Gun Scarcity in the Early Republic?

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Michael Bellesîles's "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865," *Journal of American History,* 83:2 recently presented an intriguing revisionist view of how widespread firearms ownership was in the early Republic. Using antebellum American probate records, Bellesîles argues that firearms were owned by a minority of white males, and thus by a very small minority of all Americans until after the Mexican War.[1] This is a startling claim because of its implications with respect to how widespread hunting was—an activity generally associated with the early Republic, in both the popular and academic imagination. Adding to the provocative nature of this claim of gun scarcity, Bellesîles also asserts that professional market hunters did most hunting until the 1840s, when "gentlemen" aping the British upper classes took up sport hunting;[2] that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor because few people cared about shooting;[3] that the masses held a generalized contempt for gun ownership; and that most did their best to avoid owning a gun.[4] Bellesîles's claims are so contrary to traditional historical understanding that they deserve a careful evaluation.

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[1] Michael Bellesîles, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865," *Journal of American History*, 83:2 [September 1996], 428.

[2] Bellesîles, 438-41.

[3] Bellesîles, 436.

[4] Bellesîles, 438-39.

When Bellesîles's paper appeared, I was researching a related question: Why did eight Southern states adopt laws regulating concealed carrying of deadly weapons, decades in advance of the rest of the United States? Bellesîles's article suggested an intriguing possibility: did an increasing availability of firearms in America in the late antebellum period have something to do with the development of concealed weapon laws?

As I continued my research into the development of these laws, I found that firearms played only a secondary role; daggers, Bowie knives, and other edged weapons were the primary concern of legislators. In some cases, these laws regulating concealed weapons applied *only* to Bowie knives and "Arkansas toothpicks."[5] More importantly, as I read travel accounts, memoirs, and newspapers of the period, Bellesîles's pre-1840 America—one where few people owned guns, and few hunted for sport or to feed themselves—did not appear.

It is perhaps wise to start out by understanding what contemporary sources can and cannot tell us about a period. The truly mundane objects and concerns of life may receive no mention at all. Objects that are unusual may be mentioned precisely because they are uncommon. When examining sources from antebellum America, it is important to recognize that the *manner* in which writers mention firearms may tell us as much about their scarcity as the mention itself.

For example, a resident of modern New York City who encountered a deer on the streets would describe the experience far differently than might a resident of Cougar, Washington. The New Yorker would almost certainly comment on the presence of a deer with great amazement, perhaps writing a

[5] *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-Second General Assembly of the State of Tennessee: 1837-8* (Nashville, 1838), 200-201; *Acts Passed at the Called Session of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1837), ch. 11, 7.

letter to the newspaper, leaving it for future historians to cite as evidence. The resident of Cougar would find a deer in the streets so unremarkable that there would almost certainly be no written record. Yet we all recognize in which city today it is more likely that a deer would wander the streets.

Another problem with the use of what are necessarily impressionistic sources is the very human tendency to overgeneralize. If you were to ask members of the academic community how many Americans own guns today, they would probably severely underestimate the actual percentage based upon their own circle of acquaintances. The results might be somewhat different the other direction if you asked people at a meeting of the local NRA Members Council.

If we find writers in antebellum America identifying hunting and firearms as "common" or "widespread," it might well be argued that they have overgeneralized from their experiences. For that reason we might, in good faith, reject one writer's observations. We might especially reject the accuracy of an observation if the writer came from a nation where both firearms and hunting were rarer than in America. The novelty of seeing firearms more commonly than at home might cause such a foreigner to overgeneralize from a small number of personal experiences. We cannot, however, reject large numbers of independent observations for different regions of pre-1840 America from writers both American and foreign, without assuming some sort of shared delirium.

It is also important to distinguish those accounts that describe what *should* be from what *is*. Bellesîles quotes from an 1843 children's book that condemns guns as evidence that the public was "completely uninterested in firearms."[6]

[6] Bellesîles, 439.

McGuffey's 1836 *Eclectic First Reader*, another children's book, heartily condemns rum and whiskey,[7] but no one who has read *The Alcoholic Republic*[8] would consider McGuffey's condemnation to be evidence about the scarcity of alcohol in antebellum America. Quite the opposite! Those who wrote children's literature often intended to discourage behaviors that were too common among the adult population or that were inappropriate for children.

In my examination of the contemporary documents for mention of firearms, indications of firearms rarity are non-existent (though particular *types* of firearms might be rare). Indeed, of more than two dozen published travel accounts and memoirs of the early Republic which I read during my research into antebellum concealed weapon statutes, twenty-four mentioned firearms and sport or subsistence hunting as unsurprising; in very few accounts was there no mention of firearms and hunting. *None* of these sources claimed or even implied that privately owned firearms, subsistence hunting, or sport hunting were rare, unusual, or stigmatized. Marksmanship, according to many of the accounts, was highly prized, and high competence with firearms was widespread. Furthermore, these accounts make it appear that this was true for all regions of the United States.

Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama mentions the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events, incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also refers to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car.[9]

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[7] William H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic First Reader for Children* (Cincinnati, 1836; reprinted Milford, Mich., 1982), 138-40.

[8] W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979).

[9] Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-189, 203.

Philip Gosse, an English naturalist visiting Alabama in the 1830s provides one of the more complete descriptions of the attitude of the population towards hunting and firearms:

> Self-defence, and the natural craving for excitement, compel him to be a hunter; it is the appropriate occupation of a new, grand, luxuriant country like this, and one which seems natural to man, to judge from the eagerness and zest with which every one engages in it when he has the opportunity. The long rifle is familiar to every hand; skill in the use of it is the highest accomplishment which a southern gentleman glories in; even the children acquire an astonishing expertness in handling this deadly weapon at a very early age.[10]

Bellesîles's claims about the poor marksmanship of militias would startle Gosse:

> But skill as a marksman is not estimated by quite the same standard as in the old country. Pre-eminence in any art must bear a certain relation to the average attainment; and where this is universally high, distinction can be won only by something very exalted. Hence, when the young men meet together to display their skill, curious tests are employed, which remind one of the days of old English archery.... Some of these practices I have read of, but here I find them in frequent use. "Driving the nail" is one of these; a stout nail is hammered into a post about half way up to the head; the riflemen then stand at an immense distance, and fire at the nail; the object is to hit the nail so truly on the head with the ball as to drive it home. To hit at all on one side, so as to cause it to bend or swerve, is failure; missing it altogether is out of the question.[11]

Gosse also describes widespread hunting of squirrels, wild hog, and varmints with rifles. According to Gosse's account, the Alabamans hunted for sport, food, and to protect their crops from damage.[12]

A young Alabama lawyer that Alexis de Tocqueville spoke with in 1831 asserted, "There is no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society."[13] While it is possible that most of these concealed weapons were knives, it requires a strained reading of Tocqueville's text to hold that handguns were scarce.

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[10] Philip Gosse, *Letters from Alabama* (London, 1859), 130-131.
[11] Gosse, *Letters from Alabama*, 130-131.
[12] Gosse, *Letters from Alabama*, 132-133, 226-234, 256-272.
[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven, 1960), 103.

Tocqueville also presents evidence that widespread gun ownership was not peculiar to Alabama; he quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

> [T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting.... There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.[14]

Tocqueville also describes a usual "peasant's cabin" in Kentucky or Tennessee: "There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a newspaper...."[15] Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's 1818 journey through the Ozarks also provides evidence that, contrary to Bellesîles's claims, firearms ownership, sport hunting, and subsistence hunting, were all common. His description of the frontier settlement of Sugar-Loaf Prairie shows that guns and hunting were the norm:

> These people subsist partly by agriculture, and partly by hunting.... Hunting is the principal, the most honourable, and the most profitable employment. To excel in the chace [sic] procures fame, and a man's reputation is measured by his skill as a marksman, his agility and strength, his boldness and dexterity in killing game, and his patient endurance and contempt of the hardships of the hunter's life.... They... can subsist any where in the woods, and would form the most efficient military corps in frontier warfare which can possibly exist. Ready trained, they require no discipline, inured to danger, and perfect in the use of the rifle.[16]

At least some of Sugar-Loaf Prairie's hunting was commercial fur trapping, and so perhaps this was not typical of the region—but Schoolcraft's description of other frontier settlements shows that hunting was a common part of how settlers obtained their meat.[17] By the time frontier Ozark children reached

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[14] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 95.

[15] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 281.

[16] Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, intro. by Milton D. Rafferty, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks: Schoolcraft's Ozard Journal 1818-1819* (Fayetteville, Ark, 1996), 63.

[17] Schoolcraft, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks*, 54-56, 60-62, 72-73.

fourteen years of age, they "have completely learned the use of the rifle, the arts of dressing skins and making [moccasins] and leather clothes."[18] Early in his journey, much to Schoolcraft's chagrin, he failed

> to engage our hostess and her daughters in small-talk, such as passes current in every social corner; but, for the first time, found I should not recommend myself in that way. They could only talk of bears, hunting, and the like. The rude pursuits, and the coarse enjoyments of the hunter state, were all they knew.[19]

Schoolcraft also expresses amazement that at one isolated cabin, the lady of the house was home alone, and instructed Schoolcraft and his companion not only about "errors in our dress, equipments, and mode of travelling," but also "that our [shotguns] were not well adapted to our journey; that we should have rifles…." Schoolcraft and his companion were astonished "to hear a woman direct us in matters which we had before thought the peculiar and exclusive province of men."[20]

It is very clear that Ozark women as hunters surprised a New Englander like Schoolcraft, but his comments also imply that what was surprising was the sex of his instructor, not widespread knowledge of hunting and firearms. Perhaps Schoolcraft's New England was relatively free of guns and hunting in the period that Bellesîles describes, but clearly the Ozarks were not.

