

Williamsburg GATEWAY TO THE PAST

In 1963, dreams of our glorious past became alive through the efforts of a cadre of dedicated artisans.

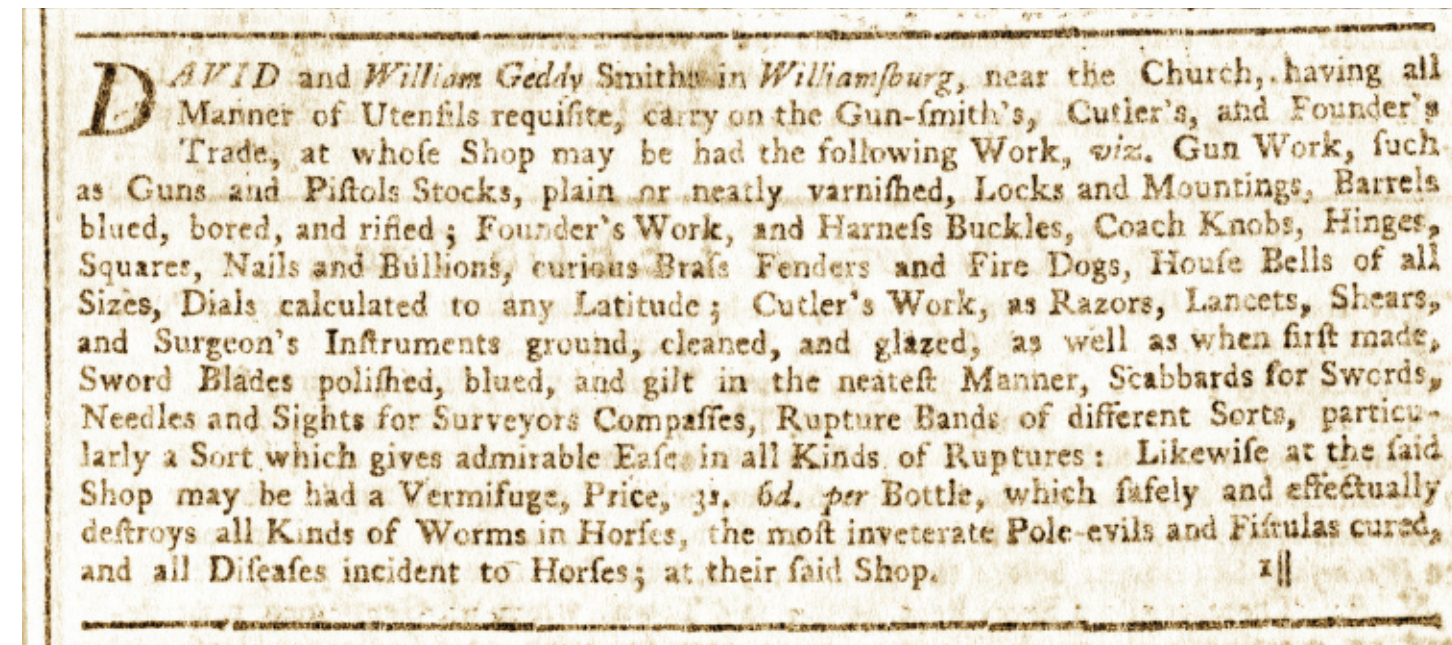
James W. Wright

Williamsburg, Virginia was a city of first importance in the colonies. Nestled near the tidewater basin of the James River, the city boasted the College of William and Mary. Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, John Tyler and sixteensigners of the Declaration of Independence were alumni of the College. George

Washington married widow Martha Dandridge Custis, from a wealthy Williamsburg family, and became a familiar local figure.

In the early 20th century, after more than a century of neglect, the Reverend Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin solicited financial support from seasonal resident John D. Rockefeller Jr. to resurrect the fading glory of the city. His dream of a revived Colonial Williamsburg was to include more than charming but static

buildings, beautiful gardens and antique furnishings. Education and historical research to understand, appreciate and respect our founding citizens became paramount guiding principles. It would become a world leader in setting standards for recreating the lifestyle from colonial American days, as well as in exploration, replication and an exacting



This ad from the Virginia Gazette dated August 8, 1761, is the first known advertisement for rifling barrels in Colonial America.

preservation of all aspects of colonial life. Their studies and research of the Kentucky rifle have been pivotal in bringing about a better appreciation and understanding of early America's frontier.

