

# Identification and Authentication of Confederate Handguns

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Identification and authentication can be almost synonymous when used in relation to Confederate handguns. A well known Confederate revolver like the Griswold and Gunnison might not need much identification, but requires authentication to distinguish it from the many fake models, while a gun like the Tucker and Sherrard needs identification to be recognized.

We will not have time to cover all the Confederate handguns but will discuss some of the better known ones. The best known are the Griswold and Gunnison, the Leech and Rigdon, the Rigdon and Ansley, and the Spiller and Burr. These were manufactured in the largest numbers by the Confederates and are made in the largest numbers by today's fakers. I believe there are far more bogus models in collector's hands today than there are real ones.

One other revolver I want to discuss is the Dance, which was made in Texas. It has great appeal for the collector and it offers some interesting aspects for both identification and authentication.

We will discuss one at a time and basically in the order of the total numbers manufactured. However, before we start to discuss the individual guns, I would like to make a few statements about authentication which are basic and fundamental.

First, one needs authentic examples of the particular revolver to examine, unless so many have been examined that all the characteristics are firmly implanted in one's mind, with a detailed mental picture. There is no substitute for placing the gun being examined alongside an authentic one. You must remember that with Confederate guns there will be variations due to the handwork which one would not find in a Colt or other totally machine-made revolver.

There are three things that are like fingerprints in separating the real from the fake revolver: the rifling in the bore, the dies that stamped the serial number, and the name (if there is one). Of course, one needs an authentic specimen for comparison to make a judgment.

I believe that a Confederate manufacturer would have had only one rifling machine, so all bores



would be alike. Not just the number of lands and grooves but the direction of the twist and the amount of the gain or lack of gain to the twist.

This would also apply to the dies used to stamp the serial numbers. With magnification one can tell if the same die was used to stamp the numbers on the different pistols. A counterfeiter can not duplicate dies of the original just as a fingerprint cannot be duplicated.

Now for the individual makes of handguns.

## **Griswold and Gunnison**

For the Griswold and Gunnison, the most distinguishing feature is the brass frame copy of the Colt Navy pistol. The brass is often of a bronze color due to the inclusion of too much copper in the brass, and this is a distinguishing feature.

The barrel is round, similar to the Colt Dragoon, with the top of the barrel housing being either round or octagon in shape. Those up to about serial number 1500 had the round top; higher numbers had the octagon shape top to the housing.

Serial numbers are made with large dies and vary somewhat as to placement. The most common sites are on the side of the barrel housing, the side of the frame and the side of the cylinder. These can be on either side of the revolver. However, many have the numbers stamped on the bottom of the frame in the same places as a Colt, or a mixture of these



**GRISWOLD & GUNNISON #2457:** Note the serial number dies, the shape of the trigger guard, and tilt back of the butt.



**GRISWOLD & GUNNISON #2085** showing the serial number dies and trigger guard shape.

places. Also, there is usually a secondary number of one or two digits stamped on various parts.

There is a cryptic letter that can be single or double stamped. Many times it is found in a backward position. It is always found on the bottom of the barrel just in the rear of the loading lever latch, and, usually, on the rear of the cylinder between the nipples, the rear of the frame beside the hammer and in the brass under the grips. Usually there are Roman numerals chiseled into the brass parts.

The butt on the Griswold is tilted to the rear as though the gun had been bent while using it as a hammer. This is easy to detect by holding the gun on its butt along with another pistol. The other pistol will have its barrel parallel to the table top while the



**Fake GRISWOLD & GUNNISON:** Note wrong dies for serial number, wrong shape to trigger guard, and fake twist marks on the cylinder run in wrong direction.

## Leech & Rigdon / Rigdon & Ansley

Griswold barrel will slope upward toward the muzzle. This is an excellent test for authenticating the Griswold.

The Griswold cylinder is made of twisted iron with the twist marks usually clearly visible. When viewed from the rear of the cylinder, the marks slope up to the right. Twist marks can be visible on the barrel also.

There are probably more counterfeit Griswolds than any other make of pistol, so proper authentication of each specimen is of utmost importance. To do this I compare the rifling and the serial numbers. I check the slope of the butt as previously described, the cryptic marks for proper placement and the use of the proper dies. The shape of the trigger guard should be square. The shape of the trigger guard and its thickness is a key feature of many Confederate handguns.

