

BIG DADDY AND THE BABY

Scaled down from the Big Dragoon, this Baby Dragoon, No. 676, was probably manufactured very close to the same time as its larger counterpart, No. 2258. The differences between the two, other than size, are that the Baby has a full octagon barrel without a loading lever, five shots versus six shots, and a flat hammer spring rather than a V-shaped spring. One very early Baby Dragoon, No. 3, has a V-shaped spring.⁶



THE FIRST MODEL (No. 676)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. No finials used | 6. Squareback triggerguard |
| 2. Lefthand address | 7. Short, thin, curved trigger |
| 3. Round cylinder stops | 8. Rounded forward end of trigger slot |
| 4. Ranger and Indian scene | 9. Slim Jim handle with great acclivity |
| 5. <i>Colts Patent</i> marked in one line left handed on cylinder | 10. No hammer wheel |
| | 11. Serial number range, 1 to 1400* |

The very earliest first models, Nos. 1 to ca. 150, have no capping cutout, no exploded cap channel, and the grips have an almost round contour at the hip, referred to as "bulbous" grips. Between serial number 700* and 1100*, a variation occurs wherein the barrel address is stamped righthanded without finials and the cylinder is also marked righthanded, but now in three lines.

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Colt's 1848 Pocket Model — The “Baby Dragoon”

— A Classification by Model

Sam Pachanian

The final months of the year 1847 found Sam Colt at last doing business from his own factory in Hartford, Connecticut. And what a year 1847 turned out to be! By November, Colt had completed delivery of the first contract for one thousand of the Walker Model Dragoon with the Army; he had made up about one hundred more of these to use for purposes of promotion, presentation and sales, and a second contract with the Army for another one thousand Dragoon pistols was in hand.

From the Eli Whitney plant, where the first eleven hundred Walker Dragoons were completed, Sam Colt brought to Hartford experienced men, machinery, and a considerable surplus of parts. As a result, production of both military and civilian Dragoons was very quickly undertaken in the new plant at 33 Pearl Street.

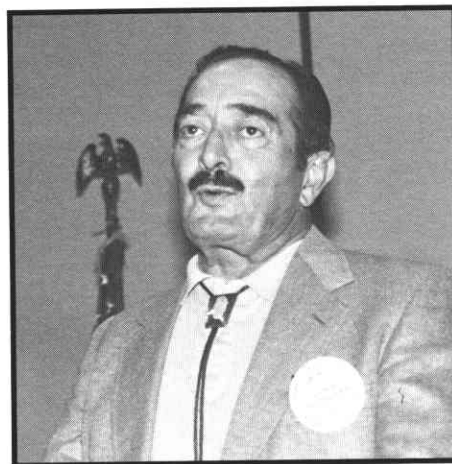
The Pocket Model was quick to follow. In a letter dated December 11, 1847, Colt wrote to one of his former agents:

The government has ordered me to make a second thousand of these arms varying a little from the Walker Model which together with a pocket gun which I am getting up for market will occupy me all winter with a force of 40 - 50 hands which I have now employed.¹

The “pocket gun” referred to in this letter was, of course, the 1848 Pocket Model revolver, the pistol so popularly recognized today as the “Baby Dragoon.” It is apparent from this letter that by December work on the new pistol had already begun. By the end of the year, it is estimated that two thousand were completed².

The demand for the new smaller pistol was very great. The Mexican War, though still in progress, opened much new interest in the West and gold was soon to be discovered. Various westward migrations created steady, strong sales. The opportunity for selling the “right product at the right time” immediately overtook Sam Colt, who in turn stood ready to supply with no intention of losing even one good customer.

Thus the 1848 Pocket Model was launched. Its production covered a span of slightly more than two years and 15,500 revolvers, beginning with serial number 1. Squareback triggerguards, the basic characteristic of the Baby Dragoon, cease to appear at about number 15,500, and are superseded by the rounded triggerguard³. The start of the rounded triggerguards is at serial number 14,400. All variations of the Baby Dragoon or Pocket Model below this number are considered to be “Baby Dragoons” in this study. The two variations that go on to become the 1849 Pocket Model have been named the “Pre-’49 Pocket



Model” and the “Pre-Wells Fargo.” A progression of eight models and a multiplicity of major and minor variations are delineated here, offering the collector a superb challenge.

Colt's 1848 Pocket Model, the Baby Dragoon, also known as the “Little Dragoon,” is a five shot, single-action, percussion revolver of .31 caliber. It is a scaled-down version of the big four-pound two-ounce Dragoon and an example with a 6” barrel weighs a much more versatile 1-1/2 pounds. This collector-friendly little Colt offers the intrigue of primitive, initial configurations that rapidly develop into a finely tuned product of which 340,000 would be manufactured over a period of twentyfive years. This is the greatest number of any percussion Colt revolver⁴.

Baby Dragoons are equipped with octagon barrels of 3, 4, 5, and 6 inch lengths, which are rifled with 7 grooves, and a very slight righthand twist. Any of these four barrel lengths can be on any of the rammerless pistols; in the two models equipped with loading levers, the three inch barrel is omitted and only the 4, 5 and 6 inch lengths were used. Barrel length does not determine a model or variation, but is an obvious difference that does affect collectability.

