



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on May 23, 2018
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The American Gun Culture

From the print edition of The New American
“It’s alive. It’s alive. It’s alive!” So exclaimed Dr. Frankenstein when his monster with the brain of a criminal began to move after jolts of electricity. I now think of that famous scene when I see the fraudulent work of Michael Bellesiles, which was quoted and cited as fact recently by the mainstream media and liberal authors. I thought we had buried that corpse long ago.



This whole sorry saga starts back in 1996, when an article by Bellesiles was published in the *Journal of American History*. Bellesiles argued that during America’s Colonial and New Nation eras, guns were scarce, and Americans weren’t proficient in their use. There was no American gun culture. He claimed that not until the middle of the 19th century did a gun culture arise, artificially created by gun manufacturers through advertising and promotion. He later expanded the article into a book, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, published in 2000.

Taken Aback by Claims

Bellesiles’ book was praised and promoted by the media and reviewed favorably and enthusiastically in academic journals. Many said it was the answer to the National Rifle Association’s argument that an armed citizenry was an American tradition going back to the earliest Colonial days. Now, they said, Bellesiles has proved Americans were not well armed and were not proficient with firearms — that was all an invention of the marketing department of gun manufacturers. Americans and guns was a myth. Hallelujah! The trustees of Columbia University awarded *Arming America* the esteemed Bancroft Prize for excellence in American history for the year 2000.

Most of us on the other side of the issue were shocked at Bellesiles’ claims. They were contrary to everything I, for one, knew about Colonial and New Nation American history. My e-mail traffic on the issue was heavy. I happened to be part of a network of Second Amendment and gun-rights advocates organized in the 1980s by Don Kates, an attorney and civil libertarian from San Francisco. He showed up at my office at UCLA one day after reading my *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, & Vigilantes* book and said, “Let’s talk guns.” He was about as far from the Left’s image of a “gun nut” as any human being could be. He was also the most knowledgeable person I had ever met on the Second Amendment and all constitutional and legal issues pertaining to guns. He wanted to organize proponents of the Second Amendment who taught in universities, especially those in history and law. Within a couple years, he had created a network that included an impressive array of scholars. With the arrival of the Internet, we all became connected with chain e-mail. Now, in reaction to *Arming America*, that chain was ablaze.

Most of us noticed individual problems with what Bellesiles had done. For example, one of his citations was for a volume of records I had wanted to use for my *Gunfighters* book. I had seen the source quoted and cited in the 19th-century works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, the great historian of California and the American West. Much to my dismay, I learned the volume had been destroyed in the great fire that



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followed the earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco. *Mirabile dictu*, Bellesiles quoted from the volume and cited it as if it existed.

Taking the lead in our group was Clayton Cramer, a software engineer, historian, and author of articles in gun magazines. He had recently earned a master's degree in history, specializing in the New Nation era, and was familiar with many of the sources Bellesiles was citing. Cramer would soon be teaching in college as an adjunct professor. Through assiduous research, he discovered hundreds — yes, hundreds — of instances in which Bellesiles had cited sources that were not extant or were misrepresented, misquoted, or entirely falsified. Cramer also found quotations with words omitted or words inserted to change the meaning of the quoted material, as well as contrived statistical evidence and altered dates.

Unlike the immediate recognition and praise heaped upon Bellesiles by the liberal media and his fellow travelers in academe upon publication of *Arming America*, Cramer toiled in relative obscurity until his criticisms of Bellesiles' work, at first publicized only by the various gun rights organizations, finally became so devastating they couldn't be ignored. Bellesiles didn't address the criticisms but relied on the Left's favorite tactic: *argumentum ad hominem* — argue against the man, attack the messenger! Cramer was nothing but, said Bellesiles, “a long time advocate of unrestricted gun ownership,” while, he, Bellesiles, was a professor at Emory University, who had “certain obligations of accuracy that transcend current political benefit.”

Bellesiles then resorted to another favored tactic of the Left: He said he was the object of hate mail and death threats. The American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians rallied to Bellesiles' defense, endorsing a resolution that supported Bellesiles and condemned the alleged attacks on him. Bellesiles felt vindicated and said “academic historians would not let their expertise be impugned by a rank and partisan amateur like Cramer.”

Cramer was soon joined by others, though, including eminent scholars Joyce Lee Malcolm, writing in *Reason* magazine and in the *Texas Law Review*; Dave Kopel, in *National Review*; James Lindgren, in the *William & Mary Law Review* and in *The Yale Law Journal*; Robert Churchill, in *Reviews in American History*; and Ira Gruber, Gloria Main, and Randolph Roth, in the *William & Mary Quarterly*. These scholars and others not only reinforced Cramer's criticisms of Bellesiles but added more of their own. It was becoming clear *Arming America* was a fraud.

