

**THE DRAGON SIDEPLATE:
ITS ORIGINS, VARIATIONS AND
CHRONOLOGIES ON FUR TRADE SITES**

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ABSTRACT

Three dragon sideplates from the Ash Rapids sites (DjKq-4, DjKq-5) on Lake of the Woods, together with a number of specimens from other Northern Ontario locations, are illustrated and compared to each other and to published data on dragon sideplates. The function, origins, variability and known chronologies of this type of sideplate are discussed, and the possibilities for using these artifacts as chronological aids in the analysis of contact and historic site materials are examined.

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, during test excavations at the Ash Rapids West site (DjKq-5) by the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation under the author's direction, a dragon sideplate from a trade gun was recovered in the Historic component. Two more dragon sideplates, different in form, were found during the subsequent 1976 testing at the "sister" site on the other bank of the rapids (DjKq-4).

Further finds of sideplates by Ministry archaeologists conducting surveys on the Albany and Missinaibi River systems, and the presence of a number of hitherto unpublished specimens of known provenience in Northwestern Ontario museums, has indicated the need for a comparative study of these unique artifacts of the fur trade era, and for a synthesis of the somewhat scattered references to dragon sideplates in contemporary North American archaeological literature.

THE DRAGON SIDEPLATE

On flintlock guns the lockplate, which holds the hammer, frizzen, and flashpan, is attached to the gun by either two or three screws which pass completely through the stock. To prevent the screw heads sinking into the wood, a plate is mounted on the side opposite the lockplate; this plate is variously known as a screwplate, a counter lockplate, or a side-plate. These plates are often decorated, and in the case of Indian trade guns the motif is almost invariably a scaly serpent or dragon.

Although the origin or reason for introduction of the dragon motif is still somewhat obscure and the dates proposed by a number of authors are either contradictory or vague, it is known that the motif first appeared in North America around 1700 on Queen Anne muskets (Hanson 1955). The motif had all but disappeared from civilian guns after 1740 but became the almost exclusive design for sideplates on trade guns for North America (Russell 1957:129) and indeed had come to mean to the Indian that the article was genuine (Mayer 1943). By the first half of the 19th century these trade guns fitted with dragon sideplates were prized items for the Indian (Howard 1964:68), and all were essentially light, sturdy weapons whether called a Northwest gun, Mackinaw gun or Hudson's Bay Fuke (Russell 1957:104). "The Indians had come to expect it. The traders insisted upon it..." (Howard 1964:69).

