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THE MCKINNONS & THE ROCKAWAY AXE

By Bob Garay

The Rockaway pattern axe is a well-known and historic pattern. There were many different patterns made during the early colonial years here in America and some resembled this "Rockaway" pattern. Particularly camp axes and belt axes during the Revolutionary War. Thus William McKinnon was not the first to make such an axe, but his company became associated with this pattern to the degree that it was forevermore called the "Rockaway" pattern due to its manufactured location.

There are four main characteristics that stand out in this pattern. One feature is that the lower edge of the axe head blade has a curve from the inside edge to the bottom of the eye. The cutting blade also has a curve from the bottom to this inside edge. This was claimed to allow the chopper or woodsman to take a wider cut when felling. The third feature was a heavier and wider poll, which helped to balance the large cutting blade. Fourth is that it has a pronounced "lug" which is the bottom part of the eye that reaches out to the handle just below the center of the axe between the poll and the



McKinnon Bros. axe showing the features of the Rockaway Pattern.

curved inside edge. Now McKinnon made other axes and edge tools but what made them well known and carried their business was the "Rockaway" pattern axe.

The McKinnon family has its roots in Scotland or Ireland before coming to America. William McKinnon, born 1816, either came to America in the early 1800's or was born here. The records on his origins are unclear. What is known is that he married Jane Shauger, (Sometimes spelled Shawger), in 1842. And here is where it gets very interesting. His wife, Jane Shauger was daughter to Henry Shauger, an iron worker and blacksmith himself in Rockaway. Thus it is reasonable that William McKinnon worked for Henry Shauger before marrying his daughter. More so because by 1845 William McKinnon came to be established as a blacksmith and axe

maker in Rockaway only three years after his marriage.

Henry Shauger was the son of George Shauger who came to America in 1764 as a skilled forgerman to work at the Hibernia Forge, four miles from



Early mark of William McKinnon on his axe head.

Rockaway. This area of Morris County had some of the highest quality iron found in this country and was

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fully exploited by the English and others before the Revolutionary War. During the Revolutionary War he and 24 other men employed at the Hibernia Forge were given exemption from military duty by the New Jersey Legislature to work at the forge producing small cannons, cannon balls and other iron products needed by the military.

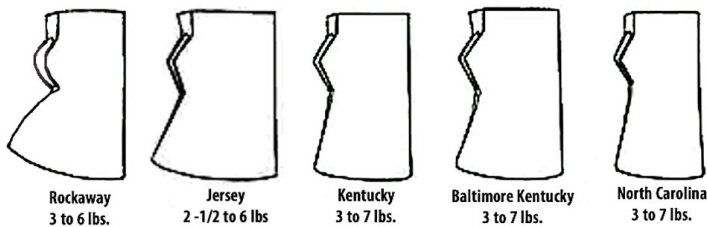
This forge was owned by the Right Honorable William, Earl of Stirling, Major General in the service of the United States during the Revolution. It seems highly feasible that camp axes and belt axes would be some of these military products needed. In



Tombstone of George Shauger dedicated in 1956 at Union Church Cemetery by his ancestors.

fact in Bob Fridlington's research, he talked to military Americana expert, Frank Kravic, who said he has excavated hundreds of axes in the Hudson and Champaign Valleys at Revolutionary War campsites. He said he has found many axes that are close in shape of the New Jersey pattern and the early Rockaway pattern axes. Frank says this axe pattern was definitely developed during the 1763-1775 years, as no evidence of this pattern is found during the earlier French and Indian War.

Additionally, the Rockaway area of Morris County was the center of iron mines and forges during the early 1800's with the Morris Canal passing thru the center of town starting in 1832. In 1845, the village itself had 400 people, a fabulous big industrial center with a blooming mill, a slitting mill, and all kinds of iron-related businesses. Cutting timbers for the produc-



Rockaway pattern and other similar patterns for felling axes.

tion of charcoal was a large enterprise during the late 18th and early 19th century.

