

# The Puckle Gun

By Graeme Davis

The Puckle Gun was revolutionary, but it never gained wide acceptance. History regards it as a failure. However, this rare and deadly weapon might still be encountered in a *Colonial Gothic* campaign. This article covers the history and design of this unusual weapon, and presents expanded rules and game stats for four versions.

## History

English inventor, lawyer, and writer James Puckle patented his "Defence Gun" in 1718. A tripod-mounted, heavy musket, its main purpose was to defend ships against boarders. The gun used a revolving magazine that made it capable of firing nine rounds per minute – more than three times the fire rate of a conventional musket in the hands of a trained and experienced soldier.

Another innovation was the weapon's choice of barrels: one firing conventional round shot for use against Christians, and another firing square shot for infidel Turks (which, it was suggested, would convince the Turks of “the benefits of Christian civilization”). The Turks, or more accurately the Barbary Corsairs who owed nominal allegiance to the Ottoman Empire, were a constant threat to Christian shipping in the Mediterranean and Atlantic until their bases in present-day Libya and Tunisia were conquered by France in 1830: the United States Marine Corps famously went to “the shores of Tripoli” in the First Barbary War of 1810-1815.

The Puckle Gun was demonstrated successfully more than once. The *London Journal* of March 31st 1722 reported that “one man discharged it 63 times in seven minutes” in a rainstorm. Damp is one of the greatest problems facing black-powder weapons, and this sustained fire rate in the rain (which must have included time spent changing magazines) was impressive. Despite this, the Puckle Gun was not adopted by the British armed forces and Puckle had trouble finding investors. One newspaper of the time observed drily that the gun “only wounded those who hold shares therein.”

A major drawback was the complexity of some components. Although details are sketchy, consistently machining the breech and the cartridges to the tolerances needed for a good gas seal must have been a challenge.

Although the Puckle Gun never entered military service, Lord Montagu purchased at least two Puckle Guns in 1722 for an expedition to colonize the Caribbean islands of St. Lucia and St. Vincent. Threatened with French intervention from Martinique and unable to secure the backing of Royal Navy ships in the Caribbean, the expedition withdrew before accomplishing its goal. It is not known whether the Puckle Guns were ever fired.

# The Gun



Image from *Recreation* magazine, by George O. Shields (American Canoe Association, League of American Sportsmen, volume 4, published 1896) via Wikimedia Commons.

The details of the Puckle Gun are hard to pin down. The few documentary sources report its bore as 1 inch, 1.25 inches, and 1.5 inches; its revolving magazine is said to hold either nine or eleven shots. Puckle’s drawing shows six and nine-chambered cylinders for round shot and a six-chambered cylinder for square shot.

The barrel of a Puckle Gun was 3 feet long and made of “brass,” which at that time meant cast bronze. The choice of metal may reflect the gun’s intended use as a shipboard weapon: an iron barrel would have been prone to rust.

The pre-loaded brass cartridges were mounted on a circular plate that screwed into place at the breech of the weapon. After firing, the screw was loosened, the plate was rotated to bring the next cartridge into position, and the screw was tightened again before firing.

The weapon was swivel-mounted on a tripod and had another screw mechanism (called a “crane” in Puckle’s drawing) to elevate and depress the barrel.

## Surviving Examples



Replica Puckle Gun at Buckler's Hard Maritime Museum, UK. Photo by Tawsnysc via Wikimedia Commons

Blackmore and Willbanks (see Bibliography) both mention a Puckle Gun in the Tower of London Armoury, and imply that it is an original. There are references online to one at the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, which was opened in 1996 to display more of the collection. At the time of writing it was not possible to confirm whether this is the one from London, but it seems likely.

Two Puckle Guns are on display at former Montagu homes in England: one at Boughton House in Northamptonshire and the other at the Palace of Beaulieu (pronounced *Byoolee* by the English) in Essex. It seems likely that these are from Lord Montagu's ill-fated Caribbean expedition.

There is a replica Puckle Gun at the Buckler's Hard Maritime Museum in Hampshire, England. The village of Buckler's Hard was founded by Lord Montagu as a port for the Caribbean trade, and was originally called Montagu Town. However, Montagu's trading enterprise fared little better than his expedition.

## Game Statistics

Type	Damage Value	Range	ROF	Size	Cost
Puckle Gun (1" round)	4(55)	40/70/90	3/2 (11)	2H	£18 14s
Puckle Gun (1" square)	6(65)	35/55/75	3/2 (6)	2H	£19 16s
Puckle Gun (1.25" round)	6(70)	40/70/90	3/2 (9)	2H	£19 16s
Puckle Gun (1.5" round)	7(75)	45/85/115	3/2 (6)	2H	£22

ROF: The number in brackets is the capacity of a magazine. Changing a magazine takes a full round.

The Puckle Gun was a heavy weapon, designed to be fired from a tripod. The tripod weighs about 20 pounds, and takes a full round to set up. Characters with a high Might score may try firing the weapon without a tripod; this imposes a -4 penalty to hit and reduces the ROF to 1.

## **Adventure Seeds**

Historically, problems of engineering and cost doomed the Puckle Gun to failure. However, this need not be the case in a *Colonial Gothic* campaign. The following paragraphs present a selection of adventure seeds in various times and places.