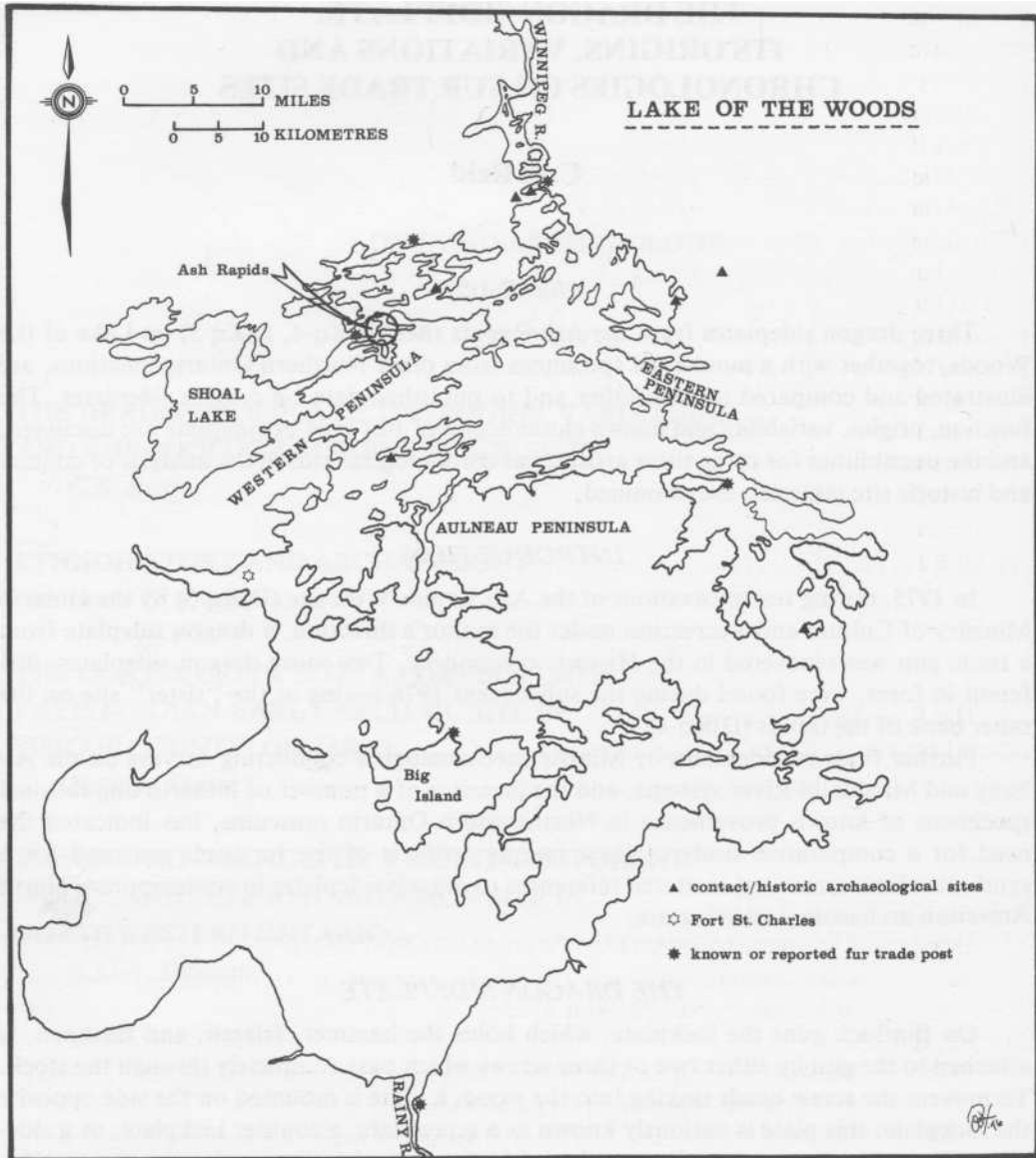


Fig. 1 Location of Ash Rapids and of contact/historic sites on Lake of the Woods, Ontario.

THE ASH RAPIDS SITES

The three dragon sideplates which prompted this paper were recovered at Ash Rapids, the only entrance from Lake of the Woods into Shoal Lake (Fig. 1). There is a large multi-component site on each side of the rapids and these have been assigned the Borden designations DjKq-4 and DjKq-5 (Fig. 2). Test excavations at these sites in 1975 and 1976 yielded McKean, Shield Archaic, Laurel, Blackduck, Selkirk, Contact and Historic components (Reid 1977).

Ash Rapids is a location of considerable importance for cultural dynamics in the Lake

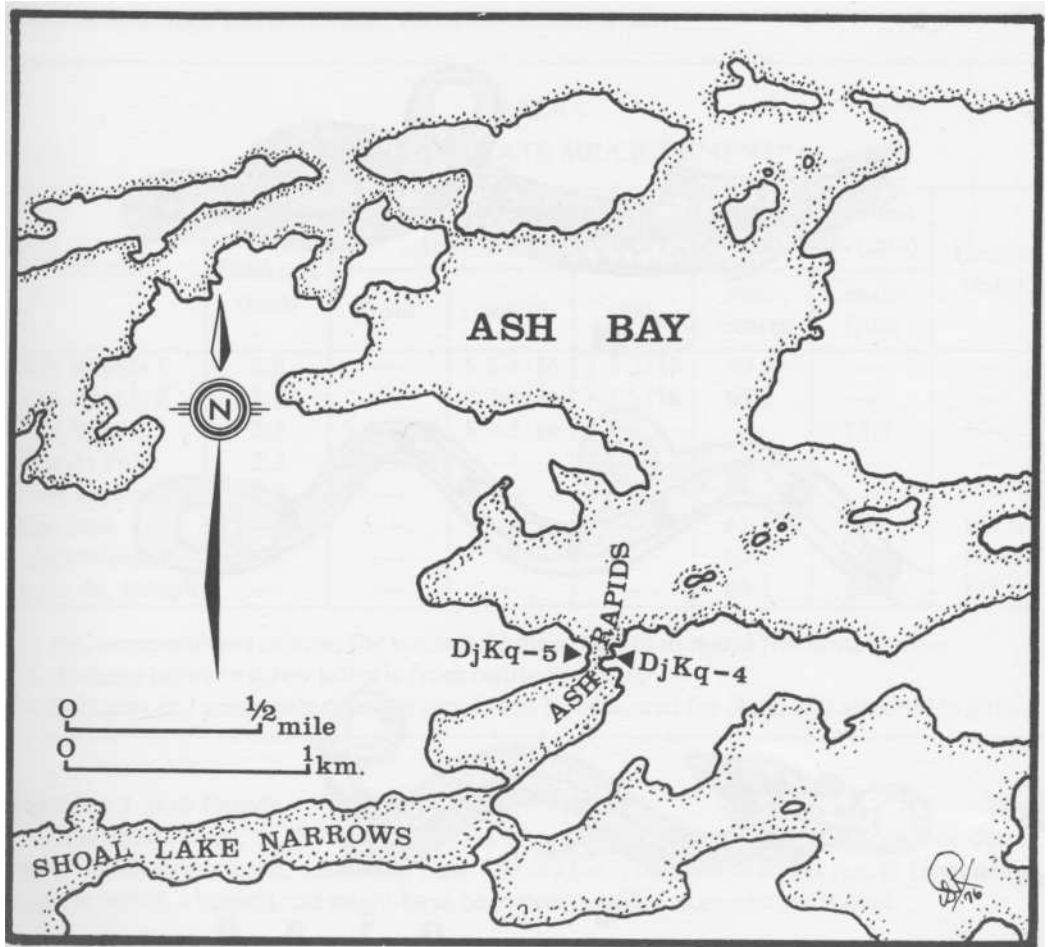


Fig. 2 The Ash Rapids sites: DjKq-4 and DjKq-5

of the Woods drainage area, as it serves as a microcosm of Lake of the Woods archaeology as a whole. It is a natural corridor, the only entrance to Shoal Lake, and is an ideal fishing location. Hind describes Shoal Lake as "a favourite haunt of aquatic birds" (1860, Vol. II: 78), and the Hudson's Bay Company maintained a wintering post — Shoal Lake House — just below the rapids (Fig. 1). The two sites will be the subject of a forthcoming monograph once analysis of the 1976 test excavations is completed.

