

The Henry Deringer Study—A Comparative Analysis of the Percussion Deringer—Augusta 1997

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First, I would like to thank fellow members Dave Stewart, Dick Kennedy and Ken Connaughton for able assistance and weapons. Their pieces—added to my collection—made one of the most complete grouping of Henry Deringers I have ever seen.

Thanks also to Bob Nelson for his photography. He did an excellent job under “field conditions.”

This group of Deringers was assembled to illustrate the progression in the pistols themselves by showing the five different stampings of the Deringer legend and then the different styles of trigger finials. The time framed spanned is 40 years, from 1830 to approximately 1870. After 1870, the cartridge Deringer became popular and eliminated the demand for the percussion product. Additionally, Henry Deringer died in 1868.

A great deal of the information found in the photographs and captions on the picture graph analogue is fresh and has come to light since the publication of *The Deringer in America Vol. I* in 1985. To initiate those new to Deringers let us first review “How the Deringer came to be.”

As firearms began to supplant the sword as a means of personal defense in the 18th century, demand increased in both Europe and America for a pistol that could be easily and unobtrusively carried, especially in the pocket of a civilian coat. The only parallel development, the sword cane, was never a complete success since the cane was more limited to type and class of dress. Pocket pistols with flintlock ignition systems were common and particularly popular with traveling gentlemen. The ladies had their own version designed to be carried in the winter muff or a purse. But the flint mechanism was inherently bulky, and it was with the development of the percussion cap, and its perfection after the first quarter of the 19th century, that the pocket pistol came into its own.

In America, a Philadelphia gunmaker named Henry Deringer developed a style of pocket pistol so practical, compact and effective that “Deringer’s pistols” achieved a worldwide renown to become “the deringer pistol” (or “derringer” and a variety of similar spellings)—a specific type and style of pocket pistol, recognized wherever men knew guns. Deringer’s work, further, is important in that it spanned

the transitional period from flint to percussion and his concept of a tiny, large caliber weapon made the even more dramatic transition to the cartridge era, existing today as a sneak or back-up arm.

Unlike most gunmakers, whose life and work is revealed only by their products and sparse, inconclusive references, we know a great deal about Henry Deringer. The reason is tied directly to the fame of his pistols, the inevitable attempt to counterfeit them in order to capitalize on his reputation, and the transcript of a civil suit initiated by Deringer, then more than 80 years old, against a blatant infringement on his rights. The case, which Deringer did not live to see concluded, was successfully prosecuted by his estate and is a landmark case in trade-mark infringement in that it was the first to award the amount of profit by the defendant as damages to the plaintiff—in Deringer’s case approximately \$1,700.00. Most importantly, however, the transcript provides us with a record in his own words—and those of his successors, workmen, agents and competitors—of Henry Deringer’s gunmaking operation: his output, methods, distribution, his own definition of the pistol he made so famous, and even a glimpse of the personalities and interpersonal relationships in a mid-19th century gun shop.

As for the Deringer pistol itself, it was not made exclusively in the tiny sizes we tend to recall today. Henry Deringer began by making military arms as well as civil, producing holster and belt pistols, a box-lock martial model for the U.S. Navy, and even long arms—especially military rifles of the 1814 and 1817 patterns.

When metallic cartridges were perfected after the Civil War, and breechloading finally became truly feasible, the deringer was one of the models immediately adapted to the new system. Colt and Remington, the leading manufacturers of handguns in the United States, began producing cartridge “Deringers” and their popularity has continued unabated into the present.

The statements made in this article are made based on my observations and are correct to the best of my knowledge. But, are not absolutes. One has to be careful with absolutes. All too often something contradictory turns up.

THE FIVE KNOWN LEGEND STAMPS

1. **H. DERINGER**

PHILADA

This is the earliest style legend, all hand-stamped letters. These pieces will generally have horn four cap. Circa 1830-33. This style legend is also found on some long arms 1814 through 1826 or later.

2. **DERINGER**

PHILADA.

