

# **WHITNEY FIREARMS IN THE CIVIL WAR**

**by James Genco**

From a modest factory complex straddling the Mill River just North of New Haven, Connecticut, the Whitney Armory produced more long-arms prior to and during the Civil War than any other private domestic manufacturer. From available records, it appears that the Whitney Armory turned out approximately 141,620 shoulder arms between 1826 and 1865. Furthermore, the variety of arms made was unsurpassed, even when compared to the National Armories. Most if not all of the Whitney long-arms of this period found their way into the hands of Union and Confederate volunteers. (Note: I have not included the 1798 and 1812 era contract muskets in this analysis since it is likely that few of those guns would have seen extended service in the Civil War.)

The Whitney factory had origins in 1798 when Eli Whitney Sr., of cotton gin fame, chose the site on the Mill River, which flows south to Long Island Sound, because of its convenient use of water to power the machinery. The original factory building was on the west side of the river and was the production site of his early flintlock firearms. For the next 60 years the site was developed so that by the Civil War there were buildings on both sides of the narrow river, with a covered bridge connecting the operations. Eli Whitney, Jr. put the final improvements on the factory around 1860 with the enlargement of the dam to increase water pressure.

From the first government contract in 1798 through the Civil War, Whitney Armory had a steady flow of government work. Between 1826 and 1839, they made 39,000 M1816/22 flintlock muskets, most of which were subsequently converted to percussion. In addition, at least 2,000 more were made directly under state contracts. When the 1841 US Rifle was adopted, Whitney, then under the leadership of Eli Whitney, Jr., received orders totaling 26,500, between 1843 and 1855. They made another 600 with M1855 long-range sights and 420 more for Ohio using parts left over from the US contracts.

Ever creative and practical, Whitney was a master at taking parts discarded by others and incorporating them into serviceable weapons. With the advent of the Civil War, and during the months leading up to the conflict, several unusual models of long arms were made using parts from other sources, such as the US Armory at Springfield and the defunct Robbins and Lawrence operation in Windsor, Vermont. One model closely resembled the US M1855 Rifle-musket, using M1855 lock-plates from Springfield. Only 350 were made and all appear to have been sold to the State of Connecticut around 1861. Around this time, Whitney also made a completely different model which strongly resembled the P53 British Enfield Rifle-musket. This unique arm was made largely from surplus P53 Enfield parts left over from Robbins and Lawrence's failed Crimean War contract with British government. It is estimated that 3,500 were made and sold to State governments, with 2,000 going to Maryland, 1,225 going to Georgia and 75 to Mississippi in the months just prior to the war. Other arms made in small quantities during this time included 750 Enfield style two-band rifles and 100 M1855 US style two-band rifles. Despite his New England blue-blood roots, Eli Whitney, Jr. apparently had no qualms about selling arms to Southern states on the eve of the Civil War. Of course, in fairness, the Southern states were still part of the Union at the time, so there was no legal reason to deny them arms. Confederate arms expert Bill Adams recently observed that "Whitney was a significant supplier to the Southern states and ... more Whitney firearms went South than is generally cited."

Once the war commenced in earnest, Whitney dedicated almost all of its arms production to the manufacture of arms for the Federal Government and the State of Connecticut. Although Whitney was awarded a contract to make 40,000 US M1861 Rifle-muskets in 1861, he instead chose to proceed with his Connecticut contracts and the M1861 US Navy Plymouth Rifle. In late 1861, the State of Connecticut, taking advantage of its resident gun-maker, bought 6,000 rifle-muskets closely following the M1861 pattern, but not quite to Government specs. In 1862, Connecticut purchased an additional 8,000 rifle-muskets. In addition about 200 rifle-muskets with “humpback” locks, but conforming in all other ways to the Connecticut contracts, and probably bought by Connecticut, were made around this time. Around 1863, Whitney also made approximately 1,200 to 2,000 M1861 Rifle-muskets with extra parts from the Connecticut contract guns and marked them with the name “Manton,” an English gun-maker. Like the Connecticut guns, these Manton rifle-muskets did not meet government specifications, but were serviceable arms.

Whitney’s major federal efforts early in the war were directed at the manufacture of the new Plymouth Rifle. After a slow start, Whitney was able to fill the entire contract of 10,000 stands between 1861 and 1864. With the Plymouth contract nearing completion, Whitney agreed to manufacture 15,000 M1861 US Rifle-muskets for the Federal government. With machinery and gauges in place, this was done quickly and all were delivered in 1863 and 1864. Unlike the Connecticut contract guns, these all met the strict Federal specifications.

Finally, it should be remembered that while Whitney was manufacturing this array of long-arms, his Whitneyville factory was also turning out 33,000 well-made Navy model revolvers for the Federal government and state governments (New Jersey, to name one), as well as 34,500 pocket model revolvers for the civilian market.

In conclusion, it is clear that Whitney arms played a substantial part in the Civil War. The well-used condition of most surviving examples evidences the substantial service witnessed by the arms manufactured by this classic Yankee businessman and arms-maker.

*Sources: Eli Whitney and the Whitney Armory, by Carolyn Cooper and Merrill Lindsay (1980); Civil War Guns, by William B. Edwards (1962); Flayderman's Guide to Antique Firearms, by Norm Flayderman, 8th Edition.*

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