

# The Rebel Sharps

by: William B. Floyd

When George Missbach called on me to present a paper at this meeting, my first reaction was "how can I present a paper on a story that is yet incomplete and so much to be turned up?" I realized that all information available might take a lifetime to compile. Until 1955, the best and only work done on the rebel Sharps was published in 1944 by Richard Stuart and Claude Fuller, entitled *Firearms of the Confederacy*. This excellent piece of work, unfortunately, was incomplete but served as a basis for further research. In the fall of 1955 additional work was presented by, Bill Albaugh in the *Texas Gun Collector*, the official publication of the Texas Gun Collectors Assn. Bill did some fine research in both the Official Records and the National Archives, and filled in some of the missing pieces. Some of the articles were included in his book, *Confederate Arms*, published in 1957. It was from these works that I began my study to help in a small way to complete the story.

Having in my collection several Rebel Sharps with wide variations, I felt this subject needed more work and I began examining other guns in collections and museums as well as purchasing all I could find available at a reasonable price. The more I became involved, the more I wanted to know. Only when I visited the National Archives did I start to turn up needed information.

As most of you know, the South was ill prepared to manufacture military firearms and when the call went out for offers there were numerous persons seeking contracts. One such person was Samuel C. Robinson of Richmond, Va., prominent businessman with much property. One of these was the Belvedere Lumber and Planing Mills that later furnished much lumber to the Confederate Government. Due to his high prices, the C. S. Government bought his stock and leased the property and machinery. Another piece of property, a factory with water power, was leased to the Government for \$1,000 per year in 1861, until the end of the war. Robinson had still another building, a machine shop, and as early as 1861 was altering military muskets and pistols from flintlock to percussion for the Richmond Armory. He also supplied parts to other gunsmiths, as well as to the states of Virginia and North Carolina, for such conversions. S. C. Robinson at first offered to the State of Virginia to manufacture revolvers of the Whitney pattern at \$20.00 each and was unanimously accepted at the proceedings of the Advisory Council of the State of Virginia on April 27, 1861. There are no records to show if any were ever manufactured. Robinson continued to alter Flintlocks and make parts into early 1862. Desperate need for cavalry breechloading carbines caused the C. S. Government to seek contracts where they could and such a contract was made with Robinson, who had



formed the S. C. Robinson Arms Manufactory. A carbine of the Sharps pattern, described by Col. Josiah Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance, CSA as "the best cavalry arm we had", was called for in the contract and Robinson rushed through the manufacturing of the machinery" from the stumps up", capable of turning out 100 arms per day. As can be expected from such a rush venture, the arms were not perfect due to the lack of experience. The C. S. Government, being new at this thing, also had no rigid guidelines for Robinson to follow; therefore, guns were assembled with too short nipples so that the rim of the cap rested on the squares of the cones and kept the hammers from striking a sound blow on the cap. Another complaint was the failure of the workmen to drill the vent holes through. Most of these problems could have been solved with a good inspector, and after the first delivery in November of 1862, Col. Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance, had Mr. Solomon Adams, Master Armorer at the Richmond Armory, work with Mr. Robinson in inspecting his arms and developing improvements. He was of such help that Robinson wrote Gorgas on November 29th that his second group of carbines were ready and asked that Mr. Adams again inspect them, since he wanted to turn out a good arm. He also asked that an inspector be called upon without troublesome forms in order to speed up inspecting. We can find no record that such an inspector was named and herein lies the basis for the problems that created such unhappy experience. The problem grew out of proportion when 60 carbines were shipped to the 4th Va. Cavalry, Lees Brigade. Due to improper instructions, several guns misfired and when tried again, the forearms split from loose powder exploding underneath them. On this same date two letters were written that explain what happened. First a Lt. N. D. Morris wrote a letter to the Richmond Whig, a newspaper, and this started the uproar. Quote "On March 30, 1863 there appeared in this paper, under

the caption "An Outrage", an article which is familiar to many, for those who do not recall Lt. Morris's spleen, here is a sample: "A Lieutenant of Cavalry writes to us from Culpeper CH, March 23 as follows: 'Forty new Sharps rifles, with Richmond stamp on them were handed yesterday to my company. The men ordered to test them. Nine were fired, and seven of the nine burst.'" The lieutenant suggests that the manufacturers of these arms be sent to the field, where "they can be furnished with Yankee sabers, while the iron they are wasting can be used for farming implements". You can imagine what happened when this appeared — letters to everyone connected with the Army and Government.

