

# Colt “Derringers”

George S. Lewis

I wanted to find out what the true meaning of a gun expert was, so I went to the proper place to find the answer, the authority on everything, my wife, Bev. After pausing a moment, her definition was: “a person who could convince his wife not to buy a new car or take a dream vacation so that he could buy a gun!” That is a gun expert. Most likely at times this applies to many of us.

Over 25 years ago, I became interested in specializing in one particular area of Colt collecting, Colt “Derringers.”\* In my early years of gun collecting, like so many of us, I had no direction or particular feel for a way to go or specialize. As time went on, I found that I was drawn to the little Colt derringer, not because it had an interesting history or because it was beautiful or because there are many variations and models to obtain, but mainly because my pocketbook could afford the derringer, and I could compete with the best of the collectors. One other reason that gave me direction was that my wife thought they were terrific.

The Colt derringer in those years was greatly overlooked by advanced collectors. Most collections included only a sample of a 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Model Colt derringer, not going after any special type or variation. Though not plentiful, there were some mint derringers and a very few of the rare types to be found. I advertised regularly in the *Gun Report* and *Shotgun News* for all types and rarities, and did acquire a few through this media. Overall, I made my collection via fellow derringer collectors such as Harry Knode and Lyle Finley of Balboa Island, California, plus many other collectors I met at gun shows and through correspondence and referrals.

The first major gun show that I attended was the first *Gun Report* National Show in the Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri (Bagnall Dam), in the late 1950s. This is where I had one of my most unusual moments in gun collecting. I had just met a young man about my age from Tennessee, and since I was looking for Colt derringers, he told me of a very unique (sic) one that he had at home. He said that it was a mint 2nd Model with a rare brass frame. Since I didn't know if the frames should be brass or iron, I tried to find Servens' book on Colts to read about that model. At the time I could not locate the book, so the next best thing was to look for any 2nd Model Colt derringer. I found one



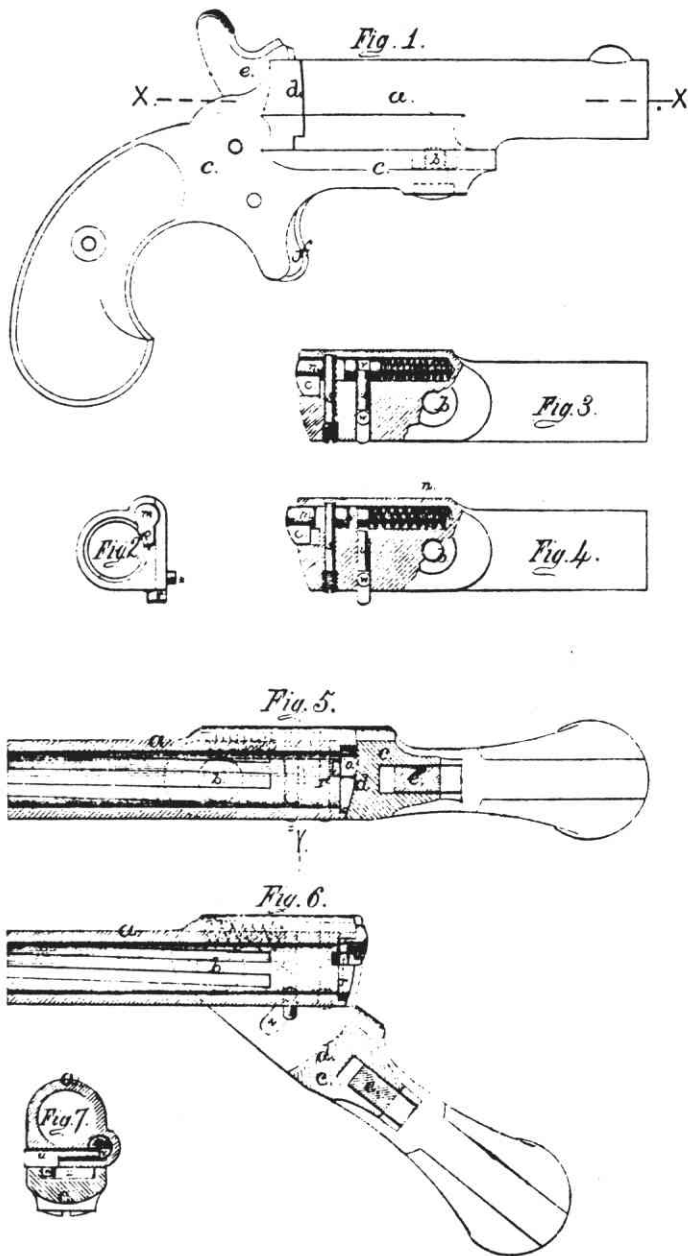
on Herb Green's table and when I examined it closely, I discovered that the first 2nd Model Colt derringer that I ever looked at had a brass frame — therefore, all 2nd Models were manufactured that way! Thank goodness a sixth sense had me purchase the gun, serial #1512, inscribed “Hez McKinney” on the backstrap, because as of today only 5 brass frame 2nd Model Colt derringers have come to my attention — and I own 4 of them.

In reflecting on the history of the breech loading derringer, this was a direct and logical result of the development of the metallic cartridge. The first true breech loading derringer in the sense of a compact single action pistol of heavy calibre was Daniel Moore's patent no. 119,474 of Feb. 19, 1861. Moore also had a second patent which was a design patent of Feb. 24, 1863, relating merely to the ornamental configuration of the all-metal handle.

The Moore design was improved during the National Arms Company period through the addition of the knife blade extractor. The National Arms Company was bought by Colt in 1870. Edwin Steven, who had worked for the National Arms Company in Brooklyn, New York, came to Colt's Manufacturing Company in September, 1872, and went on assembling No. 1s and 2s as long as they were made; no one knows the total number produced.

Colt's 3rd Model derringer was the brain child of F. Alexander Thuer, a veteran gunsmith at Colt, whose percussion revolver alteration is widely known and highly valued by collectors. The patent on the No. 3 derringer, no. 105,388, was granted on July 12, 1870, and was immediately assigned by Thuer to Colt; the witnesses were Horace Lord and C.B. Richards of the Colt-Richards conversion fame.

\*Early National Arms Company and Colt advertisements spoke of their “Deringer” pistols, spelling the name as did Henry Deringer. Modern spelling is “derringer” for the generic term. Ed.




F. A. Thuer's Patent, July 12, 1870

Patent drawing for Thuer's no. 105,388.

