

Robert P. Eldredge's Billinghamurst Cylinder Rifle

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Many of us are aware of the Rochester, New York rifle-maker, William Billinghamurst. As a collector of percussion American firearms, I have been an admirer of arms made by him because, to me, they exemplify the highest quality that could be achieved especially considering the working methods and conditions of the time.

WILLIAM BILLINGHURST, RIFLEMAKER

The rifle at the center of this work is a revolving, or more appropriately termed, cylinder rifle, because it only revolves manually. William Billinghamurst is known also to have made single shot rifles, double rifles, some pistols, and the somewhat celebrated underhammer single shot pistol also known as the “buggy rifle” with the removable shoulder stock. Examples of all of these show the highest degree of fit and finish. One notable feature of the Billinghamurst and other similar cylinder rifles is the extraordinarily long cylinders that are almost always rifled to match the rifling of the barrel, a very over engineered and expensive feature. The Billinghamurst cylinder rifles were of pill lock ignition and followed from similar rifles that were patented by John and James Millar, originally of Rochester, New York. Billinghamurst was apparently a protégé and early employee of the Millars in their Rochester shop along with Joseph Medbury (some-



times spelled “Medbery and Medberry”). It now seems very likely that the Millars had a shop to produce these firearms but probably did not do the work themselves.

William Billinghamurst was born in Brighton Township, New York on February 10, 1807. He relocated to Rochester prior to 1827 and began working as an apprentice gunsmith for Joseph Medbury as well as for John Millar at that time.¹ Interestingly, I recently was provided information gathered by a descendant of John Millar, Sr., father of the gunmakers John and James, that John Millar, Sr. also settled in what was to become Brighton Township, New York around 1800.² John and James Millar settled in Rochester sometime previous to 1828. It is reported that William Billinghamurst, Sr., father of William Billinghamurst the gunmaker, was prominent in the organization of the new Town of Brighton, New York, in 1814.³ It was also noted that all of the Millar clan, except for John the (then) gunsmith, relocated to Macomb County, Michigan in 1830 on 1,300 acres of land that John Millar, Sr., father of James and John Millar the gunmakers, had purchased from the government.⁴ James Millar was never in the gun making business after he moved to Michigan. It would now appear likely that John Millar, Sr. as well as William Billinghamurst Sr. were very probably acquainted in Brighton, now a suburb of Rochester, New York.



Figure 1. Barrel Marking.

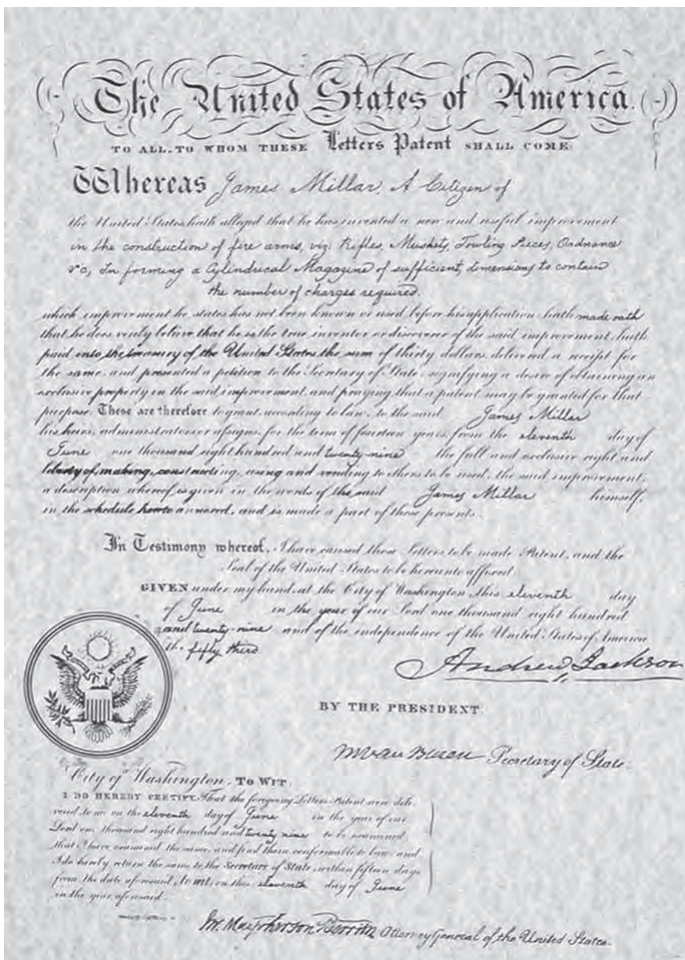


Figure 2. Copy of original Millar Patent.

