An example of a .44 caliber flat frame Dance revolver.

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.44 Caliber Flat Frame Dance Revolvers

By Flem Rogers

When presenting new material on an old subject, often the research of past authors is forgotten or misconstrued. Credit must be given to the pioneers of our efforts. William Albaugh, Claude Fuller, and Richard Steuart first presented material on Confederate arms and helped countless collectors. Recently, Bill Gary and Gary Wiggins completed works and continued our education. To all of these authors, we owe our gratitude for the knowledge and savings to our pocketbooks they provided or stimulated. Any mistakes made in this article are my own. I challenge any future researchers to correct those mistakes and present their findings to enlighten future collectors.

This article is about .44 caliber flat frame Dance revolvers. Dance pistols in .36 caliber and those having recoil shields will not be discussed. All observations are my own from firsthand experience and these two rarer variations would require further study with examples in hand (Figure 1).

The Dance family began their immigration to Texas in the early 1840s from North Carolina. Their name is found on the 1846 Tax Census for Brazoria County.[1] The next record of their location is at the John Sweeney plantation where they worked and lived as carpenters.[2] They were apparently very successful in this venture and purchased several lots of land in the town of Columbia (now known as East Columbia).[3] The photos I found show two of the three Dance brothers; pictures of John have not been found (Figure 2).

Columbia at this time was a booming town (Figure 3). It was established in 1824 and the first Capitol of Texas was later located nearby in West Columbia. Columbia was the largest river port in Texas (Figure 4). It is the only town that

Figure 1. (A) Unknown Confederate soldier with Dance revolver. (B) Geronimo holding a Dance pistol.

can claim that Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, and many other Texas notables walked its streets. Home at one time to two newspapers and three schools, it now has 19 homes on the historic registry and

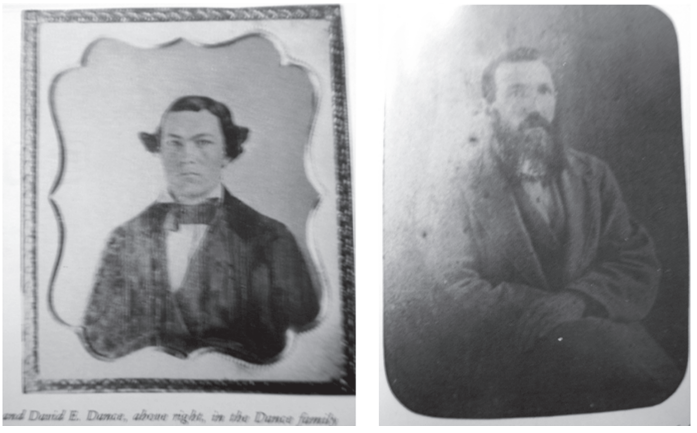

Figure 2. David and George Dance (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).

Figure 3. Main Street, East Columbia, Texas ca. 1870 (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).

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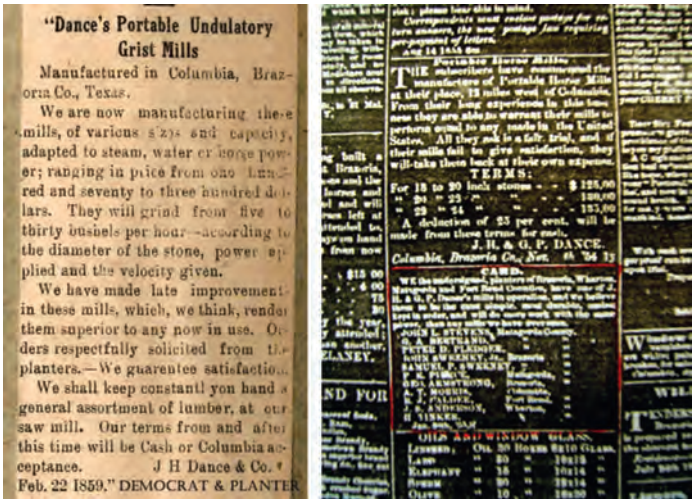
Figure 4. Commerce in East Columbia (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).



