Letter to the Editor
Shotgun News
by
Glenn M. Kaye, MD

Hi guys,
You may have noticed the article on Peabody's in a recent issue of Shotgun News. It contained many errors, which I corrected in a letter to the editor. The following are those corrections, which you might want to have on hand if you read the article.

Dear Mr. Hunnicutt,

Thank you for returning my call. I have been a subscriber to Shotgun News for many years, and I particularly enjoy the feature articles on vintage and antique arms. My areas of expertise, in terms of collecting and research, are the Peabody rifle, the Remington rolling block rifle, and the Peabody-Martini rifle.

I was delighted when I received Shotgun News Volume 62, Issue 3, and saw a feature article on the Peabody rifle. But after reading it, I was disappointed at the many errors it contained. This came as no surprise to me when I noticed the author of the article, Paul Scarlata. While I know that Mr. Scarlata is a prolific contributor to Shotgun News, I don't mind telling you that in the realm of serious collecting and arms research, his articles are known for their lack of thorough research and paucity of in-depth knowledge of his subject.
The following are the most readily apparent errors in the Peabody article.

Page 62, first column:
"***Originally, the separate lever that lowered and raised the breechblock also cocked the hammer…."***

This is not true. There was a design that incorporated an internal lock mechanism (no outside hammer), which was attributed to Peabody, but is not supported by patent documents. It is not part of Henry Peabody's original design and patent.

Page 62, second column:
"Peabody's first rifles were chambered for … the .44 Henry rifmfire."

No Peabody rifles were ever chambered in that caliber, nor any production carbines. One sample carbine, submitted for the U.S. Army trials of 1864 was chambered for the .44-40-350 cartridge.

Page 62, third column:
"Shortly before the Civil War, Col. Richard Borden became a major shareholder, and later, company president (of the Providence Tool Co.)…"
"During the war, Peabody became an employee (of the Providence Tool Co.)…"
"Col. Borden gave him free rein to refine his rifle."

Col. Borden did become a major shareholder in the company, but took no significant role in running it. John B. Anthony, who was actually Treasurer, had the major role in running the Providence Tool Company during the gun-making years. Henry O. Peabody was never an employee of Providence Tool, and his design was not significantly changed after he sold the patent to Providence Tool.

Page 62, second column:
"Samples of a carbine firing the .50-60 Spencer cartridge were submitted to the U.S. Army's 1865 trials were rejected…"

The Peabody was not "rejected", and it was not chambered for the .50-60 Spencer cartridge. The first U.S. Army trial of a Peabody sample carbine was in June 1862, before the patent was bought by the Providence Tool Company. The report was very favorable, but the Army withheld any purchases as they had plans for more extensive competitive trials to select a standardized carbine. The caliber of this first sample of a Peabody carbine is apparently not documented in the report.

In August 1864, the Ordnance Board conducted further trials for the purpose of selecting a standard caliber of metallic cartridge. A Peabody carbine chambered for the .44-40-350 cartridge performed favorably in these trials, but further trails were planned to select a standard breechloading system for the Army.

In 1865, the Secretary of War convened a board, with Colonel T.T.S. Laidley as president, for the purpose of selecting a standard breechloading arm for the U.S. armed services. The Providence Tool Company (by then, owners of the Peabody patent) submitted sample Peabody rifles and carbines, which competed against sixty-five other designs. After extensive tests of durability, accuracy, weather resistance, and serviceability, the board selected the Peabody design as best suited for military service! If you read John B. Anthony's account of the last day of the trials, he clearly describes how the several finalists in the trials were successively loaded with increasing powder charges and balls until they were destroyed, save for the Peabody rifle, which was still functional even after being charged with eighty grains of powder and five balls. Anthony made plans to

provide carbines to the Army for field trials in 1865, but the War ended before the Ordnance Board submitted its final report. Further experimentation was conducted in 1866 with sample Peabody rifles in .45 and .50 caliber made at Springfield Armory, but the end of the War eliminated the urgency to purchase new arms. Still more trials were conducted in 1870 and 1872, including the various designs of muzzleloaders converted to breechloaders (Allin design, Snider, etc.).

Page 63, second column:
"The Principality of Romania placed an order for 30,000 rifles… identical to the Canadian rifles…"

The Romanian rifles (only 25,000 were delivered) were very different than the Canadian rifles, the former being a two-band rifle with 33-inch barrel, and the latter being a three-band musket with a 36-inch barrel. The Romanian rifles were, however, nearly identical to the Swiss contract rifles, both being two-band and having a quadrant rear sight. The Canadian rifles were unique as the only Peabody rifles in a 3-band, musket configuration, with a musket rear sight. All other contracts were the two-band, 33-inch barrel configuration.

