

# GUN LAW HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES AND SECOND AMENDMENT RIGHTS

ROBERT J. SPITZER\*

## I

### INTRODUCTION

In its important and controversial 2008 decision on the meaning of the Second Amendment, *District of Columbia v. Heller*,<sup>1</sup> the Supreme Court ruled that average citizens have a constitutional right to possess handguns for personal self-protection in the home.<sup>2</sup> Yet in establishing this right, the Court also made clear that the right was by no means unlimited, and that it was subject to an array of legal restrictions, including: “prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”<sup>3</sup> The Court also said that certain types of especially powerful weapons might be subject to regulation,<sup>4</sup> along with allowing laws regarding the safe storage of firearms.<sup>5</sup> Further, the Court referred repeatedly to gun laws that had existed earlier in American history as a justification for allowing similar contemporary laws,<sup>6</sup> even though the court, by its own admission, did not undertake its own “exhaustive historical analysis” of past laws.<sup>7</sup>

In so ruling, the Court brought to the fore and attached legal import to the history of gun laws. This development, when added to the desire to know our own history better, underscores the value of the study of gun laws in America. In recent years, new and important research and writing has chipped away at old

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\* Robert J. Spitzer (Ph.D., Cornell University, 1980) is Distinguished Service Professor and Chair of the Political Science Department at SUNY Cortland. He is the author of fifteen books, including five on gun policy, most recently *GUNS ACROSS AMERICA* (Oxford University Press 2015).

1. *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).
2. *Id.* at 628–30, 635–36.
3. *Id.* at 626–27.
4. *See id.* at 623, 627 (citing *United States v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174, 178 (1939)) (distinguishing validity of ban on short-barreled shotguns and noting that weapons protected were those used at time of ratification).
5. *See id.* at 632 (excluding gun-storage laws from scope of decision).
6. *See id.* at 626–27, 629 (“From Blackstone through the 19th-century cases, commentators and courts routinely explained that the right was not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever and for whatever purpose.”) (citation omitted).
7. *Id.* at 626.



myths to present a more accurate and pertinent sense of our gun past.<sup>8</sup> Researchers and authors including Saul Cornell, Alexander DeConde, Craig Whitney, and Adam Winkler have all published important work making clear that gun laws are by no means a contemporary phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Yet even now, far too few understand or appreciate the fact that though gun possession is as old as America, so too are gun laws. But there's more: gun laws were not only ubiquitous, numbering in the thousands, but also spanned every conceivable category of regulation, from gun acquisition, sale, possession, transport, and use, including deprivation of use through outright confiscation, to hunting and recreational regulations, to registration and express gun bans. For example, the contemporary raging dispute over the regulation of some semi-automatic weapons that began in late 1980s was actually presaged seven decades earlier, when at least seven states banned such weapons entirely—a fact that seems to have been unknown to modern analysts until now. A vast newly compiled dataset of historical gun laws reveals that the first gun grabbers (as contemporary gun rights advocates like to label gun control proponents) were not Chablis-drinking liberals of the 1960s, but rum-guzzling pioneers dating to the 1600s.

This historical examination is especially relevant to the modern gun debate because, at its core, that debate is typically framed as a fierce, zero-sum struggle between supporters of stronger gun laws versus supporters of gun rights (who, of course, largely oppose stronger gun laws—or so it is said). The zero-sum quality of this struggle posits that a victory for one side is a loss for the other, and vice versa. Yet history tells a very different story—that, for the first 300 years of America's existence, gun laws and gun rights went hand-in-hand. It is only in recent decades, as the gun debate has become more politicized and more ideological that this relationship has been reframed as a zero-sum struggle.

The plethora of early gun laws herein described establish their prolific existence, but also validate the argument that gun rules and gun rights are by no means at odds. If the Supreme Court was indeed serious in saying that the provenance of gun regulations is relevant to the evaluation of contemporary laws, then this examination advances the Court's stated objective. The common

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8. SAUL CORNELL, *A WELL-REGULATED MILITIA: THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE ORIGINS OF GUN CONTROL IN AMERICA* (2006); *THE SECOND AMENDMENT ON TRIAL: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA V. HELLER* (Saul Cornell & Nathan Kozuskanich eds., 2013); CRAIG R. WHITNEY, *LIVING WITH GUNS: A LIBERAL'S CASE FOR THE SECOND AMENDMENT* (2012); ADAM WINKLER, *GUNFIGHT: THE BATTLE OVER THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS IN AMERICA* (2011).

9. CORNELL, *supra* note 8; ALEXANDER DECONDE, *GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL* (2001); WHITNEY, *supra* note 8; WINKLER, *supra* note 8. More than any other single scholar or writer, historian Saul Cornell has been most responsible for excavating the legal and social realities of the laws and practices related to guns in early America. In addition to many articles, Cornell has published a number of books on the subject including, *WHOSE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS DID THE SECOND AMENDMENT PROTECT?* (2000), *A WELL-REGULATED MILITIA: THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE ORIGINS OF GUN CONTROL IN AMERICA* (2006), and *THE SECOND AMENDMENT ON TRIAL*, *supra* note 8. The first important serious treatment of early gun laws and history is LEE KENNETT & JAMES LAVERNE ANDERSON, *THE GUN IN AMERICA: THE ORIGINS OF A NATIONAL DILEMMA* (1975).



notions that gun laws are largely a function of modern, industrial (or post-industrial) America, that gun laws are incompatible with American history and its practices or values, and that gun laws fundamentally collide with American legal traditions or individual rights, are all patently false. Following this introduction in part I, part II establishes that gun laws are as old as the nation. Part III summarizes the different categories into which early gun laws are categorized, and the frequency distributions within each category divided into time periods from 1607 to 1934. Part IV examines illustrative laws within each category and considers their nature and consequences. Part V offers a brief conclusion.

Above and beyond the general ubiquity of gun regulations early in the country's history, the range of those regulations is punctuated by the most dramatic of those laws discussed in parts III and IV: measures that called for gun confiscation for myriad reasons including military necessity, failure to swear allegiance to the government, improper firearms storage, ownership of proscribed weapons, hunting law violations, and failure to pay taxes on guns. One may argue for or against the propriety of such measures, but one may no longer argue that they are the sole province of modern gun control advocates. Further, in the seventeenth century no less than in the twenty-first, an abiding concern underlying many, if not most, of these regulations is the protection of public safety by the government.

## II

### GUN LAWS ARE AS OLD AS THE NATION

The first formal legislative body created by European settlers in North America was convened in the Virginia colony on July 30, 1619, twelve years after the colony's establishment.<sup>10</sup> The first General Assembly of Virginia met in Jamestown where it deliberated for five days and enacted a series of measures to govern the fledgling colony.<sup>11</sup> Among its more than thirty enactments in those few days was a gun control law, which said "[t]hat no man do sell or give any Indians any piece, shot, or powder, or any other arms offensive or defensive, upon pain of being held a traitor to the colony and of being hanged as soon as the fact is proved, without all redemption."<sup>12</sup>

If a death sentence for providing Native Americans with firearms and ammunition seems a little draconian even by the standards of the day, it punctuated the degree of tension, suspicion, and confrontation that existed

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10. *First Legislative Assembly in America*, HISTORY.COM (2010), <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-legislative-assembly-in-america> [<https://perma.cc/3T2G-W3DH>] (last visited Dec. 21, 2016).

11. *Laws Enacted By The First General Assembly of Virginia*, in COLONIAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION 283 (Donald S. Lutz ed., 1998) (quoting 1 JOURNALS OF THE HOUSE OF BURGESSES OF VIRGINIA, 9–14 (H.R. McIlwaine & John P. Kennedy eds., 1905)).

12. *Id.* at 287.



between the settlers and the indigenous population.<sup>13</sup> Other colonies adopted similar measures, although they were of limited effectiveness—not only because of the difficulty of monitoring arms trading in early America, but because such trading was highly profitable, was fed by traders from other nations, including the French and the Dutch, and because many Native Americans allied themselves with settlers against various foes.<sup>14</sup> Far from being an anomaly, this early gun law was just the beginning of gun regulations in early America.

### III

#### THE ARC OF AMERICAN GUN LAWS

America's early governmental preoccupation with gun possession, storage, and regulation was tied to the overarching concern for public safety, even as it intruded into citizens' private gun ownership and habits. Symptomatic of this is the fact that colonial and state governments enacted over 600 laws pertaining specifically to militia regulation and related militia activities alone.<sup>15</sup> Yet militia-related laws hardly constituted the extent of gun regulation in America.

A recently researched and compiled listing of colonial and state gun laws spanning from America's founding up to 1934 (the year the first significant national gun law, the National Firearms Act, was enacted<sup>16</sup>), has recently become available.<sup>17</sup> It is by far the most comprehensive compilation to date. This far-reaching compilation process, conducted by lawyer and researcher Mark Anthony Frassetto, has become possible thanks to the ever-growing digitization of state law archives and other electronic sources of historical information about law, including HeinOnline Session Laws Library and the Yale Law School's Avalon Project, and also some digitized state session law archives. Aside from key-word electronic searches of these sources, Frassetto also consulted secondary sources to produce this prodigious list.<sup>18</sup>

The result is a compilation of nearly one thousand gun laws of every variety—with some exceptions, this list does not include militia laws, hunting regulations, laws pertaining to gunpowder storage, and laws against weapons firing.<sup>19</sup> Following Frassetto's method of organization, these laws are organized by category and summarized in Table 1. Within those categories, they are arrayed

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13. This precarious dynamic is well chronicled in NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, *MAYFLOWER: A STORY OF COURAGE, COMMUNITY AND WAR* (2006).

14. KENNETT & ANDERSON, *supra* note 9, at 51–56.

15. Kevin M. Sweeney, *Firearms, Militias, and the Second Amendment*, in *THE SECOND AMENDMENT ON TRIAL*, *supra* note 8, at 310–11.

16. National Firearms Act of 1934, Pub. L. No. 73-474, 48 Stat. 1236 (codified as amended at I.R.C. §§ 5801–5872 (2012)).

17. Mark Anthony Frassetto, *Firearms and Weapons Legislation Up To The Early Twentieth Century* (Jan. 15, 2013) (unpublished manuscript), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2200991> [<https://perma.cc/YEY9-KEN8>]. Unless otherwise noted, the citations to colonial and state gun laws found here are taken from this compilation.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

by state alphabetically within four historical periods: 1607–1789 (the colonial and pre-modern-Constitution period); 1790–1867 (the pre-Fourteenth Amendment period); 1868–1899 (the post-Fourteenth Amendment period); and 1900–1934 (the twentieth century). Despite the admirable thoroughness of Frassetto’s electronic database searches, he notes that his list cannot be considered definitive, owing to multiple spellings of common words and other glitches inherent in the nature of such searches.<sup>20</sup> Thus, his total list of laws is an underestimate of the actual universe of gun statutes—indeed, this article discusses a few early laws from Massachusetts in the 1600s that were not a part of Frassetto’s list.<sup>21</sup>

**Table 1**  
NUMBERS OF GUN LAWS IN THE STATES, AND NUMBERS OF  
STATE GUN LAWS, BY CATEGORIES, 1607–1934<sup>22</sup>

LAW TYPE	1607–1790	1791–1867	1868–1899	1900–1934
Ban	0	0	7	0
Number of states	0	0	5	0
Brandishing	2	4	14	7
Number of states	2	3	13	7
Carry restriction	5	31	48	21
Number of states	4	19	28	18
Dangerous weapons	1	4	9	53
Number of states	1	4	8	35
Dueling	3	7	3	0
Number of states	2	7	3	0

20. *Id.* at 2.