The inventor's specifications for this gun state: invention consists in an ejector, the movement of which to eject the shell is provided by a spring, in combination with a bolt or other detent, so connected with the said spring and ejector that the ejector can thereby be bolted fast, so that it may not spring outward, but which bolt may, after the breech is uncovered be withdrawn from the ejector, whereupon thus released will spring outward and eject the shell from the cartridge from the chamber." This in itself doesn't sound too important, but the very first Colt derringer that I purchased, I did so because the dealer impressed upon me that even though the gun was void of finish and had a few pits, the ejector still worked. So for the six months that I owned that little derringer, I showed to everyone who was interested, by inserting a dummy 41 R.F. cal. cartridge that the ejector still worked. Even though they were kind enough not to laugh in my face, just like you, they thought that I was very naive.

The Colt 3rd Model derringer was first advertised in England in the *London Illustrated News* on July 1, 1874, but not until October 16, 1874, did an advertisement appear in this country, by Colt agents B. Kittredge and Co. in *Turf, Field and Farm*.

Colt received letters from Baron Von Oppen, the representative in London, when, as early as May 7, 1874, he reported to Hartford, "We recently had one of the Colt Deringer pistols in our hand for repair, which probably we think will sell here." Samples were sent to him, but difficulties were encountered in procuring suitable rim fire cartridges from Messrs. Eley Bros. Of their initial suggestion Von Oppen wrote, "the explosion bulges out the base of the cartridge so that the shoulder or flange becomes round, offering no hold to the extractor." It was not until he had experimented with altering the derringer to center fire and then to rim fire cartridges from Union Metallic Cartridge Co. of Bridgeport, Connecticut, that Eley produced satisfactory ammunition. Von Oppen also wrote

"This  is the mark which we stamp on the Colt derringers sold by this agency. The other arms bearing your name and address in full require it less."

So much for the history lesson, now let's look at various Models and markings on the Colt Deringers.

In closing I'd like to mention that collecting various Colt Deringers is not only rewarding, but at times I almost feel guilty enjoying the infinite hours of pleasure and satisfaction they have given me.

I hope that my talk and the photographs have helped you to become more aware of the Colt derringer models and rarities. I look forward to having some of you as derringer competitors and mentors in the future.

COLT'S NEW PATENT DERINGER PISTOL.  
**Colt's National Deringer Pistol**

FOR SALE BY THE TRADE GENERALLY.

MANUFACTURED BY

**COLT'S PATENT FIRE ARMS MANUF'G COMPANY,**  
 HARTFORD, CONN.

**COLT'S NEW PATENT DERINGER PISTOLS.**

THIS BREACH-LOADING  
 DERINGER can be Loaded  
 and Fired more rapidly, and  
 with less inconvenience than  
 any other kind.



EXACT SIZE.



Cartridge, .41 cal.

Weight 6½ ounces.

DIRECTIONS FOR USE.

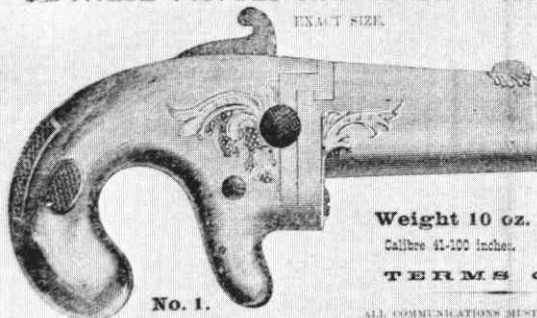
TO LOAD.—Set the Hammer at half-cock, and swing the Barrel to one side; this opens the Breech.  
 After firing, the empty shell may be expelled entirely by opening the Breech as far as possible.  
 The exploded shell need not be touched by the fingers.

**THE NATIONAL DERINGER PISTOL,**

(Formerly Manufactured by the NATIONAL ARMS CO., of Brooklyn, N. Y.)

Silver Plated Frame, Blued Barrel, \$12.00 per pair. Silver Plated Frame, Silver Plated Barrel, \$12.00 per pair.

THESE PISTOLS ARE MADE WITH METAL OR WOOD STOCKS.



EXACT SIZE.

DIRECTIONS FOR USE.

TO LOAD.—Set the Hammer at half-cock; grasp the stock in the right hand, and drawing back the Steel Button with the fore finger, rotate the Barrel toward you with the left hand. Holding the Barrel thus, turned aside, introduce the Cartridge and then rotate it to its original position.

After Firing, the empty shell may be ejected by rotating the Barrel as directed for loading.

Weight 10 oz.

Calibre .41-100 inches.

Manufactured by COLT'S PATENT FIRE ARMS MFG CO., Hartford, Conn.

TERMS CASH.

No. 1.

ALL COMMUNICATIONS MUST BE ADDRESSED TO

**Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manuf'g Company,**

HARTFORD, CONN., UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

An advertisement for Colt's "Deringer" pistol, ca. 1872.

1886

# COLT'S DERINGER PISTOLS. 1886

## COLT'S NEW DERINGER AND THE NATIONAL DERINGER.

### COLT'S NEW DERINGER.

Exact size. Weight 6 1/2 oz.



This Breech-Loading Deringer can be Loaded and Fired more rapidly and with less inconvenience than any other kind.

NICKEL PLATED FRAMES, BLUED BARRELS, \$10.00 per pair.  
NICKEL PLATED FRAMES AND HAMMERS, 12.00 per pair.

#### DIRECTIONS FOR USING.

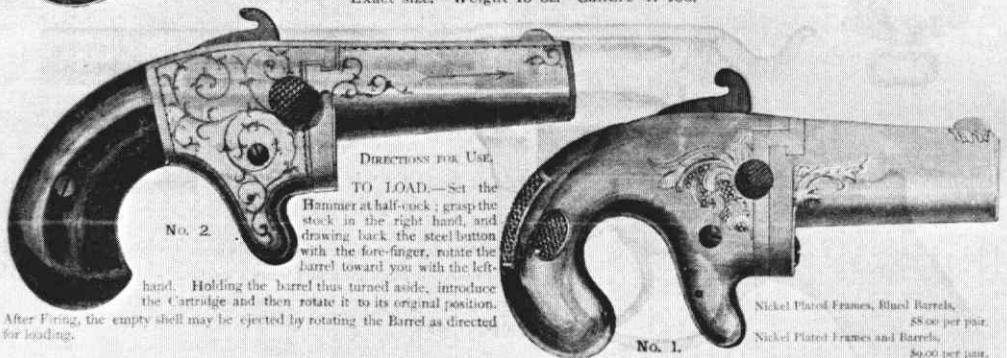
TO LOAD.—Set the Hammer at half-cock and swing the Barrel to one side; this opens the Breech. After Firing, the empty shell may be expelled entirely by opening the Breech as far as possible.

