

Michael Bellesiles's *Arming America* v2.0

Worse Than Wrong

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Arming America: A Fresh Look? Or Deception?

Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 578 pp. \$30.

By now, you have probably heard about this “stunning”¹ or “brilliantly argued”² new book by Professor of History Michael A. Bellesiles of Emory University. *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* is receiving all sorts of positive attention in the academic community and the media. For these reasons, it is really important to understand what Bellesiles claims, and why he isn’t just wrong--he is intentionally deceptive.

Arming America is a startling book that demolishes many long-cherished myths of early America about violence, guns, and the effectiveness of the militia. It is a novel work, in both senses of the word “novel”: much of it is certainly “new,” and much of it is highly imaginative fiction. Bellesiles argues that the militia was, throughout American history, an ineffective force; that guns were very scarce in America before about 1840; and that few Americans hunted.

The first of these claims—that the militia was quite ineffective—is really the least controversial (at least to historians). Many Americans have grown up with a vision of Minutemen, running out the door, Kentucky long rifle in hand to take on them “Redcoats.” Historians have recognized for at least 40 years that for every success of the “citizen soldier” in

¹ Alfred F. Young quoted on <http://www.amazon.com>.

² Peter S. Onuf quoted on <http://www.amazon.com>.

defending home and nation, there were far more examples of militias turning tail in battle, or simply leaving for home, because harvest time had come.

Bellesiles argues that the notion that armed citizens would be a useful alternative to standing armies, or a restraint on tyranny, was a romantic delusion of the Framers of our Constitution. Bellesiles's goal in blackening the reputation of the militia is to demonstrate that the Second Amendment was a fantasy from the very beginning.

Bellesiles is correct that militias were never as well trained as standing armies, and seldom very effective in fighting against regular troops. Similarly, there was really no realistic alternative to at least a small standing army, especially on the sparsely populated frontiers. But the ineffectiveness of the militia is really a sideshow in Bellesiles's book. The truly novel part is Bellesiles's claims that guns were scarce in America until nearly the Civil War.

Why were guns scarce? Because not only were guns expensive, but also because, "the majority of American men did not care about guns. They were indifferent to owning guns, and they had no apparent interest in learning how to use them."³ Bellesiles claims that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor, and large numbers of adult men had no idea how to load a gun, or how to fire one.

To hear Bellesiles tell it, this lack of both interest and knowledge was because of the fundamentally peaceful nature of early America⁴ and that hunting was very rare here until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans chose to ape their upper class British

³ Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.

⁴ Bellesiles, 314-15.

counterparts.⁵ Indeed, Professor Bellesiles would have us believe that by the 1830s, a pacifist movement, fiercely hostile to not only gun ownership, but also a military, and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.⁶

When Bellesiles first presented these ideas in a *Journal of American History* article in 1996, I was starting research on a related question: why did eight slave states take the lead in the development of concealed weapon regulation in the period 1813-1840? Bellesiles's claim that guns had been rare in America until the Mexican War was certainly intriguing. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appear at a time that Bellesiles claims America was changing from a peaceful, gentle land almost unarmed nation into a land of violent gun owning hunters.

As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles was wrong—way wrong. The traditional view of early America, as a place where guns and hunting were common, appeared repeatedly in travel accounts, memoirs, and diaries. I at first assumed that Bellesiles was simply mistaken—that his choice of sources had been atypical, or that in his zeal to confirm a novel hypothesis, he had simply misread his sources. Unfortunately, novelty is, at times, of more value in the academic community than accuracy. Who wants to listen to a paper that confirms what is already conventional wisdom? The iconoclast is always more interesting!

Having now read Bellesiles's book-length treatment of his ideas, and checked his sources with great care, I am sorry to report that what is wrong here is a lot more serious than atypical sources, or even excessive zeal defending a mistaken hypothesis. Generally, the errors in

⁵ Bellesiles, 320-23.

Arming America can be divided into the following categories: out of context quotes; using sources that confirm his thesis, while ignoring sources that contradict his thesis; and intentional deception.

I am not suggesting that Bellesiles simply missed sources that might have contradicted his claims of an America with few guns and little hunting. Indeed, most of the examples here of selective use of sources use Bellesiles's own citations—so I know that he read these documents. His use of the sources is so biased that one is hard pressed to take seriously any claim that he considered both sides of his argument.

Exaggerating the Failure of the Militia

As an example, Bellesiles quotes George Washington, concerning the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia:

Colonel Washington reported on the militia to Governor Dinwiddie: "Many of them [are] unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision." In one company of more than seventy men, he reported, only twenty-five had any sort of firearms. Washington found such militia "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy."⁷

But when you examine what Washington *actually* wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has misquoted Washington. Bellesiles leads the reader to believe that Washington was complaining that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington was clearly referring to only *some* militia units:

I think myself under the necessity of informing your Honor, of the odd behaviour of the few Militia that were marched hither from Fairfax, Culpeper, and Prince William counties. Many of them unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision. Those of Culpeper behaved particularly ill: Out of the hundred that were draughted, seventy-odd arrived here; of which only twenty-five were tolerably armed.

⁶ Bellesiles, 300-1.

⁷ Bellesiles, 159.

Washington considered the militia arriving inadequately armed to be “odd behaviour,” and worth mentioning. This suggests that other militia units were adequately armed, and brought ammunition. Washington sought to have the unarmed militiamen punished, which suggests that their behavior--arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical.⁸ And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a “few” of Washington’s militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Gun Scarcity: Arms Censuses That Weren’t

Gun Scarcity During the American Revolution

Bellesiles also claims that, immediately before the American Revolution, “Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people.” Bellesiles claims that this included all privately owned firearms.⁹ Bellesiles’s source for this claim is an inventory of “Warlike Stores in Massachusetts, 1774.” But when I examined the inventory, dated April 14, 1775, I found that there is nothing there that tells what categories of firearms were counted. Certainly, it includes stockpiles owned by towns.¹⁰ But does it include all privately owned arms as well?

The sources that Bellesiles lists for this claim, however, are largely silent as to what categories of firearms were counted. None of the pages that Bellesiles lists tell us that all

⁸ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 2:78-79, hereinafter *Writings of George Washington*.

⁹ Bellesiles, 180.

privately owned firearms were included in that inventory. The only information that I can find about this arms census is a note of February 13, 1775, that orders a committee to inquire “into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress.”¹¹ This seems to say that only military weapons possessed by enrolled militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted. There is nothing that indicates that all privately owned arms in Massachusetts were counted.

The evidence from Bellesiles’s own sources suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the inventory recorded only a small part of all firearms in the province. An entry for October 27, 1774 directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be “properly and effectually armed and equipped” and that “if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law” the town was to arm them.¹² If there were really only one gun for every eleven people, as Bellesiles claims, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn’t have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve? If guns were scarce, from whom were the local governments buying guns? The town of Lunenburg “assembled in legal town-meeting, and voted £100... for the purpose of purchasing fire-arms with bayonets, and other implements of war...”¹³

¹⁰ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), 756.

¹¹ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 98.

¹² Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 34.

¹³ *Essex Gazette*, January 17, 1775, quoted in Frothingham, 43 n.1.

Other pages in this same book that Bellesiles lists as a source show quite clearly that firearms were *not* scarce. A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775:

Whereas, a few of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements;

Resolved, That the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this colony be, and hereby are, directed and empowered to examine into the state of the equipment of such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as are, or may be, enlisted into the service of this colony, and where any are deficient in arms or accoutrements, as aforesaid, it is recommended to the selectmen to supply them out of the town stock, and in case of a deficiency there, to apply to such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as, in their opinions, can best spare their arms or accoutrements, and to borrow or purchase the same for the use of said inhabitants so enlisted: and the selectmen are also directed to take a bill from such persons as shall sell their arms and accoutrements, in the name of this colony....¹⁴

Not “most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service” are without firearms; not “many”; not “some” but “a few”—and it isn’t clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or “accoutrements” (for example, cartridge pouches). Certainly, it is possible that a person who used a musket primarily for hunting would lack a bayonet. (Interestingly enough, one account of the Battle of Bunker Hill refers to “the few who had bayonets” as distinguished from the mass of the militia.)¹⁵ Perhaps the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts didn’t know how well its militia was armed—at least, not as well as Michael Bellesiles knows.

