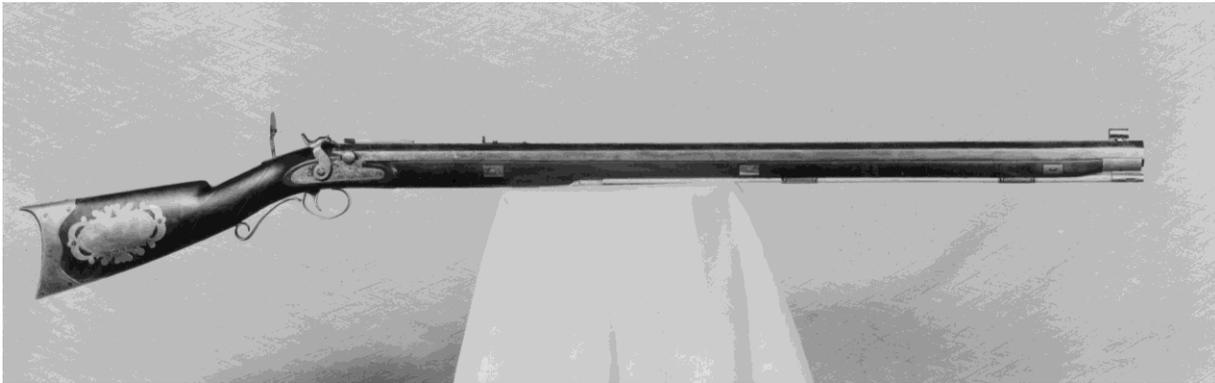


Amasa Belknap, Gunsmith 1786 – 1878 Muzzle Blasts for August, 1952

When I was a small boy and my great grandfather was still living, I remember his tales of his boyhood in Cherry Valley, NY. I was particularly interested in the stories about shooting the beef on the farm with a rifle made by Amasa Belknap, an early gunsmith of Cherry Valley.



Since then I have been interested in muzzle loading guns, and especially guns made by Belknap, as well as information about him. As far as I have been able to learn from gun books, I believe he is an unknown gunsmith. But since I have seen his work, I know him as an artist at his craft.

I first purchased two Belknap guns in Cherry Valley. One is a percussion full stock rifle and the other a very light boy's squirrel shotgun. I decided then to search for more guns and information about Belknap. My search continued until I located the last house in which he had lived. I was told that a brick gun shop had stood close beside the house, and had been torn down about 1900. An old barn stood behind the house, and in it, overhead, I found two old walnut stock banks, all sawed to pattern. This seemed to be all I could learn there, so I searched to see if I could find someone who had known Amasa Belknap.

Finally I found an old man, then over 90 years old, who said that, as a small boy, he had known Belknap and had played in his shop. He remembered the guns there for repairs, and also the old-time rifling machine. He also said that he and his friends had been warned many times not to play with fire around the shop as it contained a quantity of gunpowder.

In the Cherry Valley cemetery where I found the gravestone which marked his burial place, I learned that Amasa Belknap was born in Ellington, Connecticut, November 29, 1786 and died at Cherry Valley September 21, 1878, when he was nearly 92 years old.

