

A Trip to the Archives: A Practical Guide to Military Small Arms Research at the U.S. National Archives

By Charles Pate

Over the past few years there has been a significant improvement in the quality of some publications covering U.S. military small arms and accoutrements. In the past we have had to rely on reference works based largely on observed examples and few, if any, primary source documents. But now one can often find scholarly works based on primary sources, with most of those sources being government records stored at the National Archives and other official record repositories. Certainly the use of these records is to be encouraged. But their use is daunting, a factor that has in the past often led to their exclusion and the publication of reference works that are far from definitive. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief tutorial on the use of National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) sources in the research of U.S. military small arms. Naturally this subject is very broad and the records are so vast that the author can only strive to provide the reader with a useful orientation to performing such research. And the truth of the matter is that one can only really learn to do this work through actually attempting it and devoting the considerable time and effort that is required. This article is intended to provide the reader with a good starting point.

The approach used for this article will be to “walk through” a research trip to the National Archives. Along the way, the author will discuss the NARA facilities, tools and resources available to the researcher, procedures required by NARA and constraints they place upon the researcher, the sources of information available, challenges faced by the researcher and recommendations the author would make to those desiring to research small arms at NARA or other similar organizations. The author will use examples from his past research to illustrate some of these topics.

NARA FACILITIES

U.S. military small arms source documents vary greatly and do so especially based on the period of history involved. The National Archives has two facilities in the D.C. area. The downtown facility has most of the older records and the College Park, MD facility has most records for post World War I. There are also regional archives facilities, which generally contain records of an interest to the geographic areas they represent, and affiliated archives, such as those at the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Naval Academy. In the



interest of space this article will not address these latter facilities (1).

We will begin with research at the downtown D.C. facility, located between Constitution Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue at 7th Street. For the purpose of illustrating the process the author will use examples from U.S. Army records, primarily those of the Chief of Ordnance. But prior to going to the beautiful old main building, which houses many of our nation’s most treasured historical documents, it is important that we prepare for the visit. As will be thoroughly addressed below, time at the Archives is precious and should be spent as productively as possible.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

To efficiently research records at the National Archives, one should learn as much as possible about the organization that created the records, and do this prior to visiting the facility. Knowing the organization’s structure, functions performed, procedures and even the key individuals who were in the organization is critical to fully understanding the organization’s records. In some cases this understanding is important to finding critical documents. For example, Chief of Ordnance letters during the Civil War were typically filed by the first letter of a person’s last name. Letters to and from the Colt firearms company may have been filed under “C” (for Sam Colt or the Colt’s Patent Firearms Company),

“R” (E. K. Root), “H” (W. M. B. Hartley), etc. Civil War letters between the Chief of Ordnance and the officer in charge of inspecting contract arms may be filed under the order in which they served in that role: “T” (William A. Thornton), “W” (Robert H. K. Whiteley), “B” (George Balch), “H” (Peter V. Hagner), “T” for Thornton again, or finally “I” (for Inspector of Contract Arms).

In learning the roles, functions and procedures used by the organization, one will gain an understanding of the records that the organization created and the terminology used in those records. For example, the Ordnance Department's process for the distribution and issue of arms required the receiving organization to submit a requisition. The requisition was typically approved and prioritized by the War Department (often by the General-in-Chief, the Secretary, or the Chief of the Cavalry Bureau, etc.). The Chief of Ordnance knew where arms were available to issue through receiving “returns” (reports) periodically submitted by Ordnance Department officers in charge of depots and armories, and he would send them an “Order for Supplies,” directing them to make the issue. Then there were invoices and receipts, etc. associated with the issue and more returns submitted by the officer who ultimately received the arms and became accountable for them.

There is no single published source the author knows of that addressed this topic as its primary subject. Instead, for a given period and service, one must often piece this understanding together through general study of military documents such as the Ordnance Manual, Ordnance and Army Regulations, etc., as well as more easily accessible material. Some potentially useful sources that are readily available are recently published books on military small arms that have been written by archival researchers. Several good examples are listed in the bibliography of this article, and in particular, the author recommends Paul Johnson's book for U.S. Army Ordnance during the period of the 1850s through the Civil War. Jumping to the more modern era, in 1960 the Army published *The Technical Services, The Ordnance Department: Procurement and Supply* as a part of the series on the U.S. Army in World War II. In addition, the Internet is becoming more and more important in both providing access to materials that are already available and encouraging organizations such as NARA to provide more.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

The NARA web site (www.archives.gov) currently has value but is very limited in the aid it gives researchers. However, anyone planning to do research of this nature should explore the site in advance of visiting. In particular,

the site identifies NARA publications that may be useful in learning about both the organizations to be researched as well as surviving records of the organizations that are now held at the Archives. Reference Information Papers, which are written on specific topics by NARA experts, are especially helpful where they exist for the topics to be researched (2). The NARA site also describes the tools and resources available to the researcher, although the terminology can be confusing and sometimes misleading. For example, “finding aids” is used on the site generically for the guides, inventories, and special lists used to access records. But it is also used in a more specific and critical sense that will be discussed shortly. In the interest of making this as brief as possible and still give the reader the means to actually begin research of military small arms, the following describes basic NARA record organization, the understanding of which is required to actually retrieve and review records.

At the highest level, records are arranged in “record groups,” with a record group generally relating to a specific organization. As examples, records of the Army Chief of Ordnance are in Record Group (RG) 156, the Army Continental Commands are in RG 393, Army Adjutant General records are in RG 94, and records of the Naval Bureau of Ordnance are in RG 74 (3). An inventory (or in some cases a “preliminary inventory”) is available for each record group and it describes the records held in sufficient detail to give the researcher a good idea of the value of the records within the record group. Published inventories are available for some record groups and can be ordered through the NARA website. Unfortunately, none of the inventories of interest here are available in this manner.

According to the NARA web site, the next level down from record group in the record hierarchy is “series.” However, that term is not used in that context in accessing Army Chief of Ordnance records. Instead, the subdivisions of RG 156 are listed by finding aid. There are currently four finding aids for the record group. For the purpose of this article, we will use examples from the Civil War and early Indian Wars period. Most of these records are in only one finding aid, the “A1” finding aid, so we need not discuss this level of the hierarchy further.

The next level down, the “entry,” is key to accessing records. This level is a logical subdivision of the record group, generally covering a specific type of records for a specific period. Records within an entry are organized by some type of file series, which may be time period, filing system (for example, the decimal filing system), security classification level, etc. You must understand this organization in order to request the records you wish to review. The request you submit must identify the record group and entry number

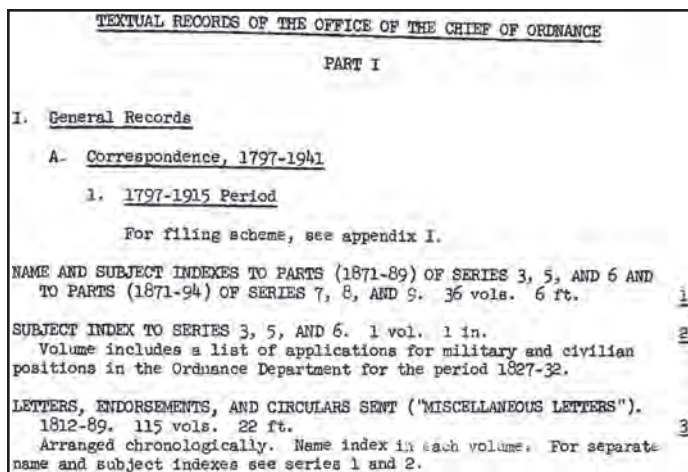


Figure 1. This is the first page of the Preliminary Inventory of Record Group 156, the U.S. Army Chief of Ordnance records, showing the listing for Entry #3, 115 volumes of letters, endorsements and circulars sent to miscellaneous addressees, including Sam Colt.

and then provide the staff some means to further narrow down the “pull request.” In most cases you need to identify the specific file or at least a date range so that the appropriate records can be pulled from storage. In some cases this direction can be down at the box, volume or even document level.