As the Revolutionary War continued, there are again discussions of the need to arm those soldiers “who are destitute of arms,” but there is no indication that this was a problem of great concern.¹⁶ If there were a serious shortage of firearms or ammunition for the militia, as Bellesiles claims, it seems strange that the Provincial Congress on June 17, 1775 (almost two

¹⁴ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 209-10.

¹⁵ Frothingham, 148.

months after Redcoats fired on Minutemen at Lexington) recommended to non-militia members “living on the sea coasts, or within twenty miles of them, that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship.”¹⁷ Somehow, there was a shortage of guns and ammunition for the militiamen, but non-militia members still had enough arms and ammunition that they were encouraged to bring them to all public meetings.

Were guns rare in colonial Massachusetts, as Bellesiles claims? If so, you would expect the value of guns to be high, especially once the Revolutionary War started, and there was no way to import more guns from Europe. (Bellesiles claims that there were almost no guns made in the colonies.)¹⁸ The Provincial Congress of Massachusetts bought weapons from many private owners in the first few months of the war, sometimes purchasing as many as 100 weapons in a single transaction. Interestingly enough, they appear not to have seized these weapons, but repeatedly appealed to the patriotism of private gun owners.¹⁹ The *Journals* that Bellesiles uses had records of at least 483 guns, “fire-arms,” and “small arms” purchased from private parties by the Provincial Congress. The weapons were appraised; the values listed do not suggest that guns were rare.²⁰

The average price of these weapons comes to just under £2. Perhaps some of these weapons contained in transactions labeled “small arms” were actually pikes or swords; let’s give the benefit of the doubt to Bellesiles, and only look at transactions labeled “fire-arms” or “guns,”

¹⁶ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 332.

¹⁷ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 348-49.

¹⁸ Bellesiles, 188-91.

¹⁹ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210, 336-37.

and assume that *none* of the “small arms” are guns. Even the “fire-arms” and “guns” transactions (total of 89 weapons) show an average price of £2 5 s. 1 d.--not a trivial amount of money for the time, but about the same as a sergeant’s monthly wages in the Massachusetts army.²¹ If guns were scarce, it doesn’t show up in their valuation.

If the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts were desperately short of arms for its soldiers, one would expect them to have used their power of eminent domain to obtain privately owned firearms. Instead, the private owners were told, “[I]t is strongly recommended to such inhabitants..., that they supply the colony with same.”²² A request of June 15, 1775 for individuals to sell their arms is phrased in terms that seem quite voluntary. “*Resolved*, that any person or persons, who may have such to sell, shall receive so much for them, as the selectmen of the town or district in which or they may dwell, shall appraise such arms at....”²³

Another piece of evidence about gun scarcity in Massachusetts is the stock of arms surrendered by the people of Boston to General Gage. In the days after Lexington and Concord, General Gage was understandably nervous about being attacked from the rear by armed Patriots. Many Bostonians were also deeply interested in leaving town, both because of the increasing poverty caused by the Boston Port Act of 1774, and the increasing likelihood that the Revolutionaries would attack Boston. General Gage consequently ordered the people of Boston to turn in their arms. As an incentive, General Gage offered passes to leave Boston to all who turned in their weapons—and no weapons or ammunition were allowed to leave

²⁰ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 536-37, 584-93.

²¹ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 413.

²² Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210.

²³ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 336-37.

Boston. The arms were to be “marked with the names of the respective owners...that the arms aforesaid, at a suitable time, would be returned to the owners.” The marking of the arms demonstrates that these were personally owned, not public arms. On April 27th, “the people delivered to the selectman 1778 fire-arms, 634 pistols, 973 bayonets, and 38 blunderbusses....”²⁴

At first glance, this count of firearms (in the modern, more inclusive sense of the word) doesn't sound so impressive: 2,450, in a town that had, before the Boston Port Act, a population of about 17,000 people.²⁵ If averaged over the entire population, this would mean that 14.4% of the population owned a gun. But this overlooks several important qualifiers.

First of all, many Bostonians had left town in the weeks before Lexington, as it became increasingly apparent that war was coming.²⁶ Ammunition, military stores, muskets, and even cannon “were carried secretly out of Boston.”²⁷ It seems unlikely that Patriot forces would have left large numbers of guns in Boston, where they would be most easily seized by British soldiers, and even less likely that Loyalists would have removed their guns to the countryside. The count of guns surrendered to General Gage must therefore be regarded as only a part of the guns that had been in Boston in 1774.

Furthermore, General Gage's proclamation of June 19 complained that contrary to the claims of the selectmen of Boston that “all the inhabitants had delivered up their fire-arms” he had suspected, and now had proof, “that many had been perfidious in this respect, and had

²⁴ Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill*, 6th ed. (Boston: 1903), 94-95.

²⁵ Frothingham, 19.

²⁶ Frothingham, 54-55.

secreted great numbers.’²⁸ Some have suggested the Gage was lying, and using this as an excuse to prevent anymore civilians from leaving Boston. This is certainly a possibility—but it also suggests that Gage considered this a plausible lie, one that wouldn’t cause the civilians to laugh at him.

If Gage was telling the truth, the 2,450 firearms surrendered on April 27th were not just a fraction of the privately owned weapons that had been in Boston the previous year; they were a fraction of the privately owned weapons that had been in Boston on April 27th. How many guns were there in Boston on April 27, 1775? How many were there in Boston on April 27, 1774? To make any claim at all is just guessing, but we can say that it is unlikely that General Gage was upset because just a few dozen guns were still in hiding, and it is also unlikely that just a few dozen privately owned guns left before the Battle of Lexington.

Finally, it is important to look at an important set of demographic differences between Boston in 1775 and any American city today that makes 14.4% (or even 28.8%) misleading. Families were larger, and the average lifespan was substantially shorter than today. At least some part of the population were slaves. The number of free adult males (those most likely to possess a gun for either hunting or militia duty) was a relatively smaller percentage of the population than today. A town of 17,000 people today would have about 5000 households, and perhaps 3000 male heads of household. Boston likely had less than 2500 households, and perhaps as few as 2000 to 2200 male heads of household. The surrender of 2,450 guns suddenly seems quite impressive.

²⁷ Frothingham, 15.

We have other anecdotal evidence that suggests that guns were readily available. The baggage train of the British soldiers marching towards Concord had only twelve men guarding it. On the road, “about a dozen of the elderly men of Menotomy, exempts [from militia duty] mostly, assembled near the center of the village and awaited the arrival of the baggage train....” They shot and killed two British soldiers, wounded several others, took the rest prisoner, captured the baggage train, and obliterated all marks of the struggle from the road. There is nothing that identifies how many of these non-militiamen had guns, but the implication is that many of them did, if not all.²⁹

There were other, individual attacks by non-militiamen with guns on British soldiers. “Jason Russell, aged fifty-eight years” unsuccessfully defended his home from British soldiers on the Concord road with a gun.³⁰ “Samuel Whittemore, aged eighty years,” upon seeing British soldiers marching towards Concord, prepared by oiling “his musket and pistols and sharpening his sword.” When the soldiers returned,

Whittemore had posted himself behind a stone wall, down Mystic Street about four hundred and fifty feet.... The distance seemed an easy range for him, and he opened fire, killing the soldier he aimed at. They must have discovered his hiding place from the smoke-puff, and hastened to close in on him. With one pistol he killed the second Briton, and with his other fatally wounded a third one. In the meantime, the ever vigilant flank guard were attracted to the contest, and a ball from one of their muskets struck his head and rendered him unconscious. They rushed to the spot, and clubbed him with their muskets and pierced him with their bayonets until they felt sure he was dead.... Whittemore lived eighteen more years, dying in 1793 at the age of ninety-eight.³¹

²⁸ Frothingham, 208.

²⁹ Coburn, 119-20.

