

Frederick Sheetz

Acclaimed Gunsmith and Community Leader

Hampshire County, West Virginia

Frederick Sheetz, son of Henry Sheetz, Sr., was born at Shepherds-town, Virginia, on November 11, 1774. His father, Henry and his uncle, Philip were gunsmiths there. Records show that Frederick Sheetz was in the western part of Hampshire County, Virginia, as early as 1792. This was in present day Mineral County, West Virginia. Land records show that he bought lots in Frankfort (now Fort Ashby) that year. For several years, Frederick was content on making his rifles in Fort Ashby, along with his brothers Henry and Otho.

About 1810-12 Frederick moved his gun shop to present day Headsville, WV. There he built a mill and from that time until after the Civil War, that community was called Sheetz' Mill.

Frederick was a prominent man in his community, who accomplished more than being a successful mill owner and gunsmith. He was elected and served one term in the Virginia Assembly House of Delegates 1813-14, as a member of the Federalist party. He was the postmaster of Sheetz's Mill for a while and an elder in the Presbyterian Church. In 1820, he was appointed School Commissioner. There is oral history that tells of him being instrumental in starting the first school in that part of the county. Old records show he was elected as Sheriff of Hampshire County in 1828. He was also a member of the County Court and was appointed Justice of the Peace.

Frederick and his brothers not only made rifles for private use, but they also made rifles for the Virginia Militia. In a letter from John Snyder to Virginia Governor Barbour,

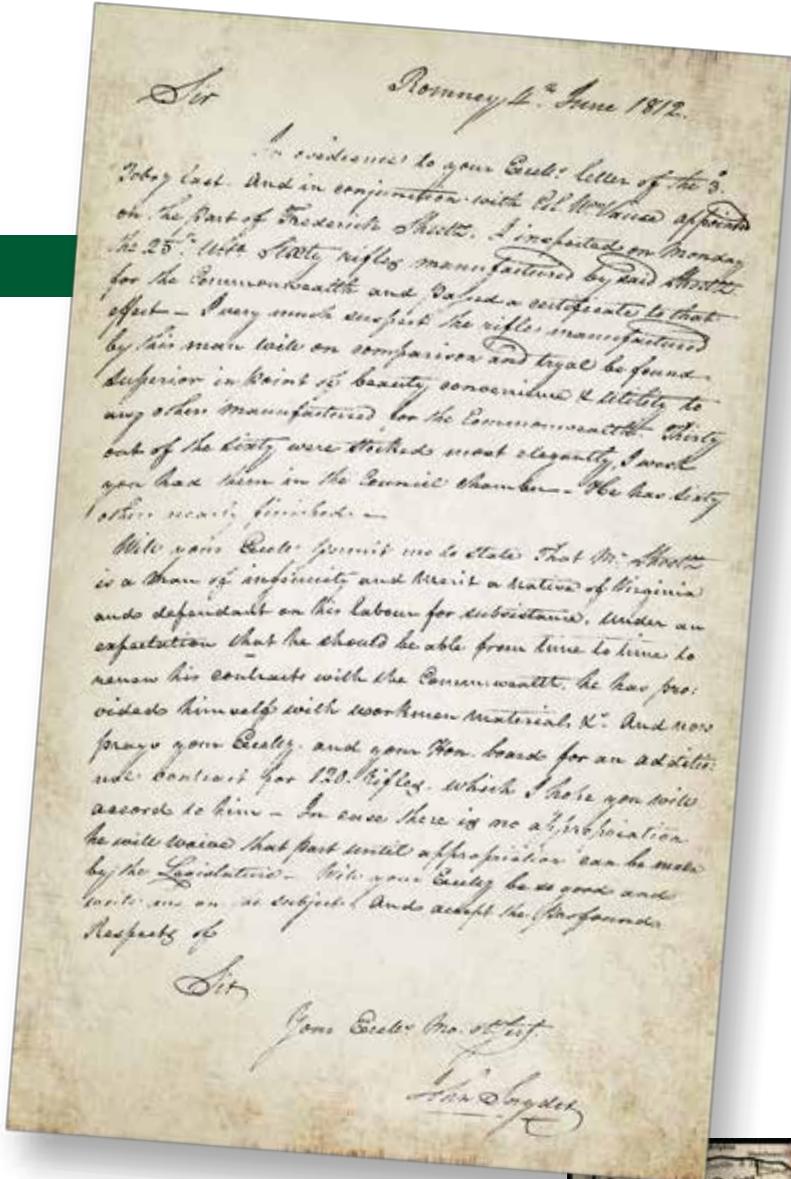


Jeff Prechtel's artist rendition of a happy customer receiving his handsome new Sheets rifle from Mr. Frederick Sheetz himself, just outside the Sheetz mill.

