

## MODEL 1841 MUZZLE-LOADING RIFLES OF THE US NAVY

by Charles W. Thayer, Professor Emeritus  
University of Pennsylvania

The “G.N.Y” stamps on the butt-plate-tangs of Mississippi rifles are the marks of the Gosport Navy Yard, (now Portsmouth, VA) and those rifles are believed to have been issued to vessels of the US Navy in the late 1840’s through the 1850’s.

Two lines of evidence from the same period prove that GNY stands for Gosport Navy Yard.

- (1) “GNY is stamped on powder flasks intended to prime the pan of naval cannons that were fired by linstock or flintlock. The initials are on the side of the flask body, which is constructed of tinned sheet iron. One of these flasks is illustrated in Ray Riling’s *Powder Flask Book* (Fig. 868), correctly attributed to Gosport Navy Yard. Here the initials are possibly struck with the same stamps used on the rifles. I have seen another such flask in which the initials were considerably larger. A similar flask (Fig. 867) in Riling’s book is stamped “U.S.” over “NYW,” the well-known initials for the Washington Navy Yard, as stamped on numerous Dahlgren boat howitzers. The similarity of the NYW and GNY markings leaves no doubt that the GNY stamp is also a navy yard mark.

These flasks must date prior to the late 1850’s, when the Hidden percussion lock made priming flasks obsolete in the US Navy.

- (2) Iron-clad evidence is the presence of “GNY” stamped on the bronze spikes used in the construction of the US Sloop *Constellation* at Gosport in 1854. Confusion with the *Constellation* frigate of 1798 arose because a parsimonious Congress funded repair of old ships, but not new ones. Thus *Constellation*, although “administratively rebuilt” in 1854, was in fact, a new ship. Many such spikes were removed during *Constellation*’s restoration in Baltimore in the 1990’s, and some may now be seen in the museum there.

The stamping on the spikes is larger than on the rifles, but all examples (on rifles, flasks, and spikes) are in the same type face.

Navy collectors have been reluctant to accept the GNY Mississippi rifles as naval issue, preferring to dismiss them as the arms of the guards at the navy yard, or the arms of the marines. The first position makes a too narrow construction of the “yard” designation, and overlooks a more practical alternative, namely pistol and cutlass. The second ignores the fact that, by the 1850’s, Marines and Navy were separate services with separate arms budgets. Although a Navy gun might be used by a Marine, any Navy Yard marking is clear indication of Navy ownership.

From the 1820's through the early 1840's, Hall breech-loading flintlock rifles were used by the US Navy. The accounts of the Wilkes Expedition (1837-1842), which also used the Elgin "pistol-knives," leave no doubt that officers and men alike appreciated the difference between muskets and rifles. *Seas of Empire* is an account of the Wilkes Expedition by the currently popular author . Besides its scientific accomplishments, the Wilkes Expedition predicted the discovery of gold in California and provided strategic information for the conquest of that territory during the Mexican War. Having used the percussion Elgin "cutlass pistols" and percussion Hall carbines from 1837 on the Wilkes Expedition, it seems safe to assume that the US Navy would have sought percussion replacements for its aging flint-lock Hall rifles when the first M1841 US rifles became available.

The three GNY-stamped M1841 rifles in my collection are early contract arms with standard army inspection marks: two 1849 Robbins & Lawrence rifles and one 1852 Remington. Transfer of arms from the Army Ordnance Department to the Navy was nothing new, for that is how the Navy obtained its Hall rifles and carbines, the first arsenal made, the latter contractor-produced. The Army surely documented this transfer, and the paper trail may yet be found. Navy inventories, however, are rarely specific enough to distinguish M1841 muzzle-loading rifles from their predecessors, the Hall rifles, or their evident replacements, the rifled muskets, which the Navy first acquired in 1856 (see *McCauly's Civil War Small Arms of the U. S. Navy and Marine Corps*).

The "GNY" spikes and flasks were marked to record their place of manufacture, but the rifles must have been stamped to indicate ownership. During the Mexican War (1846-48), the US Navy was involved in massive amphibious operations in which the small arms of numerous ships easily could have become intermingled. This would create an accountability problem, for when each vessel was commissioned, she was armed from the stores of the navy yard in her home port. At the end of active service, the ship was decommissioned and all stores and ordnance were returned to storage in that same navy yard.

One of my GNY rifles bears crude initials of the sort often seen on Confederate arms. Before the retreating Federals abandoned and burned the Gosport Navy Yard to prevent the Confederates from seizing the ships there (including *Merrimac*, which would be transformed into the iron-clad *Virginia*), civilian employees helped themselves to the small arms. I suspect that many of those arms were subsequently used by the Army of Northern Virginia.