

The Gatling Gun

on Display at the Garrett County Historical Museum

Oakland, Maryland

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Among many items in the Garrett County Historical Museum located at 107 South Second Street, Oakland, MD, is a .30 caliber Naval Gatling gun that was built by the Colt Company in 1901.

Inventor, Richard Jordan

Gatling, was born in North Carolina on September 12, 1818. Teaching, retail sales, marketing and doctoring were just a couple of the careers that Richard Gatling would undertake, but he was more interested in creative endeavors.

In 1844, Richard received his first patent for a rice-seed planter. He left North Carolina and moved to St. Louis to manufacture and market his planter. During that time he converted his machine to a wheat planter and amassed a fortune. In the winter of 1845, Richard contracted smallpox on a business trip by riverboat – the steamer was ice-locked for 2 weeks and he was unable to obtain medical attention. Upon recovering he decided to study medicine so he would be able to care for himself and his family. Gatling attended Indiana Medical College and Ohio Medical College receiving a diploma as a physician in 1850,

at which time he briefly practiced medicine in Indianapolis. Robert continued to invent and improve on inventions and he married Jemima Sanders in 1854; they had four children.

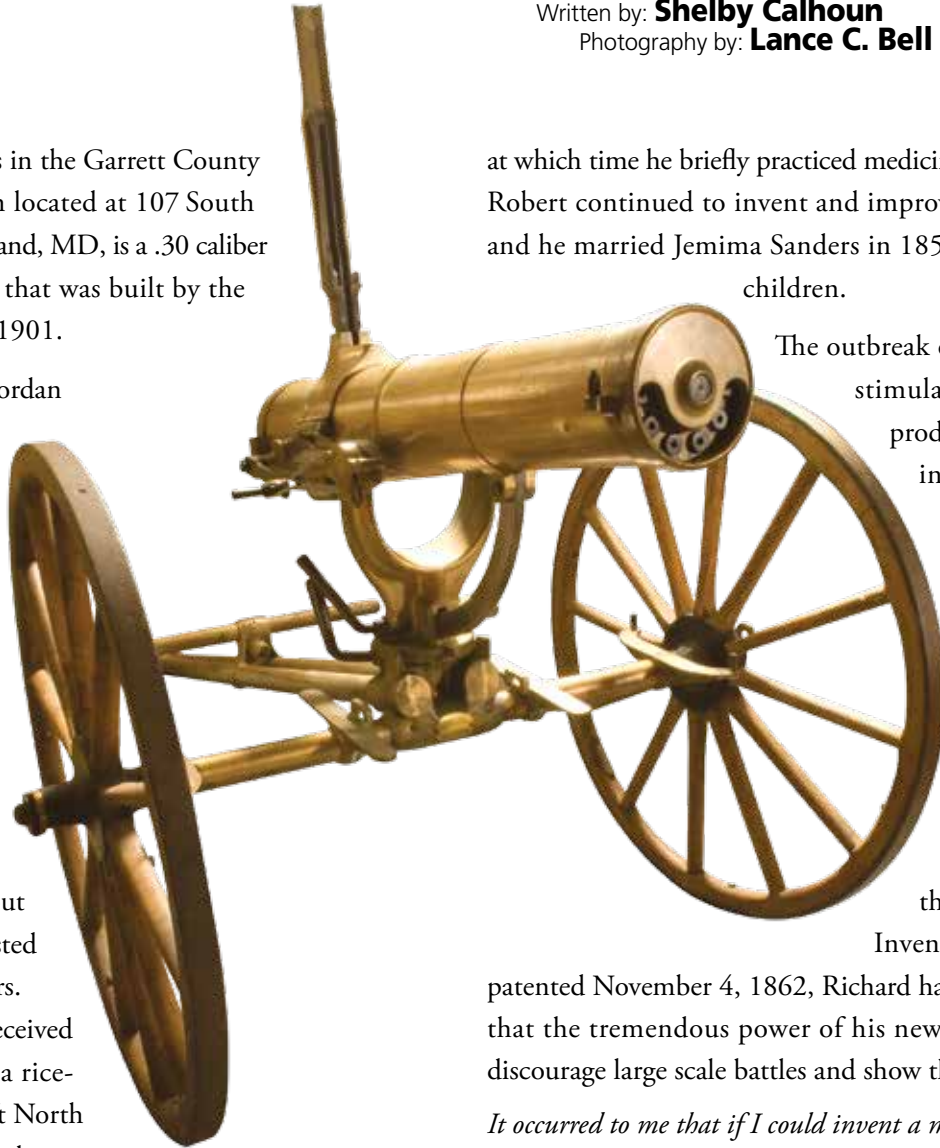
The outbreak of the Civil War stimulated Gatling to produce the greatest invention of his career and one that revolutionized warfare. This was the machine battery gun that became known the world over as the “Gatling gun.”

Invented in 1861 and patented November 4, 1862, Richard had actually hoped that the tremendous power of his new weapon would discourage large scale battles and show the folly of war.

It occurred to me that if I could invent a machine – a gun – which could by its rapidity of fire, enable one man to do as much battle duty as a hundred, that it would, to a large extent supersede the necessity of large armies, and consequently, exposure to battle and disease [would] be greatly diminished.

— Richard Jordan Gatling

Though crude, the first gun tested and patented in 1862 had a firing capacity of 200 rounds a minute. Working to improve his invention, a revised model was patented in 1865. Twelve guns of this model were submitted to the U.S. Army for tests and the Gatling gun was officially



adopted by the War Department in 1866. The Gatling gun's operation centered on a cyclic multi-barrel design which facilitated cooling and synchronized the firing-reloading sequence. Each barrel fired a single shot when it reached a certain point in the cycle, after which it ejected the spent cartridge, loaded a new round, and in the process, allowed the barrel to cool somewhat. A later model was capable of firing 1,200 shots a minute. In 1870 he sold his patents for the Gatling gun to Colt. Gatling remained president of the Gatling Gun Company until it was fully absorbed by Colt in 1897. In 1893, Gatling patented a model that replaced the hand cranked mechanism with an electric motor, a relatively new invention at the time, achieving a rate of fire of 3,000 rounds per minute. The hand-cranked Gatling gun was declared obsolete by the United States Army in 1911. Decades later, after World War II, the mechanical concept was resurrected and wedded to electricity-driven cranking in the M61 Vulcan.

Throughout his life, Gatling patented inventions to improve toilets, bicycles, steam cleaning of raw wool, pneumatic power, steam tractors, and many others. He was also elected as the first president of the American Association of Inventors and Manufacturers in 1891, serving for six years. Although still quite wealthy at the time of his death, February 26, 1903, he had made and lost several fortunes in bad investments.

Garrett County Historical Museum
107 South Second St., Oakland, MD 21550
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