Frederick Sheetz is praised for his superior workmanship as a rifle manufacturer. These militia rifles (from 1808 through 1815) were made by private Virginia gunsmiths not employed by the Virginia Armory and are also referred to as contract rifles. It is believed many of these rifles were used in the war of 1812. The militia rifles made under this contract would be stamped with regimental markings such as "114 Regt. Va Militia Hampshire." Frederick delivered at least 570 of these of which probably less than half a dozen are surviving today.

Frederick Sheetz' work is similar to that of Winchester, VA, gunsmiths Simon Lauck and Adam Haymaker — the stock profile, the Winchester release system on his patch boxes, the square headed nails on the inlays and to some extent his carving. Frederick was an excellent engraver and some of his surviving rifles have silver wire inlays.

Frederick Sheetz died on January 18, 1861, and was spared the grief of witnessing the destruction of his mill, burnt to the ground by Union forces. The destruction of mills



Left: A copy of an 1812 original letter to the Governor of Virginia praising and requesting more rifles by Frederick Sheetz.

Below: Typed version of the letter for clarity.

Romney June 7th
His Excellcy. James Barbour Esq. Governor of
Virginia, Richmond

Romney 4th June 1812

Sir

In obedience to your Excellcy. Letter of the 3rd February last and in conjunction with Col. Wm. Vause appointed on the part of Frederick Sheetz. I inspected on Monday the 25th sixty rifles manufactured by said Sheetz for the Commonwealth and payed a certificate to that effect – I very much suspect the rifles manufactured by this man will on comparison and tryal be found superior in point of beauty convenience and utility to any others manufactured for the Commonwealth. Thirty out of the sixty were stockd most elegantly. I wish you had them in the Council chamber. He has sixty others nearly finished —

Will your Excellcy. permit me to state that Mr. Sheetz is a man of ingenuity and merit a native of Virginia and dependant on his labour for subsistence. Under an expectation that he should be able from time to time to renew his contract with the Commonwealth, he has provided himself with workmen materials etc. And now prays your Excellcy. and your Hon. board for an additional contract for 120 rifles which I hope you will accord to him — In case there is no appropriation he will waive that part until appropriation can be made by the Legislature — will your Excellcy. be so good and write us on the subject. And accept the profound respect of

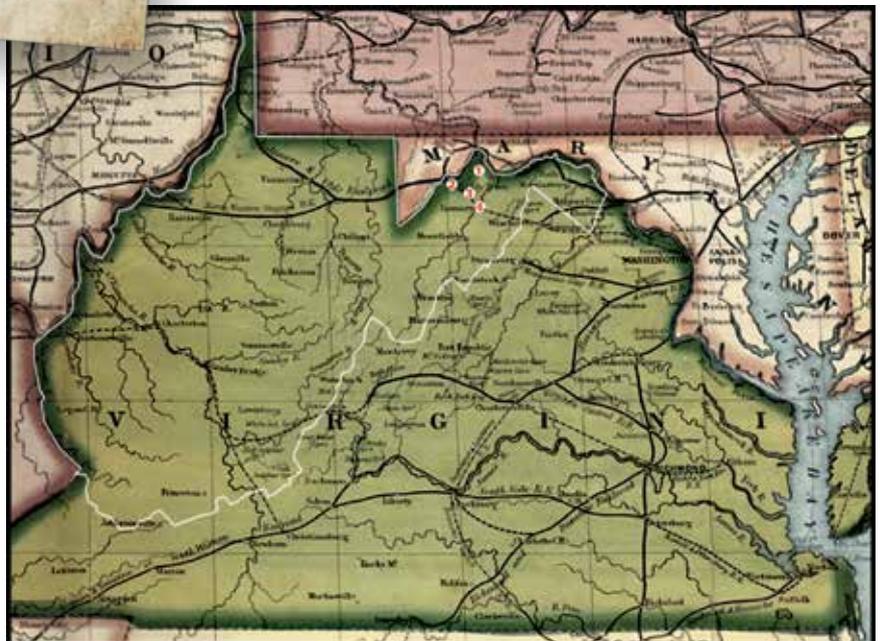
Sir

Your Excellcy. and others,
John Snyder

and many homes in Hampshire County were carried out under the command of Union General Lander early in 1862.

Frederick was also saved from the sorrow of the death of his beloved grandson and namesake, Captain George Frederick Sheetz. Captain Sheetz lost his life on May 23, 1862, leading his men of the 7th Virginia Calvary at Buckton Station, near Front Royal, Virginia.

Frederick Sheetz and his grandson, Captain G. F. Sheetz, lie at rest in Eusebia Presbyterian Cemetery, a few miles west of Fort Ashby, West Virginia.



1. Fort Ashby, WV
2. Keyser, WV
3. Sheetz Mill (now Headsville, WV)
4. Romney, WV

State of Virginia before 1863
State of West Virginia after June 20, 1863

Frederick Sheetz's Virginia Contract Rifle



Overall length is 61 inches. Caliber .45. Weight about 10 pounds. The flat, bevel edged lock is 5½ inches long, has an integral pan and terminates at the rear in a teated point. The toe of the frizzen is curled. The hand forged lock is well made and conforms generally in profile to the standard Virginia Manufactory type. It is completely without markings.

