morphyauctions.com).



Figure 6. The early 18th-century club butt fowler from the Patton collection (Riser, Riser, and Weil 2022).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The cross configurations on the Patton fowler are very similar to those on an incomplete club butt musket recovered from the wreck of the *Elizabeth and Mary* which sank in a cove at l'Anse aux Bouleaux, Quebec, in August of 1690 (Bradley and Karklins 2012). The ship had been part of a fleet commanded by Sir William Phips that attacked Quebec City during the second year of King William's War. Two simple crosses composed of shell wampum beads set into the wood on end adorn either side of the stock. In addition, a row of wampum runs along the lower edge of the stock beneath the crosses (Figure 10). In that wampum inlays in weapons were fairly common among the Indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands, it is possible that the firearm was either owned by an Aboriginal member of the war party or was obtained from such a person. It is uncertain whether the Patton fowler

was once the property of an Indigenous person or the cross design was simply adopted by a white individual.

Regarding the other firearms, the geometric nature of the bead inlay of the Wilson gun in Figure 7 suggests it originally belonged to a Native person. Conversely, the initials and dates on the two remaining guns intimate white ownership. Although some Indians living in the Northeast did have Anglo names in the 18th century and likely knew about the use of initials, the combination with dates seems more a Euro-American trait. Nevertheless, it is possible that the actual bead inlay was done by an Indigenous person.

Based on the guns discussed here, the inlay of firearms with wampum and glass seed beads is restricted to a relatively short time span between 1690 and 1777. How prevalent this practice was and how long it persisted remains to be determined. Hopefully, additional inlaid firearms will come to light that will help to answer these questions.

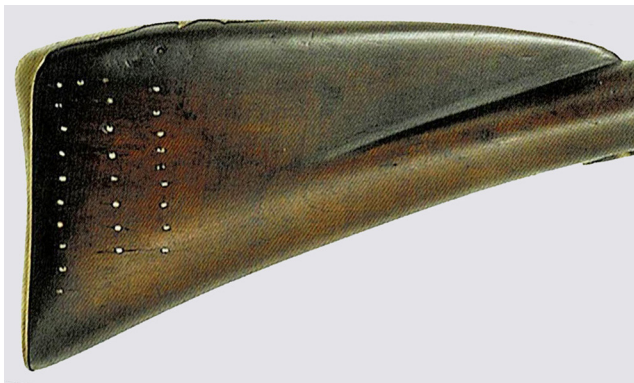


Figure 7. The glass bead inlay on the right side of the Wilson trade gun stock (ca. 1765-1780) (Gale 2010:135).



Figure 8. The 1769 date on fowler stock (courtesy: Evans 2020).



Figure 9. The possible initials on the right side of the 1769 fowler stock (courtesy: Evans 2020).



Figure 10. The wampum inlay on the left side and underside of the musket stock recovered from the 1690 wreck of the *Elizabeth and Mary* (photo: George Vandervlugt, Parks Canada).

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