



"The Old Pistol Factory" photos by J.E. Helmerich in 1966.



JAMES REID'S CATSKILL KNUCKLEDUSTERS

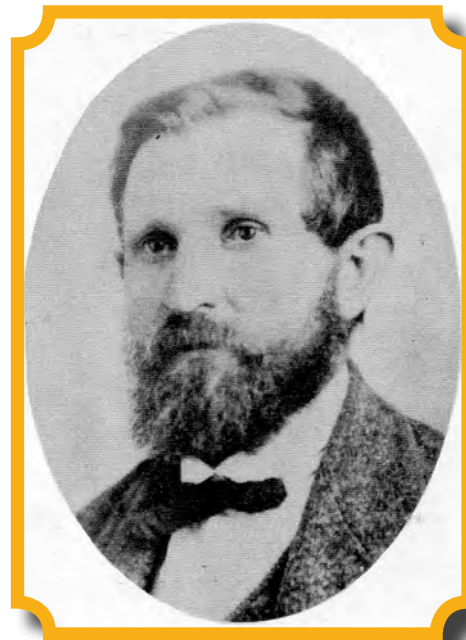
by James Reid

On a bright July day in 1966, J. F. (Buzz) Helmerich drove to Catskill, New York, and went west on Cauterskill Creek Road. The road followed Cauterskill Creek upstream, and about 3 miles out of town he found what he was looking for: a two-story brick building standing adjacent to an abandoned multi-story gristmill. With the property owners' permission and camera in hand, he surveyed the entire area, taking photographs of the remains of what the older locals called "The Old Pistol Factory." The only sounds were the wind, the rush of the creek, and creaking boards. Continuing his inspection, the property owners allowed him inside the large two-story house just across the creek. More photos reveal a house and interior probably little changed from the time it was constructed. The factory, mill, and house were built by James Reid, pistol maker, almost 100 years earlier.

Today, the brick pistol manufacturing building and the gristmill are gone. The house still stands, but when I visited the property several years ago the owner was reluctant to let visitors on the property. The mill foundations and sluice runs, however, are still visible in the creek.

Normally you save "credits" until the end, but in this circumstance two gentlemen contributed the majority of what we know about James Reid: Sam Smith, now deceased, and former member of AS of AC, Taylor Bowen, recently deceased. Little is known about Reid other than public records, some family correspondence, and anecdotal information from relatives. No factory records survived. Sam Smith had found a playmate of the Reid children named Bert Beardsley from the Catskill area. Beardsley directed him to Thomas L. Egnor, a brother-in-law. Through Egnor, Smith located Charles T. Reid, a grandson of James Reid, Jr., who made available what letters and papers he had with his memories. If not for Smith and Bowen, what little history we have might have vanished.

According to Sam Smith's research, the earliest records of this branch of the Reid clan place them in or near the Town of Carrick-Fergus, County Antrim, Ireland. They were known locally as "Gentlemen Farmers," lawyers,



James Reid (1827 – 1898)

and clergy. The James Reid of our concern was born near Belfast, Ireland, on April 9, 1827, to James and Rebecca Reid. Records indicate that James' father operated a small factory in Belfast that manufactured "fine woolens."

James the elder died when James was about 10 years old, and 2 years later his mother also died. The grandfather continued to operate the factory and it is assumed that the younger James worked at the factory and there gained valuable mechanical skills. Around 1846 James, an Irish Protestant, moved to friendlier Scotland. Two years later he married Agnes Williamson.

During the 1850s, the couple lived near Glasgow, Scotland. The area was experiencing significant industrial growth. Cotton and wool production was on the increase and the machinery of the industrial revolution combined with James' mechanical skills must have provided him opportunity. Records indicate that he had established himself as an "iron turner" — a machinist in modern terms. A daughter, Annie Reid, was born to the couple in 1855. She was the fifth child born to them, but the only one to survive beyond infancy up to that point.

In 1856, economic hard times hit the Glasgow area and

numerous factories closed. Reid had relatives in America and at that point they looked for a better future in the United States. At this point in his life, James was believed to be a successful businessman. He came to America with money in his pocket and as a skilled machinist. His wife was also pregnant with their sixth child during the voyage in 1857.