"Dance's Portable Undulatory Grist Mills

Manufactured in Columbia, Brazoria Co., Texas.

We are now manufacturing these mills, of various sizes and capacity, adapted to steam, water or horse power; ranging in price from one hundred and seventy to three hundred dollars. They will grind from five to thirty bushels per hour—according to the diameter of the stone, power applied and the velocity given.

We have made late improvements in these mills, which, we think, render them superior to any now in use. Orders respectfully solicited from the planters.—We guarantee satisfaction.

We shall keep constantly on hand a general assortment of lumber, at our saw mill. Our terms from and after this time will be Cash or Columbia acceptance. J H Dance & Co.

Feb. 22 1859." DEMOCRAT & PLANTER

TERMS:

For 18 to 20 inch stones - - - $ 125,00

" 24 " 25 " - - - 150,00

" 28 " 34 " - - - 175,00

A deduction of 25 per cent. will be made from these terms for cash.

J. H. & G. P. DANCE.

Columbia, Brazoria Co., Nov. 4th '58 13

Figure 5. Early newspaper advertisement (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).

more historical markers than streets. The Dance brothers served the needs of the paddle wheelers and numerous sugar mills that lined the river of Austin's Texas by establishing a steam shop (machine shop) and a lumber mill on the banks of the Brazos River.

One of their earliest ventures was marketing grist mills to the surrounding plantations (Figure 5). A newspaper advertisement in the Columbia *Democrat and Planter* shows their prices and an endorsement from plantation owners in the area.[4] In addition, George P. Dance was issued patent number 28,534 on May 29, 1860, for a hanging millstone. When the current owners of the Dance home were landscaping, a round stone that a birdbath sat on was uncovered (Figure 6). After cleaning the stone, a round hole and the grind lines were evident. Figure 7 shows the Dance home in 1880 and how it looks today. The State of Texas erected a marker for the pistol factory site (Figure 8). The buildings were constructed of wood (Figure 9) with the boiler room encased in handmade brick. The remains are shown in Figure 10.

From the firing of the first guns of the War of Northern Aggression, the needs of the South were evident. The Dance's initially provided ground foodstuffs and carpentry work for the South, but they eventually decided to manufacture pistols. Without receiving a loan from any governmental

Figure 6. Stone base for a bird bath at the Dance home.

Figure 7. Dance home (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).

Figure 8. Monument and plaque to the Dance shop.

Figure 9. The Dance factory, then and today.

Figure 10. Remnants of the Dance factory boiler room.

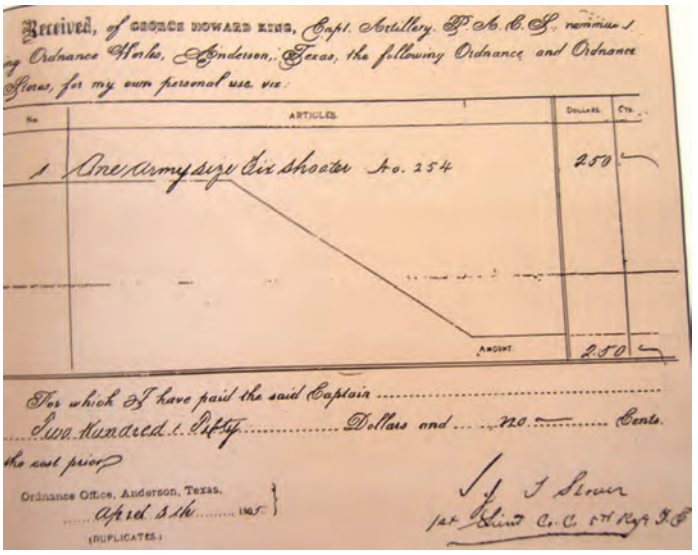


Figure 11. Receipt for a Dance pistol for $250.00 (Photo courtesy of Brazoria County Historical Museum).

