

# Getting Beyond the House: Comparing Inventories of Revolutionary Era New York and New Jersey

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*This is the sixth in a series of installments that will discuss how various categories of furnishings and items are represented in the different inventories. The different groups will be examined to determine if there are variations in the types and numbers of objects in each category.*

The majority of historic house museums are severely handicapped. They survive in almost total isolation from the environment that originally supported their existence. Cut off from their own world they face the difficult task of explaining a rural, agricultural, non-mechanized world to a consumer-oriented, technologically sophisticated, urban and suburban-based visitor population. They have to do this in a domestic setting with few visual cues that can lead the visitor beyond the four walls of the museum into the world of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Americans. Inventories provide some alternative objects that can be placed in or by the house, usually on a seasonal basis, that speak to the broader environment.

## PIGEONS<sup>1</sup>

Sometime in the month of April, a general emigration takes place to the northward, first of the geese and ducks, and then of the pigeons...; When they pass in spring which they always do in the same track, they go in great numbers, and are very fat. Their progression northward and southward begins always about the vernal and autumnal equinoxes; and it is this that renders the carnage so great when they pass over inhabited districts.... This migration, as it passed by, occasioned, as I said before, a total relaxation from all employments, and a kind of drunken gaiety, though it was rather slaughter than sport; and, for above a fortnight, pigeons in pies and soups, and every way they could be dressed, were the food of the inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

We have twice a year the pleasure of catching pigeons, whose numbers are sometimes so astonishing as to obscure the sun in their flight.... We catch them with a net extended on the ground, to which they are allured by what we call tame wild pigeons, made blind, and fastened to a long string; his short flights, and his repeated calls, never fail to bring them down. The greatest number I ever caught was fourteen dozen, though much larger quantities have often been trapped.... Every farmer has a tame wild pigeon in a cage at his door all the year round, in order to be ready whenever the season comes for catching them.<sup>3</sup>

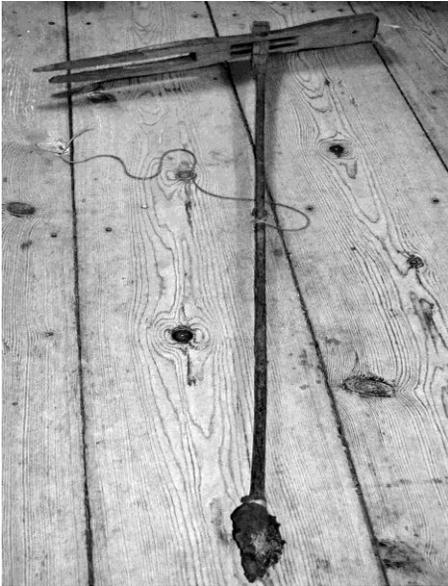
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<sup>1</sup> The pigeon referred to below is the American Passenger Pigeon which became extinct in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> [Anne Grant], *Memoirs of An American Lady: with Sketches of Manners and Scenery in America as they existed previous to the Revolution*, 2 vols., London, 1808, New York: Research Reprints Inc., 1970, pp. 67-70.

<sup>3</sup> J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer*, reprint based on 1782 original, Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1968, I:38.

During the course of my ride from Newport, I observed prodigious flights of wild pigeons: they directed their course to the southward, and the hemisphere was never entirely free from them. They are birds of passage, of beautiful plumage, and are excellent eating. The accounts given of their numbers are almost incredible; yet they are so well attested, and the opportunities of proving the truth of them are so frequent, as not to admit of their being called in question. Towards evening they generally settle upon trees, and sit one upon another in such crowds, as sometimes to break down the largest branches. The inhabitants, at such times, go out with long poles, and knock numbers of them on the head upon the roost; for they are either so fatigued by their flight, or terrified by the obscurity of night, that they will not move, or take wing, without some great and uncommon noise to alarm them. I met with scarcely any other food at the ordinaries where I put up; and during their flight, the common people subsist almost wholly upon them.<sup>4</sup>



*Pigeon stool or perch. Perch is stuck in the ground. A “tame blind pigeon” would be tied to the perch. The pigeon’s call would bring wild pigeons down to the ground at which point a pigeon net would be thrown over the birds. Uncatalogued.*

Descriptions of the annual spring and fall pigeon hunts make it clear that the residents of the Hudson Valley and New Jersey used a variety of techniques to kill the migrating birds. They could be knocked out of the trees with long sticks or they could be shot. Neither of these techniques required specialized equipment for the hunt. However the use of decoy pigeons and nets called for specific tools which appear on the inventories. Pigeon nets, used to trap the birds which are lured to the ground by a “tame pigeon,” are listed on the inventories from frontier areas, Somerset County in New Jersey and Ulster County in New York. They appear on 11% of the New Jersey inventories and 17% of the Ulster inventories. Westchester also has a single pigeon net while none appear on the New York City inventories. Additional items — pigeon cages and pigeon baskets — are also present on these same inventories although none of the inventories included the so-called “tame wild pigeon” mentioned by Crèvecoeur.

**CHART 16: APPEARANCE OF PIGEON HUNTING EQUIPMENT**

	New York City (47 inv.)	New Jersey (119 inv.)	Ulster (71 inv.)	Westchester (63 inv.)
<b>Pigeon Net</b>	0	13 (11%)	12 (17%)	1
<b>Pigeon Cage</b>	0	1	4	0
<b>Pigeon Basket</b>	0	1	2	0

<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through the Middle Settlements in North America, in the Years 1759 and 1760; with Observations upon the State of the Colonies*, Third edition, London: Printed for T. Payne, at the Mews-Gate, 1798, pp. 101-102.

