

Fur Traders' Pistols

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The fur trade lasted over 400 years as our frontiers moved slowly to the west and north across North America. Hundreds of thousands of guns were used by white traders and sold to Indians. Some of them were, quite naturally, pistols.

Ordinarily Indians used long guns for hunting and were not too interested in pistols. However, a few were sold to them by British companies in the 18th Century and hundreds more were issued to Indian allies by the British during the War of 1812.

Traders and their employees in the wilderness habitually carried both pocket and holster pistols for protection. The photographs show a few ordinary utility pistols which have possible association with the fur trade either by virtue of the location where they were collected or by the name of their maker; there are others in various museums. Years ago the historical exhibit in the Vancouver Hudson's Bay Company store included a fine flintlock over-and-under pocket pistol brought to Victoria by the well-known trader, John Work.

Most of the traders' pistols were common models generally available from dealers and gunmakers, but the particular demands of the trading fraternity led to the manufacture of some rather exotic special models through the years.

In the period 1800-1820 the rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada was intense. There were fights, shootings and all kinds of hostile maneuvers. Both companies supplied swords and pistols to their men in the field.

The North West Company was a partnership of Montreal firms and only fragments of its records have survived. A few North West Company pistol orders in this period have been examined: in 1801 Forsyth & Richardson of Montreal, associates in the North West Company, received "12 pairs of good pistols, 12 inch barrels, double bridle locks, etc." along with some good pocket pistols with "secret triggers." In 1802 Alexander Mackenzie & Co., another partner, ordered "4 pr. Brass mounted Holster pistols, round 12 inch brown Barrels, acorn guards, 3/4 Bridle locks, Spider sights, etc." and 2 pair similar with "Spanish brown" barrels, acorn guards, Double 3/4 bridle locks, etc.

One would not expect snow to keep a leading student of the life and ways of the American fur trader from traveling to give a talk, but that's what happened. Luckily, the talk was sent to the editor earlier, to be presented here.



In 1803, Alexander Mackenzie & Co., received from England: "6 prs. 10 in. pistols, sights, etc. and 3 prs. ditto, brown barrels." In 1804 there is an invoice for "10 pair, good pistols, 12 in. and 6 pair neat brown same."¹

At least some of these pistols were specified to have brass acorn guards which were something of an anachronism in the first decade of the 19th century.² This was probably related in some way to the traditions of the Montreal merchants who ruled the North West Company, since it appears the pistols were intended to arm their traders in the field. There is, of course, a scant possibility that the pistols were also intended for friendly Indians who liked the old trigger guard design. Indians were often very traditional about ornamentation. This is what kept the design details of the Northwest gun very constant for nearly 150 years.

Figures 10 and 11 show a pistol made in the North West style. It came from an upstate New York collection without provenance, but it was made by John Sharpe of Birmingham who also manufactured trade rifles and supplied Northwest guns to the Montreal merchants.³ The butt is of early 19th Century form, but it is fitted with a brass acorn guard and a 10 3/4 inch round barrel. Caliber is .69.

These Nor'west pistols were big weapons. In 1820 the famous George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company was at his company's new establishment on Lake Athabasca, built immediately adjoining the rival North West Co. post there. In a confrontation over some new construction, he wrote that Nor'wester Simon McGillivray and several of his "bullies" came out, "each armed with a dirk and a brace of large pistols, not fastened as usual

in their belts, but held openly to view in their hands.’⁴ Apparently the pistols were often loaded with buckshot instead of balls. The noted North West Company explorer Alexander Mackenzie wrote in 1793 that he carried his pistols loaded with five buckshot each.⁵

The Hudson’s Bay Company acted quickly to furnish its men in the field with holster pistols, pocket pistols and hangers. To provide something a bit more forbidding in appearance than the ordinary center-hammer pocket pistol, it ordered some super pocket-style pistols from Phillip Bond of London in 1808. They were described as ‘pistols with screw barrels and draw bolts for Officers Inland.’ Each gun was to have a belt hook, good lock and be as light as could ‘be proper with a large bore.’⁶ An original pair of these pistols (figure 13, 14) from the Museum of the Fur Trade Collection is illustrated, showing their large size: 9 3/4 inches overall, with a bore of .56 caliber.

Fortunately for the cause of frontier civilization, the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company signed an amalgamation agreement in March, 1821, and selected employees of both companies embarked upon a new era of prosperous trading under the Hudson’s Bay name. The day of exotic personal armament had passed.