A Gun Building Tradition: Gun building in Williamsburg began with John Brush who arrived from London in 1717. He was a master in the Gun Makers' Guild in England.

James Geddy Sr. established his shop prior to 1736. His sons, William and David, carried on the business after their father died in 1744. In 1750, six years after her husband's death, Anne Geddy sold the east lot, forcing her sons to relinquish the workroom on the property to its new owner. Subsequently, the brothers built a workroom on the west side of the foundry.

The Geddy brothers advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* on August 8, 1751 they were carrying on the "Gunsmith's, Cutler's and Founder's trade, to include Gun Work, such as Guns and pistols, Stocks plain or neatly varnished, Locks and Mountings, Barrels blued, bored and rifled." This advertisement indicates that David and William Geddy were partners, continuing in

their father's trades of gunsmithing and brass casting. After 1760, when James Geddy Jr. purchased the house and lot from his mother and established his silversmith and jewelry business, William and David continued to operate the foundry as a separate enterprise. These findings verified the history of gunsmithing from before the Revolutionary War in Williamsburg and a concerted effort began to address recreating this craft.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation realized that people are the lifeblood of any organization. Many talented individuals availed themselves to work, study, research and examine priceless artifacts.

A young Wallace Gusler in 1968.



Others arrived with little more than a desire to be part of something bigger than themselves, and a willingness to learn the nearly forgotten manner of daily colonial life. As the crafts became more of a focus, literally from the hills of Virginia came a young man who would become a virtual *Pater classis* among artisans in general and gunsmiths in particular. Wallace Gusler had been working as a self-taught gun builder for several years when his work came to the attention of the young longrifle collector Robin Hale, a graduate student at Virginia Tech. After graduation Robin learned Colonial Williamsburg needed a gunsmith. He saw an opportunity and his interest helped Wallace to get an interview and eventually employment at the Colonial Williamsburg's Deane Forge, beginning December 3, 1962.

When Wallace arrived, Reeves Goehring Jr. was working at the magazine, a repository for a large number of original muskets. Reeves was training Dan Berg in repairing and maintaining the 'Brown Bess' muskets used in the militia musters and musket firing demonstrations. Working out of the second floor of the guard house and at the powder magazine, Reeves had Berg stock up a smoothbore long gun from parts. With his experience in casting

Left: The reconstructed Geddy work shop now holds the C.W. Gun Shop.

The "movie rifle" documented in the 1968 film, *The Gunsmith of Williamsburg*.



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brass, Reeves also introduced Berg to foundry work at the Deane Forge, which became Berg's main interest. Dan went on to be a foundry man at the Geddy Foundry, a position he held until retiring.

In the meantime, Wallace became frustrated forging items for sale to tourists. During the spring of 1963, working on his own after hours, Gusler built a flintlock rifle using an original barrel and lock with commercially cast brass trigger

guard and butt piece, fabricating the stock and sheet brass mounts using only hand tools. He completed this first rifle in only eight days. This bold move was the catalyst for the re-establishment of gun building in Colonial Williamsburg.

Reeves would head the shop, but as a summer employee who had worked five weeks in 1962 and six weeks in 1963, making only \$100 a week with lodging, he soon moved on to his main vocation, that of a history teacher. In 1963, the Williamsburg Gunsmith Shop opened in one room above the Deane Forge Blacksmith

Shop on Prince George Street.

Gusler's lifelong friend Gary Brumfield, who had hunted with Wallace using their homemade



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Right: An early photograph of Gary Brumfield at work in the shop.

Below: Current Gun Shop Master George Suiter (r) rifling a hand forged gun barrel with journeyman Clay Smith assisting, while journeyman Richard Frazier works on a lock.



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flintlock rifles, commented on the state of knowledge at the time: "It was obvious back in Salem, when we saw the early rifles in Kindig's book, *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in it's Golden Age*, we had been missing what characterized firearms from before and around the Revolutionary War. And the early guns really appealed to us." From the beginning, the gun shop epitomized Colonial Williamsburg's goals. It was a fortuitous day when this shop was established, not only for the Foundation, but also for future aspiring gun builders who would have an interest in building flintlock firearms, and the desire to



A beautiful brace of silver mounted pistols, one of two identical sets, each a joint effort by George Suiter, Clay Smith, Richard Frazier and Richard Sullivan.

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Current Shop Master George Suiter engraves a silver pistol butt cap cast at the Getty foundry.