³⁰ Coburn, 139-40.

³¹ Coburn, 141-42.

As the retreat reached Somerville, “James Miller, about sixty-six years old, stood there awaiting the British. With him was a companion, and both fired with deadly effect, again and again, as the British marched by in the road below.”³²

It is certainly true that the plural of anecdote is not data; a collection of such examples does not give us much evidence of the number of the guns in private hands. But it does raise serious questions as to whether it is credible that guns were scarce, when so many examples of non-militiamen turning out to fire at retreating British soldiers have been preserved.

In addition, there were 3,733 militiamen who turned out along the road to Concord to fight against 1,800 British soldiers on April 19, 1775.³³ It is possible that many of the Americans were not armed with guns—but if so, it raises the question of how a small number of farmers, who were, according to both Bellesiles and the British accounts, not skilled in warfare, managed to cause such destruction to the world’s best trained army.

Bellesiles also claims that guns and powder were in extremely short supply during the Revolution: “But, as the account of stores kept by Washington’s new Continental army outside Boston confirms, the Americans had to rely on dozens of shipments of individual guns and half-barrels of powder for use by the army, including a small chest of powder from Ezra Ripley, ‘Colledge Student.’”³⁴ Certainly, there were shortages of powder at times, and Washington often complains about it. But the size of the problems about which Washington often complains sound a bit different from the penny-ante difficulties that Bellesiles discusses.

³² Coburn, 151-52.

³³ Coburn, 159.

³⁴ Bellesiles, 184.

As an example of both the need to be careful with gunpowder—and that the shortage would not appear to have been severe—is a report of September 7, 1775, from the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety. A Col. George Slaughter sought “leave to purchase Gunpowder for the use of a New Settlement in Virginia or Kentucky...for the protection of a number of Families, they not being able to furnish themselves elsewhere....” The Committee of Safety agreed to let Col. Slaughter purchase 100 pounds from the York Town (Penn.) Committee of Safety, “if the Committee of that Place think fit to spare the same.”³⁵

Pennsylvania seems to have been a major producer of gunpowder during the Revolution, and perhaps before. (Of course, the demand for gunpowder for hunting or self-defense would necessarily be far less than required for warfare.) Records of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety show that on August 26, in response to a request from the Provincial Congress of New York, it directed that 2000 pounds of gunpowder be transported to Newark, New Jersey.³⁶ On August 28, “Mr. Robert Towers reports that he has receiv’d from Mr. Robert Morris 4650 lbs. Gun Powder, which is put in the Powder House.”³⁷ Congress also delivered saltpeter to the Pennsylvania government to be used in the making of gunpowder. At one point Congress delivered fifty tons of saltpeter to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety “to have the same manufactured into Gun powder in the cheapest and most expeditious manner....”³⁸

A number of private firms seem to have been involved in manufacturing or remanufacturing gunpowder. We have records indicating that there was 500 pounds “receiv’d from George

³⁵ September 7, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1970), 10:332.

³⁶ August 26, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, 10:315.

³⁷ August 28, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:322.

³⁸ February 13, 1776, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:484.

Lush, being the damag'd Powder Sent him to be made good; ½ Barrel of Ditto, 25 lbs., receiv'd from George Havener....”³⁹

Washington wrote to the Continental Congress on February 18, 1776, complaining that the “Militia, contrary to an express requisition, are come, and coming in without ammunition; to supply them alone, with 24 Rounds, which is less by 3/5th than the Regulars are served with, will take between fifty and 60 Barrels of Powder; and to compleat the other Troops to the like quantity will take near as much more, and leave in store not more than about 60 Barrels, besides a few rounds of Cannon Cartridges ready filled for used.”

Washington had roughly 150 barrels of powder—and at the end of the letter, written somewhat later, he adds, “P.S. hearing of the arrival of a small parcel of Powder in Connecticut I have been able to obtain 3000 Weight of it, which is in addition to the 60 Barls before mentioned.”⁴⁰ Another letter explains that the “small parcel” was 4217 pounds.⁴¹ Washington’s concern about his supplies was understandable; wars burn powder rapidly, and some of his frustration was that there were still large stockpiles of powder belonging to the town stocks.⁴² But if more than two tons of powder is a “small parcel,” it certainly raises some interesting questions as to whether the circumstances that Bellesiles writes about were typical.

On October 9, 1776, the Continental Congress directed the Board of War to send to the “Commissary of Stores at New York, 10 Tons Musket and Rifle powder, 20 Tons Buck

³⁹ October 28, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:382.

⁴⁰ George Washington to Continental Congress, February 18, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:337-38.

⁴¹ George Washington to Governor Jonathan Trumbull, February 19, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:338.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 340.

shot....”⁴³ Somehow, this doesn’t sound like the crisis of begging half-barrels of powder from college students that Bellesiles presents as typical.

Also interesting, if the militia was so poorly supplied with firearms, that their arrival would become an ammunition problem for Washington. Washington complained that they showed up without ammunition, and he had to provide it to them; clearly, many of the militia had guns, or he wouldn’t need to supply them with ammunition.

More evidence that guns were widely distributed in America comes from the Continental Congress, which ordered, “That all the Militia take proper care to acquire military skill, and be well prepared for defence by being each man provided with one pound of good gun powder, and four pounds of ball, fitted to his gun.”⁴⁴ Perhaps they meant “to the gun issued to him by the government,” but if, as Bellesiles daims, the majority of the guns in America were Brown Besses,⁴⁵ why make a point of ordering that the militiamen own bullets “fitted to his gun”? Brown Besses were a standard caliber. Why order militiamen to supply their own ammunition, if they didn’t own guns?

Bellesiles spends several pages telling us that guns were in extraordinarily short supply during the Revolution, with example after example of the inability of militias and Continentals to find usable firearms.⁴⁶ Indeed, one can find letters that can be quoted to show a shortage of guns, such as Washington’s letter of August 28, 1777 to John D. Thompson: “I wish it was in

⁴³ October 9, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 860.

⁴⁴ *Journals Continental Congress*, July 18, 1775, 188.

⁴⁵ Bellesiles, 182.

⁴⁶ Bellesiles, 184-88.

my power to furnish every man with a firelock that is willing to use one, but that is so far from being the Case that I have scarcely sufficient for the Continental Troops.”⁴⁷

But later in the same letter, Washington presents a more complex picture, and one that suggests that Washington believed that there were some significant number of guns still at home that, while not well-suited to military use, were certainly functional: “It is to be wished, that every Man could bring a good Musket and Bayonet into the field, but in times like the present, we must make the best shift we can, and I wou’d therefore advise you to exhort every Man to bring the best he has. A good fowling Piece will do execution in the hands of a Marksman.”⁴⁸

Other letters also suggest that guns (though perhaps not military muskets) were available in the free market. A letter from Washington to Elisha Sheldon, directing him to raise a cavalry regiment, suggests what type of horses he should purchase, and how he should pay for them. In the same tone, Washington instructs Sheldon:

Saddles, Bridles, Carbines, Broadswords, Pistols and every other Accoutrement necessary (agreeable to a pattern herewith given you,) you will procure as cheap as possible.⁴⁹

There is nothing in the letter that indicates any of these items are going to be difficult to obtain, nor any suggestion that Sheldon would have any difficulty purchasing all of these items privately.

Washington’s letter of February 14, 1780 also suggests that there were some significant number of soldiers who brought their own guns with them into service:

There does not appear to me any reason, upon which the soldiers are intitled to, or can

⁴⁷ George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41; see also George Washington to Philip J. Schuyler, February 9, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:123.

⁴⁸ George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41. Frothingham, 285, thus described Washington’s army in early 1776: “A large number had brought into the field their own fire-arms.”

