



Leech & Rigdon revolvers pictured with a Leech & Rigdon Foot Officer's sword. Serial number 1231 on the left and 1052 on the right. Courtesy of Edward N. Simmons (and pictured on page 11 of *Confederate Arms*)

## Variations of the Leech & Rigdon Revolver

Edward J. Meredith

Charles H. Rigdon, one of the Confederacy's great mechanical entrepreneurs, stepped onto the American stage as a scale maker in the city of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1844 he transferred his "weighty" business to St. Louis, Missouri, later becoming a part-time engineer on a steam engine project. Soon after this venture he moved the balance of his business to bustling Memphis, Tennessee. There Rigdon's ability as a scale maker, requiring intricate skills in precision instruments, led to a more patriotic calling of revolver manufacturing as the clouds of war shadowed the American unity.

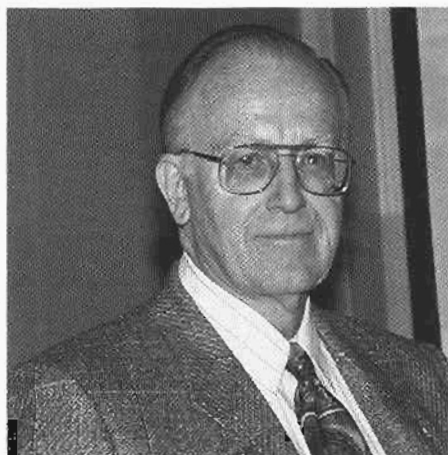
Enter Thomas Leech who had been in Memphis working as a cotton broker several years prior to Rigdon's arrival. The Civil War threats adjusted his thinking, and he turned his attention to the manufacture of war materials. By late 1861, Leech's company, the Memphis Novelty Works, was fashioning swords, sabers, Bowie knives, bayonets, spurs, and other accouterments for the glorious Southern Cause.

In the Spring of 1862, the Memphis Novelty Works was advertised as under the joint control of Thomas Leech and Charles Rigdon, marking the humble beginning of the Leech & Rigdon Company.

War threats to the city of Memphis in May of 1862 caused the neophyte company to pack up machinery and baggage and move to safer quarters in Columbus, Mississippi.

It is generally assumed that the first Leech & Rigdon revolvers were manufactured in Columbus, Mississippi, as there is no solid evidence that any revolvers evolved from the Memphis facilities. A short-lived stay in Columbus saw the transition of the firm name from the **Memphis Novelty Works** to the **Novelty Works, Leech & Rigdon Company**, as marked on some of their swords and revolvers. The War dictated that revolvers were more in demand than swords, and a contract with the Confederate Government for approximately 1500 Colt-type revolvers, with six cylinder stops, was expected by November, 1862. However, the contract itself never surfaced, even though it apparently had been fully promulgated.

Before the Leech & Rigdon Company could gain momentum in Columbus, the relentless Federal invasion pushing southward necessitated another major machinery move to a safer haven, Greensboro, Georgia. There the company purchased the building formerly used by the Greensboro Steam Factory and re-assembled their thus-far very mobile opera-



tion. In April, 1863, the company discontinued its sword-making operation entirely and their sole endeavor now consisted of the manufacture of percussion revolvers. However, their apparent success was to prove short lived.

For unknown reasons the partnership of Charles Rigdon and Thomas Leech failed, and on December 13, 1863, the Leech & Rigdon Company was dissolved. In its brief history, the firm did produce some 900 revolvers of the originally contracted 1500, while located on three separate factory sites. Undaunted by this setback, Charles Rigdon formed another partnership with Jesse Ansley, Andrew Smith, and Charles Keen, renamed the firm Rigdon, Ansley and Company, and relocated it to Augusta, Georgia. The balance of the old Leech & Rigdon contract for the Colt-type revolvers was faithfully completed by the new firm before changing to production of a twelve cylinder stop model, later to be known as the Rigdon, Ansley revolver.