Left: Three pistols made in the Williamsburg gun shop. (Top) made by Wallace Gusler in 1971, with touch-marks of Jon Laubach and Gerry Abbott, indicating it is a hand-forged barrel; (middle) an iron mounted pistol with set triggers and hand-forged barrel by Gary Brumfield; (bottom) signed by Jon Laubach and George Suiter. It is the first project George worked on in the shop, 1977.

SIX SHOP MADE RIFLES FROM COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG



Wallace Gusler, the "First Williamsburg Rifle."

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Jon Laubach – his personal rifle.

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David Wagner – passed away in 2005.

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Ed Thomas – an early apprentice and journeyman, passed away in 2009.

OMAR GUERRA

Gary Brumfield – the second shop Master.

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*George Suiter – current shop Master
A hand made double barrel, swivel breech rifle.*

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replicate technologies used in their construction. The conscious decision to take an exacting approach to gun building was made, and has continued to this day. The arduous challenges of rediscovering the hidden past became a mission, and as some of the few “institutionalized tradesmen” the Gunsmiths of Williamsburg were allowed the freedom and time to research and redevelop the skills of 18th-century gunsmithing.

The next major challenge would be a hand-forged rifled gun barrel. Throughout 1963-64 there was much research and experimentation to discover methods and techniques of this technology. Even visits to ‘pick the brain’ of legendary gunmaker Hacker Martin were of little benefit. “Contrary to popular stories” says Wallace, “Hacker never actually forged a rifle barrel. He could not understand, with barrels readily available, why I would even want to try it.” Pressing the issue, Hacker finally told young Gusler “If you want to forge a rifle barrel you need a great big fire and three big dumb men!” Knowing of no other resources, in order to learn the techniques of gun barrel forging, the fledgling gun shop was on its own. “Hacker did teach us how to make cherry reamers” added Wallace “but that was about it.” Hacker was not being guarded about forging barrels “He was one of the most helpful gun makers I ever met; he just did not know for sure.”

Finally, in the early 1965 Gusler successfully forged a gun barrel tube. “I had to use 1020 (mild) steel” explained Wallace “because I could not obtain wrought iron. Since I had no help that winter, I fashioned it from three pieces and butt-welded them together.” With an understatement, he added: “It made for a very difficult task of reaming the bore smooth.”

In the winter of 1966 the gun shop and its 24 year old Master, Wallace Gusler, moved into the Ayscough shop where they had a forge, a wall of tools, work benches, a barrel boring machine and a rifling



Journeyman Richard Sullivan recently completed an all hand made rifle with 18th century tools.

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guide. There they offered colonial flintlock guns “lock, stock and barrel,” as well as less expensive firearms with commercially made locks and barrels.

A life of study, research and practical experience has shaped Wallace’s and Gary Brumfield’s definition of a handmade firearm. To the journeymen and masters of Colonial Williamsburg, it includes using strictly 18th century technology.

Gary Brumfield commented: “While by far the greatest number of rifles that have been made in the shop over the years have used commercially available locks and barrels, this was driven by the economics of producing rifles for customers and in no way lessened the shop’s goal of redeveloping and keeping alive the traditional skills necessary to make an all hand-made rifle. In the mid-nineteen eighties we had a huge backlog of potential customers and decided to switch to making only totally hand-made

guns for our custom orders. The economic downturn of the early nineteen-nineties hurt the market for these expensive guns and in 1994, after Gusler returned as master of the shop, once again commercial locks and barrels were offered as a less costly option.”

The year 1968 proved to be a milestone for the education and inspiration of traditional gun builders. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation produced *The Gunsmith of Williamsburg*, a docudrama of small shop technology showing a flintlock rifle made in a traditional manner from start to finish. All the materials, including the wrought iron, as well as the tools and construction methods used were exacting to the 18th century methods. Still available as a DVD, it remains the premier documentary on building flintlock rifles with period tools and technology, continuing to influence makers today.

