

The Holstered Pepperbox

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My interest in collecting antique firearms began in the early 1960s. For many years, I was a general collector with some emphasis on the Civil War period. Let me assure you that I did not set out to collect pepperboxes in their original holsters. This interest began when I moved to Nevada City, California. This area is steeped in the history of the California Gold Rush and gold mining. It wasn't long before I was caught up in this historic period and was collecting the Gold Rush period weapons and artifacts. One of my desires was to own a holstered pepperbox. This was not an easy item to locate, and it was only in the early 1970s that I found one. This first treasure was an Allen & Thurber, Norwich, CT, medium frame pepperbox with a ring trigger. It was in its original socket-style holster. This acquisition fueled my desire to have more, and I found myself searching for them and trying to purchase every one I located. In some cases, I purchased a holster and then was able to match the correct pepperbox with it. On two occasions, I found complete rigs that consisted of the pistol, holster and waist belt. One of these sets even had a loading rammer in a leather pouch. This article is about the eight holstered pepperboxes that I have located over the last 30 years.

As I read and studied the history of the California Gold Rush, I found frequent references, art work and photographs of pioneers armed with pepperbox pistols. This was one of the most popular firearms that came west with the gold seekers. In the course of my research, I located four very early photographs (daguerreotypes) of pioneers wearing holstered pepperboxes.

Figure 1 is a daguerreotype of E. Dean, who was about to leave for California.¹ In this picture, he is wearing an early medium-size Allen & Thurber pepperbox that is carried in a simple loop on his waist belt.

Figure 2 is a daguerreotype of Dr. MacBeth who is in the full costume that he planned to wear crossing the plains.² Dr. MacBeth is wearing a bag-gripped pepperbox in a flap holster with a pepperbox powder flask balanced in the holster flap and a loading rammer in a pouch on the waist belt. The rig worn by Dr. MacBeth is very similar to one in my collection that is described later.



Figure 3 is an 1840's period image of George Norton who is described as armed to the teeth with a Hall breach loading carbine, two pepperboxes, a Colt .44 caliber Walker revolver, and a large Bowie knife.³ The pepperbox in the socket holster appears to be an early Allen and Thurber dragoon-size pistol. This holster is similar to the one in my collection which is described later in this article.

Figure 4 is a daguerreotype from the late 1840s of a young adventurer who is armed with a pair of bag-gripped pepperboxes that are carried in open-topped belt holsters with concaved throats.⁴ Based on the accessories worn by this individual, he may have been part of a military unit.

Before I begin describing my holstered pepperboxes, I feel it is important to note that I am not a pepperbox expert. My knowledge comes from various publications that I will reference as I go along. My knowledge, however, lies in the holsters for these unusual pistols. As I studied the pepperboxes, I found that authors use more than one term to describe the same feature on a pistol. For the sake of consistency, I have selected the terms I like best to use throughout the article. With regard to Allen & Thurber Grafton pepperboxes, the right angle of the grip drop is referred to as the "Quick Drop" and "Dog Leg"; I will use the term "Quick Drop." On Norwich pistols, the terms are "Slow Drop" and "Semi Dog Leg"; I will use "Slow Drop." The most often encountered Allen pepperbox is referred to as the "Standard" or "Medium" size. I will use the term "Medium



Figure 1. E. Dean armed with an early Allen & Thurber medium size pepperbox.

Size”.^{5,6} I recognize that the numbers on most of these pepperbox pistols are not serial numbers but production numbers. I will refer to them as production numbers. Those pistols with serial numbers will be listed as such. Other descriptions of rib style, frame and grip shape can be determined from the accompanying photographs.

Now to the subject of this article that is semi-organized by holster style. Editor’s Note—The start of each style and respective figures are numbered.