The blacksmiths of Rockaway was sure to find an enterprising business making felling axes for this operation. Thus it is highly likely that George Shauger, working at the Hibernia Forge and later on his own, was making axes of the early New Jersey pattern. It is highly likely that thru the years this pattern was handed down to his son Henry, who later handed it down to his

new son-in law, William McKinnon during the early 1800's.

When looking at the early axes that William McKinnon made, it is evident that he was following a New Jersey pattern. There is not a lot of difference between the two. One of the major differences is the curve in the underside of the blade, which the early McKinnon axes do not exhibit. As Bob Fridlington in his research states he feels that William McKinnon the founder of the McKinnon axe did not produce a true "Rockaway" pattern, but it was later developed by his sons after his death in 1873. It is easy to see the difference when two axes of these different time periods are compared side by side.

By 1860 his business was listed in the New Jersey Industrial Census as an edge tool maker rather



Comparison of two McKinnon axes. Left is earlier William McKinnon axe that follows closely the New Jersey pattern. On right is a later axe made by his son William that shows the full development of the Rockaway pattern.

than a blacksmith, with axes comprising two-thirds of the edge tool production. At this time his production was only about 500 axes a year. This low production may be the result of his claim that his axes were manufactured by hand and not machine made. These early axes were marked **W. McKINNON**. William McKinnon had five sons, all of whom apprenticed and became blacksmiths themselves. When he died, in 1873, his



Early William McKinnon 4" slick chisel. Inset is early W. McKINNON makers mark.

two youngest sons, Walter and William, took over the business, Walter was 21 and William was just 16. From this time, for about ten years the axes were marked

McKINNON BROS. ROCKAWAY, N.J.

The company stayed with small production runs and records list only two employees, and operated ten months a year. They worked from May to November an average of ten hour days. From November to May they worked a thirteen hour day.

The census did not say which months they were closed. Water power from the fast moving Rockaway River supplied power

for their work from the beginning. Later around 1883 William (the second) switched to steam power for his expansion of production. The factory was located in the center of town on the Rockaway River close to the Morris Canal. Later the Hibernia Rail Road passed right by the factory delivering high quality iron ore and for pick-up of their manufactured products for delivery to the Central Railroad of NJ at Port Oram, (modern day Wharton).

After about ten years the older brother Walter left the company and William took over the business. William expanded the production and by 1890 he was making over 7000 axes a year. These axes were marked, **Wm. McKINNON, ROCKAWAY, N.J.** During this time, The Industries and Resources of New Jersey, a promotional publication for local industries, stated;



Broad Axe over-stamped with Wm. McKinnon mark for the repair done replacing the steel cutting edge.

“The axes and edge tools are all manufactured by hand in the best materials. Only the finishing touches being given by machinery. The leading specialty for which this factory has acquired a more than local celebrity are chopping axes for lumberman and wood choppers. They also manufacture broad, post and rail axes of special design, logging hoes, mill picks, water tuyers, chisels, drawing knives and a variety of edged tools of superior quality and adaptability.”

William McKinnon who now ran the expanded company was involved in an accident when he got caught in a machinery belt of a polishing wheel in 1902. It actually pulled him up into the machinery and tore him up rather badly. He lived for three more years and died in 1905. A son of his, Samuel D. McKinnon took over the business and he continued to manufacture under the name of William McKinnon.



Mortise axe made by Wm. McKinnon circa. 1890's.

In 1907 the business incorporated for the first time and became, **The McKinnon Rockaway Axe Co. Inc.** Part of the reason for the incorporation was to trademark their various products. They trademarked the name “**Rockaway**” and they trademarked the name “**McKinnon**”. They realized big axe manufacturers had picked up and duplicated the Rockaway pattern and sold their axes as Rockaway axes. Companies making various axe patterns became a common practice by axe makers after the Civil War. The American Axe Company bought out over forty-five separate tool manufacturers, most of them axe companies. In 1907 this company manufactured a Rockaway pattern in at least six different axe trade names. The Hunt's Superior Axe which was an old Douglas Axe, the Southern Star, a Blood's Champion Axe and the Handmade Axe from Jamestown Axe Co. all had Rockaway patterns. One of the latest examples of the Rockaway pattern being manufactured



A farming hoe made by Wm. McKinnon. Inset left is makers mark.



