



Figure 1. Lithopane image of Samuel Colt.

Colt Brevete Revolvers: “The Final Chapter in the Colt Story”

By Roy Marcot

During the last 50 years, the history of Samuel Colt and his world famous revolvers has been well documented by accomplished authors in more than six dozen books and hundreds of magazine articles. The high quality of this research has produced a body of knowledge that can be relied upon by collectors and historians alike (Figure 1).

With the advent of Colt's Dragoon revolvers, his 1849 Pockets and his 1851 Navies, it was clear that Samuel Colt's revolvers were an unqualified success. His revolvers gained popularity not only in America, but throughout the western world. Colt firearms were very well made, and they afforded the user a dependable, multishot revolver far better than any other maker's pistol.

COPIES OF COLT REVOLVERS WERE BEING MADE EVERYWHERE

As Colt's revolvers gained in popularity, gunsmiths began making copies of them, some even putting Colt's name on their finished products. Samuel Colt realized that these inferior copies not only hurt his reputation, but meant that customers were paying others for Colt-like revolvers. How can an inventor in Hartford, Connecticut, halt the sale of these guns when they were being made in nearly every civilized country in the world? This was the problem confronting Samuel Colt in the late 1840s and early 1850s (Figure 2).

The answer lay first in securing patents not only in the United States, but in other countries such as England, Belgium, France, Spain, Austria, and Germany. Once the patent was issued, it would be illegal in that country for a gun maker to fabricate a revolver that had one or more Colt features. However, securing all of these patents in many countries was both difficult and costly.

The word “brevete” is a French word meaning patent, and the expression “Colt brevete revolvers” has become a generic term for all copies of original Colts—both those approved by the inventor, and those which were out-in-out infringements. It should be understood that a patent was only good in the country it was granted for a certain period, and once the patent expired, anyone could make firearms using that patented feature without fear of lawsuit.

Even the most advanced collectors of Colt revolvers are often puzzled by these “faux Colt” copies, and they are



not always certain where they fit in the historic Colt scheme. As noted antique arms authority Norm Flayderman has said: “The study of Colt Brevete revolvers is the last chapter in the legacy of Samuel Colt . . . the one that needed to be told to complete the full study of this amazing inventor and his innovative firearms.”

SAMUEL COLT FIGHTS BACK

How to enforce one's patent became quite a challenge. Early on, Samuel Colt realized that the majority of infringements were coming from the gun-making capital of Europe—Liege, Belgium. Because every firearm made or sold in Belgium had to pass through the proof house successfully, Colt rightfully assessed that the proof house was the bottleneck where he could halt the flow of unlicensed Colt-like revolvers.

Colt initiated a plan to allow the infringers to continue making Colt-like revolvers, but they had to pay a royalty of 10 francs for each gun that passed through the Liege proof house. The infringing gun maker had no recourse but to comply with Colt's demands. If they refused to pay the royalty, Colt's Belgian representative, Monsieur Devos-Sera, could legally confiscate the revolver, leaving the gun maker with nothing to show for his labor or materials. An important point was that the pistol was required to meet Colt's demanding standards as a first-class revolver. Substandard



Figure 2. A sampling of different Colt Brevete revolvers.

work would not pass the Colt inspector's examination, and the arms would be confiscated. Lastly, these "authorized" Colt copies could not be exported to the United States.

It was during and immediately following London's Great Exhibition in 1851 that dozens of gun makers in London, Birmingham, and Liege began making imitations of Colt's Pocket and Navy revolvers (Figure 3). The 4-month long exhibition had barely closed its doors when Samuel Colt published this warning (Figure 4): "Every infringer of these arms will be prosecuted according to Law. Gunsmiths wishing to negotiate with the Patentee for the right to manufacture may likewise apply to Monsieur Devos-Sera, Colt's representative at the Rue Petite Tour, Liege, The 20th of September 1851, S. Colt."