THE ASH RAPIDS SIDEPLATES

The three sideplates are shown in Fig. 3 and Fig. 5c-e. One (Fig. 3a) was recovered from Excavation Unit 1, Level IV (9-12 cm.) on DjKq-5, and the remaining two are surface finds from DjKq-4.

Sideplate 1, Ash Rapids

This specimen (Figs. 3a, 5e) is cast brass, and the dragon's head has been broken off. The loop formed by the coiled dragon's tail is oval with a solid centre, rather than the more usual circular and open loop (see Figs. 6-8). There are four short, deeply incised, oblique

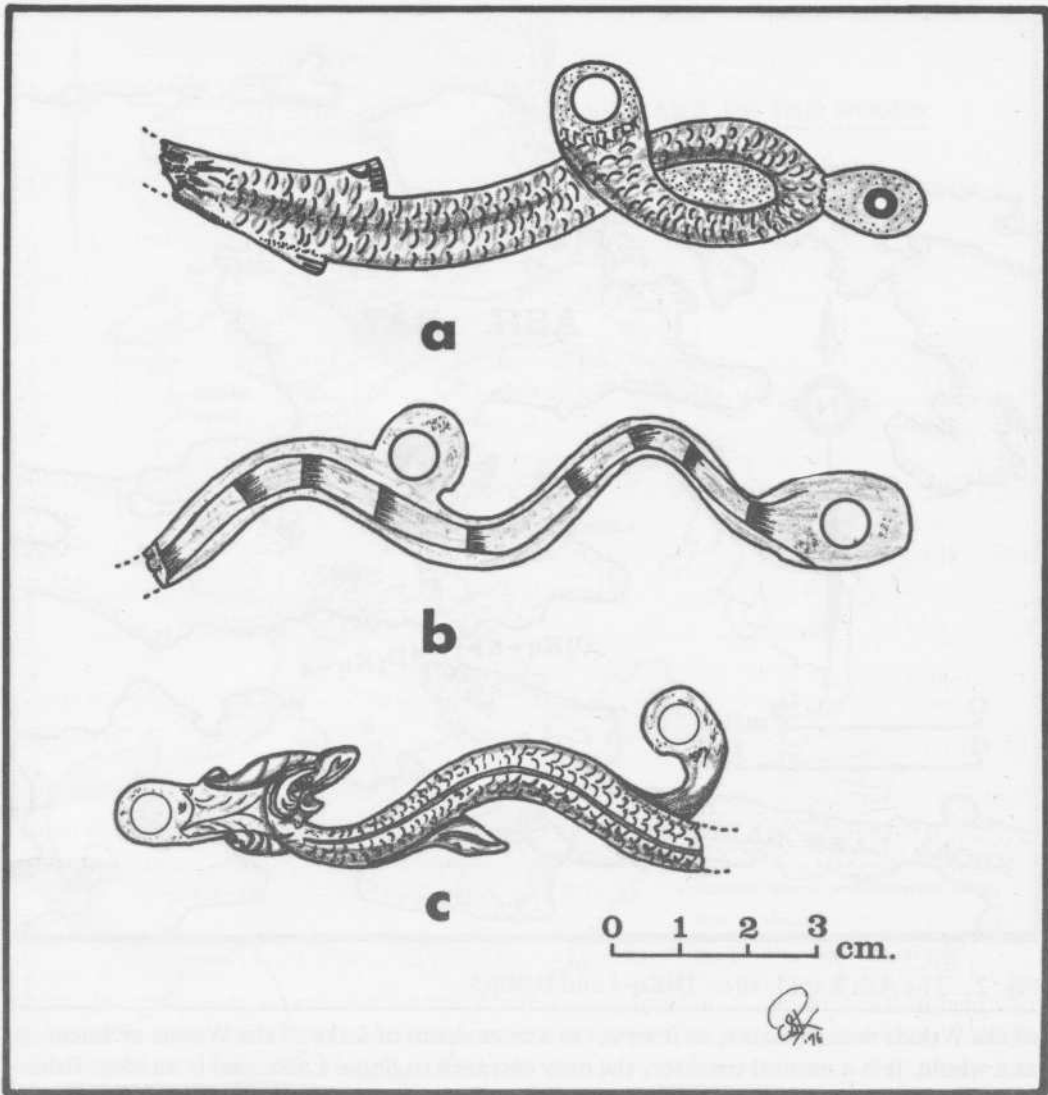


Fig. 3 The Ash Rapids dragon sideplates.

marks on the reverse just behind the breakage point. The casting is relatively crude — possibly a sand casting — when compared to the other cast specimens, with heavy burnishing of the dragon's scales which may either be the manufacturer's attempt to smooth the irregularities of the casting to enhance the visual qualities of the plate or the result of heavy use wear. It is oval in cross-section, and the rear screw hole is beveled. Measurements are shown at Table 1.

Sideplate 2, Ash Rapids

This plate (Figs. 3b, 5d and Table 1) is of brass, and the design is engraved by hand with two fine lines running the length of the piece, joined at mean intervals of 11 mm by vertical lines to form rectanguloid compartments. A series of very fine lines to the right of each vertical line give an abstract impression of scales. The dragon's head is broken off, and

there is no looped coil to the tail. The cross-section is flat.