Harriet Martineau's account of mid-1830s America gives us reason to believe that firearms, target shooting, and sport hunting were common occurrences along the Mississippi, and unsurprising to her:

> While I was reading on the morning of the 12th, the report of a rifle from the lower deck summoned me to look out. There were frequent rifle-shots, and they always betokened our being near shore; generally under the bank, where the eye of the sportsman was in the way of temptation from some objection in the forest.[21]

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[18] Schoolcraft, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks,* 74.
[19] Schoolcraft, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks,* 54-55.
[20] Schoolcraft, *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks*, 23.
[21] Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London, 1838, reprinted New York, 1969), 2:20.

Visiting America at the same time was Charles Augustus Murray, who like Martineau was British. Murray's account repeatedly describes one of his reasons for visiting America: to hunt. Murray's hunting in America tells us nothing by itself; what makes his account useful is what it tells us about American firearms ownership and hunting. Only Murray's type of rifle was unusual in America, not that he hunted for sport, or that he had a firearm. Murray shows his understanding of how common both firearms ownership and sport hunting were in rural Virginia:

> I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, "I guess I could beat you to a mark."[22]

Bellesîles agrees that gun ownership was *more* common in the South than in the North, but even Northern accounts of life in the period 1800-1840 clearly show that the U.S. was already a "gun culture." *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* describes Fortescue Cuming's journey through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky from 1807 to 1809. Throughout his journey Cuming mentions, with no particular surprise, widespread use of guns for sport, subsistence hunting, and self-defense. Cuming also distinguishes between subsistence hunting and hunting for market, and still suggests that subsistence hunting was common, not rare.[23] In Kentucky, Cuming describes how abundant the wildlife of the area remained, even after settlement by telling us "that little or no bread was used, but that even the children were fed

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[22] Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London, 1839, reprinted New York, 1974), 118-119.

[23] Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country Through the States of Ohio and Kentucky; A Voyage Down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers*… (Pittsburgh, 1810), 30, 42, 114, 118, 135.

on game; the facility of gaining which prevented the progress of agriculture…."[24]

Even though Cuming was a hunter,[25] he expressed his admiration for the marksmanship of Western Pennsylvanians:

> Apropos of the rifle.—The inhabitants of this country in common with the Virginians, and all the back woods people, Indians as well as whites, are wonderfully expert in the use of it: thinking it a bad shot if they miss the very head of a squirrel, or a wild turkey, on the top of the highest forest tree with a single ball; though they generally load with a few grains of swan shot, with which they are equally sure of hitting the head of the bird or animal they fire at.[26]

Cuming also makes occasionally references to use of firearms for law enforcement. When two Western Pennsylvanians discovered a murder (committed with a gun and a knife), they "rode on to the next house and gave an alarm, which soon mustered the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who arming themselves, went in pursuit of the murderers. One of them resisting, when discovered, was shot, and the other apprehended…."[27]

Cuming also describes meeting in Kentucky "straggling parties above fifty horsemen with rifles… at a militia muster," apparently mostly drunk, which led to fights later in the evening.[28] Militias armed with cornstalks and brooms were more the rule away from the frontier, as Bellesîles claims, but we have examples like this one that suggest that frontier militias in 1807 were capable of showing up armed with rifles, and this was not surprising to a traveler.

Ten years later, in 1817-18, Elias Pim Fordham, a British immigrant to America, describes crossing through Western Pennsylvania and "the Cove Mountains & the Sidelong Hills. The two last are infested with banditti, after whom about 40 young men went with their rifles about a week since. These

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[24] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 156.
[25] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 42.
[26] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 30.
[27] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 54.
[28] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, 209.

men have not yet attacked travellers, but they plunder farmers of their clothes and cattle."[29] While Fordham does not tell us how common rifles were in this area, that such a large party would go out armed looking for mere thieves suggests that there was no shortage of young men with rifles. Fordham also found nothing surprising about them having rifles. Similarly, while staying at Princeton, Indiana, Fordham reports that, "Yesterday 8 men on foot armed with pistols and rifles came into the town from Harmony. They had been in pursuit of an absconded debtor from Vincennes."[30] There was no problem persuading eight men armed with pistols and rifles to pursue a mere debtor, and Fordham found nothing surprising about them being so armed.