Devos-Sera was Colt's sole representative in Belgium and was tasked with communicating with Liege-based craftsmen making Colt revolver parts, and with gun makers assembling the parts into finished revolvers. These arms were then sub-

mitted to the Liege proof house, where they were test fired. Devos-Sera would visit the proof house on a regular basis and visually inspect the revolvers that had already been test fired and stamped with the Belgian ELG-star proof mark. The arms that were up to Colt standards were accepted by Devos-Sera and he marked the top of the barrel with the "COLT / BREVETE" stamp, as per Samuel Colt's directions (Figure 5).

From the winter of 1851 through mid-April 1853, 17,550 francs were collected by Colt's Belgian representative. This means that approximately 1700 Colt Brevete revolvers and revolving rifles were accepted and placed on the market in Belgium. It may never be known how many unauthorized, counterfeit revolvers were made and marketed during this period.

The heart of the problem was that the majority of the Liege gun makers copying his revolvers were small, cottage-industry shops, often with only one gun maker working. This was compounded by the fact that nearly all of the coun-



Figure 3. Samuel Colt had a prominent display of more than 400 firearms at London's Great Exhibition in 1851. His revolvers soon became the most sought-after pistols in England and on the Continent.

terfeit revolvers were unmarked, with no definitive way of knowing which shop made the firearm. And lastly, should the infringer be found out, in all probability they were of very limited means and had little to give up if Colt embarked upon a lengthy and expensive patent lawsuit. Samuel Colt was in a very difficult business situation.

Within a year Colt came up with a new plan to increase his revenues on the Colt Brevete revolvers being made in Belgium. He decided to ship surplus Hartford-made parts (barrels, cylinders, trigger guards, etc.) to Liege and compel the final assembly gun makers to buy them and use them to make up Colt Brevete Pocket and Navy revolvers. Initially, Colt priced the Hartford- (and later London Armory-) produced parts as follows: Colt Pocket Model parts @ 50 francs; Colt Navy Model parts @ 65 francs; and Colt Dragoon Model parts @ 75 francs.

At the Liege proof house, Colt's representative would inspect the finished guns, stamp them, and later accept the 10 franc royalty payment on each. Belgian gun makers protested to no avail, and needed to bide their time until Colt's Belgian patent would expire. Unless the patent was extended, after this date any Belgian gun maker could produce Colt-like revolvers without fear of lawsuit. Overnight, the revolvers would go from being "licensed" to being just "copies" (Figure 6).

In America, Samuel Colt had similar problems with counterfeit copies, but on a smaller scale than he was experiencing overseas. In late May 1851, Samuel Colt filed a lawsuit against the Massachusetts Arms Company alleging that its revolvers (based on the designs of Wesson and Leavitt) infringed on Colt's patents. The primary areas of litigation involved the use of a cylinder rotated by the action of cocking the hammer, a hammer-actuated cylinder locking system, and the cylinder shoulders between the nipple recesses. These were features protected in the United States by Colt's 1836 patent, which had been reissued on October 24, 1848.

The successful outcome of the trial for Colt restricted the defendant and other manufacturers from making

revolving, multichamber firearms with Colt-protected features, until Colt's primary patent expired in 1857.

Although appealed by the infringing company, the conviction was upheld and the Massachusetts Arms Company settled out-of-court for \$15,000, a hefty sum in the early 1850s. Samuel Colt's basic revolver patents gave his Hartford company a virtual monopoly in revolver production in America until 1857. Thereafter, the flood gates opened for dozens of gun makers to copy Colt's designs.

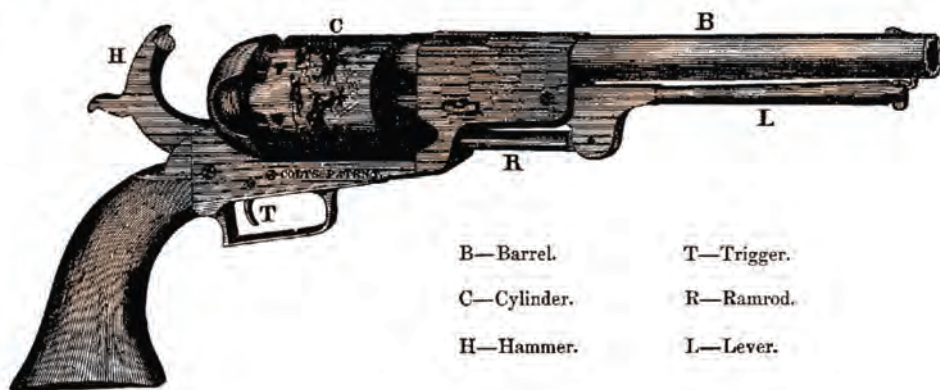
February 25, 1857, was an important date for revolver manufacturers in America, as Samuel Colt's U.S. Patent of 1836 expired after 21 years. Unfortunately for Colt, he was unsuccessful in acquiring a second patent extension for an additional 7 years. Beginning in 1857, any American manufacturer could legally produce Colt-like revolving, multi-chamber firearms, as long as they did not infringe upon