TABLE 1
DRAGON SIDEPLATE MEASUREMENTS

Sideplate	Mean Thickness (mm)	Screw Hole Diameters (mm & inches)			Distance Between Screw Holes (mm)		Length (mm)
		front	centre	rear	rear-centre	centre-front	
Ash Rapids 1	2.6	—	5.8-4/16	3.5-2/16	40.2	—	—
Ash Rapids 2	1.6	—	6.2-4/16	7.1-5/16	65.2	—	—
Ash Rapids 3	2.5	5.1-3/16	5.0-3/16	—	—	73.7	—
Martin Falls	2.3	6.9-5/16	—	—	—	—	—
New Brunswick	2.3	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lac Seul	—	—	—	—	65.1	89.4	165.0
Lake Nipigon	—	—	—	—	60.1	69.2	145.6
Lake St. Joseph	—	—	—	—	60.1	69.2	145.6

- measurements are in mm; for screw hole diameters in mm and fractional inches
- distance between screw holes is from centre to centre
- thickness and screw hole diameters could not be measured for plates still attached to guns

Sideplate 3, Ash Rapids

This plate (Figs. 3c, 5c and Table 1) is of cast brass, and is well made with fine detailing of the dragon's head, scales and fins. The dragon's tail is broken off just in front of the point at which a looped coil might have been present. The cross-section is oval.

OTHER NORTHERN ONTARIO DRAGON PLATES

Five plates from various locations in Northwestern Ontario (Fig. 4) were examined and are described below. Two other plates from Longlac Post (Fig. 4), excavated by K.C.A. Dawson (1969), are considered in the *COMPARISONS AND DISCUSSION* section.

Lac Seul Post

This complete plate (Fig. 6 and Table 1) is from the Captain Edwards Collection in the Lake of the Woods Museum, and was found at the Lac Seul Hudson's Bay Company post. It is complete and still attached to the remains of the original flintlock gun which was probably discarded when the barrel burst at the muzzle. Although the lockplate is complete, it is too corroded to read the maker's mark. The sideplate is cast brass, well made, and oval in cross-section with a circular looped coil.

Lake Nipigon

This complete plate (Fig. 7 and Table 1) is from the collection of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum, and was dragged up in a fisherman's net from Lake Nipigon in 1928. It is complete and still attached to the remains of the original flintlock gun. Although the lockplate is complete, it is too corroded to read the maker's mark. The sideplate is cast brass, well made, and oval in cross-section. It possesses a circular looped coil.

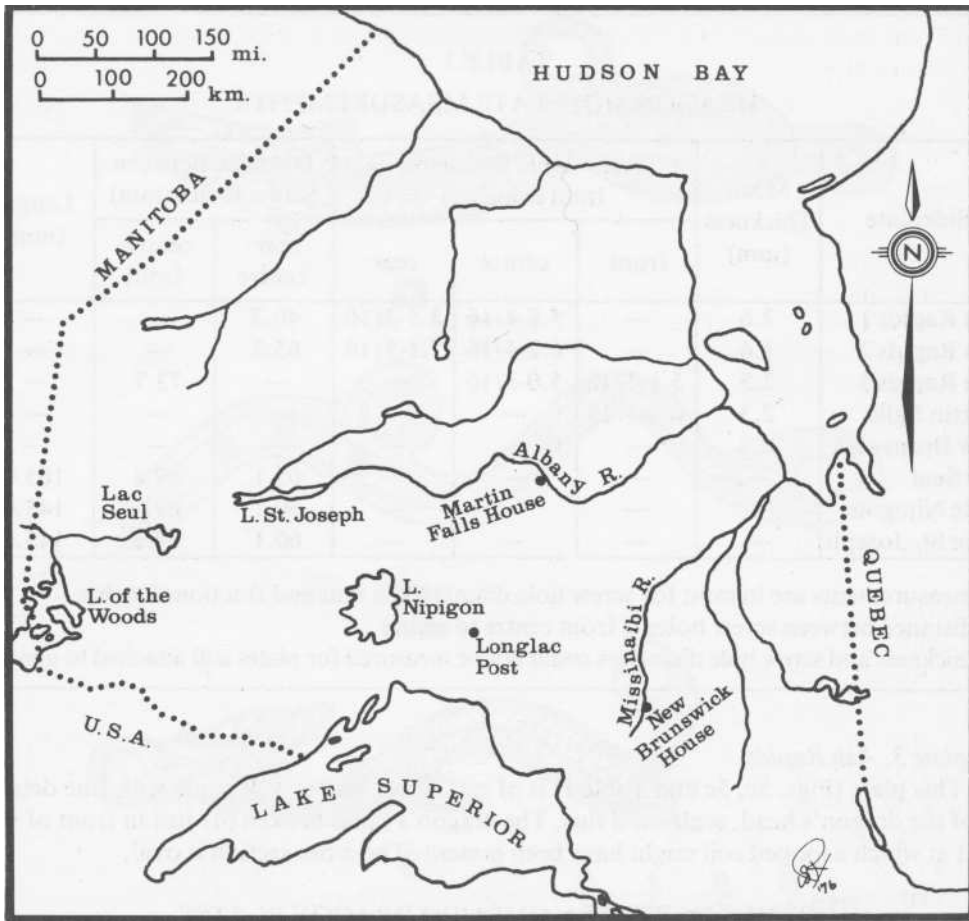


Fig. 4 Locations of northern Ontario dragon sideplate recoveries mentioned in the text.