Cartridge, .41 cal.

THE EXPLODED SHELL NEED NOT BE TOUCHED BY THE FINGER.

### THE NATIONAL DERINGER.

Exact size. Weight 10 oz. Calibre 41-100.



#### DIRECTIONS FOR USE.

TO LOAD.—Set the Hammer at half-cock; grasp the stock in the right hand, and drawing back the steel button with the fore-finger, rotate the barrel toward you with the left-hand.

After Firing, the empty shell may be ejected by rotating the Barrel as directed for loading.

No. 2

No. 1

Nickel Pistol Frames, Blued Barrels, \$8.00 per pair.  
Nickel Plated Frames and Barrels, \$9.00 per pair.

These Pistols are made with METAL OR WOOD STOCKS. No. 1 represents the pistol with the Metal Stock, and No. 2 with the Wood Stock.

### COLT'S BREECH-LOADING SEVEN-SHOT REVOLVING PISTOL.



.22 Calibre. Weight 8 oz., Weight of ball 27 grains or 260 to the pound. Can be used with long and short No. 22 cartridges.

This Drawing gives the precise size of the Pistol.

PRICE, \$5.00.

#### TERMS CASH.

ALL COMMUNICATIONS MUST BE ADDRESSED TO

COLT'S PATENT FIRE-ARMS MANUFACTURING COMPANY,  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT.

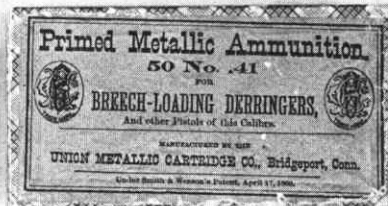
Another Colt advertisement, ca. 1886.



Left, early and rare boxes of .41 rim fire cartridges. Note reference to a Dahlgren pistol on the top box.

Above, the box label and samples of the Eley center fire derringer cartridges. Harry Knode photo.

Below, more early and rare cartridge boxes.



*The 1st Model Deringer*

All iron construction with just slight variations, like sparse leaf engraving on breech of barrel. Barrel address the same on all 1st models except on die errors etc. Serial numbers from #1 up to approximately 5500; they were made 1870-1890. Barrel address reads:

✠ COLT'S P.T.P.A.MFG.CO. NO.1 ✠  
HARTFORD CT.U.S.A.



First Model no. 2853 with the trade label of P. Orr & Sons of Madras, India.

### *The 2nd Model Derringers*

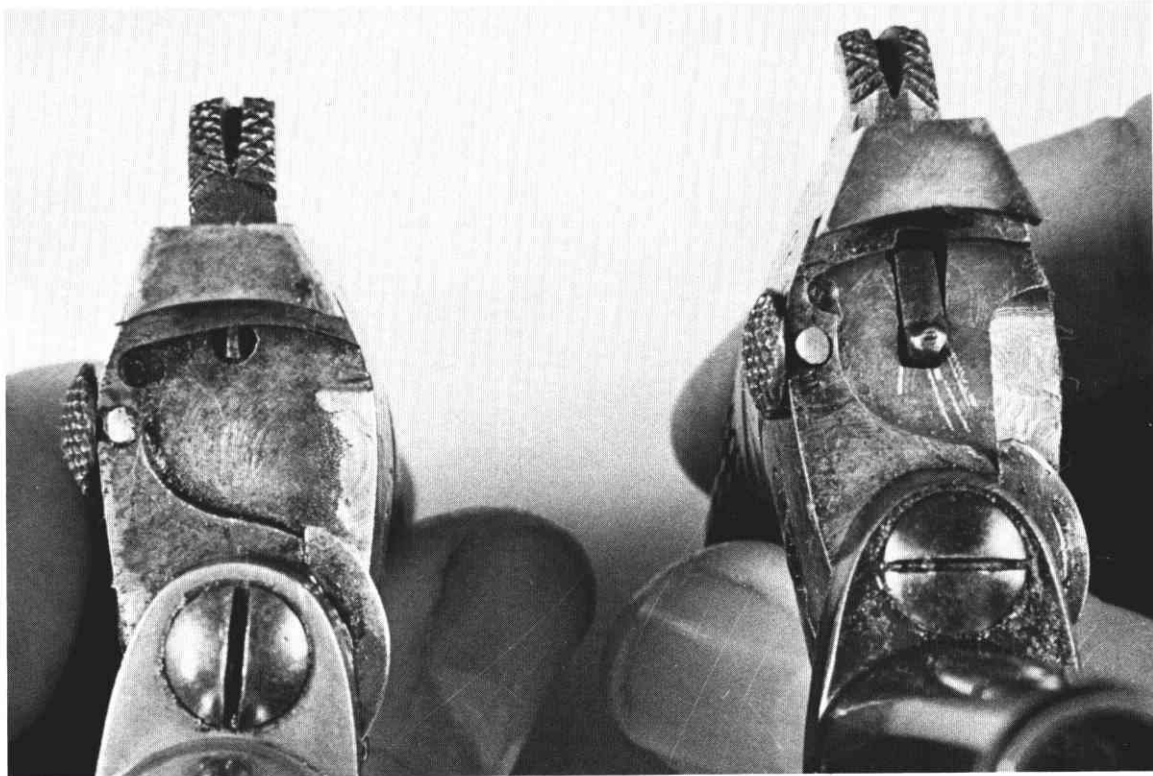
Same as first model except wooden grips were added: checkered wood or rarely pearl or ivory. Two types of barrel addresses. The first type has a serial number range from serial #1 to approximately 1600. The second type address, serial numbers range from approximately 1600 to 9500.

*First Type, (serial #1 to approx. 1600)*

✠ ADDRESS COL. COLT ✠  
HARTFORD CT U.S.A. 2

*Second Type, (serial #1600 to approx. 9500)*

✠ COLT'S P.T.F.A.M.F.G. CO. ✠  
HARTFORD CT. U.S.A. NO 2 ✠



**The breech areas of the rim and center fire No. 2 derringers.**



Colt 2nd Model derringers, nos. 15, 722, and 1512; all have the first type barrel address.

