

Gun Hammers vs. Buttonhole Cutters – a Primer

By

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The purpose of this article is to compare, contrast, and illustrate two types of late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, American-made, utilitarian, hand tools made primarily in Virginia and Pennsylvania. These small tools are rarely encountered today. When found, they are often misidentified by most except for a relatively small group of collectors (Fig. 1, Gun hammer on left & buttonhole cutter on right).



Figure 1

Just about everybody knows what a buttonhole is and, more than likely, can figure out what a buttonhole cutter did. A buttonhole cutter was used for cutting buttonholes in cloth and leather. However, identifying a gun hammer and determining its original use is far more problematic for most people.

Both of these tools were made primarily of steel or occasionally of wrought iron. In both types, some were quite fancy in design, while others were plain, strictly utilitarian. American buttonhole cutters and gun hammers evolved from earlier British and other European examples. While American buttonhole cutters changed little from their overseas counterparts, American gun hammers took on a distinctly new-world character.

Henry Rene' D'Allemagne, in his book on decorative ironwork, illustrates several seventeenth/eighteenth century gun hammers (likely continental) (Fig. 2, Plate 283, items A through C, gun hammers) and (Fig. 3, Plate 375, items A through D, gun hammers). He refers to those in Plate 283 as "Smoking accessories" and those in Plate 375 as "Tools for woodworking and iron working". D'Allemagne also illustrates what appear to be four buttonhole cutters of the same age and likely origin (Fig 4, Plate 378, items A through D, buttonhole cutters). He refers to

