

# Tracking Harpers Ferry Pistol Serial Numbers

By David Prawdzik

I first became interested in Harpers Ferry pistols when I was a teenager in the early 1970s. I picked up a copy of *The Gun Report* that was around the house and read the article about Ralph Arnold's pair of SN 351s which were pictured on the cover. That was one of the first known pairs to be discovered. I really admired that pair of pistols. My father had a US martial pistol collection. We decided to try to mate up a pair of our own Harpers Ferry pistols. My father got a copy of Sam Smith's list of serial numbers from Chet Parker. I have maintained the list since then.

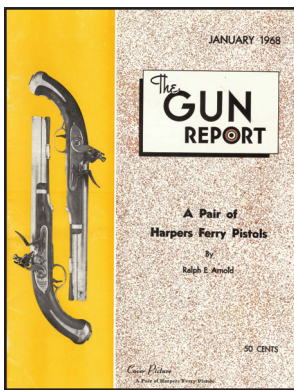


Figure 1. Cover of *Gun Report* magazine.

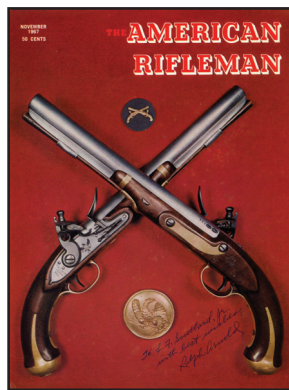


Figure 2. Cover of *Man at Arms* magazine.

We collected serial numbers wherever we could find them: gun shows, auction catalogs, dealers, museums, magazines and other collectors. In the mid-1990s we combined our list with a Massachusetts collector, and recently I included a list from Ohio to develop the list I have today.

My current total of identified serial numbers is 459 out of the 4096 pistols built. I am sure there are more numbers which I haven't located. I add about 5 new numbers to the list every year or two.

In 2001 my father and I were very fortunate to reunite a pair of pistols, serial number 687. It can be rewarding to track serial numbers. The excitement on the day we finally



Figure 3. Rough, but one of the pair numbered "687".



bought the other pistol to complete our pair was something I won't forget.

For obvious reasons of privacy, I will not publish my list. I will share information about serial numbers with collectors, so please feel free to ask me about serial numbers.

## SUMMARY OF EXISTING SERIAL NUMBERS

1805 dated	1 specimen serial M2
1806 dated	52
1807 dated	303
1808 dated	103
Total:	459 pistols (includes percussion and flint)

## Today's Survival Rate

Harpers Ferry Production	Identified Serial Numbers	Survival %
1805	1	
1806 245 pairs = 490 pistols	52	10.6%
1807 1343 pairs = 2686 pistols	303	11.2%
1808 460 pairs = 920 pistols	103	11.1%
Total: 2048 pairs = 4096 pistols	459	11.2%

Pairs of Harpers Ferry pistols are extremely rare. There are currently 7 known pairs and 5 of them are united. I am sure now that I made that statement, there will be more identified.

## 7 Identified pairs

61	1806 dated, Dr. Walter Peterson and Julia Auction, not united
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Figure 4. Second of the pair numbered "687".

- 351 1807 dated, Ralph Arnold
- 669 1807 dated, Murphy Collection and West Point Museum not united
- 687 1807 dated, Prawdzik Collection
- 1597 1808 dated, Meade Patterson Auction
- 1785 1808 dated, Dick Shea Collection
- 2038 1808 dated, anonymous collector—pistol and loose barrel

The 687 pair of pistols was fitted by hand and there is absolutely no interchangeability. The locks don't fit the other gun, the barrels won't fit the other wood and even the screws can't be switched. The condition of this pair varies quite a bit. The bottom pistol has seen considerably more use than the top gun.

	Top Pistol (inches)	Bottom Pistol (inches)
Barrel Lengths .....	10.08	10.03
Length of locks .....	4.814	4.798
Height of locks .....	.940	.948
Thickness of locks .....	.101	.104

*Pistol Production at Harpers Ferry  
(pairs received by serial number)*

- 1807:**  
**Month, number of pairs received, and Serial Numbers\***  
 January 29 pairs, serial numbers 246-274



Figure 5. The pair of pistols.