Triggerguards and backstraps are made of brass, silver plated. The front sight is a conical pin and the rear sight a notch in the forward hammer lip. Triggers are short, thin and curved. The COLTS PATENT marking on the left side of the frame is moved from a center position on early models to a more forward position. One example even has this marking on the barrel lug. Because of its erratic nature, this marking is not considered in the determination of models. The famous “Slim Jim” handle is most pronounced in the earlier pistols and gradually disappears by the 12,000 range, where the backstrap no longer has a greater drop than the forward gripstrap and the upward slope (acclivity) of the butt is eliminated. Stocks are made of one-piece varnished

walnut, and on rare occasions, of more exotic materials such as ivory or ebony. There are also, though in very scarce quantity, engraved, inscribed, cased and presentation arms.

The realization that the Baby Dragoon had not been entirely segregated into easily recognizable models and variations was triggered by a need to know and explain why "dashed finials" suddenly replaced the "elaborated brackets" encasing the typical two-line barrel address.

Mention is rarely made of these dashes, and guns with both markings are classed in the same group. While seeking the answer to this one point of inquiry, a great many other bits of interest surfaced, and the classification of models presented here is the result. All facts were garnered through the study of actual examples. To be sure, Colts that challenge any conformity do keep turning up, and add much to the collecting of Baby Dragoons.

Overlapping of serial numbers is a strong characteristic of the Baby Dragoon, as many as four models running concurrently with their numbers intermixed. No duplication of serial numbers has been encountered. Most serial number ranges used in this study are those determined by P.L. Shumaker in his book, *Colt's Variations of the Old Model Pocket Pistol, 1848-1872*.⁵ Where a serial number is marked with an asterisk, it has been modified or added to these ranges by this study to include the model divisions newly outlined. The following pictures and their captions will tell the story.



Notes

Photos and drawings used in this article are by L. Frank Richey.

1. Edwards, *The Story of Colt's Revolver*, p. 216
 2. Sutherland and Wilson, *The Book of Colt Firearms*, p. 103
 3. Shumaker, *Colt's Variation of the Old Model Pocket Pistol 1848-1872*, P. 52
 4. Wilson, *The Colt Heritage*, Appendix 3
 5. *Ibid* 3, P. 37
 6. *Ibid* 2, P. 102 & 104
 7. Information on Baby Dragoon no. 6139 provided courtesy of Dr. Henry Alperin
 8. The Connecticut Historical Society, *Sam Colt's Own Record*, P. 9 & 10
 9. Correspondence with Dr. John B. McCall, Arlington, Texas
 10. Courtesy of Dr. Max Longfield, Brampton, Ontario
- Permission to use the following photos and drawings from introductory articles was given by *Gun Report* magazine: Figures 14, 18, 19, and 20 (January, 1987) and Figure 15 (May, 1988).

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Periodicals

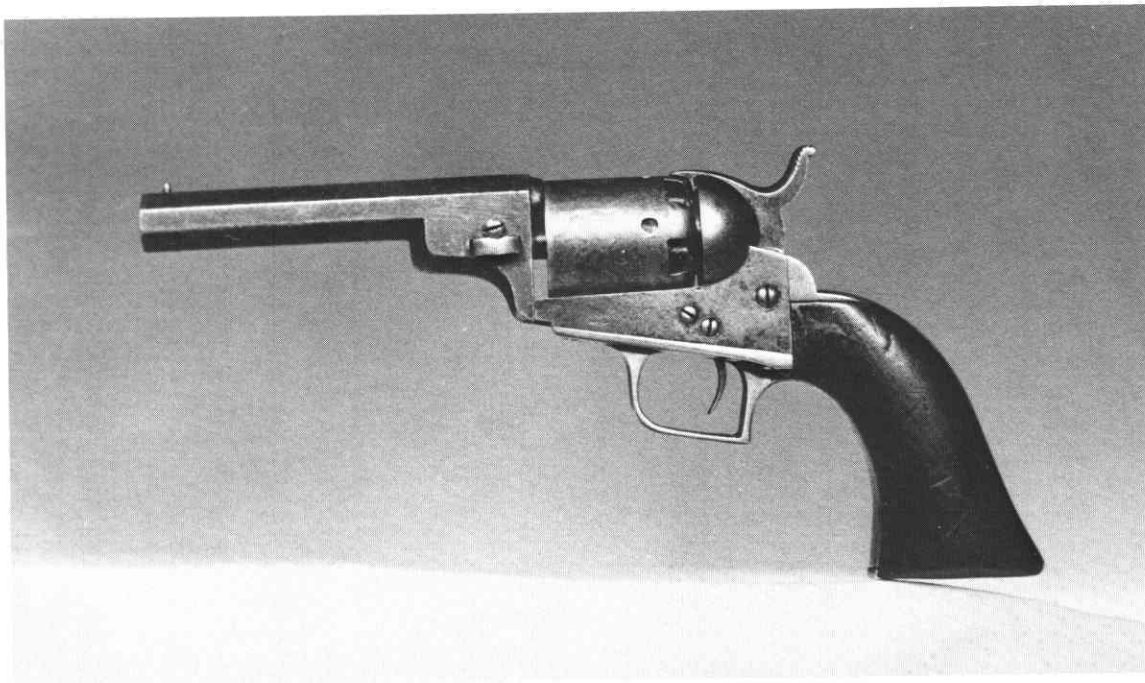
- Henry M. Stewart, "Colt Pocket Models," *The Gun Report*, October, 1956.
- Sam Pachanian and L. Frank Richey, "Brackets and Dashes on the Baby Dragoon," *The Gun Report*, January, 1987.
- Sam Pachanian and L. Frank Richey, "Sam Colt Dealt Himself Five Aces," *The Gun Report*, May, 1988.
- Theodore B. Pittman, "Colt 1849 Pocket Model Without Loading Lever" *The Texas Gun Collector*, January, 1955.
- Dr. Bob Bettis, "The Rarest 'Wells Fargo'," *The Texas Gun Collector*, Spring, 1986.
- Dr. James T. Brown, "The Phillip R. Phillips Collection," *The Texas Gun Collector*, Spring, 1987.