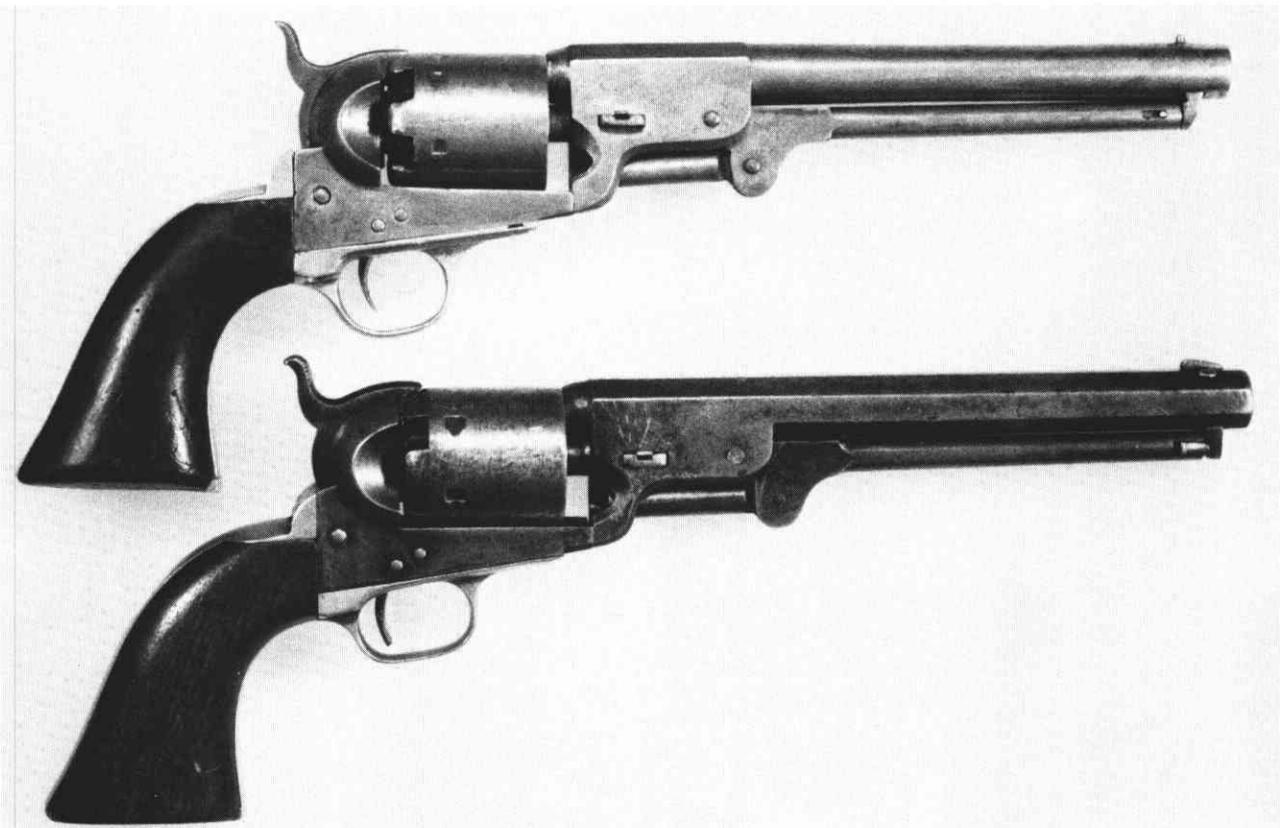
Other key features of the Griswold are the inside castings and file marks on the brass parts, and the way the thread end of the screws are made.

Now for the Leech and Rigdon and the Rigdon and Ansley. I shall discuss these revolvers together since they were made by the same workers on the same machinery and their serial numbers are in sequence.

There were changes that occurred at particular points throughout the production of these guns; changes which tie into the approximate serial numbers when they occurred. These changes help to expose the bogus gun.