The following is an example of a pull request and the results. The author wished to research the Army Ordnance Department’s first order for the Colt Model 1860 Army revolver. Already knowing this order occurred shortly after the beginning of the Civil War and that the Chief of Ordnance was the Secretary of War’s designated official for initiating such orders, the logical place to look was in the letters sent by the Chief of Ordnance for the April-May 1861 period. The first page of the RG 156 preliminary inventory, Figure 1, shows that Entry #3 (4) contains “Letters, Endorsements, and Circulars Sent (Miscellaneous Letters), 1812-89.” There are other “letters sent” entries but they are for letters sent to the Secretary of War, Ordnance Officers, National Armories, etc. and we are looking for letters sent to Samuel Colt or to his company. With the basic criteria of addressee and date it was easy for the staff to identify the specific volume the author needed to see. Entry 3 is a set of volumes containing “fair copies” of letters sent by the Chief of Ordnance. Department clerks copied letters into these

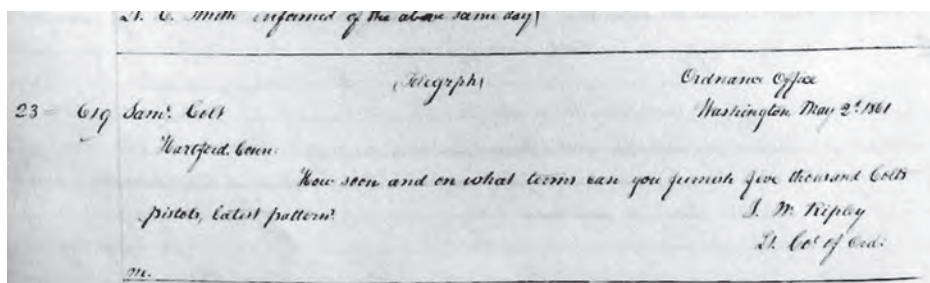


Figure 2. Page 608 of Volume 52, Entry 3, gives General Ripley’s telegram to Colt regarding the Ordnance Department’s first order for Colt Model 1860 revolvers.

volumes from “press copies” that were made using onionskin paper pressed against the actual letters sent while the ink on the original letters was still wet. Making these fair copies was necessary due to the poor quality and comparatively short life of the press copies.

Volume 48 of Entry 3, Figure 2, contains the first order the Chief of Ordnance issued for Colt Model 1860 revolvers. On page 608 we find that General Ripley, Chief of Ordnance, sent a telegram to Sam Colt on May 2, 1861, asking: “How soon and on what terms can you furnish five thousand Colt’s pistols, latest pattern?” To the left of this entry is the notation “23 = 619,” which gives the page numbers of the previous letter and next letter sent to Sam Colt. The letter on page 23 is not of interest for this article but the document on page 619 completes this first order. After receiving a response from Sam Colt (to be found in Entry 21, Letters Received) that he could supply 500 of the 5,000 in short order, General Ripley again telegraphed Colt on May 4, 1861, saying, “Deliver the five hundred pistols to Maj. Thornton at New York Arsenal. For further orders, wait for mail.” The 500 pistols were delivered on the 21st of May and Colt promptly submitted his bill for the same. After it was reviewed by General Ripley, the bill, along with Maj. Thornton’s receipt, was forwarded to the Treasury Department for payment. This package is now filed in RG 217, Records of the General Accounting Office, under Entry 523B, Settled Accounts and Claims. See Figure 3 for the package, which is still bound in the government’s ubiquitous red tape.

The above material is admittedly somewhat complicated and the NARA website is even more so, as well as being overwhelming. At this point the reader might be asking, “Don’t they have someone who can help me with my research?” The answer is (to a limited degree) yes, and we will address that shortly. First, we need to begin our walkthrough and discuss some of the procedures to be used in conducting research and the constraints imposed upon the researcher.

PROCEDURES AND CONSTRAINTS

The first problem the researcher faces is just getting to the building. Washington’s rush hour traffic is some of the worst in the nation and parking downtown is both difficult to find and expensive. If you visit from out of town, stay somewhere near a subway stop and use the subway to get there if possible. The Archives/Navy Memorial Metro stop (Yellow and Green Metro lines) is just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the staff and researcher entrance to the building. Once inside the building, researchers are

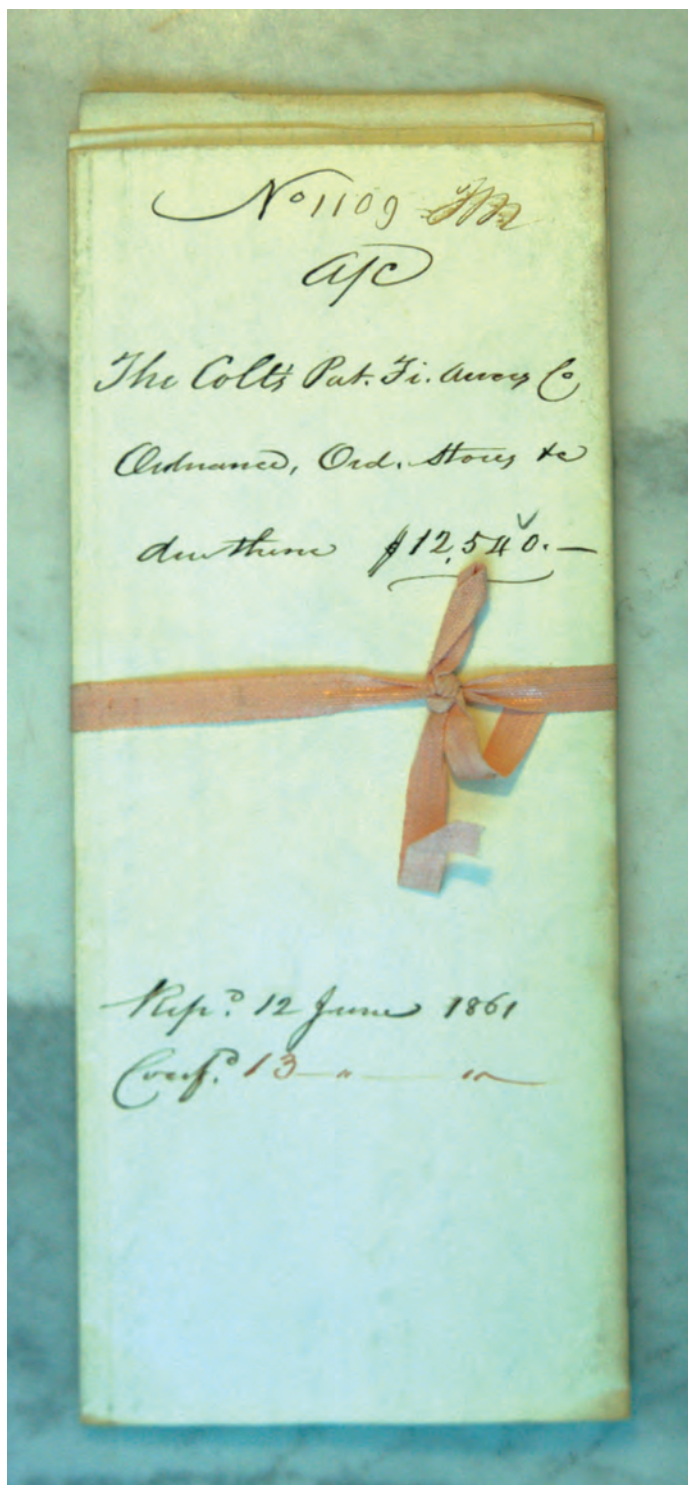


Figure 3. This package contains the account for General Ripley's first order of Colt Model 1860 revolvers. It contains Colt's invoice, a certificate of inspection and a receipt for their delivery. It is from the Treasury Department's Second Auditor files, now stored in the records of the General Accounting Office.