Contemporaneously another important development for the craft of building traditional rifles came from Albert Sullivan, one of the first major antique rifle collector to seriously treat revival firearms as a collectable art form. Sullivan commissioned rifles by highly talented craftsmen including Carl Pippert, Bob Ditchburn, William Buchele, and George Stanford as well as Wallace Gusler. The interest in authentic and historically correct styled colonial era firearms was rapidly growing with the Colonial Williamsburg gun shop taking the lead in setting standards in the study of traditional workmanship and methods. The motto of Colonial Williamsburg is ‘that the future may learn from the past.’ For 47 years literally hundreds of thousands of visiting tourist have been influenced by interpretation and demonstration at the Gun Shop at Colonial Williamsburg. Not only have they learned about early American technology and the role the gun has played in frontier life, but also about the exploration, expansion, and settlement of colonial America. The efforts of a handful of passionate

individuals accurately presenting our past, have given the world a better understanding of the early American frontier. Years of dedication, hard work and long hours have paid huge dividends not only to the colonial capital community of Williamsburg, but to the society of the Longrifle Culture as well.

A Cadre of Gifted Artisans:

Wallace Gusler (b.1942) started as an interpreter in the Historic Trades Department at Colonial Williamsburg in 1962 and in two years was promoted to Master Gunsmith. In 1972 he left the Gun Shop to become the Curator of Mechanical Arts, Furniture and Arms for the CW Foundation, and then the Director of Conservation before he returned as Master of the Gun Shop in 1994. During this tenure, Wallace wrote *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia 1710-1880*, and *Decorated Firearms 1540-1870* with Professor James Lavin, and has been published in numerous magazines and journals. He remains active teaching at the annual Western Kentucky University Longrifle Seminar and other Workshops. He served as the first President of the Contemporary Longrifle Association and was the first recipient of the CLA’s Distinguished Service Award. In 2001 he was once again honored by the presentation of the CLA’s Pioneer Award. Also a member of the Kentucky Rifle Association and the National Muzzleloading Rifle Association, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the Kentucky Rifle Association in 1986. Wallace retired from Colonial Williamsburg in 2004 and resides in Queen’s Lake outside Williamsburg.

Top right: Tomahawks by Jon Laubach (top) and Wallace Gusler (middle). The belt axe (bottom) is by George Suiter. The plug bayonet is by Jon Laubach.

Right: Forging a barrel tube under the careful eye of Gary Brumfield (left) assisted by Jon Laubach (foreground) and (almost obscured) Dave Wagner.



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Gary Brumfield (b.1946) worked three summers beginning in 1965 at the Deane Forge shop, while earning his degree at Virginia Tech. In 1969 Gary joined the US Army. With a drawdown, Gary opted for a short tour as a Spec 5 and worked as an Armorer. In April 1972, Gary was employed full time at the Williamsburg gun shop. After Wallace moved to another job at Colonial Williamsburg, Gary became a journeyman and 'Shop Manager' in 1972. In 1974, he was designated as Shop Master. Under his leadership, the gun shop focused on handmade rifles, fowlers and pistols. When Gary relocated in 1990 to another job at Colonial Williamsburg, he had been the longest serving gun shop Master, having held the position for 18 years. Gary was the editor of the *Journal of Historical Armsmaking Technology* (JHAT), and was published in numerous magazines.

fowlers and pistols, and a fabulous swivel breech rifle. He is known for making cased sets with workmanship rivaling the finest period gun makers. George is a graduate of Trinidad State Junior College's Gunsmithing Program. Prior to Williamsburg, he was employed at the Douglas barrel making company from 1975 to 1977. Building on the foundation of Wallace and Gary, new methods of die forging lock parts were developed by George and his journeymen, as well as a technique for charcoal bluing barrels.

Jon Laubach (b.1946) from Allentown, Pennsylvania, served in Vietnam in the US Navy as a Search and Rescue swimmer aboard the DD723 (destroyer) USS Walke. After leaving active duty, Jon

a class project. Dave began working in the Colonial Williamsburg gun shop as a summer helper while attending Millersville University. Graduating in 1980 with a degree in Industrial Arts, Dave taught one year as a high school shop teacher before returning to Colonial Williamsburg as an apprentice under Gary Brumfield and Jon Laubach. Dave was an excellent student who learned quickly and soon joined the ranks of the few contemporary artisans who have made a rifle entirely by hand with 18th century technology. On September 18, 1986, he was promoted to Journeyman.

Dave taught classes at the NMLRA Gunsmithing Seminar at Western Kentucky

Shop built rifle with fire blued forged iron mounts by Wallace Gusler.

University and authored articles in *JHAT* (volume two), including one on making a barrel crowning tool. When his health deteriorated in 1998, Dave moved back to Mifflinburg where he continued to do fine gun work until he suffered a fatal heart attack February 27, 2005.

