

U.S. Navy markings & their variations on Colt 1851 & 1861 Navy model revolvers, percussion & conversion

Sam Pachanian

Photos & Drawings by L. Frank Richey

In 1857, Sam Colt received his first large order from the United States Navy. This was for 2,000 percussion revolvers of his 1851 Navy model.

Prior to this, in what may have been Sam Colt's first dealing with the U.S. Navy, a batch of 100 ordered in 1852, five years earlier, was made up of 50 Navy models, 25 Armies and 25 Pockets. These were supplied to Commodore Matthew C. Perry, through the Navy department, for his expedition to open trade with Japan. Since they were intended to be used both as gifts and trade, Sam undoubtedly visualized great future profits, and gave Perry another \$1,000 worth of pistols as well. Many of these were engraved and cased. (Ref. 1)

As evidenced in a letter to Commodore Charles Morris, Navy Chief of Ordnance, Colt indicates that he is not aware of the method to be used to gain payment:

Hartford, Ct., Aug. 8, 1852

Herein I enclose invoice of 100 Revolving Pistols forwarded by me on 10th of July, agreeable to your order of 25th of June to the Navy Yard, Brooklyn, these arms being for the steam frigate *Mississippi* bound for the China Seas.

I have previously sent duplicates of the invoice to the Navy Department at Washington, and also to Commodore Perry, who has acknowledged receipt of the pistols in good order.

I know not whether I have taken the proper course in presenting my accounts. If not, would like to be advised of the mode to be pursued to bring the same to adjustment. I have the Honour to be, Sir, Your Ob't Serv't,

Sam'l Colt (Ref. 2 q.v.)

Between this order for Perry in 1852 and the 2,000 pistol order of 1857, several small shipments of 50 or 100 are reported by various sources, but no revolvers with Naval markings in a serial number range that would qualify them as having belonged to the U.S. Navy from this period have turned up in this survey.

As a result of this study, a chronology of five periods, during which major naval inspections took place, became apparent, and this division is used to set forth the variants.

The first three groups are comprised of the three different percussion models of Colt revolvers purchased



by the Navy: in 1857, 2000 late Third Model Navies; in 1859, 600 early Fourth Model Navies; in 1861 and '62, 3887 New Model Navies. A total of 6487. These pistols are referred to as Navy-Navies, a double-barreled name for '51 and '61 Colt Navy models actually used by the U.S. Navy and so marked. (Ref. 3) (Drawings 1, 2)

The fourth group is made up of revolvers from the three previous periods which were reinspected circa 1865 to establish their reliability for continued service. At this time some new proofing was added.

Group five, by far the most challenging, is made up of the 2077 conversions from percussion to cartridge accomplished by Colt for the Navy in 1873, '75 and '76. These were pistols drawn from the previous four groups still in the possession of the Navy. (Drawings 3 and 4)

The study of the conversions or alterations is simple in that only one inspector proof-stamped the arms sent to his station, but extremely challenging because of the very many configurations that these pistols ended up in, the results of the conversion and subsequent repairs by Colt, repairs and replacement of parts by Naval Ordnance, and without doubt some work by others.

GROUP I: THE LATE THIRDS ARE EARLY

Group I consists of the 2000 revolvers ordered in 1857 which are classified as the "Early" Navy-Navies. The lowest number in this survey is 55,782 and the high is 62,360. (Ref. 5)

This entire group of percussion revolvers falls into the Colt collector classification of "Late Third Model", which usually is equipped with a small oval brass triggerguard and a brass backstrap (Drawing 5).