Traders in United States territory also had the usual holster and pocket pistols for personal weapons, but they did eventually encourage the development of one new type of muzzle-loading pistol.

In his famous lawsuit over unauthorized use of his name on pistols made by others, Henry Deringer made a long statement in 1866.⁷ He said that he had manufactured his pistols since 1825 and that they ‘came into notice’ when he made a pair for Major Francis W. Armstrong, who was appointed Indian agent for the Choctaws in 1831, the year they began to move to the West, and was appointed acting superintendent of Indian Affairs in the ‘Western Territory’ in 1834.⁸ Deringer said that Armstrong was ‘much pleased’ with the weapons and introduced them among the Indian chiefs, heads of Departments at Washington and members of the Cabinet. He also said that Major Armstrong gave the pistols the name, ‘Deringer Pistols’ but Deringer himself called his smaller pistols, ‘Armstrong Pistols’ at least during the 1830s. This may have been something of a memorial because F.W. Armstrong died at Choctaw Agency August 6, 1835, and was succeeded by his brother William A. Armstrong of Nashville.

Records of the Office of Indian Affairs include a typical Deringer invoice for one box containing 18 pairs of pistols consigned to ‘Major F.W. Armstrong, Choctaw Agency, West’ on June 19, 1835.⁹ In 1837 Aeneas Mackay, the American Fur Company agent in Philadelphia, wrote a letter to the New York Office describing the pistols made by Deringer at that time:

He makes a pistol the price of which is \$30, it is very much in use by officers, travelers and *western men* as belt pistols and generally known by the name of the *Armstrong* pistol . . . the barrel of those are only 4 1/2 to 5 1/2 in. long. They are made to carry in a belt around the body or in the pocket and are seldom put up in boxes. The pistol of 7 to 8 in. barrel . . . one which he calls the *duelling pistol* and made with a box, etc. will cost from \$50 to \$60—perfectly plain . . . they could be got for \$50—They are made with *detain* trigger and are a first rate article.¹⁰

Hercules Dousman, American Fur Company trader at Prairie du Chien, ordered a pair of ‘Armstrong pistols’ with 4 1/2 inch octagon barrels, 45 balls to the pound (.47 cal.), short butt and percussion locks, in 1835. Bernard Pratte, fur company partner in St. Louis, also ordered a pair of pistols of the same description in 1835.¹¹ Joseph Rolette, another well-known trader of the western Great Lakes, ordered a pair of ‘Armstrong pistols’ with rifled barrels in 1839.¹²

Henry H. Sibley of Fort Snelling ordered a pair of steel-mounted Deringer pistols of duelling size with 8 inch barrels, 75 balls to the pound (.39 cal.) in 1837.¹³ All the orders listed above were handled by the American Fur Company’s New York office. Deringer sold countless other pistols to individual buyers. As an example, the famous Big-Foot Wallace said that when he came to Texas from Virginia in 1837 he had a good rifle, a pair of ‘Deringer pistols’ and a bowie knife.¹⁴

Edward K. Tryon, ever the aggressive proponent of his own wares, ran a long advertisement for guns in the *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) for February 19, 1839. In it was the statement: ‘They [Tryon, Son & Company] also manufacture the celebrated Armstrong pistols.’

Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Company of St. Louis, successors to the American Fur Company, purchased a large number of Northwest guns and a few double-barreled shotguns from W. Chance & Son of Birmingham. Beginning in the 1850s they also imported from the same firm some belt pistols something like the old Armstrong pistol. One order in the Chouteau Accounts for 1855 included: ‘24 pistols 6 & 7 in. barrels, percussion locks.’¹⁵ Figures 17 and 18 shows a Chance pistol of this type with 6 1/2 inch octagonal twist barrel in .47 caliber. The stock is checkered and fitted with several German silver inlays. The barrel has a hook-on patent breech and front and rear sights. These pistols were available for purchase by frontier traders and their Indian customers.

In Alaska the fur trade was conducted by the Russian American Company from 1799 to 1867. As the fur trade progressed from the coastal forts to the Alaskan interior, there were a few hostile incidents. On at least one occasion some trading employees were overpowered and killed in a crowded native hut. Their flint muskets were useless in such situations and the company regulations were amended to require every man to wear a pistol at all times when outside the fort where he was stationed.

