



Figure 1. A Le Mat Confederate revolver–right profiler.



Figure 2. A Le Mat Confederate revolver–left profiler.

Some Thoughts on the Confederate LeMat Revolver

By Frederick R. Edmunds

Editor's comments: Fred Edmunds has spoken to the Society on his field of Confederate arms on numerous occasions. Fred is well known for his knowledge in his field and in this article he chose to record his observations about LeMat revolvers gained over many years of collecting. The *Bulletin* offers an excellent opportunity to share knowledge via the oral and/or the written word.

Having collected Confederate small arms and edged weapons for a considerable period (approaching 50 years) during which time I have owned many LeMat revolvers and thoroughly examined many others, I have decided to record some of my observations about them.

This is not a study of the gun itself or of the model variations, but rather, random commentary concerning this most intriguing firearm.

After the first shipment of 450 First Models went to the Confederate Navy under their contract, Col. Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance of the Confederacy, ordered them diverted to the cavalry (only a few were sent to the navy). Although it was felt that they were an ideal arm for cavalry, such was not necessarily the case.

First of all, it should be noted that the gun could not possibly be loaded by a cavalryman while on horseback, unless horse and rider were at a standstill for a lengthy period of time. Each cylinder chamber must be loaded with the cartridge and rammed down individually before proceeding to the next chamber. This must be accomplished nine times for a complete loading. Considerable force must be exerted in ramming (seating) the bullets in the chambers.

Next, if the shotgun barrel is to be loaded, the removable plunger, located in the hollowed-out rammer arm, must be extracted and used to ram the shotgun cartridge home. This presents another problem because the plunger is a relatively short rod with a round disc at it's head to be used as a ramrod. Not only is it difficult to exert much ramrod pressure, but due to the size and difficulty of use, it would be easy to lose.

The last step in loading would be to place a percussion cap on each nipple: a total of ten, including the shotgun nipple. This requires half-cocking the gun and rotating the cylinder to it's nine-stop capping locations, then *full-cocking* the gun and placing the last cap on the shotgun nipple.

The entire procedure could be difficult and dangerous while astride a horse. For these reasons, it is my belief that troops loaded their LeMats in camp—certainly not while on horseback.



Along with such thoughts, it is reasonable to assume that once the LeMats were completely discharged in battle, they were seldom able to be reloaded and used again without at least a short respite during the action.

It is also to be noted that in the loading procedure, I have referred to *cartridges* being used. The loading procedure described above was based on the assumption that we were loading a Confederate manufactured, self-contained, .42 caliber paper cartridge, rather than loading with separate components, such as powder, ball and patch (and grapeshot for the shotgun barrel). There is little question that manufactured paper cartridges for the LeMat were in limited supply as compared to those for other more standard .36 and .44 caliber handguns.

One can only imagine the lengthy time period and difficulty encountered in preparing a LeMat revolver for use in battle when manufactured cartridges were *not* available. The soldier had to secure a supply of lead, melt it, cast his own bullets and grapeshot in his *issued* brass-mold (wait for the castings to cool) then measure out his powder for each chamber, and finally charge and load each chamber separately—quite an ordeal, especially under strenuous circumstances.

My experiences in loading and firing a modern-made LeMat pistol (Navy Arms Manufactured) using purchased bullets, grapeshot and the remaining component materials, made me acutely aware of what a difficult and time

consuming job it was! I also used a (non-issue) wooden ramrod to load the patch, grapeshot and ball into the shotgun barrel, finding the small LeMat ramrod wasn't really up to the job!

I used a modern non-corrosive black powder, instead of the regular black powder which would have been used by the rebs, and still after an average of four or five shots, the cylinder had to be hand-turned to index the next chamber to line up with the bore! I had to be very careful to make sure that the chamber and bore were in alignment because the reciprocating locking pins in the frame did not operate freely enough to engage their bored-out recesses in the cylinder. One can only imagine how the use of old corrosive black powder would have gummed up the action!

Which brings us to the next consideration: cleaning the gun after it has been discharged. In using modern cleaning solvents and hot soap and water, it took me more than half an hour to properly clean the weapon, and some recesses in the cylinder nipple area still needed extra attention. I was aided in the cleaning by using hot water from the faucet in the kitchen sink—not available to Johnny Reb, who was limited to a nearby creek. It is doubtful that Johnny used soap of any sort to clean his LeMat, which brings up a further consideration.