Only one known pair of pistols, Deringer size, has this legend. It is also found on long arms circa 1812 to 1820 or later. It is one-third larger letters than style #1, and two times as large as type #3, and three times the size of all other small pistol legends.

3. **DERINGER**

PHILA

This legend is circa 1832 to 1836 and will be found on all models which have square back trigger guards or very heavy stocks and iron trigger guards and finials. All of these will have ram rods.

4. **DERINGER**

PHILADEL'A

This legend is also seen on flint rifles as well as 1842 percussion pistols and pocket size deringers of the period. Deringers made in this period are circa 1835-1847 or later.

5. **DERINGER**

PHILADEL'a

This legend was started circa 1848 and carried through to the end of the production, circa 1870. It is the most common legend seen and will be found on all pistols no matter what size, after 1848.

Note while studying the finials in Figures 1 through 16, they may vary some from page 10 in *The Deringer in America, Vol. II*, which follows. While shop finishers fol-

lowed a general pattern, they were free to vary as they saw fit. Styles seen on this duplication of page 10 were observed and only serve as generalizations.

**Triggerguard
finial details
for various
periods of
Henry
Deringer
pistol
manufacture.**

Note: Due to hand-
engraved nature,
details vary on
specimen pistols.

#1



Circa 1820-30
Found on large pistols and
some very early pocket
pistols. Fitted in iron;
guns will have large size
address stamp, as found
on Deringer rifles.

#2



Circa 1830-35
Coat size and pocket size
pistols, in iron or coin sil-
ver, plain or lightly en-
graved. Barrel breech and
lock marking same as in
#1.

#3



Circa 1830-35
On earliest type pocket
size Deringers, which are
barrel breech and lock
marked as the pistols with
styles #1 and #2. There
will be no cap box or butt
cap cover on these pis-
tols.

#4



Circa 1835-45
Tip of this finial some-
times squared off. Usually
accompanied by forend
caps, ramrods, and butt-
cap boxes with covers.
Locks and breeches with
standard small-size maker
marking, and sunburst
and P.

#5



Circa 1845-48
A rarely observed early
style pineapple finial;
specimens will be fitted
and marked generally as
pistols noted in #4.

#6



Circa 1848-50
The finial rather sparsely
engraved.

#7



Circa 1850-70
Through end of produc-
tion, this pattern is the
most often observed.
Smallest size pistols will
only have the pineapple
and several leaves for-
ward of the triggerguard.

Note: Pistols represented by figures 5, 6, and 7 will generally have the P marking within a sunburst on barrel breech. About 3% of Henry Deringer pistols observed by the authors were mounted in iron, about 1% in gold, about 10% in silver, and the balance in German silver.



Figure 1. These two sizes of oak leaf and acorn pattern triple compartment flask are commonly thought to be Deringer manufactured. They are seen in both large and small casings. However, at least three other styles of triple compartment flask are known in existing original cased sets, as well as two sets known to have regular single compartment powder flasks. This leaves the impression that what ever was handy or requested went into the casings.



Figure 2. This is the earliest style Deringer, circa 1830-31. The four inch barrel is .55 caliber, the address is all hand stamped. The horn forecap is missing. The barrel and breech are all one piece, but engraved to appear separate. The finial is engraved in the European dueling pistol style. All the pistols of this period had blued iron engraved trigger guards.



Figure 3. This Deringer is just like Print #2 except the barrel is 3½ inches. It has the original horn forecap. It has no markings except the name J.H. DERINGER engraved on the silver name plate on the back strap of the pistol. J.H. Deringer was Henry's younger brother who died in 1837. Philadelphia records state he was a gun maker also. It is my opinion that he worked for Henry in his shop as the engraving on the plate #2 and this piece are the same except for minor variations and the style. The workmanship is 95% the same.



Figure 4. Here we see a different lock style with the large style hammer. The stock has no large mortise around the lock. It is somewhat shorter, not as thick and the forecap is silver. It has the wider larger trigger guard like #2 and #3, but it is silver and the only fitting to be engraved.

