

Carroll Yesteryears
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Famed Gunsmith Had Roots in Taneytown
By David Buie

At the beginning of the 1800s, Taneytown was home to a number of highly skilled craftsmen. One of them was Philip Creamer, a classically-trained gunsmith, who achieved fame for his rifles and pistols, a few of them owned by famous Americans.

Philip was born in Taneytown around 1775, the son of German immigrants according to family genealogy. He received his initial training from one of several gunsmiths already turning out weapons in the town, but may have gotten additional experience working at the Harpers Ferry Armory which was established soon after 1800.

Shortly after settling his father's estate around 1805, he relocated to the frontier region of western Illinois not far from St. Louis, Missouri, with his wife, Margaret McKean, and family. There he began building and repairing guns for local settlers as well as working for the influential trading firm of Bryan and Morrison in nearby Cahokia. Creamer likely played a significant role in the design and development of what became known as the famous St. Louis plains rifle, a weapon supplied to some of the early western expeditions.

By 1809, Creamer's reputation had increased significantly. He made a pair of pistols for William Morrison, the trader for whom he worked. Morrison could have ordered pistols from virtually any maker he chose, but opted to arm himself with ones crafted locally by Philip Creamer. Morrison's powerful endorsement must have contributed to Philip's growing popularity as a maker of both rifles and pistols

Creamer's rifles were likely used by the Missouri Fur Company, a group of fur traders that included William Clark who had previously explored the West with Meriwether Lewis. Clark later served in St. Louis as the U.S. Indian agent, as a general in the Louisiana Territory militia and governor of Missouri. He owned at least one Creamer rifle.

The locks on weapons Creamer produced were so reliable it soon became a colloquialism that a man of dependable reputation and character was "as sure as a Creamer lock." This earned his work a special place in the hearts of those compelled to defend their reputations. Men about to engage in duels were known to seek out Creamer beforehand so he could personally put their pistols "in a perfect condition" for dueling.

Between 1817 and 1824, money was raised to present U.S. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun with a pistol made by Creamer. Calhoun was so taken with its quality that he wrote the maker to inquire how he had learned to produce such magnificent weaponry. However, the proud gunsmith refused to reply, believing he was "no showman or stud-horse to be advertised."

In 1825, Philip Creamer returned east to work at the Harpers Ferry Armory in West Virginia. He stayed only two years and returned to the St. Louis area where he served as the gunsmith for the

newly-opened St. Louis Superintendency for Indian Affairs until 1833. He remained in St. Louis until 1835, operating his gun shop on “Olive near Fourth.”

During this period he likely built a set of dueling pistols for Andrew Jackson, one of which is owned by the “Hermitage,” Jackson’s Tennessee home and now a museum. That pistol is an outstanding example of Creamer’s overall mastery of the art of gunsmithing—unique even in an era when all firearms and dueling pistols were held to the highest standards. It is a sure bet that a man like President Andrew Jackson would demand and be satisfied with nothing less than the best. The pistol is outfitted with a fine percussion lock. Creamer was one of the earliest frontier gunsmiths to specialize in making them. Like many finer pistols of the day, it also sported inlaid bands of gold and a gold-covered maker’s cartouche. Philip Creamer’s hand engraving is among the finest to be seen, especially when considering work done by a gunsmith located on the frontier in early 19th-century America.

Although Creamer’s fame came from the years he spent working in Illinois and St. Louis, his training began in Taneytown and Daniel Hartzler and James Whisker discuss him in their book “Gunsmiths of Maryland.” By the time he died, probably in Green County, Illinois, about 1841, the area was no longer the frontier it had been when he first arrived.

David Buie is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County and can be contacted via e-mail at teambuie05@msn.com.



Half stock, muzzle-loading percussion pistol, made by Philip Creamer, bearing the inscription “Andrew Jackson” on the stock plate. (Courtesy of the Hermitage Historical Museum in Davidson County, Tennessee).