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# Introduction

The creation of a NPS site at “Coltsville” presents a unique opportunity to engage visitors with some of the thornier issues in American history, namely the origins of what might generally be termed “gun culture” in the United States and its legacy in the twenty-first century. While the story of the Connecticut Valley’s role in America’s industrial revolution, particulary in precision manufacturing, is important and will no doubt be a part of Coltsville’s interpretive framework, the NPS can use the armory, Armsmear, the Church of the Good Shepherd, and surrounding landscape to tell other stories that will challenge visitors to reassess their understandings of American history and its relationship to the present.

In the following report, I will discuss three broad historical questions the NPS will need to answer in order to accomplish this.

# I. How did people in the 19th c. understand guns? What did guns mean to them?

In 2019, few issues engender such fierce debate as the role of guns in American society. We can rest assured that every person who visits Coltsville will arrive with an opinion about guns, who should have access to them, and whether or not they should be restricted. Guns are everywhere — on television, movies, music, and video games. American popular culture (a theme I will return to later) has played an important role in familiarizing (some might say desensitizing) Americans both young and old to guns and their use. For Americans today, guns represent a host of conflicting ideas: safey and personal protection, freedom, independence, manhood, feminity, racial self-determination,

whiteness, Blackness, the foundations of democracy, a threat to democracy, a public health and safety crisis, the roots of authoritarianism, a culture of fear and oppression. The challenge for the NPS will be to defamiliarize visitors who hold these notions with stories about how nineteenth-century Americans viewed guns.

In early America (1600s-1860), however, there is considerable debate about the prevelance of guns and their meaning for Americans. First, there are questions of just how many guns there were in circulation, what kinds of guns were available, who had access to them, and their efficacy.

Legal historians James Lindgren and Justin Heather examined early probate inventories, dating from the 1630s to 1810, and concluded that more than 50%, and in some cases upwards of 75%, of male estate inventories included firearms, while fewer (6-38%) of female estate inventories included them. In comparison with other items typically found in estate inventories, Lindgren and Heather found that guns were “particularly high.” Behind clothes and books, guns were the third most common listed item. This was especially true “where the decedent was male, Southern, rural, slave-owning, or above

the lowest social class.” This evidence contradicts early studies that asserted (erroneously, as Lindgren and Heather point out) that gun ownership was not widespread in early America.1

But even if we accept that gun ownership was more widespread than previously thought, important questions remain:

\*How do we explain the apparent gender gap in gun ownership?

\*Why was gun ownership seemingly more prevalent in the slaveholding South?

1 James Lindgren and Justin Heather, “Counting Guns in Early America,” *William & Mary Law Review* 43, 5 (2002): 1777-1842; 1778.

\*What does the Southern-male orientation of early gun ownership say about the cultural meanings guns may have acquired during this period?

These questions point to the role of slavery in the development of customary practices regarding gun possession as well as the ideology of arms bearing as a distinct individual right of white male citizens. Carl Bogus explored this relationship and argued that fears of slave rebellions informed the creation of the Second Amendment. Examining the records of a 1788 debate in Virginia over the Constitution, Bogus found that both Patrick Henry and George Mason accused James Madison of drafting a document that would

impede slave states’ ability to guard against insurrection. In response, Bogus argues, Madison added a constitutional protection for slavery that ensured states could keep a “well regulated militia” for the purposes of slave control. Bogus admits that his evidence is circumstantial – Madison never expressly said this was his motivation for adding the Second Amendment. But Bogus’s conclusions support the work of other historians who clearly establish that slave rebellion was and had been a paramount concern for southerners and drove much of internal state and local politics in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the “well regulated militia” in the South doubled as a slave patrol in many locations.2

Guns also became a tool elites could use to quell class conflict. In her study of Bacon’s Rebellion (1676), Kathleen Brown demonstrates how colonial leaders in Virginia extended firearms access to disgruntled, landless whites, as a way of protecting white settlers against Indian attacks and potential slave uprisings. By creating a kind of fraternity of white men who possessed guns, if not land, colonial authorities sated lower- class white men’s desire for independence and authority. Guns cemented the bond

2 Carl Bogus, “The Hidden History of the Second Amendment,” *U.C. Davis Law Review*, 31 (1998): 309-

408. See also Bogus’s retrospective discussion of this thesis, [here.](http://www.carltbogus.com/edmund-a-blog/72-the-hidden-history-of-the-second-amendment-redux) On fears of slave rebellion, and the use of the militia as a slave patrol, see John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* and Sally Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*.

between white men against against the threats, both real and imagined, posed by Native and enslaved people.3

What this scholarship suggests is that long before Samuel Colt began to manufacture revolvers in the 1850s, guns already had acquired political and symbolic importance in the slave South, if not elsewhere in the United States.