authority, production began on or around July 1862.[5] Production continued in Columbia until November 1863.[6] Whether the threat of invasion from Union forces or the purchase of the pistol works by the Confederate Ordinance Works caused them to move to Anderson, Texas, is not known. A letter dated June 6, 1864, mentions resumed production with the completion of 46 revolvers (Figure 11).[7] On April 5, 1865, a receipt was issued to Lt. John Stover from the commanding officer of the Ordinance Works in Anderson selling him a pistol with the serial number 254.[8] That would give us the estimation that at least serial numbers 208 and above were made in Anderson (Figure 12). Although they were enrolled in the Confederate army, members of the Dance family were considered exempt from military service while they continued producing the pistols. This is a truly unique situation that illustrates the urgency of providing pistols for the war effort west of the Mississippi during that time. At the conclusion of the war, the Dance brothers returned to Columbia and resumed their lumber and carpentry business. Total production is estimated to have been approximately 350 to 450 guns.

Figure 12. Dance pistols with serial numbers 17 and 247.

The Dance revolvers discussed here are characterized by having no recoil shields and being .44 calibers. Barrels from these revolvers are mostly round with a few found to be octagonal in the higher serial number range (Figure 13). Back straps and trigger guards are mostly brass with some back straps found in iron in the higher serial number range. Serial number 247 on my display shows both the octagonal barrel and iron back strap. Trigger guards are thick and thin, round and square, and have been used to identify production periods. This can be a fallacy as this photo shows (Figure 14). There is a difference in trigger guard lengths to the barrel lug with very early pistols being much shorter (Figure 15). Hammers vary in contour. These differences occur during the time of production, whether manufactured early or later in production (Figure 16). Most pieces are hand fitted to a large degree. Although some parts such as frames are relatively uniform in size, the differences in other parts have confused many collectors. Often they are compared in size to a Colt Dragoon; this is not a true comparison (Figure 17). The difference in cylinder size is very evident (Figure 18). As a young collector, I became frustrated with collectors who would give a cursory glance at a Dance pistol, heft it once or twice, and proclaim it to be correct. Some of them knew the difference, many did not.

One of the misconceptions is that Dance pistol frames are made from railroad ties. In late 1862, Confederate Major General John Magruder was posted to Texas. One of his many concerns was coastal defense; however, no stone was available to reinforce the walls. Many Texas artillery emplacements were built entirely of sand. His arrival coincided with the beginning of the pistol factory. Also at that time, railroad lines along the Texas coast began to be stripped of their ties and replaced with wood.[9] Where did that steel go? A recent discovery in the Springfield, Massachusetts *Springfield Republican* dated December 14, 1863, gives us an answer. In an article titled "More Success in Texas," it states ". . . Fort Esperanza, Pass Cavallo, Matagorda Bay. December 2. At 1 a.m. November 30th, the rebels blew up the magazines of this fort, having evacuated two hours before. It is a very large and complete work, bomb-proof, and partially encased with railroad iron." General Magruder used the railroad rails to reinforce the fort walls; therefore, the Dance gun makers did not use the railroad ties to make their pistols.