⁴⁹ George Washington to Elisha Sheldon, December 16, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:386-7.

claim the Continental fire arms at the expiration of their times of service. The act of Assembly is very plain. As an encouragement for men to bring their own arms into the army, it offers a certain bounty, and to such who do not, a lesser sum. The difference which is given to the former, appears to have been designed as a compensation for the use of the arms; nor can any construction whatsoever authorise the latter to carry off arms &c. the property of the Continent.⁵⁰

Washington in December, 1776 warned the Pennsylvania Safety Council:

I have not a Musket to furnish the Militia who are without Arms; this demand upon me makes it necessary to remind you, that it will be needless for those to come down who have no Arms, except they will consent to work upon the Fortifications instead of taking their Tour of Military Duty; if they will do that, they may be most usefully employed. I would recommend to you to call in as many Men as can be got, for the express purpose of Working for we shall most undoubtedly have occasion for every Man who can procure or bear a Musket.⁵¹

Why would Washington request that they call in men “who can procure or bear a Musket”?

Washington obviously thought that there was some realistic chance of men showing up with a musket of their own.

What is one to make of Washington’s letter of April 29, 1778? He complains, as Bellesiles would have us believe, “I am as much at a loss as you can possibly be how to procure Arms for the Cavalry...” But the rest of the sentence tells the rest of the story: “there are 107 Carbines in Camp but no Swords or Pistols of any consequence. General Knox informs me, that the 1100 Carbines which came in to the Eastward and were said to be fit for Horsemen were only a lighter kind of Musket.”⁵² Guns were available; just not the right sort of guns.

Bellesiles tells us that Washington ordered his officers to start carrying half-pikes, and suggests that the motivation was partly to deal with the shortage of arms.⁵³ But as usual, a

⁵⁰ George Washington to Henry Jackson, February 14, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:9.

⁵¹ George Washington to Pennsylvania Safety Council, December 22, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 6:422.

⁵² George Washington to Stephen Moylan, April 29, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 11:322-3.

⁵³ Bellesiles, 187.

careful reading shows that what Washington ordered was not driven by a shortage of firearms, but the different needs that officers had for arms compared to the privates:

As the proper arming of the officers would add considerable strength to the army, and the officers themselves derive great confidence from being armed in time of action, the General orders every one of them to provide himself with a half-pike or spear, as soon as possible; firearms when made use of with drawing their attention too much from the men; and to be without either, has a very awkward and unofficerlike appearance.⁵⁴

There is nothing in Washington's statement that indicates that firearms weren't available for the officers; Washington's concern was that the time required to load and fire them was a distraction for officers from leading the soldiers.

A somewhat similar issue appears in Pennsylvania, where the use of the pike is suggested as a solution to the problem that "the Spirit of our People supplies more Men than we can furnish with Fire Arms, a deficiency which all the Industry of our ingenious Gunsmiths cannot suddenly supply..." But a little later in the same paragraph, we see evidence that it was not firearms in the modern sense that was in sort supply, because "Each Pikeman to have a cutting Sword, and where it can be procured, a Pistol."⁵⁵

Washington complained at various times that his forces had been well armed, but that various public arms had drifted away with the soldiers.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, he complained "The scandalous Loss, waste, and private appropriation of Public Arms, during the last Campaign is beyond all conception." He also asked the state governments to ask for an accounting of the public arms that had been issued to various regiments, but also made another request that shows that Washington believed that there were large numbers of privately owned firearms in America:

⁵⁴ George Washington, December 22, 1777, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 10:190.

⁵⁵ August 26, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:322.

⁵⁶ George Washington to the New York Legislature, March 1, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:215-16.

“I beg you will not only do this, but purchase all, fit for the field, that can be procured from private persons, of which there must be a vast Number in the Government.”⁵⁷

Similarly, Washington’s letter to the Continental Congress War Board of March 8, 1780, concerning two regiments of dragoons that were to be outfitted seems to indicate that pistols were available for them: “There are pistols in the Magazine, but the Horsemens swords must be made, as there are none proper for the purpose on hand, that I know of.”⁵⁸ It appears that firearms of the wrong sort were available; this is not an indication that firearms were scarce in America.

Bellesiles tells us “the frontier regions were worst hit by this scarcity of firearms.”⁵⁹ Yet instructions from the Continental Congress and letters from Washington suggest that they were oblivious to these shortages. On June 16, 1778, the Continental Congress, observing “the reward offered in March last to such drafts as should bring firelocks &c with them into the field” because the government owned too few “arms and accountments” increased the reward offered to the two new regiments “to be raised in Virginia and Pennsylvania, to induce them to come armed and accoutred....” If the soldier brought “a good serviceable rifle, with a powder horn, bullet pouch, and mould, eight dollars; for a good serviceable musket, with a bayonet and a powder horn, and bullet pouch, or a good cartouch box, six dollars; for a like musket and accountments, without a bayonet, five dollars; for a knapsack, two dollars; for a haversack,

⁵⁷ George Washington to the Massachusetts Council, February 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:209.

⁵⁸ George Washington to the Board of War, March 8, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 18:86.

⁵⁹ Bellesiles, 185-86.

one dollar; for a blanket, eight dollars.”⁶⁰ If guns were so seriously scarce on the frontier, why was a rifle with all the accessories worth only three times what a knapsack was—and the same as a blanket?

Another example is Washington’s letter of July 28, 1781 to Thomas Parr, asking him to recruit riflemen from Pennsylvania says, “I observe by the Recruiting instructions that the Men are to be paid for the use of their Rifles if they bring them into the field; this leaves the matter optional, and if a considerable part of them should come unarmed we shall be put to very great difficulties on that account, as we have but few Rifles belonging to the Continent.”⁶¹ If rifles were really so incredibly scarce, this would not be “optional.”

A somewhat similar letter to Joseph Reed the previous month requests his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania. Washington expected these men to bring their own rifles:

One of the terms should be that they are to find their own Rifles, as we have none in Store. I shall be glad to hear as soon as possible what probability there will be of succeeding in this undertaking. The greater part of the Men, must be with the Army by the 1st. of Augt. or their services will be useless afterwards.⁶²

In a bit more than a month, Washington had a realistic hope that Reed would be able to raise perhaps 300 men with their own rifles—and have them with the Continental Army. If firearms were actually scarce on the frontier, someone seems to have not told Washington, who assumed that many could be persuaded to bring their rifles with them.

Finally, Bellesiles often contradicts himself. Describing the state of the American colonies at the start of the Revolution, Bellesiles claims, “Most of the guns in private and public hands came

⁶⁰ June 16, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 611-612.

⁶¹ George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.

⁶² George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:258.

from the twenty thousand Brown Besses supplied by the British government during the Seven Years' War.'⁶³ Yet two pages earlier, Bellesiles tells us that Massachusetts found that at the outbreak of the war, "there 21,549 guns in the province...."⁶⁴ If "most of the guns" in America were from the 20,000 Brown Besses, then there could not have been more than 40,000 guns in all of America—and more than half were in Massachusetts!

A contemporary account—and not a friendly one to America—tells us that in the latter part of 1774, "the inhabitants of the middle and southern colonies began to arm themselves individually... But the business of arming and putting the country in a state of defence was now taken up by the provincial conventions..."⁶⁵ Perhaps Stedman refers only to swords, pitchforks, and pikes. But in conjunction with Stedman's remarks about the accuracy of American marksmen (see page 30), this seems implausible.

Gun Scarcity in the Early Republic?

Intentional deception is by far the most serious problem with *Arming America*. One can sympathize with the historian whose choice of sources is deficient, or whose sources are atypical of a period. One can even understand the historian who allows his biases concerning political controversies ancient or modern to influence how he reads the evidence. There comes a point, however, where the misreading of a source becomes so flagrant that the only explanations are gross stupidity (unlikely for a history professor) or dishonesty.

⁶³ Bellesiles, 182.

⁶⁴ Bellesiles, 180.

⁶⁵ Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (London: J. Murray, 1794), 115.

