

Colonel James Cameron —with Compliments of Colonel Colt

By Henry A. Truslow

The inscription on the backstraps of these two civilian model 1860 Colt Army revolvers tells just a part of their story. The recipient, Col. James Cameron, was a brother of Simon Cameron, the first Secretary of War under President Lincoln. The Cameron family was politically influential in Pennsylvania politics and Simon Cameron used this influence to assure Lincoln he had the delegate support needed for the Republican nomination in the election of 1860. In return, Lincoln gave Cameron his choice of a Cabinet position, either as Secretary of State or Secretary of War. Cameron chose the War Department post.

Simon's brother William resided in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania and had vast real estate holdings in Philadelphia as well as in the Lewisburg area. He also owned a bank and, most importantly, the railroad system between Sunbury and Philadelphia known today as the Main Line. Prior to the war, his brother James Cameron had apprenticed as an attorney, worked at the newspaper, and managed the railroad station, all in Sunbury. James and his wife Rebecca also operated two farms, one in Milton, Pennsylvania where they



resided and the other in West Chillisquaque Township, Pennsylvania. These properties will reappear later in this presentation. Rebecca was the daughter of Henry Leman, the famed gun maker from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The Cameron family had migrated to the Sunbury area from Lancaster in the 1840s.



Figure 1. Colt Model 1860 army revolvers presented by Col. Colt to Col. James Cameron of the 79th New York Highlanders.

When the war broke out, Simon would do two things that would influence the family for generations. The first was his accomplishment of getting Congress to reimburse the railroads twenty-five cents a head for each soldier it transported. With his brother William controlling the railroads, it is easy to see how William amassed a fortune during the war. The other action taken by Simon would cost the life of his brother James. Simon pressured Governor Morgan of New York to appoint James to a position in the New York militia. Included in my display is a letter from the New York Adjutant General pointing out that it was not legal for a non-resident to serve in a state militia unit. In spite of this, James Cameron's appointment went through. This commission is also included in the display. I have not yet been able to determine exactly what influence Simon Cameron used on Governor Morgan but the transaction has his fingerprints all over it. Because of these and other hints of corruption, Lincoln was forced by Congress to replace Cameron with Stanton less than a year into his term. Cameron landed on his feet, however, as he became the United States' first Minister (now called Ambassador) to Russia.

On June 20, 1861 the 79th New York Highlanders held a gala party in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the election of James Cameron as their Colonel. Simon gave an eloquent speech at this event, not knowing that in a month and a day James would be killed at the Battle of Bull Run. I suspect that



Figure 2. Painting commissioned by the family after Col. Cameron's death at Bull Run.



Figure 3. Col. Cameron's commission from Gov. Morgan.

it was at this gathering in Washington that Col. Colt presented James Cameron with this pair of pistols and Simon Cameron with the pair of pistols on display at the Civil War Museum in Harrisburg. These are two of the earliest known wartime presentations made by Colt.

On July 21, 1861 James Cameron fell mortally wounded while rallying his men at Bull Run. His horse, sword, and pistols were recovered on the battlefield and sent to Simon Cameron via James Cameron's orderly. They were then sent on to William in Lewisburg. For many years one of the revolvers and the double casing were on display at the Sunbury GAR post. The second revolver was assumed to have been lost and all hope of finding it was lost as well.

Remarkably, after a separation of an unknown length of time, the guns were reunited on November 17, 1988. The odds that the pair would be restored have to be astronomical. By chance, Virgil Mylin stopped in at the Pennsylvania Antique Gun Collectors Association fall show. He was on his way to Long Island to deliver some guns that he had sold and decided at the last minute to stop and check out the show. I happened to be at Ted Dolan's table when Virgil came up and announced that he had a gun presented to James Cameron by Col. Colt. I had never met Virgil and thought right away that he had been put up to play a joke on me by all those in the room who knew I was looking for just such a gun. Only after Virgil showed me the pistol and I showed him the picture of its mate did we realize what had hap-

pened. Virgil's gun had been in the famed Johnnie Basset collection and was found in Indiana. James Cameron had a sister who married a doctor in Indiana, thus leaving Lewisburg. We can only guess that she took one of James' revolvers with her, leaving the other one with William. Along with the gun came family images and other artifacts that lead me to believe that this is how and why the guns were separated.

As an epilog, the Cameron family remained powerful in Pennsylvania politics into the 1920s, with Simon's son J. Donald Cameron influencing much of what went on in Harrisburg. After James' death at Bull Run, his farms were put up for sheriff's sale by the very bank owned by William. Simon and William purchased both properties for dimes on the dollar and sent widow Rebecca packing to Lancaster with her \$300 widow's dower, thus making them two of the pioneer robber barons on the 19th century!

James Cameron's body was buried near the Henry house on the battlefield. The Confederates knew where it was but General Beauregard did not allow the body to be returned to the family for over a year. Many negotiators traveled under flags of truce to try to arrange for its return and most of them ended up held as prisoners of war. A newspaper account gave credit to Confederate General Wade Hampton for shooting Col. Cameron, a charge that General Hampton fiercely denied.