

# The Colonial Williamsburg Gunshop

## Part I

*by John Bivins, North Carolina*

**T**he restoration of Virginia's colonial capital, beginning in the 1930's, carried with the project the need to interpret a good deal more than just a handsome collection of architecture. Among various programs designed to recapture what might be called the "colonial experience" was the Crafts Department, now called the Crafts Program due to its ever-increasing diversity, which was given the awesome challenge of establishing a realistic presentation of the early trades which were followed in eighteenth century Williamsburg. That particular aspect of the interpretive programs there has proven to be a rather stunning experience for visitors to the restoration, since the shops are not just static displays of early tools and objects enlivened by costumed people playing roles. They are each a very real, microcosmic study of an early trade in actual operation, complete with the structured hierarchy of the traditional apprenticeship system. The successful recreation of the early trades in Williamsburg has consumed a vast quantity of capital and has required skillful and sensitive administration by individuals such as Bill Geiger and his successor, Earl Soles, both of whom deserve considerable credit for bringing together a sizeable group of skilled artisans with the ability to teach us the essence of "lost" arts and technology.

Nowhere in Williamsburg is this success more evident than in the gunshop, which began as sort of an ancillary operation of the Deane Forge in 1963. The well-known purveyor of cast gun furniture, Reaves Goehring, worked in the one-room gunshop attached to the Forge during the first summer the shop was open, while on vacation from his teaching duties in Pennsylvania. Dan Berg, who is now master of the Geddy Foundry in Williamsburg, shared those initial gunshop duties with Reaves. During the same year the Crafts Department hired Wallace Gusler, a native of Salem, Virginia, as a gunmaker. Though only twenty-one at the time, Wallace came to Williamsburg with seven years' experience in making longri-

fles. Despite that fact, the shop really didn't get into full operation for a year after Wallace's arrival, since he was required to put in most of his first year in the adjoining forge. While he learned a great deal about fine smith work from the Deane Forge master, John Allgood, Wallace still has a distinct memory of the frustration he felt in the everyday grind of forging tiny horseshoes for visitors, all the while he was itching to tear into a curly maple blank. One morning he walked straight through the Forge without a word to anyone, picked out a stock blank, and proceeded to stock up a rifle in only a week's time. After that, no one suggested that Wallace forge horseshoes.

By 1964, the year which Wallace was appointed master of the gunshop, I had seriously embarked upon gunstocking myself. Robin Hale of Knoxville, Tennessee--the acknowledged high priest of the southern Appalachian longrifle--suggested that I should visit the new shop in Williamsburg. Returning from a trip North, I stopped by Wallace's house--the Deane Quarters, a tiny gambrel-roofed residence behind the Forge--on a cold and gray Sunday afternoon in the fall of the same year. That was the first of a long series of visits over the years, of memorable weekends observing the increasing depth of technological and artistic understanding evolving in the gunshop. Those visits were characterized by long philosophical harangues into the wee small hours, with old guns and books spread all over the floor, the discussions lubricated with a frosty succession of the inevitable Dr. Peppers that Gusler's refrigerator has ever known to be filled with. I've a lot of images from those days, watching the quick sureness of Wallace's handwork with file or gouge, that quality of confidence in using tools that the old boys understood in the familiar term "workmanlike" which was part of all trade vernacular. I remember a late-night session in the darkened Deane Forge, with white-hot flux illuminating the room in a crackling, brilliant shower when Wallace forge-welded a piece of file onto