required to wait until 9:00 AM, at which point security processing begins:

Passing through a metal scanner, signing in, getting a property pass for any electronic devices like a laptop, etc. Coin-operated lockers are provided for you to store coats and other material, but since property passes are required and you are subject to searches upon exit, take as little with

you as possible. A researcher's photo identification badge is required in order to request documents and for access to the reading room but can be obtained in reasonably short order after passing security.

The next step is to go to the research assistance room to request your documents. It is in this room that you may talk with an archivist about your research project and review the finding aids and inventories discussed above. However, there is usually only one archivist on duty for Army records and it is unlikely that this archivist will be very knowledgeable about your specific topic. If that is the case, this person can request the assistance of an archivist who may be more knowledgeable. Just be aware that all of this takes time, and plan accordingly.

Once you have identified the records you need to see, the next step is to fill out and submit pull requests for the documents. If you know exactly what is required to fill out this form it is a simple matter of filling it out and giving it to the archivist to get it in for the next scheduled pull (5). The archivist will enter your pull information into a computerized tracking system and give the pull slip to another staff member who will pull the records from "the stacks," large rooms with hundreds of metal shelves holding the records. Only four pulls are done per day and you are allowed to submit requests for only one record group at a time. The first pull is at 10:00 AM and the others are at 11:00 AM, 1:30 PM and 2:30 PM. It takes the staff an hour to two hours to pull records, so on the first day of your visit it is unlikely you will actually see any paper records until 11:30 or later (but see the discussion of microfilm records below). The last pull obviously provides little time that day to find what you're looking for and is useful primarily for obtaining records to review the following day.

If your pull is for only one box or one volume your records will be taken directly to the reading room. If your pull is for more than one box or volume, the records will be pulled from the shelves, placed on a cart and the cart will be placed in a temporary storage room for the reading room staff to retrieve for you. In either event, a copy of your pull slip will be taken to the reading room and the staff in that room will update the computerized tracking system.

Once you have submitted your pull request, you can go to the beautiful old second floor reading room to wait for your records. For security reasons, your photo id is used to gain access to this room and you cannot take bags, coats, ballpoint pens or original documents with you. The Archives provides pencils and paper for your use. The guards and staff use video surveillance cameras to monitor researchers in order to prevent theft and damage to the documents.

At the downtown Archives, you must check in with the reading room staff periodically to see if your records have arrived. At the College Park facility, the person pulling the documents fills out a logbook when he delivers the records

to the reading room and researchers can check that book to see if their records have arrived. (This is just one of a number of frustrating inconsistencies in procedures between the two facilities.) Once your records have arrived, you sign for them and take them to a desk to begin work—or perhaps not.

In approximately one out of four cases there is a problem of some sort, such as the wrong records being pulled—for example, the 22nd Pennsylvania Infantry records might have been brought instead of those for the 22nd Pennsylvania Cavalry. Other frequently encountered problems are other researchers having checked out the records you want to see, the records have been misfiled or temporarily lost, or, most irritating, the Archives staff have reboxed or reorganized the records and they are no longer where they were the last time you worked with them. The author has also made mistakes in properly filling out the pull slips. When any one of these problems occurs, you have lost not only the time you've spent but also the time it will take to correct the problem. While most of the Archives folks are very conscientious, they are understaffed and can't quickly correct such mistakes as bringing the wrong records, even if the mistake was theirs.

Once you actually begin to review documents, you are allowed to take only one folder out of a box at a time and you must also use a marker in the box to ensure the folder or document is replaced in its proper sequence. There are numerous other rules as well, all of which are clearly appropriate if you understand the staff's concerns (6).

SOME SAMPLE RESEARCH EFFORTS

First Sample: Colt Model 1860 Army Revolver #5246

In 2007, the author acquired a fluted Colt Model 1860 Army revolver that, according to the Springfield Research

Service (SRS), had been used by the 8th U.S. Cavalry in New Mexico after the Civil War (7). (Figure 4.) Percussion revolvers that can be documented to the Indian Wars are extremely rare and this pistol, if it and the SRS information proved to be correct, was even more special due to its fluted cylinder and the fact that the 8th Cavalry earned several Medal of Honor awards for action against Apache Indians during the early post-Civil War period. However, there were several questions that needed to be answered in determining whether or not the limited SRS information available about the pistol's history was actually correct. Was this serial number, 5246, actually in the

Army records? These records were hand-written and many are in poor condition, leading to errors in their interpretation. If it was in the records, was it likely to be a mistake? After all, according to most published sources the serial number was quite low to be a pistol purchased by the Army and the Army was not known to have purchased Model 1860 revolvers with fluted cylinders. If the records were correct, how did the revolver get into the Army inventory? If it indeed was a U.S. Army pistol, what happened to it after its purchase? After receiving the pistol, the author began a quest to see if these questions could be answered.

The published SRS information on the pistol was that the revolver was in the 8th U.S. Cavalry on December 6, 1871 and was defective. In researching the pistol at the National Archives, the author found this data was based on a Board of Survey report for a board held at Fort Stanton, New Mexico (8). A board of officers was established by a post special order of that date to examine and report upon the condition of a lot of ordnance for which 2nd Lieutenant Richard A. Williams, 8th Cavalry, was responsible. The defective arms examined included five Colt Army revolvers. Serial numbers were only rarely included in these board reports, but in this case, in addition to being present they were quite clearly written. There was no question about the number 5246. This was the only four-digit serial number among the five, the others being in the 30000 range or higher. Lt. Williams testified that the arms had been "rendered unserviceable by ordinary wear and tear." All of the revolvers were defective due to the loss of small parts. The main spring screw of serial number 5246 had been lost. Lt. Williams further testified that the enlisted soldiers who had lost the revolver parts had been charged for their cost. After examining the arms and listening to testimony from Lt. Williams and others, the board agreed that Lt. Williams should not be held at fault for the damaged arms and adjourned sine die.