The Russian American Company operated under a Royal Charter and had special connections with the Imperial Navy. In fact, service as a company officer counted toward naval retirement, and many naval men did stints with the company for adventure or profit. The official company pistol was the Russian navy flintlock pistol with a belt hook. The navy used two models of flintlock pistol. One type had a half-stock with an attached iron ramrod passing through a stud at the muzzle and was usually fitted with a belt hook. It is generally considered to be the "Navy Model 1809" but this designation was not confirmed until 1839. The Navy and some Cossack troops also used the regulation 1809 Russian pistol fitted with a belt hook.¹⁶ About twenty-five percent of the regulation 1809 pistols were equipped with belt hooks, and they were probably the type used in Alaska. An excellent example obtained in Sweden is illustrated in figures 19, 20, 21: it shows the typical attachment of the belt hook by the rear side-screw and a stud driven into the stock. The iron ramrod had an eye at one end and was carried on a looped cord, generally around the user's neck.

One of the naval officers who transferred to Alaskan service was Lieutenant L.A. Zagoskin who served there 1839-1845. During a long trip to the interior, he kept a detailed journal that is today a very valuable source of information. In 1842 he wrote that the pistols carried by the employees were "quite impractical." First, they were flintlock, second, they were heavy, and third, they were "horned." "I know of no other way to describe the hooks which are screwed onto the stock to fasten the pistol to a belt." He carried a pair of English pocket pistols which were always dry and in readiness.¹⁷

Last on our list of typical pistols in the fur trade is the familiar Remington Army .44 caliber percussion revolver. There are numerous citations to the use of Colt and other revolvers by the Plains Indians, but the Remington seems to have been something of a favorite with many of them. This was probably due to their availability after the end of the Civil War and to their rugged solid frame construction.

In 1868 the Cheyenne and Arapaho requested in treaty negotiations that they be supplied with 250 rifles and 500 "Remington" revolvers.¹⁸ In 1873 the Blackfoot agent asked the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to permit the sale of revolvers to the Indians because they were "now using Colts and Remingtons for buffalo hunting."¹⁹ At that time Thomas Boff at Fort Clagett, Montana wished to sell certain ammunition, rifles and "12 Remington revolvers" to the Indians. I.G. Baker, Bro. & Co. made a similar request to sell balls, caps, powder, 6 Colt's Army revolvers and 24 Remington army revolvers.²⁰ In his report of 1879 the Chief of Ordnance listed 410 guns captured from the Sioux and Cheyenne in 1877. There were 41 Remingtons in the list.

Figure 22 shows one of the few examples of a .44 Remington known to have been owned and used by an Indian. It came to the Museum of the Fur Trade from an Oglala Sioux Indian whose great-grandfather had carried it in the Indian wars. It has seen use and neglect but is still shootable. The grips are old native replacements.

These percussion revolvers, used both for war and hunting, were the last handguns on the fur trade frontier.

NOTES

1. - *Documents de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*. Archives De Seminaire de Quebec. Microfilms in the Dominion Archives, Ottawa, Canada.
2. - See J.N. George, *English Guns and Rifles*. Plantersville, SC., 1947, pp. 106 and 112.
3. - John Sharpe was a gun and pistol maker for exportation, listed on Edmund Street, Birmingham, 1811-1817. Later listed as John Sharpe & Co., 1818-1826, and John Sharpe, 1827-1831, in Birmingham. DeWitt Bailey and Douglas Nie, *English Gunmakers*. London, 1978, p. 52.
4. - E.E. Rich, editor. *Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department by George Simpson, 1820 and 1821, and Report*. Toronto, 1938, p. 86.
5. - Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through the continent of North America to the frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793*. Reprint, Rutland, Vt., 1971, p. 370.
6. - *Hudson's Bay Company Records, Reel 376*. "Orders 1808." Dominion Archives, Ottawa, Canada.
7. - John E. Parson's *Henry Deringer's Pocket Pistol*. New York, 1952, p. 160.
8. - Grant Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier 1830-1860*. Norman, Okla., 1933, pp. 65, 132.
9. - *Indian Bureau Records*, Misc. and Emig. File. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
10. - Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "The Deringer Belt Pistol," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*. Chadron, Nebr., 1982, Vol. 18, Nos. 1 & 2; pp. 18-20.
11. - Letterbooks, *American Fur Company Papers*. New York Historical Society, New York.
12. - John E. Parsons, p. 230
13. - Charles E. Hanson, Jr., p. 18.
14. - John C. Duval, *The Adventures of Big-Foot Wallace*. Lincoln, Nebr., 1966, p. 8.
15. - Charles E. Hanson, Jr. *The Plains Rifle*. Harrisburg, Pa., 1960, pp. 159-160.
16. - Personal communication from the Sotamuseo, Helsinki, Finland. 1977 and V.G. Federov, *Atlas-Russian Armament*, p. 5.
17. - Henry N. Michael, editor. *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844*. Toronto, Canada, 1967, p. 132.
18. - Charles E. Hanson, Jr. "The Post-War Indian Gun Trade," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*. Chadron, Nebr. Fall, 1968. Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 1-11.
19. - *Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Montana Superintendency*. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Roll 494, 1873.
20. - *Ibid.*, Roll 496, 1873.