Once small, personal firearms - the kind that could be concealed under a jacket or in a pocket - became available in larger numbers in the early nineteenth century, other questions arose:

\*Was it a good idea for people to be able to carry concealed firearms?

\*What dangers did these “pocket pistols” and other concealable weapons pose?

\*Did state and local governments have a right to restrict the type of weapons a citizen could carry on his person?

\*Or did the Second Amendment guarantee citizens the unfettered right to carry whatever weapons they deemed necessary for their personal protection whenever and wherever they chose?

Beginning in the 1820s, states began to pass restrictions on the carrying of personal weapons in public. *Bliss v. Commonwealth of Kentucky* (1822) was the first state case challenging these restrictions. Others followed: *State v. Buzzard* (AK) in 1842, *Aymette v. State* (TN) in 1840, *Nunn v. Georgia* in 1846. Most of these cases ruled that restrictions on individual arms bearing violated a citizen’s right to defend himself (except *Buzzard*). Aymette was most explicit in its reasoning: “the free white men of this State have a right to keep and bear arms for their common defence.” These cases reveal how boundaries between collective and individual defence had become blurred by the mid-nineteenth

3 Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia.*

century. They also reveal that state legislatures deemed the growing popularity of personal firearms to pose a threat to public safety.4

But did all citizens have a right to bear arms in their own defence or in defence of the state? Aymette made it clear they did not. The Supreme Court also weighed in on the matter in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857). In his decision, Chief Justice Roger Taney declared that black people were an “inferior order” with “no rights a white man was bound to respect.” Taney listed a number of such rights, including the right to bear arms. In Taney’s reasoning, it was ludicrous to imagine the Founders had intended to give black men access to guns, either collectively or individually, therefore they could not be citizens of the United States.5

This debate didn’t reach the federal level again until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act (CRA) in 1866. The foundations of what would become the Fourteenth Amendment, the CRA offered federal protection of all citizenship rights enumerated in the Constitution to “all persons born or naturalized” in the United States. The object of the bill was to secure citizenship rights for recently emancipated slaves. According to Radical Republicans like Lyman Trumbull, who sponsored the bill, this included the right to bear arms. After the Civil War, southern states began passing Black Codes, restricting the rights of freedpeople. These laws explicitly forbade “any negro or mulatto from having fire-arms.”6

While Trumbull and his Republican colleagues cited these restrictions as evidence of the need for a federal law guaranteeing the rights of freedmen, opponents to the measure cited the fear of black violence as a reason to vote it down. Nevada Senator James Nye, warned that the real threat to southern reconstruction came not from whites who would violently resist it but from freedpeople who had been trained as soldiers during the war. “We have taught one hundred and sixty thousand of them in the art of killing … [and

4 See Saul Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia*, esp. Ch. 5 on the antebellum debates over state restrictions.

5 Don Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law*.

6 On the CRA debates, see Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War*, pp. 152-153

that] as citizens of the United States they have [an] equal right to protection and to keep and bear arms for self-defense,” Nye observed. “It must be a poor observer of human nature who does not realize that the colored people of the South can be goaded into desperation.” Nye’s argument that black people were too volatile and prone to violence to be entrusted with the sacred right of arms bearing reflected a growing belief among white Americans that free African Americans were a threat to white safety, even when the evidence bore out the opposite conclusion.7

The first Supreme Court decision to consider the Second Amendment reflected this. In *United States v. Cruikshank* (1876), the Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment only protected against state action, not the action of private individuals. In this case, where black Louisianans had been murdered by white paramilitaries whose convictions were overturned by the U.S. Court of Appeals, the U.S. Attorney argued that the victims’ First and Second Amendment rights had been violated and asked the court to enforce those rights as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. The court ruled, however, "the right to bear arms is not granted by the Constitution; neither is it in any manner dependent upon that instrument for its existence. The Second Amendment means no more than that it shall not be infringed by Congress, and has no other effect than to restrict the powers of the National Government."8

The racialization of the Second Amendment debates continued into the 20th century. While organizations like the NRA touted an ostensibly universal right to bear arms, their propoganda campaigns often relied on the specter of black crime and its threats to white Americans, especially in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of black radical politics in the 1960s.9

While the jurisprudence on the gun rights at both the state and federal levels is complicated and difficult to distill in the space the NPS has at their disposal to tell the

7 Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 153. On white perceptions of black criminality, see Khalil Gibran Muhammed, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America*. 8 *U.S. v. Cruikshank* 92 U.S. 542 (1876) at 553.