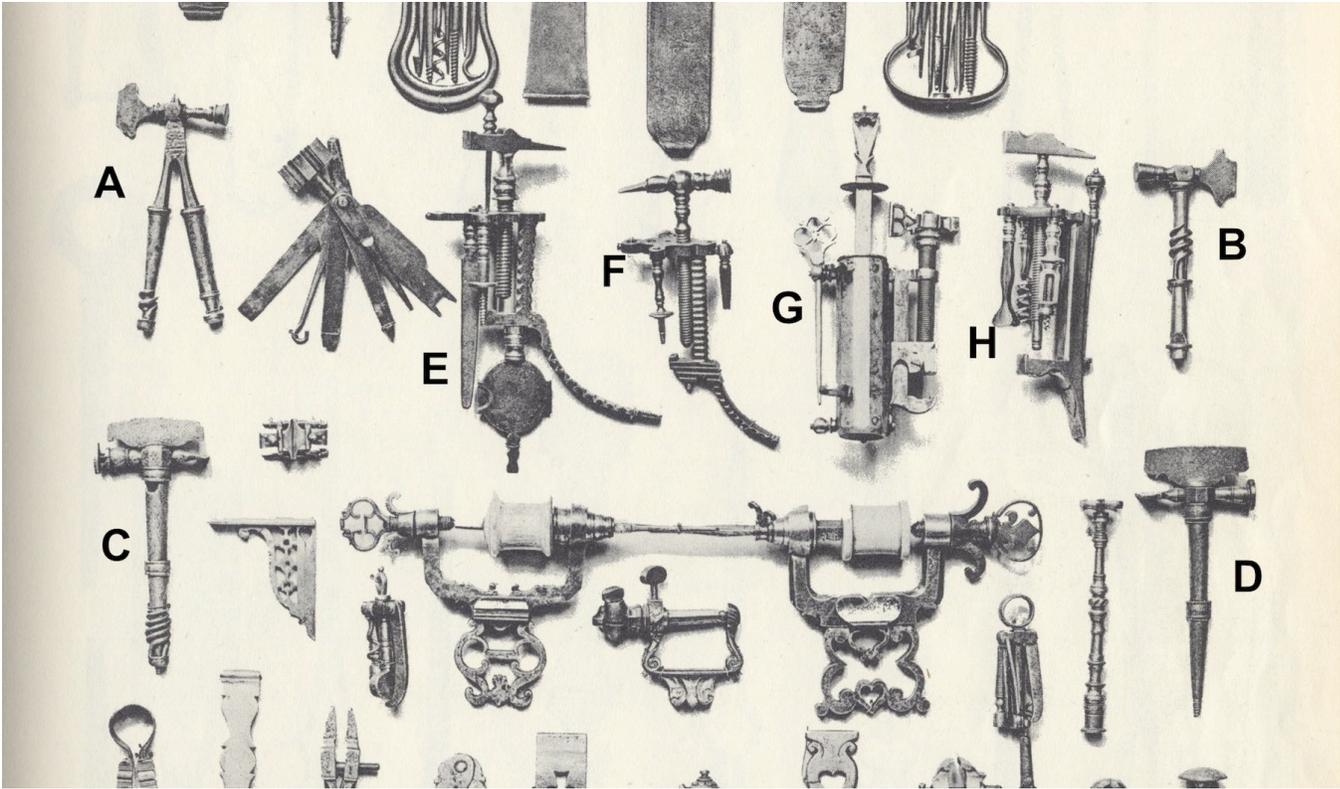


Figure 3



Figure 5



Figure 6

Don Plummer, in his book on the Sorber Collection of wrought iron, illustrates in Plates 2-30 through 2-35 a mixed assortment of 34 gun hammers and buttonhole cutters. He calls them all buttonhole cutters.³ Initially, this sounds like a misattribution of the gun hammers, but it is not that simple. An explanation will be provided later in this article.

In their book on gun tools, Dorsey and Shaffer show several gun hammers from Europe and possibly Asia. These authors refer to them as “combination tools” and correctly identify their uses.⁴

As previously mentioned, buttonhole cutters were for cutting buttonholes in cloth or leather. There are a variety of shapes and sizes of American buttonhole cutters. Likewise, there are varying levels in decoration ranging from unadorned as in Fig. 1 to finely whitesmithed with file work (Fig. 7, Decorated buttonhole cutter). The two basic types of this utilitarian tool are hand-pushed for thinner layers of material and hammered for thicker layers (Figs. 8 & 9, Hand-pushed buttonhole cutters) and (Fig. 10, Hammered buttonhole cutters). In Fig 9, note the similarity of these two cutters with item A in Fig. 4. The cutter on the left in Fig. 8 is unadorned, while the one on the right has minimal decorations. In Fig. 9, neither have decorative file work. The three hammered buttonhole cutters in Fig. 10 have nicely formed garnets, and the two on the right have some medial file decoration as well. The two hammered cutters in Fig. 11 are crudely made but still functional (Fig. 11, Crude buttonhole cutters). The one on the bottom has two blades for cutting two different-size buttonholes. It also has a hint of a decorative twist. The top example is unadorned. Plummer illustrates several other variations of buttonhole cutters.⁵ Remember, these cutters are all hand-made, one-of-a-kind tools.