THE STANDARD MODEL OR SECOND MODEL

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. BRACKET finials | 6. Squareback triggerguard |
| 2. Righthand address | 7. Short, thin curved trigger |
| 3. Round cylinder stops | 8. Rounded forward end of trigger slot |
| 4. Ranger and Indian fight scene | 9. Slim Jim handle with medium to great acclivity |
| 5. <i>Colts Patent</i> marked in three lines left handed on cylinder | 10. No hammer wheel |
| | 11. Serial number range, 1400* to 6300* |

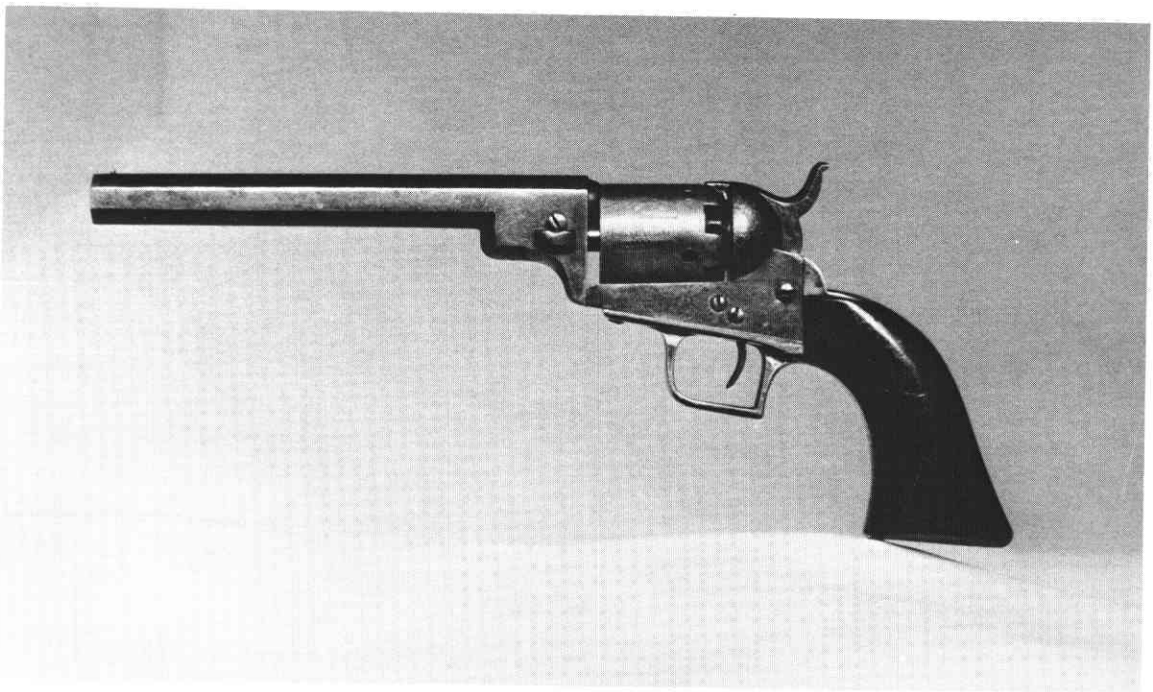
Between serial number 5000* and 6000* the three-line-lefthanded cylinder marking turns to righthanded. One example, No. 6139, has an unusual cylinder marked in TWO lines lefthanded, retains a righthanded barrel address with bracket finials.⁷



THE FIRST TRANSITION MODEL (No. 6592)

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. DASHED finials | 6. Squareback triggerguard |
| 2. Right or lefthanded address | 7. Short, thin curved trigger |
| 3. OVATE (slightly rounded) cylinder stops | 8. Rounded forward end of trigger slot |
| 4. Ranger and Indian fight scene | 9. Slim Jim handle with slight to medium acclivity |
| 5. <i>Colts Patent</i> marked in three lines righthanded on cylinder | 10. No hammer wheel |
| | 11. Serial number range from appx. 6300* to 10900* |

Development of the widened hammer-spring attachment boss begins with this model.



THE SECOND TRANSITION MODEL (No. 11111)

1. DASHED finials
2. Righthanded address
3. ELONGATE (long oval) cylinder stops
4. Ranger and Indian Fight scene on earlier sn 9500 to 11600, overlapping with the new stage coach holdup scene sn 10400 to 12434*
5. *Colts Patent* marked in three lines righthanded on cylinders with the Ranger and indian scene
6. Squareback triggerguard
7. Short, thin and curved trigger
8. Rounded forward end of trigger slot
9. Slim Jim handle with slight to medium acclivity
10. Hammer wheel found on pistols over sn 12000*
12. The single cylinder safety pin ends with this model, and is found on both the R & I and the Stagecoach cylinders



