

Guns Along The Santa Fe Trail: The John Sites Gunsmith Shop in Arrow Rock, Missouri



The following paper by Timothy Baumann, Michael Dickey and Thomas B. Hall was presented in the symposium "From Missouri to Mexico City: Archaeology along the Santa Fe Trail and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro," organized and chaired by Timothy E. Baumann at the Society for Historical Archaeology's 2008 Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Albuquerque, New Mexico, January 9 – 13, 2008.

Baumann also presented the paper at the Annual Meeting of the Friends of Arrow Rock on May 4, 2008. This paper is especially appropriate since Arrow Rock's National Historic Landmark designation is related to westward expansion, especially the Santa Fe Trail, and Arrow Rock will host the Santa Fe Trail Association's Symposium in the fall of 2009.

The John P. Sites Gun Shop is one of the Friends of Arrow Rock's earliest restorations.

Introduction

In 1821, William Becknell left Franklin, Missouri, and crossed the Missouri River near Arrow Rock to start the Santa Fe Trail. This trail quickly transformed into a major trade route with Missouri's agricultural products being exchanged for Spanish / Mexican gold. Once established, this route was also utilized by western settlers and the U.S. government for expeditions and military campaigns. A reliable gun was needed by all who used this trail. In Arrow Rock, a National Landmark, the John Sites gunsmith shop has been restored through archaeological research and operates as a living history museum to explain the role of guns and gunsmiths along the Santa Fe Trail.

John P. Sites, Jr. & Family

A wide variety of skilled tradesmen lived in Arrow Rock. They included blacksmiths, wagon wrights, saddle makers, coopers, carpenters, stonemasons, boat builders and potters. One such tradesman, gunsmith John P. Sites, Jr., left his mark on the history of Arrow Rock. Sites, Jr., who was popularly known as "Uncle Johnnie," was born in Rockingham County, Virginia, on May 31, 1821. He came from at least three generations of gunsmiths, who primarily made, repaired, and modified long rifles, but they also produced pistols (Dickey 2004).

John Jr.'s father, John Sr. was a skilled gunsmith, who moved his family to Marion in Cole County, Missouri, in 1834. The following year, John Sr. established a gunsmith shop at

Boonville in Cooper County, a booming town on the Missouri River. John Sr.'s gunsmith shop prospered until his death in 1853. John Jr. worked as an apprentice for his father until 1841. On September 23rd of that year, he married Nancy "Nannie" Jane Tool (Toole) from Madison County, Kentucky (Stubbs 1990). Shortly after their marriage, John Jr. established his own gunsmith shop at Clifton in Cooper County, Missouri.

In 1844, Sites, Jr. relocated to Arrow Rock, Missouri, in adjacent Saline County, where he set up another shop. His arrival coincided with the boom period of this Missouri River town. Trader Josiah Gregg (1990:32) made it clear in the 1840s that the Santa Fe trade activity was still occurring in central Missouri: "*The town of Franklin on the Missouri River, [the original starting point of the Santa Fe Trail]...in conjunction with several neighboring towns [like Arrow Rock] continued to furnish the greater number of these adventurous traders. Even subsequently to 1831, many wagons have been outfitted and started from this interior section.*" Many residents of the Arrow Rock community at this time were active as traders or investors in the Santa Fe trade. These include Philip W. Thompson, and Stephen, Simeon, Jesse and Talton Turley, who remained active traders on the Santa Fe route up to the beginning of the Civil War.

Even though Santa Fe caravans passing through Arrow Rock were in their declining days upon Sites, Jr.'s arrival, the great migrations to California and Oregon were soon to begin. Arrow Rock served as a rest stop and point of re-supply for these emigrants. John Jr. was well situated to intercept this large volume of traffic. His first shop was located on Main Street, across the street from the Huston Tavern. This was on the intersection of the overland road from Boonville and main thoroughfare from the Missouri River landing and ferry crossing. Guns made by John Sites, Jr. have been found in California, Oregon, Montana and New Mexico, evidence that he supplied these westward bound settlers and traders. Sites could build an entire gun "*lock, stock and barrel*" although much of his work probably involved repairs and converting rifles from flintlock to the more efficient percussion lock. With John Jr.'s growing business, the 1860 census documents that he took on William Toole, his 16 year-old nephew, as an apprentice. John and Nannie only had one son, Charles, who was born on October 22, 1844. Charles may have been the next generation of Sites gunsmiths, but he died at the age of 10 on July 31, 1855. In 1866, John and Nannie Sites purchased a small brick home on the corner of 5th and High Streets for \$600, which had been built by 1837. In March of 1868, he then acquired part of the adjacent lot 92 and moved his gun business to this location.