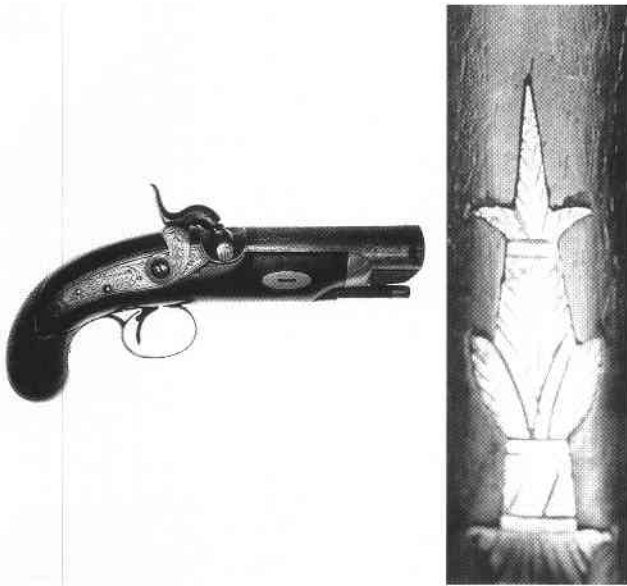


Figure 5. This piece is exactly like Print #4 except for the round barrel and an iron belt hook. All other features are the same.

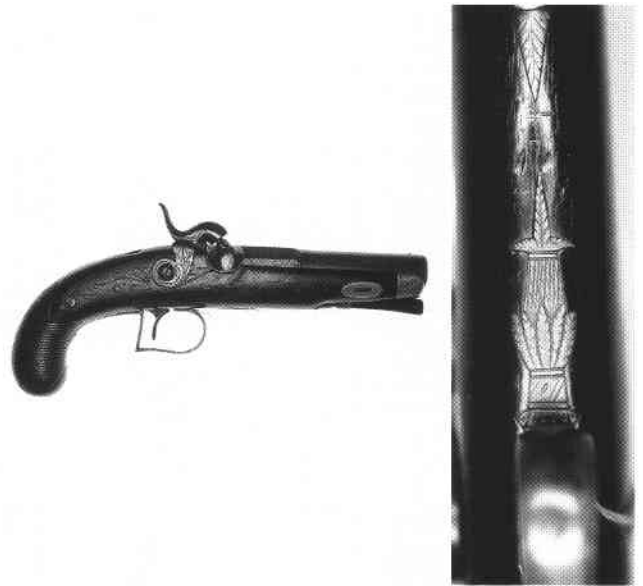


Figure 6. Starting with this piece and going through #7 and #8, we see the ultra-rare square back trigger guard models. Of the five known examples of this type, three have iron trigger guards and finials and the other two have silver finials. Here Deringer started with a tang and breech plug screwed into a separate barrel. Prices made before this model generally have one piece tang, breech and barrel with the breech being noted only by skillful engraving. Only #7 have a full round barrel. All the others have half octagon from breech to somewhere near center, and then round out to the muzzle. All these pieces have the #3 style legend.



Figure 7.

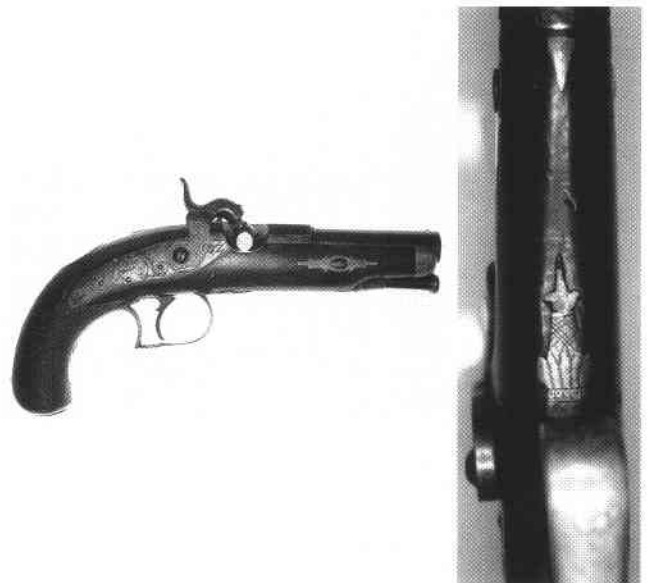


Figure 8.