21. I also conducted my own spot check of a few of the laws on Frassetto’s list that are not included in this article, and found them to be, taken on the whole, accurate and correct.

22. Source: Frassetto, *supra* note 17. Though the table is labeled “State” gun laws, it also includes laws enacted when the states were colonies, and some local/municipal laws. The full category titles of gun laws from Frassetto’s paper are: Bans on Handguns/Total Bans on Firearms; Brandishing; Carrying Weapons; Dangerous or Unusual Weapons; Dueling; Felons, Foreigners and Others Deemed Dangerous By the State; Firing Weapons; Hunting; Manufacturing, Inspection and Sale of Gunpowder and Firearms; Militia Regulation; Possession by, Use of, and Sales to Minors and Others Deemed Irresponsible; Registration and Taxation; Race and Slavery Based Firearms Restrictions; Sensitive Areas and Sensitive Times; Sentence Enhancement for Use of Weapons; Storage.



Felons, foreigners, etc.	11	2	1	26
Number of states	5	2	1	19
Firing weapons	19	17	19	22
Number of states	9	14	17	20
Hunting	11	8	24	58
Number of states	8	5	21	43
Manufacturing, inspection	2	11	11	22
Number of states	2	10	9	17
Militias	23	15	2	0
Number of states	11	15	2	0
Minors, etc.	0	2	15	21
Number of states	0	2	15	19
Registration, taxation	3	8	12	18
Number of states	2	6	11	15
Race/slavery <sup>23</sup>	5	18	0	0
Number of states	5	11	0	0
Sensitive areas, etc.	11	23	30	35
Number of states	7	17	20	26
Sentencing enhancement	3	3	5	12
Number of states	3	3	5	10
Storage	2	7	2	0
Number of states	1	6	2	0

23. The small number of laws pertaining to slaves or race-based restrictions pertaining to guns is not meant to suggest that the legal regime in the pre-Civil War South was somehow not uniformly harsh, but rather reflects the fact that express statutory restrictions were not necessary in all places, given the South's uniformly oppressive system of slavery.

The types of gun laws span about every conceivable category. The two most common and prolific types of laws regulated hunting and militias—in fact, Frassetto noted in his compilation that he excluded from his list most hunting and militia laws, gunpowder storage laws, and laws against the firing of weapons, because there were simply too many of them. Those categories and some of those laws, however, are represented in the list provided here. Thousands of gun laws existed from the country’s founding up to 1934.<sup>24</sup> The data presented here represents a subset of these thousands of laws. Notwithstanding Frassetto’s exclusions, his full list includes over 800 laws.<sup>25</sup> The version of his list presented here is somewhat shorter, as it excludes state constitutional provisions, weapons laws that did not specifically mention firearms, and British laws from the early colonial period that Frassetto included. Thus, the list presented here includes about 760 laws.<sup>26</sup> These include colonial laws, laws of territories that later became states, and of course state laws. Generally speaking, most laws established jurisdiction-wide regulations, although some of the laws were more narrowly drawn to include only densely populated areas, such as cities and towns, or on occasion specifically named cities or counties. Each type of law warrants detailed attention.

Before examining these laws, one other question presents itself: were any of these laws challenged in court? If so, were these challenges based on claims of federal or state right to bear arms-type provisions? If so, what were the outcomes?

A perusal of nineteenth century litigation in state courts reveals that at least one type of gun law was subject to court challenge: those restricting concealed or open gun carrying. The outcomes of such challenges were summarized by a 1905 Kansas state court decision this way: “It has . . . been generally held that the Legislatures can regulate the mode of carrying deadly weapons, provided they are not such as are ordinarily used in civilized warfare [i.e. in a military context]. To this view,” the court continued, “there is a notable exception in the early case of *Bliss v. Commonwealth*, 2 Litt. (Ky.) 90, 13 Am. Dec. 251 . . . . While this decision has frequently been referred to by the courts of other states, it has never been followed.”<sup>27</sup> A Washington State court from 1907 offered the same verdict:

Nearly all the states have enacted laws prohibiting the carrying of concealed weapons, and the validity of such laws has often been assailed, because denying to the citizen the right to bear arms; but we are not aware that such a contention has ever prevailed, except in the courts of the state of Kentucky [a reference to *Bliss*].<sup>28</sup>

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24. See Frassetto, *supra* note 17 (compiling over 800 gun laws excluding the majority of the most common gun laws including hunting and militia laws, gunpowder storage laws, and laws against the firing of weapons).

25. See *id.*

26. A full summary list of the laws is available at ROBERT J. SPITZER, GUNS ACROSS AMERICA: RECONCILING GUN RULES AND RIGHTS 185–208 (2015).

27. *City of Salina v. Blaksley*, 83 P. 619, 620 (Kan. 1905) (citing *Bliss v. Commonwealth*, 12 Ky. (2 Litt.) 90 (1822)).

28. *State v. Gohl*, 90 P. 259, 260 (Wash. 1907); see also *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008) (explaining that nineteenth-century courts typically upheld prohibitions on carrying a concealed



The *Bliss* case was the outlier in this state case law, although in one other case, *Nunn v. State*, the Georgia state court struck down a provision of a state gun carrying law that included restrictions on both concealed carry and open carry.<sup>29</sup> The court struck down only the open carry provision—the man convicted of violating this provision was apparently carrying a handgun openly, yet the law failed to list handguns among those weapons not to be openly carried, while it did list them among those not to be sold or carried concealed.<sup>30</sup>

The conclusions offered by state courts that restrictions on gun carrying were invariably upheld when challenged is punctuated by the fact that, as late as 1981, only two states of the union had loose, “shall issue” carry laws (meaning that the government is obligated to issue a carry license upon completion of proper paperwork, unless the applicant is a felon, mentally unbalanced, or a part of some other category of person prohibited from owning a gun), and one state had no system of permitting for gun carrying.<sup>31</sup> Nineteen states barred concealed gun carrying entirely, and twenty-eight states had “may issue” laws, where states have great discretion as to whether to issue carry permits.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

### CATEGORIES OF EARLY GUN LAWS

#### A. Gun Bans

A handful of laws established outright, categorical bans that criminalized the sale or exchange of firearms.<sup>33</sup> All were enacted in the post–Civil War era. Six of the seven state bans—in Arkansas,<sup>34</sup> Kansas,<sup>35</sup> Texas,<sup>36</sup> and three in Tennessee<sup>37</sup>—were of pistols. The seventh, from Wyoming, banned all firearms—both handguns and long guns—from “any city, town, or village.”<sup>38</sup> Arkansas also banned any sale or transfer of pistols, except for those in military use.<sup>39</sup>

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weapon).

29. *Nunn v. State*, 1 Ga. 243 (1846).

30. *Id.* at 246–47.

31. *Concealed Weapons Laws in America from 1981 to Today*, LAW CENTER TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE, at <http://smartgunlaws.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ccw-factsheet.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/5ZYV-HYSS>].

32. SPITZER, *supra* note 26, at 113.

33. In some subsequent categories to be discussed, gun confiscation was sometimes the penalty for violations of law.

34. Act of Apr. 1, 1881, ch. XCVI, § 1, 1881 Ark. Acts 191, 191 (codified at ARK. CODE ANN. ch. 48 § 1498 (1894)).

35. Act of Mar. 13, 1872, ch. 100, § 62, 1872 Kan. Sess. Laws 210, 210 (codified at KAN. GEN. STAT. § 1003 (1901)).

36. Act of Apr. 12, 1871, ch. XXXIV, § 1, 1871 Tex. Gen. Laws 25, 25 (codified at 1879 Tex. Crim. Stat. 24).

37. Act of Mar. 26, 1879, ch. CLXXXVI, § 1, 1879 Tenn. Pub. Acts 231, 231; Act of June 11, 1870, ch. XIII, § 1, 1870 Tenn. Pub. Acts 28, 28; Act of Dec. 1, 1869, ch. XXII, § 2, 1870 Tenn. Pub. Acts 23, 23–24.

38. Act of Dec. 2, 1875, § 1, 1876 Wyo. Sess. Laws 352, 352.

39. Act of Apr. 1, 1881, ch. XCVI, 1881 Ark. Acts 191 (codified at ARK. CODE ANN. ch. 48 § 1498



Subsequent categories of gun laws also include specific bans on particular types of weapons, like automatic weapons, and on weapons accessories, like silencers. These laws, and a few to come, make clear that gun banning—while not common—was not the sole province of 1960s anti-gun liberals.

### B. Brandishing Laws

States also enacted brandishing laws, designed to criminalize the threatening use of the weapons named in these laws.<sup>40</sup> The prohibited behaviors were typically described as “exhibit[ing] any of said deadly weapons in a rude, angry or threatening manner,”<sup>41</sup> or with similar language. Some laws in the later 1800s also identified the prohibited behavior as “draw[ing] or threaten[ing] to use” such weapons.<sup>42</sup> These laws also generally included exemptions for the use of such weapons in personal self-defense or for military purposes.

### C. Gun Carry Restrictions

Carry restriction laws were widely enacted, spanning the entire historical period under examination. As early as 1686, New Jersey enacted a law against wearing weapons because they induced “great Fear and Quarrels.”<sup>43</sup> Massachusetts followed in 1750.<sup>44</sup> In the late 1700s, North Carolina<sup>45</sup> and Virginia<sup>46</sup> passed similar laws.<sup>47</sup> In the 1800s, as interpersonal violence and gun carrying spread, thirty-eight states joined the list;<sup>48</sup> five more did so in the early

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(1894)).

40. Generally, these laws covered pistols along with specific, named knives used for interpersonal violence, such as dirks, sword canes, stilettos, and Bowie knives, and weapons like a “slung shot,” which was a hand weapon made up of a piece of metal or other weight attached to a strap or flexible handle.

41. Act of Sept. 30, 1867, § 1, 1867 Ariz. Sess. Laws 21, 21.

42. Act of Mar. 13, 1875, ch. XVII, § 1, 1875 Ind. Acts 62, 62 (Spec. Sess.).

43. Robert J. Spitzer, *Stand Your Ground Makes No Sense*, N.Y. TIMES (May 4, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/opinion/stand-your-ground-makes-no-sense.html> [<https://perma.cc/Z7NY-84UL>] (quoting *An Act Against Wearing Swords, (1686)*, in THE GRANTS, CONCESSIONS, AND ORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONS OF THE PROVINCE OF NEW JERSEY, 289 (1758)).

44. Act of Feb. 14, 1750, ch. 17, § 1, 1750 Mass. Acts 544, 545.

45. FRANCOIS XAVIER MARTIN, A COLLECTION OF THE STATUTES OF THE PARLIAMENT OF ENGLAND IN FORCE IN THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA 60–61 (1792).