## FISHING

... sturgeon of a large size, and in great quantity made their appearance in the river. Now the same ardour seemed to pervade all ages in pursuit of this new object. Every family had a canoe; and on this occasion all were launched; and these persevering fishers traced the course of the sturgeon up the river; followed them by torch light; and often continued two nights upon the water, never returning till they had loaded their canoes with this valuable fish, and many other very excellent kinds, that come up the river at the same time. The sturgeon not only furnished them with a good part of their food during the summer months, but was pickled or dried for future use or exportation.<sup>5</sup>

Landing on the West Shore we found a Number of People fishing with a Seine; they caught plenty of Shad and Herring and use Canoes altogether having long, neat and strong Ropes made by the People themselves of Elm Bark.<sup>6</sup>

The statements above refer specifically to the annual spring spawning runs of the Hudson River sturgeon in the 1750s.

However the rivers and streams of New York and New Jersey teemed with fish and served as an important supplemental food source for the residents. In addition to the sturgeon, shad and herring mentioned above a common seine might bring in “between five and six hundred fineshad, bass, perch, and other fish....”<sup>7</sup>

This was a communal activity. Manning the boats, throwing out the nets, pulling in the catch, cleaning and preserving the catch, all required coordinated effort, timed to coincide with the migratory habits of the various fishes. It wasn't sport fishing.



*Night fishing with harpoons, one of the techniques that was used for sturgeon in the Hudson Valley, as described by Peter Kalm. Plate 53 “Fishing XII,” Denis Diderot, A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia of Trades and Industry, Manufacturing and the Technical Arts in Plates Selected from ‘L’Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers’ of Denis Diderot, Edited with Introduction and Notes by Charles Coulston Gillispie, 2 vols., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959.*

The inventories include seines and boats among items listed, however they are quite rare. Generally, an inventory that includes a seine also includes a boat or canoe. Only 9 seines or fishing nets appear on the 300 inventories examined. Five appear in New Jersey, two in Ulster, and one each in New York City and Westchester. Boats are even rarer, three boats and one canoe in New York City, three

<sup>5</sup> [Anne Grant], *Memoirs of An American Lady*, I:71.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Smith, *A Tour of Four Great Rivers The Hudson, Mohawk, Susquehanna and the Delaware in 1769 Being the Journal of Richard Smith of Burlington, New Jersey*, Edited, with a Short History of the Pioneer Settlements by Francis W. Halsey, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jasper Danckaerts, *Journal of a Voyage to New York in 1679-1680*, ed. Henry C. Murphy, (Memoirs of the Long Island Historical Society) Vol. 1, Brooklyn, N.Y.: Published by the Society, 1867

canoes in Ulster and one boat in New Jersey. Evidence for fishing by line is also present, but similarly scarce. Ulster inventories include 6 fishing poles and two fish hooks, while 2 fishing lines appear on a New York City inventory. Despite the abundance of fish in the streams and rivers, the inventories provide little in the way of supporting evidence for an interpretation in which fishing played a major role in the lives of 18<sup>th</sup> century inhabitants. The majority undoubtedly focused on farming. However, if inventories for estates located right on the rivers can be identified and examined; a better understanding of the role of fishing in 18<sup>th</sup> century life might be attained.

## **FIREARMS AND WEAPONS: HUNTING AND DEFENSE**

Looking beyond farming equipment, firearms represent the most common tool that can link the domestic space to the broader world. Guns, variously identified as “flintlock,” “musket” or simply “gun” are commonly listed on the inventories. They played a complex role in the 18<sup>th</sup> century world. On one level they were used to bring down food and to protect other food sources from the depredations of vermin. In this sense they are the counterparts to the pigeon nets and seines mentioned earlier. However they also had a socio-political role, one that proved especially important to the frontier world of 18th century New York and New Jersey.

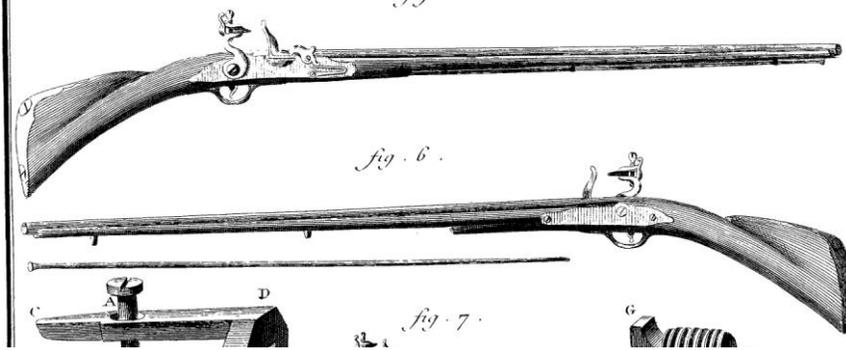
**CHART 17: APPEARANCE OF FIREARMS AND WEAPONS ON INVENTORIES**

<b>Weapon or Accessory</b>	<b>New York City (47 inv.)</b>	<b>New Jersey (119 inv.)</b>	<b>Ulster (71 inv.)</b>	<b>Westchester (63 inv.)</b>
<b>Guns</b>	14 (29%)	60 (51%)	35 (49%)	14 (22%)
<b>Pistols</b>	5 (11%)	7 (6%)	7 (10%)	2 (3%)
<b>Swords</b>	4 (8.5%)	27 (23%)	13 (18%)	8 (13%)
<b>Bayonets</b>	1 (2%)	8 (7%)	6 (8%)	2 (3%)
<b>Powderhorns</b>	3 (6%)	21 (18%)	16 (23%)	1 (2%)