- February 78 pairs, serial numbers 275-352
- March 129 pairs, serial numbers 353-481
- April 165 pairs, serial numbers 482-646
- May 174 pairs, serial numbers 647-820
- June 111 pairs, serial numbers 821-931
- July 124 pairs, serial numbers 933-1055
- August 91 pairs, serial numbers 1056-1146
- September 118 pairs, serial numbers 1147-1264
- October 59 pairs, serial numbers 1265-1323
- November 151 pairs, serial numbers 1325-1474
- December 114 pairs, serial numbers 1475-1588

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Total 1343 pairs x 2 = 2686 pistols

- 1808:**  
**Month, number of pairs received, and Serial Numbers\***  
 January 150 pairs, serial numbers 1589-1738  
 February 150 pairs, serial numbers 1739-1888  
 March 160 pairs, serial numbers 1889-2048

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Total: 460 pairs x 2 = 920 pistols

Total production 4,096 pistols (in 1807) - 920 pistols (in 1808) = 490 pistols left for 1806 production, or 245 pairs in 1806.<sup>1</sup>

\*The serial number range by month, when cross referenced to my serial number list, shows there are many exceptions. There are lock dates and barrel serial numbers that are out of this sequence. I estimate the serial number range is about 80-85% accurate.

Harpers Ferry pistols were ordered in pairs, produced in pairs, received in pairs and shipped in pairs. Why aren't there more pairs in existence? The answer is pretty simple: they were issued 1 pistol per officer. These pairs of pistols were separated when issued.

*Pistol Production Costs at Harpers Ferry Arsenal*

Preparing iron with tile hammer, Smiths .....	.007½
Forging a barrel .....	.0.23
Boring a barrel .....	.0.10½
Grinding a barrel .....	.0.04
Brushing, filing and preparing a barrel for stockers .....	.0.14½
Forging a lock .....	.0.42
Filing a lock .....	.1.25
Hardening and polishing a lock .....	.0.30
Stocking a pistol .....	.1.45
Finishing a pistol .....	.0.62½
Forging a rib .....	.0.04½
Filing a rib .....	.0.20
Grinding a rib .....	.0.03



Figure 6.

Soldering a rib on a barrel . . . . .	.02
Casting a set of mounts . . . . .	.06
Filing a set of mounts . . . . .	.20
Forging a loop, trigger, slides, bridle pan, 2 side pins, Mask screw, cap screw and 2 guard screws . . . . .	.08
Filing a trigger . . . . .	.02
Filing a slide . . . . .	.01
Filing a breech pin, 2 side pins, cap screw, 2 guard screws, 1 mask screw . . . . .	.02½
Forging a breech . . . . .	.04
<u>Engraving a lock</u> . . . . .	.03½
Total . . . . .	\$5.40½

Note: This does not take into account materials and supplies. Samuel Annin was charging Kentucky \$16.50 per pair or \$8.25 each in 1811.  $\$8.25 - 5.40 = \$2.85$  for supplies and materials. Harpers Ferry was paying \$.25 each for pistol stocks in 1819 and packing and shipping cost \$.30 per pistol. This leaves \$2.57 for iron, steel and brass per pistol.<sup>2</sup>

*Production Workers at the Armory at Harpers Ferry, October 1807*

- 2 barrel welders, 147 musket barrels, 150 pistol barrels
- 3 lock forgers and 3 assistants, 470 locks forged
- 8 lock filers, 270 locks filed
- 11 stockers, 271 pistols stocked\*
- 5 finishers, 318 pistols finished\*\*
- \*Production ranged from 20 to 35.
- \*\*Production ranged from 40 to 90 pistols.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, I want to thank Lou Southard for his very generous help with this article. Lou kindly allowed me to share some of his fantastic research as it pertained to monthly production, pairs received, serial numbers by month, cost, and labor information.

I hope that the information in this article will stimulate more interest in Harpers Ferry serial numbers, and information sharing among collectors. Perhaps more pairs of pistols will be united in the future. I can be contacted at [dprawdzik@comcast.net](mailto:dprawdzik@comcast.net) regarding any questions on Harpers Ferry pistols.

REFERENCES

1. National Archives and Records Administration Records, Group 107, Entry Microfilm 222. Letters received by Secretary of War, unregistered series 1804-1807, Roll 2. Return of Arms Received in Store, by Samuel Annin, Storekeeper, Harpers Ferry.
2. National Archives and Records Administration Roll, Group 107, Entry Microfilm 221. Letters received by Secretary of War, Roll 12, Letter S 400, Stubblefield to Secretary of War. A statement of the prices given for manufacturing the different parts of a pistol.
3. National Archives and Records Administration Record, Group 107, Entry Microfilm 221. Letters received by Secretary of War, Main Series 1801-1870.