



The Powder Horn

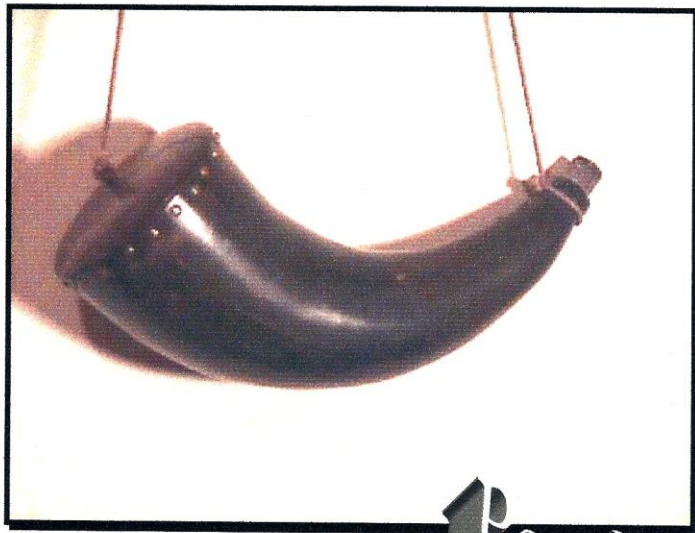
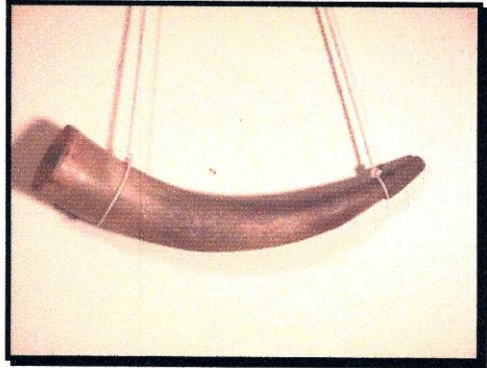


Our colonial period ancestors were often very resourceful when they needed things.

They looked around them for other things that were already available, and which they could alter and manipulate into the thing they needed. In an age when plastic bags and other mass-produced containers were not readily obtainable, one such thing that men needed was something in which to carry gunpowder. Gunpowder required two things: to be kept dry and to be easily accessible. Some gunpowder pouches were produced using leather, but they did not necessarily prevent dampness and after leather got wet a number of times it might harden and become brittle. Leather pouches were difficult to pour powder from, therefore they were primarily used to hold bullets. Metalsmiths manufactured powder flasks in

brass and silver, but they were expensive and out of the reach of most people.

The solution to the problem of finding an easily crafted and inexpensive container was the discovery that horns of cows (and some other animals) were hollow and would satisfy all the requirements of the needed containers. Powder kept in them would remain dry for a long time and the basic conical shape allowed for controlled pouring from the small end. Horns were easily cut and carved. A simple wooden disc could be made to plug the large end where the horn had been cut off the cow's skull. And the smaller end could likewise be plugged albeit with a smaller wooden stopper. Cow horns were popular as powder containers for both hunting



Powder Horns
from the collection of
Larry D. Smith

and military activities and were widely used in America throughout the colonial period. From the French and Indian War until muzzle loading guns were superseded by the more accurate breechloading and carbine rifles (*i.e.* circa the Civil War period) the use of powder horns was common.

The manufacture of a powder horn was somewhat simple and inexpensive. They were available in abundance at slaughter houses. The production of a powder horn started with sawing the horn from the cattle's head. It was then boiled so that the soft inner matter would be more easily removed. The boiling process started out with soaking the horn for several days in water, then the water in which the horn had soaked would be brought to a boil. As much of the soft inner matter as possible was scraped out with a knife. Then the horn would be scraped on the outside. The purpose of the inside scraping is self-evident; without a cavity in the horn you could not use it to store anything in. The scraping of the outside of the horn is not so readily apparent. At first glance it might seem that the outside was scraped primarily for appearance, but it had a different purpose. A thin layer of bone is somewhat translucent. The thinner the layer, the more translucent it would be. The craftsman who worked with bone, also known as a hornsmith, would scrape the horn as thin as possible without causing it to be too fragile. As the horn's wall grew thinner, it became more translucent, and that allowed the horn's user to be able to see the amount of powder that was in the horn. The tip of the small end of the horn was cut off, producing a pour spout. A small wooden peg was carved to fit in and plug the spout end. A wooden form, in the shape of a truncated cone, was carved for the other, larger end. The large wooden plug tended to be rounded, and often decoratively carved in horns from the American Revolutionary War period. Although not a steadfast rule, the plugs in later horns tended to be flat. The horn would be softened again in hot water and the conical shaped wooden plug was stuck in the large end and nailed in place. A leather strap would be nailed or otherwise fastened to the large end's wooden plug and tied around the smaller end's neck.

