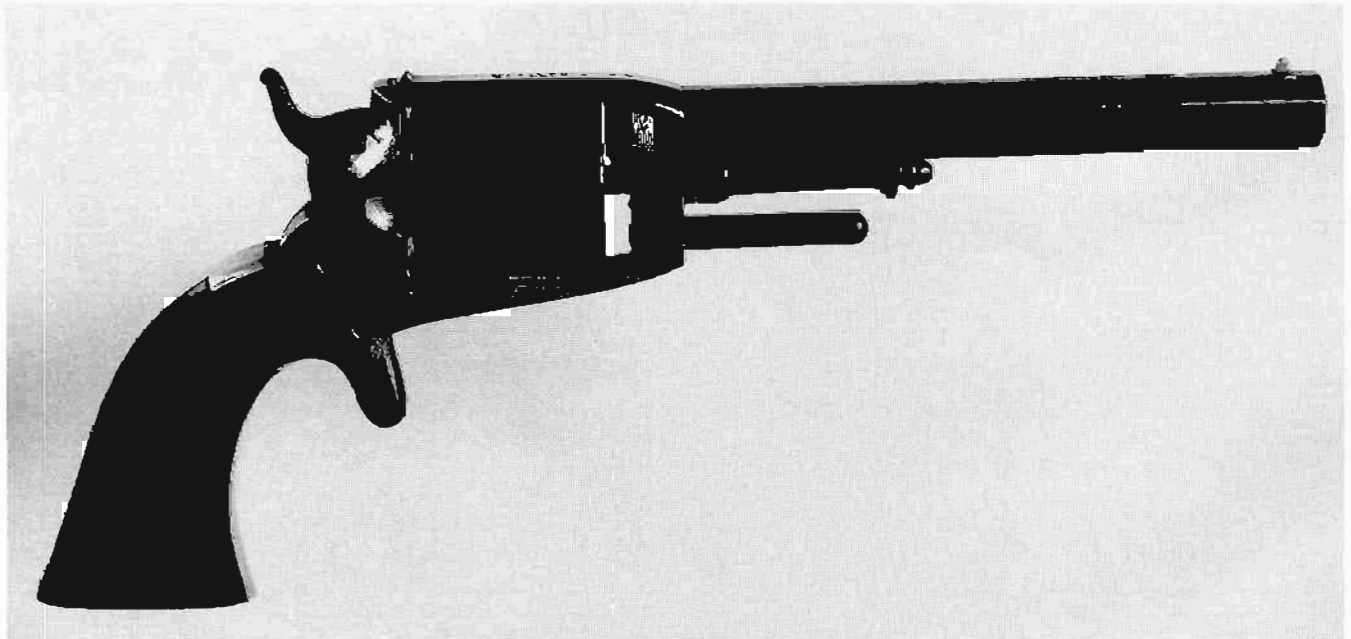




Standard percussion model. No serial no. but stamped with letter "L" on several parts. Shown with its original brown tooled Confederate-styled holster which is marked:

21-July-1864
This Revolver and Holster
was(sic) captured from a Rebel
Signal Officer by
Cap't S.H. Merrill
11th Maine
Reg't



One-piece cylinder percussion-cartridge revolver. No serial no. Shows cylinder release button and attached rod for hand ejection of cartridge casings. One known example.

The Legacy of a Tidewater Gunsmith—Thomas W. Cofer

M. Clifford Young

A definitive study of the legacy of Thomas Wrenn Cofer has to encompass four main subjects: the Revolvers, Cartridges, Patent Papers and Government Contract. I will endeavor to outline important highlights of each which should give adequate coverage.

THE REVOLVERS

One of the rarest, ingenious, and most sought after of Confederate revolvers is the one made by Thomas W. Cofer, a Tidewater gunsmith from Portsmouth, Virginia. Copied from the solid frame principle of the Whitney model but with a brass frame and sheathed trigger, it was most colorful and distinctive. The only revolver made under a patent in the Confederacy, it was also the first made under a Confederate Government contract.