COLT'S PATENT REPEATING PISTOLS,

ARMY, NAVY, AND POCKET SIZES,

MANUFACTURED AT
HARTFORD, CONN.

BEWARE OF COUNTERFEITS AND PATENT INFRINGEMENTS.



B—Barrel.	T—Trigger.
C—Cylinder.	R—Ramrod.
H—Hammer.	L—Lever.

The peculiar excellences of these "Revolvers" are well known. For safety, simplicity, durability, accuracy, and celerity of fire, force of penetration, and security against moisture, they possess important advantages both for public and private service. The barrel is rifle-bore. The hammer, when at full cock, forms the sight by which to take aim, and it is readily raised to full cock by the thumb, with one hand. And—it has been tested by long and actual experience—the arrangement is superior to those weapons in which the hammer is raised by pulling at the trigger, the strength of the pull necessary for this purpose, interfering with the correctness of aim which is of so much importance.

Figure 4. Colt's broadsides featured the stern warning to "beware of counterfeits and patent infringements."



Figure 5. Colt's agent in Belgium, Monsieur Devos-Sera, would inspect all revolvers for features that would infringe on Colt's patents. The maker would pay 10 francs to Colt and would be allowed to market the revolvers in Belgium and Europe, once the barrel was stamped "Colt/Brevete."

Colt's other in-force patents, including one for a loading lever.

How many copies of Colt revolvers were made in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s may never be known, but figures as high as 100,000 guns might be realistic. Just how many of these revolvers were authorized by Colt can only be speculation, as tens of thousands were made in countries throughout the world.

COLLECTING COLT BREVETE REVOLVERS

Until recently, one could acquire a Colt Brevete revolver for a fraction of the cost of a "true" Colt. This has now changed because collectors understand that many of these pistols were authorized by Col. Colt, and are not pirated copies. Most are as well made as their Hartford and London Armory counterparts, and represent the Colt name well.

Colt Brevetes were made in nearly every civilized country of the world in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. These Brevetes include copies of all models originally made in America, including Paterson revolvers, Walkers, Dragoons, Model 1849 pockets, and Model 1851 Navies. In many

instances they are barely distinguishable from the Paterson and Hartford originals.

Norm Flayderman (Figure 7), the dean of antique firearms collecting, believes that the proliferation of information on these Colt Brevete revolvers is now leading to a new Colt collecting field with many examples readily available at most major gun shows. To this we say: "happy collecting." A gallery of Colt Brevete Revolvers is included with this presentation (Figures 8-13).



Figure 6. Two different Colt Brevete Model 1851 revolvers.



Figure 7. Norm Flayderman, known as the Dean of Antique Gun Collecting.



Figure 8. Colt Brevete "Belt Model" Paterson revolver, made in Suhl, Germany (from the Dennis Levett Collection).



Figure 9. Presentation grade Colt Brevete Walker revolver manufactured by N. Gilon of Belgium (Bobby Smith Collection).



Figure 10. Cased pair of Colt Brevete 1st model Dragon revolvers (Henry Stewart Collection, VMI Museum).



Figure 11. Colt Brevete "Baby Dragon" revolver with brass frame (Henry Stewart Collection, VMI Museum).



Figure 12. Engraved and cased Colt Brevete Model 1849 revolver manufactured in Liege, Belgium (William Myers Collection).



Figure 13. One of a pair of presentation cased Colt Brevete Model 1851 2nd model revolvers (Anonymous collection).