On the same date, another letter was written, as shown by the *first slide*. Hd. Qtrs. Lees Cav. Brigade, Culpeper CH, March 23, 1863, letter to Col. J. Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance, Richmond, Va. . . . Colonel: I have the honor to report that out of a lot of 60 carbines received from the Richmond Arsenal about three weeks ago and manufactured by S. C. Robinson, 40 out of the 60 have been tested and condemned as unfit for the service. The great fault about them is that after they are fired two or three times that part of the stock of the gun just under the breach bursts and splits. Many of them will not burst a cap until the second trial.

I have sent the unserviceable carbines to Col. Stansburys address, Very Resp. your obt. servant \_\_\_\_\_ for Ord. Off. Lee's Brigade."

You will note that this letter does not say the gun burst, only the stock forearm. The article in the Whig was brought to the attention of Gen. R. E. Lee who on June 8th wrote Col. Gorgas that it had been reported to him the carbines made in Richmond were "so defective as to be demoralizing to our men."

Prior to this, Capt. Downer, Supt. C. S. Armory — Richmond writes on April 3, 1863: "My attention has been called to an extrease from a communication to the Whig newspaper in relation to carbines said to have been tested by order in a cavalry company of which it is said: 'Of 9 fired, 7 bursted'. I have no hesitation in saying that there is a misunderstanding or a mistake of some kind in this statement. In the first place this being a breech loading arm, it is impossible to introduce a sufficient charge of ammunition into the gun to burst it unless the muzzle is plugged up intentionally. The barrel of the gun is chambered to a certain distance from the breech, the distance being just sufficient to allow the insertion of a ball cartridge and it is impossible to get more than one cartridge into the gun. Again, these barrels are proven with a charge five times greater than the service charge before they are passed by the inspector. I have no doubt the injury to the arms has arisen from the ignorance of the men in handling a weapon which was new to them, and in which they have been uninstructed by their officers. The injury to these guns as far as I have seen any of them, and I believe that they have all been returned here, occurs as follows:

When the men are instructed to fire these arms, they do not ascertain before loading them that the vent (nipple) is

clear, which is not apt to be the case in a new arm as the oil we are compelled to use is apt to gum and stop up the vent.

They load their arm and snap the cap without effect. A portion of the powder from the cartridge falls into the gas chamber in the slide (breech). They hold their gun muzzle down to prevent the powder from spilling at the breech and draw the slide down; by that means empty the powder remaining in the gas chamber into the mortice for the crank spring in the forestock under the barrel."

They get the vent clear and fire their gun after closing the breech and the flash from the cap communicating with the powder in the mortice explodes, and bursts a part of the stock.

This is an unavoidable fault connected with the new gas check. The same accident happens to the original Sharps carbine in the hands of 'greenmen'.

This can be remedied by going back to the old fashioned smooth slide without a gas chamber and making the vent hole fuller. We would not get so perfect a gas tight joint but the difficulty of having a portion of the powder falling into the slide would be remedied.

There can be no responsibility attached to the manufacturer of this arm, Mr. Robinson, for this fault, as it is incidental to the model. Mr. Robinson has shown a persevering energy in getting up the machinery for the manufacture of these carbines, which has been of great advantage to the Government.

The work on the machinery for this manufacturer was commenced about one year ago and had been pushed on since then with most untiring energy against the advice of friends, and part of the time within hearing of the guns of the enemy, until now the Government is in possession of the manufactory and able to turn out 20 to 30 finished carbines per day.