One category of sources that Bellesiles uses to prove that guns were in very short supply in the early Republic is arms censuses, which Bellesiles purports included not only publicly owned arms, but also privately owned arms. Bellesiles tells us that in 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted “a careful census of firearms in America, with the intention of demonstrating that the America militia owned sufficient firearms.” After reporting that there were 235,831 guns, Bellesiles claims that, “Half of all these guns were in the hands of the federal government, with about one-quarter in state arsenals. The remainder were privately owned.”⁶⁶

But when you examine the sources that Bellesiles cites for this statement, there is nothing to support his claim that this census included all privately owned guns. The circular letter from Secretary of War Dearborn to the state and territorial governors is explicit, asking them to provide information “stating the military strength of each State, the actual situation of the arms, accoutrements, and ammunition of the several corps, with the same, and every other thing which may relate to their government, and the general advantage of good order and military discipline.”⁶⁷ There is no division contained in the “Return of the Militia” tables that distinguish between those “in the hands of the federal government” and those in state arsenals, and nothing that indicates how many of the arms were privately owned, and how many arms there were other than those in the hands of the militia.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that any arms “in the hands of the federal government” would be listed in a “Return of the Militia,” based on the language of the circular letter. The similar 1810

⁶⁶ Bellesiles, 240.

and 1811 Returns of the Militia,⁶⁸ by contradistinction with the 1811 inventory of federal military stores,⁶⁹ strongly implies that a “Return of the Militia” included no federal arms at all. Nor is there anything in the 1803, 1810, or 1811 “Return of the Militia” supporting circular letters, or explanatory notes that identifies or even suggests that tells how many of the arms so listed are privately owned.⁷⁰

Had Bellesiles turned even three more pages, he would have found somewhat larger numbers of firearms in a “Return of the Militia” compiled less than two months later, after New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky sent in their returns.⁷¹ Of course, this increases the number of firearms a bit, but does nothing to support Bellesiles’s claim that these are comprehensive censuses of firearms in the United States, or that they list all privately owned firearms.

Another interesting point is that the firearms listed in these censuses are “pairs of pistols,” muskets, and rifles. From the categories, it would seem that this census was only of military arms, and could not have included all privately owned arms, many of which would have been inappropriate for militia use.

So where does Bellesiles get these numbers from? A report in 1806 that Bellesiles cites as evidence of the scarcity of guns in private hands is quite explicit: After explaining that the laws of the United States required every “citizen enrolled in the militia” to “provide himself with a good musket or rifle,” the report explains, “From the best estimates which the committee has

⁶⁷ United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.

⁶⁸ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.

⁶⁹ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.

⁷⁰ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301.

been able to form, there is upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles in the hands of the militia, which have, a few instances excepted, been provided by, and are the property of, the individuals who hold them.”⁷² This is explicitly a statement that were *at least* 250,000 privately owned guns in the hands of the militia, and this was clearly *not* a complete inventory of all guns in America.

Yet Bellesiles claims, based on this report, that “a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America.”⁷³ At a minimum, the 120,000 fire arms and rifles “fit for use” and 12,000 “which need repairs” in the magazines of the United States would need to be added, along with guns in the hands of non-militia members. Depending on how would interprets the congressional committees report, it is possible that there were also large numbers of firearms owned by militia members that were not considered to be military weapons, and thus not included in this estimate of “upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles....”

“One can examine the records kept by any public official associated with the militia in the early nineteenth century and find similar complaints of the lack of firearms and the general failure of the system.”⁷⁴ Bellesiles points to W.C.C. Claiborne, governor of Mississippi Territory 1801-1803, and of Orleans Territory starting in 1812, as an example of such a public official. Bellesiles quotes Claiborne that his efforts to organize the Mississippi militia had met “many

⁷¹ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:165, 168-72.

⁷² *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.

⁷³ Bellesiles, 240 n. 123.

⁷⁴ Bellesiles, 248.

obstacles...the greatest of which are the want of arms and the means of obtaining a supply.”⁷⁵ Indeed, Claiborne did write that to Secretary of State Madison.⁷⁶

Yet, within a few months, Claiborne wrote to the Secretary of War, “The prospect of organizing the militia is flattering: the different Counties are laid off into regiments, battalions and company Districts: the officers are all appointed, and the men enrolled: a great degree of rivalry exists between the different corps: and I flatter myself that in a little time I shall have a well-armed and well disciplined militia.”⁷⁷ Later in the week, Claiborne finishes his letter, “In the course of this week, I have reviewed the militia of Jefferson and Adams Counties; and can assure you that the prospect of having a well-armed militia, exceeds my most sanguine expectations.”⁷⁸

Were guns in short supply? Bellesiles tells us that, in response to Governor Claiborne’s need for arms, “The government helped by sending 163 rifles and one hundred muskets to be stored for the militia’s use, increasing the number of guns in the territory by 47 percent to 820, enough for 31.7 percent of the registered militia.”⁷⁹ Yet, by reading what Claiborne *actually* wrote, we find a considerably different situation.

There is nothing in the sources that Bellesiles cites that indicates that the guns listed on the Return of the Militia were the only firearms in the territory—certainly, nothing to justify Bellesiles’s claim of increasing the number of guns in the territory “by 47 percent to 820.” The

⁷⁵ Bellesiles, 248.

⁷⁶ William C. Claiborne, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1917), 1:39.

⁷⁷ Claiborne, 1:152.

⁷⁸ Claiborne, 1:155.

⁷⁹ Bellesiles, 248.

shortage of guns that Governor Claiborne complained about at the start of his militia organizing effort seems to have been a short-lived problem, and not the chronic difficulty that Bellesiles would have us believe: “You will discover that many of the privates are yet unarmed, but I flatter myself, this Inconvenience will soon be remedied—the Rifles (which were sent to me) are in high Estimation among the Militia, and the probability is, they will all be sold, upon the conditions, I have prescribed....”

Those conditions included a certificate from the captain that “Every Citizen applying for a Rifle” “is regularly inrolled on his Company, and in want of Arms,” and that the applicant must pay \$14 for it—a sizable sum of money for most Americans in 1802. “Upon those conditions I suppose the Rifles will speedily be disposed of to the Militia.... As to the Muskets, they are in no demand among the Citizen Soldiers, and I cannot persuade them of their utility....” Instead, Governor Claiborne planned to store the muskets in a warehouse, apparently because demand was so low for them.⁸⁰ So much for the shortage of firearms!

Governor Claiborne also reported, “I received, the other day, sixty stands of muskets from Fort Adams. They have been heretofore used, and are not in good order: I propose therefore to sell them at the moderate sum of eight dollars apiece. At this reduced price I expect the militia will speedily purchase them. But I find the people here are much prejudiced against muskets, and are unwilling to depend on any other arms but rifles.”⁸¹ How interesting that Bellesiles neglects to mention this fact! If the militia was insufficiently armed, this was apparently

⁸⁰ Claiborne, 1:182-83.

⁸¹ Claiborne, 1:152.

a temporary condition, and reflective not of a shortage of firearms, but a desire by the militia for rifles, not muskets.

Bellesiles would have us believe that Claiborne, like most public officials, complained about “the general failure of the system.”⁸² But this is not an accurate statement of Claiborne’s beliefs. According to even the pages that Bellesiles cites, Claiborne’s concern was not a “general failure” of the militia system, but defects in the militia law of Mississippi Territory: “The exertions of the Officers to organize and discipline the Militia, have been accompanied with great success, and authorize a hope that *this best resource*, of a free people, will shortly become an efficient means of defence. Experience, however, has proven, that our militia laws are still defective.” [emphasis in original] Claiborne asked the Mississippi Territorial Legislature to correct the territory’s militia laws;⁸³ his speech to the legislators shows that he did not see the militia system as a “general failure.”

Gun Demand

As the negotiations at the end of the Revolutionary War dragged on, Congress provided an incentive for soldiers to stay on until the final treaty was signed:

That such of the non-commissioned officers and privates soldiers of the above description, as continue in service to that period, shall be allowed their fire arms and accoutrements, as an extra reward for their long and faithful services.⁸⁴

This suggests that there was demand for guns from ordinary soldiers—enough so that this would be considered an incentive to stay.

⁸² Bellesiles, 248.

⁸³ “Address to Mississippi Legislature,” December 9, 1802, Claiborne, 1:237.

⁸⁴ George Washington, May 1, 1783, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 26:372.

