

WHICH CHRISTIAN BECK IS IT?

“CHRISTIAN BECK THE EARLIER OR CHRISTIAN BECK THE LATER” ... WHO BUILT WHICH GUN?

BY VAN PITMAN, KRA

That is the question I will begin to answer in this article, the first of a two part series. Part one will investigate Christian Beck the Earlier. You can pick up a rifle signed “C. Beck” and ask the owner which Christian Beck built it and you will normally hear the response, “Christian Beck the Earlier”, or “Christian Beck the Later”; which sounds more like a question than an answer. The determination being made based upon the definitions that Joe Kindig Jr. outlined in his book *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age*¹. The next definitive work presented to the collecting community is Sam Dyke’s KRA article in the Fall 1981 issue entitled *The Beck Family of Gunsmiths, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*. Using these sources as a foundation, I have begun a study to attempt to sort out the various Becks and which rifles they signed.

John Christian Beck III, or as Joe Kindig Jr. labeled him, Christian Beck the Earlier, was born in Lebanon, Dauphin County (now Lebanon), Pennsylvania on September 12th, 1787², as the second son of John Christian Beck Jr. and his wife Eva Margaret (Ritter). John Christian Beck Jr.’s first son was named John Christian Beck II, but died on September 2nd, 1781 at the age of 1 ½ of smallpox³. They had four other sons together: Tobias, George, David and Wilhelm, none have been identified as gunsmiths. The family genealogy is provided at the end of the article to help understand the family relationships discussed in this article.

John Christian Beck III, called in this article Christian Beck III, was raised in Lebanon while his father worked as a joiner, a powder maker and possibly as a gunsmith with his brother, J. P. Beck. When Christian III became of age to serve as an apprentice, the occupation chosen for him was gunsmithing.



APPRENTICESHIP YEARS (1800-1801 THRU 1807 - 1808)

There are no records of Christian III serving as an apprentice, but he should have started about 1800 to 1801. I believe, as did Joe Kindig Jr., Christian III apprenticeship was served in the Bonewitz shop in Womelsdorf, Berks county. This was during the same time that Leonard Reedy was working in Womelsdorf with John Bonewitz⁴. If you review some of Christian III's earlier signed rifles in the following photos, you can identify the characteristics directly linking him to Bonewitz shop. Review the photograph, Figure No. 1, of an earlier signed Christian Beck III rifle that still resides in the Kindig collection and compare it to the Reedy rifle show in Figure No. 3. The influence of Reedy's carving style and design is apparent in Christian III's rifle. One distinguishing difference between

Reedy and Christian III is Reedy normally used, but not exclusively, a series of parallel lines in the infilling of his designs while Christian III used cross hatching.

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Figure 1 Kindig's Beck Rifle #107 showing cheekpiece side carving.



Figure 2 Kindig #107 showing crosshatching detail.



Figure 3 Reedy's rifle showing cheekpiece side carving.



Figure 4 Reedy's rifle showing parallel lines detail.

Another Womelsdorf feature that identifies Christian III with the Bonewitz shop is the use of a double rivet in the patchbox lid and the decorative feature of having a butt plate extension molding commonly referred to as a wedding band. These features can be seen in the next two comparisons of a signed Christian III rifle and a Reedy rifle, Figures # 5 and # 6.

The trigger guard, with its three raised half octagon platforms, one at the front base of the bow, another at the junction of the bow and rail, and the final one at the base of the rear spur, is another feature common in the Bonewitz/Reedy shop that was used by Christian III. This feature was used on Christian III's early rifles and also his later rifles made while in Franklin County. The comparisons between a signed Christian III and Bonewitz/Reedy trigger guards are shown in the next two photographs, Figures #7 and #8.



Figure 5 Kindig's Beck Rifle #105 Butt Plate Extension Molding and Double Rivets In Patchbox Lid.



Figure 6 Reedy's Butt Plate Extension Molding and Double Rivets in Patchbox Lid.



Figure 8 Two Bonewitz (Left) and Reedy (Right) with Raised Platforms.



Figure 7 Kindig Beck Rifle #105 showing Trigger Guard With Raised Platforms.

The final comparison is seen when reviewing the lock side plate. Bonewitz developed his own pattern of lock side plate and used it through his career, with Reedy following his teaching. The Bonewitz lock plate had a flat ledge and raised molding on the lock side plate forward bolt. The lock side plates of a signed Christian III and signed Bonewitz can be seen in Figure #9 and #10.