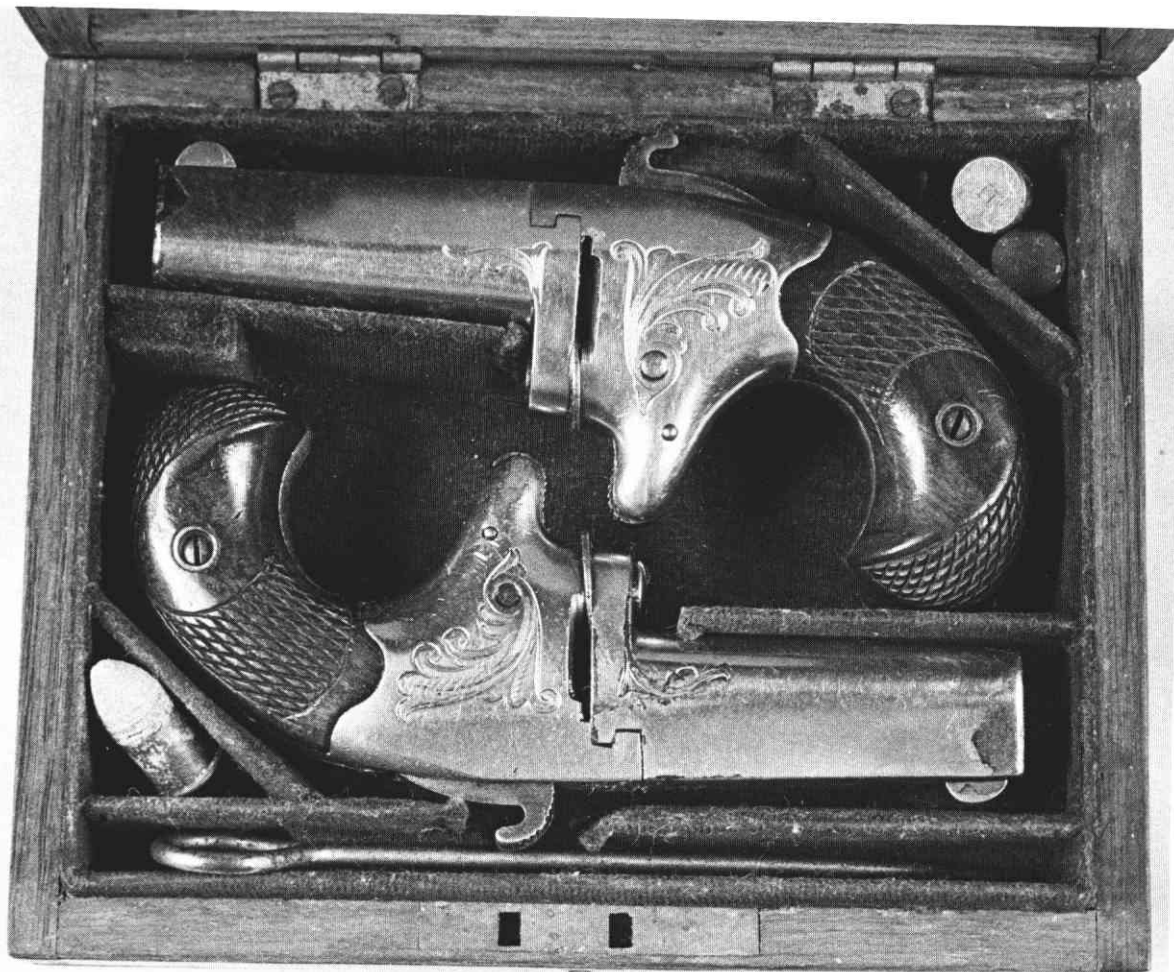




**Second Model frame differences: no. 15, top. and no. 2525.**



**Second Model no. 2525 with brass frame, in its case.**



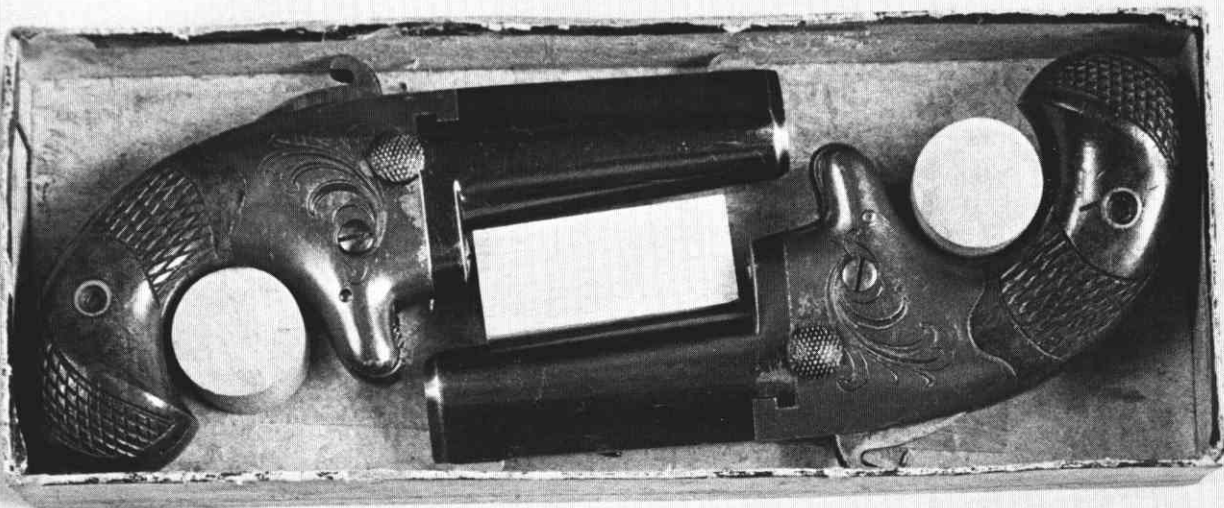
A pair of brass framed Second Models, nos. 2522 and 2529, in their case.



Four brass framed Second Models! Nos. 2522, 1512, 2525, 2529.



*A Second Model, no. 3642, made of "sterling metal" from the American Sterling Company, Naubuc, Conn. (See page 70.)*



**National No. 2 derringers in their original box — the only box of its kind known.**



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
CONNECTICUT STATE LIBRARY  
CAPITOL AVENUE • HARTFORD 15. CONNECTICUT

May 29, 1962

Mr. George S. Lewis, Jr.  
Lewis Investment Company  
1025 Grand Avenue  
Kansas City 6, Missouri

Dear Mr. Lewis:

We are keeping our promise to let you know if and when we located any mention of a deringer marked "American Sterling".