Fordham describes an associate judge as carrying "a pair of pistols at his saddle bow; and altogether [he] looks more like a Dragoon Officer in plain clothes, than a Judge."[31] There is nothing remarkable about the pistols; what is remarkable, at least to a transplanted Englishman, is that a *judge* was carrying them. If a tiny minority of Americans owned guns in antebellum America, as Bellesîles claims, Fordham's description suggests that it was not confined to the upper classes.

Fordham also describes a party in the Illinois Territory which had excluded some "vulgar" party-crashers. Some of Fordham's party "armed themselves with Dirks (poignards worn under the clothes)" to resist another such attempt, but later, "In going away some of the gentlemen were insulted by the rabble, but the rumour that they were armed with dirks and pistols prevented serious mischief."[32] While the antecedent of "they were armed" is somewhat unclear,

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[29] Elias Pim Fordham, ed. Frederic Austin Ogg, *Personal Narrative: Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817-1818* (Cleveland, 1906), 60-61.

[30] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 137.

[31] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 155.

[32] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 219-220.

that it prevented serious mischief by "the rabble" suggests that Fordham's party were the ones armed. Perhaps this might be used as evidence that firearms were owned by only a minority of the population, but it certainly suggests that pistols (a subset of firearms) were weapons commonly enough carried to be a realistic deterrent to "the rabble." (That the weapons carried by Fordham's party were merely a "rumour" shows that they carried their weapons concealed—a practice not regulated in Indiana until 1820.)[33]

Fordham's arrival at St. Vincennes in Indiana in 1817 gives us some idea of what was considered appropriate paraphernalia for traveling in the Indiana wilderness. "We were furnished with guns and tomohawks [*sic*], and all things necessary to encamp in the woods…." Fordham also describes Indiana's "back-wood settlers, who are half hunters, half farmers."[34] He divides the frontier population of Illinois into four categories:

> 1st. The hunters, a daring, hardy, race of men, who live in miserable cabins, which they fortify in times of War with the Indians, whom they hate but much resemble in dress and manners.... But their rifle is their principal means of support. They are the best marksmen in the world, and such is their dexterity that they will shoot an apple off the head of a companion. Some few use the bow and arrow.
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> 2nd. class. First settlers;—a mixed set of hunters and farmers....[35]

Fordham's letter to his brother back in Britain describes his style of dress when traveling, and in a manner that suggests that this is the norm in Illinois Territory: "I wish you could see your brother mount his horse to morrow morning. I will give you a sketch. A broad-brimmed straw hat,—long trousers and moccasins,—shot pouch and powder horn slung from a belt,—rifle at his back, in a sling…."[36] Fordham also observed that "should a war break out on our frontiers, I hope that there is not nor will be, a young Englishman among

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[33] *Laws of the State of Indiana, Passed at the Fourth Session of the General Assembly* (Jeffersonville, Ind., 1820), 39.
[34] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 95-96.
[35] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 125-126.
[36] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 109.

us, who would hesitate to turn out with his gun and blanket."[37] It appears that Fordham assumed that every "young Englishman" settled on the Illinois frontier would own at least one gun appropriate for war.

While Fordham describes people who hunted at least partly to sell the game to others,[38] he also gives us evidence that hunting for one's own table was common. Fordham's account of a Christmas Day village feast lists a variety of game being cooked, including wild turkeys. That the game were hunted, not trapped, may be inferred from the following description:

> The young men had their rifles out, and were firing feux de joi almost all the preceding night, all the day till late into the evening. It reminded me of Byron's description of the Moslems firing at the feast of the Ramadan in Constantinople—but we backwoodsmen never fire a gun loaded with *ball into* the town,—only from all parts of it, out towards the woods.[39]

Indeed, Fordham's account is filled with descriptions of settlers (including himself) engaged in hunting for sport and for food.[40] Most significantly of all, with respect to the supposed rarity of firearms in America, Fordham wrote a letter to his brother telling him what he should bring to America, and what was not needed: "Do not bring with you any English rifles, or indeed any firearms but a pair of pistols. A good rifle gunlock would be valuable."[41] While pistols might be expensive or rare, firearms in general were readily available and were as cheap or cheaper than in England, which was at the time a major firearms manufacturing nation. (Twenty years later a Norwegian immigrant told those considering immigration to bring, "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."[42] This suggests that rifles were

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[37] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 205.
[38] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 143.
[39] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 147.
[40] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 181, 200, 213, 223-225.
[41] Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, ed. Ogg, 237.
[42] Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (1926; Freeport,

in demand in frontier America by 1838, enough to justify the cost of bringing them from Norway.)

The Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright described a journey through the Alleghany Mountains to Baltimore in April, 1820 that shows that pistols were not startling discoveries, even when found lying in the road:

> In passing on our journey going down the mountains, on Monday, we met several wagons and carriages moving west. Shortly after we had passed them, I saw lying in the road a very neat pocket-pistol. I picked it up, and found it heavily loaded and freshly primed. Supposing it to have been dropped by some of these movers, I said to brother Walker, "This looks providential;" for the road across these mountains was, at this time, infested by many robbers, and several daring murders and robberies had lately been committed.[43]

Cartwright then recounted his use of this pistol shortly thereafter to defend himself against a robber.[44] On his return trip, he described his carrying of a pistol to defend himself from robbery during a dispute at a toll gate. The owner of the toll gate "called for his pistols," apparently with the aim of shooting at Cartwright.[45] In other incidents from the 1820s, Cartwright makes references to pistols in a manner that suggests that they were not at all unusual items, even if the *use* of them was dramatic.[46]

Rev. William C. Smith's frontier account, *Indiana Miscellany*, describes settlers who are heavily armed with guns for self-defense against Indians—because the Indians commonly carried guns.[47] Smith describes the morality of the early Indiana settlements by telling us "it was a rare thing to hear… the report of a hunter's gun on the holy Sabbath day…."[48] Smith thus implies that gunfire was *not* rare the rest of the week.

N.Y., 1971), 99.

[43] Peter Cartwright, W. P. Strickland, ed., *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright The Backwoods Preacher* (Cincinnatti, n.d.), 200.

[44] Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 201.

[45] Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 206.

[46] Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 223-225.

[47] William C. Smith, *Indiana Miscellany* (Cincinnati, 1867), 18-22.

[48] Smith, *Indiana Miscellany*, 39.

During the War of 1812, Smith tells us of a shortage of provisions for the settlers, who had fortified their villages,

> but usually they had plenty of meat. All the men were excellent hunters—some of them real experts. The country abounding in game, they kept the forts well supplied with venison and bear-meat.... When considered at all admissible to venture outside the fort to labor, the men went in company, taking their trusty rifles with them.... Some of [the women] could handle the rifle with great skill, and bring down the game in the absence of their husbands....[49]

New Yorker John Stillman Wright's acidic *Letters from the West* (1819) describes the early farmers of southern Indiana as, "mostly, of indolent slovenly habits, devoting the chief part of their time to hunting, and drinking whiskey...."[50] While Wright is not explicit that these farmers hunted with *firearms*, he is explicit that hunting was not an upper class phenomenon in southern Indiana, nor was it rare.

Sandford C. Cox's *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* describes Indiana in the 1820s and 1830s using the journals and memoirs of the early settlers. The settlers use guns for hunting, self-defense, assisting law enforcement, and criminally. The references to firearms and subsistence hunting in Cox's book are so common that there is no point in giving page numbers, nor do the journal-keepers and memoir-writers give the reader any reason to be surprised about the presence or use of guns.[51]

Baynard Rush Hall describes frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816) in a lighthearted way, but his account also makes it clear that hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh meat at very little expense.[52] Hall devotes an

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[49] Smith, *Indiana Miscellany*, 77-78.

[50] John Stillman Wright, *Letters from the West; or a Caution to Emigrants* (Salem, N.Y., 1819; reprint, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1966), 21.

[51] Sandford C. Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (1860; reprinted Freeport, N.Y., 1970).

[52] Robert Carleton [Baynard Rush Hall], *The New Purchase, or Early Years in the Far West*, 2nd ed. (New Albany, Ind., 1855), 66, 82, 139-49, 153, 160-3, 375, 448-51.

entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

> Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated....[53]

He also describes target shooting matches as common, and takes pride in participating in a match that he happened upon where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As the president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the ground.[54] Target shooting matches were apparently quite common on the frontier, contrary to Bellesîles. (Similarly, Richard Flower, a British immigrant to the Illinois Territory in 1820-21, describes Sunday amusements at Albion: "the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport....")[55])

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience. They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but rifle matches they understood.[56] Hall also describes the use of rifles both by settlers pursuing criminals, and by criminals trying to avoid arrest.[57]

Hunting and target shooting were common enough that Hall describes non-lethal hunting and target shooting accidents.[58] Hall also makes occasional references to pistols with no indication that they are either rare or regarded

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[53] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 100-113.

[54] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 104.

[55] Richard Flower, *Letters from the Illinois, 1820-1821: Containing An Account of the English Settlement at Albion and Its Vicinity*... (London, 1822), 14.

[56] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 228-30.

[57] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 189-90.

[58] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 262-3.

with any particular concern.[59] Yet Hall's references to pistols are far exceeded by mentions of rifles and shotguns.