The production of a powder horn could be as simple as that. The designing of a decorated horn, though, could become very detailed and intricate, depending on the artistry and skill of the hornsmith. The powder horn shown in the photograph on the front page of this newsletter was scraped down to different levels to produce a simple design of light and dark areas. The horn shown in two views in the top, left and

bottom, left corners on the next page was uniformly scraped smooth. The pour spout was defined by additional carving and a simple incised design was applied to the large end. There are examples of powder horns in existence which have intricate scenes or maps engraved onto them. Such horns were undoubtedly engraved by the owners as a sort of personal diary of the campaigns and battles they had participated in. The tediousness of camp life between actual military actions would have been relieved, if ever so slightly, by engraving powder horns.

Due to the fact that powder horns were used continuously by our colonial ancestors through the colonial period and into the first half of the nineteenth century, not all powder horns that are found today can be dated to the American Revolutionary War period. There is one characteristic of the powder horns that help to identify possible Revolutionary War artifacts from later examples. The earliest powder horns exhibit very few (usually only four) iron nails holding the wooden plug in place in the large end of the horn. The nails were the most expensive part of the powder horn. Nails were generally scarce during the colonial period and could not be "wasted" on something like a powder horn. Until the 1830s, nails had to be made by hand; thereafter, machine-made nails became common and hornsmiths could afford to use more of them in the making of a powder horn.

The size of powder horns ranged anywhere from just three or four inches in length to one which reached over a foot in length. The smaller horns were most often used to load pistols, and therefore were used primarily by officers (who were the only soldiers who carried pistols). The larger, oversized powder horns were commonly called *mother horns* and tended to be utilized by artillery crews to prime their cannon. Another interesting aspect about powder horns is that they were either right or left handed. The oxen from which the horns had come had both right and left horns of course, curving gracefully in opposite directions. The Patriots wanted the natural curves to fit snugly at their sides and easily grasped when needed. A right handed Patriot would have wanted a horn that would curve toward the left and upward from the large end to the pour spout. The left handed Patriot would have wanted his horn to curve toward the right and upward from the large end to the pour spout. That way, not only would the horn hang in a sort of wrap-around fashion to the Patriot's body, but the tip would be angled upward and help to keep the powder from spilling out in case the spout plug

accidentally came out. The horn illustrated on the front page of this newlster was used by a right handed Patriot.

1st Quarterly Meeting

The 1st Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter, SAR will be held on Saturday, February 13, 1999 at the Kings Family Restaurant in downtown Altoona. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 12:00 noon.

1999 Meeting Schedule ~ Blair County Chapter

February 13	1st Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
February 20	George Washington's Birthday (DAR)	12:00 noon	Dave's Dream Party House (behind restaurant)
April 10	2nd Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
June 26	3rd Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
September 11	Constitution Day Dinner	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
October 23	4th Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
To be announced	Annual Meeting	To be announced	

DAR TO HOST THE 1999 CELEBRATION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY

George Washington's Birthday will be celebrated this year at Dave's Dream Party House on the 20th of February, 1999. The event will be hosted by the Colonel John Proctor Chapter, DAR. The Blair County Chapter, SAR is invited to attend. This year, the George Washington's Birthday celebration will be held at the Dave's Dream Party House in Hollidaysburg. Please note that the Dave's Dream Party House is located in a building apart from the Dream Restaurant; it is located on Blair Street, behind the Dunkin Donuts. Access can be made from Route 22, through the Dream Restaurant's parking lot.

The dinner/meeting is scheduled to begin at 12:00 noon. The meal will consist of: fruitcup, tossed salad, boneless chicken breast, mashed potatoes, steamed vegetables and coconut creme pie. The Reverend Ralph W. Hamer, III will be the featured speaker.

The cost of the dinner/meeting is \$13.50. It is requested that you make reservations with the Colonel John Proctor Chapter Treasurer, Mrs. Helen Louise Sellers prior to February 10, 1999. Mrs. Sellers may be reached by telephone at: 695-1735, or by mail at: 901 Penn Street, Hollidaysburg, PA 16648.

INTERNET NOTICE

I have started a homepage on the internet devoted to the history of Bedford County during the Revolutionary War period. The site is titled *Mother Bedford And The American Revolutionary War*. It resides on the America Online website and has the following address: <http://hometown.aol.com/ldshnn/page/index.htm>. I plan to keep it filled with a variety of subjects related to how the people of Bedford County responded to the War and the Patriot Cause. The structure imposed by the sites maintained by the NSSAR and PASSAR does not allow for much actual sharing of information about the American Revolutionary War. Those sites are geared primarily to promoting the SAR, so I plan to use my personal homepage as a forum to present information similar to what I present in this newsletter forum.