46. A COLLECTION OF ALL SUCH ACTS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA, OF A PUBLIC AND PERMANENT NATURE, AS ARE NOW IN FORCE 33 (Richmond, Augustine Davis 1794).

47. See Spitzer, *supra* note 43 (discussing these early laws).

48. Laws from 1800–1867: Alabama: An Act of Feb. 1, 1839, no. 77, § 1, 1838 Ala. Laws 67; Arkansas: ARK. REV. STAT. div. VIII, ch. XLIV, art. I, § 13 (1837); California: Act of Apr. 16, 1850, ch. 99, div. Eleventh, § 127, 1850 Cal. Stat. 229, 245; Colorado: Act of Aug. 14, 1862, 1862 Colo. Sess. Laws 56; Delaware: DEL. REV. CODE tit. fifteenth, § 13 (1852); District of Columbia: D.C. CODE REV. § 141–16 (1857); Georgia: Act of Dec. 25, 1837, 1837 Ga. Laws 90; Indiana: Act of Jan. 14, 1820, ch. XXIII, 1820 Ind. Acts 39; Kentucky: Act of Feb. 3, 1813, ch. 89, § 1, 1812 Ky. Acts 100, 100–01; Louisiana: Act of Mar. 25, 1813, 1813 La. Acts 172, 172–73; Maine: ME. STAT. REV. tit. twelfth, ch. 169, § 16 (1840); Montana: Act of Jan. 11, 1865, 1864 Mont. Laws 355; New Mexico: Act of Jan. 14, 1853, 1852 N.M. Laws 67; Ohio: Act of Mar. 18, 1859, 1859 Ohio Laws 56; Oregon: OR. REV. STAT. ch. XVI, § 17 (1853); Pennsylvania: Act of Apr. 8, 1851, no. 239, § 4, 1851 Pa. Laws 381, 382; Tennessee: Act of Oct. 19, 1821, ch. XIII, 1821 Tenn. Pub. Acts 15, 15–16; Wisconsin: WIS. STAT. REV. tit. XXVII, ch. 176, § 18 (1858). Laws from 1868–1899: Alaska: FRED F. BARKER, COMPILATION OF THE ACTS OF CONGRESS AND TREATIES RELATING



1900s.<sup>49</sup> Laws in the eighteenth century did not typically identify weapons concealment as criminal *per se*, but did restrict more general carrying of firearms, usually if done in crowded places, or groups of armed people. Among the earliest laws criminalizing the carrying of concealed weapons was that of Kentucky in 1813.<sup>50</sup> As with the brandishing laws, concealed carry laws normally targeted pistols as well as various knives, the chief feature of which was that they had long, thin blades that were favorites in interpersonal fights. Louisiana enacted a similar law that same year.<sup>51</sup> A particularly sharp comment on the intent behind such laws was expressed in Tennessee's 1837 law, which referred to "[e]ach and every person so degrading himself" by carrying pistols or other named weapons.<sup>52</sup> The preamble of Georgia's 1837 law began: "AN ACT to guard and protect the citizens of this State, against the unwarrantable and too prevalent use of deadly weapons."<sup>53</sup> Alabama's 1839 concealed carry law reflected similar antipathy to the practice it was prohibiting: "AN ACT To suppress the evil practice of carrying weapons secretly."<sup>54</sup> Concealed carry laws generally made exceptions for travelers passing through an area while armed.

These laws were enacted in most states of the union and all across the country, including territories. In nineteenth-century laws, the main emphasis was on prohibiting concealed carry, whereas early twentieth century laws generally

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TO ALASKA FROM MARCH 30, 1867 TO MARCH 3, 1905, S. DOC. NO. 59-142 (1906); Arizona: Act of Mar. 18, 1889, no. 13, 1889 Ariz. Sess. Laws 16; Florida: Act of May 31, 1887, ch. 3777, no. 97, § 16 1887 Fla. Laws 181, 186; Illinois: Act of Apr. 16, 1881, 1881 Ill. Laws 73 (codified in 38 ILL. COMP. STAT. §54(d) (1882)); Kansas: KAN. STAT. ANN. ch. 19, art. 3, § 68 (1901); Maryland: Act of Feb. 26, 1872, ch. 42, 1872 Md. Laws 56; Michigan: Act of May 31, 1887, no. 129, 1887 Mich. Pub. Acts 144; Minnesota: MINN. STAT. ch. CIV, § 17 (1881) (as amended through 1878); Mississippi: Act of Feb. 28, 1878, ch. XLVI, § 1, 1878 Miss. Laws 175, 175; Missouri: Act of Mar. 3, 1873, art. III, § 15, 1873 Mo. Laws 322, 328; NEB. STAT. REV. pt. III, ch. V, § 25 (1881); New York: Act of Mar. 27, 1891, chap. 105, § 209, 1891 N.Y. Laws 127, 177; North Dakota: N.D. REV. CODE § 7313, N.D. PENAL CODE § 457 (1895); Oklahoma: Penal Code of the Territory of Oklahoma, ch. 25, art. 38, § 20, 1890 Okla. Sess. Laws 412, 476; Rhode Island: Act of May 3, 1893, ch. 1180, 1893 R.I. Pub. Laws 231; South Carolina: Act of Dec. 24, 1880, no. 362, § 1, 1880 S.C. Acts 448; South Dakota: S.D. REV. CODE, PENAL, ch. XXXVIII, § 457 (1883); Texas: Act of Aug. 12, 1870, ch. XLVI, 1870 Tex. Gen. Laws 63; Washington: WASH. REV. CODE ch. LXXIII, § 929 (1881); West Virginia: W. VA. CODE ch. CXLVIII, § 7 (1870); Wyoming: WYO. STAT. ch. LII, § 1 (1876).

49. Connecticut: Act of June 2, 1923, ch. 252, 1923 Conn. Pub. Acts 3707 (codified in II CONN. GEN. STAT. tit. 59, § 6219 (1930)); Hawaii: Act of Mar. 19, 1913, no. 22, 1913 Haw. Sess. Laws 25; Idaho: Act of Feb. 17, 1909, H.R. 62, 1909 Idaho Sess. Laws 6; Iowa: Act of Apr. 16, 1929, ch. 57, § 30, 1929 Iowa Acts 81, 90; Nebraska: Act of Mar. 27, 1901, ch. 16, § 129-LV, 1901 Neb. Laws 71, 141 (codified at NEB. REV. STAT. part I, ch. 14, art. I, § XXV (1901)).

50. This Kentucky law was struck down as a violation of the Kentucky state constitution in *Bliss v. Commonwealth*, 12 Ky. (2 Litt.) 90 (1822). The court's decision did not involve or touch on the federal Constitution's Second Amendment, but instead was based on Kentucky's more expansive right-to-bear-arms-type provision. *See id.* at 90–92. In addition, this ruling was an anomaly in that concealed carry laws were widely held as constitutional when challenged in other states. *See* ROBERT J. SPITZER, *GUN CONTROL*, 96–99 (2009) (noting that the *Bliss* case was an exception to the prevailing trend of upholding state gun carry restrictions).

51. Act of Mar. 25th, 1813, 1812 La. Acts 172.

52. Tennessee: Act of Oct. 19, 1821, ch. XIII, 1821 Tenn. Pub. Acts 15.

53. Act of Dec. 25, 1837, 1837 Ga. Laws 90. This was the law that was challenged in *Nunn v. State*, discussed *supra* in part III.

54. An Act of Feb. 1, 1839, no. 77, 1838 Ala. Laws 67.



applied to all carrying, whether concealed or open. Aside from hunting and militia laws, they were among the most common and widely accepted gun regulations to be found in our post-1789 history. These laws therefore pose an especially stark contrast with the contemporary American political movement—dating to the early 1980s—spreading the legality of concealed carry.<sup>55</sup>

Many southern states were among those seeking to curtail gun carrying, as well as the enactment of other laws pertaining to criminal uses of guns, which is attributable to the fact that “the Antebellum South was the most violent region in the new nation.”<sup>56</sup> After the Civil War, the ravaged South again witnessed violence at rates greater than the rest of the country.<sup>57</sup> Thus, states with greater violence, in the form of greater gun violence, turned in part to stronger gun laws as a remedy.

These historical concealed carry laws also recognized what modern gun control advocates stress: that, among all firearms, handguns pose a unique danger to public safety. Even though there are twice as many long guns as handguns in America, and long guns are generally easier to obtain, about eighty percent of all gun crimes are committed with handguns because of their ease of use, concealability, and lethality.<sup>58</sup> Little stretch of the imagination is required to infer that the same trend existed in the nineteenth century as well.

Before considering other types of gun laws, it should be noted that concealed and open carry restrictions were common in the American western frontier during the nineteenth century in the so-called “Wild West.” The truth of life in the Old West, and the actual role of guns in it, is known, but not well known. Axiomatic expressions such as “the guns that won the West”<sup>59</sup> and “arm[s] that opened the West and tamed the wild land”<sup>60</sup> still too often typify what in actuality is a romanticized and wildly exaggerated assessment of the importance of guns in the settling of the West.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, some have gone so far as to claim that “the American experiment was made possible by the gun.”<sup>62</sup> But these characterizations ignore the central role of homesteaders, ranchers, miners,

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55. ROBERT J. SPITZER, *THE POLITICS OF GUN CONTROL*, 68–70 (6th ed., Paradigm Publishers 2015) (1995).

56. Saul Cornell, *The Right to Carry Firearms Outside of the Home: Separating Historical Myths from Historical Realities*, 39 *FORDHAM URB. L.J.* 1695, 1716 (2012) (citing RANDOLPH ROTH, *AMERICAN HOMICIDE* (2009); ERIC H. MONKKONEN, *MURDER IN NEW YORK CITY* (2001); Joshua Stein, *Privatizing Violence: A Transformation in the Jurisprudence of Assault*, 30 *LAW & HIST. REV.* 423, 445 (2012)); see generally DICKSON D. BRUCE, JR., *VIOLENCE AND CULTURE IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH* (1979).