Both Somerset County in New Jersey and Ulster County in New York remained frontier areas, especially during the first three quarters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A local militia, made up of each community’s armed residents, served as the military defense for the region during repeated imperial conflicts between the English and French and their respective Native American allies. These culminated in the French and Indian War (1755-1763). This was followed by the Revolutionary War which once again relied on local militia and state forces to support the nascent national army under

George Washington. Supporters of both the American and British forces during the war relied on an armed citizenry to take the field in battle and defend the lands from attack.

The distribution of guns between the various regions shows a clear differentiation between frontier areas and more settled regions. Both New Jersey and Ulster inventories show about 50% gun ownership. By comparison guns appear on only 29% of the New York City inventories and 22% of the Westchester inventories. [See Table 31] In all regions a clear majority of gun-owning estates



Two typical flintlock muskets. Plate 61 "Small Arms III," Denis Diderot, *A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia*.

include a single gun: NYC 54%, New Jersey 66%, Ulster 68% and Westchester 86%. [See Table 32]

The guns on the inventories show a wide range in valuations with nearly three-quarters of all guns assigned values less than £2 [New York City 70%, New Jersey 70% and Ulster 72%].

While 8% of the New Jersey guns had valuations of £4 or more, the high end guns more typically fell into the £3-£4 range. [See Table 33]

The guns discussed above belonged to the typical farmer and the common soldier. They reflected his social and political status. The common farmer or soldier owned the musket, the flintlock, or the generic "gun." Ownership of a pistol however, indicated a higher social position. Less effective than the musket, it served instead as a symbol of authority. An officer could claim ownership of a pistol, a common soldier a musket. Pistols appear on between three and eleven percent of the inventories. In almost all cases an estate with a pistol will also include one or more guns.



Officers pistol, French, Spanish or possibly Hessian, c. 1770. 1977.11054.01.

The inventories also include a variety of accoutrements required for the successful firing of an 18<sup>th</sup> century musket or pistol. The inventories refer to “cartridge,” “cartridge box,” “bullet,” bullet mold,” “shot mold,” “shot/lead,” “shot bag,” “powder horn,” and “powder.” The powder horn is the only accessory that appears on a significant number of inventories,



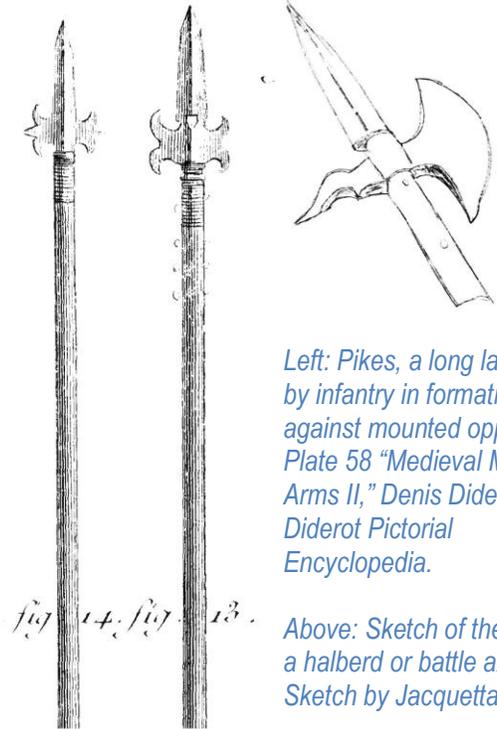
*Powder horn, the cartouche reads "Year 1736 The 14: Novembr: LB" and is believed to have been the property of Louis Bevier of New Paltz. 6306.01.*

ranging from 2% of the Westchester estates to 23% of the Ulster estates. They also tend to appear in multiples with one inventory in New Jersey listing 8 powder horns while on average three powder horns appeared on the relevant Ulster inventories. Regardless of region, the inventories with guns seldom listed all the paraphernalia needed to fire the gun. This simply may indicate that various components were lumped together.

While guns should be viewed as tools for both war and peace, several other items appear on the inventories that are strictly military weapons. The most common of these is the sword. Like the pistol, the sword is an indicator of status as well as a weapon. Like the pistol, the sword belonged to an officer rather than a common soldier. Swords appear most frequently in those regions that had a strong militia, the frontier areas of New Jersey [23%] and Ulster [18%], diminishing to 12% of the Westchester inventories and 9% of the New York City inventories. If there is a sword on an inventory it is usually solitary although a very small percentage show two swords and Ulster includes one inventory with three swords. Swords with silver hilts occur on three inventories, two in Ulster and one in New York City. [\[See Table 34\]](#).

The bayonet is another strictly military blade found on the inventories, once again with a stronger presence on New Jersey and Ulster inventories [7% and 8% respectively] than on the New York City [2%] and Westchester [3%] estates. In all cases possession of a bayonet is linked to possession of a gun.