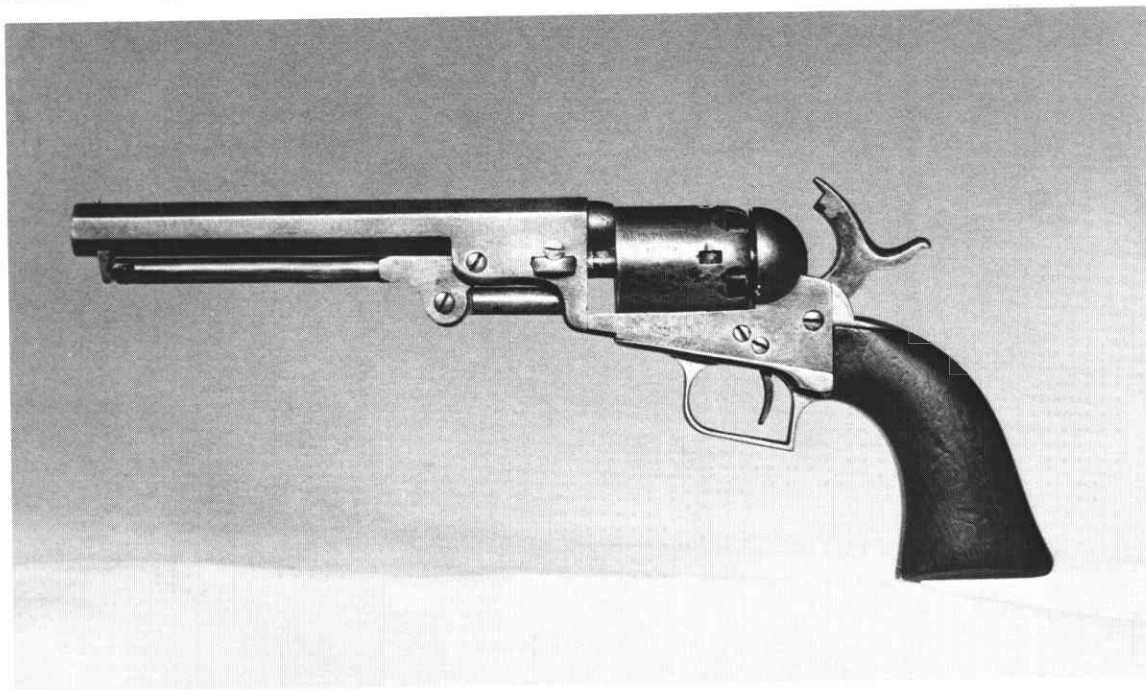
THE THIRD TRANSITION MODEL (No. 13944)

1. DASHED finials
2. Righthanded address
3. RECTANGULAR cylinder stops with guide grooves
4. Stagecoach holdup scene
5. New style of turning ratchet
6. Squareback triggerguard with thickened plate at rear screw holes.
7. Short, thin, curved trigger
8. Squared off forward end of trigger slot
9. Handle flat without acclivity, ending this early Baby Dragoon feature
10. Has the hammer wheel
12. Five cylinder safety pins



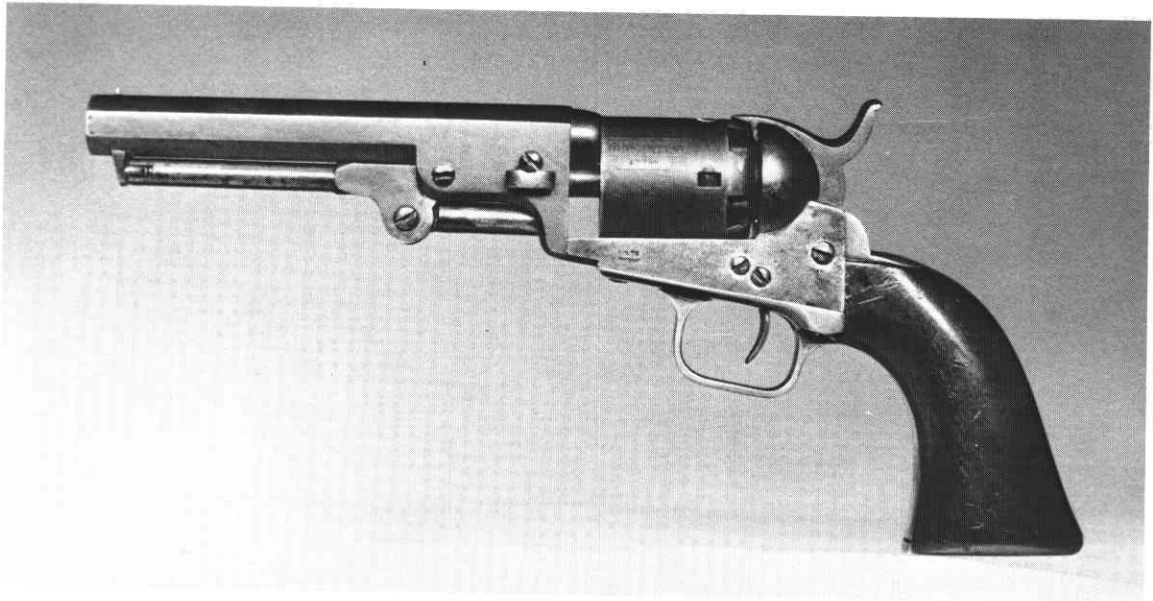
THE PRE-WELLS FARGO MODEL (No. 15771)

In this, the final rammerless model of the Baby Dragoon, the only change made from the third transition is the **ROUNDBACK** (small rounded) triggerguard. All other features are the same. The rounded guard is introduced at about No. 14400 and is manufactured along with the squareback third transition to No. 15500. The example illustrated here is actually an early type Wells Fargo, in all details the same except the serial number is over 15500.