I beg to suggest that officers be instructed when testing these carbines in the future to ascertain before loading that the vent is clear, and instruct the men to avoid as much as possible drawing down the slide after the charge is inserted in the arm. If the vent is kept clear, the gun will always fire, and if proper care is taken, no accident will ever happen from it. I would also suggest that Lieut. N. D. Morris, of Capt. McKinney's Company, 4th Va. Cavalry, be notified to communicate with the department through his proper officers, rather than through the columns of the newspaper."

This sums up the problem.

Robinson's production was excellent as shown by the next *four slides*, but his price had increased from \$65 to \$75 per carbine. This, plus all the bad publicity, caused the Confederate Government to start negotiating to purchase the Robinson Factory. Robinson, being a shrewd business man, used a very confusing approach in arriving at a price for his factory. After much dickering, he finally settled for the sum of \$357,500 for his machinery, which was to take effect the 28th of Feb. 1863 as shown by the next slide. Later he requested and received extra money for completion of machinery that was not finished at the time of the

agreement. Further, he received between \$50,000 and \$60,000 for parts and supplies. As shown by the next slide, he rented the property to the C. S. Government for \$8,000 per year, payable quarterly. He also rented the planing mill and building for \$10,000 per year, as shown by the next *two slides*.

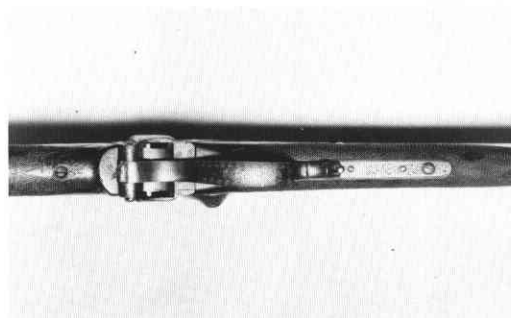
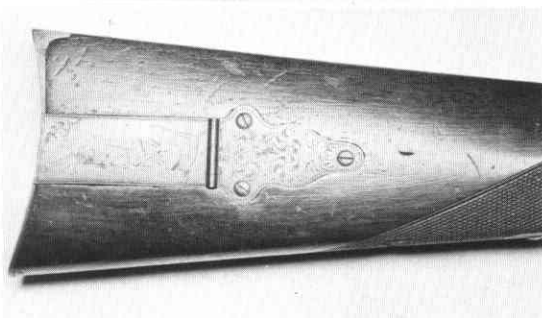
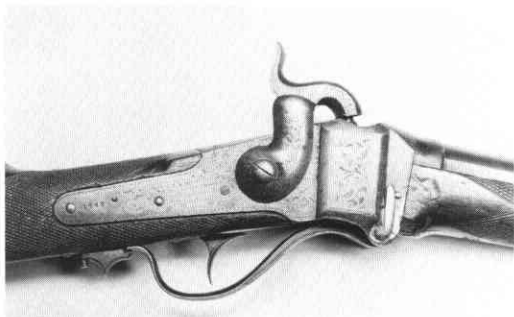
During his short venture in manufacturing Sharps Car- bines, Robinson produced about 1900 carbines. The high- est known serial number with his name is 1889. The lowest number without his name is 1925. There seems to be much confusion concerning how many carbines were turned out by the C. S. Government. The highest known serial num- ber is 5156. Subtract the approximate 1900 made by Rob- inson and you have about 3256 left. Major W. S. Downer, Supt. C. S. Armory, Richmond, states that "The number of Sharps rifles delivered to the MSK is not as large as it might have been. More attention having of late been paid to getting up the tools and machinery for the new carbine approved by Gen. Lee. The number of parts on hand are equal to 948. At the present price which 2910 new and 877 repaired and delivered to the MSK is 3735 as the result of

the labor in this establishment from the 1st of March to the 30th of Nov. 1863, with this additional fact that a saving in these arms amounting to \$50,000 has been effected by the purchase from Mr. S. C. Robinson." This leaves slightly over 3000 the number of carbines produced in the nine months by the C. S. Ordnance. There exists some confu- sion since some carbines in collections are reported to have serial numbers beginning with 8. The next *two slides* will show how the broken dies of the 3 looks so much like an 8.