(1)
Dutch pistol ca. 1650, lock marked "L.P. Robiony." Both barrel and forestock have been severely shortened. Collected in upstate New York.



(2)
Reverse of the 1650 Dutch pistol. All mountings are iron. Barrel now $8 \frac{5}{8}$ inches long, .52 caliber.



(3)
French pocket pistol. Homemade, using lock, barrel and sideplate from a fowler of the last half of the 17th century and a reshaped brass guard ca. 1720. $4 \frac{11}{16}$ inch barrel of .57 caliber.



(4)
Reverse of homemade French pocket pistol showing early iron sideplate. This gun came "out of the woods" in central Quebec and was probably carried by a voyageur or other habitant traveler.

(5)

Brass-mounted French pistol with 9 3/4 inch barrel, .54 caliber. This pistol was a family heirloom in Missouri with excellent probability of fur trade use. Note "DE ROYVILLE" on butt cap spur.



(6)

Reverse of brass-mounted French pistol from Missouri.



(7)

A Belgian-made "common pistol" with octagon brass barrel and spurious "SHARPE" and "TOWER" markings. There are numerous references to the use of such pistols by trading company employees and trappers, sometimes calling them "Spanish" or "German" pistols. This confusion resulted from the fact that Belgium did not exist as a country until comparatively recent times: it was ruled by Spain from about 1585-1701 and by Austria 1713-1797. After the defeat of Napoleon it was annexed to the Netherlands but independence was gained by a revolution in 1830.



(8)

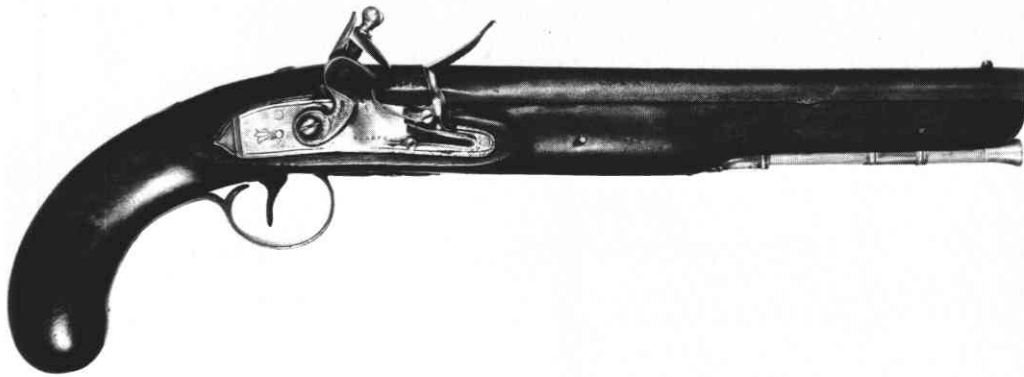
Reverse of Belgian brass-barreled "common pistol" showing fake British proofs and legend "EXTRA PROOF;" 8 5/8 inch barrel of .60 caliber.





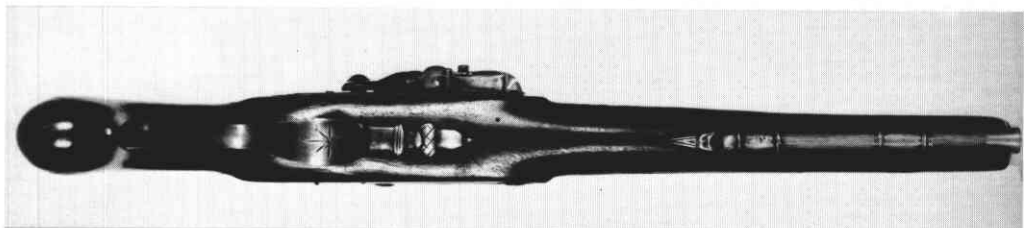
(9)

Two pistols by Wheeler of Birmingham, a consistent maker of arms for the fur trade in the 1790-1815 period. Both were collected in Michigan. Top: plain "common pistol" of the type regularly carried by British fur traders. Bottom: ordinary pocket pistol of the type regularly carried by British fur traders.