General features of the Leech and Rigdon are the round barrel copy of the Colt Navy, the small round-shaped trigger guard, the small serial numbers stamped individually and in an irregular line, the ball type loading lever catch and the lack of a cap release groove in the recoil shield. The barrel has seven lands and grooves, a clockwise spin with a modest gain twist.

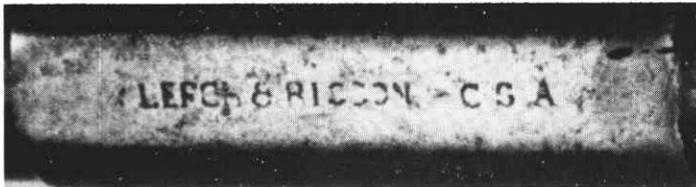
The name stamping on the top of the barrel



LEECH & RIGDON #1059 (at top) and COLT NAVY: Note small round trigger guard of L&R as compared to Navy Colt.



**RIGDON & ANSLEY #2091:** Note 12 cylinder stops and rear trigger guard screw breaking out side of trigger guard.



**LEECH & RIGDON #1029:** Note breaks in die of name stamp.



**RIGDON & ANSLEY #1584:** Later production dropped the Augusta, Ga. and had only the CSA.

housing goes through an evolution. The first pistols manufactured had no name stamping. Later models begin to have, in small lettering, Leech and Rigdon. Later they changed to a larger die and still later added CSA. As the numbers go higher we begin to see pieces of the die breaking off, leaving gaps in the letters which is an important factor in authentication.

The serial number dies were small and put on one at a time; thus they are in an irregular line. By the time serial number 1200 was reached the number one die broke and it becomes just a mark.

The first revolvers had a ball type catch to the loading lever with no pin; later it was changed to a ball and pin type catch.

The cylinders had safety pins between the nipples up until about the 900 numbers, then they were eliminated.

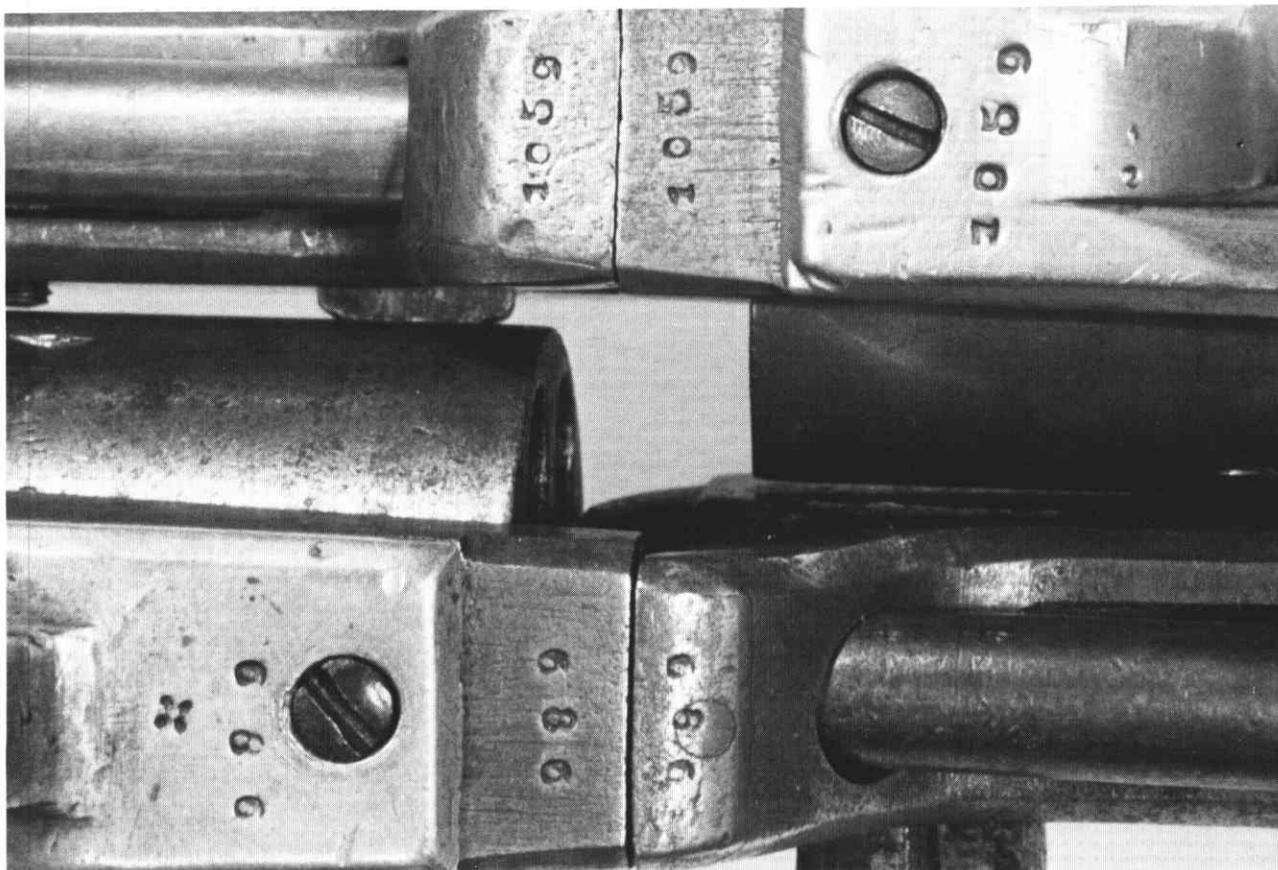
These handguns usually have a cryptic mark which is no doubt an inspector's mark. These marks can be "N" "J" "D" "W" and an arrangement of four dots in the form of a cross or a cloverleaf. They are found on the side of the trigger guard bow or on the bottom of the trigger guard plate between the front of the bow and the serial number.