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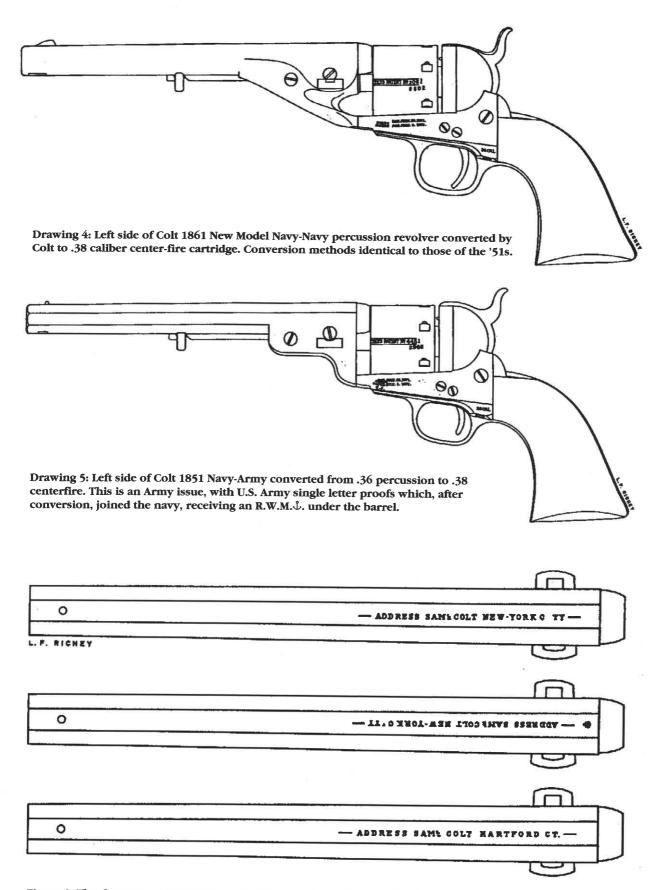


Figure 2: The three '51 percussion barrel addresses: Top – First New York righthanded; Middle – First New York lefthanded; Bottom – Hartford. Notice that the "I" is missing in New York C ty.

Simultaneous shipments of this model to the U.S. Army still retained these features, whereas those of the late 3rd model destined for the U.S. Navy were equipped with a larger oval flat-bottomed triggerguard of iron and a backstrap also of iron.

The top barrel flat carries the first New York address and, with the exception of five known examples, has a small "U.S." stamped on the left forward frame under the two lines "COLTS/PATENT". It appears that Colt factory markings were of little or no matter to the naval inspectors. A prime example of this is the percussion era "36 CAL" still left imprinted and sometimes added to '51 conversions on the left rear flat of the triggerguard during conversion to .38 center fire. (Fig. 21)

The distribution of these revolvers is well explained in a letter from Sam Colt to the Navy:

"This is to advise that 615 pistols and appurtenances were sent to Norfolk on Nov. 9th. Also 667 pistols were sent to Boston on Dec. 6th - the remainder to make up an order for 2000 are on their way to New York." (Ref. 5)

The 615 revolvers sent to the Norfolk Navy Yard were inspected by Cdr. James L. Henderson. His proof consisted of the letters U.S.N. stamped over his initials, J.L.H., in two lines on the metal buttstrap in a heel to toe direction.

The only variation found in this J.L.H. marking is in the number of dots used for punctuation, and three different formats are to be found. In the case of four dots, they are placed between the six letters. With five dots used, the omission comes after the N, and with six, a dot occurs after each letter.

The lower serial numbers are found in the Norfolk batch, and reach from a known low of 55,782 to a high of 59,713. (Fig. 1 a, b & c)

In the Norfolk batch of revolvers a very interesting Colt marking is found. It is possibly the only instance of '51 Navy Models being struck with a left-handed address on the barrel. Instead of the customary muzzle to breech or right-handed direction, pistols in the 59,000 serial number range are found reading breech to muzzle, left-handed. Lowest left-handed 59,045, highest 59,718, with 59,721, three guns later, returning to the right. No apt explanation for this odd phenemenon has been offered.

Three revolvers are recorded with the right-handed address in the middle of this change: 59,315, A Navy-Navy conversion with iron straps and J.L.H. butt. 59,350 and 59,410 are Navy-Armies. The change back from left to right having occured in the area between 59,718 and 59,721 gives an estimate possibly of 600 to 700 left-handers. Both of these are G.M.R. inspected. (Fig. 2)



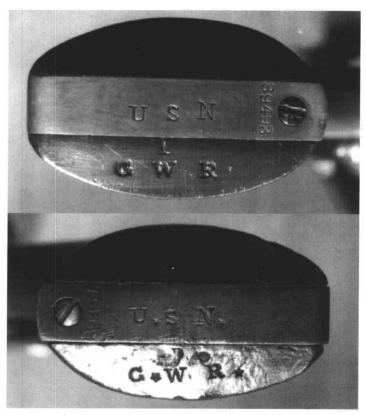
Figures 1A, 1B and 1C: The three minor variations of the work of Inspector James L. Henderson at the Norfolk Navy Yard. Butt marked with 4, 5 or 6 dots.