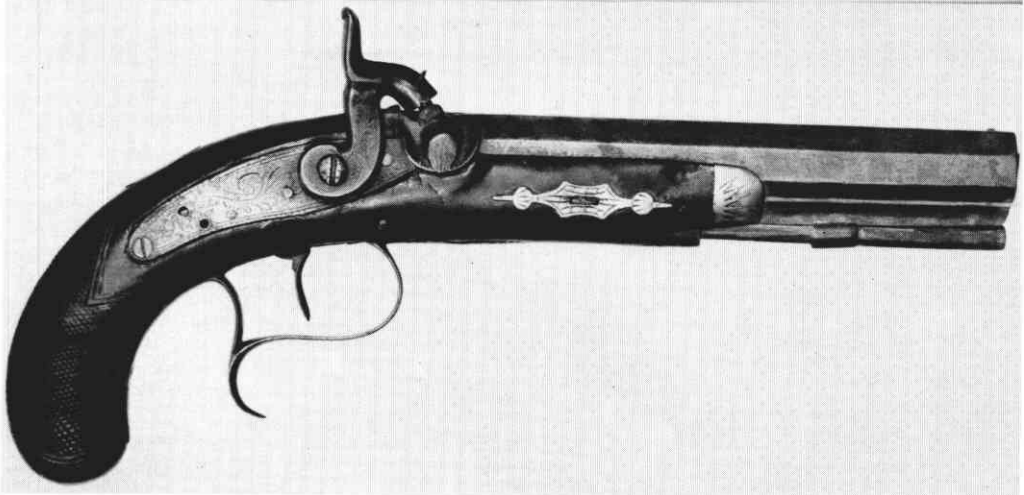
(10)

North West Company style pistol by John Sharpe of Birmingham, 10 3/4 inch barrel of .69 caliber. Sidescrews are fitted with round washers.



(11)

Bottom view of Sharpe Nor'west pistol showing brass acorn guard.



(12)

Deringer "Duelling Pistol" of the 1830's; 7 inch octagon barrel of .44 caliber, steel guard.

(13)

Large "pocket pistol" made by Philip Bond for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1808.



(14)

Reverse of Bond Hudson's Bay pistol showing the belt hook. This is one of a pair now in the Museum of the Fur Trade, Chadron, Nebraska.



(15)

Deringer "Armstrong Pistol" of the 1830s showing small butt and part-octagon barrel 4 5/8 inches long, .47 caliber.



(16)

Reverse of Deringer "Armstrong Pistol."





(17)

Pocket or belt pistol by Chance & Son of Birmingham ca. 1850; 6 1/2 inch barrel with sights, .47 caliber.



(19)

Russian flintlock Navy pistol dated 1814.



(21)

Close-up of brass monogram plate of Alexander I on wrist of Russian Navy pistol.

(18)

Reverse of Chance & Son pistol showing German silver inlays.



(20)

Reverse of Russian Navy pistol showing steel belt hook. These hooks were hand-forged and vary in exact size and design.



(22)

Remington percussion .44 revolver carried by an Oglala Sioux Indian in the 1870s.