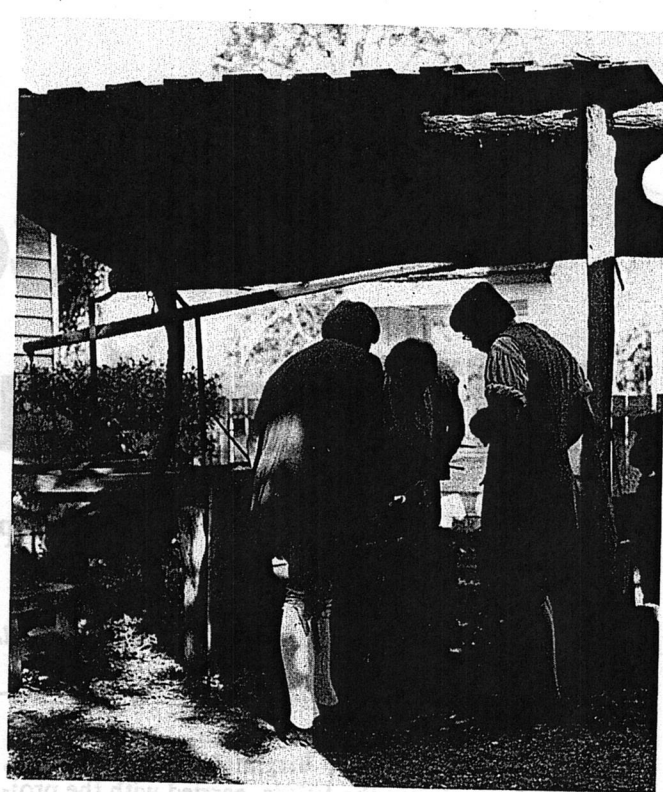


*The Colonial Williamsburg gunshop, where in two crowded rooms every aspect of the gunmaking art is carried on, with the exception of barrel boring and forge work...*

the face of a frizzed blank for me. I recall seeing the first efforts in barrel making, when Wallace began skelp-welding tubes by himself, without the benefit of a mandrel. The process of teaching oneself an entire series of ancient methods is a serious business, but the shop was never without Gusler's wry and frequently stinging humor. I remember him stating very seriously to a visitor that he proofed a new barrel with a double charge and two balls, but that the blacksmiths on the other side of the shop just poured water into a tube to see if it'd leak. Wallace learned early on, though, that if the visitor didn't smile after hearing such a tale, then he'd best hasten to reveal the joke.

Every time I made the 250-mile trip to Williamsburg, it was like going home for Christmas, for I'd be able to fondle a whole new array of gunsmithing tools which Wallace had fashioned to do some specialized job. Most of them were his own interpretations which arose from some job at hand, though we know now that virtually all of them paralleled original tools of the trade, not many of which had been seen in those days. Wallace began with the more conventional implements, such as breech taps and screw plates, and proceeded to more esoteric tools such as barrel inletting planes, fixtures which could be used with a small backsaw to cut the swamped profile of a barrel into a blank, and forestock molding planes. I still have a molding plane he made, now quite shiny and worn with use.

