

## Dating Green River Knives

**What is a Green River Knife?** J. Russell & Co. was established on the Green River in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1834 to produce cutlery. When the migration westward began, John Russell decided to begin manufacturing a hunting knife. The Russell Company shipped ¾ million knives west between 1840 and 1860. The knife was used by buffalo hunters, mountain men, Plains Indians, trappers, homesteaders and gold miners. It was the preferred weapon to settle disputes! The knife came to be known as the Green River Knife. "The Knife That Won the West".

The original Green River hunting knife, circa 1840, had an 8 inch blade, plain beechwood handle attached to the tang with iron pins, no bolster or guard. Collectors often confuse this very plain hunting knife with another knife produced later in the Company's history. The overnight success of the Green River Knife allowed Russell to produce new types of cutlery. A curved skinning knife and a butcher knife nicknamed the Dudley. The latter most common. All three knives came to be known in time as Green River Knives.

**The Green River Knife Prior to 1870.** The date 1870 appears pivotal in dating the Green River knife. During the 1860's the company's sales were robust and the need to expand existed. The Green River was insufficient in supplying waterpower and no space was available at the works to expand production. Around 1868 John Russell retired, and new management took over the Company. A decision was made to move production to a much larger factory on the Connecticut River in nearby Turners Falls. This move permitted the Russell Company to expand both production and product line.

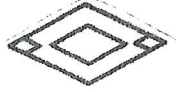
Many of the Green River Knife physical changes occurred after 1870, including the Company trademark. Prior to 1870, the Green River Knife had a plain beechwood handle attached to the tang with 3 or 5 iron pins. The trademark stamped in the blade:

**J. RUSSELL & CO.  
GREEN RIVER WORKS**

Prior to 1870 the Russell Company imported crucible steel (cast steel) from Sheffield, England. It has been observed that early Green River Knives have tangs that don't extend to the end of the handle, a steel saving strategy. The author has examined pre 1870 knives with shortened and full tangs.

**The Green River Knife After 1870. The trademark stamped in the blade:**

**J. RUSSELL & CO.  
GREEN RIVER WORKS**



The 1884 Russell product catalog shows how the Green River Knife has changed. Blade lengths from 4 1/2 to 10 inches. In addition to plain beechwood, handles are available in redwood, ebony, cocoa and stag with bolsters and guards. The author has noticed that all post 1870 traditional plain beechwood knives have 5-pins and a new trademark. Some knife styles with exotic handle materials in the 1884 catalog have retained the 3-pin handle and pre 1870 trademark.

**The Green River Knife After 1890.** 1890 is another pivotal date. The Russell Company introduced acid etching of the trademark on the blade. Mechanically stamped trademarks on the blade are sharp and bold. Acid etching trademarks often appear fuzzy and slight. Sometime after 1900 the Russell trademark J. Russell & Co. was dropped. New blade trademarks:

» **RUSSELL**

**GREEN RIVER WORKS**



» **RUSSELL**

**GREEN RIVER WORKS**

» **RUSSELL**

**The Green River Knife after 1936.** After 1936 the Russell Company ceased to exist! The great Depression effected most American companies. In 1933 the Russell Company was failing and merged with the Harrington Cutlery Co. of Southbridge, MA. The result was the Russell-Harrington Co. while maintaining the factory in Turners Falls. The Connecticut River flood of 1936 seriously damaged the Russell factory resulting in production being moved to Southbridge. The move to Southbridge brought an end to the John Russell Cutlery Company.

Green River Knives are still being produced today using Russell trademarks in Southbridge, MA by the Dexter-Russell Co. One can purchase a new traditional Green River Knife from the factory store. The handle utilizes rivets instead of iron pins and the trademark is acid etched onto the blade.

Recent trademarks:

**J. RUSSELL & CO.  
GREEN RIVER WORKS**



**MADE IN U.S.A.**

**»RUSSELL**

**GREEN RIVER WORKS**



**MADE IN U.S.A.**

**A Caveat on Dating Green River Knives.** The author has noticed Green River hunting and skinning knives offered for sale with late 1800's trademarks and 5-pin handles in new and near unused condition. It appears the Harrington Company had released these knives in the mid to late 1900's. Are these knives historic or reproductions?

**Want a traditional historic Green River Knife?** It should have a plain beechwood handle and no metal bolster or guard. Beechwood is light in color compared to the dark exotic materials. The handle has 3 or 5 pines (no rivets) and the blade length around 4 1/2-8 inches, stamped in the blade with the J. RUSSELL & CO. trademark. No "MADE IN U.S.A." mark. These specifications are for hunting, butchering, skinning and sheath knives prior to 1890. Look for some "honest wear".

Al Shane, curator  
Museum of Our Industrial Heritage ([industrialhistory.org](http://industrialhistory.org))  
Greenfield, MA



**Figure 1**

**\*Historic Green River Knives**

- A. Skinning Knife, Circa 1870's, 6-inch Blade, 5-pin Beechwood Handle
- B. Butcher Knife, Circa 1850's, 6-inch Blade, 3-pin Beechwood Handle, Shortened Tang
- C. Hunting Knife, Circa 1880's, 6-inch Blade, 5-pin Beechwood Handle

\* Museum of Our Industrial Heritage Collection



**Figure 2**

**\*Green River Knives**

- A. Butcher Knife, Circa 1910, 6-inch Blade, 5-pin Beechwood Handle
- B. Sheath Knife, Recent Dexter Russell Company Issue, 4 ½-inch Blade, Riveted Beechwood Handle
- C. Skinning Knife, Circa Late 1900's, Russell Harrington, Inc. Issue, J. Russell & Co. Made in U.S.A. Trademark, 5-inch Blade, Riveted Beechwood Handle

\*Author's Collection

## **Bibliography**

Arabia Steamboat Museum, Kansas City, MO - Recovered Green River knife artifact from the 1856 Arabia sinking. Photo and correspondence with the curator.

Merriam, Robert L. et al – “The History of the John Russell Cutlery Company”, Bete Press, 1976.

Museum of Our Industrial Heritage, Greenfield, MA. - Russell Green River knife Collection.

Levine, Bernard – “Levine’s Guide to Knives and Their Values”, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., DBI Books, 1997.

Russell, Carl P. – “Firearms, Traps and Tools of the Mountain Men”, University of New Mexico Press, 1967.

Russell and Irwin Manufacturing Company – 1865 hardware catalog, “Russell’s American Table Cutlery”, 1980 reprint.

Taber, Martha Van Hoesen – “A History of the Cutlery Industry in the Connecticut Valley”, Smith College Department of History, 1955.

Al Shane is a retired community college instructor with a background in engineering and technology. His interests include industrial history, military history, and industrial archeology. He is the curator at the Museum of Our Industrial Heritage, Greenfield, MA ([industrialhistory.org](http://industrialhistory.org)). The museum is in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts, an area rich in cutlery production.