They arrived in America, and some weeks later James Jr. was born on March 30, 1857. They moved near relatives in New Jersey for several years. During this period Agnes died and James Sr. remarried Margaret Patterson. After having gotten a feel for business in the New Jersey area, the couple moved to New York City and in 1862 a city directory first notes the "James Reid Manufactory" at 167 E. 26th Street, New York City, New York.

No records exist showing what products Reid manufactured at this location, but at some point Reid decided there was a market for pocket pistols. The idea may have been original, or it may have been suggested to him by William Irving or James Fitch. Both men were agents for Reid, marketing his pistols. Regardless of the source, he manufactured pocket pistols.

The New York pistols, and probably other manufacturing trade, again established Reid as a successful businessman. These designs and their story are for another day when that part of my collection is complete.

In 1864, Reid moved the factory out of New York City. Family recollections suggest that his 9-year-old daughter, Annie, was suffering from an illness that doctors attributed to the poor environment of the city — poor sanitation, air pollution, and questionable drinking water. A move to the country would greatly benefit her health. It has also been suggested that Reid and his employees witnessed the 1863 New York City Civil War draft riots from the factory windows. Whatever the reason, Reid searched north up the Hudson River and located an ideal spot for a factory just outside Catskill, New York.

The property had been the site of numerous water-driven factories dating back to the 1600s. The first recorded owner of the property with a sawmill was a Dutch owner named Van Bergen. The most recent owners at the time, the Moore family, operated a paper mill at the site which had burned the previous year. The site was next to Klein's Falls on Cauterskill Creek and offered several advantages. The property was relatively inexpensive. Numerous mills

were idle because the Civil War had not provided the anticipated increase in business expected. Klein's Falls provided a good power source. The location was close to the Hudson River providing good transportation for incoming materials and outbound finished product. In 1864, Reid purchased the mill site for \$ 3000 giving Moore a \$1000 deposit and agreeing to a mortgage with interest.

Reid would have had to clear the site of the burned paper mill. A two-story brick structure measuring 25' by 50' was constructed as the manufacturing facility. A mill measuring 25' by 50' was constructed adjacent to the brick building that provided power for the pistol factory and for a gristmill. At some point family records indicate that a steam generator was added to provide power during periods of low water or when ice choked the stream.

In addition to the factory, Reid built a large house for himself and relatives that still stands today. Because of its size, it would have been regarded as the home of a successful individual. Moreover, it appears that he also built additional houses for employees and a granary for storage near the mill.

It appears that Reid began working on a new design for his pistols before he left New York City. The new design would be a small vest-pocket or pants-pocket revolver that could be used both as a pistol or a weapon of self-defense. How he came up with the design is sheer speculation. Pistols, particularly single-shot pistols, were routinely used as clubs after the round had been discharged. He chose the term knuckleduster to describe the new design and the Oxford Dictionary definition reads: "A metal guard worn over the knuckles in fighting to increase the effect of the blows."

Taylor Bowen's research of serial numbers indicates that several of the new Knuckleduster's were actually produced in New York City, probably as prototypes. Reid's serial numbering system beginning with his first production revolvers in New York City continues chronologically through the entire span of production regardless of the model. The prototypes appear to be few in number and land between runs of the Model 4 revolvers he was making in New York City. Prototype Knuckleduster serial number 3454 was made before the New York Model 4A revolver serial number 3462.

It appears that he continued to operate in New York City after the purchase of the Catskill property. During this

time, Reid conceived of and sought a US patent for the new Knuckleduster. After filing for a patent on September 18, 1865, and revising it due to rejection by the Patent Office, he was finally issued Patent No. 51,752 on December 26, 1865. The first significant point was a sliding cylinder lock that acted as a safety latch.

The pistol had an odd number of chambers in the cylinder, and when the latch was engaged, the hammer rested between chambers. The second point was a design feature that connected the spur trigger to the bottom of the grip to form a metal “bow.” It would protect the little finger in a fight. It was a unique design for its time.

The .22 caliber Knuckleduster production was begun in Catskill in 1868.