Although the patent was granted for and relates only to the original model with its unique two-piece cylinder, Cofer, for reasons of his own—perhaps pride—had all subsequent revolvers stamped on the tops of their frames: “T.W. Cofer’s Patent.”

Cofer produced three distinctive models before Portsmouth fell in early May of 1862. The first was a percussion-cartridge revolver typified by its patented split-cylinder for special reloadable cartridges. There are only two known examples; one is .36 caliber, the other about .33 caliber with a shorter cylinder. Both are in the Fred Slaton, Jr. collection.

The second model was also a percussion-cartridge revolver but utilized a single-piece cylinder for an improved reloadable cartridge. There is *one* known specimen which is on display.

Failing of success with the complexities of making these two metallic cartridge types, the exigencies of war prompted Cofer to be realistic and practical, especially since he had applied for and had been granted a Government contract. All of his efforts were then concentrated on producing a standard percussion model.

The third or standard percussion model could be called the production model as it is the most numerous of existing Cofer’s, there being about a dozen known examples in museums and private collections. The one on display is with its original Confederate style brown holster that is tooled with oak leaves and acorns and other design patterns. The holster is marked “21 July 1864. This revolver and holster



was (sic) captured from a Rebel Signal Officer by Capt. S.H. Merrill, 11th Maine Regt.”

While there are no known likenesses of Cofer, there is one of Capt. S. H. Merrill in the Maine State Archives as well as a photograph of his marker in Arlington National Cemetery.

THE COFER CARTRIDGES

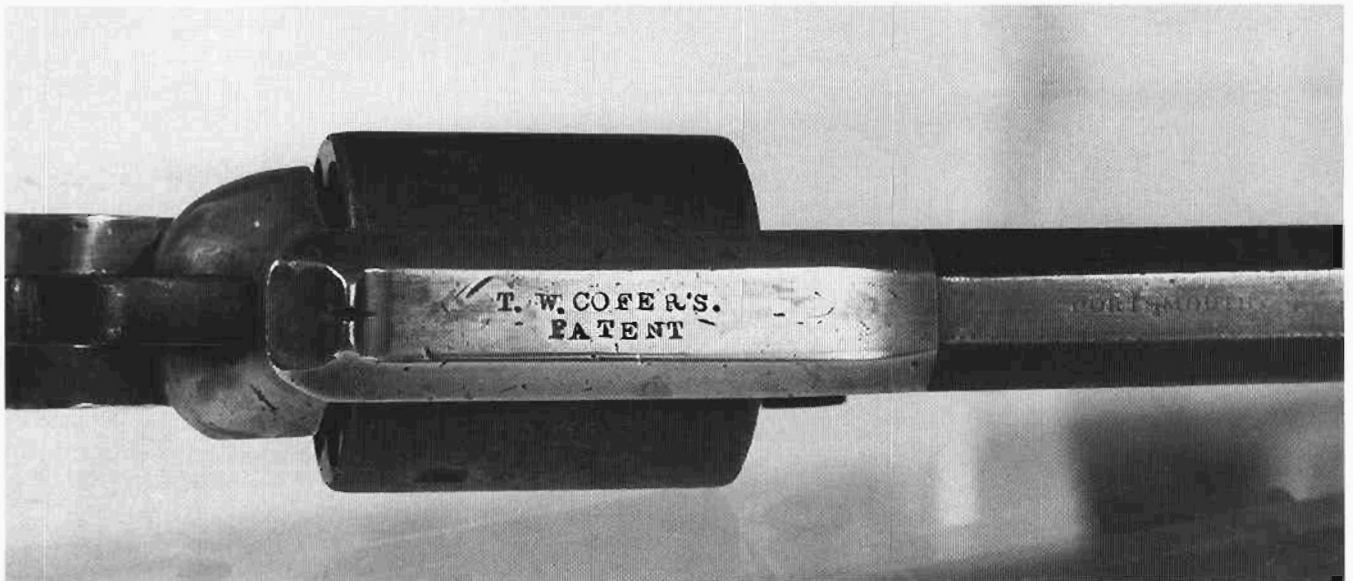
Cofer’s Confederate patent application described two different types of cartridges that could be utilized in his two-piece revolver cylinder. No examples of Type I cartridge or cylinder are known, however, so whether or not he ever made either is a matter of conjecture.

