

Colt Spur Trigger Pocket Pistols Introduced 1870 to 1882

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With the Rollin White patent expiring in 1869, Colt Firearms was anxious to enter the metallic cartridge era full force.

Over the next fifteen years a multitude of deringers¹, pocket revolvers, double actions, and the famous Single Action Army were introduced by Colt, not to mention a full range of shotguns, rifles and carbines.

One of the most overlooked areas in Colt collecting are the small pocket defenders with spur triggers. In the past, many collectors have relegated these diminutive pistols to a second class status, but the majority of these models were produced with the same quality, care and finish as their contemporary Colts in the bigger frames.

Many older collections included only a specimen or two of the deringers, New Lines, Cloverleaves, etc. However, there are a multitude of variations in most of these models that are only limited by the imagination and pocketbook. For instance, in the New Line series there are five different calibers, up to three separate models, depending again on the caliber, an infinite variety of finishes, four barrel lengths, factory and New York engraving, varying grip materials and designs, plus much more.

Recently, I've noticed a tremendous influx of new collectors into this area. They are finally discovering how handsome and interesting these little Colts are.

Another factor that has attracted buyers is one of economics. I'm not inferring all the models and varieties in this presentation are available at reasonable levels, but decent specimens of certain spur trigger Colts can be purchased with a few hundred dollar outlay. For those of you who remember buying old Colts out of peach baskets at the local gun show, I'd like to add most guns are now selling for a little more than \$2.00 each.

Now, let's step back in time and take a closer look at the spur trigger Colt pistols of the 1870s and 1880s. I will attempt to avoid discussing minute changes in barrel addresses, inspectors marks and other trivial information in order to keep you from snoring during the presentation.

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Figure 1: 1st Model Deringer

FIRST MODEL DERINGERS

Colt purchased the National Arms Company in 1870. Colt's 1st (figure 1) and 2nd model deringers are direct improvements on the National Derringer. The 1st and 2nd Colt Deringers also share another feature. Factory engraved specimens of these two models were standard and unengraved specimens are virtually unknown.

The 1st model is distinguished by its all-metal construction, including the grip area. They, of course, fired the sturdy .41 short rimfire, through a 2-1/2" barrel. Total production of the 1st model was about 6,500; they were manufactured starting in 1870 and were still advertised in Colt's catalog of 1890.

In my opinion, they were not *manufactured* at this late date for two logical reasons:

1. The 2nd and 3rd models had superseded the 1st models and were themselves in production since the early 1870s.

2. By 1879 Colt's agent in London wrote the Colt factory and stated "our deringers are now more and more difficult to sell, they seem to have lost all novelty and attraction."

Therefore, the 1st models still advertised in 1890 were simply OBSOLETE STOCK that needed to be sold.

1st model serial numbers were stamped on the butt and the bottom of the barrel. Standard finish was either all nickel, all silver, or blued barrel with frames plated in nickel or silver. The pistols were loaded and unloaded by pivoting the barrels to the left.

Casings for 1st model deringers are very rare. One wooden case is marked with an East Indian paper label inside the lid naming the dealer and Indian city.



Figure 2: 2nd Model Deringer

SECOND MODEL DERINGERS

This model (figure 2) has the same physical size as the first model but is immediately distinguishable by its removable grips, which were usually checkered walnut. Rarely, ivory and pearl were used; other materials are virtually unknown.

The standard cartridge was the .41 short rimfire. A very small production of .41 *centerfires* are also known: they are British Proofed². Total production of 2nd models approximately 9,000. They were produced from 1870 and advertised until 1888 but apparently were not actually produced during the later years—simply old stock being sold off. Factory engraving, similar to the 1st models, is standard in this model.

The 2-1/2" barrels were nickel or silver plated or blued. The standard frames were iron, nickel or silver plated. A handful of 2nd models were produced with brass frames (possibly leftover National Deringer frames). A sterling silver 2nd model is in the George Lewis collection!