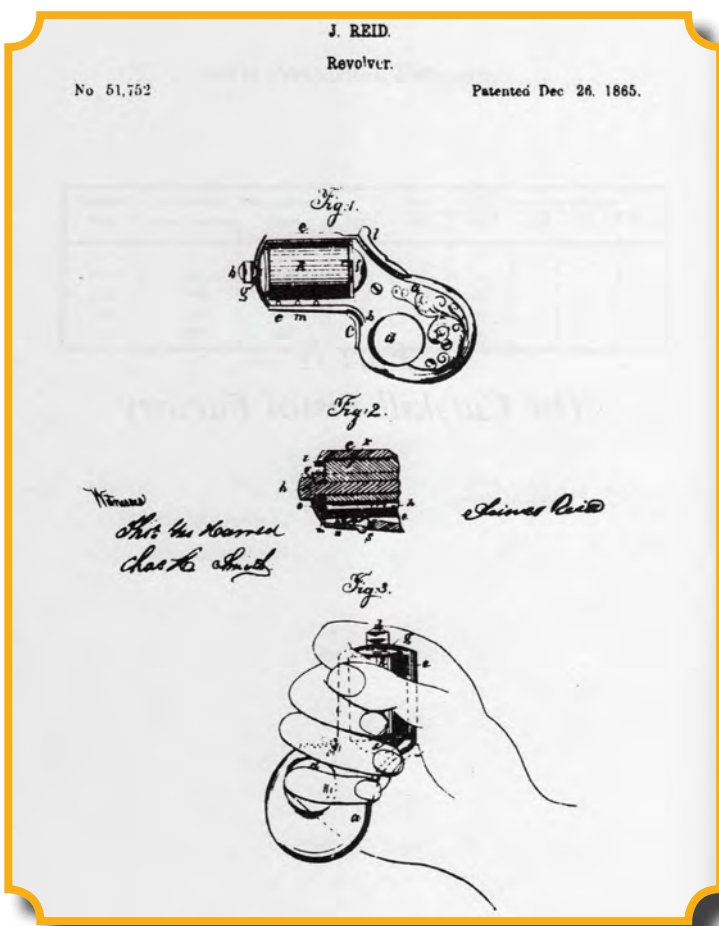
Reid .22 caliber Knuckleduster



**Specifications for the
.22 caliber Knuckleduster**

- Overall length:** 4-1/4"
- Caliber:** .22 rimfire (short)
- Cylinder:** 1-7/16" long, round with seven chamber (not rifled)
- Hammer:** Birdhead style
- Frame:** Brass with and then without safety latch or Iron without safety latch
- Finish:** Silver or nickel (some blued cylinders exist)
- Estimated period of manufacture:** 1868 through 1882
- Estimated production:** 10,000+
- Markings:** MY FRIEND on left rear of bottom strap or MY FRIEND PATD DEC. 26, 1865 on left side of top cylinder strap.

It was a relatively simple single action design. The hammer had a rounded, “birdshead” shape that wouldn’t get snagged coming out of a coat or pants pocket. The overall



Patent Diagram



**Reid .22 caliber Knuckleduster
Close up of the disassembled Reid .22
with inset of markings.**

design resulted in smooth surfaces that wouldn't gouge the hand if used in a fight. The cylinder was removed to load cartridges and the cylinder pin could be used to knock out spent cartridges. The original design had a cylinder pin that had right-hand threads that caused the pin to loosen as the cylinder rotated. Around serial number 6000 Reid changed the cylinder pin rotation to left hand threads. This solved the problem of the pin loosening, but resulted in many broken pins. Owners unaware of this backward threading would use pliers and wrenches to remove it and snap the pin.

The frames were engraved and this improved the overall look of the weapon. It softened the flat sides and sharp edges and often covered up small casting imperfections. According to family records, James' son, James Jr., was responsible for some of the engraving between 1874 to 1882. James Jr. seems to have inherited his father's mechanical skills and artistic talent. He eventually had several patents to his name and worked in the railroad industry in later years.

Reid removed the safety latch after about 4 years. No reason has been found for this and it may well have been an effort to reduce costs. Frames that already had the slot for the safety were still used and the slot was filled with a brass insert. Iron frames replace the brass frames late in the life of the product. It may have been an issue of fashion — brass was out of style — or for economy. It made for a more durable frame.