Figure 3: Butt marking of Cdr. George M. Ransom, Inspector at the Boston Navy Yard.



Figures 4 & 5: Butt stamping of Cdr. James R. Madison Mullaney at the New York Navy Yard, and of Cdr. Stephan C. Rowan at the New York Navy Yard.



Figures 6A, 6B, and 6C: Above and right: three variations in the butt markings of Cdr. George W. Rodgers, Inspector at the New York Navy Yard: 6A, without punctuation marked heel to toe; 6B, with stars marked toe to heel; 6C, with stars marked heel to toe. (stock replaced)

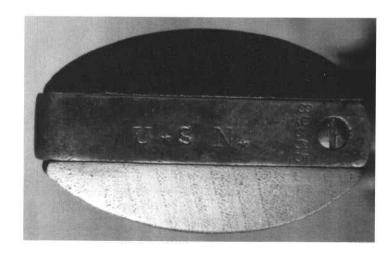
The central lot of 656 revolvers sent to the Boston Navy Yard were inspected by Cdr. George M. Ransom, who used a somewhat opposite approach than J.L.H at Norfolk. All G.M.R. pistols observed are marked to read toe to heel with small 1/16 inch high letters. The USN is stamped close to the lower right edge of the metal buttstrap and just below, in the wood, his initials, G M R. No punctuation is used and no variance occurs. With the exception of 59,718 mentioned as the highest left-handed address, barrels resume the right-hand stamping.

The third quantity of 718 revolvers shipped to the New York Navy Yard came under the inspection of two officers, Cdrs. James R. Madison Mullaney and Stephan C. Rowen. The lower serial numbers fell to Mullaney and the higher to Rowan, with a mix of numbers between them.

Once again, a new format was introduced and rigidly adhered to by these two naval officers. Into the metal buttstrap, a U*S*N was stamped. Below it in the wood of the bottom of the right side of the stock, an I for inspector or inspected was stamped above the initials J*R*M*M or S*C*R. For punctuation a five-pointed star was used between letters. Markings read from toe to heel and no deviation from the format was observed. Serial number low starts at 61,306, to a high of 62,360. (Fig. 4&5)

For the purpose of centering and because of the four initials used, it often appears that the U*S*N or J*R*M*M butts is set further back towards the heel than is the three initial mark of S*C*R. On several specimens measured, the difference amounts to ½th inch, more or less, when measured from the center of the butt screw to the center of the first star after the U*.

It is obvious that buttstraps with this particular U*S*N can be attributed to one of these two inspectors. With this measurement one can take a fairly well educated guess as to which of the two it may be on '51s that have replaced or conversion stocks, which were beveled higher at the butt. The average distance from



the center of the butt screw to the center of the first star after U* is ¹%₂ inch for S*C*R. The average for J*R*M*M is ²%₂ inch. One S*C*R measures ²%₂. Because so few have been measured thus far, no high degree of accuracy is attributed to these conclusions.

GROUP II: THE EARLY FOURTHS ARE LATE

In 1859 the second order of '51 Navy model Colts, 600 percussion, was received at the New York Navy Yard. In the two year interval, the Colt model had changed from the late thirds of 1857 to early fourths and these are known as the late model Navy-Navies.

The early fourth model Colt Navies for the U.S. Navy now carried the Hartford barrel address. (Fig. 2) Again, instead of brass, it was equipped with an iron backstrap and an iron large rounded triggerguard of the final design used by Colt. A small U.S. is placed under the COLTS/PATENT on the left forward frame as before.

The inspector assigned was Cdr. George W. Rodgers, and it appears that he was the only officer to accept the 600 arms.