All of the Leech & Rigdon revolvers produced were patterned after the then immensely popular .36 caliber Colt 1851 Navy Model. The revolvers all had iron frames, brass backstraps, and small, rounded brass trigger guards, but a more easily machined round barrel was substituted for the octagonal barrel of the Colt. Leech & Rigdon felt that "their revolver was fully equal to a Colt with the exception of a little outside show."<sup>1</sup> Surviving examples today, when compared to a number of the other Confederate-made revolvers, prove this statement to be accurate.

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1. Gary, William A., *Confederate Revolvers*, page 14.

Because of the many changes in the company's name and location, there are a number of variations in the markings found on surviving examples of the Leech & Rigdon revolvers. In order to present a coherent pattern of these revolvers and their markings, I will break down the serial numbers into ranges that conform to the different firm stampings.

In the range of serial numbers 1 to approximately 24, the revolvers are marked on the top barrel flat: **LEECH & RIGDON NOVELTY WORKS, CSA**. The known surviving examples are serial numbers 11, 15, and an un-numbered specimen in the author's collection. The firm stamp letters are approximately 1 mm in height with the small serial numbers 1½ mm in height and individually stamped. The same serial number dies appear to have been used throughout the entire Leech & Rigdon production. A larger stamping of the serial number (measuring 2½ mm) appears on the wood of the right grip butt of the early revolvers. The numbered parts include the trigger, hammer, cylinder, barrel, loading lever, plunger, loading lever barrel catch (ball type), backstrap, trigger guard, and the loading lever screw face. The numbering on the screw face is seen as far as serial number 60.

On the earlier revolvers we see examples of both the longer and shorter barrel lengths, which ranged from 7¼ inches to 7⅝ inches. Safety pins on the back of the cylinder and the slotted hammer face carry through into the serial number 900 range. The absence of the cap release channel in the recoil shield is common throughout the entire production of the firm's revolvers.

Overall, the quality of the earlier manufacturing is more coarse, or rougher, especially in the brass castings, than what was seen in the later revolver production. The iron used in the barrel, frame, and cylinder contains numerous casting flaws, but no twist lines are noted as usually seen in other Confederate revolvers such as the Spiller & Burr and the Griswold & Gunnison.

After serial numbers 25 and 26, both of which are marked **LEECH & RIGDON** on the barrel housing flat in the 1 mm size die, we need to consider the range of serial numbers 27 through, at least, 52. All known survivors in this range have an unmarked barrel housing flat. The larger size serial numbers stamped into the wooden grip butt continue to be found up to serial number 52. The coarse metal qualities are still noted, while the ball type loading lever is carried through into the serial number 300 range.

"Some of the first revolvers made by Leech & Rigdon were sent to Rigdon's old friends of the First Missouri (Confederate) Infantry, comprised almost entirely of St. Louis

boys."<sup>2</sup> In the author's collection is serial number 52 which was forcibly obtained from a young, unknown Confederate officer at Fort Smith, Arkansas, by Major Mayberry Lacy of the 69th Indiana Volunteers. Also in that haul was a fine Confederate Staff and Field Officer's Leech & Rigdon sword belonging to the same unfortunate Confederate. A portion of the First Missouri Infantry had been stationed at Fort Smith during the mid-1862 period.

The third breakdown is from serial numbers 53 to approximately 347 and features the small firm stamping, **LEECH & RIGDON**. It is the identical Leech & Rigdon stamp as that portion used in the earlier Novelty Works marked revolvers. To this point there has been a lack of any other markings other than the serial numbers and firm stampings. An exception is found on serial number 121 which has the letter **N** stamped on the trigger guard. This **N** in block type is a cryptic mark believed to be, along with the following letters and pattern, an internal company inspector's mark. Other cryptic marks that appear on later serial numbered revolvers are **J**, **D**, **W**, a stylized **N**, and an arrangement of four elongated dots in the form of a cross. All of these marks are located on various parts of the brass trigger guards and have yet to be seen stamped on the iron or steel portions of the revolver. Some revolvers, such as serial number 1109, have two different cryptic marks, a block **N** and the dotted cross.