James and John Millar had patented the basis for their cylinder rifle in 1829, and James is shown as the patentee on the document that is reproduced here. Of the numerous gunmakers apparently licensed by the Millars to produce these, William Billinghamurst was probably the most prolific and the highest quality maker.⁵ Much information on the Millar patent and the Millar guns were gathered by American Society of Arms Collectors member Ernie Bates with assistance from Jim Smith, Jerry Swinney, and Ed Eich and was presented to the Society in April of 1983; I am presenting some updated information here.

There continues to be a surprising lack of information about all of the cylinder rifle makers, including Billinghamurst. John Miller sold out and got into the fish business in 1853, still in Rochester, and soon thereafter moved to Michigan. Joseph Medbury sold out to Billinghamurst apparently earlier than that, in 1841, according to Ed Eich. James Millar died in 1849 in Michigan. Jerry Swinney has reported that James Millar was listed in 1830 as being “the patentee . . . Not a Rifle manufacturer by trade . . . has now in his employ several excellent workmen . . .”, one of those certainly being William Billinghamurst. There are several press releases touting the “Billinghurst Repeating Rifles” and those individuals for

who he made them from 1841 to 1852. Such notables are the Emperor of Brazil for whom one was made in 1841 for the price of \$400.00(!)⁶ and a “gentleman” of Bombay, India whose rifle was “designed for the demolition of Tigers, and carried but 16 balls to the pound”⁷ or .66 caliber! So, with an advertisement in 1853 by William Billinghamurst as being the provider of the “seven-shooter”, it could be assumed that Billinghamurst was well on his own by then and independent of any licensing or royalty payments to either Millar brother for their patent, which had since expired. As his advertisements after this time do not mention “Millar Patent”, etc., and we know that the patent was never renewed, Billinghamurst was apparently now advertising these seven-shooters as his own creation. Only the earliest style of Millar Patent cylinder rifles were marked “J. Millar” or “J & J Millar”. The later guns were not marked with that or anything similar. A very interesting and probably unique ambrotype photograph is shown here. Although it is undated, the unidentified sportsman is obviously proud of his topstrap Millar Patent rifle.

To provide points of reference, a comparative table of dates and locations derived from several Rochester directories of William Billinghamurst, John Millar, and Joseph Medbury follow. See Table 1.



Figure 3. Quarter plate Ambrotype showing Millar Patent Rifle.

Table 1.

Year	William Billinghamurst	John Millar	Joseph Medbury
1827	Gunsmith w/Medbury	Tanner w/Medbury	River Street
1834	Mason Street (w) 9 Chestnut Street (h)	Mason Street (w) 9 Chestnut Street (h)	31 Buffalo Street (w) 3 North State Street (h)
1838	—	Mansion House (w)	—
1841	43 Main Street (w) 6 Mansion House (h)	Front Street (w) —	1 State Street (w) —
1844	1 Buffalo Street (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	11 Front Street (w) 9 Chestnut Street (h)	— —
1845	1 Buffalo Street (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	— 9 Chestnut Street (h)	— —
1847	1 Buffalo Street (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	Curtis Building (w) 9 Chestnut (h)	— —
1849-51	Curtis' Block (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	2 nd Floor 43 Main (w) 9 Chestnut Street (h)	— —
1852-55	Curtis' Block (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	— —	— —
1856	2 nd Floor Curtis' Block/Main (w)	—	—
1857	Over 41 East Main Street (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	— —	— —
1859	2 nd Floor Kearney's Block/Main (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	43 Main Street (w) —	— —
1861-69	Corner Main and Water (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	— —	— —
1871-79	Over 41 East Main Street (w)	—	—
1880	41 East Main Street (w) 9 Stillson Street (h)	— —	— —

Note: (w) signifies work, while (h) signifies home.