What kind of a gun was the Rebel Sharps? One in my collection is serial number 73, with TBM-1865 carved in the stock. This gun shows much wear and indicates that it held up well. Also I have a number 11 with iron band and buttplate. How many exist today? Out of the little over 5000 made, only about 100 are found in collections and museums. There were some differences between the Yan- kee and the Rebel as well as differences between the Con- federate productions. Let's look now at some slides show- ing these comparisons .....

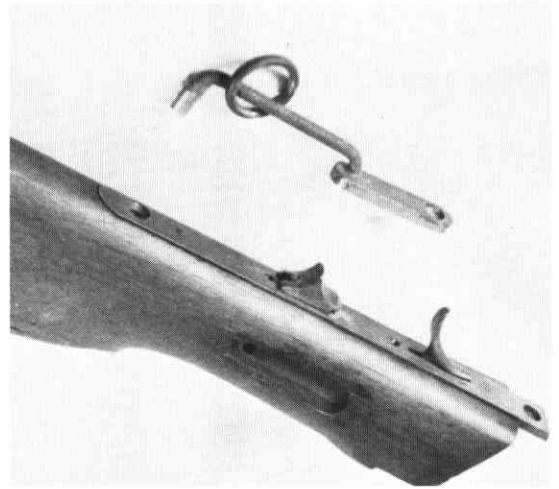


The rare "Van Renssalaer" engraved Confederate Sharps rifle. Full stock 25 inch barrel, patch box; # 1642 from the M. Clif- ford Young collection.

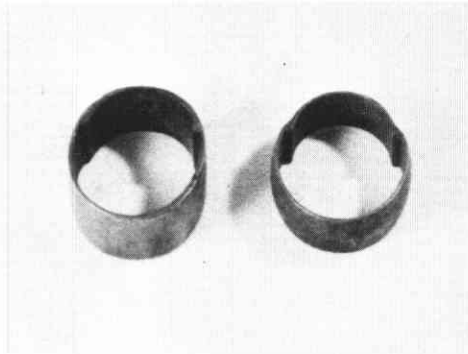




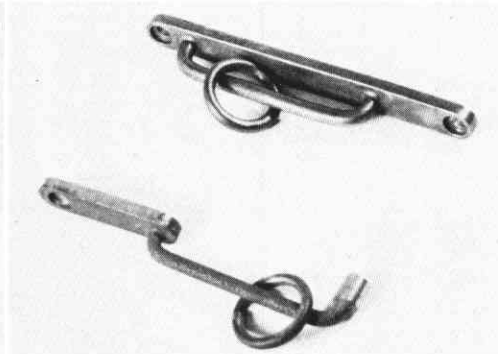
C. S. Sharps sling bar and recess



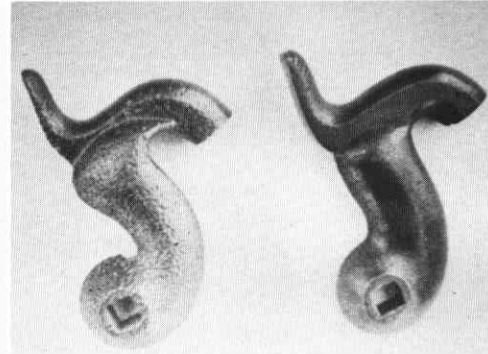
U.S. Sharps sling bar and recess



C. S. (Left) and U.S. front bands, C.S. can be brass or iron



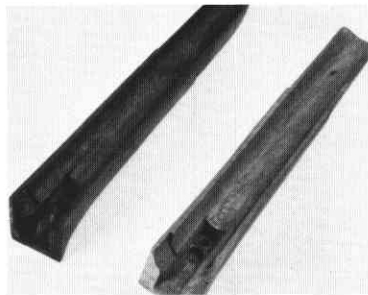
Comparison of Confederate (Top) and U.S. sling bars



