

From the Old World to the New

Photo by Taimadge G. Rutledge. Circa 1640 map courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library/University of Georgia.

Those hearty souls who left England in 1620 in search of a fresh beginning in the New World did so knowing that just the act of surviving could be their greatest accomplishment. One wide-eyed youth named John Alden was only 20 years old when he chose to cast his fate with those other Pilgrims who had co-signed the "Mayflower Compact" and decided to make Plymouth Colony home. Like most of the able-bodied men in the new colony, Alden was a member of Captain Miles Standish's Militia unit and carried his own musket to the regular drills.

The manifest of the *Mayflower* and Alden's will both show that he owned a number of firearms. One, a wheellock of Italian origin, is currently on display in the National Firearms Museum at NRA Headquarters in Fairfax, Va. Having been found during a restoration of Alden's home in Duxbury, Mass., in 1924, (January 1971, p. 28), Alden's musket is typical of many early firearms associated with the Pilgrim settlers.

The short carbine is a finely made Italian wheellock that appears to have been originally a .50 caliber. The few markings on the gun have not as of yet yielded any further clues as to its origins. According to the few written records available for it, the gun is thought to

John Alden, seeking freedom in a New World, brought his wheellock carbine to Plymouth Colony on the *Mayflower* in 1620. This remarkable piece of history bridges the gap between the Old and New Worlds.


By Philip Schreier
Curator of Educational Programs,
National Firearms Museum

have been re-stocked at some point in the New England area with American walnut.

It was not uncommon for early settlers to keep their potential enemies at arms' length while remaining cordial with them to their faces. A number of times, it was noted that firearms were stored among the wall boards and in closets to hide them from view, but to keep them handy in case of a raid by Indians or other hostiles. It was in the Alden's second home (the one built in Duxbury in 1653), where the now famous wheellock was discovered during restoration work.

Records kept by the Pilgrim Society indicate that the Alden home was occupied by members of the family from 1653 through 1896—a remarkable feat. Additional records also indicate the transfer of numerous firearms in the wills of John Alden and his heirs.

The Alden wheellock is in a special exhibition in the National Firearms Museum that symbolizes the transition from the firearms of old Europe to the new freedoms and heritages to be found in the New World.

The National Firearms Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week, and is closed on major holidays. Admission is free. For more information, call (703) 267-1600 or visit the NFM at www.nrahq.org. 

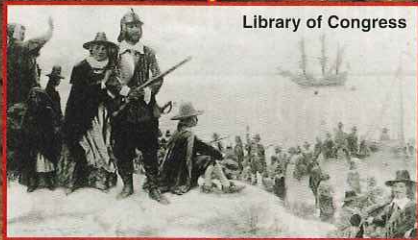


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