



William Waller Powder Horn

PHOTOGRAPH

## William Waller Powder Horn

Museum of the American Revolution



This powder horn was carried by a Virginia rifleman named William Waller during the Revolutionary War. Rifles and muskets in the 18th century used a mechanism called a flintlock in order to fire. Loose gunpowder was poured into the pan of the gun, then ammunition was forced down the barrel of the gun. When fired, a spark lit the gunpowder in the pan, which ignited and sent more sparks through a small hole into the barrel, igniting a larger explosion that forced the ammunition out of the weapon. Whether a hunter shooting animals or birds, or a soldier shooting at his opponent, gunmen needed to carry dry gunpowder with them as they traveled.

Powder horns were made from the horn of a cow. After being hollowed out, a hole was drilled in the tip for easy pouring, and a removable cap or plug was placed on that end. A larger plug was placed on the other end to keep it sealed. The owner of a powder horn might decorate it in his down time, or have an artisan do it for him. This horn is inscribed with William Waller's name and the phrase "Liberty or Death." This might refer to Patrick Henry's famous 1775 speech, in which he urged fellow Virginians to actively prepare for war, as he believed peace was no longer an option. While his speech was not transcribed, those present remembered his closing words, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" Waller's powder horn is also inscribed with other phrases, including "Appeal to Heaven" and "Kill or be Killd," all surrounded by flowers and vines.

Waller was captured by the British in November of 1776 while defending Fort Mifflin, near Philadelphia. After his release, he continued to fight for the Americans and served at the Battles of Germantown and Monmouth.