I believe, using these features shown in the above series of photographs, it is clearly demonstrated that Christian Beck III was taught in the Bonewitz shop in Womelsdorf and his work can be singled out from other rifles signed "C. Beck". Christian III learned his trade so well there are times his unsigned work is difficult to distinguish from that of Leonard Reedy without close examination of the engraving and carving techniques.

STARTING A FAMILY AND A CAREER

Christian Beck III's apprenticeship was over in Womelsdorf no later than 1808. It was during this time that Bonewitz and Reedy were planning to move their shop to Pine Grove, PA. While Bonewitz and Reedy were headed northwest, Christian III decided to go southwest toward Franklin County. He didn't go, as once thought, to Jonestown, Bethel Township, Pa. There is a Christian Beck listed in the 1807 - 1811 tax roles for Jonestown but I don't believe it was Christian III.

Christian III's first order of business was finding a wife. In early 1809, at 21 years old, he married Magdaline Ahl, born February 6th, 1790 in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, daughter of Dr. John Peter Ahl, a surgeon in the Continental Army during the Revolution. Their first son, Samuel was born on December 13th, 1809 in Adamstown, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania⁵. I have been unable to locate any records indicating Christian III set up a shop or worked with other gunsmiths in Adamstown. However, there was a gunsmith by the name of John Hagi (Haga) who worked in Adamstown from 1800 thru 1809, as noted on the tax rolls⁶. At this time, it is impossible to say if Christian III worked with John Hagi during his short stay there.

Christian III's next move was to Roxbury, Lurgan Township, Franklin County, Pa., sometime in 1810, as their next child, Elizabeth, was born in Roxbury on January 22nd, 1811⁷. Christian III doesn't



Figure 9 Kindig's Beck Rifle #104 Lock Side Plate.



Figure 10 Bonewitz Lock Side Plate.

show up on the Tax Records until 1813⁸. He is listed in 1813 and 1814, not reported in 1815, and continuously from 1816 thru 1821, occupation always listed as a gunsmith. During their time in Roxbury, Christian III and his wife Magdaline had seven more children, as outlined on the genealogy page⁹. He did not appear in the 1810 Federal Census but is present in the 1820 Federal Census in Lurgan Township¹⁰. Another reference to Christian III living in Roxbury, Pa is in the Pennsylvania Septennial Census taken in September, 1921 for Franklin County, Lurgan Township that also has him listed as a gunsmith¹¹. The Septennial Census, taken every seven years from 1779 to 1863, by the General Assembly of Pennsylvania enumerated potential taxpayers for the purpose of determining representation in the General Assembly. Unfortunately, only about eleven percent of these records survive today. They provide a valuable reference as the Census listed the taxpayers name and occupation.

Roxbury is a small town that sits at the base of the Blue Mountains below McAlister's Gap in the northern part of Franklin County. The village of Roxbury is situated on Condoquinet Creek and was laid out in 1778 by William Leeper who built a grist mill there in 1783. The town also had its own forge, called Sound Well Forge, built in 1798, followed by an iron furnace in 1815¹².

Roxbury was, in its early day, an important center for transportation, as many packhorses used the natural gap in the Blue Mountains as an access point to shorten the journey while traveling the Forbes Road to the west, toward Fort Bedford., or over the mountain to Path Valley. Path Valley was the area of Franklin County that developed a large iron making industry, established in 1783. The iron making industry was very labor intensive, requiring workers to harvest the hardwood

Figure 11 Kindig's Beck Rifle #104
Cheekpiece Side View.



forests for the making of charcoal, excavating the limestone and, of course, mining the iron ore. The Mont Also Furnace, built in 1807, had over 500 workers. Franklin County had over eight large furnaces¹³. This abundance of industry brought a large influx of workers to the area, all potential customers for a gunsmith. The furnace and forge provided a close source for the materials that were needed to make the rifles that Christian III built. It was, looking back in time, as good a place as any to start in business.

Christian Beck III's earlier rifles exhibiting his Womelsdorf training could have been made after he set up shop in Roxbury, or perhaps during the time he was migrating to Franklin County. The following rifles, all from the Joe Kindig Jr.'s collection, show his Womelsdorf training, and begin to exhibit his independent flair for carving, engraving and patchbox selection. I have included photos of his signature on the barrels to give an idea how it changed during his early years. The first two photos, Figures #11 and #12 are Kindig's rifle # 104, a signed Christian III rifle.

