

North Carolina Inventors: Carbine Williams



Inventor Carbine Williams,
Photo credit: North Carolina Museum of
History

David Marshall Williams was born in Godwin, Cumberland County, at the turn of the twentieth century. He was the son of a well-to-do landowner. Williams was fascinated by weapons from an early age. He built his first pistol—with a reed barrel—when he was only ten years old. His greatest discoveries, however, would come to him later in an unexpected place—Caledonia Prison Farm in Halifax County.

As a young man, Williams began to make and sell moonshine, or illegal alcohol. The police tried repeatedly to shut down Williams's bootlegging operation. Things finally ended with a shootout between Williams and law enforcement officers during a raid on his whiskey still. Deputy sheriff Al Pate was killed during that raid. Williams was convicted of the murder, but he maintained his innocence until the day he died. Only twenty years old, he was sentenced to thirty years of hard time.

After a rocky start in prison, Williams settled in. He eventually became a “trustee,” a prisoner who had the trust of the warden. Williams began working in the prison blacksmith shop repairing broken equipment. It was there he started creating his own gun inventions from scrap metal. In 1929, after serving eight years, Williams's case was reviewed and he was pardoned. He returned to Godwin, where he built a one-room workshop and continued working on weapon innovations.

When World War II broke out, the U.S. military needed a new type of weapon to combat the new fighting tactics of German forces. Support troops needed guns that were lighter than standard service rifles so that they could go about their normal duties. But they also needed guns that were more effective in combat than the pistols they had been using. The Ordnance Department asked for gun design proposals from both military and civilian designers.

At this same time, Williams was working for Winchester Repeating Firearms Company in Connecticut. Winchester decided at the last minute to enter a light rifle prototype in the competition. An important part of this rifle was Williams's short-stroke gas piston, which he had worked on in prison. After several weeks of tests and a number of modifications, Winchester's entry, the Carbine Caliber .30 M1, was adopted as the standard rifle for military service.

The M1 carbine, as it came to be known, went from a design on paper to a weapon in the hands of soldiers in less than a year. Companies such as General Motors, Underwood-Elliott-Fisher (which made typewriters), Rock-Ola Manufacturing Company (which made jukeboxes), National Postal Meter, and IBM worked to make more than six million M1 carbines from 1941 to 1945.

Although he held more than 50 invention patents, David Marshall Williams is best remembered for the gun that gave him his nickname. In 1971 Carbine Williams gave his workshop and its contents to the North Carolina Museum of History. Visitors to the museum can view Williams's shop, see examples of his work, and learn more about the legendary inventor.