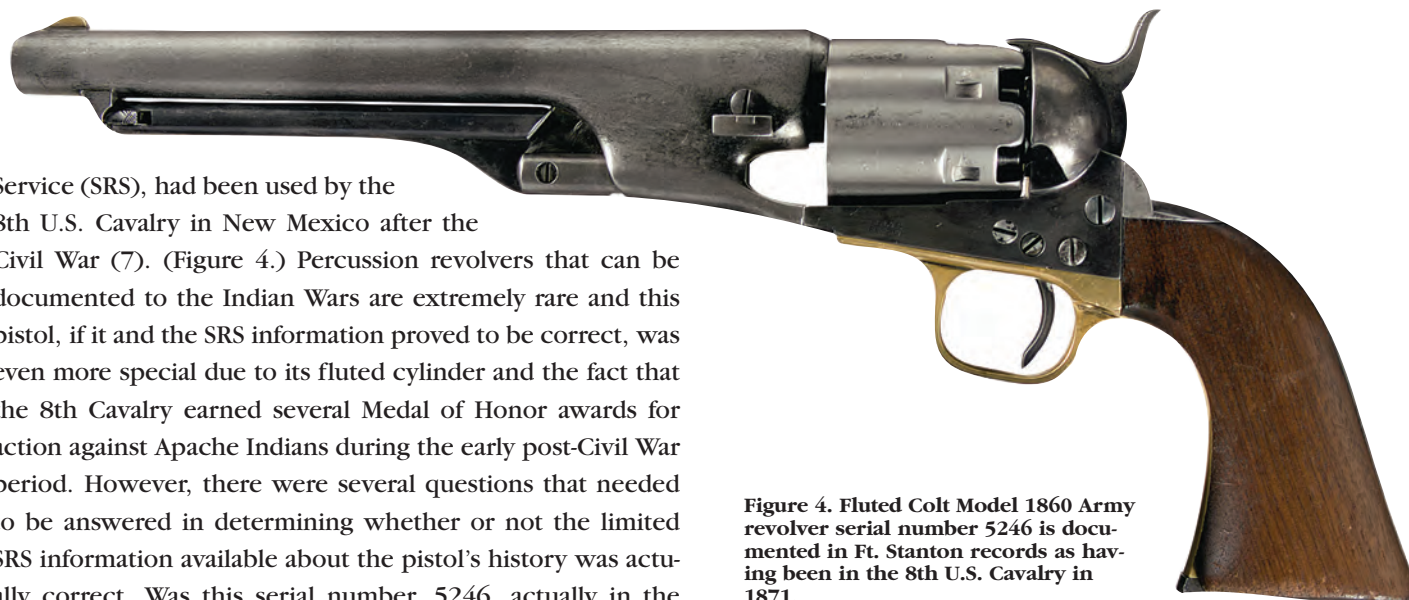


Figure 4. Fluted Colt Model 1860 Army revolver serial number 5246 is documented in Ft. Stanton records as having been in the 8th U.S. Cavalry in 1871.

The Army's process for relieving responsible officers for damaged property was to establish such boards and charge them with examining the facts of the case and determining responsibility, where appropriate, for losses. Usually an inspecting officer (either from the Office of the Inspecting General or an officer detailed for this purpose) would then examine the damaged arms and determine what was to be done with them. Where possible, arms were repaired locally or, if required, they would be sent to the nearest Ordnance Department facility for repair. Those beyond repair would usually be sent to a major Ordnance facility such as Rock Island Arsenal to be scrapped for parts or sold by auction (9). In any event, the inspecting officer's report and that of the survey board were submitted through command channels for approval and the document discussed here was Fort Stanton's fair copy of the report submitted by the board. Had these weapons been damaged beyond repair, the approval document would have given Lt. Williams authority to turn in the damaged weapons, drop them from his property return (10), and requisition replacements. While the files examined do not give the disposition of these arms, given the minor nature of the problem, it is most likely that serial number 5246 was repaired at Fort Stanton.

But how did this revolver, which bears none of the inspection marks typical of arms purchased by the Army Ordnance Department, get into the Army inventory? Shortly before acquiring this pistol the author had begun research of the Model 1860 revolver for the purpose of writing a book on the pistol. In addition to collecting data on surviving examples, this effort has included extensive research at the National Archives and other record repositories, including the Colt factory. The author was able to study the Colt shipping records for the period in which number 5246 was manufactured and shipped, and he found that the pistol was in a shipment of 350 "New Model Army" revolvers sent to J. C. Grubb, a major weapons dealer in Philadelphia. According to these records the shipment was made in August 1861. In the interest of brevity, the author will only summarize the research that followed.

After the Union defeat at the First Bull Run, the Ordnance Department greatly expanded its purchase of arms, including buying off the open market all suitable arms that could be purchased at "reasonable" prices. Lt. Thomas J. Treadwell at Frankford Arsenal was one of the officers authorized to make such purchases (11). In a series of letters and telegrams between Lt. Treadwell and General Ripley these 350 revolvers and other arms purchased from Grubb were specifically discussed (12). Congressional Series Executive Document 99 (ED 99), which lists Civil War arms purchased by the U.S. Army from dealers and manufactures, shows 350 Colt New Model Army revolvers bought from

Grubb in August 1861. The sources for ED 99 data were accounts submitted to the Ordnance Department, which were then verified and forwarded to the Treasury Department for payment. The author checked the Treasury Department records of settled accounts and found the documentation for Treadwell's purchases from Grubb in August and the account included one purchase of 350 Colt "New Model Army" revolvers. Some earlier and later purchases were made from Grubb, but practically speaking, there were no other purchases that could have included this pistol (13).

Treadwell later reported that he had shipped the arms purchased from Grubb in August to the Washington Arsenal, in accordance with orders from the Chief of Ordnance. These orders had been issued on direction of General McClellan, who was arming the Army of the Potomac (14). At this point the history of the revolver is lost because records associated with requisitions, orders for supplies and receipts for issues made were not retained. The only potentially useful records are letters sent and received by the various organizations. These latter files indicate regular army U.S. Cavalry units that were being outfitted in the east were given priority for the best arms at this time but this is in no way definitive regarding the history of serial number 5246. Fortunately, it appears the trail can be picked up again in 1867.

On September 17, 1867, the Commanding Officer of Benicia Arsenal (near San Francisco) wrote the Chief of Ordnance complaining that the 1000 supposedly "serviceable" Colt Army revolvers (15) sent to him for arming the cavalry regiment then being formed there (the 8th U.S. Cavalry) included 281 "old" revolvers. Of this 281, 112 needed replacement parts of various kinds, including 25 cylinders, 12 lock frames, 75 keys (wedges), etc. This letter has the notation "Springfield Armory" on it, which suggests the Armory was tasked to provide the needed parts (16). At the date of this writing the author has not gone further with this research other than to check the few later returns of the 8th Cavalry that exist and they do show many Colt Army revolvers on hand in the regiment.

Second Sample Project: Lefauchaux Revolver #34004

Several years ago a friend of the author found a list of serial numbers of Lefauchaux revolvers that had been issued to the 2nd Kansas Cavalry. He subsequently found and purchased serial number 34004, which was on that list, and sold it to the author. (See Figure 5.) The purpose of this research task was to identify the soldier who was issued the pistol and obtain as much information about him and his use of the weapon as could reasonably be found.

The source of the serial number was the Civil War volunteer regiments' "Regimental Books" stored in RG 94, records of the Army Adjutant General. RG 94 is a very large