I—Allen & Thurber Grafton, Mass. Dragoon model pepperbox (Figures 5-10)

This is a second type Grafton dragoon pepperbox listed in Flayderman’s Guide as number 5A-017.⁷ It is a 36 caliber 6-shot double action pistol with a 6-inch barrel group. With the exception of its production number “30,” the only marks on this pistol are the name and town of the Allen & Thurber Agent, “Spies, New York.” This agent’s mark is stamped on the side of the bar hammer, the frame has the right angle quick drop of the grip and the wide back strap, and the pattern of the engraving is the standard Grafton style. The early flat style grips are of fancy figured wood with a silver oval inlay. The grip and tension screws are located low on the grips and front strap. There is no nipple shield and the nipples are removable. The barrel group has fluted ribs. This pistol dates from the late 1830s to the early 1840s.⁸



Figure 2. Dr. McBeth in full costume armed with a bag-gripped pepperbox in a flap holster.

Its unmarked, plugged bottom holster is almost tubular in shape and is called a socket or sleeve holster and it is made of heavy leather that is dyed black. The holster covers the barrel group, trigger guard and bar hammer and it has a sewn-in loop for a waist belt.⁹ This pistol and holster did not come together, but they are a correct match. This holster is similar to the one shown in Figure 3.

II—Allen & Thurber, Norwich, Conn. Medium size pepperbox (Figures 11-15)

This is a medium size Allen & Thurber, Norwich, Conn. ring trigger, double action pepperbox that is listed in Flayderman’s Guide as number 5A-029.¹⁰ This was my first holstered pepperbox and started me on my search for more. This Allen pepperbox has the distinctive ring trigger feature. It is marked with the large size “Allen’s Patent” on the side of the bar hammer. On the flat of the barrel ribs is stamped “Patented 1837: and “Cast Steel.” This pepperbox can be dated between 1842 and 1847: the 1842 date can be determined by a law change in 1842 that required the patented year to be marked on all patented products and the 1847 date is based on Allen & Thurber’s move from



Figure 3. George Norton armed to the teeth including two bag-gripped pepperboxes.

Norwich, Conn. to Worcester, Mass. The production number of this pistol is 96. The frame has the slow drop of the grip and is engraved in the scroll/floral design. The walnut grips are more rounded with a silver oval inlay. The grip and tension screws remain low on the grips and front strap. The frame has the attached scroll designed nipple shield. The barrel group is 3.25 inches long with integral nipples. The pistol is a six shot, 31 caliber, double action pepperbox.¹¹



Figure 4. A young adventurer who is armed with a pair of bag-gripped pepperboxes.

The unmarked holster for this pistol is a socket type of lightweight brown leather. It is shaped from a single piece of leather that is formed around the barrel group ending in a plugged bottom; it also encloses the ring trigger and bar hammer. The holster has two slots on the upper tab to accommodate a narrow waist belt with a second piece of leather stitched onto this tab to strengthen the belt loop area. This holster is typical of early civilian pepperbox holsters.

III—Allen & Thurber, Grafton, Mass. Medium size pepperbox (Figures 16–23)

This is a medium size Allen & Thurber, Grafton, Mass, double action pepperbox listed in Flayderman's Guide as number 5A-015. This early Allen & Thurber pepperbox is a third type medium frame Grafton pistol with no nipple shield and integral nipples cast into the barrel. The frame has the right angle quick drop of the grip. The pattern of the engraving is the standard Grafton style. The walnut grips have the distinct flatness with silver oval inlays and with the grip and



STYLE I—Figure 5. Author's Allen Grafton Dragoon pepperbox left side.



Figure 6. Detail showing the "A.W. Spies" marking, engraving style, removable nipples and production number on the Allen & Grafton Dragoon pepperbox.



Figure 7. Detail showing the wide back strap and engraving style on the Allen & Grafton Dragoon pepperbox.



Figure 8. The Allen & Grafton in its holster.

Figure 9. Front view of Dragoon holster.