Cases for 2nd models are very scarce. I have encountered single and double English oak cases more often than any others.



Figure 3: 3rd Model "Thuer" Deringer. Early style with high hammer, tight radiused grip strap and factory engraved.

3RD MODEL DERINGERS

The 3rd Model or Thuer Deringer (figure 3) was also produced beginning in the early 1870s and it was manufactured concurrently with the 1st and 2nd models. This model was the only Colt Deringer still offered in the 20th Century.

Similar to other Colt deringers, the 3rd model fired a .41 short rimfire.

At first glance, one would assume one or two variations would sum up a good representation of this model. In reality, a collection of 15 or 20 guns could be assembled if you take into consideration variations such as engraving, high and low profile hammers, blue, nickel, silver and gold finish, varying grips, different barrel addresses, and grip frame profiles, to name a few.

The earliest 3rd models were produced with a pronounced hump on the bottom of the frame, affectionately dubbed the "pregnant" frame. They also featured a tiny "Colt" barrel address, high hammer profile, and a very tightly radiused grip. The "pregnant" frame was soon dropped and today this is a very scarce variety. The 3rd models continued and underwent a normal evolution of features. Eventually, a lower profile hammer was introduced and later the pistol was redesigned with a more graceful or open grip strap profile (figure 4). With that change, Colt began renumbering the 3rd model, starting at #1 again. 3rd models were usually shipped in pairs in pasteboard boxes (figure 5). Wooden and leather covered cases are usually English, both singles and pairs (figure 6). Pairs of deringers with consecutive serial numbers are rarely found.

We now move on to the early House pistols.



Figure 4: 3rd Model Deringer with low hammer and "open" profile grip strap.

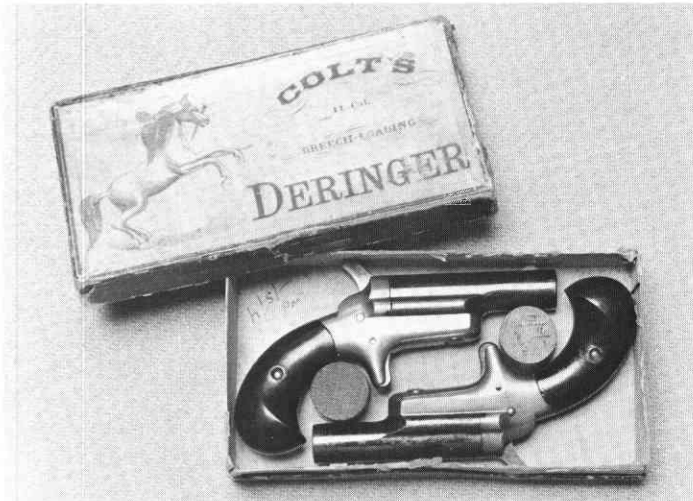


Figure 5: 3rd Model Deringers in factory double pasteboard box.

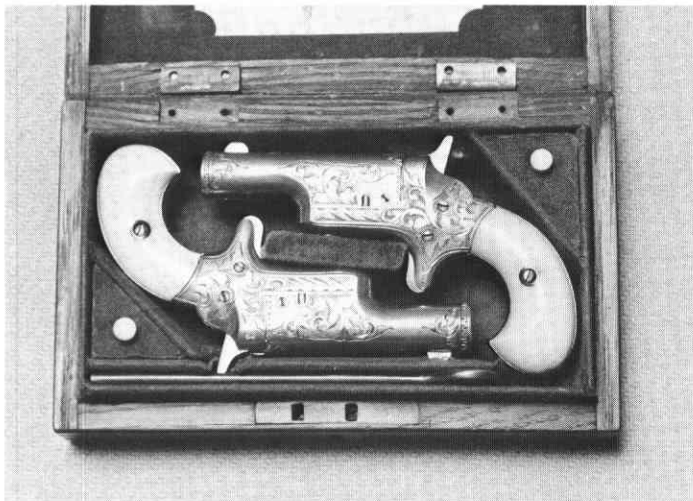


Figure 6: High hammer 3rd Model Deringers in English oak case.