Guns, pistols, swords, bayonets, these all clearly belong in late 18<sup>th</sup> century America. There are however, a few items that recall warfare in an earlier age. The New Jersey inventories include two pikes and three halberds, both mediaeval weapons. A pike consisted of a long wooden shaft — 10 to 15 feet long — with a metal blade attached to one end. A halberd was a battle axe with a wooden shaft, an axe blade on one side, a metal hook on the opposite side and a spear head at the top. It was wielded with two hands. In addition to these early weapons, one of the New York City inventories includes armor. All these pieces were undoubtedly family heirlooms which point to an earlier generation's military experience.



*Left: Pikes, a long lance used by infantry in formation against mounted opponents. Plate 58 "Medieval Men at Arms II," Denis Diderot, A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia.*

*Above: Sketch of the head of a halberd or battle axe. Sketch by Jacquetta Haley.*

### What's the message?

Hunting and fishing in general are seasonal activities and the maintenance of the tools, specifically repairing pigeon nets or seines if your historic house is near a river, provides a means of tying the domestic world of the historic house to the larger late 18<sup>th</sup> century environment. They also provide a strong link with today's concerns for environmental protection as the pigeon was eventually hunted into extinction and the stocks of Hudson River sturgeon and other fishes had begun to dwindle even by the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century: "Several gentlemen and merchants, between fifty and sixty years of age, asserted, that during their life they had plainly found several kinds of fish decrease in number every year; and that they could not get near so many fish now as they could formerly."<sup>8</sup> The profligate methods used by 18<sup>th</sup> century fishermen accentuate the view that nurturing the native species was not necessary; they would always be available in great abundance. Descriptions of night fishing north of Albany illustrate this profligacy:

The torches which they employed were made of that kind of pine, which they call the black pine here. The nights were exceedingly dark, though they were not shortest, and though we were in a country so much to the South of Sweden. The banks of the river lay covered with dead sturgeons, which had been wounded with the harpoon, but escaped, and died afterwards; they occasioned an insupportable stench during the excessive heat of the weather.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> June 22, 1749, Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America*, Translated by John Reinhold Forster, Introduction by Ralph M. Sargent, Barre, Mass.: The Imprint Society, 1972 , p. 315.

<sup>9</sup> June 22, 1749, Kalm, *Travels in North America*, p. 341.

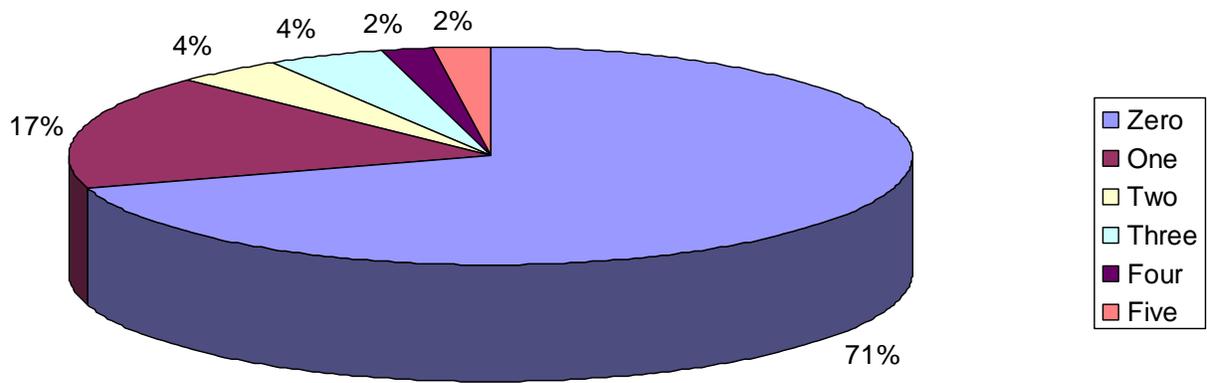
Guns and other weapons provide the opportunity to discuss the importance of the militia, especially in frontier areas, as well as the supplemental role that hunting played in providing food for the table. The residents of both New York and New Jersey experienced the American Revolution on a first hand basis, both as a source of manpower for both sides and as the site of battles and winter encampments. The tools of war offer an avenue to discuss the political situation beyond the house.

## About the Author

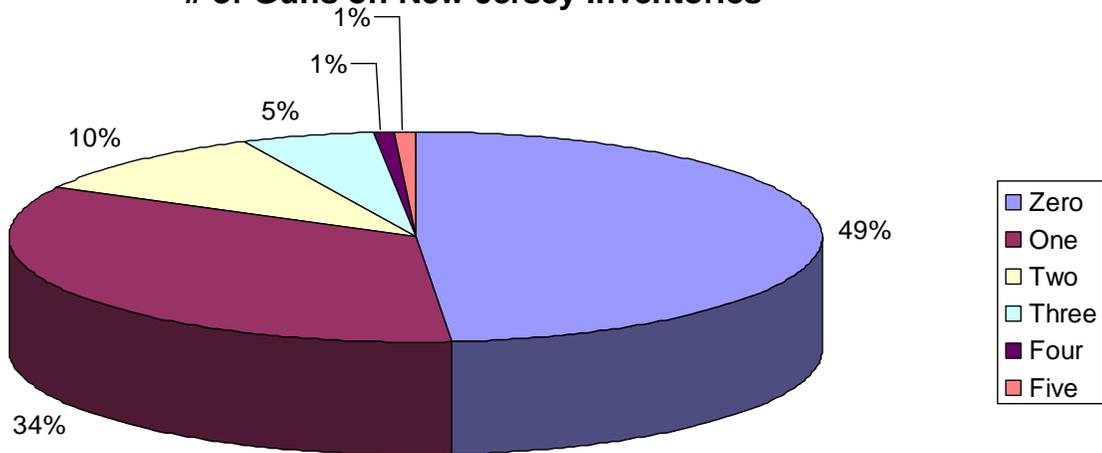
Jacquetta M. Haley has worked with historical agencies and sites in the Hudson Valley for many years. After 12 years working in the research and interpretation departments at Historic Hudson Valley, Ms. Haley established Haley Research & Consulting. As a consultant she has published regional histories, curated exhibitions, developed interpretive strategies and prepared furnishings plans for many historic properties including Conference House and the Dyckman House for the Historic House Trust of New York City, Lyndhurst for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Mark Twain House and the Florence Griswold House in Connecticut, the Howell Living History Farm in New Jersey, the Alexander Ramsey House in St. Paul, Minnesota and the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia.