In this particular serial number range (53 to 347) the direction of the firm stamping is sometimes reversed down the barrel to the muzzle instead of towards the breech. In this grouping we also see a transition from the ball type latch to the pin and ball loading lever latch. Interestingly enough, there is an extreme lack of current collector knowledge of the revolvers between serial numbers 121 and 346. No records of any revolvers in the serial number 200 range have been recorded, and only three examples in the serial number 300 range have been documented.

A large firm die, **LEECH & RIGDON**, ushered in the next range from approximately serial numbers 399 to 457. Known survivors are serial numbers 422, 439, 450, and 457. These are all marked with the cryptic stylized **N** stamped in the trigger guard area, and the firm die letters measure just under 2 mm in height. The direction of the firm stamping had been stabilized by this stage, reading from the muzzle end to the breech end. Both this stamping direction and the pin and ball loading lever latch continue throughout the remaining production of the firm's revolvers.

In the range of serial numbers 346 to 597, besides the firm stamping, only the stylized **N** cryptic mark is noted. By this time, the quality of the revolver is generally improved,

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2. Fuller and Stuart, *Firearms of the Confederacy*, page 269.

especially in the brass sand castings of the backstrap and trigger guard. The frame, hammer, and loading lever are case hardened, while the barrel and cylinder have a thin blue finish. The author has not detected any traces of silver plating on the brass, a practice seen on some of the Union made revolvers of this period.

Finally, the large firm die most familiar to arms collectors, **LEECH & RIGDON CSA**, enters the production line, appearing soon after serial number 457 and continuing through serial number 1489. This stamping appears to be the same size die as the earlier **LEECH & RIGDON** but with the added **CSA**.

In the range of serial numbers 1006 to 1300, a **S.C.** or **S.Ca** stamp appears on the right grip butt. The question arises, "was this a South Carolina subcontract or were the revolvers to be issued to South Carolina troops?" Unfortunately, to date, no answers have been forthcoming.

A Confederate arms inspector's cartouche, **W.H.** (for Captain Wescom Hudgins, CSA) enclosed in a small diamond on the right grip butt has been noted on four revolvers from serial numbers 1262 to 1416.

Taking a page out of Colt's book, Rigdon attempted to utilize leftover parts, such as slotted hammers and cylinders with safety pins, but not necessarily in tandem. In the serial number 900 range to the end of the run, the slotted hammer face and safety pins disappeared. Safety, like the glorious Southern cause, appears to have been cast to the winds. This period represented the transition of Leech & Rigdon to Rigdon, Ansley production with the firm's move to Augusta, Georgia, where Charles Rigdon pulled all his loose ends and parts together in order to improve the company's cost effectiveness.

The end of Rigdon's changing address saga was found in revolver serial number 1490, the true transitional piece from Leech & Rigdon to Rigdon, Ansley. The firm stamping appears on the three top sides of the barrel housing: **ADDRESS/C. H. RIGDON/AUGUSTA, GA**. The size of the discernible **AUGUSTA** and **GA** carries through into the **AUGUSTA, GA** marked revolvers of Rigdon, Ansley. The pin and ball latch is still present on serial number 1490, but the cylinder now has twelve stops as seen in the later Rigdon, Ansley revolvers. The cryptic mark **W** appears for the first time in the production sequence.

Rigdon's old partner, Thomas Leech, passed into oblivion after the War and died in 1885. On October 9, 1866, Charles Rigdon died of inflammation of the bowels, or more probably, acute ulcerative colitis. Apparently the stresses and strains of the War, assembling, tearing down of machinery, packing, unpacking, and re-assembling, along with the ex-

treme disappointment of a losing cause, were too much for this patriotic mechanical genius of the South.

Rather than close with a *post mortem* report of the frustrating life of Charles Rigdon, I would like to conclude with a word of encouragement to the many handgun seekers who have fallen victim to the strains of "Dixie."