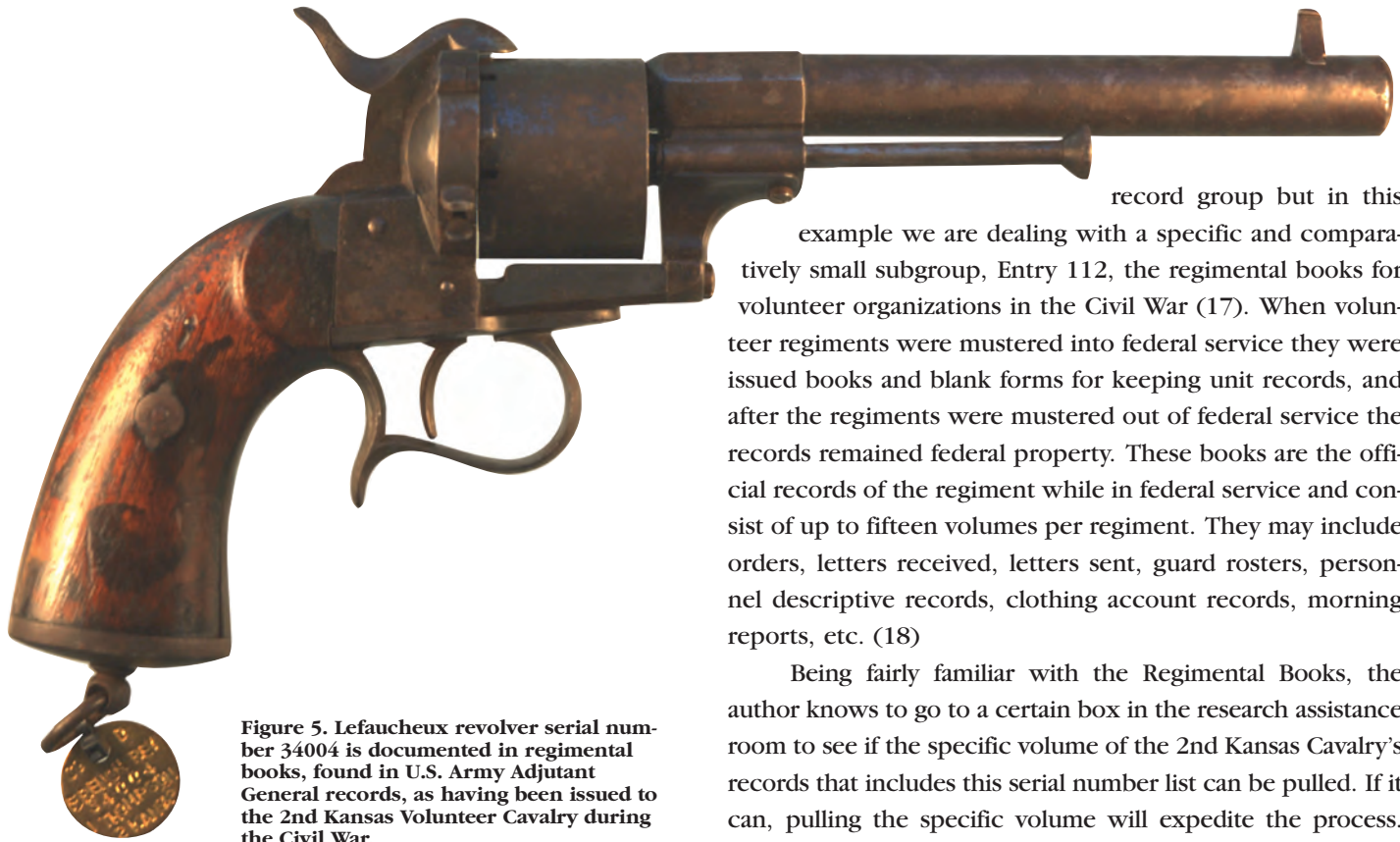


Figure 5. Lefauchaux revolver serial number 34004 is documented in regimental books, found in U.S. Army Adjutant General records, as having been issued to the 2nd Kansas Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War.

record group but in this example we are dealing with a specific and comparatively small subgroup, Entry 112, the regimental books for volunteer organizations in the Civil War (17). When volunteer regiments were mustered into federal service they were issued books and blank forms for keeping unit records, and after the regiments were mustered out of federal service the records remained federal property. These books are the official records of the regiment while in federal service and consist of up to fifteen volumes per regiment. They may include orders, letters received, letters sent, guard rosters, personnel descriptive records, clothing account records, morning reports, etc. (18)

Being fairly familiar with the Regimental Books, the author knows to go to a certain box in the research assistance room to see if the specific volume of the 2nd Kansas Cavalry's records that includes this serial number list can be pulled. If it can, pulling the specific volume will expedite the process. The individual books of some regiments are separately identified in this "location register" box and others are not. If the individual volume is not listed, the Archives staff will pull all of the books for the regiment—which often means they will be the only documents the staff will bring for this pull and no other records will be available for study for the next three to four hours. In this case the specific volume was listed. See Figure 6 for the pull slip and the label of the box containing this volume. All of these volumes, most of which are very fragile and are falling apart, have now been boxed in archival storage boxes that should aid in their preservation.

As can be seen, this volume is the "Order Books" for Companies B and D. The reader might note that in the above listing of regimental books there was no mention of an "Ordnance Book." In a very few cases there were such records maintained but that was not the norm. While a few regimental commanders, and some at higher command levels, directed subordinate officers to maintain serial number-specific records of the arms issued to troops, keeping such records was not required by the

REFERENCE SERVICE SLIP						DATE	NO.
NAME OF REQUESTOR <i>Pate Charles</i>				AGENCY OR ADDRESS <i>041355</i>		<i>4/1/06</i>	
UNITS OF SERVICE				SOURCE OF REQUEST (Check)			
INFORMATION SERVICE <i>(Number of replies)</i>	RECORDS FURNISHED <i>(Number of items)</i>	TEXTUAL STILL PICTURES, ETC. <i>(Number of copies)</i>	MAKING OF PERS. RECORDS <i>(Number of feet)</i>	NA Administrative Use			
WRITTEN	ORAL			Agency of Origin			
				Other Government			
				Nongovernment			
REQUEST HANDLED BY							
RG NO. <i>94</i>	STACK AREA <i>9W3</i>	ROW <i>14</i>	COMPARTMENT <i>17</i>	SHELF <i>2</i>	OUTCARD NO.		
RECORD IDENTIFICATION <i>Civil War Regimental Books 2nd Kansas Vol. Cavalry Order Book B+D</i>							
RECEIVED BY				DATE	RETURNED TO	DATE	
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION DO NOT REMOVE FROM RECORDS NA FORM 14001 (11-85)							

RG 94: Records of the Adjutant General's Office
 Book Records of Volunteer Union Organizations
 2d Kansas Cavalry
 Order Book
 Companies B and D
 E112-115 PI-17 Vol 5 of 5

Figure 6. This is an example of a pull slip and the box requested by it. The box contain the order book for Company D, 2nd Kansas Cavalry.