Figure 10. Dragoon holster—reverse view.

tension screws located low on the grips and front strap. This pepperbox is marked with a tiny “Allen’s Patent” on the top of the bar hammer and “A.W. Spies” on the side of the hammer and has the production number 31. The 4-inch barrel group is 31 caliber, 6-shot with fluted ribs. The hammer is slotted at the rear; this slot may have been used as a sighting aid.¹²

The “A.W. Spies” name on the hammer of this pepperbox is for the New York Arms Dealer who became an agent for Allen firearms in 1836 or 1837. Adam W. Spies was in business from 1783 to 1863 at 192 Pearl St., New York.¹³ He was so delighted with Allen’s products and their price that he agreed to purchase all that Allen could produce.¹⁴

Being a successful businessman, Adam W. Spies recognized the potential of the market that would develop in

California as a result of gold having been discovered there. By January, 1849, Adam W. Spies consigned a stock of firearms with Jules Francois Bekeart that consisted of 200 Colt Patterson revolvers and 200 Allen pepperbox revolvers. Bekeart was to take these pistols to the California market. He sailed from New York to the Isthmus of Panama, then crossed the Isthmus and sailed for San Francisco; from San Francisco he went to Sacramento and then to the gold discovery site of Coloma where he rented a small log house for his gunsmith shop. Within a

few days, he had plenty of work and was making over \$100 a day in gold dust and coin. Some portion of his daily sales must have been these consigned firearms. The Allen & Thurber pepperboxes that Bekeart brought to California are nearly identical to this Grafton pistol.¹⁵

The unmarked pair of pommel bags with this pepperbox are of a small size and an early style. They are designed to fit over the saddle horn so the holstered pistol would be within easy reach of the rider. The position and unusual shape of the holster on these pommel bags was a problem for me. For many years I was unable to find any standard revolver that would fit and still allow the flap to close. Not long ago, I found an identical pair of bags in a museum in a Northern California gold mining town. This pair of bags had



STYLE II—Figure 11. Allen Norwich medium size—ring trigger pepperbox.



Figure 12. Detail showing markings, engraving, ring trigger and nipple shield of Allen Norwich pepperbox.



Figure 13. Allen Norwich medium size pepperbox in its holster.

its original, early, medium size Allen and Thurber pepperbox still with it. The high position and wide shape of the holster is a perfect fit for this style pepperbox. The later style Allen and Thurber pepperbox with the more gradual angle of the

grip won't fit properly into these pom-pom bags. Now that I knew which pistol fit into the holster, the search was on. After some time, I located this early Grafton pepperbox which is a perfect fit. Although they are pictured together, they were brought together by me.

IV—Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass. Dragoon size pepperbox (Figures 24-27)

This dragoon size Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass., double-action pepperbox is listed in Flayderman's Guide as number 5A-050. This pistol's production number is 139. It has a 6-inch, 6-shot, 36

caliber barrel group with flat ribs. The side of the hammer is marked with the large size "Allen's Patent." Marked on two of the flat barrel ribs is "Allen & Thurber, Worcester" and "Patented 1837 Cast Steel." Even though this pistol has the



Figure 14. Holster front view.



Figure 15. Holster reverse view.



STYLE III—Figure 16. Allen Grafton medium size pepperbox.

1837 patent date, it is of the 1845 patent type, and based on the Worcester, Mass. marking, is circa 1847 to 1865. It has the rounded, evenly arched frame with bag-shaped walnut grips. There is a finger spur projecting from the rear of the trigger guard.¹⁶ The nipple shield is hand-engraved in the rose vine design while the frame is engraved in the scroll/floral design. This Allen & Thurber dragoon pepperbox is often referred to as the '49'er type. Many of these heavy pistols were carried to the California gold fields in the late 1840s through the 1850s, thus the 1849 reference.¹⁷