By now Bellesiles was admitting to what he claimed were only minor errors in his citations or saying his improbable statistical tables were the result of his never being good in math. When asked to produce the notes he took from all the documents he supposedly perused, Bellesiles said they had been destroyed when fire sprinklers in his office went off accidentally.

Reduced to Rubbish

Emory University finally launched an investigation of its own and had a committee of historians examine *Arming America*. The committee reported that Bellesiles had falsified portions of his book and violated Emory's policies and standards. Largely because of the book, Bellesiles had recently been awarded tenure. Now, because of the book, Bellesiles resigned. A few months later, Columbia University revoked his Bancroft Prize and asked him to return the prize money. The publisher of the book, Alfred A. Knopf, announced it would cease printing copies, and unsold copies returned by bookstores would not be sold as remainders but turned to pulp.

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Those who had heaped lavish praise upon Bellesiles when *Arming America* first appeared were now left with egg on their faces. To their credit, several acknowledged their mistakes. Garry Wills, who had written a glowing review for the *New York Times*, now declared, "I was took. The book is a fraud." Edmund Morgan, the author of a very positive review in the *New York Review of Books*, now viewed the book as highly flawed. Roger Lane, who had called Bellesiles' research "meticulous and thorough" in the *Journal of American History*, now said, "It's now entirely clear to me that he's made up a lot of these records. He's betrayed us. He's betrayed the cause. It's 100 percent clear that the guy is a liar and a disgrace to my profession."

Clayton Cramer was not done with Bellesiles. In 2006, Cramer's book *Armed America* was published. As Bellesiles had expanded an article into a book, Cramer expanded many articles into a book and, in an organized whole, exposed the misdeeds of Bellesiles. There is page after page of specific examples of Bellesiles deliberately misrepresenting, misquoting, altering, and fabricating original source material. Case closed.

At least that's what we all thought. In 2010, Bellesiles came out with a second book, *1877: America's Year of Living Violently*, published by New Press. He certainly deserved a chance to do it right this time, but promotional copy for the book was Orwellian: "A major new work of popular history, *1877* is also notable as the comeback book for a celebrated U.S. historian. Michael Bellesiles is perhaps most famous as the target of an infamous 'swiftboating' campaign by the National Rifle Association, following the publication of his Bancroft Prize-winning book *Arming America*."

It's mind-boggling that a publicist actually wrote such copy, and even more mind-boggling that Bellesiles allowed it to be used in promotion of his book. Northwestern University Professor of Law James Lindgren reacted immediately. "The idea that the NRA had anything substantial to do with Bellesiles' case," said Lindgren, "is utter nonsense." Lindgren noted that Charlton Heston criticized *Arming America* in a column in an NRA magazine, but beyond that the NRA was on the sidelines. Moreover, Lindgren said, when Clayton Cramer asked the NRA for a small travel grant to check Bellesiles' sources in New England libraries, the NRA turned him down. Just how did the NRA influence all the scholars who independently criticized *Arming America*? asked Lindgren. "It is ironic that a historian whose book spread unsupported and untrue stories about early America," concluded Lindgren, "is now defended by an editor at the New Press who is spreading unsupported and untrue stories about the dispute over that book."

Stunningly, Bellesiles' discredited arguments were resurrected in Pamela Haag's *The Gunning of America* in 2016. Haag says she thinks Bellesiles was right about the scarcity of guns and the absence of a gun culture in Colonial and New Nation America. She essentially repeats everything Bellesiles said about the early days of the United States and argues forcefully that an American gun culture was an artificial creation of Colt and Winchester and other gun manufacturers advertising and promoting their products beginning in the 1850s and '60s. Her book received a warm welcome by the media; evidently 14 years was enough time to forget that Bellesiles' thesis had been destroyed.

Proof Positive

Fortunately, Clayton Cramer, the leading figure in exposing Bellesiles, has a new book out, *Lock, Stock,*



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and Barrel: The Origins of American Gun Culture (Praeger, 2018). It's not only a must-read, but a must-addition to one's library as an invaluable reference work. Cramer provides incontrovertible evidence that guns were fundamental to the American way of life from the very earliest Colonial days, more than 200 years before Bellesiles and Haag said a gun culture was created by the gun-manufacturing industry. Examples abound in colony after colony of laws requiring freemen to arm themselves and for the owners of indentured servants to supply each servant with a gun when his term of indenture was completed.

In 1631, Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted a statute requiring every adult male to have a musket, one pound of gunpowder, and 20 bullets. A 1637 ordinance required adult males to carry their muskets to public assemblies and to carry their firearms when traveling more than a mile from home. There was even an ordinance requiring men to have their firearms with them when attending church. The neighboring Plymouth Colony enacted a statute in 1632 requiring "every freeman or other inhabitant of this colony provide for himselfe and each under him able to beare armes a sufficient musket." A later addition to the law required each person to also have two pounds of powder and 10 pounds of bullets.