During his time in Franklin County, Christian III had to transition his design from the Womelsdorf School into building a rifle that was similar to the Chambersburg School, the style of choice for the area in which he now lived. When completed, he made some rifles that merged the styles very nicely. A signed Christian III rifle, from Kindig's collection #108, is a rifle that exemplifies this type of transition, shown in Figures #18 and #19. The architecture has completely changed but the Womelsdorf influence in his carving is still apparent. He has added checkering in the wrist, still continues to infill his carvings with crosshatching, and has developed his engraving skill in the nicely done bird finial on the patchbox.

Christian III lived in Roxbury, Pa. a little over a decade, and during

that time frame he must have made a large number of rifles. You see more of his Chambersburg style of rifle than any other. He didn't always make fancy rifles, as his later style was more utilitarian than his earlier work. The following signed rifle, from John Maike's collection, is an example of such a rifle. It conforms nicely to Christian III later style of guns, and has the more common patchbox design you normally see in the Chambersburg area.

EXPLORING NEW ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Whether it was the result of the general economic times caused by the Great Panic of 1819, or a local turndown in the iron industry, Christian III filed

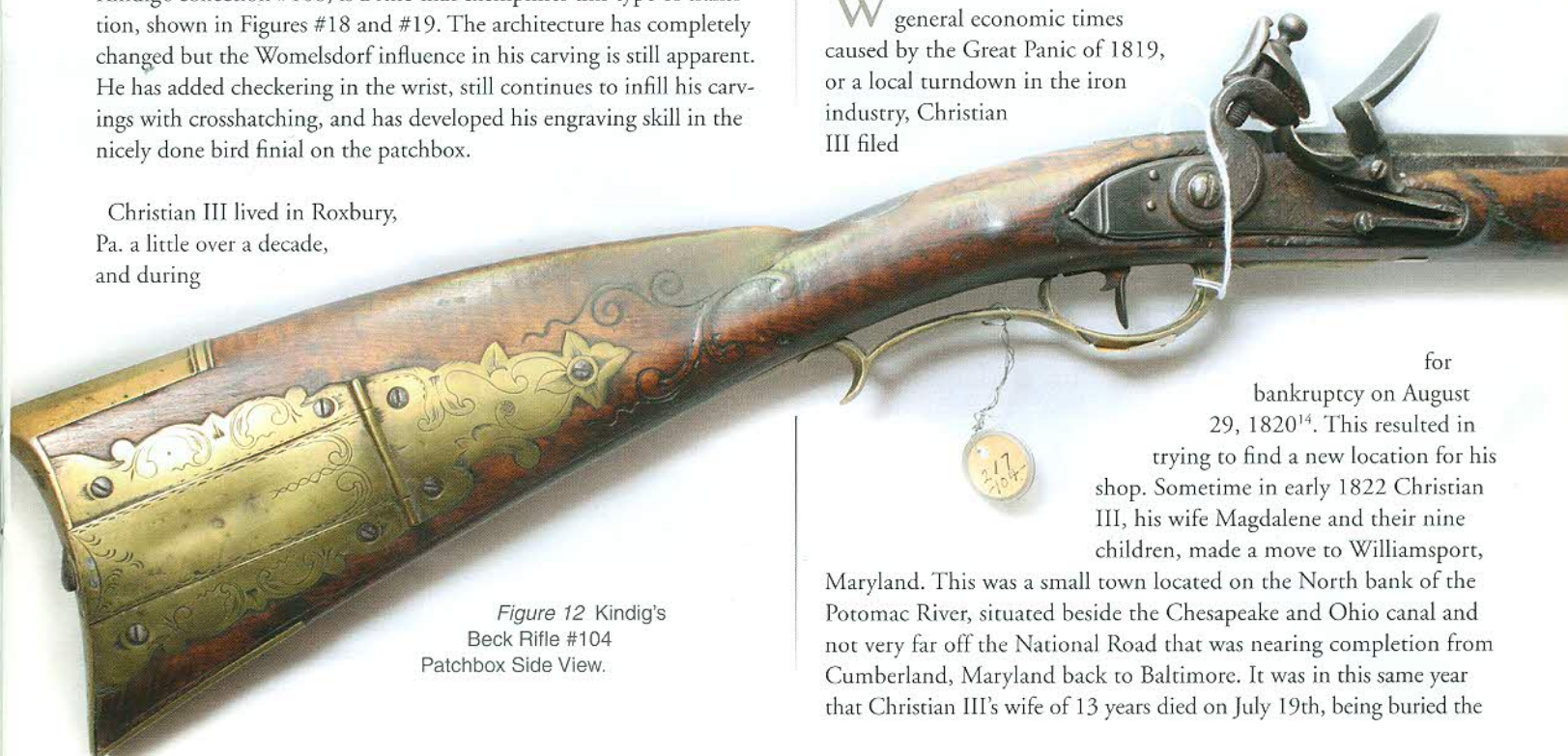


Figure 12 Kindig's
Beck Rifle #104
Patchbox Side View.

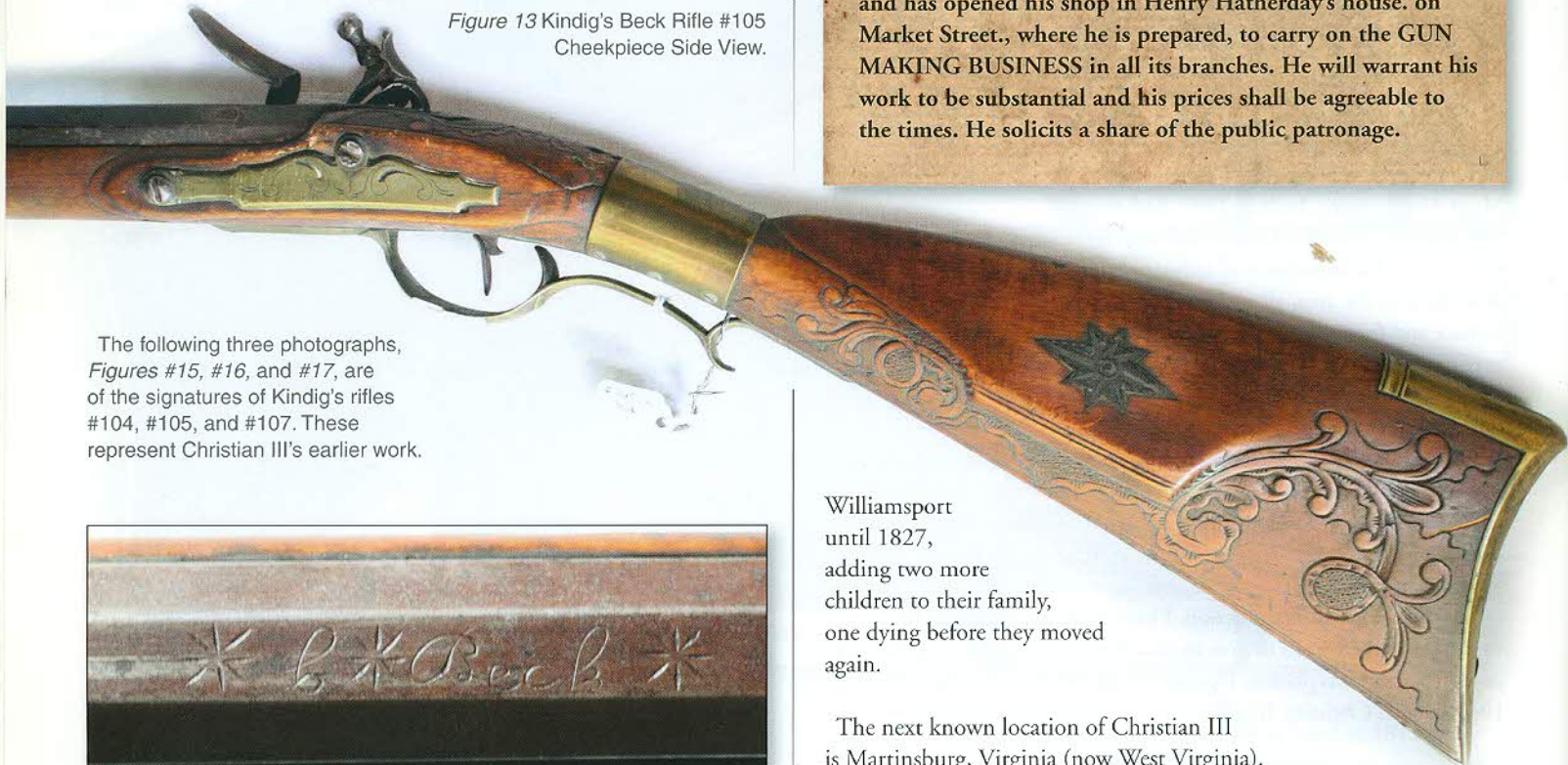
for bankruptcy on August 29, 1820¹⁴. This resulted in trying to find a new location for his shop. Sometime in early 1822 Christian III, his wife Magdalene and their nine children, made a move to Williamsport, Maryland. This was a small town located on the North bank of the Potomac River, situated beside the Chesapeake and Ohio canal and not very far off the National Road that was nearing completion from Cumberland, Maryland back to Baltimore. It was in this same year that Christian III's wife of 13 years died on July 19th, being buried the