Lake St. Joseph

The plate (Fig. 8 and Table 1) is from the collection of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum, and was recovered from Rat Rapids below Lake St. Joseph by skindivers. It is still attached to the original flintlock gun and although the part behind the looped coil is missing, it is possible to measure the plate's complete length to the rear screw. This gun is in every way identical to that from Lake Nipigon. Although the lockplate is badly corroded it is possible to read the last three letters of the maker's name, which are " _____ SON." If this weapon is a Hudson's Bay Company trade item we can turn to the lists of gunmaker's for the H.B.C. (Gooding 1960:89-90) in an attempt to isolate the date of production. The gunmakers with names ending in "SON" are: Nelson, Nicholson, Richardson, Sanderson, Watkinson, Wilkinson and Wilson. All but Wilson date prior to 1712, and from the form of the cock we may exclude these earlier names. Although this would seem to provide a neat *terminus post quem* for this dragon sideplate, the known dates of manufacture of trade guns by Wilson for the H.B.C., the Wilson family produced guns in this category from 1730-1833 (Gooding 1960:90) so we are faced with a time span of 103 years.

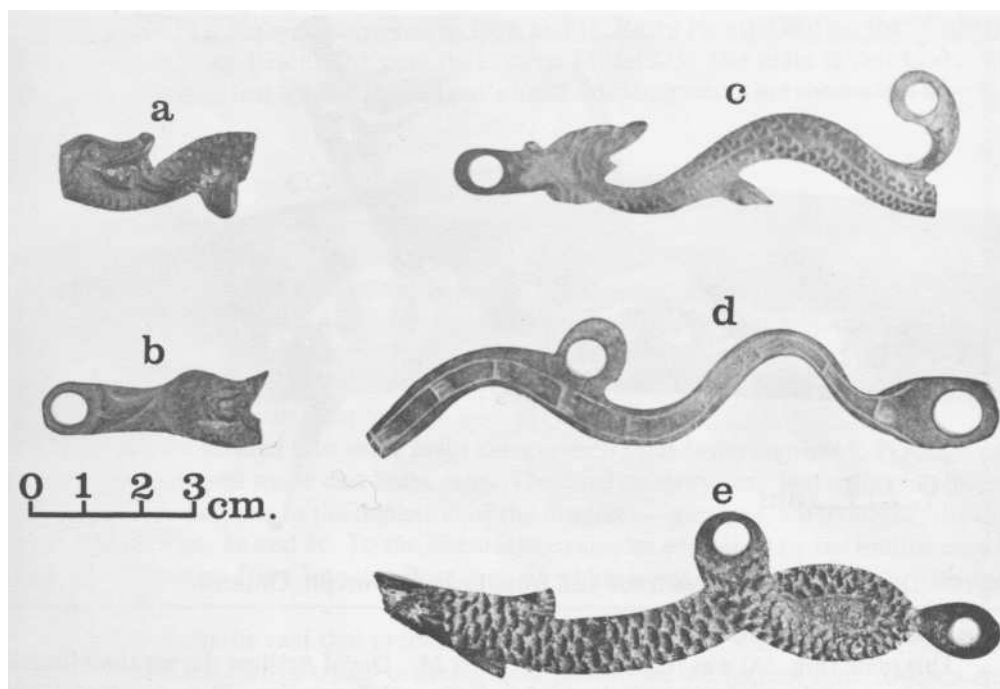


Fig. 5 Northern Ontario dragon sideplates: a: New Brunswick House; b: Martin Falls House; c-d: Ash Rapids East; e: Ash Rapids West.

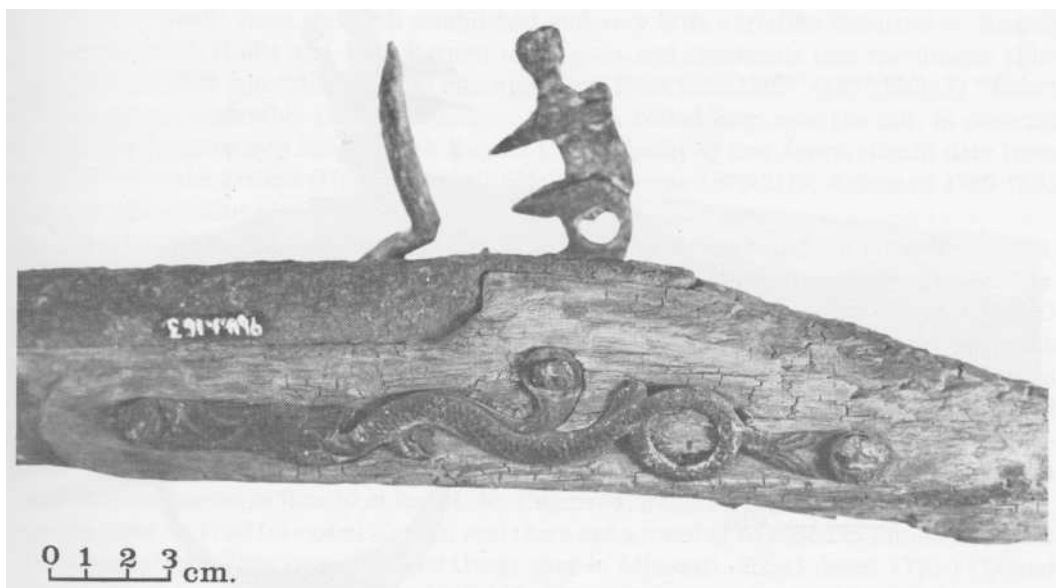


Fig. 6 Dragon sideplate on a trade gun from the Lac Seul HBC Post, Ontario.