During the 1630s, Connecticut enacted laws requiring adult males to have guns and ammunition at home, and those too poor to purchase the firearms for themselves to be provided with them at taxpayers' expense. In 1643, Connecticut passed a law requiring men attending church to "bring a musket, pystoll or some peece, with powder and shott to each meeting." New Hampshire required every "Male person from Sixteen Years to Sixty," with a few exceptions, to have a firearm. Rhode Island enacted a statute reading, "noe man shall go two miles from the Towne unarmed, eyther with Gunn or Sword; and that none shall come to any public Meeting without his weapon."

Laws similar to those cited for the New England colonies were enacted in all the colonies, although by the 18th century the southern colonies were beginning to draw a color line. The colonists were well armed, and for good reason. Indian attacks were common, and the threat of European wars spilling over the Atlantic into the colonies was ever-present. Then, too, the colonists became hunters of wild game, something denied the common man in Europe. A 1632 Virginia law required a license to hunt wild pigs, but "any man be permitted to kill deare or other wild beasts or fowle in the common woods, forests, or rivers.... That thereby the inhabitants may be trained in the use of their arms, the Indians kept from our plantations, and the wolves and other vermine destroyed."

In his 1682 Frame of Government for Pennsylvania, William Penn granted the settlers "liberty to fowl and hunt upon the lands they hold, and all other lands therein not inclosed." A 1698 traveler's account suggests Pennsylvania was a hunter's paradise. "Here is curious Diversion in Hunting, Fishing, and Fowling," said Gabriel Thomas. Deer are everywhere and "there are vast Numbers of other Wild Creatures, as Elks, Bufalos, etc., all which as well [as] Beasts, Fowl, and Fish, are free and common to any Person who can shoot or take them, without any let, hinderance or Opposition whatsoever."

Virginia and Pennsylvania were not atypical — hunting was common throughout the colonies. The tons of gunpowder imported into the colonies gives some indication of the volume of shooting that occurred. Good records exist for gunpowder passing through American ports from 1769 through 1771. A stunning 1,030,694 pounds was recorded, which is enough gunpowder for 40-50 million shots. Some of that gunpowder went to British troops stationed in the colonies, British naval stores, and Indian trade, but the great bulk went to the colonists themselves. Remembering Americans, not liking British taxation, were smugglers, there may have been considerably more gunpowder imported. I suspect there was



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enough gunpowder imported each year for two million shots a month. If the colonists weren't armed, as claimed by Bellesiles and Haag, what were they doing with hundreds of thousands of pounds of gunpowder each year — sprinkling it on their oatmeal?

Another indication of widespread gun ownership in the colonies is the large number of gunsmiths. A look at city directories, census reports, tax lists, and newspaper advertisements reveals it was a common occupation. Then, too, persons who described themselves as blacksmiths and locksmiths were often gunsmiths as well. Many gunsmiths had indentured servants or apprentices working for them. There was a black slave, called Caesar, in South Carolina who served as gunsmith for the local militia, cleaning and repairing all the militia's firearms.

Most of the colonial gunsmiths, like Caesar, repaired existing firearms, but there were also many dozens who manufactured guns from scratch. The greatest concentration of gunmakers was in Pennsylvania, which makes sense because of the great number of German immigrants — the Pennsylvania Dutch — who settled there. In Europe, the Germans were known as the finest gunsmiths and makers of guns. In Pennsylvania, it was German gunsmiths, especially in Lancaster and Reading, who developed the rifle that conquered the colonial frontier, the famous long rifle or Kentucky rifle. It was in 1719 in Lancaster that the first boring mill was established to make high-quality barrels. Pennsylvania gunmakers supplied thousands of muskets for American militiamen during the Revolution. When the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety ordered muskets during the fall of 1775, 4,000 were delivered by April 1776.

As with gunpowder, if there wasn't widespread ownership and use of guns, why were there so many gunsmiths and gunmakers in America?

Traveling Tales

Perhaps the most outrageous thing said by Bellesiles in *Arming America* was that most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt until the mid-1830s, when it became fashionable for wealthy Americans to do so in imitation of the British upper class. Bellesiles cited travel accounts to support his claim. Like so much of what Bellesiles asserted, this stunned me. However, unlike most of the sources Bellesiles cited for other things in his book, I was very familiar with travel accounts. For me they always made for great reading — Europeans traveling through the United States and commenting on America and Americans — and most of the travel accounts included chapters devoted to the American frontier, my field of specialization.

