

Gatling, Richard Jordan ^[1]

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Gatling, Richard Jordan,

by John Richard Jordan, Jr., 1986

12 Sept. 1818–26 Feb. 1903



Richard Jordan Gatling. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

^[2]Richard Jordan Gatling, inventor of the machine gun and numerous other devices, was born in the Maney's Neck section of [Hertford County](#) ^[3]. His father was Jordan Gatling, a slaveholder who owned an almost completely self-sufficient plantation containing more than a thousand acres; his mother was Mary Barnes Gatling. Richard Jordan had three brothers, Thomas B., [James Henry](#) ^[4], and William J., and two sisters, Mary Ann and Martha. The entire family is remembered for its exceptional intellect. Jordan Gatling was himself an inventor and in 1835 patented machines for planting and for thinning [cotton](#) ^[5]. James Henry, an older brother of Richard Jordan, was greatly interested in heavier-than-air flight by man and in the 1870s constructed a crude hand-powered aircraft with which he experimented unsuccessfully; he also invented and patented devices for chopping cotton stalks and for converting pine into lightwood. It was in this climate of intellectual curiosity that Richard Jordan Gatling spent his boyhood. He had brief formal education at Buckhorn, a local common school. He then became a schoolmaster but gave up teaching to open a country store near the town of Winton. During this period Gatling's inventive genius first found expression. Having observed an experimental steamboat trial while on a visit to Norfolk, Va., in 1841, he conceived the principle of the screw propeller as a substitute for the slow and cumbersome paddle-type wheels then in use. At first his father refused him permission to go to Washington to patent the principle, but relented seven months later. When Gatling arrived in Washington, he learned that the celebrated Scandinavian-American inventor, [John Ericsson](#) ^[6], had patented the identical invention only a few days before.

Three years later Gatling obtained his first patent. It was for a rice-seed planter. He then left North Carolina and moved to St. Louis to manufacture and market his planter. There, converting his machine to a wheat-planter, he amassed a fortune in the midwestern wheat fields. During the winter of 1845, Gatling contracted smallpox while on a business trip by riverboat. For two weeks, when the steamer was ice-locked, he was unable to obtain medical attention. Upon recovering from this near-fatal illness, he decided to study medicine simply to be able to care for himself and his family. Accordingly, Gatling attended both Indiana Medical College and Ohio Medical College, receiving a diploma as a physician in 1850. At

this time he moved to Indianapolis, where he practiced medicine only briefly. Returning to his creative interests, he invented and patented a hemp-breaking machine and later invented a steam-plow.

The outbreak of the Civil War ^[7] stimulated Gatling to produce the greatest invention of his career and one that revolutionized warfare. This was the machine battery gun that became known the world over as the "Gatling gun ^[8]."



Gatling Gun. Image courtesy of NC Office

of Archives & History. ^[9]One of the most interesting aspects of the life of Gatling is his own conception of the meaning of the terrible weapon that he had created. When he invented his famed gun he acted not as a merchant of violence but as a humanitarian who wished to reduce the number of men required to fight wars and thereby reduce the incidence of death. At the beginning of the Civil War, Gatling frequently visited the trains bringing in dead and wounded troops from the battlefields and army camps. From his examinations, he learned that only three out of eighteen died from their bullet wounds; the remainder died from fever, pneumonia, and other illnesses contracted in camp. The loss of life due to illness impressed Gatling with the idea that, if a weapon could be devised to shoot more bullets, fewer men would be required to fight wars and, therefore, fewer and smaller concentrations of men would be necessary. This, he contended, would cut down the rate of death by both illness and combat. He also hoped that the terror created by such a weapon would tend to discourage war altogether.

Although Gatling's humanitarian theories have proved fallacious, the essentially humanitarian conception of his invention was accepted in many respectable quarters, particularly in England where the Gatling gun was early adopted. A British newspaper of the period commented: "The general use of the formidable weapon will tend to diminish the barbarity and actual carnage of warfare, as its known relentless certainty of execution will help to prevent wars and thereby aid in keeping the peace of Christendom." The first gun was tested and patented in 1862. Although crude, it had a firing capacity of more than 200 rounds a minute. There is some evidence that this early model was used by Union forces on the James River near Richmond on 6 May 1864, but the actual facts have never been ascertained. Gatling worked diligently to refine his invention, and in 1865 an improved model was patented. Twelve guns of this model were subsequently manufactured and submitted to the U.S. Army ^[10] for tests. In 1866, the Gatling gun was officially adopted by the War Department.

The gun consisted of a group of ten rifle barrels grouped around a central shaft that was revolved by gear action and a hand crank. Bullets were automatically fed into the barrels, the hammers of which revolved continuously as the hand crank was turned. A later model was capable of firing 1,200 shots a minute and, before selling his patent rights to the Colt Fire Arms Co. ^[11], Gatling experimented with a model that stepped up firing to 3,000 shots a minute. The Gatling gun was eventually adopted by every European power except Belgium. It was used with particularly telling effect by the British in the Boer War and by the American armies in Cuba.

In 1854 Gatling married Jemima Sanders, the daughter of Dr. John H. Sanders of Indianapolis. The couple had four children: Mary S. (b. 1855), Ida (b. 1858), Richard Henry (b. 1870), and Robert B. (b. 1872). Gatling became a member of the Methodist ^[12] church during his boyhood in North Carolina. In Indiana in 1864 he was reported to have been a member of the Order of American Knights, an organization regarded as treasonable by the federal government. He died in New York City at age eighty-four. He and his wife were buried in a family plot in Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis, Ind.

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Additional Resources:

"Richard J. Gatling." N.C. Highway Historical Marker A-26, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=A-26> ^[13] (accessed May 3, 2013).

Richard Gatling Papers, WorldCat: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/richard-j-gatling-papers-1888/oclc/50597982> [14]

Richard Jordan Gatling results in WorldCat: https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AGatling%2C+Richard+Jordan%2C&qt=hot_author [15]

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"Richard J. Gatling." Gatling Gun. N.C. Highway Historical Marker A-26, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=A-26> [13] (accessed May 3, 2013).

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[10] <https://www.us.army.mil/>

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