

From the Beginning: Patent Arms Manufacturing Co., “Colts Patent”

by John Castro

It was interesting to note, in doing the research for this paper, how much greater is the knowledge available now than in 1934, which was much closer to the beginning than this, the current date. One would think that records would have been more available forty-five years ago. I refer to a monograph by William Renwick, on *The Folding Trigger Paterson Colt*, published in 1934. This was for several years the most in-depth work done on the Colt Paterson Pistol. However, since the advent of the Sutherland-Wilson book on Colt firearms, a whole new wealth of information has been gleaned relative to Colt's beginning.

As a point of interest and explanation to my statement about time lapse, there are probably about a million more people involved in antique weapons today, both in collecting and documenting, than in 1934. Therefore, guns and gun-related material have been turned up that shed new light on the subject.

As an example of error on the part of Mr. Renwick, in the preface to his paper, he depicted a drawing and a picture of what he termed the inventor's model. The drawing was in fact the prototype or the John Pearson "Inventor's Model," but the picture shown and purported to be the same gun was in fact a #5 pistol or what is known today as the holster (Texas Paterson) model, in 7½" bbl length. In no way is it my intention to demean or criticize Mr. Renwick, but just to prove a point—at the time of Renwick's article he had never seen the prototype; he had only factory drawings and a Texas Paterson available which he called the inventor's model.

As a point of interest, at least twenty-six experimental models were made by Pearson, Chase, F.H. Brask and others. Of these, nine were rifles, sixteen were pistols and one a shotgun. The company was put together under the name of The Patent Arms Manufacturing Co., of Paterson, New Jersey, on the 5th of March 1836, by a group of New York capitalists. Stock was subscribed to in the amount of \$230,000. Samuel Colt's part in this was to receive a royalty of \$1.00 to \$2.00 for each arm produced, and a nominal salary for attention and acting superintendence.

Pliny Lawton, of Springfield, Mass., was hired to run the factory complex, and Dudley Selden, a cousin of Colt, was appointed treasurer of The Patent Arms Manufacturing Company. Because of Colt's proclivity for good living and the promotion of his guns, there was a constant running battle between Selden, in control of the purse strings, and Colt, which would continue for the duration of the company.

Production of arms began in 1837 with the Ring Model rifles (First Model). The manufacture of the pistols did not start until late in 1837, with the Number One pistol (Baby Paterson) and the Number Three pistol (Belt Model). Holster pistol Number Five and Pocket Pistol Number Two followed soon thereafter.

The fabrication of the pistols gave Samuel a great sales promotion device. He could give these pistols to high ranking

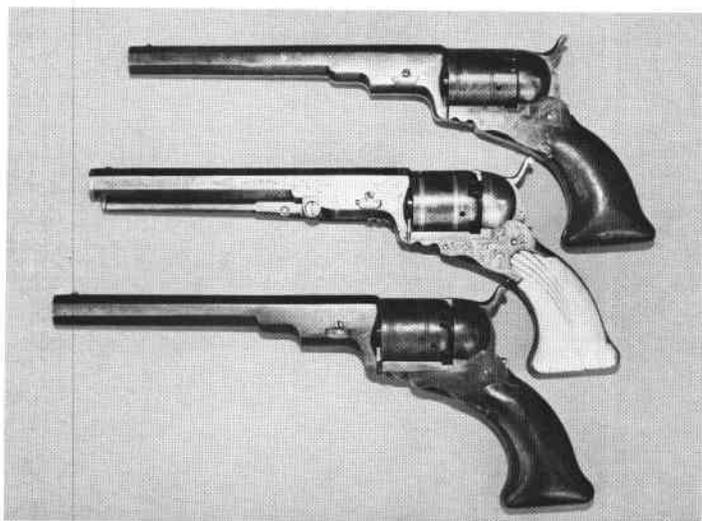


officials in the government or private enterprise, wherever he felt it would do the most good in fostering sales. Another device used by Colt was to display at fairs and similar exhibitions. He also gave shooting exhibitions to promote sales, visited gun stores, met with sportsmen and people of influence whenever possible. He left no stone unturned in the pursuit of sales, either large or small.