The striped maple stock extends to within 3/16 inch of the muzzle. The low comb is about 10 inches long and a straight cheekrest is on the reverse of the buttstock. A moulding extends from the tailpipe forward to the foretip.

The wedge-fastened, fully octagonal barrel is slightly swamped, with a swell at both muzzle and breech. The length is 44½ inches. A brass blade front sight is 1¼ inches from the muzzle and an open rear sight 15 inches from the breech. Stamped on the top flat are regimental and county markings.

The hickory ramrod is held by three pipes and a tailpipe. The 8¾ inch Pennsylvania style trigger guard is squared at both ends. The relatively ornate patchbox with top and

bottom plates, is 8 inches long and held by seven screws. The curved buttplate is 4½ inches long and has a 2½ inch tang through which the patchbox cover release button passes.

Frederick Sheetz of Hampshire County, Virginia, received the first contract for rifles issued by the state in August 1808, calling for thirty stands to be delivered by October 1, 1809 at \$15.00 each. Between that date and February 15, 1815, Sheetz delivered 570 rifles, or about one-third the total of 2,145 received by Virginia from fifteen gun-makers during this period.

The number 44 marking was added to the end of the barrel. It is believed by some to have been done by the Arsenal at the time of converting and shortening.



Many of Frederick Sheetz's rifles were converted from flint lock (bottom rifle) to percussion or cap lock (top rifle) sometime before the Civil War (1861-1865). The barrels and stocks were shortened to between 30" and 36" or more at conversion time. The top Sheetz rifle is after conversion to a percussion lock and with the barrel shortened.



The maker's name engraved on top of the barrel.



Frederick Sheetz rifle (above) is owned by Royce Saville of Romney, WV.

We would like to thank Royce Saville and Mark Smith for their help, knowledge, and guidance in producing this story.



This Frederick Sheetz rifle, uncut or modified, was made in Fort Ashby, WV, circa 1800.

The Hampshire County Rifle

To the early settler of Hampshire County the rifle was an important tool, as important as the ax or knife. Hostile times and the use of the rifle to provide meat for the family was the fuel that started the rifle making industry in Hampshire County, Virginia. There are some records that indicate there may have been at least one gunsmith making guns in Hampshire County as early as 1760.

The Hampshire County rifle is a muzzle loading long rifle that was made in the boundaries of Hampshire County from the late 1700s, through the late 1800s. It is possible that a few could have been made as late as 1900. The Hampshire County rifle is a Kentucky rifle such as the one Daniel Boone carried. The Kentucky Rifle is truly the first American rifle. These long rifles with beautiful maple stocks and stunning patch boxes were first made by German immigrants in Pennsylvania. The Germans were already familiar with rifling firearms in the Jaeger Rifles from their homeland.

The German Jaeger had a large caliber and short rifled barrel. The Hampshire rifles made here had long barrels with smaller calibers. Calibers seen on Hampshire County rifles range from .36 to .45 with the larger calibers on earlier rifles and smaller calibers on later rifles. Barrels on Hampshire County guns ranged between 30" to 46" in length. Typically the early rifles had longer barrels and the later ones shorter. These barrels were also mostly octagon shaped. Most Hampshire County rifles have set triggers for accurate shooting. Hampshire County rifles are almost always stocked in Maple and some have wonderful curl

and tiger striping. Most Hampshire County rifles are full stock, though a few (1850s and later) are halfstocks. A star inlaid with coin silver on the cheek piece was common on Hampshire rifles. The first guns made in the county were flintlock; then around 1830 percussions started to show up, and from about 1835 on, most rifles made in the county had the percussion lock. The earlier Hampshire County rifle had a wider, taller butt on the stock, and many of these were carved, some incised, and some relief.

The early Hampshire County rifle looked the same as the Winchester, Charles Town, and Shepherdstown rifles. About the time percussion locks came into use, the Hampshire County makers began to develop a unique style of rifles. Today collectors call it a "School." The Hampshire County "School" rifle had the famous Roman Nose stock. This is also about the time that carving on guns was replaced by coin silver inlays: hearts, weeping hearts, stars, fish, ovals, crescent moons, etc. Most of these inlays had some Christian meaning. The acorn also began to dominate the finial on the engraved brass patch boxes; this is not to say the flower or pointed finial was not used anymore, just not as much. Another feature almost unique to the Hampshire County rifle is that once percussion locks dominated the area rifles, there were small brass lid boxes on the cheek piece side that were used for carrying percussion caps. Naturally, these are called "Cap Boxes." Occasionally a few of these are on Ohio guns, but not many. Some, but not all, of the Hampshire County rifles are signed by the maker on the octagon barrel between the breech and the rear sight.