Cdr. Rodgers also used a different format in his mark than had his four predecessors, once again making himself readily identifiable. He appears to have used the same dies for the letters USN as had J*R*M*M and S*C*R, but he started without any punctuation. The N is often found double-stamped. Three butt variations are found:

- 1. A large U S N on the metal buttstrap, and in the wood of the right stock the letter I over G W R with no punctuation, reading from heel to toe. This is the most numerous of the Rodgers markings, and reaches from a low of 89,308 to about 89,850.
- 2. The same letter marking, but with a star after the U* and after the N* reading U*SN*. In the wood a star after the G* and after the R* reading G*WR* from toe to heel. Two examples of this are 89,851 and 89,864.
- 3. Same as 2, with stars in the same places but reading from heel to toe. The change of direction of the two pistols above is an unusual break from the customary conformity. (Figs. 6 a, b & c)

GROUP III: THE NEW MODELS

The percussion revolvers of this group, Colt 1861 New Model Navy-Navies, show no signs of having been inspected when received by the U.S. Navy, but some are found with a U.S.N. on the brass buttstrap, denoting acceptance. The style of the letters used is different from any used on the '51s. ¹

Three variations of this butt marking have been noticed. One having 3 dots, one after each letter, and with two dots between the letters which are ½2 inch high. A third is of smaller letters, ½6 inch high, with three dots,

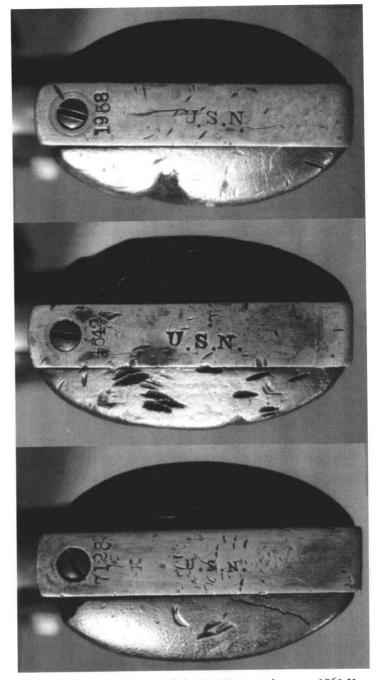
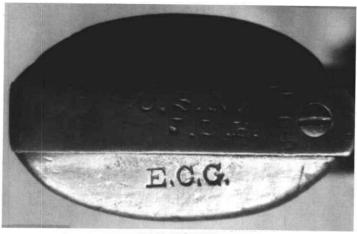


Figure 7: Three variations of the U.S.N. stampings on 1861 New Model Navy butts. All read toe to heel, with 7A having two dots and 7B three dots. Letters are ½ inch tall. 7C has three dots with letters ½ inch. This is the only example of this marking

one after each letter (Figs. 7 a, b & c). This occurs on a conversion which also bears an anchor of the reinspection period on the barrel. No other example has been located to verify it. In 1861 and 1862, 3887 of the new models were acquired by the Navy. (Ref. 7) Serial numbers range from 100 to 10,000. The barrel address was standard throughout. At this point, the U.S Navy discontinued buying Colt revolvers for the Civil War.

Doubtless the haste and urgency of the war as well as the loss of personnel to the Confederacy caused the abandoning of the inspection process for the '61 New Models.





Figures 8 & 9: Dual inspection on 59,082 and 68,360.

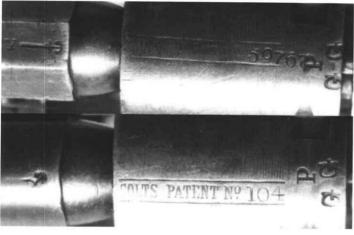


Figure 10A and 10B: Matched numbers: '51, no. 59,767 and '61, no. 7104, showing the anchor stamp on the barrel mated to the inspector's P/GG on the cylinder periphery.



Figure 11: The inspection mark of Cdr. John R. Goldsborough.

DUAL INSPECTORS

Three Colt revolvers are known which carry the initials of two inspectors on their butts. I would like to present them at this time in hopes that more input will be forthcoming.

