

# THE FLINTLOCK HAWKEN



*Ashley Hawken Copy.*

## - A DISCUSSION -

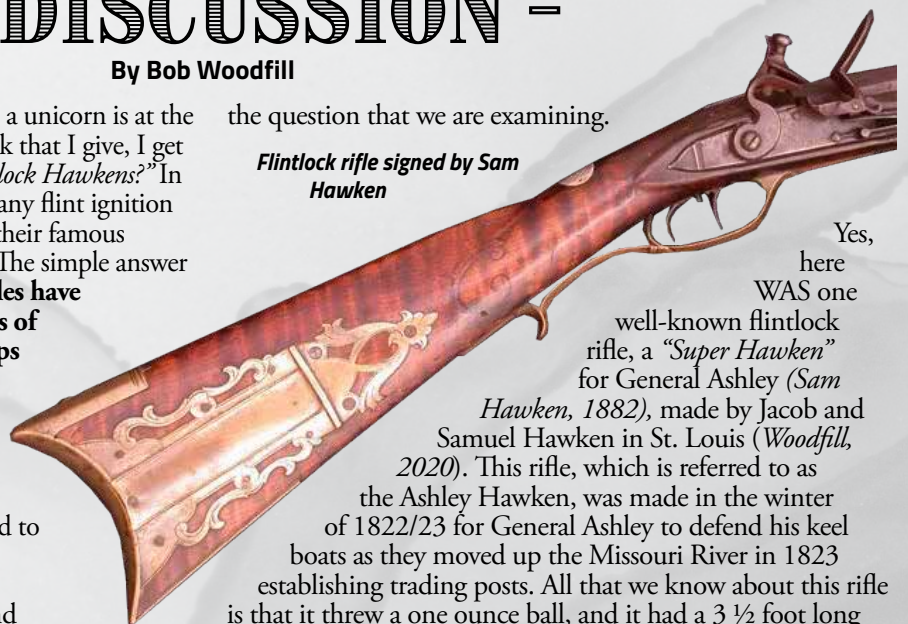
By Bob Woodfill

A flintlock Hawken rifle is about as illusive as a unicorn is at the Kentucky Derby. Just about every seminar talk that I give, I get asked the same question, “*Were there any flintlock Hawkens?*” In other words, did the Hawken brothers make any flint ignition rifles in St. Louis before they started making their famous half-stocked percussion rifles in about 1830. The simple answer is that **experts and collectors of Hawken rifles have NOT found any original flint ignition rifles of Hawken manufacture with the barrel stamps of either J. Hawken or J&S. Hawken on them.** Therefore, we must ask the additional questions, “*Why not? Were there none made? Have they all been worn out and lost? or have they just not been discovered?*” To get reasonable answers to these questions, we need to look at some early Hawken history.

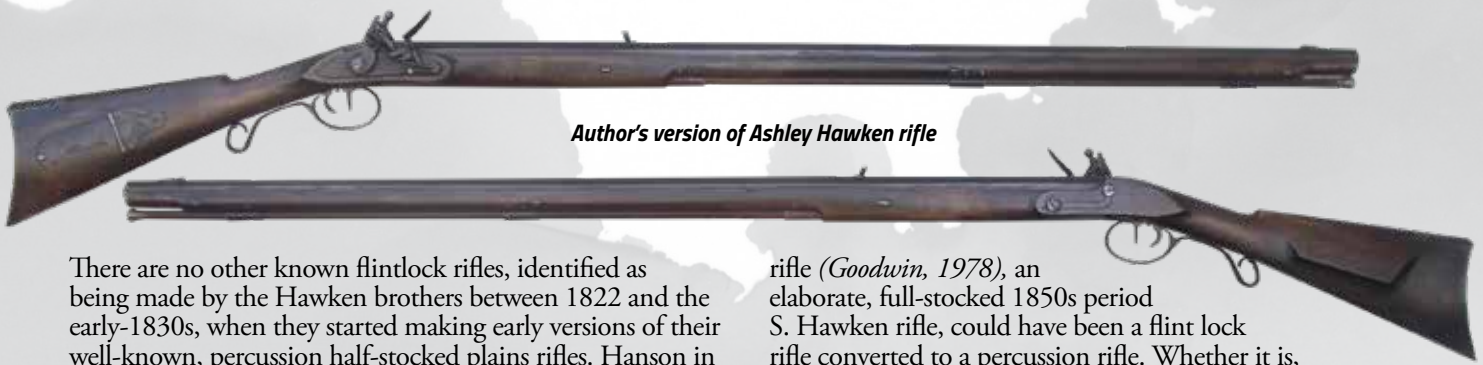
Jacob Hawken came to St. Louis in 1818 and Samuel Hawken in 1822. Both brothers worked at the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and both were familiar with the flint lock system. There is an existing Pennsylvania-style flintlock rifle made prior to 1822 and signed by Samuel Hawken, when he had a gun shop in either Hagerstown, Maryland or Xenia, Ohio, but that is not