Thomas Rainey (1914: 43-44) an early chronicler of Arrow Rock described John Sites as, "*...good natured; stammered badly and when he was using his mouthpiece as a gateway for profanity, he smoked.*" John was not a religious man, but Nannie was a Campbellite. Since that denomination was not in Arrow Rock, once a year he took Nannie to church services in Cooper County. At one of these meetings, he repented, was baptized and joined the church. Rainey said, "*We did not believe it possible for John to quit smoking and swearing as he proposed to do. We thought if he did not smoke he would swear on account of it and if he did not swear he would have to smoke to console himself...but we were mistaken. I never knew such another change in a man. He stopped swearing; he stopped smoking and became an active, zealous, missionary Christian to the end of his life. He was largely instrumental in building and supporting the Christian church in Arrow Rock.*"

Rainey (1914:43) further stated that John could not read or write, and this was also noted in the 1880 census. Nannie would read to him from the Bible, and he would memorize the verses. Sites liked to argue church doctrine and would frequently quote the scriptures he knew. If his opponent quoted a verse John did not know, he would end the debate by raising his voice, citing a verse he knew then would tuck his cane under his arm and walk off laughing.

In the latter half of the 19th century, economically priced, mass manufactured guns became available through mail order. Likewise, surplus military weapons from the Civil War were abundant and cheap. Gunsmiths like Sites went through a transition. They still sold and repaired guns but seldom if ever, built them anymore. Rainey (1914:42) described Sites as “handy” with tools and a “...healer of the infirmities of old guns, clocks, pocket-knives and women’s scissors.” The Arrow Rock Statesmen newspaper carried a front-page ad on January 8, 1897: “*HUNTERS If you want Anything in the Sporting Line call on J.P. Sites. He carries a general stock of Guns, Pistols, Ammunition Fishing Tackle He Makes a Specialty of Lock and Gun Repairing*” (Stubbs 1990:7).

Nannie Sites passed away on November 26, 1900, and was buried in the Arrow Rock cemetery. John went to live in Cooper County with his nephew Captain Tom Sites, who operated the steamboat “Nadine” on the Lamine and Missouri River. John passed away on April 9, 1904, and was buried in Arrow Rock. His probate records in 1904 clearly illustrate the decline of the gunsmith craft, which listed 1 lot of stock blocks for 25 cents, 1 bellows, 7 powder flasks for \$6, and a lot of 22 old guns and rifles for *only* \$2 (Hall 1969:184). After his death, the gunsmith shop was transformed into an automobile garage and the first telephone office for Arrow Rock. The adjacent Sites house was first rented and then purchased by various families until the 1960s historic preservation project.

Archaeology

In 1966, the Friends of Arrow Rock, the local historical society in Arrow Rock, acquired the Sites gunsmith shop and then in 1973 the adjacent Sites home in Arrow Rock with the purpose of restoring these structures for heritage tourism and educational programs. The Friends of Arrow Rock was created in 1959 to preserve and interpret historic buildings and sites in this village. Since its inception, this organization has acquired and restored thirteen historic buildings. Their work has been conducted in collaboration with the Arrow Rock State Historic Site, which was created in 1923 through the efforts of the Daughters



of the American Revolution as the first historic site owned by the state of Missouri for heritage tourism. This historic site encompasses ¼ of the town with the Huston Tavern, the oldest active restaurant west of the Mississippi River, and the home of George Caleb Bingham, Missouri's famous 19th artist, as its hallmarks. In 1963, the town of Arrow Rock was recognized as a National Landmark district because of its connections to the Santa Fe Trail, in 2006 Arrow Rock was named as one of the "Dozen Distinctive Destinations" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and in 2008 First Lady Laura Bush designated Arrow Rock a "Preserve America Community."

In 1967, University of Missouri archaeologist Robert T. Bray was contacted to direct two excavations at the Sites gunsmith shop (Baumann 2005). The first was performed over two days in March of 1967 with volunteers from the Big Bend Chapter of the Missouri Archaeological Society and focused on the gun shop's interior (Bray 1967a, 1967b). Henry and Jean Hamilton, who were lifelong residents of Saline County, facilitated this relationship, as both were active in the Missouri Archaeological Society with Henry as its president for several decades. Jean Hamilton (1972) also produced the first published history of Arrow Rock in 1963 entitled *Arrow Rock: Where Wheels Started West*.