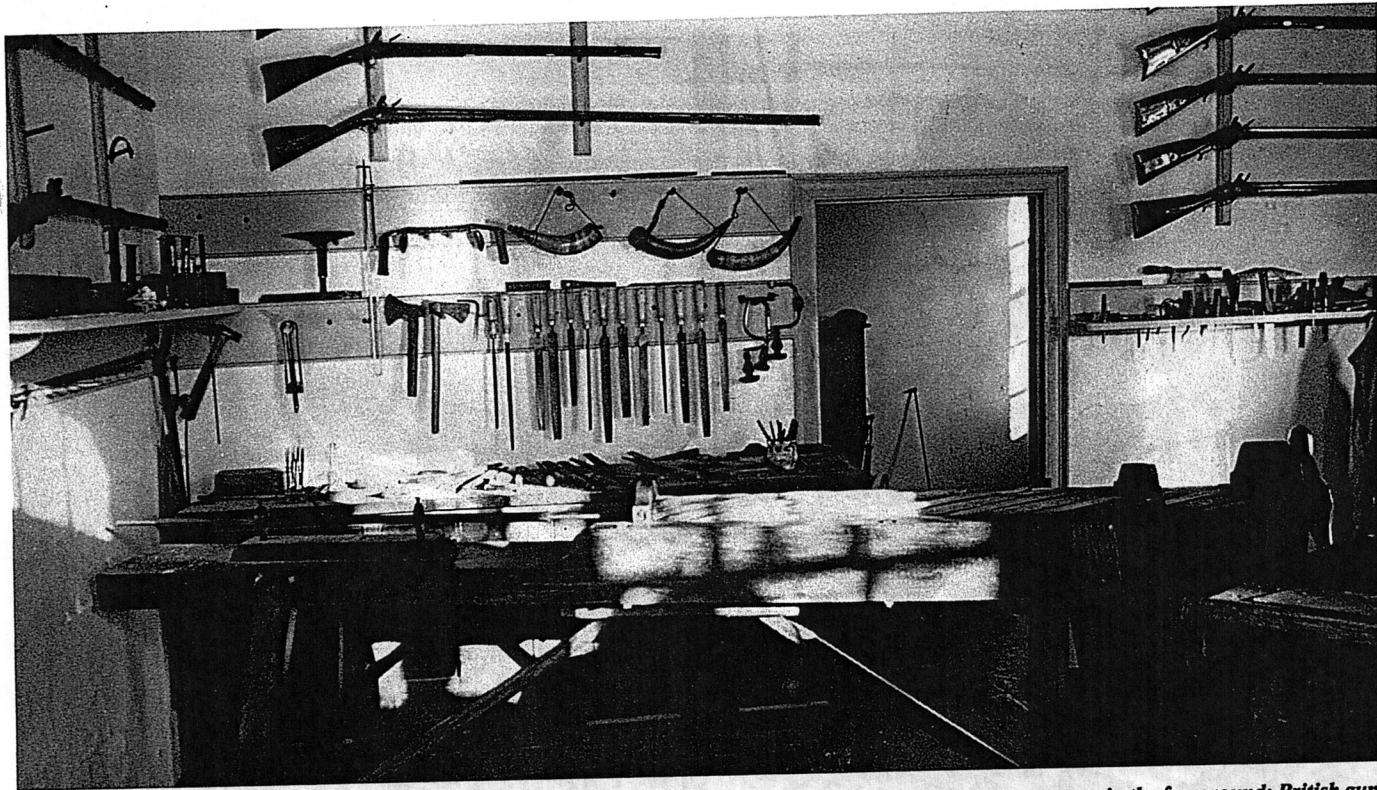
During all this process of evolving technology, the art of the shop was being molded under Wallace's hands. He was never satisfied to copy originals, and refused to do so. His own early style was exceedingly imaginative, some



*...both of which are outdoor activities, which is certainly appropriate for the forge in view of the stifling heat of a southeastern Virginia summer.*

of it seemingly having little to do with the American mainstream of longrifle style. We'd argue over such things. Though I didn't copy old work either, Wallace used to tell me that my rifles looked more like original ones than his. I hadn't developed much of a stylistic vocabulary, so my stuff was indeed more conservative. Inevitably, though, we'd find something like one of his strangely-faceted thimbles on some European rifle, then on an early American piece, and I'd be subjected to a new spate of jocular harrassment from Gusler the next time I walked into the shop. It was like having some character out of *Brave New World* for a friend, an Alpha who had been electronically programmed as a child with an entire subconscious repertoire of Baroque art. I still have Gusler's letters from twenty years ago that are covered with scrollwork, leafage, and writhing grotesques rapidly sketched in ballpoint around some sparse message. Even so, Wallace's fertile imagination was increasingly attracted to the study of original longrifles made in Virginia, and his work increasingly showed the impact those rifles had upon him. Each time an important rifle surfaced, work in the shop would begin to show subtle shifts, perhaps in the way the turn of a leaf was engraved or a lock molding shaped. Every old rifle with any artistic merit was a "book" to Wallace, and he absorbed the tiniest features; his memory for detail is phenomenal. We made several trips to Joe Kindig's together to study his numerous southern rifles--some of which Kindig didn't even *know* were southern--and Wallace later began to spend entire weekends with the grand old man. That would have been an experience for anyone; Kindig's standard breakfast was a Coke, a piece of a big, soft Hanover





*A portion of the principle workroom, with the rifling guide - the second made by the shop, after the first was worn out - in the foreground; British guns and early Virginia rifles grace the racks on the wall.*

pretzel, and a Hershey bar.