Records indicate that Colt was the promoter of sales and Lawton was responsible for most of the improvements on company arms.

With the advent of the Seminole War of 1838, Colt went south with samples of his wares and was successful in securing an order for fifty of the long guns from Gen. Thomas Jessup. The guns did not fare well in the engagement; they were delicately made and easily put out of order. However, they were in continuous use and not a single accident occurred to cause injury of any person. Col. Harney, who was affiliated with General Jessup's staff, was in sympathy with Colt and did like the arms. He later wrote Colt a letter saying, "I honestly believe that, but for these arms, the Indians would now be luxuriating in the Everglades of Florida." Despite the sentiments of Harney, the ring lever rifles did not fire well and Colt was having trouble with sales to various state governments, with the exception of Texas. In 1839, the Texas Navy purchased 180 holster sized pistols and 180 Model 1839 carbines. That same year they also purchased 100 ring lever rifles, through their Navy department. These sales were very important, because they introduced Colt arms into service, and on the whole their record of achievement was good. The use of the Colt against the Indian and the Mexican by the Texas navy, army and rangers was good for its reputation and in time would reward Colt after several years of frustration and effort.

In 1840-41, only one commission of any importance was consummated by the company and that was to the U.S. Navy. They purchased 160 of the Model 1839 rifles, with which to arm



Three different models of the #5 Pistol (Texas Paterson), all with 7½ barrels.



All models of Colt's rammerless Paterson pistols. From top: #5, Holster model; engraved #3, Belt model; #2, Pocket model; #1, Baby Pocket model.

two companies. These were accompanied by waterproofed cartridges for trial in the rifles.

Pliny Lawson, factory superintendent, advised Colt of the evolution of the arms and advised Colt that they were adopting the round shoulder-contoured cylinder and that a hunting scene was being applied to the powder flask for the Model 1839 carbine. The attached loading lever was also adopted in 1840, in about August. These changes were brought about to make not only a better arm but to boost sales.

However, they were not enough. Control of The Patent Arms Manufacturing Company was gradually being taken over by John Ehlers. He was elected company treasurer in April 1840, and by May of 1841, Colt and Ehlers were locking horns. Ehlers had confiscated about 210 rifles, 260 carbines and 350 pistols. An injunction was filed by Colt to stop Ehlers from recouping his investment. However, Ehlers continued the sale of arms and in December, 1841, he sold 100 carbines and 100 holster pistols to Commodore Thomas C. Jones for use in the Navy's Pacific Squadron. In February, 1842, Colt received a letter from Captain McLaughlan stating that when put to the

test the arms proved to be an entire failure, intimating that quality control was lacking. Colt quickly responded and deftly blamed the production defects on Ehlers, stating that Ehlers had caused the arms to be imperfectly manufactured to injure their sale when they again would come under his (Colt's) control.

The end result of the litigation was that Ehlers won a victory in that all of the property of The Patent Arms Company was put up for sale by court order and Ehlers acquired the guns and machinery, and other items, for \$6,000. He completed and sold several hundred hand guns and long arms between the years of 1842 and 1846.

Thus ends the saga of the start and finish of The Patent Arms Manufacturing Company, Colt's patent.

The authors of *The Book of Colt Firearms*, R.Q. Sutherland and R.L. Wilson, did a tremendous amount of research in the compilation of their book and as a result their effort has been a boon to all of us who are Colt collectors. The authors' classification of Paterson models and sizes has been established as follows:

No. 1 Pocket Model (Baby Paterson)

No. 2 Pocket Model

No. 3 Belt Model

No. 5 Holster Model (Texas Paterson)

According to records, the order of manufacture was not logical inasmuch as the Number One Pistol was the Baby and next was the Number Three, or Belt Model. Last were the Number Two Pocket and then the Number Five Holster Pistols. One would think that the Holster Models would have been the first ones manufactured, since what orders they received were for that model.

Calculations made by Sutherland-Wilson indicate that the following pistols were produced:

No. 1 Pocket, Baby Patterson	500
No. 2 Pocket	800
No. 3 Belt	900
No. 5 Holster	1,000
Total	3,200

Each of these models carried its own serial number range.