THE SQUAREBACK '49 (No. 12399)

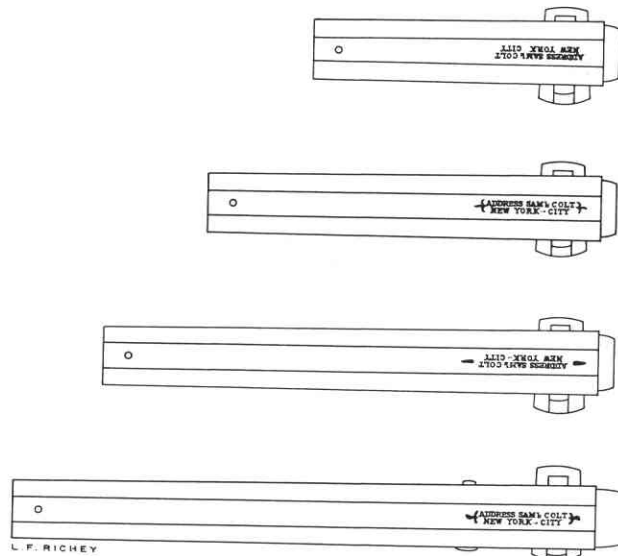
1. **DASHED** finials which are later interspersed with a new style of **BRACKETED** finials.
2. Righthanded address
3. The **FINAL CYLINDER**
 - a. rectangular stops with tapered approaches or bolt guides
 - b. Stagecoach holdup scene
 - c. five cylinder safety pins
 - d. new style ratchet
6. Squareback triggerguard, thin plate on early, becoming wide at about the 12000 range with a great deal of overlap between the two types
7. Short, thin, curved trigger turning to longer type in later production occasionally
8. Squared forward end of trigger slot
9. Handle flat without acclivity to buttstrap
10. Has hammer wheel
11. Serial number range 11020* to 15500.
12. New barrel design with loading lever added. This extends the rear of the barrel, the arbor, frame and triggerguard plate by 1/8th of an inch.



PRE '49 POCKET MODEL (No. 14958)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. DASHED finials 2. Righthanded address 3. The final cylinder | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Roundback triggerguard with thick plate 7. Short, thin, curved trigger but also found on occasion with longer 8. Squared forward end of trigger slot |
|--|---|

At serial number 15500 this revolver becomes the '49 Pocket Model. The only change left to be made occurs in the 22000 range when the DASHES are changed to the new style of BRACKETS.



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BABY DRAGOON IN DETAIL

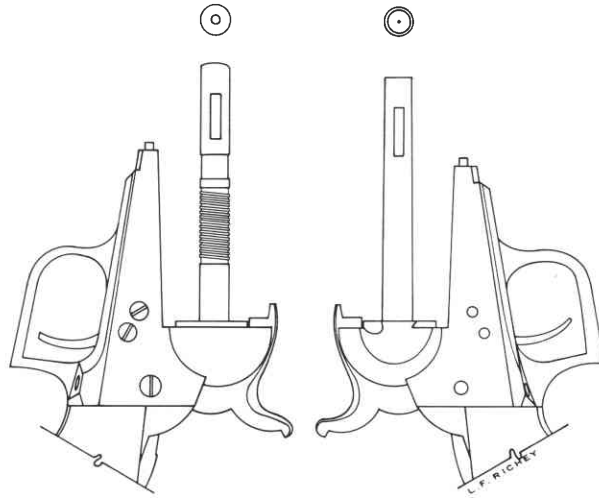
All barrel top flats are stamped with the same two lines: ADDRESS SAM^l COLT / NEW-YORK CITY. The variance comes with the finial used at the ends of this marking, and these have an important place in the determination of models. To a lesser degree, whether the address is stamped left or right handed has significance, especially on earlier pistols. After serial number 11000, the right hand marking prevails.

TOP: A three inch First Model barrel showing no use of finials, stamped left handed and with no hyphen in New York.

SECOND FROM TOP: Second Model with four inch barrel showing the "elaborated bracket" finials, stamped righthanded and now with a hyphen in New-York.

THIRD FROM TOP: A First Transition with five inch barrel showing the "dashed" finials which indicate the change to OVATE cylinder stops and separate it from the standard model. It is in the First Transition that the direction of the address stamping seems to be used haphazardly left or right until serial number 10900*.

BOTTOM: The Squareback '49, six inch barrel, showing the new style of "brackets" used on some guns of this model concurrently with the "dashed" address. These brackets stop at circa 15500 to be picked up again in the 22000 range of 1849 Pocket Models. Between these two ranges, the '49er is marked with dashes. Engraved models in this serial range retain the original address stamping until the brackets are reintroduced, and at that time the script "SAM^l COLT" is used. This barrel also shows the extended bore of guns equipped with a loading lever.



Perhaps, being the only inside part numbered to the gun, the cylinder pin (or arbor, or centerpin) is of particular interest to the collector.

RIGHT: The plain arbor used on all Baby Dragoons without loading levers. The forward end of this pin is hollowed out in the shape of a truncated cone so that it can be used as a tool to seat balls or conicals in the cylinder chamber. This of course required take-down of the barrel and cylinder for loading.

LEFT: With the addition of the hinged loading lever and rammer assembly on the newly designed barrel, the length of the arbor is increased 1/8th inch, and the helicoid groove meant to ease rotation by holding lubricant and catching fouling particles is added. The forward tip is then finished off in a slightly convex shape.

