

The Colonial Williamsburg Gunshop

Part II (conclusion)

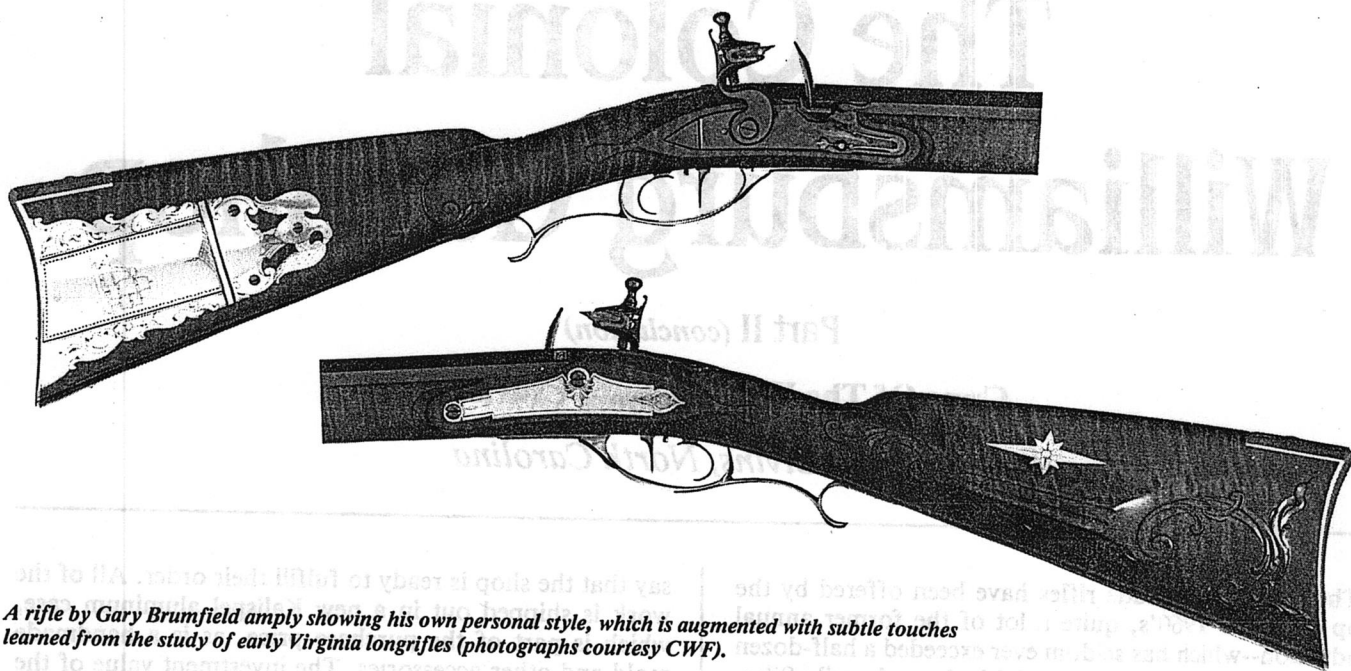
Guns Of The Williamsburg Craftsman

by John Bivins, North Carolina

Though all-handmade rifles have been offered by the shop since the 1960's, quite a lot of the former annual production--which has seldom ever exceeded a half-dozen pieces a year--utilized commercial locks, primarily Siler, and unfinished barrel blanks from Bob Paris which were rifled at the gunshop. Since 1982, however, the emphasis has been entirely upon rifles made lock, stock, barrel in the shop. That philosophy is only right, since the production of all-handmade pieces provides a constant exposure of all the facets of gunmaking to the visitor. Apprentices are started off with tasks such as filing woodscrews, and are given more complex jobs as their skill increases. The shop now cuts all of the timber it uses, sawing the blanks to pattern and then roughing them close to final dimension in order to season quickly and uniformly. Like the lockmaking technology the shop is exploring, this method of seasoning blanks is known to have historical precedent. Aside from the multiplicity of work done in wrought iron and steel, the shop produces all of its own castings as well. Needless to say, a new rifle entirely made by early methods is an expensive proposition due to the sheer number of man-hours involved in production. Six years ago Gary Brumfield made an extensive "time in production" study of the manufacture of a standard-grade brass-mounted flintlock longrifle in the pre-Revolutionary style. Based upon the time spent by the shop master and one skilled journeyman, it was found that some 400 hours were consumed in making such a rifle; a finished barrel alone accounted for some 150 hours. Understanding this, it's terribly surprising that the work now produced by the gunshop generally falls in the \$10,000-\$16,000 range; the shop rate, either for new work or conservation work, is considered to be \$30 per hour. At the lower end of the price scale is a relatively plain longrifle in the British style, much like a fowler of the period; such pieces were known to have been made in Tidewater, Virginia. As a credit both to the reputation of the gunshop and the academic interests of its patrons, the shop has a very substantial backlog of orders. Gary recently told me that he was now contacting individuals who'd been placed on the waiting list in 1978, writing to