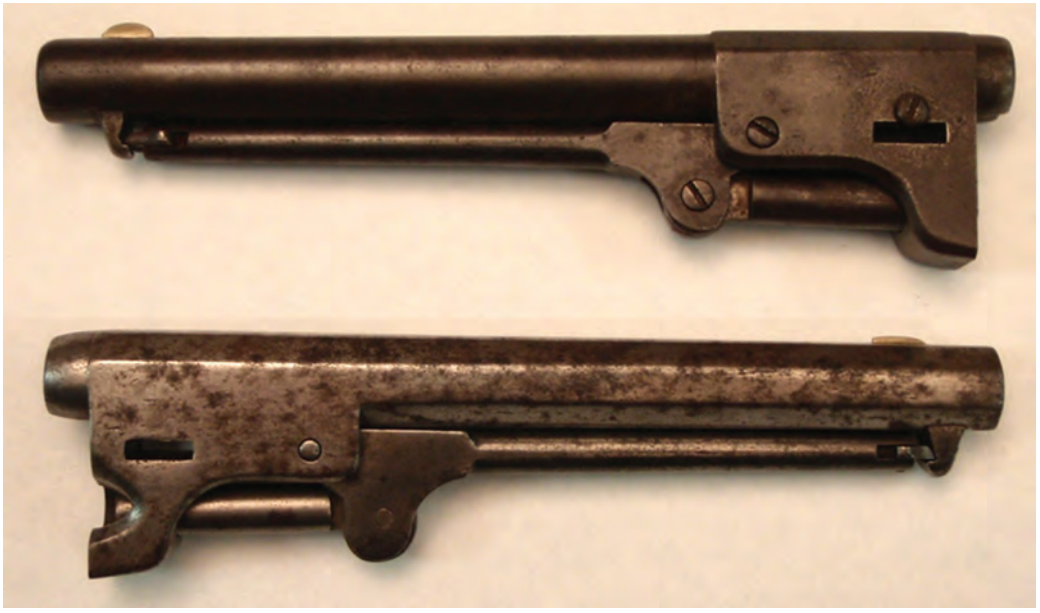


Figure 13. Round and octagonal Dance barrels.

Figure 14. Dance trigger guards.

The value and rarity of these revolvers has given rise to many being younger than the Civil War. What can help a collector ascertain the authenticity of a hand fitted revolver made in the backwoods of Texas? I'll give you a few "tells" here, but not all I have discovered: Look at the