### ***New England, 1721-25***

Known by various names (including Dummer's War, Father Rale's War, and the Fourth Indian War), fighting has broken out along the border between New England and New France (modern-day Maine, Vermont, Quebec, and New Brunswick). Backed by France, warriors of the Wabanaki Confederacy have attacked British settlements, sparking a series of reprisal raids by British forces. As matters escalate, three British forts at the mouth of the Kennebeck River are attacked.

The Puckle Gun was designed as a point defense weapon, and its presence at any of these forts will strengthen them considerably. PCs (who may have been accompanying Lord Montagu's Caribbean expedition) find themselves sent to New England to strengthen the frontier forts, and must run a French gauntlet to reach their destination.

### ***The Ohio Territory, 1754-63***

The Puckle Gun was aging by the time of the French and Indian War, but it could still outperform a standard infantry musket. As France and Britain struggle for control of the Ohio Territory, both sides build forts along the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela Rivers. Control of these forts is the key to winning the war, and any weapon that strengthens their defenses is valuable.

As a British expedition under Captain William Trent constructs a fort at the Forks of the Ohio, Major George Washington of the Virginia Militia returns from a diplomatic mission and reports to Governor Dinwiddie that the French will not withdraw. War seems inevitable. Washington, promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, is ordered to strengthen Trent's forces at the new Fort Prince George.

The most pressing need is for artillery, but Dinwiddie's arsenal at Williamsburg is small. Washington strips a handful of Puckle Guns from the city's walls and orders the PCs to hurry ahead while he assembles more reinforcements. They must make their way to Fort Prince George through largely unknown territory, confronting natural hazards and hostile natives along the way. They may

arrive too late and find the French have destroyed Fort Prince George and begun construction of their own Fort Duquesne – or they may be just in time to fight off a determined French attack and change the course of history.

### ***Boston, 1775***

As tensions escalate during the siege of the city, General Thomas Gage strengthens the fortifications on the Neck, which protect the British-held town from its Patriot-controlled surroundings.

Gage's American counterpart, General Artemas Ward, learns that a shipment of Puckle Guns is coming from London aboard a Royal Navy frigate to help strengthen the defenses. These heavy weapons would be a valuable prize for the American cause – but can the Heroes intercept and board a fully-armed enemy warship to seize them?

This incident would make a challenging side-adventure at the start of the *Flames of Freedom* campaign. It would work very well immediately after *A Surprise for General Gage* (from *The Gazetteer*), in which the Heroes are introduced to Ward and prove their value as an irregular special-missions unit.

### ***Philadelphia, Paris, and London, 1776***

Benjamin Franklin has heard of the Puckle Gun, and longs to obtain a specimen which can be reverse-engineered to develop a rapid-firing heavy weapon for the Continental Army. He sends the Heroes to Paris, where confederates of his equip them with false identities that will enable them to operate freely in London.

One set of plans is in the Patent Office in London, and another is at the offices of the Master-General of the Ordnance, along with a working prototype. Both these locations are fairly secure. The two Montagu houses of Boughton House and Beaulieu are softer targets, but they are set in smaller communities where outsiders of any kind will draw attention. The Heroes will have to be stealthy and resourceful to spirit a Puckle Gun away from either place.

For an added complication, Franklin's French allies may have an agenda of their own. They may be early Revolutionaries, inspired by America's resistance against an oppressive monarchy and critical of the growing economic crisis which arose from the expense of the French and Indian War and which, in history, would carry on to become a major cause of the French Revolution of 1789-1799. They may be royal agents ordered to obtain the British weapon for France. They may even be secret agents of some

shadowy organization like the Freemasons, or of the immortal Comte de St. Germain. Whatever their loyalties, these supposed allies will turn on the Heroes and try to take the stolen gun for themselves.

### ***The Caribbean, 1778***

Montagu's expedition to St. Lucia and St. Vincent was the only confirmed instance of Puckle Guns going into the field. Historically, the French fleet at Martinique did not attack Montagu's seven ships, but in a *Colonial Gothic* campaign this need not be the case. Montagu's two guns may be in a French armory in Martinique, and the Heroes may find themselves sent by Washington or Franklin to recover them. How they do so is up to them; they may try diplomacy, bribery, or theft – but if they are caught, they risk jeopardizing the delicate but valuable alliance between France and the United States.

### **Bibliography**

Blackmore, Howard, *British Military Firearms 1650-1850*. Herbert Jenkins, 1961.

Peterson, Harold L., *The Treasury of the Gun*. Golden Press, 1962.

Puckle, Owen Standidge, *James Puckle, N.P.: His Books and His Gun*. No publisher listed, 1974.

This title is listed by the British Library, but seems impossible to obtain.

Willbanks, James H, *Machine Guns: An Illustrated History of their Impact*. ABC-CLIO, 2004.

### ***Online Resources***

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puckle\\_gun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puckle_gun) gives basic information on the weapon;

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Puckle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Puckle), on Puckle himself, gives more.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nTqV7o2jE8> shows a model Puckle Gun firing. A hot wire is used instead of a flintlock firing mechanism.