the question that we are examining.

*Flintlock rifle signed by Sam Hawken*



Yes, here WAS one well-known flintlock rifle, a “*Super Hawken*” for General Ashley (*Sam Hawken, 1882*), made by Jacob and Samuel Hawken in St. Louis (*Woodfill, 2020*). This rifle, which is referred to as the Ashley Hawken, was made in the winter of 1822/23 for General Ashley to defend his keel boats as they moved up the Missouri River in 1823 establishing trading posts. All that we know about this rifle is that it threw a one ounce ball, and it had a 3 ½ foot long barrel. Since it was made before 1830, it had to be of flintlock ignition. It is unknown how the barrel might have been marked nor the fate of the rifle. The author made his version of the Ashley Hawken utilizing the available information on the rifle and rifle components that would have been available in 1822 (*Woodfill, 2017*).



*Author's version of Ashley Hawken rifle*

There are no other known flintlock rifles, identified as being made by the Hawken brothers between 1822 and the early-1830s, when they started making early versions of their well-known, percussion half-stocked plains rifles. Hanson in his comprehensive 1979 book, *The Hawken Rifle—Its Place in History*, suggests that between 1822 and the early-1830s, Jacob and then Samuel Hawken were fully engaged in the repair and manufacture of items for the fur trade. Invoices show work for making horse shoes, repairing traps, repairing guns, etc. Any of the rifle repair during this 1822-1830 period could have been work on flintlock rifles. No evidence shows that any flintlock rifles of Hawken manufacture were made, nor were any flintlock barrels stamped *J. Hawken* or *J&S. Hawken* during this period (Gordon, 2007). Both Jacob and Sam also had real estate holdings in the area, and they were busy trying to make a living.

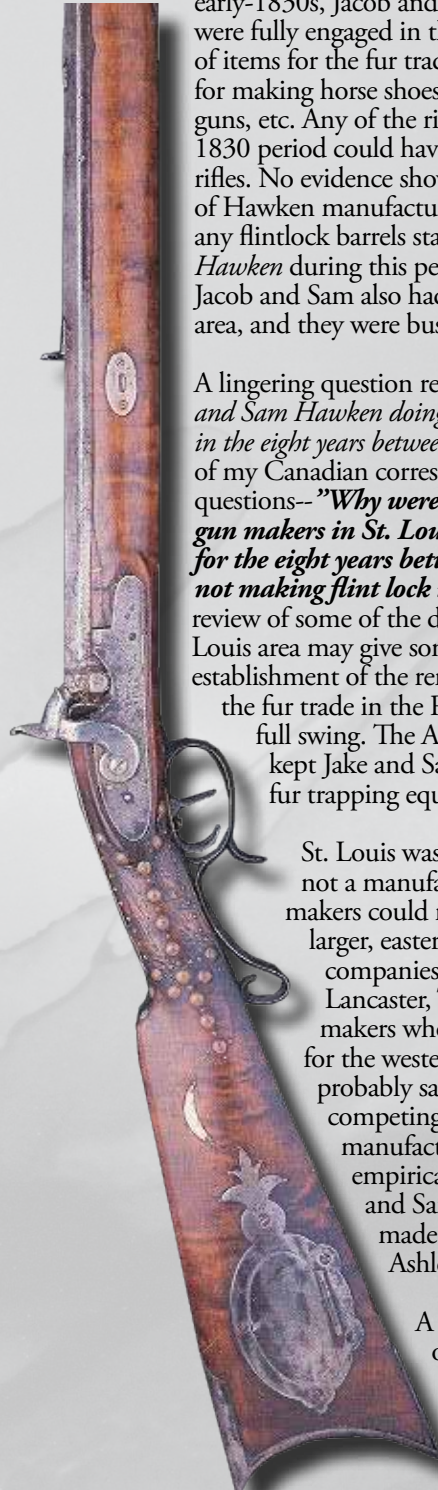
rifle (Goodwin, 1978), an elaborate, full-stocked 1850s period S. Hawken rifle, could have been a flint lock rifle converted to a percussion rifle. Whether it is, or is not, that is NOT the essence of the question under discussion. We are addressing any rifles possibly made during the 1822-1830 period by the Hawken brothers in St. Louis. The famous mountain man, Jim Bridger, purchased a flintlock rifle in 1826 from the American Fur Company, but it was a J. J. Henry rifle and not a Hawken rifle (Hanson, 1979, p. 67). Bridger did purchase a Hawken rifle in 1842 as shown in the Chouteau Accounts (Hanson, 1979, p. 31), and based on the purchase price of \$33.00, it was probably a half-stocked percussion J&S Hawken rifle.