Serial number 1500 marked the end of the Leech and Rigdon and the beginning of the Rigdon and Ansley. There were three major changes made at this time which are important identifying features of the Rigdon and Ansley. The cylinder changed to 12 cylinder stops, the loading lever changed to a Colt Navy type latch, and the face of the recoil shield now had a cap release groove.

On the early Rigdon and Ansley the top of the barrel housing was stamped Augusta, Ga. CSA. This was the same CSA die used from the start of the Leech and Rigdon use of that marking.

The dies used for the serial numbers were the same Leech and Rigdon dies with the broken number one. Somewhere around the number 1900 new dies began to be used and these were larger than the old ones.

I find the Leech and Rigdon to be the second most-often counterfeited of the Confederate handguns. When all of these features, with the serial number range in which they occur, and the comparison of the dies used for stamping the numbers and letters, the fake gun can be easily exposed.



Comparison of two Leech & Rigdon serial number stampings. It can be seen that the same die stamped both guns. Also, note the 4 dot marking.

## PROGRESSION OF RIGDON REVOLVERS

### Name Markings\*

Serial #1 - 60 — No name marking

*(First production, no serial number or name marking. One has no number and #15 is marked "Leech & Rigdon Novelty Works CSA")*

Serial #60 - 400 — Small Leech & Rigdon

Serial #450 — Transition to large Leech & Rigdon but no CSA.

Serial #460 - 1500 — Large Leech & Rigdon CSA.

Serial #1490 — Transition to Rigdon & Ansley; marked on 3 barrel housing flats. Address — C.H. Rigdon, Augusta, Ga.

Serial #1500 - 1650 — Augusta, Ga. CSA.

Serial #1650 - 2400 — CSA.

### Serial Number Markings

Serial #1 of L & R to #1950 of R & A, small die.

Serial #1950 to 2400 — Large die.

### Loading Lever Catch

Serial #1 - 350 — ball type.

Serial #350 - 1500 — ball and pin type.

Serial #1500 - 2400 — Colt navy type.

### Safety Locking Device

Serial #1 - 900 — safety pins.

Serial #900 - 1500 — no safety device.

Serial #1500 - 2400 — 12 cylinder stops.

\*Serial number ranges are approximate.

## Spiller & Burr

The Spiller and Burr is the next Confederate handgun I would like to discuss. One does not seem to find many bogus Spiller and Burrs, so authentication is not as important as identification.

The Spiller and Burr is a brass-framed copy of the Whitney navy. Beside the brass frame, the main difference is that the open space between the front of the cylinder and the frame is filled in solid on the Spiller and Burr. This was done to give added strength to the brass frame, which was weaker than the iron frame.

