

UNION ARMS COMPANY REVOLVERS

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It is impossible to say anything in praise of Union Arms Company revolvers. They are, by and large, about as poor quality a revolver as was ever made in this country. The best, perhaps, that can be said, is that you get quite a lot of old iron for your money when you buy one, for they were and remain relatively an inexpensive arm.

You may well wonder after this glowing introduction why I am talking about them. One reason is that I feel reasonably safe in that I doubt if any person in this distinguished audience has ever stooped so low. Thus, there will be few, if any, to point out the errors I am about to communicate. The other reason is simply curiosity. It so happened that I picked up some three specimens at a gun show some years back -- all of which were different in some particular. Thereafter, whenever at a show I looked around for available specimens and found to my amazement that variations continued to crop up.

This further whetted my curiosity and induced me to undertake to see whether or not it was possible to trace a development and classify the types.

Time has not permitted me to embark on a systematic search or to do research in the archives of historical societies. I make no pretense that I have carried this study to the point where it is in the least definitive. Yet, it may be of some interest to see what in a tentative sort of way are the results to date.

Incidentally, I would be most happy to have data on specimens in your collections.

Little appears to have been written about the Union Arms Company and their products. The name indicates that the company came into existence at a time when the clouds of the approaching conflict between the North and South were beginning to gather. It will be shown later that the Company was organized in 1857.

It was probably formed to capitalize on the growing demand for side arms and the fact that as the basic Colt patents had run out in 1856, a competitively priced percussion weapon might be able to take business away from the Colt Company and other established firms which had high standards of workmanship and finish.

We note that Carey in his American Gun Makers states the Company office was in New York and the plant in Hartford. He gives the life span of the Company as from 1858 to 1865.

Gluckman and Satterlee, in their dictionary of gun makers, on the other hand, state that the Union Arms Company operated a plant in New York where only rifle muskets were made, and another plant (possibly, by implication, a different firm using the same name) at Hartford where hand guns were produced. These editors give the time span as : 1857 - 1861 and later."

These two references, plus Chappell's book on gun prices appear to be about all that has been published on the Company.

Lack of time has prevented a through search into the history and operation of the Company. All that has been done in this connection is to examine the city directories of Hartford and New York City, which are the only two locations mentioned in the standard publications mentioned earlier.

This has been moderately successful, and , I believe, enables us to correct a number of errors now in print.

First, as to New York. A careful examination of Trow's New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1858 (vol. XX) to volume XXVII . . .for the Year Ending May 1864 makes no mention of the Union Arms Company. Thus it would appear that if there were a plant or office in New York, it was of very brief duration, or as is more likely, the sales end was handled by some general agent who also handled other products as well.

However, when it comes to Hartford, Geer's Hartford City Directory for 1858-59 we hit some pay dirt. There on page 363 we find:

"Union Arms Company 2 Central Row
Organized 1857 Capital \$5000.000.
J. A. B. Cutter, President
S. C. Preston, Secretary
J (ames) B. Powell, Treasurer

Directors: Charles Thompson, J. A. B. Cutter, Holbert Taylor, S. H. Smith, Luter G. White, M. W. Chapin, George S. Lincoln, William L. Wright and Mason Smith.
Annual Meeting 3rd Tuesday in February."

A check of the individuals listed produced the following:

Cutter, Thompson, Taylor, S. H. Smith and White are not listed and thus presumably were not residents of Hartford.

Of those Directors living in Hartford, we found that Preston was a physician and surgeon, Powell was cashier of the Mercantile Bank, Chapin was a merchant, Lincoln was the head of the Phoenix Iron Foundry located at 54-60 Arch Street where they operated as iron founders, machinists and tool builders, Wright was a painter and Mason Smith was a partner in the firm of Smith, Blodgett & Co., carmen (def. one of a crew of a streetcar or the like, one who drives a car or cart.)

The Union Arms Company was again and for the last time listed in the Directory for 1859-1860 with no changes. Subsequent Directories for the years 1860-1861, 1861-1862, 1862-1863, and 1863-1864 make no mention of the firm.

Thus it appears fairly certain that the company had a brief life from some undertermined month in 1857 and had ceased to exist by 1861 at the latest and possibly as early as 1859. Thus the company may have been producing arms for as little as two years and at the most for a period of four.

The Directory also shows there may have been some connection between the Union Arms Company and the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company, as the latter also had an office at the same location and also had two Directors in common: S. C. Preston and M. W. Chapin.

It would appear that the die stamped "N. Y." which appears on one model, at least of the Union revolvers, has even less meaning than Colt's use of the N. Y. address on his handguns.

