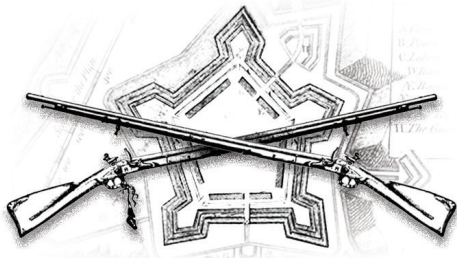


UP FRONT



FORT PITT

By Mike Burke, Exhibit Specialist,
Fort Pitt Museum

Our Favorite Things

In the late middle ages, when firearms began to supplant traditional weapons such as crossbows and pikes, the propellant (black powder) and projectile (the round lead or iron bullet) were carried separately and loaded down the muzzle of the gun prior to firing. Compared to drawing a bow, the process

was considerably more laborious, but while military musketeers soon came to rely on preloaded wooden—and later paper—charges to speed up the process, the loading procedure for most civilians remained largely unchanged for centuries.

The separate transportation of powder and ball required discrete containers for each. Round, lead balls were typically kept in a leather shot pouch slung over the shoulder or suspended from a waist belt, while the black powder required a more specialized vessel. Being highly explosive, prevention of ill-timed ignition was a top priority, as was keeping the powder—which tended to absorb atmospheric moisture, thereby rendering it useless—dry. Though a plethora of materials from leather to ivory performed reasonably well, to early modern folk, one material stood above the rest: horn.

Harvested from bovine animals such as cows, oxen, or buffalo following butchering, horn was cheap, plentiful, non-sparking, lightweight, tough, resistant to both heat and moisture, and thermoplastic in nature, meaning that it could be molded with the application of heat. While Europeans tended toward artfully molded horn flasks, their counterparts in the American colonies, perhaps with a nod toward simplicity, preferred horns in their natural state. As an added benefit, the gracefully curved shape of the unmodified horn fit perfectly against the sides of hunters, settlers, and Indians alike. Thus, the ubiquitous American powder horn was born.

While powder horns could be entirely undecorated, many were engraved with significant names, dates, rhymes, and other whimsical figures. These engraved horns provide



A few of the powder horns in the Fort Pitt Museum collection, including a black buffalo powder horn with vermillion-tinted engraving, and a honey colored horn with an early depiction of Pittsburgh, both made at Fort Pitt.

Fort Pitt Museum, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. All photos by the author.



Jacob de Gheyn, *Musketier*, Early 17th Century, Rijksmuseum, Netherlands. This engraving shows a typical European musketeer with wooden charges suspended from a shoulder belt. The small wood or horn flask on his hip held finely ground priming powder ignited by the long cord, or match, when the musket was fired.

a priceless record of the experiences and musings of common people, and in many cases, they represent the only surviving artifact associated with a given soldier, settler, or American Indian. Made by human hands and shaped by human events, they are eyewitnesses to history.

Our new exhibition, opening June 24, 2017, takes an in-depth look at these fascinating 18th-century objects. During our exploration, we will display some of the best examples from both public and private collections, with a special focus on horns made at Fort Pitt during the turbulent years between the French & Indian War and the American Revolution. We will examine the graphic influences absorbed by the average 18th-century person, and the science behind a horn's unique characteristics. We will even take you into the field to explore how 18th-century powder horns were made and engraved. It's a fascinating look at the history, technology, and the significance of some of our favorite objects, and we hope you will join us. ☀

Raw, unworked cattle horns. An interactive portion of the exhibition will show how 18th-century carvers made and engraved powder horns using only raw horns, a bit of wood, and a few basic hand tools.