There are other fascinating glimpses into the private market for firearms in America, of which the government's surplus orders are probably just a keyhole look. On May 2, 1787, the Continental Congress ordered public auction of an interesting collection of military odds and ends: "413 old militia Arms... 365 old militia gun barrels... 985 old gun locks... 2000 damaged muskets... 700 pistols... 1194 damaged muskets... 1066 damaged carbines... 4446 damaged musket barrels..." and a bit more than thirteen tons of damaged powder.⁸⁵ A single day's surplus sale included 4200 damaged firearms, 700 apparently functional pistols, and large numbers of gun parts. Perhaps the government was deluding itself, thinking that there would be a market for all these firearms and parts in America.

Marksmanship

It has long been traditional in American histories of the Revolution to emphasize the high quality of marksmanship among ordinary Americans:

[A] martial spirit had been excited in the frequent trainings of the minute-men, while the habitual use of the fowling-piece made these raw militia superior to veteran troops in aiming the musket.⁸⁶

Frothingham's account of the Battle of Bunker Hill emphasizes the tremendous effectiveness of the militia in cutting down the advancing British soldiers:

Many were marksmen, intent on cutting down the British officers; and when one was in sight, they exclaimed, "There! See that officer!" "Let us have a shot at him!" – when two or three would fire at the same moment. They used the fence as a rest for their pieces, and the bullets were true to their message.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ May 2, 1787, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 244-246.

⁸⁶ Frothingham, 102-3.

⁸⁷ Frothingham, 141-42.

British journals sought to explain the enormous loss of life at the Battle of Bunker Hill as evidence of uncommon valor by British troops, and remarkable shooting by the Americans:

Attempts were made to account for the facts that so many of the British, and so few of the Americans, fell. One officer writes of the former, that the American rifles "were peculiarly adapted to take off the officers of a whole line as it marches to an attack." Another writes, "That every rifleman was attended by two men, one of each side of him, to load pieces for him, so that he had nothing to do but fire as fast as a piece was put into his hand; and this is the real cause of so many of our brave officers falling."⁸⁸

Charles Stedman, who fought under General Howe in America, and was not sympathetic to the American cause, described why even able officers were unable to fight back effectively against the Minutemen:

[I]f the Americans were yet unacquainted with military discipline, they were not destitute of either courage or conduct, but knew well, and dared to avail themselves of, such advantages as they possessed. The people of the colonies are accustomed to the use of fire-arms from their earliest youth, and are, in general, good marksmen. Such men, placed in a house, behind a wall, or amongst trees, are capable of doing as much execution as regular soldiers: And to these advantages, which they possessed during the greatest part of the nineteenth of April, we may attribute the inconsiderable losses sustained by them, compared with that of our detachments.⁸⁹

It is certainly true that it is easier for the losers to admit that the winners were good shots than to admit that there were serious supply errors and tactical mistakes on the British side that played a part. But it is hard to see British officers, who held the American militias in utter contempt, giving them credit for better weapons or better shooting if there was not some truth to it.

Most of the shooting in the initial engagements seems to have been with muskets, but by July, frontier riflemen had arrived, sounding from Frothingham's description ominously like Daniel Boone:

They had enlisted with great promptness, and had marched from four to seven hundred

⁸⁸ Frothingham, 197.

⁸⁹ Stedman, 120.

miles. In a short time, large bodies of them arrived in camp. They were remarkably stout, hardy men, dressed in white frocks or rifle-shirts, and round hats, and were skillful marksmen. At a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter, at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards. They were stationed one the lines, and became terrible to the British. The accounts of their prowess were circulated over England.⁹⁰

Bellesiles makes quite a point of the relatively poor quality of American marksmanship, contrary to not only popular wisdom today, but much of it from the 18th and 19th centuries.

George Washington's letter to John A. Washington of February 24, 1777, describes contacts between the Continental and British armies:

Our Scouts, and the Enemy's Foraging Parties, have frequent skirmishes; in which they always sustain the greatest loss in killed and Wounded, owing to our Superior skill in Fire arms...⁹¹

A letter to Joseph Reed, requesting his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania, describes their mission as

to fire into the embrasures and to drive the enemy from their parapets when our approaches are carried very near their Works.... General Lincoln informs me that the enemy made use of this mode at the Siege of Charlestown, and that his Batteries were in a manner silenced, untill he opposed the same kind of troops and made it as dangerous for the enemy to shew their Men as it had been before for him to expose his.⁹²

So much for the poor quality of colonial American marksmanship!

Gunsmiths & Gunmakers: Rare As Hen's Teeth?

Bellesiles tells us that both gunsmiths and gun manufacturing were quite rare in America before the American Revolution, and remained so for the first few decades of the Republic.

Gunsmithing and gun manufacturing, while they have much in common, also have much that distinguishes them. By necessity, a gun manufacturer would certainly have been a capable

⁹⁰ Frothingham, 227-8.

⁹¹ George Washington to John A. Washington, February 24, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:198.

gunsmith; anyone capable of building a gun, either from parts, or from scratch, would certainly have been more than capable of repairing a gun built by someone else.

A gunsmith, on the other hand, might only repair guns, or make minor modifications to existing guns. At what point a gunsmith crosses the line into being a gun manufacturer is necessarily an imprecise measure. Every gun manufacturer, it seems fair to conclude, is also a gunsmith, even if he chose not to engage in the repair of guns. A gunsmith, on the other hand, might be limited by either desire or ability to the repair of existing guns.

Bellesiles's argument includes the assertion that gunsmiths had so little work to do that most worked as blacksmiths as well. But this is not necessarily evidence that there was little demand for gunsmithing. It might equally be evidence that in an era when most Americans lived in small towns, because narrow specialization was economically unproductive, a person skilled at any form of metalworking would have to perform whatever work was in demand at the moment.

Indeed, works with no ax to grind on the subject of gun ownership in America are explicit: the two related trades of gunsmithing and blacksmithing were often followed by one man, and for a very good reason:

It is known that, at times, a gun was made by a number of craftsmen; and that at other times, a complete gun was made by one man. It is also apparent that much forge work was required to forge and weld a gun barrel, to forge and fit the lock parts, and to forge iron mountings such as the trigger guard, the butt plates and other small parts.⁹³

This combining of the two trades, or alternating the two trades from year to year, was apparently common during both the Revolutionary War period, and in peacetime.⁹⁴ Other

⁹² George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:257.

⁹³ Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Ironware: Cast and Wrought* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1956), 111-113.

⁹⁴ Kauffman, 113.

combined trades are also in evidence, such as “W. Clevell, a gun- and locksmith who worked in Bushkill Township, Northampton County, Pennsylvania, in 1820.”⁹⁵

The ultimate expression of this broad approach to smithing is an ad from the *New Hampshire Gazette* of July 17, 1767 that simply described Joseph Hammond’s trade as, “Smith,” who “performs all Sorts of the Iron of Boat Work, Chaise and Chair Work cleaning and mending of Guns, Pistols, Locks and Keys, cleans and mends Jacks, Shoes Horses, and makes all sorts of Kitchen furniture, and sorts of Hinges for Houses, &c.”⁹⁶ It seems doubtful if Joseph Hammond would appear in any list of “gunsmiths,” but he certainly found it worth his while to advertise his ability to mend guns.

To add to the problem of identifying blacksmiths who were also gunsmiths, blacksmiths were by far the most common metal craftsmen in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Blacksmiths, at least when working as such, seldom marked their products with their name, making them obscure compared to other metal craftsmen.⁹⁷

Indeed, if gunsmiths were actually in short supply before and during the Revolution, there are some difficult to explain letters. During the French & Indian War, Washington complains to Governor Dinwiddie about the severe problems he was experiencing concerning supplies and gun repairs:

Six or eight Smiths who are now at Work, repairing the fire Arms that are here, which are all that we have to depend on. A man was hired the 24th of last Month, to do the whole, but neglected and was just moving off in Wagons to Pennsylvania [sic].⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Kauffman, 107.

⁹⁶ Kauffman, 52.

⁹⁷ Kauffman, 52.

