

U.S. ARMY ARTIFACT SPOTLIGHT

WASHINGTON'S PISTOLS

By Leslie D. Jensen

George Washington's pistols at the West Point Museum, located on the grounds of the U.S. Military Academy in New York, are perhaps the best documented of several pistols that General Washington used over his lifetime. As such, they are a national treasure that reside today in the area where he spent the most time during the long struggle for independence the years in which the Army matured, professionalized, and launched its victorious Yorktown campaign. Washington's long standing association with West Point and the Hudson Valley led to the continued presence of the U.S. Army at West Point from the revolution until today.

In April 1778, Capt. Henry Fauntleroy, having returned from recruiting duty and a furlough with his family in Virginia to the Continental Army's encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, delivered a letter and package to the headquarters of General George Washington. The letter, dated 22 March 1778, was from Fauntleroy's brother in law, Thomas Turner. It read:

May it please your Excellency,

Altho' I have not the honour of being personally acquainted with your Excellency, nevertheless I am far from being a Stranger to your distinguished merit, both in private and publick life; your indefatigable zeal, and unwearied attention to the true Interest of your native Country, since the commencement of these differences, must excite the warmest sense of gratitude in the breast of every American that is not callous to the rights of humanity; that it may please the supreme Disposer of human

Events, to crown you with success in this important struggle, & speedily put an end to the distressing Scenes of this unnatural War, is the fervent wish of your, Excellency's respectful & Obedient Servt

Thos Turner

P.S. I have transmitted to your Excellency a pair of pistols &c. &c. your acceptance of which will confer a singular obligation on

T.T.¹

Washington's reply to Turner, dated 25 April 1778, notes:

Altho I am not much accustomed to accept presents, I cannot refuse one offered in such polite terms as accompanied the Pistols & furniture you were so obliging as to send me by Captn Fauntleroy. They are very elegant, & deserve my best thanks, which are offered with much sincerity. The favourable Sentiments you are pleased to entertain of me, & the obliging and flattering manner in which they are expressed add to the obligation & I am Sir Yr Most Obedt & Most H: Ser.

G. W.

Thomas Turner and his wife, Jane Fauntleroy Turner, lived on the Rappahannock River southeast of Fredericksburg, Virginia. His father and grandfather had been prominent planters, and Washington had known Turner's father in his younger years.



Public Sale Alexandria 20th April 1804

10 lots of Pamphlets & loose papers of	P. H. Rose	1. 9. 0	
10 lots of Prints	10/- Louis Cuvier	1. 7. 0	
Estate of Gilbert Roman Esq; 12 Vols of the Douglas Geographer	14. 10. 0		
10 Landings Johnson's works	10/- Louis Cuvier	1. 2. 0	
10 Biographical & Historical	10/- Lester Dick	1. 8. 1. 6	
10/6 Dredged Shells &c	10/- H. Howell	1. 7. 2. 0	
10 Burns History of England & others	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 8. 1. 6	
Smollett's Continuation	5/- G. Young	1. 6. 9	
10 Burns Essays	10/- H. Howell	1. 0. 0	
Goldsmith's Romany	2 d	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 6. 6
Pin's Essays	3 d	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 8. 1. 6
Wilson's Heredities	10/-	10/-	1. 10. 0
Books on Architecture	2 d	10/- H. Howell	1. 6. 0
Coats Gazetteer Land	2 d	10/- H. Howell	1. 6. 0
Matthew's Paradise lost	10/-	10/- Wm Herbert	1. 6. 0
Juniperan in India	10/-	10/- Douglas Geographer	1. 0. 0
History of California	2 d	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
London & Environs	6 d	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 14. 6
Days Journey Address to a lady	2 d	10/- H. Howell	1. 6. 9
Johnson's Dicty of Fesse	3 d	10/- H. Howell	1. 6. 3
Watts' poems & Prose	5 d	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 11. 3
Horace's Journal	5 d	10/- P. H. Young	1. 11. 3
Pennell's Faith, Barley & other	10/-	10/-	1. 2. 6
Poems	10/-	10/-	1. 2. 6
Quips & Quotations	10/-	10/-	1. 0. 0
Vivier & Horner	6/-	10/- Dodingtonfield	1. 8. 0
History of Wakefield albums	10/-	10/- H. Howell	1. 14. 0
10 French Travels	10/-	10/- H. Howell	1. 14. 0
Blair's Theology & Dodds' Polymath of Connock	10/-	10/- H. Howell	1. 14. 0
Herne's Bar Abelard	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 14. 0
Seized & Burnt on order of the 10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 14. 0	
Concise Compendious Roans Poets	10/-	10/-	1. 0. 0
Beauties of Plato	5 d	10/-	1. 0. 0
10000 Blair Young & Kelly	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
10000 Watts & 2 Philadelphia 10/-	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
Lewis the 10/- French & Hale	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
20000 Heathcotes	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
The Washington's Case of Ideas collected 10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0	
Pistols	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A Library of old worn out day	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
Map of Kentucky	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A Library of Govt Washington	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A Landscaper	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A Painting of lot & his daughter	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A Library of Govt Washington	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
7 pairs of Stockings up	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
A lot of cattle	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
Fayre & Shewing Utensils Miss	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
Brothels &c	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
Sea Caddie Mahogany	10/-	10/- P. H. Rose	1. 0. 0
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Sadly, Captain Fauntleroy, who delivered the pistols, was killed later at the Battle of Monmouth in June.