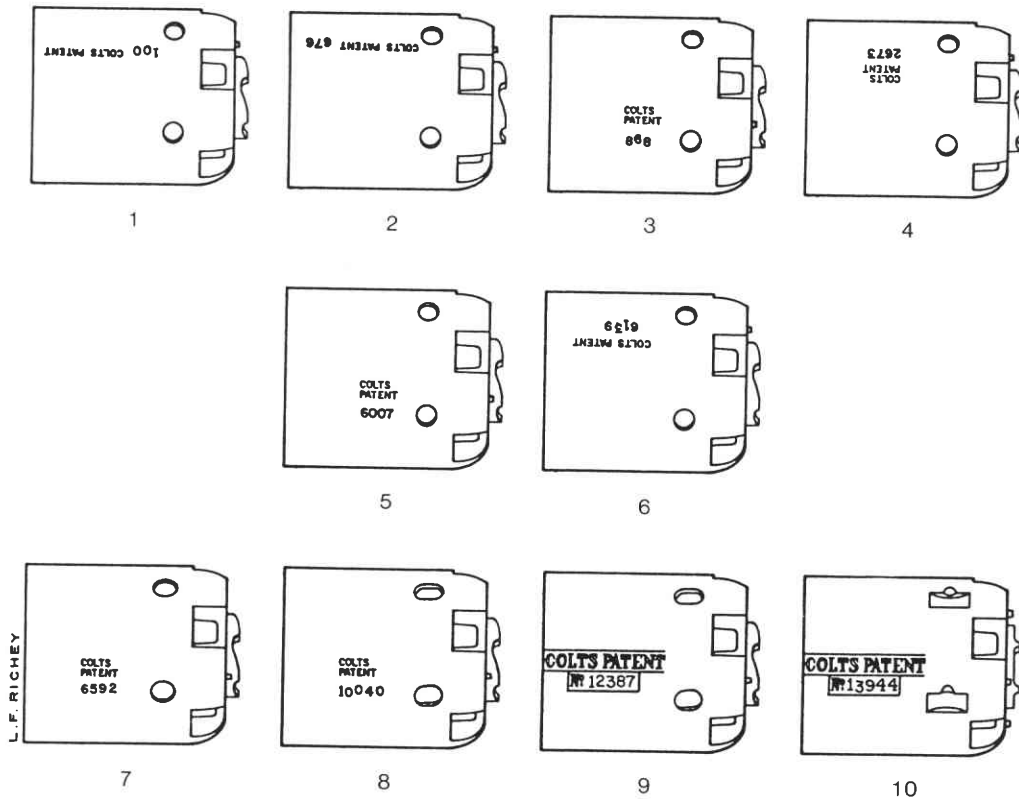
To compensate for the increase in the bore extension, widening the gap between the cylinder face and the barrel lug, the frame and the triggerguard plate are extended forward 1/8th inch. It is at approximately this time that the plate is thickened at the rear screw holes, creating the '49 handle contour with flat butt.



The Cylinder Scene. To honor the Texas Rangers who had done more than anyone else to promote his pistols, both individually and as a group, Sam Colt had a scene roll-embossed on Dragoon cylinders representing a well-known skirmish between the Texas Rangers and Indians. Sam Walker told it best in a letter to Colt dated November 30th, 1846:

In compliance with your request I take great pleasure in giving you my opinion of your revolving patent arms. The pistols which you made for the Texas Navy have been in use by the Rangers for three years, and I can say with confidence that it is the only good improvement that I have seen. The Texans who have learned their value by practical experience, their confidence in them is unbounded so much so that they are willing to engage four times their number. In the summer of 1844 Col. J.C. Hays with 15 men fought about 80 Comanche Indians, boldly attacking them on their own ground, killing and wounding about half their number. Up to this time these daring indians had always supposed themselves superior to us, man to man⁸.

With testimonials such as this to spread the fame of Colt's revolvers, it is little wonder that Sam did much to honor his Texan benefactors. The well-known engraver, W.L. Ormsby, was hired to create the scene for the cylinder of the Dragoon, and his name is visible on it. A smaller portion of this scene was rolled onto the Baby Dragoon cylinders, along with a newly-designed cartouche to surround the COLTS PATENT/(NUMBER) stamping.



Ten stages in the development of Baby Dragoon cylinders.

Cylinders 1 & 2 are first-model-early, stamped lefthanded and with serial number preceding COLTS PATENT at first then following it. There is much overlap in this style of marking. Cylinder 3 is the righthanded-in-three-lines marking of the unusual group of first models from No. 700* to No. 1100*. It then reverses to lefthand-in-three-lines for the standard or 2nd model to No. 6000*, cylinder 4. For the last of the standard models a shift is made to right-hand-in-three-lines from about No. 5000* to No. 6400*, example 5.

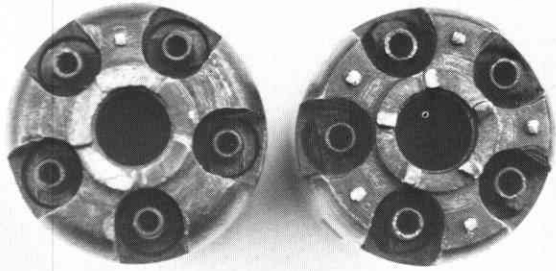
Only one example of cylinder 6 has been found. The marking has again reverted to lefthand but is now in *two lines*. This unusual variation occurs in the area of change from the Standard model to the First Transition model. In all other respects it is a standard model.

