

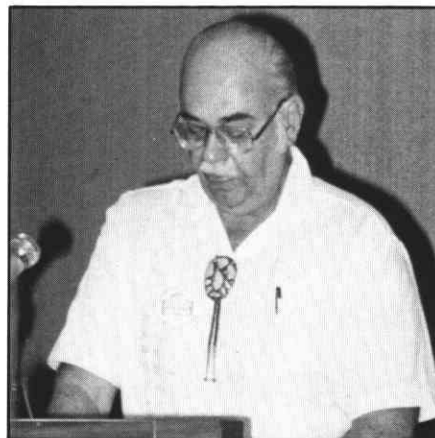
Ethan Allen's Dragoon Pepperboxes

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Several books and articles have been written containing information on Allen's Pepperbox Arms. In all cases an attempt was made to classify and cover the complete line of pepperboxes. I would like to discuss only the dragoon models that Allen produced. I will begin with Grafton, then Norwich and finally Worcester manufactory. I have attempted to arrange them in as nearly perfect a sequence of production as possible.

The information presented here was developed from a study of my 26 pieces, the 25 pieces in the Philip Van Cleave collection and by cross-comparing with the standard size pepperboxes and bar-hammer single shots in my collection.

The dating of any Allen Arms is a rather difficult procedure, since very little daily production information from the Allen shops has survived. Serial numbers mean very little; they were actually batch numbers used to separate the parts during the finishing process and final assembly. Whatever types of arms being produced at that particular time were indiscriminately numbered as they went to the finishing room. We are left, therefore, with



the observation of such differences as frame castings, interior mechanics, types of barrels, die stampings, types of sideplates, grip straps and the various types of engraving used.

The 26 pieces that we will examine in some cases differ only in minor details, such as type of grips and agent markings; but I felt that these subtle differences also merit recognition as they do indicate rarity.

Grafton Production



The first Grafton dragoon, serial 12, discussed overleaf.

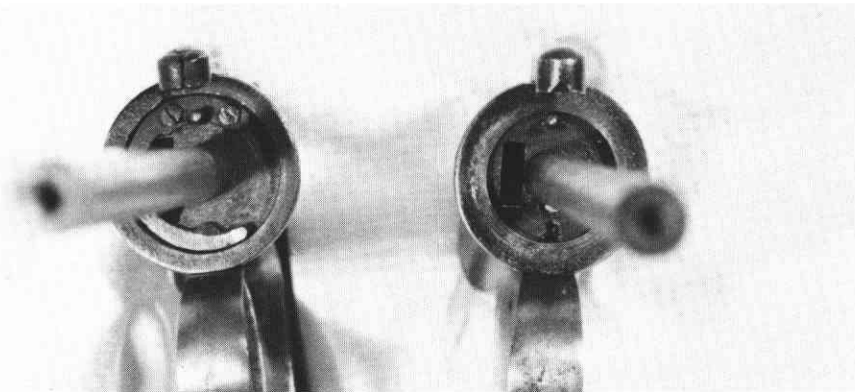
In the later part of 1838 Allen began producing pepperbox revolvers beginning with the 28 caliber dainty Grafton model, then the standard size Grafton and finally the Grafton Dragoon in 1839.

The first dragoon Allen produced showed the spring cylinder pin barrel stop system used on the previous models was not effective on the dragoon model. The inertia of the large, heavy barrel prevented the pin from consistently stopping the barrel rotation at the point of firing.

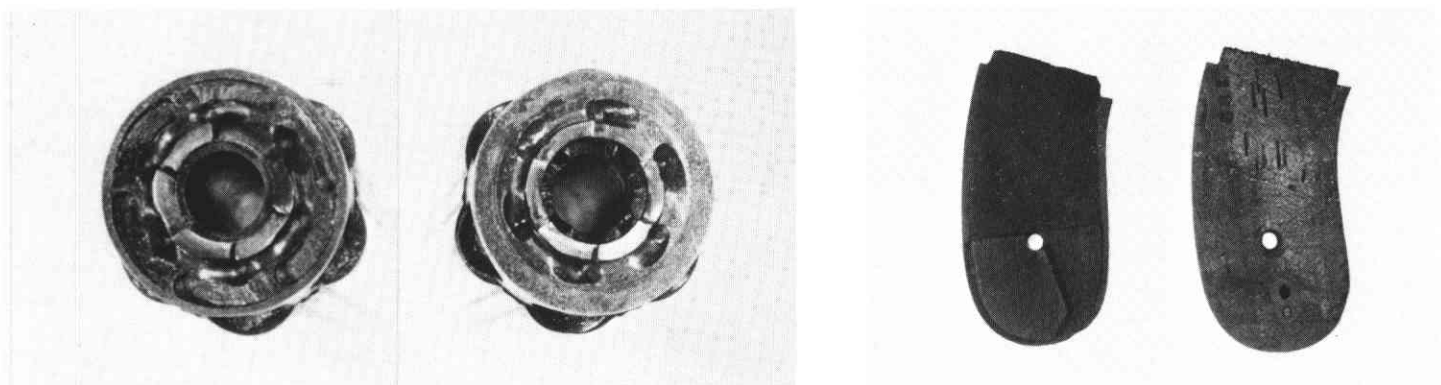
This necessitated Allen's developing a new mechanism (the so-called pitman and ratchet) to line up the barrel and hammer at the instant of firing. This improvement, once perfected, was incorporated in all of his pepperboxes.