*J. J. Henry rifle*

A lingering question remains-- "*Why were Jacob and Sam Hawken doing only repair work on guns in the eight years between 1822 and 1830?*" As one of my Canadian correspondents, Hatchet Jack, questions-- "*Why were two of the most skilled gun makers in St. Louis, setting on their butts for the eight years between 1822 and 1830, and not making flint lock ignition rifles?*" A quick review of some of the developments in the St. Louis area may give some insight. With Ashley's establishment of the rendezvous system in 1823, the fur trade in the Rocky Mountains was in full swing. The American Fur Company kept Jake and Sam busy repairing guns and fur trapping equipment.

My Canadian correspondent, Hatchet Jack, continues that common sense would argue against Jacob and Sam Hawken sitting on their hands for 8 years between 1822 to 1830, and not making any flintlock rifles. He notes that the Hawken brothers did form a partnership in 1825 as *J&S Hawken*, and they worked out of the same shop. Bob Browner agrees (personal communication, 2022), and adds that any rifles made by the Hawken brothers during this period would probably NOT look like we want them to look! In other words, they might not have been fully stocked with iron fitting, nor have the symbolic close-to-the-wrist J&S Hawken trigger guard. **I am certainly open to these ideas and look forward to some qualified researcher examining flintlock rifles made during this 1822-1830 period that might have some linkage to Jacob and Sam Hawken while they worked in St. Louis.**



*Smithsonian Hawken rifle*

St. Louis was a commercial center and not a manufacturing center. Local gun makers could not compete against the larger, eastern gun manufacturing companies such as Henry, Deringer, Lancaster, Tryon, or European makers who made 100's of rifles for the western trade. Jacob and Sam probably saw no business opportunity competing with the eastern manufacturers. Therefore, we can empirically conclude that Jacob and Sam Hawken probably only made only one flintlock rifle, the Ashley Hawken, before 1830.

### A MODERN FLINTLOCK HAWKEN RIFLE

Now, let's examine the idea of a '*modern*' flintlock Hawken rifle. The image of a full-stocked, flintlock rifle with Hawken styling is '*intoxicating*' to today's hunters and shooters. Even though, to date, they have not been proven to have been made by the Hawken brothers. The idea of a **full-stocked rifle with Hawken styling, iron mounted fittings, and a flint lock system is very appealing to the today's hunters and shooters.**

A Montana correspondent of mine is always first to point out that the Smithsonian Hawken

Back in the 1960s and 1970s several of the prominent commercial Hawken rifle suppliers: GRRW, Lyman and others, and some custom Hawken rifle makers, made flintlock Hawken rifles incorporating their ideas. In general, they offered a fully-stocked rifle, with a square Tennessee-style cheek piece, a crescent iron buttplate, an iron J&S Hawken-style close-to-

*(Continued on page 22)*



**Tom Dawson flintlock Hawken**

the-wrist trigger guard, double-set triggers on a long trigger plate, an iron nose cap and a flint lock. The rifle generally had a 36" to 40" long barrel in 50-caliber or bigger, and they called it a *'flint Hawken'*. The well-known name Hawken was used as a sales gimmick, and it was applied to almost any large-bore rifle, either full- or half-stocked, to increase sales. The implied idea was that the Hawken brothers were making Hawken rifles for the fur trade with flint ignition, which we have seen, has no historical evidence.