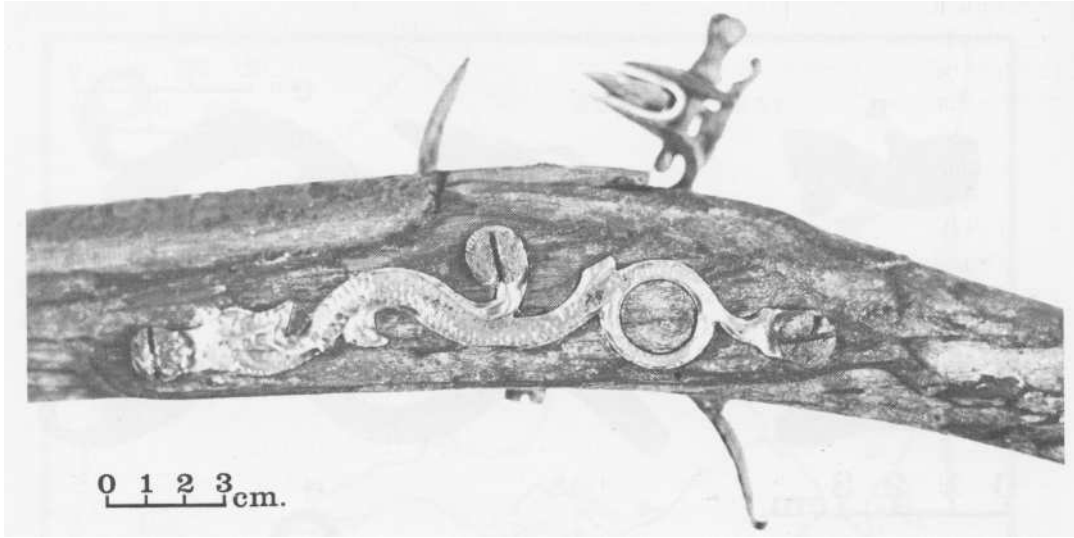


Fig. 7 Dragon sideplate on a trade gun from Lake St. Joseph, Ontario.

New Brunswick House (DgHu-1)

This plate (Fig. 5a) was recovered in 1976 by Mr. David Arthurs during the Missinaibi River survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Recreation. The post (Fig. 1) dates from 1788 to 1879. The plate is cast brass, well made, oval in cross-section, and is broken in front of the dragon's head and behind the first fin. Due to this damage, the only measurement possible is thickness (Table 1).

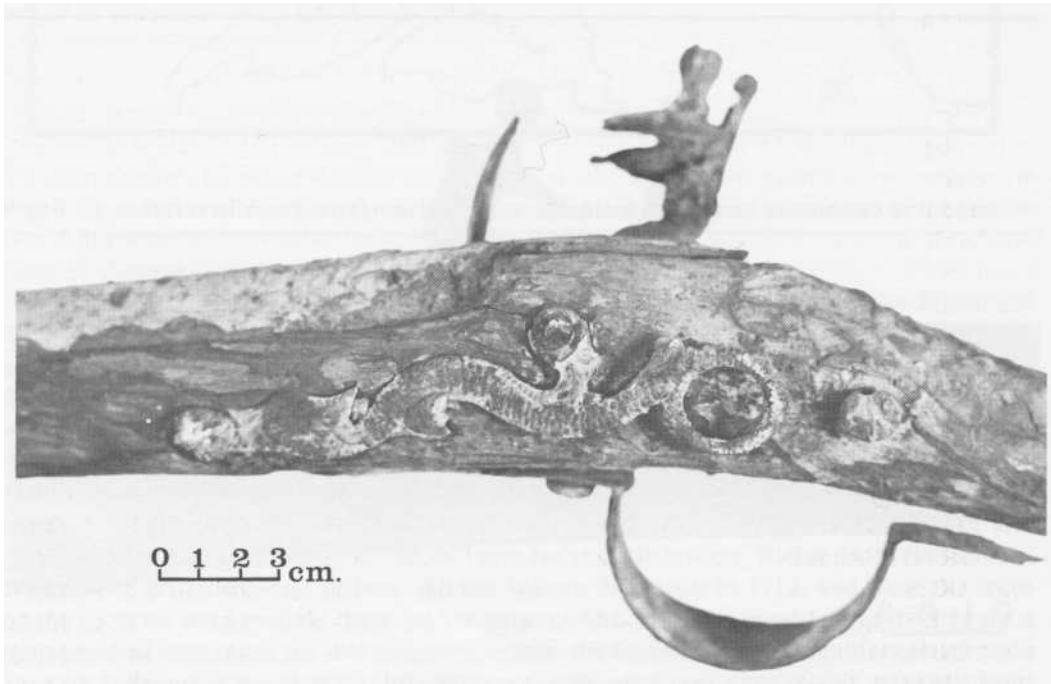


Fig. 8 Dragon sideplate on a trade gun from Lake Nipigon, Ontario.