It is now time to launch forth into the Union Arms Company "line". What did they make? It would appear that they manufactured:

31 caliber single shot double action percussion pistols, 31 caliber 6 shot percussion pepperbox revolvers, 31 caliber 5 shot percussion revolvers, 31 caliber 6 shot percussion revolvers, 36 caliber 6 shot percussion revolvers and 1861 U. S. Contract rifle muskets.

We may add now a few generalities:

All the pistols and revolvers probably were made in a variety of barrel lengths.

All are percussion; no cartridge weapons are known.

No specimen has been found with a rolled on die stamped engraving on the cylinder.

It would appear POSSIBLE that the serial numbers on the revolvers run from #1 to over #13,000 and that only one series was used in the entire Union production, whatever the model. Actual serials recorded range from #733 to #12,858 but I have no serials recorded for single shot pistols, pepperbox revolvers or 36 caliber revolvers. however, on the 31 caliber revolvers, at least, a consistent evolution can be traced.



MODEL I
UNION ARMS CO. REVOLVER, SERIAL 733.
31 CALIBER, 5 SHOTS

This model has the lowest serial #733 so far recorded, and it is for that reason I am classifying it as model I.

It may exist in other barrel lengths but I have only seen it in 4".

The specimen examined has the following characteristics:

Barrel: round, rifled with five grooves, cylinder: semi-fluted, five shot, steel trigger guard, marked on barrel: Union Arms Co., N. Y. on one line, sight: brass pin, scroll engraved frame, wood grips held by screw through grips, has tension screw for adjusting main spring, has barrel wedge,

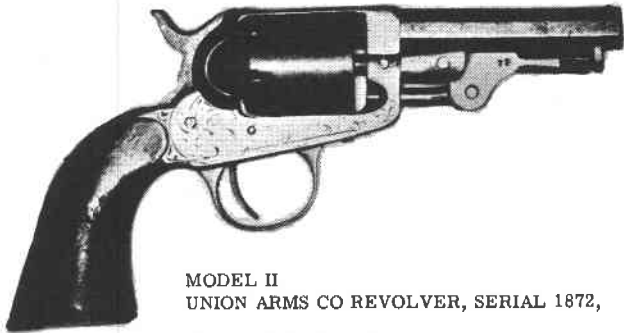
loading lever has ball and socket latch, no strap over the cylinder.

The serial 733 appears on frame inside grips, on stud loading lever latch, on underside of barrel, on loading lever and rammer, on barrel wedge and on side plate. The cylinder is stamped 852.

The revolver is in every way an identical copy of the Bacon, even to the knurling on the hammer spur and the engraving on the frame.

Another revolver in the writer's collection has identical features, except for the marking on the barrel: 'B. J. HART & BRO N Y' which has the serial 439. It also has five grooves in the rifled barrel.

This Union revolver is the best in point of workmanship of any produced by that firm as shown by the tension screw, a refinement that does not again appear on later models, and the care with which the various parts are fitted.



MODEL II
UNION ARMS CO REVOLVER, SERIAL 1872,
31 CALIBER, 5 SHOT

MODEL II This model has a range of serials from #1782 to #3328 as presently recorded..

It is a completely different model from Model I.

It has these characteristics:

Barrel: octagonal, rifled with six grooves, common to all later models, cylinder: straight, five shot, .31 caliber, Brass trigger guard, marked on barrel: "THE UNION/ARMS CO." on two lines, sight: brass pin, engraved frame with top strap which has an engraved star on the flat, wood grips with iron escutcheons, loading lever retained by Colt Navy-type sliding latch, locking screw extends through pin and frame, trigger

long and slender and has top strap over the cylinder.

#1872 has a refinement not present in #1782 in that it has safety recesses in the back of the cylinder between the nipples, a feature common to all subsequent models.

This model closely resembles the Whitney 31 caliber pocket model.

The serial number is no longer common to all parts, but the principal serial is found on the frame ahead of the trigger guard. The two specimen examined bear these marks:

1782 on frame	1872 on frame
24 on frame under grips	11 on frame under grips
8 on barrel under loading lever	(not visible)
82 on loading lever	72 on loading lever
82 on cylinder	1(?) on cylinder

Barrel lengths noted are 31/2" and 41/2".

MODEL II A. There is a minor variation of Model II which justifies its designation as Model II A.

These modifications are (1) that the trigger guard is iron with a slight engraved decoration; (2) the screw escutcheons joining the grips are of brass and the screw of smaller size; (3) the barrel is an odd length 4-5/16" - probably intended for 4-1/4"; (4) there is engraving also on the flat of the frame where it encircles the barrel. The only specimen examined has the serial #3328.

MODEL III. The range of serials for this model, as now known, range from \$4212 to #8261.

This model is similar to the preceding from which it differs most noticeably in having a semi-fluted cylinder.