Harriet Williams Sawyer of Maine described life in 1840 Indiana, and complained about how the Lord's Day was treated:

> The Sabbath in the West is much desecrated; trades are transacted; labor, it is true, is generally suspended, but the Sabbath is regarded by most as a day of recreation. Hunting and intemperance are common.[60]

During this same period "Christmas shooting" took the same place on the frontier that Christmas caroling did in the America of my youth. Gert Göbel's description of the Missouri frontier in the 1830s tells us that at Christmas, there were no religious observances, and no gifts exchanged:

> There was just shooting. On Christmas Eve, a number of young fellows from the neighborhood banded together, and, after they had gathered together not only their hunting rifles but also old muskets and horse pistols from the Revolutionary War and had loaded them almost to the bursting point, they went from house to house. They approached the house as quietly as possible and then fired a might volley, to the fright of the women and children, and, if someone did not appear then, another volley no doubt followed. But usually the man of the house opened the door immediately, fired his own gun in greeting and invited the whole company into the house.... After everyone had chatted for a little while, the whole band set out for the next farm, where the same racket started up anew. In this way, this mischief was carried on until morning, and since, as a rule, a number of such bands were out and about, one could often hear all night the roaring and rattling of guns from all directions.[61]

Accounts of similar practices—apparently of German origin—appear in many states, both frontier and settled, in the 1830s.[62]

Rebecca Burlend's narrative of the Missouri frontier in 1831 describes hunting game birds in a way that suggests it was not only common among British emigrants, but also among Americans. Her husband had successfully hunted a turkey, and she had it mostly ready for Sunday dinner, when their

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[59] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 449, 452.

[60] Shirley S. McCord, ed., *Travel Accounts of Indiana, 1679-1961* (Indianapolis, 1970), 183.

[61] Gert Gõbel, *Länger als ein Menschenleben in Missouri* (St. Louis, [1877]), 80-81, quoted in Walter L. Robbins, "Christmas Shooting Rounds in America and Their Background," *Journal of American Folklore,* 86:339 (1973) 48-52.

[62] Robbins, 49-51.

guest arrived and expressed surprise, "as those birds are difficult to obtain with a common fowling-piece…." (Mr. Burlend had bagged a vulture, not a turkey—definitely not fit for the table.)[63]

The frontier, of course, would have more reason for firearms ownership than settled areas of the Eastern U.S., but even from the most settled parts of pre-1840 America we have memoirs and travel accounts that treat gun ownership as unremarkable. Charles H. Haswell's *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* describes New York City life from 1816 to 1860. The incidents and tone suggest that guns, even in the 1830s, were an ordinary, not contemptible part of life. Haswell's entry for November 1830 tells of shooting a "ruffed grouse" at 144th Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan, "and it was believed by sportsmen to be the last one to suffer a like fate on the island." Haswell describes the opening of commercial hunting facilities on Manhattan. This suggests that sport hunting on Manhattan was already common at a time when Bellesîles argues that sport hunting was still unusual in America.[64]

Haswell's memoirs also describe a widely reported 1830 incident in the District of Columbia. A prominent Washington newspaper editor, Duff Green, drew a concealed handgun to deter attack by a New York City newspaper editor at the U.S. Capitol. Haswell's account of subsequent events suggests that instead of regarding this as dastardly, criminal, unrespectable, or surprising, Green's acquaintances engaged in good-natured ribbing of him about the incident.[65] Green appears to have earned no infamy for his actions; two years later he published the 1830 census for the federal government.[66]

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[63] Rebecca Burlend, *A True Picture of Emigration: Or Fourteen Years in the Interior of North America*… (London, 1848), 29-30.

[64] Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* (New York, 1896), 261.

[65] Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian,* 244.

[66] *Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, 1830* (Washington, 1832).

Haswell's February 1836 entry describes a mob that gathered to burn "Saint Patrick's Church in Mott Street." The effort came to naught, however, because "the Catholics… not only filled the church with armed men" but put so many men on the walls, presumably armed with long guns, that he described the walls as "crenellated."[67] The attempt to burn the church is worthy of note; that the church was defended with armed men was worthy of note; that there were men armed, apparently with long guns, is treated as unsurprising.

Frances Wright is certainly one of the most extremely pro-American British visitors of the early Republic, and her claims should be regarded with somewhat greater care than many of the other visitors. Nonetheless, her assertion, "Every man, or nearly every man, in these states knows how to handle the axe, the hammer, the plane, all the mechanic's tools in short, besides the musket, to the use of which he is not only regularly trained as a man but practised as a boy"[68] suggests that the use of firearms was widespread. Even granting hyperbole on Wright's part, firearms knowledge was apparently common in America.