The first piece we will discuss is the earliest dragoon model known and it has the experimental pitman and ratchet. There are two of these rare pieces known. Mine is number 12 and its exact twin, number 14, is in the Van Cleave collection. I acquired both of these guns within six months of each other; the second one turned up in a gun shop in Houston. The one shown is number 12.

It is equipped with the wide back straps ($\frac{5}{8}$ " wide), removable nipples and fluted rib barrel. It has no bushing on the end of the cylinder pin for the barrel to ride upon, as the later models do. It has a plain, unengraved side plate and spangled or silver oval two piece grips. It is marked "Allen & Thurber, Grafton, Mass." on the side of the bar hammer and with the small die "Allens Patent" on top of the bar hammer.



This photo shows the experimental pitman and ratchet on the left and the perfected version on the right. In the early version the spring stop is activated by a pin shoved through the frame by the front face of the sear, as it nears the hammer release point. This engages the end of the spring in the milled-out slot on the butt of the cylinder, thus stopping rotation. In the later version the pin is hinged to the sear and engages the rear of the cylinder directly.



Left photo shows the two cylinder butts, the earliest on the left. Note the milled-out ratchet slots on the periphery of the cylinder while in the later model the slots, or teeth, are on the interior of the cylinder next to the hole for the cylinder pin. This early system worked but was clumsy, hard to make and did not hold up. The perfected version was developed by Allen a short time later and proved to be cheaper to produce. The right photo shows an example of a two-piece grip and the later one-piece grip with the grip pin holes.



The gun shown here, serial 4, is the first production model; there are three specimens known. It has the wide back strap, replaceable nipples, plain two-piece grips, fluted rib barrel and the first case of the typical Grafton engraving on the sideplate. It does not have a bushing on the cylinder pin, but it does have the improved pitman and ratchet cylinder stop mechanism. It is marked the same as the earlier model.



The next dragoon, serial 30, is a medium vintage Grafton and marks the first introduction of the fixed nipples in the cylinder which will be evident from here on. It also has the fluted rib barrel, spangled two piece grips, wide back strap and the same markings and engraving as the previous model. I would like to point out the humpback appearance of the frame and the quicker drop to the grips. This is the first frame modification in this series.



This pepperbox, serial 6, is the next-to-last type of the Grafton dragoons. It shows the first appearance of the nipple shield and in this case has the hand-engraved scroll design. There are two known with the hand-engraved shields. Later models of this type have the machine rolled-on scroll design nipple shield. It still has two piece spangled grips, wide back strap and has the typical Grafton engraving. The hammer is marked "Allen's Patent" on the top and "J.G. Bolen, N.Y." on the side. This is the earliest agent-marked dragoon observed.

The last model Grafton Dragoon, supposedly the most common type, I do not have. It was started into production in Grafton and continued into the early Norwich era. Pieces I have observed have the narrow 7/16" back strap, one piece grips and cylinder pin bushings. They are found both with and without Grafton markings. Both types, however, have the "Allen's Patent" stamp on the top of the hammer. The later ones are believed to have been produced at Grafton and sold after the firm was moved to Norwich and the new dies were not yet available. Incidentally, the narrow back straps and cylinder pin bushings first appearing here will continue from this point to the end of the line.

Norwich Production



This photo shows the earliest of the Ring Trigger dragoons, serial 4. It is shieldless and has the narrow back strap, one piece spangled grips, fluted rib barrel and a more elaborate three floral engraving on the side

plate. The hammer is marked with a new large die "Allen's Patent" on top and "Allen & Thurber, Norwich C-T" on the side. This is the first appearance of the new Norwich markings and the large "Allen's Patent" die. The thing that makes this piece unique is that the barrel is marked "Tryon" "Cast Steel." The only Tryon-marked dragoon I have observed. The "Cast Steel" markings without a patent date indicates it was produced before the law of 1842 requiring the patent date to be a part of the die stamping.



The next piece, serial 21, is a shieldless conventional trigger with fluted rib barrel and spangled grips. The side plate shows the typical early two floral engraving. The hammer is marked the same as the previous piece; while the barrel has no markings whatsoever.