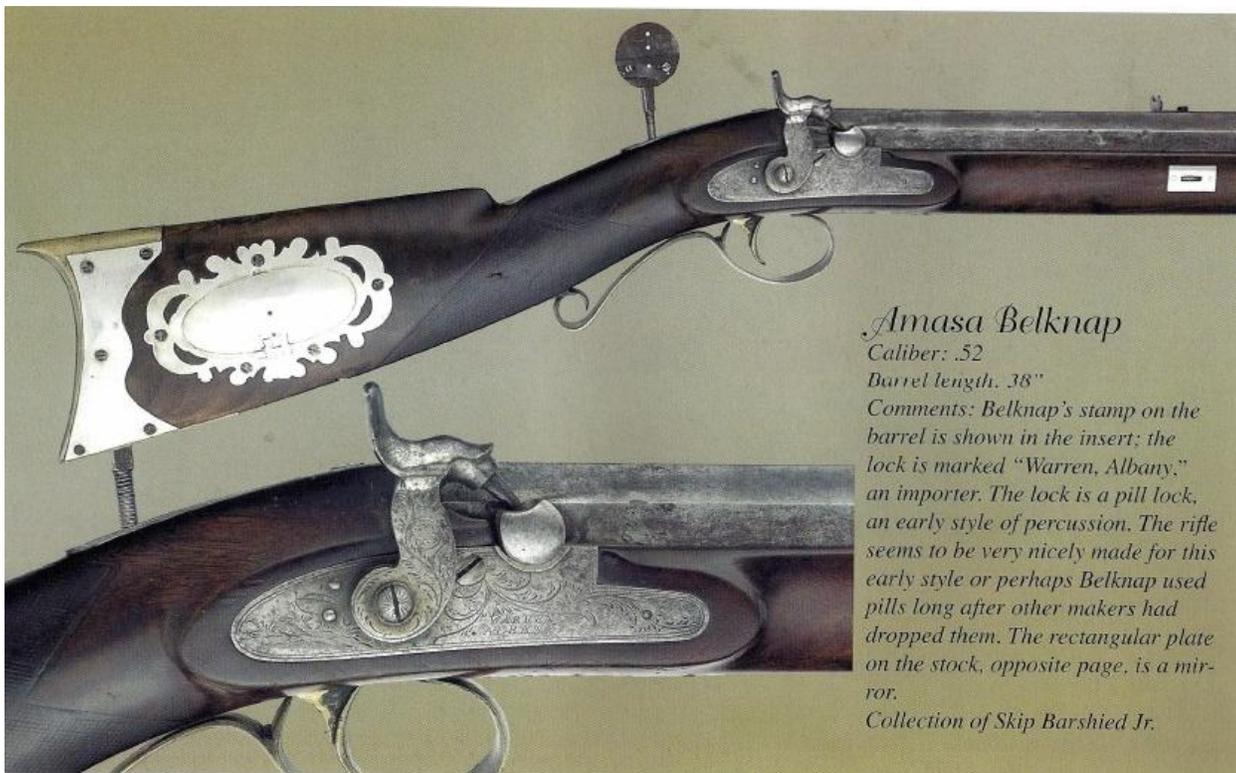
Through the kindness of Mrs. Harold Davis of Ellington, Connecticut, I also learned that Belknap married Betsey Chapman of Vernon, Connecticut, on September 3, 1807.

One day, a little later, when I stopped at the local post office, a man I knew told me he had an old gun he wanted to sell, a gun which had been in his family and dated back to the Civil War. Can you imagine my surprise when I found he had, not a Civil War rifle, but a good pill-lock target rifle, made by Belknap. The name Belknap on the barrel surprised me too as I had nearly give up hopes of finding any more of his guns. This is the gun pictured with this article.

In the patchbox of this rifle I also found a goose quill with a wooden plug in the end, and three of the original pills inside. The pills were black and about the size of the head of a pin.

It is said in history that Belknap made over a thousand rifles for the State of Texas, about the time of the Mexican War. It may be that one of the readers of this article may have one of his guns, and if so, I would like to hear about it.

Much of the other history about Amasa Belknap is apparently lost, as is the case so often regarding interesting persons. There seems to be no record of when he removed to Cherry Valley, but I shall keep searching. Bit by bit, facts of his life may come to light, and more of his guns may be located. There may be many surprises, and aren't these unexpected findings what make the gun game the interesting pastime that it is.