The Type II cartridge case consists of a brass cylinder with a flange near the head, followed by a steel nipple for a percussion cap. It was made specifically for the two-piece or split-cylinder revolver. There are about a dozen of these cartridges known, two of which are on display.

Type III was not covered by the patent but it was the logical culmination of Cofer’s search for a practical self-contained cartridge for the one-piece cylinder revolver. Although still utilizing a percussion cap, the cartridge is effectively a reloadable centerfire. Two *reproduced* cartridges that were probably the type used are on display with the single-piece cylinder revolver.

THE CONTRACT PAPERS

The Cofer revolver has always been classified by au-



Typical "T.W. Cofer's Patent" and "Portsmouth, VA" frame and barrel stampings.



Patented two-piece or split-cylinder percussion-cartridge revolver. Ser. No. 7. Exploded view of remnant revolver depicting component parts. Two known examples.

thors, researchers and collectors as a secondary Confederate or associated-Confederate arm. This second class status was based upon the fact that no information had come to light to indicate that the revolver was made under a government contract. Since the Portsmouth-Norfolk area was evacuated during the early part of the war, it was generally assumed that the relatively few revolvers that were made there, were sold privately.

Within the past several years, a most startling discovery was made at the National Archives in Washington by William Leigh III, the eldest son of Lewis Leigh, Jr., the noted Confederate collector. Found in the "Citizens or Business Firms"¹ files were documents revealing that Thomas W. Cofer did, indeed, possess a government contract to specifically deliver eighty-two revolvers to Capt. Edgar Burroughs' Company, 5th Virginia Cavalry. These papers indicated, in detail, that seventeen revolvers were initially delivered on January 18, 1862, and payment was received on February 5, 1862. The balance of sixty-five revolvers were delivered on May 1st, 1862, and payment was received on May 31st. Two other receipts made references to the fact that the revolvers were part of a contract with Mr. Cofer.

Although the Cofer was never classified as a primary Confederate revolver, it was always considered one of the most desirable. With the discovery of these papers, re-evaluation to primary status has finally been attained. And on another note of interest, although the original contract vouchers—like the patent papers—were issued in Richmond in 1862 and are now in the Archives in Washington, copies are now being displayed for the very first time and at the Society Meeting in Richmond.

THE PATENT PAPERS

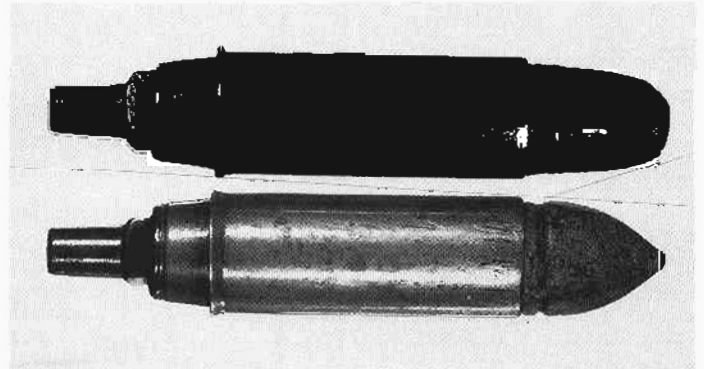
On May 21, 1861, an act by the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States established the Patent Office under a Commissioner of Patents who was to be appointed by the President and placed under the direction of the Attorney General. The Commissioner of Patents was Rufus R. Rhodes. The Attorney General was Judah P. Benjamin. Surprisingly, the principal difference from the U.S. patent law was that under the Confederate patent law, slaves could receive patents for their inventions.²

1. Confederate Papers Relating to Citizens or Business Firms. (M346, Box 205, 7W4, 9:7E). Confederate Records Division, National Archives, Washington.