This pepperbox came with its original, rather scarce, unmarked holster rig. The matching set consists of a waist belt, holster, ramrod pouch and rammer, all in medium weight brown leather. The waist belt is typical of this early style. It has a narrow belt that fits into a small buckle on the underside of the wide waist belt. The wide belt then covers over the narrow belt and buckle to protect them. There is a

ramrod pouch which was originally sewn to the waist belt, but the stitching failed, so the pouch was then slotted to slide over the belt. In the pouch is a 6 1/2-inch pepperbox rammer without its wooden end. The holster is a flap top, plug bottom holster with a large brass button to hold the flap closed and is constructed so that it forms a hood over the pistol. The stitching that holds the holster flap and belt loop failed in the past and were repaired with some rather crude hand sewing. This holster rig is nearly identical to the one worn by Dr. MacBeth shown in Figure 2.

V—Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass. Dragoon size pepperbox (Figures 28-33)

This dragoon size Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass., double-action pepperbox is listed in Flayderman's Guide as number 5A-050. This pistol's production number is 37. It has a 6-inch, 6-shot, 36 caliber barrel group with flat ribs. The side of the hammer is marked with the large size "Allen's Patent." Marked on two of the flat barrel ribs is "Allen & Thurber, Worcester" and "Patented 1837 Cast Steel." Even though this pistol has the 1837 patent date, it is of the 1845 patent type and based on the Worcester, Mass. marking is circa 1847 to 1865. It has the rounded, evenly arched frame with bag-shaped walnut grips. There is a finger spur projecting from the rear of the trigger guard.¹⁸ The nipple shield is hand-engraved in the rose vine design, and the frame is engraved in the scroll/floral design.¹⁹ Although this Allen & Thurber dragoon pepperbox is the type referred to as the "49'er," this pistol was carried as a non-regulation military sidearm during the Civil War.



Figure 17. Detail of "A.W. Spies" markings and Grafton style engraving.