The pistols themselves are a pair, brass-barreled and silver-mounted with a panoply of arms on the side plates and a grotesque face on the butts. The lock plates are signed "HAWKINS." John Hawkins Jr. was a general London gunsmith who had taken over his father's shop in 1714 and carried on the business until 1760. Normally, mounts were bought from silversmiths, and there is a single London date letter, an "n" for 1748, on the tail of one silver trigger guard bow. The barrels are 8.5 inches long, .65-caliber and are stamped "London" on top along with "RW," for Richard Wilson, a prominent London gunmaker, and London proofmarking. The practice of different makers supplying parts to produce pistols was standard among London gunsmiths of the time. Hawkins and Wilson both had extensive trade with the colonies. Indeed, Wilson produced about 2,000 muskets for New York City in two contracts and possibly 500 to 1,000 for New Jersey, as well as muskets for Georgia and South Carolina, and trade guns for Virginia, all about the time of the French and Indian War (1754–1763). Occasionally, Wilson barrels are found on other American-made arms. Work by modern arms scholars have documented several silver-mounted, high-end pistols, one almost identical to the Washington pair, which follow the basic profile of these pieces. Although these pistols were thirty years old when they were presented to Washington, their age was far less important than the fact that they were obviously high-end pistols by a prominent London maker.

Each pistol has a silver strap inlaid across the back engraved: "Gen'l G. Washington," probably done for the presentation. There was some damage to the stocks when they were cut for the inlay.

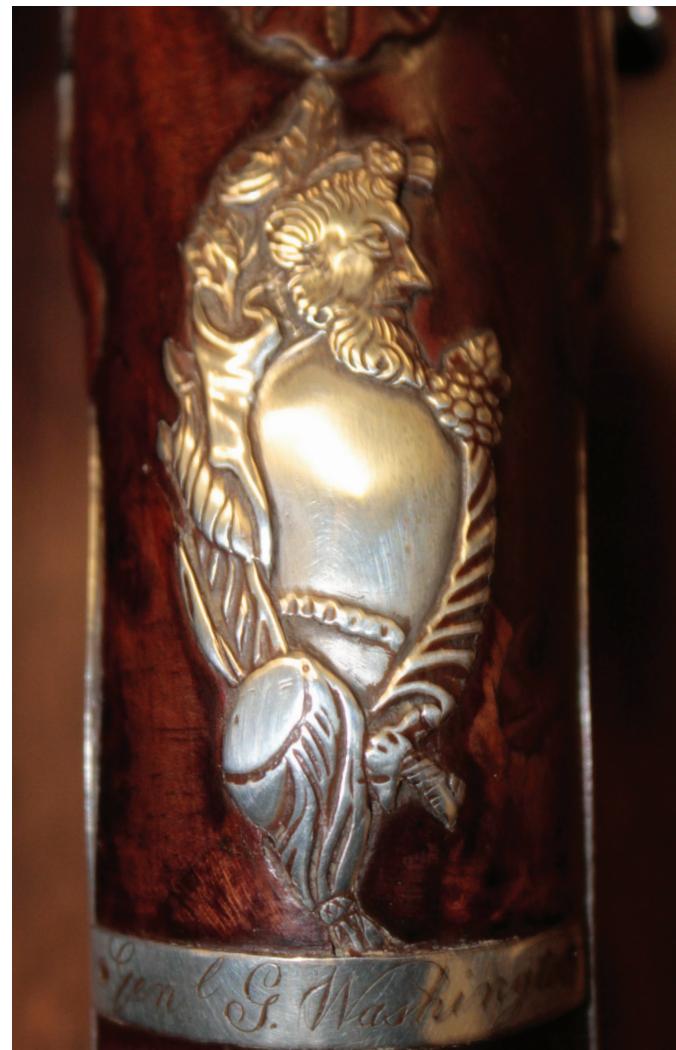
Washington certainly had these pistols from the close of the Valley Forge encampment through the end of the revolution. It appears that they saw active use, for the silver mounts show considerable wear on the high spots consistent with being carried in saddle holsters. The box in which they came, which has the original woolen lining, only shows wear from the lock screws which protrude farther than the silver mounts. Because the mounts were clear of the box surfaces, the wear on the mounts did not come from being in the box.