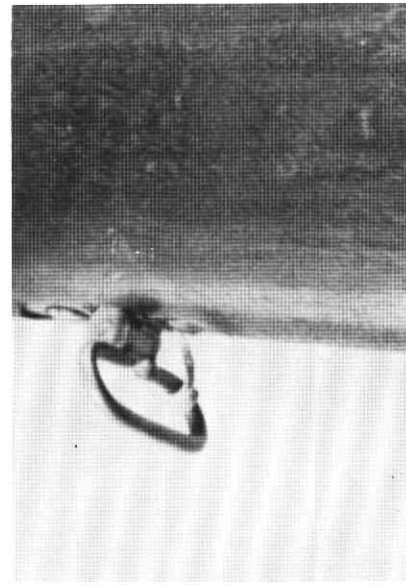
U.S. (Left) and C.S. carbine hammers



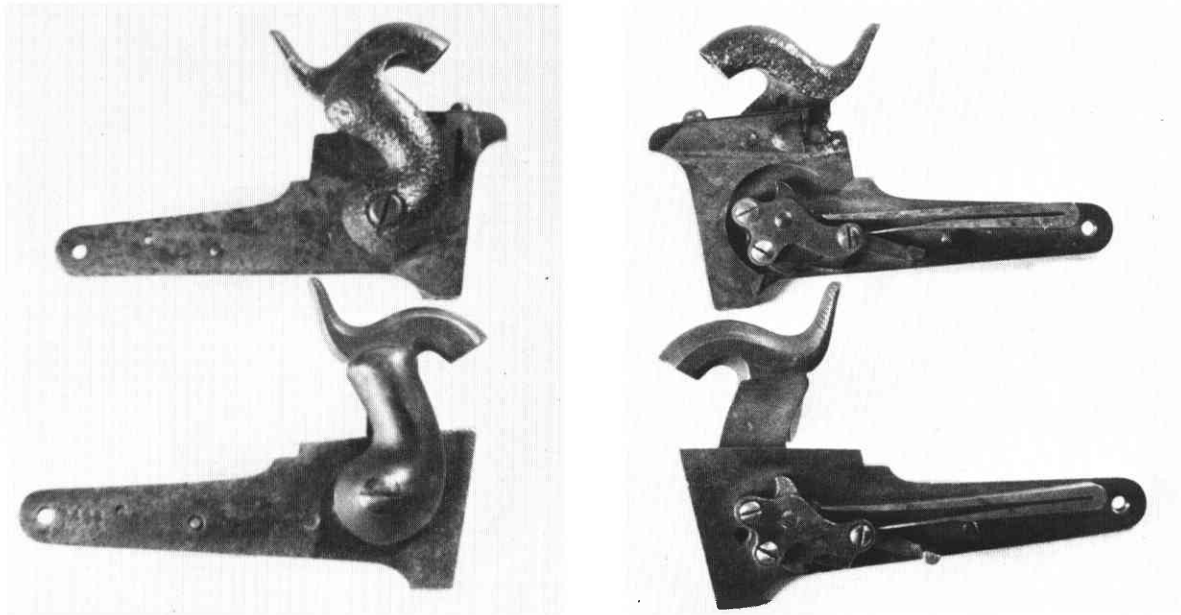
View of rifling in C.S. Sharps Carbine



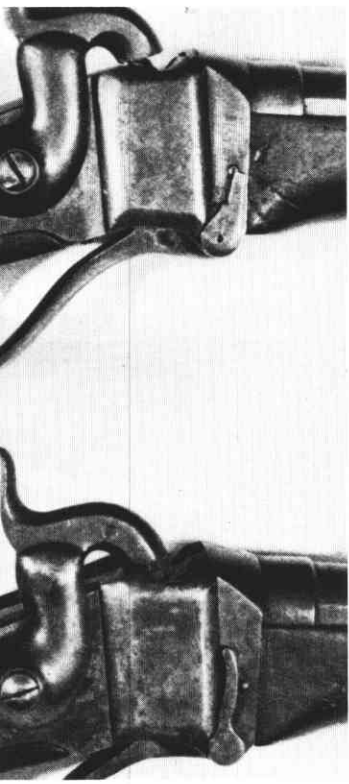