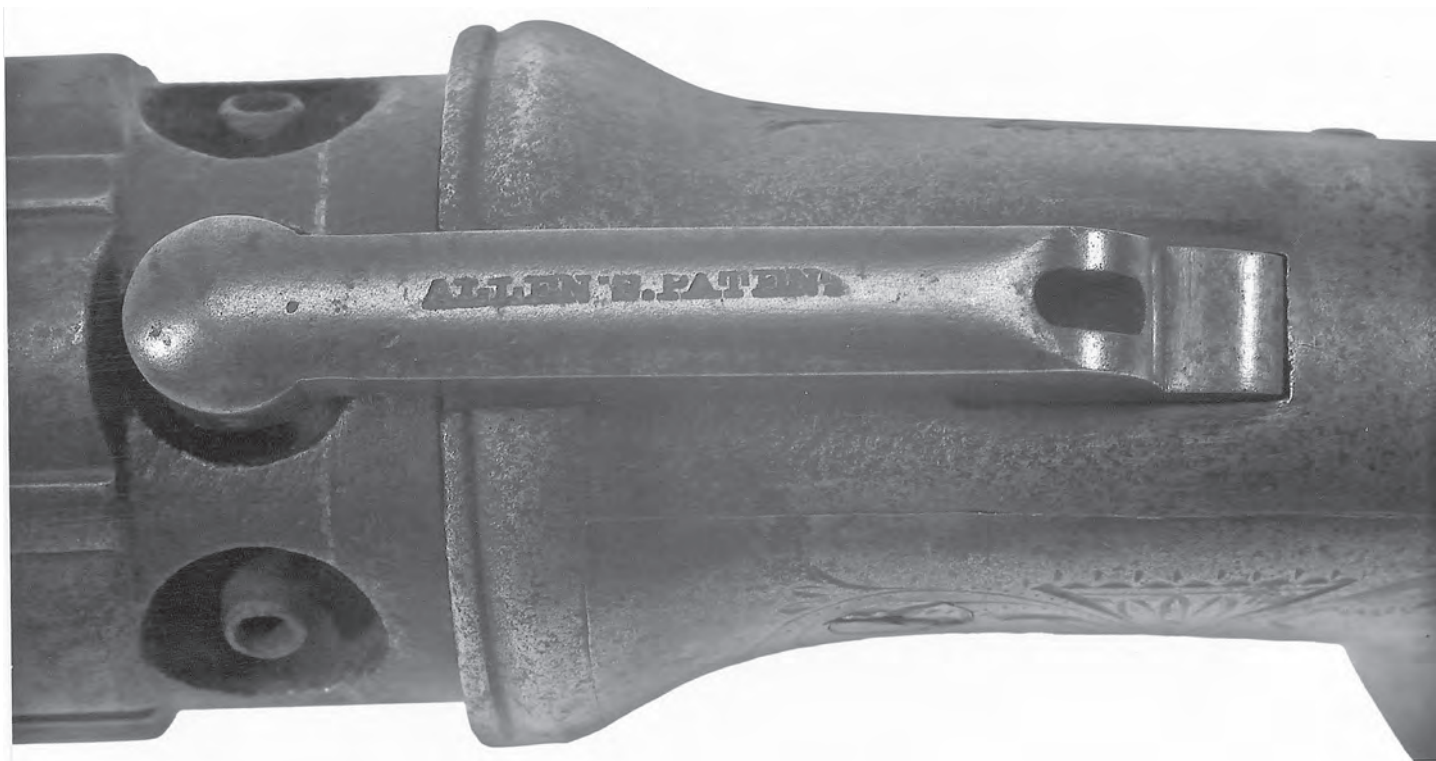


Figure 18. Detail of small size "Allen Patent" and sight slot in the bar hammer.

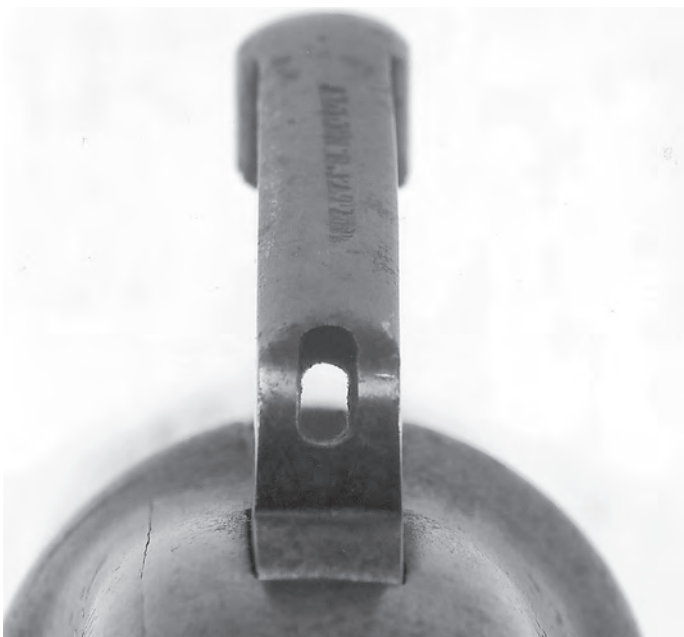


Figure 19. Detail of bar hammer raised and sight slot.

The holster with this large Allen & Thurber pepperbox is a heavy weight black leather Civil War flap-style military holster. There is a brass stud to hold the flap closed. The belt loop allows the pistol to be carried at an angle to facilitate drawing the pistol. The end of the holster is open so no moisture or dirt will collect in the bottom. On the inside of the holster flap are two unidentified initials or numbers, as well as "Co.L" and "5NY." I have no information about the person who carried this weapon in the Civil War because there were four regiments that were identified as the 5th New York.²⁰ Regardless of the person's history or unit, this is a superb example of a Civil War holstered pepperbox.

VI—Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass. Medium size pepperbox (Figures 34-38)

This is a medium size Allen & Thurber, Worcester, Mass., double action pepperbox listed in Flayderman's Guide



Figure 20. Top side view of pommel bags with the pepperbox holster.