Because of their many variations, the Leech & Rigdon revolvers present an exciting but sometimes exasperating challenge to the already befuddled and confused collectors of these beautiful Southern six shooters. As far as craftsmanship and technical skills are concerned, the revolvers produced by Charles Rigdon and his partners rank among the finest handguns turned out by the embattled Confederacy.

The serial number records used in this report contain details, not hearsay, on 121 Leech & Rigdon revolvers, representing a survival record of over 8%. Each year I am once again amazed to see or hear of another lost survivor coming out of the woods, so keep your eyes peeled. The more data we can add, the more complete the picture. These handguns are worth the time and the vigilance!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my mentor and longtime friend, Bruce Kusrow. Bruce, under the guidance and influence of the late Bill Albaugh, has spread the love of Confederate handguns to me over the last twenty years. With his unerring memory, meticulous records, and photographic history, he has helped, along with his wife, Annamarie, to make this report possible.

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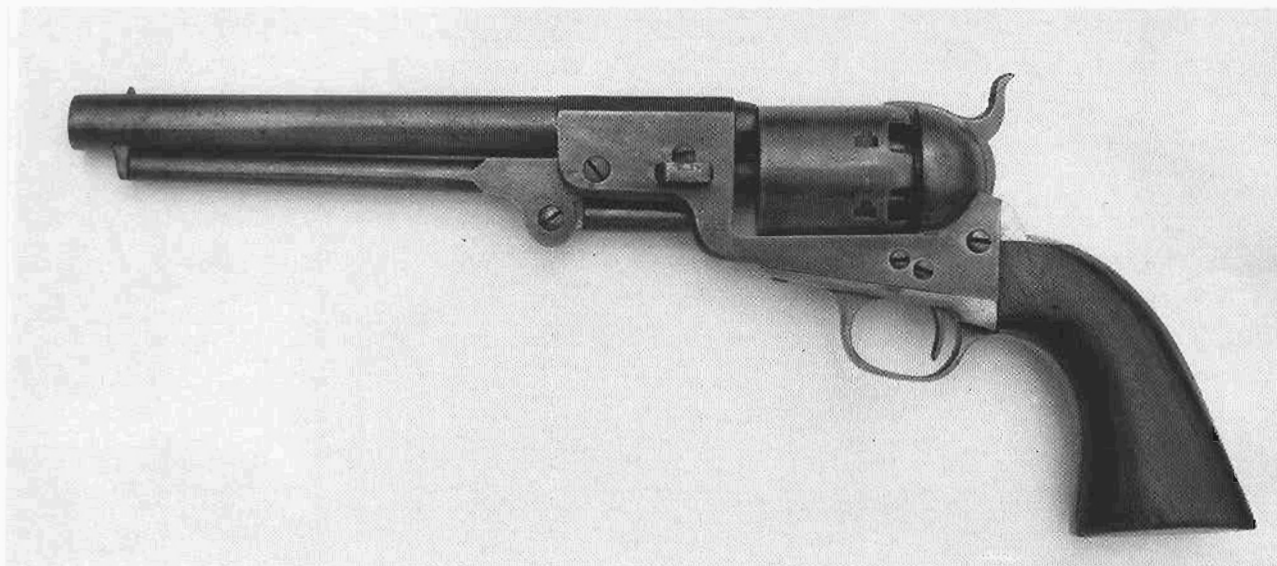
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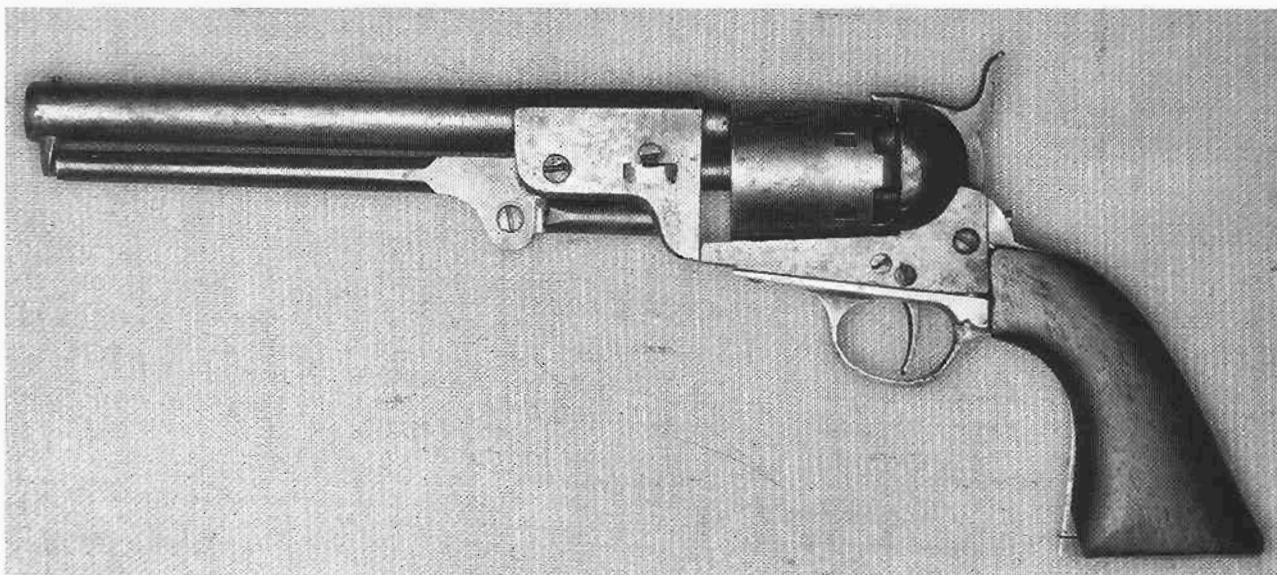
### Leech & Rigdon Revolvers and Some of Their Characteristics