Up to this point all stops are round.

Cylinder 7 is that of the First Transition, stamped righthanded in three lines. The stops are now *ovate*, sometimes referred to as slightly oval, and have more of an egg shape. This change to *ovate* stops occurs with the change from brackets on the barrel address to dashes.

The cylinder scene changes in the Second Transition: the earlier, 8, No. 9500 to No. 11600 have the Ranger and Indian scene, and the later, 9, No. 10400 to No. 12434* have the new stagecoach holdup scene. Both have one cylinder safety pin and the new *elongate*, long oval, stops. There is a large overlap (about 500) of pistols using either scene.

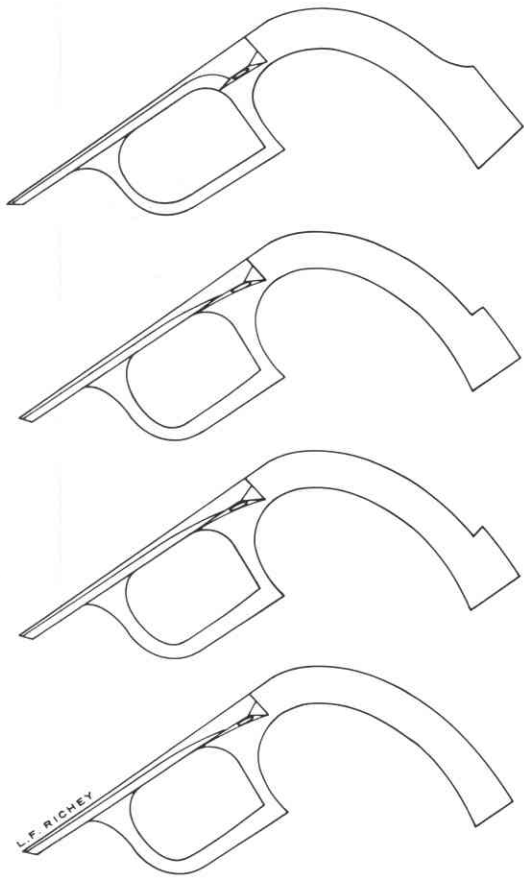
Number 10, the "*final cylinder*" has the stagecoach holdup scene and five safety pins, the new rectangular stops with tapered approaches and a new style of ratchet. This cylinder is found on 3rd transitions, pre-Wells Fargos, squareback '49s, and pre-'49 Pocket models.



Back of cylinders, showing the single and five pin arrangement and the old and new style of ratchets. The one pin was placed in line with COLTS/PATENT/6007 cartouche so that it could be placed under the hammer more easily. Now it is a great help in locating which shoulder has a badly battered-down pin.



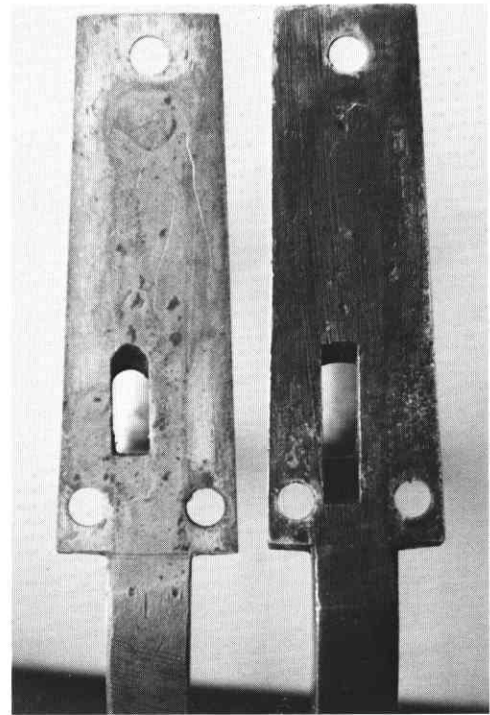
The fourth and final change took place between the Second and Third Transition. The forward part of the trigger slot, which up to this point had always been rounded, is now cut square. This change took place along with the wider guard plate.



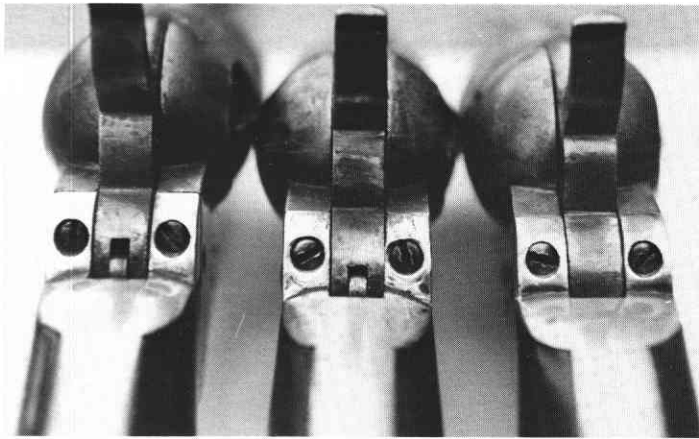
Squareback trigger guards undergo four changes. The bottom drawing shows typical guard used on First models, Standard and Early First Transition with a thin plate and no enlargement for the hammer spring attachment. In the later First Transitions, second up, the base of the forward gripstrap is expanded rearward with a notched contour, providing a more substantial attachment boss for the hammer spring. This is drawn from No. 9331.

One from top is a guard from Second Transition No. 11111, and shows a slight variation in design of the boss, being cut square and not notched.