The .22 Knuckleduster was the most popular of all the Catskill Reids. The total production is estimated to be more than 10,000. In 1873, an ad for a .22-caliber Knuckleduster shows the price, including 100 cartridges, at \$10.00. By 1876, the retail price dropped to between \$8.00 and \$8.50.

After 2 years of production of the .22 model, Reid introduced larger versions of the same design. In 1870, there were two production runs of about 100 .41-caliber Knuckledusters and production was started on the .32-caliber Knuckleduster. Both were five-shot models and early versions had the patented safety device. Both models provided access to the mainspring through the bottom of the frame. The cylinder chambers of the .41 caliber were rifled, probably in an attempt to improve accuracy.

The .32 caliber seems to have sold fairly well and pro-

duction continued until the plant closed. The estimated total production was around 3000 units. It was a "scaled-up" version of the .22 and it, like the .22, had the safety latch dropped and had an iron frame near the end of production. As with the .22, the finish was nickel or silver. It was priced around \$12.00 for the weapon and 50 .32 cartridges.

The .41-caliber Knuckleduster was heavy, awkward, and probably difficult to shoot. It was inconvenient to carry in a pocket. It doesn't appear to have ever have been advertised and lack of demand seems to have relegated it to about 150 units.



Reid .41 caliber Knuckleduster



**Specifications for the
.41 caliber Knuckleduster**

- Overall length:** 4-1/4"
- Caliber:** .41 rimfire
- Cylinder:** 1-11/16" long, round with five chambers (rifled)
- Hammer:** Birdhead style
- Frame:** Brass with safety latch
- Finish:** Silver with blued cylinder
- Estimated period of manufacture:** 1870 through 1872
- Estimated production:** 150
- Markings:** J.REID'S DERRINGER / PATD. DEC 26, 1865 on two lines on the top cylinder strap.



Reid .32 caliber Knuckleduster

**Specifications for the
.32 caliber Knuckleduster**

Overall length: 4 ¾"
Caliber: .32 rimfire
Cylinder: 1-11/16" long, round with five chambers (not rifled)
Hammer: Birdhead style
Frame: Brass with and then without safety latch or Iron without safety latch
Finish: Silver or nickel (some blued cylinders exist)
Estimated period of manufacture: 1870 through 1882
Estimated production: 3,100
Markings: MY FRIEND PATD DEC. 26, 1865 on left side of top cylinder strap.

Business was rolling along well for the Reid until 1873. The Panic of 1873 sent production from an estimated 1400 units per year in 1872 to an estimated 700 units in 1873. This international depression resulted from post-Franco-Prussian War economic trauma in Europe, the bust in the US railroad boom after the Civil War, huge property losses because of the Chicago and Boston fires, strains on bank reserves, and rampant over-speculation around the world. It would drag on for many, many years.

Records indicate that Reid reduced staff in response to the lack of sales. His nephew, James B. Reid, was one of the employees he let go and he became a butcher, eventually opening his own butcher shop in Catskill. James Sr. mortgaged the family home. As finances continued to press his operation he sold the home to his son-in-law who assumed the mortgage obligation. He also mortgaged the factory and the gristmill to pay back loans to his brother Samuel. Suit was finally filed against him for non-payment of the mortgages against the factory and gristmill

and the plaintiffs bought the property at auction. This, however, didn't put Reid out of business. No one else wanted to occupy the factory and mill, so the new owners allowed Reid to continue to do business and make rental payments. He hung on.

During this period, it appears Reid looked for ways to improve sales. His initial attempt was to take the standard .32 Knuckleduster and add a 3" barrel, then later add a 1 ¾" barrel. The change might have been made to improve accuracy — not necessary for a weapon designed for close range work — or it may have been a marketing ploy. Regardless of the intent, it didn't work. There was little or no demand for the slightly modified Knuckleduster, and an estimated 350 units were all that were built.