Washington had other pistols, including ones given to him by General Edward Braddock and Maj. Gen. Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, but it is not always easy to trace their individual histories. The provenance of this pair, however, is strong. The guns themselves provide the date of manufacture and who made them. The Turner/Washington letters document the presentation, and their condition shows some indication of their use.

The gift to Washington, just after the Valley Forge winter and the troubles with the Conway cabal, must have been a welcome indication that he still had strong supporters. Washington had the pistols from that time until he gave them to his private secretary Bartholomew Dandridge Jr. Dandridge was Martha Washington's nephew, and he was close with his aunt and uncle. Dandridge died of yellow fever in 1802 in Haiti while serving as consul.

Although there is no documentation of the date when the pistols went to Dandridge, his effects were auctioned in 1804.







The original auction list, which has remained with the pistols and is also in the museum collection, clearly identifies them as “The Washington Pistols,” and notes that they were silver-mounted. They were purchased by Philip G. Marsteller, the son of a Washington family friend who had been one of the six pallbearers at Washington’s funeral in 1799.

The pistols remained with the Marsteller family for nearly a century. They were auctioned again in 1903, when they passed to Francis Bannerman, an international arms dealer and collector. Bannerman sold them to John S. Reed, and in 1914, E. Hubert Litchfield acquired them from the auction of the Reed collection. Litchfield, an early arms and armor collector, loaned them for a time to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where they were on exhibit. In 1951, Litchfield sold them to New York millionaire Clendenin J. Ryan, and it was he who presented them to the West Point Museum in 1953.

This virtually unbroken chain of ownership and consistent documentation, plus other studies over the years, make these pistols the most important of the many valuable objects at the West Point Museum. They will, of course, figure prominently in the museum’s observance of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution.

Leslie D. Jensen is the curator of arms and armor at the West Point Museum and has been managing a collection of approximately 7,000 items dating from ancient Egypt to the latest U.S. Army weapons for the last twenty-three years. He first was involved in museum work in 1962 as a member and sergeant major of the Colonial Williamsburg Fifes and Drums, with later interpretive experience at Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown Festival Park, the Virginia War Museum, and the National Park Service. After graduating from Roanoke College, he became curator of collections at the American Civil War Museum (formerly the Museum of the Confederacy), museum curator at the U.S. Army Transportation Museum (1982–1984) and director of two Army museums: 2d Armored Division Museum (1984–1986) and The Old Guard Museum (1986–1989). He moved to the U.S. Army Center of Military History’s Museum Division in 1989, joining the initial planning team for the National Museum of the U.S. Army and later as chief of collections for the Army Museum System. His last major duty with the Center before moving to West Point was to lead the Army portion of the artifact recovery team in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attack on the Pentagon.

AH

Notes

1. “To George Washington from Thomas Turner, 22 March 1778,” Washington Papers, Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0249>.

2. Ibid.