Figure 7: Cloverleaf with 1 1/2" barrel.



Figure 8: First style Cloverleaf with 4 shot cylinder and 3" barrel.

CLOVERLEAF HOUSE PISTOL

You may imagine Colt's first example of a revolver produced only for the new metallic cartridge would be a big, impressive model, such as the Single Action Army.

Actually, the pistol with this honor is the Cloverleaf House pistol (figure 7). This model enjoyed a limited production of approximately 10,000. The early four shot models with the cloverleaf-shaped cylinders are a unique design for Colt. They were produced with both octagon and round barrels; the longer 3" barrel (figure 8) is more often encountered. The early guns had a high hammer profile that was later modified to a lower profile.

The Cloverleaf cylinder design eventually evolved into a five shot round cylinder (figure 9); at the same time the barrel was shortened to 2-5/8". This variety is much scarcer than the Cloverleaf shape.

Although this entire series was produced in the powerful .41 caliber, they were designed with a brass frame. This approach differed greatly from Colt's heritage of "top quality." In my opinion, Colt wanted a product that would compete in price with the multitude of horrible quality handguns produced during that era. I believe the guns with blued barrel and cylinder were produced without silver finish on the frame in order to cut costs. This model was definitely a *second quality* revolver. This is also borne out by the scarcity of factory engraved specimens. Evidently this model wasn't considered worthy of extra adornment and when engraved specimens are encountered, it's usually to punch dot, zig-zag, bottom-of-the-line style. Factory casings for this model are virtually unknown.



Figure 9: The later and scarcer Cloverleaf with round 5 shot cylinder.



Figure 10: A rare double English-cased pair of early .22 Open Tops with long barrels, ejectors and high hammers.

OPEN TOP .22 REVOLVERS

This model (figure 10) is synonymous with the old school designing still in effect at Colt's: the barrel assembly is held in place by a key; the cylinder revolves around a fixed arbor pin similar to the older percussion Colts; there is no top strap over the cylinder. In fact, this model was obsolete within a few years after its inception in 1871.

Similar to other spur trigger Colts, there are a multitude of variations within the open top .22 series. With a production of 114,200, this pint-sized seven shot revolver offers the detail-oriented collector a myriad of possibilities. You may choose from two barrel lengths, differing barrel addresses, specimens with and without ejector rods, different finishes, several grip materials, factory and New York engraving and much more.

The earliest examples were shipped with a 2-7/8" barrel, an attached ejector rod housing and a high hammer profile. Most were plated, some were blued and plated. Factory engraved specimens of this configuration are very rare. Soon Colt reduced the length of the barrels to 2-3/8" but retained the ejector housing (figure 11). After a short period the .22 was redesigned and the ejector housing was omitted (figure 12). Eventually, the high hammer profile was replaced with a lower profile.

This model competed heartily in the firearm price wars on the 1870s and 1880s: they were available, *unengraved*, in the \$4.50 range. They were made until 1877 and had the largest production of any model/caliber Colt spur trigger pocket pistol. Factory cardboard boxes are predominant for this model.



Figure 12: The last type of Open Top .22 with short barrel and low hammer profile.



Figure 11: The scarce Open Top .22 with ejector but standard 2 3/8" barrel in original factory box.

NEW LINES

This model is the most popular example of the spur triggers discussed today. Their popularity is aided by their handsomeness, quality, various calibers and variety of features. Let's discuss this series in ascending caliber order.