following day at Williamsport¹⁵. Two years later, on June 27th, 1824 Christian III married Mrs. Elizabeth Ensminger, a widow with four sons; John, George, Ludwig, and Philip. Elizabeth's first husband was Philip Ensminger, who died in 1820¹⁶. Christian III and Elizabeth stayed in

Gun Making Business

The suscriber respectfully informs his friends and the public in general, that he has established himself in Martinsburg and has opened his shop in Henry Hatherday's house. on Market Street., where he is prepared, to carry on the GUN MAKING BUSINESS in all its branches. He will warrant his work to be substantial and his prices shall be agreeable to the times. He solicits a share of the public patronage.

Figure 13 Kindig's Beck Rifle #105 Cheekpiece Side View.



The following three photographs, Figures #15, #16, and #17, are of the signatures of Kindig's rifles #104, #105, and #107. These represent Christian III's earlier work.



Figure 15 Kindig's #104 Signed On Barrel "C Beck".



Figure 16 Kindig's #105 Signed On Barrel "Christian Beck".

Williamsport until 1827, adding two more children to their family, one dying before they moved again.

The next known location of Christian III is Martinsburg, Virginia (now West Virginia). On April 27, 1827 he ran an advertisement in the Martinsburg Gazette and Public Advertiser¹⁷.



Figure 14 Kindig's Beck Rifle #105 Patchbox Side View.

The above two rifle profile photographs, Figures #13 and #14, are a signed Christian III from Kindig's collection #105.



Figure 17 Kindig's #107 Signed On Barrel "Christian Beck".

I have not seen, to date, any rifles made by Christian III during his eight year tenure in the Williamsport and Martinsburg area. I expect his guns would begin to display some of the Upper Shenandoah Valley characteristics or possibly some influence from the Emmitsburg, Maryland school. If there are KRA members who know of such a rifle, I would be very interested in reviewing the rifle for my study.

Figure 18 Kindig's Beck Rifle #108 Cheekpiece View.

Christian III presence in Martinsburg, Va. was also confirmed by the 1830 Federal Census¹⁸. It listed Christian III, his wife and ten children, five of the oldest apparently on their own at this time. Their time in Martinsburg was also confirmed by their eighth son, Jacob Beck, in his biography written in 1882¹⁹. Jacob stated that he was educated in the Martinsburg, Va. public schools.

Martinsburg was a thriving community that was situated on the southern side of the Potomac River, just across from Williamsport, Maryland and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and more importantly, was along the Great Wagon road that leads south into the Shenandoah Valley. This road carried a lot of commerce and travelers through the town. Using the address in the 1827 advertisement, I was able to locate the original house where Christian III set up shop, shown in Figure #24. It was here that he and Elizabeth had their third child.



Figure 20 Kindig's #108 Signed On Barrel "C Beck".

WESTWARD BOUND

Christian III's was not a man that was afraid to move his large family. Whether it was living close to the National Road heading west, or the Great Wagon Road going south, the call to go west must have been strong. He was possibly being encouraged by his brother, David Beck, who had been working as a tailor in Connersville, Indiana since 1820 or Christian III's third son, Christian, who at 23 years old, opened a gunsmith shop in Connersville²⁰. Christian III decided to move his family to Connersville, Indiana sometime late in 1830 or early 1831²¹, remaining there till sometime in 1839, adding two more children to their family. There are no records of Christian III operating a gun shop in Connersville, but it is entirely possible he worked in his son's shop.

Figure 19 Kindig's Beck Rifle #108 Patchbox View.