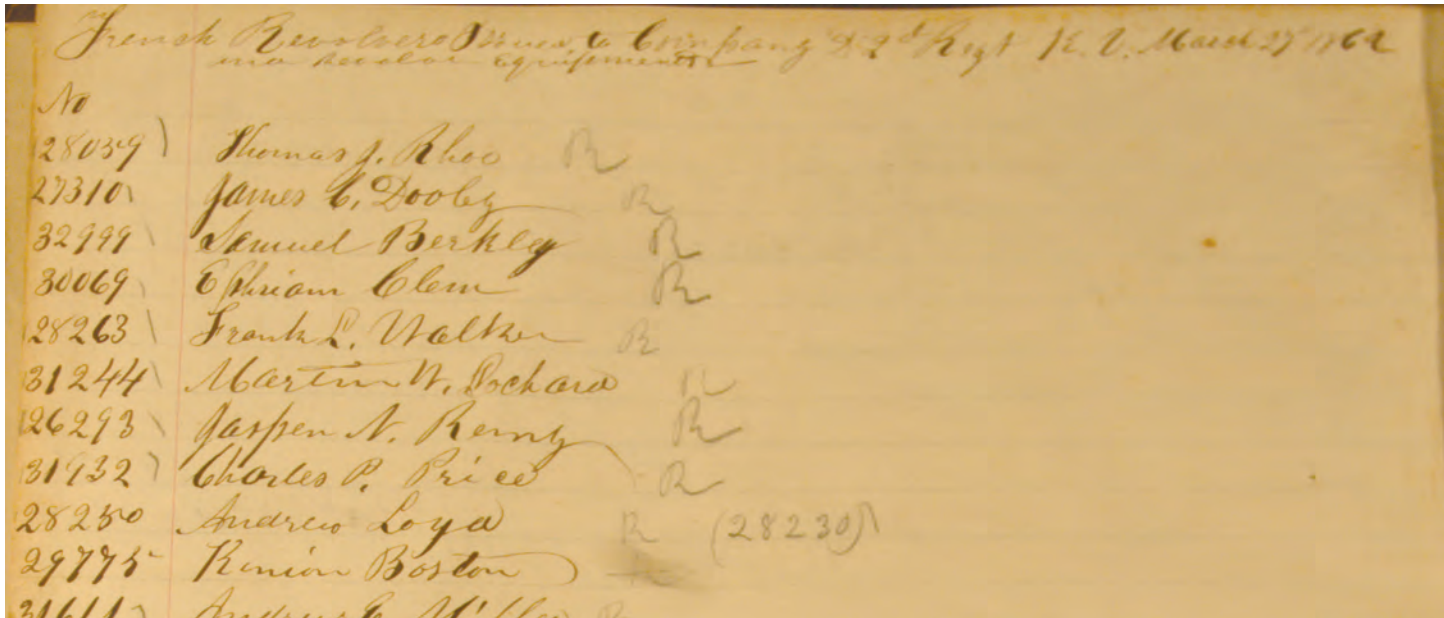


Figure 7. The Company D 2nd Kansas Cavalry order book is one of the very few such records documenting the arms issued to soldiers. It is also exceptional in that it is in good condition, reasonably easy to read, gives the date the issue was made and specifically identifies the type weapon being issued.

Chief of Ordnance or Army regulations (19). Instead, it was up to the officers accountable for the arms, usually the company commanders, to maintain whatever records they thought appropriate. It was then up to the responsible officers to account for the arms in their ordnance returns by type, quantity and condition. If serial number records were maintained, they may be found anywhere in any of the company books—essentially wherever it was convenient to put them at the time (20). This subject alone would make a lengthy article, and for our purposes here it is enough to say that a list exists in this book showing the serial numbers of “French Revolvers issued to Company “D” 2nd Regt. K. V. March 27th 1862.” (Figure 7.) This list is also extraordinary in that it gives the date of issue, it specifically identifies the type of weapon being issued, and it is in exceptionally good condition. As can be seen in Figure 8, serial number 34004 was issued to James Thompson. Note also there is an “R” by his name. This indi-

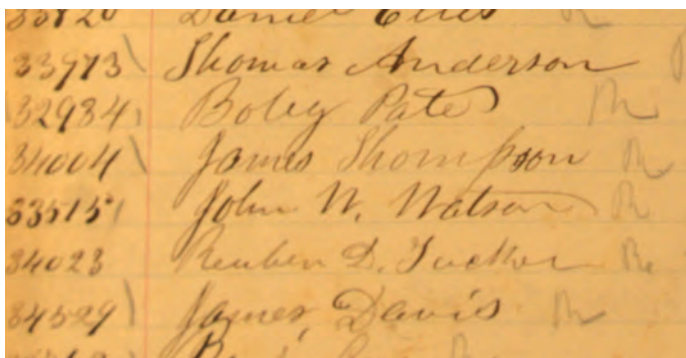


Figure 8. The listing in the Company D order book shows that “French Revolver” serial number 34004 was issued to James Thompson. The “R” beside his name indicates that the pistol was later turned in (“Returned”), probably when the company was issued Colt Model 1860 revolvers in early 1863.

cated the pistol was “returned” at some point. The Lefauchaux revolvers were very unpopular, due in large part to the weak charge of powder the metallic cartridge contained. While a specific date has not yet been established, the regiment’s “French” revolvers were replaced with Colt Army model revolvers in early 1863.

Often in these lists only last names are given and in most cases the writing is very poor, the document faded, dirty, and difficult to read. When the numbers are in regimental books other than the Descriptive Book (21) and only the soldier’s last name is given, it may be necessary to pull the Descriptive Book also to make a preliminary identification. The name may be spelled differently in various records, so the next step is to consult the Adjutant General’s index of names for soldiers who served in the Civil War (22) to find the soldier’s record since it was filed under the spelling used by that office. In this case, the Adjutant General’s records show no James Thompson in Company D at all, although there was one in Company K. This discrepancy obviously required additional research.

Typically at this point the next step is to put in a pull request for the soldier’s record and wait for it to arrive in the reading room. This is another two to three hour process, so try to have other work you can do while waiting for records to be retrieved. If you have a long wait you might make use of the microfilm records discussed below. Given the conflict regarding Private Thompson’s company, the author also decided to review the other regimental books.

Thompson’s “Compiled Military service Record” (CMSR) was brought to the reading room first, and it showed that Thompson had enlisted in “1st Lt. Russell’s Company” of

the 2nd Kansas on November 12, 1861, when the regiment was still an infantry unit (it was reorganized as a cavalry regiment in March 1862). The record card for the December 1861 muster said he was in Captain Crawford's company (which other records show was Company D). The first card giving his company as Company K was for the April 1862 muster. Thompson's muster-in card described him as being a 26-year-old farmer who had been born in Perry County, Pennsylvania. He was 5'9" tall with a fair complexion, gray eyes and dark hair. More importantly, the CMSR noted that Thompson was wounded in action in the Battle of Poison Springs, Arkansas, on April 18, 1864 and that he had died in a Rebel prison in Tyler, Texas, on February 28, 1865.

The Company K Descriptive Book was even more informative. While it provided no more information about Thompson, it was in fact the source of much of the information in his CMSR (23). The author was surprised to find a four-page history of K Company, which showed that the company was not organized until April 5, 1862, several days after the issue of Lefauchaux revolvers to "D Company, 2nd Kansas Infantry." Further investigations showed that other troopers of the old D Company were also in the new K Company, 2nd Kansas Cavalry.

The author was also happy to find that this K Company history listed the actions the company participated in during the time they had the Lefauchaux revolvers. The War Department did not require Civil War units to compile narrative histories. Veterans, or others, wrote those that now exist, usually long after the war was over. An excellent 2nd Kansas regimental history was written by one of the regiment's officers, but as is usually the case it was not always clear which of the companies were involved in the regiment's various engagements (24).

Given that Private Thompson was wounded, captured, and died as a prisoner of war, the author knew that if he had dependents they were likely to have received a pension for his service. A check of the pension index in the microfilm room showed that was the case. Private Thompson's widow, Elizabeth, received a pension until her death in 1904. These pension files are often excellent sources of genealogical information and sometimes have good information on the soldier's service.

NOTES ABOUT THE INDIAN WARS TO WORLD WAR I ERA RECORDS

Spanish-American War Adjutant General records are much like those of the Civil War and need not be addressed here. For the post Civil War period, the records at the downtown facility that are most often useful for small arms research are the correspondence files of the Army Chief of

Ordnance, Navy Bureau of Ordnance, or USMC Quartermaster or USMC Headquarters (especially the original letters received). These latter records are usually letter size, folded in thirds, and packed in boxes that hold three to four hundred letters. To search them efficiently you need to understand the filing system used by the organization at the time (the services all appear to have changed systems over time, and some changed several times). Some indexes exist that may point the researcher to specific letters, but the contents of these boxes have often been shuffled by previous researchers, and it may be necessary to go through them one letter at a time. It takes about thirty to sixty minutes to go through a box of these letters one at a time, much longer if one finds interesting material along the way.