⁹⁸ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, October 11, 1755, *Writings of George Washington* 1:201.

What are we to make of William Grayson's letter to George Washington, on the eve of the Revolution? Grayson appears to have been encouraged by Washington to organize an "independant Company." If guns were in short supply, why did Grayson report "several of the soldiers had purchas'd muskets in the Country, and that some others had imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms."⁹⁹

What should we make of Bellesiles's claim that gunsmiths were in short supply, with only "thirteen smiths and armorers" in Massachusetts "capable of repairing firearms"?¹⁰⁰ Gunsmiths keep appearing in histories of the start of the Revolutionary War, unsurprisingly, but apparently as common bystanders. One of the first warnings that the British were about to march on Lexington and Concord came from, "A gunsmith named Jasper [who] lost no time in informing Colonel Waters of the Committee of Safety...."¹⁰¹ In Concord there was a gun factory operated by Samuel Barrett.¹⁰² What about Bellesiles's claim that "Domestic production of firearms remained almost non-existent" during the Revolutionary War? Grayson makes clear that several members of his "independant Company" "imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms."¹⁰³

We know of some gunsmiths only by casual reference in other documents, such as John Fraser (or Frazier) "a Pennsylvania gunsmith and Indian trader" who set up shop on the

⁹⁹ William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers*, Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1902), (hereinafter *Letters to Washington*) 5:78-79.

¹⁰⁰ Bellesiles, 189.

¹⁰¹ Frank Warren Coburn, *The Battle of April 19, 1775*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: n.p. 1922; reprinted Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 18.

¹⁰² Coburn, 79.

¹⁰³ William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.

Monongahela River in 1753.¹⁰⁴ James Anderson, described as “a blacksmith and gunsmith” who in 1771 purchased “Mrs. Campbell's old place” near the Capitol in Williamsburg.¹⁰⁵ Anderson by 1777 had contracted with Virginia to do “Blacksmith’s work,” but the details of the contract indicate that he was to be paid for the use of tools and vices for gunsmithing, as well as two forges.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps Virginia was uniquely awash in gunsmiths. But Grayson’s letter also “return their thanks” to Washington “for your kind offer, and will be much oblig’d to you, to write to Philada. for forty muskets with bayonets, Cartouch [cartridge] boxes, or Pouches, and slings, to be made in such a manner, as you shall think proper to direct;... I can venture to assure you, that the gunsmith who undertakes the business, will be paid on demand....”¹⁰⁷ If Bellesiles is right, Grayson and his friends were remarkable not only in having their “own gunsmiths,” but they were under a serious delusion that they would be able to order muskets made to order in Philadelphia.

Another letter to Washington, from William Milnor in Philadelphia, the previous month, also demonstrates that there were a number of gunsmiths in the City of Brotherly Love, and while guns could still be made to order, time was running out to place orders:

I have Applied to two Gunsmiths, -- One palmer tells me he Can make one hundred by May next, And Nicholson says he Can make the like Number by March, they both agree in the price at £3..15.. this Curry. Palmer says Mr Cadvalder had agreed With him for 100 at that price, a Jersy Musquet was brought to palmer for a patern, Mr. Shreive Hatter of Allexandira has one of that sort, which you may see, & if you Conclude to have

¹⁰⁴ George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 1:130.

¹⁰⁵ George Washington, Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 3:25.

¹⁰⁶ Kauffman, 111.

¹⁰⁷ William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.

any, please to inform me by the first post, as the Gunsmiths I believe will soon be preengaged, & there is not one Musquet to be bought in this City at present, if you should Chose any Alteration, from that Musquet please to let us know...¹⁰⁸

We have evidence of large numbers of gunsmiths moving as groups, as described in this letter from Washington to Henry Knox:

The Bearer Mr. Buel, who is recommended to me by Governor Trumbull, will undertake to stock a number of the Gun Barrels at Springfield, and repair the old Arms. He has a set of Workmen of his own and will go on with the Business upon Credit, which is a very material consideration. But to prevent the matter being made a job, I think it will be best for you to give orders to the Officer superintending the Laboratory to have the Barrels sufficiently proved before they are delivered to Mr. Buel, as I suspect that they are most of them of the trash kind which Mr. [Arthur] Lee charges Mr. [Silas] Deane[']s Agent with purchasing.¹⁰⁹

The notes describe Benjamin Buell as “a gunsmith of Hebron, Conn.”¹¹⁰ Clearly, Buell was more than a single craftsman, but an entrepreneur prepared to bring his workmen with him to build guns on credit.

Examination of the papers of the Pennsylvania Council of Safety shows that Pennsylvania had a substantial gunmaking industry—or at least the Revolutionary government of Pennsylvania thought that it did. Among their resolutions of June 30, 1775, is instruction to the various counties of Pennsylvania that they were “immediately to provide a proper number of good, new Firelocks, with Bayonets fitted to them;” cartridge boxes with 23 rounds in each box, and knapsacks,

not less than 1500 of each article for the City and County of Philadelphia; 300 for the County of Bucks; 500 for the County of Chester; 600 for the County of Lancaster; 300 for the County of York; 300 for the County of Cumberland; 400 for the County of Berks; 300 for the County of Northampton; 100 for the County of Bedford; 100 for the County of Northumberland; & 100 for the County of Westmoreland....¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ William Milnor to George Washington, November 29, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:65-66.

¹⁰⁹ George Washington to Henry Knox, November 30, 1780, *Writings of George Washington* 20:423-4.

¹¹⁰ *Writings of George Washington* 20:423 n.34.

¹¹¹ June 30, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1970), 10:229.

Significantly, this order is to provide *new* firelocks, not used ones, and not ones purchased from the civilian market.

From where were these new firelocks to come? “That the Firelocks to be provided as aforesaid, be of one Bore, with Steel Rammers, well fitted to the same, and that Patterns of the said Firelocks, Rammers and Bayonets, be immediately made in the city of Philadelphia, and sent to the different Counties.”¹¹²

Another note of July 4, 1775 of the Committee of Safety directs the committee in charge of obtaining gunpowder and saltpeter to “procure at the same time two thousand Stand of good Fire Arms.”¹¹³ An August 24 meeting directed “Mr. George Gray procure 1500 Brushes an priming wires, for the Provincial Firelocks....”¹¹⁴

The guns were not just ordered, but apparently made. On October 27, 1775, the Committee of Safety directed that Mr. Towers

prove all the Muskets made in this City for the Provincial Service, and to Stamp such of as are proof, with the letters P; and that a Copy of this Minute be handed to the County Commissioners, who are to notify the Smiths they contract with for said Muskets, of this Resolve, and that none of their Guns will be receiv'd or paid for by this Board, but such as have been so proved and Stampd as aforesaid.¹¹⁵

A minute of February 6, 1776, directs payment for £150 for “Gunlocks & Files....”¹¹⁶ This is also evidence of manufacturing of firearms, though the gunlocks might have been imported.

Washington in 1778 complains “that there were 5000 Muskets unfit for service in the Magazine at Albany. I most earnestly desire that you will use your utmost endeavours to have

¹¹² June 30, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:230.

¹¹³ July 4, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:233.

¹¹⁴ August 24, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:314.

¹¹⁵ October 27, 1775, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:383.

¹¹⁶ February 6, 1776, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* 10:477.

them put into repair by the opening of the next Campaign.”¹¹⁷ Why would Washington make a request to repair 5000 muskets “unfit for service,” if gunsmiths were actually in such short supply?

Gunlocks

A “gunlock” is the trigger lockwork mechanism. Bellesiles emphasizes that gunlocks were very complex to make, and claims that there were none made in America until the 1840s. While gun locks were indeed imported in large numbers from Britain during the colonial and early Republic periods, they were made in the United States as well, at least in small quantities. We still have examples such as a late flint gunlock made by P.A. & S. Small of York, Pennsylvania.¹¹⁸ Robert McCormick advertised for “Lock forgers, lock filers” among another “Gun-Smiths wanted” in the *Pennsylvania Herald and York General Advertiser* of May 25, 1798.¹¹⁹ Daniel Sweitzer advertised for mechanics to work at his “Gun Lock Manufactory” in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania newspaper on August 23, 1808.¹²⁰

At least part of why they were generally imported, however, may not have been because Americans could not make them—because we know that Americans did make them—but because there was little advantage to doing so. It would appear that gunlocks were recycled from used guns, reducing the need for new gunlocks. It might also be that gunlocks, being the

¹¹⁷ George Washington to Philip van Rensselaer, February 8, 1778, *Writings of George Washington* 10:431.