.22 CALIBER

The only New Line with a flat sided barrel and produced with a *brass* frame (figure 13). A 2-1/4" barrel was the standard length and most barrels had an acid etched caliber marking. The .22s were predominantly nicked; other finish combinations are rarely seen. Due to the inexpensive original price of this caliber, most specimens were fitted with wood or hard rubber grips. Engraved examples will often have ivory or pearl grips and the engraving style is usually the cheapest possible. The 1st model .22s had locking notches in the periphery of the cylinder. Later Colt redesigned this system and the cylinders were locked for firing at the rear.

Therefore, the 2nd models are without visible locking notches. .22 caliber New Lines enjoyed the largest production of any caliber. Over 55,000 were produced from 1873 to 1877. This caliber was usually shipped in factory cardboard boxes. English proofed guns (figure 14) are seen in oak cases and sometimes leather covered cases.

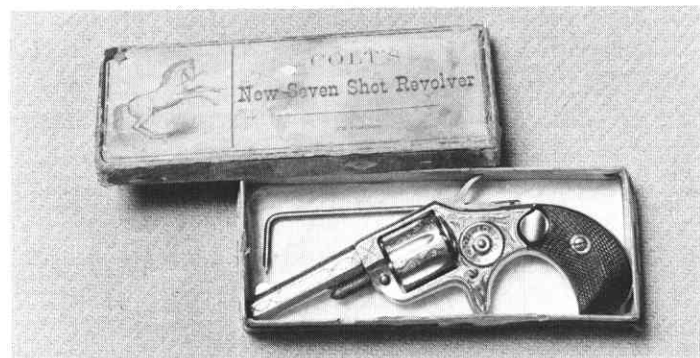


Figure 13: Colt New Line .22 caliber with factory engraving in factory pasteboard box.



Figure 14: .22 New Line 2nd model in English Oak Case.

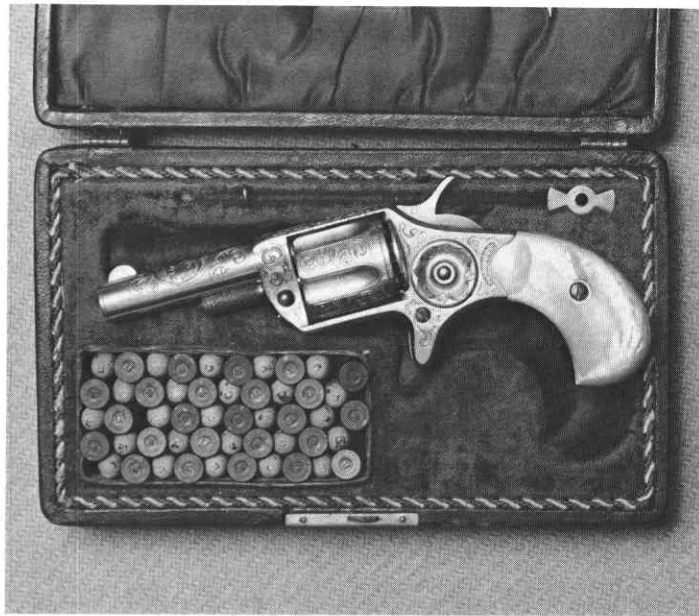


Figure 15: New Line in .30 caliber. Factory engraved in factory leather covered case.

.30 CALIBER

This was Colt's only revolver (figure 15) produced in this caliber. They went into production after Colt had begun making the 2nd model variation, so no 1st model .30 calibers are available. This tiny revolver was made with a 2-1/4" barrel but a scarcer 1-3/4" barrel (figure 16) was also available. Most .30s were nickel plated but a customer could be provided with a blued pistol with case hardened frame. All were rimfire.

New Lines with fancy grips are unusual except in engraved specimens. The cost of an ivory or pearl grip was 60%-80% more than a revolver without these special grips. Only 11,000 .30 calibers were produced during the mid-1870s. Cased .30 caliber New Lines are rare and I've only encountered one factory cardboard box.



Figure 16: Scarce .30 caliber New Line with 1 3/4" barrel and rare grip design.