In the 1960s and 1970s, several of the prominent custom builders of Hawken rifles offered their version of the 'flintlock Hawken', or a rifle that was made by the Hawken brothers for use during the fur trade. One such rifle was made by the well-known Hawken rifle maker T. K. Dawson in the 1970s. This rifle was made for another well-known buckskinner and Hawken enthusiast, Andy 'Doc' Baker. It was built around a Bill Large 58-caliber barrel, Bob Roller flint lock, and iron J&S Hawken fittings. Some of its features including the J&S Hawken-style close-to-wrist trigger guard, snobble nose cap, elaborate patch box, Gemmer rear sight, and engraving on this rifle were not introduced until the 1840s or later. We have learned a lot more about the evolution of the Hawken rifle since the 1960-1970 heyday of Hawken rifles at Friendship.

At this point, I must comment that, **"I am in favor of modern-day rifle makers building flintlock rifles that mimic rifles that could have been used by mountain men before and during the fur trade, but don't call them Hawken rifles."** In fact, I believe that these rifles would have been more similar to the Beckwourth rifle described by Blake (2015). Jim Beckwourth joined Ashley in 1824 to trap beaver. His rifle is described as a full-stocked, iron-mounted rifle weighing 12 pounds and 9 ounces. The 40 5/8" long barrel was about 56-58 caliber. It has a 4" long tang and was originally a flintlock, but has been crudely altered to a caplock. This rifle truly represents a rifle that **'did go to the mountains during the fur trade'**, and is representative of big-bore, Tennessee-style rifles made in the mid-west and carried by the earliest fur traders.

The author also built an idealized flintlock rifle that *'could have been'* built by the Hawken brothers during the 1822-1830 period based on their experience with the fur trade rifles (Woodfill, 2018). My *'idealized'* rifle's flint lock has a double-throated hammer similar to the Harpers Ferry 1803 lock. I used straight-grained maple, iron fittings, and double-set triggers in a large, English sporting rifle trigger guard. A simple, iron patch box similar to those made by the Virginia Manufactory Arsenal would finish the package, and carry over the simple design of the Southern and Virginia long rifles of which Jake, Sam, and Lakenan were well acquainted. I chose a 54-caliber, 38 1/2" long, 15/16" octagonal barrel, and added a leather sling so that the rifle could be carried more easily in the mountains. Again, this is *'just one man's concept'* as to what a flintlock Hawken rifle could have looked like, IF Jake and Sam would have made one.

During the September 2022 NMLRA shoot at Friendship, IN, the author purchased a modern *'flintlock Hawken'*. It is an excellent example of



**Beckwourth rifle**



**Author's flintlock rifle**



Modern flintlock Hawken rifle

just what today's shooters and hunters think of when they say a 'flintlock Hawken'. The rifle is stocked in fine curly maple and has iron fittings. The 36" long, 54-caliber Green Mountain barrel shoots accurately, and the L&R Hawken flint lock sparks well. **It is what today's shooters and hunters want in a 'flintlock Hawken'**, but it does not have the correct components and features available at the time that the Hawken brothers would have built into a rifle made during the 1822-1830 period.

In summary, there are no authenticated 'flintlock Hawken's' built by Jacob and Sam Hawken in St. Louis during the 1822-1830 period, after they built the Ashley Hawken in the winter of 1822/1823. This does not mean that a builder today can't put a flint lock on a 'Hawken-looking' rifle, and have a fine flintlock rifle for target shooting or hunting purposes. I greatly approve of shooting and enjoying your muzzle-loading, black powder rifle no matter what you call it!

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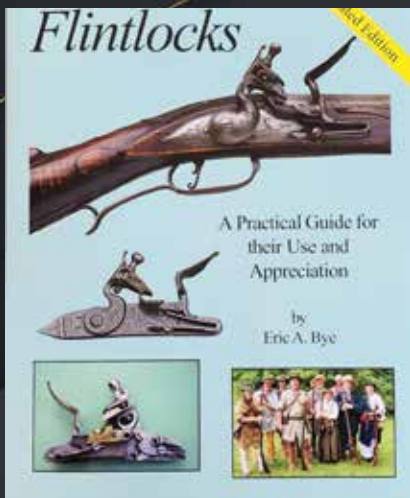
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