say that the shop is ready to fulfill their order. All of the work is shipped out in a new Kalispel aluminum case, which is part of the purchase price, as is a handmade mold and other accessories. The investment value of the gunshop's work has been proven in the market place, judging from the turnover of a few Williamsburg rifles in recent years. Collectors, of course, are particularly interested in the work which the shop does, but all of the pieces which go out are made with utility in mind first and foremost. As a matter of interest, a comparison of the gunshop's work with the known selling prices of American rifles in the 1780's appears to indicate that the current prices are largely in direct proportion to what they were in the eighteenth century. Two centuries ago, a good rifle sold at prices falling in the £4 - £6 range, judging from inventories. Most American rifles, at least those made near urban centers, were likely fitted with a European or British lock and a mill-made, water-bored and ground barrel, thereby saving expense. As one 1787 cabinet-trade price book from Philadelphia indicates, a fine desk with a fully-appointed interior and ogee feet could be "bespoken" for £7.10 in that city. A cabinetmaker producing such a desk today using nothing more than hand tools would have to charge above \$12,000 for the work in order to make a decent wage.

The production of the gunshop is not high due to the shop's primary responsibility, which is education. During the summer months, it's nothing unusual for well over 1,000 visitors to shuffle their way through the shop each day. Providing a basic interpretation of the shop, cheerfully answering a bewildering number of questions, and trying to complete some exacting job, all while coping with the brassy and wilting heat of a Williamsburg summer, requires individuals with a special temperament. That must be especially true near the end of a long August day, when someone raises the inevitable query "Those things don't really shoot, do they?" for the hundredth time. It's really not so surprising that many visitors can be a bit mistrustful of the things that they see in the gunshop, since they learned long ago that things such as gun barrels, like automobile crankshafts, surely must



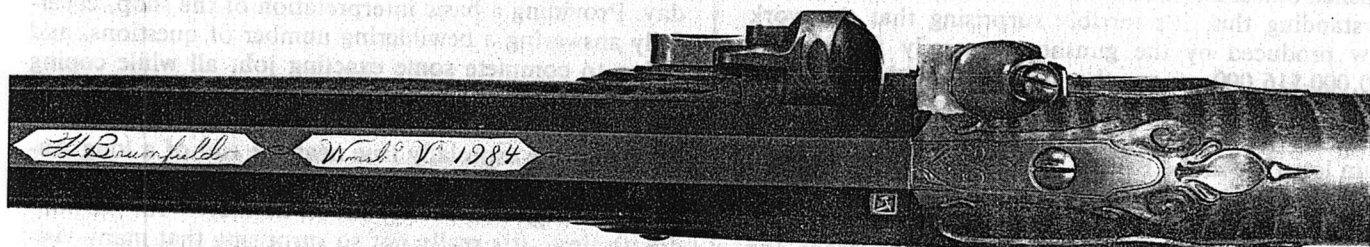
A rifle by Gary Brumfield amply showing his own personal style, which is augmented with subtle touches learned from the study of early Virginia longrifles (photographs courtesy CWF).

all be the products of heavy industry. If the visitor manages to ignore the heat and restless crowd, though, he leaves with more than a little understanding that the foundations of the Industrial Revolution lay in the technical genius in shops such as this one.