Amasa Belknap Rifle (Picture from New York State Firearms Trade by H. J. Swinney)

Amasa Belknap – Cherry Valley Gunsmith Corrections and Additions Fifty Nine Years Later

My Article about Amasa Belknap was published 59 years ago in "Muzzle Blasts", the official magazine of the national muzzle loading rifle association. In 1952 I was 22 years old. My handwriting was crude and my typing worse. So I will accept the responsibility of the incorrect spelling of Amasa's name. It was a disappointment to see "Amaso" all through the article. About that time I met Holman J "Jerry" Swinney because of our common interest in Belknap. His lifelong search for information regarding New York State gun makers culminated in the publishing of the five volume work "The New York State Firearms Trade" in 2003. These remarkable volumes came about after Jerry Swinney passed away. He

included information about Belknap that I had never come across at the time I wrote the Muzzle Blasts article and I visited Belknap's grave in Cherry Valley, NY.

Although Cherry Valley is not too far distant from home I had no occasion to go there again. I found when Jerry's book came out that he had a different year of death for Belknap. I then visited the grave site again and found my date of 1873 was incorrect. The year of Belknap's death was 1874. I regret these errors. However my omissions of other details known to me when I wrote the story were equally distressing. I'll try to fill in the spaces 59 years later and trace my Belknap related footsteps since the story was published.

Who can I credit with instilling within me a lifelong interest in history, preservation and collecting? The answer to a great extent would be my maternal grandfather Benjamin J Garlock (1877 to 1970).

Where did I first hear Amasa Belknap's name? It was probably from my maternal great grandfather, David Hubbs (1859 – 1945). In my reference to him in the first paragraph of the 1952 article I failed to include an important firearms related statement of his. He said that they only had one or two balls and percussion caps and that the caps kept falling off. I ask why the caps kept falling off and he replied that they were on the bottom of the rifle. Even though I was only 12 or 13 years old at the time I was aware that underhammer muzzle loading firearms did exist. However that was the first that I knew that Belknap had once made them. My search then began to actually find an underhammer Belknap rifle. Shortly after that I was fortunate to meet an elderly Cherry Valley man, Major Cox. He showed me a fine underhammer rifle that Belknap had made for his family. Major Cox also told me the Belknap had made pistols and air rifles, one of which was once in his family. I have seen that air rifle and know of its whereabouts yet today. All of this goes to show how varied the products of old time gunsmiths actually were.

In thinking back some 70 years I remember another fullstock Belknap rifle that had remained in the family for who the old gunsmiths had made it. The owner at that time was my friend Willard White of Ames, NY. In that long ago time my father took me to a rifle range on Mr. White's farm. He and his friends were shooting different guns including the Belknap rifle.