The Ehler's models can sometimes be identified by the presence of one or more of the following features: some were not marked with a barrel address, differences in configuration of barrels, variations in loading levers, differences in finishes on grips, high serial numbers in terms of production known for each model and the lack of serial numbers on some specimens. Loading levers were thought to be present on nearly all guns except the shotguns.

It would appear that Ehlers employed a number of different people on the bench to do finish work on the arms and there was not a set standard for quality control or pattern, hence a lot of variation. Barrel lengths varied from 2" to as much as 12" in the Holster Models.

Calibers have been established as 28 and 31 in the Pocket Model No. 1, 31 and 34 in the Pocket Model No. 2, 31 and 34 in the Belt Model No. 3, and 36 in the Holster Model No. 5. Round balls were standard projectiles in all models.

Rifling was usually of 11 grooves and, in rare instances, seven grooves, with a slight twist to the right.

Cylinders were roll engraved with either the centaur motif on the pocket and belt models or the stage coach holdup scene on the holster model only. Both cylinder patterns included the word COLT. A few specimens have been observed without the cylinder scene on the holster pistols. Use of silver bands as decoration was another reason for lack of rolled scene.

The round shoulder on the breech end of the cylinders was adopted beginning in April, 1840, and, as Pliny Lawton said to Colt in a letter, "I now round the cone ends of all our cylinders, which improves the looks and prevents any catching of caps."

The standard number of shots for all Paterson pistols was five.

Cylinder pins or arbors were standard with a groove or notch in the top, forward of the muzzle of the cylinder, to reduce the likelihood of fouling and to aid in lubrication.

Hammers were standard with a "V" notch in the lip forming the rear sight. The front sight was usually a German silver blade or brass or steel pin.

Engraved pistols or pistols with silver bands or plaques inlaid in the backstrap were a great rarity. A still greater rarity is a pistol with an inlaid plaque that has been initialed or inscribed.

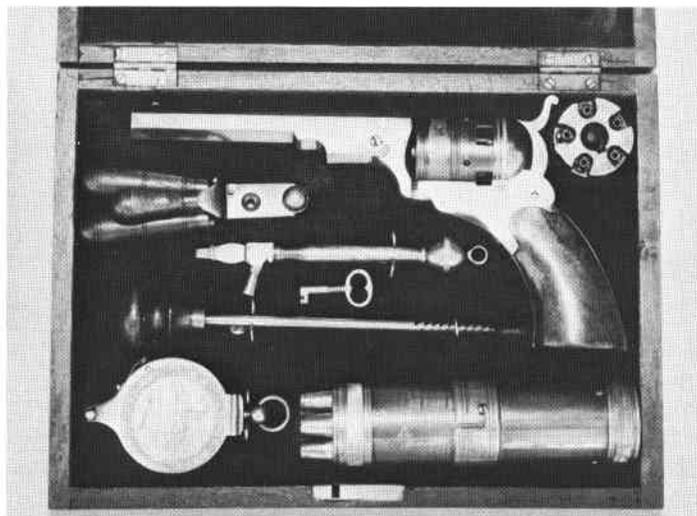
Colt and Lawton gave a great deal of thought to the accessory items for the Paterson pistols. The patent of August 29, 1839, included the combination tool, rammer, screwdriver, nipple pick, nipple wrench, the flask charger, the capper and the bullet mould. All Patersons were designed to use the round ball only. The aforementioned accoutrements were contained within a specially designed pistol case. These have been observed in both single and double pattern. Standard wood was varnished mahogany, with brass hinges and locks. Bevelled lids were standard and lid plaques were sometimes applied. Interiors were usually of dark color; most common was brown, but have also been noted in black, maroon, green, blue and purple.

A cased revolver with the attached loading lever needed only the mould, charger flask and screwdriver-nipple wrench combination. Keys were a part of all cased sets and extra barrels were sometimes present in the belt or holster models.