In a ledger recently received from the Colt Company, we found the following notation listed under the date of Tuesday, August 27, 1872:

Presentation

1 Natnl. Der. Pistol made of Sterling  
Metal from Am. Sterling Co. \$4.75  
To American Sterling Co., Naubuc (Conn.), Aug. 15th

Unfortunately no serial number is listed, but it is the sole mention of American Sterling in the ledger.

Needless to say we will let you know if further information becomes available.

Sincerely,

*Arline G. Maver*  
(Mrs.) Arline G. Maver, Curator  
Museum & Colt Collection

AGM:FJC

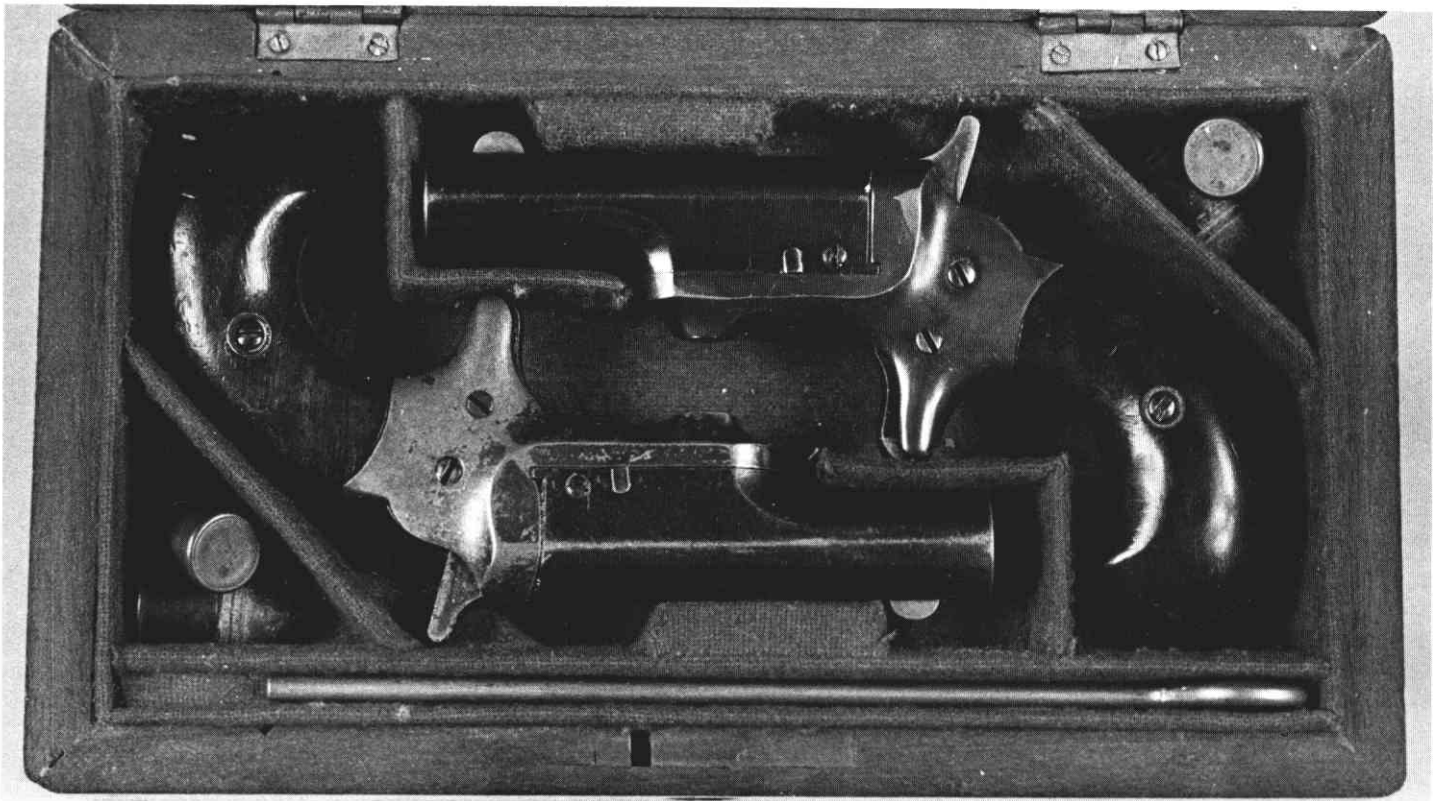
A letter from the Connecticut State Library describing a pistol made of sterling metal.