As the gunshop developed during the 1960's, a succession of apprentices made their way through the shop. Most of them are long since gone, but all of them unquestionably left with a legacy of perception into the nature of all manner of hand-work. Association with Gusler was always a good deal more than just the matter of learning a trade, for his own curiosity about the minutiae of gunmaking and all of its related trades, along with the social history surrounding them, was almost cosmic. One of the apprentices who stayed was Gary Brumfield, a childhood neighbor of Wallace's in Salem; he's now master of the gunshop. Gary has his own unique view of the world of gunmaking, but it's significant that he has much the same questing nature that Gusler does, and his interests in early culture extend well beyond the door of the gunshop.

In 1967 the shop was moved from its cramped quarters at the Deane Forge to the present building on Francis Street, a partially-reconstructed eighteenth century structure which, though its original use has not been discovered, is known to have been a shop of some sort; it stands on property once owned by the Ayscoughs, who were gardeners to the Royal Governor. Not long before this move, Wallace completed the gunshop's first all hand-made rifle, having made every screw, pin, and mechanism on the piece. It was an exceedingly elaborate affair--the rifle illustrated on this issue's cover--and Wallace made it for himself. I watched it in process over a long period of time as it was worked in with customers' rifles. I remember the night he started to put finish on the stock, or he called and said he'd just spent twelve hours engraving the patchbox alone. I didn't see it finished until we

both met at Hacker Martin's, down near Appomattox, a few weeks later to trade tales with Hacker, rummage through his great gouts of old parts and barrels, and do a bit of shooting. Wallace was never much good at hitting paper bulls, but he had the sort of vision that allowed him to shoot a bottlecap off a tree limb at forty paces through the woods, when I was doing well just to see the limb. Hacker wouldn't shoot with us due to his rapidly failing sight, but he'd stand there and watch, reeling off a non-stop collection of shooting stories, all punctuated with his usual giggles and guffaws.

In 1968, Colonial Williamsburg finished the production of the now-famous film we all know so well. Far more than an entertaining overview of gunmaking, the film is in every sense a detailed documentation of early trade practice. This thoroughness is not unusual for any production of Art Smith's, a sensitive man who was director of audiovisuals for Colonial Williamsburg at the time. The shop was closed for almost six months during the filming, and every detail covered in the footage was considered with exceptional care. For example, Swedish wrought iron was purchased for making the rifle in the film, and Wallace told me that he nearly had to learn barrel welding all over again due to the high working temperatures required by iron, in contrast with the mild steel he'd used before that time. Nothing was spared for authenticity; even the "movie gun," as the fellows in the shop call it today, was stocked up in a very conservative manner so that there would be no question about the intent to produce a rifle clearly of colonial style.

Gusler's steadily expanding scholarship and research in Virginia gunmaking finally drew him into an abiding in-



*The central business of the gunshop: interpretation in depth. Here Gary discusses barrelmaking with visitors...*

terest in early Virginia furniture by the late 1960's, and in 1972 he was lured away from the gunshop to the Department of Collections. One of the two books that he produced after that time was the landmark *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia*, which was the first such study of American furniture to explore the technology of the cabinetmaking trade in depth. Wallace has only recently left his position as Curator of Furniture and Firearms to work full time as head of the Foundation's Conservation Shop. Wallace, in fact, has been a major figure in molding responsible thinking among American conservators in the last decade. Despite his success in the curatorial field, it's no surprise that he's ultimately returned to hand work, both in the restoration of early objects and making carved furniture in the southeastern Virginia style.

Gusler's move out of the gunshop by no means left a void there, primarily due to the apprentices which had trained under the man. Jon Laubach, a native of Allentown, Pennsylvania, had graduated in gunsmithing from Trinidad State in Colorado, and had joined Wallace in 1970. Gary Brumfield had been a summer apprentice in the gunshop beginning in 1965; he'd received a B.S. degree in Forestry and Wildlife from Virginia Tech in 1969, and had just completed a two-year stint in the Army, where he'd served as an armorer and was a member of the Army Rifle Team. Though Jon hadn't worked at the trade before arriving in Williamsburg, Gary had been at the bench off and on since 1960, when he was fourteen.