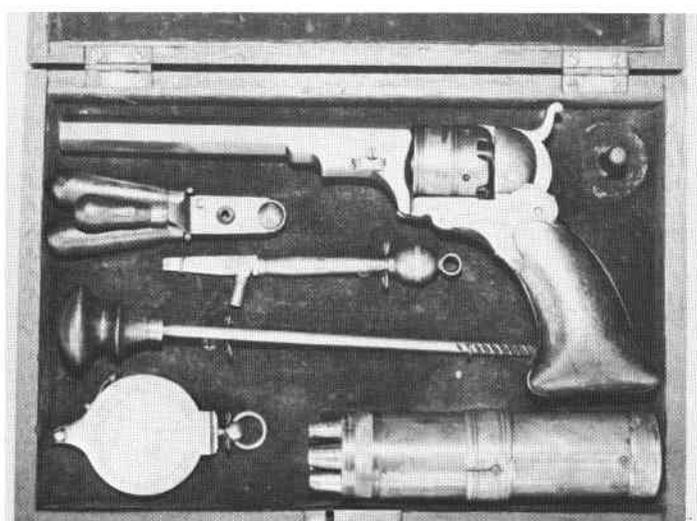
Casings were very important for the Paterson Colts, because of the larger number of components necessary to load and fire the pistol. It is interesting to note that the first use of the rampant colt as a logo on a Colt product was on the lid of the Paterson cappers.

An item of interest is that no pocket models were made with other than straight grips, and no holster pistols were made with other than flared grips, but belt models were made in a combination of both flared and straight.

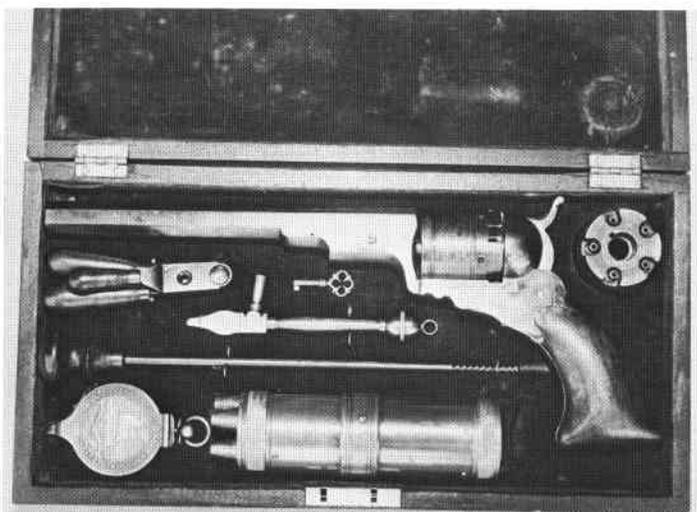
In both the monograph of 1934, by William Renwick, and the *Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Colt Percussion Revolvers to the Metropolitan Museum*, by John E. Parsons, published in 1942, the author indicated only three models of the Paterson pistol. They evidently both assumed that what we now know as the Baby and Pocket Model were one and the same model, not realizing that they each had their own serial number range.