Martin Falls House (Ejlp-1)

This plate (Fig. 5b) was recovered in 1976 by Mr. Barry Newton during the Ministry's survey of the Albany River. The post dates *circa* 1793-1923. The plate is cast brass, well made, and is broken just behind the dragon's head. Measurements are shown in Table 1.

COMPARISONS AND DISCUSSION

The forms and provenience of the Northwestern Ontario finds are here compared to each other and to sideplates from various North American contexts. The origin, development and variability of dragon sideplates are discussed in a brief synthesis of the more readily available site reports and firearms articles in an attempt to consolidate the data for use by Ontario archaeologists working on contact and fur trade sites.

The North western Ontario Sideplates

These can be divided into three main categories: 1) flat brass engraved; 2) rough cast brass, oval; and 3) well made cast brass, oval. The third category may be further sub-divided on the basis of variations in the depiction of the dragon — compare, for example, the dragon's heads in Figs. 3a and 3c. To the illustrated examples examined by the author may be added two sideplates from Longlac Post, one of which is engraved and one cast (Dawson 1969:40, Pl. 5).

Generally it can be said that archaeological provenience for most of these plates does not provide data for chronological ordering since all but one are surface finds (provenience for the Longlac plates is not provided in the published report). The Ash Rapids sideplate 1 (Figs. 3a, 5e) however, was found in a level of excavation which has tentatively been identified as late 18th century. In addition, several other references indicate that the Ash Rapids sideplate 1 is an early example of the *cast* variety, as follows: 1) the third category identified above, the "final" form (Hamilton 1960:136), is invariably well made as opposed to the rough casting of Ash Rapids 1 (Hamilton 1968; Howard 1964; Russell 1957); 2) by at least 1805 this "final" form was well established and very little variation occurred — Russell illustrates 1886 Hollis and 1805 Barnett trade guns and comments that the dragon side-plate on the 1886 gun "differs in no important way from the...1805" (1957:130); 3) "final" forms almost invariably possess a hollow, circular, coiled loop near the tail, in contrast to the solid-centre oval loop of Ash Rapids 1; and finally 4) cast forms should date from 1780-1790 at the earliest (Hamilton 1960:135; Noel-Hume 1970:218). A date of 1780-1805 for this plate is thus a strong possibility.

In the case of the Ash Rapids sideplate 2 (Figs. 3b, 5d), although it is a surface find, some attempts at chronological ordering on the basis of provenience and form are possible. This plate was found on the sand/cobble beach of Area A, DjKq-4, adjacent to a 3 by 1 metre test trench. A distinct Blackduck stratum in this trench at a depth of 16-18 cm yielded Early Historic artifacts including a classic Late Woodland point manufactured from early glass (as evidenced by a patina from manganese leaching) in near proximity to and at the same depth as an identical point chipped from Hudson Bay Lowland chert. Black-duck artifacts are considered by some authors to be associated with the Ojibway (Wright 1971:23) and extend in time to at least 1750. Engraved dragon sideplates are the early form, dating prior to 1780 (as noted above), and there are a number of dated examples available for comparison. They occur on two Osage sites in Missouri, 23Sa3 dated 1730-1775 and 23Vel dated 1790-1815 (Hamilton 1960:135, Fig. 49); they are further identified by Hamilton (1968) in his study of early trade guns as being of three types — Type O dating to the mid-18th Century and possible French, Type P dating 1730-50 of English origin, and Type Q

dating 1730-50 and also English (Hamilton 1968:27-30, especially Fig. 18). A *tentative* date of 1730-1780 is therefore assigned to Ash Rapids sideplate 2.

Sideplate 3 is without any doubt a "final" form sideplate, and could have been produced at any time in the 19th century, although it should be noted that "all but a handful belong to the first half of the 19th century" (Noel-Hume, 1970:218). It should be noted that it differs from the other Ontario examples in the shape of the dragon's head and in the body design — note the central line on the body of this plate. It is suggested that these small differences in motif on the "final" plates are the result of minor variations produced by the relatively large number of gunmakers in several countries manufacturing guns for the Indian trade, for example, the Belgian copies of Burnett guns shown in Hanson 1960: Fig. 78.

For the remaining five plates from Northwestern Ontario a general lumping into the "final" form is the only chronological aid. However, it should be noted that only two of these specimens are identical, the Lake Nipigon and Lake St. Joseph sideplates. It has been suggested that the small differences between "final" form plates reflect different makers and it may be possible in the future to establish fairly precise dates for dragon side-plates by comparing variations in the motif together with sideplate measurements.

Discussion and Comparative Materials

The number of dragon sideplates reported from specific archaeological sites and in articles on trade guns has been increasing gradually in recent years. The following is a brief examination of a number of reports for comparative purposes which may also serve as a comprehensive if not exhaustive bibliography for dragon sideplates. Articles are presented alphabetically by author.

Dawson's 1964 excavations at Longlac Post, Ontario, produced two brass dragon sideplate fragments, one cast and one engraved. One is a mid-section of a "final" form and the other is broken just behind the head (Dawson 1969: Pl. 5). No provenience or measurements are given and the photograph possesses no scale.