- 1. Conversion 59,082, properly inspected by J.L.H. (6 dots), has the additional letters E.C.G. stamped in the left butt wood in ½ inch high letters reading heel to toe, in direction with the buttstrap letters, An E.C. Grafton is listed as a Navy Inspector in 1861.² The stock on the pistol is the original matching percussion part and it has not been beveled to a higher flare. (Fig. 8)
- 2. 1851 Percussion 68,360, still with its original stock, is marked "J.D.V." on the bottom wood right side: John Dahlgren Viewed. the iron buttstrap is deeply impressed with U*S*N*, the stars being a bit different in size and shape than those used previously. The bottom of the left side of the stock is marked I over G.M.R., inspector George M. Ransom. All of the letters used are % inch high and read heel to toe. (Fig. 9)
- 3. The serial number of this example is not known, but the iron buttstrap is marked U*S*N. In the wood of the right butt is I over J*R*M*M, and on the left butt wood in letters ½ inch high, G G V with no punctuation, in keeping with Cdr. Guert Gansevoort's method of marking. We can guess this pistol to be in the 61,000 range by virtue of the original proofing of Cdr. Mullaney.³

GROUP IV: RE-INSPECTION

With the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the Navy opted to conduct a re-examination of its weapons still retained and rate them as to their suitability for service. Any of the '51s and '61s of the previous three groups were subject to this re-inspection but not too many of them made it.

Regulations by the Navy Bureau of Ordnance in 1864 stated, "The Bureau directs that hereafter, all small arms, when passed by the inspector be stamped in the following manner...Revolvers: on the top of the barrel, near the cylinder, with an anchor; and on the face of the cylinder the letter "P" over the initials of the inspector..." (Ref. 7, p. 33 q.v.)

As regards Colt revolvers, this task was achieved by two inspectors; Cdrs. Guert Gansevoort and John R. Goldsborough. Examples of the re-inspection by these two men discloses some variation in interpretation.

The tiny anchor stamp on the top of the barrel in front of the cylinder appears in conjunction with a P/GG or P/JRG proofing on the cylinder. Where the cylinder is a mismatched replacement, this mating is lost. (Figs. 10a & 10b)

John R. Goldsborough stamped to the rear outer periphery of the cylinder with the P over his initials or with the P under the J.R.G. and varying in each instance with two or three dots. Sometimes a dot is found after the P. The two-dot example shown in figure 11 may have lost its third point when the cylinder was shortened in conversion. The J.R.G. markings are impressed parallel to the cylinder axis.

Guert Gansevoort stamped the cylinder in either of two places: "P over G G" is placed vertically to the cylinder axis on the rear outer periphery, or on the front face between the chambers, as shown in Figure 12.

No instance of the J.R.G. marking on the front face was encountered, possibly due to a lack of accommodation for three initials to fit. Since the regulations say "face of cylinder", what constituted the face could have been easily mis-interpreted.

GROUP V: THE CONVERSIONS

In the years 1873, '75 and '76, the U.S. Navy arranged with the Colt factory to have its percussion revolvers converted to use a new .38 caliber center fire cartridge. The Navy simply stated that it could not afford the new "Single Action Army" being purchased by the U.S. Army.

Of the approximately 6,500 percussion '51s and '61s owned by the Navy originally, 2,097 were converted over the three year span. There was some difficulty in getting about a third of its store scraped together from the various Navy Yards and ships.

Multiple markings abound on the conversions: the stars, dots, initials and anchors of the first four groups may be found as well as the one new marking of the conversions.

From all matching numbers to those having newly made, revived or interchanged parts assembled by Colt during conversion, or to refurbishing by Naval Ordnance, however it was accomplished, the Colt was particularly well adapted for conversion, Figures 13 through 20 tell a part of the story.

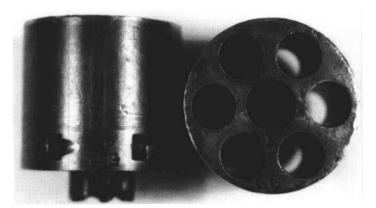


Figure 12: Comparison of Cdr. Guert Gansevoort's markings on the rear periphery and front face of cylinder.

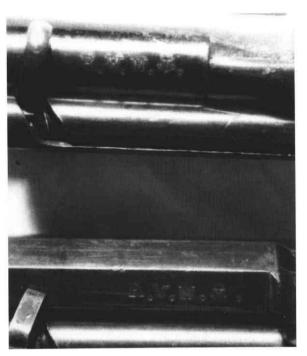


Figure 13: The only inspector to put his mark on the conversions was Cdr. Richard W. Meade at the New York Navy Yard. Fortunately a little more than half were sent to his station, and his initials followed by an anchor are a welcome sight to collectors. The barrels of a '51 and a '61 show his R.W.M.\u00fc. stamping. Only in one instance was a dot found missing, and that was after the anchor.