Ms. Haley received her doctorate in American History from Binghamton University. She served on the board of trustees of Greater Hudson Heritage Network from 2003-2009, and again from 2010 to the present. Ms. Haley was president of the board of trustees in 2006-2009 and 2010-2011.

**# of Guns on New York City Inventories**

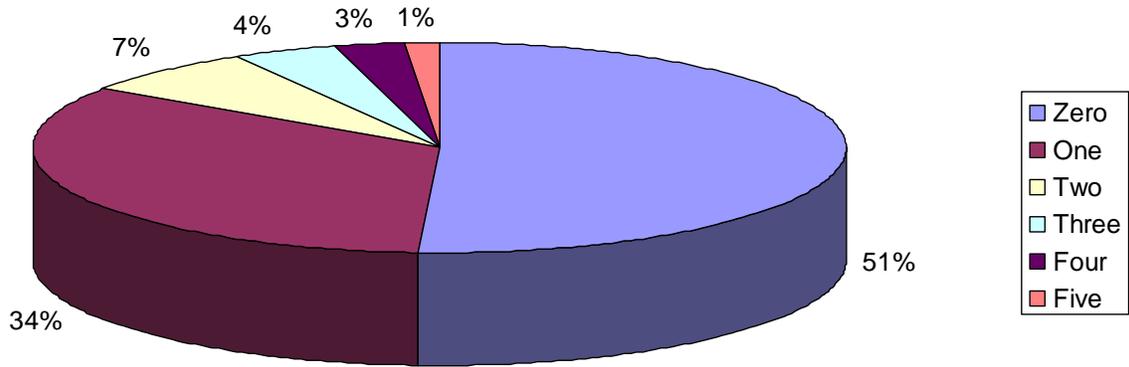