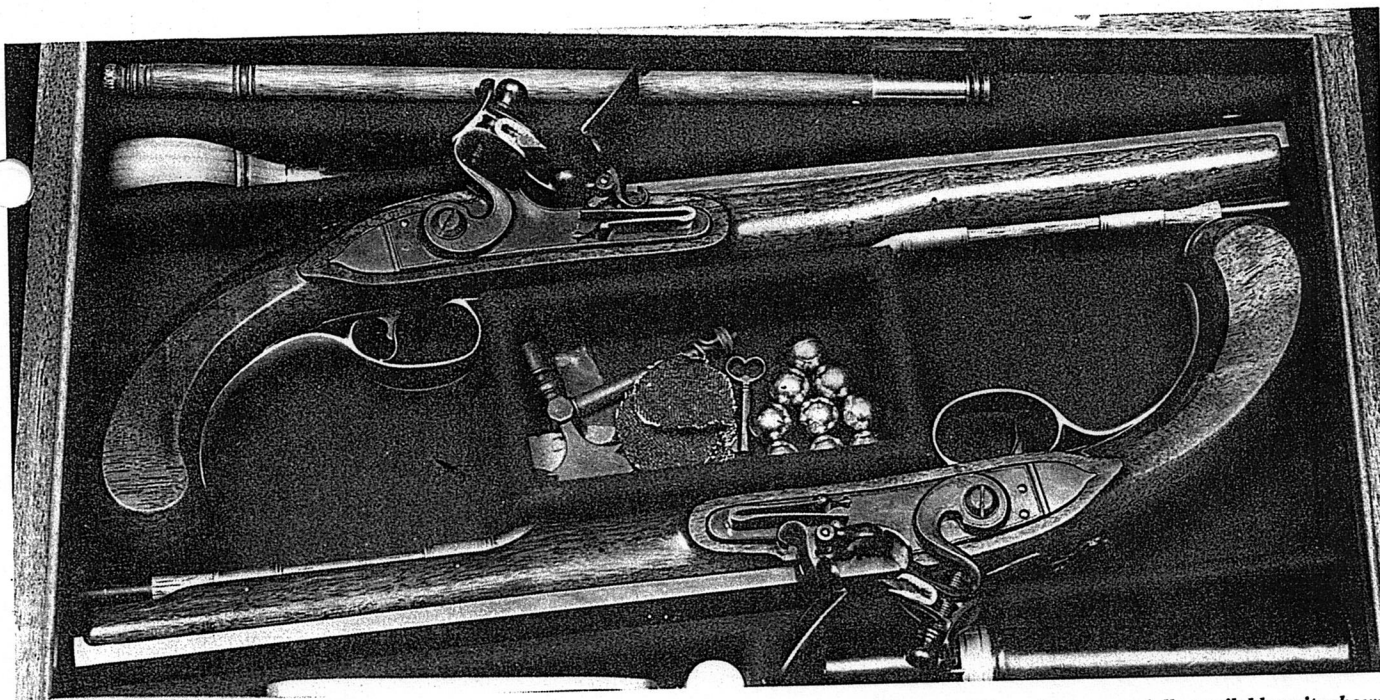
So that no single gunmaker is saddled with an undue amount of interpretive responsibility, Gary has structured daily schedules that give each man equal time at the bench or forge. Of course, since the apprentice system still works there just as it should, certain individuals no doubt do find themselves standing behind the boring bench or rifling guide a *trifle* longer than the master might be expected to do each day. During the summer press, additional personnel are added to assist with the interpretation. Gary feels that a balanced shop should have perhaps three full-time journeymen and a like number of apprentices in addition to the master, and for that reason he would like to add apprentices to his staff. At the present, however, he indicates that the Crafts Program budget won't allow the addition of salaried personnel.