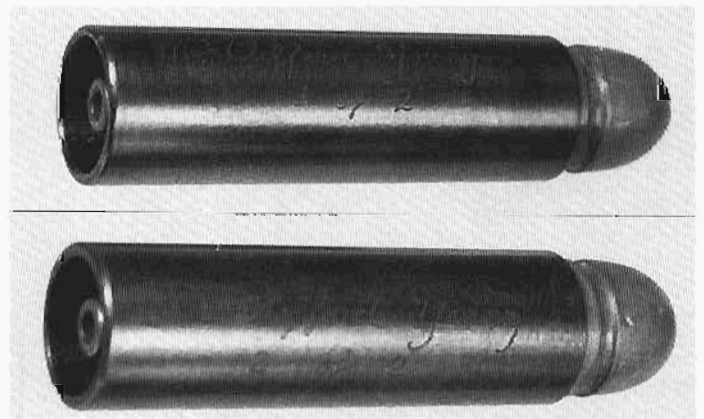
2. Kenneth W. Dobyns, *The Patent Office Pony: A History of the Early Patent Office* (Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1994)



Photograph of Capt. Simeon H. Merrill of the 11th Maine who captured the revolver and inscribed its holster.



Two original Cofer reloadable cartridges made under the same patent as the split-cylinder revolver. Shown together for comparison: You will note, from the distorted condition of one of the flanges, that that cartridge had more usage than the other.



Two conjectural made-up cartridges for the improved single-piece cylinder revolver. Note the recessed percussion nipples and the absence of flanges. Also steel rather than brass tubing was probably utilized for greater strength. They have been carefully inscribed for identification purposes to denote the fact that they are not original.

During the Civil War, the United States Patent Office issued 16,051 patents, while the Confederate Patent Office issued a total of 274 patents. Of the three surviving Confederate Patent Papers, the Cofer is the only one related to small arms. Of the two other known, one is at the Confederate Museum in Richmond, which was granted for a "Torpedo" and the other at the National Archives, was issued for an "Instrument for Measuring Distances."

The official Patent Office publication clearly detailed the requirements for obtaining a patent.³ In addition to presenting a patent *model*, preferably in working order, two copies of the patent were to be submitted consisting of *specifications* and a *drawing*. If the patent was granted, the Patent Office made up patent page one—the "Letter of Patent"—in duplicate, filed one set and returned the other to the inventor. Complete, there were three pages and one drawing tied together with a green ribbon. Thus, there were two original sets of patent papers. The copy on display is from the inventor's set.