The characteristics are: barrel: octagonal rifled with six grooves, cylinder: semi-fluted, five shot, iron trigger guard, marked on barrel: "THE UNION/ARMS CO." in two lines, sight: brass pin, frame: plain, wood grips with brass escutcheons for screw and a loading lever with Colt Navy-type latch. The screw holding the rammer assembly does not pass completely through the cylinder pin and frame as in Models II and II A. It seats in a hole in the cylinder pin.

The serial numbers appear on frame before trigger guard

	4212	4701
on loading lever (side)	12	01
on cylinder	12/-	01
on cylinder pin	12	68 or 89
on barrel	12/-	71
on frame under grips	18	204
Two different barrel lengths are known: 4-3/16", 5-1/4"		



MODEL IIIA
UNION ARMS CO. REVOLVER,
SERIAL 6697, 31 CALIBER, 5 SHOT

MODEL III A. Differs from Model III only in having (1) a brass plate into which the trigger guard is set; (2) a sighting groove in the flat over the cylinder. The serial number of the Specimen examined is #6697. The barrel length of this sample 6-1/4" and is the only specimen so far noted with this length.

MODEL III B. Differs from Model III A in having a brass trigger guard as well as a brass trigger guard plate. Serial numbers for this variation are: #6776, #8261.

The barrel lengths of the two specimens examined are 4" and 4-3/8".



MODEL IV
UNION ARMS CO. REVOLVER,
SERIAL 12858, 31 CALIBER, 6 SHOT

MODEL IV. The range of serials for this model range from #10,575 to #12,858.

The model from its high serial (#12,858) may possibly be the last model in the Union line of 31 caliber revolvers.

Its characteristics are: tapered round barrel, 4-5/16", not threaded between frame and cylinder, cylinder straight. The cylinder stops on this model only are placed close to the nipples and line up with the corner of the nipple recesses, six shot. This is the only six shot 31 caliber model so far located, brass trigger guard, marked on barrel: "THE UNION ARMS

CO." on one line, sight: brass pin, frame: plain, wood grips held by screw through grips. These grips are thicker, are shaped at top and are unlike any other Union grips encountered. Loading lever has Colt Navy-type latch and is of a different and lighter shape than earlier models. Its two elements also are rivetted instead of screwed together. The trigger is heavier. The strap over the cylinder is a sighting groove as in Model III A.

MODEL V. 36 caliber percussion revolver.

The information on this model is taken from Chappel and has not been verified. Caliber 36, 6 shot, Single action, 7.875" rifled octagonal barrel, marked on barrel: UNION ARMS CO., sight brass cone, V notch rear sight in frame, grips wood, trigger guard brass, finish: blued barrel, cylinder frame, and hammer and also cone in 5.5" barrel.

MODEL VI. Percussion Pepperbox Revolver. The information on this model has been taken from Chappel and has not been verified. Caliber 31, 6 shot, Barrel 3.75", marks on barrel; THE UNION/ARMS CO., on two lines, flat top hammer and also with 2" barrel.

Lewis Winant, Pepperbox Firearms, p. 52 states that it is uncertain whether or not this arm was actually made by the Union Arms Co. of Harford. He also describes it as externally like an Allen Pepperbox.

A specimen generously lent by Sam E. Smith differs from that just described in being marked: The Union arms Co. in two lines on the top of the hammer.

It bears two serials: 205 and 86. They both appear on the frame inside the grip, one on each side. Serial number 205 also appears in pencil on the grips, 86 appears on the cylinder on the nipple recess and also "M" or "W", 86 appears on the trigger, no other marks are visible. The finish is blued and both the frame and the nipple shield are engraved.

Because of the low (86/205) serial recorded the pepperbox probably precedes the standard type revolver. Probably it should be classified as Model I.

MODEL VII. Single shot pistol. The information on this model has been taken from Chappell and has not been verified. Caliber 31, double action, barrel: 2' round-octagonal, pepperbox hammer, marked: UNION ARMS CO. and also with 4' barrel.

It is interesting to observe that with the exception of Model I the numbers on the frame inside the grips on no other model ever has any relation to the serial number on the frame forward of the trigger guard.

Finally, passing mention must be made, to complete the record, that reference works record a 1861 model U. S: Contract rifled musket as the product of a Union Arms Company.

It is stated that this company received a contract on Nov. 15, 1861 for 25,000 stand at \$20,000.

Satterlee and Gluckman state (I believe incorrectly) that only three were delivered. But, at least, we know it is one of the scarciest contract muskets.

It is a question if it was made by the same company. The specimen in my collection is clearly dated both on lock and barrel 1863. The lock plate is marked U. A. CO. New York and the stock has inspectors stamps. Long before that date the company was supposedly defunct. How does one explain this?