Forearm construction on C.S. (Left) and U.S. carbine forearms



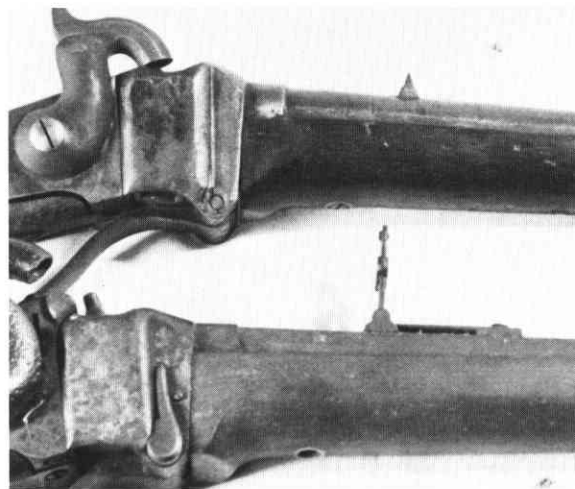
Rear sling swivel on C.S. carbine not found on U.S. model



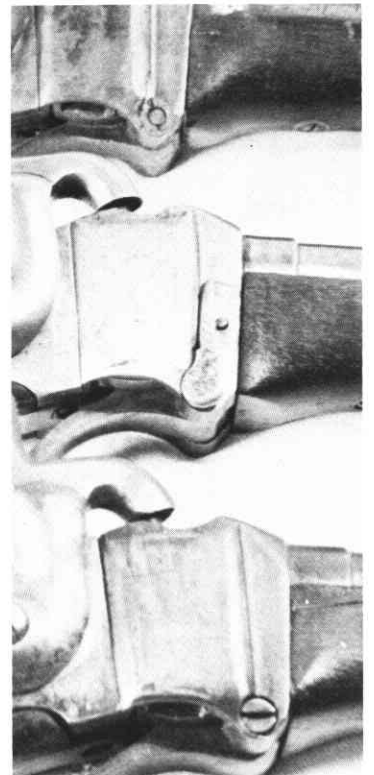
Comparison of U.S. (*Top*) and C.S. Sharps carbine locks