**# of Guns on New Jersey Inventories**

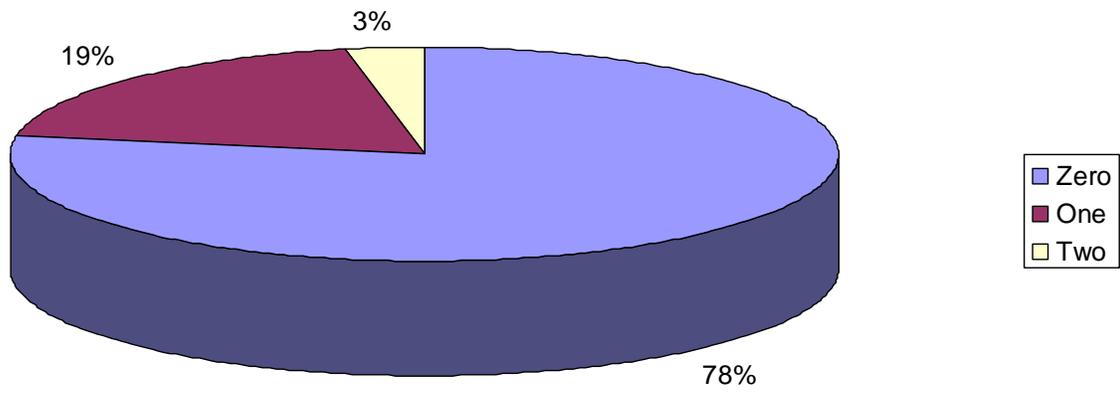


**TABLE 31: NUMBER OF GUNS ON INVENTORIES**

**Number of Guns on Ulster Inventories**

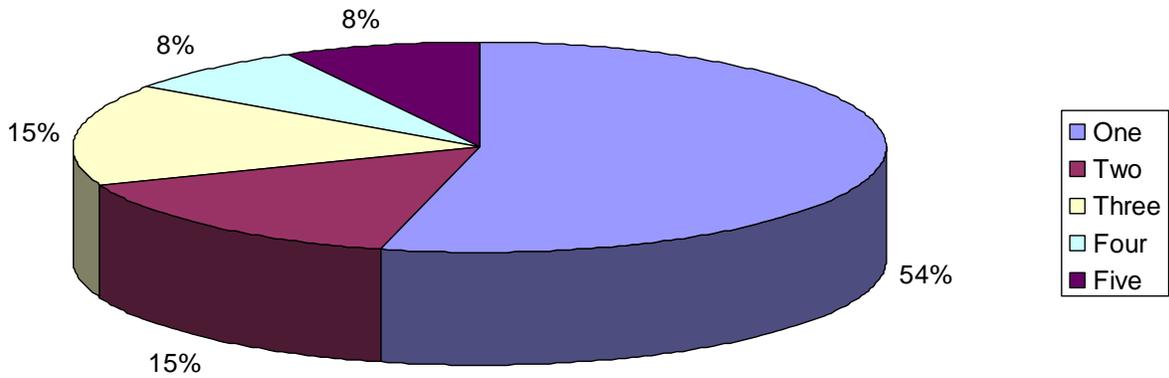


**Number of Guns on Westchester Inventories**

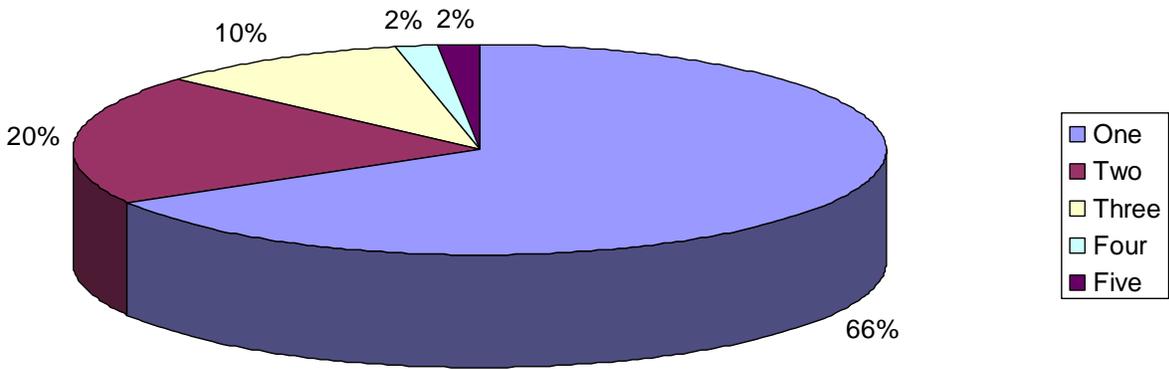


**TABLE 31: NUMBER OF GUNS ON INVENTORIES**

**# of Guns