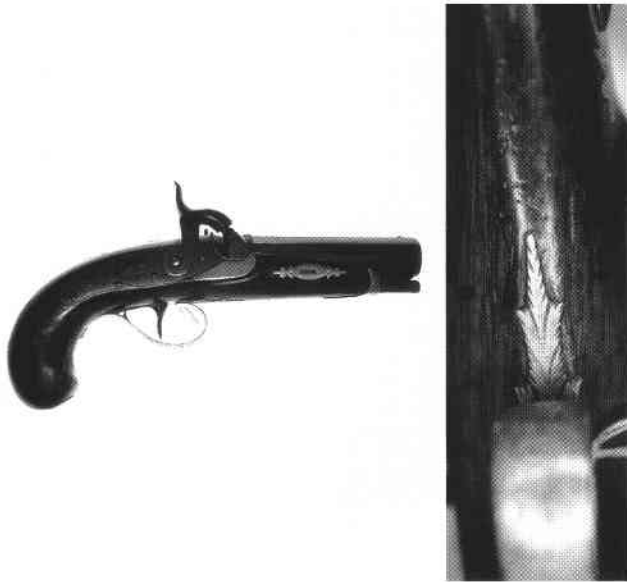


Figure 9. With this style Deringer the pieces have the #4 legend. They are generally still seven to eight inches in length and have ram rods and plain silver or German silver fittings. Some trigger guards are iron with some style of engraving. Hammers are beginning to slim down and thickness of the stock is thinner.



Figure 10. This piece is very much like #9 in its overall configuration, only the trigger guard finials differ. It has the #4 company legend.



Figure 11. This gun is one of a matching pair. It is a real enigma. It is the only known example to have type two legend which should make the gun at least 20 to 25 years older. It has a peanut size lock fitted to a coat size pistol. Based on the finial style and the overall style of the gun, it was manufactured circa 1845-49.

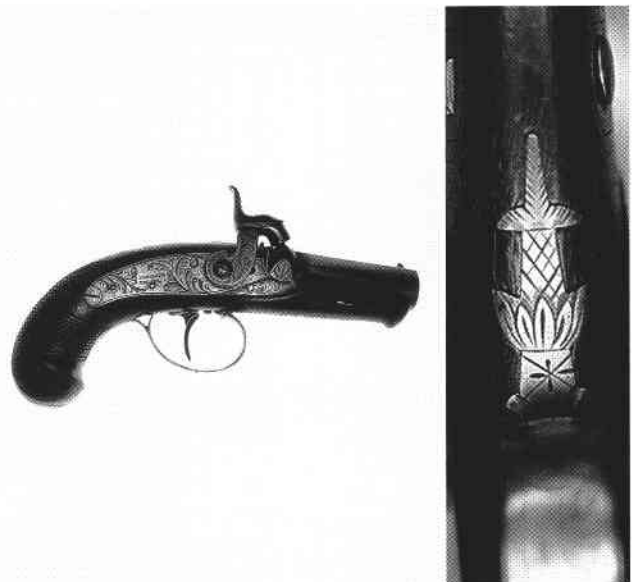


Figure 12. This Deringer has the same legend as #9 which is the fourth legend. It was made at the end of the period when that same legend was used. It begins to look more like the regular style Deringer, in the Lincoln size. For some unknown reason this piece has a set trigger. The screw can be seen just forward of the trigger. This is a very rare feature on this type weapon. I have only inspected one other Deringer of this size with that feature. This feature is sometimes found on coat-size pistols and on most dueling pistols.

