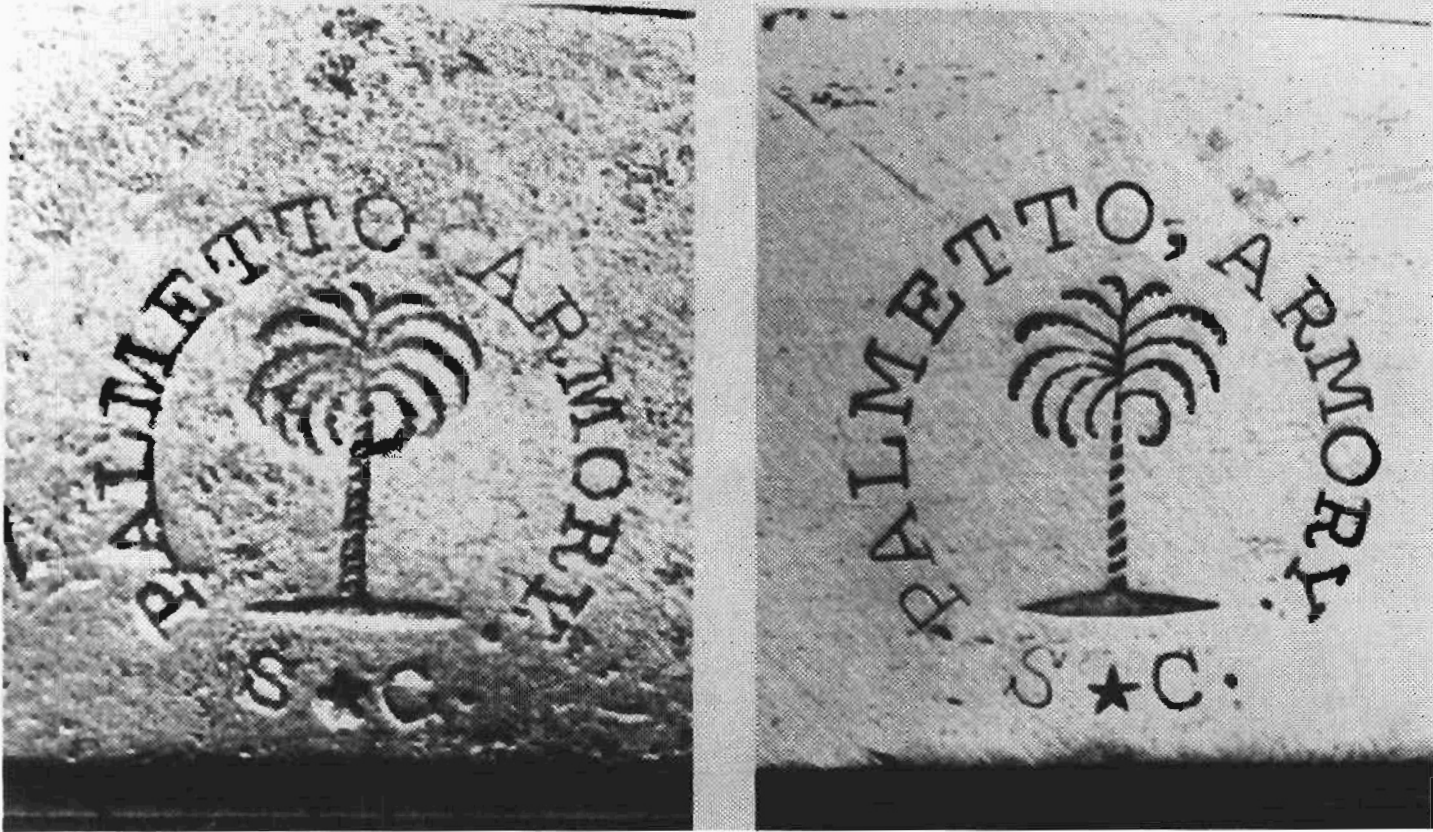


Note difference between genuine (left) and fake (right) Palmetto Pistol markings. Markings on fake pistol are too clean and sharp, and effect of aging is noticeably absent from surface of lockplate



No. 1. Recognizing a fake Palmetto pistol done in the late 1930s would not be as easy today as it appears in this photograph which was shown on page 19 of the January, 1962 *American Rifleman* with an article by Harry Knode. Identification was easy as the shiny finish on the lockplate was too pristine for its age. Today, after more than 30 years of exposure to oxidation, oils and smoke, the metal finish will have dulled considerably. Note, also, however, the flat base of the genuine tree compared to the base on the fake, and the size of the trunks.