Gooding's (1960) study of Hudson's Bay Company trade guns may have pinned down the date of *formal* introduction of the dragon sideplate on trade guns. He illustrates a dragon sideplate by the gunmaker Thomas Green, who was appointed Company gun viewer in 1715 and who was ordered in that year to establish the standard patterns for the Company's trade guns (Gooding 1960:87, Fig. 23). In addition, Gooding lists the Company gunmakers and the dates of their contracts from 1671 to 1875 (1960: 88-90) and the quantities shipped to North America between 1670 and 1781 (1960: 93-95) for each year for which there are records. A remarkable total of 45,700 guns were imported during this period.

Hamilton's (1960) examination of four Osage sites in Missouri is valuable as it provides data for both cast and engraved dragon sideplates from firmly dated archaeological proveniences. His data is referred to above in the description of Ash Rapids sideplate 2.

Hamilton's (1968) monograph is extremely valuable for comparisons in that it organizes trade guns into "types" based on dates of production, country of origin, and (dragon) sideplate styles, all of which are illustrated.

Hanson's (1955) monograph on the Northwest gun has been the standard reference for a number of years. It is updated by Hamilton's work and by Hanson's own further work (1960).

Howard (1964) examines Northwest Company trade guns and his work should be combined with Gooding's on the Hudson's Bay Company guns for maximum comparative data. His description of a Barnett gun of 1789 (Howard 1964:69, Fig. 3) as the "earliest

known dated Indian trade gun" should not be taken to mean that it is the earliest dated side or lockplate, but rather the earliest complete weapon *of collection quality* bearing a dated maker's mark.

Kidd (1970) in his excavations at Fort George, Alberta, a Northwest Company post dating 1792-circa 1800, uncovered one complete and five broken sideplates. The complete specimen and two of the broken plates are cast brass dragon sideplates; the remaining three examples are not described. Measurements for the complete sideplate and one broken specimen are provided and the former illustrated (1970:70, Fig. 59). It is nearly identical in form and measurements to the plates from Lake Nipigon and Lake St. Joseph, Ontario.

Mayer (1943) deals with Seneca trade guns from 1620-1687 in an extremely detailed work which is of particular value to Iroquoian archaeologists dealing with the Contact/Historic periods.

Maxwell and Binford (1961) recovered cast brass "final" form dragon sideplates at Fort Michilimackinac, three fragments to which they assign proveniences of 1734, 1770 and 1772 (1961:103, Fig. 16, Pl. VI). Although the presence of a "final" form in "a storage pit in an early French house (1734)" is an enigma, and the other two dates also appear rather early, no explanations or further analyses are offered. It should also be noted that specifically French forms of "monster" sideplates were excavated at Michilimackinac — although not reported by Maxwell and Binford — and are assigned to Types B and C, French, 1680-1730, by Hamilton (1968:5-7, Fig. 3).

Meyer-Oakes (1970) recovered two sideplates in his investigations in the Grand Rapids Reservoir in Manitoba, one of which is a cast dragon "final" form (1970: Fig. 111) which appears to be identical to the Martin Falls House sideplate from Ontario. He offers no analysis, and it is assumed from Fig. 111 that the dragon plate is brass.

Nash (1975) found a portion of a dragon sideplate on the JdLx-17 site in Keewatin District, N.W.T. which he describes as a "fully developed dragon motif characteristic of nineteenth century trade muskets" (1975:129). However, the material of manufacture or measurements are not given and the illustration (Fig. 57) is too dark to show whether the plate is cast or engraved.

Russell (1957) provides some useful illustrations of Belgian and American made trade guns (Figs. 23-26), as well as the Hollis 1886 and Barnett 1805 comparison already mentioned, and discusses the numerous makers in England, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and the U.S.A.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The possibilities for assigning dates to the earlier forms of dragon sideplates have been examined in the case of the Ash Rapids sideplates 1 and 2 and it would appear that despite the limited number of references it is now feasible to assign relatively accurate dates — to within a quarter century — to these artifacts. In the case of the "final" form sideplates, tight dating is not yet possible unless either 1) a marked lockplate accompanies the side-plate, or 2) other diagnostic historic artifacts are found in direct association with the side-plate.

There is, however, a possible diagnostic method for dating "final" forms. This pro-posed method relies on comparative metric data and identification of minor motif variations in the cast dragon. It is proposed that archaeologists reporting dragon sideplates provide measurements and detailed scale drawings and compare these to plates associated with marked lockplates. As data accumulates it should be possible to compare the distances between screw holes on sideplates to the equivalent distances on marked lockplates, to as-

sociate stylistic variations with specific makers, and to chart changes over time in the products of a single maker. This will entail detailed examination of the maximum number of complete or partially complete guns in museum and private collections, and the provision of both precise measurements and precise proveniences. The potential results suggest this methodology for profitable research design.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to extend his thanks to the following people and institutions for their assistance. The Lake of the Woods Museum provided the loan of the Lac Seul musket and associated records, and the Thunder Bay Historical Museum loaned the Lake St. Joseph and Lake Nipigon specimens. Within the Historical Planning and Research Branch of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation, Mr. David Arthurs and Mr. Barry Newton provided access to their collections and data from the 1976 Albany River and Missinaibi River Projects respectively, Mr. Peter Engelbert developed the photographs, and Mr. William Fox placed the facilities of North Central Region's laboratory at my disposal.

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