NOTES

- 1. Pictured in The Gun Report, September, 1973, p. 22.
- 2. Listed in The Gun Report, January 1970, p. 19.
- 3. Pictured in Small Arms of the Sea Services.
- 4. Illustrated on page 196 of Colt Revolvers by James E. Serven.
- 5. Col. R.H. Rankin, N. Flayderman & Co. 1972, p. 77.

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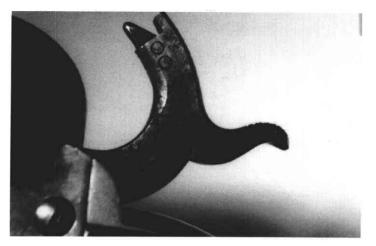


Figure 14: One of the oddities on some conversions is the presence of a Richards-Mason 1860 Army hammer on a '51 or '61 Navy model. Three examples are known: 59,721 (pictured), 4,339, a '61 NM Navy-Navy, and 56,974 (reported). The larger dimension of the firing pin is very noticeable, as it is \% inch longer for the Navy-Navies than for the Army alterations. This hammer and pin is original to both the Transition or Second Richards and the Richards-Mason.



Figure 15: A '61 barrel very well adapted to a '51. These are found with no numbers or with numbers matched to the revolver placed above its original number. In the photo above the original barrel number was left intact and unenhanced.

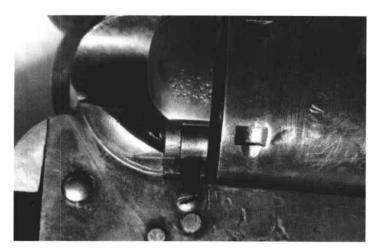


Figure 16: A '51 fourth model frame replaced on a '61 Navy and renumbered to the '61. The notch immediately behind the loading gate hinge occurs because of the larger loading cut-out on the '51s. This cut-out is smaller on the '61s and results in a solid housing. In the deep end of the notch the threads of the hinge screw can be seen showing through, very commonly so.



Figure 17: This cylinder has worked in at least two '61s besides its original '51, serial number 89,792. Cylinders are interchangeable and after alterations were renumbered to match the revolver, sometimes under the original number and other times on the rear face between the cartridge chambers. Serial numbers were left intact and old ones were not crossed off.

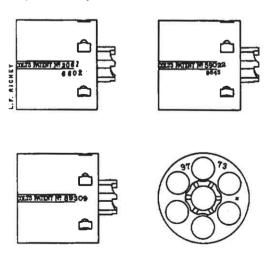


Figure 18: Four cylinder views showing renumbering patterns. Lower cylinder is numbered on its rear face. Lowest serial number for the late Navy-Navies is a conversion cylinder no. 89,308.

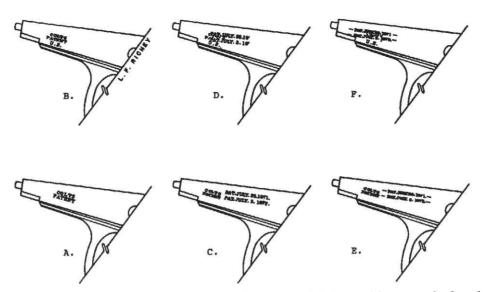


Figure 19: Applied at the time of conversion, the two lines of patent dates on the left forward frame can be found in four variations: (C.) Type I has eight dots, one after each word and number. (D.) Type I Broken. The 71 and 72 as well as the dots that follow are broken off the right end of the die. Remnants of the sevens can be seen faintly imprinted. (E.) Type II has four dashes, one at the beginning and end of each line. All eight dots are intact. (F.) Type II Broken. The dot is missing after the 1871 date.