Richard Frazier (b.1946) spent five years building muzzleloaders at Silver Dollar City in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, before coming to Williamsburg. He began his apprenticeship with Gary in 1988, and continued under Wallace in 1995. Richard is not only a talented gun maker, but also a scholar of 18th century studies. Richard forged two gun barrels, and became part of a select group to build very fine cased sets of flintlock pistols. He retired after 20 years in 2008.

Clay Smith (b.1956) began working at Colonial Williamsburg in 1988 as a summer interpreter before spending two and a half years with blacksmiths Peter Ross and Ken Swartz at the Anderson Forge. His gun building

apprenticeship began under George Suiter and finished under Wallace in 1995. He has completed twelve hand-made rifles and pistols. Clay left Colonial Williamsburg in January 2009 due to staff reductions.

Richard Sullivan is the latest gun builder at Colonial Williamsburg to have completed a rifle lock, stock and barrel with traditional tools. Richard built flintlock rifles as a hobby before becoming an apprentice in 2003.

Full Circle: The dreams of a glorious past come home

Having known several of these gun makers for many years, I was always struck that they were never

content in the research, or in their striving to be more exacting. It seemed to be a point of contention in their approach to recreating the authentic Williamsburg gun shop that the Francis Street building was never a gun shop; however, in 2008, that changed when the shop relocated to the Geddy site where they would be building firearms at a documented site.

More than two centuries later, the Geddy workshop is again alive with the sounds of hammers, rasps and gun making, replete with the dusky smells of the coal fired forge, varnishes and vegetable oils. With George Suiter as the Master Gunsmith, assisted by journeyman Richard Sullivan, fine hand made colonial rifles, fowlers and pistols are being crafted just as in centuries past. The dream of Reverend Dr. Goodwin, who imagined a glorious future dedicated to the past, is realized in the revived Colonial Williamsburg Gun Shop. Two centuries after its role as a city of first importance, Colonial Williamsburg is again the premier city to those who love, admire and respect our heritage, and strive to reconnect with our founding colonial ancestors, especially for those building Kentucky Rifles.



The last day at the Francis Street Gun Shop. Master George Suiter (front left) with journeymen Richard Sullivan (front right), Clay Smith (back left) and Richard Frazier (back right).

References:

Anecdotes, recollections and details obtained through interviews with Wallace Gusler, Liza Gusler, George Suiter, Reeves Goehring, Jon Laubach, Clay Smith, Richard Frazier, and Richard Sullivan. My particular appreciation goes to Gary Brumfield for his investment of many hours to assist in producing a better and more accurate article. Gordon Barlow. *Following the Tradition; Celebrating the Artisans of the Contemporary Longrifle Association*, Texarkana: Scurlock Publishing Co., 2008. Mark Silver and Wallace Gusler. *Three Centuries of Tradition; the Renaissance of Custom Sporting Arms in America*, Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Scala Publishers Ltd., 2003.

EMPLOYEES OF THE CWB GUNSHOP THROUGH ITS 47 YEARS OF OPERATION

Editor's Note: We thought it might interest our readers to see a list of the employees who have worked at the gun shop during its existence. In alphabetical order:

- Jerry Abbott
- Peter Alexander
- Dan Berg
- Nick Blanton
- Walt Brinkley
- Gary Brumfield
- Mark Christensen
- Jay Close
- J.P. Cottingham
- William Fenstermacher
- Richard Frazier
- Jeff Geyer
- Harold Gill III
- Susan Gilliam
- Lindsay Grigsby
- Reaves Goehring Jr.
- Wallace Gusler
- Alan Gutches
- Kevin Harding
- Steve Hicks
- Carson Hudson
- Ronnie Jacobs
- Shawn Johnson
- Art LaBonte
- Jim LaRue
- Jon Laubach
- Mike Lavin
- Bill Little
- Paul List
- Bill Lloyd
- Larry Luck
- Glenn McIntyre
- Jay "Roddy" Moore
- Bruce Moyle
- Randy Schon
- Clay Smith
- Tom Strohfeltd
- George Suiter
- Richard Sullivan
- Frank Tate
- Blair Taylor
- Ed Thomas – deceased 2009
- Dave Wagner – deceased 2005
- Joe Wheeler
- Bill Wilde
- Chris Wright

Personnel records only go back several years. Possibly we have missed individuals or perhaps misspelled a name. If so, please accept our apologies.