

A DOUBLE SUB-INSPECTED MODEL 73 SINGLE ACTION COLT ARMY

by John R. Ewing



Figure 1. Colt single action Model 1873 with double inspection marks.

The group of Colt single action army revolvers with serial numbers from 15191 to 19565 is known as the 'The 1875 Models'. These were produced from December 2, 1874, to March 16, 1875, for a total of 2,560 pistols for the U.S. Ordnance Department, and over 1,800 for the civilian market. There were three sub-inspectors who inspected these pistols: Samuel B. Lewis, his stamp a small 'L'; Albert P. Casey, his stamp a small 'C'; and W. W. Johnson, his stamp a small 'J'. There are groups of pistols in which the sub-inspector marks are all from one individual, but one group has mixed marks from Casey and Johnson, some parts marked with a 'C' and some with a 'J'.¹ The pistol with serial number 17087 is one of these (Figure 1, 2).

This gun was nickel-plated at one time and shows some of the original finish where the nickel is worn away. On the underside of the barrel near the cylinder pin is stamped a small 'C' above the small 'P' proof mark (Figure 3). The cylinder is marked with a 'P' proof mark, the number 7087, and the remnants of a small 'J'. Below the serial number on the trigger guard is the top of a small 'J', but on the back strap the small 'J' is prominent. There is a small 'C' on the bottom of the left side of the grip, and the remnants of the 'APC' script cartouche are on the lower left grip. The serial numbers on the barrel, cylinder, frame, trigger guard, butt and inside the grip all match. The "U.S." stamp is on the frame (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Small “U.S.” stamp on the frame (upper left) and clockwise, the serial number stamped on the cylinder, under frame and front of trigger guard, butt strap, and barrel. Note the “J” inspection stamp just below the “0” in the serial number stamped on the front of the trigger guard (center, bottom).

There are a small number of these double sub-inspected revolvers in known collections making them very interesting. Since this pistol has all the sub-inspection marks and no condemnation marks, it was passed and accepted by the Ordnance Department.²

Difficulties in tracking individual pistols

Colt used the same line of serial numbers on both government and civilian pistols. When a government order came in, the number of guns needed for the order were pulled from general production and submitted to the Ordnance inspectors. Those that passed were stamped with the proper marks and noted on the inspection reports. Unfortunately, these reports did not contain the serial numbers of the passed pistols. Often the government orders were for 50 to 200 pistols, and these were packed in crates of 50 pistols each and shipped to the Springfield Armory without recording the serial numbers of the pistols in the crates. These crates would be shipped to various arsenals for issue to the troops, and these serial numbers were not recorded by the issuing units. Some of the pistols were shipped to various states for issue to the state militias under The Militia Act of 1808. Most states did not record the serial numbers or such records have been lost. The State of New York was an exception with fairly extensive serial number records. Existing Colt records concerning production serial numbers are very scarce for early pistols, especially on numbers 20000 and earlier. Serial number records began to be kept by the Ordnance Department in 1878.

Inspection procedure for pistols

Each pistol was inspected first by the ordinance officer in charge and at least one in twenty were disassembled in his presence and

the parts checked with gauges. The serial-numbered parts were stamped with the sub-inspector’s small stamp when they passed. Small parts were replaced if they were rejected. A Colt employee would then assemble the pistol in the inspection room, watched by the sub-inspector. Once assembled, the pistol was checked for proper function in all of its mechanical operations. If it operated properly and passed all the function tests, it received the final cartouche on the lower left grip.³ The first pistols under serial number 20000 had the frame stamped with ‘U.S.’ before the frame was case-hardened. After that the frames were stamped ‘U.S.’ after the frame was case-hardened. No serial numbers were recorded on the inspection reports.

Colt pistols to the state militias

Of the total of 37,134 pistols manufactured by Colt for the U.S. Government, 12,000 were sent to state militias. Among the first requests were three separate ones from the State of Virginia in mid-1874 for a total of 2,307 pistols. This was the largest numbered requested by any state with New York second with a request for 1,395 pistols. Springfield was asked to ship the Virginia pistols to a commercial arms dealer named J. W. Frazier in New York City. The transaction was to be overseen by the Virginia State General Agent, General George E. Pickett of Gettysburg fame.⁵ The pistols went into the civilian market and the proceeds went to the State of Virginia. Eventually 2,000 of the pistols ended up with the dealer Hermann Boker, which he sold to dealers across the country. Because the pistols were ‘U.S.’ marked with the standard finish, some efforts were made to alter their appearance for vendors to avoid the charge of selling government property. To this end, many were nickel-plated or the barrels shortened or the grips changed or the



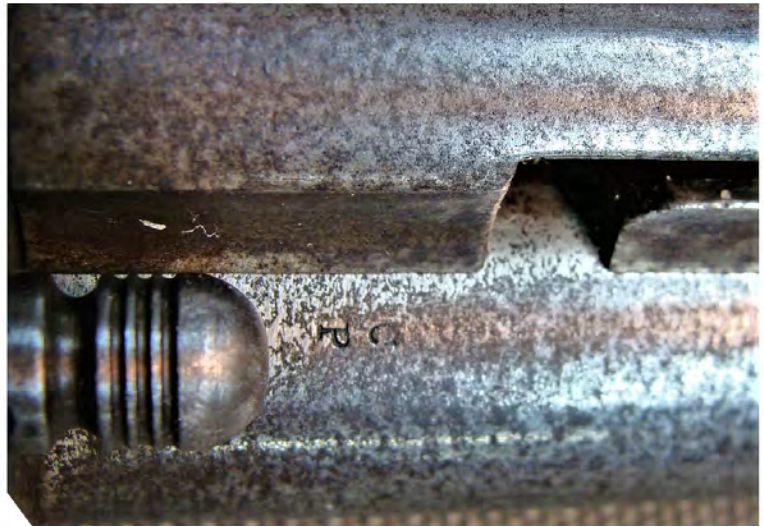
“P” ON THE CYLINDER



“J” ON THE CYLINDER



“J” ON BACKSTRAP



“C” AND “P” ON THE BARREL



“C” ON THE LEFT BUTT OF THE GRIP

Figure 3. Inspection stamps on various parts of the pistol.

Bibliography

- Kopec, J. A., Fenn, H. S., *Colt Cavalry & Artillery Revolvers...A Continuing Study*. Newport Beach, CA, Graphic Publishers, 1994.
- Cochran, K., *Colt Cavalry, Artillery and Militia Revolvers (1873-1903)*. Rapid City, SD, Cochran Publishing Company, 1987.
- Serven, J., *Colt Firearms 1836-1954*. Santa Ana, CA, James Serven Publisher, 1954.

Endnotes

- 1 Graham, R., Kopec, J., Moore, C. K. *A Study of the Colt Single Action Army Revolver*. Dallas, TX, Taylor Publishing Company, 1976. p. 206-7.
- 2 Ibid., p. 208.
- 3 Ibid., p. 215.
- 4 Ibid., p. 390.
- 5 Ibid., p. 375-382.
- 6 Moore, C. K., *Colt Single Action Army Revolver Study "New Discoveries"*. Lincoln, RI, Andrew Mowbray Inc.-Publishers, 2003. p. 59.