The year-round gunshop staff currently consists of Gary, Jon Laubach, who is considered a senior journeyman, along with George Suiter, who has recently com-

pleted his apprenticeship, and Dave Wagner, who is still an apprentice, albeit one with more gunmaking skills than many of us who have been working at the trade for decades. George, like Jon, is a graduate of the gunsmithing program at Trinidad State, which he attended after two years at Marshall University. A native of West Virginia, George has been in the gunshop since 1977. George is thirty-one, is married, and has two children. The youngest member of the shop workforce is Dave, who's twenty-eight; he's a native of Mifflinburg, Pennsylvania, and has been in the gunshop full-time for two years. He worked in the shop for six summers before that time, however, during the period he was studying for a B.S. in Industrial Arts Education at Millersville State University. Dave had received quite a bit of encouragement from former barrelmaker Dick Getz, who is himself an excellent gunstocker and a rabid student of the American longrifle. Dave's gunmaking history, in fact, is a good example of how the gunshop is in a great sense self-perpetuating. When he was a junior in high school, Dave saw the *Gunsmith of Williamsburg* film, and "became so inspired" that he stocked up a rifle in shop class. After that, he "just got carried away with it," in his words. He



All the shop's work is signed and dated, and the silver arm-and-hammer at the breech proudly proclaims the piece to be entirely made by hand, as all of the guns illustrated in this article were with the exception of the cased duellers (photograph courtesy CWF).



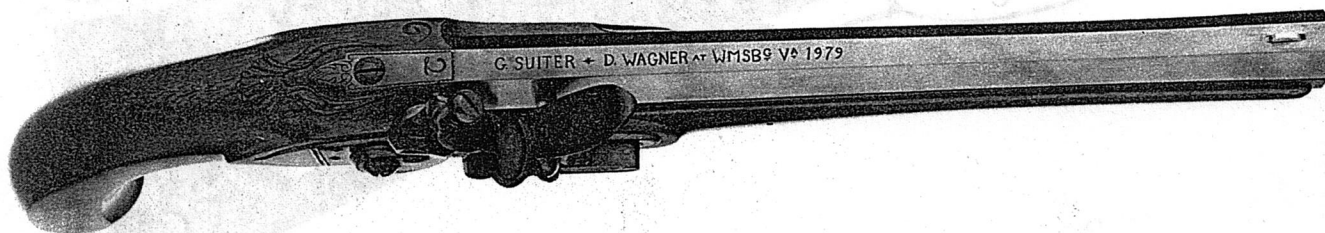
An elegant cased pair of cased duellers or travelling pistols by Suiter and Wagner, here with L & R Locks, the only commercially-available units shown here; since 1982, the shop has produced all of its work "lock, stock, and barrel" (photograph courtesy CWF).

likes all of the work "...equally well, from welding a barrel to engraving a patchbox."