Reid .32 caliber Knuckleduster with a 3" barrel

**Specifications for the
.32 caliber Knuckleduster with a 3" barrel**

Overall length: 6 ¾"
Caliber: .32 rimfire
Barrel: 3", round
Cylinder: 1-3/16" long, round with five chambers (not rifled)
Hammer: Birdhead style
Frame: Brass
Finish: Silver plated frame with blued barrel and cylinder
Estimated period of manufacture: 1875
Estimated production: 250
Markings: MY FRIEND PATD DEC. 26, 1865 on left side of top cylinder strap.



Reid .32 caliber Knuckleduster with a 1 3/4" barrel.

Specifications for the

.32 caliber Knuckleduster with a 1 3/4" barrel

Overall length: 5-1/2"
Caliber: .32 rimfire
Barrel: 1-3/4", round
Cylinder: 1-3/16" long, round with five chambers (not rifled)
Hammer: Birdhead style
Frame: Brass
Finish: Nickel plated
Estimated period of manufacture: 1877
Estimated production: 100
Markings: MY FRIEND PATD DEC. 26, 1865 on left side of top cylinder strap. MY FRIEND on top of barrel and on cylinder

During the next 2 years, Reid designed and introduced six new models. He was fighting an uphill battle to survive. His major competitors were all better financed: Colt, Smith & Wesson, and Remington, just to name a few. They could purchase raw materials in large quantities and manufacturer in mass. Their marketing and distribution networks were superior. There were also a host of other "hangers-on," just like Reid, struggling to survive in a market marked by a glut of arms left over from the Civil War. The production of his standard .22 and .32 Knuckledusters kept the business barely afloat.

Reid began production of an all-metal revolver marked "REID'S DERRINGER." It was still a single-action .41-caliber pocket pistol and it was heavily engraved. The new product had a more typical pistol grip and a spur trigger. The barrel was octagonal and the cylinder still had to be removed to load. The cylinder pin had a more convenient release under the barrel. The heavy engraving gave it an elegant look and it was probably expensive to produce. Ultimately, it was unsuccessful and only an estimated 75 were built.



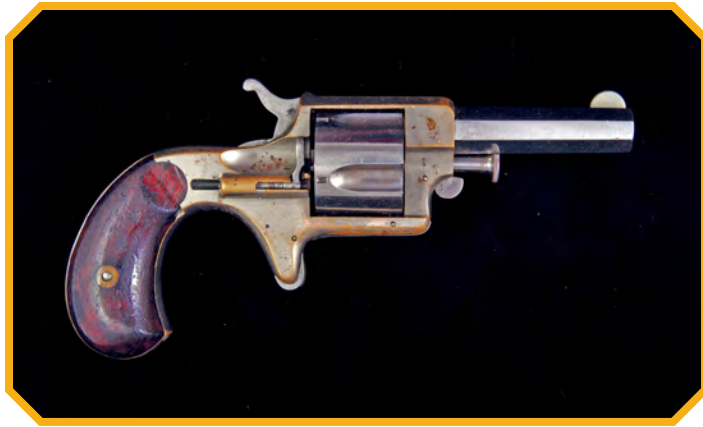
.41 caliber all-metal REID'S DERRINGER

Specifications for the

.41 caliber all-metal REID'S DERRINGER

Overall length: 6-1/4"
Caliber: .41 rimfire
Barrel: 2-3/4", octagon
Cylinder: 15/16" long, fluted with 5 chambers
Hammer: Spur type
Frame: Iron
Finish: Nickel plated
Estimated period of manufacture: 1882
Estimated production: 75
Markings: REID'S DERRINGER on top of the barrel

The lack of success of the more expensive all-metal REID'S DERRINGER must have persuaded Reid to modify the design and reduce the cost. This model would be identified as a .41-caliber "Extractor" model. The DERRINGER model was modified and wooden grips replaced the expensively engraved metal grips. At the same time, he had been working on a feature he must have felt could add sales appeal to the weapon. It was a cartridge extraction device that would make it easier to remove spent cartridges from the cylinder. The device placed a small knife-edge under the lip of the cartridge and a lever allowed the cartridge to be more easily removed. The spring-loaded device also served as a loading gate marking the first Catskill pistol to be loaded without removing the cylinder. Unfortunately, the design had a serious flaw. When the cylinder was removed for cleaning, the entire small extractor mechanism fell out — in pieces. The entire estimated production was 125 units and apparently had no market impact.