Near the end of the war, during the general evacuation

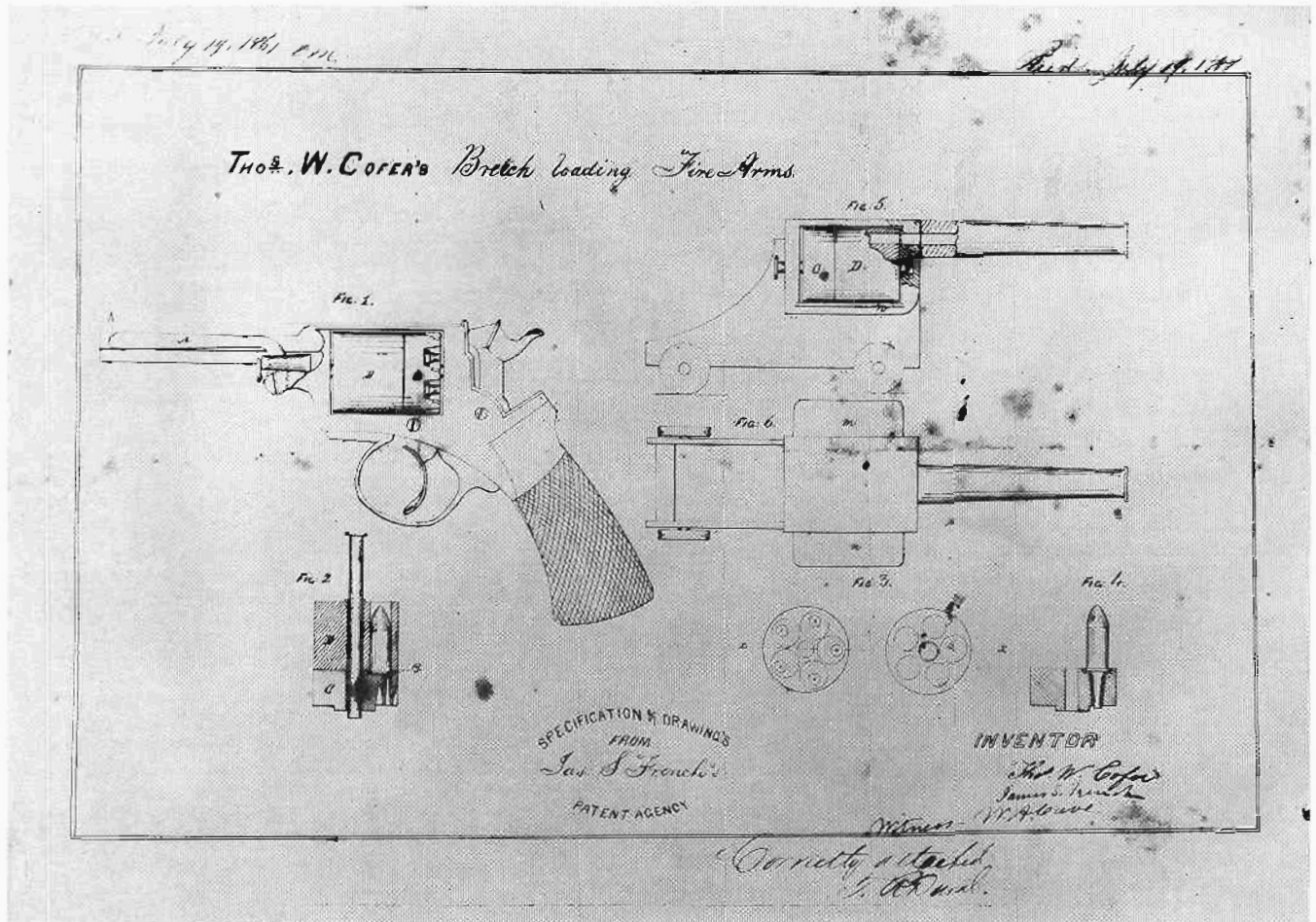
of Richmond, Confederate troops set fire to a warehouse to prevent the contents from being taken by approaching troops. The fire spread and on April 3, 1865, burned a large part of central Richmond including the building in which the Patent Office was located. Apparently, all the patent sets and models were destroyed.

Miraculously, after over 130 years of neglect, the surviving Cofer Patent Papers surfaced in complete and relatively good condition. After acquiring them, I felt that I had an obligation and had them professionally restored to preserve them, using the latest techniques. They were later re-framed in natural North American black walnut with splined corners and 23-karat gold leaf trim.

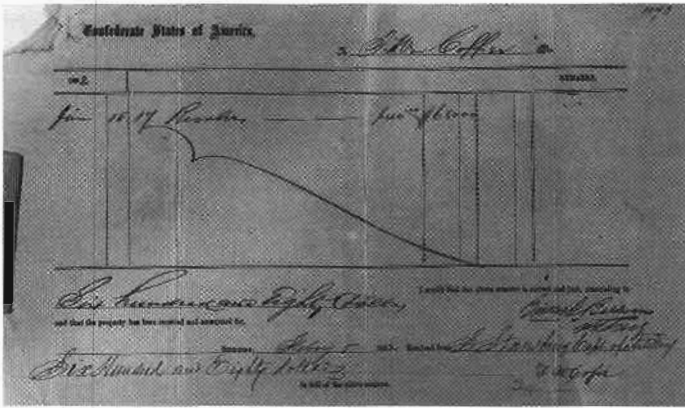
Confederate Patent Number 9 was granted to Thomas W. Cofer on August 12, 1861 in Richmond, Virginia. Now over a century and a quarter later, they have returned to Richmond!!