The next photo shows a shieldless ring trigger with fluted rib barrel and spangled grips, serial 34. This is the earliest case of the barrel having the "Patented 1837 cast steel" markings. The hammer is marked "Allen's Patent" on the top and "Hyde & Goodrich, New Orleans" on the side. This is the only dragoon I have observed with this agent's markings.



This shielded conventional trigger dragoon, serial 12, is the earliest example of the machine-rolled scroll nipple shield that I own. The barrel is marked the same as the previous model; while the hammer is marked "A.W. Spies — Allen's Patent" on the side. This is the first appearance of the slot in the rear of the bar hammer supposedly used for sighting.



This shieldless conventional trigger dragoon is the earliest observed with the thin, flat barrel ribs, serial 38. This piece is unique in that the hammer is marked with the rare "Lane & Reed, Boston" agent's name. The barrel is marked the same as the previous piece.



The next piece is a shieldless ring trigger, serial 62, and has the slotted hammer marked only “Allen’s Patent” on the side. The barrel markings are interesting as they show the first appearance of the broken 3 in the 1837 die. This resulted from exceptional wear on the die as it was used to stamp the fluted rib barrel. The top and bottom of the die shows wear and continued to deteriorate in later use. Another example of how frugal Allen was in the use of his equipment.



Number 11 is a shielded conventional trigger transitional dragoon, serial 57, and is very special in that it illustrates the changeover from the 1837 type of action to the 1845 type. The most obvious characteristic is the 1837 spring tension screw has now been moved from close to the bottom of the front face of the grip strap to above the middle of the strap. I use the word transitional because the frame was cast for the 1837 action and the tension screw hole was filled and redrilled for the 1845 action; further the grips have been routed out for the wider 1837 spring, which was not required in the 1845 action. Another interesting feature of this gun is that it has a barrel length of 4¾”, the shortest barrel observed on a dragoon.



Serial 11, bottom, comparing the 1845 raised spring tension screw with the lower 1837 screw above.



This shielded conventional trigger dragoon, serial 39, is one of the first examples of the ornate floral sideplate engraving which is continuous from one sideplate across the back to the opposing sideplate or the so-called “wrap-around” engraving. This mid-period Norwich dragoon is one of the more common, frequently found, pieces. The barrel die stampings show more advanced wear as the Patented and Cast Steel are broken at top and bottom. It is also marked “Allen & Thurber, Norwich C-T” on the side of the hammer.



The next dragoon, serial 174, although very similar to the previous one, is slightly later and has wrap-around engraving which is somewhat less ornate.



This shielded ring trigger dragoon, serial 182, is the latest of the ring trigger production and it has a different type engraving: the curls are both pointing forward, rather than one forward and one aft. This period of engraving is also evident in the bar hammer single shot series.



This piece is identical to the previous one in markings and engravings, serial 39. It is one of three known with spangled ivory grips.

Worcester Production



This single action dragoon is one of the most unusual pieces I have. It is one of two known: factory records indicate twelve single actions were made early in Worcester production and, several months later, ten were returned to the factory. Obviously not a very popular item. This pepperbox is the only known Allen dragoon made with a seven-inch barrel. The gun is unmarked except for serial number (21), as is the other known specimen. It is also the first appearance of the wide rib barrels made on contract to Allen by the firm of Benchley & Hopkins. The previous narrow rib barrels were made by E.A. Prescott.



This shielded conventional trigger dragoon (serial 157) is the earliest Worcester-marked piece I have. It is the only dragoon to come equipped with engraved silver grips that I have observed; note the grip engraving is the ornate floral type. The side plate engraving is no longer continuous from side to side and the curls in the design are changed such that one points up and the other points down. Further, this is the first case of a dragoon having the rose and vine engraved nipple shield which is used from here to the end of production. In addition, the gun is marked with a new small die "Allen's Patent" on the side of the hammer and a new "Patented 1837 (flat top 3) Cast Steel" die. The barrel is also marked "Allen & Thurber, Worcester." Lastly, this is a different frame casting that has the so-called "dogleg" profile. This grip profile is also found on the standard size pepperboxes of the same period.



The next two pieces are the last of the more common quick drop frames with spangled flat wood grips. This gun, serial 85, has the same markings as the previous one. The engraving is very similar, only it is of a thinner (top to bottom) and longer profile.



This piece is identical to the previous gun with the exception that the barrel is marked "Bolen, 104 BWay, N.Y." and is the latest agent-marked dragoon observed. Serial is 140.

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The latest major change in the Dragoon design took place in the late Allen & Thurber era with the introduction of the spur trigger guard known as the "49er Model." The grips are of bagshape design and the side plate is rounded rather than flat. Another radical change appeared at this time in the form of a fluted barrel. It is felt the 49er models were made in both barrel types (ribbed and fluted) at the same time and this will be pointed out in the dating of the two series of guns.