Among Gun Owners, NYC**

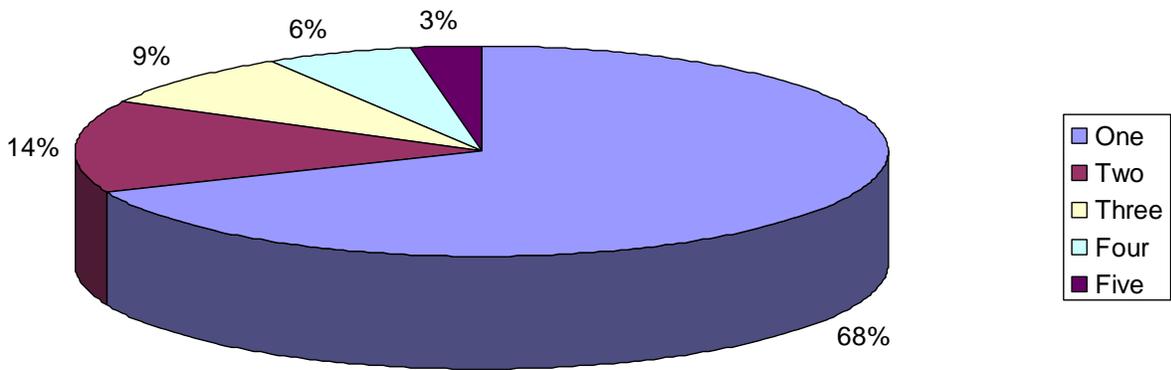


**# of Guns Among Gun Owners, NJ**

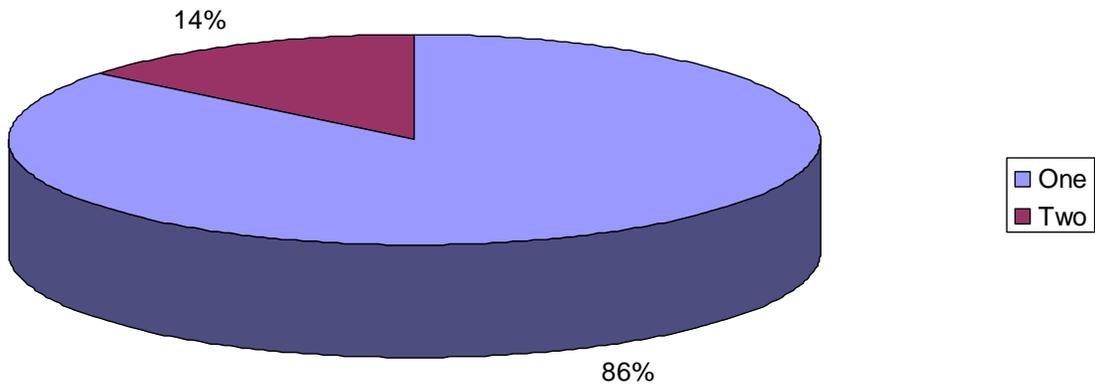


**TABLE 32: NUMBER OF GUNS AMONG GUN OWNERS**

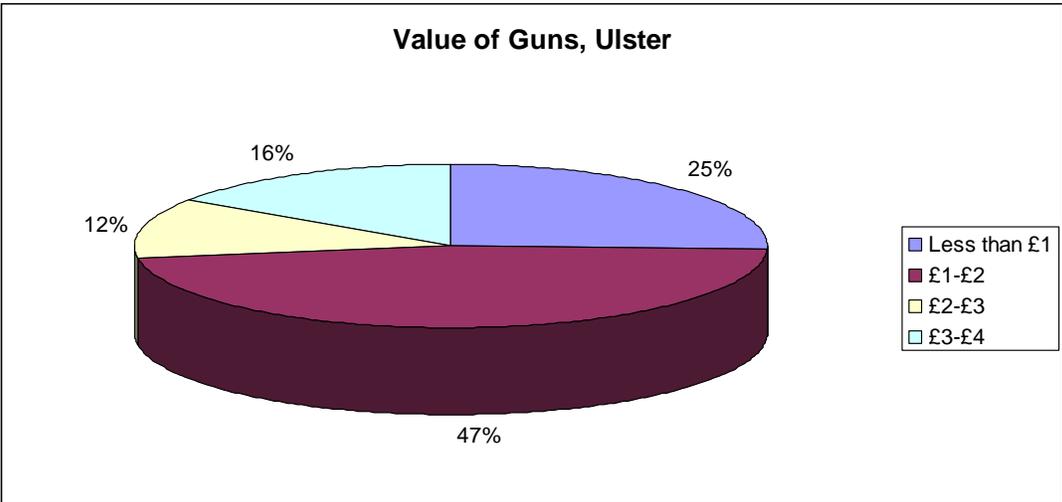
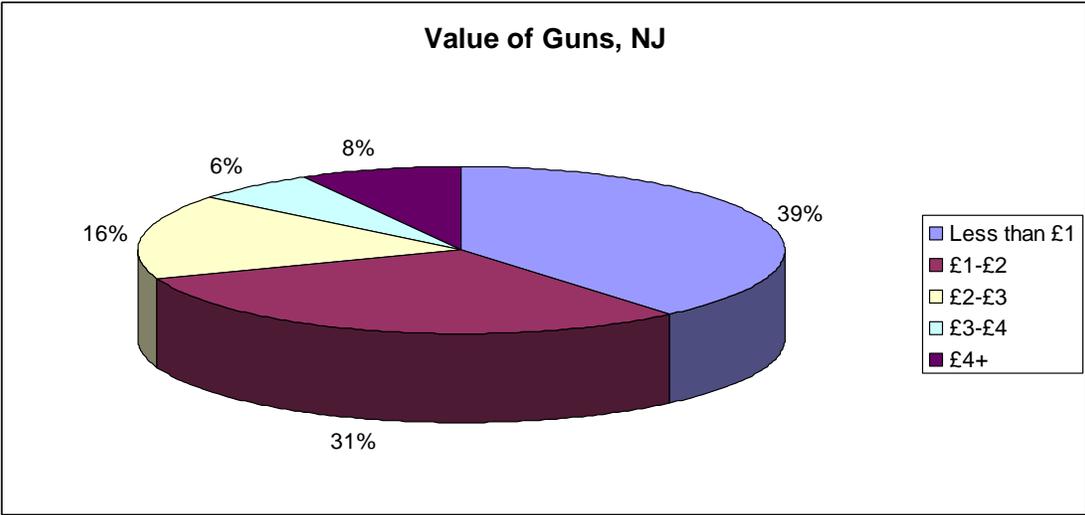
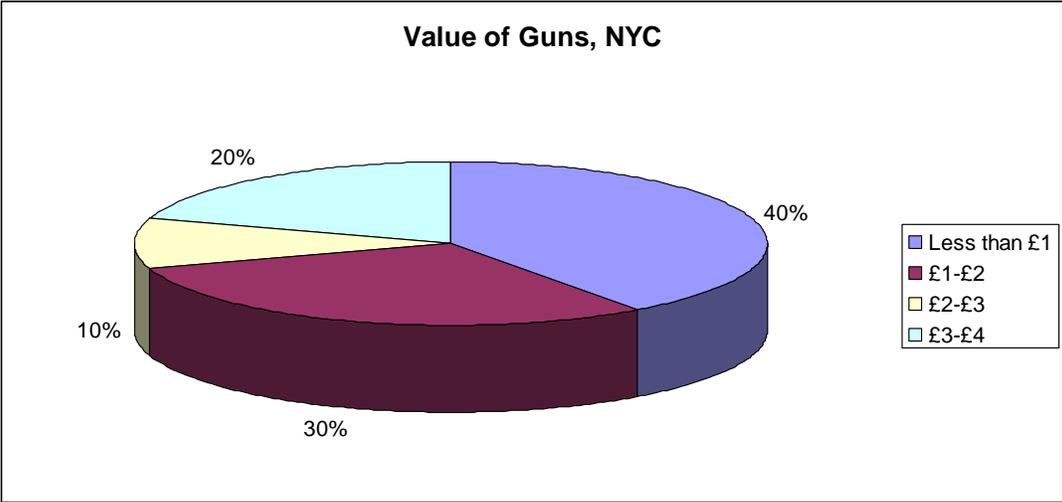
**Number of Guns Among Gun Owners, Ulster**