The Faking of Palmetto Pistols

Peter A. Schmidt

One of the most useful books available today for the beginning collector of American antique firearms is without doubt Flayderman's *Guide*.¹ This book is not only a great help for beginners, but a veteran as well finds a place to carry it when attending gun collectors meetings. In each revised edition, in the paragraph covering the Model 1842 pistol, the author makes the following statement: "CAUTION: a much sought-after Southern made pre-Civil War pistol, considered a Confederate handgun. A rash of spurious examples, made from standard 1842s which had their Northern markings removed and replaced with false Palmetto marks, found their way to the collector's market in the late 1950s."

From the view of warning the collector, several articles and books were written some years ago covering the faking of Palmetto pistols,² but none of the *facts* have yet been printed about this atrocious act and it is doubtful that anything further would be, as those involved with discovering the faking have since passed on and details have never appeared in print admonishing those who were responsible.

What has survived, however, are a few letters that were found among the Sam Smith and the Ernie Laube papers, not collectively as a file, but within correspondence to individual collectors regarding the faking of Palmetto pistols. Portions of those letters will be quoted here, giving some testimony of those who discovered the faking, and hopefully it will establish for future collectors that this event did indeed happen, and we can rest assured that as time passes each Palmetto pistol offered for sale will be a genuine specimen.

The earliest correspondence I found was a copy of a letter written by Jos. W. Desserich of Foster, Ohio, and, even though it is undated, it was contained in a file of letters written in mid-year, 1959.

Dear Red, Bob and Sam.

I am writing this letter in triplicate because I hate like h
... to write and second it involves you three and me to.

At the Columbus meet last I was walking around and a friend of mine came up and said "Joe did you see that Fayetteville pistol?", so off to the races. When he pointed the table to me I looked first who the owner was. It was occupied by one of the Chi. boys that I am not acquainted with so I picked the gun up. I pride myself on knowledge of steel and welding and it was possible to see blow holes and a difference in color and also the stamping did not look kosher. Anyway asked how much. Price 1,200.



So I carefully laid it down and picked up two Palmetto pistols. Plate stampings not too good on one other too fine. Bl. markings the tops. Laid these down and seen a friend from the same outfit coming in the door, so we walked up to him and said who in the hell made the Fayetteville pistol. He said he didn't know but that it was alright that he had sent it to S.E.S. [Sam E. Smith] and that Doc Allen and Sam had used X ray on it and claimed it was o.k. At friendship meet this same fellow had a beautiful Palmetto. And I asked about it how these markings could be so fine and he exclaimed that he had it recut and deepened. So I hunted up another fellow from Chi. who is a collector. First thing he asked me how I liked the Fayetteville pistol and I said its a fake. He agreed and came forth with the information that to date they have mfg. 14 Palmetto pistols and I believe he said Rbt. Ables bought a pair in a saddle holster and Red Jackson bought one. He told me how they have one man there that is a expert photo man who takes the picture and reduces it to size with some sort of a silk screen method then it is turned over to another who is a retired tool & die maker who made the dies. In fact my friend tells me it was his Fayetteville rifle they took the markings from. Now hold your hat. There will shortly come on the market the small type Merrill Mossman & Blair with all the markings and being sold as old.

I had thought I would be able to get to Washington and bring this up at the meet but now find I will be unable to make it so maybe one of you can do it.

The first dated correspondence is in a letter of 5 August, 1959, from Sam Smith to William Albaugh:

"I heard some startling (or shocking) news the other



No. 2. Lockplate markings from a real Palmetto pistol. Note the circular base lines under the lettering in the semi-circle.

day. A friend of mine from Massilon, Ohio, wrote and said that someone was faking Palmetto perc. pistols. First I'd heard of it. He didn't say any more, and I don't know how cleverly it is being done, but I presume a poor-conditioned Aston pistol has its lockplate ground down and then re-stamped. I am going after more information on how the pistols look, where made & by whom.³

On March 7, 1960, L.C. Jackson wrote Joe Desserrich the following letter regarding the Palmetto pistol mentioned in the first letter which was undated.

Dear Joe:

Many thanks for your letter of March 2nd. Quite naturally I am disturbed over the faking or duplication of any collector-type firearm. It's been going on a long time in Ohio on U.S. martial single shots and in many areas on Colts and other rare guns. It is my opinion, however that every effort should be made to stamp it out. Up to now the biggest problem has been getting real evidence. While I think I know the person to whom you refer, I am not certain. The only Chicago individual from whom I have bought a Palmetto Armory is Ed Tedesco. If this gun was a fake he surely fooled me and the workmanship is awfully good. However, to make certain I have contacted the customer to whom I sold the gun and ask that he return it to me for examination. If I find that it is a fake, I will return his money. . . .