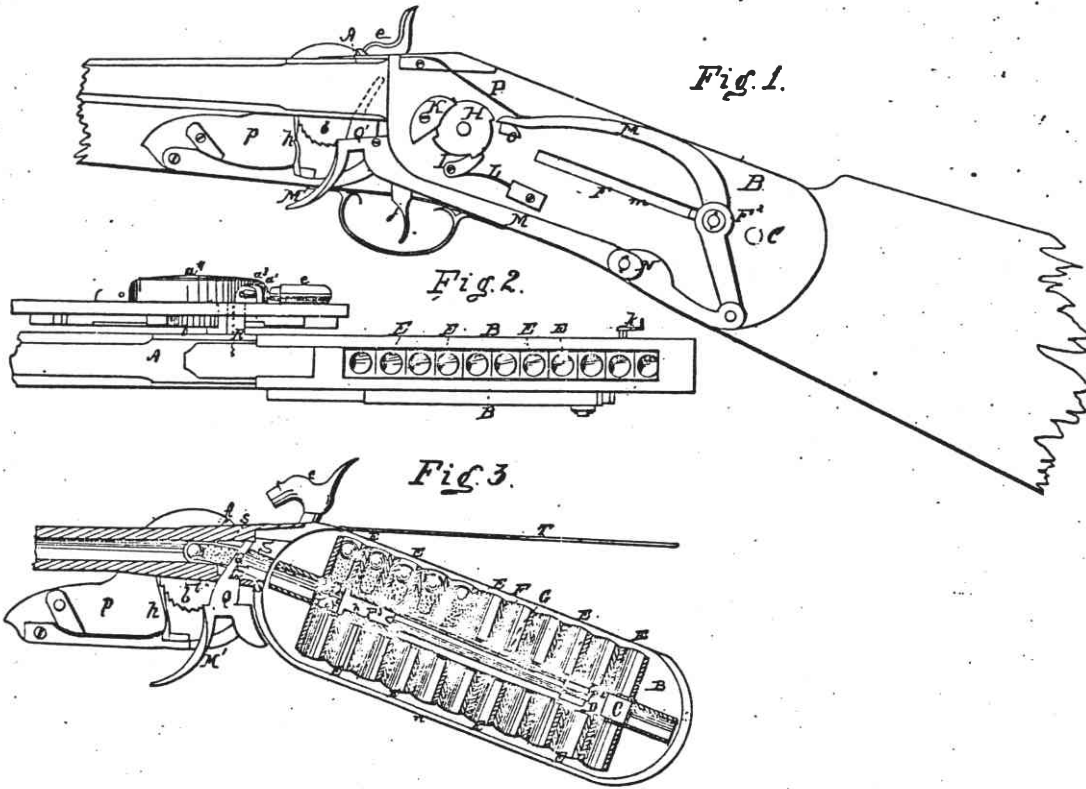


No. 5,814.

M. M. CASS.
Magazine Fire-arm.

Patented Sept. 26, 1848.

2 Sheets—Sheet 1.



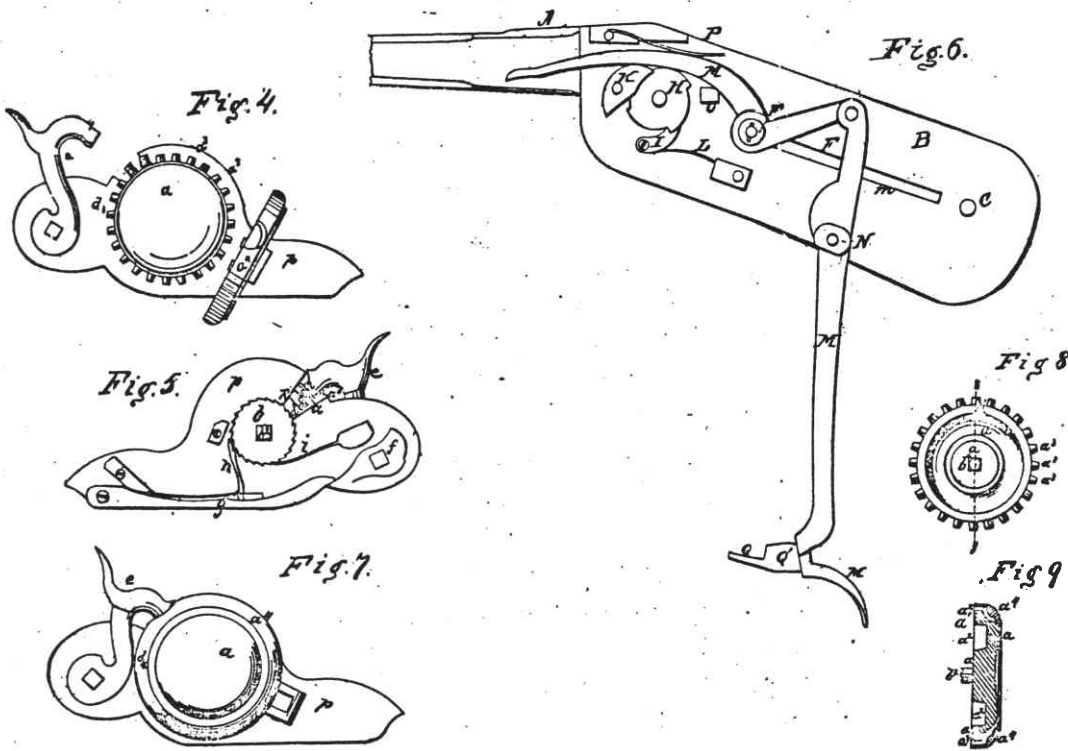
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