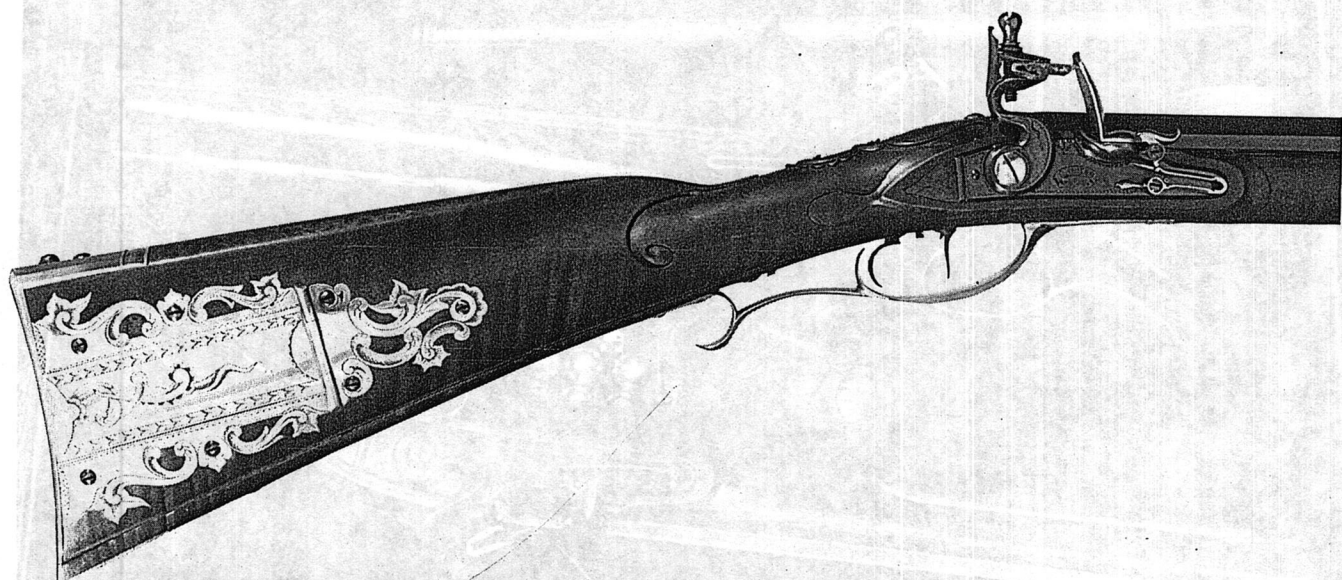
A 1969 visit to Friendship hooked George Suiter hard enough to cause him to blow all of his savings on a set of parts for a flint rifle. He was able to spend quite a lot of time "pestering" both Bill Large and Bob Roller, learning precision machine work. This experience, coupled with his schooling at Trinidad, landed George a job at Douglas Barrels, Inc., and when he left there he was making cut-rifled muzzleloading barrels, stocking up rifles all the while. In his own words, George notes that "Since I have been in the trade I have seen or used almost every conceivable method to make guns. I can deep-hole drill a piece of stainless steel to make a barrel, or forge-weld one from a bar of wrought iron...both methods can make excellent barrels, or good horseshoe stakes." George emphasizes that whatever the technology applied, complete control of the tools is paramount to the gunmaker. There is nothing wrong, he asserts, in "custom gunmakers making a one-of-a-kind, functional work of art using state-of-the-art technology to reduce labor cost and investment in time." All of the fellows have their own gunshops, and do occasional "outside" work following the premise

which George stated, using modern technology where possible. When asked whether he felt the gunmaking trade a good one to enter; though, Gary candidly replied in the negative, stating that "Outside of the few museum gunshops the trade...demands too much work for the money earned, and/or takes too long to get established." Certainly, having the asset of a salaried position provides Gary and his associates with the opportunity to produce a type of work almost no independent gunmaker would be able to make a consistent living with today.

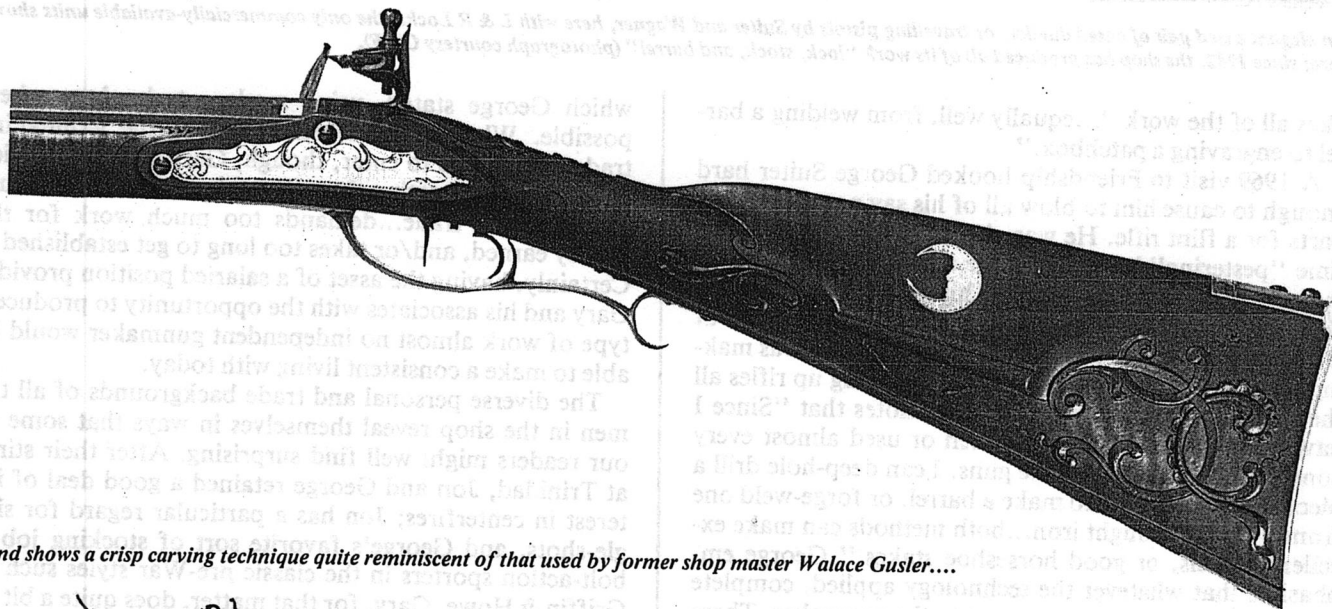
The diverse personal and trade backgrounds of all the men in the shop reveal themselves in ways that some of our readers might well find surprising. After their stints at Trinidad, Jon and George retained a good deal of interest in centerfires; Jon has a particular regard for single-shots, and George's favorite sort of stocking job is bolt-action sporters in the classic pre-War styles such as Griffin & Howe. Gary, for that matter, does quite a bit of centerfire shooting and reloading, and works to maintain his competitive edge with an M14, sandwiching shooting time between other pastimes such as volleyball, running, rock climbing, and paddling kayaks through foamy rapids. He recently finished stocking a M70 Winchester for