Figure 21. Allen Grafton pepperbox in pommel bag holster.



Figure 22. Holster detail.

as number 5A-045. This pistol's production number is 139. It has a 4-inch, 6-shot, 32 caliber barrel group with flat ribs. The side of the bar hammer is marked with the large size "Allen's Patent," and marked on two of the flat barrel ribs is "Allen & Thurber, Worcester" and "Patented 1837 Cast Steel." Even though this pistol has the 1837 patent date, it is of the 1845 patent type and based on the Worcester, Mass. marking, is circa 1847 to 1865. It has the rounded frame with bag-shaped walnut grips.²¹ The nipple shield is the hand-engraved rose vine design²² and the frame is engraved in the scroll/floral pattern. With the exception of the early patent date, this is one of the most common Allen & Thurber pepperboxes encountered.²³

The holster for this pepperbox is of rather lightweight black leather. It is a military style flap holster that has a brass stud to hold the flap closed. From years of use, the holster has formed itself around the pistol. I owned this rig for several years before I found there was a name and unit carved in the belt loop. After some work, I was able to determine that the name was "I.H. Putnam" and the unit "13 Regt. New York." With some help, I was able to determine that the pistol was carried by Israel H. Putnam who was a Lieutenant in the 13th Regiment of the New York Infantry. The 13th Regiment of New York was very active during the Civil War and lost four officers and 67 enlisted men killed or mortally wounded in combat and 29 enlisted men to disease—a total of 100 men lost.²⁴ Research is continuing on Lt. Putnam.

VII—Robbins and Lawrence Co. pepperbox (Figures 39–44)

This Robbins and Lawrence Co. small size pepperbox is listed in Flayderman's Guide as number 7B-015. This unusual pepperbox is an improved version of the George Leonard's patent of 1849. Unlike other pepperbox pistols, it has fixed barrels. A concealed hammer rotates to fire each barrel. The ring trigger rotates and cocks the hammer; a small outer reverse curved trigger fires the weapon. The barrel group is unscrewed from the hinged breach

section for loading. Once the pistol is loaded, the barrel breach unit is lowered by releasing the top catch, which exposes the nipples for capping. This pepperbox has the secured fixed hinge. This is the small size Robbins and Lawrence Co. pepperbox, serial number 3046, which has a 3 1/2-inch, 28 caliber, 5-shot fluted barrel group. The barrel flutes are marked "Robbins & Lawrence Co., Windsor VT," and "Patent 1849." The pepperbox engraved with a decorative scroll design was manufactured between 1851 and 1854.²⁵

The unmarked holster with this unusual pepperbox comes with its waist belt. The holster is made of lightweight black leather. It is a semi-socket style with a plugged bottom.