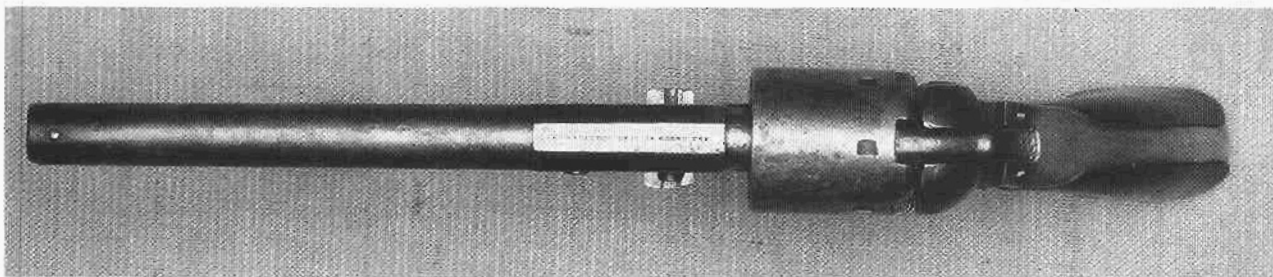
An unserialized early Leech & Rigdon revolver with the markings: LEECH & RIGDON NOVELTY WORKS CSA. This revolver has the longer barrel. Author's collection.



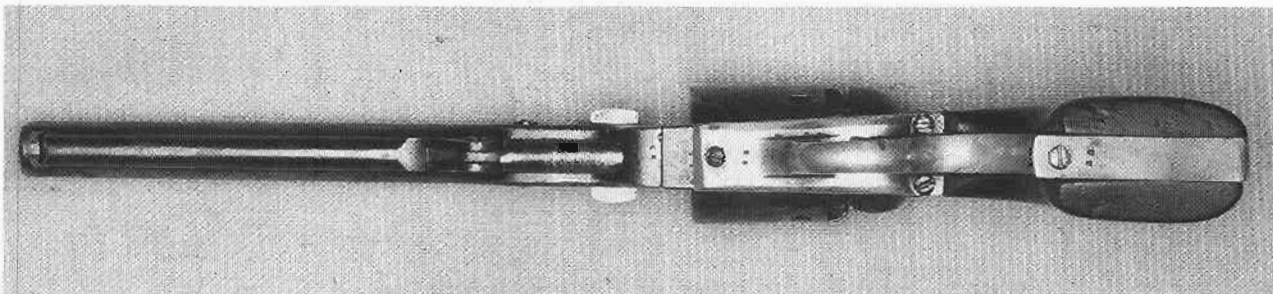
Closeup of the barrel markings on the unserialized Leech & Rigdon revolver.