Serial numbers are located on the bottom of the barrel just in front of the frame, on top of the loading lever flat, top of the link between the lever and cylinder pin and the bottom of the frame under the trigger guard. Also, inside of the trigger guard plate and on the side of the cylinder. However, many cylinders were never numbered.

About one out of four pistols have the name Spiller and Burr stamped on the top of the barrel. The others are unmarked.

The cylinders are made of twist iron and the twist is visible on some but not all. When viewed from the rear, the twist runs up to the left which is opposite to the twist direction of the Griswold.

The loading lever, cylinder and trigger guard are identical to those of the Whitney. Thus it is difficult to distinguish when a replacement part has been used. However, when there is no serial number on these parts, be suspicious! If they are replacement parts with their numbers removed, these replacements would adversely affect the value of the pistol.

Not too well known is the fact there was a "first model" of the Spiller and Burr. It had the open space in front of the cylinder similar to that of the Whitney. Two known examples of this are numbers 13 and 23. When the manufacturer changed to the solid frame they started over with serial number one.



**SPILLER & BURR #287:** This revolver has no name stamping but has the CS on the side of the frame.

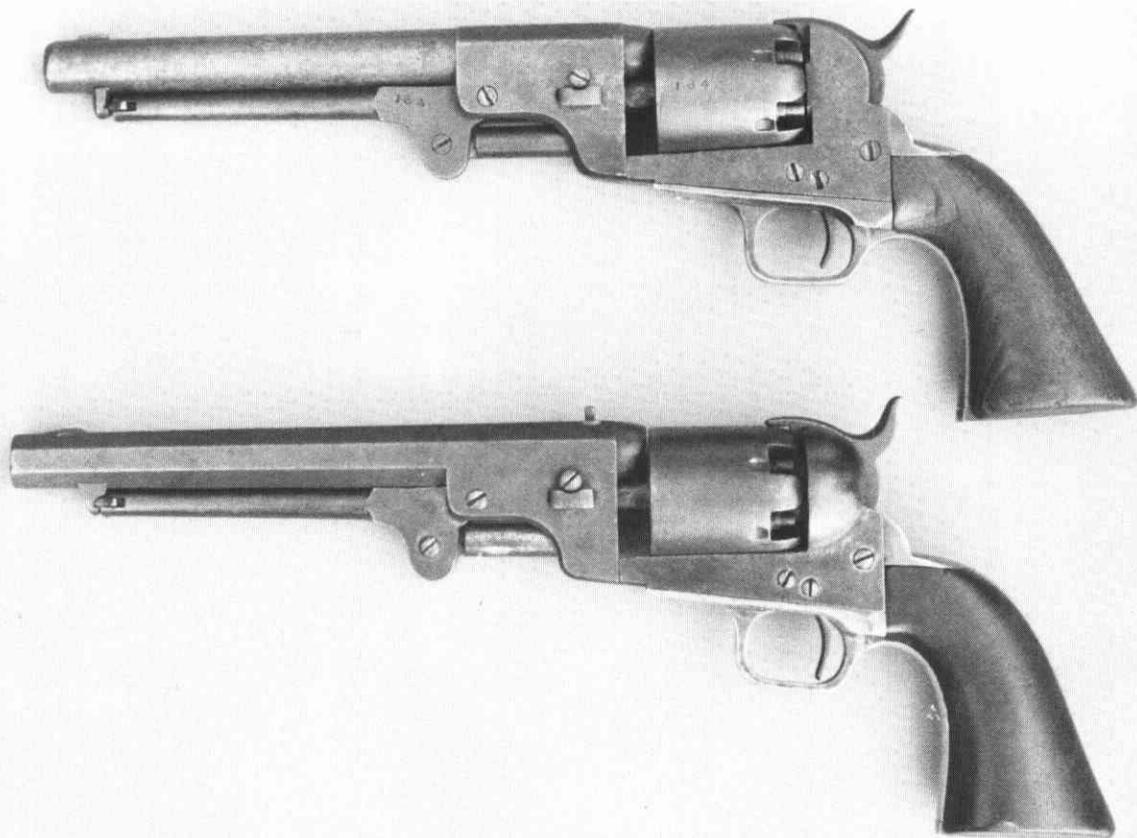
## The Dance Brothers

Finally the Dance revolvers. These are the only known Confederate revolvers made in both 36 cal. and 44 cal. If serial numbers are an indication, there were about three times as many 44 cal. pistols made as there were 36 cal. Also, there were duplications of serial numbers so it would seem that they were num-

bered in separate series. There were approximately 135 36 cal. revolvers made and about 350 44 cal. made.