9 Adam Winkler, *Gun Fight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America*.

story of Coltsville, it is important to note (a) that our current debates have a long history;

(b) that history does not provide a straightforward answer to those debates; and (c) slavery was at the center of white Americans’ ideas about why they needed guns.

1. What role did Samuel Colt play in the creation of American guns culture?

The most obvious answer to this question is the one about interchangeable parts and the repeating mechanism. In many ways, that’s the easiest story to tell. The harder one, but just as important, has to do with the way the “Colt” brand came to stand for frontier conquest and American manhood. Although the 1873 model’s label as “the gun that won the West” may be apocryphal, the association between the “Peacemaker” and western expansion/settler colonialism in the late nineteenth-century deserve explanation.

Samuel Colt’s true gift, it seems, lay in marketing. During his lifetime, his practice of gifting ornate presentation pieces to powerful figures, such as Czar Alexander, and other political leaders in the United States and abroad, helped forge the association between his firearms, American ingenuity, and later martial prowess.

His widow, Elizabeth, also excelled in this area. It might even be argued that her talents as a promoter of the Colt brand exceeded her husband’s. Elizabeth Colt was one of the first women to lead a major American company, and her imprint on Coltsville, from Armsmear to the Church of the Good Shepherd, should receive at least equal billing to Samuel’s role in the company’s origins.

With the help of dime novelists like Ned Buntline, traveling theatrical productions like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and later cowboy movies, the “Colt” became symbolic of the “Wild West,” a myth that continues to shape American political culture. In that mythology, violence was necessary in order to tame and “civilize” the frontier. By justifitying the brutal suppression of Native peoples, Mexicans, and untold others, this

mythology has allowed subsequent generations of Americans to legitimize other forms of collective and individual violence at home and abroad.10

It helped the U.S. government favored Colt revolvers. By 1873, most soldiers serving in the west theatre carried a Single Action Army side arm.11 It remains one of the most highly-prized firearms for collectors. In 1987, one brought a record $242,000 at auction, even though that particular gun never made it out of New Hampshire. It is simply, according to one gun collector, “the most famous gun ever produced in America.”12

While Colt was not singularly responsible for the creation of this mythology and the culture surrounding it (other gun manufacturers such as Remington and Smith & Wesson also contributed), the fetishization of Colt weaponry was both a product of the company’s image as it emerged from the Civil War (under Elizabeth’s direction) and a reflection of

the public’s association of certain weapons (the “Peacemaker” or the .45) with the West.

# How should the present interact with/inform the past at Coltsville?

As we noted during the roundtable and public meeting, the ghosts of Sandy Hook haunt this park site, and they should. Less than twenty miles away, the horrific murders at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 put Newtown, Connecticut, at the center of the gun control debates. The Coltsville site’s close proximity to Newtown, a community still dealing with the tragic deaths of twenty of its members due to gun violence, requires not only sensitivity to that painful history but also acknowledgement of it. Similarly, the Hartford community is also struggling to deal with the effects of gun violence. A memorial to the victims of violence (not limited to but including gun violence) sits adjacent to the Church of the Good Shepherd. The Coltsville site’s location in an urban environment that has experienced the negative effects of deindustrialization,

10 See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America.*

11 <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a23685/colt-single-action/>

12 Rita Reif, “1873 Colt Revolver Brings Record Price for Firearm,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1987: <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/16/arts/1873-colt-revolver-brings-record-price-for-a-firearm.html>

urban renewal, and disinvestment, as well as its proximity to Sandy Hook, raise important questions, such as:

\*What impact will a site memorializing a gun manufacturer have on the larger community of Hartford and beyond?

\*What responsibility does the NPS have to community members who have been affected by gun violence?

\*What might those stakeholders bring to the table when discussing the site’s interpretive framework?

\*Will the NPS actively seek out those stakeholders?

Its location and the ongoing trauma associated with gun violence put the Coltsville project in the unusual (some might say unenviable) situation of grappling with what it really means to do public history. In many ways, it makes an excellent case study for the NPS and public history scholars who are invested in engaging public audiences with the importance of history and historical interpretation. A more benign, ostensibly “neutral” presentation of Coltsville might appease those who, in our present cultural moment, believe history should be stripped of its contemporary linkages when those linkages do not conform to their understandings of the past. But if the NPS truly wishes to lead visitors to a more informed view of the past, it must do so by confronting the present.