57. ROTH, *supra* note 56, at 180–249.

58. SPITZER, *supra* note 55, at 54–55.

59. JAMES WYCOFF, *FAMOUS GUNS THAT WON THE WEST* (1968).

60. MARTIN RYWELL, *THE GUN THAT SHAPED AMERICAN DESTINY* (1957).

61. RICHARD SHENKMAN, *LEGENDS, LIES, AND CHERISHED MYTHS OF AMERICAN HISTORY* 112 (1988).

62. WYCOFF, *supra* note 59, at 5–6; see also RYWELL, *supra* note 60, at 4 (1957); JAMES B. TREFETHEN, *AMERICANS AND THEIR GUNS: THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION STORY THROUGH NEARLY A CENTURY OF SERVICE TO THE NATION* (James E. Serven ed., 1967); HAROLD F. WILLIAMSON, *WINCHESTER: THE GUN THAT WON THE WEST* 3 (1952).



tradesmen, businessmen, and other settlers across the western plains. The “taming” of the West was in fact an agricultural and commercial movement, attributable primarily to ranchers and farmers, not gun-slinging cowboys.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the six-shooter and rifle played relatively minor roles in the activities of all these groups—even the cowboys.<sup>64</sup> According to historian Richard Shenkman:

The truth is many more people have died in Hollywood westerns than ever died on the real frontier . . . . In the real Dodge City, for instance, there were just five killings in 1878, the most homicidal year . . . . In the most violent year in Deadwood, South Dakota, only four people were killed. In the worst year in Tombstone, home of the shoot-out at the OK Corral, only five people were killed. The only reason the OK Corral shoot-out even became famous was that town boosters deliberately overplayed the drama to attract new settlers.<sup>65</sup>

Even in the most violence-prone western towns, vigilantism and lawlessness were only briefly tolerated. In his sweeping history of the West, historian Ray Allen Billington noted that local businesspeople and other leaders quickly pushed for town incorporation in order to establish local police forces, which were supported by taxes levied against local bars, gambling establishments, and houses of prostitution.<sup>66</sup> The prohibitions against carrying guns analyzed here were enforced, and there were few homicides.<sup>67</sup> The western-style shoot-outs glorified in countless books and movies were literally “unheard of.”<sup>68</sup> In the most violent cow towns of the old West—Abilene, Caldwell, Dodge City, Ellsworth, and Wichita—a total of forty-five killings were recorded between 1870 and 1885, and only six of these killings were from six-shooters; sixteen killings were by police.<sup>69</sup> As cowboy experts Joe B. Frantz and Julian E. Choate observed, “the six-shooter has been credited with use entirely disproportionate with the facts.”<sup>70</sup>

Even western outlaws illustrate the extent to which myth replaced fact with respect to guns and lawlessness. Many studies of the famed western outlaws demonstrate that “they were few, inconspicuous, and largely the invention of newspaper correspondents and fiction writers.”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, “the western marshal [was] an unglamorous character who spent his time arresting drunks or rounding up stray dogs and almost never engaging in gun battles.”<sup>72</sup> Most of the killing that took place on the frontier involved the wars between the U.S. Cavalry

63. LEWIS ATHERTON, *THE CATTLE KINGS*, xi, 31–42, 241–62 (1961).

64. PAMELA HAAG, *THE GUNNING OF AMERICA: BUSINESS AND THE MAKING OF AMERICAN GUN CULTURE* 353–55 (2016).

65. RICHARD SHENKMAN, *LEGENDS, LIES, AND CHERISHED MYTHS OF AMERICAN HISTORY* 112 (1988); *see also* ROBERT R. DYKSTRA, *THE CATTLE TOWNS* 112–48 (1968) (detailing the exaggerated nature of frontier West violence).

66. RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON, *WESTWARD EXPANSION* 587 (6th ed. abr. 1974).

67. JOE B. FRANTZ & JULIAN ERNEST CHOATE JR., *THE AMERICAN COWBOY: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY* 78 and *passim* (1955).

68. BILLINGTON, *supra* note 66, at 587.

69. *Id.*

70. FRANTZ & CHOATE JR., *supra* note 67, at 78.

71. BILLINGTON, *supra* note 66, at 587.

72. *Id.*; *see also* FRANK RICHARD PRASSAL, *THE WESTERN PEACE OFFICER: A LEGACY OF LAW AND ORDER* 22 (1972), and the numerous works cited by BILLINGTON, *supra* note 66.



and those Native Americans who rebelled against harsh and duplicitous treatment at the hands of whites.<sup>73</sup>

#### D. Restrictions On Dangerous Or Unusual Weapons

States moved to enact laws restricting or barring certain dangerous or unusual weapons—also a subject that has contemporary reverberations. Such laws in the country's early decades were aimed in part at pistols and offensive knives, like most concealed carry laws, but also at the practice of rigging firearms to be fired with a string or similar method to discharge a weapon without an actual finger on the firearm trigger. Referred to as “gun traps,” the earliest such law was enacted by New Jersey in 1771.<sup>74</sup> Some laws later referred to such weapons as “spring guns,”<sup>75</sup> “trap guns,”<sup>76</sup> and “infernal machines.”<sup>77</sup>

The bulk of the laws that identified certain weapons as dangerous or unusual, however, appeared in the early 1900s, when most states moved aggressively to outlaw machine guns (usually meaning fully automatic weapons), sawed-off shotguns, pistols, weapons and mechanisms that allowed firearms to be fired a certain number of times rapidly without reloading, silencers, and air guns (which propels projectiles with compressed air rather than gun powder). The first state to enact an anti-machine gun law was West Virginia in 1925.<sup>78</sup> A number of states enacted anti-machine gun laws in 1927 alone—a year in which a concerted national push unfolded to regulate these and other gangster-type weapons. In all, at least twenty-eight states enacted anti-machine gun laws during this period.<sup>79</sup>

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73. RICHARD W. STEWART, *AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY VOL. 1: THE UNITED STATES ARMY AND THE FORGING OF A NATION* 321–40 (2005); W. EUGENE HOLLON, *FRONTIER VIOLENCE: ANOTHER LOOK* 124–45 (1974). Hollon notes that “of all the myths that refuse to die, the hardest concerns the extent of the unmitigated bloodletting that occurred in the Western frontier during the closing decades of the nineteenth century.” *Id.* at x.

74. Act of Dec. 21, 1771, ch. DXL, § 10, 1771 N.J. Laws 343, 346.

75. Act of Apr. 21, 1915, ch. 133, part II, §§17(c), 18, 1915 N.H. Laws 173, 180–81.

76. Act of Feb. 25, 1931, no. 58, 1931 S.C. Acts 78, 78.

77. *E.g.*, Act of Mar. 14, 1901, ch. 96, 1901 Utah Laws 97, 97.

78. Act of June 5, 1925, ch. 3, 1925 W. Va. Acts 24.

79. Act effective July 29, 1927, ch. 552, 1927 Cal. Stat. 938; Act of Feb. 25, 1931, ch. 249, 37 Del. Laws 813; Act of Apr. 27, 1933, no. 120, 1933 Haw. Sess. Laws 117; Act of July 2, 1931, 1931 Ill. Laws 452; Act of Mar. 27, 1927, ch. 156, 1927 Ind. Acts 469; Act of Apr. 19, ch. 234, 1927 Iowa Acts 201; Act of Nov. 28, 1933, ch. 62, 1933 Kan. Sess. Laws 76 (Spec. Sess.); Act of July 7, 1932, no. 80, 1932 La. Acts 336; Act of Apr. 27, 1927, ch. 326, 1927 Mass. Acts 413; Act of June 2, 1927, no. 372, 1927 Mich. Pub. Acts 887; Act of Apr. 10, 1933, ch. 190, 1933 Minn. Laws 231; Act of June 1, 1929, H.R. no. 498, 1929 Mo. Laws 170; Act of Apr. 29, 1929, ch. 190, 1929 Neb. Laws 673; Act of Mar. 19, 1927, ch. 95, 1927 N.J. Laws 180; Act of Apr. 15, 1931, ch. 435, 1931 N.Y. Laws 1033; Act of Mar. 9, 1931, ch. 178, 1931 N.D. Laws 305; Act of Apr. 8, 1933, no. 64, 1933 Ohio Laws 189; Act of Mar. 10, 1933, ch. 315, § 3, 1933 Or. Laws 488, 489; Act of Apr. 25, 1929, no. 329, 1929 Pa. Laws 777; Act of Apr. 22, 1927, ch. 1052, 1927 R.I. Pub. Laws 256; Act of Mar. 2, 1934, no. 731, 1934 S.C. Acts 1288; Uniform Machine Gun Act, ch. 206 §§ 1–5, 1933 S.D. Sess. Laws 245; Act of Oct. 25, 1933, ch. 82, 1933 Tex. Gen. & Spec. Laws 219; Act of Mar. 7, 1934, ch. 96, 1934 Va. Acts 137; Act of Mar. 6, 1933, ch. 64, 1933 Wash. Sess. Laws 335; Act of June 5, 1925, 1925 W. Va. Acts 24 (Extraordinary Sess.); Act of May 28, 1929, ch. 132, 1929 Wis. Sess. Laws 157.



Texas, for example, defined machine guns in 1933 as those from which more than five bullets were automatically discharged “from a magazine by a single functioning of the firing device.”<sup>80</sup>

The lesson here is significant both for its historical context and for the contemporary debate over the regulation of new or exotic gun technologies. In these instances, new laws were enacted not when these weapons were invented, but when they began to circulate widely in society. So, for example, fully automatic weapons, most famously the Tommy gun, became available for civilian purchase after World War I.<sup>81</sup> But it was only when ownership spread in the civilian population in the mid-to-late 1920s, and the gun became a preferred weapon for gangsters, that states moved to restrict them. The lesson of gun regulation history here is that new technologies bred new laws when circumstances warranted.

#### E. Semi-Automatic Gun Restrictions

Of particular relevance to the modern gun debate is the fact that at least seven, and as many as ten, state laws specifically restricted semi-automatic weapons—weapons that fire a round with each pull of the trigger without manual reloading<sup>82</sup>—anticipating by seven decades the semi-automatic assault weapons ban debates, and related efforts to restrict large capacity bullet magazines, from the 1990s to the present.

States with laws in this category typically combined fully automatic and semi-automatic weapons under a single definitional category.<sup>83</sup> A 1927 Rhode Island measure defined the prohibited “machine gun” to include “any weapon which shoots automatically and any weapon which shoots more than twelve shots semi-automatically without reloading.”<sup>84</sup> To compare, a 1927 Massachusetts law said: “Any gun or small arm calibre designed for rapid fire and operated by a mechanism, or any gun which operates automatically after the first shot has been fired . . . shall be deemed a machine gun . . . .”<sup>85</sup> Michigan’s 1927 law prohibited machine guns or any other firearm if they fired more than sixteen times without reloading.<sup>86</sup> Minnesota’s 1933 law outlawed “[a]ny firearm capable of automatically reloading after each shot is fired, whether firing singly by separate trigger pressure or firing continuously by continuous trigger pressure.”<sup>87</sup> It went on to penalize the modification of weapons that were altered to accommodate such extra firing capacity.<sup>88</sup> Fully automatic .22 caliber “light sporting rifles” were

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80. 1933 Tex. Gen. & Spec. Laws 219, 219.

81. NRA-ILA, *Fully-Automatic Firearms*, NRAILA.ORG, (July 29, 1999), <https://www.nraila.org/articles/19990729/fully-automatic-firearms> [<https://perma.cc/NT68-ZEF6>].

82. See Table 2.

83. See Table 2, laws of Mass., Mich., S.D., and Va.

84. 1927 R.I. Pub. Laws 256, 256.

85. 1927 Mass. Acts 413, 413–14.