Of the more than one hundred-plus specimens of LeMat pistols I have examined, relatively few showed heavy corrosion around the hammer nose area (including the swivel nose) or around the percussion nipple cutouts in the cylinder or the percussion nipples themselves, leading to two possible conclusions:

1. They received moderate use and after being discharged were meticulously cleaned, oiled and made ready for their next use,

or

2. Many of these pieces saw very little use, and those few which did received very good care.

It is believed that many LeMats were used by Confederate cavalry and if so, a cavalryman may have had much more time to care for such a weapon than an infantryman. This would account for the pieces being in such good condition. It could also be that some guns saw very little use. I have seen many which show no use at all. Some pieces in excellent condition have been seen with considerable holster wear, indicating that they were probably carried on horseback and were hardly, if ever used, but bounced with their rider in the saddle for a lengthy period.

It is well known among advanced Confederate collectors that Caleb Huse was the Confederate agent who was sent to Europe to purchase arms for the Government. Huse's

unreasonable treatment of the LeMat manufacturer (Girard) is also well known. Huse laid every stone in Girard's path concerning the delivery and payment for LeMat pistols. He even claimed that LeMat pistol frames were made of cast iron, when in fact they were made of malleable iron (claimed by Girard to be of cast steel) and quite suitable for their intended purpose.

This brings us to another consideration—there is wide disparity between the quality of polishing and finishing of LeMat pistols. There is no doubt hand finishing had much to do with this situation. We see instances of metal surfaces whose imperfections had not been polished out before the bluing process, thus giving the finished surfaces a pock-marked appearance under the blued finish. Other pieces were meticulously polished and finished, approaching the quality of the Colt.

Many LeMat pistols are seen without their loading levers. It is my belief that troops frequently discarded them because they were cumbersome and 'flopped' around, and were not necessary or useful in loading the gun. Without loading levers, they were also easier to holster.

NOTES FROM GERALD BENNETT

It would seem that a disproportionate number of LeMats are found without loading lever assemblies (which were probably discarded). They were loaded in camp with their cylinders removed and more effective tools were substituted for ramming home the charges.

There has been a theory advanced that perhaps extra cylinders were issued with LeMat pistols. No extra cylinders have been seen by any of the known LeMat collectors, so the 'extra cylinder' theory can be put to rest (it would not solve the problem of the difficulties in using the pistol).

Similar problems in loading the LeMat have been experienced by noted collectors Hayes Otoupalik and Dr. Doug Adams. Fortunately, the problem(s) occurred while they were loading reproduction LeMats.

The shotgun barrels were loaded first by using a wooden ramrod, instead of the small LeMat ramrod which fits into the hollowed-out loading lever arm. Without replacing the ramrod, they attempted to load the revolver chambers by pulling down on the loading levers. In each case, the loading levers broke off or badly bent the tube section, rendering it useless. Civil War soldiers may have had the same experience in the field, explaining the fact that so many LeMats are found without loading lever assemblies—they were discarded.

Hayes and Doug still shoot their repro LeMats, but have discarded the loading lever assemblies (probably for the same reasons as their Civil War predecessors).

LeMat collector Don Bryan (who has owned over 100 LeMat revolvers), agrees with these observations and adds that the lanyard ring was a very important and functional part of the pistol to keep it from being lost if dropped because of its weight during a cavalry engagement. Bryan is surprised that Colt and Remington didn't use lanyard rings. At least half of Don's LeMats were missing the loading lever assembly and he believes that the ones retaining the loading lever assembly saw little use.

Bryan speculates that a cavalryman would be well armed on horseback if he had two LeMats with him, but he's never seen or heard of a pommel holster with would be appropriate for the LeMat.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS BY EDMUNDS

It is widely known by LeMat Collectors that US Major Beauregard arranged for an informal testing of LeMat's revolver in New Orleans in March of 1859, where it received favorable comment. It is curious, however, that after further testing in Washington, no further information or reports seem to have surfaced—it appears that the matter was dropped.

Could it be that the tests conducted later by the Ordnance Board in Washington revealed the inherent problems of the LeMat, such as the inadequacy of the loading mechanism, as well as the fouling of the action which so readily occurs when the piece is fired several times? Did the Board observe the difficult and time consuming loading procedure and was the contemplated scarcity of LeMat cartridges also reason to negate further consideration of this unique pistol?

Many believe that the quality and familiarity of Sam Colt's products and his influence (as well as his gifts to in politics and the military) were the primary reasons for turning down the production of a more potent revolver, but in view of the above considerations, the Colt was the superior military weapon.

All of the seven LeMats which I presently own have seen very little use. An interesting fact in all seven—the percussion nipples are easily removable and the corresponding cylinder cut-outs show no appreciable wear—this obviously shows they received very little use, if any! Of course, I have endeavored to collect the finest example when possible, but my serial number ranges are widely spread, so this may be considered a fair sampling of existing LeMats.