Two different travelers in 1830s America make reference to emigrants headed to the frontier, and in a way that suggests that rifles were the norm, not the exception. The Anglo-Irishman Thomas Cather describes while crossing Michigan in 1836:

> [E]migrants from the old states on their way to settle in the Western forests. Each emigrant generally had a wagon or two, drawn by oxen. These wagons contained their wives, children, and *rest of their baggage.* The man walked by the side of his team with his rifle over his shoulder….[69]

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[67] Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian,* 312-313.

[68] Frances Wright, ed. Paul R. Baker, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 150.

[69] Thomas Cather, Thomas Yoseloff, ed., *Voyage to America: The Journals of Thomas Cather* (New York, 1961; reprinted Westport, Conn., 1973), 132.

The British naval officer and novelist Frederick Marryat similarly described North Carolinians emigrating west in 1837:

> These caravans consist of two or three covered wagons, full of women and children, furniture, and other necessaries, each drawn by a team of horses; brood mares, with foals by their sides, following; half a dozen or more cows, flanked on each side by the men, with their long rifles on their shoulders; sometimes a boy or two, or a half-grown girl on horseback.[70]

While neither writer explicitly identifies these scenes as common, the tone of both suggests that the presence of rifles was typical.

Marryat's account of his journey to America includes many references to his own hunting with firearms, but this is not necessarily indicative of how common hunting was by Americans. Marryat does, however, make a number of references to Americans hunting and shooting that suggest that there was nothing particularly unusual about it. He describes how hunting was the "principal amusement of the officers" at Fort Snelling. Captain Scott, one of those officers, had a reputation as a very great marksman, based on his ability to throw two potatoes in the air, and puncture both of them with a single rifle bullet.

Nor was Captain Scott's hunting a peculiarity of Fort Snelling being on the frontier. Marryat recounts Scott's hunting anecdotes as a 12-year-old in Vermont, and these accounts indicate that not only was hunting common in Scott's youth in Vermont, but so was gun ownership.[71]

The sources from the early Republic certainly provide persuasive evidence that firearms and hunting were the norm—not the exception. Is this simply a characteristic of the sources that I examined? No. Careful examination of Bellesîles's evidence shows that there is less present than a cursory reading

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[70] Frederick Marryat, ed. Jules Zanger, *Diary in America* (London, 1839; reprinted Bloomington, Ind., 1960), 288-9.

[71] Marryat, *Diary in America*, 237-42.

suggests. Bellesîles quotes an article from the *Atheneum* that warns that "citizens of Philadelphia interested in a walk in the country" should walk well out of town "'to avoid the showers of shot' sent skyward by a few overenthusiastic bird hunters."[72] If hunting were the rarity that Bellesîles claims, from whence came these "showers of shot"? In an era before repeating shotguns, it would take a lot of hunters to create "showers of shot."

Bellesîles has certainly provided some statistical evidence to back up his claim about the scarcity of firearms in antebellum America, and literary evidence alone seems insufficient to disprove his claim. Another model for examining gun scarcity is to look at manufacturing of firearms, related goods, and the number of gunsmiths. Bellesîles suggests that gun manufacturing and gunsmithing were scarce activities in antebellum America: "Most communities lacked gunsmiths and had to rely on blacksmiths to make the necessary repairs to guns…."[73]

It is necessarily difficult to determine much about the national production of firearms and related products from isolated references in travel accounts. Nonetheless, if we find references to gun manufacturing and gunsmithing in travel accounts, we must come to one of two conclusions: those travelers just happened to visit very atypical parts of the United States; or gun manufacturing and gunsmithing was not that unusual.

Cuming lists two gunsmiths in 1807 Pittsburgh.[74] Fearon includes a table of "Manufactories in and near the city of Pittsburgh, in the State of Pennsylvania, in the year 1817" listing 14 men employed as "Gun-smiths, and bridlebit-makers" with a yearly value of $13,800.[75]

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[72] Bellesîles, 439.
[73] Bellesîles, 443.
[74] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country,* 222.
[75] Fearon, *Sketches of America,* 203.

The most complete statement of firearms manufacturing comes from the 1810 manufacturing census. Inconsistencies in the data clearly demonstrate that this survey was haphazard and incomplete. As an example, Massachusetts manufactured 19,095 guns classified as "other"—but listed no gun manufactories, and no gunsmiths. Only nine of the seventeen states are listed as having made any guns at all, and there is no firearms manufacturing listed in any of the five territories, or the District of Columbia. Only Maryland, South Carolina, and the territories of Orleans and Louisiana reported any gunsmiths. In spite of the 1807 and 1817 data from Fearon and Cuming for Pittsburgh showing a growing community of gunsmiths there, there are no gunsmiths listed in Pennsylvania at the 1810 manufacturing census. New York, at the time one of the great manufacturing states of the Union, showed no gun manufacturing or gunsmithing at all. Even with these clearly incomplete records, however, there were 117 "Gun manufactories" in the U.S., 37 gunsmiths (a severe undercount, based on Fearon and Cuming's reports for 1807 and 1817 for Pittsburgh alone), and 42,853 firearms manufactured.[76]