86. Act of June 2, 1927, no. 372, 1927 Mich. Pub. Acts 887, 888.

87. Act of Apr. 10, 1933, ch. 190, 1933 Minn. Laws 231, 232.

88. *Id.*



also considered machine guns under the law, but .22 caliber semi-automatic “light sporting rifles” were exempted.<sup>89</sup> Ohio also barred both fully automatic and semi-automatic weapons in a 1933 law, incorporating under the banned category any gun that “shoots automatically, or any firearm which shoots more than eighteen shots semi-automatically without reloading.”<sup>90</sup> The law defined semi-automatic weapons as those that fired one shot with each pull of the trigger.<sup>91</sup> South Dakota barred machine guns by defining them as weapons “from which more than five shots or bullets may be rapidly, or automatically, or semi-automatically discharged from a magazine . . . .”<sup>92</sup> Like several other states, Virginia outlawed weapons

of any description . . . from which more than seven shots or bullets may be rapidly, or automatically, or semi-automatically discharged from a magazine, by a single function of the firing device, and also applies to and includes weapons, loaded or unloaded, from which more than sixteen shots or bullets may be rapidly, automatically, semi-automatically, or otherwise discharged without reloading.<sup>93</sup>

Aside from these seven states, another three included language that was ambiguous as to whether they extended prohibitions to semi-automatic as well as fully automatic weapons. Illinois enacted a 1931 law that prohibited “machine guns and sub-machine guns of any calibre whatsoever, capable of automatically discharging more than eight cartridges successively without reloading, in which ammunition is fed to such gun from or by means of clips, disks, belts, or other separable mechanical devices.”<sup>94</sup> Louisiana’s 1932 anti-machine gun law,<sup>95</sup> and South Carolina’s 1934 law,<sup>96</sup> both defined machine guns in the same way using identical language, including the eight cartridge standard. In the case of these three laws, the word “automatically” would seem to refer to fully automatic firing, but when that wording is married with “discharging more than eight cartridges successively without reloading,” it would seem to encompass semi-automatic firing as well.

Table 2 summarizes the key portions of the laws from these ten states. The lesson of the previous part also applies here: new technologies bred new restrictions. And who would have guessed that the fierce controversy over regulating semi-automatic assault weapons in the 1990s and 2000s was presaged by the successful, and at the time obviously uncontroversial, regulation of semi-automatic weapons in the 1920s and 1930s.

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89. *Id.*

90. Act of Apr. 8, 1933, no. 64, 1933 Ohio Laws 189, 189.

91. *Id.*

92. Uniform Machine Gun Act, ch. 206, 1933 S.D. Sess. Laws 245, 245.

93. Act of Mar. 7, 1934, ch. 96, 1934 Va. Acts 137, 137.

94. Act of July 2, 1931, 1931 Ill. Laws 452, 452.

95. Act of July 7, 1932, no. 80, 1932 La. Acts 336.

96. Act of Mar. 2, 1934, no. 731, 1934 S.C. Acts 1288.



**Table 2**  
**STATE LAWS BARRING**  
**SEMI-AUTOMATIC WEAPONS, 1927-1934<sup>97</sup>**

STATE AND YEAR	PROVISION OF LAW
Massachusetts 1927	"rapid fire and operated by a mechanism"
Michigan 1927	"any machine gun or firearm which can be fired more than sixteen times without reloading"
Minnesota 1933	"[a]ny firearm capable of automatically reloading after each shot is fired, whether firing singly by separate trigger pressure or firing continuously by continuous trigger pressure."
Ohio 1933	"any firearm which shoots automatically, or any firearm which shoots more than eighteen shots semi-automatically without reloading."
Rhode Island 1927	"any weapon which shoots automatically and any weapon which shoots more than twelve shots semi-automatically without reloading."
South Dakota 1933	"a weapon of any description . . . from which more than five shots or bullets may be rapidly or automatically, or semi-automatically discharged from a magazine."
Virginia 1933	"a weapon of any description . . . from which more than seven shots or bullets may be rapidly, or automatically, or semi-automatically discharged from a magazine, by a single function of the firing device, and also applies to and includes weapons, loaded or unloaded, from which more than sixteen shots or bullets may be rapidly, automatically, semi-automatically, or otherwise discharged without reloading."

97. Source: Act of Apr. 27, 1927, ch. 326, 1927 Mass. Acts 413, 413; Act of June 2, 1927, No. 372, 1927 Mich. Pub. Acts 887, 888; Act of Apr. 10, 1933, ch. 190, 1933 Minn. Laws 231, 232; Act of Apr. 8, 1933, no. 64, 1933 Ohio Laws 189, 189; Act of Apr. 22, 1927, ch. 1052, 1927 R.I. Pub. Laws 256, 256; Uniform Machine Gun Act, ch. 206, § 1, 1933 S.D. Sess. Laws 245, 245; Act of Mar. 7, 1934, ch. 96, § 1, 1934 Va. Acts 137, 137; Act of July 2, 1931, § 1, 1931 Ill. Laws 452, 452; Act of July 7, 1932, no. 80, § 1, 1932 La. Acts 336, 337; Act of Mar. 2, 1934, no. 731, § 1, 1934 S.C. Acts 1288, 1288.



<b>AMBIGUOUS STATE LAWS</b>	
Illinois 1931	“machine guns and sub-machine guns of any caliber whatsoever, capable of automatically discharging more than eight cartridges successively without reloading, in which ammunition is fed to such gun from or by means of clips, disks, belts, or other separable mechanical devices.”
Louisiana 1932	“machine rifles, machine guns and sub machine guns of any caliber whatsoever, capable of automatically discharging more than eight cartridges successively without reloading, in which ammunition is fed to such gun from or by means of clips, disks, belts, or other separable mechanical device.”
South Carolina 1934	“machine rifles, machine guns and sub-machine guns of any caliber whatsoever, capable of automatically discharging more than eight cartridges successively without reloading, in which ammunition is fed to such gun from or by means of clips, disks, belts or other separable mechanical device.”

## F. Dueling Prohibitions

A well-known category of gun laws with ties to American history is the prohibition against dueling. Prominent public figures from early American history, including Alexander Hamilton and Andrew Jackson, found themselves in highly publicized duels.<sup>98</sup> Hamilton’s longstanding political feud with fellow New York politician Aaron Burr ended when the two men dueled in New Jersey in 1804.<sup>99</sup> Hamilton died from his wounds, and Burr’s political career never recovered.<sup>100</sup> Jackson engaged in several duels, and was even injured during one

98. DON C. SEITZ, *FAMOUS AMERICAN DUELS* (1929).

99. Burr was vice president at the time; New York barred dueling, so they traveled to the neighboring state. LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA, “*Blow Us All Away*,” “*Your Obedient Servant*,” “*The World Was Wide Enough*,” on *HAMILTON: AN AMERICAN MUSICAL*, ACT II, (Atlantic Records 2015).

100. RON CHERNOW, *ALEXANDER HAMILTON* 704–05, 717–22 (2004).



in 1806.<sup>101</sup> Though not barred in every state, the practice declined in the North after the Hamilton–Burr duel, but persisted in the South until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>102</sup>

### G. Felons, Foreigners, Others Considered Dangerous

Early gun laws aimed at preventing felons, foreigners, or others deemed dangerous from owning firearms focused on Native Americans, with at least five colonies enacting such laws<sup>103</sup>—including the 1619 Virginia law cited earlier.<sup>104</sup> The Massachusetts colony enacted a law in 1637 that required named individuals who expressed “opinions & revelations” that “seduced & led into dangerous errors many of the people” of New England to turn in all “guns, pistols, swords, powder, shot, & match,” and it further barred them from “buy[ing] or borrow[ing]” any of the same until such time as the local court said otherwise.<sup>105</sup> If those disarmed admitted to their “seditious libel,” they could have their weapons restored.<sup>106</sup> In the 1770s, Pennsylvania enacted a law to bar or strip guns from those who refused to swear loyalty to the new American government.<sup>107</sup> In fact, ten of the thirteen states had laws allowing the impressment—that is, taking—of privately held firearms during the Revolutionary War.<sup>108</sup> Massachusetts also enacted such a law in 1776, although it does not appear in Frassetto’s list.<sup>109</sup> By the early 1900s, as anti-immigrant sentiment spread, many states enacted laws aimed at keeping guns from non-citizens, as well as the young, those who were inebriated, felons and other criminals, and non-state residents.

### H. Firing Location Restrictions

Concerns over the inherent harm and risk attendant to the firing of weapons near others spawned a steady stream of laws prohibiting such acts from the 1600s

101. SPITZER, *supra* note 26.

102. ROTH, *supra* note 56, at 181.

103. Act of May 9, 1723, 1723 Conn. Pub. Acts 292; Act of Mar. 31, 1639, 1639 N.J. Laws 18 *reprinted in* LAWS AND ORDINANCES OF NEW NETHERLAND, 1638–1674 (Edmund Bailey O’Callaghan, ed., 1868); Act of Feb. 23, 1645, 1645 N.Y. Laws 47 *reprinted in* LAWS AND ORDINANCES OF NEW NETHERLAND, 1638–1674 (Edmund Bailey O’Callaghan ed., 1868); Pennsylvania Act of Oct. 22, 1763 *reprinted in* VI THE STATUTES AT LARGE OF PENNSYLVANIA FROM 1682 TO 1801, 319 (James T. Mitchell & Henry Flanders eds., 1899); Virginia Act of Feb. 24, 1631, Act. XLVI, *reprinted in* I THE STATUTES AT LARGE; BEING A COLLECTION OF ALL THE LAWS OF VIRGINIA, FROM THE FIRST SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE 173 (William Waller Henning ed., 1823).

104. *The Laws Enacted by the First General Assembly of Virginia*, *supra* note 11.

105. I RECORDS OF THE GOVERNOR AND COMPANY OF THE MASSACHUSETTS BAY IN NEW ENGLAND 211–12 (Nathaniel B. Shurtleff ed., 1853). This law was not among those appearing in Frassetto’s list. *See* Frassetto, *supra* note 17.

106. RECORDS OF THE GOVERNOR, *supra* note 105, at 212.

107. Act of July 19, 1776, ch. DCCXXIX, IX THE STATUTES AT LARGE OF PENNSYLVANIA FROM 1682 TO 1801, 11 (1903).

108. WINKLER, *supra* note 8, at 113.

109. Saul Cornell & Nathan DeDino, *A Well Regulated Right*, 73 FORDHAM L. REV. 487, 507 (2004). The Massachusetts law is Act of March 14, 1776, ch. VII, 1776 Mass. Acts 31–36. *See* Frassetto, *supra* note 17.



through the early 1900s. Early such laws prohibited not only the firing of firearms in or near towns, but firing after dark, on Sundays, or near roads.<sup>110</sup> Early laws also punished firing that wasted gunpowder, or that occurred while under the influence of alcohol.<sup>111</sup> A North Carolina law from 1774 barred hunting by firelight at night, citing this concern in its preamble: “WHEREAS many Persons under Pretence of Hunting for Deer in the Night, by Fire Light, kill Horses and Cattle, to the Prejudice of the Owners thereof.”<sup>112</sup> In the 1800s and 1900s, such laws were focused almost exclusively on firing in, around, or near towns or other populated areas or events.