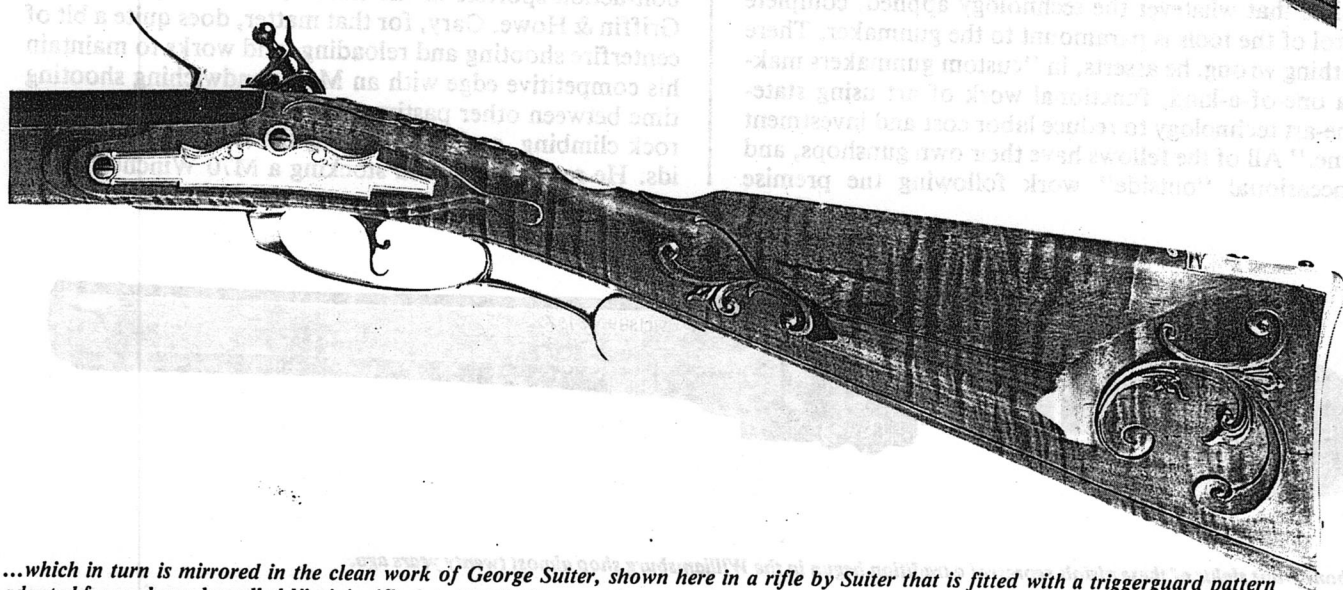
The bone front sights of these pistols represent a tradition begun in the Williamsburg shop almost twenty years ago.