¹¹⁸ Kauffman, 116.

¹¹⁹ Kauffman, 115.

¹²⁰ Kauffman, 115.

smallest part of a gun, could be produced so efficiently in Britain, that they justified importation instead of domestic manufacture.

Travel Accounts

Another example of what makes *Arming America*—and the author—not simply wrong, but intentionally deceptive, is the claim, “an examination of eighty travel accounts written in America from 1750 to 1860 indicate that the travelers did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence.”¹²¹ Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the 1840s was done almost entirely by a small number of professional market hunters, or by Indians. Most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt.¹²²

Bellesiles’s romantic, nearly gunless America where few non-Indians hunted (and then, almost entirely with knives), is intriguing. But as I started to read travel accounts from the first 40 years of the 19th century, I came to the realization that if Bellesiles is right about this rarity of guns and hunting, not only will a lot of our textbooks have to be rewritten, but dozens of books written by people who lived in the period 1800-1840 will have to be rewritten as well, to bring them into conformity with Bellesiles’s highly selective, often grossly misquoted “scholarship.”

Let us be very clear on this: I am not saying that Bellesiles simply hasn’t read the same sources that I have. It is very easy, with the enormous supply of books, diaries, and government reports from that time, to find two different historians coming to very different conclusions by reading different sources. One can be led astray by focusing entirely on one

¹²¹ Bellesiles, 304.

¹²² Bellesiles, 320-23.

region of the country, and assuming that this region typifies America. Indeed, if Bellesiles had read only sources associated with the North, or perhaps even the coastal lowlands of the South, I could accept the possibility that he simply over generalized from the relatively peaceful nature of those regions.

Had Bellesiles read a *completely* different set of travel accounts, I could wonder about the odds of his travelers not noticing that they “were surrounded by guns and violence,” while so many other travelers noticed and wrote about it at length. But there are enough sources that Bellesiles has read (or claims to have read) that I have read as well—and that make it very clear that before 1840, guns, murder, mayhem, and hunting were widespread on the frontier, and not unknown or even startling in the settled and urban East.

What can one say when Bellesiles reads Baynard Rush Hall’s memoir of frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816)—and misses Hall’s detailed description of how hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh meat at very little expense.¹²³ Not surrounded by guns? Hall devotes an entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated....¹²⁴

Hall also describes target shooting matches as common, and takes pride in participating in a match that he happened upon where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As the president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the

¹²³ Robert Carleton [Baynard Rush Hall], *The New Purchase, or Early Years in the Far West*, 2nd ed. (New Albany, Ind., 1855), 66, 82, 139-49, 153, 160-3, 375, 448-51.

ground.¹²⁵ (See also the account of Richard Flower describing the 1820-21 Illinois Territory—one of many that Bellesiles didn't read. At the frontier village of Albion, Sunday amusements included that “the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport....”¹²⁶)

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience. They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but rifle matches they understood.¹²⁷ Hall also describes the use of rifles both by settlers pursuing criminals, and by criminals trying to avoid arrest.¹²⁸

Hunting and target shooting were common enough that Hall describes non-lethal hunting and target shooting accidents.¹²⁹ Hall also makes occasional references to pistols with no indication that they were either rare or regarded with any particular concern.¹³⁰ Yet Hall's references to pistols are far exceeded by mentions of rifles and shotguns. Hall's discussions of hunting, use and misuse of guns, and target shooting take up 41 pages of Hall's book— all of which Bellesiles seems to have either missed, or disregarded.

Bellesiles read Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama, and missed her discussion of the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events,

¹²⁴ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 100-113.

¹²⁵ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 104.

¹²⁶ Richard Flower, *Letters from the Illinois, 1820-1821: Containing An Account of the English Settlement at Albion and Its Vicinity...* (London, 1822), 14.

¹²⁷ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 228-30.

¹²⁸ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 189-90.

¹²⁹ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 262-3.

¹³⁰ [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 449, 452.

incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also refers to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car.¹³¹

Even when Bellesiles admits that there is a mention of guns in one of these travel accounts, he distorts what it says to fit his novel claims. As an example, “Similarly, Ole Rynning advised his Norwegian readers to bring ‘good rifles with percussion locks,’ as such good guns are far too expensive in America and can be sold there for a good profit. Guns thus had an economic value, but if thought requisite for self-protection, it remained an unstated assumption.”¹³²

But unlike the vast majority of those who will read Bellesiles, and accept the accuracy of Bellesiles’s statement, I had already read Rynning’s book, and knew what it *actually* said there. Rynning said to bring “good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars.”¹³³ Bellesiles didn’t actually lie, and say that the *only* possible value of a gun for a Norwegian immigrant was to sell it here; instead, he misleads, by giving the impression that the value of bringing a good gun to America was to sell it, not to use it yourself. Rynning is clear that one should bring guns both to sell, and because you would need them here.

Bellesiles is really a master of this sort of careful mischaracterization of sources that doesn’t quite cross the line into lying. Another example is Charles Augustus Murray’s description of his hunting trip from Britain to America in the late 1830s. Bellesiles tells us that, “Hunting in

¹³¹ Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-189, 203.

¹³² Bellesiles, 339.

America disappointed Murray. He had expected more gentlemen hunters, but only army officers on frontier posts seemed to fit that description.”¹³⁴ Having spent great energy in promoting the idea that hunting was a rare activity, done only by professional market hunters and Indians, the reader not familiar with Murray’s book will slide right past that sentence and conclude that there weren’t many hunters in America. But Murray met *lots* of hunters—they just weren’t “gentlemen” hunters. Murray shows his understanding of how common both firearms ownership and sport hunting were in rural Virginia—and these were ordinary farmers, not “gentlemen” of the sort that Bellesiles claims were overwhelmingly the sport hunters of that time:

I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, “I guess I could beat you to a mark.”¹³⁵

Bellesiles read Murray, Rynning, Royall, and Hall; he quotes selectively and out of context from some, and mischaracterizes others, when he tells us that the travel accounts generally show no evidence that the travelers were “surrounded by guns.”

I could belabor the point, and point to the dozens of other travel accounts that Bellesiles seems to have missed—including common works such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Journey to America*. A young Alabama lawyer that Alexis de Tocqueville spoke with in 1831 asserted, “There is no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol

¹³³ Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning’s True Account of America* (1926; Freeport, N.Y., 1971), 99.

¹³⁴ Bellesiles, 309.

¹³⁵ Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London, 1839, reprinted New York, 1974), 118-119.

comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society.”¹³⁶

While it is possible that most of these concealed weapons were knives, it requires a strained reading of Tocqueville’s text to hold that handguns were scarce—or that America was the peaceful, almost pacifist nation that Bellesiles describes.

Tocqueville also presents evidence that widespread gun ownership was not peculiar to Alabama; he quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

[T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting.... There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.¹³⁷

Tocqueville also describes a usual “peasant’s cabin” in Kentucky or Tennessee: “There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a newspaper....”¹³⁸ Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

Perhaps Bellesiles is right, and dozens of eyewitnesses of the time are wrong. But when an historian repeatedly mischaracterizes, quotes out of context, or simply ignores sources because they do not fit his claims—well, let’s just say that it’s bit early to start revising textbooks to fit the new wisdom from *Arming America*.

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¹³⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven, 1960), 103.

¹³⁷ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 95.

1999. A more detailed critique of the Bellesiles's claims, including other diaries, travel accounts, and statistical evidence, can be found at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/GunScarcity.pdf>. The previous version of this document can be found at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/ArmingAmericaLong1.1.pdf>.

¹³⁸ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 281.