Early Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 15. Note the shorter barrel. Current owner unknown.



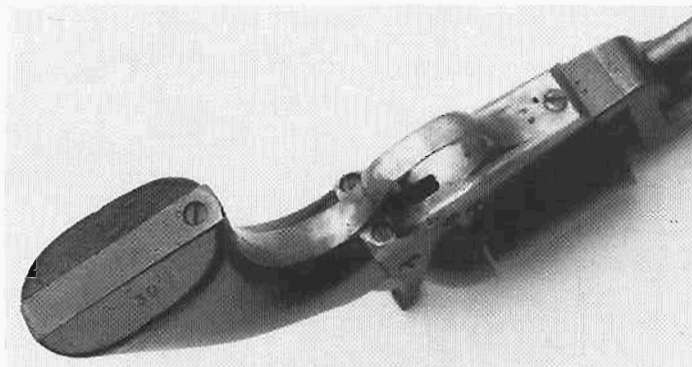
Top barrel flat of Leech & Rigdon number 15 showing the firm markings: LEECH & RIGDON NOVELTY WORKS CSA.



Underside of Leech & Rigdon number 15 showing the larger sized serial number "15" stamped in the upper grip butt.



Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 39. No company markings are present on the barrel top. Note the shorter type barrel as well as the casting flaws in the trigger guard area. Author's collection.



Leech & Rigdon number 39. Note the larger sized stamping of the serial number in the wooden grip butt.



Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 41. No company marking is present on the barrel top. Note the ball (no pin) type loading lever latch. Formerly in the author's collection.



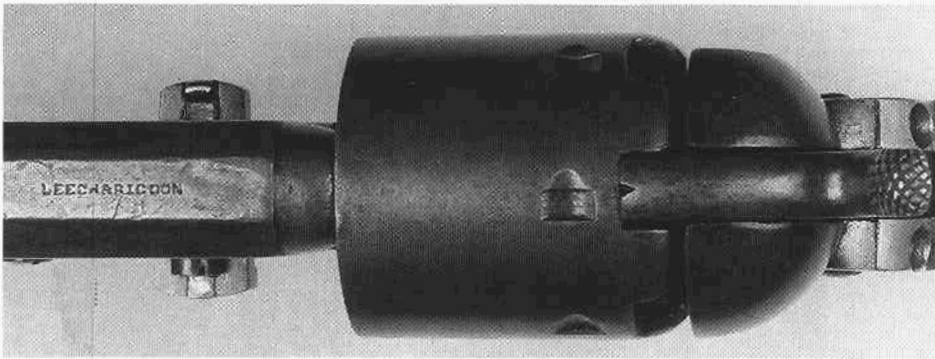
Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 52. Note the longer barrel type, and that the brass portions have pitting-like casting flaws. No company markings are present on the barrel top flat. Author's collection.



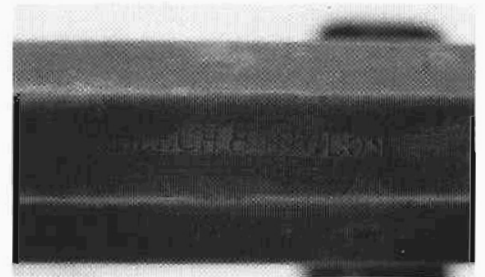
Leech & Rigdon revolver number 59. The company name stamping is the small sized die. The loading lever screw is serialized.



Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 60. Company name markings are LEECH & RIGDON by the small sized die, and the loading lever screw is serialized. Courtesy of Dr. Robert L. Moore, Jr.