When the interior excavations began, the gunsmith shop had been used as an automobile garage for nearly 60 years. The floor was covered with four to six inches of crushed rock and below this were two strips of concrete that were poured for parking an automobile. Underneath this, Bray documented a wooden floor that covered three-fourths of the shop and an original earthen floor with trampled artifacts. The wooden floor was identified by the remnants of nine wooden floor joists, running north to south, and several limestone piers, providing support and leveling for these joists. The wooden floor stopped approximately five feet short of the west wall and was bound by a brick border or short wall, which separated the workshop from the forge. The latter was identified by a flue in the extant west wall and a small brick foundation immediately below. The forge was surrounded by a compact earthen floor with a large concentration of charcoal. A four by five feet room was also identified adjacent to the forge in the southwest corner, which was likely used for storage.

A number of artifacts were collected that can be directly associated with guns and gunsmithing activities, including iron tongs, pinfire shotgun shell, rifle butt plate, whetstone, steel files, lead shot and lead pieces, and brass cartridges. Other artifacts collected were iron tools, hardware, glass bottles, lamp chimney glass, and window glass.

In June of 1967, a second excavation was operated as an archaeological field school through the University of Missouri. These excavations focused on the exterior of the gunsmith shop. Unfortunately, no known report was made by Bray of this later work, and none of the field notes or analysis has survived. All that remains are the artifacts and field photographs. Excavations were conducted along the south and west elevations, recording the extant limestone foundation on the south wall, and a 10 x 10 feet limestone foundation. The latter was interpreted as a powder magazine for the gun shop, which included a four feet deep cellar with mortar sealing the interior walls.

In the inaugural issue of *Historical Archaeology* in 1967, Bray provided a short summary of these second excavations and stated that no artifacts found outside the shop could be associated with gunsmithing (Bray 1967b:84). A reanalysis of these materials supports Bray's conclusion. The bulk of the artifacts were recovered from the powder room, which was likely used for trash dumping after the shop was converted into an automobile garage in the early 20th century. The majority of the objects are associated with domestic activities including glassware, ceramics, buttons, and medicine, soda, liquor, and condiment bottles. Most of the identifiable maker's marks from the ceramics and bottles date after 1904 and the deaths of John, Jr. and Nannie Sites.

Despite the large amount of post-Sites artifacts, there are a small number of artifacts from these second excavations that may be linked with John Sites and the gun shop. These include glass bottles, architectural materials, and fish hooks. Several bottles were found with hand tooled lips, which normally have a pre-1903 manufacture date, and could have stored supplies in the powder room or shop. Four of these were medicine bottles that were embossed with "Rex," which were manufactured from 1880 to 1900 (Toulouse 1971:440). These marked bottles were used for different medicines, but one known example has a paper label for "St. Luke's Immediate Relief or Pain King" (Toulouse 1971:440). Nannie Sites died in 1900 from pneumonia. Were these bottles used in her medical care?

The architecture materials consist of hinges, locks, door knobs, and window glass. Some of these objects may have been part of the building materials for the powder room or from the remodeling of the adjacent Sites home between 1872 and 1875. There were 54 flat glass fragments collected from these excavations. Utilizing archaeologist Randall Moir's (1987) glass dating formula, there are four temporal peaks of construction or remodeling activity. The first is associated with the initial construction of the adjacent Sites home, which was built by 1837. The second is coupled with the purchase and then construction and/or remodeling by Sites, Jr. of his home and shop in late 1860s and 1870s. The next is linked to John, Jr.'s death in 1904 and the change of ownership. The final grouping is connected with mid to late 20th century remodeling and restoration efforts.

The most conclusive link to John Jr. from the exterior excavation is the recovery of four fishing hooks. As early as 1860, Sites, Jr. expanded his business to include a variety of sporting goods, which included a "*general stock of Guns, Pistols, Ammunition, and Fishing Tackle.*" He also sharpened knives and scissors, and repaired clocks and locks. A broken pair of scissors and two locks were recovered from these excavations.