It is always hazardous to make comparisons between such different times as 1810 and the present. Firearms manufactured in 1810 were far less precise than modern weapons, and of shorter useful lifetime as well. During this period, "it was assumed that a musket would have a life of 12 years in the regular service or 10 years if in use by State militia."[77] Nonetheless, it is intriguing to compare 1810 production rates per population with modern production rates.

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[76] Albert Gallatin, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States of America* (Washington, 1812), 11. Secretary of the Treasury Tench Coxe's admission that the manufacturing census was very incomplete can be found in Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 19.

[77] Berkeley R. Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition in the United States Service, 1776-1865* (Washington, 1956), 47.

The *minimum* 1810 U.S. production rate was 592 guns per 100,000 people. By comparison, in 1969, U.S. production of firearms was only 2,605 guns per 100,000 people.[78] To add to the impressiveness of this per capita gun manufacturing rate, the United States in 1969 had an army that approached 1% of the total population, and was actively at war in Vietnam; by comparison, in the 1820s, the United States had an army of 6000 men out of a population of 13,000,000[79]—or 0.04%. In spite of a far larger military, with a active war consuming small arms, the United States manufactured *no* more than 4.5 times as many small arms per capita in 1969 as it did in 1810. The 1810 manufacturing census is unquestionably incomplete in a way that the 1969 manufacturing records are not; it is likely that the *actual* number of guns manufactured in 1810 would raise the per capita rate close to 1969 levels.

Gunpowder production data also suggests that Bellesîles's claims about gun scarcity require considerably more evidence to be persuasive. Cuming's description of 1807 Lexington, Kentucky lists six gunpowder mills "that make about twenty thousand pounds of powder yearly."[80] Ten years later, Henry Bradshaw Fearon's *Sketches of America* describes gunpowder mills in the same area that made £9000 worth of goods annually.[81] U.S. exports of gunpowder for 1817 were worth $356,522.[82] While the gunpowder manufacturing data in the 1810 census appears to be more complete than the firearms data, there are still some states where the census gives a total dollar valuation of gunpowder

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[78] James D. Wright, Peter H. Rossi, and Kathleen Daly, *Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America* (New York, 1983), 30, provides production and importation figures from which this data was calculated.

[79] William G. Ouseley, *Remarks on the Statistics and Political Institutions of the United States, with Some Observations on the Ecclesiastical System of America, Her Sources of Revenue, &c* (1832; reprinted Freeport, N.Y., 1970), 32. That the U.S. Army was still only 6000 men in the 1830s is confirmed in Lorenzo de Zavala, Wallace Woolsey trans., *Journey to the United States of North America* (Austin, Tex., 1980), 23, and Murray, 1:176.

[80] Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country,* 163.

[81] Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States* (London, 1818; reprint New York, 1969), 245.

[82] Fearon, *Sketches of America,* 383.

manufactured, but not a total weight. Even with these missing numbers, the U.S. manufactured at least 1,397,111 pounds of gunpowder in 1810.[83]

This data is somewhat less useful than it first appears, since Americans used gunpowder not only for small arms, but also cannon, and blasting. Coarse-grained gunpowder was better suited to cannon than to small arms.[84] Unfortunately, there is nothing in the 1810 census data that allows the historian to distinguish for which weapons the gunpowder was manufactured, or to distinguish that intended for weapons from that used for demolition.

It also seems impossible at this late date to make any authoritative statements distinguishing military from civilian consumption of gunpowder in the period 1800-1840, but during the American Revolution, 2,349,210 pounds of gunpowder were consumed (of which 2/3 was imported),[85] or about 335,000 pounds of gunpowder per year. Per capita U.S. production of gunpowder in 1810 was at least comparable to per capita U.S. military consumption during the American Revolution. At a minimum, the burden of proof is on those who argue against widespread gun use during this period to explain this astonishing rate of gunpowder production in peacetime.

Bellesîles has presented some interesting probate data, but to believe that firearms in the early Republic were rare, and hunting confined largely to market hunters requires more than a rewriting of American history textbooks; it requires a rewrite of dozens of contemporary accounts as well.

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[83] Gallatin, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States of America*, 33.
[84] Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition*, 20-22.
[85] Lewis, *Small Arms and Ammunition*, 24.

Check back at http://www.ggnra.org/cramer for an expanded criticism of Bellesiles's book *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Knopf, 2000) shortly.