### I. Hunting Restrictions

Hunting laws are significant for the extent to which early ones reflect contemporary concerns. Though one imagines the America of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries as a nation little concerned—or not needing to be concerned—about matters related to wildlife management, safe hunting practices, or the like, these concerns are expressed early in American legislative histories, for example in the legislative history for the North Carolina night-time hunting law just quoted. Early hunting laws were aimed at those who hunted on private lands or in preserves, those who hunted certain types of game, most notably water fowl—often tied to prohibitions against hunting of such game from canoes, skiffs, or other water craft—and even the common deer.<sup>113</sup> For example, it comes as something of a revelation to note that Pennsylvania established a deer hunting season, penalizing out-of-season hunting, as early as 1721,<sup>114</sup> and North Carolina as early as 1768.<sup>115</sup> The penalty for violation of the North Carolina law was a fine of five pounds and “forfeiture of his gun.”<sup>116</sup> Hunting even in this early period also sometimes required a license.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, laws in the 1800s also restricted what was by then termed “fire-hunting,” hunting by firelight at night, poaching on private lands, and the use of certain restricted weapons, such as a “punt gun” or “swivel gun,” defined as a smooth bored gun mounted on a swivel that fires a charge of shot to bring down water fowl, or any weapon not fired from the shoulder.<sup>118</sup> Measures were also enacted to protect certain game, to require

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110. Act of Oct. 1672, 1672 Conn. Pub. Acts 3; Act of Aug. 27, 1746, 1746 Mass. Acts 208; Act of Oct. 14, 1713, 1713 Mass. Acts 291; Act of Mar. 3, 1642, Act XXXV, 1642 Va. Acts 261.

111. Though a 1655 Virginia law specifically exempted drunken firing at weddings and funerals! Act of March 10, 1655, Act XII, 1655 Va. Acts 401.

112. This quote is from North Carolina’s 1777 version of this law, Act of May 8, 1777, ch. XXI, 1777 N.C. Sess. Laws, 33, 33.

113. 9 Del. Laws 263; Act of Jan. 8, 1857, 1856 N.C. Sess. Laws 22; Act of April 1, 1853, ch 161, 1852 Va. Acts 133.

114. Act of Aug. 26, 1721, ch. 3, 1721 Pa. Laws 106, 1721 PA. STAT. ch. CCXLVI.

115. Act of Dec. 5, 1768, ch. 13, 1768 N.C. Sess. Laws 168.

116. *Id.* § 2, at 168–69.

117. Act of Mar. 30, 1882, 1882 Md. Laws 257; Act of Aug. 26, 1721, ch. 3, 1721 Pa. Laws 106, 1721 PA. STAT. ch. CCXLVI reprinted in III Mitchell & Flanders, *supra* note 103 at 254.

118. 14 Del. Laws 401; Act of Nov. 14, 1828, 1828 Fla. Laws 48, 75; Act of Sept. 21, 1882, 1880 Ga. Laws 142, 142; Act of Jan. 8, 1856, 1856 N.C. Sess. Laws 22, 22; Act of Apr. 20, 1874, 1874 Ohio Laws



licensing, and bar fishing “with any kind of gun.”<sup>119</sup> In the twentieth century, in addition to the types of laws already mentioned, states barred hunting with silencers, from aircraft, by under-age persons, or with certain kinds of weapons—still including swivel guns, but now including automatic weapons.<sup>120</sup>

#### J. Gun Manufacture, Inspection, Sale Restrictions

Gun laws also dealt broadly with manufacturing, inspection, and sale of weapons. Many of the laws in this category pertained to the manufacture, sale, transport, and storage of gunpowder. Gunpowder matters were of great concern because early firearms operated with the addition of loose gunpowder to serve as the igniting or explosive force to propel a projectile, so the two were inextricably linked.<sup>121</sup> But beyond the safety concerns about explosions or fires resulting from the mishandling of gunpowder, safety issues also led to other early regulations. In 1814, for example, Massachusetts required that all musket and pistol barrels manufactured in the state be first tested or “proved” to insure that they could withstand the firing process without rupturing.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the law provided for a “person appointed according to the provisions of this act”—in other words, a state inspector—to oversee or conduct the testing.<sup>123</sup> This continued a long tradition in Massachusetts of giving local officials the power to survey, inspect, and even confiscate arms as needed. As early as 1642, “surveyors of arms” were empowered in colonial law to demand the delivery of gun powder and firearms from individuals in order for these items to be used in “times of danger.”<sup>124</sup> New Hampshire created and appointed state gunpowder inspectors to examine every storage and manufacturing site.<sup>125</sup> Twentieth century laws extended safety regulations pertaining to gunpowder and other explosives; one state, South Carolina, prohibited the use of explosives to kill fish (hardly a sporting enterprise).<sup>126</sup>

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147, 148; 1721 Pa. Laws 106, 1721 PA. STAT. ch. CCXLVI *reprinted in* III Mitchell & Flanders, *supra* note 103 at 254; Virginia Act of Mar. 2, 1642, Act. XI, *reprinted in* I THE STATUTES AT LARGE; BEING A COLLECTION OF ALL THE LAWS OF VIRGINIA, FROM THE FIRST SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE 248, 248 (William Waller Henning, ed., 1823).

119. Act of Dec. 23, 1878, no. 602, 1878 S.C. Acts 724, 724.

120. Act of Apr. 4, 1931, ch. 97, 1931 Colo. Sess. Laws 399, 399–400; Act of Mar. 29, 1927, 1927 Del. Laws 516, 516; Act of Apr. 27, 1911, ch. 165, 1911 Del. Laws 322, 324; Act of May 10, 1901, 1901 Ill. Laws 212, 213; Act of Mar. 5, 1883, ch. CV, 1883 Kan. Sess. Laws 159, 159; Act of May 24, 1923, no. 228, § 704, 1923 Pa. Laws 359, 386.

121. Act of May 29, 1771, 1771 Mass. Acts 597; Act of Nov. 23, 1715, no. 234, 1715 Mass. Acts 311; Act of Feb. 28, 1786, 1786 N.H. Laws 383.

122. Act of Feb. 28, 1814, ch. CXCII, 1814 Mass. Acts 464, 464–65

123. *Id.*

124. RECORDS OF THE GOVERNOR, *supra* note 105, at 26. *See also* RECORDS OF THE GOVERNOR, *supra* note 105, at 31, 73–74, 84 for similar references. This law was not among those appearing in Frassetto’s list. *See* Frassetto, *supra* note 17.

125. Act of June 21, 1820, ch. XXV, 1820 N.H. Laws 274, 274–76.

126. Act of Feb. 16, 1903, no. 82, 1903 S.C. Acts 124, 124–25.



### K. Firearms Sales

At least eight states regulated, barred, or licensed firearms sales. For example, Florida (1927),<sup>127</sup> Georgia (1902),<sup>128</sup> and North Carolina (1905)<sup>129</sup> gave localities the power to license, regulate, or even bar the commercial sale of firearms. In a 1917 law, New Hampshire required the licensing of gun dealers, requiring them to record the name, address, date of sale, amount paid, and date of the purchaser's permit for all who made gun purchases.<sup>130</sup> In turn, this information was passed to the local city or town clerk or county office, and "[t]he records thus filed shall at all times be open to the inspection of the police departments, or other public authorities."<sup>131</sup> New Jersey prohibited pawn brokers from selling or in any manner transferring any firearms.<sup>132</sup> New York established a registration system for all handgun sales—part of the 1911 law known as the Sullivan Law—which required gun owners to obtain a permit for ownership.<sup>133</sup> In a 1925 law, West Virginia barred the "public display" of any firearms for sale or rent, or ammunition. Gun dealers were also to be licensed, and were required to record the name, address, age "and general appearance of the purchaser," as well as all identifying information about the gun, which was then to be immediately reported to the superintendent of the local department of public safety.<sup>134</sup>

### L. Militia Laws

The militia laws that appear on this list represent one category of early gun laws that have been carefully studied elsewhere.<sup>135</sup> Not surprisingly, the laws here replicate what is now well known about the early-American militia system. Early laws confirmed the power of state governments to impress or take the firearms of citizens if needed. Militia-eligible men were typically required to obtain and maintain in working order the necessary combat-worthy firearm, at their own expense, along with the necessary accoutrements of powder, shot, and the like.<sup>136</sup> In Virginia in the early 1600s, men were required to bring their firearms to church for fear of Indian attacks.<sup>137</sup> In some states, laws stipulated when, where, and under what circumstances guns were to be loaded or unloaded.<sup>138</sup> In Maryland,

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127. Act of June 6, 1927, ch. 12548, § 19(13), 1927 Fla. Laws 206, 212.

128. Act of Dec. 18, 1902, part III, tit. I, no. 192, § 16, 1902 Ga. Laws 427, 434–35.

129. Act of Mar. 6, 1905, ch. 188, § 6, 1905 N.C. Sess. Laws 545, 547.

130. Act of Apr. 19, 1917, ch. 185, 1917 N.H. Laws 727, 727–30.

131. *Id.* § 3, at 728.

132. Act of Mar. 30, 1927, ch. 321, § 1, 1927 N.J. Laws 742, 742.

133. Act of May 25, 1911, ch. 195, § 2, 1911 N.Y. Laws 442, 444–45.

134. Act of June 5, 1925, ch. 3, § 7(b), 1925 W. Va. Acts 24, 32 (Extraordinary Sess.).

135. CORNELL, *supra* note 8; JOHN K. MAHON, *THE AMERICAN MILITIA: DECADE OF DECISION 1789–1800* (1960); JOHN K. MAHON, *HISTORY OF THE MILITIA AND THE NATIONAL GUARD* (1983); H. RICHARD UVILLER & WILLIAM G. MERKEL, *THE MILITIA AND THE RIGHT TO ARMS: HOW THE SECOND AMENDMENT FELL SILENT* (2002).

136. The Uniform Militia Act of 1792, 1 U.S. Stat. 271.

137. Virginia Act of Feb. 24, 1631, Act LI, *reprinted in* I Henning, *supra* note 103, at 174.

138. Act of Mar. 16, 1877, 1877 Mo. Laws 298, 306; Act of Mar. 21, 1835, ch. 423, art. XI, 1835 Mo. Laws 512, 537; Act to Regulate the Militia, 1844 R.I. Pub. Laws 1, 16.



privates or non-commissioned officers who used their muskets for hunting were fined, according to a 1799 law.<sup>139</sup> These laws disappeared with the end of the old militia system in the mid-1800s.

#### M. Gun Access By Minors And Irresponsible Others

Numerous laws restricting gun access by minors—minimum ownership ages ranged from twelve to twenty-one—or others deemed irresponsible arose in the late 1800s, becoming more common in the early 1900s. Some states added other barred categories, including convicts or those of poor moral character, those inebriated, and people of unsound mind.<sup>140</sup> In 1907, the then-territory of Arizona barred

any constable or other peace officer . . . while under the influence of intoxicating liquor of any kind, to carry or have on his person a pistol, gun, or other firearm, or while so intoxicated to strike any person, or to strike any person with a pistol, gun or other firearm . . . .<sup>141</sup>

#### N. Arms And Ammunition Trafficking

Arms and ammunition trafficking was also a concern as early as the seventeenth century, just as it is today. Various registration or taxation schemes sought to address this concern. For example, a 1652 New York law outlawed illegal trading of guns, gun powder, and lead by private individuals.<sup>142</sup> A 1631 Virginia law required the recording not only of all new arrivals to the colony, but also “of arms and munitions.”<sup>143</sup> Twenty years later, Virginia required that “all ammunition, powder and arms, other than for private use shall be delivered up” to the government.<sup>144</sup> In the 1800s, three southern states imposed taxes on personally held firearms. Georgia in 1866 levied a tax of “one dollar a piece on every gun or pistol, musket or rifle over the number of three kept or owned on any plantation . . . .”<sup>145</sup> In 1867, Mississippi levied a tax of between \$5 and \$15

upon every gun and pistol which may be in the possession of any person . . . which tax shall be payable at any time on demand, by the Sheriff, and if not so paid, it shall be the duty of the Sheriff to forthwith distrain [to seize property for money owed] and seize such gun or pistol, and sell the same for cash . . . .<sup>146</sup>

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139. A Supplement to the Act, Entitled, An Act to Regulate and Discipline the Militia of this State, ch. 100, § 30, 1798 Md. Laws 69, 75.

