

Shot Towers Seen and Unseen

by Lynne Belluscio

I just returned from a trip to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where I attended the annual meeting of the Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums. It was a ten hour drive through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia and finally into North Carolina.

On the way down, the rain was torrential and I was in a hurry to make a 5 pm meeting, so I didn't stop in Virginia to see the Jackson Ferry Shot Tower, but on the way back last Wednesday, I took a side trip off the interstate (much to the chagrin of the voice in my Garmin – she kept “recalculating”; I've decided to name her “She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied”).

The shot tower is one of only a few remaining in the United States. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. The reason why I wanted to see the tower is because I am writing an article for the Historical So-

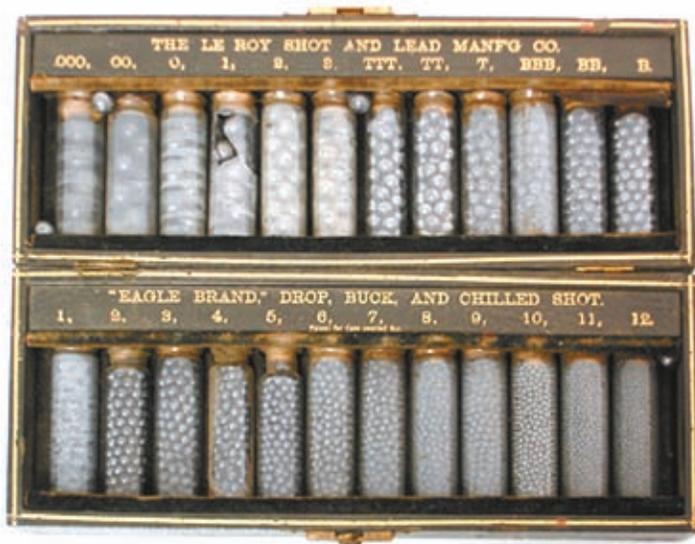
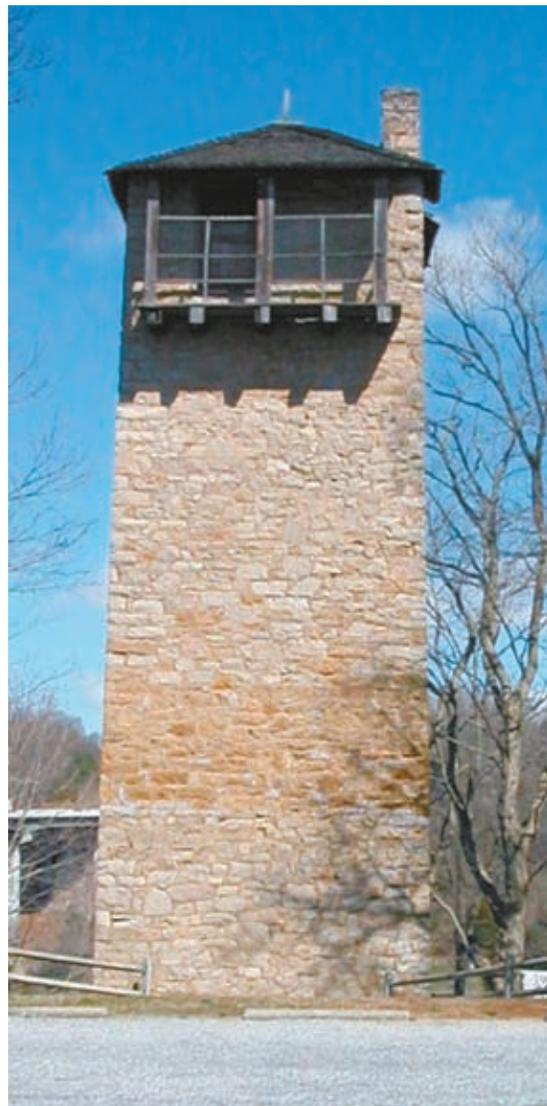
William Watts of Bristol. Hot molten lead mixed with arsenic was poured from a tall tower through a sieve into cold water. The lead formed little round balls. The size of the sieve and the length of the drop determined the size of the shot. Most of the gun shot in the United States was imported from England, but in 1808 President Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo on foreign goods and Americans began building shot towers.

The Jackson Tower is one of the oldest in the United States, and although some people believe that it was in operation before 1800, it is likely that it was a few years later before it was producing lead shot. It is unusual because the tower is built of limestone instead of brick. The 234 foot brick Phoenix tower in Baltimore was built in 1828 and was the tallest structure in the United States until the Washington Monument

shot towers in New York City, but the new “wind tower” method soon made them obsolete.

By 1873, only the LeRoy tower was still standing. So far, I haven't been able to locate the site of the LeRoy shot tower, but hopefully on my next visit to New York City, I'll have a chance to look at some city maps at the library. There is a possibility that the tower was near 262 Water Street where the T.O. LeRoy Company was located. That building is still standing and is in a historic district near the East River.

One of New York City's most famous steak houses, Mark Joseph, is located in the old LeRoy building. It is not far from the Brooklyn Bridge and I found an 1896 article in the *New York Times* that poses an interesting puzzle. “Look at the shot tower from the bridge, then go and try to find it.” The article goes on to say that the tower (presumably the LeRoy tower, because it was the only tower still standing in 1873) can be seen from the bridge, but once you try to find an entrance to a tower on street level, it can't be found, because a regular building is in front of the tower. “The entrance to the tower is exactly like any of the places of business which line the



ciety Newsletter about Thomas Otis LeRoy, who was born in LeRoy House in 1823. He was the oldest child of Jacob LeRoy and when he was twenty-two he established a company in New York City to manufacture lead pipe and in 1848 his company registered a patent for a new process to manufacture lead shot for guns.

The manufacture of lead shot was developed in England by

was built. It too is listed on the National Register.

In 1848, the T.O. LeRoy Company in New York City registered a patent for a “wind tower” method of manufacturing lead gun shot. The new process was actually developed by David Smith, an employee of Thomas LeRoy. A blast of cold air from the bottom of the tower reduced the necessity for tall towers. As late as 1868, there were three

street, except that the business sign has reference to shot.

The courteous proprietor leads the way back through a long shop, down a flight of iron steps to the basement, in the middle of the building. There is the tank of water into which the shot falls from a height. It is surrounded by brick and iron pillars, which support the tower. There isn't any tower there. Like a church steeple, it is on top.” “We seem to be the prize conundrum of the city,” said the proprietor. “We have worn a path showing visitors where the tower is not.” So I am still wondering, is the LeRoy tower still in New York City? Stay tuned.