### *The 3rd Model Derringers*

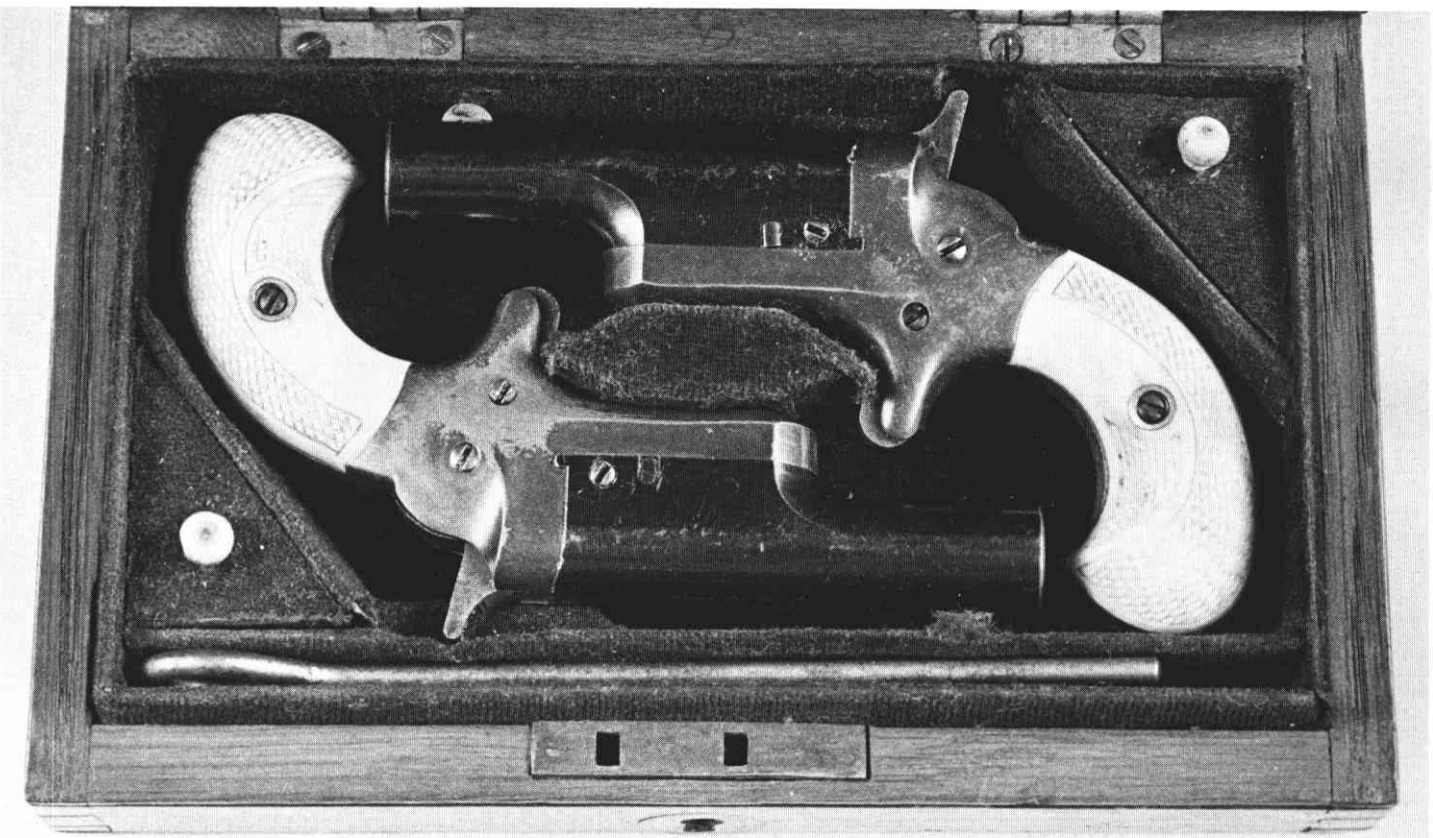
Manufactured from approximately 1872-1912. There are four variations of the Third Model derringer: the first has a high hammer, a large barrel-swivel bolster, a short curved grip, serial range 1-2199. The second has a high hammer, *no* barrel-swivel bolster, short curved grip, and serial range 2200-24000. The third has a sloping hammer and short curved grip, numbers 25000 to 27000. The last 3rd Model derringer has a sloping hammer and a long curved grip; Colt then started a new serial number range from 1 to approximately 45000.



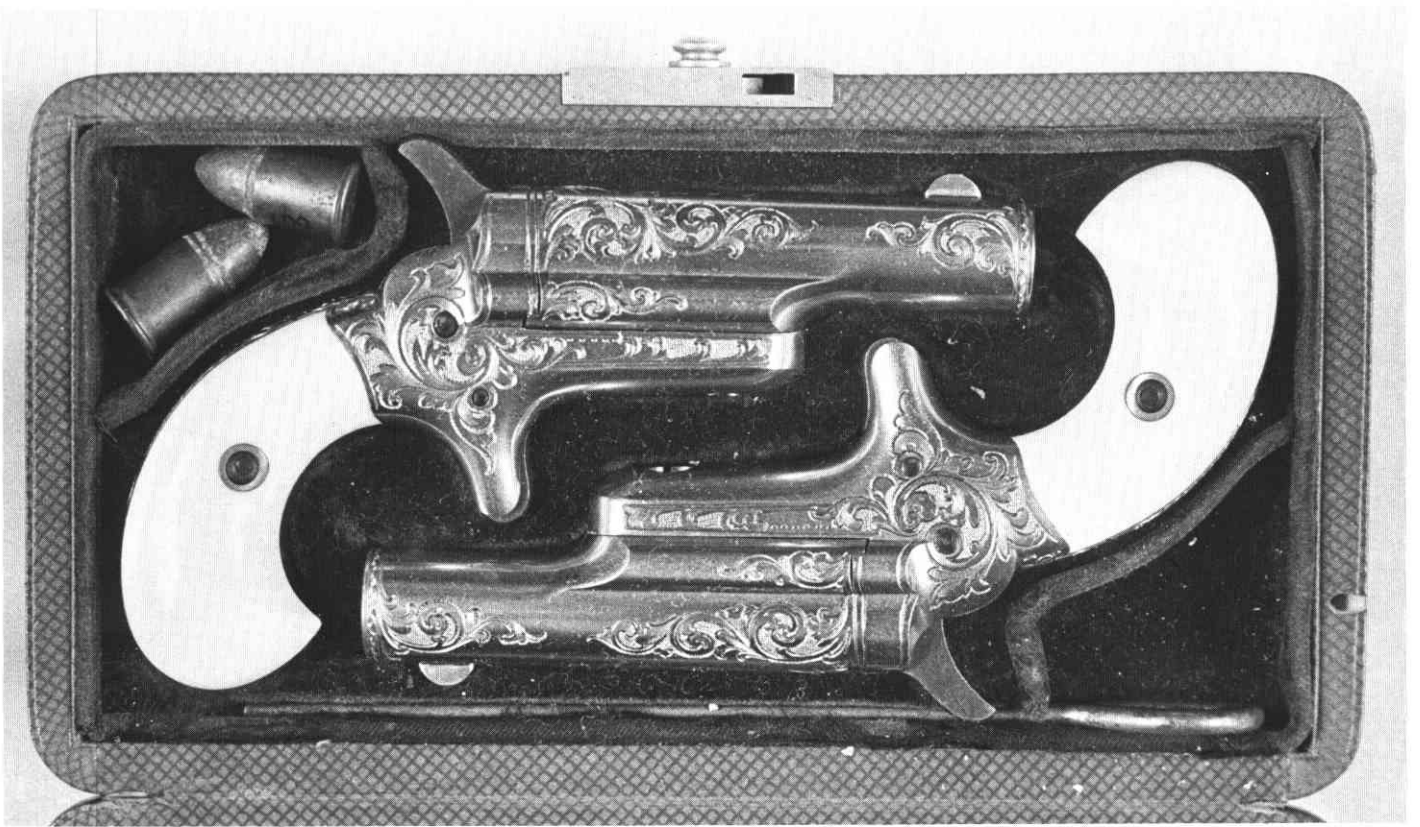
Third Model pistols. An experimental gun, top, then nos. 166 and 491.



A cased pair of early and small Colt No. 3 derringers, nos. 166 & 168.