There also was a listing for a William Billinghamurst as boarding with a J. Medbery in 1858, but this likely is William Billinghamurst, Jr. who died in 1873 at 30 years of age.⁸ William Billinghamurst died in Rochester in 1880 at the age of 73.

The various advertisements offer the “repeating rifles, or seven-shooters” from his earliest advertisement shown above (that the writer has found so far) in 1853, through his next to last advertisement of 1877. From these, it is fairly evident that these rifles had been produced for quite some time.

72 DEWEY'S ROCHESTER

RIFLES, RIFLES,

The subscriber is largely engaged in the manufacture of Rifles, on the most improved principle with which few are practically acquainted. Rifles, Target Rifles, Repeating Rifles, or Seven-Shooters;— Double-Barrelled Rifles, one above the other; and Rifle and Shot ditto. Telescopic Sights for Rifles made to order. A large assortment of Double and Single Guns, Pistols, Powder-Flasks, Shot-Bags, Caps and Percussion Pills, Powder, Lead, &c. Shot Guns Bored and Finished inside, so as to improve their shooting. Repairing of all kinds done to order.

WM. BILLINGHURST,
2d Floor, Curtis' Block, Main Street, Rochester.

Figure 4. Advertisement from Dewey's Rochester Business Directory 1853-1854.

Discerning exactly when he produced these rifles or any idea of the total production of these has been very difficult to ascertain. The patent was awarded to the Millars in 1829, and certainly production started soon after that. It seems likely that John and James Millar did not actually make these themselves, having apprentices and workmen such as William Billinghamurst doing the work. By 1841, when William Billinghamurst is extolled in a newspaper article, he was 34 years of age, certainly at an age that he had mastered the manufacturing process. The other known makers of the Millar patent rifles, numbering more than a dozen, may have paid Millar a royalty for each one sold early on and it should have taken

some time for any popularity to have gotten built up so that those makers would produce them. Many of these makers apparently worked at one time for Millar and/or Billinghamurst before going out on their own.⁹ I have been in contact with several direct descendants of William Billinghamurst who unfortunately have no records of William Billinghamurst's of any kind, nor do they have any images of him.

There are few testimonials of the performance or popularity of the cylinder rifles. Although popular thinking today is that they were very dangerous, this may not be altogether true. Witness the words of Seth Green, reported to be a famous marksman of the day: “Seth Green, the best shot in New York State, and an ardent sportsman, prefers a rifle made by Billinghamurst, of Rochester on Millar's patent. It is a seven-shooter, having a cylinder similar to Colt's, patch ball, round or long, and pill-lock. In loading, the powder is put into the cylinder, and the ball patched and pushed down the barrel to the cylinder, turning the cylinder every time a ball is put down, until the cylinder is loaded, then drop a pill in the primhole, and tallow it over, and you are all right for 7 shots. With this kind of rifle, Green has shot for many years, and always found it answer well (sic); in



Figure 5. Billinghamurst Pill Primer container.

his own words, 'When you are in the woods, with one of the above guns, you feel that you are monarch of all you survey, and do not fear anything that wears hair.' ".¹⁰

Through the years, there has been some confusion expressed as to how these rifles were supposed to be loaded. The patent specifically states that the loading of each of the seven chambers "may be performed thru the main barrel or thru the cap as fancy may dictate." Many, if not all of the earliest model Millar rifles had a ramrod that had an extension incorporated into it. This was to allow the shooter to have enough of a handle to push on, to allow him to load each round through the muzzle end of the barrel. Ernie Bates speculated that there were three models of these rifles, with significant differences between the earliest model that conformed closely to the language of the patent, and the later versions. The later guns do not have such a ramrod extension, but the ramrods were made long enough to use in one piece. The later guns also do not have the plates covering the front of the cylinder which had obviously been proven to be a very bad idea, even with holes bored in this plate to allow the escape of bullets that mistakenly ignited due to multiple discharge. The rifled chambers are *not* chamfered to facilitate loading through the front of the cylinder, so it was still clearly the intent of Millar that each ball be rammed into the cylinder by pushing it all of the way down the barrel. Between this logic, the wording of the patent and Seth Green's description, the dilemma should be laid to rest.