Figure 7

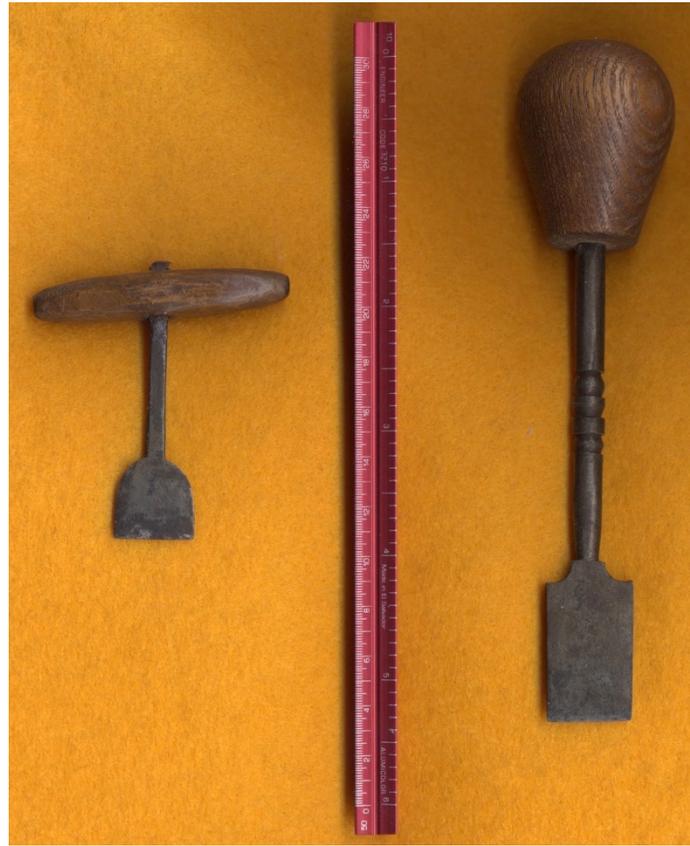


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

In Europe, gun hammers first appeared at least with the advent of firearms with flintlock and maybe even earlier wheellock firing mechanisms. Gun hammers are combination tools with a small hammer face for dressing and/or knapping flints ⁶ and a blade for use as a turnscrew (i.e. screwdriver) in tightening a flint into the cock of the lock (Fig. 12, Dressing flint with a gun hammer) and (Fig. 13, Tightening flint into cock). In addition, British and European gun hammers sometimes were equipped with a pin for cleaning flash holes in gun

barrels (Fig. 14, Cleaning flash hole) and/or a coiled worm for cleaning/clearing barrels (see Fig. 2, items A through C, Fig. 3, items A through D, Fig. 5, & Fig. 6). More elaborate combination gun tools are shown in Fig. 3, items E through H.



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, American gun hammers morphed from their British and continental ancestors into generally more simplified tools for use primarily with flintlock, American longrifles. They usually took the form of various hammers, axes, and tomahawks. These simple tools were carried by riflemen on the frontier in their rifle bags along with other necessary items such as fire starters, powder measures, bullet molds, bullets, spare flints, etc. Their function of dressing flints and tightening flints in cocks remained essentially the same. However, American gun hammers usually had a sharpened end for use as a general-purpose awl for punching holes in leather and other

materials. As with American buttonhole cutters, American gun hammers were individually made by hand and are one-of-a-kind items. Their form and level of decoration vary widely, and individual designs were limited only by the imaginations of the gunsmiths and their customers.

The gun hammer in Fig. 1 and those in Fig. 15 are devoid of any file-work decoration and are based directly on eighteenth-century, British-style gun hammers (Fig. 15, Gun hammers related to British counterparts) and (see Fig. 5). In turn, the British ones were likely derived from earlier continental examples (see Fig. 3, items B through D). Other American gun hammers were patterned after axes and hatchets common in America late in the eighteenth century (Fig. 16, Axe-style gun hammers). The gun hammer on the left has some minor file work near its head. The one fourth in from the left has more file-work decoration, but little is visible because of heavy pitting. Fig. 17 shows American gun hammers based on hammer-poll axes (Fig. 17, Hammer-poll axe gun hammers).



Figure 15



Figure 16

date puts this highly decorated gun hammer at the very end of flintlock usage. The weight of the first three gun hammers in Fig. 19 indicates that they probably were used as knapping tools for manufacturing new gun flints rather than dressing the striking edge of existing flints. When it comes to imagination, the gun hammer in Fig. 20 is over the top. It has file-work decoration, a blacksmith hammer head, a sharpened awl end, and two wing-like turnscrews. In a way, it resembles a stylized eagle (Fig. 20, “Eagle” gun hammer).



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

A final group of American gun hammers is presented in Fig. 21. These gun hammers were based on pipe tomahawks, a familiar item on the frontier (Fig. 21, Tomahawk gun hammers). While looking at these as well as the other American gun hammers with turnscrew blades presented in this article, damage is evident on many of them. As flintlocks were being replaced with more efficient percussion locks beginning in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the need for gun hammers declined. They became relicts ripe for secondary use. People

still used buttons, and those obsolete, little, axe-shaped tools with their sharp blades were pressed into service as hammered buttonhole cutters. This explains the damage many American gun hammers suffered. This reuse also explains why Plummer was technically correct when he identified the buttonhole cutters and gun hammers in the Sorber Collection all as buttonhole cutters. On the rare occasions when gun hammers are discovered, they often emerge from sewing-related collections.