Figure 17: Factory engraved 1st Model New Line .32 caliber with locking notches on periphery of cylinder in deluxe factory casing.

.32 CALIBER

Possibly the most common caliber in superb condition (figure 17). Standard barrel length was 2-1/4" and, although 4" examples were apparently produced, I've only seen a photo of one specimen. Similar to the other calibers, most were acid etched on the left barrel side with the caliber, although it seems Colt experienced difficulty on deciding how to mark the New Line series. Sporadically, guns were marked with patent dates on the barrel, etched and plain barrels, different barrel address stampings, a grooved barrel bottom to accommodate the cylinder pin, differing locations for frame caliber markings, and location of serial numbers: a veritable treasure trove for the variety collector!

The .32s were available in rimfire or centerfire. They were also produced in 1st and 2nd models (figure 18). A customer could order a nickel or a blue and case hardened revolver; I have observed *all blue* English-marked New Lines also. Engraved specimens are available with a gold plated cylinder, hammer, trigger and cylinder pins; the frames were usually nickered on this rare combination. Factory cardboard boxes (figure 19) were used to ship production models; fancy boxes or English oak cases are sometimes available.

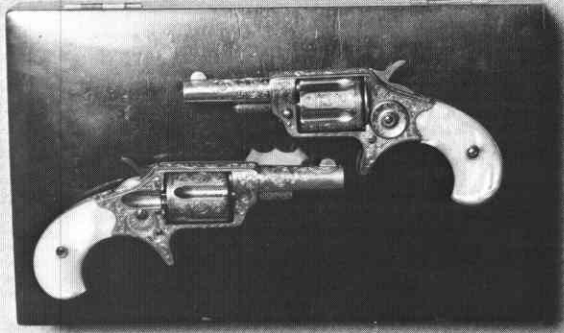


Figure 18: Pair of factory engraved .32 New Lines with 2nd model configuration. Rare "Colt New .32" factory engraved on barrels.

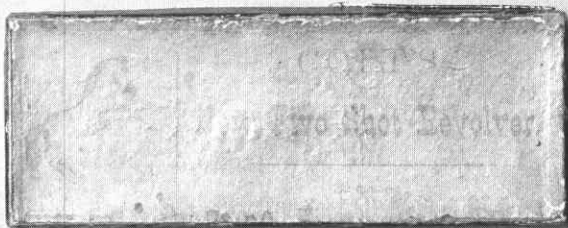


Figure 19: Factory cardboard box for .32 New Line.

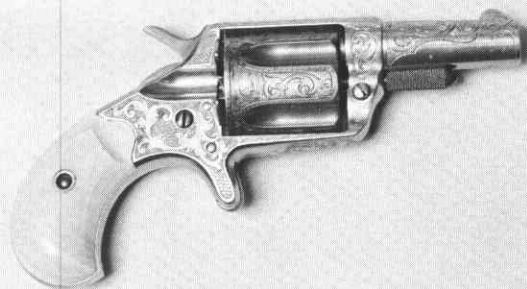


Figure 20: A deluxe factory engraved 2nd model .38 New Line.

.38 CALIBER (figure 20)

A large Colt jobber, Kittridge & Co., in Cincinnati, Ohio has been credited with marketing New Lines with special names factory-inscribed on the barrels.

Each caliber enjoyed its own moniker: the .38s were dubbed "Lady Colts," the .41s were called "Big Colts." Today a Kittridge marked Colt is a prized possession.

The large caliber New Lines are very difficult to obtain in prime condition, due to their paltry production figures: approximately 5,500 .38s were produced but the exact amount is clouded, since this and the .41 caliber New Lines were apparently serial numbered in the same range

as the New House and New Police Colts! A small collection of .38 New Lines alone could be assembled: they were made in 2-1/4" and 4" barrel lengths (figure 21), blue with case hardening and nickel finishes, 1st, 2nd models, and 3rd models with and without loading gates, varying grips and other minutia observed in the study of any firearms.