The lack of a recoil shield has always been the most important identifying feature of Dance revolvers.

I would like to discuss the 44 cal. Dance first. Besides the lack of recoil shields, the size is another



Standard type DANCE 44 caliber #164 at the top. Bottom is a 44 caliber DANCE with recoil shields and octagon barrel marked "G. Erickson Houston, Texas" on top of barrel.

key feature. We find the overall length to be the same as a Colt dragoon. However, the length of the cylinder corresponds to that of a Colt 1860 army. This makes the barrel actually longer than that of a dragoon.

Almost all the parts are stamped with the serial number. The dies used were fairly large. The name is never stamped on a Dance. Also, we find a few examples with no serial numbers, and others stamped with zeroes and diamonds or combinations of both.

The trigger guard is rather square, thick and heavy. However, low-numbered revolvers have a lighter-weight trigger guard than do the higher numbers.

The bore has seven lands and grooves with a clockwise spin and no gain to the twist.

There is a roller on the hammer of most examples but not all. A few examples have octagon barrels, and I have seen one with an iron backstrap instead of the customary brass. Considerable variation exists in all the specimens because of the hand work.

Contrary to what most books have said, there is a cap release groove on the Dance.

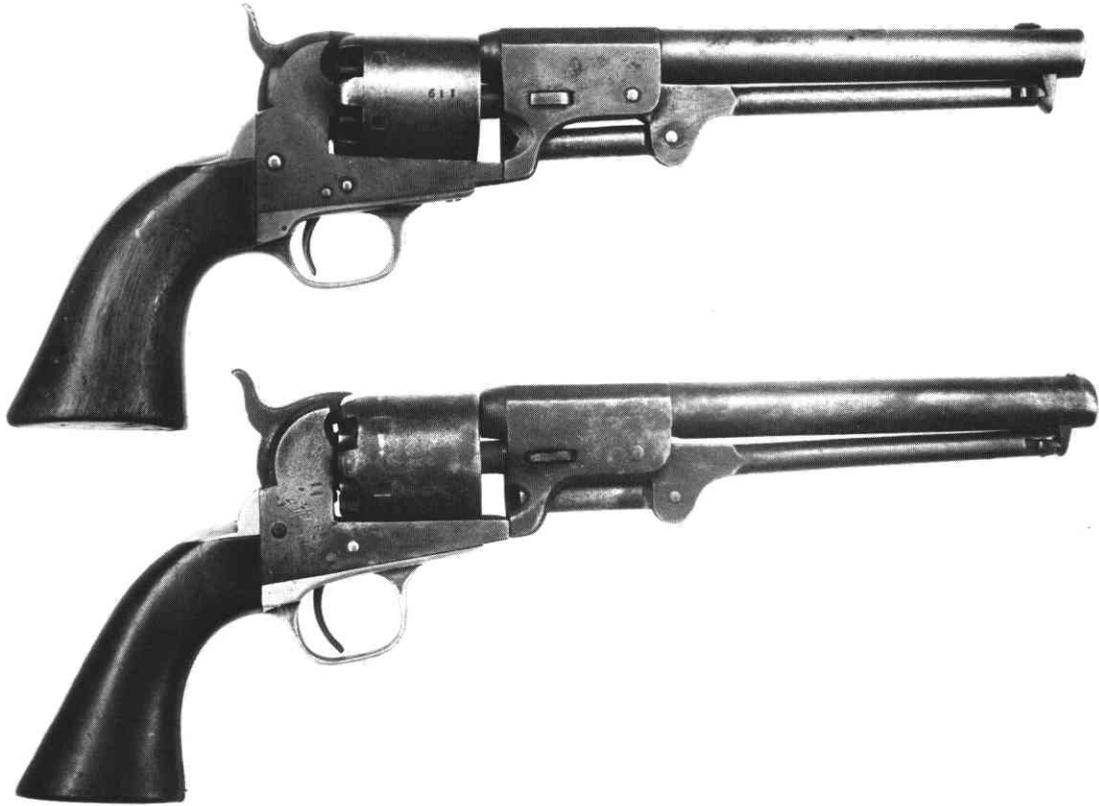
The few bogus 44 cal. Dances that I have seen