Both men not surprisingly admit that the individual who has made the greatest impact on their work has been Wallace Gusler, Gary stating that Gusler "...had been a major influence, especially in technical skills and processes." Contemporary work by both Gary and Jon is quite distinctive, showing their own personal statements, but subtle influences from Gusler's designs remain behind nevertheless as a twentieth-century documentation of just how style evolved in a similar shop two centuries

Despite the monumental strides which Wallace made in gunmaking, leaving something of a difficult act to follow, the shop has in no way remained static either artistically or technically since his tenure there. Instead, every aspect of the shop operation shows a very significant growth over the past decade. Illustrated here, for example, are numerous specialized hot-forging dies, grinders used for forming screw heads, and the like, all tools which the shop has made following early prototypes of lockmaking tools. Various other aspects of such work are underway, like the use of hand-turned tumbler mills which may be used to concentrically form both axles of a tumbler forging as well as squaring off the faces, all in one operation. The great value of such scholarly experimentation and actual technical application lies in our ultimate understanding of how the trade really worked. Few of us are aware, for example, that the eighteenth century locksmith had no need of a lathe to make precision moving parts, but rather relied on very specialized bench tools like the tumbler mill. The development of such things has



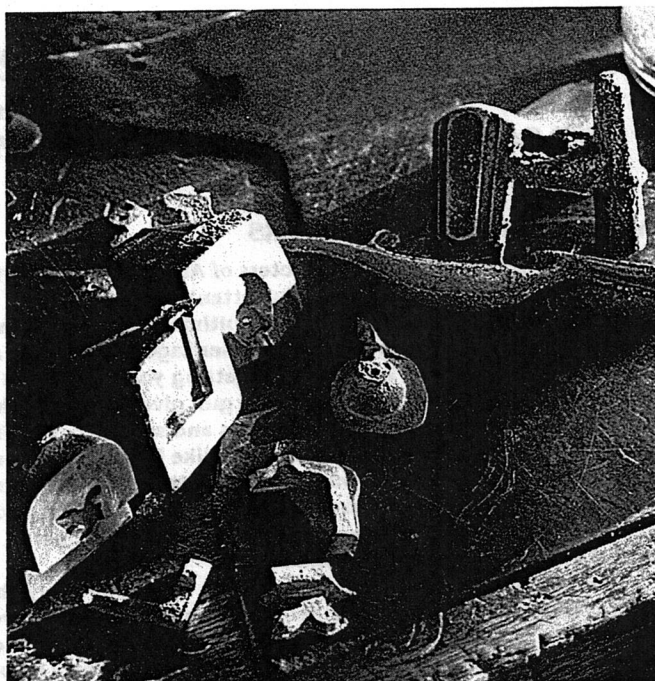


*...while a barrel is in actual production at the forge, Laubach with hammer, Wagner with sledge, and Suiter handling the mandrel.*