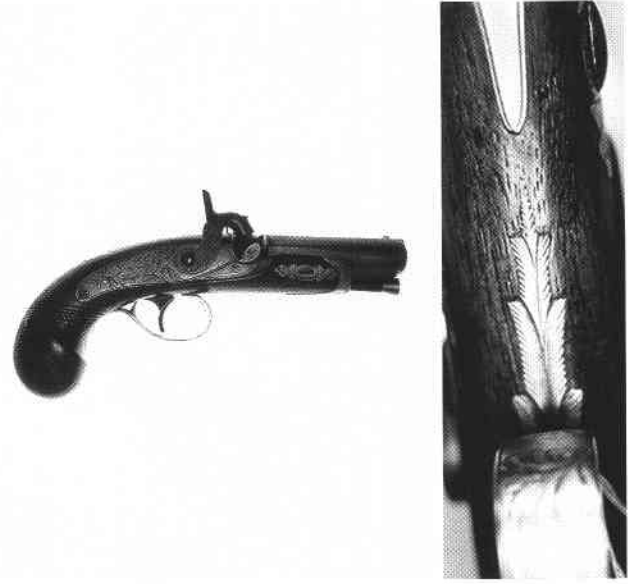
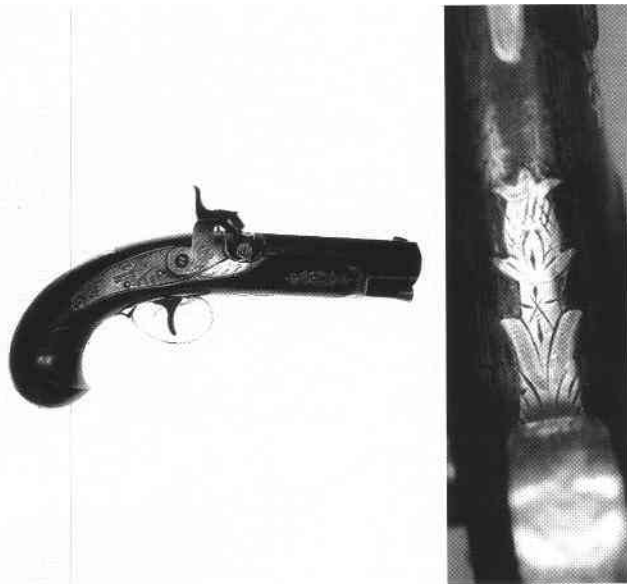


Figure 13 & 14. Both of these examples are with the fourth legend, circa 1842-47. Both are coat size with original ram rods. Example 13 has cap box in the butt.

Figure 14.

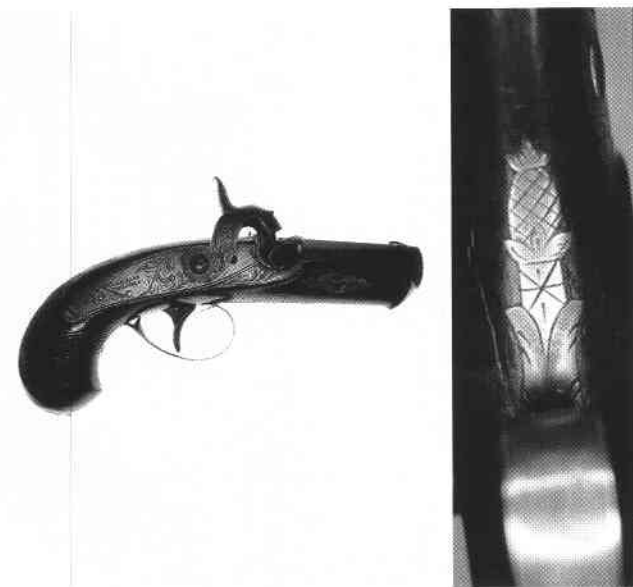


Figure 15. This piece is circa 1850-55 with cap box in the butt. It has the 5th and last legend. This is the most common marking.

Figure 16. This is the piece which was made some time circa 1850-55 and has the last (5th) Deringer company legend. It is of the size everyone refers to as a "peanut." It is included here because it has two unique features. The butt is bag shaped and it has the shortest known barrel length, measuring 15/16 inches. It is .36 caliber.