140. Act of Mar. 5, 1907, ch. 16, 1907 Ariz. Sess. Laws 15; Act of Feb. 4, 1881, ch. 3285, 1881 Fla. Laws 87; Cook County Ordinance chap. 53 of Chicago (Ill.) Code of 1911.

141. Act of Mar. 5, 1907, ch. 16, § 1, 1907 Ariz. Sess. Laws 15, 15–16.

142. Ordinance of the Director and Council of New Netherland Against Illegal Trade in Powder, Lead and Gunds in New Netherland by Private Persons, 1652 N.Y. Laws 128.

143. Virginia Act of Feb. 27, 1631, Act LVI, *reprinted in* I Henning, *supra* note 103, at 174–75.

144. Articles at the Surrender of the Countrie of Virginia, Mar. 22, 1651, *reprinted in* I Henning, *supra*, note 103 at 365.

145. Act of Dec. 7, 1866, no. 41, § 1, 1866 Ga. Laws 27, 27–28.

146. Act of Feb. 7, 1867, ch. CCXLIX, § 1, 1867 Miss. Laws 327, 327.



In 1856 and 1858, North Carolina enacted taxes on pistols and other weapons “used or worn about the person.”<sup>147</sup> An 1851 Rhode Island law taxed anyone who owned or kept a pistol or rifle shooting gallery in certain locations;<sup>148</sup> Louisiana and Mississippi did the same in 1870<sup>149</sup> and 1886, respectively.<sup>150</sup> Alabama imposed a tax on firearms dealers in 1898.<sup>151</sup> That same year, Florida required a license for anyone owning “a Winchester or repeating rifle,” and further required the licensee to “give a bond running to the Governor of the State in the sum of one hundred dollars, conditioned on the proper and legitimate use of the gun with sureties to be approved by the county commissioners.”<sup>152</sup> Hawaii licensed firearms for sporting purposes in 1870,<sup>153</sup> as did Wyoming in 1899,<sup>154</sup> and Georgia imposed a pistol dealers’ tax in 1894.<sup>155</sup> Nebraska granted to city mayors the power to issue licenses to carry concealed weapons, adding mayoral discretion to “revoke any and all such licenses at his pleasure.”<sup>156</sup>

### O. Registration And Taxation

Registration and taxation laws were enacted with greater frequency beginning in the twentieth century. At least twelve states imposed various gun sales or dealer registration, regulation, taxation, or gun registration schemes.<sup>157</sup> The earliest applicable to purchasers of all firearms, was enacted in Michigan in 1913;<sup>158</sup> New York’s 1911 Sullivan law applied to handguns only.<sup>159</sup> Michigan also mandated in 1927 that all pistols be presented by their owners “for safety inspection” to local officials, if they lived in an incorporated city or village.<sup>160</sup> Perhaps most remarkable was this sweeping law, enacted by Montana in 1918, titled “An Act providing for the registration of all fire arms and weapons and regulating the sale thereof”:

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147. Act of Feb. 16, 1859, ch. 25, sched. A, § 27(15), 1858 N.C. Sess. Laws 28, 35–36; Act of Feb. 2, 1857, ch. 34, § 23(4), 1856 N.C. Sess. Laws 28, 34.

148. Act of Jan. 20, 1851, § 2, 1851 R.I. Pub. Laws 9, 9.

149. Act of Mar. 16, 1870, no. 68, § 3, sixth, 1870 La. Acts 126, 127.

150. Act of Mar. 18, 1886, ch. II, § 1, 1886 Miss. Laws 12, 19.

151. Act of Feb. 23, 1899, no. 903, § 16, sixty-seventh, 1898 Ala. Acts 164, 190.

152. Act of June 2, 1893, ch. 4147, 1898 Fla. Laws 71, 71–72.

153. Act of July 18, 1870, ch. XX, 1870 Haw. Sess. Laws 26, 26.

154. Act of Feb. 15, 1899, ch. 19, § 14, 1899 Wyo. Sess. Laws 27, 32–33.

155. 1893–1894 Treasurer’s Report, 1894 Ga. Laws 325, 326.

156. LINCOLN REV. ORD. ch. XIV, art. XVI, § 6 (Neb. 1895).

157. Act of June 19, 1931, ch. 1098, § 1, § 9, 1931 Cal. Stat. 2316, 2316–19; Act of June 2, 1923, ch. 252, 1923 Conn. Pub. Acts 3707; Act of Apr. 7, 1909, ch. 271, 25 Del. Laws 577; Ga. General Tax Act, no. 260, § 2, ninety-third, 1921 Ga. Laws 38, 65; Act of Jan. 9, 1934, act 26, 1933 Haw. Sess. Laws 35 (Spec. Sess.); Act of July 2, 1931, 1931 Ill. Laws 452; Act of May 7, 1913, ch. 250, 1913 Mich. Pub. Acts 472; MISS. CODE ch. 114, § 3887 (1906) (published in 1906 Miss. Laws 346, 367 (Spec. Sess.)); Act of Feb. 20, 1918, ch. 2, 1918 Mont. Laws 6 (Extraordinary Sess.); Act of Mar. 10, 1919, ch. 197, 1919 N.C. Sess. Laws 397; Act of Mar. 26, 1923, no. 11, § 11, 1923 S.C. Acts 12, 19–20; Act of Feb. 18, 1933, ch. 101, 1933 Wyo. Sess. Laws 117.

158. Act of May 7, 1913, No. 250, 1913 Mich. Pub. Acts 472.

159. Act of May 25, 1911, ch. 195, § 2, 1911 N.Y. Laws 442.

160. Act of June 2, 1927, no. 372, § 9, 1927 Mich. Pub. Acts 887, 891.



Within thirty days from the passage and approval of this Act, every person within the State of Montana, who owns or has in his possession any fire arms or weapons, shall make a full, true, and complete verified report upon the form hereinafter provided to the sheriff of the County in which such person lives, of all fire arms and weapons which are owned or possessed by him or her or are in his or her control, and on sale or transfer into the possession of any other person such person shall immediately forward to the sheriff of the County in which such person lives the name and address of that purchaser and person into whose possession or control such fire arm or weapon was delivered.

... For the purpose of this Act a fire arm or weapon shall be deemed to be any revolver, pistol, shot gun, rifle, dirk, dagger, or sword.<sup>161</sup>

The remarkable sweep of this statewide gun registration scheme is exceeded only by its early provenance.

#### P. Right To Bear Arms

In all of the nearly one thousand statutes examined in this analysis, only one referred to the right to bear arms—and it managed to misquote the Second Amendment; it is “the right *of* the people” not “the right *to* the people.” In 1868, Oregon enacted “An Act To Protect The Owners Of Firearms”:

Whereas, the constitution of the United States, in article second of amendments to the constitution, declares that “the right to the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed;” and the constitution for the state of Oregon, in article first, section twenty-seven, declares that “the people shall have the right to bear arms for the defense of themselves and the state;” therefore, . . . .

Section 1. Every white male citizen of this state above the age of sixteen years, shall be entitled to have, hold, and keep, for his own use and defense, the following firearms, to wit: Either or any one of the following named guns and one revolving pistol: a rifle, shot-gun (double or single barrel), yager [a heavy, muzzle-loading hunting rifle], or musket . . . .

Section 2. No officer, civil or military, or other person, shall take from or demand of the owner any fire-arms mentioned in this act, except where the services of the owner are also required to keep the peace or defend the state.<sup>162</sup>

Even in this articulation of a specified right to guns, the law extends that right to “any one of the following,”<sup>163</sup> limiting citizens’ gun rights both as to numbers of guns to be owned, and to the specified types. Here, indeed, is a “well-regulated right.”<sup>164</sup>

#### Q. Race And Slavery

The history of firearms regulations pertaining to race and slavery is surprising only in the relatively small number of written state restrictions. Yet that is not to suggest that the antebellum slavery regime was somehow less than uniformly oppressive. Two competing values shaped the relationship between slavery and guns. First, many sought to maintain some discretion regarding the arming of slaves. Early in the country’s history, slave owners found it not only useful, but

161. Ch. 2, 1918 Mont. Laws 6–9.

162. Act of Oct. 24, 1868, 1868 Or. Laws 18, 18–19.

163. *Id.* at 18.

164. Cornell & DeDino, *supra* note 109.



necessary, to arm slaves in early conflicts with Native Americans. For example, during the bloody Yamasee War (1715–1717) in South Carolina, nearly half of the colonist militia forces deployed were slaves.<sup>165</sup> Later on, the practice of enrolling slaves or indentured servants in local militias was largely abandoned, especially as such forces were used to monitor the slave population.<sup>166</sup> In addition, individual slave owners also often wished to arm their slaves when hunting or traveling.<sup>167</sup> The second, opposing value was the overriding fear of slave rebellions. With so much of the population of the South composed of people in bondage, whites lived in constant fear of violent uprisings.<sup>168</sup> Part of the pathology of control extended to deterring and catching runaway slaves.<sup>169</sup> Finally, gun prohibitions often extended to free blacks as well, although some laws distinguished between those in bondage versus those who were free. For example, Virginia enacted a law in 1806 that permitted “every negro or mulatto” to own guns, as long as they were not slaves.<sup>170</sup> Most of the laws listed here either penalize slaves for gun hunting or gun carrying without their owners’ authorization or presence. Others barred slave gun carrying entirely, or barred guns to free blacks or those of mixed race.

#### R. Time And Place Restrictions

Probably the most common type of gun law in America today is that which restricts the use of firearms in sensitive areas and times. One would be hard-pressed to find a city, town, or village in the contemporary United States that does not have a law against the discharge of firearms within its jurisdiction. Indeed, such laws existed early in our history, some of which fell into previous categories. Early such laws barred firearms carrying and discharges in named or generic public places, communal gatherings, schools, entertainments, on Sundays, or election day, as well as laws enacted in the late 1700s and 1800s to bar firearms discharges in cemeteries (clearly a source of significant mischief), on or at trains or other public conveyances, near roads, churches, bridges, homes or other buildings, or state parks.<sup>171</sup>

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165. JERRY COOPER, *THE RISE OF THE NATIONAL GUARD* 3 (1997); John Shy, *A New Look at the Colonial Militia*, 20 WM. & MARY Q. 175, 175–85 (1963) reprinted in *A PEOPLE NUMEROUS AND ARMED: REFLECTIONS ON THE MILITARY STRUGGLE FOR AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE* 31–38 (rev. ed. 1990).

