

Amaso^A Belknap, Gunsmith 1786 - 1878

by Willis Barshied, Jr.

When I was a small boy and my great grandfather was still living, I remember his tales of his boyhood in Cherry Valley, N. Y. I was particularly interested in the stories about shooting the beef on the farm with a rifle made by Amaso Belknap, an early gunsmith of Cherry Valley.

Since then I have been interested in muzzle loading guns, and especially guns made by Belknap, as well as information about him. As far as I have been able to learn from gunbooks, I believe he is an unknown gunsmith. But since I have seen his work, I know him as an artist at his craft.

I first purchased two Belknap guns in Cherry Valley. One is a percussion full-stock rifle and the other a very light boy's squirrel shotgun. I decided then to search for more guns and information about Belknap. My search continued until I located the last house in which he had lived. I was told that a brick gunshop had stood close beside the house, and had been torn down about 1900. An old barn stood behind the house, and in it, over head, I found two old walnut stock blanks, all sawed to pattern. This seemed to be all I could learn there, so I searched to see if I could find someone who had known Amaso Belknap.

Finally I found an old man, then over 90 years old, who said that, as a small boy, he had known Belknap and had played in his shop. He remembered the guns there for repairs, and also the old-time rifling machine. He also said that he and his friends had been warned many times not to play with fire around the shop as it contained a quantity of gunpowder.

In the Cherry Valley cemetery, where I found the gravestone which marked his burial place, I learned that Amaso Belknap was born in Ellington, Conn., November 29, 1786 and died at Cherry Valley September 21, 1878, when he was nearly 92 years old.

Through the kindness of Mrs. Harold Davis of Ellington, Conn., I also learned that Belknap married Betsey Chapman of Vernon, Conn., on September 3, 1807.

One day, a little latter, when I stopped at the local post office, a man I knew told me he had an old gun he wanted to sell, a gun which had been in his family and dated back to the Civil War. Can you imagine my surprise when I found he had, not a Civil War rifle, but a good pill-lock target rifle, made by Belknap. The name Belknap on the barrel surprised me too, as I had nearly given up hopes of finding any more of his guns. This is the gun pictured with this article.

In the patchbox of this rifle I also found a goose quill with a wooden plug in the end, and three of the original pills inside. The pills were black and about the size of the head of a pin.

It is said in history that Belknap made over a thousand rifles for the State of Texas, about the time of the Mexican War. It maybe that one of the readers of this article may have one of his guns, and if

so, I would like to hear about it.

Much of the other history about Amaso

Belknap is apparently lost, as is the case so often regarding interesting persons. There seems to be no record of when he removed to Cherry Valley, but I shall keep searching. Bit by bit, facts of his life may come to light, and more of his guns may be located. There may be many surprises, and aren't these unexpected findings what make the gun game the interesting pasttime that it is?