The first model flat rib barrel 49er, serial 34, has the ornate floral side plate engraving and is marked the same as the previous series. This is the last case of this type engraving being used.



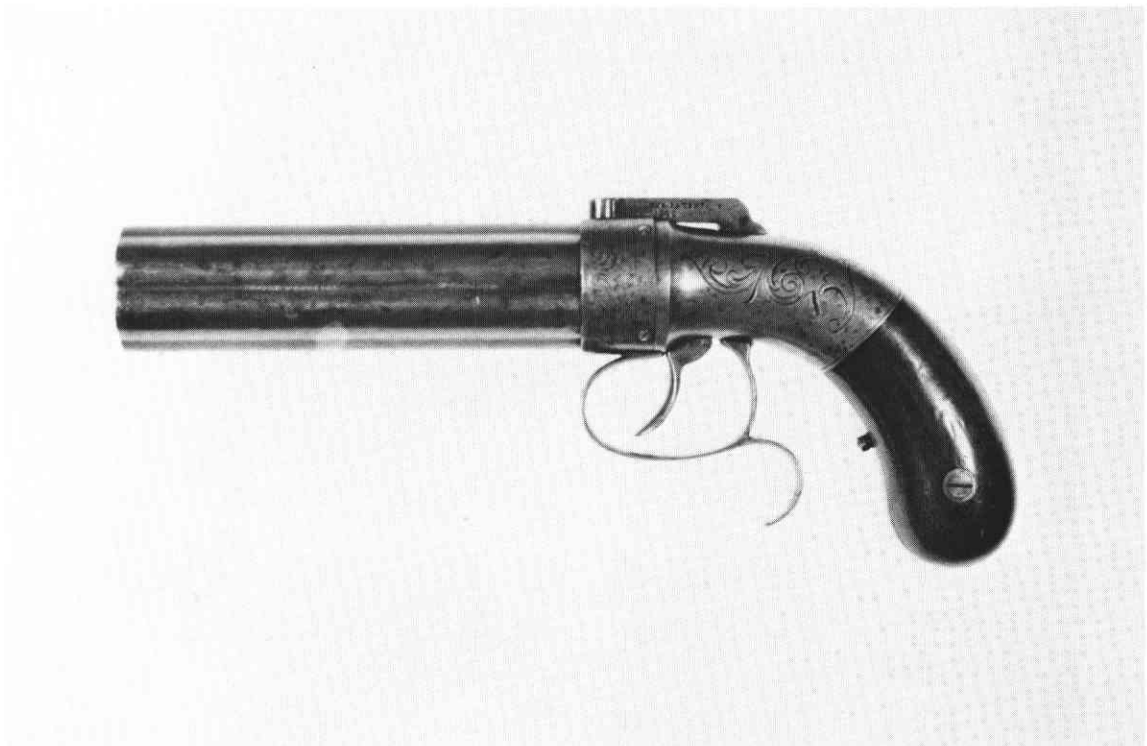
The second type 49er, serial 284, has a completely different form of side plate engraving. The two scrolls or curls now open down at the point where they meet. The hammer has a new die stamping marked "Allen's Patent, 1845"; this is the first use of the 1845 patent date. The barrel is marked "Allen & Thurber, Worcester."



The third variation of the ribbed barrel 49er, serial 212, is different only in the style of engraving. The curls open upward at the point where they meet.



The first model fluted barrel 49er, serial 311, has the identical side plate engraving as the first flat rib model. The barrel markings are the same. The hammer, however, does not have the 1845 date die. It is marked only "Allen's Patent."



The second model fluted barrel 49er, serial 36, has the same side plate engraving as the second model ribbed barrel type. The scroll engraving opens downward. The barrel is marked the same as the first model fluted barrel; however, the hammer now has the 1845 patent date the same as the ribbed barrel model.



This 49er, serial 4, is unusual in that it has no firm name or location markings on the barrel. The hammer now has the last style of die stampings "Patented April 16, 1845." This new hammer die is the smallest stamping used on a dragoon. It was also used on the standard size, as well as the four barrel pepperbox. It has the last style of engraving where the scrolls open upward. It is felt this gun was produced by the Allen & Wheelock firm and possibly sold before the Allen & Wheelock dies were received.



This is the last dragoon pepperbox, serial 41, produced by Allen. It is identical to the previous gun in engraving and markings with the exception that the fluted barrel is stamped "Allen & Wheelock." The demand for dragoons at this time must have decreased rapidly, as few Allen & Wheelock models were made; only seven pieces are known.

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The missing link in the dragoon series is an Allen Thurber & Co. marked fluted barrel specimen. There was one listed in an early gun catalog and the poor quality photo showed it to be of the correct type. To my knowledge, however, the gun has never surfaced and until I see it in the flesh I must assume that it does not exist.