The top drawing illustrates the triggerguard from Third Transition No. 13944, with the final design of the boss. Note that the guard plate is widened, giving a new contour to the handle of the Baby Dragoon and in turn eliminating acclivity of the butt.

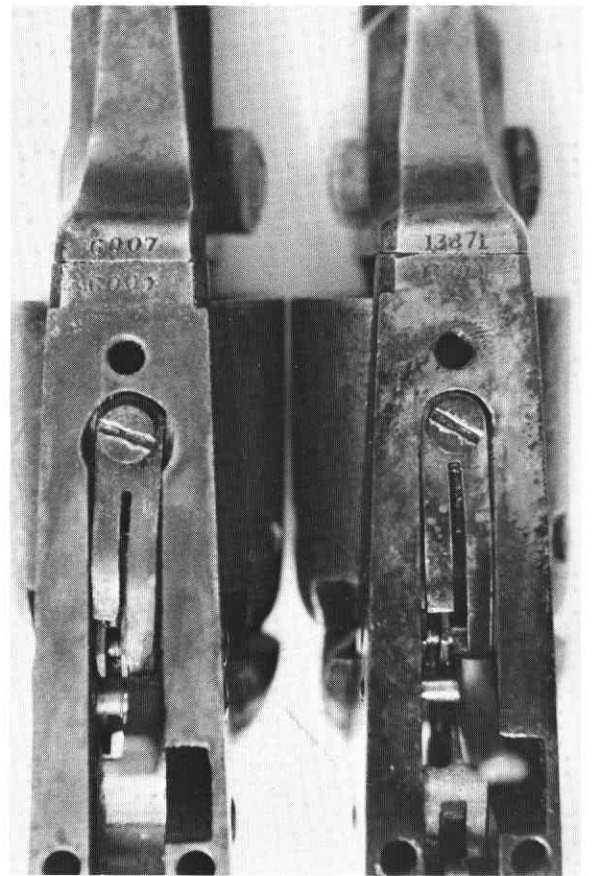


This view of the triggerguard plate shows the increased trigger relief of the square-cut slot.

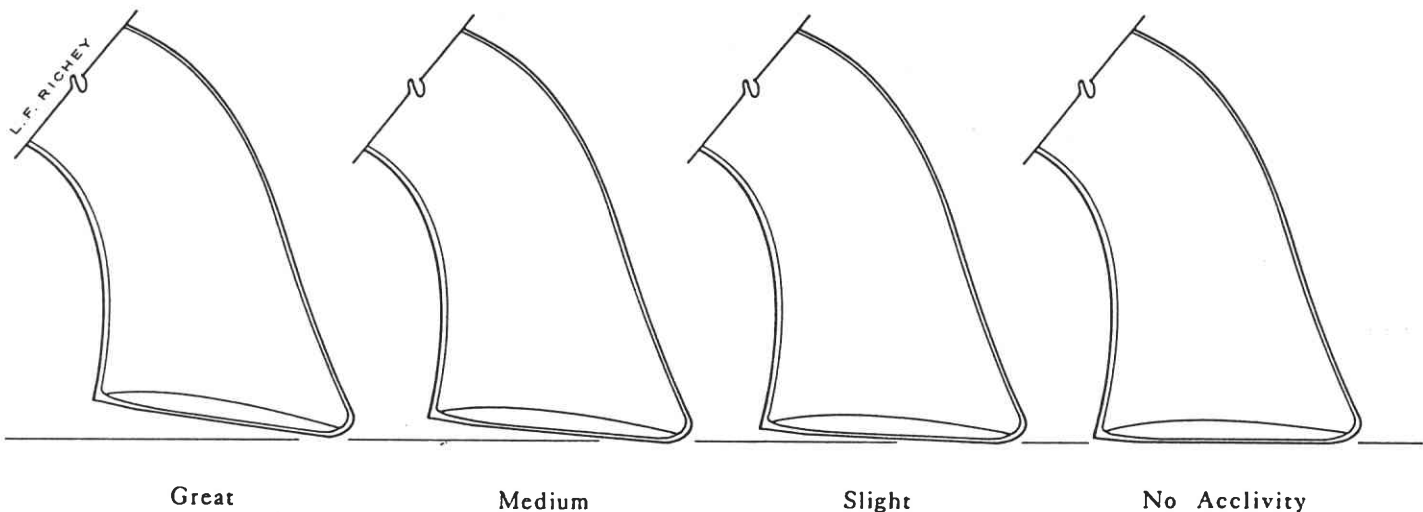


1848 and 1849 Pocket Model hammers. The Baby Dragoon hammer can be seen at right with no wheel and a very small bevel in the backstrap cowling to relieve the hammer in full-cocking. During the period of transition, the hammer wheel was cut lower than on later models, center and left, and the amount of bevel of the cowling at the hammer channel becomes more pronounced.

The hammers can be seen with and without the hammer wheel.



Bottom of the frame showing the "keyhole" cut around the screw retaining the bifurcated bolt-trigger spring (left gun), and the parallel cut of the frame slot in later guns (right). First model revolvers have only a hint of this keyholing, but in the standard model it becomes a firm feature that lasts through the First Transition, ending with the Second Transition.



The upward slope of the buttstrap from heel to toe is a very desirable primitive feature of the Baby Dragoon. It can be defined as *great*, as on First and Standard models, *medium* as found on Standard and First Transitions, *slight* on First and Second Transitions, and no acclivity as in the Third Transition and squareback '49s and all succeeding models.