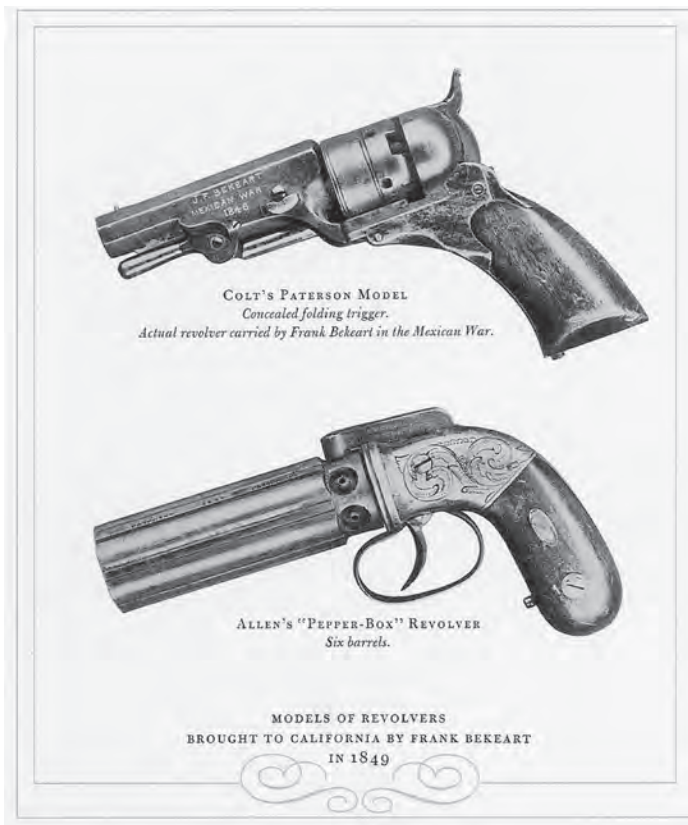


Figure 23. Photo showing the “A.W. Spies” Allen & Thurber pepper-box brought to California by Frank Bekeart.



Figure 26. Complete holster rig with wide waist belt covering the small inner belt and buckle.



Figure 27. Detail of complete holster rig.

The pistol is held in place by a narrow leather top strap. The waist belt is made of similar lightweight leather that is 1 1/2 inches wide. It originally had a painted finish some of which still remains. The two-piece tongue and wreath belt buckle is made of thin brass that is embossed with a patriotic military style eagle in its center with “M. Cohen & Brother, San Francisco, Cal.” around the center ring. The wreath of this buckle is undecorated. The September 1, 1850 San Francisco Directory by Charles P. Kimball on page 31 lists, “H.M. Cohen, Clothing, Montgomery between Jackson and Washington.” The 1860 census of San Francisco, page 503, line 29, lists “M. Cohen, Merchant, age 32, male, Hamburg,” and on page 519 of the same census, line 30 lists, “L. Cohen, Merchant, age 24, male, Hamburg.” In the 1861 San Francisco Directory by Henry G. Langley, the brothers are listed on page 100 as “Michael Cohen, Clothing and Louis Cohen as a Tailor.” No further information is available on the brothers. It is evident that this belt and buckle were intended for civilian use and were both patriotic and advertising purposes. This rig was a handy sidearm for an early California pioneer.

VIII—Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing Co. pepper-box (Figures 45–48)

This Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing Co. double-action, medium size pepperbox is listed in Flayderman’s Guide as number 5C-005. The outward appearance of this



STYLE IV—Figure 24. Allen & Thurber Worcester Dragoon pepperbox.



Figure 25. Detail of plugged bottom flap Dragoon holster.



STYLE V—Figure 28. Allen Worcester Dragoon pepperbox.



Figure 29. The Dragoon in its military style Civil War holster with open bottom.



Figure 32. Front side view.



Figure 30. Holster with flap open showing unit markings.



Figure 33. Reverse side view.



Figure 31. Detail of Company and Unit markings.

Manhattan pepperbox leads one to believe that it is an Allen copy or infringement. Neither is true. The Manhattan pepperbox is of different construction and was manufactured by the Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing Co.²⁶ This pepperbox was made in the late 1850s in Norwich, Conn. It is a double-action, 31 caliber, 6-shot pistol with production number 58. It has a 4-inch fluted barrel group that is marked in two of the flutes with "Manhattan F.A. Mfg. Co. New York" and "Cast Steel." The frame is engraved in the scroll/floral design and the nipple shield is undecorated. The walnut grips are bag-shaped. Based on the style and locations of the marks, this is one of the earlier Manhattan pepperboxes.²⁷

The unmarked holster for this pepperbox is made of medium weight black leather. It has a socket-shaped body with a plugged bottom. It has a flap that is formed so it provides a hood over the pistol. The flap is held closed by a



STYLE VI—Figure 34. Allen Worcester medium size pepperbox.



Figure 37. Civil War holster reverse side.



Figure 35. Allen Worcester in its Civil War military style holster.



Figure 36. Civil War holster front side.



Figure 38. belt loop showing the "I. H. Putnam—13 Regt. N. Y." markings.