Figure 21

The gun hammer on the left in Fig. 21 is a hand-made reproduction produced to show the pipe bowl that is usually severely damaged or missing on tomahawk gun hammers that have been used as buttonhole cutters. The pipe bowl is almost completely flattened on the second from the left gun hammer and is totally missing on the third and fourth examples. The tomahawk gun hammer on the right possibly never had a pipe bowl.

Another interesting gun tool seen occasionally in the antiques market is the eslabone. It is, in fact, a gun hammer with its roots in Moorish Spain and North Africa. An early version, likely dating to the seventeenth century, is illustrated in Fig. 2, item A. Jim Lavin, in his book on Spanish firearms shows four Spanish eslabones - one seventeenth century, two eighteenth century, and one nineteenth century.⁷ These Lavin examples are closely related to the one in Fig. 2, item A. The early Spanish eslabones are quite rare. The more common examples found today vary in design from those in Fig. 2 and Lavin; however, they evolved from them. While more common, they are not plentiful. The original purpose of eslabones was the same as for all gun hammers, knapping and dressing gun flints and tightening flints in cocks. These common eslabones run the decoration gambit from rather plain to intricately crafted and decorated. Even the plain examples usually have decorative file work (Fig. 22, Common eslabones, plain) and (Fig. 23,

Common eslabones, highly decorative). All the common eslabones had lanyard loops, and some are found today with original awls attached (see Fig. 22).



Figure 22



Figure 23

Dorsey and Shaffer show an excellent, seventeenth century eslabone similar to the one in Fig. 2, item A and in Lavin. They also show four common eslabones. Dorsey and Shaffer correctly identify these gun hammers as eslabones, and they attribute their purpose to knapping and dressing gun flints. Further, they postulate, in our opinion incorrectly, that the blade end of eslabones was for striking thin gun flints from heavier flint cores rather than serving as a turnscrew for tightening flints in cocks. It is unlikely that these blades could withstand such heavy steel-to-stone impacts. Most common eslabones encountered today, including those presented by Dorsey and Shaffer, have fairly intact

blades. These authors also assign the common eslabones to Spain.⁸ Lavin believed they were made in both Spain and North Africa, but primarily in North Africa, in the late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century.⁹

Gun hammers, in all their iterations, are but a note in the history of flintlock firearms. Many of the American gun hammers saw a second life as buttonhole cutters. Their British and continental counterparts became curiosities from the past. All are now sought-after by collectors and museums.

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Endnotes

1. D'Allemaigne, Henry Rene', *Decorative Antique Ironwork*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1968, Plates 283, 375, & 378.

2. Roberts, Kenneth D., *Tools For The Trades And Crafts, An Eighteenth Century Pattern Book*, R. Timmins & Sons, Birmingham. Fitzwilliam, NH: Ken Roberts Publishing Co., 1976, p. 173.

3. Plummer, Don, *Colonial Wrought Iron, the Sorber Collection*. Ocean Pines, MD: Skipjack Press, 1999, pp. 98-100.

4. Dorsey, R. Stephen and Shaffer, James B. *Gun Tools, Their History and Identification, Volume 2*. Eugene, OR: Collectors' Library, 1997, pp. 157, 171, & 172.

5. Plummer, pp. 98-100.

6. For flints in a flintlock to function properly by striking a spark against the lock frizzen or steel, they must have a sharp edge. With repeated firing, the flint edge dulled, and misfires would occur. Dressing or resharpening the edge of the flint was, therefore, a necessity.

7. Lavin, James D., PhD., *A History of Spanish Firearms*. New York, NY: Arco Publishing Co., Inc., 1965, p. 247.

8. Dorsey and Shaffer, pp. 162-166.

9. Personal communication with Jim Lavin, now deceased.