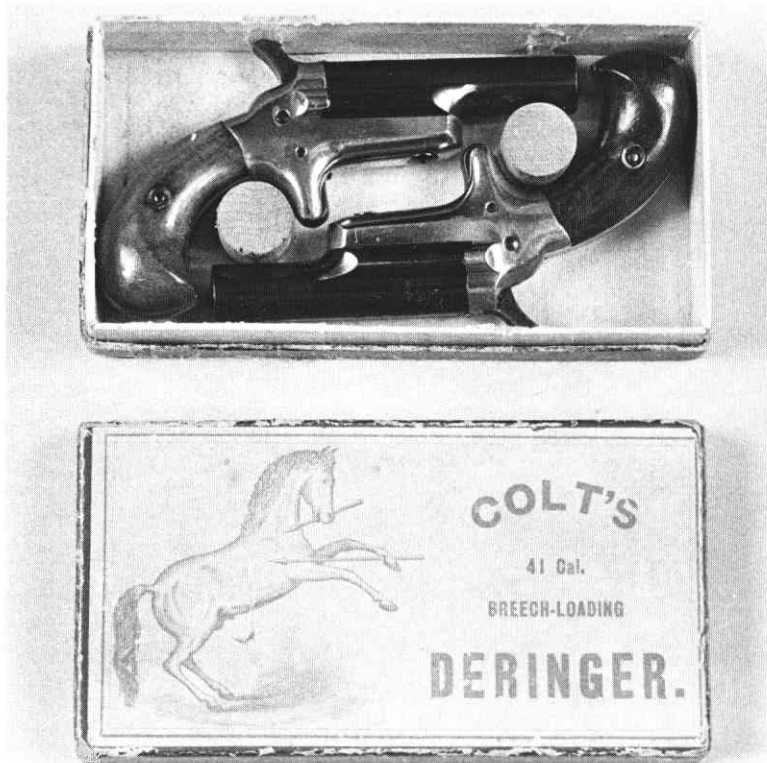
A cased pair of Third Model derringers, nos. E7548 & E7555. The sloping hammer spur and short curved grip are rare, and in serial number range 25,000 - 27,000.



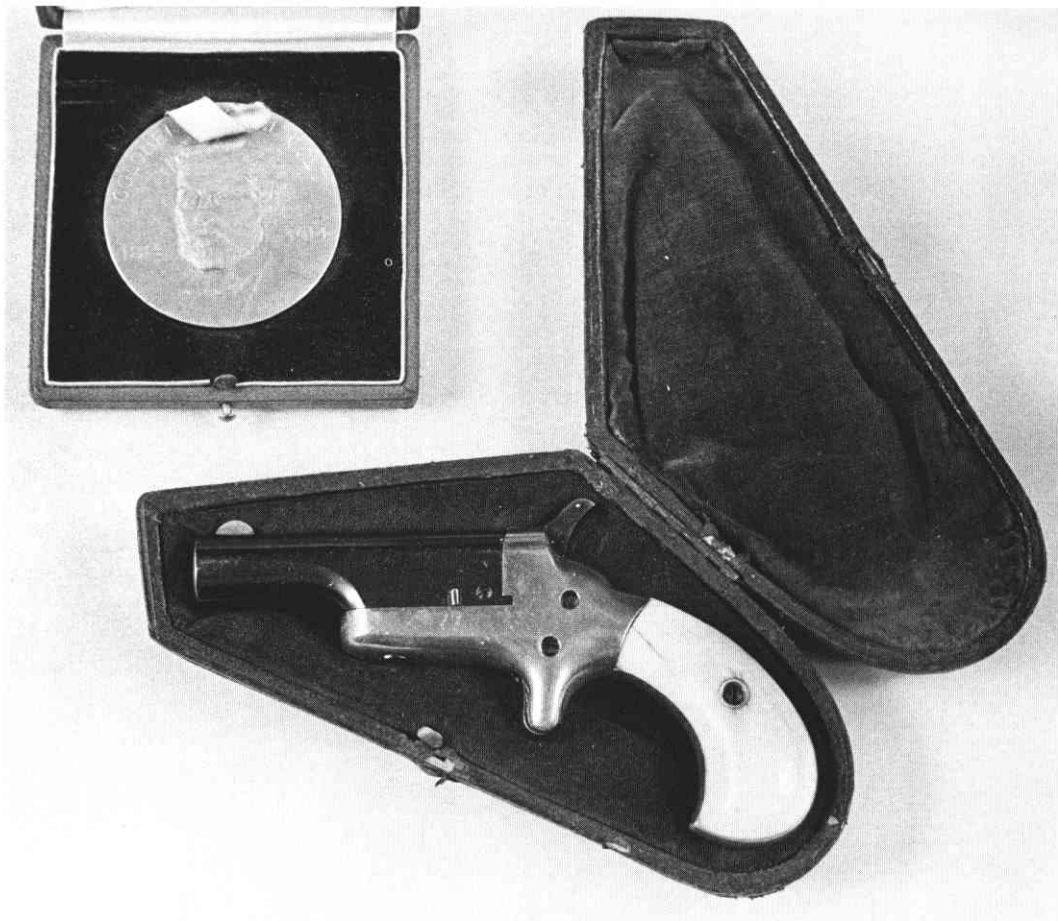
Another cased pair, nos. 26083E and 26984E. The last Third Model derringers have a sloping hammer, long curved grips. They are in a new serial number range from 1 to approximately 45,000.



The last type, nos. 18 & 19, in a rosewood case.