**Number of Guns Among Gun Owners, Westchester**

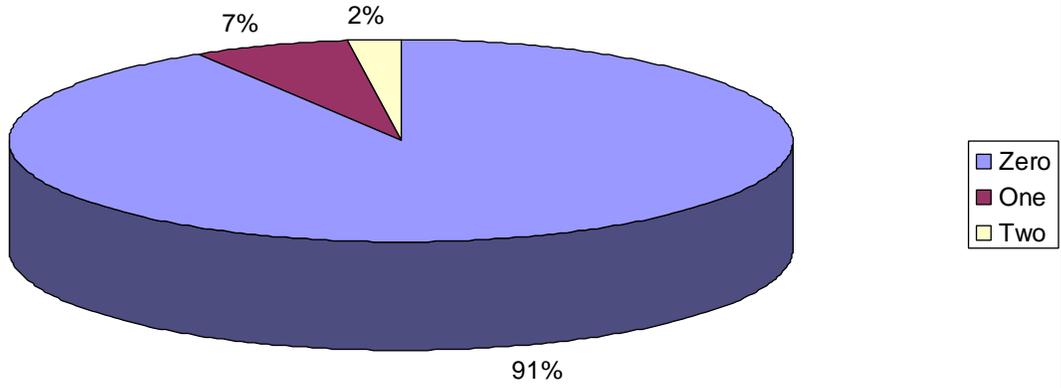


**TABLE 32: NUMBER OF GUNS AMONG GUN OWNERS**

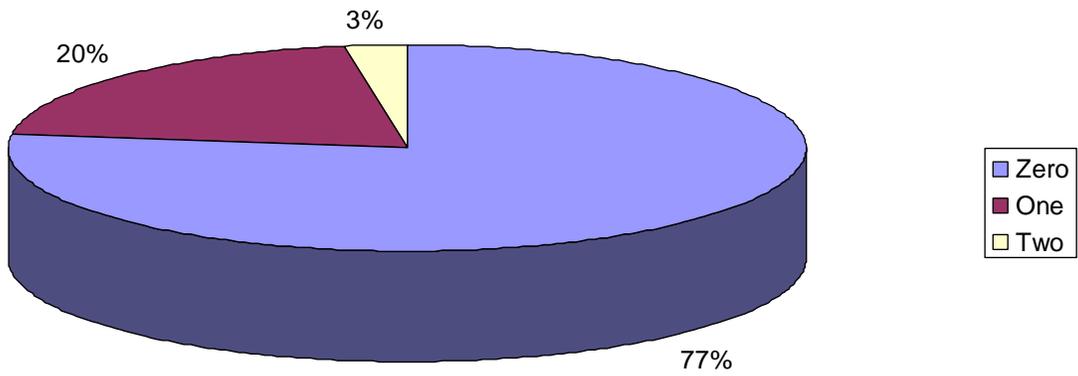


**TABLE 33: VALUE OF GUNS**

**# of Swords on New York City Inventories**

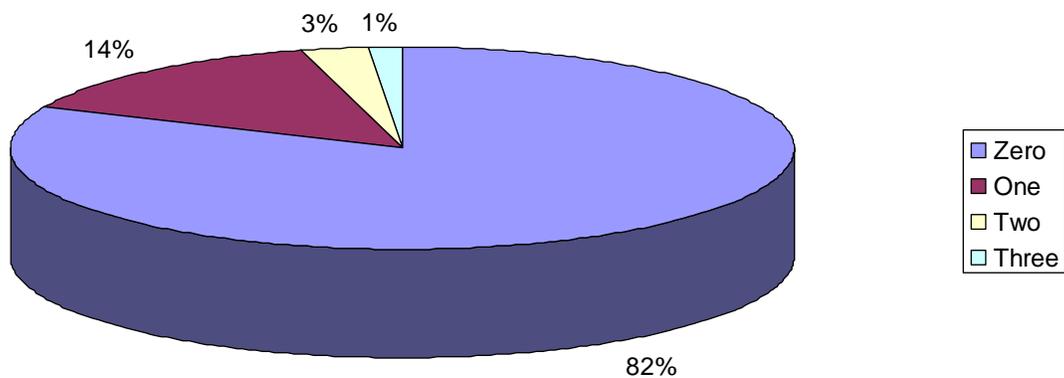


**# of Swords on New Jersey Inventories**

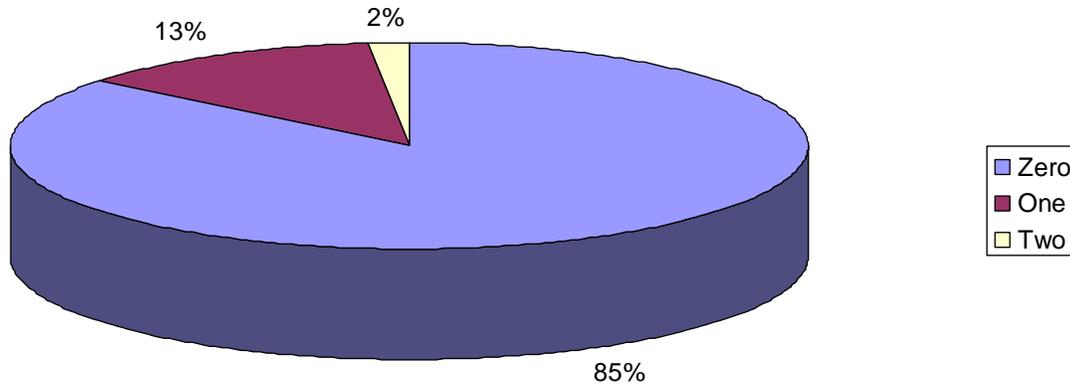


**TABLE 34: NUMBER OF SWORDS ON INVENTORIES**

**Number of Swords on Ulster Inventories**



**Number of Swords on Westchester Inventories**



**TABLE 34: NUMBER OF SWORDS ON INVENTORIES**