Equally frustrating to finding information on William Billinghamurst's shop and production is finding descriptions of tools and accoutrements for these rifles. Apparently they were not marked, but certainly would have been sold with each rifle. I did find a reference to a cased Millar Cylinder Rifle that was in a collection some years ago. It was reported to have been totally complete, even to the original instruction paper that came with the rifle. If anyone is aware of where that outfit is, I would sure like to know about it as it could very possibly tell us of similar tools that the Billinghamurst rifles would have been fitted with. And, although I knew that they had to have been made in some

quantity, I had never been able to find a container for the Pill Primers from the Billinghamurst shop until recently. I was very fortunate to find one of the very few marked containers ever heard of, and it is pictured here. It is slightly larger in diameter than a quarter and has a stopper that appears to be some sort of hard rubber. The pills contained inside are extremely diverse in size, so the shooter would put one or several into the receptacle in the cylinder to be beeswaxed over.

As previously stated, there were more than just a few percussion cylinder and/or revolving rifles made from the early 1830s to the 1860s by several makers, many of these not using the Millar patented system or the pill-lock system.¹¹ Logic would indicate that the Millar patent rifles were more expensive to produce as their manufacture required more steps, especially cylinder to barrel fitting to minimize shaved slugs or multiple discharges, both somewhat distressing to the shooter! One would think that the luster of this new and different system would have worn off in a few years, yet Billinghamurst continued to promote them for at least 40 years while he was on his own, or a total of some 50 years since they were patented and evidently first produced at the shop of James and John Millar. There are a few examples still around, but not many. Because of the existence of very few of these rifles today, Billinghamurst seems to have totally believed in this system and was unflinching in his promotion of it without the benefit of the necessary amount of business to justify a large production. All of the examples that I am aware of are not serial numbered and each shows at least some difference from the others, so I believe that each was produced more on a singular, or to order, basis.

One final interesting comment that I came across several times was that the Millar brothers either died or let the patent for their "revolving" arms expire, thus enabling Samuel Colt to appropriate the patent and go on to untold riches. I also received one reference from a descendant of John Millar stating that he (John Millar) "was a gunsmith, inventing the revolver, with the aid of his brother James. This was afterwards sold to a Mr. Colt, for a small sum of money, and became the famous Colt Revolver."¹² There is certainly enough controversy regarding Sam Colt's idea for the revolver without making the assumption that he took advantage of John and James Millar. Colt's attorneys apparently used an example of a Millar cylinder rifle in the famous Samuel Colt vs. the Massachusetts Arms Company trial, and the supposed exhibit is still in the Colt factory collection.¹³ Basically, the patent, thoroughly and typically worded, gave Millar the right to manufacture these rifles "and other muskets, fowling pieces, ordinances," with his improvement being summarized as a seven shot cylinder firearm with a cover over the front of the cylinder and a top strap over the cylinder connecting the barrel to the frame, using an index-



Figure 6. Right side view of rifle.

ing stop, with the firing of a bullet that was ignited by a pill-lock or “a lock that will prime itself”. It had nothing to do with the automatic rotation and indexing of the cylinder in any revolving arm, which was the basic principle of the first Colt patent. There are hand revolved cylinder arms going back to the age of the matchlock, so this principle was hardly the idea of the Millars. I would imagine that there are some Millar descendants out there still lamenting that idea that their ancestors “gave away the farm”.