For Army correspondence up to 1870, letters received were filed by year, then by the first initial of the writer's last name, and then numerically in the order received. Letters received between 1870 and 1894 were simply numbered in the order received each year. For most years, an index is available, but the author has found these to be both unreliable and inadequate. From 1894 to 1915, letters were filed by "subject number" and these records are exceptionally difficult to search if the subject numbers for the files of interest can't be identified.

Up to the introduction of the typewriter letters sent were copied into volumes but separate volume series were used based on to whom the letters were sent (the Secretary of War, Ordnance officers, arsenals and armories or to miscellaneous parties). It is necessary to understand how the Ordnance Department did business at the time, which is too complicated to cover here in more detail.

Other records of note for this period that are downtown are records of posts/forts and individual units, the latter being very limited, unfortunately. Most of the Treasury Department records for this period are also downtown and they are the source for original copies of contracts. Each of these sets of records presents its own challenges, especially for those periods in which the filing systems changed.

MODERN RECORDS AND THE COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND, FACILITY

Most World War I and later records are at the College Park, MD facility. The best way to get there is to drive, but you can also go to the downtown facility first and catch a bus to "Archives II." There is plentiful free parking at this facility and it is a beautiful, modern building. The hours and general procedures are the same but here you have more to do in identifying the records to be pulled—you have to identify the physical stack location of the records yourself. The finding aids for identifying the records you want pulled and their locations are voluminous and confusing. The record

organizations are, in some cases, still changing—a very frustrating problem for people who first looked at these records several years ago. In many cases records that were previously in one record group have now been assigned to new ones. Within record groups many entries have been broken down further or renumbered. Many records that we previously noted by box number have now been reboxed and our citations are no longer valid. Unfortunately, few of the archivists who are there to help are familiar with these changes, so we jointly have to figure out where to look for documents in these situations.

The College Park records of interest are mostly in the same categories as described above—the most useful being military correspondence files, but unit/organization files are also productive. For example, the OSS records contain weapon procurement information as well as many documents showing issues of weapons to individuals. As another example, in the records of the Southwest Pacific Area, the author recently found over four hundred Model 1903 rifles that had been assigned to individual ships of the U.S. Army's World War II fleet.

Many of the records stored at College Park were once classified and still bear the markings of the classification. The staff at this facility plays close attention to this matter and any copies of documents marked as classified must have the declassification notice applied or you will not be able to take them out of the facility.

An added benefit of the College Park facility is that it contains the collection of still and motion pictures. This latter Archives branch is not very busy and the staff can pull records for you quickly. An added advantage to this research is that reasonably good indexes exist, plus some of these photos are absolutely fascinating.

Overall, the College Park facility is more busy and crowded than downtown D.C. since it contains such records as the Nixon tapes and JFK assassination records (both still popular), and records that are heavily used by government-paid researchers, World War II/Korea/Vietnam researchers, and researchers from overseas.

MICROFILM RECORDS AT THE ARCHIVES

The Archives tries to provide records that are frequently accessed through microfilm. This prevents damage to the often-fragile originals and speeds researcher access since the microfilm rolls are stored in containers directly available to the researcher. Many records of interest to military arms researchers are available only on microfilm. These include most (if not all) of the Secretary of War records, most of the Adjutant General records, ordnance returns, regimental and post returns, and more and more individual soldier service

records are being filmed. But many of these documents are very hard to read on microfilm and, with wear of the film, they are becoming even more so. Large format documents like the ordnance returns are especially problematic. A digital image of reasonable resolution would be much better. Unfortunately, even in this day of excellent digital scanning and imagery, the Archives is still slavishly devoted to microfilm, which can be viewed by only one person at a time, wears through the mechanical process of viewing, and of course cannot be posted online or searched through computer technology. Making paper copies from the microfilm is also inconvenient and the quality of the copy is poor.

The National Archives has an active digital records program, but until recently it has been devoted almost exclusively to records that were provided to them in digital media. There is now some progress toward digitizing older records and making them available over the Internet. In most cases, however, this is through partnerships with commercial firms such as Ancestry.com and Footnote.com, and is oriented primarily toward genealogy. But the digitized military service record index and pension applications are very useful for “identified” small arms research.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above material has already made obvious many of the difficulties one will face in conducting small arms research at the National Archives. Many are simply time-consuming irritants. The most significant challenges one faces are knowing (or learning) where to look and the tremendous volume of records that may need to be reviewed. For example, in an attempt to write a definitive study of the Colt Model 1860 revolver, the author has believed it necessary to review all of the Chief of Ordnance correspondence files for the Civil War period. These included the following:

- RG156, Entry 20 (Registers of Letters Received): 12 volumes
- RG156, Entry 21 (Letters Received): 65 boxes
- RG156, Entry 3 (Misc. Letters Sent): 14 volumes
- RG156, Entry 5 (Letters Sent to the Secretary of War): 4 volumes
- RG156, Entry 6 (Letters Sent to Ordnance Officers): 12 volumes

The registers and letters sent volumes are typically more than five hundred pages each and have usually taken one to three weeks each to review. The author is also reviewing the correspondence files for the Indian Wars years as well other records, such as those on weapon sales and disposal, and issues made to state militias.

Given these challenges, for those planning to do similar research, the author makes the following recommendations:

- Do as much work outside NARA as possible.
- Have work you can do while you're waiting for documents to be brought to you.
- Use a digital camera to photograph material that can't be photocopied (none of the volumes can be).
 - If you do plan to use a digital camera, practice in advance with minimal lighting. You cannot use a flash in the reading room.
 - Photograph the citation or pull slip.
 - Name your photo files using the document citation for future reference purposes.
- Keep good records on what records you have reviewed. You will probably have to look at them again.

CONCLUSION

Obviously this is only a superficial treatment of the research process and the records themselves. The author and other small arms researchers have found useful information in at least 45 separate record groups at the National Archives (and we have searched several other repositories as well). While much of this work has focused on finding serial numbers of small arms, these same records are, of course, important sources for information on the procurement, use, and disposal of these weapons. As should be apparent from the material presented here, research at the National Archives is neither quick nor easy, but the effort can be very rewarding and, at least in some cases, link us directly with historic events and individuals through serial number-specific identification of artifacts. See Figure 9 for another interesting example.

APPRECIATION

The author would like to thank researcher/author Paul Davies for the use of his photographs and his review of this article.

END NOTES

1. The one regional archives that should be specifically mentioned is the northeast regional facility in Waltham, MA. This facility contains the records of the Springfield Armory, which was a key organization in U.S. small arms for many years. While copies of many of the Armory's communications with the Chief of Ordnance (and some other records) can be found in the Chief of Ordnance files in Washington, others that may be critical to one's research can be reviewed only at Waltham.

2. An excellent example is RIP number 109, "Military Service Records at the National Archives," which was



Figure 9. The author recently researched a Remington New Model Army revolver for a friend and found that it had been issued to Sgt. John W. Mustion, Company K 16th Missouri Cavalry and that upon mustering out of service Sgt. Mustion paid \$8.00 to retain his revolver. In an extraordinary coincidence, another friend had found this photograph of Sgt. Mustion, with two Remington revolvers stuck in his belt, in the Civil War photograph collection at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center. (RG 98S-CWP 10.53, Sgt. John Woodson Mustion, Co. K, 16th Regt. Missouri Vol. Cav.)

authored by Trevor Plante, one of the best of the current military archivists.

3. Other records of potential interest are those of other staff organizations such as the Inspecting General as well as those of Regular Army mobile units. As an example of the latter, some weapon serial numbers for Indian Scouts were found in the files of Regular Army cavalry units.