William McKinnon standing in front of his axe company next to the Rockaway River. Circa 1900



Photo inside the McKinnon axe Company. Working an axe head on the trip hammer is J.H.Blanchard while behind him with hammer in hand is William McKinnon.

Company in 1937. Their 1937 catalog had a distinctive Rockaway pattern listed, as a Rockaway.

Sometime during the mid-1920's the McKinnon axe factory burned down. The foreman who ran the production, James Harvey Blanchard, bought out the company and rebuilt the factory to continue the business. He salvaged what machinery he could and all the patterns. The new company using the Rockaway pattern marked their axes – **J.H.BLANCHARD, ROCKAWAY, NEW JERSEY**. But he had a rough time making the business successful. Some say that Blanchard did not know the McKinnon secrets of axe tempering, but that seems highly unlikely as he ran the axe production under McKinnon. In fact J.H. Blanchard was related to the McKinnons. He was a descendant of John Blanchard who was married to Eleanor Shauger, the older sister of Jane Shauger, who married the original William McKinnon. Thus William McKinnon and John Blanchard were Brother-in-Laws and in the 1870 census it shows they lived next door to each other.

The depression of the 1930's closed many businesses and his was one of them in the 1930's. I found advertisements in the Rockaway Record in 1928, 1929, 1932, & 1933 for;

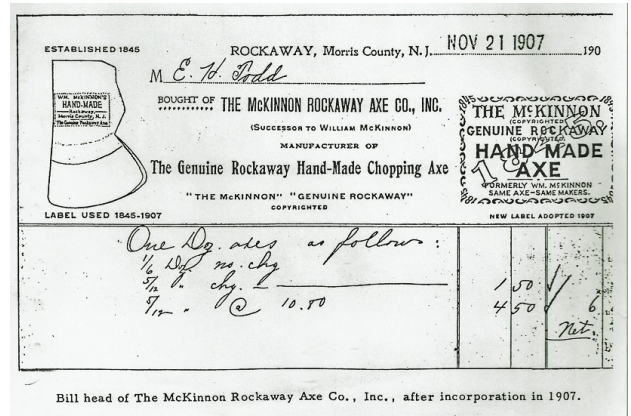


Rockaway axe with J.H.BLANCHARD maker's mark.

“J.H.Blanchard & Co. Manufactures of ROCKAWAY HAND MADE AXES with or without handles. All kinds of edge tools and lawn mowers sharpened. 72 Union St., Phone – Rockaway 76”.

As a side note, his advertised address of 72 Union St. was over one mile from the site of the original McKinnon Co. Shop. But by April 30, 1936 his advertisement in the same newspaper does not mention manufactures of axes, only his sharpening services.

What is puzzling to me is the name in the advertisement is J.H.Blanchard & Co. and I am curious about who was included for the “& Company” designation. If this was the same J.H.Blanchard listed in the 1880 census as 20 years old and occupation – forgerman, then it seems he is about 65 years old when he took over the McKinnon operation. Thus maybe this is one of the reasons why his axe business did not prosper and by 1936 is listed as sharpening services



and not blacksmithing or axe making. Blacksmithing and especially axe making is a backbreaking job, and any man would slow down after a lifetime doing this kind of work.

Shortly thereafter the development of the chain saw would end many axe makers production. We in New Jersey are lucky to have two axe patterns. The Jersey Pattern developed during the late 1700's was made in Rockaway and the McKinnons added their own ingenuity to develop the Rockaway Pattern.

Thanks to the research of Bob Fridlington and documentation by James Aber for the groundwork of this McKinnon axe history.