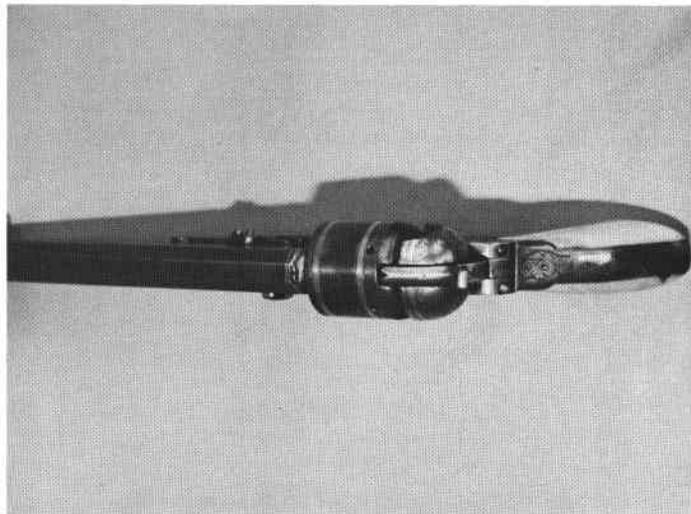
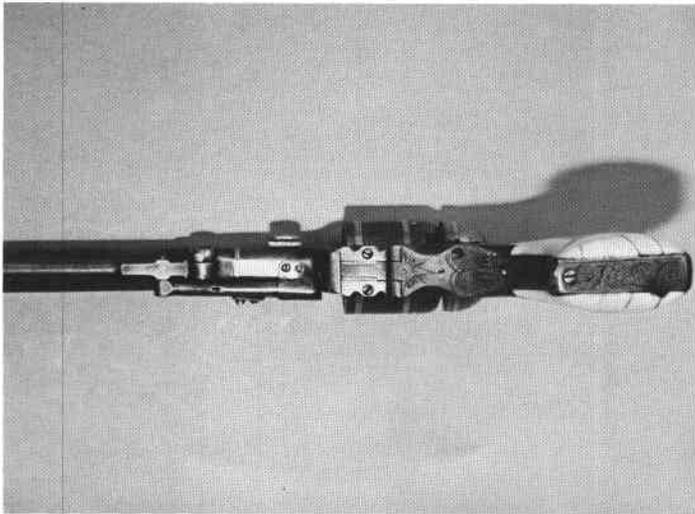
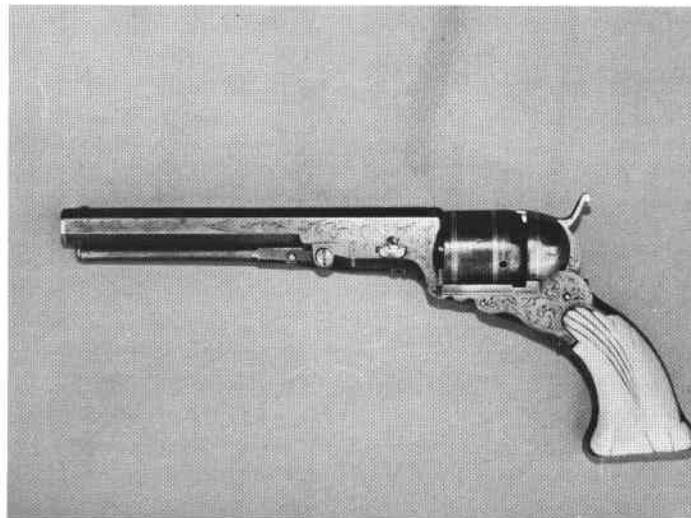
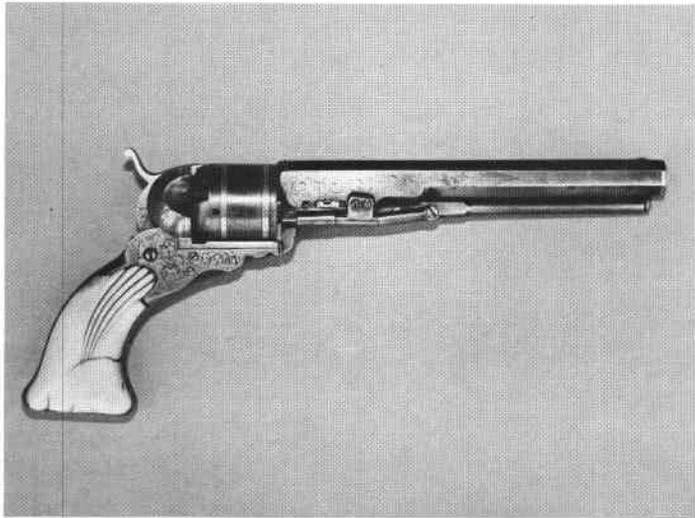
Cased belt model with all accoutrements, straight grip.



Cased belt model with all accoutrements except extra cylinder, flared grips.



Cased Texas Paterson with all accoutrements.



Four views of a Texas Paterson with ivory shell-carved grips, engraved (vine scroll) silver bands, escutcheon on back strap with name J. RIVAS engraved in gold. Rammer lever with serial #1 stamped in two places. All guns from the collection of the author.



There's always room for expansion at Santa Barbara.