"Simeon North" by Robert Carlson

Simeon North has been referred to as "the first official pistol maker of the U.S." He produced arms for the U.S. Government from 1799 to 1852. Up until 1823, when he received his first "gun" (i.e. rifle) contract, he appears to have been the exclusive private pistol maker for the U.S. government. Of course, Harpers Ferry and Springfield Armories manufactured pistols at the national armories in 1807, 1808 and 1818. For the 20 years prior to his death in 1852, Simeon North engaged exclusively in the manufacture of Hall guns. With completion of his final contract, one year prior to his death, his production of Hall guns ceased and the North factory ceased business shortly thereafter.

Born on the same day as Eli Whitney on July 13, 1765, they each possessed the same genius for mechanical invention of machinery resulting in firearms with interchangeable parts as taught them by John Hall of the Harpers Ferry Armory. They each received their first U.S. government contracts within 14 months of each other – Eli Whitney on January 14, 1798 and Simeon North for 500 horse pistols on March 9, 1799.

North was always very patriotic and in the early years of the new republic, he supplied arms to resist the British and French incursions on our sovereignty. Born in Berlin, Connecticut, Simeon was a sixth generation descent of John North, who emigrated from England in 1635. Simeon attempted to join the Continental Army in 1781, but was not enlisted due to the imminent surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. He is referred to as Colonel North due to his election as Lieutenant Colonel of the 6th Connecticut Regiment from 1811 to 1813.

North's early contract for 500 horse pistols was followed by a contract, on February 6, 1800, for 1,500 similar pistols to be made at his Berlin, Connecticut facility. His third contract was in June 30, 1808, for 2,000 Navy boarding pistols. He showed his inventive genius by proposing changes to the government pattern pistol and producing all parts of all pistols with mostly interchangeable parts. Another contract for 2,000 additional horse pistols was received in 1810.

On April 16, 1813, a new contract called for 20,000 pistols known as the Model 1817 or "double-band" pistol, with more truly interchangeable parts (as specifically written into the contract). As part of this successful effort to make truly interchangeable parts, the filing gig was invented by Simeon's son, Selah, as was the first milling machine to be used in his factory. The factory was then moved to Staddle Hill in Middletown, Connecticut and his eldest son took over the Berlin facility until 1843. The final pistol contract for 10,000 horse pistols was received July 3, 1819, and for 3,000 short Navy pistols with swivel ramrods to be delivered from 1826 to 1828. The total production of pistols by Simeon North was approximately 50,000 pistols at a cost of \$400,000. Simeon North was becoming a wealth man!

From, this point, North concentrated on rifle production, with contracts for 6,000 "standard" rifles in December, 1823 and 1,200 in 1828; 5,000 Hall rifles on December 15, 1828; 10,000 Hall carbines in 1833; 4,000 rifles in 1835; 2,500 plus an indeterminate number of carbines from 1835 to 1836. All of these were done specifically "with complete uniformity of parts." The May 9, 1839 contract for 10,000 Hall carbines came to include "North's Improvement" of a side-latch breech lever to the right side of the breech. This was patented with Edward Savage, in 1844. Due to his altruistic nature to "share" his inventions for the benefit of his country, most of his inventions were unprotected by patents. Another new idea included a multi-charge, 10-shot, repeating flintlock rifle in 1825, only a few of which were

produced. North suggested the use of east steel in carbine barrels in July, 1848 (also recommended by Samuel Remington, but actually adopted by North first).

During his more than 50 years of producing arms for the U.S., Simeon North showed himself to be extremely honest, ethical and patriotic, as well as a man before his time in a technological sense.

Both Jim Genco and I have added to this saga of Simeon North. Simeon was given a farm in Berlin, Connecticut by his father, Jedediah, who bestowed farms to all of his six boys. That enabled Simeon to marry Lucy Savage in 1786 when he was only twenty-one. The couple had five sons (Reuben-1786, James-1788, Alvan-1790, Sclah-1791, Simeon-1802) and three daughters (Elizabeth-1796, Lucetta-1799, Nancy-1804). In 1795, the couple purchased, for twenty-four dollars, a saw mill located on Spruce Brook at the western boundary of their land in Berlin, Connecticut. He enlarged the building to house a forge and a trip hammer, and thence began to manufacture scythes from imported steel. Prices ran from \$.75 to \$1.67, depending upon size and quantity. Shortly thereafter (1808), he obtained a contract to manufacture pistols in the mill building. An account book, kept by Reuben, the eldest son, has been preserved, and the entries, which began in 1808, throw much light on the business conducted at the factory on Spruce Brook. I have visited the old factory in Berlin, and stirring around in the dust of the ruins, I came across a number of old locks that had been discarded and buried there.

As noted above, Simeon employed his sons, Selah, Reuben and also son, James, in the business. He also had two brothers-in-law, Elisha Cheney, the clock maker, and Josiah Savage. The first U.S. contract pistols were marked North & Cheney. Cheney's shop was just upstream of Simeon's. When Simeon outgrew his mill building in Berlin, he moved the major operations to Staddle Hill in Middletown, Connecticut, but retained the Berlin site under the direction of son, Reuben. (Nathan Starr, whose sword factory was at Staddle Hill, was on the same stream as that of Simeon North,) But, being short of the capital to fund the building of a new factory, Simeon brought Josiah Savage in as a partner and it was Savage who supplied much needed funds. That all went well until, in 1831, Josiah Savage died. Then Josiah's son Edward Savage assumed his father's interest as Simeon's partner. About then, Simeon decided to retire from active management of the business and turned over the daily operation to his son James North. So, now the two sons are running the operation, although Simeon is still a partner. Then Simeon died in 1852, aged 87 years. His grave is at Indian Hill Cemetery, Middletown.

North & Savage made 5,700 Hall rifles and 24,664 Hall carbines under contract from 1829 to 1852. When James North died in 1856, just four years after his father, Edward Savage, then the sole owner, changed the name once again to Savage Revolving Firearms Company. Henry North, James North's son and Simeon's grandson, worked for Edward Savage and he contributed many patented ideas to the technology.

Incidentally, The Savage Repeating Arms Company of Ilion, New York, formed in 1893, has no relationship to the Savage Revolving Arms Co. of Middletown.

Sources: <u>Simeon North, first Official Pistol Maker of the United States, A memoir</u>, by S.N.D. North & Ralph H. North, copyright 1913.

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