4. It is interesting to note that the description of this entry that can be accessed through the NARA website is very difficult to find, confusing (even to an experienced researcher) and worthless in submitting a pull request since it doesn't actually give the entry number.

5. Multiple forms may be required depending on how the records are stored and the nature of the request. There are also limits on the number of boxes and/or volumes you can have out at one time.

6. You also have to go through security as you leave the reading room. This sometimes means waiting in line while

the guard laboriously fingers through each page of every person's documents making sure every page shows evidence of having been made on the Archives' copier and that no originals are included. You also go through a similar process as you leave the building. Recently a few people, some quite prominent, have been caught stealing documents and these inconveniences are just a fact of life.

7. Mr. Frank Mallory founded the Springfield Research Service in 1976 and under that organization published serial numbers, with associated summary data, that he and other researchers had found in official records. He then provided authentication letters and, where possible, copies of the documents for collectors having weapons with these serial numbers. In 2003 when Mr. Mallory could no longer continue with SRS due to ill health, the author took responsibility for the research service and continued with it for three and a half years. At that point the current owner, Mr. Wayne Gagner, assumed responsibility. Mr. Gagner can be reached through his website, usmartialarmscollector.com.

8. RG 393, Entry 18, Records of Ft. Stanton, NM.

9. The surviving records of these sales are 12 large volumes containing abstracts describing the contents of the sale, prices realized, purchasers, place and date of sale and the name of the officer in charge of the sale. The records are in RG 156, A1 finding aid, Entry 124. Interestingly, the records include individual sales to officers for their personal use. Sadly, only four weapon serial numbers were found in these records. However, the overall data is very interesting and useful.

10. Army regulations required officers responsible for government ordnance to make periodic returns, or reports, to the Chief of Ordnance showing the ordnance on hand and its condition. There are numerous instances in the Chief of Ordnance records where officers had their pay stopped for failing to submit these reports or not being able to properly account for their ordnance stores. Unfortunately these returns were viewed as temporary records and were not retained. Very few of them exist today and those that do exist usually survived because they happened to be filed with other records that were retained, such as correspondence files.

11. RG 156, Entry 5, Letters to the Secretary of War, Volume 13.

12. RG 156, Entry 6, Letters to Ordnance Officers, Volume 21 and Entry 21, Letters Received, T-435 and T-444.

13. RG 217, Entry 523B, Settled Accounts & Claims, Account #1924.

14. RG 156, Entry 21, T-461.

15. Almost all the revolver issues being made at this time were of Remington Army revolvers since a large stock of new Remingtons was on hand. As an example, the Commanding Officer of the 5th Cavalry specifically asked for Colts but was told they were not available. It is not clear why

some of the few serviceable Colts on hand were being sent for the 8th Cavalry.

16. RG 156, Entry 21, B-258.

17. Spanish-American War books are in Entry 116 of RG 94.

18. After the war the Adjutant General's office had company records consolidated and bound into the large volumes that exist today.

19. On February 3, 1865, the Commanding General of the Cavalry Corps, Army of the Middle Military Division (which included the Departments of Washington, Susquehanna, West Virginia and the Middle Department) issued General Order #8 requiring company commanders to "... make and keep property rolls of their respective companies. These rolls will have the names of each enlisted man in the company and an inventory of the arms and accoutrements issued to each man will be made and the same will be charged to him on the property rolls. In the charge the patent and number of the carbine and pistol will be recorded, as also the condition of all arms and accoutrements when issued. When a man is discharged, goes to hospital or on furlough he will turn in his arms etc., the condition and number of which will be compared with the charges of the property rolls where, if found correct, the charges will be checked off. If not, the deficiency or damage will be charged on the next muster roll or final statement..." This order was issued "... to prevent the frightful expense that is daily occurring to Government in the loss of arms and accoutrements..."

20. Serial numbers are where you find them in these records. The serial numbers may be in a list of names specifically made for the purpose or they may be annotations in an existing list of soldier names (the "Descriptive" list, a guard roster, etc.). In other cases the serial numbers are scattered throughout a given volume or in multiple volumes. For example, an entry noting a soldier deserted and took his weapon with him might include the serial number, although this is rare. In such cases the serial number notation may be in a section listing deserters but it may also be in the section providing individual soldier descriptions as a note beside the soldier's entry. Also, in most cases the specific make and model of the weapon is not given and, in fact, the list may include multiple makes of weapons (for example, both Colt and Remington Army revolvers). Some lists were obviously used over an extended period and have numerous additions, deletions, corrections and other notations. Errors were also made, such as calling the Colt Army model revolver a "Navy" pistol due to the naval engagement scene on the cylinder, calling a Sharps & Hankins carbine a "Sharps," or calling a Wesson carbine a "Smith & Wesson." If there is any question as to the type of arm issued, the regiment's quarterly ord-

nance reports ("returns") may be useful in their identification. These ordnance returns are available in the National Archives on microfilm. However, the reports were not always made or retained if they were made at all.

21. The Descriptive Book was a record kept by each company that included a brief description of each soldier (in case of his death, desertion, etc.), his term and place of enlistment, and often a notation of the clothing he was issued, bounty paid, etc.

22. This index is available at the downtown Washington Archives on microfilm. It is also available on the Internet at <http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss>, a National Park Service website for the "Civil War Soldiers & Sailors System."

23. These service records were compiled by the Adjutant General's Office well after the Civil War. They used the regimental books (especially the Descriptive Books), unbound regimental papers and muster rolls as their sources. See Musick, Michael P., "The Little Regiment: Civil War Units and Commands," *PROLOG*, Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration, Summer 1995, Vol. 27, No. 2.

24. Crawford, Samuel J. *Kansas in the Sixties*, 1911, reprinted by the Kansas Heritage Press in 1994. Brief outline histories of each Union regiment were privately produced by Frederick H. Dyer in his *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, and this work may provide the only existing history of a given regiment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Crawford, Samuel J., *Kansas in the Sixties*, 1911, reprinted by the Kansas Heritage Press in 1994. [This book is

essentially a regimental history of the 2nd Kansas Volunteer Infantry and 2nd Kansas Volunteer Cavalry.]

Davies, Paul J., *C.S. Armory Richmond*, privately published, 2000. [This work included extensive research of Confederate records at the National Archives.]

Graham, Ron; Kopec, John A; and Moore, C. Kenneth; *A Study of the Colt Single Action Army Revolver*, Taylor Publishing Company, Dallas, Texas, 1976.

Johnson, Paul D., *Civil War Cartridge Boxes of the Union Infantryman*, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, Lincoln, RI, 1999.

Musick, Michael P., "The Little Regiment: Civil War Units and Commands," *PROLOG*, Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration, Summer 1995, Vol. 27, No. 2. [This is an excellent article on regimental records.]

Pate, Charles W., *U.S. Handguns of World War II: The Secondary Pistols and Revolvers*, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, Lincoln, RI, 1998.

Pate, Charles W., *The Smith & Wesson American Model, in U.S. and Foreign Service*, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, Woonsocket, RI, 2006.

Plante, Trevor, *Military Service Records at the National Archives*, Reference Information Paper 109, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., 2007.

Thomas, Dean, S., *Round Ball to Rimfire, A History of Civil War Small Arms Ammunition*, in two volumes, Thomas Publications, Gettysburg, PA, 2002.

Thomson, Harry C. and Mayo, Lida, *The United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, The Ordnance Department: Procurement and Supply*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C., 1960 (reprinted in 1991).