Another letter from Sam Smith to William Albaugh dated March 31, 1960 states the following:

Last Sunday I visited a recently-started gun collector for the first time and was shown a Palmetto Armory S.C. 1852 perc. pistol that he had bought the end of last December. I

looked it over and then had to tell him that I thought it was one of those recent FAKES. And I'm sure it is, since he had me take it home with me and compare it with my own. I believe the young man can get his money back from whom he bought it, and the seller is also innocent and can get his money back from whom he in turn got it. But after that, along the chain somewhere about once more backwards, there is going to be a stink and someone refuse to make restitution.

A letter dated July 13, 1961, from Sam Smith to Ernie Laube (a St. Louis collector) is mostly regarding Deringer Boxlock pistols and the number of surviving North & Cheney pistols. Of interest is the following from the letter. (Mr. Laube was apparently doing a study on Deringer pistols and was corresponding with Sam as many did to get his opinion on something.)

However, here's a strange thing that may happen: what about this faker down in Illinois who is changing Ames Box-lock pistols into Deringers? If it becomes known that the Deringers weren't really Martial pistols after all, then maybe the demand will fall off, and the poor faker will have to change all his Deringers back to Ames again!

On April 18, 1965, Albert W. Lindert wrote Ernie Laube offering a Palmetto pistol for sale. He lamented that the one being offered was not one of the fakes, and went on to recall the following story.

Now let me tell you a story about Palmettos, and incidentally this will establish the authenticity of this piece. About 5 years ago I bought from a man named Tedesco, [Ed] a gun that was purported to be a Palmetto. A year later I bought another for a friend at the same price (which was at the going



No. 3. The William Glaze and Company marking on the left side of the barrel. Note the two circular base lines under the "M" marking.

price for Palmettos, not "fakes"). My friend soon tired of his Palmetto and traded his gun for a Confederate piece from a man named Sutherland who lived in Columbia, S.C. Upon examining the gun he pronounced it a fake. Since I was the one responsible for the situation I called for the gun's return. Meanwhile I bought this particular Palmetto from another man I was sure was far removed from Tedesco and he guaranteed me that this particular gun was authentic in every respect. I measured up the friend's gun, to my gun, which I formerly bought from Tedesco, and this particular pistol. At first I stained the iron with Nitol. (This is an etching agent that the police commonly use to bring up numbers on pistols that have been eradicated or obliterated by crooks.). This didn't bring anything too definite a/c of the more aggressive overstamping. Next, I tried "miking" [measurement with a micrometer] the lockplate and the brass sideplate (which doesn't reveal anything with Nitol). Assuming that the Aston M1842 lockplates were uniform, I found that the two pistols I got from Tedesco were about .006-.007" undersize compared with this pistol! Also, I found that the brass sideplates of the two pistols were about .003" thinner at the center than they were at each end. This confirmed that the "Palmettos" were really Austons that were made over.

So much for the saga about the Palmettos. Prepared with my measurements I went down to Kankakee to the I.G.C.A. meeting where I arranged to meet Tedesco. He didn't suspect I had the conversation "Bugged" with a portable tape recorder under the table. He admitted to making "7" of them, and I don't believe him any more than I could throw a piano. When I asked him what his reasoning was he said "Let the buyer beware." That's a fine attitude for one of the I.G.C.A. officials to have!

Shortly after that, I heard that fake Deringer M1843 pistols were being made. I counted six on various tables at one Kankakee show. Never before or since have I seen so many "authentic" Deringers in one spot! I may have made a mistake, but I quit.

Another letter from A.W. Lindert to Sam Smith dated June 26, 1977, refers to working on the Deringer problems and makes

reference to USR marked Deringers that were never made. Sam responded to Mr. Lindert on June 29, 1977 with the following:

Now regarding the Deringer Box-lock pistols with the "USR" markings—I am positive there is NO such thing. I have never seen an original one in all my 50 plus years of collecting. And that enlargement in Chapel's book (4th Edition you mention) has now been corrected by ME! The 12th Edition of Chapel's HANDBOOK OF VALUES has just come out this month, and there is no mention of a Deringer USR. I believe I got them to change it (remove such mention) back about the 8th or 9th EDITION. It got into Chapel's book simply because by the fact that Mr. Chapel didn't know alot about martial pistols or what he was writing about, and he did it himself. It was some time after he died that I continued to help the widow (I still do with prices and try to go get some of the MANY errors in the book corrected) that I got the Deringer USR mention deleted.