STYLE VII—Figure 39. Robbins & Lawrence pepperbox.



Figure 42. Robbins & Lawrence in its holster with top strap open.



Figure 40. Robbins & Lawrence with barrel breach open for capping.



Figure 43. Robbins & Lawrence in its holster on the waist belt.



Figure 41. Details of Robbins & Lawrence—markings, engraving and barrel latch.



Figure 44. Belt buckle detail.



STYLE VIII—Figure 45. Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing pepperbox.

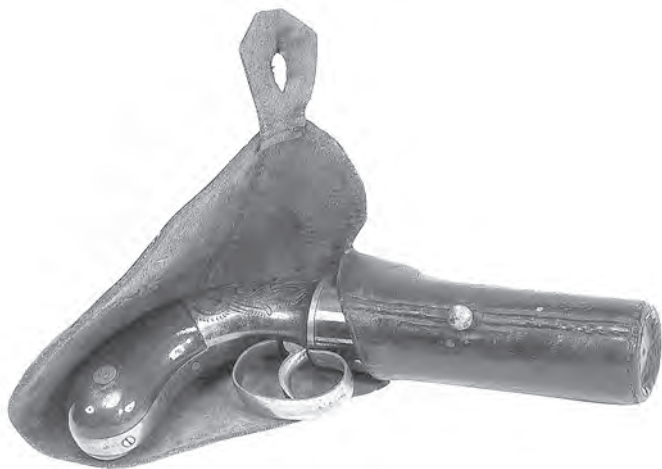


Figure 46. Pepperbox in holster with flap raised and plugged bottom show.



Figure 47. Flap closed.



Figure 48. Holster reverse.

brass stud on the holster body. The belt loops are simple slots in the back side of the flap. This was a poor holster design with the weight of the pistol being carried by the slots in the holster flap. Evidence of this weak design is the tear that has already begun where the flap transitions to the holster body. This 1850's period pepperbox and holster would be appropriate for civilian or military use.

My interest and study of the holstered pepperbox continues. I am sure there are other patterns and variations that I have yet to discover. In the future, I hope to add updated information on these scarce holstered pistols.

NOTES

1. Copy of an original daguerreotype of E. Dean with pepperbox from the collection of John N. McWilliams
2. "Silver and Gold", edited by Drew Heath & Marcia Eymann, a daguerreotype of Dr. MacBeth, Page 143, number 67
3. "Firearms of the American West," Louis A. Garavaglia & Charles G. Norman, 1803-1865, page 280
4. "Packing Iron," Richard C. Rattenbury. A daguerreotype of a young adventurer, page 63. From the collection of Herb Peck, Jr
5. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition by Norm Flayderman, pages 49, 50, 52, and 53.
6. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, page 161.

7. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 49.
8. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, pages 159-164.
9. "Packing Iron," Richard C. Rattenbury, page 100.
10. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 51.
11. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 51.
12. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 49.
13. "American Gunsmiths," Frank M. Sellers, page 290.
14. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, pages 19-20.
15. "Three Generations," Phillip Kendal Bekeart, pages 6, 8-11.
16. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 53.
17. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, pages 100, 164.
18. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 53.
19. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, pages 160, 164.
20. "Compendium of the War of the Rebellion," Frederick H. Dyer, pages 1406-1407.
21. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, pages 51-52.
22. "Ethan Allen Gunmaker," Harold R. Moillesseaux, page 164.
23. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 52.
24. "Compendium of the War of the Rebellion," Frederick H. Dyer, page 1410.
25. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value,"

8th edition, Norm Flayderman, page 330.

26. "Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Value," 8th edition, Norm Flayderman, pages 110-111.

27. "American, British & Continental Pepperbox Firearms," Jack Dunlap, pages 191-192.

All photographic images in this article are the work of Photographic Reflections of Grass Valley, CA, Steve and Gloria Buckley, Prop.

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