THE ROBERT P. ELDREDGE RIFLE

Robert P. Eldredge was born in 1808 in the town of Greenwich, Washington County, New York, located on the eastern border of New York State, near Saratoga Springs. He was preparing for college by attending Hamilton Academy, but due to the death of his mother he was not able to follow



Figure 8. Robert P. Eldredge.

the path that his father had for him to have a “liberal education”.¹⁴ After teaching school for a short time, he heard Detroit was the place of opportunity, so in 1826 he made his way through Rochester to Buffalo and finally to Detroit by traveling on stagecoach, canal packet and steamer.¹⁵ It is family legend that he arrived there with only ten shillings and the clothes on his back. For the next two years he supported himself by teaching in one of the poor-debtors rooms of the old stone jail,

studied law in the office of Henry S. Cole, then went on to Pontiac where he taught school, copied deeds and the like to make a living. During this time, he walked to Mt. Clemens, Michigan where he was to make his fortune and home for the rest of his life. He passed the bar exam in the fall of 1828 in Detroit and began his law practice, the first in Mt. Clemens.¹⁶ He must have become somewhat quickly prominent as he was elected prosecuting attorney in 1832 at the young age of 24 years and was asked to provide the Oratory at the dedication of the ill-fated Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal on July 20 of 1838.¹⁷ He became the Secretary of State of Michigan in February of 1842, then a state senator in 1846. It was reported that he was “an enthusiastic lover of hunting, fishing, and sports that brought him into close touch with nature”.¹⁸



Figure 7. Patch (Beeswax) Box with inscription.



Figure 9. Close up view of lock plate and tang sight.

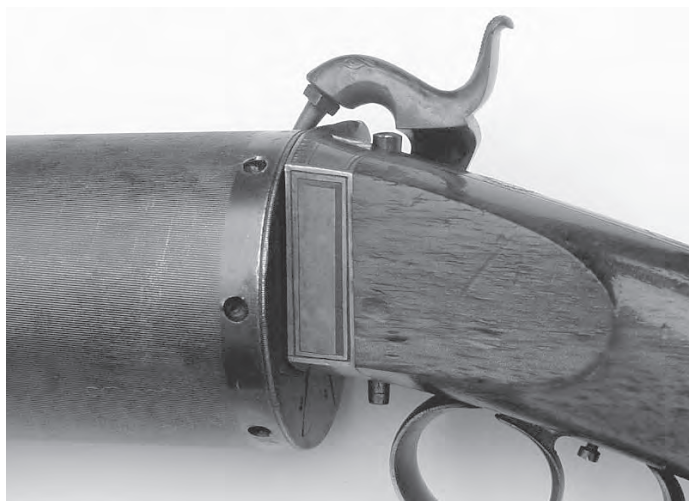


Figure 10. Close up view of left side showing tapered "take down" pin.

This William Billingshurst Cylinder Rifle is engraved on the fancy, case hardened patch (actually beeswax) box with the inscription "R. P. Eldredge/Mt. Clemens (sic)/Mich.". The rifle is caliber .44 and has a 26-3/4" octagonal barrel. It has a seven shot rifled cylinder that measures 3-3/8" in length. The iron parts are casehardened except for the barrel and cylinder that are browned, and the adjustable tang sight and rear sight that are heat blued. The forend cap is pewter. The burled walnut stocks appear to have been polished with several coats of a hand rubbed oil finish. The buttstock has coarse checkering at the wrist. The hickory ramrod has an iron worm with a threaded brass cover as well as a counter-sunk brass head for engaging the end of the patched bullet. There is a tapered pin immediately behind the cylinder that upon its removal, allows the rifle to be "taken down" into two parts; the frame, lock and buttstock separating from the cylinder, cylinder pin, barrel and forestock. Apparently there was a special wrench that engages the rear end of the cylinder pin allowing it to be removed from the barrel for cleaning. Finally, the rifle has a single set trigger.

The fit of the walnut to iron is superb. There seems to be substantially more engraving on this rifle than is seen on the typical Billingshurst rifles existing today. The execution of the engraving is very fine and has a delicate, lifelike detail. Likewise, the patchbox is of a deluxe design that differs from all other Billingshurst rifles that I have examined in hand or by photograph.

Other than a probable test firing, I seriously doubt that this rifle was ever fired. Virtually all of the original finishes are still on this rifle, with just the slightest handling wear. The burst of color of the vivid casehardening on the lock-plate and the frame immediately behind the cylinder is especially beautiful.