But here is an interesting thing about the Deringer USR story. That faker in Chicago who was changing poor conditioned H. Aston model 1842 pistols into Palmetto Armory pistols, also did his work on changing Ames box-lock pistols into Deringers too, you know I'm sure. And at one of the Sig Shore Auction gallery sales about 10 years ago, I saw the damnedest box-lock you can imagine! It was an Ames, of course, but remarked with Deringer USR on the lockplate and on the barrel. The name Deringer and Philadelphia were both very large on the barrel and so was the USR and it was dated 1845. Yes, eighteen forty-five. It sold to some poor, dumb, unsuspecting fellow, I believe. I've never seen nor heard of it again. Anyway, the Chicago faker read his copy of Chapel and created a Deringer USR with an 1845 date, on bbl."

The punctuated remark about the date of 1845 on a Deringer boxlock is because the last of these pistols Ames delivered were dated 1845. Deringer then bought the machinery and attempted to set up shop throughout 1846 and 1847.

Correspondence indicates that Deringer defaulted in 1848.⁴ I disassembled three different Model 1842 pistol and made measurements to confirm how closely the original



No. 4. The date on the tang and Palmetto tree proof mark below the "V".

Model 1842 pistols were made.

PISTOL	LOCK	LOCK	SIDE
MAKE	DATE	PLATE	PLATE
ASTON	1846	.166-1665	.083-.083
JOHNSON	1853	.166-1675	.083-.084
SHOP MODEL	undated	.160-.162	.080-.081

While Mr. Lindert did not include the actual measurements he had taken, he did send a drawing to Mr. Laube showing where he had taken measurements, basically of the middle and end of the lock and side plates.

The rarity of the Palmetto pistols may have been overshadowed by a long standing misconception as to the number originally made for the State of South Carolina. Most reference materials available list a contract between Glaze & Company and the State of South Carolina for 1,000 pairs of pistols. The following is worth noting:

The report for the following year shows the delivery of 1,000 pistols. The fact that Glaze agreed to manufacture only 1,000 pistols instead of the 2,000 (1,000 pairs) called for in his contract is confirmed by the report of the Committee on the Military in December, 1853. The Committee reported that most work was "done or nearly finished before they were notified of the conditions of things" but that "they [Glaze & Company] gave up their right to make a thousand dragoon pistols."⁵

In reality, Glaze delivered only 1,000 pistols making original Palmetto pistols twice as rare as collectors originally believed. So rare that a comment from an early collector from Dayton, Ohio, named Albert Kern is worth inclusion. Mr. Kern wrote to Stokes Kirk in 1911 asking them to "please find me one of these rare Palmetto pistols."⁶ Collector Kern was fortunate enough to get his Palmetto pistol as the following letter attests:

West Orange, N.J.
Sept. 27, 1912

Mr. Kern,
Dayton, O.

Dear Sir,

As per your request I am sending today a very fine Palmetto pistol @ \$25.00.

These are very rare as you know and this one is exceptionally fine. An incomplete & badly rusted one sold for \$14 at last Boston sale.

Very Truly

Stephen Van Rensselaer

On 16 October, Collector Kern wrote Mr. Van Rensselaer and enclosed a \$25.00 check for the pistol, mentioning that the price was a bit high.⁷

In closing, the letters quoted above relate information that a few serious collectors were able to exchange through their own investigative instincts. It also makes a case for written correspondence on such subjects as it can be referred to at a later time. It is hoped that the information cited above will be evidence that this unfortunate event did indeed take place and that enough has been presented to help both the beginning and advanced collectors to steer clear of making a bad investment.

NOTES

1. Flayderman, Norm, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, Chicago, Ill. D.B.I Books Incorporated, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1987, 1990, and 1994.
2. Articles have appeared in *The American Rifleman* as well as books such as *The Collecting of Guns* by Jim Serven.
3. The 1958 Ohio Gun Collectors Directory lists 20 members from Massilon, Ohio. Only one of those collectors had an ongoing correspondence with Sam Smith. While no letter was found in this Massilon, Ohio, collectors file mentioning the faking, a letter from Sam in October, 1959, mentioned it was good to have spent some time together at the last O.G.C.A. show. Either the information was discussed verbally or Sam was referring to Joe Desserich of Foster, Ohio?
4. Woods, Hiram B. (Luke), A.S.A.C. *Bulletin* No. 64, pp. 24-27.
5. Meyer, Jack Allen, *William Glaze and The Palmetto Armory*, South Carolina State Museum, Museum *Bulletin* Number 6, P. 10. I wish to thank fellow American Society Member Luke Woods for pointing this out to me.
6. I would like to thank Luke Woods for providing me not only with photos 2-4 but also with a copy of this letter from the Jos. Desserich files.
7. The letters are also from the Joseph Desserich files in the possession of fellow A.S.A.C. member Luke Woods.