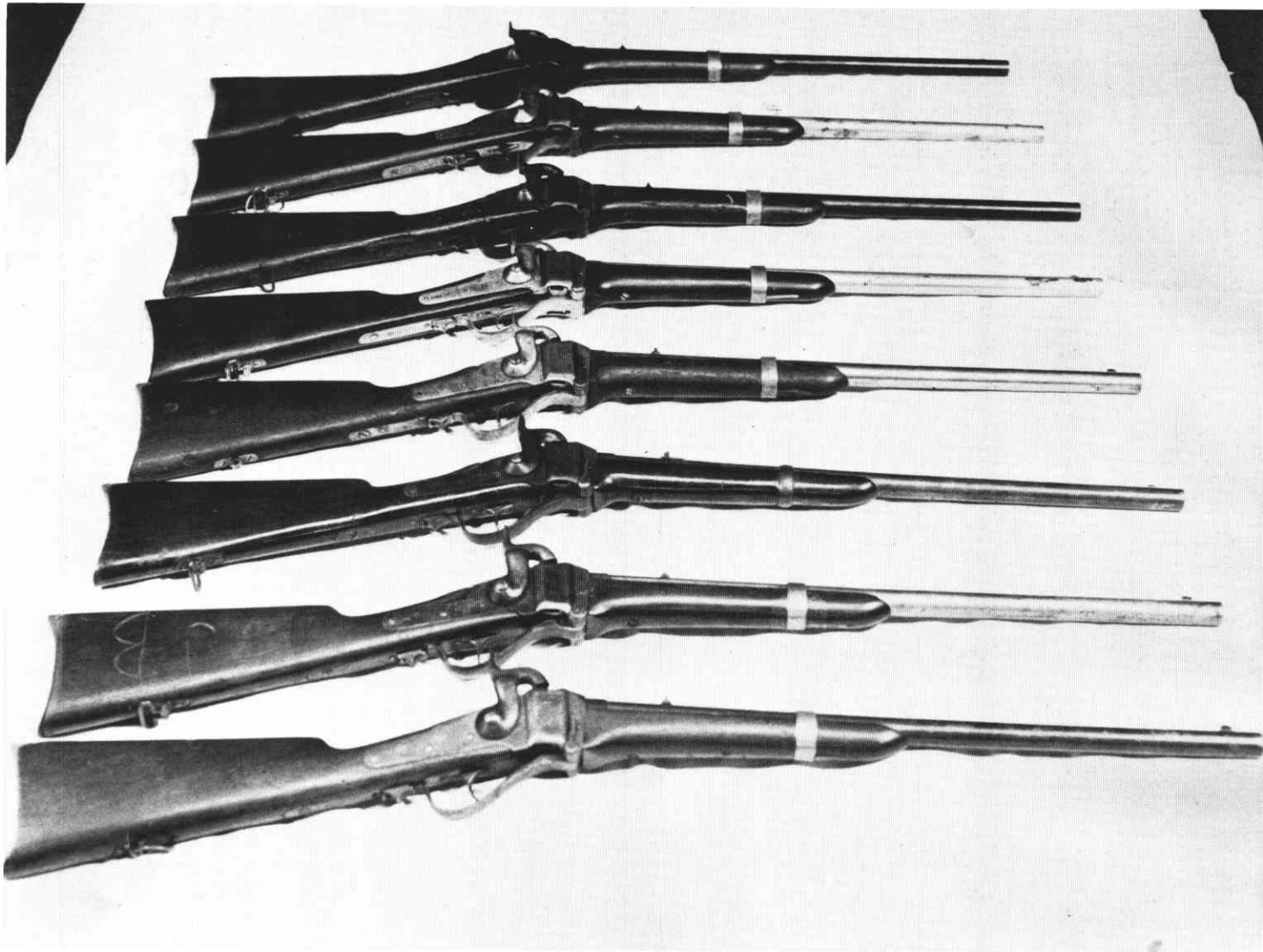
Variation of C.S. and U.S. breeches.



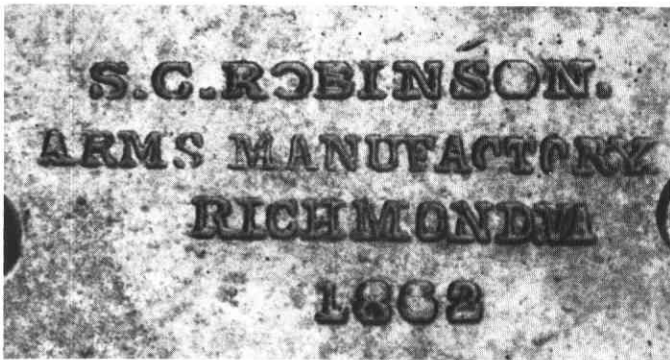
Comparison of C.S. (*Top*) and U.S. rear sights.



Variations in C.S. Sharps block pins. Top and bottom not milled for standard pin.



Eight Confederate Sharps Carbines



Note broken dies in this Robinson Stamp



"3" looks like "8" in C.S. serial number.