166. Paul Finkelman, *The Living Constitution and the Second Amendment*, 37 CARDOZO L. REV. 623, 644 (2015).

167. 1 Del. Laws 104; 9 Del. Laws 552 (1843); Act of Oct. 1, 1804, 1804 Ind. Acts 107, 108; Act of Feb. 8, 1798, ch. LIV, 1798 Ky. Acts 105, 106; Act of Nov. 27, 1729, 1715–1755 N.C. Sess. Laws 35, 36.

168. Finkelman, *supra* note 166, at 644–45.

169. For more on early laws and practices regarding free blacks, slaves, and guns, see CORNELL, *supra* note 8, at 28–29; KENNETT & ANDERSON, *supra* note 9, at 49–51; WINKLER, *supra* note 8, at 115–16.

170. WINKLER, *supra* note 8, at 116.

171. Act of Sept. 30, 1867, 1867 Ariz. Sess. Laws 21, 21–22; Act of Oct. 1672, 1672–1714 Conn. Pub. Acts; 3 Del. Laws 326; 10 Del. Laws 9; Act of May 24, 1895, no. 436, 1895 Mich. Local Acts 591, 596; Act of Oct. 14, 1713, 1713 Mass. Acts 291; Act of June 28, 1823, ch. XXXIV, 1823 N.H. Laws 72, 73 Act of Dec. 31, 1665, 1665 N.Y. Laws 205; Act of Feb. 9, 1750, ch. CCCLXXXVIII, 1745–1759 Pa. Laws 208; Act



### S. Crime And Guns

The idea that those who commit crimes with guns should suffer a greater punishment is an old idea, but not one widely found during the period under study here. In 1783, Connecticut enacted a law that called for the death penalty for those who committed a burglary or robbery with a gun because it was seen to “clearly indicate their violent intentions.”<sup>172</sup> By comparison, commission of the same crimes without a gun resulted in a whipping and jail time.<sup>173</sup> A 1788 Ohio (Northwest Territory) law increased the penalty and jail time for anyone convicted of breaking and entering with a dangerous weapon, including firearms.<sup>174</sup> Several states provided for enhanced sentences for crimes committed with firearms in the 1800s.<sup>175</sup> In the 1900s, extended sentences were meted out to those who used explosives or guns while committing crimes—sometimes machine guns or pistols were stipulated.<sup>176</sup>

### T. Storage Regulations

The final category of gun regulation pertains to storage regulations. Many early laws imposed storage restrictions on gunpowder, but similar rules sometimes extended to firearms as well. For example, Massachusetts enacted a 1782 law specifying that any loaded firearms “found in any Dwelling House, Out House, Stable, Barn, Store, Ware House, Shop, or other Building . . . shall be liable to be seized” by the “Firewards” of the town. If the storage was found to be improper by a court, the firearms were to “be adjudged forfeit, and be sold at public Auction.”<sup>177</sup> Armories and gun houses were subject to regular inspection by the terms of an 1859 Connecticut law.<sup>178</sup> In 1919, Massachusetts passed a law to authorize the issuance of warrants for any complaint alleging that someone was keeping “an unreasonable number of rifles, shot guns, pistols, revolvers or other dangerous weapons, or that an unnecessary quantity of ammunition, is kept

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of Dec. 24, 1774, ch. DCCCIII, 1759-1776 Pa. Laws 421; Act of Feb. 28, 1740, no. 692, 1731-43 S.C. Acts 162[j], 174; Act of Mar. 13, 1871, ch. VI, 1871 Tex. Spec. Laws 11, 14; Act of Aug. 12, 1870, ch. XLVI, 1870 Tex. Gen. Laws 63; Virginia Act of Mar. 10, 1655, Act XII, *reprinted in* I THE STATUTES AT LARGE; BEING A COLLECTION OF ALL THE LAWS OF VIRGINIA, FROM THE FIRST SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE 401, 401-02 (William Waller Henning ed., 1823); Virginia Act of Mar. 2, 1642, Act. XI, *reprinted in* I THE STATUTES AT LARGE; BEING A COLLECTION OF ALL THE LAWS OF VIRGINIA, FROM THE FIRST SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE 248, 248 (William Waller Henning, ed., 1823); A COLLECTION OF ALL SUCH ACTS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA, OF A PUBLIC AND PERMANENT NATURE, AS ARE NOW IN FORCE 33 (Augustine Davis ed., 1794).

172. Act of Oct. 9, 1783, 1783 Conn. Pub. Acts 633, 633.

173. *Id.*

174. Act of Sept. 6, 1788, ch. 2, 1788 Ohio Laws 6, 8.

175. Act of Oct. 9, 1783, 1783 Conn. Acts 633; Florida Act of Aug. 6, 1888, chap. 1637; Act of Sept. 6, 1788, ch. II, 1788-1801 Ohio Laws 8; Act of Dec. 2, 1869, 1869 Wash. Sess. Laws 198, 203.

176. Act of Apr. 3, 1907, ch. 151, 1907 Colo. Sess. Laws 334; Act of June 22, 1911, ch. 98, 1911 Conn. Pub. Acts 1357; Act of May 15, 1905, ch. 5411, 1905 Fla. Laws 87; Act of July 2, 1931, 1931 Ill. Laws 452; Act of Mar. 8, 1929, ch. 55, 1929 Ind. Acts 139.

177. 1782 Mass. Acts 119, ch. 46, § 1.

178. Act of June 24, 1859, ch. LXXXII, § 7, 1859 Conn. Pub. Acts 61, 62.



or concealed for any unlawful purpose in a particular house or place . . . .”<sup>179</sup> If a court concluded that the possession was not justified, it could order the weapons and ammunition forfeited.<sup>180</sup>

## V

### CONCLUSION: FIREARMS LAWS ARE AS AMERICAN AS GUN OWNERSHIP

Early gun laws were comprehensive, ubiquitous, and extensive. Taken together, they covered every conceivable dimension of gun acquisition, sale, possession, transport, and use, including deprivation of use through outright confiscation—not merely for the commission of serious crimes, but even for violation of hunting regulations. Given that the dark fear of contemporary gun rights enthusiasts is government confiscation of firearms, it bears noting that this survey of early gun laws included measures that invoked gun confiscation for a wide range of reasons or offenses including: military necessity; failure to swear a loyalty oath to the government; improper storage of firearms; improper possession of weapons legal to own under certain circumstances, including, but not limited to, possession of specific, named types of prohibited firearms—especially handguns and machine guns; violations of certain hunting laws; and failure to pay a gun tax.

Another category of gun regulation, remarkable in its own right, is the prohibition of semi-automatic weapons in up to ten states, summarized in Table 2. This important statutory prohibition, unknown until now, also has contemporary reverberations as precedent for the assault weapons ban debates in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>181</sup>

In all of this lawmaking, there is, with the rarest exceptions, no suggestion that these laws infringed on anything related to any “right to bear arms”—remembering that the Second Amendment did not apply to the states until the Supreme Court so extended it in 2010<sup>182</sup>—be it the U.S. Constitution’s Second Amendment or the various state constitutions’ right-to-bear-arms-type provisions. Many state laws predated the modern state and federal constitutions, but there is no indication that subsequent state laws were somehow inhibited or stymied after the adoption of right to bear arms provisions, aside from facing occasional court challenges.<sup>183</sup> Many of these laws did, however, include two types of exemptions: those related to militia or military activities; and instances when individuals used firearms for justifiable personal self-defense. As Saul Cornell has noted, “the common-law right of individual self-defense”<sup>184</sup> was not only well

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179. Act of May 22, 1919, ch. 179, § 1, 1919 Mass. Acts 139, 139.

180. *Id.*

181. See SPITZER, *supra* note 26, at ch. 3 (analyzing the contemporary dispute over regulating semi-automatic assault weapons).

182. *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, 561 U.S. 742 (2010).

183. SPITZER, *supra* note 55, at 91, 91–136.

184. CORNELL, *supra* note 8, at 21.



established long before codification of the right to bear arms in American constitutions; it existed independent of that right.<sup>185</sup>

Taken together, these sixteen—sometimes overlapping—categories of gun laws span a wide range. Some encompass anachronistic practices—like slavery, dueling, and old-style militias—that nevertheless reflect the scope of government power over the kinds of persons who could carry guns, the circumstances of gun carrying, criminal gun behavior, and military or defense exigencies. Others reflect the most basic efforts to improve safety, including laws that criminalized menacing behavior with guns (such as brandishing), the firing of weapons in populated areas, hunting laws, some of the laws related to manufacturing and inspection pertaining to firearms, laws restricting firearms access to minors, criminals, and those mentally incompetent, laws restricting firearms in sensitive areas or places, sentence enhancement laws, and storage laws.

Finally, some of the gun law categories represented more sophisticated, ambitious, or seemingly modern approaches to gun regulation. Dangerous weapons barred outright by laws enacted in the 1920s and early 1930s included automatic weapons like submachine guns. Congress moved to restrict access to such weapons nationwide in 1934.<sup>186</sup> Yet state laws also barred silencers, air guns, trap guns, and even semi-automatic weapons and the early equivalent of large capacity bullet magazines. While standards varied, some states barred weapons or mechanisms that could fire more than five, seven, eight, sixteen, or eighteen bullets without reloading. The concerns then were akin to those that motivated Congress to enact the Assault Weapons ban of 1994<sup>187</sup>: excessive firepower in the hands of civilians, and the related question of public safety. Beyond these laws are those that are essentially off the agenda in the contemporary political environment: registration and licensing laws, and significant, categorical gun bans.

Taking most of these gun law categories together, one overarching concern straddles them: the conviction that handguns represented a uniquely dangerous threat to societal interpersonal safety. Even though these laws were enacted long before the government or private researchers began to collect systematic data on gun violence, the carrying of pistols was seen as an activity largely confined to those who contemplated or committed crimes or other forms of interpersonal violence, and that therefore pistol carrying should be subject to stricter rules and standards, including in many instances prohibition. While gun control proponents continue to make the same arguments in modern America, those arguments carried more weight in the America of the 1600s through the early 1900s than they do today. The relationship between citizens and their governments with

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185. Cornell, *supra* note 56, at 1703, 1707; see also SPITZER, *supra* note 26, at ch. 4; Nathan Kozuskanich, *Originalism in a Digital Age*, in *THE SECOND AMENDMENT ON TRIAL*, *supra* note 8, at 289–309.

186. National Firearms Act of 1934, Pub. L. No. 73-474, 48 Stat. 1236 (codified as amended at I.R.C. §§ 5801–5872 (2012)).

187. SPITZER, *supra* note 55, at 149–55.



respect to guns contemplates a regulatory regime that bears little resemblance to the modern gun rights narrative of the past. Yes, there was lawlessness, rebellion, and rugged individualism. But the context was that of a governing framework where the state confined and defined lawful use of force by individuals.

Gun laws are as old as the country; more to the point, the *idea* of gun laws and regulation is as old as the country. The prevailing gun law movement in America in the last three decades toward the relaxing of gun restrictions—for example, the reduction of gun sale inspections, the shielding of manufacturers and dealers from criminal and civil liability, the rise of unregulated internet gun and ammunition sales—as well as the spread of concealed carry laws, the open carry movement, and most recently of “stand your ground” laws are not a return to the past. They are a refutation of America’s past, and a determined march away from America’s gun regulation tradition. And these changes have nothing to do with improving safety or security in society, but everything to do with politics.