In 1839, Christian III moved his family again to a farm near Tioga, Hancock County, Illinois²². This has been verified by the 1850 Federal census that listed him and his children and gave his occupation as a farmer²³. Also, on June 22nd, 1850 records show that Christian III bought a tract of land for \$125, the first actual recorded deed the writer has been able to locate²⁴. The family history states that Christian III continued to make rifles his entire life. However, since his move to Tioga, Illinois, I have not been able to verify that he

The following three photographs, Figures # 21, #22, and #23 are of Maike's Christian Beck III.

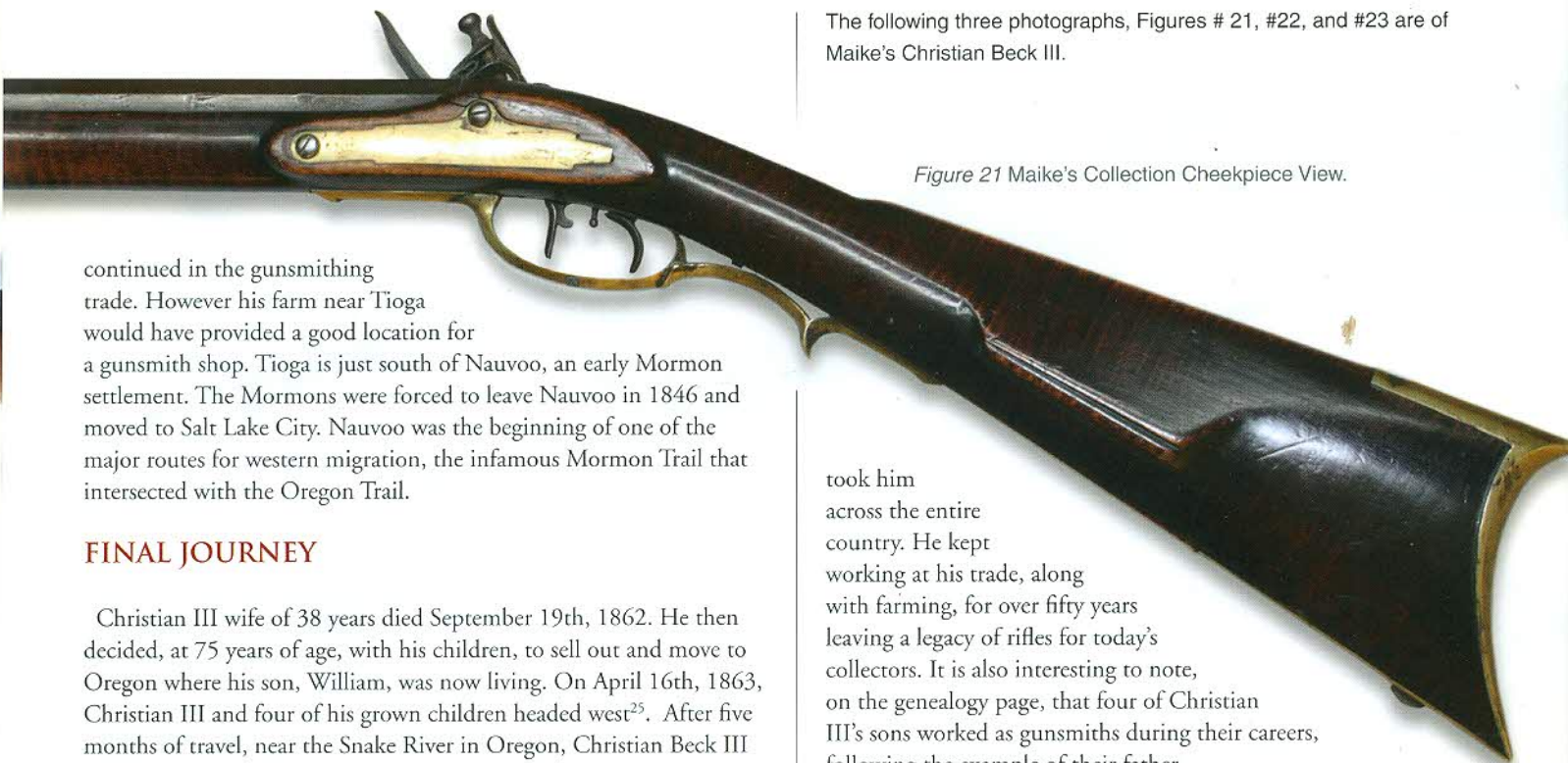


Figure 21 Maike's Collection Cheekpiece View.

continued in the gunsmithing trade. However his farm near Tioga would have provided a good location for a gunsmith shop. Tioga is just south of Nauvoo, an early Mormon settlement. The Mormons were forced to leave Nauvoo in 1846 and moved to Salt Lake City. Nauvoo was the beginning of one of the major routes for western migration, the infamous Mormon Trail that intersected with the Oregon Trail.