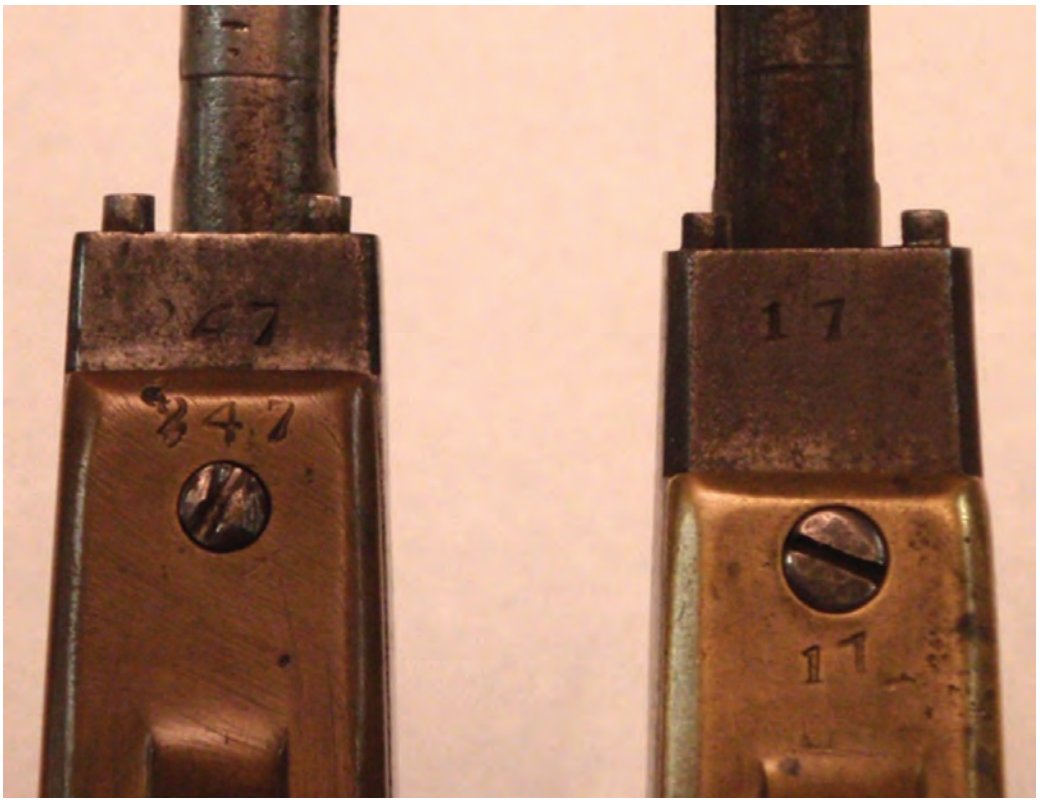


Figure 15. Differences in two Dance trigger guard lengths.

Figure 16. Two Dance hammer profiles.

frame size (Figure 19). Dance pistol frames usually measure 83 to 85 mm along a line from the barrel lug to the back of the frame above the trigger guard. The pawl that rotates the cylinder generally has a hand cut alleviation on the face of the frame to allow it to move the cylinder (Figure 20). Under the cylinder pin, on the frame, are the trigger guard screw, the trigger and locking bolt spring screw, and the locking bolt for the cylinder. On a Dance revolver the trigger and locking bolt spring screw are set at an angle to the inside edge of the locking bolt (Figure 21).

I hope that these small bits of information will not allow misrepresentation of these pistols to occur. I would also like to thank fellow member Dick Salzer for encouraging me to make this presentation.

Figure 17. A Colt Dragoon (left) and a Dance pistol (right).

Figure 18. A Colt Dragoon cylinder (left) and a Dance pistol cylinder (right).

Figure 19. A Dance frame measuring 84 mm.