Travel accounts were also dear to the heart of Clayton Cramer, and he devotes a chapter of *Lock, Stock, and Barrel* to the very accounts Bellesiles cites, and he reveals that Bellesiles, again and again, said just the opposite of what was actually in the accounts. Cramer treats the reader to dozens of descriptions by travelers, which should leave no doubt in anyone's mind that Americans were a gun-toting and hunting folk on a scale never seen before in history.

Renowned English astronomer Francis Baily in his *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled Parts of North America in 1796 & 1797*, while visiting Washington, D.C., said, "Game is plenty in these parts, and, what perhaps may appear to you remarkable, I saw some boys who were out a shooting, actually kill several brace of partridges in what will be one of the most public streets of the city." He described Fredericktown, Maryland, as a "large and flourishing place" with a "large manufactory of rifle-guns carried on." He noted Hagerstown is "also a manufactory of rifle-guns." While descending the Ohio



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River, he said the boatmen every day go “into the woods with their guns to hunt for deer, turkeys, bears, or any other animals fit for food.” Baily also said even the farmers lived “a great deal upon deer and turkeys, which they sho[t] wild in the woods.” Although Baily didn’t observe anyone hunting in the streets of New York City as he had in the capital, he said people would “go over to Long Island to hunt, shoot, and fish.”

Anglo-Irish explorer and writer Isaac Weld also traveled through the United States in the mid-late 1790s. He noted German gunsmiths in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, sold rifles which, “although not as handsome as those imported from England, are more esteemed by the hunters, and are sent to every part of the country.” He was, of course, referring to the famous and deadly accurate Kentucky rifle. “An experienced marksman with one of these guns,” said Weld, “will hit an object not larger than a crown piece, to a certainty, at the distance of one hundred yards.” Weld then described an exhibition of shooting prowess with one rifleman holding a square piece of wood between his knees while another rifleman, a hundred yards away, shot it. But that was just one of many feats. “Were I,” said Weld, “to tell you all the stories I have heard of the performance of riflemen, you would think the people were most abominably addicted to lying.”

Upper-crust Englishman and real estate speculator Fortescue Cuming recorded his impressions of America during the years 1807-1809. In *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country*, he noted the armed citizenry and the popularity of hunting. In Kentucky, he said, “little or no bread was used, but that even the children were fed on game; the facility of gaining which prevented the progress of agriculture.” The settlers were such expert marksmen that they thought “it a bad shot if they miss the very head of a squirrel, or a wild turkey, on the top of the highest forest tree with a single ball.”

William C. Smith was a circuit-riding Methodist minister who traveled the West in the early 1800s and recorded his observations in *Indiana Miscellany*. He noted the settlers hunted regularly, although, he was pleased to announce, usually not on Sunday. The settlers always went about armed for fear of Indian attack, especially during the years of the War of 1812. “All the men were excellent hunters,” said Smith, “some of them real experts.... Some of [the women] could handle the rifle with great skill, and bring down the game in the absence of their husbands.”

And so it goes, one traveler’s account after another — that of upper-crust Englishman Pym Fordham, America’s first woman journalist Anne Royall, American geographer and geologist Henry Schoolcraft, English aristocrat William Blane, English naturalist and marine biologist Philip Gosse, German Duke Karl Bernhard, French jurist and minister Alexis de Tocqueville, and a dozen others all give similar descriptions of guns everywhere, the shooting skills of the people, and the prowess of the hunters. This was our America long before, as claimed by Bellesiles and Haag, the gun industry beginning in the 1850s and ’60s supposedly created the American gun culture. Sorry, folks, but you’re more than 200 years late on that. Do you really understand so little about America?

Anglo-Irishman Thomas Cather said it all for me in his *Voyage to America*, a record of his travels to the frontier in 1836-1837. He watched pioneers headed west as they moved along a trail. “Each emigrant,” said Cather, “generally had a wagon or two, drawn by oxen. These wagons contained their wives, children, and [the] *rest of their baggage*. The man walked by the side of his team with his rifle over his shoulder.”

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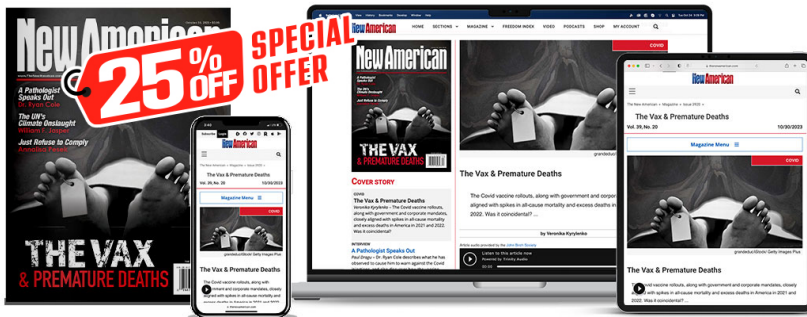
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