William Billingshurst apparently loved press releases, and as previously written, there are many instances where he made a rifle for someone prominent and it was soon after reported in one of the Rochester daily newspapers. Despite several searches through the records of the Rochester daily newspapers, however, no mention of this specific gun or its owner has been found, but I am still looking. This gun with the unquestionably original inscription on the patch box (having been engraved prior to this part being casehardened) had to be for some sort of special occasion, but what could that be? And when could this have happened?

As previously mentioned, Robert P. Eldredge was a noted hunter and sportsman. According to conversations with a descendant, there are no records or family lore about any firearms either being owned or disposed of prior to Eldredge's death. It would be logical to assume that an experienced hunter would have used his weapons. I don't know what other guns he might have owned, but we do know that this rifle was one of them and it does not show any signs of use. He could have had it specially ordered for himself, but it would be logical then that he would have used the rifle. Despite the glowing praise of Seth Green, I would suspect that many knowledgeable hunters and shooters of the day found the escaping gases at the junction of the barrel and cylinder to be distracting and the risk of multiple discharge very discomfoting. Certainly these characteristics would be known and some shooters simply would not use such a gun. The rifle appears to be unfired, so it would seem unlikely that Eldredge would have ordered such an expensive rifle, then never used it. And finally, the town name of Mt. Clemens on the inscription was misspelled, so if Eldredge had ordered it, it would be practical to assume that he would have had this fault corrected. So, the idea that the weapon was a nice gift could be the most logical.

Robert P. Eldredge was a prominent man in the town of Mt. Clemens, Macomb County, Michigan until 1884 when he died at 77 years of age. Sterling Township, home of inventor James Millar, lies in the same county and is adja-

cent some eight miles to the west of Mt. Clemens. During the time that Eldredge lived in Macomb County, James Millar obviously enjoyed some degree of prominence in the same county as well. The two men certainly had to be acquainted at the very least. It would seem entirely possible that Eldredge could have been given the rifle as a gift it for doing the Oratory, in 1838, or on the occasion one of the state elections in the 1840s. Or, could this rifle then be a gift to Eldredge, a "favorite son" of Macomb County, Michigan for some other reason, with Millar as the conduit by his connection to Billinghamurst? Did Eldredge appreciate it leaving it in its new condition, misspelling of his town and all, as a remembrance of one of his accomplishments? Maybe James Millar gave it to him for another reason. Perhaps we will never know.

I think it would suffice to say that the Robert P. Eldredge Billinghamurst Cylinder Rifle is an outstanding example of an intriguing rifle with an ironclad connection to an interesting man, with a really great untold story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES:

1. Edward L. (Eich,) Notes on the Brighton Powder Mill Explosions, City of Rochester Public Library.
2. Handwritten genealogy as dictated by Mary Ann Shanley Millar to Laura Belle Millar about 1902.
3. Eich.
4. Eich.
5. Norm Flayderman. *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms, 8th Edition*, Iola, Wisconsin; 2001, pages 589-590.
6. Rochester Gem and Ladies' Amulet, July 24, 1841.
7. Rochester Daily Democrat August 22, 1843.

8. Rochester Union Advertiser, August 4, 1858.
9. Flayderman p. 589-590. And James R. Smith, Canadian Journal of Arms Collecting, Vol. 9, #3, August, 1971 where 20 different makers of this patent are listed.
10. Notes on William Billinghamurst, Rochester, N.Y. and Edward C. Barber, a contemporary, by Eric C. Stone, Rochester Public Library, 1868.
11. Flayderman p. 590.
12. *ibid.*, Mary Anne Shanley Millar.
13. R. L. Wilson, *Arms Collection of Col. Colt*, Bullville, New York, Herb Glass, 1964, p. 83
14. Robert F. Eldredge, Biography of Robert P. Eldredge from *Past and Present of Macomb County, Michigan*, The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., Chicago: 1905, p. 6.
15. Eldredge, p. 6.
16. Eldredge, p. 6.
17. Susan Crissman Gower, *Canal Dreams*, Michigan History Magazine, July/August, 1997.
18. Eldredge, p. 6.

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