Concealed plugs and rotten trunnions: David Tanner and his problems with gunfounding in the American War of Independence

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ABSTRACT: In the early 1770s the British Board of Ordnance decided that all new iron guns must be cast solid and bored out, rather than cast round a core. As a result when war broke out shortly after with the American colonists, the Ordnance had to work with a number of founders with no previous experience of either casting guns or dealing with the Board. One of these new founders was David Tanner of Tintern who had a very poor record of casting. Over a number of years his letters reveal the difficulties an iron founder had in attaining the high standard which the government expected for their cannon, the excuses he made and his attempts to have the guns accepted. However in the wake of the defeat in the War and the financial crisis that followed, the Board was reorganized with the military officers in stronger control of the supply and proof of new guns and Tanner was forced to find an alternative market for his rejected guns.

Introduction

After Britain recognized American independence in the 1780s, she was forced to examine the reasons for her defeat. One result was the reorganization of the Ordnance Office, the government body that supplied the armed services. There had long been tension between its civilian staff and the military personnel, who belonged to the Royal Regiment of Artillery or the Royal Engineers. Following the defeat, the military were on the ascendant and Captain Thomas Blomefield, promoted to Inspector of Artillery in the course of the War, began a review of all aspects of artillery. Part of this new regime was to tighten up what they considered had been the lax ways of the previous civilian regime. A thorough review of all guns in service was undertaken and increasingly severe conditions were imposed on the government contractors providing new weapons. In this atmosphere the gunfounders of the American War were put under a fiercer scrutiny than their predecessors, and consequently their reputations have suffered. One reason for this was the decision by the Board of Ordnance early in the 1770s to accept iron guns only if bored from the solid. Thus, when war broke out shortly afterwards, the Board had to deal with the problems of a new technology and companies new both to gunfounding and to dealing with the Board, since few of its previous suppliers in the Weald were able to produce such guns. Some of these founders were not entirely honest in their dealings with the Board; John Wilkinson used an elaborate network of colleagues to disguise the fact that he was casting more guns than the Board wanted him to, while George Matthews of Calcutts in Shropshire drew the Office into financial disputes with his unfortunate partners. However these were problems over finance, and it must also be said that the founders were dealing with high stakes; towards the end of the War, the Board and the British government were in the severest of financial straits. They failed to pay the founders, not only the money owed, but even the interest on it, and a number of concerns, including Matthews’, went into liquidation as a result. However, there was one major long-running dispute during this period which involved the quality of the guns offered, and it throws some light on the problems which the gunfounders faced, in what they thought were unreasonably high standards demanded by the military. This was the case involving David Tanner.