

PHOTOS OF WEAR PLATES ON LEVI BIDDLE RIFLES

The accompanying images are of so-called “wear plates” on several Levi Biddle rifles from Tuscarawas county. Several of the shapes – especially the “propeller” were used by other makers of the era. In some instances, the plates may have been affixed to cover mistakes in drilling the ramrod channel, or could possibly have a utilitarian function in protecting the stock from handling or saddle wear. It is also plausible that they sometimes functioned as a convenient site for adding more “bling” to a rifle by providing an opportunity to display inlay patterns and engraving skills. (see photos)

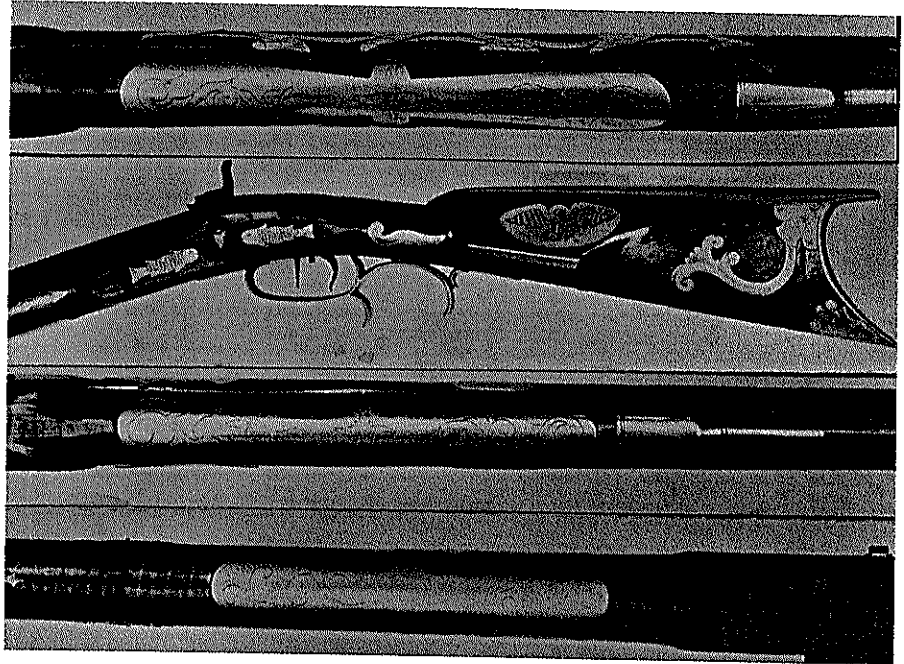


Fig. 1. Wear plates on Levi Biddle marked rifles in AOLRC archive photos (James Whisker photo)

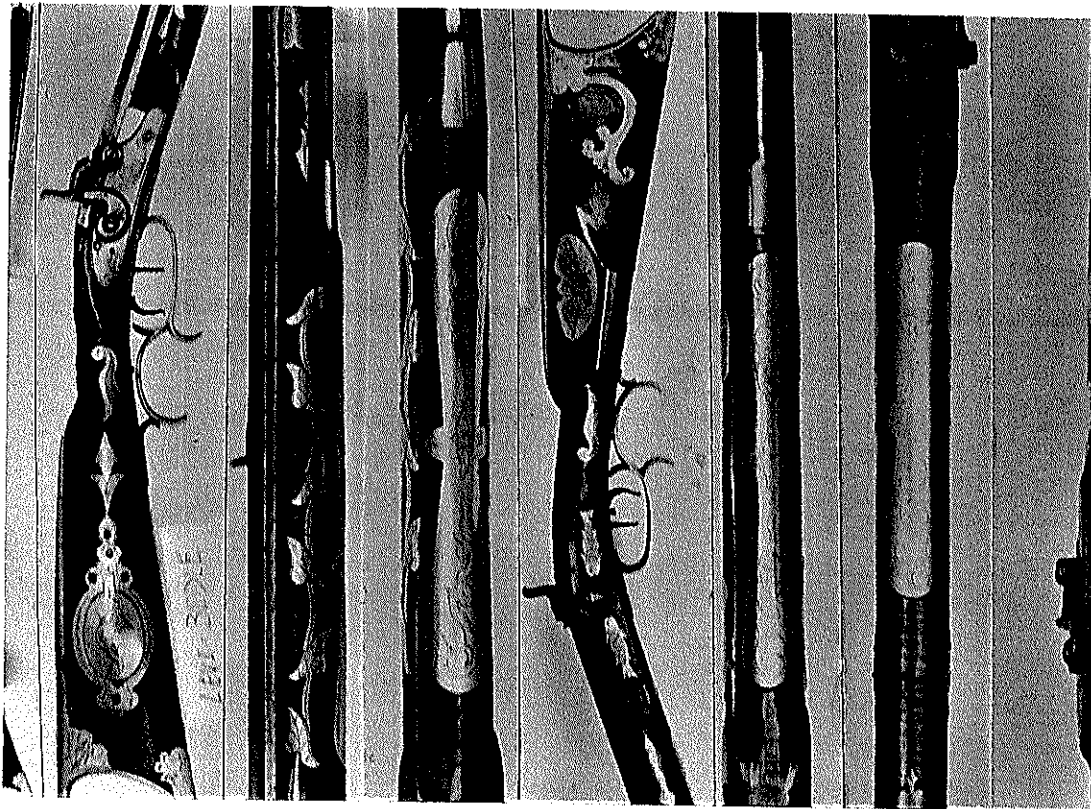


Fig. 2. Wear plates on Levi Biddle marked rifles in AOLRC archive photos (James Whisker photo)