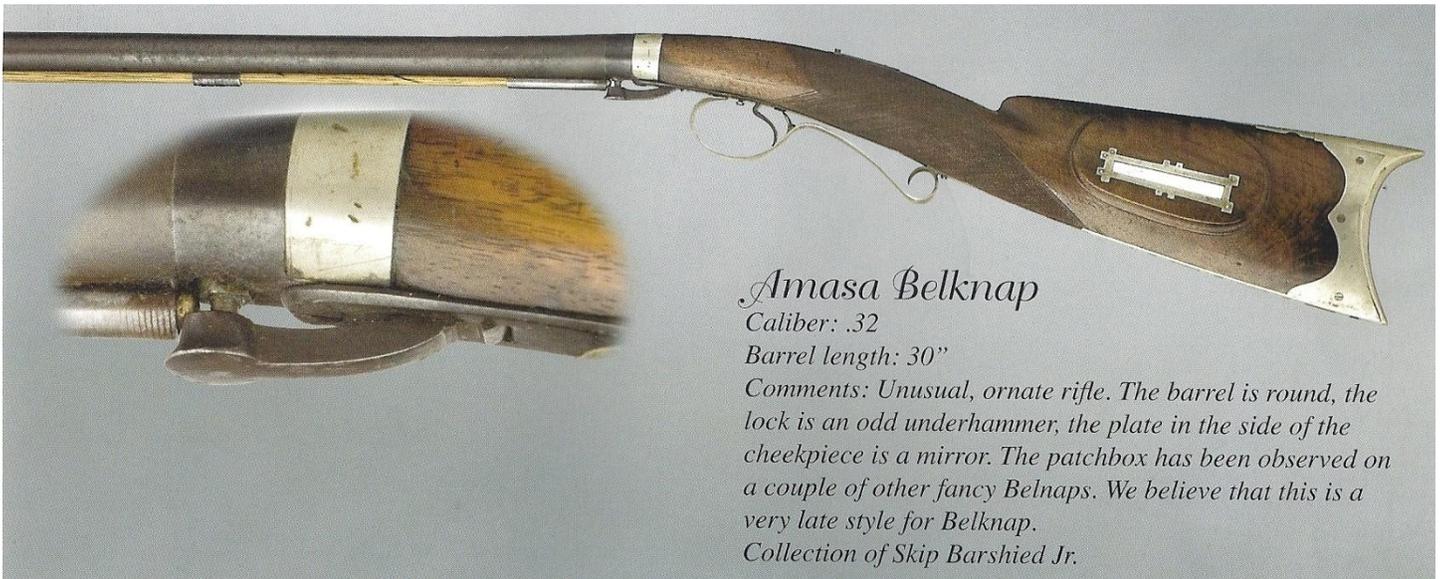




White Family Rifle

I believe that was the first time I saw a muzzle loading firearm actually fired. I remember saying that same day I would like to have an old rifle like that and being told it was unlikely to happen since they were so rare. In the years that followed I have collected six guns made by Belknap. In the summer of 1954 my plea for more information about Belknap as written in my 1952 article paid off. Hugo Von Linden of Schoharie brought a fine underhammer rifle to show me.

It was much the same as the Major Cox family rifle. Hugo and his wife Grace became special friends of my wife and I. Years later I was fortunate enough to purchase that rifle and have kept it to the present. At last I had an underhammer Belknap rifle like my great grandfather had described when I was very young. I never cease marveling at the fine workmanship Belknap achieved.



The Belknap Underhammer Rifle (Picture from New York State Firearms Trade by H. J. Swinney)

I'll finish this story by describing a great disappointment. When I looked through Belknap's barn over 50 years ago I was not aggressive enough. The building was demolished several years ago. I was told that some of Belknap's record books

and gun parts were found. Unfortunately I could not get the contractor who found these artifacts to show them to me. Now he too has passed away.

Does this end the Belknap story? No one knows – only time can tell.

Skip Barshied, Stone Arabia, January 2012

June 7, 2012

This morning I again take up my pen to continue the story of Amasa Belknap, the Cherry Valley gunsmith. I have pursued Belknap since about the time of my twelfth year in 1942. Many of those pursuits have been recorded in the story I wrote for Muzzle Blast in 1952 and in bits and pieces since that time. Some time ago I made it clear that Belknap's house and barn were torn down years ago. I can only re-visit those buildings in my memory. I wish to do so now. I knocked on the door of Belknap's house a long, long time ago. My knock was answered by Catherine Yates who then owned the house. It turned out that she had been a friend of my grandmother Anna Hubbs Garlock who was born and raised in Cherry Valley. Time has erased a memory as to whether I was in the house. As I have stated before I did search through Belknap's barn.

I explained my great interest in Belknap that day and said that I would like one of Belknap's tools. Catherine Yates gave me a tool that once belonged to Belknap. Its specific use is yet unknown to me. One now tends to wonder if there were many of his tools in that house and where they are today.



The trunk of documents that I stated were found when those structures were torn down surfaced by a strange course of events on or about my 82nd birthday. After all of these many years I could lay my hands on the hide covered trunk and its contents. The years had taken it from Cherry Valley to Amsterdam, NY, to Pennsylvania then back to Amsterdam and finally to me.