FINAL JOURNEY

Christian III wife of 38 years died September 19th, 1862. He then decided, at 75 years of age, with his children, to sell out and move to Oregon where his son, William, was now living. On April 16th, 1863, Christian III and four of his grown children headed west²⁵. After five months of travel, near the Snake River in Oregon, Christian Beck III died from reportedly eating poisoned salmon²⁶. He was buried in an unmarked grave along the trail, marking the end of a long career that

took him across the entire country. He kept working at his trade, along with farming, for over fifty years leaving a legacy of rifles for today's collectors. It is also interesting to note, on the genealogy page, that four of Christian III's sons worked as gunsmiths during their careers, following the example of their father.

Part II of this article will investigate the mystery of how many other "Christian Becks" are gunsmiths in the Dauphin and Lebanon County during the early 1800s. ❖



Figure 23 Maike's Collection Signed "C Beck".



Figure 24 Christian Beck III Martinsburg, VA (now WV) In 1827.



Acknowledgements: I want to acknowledge the following people for assisting me with the research and especially for making their rifles available to photograph for study: Henry Bishop, Tim Hodges, Frank Kobilis, Tim Landers, John Maike, Bruce Moyer, Steve Potter, Fred Schry, and Mac Spencer, all of the KRA. Also, special thanks to Joe Kindig III and Jenifer Kindig for making available their time and rifles that allowed this study to be completed. It is greatly appreciated.

¹ Joe Kindig, Jr. (1960) Thoughts On The Kentucky Rifle In Its Golden Age. York, Pennsylvania: George Shumway Publishers.
² Salem Evangelical Church Records, Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Located in the Lebanon County Historical Society.
³ Ibid
⁴ Bishop, H. I. (January, 2010). Master – Apprentice – Master. American Tradition – Journal of the Contemporary Longrifle Association, Page 34.
⁵ Information from a German Prayer book owned by Christian Beck III and passed down thru the family and obtained from Link York, wife of a Beck descendant. All information has been verified by various sources.
⁶ Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa., Lancaster County Tax Records, Cocalico Twp., 1751 – 1838.
⁷ Same as Note #5.
⁸ Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa., Manuscript Group 4, Franklin County, Lurgan Township 1801 – 1830.
⁹ Same as note #5
¹⁰ Ancestry.com 1820 Federal Census (on line). Provo, UT.
¹¹ Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa. RG-7 Records of the General Assembly for Franklin County in 1821.

¹² Jacob Fraise Richard, Samuel Penniman (1887) History of Franklin County Pennsylvania, Chicago, IL, Warner, Beers & Co.
¹³ Stoner, J. H. (1946) Mount Alto Furnace Days, Franklin County Historical Papers, 541.
¹⁴ Bowers, W. S. (1979). Gunsmiths of Pen-Mar-Va. Mercersburg, Pa. Mercersburg Printing
¹⁵ Ibid Same as Note 5
¹⁶ Ancestry.com, Online notes from the Ensminger family, Provo, Ut.
¹⁷ Berkeley County Historical Society, Martinsburg, WV. Martinsburg Gazette and Public Advertiser, April 19th, 1827.
¹⁸ Ancestry.com 1830 Federal Census for Berkeley County, Virginia (on line). Provo, UT.
¹⁹ Perrin, W. H. (1882) History of Bond and Montgomery County Illinois, Chicago, IL. O. L. Baskin Publishers.
²⁰ Barrows, F. I. (1917) History of Fayette County, Indiana. Indianapolis, Indiana, B. F. Bowers & Co.
²¹ Ancestry.com, Biography of John Christian Beck written by Jesse Glenn Beck in 1941.
²² Ibid Same as Note 21.
²³ Ancestry.com 1850 Federal Census for Hancock County, Illinois (on line). Provo, UT.
²⁴ Ancestry.com State of Illinois, Illinois Public Land Purchase Records (on line). Provo, UT.
²⁵ Ibid Same as Note 21.
²⁶ Ibid Same as Note 21.

Genealogy of John Christian Beck III - Gunsmith