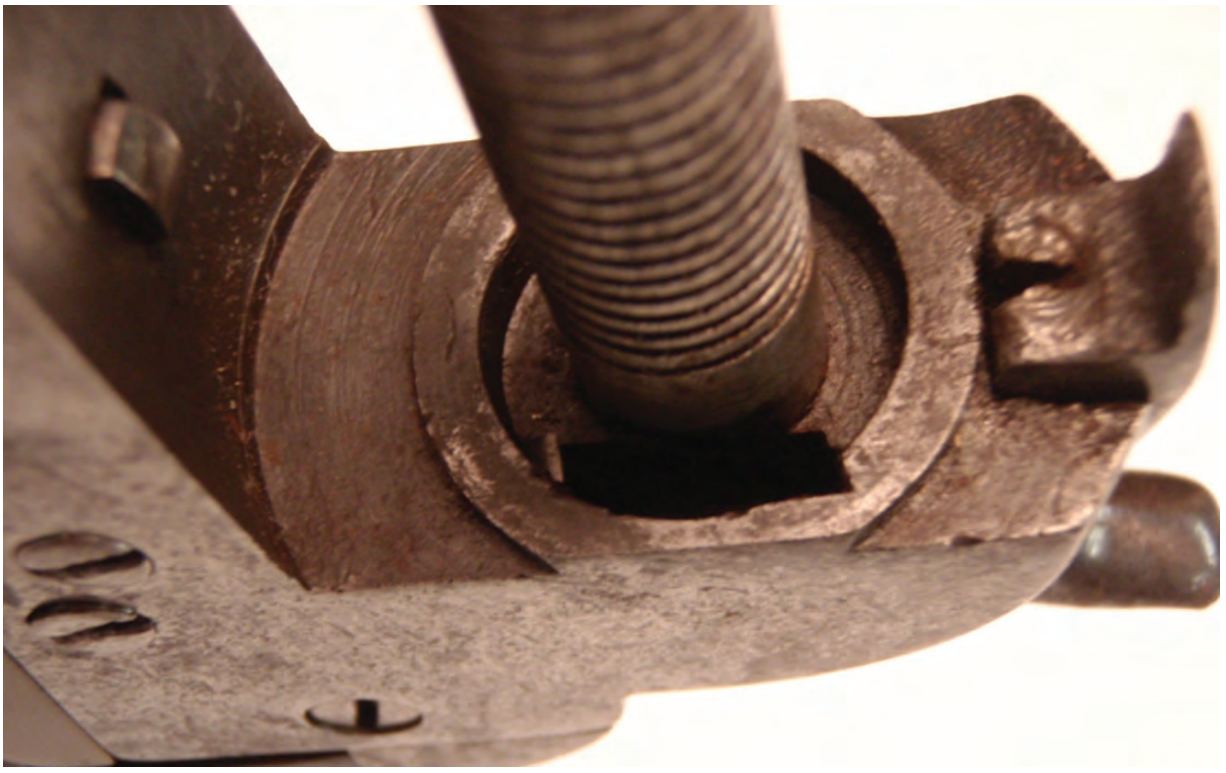


Figure 20. Pawl cut on a Dance pistol.

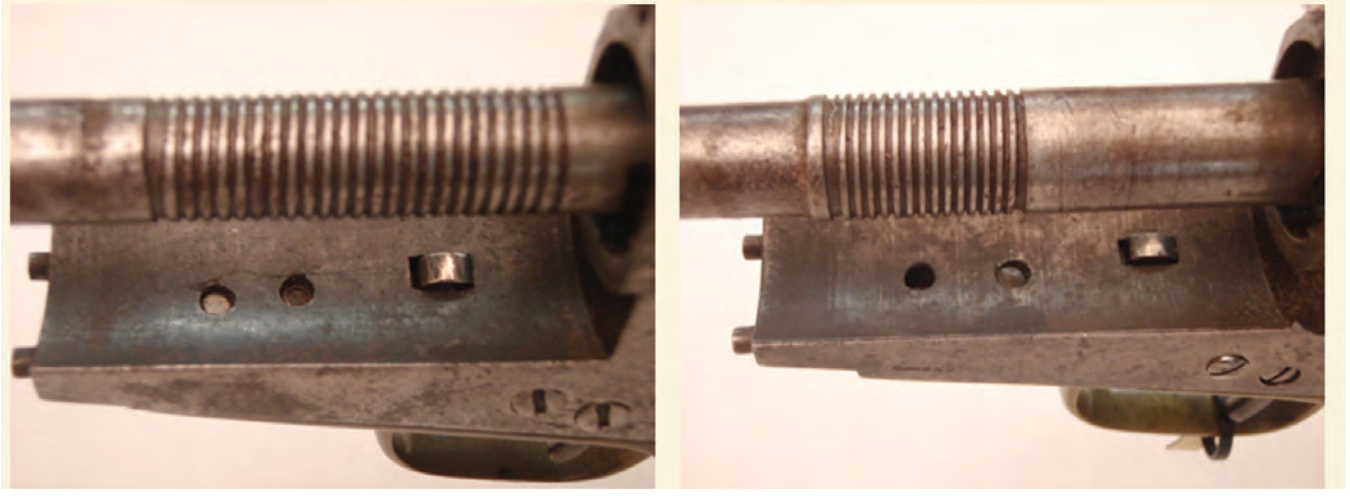


Figure 21. Dance pistol screw holes (left) compared to those of a Colt Dragoon (right).

END NOTES

1. Texas Census' records 1820–1890.
2. 1850 United States Federal Census.
3. Brazoria County Deeds and Records Book, p 22.
4. Columbia *Democrat and Planter* Oct. 9,1855.
5. Mattie and George Duff letters, Confederate Research Center, Hill Junior College, Hillsboro, Texas.
6. Bill Gary, *Confederate Revolvers*, Taylor Publishing Co., Dallas, Texas, 1987, p 61.
7. Lewis J. Wilson letter, Confederate Research Center, Hill Junior College, Hillsboro, Texas.
8. Gary Wiggins, *Dance & Brothers, Texas Gunmakers of the Confederacy,* Moss Publications, Orange, VA, 1986, p 96.
9. James Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County, Texas*, Texian Press, Waco, Texas, 1975, p 215.