3. *Rules and Directions for Proceedings in the Confederate States Patent Office* (Richmond, 1861)

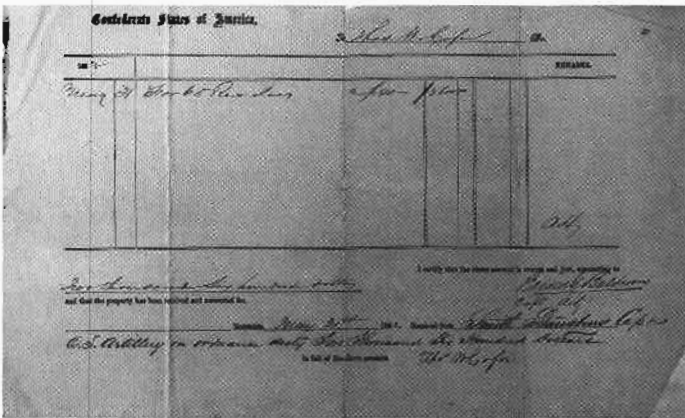
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



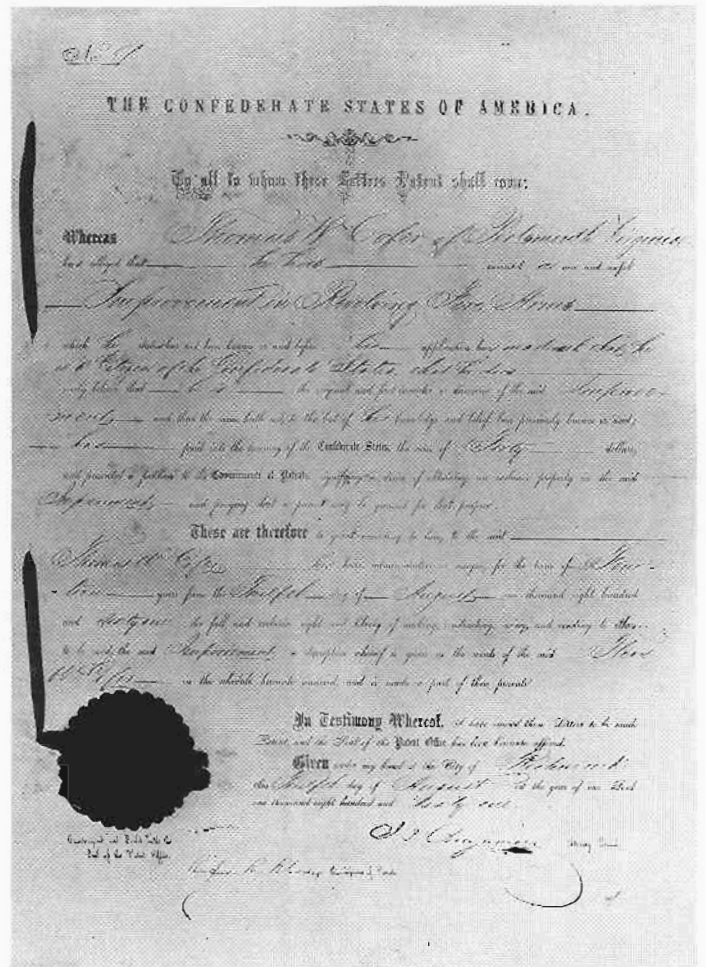
Required Confederate Patent Office drawing submitted with application.



Confederate States of America contract voucher for 17 revolvers. Addressed to T.W. Cofer (mis-spelled with two f's).



Another contract voucher to Thos. W. Cofer for 65 revolvers.



The Confederate "Letter of Patent" granted to Thomas W. Cofer.



Cofer family lot in Oak Grove Cemetery, Portsmouth, Virginia.