Any one of these four variations may be found bashed over or set adjacent to the original COLTS/PATENT/U.S. Occasionally the patent dates were not applied, leaving the original percussion C/P/U.S. on '51s, or C/P on '61s. (B and A) (Ref. 8)

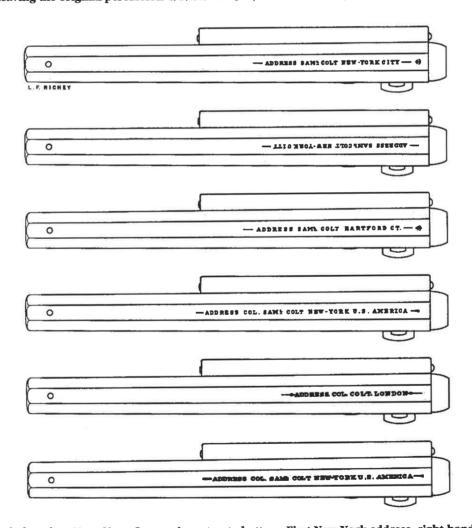


Figure 20: Different barrels found on Navy-Navy-Conversions, top to bottom: First New York address, right-handed; First New York address, left-handed; Hartford address; Second New York address found on a conversion in the 89,000 range whose original barrel would have been a Hartford; London barrel found on conversion 89,581 with British proofs on left lug. How the barrel was adapted to fit the smaller diameter of the American pistol is not known, as disassembly was not achieved; barrel for an original cartridge conversion with the deep address stamping, no rammer catch dovetail, single cut in the loading notch second bevel not made, screw hole for ejector only and the slight forward tilt of the front edge of the barrel lug. Bottom of barrel stamped R.W.M.\$\ddot\$. British proofs on left lug. '51 conversion no. 89,718 also has an unconventional, large USN stamped in its butt.

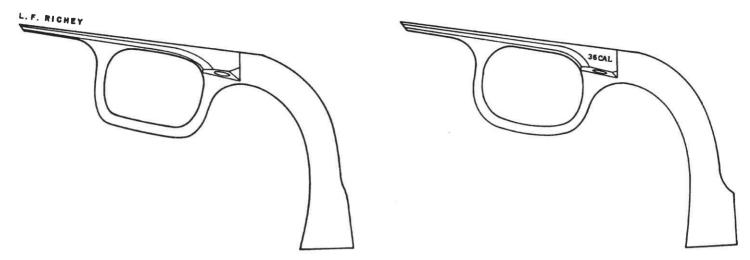


Figure 21: The two triggerguards used on the Navy-Navies. The left guard with a flattish bottom to the bow is the iron guard of the early Navy-Navies, which had an iron backstrap.

This large oval guard, right, the final design used by Colt, is iron on the late Navy-Navies, which also have an iron backstrap. On the '61 New Model Navy-Navies both triggerguard and backstrap are of this shape but made of brass. The "36 CAL" marking on the left rear triggerguard flat was standard on the 1861 but was added to a few of the 1851s at the time of conversion. This seems a bit of a strange thing to do, but the Navy inspectors appear to have ignored its presence, as well as appearing oblivious to any of the other Colt markings.

In keeping with this, a Colt advertising sheet circa 1872 shows "Colt's Metallic Cartridge Navy Six Shot Revolving Pistol" still being referred to as ".36 caliber" instead of its actual .38 caliber.

A total of 272 Colt Navy-Navy revolvers were recorded for this study:

| | Group I Early Model 1851 | Group II Late Model 1851 | Group III 1861 New Model |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Percussion | 66 | 20 | 33 |
| Conversion | 85 | 19 | 49 |
| | 151 | 39 | 82 |
| Serial Number Ranges | | REPORTED | OBSERVED |
| 55600 to 56999 | | 6 | 15 |
| 58000 to 59000 | | 12 | 7 |
| 59000 to 60000 | | 32 | 29 |
| 60000 to 61000 | | 2 | |
| 61000 to 62000 | | 22 | 21 |
| 62000 to 63000 | | 3 | 2 |
| Total, Group I = 151 | | 77 | 74 |
| 89000 to 90000 | | 18 | 20 |
| 90000 to 91000 | | 1 | |
| Total, Group II = 39 | | 19 | 20 |
| 100 to 2 | 000 | 6 | 3 |
| 2000 to 3000 | | 8 | 5 |
| 3000 to 4000 | | 7 | 5 |
| 4000 to 5000 | | 12 | 3 |
| 5000 to 6000 | | 3 | 4 |
| 6000 to 7000 | | 6 | 3 |
| 7000 to 8000 | | 4 | 2 |
| 8000 to 9000 | | 2 | 3 |
| 9000 to 10000 | | 1 | 5 |
| Total, Group III = 82 | | 49 | 33 |