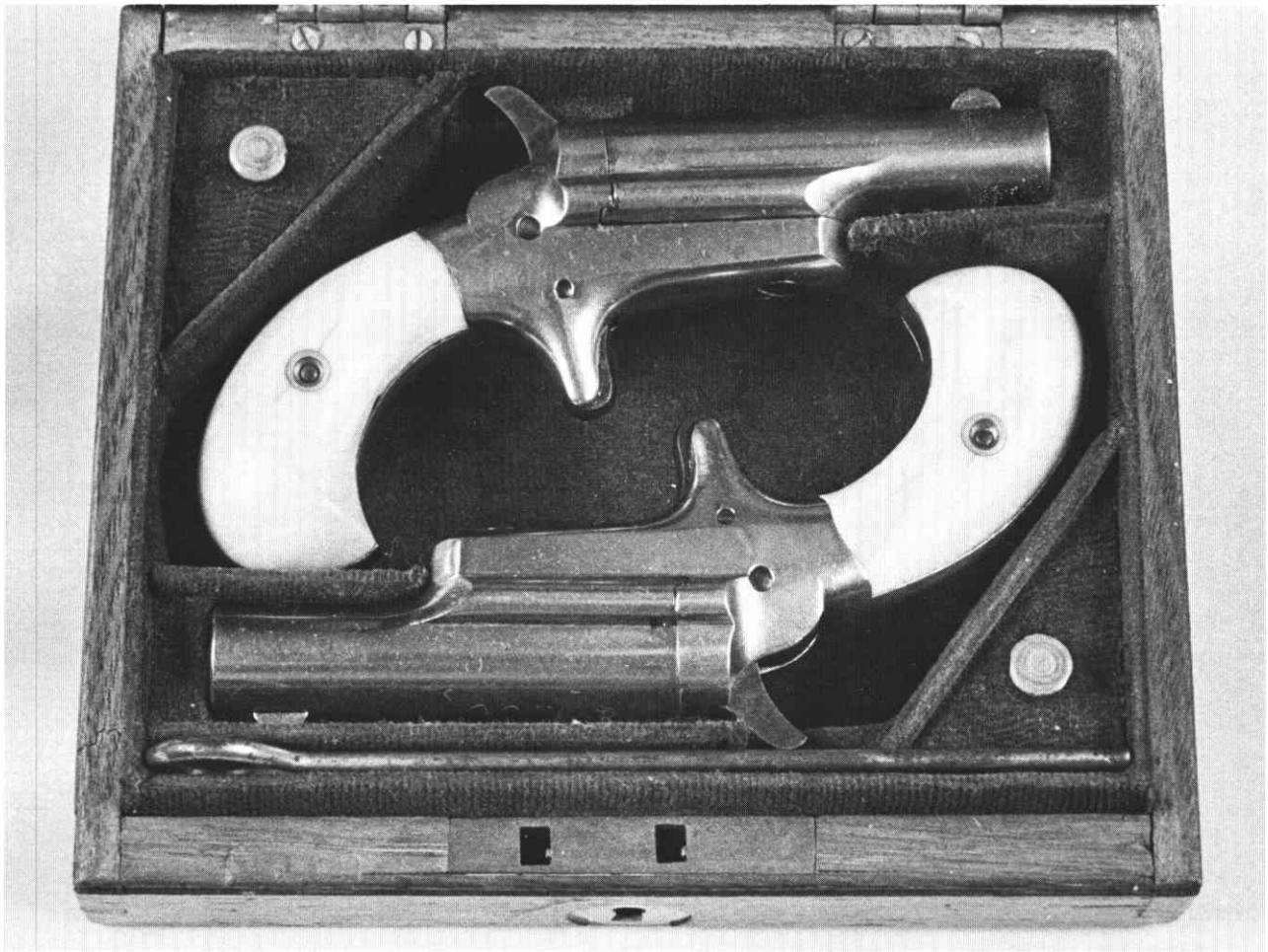


Numbers 17533 & 17534 in a more standard cardboard box.

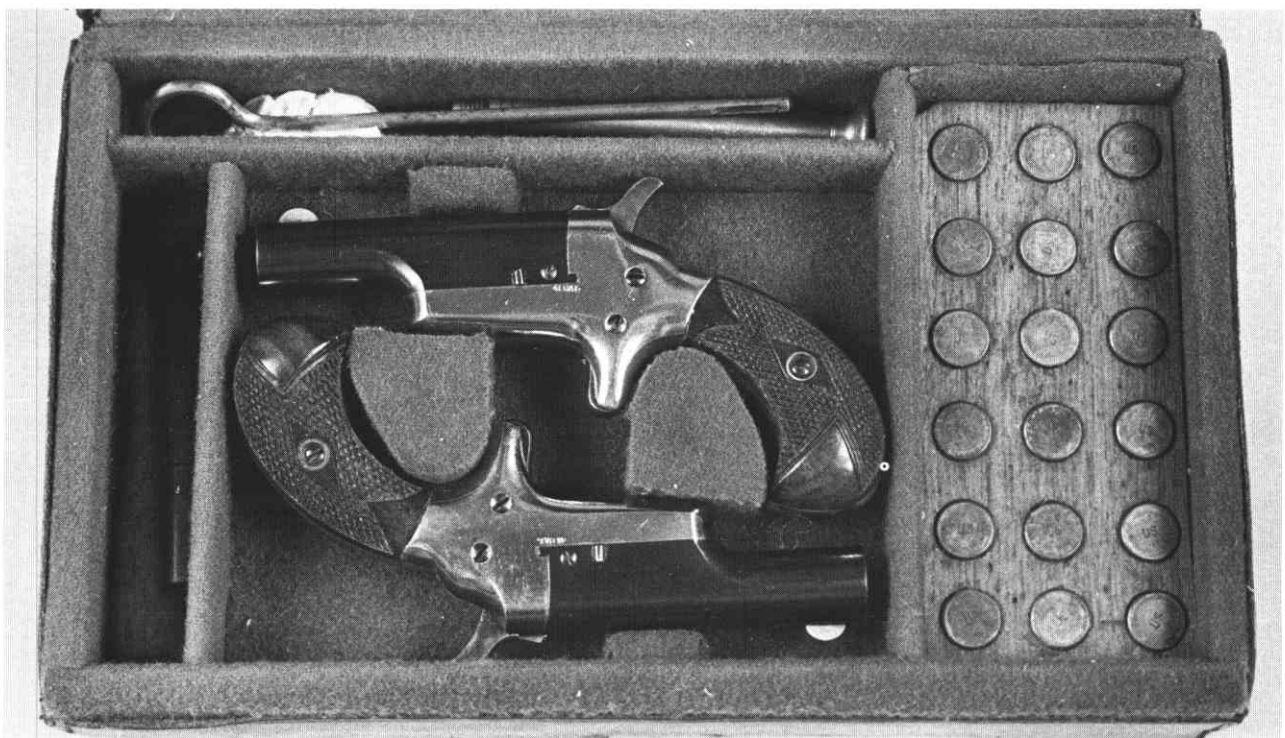


Serial number 2, and a gold Colt Medallion.





A London cased pair, nos. 35197 & 35214.



An unusual pair in an unusual case, which may be a salesman's sample set: nos. 19789 & 19813, blue and silver plated, checkered grips, not British proofed, in a leather covered wooden case. They date ca. 1900, have US Cartridge Company head stamped ammunition of that date. The label says:

Colt's Pt. Firearms Mfg. Co.  
Hartford Conn. U.S.A.  
Depot 14 Pall Mall London



Cigar-holder type casing with London address. No. 40318.



All types of the Third Model derringers: nos. 26083E, 166, 491, 7403, and 35197.

*The text of H. Michael Madaus' talk, "The Percussion Long Arms of Eli Whitney, Jr.," was not received in time for publication in this Bulletin.*