A NEAT WRIST REPAIR: UNMARKED MADISON COUNTY FOUND RIFLE

BY MARK BENDER

I have always been fascinated by period repairs on muzzle loading firearms. The repairs on the many slim Ohio rifles with delicate wrists is especially fascinating, given the challenge of putting back together spiny wood splinters, often with undulating maple curl, that are stressed by the weight of a heavy barrel. It is also likely that in many cases it was the heavy barrel that contributed to the break in the first place – a rifle falling to the floor, dropping out of a buggy, being run over by a wagon, used as a club, flung about in a fit of rage, or some other calamity. Or just breaking from stress fractures in improperly cut or unseasoned wood. Repairing such breaks without modern adhesives seems to make the results even more laudable.

I personally find well-done wrist repairs exemplary of the gunmakers art. It is one thing to make a graceful gun, it is another to try to put a busted one back to a utilitarian, if not aesthetically pleasing state. I've seen enough cast away brass wrist repairs filling old cigar boxes of collectors to know that some guns were repaired over and over and some collectors want the object in their possession restored to be like the day it was made. That argument aside, what options did 19th century gunsmiths have to repair a broken wrist? The repairs I have examined include brass plates (held on with nails or screws – or both), the use of wooden pins and splicing techniques, coils of wire, rawhide and tacks, and hide glue – and any combination of the above.

This leads me to offer a few pictures of what I consider

a neat repair on the wrist of an unmarked mid-19th century rifle that was for generations in a family near Plain City, Madison county, Ohio – though the ultimate provenance is unknown. The carefully crafted repair – assuming it was not originally made with the brass wrist wrap – measures 4 inches long and encircles the wrist. The brass plate must have been designed on flat sheet metal – maybe based on a paper, sheet metal, or leather pattern that was first formed and measured around the wrist. The symmetrical brass plate would then have been sawed or chiseled out, filed, and dressed. The plate has a carefully made symmetrical-lobe indentation at the top of the wrist – a subtle touch reflecting the artistry of the repairer. Rather than a simple wrap around straight-on-both ends patch, each end is angled into the lines of the wrist, which works with the “fish belly” contour of the stock. The plate seems to be held on only by a series of 6 smallish, hand-dressed screws on each side of the wrist, about a ¼” from the bottom of the grip. It would be interesting to know if the screw holes were drilled (or punched) into the flat sheet before mounting, or after mounting (I would favor the before mounting hypothesis).

The gracile rifle is itself a very plain one, no cap box, a minimal side plate made from a brass scrap and no rear ramrod pipe (the entry hole and v-cross-section fore stock are well executed). The overall wood and metal craftsmanship is good, and the repair may well be the work of the rifle maker. (See figures 1-3.)

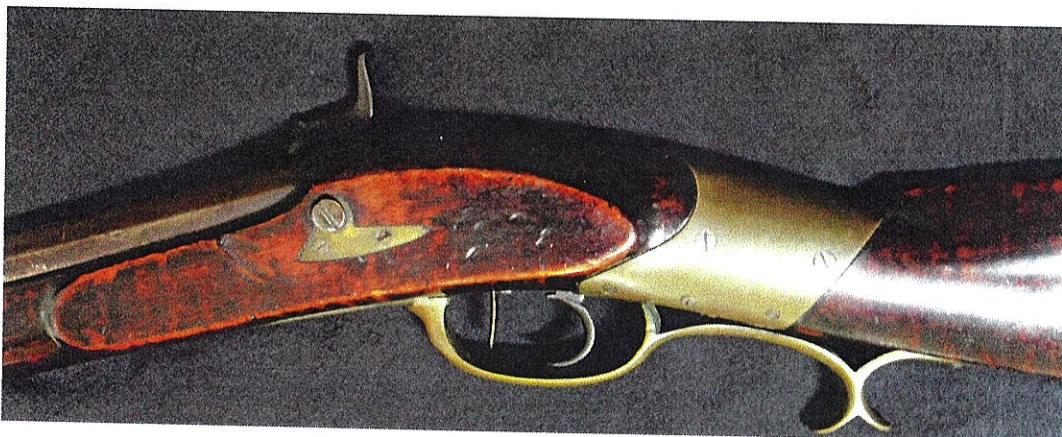


Fig. 1. Brass wrist repair (side plate view). (all photos Mark Bender)