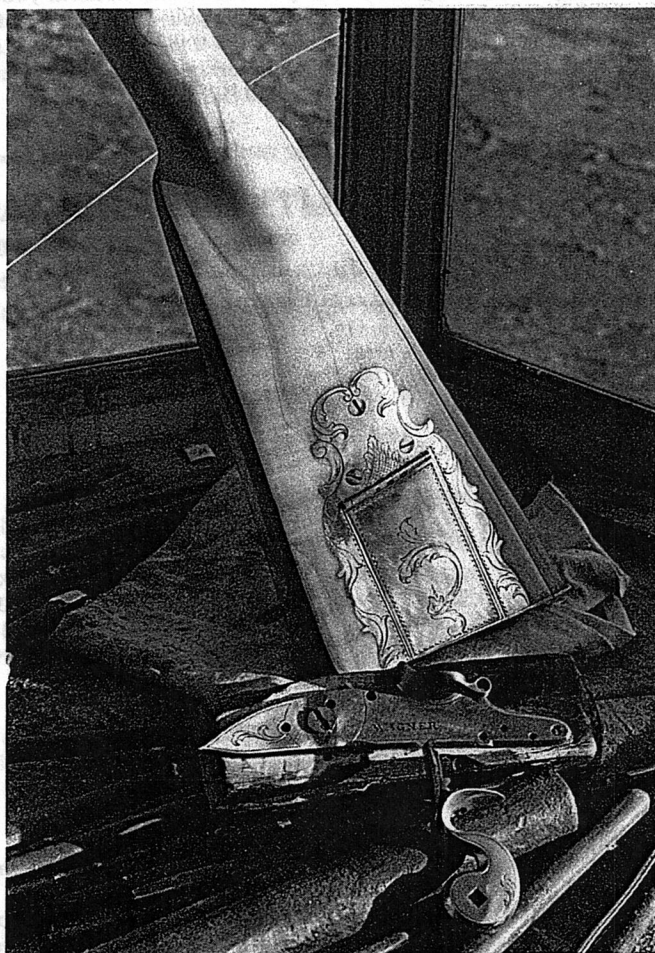
been given a particularly strong boost this winter, when for the first time the gunshop has been closed to the public for a ten-week "production period" which will give the gunmakers "breathing space" to implement new ideas during the course of uninterrupted working time. Of course, a much higher output during those weeks will also be a result, providing needed income for the Crafts Program.

In concert with the shop's technical explorations, Gary is currently writing a major treatise on early lockmaking procedures for Western Kentucky University's *Journal of Historic Armsmaking Technology*, the first issue of which is to be published this summer. Such things are nothing unusual for Gary and the fellows working for him. Every man in the shop constantly refers to early records they've examined, using such documentation in an almost unconsciously familiar way to underscore some verbal point to be made. That sort of easygoing scholarship lies at the center of the exceptionally fine education which visitors receive in the shop. Gary, who shares gunmaking instruction duties with myself and others at the annual Western Kentucky University seminar, is one of the finest teachers I've ever had the pleasure to listen to. His incisive approach to every subject, coupled with his genial wit, have served to set the tenor for the quality of interpretation the gunshop is known for today.

We will conclude this article in the June issue with a closer look at the guns of the Williamsburg craftsmen. ●



*The exciting products of scholarly investigation: new hot-forging dies for forming lock components, shown with raw forgings and freshly-sand cast brass rifle furniture.*



*The artistic clutter of a working gunshop: in the shop's bay window a rifle in process by Wagner and Suiter, with its handmade lock, awaits further cuts from Dave's graver.*



*The Williamsburg gunmakers, clockwise from left rear: Gary Brumfield, master; Jon Laubach, journeyman; Dave Wagner, apprentice; George Suiter, journeyman.*

**T**raditional gunsmithing. That's the darling catch-phrase of many a muzzleloading gunmaker in this day and time. But what does it mean? Can tradition be served merely by chucking out our investment castings and electric drills, and by learning to beat on red-hot metal? Well, *tradition* is a problematical concept all unto itself, gunsmithing aside. Though it is often used to engender a warm and comfortable mental image of the past that might do justice to a mellow frontier scene by N.C. Wyeth, tradition is really a far more complex than that. And it also spans quite a lot more of western culture than just back-country living, folklorists aside. It's really a multiprismed view of the world in terms of aesthetic, technology, use, and symbolism, all inexorably tied together in a myriad of intricate fashions. Tradition lies at the center of what social historians call material culture. It's the matrix of communication through design and method that has bound together all of the objects around us for centuries, and will continue to do so. It's a tangible concept, well-defined by the products of human ingenuity, and nowhere is that more evident than in an ancient trade such as gunmaking. And if we're interested in gunmaking tradition--the real thing, not the romance--then the center of the world today may be pinpointed rather precisely on Francis Street in Williamsburg, Virginia, for that's where the most important body of information regarding early armsmaking technology has come from for the past twenty years. Quite a lot of us know about Colonial Williamsburg's gunshop through the fine film *The Gunmaker of Williamsburg*, but the history of that shop and what is happening there now may not be so well known.