Getting back to Caleb Huse—there's little doubt that he was unfair in his treatment of Girard concerning the LeMat pistols, nevertheless, it is noteworthy that subsequent inspections concluded that many were defective and were thus rejected. It is a known fact that CS Naval Commander

James Bulloch inspected many LeMat pistols and found them to be generally unacceptable.

Many of the finer-conditioned specimens I have examined seemed to have been protected from the ravages of age and excessive handling and show hardly any evidence of use, post-war or otherwise. While many surviving Civil War handguns, such as Colts, Remingtons, Whitneys and others, including Griswolds and Spillers and Leech & Rigdons show considerable wear, much of this could be post-war use, due to the fact that many paper cartridges were available in .36 and .44 calibers, allowing subsequent owners (all owners down through the line to the present time, excluding the original owners) to easily put these guns to use. That doesn't seem to be the case with the LeMats, probably for several reasons:

1. There were apparently few paper cartridges available for the LeMat pistols, even during the Civil War. A subsequent LeMat owner would probably not have access to them.
2. Bullet molds were not readily available for LeMats.
3. Many subsequent LeMat owners didn't understand the workings of the LeMat.
4. Subsequent owners would not have known the caliber or bore diameter of the LeMat. They would have found it necessary to employ a gunsmith to measure these diameters and make a bullet mold so that they could make their own ammunition. Buckshot could be used in the lower smoothbore barrel, but a special mold would have to be made for the nine-shot .42 caliber cylinder chambers.

Thus, because of its uniquely attractive appearance, a subsequent owner would have provided special care and kept it in good condition, rather than treating it as just another handgun.

There are many Colts, Remingtons and other Union handguns which are in excellent condition, having never been used, but these were recognized as collectors' prizes soon after the Civil War—many more were manufactured than the LeMats.

BRUCE KUSROW NOTES

A well-known and knowledgeable collector, Bruce Kusrow, has brought up the subject of LeMat holsters. While they are even scarcer than the pistols, there are many variations in their design and construction. While all observed are made of leather, some have large fold-over flaps with straps and buckles, others have just a large fold-over flap, some have no flap, but are open tops resembling the gun-slinger variety, some are lined with another layer of leather.

None of the holsters seem to afford a great deal of security to the pistol itself, and causes one to wonder what

difficulty would be encountered when trying to draw the gun out of its holster while riding on horseback—or even while standing on level ground! The provision for attaching the holster to a belt doesn't seem to be adequate for a piece of such heft, especially when fully loaded.

With the loading lever mechanism fully intact, the gun might bind with the holster when being drawn—might that also be a factor to consider when we have mentioned before the discarding of the loading levers?

AUTHOR NOTES

It is noted that in an early Jackson Arms' catalog #14, the front cover shows three LeMat pistols, which are listed inside the cover. Following Jackson's description of LeMat #947, which has a replacement loading lever, he inserts a note in the following paragraph:

NOTE: The loading levers on all model LeMats were fragile and did not work very well. Therefore most of them were abandoned by their users. For this reason over 90% of the LeMats when found will be without a loading lever. The replacement levers on these revolvers offered here are exact copies of the original and are so good that you might have to be told that they were not original

The above observation by Red Jackson certainly adds fuel to the fire regarding the frail design and defective functioning of the loading lever assembly on the LeMats. Current owners of LeMats with original loading levers should be quite pleased to learn that their pieces are relatively rare.

NOTES FROM HAYES OTOUPALIK

LeMat collector Hayes Otoupalik passes his experience along in a letter to the undersigned, concerning his experiences while shooting one of Navy Arms Company's Lemats. Hayes and several other repro LeMat shooters experienced the same problems while range testing these pieces:

1. Attempts were made to use the inner rod to load the shotgun barrel and found it to be too short and impractical to use—it was not placed back into the loading lever.
2. Upon attempting to load the cylinder chambers using the loading lever, it bent under the pressure of inserting the load and became bent and/or broken in all cases. Many inner rods were probably lost or discarded, which weakened the loading levers, which were already found impractical.
3. It was concluded that the poor construction of the loading lever assemblies was the reason that most surviving specimens which show any evidence of use, are found to be missing the loading lever assemblies.
4. Because of the inherent difficulty in loading the LeMat the soldier would have accomplished that in camp or someplace where he could use his own makeshift tools. He then had to encounter the problem of using blackpowder which easily fouled the mechanism. Nothing about the LeMat was easy, but when properly loaded, it was a great weapon, nevertheless!