Top view of Leech & Rigdon number 60. Courtesy of Dr. Robert L. Moore, Jr.



Top view of serial number 450 showing the LEECH & RIGDON company markings.

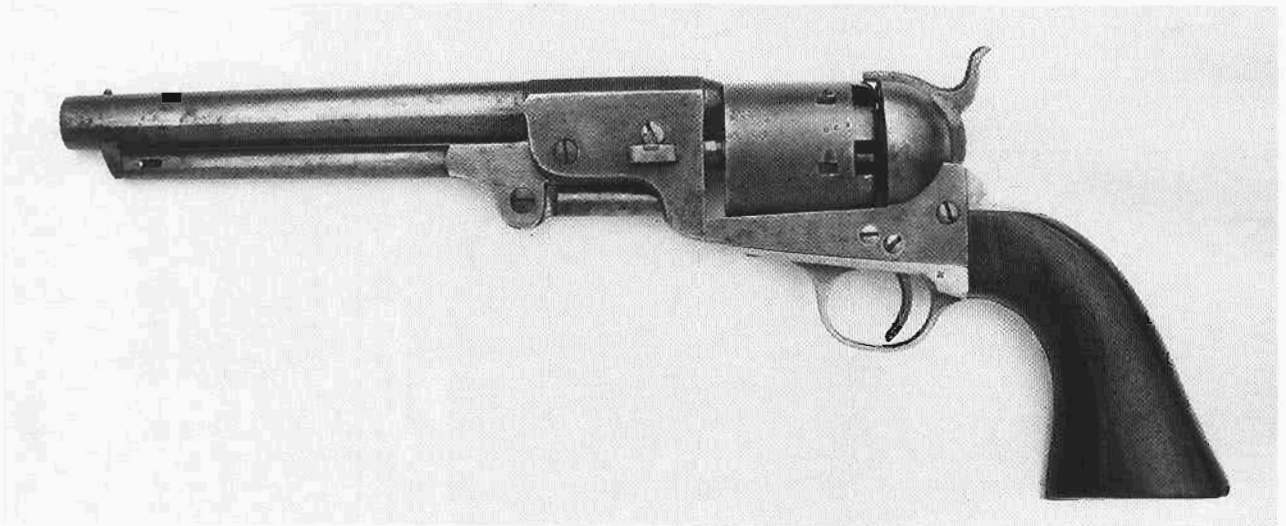


Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 450. Company markings on the barrel top flat are LEECH & RIGDON with the large die stamping. Author's collection.





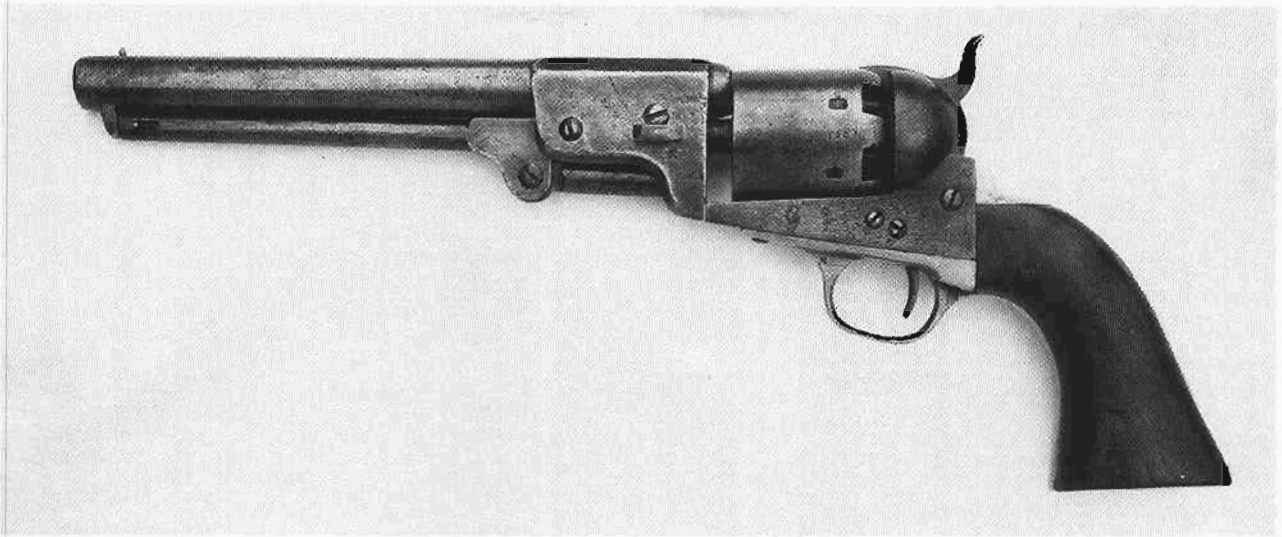
Leech & Rigdon revolver number 597 marked LEECH & RIGDON CSA on the barrel top flat, and a closeup view of the stylized cryptic letter "N" on the trigger guard. Author's collection.