Cased .38 New Lines are rarely found; if available, it's usually the English oak variety. Factory engraved New Lines of this caliber are another scarcity; a high condition specimen would be a major find. The earlier production revolvers were usually rimfires which later evolved into centerfires.



Figure 21: New Line in .38 caliber with 4" barrel.

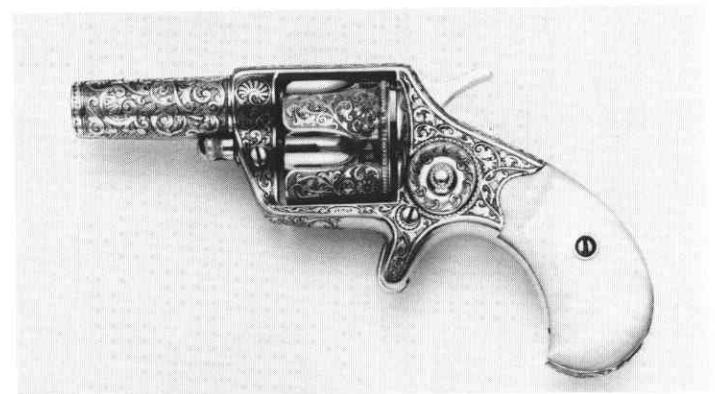


Figure 22: A deluxe factory engraved 1st Model .41 caliber New Line presented to Carl Ehbets, a prolific inventor who worked for Colt.

.41 CALIBER

This is the largest caliber of the New Lines (figure 22). It employs a five shot cylinder that is 9/32 inches shorter than .38 caliber cylinder. Again, this caliber was produced in 1st model, 2nd model and 3rd model (figure 23) with the loading gate. Most .41s are nickel plated, but occasionally a blue and case hardened pistol is observed. Barrel lengths are the same as .38s, usually 2-1/4" and rarely 4". Approximately 7,000 were produced, so locating even a single exceptional example can be a difficult chore. Both rimfires and centerfires were available. Factory engraved specimens are very scarce, and although I assume Colt shipped regular production guns in cardboard boxes, I've never seen or heard of one. Infrequently, an English oak box will be seen (figure 24).



Figure 23: 3rd Model .41 New Line with loading gate.

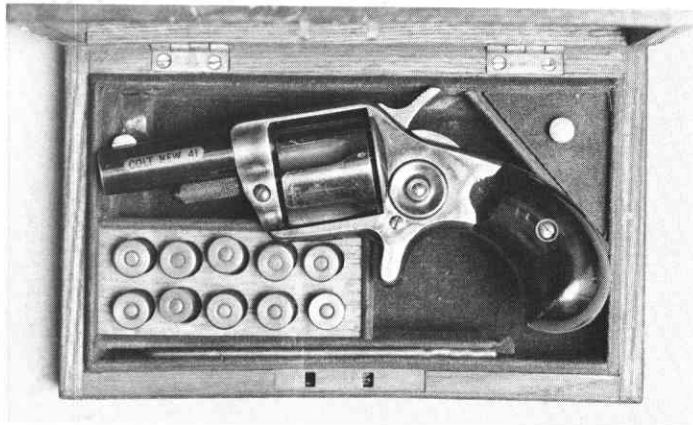


Figure 24: .41 New Line in English Oak case.



Figure 25: English-cased New Police without ejector.

NEW POLICE

Not to be confused with the later Colt New Police double action (figure 25), the pistol we are discussing today is more affectionately called the "Cop & Thug" model. Its name is obviously derived from the imaginative grips common to this model.