Page 63, third column:
"Bulgaria, a Russia ally, received quantities of Romanian Peabody rifles that had been captured by the Turks, then re-captured by the Russians…"

I could find no reference substantiating this. Perhaps he has confused Roumanian Peabody rifles with Turkish Peabody-Martini rifles.

Page 63, third column, table:
"Specifications: Connecticut State Militia Peabody Rifle, Barrel Length: 35.9 inches"

Actually, the barrel length is 33-inches, which should have been obvious since the article is largely based on an example of this rifle.

Page 64, third column, and picture caption, second column:
"Another unique feature (of the Connecticut Peabody rifle) was the rear sight. While it consisted of the usual ramp and leaf, instead of the open sight notches… it utilized apertures."

The rifle pictured in the article has had the rear sight replaced with one from a Remington rolling block rifle, Spanish export model, in .43 Spanish Remington

caliber. The Connecticut Peabody rifles did have a unique rear sight, compared to the other Peabody rifles, in that it was windage adjustable. It had a finely serrated ramp for fine elevation adjustment, and a windage adjustable notched leaf, but certainly no apertures.

He might have also gone on to explain that another unique feature of the Connecticut Peabody rifles is that they have Alexander Henry rifling, a feature not seen in any other American-made firearm. The Connecticut Peabody's were originally chambered in .43 Spanish, as were the Massachusetts contract Peabody's, and issued with the usual rear sights, as they were taken from existing stores of Spanish model Peabody rifles. For unclear reasons, both of these state militia contracts were ordered without sling swivels (a feature also seen on the Sharps-Borchardt Model 1878 militia contract rifles). In 1877, an inspection found Connecticut rifles were "…ill-kept, rusty, unfit to shoot…" and were returned to the factory for refurbishing. At that time, the Providence Tool Company was producing .45 caliber barrels for the Turkish contract Peabody-Martini rifles (as ordered with Henry rifling). These barrels were retrofitted to the Peabody actions and chambered in .45-70 Gov't, along with upgraded rear sights, for the Connecticut Militia.

Page 64, second column:
"While his rifles were undergoing trials in Britain, Martini sought another manufacturer. He approached the Providence Tool Co. and in 1873 an agreement was reached whereby they would produce the Martini, or Martini-Peabody as the Providence firm referred to it, for sale outside of Britain."

This is pure fantasy. Martini never approached the Providence Tool Company in any such fashion. He was involved in a lawsuit for patent infringement, and freely admitted that his design was a modification of Peabody's design. The Providence Tool Company won no settlement, but was free to manufacture Martini rifles without paying royalties to Martini based on the fact that they owned the Peabody patent, i.e., the parent design. The Martini rifles manufactured at Providence are called Peabody-Martini's, not "Martini-Peabody's", as can be clearly seen by simply looking at the markings on any and every example of this rifle (or carbine), or any of the readily available reprints of original catalogs.

Page 64, second column, picture caption:

"A socket bayonet … The blade rode below the muzzle rather than to the side,…"

This is wrong; the angular socket bayonet on Peabody rifles lies on the right side, as on most rifles of the era. In the picture you can see that the cleaning rod extends the full length of the barrel, hence an under-riding bayonet would be impossible. The angular socket bayonet for the Peabody-Martini rifle does, however, lie underneath the barrel when affixed, and the cleaning rod ends an inch or so short of the muzzle to accommodate the bayonet in that position.

Page 64, third column:
"…re-blued sometime before I purchased it."

Actually the rifle has been completely refinished (and, as mentioned, the rear sight replaced). The receiver and lockplate have been "faux color-casehardened" by flame-bluing. While I don't fault the author for this per se, I certainly do think he could have borrowed a better example to feature in an article. He used this same Peabody rifle for pictures in an article published in Man At Arms. That article was on French arms of the Franco-Prussian War. It bespeaks the author's laziness to have used this rifle in such an article, as well. A proper example of a French contract Peabody rifle is the most commonly available Peabody rifle on the collector market, and the most easily found in nearly mint original condition.
In his closing comments, the author praises the functioning of the rifle he tested (no doubt the only example of a Peabody rifle he has ever seen), and rightly so. One would have expected at least some mention of the fact that the Peabody rifle performed in exemplary fashion in several U.S. Army Ordnance Board trials during and after the Civil War. The reports of those trials are available references. That the Peabody did not become the standard arm of the U.S. Army was more an economic and political issue than anything else.

Again, I appreciate the fact that you are interested in my comments, and have taken the time to return my call and request these details. Virtually all of this information is available in the seminal reference "Providence Tool Company Military Arms", by Edward Hull, which is based extensively on source research. I would appreciate your reply with your opinion and comments.

Sincerely,

Glenn M. Kaye, M.D.