With a fine London-style lock by George Suiter, this rifle by Jon Laubach could be dated stylistically in the late 1780's....



...and shows a crisp carving technique quite reminiscent of that used by former shop master Wallace Gusler....



...which in turn is mirrored in the clean work of George Suiter, shown here in a rifle by Suiter that is fitted with a triggerguard pattern adapted from a brass-barrelled Virginia rifle dated 1771 (photographs courtesy CWF).

himself in elegant style, though he steadfastly refuses to drive himself nuts checkering it. Of the four fellows, Dave is perhaps the most tied to purely historical designs in his own interests and tastes, but in taking measure of each of the men's interest, it's quite apparent that what each of them appreciates most of all is fine work, whatever the style, system, or period. Handed some piece of work from past or present, each of them will study the piece in great detail, and the relationship between the art of gunmaking and other bench trades is not lost on them, either. On a recent visit to the shop, Gary told me that he had sent Dave to study the engraved backplate of an eighteenth century Virginia bracket clock before decorating a patchbox he'd just inletted. Looking at that box, I could readily see details of both art and technique that Dave had absorbed from the clock engraving, little subtleties of shading and leafage motifs brand new both to his own work and to the shop.

That, perhaps, is the sort of thing that has proven to be one of the most important achievements of the gunshop in Colonial Williamsburg. The lively minds of the gunsmiths there, both past and present, have minutely explored an impressive weave of traditional threads in early technology and design, and in bringing them all together, have created for the shop a tradition of its own. Not only has the shop justifiably earned an international reputation as a teaching center for historical armsmaking technique, it has developed a fresh style that's just as identifiable and individualistic today as the products of any early gunmaking school. That, I think, should be counted as a total success in understanding and applying the elusive "mystery" of one of the most complex trades in the history of hand work. And we're the benefactors of all the myriad traditions the gunshop has either established or breathed new life into, for a visit to that very special place never fails to impress one that the visitor--especially one who really wants to learn--comes first.

Editor's Note: The Gunsmith of Williamsburg film may be rented or purchased from Colonial Williamsburg. They also have available VHS and Betamax I and II. For information write or call:

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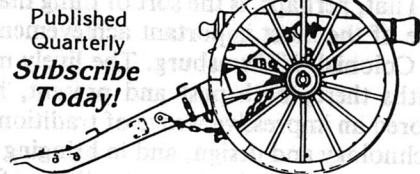
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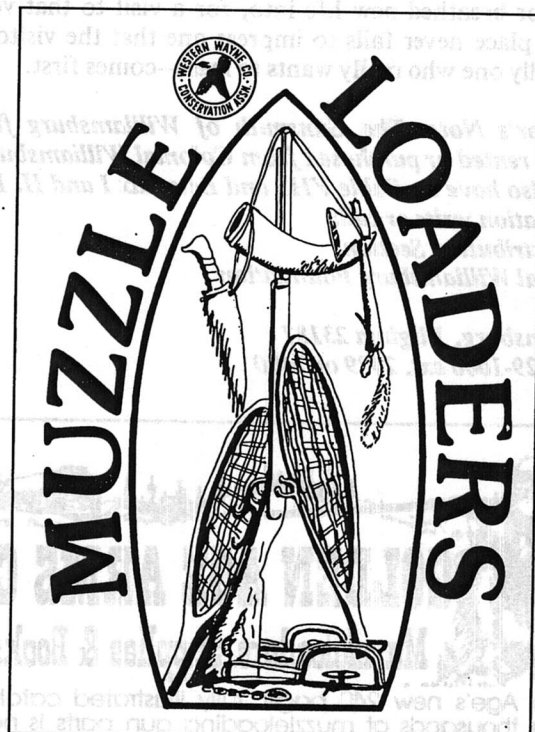


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