"Cop & Thugs" were produced with and without ejector rod housings and the standard barrels range from 2-1/4"

to 6". The most common caliber is .38; .32 and .41's were also made, but are rarely seen. Due to the low production of this model, superior quality examples are seldom available. The caliber markings are acid etched on the left side of the barrel, as with the New Lines. The model is also etched with name variations such as "New Police" and "Colt New" plus calibre: 32, 38, or 41. This weapon fired only center-fire cartridges.

The New Police and New House pistols without ejector housings are precisely the same gun except for the different grips and model designation etching on barrel. The ejectorless model in today's presentation is British proofed and in an English oak case. I'm only aware of two factory engraved Cop & Thugs and the example presented here (figure 26) with the ejector housing is the only factory cased example known to me. New Police Revolvers were produced from 1882 to 1886 and were manufactured in either full nickel or full blue finishes.

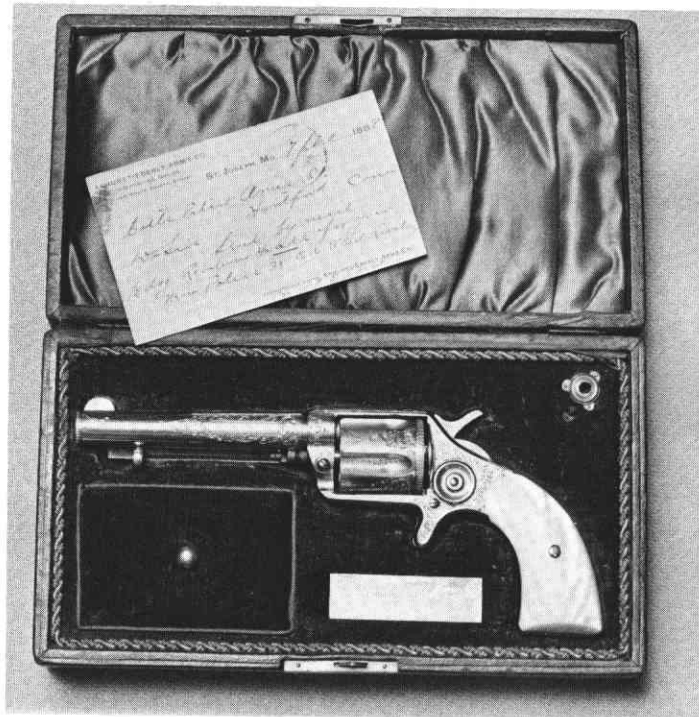


Figure 26: Factory engraved "Cop & Thug" with ejector. A factory cased presentation revolver to the Mayor of Hartford, CT.



Figure 27: Colt New House model

NEW HOUSE

The New House pistols (figure 27) were produced from 1880 to 1886. The most common caliber is .38 although .41s do appear and a few .32s were also made. This is a very scarce model with a total production of approximately 4,000: the exact amount is unknown since this model was produced in the same serial number range as two other Colt models, as previously mentioned. Most barrels were etched on the left side with many caliber and model name variations, such as "New House .32" or possibly "Colt House .41."

The standard barrel length for a New House is 2-1/4". Some are known with longer barrels but they are very rare. A factory engraved New House would represent a major rarity in Colt Collecting and locating anything but an English oak case is highly unlikely. New Houses were probably sent from the factory in cardboard boxes.

This concludes the models of Spur Trigger Colts from the last century. I have attempted to present you an overview of these pistols without explaining minute features that are of little interest except to a Colt specialist. When certain models share the same features, such as the New Lines in the different calibers, I've purposely avoided covering the same ground repeatedly.

I hope you have enjoyed learning more about these little Colt revolvers. If you have any questions, let me know.

Notes

1. The current spelling of the generic term is "derringer," but since the Colt spelling on boxes for these guns uses the "one R" spelling, it will be used in this talk.
2. The British had problems with base expansion of their .41 rimfire cartridge, so Eley made a centerfire cartridge of the same size which was used in the British guns; the cartridge was never made in the U.S.

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The Edgewater Beach Hotel, Chicago, as it was in 1954. Turn page.