Bray's (1967a:7) restoration recommendation for the gun shop's interior restoration was to use the findings from the excavation to reconstruct the forge and wooden floor. Period artifacts, he argued, should "be used in context wherever feasible," but should not be placed in an exhibit case for display in the shop. Instead, he suggested that objects that cannot be displayed within the recreated gun shop should be given to the Arrow Rock State Historic Site to establish a formal museum. Future excavations and archival materials could also be housed in this new museum, which unfortunately was not constructed until 1991, and may have inadvertently resulted in the mishandling and destruction of Bray's field notes from the gun shop excavations.

Restoration

The purpose of the 1967 excavation was to restore the shop as a 19th century gunsmith shop for educational programs. The first restoration effort occurred between 1966 and 1970. This was overseen by the Friends of Arrow Rock and accomplished through many volunteers from the community. The significant characters included Thomas Hall II, a physician from Kansas City, who provided the historical research on the Sites family, Victor Allen, who reconditioned old rifles, and Ted Hamilton (1960, 1968, 1976, 1980), the brother of Henry Hamilton and an expert on early frontier guns. The restoration goal was to re-establish this building into a working 19th century gun shop.

The gun shop building is a small two-story brick structure, measuring 15 x 25 feet, with a continuous limestone foundation and a common bond brick technique. At the time of its purchase in 1966, the gun shop had been transformed into an automobile garage, which had removed a second story balcony and cut a large door on the front elevation. Diagnostic architectural markers include a 1:4 brick header to footer ratio and an original window with six over six divided glass panes, which both argue an original construction date of 1850s and prior to Sites, Jr.'s purchase. The previous owner of the adjacent Sites home was L. Noble, a saddle maker who may have used this shop for his business. Dates from window glass fragments may also suggest a pre-Sites construction date.

Overall, the building was in poor condition in 1966 and needed a complete restoration, which consisted of reconstructing the front façade, brick tuck pointing, repairing or replacing the roof and windows, rebuilding the forge and wood floor, and fixing the interior plaster and lath. The first floor was then furnished as a gunsmith shop with “a leather bellows, anvil, vises, metal and wood working tools, at least two types of rifling rigs, stock blanks, and a display of all the necessary accessories John Sites sold to the shooter” (Hall 1969). The razed powder room was also reconstructed on top of its original foundation, but the interior was not recreated. The original function of the gun shop's second floor is unknown, but it may have been used for storage or as a living quarters for Wesley Brown, an African American servant of the Sites family in 1870 or for a gunsmith apprentice. If the gun shop was built prior to the Civil War, the second floor may have also housed an enslaved African-American.

The most unique component of the first gun shop restoration was the placement of a store sign in the shape of a large gun along the roof line. There is no known evidence that John Jr. utilized this marketing tool in Arrow Rock, but an 1858 photograph survives of John Sr.'s gun shop in Boonville, which includes a similar sign with John P. Sites labeled on the gun stock. The Friends of Arrow Rock decided to replicate this sign and use it in their restoration.

A second restoration was required in 1991 because the original refurbishment did not include a security system or any environmental controls, which led to moisture and mold damage. This second refurbishment was accomplished with a generous gift by Bryon C. Shutz of Kansas City, which included rehabilitation funds and a sizable gun collection that he inherited from his grandparents Max A. and Susan Christopher. Thomas Hall III followed in his late father's footsteps and led the second restoration with assistance from early firearm experts, Ted Hamilton, John L. Davis, and Jim Duncan. This second effort established vapor barriers along

the foundation, installed an alarm system, and put in a geothermal heating and cooling system. The latter was hidden within the reconstructed powder room.

The first floor was refurbished a second time with tools and cabinets, and the second floor was developed into an exhibit room with eight Sites guns on display, including six rifles, a pistol, and an anti-theft gun. Both John Sr. and Jr. used similar maker's marks, so in most cases it is unclear who made a specific gun. In December of 2007, the Friends of Arrow Rock acquired two additional Sites rifles, which will be incorporated into the gun shop exhibit.

The Sites house and gun shop are now open for guided tours and school programs throughout the year. Periodically, special demonstrations of 19th century gunsmith techniques or living history actors provide historical programs in the shop and home. For example, in September of 2002, Wallace Gusler, a master gunsmith at Colonial Williamsburg, visited Arrow Rock and provided a program on gunsmithing. After his visit, Gusler concluded, "to his knowledge, the Sites shop is the only historic gunsmith shop restoration in the original (not reconstructed) building and on its original location" in the United States (Hall III 2002).

The legacy of the Sites gun shop and Sites family has now been immortalized on a special Missouri license plate for the Friends of Arrow Rock that depicts a silhouette of the shop.

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