Reid .41 caliber Extractor Revolver

Specifications for the
.41 caliber Extractor Revolver

Overall length: 6-3/4"
Caliber: .41 rimfire
Barrel: 2-3/4", octagon
Cylinder: 1-1/16" long, fluted with 5 chambers
Hammer: Spur type
Frame: Iron with loading gate and extractor
Finish: Nickel plated
Estimated period of manufacture: 1882
Estimated production: 125
Markings: REID'S EX'TR on the top of the barrel

At first glance, his next attempt, Reid's New Model .32-caliber pistol looks just like a Colt New Line .32 revolver — and many other "suicide specials" of the era. The design may well have been a desperate attempt to sell pistols. Reid incorporated an improved, redesigned extractor device that didn't fall out when the cylinder was removed for cleaning. The New Model was also a non-starter and only 250 were estimated to have been made.



Reid .32 caliber New Model Extractor Revolver

Specifications for the
.32 caliber New Model Extractor Revolver

Overall length: 6-3/4"
Caliber: .32 rimfire
Barrel: 2-1/2", round
Cylinder: 1-3/16" long, fluted with 5 chambers
Hammer: Spur type
Frame: Iron with loading gate and extractor
Finish: Nickel plated
Estimated period of manufacture: 1882 - 83
Estimated production: 250
Markings: REID'S NEW MODEL .32 on the top of the barrel, REID'S / SHELL / EXTRACTOR in three lines below the extractor on the frame.

The last gasp was the production of Reid's New Model .32 / My Friend Knuckleduster. In 1883, Reid combined the old Knuckleduster design that had served him so well over the years with the New Model design. It may have been the best looking model he produced at the Catskill factory. To my eye, the original Knuckledusters were clumsy looking (although efficiently designed). The All-Metal version looked awkward and the New Model was a blatant copy of the Colt. This model was engraved and it looked stylish. It had all-metal grips and Reid dropped the shell extractor, probably because of the added cost. It was, unfortunately, unsuccessful with only about 360 made.



Reid New Model .32 MY FRIEND

**Specifications for the
New Model .32 MY FRIEND**

Overall length: 6"
Caliber: .32 rimfire
Barrel: 2", round
Cylinder: 1-3/16" long, fluted with 5 chambers
Hammer: Spur type
Frame: Iron with loading gate and extractor
Finish: Nickel plated
Estimated period of manufacture: 1883
Estimated production: 360
Markings: REID'S NEW MODEL .32 / MY FRIEND
on the side of the barrel

The economic climate in 1883 was one of sluggish business and tough times. Between 1873 and 1883, Sharps Rifle Company closed and Whitney Armory was offered for sale. Numerous other arms manufacturers reorganized or were absorbed by competitors. After 15 years in Catskill, Reid was in considerable debt to family friend James Bird. These loans had been arranged through James Jr. His son-in-law Wilson still owned the house and some adjoining property and it was deeded over to Mr. Bird "in consideration of the sum of one dollar and other good valuable and sufficient consideration" on November 19, 1883, to satisfy the debts. Bird was a good friend and allowed the Reids to stay in the house past Christmas into the New Year. In addition, James Reid Sr. had a reputation of being generous in making loans to friends. These loans were apparently all total losses and, according to family lore, "nearly cleaned him out." Reid was out of the pistol manufacturing business.

James Reid Sr. moved north to West Troy, New York, and worked as a machinist at the woolen mills of James Roy and Company. He had come full circle and was working in the woolen mills again. His wife, Margaret, died in 1892, and his daughter, Annie, died in 1897. James Sr.

succumbed to what is believed to have been heart disease on May 28, 1898, at 71. He is buried in the Reid family plot at Albany Rural Cemetery in an unmarked grave.

James Reid was an innovative and accomplished designer. His son, James Jr., inherited some of that creative talent and has patents to his name, not all in the arms industry. When James Sr. was married in Ireland at 21, he was apparently illiterate; he signed his name on the marriage document with an "X." Reid educated himself and utilized his considerable talents to start several successful companies and design a wide variety of pistols. James Reid had that "one good idea" — the Knuckleduster — and that's something that eludes most of the rest of us.

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