were such poor copies that they were easy to identify. There have been no reproductions to try to "age" and no other pistol that might be altered to resemble a 44 cal. Dance.

However, this is certainly not true for the 36 cal. Dance. It is a simple procedure to take a Navy revolver, grind off the recoil shield, turn the barrel round, then pass it off as a Dance. There are so many fakes and so few real examples that few people can identify an authentic 36 cal. Dance.

Here are some of the things to look for in authenticating a 36 cal. Dance: the serial number is large and found on all parts just like the 44 cal. and the rifling has no gain to the twist. The front of the barrel housing and barrel lug are somewhat square. The small of the grip is thicker than it is on most other pistols. One should also look for signs that the recoil shield had been filed off.

Now for a most interesting aspect in the identification of the Dance revolvers. It has always been believed that the lack of recoil shields was a must for a revolver to have been made by the Dance brothers. However, there is a very strong case to substantiate the premise that they did manufacture a few with shields.



36 caliber DANCE #119 at top compared with 36 caliber fake Dance at bottom. Fake was probably made from a Colt Navy.

In reference to the 36 cal. model, there are three known revolvers with recoil shields that meet every comparison test with the 36 cal. Dances without recoil shields. Their serial numbers are 48, 50 and 51. These serial numbers are stamped with the same dies as the other Dance revolvers and in the same places. The rifling in the bore is the same. They have the same squareness to the front of the barrel housing and barrel lug, the same thickness to the small of the grip and the same misplaced screw. In working revolvers, the Confederates used a wooden jig to drill the screw holes. All 36 cal. Dances have one screw that is misplaced. These revolvers with the recoil shields have the same misplaced screw.

For the icing on the cake, number 51 is marked on the grips with the name Charles Hill, Co. H, Brown's Regiment. National Archives records show that there was a Charles Hill in this unit. Brown's Regiment was headquartered near Columbia, Texas where the Dance factory was located. Dance sold most of their guns to individual soldiers. The older Dance brother was a lieutenant in Brown's Regiment and secured the assignment of a number of soldiers from this regiment to work in the Dance factory. It is readily apparent that Charles Hill had every reason

to have secured a Dance.

As for the 44 cal. revolvers, Tom Seymour has one that appears certain to have been made by Dance. All measurements are correct and the rifling in the bore is correct. It has the squareness to the barrel housing and barrel lug and the square heavy trigger guard. It has an octagon shaped barrel and it is known that Dance made a few of these. It does not have a serial number but is stamped with the letters J.B. in places where the serial numbers would ordinarily have been found. This precludes the comparison of the dies but the letters are of the same size as the numbers.

The pistol is stamped on the top of the barrel "G. Erickson, Houston, Texas." Erickson was a gun dealer in Houston during the Civil War and is known to have stamped his name on Derringers and some rifles. Since the Dance factory was at Columbia, Texas, 30 miles from Houston, it is very possible that Erickson could have purchased a Dance and then stamped his own name on it.

From the evidence presented, I have no doubt in my mind that Dance did make a few pistols with recoil shield and there are probably some people who own Dance revolvers and don't know it.

## Summation

In summation on the authentication of Confederate revolvers, the following points should be considered. Does the patina, rust and wear ring true? Do the dies used to stamp serial numbers and names match the true ones? Does the rifling in the bore match? Does the trigger guard have the correct size and shape? Do all the characteristics and measure-

ments match the real thing?

To answer these questions one needs an authentic example for comparison. Also, if one is not an experienced Confederate collector, it would be of help to confer with someone who is.

Here's hoping you never end up with a high-priced Confederate counterfeit in your collection.

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36 caliber DANCE #51 with recoil shields.