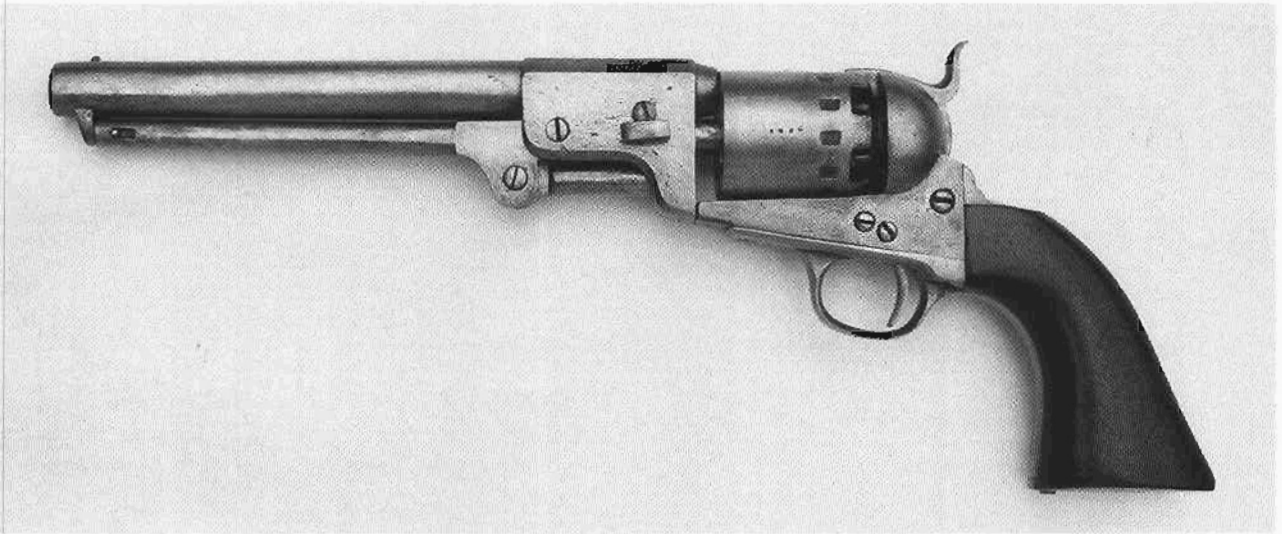
A fine Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 861. Note the four dot cryptic mark on the trigger guard. Author's collection.



Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 1070 with the firm marking LEECH & RIGDON CSA stamped on the barrel top flat. Formerly in the collection of Bruce Kusrow.



Leech & Rigdon revolver serial number 1109 with "S.C." stamped in the wooden grip butt. Author's collection.



Transitional model revolver serial number 1490 with the addition of the 12 cylinder stop safety feature instead of the six of the preceding revolvers. The revolver is marked: ADDRESS/C. H. RIGDON/AUGUSTA GA on the three top flats of the barrel. Author's collection.



Reverse view of the transitional model number 1490.